

10 – A Backstage Mystery – Rebecca Cockcroft

Backstage of a rustic temporary outdoor stage – we see the reverse of flimsy backdrop boards, mostly held together by duct tape and luck. Someone has written Joseph was here in red marker pen on one panel.

There are props in plastic tubs, a makeshift costume rail, a handful of plastic chairs (like the ones you'd find in school halls and canteens. There is a wall partition stood near the costume rail.

Enter KEVIN looking more than a little stressed. He's on the phone and wearing civilian clothes.

Kevin: Honestly, Sandra, just tell Ian that if he isn't here in 15 I'll put the stick the beard on Margery and she can go on for him. I really haven't got time for this today...

Kevin hangs up the phone, and paces. He starts using even more tape on the back of the set. Off stage, voices and laughter make their way towards him. Enter MARTIN and MARGERY, two performers in middle age who are mostly in a low budget Biblical costume. They sit, make tea, generally potter about backstage while they chat. Kevin frets around checking things off on a list on a clipboard, fixing things etc.

Margery: I'm there, final act, Hamlet is fighting away in front of me with Laertes – and I go blank. It's gone. Everything.

Martin: Everything?

Margery: The words, the blocking, the lot.

Martin: Jesus.

Margery: I'm beside myself, so I'm peering around trying desperately to remember where Pete is sitting with the script – only to spot him in the wings, absolutely fast asleep.

Martin: No!

Margery: Yes! Never forgotten a line in my life – it was terrifying.

Martin: What did you do?

Margery: Oh, that sweet boy, Charlie, he was playing Hamlet...

Martin: I bet he was wonderful.

Margery: Oh, he was.

Martin: I saw his Dickie 3, superb.

Margery: Wasn't he just! He just piped up with a line that covered me, perfectly. You wouldn't have known that Bill hadn't penned it himself, it was perfect. Just improvised. Right off the cuff.

Martin: Amazing.

Kevin: Have either of you seen Ian?

Martin: Sorry Kev – we've just come from the chantry though; he might have gone in the front.

Kevin: The front? I told him to meet us at the yard... Oh, I don't know why I bother!

Margery: Because you care, Kevin.

Kevin: I do care. You're quite right, Margery I do care. Too much. And much more than Ian it seems.

Martin: He's always late. It's his thing. He's such a diva.

Margery: Oh, lord, do you remember that tour we did – gosh it must have been early 90s –

Martin: Tempest.

Margery: No, Ian wasn't in Tempest. You're thinking of Andrew.

Martin: Of course.

Margery: Much Ado! It was Much Ado.

Martin: I didn't do Much Ado.

Margery: Yes you did, you were Don Pedro.

Martin: Was I?

Margery: Yes!

Martin: I don't remember that.

Margery: You were fabulous.

Martin: I came to *see* Much Ado. Chester.

Margery: Oh. Maybe you weren't in it then?

Martin: No.

Kevin: Do either of you have an alternative number for Ian? His phone is just ringing out.

Margery: Sorry darling, I don't have his number at all.

Martin: (*pulls his phone out of a hidden pocket in his robe*) I've got one that ends in 97?

Kevin: No, that's the one I've got.

Margery: Since when does your robe have pockets?

Martin: Elaine sewed them in for me. They're very handy.

Margery: Do you think she'd do some for me?

Martin: If you ask her nicely.

Margery: What were we saying?

Martin: Tempest.

Margery: No, Ian, Much Ado.

Martin: Right.

Margery: Oh, you should have seen him then – he'd just done some expensive and useless workshop at some London school for acting, and we were treated to a nightly masterclass, according to him. Poor James Owen, do you remember him? He was playing Benedick so well, and then Ian came along with his acting tips and set the poor lad into fright.

Martin: What happened to him? I don't remember the last time I saw him in anything.

Margery: He gave it all up. I don't blame him, that entire tour was a shit show.

Kevin: Do I need to remind you where we are, Margery?

Margery: Sorry Kevin.

Kevin: If he's not here by twenty to, I'm going to have to go on.

Martin: He'll be here.

Giggling off stage

Martin: Ah, the lovebirds are back I hear.

Enter Kelly and Jacob, two late-teen/20 somethings, who are a little giddy with each other, in civilian clothes.

Kelly: Hi guys. We brought snacks. Martin, the Monster Munch are for you.

Martin: You remembered?

Kelly: You're welcome. Kev, I got you some Pringles – these ones, ok?

Kevin: Perfect.

Jacob: And for the good lady Margery-

Jacob goes down on one knee, raising aloft a packet of Chicken crisps

Jacob: The very last packet of Chicken crisps in the whole of the shitty little newsagent a mile down the road.

Kevin: Language.

Jacob: Sorry.

Margery places her hand on Jacob's head, as if to bless him.

Margery: You are a saint, Jacob.

Kelly: There was quite a little queue forming at the gates. The Vicar was there, but I think running a box office might be a bit out of his range.

Kevin: I'll pop up when Ian gets here.

Jacob: God, is he – sorry Kevin, language, I know. Ian's late then?

Kevin: I can't get hold of him. Sandra is keeping an eye out.

Jacob: I mean, why change the habit of a lifetime...

Kevin: I'm going to get the robe on – just in case. I'll have to go on with a script, obviously...

Kevin goes behind the partition and puts on a tatty, old, badly fitting robe that looks like it has seen better days.

Martin: Let's not jump to conclusions. During Faust he turned up with seconds to go and still knocked it out of the park.

Jacob: What a prick – *(Kevin glares at him)* sorry!

Kelly: What's the plan for tonight then Marg? You coming with me to check out that nightclub under the hotel?

Margery: You try and stop me, darling! Shots are on me.

Kelly: Here, your knot's all getting frayed – let's have a look at you.

Kelly sorts Margery's knot, as Jacob digs his costume out of the rack.

Jacob: That stain came out alright, didn't it?

Martin: I tell you, there is nothing Elaine can't do with fabric.

Jacob: I did offer to pay to get it sorted.

Martin: Hardly your fault that the blood of Christ ended up in your lap.

Jacob: And handy that Margery had that bottle of white stashed in the props box...

Kevin: She did what?

Margery: If you're going to be playing with actual red wine on stage, Kevin, you're going to need some white on hand, just in case of accidents. Or bad audiences.

Jacob starts to get dressed, simply by stripping off – he's got a good physique, and Kevin, Margery and Kelly both have trouble not noticing it...

Kelly: *(shaking herself out of her slight stupor)* There we go Marg, that knot's looking much tidier.

Margery: Thank you darling. Kevin, can I get a time check?

Kevin: It's twenty-five to.

Kelly: Shit, I'd better get changed.

Kevin/Margery: Language.

Kelly: Sorry.

Kelly grabs her robes, and finds an excuse to need to touch Jacob to move him out of the way as he's still mostly parading around in his boxers, and she moves behind the partition.

Jacob: My Gran's coming to see it today.

Margery: Oh how lovely!

Jacob: She's not the religious type. Not into God or anything. But she said she'd come along anyway, as she's only round the corner.

Margery: Oh now that will be nice.

Martin: Phil and Frances from the Hart said they'd see if they could make it.

Margery: That reminds me, Colette and the WI girls are planning on popping out as well.

Kevin: Please tell me you haven't comped tickets for them all? We could actually do with some takings at the end of this...

Margery: Oh! No, of course not. Although I did say that if Barbara brought some of her Victoria sponge, we might sneak her in for free?

Kevin: Payment in cake is still payment I suppose... Has anyone seen the beard glue?

Kelly steps out from behind the partition now in her robes

Kelly: How do I look?

Jacob: You've got something-

Jacob very smoothly removes a piece of cotton from Kelly's hair. She blushes a little.

Jacob: There. Now you're perfect.

Kelly: Thank you.

Martin: Ok, you two, save it 'til after the show!

Kelly/Jacob: What/we're not...

Kevin: Ok, it's twenty-to, I need to get the beard on, or it'll never set in time. Martin, would you give me a hand?

Throughout the next section, Martin kneels in front of Kevin and begins to apply his fake beard.

Margery: Why do you keep hiring Ian, darling? He's a total nightmare.

Jacob: Probably because he's good, right?

Kevin: He's very good.

Jacob: Can I pinch a Pringle?

Kevin: Help yourself. I can't eat any more anyway, I'd get crumbs in my beard.

Kelly: Who first decided that God would have a beard?

Martin: Probably the same people who decided that Jesus was white.

Margery: Let's not start that argument again, here of all places. Kevin, I think you look very fetching with the beard, and I have no doubt of your turn here this afternoon being a marvellous one.

Kevin: I've not had to go on before.

Martin: You'll be fine, mate. You've got the script?

Kevin waves his clipboard in the air

Martin: And it's just reading, really. You're not in the tableaux, you're not in the scenes, you're not in the big dance number...

Kevin laughs

Martin: I'm quite excited to be getting up on stage with you if I'm honest.

Margery: You might find you catch the bug for it, then Martin will be out of a job!

Martin: Good point, maybe you should stay in the wings!

Martin pats Kevin's arm jovially and laughs. Kelly peers gingerly around the edge of the set.

Kelly: The audience are coming in now.

Kevin: Ok, so have we got everything we need? Props?

Jacob lifts a prop snake and prop apple up

Jacob: Check.

Kevin: Costumes?

All: Check

Kevin: Ok then.

A beat.

Kevin: I'm quite nervous, actually.

Margery: Oh darling, there's really no need. You know this show better than all of us, you're going to be fine!

Kevin: I don't think I can do this.

Martin: Yes you can. Once you're out there and you've got your first line out, that's it, boom! You'll have that audience of God-botherers eating out of the palm of your hand.

Kevin: You think so?

Martin: I do.

Kevin: I don't know...

Kelly: I remember my first show, I was shit- I was really scared, but Martin's right, once those first few words come out of your mouth, then it's totally plain sailing from there. And the buzz you get at the end – ugh – amazing.

Jacob: You've got this, man.

Kevin: *(unsure)* Ok. *(with more confidence)* OK! I can do this!

Martin: That's the spirit!

*Off stage, noises of the audience arriving on the other side of the set start up.
Kelly pops her head around the edge of the set.*

Kelly: That's a good-looking audience.

Martin: For a bunch of God-botherers...

Kevin: Am I doing this?

Margery: You're doing this!

Kevin: Ok, let's do it!

Kelly: Yes!

Kevin: Break a leg everyon-

Kevin is interrupted by the arrival of IAN – an older gentleman with a fantastic fake beard, dressed resplendently in glittering white pearl robes. They stand opposite each other, Ian clearly putting Kevin's attempt at costume to shame.

Ian: Argh, I know, I'm late, I'm sorry folks, only I thought I'd get the old costume on out of the way of prying eyes, you know, and I think I got out here just in time because there's a gorgeous audience forming out there. Sandra is entirely swamped, you know. And ten bob a head, I think we're going to do alright out of today! Oh, Kevin – the beard, were you going to go on? How brave of you! Well, I'm here now, so you can relax, yeah?

Kevin: *(sorely disappointed now not to be going on)* Yes, it's a miracle!

Ian: Shall we, ladies and gent?

Ian, Margery, Martin, Kelly and Jacob take to the stage to applause from the small audience.

Kevin: *(sadly)* A fucking miracle.

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