The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Melinda Pfundstein (left), David Ivers, and John Taylor Phillips in Dial M for Murder, 2011.
Dial M for Murder

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Synopsis: *Dial M for Murder*

In London, 1952, the wealthy Margot Wendice has convinced her professional tennis player husband, Tony, to give up playing to spend more time with her. He now sells sports equipment, and, to Margot, their life together is a happy one. However, he has discovered that while he was on a tennis tour in the United States several years ago, Margot had an affair with an American murder mystery writer named Max Halliday.

Because he wants revenge as well as her money, Tony meticulously plans Margot’s murder. She has no idea that Tony knows of her past affair, nor does she have any suspicion that he planning to kill her. Max comes to London to visit the couple, and Tony uses this as the opportunity to fulfill his plan.

Tony blackmauls a man who calls himself Captain Lesgate, a former schoolmate and convicted criminal, to carry out the scheme. They plan what they believe is the perfect murder. But when Margot refuses to play the part of the victim, things go much differently than planned.
Characters: *Dial M for Murder*

**Margot Wendice:** The charming, naïve, and wealthy wife of Tony, Margot has no idea that Tony knows of her past affair with Max, nor does she suspect that Tony is planning to murder her.

**Max Halliday:** An American murder mystery writer, Tony had an affair with Margot during the time Tony was playing professional tennis tournaments in America. He is still in love with Margot and comes to visit the couple in London.

**Tony Wendice:** Margot's husband, Tony is a former professional tennis player who married Margot for her money. He is selfish and arrogant and has an elaborate scheme to murder Margot because of jealousy over a past affair between Margot and Max.

**Captain Lesgate:** An old schoolmate of Tony's and a convicted criminal, Lesgate is now being blackmailed by Tony into murdering Margot. He seems willing to do anything for money.

**Inspector Hubbard:** A British Inspector of Police, Hubbard is a bit eccentric, but thoughtful and thorough.

**Thompson:** A police officer.
Frederick Knott: The Reluctant Writer
By Carly Higley

For someone who received a substantial amount of fame and acclaim for his ingenious and unorthodox plots, Frederick Knott has a remarkably slim list of credits to his name. These plays and screenplays, however, were so successful that they allowed him to thrive in his beloved Manhattan for the last thirty years of his life, adding nothing further to his literary accomplishments (Tom Vallance, “Frederick Knott [http://www.Independent.co.uk, 26 December 2002]).

As his wife told Douglas Martin of the New York Times in a 2002 interview, “He hated writing. He wrote only for the money” (20 December 2002, 15). It is extremely fortunate, then, that he was still in need of finances when he contrived the play and, later movie adaptation, Dial M for Murder, or we might not be enjoying it at this year’s Utah Shakespeare Festival.

Frederick Knott was born 28 of August 1916 in Hankow, China, the son of well-to-do Quaker missionaries (Elaine Woo, “Frederick Knott, 86” [Los Angeles Times, Obituaries, 22 December 2002]). During this time, the foundation was laid for his career with the stage when he and his sister Jean listened to records from Gilbert and Sullivan plays with Knott then staging his own versions in the family garden. At ten years of age his parents sent him back to England for formal education at the Quaker approved schools of Sidcott and Oundle, followed by four years at Cambridge from 1934 to 1938. During this time he played tennis for Cambridge and was by all accounts a gifted competitor. He would have competed at the most prestigious of all tennis tournaments, Wimbledon, had not World War II occurred (Vallance). As it was, he served Britain admirably in the Royal Artillery for the duration of the war (Woo).

After the war, he tried his hand at screenwriting for several years with little success until the simple sound of a gunshot became the muse for a masterpiece (Vallance). Knott later said in an interview: “I was always intrigued with the idea that somebody would plan a crime, and then you see that everything doesn’t turn out right. You can plan a murder in great detail and then put the plan into action and invariably something goes wrong and then you have to improvise, and in the improvisation you trip up and make a very big mistake” (Ronald Bergen, “Frederick Knott: Playwright and screenwriter preoccupied with the question of the perfect crime” [http://www.The Guardian.co.uk, 16 January 2003]).

He spent the following eighteen months confined in a small “chalet” next to his parents’ estate in Sussex, purchased in 1948, doing very little but eating, sleeping, and writing about his idea (Bergen). Indeed, there were many days he spent entirely in pajamas where the only other soul he saw was his mother, when she would drop off meals (Vallance). Apparently, he wasn’t the only one intrigued by the idea of a planned murder gone awry because the success of the result, Dial M for Murder, continues to capture audiences over fifty years later. Amazingly, Knott was turned down seven times when he offered it to various producers, including August McLeod who was superbly confident that, “the play as a whole would cause little interest” (Martin). In 1952, just before Knott was about to accept that his screenplay was a failure, the BBC offered to produce it as a ninety-minute “television play.” The production enthralled audiences and caught the eye of a very shrewd producer, Sir Alexander Korda (Martin). Recognizing the big screen potential of the play, he persuaded Knott to sell the rights to him for a paltry £1,000 before selling it in turn to Warner Brothers for £175,000 (Vallance). However, it was not all disappointment that Knott experienced during this time period. At a party following a Broadway performance, he met his future and lifelong wife, Ann Hillary, who later revealed, “I took one look at Frederick and was absolutely fascinated.” The feeling was mutual and they wed in 1953 (Vallance).

Meanwhile, Warner Brother’s entrusted the rights to Dial M for Murder to the skilled hands
of Alfred Hitchcock, who entrusted Knott himself to write the screenplay. During the shooting of the movie, Knott stayed with Alfred Hitchcock and his family, and the two similar, scheming minds got along so well that a lasting friendship was formed (Vallance). In 1954 Dial M for Murder premiered at the cinema, and a legend was born.

Encouraged by his success, Frederick Knott tried his hand outside the suspense genre with the play, Mr. Fox of Venice, but to no avail; His gift was weaving sinister suspense stories, and all future theatrical success fit into that category, most notably the plays Write Me A Murder in 1961 and Wait until Dark in 1966 (Bergen). In 1967 Wait until Dark was made into a film starring Audrey Hepburn as a blind woman who destroys the lights in her house, leveling the field as she confronts three intruders (Bergen). The film was tremendously popular, and Audrey Hepburn received an Oscar nod for her performance (Vallance).

Frederick Knott had a mind that was a potential money pot. Maurice Evans, who played the lead in Dial M for Murder at Westminster Theatre in 1952, described him as “a particularly meticulous writer. The fascinating web of clues, counterclues, and red herrings that so intrigued theatre audiences is typical of the way his mind works. . . . Every detail of his plot is placed with the deadly accuracy of stroke in a championship tournament (Vallance).

The lucrative potential of his genius plot lines generated a demand for more stories of morbidly fascinating themes, but Knott had no desire to accommodate any request. No amount of money offered could change his mind. Though he had two complete plays already constructed in his head, he could not be induced to ever pen a word of them to paper (Woo). “He was perfectly happy the way things were,” related his wife (Vallance). Knott spent the last three decades of his life with his wife in New York enjoying the fruits of a few strokes of genius and the company of friends until his death on December 17, 2002 (Martin). Mrs. Knott described their life together as “a marriage as perfect as any I can imagine”(Vallance). Frederick Knott is survived by his wife and son, two grandsons, and a legacy of literary intrigue.

The Psychology of Our Adversaries
By Heidi Madsen
In the words of Aristotle, “a man may wrong his enemies because that is pleasant; [but] he may
equally wrong his friends because that is easy" (Rhetoric 1373, 3-5). However important the who and the how are to a story, it is the endlessly seductive why that is most imperative. Anyone may commit a crime; but it is the often hidden aspects of a situation, the psychological motivations behind the action, that are so complex and powerful. As Brian Boyd points out, this information catches our attention not out of some idle or even morbid curiosity, but because it is so strategic to our survival; “we need to understand the psychology of our adversaries,” because a predator can just as easily take the form of friend or foe (On The Origin of Stories; Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction [Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009] 281).

Though happily married for half a century, playwright Frederick Knott wrote two successful stage thrillers about husbands who put their wives in mortal peril—with one important difference: in Wait until Dark, the husband endangers his wife unknowingly; in Dial M for Murder the husband truly wants his wife dead. This husband, Tony Wendice, knows of his wife Margo’s attachment to another man; and, yet, his gruesome plan is not a lover’s crime of passion. In fact, if one were to classify Dial M for Murder as one of Georges Polti’s thirty-six dramatic plots, it would not be Murderous Adultery, or even An Enemy Loved, but most fittingly that bold number nine: Daring Enterprise.

Dial M for Murder is intricately plotted “with the deadly accuracy of a stroke in a championship tournament;” but, much of the character and story development occur in the back-story even before the opening scene (Evans, Maurice qtd. in The Independent, “Frederick Knott,” Thursday December 26, 2002, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/Frederick-knott-612029.html). A retired tennis champion, Tony is accustomed to fanfare and posh living, but the salary for any professional athlete in the 1950s was not as sizable as it is today. Tony’s plan, then, is to “snap up” one of his female fans with a large bank account; he almost ties the knot with “a tubby Boston deb with five million dollars [but] finally settles for Margo and her ninety thousand pounds (18). The couple may have lived happily ever after, except that while Tony is away playing the grass courts in America, Margo falls for Max Halliday—a crime writer for an American weekly television series. Tony begins to worry what will happen if Margo leaves him. He agonizes, “All of these expensive tastes I’d acquired while I was at the top . . . big tennis had finished with me—and so, apparently, had my wife” (20).

According to Carolyn Wheat all of the basic ingredients of suspense fiction are found in the Fairy Tale. The hero, or heroine as is the case here, takes a journey which involves tests, enemies—even a brush with death. “Snow White tames the huntsman whose mission it is to kill her . . . and Gretel passes the ultimate test when she tosses the old witch into her own oven” (How To Write Killer Fiction [Santa Barbara, California: John Daniel & Company, 2003], 98). Not unlike these gentle maidens who possess no formal skills of defense, Margo Wendice will need to improvise in order to survive. On her journey she will face a type of huntsman (Captain Lesgate, aka Charles Alexander Swann, who was at Cambridge with Tony), engage in a deadly contest with a scarf and a pair of scissors, endure imprisonment and prosecution, and learn of Tony’s treachery. Fortunately for Margo, in fairy tales “people or things that at first seem insignificant or powerless, can become the best friend a hero or heroine ever had” (Wheat, 101). Her old friend Max is visiting from the States.

Though Frederick Knott could not have anticipated the modern day obsession with dramatized forensics and criminal profiling, his character Max Halliday is a 1950s pioneer in the experimental world of television murder mystery. On paper, Max “kills” one person per week—deciding who, how, and why by randomly drawing from three corresponding hats. Max is no professional detective like Holmes or Perot, but he does sort through crime scene potpourri like a player in a game of Clue, and criminal combinations such as Mrs. Peacock, in the library with a candlestick are his area of expertise. He believes in the perfect murder—on paper. “And I think I could plan one better than most people,” he innocently brags to Tony on the evening of the planned murder, “but I doubt if I could carry it out” (32). Why? “Because in stories things turn out as the author plans them to. . . . In real life they don’t—
Frederick Knott’s debut play Dial M for Murder opened in London in the summer of 1952, and in New York a few months later with slight changes to the script (for example, the M in the title referred to a British phone exchange which would be meaningless to an American audience). It was performed in thirty countries, and in 1954, a screen version adapted by Knott and directed by Alfred Hitchcock was released. Such an unemotional study of the art of murder and the darker impulses which motivate one human to harm another seems tailor-made for Hitchcock.

Additional motifs that may have attracted the great director to this work include characters who play tennis and swirl brandy; but, one of the most “Hitchcockian” features in Knott’s play is the staircase—a symbol employed in German expressionism to denote emotional identity, or the landscape of the mind. A disciple of expressionist film, Hitchcock used the staircase to illustrate different emotions, to heighten suspense, and to convey movement either toward or away from danger. In Dial M for Murder, it is the place (on the fifth step) where Tony hides the key to his apartment and it is a crucial site of plot reversal and recognition.

Up until the moment of the awful death scene, the audience knows that Tony is in control and that Margo has little chance of survival; we watch even as Tony listens to the sounds of the horrid struggle, and then her choking voice in the phone; Margo is not dead. What makes Dial M for Murder so compelling is not the fact that a man carries out a plot to murder his wife, but because when everything in his seemingly perfect plan A fails, he is nearly able to extemporize his way to freedom with a brilliant plan B. As he asks himself “Well, what do I do next?” Tony’s composure and cleverness are so great that an audience might even begin to overlook his faults and cheer on his escape; but he never truly develops into a likable villain, or even a bad guy we love to hate such as Count Fesco from Wilkie Collins’ great detective story The Woman in White, or the admirably terrifying Mrs. Danvers in Rebecca. It is not too disappointing, then, when Margo and Max—with some help from Inspector Hubbard of Scotland Yard—manage in the end to “push Tony into his own fire.”