

# Death Takes Center Stage



Elizabeth Ireland

*To beguile the time,  
 Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,  
 your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,  
 But be the serpent under't.  
 Macbeth Act I, Scene 5*

## PROLOGUE

Irene Davenport despised Chicago. It was the city in which, through supreme force of will, and not a little talent, she had begun her career as an actress. It was far too closely connected to the persona she had left behind her and the man who had propelled her into a life in the theater, the man with the coldest of hearts, Roger Plant. It had been winter when she had made her debut in the city, performing a walk-on role as a maid in a comedy, the title of which even she had forgotten. Now, twenty years later, in the sweltering fall of 1871, she found herself right back where she had begun her career. Only this time she was the major attraction.

She had been charmed by Augustin Daly, as she always was. Of course, she had her own reasons for being here at this time and Daly's offer was just too much to resist – star of a new combination company, a promise that the production would tour for a year and a comfortable, secure salary of three thousand a week. On top of all that, the Chicago run included an all-expense paid suite at the Sherman House. How could she refuse? She had always made her own rules and this first stop in on the tour would be no exception. The money alone went a long way to making her forget how much she disliked being back in Chicago.

All this she considered as she sat in her private dressing room, in between scenes, and contemplated her reflection in the make up mirror.

Those who met her in person were surprised at how small and how delicate she was. She appeared much taller, bigger and full of life on stage. Part of this was her projection and part of it was arranged artifice on her behalf. Onstage, she cleverly managed to maneuver herself onto a step or a platform so that she would appear slightly taller than, or at least equal to, the height of her leading men. She always arranged for her male counterpart to be no more than half an inch taller than her five-foot-two frame.

It was one of her personal vanities. However, it did not detract from her performance. Irene Davenport never disappointed an audience. She was, when all was said and done, a monumental talent. Incomparable as Lady Macbeth, she wore a costume hand-made to her specific design: a dress molded to her exquisite figure, the subdued bustle was the height of current fashion. As if woven with moonbeams, the dark shimmering fabric caught whatever light was available and held it, enhancing her personal charisma. In tribute to the play, a tartan shawl was added to her costume. It was artfully arranged on top of her right shoulder, draped across her back and under her left arm, then brought up the front of her chest and fastened with a large, intricate Celtic pin on top of her right shoulder.

Beads of perspiration collected at her hairline and she impatiently brushed them away. Ordinarily, by the end of September, cooling breezes blew off Lake Michigan and refreshed the city air, but not this year. She had read in the *Chicago Journal* that there had been no rainfall to speak of the past summer. The night before there had been a fire – apparently a common event during the past few months. However, that did not deter the audience this evening. Even though the air was so still, so stifling, that every lady who had the foresight to bring a fan was making prodigious use of it, not a seat in the 2600-

capacity theater was empty. Instead, there was an aura of excited expectation. Irene felt it, savored it, loved it. Now they were waiting for her last entrance.

This reminded her how disappointed she was in this, the opening night performance. She simply did not comprehend what was going on. Strange mistakes were being made, props were misplaced and cues were off. There had been a problem with the downstage trap doors and the appearance of the three witches had been late. The elevator mechanism ran unevenly lending the emergence of the witches an almost laughable quality. She felt she had to make up for it and was giving a tour de force performance of what was already an illustrious career. Lady Macbeth was her favorite role; she adored playing it and loved the way the audience worshipped her in response. But tonight, every thing that could possibly go wrong had. She blamed a good part of it on the actor who portrayed Macbeth, Edward Hearne. *What a poor excuse for a man*, she thought to herself. She had no idea how he fancied himself a leading man. If he was not drunk now, she knew he very soon would be. Everyone knew that he kept a “water” pitcher on the prop table and poured himself a glass before entering or leaving the stage. In their scenes together, she could smell the scent of alcohol on his breath. The last rehearsal had been decent. She simply could not understand why things were now going so poorly!

A trickle of sweat coursed down her lovely spine, but she disregarded it. She stared at the reflection in the mirror. Her thoughts shifted to her own appearance. What she saw pleased her – black hair, deep green eyes, and a heart shaped face with a completely clear porcelain complexion. She was small in stature, but her figure was perfect. A “pocket Venus.” She exuded a presence that simply could not be ignored. If

she chose, she could make her every move – whether an entrance onto a stage or into a restaurant – draw the attention of every person present.

Her reverie was interrupted by the arrival of her personal dresser, the crane-like Beatrice O'Neill, almost fifty, thin to the point of emaciation, and dressed immaculately in black. She carried a jewelry case.

“I brought the pearls, Mrs. Davenport.”

The title was honorary, for Irene had yet to marry. Nevertheless, she was well aware that as a woman in the theater, one had to have the title in order to garner some respect from the outside world. It was all part of the mystique she had created about herself.

She glanced up at the willowy matron who also functioned as her personal assistant. Beatrice had proven herself invaluable many times, and the actress knew how much Beatrice adored her. She would miss Beatrice's attention in the new life she was contemplating for herself. For now, she merely nodded and her aide opened the case, lovingly removed the pearls and handed them to Irene. They were Irene's trademark - a rope of flawlessly matched Orientals, rumored to have cost a fortune and been presented to her by a grateful lover. Only Irene knew that story was a myth, having invented it herself. In reality, the baubles were paste. Extremely expensive and authentic looking paste, but counterfeit all the same.

She carefully placed them around her neck. They hung below her waist and were knotted close to the end. She always wore them as part of her costume, regardless of the role she performed.

O'Neill silently backed away to put the case in the travelling trunk. Once more, Ire brought her attention back to the mirror. Her expression hardened as she thought about those waiting for her on stage.

She was interrupted by an abrupt knock on her dressing room door. Bobby Martin poked his head in. The gangly thirteen year old call boy got on her nerves, so before he could even say: "Places Mrs. Davenport", she screamed "Get out!" He disappeared without a word.

She took a deep breath and stood up. She smoothed back her flawless hair, checked her make-up and found nothing out of place and everything to be perfect. She adjusted the long strand of signature pearls and smiled. Touching her pearls always calmed her down, made her feel more at ease. She went through the door, down a hallway, up a winding stairway and out onto the dimly lit backstage area. Her countenance was a careful mask, which she had thoughtfully arranged in preparation for her next scene. Not now, not ever, did she let her face betray any personal sensibility. However, her deep green eyes flashed with dangerous emotion and there was an almost electric energy about her that warned all who approached to keep their distance.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Edward Hearne and ignored him. She walked past Mary Cosgrove; one of the young women hired from among local actors, and pointedly ignored her as well. She looked around and wondered where the other one was – Lily or Lottie, something like that – the giddy girl who played the Gentlewomen and introduced her next scene. Irene spotted her...on the wrong side of the stage. *Where is Teddy? He's the stage manager, so why isn't he watching that girl,* she hissed to herself. The *entr'acte* was almost over and Irene impatiently waited for the performance of

Harold Jordan, the tall and gawky tenor who was singing an insipid love song, to come to its tedious conclusion.

She took a deep breath and waited. *Where was that boy?* In the next instant Bobby rushed over to her, a single white candle in his hand. She reached over and grabbed it from him.

“Light it, you fool”, she hissed at him.

His hand shaking, Bobby struck the match several times before it finally sparked and the wick flickered and caught. He quickly backed off and disappeared.

Irene heard the polite applause from the audience as Jordan quickly took his bow in front of the act curtain and stepped through the slit where it joined. He was about to exit stage left when he saw Irene standing there. Wisely, he chose the opposite side of the stage, even though it meant he had to dodge around some scenery that was set for her scene. He pitied anybody who had to go near Irene just now.

The audience quickly settled down into a restless hum of incoherent comments and chatter. With the change of music, a sense of expectancy settled over the house. It was time for Lady Macbeth’s final appearance and each patron sat up a little straighter and leaned forward. The stupid girl who had been on the wrong side of the stage made a dash for the correct side and ran directly behind Irene as quickly as she could. Irene was outraged, but before she could take the girl to task, the act curtain slowly rolled back, the well-oiled pulleys making almost no sound as the heavy deep blue velvet material parted and opened to reveal the courtyard of Macbeth’s castle.

The Doctor and the Gentlewoman moved onstage. Irene waited and listened. The actors began their speeches.

Irene straightened her shoulders and moved gracefully toward the center of the stage. She stepped onto the platform specifically placed for her to increase her height over the other actors and force them to turn their backs to the audience and look at her. Out of the corner of her right eye, she could see several people, including the disgusting drunk, Edward Hearne, cue up for the next scene. *Let him watch. Perhaps he would learn something about acting!*

To the audience, it was if she suddenly appeared, emerging like a phantom from the darkness. There was no applause, just the combined, sudden intake of breath in twenty-six hundred throats. Applause was beyond them. In that one incandescent moment, every man wanted her, every woman wanted to be her.

Only the faint hiss of the gas lamps could be heard as she slowly turned her body, taking her time. As she raised her head, the unearthly light from the candle illuminated her face and sent eerie shadows dancing across the stage floor. Her expression now revealed a woman whose sanity was completely gone, a woman caught in fear and guilt from committing an act of murder, a woman without peace or solace, not even in sleep. She began to move, and then suddenly stopped. Eyes wide open; she faced the audience, but did not focus on them. In that moment, Irene completely felt her power and knew that this was a role she absolutely owned, that she was the Lady Macbeth of her generation.

As the light slowly came up behind her, the walls of the castle were revealed, yet cast in shadow. She waited for one the Gentlewomen to say her line. Then, she began to speak.

“Yet, here’s a spot,” she whispered.

Her perfectly modulated, perfectly tuned voice - the product of years of intensive training and use - effortlessly projected to every seat in the theater and commanded each ear to listen. She wove her magic upon them, forced them to bear witness to the crumbling mind of a woman who, through relentless ambition, had pushed her husband to regicide. She was a woman in despair and fear of the penance she must now face for the execution of a most grievous murder, a woman out of touch with all reality. She cried out:

“Here’s the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!”

As she slowly worked her way across the stage, she became a woman possessed by her own insanity.

Irene did not wander all over the stage as many who played this role often did, instead, she swayed slightly, seemingly caught in the throes of the consequences of her character’s actions. The audience was swept away by the pain of her experience and many were moved to tears by her actions now. She worked her way to her last speech, not in extreme emotion, but by pulling that emotion from the audience themselves. All too soon, she came to her last speech. Tearless, but vibrating with the resultant pain of her actions:

“To bed, to bed: there’s knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What’s done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.”

She blew out the candle and phantom-like floated off the stage. There was a moment of silence. Just as the Gentlewoman was about to speak, twenty-six hundred pairs of hands came together to form their tribute. The applause was overwhelming,

incredible. It became a wave that grew stronger and stronger. When Irene stepped out from the wings, their voices added to their praise. The stifling heat was forgotten; in that moment they simply expressed their adoration of the Great Davenport.

She merely stood. After a moment of absorbing the applause, she went to the center of the stage. The extraneous actors left. They knew their speeches would go unheard anyway and they quickly backed into the wings and off of the stage, leaving Irene alone.

In the house, the audience was on its feet. The ovation became louder, stronger, overwhelming. Irene smiled. Exhilarated, vindicated, she gracefully took a step forward and made her deep actor's bow to them, those luminous pearls just kissing the oak planks of the stage floor. She felt wonderful. She raised her arms and spread them out to encompass the entire theater. Her face was a mirror of their adoration, gratefully accepted.

Bobby Martin trotted across the stage, almost completely hidden behind the huge bouquet of thirty-six long stemmed golden roses. A startled look of annoyance flickered across her face, as she wondered who would have thought to send her yellow roses. She noticed a card, and the thought occurred to her that this must be some trick played upon her by her co-star. She arranged her face into a beatific smile and bowed to accept them, gently rubbing her cheek against the delicate yellow blooms. Bobby darted off the stage.

She looked up straight into the faces of her audience and allowed a single tear to course down her right cheek, her best side. She took several slow, dancer-like steps backward, her arms a mass of yellow blooms.

Behind her, the scenery began to change for the next scene, which took place in the forest of Birnam Wood. Her anger returned in a flash. She wondered, with an internal scowl, who dared take focus away from her in this moment. The applause started to slacken, but Irene did not leave the stage. The main curtain began to close. Taking one final deep bow, she lowered her head almost to the floor and then threw it back in a triumph-filled gesture. Her pearls, following the momentum of that effort, swung back behind her and caught on the scenery. The applause picked up one final time and she decided that now was the moment to leave.

She turned, but, as if caught by an invisible hand, she was yanked back. The scenery moved upwards and was lifted into the fly space. Irene was caught and pulled backwards. The knot in her pearls slipped toward her neck and tightened around her throat. She felt herself being slowly pulled upward. The pearls dug into her neck and she felt the pressure of each one against her delicate skin.

At first, she was merely surprised and startled. *What new disaster is this?* she asked herself. She put her right hand up to her neck and tried to loosen the pearls, which only drew tighter. All pretenses were then cast aside; she panicked and dropped the roses, as both of her hands reached up to grab the white, translucent noose around her neck. The roses hit the floor, sending several yellow petals floating up and then gently back down to the stage where they softly landed, abandoned on the scarred floor.

The orchestra, which had been playing background music, stopped abruptly. The applause completely died out, replaced by confusion. The audience watched as Irene's feet rose from the stage floor, and still the scenery continued to move up and into the fly space. She pulled at her pearls. In blind terror now, she concentrated only on wrenching

away the pearls, but was ineffective against the ever tightening noose. Her face lost its actor's mask and now showed only raw fear. As she struggled and gasped for breath, the audience finally began to comprehend what was taking place. A woman screamed in horror and that was the signal for the entire audience to merge into the aisles in an attempt to exit wherever possible.

Several men in black evening dress jumped up from the orchestra section and clambered onto the stage, dust and dirt smearing their clothes. They reached for her, but now she was just above them. They looked up into the black abyss and stood helplessly as her feet twisted and beat against the scenery.

There were shouts from backstage, but the scenery still rose. The commanding voice of Teddy Ryan yelled, "Cut the rope! Cut the damn rope for the love of God, cut the rope!"

Almost immediately the backdrop fell and with it came the body of Irene Davenport.

More screams were heard as she crashed to the stage floor with an awful sound. Her pearls broke and scattered, jumping and rolling across the stage. One came to rest near the golden petals of a rose.

The act curtain finally closed, shutting off the scene. In the house, all was chaos. In a sudden rush to leave the theater, the aisles became crowded rivers of elegantly dressed men and women.

On the other side of the curtain, on the stage, the men who tried to save her formed a circle around her inert form. Her face no longer resembled the goddess they worshiped such a short time ago. Now her eyes bulged out, her lips were hideously drawn

back and her neck was red and raw where the pearls had trespassed. An aura of despair softly descended upon this small gathering, as the full impact of the disaster became reality. Irene Davenport, the greatest Lady Macbeth of her generation, was dead.

Irene Davenport felt nothing; she merely floated in a void of complete darkness. Very slowly, she became conscious of the feeling of weightlessness. Then, a curious sensation flashed through her being – a bone numbing chill that sent a whiplash of cold right through her very core. It took her breath away and threw her into a spasm of memory.

She was back on the farm where she had grown up in western Illinois. It was winter and the snow was piled up to the roof of the barn. She was seven years old and had been sent out to collect wood. She was freezing. Her skin was dry and chafed and her extremities were numb. She felt as if she would never be warm again. And she was so tired; she just wanted to go to sleep. But she knew she would be punished if she did not return with the wood and she was afraid. It was the fear that pushed her forward, the fear of what they would do to her, how they would hurt her and she could not bear it.

Then, she was back in the present, but the fear remained and expanded. Irene struggled to master it. That childhood memory was buried deep within her brain and no one knew of it. The poor, unloved childhood of Margie Conklin did not exist. It resided in the recesses of her most private thoughts. Very few people knew about Margie Conklin and certainly no one from her theatrical life. Only the myth of the talented and precocious childhood of Irene Davenport existed. A girl nothing like Margie Conklin. Irene Davenport was worshiped, adored, rich and famous. For all intents and purposes, Margie Conklin never existed.

Irene took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. It seemed to release the memory and the fear. Her breath condensed in front of her face. Why was the air so frigid? Why this sudden memory of her childhood? The feeling of the cold dissipated, but the cold itself remained. The nothingness returned.

What happened to her? A moment ago it was so hot in the theater.

*Damn this heavy costume and the gas lights and their annoying hiss.*

But, she could no longer hear the hiss. There was no sound at all. There was no sense of the weight of her costume. The cold wrapped around her once again she reached down to pull up her tartan shawl and surround herself in its warmth. It did not help.

*Where had the heat gone,* she wondered.

For the first time, she looked down at her hand, at her body and realized she was floating along the ceiling of the theater. She screamed. Panic flooded through her mind and her body. The visceral need to get back on to the stage floor overwhelmed her. She attempted to move in that direction, but nothing happened.

“I must get to the floor of the stage,” she said, in desperation.

And immediately, she floated downward, closer and closer to the proscenium of the stage.

She looked out into the audience and was surprised to see no one there. The house was completely empty. But it had been filled to capacity just a moment ago. She was sure of it. Once again, she thought about moving upstage and immediately found herself there. She turned to move left and downstage and nothing happened, but when she thought about moving left and down, she moved in that direction. That was when she

became aware of a group of people in evening dress standing on the stage. They appeared to be looking at something or at someone on the floor in the center of the stage.

*What are they doing down there?* She wondered and immediately drifted toward them.

“I am here! Can’t you see me?” she called out.

There was no response.

She reached out her right hand and touched the shoulder of a distinguished looking man in expensive evening clothes who was bent over the stage. While she could see the fine texture of the cloth, she could not feel it. He shuddered and quickly looked behind him. Irene recognized him then – it was Samuel Connelly. She felt a certain power run through her. He was absolutely devoted to her. Part of her carefully orchestrated plan for her future, for she knew he could not deny her, that he would help her.

“Samuel. I’m here. Look at me!”

Irene was right next to him, but he did not acknowledge her. His face was pale and lined with anguish. Then she noticed his companion, a younger man, dressed just as elegantly. She recognized Samuel’s assistant, Paul Coopersmith. The younger man reached out and gently grabbed Samuel’s arm and whispered in his ear.

“I am afraid she is dead, sir. We are of no use here. We must leave before the authorities arrive.”

Samuel stood up. He slowly straightened his shoulders and nodded to his companion.

“You’re right, Paul. We’d best leave now.”

Paul nodded and took a step back, waiting for Samuel to move ahead of him. Just as he turned to go, Samuel bent down and picked something up off the floor. It was one of her pearls. He held it in the palm of his hand for a moment and then, wrapped his fingers around it and placed it in his jacket pocket. Abruptly, he turned, nodded his head at Paul and then strode from the stage. Down the steps he went and out through the audience, moving so quickly, that the younger man had to work to keep up with him.

Furious, Irene called after him, but he did not hear her. She thought of her pearls.

“I am wearing my pearls, am I not?” She asked aloud.

She was not sure. She was not sure of anything anymore. Quickly, she looked down at her clothes and saw her pearls.

“Yes. They are here. But, how is it possible that they are also scattered across the floor?”

She began to float again and panic coursed through her. She could not control the direction in which she went or the movement itself. Fear overwhelmed her.

“Help me!”

She grabbed at the scenery, pulled at the side curtains, trying with all her might to stop from going up and up. And then, suddenly, she stopped. The voices of the people below her came to her in murmurs overlapping one another.

“Tragic.”

“Such a loss.”

“What shall we do?”

“Should we move her?”

“Don’t touch her.”

“How could this happen?”

“Horrible, horrible.”

Curiosity enveloped her as she thought about what they were saying. Once again, she glided downward.

There was a woman lying in the center of the stage floor, her body splayed at an odd angle.

*Who is this*, she wondered.

“Poor, poor Irene.”

Her mouth hung slack as she realized that the body on the floor was her own.

*How can this be? I’m here, I’m right here! I’m alive!*

Drawn downward, she felt a compelling urge to return to her body. She was possessed by the need to get back into that body. She must be *in* that body.

*Yes, yes, yes*, she moaned as she made her way towards the floor.

She was close, so very close. Everywhere, there are people, people walking, staring, and standing over her body, in her way. She clawed and scratched her way closer to the floor and attempted to force her way back into the body, but nothing happened. Frantically, she looked around for help but was completely ignored. No one *saw* her. She screamed, but once again, only she heard it.

“Why can’t they see me? I’m right here!”

Hovering just above her body she looked at the face – her face. It was horribly contorted and there was a deep red gash across her throat. Immediately she placed her right hand on her neck. There was no gash. A cold streak of fear gripped her, deeper and stronger than any cold she ever experienced.

She remembered now. The pain, the choking, the gasping for breath. Her throat, the inability to breathe. The pain, the pain...and then nothing. She took a deep breath. Was she breathing now? She felt no pain. She knew she put her foot right through that backdrop, yet her foot felt no pain.

*Am I...dead?* she asked herself.

She moved closer in and, once again, tried to force herself into her body. It was impossible; she no longer had any connection with her former body. She had no substance; she was merely thought now. It was if only her mind survived. And her thoughts were what allowed her to function at all.

“Unimaginable!” she whispered.

She floated away once more. There was no longer any urgency to get back to her body. It was an ugly thing to her.

An overwhelming rage suddenly gripped her. White hot anger coursed through her being. This was not an accident.

*Who did this to me?* she demanded.

Whoever it was, she would find him and she would find a way to make him pay.

A light began to shine somewhere below her and to her left. As she studied it, she began to think about how beautiful it was. She found herself floating toward it. It seemed to offer warmth. There was movement in the light and it called to her. Compelled to follow it, she floated toward one of the actors. It was that new girl, but the thought of her name failed Irene.

*Louise*, she thought. *No. Lily? No, Lillian! Yes, that was it!*

Lillian was one of the supernumeraries hired for the production and one of the Gentlewomen who had appeared just before her sleep walking scene.

Irene watched as Lillian was led away from the stage by Edward Hearne. It was just like that no-talent-drunk to thwart Irene at this moment. The light, though – it seemed to encircle Lillian, seemed to pulsate around her, as if it were emanating *from* her. Sparks shot out from her and sparkled like snowflakes against the sun, and then faded away. Irene was entranced. She searched the rest of people on the crowded stage. No one else had that special light. She watched as Edward sat Lillian down near the property table and handed her a glass of water. Lillian looked up at him, smiled and thanked him.

As a moth to a flame, Irene was drawn to Lillian. She moved closer and closer. Convinced now that there was some warmth there, some solace, that she very desperately needed to be close to it, Irene moved toward Lillian and that light. No one noticed her and no one saw her. She had to get to Lillian. She had to see what that light was. She had to get to Lillian. She had to see what that light was. So she moved closer and closer until finally she was just above Lillian and she reached her hand out toward the girl.

Suddenly, she heard a voice.

“Stop!”

The sound of it reverberated through her skull and the noise became almost unbearable. Someone saw her! She turned around to try and find the person who had spoken that one clear and concise word. What she saw was a rather ordinary man in his late forties, slender, dressed not in evening wear, but work clothes. It was Teddy Ryan, the stage manager.

*Is it possible, she said to herself. Can he see me?*

He looked in her direction, but not specifically at her. She sighed. There was no special light emanating from him. No one paid him any attention and it was obvious to her that no one else heard what he said. He stood near the stage right entrance, alone.

She suddenly remembered that Teddy was highly superstitious, obsessed with good and bad luck and knowledgeable of every myth and fable about the theater. Never having given him any serious regard before, she now regarded him with curiosity and willed herself to move closer to him.

He took a step back, apparently sensing her presence. He continued to stare, not at the rest of the people, not at the body on the stage, but up and over at her.

*He sees me! He knows I'm here. Maybe he can help me.*

He would help her, she would make him! At that moment, she finally noticed the expression on his face. Teddy was not happy that she was there.

He turned away from her. He walked over to Lillian, where she sat by the prop table, abandoned by Hearne. Teddy reached out and took Lillian by the elbow and led her off the stage and down to the dressing rooms. The light dissipated and faded out.

Irene felt herself move back and up into the fly space and the events taking place upon the stage faded and telescoped, moving a long way away from her.

There, she hovered, consumed in her fury. The desire for revenge flooded through her and she knew she would have to bide her time until the right opportunity came along.