

MURPHY'S XMAS (EXCERPT)

Stage Adaptation

by

Trey Nichols

From the short story

and excerpts from

The Murphy Stories

by

Mark Costello

Trey Nichols

3730 S. Sepulveda Blvd. #202
Los Angeles, CA 90034
(310) 926-1061
trey@treynichols.net

Cast of Characters
(in order of appearance)

Michael Murphy: Mid-20's. Teacher. Alcoholic. Volatile, haunted, needy. Aware of NARRATOR at all times.

Narrator: 40's or older. Omnipresent storyteller and voice of Murphy's conscience. Can be played by a man or woman. Can variously employ such styles of address as sideshow barker, commentator, analyst, raconteur, priest, judge, stand-up comic, lyric poet, motivational speaker, tough love coach, etc. Addresses Murphy as well as the audience.

Annie: Late teens. Murphy's girlfriend and mistress. A hopelessly untalented music student. Loving, giving, innocent.

Glover: Murphy's friend and Annie's cello instructor. Relentlessly cheerful.

Judith: Murphy's not quite ex-wife. Devastated, vulnerable. 3 1/2 months pregnant by Murphy.

Murphy's Father: Volatile, proud. Deeply disappointed in Murphy. Can be played by the same actor who plays Glover.

Murphy's Mother: Loving, smothering, anxious. Can be played by the same actor who plays Annie.

Scene

Various locations in Kansas, Missouri, Iowa and Illinois.

Time

Late December, 1969.

The Stage

Flexible unit set to indicate the following locations: several apartments; a Volkswagen Bug; a veterans' cemetery; a room in a YMCA; Murphy's parents' house, a motel room, a music practice room, a zoo.

Production elements can be as modest or elaborate as budget and facility allow. Blocks (four small, one large) can be employed as set pieces to suggest various locations or a small table and four chairs, etc.

A bed, or sheet and pillows suggesting such, is suspended upstage right, providing a bird's eye view from the audience.

Scene 6

SETTING: The borrowed Volkswagen.
Late night.

AT RISE: The chairs have been reconfigured
to represent the Volkswagen.
Murphy is driving.

NARRATOR
The night is prodigal.

MURPHY
The inane angels of the radio squawk out their thousand
songs of Christmas

NARRATOR
and return. Murphy murders the memory of

MURPHY
Annie and Glover

NARRATOR
with the memory of his father, whom he has betrayed to old
age, the stars and stripes of the U.S. Mail.

(Murphy's FATHER shambles on in a
bathrobe, holding pad and a pen.)

He composes quick notes that he sends by air mail...but not
to Murphy:

FATHER
(Writing)
I was feeling pretty low, x, until I got the pictures you
drew for me, Michael boy, x, then I bucked up

NARRATOR
X

FATHER
God bless you

NARRATOR
X

FATHER

I miss you

NARRATOR
X

MURPHY
X

FATHER

Give my love to your daddy

NARRATOR
X!

MURPHY
X!

FATHER
X!

FATHER

who

NARRATOR

unblessed and rocking in the slick crescents of Dexamyl and fatigue, is on his way home

MURPHY

for still another Christmas.

NARRATOR

Now as he drives, Murphy notes

MURPHY

the dim absence of birds on the telephone lines

NARRATOR

and thinking of the pictures Michael draws for his grandfather, the happy crows

MURPHY

with smiles in their beaks

NARRATOR

Murphy sees his father stumbling under the sign of the cross, wandering in a listless daze across the front lawn

(FATHER shuffles in front of MURPHY,
crossing himself on the forehead, lips
and heart.)

not knowing whether to clean the gutter along the street,
or pray for his son

FATHER

who has sunk so low out in Kansas.

(FATHER exits.)

NARRATOR

It is just dawning when Murphy breaks into the mauve and white outskirts of his

MURPHY

dear dirty Decatur

NARRATOR

where billboards and Newport girls in turquoise are crowned by the bursting golden crosses of

MURPHY

my old high school

NARRATOR

then he's

MURPHY

home.

NARRATOR

Pulled up and stopped in his own driveway. And sitting there he feels

MURPHY

Agog. Like a Budhistic time bomb about to go off.

NARRATOR

About to

MURPHY

splinter and explode

NARRATOR

inside the dry sleep of his parents. The tears will smoulder. The braying angels of insomnia will shatter around the childless Christmas tree. There will be a fire

MURPHY

It will sputter and run up the walls

NARRATOR

and be Murphy's fault. Murphy can feel

MURPHY

hearts. Beginning to pump in the palms of my hands

NARRATOR

and he doesn't want to let anybody die as he knocks on the dry oaken door of his parents' home.

(NARRATOR moves chairs to set up sofa in Murphy's parents' home. Murphy remains seated.)

As he knocks on the dry oaken door...

(MURPHY doesn't move.)

...as he knocks

(Finally, MURPHY gets up, grabbing his duffel. NARRATOR moves Murphy's chair to complete the sofa. MURPHY knocks. MOTHER and FATHER enter.)

and is welcomed with

(MOTHER opens the front door.)

open arms, and the sun rising behind his back.

MOTHER

Merry Christmas!

MURPHY

Merry Christmas, Mom.

(MURPHY and MOTHER embrace.)

MOTHER

Did you drive all night? You must be exhausted.

MURPHY

I'm fine.

FATHER

Well, come on in. House is losing heat.

(MURPHY and MOTHER follow Father right.)

MURPHY

Hi, Dad.

(MURPHY and FATHER shake hands.)

Merry Christmas.

FATHER

Merry Christmas.

(He reaches for Murphy's duffel.)

I'll take that.

MURPHY

It's okay.

FATHER

I got it.

(FATHER takes Murphy's duffel. It rattles, heavy with bottles.)

FATHER

Jeez. Whatcha got in here?

MURPHY

Just some holiday cheer.

FATHER

Is that your car out there?

MURPHY

A friend's.

FATHER

'Cause if you ever need help finding a good car--

MURPHY

Thanks, Dad. But I live so close to campus--

FATHER

I'm just saying. I'd be happy to help you look.

MURPHY

(Looking at living room)

What happened in here?

MOTHER

What? Oh! Didn't we tell you? We had the living room painted.

FATHER

Turquoise.

MURPHY

Turquoise.

NARRATOR

Turquoise.

MOTHER

And there's our little Christmas tree. Isn't it darling?

NARRATOR

It's the saddest Christmas tree Murphy has ever seen.

MOTHER

We wanted something smaller this year. With just the three of us on Christmas, why make such a fuss?

FATHER

All those damn pine needles.

(Beat.)

Well, I'll let you two visit.

(FATHER exits. MOTHER leads MURPHY into the kitchen.)

MOTHER

Now have you eaten breakfast?

MURPHY

No, I'm really not--

MOTHER

I went out yesterday and bought all your favorites.

MURPHY

Mom, please. A glass of milk would be fine.

MOTHER

That's all?

MURPHY

Maybe some cottage cheese.

MOTHER

(Starts to cry)

Oh Michael please eat you look like you've lost fifty pounds since you last came to visit I have everything you

love bacon, eggs, cornbread, coffee, butter-chunk sweet rolls

NARRATOR

and Brazil nuts

MOTHER

Please eat something. I think you're making the biggest mistake of your life

MURPHY

I'm just not hung--

MOTHER

I think you'll live to regret it. Judith is a lovely girl. You have a wonderful son and another child on the way. Isn't there any hope of you getting back together? I pray night and day for you and can't get little Michael off my mind. What's ever going to happen to him and the new child? Oh, I wish I were twenty years younger.

(MURPHY glances desperately toward Narrator.)

NARRATOR

After breakfast they go shopping.

(FATHER enters. HE and MOTHER flank MURPHY. All three are now in a store.)

For his Christmas present Murphy picks out:

MURPHY

Three packs of stainless steel razor blades and a pair of black oxford basketball shoes.

FATHER

Is that it?

MURPHY

Yup.

MOTHER

Are you sure?

MOTHER

You hardly even looked around.

FATHER
You can look some more. It's Christmas, for chrissake.

MOTHER
Mike!

FATHER
Well, it is!

MURPHY
This is all I want.

(MOTHER and FATHER exchange a glance.)

MOTHER
You don't want me to wrap it? I can wrap it up nice.
Don't you want to open something from under the tree
Christmas morning?

FATHER
Don't pester him. He knows what he wants, evidently.

(MOTHER and FATHER retreat upstage to
table. FATHER hands MOTHER a portion
of newspaper and they read.)

NARRATOR
After they get home, Murphy slips off for a workout at his
high school gym.

(MURPHY rises and starts jogging in
circles around stage.)

The basketball team is practicing, and Murphy runs in wide
circles around them

MURPHY
not bothering a soul.

NARRATOR
On his way home, Murphy explores the old neighborhood. Up
and down each block

MURPHY
birds bang in and out of bird feeders.

NARRATOR
The withering neighbors have put up fences

MURPHY

within fences within fences.

NARRATOR

Left to himself that afternoon, he drinks

MURPHY

rum and egg nog

NARRATOR

and plays with the remote controls of the color television set.

(MURPHY picks up a remote and switches channels. We hear snatches of 60's TV: cartoons, newscasts, commercials, Vietnam War. As MURPHY flips channels, the war sounds become louder and more frequent, until finally it's stuck on one channel. FATHER slams down his newspaper, gets up, and crosses toward MURPHY.)

FATHER

The hell's going on in here?!

(MURPHY shrugs and surrenders the remote. FATHER turns the TV off. MURPHY gets up.)

NARRATOR

Then Murphy roams the house

MURPHY

and everything has changed.

NARRATOR

The sheets of his bed

MURPHY

are blue.

NARRATOR

On the walls, where once there were corniced frames with color photographs of Murphy in tight-collared military attire, there are now

MURPHY

purple paintings of Jesus Christ kneeling on rocks in the Garden of Gethsemane.

NARRATOR

Every place he looks, he sees the old newspaper photographs of himself in his high school basketball uniform with game highlights and box scores. As he looks

MURPHY

the clippings get smaller and smaller, the points fewer and fewer, and there is always a snub-nosed statue of St. Francis of Assisi standing there

NARRATOR

to measure himself by. Half-drunk, Murphy wanders outside and keeps hitting the wrong switches.

(Sudden bright light on MURPHY.)

MURPHY

Ahh!

NARRATOR

Floodlights glare from the roof of the garage and light up the whole backyard.

FATHER

Hey, hey, watch it out there! The neighbors'll think you're breaking in!

MOTHER

Mike...

FATHER

A little peace and quiet! Is that too much to ask?

(MURPHY slouches back to the sofa. We HEAR Christmas Carolers singing. Father crosses to the front door.)

NARRATOR

All night long, Murphy's father keeps paying the encroaching negro carolers not to sing.

FATHER

(To "Carolers")

Thank you. Thank you. Merry Christmas.

FATHER (CONT.)

(Off MOTHER's look)

Just a little peace and quiet. If we're not gonna have kids running around the house, can't we at least have a nice quiet Christmas Eve?

NARRATOR

Finally, Murphy gets up from the sofa and announces that he's

MURPHY

going out.

(MURPHY exits with his rum and egg nog. MOTHER and FATHER look at him disapprovingly. They exit. Lights dim.)

CHRISTMAS MUSIC fades up as NARRATOR sets up the VW. MURPHY enters and sits.)

NARRATOR

He sits in the Volkswagen and drinks rum and egg nog until three o'clock in the morning. Then he gets out,

(MURPHY gets out of the car unsteadily.)

vomits on the curb

(MURPHY doubles over and retches.)

and goes back inside

(MURPHY exits and re-enters, and stumbles into the house. MOTHER enters in her nightgown.)

NARRATOR

where his mother is awake in a nightgown of shriveled violet.

(MURPHY and MOTHER face each other.)

And how will Murphy deck his song for that large sweet soul? And how will he hold her when she stops him on the

carpet outside his bedroom door? And what shall his perfume be?

MOTHER

Michael? Have you been drinking?

MURPHY

A little.

MOTHER

It's so late.

MURPHY

I couldn't sleep. What are you doing up?

MOTHER

I couldn't sleep either. And your father's been tossing and turning all night.

MURPHY

We should all get some sleep. Good night.

MOTHER

Wait. Michael...

MURPHY

Yes?

MOTHER

I just want to tell you that...that I love you, in spite of everything, that you'll always be my son no matter what happens...

MURPHY

(taking her face in his hands)

I love you, too, Mom.

MOTHER

I'm just so sorry you had to leave your wife and child for a mere girl. It is unbelievable that

NARRATOR

in his hands, her small skull buzzes. And even before she mentions the fact of Annie, Murphy is holding

MURPHY

Annie's skull

NARRATOR

in his hands, and the sinking wings of his mother's sweet shoulders are Annie's shoulders in his mother's nightgown sinking.

MURPHY

What are you talking about?

MOTHER

That girl you're living with. She called tonight. On Christmas Eve. Your father answered. He was furious.

MURPHY

Mom, I'm not living with anyone.

MOTHER

Michael, I know you are.

MURPHY

I'm not. Good night.

MOTHER

If you're not living with someone then who was it who called? She sounded like she was fifteen and she asked for Michael Murphy, and when your father said "This is Michael Murphy," she giggled and said, "No, the other Michael Murphy. I'm his...his lover."

MURPHY

Maybe she meant Glover. He's her

MURPHY

cello teacher.

NARRATOR

cello teacher.

MOTHER

She said "Michael Murphy."

MURPHY

Then I don't know who it could have been. I told you I'm not living with anyone.

(MOTHER starts sobbing. MURPHY holds her.)

NARRATOR

Disregarding the crooked insomnia of his eyes, she finally says:

MOTHER

All right. Just promise me you'll try to get some sleep.
Do you promise now?

MURPHY

I promise.

(MOTHER kisses MURPHY and exits.)

NARRATOR

And she leaves him sleepless, holding his lie like a sheet
up to his chin, with Christ kneeling on the wall

MURPHY

the scent of her handcream

NARRATOR

on the back of his neck. And he hears her alone in the
next room, coughing like a wife he has lost at last and
picking at her rosary beads all night long.

MURPHY

There is no sleep.

NARRATOR

Or peace on earth.

BLACKOUT