

Thelwell's Thespians

Act One

The final run-through, three days before the first dress rehearsal, was always likely to be fraught. *The Stienholden Vase* which had once been owned by Gracie Fields, was the centre piece of the storyline and had been borrowed for eight days only from the *Vale of the White Horse Museum of Rural Life*. It was valued circa £45,000, the loan underwritten by an 'all-risks' insurance policy at a premium of £575. Those involved knew this was clearly a gross extravagance for a am-dram group who seldom played to audiences larger than a hundred, spread over a two-night run, most of whom had to be arm-twisted into attendance and provided with complimentary 'friends and family' tickets.

Three minutes into Act One, 'Sybil Higginbotham', (real name Melanie Thelwell, behind her back 'The Diva' and sometimes 'The Bloody Diva'), slurred her words, tripped on an imaginary carpet edge, recovered, then segwayed into a heartfelt rendering of the closing speech from Act Three.

Those on stage with her froze. The tension in the hall hit 12.5 on the Richter scale.

When 'Basil Higginbotham', the male lead, (real name Bert Fallings, nickname Topall), shook his head and turned away, The Diva picked up the vase by its odd handle, raised it above her head then smashed it to the floor, causing sharp intakes of breath and 'OH-MY-GA-AW-ADS!' from almost everyone. Viktoria, the twenty-seven-year old Chambermaid gave out a high-pitched nervous giggle which bounced off the walls like a baboon on speed.

With her voice, tremulous at first, firming as she reached the end of the sentence, Melanie snarled at the giggler who was now on her knees trying to make amends for her faux pas by scooping the shards towards her and trying to piece the fragments together.

'That's not going to work,' The Diva said, bossily.

An off-stage voice boomed:

'No one moves. Health and Safety!'

The sound system played Agnetha Fältskog from the ABBA soundtrack, rather too loudly:

*Mother says I was a dancer before I could walk
She says I began to sing long before I could talk*

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*And I've often wondered, how did it all start
Who found out that nothing can capture a heart
Like a melody can
Well, whoever it was, I'm a fan*

*Thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing
Thanks for all the joy they're bringing
Who can live without it, I ask in all honesty
What would life be
Without a song or a dance what are we
So I say thank you for the music
For giving it to me.*

While the music was playing Kris, the Backstage Manager, flitted on with a brush and shovel-pan and expertly swept up, using a powerful head-torch to seek out every last sliver.

The song ended and the cast began to shuffle from the stage, avoiding eye contact. Jane, seated at the back of the hall, switched on her throat mic and through the sound system said:

'Right, folks, early toilet and tea-break, back in ten, *and sharp!* Melanie, dearie, let's have a word. Outside please, NOW! We need a breath of fresh air, methinks'.

Switching channels, she said to his earphones, 'Kris, give Melanie a hand, thanks. We don't need her falling over, not again. Then check her handbag for a bottle and, if there's any left, ditch it, there's a luv.'

Lesley, sitting beside her as her Runner, said quietly. 'Sorry, she must have hidden it somewhere in the car and smuggled it in while I was setting up that bloody vase on its pedestal. I knew borrowing it was a madness but at least your museum pals will get the insurance money and they'll be able to upgrade the place for disabled access which will get them back open again. I'll run her home, OK?'

'Is she up to it, Viktoria? Or will I have to step up again like three times ago?'

'Viktoria will be fine, honestly. I could see this coming and I've been reading her in. She's good, I promise you. See you later for a drink at *The Blue Boar* and we'll talk it over, OK? I'll get The Diva home, get her tucked in, make sure the wine cellar is locked with the key in my handbag. Just as well Hectore is away overnight to Leeds.'

'Leeds *again?* Mmmm. Why not York or Cheltenham? He's losing his touch is our Hectore.'

This year, it was Melanie's turn to be the woman lead. In fact, it was Melanie Thelwell's third show in a row as lead, her seventh show out of ten since the establishing

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of *Thelwell Thespians* five years earlier, having received a (tax-dodging) founding grant from the *Femme Fatale Parfums* slush fund account.

In Melanie's memory, *The Thespians* had all been her 'big idea' but the seed had been planted and nurtured by Lesley Lyon, her sole employee (and confidante) whose day job was as Melanie's personal assistant and chauffeuse. Although Melanie claimed the scripts as her own, Lesley had done 99% of the creative writing to ensure the words were simple enough for her employer to cope with.

On stage the crisis passed, order was restored. Melanie was sent home with her son Theo and Viktoria took over the lead with Kris filling in Viktoria's lines from his sound desk in a convincing falsetto.

Their latest barnstormer would be delivered as hand-billed:

Fawtless Towers

An hilarious spoof in three acts, written by and starring Melanie Thelwell with occasional music and audience participation ditties composed and arranged by Theodore Thelwell, a widely- acclaimed budding impresario.

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Act Two

By the Saturday morning dress rehearsal, sans audience, everyone was ready, word perfect, if still a bit wooden. Or, at least, nearly everyone. Although faultless as Melanie's understudy, the new girl Viktoria Delaney was still unreliable in her own part. Fortunately, the spare lady, Sheila Sopwith, a quick reader, was soon up to speed as the replacement Chambermaid.

The Diva, although recovered, was resting at home but had insisted she would arrive by taxi in time for the afternoon matinee performance.

Theo, Melanie's seventeen-year-old stepson, eight weeks into his expensive, self-funded course at *The Urdang Academy* in Islington was struggling to make headway, failing to keep up with his assignments and already skipping classes to 'compose' at home. In this production, Theo had a bit part as a dim Spanish waiter but for the major part, he skulked behind the scenes, sticking close to his latest boyfriend Kris (Kristian), a gorgeous twenty-three-year-old Nigerian who worked as a personal trainer and sports masseur at the up-market gym called *Fame Fatale Fitness*.

Although Theo gave the impression of being in charge behind the scenes, everyone knew it was Kris who had automated the lighting sets, mics and sound system using his laptop. With a beautiful baritone voice and perfect diction, Kris was the invisible, linking Narrator, doubling as '*the off-stage voice from Reception*' and generally moving around to pull at the backdrop pulleys or move the props between acts which, because he was black against the dim stage, made it seem to the audience as if these eerie and indistinct objects were being moved by magic.

Fame Fatale Fitness was co-owned by Hectore with his cousin Jane, who was the Stage Director of *The Thespians*. Lesley, who was secretly much more friendly with Jane than they allowed Melanie to discover, had complimentary membership of the gym and had reported back to the other cast members that, when kitted out in his lycra leggings, it was evident Kris was 'hung like a racehorse'. At the gym, he was known behind his back as Kris The Cobra.

Melanie had been, at first, resistant to his selection as Back Stage Manager. This was partly because she would have preferred her gay stepson to choose a white partner but mainly because of her rivalry with Jane for control of *The Thespians*. However, even The Diva had to admit Kris Konstante was a godsend so had decided to 'like him' on Facebook, a rare privilege, not lightly bestowed.

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As their nominal Producer, Hectore Thelwell's role was restricted to providing the annual donation to fund hall hire and all the other costs associated with putting on two shows a year. Although this largesse looked amazingly kind, in fact, these costs were offset against the tax affairs of *Femme Fatale Parfums* so cost him nothing. For Hectore, the quid pro quo was *The Thespian's* rehearsed two nights a week, for forty weeks a year plus extra sessions before productions, ensuring he was free to watch soccer on television without interruption or, occasionally, to 'interview' prospective future employees over a candle-lit dinner in a remote country inn with a comfortable bedroom awaiting upstairs, if the girl showed promise.

The number of actors was less this year, down from fifteen to nine, which suited Melanie, making her seem more important. The cast and helpers at *The Thespians* had a constant turnover, mainly because of Melanie's bitchiness but also because of Hectore's inappropriate innuendo and wandering hands. However, Hectore, who owned a chain of discount perfume shops and in-store franchises and employed only the most attractive young women, never older than thirty, was always able to produce new female volunteers when required. Melanie, who had once been one of his 'girls', had cleverly managed to oust Hectore's previous wife, Thelma, mother of Theo. Thelma lived now in the next village with her new husband Phillip Lyon (Lesley's cousin), who had once been her gardener. Now, with Thelma's help, Phillip ran *Streakless*, a successful window-cleaning business, employing twenty operatives each with van to carry a tank of treated water pumped through long-pole brushes to clean windows and extending suction tubes clear gutters without the need of ladders.

In Lesley's other script, still under development and kept securely in an encrypted file on her iPad, she had written out Melanie and moved in with Hectore as his housekeeper and secret lover. In one raunchy bedroom segment of her fantasy, this arrangement had been discussed with Hectore, in concept only. At their imaginary secret love-nest weekends, Melanie's many faults were examined and he had agreed she had degenerated to become a gushing bore, a caustic grouch and an irretrievable drunk and that the time was nigh when they must rid themselves of her.

Lesley's many ideas for disposing of Melanie, by divorce, accident, poisoning, hiring an assassin on the Dark Web and so on, remained unwritten. These notions shimmered at the periphery of her mind like sirens sometimes glowing bright and seeming tangible before fading away, unreachable. Later, in the small hours of the night, they would resurface, morphed, calling to her again, tugging at her psyche, sending it off on another fruitless quest for a 'solution' to the obstacle called Melanie.

Frustratingly for Lesley, (still an attractive, well-presented three-time divorcee whose age must never be discussed or alluded to), these make-believe romantic romps

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were only possible when Melanie went to her spa resort hotel in The Lake District for her bi-annual 'recuperative refreshers'. Lesley's role in this was to deliver and collect her employer to and from Oxford station after which Melanie travelled first class by train and complimentary Rolls Royce to her destination, an exclusive resort hotel. Here, she endured 'full package' ten-day fasting and drying out retreats which returned her to her real life, bright eyed, bushy tailed and in sore need of a binge-blow-out.

For Lesley, the blessing of these interludes which she looked forward to eagerly, was they occurred in the immediate wake of *The Thespians* bi-annual productions, ergo, they could be planned by all parties well in advance. In her writings, Lesley would invent various romantic adventures with Hectore in which he whisked her to somewhere glamorous like Cannes or St Moritz or Cairo, to live the high life in seven-star luxury and play their casinos, breaking their banks and solving all her money worries.

Disappointingly, when Melanie went off on these spa trips, Hectore immediately also disappeared, flying to Paris, Milan, Rome or wherever, always with his latest, leggy and gorgeous purchasing guru in tow. Left high and dry at *Ridgeway House*, Lesley was expected to house-sit the Thelwells' cantankerous old moggy, Norman and their delightful Afghan, Phoebe. Less enjoyably, she must also cook and clean for Theo and his boyfriends.

Lesley's quid pro quo was she could drive Hectore's Range Rover which she used to visit far-flung antiques fairs and bespoke auction houses. At these locations, while poking around for bargains, she pretended to be a mysterious expert, dropping hints she was an undercover television producer planning a new series and scouting locations. Normally these well-honed scripts would produce a very nice free lunch or afternoon tea.

With Hectore away, Lesley was authorised to run-up a bill of up to £1,000 on his telephone account with *Fortnum & Mason*, pigging out on luxury food and exclusive vintage wines while watching boxed sets on *Netflix* in the Thelwell's home studio cinema, with Norman and Phoebe in attendance.

In recent times, it also provided a venue for the occasional clandestine visit by Viktoria, Lesley's daughter from her final marriage to Declan Delaney. Viktoria had been removed from her as a child because of Declan's violent behaviour. Mother and daughter had been reunited when Viktoria had been 'directed' by Hectore to join the cast eighteen months earlier. It was Viktoria who had imparted the welcome news her father Declan was now serving a life sentence in Spain for armed robbery, with aggravated violence.

Mother and daughter had agreed to keep their relationship secret from everyone, even Jane, in case it might hamper Viktoria's progress within *Femme Fatale Parfums*, where Viktoria, a Chartered Accountant, was currently deputy to the CEO, Hermione

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Thelwell. Hermione, Hectore's older sister, detested Melanie whom she blamed for wrecking Hectore's first marriage and 'damaging' her wonderful nephew, Theo.

In replenishing the cast for *The Thespians*, Melanie was always a good source of suitable men and boys, garnered during her work as a self-styled Executive Search Consultant. This was an entrepreneurial venture Melanie had started as a means of proving to Jane and her snobby friends that she was not just a dishy airhead from Watford, with a dodgy past in promotional videos, aimed at the soft-porn girl-on-girl sex toy market.

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Act Three

The stage was set for the afternoon matinee in front of a bus load of rather pretentious ladies from the *Ceramics Class* at *Denham College* located in the nearby town of Abingdon, a course organised by *Gloucester Federation of Women's Institutes*.

Lesley had provided a near replica of *The Stienholden Vase* from her stock of antiques, its large ornate chipped handle camouflaged with daubs of nail varnish, undetectable by the audience. Prior to the show, this replica vase had been scrutinised and tittered at and competition for seats in the front row had been acrimonious. However, everyone agreed Melanie Thelwell had done amazingly well in persuading the authorities to allow *The Thespians* to borrow such an iconic work of art.

Viktorija was back in her Chambermaid outfit. Like everyone else she was high on adrenaline, with the first night only a few hours away.

Behind the scenes, talking quietly on his headset and bud mike to Jane, Kris was running through the last-minute checklist and tweaking the lighting sets and speakers, broadcasting a voice take made at a recording session two weeks earlier when Melanie had been fully sober. Jane and Lesley were offering feedback. Finally, everything was perfect and Jane gave the signal and the ten-minute countdown to Curtains Up commenced.

However, The Diva was locked in her cubby hole dressing room, refusing to answer Sheila, who had been subbing for Viktorija in the morning rehearsal and was now back in original role as Timing and Prompt.

Shelia knocked loudly and tried the handle. The door was locked.

'Melanie, that's FIVE to Curtains. We need you stage left. NOW, please.'

No response.

'Melanie, last chance or we switch to Viktorija and you're scrubbed. You know I mean it. Remember three performances back when Jane had to sub you on the final night.'

Was that a shuffling sound, thought Sheila.

'NOW, PLEASE! OR ELSE!'

A thud, then silence.

On her mic, Sheila spoke to Kris.

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'Kris, The Bloody Diva is not responding. Could you get this door open? She's probably drunk again but we'd better check, yeah?'

As she turned, Kris appeared by her side, key outstretched, twisted it in the lock and threw open the door with a dramatic flourish.

'Voila!

They ran to the open window and were just in time to see Melanie's Mercedes sports car race out of the car park and slalom into the side street, tyres screeching as the car snaked towards the busy junction then disappeared.

'Oh, My Gawd! She's not allowed to drive, that's why she has Lesley as her chauffeuse! The bitch was banned for life after she killed that poor man. We must call the police. We simply must!'

'She killed someone?'

'Yes, a head-on with an elderly farmer driving his tractor home. Years ago, near Stow-in-the-Wold. She was drunk as a skunk but got off without prison because he wasn't showing lights and it was officially past lighting-up. It was classified as mutual culpability. She had a fancy QC to rep. ...'

At that point Sheila was interrupted by a loud THARUUMP followed by a cacophony of car horns. Behind the rooftops, near the flagstaff of *The Blue Boar*, they saw a pall of dark black smoke billowing and swirling away on the freshening breeze.

'OH MY GAWD, Kris, she's crashed. Please God she hasn't killed anyone else.'

Through her headphones, Jane's voice.

'Sheila, that's it. I bloody knew Melanie would bomb on us again. Tell her she's scrubbed. Get Viktoria prepped as the lead. I've paused the clock. You have an extra three minutes. *Prontissimo!* And don't worry, when she missed the TEN, I phoned Hectore. He's on his way to collect her, should be here any second.'

'Jane,' said Sheila to her mic. 'Kris and I saw Melanie driving off in her Merc. There's an empty Vodka bottle here and two empty cans of diet Pepsi. Pound to a penny she's drunk and driving. We heard a smash and we can see smoke. Oh, there's a police car sounding now. What should we do?'

'Ah! Look, we have no proof it's her, right?'

'No, but. ...'

'Right, say nothing. Tell me you heard that. *Both* of you, please.'

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'OK, we're in.'

'Good, thanks. Lock the door to Melanie's room and keep schtum. Get Viktoria prepped. Kris, get Rick to take over Timing and Prompts. Sheila, you stand-in for Victoria as Chambermaid. Lesley, on my signal reset the timer for TEN and then scoot to the front door and head off Hectore. Don't let anyone in or out, right. The show must go on. *The Thelwell Thespians* are more just *The Bloody Diva*, right?'

Switching to the GREEN ROOM channel, Jane said:

'Heads up, everyone. Our dear Melanie has decided to withdraw. I'm resetting The Clock. The Cast as per our morning run through. And its TEN MINUTES TO CURTAINS UP. Break a leg, why don't you!'

'Jane,' said Lesley. 'Hectore's not answering his mobile. How odd.'

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The Show Goes On!

Both Hectore and Melanie were cut-out of their charred vehicles and rushed to hospital. An hour before *Curtains Up*, they were in side by side operating theatres while the cast met to discuss what to do. In the information vacuum and knowing it was what the couple would have wanted, Jane insisted they must go ahead and present their production.

Both the matinee and evening shows went well and the audiences were heard to say on leaving the new leading lady was a vast improvement on the previous one.

Theo spent the evening at the hospital, dozing outside the ITU suite. The part of the dim Spanish waiter was played by Rick and Lesley did Timing and Prompts.

After the Saturday evening performance, Kris joined Theo at the hospital while the rest of the cast and helpers moved to *The Blue Boar*. Initially the celebrations were muted but after the sixth round of drinks, everyone perked up and the party moved on to Jane's place.

It was only as the party ended, Viktoria Delaney and Rick Graham revealed they had been dating in secret for six months. As she was now pregnant, everyone was invited to their wedding to be held in the village hall in six weeks' time.

After five days on life support, the Consultant from the *John Radcliffe Major Trauma Centre* advised that, should they ever recover enough to leave hospital, they would most probably both be paraplegics. As next of kin, Hermione signed the forms and both life-support machines were switched off.

As neither Theo nor Kris could drive, Hermione asked Lesley to move into Ridgeway House pro temp as their housekeeper, chauffeuse and pet minder.

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Two weeks after the funeral, while Theo and Kris were in Ibiza trying to escape the melancholy of their new situation, Lesley drove the Range Rover to the *Museum of Rural Life* where she presented the Curator with the insurance cheque for £45,000.

Chatting to the Curator, Lesley learned the *Stienholden Vase* had always been an embarrassment with its peculiar handle in the form of a rather too life-like, drooping, circumcised penis. Under the instructions of the Trustees, it had been kept hidden from children and 'undesirable' visitors, in a closed cabinet, available to view only 'on

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request'. In short, the *Stienholden Vase* had been an inconvenient white elephant asset which, under the terms of its bestowal, they were not allowed to sell.

In exchange for a personal donation of £20, she persuaded the Curator to give her, as a keepsake, the now redundant provenance documentation for the real vase which Melanie had 'dropped'.

Later, back at Ridgeway House with all doors locked, she checked the paperwork against the original *Stienholden Vase* which had had kept well hidden from the moment she had collected it weeks earlier. Satisfied the paperwork and object matched perfectly, she then made a call to a private auction house in Manchester which she had heard about on the auction circuit grapevine; a place where objects could be sold for cash, no questions asked.

The next day, she made the trip to Manchester and found the office in an anonymous city centre tower block. The Auctioneer, with his tame Ceramics Specialist in attendance, subjected the real *Stienholden Vase* to intensive scrutiny, checking it closely against the accompanying document which verified its authenticity.

Lesley sat po-faced in the background while the anonymous bidders were contacted by email. Two hours later, the Internet auction was opened and closed within ten minutes. During this time the *Stienholden Vase* was placed on a rotating platform and its image streamed by a video link. After a short and aggressive bidding war, the vase was sold for £67,000 (net) cash-in-hand to Lesley as its 'owner'.

Lesley would never learn how the process was managed. Her money was taken from the Auctioneer's safe, in bundles of a thousand pounds assembled in mixed denominations and counted, twice on the Auctioneer's desk then counted for a third time as the bundles dropped into a rucksack which she was gifted. She was not required to sign any forms or reveal her identity.

To be fair to Lesley Lyon, when she had made the original substitution, her intention had been only to protect the real *Stienholden Vase*. At that time there had been no intent to steal it but, at the instant The Bloody Diva had smashed her substitute, she had known what she must do. After all, she had paid £230 of her own money at a country house auction near York for the excellent replica which Melanie had destroyed in her fit of pique. Caught in the horns of her dilemma and, at a further personal cost of £95 plus £23 for express courier delivery, Lesley had sourced a second Chinese-made replica. Online it had been described as 'only slightly distressed' but, when she received it, she realised at once, the online image had been photoshopped. Working carefully, by dint of her deft handiwork, she had restored this sad example of manhood to the much more

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vibrant version which had been so admired and photographed in lewd selfies by the ladies from *Denham College*.

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Almost two years later, when Viktoria returned to work after her baby, she was promoted to *Chief Financial Officer* at *Femme Fatale Parfums*. On Hermione's retirement, Jane lured Bert Fallings from *Marks & Spencer* to take over as *CEO*.

In a complimentary move, Jane appointed Rick Graham as the *Operations Manager* at *Femme Fatale Fitness*, freeing her to develop her brand with plans to create a gym in each of the other affluent *Cotswold* towns nearby.

After *Ibiza*, given what had happened to *Hectore* and *Melanie*, *Theo* and *Kris* decided they would never, ever, learn to drive. *Lesley* was asked to move permanently to *Ridgeway House*. Having done so, she set up her two-bedroom flat in *Abingdon* for renting out through the *Airbnb* website.

After a wrangle and based on the *Police* report which proved *Hectore* was entirely innocent, the car insurance company was forced into providing a like-for-like replacement *Range Rover*. Since the car written off was only a few months old, *Lesley* was provided with a brand-new top-of-the range vehicle. In the negotiations she traded the original pearlized *Blush Pink* paint job for a less extravagant metallic *Midnight Blue* and a 'free' set of winter tyres including a ten-year storage and changeover service.

Now revealed as the mother of *Viktoria*, *Lesley* has become a doting granny to *Dorian*, her perfect grandson, whizzing him around auction houses in the *Range Rover*, perched in his custom-fit ultra-safe child seat.

Theo gave up his course at *The Urdang* to concentrate on composing and song-writing. With *Kris*, they built a huge studio in the grounds of *Ridgeway House* and formed an *LGBT* band called *Falling 4 U* which has a growing fanbase, transmitting free, live, weekly studio sessions. Using her creative writing skills, *Lesley* has become a key member of their song-writing team.

The clever website devised by *Kris* promotes the *Falling 4 U* music download portal, the *Femme Fatale Fitness* workout-at-home-to-music video modules and the new *LGBT* 'flavours' from *Femme Fatale Parfums*. These promo shows have grown steadily in popularity, attracting *Falling 4 U* fan club members from across the globe, reaching out to *LGTB* communities across the *World*.

The reformed *Thelwell Thespians* have moved upmarket and are now regulars at the *Cheltenham Festival of Performing Arts*, playing to audiences in excess of 3,000 over a five-night-run.

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Since their marriage, Kris and Theo have blossomed as actors and are now firmly front and centre stage in every production, leading the audience participation ditties co-written by Theo, Kris and Lesley. The duo always gets the loudest cheers and wolf whistles from the LGBT crowd who compete for first night seats when Lesley's Chinese replica *Stienholden Vase* is displayed centre-stage, firmly glued to a secure pedestal.