

Murder Upon Murder

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Acknowledgement and Dedication

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Creative Statement

Introduction

Writing and producing this play became a much more intense experience than I ever expected. I first conceptualized the project last spring as a traditional academic thesis that would cover popular culture's fascination with murder ballads through lenses I discovered in my Honor Scholar classes like human evolution and religion. This summer, I realized I wanted to reach a general audience with the project and that I wanted to work in public musicology as a career. My 2019 play *Somber and Wild* interested an audience outside the School of Music and even outside of DePauw, so I felt confident that a play could attract the audience I wanted to entertain and educate. When fall came, it was clear that a play would suit my artistic and career goals better than a traditional paper.

"Down in the Willow Garden" from Mike Block's album *Final Night at Camp* was the first murder ballad that I ever noticed. Block does a wonderful job contrasting the beautiful, upbeat, sung melody with instrumentals that reflect the seriously disturbing text. After hearing it, I did a cursory Google search, found out what murder ballads were, and (somewhat disturbed) emailed Dr. Harbert to ask her more about them. After more research, I chose murder ballads as the topic of the final project that semester for Dr. Harbert's History of Western Music Survey class.

When I decided to take up the subject again for my Honor Scholar capstone, those close to me told me it would not be a good idea for my mental health. Working on my first murder ballad project prompted nightmares, paranoia, and mood swings. The grief and anger I felt about the way the ballads portrayed people encouraged me to take on this project in a different way. I wanted to bring out the humanity and the realness of these people's lives and experiences. Ironically, dramatization seemed the most natural way for me to do this.

Research

The main book I used as a stepping-off point for my research was Olive Wooley Burt's *American Murder Ballads and Their Stories*. I remember reading this book while I worked in Roy O. West Library when I got to the section about Pearl Bryan. Thinking it would be like all the others- a man murders his lover in a faraway place and time- the words "Greencastle, Indiana" on the page sent a chill go through my whole body. After reading the rest of the section in the Burt, I quickly went online to browse the local newspaper archives. It *was* in Greencastle, Indiana. That realization drove home the very serious realities of the histories I dealt with when studying murder ballads.

The source I used most throughout the process was *Folksinger's Wordbook*, edited by Erwin and Fred Silber. This anthology of folk song lyrics helped me explore the genre a lot more by seeing interesting titles and listening to performances of those songs. It was a starting point for finding different performing artists, too. This book was an invaluable reference throughout the process as I kept track of songs I was considering for the production as well as dialectical things for the characters. Every song in the show other than the murder ballads themselves were found through this book.

I focused on researching historical material for this project to understand the characters' situations and lifestyles. This often led to some dark places in academia and otherwise. Researching the Frank case often led to white supremacist messaging in online propaganda and historical sources. A letter Lucille wrote to the press was the only thing I could find in her own words, and I included a sentence of it in the script ("But not on that day or at any other time did

my husband by word or act, or in any other way, demean himself otherwise than as an innocent man”).¹

One of the most interesting sources to find and read was *Heaven's speedie hue and cry sent after lust and murther* by Henry Goodcole.² I started my search for this source in a medical history book called *The Body Emblazoned* in Prevo Library and traced through a footnote and a print-only article in the bound periodical section of Roy before finding the author and title. Kayla Flegal helped me use the microfilm reader, and I was happily off and running.

Henry Goodcole was a priest who visited prisoners where Sherwood and Evans were jailed. He wrote many moralizing pamphlets about crime news based on his experiences. I read *Heaven's speedie hue and cry* with some difficulty because of the language and the deeply Christian framing of the situation. Goodcole describes Sherwood's hanging poignantly, saying that Sherwood asked for forgiveness and prayer from the crowd (with words quoted in the sentencing scene in *Murder Upon Murder*). The crowd then prayed “with their loud voices,” saying, “Lord Jesus take mercy on him, sweet Jesus forgive his sins and save his soul.”³ I doubt this happened as described, but it transfixed me nonetheless.

I also looked in several reference books to try and understand the English Bess and Tom spoke. Using fewer contractions and trying my best not to use turns of phrase and colloquialisms we do today was the best I could do. In performance, I hope, the British accents further separate Bess's and Tom's dialects from those of the other characters.

¹ When referring to parts of the play, I am talking about material shared between the live and remote versions unless otherwise noted.

² The murder ballad *Murder Upon Murder* is spelled in the modern way, but

³ Henry Goodcole, *Heaven's speedie hue and cry sent after lust and murther*, London: N. and I. Okes, 1635, microfilm.

Working on the Play

Once I decided which murder ballads to focus on, I started sketching ways the characters could interact. I drew maps with lines connecting different characters as a way to visualize how everything would work. After trying to figure out which stories could be dramatized with the most clarity, it was clear that Pearl's story would be the main one in the play.

I wrote in bursts, first taking a long time to plan and think about how the story would go without writing much dialogue. When inspiration struck, I would write as much as I could. This would be triggered by a conversation I had about the ballads or a meeting with my sponsor. A few times it was because I dreamt of a scene and had to write it down before I woke up (Scott and Tom's conversation in Act 2, Scene 1 of the live version is an example).

Structures

The play takes place outside of time and space in the world created by the ballads. People passing around murder ballads and singing them over and over in the real world causes the characters to have to reenact the murders. The cyclical ending reflects this process as well. Once I had the idea for *The Bard*, it became metatheatrical. I read related works suggested by my committee at the thesis refinement meeting (*Our Town*, *Assassins*) and researched metatheatrical traditions.

The structure of the play was elusive to me. I didn't like the idea of scenes for the first act of the live version because the same characters remain onstage in the same setting for the whole act. Breaking it up based on the action made more sense and gave the actors and director a better idea of how the drama should unfold, so the first act is divided into three sections: "Entrance," "Decision," and "Action." In the live version, the two-act structure comes from musical theatre and gives room for an intermission if needed. The second act has scenes because it is more episodic and deals with different characters separately.

The remote version is all scenes in only one act. It wouldn't make sense to make two acts in the remote version because there wasn't a need for an intermission. Breaking it up into scenes worked better because it was organized in successive interviews.

Music

Being a performer myself, I wanted to democratize the roles to make sure different members of the cast wouldn't feel bad about not having a solo to sing. I made sure that every character got their own "aria." Many ballads are in first-person, and finding just the right ones for each character was a fun process. The songs in *Folksinger's Wordbook* were sorted by content in sections like "They'll love you and leave you: songs of those who loved not wisely but all too well," "I know where I'm going: songs of women who know what they want," and, of course, "Murder most cruel: songs of cruel mothers, jealous lovers, quarreling brothers, and other bloody ballads." I played off of these folk song tropes in my characterization of each of the murder ballad subjects.

Putting music in the production was a source of continued confusion when it came to the genre of the work. At first, it made sense to call it a ballad opera because it used folk music. The more I talked about the work with others, the more I defaulted to calling it a play rather than a ballad opera because people generally understood that better. As the show developed, it shifted to being more like most musicals where the plot happens in the dialogue and the characters reveal their feelings in the songs. After watching and listening to musicals that are in conversation with my work, including *Parade* and *Assassins*, I was hesitant to call it a musical lest people expect musical theatre-style singing and dancing. I continued calling it a play enough that it eventually stuck, finally dubbed it a play "with music" so audiences wouldn't be too surprised.

I decided early on not to notate sheet music for the songs I chose. I liked that folk ensembles didn't have fixed instrumentation and that songs are mostly learned by rote. To draw out the stylistic variety in the genre, I wanted to leave it to each production to decide how they wanted the music to be performed. Allowing the music to be modified based on resources would, I hoped, make the play easier to perform in a variety of venues and by a variety of companies.⁴ As we now know, this flexibility helped my production of the play happen even in extenuating circumstances.

Characters

The Bard is a magic, omniscient, metatheatrical, genderless character. I conceived of them early on. They help situate the work in the metatheatrical tradition and are reminiscent especially of the Stage Manager in *Our Town* and the Balladeer in *Assassins*. The main difference I see with The Bard is that they do not exist for the audience's benefit. They bring the story along in ways that may sometimes be confusing to the audience and are one of the main mysteries in the work. They are a puzzle, and their function should remain a mystery until the final scene and final moments when the play restarts and their ultimate power is revealed.

The Bard represents several things. Their genderlessness gives them needed fluidity to personify these different groups and ideas. One is the populace whose collective memory maintains the infamy of murderers and their victims. The Bard's glee at the misfortune of the other characters represents the sensationalization of their deaths and bad decisions. This play would not exist without the ballads, and The Bard is also a characterization of the ballads themselves. They use the ballads to move the events of the play forward. The characters cannot

⁴ The hardest part for our production was finding the tune for the ballad *Murder Upon Murder*. The tune it should be set to, based on the broadside, "Bragandary Downe," is no longer extant. We set it to a tune mentioned on other ballads in the same meter from the time called "The Wanton Wife."

break free of the stories people tell about them. The Bard sings the ballads to control, torment, and memorialize the other characters.

The Unquiet Grave Reprise is the only song The Bard sings that isn't a murder ballad. In the live version, they sing it mostly alone, transfixing the other characters into restarting the play. I made "ghost" plural in the line "the ghosts should rise and speak" so that it would refer to the other characters in the play, ghosts from the past that these ballads bring back to life. The others respond with the next line, "why singest thou upon my grave/ and will not let me sleep?" in protest against the unending cycle that, in the world of the play, disturbs them in the afterlife.

The Bard also represents me in some cases. I controlled the way the characters acted and who they talked to. I put all of them there and decided that multiple performances of the show should play "over and over" for people. The play would not exist without the ballads and it also would not exist without me.

I felt immense responsibility grappling with the power I had to characterize Pearl Bryan, Scott Jackson, Lucille Frank, Elizabeth Evans, and Thomas Sherwood. I also felt compassion for each of them because they are all memorialized because of awful things. Am I erasing these people's identities further by bringing them "to life" years after their deaths? Are my understandings of their personalities and the way I wrote them in *Murder Upon Murder* damaging in the same way I felt the ballads were?

I purposely chose each ballad because I felt the perpetrators/victims were all victims of circumstance to some extent, and all the characters have slightly different perspectives in their murder cases. Tom and Bess are what we would now call serial killers, Scott is (in this dramatization) an accidental murderer, Pearl is a victim, and Lucille is the wife of an accused murderer turned victim. Leo was originally a character in the play. He almost became a victim of

Bess and Tom's schemes. I did not want Bess to seduce Leo because it played into a claim that he was a womanizer, which partly led to his false conviction. His timeline became too complicated to add in with the others, and Lucille became more interesting for me to research and include.

Lucille remained to give a different perspective on murder, so it made sense for Leo's death to have taken place before the play started. Her reflections on these events put Pearl's death in perspective and cloud the morality of capital punishment. Her relationship with The Bard is different than all the other characters. She is aware that The Bard is controlling the play in some way, but cannot alert the other characters to the situation because of The Bard's control. Leo's death haunts Lucille and she will not stop talking about him. She cannot help but be defined by his death because her purpose in the play is to draw attention to the problems with systems of justice, and she is metatheatrical-ly aware of that while being unable to change it.

Lucille sings *The Unquiet Grave*, a song that wrestles with the impossibility of bringing someone back from the dead. In the live version, Lucille sings this lament mostly to herself while the other characters are under The Bard's spell. In the remote version, she sings it in a much more poignant moment after she has told the other women the story of Leo's death.

Pearl is arguably the main character in the play. Her pregnancy is the catalyst for the conflict and her death is the climax of the show. She, however, defers her decisions to others because of her insecurities about her position. Some evidence shows that Pearl felt helpless about her pregnancy and may have written to Scott and other close friends asking for advice, unwilling to try anything by herself. The murder ballads and news coverage about her characterized her as sweet, innocent, and too naïve to be careful enough. I made sure that the other characters in the play saw her this way, too. Bess calls her "sweet" when they have barely met, and Tom says "she

seems sweet” before meeting her. Lucille feels like she has to stick up for Pearl when Scott complains about her pregnancy. Every other character gives Pearl advice, yet we never get to hear what she wants.

I wrestled with how to depict Pearl with a feminist lens but without taking her out of historical context. She cares a lot about what Scott thinks and makes it known that she believes “men often know better” when talking to Lucille and Bess. When Lucille asks Pearl if she wants to have her baby at the end of the Decision section in the first act of the live version of the show, Pearl is most concerned with whether that would cause Scott to leave her. She expresses similar concerns to Tom during their conversation in the same section, and he condescendingly responds not to worry because she’s “sweet.” Although it is established in *Lavender Blue* that Scott and Pearl love each other, they do not show any more real affection in the rest of the play. They are, like Bess, Tom, and Lucille, putting up a front of peace and normality so they don’t draw attention to the problems in their lives. No one asks Scott or Pearl about love for the rest of the show because I did not want to make the abortion something that is based on love. I wanted Pearl’s powerlessness and reliance on Scott to seem wrong. Scott’s failure in helping the situation is meant to be the nail in the coffin for women trusting men with big decisions in their lives.

Pearl sings *All My Trials* as she dies, a beautiful song that I chose in large part because of the line “hush little baby don’t you cry, you know your mama was born to die.” That lyric was at the beginning of the piece in the *Folksinger’s Wordbook*. I moved it to the end so that in the beginning it seems like Pearl’s trials will be over because the abortifacient is working, and, in the end, she realizes she is about to die.

Pearl’s final monologue was one of the first things I wrote. I wanted her to have a long moment all to herself after her general lack of agency throughout the rest of the play. I imagined

it as what she would have said if she saw her funeral. The dehumanizing thing about murder ballads is that they focus on the victim's moment of death. Pearl is known for that forever, and I think she wouldn't want that to be the case.

Bess and Tom were the most fun to write because I didn't have many sources about their personalities. After discussing the early ideas for my play with the Women's Studies reading group I was part of during first semester, it seemed like it would be most interesting for audiences if Bess was in denial about her involvement in the murders.

I chose Bess's song, *Katy Cruel*, for its vaguely archaic diction and catchy refrain. The speaker laments about her fallen reputation but doesn't explicitly say what she did. The confusing lines in the refrain "oh that I was where I would be/ then I would be where I am not/ here I am where I must be/ go where I would I cannot" in the context of the play hint at the fact that Bess is under the control of The Bard. In one of the final verses, she says "through the woods I go and through the boggy mire/ straightway down the road and to my heart's desire." This line also convinced me to pick this song for Bess because in context it would describe her leading the men to Tom to be robbed and murdered.

Bess doesn't acknowledge Tom until she is alone with him in the second half of the play (Act 2 live version, Scene 5 remote version). Goodcole wrote that Tom and Bess blamed each other in their private conversations with him and that they met at least once while in prison to receive communion. Tom confronted her, "affirmed to her face, that she helped him... [and] she there confidently, denied the same."⁵ The idea of this meeting inspired me. What was Tom's motivation for getting her to admit to helping him? It was most romantic to think he was

⁵ Henry Goodcole, *Heaven's speedie hue and cry sent after lust and murther*, London: N. and I. Okes, 1635, microfilm.

offended because she was denying their partnership and love affair in some way. That's the direction their confrontation took in the play. It begins with *False True Love*, a beautiful song with an ironic title that makes a lot of sense for the pair. I changed "and since you are engaged to another true love" to "and since you have chosen to end our true love" because the former didn't fit in the story. The song is Tom's most likable moment. Without it, he would be unbearably evil. Because it is the first time the pair have talked in a long time, the song starts their confrontation in a sweet, tentative place. There is dialogue within the song like in musical theatre. After the song ends and the conversation goes on, their vulnerability turns to hostility. In their argument, Tom never says outright that he loved Bess (he does say they were "in love"), while she admits it to him.

Tom's deliberate, repeated murders prove he was malicious in life. Tom ended up being a much more evil character in the play than I first expected. He is called both Thomas "Shearwood" and "Sherwood" in the Goodcole pamphlet, the latter more frequently, so I decided to use that name in the play. At first, his role was more undefined. I thought a lot about Bess and meant for Tom to stay in the background for at least the first act as conflict increased. Tom has confidence and control wherever he is. I never made Tom feel unsure or powerless in the live version of the script. Even when he does not understand what is happening in the final scene, his confusion is channeled into anger rather than fear.

The song I chose for Tom was *Rambling, Gambling Man*, which is either traditional like all the other songs in the play or written by Gil "Cisco" Houston in the 1950s (sources conflict). It has the sort of carefree confidence I wanted for Tom. I transformed the part about the speaker's girlfriend into a scene where Scott and Tom could be joking together. I changed some of the place names and wording so that one of the verses could be about Bess ("I lost my money

where I one my honey way down in New Orleans” to “way down in Canbury”). Scott impersonates the girlfriend's mother in the live version, and in the original staging, we had The Bard impersonating the girlfriend. The lighthearted song shows that Tom isn't a rule-follower without giving away that he is a serial killer. His bad influence on Scott and his evil ways are slowly revealed throughout the play.

The interesting thing about Tom's evilness is that the things that made the cast's (and hopefully audience's) skin crawl were the misogynistic things he said. I wanted to play off the “locker-room talk” idea in Tom and Scott's conversations. They were men talking about what men talk about, sharing a space where they didn't have to confine themselves to moral actions or conversation. I have a theory that this kind of conversation between Scott and Alonzo Walling (his accomplice and fellow dental student) was the beginning of the plan to concoct an abortifacient and perhaps plan the decapitation as well.⁶

Scott never confessed to the crime and was reportedly very stoic during the trial and questionings despite law enforcement's best efforts. As the version of *The Ballad of Pearl Bryan* in *Murder Upon Murder* depicts, they showed Pearl's decapitated body with an empty pillow where her head should have been to Scott and Alonzo to try and get a confession out of them. Neither ever admitted to knowing where her head was and both blamed each other for the murder. I broke away from this depiction of Scott because I wanted people to feel bad for him, too, and question their sympathy for him. I didn't want to demonize him for trying to give Pearl

⁶ The main running joke in the play is about the difference between dentists and doctors. Tom and Bess repeatedly overestimate Scott's medical knowledge because in 1635 dentistry was part of being a doctor. This joke was funny to me and the cast, but only after I explained it. I think it would be hard for an audience to get on the first pass. I still left it in for myself and as one of the elements that helps cue the audience to the fact that they are from different periods. Now that we are in the middle of a pandemic with medical misinformation spreading and causing harm, this joke has a much darker tone.

an abortion but instead, bring out the horror in his decision to cut off her head when the abortion went wrong.

Scott's song, *Man of Constant Sorrow*, comes at different times in the live and remote versions. In the live version, it is an exaggeration of his uncertainty about Pearl's pregnancy and a catalyst for Lucille's entrance. Scott's assertion that he might as well die if he's going to have a child is more like a metaphor for his bachelor lifestyle than about literal death. In the remote version, he sings it in jail after the murder. Scott grieves Pearl's death and his imprisonment. The song has a more honest quality in the latter presentation because such horrible things have already happened. When he sings about death, he sings about his possible execution. This switch changes the performance of the piece from a comical, overly emotional performance to a serious and sad one.

Production

I started the production process by fundraising, which I decided to do through crowdfunding to learn new skills after receiving a grant for my first play. The Indiegogo campaign went "live" before the senior poster session in the fall so I could spread the word.

I picked the production team first semester as well. Suzette Hartsfield '20, the director, and I have been friends since the first day we met. She directed my first play, and I respect her leadership and directing style. Noelle Johnson '20, the stage manager, is a dear friend and a talented stage manager who also worked on my first play. Genevieve Miedema '21, the music director, acted in my first play and showed great interest in working on this one. I regretted not having a music director for *Somber and Wild*, so I asked her to be the music director for this project. Her musicianship on cello, piano, banjo, and percussion shaped the music for this production.

I strived to be as ethical as possible with casting. Because of *Somber and Wild*, friends expressed enthusiasm for my new production before writing began. These friends were kept in mind as I wrote. When it came time to cast at the beginning of first semester, I consulted with Dr. Jennings on different casting procedures and standards. He helped me identify what things I should see from all the auditionees (singing, acting, accents). Suzette and Genevieve watched auditions with me. Six wonderful people auditioned and fit the show perfectly: Serenna Hallie Jones '20, Melanie Roma '20, Eric Boylan '20, Anna Grace Roth '20, Jonathon Tebbe '21, and Sarah Hennessy '20.

I considered music as I wrote. An all-vocal music setup for the initial production made sense at first because I have so many vocalist friends at DePauw. As the show developed, and a chorus no longer became necessary in the script, the idea became less feasible. We ended up using a mix of acapella and instrumental arrangements while staging the live version. We wrote chords and instrumentation over the lyrics in the script and added solfege for harmonies we included. In the remote version, the acapella arrangements seemed they would be too difficult to coordinate.

Everyone was a joy to work with as we rehearsed for the live performance. It was scheduled to be at the new Ullem Center for Sustainability on April 2 and 3. The space has a rustic feeling and lots of wooden beams that are suggestive of gallows. We could bring our own lighting and use moveable seating to make the space fit our vision. I craved that freedom after dealing with the limitations of M2 for *Somber and Wild*. Malorie and Joe Garbe at the Ullem Center met with us and helped us understand ways we could make our production more sustainable. We were going to set up the action in different places around the audience. The Green Center for the Performing Arts staff agreed to help us with lighting and tech. Genevieve

and I arranged all the music in collaboration with the singers. We were beginning to think about costumes. Then, COVID-19 began spreading in the US, and things changed very quickly.

COVID-19

DePauw announced it would be closing in-person operations on the evening of Wednesday, March 11. The announcement email arrived right after a rehearsal for *Murder Upon Murder* ended. That night was intensely emotional. I decided we should meet for our rehearsal the following day to see what everyone thought. They wanted to make a video recording of the show. We were limited to gatherings of no more than 12 people, and there were 10 of us. The recording would go online. We planned the recording for the following Monday.

On that Sunday, the rug was pulled out from under us when it was announced that we would have to leave by Monday at 5:00 pm. The recording was canceled, tears were shed, fake blood was unfortunately wasted. We left campus thinking it was over.

On March 19, I dreamt we were doing the play virtually, but having microphone problems. I messaged the cast and crew about it from my partner's family farm, where I was staying, and got a vague response. On March 22, I dreamt about a virtual performance of a horror version of the script over a video call. I again messaged the cast and crew, this time outright asking if they would be willing to work on the play remotely. Their enthusiasm encouraged me.

We brainstormed ideas before I wrote. Based on vocalists' difficulty adapting to recorded accompaniment tracks, we decided to work "backward" and add accompaniment to recorded singing. When possible, singers accompanied themselves to make the post-production process easier. The remote version couldn't have as much subtlety as the live version. I decided an interrogation format would work. The morality of remembering someone "for the bad things that happen to them" and the theme of medical misinformation became more poignant in the pandemic.

We met again in a Google Hangout on March 30 to have a table read and make a new rehearsal schedule. We moved to Zoom after that, where we rehearsed and recorded all the dialogue, murder ballads, *False True Love*, and *The Unquiet Grave Reprise*. The cast recorded the other songs separately. Zoom, with its theme of dark greys and blacks, helped us make something with a specific, mysterious aesthetic. Rehearsals were an excuse for us all to see each other and helped me adjust to remote existence. The Zoom background feature was used for backdrops in different scenes, and the actors made character-specific profile pictures that showed up when their video was off. The cast did their hair, costumes, and makeup with what they had at home. We came together and wrote introductions for each character (except The Bard) that were included in the final cut of the show. We recorded over two sessions on April 16 and 17. Genevieve and I edited the footage using Adobe Premiere Pro, which we learned how to use very quickly for this project. I published the video on my YouTube channel on April 23. We made it happen.

Conclusion

Murder ballads sensationalized people's lives. The infamy of the crimes eclipsed the identities of all involved. Victims' lives were cut short and then reduced down by the media to little more than their victimhood. Condemned murderers became cautionary figures, warning others not to make their mistakes and begging for forgiveness. Because of its basis in sensational stories, *Murder Upon Murder* will always benefit from more research and greater understanding. I hope to refine the characters further in future versions of the work.

Folk ballads are also about community. Ballads entertain us when we are going through hard times. They bring us together after a long day's work and whisk us away to another time and place. They let us be someone we're not and sing about feelings we all have. "They are stories we all tell because they are stories about us. All of us." These ballads can do more than

remind us that murder is wrong. They reveal other faults, too. We've mistreated each other, hated people that were different from us, defined others by one part of their identity, hurt people we loved. These ballads should still matter to us because they provide a window through which we can come together, see the mistakes of our predecessors, and learn from them.

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Murder Upon Murder

a play with music in two acts

by Patricia Schuelke

2020

Dramatis Personae

The Bard: magical, omniscient, plays guitar, genderless

Pearl Bryan: early 20s, five months pregnant, American, woman, girlfriend of Scott; Greencastle, Indiana resident murdered in 1896 near Fort Thomas, Kentucky, from several ballads titled *Pearl Bryan*

Scott Jackson: early 20s, American, man, boyfriend of Pearl; murdered and decapitated Pearl Bryan in 1896 with his classmate, from several ballads titled *Pearl Bryan*

Thomas "Tom" Sherwood: early 20s, British, man, once lover of Bess; serial killer convicted in 1635 in London, from ballad *Murder Upon Murder*

Elizabeth "Bess" Evans: late teens, British, woman, once lover of Tom; serial killer convicted in 1635 in London, from ballad *Murder Upon Murder*

Lucille Frank: late 20s, American, woman; wife of Leo Frank, who was wrongfully convicted and then lynched for the 1913 murder of Mary Phagan by an antisemitic mob near Atlanta, Georgia, from ballad *Little Mary Phagan*

Musical Note

There is no sheet music accompanying this script because it is the will of the playwright that the music will be arranged by each production to best fit the actors' abilities. This reflects how traditional murder ballads were passed down through generations and interpreted differently by different performers. Productions may base their arrangements on whatever recordings, memories, or sheet music they find of the songs. Actors are encouraged to find the keys and versions they like best and base their performances on these preferences. The songs can be performed acapella, with other characters adding vocal harmonies, with added instruments and musicians that fit with the desired folk style, or in other creative ways.

ACT 1

Entrance

There is a bar and several tables and chairs. THE BARD sits on the bar, TOM, BESS, and LUCILLE sit in the chairs at separate tables.

The BARD plays the progression for "THE UNQUIET GRAVE" on their guitar.

PEARL and SCOTT enter and walk up to the bar.

PEARL

Look, they have instruments. I wonder if there will be a concert.

SCOTT

Hey, is there anybody here? I'd like a drink.

PEARL giggles at SCOTT and sets her valise and hat on the bar. THE BARD moves behind the bar and motions to the drinks on the shelf.

SCOTT

I'll have gin.

PEARL

I'd like water if you have some.

THE BARD nods and gets them their drinks. SCOTT passes them a coin.

SCOTT

Motions to BESS

Look at her, all alone. Not very fun.

PEARL

Everyone's alone in this place. Scott, I thought you said you've been here before.

SCOTT

I must have made a wrong turn. I'm new to the city, you know, but it's a good city. This will be fun. An adventure.

PEARL

Don't you think it's a little serious in here?

SCOTT

We'll stay for a little while. Just let me get my drink.

BESS

Not very fun?

SCOTT

What?

BESS

You want me to amuse you?

PEARL laughs nervously.

SCOTT

Well it doesn't seem like a lively place, that's all.

BESS

I know you spoke of me.

She motions for PEARL and SCOTT to join her. PEARL approaches BESS's table.

Come, I think I can explain why. I think I would like some company.

PEARL

We didn't mean to offend you.

BESS

Yes, of course *you* didn't offend me, miss. You're sweet.

PEARL

It's just a little solemn in here, isn't it? Quiet.

BESS

I found myself here just now. This place is not how I remember it.

SONG: "KATY CRUEL"

The BARD takes out their guitar and accompanies BESS.

PEARL

Why are you alone?

BESS

When I first came to town,
They called me the roving jewel;
Now they've changed their tune,
They call me Bessie Cruel,

Oh, diddle, lully day,

Oh, de little ay doe day.

Oh, that I was where I would be,
Then I would be where I am not,

Here I am where I must be,

Go where I would, I cannot,

Oh, diddle, lully day,

Oh, de little ay doe day.

When I first came to town,
They brought me bottles plenty;
Now they've changed their tune,
They bring me the bottles empty,

Oh, diddle, lully day,

Oh, de little ay doe day.

Oh, that I was where I would be,
Then I would be where I am not,

Here I am where I must be,

Go where I would, I cannot,

Oh, diddle, lully day,

Oh, de little ay doe day.

Eyes as bright as fire,

Lips as red as cherry,

and 'tis my desire

To make the young ones merry,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.
Oh, that I was where I would be,
Then I would be where I am not,
 Here I am where I must be,
 Go where I would, I cannot,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.
 Through the woods I go,
And through the boggy mire,
 Straightway down the road,
 And to my heart's desire,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.
Oh, that I was where I would be,
Then I would be where I am not,
 Here I am where I must be,
 Go where I would, I cannot,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.
 I know who I love,
And I know who does love me;
 I know where I'm going,
And I know who's going with me,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.

PEARL

So that's your name? Bess?

BESS

Indeed.

PEARL

I'm Pearl. You don't seem very cruel to me. Why would people call you that?

BESS

You would be surprised at the cruelty in this world. Sometimes people say you are cruel because of their own cruelty.

PEARL

What do you mean?

BESS

We cannot control how others think of us. I am not cruel. You know that! People see what they want to see in me.

Beat

Who is he?

PEARL

Oh! Scott- he's Scott. I'm his. He's mine— at least, I think. I'm visiting him here in Cincinnati this weekend. Are you waiting for someone?

BESS

No.

PEARL

It's always more fun to have someone to go with.

BESS

After men go with me, they do not return. No one will have drinks with me here now. I am nice for the men though, sweet. Like you, I think. Sometimes.

She drinks some of PEARL's water.

Oh— water. You should not drink that; it could be unclean.

PEARL

What do you mean? Is the water bad here? It tastes fine.

BESS

Wine is better. It cannot make you sick.

PEARL

That's kind of old-fashioned, don't you think? Anyway, Scott got it for me, so I'm sure it's fine. He's going to be a dentist, so he knows about health and medicine and that sort of thing. He even has surgeon's tools and medicines that he can use at school. I don't think he would take me here if it weren't safe.

BESS

Hearing about love does lift my spirits. There's nothing quite like it. Is Scott good to you?

PEARL

He's nice. Well, he's not so good at letter writing, but when we're together he's very good to me. I don't know if he's the nicest boy who calls, but he's the one that called the most this summer.

BESS

Many boys in one summer!

PEARL

Well, it's nothing like that!

BESS

Virginity is our greatest asset. That is what my mother always told me.

PEARL

Well-

BESS

Can he come talk to us? I want to meet him.

PEARL

I guess so. He's just trying to finish his drink so we can leave. This wasn't the bar he meant to take me to.

BESS

There isn't anything wrong here. Now you have a friend. You can stay.

PEARL

You are the first friend I've made since I came to visit. We've spent so much time planning things that I haven't had a moment to rest.

BESS

Love plans?

SONG: "LAVENDER BLUE"

PEARL

Looks back at SCOTT. As she sings, she tries to get him to come sit with her.

Lavender blue, dilly dilly,

Lavender green

When you are king, dilly dilly,

I shall be queen

BESS

Who told you so, dilly dilly,

Who told you so?

PEARL

'Twas my own heart, dilly dilly,

That told me so

Lavender blue, dilly, dilly

Lavender green

If I love you, dilly, dilly

Then you love me

SCOTT

Lavender blue, dilly, dilly

Lavender green

Then I'll be king, dilly, dilly

And you'll be my queen

PEARL, SCOTT

Let the birds sing, dilly, dilly,

Let the lambs play.

We shall be safe, dilly, dilly,

Out of harm's way.

I love to dance, dilly, dilly,

I love to sing.

PEARL

When I am queen, dilly, dilly,

You'll be my king

BESS

Who told you so, dilly, dilly,

SCOTT, BESS

Who told you so?

PEARL

'Twas my own heart, dilly, dilly,

That told me so.

PEARL, SCOTT

'Twas my own heart, dilly, dilly,

That told me so.

BESS

Well isn't that sweet!

PEARL

I'm glad you think so. I guess I can sit for a little longer.

PEARL sits with BESS and they continue to talk.

TOM

Is that your girl?

SCOTT

Ha! I guess so. Pearl's her name.

TOM

She seems sweet.

SCOTT

That she is, friend!

TOM and SCOTT laugh. SCOTT approaches TOM.

I'm Scott.

TOM

Tom. Good to meet you. Haven't seen you around before. That's an interesting set of clothes you've got there. Must have cost a little fortune.

SCOTT

That's nice of you, man. I think they look nice, myself. I'm glad to meet another fine sir at this establishment.

PEARL

Noticing TOM and SCOTT together

Oh, now look what he's gotten himself into.

BESS

Hm.

PEARL

Do you know him?

BESS

What do you mean?

TOM

What makes you think I'm so good?

SCOTT

That accent! I've been around. I know an Englishman when I hear one. How'd you end up over here?

TOM

I was going to ask about your way of speaking, too. I've never heard anything like it before. I've never seen boots that fine before, either. Where are you from?

SCOTT

All over, ya know. My mom moved me around a lot growing up to try to keep me out of trouble.

TOM

And did you?

SCOTT

Hell, no!

SCOTT and TOM cheer and drink, signaling for THE BARD to bring them another round.

TOM

You see that girl Pearl's talking to?

SCOTT

Yeah. The boring one?

TOM

She used to be my little thing. She wasn't always like this. She is only boring now because she isn't being mischievous. She has a devil in her. I have never met another girl who can hide her true self away like that.

SONG: "RAMBLING GAMBLING MAN"

SCOTT

And you've met a few?

TOM

That's right, kind sir!

I am a rambling, gambling man.
I gamble down in town.
Whenever I meet with a deck of cards
I lay my money down,
I lay my money down.
Now if you want to gamble
Your luck you want to try
Just pass the queens and check the kings,
And bet your aces high
Oh, bet your aces high.
I'm a Rambler, I'm a gambler.

I'm a rambling, gambling man.
Well, I'm a Rambler, I'm a gambler,
And I gamble when I can.
I've gambled round in London town
With money all with me.
But I lost my money where I won my honey
Way down in Canbury,
Way down in Canbury.
I'm a Rambler, I'm a gambler.
I'm a rambling, gambling man.
Well, I'm a Rambler, I'm a gambler,
And I gamble when I can.
Well, she took me in her parlor
And cooled me with her fan.
She swore I was the prettiest thing
In the shape of mortal man,
In the shape of mortal man.

SCOTT

My daughter, my dear daughter
How can you leave me so?
And leave your dear old mama
And with this gambler go?
And with this gambler go?
He's a Rambler, he's a gambler!
He's a rambling, gambling man!
Well, he's a Rambler, he's a gambler!
He's a rambling, gambling man!

TOM

So deal around the deck, my friends,
And give me just five cards.
I'll show you rambling, gambling men
A lover's hand of hearts,
A lover's hand of hearts.
I'm a Rambler, I'm a gambler.
I'm a rambling, gambling man.
Well, I'm a Rambler, I'm a gambler,
And I gamble when I can.
I'm a rambling gambling man!

SCOTT and TOM let out a loud laugh and continue to talk.

PEARL

Him? Really? He doesn't seem very nice.

BESS

He isn't.

TOM gets up and starts to lead SCOTT out of the bar.

Decision

PEARL

Scott, don't leave me here! Don't you want to stay?

SCOTT

Of course, honey pie. Sure.

SCOTT returns to PEARL and gives her a kiss. TOM follows SCOTT back to their table, disappointed. THE BARD begins to sing, and ALL OTHERS freeze in place.

SONG: "MURDER UPON MUDER"

THE BARD

List Christians all unto my song.

'Twill move your hearts to pity,
What bloody murders have been done,
Of late about this city
We daily see the blood of Cain,
Amongst us ever will remain.
O murder, lust and murder,
Is the foul sink of sin.
Of the story now at hand,
The truth I will declare,
How God leaves man unto himself,
Of Satan then beware,
Thus doth Tommy truly find,
He unto murder bent his mind.
O murder, lust and murder,
Is the foul sink of sin.

ALL OTHERS unfreeze.

TOM

Pretty tied down with that maid, are you?

SCOTT

You could say that.

TOM

Oh?

SCOTT

It's not something I should say to someone I just met.

PEARL

To BESS.

There's something between Scott and me that's been bothering us.

BESS

What could it be? He seems nice enough to you. Well-dressed, too. You both have such interesting clothes.

PEARL

I guess I shouldn't say.

THE BARD strums their guitar again, playing through the progression from "MURDER UPON MURDER." PEARL continues as if in a trance.

PEARL

The thing is that I have a sort of problem. I guess we're sort of in the family way, if you know what I mean.

PEARL puts her hand on her stomach, then seems to come out of a trance with a start.

I don't know why I told you that! It's awfully personal, you know. I haven't even told my mother.

BESS

People say I have a trustworthy way about me. Don't fret.

PEARL

We just don't know what to do.

SCOTT

To TOM, as though in a trance.

Pearl's in trouble, and it's my doing, if you understand my meaning. I'm trying to stay loving, but it's hard knowing that something drastic is going to have to happen.

Coming to.

I don't know why I just told you that.

TOM

Speak your mind, sir! I am not a judgmental man.

SCOTT

It's not so much that. I mean it's not quite my problem...

TOM

It's the lady's problem!

SONG: "MAN OF CONSTANT SORROW"

SCOTT

I mean— I don't know. It's been bothering me an awful lot to be her problem alone. I know I have to fix it. I don't want her to bear the burden, and I don't want to have to marry her. If I just fixed it and left, that would be simpler. I don't want to... I can't have a wife and a family!

I am a man of constant sorrow,

I've seen trouble all my days.

I bid farewell to old New Jersey,

The place where I was born and raised.

For six long years I've been in trouble,

No pleasure here on Earth I've found,

For in this world I'm bound to ramble;

I have no friends to help me now.

Well, it's "fare thee well my old true lover,

I never expect to see you again,"

For I'm bound to ride out on the railroad;

Perhaps I'll die upon the train.

Well you can bury me in some deep valley,

For many years where I may dwell.

Well, then you may learn to love another

While I am sleeping in my grave.

Well, maybe your friends think I'm just a stranger,

A face you never will see no more.

But there is one promise that is given:

I'll meet you on God's golden shore.

LUCILLE

You consider this a tragedy?

SCOTT

Excuse me?

THE BARD begins playing their guitar.

LUCILLE

Cutting off THE BARD.

Stop! How dare you? Let me speak! You've done well enough silencing me and all these other good people.

To SCOTT

Young man, do you really think that this sweet girl's pregnancy is a "problem"?

SCOTT is stunned.

Speak, boy!

SCOTT

I guess I didn't really mean it like that.

LUCILLE

Then what did you mean?

SCOTT

It's just been troubling me, that's all, I guess.

PEARL

Scott, don't worry, I'm not angry. It's good for me to know how you feel about it.

LUCILLE

He's not thinking about you, dear.

SCOTT

How- Why-

LUCILLE

Hold your tongue. Don't upset her more than you already have. Do you really know what trouble is in this life? Have you known someone to suffer wrongly? Have you really known suffering at all?

PEARL

He sort of made a mistake! We both did.

LUCILLE

Making a mistake doesn't have to be something you suffer over. This is only a change not—

SONG: "LITTLE MARY PHAGAN"

THE BARD begins to play and sing, and ALL are frozen in place.

THE BARD

Little Mary Phagan, she went to town one day.
She went to the pencil factory to get her little pay.
She left her home at seven, she kissed her mother goodbye.
Not one time did that poor girl think she was going to die.
Leo Frank, he met her-

LUCILLE struggles to free herself from the trance.

LUCILLE

Exclaiming

No! You will not talk about my husband like that any longer. I was not allowed to speak at his trial. How have you trapped me so that I cannot speak on his behalf after he was murdered, too?

LUCILLE attempts to shake BESS, but ALL remain frozen.

You won't let me tell them what happened to my Leo— my poor husband. Why? Why are these songs so important to you that you can't let me tell the truth? The song you sing about him was written by someone who thought he was a murderer. They were wrong. And he was killed by people who were wrong about him. All they could see was hate. Is that something you want to keep from these people? My loss and my pain?

SONG: "THE UNQUIET GRAVE"

Cold blows the wind to my true love,
And gently drops the rain.
I've never had but one true love,
Now in a green wood he lies slain.
I'll do as much for my true love,
As any young girl may,
I'll sit and mourn all on his grave,
For twelve months and a day.

THE BARD begins to accompany LUCILLE on guitar. ALL OTHERS slowly emerge from the trance they are under and turn to face LUCILLE.

And when twelve months and a day was passed,
His ghost should rise and speak,
"Why sittest thou all on my grave
And will not let me sleep?
Go fetch me water from the desert,
And blood from out of a stone,
Go fetch me milk from a fair maid's breast
That young man never has known.
How oft on yonder grave, sweetheart,
Where we were wont to walk,
The fairest flower that e'er I saw
Has withered to a stalk."
A stalk has withered and dead, sweetheart,
The flower will never return,
And since I've lost my own true love,
What can I do but yearn?
When will we meet again, sweetheart,
When will we meet again?
"When the autumn leaves that fall from the trees
Are green and spring up again."

Beginning to cry.

You'll let them see me break down, but you won't let them see me challenge you? All of you, beware what they sing. It's about you, but it doesn't have to be true. You don't have to listen.

LUCILLE breaks down. BESS goes to comfort her, bringing her wine. As THE BARD begins to sing, ALL fall into a trance. PEARL and TOM sit at a table together, and BESS leaves LUCILLE to sit at a table with SCOTT.

SONG: "MURDER UPON MURDER CONTINUATION 1"

THE BARD

A man of honest parentage,

Trained up to husbandry,
But weary of that honest life,
To London he did hie:
Where to his dismal woeful fate,
He chose a whore for his bunkmate.
O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin
One Canbury Bess in Turnbull Street,
On him did cast an eye,
And prayed him to give her some drink
As he was passing by;
O so too soon he gave consent,
And for the same doth now repent.
O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin

SCOTT

Did you hear that? Were they just singing about you?

BESS

I think I've been coming here listening to their songs for a long while, and nothing they say has ever bothered me.

SCOTT

But it was something about lust and murder. What do you know about that?

BESS

Nothing. I'm a good woman. I may be young, I may not have my education, but I'm a good woman.

BESS and SCOTT continue to talk quietly.

PEARL

Should I be worried about Scott? What did he tell you about it?

TOM

He told me he was burdened by the news. It would be better for the both of you if you could solve this problem.

PEARL

I haven't even told my family yet.

TOM

You won't have to if you fix it before they notice. Scott told me he can fix this. He has medical training, you know.

PEARL

He's at school to become a dentist.

TOM

What's the difference between dentists and doctors anyway? See, he can help if you let him.

PEARL

I don't want him to leave me.

TOM

Don't worry about that, little lady. You're sweet.

TOM and PEARL continue to discuss quietly.

BESS

She didn't want to say much to me.

SCOTT

Pearl didn't say anything to you about it?

BESS

She hasn't told her family yet, you know.

SCOTT

Well, that means something to her. She's close with her family.

BESS

What do you think that means?

SCOTT

It must be important enough to her to keep it a secret.

BESS

Do you think you can help?

SCOTT

I don't know. I think there may be some things at my college we can use. I'm trying to be a dentist.

BESS

Oh, a doctor! Well, that's perfect!

SCOTT

You really think I could do something?

BESS

Yes! I've never known a doctor before. Do you have a lot of money?

SCOTT

Not now, I'm just in school.

BESS

What's it like? Do you have to study dead bodies? I don't think I could stomach it, surrounded by death.

SCOTT

No, nothing like that. Not yet, I mean. I just started.

BESS

Does that mean you don't know enough to help Pearl?

SCOTT

I think I could muster it with a little help. Find some things that I think would work.

BESS

I knew a woman when I was little that would make potions for ladies with family problems. One time my friend sneaked into her house to see how she was making it. It was just boiled pennyroyal and sage. I don't know how that could have done it.

SCOTT

I guess I can think of something. I can try. If she wants.

SONG: "MURDER UPON MURDER CONTINUATION 2"

As THE BARD sings, ALL OTHERS freeze, then SCOTT and PEARL trade places. As SCOTT gets up, BESS pickpockets him, still in a trance.

THE BARD

Much mischief then by them was done,

In and about the city,
But still they escape unpunished
Not known more was the pity,
To deadly sins they then did fall,
Not only rob but murder all.
O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin.

The trance ends.

PEARL

Did you talk to him? What did he say?

BESS

I think he can do it! He knows about medicine; he said so.

PEARL

Have you... has anything like this every happened to you?

BESS

Not exactly. Men have wronged me before, sure. I've gotten myself into trouble, too. Not that sort, though. I've been in troubling situations. It's something you can get yourself through, Pearl.

PEARL

But how will he do it?

BESS

When I was little women would drink things. I told him about it, and I think he rather liked my idea.

PEARL

That doesn't sound so hard. But what if...

LUCILLE

What if you want to have your baby?

PEARL

Will he leave me if I do?

LUCILLE

I can't say.

BESS

He seems good.

LUCILLE

It's dangerous to go off of how people seem.

PEARL

That's why I worry. He isn't the only boy who comes calling, but I know it's his. He's not even the nicest boy who comes calling, I guess.

LUCILLE

You sweet thing. Think about yourself.

SONG: "MUDER UPON MURDER CONTINUATION 3"

THE BARD begins to play again. LUCILLE slinks back to her seat with a scowl. ALL except THE BARD freeze. PEARL moves to sit with TOM and SCOTT.

THE BARD

The first was Master William Loe,
A gentleman of note,
And cruel Tommy laid him low
With an inhuman stroke:
Nor birth nor blood they did regard,
Yet death for blood is their reward.
O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin.
One Master Holt of Windsor Town,
A Norwich factor he,
Walking abroad to take the air,
Felt next their butchery,
For Tommy with a fatal blow,
This goodman killed as the whore willed.
O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin.
The last that fell into their hands
Was Master Claxton he,

A gentleman of good descent
And well beloved truly,
Who walked unarmed by break of day,
In Holborn fields they did him slay.
O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin.

The trance ends.

SCOTT

Have you decided?

PEARL

Have you?

TOM

It seems you both have decided.

SCOTT

Pearl...

PEARL

I think I can take it.

SCOTT

I'll really do my best. I'll get all the help I can. It will be a secret. We will keep it a secret.

PEARL

I'm scared. I've been so scared about it. About what you think. About what might happen.

She begins to cry

I hope everything will be alright. I just want to get everything over with and go home.

SCOTT

We can make it right. Tom told me he would help.

PEARL

Are you sure that's a good idea?

TOM

Sure, it is. You can trust me— you and your fine medical man here. He knows his stuff.

BESS is alarmed by TOM's involvement and stands up.

SCOTT

He's right, Pearl. I can get a lot from the dental college. I could get everything together tonight.

PEARL

Is this what you— do you really think so?

SCOTT

We'll be fine, Pearl. Trust me.

BESS takes PEARL's hand and leads her back to a table where LUCILLE is sitting. PEARL and BESS sit down. SCOTT and TOM exit.

Action

LUCILLE, BESS, and PEARL sit at a table together. THE BARD cleans up the other tables and chairs, stacking them as if it were closing time.

BESS

See? Everything will turn out splendidly.

LUCILLE

We'll stay with you.

PEARL

What happened to you, ma'am? What were you talking about before?

LUCILLE

I can tell you if you like, but it's a sad story.

PEARL

I just want to think about something else.

BESS

Yes, please, go on, madam.

LUCILLE

Well, before anything else, I should tell you my name is Lucille Frank. My husband's name was Leo Frank. Have you heard of him?

BESS

No.

PEARL

Is he famous or something?

LUCILLE

I'm glad you have not. Infamy cursed him.

BESS

A true curse?

PEARL

What do you mean "a true curse"?

BESS

Was there a spell on him?

PEARL

Those things aren't real.

LUCILLE

No one put a spell on him, but people did hate him. One of the girls he employed died at the factory. A tragedy. But not on that day or at any other time did my husband by word or act, or in any other way, demean himself otherwise than as an innocent man. The only evidence against him came through torture; the police took our cook and interrogated her for hours before she produced a statement.

PEARL

Well where was he that night? Who did it?

LUCILLE

He spent the whole Saturday evening in my company. I couldn't testify for him because I'm his wife. That's the law.

BESS

Well, who killed the child?

LUCILLE

I don't know.

PEARL

That's terrible.

BESS

People assumed it was your husband, her employer.

LUCILLE

They hated him because he was Jewish. And their hatred sent him to prison.

PEARL

Can't he escape? Isn't there a lawyer or someone?

LUCILLE

After another prisoner stabbed Leo, a mob took him from his cell and hanged him from a tree.

BESS

Maybe it was a curse.

PEARL

I'm so sorry.

LUCILLE

I trusted in a sense of fairness and justice for the people. All I received was pain.

PEARL

How could so many people be misled like that?

BESS

Trickery is easy.

LUCILLE

I don't know, Pearl. They misled themselves.

BESS

I think it's easiest for a woman to trick a man. They don't think we're smart enough to do anything crafty.

PEARL

Well why would you want to? It seems to me men often know better.

LUCILLE

Are you feeling alright about all of this?

PEARL

I trust him. I don't think he would do anything to hurt me.

Pause.

I don't know what else to do.

TOM enters and walks to PEARL. BESS sees him and goes to the bar.

TOM

He's getting his things. The town is strange that way. Larger buildings than I have noticed before. Would you come with me?

PEARL takes LUCILLE's hand.

PEARL

No, I want to stay here if I can.

Looks around.

Everyone here knows. I don't want to go out in the cold.

LUCILLE

Sure, we'll stay if you want us to.

BESS

To herself

You trust him?

SCOTT enters with a vial, visibly sweating.

SCOTT

Pearl, are you alright?

Gaining composure.

I have everything. This will work. Everything is fine.

SCOTT kisses PEARL.

PEARL

I'm alright. Can they stay?

SCOTT

No. This is private. Like with a doctor.

PEARL

I'm scared.

SCOTT

No, you're not. Look at me. I know what to do. You'll be fine. They have to go.

SCOTT looks at LUCILLE, and she reluctantly exits. BESS follows LUCILLE. TOM stops short of exiting on the opposite side of the stage to watch.

SCOTT

Look at me, Pearl. I know what I'm doing.

PEARL

Beginning to cry.

I know, Scott. I know.

SCOTT

Don't be scared.

PEARL

Scott—

SCOTT

Here.

Giving PEARL the vial.

I'll stay here.

Takes PEARL's hand.

PEARL holds the vial in her other hand and looks at it. THE BARD begins to strum "ALL MY TRIALS" on the guitar.

SONG: "ALL MY TRIALS"

PEARL

Will it hurt?

SCOTT

It's medicine. It will help.

PEARL

Will it be quick? Should I lie down?

SCOTT

I know what I'm doing, Pearl. You only have to drink it.

PEARL drinks from the vial and collapses from her chair onto the floor. SCOTT holds her up.

PEARL

All my trials Lord, soon will be over

The river of Jordan is chilly and cold

It chills the body, but it warms the soul

All my trials Lord, soon will be over

If living was a thing that money could buy

The rich would live and the poor would die

All my trials Lord, soon will be over

Too late my brothers, too late, but never mind

All my trials Lord, soon will be over

There is a tree in Paradise

The Pilgrims call it the tree of life

All my trials Lord, soon will be over

Hush little baby don't you cry

You know your mama was born to die

All my trials Lord, soon will be over

All my trials Lord, soon will be over

PEARL faints. SCOTT looks back to TOM.

SCOTT

What should I do?

TOM

Be calm.

SCOTT

How? Is she dead?

TOM

Is she?

SCOTT

She's breathing. I can see her chest moving.

TOM

Will she live?

SCOTT

I don't know! I thought it would shock her, but not like this. I thought maybe she would just feel ill. Pearl! Wake up!

SCOTT stands, laying PEARL on the floor.

Wake up! Please. I don't want to kill anyone.

TOM

No one will know.

SCOTT

If they don't know... her mother. Her sister just died this summer. They can't—

TOM

We can disguise it. No one will know it's you.

SCOTT

But when she doesn't come home...

TOM

It would be better if they never knew.

SCOTT

She's breathing. Maybe she will come to.

TOM

Scott, you—

SCOTT

I can't do it. I can't *do* that.

TOM

You may have already done it.

SCOTT

No, I can't. Please, Tom. Help me!

TOM drags PEARL offstage. PEARL screams. SCOTT exits to see what is going on. There is the sound of a struggle, then a body hitting the floor.

SCOTT enters, teary-eyed, frazzled, and with blood on his shirt.

SCOTT

Simultaneously sinking to the ground and picking up the vial.

I didn't do it. I didn't do it. *(repeat)*

TOM enters with a scratch across his cheek and blood on his hands.

TOM

Is there a bag? Get me a bag!

SCOTT scrambles to his feet, sees PEARL's valise on the bar, and hands it to TOM. TOM exits. SCOTT looks offstage and sees what is happening.

SCOTT

Dropping the vial.

What...

TOM returns with the valise, now full of a head-shaped object and soaked in blood. He hands it to SCOTT.

TOM

Hide it, and no one will know who she was. Now.

SCOTT begins to cry and runs offstage. TOM looks around, takes PEARL's hat from the bar, and exits.

END ACT 1

ACT 2

Scene 1

There are three jail cells with a stool and cot in each. They are upstage center, stage right, and stage left, respectively. Between these is an empty space with two chairs and a table. SCOTT is onstage in the stage left jail cell. The lights come up only in the empty space, where BESS and LUCILLE are sitting.

The BARD enters wearing a policeman's hat.

THE BARD

Just a few more questions, ladies.

BESS

What more is there?

LUCILLE

We were there in the bar, but we left before anything happened. He didn't want us to stay.

THE BARD

You knew what he was going to do?

LUCILLE

Yes.

BESS

I didn't know about the part— you know...

She draws a finger across her throat.

LUCILLE

May we go now?

THE BARD

If there's nothing else you would like to tell us, then you may.

LUCILLE exits.

BESS

Do you think Scott committed the London murders as well?

THE BARD

Actually, miss, based on what you told us-

BESS

Oh, I hope you believed me. What happened to those men is terrible. Robbed and murdered. Sinful, you know.

THE BARD

Miss—

BESS

Why would someone do such a thing? It is truly unfathomable.

THE BARD

Miss, we would like to take you in for questioning for the London murders.

BESS

What?

THE BARD

Please follow me.

The BARD leads BESS into the upstage cell.

SCOTT enters nervously to talk to SCOTT. The lights come up on SCOTT in his cell. SCOTT is shaking and weeping.

TOM

Scott!

SCOTT

Nervous and surprised.

Tom. Oh, Tom.

TOM

Good God, man.

SCOTT

I didn't do it. *You* did it! What did you do to her?!

TOM

They don't know.

SCOTT

I'm the one who's in here, and I didn't do it. It was Tom! Hey, guards! Anybody? Arrest this man!

TOM

Peace, man. It'll be alright.

SCOTT

No, it won't. I tried to tell them that it wasn't my idea.

TOM

It was all your idea!

SCOTT

Not with her head! That was you!

TOM

It was a backup plan. *Our* backup plan.

SCOTT

It all happened so fast.

TOM

I tried to tell you what you were getting into.

SCOTT

Now they know. They know what happened. They know what I've done.

TOM

What can they do?

SCOTT

Kill me. They can kill me! "What can they do?"

Beat

What have I done? Pearl, Pearl, Pearl.

He works himself into a tizzy. The BARD, still as a policeman, hearing SCOTT's screams, approaches TOM.

THE BARD

Sir, what's your name?

TOM

Gruff, but keeping composure and charm.

Tom. Some say Country Tom.

THE BARD

Sir, please come with me. I think we have a few questions for you.

TOM

About what? You must know what he did already.

SCOTT

What I did? *I did?!*

THE BARD

No, sir. It isn't about that.

TOM

Then I should be free to go as I please.

THE BARD

It's about another matter, Tom. We've found Bess.

Scene 2

BESS is in the upstage center jail cell. TOM is in the stage right jail cell. TOM moves toward BESS's cell. He shakes the bars of his cell and stomps his feet.

TOM

Guardsmen! Please, allow me to speak to her! Allow her to meet me somewhere, for a moment.

The BARD enters with a ring of keys. He looks at BESS, who is still. He unlocks her cell. BESS exits her cell and sits in a chair center stage, facing away from TOM. There is a pause.

TOM

Excuse me, good sir. Unlock this gate so I may sit with her.

The BARD looks at BESS.

SONG: "FALSE TRUE LOVE"

BESS

Come in, come in, you old true love,

And chat for awhile with me,

For it's been three quarters of a long year or more,

Since I spoke one word to thee.

The BARD unlocks TOM's cell door.

TOM

Exits cell and stands behind BESS, who does not face him.

I wish to the Lord I'd never been born,
Or had died when I was young,
Then I never would have hurt my old true love,
Nor have courted no other one.

BESS

There is many the star shall jingle in the west,
There is many the leaf below,
There is many the damn that shall lite upon a man,
For treating a poor girl so.

TOM

Moving back towards his cell.

I shan't come in, I shan't set down,
I don't have a moment's time,
And since you have chosen to end our true love,
Then your heart is no longer mine.

Bess, I... when did you decide that what we do is wrong?

BESS

What we did.

TOM

You admit it, then? You remember again? It all happened. We robbed and killed those men. We did those things. We were in love.

BESS

When you were mine, my old true love,
Then your lead lay on my breast,
You could make me believe by the falling of your arm,
That the sun rose up in the west.

TOM

There is many the star shall jingle in the west,

There is many the leaf below,

BESS, TOM

There is many the damn that shall lite upon a man,

For treating a poor girl so.

TOM moves to sit in the chair facing BESS.

Come in, come in, you old true love,

And chat for awhile with me,

For it's been three quarters of a long year or more,

Since I spoke one word to thee.

BESS

What will happen to us?

TOM

I blamed you.

BESS

I blamed you, too.

Beat.

Why did you assist in killing that poor girl? You incriminated us both!

TOM

We worked together.

BESS

I wanted money. I wanted love. I did not want this.

TOM

We had no wealth. How was I supposed to care for you?

BESS

Lust... and *murder*...

TOM

How was I supposed to care for us?

BESS

Not in this way!

TOM

Why can't you admit that you were a part of it? Why can't you admit that you wronged others?
That you led them-

BESS

No! Why am I here? What have I done? I loved you.

TOM

Oh, that's the crime?

BESS

Perhaps it is. I was like a child, barely a woman.

TOM

You knew what you did just as I did.

BESS

I did not intend for any men to die.

TOM

I wanted things to be nice for you. Just like they were with your family.

BESS

We have forsaken our families! You wanted us to be like my parents? Like your parents?

TOM

Bess!

He becomes enraged and kicks his chair over.

BESS

I will not confess to a wrong I did not commit.

TOM

You lured them! You seduced them into meeting me! You knew what I would do. You knew what I was doing.

BESS.

No.

BESS walks to her cell and slams the door, enclosing herself in it once more. The BARD locks the door to her cell and motions for TOM to enter his.

TOM

You are a wretch!

THE BARD

Locking TOM's cell door, giggling.

And what does that make you?

Scene 3

Lights up only on SCOTT's cell.

SONG: "LAVENDER BLUE REPRISE"

SCOTT

Lavender blue, dilly, dilly

Lavender green

Then I'll be king, dilly, dilly

And you'll be my queen

Let the birds sing, dilly, dilly,

Let the lambs play.

We shall be safe, dilly, dilly,

Out of harm's way.

He bursts into tears. The BARD walks towards his cell, still in policeman garb, with a notepad.

THE BARD

Scott, the family wants to know.

SCOTT

I don't know, I don't know. It wasn't me! *He* did it. I told you. I gave her the drink. I gave it to her because I thought it would help her.

SONG: "THE BALLAD OF PEARL BRYAN"

THE BARD

Scott, where is her head.

SCOTT

I don't know.

THE BARD

Scott, please don't be cruel.

Dear Scott, if you'll listen, a sad story I'll relate.
It happened near Fort Thomas in the old Kentucky State.
'Twas January the thirty-first the dreadful deed was done
By Scott Jackson; how cold his blood did run!

SCOTT

Simultaneously

I didn't do it!

THE BARD

And little did Pearl Bryan think when she left her home that day
The grip she carried in her hand would hide her head away.
She thought it was her lover's hand she could trust both night and day,
Although it was her lover's hand that took her life away.

SCOTT

It wasn't just me! Him! He did it! I was just trying to help. She was so worried. I was so worried!
She wouldn't stop crying!

THE BARD

Little did her parents think when she left her happy home,
Their darling girl just in her youth would never more return.
How sad it would have been to them to have heard Pearl's lonely voice
At midnight in that lonely spot where those two boys rejoiced!
In came Pearl Bryan's sister and falling to her knees,
Begging to Scott Jackson, "My sister's head, O please!"

SCOTT

I don't know where we put it! Stop asking me!

THE BARD

Scott Jackson set a stubborn jaw, not a word would he have said, but
"You'll meet your sister in heaven, and there'll be no missing head."

SCOTT

I didn't want her to die. I didn't! I knew her mother, her family. I didn't want to do this to all of them.

THE BARD

Addressing the audience

Now all you ladies take warning, men are so unjust.
It may be your best lover, but you know not whom to trust.
Pearl Bryan died away from home upon a lonely spot.
Take heed, take heed, believe me girls. Don't let this be your lot!

SCOTT

What do you want me to say?

There is silence as THE BARD waits for a confession. They open to a fresh page in their notepad.

I don't really know what happened. I'm not a doctor.

THE BARD

You're a dentist, correct?

SCOTT

I'm *studying* to be a dentist. I thought I knew what to do. I thought I could help her, help both of us. I thought it would work. When I asked my classmates, asked some druggists, it seemed like it could work. He said he would help. It wasn't my idea— what he did with her head.

THE BARD

You trusted him.

SCOTT

I trusted him. We were working together. I didn't know who he was. She told me she wanted to do it. She wouldn't stop crying. She wouldn't stop writing me. I wasn't the only man who came calling

that summer. And, I'm not a good letter-writer. I tried to tell her how to do it herself. She insisted she would come to Cincinnati. All the way from Greencastle! I didn't want her to lie to her family, but she did. She came all the way here for my help. Was I supposed to turn her away?

All that with her head was not part of the plan. We didn't want to get caught, that's all, and she seemed dead! Now you and the doctor and everyone tell me you can tell that she was still alive. She was not! We couldn't have saved her.

THE BARD

Your trial begins tomorrow.

SCOTT

Officer, please! Please, tell them what I said. Please, tell her sister I'm sorry.

THE BARD

You stared at her silently when she asked for her sister's head, Scott. You can't take that back.

Blackout.

Scene 4

The stage is set with three chairs in a line, facing the audience. The jail cells are gone. In the chairs are TOM, BESS, and SCOTT. Behind them is *THE BARD*, again with their guitar, also facing the audience.

BESS

To TOM

You are a thief; you are a murderer.

TOM

You know what you did. You can't take it back. And now all of London knows.

BESS

You killed those men, not me.

TOM

You knew what I was doing. You wanted us to have that money.

BESS

We needed it.

THE BARD

Interrupting, in a London accent, and addressing TOM and BESS.

For the murders they have committed, Thomas Sherwood and Elizabeth Evans are to be executed on the 14th and 17th of April, this year, 1635. For them, no love, no mourning, and no place of burial. They have rejected their families and have no fear, no care, no thought, and no love for God. Their story is indeed a cautionary tale for all. Parents, cast not off your children in their youth, knowing how subject youth is unto temptation. Children, obey your parents. Men, do not be seduced as he was by this bewitching creature. Women and men alike, beware of thieves like him.

Do you, Thomas Sherwood, Elizabeth Evans, have any last words?

BESS and TOM stand.

TOM

Oh Lord my sins are so heinous, great and many. If thy mercy help me not, what will become hereafter of my poor soul?

BESS scoffs.

THE BARD

After execution, he will hang in chains at Battle-bridge. She will be dissected, and her dried skeleton will be preserved to be displayed in the Barber Surgeons Hall.

BESS

Horrified.

What?

THE BARD motions for them to exit. TOM and BESS exit one at a time. Once each is offstage, there is the sound of a body hitting the floor.

SONG: "MURDER UPON MURDER"

THE BARD

Much mischief then by them was done,

In and about the city,

But still they escape unpunished

Not known more was the pity,

To deadly sins they then did fall,

Not only rob but murder all.

O murder, etc.

Wishing all men when as they walk

To have a special care,

And not to go unarmed, or late,
But sword or truncheon wear.
Had they done so, Sherwood doth say,
He had not ventured them to slay.
O murder, lust and murder,
Is the foul sink of sin.
Within three quarters of a year
These murders they have done,
And maimed and spoiled many a one,
By their confession:
Such deadly blows he did them give,
It was strange that after they should live.
O murder, lust and murder,
Is the foul sink of sin.
For these bad facts he now doth die,
Just judgement for his meed.
All such ill-livers grant they may,
No worse nor better speed,
So shall England from crying sin,
But ever freed, God's mercy win.
O murder, lust and murder,
Is the foul sink of sin.

SCOTT sits in his chair, fearful. THE BARD looks at him, and, as if under a spell, SCOTT applauds for THE BARD's song.

THE BARD

Clears throat, no longer speaks in British accent.

On this day, May 20, 1897, Scott Jackson and his accomplice will be hanged for the murder of Pearl Bryan. Have you anything to say?

SCOTT snaps out of the spell, is momentarily confused, then regains composure and stands up.

SCOTT

I have only this to say, that I am not guilty of the crime for which I am now compelled to pay the penalty of my life.

THE BARD motions for him to exit. Once he is offstage, there is the sound of a body hitting the floor.

Scene 5

PEARL enters, confused and sheepish.

SONG: "THE BALLAD OF PEARL BRYAN"

THE BARD

Little did Pearl Bryan think when she left her home that day
The grip she carried in her hand would hide her head away.
She thought it was her lover's hand she could trust both night and day,
Although it was her lover's hand that took her life away.

PEARL

Pardon me... hello.

THE BARD turns to face her.

I don't really know why I'm still here. I thought, well, I thought maybe you could help me.

THE BARD nods and motions PEARL to come closer.

I thought that once someone dies, they go to heaven, or they at least rest in peace. Now I'm here with you of all people. Do you know, was I already dead when I met you before?

THE BARD does not answer.

I've been thinking about it; I've been trying to make sense out of all this. We came to the bar and you were the one who seemed to know everything. You seemed like you knew that I was going to die before I knew it. I thought that's something only God knows, and I know you are not God.

PEARL becomes more agitated when THE BARD does not respond.

Well, aren't you going to say anything? Can you only sing? Ever since I died those songs you sang kept ringing in my head. Every time I think I am about to finally get some peace, those songs creep into my ears and down my spine. And it isn't always you singing, it's other people, too. Sometimes I think I can recognize the voices. Is this it? Is this some sort of torture? Why are all these people singing about me just because I died? Do they really care about me?

Why won't you tell me anything? I know you must know something! I just want to be remembered for who I was, not for what someone else did to me! That isn't too much to ask!

LUCILLE enters.

LUCILLE

Pearl! Oh, you poor thing.

PEARL

I thought it would be over, Lucille! I thought now that everyone was punished, I could go away!

PEARL falls into LUCILLE's arms.

LUCILLE

I thought it would be that easy at first, too. I don't want to be defined by Leo's death. I want to continue to live. These songs people sing about him, the lies they tell, it isn't right. I know that. They still haunt me. I hear little children singing about Mary Phagan as they walk down the street. Reporters still knock on my door.

When they buried Leo in Queens, I made sure his headstone read "beloved husband," and I meant it. I loved him, and he is beloved to this day. There's something else, too, on his headstone. "Semper idem;" always the same. At the time, I meant it to mean he is always loved. Now, I feel like it was a sentence. He will always be famous for a crime he didn't commit, and I will be haunted by that fame.

PEARL

I'm sorry.

LUCILLE

Oh, hush. It isn't your fault.

To THE BARD

Well, aren't you going to say anything?

THE BARD

It isn't my place to decide what happens to either of you. I only tell what I have learned through song.

LUCILLE

Well, how's that? It seems like you knew Pearl's song and Tom and Bess's song even before they did.

THE BARD

These songs have existed for a long time, passed down through the generations. They are stories we all tell.

LUCILLE

That isn't an answer. We want to leave; we want to move on.

THE BARD

You want to forget?

LUCILLE

No! Not forget, just move on. None of us can change the bad things that happen, none of us can change anything. I just want to have a life beyond Leo's death.

PEARL

I just want to rest. That's all. I know what happened to me. I know what I did, what he did. None of it can change, I just want to be able to leave this place where all I can think about is death. All anyone can think about is the bad things that happened to us.

LUCILLE

Our lives are not only the bad things.

PEARL

I had a childhood. I have a family. I was in love. I helped raise my brothers and sisters. I felt warmth and joy. I had dreams. I want to think about those things. I want to rest in the peace of my life. I don't want to be haunted by how it ended.

THE BARD

This isn't for me to decide.

LUCILLE

You can stop singing the songs. It's the songs!

PEARL

They're trapping us!

BESS enters. When she sees PEARL and LUCILLE, she is stunned, stopping in place.

THE BARD

These songs have existed for a long time, passed down through the generations. They are stories we all tell.

PEARL

That doesn't mean they are harmless! They are about me!

LUCILLE

About my husband!

THE BARD

They are stories we all tell! They are stories we all tell because they are stories about us. All of us.

PEARL

Well what will happen? If I go, how will it end?

LUCILLE

Will I get a life after this?

THE BARD

Your stories do not end with you.

BESS

Hello?

LUCILLE

To THE BARD.

It's all of us?!

PEARL goes to BESS, takes her hand, and leads her to the others.

PEARL

It's alright.

BESS

Is it? Why am I back? Is this heaven?

LUCILLE

No, dear.

TOM and SCOTT enter, arguing.

TOM

— and now I'm here with *you*. Of course! You betrayed me; Bess betrayed me. Everyone hated me, and I am stuck with you forever.

SCOTT

You really killed her! They told me she was still alive when her head was cut off. That wasn't my fault!

TOM

It was your idea, and you helped!

SCOTT

It was a backup plan! I didn't think we'd have to go through with it! And you think I want to be stuck with you after what *you've* done? Killing all those people! I thought you wanted to be friends. Is that what you were going to do to me once—

SCOTT and TOM stop short as they notice the others. After a beat, TOM marches up to THE BARD.

TOM

This is Hell! And you're punishing us! But, then, how did we know you before? You were in the bar before!

LUCILLE

It isn't about punishment.

BESS

Then what is it about?

SCOTT

Still stunned.

Pearl.

He runs to PEARL and grabs her head and shoulders, amazed.

Pearl, you're alright?

PEARL

Scott?

SCOTT

I'm sorry for what I've done to you, Pearl.

PEARL

I knew the risk I was taking.

SCOTT

No, I mean, to... um...

BESS begins to cry, and PEARL turns away from SCOTT to comfort her.

LUCILLE

Scott, she only knows what's in the songs. And they tell so many different stories, she doesn't know what's true about what happened.

TOM

The songs? I hear one, too.

BESS

So do I!

SCOTT

I heard mine from the policeman first! In the jail. They were trying to get me to confess. It was...

He turns towards THE BARD.

It was you! I can't get it out of my head. That's what people think of me? I hear it. Masses of people. People singing it over and over for all time.

TOM

Well, it isn't like they're lying. Now everyone knows what we've done.

BESS

Everyone?

PEARL

These songs make me seem like I never did anything. Like I was only a victim.

LUCILLE

Don't forget, Pearl, they said we could leave if we wanted.

TOM

Where would we go?

SCOTT

It doesn't feel like anything else exists past this.

BESS

Tell us!

ALL look at THE BARD. THE BARD snaps their fingers, and ALL freeze as if under a spell. THE BARD moves center stage. They motion for ALL OTHERS to surround them in a circle. As THE BARD sings, ALL OTHERS walk slowly around them.

SONG: "THE UNQUIET GRAVE REPRISE"

THE BARD

And when twelve months and a day was passed,

The ghosts should rise and speak,

PEARL, SCOTT, TOM, BESS, LUCILLE

"Why sing thou all on my grave

And will not let me sleep?"

LUCILLE, BESS, and TOM take the three chairs and set them where they were each sitting in the first scene and sit down, still as if under a spell. PEARL and SCOTT exit, still as if under a spell.

THE BARD

A stalk has withered and dead, sweetheart,

The flower will never return,

And since they've lost their own true love,

What can one do but yearn?

When will we meet again, sweetheart,

When will we meet again?

"When the autumn leaves that fall from the trees

Are green and spring up again."

Blackout.

Lights up. The stage is set as in the first scene. PEARL and SCOTT enter and walk up to the bar.

PEARL

Look, they have instruments. I wonder if there will be a concert.

SCOTT

Hey, is there anybody here? I'd like a drink.

PEARL giggles at SCOTT and sets her valise, now clean, and hat on the bar. THE BARD moves behind the bar and motions to the drinks on the shelf.

FIN

Murder Upon Murder

a play with music in two acts meant for remote performance

by Patricia Schuelke

2020

Dramatis Personae

The Bard: magical, omniscient, plays guitar, genderless

Pearl Bryan: early 20s, five months pregnant, American, woman, girlfriend of Scott; Greencastle, Indiana resident murdered in 1896 near Fort Thomas, Kentucky, from several ballads titled *Pearl Bryan*

Scott Jackson: early 20s, American, man, boyfriend of Pearl; murdered and decapitated Pearl Bryan in 1896 with his classmate, from several ballads titled *Pearl Bryan*

Thomas "Tom" Sherwood: early 20s, British, man, once lover of Bess; serial killer convicted in 1635 in London, from ballad *Murder Upon Murder*

Elizabeth "Bess" Evans: late teens, British, woman, once lover of Tom; serial killer convicted in 1635 in London, from ballad *Murder Upon Murder*

Lucille Frank: late 20s, American, woman; wife of Leo Frank, who was wrongfully convicted and then lynched for the 1913 murder of Mary Phagan by an antisemitic mob near Atlanta, Georgia, from ballad *Little Mary Phagan*

Musical Note

There is no sheet music accompanying this script because it is the will of the playwright that the music will be arranged by each production to best fit the actors' abilities. This reflects how traditional murder ballads were passed down through generations and interpreted differently by different performers. Productions may base their arrangements on whatever recordings, memories, or sheet music they find of the songs. Actors are encouraged to find the keys and versions they like best and base their performances on these preferences. The songs can be performed acapella, with other characters adding vocal harmonies, with added instruments and musicians that fit with the desired folk style, or in other creative ways.

Remote Presentation Note

A different version of this play was staged with the original cast in March 2020 in preparation for live performance at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the university was closed and the cast and crew separated. This version of the script is meant to be performed on a virtual meeting platform. It caters to conventions of these platforms like "spotlighting" those on the video call that are loudest. The camera mentioned in the stage directions is the webcam of each actor. The original cast was wonderful to embrace difficult circumstances and go forward with a remote performance of the work. The original cast included Serenna Jones as The Bard, Melanie Roma as Pearl, Eric Boylan as Scott, Jonathon Tebbe as Tom, Anna Roth as Bess, and Sarah Hennessy as Lucille. Suzette Hartsfield directed, Noelle Johnson stage managed, and Genevieve Miedema music directed.

Act 1

Scene 1: Pearl

THE BARD claps.

PEARL

What should I tell you?

THE BARD

Tell me what happened, Pearl.

PEARL

Shaking her head, as if coming out of a trance or dream, then looking straight to camera.

We were in a bar. Scott was there. Scott was helping me. There were other people there. Everyone looked sad.

SCOTT

Hey, is there anybody here? I'd like a drink.

PEARL

He said. There was someone at the bar. I can't remember their face. They came and served us.

SCOTT

I'll have gin.

PEARL

I had water. One of the people there, Bess. Are you going to talk to Bess?

THE BARD

I can't tell you that.

PEARL

Scott saw her. She saw us, too.

SCOTT

Look at her, all alone. Not very fun.

BESS

Not very fun?

SCOTT

What?

BESS

You want me to amuse you?

PEARL

I liked her. I thought maybe it would be nice to make a friend other than Scott. I told her we didn't mean to offend her.

BESS

Yes, of course *you* didn't offend me, miss. You're sweet.

PEARL

It's just a little solemn in here, isn't it? Quiet.

BESS

I found myself here just now. This place is not how I remember it.

SONG: "KATY CRUEL"

PEARL

Why are you alone?

BESS

When I first came to town,
They called me the roving jewel;
Now they've changed their tune,
They call me Bessie Cruel,
Oh, diddle, lully day,
Oh, de little ay doe day.
Oh, that I was where I would be,
Then I would be where I am not,
Here I am where I must be,
Go where I would, I cannot,
Oh, diddle, lully day,
Oh, de little ay doe day.
When I first came to town,
They brought me bottles plenty;

Now they've changed their tune,
They bring me the bottles empty,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.
Oh, that I was where I would be,
Then I would be where I am not,
 Here I am where I must be,
 Go where I would, I cannot,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.
 Eyes as bright as fire,
 Lips as red as cherry,
 and 'tis my desire
To make the young ones merry,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.
Oh, that I was where I would be,
Then I would be where I am not,
 Here I am where I must be,
 Go where I would, I cannot,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.
 Through the woods I go,
And through the boggy mire,
Straightway down the road,
 And to my heart's desire,
 Oh, diddle, lully day,
 Oh, de little ay doe day.

Oh, that I was where I would be,
Then I would be where I am not,
Here I am where I must be,
Go where I would, I cannot,
Oh, diddle, lully day,
Oh, de little ay doe day.
I know who I love,
And I know who does love me;
I know where I'm going,
And I know who's going with me,
Oh, diddle, lully day,
Oh, de little ay doe day.

PEARL

I liked her. I sat with her after that. I just felt like I needed a friend with everything else going on. A friend who didn't know about any of that.

THE BARD

Was there anyone else there?

PEARL

There was a man, and another women...

THE BARD

Can you remember, Pearl?

PEARL

The person at the bar... I can't quite remember them.

PEARL concentrates so hard it hurts her head.

THE BARD

That's alright for now, Pearl.

Claps.

Bess.

Scene 2: Bess

BESS

I will not tell anyone about it.

THE BARD

Talk about it with me. Don't worry.

BESS

He told me not to tell anyone. I promised myself. It wasn't me. I didn't do anything.

THE BARD

Bess, please. Let's just talk about Pearl.

BESS seems to come out of a dream or trance.

BESS

Oh, Pearl. Poor girl.

THE BARD

Yes, it's very tragic. What do you remember about Pearl and Scott?

BESS

From the bar?

THE BARD

Yes.

BESS

I asked her about him. I wanted her to talk about Scott. I'm so distrustful of men, and he was rude to me when they first walked in. She said:

PEARL

Oh! Scott- he's Scott. I'm his. He's mine— at least, I think. I'm visiting him here in Cincinnati this weekend. Are you waiting for someone?

BESS

No.

PEARL

It's always more fun to have someone to go with.

BESS

After men go with me, they do not return. No one will have drinks with me here now. I am nice for the men though, sweet. Like you, I think. Sometimes.

To THE BARD.

I noticed she was drinking water of all things and reminded her how dirty it could be.

PEARL

What do you mean? Is the water bad here? It tastes fine.

BESS

Wine is better. It cannot make you sick.

PEARL

That's kind of old-fashioned, don't you think? Anyway, Scott got it for me, so I'm sure it's fine. He's going to be a dentist, so he knows about health and medicine and that sort of thing. He even has surgeon's tools and medicines that he can use at school. I don't think he would take me here if it weren't safe.

BESS

Hearing about love does lift my spirits. There's nothing quite like it. Is Scott good to you?

PEARL

He's nice. Well, he's not so good at letter writing, but when we're together he's very good to me. I don't know if he's the nicest boy who calls, but he's the one that called the most this summer.

BESS

Many boys in one summer!

PEARL

Well, it's nothing like that!

BESS

Virginity is our greatest asset. That is what my mother always told me.

PEARL

Well-

BESS

Can he come talk to us? I want to meet him.

PEARL

I guess so. He's just trying to finish his drink so we can leave. This wasn't the bar he meant to take me to.

BESS

There isn't anything wrong here. Now you have a friend. You can stay.

PEARL

You are the first friend I've made since I came to visit. We've spent so much time planning things that I haven't had a moment to rest.

BESS

Love plans?

To THE BARD.

Once we spoke of love, Scott came to join her.

SONG: "LAVENDER BLUE"

PEARL

Lavender blue, dilly dilly,

Lavender green

When you are king, dilly dilly,

I shall be queen

BESS

Who told you so, dilly dilly,

Who told you so?

PEARL

'Twas my own heart, dilly dilly,

That told me so

Lavender blue, dilly, dilly

Lavender green

If I love you, dilly, dilly

Then you love me

SCOTT

Lavender blue, dilly, dilly

Lavender green
Then I'll be king, dilly, dilly
And you'll be my queen
Let the birds sing, dilly, dilly,
Let the lambs play.
We shall be safe, dilly, dilly,
Out of harm's way.

PEARL

I love to dance, dilly, dilly,
I love to sing.
When I am queen, dilly, dilly,
You'll be my king

BESS

Who told you so, dilly, dilly,
Who told you so?

SCOTT

'Twas her own heart, dilly, dilly,
That told her so.

PEARL

'Twas my own heart, dilly, dilly,
That told me so.

BESS

It was sweet. Now I know that they were not making love plans after all.

THE BARD

You wouldn't say so?

BESS

Perhaps in a way they were. The next thing she told me was that she was with child. She didn't know what to do and thought Scott would help. Wait, no! There was something before that. Someone... sang some sort of song. Why can't I remember?

SONG: MURDER UPON MURDER

THE BARD

Claps.

Hush, dear. Shh.

Of the story now at hand,
The truth I will declare,
How God leaves man unto himself,
Of Satan then beware,
Thus doth Tommy truly find,
He unto murder bent his mind.
O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin
A man of honest parentage,
Trained up to husbandry,
But weary of that honest life,
To London he did hie:
Where to his dismal woeful fate,
He chose a quean for his bunkmate.
O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin
One Canbury Bess in Turnbull Street,
On him did cast an eye,
And prayed him to give her some drink
As he was passing by;
O so too soon he gave consent,
And for the same doth now repent.
O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin.

Tom?

Scene 3: Tom

TOM

That's my name. Some say Country Tom. Was someone singing just now? It's like there was music playing in my head.

THE BARD

I have a few questions for you.

TOM

About what? You must know what Scott did already. Killing that poor girl. Horrible.

THE BARD

How did you meet?

TOM

That day. In the bar. I saw him with his girl, and I asked him about her. It's a way to get a man talking.

SCOTT

Ha! I guess so. Pearl's her name.

TOM

He said. I got a look at her and replied:

She seems sweet.

SCOTT

That she is, friend!

TOM laughs.

I'm Scott.

TOM

Tom. Good to meet you. Haven't seen you around before. That's an interesting set of clothes you've got there. Must have cost a little fortune.

SCOTT

That's nice of you, man. I think they look nice, myself. I'm glad to meet another fine sir at this establishment.

TOM

What makes you think I'm so fine and good?

SCOTT

That accent! I've been around. I know an Englishman when I hear one. How'd you end up over here?

TOM

I was going to ask about your way of speaking, too. I've never heard anything like it before. I've never seen boots that fine before, either. Where are you from?

SCOTT

All over, ya know. My mom moved me around a lot growing up to try to keep me out of trouble.

TOM

And did you?

SCOTT

Hell, no!

SCOTT laughs.

TOM

You see that girl Pearl's talking to?

SCOTT

Yeah. The boring one? Bess?

TOM

She used to be my little thing. Canbury Bess I called her. She wasn't always like this. She is only boring now because she isn't being mischievous. She has a devil in her. I have never met another girl who can hide her true self away like that.

SCOTT

And you've met a few?

SONG: "RAMBLING GAMBLING MAN"

TOM

That's right, kind sir!

I am a rambling, gambling man.

I gamble down in town.

Whenever I meet with a deck of cards

I lay my money down,

I lay my money down.

Now if you want to gamble
Your luck you want to try
Just pass the queens and check the kings,
And bet your aces high
Oh, bet your aces high.
I'm a rambler, I'm a gambler.
I'm a rambling, gambling man.
Well, I'm a rambler, I'm a gambler,
And I gamble when I can.
I've gambled round in London town
With money all with me.
But I lost my money where I won my honey
Way down in Canbury,
Way down in Canbury.
I'm a rambler, I'm a gambler.
I'm a rambling, gambling man.
Well, I'm a rambler, I'm a gambler,
And I gamble when I can.
Well, she took me in her parlor
And cooled me with her fan.
She swore I was the prettiest thing
In the shape of mortal man,
In the shape of mortal man.
So deal around the deck, my friends,
And give me just five cards.
I'll show you rambling, gambling men
A lover's hand of hearts,
A lover's hand of hearts.

I'm a rambler, I'm a gambler.
I'm a rambling, gambling man.
Well, I'm a rambler, I'm a gambler,
And I gamble when I can.
I'm a rambling gambling man!

TOM laughs, and THE BARD chuckles, too.

TOM

A good man, Scott. Trying to do his best. We were talking and he told me that Pearl was going to have his child. He didn't want that. He wasn't the man for a wife and family. He was telling me about that when this *woman* interrupted us!

THE BARD

Can you remember what she said?

TOM

I... well, my mind gets foggy then. That song is still in my head. Did you hear someone singing before? Or was that- was it at the bar?

THE BARD

That's fine, Tom. Did you talk to Pearl? Try to remember that.

TOM

I did! We talked. She was nervous. She asked me:

PEARL

Should I be worried about Scott? What did he tell you about it?

TOM

He told me he was burdened by the news. It would be better for the both of you if you could solve this problem.

PEARL

I haven't even told my family yet.

TOM

You won't have to if you fix it before they notice. Scott told me he can fix this. He has medical training, you know.

PEARL

He's at school to become a dentist.

TOM

What's the difference between dentists and doctors anyway? See, he can help if you let him.

PEARL

I don't want him to leave me.

TOM

Don't worry about that, little lady. You're sweet.

THE BARD

That's fine, Tom. Thank you.

Claps.

Now, for Lucille.

Chuckles sinisterly.

Scene 4: Lucille

SONG: "LITTLE MARY PHAGAN"

THE BARD

Little Mary Phagan, she went to town one day.

She went to the pencil factory to get her little pay.

She left her home at seven, she kissed her mother goodbye.

Not one time did that poor girl think she was going to die.

Leo Frank, he met her-

LUCILLE struggles to free herself from a trance.

LUCILLE

Exclaiming

No! You will not talk about my husband like that any longer. I was not allowed to speak at his trial. How have you trapped me so that I cannot speak on his behalf after he was murdered, too?

THE BARD

Hello, Lucille.

LUCILLE

Don't give me that! Why can none of them remember you? It was you singing the songs in the bar that night. Are you doing this to them?

THE BARD

Stern

That was before. I want to ask you about Pearl now.

LUCILLE

Why are these songs so important to you that you couldn't let me tell the truth? The song you sang about my husband was written by someone who thought he was a murderer. They were wrong. And he was killed by people who were wrong about him. All they could see was hate. Is that something you wanted to keep from these people? My loss and my pain?

You wouldn't let them see me challenge you. Now what? We're trapped, answering to you? And Pearl, where is she? Did all of that happen to her? You let those men cut off her head? Did they really think it would disguise what they did?

THE BARD

What did you say to her in the bar that night?

LUCILLE

I don't have to tell you anything. Can't *you* remember?

THE BARD

Claps

Answer me, Lucille. What did you say to her in the bar that night?

LUCILLE

She was so worried about Scott giving her an abortion. Bess and I were just talking to her about it.

BESS

See? Everything will turn out splendidly.

LUCILLE

We'll stay with you.

PEARL

What happened to you, ma'am? What were you talking about before?

LUCILLE

I can tell you if you like, but it's a sad story.

PEARL

I just want to think about something else.

BESS

Yes, please, go on, madam.

LUCILLE

Well, before anything else, I should tell you my name is Lucille Frank. My husband's name was Leo Frank. Have you heard of him?

BESS

No.

PEARL

Is he famous or something?

LUCILLE

I'm glad you have not. Infamy cursed him.

BESS

A true curse?

PEARL

What do you mean "a true curse"?

BESS

Was there a spell on him?

PEARL

Those things aren't real.

LUCILLE

No one put a spell on him, but people did hate him. One of the girls he employed died at the factory. A tragedy. But not on that day or at any other time did my husband by word or act, or in any other way, **demean** himself otherwise than as an innocent man. The only evidence against him came through torture; the police took our cook and interrogated her for hours before she produced a statement.

PEARL

Well where was he that night? Who did it?

LUCILLE

He spent the whole Saturday evening in my company. I couldn't testify for him because I'm his wife. That's the law.

BESS

Well, who killed the child?

LUCILLE

I don't know.

PEARL

That's terrible.

BESS

People assumed it was your husband, her employer.

LUCILLE

They hated him because he was Jewish. And their hatred sent him to prison.

PEARL

Can't he escape? Isn't there a lawyer or someone?

LUCILLE

After another prisoner stabbed Leo, a mob took him from his cell and hanged him from a tree.

BESS

Maybe it was a curse.

PEARL

I'm so sorry.

LUCILLE

I trusted in a sense of fairness and justice for the people. All I received was pain.

SONG: "THE UNQUIET GRAVE"

Cold blows the wind to my true love,

And gently drops the rain.

I've never had but one true love,

Now in a green wood he lies slain.

I'll do as much for my true love,

As any young girl may,

I'll sit and mourn all on his grave,
For twelve months and a day.
And when twelve months and a day was passed,
His ghost should rise and speak,
"Why sittest thou all on my grave
And will not let me sleep?
Go fetch me water from the desert,
And blood from out of a stone,
Go fetch me milk from a fair maid's breast
That young man never has known.
How oft on yonder grave, sweetheart,
Where we were wont to walk,
The fairest flower that e'er I saw
Has withered to a stalk."
A stalk has withered and dead, sweetheart,
The flower will never return,
And since I've lost my own true love,
What can I do but yearn?
When will we meet again, sweetheart,
When will we meet again?
"When the autumn leaves that fall from the trees
Are green and spring up again."

PEARL

How could so many people be misled like that?

BESS

Trickery is easy.

LUCILLE

I don't know, Pearl. They misled themselves.

BESS

I think it's easiest for a woman to trick a man. They don't think we're smart enough to do anything crafty.

PEARL

Well why would you want to? It seems to me men often know better.

LUCILLE

Are you feeling alright about all of this?

PEARL

I trust him. I don't think he would do anything to hurt me.

Pause.

I don't know what else to do.

LUCILLE

To THE BARD

Then Tom came in. He was helping Scott get everything ready.

TOM

He's getting his things. The town is strange that way. Larger buildings than I have noticed before. Would you come with me?

PEARL

No, I want to stay here if I can.

Looks around.

Everyone here knows. I don't want to go out in the cold.

LUCILLE

Sure, we'll stay if you want us to.

BESS

To herself

You trust him?

LUCILLE

To THE BARD

Finally, Scott came back. He was sweating like a pig.

SCOTT

Pearl, are you alright?

Gaining composure.

I have everything. This will work. Everything is fine.

PEARL

I'm alright. Can they stay?

SCOTT

No. This is private. Like with a doctor.

PEARL

I'm scared.

SCOTT

No, you're not. Look at me. I know what to do. You'll be fine. They have to go.

LUCILLE

To THE BARD

And so, Bess and I left. You know what happened next.

THE BARD

Goodbye, Lucille.

Claps

Scene 5: Bess and Tom

But I wonder if Bess and Tom know more?

SONG: MURDER UPON MURDER

Much mischief then by them was done,

In and about the city,

But still they escape unpunished

Not known more was the pity,

To deadly sins they then did fall,

Not only rob but murder all.

O murder lust and murder is the foul sink of sin

Bess, is there something you'd like to say?

BESS

As if in a trance

Yes. There's something I didn't tell you. I talked to Scott in the bar.

THE BARD

Mhm.

BESS

He was being so honest with me. I don't know why. Maybe...

She closes her eyes and holds her ears as though she is having tinnitus, then comes out of the trance.

There's a song in my head. Was it playing in the bar? I feel like he was being honest because of some song we heard. Why can't I remember who was singing? Were they singing about us? I can't remember the words.

THE BARD

Tell me what Scott said.

BESS

He was talking about how sad he was when Lucille interrupted him.

LUCILLE

You consider this a tragedy?

SCOTT

Excuse me?

LUCILLE

Young man, do you really think that this sweet girl's pregnancy is a "problem"?

SCOTT is stunned.

Speak, boy!

SCOTT

I guess I didn't really mean it like that.

LUCILLE

Then what did you mean?

SCOTT

It's just been troubling me, that's all, I guess.

PEARL

Scott, don't worry, I'm not angry. It's good for me to know how you feel about it.

LUCILLE

He's not thinking about you, dear.

SCOTT

How- Why-

LUCILLE

Hold your tongue. Don't upset her more than you already have. Do you really know what trouble is in this life? Have you known someone to suffer wrongly? Have you really known suffering at all?

PEARL

He sort of made a mistake! We both did.

BESS

To THE BARD

Then... ugh that song. I hear that song again.

THE BARD

Please, Bess. Try to remember.

BESS

He was talking to me. We heard this music, and he said:

SCOTT

Did you hear that? Were they just singing about you?

BESS

I think I've been coming here listening to their songs for a long while, and nothing they say has ever bothered me.

SCOTT

But it was something about lust and murder. What do you know about that?

BESS

Nothing. I'm a good woman. I may be young, I may not have my education, but I'm a good woman.

SCOTT

What did Pearl tell you about our problem?

BESS

She hasn't told her family yet, you know.

SCOTT

Well, that means something to her. She's close with her family. It must be important enough to her to keep it a secret.

BESS

Do you think you can help?

SCOTT

I don't know. I think there may be some things at my college we can use. I'm trying to be a dentist.

BESS

Oh, a doctor! Well, that's perfect!

SCOTT

You really think I could do something?

BESS

Yes! I've never known a doctor before. Do you have a lot of money?

SCOTT

Not now, I'm just in school.

BESS

What's it like? Do you have to study dead bodies? I don't think I could stomach it, surrounded by death.

SCOTT

No, nothing like that. Not yet, I mean. I just started.

BESS

Does that mean you don't know enough to help Pearl?

SCOTT

I think I could muster it with a little help. Find some things that I think would work.

BESS

I knew a woman when I was little that would make potions for ladies with family problems. One time my friend sneaked into her house to see how she was making it. It was just boiled pennyroyal and sage. I don't know how that could have done it.

SCOTT

I guess I can think of something. I can try. If she wants.

THE BARD

Bess, we've talked to Tom.

BESS

I don't want to talk about that.

THE BARD

Is there something we should know?

BESS

No, of course not. I don't know what you're talking about.

THE BARD

I think you do know, Bess.

BESS

Covering her ears again

Ah! What is happening to me? This song is like poison. Who is singing it?

THE BARD

Is the song right, Bess?

BESS

No! Who's saying this about me? A murderer? That is not me!

THE BARD

Tell me, then, is it another Canbury Bess?

BESS

What?

THE BARD

All those months ago, who killed those men in London? Did you ever know the killer?

BESS

I told him I would not tell anyone.

THE BARD

Smiling

Tell me.

BESS

Tom. Tom did it! All I had to do was look at men to get them to sit with me. That's all I did. I talked to some men. I told them... I told them lies. They would follow me. I didn't want them to die! I only wanted their fancy clothes, their things. We needed to get money somehow.

THE BARD

Where would you lead them, Bess?

BESS

Tom would be there. He had a club. I couldn't watch!

THE BARD

Bess-

BESS

He was helping Scott. Oh, God. He must have helped him kill Pearl. Oh, that poor thing. She must have been terrified. Did he cut off her head? Would he do something like that?

THE BARD

Would he?

BESS

Beginning to cry

I don't know.

THE BARD

That's all, Bess. That's all. I will have to take you into custody for the London murders.

BESS

Oh, please, no! What did I do? It was Tom!

THE BARD claps. BESS is silent.

THE BARD

It's Tom's turn now.

TOM

Coming out of a trance

Where am I?

THE BARD

You're here with me, Tom.

TOM

Why? Let me out!

THE BARD

Bess told me what you did.

TOM

No, she did not.

THE BARD

Do you want to argue or do you want to tell me your side of things?

TOM

What did she say?

THE BARD

We know about the London murders, Tom.

TOM

She really told you! That-

THE BARD

I'm asking about you not her.

TOM

With a sudden pained look as if he had tinnitus.

This song in my head, where have I heard it before? It's about Bess and me.

THE BARD

Talk to me, Tom. What did you do?

TOM

We needed money! We just robbed these men. I would knock them out and take their clothes and things. Bess brought them to me. We were in love, you see. I was doing it for her.

THE BARD

You loved her?

TOM

She told me she would never tell. What did you do to her? Is she here? Please, allow me to speak to her! Allow her to meet me somewhere, for a moment.

BESS

Hello?

TOM

Oh, Bess. May I speak to you?

SONG: "FALSE TRUE LOVE"

BESS

Come in, come in, you old true love,

And chat for awhile with me,

For it's been three quarters of a long year or more,

Since I spoke one word to thee.

TOM

I wish to the Lord I'd never been born,

Or had died when I was young,

Then I never would have hurt my old true love,

Nor have courted no other one.

BESS

There is many the star shall jingle in the west,

There is many the leaf below,

There is many the damn that shall lite upon a man,

For treating a poor girl so.

TOM

I shan't come in, I shan't set down,
I don't have a moment's time,
And since you have chosen to end our true love,
Then your heart is no longer mine.

Bess, I... when did you decide that what we do is wrong?

BESS

What we did.

TOM

You admit it, then? You remember again? It all happened. We robbed and killed those men. We did those things. We were in love.

BESS

When you were mine, my old true love,
Then your head lay on my breast,
You could make me believe by the falling of your arm,
That the sun rose up in the west.

TOM

There is many the stars shall jingle in the west,
There is many the leaf below,

BESS

There is many the damn that shall light upon a man,
For treating a poor girl so.

BESS

What is happening to us?

TOM

I blamed you.

BESS

I blamed you, too.

Beat.

Why did you assist in killing that poor girl? You incriminated us both! Now they know all of it!

TOM

We worked together.

BESS

I wanted money. I wanted love. I did not want this.

TOM

We had no wealth. How was I supposed to care for you?

BESS

Lust... and *murder*...

TOM

How was I supposed to care for us?

BESS

Not in this way!

TOM

Why can't you admit that you were a part of it? Why can't you admit that you wronged others?
That you led them-

BESS

No! Why am I here? What have I done? I loved you.

TOM

Oh, that's the crime?

BESS

Perhaps it is. I was like a child, barely a woman.

TOM

You knew what you did just as I did.

BESS

I did not intend for any men to die.

TOM

I wanted things to be nice for you. Just like they were with your family.

BESS

We have forsaken our families! You wanted us to be like my parents? Like your parents?

TOM

He becomes enraged.

Bess!

BESS

I will not confess to a wrong I did not commit.

TOM

You lured them! You seduced them into meeting me! You knew what I would do. You knew what I was doing!

BESS

No!

TOM

You are a wretch!

THE BARD

And what does that make you?

TOM

No! Please. Don't take her away.

THE BARD

You're going to jail for the London murders, Tom.

Claps.

Scene 6: Scott

Scott, it's finally your turn.

SONG: MAN OF CONSTANT SORROW

SCOTT

I am a man of constant sorrow,
I've seen trouble all my days.
I bid farewell to old New Jersey,
The place where I was born and raised.
Well you can bury me in some deep valley,
For many years where I may dwell.

Well, then you may learn to love another
While I am sleeping in my grave.
Well, maybe your friends think I'm just a stranger,
A face you never will see no more.
But there is one promise that is given:
I'll meet you on God's golden shore.

He bursts into tears.

THE BARD

Scott, what happened? The family wants to know.

SCOTT

I don't know. It wasn't me! *He* did it. I told you. I gave her the drink. I gave it to her because I thought it would help her.

THE BARD

Scott, where is her head.

SCOTT

I don't know.

SONG: "THE BALLAD OF PEARL BRYAN"

THE BARD

Scott, please don't be cruel.

Dear Scott, if you'll listen, a sad story I'll relate.
It happened near Fort Thomas in the old Kentucky State.
'Twas January the thirty-first the dreadful deed was done
By Scott Jackson; how cold his blood did run!

SCOTT

Simultaneously

I didn't do it!

THE BARD

And little did Pearl Bryan think when she left her home that day
The grip she carried in her hand would hide her head away.

She thought it was her lover's hand she could trust both night and day,
Although it was her lover's hand that took her life away.

SCOTT

It wasn't just me! Him! He did it! I was just trying to help. She was so worried. I was so worried!
She wouldn't stop crying!

THE BARD

Little did her parents think when she left her happy home,
Their darling girl just in her youth would never more return.
How sad it would have been to them to have heard Pearl's lonely voice
At midnight in that lonely spot where those two boys rejoiced!
In came Pearl Bryan's sister and falling to her knees,
Begging to Scott Jackson, "My sister's head, O please!"

SCOTT

I don't know where we put it! Stop asking me!

THE BARD

Scott Jackson set a stubborn jaw, not a word would he have said, but
"You'll meet your sister in heaven, and there'll be no missing head."

SCOTT

I didn't want her to die. I didn't! I knew her mother, her family. I didn't want to do this to all of
them.

THE BARD

Addressing the audience

Now all you ladies take warning, men are so unjust.
It may be your best lover, but you know not whom to trust.
Pearl Bryan died away from home upon a lonely spot.
Take heed, take heed, believe me girls. Don't let this be your lot!

SCOTT

What do you want me to say?

There is silence as THE BARD waits for a confession.

I don't really know what happened. I'm not a doctor.

THE BARD

You're a dentist, correct?

SCOTT

I'm *studying* to be a dentist. I thought I knew what to do. I thought I could help her, help both of us. I thought it would work. When I asked my classmates, asked some druggists, it seemed like it could work. Tom said he would help. It wasn't my idea— what he did with her head.

THE BARD

You trusted Tom.

SCOTT

I trusted him. We were working together. I didn't know who he really was. She told me she wanted to do it. She wouldn't stop crying. She wouldn't stop writing me. I wasn't the only man who came calling that summer. And, I'm not a good letter-writer. I tried to tell her how to do it herself. She insisted she would come to Cincinnati. All the way from Greencastle! I didn't want her to lie to her family, but she did. She came all the way here for my help. Was I supposed to turn her away?

All that with her head was not part of the plan. We didn't want to get caught, that's all, and she seemed dead! Now you and the doctor and everyone tell me you can tell that she was still alive. She was not! We couldn't have saved her.

THE BARD

What happened that night?

SCOTT

I told her we had to be alone. Everyone had to leave. She asked me:

PEARL

Will it hurt?

SCOTT

I told her: It's medicine. It will help.

PEARL

Will it be quick? Should I lie down?

SCOTT

I know what I'm doing, Pearl. You only have to drink it.

PEARL drinks from a vial.

SONG: ALL MY TRIALS

PEARL

All my trials Lord, soon will be over
The river of Jordan is chilly and cold
It chills the body, but it warms the soul
All my trials Lord, soon will be over
If living was a thing that money could buy
The rich would live and the poor would die
All my trials Lord, soon will be over
Too late my brothers, too late, but never mind
All my trials Lord, soon will be over
There is a tree in Paradise
The Pilgrims call it the tree of life
All my trials Lord, soon will be over
Hush little baby don't you cry
You know your mama was born to die
All my trials Lord, soon will be over
All my trials Lord, soon will be over

PEARL faints, falling offscreen.

SCOTT

To THE BARD

I didn't know what to do. Tom was still there. Why didn't he leave? I asked him for help. I said:

To TOM

What should I do?

TOM

Be calm.

SCOTT

How? Is she dead?

TOM

Is she?

SCOTT

She's breathing. I can see her chest moving.

TOM

Will she live?

SCOTT

I don't know! I thought it would shock her, but not like this. I thought maybe she would just feel ill. Pearl! Wake up! Wake up! Please. I don't want to kill anyone.

TOM

No one will know.

SCOTT

If they don't know... her mother. Her sister just died this summer. They can't—

TOM

We can disguise it. No one will know it's you.

SCOTT

But when she doesn't come home...

TOM

It would be better if they never knew.

SCOTT

She's breathing. Maybe she will come to.

TOM

Scott, you—

SCOTT

I can't do it. I can't *do* that.

TOM

You may have already done it.

SCOTT

No, I can't. Please, Tom. Help me!

TOM and SCOTT leave frame. There is the sound of a struggle from PEARL's empty frame. There is then the sound of tearing flesh and bone.

PEARL turn off camera when SCOTT begins speaking.

SCOTT

Returning to frame

I didn't do it. I didn't do it. *(repeat)*

TOM returns to frame with a scratch across his cheek and blood on his hands.

TOM

Is there a bag? Get me a bag!

SCOTT begins to cry.

SCOTT

To THE BARD

We used her own purse that was still sitting on the bar. We put her head in it. I didn't know what else to give him. He said:

TOM

Hide it, and no one will know who she was. Now!

SCOTT

I... blacked out. I don't know where we put it. Her head is gone.

THE BARD

That's all, Scott.

SCOTT

Officer, please! Please, tell them what I said. Please, tell her sister I'm sorry.

THE BARD

You stared at her silently when she asked for her sister's head, Scott. You can't take that back.

Claps.

Scene 7: Sentencing

THE BARD

Straight to camera.

Time to sentence the killers.

Claps twice.

BESS

To TOM

You are a thief; you are a murderer.

TOM

You know what you did. You can't take it back. And now all of London knows.

BESS

You killed those men, not me.

TOM

You knew what I was doing. You wanted us to have that money.

BESS

We needed it.

THE BARD

Interrupting, in a London accent.

For the murders they have committed, Thomas Sherwood and Elizabeth Evans are to be executed on the 14th and 17th of April, this year, 1635. For them, no love, no mourning, and no place of burial. They have rejected their families and have no fear, no care, no thought, and no love for their God. Their story is indeed a cautionary tale for all. Parents, cast not off your children in their youth, knowing how subject youth is unto temptation. Children, obey your parents. Men, do not be seduced as he was by this bewitching creature. Women and men alike, beware of thieves like him.

Do you, Thomas Sherwood, Elizabeth Evans, have any last words?

TOM

Oh Lord my sins are so heinous, great and many. If thy mercy help me not, what will become hereafter of my poor soul?

BESS scoffs.

THE BARD

After execution, he will hang in chains at Battle-bridge. She will be dissected, and her dried skeleton will be preserved to be displayed in the Barber Surgeons Hall.

BESS

Horrified.

What?

THE BARD motions for them to exit. *TOM* and *BESS* exit frame one at a time. Once each is out of frame, there is the sound of a body hitting the floor.

SONG: "MURDER UPON MURDER"

THE BARD

Much mischief then by them was done,

In and about the city,

But still they escape unpunished

Not known more was the pity,

To deadly sins they then did fall,

Not only rob but murder all.

O murder, lust and murder is the foul sink of sin

For these bad facts he now doth die,

Just judgement for his meed.

All such ill-livers grant they may,

No worse nor better speed,

So shall England from crying sin,

But ever freed, God's mercy win.

O murder, lust and murder,

Is the foul sink of sin.

THE BARD

Clears throat, no longer speaks in British accent.

On this day, May 20, 1897, Scott Jackson and his accomplice will be hanged for the murder of Pearl Bryan. Have you anything to say?

Claps once.

SCOTT snaps out of the spell, is momentarily confused, then regains composure and stands up.

SCOTT

I have only this to say, that I am not guilty of the crime for which I am now compelled to pay the penalty of my life.

THE BARD motions for him to exit. Once he is out of frame, there is the sound of a body hitting the floor.

SONG: "THE BALLAD OF PEARL BRYAN"

THE BARD

Little did Pearl Bryan think when she left her home that day
The grip she carried in her hand would hide her head away.
She thought it was her lover's hand she could trust both night and day,
Although it was her lover's hand that took her life away.

Scene 8: Fallout

PEARL

Pardon me... hello.

I don't really know why I'm still here. I thought, well, I thought maybe you could help me.

I thought that once someone dies, they go to heaven, or they at least rest in peace. Now I'm here with you of all people. Do you know, was I already dead when I met you before?

THE BARD does not answer.

I've been thinking about it; I've been trying to make sense out of all this. We came to the bar and you were the one who seemed to know everything. You seemed like you knew that I was going to die before I knew it. I thought that's something only God knows, and I know you are not God.

PEARL becomes more agitated when THE BARD does not respond.

Well, aren't you going to say anything? Can you only sing? Ever since I died those songs you sang kept ringing in my head. Every time I think I am about to finally get some peace, those songs creep into my ears and down my spine. And it isn't always you singing, it's other people, too. Sometimes I think I can recognize the voices. Is this it? Is this some sort of torture? Why are all these people singing about me just because I died? Do they really care about me?

Why won't you tell me anything? I know you must know something! I just want to be remembered for who I was, not for what someone else did to me! That isn't too much to ask!

THE BARD claps.

LUCILLE

Pearl! Oh, you poor thing.

PEARL

I thought it would be over, Lucille! I thought now that everyone was punished, I could go away!

LUCILLE

I thought it would be that easy at first, too. I don't want to be defined by Leo's death. I want to continue to live. These songs people sing about him, the lies they tell, it isn't right. I know that.

They still haunt me. I hear little children singing about Mary Phagan as they walk down the street. Reporters still knock on my door.

When they buried Leo in Queens, I made sure his headstone read “beloved husband,” and I meant it. I loved him, and he is beloved to this day. There’s something else, too, on his headstone. “Semper idem;” always the same. At the time, I meant it to mean he is always loved. Now, I feel like it was a sentence. He will always be famous for a crime he didn’t commit, and I will be haunted by that fame.

PEARL

I’m sorry.

LUCILLE

Oh, hush. It isn’t your fault.

To THE BARD

Well, aren’t you going to say anything?

THE BARD

I only know what I have learned through song.

LUCILLE

Well, how’s that? It seems like you knew Pearl’s song and Tom and Bess’s song even before they did.

THE BARD

These songs have existed for a long time, passed down through the generations. They are stories we all tell.

LUCILLE

That isn’t an answer. We want to leave; we want to move on.

THE BARD

You want to forget?

LUCILLE

No! Not forget, just move on. None of us can change the bad things that happen, none of us can change anything. I just want to have a life beyond Leo’s death.

PEARL

I just want to rest. That’s all. I know what happened to me. I know what I did, what he did. None of it can change, I just want to be able to leave this place where all I can think about is death. All anyone can think about is the bad things that happened to us.

LUCILLE

Our lives are not only the bad things.

PEARL

I had a childhood. I have a family. I was in love. I helped raise my brothers and sisters. I felt warmth and joy. I had dreams. I want to think about those things. I want to rest in the peace of my life. I don't want to be haunted by how it ended.

THE BARD

This isn't for me to decide. I cannot control where you go from here.

LUCILLE

You can stop singing the songs. It's the songs!

PEARL

They're trapping us!

THE BARD

These songs have existed for a long time, passed down through the generations. They are stories we all tell.

PEARL

That doesn't mean they are harmless! They are about me!

LUCILLE

About my husband!

THE BARD

They are stories we all tell! They are stories we all tell because they are stories about us. All of us.

PEARL

Well what will happen? If I can go, how will it end?

LUCILLE

Will I get a life after this?

THE BARD

Your stories do not end with you.

Claps

BESS

Hello?

LUCILLE

To THE BARD.

All of us?!

PEARL

It's alright.

BESS

Is it? Why am I here? Is this heaven?

LUCILLE

No, dear.

THE BARD claps twice.

TOM

— and now I'm here with *you*. Of course! You betrayed me; Bess betrayed me. Everyone hated me, and I am stuck with you forever.

SCOTT

You really killed Pearl! They told me she was still alive when her head was cut off. That wasn't my fault!

TOM

It was your idea, and you helped!

SCOTT

It was a backup plan! I didn't think we'd have to go through with it! And you think I want to be stuck with you after what *you've* done? Killing all those people! I thought you wanted to be friends. Is that what you were going to do to me once—

To camera

Pearl?

TOM

This is Hell! And you're punishing us! But, then, how did we know you before? You were in the bar before!

THE BARD

Smiling

Me?

LUCILLE

It isn't about punishment.

BESS

Then what is it about?

SCOTT

Still stunned.

Pearl. Pearl, you're alright?

PEARL

Scott?

SCOTT

I'm sorry for what I've done to you, Pearl.

PEARL

I knew the risk I was taking.

SCOTT

No, I mean, to... um...

BESS begins to cry, and PEARL turns away from SCOTT to comfort her.

LUCILLE

Scott, she only knows what's in the songs. And they tell so many different stories, she doesn't know what's true about what happened.

TOM

The songs? I hear one, too.

BESS

So do I!

SCOTT

I heard mine from the policeman first! In the jail. They were trying to get me to confess. It was...

It was them! I can't get it out of my head. That's what people think of me? I hear it. Masses of people. People singing it over and over for all time.

THE BARD laughs.

TOM

Well, it isn't like they're lying. Now everyone knows what we've done.

BESS

Everyone?

PEARL

These songs make me seem like I never did anything. Like I was only a victim.

SCOTT

It doesn't feel like anything else exists past this.

LUCILLE

Tell us!

THE BARD claps five times. ALL sing as if in a trance, straight to camera.

SONG: "THE UNQUIET GRAVE REPRISE"

THE BARD

And when twelve months and a day was passed,

The ghosts should rise and speak,

PEARL

"Why sing thou all on my grave

And will not let me sleep?"

LUCILLE

A stalk has withered and dead, sweetheart,

The flower will never return,

SCOTT

And since I've lost my own true love,

What can one do but yearn?

TOM

When will we meet again, sweetheart,

When will we meet again?

BESS

"When the autumn leaves that fall from the trees
Are green and spring up again."

THE BARD claps.

PEARL

What should I tell you?

THE BARD

Tell me what happened, Pearl.

FIN