

THE CASE OF THE
MIXED METAPHORS

A Play in One Act
for Young People

by

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SYNOPSIS

The Case of the Mixed Metaphors is a 1940's *film noir* style mystery / parody about a detective, Nick Sharp, who takes on a challenging case: a writer who suddenly finds that she is incapable of using metaphors without mixing them. The writer, Charlotte Quillenby, recounts how this condition began at a friend's party, and then describes the various unique individuals who were there, ranging from a gangster to a millionairess, from a mad scientist to an Olympic track star. The detective and his secretary interview each suspect, only to discover not only that each has both motive and method, but that they are all mixing metaphors as well. In the end, the suspects are all brought together, and, through brilliant deduction and a dramatic confession, *The Case of the Mixed Metaphors* is solved.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

The Case of the Mixed Metaphors has received two productions, for two studio performances each, by the Junior Players of the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, GA, in 2002 and 2006. The performances took place in the Theatre 3 of the 14th Street Playhouse, and in the Black Box of the Alliance Theatre. The show was presented free of charge, and it was not reviewed.

CASTING

The Case of the Mixed Metaphors has a cast of 11, including six girls and five boys. Several of the roles could be cast as either male or female, with adjustments of names and pronouns.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

The Case of the Mixed Metaphors can be produced with a minimum of technical support. The simplest staging calls for a variety of chairs or stools and basic lighting. The play could also be produced with a more elaborate set or sets suggesting the period and the numerous settings of the story, and more detailed lighting to create distinct playing spaces and evocative moods. In the original production, the first two scenes of the play were lit exclusively by flashlights and a floor lamp next to NICK's chair.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Nick Sharp, a Private Investigator
Midge Woolley, his Assistant
Charlotte Quillenby, a Novelist
Lavinia Rhapsody, a Millionairess
J. Bartholomew Hightower III, the Mayor
Prometha de Nova, an Actress
Dr. Siegfried Wittschnecker, a Scientist
'Sticky Mitts' McGuire, an ex-Convict
Jackie Dash, a Track Star
Sweetie Framboise, a Confectioner
Remington Peck, a Reporter

THE STAGE is set neutrally with specific places for the various characters in the play. Set pieces and backdrop suggest a dark and sultry urban landscape, evocative of the film noir genre. Once the actors enter, they remain on stage throughout the play, unless otherwise noted.

IN THE TEXT, the mixed metaphors are followed by a parenthetical phrase (EEZH!) indicating a wince or cringe in response to the mixed metaphors. In the world of the play, mixed metaphors are an affliction; when a character utters a mixed metaphor, it is as if a small jolt of sudden pain is felt. The speaker will wince, and others in the scene may do so as well. The wince or cringe device will signal the mixed metaphors to both actors and audience, as well as allow a beat for the audience to think about and respond to it. The wincings should be shaped and modulated by the actors and director to find an appropriate balance. They should not be so big as to be annoying, nor so small as to be meaningless. As the play progresses, the wincings may become more intense, indicating that the mixed metaphors are more excruciating.

In addition, each of the eight suspects has a quirk or personality aberration which occurs occasionally as he or she speaks. The quirk is defined parenthetically at the character's first appearance and signalled in the text by italics within the speech. The quirks should markedly alter the character's delivery. These quirks may be included or ignored at the director's discretion; however, if any of the actors use the quirks, they all should.

PROCESSION. Introductory music, a slow jazzy blues of the 1940's or 1950's, plays as the characters, with the exception of MIDGE and CHARLOTTE, emerge one by one to take their places on the stage. As they move into place, they encounter and assess each other, both suspiciously and suspectingly. Once they are all on stage, they may do some synchronized choreographed movements to the music before taking their seats.

SCENE 1. *The Case and the Suspects*. NICK'S OFFICE. Late in the day. NICK alone. He speaks directly to the audience.

NICK: It was the end of a long day. The phone had been ringing like a fire alarm in a volcano. I was about to head off to the roller rink for a few spins around the track. Suddenly, my assistant burst in like a freight train with an urgent delivery.

(MIDGE enters.)

MIDGE: Nick, you would not believe who is in the office, wanting to see you!

NICK: I could tell from the tone of her voice that I was about to get pulled into some kind of tornado. (To her.) Try me, Midge.

MIDGE: It's her. You know those books I read? Those mysteries? Well, she's here! The author! Charlotte Quillenby!

NICK: Calm down. You're hopping like a popcorn popper on overdrive.

MIDGE: I'm just so excited! I'm almost at the end of her latest book. It's called, Death Takes City Hall. It has this coldblooded killer, Charles Derrumer. It's all about politics and everything. And I hear they're making it into a movie.

NICK: Midge, don't get your hair twisted all in knots. This is a Private Eye's office, not a Hollywood fan club. So put the brakes on.

MIDGE: But, Nick, can't I even ask for her autograph?

NICK: Not until we find out what she wants. Show her in. (To audience.) In this game, you've got to be careful not to show your cards too soon. Nick Sharp, Private Investigator. The best in the biz. The cream of the crop. The icing on the cake. The shine on the silver. Choose your metaphor, they all fit.

MIDGE: Mr. Sharp, this is Ms. Charlotte Quillenby!

NICK: I could tell by looking at her, she was one smart bird. Ms. Quillenby, what can we do for you?

CHARLOTTE: Mr. Sharp, you've got to help me! I feel like a wild animal locked in a cage with no hopes of finding my way back to port! (EEZH!)

NICK: Hold on a minute, doll! You're not making any sense.

CHARLOTTE: That's just it! I'm a writer. I'm known around the world for my way with words. I can turn a phrase like a key in a lock on a door that has come unhinged (EEZH!)

NICK/MIDGE: A door that has come unhinged?

CHARLOTTE: Yes, exactly, unhinged! I mean, I am known as the mistress of metaphors, the sultan of similes, but now I'm the queen of bad writing sitting on a throne of confusion with a scepter that has run out of ink (*EEZH!*)!

NICK: Now calm down. You've got to start talking straight, and cut out all these . . . these . . .

MIDGE: Mixed metaphors! She's talking in mixed metaphors!

CHARLOTTE: That's just it! I'm talking in mixed metaphors! If this doesn't stop, my career is over!

NICK: Listen. Tell me when this started. Just the facts. Don't try anything fancy. Nouns, verbs, that's it.

MIDGE: Yes, Ms. Quillenby, it will be hard, but, whatever you do, no 'like' or 'as.' No images. No figures of speech.

CHARLOTTE (*carefully*): I'll try. I was at a party. A wonderful party. . . .

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[From Scene 2, the initial interrogations]

NICK: Come on, Midge. I hope you're feeling like some ice cream. (*To audience.*) So we slid on over to the infamous Sweetie's Treats.

(*NICK and MIDGE have ice cream cones.*)

SWEETIE: So 'Sticky Mitts' told you that? Well, he's certainly jumped right out of the frying pan and into the pot calling the kettle black (*EEZH!*). *Yes! Yes! I was furious about what she did! I was so hurt!* But that's behind me now. Now I want to use my culinary skills, to bring people joy.

MIDGE: This is good. What's in it?

SWEETIE: Oh, I have some secret ingredients I use here. They always achieve the desired effect. I'll never tell. Let's just say I'm creative.

NICK: How can we be sure you didn't find a creative way to ruin Charlotte Quillenby's career?

SWEETIE: I'm just not competitive by nature. But do you want to know who is? That Olympic runner, Jackie Dash. She seems as solid as a rock with deep, deep roots (*EEZH!*). But appearances can be deceiving.

MIDGE: She's one of Ms. Quillenby's oldest and dearest friends!

SWEETIE: Is that what Ms. Quillenby told you? The truth is, she's one of Ms. Quillenby's oldest and angriest enemies. You see, Jackie has hated Charlotte, ever since Charlotte beat her at a Spelling Bee in the 5th Grade. Jackie has devoted her life to outdoing Charlotte. But even her gold medals aren't enough. She has bats in her belfry, and they're beginning to fly the coop (*EEZH!*).

NICK: That will be enough. And thanks for the treats. (*To audience.*) So we headed to the stadium to catch the track star between laps.

JACKIE: No, I have nothing against Charlotte. I'd like to be friends. I've learned, you can lead a horse to water, but she's a horse of a different color (*EEZH!*).

MIDGE: What about that Spelling Bee?

JACKIE: That Spelling Bee? *Oh, I should have won. I was the best speller in the school.* But she played mind games. I've learned since then. That's how I've become a champion. Sure, I run very fast -- but I win because I psych out the competition. I make them paranoid. Because when you're between a rock and a hard place, you can't see the forest for the trees and you end up down in the dumps (*EEZH!*). Then you lose. *And I win! It works every time. And in many different ways.* Mind games.

NICK: But you still hold a grudge.

JACKIE: Against a two-bit mystery writer? Give me a break! No, you want to know who holds a grudge? It's her old boyfriend, that scientist, Dr. Siegfried Wittschnecker.

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[From Scene 3, with all the suspects gathered]

PROMETHA: Mayor Hightower, be careful about what you say. Everyone knows that you are not the fastest tool in the shed (*EEZH!*)!

SWEETIE: Miss De Nova, don't try to avoid the spotlight. You've made your bed, now eat it (*EEZH!*)!

REMYNGTON: It all happened at your party, Sweetie. So I would say that you are skating on very thin hot water (*EEZH!*)!

ALL: Let's get to the bottom of this cesspool of lies and deception (*EEZH!*).

NICK: Ladies and gentlemen, that is just what I intend to do. So to speak. Now, each of you has a reason for trying to destroy Charlotte Quillenby. You've not only mixed up

her metaphors, but everyone else's as well. And each of you has a possible method, a way of meddling in the inner workings of that amazing machine we call the human mind. But only one of you is guilty of this horrible crime. If you speak up now, you might escape the long arm of the law.

REMYINGTON: He's right. Whichever one of you is responsible for this -- it's time to step up to the plate and cut the mustard (*EEZH!*).

SWEETIE: What about you? You just came to my party to rock the muddy waters (*EEZH!*).

BARTHOLOMEW: Sweetie, I think you let the cat out of the bag and now it's got your tongue (*EEZH!*).

SIEGFRIED: But what are you hiding, Mayor? It could be a can of worms you don't want to let out of the starting gate (*EEZH!*).

LAVINIA: Professor, I believe you're trying to pull the woolen rug out from over our eyes (*EEZH!*).

STICKY MITTS: Don't be so smug, Lavinia. All that glitters isn't worth the paper it's printed on (*EEZH!*).

JACKIE: But who's a criminal at heart, Sticky Mitts? Once again, you've been caught in the cookie jar with your pants down (*EEZH!*).

PROMETHA: Mr. Sharp, please, please, make them stop this! All I know is, I smell trouble and it's not a pretty picture (*EEZH!*).

NICK: That's enough! Thank you. You've all just set the stage for the final chapter of our little game of wits (*EEZH!*).

MIDGE: Nick?

NICK: This case is like a bull in a china shop, so we've got to take it by the horns and run with it (*EEZH!*).

MIDGE: Not you too?!

NICK: When I spell it all out, it just doesn't add up (*EEZH!*).

MIDGE: Oh, no!!!

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