

Comedians

Trevor Griffiths

We asked Trevor Griffiths to suggest an excerpt from his acclaimed play to mark the 40th anniversary of Comedians' first production at Nottingham Playhouse, on 20 February 1975, directed by Richard Eyre. He chose this scene at the end of Act Two, which begins with detailed stage directions.

Price emerges, carrying the tiny violin and bow. He wears baggy half-mast trousers, large sullen boots, a red hard wool jersey, studded and battered denim jacket, sleeves rolled to elbows, a red and white scarf tied on to an arm. His face has been subtly whitened to deaden and mask the face. He is half clown, half this year's version of bovver boy. The effect is calculatedly eerie, funny and chill. He takes out a deeply filthy handkerchief, spreads it carefully, expertly across his right shoulder, slowly tucks the tiny violin on his left, stands perfectly still, looks for the first time at the audience. Cocks the bow, stares at it intently, apparently sinking into process. Notices a very fine thread of gut hanging down. Shakes the bow. Shakes it again. The thread hangs on. He brings the bow finally to his mouth, tries to bite the thread off, his teeth are set on edge, he winces mutely, tries again, can't. He thinks. Tries, bending oddly on one leg, to trap the thread under his huge boot. Fails. Thinks. Takes out a lighter. Sets fire to the thread. Satisfaction. Makes as if to play. The cocked bow slowly begins to smoulder at the far end. He waves it about, horrified. The violin now begins to play unaided in his other hand a piece of intricate Bach. He's trapped for a moment between the two events; finally he places the spent bow on the stage, puts the violin under his boot, dims it like a cigarette until it's thoroughly crushed.

PRICE (to himself, not admitting the audience's existence) Wish I had a train. I feel like smashing a train up. On me own. I feel really strong. Wish I had a train. I could do with some exercise.

He does a complicated kata, with praying mantis footsweeps, a tan-fui, pa-kua dao, and other kung fu exercises. A spot suddenly illuminates larger than life-size dummies of a youngish man and woman carried on by a club-hand. Well dressed, beautiful people, a faint unselfconscious arrogance in their carriage. The man wears evening dress, gloves, etc., the girl, a simple, stunning white full-length dress and wrap. Her arm is looped in his. They stand, perhaps waiting for a cab to show after the theatre. Price has continued his exercises throughout this 'arrival'. Becomes aware of them gradually: rises slowly: stares. Turns to the audience, slowly smiles, evil and childlike. Sniffs. Ambles over. Stands by the man, measuring, walks round to stand by the girl. We sense him being ignored. He begins to inspect the girl minutely. Takes a cigarette from pocket.

Cigarette? *(Nothing. He offers it to the man.)* No? *(He pockets the cigarette, turns, calls 'Taxi!' sharply out front, shakes his head as it disappears. Moves round to the man's side again.)* Are you the interpreter, then? Been to the match, have we? Were you at t'top end wi' lads? Good, wannit? D'you see Macari? Eh? *(Silence.)* P'raps I'm not here. Don't you like me? You hardly know me. Let's go and have a pint, get to know each other. Here, don't you live in Salford? I swear I've seen you at the dog track. *(Nothing. He takes a cigarette out of the man's top pocket.)* Very kind of you. Ta. *(He lights the cigarette, blows the smoke in slow separate puffs across the man's face.)* Int this nice? I like a good chat. *(intimate, man-to-man)* Eh. I bet she's a goer, int she, sunshine? She's got a fair pair of knockers on her too. Has she been around? Does she ever go dancing at Belle Vue, Satdays? I think Eric Yates took her home one night. If it's her, she's a right goer, according to Eric. *(Pause.)* I don't know whether to thump you one or what. I suppose I could just give you a clout, just to let you know I exist. *(He blows smoke into the man's face.)* Is that hair dyed? Looks dyed. Are you a puff? Are you a puffer? *(Sniffs. Front, fast) Taxi! (Pause.)* That's not a taxi, lady, it's a hearse. *(Evilish grin)* You're getting confused, lady. Unless you were thinking of a quick fun funeral before retiring for the night. *(to man)* Say something, Alice? She's calling hearses, he's talking to himself. *(He turns back to the man.)* You do speak, do you? I'm trying to talk to you. Say some'at. Tell us what kind of day you've had. Are you on the buses? Eh. Shall I make you laugh? This feller pays twenty pounds for this whore, right? Only she dunt fancy him and runs out of the room. He chases her, stark nekkid, down t'street. Cop stops

him, says, Where's the fire, lad? Feller says, I've no idea, but if you see a nude bird running down street, fuck her, it's paid for. *(Pause. Nothing.)* You can laugh, you know, I don't mind you laughing. I'm talking to you ... There's people'd call this envy, you know, it's not, it's hate. *(Now very fast)* Are you a bi-sexual or is that your sister? You'll never get a taxi here, they're all up at Piccadilly waiting for t'last train from London. Ask me how I know. I work there that's why. And don't interrupt when I'm talking, dint your mother ever tell you, it's rude? *(He does a kung fu thrust, missing the man's head by inches.)* Bruce Lee, do you like him? God, he is. You're a stuck-up bastard, aren't you? Give me a kiss, then, go on Alice, give us a kiss. I love you, give us a kiss. *(He halts his burble. Blinks. Pads round to stand at woman's side.)* Say something? *(In her ear)* Listen... I've got a British Rail delivery truck round the corner, ditch Alice and we'll do the town. *(He notices a folded copy of The Times in the man's hand. Passes behind the figures, pops his head between them.)* Crosswords? *(Thinks a moment.)* Election. Nine across. Big poll in China, question mark. *(Chinaman)* E-lection, *(Price looks from one to the other, laughs suddenly. He takes hold of their handles, begins to lift them up and down, to indicate their mirth.)* Election! Election! Big poll in China. Laugh, you buggers, laugh! *(Price exhorts them to laugh, squeezing their bodies up and down and voicing their laughter for them. Then, very suddenly)* Here. *(He takes a flower out of his pocket, offers it to them.)* For the lady. No, no, I have a pin. *(Pause. He pins the flower – a marigold – with the greatest delicacy between the girl's breasts. Steps back to look at his work.)* No need for thanks, my pleasure entirely. Believe me.

Silence. Nothing. Then, a dark red stain, gradually widening, begins to form behind the flower.

Aagh, aagh, aagh, aagh ...

The spot shrinks slowly on the dummies, centring finally on the red stain. Price's 'aaghs' become short barks of laughter. Innocence.

I wonder what happened. P'raps it pierced a vein.

Their light goes out altogether. We're left with his single chill image.

I made them laugh, though. *(depressed)* Who needs them? Hunh. Who

needs them? We manage. (*chanting*) U-n-i-ted. Uni-ted. You won't keep us down there for long, don't worry. We're coming up there where we can gerratt yer (*Chants.*) Lou Macari, Lou Macari ... I shoulda smashed him one. They allus mek you feel sorry for 'em, out in the open. I suppose I shoulda just kicked him without looking at him. (*Pause. He looks after them. Calling*) National Unity? Up yours, sunshine. (*Pause. He picks up a tiny violin, i.e. another, switched, uncrushed, and a bow. Addresses it. Plays 'The Red Flag' – very simple and direct.*) Still, I made the buggers laugh ...

Price walks off. The Concert Secretary, probably shocked, embarrassed, not wishing to dwell. Lights fade. Waters stands, face gaunt, grey. Challenor tosses down a scotch, sheafs his notes, pockets pen.

CONCERT SECRETARY: That's the lot, ladies and gentlemen. You have your cards, I think. Charlie Shaw has 'em for them that hasn't, and we're starting right away, settle yourselves down, now. And it's eyes down for a full house ...

Lights fades gradually.

Always look after ... Number One.

Lights fade to black.

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Comedians is published in Volume I of Theatre Plays by Trevor Griffiths, the first of two volumes which include 15 plays in all (Spokesman, £15 each).