

A Shot in the Dark



Meet the inspector on the job—a real high calibre comedy!

The spicy murder mystery, originally written by Marcel Achard, spins the tale about an extremely candid and vivacious parlor maid who is accused of murdering her lover. Twists and turns beget mystery and laughter. Described by the New York Times as a “bubbling saucy comedy... A light tasty souffle.”

**Presented By Theater Works
Saturday, April 17
7:30pm
Peoria Arts Center**

History on A Shot in the Dark

Although A Shot in the Dark is best known as a film in the Blake Edwards' Pink Panther series, its origins as a play have little to do with Inspector Clouseau. The first version, *L'Idiote*, was written by the French playwright Marcel Achard in 1960. In just a four year span, the play was given an English translation, a year-long run on Broadway, and a feature film adaptation. Though the film was never intended to be a part of the Pink Panther series, a last minute decision was made to rework the story to include Peter Sellers' famous French detective. Since then, most have forgotten about Harry Kurnitz's Broadway hit and only a few know of its beginnings as a classic boulevard comedy by one of France's most prolific playwrights.

Marcel Achard was born Marcel-Auguste Ferreol in Sainte-Foy-Les Lyon in 1899. Achard loved telling the story of his birth, which required special dispensation from both the Pope and the President because his father had married his own niece. Perhaps the odd circumstances of his childhood instilled a sense of humor at an early age. Achard wrote his first "cape-and-sword" play at the age of ten, and by the age of eighteen he had moved to Paris to pursue a career in theater. One of his first jobs was as a prompter for the Theatre du Vieux-Colombier, giving actors their cues from under the footlights. The young Achard was quickly fired, however, as he found himself too distracted by the actresses' legs.

His next job was as a journalist for *L'Oeuvre*, and it was during this time that he began writing for the stage. Although his first few plays had little success, his fourth play *Jean de la Lune* brought him major success, both in France and internationally. From 1923 to 1959, Achard wrote more than twenty-five plays, mostly boulevard comedies: farces of infidelity, mistaken identity and misguided amours. Early critics compared Achard to the likes of Alfred de Musset, but after World War II, the boulevard comedy fell out of fashion as a genre and were criticized for their lack of redeeming social values. Still, plays like Achard's continued to fill playhouses, audiences continued buying tickets and Achard went on to become one of the most prolific playwrights of his time. He was elected to the prestigious Academie Francaise in 1959.

Four of Achard's plays had Broadway runs. *Domino*, adapted by Grace George (1932), and Irwin Shaw's version of *Patate* (1958) each ran for only seven performances. *I Know My Love*, S.N. Behrman's translation of *Aupres de me blonde*, had a much better run with 247 performances in 1949. *A Shot in the Dark* had the longest run of Achard adaptations with 389 performances. At the time of its Broadway premiere, Achard was doing quite well in

France, with three plays running simultaneously on Parisian stages.

Harry Kurnitz adapted *L'Idiote* into its English incarnation in 1961. Kurnitz was a former reporter who came to Hollywood in 1938 to adapt his own story, *Fast Company*, into a film. It would be the start of a very successful career in screenwriting. From 1940 to 1957, Kurnitz helped adapt, develop or create over twenty-four film scripts including the Errol Flynn classic *Adventures of Don Juan*, Danny Kaye's *The Inspector General*, and the Billy Wilder adaptation of Agatha Christie's play *Witness for the Prosecution*. Kurnitz, a card-carrying member of the Communist party, was blacklisted from Hollywood in 1946. He moved to Europe and continued to write from abroad, but he did not return to the United States for ten years. When he finally did, he came back to his hometown—New York City—and began writing plays. His first play, *The Reclining Figure* ran for over 100 performances in 1955. His next hit, *Once More, With Feeling* (1958) enjoyed an impressive run on Broadway and was adapted into a film starring Yul Brynner in 1960. In 1963 he teamed up with Noel Coward to write the musical *The Girl Who Came to Supper*, an adaptation of Terrence Rattigan's play *The Sleeping Prince*. Kurnitz and Coward were both nominated for Tony Awards for Best Author (Musical) in 1964.

A Shot in the Dark was Kurnitz's longest running play on Broadway, opening on October 18, 1961 and closing on September 22, 1962. The play received excellent reviews, in particular for lead actress Julie Harris in the role of Josefa Lantenay. Harris was already a Broadway star, with two Tony awards under her belt for *I Am a Camera* in 1952 and *The Lark* in 1956. Critic Richard Watts called her role in *A Shot in the Dark* "Harris' best performance in years." William Shatner originated the role of the magistrate Paul Sevigne and was praised as the play's "straight man." Walter Matthau also received critical acclaim for his performance as the snobby aristocrat Benjamin Beaufeuvers. Donald Cook had originally been cast in the role, but he died of a heart attack shortly after the out-of-town tryouts in New Haven. In his book *On Directing*, director Harold Clurman recalls that Matthau's casting caused a lot of "head-shaking. He was certainly not 'the type.'" To help with Matthau's transformation, Clurman suggested that Matthau listen to a song he found to be "super-elegant" and walk around his apartment to it before rehearsal. His gait changed so much that the producers asked Clurman to cut it, but he refused. It must have worked because Matthau received the show's only Tony award, for Best Supporting or Featured Actor.

Kurnitz's writing was praised by *Journal American* for "explosive charm" and "rare, irrational wit." The *New York World Telegram* agreed: "Whether Achard is the French Kurnitz or Kurnitz the American Achard doesn't really matter...the two have hit the target." Although the *New York Times* found the plot too mechanical, the *Post* recognized that the play "doesn't pretend to

be a work of important stature" and provided "highly satisfying entertainment."

A Shot in the Dark was adapted for film just a few years later by William Peter Blatty and Blake Edwards. Blatty is best known today for his novel and screenplay *The Exorcist*, although he got his start in comedic writing. He teamed up with Blake Edwards for the first time to write *A Shot in the Dark*, and the two went on to create several other films together, including *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?* (1966), *Gunn* (1967) and *Darling Lilly* (1970).



A Shot in the Dark was originally intended to be a straightforward adaptation of Kurnitz's play with Peter Sellers and Walter Matthau in the lead roles. Sellers was unhappy with the film and threatened to leave the project. In order to keep Sellers happy, United Artists brought in Sellers' friend Blake Edwards, who felt that the script might work better using the characters from Edwards and Sellers last project, *The Pink Panther*, which had not yet finished filming. The two films were completed so close to each other that *A Shot in the Dark* was released just four months after *The Pink Panther* in 1964.



The initial response to the film was lukewarm. Critics complained about the lack of substance in the story and found the physical humor to be too broad. Much like Achard's audience in France, movie-goers ignored the critics and made the film a great success. Today, many critics now consider *A Shot in the Dark* to be not only the best of the *Pink Panther* series, but also a comedy classic.

A Shot in the Dark Movie Synopsis

When rich M. Ballon's spanish driver is found shot dead, Inspector Jacques Clouseau is the first official on the scene. All evidence suggests Maria Gambrelli, the maid, to be the murderer. But Clouseau, being attracted to the beautiful girl, is convinced that she is hiding something. So, he has her released from jail and tries to follow her secretly. Things do not work out the way the inspector wanted and people keep being murdered, and each time innocent Maria seems to be the killer. But with someone important wanting Clouseau and nobody else to cover this case, his tolerance-challenged boss Charles Dreyfuss is close to losing his mind when casualties keep turning up. And Clouseau keeps on causing trouble without knowing it...