

MURDER IS A FINE ART

by Jack Pachuta

Act 1

Sharon Sharalike and Libby LaBelle are standing near each other. Brett Cutler, in disguise, is walking around the gallery looking at the art. Fiona, wearing sharp, dangly jewelry and a small magnifying glass around her neck, is examining the art on display. Pete and Luigi are standing with the guests in the area of the gallery where Sharon will be speaking. Sharon glares at Libby, walks near her as she approaches the area where she will speak, then quiets the crowd. Libby LaBelle is drinking from a wine glass and loudly making snarky comments about Sharon and the gallery from where she is standing.

SHARON

This is a memorable evening for this gallery and for the art world. Tonight I have been able to combine the masterpieces of Pete Casso with the cuisine of Luigi Lambrusco and orchestrate an evening that will never be forgotten. After many years planning fantastic extravaganzas on the East Coast, the gallery has chosen me to coordinate this event. It couldn't have made a better choice.

LIBBY

(Yelling at Sharon.) That makes sense. If you're going to have an event that should be held in Hicksville, why not hire a hick? *(Laughs.)*

SHARON

(Stares at Libby, then turns to guests and continues. Sharon stumbles over the first few words.) I can see by the looks on your faces that you've been sampling Luigi's culinary treats. He courageously made it through some very rough times to become the chef of choice for many rich and famous people. I've scored a real coup by bringing him here. His food and wine selections are top notch. Luigi, where are you? Come up here and take a bow.

LIBBY

(Still holding her wine glass, she gestures with it.) Or, just bow out. Then you'll really get loud applause – especially from me.

LUIGI

(Luigi carries a large fork and joins Sharon. He tries to ignore the comment from Libby. He speaks with an Italian accent.) Grazie, Sharini. All of you enjoy my food. I've put together a menu especially for tonight. The food is prima classe. You won't taste such cuisine anywhere else in the world. I only have a little bit left of the wine I picked for you. It's very expensive. It comes from a wonderful little winery located on a small body of water in Italia and has a picture of a Roman emperor on the label.

LIBBY

Is that what I'm drinking? You told me you picked it out just for me. *(Puts nose in glass and sniffs.)* Strange aroma. The aftertaste is like mouthwash. I'll be sure to mention that in my column.

LUIGI

(Turns toward Libby, gestures with the fork, opens his mouth and starts to say something, but stops. He turns to the audience, smiles and grits his teeth while speaking.) But I've said too much.

LIBBY

Finally – something we can all agree on.

LUIGI

Everyone please, eat, drink and be merry. After all, who knows what the future will bring? This could be someone's ultimo pasto. Addio! *(Luigi takes a few steps and stands near Sharon, folds his arms still holding the fork, and stares at Libby. He then turns toward Sharon.)*

LIBBY

And I'll be dying to write all about it. *(Pete Casso loudly enters the scene, waving and blowing kisses to the audience. The actors gather around him and someone yells "Ouch!" Sharon moves to prominent position on stage, stares at Libby, then speaks to the crowd.)*

SHARON

Now, I have the honor of introducing a person who has made the art world stand up and take notice. His innovative way of combining form with color has been extolled by MOST art critics around the world.

LIBBY

Yeah, the ones who wouldn't know art if it killed them.

SHARON

(Trying to ignore Libby.) Those of you who aren't familiar with his work need only to look at the masterpiece he brought with him as a preview of his exhibit that will open here in a few weeks. "Black Cat at Midnight" will intrigue and delight you. It is a piece that I'm certain you'll never forget. Join me in welcoming Pete Casso.

(Sharon leads applause.)

PETE

(Joins Sharon and Luigi with a flourish, still waving to the crowd and blowing kisses.)

Thank all of you for the warm reception you've given me. "Black Cat at Midnight" took years to finish. I searched the world for inspiration because I needed to find just the right combination of colors and composition to create a work of art that will be remembered long after we have all left this planet.

LIBBY

Or at least until my column is printed. *(Laughs loudly and starts to cough.)*

PETE

(Talks to Libby with irritation.) Every other art critic who's reviewed my work describes it as exhilarating, exciting and ahead of its time. You are the only one who writes that I'm a charlatan. How dare you? *(Pulls palette knife from his pocket. Cast gasps. He points to knife.)* I've refined a delicate technique that utilizes a palette knife

and oil paint – but not just any paint. I’ve formulated the perfect mixture of pigment and natural chemicals to produce archival works of art.

LIBBY

(Libby limps toward Luigi, Pete and Sharon while sipping wine. She looks tipsy.) I’ve seen more creative works on the walls of kindergartens. I’ve even looked at forgeries that are better works of art than your paintings. If I was an art forger, it wouldn’t take me long to duplicate your so-called masterpieces. I’d just look at them for a few minutes and produce Pete Cassos that could fool anyone – except me, of course. I’ve uncovered a lot of forgeries recently. You’ve probably read about it in my column. *(Libby stares at the crowd, chuckles, and does a slight double-take when she sees Fiona Fakes. Fakes fiddles with her necklace, turns away and exits to area where “Black Cat at Midnight” is displayed. Libby coughs and staggers toward Luigi. She grabs Luigi to steady herself.)*

LUIGI

(He catches Libby who rears back and grimaces at him.) A little too much vino maybe, Signorina Libby?

LIBBY

It’s your wine – that one with the emperor on the label. But don’t worry about me. I’d be surprised if you did. *(Staggers toward Casso.)* I’m clear-headed enough to write my column. You can’t wait to read it, can you? *(Briefly straightens up, then falls into Casso, holding onto his neck.)*

PETE

(Holds palette knife at arm's length from Libby.) Careful! This knife is sharp. You wouldn't want to get cut. I have enough red pigment. I don't need more. Although it might give my work a little body.

LIBBY

(Lets go of Casso and staggers toward Sharon.) And you, Sharon Sharalike, all dressed up in your Fifth Avenue clothes and spike heels. You wouldn't know how to stage a flea circus on a schnauzer. If you were really good, you'd be working on Park Avenue, not here. *(Holds on to Sharon who tries to back off, but can't get away from Libby.)*

SHARON

And, if everything goes as planned, I'll be there again soon.

LIBBY

Not when they read what I have to say. I hear Podunk Junction is opening an art museum. You might be interested in applying for a job there. *(Releases her hold on Sharon, looks at the empty glass of wine and falls to floor moaning. Her arms and legs move in spasms. Suspects gasp, then smile.)*

SECURITY GUARD

(Rushes to Libby and gestures for everyone to get back.) Move back. Move back.

Everyone, give her air. *(Kneels down to look at her, after a few seconds, pulls our cell*

phone and makes call.) Hello, 911? We have a medical emergency. We need someone here now. *(Listens.)* Right. We'll meet you at the back of the gallery. *(Ends call.)*

SHARON

(Steps in front of Security Guard and Libby who continues to moan and wave her arms.) Everyone, keep calm. The security guard has everything under control. Don't let this spoil our event. Please join me over there. Pete Casso has graciously agreed to tell us more about his masterpiece. *(She leads crowd into room where "Black Cat at Midnight" is displayed. Security Guard and a volunteer from the crowd drape her arms over their necks and carry her toward the back door.)*

SECURITY GUARD

(Gestures for people to make room for stretcher.) Move back. Move back. Let us through.

SHARON

(Standing with Casso about 20 feet from the painting.) Now you are in for a rare treat. Pete Casso will enlighten us all about the inspiration and execution of his new masterpiece, "Black Cat at Midnight." I can't wait to hear what he has to say. I'm certain you feel the same way.

PETE

(Walks toward "Black Cat at Midnight." Fiona is already there with magnifying glass closely examining the painting. He yells at her.) What are you doing? Don't touch it. It's worth millions. *(Fiona backs off.)* Wait a minute. I know you. You're Fiona Fakes. You were one of my students when I taught at the university.

FIONA

It's pronounced Fay-KESS! Fay-KESS! The emphasis is on the KESS. It's French. You never could get it right.

PETE

You thought you'd become a world-famous artist like me, but Libby LaBelle panned your work. I think I remember what she wrote about you. (*Looks up as if trying to recall the column.*) "Fiona Fakes . . .

FIONA

Fay-KESS! Fay-KESS. Get it right!

PETE

" . . . embodies the craftsmanship of a six-year-old coloring outside of the lines complemented by the artistic eye of Ray Charles. She is a small blip on the art world's radar screen that will fade away with the dawn's early light." That was quite a review.

FIONA

Yes, it destroyed my career. But, didn't she write this about you? (*Stares into distance as if trying to remember the exact words.*) "Casso's cache of cantankerous curiosities is a fast-fading fad on the art scene. His pompous pronouncements about his so-called masterpieces will mesmerize only pseudo-art aficionados who know nothing about true talent."