

**PLEASE READ:** Before you read anything else connected to this show, please follow one piece of advice. DO NOT watch Youtube clips of the film version of the show. There are some actors' portrayals of the characters that I find wonderful. There are also some actors' attempts at the parts that I find rotten. I will not tell you who I love and who I hate. Find your own understanding of the roles for which you wish to read. I do not want to see copies of others' work in audition.

## *Arsenic and Old Lace Plot Synopsis*

*Arsenic and Old Lace* opens in the living room of the Brewster home, inhabited by two spinster aunts, Abby and Martha Brewster, and their nephew, Teddy. The Reverend Dr. Harper is chatting with Abby about her other nephew, Mortimer, a drama critic who is in love with the reverend's daughter, Elaine. Soon joining the conversation are two friendly police officers, Brophy and Klein, who have come by (as they often do) to pick up a box for charity from the kindly Brewster sisters. Teddy, who is rather crazy but harmless, believes himself to be Theodore Roosevelt. He charges up the stairs to retrieve the box. The reverend and the policemen leave. Mortimer enters and announces to his aunts that he intends to marry Elaine, whom he is taking to a play that evening.

Things begin to unravel as Mortimer lifts the lid to the window seat. He discovers the dead body of Mr. Hoskins and assumes that Teddy has killed him. However, Abby and Martha tell Mortimer that it was they who poisoned the man with their homemade elderberry wine - and that he is the eleventh (or twelfth, depending on how you count) gentleman they have shared their wine with. The sisters explain that these are charitable acts: they befriend lonely older gentlemen who do not have much to live for and then kill them with elderberry wine laced with arsenic. Meanwhile Teddy is down in the cellar digging what he believes is the Panama Canal but is in reality the latest grave.

Elaine arrives and an excited and worried Mortimer tells her they are not going to the theatre after all. After a brief quarrel, Elaine leaves. Mortimer and Teddy's brother Jonathan arrives. Jonathan, a true maniacal criminal, is accompanied by Dr. Einstein, a plastic surgeon of doubtful character. Dr. Einstein has operated on Jonathan so that he looks like Boris Karloff, the horror film star.

Teddy invites Einstein to join him in the cellar, where he believes he is digging the Panama Canal. Einstein quickly returns and confides to Jonathan that there is a hole large enough to bury Mr. Spenalzo (a man Jonathan recently killed) after everyone goes to bed. Once the lights are out and everyone is supposedly asleep, Teddy goes to the window seat to get Mr. Hoskins. At the same time Jonathan and Einstein go to their car to retrieve Mr. Spenalzo. Both plan on burying the bodies in the cellar.

Several hilarious scenes ensue. Lights blink on and off, bodies are moved from the window seat to the cellar to the car outside, accusations and threats fly back and forth. Due to the commotion at the house, Officer O'Hara stops by to make sure all is well. When he is convinced that

everything is alright, he shifts topics and corners Mortimer in a discussion of a play he is writing. Just then, Lieutenant Rooney bursts in and recognizes Jonathan as an escapee from a prison for the criminally insane. Jonathan tells the officers about the bodies in the cellar, but they don't believe him and take him off to prison. Einstein gets away, and Teddy is certified insane and taken to the Happy Dale Sanitarium.

Trying to protect society without sending his aunts to prison, Mortimer ecstatically agrees when his aunts insist on going to Happy Dale with their nephew. The aunts then kindly inform Mortimer that he is actually not a member of the Brewster family. He was an illegitimate child and thus can marry Elaine without fear of passing the Brewster insanity on to his children. Mortimer happily departs, but before the women leave their house, they offer a drink to the head of Happy Dale, Mr. Witherspoon. Witherspoon is a lonely older gentleman, and he gladly accepts a glass of the spiked elderberry wine. . . .

## *Arsenic and Old Lace* Character Descriptions (In order of appearance)

**ABBY BREWSTER (Female, late 60's):** The actor wishing to secure this role must have a truly impressive knowledge of garnet rings, especially those of the English variety. Abby is, of course, sister to Martha Brewster. Both sisters are the very model of Victorian charm and grace. They seem to be the absolute embodiment of the values and polite society of a bygone age. Of course, one of my professors in college once said, "You know, the thing you have got to remember about the good old days is that they weren't so good." But that's neither here nor there right now. Okay, of the two sisters, Abby is clearly the more dominant. As such, I want to see the actor who reads for this role display an understanding of her dominance. I am also placing Abby a bit older than Martha. A huge challenge for every actor performing in this show will be for him or her to effectively make the role his or her own. I want to see differentiation from not only others' past takes on the roles, but also great clarity between you and your fellow actors' portrayals of the parts. And those who take on the roles of Abby and Martha Brewster have the greatest challenge of all in creating unique, distinct interpretations. Yes, these wonderful older ladies have some very similar physical, verbal, emotional, psychological, and other traits. Still, GO FURTHER. Show me how they are different. Show me how they are their own person. And don't obsess exclusively over the moral I pointed out earlier. Dominance and submission are not the exclusive game to be had in shaping the personalities of the Brewster sisters. What's more, and this applies to *all actors* in the show, don't just use your dialogue. Show me your sense of Abby every bit if not more when she is silent as well as when she is speaking. Okay, some other things to keep in mind. Do not play a stereotypical old woman as you read for Abby. This is the mark of a novice performer. Neither do I want you to play the part as if she's 16. I do think there's absolutely room to make use of a character voice. In fact, I feel the roles of both aunts demand one. However, please keep in mind that both Abby and Martha are happy, healthy, lucid, and spry. Show me age with some vitality. Something else to keep in mind, both of the aunts have *AWESOME* one-liners that will just send shockwaves of laughter through the audience. Find them. They're there, and your understanding of how they should be delivered will make or break your ability to secure this role for yourself in audition.

**DR. HARPER (Male, 50's):** We only see Elaine's father in the opening scene of the show. Still, it's a nice part for the right actor. Dr. Harper is a doctor of divinity. He's the minister of the church next door to the Brewsters. The Brewster sisters have seen many ministers come and go over the years, but they seem to be particularly fond of Dr. Harper. Harper displays an inexhaustible sense of kindness for the Brewster sisters, but his affection for them has suffered a bit in recent months as his daughter has begun dating their nephew Mortimer. Both Dr. Harper as well as his invented wife feel that Mortimer is perhaps not the best option for their child. The actor who seeks this role should display a sense of polish, refinement, and mild-mannered sensitivity towards others. Still, he's no pushover. He feels very much at ease giving voice to his concerns for his daughter and her relationship with the Brewsters' nephew.

**TEDDY BREWSTER (Male, 40's):** He thinks he's Theodore Roosevelt.

**GHATCHA ONTHADWHAN:** The Brewster's Brazilian butler, this character was given a significantly greater role in the lesser-known film sequel to *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Piranha and Petifores*. Yeah, we're not done with Teddy. Yes, he's the brother of Jonathan and Mortimer Brewster. Yes, he thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt. This guy can be played extremely well just sticking to the nuts and bolts of the script, but I think you can give him a bit more depth than that. On the surface, I want to see a man who is convinced he is the 26<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, but I want to see a little more. Show me the moments when the "real" Teddy appears. I'm not sure when these moments might occur. We'll play with it. Now, 62.56% of the time he's very happy and extremely good at "playing" Theodore Roosevelt, so don't get carried away with this. Some absolute must-haves include an ability to exert extreme dedication and energy while charging up a flight of stairs and screaming "CHARGE THE BLOCKHOUSE!" Seriously, this is of paramount important to the role. Teddy is a very likable fellow. Going back to showing the audience when he's not Teddy, try to find moments when the real Teddy Brewster shines through. I can think of one starkly evident moment in particular, but there are several to be found. Seriously, this guy could be taken apart and discussed at great length. He's a wonderful acting opportunity. Show me what you can do.

**MRS. HARPER (Female, 50's):** Another invented person. Mrs. Harper is Elaine's mother and the good doctor's wife. Where her husband quite willingly voices his opinions and concerns with others, Mrs. Harper chooses to remain much more low-key. She would rather be polite that cause a mild scene. That's really about all the thought I've given to this character so far. Again, show me your ideas for who she is during the audition.

**OFFICER BROPHY (Male, mid-30's):** The first police officer we meet in the show, Brophy is a thoroughly likable sort of fellow. He's gotten to know the Brewster sisters just about as well as O'Hara and Shannon.

**OFFICER KLEIN (Female, mid-30's):** Yet another officer. Klein is being cast as a female character. We know she's not good at cleaning guns. Anyway, she is also a likable person.

**OFFICER MURPHY (Male, late 20's):** The newest officer assigned to the beat that includes the Brewster's neighborhood, Murphy is entirely unacquainted with the goings on of the aunts' household. As such, Murphy should display a sense of slight unease and dismay during his first scene.

**OFFICER HOWARD (Female, late 20's):** Another female officer, Howard is as familiar with the Brewsters as Klein and Brophy.

**MARTHA BREWSTER (Female, late 60's):** She's the more submissive of the two sisters. Still, she does have a backbone, so don't portray her as a weakling. She and her sister have lived together for many, many years. Their personalities and pecking order around each other have been firmly rooted for eons. Oh, if you have an aversion to high collars, this is not the role for you. Okay, seriously, many of Martha's qualities are mirrored in her sister. Additionally, I've also already mentioned a lot of what I'm looking for in developing this role as I explained Abby's personality above. Again, goal here is to show me distinction from her sister, and attack the role with truth but without stereotypes.

**MORTIMER BREWSTER (Male, low to mid-30's):** Mortimer is the nephew of Abby and Martha Brewster and brother to both Teddy and Jonathan Brewster. He's basically a pretty likable guy. His day job is writing theatre reviews of the latest dregs premiering on Broadway and thereabouts. While you may find this potential line of work interesting, Mort hates it. His original position with the paper had him covering real estate, "which he actually knew something about." At any rate, he's also a novice writer of nonfiction. In a nutshell, he's an exceptionally intelligent guy who doesn't have proper outlet for his talents. As a result, he finds himself fuming with criticism for all things both in and outside his work life. Even so, he is a likable guy, and should be played as such. His care and affection for his dear aunts are immediately evident in the opening encounters he has with them. He's also deeply in love with Elaine Harper, a neighbor of his aunts. She's an exceptionally rare find for him, and he's quickly realized that she's the one who he cannot allow to slip away. Some of Mort's natural intellect slips out in a few of his opening lines. However, his real talents are revealed as he frantically thinks on his feet in order to preserve the best possible outcome for his beloved aunts once he realizes the full extent of their shenanigans. This selfless dedication to his family should exist as further evidence of his genuine decency. The actor who seeks this role must be comfortable to utterly *let go* from day one of the rehearsal process. Mortimer controls the show. Yes, obviously we require an extremely strong ensemble, but I must make this clear. Mortimer controls the show. If Mortimer is weak, the show will not work. As such, I need to see absolute, raw energy in audition. As soon as the first body is discovered, Mortimer must be electrified. He carries that energy all the way through the duration of the show, with the possible exceptions of when he is tied up and when he departs with Elaine at the close of Act 3. I will place tremendous pressure on the individuals who seek this part. However, I want to also stress that the role of Mortimer is a *wonderful* part to play. In the audition show me your understanding of the role. Mortimer must be played with an apt understanding of physical comedy, perfection of timing in dialog delivery, likability in presence, overemphasis in presentation, and an ability to display agility in navigating the rapidly changing circumstances of each scene.

**ELIANE HARPER (Female, mid to late 20's):** She's a deceptively interesting character. She's the daughter of a minister. Yet, she really doesn't play well the role of a minister's daughter. She's a little bit wily, sassy, and absolutely sharp. She is refinement mingled with the realities of a life that's been lived a bit beyond what might be expected given her upbringing. The actor seeking this role will show genuine zest and spunk. She will also need to display a wonderful sense of versatility. We witness Elaine progress from casual happiness, to utter bliss, to twisted confusion, to stark fear, to godsend relief, and back to casual happiness again. Truly, this role will be a challenge to perfect. The actor who seeks to take on Elaine must show tremendous versatility in audition. I want to buy every moment of Elaine. Practice transitions, and show me why Mortimer is willing to settle down with this gal.

**MR. GIBBS (Male, late 60's):** This is a very quick part, but it's a part nonetheless. Gibbs is the quiet old man who comes to the Brewster home looking to rent a room. His dialog, short as it is, is very revealing. It speaks to the sort of education and background he's had. There's some room for interpretation of this role, but I do want a couple of things to be visible. He's a little gruff, but he warms up fairly quickly upon being offered a treat he hasn't had since he was a child. He also has an opportunity to display stark fear once Mortimer frantically chases him from the clutches of his aunts. Again, it's really a nice bit part. It offers some challenges.

**JONATHAN BREWSTER (Male, low 40's):** Think of Ted Kennedy, mixed with Liberace, and add a trace of Billy Dee Williams, Ann Coulter, and Deepak Chopra. No, you won't arrive at the composition that is Jonathan Brewster, but I'm sure the resulting personality would prove endlessly and bizarrely entertaining in conversation. In one word Jonathan is a sociopath. Jonathan is a very shady kind of guy. We are given a decent amount of insight into this character before he ever arrives on stage. He's creepy, plain and simple. As a child, he practiced his penchant for inflicting inhumane suffering on others with his brother Mortimer. Jonathan is a killer, and he thoroughly loves the business. Additionally, he's got an unbelievably short temper. He's not predictable, and he's certainly far from in-control of his emotions. He's the antagonist, and he does an amazing job at it. Keep in mind that he's been through numerous plastic surgeries to alter his appearance. The actor who seeks this role will display a truly menacing presence in audition. Truthfully, I'm not sure if this guy has a single line of dialog written that is intended to illicit laughter. Anyway, he really is a very fun role to take on, and he provides a pretty interesting acting challenge. Clearly, he harbors a very deep-seeded animosity for Mortimer. We can speculate that this aggression developed out of the jealousy he held for the affection shown to Teddy and especially to Mortimer by their parents and, presumably, the greater family in general. Yeah, let's go with that. What else? I'm not entirely positive of the extremely narrow take that I have on Jonathan, but I do have some general guidelines that I'm demanding. The actor seeking this role should present him as severely sedate and looming in one instant, and wildly aggressive and animalistic in the next. He is one who is in control in most circumstances. When he cannot gain control he does not become a pussy cat, but he definitely evades the scene rapidly. Show me some creativity in audition.

**DR. HERMAN EINSTEIN (Male played by Female, late 40's):** Again, a *wonderful* character role to be had. Ladies, I deed this part to you. Why? BUT, I'm keeping the gender male. Anyway, we have SO MANY talented, amazing female actors in the program that I know two of you will find a way to

knock this part out of the park in audition. If I had to describe Einstein in one word, I would say “mousey.” He’s a mousey guy. He is utterly submissive to Jonathan, but that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t know how to control him or at least how to attempt to control him. Einstein should be viewed as a good guy whose life has gone bad. Given a few different decisions along the way, we should believe that he would have become a wonderful, upstanding citizen. The audience truly has to sympathize with this guy. There are a couple of character descriptions in the script that warrant mention. They read as follows: “He is somewhat ratty in appearance. His face wears the benevolent smirk of a man who lives in a pleasant haze of alcohol. There is something about him that suggests the unfrocked priest.” Now, take and do with these notes as you will in audition. However, Einstein should *not* be played overly intoxicated. The actor who seeks this role should also be able to display a thoroughly proficient ability to nail a German accent as well. This really is important. In fact, I am going to insist on an attempt at an accent in performance. Ladies, this is one of the very best character challenges I’ve had to offer in quite a long time. Impress me!

**OFFICER O’HARA (Male, mid-30’s):** He’s the quintessential example of an Irish-American police officer. Good-natured and well-intentioned, O’Hara really doesn’t mean to come across as annoying as he does. Clearly, given much of the dialog that’s offered, we know he’s on very good terms with the aunts. We can probably believe that he’s one of the closest members of the police force who has gotten to know them. The actor seeking this role needs to plainly display the nagging, persistent drive that’s kindled within him once he discovers that Mortimer is a famous dramatic critic. O’Hara also requires a fairly believable portrayal of heavy intoxication. It’s possible to go too far with this, and it’s certainly possible to come across totally inappropriately. Try to find some balance. Bottom line, O’Hara is full of life and must be played big. This role has been split into two parts; however, O’Hara himself retains the lion’s share of the dialog.

**OFFICER SHANNON (Female, mid-30’s):** This character was spawned from a portion of O’Hara. However, I’ve tried to color her with some elements that make her distinctly different from her donor body. She’s O’Hara’s partner, and so they’ve gotten to know each other very well over the years. She’s heard all of his stories a dozen times over while working their beat together. As such, she’s all too willing to finish his sentences and offer up information about O’Hara in their casual conversations with people. She’s a bit cynical about O’Hara’s aspirations of becoming a famous playwright, but she is his friend. As such, she passively supports his dream. Okay, that’s really the only framework I have developed for this character so far. In other words, she’s wide open for additional interpretation during audition. Show me your ideas.

**LT. ROONEY (Male, low 50’s):** This is a fun role and not too complicated. Rooney is the man in charge at the local police precinct. Very early on in the show we gain a pretty strong understanding of the caliber of men and women he has to manage under his watch. As such, he’s forced to run a pretty tight ship. Rooney has very little patience for blunders and mistakes, most of which deems inexcusable. The actor who seeks this role will be able to display a strong, commanding presence. He’s loud, decisive, and clearly in-charge of every situation in which he finds himself.

**OFFICER THOMPSON (Female, late 40's):** Another invented role. Thompson should be viewed as being Rooney's right-hand. She accompanies him everywhere on official police business. When Rooney's not around, Thompson runs the show.

**MR. WITHERSPOON (Male played by Female, late 50's to low 60's):** He's the superintendent of Happydale Sanitarium. Again, this role will be given to a female actor, but we're retaining a male gender for the part; have to. I want to see Witherspoon played with a gentle, reserved dynamic. He's a bit advanced in years, and he's certainly seen it all with regards to human behavior. As such, very little catches him off-guard.

**WITHERSPOON'S AIDE (Female, low 30's):** This character is yet another invented role. She is the dutiful assistant to our sanitarium's director. As Thompson is to Rooney, so the aid is to Witherspoon.