

(The following piece by Lee Sheldon concerns his writing of a Poe-permeated installment of the television program `Blacke's Law.'--Ed. note)

On the Writing: of "Wax Poetic"

It began with a title eight years ago. If one is sufficiently in tune with the games our language plays with us, "Wax Poetic" should be immediately suggestive. A figure in wax. Madame Tussaud's famous museum. Poe.

At that time, I set down in a brief paragraph an idea for a shipboard whodunnit with supernatural overtones set in the late nineteenth century, and centering around a group of wax figures being shipped from London to a New York museum. One of these would be Edgar Allan Poe. It would be this figure that would apparently become animate during the dog watches and kill passengers in locked staterooms. At a crucial juncture, credence would be lent to the super natural explanation to the crimes by the discovery that there were human bones beneath the wax of the figure. In the end, Poe's figure would be exonerated and a very human murderer unmasked.

Nothing came of the idea. I'm sure I even attempted to sell it to anyone other than myself. But the title and the premise continued to haunt me over the years.

Since I first began reading the novels of John Dickson Carr as a teenager, I've been fascinated by impossible crimes--not simply locked room puzzles, but all variations of the form. And despite the obvious necessity for additional exposition (not only who, but how), I've managed to write some twenty impossible crimes for television. Therefore, when *Blacke's*

Magic, a television series wherein a magician solves impossible crimes, was announced, I slid into the program like a killer's hand into a soft suede glove.

Substituting Alexander Blacke's apartment for an ocean liner was simple. As a book collector myself (impossible crimes and nineteenth century detective fiction), I've always thought television unfairly neglected book collectors when choosing interesting characters to portray, so I settled on an auction of a previously undiscovered Poe manuscript.

My first experience with Poe was reading him, not seeing his name taken in vain by filmmakers. But I knew I'd need to do some research. *The Murders in Cemetery Square* was to be a full-length novel featuring C. Auguste Dupin, and set in New York. I created a provenance for the manuscript, showing when it had been completed (1848), and how it had come to be found in a trunk in the attic of a one-time rooming house on New York's Lower East Side. Although the title remains, much of the rest was excised. While it was interesting to me, others thought it served only to slow the forward momentum of the story.

I originally credited the wax figure to Madame Tussaud, but was convinced by Universal's legal department that it was better not to suggest, despite her use of death-masks, that this eminent (and elderly) lady went about digging up corpses from Baltimore churchyards to add authenticity to her creations. A scene that included the restorative powers of Amontillado was also cut because the show was too long.

What remain are over two dozen Poe references both obvious and subtle: character names, situations, etc. Even if some of these were missed by the general public, they didn't slow down the story, and the show remains a Poe puzzle in itself for those who care to piece it together.

Casting? Vincent Price sprang instantly to mind. How could he not? Star of the Corman/Poe thrillers of the early sixties, he is also remembered fondly for his famous meltdown (long before Three-Mile Island and Chernobyl) in the 3-D remake of "The House of Wax." He is the only member of the cast who recognized most of the Poe allusions.

"Wax Poetic" aired on May 7, 1986, and *Blacke's Magic* was given a premature burial by NBC shortly thereafter.

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