

THE MOLLÉ MYSTERY THEATRE

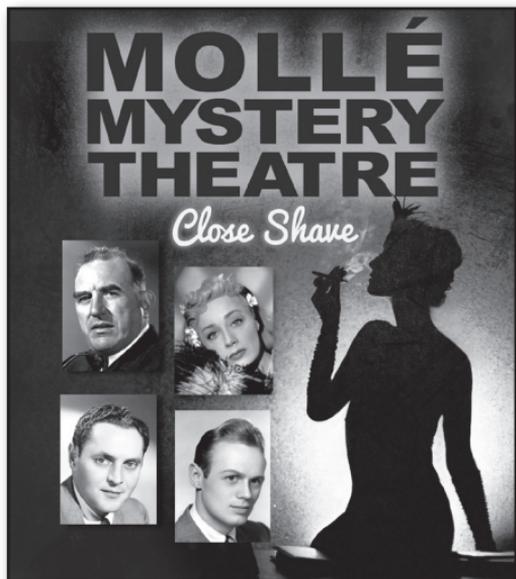
Close Shave

Program Guide by Karl Schadow

Mystery, as a genre, has been a staple of literature, stage plays, films, and television. Radio also provided an avenue for enthusiasts of such stories, especially during the 1940s. In his essay on the state of radio mysteries during the middle of that decade, Ken Crossen opined: "...two programs...occasionally offered a glimpse of the quality that is possible in the air mystery drama..." The first, causing little astonishment, was *Suspense*. The other, however, may have surprised many readers. It was *The Mollé Mystery Theatre*.

This particular program, often billed as *Mystery Theatre*, debuted on Tuesday, September 7, 1943 over NBC. Contrary to what is often incorrectly stated about the lack of advertising during the initial season, this venture was indeed a commercial entity right from that premiere broadcast. The program was created by the Young & Rubicam (Y & R) advertising agency, which was one of the largest radio packaging firms (in terms of monetary billing and number of network programs) at that time. Y & R had several clients, including Sterling Drug, Inc. --

the parent firm of the Centaur and Cummer divisions, which oversaw production of various Mollé products.



As announced by Dan Seymour, the anthology offered each week: "... one of the great mystery stories; selected from either the famous classics or from the best of the moderns." When Hobe Morrison of *Variety* (September 15, 1943) reviewed the series' first episode ("The Tell-Tale Heart"), he proclaimed: "... due to skillful scripting and imaginative production, it provides enter-

taining, even absorbing listening.” Each of the thirty-minute dramas was hosted by the fictitious Geoffrey Barnes. Though portrayed by NBC as a real person, a crime connoisseur who selected each week’s story, the role was first held by actor Roc Rogers.

Much of the behind the scenes work, however, was actually accomplished by teams at both Y & R and NBC. Sandy Stronach and, later, Day Tuttle were the agency’s producer/directors during the program’s first year on the air. Joe Scibetta and Lester Vail assisted in the control booth. The commercial copy was written by Bill Whitman and Bryon Collins under the supervision of Innes Harrison and John Sawyze. The Mollé Brushless Shave Cream copy was read (and sung) by Dan Seymour (below) for which *Radio Daily* (April 15, 1947) had this praise: “To break the monotony of caustic comments on commercials, we’d like to pin a grace note on the musical novelty plugging Mollé on the *Mystery Theatre*.” Additional Sterling Drug brands Double Danderine and Ironized Yeast were promoted by spielers George A. Putnam and Dick Dunham, respectively. At NBC, continuity director Stockton Helffrich scrutinized each script so that it met required network guidelines. On the technical side, the sound effects artists included John Powers, John Shurtleff, Lewis Lane, and Jerry McGee. The control board operators were Ed Watkins and Dudley Connolly. Jack Miller composed and conducted the original theme and incidental music. In this collection, Alexander Semmler is the conductor for several episodes.

Even though ratings during the first year were mediocre, the sponsor continued to periodically renew the program. In July of 1944, Frank K. Telford from Y & R was appointed as the new producer/director, as the anthology continued without



Dan Seymour

a summer hiatus. A year later, he was credited by *Variety* (June 27, 1945) with bringing the program its first double-digit ratings. A native of Detroit, Telford had performed various duties at WXYZ before earning both undergraduate and graduate degrees at Wayne State University. During World War II, he wrote and directed *You Can't Do Business with Hitler* and *This is Our Enemy*. He joined Y & R in March of 1944. *The Mollé Mystery Theatre* took its first summer break in 1945, and returned to NBC the following October 5th at a new day and time: Fridays at 10 pm Eastern. Bernard Lenrow held the role of Geoffrey Barnes, and the program’s

successes continued. For several months, beginning in July of 1946, there was amazement reported in the trade regarding this achievement considering its rather low weekly budget. Frank Telford was quoted in *The Billboard* (July 20, 1946): “We try for something novel all the time, and it’s hard to get good material.” Throughout its tenure on radio, scripts were accepted for the program on a freelance basis. Telford emphasized this policy in *Variety* (December 17, 1947), in an attempt to counter the previous issue’s complaint about a lack of outlets for authors. Telford declared: “... but in view of the implication of your story, that good writing talent is going to waste, here is a market.” In the current set, scripts were crafted by veteran scribes Joseph Ruscoll and Sidney Slon, and by relative newcomers Frederick Methot and Paul Monash. The latter would go on to achieve success in films (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*) and television (*Peyton Place*).

Though authors were duly acknowledged on-air, there was inconsistency in the cast credits. When present, film and stage stars such as Elizabeth Scott (below) and John Payne (both of whom appear in the current broadcast batch) always received oral curtseys. With regards to selecting performers, Frank Telford was praised by *Radio Daily* (July 19, 1946): “... rates a bow for showing partiality to ex-GI radiolites when casting.” Two such former service members heard in episodes of this release are Ian Martin and Bob Quigley.

The Mollé Mystery Theatre completed its NBC tenure on June 25, 1948. It was subsequently moved to CBS on Tuesday nights the following week, with a new agency and production team.

Episode Guide

CD 1A: “Dilemma” - 11/21/1944

This story by S. Weir Mitchell, M.D. was originally published in *Century Magazine* (July 1902) without a decisive ending. Readers were left to ponder the final conclusion. Adapted for radio by Louis Pelletier and Jacques Anson Finke, this stars John Sylvester as a greedy coward seeking his grandfather’s fortune. Featured in the cast are Joan Alexander as Ellen, Arnold Moss as the estate executor, the constable and the minister, Ted Jewett as both the doctor and the architect, Philip Clarke as the explosives expert, and Ted Osborn as both Grandpa Faulkner and the bar



Elizabeth Scott is heard in
"Female of the Species."

patron. The last five minutes of this *Mystery Playhouse* version (hosted by Peter Lorre) includes a preview of that series' following week's episode of *Mr. & Mrs. North*. The NBC producer is Paul Martin.

CD 1B: "Lady in the Morgue" - 05/15/1945

Ken Lynch and John Gibson enact the roles of private detectives Crane and O'Malley as they search for a missing corpse in L. K. Hoffman's script. This comedy-mystery was culled from the 1936 novel by Jonathan Latimer, one of nine from the Doubleday Doran & Co. Crime Club series utilized on the *Mollé* program. It was originally scheduled for broadcast on May 8th, but was postponed to the following week on account of the V-E DAY celebration. Supporting players include James Van Dyk as Mr. Courtland, Jerry Macy as Lt. Grady and Mandel Kramer as Sam Udoni. Paul Dumont is the NBC producer.

CD 2A: "The Creeper" - 03/29/1946

One of the aural medium's most famous yarns, this original drama was crafted by Joseph Ruscoll. Charlotte Manson stars as Georgia, the frantic wife of policeman Steve Grant (Jackson Beck). They are assisted by Richard Widmark as Perley, Rolfe Sedan as both the radio broadcaster and the doorman, Gladys Thornton as Mrs. Stone, Ted Osborn as the druggist, Jim Lee as the elevator operator, and Bill Zuckert as the maniac terrorizing the city. The NBC producer is Ted Mabley, with Tom O'Brien providing the closing cue.

CD 2B: "Night Must Fall" - 04/12/1946

This play by England-native Emyln Williams was initially performed in the United Kingdom in 1935. In this radio rendition by Don Agger, Ian Martin has the lead role as the mentally unstable Danny, with Virginia Field (below) as Olivia, Ethel Browning as Mrs. Bramson, Thelma Jordan as Dora, Anthony Kemble Cooper as Hubert Laurie, and Neil Fitzgerald as Inspector Belsize. The NBC producer is Jim Harvey, with network cue by Bill Malcolm.



Virginia Field is heard in "Night Must Fall."

CD 3A: "Follow That Cab" - 04/19/1946

Created exclusively for radio by Larry and Sidney Slon, this is a frolicking mystery of two bumbling cab driver-detective wannabes, Julius and Moe. John Gibson and Larry Haines co-star, along with Sidney Slon as Burton, Francis Chaney as the woman, Jerry Macy as Chief

O'Brien, Ruben Weiss as Cop #1, and A. Kelley as both Cop #2 and jail guard. Jim Harvey is the NBC producer, with network cue by Bill Malcolm.

CD 3B: "The Further Adventures of Kenny Andrews" - 05/10/1946

When listeners of the program heard the first episode of 'the Broadway tout with all the angles,' they clamored for more. Thus, this second chapter was provided by Joseph Ruscoll, with Carl Eastman once again the headliner. Additional cast members are Ralph Bell as both Alexander Farfel and Chicago Looie, James Van Dyk as Pinko Shultz, Elspeth Eric as Nikki Passions, Ted De Corsia as both Big Al and the radio announcer, and Frank Dane as both Blintzes Malloy and Inspector Ross. The NBC producer is Ted Mabley, with Tom O'Brien providing the network cue.

CD 4A: "Witness for the Prosecution" - 05/31/1946

This classic story by Agatha Christie (below) was first published under the title "Traitor's Hands" in the January 31, 1925 issue of *Flynn's*. The lead actress of Lawrence Menken's radio version is Lesley Woods, who plays both Romaine Vole and Mrs. Mogson. Courtney Benson is heard as Mr. Vole, with Maurice Tarplin as Mr. Mayherne, Carl Emory as both Mr. Pinglebarn and the judge, Bob Quigley as both the Inspector and court clerk, Alan Hewitt as the prosecutor, and Thelma Ritter as Janet. The NBC producer is Ted Mabley, with network cue by Tom O'Brien.

CD 4B: "Female of the Species" - 06/07/1946

This script is the first of five for this program from the pen of actress Irene Winston. Movie siren Lizabeth Scott portrays femme fatale Eva Lester, the conniving owner of a posh beauty salon. Supporting cast includes Gilbert Mack as Fred and Virginia Dwyer as Helen. The NBC producer is Walter McGraw, with network cue by Tom O'Brien.

CD 5A: "The Adventure of the Fallen Angels" - 06/14/1946

Tony Verner is a playboy who must raise \$20,000 to resolve a gambling debt. The original story by Percival Wilde (*The Popular Magazine*, October 20, 1924) is adapted for radio by Frederick Methot. Les Tremayne stars as Tony, with Ralph Bell as Johnny, James Van Dyk as Ace Kendrick, Alice Reinhart as



Agatha Christie

Lucky, and Mandel Kramer as Inspector Burke. Additional roles of various club members are played by Gilbert Mack and the script writer. Walter McGraw is the NBC producer, with Tom O'Brien providing the network cue.

CD 5B: "The Hands of Mr. Ottermole" - 06/21/1946

This thriller, adapted by L. K. Hoffman from the Thomas Burke yarn, first appeared in *The Story-Teller* (February 1929). The cast includes Arnold Moss as the narrator, Ted Osborn as both Mr. Whybrow and the waiter, Ruben Weiss as both James and the fishmonger, Thelma Schnee as both Mrs. Whybrow and Janie, Earl Hammond as Crane, Horace Braham as the editor, William Podmore as both the constable and the mayor, and Craig McDonnell as the sergeant. The network producer is Walter McGraw, with the NBC cue provided by Tom O'Brien.

CD 6A: "St. Louis Lady" - 08/23/1946

This original radio play by Irene Winston was first titled "St. Louis Blues," as a tribute to the song heard throughout the story. It was then changed to "St. Louis Woman," and altered again to avoid confusion with the musical of that same name that was playing in New York. The Lady caught in a love triangle is portrayed by Elspeth Eric, with Gilbert Mack and Frank Lovejoy as her two suitors. George MacFarland is the singer. Ron Rawson subs for the vacationing George Putnam to make the Double Danderine pitch. The NBC producer is Paul Knight, with Tom O'Brien providing the network cue.

CD 6B: "Angel Face" - 12/20/1946

Femme fatale Dolores is played by June Havoc (below), who teams with Larry Haines as Al (her partner in a vicious get-rich scheme). Richard Widmark is heard as Joe in Don Agger's transformation of the Walter Wilson short story "Murder on Her Mind" (*Thrilling Detective*, August 1944). The NBC producer is Wayne Howell, with Don Pardo providing the network cue.



June Havoc is heard in "Angel Face."

CD 7A: "Kenny Angles and the Queen of Diamonds" - 04/18/1947

In this third and final chapter of the Kenny Andrews saga, Carl Eastman and Ralph Bell return in their roles of Kenny and his irritated attorney. Their AFRA comrades include Elspeth Eric as the librarian, Jerry Macy as the inspector, Santos Ortega as both Bobo and Itchy, George

Mathews as Blintzes Malloy, and Arnold Stang (right) as Klepto Grimes. The NBC producer is Wayne Howell, with network cue provided by Don Pardo.



Arnold Stang is heard in "Kenny Angles and the Queen of Diamonds."

CD 7B: "Talk Them to Death" - 06/27/1947

A circus locale provides the background for this aural medium exclusive by Walter B. Newman. Everett Sloane is featured as the conniving Nick Duncan, with Ralph Bell as Duke, Mary Shipp as Annette, Elspeth Eric as Ruby, Bill Zuckert as both Lee and the police chief, Bill Quinn as Peter the Great, and Brad Barker as the untamable Jezebel. The NBC producer is John Bloch, with the New York network cue by Mal Ritter.

CD 8A: "Goodbye, Darling" - 08/08/1947

Numerous twists and turns are encountered in this chiller by Hank Warner (a member of the CBS press department). Ed Begley stars as George, with Elspeth Eric as Lilly, Chuck Webster as Curtis, and Everett Sloane as both Frank and the Inspector. The NBC producer is John Bloch, with network cue provided by Tom O'Brien.

CD 8B: "The Four Fatal Jugglers" - 11/14/1947

In this story by Paul Monash, two law partners argue over their affections for the same woman. Alan Hewitt headlines the cast as Gordon, with John Sylvester as Bob, Charlotte Manson as Lydia, and Grant Richards as Dave. John Bloch is the network producer, with Tom O'Brien providing the closing cue.

CD 9A: "Two Men in a Furnished Room" - 11/28/1947

John Payne stars as Red Carr in the Paul Monash version of this William Irish (Cornell Woolrich) tale. (It was published as "He Looked Like Murder" in the February 8, 1941 issue of *Detective Fiction Weekly*.) Bill Quinn is featured as Carr's roommate Dixon, with Ralph Bell as both Sgt. Hiller and Mr. Michaels. Don Pardo and Tom O'Brien are the opening and closing NBC announcers respectively. John Bloch is the network producer.

CD 9B: "Make No Mistake" - 04/30/1948

This solemn story by Robert Mitchell and Gene Levitt casts Alan Baxter as Dave Kimble, who seems to regret one major error. Featured are Adrienne Bayan as both the first motorist and Jeannie, George Randall as both the second motorist and Mr. Meade, Everett Sloane as both the third motorist and Bert Ragnor, Bill

Smith as Mr. Mundy, and Carl Eastman as both Tommy and the desk sergeant. John Bloch is the network producer with Lionel Ricau providing the NBC cue.



Elspeth Eric is heard in "Close Shave," and five other mysteries in this collection.

CD 10A: "Close Shave" - 05/14/1948

Frederick Methot wrote this tale of a woman's desperate fight for survival, which stars K. T. Stevens as the swindled Ellen Thomas. Bill Quinn is featured as Tony, with Elspeth Eric (right) as Stella, Ann Thomas as Rickie, and Everett Sloane as Larry. The NBC producer is John Bloch, with the network cue contributed by Lionel Ricau.

CD 10B: "Solo Performance" - 05/21/1948

As the beleaguered actor Albert Perry, Everett Sloane delivers a distinguished performance in this George and Gertude Fass story of the ill-timed murder of a theatrical producer. Elizabeth Morgan portrays Albert's wife Elspeth, with Dan Ocko as both Luigi and Matt Blaine, Elaine Rost as Miss Johnson, Don McLaughlin as the director, and Walter Vaughn as the detective. Jim Hayes is the NBC producer, with Lionel Ricau providing the network cue.

Suggested reading:

Ken Crossen (1946) "There's Murder in the Air" in *The Art of the Mystery Story* (H. Haycraft ed.)

Acknowledgements: The author thanks Bryan Cornell and Harrison Behl (both from Recorded Sound Research Center, Library of Congress) for their invaluable assistance.



www.RadioSpirits.com

PO Box 1315, Little Falls, NJ 07424

© © 2018 RSPT LLC. All rights reserved. For home use only.
Unauthorized distribution prohibited.

Program Guide © 2018 Karl Schadow and RSPT LLC. All Rights Reserved.