The Big Night!

Welcome: When your guests arrive, they enter a different world. The cast is in costume and in character. They answer only to their stage names. They are scattered around the room ready to interact with the guests. At first, it may be somewhat confusing, but patrons will quickly catch on and enjoy "playing" along.

This get-acquainted period lasts about 30 minutes. During this time, guests mingle, snack on appetizers, read through character descriptions, and start the table game. Drinks, cups, ice could be located at a separate table to allow guests to get up and walk around in addition to mingling with people at other tables.

People arrive with an appetite. Hors d'oeuvres located on the tables are appreciated. By putting them on the table rather than at a buffet, patrons will get equal shares. Even simple options like pretzels are appreciated.

Host: A great host will smoothly guide the audience through the evening. He or she will explain what the audience needs to do at each stage of the night. This will be the very first dinner theater experience for many of the attendees.

A well-prepared host will know exactly when to be on stage to instruct the audience as well as the best way to quickly introduce each section of the play. The patrons will rely on the host to explain when to turn their chairs, how to get their food, when to guess who-dun-it, and when dessert will arrive!

Presentation: Use the suggested schedule that comes with your script purchase. Do be flexible. Each script contains a crime. The audience gets involved by trying to determine who committed this crime. Allow the audience opportunities to talk to the suspects before they complete their ballots. <u>After</u> ballots are turned in, the final scene is presented. This scene will reveal who did it, how they did it, and why!

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 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	Cast Presents the Final Scene which Solves the Crime
9:00 – 9:10	Announce the Winners *(Ex: Table Game, Best Cupcake, Door Prize, Clueless, Who-Dun-It)*
9:10 – 9:15	Say Thanks to all who helped and to those who attended

Accusations: After a crime occurs and during dessert, each audience member completes his/her guess of who's guilty. Cards are turned in prior to the final scene. As this revealing scene is presented, cards are reviewed back stage. Winners are selected by identifying those who answered <u>all</u> questions correctly.

Winners: Typically, only a few guests will answer the how/why questions correctly. Let the guests know that some were close but you selected the very best. You may decide to have 2 winners if prizes allow.

Clueless Award: <u>A MUST DO</u>! The host tells the guests ahead of time that they could win the "Clueless Award." It goes to the person who is the FURTHEST from guessing the correct suspect and reason – *NOT any of those mentioned in the playbill*. There are ALWAYS some characters in the audience who will enjoy this opportunity for a laugh. Also, it's a fun way for family members of the cast to get involved.

Thanks: Write down the names of everyone who was involved and thank them. Chances are, if you don't <u>write the names down</u>, someone will be forgotten – which feels horrible.

THANKS and Break a Leg! Nancy Bond

RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES FOR A MEMORABLE EVENT!
Coordinating, Decorating, Practicing, Advertising, Ticketing, Seating

Vision: Get a vision of hosting a mystery dinner for your organization. Who would get involved? What is the purpose – Community Outreach? Fellowship? Fundraiser?

Find a Script: Read descriptions. Then preview scripts to find the perfect match. Place your order.

Coordinate: Recruit team leaders for major areas so that one person is not bombarded by too much. *Each person could possibly be in charge of more than one part.*

☑ Overall   ☑ Food/Serving   ☑ Decorations   ☑ Drama   ☑ Props / Backdrops   ☑ Ticket Sales / Seating

☑ Sound / Lighting   ☑ Registering / Greeting guests when arriving   ☑ Advertising / Photographing

Brainstorm: After receiving the script, get together with your team. Brainstorm fresh and creative ideas for your menu, decorations, games, props, publicity, . . . Don't forget to encourage volunteers to participate who may not be involved in other ministries. Have regular group meetings to check progress.

Decorations: The look of the room should match the theme. When decorating, consider colors, back drops, table cloths, plates/napkins, centerpieces, wall decor, signs, background music, etc. Start working well in advance of the big night. You can save money by making items, matching prices, thrift stores, donations or via the internet – allowing sufficient time for shipping.

Note: Attractively decorated tables make the room look great. Don't put them too close together. Pull out chairs to see that people can walk between chairs easily.

Sound: Ideally all the characters will use wireless mics. Be sure to involve your sound team <u>early</u> in the process so that sufficient plans can be made. It's very disappointing to put in hard work memorizing lines only to discover the audience can't hear or feedback interrupts. *(Microphones are costly. Consider options my church has successfully used by borrowing, renting and asking for donations of mics.)*

Casting: Finding a quality cast is extremely important. If you are part of a larger organization, plan auditions. For smaller groups, select cast members by asking them directly. As needed, look for actors or actresses outside your organization. You will enjoy making new friends and they will bring additional audience members.

Be prayerful and consider carefully who will receive each role. Every script contains a few **key characters** that carry the bulk of the lines and the action. If possible, enlist a director who is not part of the cast. Remember to recruit the vital role of host. This person is not required to be at every rehearsal but should be familiar with the action, plot and timing.

Practice: After selecting your cast, pass out the scripts. Allow characters one week to become familiar with their parts before rehearsals begin. Next, I suggest <u>at least</u> 6-7 weeks of practice - which requires groups to order the script a minimum of 8 weeks before the performance date.

Coordinate a practice schedule that lets the cast know which scenes will need to memorized by what date. Be realistic. It's normal for cast members to think that they have memorized their lines and then forget most of them at practice. This process helps actors and actresses to see where they need to put in more effort. Require them to drop the scripts and ask for a "line" when they need it. *Note: Example schedules are included.*

Don't forget to make practice fun! Laugh at yourselves and enjoy getting to know one another. Bring treats once in a while. Always show the cast appreciation and let them know what they're doing right.

Dress Rehearsal: Don't assume everyone knows what's in your head and the plans you have. Tell them. Give them outlines to follow. This includes the cooks, stage crew, sound team, cast, everyone who is helping. Mistakes are going to happen during the dress rehearsal but try to keep it moving. <u>It will take longer than you think</u>. Again - have fun!

Publicity: It's crucial! Publicize <u>at least</u> 6 weeks in advance. Make sure people have something in their hands that tells the description, place, time, date, cost, contact information, …

Utilize bulletins, handouts, emails, dramas, posters in store windows, radio stations, local papers, outdoor signs, online presence and social media … Consider donating tickets *(that require reservations)* to leaders who will invite additional groups of people. Give a DEADLINE for ticket sales.

Ticket Sales: Set a ticket price by considering expenses such as: food, script, props, costumes, lighting, decorations, childcare, etc. Also, decide if the goal is to break even or to make money. Especially the first years, there are unexpected costs such as cookers, staging needs, tables/chairs, new microphones, etc.

Do remember that the higher the cost of the ticket, <u>the greater the expectations will be</u> for the food, service, décor, atmosphere, props, and acting. *(Create a secret code that has a discount for those who need it.)*

Sell tickets in advance *(start at least 4 weeks prior)* so that you can plan food purchases and seating requirements. When people see that the best seats are disappearing, they'll get excited and want to purchase tickets! Normally there are no ticket sales at the door. However, there may be a few unexpected guests who arrive. They will need to understand that their seating may be located in the back of the room or they may be separated.

Seating Plans: You can plan table numbers in advance with a chart mapping where each table is located. Then, as tickets are sold – mark off the seats and you'll know when a specific table is full. **OR** Announce general seating and people will come early if they want a good seat.

Save one empty table for servers which can be used for unexpected guests if needed. People often think that they can bring a friend or two who will "squeeze in" at their table. It's almost impossible to eat comfortably with an extra guest especially at round tables because chairs won't fit.

Do not put the cast at tables. They help with serving/mingling and eat later. *(Set aside dinner plates for them.)*

Seating plans can be difficult. **Be flexible** because the final week several changes will need to be made. Many people will either change their minds, invite extra guests, call last minute to request tickets, …

Handouts: Make a playbill to hand each guest as they arrive. *(Examples are provided with purchase.)* For proper etiquette, always include the author's name with the title of the script. Provide information such as names of those who have helped, cast members, how the evening will flow, details about your group, etc.

At minimum - put character descriptions on the tables for guests to read. Also, have the "Who done it?" accusation cards and the itinerary on the tables. Provide pens and paper to encourage guests to take notes.

Name Tags: *Optional.* It's great if all the guests wear name tags. Casts can wear name tags before the play, and then remove them. These tags help the guests recognize who each character is. Also, it's a great way for guests to interact with one another without being embarrassed for not knowing someone's name. Name tags can have fun, thematic stickers or be printed from a computer using colorful pictures.

Games: To keep the evening flowing and fun, use the unique table game that is included with each script purchase and corresponds with the theme. It's a fabulous way for table guests to interact with people they do not know. Plus, it's a great excuse for guests to <u>chat with the characters</u>. Another idea is to have everyone write their names on the back of the tickets and turn them in for a door prize.

Prizes: Choose prizes for the game, door prize, the crime solvers, and the Clueless Award. Prizes should reflect the theme. They do not need to be expensive. People simply like to win and be recognized. Note that candy or food is ALWAYS a great option for all ages. Display prizes proudly for all to dream of winning.

Photos: Take loads of pictures of the crowd, cast, cooks, décor, etc. They'll be fun to look at later, place on your website, post on social media, and encourage people to attend next year. To prevent blur, use the "motion" or "sports" camera setting. For best lighting, get as close as possible to the action, use "nighttime" setting or increase exposure. *Hint: Some of the best cast action pictures come from dress rehearsal.*