



# Mystery Scene

YOUR GUIDE TO THE BEST IN MYSTERY, CRIME & SUSPENSE



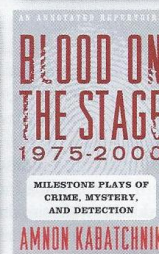
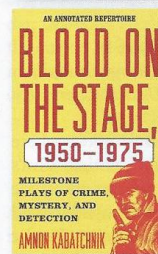
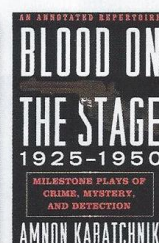
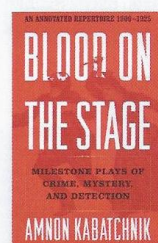
Amnon Kabatchnik

## Life Upon The Wicked Stage

Spanning the years 1900 to 2000, Amnon Kabatchnik's monumental work of scholarship comprises a vast and detailed resource for devotees of theatrical mayhem

by Joseph Goodrich

Theatre is the most ephemeral of the arts; it lives and dies in the moment. A dedicated cultural anthropologist is needed to dig up a vanished play and bring it back into the light to be remembered, read and—with any luck—brought to life again on stage.



Amnon Kabatchnik is one such intrepid explorer of the theatrical past. *Blood on the Stage*, his four-volume chronicle of “milestone plays of crime, mystery and detection,” is the result of his explorations.

Spanning the years 1900 to 2000, Kabatchnik's books comprise a vast and detailed resource for devotees of theatrical mayhem. A whopping 458 plays are covered in over 2,500 pages. The great, the near-great, and the now-obscure are all included. Classics like Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under The Elms* (1924) and Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978) rub elbows with once popular plays like Owen Davis' *Nellie*, *The Beautiful Cloak Model* (1906), and Elsa Shelley's *Pick-Up Girl* (1944).

Kabatchnik's focus is purposely broad. The reader is reminded that crime and punishment have long been a source of drama and have served the differing talents and ambitions of dramatists from ancient Greece to the present day.

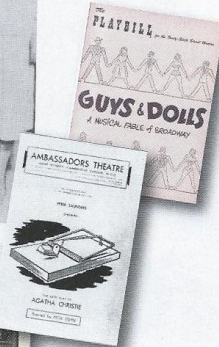
Each play included in *Blood on the Stage* receives the same basic coverage. A synopsis of the plot (with spoilers) is followed by production details, critical response, a biography of the author/s, and, where appro-



Frederick Lonsdale's delightful *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* (1925) focuses on a lady burglar and her adventures in high society.

appropriate, mention of any screen versions, revivals, and/or awards. Ample footnotes contain a wealth of information. For instance, the notes for Richard Levinson and William Link's *Prescription: Murder* (1962), in which a certain Lieutenant Columbo made his theatrical debut, features a succinct history of the inverted mystery in print and on stage.

Volume One of *Blood on the Stage* covers the years 1900–1925. Kabatchnik considers this epoch—with its plays full of “sheer adventure, excitement, and heart-pounding thrills”—the genre’s “golden age.” Such plays

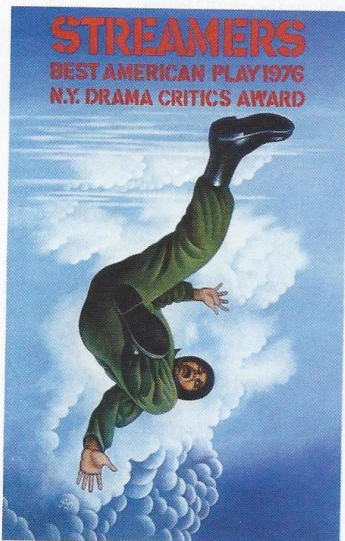


as Baroness Emma Orczy and Montagu Barstow's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1903), and

John Willard's *The Cat and the Canary* (1922) bear this conclusion out. But, Kabatchnik notes, the mystery play showed increasing depth and sophistication in works like Elmer Rice's dark, expressionistic *The Adding Machine* (1923) and Frederick Lonsdale's *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* (1925), a charming comedy of manners about a lady burglar and her excursion into high society.

A series of appendices provide information on subgenres: Twentieth-Century courtroom dramas, Twentieth-Century Death Row plays, the phenomenon of Grand Guignol, and plays that feature deadly poisons.

Volume Two, 1925–1950, details the fading away of melodrama, an increasing number of mainstream playwrights and novelists working in the genre, and the initial appearances of some of the Golden Age greats. *Black Coffee*, Agatha Christie's first original work for the stage, premiered in London in 1930. This play launched a career as a dramatist that lasted until the final years of Dame Christie's life. The prolific and popular Edgar Wallace penned a string of hits that include *The Flying Squad* (1928) and *On the Spot* (1930), which featured Charles Laughton as a Capone-like gangster. J.B. Priestley's *Dangerous Corner* (1932) used time in an innovative fashion. Daphne du Maurier's adaptation of her novel *Rebecca* (1940) found greater success in London than it did in New York.

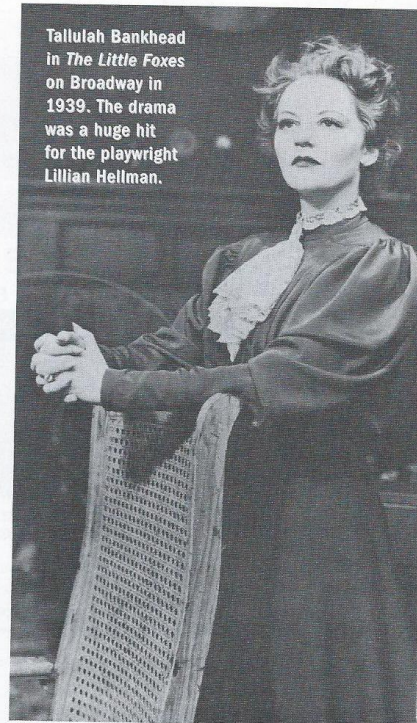


*Streamers*, by David Rabe, opened on Broadway in 1976. It was the last in a trilogy that focused on the Vietnam War. Its title is a reference to parachutes that fail to open correctly.

Golden age characters also made the leap from page to stage. Walter Butterfield and Lee Morrison brought Philo Vance to life in their version of S.S. Van Dine's *The Canary Murder Case* (1928). Mr. and Mrs. North, The Lockridges' amateur sleuths, came to Broadway in the aptly titled *Mrs. and Mrs. North* (1941); veteran playwright Owen Davis (author of the aforementioned *Nellie, The Beautiful Cloak Model*) was the author. Charlie Chan, Ellery Queen, and Flashgun Casey trod the boards in *The Keeper of the Keys* (1933), *The Four of Hearts Mystery* (1949), and *Crime Photographer* (1950), respectively, though the original authors had nothing to do with the adaptations.

Volume Two describes and discusses 171 plays. This is the Golden Age of the mystery play, if one judges by quantity alone. Quality—as evidenced by plays like *Dead End*, *The Little Foxes*, and *Night Must Fall*—isn't lacking, either. Volume Two repeats the appendices of Volume One and adds two more: plays about children in peril, and plays about Lizzie Borden.

Volume Three, 1950–1975, starts with *Guys and Dolls* (1950) and closes with Graham Greene's *The Return of A.J. Raffles*



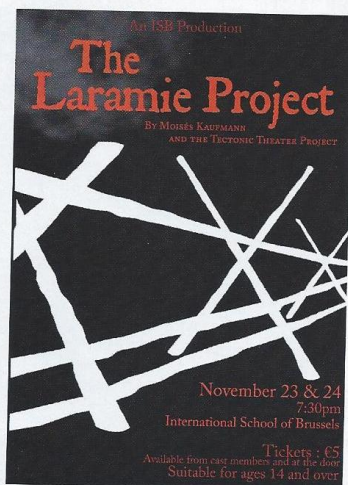
Tallulah Bankhead in *The Little Foxes* on Broadway in 1939. The drama was a huge hit for the playwright Lillian Hellman.

(1975). In between the two are some of the works that constitutes the gold standard of the mystery play. Frederick Knott's trifecta of *Dial "M" For Murder* (1952), *Write Me a Murder* (1961), and *Wait Until Dark* (1966), Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution* (1954), and Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth* (1970) were all produced in this period.

A few less-than-classic curiosities came down the pike, too. The musical comedy *Dracula, Baby* (1970) had the cast of Bram Stoker's novel "singing and dancing in the plains of Transylvania, the pubs of London, and the catacombs of Carfax." The lyrics for *Dracula, Baby* were written by John Jakes, whose historical novels would soon sell millions of copies around the world. Kabatchnik's typically entertaining and comprehensive footnote inform us that *Baby* is only one of almost a dozen musical versions of *Dracula*. Perhaps the most unusual musical mentioned is *Dracula*, which features a cross-dressing vampire.

Volume Four, 1975-2000, contains huge successes—Kander and Ebb's *Chicago* (1975) and Ira Levin's *Death Trap* (1978)—and embarrassing failures like Sidney Michael's *Tricks of the Trade* (1980), and Arthur Bicknell's *Moose Murders* (1983), both of which closed after a single performance.

*Death Trap* is the last big thriller to grace the Broadway stage. It marks the end of one age and the beginning of another: the shift to the regionals as the primary home and continuing source of new mystery plays. Los



*The Laramie Project* (2000) focuses on the reactions of the residents of Laramie, Wyoming, to the murder of gay student Matthew Shepard.



Fred Terry in Baroness Orczy and Montagu Barstow's play *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1903). The romantic hero began his career of derring-do on the stage and later moved to novels. Similarly, Lt. Columbo made his first appearance in a play, as did *Casablanca*'s Rick Blaine.

Angeles, Cleveland, Chicago, San Francisco, Denver, Tucson—these and other cities contributed productions to Volume Four.

The era encompasses shattering docudramas like Emily Mann's *Execution of Justice* (1984) and Moises Kaufman/Tectonic Theater's *The Laramie Project* (2000); hard-hitting straight plays like David Rabe's *Streamers* (1976), Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* (1981), and Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* (1991); comedies as different as Jerome Chodorov and Norman Panama's *A Talent for Murder* (1981), and Charles Ludlam's *The Mystery of Irma Vep* (1984); adaptations such as Stuart Gordon and Carolyn Purdy-Gordon's *The Little Sister* (1978), Giles Havergal's *Travels with My Aunt* (1989), and David Barr's *A Red Death* (1997); and a seemingly endless stream of Sherlock Holmes plays. Holmes' popularity as a character is a constant throughout all four volumes; his only competition is a certain Transylvanian count.

A new category is added in Volume Four's appendices: Notable One-Acts of Mayhem, Mischief, and Murder.

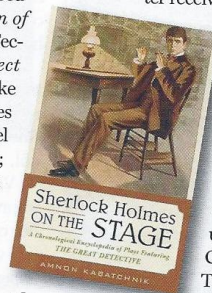
One of Kabatchnik's goals in compiling *Blood on the Stage* was to "kindle interest in neglected plays and forgotten works." He

succeeds mightily. His monumental work of love and scholarship gives us a new window onto the past, and proves that the mystery play is a rich, lively, and still-vital form.

If assembling the four volumes of *Blood* wasn't sufficiently daunting, Kabatchnik also authored *Sherlock Holmes on the Stage*, subtitled "A Chronological Encyclopedia of Plays Featuring the Great Detective." Its scope is necessarily smaller, but it shares *Blood*'s structure, thoroughness, and erudition. It proves that, for a certain breed of playwright and theatergoer, there are no plays like Holmes...

All five books were published by Scarecrow Press between 2008 and 2012, and are the product of Kabatchnik's long-standing enthusiasm for the theater and for the mystery genre. Born in Tel Aviv in 1929, Kabatchnik learned English from American movies and from novels by the likes of Ellery Queen, Agatha Christie, and Earl Derr Biggers. His years as a collector of mysteries began early. "I still remember vividly the cover of Biggers' *The Black Camel*," he says, and notes that "whenever I move to a new dwelling my first and upmost consideration is the wall space for bookcases."

An uncle in Lowell, Massachusetts, invited the young Kabatchnik to come to America to pursue an education. He studied journalism and theater at Boston University, essaying the role of Hamlet at one point. After receiving his MFA in directing



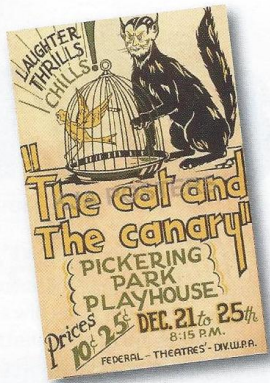
from the Yale School of Drama, he moved to New York City and served as an assistant director for Sir Tyrone Guthrie and Tony Richardson. Kabatchnik worked Off-Broadway, in summer stock and university theaters, in Canada and back home in Tel Aviv for the Habima National Theatre. Though

he staged plays by Chekov, Shaw, Pirandello, Williams, and Chayefsky, when the opportunity arose he'd choose a genre piece like *Arsenic and Old Lace* or *Gaslight*. Kabatchnik has had a lengthy parallel career as an academic. He's taught at SUNY Binghamton, Stanford University, Ohio State University, Florida State University, and Elmira College.

In the late 1960s Kabatchnik's interest in mystery book collecting led him to Marvin and Carol Lachman's apartment in the Bronx, New York City, a gathering place for

mystery buffs. Fellow attendees at Lachman's parties included, at one time or another, Francis M. Nevins, Otto Penzler, Allen J. Hubin, and the late Chris Steinbrunner—all well-known names...or soon to be. (Lachman writes about this time in his book *The Heirs of Anthony Boucher: A History of Mystery Fandom*.) These tyros encouraged Kabatchnik to "not only read and collect detective literature but also study its sources, history, and trends." This ultimately led to his magnum opus, *Blood on the Stage*.

"The project started as a checklist of milestone plays in the genre," Kabatchnik says, "and gradually developed into a full-scale endeavor." He searched libraries and used bookstores across the country for manuscripts, out-of-print plays, and old newspaper and magazine articles. Along the way a few surprises were encountered. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center yielded the stage version of Gaston Leroux's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*. At the Center for Motion Picture Study in Los Angeles, Kabatchnik unearthed *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, an obscure play by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison that served as the basis for the movie classic *Casablanca*. Kabatchnik also found a num-



ber of "obscure, pirated dramatizations of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*, written and produced in America at the turn of the 20th century."

Kabatchnik has directed mystery plays from every period, but he particularly favors the "wild, unblushing, sensational melodramas" of the early decades of the last century. He relishes "the dark passages, secret panels and shadowy corridors" of a play like Willard's *The Cat and the Canary*. He's helmed *Canary* several times over the years,

once with Abe Vigoda in the cast.

Whatever the era, the mystery play offers—in Kabatchnik's words—"strong plots; driving, relentless forward movement; issues of life and death; and nerve-racking, heart-pumping climaxes." Such qualities will always find an audience, and Kabatchnik has no doubt that a revitalization of the genre is waiting around the corner.

Having covered the modern scene from Eugene Brieux's *The Red Robe* (1900) to Moises Kaufman/Tectonic Theater's *The Laramie Project* (2000), what's next for this director/historian? At the behest of his publishers, he's embarked on a prequel to *Blood on the Stage*. The new book, Kabatchnik says, "will cite the most important theatrical works of crime and punishment, beginning with the ancient Greeks—whose stages were awash with blood—and culminating at the end of the 19th century...From Oedipus, the first stage investigator, to Sherlock Holmes, the greatest." ✦

*Joseph Goodrich is the author of the Edgar Award-winning play Panic and the editor of Blood Relations: The Selected Letters of Ellery Queen, 1947-1950. He lives in New York City.*