

SUSPENSE

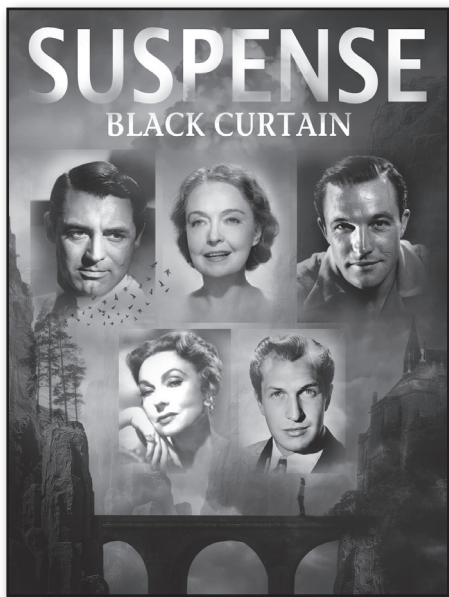
Black Curtain

Program Guide by Ivan G. Shreve, Jr.

“No less an authority than Orson Welles referred to Lucille Fletcher as “that most original of radio writers.” Fletcher, who began her career in the aural medium as a music librarian (later a copyright clerk and publicity writer) for CBS in 1934, would eventually script such radio dramas as “The Hitch-Hiker,” which was originally broadcast on Welles’ self-titled program on November 17, 1941.

“The Hitch-Hiker” would later encore (with Welles reprising his performance) on “radio’s outstanding theatre of thrills,” *Suspense* (on September 2, 1942). In fact, the long-running dramatic anthology played host to many of Fletcher’s written contributions, notably “Fugue in C Minor” and “The Thing in the Window.” But Lucille could also claim authorship of perhaps the most famous

Suspense production of them all: “Sorry, Wrong Number.” The radio play (featured in this set) allowed actress Agnes Moorehead to give a tour-de-force performance as an invalid who’s frightened out of her wits after eavesdropping on a murder plot over the telephone. “I couldn’t even finish reading it because it made me so nervous,” the actress later reminisced. “I was afraid it was too morbid and that people would turn it off.”



Fletcher recalled in interviews that the inspiration for her tale of terror stemmed from an incident in which she was shopping for milk for her sick

six-month old baby and she encountered an obstreperous woman who refused to allow Lucille ahead of her in line to make her simple purchase. But Lucille's daughter, Dorothy Herrmann, also noted that the "Mrs. Elbert Stevenson" character in "Sorry, Wrong Number" had origins in the mother of one of Fletcher's college boyfriends; a woman who held Lucille in low regard because she was "a scholarship student." "This made my mother very miserable," Dorothy commented on a podcast in 2015, the year "Wrong Number" was selected for the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry.

Lucille's "act of revenge" produced such an overwhelmingly favorable response that the production would receive an encore (on August 21st) within just a few months of its original May 25, 1943 broadcast. There are a couple of things to listen for when you play the broadcasts that come immediately before and after "Sorry, Wrong Number" in this collection. The original title of Fletcher's play was "She Overheard Death Speaking"...and that's how "The Man in Black" (Joseph Kearns) previews it at the end of "The ABC Murders" (05/18/43). Then, at the beginning of "Banquo's Chair" (06/01/43), Kearns has to explain the denouement of "Wrong Number" to the audience because a line miscue by one of the actors led to confusion among listeners. (There exists a West Coast version of "Wrong Number," however, where everything ran more smoothly.) "Sorry, Wrong Number" was presented on *Suspense* on six additional occasions between 1944 and 1960. Agnes Moorehead was the star on each broadcast, and she used the same dog-eared, pencil-marked script every time. The performance would leave her emotionally exhausted by the play's conclusion.

The November 19, 1948 encore of "Sorry, Wrong Number" may have been prompted by a feature film based on the play, which had just been released that September. It's a pity that Agnes Moorehead wasn't chosen by Paramount to reprise her famous radio showcase...though one can certainly understand why Barbara Stanwyck got the nod. Moorehead could console herself with the knowledge that Stanwyck purportedly listened constantly to a transcription of Agnes' *Suspense* performance on the set for inspiration. And it may have helped, since Stanwyck received an Oscar nomination for Best Actress as a result. But many be-



Agnes Moorehead

lieve that Moorehead's interpretation of the role stands head-and-shoulders above the rest. As for the story itself? Orson Welles called it "the greatest single radio script ever written."

In "Sorry, Wrong Number," the murderer (spoiler alert!) gets off scot-free. This was a rare occurrence on network radio, and even more so on *Suspense*. Producer William Spier had a rule that the guilty culprit would be brought to justice by program's end. Still, Spier knew a good thing when he saw it. He was also loath to tackle stories with supernatural themes or science fiction elements, but *Suspense* embarked on occasional flights of fancy with presentations like the previously referenced "The Hitch-Hiker" and the two-part production of "Donovan' Brain."

"*Suspense* is compounded of mystery and suspicion...and dangerous adventure," intoned the series' official narrator, "The Man in Black." (Joseph Kearns regularly portrayed this figure, but you'll also hear Ted Osborne and Berry Kroeger in the role on shows in this collection.) "In this series are tales calculated to intrigue you...to stir your nerves...to offer you a precarious situation and then withhold the solution *until the last possible moment*." This had been the modus operandi of *Suspense* since its premiere over CBS Radio on July 17, 1942. It was producer Spier who gave the series its recognizable stamp, supervising every aspect of production from the stories to sound patterns. His impeccable professional standards, and his ability to lure Hollywood's top names in front of the microphone, earned him the nickname "the Hitchcock of the airplanes."

It was an appropriate description, considering the program's broadcast origins. *Suspense* had received a tryout on CBS' *Forecast* series on July 22, 1940 with a performance of "The Lodger." The Master of Suspense had fashioned that story into a motion picture in 1926 (based on Marie Belloc Lowndes' novella). In fact, Hitchcock himself made his radio directorial debut with that very broadcast. Furthermore, he personally directed TV versions (for his series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*) of two of the shows in this collection: "Banquo's Chair" and "Back for Christmas."

A third show in this set, "The Black Curtain," would be adapted for a later Hitchcock program called *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*. Its presence here marks the very first sponsored broadcast of *Suspense*. The series was sustained for its first year-and-a-half...until Roma Wines signed on to pay the show's bills. The increase in budget allowed *Suspense* to attract even more marquee Hollywood stars. For example, "Curtain" stars Cary Grant...in his first of *five* appearances on the series. This persuaded the network to give the program a more secure time

slot (it had been bounced around the schedule during its sustained period). All of the shows in this collection are certainly worthy of your time...but two in particular stand out. "Murder Goes For a Swim" finds actors Warren William and Eric Blore reprising their movie roles (Michael Lanyard and Jamison) from Columbia's *The Lone Wolf* film franchise.

The second outstanding episode in this compendium features an encore performance of "Cabin B-13." This thriller was written by renowned mystery author John Dickson Carr, who's also represented here with "Five Canaries in the Room." Carr was responsible for scripting many of *Suspense's* early broadcasts, but he eventually left CBS in a dispute over one of his scripts. He journeyed across the pond to write for the BBC (which later broadcast *Appointment with Fear*, and made use of several of his previous *Suspense* scripts). Upon his return to America, Carr used "Cabin B-13" as the title for a mystery series on which he served as writer and director.

Suspense ensured that listeners came back for more each week by featuring top Tinsel Town celebrities, well-crafted plays, and unparalleled direction/production from radio pioneers like William Spier, Anton Leader, Elliott Lewis, and William N. Robson. The shows on this set feature phenomenal acting turns from Charles Laughton, Elsa Lanchester, Maureen O'Hara, Lillian Gish, Vincent Price, Peter Lorre, and more. We invite you to locate your favorite chair and settle in for twenty tales well-calculated to keep you in...*Suspense!*

The following episodes of *Suspense* were originally broadcast in 1943 under the direction of Ted Bliss, Robert Lewis Shayon, and producer William Spier. The music is conducted by Lud Gluskin, Wilbur Hatch, and Bernard Herrmann, and composed by Lucien Moraweck.



Elsa Lanchester and Charles Laughton

CD 1A: "The ABC Murders" - May 18, 1943

Mild-mannered salesman Alexander Bonaparte Cust figures in a police investigation involving a homicidal maniac. Their only clue to the murders is an anonymous letter signed with Cust's initials. Charles Laughton and Elsa Lanchester star in this adaptation of Agatha Christie's 1936 novel, along with Bramwell Fletcher and Joseph Kearns.

CD 1B: "Sorry, Wrong Number" - May 25, 1943

In the premiere broadcast of *Suspense's* most famous

production, Agnes Moorehead gives a tour de force performance as Mrs. Stevenson. The irritable invalid struggles against phone company bureaucracy as she desperately tries to report a murder plot that she accidentally overheard as a result of crossed lines. Hans Conried and Joseph Kearns co-star.

CD 2A: “Banquo’s Chair” - June 1, 1943

Detective William Brent concocts a scheme to exact a confession from a killer. He hires an actress to portray a “ghost” at a dinner party...an apparition that only the suspect will be able to see. Donald Crisp and John Loder are featured in this episode, along with Joseph Kearns, Hans Conried, and Ian Wolfe.

CD 2B: “Five Canaries in the Room” - June 8, 1943

After his bachelor party, inebriated groom Ronald Dunham returns to the wrong fifth-floor apartment...and discovers a dead body. The next morning, both the building’s janitor and the police tell Dunham that no such apartment exists! Lee Bowman, Osa Massen, and Ona Munson star in this broadcast, along with William Johnstone and Joseph Kearns.

CD 3A: “Last Night” - June 15, 1943

Margo and Kent Smith star in this adaptation of Cornell Woolrich’s short story *The Red Tide*. A man named Burrows has apparently vanished from the face of the earth. Jacqueline Blaine begins to suspect that her husband Gil is responsible for Burrows’ disappearance when she learns that the gentleman gave them \$2,500 to bail out their dude ranch. Ruby Dandridge and Joseph Kearns are also heard in this episode

CD 3B: “Uncle Henry’s Rosebush” - June 29, 1943

Carol Linden and her husband Paul decide to visit her aunt and uncle. Unfortunately, Aunt Julie doesn’t appear to be the same person Carol remembers. As for her Uncle Henry, there’s no trace of him...save his spotless bedroom and a well-tended rosebush in the yard. Agnes Moorehead, Ellen Drew, Ted Reid, and Joseph Kearns are featured in this broadcast.

CD 4A: “The White Rose Murders” - July 6, 1943

Ginny Trowbridge decides to assist her police detective boyfriend Terry Riley in his latest investigation by posing as “bait.” There’s a serial killer on the loose who murders young women and leaves a single white rose in his victims’ hands. Maureen O’Hara stars in this thriller.



Maureen O'Hara



Eric Blore and Warren William

CD 4B: “Murder Goes For a Swim” - July 20, 1943

Warren William and Eric Blore reprise their roles from Columbia’s *Lone Wolf* movie franchise in this tale (based on a novel by *Wolf* creator Louis Joseph Vance). Michael Lanyard and his valet Jamison investigate the murder of Betty Larson—who was found at the bottom of a swimming pool. Ted Osborne, Harry Bartell, Griff Barnett, and Jim Bannon are also heard in this episode.

CD 5A: “The Last Letter of Dr. Bronson” - July 27, 1943

Dr. Bronson has a theory that there are five “checks” preventing any individual from committing murder. So he gives five people the opportunity to murder him...and get away with it. Laird Cregar is featured in this broadcast, along with Helen Vinson, Walter Kingsford, George Coulouris, Harold Huber, Ian Wolfe, Ted Osborne, and Theodore von Eltz.

CD 5B: “A Friend to Alexander” - August 3, 1943

Robert Young and Geraldine Fitzgerald star in James Thurber’s classic story about a housewife who is concerned about her husband’s nightmares. Harry Andrews keeps dreaming that he’s a confidant of Alexander Hamilton, destined to duel with his enemy Aaron Burr. That duel is dangerously close to being played out in real life...with a loaded gun!

CD 6A: “The Fountain Plays” - August 10, 1943

An adaptation of a Dorothy L. Sayers short story finds Archibald Spiller being blackmailed by an old acquaintance (with whom he did time in jail). Archie relies on a fountain in his backyard to dispose of his extortionist. Edmund Gwenn stars in this episode, alongside Dennis Hoey, Wendy Barrie, Ian Wolfe, and Ted Osborne.

CD 6B: “The Singing Walls” - September 2, 1943

Tom Cochran wakes up after a previous night’s bender with a faint notion that he may have committed murder. His detective pal offers to investigate the matter, despite a scarcity of clues. Preston Foster and Dane Clark are featured in this broadcast, along with co-stars Berry Kroeger and Ken Christy.

**CD 7A: “Marry for Murder”
- September 9, 1943**

Lawyer Philip Alden is uneasy about the relationship between his friend Letty Hawthorne and her beau Mark Taylor...particularly when Taylor is adamant about purchasing rat poison to address a rodent problem in the couple's boathouse. Lillian Gish stars in this episode. Also heard are Ray Collins, Bramwell Fletcher, and Berry Kroeger.



Orson Welles



Geraldine Fitzgerald

CD 7B: “Philomel Cottage” - October 7, 1943

Orson Welles and Geraldine Fitzgerald portray newlyweds Gerald and Alix Martin. They have been married for a month, and are blissfully happy in their lovers' cottage. Things go sour after Alix rummages through her husband's diary while he's away...and deduces that he's plotting to kill her.

CD 8A: “Statement of Employee Henry Wilson” - November 2, 1943

Mild-mannered Henry Wilson is resentful that ruthless co-worker Charles Dodds has superseded him at their firm in the short span of two years. Wilson plots to kill Dodds...but doesn't count on the “collateral damage.” Gene Lockhart is featured in this broadcast, along with Joseph Kearns, Hans Conried, William Johnstone, and John McIntire.

CD 8B: “Cabin B-13” - November 9, 1943

Margo and Philip Dorn star as newlyweds Anne and Richard Brewster. They have boarded a luxury liner for a European honeymoon and stored their luggage in their cabin. After they've set sail, Anne learns from a fellow passenger that their stateroom number doesn't exist...and her husband and their belongings have vanished! Joseph Kearns, William Johnstone, Hans Conried, and Dennis Hoey are heard in this episode.

CD 9A: “Thieves Fall Out” - November 16, 1943

Up to his ears in gambling debt, Arthur Kramer decides to double-cross his confederates with a little murder for money. Concealing the evidence of his foul deeds will be a lead-pipe cinch! Gene Kelly leads the cast, which includes

Joseph Kearns, Hans Conried, Harry Lang, Ken Christy, and William Johnstone.



Cary Grant

CD 9B: “The Strange Death of Charles Umberstein” - November 23, 1943

An Allied spy adopts a false identity to carry out an espionage mission in Berlin. Going undercover has its pitfalls, however...particularly when it comes to knowing just who he can trust. Vincent Price is featured in this broadcast, along with Joseph Kearns and Hans Conried.

CD 10A: “The Black Curtain” - December 2, 1943

Cary Grant stars in this adaptation of the Cornell Woolrich novel, in which a man named Frank Townsend realizes that he can't account for the past three years of his life. When he attempts to probe into this mystery, he learns that he's wanted for murder! Joseph Kearns, Bea Benaderet, Hans Conried, Harry Lang, Lurene Tuttle, William Johnstone, and Walter Tetley are also heard in this episode.

CD 10B: “Back for Christmas” - December 23, 1943

Botany professor Hubert Schumacher murders his wife and buries her in the basement. Departing on a trip to America with the *new* Mrs. Schumacher, he'll have some trouble...the first Mrs. S. kept promising her friends that they'd be “back for Christmas.” Peter Lorre leads the cast, which includes Joseph Kearns and John McIntire.



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