

The Tell-Tale Heart

As a stage play

Edgar Allan Poe

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Notation

- MC = Main Character (1)
- PC = Physical Cast (3)

Stage directions

The choir (physical cast) unisono, also unisone with MC if they have the same words written before.

Notes

Blocking: Main actor center stage slightly left, towards the audience, PC behind or slightly to the right.

MC and PC have their own spotlight (i.e. one left, one right) plus fill light with red tint for the background. MC spot always on, PC spot only for lantern light onto bed scenes.

One PC member (often) represents MC in their story: PC1

Two others alternate between the two police officers and whatever is needed in the scene (e.g. the old man, bed, eye, a representation of mortal terror)

PC wear dark cloths and a white Mask.

i Note

PC instructions are not final. They are prompts for workshopping.

Heartbeat sounds for inspiration. Actual heartbeat sounds can be created on stage by PC.

Heartbeat sound, 80% speed:

Heartbeat sound, 50% speed:

Scenes

Opening

Character is led onto stage by PC2,3 as if in handcuffs, is being sat onto a chair (the only prop on stage). They uncuff MCs hands behind their back and move to the back.

PC1 sneaks up from behind and crouches behind the chair.

Scene 1: Self-introduction

TRUE! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute.

MC stands up. PC1 takes chair and passes it to PC2,3, who move it to the side of the stage. PC1 also moves to the back.

I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?

Hearken!

Hearken!

PC as demons escaping from hell, crawling, threatening, haunting approach from the back.

and observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

Scene 2: Build-up

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees – very gradually – I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

matter of fact, calmer to prove that MC is totally not mad

PC also move into a neutral posture

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad.

suddenly angry

Madmen know nothing.

PC move to the back as if pushed away by the anger, movement starts from the middle of the body

But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded – with what caution – with what foresight – with what dissimulation I went to work!

I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him.

PC2 as old man enters from the back and stumbles, PC3 catches them. PC1 follows close behind. PC2,3 move to the side of the stage, PC1 stays further back. PC move around in slow motion PC2,3 mime opening the door and moving their heads towards the middle, symmetrical, in sync

And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it – oh so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in!

PC1 moves between PC2,3 with an imaginary lantern stretched out in front

I moved it slowly – very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha!

PC in neutral

– would a madman have been so wise as this?

No!

PC1 turns around crouches down PC2 lies down on the floor, feet in the middle of the PC spot. PC3 moves to their shoulders, crouching.

And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously – oh, so cautiously. I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye.

PC1 holds PC2s feet, PC3 lifts PC2 by their sholders into an upright position Spotlight onto PC2, no mask, eyes closed.

And this I did for seven long nights – every night just at midnight – but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye.

PC intro neutral. walk to the back.

PC2,3 take two steps from the back and do a ballet-jump curtsy, holding the position for the next paragraph

And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he has passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

Scene 3: The 8th night

PC2,3 unfreeze from curtsy and repeat the door opening and peaking, slower as before

PC1 in the middle again with the lantern

Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers – of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back – but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed, crying out –

PC into neutral

Who's there?

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening; – just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror.

Groan, terrifying sounds. inhaling?

It was not a groan of pain or of grief – oh, no! – it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well.

PC with haunting movements, in sync with imperceivable heartbeat sound

Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little – a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it – you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily – until, at length a single dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye.

Same “bed” spotlight setup as before, mask off, eyes now wide open.

It was open – wide, wide open – and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness – all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man’s face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses? – now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.

Heartbeat sound, very slow, quiet

PC start lightly clapping their hands on the sides of their bodies as a heartbeat

I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man’s heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.

Heartbeat sound intensifies, slightly faster, louder

PC move around frantically, angry, in sync with the heartbeat sound

PC re-enact the words of MC

The old man’s hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once – once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him.

PC bang their fists on the floor for the heartbeat sound

I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased.

Heartbeat sound stops PC fade into the background

The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

Scene 4: Hiding the body

PC line up diagonally from the back right towards the position of MC on the front left. They form a “disassembly” line to mime the words of MC, passing body parts from the back to the front. PC3: saw, PC2: hatchet, hammer, PC1: floor boards.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye – not even his – could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out – no stain of any kind – no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all – ha! ha!

PC2,3 move to the back. PC1 moves to the side

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o’clock – still dark as midnight.

PC2,3 step onto stage, knock on their chests, twice like the hearbat

As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart, – for what had I now to fear? There entered two men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbor during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

PC1 leads PC2,3 onto stage, showing them around 3 positions. Ends with taking the chair from the side and putting it in its original spot in the MC spot

I smiled, – for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search – search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the

wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse.

PC in neutral, start heartbeat Heartbeat sound starts again, quietly

Scene 5: Finale

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct: – it continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness – until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

No doubt I now grew very pale; – but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased – and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound – much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.

Heartbeat sound gets louder, PC vary the movements to generate the sound

I gasped for breath – and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly – more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased.

Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men – but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed – I raved – I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder – louder – louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! – no, no! They heard! – they suspected! – they knew! – they were making a mockery of my horror! – this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! – and now – again! – hark!

louder! louder! louder! louder!

louder! louder! louder! louder!

Villains! Dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!

PC2,3 step forward as police officers, grab MC, sit them back onto the chair (repeat of opening). PC1 fades backwards. Lights off.

Heartbeat sound stops