

I'LL BE BACK BEFORE MIDNIGHT

TECHNICAL NOTES

The atmosphere of the play is Gothic. From the moment Greg and Jan enter the farmhouse the set and the lighting should reflect a shadowy decay, so that when the lights first go up and Jan looks around, the audience can appreciate her lack of enthusiasm for the place. Pacing is very important in this type of play, and it should be directed at a good clip so that the story moves relentlessly towards its conclusion. It is a tricky play to stage technically, but not beyond the capability of even small theatres. It does take more planning and more careful execution than the average play, but the results can be well worth the extra effort. It poses certain challenges, but as I hope these notes will show, it is not out of reach for even the most primitively equipped theatre.

One important point regarding the big "jumps", and the scary sequences that occur throughout the play. These take a lot of rehearsal time because the timing is so important, so extra rehearsal time should be scheduled for these sequences. Thrillers are different in this respect from other kinds of play. Also, since a number of the key scenes are played in near darkness it is important that the actors be given ample time to practice in those conditions. Acting in low light can be very disorienting.

Peter Colley

CHARACTERIZATIONS

JAN: She has come from a mental hospital, but she is the sanest person in the play. There is a tendency to play her as too neurotic. She has recovered from a nervous breakdown, but the key word is "recovered". There are chinks in her armour but she is essentially a rational, functioning human being. In fact the audience should relate to her very strongly, and admire her spunky spirit. She is insecure about a number of things, but as the play unfolds it becomes obvious that she has every right to be.

GREG: The danger here is to "telegraph" the end of the play. If Greg becomes a steely-eyed maniac intent on destruction right from page 1, then much of the surprise is lost. Jan isn't stupid, she cares about this man for a reason so he must exude a quirky charm. He must give us enough glimpses of affection toward Jan that the audience excuses his coldness and insensitivity, and are still rooting for their marriage to work. You don't want people saying "what the hell does she see in the idiot?" Greg must also have a certain sexual charisma. If he looks too much like an egghead the audience will not accept the fact that two intelligent and attractive women are fighting over him.

LAURA: The problem here is playing her mono-dimensional. She can easily end up being the classic soap-opera bitch, but it should be played against that. What she says and does is bad enough without spitting all her lines out. Laura is a human being too. Her great sin is wanting one man too much. It is best to play against the lines. In her scenes with Jan she should be all sweetness and light. That is what gives the sting to what she actually says.

GEORGE: George has been played many different ways, and many of them work well. He can be fat and slow-talking, or skinny and hyperactive. It just requires an actor with a good sense of both comedy and drama.

DETAILED NOTES

ACT I

Incidental Music

The mood can be set with pre-show taped music. Like all the music used between the scenes it should be dark, brooding music with a powerful sense of foreboding. Use of organ music can be a bit too Gothic, strings seem to capture the mood best, and there is also some excellent electronic music available, some of which has been composed as soundtracks for film. The music used between scenes should build in intensity as the play progresses.

The Car Headlights

Scene 1. Top of play. This effect is best achieved with someone in the wings holding a powerful hand-held light (such as a garden floodlight), and moving it across the darkened room.

The Darkness

Scene 1. Opening. The only time there is complete darkness on stage is between the scenes. During the actual scenes when the lights are supposed to be off there is always a small amount of light. Depending on the scene, the amount of fill-in light varies, and will be discussed as each scene comes up. The opening darkness can be quite dark, as there are no points of information necessary at this stage. The hallway should be quite dark, and if the set design includes a window in the hallway (see the ground plan) then it would be nice to see the silhouette of Greg just before he does his fall.

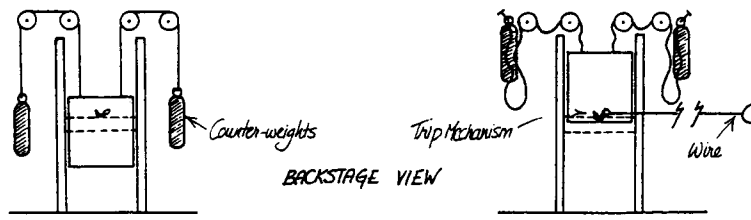
Greg's Fall

Scene 1. Opening. It is the loudness of this fall that makes it amusing. One does not want to put Greg out of commission within the first minute of the play, so that pratfall is safest if he is carrying a couple of suitcases (empty) and throws them noisily to the ground as he falls.

The Lights Come Up

Scene 1. Opening. Try not to give the set that overlit, washed out effect of a drawing room comedy. Try to use small desk and table lamps and light the room naturally, so that some areas are darker than others.

The Sliding Hatch



* Rub a candle on the wooden runners if it sticks too much.

In ACT II, Scene 3, where the hatch “accidentally” slams down, the technique is to take up the counter weights and have a trip mechanism controlled by a wire. (Beware of string, it breaks, it stretches.)

The Exploding Stove

Scene 1. If this one works well you’ve got the audience spooked already. The set explodes! What’s next? However the audience knows it’s going to blow because of the set-up, so don’t disappoint them. A feeble little “phhut” or someone firing a blank into a tin off-stage won’t meet their expectations. A flashpot in the stove should do it. Flashpots and firing systems are available to hire/buy. Safety should come first. Electricity operated flashpots are available in a range of sizes and either medium or regular would be ideal for this effect.

The Flashpot

The Flashpot should be an electrically insulated and fireproof box. This may not be legal in all areas. Check with your local authority. Commercially available flashpots should be positioned/fixed within the stove so that the “flash” can be seen by the audience. The firing/control wires should extend to the side of the stage. The flashpot should be fired from a suitable safety box.

The Squib

In the UK, squibs are called “maroons”. Commercially available maroons are available in a range of sizes. Size depends on the size of the theatre, but medium should be suitable to achieve the desired “loud bang”. It is not important that the loud bang comes from the exact position on stage where the effect is taking place. All maroons *must* be left off, safely positioned somewhere back stage, inside a properly constructed “Bomb Tank”. Maroons should also be fired from a suitable safety firing box. The “Bomb Tank” must be a suitable metal container fitted with a mesh top to prevent accidents.

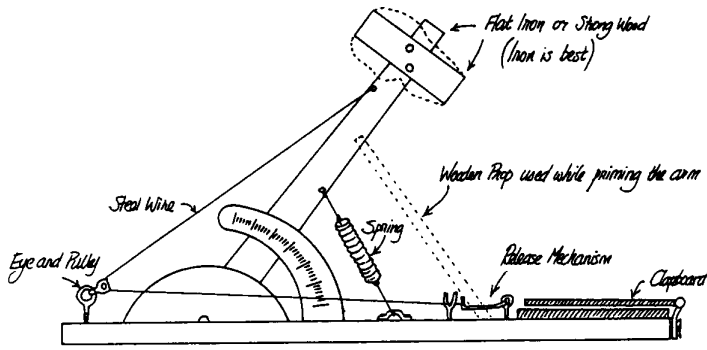
Control and Safety

Safety must be the prime consideration. There are various systems available for firing flashpots and squibs/maroons, and you should opt for a system which includes both a key switch and individual circuit firing buttons. Some areas and some theatres specify special conditions for pyrotechnics. It is important that the operator is in sight of the effect in order to ensure that no theatre personnel are too close to the effect itself or the “Bomb Tank”.

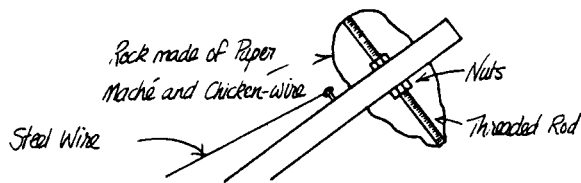
NOTE: In the UK it is illegal to manufacture or modify any pyrotechnic device. Samuel French Ltd are indebted to Howorth Wrightson Ltd who have checked and amended the above special effects notes from the first edition of this play. These effects are available from Howorth Wrightson Ltd, The Prop House, Unit 2, Cricket Street, Denton, Manchester M34 3DR. Tel: 0161-335 0220; fax: 0161-320 3928.

The “Contraption”

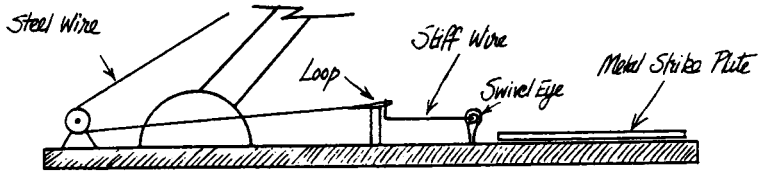
Scene 1. The biggest problem is usually that the contraption is built too small and it does not have enough impact when it is triggered. The base and the swinging arm should be at least two feet long and in order to get the arm to swing down with sufficient velocity it should be spring-loaded.



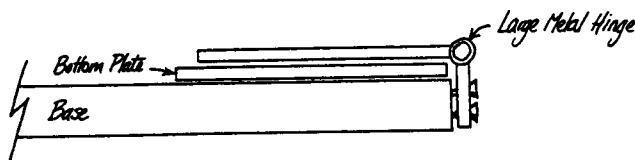
It is very hard to clamp a real rock to the end of the arm so I suggest the following technique:



If you are pressed for time and resources, a fake rock on the end of the swinging arm is not vital. You can use just the bare metal as a hammer. The triggering mechanism is also tricky, and must be placed in such a way that when George accidentally puts his mug on the base it triggers the arm without hitting George. You could try something as simple as this:



The contraption can be fancied up with fake gauges and calibrations for additional effect. To increase the sound the metal strike plate can have another piece of metal placed on it as a kind of "clap-board".



The Hatch Jolts Open

Scene 1. This can be a real "jumper" for the audience if it's done properly. The key is that Jan must be right next to the hatch but looking toward the hallway. This keeps the audience's focus away from the hatch. When it jolts open right behind her it is most

effective when accompanied by a loud noise. Ironically those jerry-built hatches that screech horribly when they open are by far the best. Of course you don't want it to stick either. Alternatively some kind of "clacking" device may be installed on the inside of the hatch which would be triggered by the hatch opening and closing. If all this is too tricky then simply leave the hatch open and have Greg's head "pop" into view.

Spilling the Coffee

Scene 1. Just use a cup of lukewarm water. It drops too fast for the audience to see it (they are also distracted by the knock on the door), and when it soaks into cloth it looks dark like coffee anyway.

The Contraption Hits George's Mug

Scene 1. It may not be possible (or particularly safe) to demolish George's mug. That is only for the adventurous director and actor. Provided the arm comes down with enough of a whack nearby, the desired effect will be achieved.

The Flint Axe

Scene 1. Make this a decent size. At least two feet long in the handle, possibly longer. The axe that is used in the final scene of the play can be made of a variety of materials, except, of course stone. Try to make it as realistic as possible without making it a deadly weapon. One of the best methods is to make the axe that Jan attacks Greg with (and the identical one that appears to get imbedded in Greg's back) out of plywood. Properly shaped and painted it can look realistic even from a few feet away. All the other Stone Age weapons can be made from real rocks lashed into the cleft of a stick and bound with leather thongs. This is pretty much how the Stone Age men made them.

Lighting in Scene Three

Scene 3. The lighting should be particularly spooky during this scene. As it is very late at night bright interior lighting should be avoided. A few well placed practicals (desk lights, sconces, etc.) with the bare minimum of fill-in lighting should give the desired atmosphere.

The Heartbeat

Scene 3. This may sound a bit corny, but it has a remarkable effect on an audience. If it is possible to have it start slowly and quietly and then build in volume and tempo then the tension can be greatly increased. At first the audience should not know if it's just the sound of their own heartbeat.

The Scratching at the Window

Scene 3. For some reason it is very hard to approximate the sound of fingernails scraping on glass and have it heard throughout the theatre. Styrofoam (polystyrene) makes some interesting noises. What has worked in a small theatre is a houseplant size rake (a clawlike tool about six inches long) scraped over brick.

The Black-out

Scene 3. The credibility of the two black-outs in this scene are crucial to the play. There should be a faint blue light coming in through the windows. Anyone who has lain awake on a moonlit night will recall that the light comes in through the windows. Too much use of overhead blue lights makes it feel like you're in a field rather than a house, and it is worth keeping in mind that moonlight has more white/gray in it than blue. It may be necessary to cheat in a little more fill-in light in the final black-outs, because the action

becomes more frantic and there is more to see. In this sequence (Scene 3) there is nothing the audience *has* to see, but some things they *mustn't* see. If you are in doubt make the black-outs in ACT I very dark, with only the faintest light delineating the shape of the windows. A shaft of moonlight is a very atmospheric effect, catching the edges of furniture and filling the room with ambiguous shadows.

Use of Incidental Music

Scene 3. The first entrance of the hermit (George in disguise) is a good time to use incidental music/sound effects. In terms of logic one could say that it had been added to the heartbeat tape by whoever is trying to drive Jan crazy. In terms of the heightened tension that it generates, it can be very powerful. The use of a long drawn out chord, either strings or electronics, as is commonly used in horror film soundtracks, gets the best results. It is useful to use it in this scene because the first entrance of the hermit is one of the most difficult scenes to make work well. The use of the soundtrack can help push it over the edge.

The Flashlight (Torch)

Scene 3. The flashlight (called torches in the UK) should be a powerful one with a rugged case. It will get some abuse. Also it is very important that spare flashlights (at least two) are hidden around the set, and that Jan practices getting them in the dark. If you only have one flashlight it is guaranteed to fail on opening night. And the batteries should be fresh and well charged.

George's Face at the Window

Scene 3. This can be a deceptively big scare, the key is to have George's face "pop" into the window and have the face well enough lit. Because of the low light on the set at this time this is often a problem but it is possible to "cheat" with the light of the flashlight/torch he is holding illuminating his face from below.

Laura's Entrance in the Dark

Scene 3. This blackout should be the darkest in the whole play. Because Laura is often clothed in white she can be seen easily in even the lowest of lights. It is vital that the audience DOES NOT see Laura before the lights come back on at the end of Act I. If they see her it not only ruins a great moment it also runs the risk of telling the audience too much about Laura's intentions. If necessary the lights should be cheated very low for Laura's entrance.

The Shotgun Blast

Scene 3. The very best blasts are the ones that send a shower of sparks across the room, although I have heard that firearm laws in Canada have been tightened in recent years so that may be more difficult. There are a number of different sizes of blank cartridge available, it really depends on the size of your theatre. One way of getting the sparks is to use a styrofoam (polystyrene) plug at the end of the cartridge which burns up in flight, but check with your local authority about this. Naturally Jan must aim it well away from Laura. Laura can even be on the floor before the blast if that is possible.

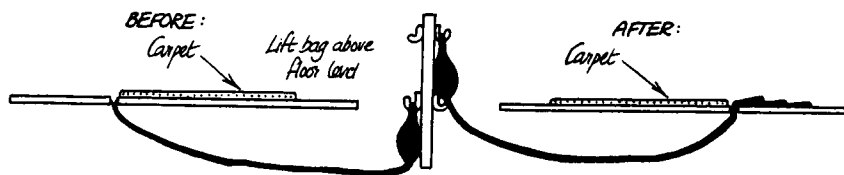
You will run into some problems regarding the use of a shotgun on stage, and safety practices must be adhered to. The Stage Manager may have to get a Firearms Certificate, and the local police may have to be notified. When the Stage Manager puts the blanks in the gun it is wise to do this in the presence of the actors and allow them to double-check the blanks. Alternatively the Stage Manager can give the blanks to the

actor/actress who is being fired *at*, and let them examine the cartridges and load the gun. From then until the gun is placed in its rack on stage it should not be out of the Stage Manager's possession. The procedure should be followed between the Acts and every night.

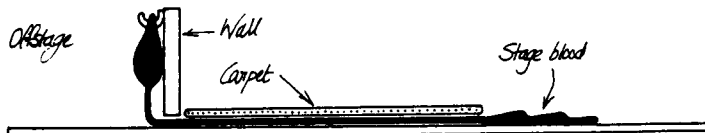
ACT II

Blood on the Floor

Scene 2. It's not absolutely vital to see the blood on the floor, but it is very effective if it can be done. If the location of the blood is behind the sofa Jan can go down there with a cloth and come up with a red stain on it, and leave the rest up to the audience's imagination. If you'd like to see blood, then this can be achieved in a number of ways, depending on your theatre. The simplest depends on whether you have under-floor access, and can drill a hole in the stage floor. That routine would go like this:



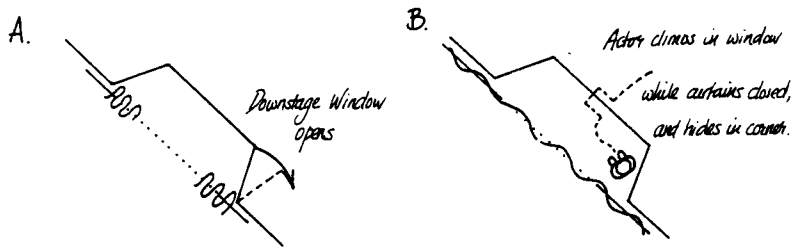
If you have no access then it's a bit trickier. Try to keep the location of the blood near to a wall. (The location is mentioned by George in Act I). With this method the blood source should be connected just before it is needed. A great amount is not needed, but if the play is working the audience will all crane their necks to see where it is, so make it visible. The tube should be a thin, flexible, plastic tube like that used for IV's in hospital. The IV bags are also perfect for storing and squeezing out the blood, but a number of other things can be used.



The Hand From the Window

Scene 2. The timing of this sequence is critical. Don't telegraph the hand, as it should be a complete shock. Almost as soon as Jan closes the curtains and turns, the hand should dart out and grab her by the throat. She should have to struggle to get free and then of course she runs straight to the door and that's where the audience gets hit with the second big scare.

How does the hand get there? There are several ways of doing this. The set can have a panel that opens like A:



Or, as in B, it is probably simpler to have either Greg or George slip in through the window while the curtains are closed and wait in the corner of the bay window, hidden from the audience by the downstage drape.

The Corpse

Scene 2. Just use the actress playing Laura as the corpse. More than one theatre has gone to great expense to make a dummy corpse only to scrap it later. Dummy corpses just don't look as effective as the real thing. She does not have to be actually hung, although if you have a body harness and a place to hang it from (and can talk the actress into it), then by all means indulge yourself. Usually having Laura grab hold of a rope and stand on tip-toe is quite sufficient. She can sway slightly and this simulates a dangling body quite effectively. She doesn't have to hang from her neck, she can be hanging from her wrists. Also the corpse should be well enough lit that the full shock impact is felt, but still be realistic.

The Hatch Slams Shut

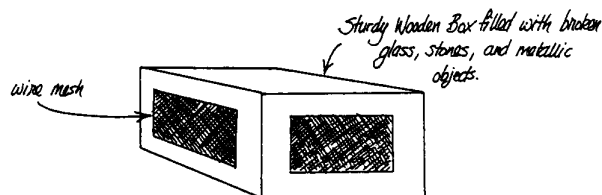
Scene 3. See earlier description of hatch mechanism.

The Crash on the Double Doors

Scene 3. For some reason this crash is sometimes "telegraphed". A small knock often seems to precede the big crash. The loudest crash should come first and it should be timed to come almost as soon as Jan puts the phone down.

Smashing the Window

Scene 3. There's no need to actually smash a window, but the old box full of broken glass routine works as long as it's a big box. Again, the volume of the crash must be big enough to create the effect that a window is breaking. This is best achieved by using a wooden box full of broken glass, one or more sides of which is open and covered with mesh. This allows the sound of the glass to get out when the box is tipped.



The Choreography of the Flashlights / Torches

The flashlights are very important, especially in ACT II, Scene 3. What the light from the flashlight does in this sequence is the same as a camera does in film — it focuses the

audience's attention on specific details. The sickle, George's face, the shovel. It is especially important in the last scene of the play to have the movement of the flashlight beam(s) carefully orchestrated.

Sometimes two flashlights have been used. One is placed by Greg (after he enters through the window) on a table or sideboard and provides a fixed beam that the actors can work around. It acts like a "Baby-Spot", and providing it is set in exactly the same place every night, and cannot get knocked over during the fight it can be useful. It gets taken off-stage by George when he ambles off to the fuse-box at the very end of the play.

Alternatively Jan can light a candle or two after all the lights go out, just before she calls George's brother. Because of the urgency of that particular scene it would be necessary for the candles to be in a convenient place (after all, these black-outs have happened before) with matches nearby. Over the fireplace for example. The gentle light from these candles can give a very naturalistic light without showing too much. They throw shadows that move eerily, and give the actors a 'hot spot' where their faces can be seen in the long black-out sequence at the end of the play.

George's Big Jump

Scene 3. When Greg shoots George he should fall behind the sofa where the audience cannot see him. Then Greg and Jan have their short scene, and George leaps unexpectedly from the shadows. This is another scare which is often telegraphed. While it is a bit scary to see George slowly stirring and getting up, it is nothing like so effective as him just leaping at them out of the darkness. This is easily done if George is half-hidden behind the sofa and Jan and Greg are talking quite nearby.

The Big Fight

This should be fun, and very energetic. It needs plenty of rehearsal time and also quite a bit of practice in low light. It is definitely possible to have a rip-roaring fight and still keep it safe. Go for broke and have furniture lying all over the stage, vases demolished and both the actors and audience left breathless.

There are two big moments in the fight. The first occurs when George is thrown on to the sofa and Greg raises the shovel to hit him while he is prostrate. George rolls off the sofa on to the floor and the shovel lands on the empty sofa with a mighty thump. Greg should make sure that George is clear before he starts the downward thrust, but then he should put all his force into the blow. In low light it really looks as though it JUST missed George.

The other big moment is similar. George falls behind the sofa or chair and we see Greg bringing the shovel down on him again. The trick is to have a cushion velcro'd to the back of the sofa and George grabs it and lays it down next to him on the floor. It is this cushion that Greg attacks with such vigour and it should sound very much like the shovel is hitting George.

Greg Turns on Jan

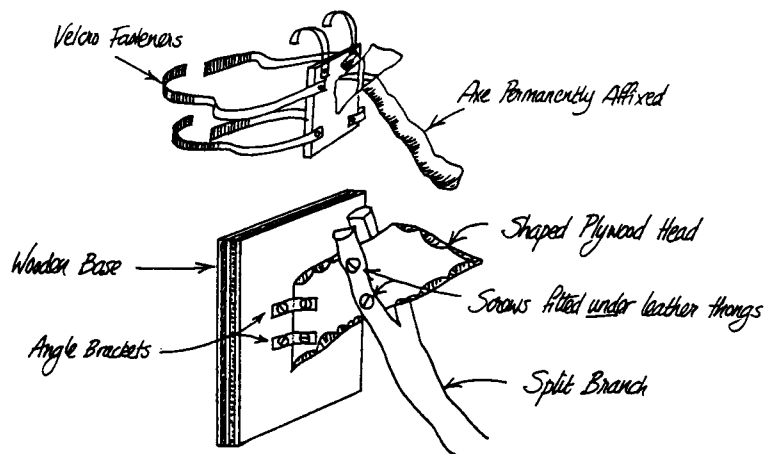
Again, it is important that we see this. Either use the two flashlight system, or have Jan hold the flashlight up to her face, or she can place the flashlight on the floor with the beam illuminating the back wall, and play the scene with Greg in silhouette. If candles are being used then the scene can be played near them.

George and Greg's Scene

The lighting is crucial in this scene. Laura cannot be seen very well because George has only opened one half of the double doors. This means that the actress playing Laura can relax a bit and does not need to be on tip-toe until later when Greg opens the other side of the double doors at the very end of the play. George brings a candle in and places it on the table. Then the stage lights can cheat up in that area to fill in. Jan, meanwhile, has to remain forgotten in the shadows until she comes out at the very last moment. She can be visible, but unobtrusive.

The Killing of Greg

When Greg goes off-stage to get the hermit outfit he has to go through a FAST change routine. Firstly he puts on a harness made like this:



Then he slips the coat over that. The coat has a slit down the back through which the axe fits. Then for the brief moment that he returns on stage he keeps his back away from the audience. Jan attacks him from behind.

We do not see Jan at all until she leaps out of the shadows with the axe. After the attack Greg staggers a couple of steps forward and slumps over the back of the sofa revealing the axe embedded in his back.

The area lighting provided to fill in for the candle should spill enough to make all this visible. The lights may have to be cheated up for this sequence because it is vital to see what Jan goes through after the attack. The final moments are predominantly visual, so it is important to see Jan's various reactions, as they tie up the storyline. If it is too dark during this sequence none of this will become apparent.

Embedding the Axe into Greg's Back

This is a simple, but quite realistic technique. Jan is hiding in a corner and picks up one of Greg's axes (the plywood one of course.) When she is behind Greg she brings the axe down on him and it hits the wooden base on Greg's back. Then Jan drops the axe unobtrusively to the floor, behind a piece of furniture. Greg suddenly wheels around, and the axe harnessed to his back becomes visible to the audience.

Greg's Final Speech on the Tape Recorder

Try to have this speech on a separate pre-recorded cassette in the portable tape recorder, with a backup on the main sound system. It sounds much more realistic if the

sound comes from the portable tape player itself. Be sure to get a tape recorder with a small red LED (Light Emitting Diode) that goes on whenever the ~record" button is pressed. The "record" button can be pressed without pressing the "play" button so the voice tape is not taped over.

The Curtain Call

It's been a heavy ending but it's over, but the curtain call music can be made more light-hearted by using some up-tempo music. Reminds the audience that it's only a play.