

Critical Stage
By Julian Boote

He'd had a bad day. That was his excuse for the mistake.

That evening, the mood had taken Michael Brand to be irritable, and when the crucial moment came he was damned if he'd patronise the arts.

Staggering numbly from the auditorium (yes, that was a fair description, he felt), eager to escape the abortion of a production he'd just seen, he'd grabbed the whisky order he'd placed during the interval, and sought cover from the emerging hordes in his usual booth to begin the post mortem. It was a short and sour assessment, even by his standards.

"*Retro Future Lost*" – he'd scribbled in his pad – "I class a play due solely to the fact that, apart from its lengthy list of elementary failings, the director did the single right and decent thing by at least remembering the whole sorry mess should be safely witnessed coming apart within the confines of a proscenium arch. The guards, symbolically placed at the foot of the stage, were indeed a wise move, not for any clumsy symbolic reasoning, but rather to bar the escape of any part of this debacle into the world, so threatening the future of Western Culture as we know it."

'Oh come on,' he'd reasoned, studying his jottings, 'you're being unfair.'

Am I? (Morose and brooding.)

'Sure,' the gnome in his head had said brightly. 'You saw its plus points.'

But people will hate whatever I print. I might as well blitz it.

'Oh, we are feeling sorry for ourselves, aren't we?'

The play – by an up and coming writer (damn, what *was* his name again? He couldn't be bothered looking at the programme) – had been about something political, some subject he neither wished to know of nor care about, not tonight anyway. The production may have been okay technically, but the performance style, as well as its literary aspects, was – on the whole – diabolical. A real hiccup for this guy's career.

#

If Chance can be thought of as having any semblance of personality, today displayed it could be both divinely merciful and grinningly cruel with schizophrenic swiftness, dispensing varying fortunes with dizzying zeal. Brand's temper certainly hadn't been helped that day by his PC's dying a hideous electronic death on him. Screaming down the phone at its makers' support technician had gleaned the useful information the motherboard had – it appeared from his description – suffered the equivalent of BSE. The manufacturers were now playing silly buggers about shipping over a replacement board. And this, while his irate editor harangued him over his parodying article about Edward Bond's latest. That one had received about as many understanding smiles as you'd expect if you jocularly asked a steward for ice in your scotch as your good ship Titanic develops a list.

The day's upside had been Judith's return from the doctor, smiling – if a tad weakly – giving the thumbs up. Brand had taken her to the pub for a celebratory lunch, where she gave him the details. An all clear for her leg and arm, and her right lung functioned as though no puncture occurred. Complete recovery in those respects at least. Not bad for the three month mark. Now if only she'd agree to give away the nursery toys and accept that the scars to her motherhood would remain, so they could move on.

And – in light of what he'd just witnessed – it was clear that Chance was again smiling on him. Had his PC not failed him when it did, he'd still be at home thrashing away at the keyboard, believing he was onto a winner. Yet Brand – a "glass-half-empty" man at his best – still couldn't help feeling a confused and relieved ill will toward the show, and, more still, himself. He hadn't known what annoyed him most; his discovery the writer had employed exactly the same premise

he was using for his own play, or that the show had clearly demonstrated the premise failed to work...and on a spectacularly embarrassing scale. Clearly Brand's PC had been privy to some secret denied its owner. He'd mentally toasted his deceased tool, thankful he could now toss the play and cast his eye on a short story that had been vying for attention at the back of his mind some weeks.

Theatre criticism had never been Brand's career goal. At drama school he'd always considered critics failures; deadbeat actors who'd given up, sold their souls to Mammon and now could only watch and comment from the wings while others at least went out and tried. Yet obviously Fate and the Muse – Chance's siblings in crime – had cheerfully conspired to slip him into this professionally creative, cramped tomb...and a tomb that stank. Tonight it had reeked more than usual; sympathising – he'd concluded after his second whisky - with his foul self-pity...*and* his worrying for Judith...*and* the lack of company. Usually his partner, Patrick, a jaded old Fleet Street veteran if ever there was one, buoyed him up. Though rivals from opposing papers, he and Pat had cultivated a mutual commiserating and morale-boosting club, nicknamed by Pat "The West End Rats". What the GI Tunnel Rats had done in Vietnam – ferreting through underground Vietcong fortresses to flush out Commies – Pat likened to their job. 'We go in,' he'd said, 'we bury the bastards, we come out again.'

His cynical comrade had however fallen ill the previous evening after breaking their code and seeing a show by himself, which meant either it had been enough to turn even Patrick's stomach, or he'd simply eaten at "salmonella" Shaker's again. Brand had offered the spare preview ticket to Judith, in the hope it would encourage her to get out, to see the world still turned and life could again be lived. She'd cried off...almost, but not quite, literally. It had been hard to take. Over the months he'd seen she'd been trying her best to return to routine; to visit friends, do the shopping, even to deliberately walk the street where the accident had occurred. Yet still she insisted on periods of seclusion, and no amount of persuasion would weaken her resolve. He knew why. *To brood over those bloody ultrasound prints again*, he'd thought then, almost saying it to her face while he threw on his coat. That's how far his frustration had built. It had become painfully visible...upsetting her. And, knowing, he'd turned and just walked out the door. Never the best way to begin an evening of critical appraisal.

Now he ached that she hadn't come with him, to give, just by her presence, some spiritual and moral support in an environment clearly lacking both:

The theatre bar.

It was a blur of sound, a stench of staleness, sycophancy, covert backstabbing, character assassination and dissection. Both a cacophonous, nicotine-fogged Hole of Calcutta, and a soulless desert of empty human shells. Just the place to witness the nastier side of Theatre...when it wasn't backstage snapping its green-eyed head at unguarded laurels.

Patrick's absence meant for once Brand could have dodged the post-show crowds, made a break for his car, gone home. But whether it was 'cos he couldn't face tensions back at the hearthside, or simply habit, he'd stayed, trying to be aloof, trying to avoid conversation so he could brood and observe quietly. But he'd made eye contact with two twats who'd recognised him and just *had* to know his opinion of the play.

Which was when he made *the* fatal mistake.

The day, the environment, cocktailed with his disillusionment, had vanquished any hope of a guarded reply, so it just, well...slipped out.

'My opinion...?' he replied in measured, deliberately considered tones. 'Well, y'know...I never thought I'd actually say this, but... Amateurs could better! God! Shit! I said it. And the funniest part of it is...it's TRUE!'

He knew it was reckless, immediately picturing target sights on his weary frame, daggers being viciously glared into him. Instantly he felt guilty, but one consolation was it had at least rid him of the annoying pair. Then he remembered...one of them had been the play's author.

Life seen through the bottom of a bottle of Jameson suddenly looked very appealing.
Well, with any luck, his response would keep the rest of the bar at bay.
No fear.

#

The Character hadn't turned up out of the blue, Brand had seen him mithering the Company's actors to sign autographs on outrageously large folded sheets of paper. He appeared the typical eccentric entrepreneur; the oddball clothes, the delicate, precise way he moved, his slightly accentuated facial expressions, even an unusual cane he waved extravagantly. His very being suited— nay, *was* the part no Stanislavskian disciple could play better...and was just the person Brand hoped to God wouldn't approach him. Yet...he'd been prowling close by for some minutes, as though waiting for a cue from the bar's Critic's Corner, and Brand noted as the eccentric carefully pocketed the papers and approached that his ears were almost glowing red, his face beaming as he made what could only be described as "his entrance".

'Michael Brand...is it?' he asked tentatively.

'For my sins.'

'Uh, yes, hello.' He offered his hand. Brand shook it. Reluctantly. 'I'm Gene Fordham.'

('Wait for it...' anticipated Brand)

'I – uh – couldn't help overhearing what you just said, and I'd like to take you up on your challenge.'

Brand made a point of looking about him in bored disinterest to convey just how much he didn't want this conversation to be happening.

'It wasn't a challenge, just a statement of fact.' He answered emphatically, spotting even as he spoke the playwright nearby giving him a steely glare, mouthing curses. Brand rolled his eyes and sighed. Obviously Chance was changing its mind again.

'And a fact I'd like to prove to you.' Fordham's voice was cheery, undaunted.

It was easy to come to the logical conclusion.

'You're not...ooooh...from an amateur group by any chance?'

'Experimental,' Fordham corrected politely with a slight wave of his hand.

'Of course...'

'Recently formed. We've only been going a few months, but I can assure you the company is *very* talented. It has only very best and promising actors.'

'You don't say...'

'I do. I should know,' again that beaming smile. 'I'm their director and producer. I chose them myself.'

'If you're drafting in high quality talent, then how can you be an amateur—'

'Oh we are...officially, make no mistake.' He tapped his nose. 'We keep "mum". You can see our show tonight if you want. Our venue's not far. Do you know the old Palais?'

Brand sighed again, wearily, emphatically.

'Look, Mr...'

'...Fordham.'

'Fordham, it's 10.20 now. Isn't it a little late for your group?' ('Thank you, now go away.')

'They don't mind.' The director began fumbling with his cane. Its ornate knob glinted, snaring Brand's attention. Fordham's hands were slowly rotating it, and the light danced on the elaborate polished markings, moving to an unheard rhythm. He watched the fingers touching, playing with the intricate engravings, caressing the foreign lettering...or were they runes? Fordham spoke again, but the voice was no longer his. The cane twirled...a child's top. The voice touched the light, and the light moved and danced...became daydreams. Brand's daydreams...and Judith's, caught and exposed; a flash of what could have been, what Brand was

only now accepting as one which would never become reality. Snatching his eyes back to Fordham's face, he saw it...their dream, the expression of a begging boy – their own son – asking for his current desire.

The dream, his thoughts, and the voice, became one...

'Well,' he considered measuredly, 'it would prove my point to this...public.'

('Come on, Dad. Let's see it...' yearned the face, the voice.)

'But the time...'

('Pleeeeeease...')

'It's really late...'

('Go on...' He had Judy's eyes...)

'Sod the time. Look at him, he's itching to show you.'

...A face, so trusting ('it could be fun...'), hoping beyond hope that his parent, the father he loved, looked up to – respected even – would say that *one* word. Just a short, simple, easy–

'Yes, alright, okay! I'll come along!' he blurted.

Faces turned at this unprovoked outburst. Eyes narrowed.

Fordham's shone with glee.

Brand gaped. He'd done it again.

'The team will be so excited, Mr. Brand. You've made their night!' Fordham enthused, already pulling out his mobile – a folding Motorola – and expertly flipping it open. From that manoeuvre and the eccentric's stance, Brand almost expected his next words to be "Kirk to Enterprise". Instead, he dialled and after a short pause said only, 'Connors, warm them up. It's preview night again.'

Brand retrieved his own mobile from his coat pocket, a slower, clumsier and altogether more begrudging affair. He dialled home, saying to Fordham, 'So how far astray are you leading me?'

#

'Well, Doc,' Judith piped cheerily, 'what's the verdict?' Her tone wasn't false, Brand noted, relieved. Their earlier "discussion" was apparently forgotten. Or at least laid aside for now. Brand, hand cupped over an ear, had to shout his reply over the bar's din.

'You're lucky you stayed at home. Conclusive proof British Theatre is alive, unwell, and festering in a corner.'

It was a joke, but his heart was in it. Fordham, standing close by, politely turned away as a gesture towards privacy, nevertheless picked up Brand's answer with those waggling ears of his, and guffawed loudly.

'I guess the aim of this call is to say you're not coming back yet...?' she ventured. It helped when she played Miss Marple. Brand turned away from the director, doing his best to lower his voice while remaining audible.

'I finally said it.'

'Ah...'

A pause, then: 'Well, you said it was inevitable you'd blab someday. But now? At this hour?'

'I'd rather get it over than put it off,' he hissed, then rolled his eyes. He'd meant it to be a whisper. He hoped Judith wouldn't misinterpret it.

'So, where's your next ordeal?'

'You sure you're okay about this?' he asked, the usual guilt of leaving her alone suddenly resurging.

'Mike, I'm a big girl. I'm past the razor-blade stage. I'll be fine.'

Sarcasm noted, Brand gave her the address, Fordham nodding confirmation as he recited it. Judith acknowledged with a 'See you later', then they left, Brand avoiding the eyes of the bar, following the back of Fordham, who snatched last, covetous glances at those actors from whom he'd twisted autographs.

#

It *had* been a theatre, Brand thought as he pulled up opposite their destination. Past its prime, it stooped as if it were a bent old man. Kick the walking stick away, and down he'd fall. Brand was surprised, not only that the Council had allowed the building to continue its faltering existence, but that it still had permission to keep its doors open to the public.

What public? Granted, it was late, but for an area not fifteen minutes from the West End, there was hardly anyone about, except for the few obligatory homeless shuffling along, or squatting in shadow-filled doorways. One emerged from a boarded-up block to the theatre's right, crawling almost painfully out of a gap in the heavy boarding. He watched and sighed. Civilization's throwaways. British Theatre wasn't the only institution rotting away. Scenes like this conjured up in Brand's mind the idea that city society was little more than a highly made up corpse. He gave thanks he was a commuter. At least he didn't have to live in the shit-hole.

He climbed from the car and locked it. The night breeze refreshed him, clearing his foggy head. Above, starlight peeked through cracked, racing clouds, dry, rolling leaves tale-told of deep autumn, and the streetlights – those working anyway – gave a tired radiance. Vehicles howled hastily by, as if eager to leave the oddly ambient area. Yet this hurrying noise of outside seemed a whisper in comparison to the bar... Life's shadowy reflection.

'Okay, Mike.' He said to himself. 'If you're so depressed, why not just end it all now?'
(*Later.*)

Fact was, his mood changes had begun to worry him. He'd started seeing an analyst about them, though Judith had remarked once upon a time it was what made him human.

'It reminds me my husband is emotionally versatile,' she'd teased lightly. 'A man who is *actually* sensitive, appreciates people's talents and foibles...though he won't admit it. You can see promise in anyone...especially me.'

Ah yes... The Salad Days...

He watched Fordham lock the steering on his own car, its doors, and set the alarm. He caught Band's expression.

'Look around...' was his reply.

'It has...character,' Brand motioned at the theatre. 'Just the place to play host to those–'
'–gothic vamp-types in *Interview With A Vampire*, yes I know,' cut in Fordham tolerantly. 'It has been remarked upon before.'

The director smiled, pursuing the idea.

'Anywhere can attract its...“monsters”. Any place can have an ambience, a personality, to which they can't help but respond.' He broadened his smile. 'Each to his own.' Fordham turned toward the theatre, and for a moment, Brand thought he saw the smile immediately fade into a...he wasn't sure. 'Besides,' the eccentric declared. 'They're all around us anyway, but heavily disguised.' He cocked his head toward Brand. 'In confidence though, the trick is to look in the right place.'

'Which is...?'

'Among the living.'

Brand frowned, puzzled. 'Aren't we all worms' meat?' elaborated Fordham, giving him a conspiratorial dig with his elbow.

'Fine...' thought Brand. He looked at the theatre again. Tatty, shoddy, a died ember of a bright, lively time gone by, not quite successfully re-vamped. Some of the facade had been repainted, other parts patched up. Its new name glowed ice-blue neon, metres above the foyer doors. An ugly, functional marriage of different times. It certainly hadn't escaped the graffiti age. Writing blanketed the alleyway containing the fire escapes, the sign indicating the stage door was hardly legible. Some bright spark had scrawled upon the entrance pillars enough that they had become almost organic; tall, discoloured fangs, framing an inside foyer that was a

yawning, well-lit, plush, red mouth. A bent old man with some bite, reflected Brand. Then the image struck home.

Moloch.

The human-eating god so effectively demonstrated in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Yet this wasn't the deity used by German Expressionists to show their fear and abhorrence of technology. This seemed to identify a new Moloch, the Moloch of Theatre. The fear of acting, a loathing of the stage, the audience, of Drama itself. A *deranged* fear.

That second scotch had been a mistake. Sometimes Brand wished his imagination wasn't so wild. Right now it seemed as wild as the graffiti, which – other than the fangs display – totally lacked any traditional street-art merit most vandals had developed. It was badly written, badly spelt, and its style...full of savage emotion...a scratchy, spitting vehemence. What parts he could read made Brand goggle.

FRUDM IS FUKNG BAS-

'...to remember what it was like.'

It was a chiding voice, with – perhaps – an undertone of bitterness.

'Sorry?'

'We want to remember what it was like,' Fordham repeated.

'Hm?' Brand had lost track.

'Us. The walking dead. The salad days...of which we all dream...'

Fordham's expression was neutral, then dissolved into a wry grin. 'I trust your attention span will be longer after curtain-up.'

'Just reading the graffiti. Who've you upset? Some of those could be responses to my reviews.'

Fordham tsk-ed.

'Vandals. They know what I'm trying to do. Has to be expected in an area like this. Revival is rarely appreciated. I threw bricks at them a few days back. Hit one too. Little fucker deserved it.'

Fordham examined Brand's expression, dismissing it with a wave. 'I know you're unimpressed, Mr Brand. I'm a man of...fairly independent means. I can refurbish the theatre, but constantly white-washing the frontage is beyond my patience, and at this crucial juncture would quickly stretch me further than my purse-strings.'

'I'm also curious. The name you've given the theatre.'

'The Rubicon?'

'Yeah...'

Again, Fordham's smile.

'You're the critic. You work it out. Now, shall we freeze, or shall we go inside?'

They crossed the road, and Brand tried to read the large posters. Even they hadn't escaped the vandals' hands. Despite the scrawl, the spray paint and the tearing, he thought he got the general idea, though – typically – a lot of the small, explanatory print was missing, and what there was he skipped.

#

Cassie Winston's City Comedy

Moolah, Wonga!

"It's a jungle out there!!"

A Gene Fordham Production

A T.O.D. Company

#

'See? No vampires on the billing here,' Fordham quipped wryly.

'T.O.D...'

Brand reflected, nodded. He'd seen theatre companies before whose actors were...aurally challenged? Was that the PC way of saying it? And he knew well enough that shows by such groups were almost always exceptional. Just because one sense was impaired, it

didn't mean their expressive abilities were also. If anything - in Brand's experience with deaf actors - their disability made them more able performers and better people than many of the unimpaired populace. Yet, if this was what Fordham's group were working on, it hardly made them experimental. Brand's college had a Drama of the Deaf course when he was a student there, and that was some time in his murky past, though right now he felt it prudent not to mention anything on that count, just for a quieter life. As for the play, he'd seen the 80s "City Comedy" about money-hungry, ethics-sacrificing yuppies a few times. He'd only ever found it an average text, and the thought of another two-hour slog deepened his already low spirits.

'I always wanted to learn sign language.'

Fordham - who'd been studying him closely as he read - turned to him at his murmur, baffled.

'Sorry...?' he asked, struggling as though to find a connection. 'No, I've never taken up that discipline.'

'I suppose,' Brand continued, musing, 'it must be difficult then, what with their disability. It could hinder communication-'

Fordham, astonished as if by some unexpected revelation, laughed amiably.

'Oh, I admire your perceptiveness and fortitude, Mr Brand. I'm surprised you take it so lightly. No, our problem isn't necessarily communication. They're not morons, Mr Brand, oh no. It is though fortunate that I'm able to make their... "disability" as you so tactfully call it, into only a minor inconvenience. However,' his eyes lowered, the expression; one of self-disappointment, 'my...uh...my only problem is having to change the company every few months.'

Brand's eyes widened.

'Really? These actors don't come two-a-penny.'

Fordham nodded uncomfortably. A tramp approached.

'I know, but they just have to move on. It's in their contracts...it's better for the company, for all of us. I'll explain after the show. Now, *please*.'

They went inside, dodging the tramp that was shaking what - in the streetlight - looked like a malformed tin. An extremely poor beggar; over the fleeing traffic Brand could hear only one coin dancing furiously as they jogged past, Fordham pretending not to notice the tramp's existence. Just as they went through the doors, the sound of the dancing coin went wild, then stopped abruptly.

#

'Programme?' Fordham asked, offering Brand the glossy magazine. He instinctively accepted it, absorbing the surroundings, handing over his Driza-Bone coat to the burly, gruff doorman with no awareness he was doing so.

The foyer had been completely refurbished, the colours, the lights...bright, attractive and warm. The carpets were deep shag, yet to suffer the first cratering cigarette burn, the walls replastered and painted to their original art deco specs. The lounge seating looked comfortable, spotlessly clean, and music drifting from the auditorium...soft and settling, almost fragrant in its subtlety, whispering and hinting of untold mystic secrets. Brand nodded inwardly, impressed. Fordham had breathed life into the Old Man alright. He then stared about more keenly.

'Looking for something, Mr Brand?'

'Where to answer Nature's call. Don't want to interrupt the entertainment now, do we?'

Fordham nodded patiently, and pointed.

It was in the men's that the theatre's new atmosphere had slipped, revealing it's older, morose face. The toilets betrayed their rank age of urine; time-cracked porcelain fittings dripped discoloured tears onto yellow-green streaked stains, and - through a smashed window - came the wind; squeezing...wheezing and moaning of times past, lives lost, souls trapped and flown. Above it, as though both snarling and weeping, came a misanthropic dancing of a coin in a tin...

Brand relieved himself quickly and left, reluctant to wash.

The slippage had occurred not only there. The theatre was next to empty. The bulky, broad-shouldered doorman – duties done – now stood bored in the foyer, absently watching the street without, and despite the lights and music, the air in the corridors was disconcertingly quiet, the auditorium as Fordham led him in...antiseptically free of the chaotic pattern of various size-and-shaped heads, swaying, coughing and chatting in the rows.

‘There’s nothing sadder than an empty theatre,’ Brand remarked. Fordham nodded, understanding. The human lack here was such that the emptiness was almost oppressive, and it – Brand considered – must be a repeat showing for the theatre of the oppression decline had wrought on Variety decades ago.

‘It became a picture house in the 30s,’ said Fordham, looking about. ‘Then during the cinema slump Mecca took it on as a Bingo Hall. It was barely hanging on by its fingernails when the National Lottery performed the coup-de-grace. Best thing that could have happened to it at the time, the poor old sod.’ The director tut-tutted, disgusted. ‘Bingo. A senile loser’s game, if ever there was one. Still, I think I can prove there’s life in the Old Man yet.’ He began walking down the aisle into the stalls, calling after him: ‘Yes...metamorphosis after metamorphosis. That’s how he survived so long. That’s how Theatre can survive, keep going beyond the multiplex, the digital age. Theatre is the alchemy of drama, the Rosetta Stone of the story, and Man is a social animal. He has always gathered with his kind round the fire that warms him, to hear the Storyteller’s tales. Theatre is his history, his future, his very lifeblood...’

(‘And a case of piles on occasion...’ reflected Brand privately.)

‘...He will call us to hear His voice long after the computer game has crashed or the CD player has fallen silent. As long as He flexes His muscles, grows, challenges the boundaries of form and convention, then there will be people to hear Him, to fill these empty seats.

‘But enough of my wittering on...’

Fordham turned and marched up toward the stage, spinning with a flourish, as though on an after-thought.

‘You’ll doubtless be relieved to hear the performance time will be just less than half the original text’s. You should only have to stay under an hour.’

Brand made a double take, raising his brows.

‘And just how did you pull off that small miracle?’ he called.

‘I’ve taken the liberty of revising the text. You understand...’ Fordham replied. Brand smirked, comprehending completely. Layman’s terms: ‘I cut the shit’. ‘The team and I wanted to focus on the sheer physical dynamics of the piece...’ the eccentric projected into the auditorium. ‘It’s energy more than anything.’

‘Sure. Fine.’ Brand answered, smiling. It would leave little sense of the already flimsy plot, but as long as it kept him occupied, no problem.

‘Good. Five minute call, I think.’

The director trotted up the steps onto the stage, ruffled the curtain...was gone.

Brand wandered down the aisle, chuckling. Fordham’s passion for theatre appeared now – he reflected, amused – not so much extravagant love...more an insensible (or mad?) obsession. His eyes sang that much; a smouldering song of barely repressed eruptions of enthusiasm, or was it something else? And that speech...the Storyteller’s voice! Well...it fitted. Fordham was consistent at least.

After a brief mental toss-up, Brand characteristically chose a middle-centre seat for the best view of the stage, fished among his pockets for his pad and pen, and settled down with his dread expectations only mostly vanquished. On the upside, he felt, looking round, the emptiness about him gave him a child-like thrill; a command performance for Michael Brand, popular theatre critic...

Silly really.

Yet, as the lights dimmed, he couldn't help also feeling embarrassed by his absurd, singular spectatorship. Then, much worse, intensely exposed, totally alone. He was isolated, a very easy and open target. What *was* he doing here? This was insane. He was in an empty theatre about to be entertained by a group of strangers. What if they have ulterior motives? Something could happen to him, and no one'd know. Whatever happened wouldn't be seen in the darkness, the deaf actors certainly wouldn't hear.

He wanted to leave. *Now*.

Then he remembered...his glimmer of sanity. Judith knew where he was, when he would be back.

The lights came up on stage, the curtain rose.

And the show began.

#

At first, Brand couldn't help wondering what Cassie Winston would think of this performance, then couldn't care. He stopped taking notes within the first five minutes, sitting mesmerised, then curled up with laughter, his notepad dropping to the floor, forgotten. This was astounding. From the moment the actors charged on stage, they flew about the boards, unable to contain their energy, the stage creaked to their to-ing and fro-ing, and with such choreographed, anarchic comedy...Brand had never seen such strength. Some were masked, and all mimed throughout to a recorded soundtrack (itself new to the text). Brand couldn't help but admire their sense of timing. There was no way such "amateurs" could be so...good. They were magnificent. Fordham had been right; this *was* experimental, and an experiment to cast awe into the hearts of the best. Within what he was witnessing were aspects of Expressionism, Farce, Absurdity, Comedia d'ell Arte--to name just four forms--and, and...aspects, elements he'd never seen tried before. Here was not only originality, but audacity; a playful, well-aimed poke in the eye to modern convention...a sweet onslaught upon the theatrical senses, totally alien to the original text, yet successfully grafted...tipping a hat to the past, stepping on the face of the present, and skipping merrily on the road to the future.

Warmed with mirth, Brand allowed himself the luxury of missing any mistakes. At one point an actor slipped and fell at the otherwise flawlessly funny Fox Hunting scene, resulting in all the actors' being thrown, and needing a minute to catch up with the soundtrack. Brand was too creased up to see much in the fall, but the expressions in body and face of the company's surprise, near horror even, their nervous, slightly desperate re-synching of their voiceless mouths with the incessant chatting, body-less soundtrack...now that he caught. It was then his neck-hairs prickled, and he knew that somewhere Fordham's eyes were watching both him and the show, and he could almost feel the atmosphere heat up in the wake of those smouldering-coal eyes. The auditorium began to cook; he could almost smell the stale sweat of the actors. Yet he endeavoured to ignore these things, and--other than them--this was *Moolah, Wonga!* through the mixed practises of all the theatrical masters rolled into one, with a new, tantalising, vibrant additional ingredient. Brand didn't like the idea of placing a name to what possible form it could be described. To name it somehow, to give it an "ism" would taint it, pigeonhole it, place Time's leaded chain about its feet. The best description he could use was, well, that here was...was...

THEATRE! A Theatre for the Present and the Future, a Theatre for all...

And a theatre rotting to high heaven.

#

He didn't know how long the smell had been creeping upon his sense, but he became aware of its encroaching pressure now, making his temples throb. It was foul, the pungent strength of it suggesting the reek could achieve density enough to become physically manifest, to move about, close in, seek an audience...

Almost gagging, Brand irritably turned to see where the dead cat had been dumped.

And saw the latecomers.

#

Six tramps could be made out in the weak residue of stage-light eight rows back. For most, their eyes were starlight-glinting, moist as though tearful. They looked ill, pale. Half the number was quite still, unreadable in the gloom. One though had a recent scar on his forehead; lumpy, puss-filled and bloodied deep brown with days of ill tending. Another sat silent, hat drawn low over the forehead, totally silhouetted but for the cheeks, themselves bone-white, the eyes...dark hollows hiding shadows the like of which Brand had only dreamt. Still another sat quietly sighing with the rhythm of resurging memories. She (or so the reddish-styled hair, and the mackintosh-distorted figure that could be made out seemed to indicate) raised her forefingers to her starlight eyes, wiped them lightly, then slowly, sadly, lowered them to her lips. The melancholy starlight flickered and faded from the eyes, the frame fell silent and still. The other tramps looked in her direction and shrugged; Inevitability, long since accepted.

They turned back to face Brand.

Brand turned back to the show.

How the hell did they get in? How did they dodge Meathead in the foyer? Brand could feel different eyes upon him now. His neck grew cold, his hands clammy. The auditorium seemed to darken further, the lights onstage themselves appeared to dim. The soundtrack merged with his thudding headache, and he felt suddenly he were the show, the object, the text to be studied, criticised, blitzed. It was almost as if a spotlight had fallen upon him for his crucial line in Life's ongoing production, but somewhere he'd fumbled, froze, and he could feel the audience's realising, knowing, sceptical look bear down on him, into him. The show continued, but he couldn't laugh, couldn't concentrate. He could see the starlight eyes in his mind, stronger now than Fordham's own, drilling relentlessly into the back of his skull. He could hear their silent presence, and the smell...as if the dead cat were within him. Yes, as though he were the corpse...rotting, coming apart. The show had slowed; the sound was that of his head pounding, the stench was of the theatre...dead, its memories decayed, his touch, the chill of one alone. The actors began their finale, oblivious to all else but their work, yet there was no song as the play required, just the thudding, oppressive pump of blood in his head, accompanied in perfect time by the distorted skipping of a battered coin in an old tin. Brand – trembling – looked around again.

Twelve tramps.

Distanced precisely.

In a semi-circle.

Four rows back.

The sound came from nowhere, seemed omniscient. The very walls were ringing with the rhythm, aggravating his headache, intensifying his unreasoning fear, his sudden claustrophobia, his panic. He couldn't ignore it now. He had to get help, warn the actors.

Whirling back to the stage, he cried out in shock.

The Tin Can Tramp, the bone-cheeked silhouette who had sat metres behind him only a minute ago, regarded him silently from the seat directly in front of his own; a twisted body eclipsing him from rescue.

The stench was unbearable now, Brand's stomach was heaving in revolt, but he wasn't sick, no throat muscle would move. The tramp's eyes had paralysed him. Two cold, tiny white-dwarf stars fiercely burned out to him from under the hat, from the dark shadows, from above the cheeks, which...*were* bone! They shone out, fighting against the defeat of eventual death, fighting with the fire of senseless hatred, anger, pain. The fire of a vengeful purpose.

Focused on him.

The tin can jolted again, and Brand could see now, clearly in the stage light; clasped tightly in this wraith's hand was an aerosol of spray paint, jolting up and down. Clack-clacking to the rhythm of the headache, the barely heard finale song, the dancing of the actors. All were one, joined by the shaking of the can, the burning eyes, the living darkness.

The can approached him, he could see the pinprick hole in the knob, could see a clawed finger rest on it, and knew this creature would blind him.

He screamed, and it came as a release. He flung his hands before his face, snapped his eyes shut, knotting himself into the seat. Cowering, he awaited the chill spray, expected the wraith to fall on him, wrestle against him, breathe agony into him.

#

The music and singing reached their crescendos...ceased.

Bows were given, the curtain fell.

The lights came up.

When Brand opened his eyes, the seat in front was empty, the stench; a light wafting, like a near forgotten, bitter memory. He whirled about, looking, expecting...

The auditorium was empty, the tramps; fled phantoms.

Brand gasped out a quaking sigh...long and relieved. He was sweating profusely, his fingernails were hurting, and he realised he'd been clawing into the upholstery. He shook his hands, flicking stuffing from his nails, and snatched glances around the playhouse as he feverishly collected his belongings. Feeling for his car keys, he looked again at the seat in front. Its...occupant...had left evidence of "their" presence.

Stains patterned the red coverings, turning the areas touched dark purple. As he watched, the very cloth seemed to stretch, break up, revealing withered-yellow padding underneath.

The creature had the touch of autumn.

Leave. Now.

Yes, he had to get out.

But they'll be waiting for you. They're outside now, crippling the car, smashing your escape—

'The show has obviously made an impression on you, Mr Brand.'

He jumped.

The curtain had lifted, and Fordham stood centre-stage, leaning confidently on his cane. Pride glowed from the director's face, his stance domineering, his eyes expecting, *commanding* an answer.

'Ah...yes,' answered Brand, composing himself. Fordham watched, unmoving, as the critic shakingly put away his notepad in a coat pocket, silent, distracted. Disturbed.

'And...?' Again, he broke the former's dark reverie.

'Uh...yes. Good,' Brand replied. 'It was very good. I...laughed. It...uh, was damn good.'

Fordham's eyes narrowed slightly, the mouth turning upward a fraction.

'Really...?'

Brand was looking again at the seat before him. The covering had turned black, was curling like dead leaves, flaking, the stuffing...a liquid, putrid green mass.

'Something troubling you...?'

'Uh...' Brand regarded the director, his mind a maelstrom of options...indecision. Finally, he managed, 'Do you let the...tramps...watch the show?'

Fordham grinned broadly.

'What a ridiculous idea. Why, whatev-' The grin froze. His eyes darkened and darted about, his nostrils pulsated, checking the air. His face flared red. 'Not *again!*'

The cane banged wildly on the boards, the voice boomed with fury into the auditorium, the walls.

'CONNORS!!'

A burly shadow appeared, skulking at one of the doors leading to the foyer. The Doorman, Brand assumed. The cane waved...an ornate, threatening cattle prod.

‘They got in again! Check the doors and windows for breakage, and make sure the cleaners are called tomorrow.’ The shadow began to shrink away. ‘And Connors...’

The shadow halted, the elongated head twisted, malforming in order to listen. Fordham turned his left foot slightly, his eyes scrutinising a speck of dust on his shoe. ‘Break out the equipment.’

The shadow paused as though contemplating this latest order, then slunk away into the gloom.

The smile switched on again.

‘They didn’t disturb your enjoyment of the show, did they?’

“Disturb” isn’t the word.’ Brand chilled at the thought of them. ‘A whole group, and that one with the hat and the begging tin...’ His voice rose in pitch. ‘It was a can of spray-paint! He was going to put the stuff into my eyes-’ He stopped abruptly, realising. ‘They’ve done this *before*?!’

Storm clouds gathered over the director’s countenance.

‘I’ll deal with them Mr Brand, don’t worry.’

Brand fancied he could hear the autumn breath whining again. Some papers from the desks onstage fluttered slightly. There was a thud. It reverberated round the hall, then...silence.

‘All you need do is call the police, Mr Fordham.’

Again...the eyes.

‘They’re *my* problem, Mr Brand. *I* will deal with them.’

The sun peeked through the gathering storm, the clouds evaporated. He gestured quickly, a showman. Summer once more. ‘Would you like to meet the cast?’

‘Look, I really ought to be going. My wife will be wondering what’s happened...’ He glanced toward the foyer, his mind already outside. ‘If you wouldn’t mind walking me to my car-’

‘They were brilliant, and you know it,’ cut in Fordham, surveying the set. ‘They would like to know that you know.’ *That* grin widened, yet more teeth shone. ‘C’mon Brand, you’re guaranteed an escort that way.’ He indicated himself. ‘You know the neighbourhood, and Connors can be *so* unreliable in the tasks I set him.’

Put *that* way... If anything, it would be only a few minutes, and that would give time for the mob outside to quieten further. He thought he could feel the breeze again.

The steps to the stage beckoned.

#

Backstage exuded scents of the past. A fresh coat of paint can wash over cracks only so far, sink into the plaster only so deep, keep its as-new odour only so long. And what it covers can have been around for much longer, has soaked up so much of the living smells, voices and events of decades, it becomes one with them. To the walls clung a sweet, shiny condensation, constantly vaporising, never disappearing; the damp that remains with the soaking of experience. Here were the theatre’s lungs; here was where it breathed in its life of past, present, fiction, phantasm, and memory, to exhale it out to its audience. And here the breeze was stronger.

Whether it was the same as that in the auditorium, Brand couldn’t guess, but the impression he gained was that the air cooled here, and that down the corridors they walked, it wafted, dancing lazily to invisible rhythmic currents, and a low, barely perceptible thrumming of machines in the building’s bowels. This cold life-essence coursed through the corridors (bronchioles?) to the different rooms, the lighting became functional, sparse, weakening in strength as the air grew yet chillier and the Green Room approached. The pungent odour of chemicals beckoned for attention from a passing closet-room. Brand looked in, to briefly catch in the gloom outrageously large sheets of paper – frozen by the moment – suspended by invisible lines, drip-drying above wide trays on a well-equipped developing desk. Out of the misty white

of the papers were emerging tiny blotches of dark typeset, arranging themselves neatly round scrawled signatures-

Blank, clinically white wall again. The smell of disinfectant replaced that of ammonia, the atmosphere hung still with winter...surgery-clean.

‘The Green Room.’ Fordham motioned Brand forward, friendly-like. Here lay the heart behind the brains.

There stood Fordham’s stars.

A click from his fingers, and they busily tussled into a line, the actor who had slipped during the performance hobbling into place, wincing with pain, trying to hide it. The fall must have done more damage than it appeared, Brand considered. The troupe smiled pleasantly, and – judging by the grin on the Slipper – were willing to give an especial desire to please. Brand guessed the pleasantries weren’t only for him, judging by how the odd pair of eyes occasionally darted in Fordham’s direction. He pushed that thought aside for now and regarded them, dismissing earlier events and re-engaging his critical faculties. All the company were thin, light and lithe, almost vulnerable-like. The unmasked actors had young and – in curious paradox to their frames – slightly bloated faces...balloons with a tad too much puff blown into them. Each visage was heavily made up, ready and itching to express more than just mere smiles. The masked, judging by those who had raised them above their foreheads, were considerably older. The “puff” had gone, the skin stretched taut as of one aged, the grins – as a result – being, Brand felt, a cautious, thin line, displaying short bars of yellow teeth. The Slipper was one of these, his quivering, widely straining smile instead throwing caution into the winter stillness. They hadn’t changed out of costume, they stood with heavy breaths and tired sways. And so they should, Brand thought. Dramatically superb as the performance was, it must have been physically exhausting.

An encouraging nod of Fordham’s head indicated Brand should go in.

The actors hadn’t uttered a sound.

‘Mr Michael Brand, critic for London Week,’ projected Fordham into the room. ‘Come no doubt to sing your praises.’

Brand stepped into the coldest, cleanest Green Room he’d encountered in all his theatre days. No food or drink, no cigarettes, no carpet even. Just smooth, chequered linoleum complementing dark reclining couches, and smooth, polished tables lining the walls. Spotless, efficient, with the unpleasant air of a barber-surgeon’s waiting room.

Brand faced the waiting troupe.

‘I, uh... You all did brilliantly.’ He meant it. The smiles faltered, softened, became genuine in pleasure. Two of the actors gave each other “I told you so” winks. Another nodded to herself. All murmured, pleased.

‘Thab you.’ It was a young, unmasked actress, apparently speaking for all.

‘To be honest, I didn’t quite know what to expect from your director here when he dragged me along,’ Brand continued, nodding toward Fordham. The director stared at the ceiling, tongue in cheek. A few of the actors guffawed. None of them wore hearing aids. Brand went on. ‘But, your performance this evening has – in the least – pointed toward a great potential, and could well be the key to a major revival in theatre practise. I never dreamt I’d see anything like this when I came, but...I was surprised, and I’m very pleased.’ He felt like a condescending teacher praising a six year old, but it was the truth, and he was on a roll. ‘I think you and Mr Fordham have pointed out a few new directions to go in theatre, you’ve displayed tonight an untapped resource of...daring imagination and vitality that has eluded British Theatre for some years now, and I hope you go public with all this very soon. You were excellent.’

‘Well,’ said Fordham, placing a hand on his shoulder, ‘we could go public if we gained a favourable write up.’ The group murmured enthusiastically. Fordham raised his hand. He had more to say. ‘But...refinements still have to be made, and – despite your open-mindedness, Mr

Brand – I still must consider public reaction to my theories and processes.’ He surveyed his cast. ‘Yes...you weren’t bad at all tonight, everyone.’ He smiled, moved round Brand, presumably to have a better look at his troupe, his hand still resting comradely on the critic’s shoulder. His gaze rested on the Slipper.

‘But that mistake, that slip up...’ The actor tensed. ‘I thought, Graham, you’d assured me this wouldn’t happen again.’

Brand saw it.

The storm clouds were rolling in again.

The actor’s eyes widened, his mouth quivered, fearing chastisement. He backed up against the table, the others edged away from him.

‘Yeb, I thid,’ he blurted quickly. ‘Id wath jud a-’

Everyone jumped as the director’s cane smacked onto the table centimetres from the unfortunate thespian, who flinched, his face creasing horribly as he tried not to panic. This was chastisement way out of line, totally unexpected and called for.

‘Fordham,’ Brand called, ‘what are you doing? It was just one slip. There’s no need-’

The cane smacked down again, accompanied by the sound of cracking twigs as it connected with the actor’s fingers, crushing them. His animal yelp of pain cut into the entire company. They started whimpering.

Brand couldn’t believe what he was witnessing.

‘Control, control!’ yelled the director, ignoring Brand completely. ‘Always it has been control with you, Graham. You promised me,’ he mimicked the moaning actor’s fumbled speech, his eyes vicious furnaces, ‘“Oh yeb, yeb, Mr Frudum, my footh fine, yeb. I won’ le’ you dow”. Well, it did, this...’

It happened so quickly. The director grabbed the actor’s swollen foot and yanked. The latter screamed in agony as his foot snapped all too easily in the former’s hands, the force of the pull causing the actor to fall and slam violently on the hard floor. The director seemed oblivious to the multiple crunch of breaking bones as body and Green Room floor made contact, the inhuman howl frightening all present.

The company’s whimperings grew. The actor stared, momentarily dazed, at his leg sticking in the air, his appendage held tightly by his master’s hands.

‘Fordham, what the fuck are you playing at?!’ shouted Brand.

‘This foot,’ the director faltered, as though suddenly spent, his focus entirely on the object of his disappointment, his frustration. ‘It’s useless. Utterly useless.’

He yanked again.

The actor screamed.

Brand leapt forward to stop him, but Fordham – still obsessed by the foot – snarled and lashed him back with the cane. Dodging, Brand stumbled backward and hit the wall, his head thumping the surface hard. Sight blurred, thinking muddled, he could only watch dumbly as Fordham yanked at the foot again, then again.

The actor, the others, screamed, and Brand stooped, dully mortified, unable to comprehend what was happening...

The foot...ripping, detaching above the ankle...blood...the actor screaming on and on, his face contorting, itself...tearing as it stretched beyond its elasticity, bleeding, breaking apart with each successive scream.

Then the director kicked, again and again, vicious and cold. He shouted obscenities at Graham, accusing him of vandalism, gibbering as if rabid. He kicked and jumped all over the body, which tried to crawl away with useless limbs...

Brand could only stare as the actor was reduced in less than a minute – and far too easily – to a barely whimpering, ruby-stained, near formless mass of, of...

Then the newly released and all too familiar stench hit him.

He bent double vomiting, his body engrossed only in that act, his mind replaying what he'd just witnessed, the smell reviving pungent memories of the auditorium. The actor's face, stretching, breaking up...

When he next became aware of himself, the surrounding assembly stood quiet, still, petrified. The body – or rather, a large mass of it – had been dragged and dumped in a corner, a hideous, unrecognisable pile of flesh.

It was still whimpering.

Fordham sat on a table, delicately holding his nose, smiling weakly, apologetically.

'You'll have to forgive me, Mr Brand. I, uh...sometimes lose my temper quite badly. This...er...this is why I must...lay off my actors.' He motioned at what was once called Graham. 'After a while they get so...breakable.' Fordham looked tired now, pathetic.

Brand felt numb, could see again the face, that foot. Though shock was setting in, realisation wasn't hindered.

'He was...he was already...'

'Yes,' confirmed Fordham, regarding Brand as though his statement had already been taken as read. He pondered a moment, brightened, then jumped lightly off the table. 'But don't you see how I've *re-employed* them?' He was shrugging this event off already, becoming eager once more about his experiment. 'You must realise how essential it is that the basic principles of the craft are already there. That way, it's not such a hard task for them to learn what I want, or for me to communicate it.' He became quiet. 'I know it's a difficult idea to adjust to...'

Brand gaped, horrified. He had to get out.

'I didn't know how you'd take it. I hoped the posters would explain enough despite the vandalism, and it did *seem* you got the gist of what they said.' He put his head to one side, sad, disappointed. 'Though apparently, from your expression...'. He abruptly thumped the wall, frustrated. 'I *knew* I should have been more candid in the programme notes. Shit!'

Brand stared at the actors.

'“T.O.D.”...’ he whispered. 'I thought it meant Theatre of the Deaf, like it normally...'

'A natural enough mistake,' sympathised Fordham. 'Only yesterday there was another critic...'. A shrug. 'Well, it's all academic now. Look, I've some business to attend to, and you don't look so well. I might have imposed upon you a little much. Sorry to have disturbed you.' He offered a helping hand. Brand dazedly took it. 'I'll escort you to your car,' he smiled. 'And don't worry about the nasty mess you made. The cleaners'll sort it out.'

Brand stumbled back into the corridor, Fordham holding his arm, his words barely registering.

'If I'm not being too cheeky, Mr Brand, I must ask you not to be too hasty to draw any negative conclusions when you come to do your write up. Perhaps a few days to mull it over...?'

#

The chill autumn wind felt warmer than backstage as Fordham and Connors led Brand to his car. The “tramps” had congregated outside as Brand had feared, but the car wasn't damaged...just slightly painted upon. The Spray Painter was triumphant, waving his weapon to and fro in the air, whooping distorted, taunting shouts, his spray-can clacking maniacally. Brand didn't care anymore. The world was a picture fast retreating from him; an image within which he could no longer take part, he was merely a witness. He climbed in and started the engine. Fordham knocked a pleasant goodbye on the driver's window with his cane, and stood watching a moment as Brand pulled slowly away, then looked to his own car, and attended with Connors to his...business.

Brand had gone less than thirty yards when the first shots made him brake, and – before he could stop himself – turn round to see what was happening.

Just in time to catch more booms and screams, and the body of the Head-Wound tramp erupt into explosions of blood and bone.

His eyes instantly back on the road, Brand's foot squashed the accelerator, and the car wailed as its wheels smoked, making it flee down the street. He swerved the nearest corner, snatching a momentary glance at the rear-view mirror in reflex to further shots and shouts, to see the diminishing figure of Fordham spitting contemptuous fire from a revolver into the crowd. The final image of the night Brand caught was that of the Spray Painter, arching back in frozen agony, his right arm disintegrating into a blossoming red cloud. His can-weapon had exploded.

The director – in a final act of malevolence toward his rebellious ex-performer – had aimed for his only remaining means of expression.

The car's wailing could only drown the screams from outside as Brand fled.

He drove home.

He drove like a madman.

Draft 6 © Julian Boote, 2nd November 2003

Precise Word Count: 9,047