

Murder Mystery Weekend  
by Michelle Weisblat-Dane

What happens when you put a weekend, six couples, two bed and breakfast inns, and two wacky murder mystery play writers together? Give up? You get an incredible two-day experience. My husband and I signed up for just such an event and came away with much more than we ever had expected.

It all started when we heard about a “Murder Mystery Weekend” at one of the local bed and breakfasts here in Manitou Springs, Colorado. The web page we looked at said that a murder would take place and it would be our job to figure it out. It sounded like something different to do for our anniversary, maybe even romantic. The web page went on to say we “... would be able to step back to the late eighteen hundreds, and live as they did in our choice of two bed and breakfast inns - The Red Crag or Victoria’s Keep - both houses built in 1890 and refurbished to their original splendor.” We signed up for The Red Crag.

A few days later a letter arrived from Red Herring Productions. It said that the mystery would be custom tailored, so they needed to know about us. There were questions about our looks, professions, ages, whether we were introverted or extroverted, and whether we had any stage experience.

“Gee, what are we getting ourselves into here?” my husband, Bruce, asked me.

“I don’t know, but let’s give it a try,” I said.

We filled out our questionnaires and emailed them back. I am a journalist and musician; my husband is a musician and retired programmer. We are both extroverts. What would they do with that? I was excited but leery.

A few days later another letter arrived. “Here are your parts; read them and try and get into your character. You might want to write some background information. We

Blind Date  
Michelle Weisblat-Dane

suggest that a costume would be nice.” Uh oh, costumes? My husband and I looked at each other in panic. This was not what we thought would happen. From what had been stated, we believed they would put on a two part play spanning Friday and Saturday evenings and we would try to figure out “who dun it.”

“Ah, why not give it a try?” I said in a quivering voice.

My husband was assigned the role of a dirt poor prospector, Phil Dirt. I was to play a rich music teacher from St. Louis who married a poor preacher and moved out west to Buffalo Chip, Colorado. But, what would we do for costuming? The thrift store! My husband found some old jeans, some period looking shirts, suspenders, and some old plain cowboy boots - all for about \$35. A suit jacket, bolo tie, and cowboy hat from his closet, and his costume was complete.

I didn't have much luck, but I found an 1800's shawl for only \$15. They thought it was a tree skirt and had marked it down as a “holiday item”. I got some material and made a skirt, added a bodice, a nice shirt, and some accessories, I now had a costume fitting my stature.

We arrived at The Red Crag Inn at 4:30 Friday, checked in, and were taken to our room. The bathroom had a lovely old claw leg bathtub. My husband and I each took a relaxing bath in anticipation of the evening's events. We dressed and left for Victoria's Keep, the other bed and breakfast, where we were to meet the guests from both inns. I wondered how this was going to work. What would my “preacher husband” be like? What would the other guest think of my homemade costume?

We were among the first to arrive and were greeted at the door by two “Pinkerton agents.” We were asked who we were and what we did in Buffalo Chip. I explained, “I'm Belinda Chiles, the music teacher. Is my husband, the preacher, here yet?”

“No, not yet,” Lacy said as she invited us in.

“I'm Phil Dirt... glad to meet yer acquaintance,” my husband said in a gnarly sort of southern accent. Kit let us know there was “grub in the kitchen” and that we should “help ourselves.” We mingled and introduced ourselves, first by our character's name and profession, then by our real names and what we really did for a living. The first question every one asked was “have you done this before?” followed by “What do we do now?”

Blind Date  
Michelle Weisblat-Dane

The preacher introduced himself as Cotton Chiles - my husband. He took my gloved hand and kissed it. I told him, "It's nice to finally meet my husband." We both giggled and he escorted me to the parlor. I sat on the couch and patted the seat next to me. My "husband" asked if he could fetch me a glass of wine. We chatted for a few minutes and I discovered that his name was Mike and he was an engineer. His real wife was Susan, and she was playing the part of Mary Beth, the female postmaster.

I was obviously not the only one in the room having wine to calm my jitters and fears. Eventually everyone came in and found a seat. Phil Dirt, cradling his shotgun "Annie", sat on the couch across from me and next to the very drunk lady postman.

Kit explained "Lacy and I are Pickerington agents hired by Colonel Parker to investigate why the stable burned down and why Brit Dawson, who'd been sent here to find out about the stable, was killed." Lacy stated, "I would like each of you to introduce yourself, say something about your background and add anything you may have about others from Buffalo Chip."

First was Lizzy, really Kim, the town call girl. She worked at the saloon. Then her real life husband, Rock, introduced himself as Frank - the hired gun slinger. Next was Zuni, the half-breed bartender. What was funny was that she was really Lorna, who had arrived here from Scotland a couple of month prior and had a Scottish accent as opposed to American Indian. Her boyfriend, Keith, had been assigned the part of an English card dealer. Having just arrived from Europe, it suited him well; his thick English accent added to the effect.

There was Angus, the blacksmith, with his wife (real life girlfriend) Tanith, the actress. We had had to explain to Angus what the blacksmith did. Then there was Matilda (really Donna), the snotty, uppity, bank president whose "husband was away on business". Her husband, Mark, played Mingo, the Mexican buffalo hunter. If this all sounds confusing, it was - at least until they put nametags on us. From that moment we were our characters.

We were each given piece of paper with one or more clues which we were to bring up in general discussion. As we took turns announcing or acting out our information, we become comfortable with our parts. Each clue helped us divulge more about our character, who the others were and our relationships to each other. It didn't

Blind Date  
Michelle Weisblat-Dane

take long for the jokes to fly. We laughed about the town whore and the innuendo that the huge gun slinger was only as good as the size of his guns. Lacy and Kit gently guided us along, knowing we had information to divulge even when we couldn't come up with a way to get it out.

As we got to know each other we were led in several rounds of getting and revealing clues. The story was beginning to unfold, and we were the story. We knew each other as characters, and our little town of Buffalo Chip, intimately. We knew who was sleeping with whom (everyone seemed to have slept with Lizzy). We knew who hated who and why. We knew the Colonel had founded the town, and that all of the women thought he was wonderful and why. We ended our first night with a couple of cliff hangers... How was Dawson shot and why? Who burned down the barn and why? The answers would have to wait for the next night.

My real husband and I went back to our B and B and met in the parlor with the others staying there. By this point we knew each other as our characters, and barely by our real names. We became our characters as we sat, ate munchies, drank wine and shared "real life" as if we were old friends and had known each other for months, not hours. We found out a great deal about each other. For example, it turned out that Rock was really shy and thought, as we did, that he would just be watching a play. He wasn't ready for this kind of interaction. But you wouldn't have suspected it by the wonderful one line quips he had been dishing out all night. Even he hadn't known he could be such a good comedian.

Mark, Donna, Bruce, and I were the old married couples and were the only ones with children. It turned out that it was Lorna's, Donna's and Susan's birthdays. Clark was a boxer from Brooklyn by night and children's "at risk councilor" by day. Keith, Rock, and my husband were all computer geeks. Lorna was a nanny. Linda had just quit her job as a customer service rep for a satellite company. Susan was from Charleston, North Carolina and Donna was a manager for a makeup company. Mark was a specialty food delivery person - no wonder they made him the buffalo hunter. We had come from all walks of life, from all over the United States and the world. By one o'clock in the morning we all finally went off to our rooms; all except Mike and Susan, who hit the hot

Blind Date  
Michelle Weisblat-Dane

tub for the next 2 hours. We said good night to our now old and dear friends; we would see each other in the morning.

I was the first one up at six thirty in the morning. The house was almost absolutely quiet as everyone slept. I sat in the solarium with a cup of coffee and watched the sunlight hit the top of the mountain and slowly move its way down, removing all shadows in the valley. It was a breath taking and picturesque view.

One by one everyone came in and said hello, greeting each other as if we were some sort of special family. Bret, our wonderful host and cook, was off making breakfast. We called each other by our character names. My “husband”, the preacher, came in and said, “Belinda my dear, how did you sleep?” and gave me a peck on the cheek. We chatted about the case and the clues, asking if anyone had anything they thought might be important. We talked more about who each of us were in real life, and where each of us lived around Colorado. It seemed the more we learned about our characters, and who each of us were in the story, the easier it was to talk about ourselves... what our likes and dislikes were, our hobbies, what we wanted to do with our lives, and what we had already accomplished.

After breakfast, everyone went off to do their “own thing.” Some went hiking, some shopping, some went to their rooms to spend time alone. We planned to meet for tea in the afternoon. Bruce and I met Lorna and Keith for cards. Lorna had never played cards, but she \came close to winning. The other women started a puzzle. The men sat and talked, trying to avoid discussing “shop.”

It was a wonderful, relaxing, day where time seemed to have slowed and the clock had been set back to the year 1888 - before televisions, before phones, before computers. Time passed at a slower pace and while we were in this magical place things stood still for us, too. All too soon, though, it was time to get ready for part two of “the play”.

We met everyone from both inns downstairs in the Red Crag’s Parlor. With the help of Lacy and Kit, yesterday was recapped; we were reminded of what we had learned and given a few more clues. We broke for a formal dinner. My preacher husband sat next to me on one side and the buffalo hunter (who had supplied the raw meat for dinner) sat on the other side. We played our characters and added to the already wonderful story that had been written for us. I dropped my napkin; my “husband” graciously picked it up and

Blind Date  
Michelle Weisblat-Dane

fetches me more wine. Phil was off courting Zuni the bartender now that he had struck it rich. The whore was trying to pick up all the town men and the snobby bank president couldn't be bought – or so it seemed.

Dinner ended and we adjourned to the living room. With a little bit of prodding, and a few written clues, we did several more rounds of banter and hints before we broke out into teams to see if we could figure out the “who, how, and why.” My team, which consisted of Frank, Angus, and me figured that it was my no good preacher husband who burned down the barn to get back at the colonel because of my crush on him (even though I had only met the colonel in letters). The team of the dealer, the buffalo hunter, and the preacher, figured out who the murderer was. It was the Postmistress, who was really the colonel. Dawson had figured out her secret and she had had to kill him, so she shot him in the back. Only the blacksmith figured out who had set the fire and who had actually killed Dawson.

Again we stayed up late - no one really wanted the night to end - sharing our new-found friendships. Some of us sat in the hot tub drinking champagne with strawberries; others were still sitting in the parlor talking. The last of us straggled to bed at 2, knowing we needed to be up at 8 for breakfast.

In the morning I got up and made banana bread for everyone while Bret fixed another wonderful breakfast. One by one everyone came in to eat; like one big family we were saying hello, grabbing a cup of coffee, and reading the paper or working on the puzzle. We all sat down to breakfast together; almost a bittersweet moment. Each of us started exchanging information with the other, not knowing whether we would really stay in touch or even see each other again. We all knew that as breakfast ended, so would our time together. In our last minutes, we all worked at finishing putting in the last few puzzle pieces. As the last piece was placed we all cheered. We hugged each other. Then, suddenly, we found ourselves crying as we said good bye.