



TALES TOLD BY AN IDIOT

Phil Parker

Iago was less of a villain compared to me that night.

I'd rehearsed how I was going to break the news. It was my responsibility as artistic director. Start with the company's financial woes, follow it up with the legal proceedings, inform them of our lack of performance space and conclude with the bankruptcy announcement. But just like all our productions, performance never went the way of rehearsal.

In hindsight, it wasn't wise to open by announcing there wasn't enough money to pay the wages. Sitting on the edge of the stage with the company in the stalls wasn't a good choice of mine either, I made too easy a target. But I'm getting ahead of myself.



No one else cared about our debts. Bringing Shakespeare to the masses isn't cheap. My fault for not making it clearer I suppose. I'd explained at the start of rehearsals for Macbeth the use of symbolism was driven by a lack of cash, rather than any artistic choice. That was why I had everyone holding brush handles above their

heads to represent Birnam Wood, and why the witches conjured spells over the tea urn we normally used in the interval. Admittedly, using tartan travel rugs as kilts wasn't such a good idea. The harsh woollen fibres irritated sensitive skin, as Robbie and Jonathan found out. Their constant rubbing of themselves, as Banquo and Macbeth on the blasted heath, brought a whole new interpretation of their relationship.

I must confess my costume choices haven't always worked. I'd insisted on tin foil armour in Coriolanus and, though it saved us thousands, it tore easily in the fight scenes. Still, the ladies in the audience enjoyed the view, even if it did lead to us getting prosecuted for indecency.

Looking back, I realise our productions were too ambitious in the early days, that's where the money went. I think we may have ignored some health and safety rules in the process. Our opening production of The Tempest is a good example. I wanted epic theatre so the storm needed more than a solitary wind machine, which is why we used four, two either side of the stage. Hurling down water from large buckets, so it got caught in the wind,

was awesome. It shorted out electrical circuits so the current arced across the stage, the audience thought it was lightning effects and applauded. The trouble was soaking the wooden stage floor made it slippery. Poor Angela. There she was as Ariel, flying in her harness over Prospero, until the assistant stage manager slipped and yanked Angela up into the fly tower. If she hadn't had concussion she'd probably have fallen with greater awareness of the spotlights. Anyway, she got off lightly with two broken legs considering how bad it could have been. She still has a fear of heights apparently.

Fairies always posed a problem.

How do you make them magical and mysterious? We've performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* several times, though in our company, the play has the same superstitious stigma as mentioning *Macbeth*.



There was the production where the fairies were styled in 60's sci-fi costumes. Silver swimwear, silver wigs and silver body paint. They looked incredible; the first entrance of Oberon and Titania earned a round of applause from the audience. Sally, who played Titania, had the body to carry off such a skimpy costume; it certainly made a lot of the men in the audience happy. Less so Becky Carter, our make-up artist. When her husband, Harry, who was playing Lysander, turned up on stage with silver lips and hands I think everyone waited to find out whose make-up needed adjusting. There was considerable debate as to whether Sally knew about the handprints and smudged lipstick when she next walked on stage.

It was a shame, everyone thought Becky and Harry to be such a happy couple. Most of us said as much when we were summoned to the divorce court as witnesses, though the women playing Hermia, Helena, Hippolyta, Mustardseed and Moth remained rather more tight-lipped I noticed.

It wasn't the only catastrophe we had with that play. I still see Terry from time to time, I go to visit him at home. He doesn't go outside these days.

He made an excellent Bottom. He had the comedic timing that meant his delivery was perfect for getting laughs. In our next production, having learned from the first, we

mounted a more conventional Dream, complete with enormous donkey's head for Terry. The company who manufactured it delayed delivery, so poor Terry didn't get chance to put it on until First Night. Someone should have checked it but last minute hiccups meant no one realised there weren't any holes for him to breathe through.

Terry realised, as he lay in Titania's bower, that he was suffocating.



The donkey's head had been jammed on to his shoulders in a rush, there'd been enough air in his lungs to sustain him for a few minutes but it's a long scene, we'd included the fairy songs you see. Poor Terry. He panicked and tried to pull off the head. As he staggered around the stage, yanking at the head screaming 'Get it off! Get it off!', the audience thought it was part of the comedy. They laughed and applauded like crazy.

Especially when Terry stumbled into the first row of the stalls.

It just so happened there was a school party in those seats. Kids who thought it was like pantomime. They all piled on top of Terry, yanking at the head. It was stuck so tight it meant they were wrenching Terry's actual head. One of the kids, a big lad built like a rugby player, jumped on his back and pretended to ride him, said he was at the rodeo. Terry's screams for help got lost in the mayhem.

A St John Ambulance lady rescued him in the end, she bellowed at the kids to get off him and punched a hole in the top of the donkey head. She was a big woman, powerful fists.

His psychiatrist told us later Terry had lapsed into a catatonic state for a time, it allowed us to carry him out of the stalls and lay him back in Titania's bower while the St John Ambulance lady performed mouth-to-mouth on him. Terry tells me he still can't look at a horse without crying.

Incidents such as these explain why the company couldn't get insurance. And I mean, none. Not even the dodgy companies would touch us, a salesperson even laughed down the phone at me and asked if I knew about our reputation. Audiences depleted. We tended to

get the sickos who waited for the next disaster. No medical practitioners came to see our plays, there was too great a chance of them being called upon professionally.

It was only a matter of time until this moment arrived.

People look for scapegoats in situations like these. And in me they found the person with the horns and the hooves. They got angry. Words were said. Things were thrown. I managed to duck most of them. The words, not the things. They hurt.

‘You’re the worst director I’ve ever met!’

Jeff Collins’ accusation was typical. But I wasn’t accepting all the blame.

‘And you’re one of the worst actors Jeff! The only time you got work in another company you understudied Polonius and actually got stabbed by Hamlet in the arras.’

‘It was the upper thigh! And that was because the idiot shoved his sword lower than we’d rehearsed!’

Jessica Dunlop stood up and everyone turned. Jessica was the most experienced of all of them, everyone deferred to her because she’d played every role there was. She took her time, adjusted her flowing robe and pointed a finger weighed down with enormous rings. She pushed back her shoulders as she always did before making a speech, regardless of the role she played. To be honest, there were no difference in the roles she played.

‘Last month, you had me play Cleopatra. I told you it was unwise to place real snakes in the basket. I told you. But you wouldn’t listen. On our first night, I opened the basket lid only to find it empty. I did my best to commit suicide with an asp that wasn’t there, using sleight-of-hand to make my necklace look



like a snake. I’m acting my heart out until there are screams from the front two rows. A big burly man is stomping his foot on something, shouting that he’ll kill the wriggling bastard. The animal lovers in the audience aim their hostility at this man while the rest aim it at me. You know some people come armed with tomatoes and soft fruit these days, don’t you? I’ve heard they practice for hours to improve their accuracy. In less than a minute I was dripping

in so much red juice I looked more like Lady Macbeth. The fault lies entirely in your hands and I refuse to accept any part in the downfall of this once noble company.'

She turned to read the expressions of those around her. It inevitably led to gushing applause.

'For that reason, I resign from the company as of now.'

She strode imperiously from her seat and out of the auditorium, followed by everyone else.

So, as our bank manager, I hope you'll agree, now I've got rid of everyone I can start again and get some decent actors this time. Don't you agree?