



Tips and What to Expect on the Night of Hosting a 3-Act Mystery Dinner Theater Play

Create a Welcoming Atmosphere: When your guests arrive, they enter a different world. Tables are decorated with fun themes like Hollywood, 1950's, Circus, Cruise ship, or Western. The cast is in costume and in character.

Cast members are scattered around the room ready to interact with the guests. Each actor or actress only answers to his or her stage name. *(Attendees may call a cast member by their given name, but the actor can quickly say something like "I don't know Jeff, my name's Randall - the ship's captain. I'm glad you've joined us. Have you ever cruised with us before?")* The crowd will quickly catch on to adlibbing their own unique storyline and will enjoy "playing" along.

This get-acquainted period lasts up to 30 minutes. During this time, guests not only mingle, they also snack on appetizers, check the menus and itinerary, read the playbill with character descriptions, and start the table game.

Since guests often arrive with an appetite, it is beneficial to place hors d'oeuvres directly on the tables. This ensures that everyone has equal access to the food, rather than having it at a buffet. Even simple options like pretzels or popcorn can help keep attendees satisfied.

Recruit a Friendly Host: An engaging host will smoothly guide the audience throughout the evening, explaining what the audience needs to do at each stage of the night. Since this will be the first interactive dinner theater experience for many attendees, it's important to ensure they feel comfortable. *For example, something as simple as letting the crowd know that laughter is wanted and welcome, makes the audience feel free to chuckle out loud.*

A well-prepared host will know exactly when to climb onstage to guide the audience, as well as the most effective way to introduce each section of the play. Attendees will rely on the host to explain when to turn their chairs, how to get their meals, the appropriate time to solve the murder or guess who-dun-it, and when dessert will arrive!

Plan Your Mystery Event Schedule: Below is a general outline. Refer to the schedule provided by Nancy Bond with your script purchase for a more detailed guideline. *At your event, be flexible if the timing changes, either moving more quickly or slowly than expected.*

6:30 – 7:00	Mingle / Start the suggested table game / Get Drinks / Eat appetizers
7:00 – 7:20	Give Official Welcome by the Host – Explain the evening / Cast Presents Scene I
7:20 – 7:55	Give Blessing / Eat Dinner / Complete and Collect table game / Restroom break
7:55 – 8:00	Host gets attention and encourages the audience to turn their chairs toward the stage.
8:00 – 8:40	Cast Presents the Largest Part of the Drama where a crime occurs such as theft or murder
8:40 – 8:50	Audience completes their Accusation Cards and Turn them in / Eat Dessert
8:50 – 9:00	The Cast Presents the Final Scene which Solves the Crime
9:00 – 9:10	Announce the Winners (<i>Ex: Table Game, Best Cupcake, Door Prize, Clueless, Who-Dun-It</i>)
9:10 – 9:15	Say Thanks to all who helped and to those who attended and Dismiss.

This schedule has a short meal time which can be accomplished with planning. Buffet lines are much faster with multiple locations that are double sided. We like to allow mission groups to earn tips by serving the tables. Servers are quick. However, those plating the food need to start early and be speedy with spooning out sides. At our last mystery, we served the meat and placed sides on the table in a family style. The crowd thoroughly enjoyed this option.

Visualize the Play Presentation and Audience Involvement: These mystery plays have three parts – or three acts. In the first act, the characters are introduced, and although the crime remains a complete mystery, the audience begins to receive clues about both the nature of the crime and potential suspects. Since this act occurs before the meal, it provides engaging details for the audience to discuss while they eat.

In the second act or main section of the play, the audience is drawn into a suspenseful and intriguing story. Guests will do more than look for clues to help them solve the crime. All of Nancy Bond's plays feature at least one form of lively audience interaction, such as inviting volunteers on stage, playing a game, creating sound effects, or joining in a dance. Then, TOWARD THE END of the second act, a crime occurs such as murder, attempted murder, sabotage, or theft.

The third act, or resolution section, of the play occurs after the accusation cards have been submitted. In this scene, the identities of the culprits, the methods they used, and their motives will be revealed. Guests will enjoy discussing with their tablemates how close they came to solving the mystery.

Explain the Clueless Award: A MUST DO! The host tells the guests in advance that they could win the "Clueless Award." This honor is given to the person who is the FURTHEST from guessing the correct suspect and motive – *specifically, someone NOT mentioned in the playbill*. There are ALWAYS a few characters in the audience who will enjoy this opportunity for a laugh. Additionally, it provides a fun way for family members of the cast to get involved in trying to earn a prize. *(While it takes a moment to review these answers, the laughter generated is well worth it.)*

Collect Audience Accusation Cards: After a crime occurs, dessert is served. Each guest considers who is guilty. Before writing down allegations, audience members can question the suspects as they walk among the tables. Accusation cards are submitted prior to the final act. As this revealing scene unfolds, cards are reviewed backstage. Winners are chosen by identifying those who answered all questions correctly.

Recognize the Winners: Everyone enjoys winning a prize! Announce winners of prizes from smallest to largest. The table game winners will be pleased to get recognition and a small reward such as movie sized candy boxes. Next, the host can read about 5 top Clueless Award answers. The audience will erupt with peals of laughter over these bits of humor. *If a decision between two submissions simply cannot be determined, allow the crowd to vote with applause or divide the prize in half!*



There should only be one grand winner*. Typically, merely a handful of guests answer both the "how" and "why" questions correctly. Thus, the host can inform the audience that some came close, but only the very best response has been chosen. First, read the names of the runners-up to give them their well-deserved recognition. Then, acknowledge the impressive skills of the "Sleuth of the Night" by announcing his or her name, leading in a round of applause, and handing out a thematic prize.

Prize Tip 1: If there are a large number of children, give each of them a small prize rather than having them compete with adults. Also, a coloring page or easy word search is fun for them to work on as the event flows.

**Prize Tip 2:* We invite a special needs group to attend. They fill several tables. I create a slightly different colored accusation card for those attendees so that they can also have a grand winner to receive a prize.

Say Thanks: The audience has had a fabulous time and some have been in their seats for nearly three hours. Therefore, please keep the final thank yous and goodbyes brief. Encourage guests to take advantage of photo opportunities with the cast before they leave.

Tip: Write down - or refer to the Playbill - for the names of everyone who was involved to quickly recognize and thank them for all their hard work. Chances are, if the names are not written down, someone will be forgotten – which feels horrible.

 THANKS and Break a Leg!  Nancy Bond