

Murder of the Year

By

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Music and Lyrics by Daven Tillinghast

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Cast of Characters

- Reginald Pierce: Your host for the evening. Chairman of the greater New Orleans philanthropic society, which has seen better times. Looking forward to a fat check from Cornelius.
- Thaddeus Boondock: Cornelius' lawyer, and Lucy's fiancée. Up to his eyeballs in debt to the mob.
- Lucy Belletresse: Cornelius' assistant; the daughter he never had, and the apple of his eye. In her heart, she's still just a girl from the bayou.
- Catherine Pridemore: Cornelius' long-suffering wife. Plays the dutiful wife very well, but is fully aware of Cornelius' faults.
- Colonel Cornelius Pridemore: Self-made multi-billionaire, philanthropist and philanderer. Notable for his larger than life personality, and mysteriously withered arm.
- Julia Floutgams: Cornelius' current mistress; works as a waitress at the Hoodoo. Knows what she wants and isn't afraid to get it.
- Eustace "Rooster" Mazzari: Eustace "Rooster" Mazzari - Mob enforcer from the Northeast. All around tough guy. Comes to collect a debt. Played by the same actor as Cornelius.

(MORE)

Cast of Characters (cont'd)

Chief Justin Boudreaux:

The local exemplar of law and order. Likes his gumbo. Sometimes has difficulty getting out of the squad car. Played by the same actor as Julia.

ACT I

REGINALD

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Hotel Hoodoo to honor the New Orleans Philanthropy Philanthropic Society's 2010 Man of the Year, Colonel Cornelius Pridemore! I'm Reginald Pierce, director of the Society. Please, feel free to call me Reggie, if you've made a donation in the last year.

I'd like to offer a special welcome to (his/her) Honor, Mayor (Charles/Charlene) LaBeuf! We're all glad to see you here tonight, and I think I speak on behalf of us all, (sir/ma'am) when I say that you have our full support in this trying time. I don't care what the newspapers say, it should not be illegal to do that with your own dog!

We're so glad to have you all here as we celebrate the life and achievements of a great man, a great benefactor, a great friend.

As he will be in these situations, REGINALD is rather overcome.

We're a little bit behind schedule, since we don't ah, quite know where the Colonel is right now.

(Awkward laugh.)

So let me take this opportunity to welcome some of our distinguished guests here on the dais.

Mr. Thaddeus Boondock, Colonel Pridemore's advisor and attorney and chief advisor. I'll bet you know where the bodies are buried, eh Thad?

THADDEUS

Uh, thank you Reginald. I have absolutely no comment about any bodies. But I'm very happy to be here.

REGINALD

Miss Lucy Belletresse, the Colonel's personal assistant. I can see why the Colonel wants to keep you close, Lucy!

LUCY

(Off put by his comment, she chooses to ignore him.)

Many thanks, Reginald. I'm privileged to be here to help honor a man who has done so much for me...and for the city.

REGINALD

And last, but most certainly not least, a blessing to our Society, a dear, dear friend, a lady whose generosity is outweighed only by her heart...

Again, he finds it hard to go on.

CATHERINE

There, there, Reggie. It'll be alright. Friends, I'm Catherine Pridewell, the Colonel's wife these many, many, many years. I must apologize for my husband's absence. I'm sure he must have a very good reason for keeping all of you fine people waiting. And when I find out what it is, I'll be sure to let him know...how much we missed having him here.

REGINALD

Thank you Mrs. Pridemore. Folks, I'm going to ask you to bear with us while we wait for the guest of honor. Please, enjoy your appetizers, and enjoy your evening!

LUCY exits, THADDEUS makes to follow. REGINALD and CATHERINE remain. On his way out, THADDEUS thinks twice, comes back, so that he hears the tail end of the following.

REGINALD

Mrs. Pridemore?

CATHERINE

Please, Reggie, call me Catherine! We've known each other long enough, heaven knows.

REGINALD

Ah, yes, Catherine.

(Giggles)

Do you, in fact, know the whereabouts of the Colonel?

CATHERINE

(Grim)

I have long since given up trying to determine the Colonel's whereabouts. I do not know where he is.

REGINALD

Well, I know he's a busy man...

CATHERINE

Yes, well - the real question is, with whom is he busy?

REGINALD

Pardon?

CATHERINE

Nothing, Reggie, nothing. You shouldn't be too concerned. Cornelius always shows up when he's least expected, larger than life.

REGINALD

Well, you see, the reason I'm concerned is that I haven't got a straight answer from the Colonel about his donation for the year.

CATHERINE

Leave that to me, Reggie. You and the Society have no better friend than myself. You know that the Colonel can be somewhat...capricious, but I will advocate for you.

REGINALD

Given all that, I'm also greatly concerned that he's mentioned changing his will. You don't think his bequest to the Society is in jeopardy, do you?

CATHERINE

Nonsense, Reggie. All talk and nonsense. Leave it to me, Reggie. Just leave it all to me.

THADDEUS

Excuse me, Mrs. Pridemore?

CATHERINE

Yes, excuse me, Reggie. I must attend to...my husband's affairs.

REGINALD exits.

CATHERINE

Now, Thaddeus, where is my husband?

THADDEUS

How should I know?

CATHERINE

You know all of his dirty laundry, don't you? I tend to think of you as chief launderer.

THADDEUS

I do not know his whereabouts. What I do know is that his absence here tonight is a major embarrassment to the business and the family.

CATHERINE

You may concern yourself with the business. As for the family, this embarrassment is only one of many, and none of your concern.

THADDEUS

I need to speak to you about something else. The colonel has received another death threat.

CATHERINE

Well, that's nothing new is it? As Cornelius says, "you cannot be loved by everyone." Or is it "anyone?"

THADDEUS

This one's different. There's more to it.

THADDEUS hands CATHERINE a piece of paper.

CATHERINE

What is this?

THADDEUS

A voodoo hex. I took it to a shop in the quarter. It's a curse, meant to result in poverty and death.

CATHERINE

Which would be worse for him, I wonder? Well, points for creativity, and a refreshing change of pace from the recent badly spelled requests for payment of non-existent debts. Still, don't show this to one to Cornelius.

THADDEUS

Why?

CATHERINE

Well, unless you want him to have a coronary. He's afraid of very little, but voodoo is different.

THADDEUS

Why is that?

CATHERINE

Did he never tell you what happened to his arm?

THADDEUS

No.

CATHERINE

So, you don't know everything? Well, it's a long story...

(Lucy re-emerges from the kitchen)

...one I have neither the time or inclination to tell now.

LUCY

Mrs. Pridemore, I...

CATHERINE

(Ignoring Lucy.)

Thaddeus, my throat is dry, and I must see to it. Let me know if you find my husband.

CATHERINE exits.

LUCY

She doesn't like me.

THADDEUS

No.

LUCY

Why?

THADDEUS

I don't know why. It's unusual...in my experience, you bring out the best in people.

He goes to her. They kiss.

LUCY

I'm glad you're here tonight. Between Mrs. Pridemore and that insufferable Mr. Pierce, it's good to have someone to talk to. Not that I can tell anyone else what I really want to say!

THADDEUS

Lucy, come now, we agreed. The time isn't right.

LUCY

I still don't understand why we can't...

THADDEUS

Shhh...

LUCY

All right. You'd better not make me wait too long. Never mess with a girl from the bayou.

THADDEUS

(Thoughtful.)

Yes.

LUCY

What is it?

THADDEUS

Nothing. Well, the Colonel received another...letter.

LUCY

Oh, no, not tonight!

THADDEUS

Yes, I'm afraid so.

LUCY

Is it serious?

THADDEUS

I don't know...

LUCY

He inspires strong feelings, doesn't he?

THADDEUS

You could say that, yes.

REGINALD re-enters.

REGINALD

Pardon me, Mr. Boondock, Miss Belletresse. Have you seen the Colonel?

LUCY

Sir, if the Colonel were here, I think you would know!

CORNELIUS

I should say so!

CORNELIUS enters, larger than life, as promised. He takes his time making his way to center stage, shaking hands, flirting, whatever makes sense at the time. His left arm is withered and useless. His apparel is conspicuous by the lack of a tie. He embraces LUCY, greets REGINALD warmly, THADDEUS more perfunctorily. THADDEUS exits to find CATHERINE.

JULIA enters, looking somewhat ruffled. It is obvious that she knows CORNELIUS, and knows him well. She produces his bowtie.

JULIA

Oh, Colonel, I found this in...the hallway. You must have misplaced it.

CORNELIUS

Ah, thank you.

She helps him put the bowtie on, showing off to the assembled. CATHERINE and REGINALD re-enter.

CATHERINE

Cornelius, so glad to finally see you. I see you've found a new friend.

JULIA

Oh no, ma'am, I've known the Colonel quite a long time.

CATHERINE

Well congratulations, Miss...

JULIA

Floutgams, Julia Floutgams.

CATHERINE

Charming. Well, Miss Floutgams, you are practically unique in my experience. My husband has a hard time keeping...friends. He's always been fond of his assistant, but you know what they say - new blood.

LUCY notices this, and is visibly bothered by it.

REGINALD

Uh, yes. Colonel, we're behind schedule. Shall we begin?

CORNELIUS

By all means.

(To JULIA)

My dear, I require another libation.

JULIA

Of course. What shall it be?

CORNELIUS

Oh, surprise me. You know what I like.

CATHERINE

I'm sure.

REGINALD comes to the dais.

REGINALD

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my singular honor to begin tonight's salute to a great man. Colonel, you have been a friend to the Society for so many years. No one has done more for us, and we rely on you and your generosity, more than ever in these trying times. We are indebted to you, deeply deeply indebted to you. If I may be so bold, without you and your largesse, we would be lost, bereft, without hope or succor. Abandoned, bankrupt, destitute...

CATHERINE

No need to lay it on quite so thick, dear.

REGINALD

When the time comes, I hope that you will always remember us, and that through us, your memory will live forever. I can only hope that...

REGINALD is so overcome with emotion that he cannot speak, but tries to hug CORNELIUS, an offer which is flatly rejected. LUCY goes to the dais.

LUCY

Colonel Pridemore, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for all of your kindness to me these past three years. I haven't had much in the way of family, and you have been, well...just know that no one could take your place in my life. I flatter myself to think that I'm special in your life too, that no one could take my place.

CATHERINE

Oh, please, where are the violins?

CORNELIUS

Catherine, behave!

LUCY

I guess I just wanted to say, I'm honored to be your assistant, honored to know you sir. Many congratulations!

Applause from all. CATHERINE applauds loudly and slowly. THADDEUS approaches the dais with a set of index cards, which he will proceed to read from.

CORNELIUS

Catherine...

CATHERINE

Oh, is it my turn?

CORNELIUS

Not yet.

THADDEUS

Mr. Pridemore, as your legal advisor, and chief strategist for Pridemore Incorporated, it is my pleasure to tell you that you have well earned your place at this table. Over the past five years, return on numerous investments has continued to increase, while expenses have...

At this point, JULIA interrupts, pushing THADDEUS out of the way.

JULIA

Hi! I don't know everyone here, but I'm a...friend of the Colonel's, and I wanted to pass on my own congratulations tonight. This is something special, just for you, Colonel.

You're out of Luck begins to play, and JULIA plays it for all it's worth. This is a private/public moment for her and CORNELIUS, and she's not shy about it.

YOU WALK IN, YOUR RIDICULOUS GRIN,
 IT TAKES BUT A MINUTE TO SEE, YOU ARE HE,
 THE ONE I'M LOOKIN' FOR
 YOU TIP BIG, GOT A LOT OF NICE FRIENDS,
 ACCUSTOMED TO LETTING YOU WIN, BUT YOU'RE WEAK,
 I KNOW YOUR WEAKNESS, TOO;
 YOU CAN GO TO HEAVEN IF YOU'RE GOOD ENOUGH,
 BUT YOU'RE BAD, YOU'RE A SINNER, YOU'RE OUT OF LUCK.
 FROM THE MOMENT WE MET, I'VE BEEN TURNIN' YOUR HEAD,
 YOU'VE BEEN CRANIN' YOUR NECK FOR A PEEK, AT ME,
 DO YOU LIKE WHAT YOU SEE?
 YES, I'M QUITE WELL AWARE OF THE REASONS MEN STARE,
 IT'S BEEN SAID I GOT MORE THAN MY SHARE, CALL IT SKILL,
 SOME MEN WOULD KILL FOR IT;
 IF YOU'RE GOIN' TO HEAVEN I CAN SEND YOU THERE,
 IT'S A ONE WAY TICKET, BETTER SAY YOUR PRAYERS,
 'CUZ WE'RE LEAVIN' ONCE WE SETTLE UP YOUR AFFAIRS,
 'CUZ I'M BAD, I'M A SINNER, YOU'RE OUT OF LUCK.
 BY THE TIME YOU CAN SMELL ME YOU'RE CAUGHT IN MY SPELL,
 WHICH I WEAVE SO DELICIOUSLY WELL, I GET MY MAN,
 YOU CAN CALL IT BLACK MAGIC
 LIKE A SPIDER DELIGHTING IN FINDING A FLY,

I AM WRAPPIN' YOU UP AND I'M SUCKIN' YOU DRY, YOUR ASS
IS MINE, HONEY,

(YOU CAN BET YOUR LIFE ON IT;)

YOU CAN GO TO HEAVEN IF YOU PAY THE FARE,

BUT I WON'T GO WITH YOU, CUZ I CAN'T STAY THERE,

IF YOU KNEW WHAT I KNEW, YOU'D BE AWFULLY SCARED,

'CUZ I'M BAD, I AM VERY BAD, I'M A SINNER

*Because it's not clear enough, JULIA plants a big
kiss on CORNELIUS at the end of the
song. REGINALD pries her loose and ushers her off
the dais. CATHERINE walks to the dais, glass in
hand.*

CORNELIUS

(to JULIA, as she's leaving)

Don't forget that drink, my dear.

CATHERINE

Well, wasn't that something? Congratulations,
Cornelius. After twenty-seven years of marriage, you do
still have the power to surprise me. I truly did not
know just what you were capable of...and in front of
all these people! Our friends, our community...I can
only imagine how...entertained everyone feels. I cannot
express to all of you, how I feel right now. You know,
all of you, that a good wife stands by her man, and
supports him in all he does. For instance...oh, just
now, Cornelius, didn't you ask for a drink?

CORNELIUS

Why yes, I...

CATHERINE

Allow me, dear.

*She throws her drink in his face, storms back to
her seat. JULIA returns with CORNELIUS' drink.*

CORNELIUS

(Gets drink from JULIA.)

Thank you my dear, your song was lovely. You could use
some more breath support, though. Come see me after all
this - I'll be more than happy to give you
some...private lessons.

(Cornelius and Julia laugh long and
inappropriately.)

Members of the Society, distinguished guests, Mayor
LaWoof...

(Laughs.)
 pardon me, Mayor LaBeuf - you sly dog...
 (Gestures to table.)

...family...
 (winks to JULIA)

...friends...
 (Takes a sip of his drink.)

Interesting. Next time, something else, dear. It has a bitter aftertaste.

(Resuming speech.)

It is customary at such times for a man to thank all of those who have made it possible for him to achieve such heights. Customary to give credit to all of the little people in his life, on whose backs he has stepped to get where he is.

There are so many backs, so many people who have made my success possible, that I cannot remember them all, so I will confine myself to these gathered friends.

Thaddeus, you have been my lawyer now for five years. I rely on your discretion and good sense, as well as the fact that you can fake my signature; saves me a lot of time signing boring tedious documents. Speaking of tedious, that was the most boring speech I've ever heard.

Reginald, you are a pillar of this community, and a good man. At least, I know you're good, not so sure about the "man" part. You might want to put a line item in the Society budget for backbone next year. That is, if there is a budget for next year! I'm just having fun with you, Reggie - donations to your society have meant millions in tax breaks for me. Sad to tell you that the tax laws have changed, so...well, I'm sure you can scrape up a few more bucks somewhere, eh, Reggie?

REGINALD whimpers as CORNELIUS laughs, then is suddenly woozy.

Pardon me, I feel a bit lightheaded. Where was I? Ah yes, Catherine, I've had many drinks thrown in my face by many women, but you are the best. Of course, you've had a lot of practice. Still, I bow to you, my dear, you have raised it to a high art.

(Suddenly serious.)

Lucy...I...thank you for everything - for being my assistant, my right hand...my friend. You do not know...I can never do enough for you, never make up for...

(he sees something on the podium,
 produces it. It is the hex.)

...what? Where did this come from? Which of you did this?

His withered arm begins twitching. After much thrashing and gyration, he falls to the ground, dead. THADDEUS runs to him.

THADDEUS

Dead. He's dead.

LUCY

No! What was it, a heart attack?

CATHERINE

I highly doubt it. My husband wasn't the kind of man to die of natural causes.

JULIA

What did he die of then?

THADDEUS

Isn't it obvious? Colonel Cornelius Pridemore was...murdered!

Collective Open Road Murder Mysteries Gasp of Surprise and Horror™

REGINALD

Ladies and gentlemen, friends of the Philanthropic Society, I'm sorry for the sudden change of plans, but I'm afraid our testimonial dinner has been transformed into a wake. And I'm afraid, a crime scene. I must ask that no one leave the premises.

During the following speech, LUCY investigates CORNELIUS' glass, smelling it, which gives her pause. She turns to confide in THADDEUS; while she does so, JULIA takes the glass and returns to the kitchen with it.

REGINALD

Now, no offense to New Orleans' finest, but to avoid any (further) scandal to the Society or the Pridemore family, I would greatly prefer to present the police with a solved case, rather than subject all of you fine people to the rigors of a full interrogation. I know (his/her) Honor the Mayor would prefer not to have any more publicity.

CATHERINE

The good news is that there are no animals present...

REGINALD

Yes! Thank you! And so, to keep the glare of unwanted attention from the society and all of it's...friends, I ask you to help us investigate this heinous deed, and

(MORE)

REGINALD (cont'd)

bring the murderer to justice. As part of your programs for the evening, on your tables, you will find (how convenient!) sleuthing sheets, that give you a place to write down the fruits of those investigations.

THADDEUS

After we dispose of the Colonel's remains, all of the guests on the podium will mingle with the other tables.

LUCY

As those closest to the Colonel, they may have particular insight into how he died, or who may have wished him dead.

CATHERINE

Let me stress this - these guests may have information crucial to your investigations - information you cannot glean in any other way than through individual interrogation.

REGINALD

So, while you enjoy your salads, please take time to see justice done.

The actors, as best they can, remove CORNELIUS' body, and bring him "backstage."

INTERACT I

After a few minutes, they filter back out as the salads are being served. They mingle with the audience, dropping clues and answering questions in character. In general, all questions about relationships are fair game, but facts and red herrings should be released only when indicated.

All the actors except Reginald and Julia mention that Lucy could smell almonds in Cornelius' drink. Julia is defensive about the drink, only saying that it was "something special." Reginald knows nothing about the drink.

Catherine:

- Cornelius' withered arm was the result of a voodoo curse, at least he thought so.
- She resents Lucy because she's close to Cornelius. She suspects they were more than friends.

Julia:

- She and Cornelius knew each other a long time, and were "very close, closer than anyone knows."
- She is not from the New Orleans area.
- If asked how long she's been working, she says "here, or my other job?" If quizzed more about the other job, she is defensive and unrevealing.

Thaddeus:

- He knows Reginald socially, and has noticed that he seems very jittery of late.
- Catherine may not show it, but she was very jealous of any woman who showed an interest in Cornelius.
- If approached about his connection with Lucy, he is evasive, saying only "the time isn't right."
- If pressed about the drink, he mentions that it smelled slightly of almonds.

Lucy:

- She and Thaddeus are engaged, but he didn't want anyone to know about it. (This shouldn't be volunteered, but will be acknowledged by Lucy if someone figures it out.)
- She is from the bayou area originally, and learned a few things about voodoo. "how to put a charm on someone, or even a hex, if needed."
- She recognizes the voodoo hex Cornelius received - "poverty and death."

Reginald:

- He is sorry Cornelius is gone, but grateful and relieved that the fate of the Society is now in Catherine's capable hands.
- This isn't the first time that he's seen Cornelius with Julia at the Hotel.

ACT II

REGINALD re-enters.

REGINALD

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to assure you that the police are on their way. However, I've also been informed that they may be somewhat slow to arrive, as it is their annual Spring Barbecue and Jamboree. I am informed that they do have a designated driver, though...he seems to have passed out. So, please, continue to enjoy yourselves, and I'll be back with an update as soon as I have one.

He makes to leave, but sees JULIA heading to the dais to clean up.

REGINALD

Excuse me, Miss, uh, Floutgams?

JULIA

Yes?

REGINALD

It isn't really my place, but I thought you should know, some of the others have been whispering...things about you...you and the Colonel.

JULIA

Well, I suppose they would. Not that they have the slightest idea what was going on between us.

REGINALD

Not my place, as I say...

(He turns to leave.)

I will say however, I think your conduct with the Colonel right in front of Mrs. Pridemore was disgraceful! To embarrass her publicly like that! Not that it's the first time - I know he never treated her the way she deserved. In the midst of this tragedy, we can at least be grateful for her.

JULIA

We? You mean your precious Society?

REGINALD

Yes, finally, with Mrs. Pridemore as the Colonel's heir, the Society's future is secure!

JULIA

I wouldn't count your chickens if I were you.

REGINALD

Mrs. Pridemore wouldn't abandon us in our hour of need,
a woman of her refinement and grace.

JULIA

Why Mr. Pierce, anyone would think you were in love!

REGINALD

How dare you suggest...it is absurd, and a slander on
the character of a great lady!

JULIA

Such passion! You hold her in high regard, don't you?

REGINALD

I do indeed.

JULIA

What wouldn't you do on her behalf, I wonder?

REGINALD

I would do anything for her...
(Catches himself.)
...within reason.

JULIA

Very interesting. Thank you Reggie, you may go.

REGINALD

Yes, ma'am.
(Makes to leave, then realizes what just
happened.)
Such impertinence! And you will call me Mr. Pierce!

JULIA

The time is may well be coming when I can call you
whatever I please. And if history is any judge, you
will come when I call, heel to me, and be grateful for
whatever morsels I throw your way.

REGINALD

I don't know where this is coming from, young lady, but
I shall speak to the management of the hotel, and have
you dismissed.

JULIA

Suit yourself...
(Reginald fumes off.)
I won't be needing the job much longer.

*CATHERINE enters with a drink, looking for peace
and quiet. She doesn't see JULIA, who conceals
herself at the dais. LUCY enters, crosses to
CATHERINE.*

LUCY

Mrs. Pridemore?

CATHERINE

Please, I have no desire to speak to you.

LUCY

But why? What have I ever done to offend you?

CATHERINE

How can you be so bold, right to my face, while my husband's corpse is still warm?

LUCY

You were his wife...I was his friend. Everyone else, everyone in his life wanted something from him. You and I should be friends now.

CATHERINE

Friends? Friends! The way he looked at you, the gifts, the phone calls! The "business trips" together - that was "friendship?"

LUCY

It wasn't like that! I was his assistant! He treated me like...

CATHERINE

...yes?

LUCY

Like a father. He said I was like the daughter he never had.

CATHERINE

(Laughs.)

He never told me he was looking for one! No one would describe Cornelius as fatherly. And you, why did you need to borrow my husband - what was wrong with your own father?

LUCY

I never knew my father, or my mother. I was an orphan, brought up by a kind neighbor. Odilia Marie - I called her Mama - everyone did. I stayed with her until I was ten years old. That's when she lost her home - some awful man heartless viper foreclosed on it, intending to turn it into a hotel or something. I was sent away to an orphanage. I've never had anything like a family since then. Until I met the Colonel. He hired me as his assistant. He was kind to me, nothing more.

CATHERINE

(Moved.)

Well, I did not know that. Any of it. The woman who raised you - what did you say her name was, Mama...

LUCY

Odilia Marie.

CATHERINE

I know that name.

(Throws it off.)

Well, I beg your pardon, my dear. It seems I was mistaken about you. Now that I think about it, you're not really Cornelius' type.

LUCY

How do you mean?

CATHERINE

You lack a certain...trashy quality, that Cornelius found so compelling. He was always more interested in someone like...

JULIA appears from behind the dais.

JULIA

Ooh, my ears are burning!

CATHERINE

Oh, for heaven's sake! You're not about to tell me you were his adopted niece, were you?

JULIA

No, nothing of the kind! My relationship with Cornelius was very straightforward.

CATHERINE

I cannot listen to any more of this.

JULIA

Ah, but this is our chance to have some girl talk.

CATHERINE

I do not wish to speak to you! And if you speak to me again, trust me - I will find a way to make you very, very sorry.

JULIA

Maybe later then?

CATHERINE turns, glares at her, exits. LUCY makes to follow.

JULIA

I have to admit, I like your style.

LUCY

I beg your pardon.

JULIA

The dress, the hair, the too-good-to-be-true bit! Nice work - I'm not from the South, so I don't think I could pull it off - I don't look good in pastels. Still, you're a class act, all around.

LUCY

I have no idea what you're talking about.

LUCY makes to leave.

JULIA

Come on, no need to be a sore loser! There's more than one way to a man's heart - the direct approach just tends to be more effective, if you get my drift.

LUCY

Direct approach?

JULIA

You gave me the idea, you know! There are definite advantages to being the Colonel's favorite, aren't there?

LUCY

What?

JULIA

(Crosses to her.)

Never break character, right? You are a pro.

(Laughs.)

Just ask your boyfriend. He'll fill you in. Well, I'd love to stay and chat, but I've got to finish cleaning up this mess, then give my notice! I'd up and quit without it, but you never know when you'll need a good reference!

Laughing, JULIA exits, leaving a flummoxed LUCY. THADDEUS enters, followed by CATHERINE, who lurks, unseen.

THADDEUS

Lucy.

LUCY

Oh, Thaddeus, that woman, that Floutgams...you have no idea what kind of person she is.

THADDEUS

I have some idea. I've known about her and the Colonel for some time.

LUCY

You've known? And you didn't do anything about it?

THADDEUS

You know how the Colonel was - I didn't take it seriously, any more than with any of the others.

LUCY

She thinks she had her hooks in pretty deep.

THADDEUS

She's entitled to her opinion. Look, I need to tell you something, darling. Something that may come as a bit of a shock.

LUCY

I'm not sure I can take any more of those today, but...
(Laughs)
...go ahead!

THADDEUS

Lucy, the Colonel made a change to his will two months ago.

LUCY

What?

THADDEUS

He added another heir - it's you, Lucy. He insisted on leaving some money for this Pierce's ridiculous society, but the rest is split between you and Mrs. Pridemore, 50-50.

LUCY

I don't believe it.

CATHERINE

I do - it all makes sense to me now. It wasn't enough that you would steal my husband's affections, now you steal his money! What wouldn't you do, my dear, to get ahead? Get added to my husband's will, then kill him off?

LUCY

Mrs. Pridemore, I would never...

CATHERINE

And to think, I believed you - I believed your story about Mama Dolly Mary!

LUCY

Odilia Marie! And it's no story, it's true.

CATHERINE

Odilia Marie, Odilia Marie. I do know that name!

THADDEUS

Mrs. Pridemore, Lucy didn't do it - she couldn't have.

JULIA and REGINALD enter under the following.

CATHERINE

As if you are to be trusted to judge her character. Did you really think that your engagement, your "secret" engagement was a secret? Cornelius figured it out, and told me! It wouldn't surprise me in the least if you two were in league to kill my husband, and take his money.

THADDEUS

Mrs. Pridemore, this is nothing but a distraction from the facts! I know that Lucy didn't kill the Colonel...because I know who did.

LUCY

Who?

THADDEUS

Someone with the perfect opportunity to kill the Colonel. Someone he trusted. His mistress, Julia!

JULIA

You can't be serious! I didn't kill Cornelius. What reason would I have?

THADDEUS

The Colonel told me he was getting tired of you, that it was time to be done with you. Maybe you don't take rejection well. More important than that is what Lucy found in the Colonel's glass. The smell of almonds...

(To the others.)

...and do you remember, how he complained of his drink being bitter?

REGINALD

Cyanide!

THADDEUS

That's my guess. We could have the glass tested, but she removed it while we were taking away the Colonel's body.

JULIA

You've really made up your mind, haven't you? Well, I'm not going back to jail, not for this. I didn't do it!

REGINALD

Why don't we let you tell it to the police?

THADDEUS, REGINALD and LUCY make to grab for JULIA. She evades them, and a chase ensues. It's put to an end by the sudden appearance of ROOSTER, resplendent in an old-time mob outfit with a decidedly tropical twist.

ROOSTER

Not so fast. I'd hate for you to leap to an unfortunate conclusion. Julia, over here.

Obvious she knows him, JULIA goes to ROOSTER. Allow me to introduce myself. Eustace Mazzari, known to my friends and associates as "Rooster."

THADDEUS

What are you doing here, sir?

ROOSTER

I represent...certain business interests in the Northeast.

REGINALD

What interests?

ROOSTER

Our portfolio is diverse! We are involved in entertainment, finance, pest control, cement apparel...

REGINALD

(He doesn't get it.)

What kind of business...

(Thaddeus whispers to him, and the light begins to dawn.)

...oh! Ah, why don't we get to know our new friend, Mr. Mazzari, while you enjoy tonight's main course!

In the interest of not leaping to conclusions, especially unfortunate ones, we again ask your assistance in determining who our killer was, and what could drive them to commit murder. You are our best hope for justice!

INTERACT II

Once again, the cast leaves the stage for a few minutes, to return and mingle with the audience. The following clues/red herrings are disclosed at during the break.

Julia

- She served Cornelius a Godfather - whiskey and amaretto, which accounts for the smell of almonds. She didn't pour the drink herself, but couldn't remember who did.
- She spent time in jail for attempted blackmail a few years ago, but "it was all a misunderstanding."

Lucy

- She didn't have to interview for the job with Cornelius. He sought her out, in fact.
- Mama Odilia was ruined by the loss of her home. If she could ever find out who was responsible, she would find a way to make them pay.

Reginald

- The Society is teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, and he is terrified.
- Knew that the previous will had left a healthy bequest to the Society, but knowing the Colonel's nature, he was very worried that that might change.

Catherine

- She says Cornelius admired Thaddeus' legal mind, and relied on him, but didn't really trust him.
- She has remembered Mama Odilia Marie. She was a voodoo queen, whose house Cornelius owned, and foreclosed on. Did Lucy know?

Thaddeus

- Once, when drunk, Reginald confessed that he is in love with Catherine. Does she reciprocate?
- Catherine has threatened Lucy before, and tried to get her fired many times.

Rooster

- His business associates have just opened a new franchise in Miami, and he's the manager.
- He came here looking for Julia, who works for him.

ACT III

Following the break, Reginald, Rooster and Catherine remain on stage - the others depart.

REGINALD

Ladies and gentlemen, I've been informed that the police are indeed on their way, but the procession is a slow one. The Jamboree was rather more successful than anticipated, I'm afraid, and Chief Budreaux has been overcome with jambalaya and uh, lemonade.

ROOSTER

May I suggest then that time is of the essence. While I've had many interactions with law enforcement, some of them highly entertaining, I have no ammunition...I mean desire for such interactions now. So it is imperative that I conduct my business and leave. Where is Colonel Cornelius Pridemore?

REGINALD

The Colonel is dead, murdered.

ROOSTER

An unfortunate development, but hardly unprecedented in my experience. Standard procedure in this case is that I speak to the next of kin, so that I can conclude our business with a minimum of stress or collateral damage.

CATHERINE

Sir, I am Mrs. Pridemore, the Colonel's wife and his...one of his heirs.

ROOSTER

Ah, then let me put it to you simply - the Colonel took out a loan in the amount of 3 million dollars in October.

CATHERINE

Three million...

ROOSTER

We sent notices, asking for repayment.

CATHERINE

These notices, were they badly spelled?

ROOSTER

What, with the spelling? Lips Fazoni is my secretary, and he graduated from sixth grade!

CATHERINE

I see.

ROOSTER

So with interest, and late fees, the current amount is 20 million, due today.

CATHERINE

What?

ROOSTER

I know, it seems high, but there's no paperwork, and our customer service is second to none! The Colonel never told you about our business arrangement?

CATHERINE

No, never.

ROOSTER

Well, I'll leave you, to commune with your grief, and your accountants if need be. We take cash, check, and oh, and as of last week, Visa!

He leaves Catherine and Reginald alone.

CATHERINE

I don't understand, what was Cornelius doing, getting a loan from the mob? He had loads of money!

REGINALD

Well, the Colonel seems to have been...a complicated man.

CATHERINE

Between this, that Miss Floutgams, and the new will...I can't say that I'm really surprised.

REGINALD

If I may, Mrs. Pridemore...Catherine. He didn't deserve you.

CATHERINE

Perhaps not.

REGINALD

(The floodgates open.)

I don't know if any man could deserve you. You are such a wonderful, generous beautifully perfect woman! You deserve to have the sun pointed in your direction at all hours of the day. You deserve to have baskets of fruit laid at your feet.

(Kneeling to her.)

Please, let me get you some fruit!

CATHERINE

No, thank you, Reggie. What you say is both very sweet, and rather disturbing at the same time.

REGINALD

Forgive me, I didn't mean to...

CATHERINE

It's all right, Reggie. Why don't you go check up in the kitchen, and see how the police are doing.

REGINALD sulks away to the kitchen, and CATHERINE exits to the backstage. JULIA and ROOSTER enter. She has her purse with her.

ROOSTER

You still haven't told me what you've been up to here.

JULIA

I've been doing what you asked! Work over the Colonel, get the money.

ROOSTER

Three months ago I send you out here, I get no report, now this is what you tell me?

JULIA

Rooster, I'm the best, that's why you sent me. The Colonel was a tough nut to crack, I had to get creative.

ROOSTER

Now what am I left with? Pridemore's dead, the widow don't know nothing, there's a lawyer here - I'm afraid this may not be a negotiated settlement.

JULIA

Since when has that been a problem for you?

ROOSTER

Look doll, I'm not adverse to getting my hands dirty, but there are an awful lot of witnesses here to take care of...

(starts counting heads in the audience)

...and Uncle Luigi's Mortuary is already backed up three weeks!

JULIA

It won't come to that.

She is suddenly woozy.

ROOSTER

What? You okay?

JULIA

Just a little woozy, it's nothing. Look, just wait until after Pridemore's affairs are settled. You'll get your money, with interest.

ROOSTER

All right, I'll wait, if only to see what you've come up with. Just a gentle reminder - no one crosses me and gets away with it. Plenty of big shots like Pridemore have learned that lesson too late.

LUCY, CATHERINE, THADDEUS and REGINALD re-enter.

REGINALD

Mr. Mazzari, the police are almost here. We have our suspect, and a motive. Will you let us turn her over to the authorities?

ROOSTER

Ah, that could get most unpleasant. Why don't you save yourself a lot of unnecessary dry cleaning by taking my word that Julia didn't bump the Colonel. That wasn't her job, and that ain't her style.

THADDEUS

What do you mean, her job?

ROOSTER

She was sent to collect a debt, nothing more or less. She doesn't do dirty work, that's why she has me.

JULIA

Excuse me, I'm not feeling very well. Could I have a drink of water?

She sits where she can. Reginald goes to fetch a glass of water, which he gives to her.

LUCY

All right then, if it wasn't Julia, who was it? Who else had motive and opportunity?

CATHERINE

Why, you did, my dear.

LUCY

What are you talking about?

CATHERINE

It's funny, at first I thought you were his mistress, then the daughter he never had, but finally, I realized, you must be his killer!

LUCY

Why would I kill the Colonel?

CATHERINE

Revenge! Revenge for your adopted mother. You see, it came to me - I remember Mama Odilia Marie. It was Cornelius that bought up the mortgage on her house - he had some half-baked notion of opening a hotel. He foreclosed on it, kicked her out onto the street.

LUCY

That was him?

CATHERINE

Yes, she got him back though. Cast a hex on him. Withered his arm, or at least he thought it did.

LUCY

He ruined her...she was never the same after that.

CATHERINE

She taught you something about voodoo, didn't she? How to put fear inside a man, how to bring him to the doorstep of death?

LUCY

No! She was a good woman.

CATHERINE

A good woman - someone you loved.

LUCY

Yes.

CATHERINE

Someone you would fight for!

LUCY

Yes!

CATHERINE

Someone you would kill for!

LUCY

Yes! I mean no! That is...

JULIA

(Laughing, she seems drunk.)

Well done, Mrs. Pridemore, you made her break at last!
Don't take it too hard, dear, it happens to the best of
us.

(She stands, stumbles.)

Why do I feel so lightheaded?

(Realizing what's happening to her.)

Rooster! I need to tell you...

(She's finding it hard to speak, points
in the direction of her purse)

...purse! Purse! Purse!

She collapses, dead.

REGINALD

(Taking the purse and going to her.)

This? Is this what you want?

ROOSTER

She's gone.

THADDEUS

Poisoned, just like the Colonel.

CATHERINE

Congratulations, Lucy, job well done. Does killing her
mean that you're Cornelius' favorite once more?

LUCY

What? His favorite...

THADDEUS

Don't be absurd, Lucy couldn't have done this - she was
no where near Julia!

LUCY

What did she mean, "purse?"

REGINALD

(Looking through purse)

What's in here? Lipstick, a checkbook, a dirty cocktail
napkin...nothing!

THADDEUS

It didn't sound like she was saying "purse" to me. To
me, it sounded like Pierce, Reginald Pierce - the name
of her killer!

REGINALD

What possible reason...

THADDEUS

Oh, let me count the reasons - the fact that you're madly in love with Mrs. Pridemore, your desperate need for money for your precious Society, which would be saved by the generous bequest in the Colonel's will. Maybe Julia knew you killed the Colonel, and she was blackmailing you to keep quiet!

ROOSTER

And, you gave her the glass of water she drank right before she snuffed it.

REGINALD

Mrs. Pridemore, Catherine - please!

CATHERINE

I'm sorry, Reggie. Given some of your recent behavior, it does make sense.

REGINALD

May I say one thing in my defense?

ROOSTER

Be our guest.

REGINALD

(To audience)

Help! Don't let them condemn an innocent man. While you're enjoying your desserts, please remember that this is your last chance to see justice done.

LUCY

Please, ask your questions, find out the truth.

THADDEUS

When your investigations are concluded, please fill out your sleuthing sheets, and hand them to any of us.

CATHERINE

The truth will out, and prizes will be awarded...

THADDEUS

...but most importantly, I won't have to go to prison. I'm begging you, friends, please, HELP!

The others grab THADDEUS and roughly push him offstage.

INTERACT III

The actors mingle with the guests one last time. The highest priority is to collect the sleuthing sheets. As they do so, guests may well ask to examine Julia's purse. All of the actors should discourage the audience from doing so. Catherine would say "I'm sorry, it doesn't go with my outfit." Thaddeus would say "that's evidence, and as we've already determined, it's irrelevant." Rooster would say "I don't wanna be seen handling a purse, it's bad for my image."

Lucy will also say "that's evidence, I don't think we should touch it." If pressed, though, she will produce the purse, and let the guests investigate. [If this happens, it should be done as low key as possible, so that it doesn't lead to discoveries by the other tables. Note also to Lucy - this will alter your reaction to the discovery of the will in act IV from one of shock to resignation.]

Catherine

- She's sorry to say it, but things do not look good for Reginald. Someone had been sending her anonymous fruit baskets, "some of it horribly inappropriate," and it must have been him.
- She doesn't believe in hexes herself, but Cornelius certainly did. He believed that Mama Odilia withered his arm - "for all I know, it may have been arthritis, but I wasn't going to be the one to tell him. I liked him being scared of something. He stopped being scared of me a long time ago."

Thaddeus

- He is concerned about Catherine's sanity - she has become increasingly bitter about Cornelius, and any woman who seems connected to him. She has threatened other women before, including Lucy.
- He doesn't think Reginald could have acted alone - he doesn't have the brains, let alone the guts to kill on his own. Were he and Catherine working together?

Lucy

- She thinks that Julia's last words are very important to the case.
- She doesn't understand the connection to the mob. She kept an eye on Cornelius' finances, and he was not in need of money.

Reginald

- Between his worries over the Society, and his

increasing infatuation with Catherine, he hasn't been sleeping very well. "And it's true, sometimes I see things that aren't there. But that's perfectly normal, right?"

Rooster

- It's no secret that he was angry at the lack of communication from Julia. "Myself and the rest of upper management were trying to decide whether or not to terminate...her employment."
- The Syndicate never uses poison - "if I have that kind of business to conduct, I like to see the man's eyes when it happens. It's the best part!"

ACT IV

The act begins with all actors except Lucy onstage. She re-enters from "outside" at the top of the act.

THADDEUS

All right, enough talk! I've heard all I need to hear. We have our suspect, and a motive. Reginald, do you have anything else to say?

REGINALD

No, look! It's true, I loathed and detested the Colonel for the way he treated you, Catherine. It made me want to tear him limb from limb.

CATHERINE

Reggie...

REGINALD

And I confess, I wanted to wipe that self-satisfied smirk off of Julia's face with a hacksaw...but I couldn't harm a flea!

CATHERINE

Somehow, Reggie, that is not very convincing.

ROOSTER

Yeah, you might want to make an appointment with your tailor for a set of prison blues.

THADDEUS

Anyone know if the police are here yet?

LUCY

They're outside, but they're having difficulty extracting the chief from his squad car. They'll be a few more minutes. Instead of waiting for them to come to us, why don't we go to them?

THADDEUS

Excellent idea. Let's go, everyone.

They do so, all exiting together. LUCY comes back, quietly going to JULIA'S purse. She opens the purse, finds the napkin, which she reads. A beat as she puts it all together.

LUCY

No, no, no!

She makes to leave, is stopped by THADDEUS.

THADDEUS

Where are you off to, darling?

LUCY

(Attempting to play cool.)

Nothing, I was just going to join the others.

THADDEUS

I'm afraid I can't let you do that - not before we have a little chat.

LUCY

What are you planning to do? Kill me?

THADDEUS

I wouldn't harm you, my darling; you're far too valuable to me. Unless you left me with no alternative.

LUCY

Like the Colonel and Julia?

THADDEUS

(Angry.)

They spoiled everything! My plan was perfect - get the Colonel to put you into the will, marry you...

LUCY

How did you do it?

THADDEUS

(Proud.)

Kill them? Ah...everybody thought it was the drink, and they were right...and wrong. It wasn't the drink Julia brought the Colonel, or the water Reginald gave Julia. It was the champagne!

LUCY

Champagne?

THADDEUS

Used to celebrate the new will - the one you have in your hand. The one the Colonel made me witness as his lawyer. The one leaving all of his money to Julia, his floozy of the moment!

LUCY

But how...

THADDEUS

A slow acting poison - almost too slow in Julia's case. But then the Colonel drank a lot more than she did, and I think the hex I planted on the podium may have helped speed things along.

LUCY

That was you?

THADDEUS

Yes, trying to cover all bases. If that fool Reginald didn't dig himself a deep enough hole, I wanted to be sure that Mrs. Pridemore was next in line. She told me that the Colonel was deathly afraid of voodoo. I thought the hex might not only speed him on his way, but would make her a more likely suspect, since she was the only one who knew about his fears.

LUCY

Besides you, you mean.

THADDEUS

Come now, who makes a better suspect - the angry, jilted wife, or the dutiful lawyer? I had nothing to gain.

LUCY

Nothing to gain, except marrying the Colonel's heir?

THADDEUS

Hmmm. His heir - I never understood his connection with you. I suppose it started out as remorse, or perhaps it was fear of another curse. In the end, though...

LUCY

In the end, in spite of everything he was, and everything he had done, he cared for me. He was my friend.

THADDEUS

Yes, your friend - whatever that means. I can't complain though. He needed very little convincing to put you in his will. The hex almost ruined it all though - I didn't know about your history with that silly creole woman...

LUCY

(Fierce.)

Her name was Odilia Marie!

THADDEUS

(Moving toward her, threatening.)

Dearest, you are overly sentimental about people. Really, they're just a means to an end.

LUCY

(Backing up, stalling for time.)

And me? What end was I the means to?

THADDEUS

Money, and lots of it! The Colonel didn't owe money to the mob - that was me. While there are great advantages to knowing how to write the bosses signature, I was a little indiscreet in using that to power to cover some gambling debt. It got to the point where I couldn't cover the losses enough without some outside cash, so I got it from the mob. They're discreet, up to a point...at least until it's time to collect. By then I knew, the Colonel would be dead, we'd be married...

LUCY

But for how long? How long do you plan on keeping me around?

THADDEUS

Details, details...a few months, a year - maybe longer. It all depends on you keeping your mouth shut. It won't be so bad, really. We'll be filthy rich - surely that's some consolation.

(He leans in for a kiss, she tries to slap him, which he intercepts.)

So you won't play along. Pity - we'll have to do this the hard way. Any last words?

LUCY

(Fearful.)

How about...

(Strong.)

...did you get all that, Chief Budreaux?

JUSTIN

(From the back of the room.)

Yes I did, Miss Belletresse. Thaddeus Boondock, I arrest you for the murders of Cornelius Pridemore and Julia Floutgams!

The other actors appear from all corners of the room, led by the incredibly impressive chief of police, Justin Budreaux. A chase through the house ensues, with hijinks and pratfalls. Much hilarity. In the end, they apprehend Thaddeus.

JUSTIN

Miss Belletresse, that was a fine bit of detective work. How did you know?

LUCY

I didn't know it was Thaddeus...I was hoping it wouldn't be. I knew the killer would come back to get the napkin.

ROOSTER
Why?

LUCY
It's something that Julia said to me - about being the Colonel's favorite. She knew about the second will, and that gave her the idea to get one of her own. She got him drunk enough to write it on a cocktail napkin, then had Thaddeus act as witness. It spoiled his plans, and he had to act fast. Too bad he didn't read it closely - he could have saved himself a lot of bother.

CATHERINE
How do you mean.

LUCY
The Colonel signed it "Horny Corny."

ROOSTER
I've been responsible for a lot of wills being read, and I'm pretty sure that wouldn't stand up in court.

LUCY
He must have been rather drunk at the time.

CATHERINE
(Taking LUCY's hand.)
No, Cornelius was never too drunk to know what he was doing, especially when it came to his money. He took care of us, dear. He was no saint, but a better man than I gave him credit for.

REGINALD
And the Society?

CATHERINE
Reggie, the Society is safe - you will have your bequest. And, I'm sorry to tell you, a restraining order.

REGINALD
Ah, sorry...the fruit? A bit too much?

CATHERINE
I'm afraid so, yes.

THADDEUS
"Horny Corny," I can't believe it!

LUCY
As you said, "darling," details, details. But you forgot the most important detail of all.

JUSTIN

What is that?

LUCY

Never mess with a girl from the bayou!

Music - "Down Home" begins.

WELL, YOU SHOULD KNOW,

BETTER NEVER MEDDLE WITH A WOMAN WITH A CAJUN SOUL,

'CUZ SHE GOT THE HEAT,

LIKE A SPICY JAMBALAYA, IT'S FLAVOR THAT YOU CAN'T
CONTROL,

NOW HERE YOU COME,

A FANCY CITY-SLICHER WITH A CARPET BAG FULL OF TRICKS,

WON'T HELP YOU NOW,

BETTER BEND ON OVER 'CUZ IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO TAKE YOUR
LICKS;

DOWN HOME, SWEET HOME, LOU'SIAN',

THE FOLK START DANCIN' TO WHILE THE BAND PLAYS ZYDECO,

DOWN HOME, SWEET HOME, ON THE BAYOU,

WE'RE STIRRIN' AND STEWIN' AND MIXIN' UP A BIG POT O'
GUMBO.

THADDEUS

I WANTED POW'R,

MADE A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL AND I THOUGHT THAT HE WOULD
GIVE ME THE CROWN,

LUCY

BUT IN YOUR FINAL HOUR,

REMEMBER ALL IT TOOK WAS JUST A CAJUN GIRL TO BRING YOU
DOWN;

ALL

DOWN HOME, SWEET HOME, LOU'SIAN',

THE FOLKS RELAXIN' WHILE THEY LISTEN TO A DIXIELAND
BAND,

DOWN HOME, SWEET HOME, ON THE BAYOU,

WE'RE STIRRIN' AND STEWIN' AND MIXIN' UP A BIG POT O'
SPICY JAMBALAYA;

BAND VAMPS

REGINALD

(spoken)

Well, thank you so much for joining us tonight,
everyone, not everything went perfectly according to
plan, but one way or another most of us got what we
seemed to deserve. On behalf of the establishment thank
you for your generosity in participating in tonight's
event, now, if you will excuse us, we really must see
to some supper ourselves.

ALL

DOWN HOME, SWEET HOME LOU'SIAN',

THE FOLKS TAKE IT EASY WHILE THEY LISTEN TO A GREASY
FUNK BAND,

DOWN HOME, SWEET HOME, GOOD OL' NEW ORLEANS,

(spoken, variously)

We're stirrin' and stewin' and mixing up a big pot o'
red beans and rice, with some crawdads, coleslaw on the
side, maybe some collards with ham, okra fried up hot
and some spicy sausage, good and spicy, real spicy,
corn bread with molasses, then some peach cobbler...

BAND PLAYS CAST OFF STAGE