

Philip Morris Playhouse

Murder Needs An Artist (May 9, 1950)

Synopsis and critique

"Johnny presents...The Philip Morris Playhouse, produced, edited and directed by William Spier. Tonight's star...Vincent Price....."

"Call for Philip Morr-ees! Call for Philip Morr-ees." "It's a call for..." "Philip Morreees."

"And now with Vincent Price as star, we bring you Murder Needs An Artist, tonight's production of the Philip Morris Playhouse."

Vincent Price stars as George Aloysius Hilton. The announcer is 'Johnny.' The other characters (actors uncredited) are:

Police Official
District Attorney
Flophouse man
Flophouse voice
Christopher Grayson
Carol
"Teddy" Meyers
Maggett, Gallery dealer

"So you see, D.A., the case just sort of dropped in our laps." The police official pauses, there's the sound of a match and an intake of breath. "Oh, excuse me, you want a cigarette?" The District Attorney, of course, accepts one. [For Philip Morris, sponsor, is a cigarette company.] "You said over the phone there was a confession." "Oh, yeah, yeah, Dogherty took it down only about a half hour ago. Have a look." There's a rustling sound as the D. A. takes a sheaf of papers and begins to read aloud. "...The whole thing began less than two months ago when I was working on a new novel. It was supposed to be about the gutter life of New York but somehow it lacked believability. In desperation I hit on the idea of spending a couple of days in a Bowery flophouse..."

The voice of **Hilton** (Vincent Price) takes over. "...I put on my shabbiest suit, locked my apartment, and decided on the Ritz Arms. Fifteen cents a night. It was a big room with one high window and cots lining all four walls. There weren't any sheets or blankets on the beds,

only moth-eaten, thread-bare mattresses, and a heavy whisky odour permeated the room.”

Prophetically, **Hilton** is assigned to Cot #13. On the cot next to him is a broken down derelict who begins coughing. **Hilton** looks at him and receives the shock of his life. “It was Grayson! Christopher Grayson. Yet it couldn’t be. I sat there absolutely paralyzed. It was insane. It couldn’t be. Grayson was dead. He died six years ago.”

Hilton speaks to the derelict desperately, but the man’s voice and mind are thick with liquor. He confesses that he doesn’t know *who* he is. **Hilton** backs off, thinking furiously. He hadn’t known Grayson at all – just met him a couple of times at parties. Christopher Grayson had been an artist – an unsuccessful artist. But after he had died – burned to death in a cheap hotel room – the value of his paintings had skyrocketed and critics began calling him a genius. Hilton notices that there are some half-crumpled sheets of paper, sketches for paintings, underneath the cot of the derelict – and this convinces him – the derelict is Christopher Grayson.

Hilton wakes Grayson up. Grayson isn’t cooperative. “I remember...only brands of beer.” He intends to go out and get a drink, but **Hilton** stops him desperately. He promises to provide Grayson with a drink any time he wants it, if only he’ll come with him. **Hilton** forces himself to speak calmly...”You see, I’m a writer. I’m doing a book on the Bowery and I ...” “Wait a minute, wait a minute, let me get this straight. You want to use me as a subject...you want to take me as you would a filthy little germ, stick me under a microscope, see what makes me tick. Well, don’t you?” **Hilton** begins apologizing, but Grayson interrupts him. “I’ll take the job. I’ll do anything for a drink. I’ve sunk that low.”

Hilton takes Grayson to his apartment. The next morning he goes to an art supply store and buys an easel, canvases, paints and brushes. As he’s leaving, he runs into Myers, the art editor for the local paper, the Chronicle. “Don’t tell me you’re taking up painting?” he says condescendingly. “...seems like a prudent move on your part, George. You read the Chronicle? Carruthers’ review of your latest, you’ll pardon the expression, book?” “I always make it a point to avoid dull reading.” **Hilton** snaps. “But the Chronicle’s readers aren’t so discriminating. And after all Carruthers is on the Board of the 'Novel of the Month' club. That’s not good, George. That’s not good.” The shop girl interrupts them and Myers leaves with a parting shot. “Well, it’s been nice seeing you, George. And good luck in your new career...”

Hilton gains control of himself. He hates Myers not only because like so many stupid people Myers couldn’t understand his books, but because of Carol. They were both after the same woman – and Myers was winning.

Hilton returns to his apartment, unpacks the painting materials and sets them up in an easily accessible area, and then wakens the still sleeping Grayson. “I’ve got to go out for a

while...I'll dissect you later." "Eh?" We made a bargain yesterday. You were tell me all about life in flophouses, and I was to stand your living expenses." Grayson laughs. "Bring back another bottle of this stuff here, will you? It packs a beautiful wallop."

After two hours, **Hilton** returns to find his high hopes realized. Grayson has started painting. **Hilton** speaks excitedly:

"A real artist never forgets, his technique remains part of him always, like a passion for a beautiful woman. That's how it was with Grayson.....there was a feverish gleam in his eyes, as if he'd just been reunited with the one thing in the world he loved." Grayson starts guiltily as soon as **Hilton** enters the room, and apologizes for ruining the canvas. He just couldn't help himself. Hilton speaks cheerily. "Go ahead, finish it." "I can keep painting? You don't mind?" "Mind?" says **George Hilton**. His voice takes on an innocent tone that is lost on Christopher Grayson. "No, I don't mind."

A week passes. **Hilton** waits anxiously for Grayson to complete his first picture. He can't hide his excitement as he calls up the husky-voiced Carol. She speaks in cheery and condescending tones...her voice sharpening only when he mentions he might be getting some money soon...and then rings off when Teddy Myers arrives. They're off to Gypsy's for Spanish food.

Hilton says "Goodbye," abruptly and hangs up. Two days later, Grayson finishes the painting. Not only that, he's put his initials, C.G., in the left hand corner. To **Hilton's** demands he protests that he doesn't know why, before passing out on the floor, drunk. **Hilton** realizes that he's got to get Grayson to paint faster – to get as many paintings as he can before Grayson recovers his memory. After that – well, he'd been dead once, he would be dead again. And Hilton would be rich.

COMMERCIAL

Several days later **Hilton** pays a visit to Maggett, the biggest art dealer in town. He explains that he had bought several paintings from Grayson before he died. Maggett's reaction is as he expected.

"Four thousand."

"What do you think I am, a fool?"

"Well, ten thousand."

"You're joking. Why, even the publicity is worth that much to you."

"Well, I'll give you fifteen thousand, no more, provided of course you give me first option on any others you have."

"Twenty thousand or I go somewhere else."

"All right. But when can I see the others?"

"In due time, Maggett, in due time."

The next day the newspapers are full of the story - a cache of Christopher Grayson's paintings is about to hit the market. Even art editor Tedy Myers writes a Sunday learned dissertation about the social importance of Christopher Grayson's 'last period.' and how his work shows the frustration of the 20th century....

And, not more than a few hours after Myers' column hit the newstands, Carol calls **Hilton** .
"Darling, I've been reading all about it. Why on Earth didn't you tell me!" Her voice is much different now, cute, cajoling...she invites him to come over. George isn't fooled, but he doesn't care:

"Money. Now that I had money Carol was mine, I knew that. She wormed a diamond bracelet out of me that evening - at least I promised to get her one."

All the next week **Hilton** leaves Grayson pretty much alone. He painted like a madman, a strange, almost crafty look in his eyes. He was interested in nothing but painting...and his bottle. But it was getting to be a race against time. Every day Grayson would say things that made **Hilton** believe he was close to regaining his memory. Losing no time, Hilton rents a cabin in the Catskills and brings Grayson up there. After a few days he returns to his apartment to get some clothes.

There's a knock on the door. It's the hated rival, Myers, as smarmy as ever. "Hello, George, aren't you going to ask me in?" **Hilton** intends to slam the door in his face, but Myers points out that he knows what **Hilton** has been doing. He'd been suspicious ever since he saw the art-hating **Hilton** buying art supplies. Myers insists on becoming a partner in Christopher Grayson, Incorporated. "My dear fellow, you have no choice." At last **Hilton** agrees, and pours out a couple of glasses of sherry for them to drink to their new partnership. "This will fix me up," says Myers. "Yes," says **Hilton** in a hard voice. "It should."

Myers insists on driving up to the cabin to meet Grayson. They take his car. As he drives he yawns more and more- Hilton has put a sleeping powder into his sherry. At last he pulls off to the side of the road, relinquishing the wheel to Hilton. Hilton drives the car to the nearest cliff, moves the unconscious Myers into the driver's seat, and sends it tumbling over the edge to a fiery doom. Christopher Grayson, Inc. has only one stockholder again.

That night, **Hilton** promises Carol that they'll go away together, soon. The next day, he sells

the five paintings Grayson has completed to Maggett and receives a check for \$100,000. He cashes the check the next day and stows the cash underneath the front seat of his car. He reserves two tickets on a plane to Rio de Janeiro. And then, once more he returns to the cabin, this time with murder on his mind. He opens the door and sees Christopher Grayson on the cot. He was staring right at Hilton, the drunken, stupid fool.. **Hilton** raised his gun. He took careful aim.

Three gun shots ring out. Someone groans. A heavy body hits the floor.

The D.A. wants to know how the police captured **Hilton** . “We didn’t.” “Huh?” The policeman explains that six years ago Christopher Grayson staged his own death, with his wife’s help. He took out an insurance policy, and then disappeared. The charred corpse that was found could have been anyone. Later his wife committed suicide (or was she murdered?) and he had all the insurance money to himself.

“Imagine how Grayson must have felt. He’d become famous, but after he was dead.” He’d also lost or spent all his money in those six years, but couldn’t show up for fear of having a murder rap pinned to him. He saw his chance to use George Hilton and took it. Meanwhile, the art dealer had subjected the paintings to flourescopic examination and discovered the oils weren’t six years old – and he’d called the police claiming he’d been swindled. The police traced Hilton to his Catskills cabin because of that call and nabbed Christopher Grayson making a getaway with a gun and the cash. **Hilton** was inside the cabin with three slugs in him. He lived twenty minutes, long enough to tell his tale.

The D.A. laughs.

....After the episode, Vincent Price speaks with Johnny. "Tonight must have seemed like typecasting to you, Mr. Price, what with the time you spend in the artworld." Vincent Price had starting collecting art at the tender age of 10, and it remained a lifelong passion. He founded The Vincent Price Gallery on the campus of East Los Angeles College in the early 1950s.

Critique

A fun episode. All of the actors give excellent performances, although the brief scene at the beginning between the police official and the D. A. is marred by both actors stumbling over a word. However, they recover well.

It is sad but true to state that most artists' work appreciates after they are dead and can produce no more. The case of artist Vincent Van Gogh is the most tragic and the most famous. Van Gogh was able to sell only one painting in his life, before he committed suicide. Now, a hundred years later, his works are worth millions.

The plot of an artist's paintings becoming fabulously valuable after his death (and therefore an artist faking his death in order to cash in) has been used many times since this program aired.

For someone giving what turns out to be a deathbed confession, Vincent Price's voice is remarkably full of life!