



Cursed in the Act

Raymond Buckland

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FIRST IN A NEW SERIES!

Bram Stoker, business manager for London's Lyceum Theatre, always expects the supernatural to be lurking around the corner. But investigating the murder of a cast member might be enough to make even him lose his head...

1881. When the star and owner of the Lyceum, Mr. Henry Irving, is poisoned on *Hamlet's* opening night, it's up to stage manager Harry Rivers to make sure the show goes on. Fortunately for Harry, Mr. Irving is able to pull through and walk the boards as planned. But when his understudy is killed the very next day, Harry's boss, Bram Stoker, becomes convinced that foul play is afoot.

Mr. Irving has a list of enemies longer than a Shakespearean soliloquy, any of whom would have been happy for the curtain never to rise. It soon becomes clear that nefarious, possibly magical, methods are being employed to shut the play down. With more cast and crew members falling victim to the increasingly dangerous accidents on set, it's up to Harry and Stoker to figure out which of Irving's critics has a voodoo vendetta...

Cursed in the Act Details

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From Reader Review Cursed in the Act for online ebook

Suspense Magazine says

It's 1881 in London's theater district. Leading man Henry Irving is poisoned on Hamlet's opening night at the Lyceum Theatre, but in the grand theatrical tradition of "The show must go on," survives and plays the role as promised. But when his understudy is killed by a runaway carriage the very next day, theater manager Harry Rivers and his boss, Bram Stoker, realize the "accident" is not merely an unfortunate coincidence. Irving himself has a long list of enemies, but who would want to kill his understudy? Other mishaps begin to plague the play, and it soon becomes clear that unworldly, possibly voodoo, methods are being employed to shut down this Hamlet production permanently. Could it be the owners of rival London theater, Sadler's Wells, about to open a Shakespeare production of their own?

With more cast and crew members falling victim to the increasingly dangerous accidents on set, and the young son of the leading lady kidnapped, it's up to Harry and Stoker to figure out who the real target of all this violence is.

In this first of the new Bram Stoker series, author Raymond Buckland cleverly employs a similar device to the great Arthur Conan Doyle: although the "great detective" is Bram Stoker, the story's narrator is Harry Rivers, who plays Watson to Stoker's Holmes. And there's even a dastardly villain who escapes capture at the book's climax, just like the evil James Moriarty in the Sherlock Holmes adventures. The game is indeed afoot, and it's great fun!

Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Class Reunions Can Be Murder" for Suspense Magazine

Bev says

Cursed in the Act by Raymond Buckland is the first in a new historical mystery series featuring Bram Stoker and his trusty side-kick Harry Rivers. Basing his premise on the fact that Stoker served as a business manager for London's Lyceum Theatre, Buckland gives the soon-to-be author of Dracula an assistant who can help him get to the bottom of mysterious doings in Victorian England.

Their first adventure takes place in 1881 and begins with Henry Irving, star and owner of the Lyceum, being poisoned on the opening night of Hamlet. Someone has put something nasty in Irving's lemonade and it is only the actor's cast-iron constitution and insistence that the show must go on that keeps opening night from being a disaster. But the horrible events continue--Irving's understudy is killed by a fast-moving carriage, a severed head comes tumbling onstage when a backdrop is unrolled, and actress Ellen Terry's young son is kidnapped--all in an effort to shut down the show. The police are making efforts to track down the evil-doers, but not fast enough to suit Stoker. He and Harry begin an investigation of their own...one that leads them into the opium dens and dockyard warehouses of London and brings them into contact with a man who believes the power of voodoo may work if straight-forward criminal acts fail.

This is more of an action/adventure novel than a straight mystery. The twist ending may provide a bit of a mystery as far as the identity of the culprit, but alert readers (or old hands in the mystery field) probably won't be taken in. It seems to me that the emphasis is on the action--the near-constant assault on the Lyceum by the villains--and on the possible occult connections. A quick and easy read--requiring no heavy thinking. The period detail and research into Stoker's background and the ways of the occult do make for a rich historical reading experience. It was nice to settle into the Victorian era and just go along for the ride. Three stars.

First posted on my blog My Reader's Block. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

Roberta says

I didn't get a free copy of this book from anyone. I bought it because someone recommended it.

Like Cornerofmadness, I have a love-hate relationship with mysteries using real people acting as the detective. They hold a certain fascination but they usually disappoint. This one was better than average and I enjoyed reading it. It is set in London, particularly at the Lyceum Theater where Bram Stoker was the theater manager for the famous Shakespearean actor, Henry Irving. The story is narrated by Harry Rivers, Stoker's stage manager and assistant.

Most people don't know much about Bram Stoker except that he was the author of Dracula and it isn't necessary to know more. Nothing in this book concerning Bram Stoker as theater manager jumped out to blatantly contradict anything in Bram Stoker's "other life" as author. Ellen Terry was a very interesting character in real life so I wouldn't have minded if she had played a larger role in the book.

Some reviews compare the Bram Stoker and Harry Rivers characters to Holmes and Watson but, for about 80% of the book, it is actually a Nero Wolfe – Archie Goodwin relationship because Bram Stoker almost never leaves the Lyceum Theater while Harry Rivers goes everywhere and does everything to carry out his instructions.

I was surprised by a contradiction on page 56. Harry tells Bram Stoker that his friend and their employer, Henry Irving, might have been blackmailed over a girl that he was said to have had a relationship with before his marriage and had abandoned. Bram and Harry both agreed that it didn't sound like something that Henry Irving would do.

But on page 53, three pages earlier, Bram has told Harry that after Henry Irving was married with one child and another on the way, he had walked out on his wife and had never seen her again. So they were both aware that abandoning a woman that he had a relationship with was indeed something that Henry Irving had done.

In her review Anna Bergmark points out a flaw in the flow of the story. When the action goes into overdrive very near the end of the book on page 226, readers are suddenly introduced to a new and relevant character. The first few paragraphs of page 226 should have appeared somewhere earlier in the book. It's like when someone tells a joke but omit some vital piece of information, they will stop suddenly just before the punchline and say something like "Oops! I forgot to tell you it wasn't just any three men, it was a doctor, a lawyer, and a minister!"

There is a person who practices Voodoo in the story but the mystery doesn't hinge on that and I was surprised, given the author's other books, that it is more or less left up to the reader to decide if there was anything paranormal going on. Others might feel differently but I was glad that a fairly realistic mystery didn't suddenly turn into something completely different.

(view spoiler)

Susan Ferguson says

Based loosely on the historical fact of Bram Stoker (pre Dracula) being theater manager for Henry Irving at the Lyceum in London. The tale is told from the point of view of Harry Rivers, stage manager at the Lyceum. Harry greatly respects his boss' abilities. On the opening night of Hamlet, Henry Irving falls ill. He has been poisoned, but insists on going on -- to the fury of his understudy, Peter Richland. The next evening Richland is run over by a "growler". He is trampled by the horses, but the police believe it is Richland by the greasepaint on the face. His burial is well attended by the theater people -- but at a later performance his head rolls out of some scenery on the stage. Fortunately, it is removed before the audience notices. Other strange things are happening - sandbag counterweights fall nearly hitting people, as well as lighting equipment falling. Fortunately the Lyceum has been wired for electricity so the fear of fire has been greatly reduced. But strange things keep happening. Stoker and Rivers suspect Ralph Bateman the younger brother of Mrs Crowe who runs the rival Strand. But Harry overhears Ralph refer to "the boss". Stoker has begun to get an inkling as to who it might be. It all comes together when Ms Terry's son is kidnapped.

Anna Bergmark says

It's the right time, the right place and the right setting. But still... There's something slightly off with the writing technique.

The two major characters are hard to get close to, even the one with the advantage of the narrative voice. Quite an achievement really. And this kind of "distance" isn't the only one.

The story takes off in a hurry with one Lyceum actor poisoned and another dead in a traffic accident, but the reader isn't there when it happens. We're told of it, not shown, and it's hard to feel interested or involved. What then follows is a rather messy and repetitive plot. The young Harry Rivers is given a task by Bram Stoker, he goes out to perform it, comes back to the theater to keep his boss informed of developments, gets a new task and the whole cycle then repeats itself...

Towards the end there's a higher pace and more excitement (and Mr Stoker leaving his office is a huge improvement), but once again the author shows his shaky grip on the storytelling by not having planted little Edward the kidnap victim earlier on. Simply letting him appear a few sentences before he "enters center stage" is weak planning. Chekhov would have winced. And there's an awful lot of explaining needed before the unlikely resolution is over and done with. But OK... Historical murder mysteries and unbelievable plots are tradition after all and nothing Buckland has to carry responsibility for of his own.

2,5 stars and a halfhearted hope of a sturdier, more determined and thought through product in the second installment. When he got going the father of Count Dracula showed himself to be a force of nature and I would very much like to see more of that!

LemontreeLime says

This had a really stiff narrative, that didn't loosen up until nearly the end. That said, it was the first book in a new series, so awkward starts are always allowed and forgiven. I really appreciated the way it placed Bram Stoker solidly in his time and place of origin, and the young stage manager main character was delightful. Keep going, Mr. Buckland. You've made a start, elaborate and diversify your mystery and keep going!

Sandra says

Well written.

Kara says

Cursed in the Act is the first installment in a series of Bram Stoker novels by author Raymond Buckland. It was a very pleasurable read for me.

The book is distinguished by the extremely amiable and profoundly human -- with all the attendant flaws of that condition -- narrator, Harry Rivers. The quality of the prose is adequate. The story was every bit as fun and amusing as I had hoped, and this is a very easy and quick read.

Note: I received a free copy of this book through a goodreads giveaway.

Cornerofmadness says

I have a love-hate relationship with mysteries using real people as their sleuths. I usually don't like them but I can't seem to stay away from them either. This one was better than most in that genre, a 3.5. It's centered on the Lyceum Theater and Bram Stoker as the theater manager. However, Mr. Stoker isn't the pov character. It's told first person by Harry Rivers, Stoker's stage manager and right hand man.

One of their competitors is trying to shut the Lyceum down, first by poisoning their lead actor (not fatally) and any host of other dirty tricks. In the middle of this, the lead's stand in actor is killed in a hit and run accident and later he's removed from his grave and his head appearing in the Lyceum.

As Harry looks into this, because they can't afford to have the theater close, he learns that the brother of the other theater's owner, might be behind it all and he has help from a very strange source, a voodoo priest he met in his travels.

While the ending wasn't too hard to predict, I still enjoyed the journey. It occurred to me I don't really know much about Stoker other than his famous novel so I have no idea how true to him this feels. I'll probably look up the next in the series.

Beth says

A very enjoyable read. Loved the historical characters of Bram Stoker and Henry Irving along with a twisty mystery. Actually a 3.5 rating and I'll be reading more of this series.

Tom Donaghey says

This is a rather nice mystery set shortly before the Sherlock Holmes stories and has much in common with them. If you enjoy the moody settings of Victorian era London, this is just the thing for you. Hansom cabs and growlers, foggy mists and ruffians along the quay side, the extravagant manners, clothing and speech patterns and the delightful little pubs that frequent the West Side.

The hero of this murder tale is Harry Rivers despite what the cover blurb would have you believe. Harry is the stage manager for the Lyceum Theater and as such is responsible for just about everything that happens within the production of the latest show, in this case HAMLET. But when the lead actor is poisoned, though not fatally, he has to investigate. When the lead's understudy is killed in a hit and run with a hansom just a day or two later, the mystery truly begins.

Could it be a rival theater that is about to stage its own Shakespeare production out to shutdown its rival or perhaps a blackmailer dredging up black secrets from the past, or is this Voodoo imported from the Caribbean for some as yet unnamed peril to our hero and his company? Conspiracy and evil lurk around every turn, there are kidnappings and rituals and at least one severed body part making an unannounced appearance on the stage.

But this is the first in the Bram Stoker mystery series, so where does he come in to all of this. I for one did not know a great deal about the man except for DRACULA (1897) and this book is set a good six years before that work was published. For his part, the Mr. Buckland, has done extensive research into the occult aspects of this book having published a great many volumes on the subject during the past thirty-five years. It is apparent he has taken a great deal of time and effort to bring out the true Stoker during this period of that man's life. Stoker was the manager of the Lyceum Theater and he had encounters with a great number of prominent people at that time to include Arthur Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde, who I feel certain will come into play in future tales. In this outing Stoker plays more of an advisor to Harry Rivers although, when needed, he does come through to save the day, rescue several people and solve the overarching mystery, the one that spans the story, and a story that includes more than one.

In sum, a good Goodreads story, the first mystery in what I hope becomes a long line of captivating capers.

Judy Hall says

The first book in a new mystery series featuring Bram Stoker as the sleuth. Set in and around the Lyceum Theater while Stoker is in charge, he and his faithful sidekick Harry investigate the poisoning of the theater's leading man.

The book is told from Harry's point of view as he goes off to do the work while Stoker is the brains.

Like many first books, it started a little slow as the characters were introduced and the stage was set (pardon my pun), but then things picked up. The historical detail was interesting. I really enjoyed the characters. I want to know more about Stoker himself. Because Harry is an employee and has some hero worship of Stoker, he keeps a distance and isn't a friend in the know.

Stoker's fascination with the occult was shown. The book leaves it up to reader to determine if there was anything paranormal going on, without going all ooky about it. It's so minor and commonplace the reader may not care.

I did figure things out far before Harry and probably before Stoker, but that could be because I read a lot of mysteries.

All in all, I'm looking forward to more.

Virginia says

2.5 stars?

nothing really bad about it, just never fully engaged me.

Ceejay says

This is a well written novel, and I did enjoy it. It's exciting, and it's really more of a thriller than a mystery. I do have two things that bothered me. This is supposed to be the first in a series of Bram Stoker mysteries. That's a little misleading. The story is told by Mr. Stoker's assistant. It's a Holmes-Watson sort of relationship. I also felt that the mystery wasn't all that important to the story. I did enjoy it, and now that I know how the author is going to handle this series, I will buy the next book. You will not feel cheated if you take the time to read this book.

Jessica Buike says

Fans of Sherlock Holmes and other old-style mysteries take note - this is a series just for you! Meet the author Bram Stoker (whose most famous work was Dracula) as imagined in a fictional way through a creative mystery surrounding the Lyceum Theater, which he worked at in real life. The cast of characters feels true to form, and you may recognize some of the names that are dropped throughout the chase to find the dastardly saboteur involved in the crimes at the Lyceum. The only thing that didn't work for me? The weird constant references to red hair - it feels like the author is obsessed with it for some reason. But otherwise this was a fun mystery!
