

## *A Very Expensive Poison* Synopsis

Please note: The following details the story of the play and therefore contains spoilers.

### **Background**

*A Very Expensive Poison* is based on the true story of the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006. A former employee of Russia's FSB (Federal Security Service, a governmental spy agency), Litvinenko became a whistleblower, outing corruption at the highest levels of the Russian government. He fled Russia for London in 2000 along with his wife Marina and son Anatoly, and became a British citizen shortly before his death. 10 years later, a public enquiry found Russia's president Vladimir Putin 'probably' responsible for approving the operation to poison Litvinenko using the radioactive chemical Polonium 210.

The story unfolds through the eyes of Marina Litvinenko. We move fluidly between three narrative timelines nestled inside one another, – the first is the 2013 public enquiry into Litvinenko's murder – Marina's quest for justice. The second is Litvinenko's death in 2006 and the subsequent investigation by British intelligence into his poisoning. And the third story begins in Moscow in 1994, showing us the events which led Litvinenko to a bed in King's College Hospital, slowly dying.

### **ACT ONE**

We begin in 2013 in a London coffee shop where Marina Litvinenko meets her lawyer, Emmerson. The inquest into her husband's death has been blocked. The government cares more about maintaining a civil relationship with Russia than it does about Marina's case. But Emmerson has another idea. A public enquiry. Tell the story to the British public.

We are transported back to November 2006 when Alexander, who Marina affectionately calls Sasha, first went to the hospital complaining of stomach pain. The hospital suspects a stomach bug. When Sasha and Marina speak to each other, the actors speak fluid English using their own natural accents, but when they speak to the various doctors at Sasha's bedside, they speak Russian-accented English. This tells us when they are speaking in Russian – to each other and to other Russians in the play – and when they are speaking in English.

Days pass, and doctor after doctor can't figure out what's wrong with Sasha. On day five, Marina decides to tell the doctors that there is a chance someone could have put something in Sasha's food. No one takes this suggestion very seriously. It's not until day 12 that they test his urine and discover Polonium 210 – a rare radioactive element, fatal if ingested. He will die, and soon. A detective from the specialist crime unit, DI Hyatt, comes to talk to him. There isn't much time for Sasha to tell the detective everything.

Moscow. 1994. Marina and Sasha are moving in together. Marina is pregnant with Anatoly. Sasha's working for the FSB where his contentious and thorough detective work is getting him noticed, and not in a good way. Total accountability is not really how things are done at the FSB. When Sasha gets a visit from a colleague who offers him a job protecting a man called Boris Beresovskiy, a prominent businessman and media mogul, he accepts. But some months later, Sasha's FSB colleagues visit again. This time, they ask Sasha to kill Boris. Sasha refuses to carry out this order. And not only that, he warns Boris Beresovskiy that there might be an attempt on his life. And it is then that Sasha's 'trouble' starts. Threatening letters. A mugging in the street. Sasha is suspended from his job and his salary stopped.

But at a party at Boris' house, we learn that Boris has managed to get the head of the FSB fired and replace him with a young friend of his, Vladimir Putin. He's set up a meeting between Putin and Litvinenko. Sasha will get his job back. They eat, drink, dance. And then we're in young Putin's office. Sasha reports for duty with binders full of corruption amongst their ranks, carefully noted and filed. When Sasha leaves, Putin places a call: 'Monitor and inconvenience' Litvinenko. At home, Marina is waiting up. Three days ago she and Anatoly found teeth on the pavement outside their door. She's frightened. Sasha tells her that things at the FSB have got worse. He and some others have decided to speak out and expose the corruption at the highest levels of government. Marina doesn't want him to do it but knows that he must; this is the man she married. In a televised press conference, Sasha accuses the FSB of kidnappings, armed robberies, killings. Of acting above and outside the law. From then on, his life in Moscow is hell. He is taken to prison on trumped up charges. He is beaten within an inch of his life. But a general election is coming and Marina is hopeful that a new president will change things – at the FSB and in the country.

The new president is revealed. It's Putin. He tells us that it's the interval now, but there's no need to come back for the second half because he can tell us how the story ends. The Litvinenkos lived happily ever after in a beautiful cottage in the Russian countryside. Alexander, Marina, Anatoly and their cat, Yuri.

## **ACT TWO**

When we return, Putin provides a running commentary on what we are seeing, which right now is the check-in desk at Moscow Airport. FSB agent Andrei Lugovoi makes his way through the auditorium to get to check-in. His flight to London's about to close. But not without his colleague Kovtun, who's cutting it extremely fine. The curtain raises to reveal the Litvinenkos' new flat. It's now 2000 and the family have escaped Russia for the safety of London, where Sasha is applying for asylum. They settle into London life. Anatoly starts school. They are happy.

Back at Sasha's hospital bed, he explains to the detectives that in London he continued to fight to expose Russian state corruption alongside a small group of dissident expats. One of them, a young female journalist, was shot and killed in her apartment one month ago. And then we are hurled back in time again to a swanky restaurant in Mayfair where Boris Beresovskiy is holding court. We learn he's also fled Russia and Sasha is now working for him as a security advisor. Boris sings a song about the Russian information network in London – a Moscow-Upon-Thames. We move to Japanese chain restaurant Itsu and Sasha's first meeting with Lugovoi and Kovtun. They're in town on holiday. They buy Sasha's lunch. He doesn't eat it.

Detective Hyatt asks Sasha to take him through his exact movements in the 24-hour period before he started to feel unwell. We go to the café in Waterstones Piccadilly where Sasha met an Englishman, Martin; to Itsu, where he meets an Italian, Scaramella; to tea at the Millennium Hotel, with Lugovoi and Kovtun, fresh from an Arsenal match; and then home to Marina and Anatoly for a celebratory dinner. Sasha has just become a British citizen and we watch what we now know are his last moments with his family.

Detective Hyatt goes to the locations one by one and tests them for radiation. None at Waterstones. None, of course, at home. But at Itsu, where he met Scaramella, radiation is found. A lead. But then Hyatt finds radiation at the table at the Millennium Hotel as well; and Sasha realises that he always sits at the same table in Itsu for meetings. It wasn't Scaramella – the first poisoning attempt happened when he met Lugovoi and Kovtun at this same table, a meeting we've already seen. We watch this scene again but this time, their clumsy attempts to poison Sasha are clear. After their

failed attempt, they pour the polonium down the toilet at the Best Western Hotel and fly home. We know they'll return a second time and succeed.

Back to the public enquiry now, and our present moment, as Lugovoi and Kovtun are named responsible for Sasha's murder. Putin commentates as the characters swirl into a mad dance, the past and the present now merging into one moment. The dance fades away to leave Sasha and Marina dancing cheek to cheek. We haven't noticed that the two assassins have escaped. And in 2013 London, Sasha is dying. A photograph of him on his deathbed is taken. And then, he's gone.

In the final moments of the play, the artifice falls away. The actor playing Marina Litvinenko reads Alexander Litvinenko's actual words in the statement he wrote before he died, indicting Putin in his murder. Then she asks some audience members to read the actual words of the report published as a result of the public enquiry. Lugovoi and Kovtun won't be extradited, they won't be imprisoned, but as far as the British legal system can go, justice has been done. With a last word to us, Marina leaves.