Background & Guidance for Putting on

 a Mystery Night Play

By Writer Ted Birkedal and Sons of Norway

Introduction:

The purpose of this guidance is to provide some helpful recommendations and advice if you are planning on putting on one of the *Murder at Sons of Norway Lodge* Mystery Night plays.

The three mystery nights, in the order they should be performed:

1. *Murder at Sons of Norway Lodge I: The Beginning of the End,*
2. *Murder at Sons of Norway Lodge II: Death Knocks Again*
3. *Murder at Sons of Norway Lodge III: The Ambassadors Come to Dinner*

I wrote the three plays after spending good money ordering canned “Mystery Nights” off the Internet and finding none suitable for a mystery night event at our Sons of Norway lodge. I decided I could do better myself and write the plays specifically for our very own Sons of Norway lodge, Bernt Balchen in Anchorage, Alaska. I finished the first play in 2009, the second in 2011, and the third in 2013. We performed the plays those same years during “spaghetti feeds” at Viking Hall, the home of Bernt Balchen lodge, and they were popular with our members.

Together the three plays constitute a trilogy; a story of mayhem and murders at a dysfunctional Sons of Norway lodge over a four-year period. You can choose to produce the first and never follow-up with the last two. Or you can put on the second or third plays independently, but if you choose this option you will let the cat out of the bag for the prior mystery night plays. This is because the second and third plays each reveal what happened at the lodge in the earlier plays. So, for example, if you put on *Murder at Sons of Norway Lodge III: The Ambassadors Come to Dinner* the audiencewill find out who was murdered and who committed the murders in the prior two plays.

The three plays of the trilogy show what can happen to a lodge when “peace and harmony” do not prevail at a Sons of Norway lodge. They are in a sense “morality plays,” but they are meant to be fun for the performers, as well as provide an entertaining night of mystery and dark humor for the audience.

Venue:

Just use your lodge headquarters as the venue and setting and adjust the stage action as needed. We used the main hall in Viking Hall so the play reflects that setting. For example, if you do not have stairs leading to a basement in your lodge facility, then create or scout out a place in your space where the character Trond Bokmusen could be ambushed by a hidden killer wielding a brick. Having a plausible location for such a scene in your space will make it that much more real for your audience.

There is mention of a downstairs library in the first play and reference to a walk-in storage room in the second play, but these rooms remain “off stage” and are never scenes of action for the actors.

In two of the plays, a large board meeting table provides the physical focus of the action and dialogue. In the third play the main focus is a large banquet table. These can be assembled from 8-ft portable tables and covered with table cloths to make them “elegant.”

Scripts:

The scripts for the plays are meant to be read, not memorized by the actors. Even if they are not asked to memorize the script, your cast will need to practice reading their lines several times separately and together during rehearsals, so reading before an audience runs smoothly.

Each director of the plays must decide whether or not to issue two editions of the script, one restricted and one un-restricted. At Bernt Balchen lodge we issued “restricted scripts” to the actors that did not play important roles in the last act of each of the three plays. Actors that had major speaking parts in the last acts received the “un-restricted scripts.” This kept the ending from accidentally being revealed and increased the surprise of everyone at the play’s end. But you are free, if you wish to issue the full script to everyone participating in the plays. We found that three-ring plastic binders worked best for the actors. They are easy to hold and help the actors keep track of the action and dialogue. Each of the plays lets the audience know what to expect at the beginning of the play; they are clearly informed that the actors are not professionals and must therefore read their lines.

The scripts provide stage directions for the actors and the placement of furniture and props. The stage directions are typed in bold in the scripts.

You are free to modify or edit the scripts in order to meet your specific lodge needs. You may need to change or adjust stage directions, the words of certain characters, cut lines to shorten the performance, add nonspeaking extras or drop one or more characters from the plays. You may also wish to change the names or gender of characters, where gender is not relevant to the storyline. We have purposely made the plays available as Word files so that your lodge could customize the plays to their needs and requirements.

Character Backgrounds:

Character backgrounds are included for each of the plays. These give your cast some insight into the primary characters in the plays. You may choose to share them with the audience, but these are not part of the script.

Props:

A recommended prop list has been prepared for each play. You are free to modify this list as needed in order accommodate your lodge’s situation. Most of the recommended props are easy to find with the exception of the “theater pistol” employed in *Murder at Sons of Norway Lodge II: Death Knocks Again.* College theater departments and small private theaters sometimes own them and may lend you one for free or for a fee. If you can’t locate one use a cap or otherwise noisy fake gun from a party/costume store.

In selecting Sons of Norway paraphernalia go over the top. You do not want to mimic exactly what your lodge uses during a board meeting; put out an exaggerated display of Sons of Norway items.

If you have a set of stairs leading to a basement in your lodge facility then you can place the shoes and stuffed pants that represent the half-hidden body of Trond Bokmusen in *Murder at Sons of Norway Lodge I: The Beginning of the End.* If you don’t have stairs leading down to a basement then you could put the stuffed pants and shoes of Trond behind a partially opened door. Another option is to drop the whole idea of the audience seeing a “body” as they come into the hall for a mystery night. Seeing a body is not essential to the play.

Dinner or Not?:

When we put on the plays at Viking Hall we incorporated a simple dinner (such as a “spaghetti feed”) as part of the mystery night event. We served dinner during the performances and provided dessert before the final act. If you decide to produce the plays as “dinner theater” you can choose to serve the dinner in any order you that works best for your lodge. Or you can choose to not include a dinner with any of the three plays.

Director:

You will need someone to serve as the play’s director to insure everyone participating knows what is going on and what their job is. The director may choose to also serve as an actor in the play, but that requires more work and attention to detail to insure that all goes as intended during the performance of the play.

Stage Manager:

We recommend that you select someone to serve as the stage manager. They would be responsible for the props and their placement as well as the layout of your “set.” Again, the stage manager can also serve as an actor, if they have their “act” together.

Master of Ceremonies:

In all plays you may have a host or “Master of Ceremonies” to inform and guide the audience as each play proceeds. The Master of Ceremonies can be either a man or woman, but the person who undertakes this role should be someone with a strong voice and commanding manner. You might also want to divide this role between two people and modify the script accordingly, if you feel that would be easier to narrate.

Actors:

The cast can be a mix of officers or members of the lodge, friends or relatives of lodge members, local high school or college students interested in theater. When we put on the plays at Viking Hall we often had the officers of the Bernt Balchen lodge play themselves, but they took on the personalities of their characters.

The most important character to get right is Detective Nils Skarpnese, who is key to the success of the play. This character may be young or old, a man or a woman. What is important is that the person playing this part has a “presence” and an authoritative and strong voice. If you choose a woman to play the part, choose a new first name that sounds Scandinavian like Siri, Unni, Hanne or Tove and would be the name of a tough, smart woman.

In fact, you are free to change the gender of any of the characters if you wish. We had to do that when one of our actors became ill before the performance. Remember to choose a different first name and modify the script if you do change a character’s gender.

Dress:

The *Murder at Sons of Norway* mystery night plays require no costumes or disguises. When we put on the plays at Viking Hall, the actors wore their own clothing and no stage make-up. But we have some recommendations for the type of dress worn by the actors. In the first two plays most of the actors may just wear casual clothes. However, Detective Nils Skarpnese should wear a suit or sport coat with slacks, and a light trench coat. Marit Stordame should also be elegantly dressed as she is a high officer of Sons of Norway. Furthermore, the Master of Ceremonies should be dressed up whether the character is played by a man or woman.

For *Murder at Sons of Norway Lodge III* all the persons engaged in the banquet should be dressed up as if for a fancy banquet. The exception would be their server, Sigrun Slanders, who wears an apron with the Norwegian flag on it. Also, the actor who played Lars Fortsykkel in our production wore a bicycle racing outfit to make the character “over the top.” In addition, the actor who played Thorvald Olsen wore his suit and tie sloppily. So, if you have an idea that you think will work, go for it.

Time needed to put on a Play:

The time it takes to put on a *Murder at Sons of Norway Lodge* play will vary. If you are producing the play along with a dinner, it will take more time to complete the play. When we put on the plays at Viking Hall, together with simple dinners, the plays each lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Clues:

Each play script includes a clue sheet which provides the audience with a set of “clues” to help them pick the murderer or murderers. One or more of the “clues” may be red herrings. These clue sheets are best distributed at the beginning of the intermission just prior to the last act.

Prizes:

The script of all three plays includes an invitation to members of the audience to pick the culprit or culprits prior to the last act. Members of the audience are asked to guess and turn in their ballots at the start of the last act of each play.

If they guess correctly, they can win a prize after the end of the play. Usually more than one person guesses correctly so we recommend having a blind drawing and draw until you have three correct guesses. Each of these winners would get an equivalent reward such as a Scandinavian crime novel.

Advertising:

Bernt Balchen advertised the mystery night plays in our lodge newsletter and through our “E-Blast” system which notifies members via email of events and news. We also posted fliers at a few select locations around town. You could also post information on your lodge’s Facebook page, other social media or websites and the Sons of Norway events page at Sonsofnorway.com. For each play, editable Word documents with posters, playbill flyers and tickets are included and can be customized for your event.

Microphones or Not?:

We did not employ microphones in any of our productions because our audiences were small, only between 60 and 80 people, and our actors were asked to speak loudly. For larger lodge halls with bigger audiences, it may be necessary to use several microphones to be passed among the actors or even rent headset microphones for hands free acting and to increase the dialogue volume.