

“THE GENIUS OF JOHNSON” BY WM. SHAKESPEARE

PART 3 – WILL POWER – LESSONS FROM SHAKESPEARE

This week's Contributor: Tomasina Middleton (Mrs.) - “Definitely no relation!”

Fired for scandalous behaviour from the Very Private Theatre Company, I was marooned in Dorset. A Hell of a dreary place unless one owns a substantial part of it and I didn't even own the kilt and sporran I stood up in. My career as a thespian was stymied at the first whatsit. But them's the breaks.

Or was it? Or were they???

But I knew I was innocent and threw myself on the mercy of the Company's owner, Lady Hoxton-Snaithe, who had more of the kefir of human kindness than her jealous spouse, I begged her for one last chance to prove myself. She pondered. She melted. She consented.

But how to do this without his Lordship's knowing?

Then... A miracle! As if He knew. As if He cared for me... The Bard himself called down through the hallowed halls of yesteryears and said,: *Get off thy arras. Bear Up! Go Out!! And Win!!!*

And so... A fortnight later.

From the Tottleigh Barton Globe's review of “The Winter's Tale” at Barton Community Hall:

This was as dull and stodgy an evening as we have come to expect from the VPT Company. And so it proved. Until, that is, the moving scene where the helpless babe Perdita is left to die on the Bohemian shore by Antigonus, on the orders of her cruel father.

The stage direction requires Antigonus to Exit, Pursued by a Bear.

Tot everyone's surprise, since this is a woefully pared-down production, a Bear promptly appears. But, instead of merely chasing Antigonus off the stage the Bear grabs him by the legs and swings him round and round, knocking over the scenery. Then Antigonus is held down and the Bear writes BOO-HOO on his forehead with green eye-shadow. Antigonus punches him off and runs. But the Beast pursues him remorselessly, like a giant brown cat teasing a large mouse dressed in doublet and hose. Antigonus blunders round and round the set. The Bear follows, huffing, puffing, whiffing, whaffling, and roaring its ursine head off. Antigonus uproots a tree and whacks the Bear over the head with it. The Bear staggers like a drunken sailor then hugs Antigonus and leaps into the pit from whence come screams, more roars, and the sound of ripping and crunching.

Finally the bloody-mouthed Bear appears and waves a human leg at the Audience. The Audience roar back at the Bear. A Teacher tries to shepherd her charges out of the theatre but the pupils stand their ground chanting, “WE WANT THE BEAR! WE WANT THE BEAR! WE LOVE SHAKESPEARE! WE LOVE THE BEAR!”

Baby Perdita sleeps soundly through all this like the little goody-two shoes she is.

The Cast struggle heroically to regain their momentum for the later scenes. But fail. The night belongs to the Bear. A night to remember.

THE AFTERMATH

There was no time to celebrate my ursine triumph since I suddenly remembered I was due at a stag do in Vilnius that very day.

I left my co-conspirators Ptolymella and her sisters Galleta, and Distrandia (the Hoxton-Snaithe daughters) in charge. Galleta - the deep-voiced athletic one - could play the Bear while the other two laundered its costume and mollified the cast.

(It is surprisingly hard to wash fake blood from the fake fur of a fake Bear, Distrandia told me later. It took several goes at the tub before it was anyway near clean again. Perfectionist!)

3 MAIL BAGS OUTSIDE CHIPPING CAMPDEN

On my return a week later I met the girls in secret at a country pub. How they laughed when I regaled them with tales of our Baltic exploits. I asked them how the shows had gone without me and Ptolymella said, "Come outside and look at this." She flung open the rear doors of a transit van to reveal 3 enormous mailbags. "Fan mail for the Bear!" she said.

At any other time I would have been delighted. But an airline ticket to Key West and a Caribbean cruise was burning a hole in my pocket. So would they kindly drive me to Heathrow? How long would I be gone? I told them. "Six weeks!" they wailed. "What do we do with all this?" "Whatever you want. It's yours" I said. "You've earned it."

When they saw I was serious Dstrandia ran into the pub and returned with a barmaid and two sheets of paper.

"Sign this, and this copy," she said. "We'll need proof we're acting on your behalf. It's a formality. Becky here will witness it."

I signed cheerfully just to get rid of the mailbags. And of course I might have read it if Becky hadn't been standing so close with her intoxicating aroma of Old Peculier. Then they were off. I reminded them about the lift but they said they were too busy. I borrowed £50 off Becky for the cab fare. And I never saw any of them again

THE BEAR LIVES!

"Your Bear's been busy," sneered Justinian Salinus, inviting me into the viewing lounge of his mega-cuiseur.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Sally," I said as a hammerhead shark slid past the window with a life belt in its jaws.

"I'm talking about the Bear you've been banging on about for the last 3 weeks. It must have earned you a stonking mint... Here. The Purser's made a show reel for you. We call it Bear Mania. Enjoy."

In London last night the RSC's experimental 'Richard III' was interrupted when Richard's cry of "A horse, A horse, My Kingdom for a horse!" was answered by a member of the audience shouting, "I've got a Bear, your Highness. Will that do?" When at length the 'Actor' was re-booted a French voice shouted, "Ah 'ave une ourse, Monsieur. Ca suffit?" The performance was cancelled.

The Market Harborough Festival of World Theatre's 'Julius Caesar' was suspended when a Bear interrupted the assassination scene. It flattened all the Conspirators, shook paws with Caesar and left jingling a bag of gold. A Spokeswoman for the Festival said, 'This is nothing to do with us. We understand it is happening all over the World.'

In Paris a Left Bank production of 'Hamlet' breaks box office records as a Bear shadows Hamlet throughout during his first soliloquy waving a sign saying, "Je Ne Suis Pas Un Ours". On alternate nights a Bear in a long dress follows the Dane doing cartwheels and hand stands, ending with a slow motion CanCan.

An Off-Broadway 'Hamlet' features a Bear ambling onto the stage at the very end and searching the dead bodies. It finds a packet of Gauloises and lights one with relish, winking at the audience.

"Congratulations," said Sally. "There's even a TV ad showing coast to coast Stateside."

Worried MOM at kitchen dinner table with the kids. Door opens. Enter angry BEAR glaring at everyone. CU: MOM's scared EYES. V/O 'Is the Man in your life a Bear? Then turn him into a Dear with Mom-Burgers!' Kitchen again. BEAR happily munches Burger. Turns back into the handsome MAN MOM married.

“I'm told they're planning a series on a streaming channel.”

My blood ran cold. It was My Bear all right. My idea. My success. But there was nothing I could do about it. The Hoxton-Snaithe Girls – Ptolly, Tetty and Dizzy – had stitched me up good and proper. They now run a Talent Agency out of Manhattan They don't take my calls.

“To be perfectly candid,” said Sally, “we didn't believe you. But now you're loaded you can pay your big fat bar Tab.”

“I thought I was a guest,” I said. “There is such a thing as...”

“Tut tut,” tutted Sally. “Did you not read the small print. Why do they never read the small print?”

Again I heard the voice of Shakespeare calling down to me through the years: *And You didn't even read the large print, Matey!*

It was a hard lesson. But it taught me that I could be a winner at something. So I gave up theatre and went into another branch of Show Business: Politics! With results for all to see see!