



THEATRICAL

Maggie Harcourt

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For Clare and Alex:
we'll always have the Ustinov.

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*Because everybody knows the
real drama happens backstage...*



ACT ONE

Audition

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Fifteen minutes.

That's only...what, nine hundred seconds – right?

Nine hundred seconds late feels so much better than *quarter of an hour late*. Doesn't it?

Okay, so no. I'm fifteen minutes late.

And what that makes me is screwed.

My umbrella turns itself inside out thanks to the March mini-hurricane blowing round the corner of the building. Funnelled between the long, low warehouses of the industrial estate, the gusts are even stronger here than they were on the main road. At least back there the rain just fell downwards; now it's going every possible kind of sideways... and I swear some of it's actually coming back up at me. I ditch the umbrella. It's blatantly not helping.

Unit thirty-two, unit thirty-two...

Come on, come on, come on...

Unit eighty-seven.

And a dead end.

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You have got to be *kidding* me.

I turn around and swim back up the road to the sign that lists all the businesses and companies on the estate with their unit numbers, looking for anything that even remotely resembles *Earl's Theatre Rehearsal Room*. Or *Theatre*. Or even *Room*.

Basically, at this point I'll take anything that's legible.

Five minutes later, I shove open a battered metal door in a red, two-storey unit – the mythical unit thirty-two, which turned out to be on a completely different road and in between unit number forty-one and unit number ninety-three (although perhaps that's only on Thursdays – maybe on Wednesdays and alternate Sundays it's next to unit thirty-three, just for fun). I peel off my soaked coat. Inside is...not quite what I was expecting. The front section of the unit has been divided off to make an entrance space; there's an empty clothes rack nailed to the side wall, so I hang my coat on one of the pegs, where it drips gently. The reception area is deserted, and the only furniture is a sagging, slightly grubby sofa and a little glass table next to it, piled with crumpled back-issues of *The Stage* and an old dog-eared copy of the *Spotlight Contacts* book.

This is not even close to how I imagined the entrance to the rehearsal room of a theatre like the Earl's would look. I think I'd pictured...I don't know, maybe something a little cleaner? A plush velvet sofa, maybe. Gleaming floor-

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to-ceiling windows with natural light streaming in and a waxed wooden floor.

Wrong on all counts.

“Umm...hello?”

My voice bounces off the dingy grey walls, coming straight back to me. *This is how horror films start*, says a small voice that belongs to a bit of me I almost certainly don't want to listen to. *It really is.*

Beyond the sofa is another door – a blue one this time, with a small, neatly-printed card taped to it.

INTERVIEWS. (Knock & enter.)

I wonder whether whoever typed it meant to make it as passive-aggressive as they have by adding the full stops. Who adds punctuation to a sign like that?

I squeeze as much rainwater out of my hair as I can, and I knock. Full stops or not.

The room on the other side is much, much larger – it's actually kind of like my school's gym hall. It even has the same floor tiles, but with dozens of little black-and-yellow taped crosses and Ls stuck to them. The main difference, though, is the back wall – the whole thing here is taken up by a huge pinboard, where hundreds of sketches, colour printouts and pages of notes flutter in a draught. And in

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front of it all, smack in the middle of the hall, is a table where three men and one woman are sitting – looking incredibly bored and *not a little* annoyed.

“Uh, hi?” I raise a hand, hoping they didn’t spot the water that just dripped off my elbow. “Hope Parker. I’m here for the internship interview? I’m really sorry, I got...”

“Drowned?” says one of the line-up, barely glancing up from the book he’s reading. He smirks at his own joke, then arches an eyebrow at me and drops the paperback – the novel about magicians that everyone seems to be reading lately, dog-eared and thick with Post-it notes poking out – on the floor with a bang. I recognize him almost immediately and want to curl myself into a ball in the middle of the floor and never speak or move or do *anything* again. Because it’s Rick Hillier. I finally get to meet Rick Hillier, my favourite actor, my favourite director, my favourite everything...and I’m late and approximately ninety-seven per cent rain. Excellent.

“Is it still raining?” The woman – she must be Amy, the Earl’s Theatre deputy stage manager who rang me about this interview – looks up at the ceiling as though she’s worried the water will start pouring through any second.

I push my hair back behind my ear again. I’ve had showers that have left me drier than this. One of my trainers sprang a leak outside unit fifteen and I can still feel the water swooshing around my toes.

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“A bit.”

“That explains why you’re late, I suppose. We’d almost given up on you,” says another of the men. Sitting at the end of the table, he’s older than the others – even older than my dad, I’d guess – and he’s got a folder open in front of him, which he keeps tapping with the end of a pen. I decide that it’s probably not the best idea to say that I’m actually late because I was practising – rehearsing – for this so hard that I completely forgot to check the time. I should have checked the time. But if they want to go with the rain story, let’s run with that.

“Yes. The rain, and the bus...” I shrug and a drop of water very slowly trickles down between my shoulder blades.

“Well, now you’re here you’d better sit down.” He points to the cushioned chair in front of the table – then looks straight over my shoulder. “Or perhaps one of those would be more practical...?”

I follow his gaze to the stack of hard plastic chairs beside the door. I drip back across the floor to the door, drip a chair out of the stack and drip all the way back to the table, sitting down across from the four of them. As one, they stare back at me. This is brutal.

“Here.” Amy has been rummaging in the rucksack at her feet and pulls out a towel, holding it out to me across the table.

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I shake my head. “I’m fine, really. Thanks.”

I sneeze.

“On second thoughts...” I take the towel and sit there with it in my lap like I’ve somehow forgotten what towels are for.

This is going well.

“So. Hope. You’re seventeen, and you’re from Marshfield School – is that right?” Folder Man looks down at his papers, then carries on without waiting for an answer. “You’ve applied for the stage management placement with us, haven’t you?”

“Umm...yes?”

“We’ve got your form, but we’d like you to tell us a little about yourself – starting with why you want to work in a role like this.”

I practised this. I did. I’ve got a whole spiel about close readings of a script and bringing a theatre company together as a family, looking after them and making sure they have what they need. I can talk about a theatre as a living, breathing machine where everyone is a cog and it’s only when the cogs are all turning together that the whole thing comes to life. I have stuff about finding props, about tech week; about schedules and supporting the director and problem-solving and *everything*. I’ve practised it in front of my mirror every night this week. I wrote it on cue cards, just to be sure.

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The ones I realized on the way over that I'd left under my bed. And now I can't remember any of it.

Superb.

Four pairs of eyes look at me expectantly.

I've got nothing. Nothing but wet hair and wet shoes and wet jeans.

It's Amy who takes pity on me. "Wow, Charlie. Big question to hit her with when she's only just sat down!" She looks along the table at him. "Maybe we could start with something a bit gentler?"

He shrugs, and she takes this as an *okay*, turning to smile at me. "You said on your form that you've got some experience of backstage work. Talk to us about that a bit, Hope."

"Umm..."

I know this is the bit where, according to the form, I'm supposed to have the chance to *demonstrate a passion for practical theatre*.

For two years, I've volunteered at the Square Globe Community Theatre in my free time as an assistant stage manager – aka the dogsbody, errand-runner, gluer-and-stapler of broken scenery, and the wielder of the safety pin and iron-on webbing that sticks anything to *anything* (trust me, I've tried). Two years of first-night applause and last-minute adrenalin rushes, end-of-run parties and those in-jokes that are only funny if you were in the room when something happened – which I usually was. Two years in

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which I've helped actors learn their lines, hissed their lines from the side of the stage when they forgot them, and listened to them complaining when lines they *had* learned got cut before they had the chance to forget them. I've learned how to get mic tape off someone's neck without making them cry, and I have even carried a pantomime cow costume to the dry-cleaner's in an unseasonal heatwave. (Tip: it's not too difficult if you actually wear the back half to walk in, but you do get some funny looks.)

And I've loved every minute of it.

Being in a theatre – any theatre – is like walking into an enormous hug. To me, standing at the back of an auditorium and looking at the stage feels like a pair of velvet-covered arms are wrapping around me and pulling me close. It's where I'm meant to be. Give me a headset and I'm happy – even one of the crappy old ones at the Square Globe which were fished out of a skip behind the Earl's. The first time I put one on, I realized it still had the red-and-gold Earl's logo stamped on it, and I promised myself that one day I'd be putting a headset on in the Earl's itself. Preferably one that hadn't come out of a skip.

This is my only chance to talk about all that, really. Not just because if I don't I can forget the placement, but because even though my mum loves the theatre, she belongs to another part of it. She's confident and so sure that she knows what she's talking about, and when she's working

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she can always say what she means and it makes sense. She just *does* it. She could talk about costumes all day (and people literally pay her to do that sometimes) but the stuff she cares about is always *meant* to be seen. It's the swooshing silks and swirling capes, beads and glitter and things shining in the light. And that's the opposite of what I am. The opposite of where I think *I'm* meant to be. And she'll never get that: how can she? People see her work and they know it's hers – she's famous for it. As for Dad and my sisters, well, they've had so many years of Mum's theatre-related dramas that the thought of me bringing even more of them home wouldn't go down well. The community theatre stuff's one thing, but as far as they're concerned, one theatre professional in the family's quite enough.

Which is why nobody knows I'm here.

This is *my* dream, that *I* need to make happen. *On my own*.
At least, that's partly why, anyway...

Four pairs of eyes are still looking at me expectantly, and everything I have to say – everything *I want* to say – turns to dust in my mouth and my voice evaporates. All the passion, all the enthusiasm, all the...whatever else I'm supposed to show them I have? Dust, smoke and ashes.

I have, to borrow a phrase from the actors, *dried*.

Amy rescues me again, clearing her throat and pointedly looking at my form on the table in front of her.

“Just one thing before we go any further. Would you be

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willing to sign an NDA for us?” She pulls a printed sheet of paper out of one of her folders, holding it out to me.

“A non-disclosure agreement?” My fingers close around the form.

“We can see that you’ve got good experience of script reading, prop management and rehearsal notes, which is great. We’re hoping to bring our intern in on our next... well, our *current* production. It’s finishing out its rehearsal-room time and moving into the theatre for technical rehearsals. We’ve got some stage magic designed by Katie Khan we’ll need to be on-site to really get working and that might be a bit of a challenge...but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I have to say, though, that looking at your background, I think this show would be a good fit for you.”

I nod. Enthusiastically. I can’t actually make any sound, but nodding I *can* manage.

Current production.

Amy is still talking.

“...And between protecting the magic and the fact we’re expecting it to be a high-profile show, the NDA is standard. It’s not just you, I promise,” she adds.

I know this. I know I know it.

I know what they’re rehearsing now, but suddenly my mind’s gone blank and all I can do is nod like an idiot. My whole brain is blacked-out by panic.

So I nod some more. What have I got to lose?

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“Obviously, we’re aware of your school commitments, but if we were to offer you the place, we would like to have you with us for the next few weeks. So that’s next week, and then into the Easter break for the end of rehearsal, tech, and – of course – opening night. Can you confirm you’d be available for the whole period? Your school will have to be on board, and sign off your absence.”

I keep nodding. This seems to be enough.

“Okay. Great. The internship is focused on the deputy stage manager role – from your application I imagine you know a lot of this already – and you would be required to work across all the different aspects of stage management. At the end, we can provide you with a reference should you wish to apply for a formal stage qualification.” She pauses, checks something written in her notebook. “The pro-rata pay isn’t particularly good, I’m afraid – but at least it’s something. Nobody goes into theatre to get rich, do they? What else? The actors have just about got their lines down and are largely off-book, but they’ll need the odd bit of prompting. You’ll be supporting Rick here –” she nods at Rick, who nods back even though he now looks like he actually hates me – “with rehearsal notes and blocking out the actors’ movements across the stage ready for when we move into the theatre.” She flips through her notebook again. “You say you’ve done a little of that?”

It finally hits me.

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Piecekeepers.

That's the show. The stage adaptation of *Piecekeepers* – the magic book with all the spells trapped in paintings; the one Rick was reading. It gets a six-week run at the Earl's before it transfers out to the West End.

And the lead?

The lead is Tommy Knight.

Actual *movie star* Tommy Knight.

Oh god.

This show is a huge deal. And they're saying I might get to work on it.

"A bit." My voice comes out wobblier than I'd like. I sound exactly as nervous as I feel, and that's not good.

"Great. Mostly you'd be shadowing me, especially through the technical rehearsals, as well as looking after the props. Oh, and we would also need you to work with our wardrobe intern..." She glances at my form. "But you don't need me to tell you about wardrobe, do you?"

No. Please no.

I wait for someone to say it. They always do.

"Parker? You don't mean...not as in *Miriam Parker*? You don't happen to be related, do you?"

Hope Parker-as-in-Miriam-Parker. Yes, *that* Miriam Parker: legendary theatrical costume designer Miriam Parker. When I get talking to anyone in theatre, it always comes back to my mum eventually.