



**THE ENGLISH THEATRE  
OF HAMBURG**

**presents**

# **DEATHTRAP**

**by  
Ira Levin**

**STUDY GUIDE**

Premiere on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2026

Preview performances at reduced prices on 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> November

Tuesday – Saturday 19:30

selected Sundays 14:30

Wednesday/Friday 11:30 (Matinee performances weekly alternating)

**THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF HAMBURG**

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**TICKETS**

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Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere **DEATHTRAP** by Ira Levin on 20 November 2026, with preview performances at reduced prices on 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> November. Bookings for this play have already started. See the cover of this publication for dates and times of performances. Teachers who wish to preview the play before bringing a group of students to the theatre should contact [marketing@englishtheatre.de](mailto:marketing@englishtheatre.de).

### **About The Playwright**

Ira Marvin Levin (August 27 1929 – November 12 2007) was an American novelist, playwright, and songwriter. His first major success was **A KISS BFORE DYING**, a highly suspenseful novel which he wrote in 1953. Other well-known novels by him include **ROSEMARY'S BABY** (1967) and **THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL** (1976), both of which were made into popular films. His plays have been produced and revived in theatres around the world. Perhaps the best known of them are **NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS** (1955), **CRITIC'S CHOICE** (1960) and **VERONICA'S ROOM** (1973). **DEATHTRAP** (1978) was one of the great successes of Broadway and London history and was filmed with Michael Caine and Christopher Reeve the leading roles.

### **About the Play**

**DEATHTRAP** is a 1978 American comedy-thriller written by Ira Levin with multiple plot twists driving its play within a play story. It is in two acts with one set and five characters. It holds the record for the longest-running comedy-thriller on Broadway, and was nominated for four Tony Awards, including Best Play.

**DEATHTRAP** was a big hit from the very beginning and has been frequently revived. It was adapted into a film starring Michael Caine, Christopher Reeve and Dyan Cannon in 1982. Following a Boston tryout at the Wilbur Theatre, **DEATHTRAP** enjoyed a four-year run on Broadway, opening under the direction of Robert Moore, February 26, 1978, at the Music Box Theatre, moving to the Biltmore Theatre January 7, 1982, and closing on June 13 of that year. It received a rave reviews including one from New York Times theater critic Walter Kerr, who wrote that it contained "effrontery everywhere and fun straight through".



## SUMMARY

Summary Of

Ira Levin's  
**DEATHTRAP**

**Time:** October of 1978

**Place:** Sidney Bruhl's Study, Westport, Connecticut

### Act I, Scene 1

Sidney Bruhl, a playwright who has not written a successful play for 18 years, has received a copy of a new comedy-thriller from Clifford Anderson, a young man he recently taught in a summer seminar.

Clifford asks Sidney to give him his opinion on the manuscript. Sidney jokingly suggests to his wife Myra that he kill the budding young playwright, steal his play and pass it off as his own. He is certain it will be a big hit and net at least two million dollars. Myra, assuming that her husband is not really serious, tells him it wouldn't pay to commit a murder at this time anyway because Helga ten Dorp, the famous Dutch psychic, is staying at the McBain cottage nearby where she is resting up from helping the police find murderers. She would be sure to find him out.

Instead, Myra suggests that Sidney collaborate with Clifford on the play, add the "professional touch" and take half the profits. At Myra's encouragement, Sidney gets on the phone and persuades Clifford to pay him a visit that evening. During their phone conversation, he asks the young man if anyone else has seen the script and whether there are any other copies. Hearing this, Myra becomes nervous as she begins to believe that Sidney might really be serious about killing the young man. Later, a friend phones and invites Myra to go to a movie, but she declines because she senses that Sidney is in a desperate, dangerous state of mind.

### Act I, Scene 2

Clifford arrives to discuss his manuscript, and Myra becomes increasingly concerned as Sidney interrogates

the boy to make doubly sure that no one knows about the play or their meeting. Sidney tries to persuade the apprehensive Myra to leave the two of them alone, but she insists on staying. She broaches the subject of Sidney and Clifford collaborating in writing the play.

Clifford is flattered that Sidney would even consider doing such a thing, but he says he prefers to send it to a few agents first and see if they agree that it needs major rewriting. After hearing this bad news, Sidney mentions that he has an idea for a play on Harry Houdini, an idol of his. He shows Clifford a pair of original Houdini handcuffs and invites him to try them on. Clifford does so. When Sidney explains the trick in getting them off, Clifford attempts to do it but fails.

As Sidney takes longer and longer to find the key for the handcuffs, Myra becomes increasingly anxious, fearing that Sidney intends to do the young man in. Sidney finally gives Clifford a key, but before the young man can get the handcuffs off, Sidney slips a garrotte around his neck and strangles him to death before the horrified Myra. Sidney then wraps Clifford in a rug and insists that Myra help him carry the body outside and bury it in the garden.

### Act I, Scene 3

Sidney returns from the garden to find Myra brooding over a drink in the study. She tells him that she cannot understand how anything could drive him to commit murder. She asks him to move out of the house in a month's time, and she demands that he buy the house and surrounding property from her as soon as the money from Clifford's play starts coming in.

While Sidney attempts to dissuade her, the doorbell rings and Helga ten Dorp, the Dutch psychic, is let in. Helga explains that she had a vision of the room they are in and that she sensed a great deal of pain there and felt the need to warn them of danger.

Using her ESP (extrasensory perception), she sees a young man in boots attacking Sidney and predicts that a dagger in the room will be used by another woman



because of a play. After Helga leaves, Sidney (who remains undisturbed by the psychic) asks Myra not to decide yet about kicking him out. Myra admits that part of her was hoping all along that he would kill Clifford.

Sidney, who is standing at the at the French doors leading to the garden, lets out a loud scream. Clifford, returned from the dead, has seized his hand and, with a piece of firewood, strikes Sidney repeatedly on the head. Paralyzed with terror, Myra watches helplessly until Sidney lies motionless on the floor. Clifford then approaches the terrified Myra with the firewood. This is too much for her. The victim of a heart attack, she falls to the floor. After Clifford checks her pulse, he announces with satisfaction, "She's dead. I'm positive." Sidney then rises. He is unhurt because the "firewood" was made of Styrofoam.

Realizing that Myra had a weak heart, he and Clifford had planned everything from the beginning: the story about the play, the mock murder of Clifford and Clifford's surprise return from the dead to frighten Myra to death.

The two men have been involved in an intimate relationship and plan to live together. While Sidney is calling the doctor, Clifford goes out to the car to get his suitcase and other things he has brought along with him.

### **Act II, Scene 1**

Two weeks later. Sidney and Clifford are sitting at an old partner's desk which Sidney has just recently purchased. Clifford is working vigorously and productively on a play which he claims takes place in a welfare office. Sidney, on the other hand, is frustrated because he is making no progress at all in his playwriting. He wants to see the play Clifford is working on, but Clifford asks him to wait until it is finished.

Porter Milgrim, Sidney's personal lawyer and friend, arrives and meets Clifford whom Sidney introduces as his secretary. When Clifford leaves to pick up some groceries, Porter tells Sidney that Myra left him a great deal of money. After they discuss a few business matters, Porter mentions that he saw Clifford lock a folder containing some papers in his desk drawer. He is concerned that the young man might be stealing Sidney's ideas for a play. Sidney is alarmed at the thought that

Clifford might be hiding something from him, so as soon as Porter leaves, he attempts unsuccessfully to break into the locked drawer.

When Clifford returns and removes the folder from the desk, Sidney secretly takes it and puts an identical looking one in its place. While Clifford then types away, Sidney reads the manuscript in the folder and discovers to his shock and dismay that Clifford has been putting the details of their plot to kill Myra in his play, which is a thriller and has nothing to do with a welfare office as he had claimed.

Sidney confronts Clifford and forbids him to continue writing the play because he is sure they will be exposed and sent to prison for Myra's murder. Clifford, however, refuses to stop working on the play and there is a heated argument ending with Sidney walking towards the fireplace to burn the manuscript. Clifford stops him by threatening to move out. Sidney says he cannot live without Clifford and gives him the manuscript. Since most of the ideas for the plot to murder Myra came from Sidney, Clifford thinks it's only fair to let him collaborate on the play.

Sidney finally agrees to do it, but it is not certain why. He lies to Clifford when he explains that he could use the money because Myra's estate was very small. Then, as Clifford types away on the play, he looks at the young man, leans back in his chair and thinks deeply as the lights fade to darkness.

### **Act II, Scene 2**

Helga ten Dorp comes to Sidney's house again, meets Clifford at the door and notices his boots—she had told Sidney earlier to beware of a man in boots. She tells Clifford she came to borrow candles because of an impending storm, but when she is alone with Sidney she tells him she really came to warn him that he is in great danger as long as Clifford is in the same house.

When she leaves, Clifford, suspecting what has happened, asks Sidney about Helga's warning. Clifford assumes Helga is confused because of the mock murder of Sidney with the Styrofoam log, but Sidney now seems to think that Clifford may really be potentially dangerous to him. He lies to Clifford for the second time when he



says that he threw Helga off the track by telling her that her images of the young man attacking him were the result of Clifford giving him karate lessons.

Sidney says he has Act II ready for Clifford's perusal, but he first wants to try out two bits of action in the play with Clifford that involve violence to make sure they'll work. In the middle of the second bit, Sidney pulls a gun on Clifford and says he is going to kill him because he can't let the play be written and produced as it is. He explains that he has already worked out an alibi for himself.

*Sydney: I asked Porter to have you checked out in Hartford. A few blots were found on your record, ... So, I gave you your notice, you became abusive and violent, and Mrs. ten Dorp's three-week-old vision came to pass.*

Sidney has his alibi worked out, but when he fires the gun Clifford just "stands for a moment and scratches himself. Clifford explains that he bought some blanks for Sidney's gun and some real bullets for the pistol he now takes from the wall.

Clifford orders Sidney to sit down. He then gives Sidney a pair of handcuffs and tells him to attach one side to his wrist and the other side to the arm of the chair. He informs Sidney he's going to continue writing the play just exactly the way the real events happened up to the point where Sidney fired the gun on him. Then he will have the psychic and the lawyer enter the play and hear a confession from the dying young man, after which the older playwright will commit suicide. Clifford says he is

now going to leave but will let Sidney live. He suggests Sidney say that he gave him (Clifford) his notice. As soon as Clifford goes upstairs to collect his things Sidney shucks off the cuffs, takes a small crossbow from the wall and aims it up the stairs. When he sees Clifford, he fires the bow. Clifford, who has been hit in the chest with the arrow from the crossbow, falls down the stairs and collapses on the floor.

Sidney proceeds to arrange the room so it looks like he killed Clifford in self-defence. He then phones the police to report what happened. While Sidney is speaking on the phone the wounded Clifford rises from the floor and stabs him fatally with a knife. Clifford then falls to the floor and dies.

### **Act II, Scene 3**

Helga and Porter are discussing Clifford and Sidney. Helga tells him that the two men caused Myra's death and she recounts all the events leading up to their murders. Porter, who is a would-be playwright, thinks it is a fantastic plot for a play he can write that will make him a lot of money. Helga demands half of the money because she gave him the plot, but Porter refuses.

*Helga: If you not share the money—I tell about telephone. You speak through handkerchief, in high voice. Say dirty words to all your friends.*

Porter, appalled that he has been discovered and is being blackmailed, approaches Helga aggressively. She takes a dagger from the wall to defend herself. As they circle the desk, he shouts invectives at her: "Bitch! Whore! Foreign slut! Dutch pervert!"

**CURTAIN**

## Study Questions

1. Why does Sidney want to steal Clifford's play?
2. Why is Myra frightened and suspicious of Sidney's motives?
3. What does Myra suggest in order to keep Sidney from harming Clifford?
4. Why does Sidney encourage Clifford to try on Houdini's handcuffs?
5. Where does Sidney say he will bury Clifford?
6. Why does psychic Helga ten Dorp come to Sidney and Myra's home?
7. Why do Sidney and Clifford attempt to cause Myra's death by shocking and terrifying her?
8. What do Sidney and Clifford plan to do after Myra's death?
9. What does Porter see that makes Sidney suspicious of the play that Clifford is writing?
10. Why does Sidney object to the play that Clifford is writing?
11. Why do Helga and Porter argue and threaten each other in the last scene of the play?

## For Discussion or Written Work

1. Why do you think **DEATHTRAP** has been such a big success throughout the world? Do you think the success is due more to the comedy or the suspense in the play?
2. What are some of the surprises in the play? Were there any twists and turns that you saw coming, or were you kept in the dark the whole time?
3. In the play there are many weapons (from plays Sidney has written) on the walls of his study. How do all these weapons make you feel about the play from the very beginning?
4. What do you think is the real nature of Sidney and Clifford's relationship? Are their feelings for each other sincere, or are they just pretending?
5. How does all the fighting and physical action in the play help make **DEATHTRAP** an exciting thriller?
6. The play would seem to be over after Sidney and Clifford kill each other. Why do you think the playwright added a final scene with Porter and Helga quarrelling and threatening each other?

## Answer Key

1. Because he has had a series of box office flops and believes that Clifford's play is a certain hit.
2. Because she suspects that Sidney may murder Clifford in order to steal his play.
3. She suggests that Sidney offer to give Clifford suggestions on improving the play and then share in the profits.
4. He wants to make Clifford defenceless so he can strangle the young man.
5. In the garden.
6. Because she is having terrible visions of pain and danger coming from their household.
7. Because they know she has a weak heart.
8. They want to live together and collaborate on writing plays.
9. Porter sees Clifford surreptitiously locking some papers in his desk drawer.
10. Because the play is based directly on their plot to cause Myra's death.
11. Because they don't want to share in the profits of the play they hope to write.