

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



LyreBird (Tales of Helpmann)

by Tyler Coppin

EXTRACT

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*"He stumbled upon the oddest fancy that
ever entered a mad man's brain: to turn
knight errant and roam through the
whole world in quest of adventures."
Cervantes, Don Quixote*

CAST

One actor plays Sir Robert 'Bobby' Helpmann, and the following roles:

Don Quixote, Binkie Beaumont, a miner, critics, Mary Helpman, young Bobby, Mr Lermontov from *The Red Shoes*, Victoria Page from *The Red Shoes*, Mount Gambier local, Bondi Beach stranger, balletomane mourners, Lilian Baylis, Ninette de Valois, Tyrone Guthrie, Oberon, the Queen, Edith Crumbhorn, Katharine Hepburn, Rudolf Nureyev, Australian journalist, James Barakauskas, the Child Catcher, a female fan.

VOICE

SETTING

The action takes place in the dressing room of a theatre in Australia during intermission of the ballet *Don Quixote* sometime in the 1970's.

PROLOGUE

Music.

Helpmann, as Don Quixote, in silhouette atop a horse. The shadow of a windmill turns. He fights battle after battle, slaying every monster that is crazy enough to challenge him. He remains victorious for a long time, but finally he is slain. As he falls to his knees...

BOBBY

IN... TER... VAL!

SCENE ONE

Lights up on BOBBY. A trail of strewn clothes and costumes is on the floor near to where he has fallen, exhausted and gasping for air. Although this is unmistakably Helpmann, he is made-up as one of his most famous roles: the wild-eyed Don Quixote De La Mancha, from the ballet of the same name.

There is a dressing table, with warm glowing light globes speckled around its mirror, crammed with pots of greasepaint, cold cream, tissues, lipstick, wigs, dried flowers, and greeting cards from Bobby's friends and fans, some open and others not.

A large costume rack used to hold practical items such as the safari suit, and whatever will be used to represent the lyrebird costume of the ballet, The Display. Throughout the play the costume rack can be used as an entrance, an exit, or a place to hide.

An old theatre lighting console sits in a corner of the room that the actor can pretend to use to control the ambience.

A big shabby comfortable lounge chair and an ashtray full of cigarette butts with smoke constantly snaking out of it.

Scattered around the room are other bits and pieces from the ballet and theatre world of a bygone era.

Music: Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia, from 'Spartacus', by Khachaturian.

BOBBY

I dreamed as a child that I was curled comfortably and dozing atop an enormous powder puff, wearing only a pair of tights. My little head was nestled gloriously on two plump pillows with satin covers. In the dream I awoke. But rather than seeing my initials embroidered on the edges of the pillow slips, I saw two simple words which would later come to hold great meaning in my life: *Max Factor*. I heard music. I looked up into the heavens and I saw a gigantic index finger descending toward me, its well manicured nail was freshly buffed. The finger touched me on my solar plexus and I quaked with fear. I gazed upon a bony hand, beyond a wrist, and along a sinewy arm where I came face to face with the head of Binkie Beaumont... in planetary dimensions. He whispered to me... I've never forgotten it. "Young man, do you know the difference between *fellatio* and a pork pie?" "No sir, I do not." "Here's my card, we're going to lunch."

Away! Fairy, begone! A quick powder and I'm back on. To the masque!

BOBBY crosses to the dressing table and sits. He applies the finishing touches to an already outrageously painted Helpmannesque face caked with greasepaint and powder. Over the following dialogue he fiercely powders his face, creating huge fluffy clouds in the air.

Don Quixote starts his day with Max Factor Bisque Beige Panstik! Colossal impedimenta muy macho. Rrah! But first, he soaps back the eyebrows to lay them flat upon the head, greasepaint over the top to cover them up, powder, more greasepaint over the top to cover that up, more powder, and then the Max Factor over the entire visage, ready to start afresh, having erased the natural features. From there he paints the new face onto his own empty canvas. Layer upon layer he creates a most perfect companion. *Oh ageless fantasy! I look into your eyes and I am gone, perhaps never to be seen again.*

(beat) Particularly once the reviews have come out.

Have you noticed how this highly courageous style of theatrical make-up has all but died out in the modern theatre? Oh yes, today actors perform *au naturel*. Now that's not because of a change in style or a push toward naturalism. No, the kids these days just want you to know who it is who's doing the marvellous acting! *(thinks better of it)* No, the reason for the disappearance is this...

During the thirties and forties we *character* actors, myself in

particular, severely depleted the world's entire supply of make-up by over use and now there's a shortage. That vein of 2A Bisque Beige grease in the Max Factor mine? It's dried up. In fact, I understand there's no more left in the ground at all, and all the miners are coming up empty handed. And frightened out of their wits. "No my fault! No my fault, Se-or! I deeg and deeg but I find no Bisque Beige!" Of course, they're shot on site. Pack-mules and all. A bullet to the head and down they roll into the shaft.

A windmill turns.

A life of mirrors. Photographs, celluloid, television, reviews... all reflections. Fifty years. A lifetime of *me*. And now? Shroud them! A knight can get sick of looking at himself. (beat) Eventually.

His attention begins to shift away from the mirror, outwards.

But with you lurking out there, I'm made to look deeper still.

As Don Quixote, BOBBY has mounted his lounge chair, which he believes to be his horse ROZINANTE, a dilapidated bag of skin and bones whose ribs stick out like the corners of a Spanish real. Throughout the play ROZINANTE will be a good listener and loyal friend. When BOBBY is not fighting windmills or shouting at his demons, he takes comfort in the friendly ear of his trusty steed. He finds a mop (or other), which he uses as a lance to fight a furious battle.

Music: Variation 7 (The Ride Through the Air) from 'Don Quixote' op. 35 by Richard Strauss.

Critics, fly not! Where are you, vile caitiffs and cowards?! "Technical deficiencies" you said? There, critic! (he stabs) Where are you... failed playwright? You failed actor? A single knight assaults you all! ARGH! (he thrusts) You gods from Olympus who pronounce your doom. "Mediocre antipodean dancer" was it? (he lunges) I'll haaaaave yooouuu, critics!!! And tonight you'll devour *me*. But tomorrow, over breakfast, I'll bring you back up again. (regurgitates) Cowards - stab me! "He isn't a real dancer, this Helpmann." Stab me! (he crumples) "Welcome back to Australia, mate. Things not going so well in England? All the good dancers finally come back from the war?" (his knees buckle) Retreat. Retreeeeeat! Interval!!

He falls into a heap next to his lounge chair.