
A SHORT-BOOK PLANNING GUIDE

THE LIVING FUNERAL EVENT GUIDE

For hosts, planners, friends, and performers building a ceremony that begins as reverence and becomes impossible.

T-30 DAYS TO SHOWTIME

How to Use This Guide

This guide is a planning companion for an event that is part memorial, part birthday, part performance, part party. It is written for the person who must turn a beautiful, dangerous idea into an actual room with guests, microphones, flowers, cues, and exits.

Use it in order if you are beginning at T-30 days. Use it as a menu if you already have venue, guests, or vendors. The goal is not to imitate a single party, but to make a coherent version of the form: a living funeral that lets people say the real thing while the guest of honor is still there to hear it.

GUIDING IDEA

The event is not a gag. It is a ritual that earns the right to become funny. Start with truth. Add structure. Then let the room become alive.

THE THREE DOCUMENTS YOU SHOULD BUILD

- A one-page creative brief: title, tone, guest count, venue, arc, must-have moments, hard constraints.
- A production run sheet: time, action, speaker, cue, on deck, owner, prop.
- A cast and vendor map: every person with a job, every vendor with arrival time, every object with an owner.

The Event in One Sentence

A living funeral is a ceremonial party where guests gather as if to remember someone after death, but the person is present, hidden, or revealed - and the night becomes a structured release of affection, absurdity, testimony, and celebration.

THE ESSENTIAL MOVEMENT

- Guests enter a solemn space and behave more carefully than they would at a birthday party.
- The first speakers make the room emotionally credible.
- A legal, theatrical, or detective frame creates permission for play.
- The guest of honor returns, objects, thanks everyone, and converts the ceremony into celebration.
- The party afterward lets people metabolize the emotional strangeness instead of leaving suspended.

PRODUCER NOTE

If the first act feels fake, the comedy feels cheap. If the first act feels real, the comedy becomes release.

The Big Host Decisions

DECIDE THESE BEFORE HIRING VENDORS

- What do guests know in advance: full transparency, semi-mystery, or theatrical surprise?
- How sincere is the first act: 70/30, 60/40, or 50/50 serious-to-absurd?
- Is the host visible, hidden, prerecorded, or revealed?
- Is the coffin a sacred object, a stage prop, a legal exhibit, a photo object, or all four in sequence?
- Will guests speak spontaneously, only by invitation, or through planted prompts?
- Does the event lean religious, secular-liturgical, gothic, comic, legal, or murder-mystery?

BEST DEFAULT

Use semi-mystery, funeral black dress, a sincere opening, four formal eulogies, an attorney turn, a detective handoff, a reveal, three toasts, cake, and dancing.

The Emotional Architecture

Think of the night as a controlled transformation. Each section gives guests a new permission.

- Arrival gives permission to whisper and wonder.
- Eulogies give permission to love the host out loud.
- The attorney gives permission to laugh at the bureaucracy of life.
- The detective gives permission to suspect, testify, and play.
- The open mic gives permission to join the ritual.
- The reveal gives permission to cheer.
- The toasts give permission to make meaning.
- The dancing gives permission to stop explaining.

ARC

The arc is simple: make the room quiet, make it truthful, make it strange, make it explode.

The Cast: People Who Make the Form Work

CORE ROLES

- The host: symbolic center, eventual witness, and final meaning-maker.
- JOHN MY FRIEND: opens the ceremony, legitimizes the ritual, introduces the first turn, and exits by 5 PM.
- Stage manager: invisible authority; controls cues, timing, handoffs, props, and vendor traffic.
- Attorney: reads will, sealed note, codicil, and legal absurdities with total seriousness.
- Detective: takes over after JOHN MY FRIEND, questions suspects, opens testimony, and drives the reveal.
- Eulogists: emotional anchors who keep the opening from becoming a sketch.
- Plants: carefully placed guests who find clues, make claims, or trigger the next movement.

A helpful rule: every performer should have a genre, not a vague concept. Attorney as probate noir. Detective as country-house investigator. Outsider spouse as sane witness. VC friend as blustering suspect.

The Speaker Mix

Do not ask several people to speak generally about the host. Give each speaker a lane. Repetition is the enemy of momentum.

FORMAL EULOGIES

- Old friend: history, loyalty, early version of the host.
- Comic friend: mischief, schemes, impossible plans, social velocity.
- Family or chosen-family voice: tenderness, children, continuity, softness.
- Work or creative-life voice: ambition, invention, unfinished projects, public self.

LATER VOICES

- Romantic or close witness: ache, longing, unresolved tenderness.
- Fake claimant: comic legal pressure.
- Witness 1: last sighting.
- Witness 2: clue or envelope.
- Toast speakers: one intimate, one familial, one comic closer.

Vendor Map

ESSENTIAL VENDORS

- Venue: the room must already contain some gravity.
- Stage manager or producer: the single most important operating role.
- Sound/DJ: microphones for ceremony and energy for party.
- Bar/catering: restrained at arrival, active after reveal.
- Photographer/video: this event is memory-rich and visually rare.
- Florist/scenic: flowers make the funeral language legible.
- Props/print: coffin, will, envelopes, programs, signs, guest relics.

OPTIONAL BUT POWERFUL

- Choir or singer, dancer, lighting designer, actors, costume stylist, live illustrator, funeral director consultant, security, professional officiant backup.

Venue and Room Design

The venue is not a container; it is the first performer. Choose a space that can hold reverence before it holds absurdity.

LOOK FOR

- A visible front focal point for coffin and speakers.
- A clean guest entrance with space for memorial signing.
- Good enough acoustics for speech.
- Load-in access for props, flowers, food, and sound.
- Permission for alcohol, amplified sound, dancing, and theatrical content.
- An end time that allows ceremony and party without panic.

ROOM ZONES

- Entrance: greeters, programs, relic signing.
- Front: coffin, mic, flowers, attorney table.
- Side/back: DJ, bar, food hold, on-deck speaker seats.
- After reveal: coffin converts from sacred object to photo site.

Guest Experience Design

Guests should never feel lost, but they should often feel deliciously uncertain. That is the line.

BEFORE ARRIVAL

- Send an invitation that signals theatricality without spoiling mechanics.
- Give dress code: funeral black, elegant, dramatic but respectful.
- Tell speakers exact length and lane.
- Tell guests whether spontaneous remarks are allowed.

AT ARRIVAL

- Greeters direct guests to sign objects.
- Music is low and solemn.
- Bar is open but quiet.
- Attorney and detective may be visible but unexplained.
- Seating begins early enough that 4 PM actually starts at 4 PM.

EXPERIENCE RULE

The guest journey should feel hosted, not chaotic. Surprise is delightful; confusion is merely unpaid labor.

T-30 to T-21: Foundation

T-30

Write the creative brief: title, purpose, guest count, venue target, budget, emotional arc, reveal, must-have people, constraints.

T-29 TO T-27

Venue shortlist, budget bands, guest list tiers, producer or stage manager selection.

T-26 TO T-24

Invitation language, dress code, save-the-date, speaker shortlist, character shortlist.

T-23 TO T-21

Begin outreach to venue, sound/DJ, photographer, catering/bar, florist, scenic/props, performers. Ask venue about alcohol, sound, dancing, load-in, insurance, candles, end time, and theatrical restrictions.

MILESTONE

By T-21, the shape should be real enough that vendors can quote it without inventing the event for you.

T-20 to T-14: Casting and Script

T-20

Define JOHN MY FRIEND's exact block. He opens, frames, introduces eulogies, introduces attorney, handles the detective interruption, and leaves by 5 PM.

T-19 TO T-18

Confirm formal eulogists and character cast. Minimum viable character cast is attorney plus detective. Strong version adds VC friend, outsider spouse, fake claimant, and two witnesses.

T-17 TO T-16

Send speaker prompts. Draft fake will, sealed note, codicil, detective arc, clue sequence, and host reveal line.

T-15 TO T-14

Create the first 5-minute run sheet with time, action, speaker, cue, on deck, prop, and owner.

T-13 to T-7: Design and Vendor Lock

T-13 TO T-11

Choose visual language, dress code, guest relics, floral direction, and printed materials. Decide whether the mood is classic funeral, gothic literary, minimalist memorial, legal absurdist, or sacred-surreal.

T-10 TO T-9

Lock sound/DJ and reveal cue. Confirm mic plan, backup mic, music timing, and whether the DJ can support speeches as well as dancing.

T-8

Lock food, bar, photographer, and shot list. Decide when food appears. Best default: quiet bar at arrival, food after reveal, cake later.

T-7

Confirm venue operations in writing. Access, exit, insurance, alcohol, sound cutoff, cleanup, trash, candles, furniture, and lockup.

T-6 to T-1: Rehearsal and Finalization

T-6

Confirm speakers individually. Remind them: short, specific, sincere. Comedy comes from truth, not commentary.

T-5

Create the master packet: run sheet, contacts, floor plan, cue list, speaker order, prop list, safety plan, cleanup plan.

T-4

Rehearse machinery: attorney, detective, stage manager, host, DJ/sound, coffin wrangler. Run the will, interruption, witness/clue sequence, voice cue, reveal, and first host line.

T-3 TO T-2

Send guest reminder, print materials, pack prop bins, reconfirm vendors, confirm payments and arrivals.

T-1

Walk the space. Test reveal mechanics. Finalize host speech. Assign phone, water, clothes, and pre-event food. Do not add genius at midnight unless genius can be taped down safely.

Day-of Flow

1:00 TO 2:30 - LOAD-IN

Coffin placed, memorial table built, flowers installed, sound checked, bar/catering staged, scripts printed, vendors checked in.

2:30 TO 4:00 - ARRIVAL

Guests sign relics, drink quietly, settle. Attorney and detective are visible but not central. JOHN MY FRIEND prepares.

4:00 TO 5:00 - JOHN MY FRIEND BLOCK

Welcome, silence, eulogies, music, attorney, sealed note, detective interruption, handoff, exit.

5:00 TO 6:20 - DETECTIVE BLOCK

Questions, witnesses, clue, testimony, codicil, no death certificate, coffin voice, build, reveal.

6:20 TO 9:00 - RELEASE

Host speaks, case closes, food/drinks/photos, toasts, dancing, cake, final lines, final anthem, cleanup.

Safety and Risk

COFFIN SAFETY

- Assign one sober coffin wrangler.
- Never lock the host in.
- Test airflow and open/close mechanics.
- Limit time inside.
- Create a signal system.
- Keep water, phone, and backup exit available.
- Rehearse the reveal under realistic conditions.

EMOTIONAL SAFETY

- Signal theatricality in the invitation.
- Do not pretend someone has actually died.
- Give guests a quiet area.
- Do not force public speaking.
- Have one emotionally intelligent person available for overwhelmed guests.

PRODUCTION RISK

- Backup mic, backup music, hard speech limits, compressible detective sequence, skip-able open mic, alternate host entrance if coffin reveal fails.

Budget and Priorities

BUDGET BANDS

- Lean: venue, basic sound, simple bar, basic props, friend photographer.
- Strong: venue, stage manager, DJ/sound, photographer, bartender, catering, florist, printed objects, selected performers.
- Grand: production team, lighting, choir, actors, scenic build, video, custom design, premium food/bar.

SPEND FIRST ON

- A room with atmosphere.
- A stage manager with authority.
- Sound that makes every word audible.
- Photography that captures reactions.
- Flowers and objects that make the ritual legible.
- Food and drink that arrive at the right moment.

BUDGET RULE

Do not spend money making the plot complicated. Spend money making the room legible, audible, and alive.

Printed and Physical Materials

PRINT PIECES

- Program: title, order of ceremony, speaker names, one line of mystery.
- Fake will: attorney packet, with bequests and sealed note.
- Codicil: second legal turn after 5 PM.
- Clue card: simple enough to read aloud.
- Object signage: instructions for cups, mirror, vase, guest book.
- Stage manager packet: not beautiful, just brutally clear.

PHYSICAL OBJECTS

- Coffin or coffin-like prop.
- Flowers and cloth.
- Pens that actually write on the selected surfaces.
- Envelopes, folders, labels, evidence cards.
- Cake or dessert reveal.
- Bins for packing signed relics at end.

Test every pen on every surface before guests arrive. A dead Sharpie at the memorial table is the tiny bureaucrat of doom.

Failure Modes and Fixes

- Starts too funny: make the first 30 to 40 minutes sincere.
- Speeches too long: four-minute formal cap, two-minute open mic cap.
- Plot too complicated: repeat the simple frame - no death certificate, suspicious vitality, deceased must answer.
- Reveal is only a gag: host speech must land the thesis.
- Too many performers: characters should unlock guests, not dominate them.
- Bad sound: hire or assign a real audio person.
- No stage manager: appoint one person with authority, not a committee.
- Food too early: serve after reveal.
- No ending: final anthem, exit instructions, cleanup owner.

TRUTH

People will forgive strangeness. They will not forgive inaudibility, hunger at the wrong time, or an ending that evaporates.

The Planner's Closing Brief

A living funeral works because it borrows the emotional seriousness of a memorial and gives it back to the living. The host receives the words. The guests receive permission. The party receives a soul.

The planner's job is to protect the arc. Keep the first act credible. Give each person a clean role. Make every object legible. Keep the cues simple. Keep JOHN MY FRIEND's block clean and let him leave by 5 PM. Let the detective carry the middle. Let the host return with meaning, not merely spectacle.

FINAL PRINCIPLE

Make it real before making it impossible.

FINAL CHECKLIST

- Title, invitation, dress code, venue, producer, sound, photographer, bar, food, flowers, coffin, relics, eulogists, attorney, detective, plants, run sheet, cue list, safety plan, printed materials, rehearsal, cleanup, final anthem.

Once those pieces exist, the event stops being a fantasy and becomes a room. And a room, when properly charged, can do almost anything.