

The First Two Pages of “You Know How Actresses Are” by C.M. Surrisi

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An Essay by C.M. Surrisi

My middle grade mystery *A Side of Sabotage* was nominated for an Agatha in 2019 and I had the pleasure of attending my first Malice Domestic conference that Spring. I met so many wonderful mystery fans and mystery writers at the conference, and I came away toying with the idea of writing a cozy mystery for grown-ups. But because I know it takes me a year to write a novel, and I wasn't sure the adult cozy genre was going to be for me, I turned to a short story. At the conference, Malice Domestic announced its call for the 2020 anthology *Mystery Most Theatrical*, a topic dear to my heart, so I was launched.

Leaping from middle grade to adult mystery is a little like being able to stretch your arms out wide and run around in unlimited vocabulary, complex sentence structure, crimier crime, and cheekier cheek. Don't get me wrong, middle grade has just as much heart, suspense, and irony as adult mystery, but there are some well-established limitations—no drugs, sex, gore, on-the-page murder... you get the picture. But I don't like those things in my adult reading, so I don't miss them when I write for kids.

I do, however, desire to write in the style of older mysteries that have that detective club charm—a genre not necessarily appreciated by modern kids. And I

have always wanted to write from the POV of an adult female amateur sleuth. In this context, I decided to write in the 1940-'50s period, draw allusions from a classical mystery stage play, and fill it full of nosy, jealous, and murderous women.

I typically start a story with a title, but this time, I decided to focus on setting the scene by opening within a theatrical scene on stage. I chose *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and I went for the hook:

Cordelia Huntington suffered a nervous breakdown while on stage playing Aunt Martha in *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

Next, I set the time and place of the story:

It was the Comstock Theater's 1953 Summer Repertory Season opening production, and Cordelia's seventh time performing the role in one venue or another.

Since the anthology guidelines set a limit on the story of 5000 words, I felt I could dedicate no more than one page to the introductory scene.

I had three goals for the scene. I wanted it to foreshadow the method of the attempted murder that would occur later in the story (the poisoning in *Arsenic and Old Lace*), introduce the victim as a famous but frail character (likeable but annoying), and set a mildly farcical tone that would exist throughout the story.

In addition, I chose a styling for the story that matched its theatrical and historical period of the 1940s. I planned to follow the Detective Club model of a female amateur detective, her sidekick, the frustrated but helpful police detective, the cloistered environment, and some slapstick. In other words, it would follow the

Agatha Christie short story model. All of that said, I needed to accomplish a lot in the tight first scene that consisted almost entirely of action.

The first thing I did was shop the play *Arsenic and Old Lace* for a scene with Aunt Martha on stage and another character to play off against her. I wanted one that would allow her to be downstage center when her nervous breakdown manifested and have another character who was strong enough to carry her off stage.

I chose the scene where she was revealing to her nephew that there were gentlemen in the basement. As can happen, I imported the scene and started working with it, and quickly I became too immersed in the play itself and discussions about how Aunt Martha and her sister poisoned the gentlemen. The first draft of the scene was over 1000 words.

It needed cutting, narrowing, and customizing. At the same time, it had to foreshadow method of murder, mental state, and humor.

Here is the final version, which took up less than a page and wound up not needing much dialogue:

Cordelia Huntington suffered a nervous breakdown while on stage playing Aunt Martha in *Arsenic and Old Lace*. It was the Comstock Theater's 1953 Summer Repertory Season opening production, and Cordelia's seventh time performing the role in one venue or another.

The actor playing Mortimer, Marshall Briggs, said his line: "But, how did the poison get into the wine?"

Aunt Martha was then to say, “Well, we put it in wine because it's less noticeable. When it's in tea, it has a distinct odor.”

Instead, Aunt Martha babbled, “bu bu bu bu bu.”

Briggs was caught up short. This wasn't her next line.

Cordelia crossed downstage center and began to undo her hair pins and let her long locks fall to her shoulders.

The audience thought it was all in the fun of the performance. They started to giggle.

Briggs looked to the stage manager who thrust his hands up in a “what the hell is going on” salute.

Then Cordelia started to rip the buttons of her shirt and when a randy fellow in the second row cried, “Take it all off, Aunt Martha,” Briggs had no choice but to scoop her up and carry her off stage, yelling, “Kill the lights! Curtain!”

From this first scene on stage, I was able to move to a second scene that took a leap of narrative time:

Many months later, Cordelia was stable enough to be released from a convalescent hospital. She accepted a position as dramaturg with the Green Briar Players, a repertory company in a nearby town.

From this position, I could now focus on her living arrangements in a quaint boarding house and set the scene for her murder.

Cordelia took up residence at Milner's Boarding house, a block from the playhouse. Next to it was a stand of pines woods that she could see from her window. She sat gazing at the trees each morning.

Her introduction to the other guests is the focus of the rest of the second page, as is the reader's introduction to the first suspects. The introductions are filled with all the nuance of ladies, tea, gossips, innuendo, and intrigue. It was a delight to write these elements since they were a complete departure from children's writing in several ways.

First of all, kids don't always have time for a slower pace in the ramp up of a story. They want action from the get-go and continued movement, including physical movement of characters through space. Second, kids like their suspects to have larger than life qualities.

Adult mysteries, on the other hand, can luxuriate in a slower-paced, more nuanced roll-out—even in a short story. It was delicious to write the last line of the second page, a juicy piece of gossip Cordelia shared over tea at the Boarding House:

Mrs. Williams leaned forward conspiratorially, “Dumped by her married boyfriend—the director.”

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C. M. Surrisi is the author of the Agatha-nominated middle grade mystery series, *The Quinnie Boyd Mysteries: The Maypop Kidnapping, Vampires On the Run, and A Side of Sabotage*; adult mystery short stories: “The Bequest” (Sisters in Crime Anthology *Minnesota Not So Nice*), “You Know How Actresses Are” (*Malice Domestic: Mystery Most Theatrical*), and “Know Nothing” (the Guppy Anthology *The Fish That Got Away*). Not only does she write for middle grade and adult readers, she's the author of *The Best Mother*, a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard picture book. She is a member of the Author's Guild, Mystery Writers of America, and the National League of American Pen Women, and is the current president of the Minnesota chapter of Sisters in Crime.