

theatre:
CALGARY

Stafford Arima, Artistic Director

PLAY GUIDE

Presented in partnership with the
Arts Club Theatre Company

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DIAL M FOR MURDER



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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2025-2026 Play Guides are intended to support your students' experience at Theatre Calgary this season. We encourage you to use some or all of these materials to provide context for your students before, during, and after their visit to Theatre Calgary. While not mandatory for students to enjoy the production, opportunities to connect art to personal life can deepen understanding and appreciation.

With that in mind, each guide provides you and your students with a range of contextual material. You will find background information on the play and playwright; social, linguistic, and historical context; expectations for the theatre; activities for you to lead in the classroom; and reflection questions to guide discussions. You'll find activities that connect to current events, are interdisciplinary, can be tied into your curriculum, and can be facilitated for various lengths of time.

Pages marked with a ★ can be photocopied and distributed to students.

We hope that you and your students enjoy your experience at Theatre Calgary this year!

ABOUT THE PLAY

SUMMARY.

Act 1.

The play is set in London in 1952. Margot Wendice and Maxine Hadley are drinking cocktails in Margot's living room. They discuss different ways that one could be killed and the different motives one might have. Margot admits that she burned all of Maxine's letters except for one. She lost the letter and was then sent two anonymous notes asking for a ransom if she wanted the letter back, or it would be given to her husband. Margot says she left £5,000 in the drop-off location, but the letter she lost was never returned to her.

Margot gives the ransom notes to Maxine and reveals that she only married Tony because her aunt encouraged her to, even though she is unhappy with him. We learn that Margot and Maxine had an affair, and after Margot left to focus on her relationship with Tony, Maxine was upset and now spends her days writing Margot letters, drinking, and writing a book. Tony arrives home but won't go out with them, so the two women leave without him.

Tony removes a framed photograph from a briefcase and sets it out. He then lays a pair of white gloves on the sofa. We hear the front door buzzer, and Tony, in disguise, opens the door to Captain Lesgate. As the two become acquainted, they learn that they both went to school at Cambridge at the same time. They then reveal that they are using false names: Stephen Fisher is Tony Wendice, and Captain Lesgate is C.A. Swann.

Tony tells Lesgate that he works for a publishing house and that he married Margot because she had money. He recounts how he struggled as a writer and how he befriended another writer named Maxine. His literary pursuits involved a lot of traveling, and his wife did not like the young women that attended his readings. One day Tony decided to spy on Margot and saw her entering Maxine's home. He saw Margot and Maxine get into an argument after cooking together and sharing a cigarette.

Tony admits that after he saw his wife with another woman, he fantasized about killing both of them. He reveals that Margot's will is worth two million pounds. Tony had told Margot he was going to give up writing and work in publishing. He now has a top job at the publishing house and is in charge of the sales push for Maxine's first novel. He tells Lesgate that he stole a love letter from his wife's handbag and sent her two ransom notes.

Tony reveals that he knows about Lesgate's time in prison and has been stalking him, discovering his many aliases and illegal activities. Tony blackmails Lesgate to murder Margot, or Tony will reveal Lesgate's true identity. Tony offers him the £5,000 his wife paid as ransom to do the job tomorrow night. Tony says he will hide the house key in the front hall, and Tony will call from a radio station where he will be doing an interview with Maxine. Lesgate is to kill Margot, whistle into the phone to let Tony know that the job is done, and make it seem like a break in before returning the key where he found it so that Tony may return it to Margot's handbag. When Tony returns with Maxine, he will find his wife dead and call the police.

The next evening Margot and Maxine sit in Margot's living room having cocktails. Margot is helping Maxine practice for her radio interview. While the women aren't looking, Tony takes Margot's key from her handbag and hides it in the hallway.

Later that evening, Lesgate attempts to sneak into the living room but is caught by Margot. He says he has been hired to kill her, and she must pay him £10,000 if she wants to know who hired him. The phone rings, and as Margot goes to answer it, Lesgate tries to strangle her with a scarf. Margot fights back, stabbing him with a pair of scissors and killing him. She picks up the phone and learns it's Tony. She tells him what happened, and he instructs her not to call the police until he returns.

Tony arrives home to comfort Margot. While she is getting dressed, he retrieves the key from Lesgate's pocket and returns it to Margot's handbag. After he calls the police, he replaces Lesgate's scarf with a stocking and moves the letter from his own wallet into Lesgate's pocket. The act ends as the front door buzzes.

STORY WHOOSH

is an interactive storytelling technique that enables any kind of plot to come alive, even without participants having prior knowledge.

- The teacher facilitates the shared storytelling by bringing individuals and groups in and out of the action.
- As soon as characters, objects, places, or events in the story (i.e., servants, bad thoughts, ships, etc.) are mentioned, the first students step into the circle and make a shape or pose that represents what has been narrated.
- At any time the teacher can say "Whoosh!," and students quickly return to their 'places' in a circle.
- Continue the story around the group, so that different students get to play various characters and everyone gets a chance to try several roles, regardless of gender.

Act 2.

The next morning, reporters call the Wendice residence, but Tony turns them all down. Maxine arrives to check on Margot. Margot tells Maxine that the man she killed admitted he had been hired to kill her and that she suspects Maxine of hiring him and writing the two ransom notes as revenge for breaking things off. Maxine denies it.

Chief Inspector Hubbard arrives. Hubbard shows Margot photos of Lesgate to see if she remembers him from before the attack, but she had never seen him before. Hubbard asks Tony who says he vaguely remembers meeting a man who looked similar but without a mustache. Margot tells Hubbard that she suspects Lesgate broke in through the french doors, but there was no sign of forced entry, and it was raining last night, which means Lesgate would have tracked mud through the apartment if he came in through the garden. So he must have used the front door. Tony recounts that Margot lost her handbag temporarily at a railway station recently, and that perhaps her key was stolen from her handbag. He claims to recognize Lesgate from that day at the railway station, accusing him of stealing the key, copying it, then returning it to the handbag.

When Hubbard and Margot are alone, Hubbard reveals to her that he found Maxine's letter in Lesgate's pocket; however, before the conversation can go any further, Tony and Maxine return. Hubbard questions Maxine about the letter. He says that after searching Lesgate's apartment, they found £5,000 that were traced back to Margot's bank account. Maxine shows Hubbard one of the ransom notes explaining that Margot was being blackmailed. Hubbard suggests that Margot let Lesgate in herself and then killed him.

Tony says he heard the incident over the phone and that everything transpired as Margot says. Hubbard suggests yet another version: that Lesgate stole Maxine's letter from Margot's handbag, used the letter to blackmail Margot, who then invited him to her home to retrieve the letter, but they argued, and she killed him. Tony accuses Hubbard and the police of planting clues. Margot reveals that Lesgate said he'd been hired to kill her.

A few months later, Margot was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. Tony is in the living room when the front door buzzes. It's Maxine. She says she hasn't spoken to Margot since she was arrested. We learn that Maxine's book was pulled in light of the scandal, and Tony has lost his job.

Maxine tells Tony that she knows he is behind the ransom notes and that he hired Lesgate to kill Margot. She hands Tony one of the ransom notes, and tells him that she will go to the police with his fingerprints on the note unless he gives her half of Margot's money. Tony says they'll only get the money if Margot is executed.

Inspector Hubbard arrives, and Tony tells him that Maxine was planning to blackmail him for Margot's money. Maxine accuses Tony of being behind the ransom notes and hiring Lesgate. Tony reveals that when he came home the night of the incident, he saw his wife rummaging through Lesgate's pockets looking for "a letter." Maxine says that when Margot hears that Tony has implicated her in the crime, she will remove him from her will. Maxine exits. Hubbard then discreetly switches his own raincoat with Tony's and leaves as well.

Tony calls a reporter offering to sell Maxine's letter for £1,000. Suddenly, Margot appears. She says she escaped out of the car on the way back to the prison. She asks Tony for help. The phone rings. It's the police station letting Tony know that Margot's handbag and other possessions are to be picked up. Tony hangs up and tells Margot that they will sneak onto a friend's yacht and run away to another country. He exits to bring the car around.

As Margot is alone in the living room, Maxine and Inspector Hubbard unlock the front door and enter. They reveal that they were working together to get Tony to confess to blackmailing Margot. They hear somebody trying to unlock the front door, but the key does not fit. The front door buzzes and someone knocks on the door. Eventually the person at the door leaves.

Hubbard reveals that he switched coats with Tony so that Tony had Hubbard's key and couldn't open the front door just now. He tells Margot that he strongly suspects that Tony plotted to murder her. Hubbard explains Tony's instructions for Lesgate to access the key and how Tony attempted to remove the key from Lesgate's pocket but mistakenly took Lesgate's own key instead.

Hubbard expects Tony to visit the police station to get Margot's handbag with the key from inside. Soon enough, we hear someone trying to open the front door, but the key doesn't fit. Margot grabs an ice pick worried that Hubbard and Maxine are tricking her. Tony identifies himself from behind the door. Then, a moment later, the front door opens and he enters, holding Margot's key which he just retrieved from its hiding place in the hallway. He sees Margot, Maxine, and Hubbard—caught in the act. Hubbard picks up the phone and dials.

Adapted from [Northlight Theatre Accessibility Guide](#)

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN.



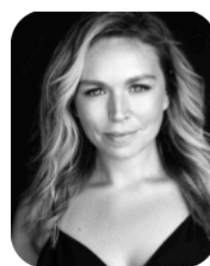
MARGOT WENDICE

wealthy socialite; married to Tony; Maxine's former lover



TONY WENDICE

failed writer turned publisher; married to Margot; Maxine's former agent and lover



MAXINE HADLEY

thriller writer; former lover of Margot and Tony (not concurrently)



LESGATE

childhood friend of Tony; unsavoury character with many aliases



INSPECTOR HUBBARD

lead detective on the case

FAMOUS FICTIONAL DETECTIVES

1. Sherlock Holmes
2. *Murder She Wrote's* Jessica Fletcher
3. Nancy Drew
4. The Hardy Boys
5. Hercule Poirot & Miss Marple
6. Kristen Bell as Veronica Mars
7. James Patterson's Alex Cross
8. Tony Shaloub as Adrian Monk
9. Dick Tracy
10. The Pink Panther's Inspector Clouseau



HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT.



3 FACTS ABOUT DIAL M FOR MURDER

- 1** *Dial M for Murder* is not a traditional whodunnit because the audience already knows who did it, but will they get away with it?
- 2** *Dial M for Murder* has been referenced in everything from Red Skelton comedy sketches to episodes of *Saturday Night Live* and *The Simpsons*.
- 3** Jeffrey Hatcher's adaptation changes Tony's profession to publishing to raise the stakes and shifts Max to Maxine to allow for additional secrets and intrigue.

EXAMPLES OF WOMEN IN LOVE IN THE THEATRE

God of Vengeance (1918), by Sholom Ash, created such a scandal with the first kiss between two women on stage that the entire company was charged with indecency.

The Children's Hour (1934), by Lillian Hellman, is set in a girls' boarding school where two head mistresses are accused of an affair that ruins their careers.

Stop Kiss (2000), by Diana Son, produced at the Public Theater, featured two women assaulted on the street after their first kiss.

Fun Home (2013), a Jeanine Tesori musical based on the autobiographical graphic novel of Alison Bechdel, tells the story of young Alison as she comes into herself through observations of her father.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DIAL M FOR MURDER

1952. Frederick Knott's *Dial M for Murder* premieres on London's West End and then Broadway, running a total of 977 performances!

1958. The first of several TV adaptations airs on American television.

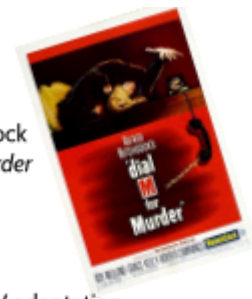
1981. A third television adaptation airs!

2022 The latest version of *Dial M for Murder*, adapted by Jeffrey Hatcher—with permission from Frederick Knott's estate—opens at the Old Globe Theatre in California

1954. Alfred Hitchcock adapts *Dial M for Murder* for the silver screen.

1967. The second TV adaptation airs... in colour!

1998. A film adaptation that combines characters and changes the reveal is released under the name, *A Perfect Murder*. The movie stars Gwyneth Paltrow, Michael Douglas, and Viggo Mortensen.



WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE



An open mind.

Let the performance surprise you! Stay open to what can happen. Look for moments of theatrical magic (how did they change that costume so quickly?) and unexpected dialogue.

Assigned seats.

Every seat in the theatre offers a unique perspective on the action. Appreciate what you can see from your seat that someone else might not.

Live actors.

The performers on stage can see you, hear you, and feel your energy. And actors love student audiences! Laugh when something is funny! Gasp when you're surprised! Applaud when you're impressed! The actors thrive on audience reactions.

A break from reality.

Theatre-makers ask the audience to "suspend their disbelief." If someone on stage says the red ribbon is blood, then it is! If an actor takes flight, then imagine you can't see the strings. This is what the actors ask of the audience. Embrace the magic of theatre.

Questions.

Listen carefully to the story being told. If you have a question, keep your voice to a whisper so it doesn't disturb others. (See the call out on Q + As to help you form great questions for the team behind the show.) Let yourself be challenged by the content. What new ideas or perspectives are you hearing?

Disconnection.

Put your phone away and immerse yourself in the technology of the theatre. The sounds and lights from your device are distracting to the actors, fellow audience members, and you! Plus, the law says that photos and videos aren't allowed, anyway.

PREPARING Q'S FOR A Q + A

While you watch the show, consider how the creative team (see pg. 10) brings the story to life on stage for you.

Consider questions about the process:

- How did the lighting / set / costume / sound designer...
- What made the director choose to...
- How did the playwright decide to...

Ask questions about the story:

- Why did [character] make the decision to...
- Can you explain how...
- Why didn't _____ happen?

Learn more about each job:

- Why did you decide to become a...
- What do I need to do to become a...
- What has been your favorite...



THEATRE TEAM TALKBACK

Theatre is a 'team sport,' and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life. After your show, you'll have a chance to ask questions of the creative team. Here are some of the folks you might expect to speak with:

The Playwright writes the script, sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story—decides what the characters say and, often, gives the designers guidelines on how the play should look.

The Director creates the vision for the production, how it will look on stage, and works closely with the actors, costume, set, and lighting designers to make sure everyone tells the same story.

The Actors use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

The Designers imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will compliment and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision.

The Stage Manager assists the director during rehearsals by taking detailed notes and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. They run the show during each performance by making sure the actors' entrances and exits and the lights and sound all run smoothly.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

IF YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES...

Two Truths and a Lie

Dial M for Murder spins a web of lies among its three primary characters. This brief exercise gives students permission to tell lies with the intention of passing them off as truths.

Focus Question. What makes a statement believable or unbelievable?

Objective. Students will be able to get to know each other and practice communication skills

Procedure.

- 1 Explain the process of the game: Each student will come up with three statements about themselves. Two of the statements must be true, and one should be a lie. The other members of your group will try to guess which one is the lie.
- 2 Model the process with your own three statements. Ask the class to guess which statement is the lie. When you reveal the correct answer, briefly explain the truth behind the statements.
- 3 Give students 'think time' to prepare their statements. Encourage them to be creative, less obvious, and not to worry about it having to be "interesting."
- 4 Break students into pairs or small groups. Have them take turns sharing their 3 statements and guessing which is the lie. Support time-keeping by encouraging them to keep moving. If needed, assign a time limit for each participant.
- 5 Reflect on the experience:
 - What did you learn about someone in your group that surprised you?
 - How did you decide what lie to tell—and how did you make it believable?

IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

Underscoring a Mystery

Much of a thriller like Dial M for Murder relies on mood music to heighten tension and set a tone of suspense. This activity encourages students to think like sound designers as they choose a soundtrack that sets the mood to tell a story.

Focus Question. How does music impact the mood of a piece of text?

Objective. Students will be able to make artistic choices to underscore a short piece of text.

Procedure.

- 1 Cut & distribute copies of [this contentless scene](#)—a short dialogue that is intentionally open for interpretation—and have students practice it with a partner.
- 2 Have three groups share their interpretation of the scene and discuss what their choices reveal about the character, setting, and/or conflict.
- 3 Play three instrumental songs (YouTube links in the box to the right) for students twice.
1st play: Just listen to the music
2nd play: Listen for shifts in mood, tempo, rhythm, etc.
- 4 Return students to their partnerships, and play each song a 4th time as students perform the scene in their pairs at the same time.
- 5 Each partnership should discuss which of the songs best suited the mood for their interpretation.
- 6 Play each song one last time, and groups should only perform when their chosen song is played. Instruct them to watch the groups perform who have selected a different option.
- 7 For a short debrief, ask students:
 - What did they consider when choosing a song?
 - What did they notice about others' interpretations of the scene that were underscored with the other songs?

Instrumental Songs for Underscoring

- [Ravda](#) by Michael Sarian & Olec Mün
- [...And Justice for All](#) by Metallica
- [Storm](#) from *Cirque du Soleil*

IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR...

Pitching an Adaptation

Dial M for Murder, a play written in 1952, has been adapted for stage, television, and the big screen. For each adaptation, changes need to be made to meet the needs of the genre.

Focus Question. What changes need to be made to a movie script in order for it to be successful on the stage?

Objective. Students will be able to determine primary differences between film and stage scripts to determine what needs to adapt a story for a live audience.

Procedure.

- 1 Divide students into groups of at least three: a playwright, director, and designer or design team. *Review the responsibilities of these roles for the theatre on pg. 10 of this Play Guide.*
- 2 Have students come to consensus on a movie they'd like to adapt into a play.

NOTE. Doing this before Step 3 ensures that students are working with something that excites them rather than something "easy."
- 3 Walk through this [brief slide deck](#) that guides students through the primary differences between playscripts and screenplays to ensure all students have background knowledge, regardless of their experience in these genres.
- 4 Frame for students that they will be meeting with a team of theatre producers who will listen to their pitch and determine if they are willing to back their theatre production.
- 5 Their presentation can include slides, posters, even a trailer, or simply a verbal pitch, depending on time. (Some groups will come to consensus very easily and others will need the whole time to discuss.)
- 6 Pair groups and have them pitch their productions to one another.
- 7 To debrief, ask who was paired with a theatre company that made a particularly compelling pitch. What made it so? This is the heart of choosing a story worthy of adaptation.

FOR THEIR PITCH

As a theatre company, they will need to discuss what will be different from the movie and what will stay the same.

- What characters will remain, and who will need to be cut?
- What challenges will this story present in shifting to a live show?
- What will you keep the same from the film and what will you change? Why?
- Why will this story be a compelling stage production?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

A theatrical experience is not complete without reflection. What is the audience talking about when they leave the theatre? Here are some questions to pose to your students following their experience at *Dial M for Murder* at Theatre Calgary.

- 1 Why do you think people are so fascinated by detective mysteries in all formats?
- 2 What role does trust play in a relationship? How important is it to be able to completely trust another person? Why?
- 3 Is it possible to commit a crime and not get caught? How do you feel about the possibility of committing the perfect crime?
- 4 How does this play comment on the stereotypical gender roles of the time period? How did this production address those stereotypes?
- 5 How would you define ambition? What drives you? Have you ever stepped over the line of what you thought was right or moral to get what you wanted?

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