

NIGHT OF THE DUNCE

BY FRANK GAGLIANO



A PLAY



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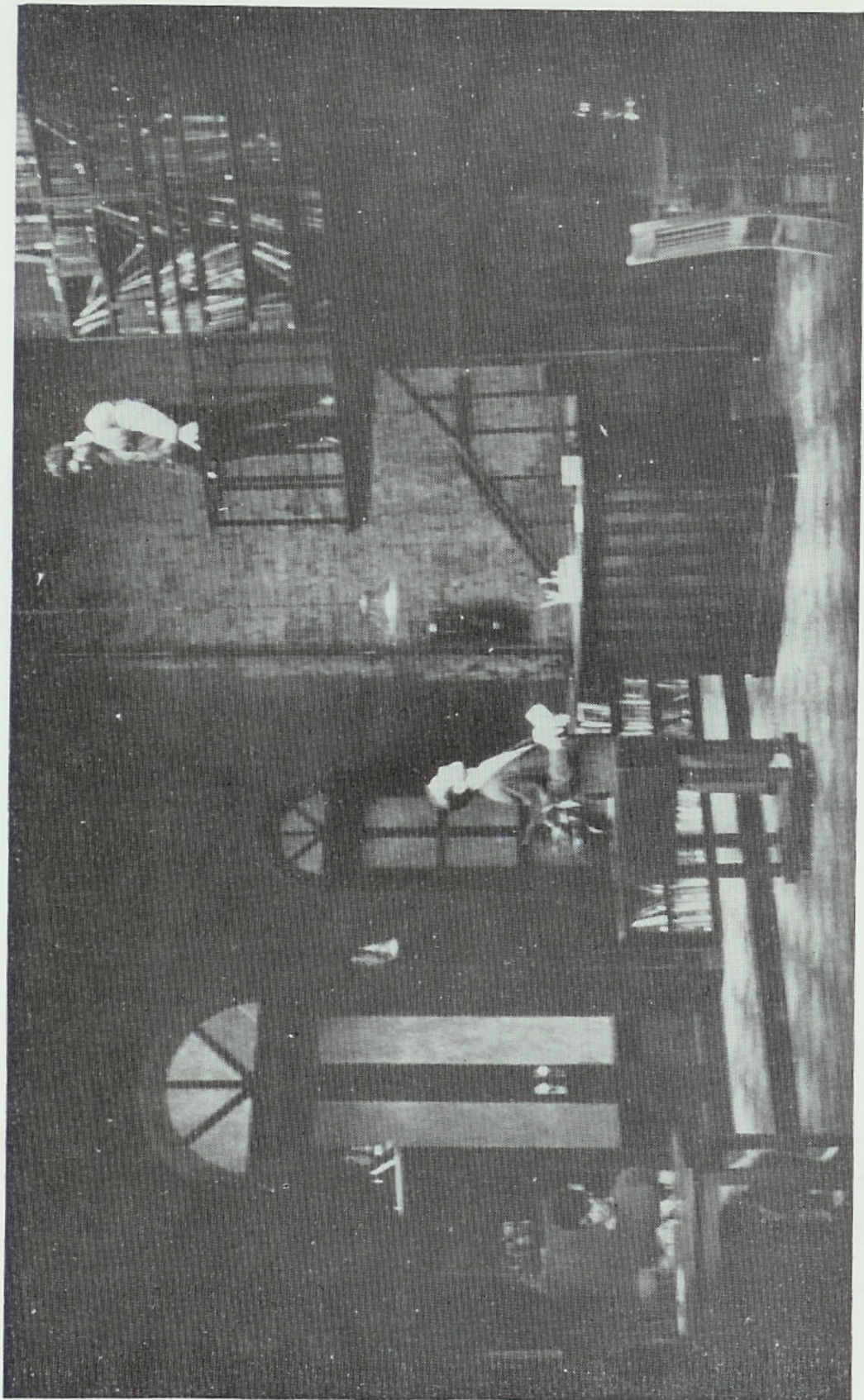


PHOTO BY ALIX JEFFRY

A scene from the New York production of "Night of the Dunce." Set by William Ritman.

YOUNG MAN: You see Rudy--he's the leader of The Dunces-- Rudy decided to smash a few windows and make some noise as a starter. Then, afterwards, Rudy plans to tear this place apart.

NIGHT OF THE DUNCE

Roads End Branch of the public library is a decaying, ominous place, where no one comes to borrow books any more, despite the efforts of the staff to keep it a going concern. But the tension that hangs in the air affects the staff too, and they bicker among themselves, egged on by the scheming young temporary staff member who has wormed his way into the head librarian's confidence.

Then, mysterious phone calls are received, shadowy figures lurk outside, and a pair of unknown young men drop in and prowls aimlessly about the stacks. The head librarian, Mrs. Vickers, is willing to believe that their interest is reading until the moment of seizure suddenly threatens, and the two young men turn out to be members of a gang of toughs calling themselves the Dunces. Their purpose is to take over the library and destroy it.

Surrounded and besieged, Mrs. Vickers and her staff wage a seesaw battle to protect what they have and hold back the tide of ugliness, which threatens to engulf them.

In the end, the night of threatened evil continues unresolved, but the courage and resourcefulness, which have come forth to stave off destruction, remain resolute as the lights dim and the defenders wait uncertainly for the attack which is sure to come.

NIGHT OF THE DUNCE was first presented by THEATER 1967 (Richard Barr, Clinton Wilder, Edward Albee) at the Cherry Lane Theater in New York City on December 28, 1966. It was directed by Joseph Hardy; the production was designed by William Ritman; and production supervision was by Michael Kasdan. The production was a project of Albarwild Theater Arts, Inc. The cast, in order of appearance, was as follows:

MALCOLM SUPLEYJames Noble
GERALDINE LA MOSSAElaine Hyman
CONNIERobert Salvio
MRS. VICKERSAnne Revere
DAVID BYRONTony Musante
MR. CROWLEYAlfred Hinckley
YOUNG MANTerry Kiser
MAX KUPREEFSalem Ludwig

Production script compiled by Charles Kindl

NIGHT OF THE DUNCE

*Road's End Branch Library. Small . . . dimly lit . . .
paint peeling from the walls . . .
A downstairs area and upstairs balcony.
[Light cue # 1.]*

MALCOLM. (Offstage. *A note of confusion, harassment, hurt, anger in his voice.*) I'm sorry, Mrs. Vickers, but I didn't do it on purpose. (*Malcolm comes on with three magazines and heads for the magazine rack. Malcolm is in his middle 30's, wears a brightly-colored tie in contrast to a conservative suit. Phone rings. Malcolm puts two magazines in rack, heads for the desk c. and picks up phone, putting 3rd magazine on desk.*) Road's End Branch, good evening . . . Road's End Branch, good evening . . . hello. Hello. (*Malcolm, troubled, hangs up phone, goes to window and looks out. Phone rings.*) Road's End Branch, good evening. (*A bit more frantic.*) Hello! (*As Malcolm hangs up phone, Geraldine La Mossa, an attractive girl of about 30, carrying a shopping bag, bursts in, slams front door.*) Miss La Mossa, good evening.

GERRY. (*Looks out door window.*) Good evening, Mr. Supley.

MALCOLM. Is something wrong?

GERRY. I thought somebody was following me.

MALCOLM. (*Crossing to Gerry.*) Following you. Who?

GERRY. I don't know. I just felt it. Somebody following me.

MALCOLM. I've seen figures out there, too. Sort of skulking around. I wonder if . . . (*Phone rings.*)

GERRY. (*Crossing to phone.*) Road's End Branch, good evening. Hello?

MALCOLM. That just happened to me twice!

GERRY. (*Into phone.*) Hello? (*The boy, Connie, enters abruptly from front door. He carries a zippered satchel. Malcolm and Gerry react to his entrance. Gerry hangs up phone.*)

CONNIE. Do you have any magazines on karate? (*Gerry puts bag down, hangs up coat, always looking suspiciously at boy.*)

MALCOLM. Magazines? No. We have books on the subject.

CONNIE. No. No books.

GERRY. There was something in *Life* . . .

CONNIE. Where can I find it?

GERRY. Latest issues are in the racks in there. (*Points off D. R.*)
Back issues are upstairs. (*She sits on stool back of desk. Begins to get involved in her work.*)

MALCOLM. (*As Connie starts for stairs, Malcolm crosses to him.*)
I'll be happy to show you.

CONNIE. That's all right. I'll look myself. Thank you. (*He goes upstairs to the balcony stacks, moves out of sight.*)

MALCOLM. (*Crossing to desk.*) Was he the one who was following you?

GERRY. Oh, I don't know. I didn't actually see anyone.

MALCOLM. Are you sure?

GERRY. It must be the fog. Besides, there wasn't a soul in the streets. Every time I passed one of those empty factories, I thought the Hound of the Baskervilles would jump out and gobble me up. It must be too many late, late shows.

MALCOLM. There might be a connection with those figures I've seen. (*Goes to phone.*) I'm calling the police.

MRS. VICKERS. (*Entering from downstairs, L.*) What's this about the police? (*Sixty-year-old Mrs. Vickers is smartly dressed in a fashionable suit, her hair is well coiffured and blue-tinted. She wears a hat. She carries a large, glass bowl cradled in her left arm. In her right hand she holds a bucket containing a box of detergent—and a sponge.*)

MALCOLM. Somebody followed Miss La Mossa in the fog.

VICKERS. Gerry! (*Places bowl on desk.*)

GERRY. I thought somebody did, but fog terrifies me. It probably was just my imagination. (*Vickers goes to front door and looks out.*)

MALCOLM. I don't think so. I've seen figures out there.

VICKERS. I don't see anything. Just the fog.

MALCOLM. (*Picks up receiver.*) I'm going to call the police.

VICKERS. Don't be silly. There's no reason.

MALCOLM. (*Beginning to dial.*) It's best to play safe.

VICKERS. Mr. Supley, you're forgetting yourself. I'm the head librarian here. I'll decide what needs to be done. (*Malcolm stops dialing.*) Mr. Crowley tells me some vandals have written filthy-

isms on the lavatory wall. Please see that they're rubbed off.
(*Hands bucket to Malcolm.*)

MALCOLM. Me? (*Takes bucket.*)

VICKERS. Yes, you. (*Crosses to Gerry.*) —Gerry, did you get the apples? (*Gerry pulls out a bag of apples from the shopping bag. Malcolm, stunned, stands by awkwardly before moving.*)

GERRY. Yes. And the thumb tacks and—oh, they didn't have the plastic jonquils, so I got a bunch of . . .

VICKERS. No. No. Just the apples. (*Vickers hurriedly arranges apples in the crystal bowl as Connie appears on the balcony. Malcolm looks up and sees him. Malcolm is still suspicious.*) Beauties. Real beauties. (*Vickers also notices Connie.*) Is that a new borrower?

GERRY. Yes.

VICKERS. (*Holding bowl up to Connie.*) Come. Have one, young man. (*Connie looks down at her.*) We're the only branch that gives out apples. (*Connie now looks down from Malcolm to Gerry.*) Lovely McIntosh.

CONNIE. I like Delicious.

VICKERS. I beg your pardon?

CONNIE. I don't like McIntosh apples. I like Delicious apples.

VICKERS. I'm sorry. I don't have Delicious apples. (*Connie shrugs and walks back into the stacks.*) So that's why the apples didn't work before.

MALCOLM. (*Crossing to Vickers.*) That was the boy we thought followed Miss La Mossa in the fog.

VICKERS. Mr. Supley, you and your foggy spectres are beginning to annoy me. Now, take care of those filthyisms.

MALCOLM. Don't you think Mr. Crowley should—?

VICKERS. Mr. Crowley is occupied.

MALCOLM. But it's his job—

VICKERS. Well, I'm making it your job. (*Malcolm begins to move D. R.*) Then, on my desk downstairs, (*She crosses to Malcolm.*) you'll find some broken knobs and knockers. Glue them together. And when you're through, we'll put them on display. And no long faces. I can't abide long faces.

MALCOLM. Yes—yes, of course. (*He picks up the bucket and exits to the toilets off D. R. Vickers, suddenly very troubled, stands looking after Malcolm.*)

GERRY. Well, the only time I ever heard you talk to someone

(Next Excerpt)

the front door. Leaves.) Shall we invite the old bitch up to watch Malcolm thrash?

MALCOLM. Infantile. Pitiful and infantile.

GERRY. Malcolm! (*She moves to front door.*) Forget him. Someone just ran by the front door. (*Malcolm joins Gerry.*)

DAVID. Now you're both seeing things.

MALCOLM. We're not. There are figures darting to and fro, like ghosts out there and, as usual, not one policeman in sight.

DAVID. (*Picks up phone receiver.*) Here, Mr. Supley. Dial tone's working. Call the police.

GERRY. I saw something, too.

DAVID. (*Still holding receiver out to Malcolm.*) Tell them you've seen ghosts "darting to and fro," in front of a public library. G'wan.

MALCOLM. I said "like ghosts." And I tell you there were figures.

GERRY. I was followed on my way to work tonight, I'm sure of it.

MALCOLM. And those phone calls. What about them? (*Knock on the front door. Shadow of a Man can be seen through glass. David hangs up phone and goes to front door. Opens it.*)

KUPREEF. (*With a booming voice, bursts in, makes bee-line for main desk with books under his arm.*) Why the hell do librarians always speak so damned loud. (*Slams book down on desk.*)

GERRY. Mr. Kupreef, must you always do that?

KUPREEF. (*All innocence.*) Do what? I merely entered. (*Kupreef is 58 years old. He wears horned-rimmed glasses, an old raincoat and uses a gnarled walking stick. Underneath the coat, Kupreef wears a moth-eaten, dark-grey cardigan long-sleeved sweater with only one or two buttons left. His trousers are baggy corduroy and on his feet, sneakers.*)

DAVID. You're wearing gum soles again. (*Malcolm crosses to window, looks out.*)

KUPREEF. Gum soles? Sneakers, my boy. (*Lifts up his right foot.*) With the bottoms burned out. See? No soles. And no pun intended. No, indeed, because they, too, are immortal. My feet, I mean. Immortal and tragic. All these years—holding up a mass of sin. Over pebbles, glass and steaming pavement carrying a bit of immortality. (*Winks.*) That's my feet.

GERRY. Mr. Kupreef!

KUPREEF. (*Putting his feet up on the nearby cart.*) I PUT 'EM UP on the bed post every night and marvel at their strangeness . . .

GERRY. Please, Mr. Kupreef . . .

(Next Excerpt)

VICKERS. Reports to the Commissioner. That's how I've been selling my soul. Padding reports. Making it seem like we have more borrowers than we need.

KUPREEF. Why?

VICKERS. Because you're right. This place is corroding, and I was afraid they'd stop the rot here with the wrecker's ball. And I've needed this place since Osgood died.

KUPREEF. And how did he die?

VICKERS. What?

KUPREEF. How did Osgood die? C'mon, make it a clean sweep.

VICKERS. Don't try to get me to say something that isn't true.

KUPREEF. It is true! It is true! C'mon, what? What did your husband die of?

VICKERS. A disease that rotted one lung, half rotted the other and was well on its way to rotting the rest of him.

KUPREEF. Your husband had big C. The word is cancer, Mattie, but that's not what killed him and you know it.

VICKERS. Oh, Max—the picture is hard to take. You see, I've been carrying it around with me since Osgood died—out of focus. And now, suddenly, it's sharp, sharp. How is it possible for a giant of a man to shrink so fast? One day he's a warm body with muscle, color and shape, who dances and runs and fondles you. Then, flesh to bones—flesh to bones right before your eyes. It's obscene. We weren't meant to see that. And we can't stop it. The doctors couldn't. I couldn't. And, oh, those eyes. The eyes of a frightened dog. He begged me to end it. And when I wouldn't—he killed himself. And all I could do was hold the bones in my arms until those eyes closed. And all I could do when I saw the neighborhood rotting was run. And cover up my rot with this. *(Pulls hat off head and throws it on shelf under the desk.)* And in here—apples. Knobs. Knockers—and a smiling rat named David Byron. I neglected Gerry. I nearly destroyed Malcolm. God, how I hate myself. And I'm tired. So goddamned tired—and yet something in me won't let go. And I think that's what I really want—to let go. Give up. Why can't I?

KUPREEF. Healthy reflexes, Mattie. Rare things to have nowadays. Hell, I can stop worrying about you now. These reflexes will get you through. *(There is a loud crash.) [Glass crash. Sound cue # 1.]*

VICKERS. Good heavens!

come upon a crowd urging a victim to jump. What are your feelings?—*Your feelings?*

DAVID. If he wants to jump, let him.

YOUNG MAN. *If?* No. You lose points for qualifying it. But pretty good. The task is to graduate from spectator to the one who pushes the victim. And from there—to the one who gets the one to push the victim. Interested?

DAVID. No.

YOUNG MAN. Ah, well, someday I'll find librarians who are interested. And they'll work for me, doing nothing but my kind of research. And that will be an organization to end them all.

CONNIE. (*Crossing in.*) Will you get to . . .

YOUNG MAN. THE PUNISHMENT! }

CONNIE. The punishment!

YOUNG MAN. All right. (*Connie crosses back to front door.*) Let's see. Can't be too refined yet. Must contain beatings, of course. (*Pause.*) Ah, I have it. A gantlet.

CROWLEY. What the hell does 'at mean?

KUPREEF. That means a bunch of punks getting their kicks beating you while you run past them. (*To Young Man.*) Have I put it well?

YOUNG MAN. Yes, indeed. But you said "punks" again. (*Connie moves threateningly toward Kupreef. Suddenly Gerry makes a dash for the L. exit. Aiming the rifle at her.*) Back! Back! (*Crowley has made a move to help Gerry but Connie stops him with his switchblade. Between the two weapons, the group is kept under control. Vickers moves to Gerry who is sobbing and shaking, seats her on chair, L., and comforts her.*) Yes. A gantlet it is. It's basic, but contains a nice mixture of discipline and ritual.

DAVID. Look, I didn't hit your buddy on the head. (*All look at David.*)

YOUNG MAN. I do admire your self interest. But that idiot—(*Meaning Crowley who moves in, but gun and knife discourage him again.*) that idiot is a product of this environment, so you must all share his guilt.

DAVID. That's not fair!

YOUNG MAN. (*Instantaneous explosive reaction to the word.*) FAIR! Fair! (*Pause as he recovers.*) Anyway, it won't be so bad. The whole club won't be involved. Only about fifteen of them swinging away. It's not as bad as our own initiation.

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