

Guilty!

The Story of the Great Amherst Mystery

by Charlie Rhindress

Guilty! premiered at Live Bait Theatre in Sackville, New Brunswick on June 19, 1991 with the following cast and crew:

Director.....Charlie Rhindress
Stage Manager.....Karen Valanne
Set Designer.....Kim Snider
Costume Designer.....Carolyn Murdoch
Lighting Designer.....Randy White
Composer.....Scott Richardson

With the following cast
(in order of appearance)

Actor.....Dave McClelland
Esther Cox.....Kiersten Tough
Jennie Cox.....Johanna Lebovitz
Daniel Teed.....George Belliveau
Olive Teed.....Maria Bourgeois
Church Ladies.....Ruth Cormier Nichols, Myfanwy Davies and Ellen McKay
Dr. Caritte, John White and Henry Porter.....Randy White
Grandma.....Carolyn Murdoch

This version of the script premiered at Live Bait Theatre in Sackville, New Brunswick on June 16, 1993

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charlierhindress@hotmail.com

Act One

The set consists of four main playing areas: the Teed's kitchen; Jennie and Esther's bedroom; an empty space that serves as a number of different locations; and the church ladies' platform which is raised above Esther's bedroom.

As the audience enters, the CHURCH LADIES are singing "Amazing Grace" and other period hymns. Their voices fade as the lights go to black.

In the darkness we hear a loud, demonic: "Esther Cox, you are mine to kill."

ESTHER: *(A scream then:)* Leave me alone. Stop! Nooooooooooooo!

The "NO" stops abruptly as a single spotlight snaps on downstage centre. In it stands an actor.

ACTOR: No doubt you came here this evening expecting to hear demonic voices and the tortured screams of an innocent helpless girl. You will not be disappointed. But first, let me introduce myself. I'm Dave McClelland *(insert the name of the actor who will play this part)*, an actor, and I know you've come here this evening to see a play, but before we get going with this true ghost story, I have to ask a favour of you. I'd like your help in..."calling up" a spirit. Sounds a little crazy, I know, but the playwright wanted to give you the facts about this Great Amherst Mystery as accurately as possible, and since the participants in the original events are no longer alive -- I mean, it did happen over a hundred and forty years ago -- we've decided to go that little step further and...contact the dead. After all, you came here to see a ghost story, right? We just want to make sure you get your money's worth.

Now we've been in touch with Walter Hubbell, an actor who detailed the original story -- and who incidentally has been dead for close to a hundred years -- and he's agreed to be here this evening. He will speak to you by channelling through me. His spirit will take over my body with me serving as the "medium." Just like Whoopi Goldberg in "Ghost." It's really quite simple.

Let me explain. Have any of you ever been alone in a room and another person walks in? And without seeing them you just know that someone else is there with

you? Sure you have. Now, when you feel the presence of another person we say you are picking up their "aura." I believe in the sixties they called it "getting vibes." Good vibes, bad vibes, (*sings the Beach Boys:*) "I'm picking up good vibrations...." (*Slightly embarrassed:*) Uh, sorry...so, we all send out vibrations, or "an aura" and when we die that aura just floats around out there in outer space somewhere.

Now, how do we get in touch with that aura? Well, think of it this way: You have two pianos in a room. You go over to one of them and hit an E. (*He hits E on an imaginary piano and we hear it.*) Now as that note vibrates it sends sound waves through the air and eventually, without anyone touching the second piano, that E starts to vibrate too. (*We hear the second piano join in on the E.*)

Just like a piano we all have our own special note or "aura" so if I concentrate on Walter Hubbell, get in tune with him, his aura -- it's just floating out there with all the other dead people's auras -- his aura will filter through me. And he can talk to you. This is where I need your help. It's a lot like a seance; you have to concentrate and believe in what I'm doing. I feel a bit like Peter Pan. "If you all just believe." But I'm quite serious.

Now, look directly into my eyes and think of everything you know about the Great Amherst Mystery. If you don't know anything, just go with it. As he takes over you may notice my face changing, but don't panic. No need to be afraid. It'll only last a moment and then Hubbell will be in control. So, here goes. Stare into my eyes.

The spotlight fades and flickers at a very low level. The ACTOR is lit from above so that he looks ghost-like, wavering in and out of view. The actor's head drops to his chest and he goes through some shaking and minor convulsions. As he finishes footlights come up. The ACTOR has physically changed so that it is obvious he is now WALTER HUBBELL.

HUBBELL looks down at his body surprised at the form he has landed in. He notices the audience and is pleasantly surprised to find himself on stage.

HUBBELL: Ahh, back on the stage. After ninety-three years. (*Looks around skeptically.*) Not much of a stage, but a stage. (*Notices someone's program.*) Oh, excuse me, could I borrow this for a moment? I haven't seen my name in print for so long. Look at

this: Walter Hubbell, a contemporary of Sarah Bernhardt, Edwin Booth and Eleanora Duse, performing alongside of *(he reads the names of other actors as though they mean absolutely nothing)* _____ and _____. At least I've top billing. *(Handing back the program.)* Thank you. Now, on to the Great Amherst Mystery. I'm not sure what you were told by *(Noticing the body he is in.)* the owner of this body. This is decidedly odd. These clothes will never do. Do people really perform in this type of attire? They promised me a nice costume. *(He looks about and notices his costume.)* Ah! *(During the following he will change his clothes and glasses.)* Aside from being an actor I am also known as the chronicler of the Great Amherst Mystery. I wrote the book on the subject back in 1879. So when I was contacted and asked to appear at this theatre I was happy to oblige. Many an actor has given a lifeless or bloodless performance but how many have trod the boards so many years after their death? Many have strutted and fretted their hour upon the stage but how many...ah, but I am rambling and I promised the playwright I would refrain from too much ad-libbing. After all I suppose it is the story of Esther Cox and the Great Amherst Mystery that you are most interested in. *(By now he has changed and is admiring himself.)* Ah, yes, much better! So, on with the show. It was the fall of 1878. This particular evening began like any other as Jennie Cox crawled into bed beside her sister Esther:

The lights come up on a bedroom. There is a bed with a night table and a box of patchwork quilt pieces near it. There is an oil lamp glowing very dimly. ESTHER COX is lying in bed half asleep. JENNIE COX enters the room and turns the lantern up. She brushes her hair, removes her housecoat and gets into bed during the following.

JENNIE: You still awake, Esther?

ESTHER: Mmhm.

JENNIE: It's an awful damp night. Real foggy. Makes ya tired. You've been in bed since seven, Olive said. Feelin' any better? *(No response.)* I heard that Bob left town over the weekend. Guess ya won't be seein' him anymore, hunh? *(Pause.)* Ya gonna miss 'im? *(Still no answer. JENNIE gets in bed.)* Oh, it's nice an' warm. I should send you to bed a coupla hours before me ev'ry night.

ESTHER: Is it September fourth?

JENNIE: Yuh. And tomorrow'll be the fifth. Why?

ESTHER: *(Mumbles something.)*

JENNIE: What?

ESTHER: 'S'nothin'.

JENNIE: If you say so. Ya know what Sally told me? She said that Harley Noiles likes me.

ESTHER: I'm tired, Jennie.

JENNIE: All right, I'll tell ya all about it tomorrow. I can't believe it, Harley Noiles!
(Pause.) Maybe you'll feel better in the mornin'. 'Night.

ESTHER: *(Mumbles.)* 'Night.

The girls lie there for quite some time. They may rearrange themselves to get comfortable but fifteen to twenty seconds should pass without words. Suddenly ESTHER jumps out of bed.

ESTHER: Ahhh! What was that? Was that you?

JENNIE: What? It wasn't me.

ESTHER: There's somethin' in the bed, Jennie. Light the lamp. I think there's a mouse in the bed.

JENNIE: A mouse?!

ESTHER: I felt 'im under me.

JENNIE: I'll get the lantern.

JENNIE gets out of bed and lights the lantern while ESTHER sorts through the bedclothes.

ESTHER: Hurry up. I can't find it. It made a lump under my back and it moved.

JENNIE: Here. Let's look.

ESTHER: Can you see anything?

JENNIE: No, do you?

ESTHER: No.

JENNIE: There's nothin' in the bed, Esther.

ESTHER: There was.

JENNIE: Even if there was, we can't be scared by a little mouse. Let's get back in. I'm cold.

ESTHER: What if he's still there?

JENNIE: If he is, a little mouse ain't gonna hurt ya. We'll be up all night if we worry 'bout that. Now let's get in.

JENNIE extinguishes the lantern and the girls get back in bed.

ESTHER: All right, but if he gets under me again, don't be surprised if I start screamin'.

JENNIE: If you start screamin' again, don't be surprised if I put the pilla over yer face. Good night.

ESTHER: G'night.

The lights cross to HUBBELL. The girls stay in bed throughout.

HUBBELL: As you can see things started innocently enough. How many of us, in that sensitive state between sleep and full consciousness, have been sure that something brushed against us and then found nothing there? Surely when that happens it is just our imagination. Or is it? Surely that was the case with Esther. Or was it?

Lights down on HUBBELL. In the dark we hear:

ESTHER: (*Hopping out of bed and screaming.*) Ahhhh! Jennie, that mouse's back.

JENNIE: What're ya screamin' about now?

ESTHER: That mouse. He's back.

JENNIE: Ya want me to put that pillow in your face?

ESTHER: It's not funny, Jennie.

JENNIE: Why don't ya go back to sleep and stop yer whinin'?

ESTHER: 'Cause there's a mouse in our bed.

JENNIE: Even if there is, I told ya last night it's only a mouse. He can't hurt ya.

Lights come up as ESTHER lights the lantern and looks through the bedclothes.

ESTHER: Let's kill it. I'm not gonna be bothered by that mouse ev'ry night.

JENNIE: He's not in the bed, Esther`, it was probably just a dream.

ESTHER: I know I felt him under me. Look! There's somethin' movin' in the box.

Both girls watch the patchwork box.

JENNIE: There is! There's somethin' movin' the patches around.

Suddenly the box leaps into the air then falls onto its side, spilling the contents, but no mouse.

JENNIE: Did you see that? That's no ordinary mouse. I didn't even see a mouse come out. Did you see a mouse come out?

ESTHER: I didn't see nothin' come out but the quilt pieces and they don't normally jump like that. It musta been the wind or somethin'.

JENNIE: There's no wind in here. The window's not even open.

ESTHER: Here, let's see. *(She hits the box with her foot.)* No mouse. *(She puts the box back in its original position and both girls watch the box in silence for ten or fifteen seconds.)* He must've got out before we had a chance to see him. Yeah, it had to be a mouse. But I ain't gettin' back in bed 'til we find him.

JENNIE: *(Still staring at the box.)* I don't know about you, Esther, but I ain't never seen a mouse make a box jump like that.

ESTHER: *(Looking through the bedding.)* Me neither, but what else could it a been? Here, help me look 'cause if it got back in this bed...

The box jumps into the air and falls again. The girls scream, then:

BOTH: *(Improvising:)* Olive! Daniel! Help! Did you see that jump?! That isn't a mouse!

The girls stand as far away from the box as they can, yelling for help. DANIEL and OLIVE come rushing in pulling on their clothes. HUBBELL stands up and snaps his fingers which causes the other actors to go silent. Lights up on HUBBELL. While we see the girls explaining to OLIVE and DANIEL what happened with the box, HUBBELL speaks.

HUBBELL: That's Jennie and Esther's sister Olive, and Olive's husband, Daniel. Jennie and Esther have lived with them since their grandmother died. But that's another story and not particularly relevant quite yet. Suffice it to say that all of these people live together. What is important here is how Olive and Daniel reacted to the news of the jumping box.

HUBBELL snaps his fingers and the other actors begin to speak.

DANIEL: You woke me up at three in the morning to tell me that a box is jumping around the room?

OLIVE: Girls, it must have been a dream.

JENNIE: Both of us havin' the same dream?

ESTHER: If you had...