

Arsenic & Lies



New to Larp?

Arsenic & Lies is a larp (short for Live Action Roleplay), a social activity where a group of people pretend for several hours to be fictional characters in a dramatic situation. Here is how you can look at it.

Arsenic & Lies is like a **tabletop roleplaying** game (e.g. Dungeons & Dragons) in that each of the players will control a fictional character. The difference is that instead of sitting around a table and taking turns to describe the actions of your character, you all simultaneously pretend to be them. E.g. instead of saying, “*Emily glares at Richard and exclaims, ‘I demand an explanation!’*,” you will, acting as Emily, do the glaring and exclaiming. Also, in A&L there are no dice, no numbers, and no concept of winning or losing.

Arsenic & Lies is like a **murder mystery** dinner party, but infinitely replayable: every time you play, the characters, their secrets and relationships will change, and both the victim and the culprit will be different. A&L doesn’t need a host and requires little preparation. The focus isn’t on figuring out whodunnit, but on the drama of being slightly larger than life characters with intense relationships.

Arsenic & Lies is like **improv theatre**, but you will be your own audience. The workshop before the game will provide you with characters and relationships, so you won’t have to invent things from scratch. Also, the tone is drama rather than comedy.

The parts of the game when you behave as your character are referred to as *in character*, and the parts when you are just yourself – *out of character*. When you’re in character, try not to do or say out of character things unless you really need to – the game is supposed to feel like an episode of a dramatic TV show rather than its blooper reel. Imagine you’re in an opulent ballroom instead of a modern room, just like you’d imagine that a theatre show happens e.g. in revolutionary France rather than on a stage. Try to see the other players as their characters, the way you’d see a character in a film rather than the actor playing them.

Feel free to invent new facts during the game and support other player’s contributions, e.g. by responding to “*I loved your show in London last month!*” with “*I wish*

the critics shared your opinion..." rather than with *"But I've never played in London!"* Don't worry about playing your character "right" – most likely none of the players are professional actors and you have no audience to impress, so as long as you enjoy yourself it will be a success.

Overview

You will play characters at a New Year's Eve party in a rich country estate in 1919, closely entwined by intrigues and secrets.

One of you will be the Killer: in Act I they will secretly poison a Victim of their choice, who will die at midnight. In Act 2, the player of the Victim will return as an Unexpected Guest. At the end of Act 2, one of the characters conducts a denouement and accuses someone of the murder.

Preparations

You will need 3 hours, 5-10 players including yourself, enough room for several private conversations in parallel, a table, and pens and paper. Name tags are recommended; 1920-style costumes and props are optional.

Optional soundtrack for timekeeping and ambience, and optional safety cards: www.arsenicandlies.com.

Workshop

This is the part where you create the characters and brainstorm relationships between them. It should take under an hour. In turn, read out a section of the following instructions and have the group follow it:

Calibration

Discuss what topics should be avoided. Books, films and TV shows set in this period sometimes include themes which might be disturbing for some people. In a larp, such themes might be even more affecting – in a way, you would be experiencing them more directly – so it is very important to steer clear of subjects that might upset the players. You can use the A&L safety cards, which let the players anonymously create a list of topics to be avoided. Remove any Relationship or Secret cards that mention these topics.

In this game, history serves fiction, and historical accuracy is not important, so it

is fine for the players to change any detail of the setting, e.g. make it less sexist than 1910s England, if they'd find it more fun.

Discuss and agree on a level of physical contact the players are comfortable with (e.g. ask whether everyone is okay hugging other players in character). Remember: during the game you do what your character would do, but only as long as you're comfortable doing that. The characters shouldn't engage in violence or any romantic intimacy beyond holding hands – we're in an upper-class English family, after all.

If you, for any reason, feel uncomfortable during the game, say **“Cut”** – everyone should stop playing immediately and try to help you.

If you want to discuss things out of character with another player, e.g. to quickly clarify a detail of your characters' relationship, say **“Off-game”** to suspend play for you and the other player. When you are ready to resume play, say **“Action”**.

Character Creation

Each player takes one Secret and one Relationship card at random. You can replace cards you don't like. Don't decide who the other characters referenced by your cards will be yet and don't discuss them with the other players; think only about who your character could be for them to make sense: age, gender, social class, profession. Your character can be as much like or unlike you as you wish.

Each player chooses a Portrait card for their character. The cards are just for inspiration; if you want, you can modify any aspect of them (e.g. make your character a poet rather than an artist).

Without giving away your secrets, **take turns introducing your character concepts**, starting with the player who'd like to play the head of the family. For now, it is enough to establish just the basic publicly known facts, especially everyone's relationship to the main family. This relationship must be close, e.g. a relative, an in-law, an old family friend, an employee, or a suitor to one of the family members. If you want, say a couple of words about the character's personality and history.

Work together to make the character concepts compatible. E.g. Emily's Secret needs an eligible bachelor, but all of the male characters chosen by the players ended up being related to her character. She asks if any of the male characters could be made into a family friend rather than a relative. If not, she can change her Portrait card or draw another Secret.

Discuss who the Unexpected Guest will be. They will appear in Act 2, but the family doesn't know that yet. They should be someone with a close relationship to most of the characters, but conspicuously missing from the party. E.g. a son of the family, presumed dead in the War; or a trophy second wife of Lord Weatherby, who recently eloped with a valet. Whoever gets killed in Act 1 will return in Act 2 playing the Unexpected Guest, so make sure no one minds playing them. Their Portrait card can be used as a prop: e.g. their photo someone secretly carries in a locket.

Think about which character your Relationship is with. Afterwards, everyone points at who they have chosen. Try to adjust so everyone has one person pointing at them.

Go off in pairs to establish the details of your Relationships in private, in turn with the person you pointed at and the person who pointed at you. If you have time, try to also establish connections with other characters. When everyone is ready, **gather again and share any new facts that would be publicly known,** e.g. that your characters are known to be best friends.

Pick a character to be the X from your Secret card. If necessary, discuss the secret with that player in private, e.g. if the card says you are pregnant by X, discuss when it happened.

Shuffle and deal out as many News cards as there are players, including the one saying "You Are The Killer". If you got the Killer card, don't reveal it to anyone and decide whom your character would want to kill; you can also decide on the fly during Act 1.

Write your character's name on a name tag and place your Portrait card on the side table, which should be easy to access from the play area. Put the Poison token and all the News cards except for the Killer card next to the Portrait cards. You can look at News cards during the game if you need inspiration for small talk topics.

Take a short break. Then, read the instructions for Act I, start the soundtrack and go in character.

Act I

It is the final hour of the year 1919. You are the Weatherby family and their guests, celebrating New Year's Eve in your opulent country estate. There's a blizzard raging outside. Today is the servants' night out, so you are the only people around for miles.

For an hour, you will confide in your friends, slander your enemies, exchange secret vows with your lovers – in general, pursue the goals suggested by your Secret and Relationship. You are all in the ballroom and shouldn't attempt to leave it, but feel free to talk in private in a corner. Avoid forming a single big group too often, but make sure everyone stays engaged.

The soundtrack has chimes at 15, 30 and 45 min – **the Killer should secretly place the Poison token beneath the portrait card of their chosen Victim sometime before the 3rd chime.** To facilitate this, everyone should visit the side table in private at least once, e.g. to “look at the painting collection”.

When the clock strikes midnight, the characters go to the table to collect their (imaginary) champagne glasses. Everyone should look under their Portrait card – if they find the Poison, they are the Victim.

Right afterwards, someone (by default the head of the family) should raise a toast. Then the Victim dies dramatically, stage whispering with their last breath a name of their choice, e.g. of the character they secretly love, or their worst enemy. This ends Act 1.

Interlude

Go out of character. Read out and perform the following instructions.

The player of the Victim will return in Act 2 playing the Unexpected Guest. They should change their name tag and, if possible, wear a different hat or some other accessory. Everyone should now have a short private conversation with them to discuss their shared secrets.

One of the players should now volunteer to have their character conduct the denouement at the end of Act 2. It will involve exclaiming *“I know who did it!”*, gathering everyone and running through the possible motives of several characters before finally accusing one of them. E.g. *“You, Lord Walter, had a strong reason to kill your older brother, who stood in the way of your inheritance. However, it is you, Miss Reed, the victim’s jealous lover, who killed him!”* Any player (including those playing the Killer or the Unexpected Guest) can perform this function.

Optionally, that player can incorporate into their background an extra detail of being a famous detective incognito, which will give them more crime-solving authority. They can e.g. reveal during the denouement: *“I haven’t mentioned it to anyone before to avoid gossip, but during my occasional trips to London I have been collaborating with local police helping them solve crimes – I seem to have a knack for deduction. You might have heard of the exploits of Emmeline Budd, especially her involvement in apprehending the notorious Blackfriar Killer – well, that’s me.”*

Take a short break. Then, read the instructions for Act II, start the soundtrack and go in character.

Act II

It is 00:25. You left the body in the ballroom and moved to the hunting room. It is clear it was murder: the Victim died in convulsions, clutching their throat, and there is suspicious white powder on the bottom of their glass. There is no way of hiding the incident from the police, or pretending it was a suicide, an accident or death from natural causes. You decided not to call the police yet – it will lessen the scandal if you find the killer yourselves.

The player of the Unexpected Guest should leave the room and return shortly after the act starts, announcing their arrival with loud knocking.

As before, pursue your character's goals, which might change due to the murder. Avoid roundtable discussions, but try not to exclude anyone.

When the clock strikes one at the end of the 35 min soundtrack, **the player who volunteered to conduct the denouement should do so** (still in character), and finally accuse someone. Remember: the goal of the accusation is creating drama for the players rather than finding the real killer – the character conducting the denouement can e.g. frame their enemy. The other characters should not interrupt. **If someone disagrees with the final accusation, they can suggest one other culprit. In that case the characters vote**, with the head of the family having the tie-breaking vote. Avoid a long discussion; the vote should take place soon after the initial accusations. **The accused can now make an impassioned speech** declaring their innocence or guilt. **The act ends with someone saying, "Call the police!"**

Go out of character and take turns to talk about your experiences. Thank you for playing!

by Karolina Soltys