

Through the Wings

“Doubt that the stars are fire
Doubt that the sun doth move
Doubt truth to be a liar
But never doubt I love”

Hamlet Act II, scene (ii), verses 115-118
All extracts from Penguin books, 1996 edition.

Prologue

The night was dark and the air chill as summer once again fell away. Marcus and Edna Oliveson, laden with luggage and a child suspended between them, one hand in each of theirs, hurried from the light of a well lit concourse into the bulky shadow of one of man's greatest achievements. It would have been the next wonder of the world, had it not been on the verge of forever parting with it.

The sleek oblong craft looked almost organic from a distance; it was only when you got close to it that you could see the joins. Man, for all his ingenuity, was far from perfect, and every safeguard conceivable had been taken to ensure that the colonists would be safe from the minor imperfections that were inevitable with a project of this size. Failsafe mechanisms had their own failsafes built in, which were guarded by a network of backups and bypasses. Every measure had been taken to prevent anything from going wrong.

Where the colonists were going was set in stone. All else was at stake. Estimates as to the time it would take them to reach their destination varied between 300 and 3000 years. All those who boarded knew that they would never reach their destination alive. Cryogenics were talked about and then left out in favour of more reliable and flexible biospheres, designed to produce vegetation that would feed a population 3 times that of those going aboard, and for as long as they needed supporting.

These pioneers were people like you and me, simple folk with simple dreams and one common objective; preserve mankind.

“Are you sure this is the right place, dear?”

Edna's shrill tones had already begun to grate against her husband's tattered nerves, and he was starting to doubt the wisdom of taking on this mission. Still, the business had struggled, and their departure would conceal financial pressures so vast that his

family would soon surely have been swamped in the fall-out. This knowledge weighed heavily on him, and he sensibly assumed that this was contributing to the increasing distaste that he felt for his chosen life partner. He hoped that once on board they could revert to their earlier marital harmony.

“Stop that Roggie, stop it this minute!”

Having briskly completed the admonishment of her son, Edna Oliveson turned again to her husband and addressed him frumpily.

“Marcus dear this doesn’t look right at all.”

“Darling, how many other bloody enormous colony ships do you think the country is likely to be launching this evening? Just keep moving, will you dear?”

The strain in his tone was enough to move his wife on, despite her reservations.

“I just like to be sure, dear.”

Ignoring his inner scream, Marcus said nothing. He approached a broad platform with the moniker ‘COLONIST BOARDING AREA’ plastered above it in ten-foot high red capitals. He assumed that if that didn’t placate his beloved, nothing would. As he approached, a waif thin bespectacled gentleman in a grey suit confronted him, flanked by two twenty-foot high security droids, bristling with armour.

“Could you step forward please”

The man spoke in a thin reedy voice, and as he did so surveyed them with a large degree of distaste.

“I’m assuming that you are the Oliveson party - I hope you realise that boarding should have finished twenty minutes ago”

Marcus replied quickly, and with no small hint of concern

“I am SO sorry, you see, my WIFE couldn’t find the craft keys.....”

“MARCUS, I... Sir...”

The man held up one practically transparent hand, which to Marcus’ enormous surprise actually served to silence his partner – now this was someone he had to have round on poker nights.

“No matter, you are here now, and in any case there are some minor technical adjustments in progress before we can depart. Please climb aboard”

He gestured towards a narrow gangway which ran away to their left, and led upwards towards a brightly lit aperture which stood out clearly against the vast hulk of the spacecraft’s bulkhead. Almost without the family’s full realisation, the droids

performed a full DNA sweep as they walked away, in order to confirm their identity. Had there been a problem, the small family would have stood little chance of escaping the gargantuan killing machines.

As they ascended the gangway, Marcus felt the sense of awe and trepidation grow within him. The vessel loomed greater and greater, until it seemed as if it would topple and crush them; consume them. The dazzling brightness that shone from within became blinding, obscuring everything as it descended to envelop them. Marcus felt that this must what it was like to walk the long walk to the pearly gates, into the light, to finally meet his maker. In his mind that was where their journey would ultimately take them. Panic spread through their midst; little Roger whimpered softly.

Suddenly the dazzling light was gone, and they stood in an airlock, gazing down a section of corridor lit from below with white fluorescent strips shaped like arrows. The direction in which they were to travel could hardly have seemed clearer. Edna glanced awkwardly behind her as they marched up the corridor, but saw only a dark rectangle, stark against the bright interior. It was to be her last view of her home planet, the last gulp she would take of the fresh late summer's air. As she turned to follow her husband, she noticed the temperature rise as the air conditioning kicked in.

“ooh, that's better isn't it luv, it's much nicer in here”

Marcus gritted his teeth. We really need this quality time together, he said. To himself. A crossroads in the corridor was approaching, so he withdrew the smartcard from his pocket that would direct him to their quarters. As they approached the junction the floor lighting shimmered and reformed to reveal a new set of arrows. ‘Now that is a smart card’ he thought to himself. 5 years into his marriage he was already keeping such thoughts to himself, for fear of having to provide a lengthy explanation of each witticism to his spouse. He formed a firm resolution to write down the things they had in common, and then try to pursue them once they were settled on board, but soon discovered that in spite of some mental exertion he was short on ideas. Mentally shrugging, he walked on.

In this way they soon reached their living quarters. As they approached, the door slid open to allow their progress to continue unhindered. Within the compound, there were 3 or 4 families huddled in a spacious and tastefully decorated communal area. It reminded Marcus rather of Big Brother XXIV, but he didn't like to mention that out loud, not yet anyway. They followed the lead of the other families in the room, perching on the edge of one of the plushly upholstered couches and looking around themselves furtively, waiting eagerly for something to occur.

After ten minutes of waiting in this fashion, little Roger said his first words since they had entered the compound

“Daddy, are we there yet?”

Deep in what was left of his soul, and in spite of himself, Marcus began to weep.

In the Space and Planetary Advanced Fusion Flight control room (otherwise known as SPAFF control), the atmosphere was deathly quiet. Some of the most gifted technical minds of a generation were hunched over their consoles intent on the success of the mission. Everyone knew what was at stake.

The chief engineer rose from his seat, and an enormous digital timer appeared on the video screens that surrounded them, counting inexorably down towards zero. The flurry of figures framed a close up image of the space craft itself, sitting serenely on the launchpad, but emanating a growing sense of tension, like a big cat readying itself to pounce.

“Is the anti-gravity field stable?”

“The passengers should be comfortable during the take off”

His second in command spoke with practised ease, and his reassuring manner gave his words added weight. After another frenzy of controlled activity, the chief engineer began the countdown.

“1 minute”

The engines started up, with a hum which rose to an alarming pitch before settling into a deep bass drone.

“30 seconds”

The gantry fell back, and the support team hurriedly withdrew to their command posts.

“10 seconds”

A heat haze rose about the craft, as the fusion retro thrusters sent an invisible torrent of flame swirling up, enveloping the exterior of the vessel.

“nine”

“eight”

“seven”

“six”

“five”

The bass warble grew to a deafening level, and the control room seemed to shake even though it was a clear two hundred miles away.

“four”

“three”
“two”
“one”
“lift off”

As the future of humanity pirouetted between the dark clouds into the bleak night sky in a spectacular orgy of light and sound, the second in command quietly whispered into the Chief Engineer’s ear.

“Those adjustments you wanted made sir”
“Yes, O’Brien?”
“I think I may well have made a slight error....”

The engineer slowly raised one eyebrow, which did not betray the icy shivers travelling down his spine.

“...erm, yes.. I may have entered the amounts in imperial rather than decimal. Just a small error – can’t really erm... matter, can it sir.”

“Well, O’Brien, it means they are off course. They could end up anywhere. Fear not though, I think we all knew it was a doomed mission anyhow, so as long as there’s no fiery wreck and the TV cameras are happy..... you get some sleep, yes?”

So Second Engineer Andy O’Brien went home and did exactly that.

1)

The Colony Ships were designed to sustain a large community for decades, centuries, millennia. They were designed to allow a society to grow and flourish within their hulls, so that the people they carried would be adequately prepared for the struggle once the ship reached its destination. There was room for the population to grow, although birth rates were strictly controlled - all couples who wanted to have children needed to go through a rigorous process of vetting and suitability tests. Whilst many things on board were automated and droids did much of the maintenance related to the ship’s safe functioning, the colonists had initially been hand picked and trained in the various skills that would be required in order to forge a new civilisation. There were scientists and technicians, chefs and lawyers. There were even sportspeople and salesmen. In theory there should also have been actors, artists and craftsmen. In theory.

When you take a cross-section of a population as a whole, there will inevitably be quirks and anomalies. It’s why small villages should be passed through. It’s why sample surveys are largely pointless and all marketing is guesswork. It’s why sociology, for the most part, is a waste of time and effort. It’s also why, on the Colony V, within a generation there unfortunately existed such a minuscule pool of creative talent that most colonists would rather eat their own livers with a spoon than listen to/watch/plug into anything produced on board. There used to be a

theatre company on the ship, but once the first generation had retired the amusement value of watching well intentioned descendants massacre masterpieces became tired after the first decade or so. The chief robotic engineer at the time, Davey Squatthrust, became an instant folk hero the day he petitioned the ship to re-wire a group of service droids to become model actors. The 'Robot Players' became so wildly popular that they were very soon playing several shows a night, with the added advantages that they never got tired, sick, or demanded outrageous riders. Most popular of all was their biennial foray into Shakespeare, where the bard's greatest masterpieces benefited from their light touch and confident delivery.

On-board sociologists have been known to comment that, given the misfortune of the creative DNA deficit on the ship and the absolute necessity of some form of escapism for the colonists, without the robot players society on board could run the risk of breaking down completely.

"What do sociologists know anyway!" muttered Sean Oliveson, as he whacked an immobile Robot Player with his spanner.

He was a second class maintenance engineer on the robotics team, which although not a glamorous role was very necessary. Which is why he did it. That's how things work on Colony V. That said, it was Sean who requested the job at the theatre, working with old Davey on the Robot Players. It wasn't so much the robots that fascinated him. For Sean it was about the industry, it was about the ART. He still watched footage on his entertainment screen of the days when people had been good actors, back on Earth. Before The Emergency, before Martial Law. Before this.... he glanced around him at the cool composite floor of his maintenance shop at the side of the theatre, and then at the cool (albeit wonderfully expressive) eyes of the Robot Player to which he was attending.

He knew, of course, why people no longer 'trod the boards' (as theatre luvvies like himself called it). Whenever he asked older members of the crew just how bad the human actors could have been, and why they couldn't return one day, he met with raised eyebrows and sympathetic patronising smiles, as if the answer should have been obvious. The answer wasn't obvious to Sean. His secret ambition was to act, to rise above convention and tread the boards, just as the great Jason Donovan once did. He would watch the Robots at work, learn what he could from them, and grow with them, so that he could appreciate the subtle nuances of language and diction in the way they did.

There was just one problem. The Robots didn't work any more.

Sean had got away with this for a week now, claiming ad hoc that the robots urgently required 'scheduled maintenance'. It wasn't totally his fault. OK so maybe he had stored all of the robots in the maintenance pit contrary to proper regulations. And perhaps the reason for storing them there was an informal gathering of his closest buddies, in lieu of a stag night ahead of his wedding. And perhaps, yes, he should have observed guidelines concerning such gatherings in the workplace and

the consumption of alcohol. After the event it's easy to say he should have removed the robots from the pit once his little brother, Danny, had somehow managed to release a can of hydraulic fluid into it. Most damningly, perhaps Sean could be viewed as entirely culpable for what happened the next morning. He woke up sprawled on the maintenance shop floor, suffering from an evil bootleg turnip wine hangover (turnips being one of the few vegetables suitable for hydroponic production). As he painfully dragged himself feetwards, he blearily knocked a precariously balanced and unfortunately live drill into the pit full of fluid and priceless robots. The electric current swiss-cheesed each and every one of all their memory circuits, in a way that would have been difficult for even the most determined saboteur to wilfully re-produce.

Of course, in Sean's mind he was entirely a victim of circumstance. But most people on the ship probably WOULD blame him. If they knew. Now there were a lot of things Sean didn't know, but he knew enough to know the following things. He knew that the robots would repair themselves eventually. They were clever like that. Their circuit memory function could nano-repair within..... well he guessed six weeks. He also knew that six weeks or similar without a performance could not be credibly attributed to 'scheduled maintenance'. Inevitably the media would come knocking on the theatre manager's door. Eventually they would find out the truth. He would be busted down to toilet tech and become a pariah, destined to be prodded with all manner of pointy things and glowered at by children in between unblocking toilets. Well, he couldn't have that – he had ambitions, and a family. A further thing that Sean knew didn't really count for much, given the circumstances. Sean knew that old Davey would have known what to do, if he had been there. He wasn't there though. He was dead in fact, and had been for 6 months.

“Oh dear” thought Sean. And went home.

Sean's brother Danny knew. He was a master spy, eavesdropper and mischief-maker, and he often followed Sean because Sean offered terrific entertainment value. And he didn't mind, because he could see the future through the eyes of a blind optimist; he saw only opportunity and excitement in the face of the impossible odds and near certain disaster. In the way that only 16 year olds do.

2)

Sean's prompt exit from work in the face of a looming crisis was not because he didn't care. He had bigger fish to fry, metaphorically speaking. It was his birthday, which had precipitated a greater crisis – he was going out to dinner with his parents and in-laws. It hadn't been his idea, of course. In actual fact he normally did pretty much everything he could in order to keep the families apart. His wife, however, didn't believe strongly enough in leaving well alone, and assumed that all manner of disputes could be resolved if people simply spent more time with each other whether they wanted to or not. Sean had found this trait touchingly naïve and good-natured when they were first courting, but in the face of his family and in-laws re-enacting the nano-wars in a nice friendly restaurant, he found himself cursing under

his breath. Or, the more he thought about it, just plain cursing. He had to get there on time, largely to ensure that there was no time for anybody to argue with each other whilst they were waiting for him to arrive. He almost wished he could bring some functioning Robot Players with him to serve as a distraction. Functioning.....

“Oh dear” Sean said aloud, as he breathlessly hustled through the ship.

The door of the restaurant was set back into the side of one of the ship’s corridors. It was styled with vaguely translucent panels in places where one might normally expect there to be panes of glass, and the doors themselves were bedecked with wood panelling. ‘Classy’, Sean thought.

As he moved forward in order to press the button which would open the door, the silhouette of Sean’s wife, Claire, loomed to meet him. Sean and Claire had been married for less than a week, so the first hot flushes of the excitement concerning the new direction of their lives was still visible in their cheeks. They had yet to have their joint accommodation request approved and were still awaiting the outcome of the parenting tests, but the thrill of anticipation was still there. Kind of.

The door slid open before Sean could reach it, and Claire’s voice immediately assailed him.

“Sean, you’re late again! Honestly it’s only a 5 minute walk away!”

“Ah”, Sean replied, “is anyone else here yet?”

“Everyone...”

“I’ve had some problems at work...”

“Come on, Sean, there’s no excuse. You know it’s important that we can all be a family. Together.

“But it’s MY birthday...”

Claire looked at him pityingly, a look which Sean was well used to.

“Come on then,” she said.

Somehow Danny had made it back ahead of Sean following his successful spying mission. He grinned across the room at Sean as the door slid shut and Sean followed Claire over to their table.

Many of the facilities on board the ship were designed in order to give the initial colonists a sense of normality, as well as some reasonable variety in their surroundings. The restaurant they had chosen was no exception. The wood panelling theme continued on the inside, with practically every surface possible adorned with the stuff. Queen Victoria herself would have felt at home there, with a little gilding here and there. The food was similar to a high quality pub, and extremely popular.

Although Sean's group took up a lot of the tables, the staff had managed to isolate them in a far corner of the restaurant, away from many of the other diners. Either their reputation preceded them, or the ever-meticulous Claire had provided them with fair warning. Sean's mum, Betty Oliveson, was as ever completely unflappable and as always clutching a set of knitting needles. She was as usual wearing what appeared to be an old tablecloth with holes cut out in the appropriate places. As Sean approached, she beamed him towards the empty seat at the head of the table.

"Oooh look, it's the guest of honour! Coo-ee Seany! I said it's the guest of honour, dear!"

Betty violently elbowed pasty faced, sad looking man sat next to her, who happened to be Sean's father, Roger.

"Happy birthday, son"

"Hi mum, hi dad - hello everyone! Thanks for coming!"

"Hello Sean!" said everyone.

Sean was amazed he had engendered such enthusiasm, given his dark mood. The dangerous kernel of an idea was conceived of somewhere deep in the murkiest parts of his brain.

"Still fiddling with them useless artsy robots, lad?"

David Miller was the type of father-in-law who liked their daughters' spouses to do nice manly things, like strangling bears with their teeth.

"Same old, same old" Sean replied, unprovoked. He was rewarded with a snort of derision.

"Don't you speak to my Seany like that, you brutish man, or I'll give you a piece of my mind, just you see if I don't" Betty chimed in.

"Wouldn't leave much behind would it! Hahahahaha"

Shirley Miller, David's other half, laughed lustily as befitted her personality. Roger Oliveson didn't quite manage to suppress a snigger and was instantly rewarded with another firm elbow, this time to the solar plexus region. Stanley Miller, Claire's surly younger brother, got up and left the table, whilst her nineteen year old sister, Sophie, sat looking intently at her cutlery. Claire just glared at Sean as if it was all his fault.

Sean's idea migrated from the murky depths of his brain to the bleeding edge of his conscious mind. He had now officially had this idea. Although there would come a time that he would wish he hadn't.

3)

The Theatre Manager, Terence Maloney, was working late. He had been receiving an escalating number of enquiries regarding cancelled performances, both from members of the public and from media professionals. And although he believed that Sean was a genuine lad of good character (if a little wayward at times), his role demanded that he investigate a little more fully the reasons why the Robot Players remained offline. He sent Sean a quick message, direct to his viewing screen, summoning him to a morning meeting. He felt sure that there was a reasonable explanation. Although, of course, he had no idea that Sean had yet to formulate one.

Sean received the message as soon as he returned to his quarters. Although he knew that someone would have to notice, eventually, it still terrified him. He almost had a plan, now, which was a comfort to him.... although it was still kind of hard to justify what he had in mind. He could though. Sean could justify anything to himself. Players were never meant to be robots and vice versa, he was reasonably sure of that. And he had it in him, he was sure of that also. His family..... well it didn't matter, they could all play the minor characters anyway.

"Ah, there you are, hiding."

Caught by surprise, Sean expertly flipped off the viewing screen and turned in a fluid motion, in the way that all men have to do from time to time.

"Hi honey"

"Don't 'Hi honey' me, I can't believe the scene you caused in there..."

As Claire spoke, a trace of a smile played around the lush contours of her mouth. Sean spread his arms wide and put on his best helpless puppy expression. Claire stepped forward and hugged him tight.

"Oh Sean, what are we going to do with them?"

"Well..." said Sean, brain in overdrive "we really need to find a way to bring them together..."

"Yeah but I've tried..." Sean tenderly put his finger to her lips.

"... ideally," he continued "in such a way as they have something to focus on other than arguing..."

"Then they need to find a common interest? Sean, how can we do that here..."

Claire tailed off as a smile broke across Sean's lips "you have an idea, don't you..."

Her tone was more trepidation than expectation, but Sean didn't quite pick up on it. He was in full flow.

"Well, I've had a word at the theatre," he lied "and I think they'll let me put on my own show... with real people..."

"Oh God, Sean, you heard what happened last time?"

"Erm....."

"Anyway, go on"

"Right, well, you see, I thought that we could do it. Give the families a common goal. Bring us all together."

"Sean how on earth? We can't... you don't know the first thing about...."

"It doesn't matter. Anyway, you could be the leading lady..."

"Ooooh, really? I mean, NO! But the leading lady? You think?"

"Absolutely."

"Well really, Sean" Claire tittered, as even married girls are likely to do when flattered.

"Would you be able to... erm... bring your parents in, do you think?"

"You know how my Dad feels about that sort of thing Sean!"

"I'm sure he'd do anything for his princess."

"Ok, I'll try. Anything's worth a try I suppose."

Claire turned to leave Sean's quarters. As she reached the door, she turned back to face him, Columbo style.

"Just one more thing, Sean? Which play are we doing?"

"Hamlet" Sean said, confidently.

"Oh dear... I mean OK... I mean, great!" And with that Claire left to find her parents.

"I shall play the Dane!" Sean declared, to no one in particular.

- - - - -

"Mum?"

"Yes dear?"

Sean's mum was watching her favourite thing on the viewscreen; the regular Friday night broadcast of 20th and 21st century soap operas. Part of her, some part deep down, still remembered a time when she was small, and some of the broadcasts had never been seen before. How jolly that must have been, she thought. Sean knew that, afflicted by such reverie, his mother was at her most suggestible. It would be overly cynical, though, to suggest that he had timed the conversation to co-incide with the broadcast. Sean didn't have time for that.

"Mum, Claire and I have arranged for our families to put on a play together."

"Oh, that sounds lovely, dear..."

"Can you make sure that you and Dad are at the theatre about 9am on Monday?"

"Oh yes, dear, I'll make sure we're there. What do you have planned dear?"

"Erm... well, we need to rehearse the play"

"Ah, the play. Very nice, dear. OK see you then.."

"erm, OK, bye mum"

“Oh Seany?” Sean turned slowly. He had thought that it couldn’t possibly be that easy, and had a feeling that his suspicions were about to be proven correct.

“They don’t make them like this any more do they, Seany? That Dirty Den deserves everything he gets!”

“No, that they don’t, mum!”

As he headed from the main room to his chamber, Sean again found himself talking to the air.

“I SHALL play the Dane!”

4)

On Monday morning, as usual, Sean approached the theatre at 8:05am on the dot. He may have always been late, but at least he was consistently late. Today was different, however. At the front of the theatre was a large Plaza, taking advantage of the higher ceilings required in order to accommodate an auditorium. The Plaza was often used for Arts and Crafts fayres and organic turnip wine festivals. When a big show was on there were usually happy buzzing crowds of people milling around, sitting on the steps and outside the one or two bars that bordered the area. The only way for Sean to reach his workshop at the side of the theatre was to cross this plaza. This morning, as he emerged from the corridor, he was greeted with a very different crowd to that which he was used to. It was unusual for anyone to be there at that time of day in the first place, but this crowd was exceptional. The buzz was decidedly hostile, and the crowd appeared to be chanting and shaking their fists at the glizily fronted theatre façade.

“What do we want?”

“ROBOTS!”

“When do we want them?”

“AS SOON AS POSSIBLE!”

This was historically militant behaviour for Colony V. Unprecedented scenes abounded. Sean pushed through the crowd and past the man with the megaphone, grateful that none of them had any idea what his job was. Ducking out of sight round the side of the theatre, he swiped his card in order to gain entry via the staff entrance, threw his belongings into a dingy corner, and called the lift that would take him to the floor above and the Theatre Manager’s office.

As the lift opened he was immediately faced with his manager waiting in the corridor, beaoning him towards his office.

“Come in and sit down, Sean”. Sean followed him into his office, and did as he was told. Terence Maloney wasn’t an intimidating character, standing at only 5’7 in his brogues and wearing a worn tweed suit. He made up for it, however, with devious

skulduggery of which Sean was always wary, given that he was the man's only direct report.

"It's a good job they don't know your face, Sean, isn't it? They damn well know mine. Want my ass they do" As he said this he gestured with an inclination of his head towards the rather splendid faux French windows in his office, which led to a balcony overlooking the Plaza. Lovely view. Even as Sean looked a rotten tomato exploded on the Perspex pane, joining a variety of other rotten vegetables that had already followed a similar trajectory. To Sean this was a disturbing image. Not just the vegetables. Not even Mr Maloney's ass. Nope. This meant pressure.

Mr Maloney pointed to a newspaper on his desk, the front page bearing the headline:

As Theatre Remains Shut People Demand Answers

"When will the robots be... erm... maintained, Sean?"

"Well, Mr Maloney, you see I'm planning this really... special performance you see, and it could..."

"Sean?" Mr Maloney cut in.

"It will be ready in... erm... two weeks."

"Sean, you know that I consider you a fine honest young man of good family, and I have absolute faith in your work. But you have one week."

"But sir..."

Terence Maloney held his hand up for silence "Sunday night, we will perform..."

Sean, what is it we're doing that is.. er... 'special'?"

"erm" Sean stuttered "Hamlet, sir"

"Hamlet, I see, excellent. I love Hamlet myself – I'm very much looking forward to this!"

"SIR..."

"Shall we tell them, Sean?"

"Tell.. who?"

"Them" said Terence, sweeping his arm towards his balcony and the angry mob below.

Before Sean could scream 'nooooooo' Mr Maloney had pressed the button which slid open the doors, and with his arm firmly around Sean's spine led him out onto the balcony. One by one the crowd took notice, until all eyes were focussed on the two men.

"Who is that with Terence Maloney?" the crowd was heard to murmur.

"Ah, that's my Sean that is!" shouted Betty Oliveson, who had joined the protest on her way to the rehearsal, just to see what all the fuss was about "He works there!"

Sean hung his head, and tried to become invisible. A putrid pear struck him on the shoulder.

"A bloody idiot, that what he is.." Hologered David Millar, who had stopped to watch on his grudging way to the theatre because he had spotted Sean on the balcony and he thoroughly enjoyed berating him.

"Oh God", said Sean, even though he wasn't religious.

Eventually the crowd quietened in anticipation of the two having something to say, and Terence Maloney took the opportunity to address them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the public" he began, in the fine confident tone of a man with nothing to lose "I have with me Sean Oliveson, chief robotics maintenance technician, with an announcement regarding our next performance"

Terence liked nothing better than delegation, especially when asses were on the line. Sean, both flustered by the situation and confused by his sudden apparent promotion, failed to rise to the occasion.

"gulp..."

"Come on Sean" whispered Terence, nudging Sean encouragingly and pushing him forward "speak up with the good news!"

"Hello!" Sean's delivery was a little high pitched, on account of the paralysing fear. He tried again.

"HELLO!" Sean's voice projected better as the adrenaline took over, and he continued confident that he had everyone's full attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we apologise for the delay in productions. I am glad to announce that on Sunday there will be a very special performance of William Shakespeare's Hamlet, just for you."

There was a pleasing reaction to this from the crowd.

"ooh" they said, and

"ooooh"

Then a brief confused silence.

"Is that the Scottish Play?" shouted out a man standing near to Sean's mother.

"Don't say that word, it's bad luck!" Betty shouted back, making her way menacingly towards him.

"Eh? Replied the unfortunate gentleman. And then,

"Oww..."

5)

Shortly after the debacle on the balcony Sean found himself below-stairs again, in his natural habitat, looking nervously this time upon the assembled ranks of his extended family.

“Hiya, thanks so much for coming everyone,” he began breezily

“Sean?” the sharpness in his mother’s tone was terrifying.

“Yes mum?”

“Sean, what’s this I hear about a play?”

“Mum, it’s....”

“I don’t care what it is, I don’t remember agreeing to it and I refuse to have any part in the whole ridiculous business.”

“First sensible thing the woman’s ever said” David’s tone was more sarcastic than sympathetic.

“Give over, luv, you’re in it either way for our Claire’s sake”

David muttered something to himself under his breath after his wife’s interjection. But he gave over, nonetheless.

Claire was the next to speak, and her tone carried with it her usual air of brisk authority.

“Sean, I assume you have cast everyone?”

“Absolutely, got the parts right here...”

Sean patted the bag slung over his shoulder with some satisfaction, then presented it to his spouse as if it were some fabulous gift. Claire duly opened it and pulled out one of the digital notepads that were used on board for writing things down. Everything written on Colony V tended to be digital, on account of the substantial waste and energy involved in paper recycling and the long term problems associated with hydroponically growing hardwood trees. It was harder to get hold of a pencil and paper on board the ship than it was in the average Big Brother house, and equally frowned upon.

Claire began scrolling down the notepad with some urgency, her stylus clicking on the screen, before she lapsed into a satisfied smile.

“Ah, so I shall be the fair Ophelia”

“Who?” said Betty

“Right, erm, Claire can you hand out the scripts please? I’ll run everyone through the basics of their characters.”

Sean immediately recognised the importance of this moment. He didn’t think that as yet anyone had made the connection between the mob outside and the family ‘bonding session’, which was almost certainly a good thing. At the same time it meant that no-one present quite appreciated how important this production could prove to be to Sean’s career prospects, not to mention his general health. Sean was painfully aware that there was more than a slight chance that the casting might lead to a big fight and everyone storming off for good. So he had been very careful indeed. Tried to match parts to peoples’ characters, that type of thing. Sean figured that the less actual acting anyone had to do, the better. His efforts were compromised by not having read Hamlet since his schooldays, some ten years

previously. He'd had a quick look through though – the thing almost directed itself. That was Shakespeare's genius, he supposed.

"Ok", he began, and breathed deeply inwards.
"I, of course, shall play Hamlet..."

Sean paused briefly in order to allow the groans to subside.

"Stanley Miller – you'll play Laertes, brother of Ophelia, who will of course be played by your fair sister."

Stanley yawned massively as Sean spoke.

"erm... right.... you of course adore your sister, and she looks up to you as a role model"

Again Sean paused, this time to allow the sniggering to subside.

"right, now, Ophelia is Hamlet's true love, and they were supposed to live happily ever after"

Once more there was laughter, this time barely suppressed. Sean wavered, and pushed down a cold feeling that suddenly welled in him.

"We are very much in love, actually.... anyway... dad – you will play two roles; the ghost of the recently deceased king, Hamlet's father, and his dastardly brother Claudius who murdered him, taking his wife and his throne"

"Whatever you say, son"

"right, Shirley you will play Claudius' wife, Gertrude"

The room dissolved in uproarious hilarity. Although the casual observer (such as Danny, for example) may have noticed that as Roger Oliveson and Shirley Miller belatedly joined in the laughter, their smiles appeared a little contrived. David Miller didn't notice.

"Ah, Sean, that's the best one yet! Who am I, the Fairy Godmother?"

Sean waited impatiently for the laughter to end. He was starting to feel markedly unappreciated.

"No, unsurprisingly you'll play Polonius, the father of Laertes and Ophelia who is suspicious of his daughter's lover. Although Polonius is well meaning, which may be a challenge for you."

There was an edge to Sean's tone. Unsurprising, really.

"Right" Sean moved swiftly on as David glowered.

“Danny, you will play Rozencrantz and Guildenstern and any of the other minor characters. Erm, actually do you have any friends who you think might want to.....”

Danny held up a hand, as if to say ‘don’t worry about it’. But by now Sean was very worried indeed. He felt sure he’d forgotten something.

“Ok and finally, mum, Sophie” Claire’s sister looked wantonly up at Sean, with no small hint of mischief in her eyes.

“Right..” Sean said, flustered “right.... there are no other major parts, but plenty of bits and...”

“Don’t worry”, said Sophie sultrily. “I’m happy to watch...”

“Oh yes, dear, I’m happy here with my knitting” Sean had forgotten about his mum, for a second there. Well, as much as anyone could.

“OK, well, that’s us for now! Can you all make it back for... ah let’s see... 8pm?”

“Bloody hell, you don’t waste any time, lad!” David Miller looked genuinely alarmed.

“Yes, well, David, erm... it’s only a bit of fun as we all know, so we have to get going, you see... out of interest, in terms of the performing the play... are we all free on Sunday?”

At which point everybody downed their scripts and left.

“Oh dear” said Sean.

6)

Sean lay on the cold, hard floor looking up at the bare arched ceiling of his robot maintenance shop. All around him the robots stood, erect and motionless like an ancient stone circle; monuments to a new age. Sean felt no hope. He had nothing to look forward to. He knew something about history – well, he knew what he could glean from the records that were kept on board. He had viewed the archives and images of the ancient world and man’s struggle to exist. Read how the ingenuity of his race had led them to strive and develop and evolve – socially, morally and personally. Discovered how the increasingly complex needs of the individual became paramount as aspirations moved beyond subsistence; eventually man aspired only to find himself, to secure his place in an ever-changing world. He knew only too well how in the end Man, in his endless quest for more, only succeeded in destroying his world (admittedly in a very imaginative way). History had all led to the hasty exodus of which Sean was lucky, he supposed, to be a part. Ultimately, that very thing that defines humankind - ambition, self-awareness and opposable thumbs – made disaster inevitable. So what had Sean aspired to? To one day see a sky? To breathe un-recycled air? Realistically not. He aspired to love, but love had been hard to come by in such a confined environment. It was still hard for him to know, really, how he felt about his wife. He had nothing to compare it to, no other experiences love or life. He had aspired to put on a play; a real play with real people who thought and felt and functioned in the same way as the characters they were portraying. Like his race before him, he had over-reached himself. What he aspired

to would destroy him. As Sean lay he thought about his ass, and how much he would miss it once he had been sacrificed to the mob.

He held out little hope that now, following the morning's debacle, his family would finally pull together and help him retain it, just for a little while. He doubted that, even if they did, it would make much difference in the end. They couldn't act, he couldn't direct, and people didn't want to see it anyway..... they wanted the Robot Players – the perfect, shiny, cold skinned automatons who never missed a cue, forgot a line or read someone else's part. Whatever happened, his ass was toast.

The clock ticked defiantly past 8pm. It was 8.03pm in fact. Sean lay with closed eyes, making desperate last use of his aforementioned posterior. He opened his eyes again in order to stare at the just-too-low-to-be-comfortable ceiling. Instead of the roof, he saw Claire's face rather sternly looking down upon him.

"Get up Sean, let's get this over with."

"Eh?" grunted Sean.

Claire wrenched him to his feet, whereupon he stood, blinking blearily at his entire extended family, plus someone else he didn't quite recognise.

"Who's that?" he mumbled

"This is my mate Mick" piped up Danny "you said you might need some help"

Mick slouched, staring surlily at Sean from beneath a hoodie, and looking for all the world as if he'd rather be anywhere else.

"Can he read??" Sean blurted out, rather tactlessly and slightly shrilly, for the adrenaline was once again getting the better of him.

The stare turned insolent. Sean didn't care. Suddenly he was embracing the possibility that he could do this, and retain his ass for posterity. As it were.

"Right" he said, pulling himself together.

Sean clapped his hands loudly and enthusiastically. It was completely unnecessary since everyone in the room was already staring at him, waiting to see what he would do next. Sean needed it though. He needed to focus.

"We're about to do something that hasn't been attempted for decades. Before all this, before we found ourselves fleeing a doomed world, actors such as ourselves would be feted as heroes, celebrities; elite amongst our kind, in the same way that the Robot Players were... erm... are now."

"Sean?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Get on with it will you?"

"But darling, I'm just...."

“Sean, I think you’re losing people”
“I told you that boy’s a prat, didn’t I luv?”

The whisper was a little louder than a whisper and probably deliberately so. David Miller was smiling, ever so slightly. Sean pretended he hadn’t heard.

“Ok, well if you all grab the scripts I gave you?”

“Sean.”

“Yes, dear?”

“You didn’t give us any scripts.”

“Really?”

“No. We all left remember? You really have to....”

“OK” Sean interjected, loudly, before scampering to a disorganised pile of his belongings in the corner of the workshop and scrabbling around a bit.

“OK.” Sean said irritably as he scrambled ever more frantically in the detritus.

“Right!” Sean cried triumphantly, as he emerged carrying an armful of the digital notepads.

“Here are your parts...” Sean moved to each would-be actor in turn, handing them a script.

As Sean turned and walked back to the front of the room, his assembled players conferred and passed each other the correct scripts. Amidst the first murmurs of discontent, there was a clicking of stylus on screen, because secretly everyone was quite looking forward to it. Well, they wouldn’t have been there, otherwise...

Sean stood still for a while to gather his thoughts, his back to the cast, for he had become rather excitable and was aware that he was losing control of himself. It was only now that he was coming to realise how much stress he had been under of late. He went once again to the pile of stuff in the corner of the room, this time to find his own notepad. By the time he emerged successfully, the cast were silent, now engrossed in the great work.

“What are they on about?” Danny asked.

“I don’t think you’ve got the English version here, son” suggested Roger

“It’s Shakespeare!” cried Sean, as if that explained everything, and looked at his own screen. Which made very little sense to him.

“Look.” said Sean, in his most re-assuring voice. “Let’s read it through I’m sure we’ll get he hang of it – everyone take their positions, and let’s get going.”

Everyone just stood looking blankly at each other.

“Scene 1?” beseeched Sean. Everyone just stood looking blankly at Sean. Who pushed forward with abandon.

“Ok, scene 1. It starts with Francesco and Bernardo. Danny you can play Francesco, and... erm....”

“Mick” Danny said, helpfully “Yes, Mick you be Ber-nar-do.”

Sean pronounced Bernardo phonetically and very slowly, so that Danny's unsavoury looking friend would be able to understand.

"Sean." Danny's friend finally spoke up.

"Look, can you just read the part for now?" Sean was becoming frustrated. Already.

Danny's friend grunted in resigned fashion.

Hamlet: Act I, scene (i), verses 1-14

Cast:

Francisco – Danny Oliveson

Bernardo – Mick Poulitice

BERNARDO: Who's there?

FRANCISCO: Nay, answer me, stand and unfold yourself

BERNARDO: Long live the King!

FRANCISCO: Bernardo?

BERNARDO: Sean!

"Look, I've told you once, just read it through, we'll work it out as we go" Although Sean had to concede that this scruffy looking character did read very well.

"sigh"

Sean shoed Mick with his arms, in the universal symbol for getting on with it.

"come on, start again"

"sigh"

"and stop sighing!"

"sigh"

"sigh"

"that's not funny, Danny"

they wouldn't get through the first scene at this rate.

"bloody hell, lad" said David.

Hamlet: Act I, scene (i), verses 1-14

Cast:

Francisco – Danny Oliveson

Bernardo – Mick Poulitice

BERNARDO: Who's there?

FRANCISCO: Doctor

BERNARDO: Doctor Who?

ALL: *Insane laughter*

Sean sagged to the floor, whilst he allowed the laughter to subside. He caught Claire staring at him, with a look somewhere between pity and contempt. The look alarmed him. Eventually, however, the hilarity subsided. Sean picked himself up, and the actors started again.

Hamlet: Act I, scene (i), verses 11-20

Cast:

Francisco – Danny Oliveson

Bernardo – Mick Poulitice

BERNARDO: Well, good night
If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

Enter Horatio and Marcellus

FRANCISCO: I think I hear them. Stand ho! Who is there?

HORATIO:

FRANCISCO: Who's playing Horatio?

MARCELLUS:

BERNARDO: I was trying to tell you, guv...

"Tell me what?" Sean snapped back

"We don't appear to have a Horatio. Or a Marcellus. And last time I read Hamlet, I'm pretty sure Horatio at least played quite an important role...."

"Look Mick, just read the part!"

"I can't, there aren't enough actors..."

"Oohhh... bugger" Sean whimpered, and collapsed to the ground again.

As, to everyone's bemusement, he rolled around and about on the cold hard (but surprisingly comfortable) composite flooring, the door to the corridor hissed open. In walked the cleaner, pushing a mop and carrying a bucket of soapy water. Hugo started slightly as he realised how many people were in the bay before continuing jauntily in his work, whistling tunelessly as he pushed his mop across the room and around Sean's prostrate form.

Sean was roused from his self-indulgence by the touch of the damp, musty mop against his pale silken cheek. He struggled again to his feet to face up to the source of this horrible cruelty, only to find that it took the form of Hugo's lanky frame. Hugo could be counted as one of Sean's closest friends. They often spent time together, for Sean regularly worked late in order to seek solace from his family, or "Seany time" as he like to call it. Hugo's role on the ship was something of an anomaly. His father had been requisitioned to work as a cleaner back when the

cleaning droids had been requisitioned to form the Robot Players, and Hugo had uncomplainingly continued in the family line. What followed then, proved to be some kind of righteous fulcrum of cosmic symmetry.

“Hugo!” Sean said somewhat emotionally, before draping himself around Hugo. His family looked on, incredulous, as he hugged the cleaner much as a long lost lover would.

“Hugo,” Sean said again, taking a step back and clutching Hugo by both shoulders “you will play Horatio.”

The deep sincerity in Sean’s tone took Hugo aback and anyway, he wasn’t one for confrontation.

“OK” Hugo replied, uncomprehendingly.

Sean held onto Hugo for far longer than was comfortable, smiling up at him warmly and, if truth be told, rather disconcertingly.

“What about Marcellus then guv’nor?”

“What?”

“Marcellus..” Mick had an eye for detail that Sean wouldn’t have anticipated, looking at him.

“Oh, Marcellus isn’t important”

“Well, he’s in this whole scene....”

“Sean have you ever actually read Hamlet?” Claire interjected.

“Shut up dear.”

“Don’t call me dear in that tone of voice...”

“Fine” continued Sean, in an equally fractious tone “Danny, you’re Marcellus.”

“But I’m already Francisco” complained Danny

“Who leaves before Marcellus arrives..”

“So I leave the stage, and then come back on again right away?” asked Danny, confused

Sean stood staring at his brother, arms spread wide, as if nothing in the world could be simpler.

“Inspired work, guv, might need to find a fake beard....”

“Shut up, Mark”

“Mick” said Mick.

“OK are we quite finished yet? Can we just read through this scene this evening, just the once? Do we all think we can manage that?”

“Fine” came a murmur

“Fine” said Sean.

“Sean, I really don’t appreciate you talking to me like that...” Claire said, seething.

“please” Sean whimpered, using every ounce of his acting talent to make plain how desperate he was to get on with things.

"You know," said David, "I really don't appreciate you speaking to my daughter like that"

"look, I'm sorry, OK?" Sean mumbled

"You will be" Claire said.

The situation resolved Sean re-aligned his frayed nerves, and issued Hugo with a spare script.

"What's this for?" Hugo asked, in all innocence

"You're Horatio, you promised" Sean replied, pathetically.

"Who's Horatio?"

"Erm, he's a character in Hamlet; we're going to perform Hamlet on Sunday. You promised.." tears began to well up in Sean's eyes.

"What happened to the robots?" Hugo said, perfectly reasonably.

"They're FINE" Sean insisted, again feeling growing tension in his temple. "anyway, are you in or out?"

"What do I have to do?" His voice cracking with the strain, Sean outlined the basics.

"Wherever it says 'Horatio' in the script I just gave you, you read the bit next to it.

Can you do that for me please Hugo?"

"Sure!"

"Marvellous. Shall we?"

Hamlet: Act I, scene (i), verses 40-45

Cast:

Marcellus – Danny Oliveson

Bernardo – Mick Poulitice

Horatio – Hugo Spankworthy

Ghost – Roger Oliveson

Enter the Ghost

MARCELLUS: Peace, break thee off. Look where it comes again

BERNARDO: In the same figure like the King that's dead

MARCELUS: Thou art a scholar. Speak to it, Horatio

BERNARDO: Looks 'a not like the King? Mark it, Horatio.

HORATIO:

Sean swiftly realised the problem and dug Hugo in the ribs, jabbing with his finger at the correct place in the script.

HORAIO: Ah... OK.... erm.... Most like. It..... harrows me with ...erm fear and ... uh.. wonder

Sean winced as Hugo massacred the script, but the fact he now had a full complement of characters did fill him, at last, with something approaching hope. As the first rehearsal ended and everyone hurried home Sean could even reflect on an

entire scene completed. At this rate he knew that they would be lucky to read through the whole play once ahead of the performance, but small victories were the only victories he had for now. It may have been dreadful, but it was a start.

7)

The baying mob advanced upon Sean's quarters. Burning torches and pointy sticks were held aloft, and an ominous, rhythmic chanting echoed around the corridors of the sleeping ship. Well, the ship would have been sleeping, were it not for the chanting baying mob.

"BURN THE ASS, BURN THE ASS, BURN THE ASS OF THE ROBOT KILLER!"

A rather-too-convincing effigy of Sean was held aloft, and pointy sticks were thrust amidst its nether regions from all directions. One of the torchbearers set a flame to the likeness, which caught alight in an instant. 'whoomph' went the fake Sean. The inferno was brief, the effigy consumed. Fortunately, they had others as well. The mob approached Sean's door and rapped upon it with their sticks-a-pointy, rousing him violently from his fitful slumber. Fully awake now, Sean took in the chanting, realised it was directed at him. He could feel the heat from the flames that burned outside of his fireproofed, heat-proofed door. Sweating, terrified, Sean twisted out of his bed, grabbed for something, anything with which to defend himself. The door hissed open, and Sean brandished the golf club he had pulled from the elephant foot umbrella stand just next to his bed. He was confronted with a burning image of himself, and a crowd of desperate, cruel and homicidal faces. Sean limply dropped the golf club and shrank back into the corner of the room. It seemed certain that he would die a horrible, painful death unless.... Sean lost control of his bowels, as he faced up to certain death. Unless.... unless.....

Sean woke with a start, in a cold sweat. He gibbered for a while, and shivered, and was afraid to move. Looked for the non-existent elephant foot umbrella stand. That should have been a dead give-away, he thought. Then he noticed that it wasn't just a cold sweat he had woken up in. That focussed his mind.

"Ewww".

Sean showered for a long long time that morning, once he had slung his sheets down the re-cycling chute. He didn't really want to use those again. Reflecting on the dream, Sean tried to read something positive into it. Maybe the burning effigy was symbolic of how much he had grown and changed, into a new and better man? Unlikely. It was more than likely a representation in his subconscious of all the horrible things that were likely to occur if the play didn't happen. More than ever,

he was convinced that the play HAD to happen. The dream wasn't real, but the mob was. He'd seen them.

Much as he had been attempting to delude himself to the contrary, he knew his scheme was a long shot. With luck, he could somehow retain the whole cast until Sunday so they could at least put on some kind of show, no matter how awful. If he could just get that one show out, then maybe it would all be OK, maybe the audience would actually want to see it again if only for comedy value. Then the robots would have the chance to heal themselves... he was a practical man, he knew the odds. But he'd made his hard choices. Was lying in a bed of his own making. He just hoped he didn't have another one of those dreams, he was running out of bed linen. Almost as an afterthought, he sent Claire a message suggesting she meet him for dinner that night. They deserved a break.

In spite of the situation, Sean still had to go to work every day, under the pretence of carrying out the fabled 'scheduled maintenance'. That was incredibly boring and stressful in itself, even if there wasn't also an angry mob to contend with. He left his quarters with extreme caution in mind, and stealthily moved his way towards where the corridor led out onto the plaza, ducking into doorways as he went. As he approached the theatre, the sound of chanting carried tinnily to his ears.

"Oh dear."

Sean scrambled in through the side door and sat up against the inside wall, breathing heavily and brushing rotten fruit from his clothing. He had hoped that the reassurances the mob received from the balcony the previous day would keep them away, but if anything their numbers had grown. Their mistrust was entirely justified, he knew that for a fact. Not only that but the formation of an angry mob was probably the most interesting thing any of them had ever done in their lives. As ever, the robots stared blithely back at him, seemingly unconcerned by the fuss they had caused. Sean had, in effect, nothing to do. No robots to maintain, no sets to erect and no lighting to test. Just the broken robots staring back at him. He decided to spend the day polishing them until they were nice and shiny, more out of guilt than necessity.

8)

The actors stood all around him. Sean gestured for silence, and silent they were. Today they would be enacting the final scene, and strangely enough everyone was quite looking forward to it. David Miller was stood, hefting the weight of a prop sword in his hands.

"Looks almost real, this one!" he said, delightedly.

David grinned slyly towards Sean, who felt a deep sense of forboding as to what the outcome of the scene might be. After all...

“Waaaaagh” screamed David Miller, running straight at Sean and swinging the sword violently around his head

“Aaaargh” wailed Sean, as his head was chopped clean from his shoulders. As it rolled around on the floor he could still see the world spinning around him. He always wondered if that happened. As his head came to a rest he was forced to watch the remainder of his body slowly keel over in a lifeless heap, spewing forth claret, everywhere. In his fading vision Claire loomed large above him, and withdrew her boot with violent intent.

“Aaaargh” Sean’s head said. Then the thought. Oh, hang on...

Sean woke with a start, smacking his head on the underside of a very shiny robot. Claire loomed large above him, and withdrew her boot with violent intent.

“Aaaargh” Sean said, as her boot ploughed sympathetically into his midriff. He nearly soiled himself again.

“Get up you lazy sod, have you any idea what time it is?” Claire ranted. “We’ve all come here to rehearse this hopeless play of yours, the least we can expect is to find you awake!”

Sean tried to rise from the floor and again clunked his head, this time on a sadly redundant box of spanners. Rubbing his abused skull, he rose to face his nemesis... sorry, wife. Shaking and sweating all over.

“Sean, are you OK?” she asked “You look very pale.”

“nnnnngghh” said Sean, winded. He wasn’t ready yet. Oh god he was going mad. The pressure.... the pressure was getting to him... surely he couldn’t....

“I’m sorry” he forced out.

He saw the look of pity once again on Claire’s face. The nightmares... well at least they respected him enough to.... oh god....

“Don’t pity me..” Sean wailed.

“Get a move on.” Claire tenderly replied.

9)

His cast assembled once again and his head slowly clearing, Sean considered the task ahead. The second scene presented many more problems. To start with, everyone was involved at some point or other. Whilst it contained scope for a great deal of intra-family interaction and bonding, there as also a lot more could go wrong. If there was going to be a riot of some description, there were plenty of likely flashpoints. Deep down, though, Sean didn’t care about any of that type of thing any more, he was past that... and besides... he was in this scene. This was his chance to do what, in his mind, he was born to do. As he readied his script, Sean mentally preened himself, reaching deep for the Hamlet within him; wronged, belittled and overtaken by events beyond his control.

Hamlet: Act I, scene (ii), verses 63-76

Cast:

King – Roger Oliveson
Queen – Shirley Miller
Polonius – David Miller
Laertes – Stanley Miller
Hamlet – Sean Oliveson

KING: Take.. thy.. fair.. hour, Laertes. Time.. be.. thine;
 And.. thy.. best.. graces.. spend.. it.. at.. thy.. will.
 But.. now, my.. cousin.. Hamlet.. and.. my.. son –
HAMLET: A little more than kin, and less that kind!
(*aside*)

The King read incredibly slowly, but the other actors ignored that out of politeness and no small measure of boredom. The reaction to Sean’s impassioned reading was very different, however. It could have been down to the pressure that Sean was under, the rollercoaster of emotions that he had already ridden in the last week or so causing some strange affliction in his tone. Maybe it was the novelty of the material, Sean’s expert delivery bringing some nuance to life that even he hadn’t anticipated. Maybe it was the extraordinary tension that had been in the room from the beginning. Perhaps, just perhaps, it was caused by Sean’s own Shakespearean tragic flaw; that given his moderate level of talent, he was taking himself just a mite too seriously.

Whatever the cause, great hilarity ensued. Hugo ended up rolling on his back waving his legs in the air, fighting for breath. Even Betty, Sean’s own mother, laughed so much she fell off her chair. Sean looked disconsolately on. He would still play the Dane. He had to.

“PLEASE stop!” Sean wailed.

He was perilously close to weeping. The laughing, curiously, stopped, although the Miller gentlemen were finding it incredibly hard to keep a straight face. Amongst his own family, the looks were no longer of derision, but once again of pity. Sean didn’t want to be laughed at. But being pitied was somehow worse - he didn’t want to be pitied either. Fortunately for Sean, his dad was the next to speak, and the dreadfully slow reading somehow brought order to proceedings.

KING: How.. is.. it.. that.. the.. clouds.. still.. hang.. on.. you?
HAMLET: Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun.

As Sean spoke, a barely suppressed snigger emerged from somewhere offstage, Stanley Miller seeming the most likely culprit. The sniggering was almost immediately followed by a heavy thud, a yelp, and then no small measure of gentle moaning noises.

“Go on, Sean, dear!” said Betty, nodding encouragingly.

QUEEN: Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,

And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not forever with thy veiled lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
Thou knowst 'tis common. All that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

HAMLET: Ay, madam, it is common.

QUEEN: If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?

HAMLET: 'Seems', madam? Nay it is. I know not 'seems'

"Surly little git isn't he!"

David Miller was receiving evil daggers from his wife for his trouble. Well, he was interrupting her scene.

"He's lost his dad" she said, "you'd expect him to be devastated"

She looked pointedly towards Stanley who made a point of fixing the point of his gaze towards his shoes.

"You'd be upset if your old man pegged it, wouldn't you son?"

"I'd get over it" Stanley replied, at length

David Miller turned to face his son with fists clenched and face reddening. Stanley took the hint, and took off with a surprising turn of pace, considering his usual lethargy. David turned to face his wife, huffing.

"Can you believe he said that, luv?"

"Come now dear, you ARE a bit of a bastard."

With David Miller rendered speechless, the show could continue. In spite of everything, by the end of the scene Sean was re-finding his enthusiasm, conveniently milking the positives for all they were worth in the very most deluded part of his mind. The main positives being that there had been almost no physical violence, and most of the actors hadn't walked out. Yet. With renewed vigour, Sean marshalled his cast for the next scene, with the most difficult part, in his mind, behind them.

"OK," said Sean "for the next scene we'll need Ophelia and Laertes..... Laertes? Ah."

Laertes, or Stanley as he was more commonly known, was still long gone for fear of his father's boot. As Sean's face became locked in a mask of minor misery, he caught sight of Danny's friend looking enquiringly in his general direction, hands on hips.

"Would you like me to, boss?" he enquired

"Oh, that would be great, erm....."

"MICK" the rest of the cast interjected, in unison.

"OK, thanks Mick. And Ophelia?" Sean continued

"Bring it on" said Claire.

Now, Claire was a girl of many talents. Her stare could wither a plant at 30 paces, or make a vicious lion turn and flee. Her cooking could be used in order to coat spacecraft in order to protect them on atmospheric re-entry. Her voice could cut glass, and occasionally took on the tone of fingernails scraping down it. Her heart was warm and her loyalty fierce. She was witty and independent and ferocious and Sean loved a great many of her qualities. So he was looking forward to seeing her act.

Hamlet: Act I, scene (iii), verses 1-9

Cast:

Laertes – Mick Poulitice

Ophelia – Claire Oliveson

LAERTES: My necessities are embarked. Farewell.
And, sister, as the winds give benefit
And convoy is assistant, do not sleep
But let me hear from you.

OPHELIA: Do you doubt that?

LAERTES: For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour,
Hold it in a fashion and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute,
No more.

OPHELIA: No more but so?

LAERTES: Think it no more.

Sean put his head in his hands. 'God, she's terrible' he thought, very much to himself. Everyone was terrible of course. Sean, even though he had not quite acknowledged it, was himself a pretty terrible actor. Claire took things to another level though. In two short sentences, devoid of any feeling or rhythm, she had drained all the hope and optimism from him.

"It's what I've been saying all along, eh luv?" David Miller interrupted

"Eh?" said his wife.

"Eh?" said Sean, snapped out of his latest reverie.

"Only after one thing. Can't be trusted." David said, rocking backwards and forwards on the balls of his feet.

"David, we get to your bit in a minute, is that OK?" Sean pointed out, trying to retain order.

"Oh, I know what's coming. Verse 127 to 129. Polonius says 'Do not believe his vows. For they are brokers, Not of that dye which their investments show, But mere implorators of unholy suits'. I'm ready."

"David, you've remembered your part already?" Sean was incredulous.

"Well, not all of it, just the good bits. I told you, though, didn't I luv?" David continued, gesturing towards his daughter.

"I told you that boy was up to no good, only after one thing" he was getting rather agitated now.

"But Dad, we got married...." Claire implored

"Yeah, but still. Slacker!" David Miller jabbed a finger in Sean's general direction.

"Look I really think we should try to focus on the script" Sean said, panicking.

He was beginning to think he could have done himself a few more favours with the casting. In fact he was starting to think that none of this had been a good idea, after all. Betty Oliveson's handbag swung violently through the air.

"Aaagh" said David, as Betty struck him about the head and knocked him to the ground.

"waaaagh" he cried as she continued to flail about his prone person.

"you nasty, nasty man" Betty said between swings "How dare you say that about my Seany! Take that!"

"STOP IT" Claire screamed, tears springing forth. She looked very beautiful to Sean, right then, no matter how bad she was at reading. He walked over and kissed her softly on the lips, ignoring the debacle unfolding around him. The fighting almost immediately stopped, although Betty got in one more lick for good measure before ceasing her assault. David mercifully kept his mouth shut in a rare moment of sensitivity. Claire was his princess, and he didn't want her to cry. As Sean stood with his arm around his wife, he fretted about things getting out of control. He needed unity. He had to get this play on, somehow, but he preferred to do it without anyone being seriously hurt in the process.

"Listen, everyone. We're about to read through probably the most pivotal scene in the play. If we get nothing else right on the night, we have to get this right. Please can't we all just.... Get along? Enjoy ourselves, even?" The sombre, reluctant grunting and nodding didn't inspire confidence. But still, Sean had no choice.

"OK, bring on the ghost.... Dad?"

"Oh, sorry son, right you want me to?"

"read the part, Dad."

"Ah good, the ghost eh?" Roger cleared his throat self-consciously.

Hamlet: Act I, scene (v), verses 22-42

Cast:

Ghost – Roger Oliveson

Hamlet – Sean Oliveson

GHOST: List, list, O, list!

If thou didst ever thy dear father love –

HAMLET: Oh God!

GHOST: Revenge his most foul and unnatural murder

HAMLET: Murder?

GHOST: Murder most foul, as in the best it is,

But this most foul, strange and unnatural.
 HAMLET: Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
 As meditation or the thoughts of love,
 May sweep to revenge.

GHOST: I find thee apt
 And duller shouldst thou be that the fat weed
 That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
 Wouldst thou not stir in this. Now, Hamlet, hear.
 'Tis given out that, sleeping in my Orchard,
 A serpant stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
 Is by a forged process of my death
 Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
 That the serpent that did sting thy father's life
 Now wears his crown.

HAMLET: O my prophetic soul!
 My uncle?

GHOST: Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,

As the words were spoken, Shirley Miller looked straight at Roger, mouthing the word 'beast' as he said it. Roger, quite thrown from his stride, stuttered appreciably which was obvious to everybody in spite of his usual glacial reading speed.

"Ahem. *cough* *cough*... sorry, got a little something in my throat there."

Shirley smiled and looked down at her feet. David, aware of her sense of humour, eyed his wife suspiciously.

"Is it alright if I chip off now?" asked Hugo
 "erm..." Sean needed Hugo for moral support as much as anything, and was reluctant to be left alone with his family.
 "I just have to push the broom around for a bit tonight, you see, so if it's ok..."
 "OK, suppose so.."
 "I'm in tomorrow though Sean, no problems. I'm getting into this Horace character. Fancy a beer when you're finished?"
 "Oh, I will I think, yes!" Claire looked spiky daggers at Sean as he spoke. Sean swiftly realised his mistake.
 "Although actually, I'm going out tonight" he amended "got to be fresh and sharp for my girl, you know..."

Hugo smiled and waved as he left the room. Sean didn't have the heart to correct his pal on his character's name. Hugo's short-term memory was the least of his problems. That all said, the scene had gone rather well so far. Sean's Dad seemed to be speeding up, marginally, and read OK once he knew it was his turn. Sean felt he did alright, too – although there were a few heavy eyelids among the cast and maybe even a little snore here and there, it was much better than hysterics.

“OK,” announced Sean “we’ll need Marcellus for this next bit, and Horatiooh... ”
He looked over at Mick once again, who nodded his head wearily. Mick was reading a lot of parts this evening.

Hamlet: Act I, scene (v), verses 156-180

Cast:

Ghost – Roger Oliveson

Hamlet – Sean Oliveson

Horatio – Mick Poulitce

Marcellus – Danny Oliveson

HAMLET: Come hither, gentlemen,
And lay your hands again upon my sword

All of Danny, Mick and Stanley began sniggering at this line, the innuendo being too much for their teenage brains. Sean tutted, but couldn’t resist having a little grin to himself, whilst trying not to let anyone see. He continued.

HAMLET: Never speak of this that you have heard.

GHOST: Swear by his sword

(beneath)

HAMLET: Well said, old mole! Canst work I’th’earth so fast?
A worthy pioneer! Once more remove, good friends.

HORATIO: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

HAMLET: And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
But come.

Here as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd some’er I bear myself –
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on –
That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumbered thus, or this head-shake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
As ‘Well, well, we know’, or ‘We could, an if we would’,
Or ‘if we list to speak, or ‘There be, an if they might’,
Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
That you know aught of me – this so swear,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you.

“You know what?” Sean pondered, come the end of the scene. “I was speaking the words, but truly and honestly I’m not sure what exactly Hamlet was on about there.”

He looked up expecting enlightenment, but was faced only by a sea of confused, weary and near broken cast members. One set of eyes flickered as they rolled under their hooded brow.

“Are you serious, guv?” Mick asked

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, it’s kind of obvious right? Hamlet plans on pretending to be bonkers in order to throw everyone off guard and ultimately unmask his dastardly uncle as a murderer and claim his rightful place on the Danish throne, thus avenging his father’s death.”

“Right.” said Sean, looking again at his script. “Where does it say that, exactly?”

“Erm, ‘To put an antic disposition on’? Pretty explicit, that.” Mick looked at Sean.

“Right.” said Sean.

“The part should suit you down to the ground, guv’nor”

“Cheeky sod” Sean chided.

Betty suddenly spoke up from no-where.

“You have been acting very strangely lately, Seany. Is anything the matter?”

“Mum, you were actually paying attention?”

“Of course I was, you mother’s not an idiot you know.” Betty looked up her son with a perception she rarely showed – that which only a mother possesses. Sean found it wildly disconcerting. Often he wondered what game she was playing.

“There’s nothing wrong!” he insisted. “Nothing at all. Everything’s fine at work. Claire and I are very much in love.”

Betty nodded back at him, her expression barely changing. Sean had to look away.

“We’d better at least get started on Act II”, he forced himself to say.

Claire’s sister, Sophie, had watched proceedings very carefully and very quietly. Much of her silence had been due to her almost continual attempts to stop herself from laughing, in spite of the obvious trauma that Sean in particular was clearly suffering. She had never in all her life seen anything both dreadful and entertaining at the same time in the way the first act had been. But then, she hadn’t seen the second act yet.

“OK,” said Sean, trying to assert himself. “One more scene, then that’s it for tonight.”

The cast cheered, raucously. They really did all want to go home quite badly now.

Hamlet: Act II, scene (i), verses 74-86

Cast:

Polonius – David Miller

Ophelia – Claire Oliveson

POLONIUS: How now Ophelia, what’s the matter?

OPHELIA: O my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted!

POLONIUS: With what, I’th’ name of God?

HAMLET: In the name of GOD!

“Sean, darling, you’re not in this scene” Claire said, a hint of warning in her tone
“Sorry, it’s just that...”

Claire looked at him expectantly.

“The way you read is no... erm.... nice!”

Sean screwed up his eyes, expecting to be struck bodily. But Claire believed what he said because she wanted to. For Sean’s part, every time Claire spoke, the awfulness of her acting took him freshly by surprise, reminding him anew of how hopeless everything was.

“Sorry dear,” he said. “carry on!”

OPHELIA: My lord, as I was sewing in my closed,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors – he comes before me.

POLONIUS: Mad for thy love?

OPHELIA: My lord, I do not know,
But truly I do fear it.

Sean resisted the physical urge to be sick at his wife’s reading, whilst wondering if ever the centuries old text had been so brutally misrepresented. In his mind he was looking for escape routes other than putting on the play. There was no laughter at Claire’s performances as there had been at his own, merely a stunned silence. Everyone was looking down at their feet, waiting for it all to be over.

“That Hamlet sounds a bit like you in the mornings in the past week, son!” Roger remarked.

The subject had been changed, and not necessarily for the better. Claire walked over to him and held him by the shoulder.

“Sean, you really have been acting strangely – looking over your shoulder, coming home early, hiding in the communal storage area.... is there something wrong at work?”

“There’s something wrong in his head. Ha ha!” David Miller added, looking anxiously towards Betty as he did so.

“I’m fine,” Sean said, unconvincingly, smiling thinly. “I’m not feigning madness, ha ha.”

“We all know you’re not faking it, lad!” David replied, having moved a safe distance from the handbag.

The net was closing around Sean. He found himself in a position where he might actually have to tell his family the truth. He knew that it was a risky proposition at the best of times, but there were strong reasons he felt it might be prudent. One reason was that he doubted the cast would see the process through if they didn’t have a very good reason for being there, and that included Claire. Right now they

simply didn't appreciate the seriousness of the situation. Another reason was that Sean was also going to have to justify his increasingly erratic behaviour. It was either that or start behaving normally, which just wasn't possible for him under the circumstances. The final reason was Claire. He was going to have to tell her how terrible she was at some point if the play was going to be at all successful – maybe even replace her. He really wanted her to understand why, because if she didn't... well if the baying mob didn't have his ass, Claire certainly would.

He waved his arms around in order to gather the players together once more. Nobody, even if they wanted to, had the strength left to resist.

"Look, Sean," David began "I'm sure everyone reckons this has been a great laugh and all, but I don't think...."

"David, hold that thought for five minutes" Sean interjected, urgently. "I need to tell you all something."

The room fell silent. This didn't come as a surprise to anyone – there was a definite feeling that something was going on.

"I haven't been entirely honest with you all...." Sean began.

He paused a second to let slide the mumbles of '*well of course*' and '*should have known*'

"the truth is," he continued, "this is more than a bonding exercise, although as a bonding exercise it's worked really well I think..."

Sean paused again, this time to allow mutterings of '*yeah right*' and '*is he on crack?*' to subside.

"OK." Sean composed himself. "The truth is we are doing this to save my ass, and more importantly, most probably society as a whole. The Robot Players...."

Hands went to heads. Although not particularly good at reading Shakespeare, everyone could read between the lines.

"Sean..." Betty's voice sounded shocked and scorned with a trifle of sympathy thrown in, the way only a middle aged woman's voice can.

"I fried them. They won't work at all for 6 weeks. And unless we can deliver a performance my ass will belong to that big angry mob from this morning."

"But surely that nice Mr Maloney?"

"..will be first in line with the pointy sticks, mum." Sean prised some dirt from his left thumbnail, before looking up, more animated.

"Anyway, that's why we have to do this right, that's why you all have to come back tomorrow and that's why you all have to try and learn these parts by Sunday."

Sean's cast resembled a goldfish convention.

"Right, I'm out of here!" David exclaimed, and turned to leave the room. One by one the other cast members disappeared, until only Sean and Claire were left.

"Sean, I.."

"Don't worry, darling." Sean said "you go home and get ready to go out, and I'll finish up here. I should have told the truth to start with. I don't even deserve an ass."

"Don't be too late, I'm looking forward to tonight" Claire said, tenderly, as she left the room. She'd taken the revelation surprisingly well.

Sean was left alone with his thoughts. He hoped what he said would help, that his family would feel guilty if they didn't continue to help him. He also felt real tears, tears of self-pity. He felt remorse, love, hatred. A curious mix of feelings for his family, and potential saviours.

Sean wanted to lose himself, to hide from his wife and family and contemplate his failure. He wanted to lie in a darkened room and close his eyes and make it all go away. He couldn't though. The ship, although gigantic, enveloped him in a claustrophobic smother. He couldn't lose himself; he couldn't run away. All he could do, in the end, was go home. But then he would have to share his misery. He longed for a world of infinite possibility. Instead the only infinite possibilities seemed to involve humiliation, pain, and his ass. Was it wrong to dream? Well, no. That wasn't, he reflected, where he went wrong. He had gone wrong by carelessly destroying all the robots, lying about it all week, then coercing his fractious extended family into replacing them through a combination of further lies and outright manipulation. This in spite of the fact that most of them struggled to read the headlines in the newspaper, let alone a finely nuanced masterpiece such as Hamlet. Even then, should his scheme prove successful, it would only buy him another week or so before the mob hung him from the theatre balcony by his underpants, and pelted him with rotten fruit. Or something.

Whatever the rights and wrongs, he concluded, he had dared to dream. Until the rehearsals. He doubted they would come back. It wasn't the laughter or the derision, or even the pity. It was the disappointment. Somehow, for some reason, they had all expected more from him. Well they were wrong. Still, Sean thought, no point in being negative. Perhaps things would look better in the once he'd had a lovely relaxing night out with his beloved.

10)

Sean had booked their favourite restaurant. Italian and musical, with waiters who had funny accents and made appalling jokes, which were largely forgiven due to their funny accents. Which were put on, of course. They always are, aren't they?

This was the restaurant in which Claire made Sean propose, a place of fond and romantic memories, and moderately good food. Softly lit and pastel paintings, enormous pepper grinders and synthetic Parmesan – just fake enough to feel real. Claire looked deeply into her husband's eyes, corneas flashing with mischief and tenderness in the soft candlelight. Sean looked back, then down at the point where their hands were clamped together on the table, then around and about in frenetic fashion.

"Sean, calm down"

"Uh, I just have to go to the toilet..." Sean tried to rise, but found his hand held fast to the table by his determined spouse.

"Sean, look at me. It's all fine. No-one's trying to kill you."

"you think not?" Sean asked, wildly.

“yes, -”
“Yes?? You think they are?”
“No, yes, I think not..”
“So they’re not?”
“No. Although I might, if you don’t...”
“I knew it.” Sean bemoaned.
“Sean, I’m joking” Claire said, patiently. “Look the starters are coming, settle down will you?”
“right.”

Sean knew deep down that people probably weren’t trying to kill him. Probably. Well, not yet. He tried to get a grip. Started poking at his food with a fork. Asked Claire if she wanted to try it first.

“Sean! You think it’s poisoned don’t you.”

“No! I wouldn’t put you at risk like that...”

“But you would though, wouldn’t you.”

“No....” said Sean, affronted. “but would you like to try it?”

“For god’s sake Sean!” Claire reached out and took a substantial bite of his broschetta.

“Happy?” Claire started coughing uncontrollably, and slumped to the floor. Waiters came running over, startled out of their accents.

“Is yer missus OK, mate?”

“Oh god.” whimpered Sean. Claire stopped coughing and rose to her feet.

“I’m joking, I’m fine.”

“It’s not funny....” Sean began

“It-sa not funny, laydee” said the waiter, composure regained. Claire swatted him away and stood over Sean, waving her knife about as he cowered in his chair.

“Sean, you need to sort it out. You made a mistake. You need to face up to it. And now I see what I mean to you. Your food taster. I’m going home, your highness.”

Once Claire had left, the staff eventually had to physically pry Sean’s fist from his mouth and lead him from the restaurant, in order to free up the table. In the corridor, left to his own devices, he looked to the roof and moaned and wept and ground his teeth.

Danny, had been keeping an eye on Sean all evening, in the hope of entertainment. Right now he had slipped into a dark corner, unnoticed, was observing Sean with interest.

Danny wondered briefly whether it would be more humane to help his brother home, rather than use him as a substitute for the video screen. ‘But why interfere in the natural order of things?’ he thought, as Sean staggered off.

11)

The next morning, Sean was afraid to open his eyes. His head hurt. With some difficulty, he tried to recall the previous evening. Ah. He probably shouldn’t have

gone straight to the nearest on-board bar once he had been escorted from the restaurant. He probably shouldn't have drunk so much either. He probably shouldn't have confided everything to the drunk Irishman at the bar¹. The guy seemed utterly insensible, but still Sean couldn't resist a twinge of paranoia. What had he said exactly? Too late now. He most definitely shouldn't have gone home via Claire's quarters, hammered on the door, and shouted beseeching vows of lament for twenty minutes before urinating on their porch. Life was becoming a whole series of 'if onlys' for Sean, or at least, 'if only I hadn'ts'. Which was worse, in a way. It meant the only opportunities he'd had were opportunities to make an idiot of himself – most of which he'd taken. With difficulty, he opened his eyes. Closed them again, because he had no choice. But something..... he opened his eyes again, for another brief second. His surroundings were unfamiliar.... quite nasty in fact. Disconcertingly so.

"What the?" murmured Sean.

"Don't worry, gorgeous, it'll work out I'm sure" said the enormous figure of a man who was gently stroking Sean's head as it rested in his lap.

Unthinkingly, Sean snuggled briefly in the fold of the man's plush stomach. Before sitting bolt upright.

"Who are you? Where...."

"As if you don't know!" the man said, cheekily. "That was quite the performance last night!"

Suddenly wide awake, Sean urgently scanned his surroundings. He was in a small, box shaped room, with two narrow sleeping bunks, one of which he was sitting on, next to his new friend. The walls were plain, there was no kind of décor other than an off yellow paint job, and no apparent way out from the inside. It was almost like.... horrible, horrible memories were beginning to resurface.

Almost on cue, the door to the police cell slid open and a fresh faced uniformed young lad walked in carrying a breakfast tray. Well, Sean assumed it must be breakfast time – you wouldn't strictly be able to tell by the jug of water and fresh crusty rolls that sat on it. He got unsteadily to his feet and approached the boy.

"What time is it??? Where am I?"

"Ah, we did have a jolly good evening last night, didn't we sir." It wasn't a question. It was a statement, and a sarcastic one at that.

"Did we? I don't think I did." Sean replied.

"Well, sir, I'm sure, thanks to you, Mr... Miller didn't have a very nice night either."

"What?!"

"The plaintiff, sir, a Mr David Miller."

"David Miller? But he's my father in law!"

¹ This man, Mickey O'Mullered, followed a long line of drunk Irishmen at bars; his grandfather had in fact been brought on board the ship specifically for the purpose.

“Look we have a long list of public order offences to charge you with, Mr Oliveson, regardless of Mr Miller’s specific complaint, of which I’m sure you are aware...”

Sean was aware. The small but sarcastic police force on the Colony V took public order offences very seriously. Although...

“So, if you’re going to charge me, what about the baying mob outside the theatre?”

“Right to protest sir, we can’t do a thing.”

“But throwing the fruit at me, that’s assault, surely?”

“Did you file a complaint?”

“Well, no.”

The junior constable regarded Sean in a deeply patronising manner.

“We can’t be everywhere, sir. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to continue....”

“Wait a minute, how long am I going to be here?”

“Oh, it shouldn’t be more than a day or so, just while we get the paperwork sorted.”

“A DAY?? But I have to... you have to let me out..”

“Unless someone can act as a reference for you sir, so we can make sure you won’t abscond?”

“Abscond?? From a spaceship?? In space??”

“Protocol, sir, rules are there to be followed.”

“But...” Sean gave up trying to understand. “A reference... I get to contact one person, right?”

“Uh, yes, sir, I believe you... erm... took up that option. Last night.”

“Do you remember who?”

“A Mr Maloney, I believe sir. Now if you excuse me I have to...”

“Oh god. What did I say to him?”

“Something about where to stick his robots, if I recall...”

Sean looked straight back at the officer. His chin wobbled slightly, and panic was in his eyes. He advanced towards the lad in desperate fashion. And grabbed him by the lapels.

“You have to let me contact someone! I have to get out of here!”

“Sir I must advise you that I’ll have to caution you with assaulting a police officer if you don’t..”

“But society... the robots....my ass....”

Sean felt an arm around his shoulder pulling him away; a very strong arm.

“Come on Seany, baby, no use crying over spilt milk” an incredibly deep voice said.

“Come here and let Uncle Magnus make it all better.”

“Oh god” Sean whimpered, as the copper hastily left the room.

Late that evening Claire approached the police station. Danny finally tipped her off, having come to the conclusion that Sean wasn’t going to make it out on his own. It

interfered with the prime directive, but he was getting bored whilst his brother was inside – they'd already had to cancel one rehearsal. Claire was still furious with Sean, but not as angry as she was with her dad. She'd had no idea that David Miller had brought about her husband's incarceration - nor would anyone in fact had Danny not been watching the whole episode. She had assumed he was just sulking, somewhere. Striding up to the front desk, Claire demanded to see Mr Oliveson, with a look in her eye and a tone of voice that dared anyone to stand in her way. No-one did. Another young constable led her to the interview room before scurrying to retrieve Sean from his cell.

As the police officer looked at the video screen showing the inside of the cell, he noticed that Sean was sat on Uncle Magnus' lap, serenely sucking his thumb. It was with a tinge of regret that he opened the door and interrupted the scene.

"Mr Oliveson?"

At the presence of another person, Sean leapt from the man's lap and arranged himself into a form somewhere approaching dignity.

"You have a visitor"

"Awww, boo" said Magnus.

"I'll write!" Sean called out, as he was led down the corridor.

Immediately on seeing his partner, Sean threw himself at her. Claire pushed him away.

"God, you stink!"

"I'm sorry," he said pathetically. "about everything."

"Sean...."

"Claire, I love you. But I'm scared. I'm so scared. It was horrible.."

"I'm sorry too." Claire said, holding him tight this time. Sorry for him.

12)

It's amazing what a good night's sleep can do. It was a shame for Sean that he hadn't had one in a week. He slept the sleep of the damned, but somehow didn't wake up feeling appreciably better about anything, in spite of Claire's assurances the previous night. She agreed that she would continue with the play, and also coerced her father into continuing his involvement and dropping the charges against Sean, on threat of ex-communication. David Miller remained a source of anxiety for Sean. Part of him would much rather his father-in-law wasn't there at all. He'd prefer to see Uncle Magnus play the role of Polonius, assuming the police would ever let him go. Sean never quite managed to discover why Magnus was in there.

Another source of anxiety was Mr Maloney. As Sean reluctantly left the house for work that day, he wondered exactly what happened in that phone call. He wondered if his swipe-card would still work, or if his replacement would be working in the maintenance shop already, prodding the robots and scratching their head.

Rounding the corner of the corridor that lead to the Plaza, he immediately stumbled upon the third and main source of his anxiety. There was a very large crowd outside the theatre now, and it was openly hostile. In fact, he was pretty sure that he could see at least one crude likeness of himself, and more than the odd pointy stick. There was no way he could get to work without passing through the crowd. It was for real this time. Unless..... nope, Sean wasn't dreaming. This mob was baying for blood... unless...

"There he is!" someone shouted. And Sean, driven to new extremes, fainted with fright. And also in the interests of getting on with things.

He woke up on the floor of the theatre manager's office. Mr Maloney had only just completed the act of filling a jug with water from the office cooler, which he continued to throw over Sean anyway, for good measure. Sean screamed.

"I can overlook the.. erm.. communication the other night, Sean." Mr Maloney began, "but please say to me that there's no truth in this."
"What?" Sean spluttered. He had no idea what had just happened.

Terence Maloney pointed to his desk. On his desk was the previous day's newspaper. This time the headline read:

HOBO CLAIMS ROBOT MAINTENENCE CROCK SHOCK

"But... he's a hobo, surely no-one believes that!"

"He works for the newspaper. They all do. Didn't you know that?"

"Oh god."

"Sean..." Mr Maloney used the same tone that Claire often did with him. And his mother, come to think of it.

"Mr Maloney. Terence. There will be a performance on Sunday. I guarantee it. Now can you please tell the mob to go away?"

"I will do, as soon as they've finished burning that big effigy of you. Although I've no idea how they managed to get that many pointy sticks into its..."

"Oh my god."

A horses head ricocheted off the French windows, leaving an unseemly smear, followed by muffled screams from the square below.

"Perhaps, Sean, you'd better stay inside this time?"

"Yes, I think so..."

13)

The actors stood all around him. Sean gestured for silence, and silent they were. David Miller was stood, hefting the weight of a prop sword in his hands.

"Looks almost real, this one!" he said, delightedly.

"Well," said Sean "We're not doing that scene yet. Although I am getting this weird sense of deja-vu. Anyway, let's carry on, eh?"

David grinned slyly towards Sean.
"David, put the sword down."
"Ah, OK."

Hamlet: Act II, scene (ii), verses 197-221

Cast:

Polonius – David Miller
Hamlet – Sean Oliveson
Guildenstern – Danny Oliveson
Rosencrantz – Mick Poulitice

HAMLET: Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick anmer and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams; all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honestly to have it thus set down. For yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am – if, like a crab, you could go backward.

POLONIUS: (*Aside*) Though this be madness, yet there is method in't. – Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

HAMLET: Into my grave?

POLONIUS: Indeed, that's out of the air. (*Aside*) How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. I will leave him and suddenly contrive the means of meeting between him and my daughter. – My honourable lord, I will most humble take my leave of you.

HAMLET: You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will not more willingly part withal – except my life, except my life, except my life.

POLONIUS: Fare you well, my lord.

HAMLET: These tedious old fools!

Enter Guildenstern and Rosencrantz

POLONIUS: You go to seek the Lord Hamlet. There he is.

ROSENCRANTZ: (*to Polonius*) God save you, sir!

Exit Polonius

GUILDENSTERN: My honoured lord!

ROSENCRANTZ: My most dear lord!.... hang on a minute....

HAMLET: Hang on a minute!

Danny looked at Sean quizzically, and with no small degree of wonder. He knew what Sean had been through.

"Danny, who are all these people?"
"What?" Danny said, innocently.

Sean stared on as a host of teenagers entered the building whilst Mick opened the door, before looking back at Danny.

"Ah, you mean these people? We asked them to come along after they'd had their dinner."

"But... what am I supposed to do with them?"

"They're extras aren't they." explained Mick, joining in.

"But, that means they'll all know..."

"Everyone knows Sean," said Mick "it was in the paper."

"Surely not everyone believes that drunken bum?"

"Ah, no, guv. He works for the press. Didn't you know? They all do."

"Right." said Sean, with some concern.

Sean appraised the situation. Things couldn't get much worse, not really. What harm could half a dozen sniggering teenage lads do?

"But... who's that?" Sean asked again.

Claire's sister Sophie had accompanied the group, chatting chirpily with one of the prettiest girls Sean had ever seen in his life. Her hair glistened softly in the half-light of the basement. Her mouth turned upwards in a perfect arch smile. She could read his mind, Sean was sure. Sophie noticed his gaze, and helped him out.

"this is my friend Katie, she wanted to come along."

"Right... ouch!"

"I saw you" Claire growled in his ear.

Betty peered at the new arrivals over her knitting. She was always knitting.

"Mum, what are you knitting?" asked Sean, swiftly changing the subject.

"I'm knitting you a nice new cardie, dear" Betty replied.

"Mum, what do I need a cardigan for? We're on a fully air-conditioned spacecraft in the middle of an endless empty void. We'll never set foot on a planet or face a change in season or atmosphere again in our lives. Unless something goes wrong. Then we're all dead anyway." he ranted.

The room was silenced.

"Well, you never know when it'll get chilly, dear." Betty replied, edgily. "ungrateful little turd" she added, under her breath.

Sean stood silent for a few seconds. It was probably time to crack on.

Hamlet: Act II, scene (ii), verses 520-535

Cast:

Polonius – David Miller

Hamlet – Sean Oliveson

Guildenstern – Danny Oliveson

Rosencrantz – Mick Poulitice

HAMLET: Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear? Let them be well used, for they are abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph

than their ill report while you live.
POLONIUS: My lord, I will use them according to their desert.
HAMLET: God's bodkin, man, much better! Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty. Take them in.
POLONIUS: Come, sirs.
HAMLET: Follow him, friends. We'll hear a play to-morrow. (*Aside to First Player*) Dost thou hear me, old friend? Can you play *The Murderer of Gonzalo*?

"Oh, no, not another play..." Stanley complained.
"It'll be a play within a play." Mick stepped in
"A meta-play, tee hee" Everyone stared at Sophie's friend. Particularly Sean.

Mick took Sean to one side.

"Sean, you'll have to cast some of these lads here. We don't have any players yet."
Sean surveyed his cast of extras 'Oh god' he thought.
"Can't you and Danny do it?"
"We're Rozencrantz and Guildenstern.."
"Right?" said Sean, not seeing the point.
"Well, we're on the stage at the same time as..."
"Look, just wear a beard and no-one will notice, or something."
Mick slowly shook his head.

"Right." He addressed the mob of teenage boys. "We may as well make use of you lot. You can be the players."
"What do we do then?" One particularly spotty teen asked.
"Well, you just stand there looking actory. You know full of energy, and life, and..."
The lads all stood gawping at him with their hands in their pockets.
"They could be Fortinbras' army too" Mick suggested
"Army, yeah, swords" the little group mumbled.
"Thanks Mick" said Sean, with an unfair degree of sarcasm.
"Shall we?" Mick asked, grinning.

"OK, well... this chap here... erm...."
"He's called Mike"
"Mike?" Sean was getting confused.
"My name's Mike" the spotty lad said.
"Right, well Mike can wear a beard and play the First Player in this scene, and all he has to do is say 'Ay, my lord'. And the rest of them can stand around looking... well... actory. Then you and Danny can wear beards and perform the play in the next scene, and no-one will know you're Rozencrantz and Guildenstern as well"
"Right" said Mick, dubiously
"Right" said Mike, unconvincingly

"Right!" said Sean, finally.
 "Can I point something else out?" Mick asked
 Sean looked up, resignation writ across his increasingly furrowed brow, in big letters.
 "There are 3 players with speaking parts, and one's a female."
 "Right"
 "so we need another player...."
 "I'll do it!" Katie volunteered. Lovely Katie.
 'Oh god' Sean thought, yet again. Very quietly, to himself.
 "Did you know, guv, that in Elizabethan times even the female characters were
 played by men or boys? The reason...."
 "Fascinating, Mick.. where were we?"
 Mick stared at Sean in a surly way. But with a hint of a smile. In case it wasn't
 already apparent, he's a smart lad is Mick.
 "Was it the soliloquy, Sean?"
 "No I think we got to the bit where Hamlet talks to himself"
 "right."
 "Can I?"
 "Go right ahead!" Mick was almost goading Sean, now, and enjoying himself into
 the bargain. 'One day..' Mick thought to himself 'One day I will play the Dane.'

Hamlet: Act II, scene (ii), verses 547-554

Cast:

Hamlet – Sean Oliveson

HAMLET: O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit
 That from her working all his visage wanned,
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.

Impassioned, Sean read on, feeling every word as if he'd written it himself. The
 resonance of the scene was strong with him; his own tangled web was not far from his
 mind.

verses 592-596

HAMLET: I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks.
 I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a do blench,
 I know my course.

Once Sean had finished, Claire had to subtly spend a few minutes walking around the room, prodding all of the players who had fallen asleep. Sean was looking down at the floor, feeling empowered.

“How was it?” he asked. He had been practising all day.

Most of the cast looked blearily back at him, rubbing their eyes. Mike gave him an extravagant, beaming thumbs-up.

14)

Hamlet: Act III, scene (i), verses 28-47

Cast:

King – Roger Oliveson

Queen – Shirley Miller

Ophelia – Claire Oliveson

Polonius – David Miller

KING: Sweet Gertrude...

POLONIUS: Oi!

The actors all turned to look at David.

“That’s my wife you’re talking to!” he warned

“Jesus, Dave, it’s only acting” said Roger, wearily.

“Well you suddenly seem a lot more comfortable with it.”

“So what if I admire your wife?” Betty’s eyes narrowed as she heard her husband speak “I admire anyone who manages to put up with you!”

“Right!” exclaimed David, grabbing Roger by the lapels.

The two men scuffled rather comically, much to the shock of everyone. This sort of behaviour was very out of character for Roger Oliveson. The teenagers gathered in a circle around them chanting ‘fight, fight, fight’ Shirley went as white as a sheet. Betty grabbed her handbag strap and prepared to engage.

Sean, panicking, thought about the merits of separating the two men. Whilst he considered it, Claire barged between them. In truth they were rather pleased she did. Fighting was most undignified at their age. Betty sat back down, disappointed

“Honestly.” Claire chided, grabbing hold of their ear-lobes, one in each hand.

She forced them to their knees, cursing. They both looked up at her anxiously.

“Now say you’re sorry to each other, or I’m sending you home.”

“sorry” said David meekly

“sorry” said Roger, pathetically.

Sean gathered himself. Some of the most famous lines in the play were coming up, and he wanted to get them right. In a way, this sight of his parents and in-laws wrestling was of some help to him, getting into character. Questions in his mind were being raised about his father, in fact about his parents in general. Nothing in life seemed quite as straightforward as he had always thought it ought to be. Now that he was married himself he looked back at his childhood and wondered who those people were, that brought him up so well.

Hamlet: Act III, scene (i), verses 56-65

Cast:

Hamlet – Sean Oliveson

HAMLET: To be, or not to be – that is the question;
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep –
No more – and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep –
To sleep – perchance to dream. Ay there's the rub.
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause.

Sean suddenly stopped reading. His dreams of late began to return to him, and the harsh reality of his situation struck him like a claw hammer. A cold bead of sweat dripped from his brow.

"The dreams..." he whispered.

"Sean?" said Claire. She looked moderately concerned, just for a second. She considered that perhaps it wasn't a good idea Sean reading such introspective parts at present. He'd always been a drama queen.

"Sean, shall we move on to the next bit?"

"What?" he said. He'd quite lost it for a second there. "Ah OK, we should crack on, eh?"

"It's you and me anyway!"

"Yup" Sean agreed.

He was worried about the forthcoming section. Hamlet was about to say some quite rude things to Ophelia, and although he was sure Claire had read the script and knew what to expect he was still concerned that she would... well....

"Claire, you know that in this scene we're acting, and I'm not really talking to you I'm Hamlet talking to Ophelia?"

"Of course!"

"OK, but you realise that even Hamlet doesn't mean it, he's only saying it to convince the watching Polonius... and the King actually... that he's mad with love for Ophelia, and it's not personal"

"Sean..."

"Look, it's acting, right?"

"Sean, don't be so silly!"

"Right."

Hamlet: Act III, scene (i), verses 135-141

Cast:

Hamlet – Sean Oliveson

Ophelia – Claire Oliveson

HAMLET: If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shall not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery. Go, farewell. Ore if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool. For wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell.

The echo from the slap rang out across the workshop. Sean winced and clutched at his cheek as he looked up from the floor, to which he had been smitten.

"I'm acting, you mentalist!" He wailed

"You're acting too well!" screamed Claire, emotionally

"What??"

"Sean, you've been absolutely hopeless the whole way through, but we've all been very kind and applauded and said well done, and now finally, in this of all scenes, you suddenly manage to sound convincing!"

"It's practice, isn't it... at least I'm making an effort. I've you'd read anything other than your horoscope in the Chronicle maybe you wouldn't sound so.... wooden!"

"Wooden? Why you mean spirited little..."

"It's true, it's like watching a 4 year old... oooooffff!"

Claire withdrew her pointy right shoe from where it had been violently buried, that is to say amongst Sean's most prized possessions. Well you get the idea. She stared impassively as he writhed on the floor, in agony.

"You, are a bastard. My dad was right. I resign and may the mob have your ass. Are you all coming?" Claire looked around and about at her side of the family. They all looked awkward.

“Well...” David Miller spoke first. “I must admit, I’m rather enjoying all this now, and I’m right looking forward to using those little swords! You never told me about the little swords...” He eyed the still prone Sean, meaningfully.

“What?? You hated the whole thing; you said it was for nancy boys and losers!”

“Sorry, luv...”

“Mum?” Claire looked imploringly towards her mother. Shirley looked back, awkwardly, and then away.

“Well, flower...” Shirley began. “Of course, I only did this for you to begin with, but now I’d hate to let everyone down...” she risked a glance at Roger, who went very red. Then quickly back to her husband, who shot her a quizzical look. Shirley raised her eyebrows and shook her head, at which David grinned, and the awkward moment passed.

“Stanley?” Claire asked, with little hope.

Stanley shrugged. “this is the funniest thing I’ve seen in ages, sis. Sorry! Plus, you really are terrible.”

“Stanley” chastised his mother, cuffing him round the back of the head.

“Ow” Stanley said.

“Fine.” Claire stood for a moment, then turned on her heel and stormed out, trying in vain to hide her tears.

Sean was still lying on the floor, watching in horror but still unable to speak, or even draw breath for that matter. He looked up helplessly and watched her go. Hugo ambled over to assist him.

“That looked like a sore one mate.”

Sean could only nod and gasp for breath as he struggled to his feet.

“Shall we finish the scene?” Mick suggested, trying to hide his grin.

“Claire...” Sean gasped, supporting himself on Hugo’s shoulder with one arm and jabbing desperately towards the door with the other.”

“I can be Ophelia, of course!”

Katie stood beaming, her bright flowing voice echoing across the room, and her bright flowing body swimming in Sean’s vision.

“Oh dear” whimpered Sean, softly.

“Excellent choice, I think!” Mick smiled beamingly.

It took several minutes, but Sean finally recovered himself enough to complete the scene. The show must go on, and all that. Plus, what had just happened was nothing compared to what an armed mob would do to him, he assumed.

Hamlet: Act III, scene (i), verses 152-170

Cast:

Ophelia – Katie Slivers

King – David Miller

OPHELIA: O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh,
That unmatched form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me
T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

The difference was startling. Katie's lilting, confident delivery brought poetry to the prose as the bard intended and led to renewed appreciation from many of the cast members for the work they had been massacring. As Katie spoke, her eyes were fixed on Sean. Or at least that was how it felt. As Sean gazed back he felt that certain feeling stir within him. 'Oh dear' he thought again.

Enter the King and Polonius

KING: Love? His affections do not that way tend;
Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger; which for to prevent,
I have in quick determination
Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England

"I wish I really could be sent to England." Sean said, wistfully.
"Claire probably would if she could." Hugo mumbled. Sean looked at him with intent, even though his comment made no sense.

At the end of the scene, the cast milled around lethargically. Sean decided that enough was enough for the evening. Blood from a stone and all that. He found his mind straying, too, to other complications. He had costumes, sets, a cast. He had one more day to get it right. He knew, though, that nobody, including himself (well, especially himself) would be able to remember their lines. There was just no point in trying. Instead he intended to attach cues and indeed large tracts of text to pillars and props and in some cases to other cast members. This, of course, meant an incredible amount of work for him, including the procurement of rare resources such as paper, pens and adhesives. He had a feeling that there was some paper upstairs, maybe the odd paper edition of the Chronicle, plus banners and such like. If all else failed he could write on stuff like pillars and the floor and, hell, even the costumes. He'd work it out, he thought, he had almost 24 hours until the next rehearsal after all.

At least he had multiple excuses for steering clear of Claire that night. His face wrinkled as he recalled the violence of which his spouse was capable. Maybe, come the next day, he'd be able to persuade her to come back. He wasn't sure how though – he wasn't dead keen on going out in public for the time being on account of the lynch mobs, and he doubted she'd speak to him remotely.

Sean gathered himself, and spoke to the group.

"OK everyone, great work today" he lied. "Tomorrow is our last rehearsal, so we'll be in full costume, we'll be using the theatre, and we'll have the full set and props!"

"Does that mean the little swords?" David asked, eagerly.

"Well, perhaps not... anyway, you're Polonius – you don't use a sword."

"I bloody will!"

Sean shrugged. "Fine, you get to use a sword. Or carry one, anyway."

David beamed.

"Where are these costumes, son?" Roger asked, deliberately. "Should we not try them on now? I was thinking Shirl and I..."

"NO!" Sean said, a little too loudly. "I mean, we can do all that tomorrow, we just need to get here half an hour earlier, OK everyone?"

"Can't wait!" said Mick, wearing his now accustomed smile, which had grown broader by the scene. He was looking forward to this.

"Marvellous." said Sean, masking his terror.

Once everyone had left, Sean looked around him. The robots looked back from the dark corner in which he now kept them, impassive and expressionless and undeniably still broken. If only they would work. He walked over and expertly prodded at one of them, but nothing happened. It had only been a week. Sean considered the tasks he needed to perform. His swipe card would (unwisely, from a theatre point of view) allow him access to the upstairs office, hopefully he'd be able to find appropriate materials if he had a rummage up there. Terence Maloney almost exclusively spent his working day completing the Chronicle crossword, which meant that small disappearances of rarely used materials would likely go unnoticed, or at least unworried about. As for everything else – well he had a lot of very musty old props, a number of holographic set projections that they had used for the robots along with some more traditional fixtures, and a night and a day to set it all up. Easy.

It was unwise, he considered, to leave the office. The threat to his personal safety was too great. Even as he stood in the soundproofed maintenance shop, he was sure he could hear muffled chanting from outside. He thought about Claire, and felt bad for the way she must be feeling, but knew there was little he could do from the theatre. She needed time. That said, he was still thrilled by the looks that Katie had given him, felt the inexorable pull of something new and exciting and... different. It felt good, and it felt right, although he knew it to be wrong. For some reason....

The door opened, and Hugo emerged from the shadows carrying a crate of beer, with a take-away pizza balanced on top.

"I love you Hugo" Sean said simply.

"I know" Hugo stoically replied. They both knew it could never be.

15)

Sean stood breathlessly behind the red velvet curtain. The evening had been an unequivocal triumph. The curtain lurched open to reveal a sea of adoring faces, cheering and smiling and chanting his name. Bouquets were thrown, one of which hit him square between the eyes. Blinking back the tears of pain, Sean beamed. He didn't care. This was the best moment of his life. The flowers were beginning to pile up around his feet. From somewhere behind him he detected a strange whirring, shuffling noise which encouraged him to look sharply over his shoulder. Trundling onto the stage came the Robot Players, whimsical expressions somehow portrayed by their remarkably expressive red glowing eyes.

'Ah, the robots, all fixed!' thought Sean, happily.

The cheering and acclaim of the audience was suddenly swamped by a cacophony of two-stroke terror, as a phalanx of chainsaws simultaneously spluttered into life. Sean's eyes widened as the Robot Players advanced towards him, waving their weapons in warlike way.

'Chainsaws?' thought Sean, "pull the other one!" And with that struggled to awaken.

All the same, he woke with a start. Enough of a start to clunk his head painfully on the base of the nearest robot.

"Ow!" said Sean

He looked up at the robot, blearily.

"You'll have to get up early in the morning to catch me out like that!" he said, patting it on its metallic rump.

Sean was sprawled in the corner of the room. The clock said 8am. Hugo was nowhere to be seen – although there were a large number of empty beer cans. That explained it. The robot moved away slightly. Almost imperceptibly, but it definitely moved. Sean could hear the buzzing of its circuits.

'Ah, the robots are alive again" Sean thought groggily. All his problems were...

He looked up at the robot, just as the chainsaw revved up.

"Waaaaagh" screamed Sean, as the robot chopped off his legs, whistling the lumberjack song.

Sean woke with a start, screaming, clunking his head painfully on the base of the nearest robot. His legs were intricately entwined with the lanky form of Hugo, who was sleeping not far away. Hugo, woken by the screams, immediately began untwining himself, and shuffling swiftly out of range.

“Oh god.” said Sean, who had soiled himself. Again.

“Don’t worry, mate, plenty of spare costumes in the theatre” said Hugo, wrinkling his nose and rapidly putting further range between them.

Sean cursed as the fluffy ruffles of his costume flapped dangerously in his face. Dangerously on account of the rickety ladder on which he was perched wobbling dangerously in rickety fashion. Which was on account of him cursing and waving his flappy arms about. It was a proud moment, though, as cursing he fixed the last cue card to the near side of an out-jutting battlement. He had been very fortunate, really. In the upstairs office he had come upon a treasure trove of abandoned rarities, including a sturdy all surface marker pen and several dozen books of Post-It notes, in varying colours. Why they were ever brought on board he would never know. It may have had something to do with lazy writing, even. He would have preferred it if each pack didn’t have a depiction of a little fluffy kitten on every page, but beggars most definitely can’t be choosers. And Sean didn’t mind begging, where his ass was involved.

The theatre itself was built in the style of a classic Victorian amphitheatre, grand and cavernous and intimate, all at the same time. It had steep banks of plushly upholstered seating rising almost to the roof, which was ornately gilded and fashioned into stunning images and patterns. The stage was at the centre, slightly raised, and for amateur actors very intimidating. On the stage, it felt like you were the centre of the world. To all intents and purposes, you were. Above the stage were all kinds of mechanisms and gantries and buttresses, designed to make set changes and such like as simple and painless as possible. The coup de grace was a state of the art and very definitely 21st century touch – a holographic projection unit which gave every set a touch of realism, and the audience a sense immersion in the scene. The holographic projection unit could in theory be loaded with any kind of background that the user wanted, as long as they had the appropriate footage. The art was to produce a convincing set, without detracting from the on-stage performances. For this reason Sean used it sparingly.

Stepping wearily down from the ladder, Sean surveyed the results of his handiwork. And cursed, once more. The physical set was beautifully erected to create a convincing representation of Elsinore, seat of the Danish throne. At the touch of a button it could be converted from an inside to an outside set, with lighting effects and holographic images to support the look and feel of each scene. Hamlet, as a well-known classic, already had a number of sets and images that Sean could easily use; this part of proceedings hadn’t taken him too long. Little prop swords, capes,

corsets, pantaloons and pirate hats were all neatly arranged waiting for his family's imminent arrival.

The theatre did look a bit different from normal however, although Sean had tried very hard to be subtle and mis-direct the observer. In spite of his best efforts it was most evident that every item and surface in the room was plastered with a line of script, a stage direction or other piece of information, mostly in the form of cuddly kitten post-it notes. Sean had initially hoped that the majority of his handiwork would be invisible to the audience, however the sheer volume of material had proved prohibitive. Still, clever lighting might be able to compensate to some extent, and as for the rest – well, he hoped that people would view it as part of the production's rough charm rather than the last desperate gambit that it was.

Hugo arrived first, carrying more pizza for Sean, who had been trapped in the theatre all day by the baying mob. He had a feeling that Claire might eventually see his potential lynching as a convenient excuse for avoiding her, but he hoped not. It was, however, a convenient excuse. Mick arrived next, unusually early and especially eager, for some reason.

"How you doing guv'nor?"

Sean nodded mutely on account of the pizza slice half-wedged in his mouth.

"What's with all the paperwork?"

As the question clearly elicited some kind of response, Sean elected to swallow an unchewed mouthful of pizza. It was a particularly pointy mouthful of pizza, as it turned out. Sean squirmed, spluttered, then managed to speak.

"Cue cards" he said, in what he hoped was a dignified manner.

"Why not just use the autocue?"

"The what?"

Mick pointed towards a large display suspended over the audience in front of the stage, clearly positioned to be unnoticeable from anywhere else in the theatre.

"You feed lines into it, then someone can operate it and bring up each line as it's spoken. With a nice one, like this, it probably has most of the classics pre-installed. It may even work from speech recognition. There must be a control panel around here somewhere...."

Sean looked at Mick disbelievingly, and put the other half of the pizza slice back in the box, before removing the box from the console he'd perched it on.

"I think I found it" he said.

Mick strolled across, and leaned over Sean to examine it.

“Ok, let’s have a look…” he said, scrolling down the screen. “there you are, Hamlet.” He pressed a button and the first lines of the play appeared overhead, almost obscured by Post-Its.

“Mick?”

“What is it, guv?”

“How do you know all this?”

“Oh, I’ve studied the theatre in my spare time. It’s in the family. In the blood, if you like. I’m really into all this stuff.”

“Right” said Sean. The robots hadn’t ever needed the autocue, so he’d never even looked at it before. He felt a bit silly.

Sean looked around the theatre again, hands on hips. Considered all the writing and standing on a rickety ladder he had done that day, cursing and nearly falling off.

“Mick?”

“Yes, Sean?”

“Could you help me to remove all these Post-Its before the others arrive?”

“Of course!” Mick was grinning already.

Half an hour later, everyone was gathered around, watching Sean remove the last of the notes from high on a balcony.

“How would we have seen that one anyway, lad? Binoculars? X-ray vision? Har har!” David said, helpfully.

Although the cue cards had been a disaster, Sean didn’t mind too much. Finally he felt like he was putting on a proper play. Whilst he was removing all the cue cards, everyone had picked out a suitably Elizabethan costume, with ruffles and silly hats and velvet aplenty. A number of teenagers were alternately jousting with the little prop swords and nursing splintered hands. David Miller was strutting about the stage in maroon velvet pantaloons, thrusting here and there with the sword that hung on his hip in an ornate plastic scabbard. Sean drafted Claire’s sister Sophie in to help with the set changes, and she was delighted to have something to do. She leaned in very close to Sean as he explained what all the buttons did. Danny, too, took a healthy interest in how everything worked, watching over their shoulder and even asking the odd question. Sean also noticed that Danny had taken to carrying a camera around with him, everywhere he went. It looked suspiciously similar to his dad’s camera, but Sean didn’t say anything – he didn’t want to spoil the mood. There was something of a festive atmosphere about the place. A bit too festive perhaps, more end of term. Which wouldn’t do at all.

“OK everyone, let’s get on with it!”

“Spoilsport” everyone said.

Before they started, probably for the first time in his life, Sean sought out David Miller.

“How’s Claire?” he asked
“None of your business” David replied.

16)

Hamlet: Act III, scene (ii), verses 226-241

Cast:

First Player – Mick Paultice
Second Player – Katie Slivers
Hamlet – Sean Oliveson
Queen – Shirley Miller

SECOND PLAYER (*as Queen*):

Nor earth to give me food, nor heaven light,
Sport and repose lock from me day and night,
To desperation turn my trust and hope,
An anchor’s cheer in prison be my scope,
Each opposite that blanks the face of joy
Meet what I would have well, and it destroy,
Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife,
If, once a widow, ever I be wife!

HAMLET (*aside*): If she should break it now!

FIRST PLAYER (*as King*):

‘Tis deeply sworn. Sweet, leave me here awhile.
My spirits grow dull, and feign I would beguile
The tedious day with sleep.

SECOND PLAYER (*as Queen*):

Sleep rock thy brain,
And never come mischance between us twain!
The Player-King sleeps. Exit the Player-Queen

HAMLET: Madam, how like you this play?

QUEEN: The lady doth protest too much, methinks

HAMLET: O, but she’ll keep her word.

Throughout the scene, Sean was distracted by occasional sniggering coming from the direction of the non-playing players. Looking behind him, he was shocked to catch a brief glimpse of a highly pornographic (and some would say controversial) image which briefly projected onto the set, before it all reverted again to the serene backdrop of Elsinore. The actors were mostly unaware, although some were now turning to look at the set, alerted by Sean’s alarm. Sophie, sat at the controls, was pretending not to notice. Danny was no-where to be seen. Ignoring it, and not entirely sure that it wasn’t a product of his over-stretched, over-tired brain’s idle imaginings, Sean focussed back on the job in hand.

Danny was hiding behind the control panel, camera jacked into the port. He had managed to get some hilarious shots of everyone that day. The dry run with the subliminal porn had been a success, and he was looking forward to seeing people

react when he did the same with the pictures he had taken. Sean wouldn't be happy, but then Sean was taking this all far too seriously – he needed to relax, and this would surely help. Danny hadn't checked what other images there might be stored on the device, though. That was his first mistake. Sophie gave him a conspiratorial pat on the shoulder, indicating the next bit was starting.

"Danny?" called Sean.

Danny crawled out from behind the console, and pretended to walk in from offstage.

"What is it?"

"Hurry up, it's you!"

"OK" said Danny, smiling to himself.

Hamlet: Act III, scene (ii), verses 264-279

Cast:

Third Player – Danny Oliveson

Hamlet – Sean Oliveson

Ophelia – Katie Slivers

Queen – Shirley Miller

Polonius – David Miller

King – Roger Oliveson

THIRD PLAYER (*As Lucianus*):

Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing,

Confederate season, else no creature seeing,

Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,

With Hecat's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,

Thy natural magic and dire property

On wholesome life usurps immediately.

He pours poison in the King's ears

Gentle waves of laughter interrupted the scene, as pictures of various cast members gurning and clowning around with costumes replaced the normal backdrop. Danny smiled in a satisfied kind of a way. Sean opened his mouth to protest, but couldn't help laughing himself as a picture of David tripping over his scabbard appeared, as it got caught in his pantaloons. Fortunately for Sean, the novelty of the super large snaps wore off after a couple of minutes, and the actors were able to continue reading whilst the slideshow kept on running.

HAMLET:

'A poisons him i'th' garden for his estate. His name's Gonzago. The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.

Behind Sean, the pictures changed from those of exuberant players to what appeared to be Roger and Betty enjoying a night out at a bar. A gigantic image

appeared of Betty clutching a glass of wine. Roger Oliveson's face suddenly became a mask of extreme concern.

OPHELIA: The King rises.
HAMLET: What, frightened with false fire?
OPHELIA: How fares my lord?

Roger had quite forgotten he was a key part of the scene, and was now making his way towards Sophie at the control panel with no small degree of urgency. At Roger's insistence Sophie began pushing buttons in a frantic attempt to stop the slideshow.

POLONIUS: Give o'er the play.
KING: Stop the pictures!
POLONIUS: What the?

Roger and Betty's night out had given way to what appeared to be an image of Shirley's chest. And she wasn't wearing anything, either. This was followed by a definite image of Roger's flushed but smiling visage. There was a clatter of feet, and Danny wasn't there any more.

"What the?" David stammered.

"MAKE IT STOP" wailed Roger.

"Oh sweet Mary mother of god." said Sean. Things had been going so well. "Jesus H Christ on a unicycle... Gordon Bennett sitting astride a...."

"You said you deleted them... oh my god I'm so sorry" said Shirley, looking grimly at David, ready for a reaction from him.

Sophie finally managed to stop the images from cycling. Unfortunately they stopped with a clear image of Roger's face where clearly Roger's face really shouldn't have been. Buried in Shirley's ample cleavage. Still, could have been worse. Well, perhaps not.

Sean was expecting a bloodbath. Strangely though, given something to get really angry about, David Miller remained calm. All the pettiness and backbiting became clear to Sean. David's insecurity was palpable. But now it was confirmed as justified... he didn't need to fight what fate was throwing at him. There was no point. In spite of his maroon pantaloons, in spite of the betrayal by his wife, in spite of everything – Sean had never seen the man appear so dignified.

Shirley left immediately, tearfully, respectfully. Roger, likewise, tried to scurry away, but didn't get very far.

"You're not going anywhere! Sit down." snarled Betty. Roger did as he was told, looking fearful for his life.

Betty sat, clutching her knitting, face grimacing in fury. You wouldn't want to be Roger at that moment, really you wouldn't. Sean was already left with half a cast,

but he feared he might be left with half a set of parents by the end of it. For the first time during the entire week, the actors all fell silent. Each member of the family contemplated what the revelations meant to them. The teenagers just stared, goggle eyed, at the frozen image. For Sean, his sense of the secret lives of his parents grew, his understanding of them as real people with real frustrations and temptations and passions and... lives. They didn't just exist to serve him any more, as he supposed they always had in his mind. He wondered what else he didn't know, what other feelings they buried for the sake of their children. Thought about how selfish he had been, all along.

It was hard, though, for Sean to be accepting of his fate as David was. He was still relatively young, had yet to be scarred by constant compromise and disappointment. Maybe he fought too much. Maybe he complained too much. Maybe he wanted too much from his life, for a robot maintenance technician doomed to spend an eternity adrift in space. The awareness coursed through him, though. He was not alone, he never had been. They were all in it together. He was frustrated with himself – he missed Claire. Maybe everyone needed more leeway to make mistakes, or to vent their frustration. Maybe she knew this. Maybe this would all turn out OK. He was lucky, he supposed.... it could have been worse.

“Right!” said David Miller, suddenly. “Shall we get on with this?”

Sean looked up, surprised. They better had, he supposed. He strolled over to the projector and switched it off. He was pleased to find that he seemed to be rather good in a real crisis. More specifically, someone else's crisis. Mick looked as if he really wanted to say something, but instead looked on. Sean swiftly made to draft in Katie as a temporary Queen, to which she elegantly assented.

“Nope!” said Betty, an uncomfortable edge to her tone. “I'll do it!”

“Mum, are you sure..” Sean was concerned.

“I'll do it” Betty said softly, a hint of a tear in her eye.

Roger looked at Betty as if seeking guidance.

“Go on, you worthless turd” she said.

Hamlet: Act III, scene (iii), verses 37-47

Cast:

King – Roger Oliveson

KING: O, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven.
It hath th'epitaphical curse upon't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand

Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?

"Oh, you'll confront it alright" Betty said, loudly.

Roger, who until that moment had sounded like he was reading at the muzzle of a shotgun, lost his nerve completely, and fled the room in panic. It wasn't pleasant to see a father figure, still less your actual father, break down like that. Sean didn't know what to do, so created a convenient mental wall of denial, and called Mick over about the play. Throughout the rehearsal Mick had stood, open mouthed, watching someone else's family fall apart. He wasn't sure what he thought really, but the phrase 'this isn't fun any more' definitely came to mind. He had been very focussed on the play, right from the start, and what began as a freak show was something he had begun to take very seriously. Now that it had become a backdrop for playing out the family's darkest dramas he saw the very real risk of his opportunity slipping away.

"Mick? Do you mind playing the King, just for a little while?" Sean was all business.
"Sean." Mick, said, ignoring the question.

"Yes Mick?"

"How do you think it's going today?"

"Quite well?" Sean replied, hopefully.

Mick slowly shook his head.

"Ah I thought not. I kind of hoped you wouldn't..."

"Notice?" Mick shook his head again, even more slowly this time.

"Sean, I think we need to do something dramatic, to detract from the... erm.... "

"Tension? Trauma? Pain that EVERYONE in the family is feeling? Confusion?" Sean was getting to the point where he'd had enough of all this.

"I hope you don't mind me saying this, Sean, but I think that playing the main part is making it hard for you to help some of the other... erm.. 'less able' actors."

"So you think I'm a really good actor, do you Mick?" Sean was deluded, but he wasn't that deluded.

"The best!"

"Right."

"Sean, I know you've done a lot for your family, and you want to help them to get through this. But perhaps, for their sake, you need to take a step back. Maybe relinquish some RESPONSIBILITY"

The word rang loud in Sean's head. It was something Claire talked about a lot. It didn't really apply to the play though. In this context, the only thing Sean had ever been taking responsibility for was his ass. Mick, for the first time, was showing some naivety.

"So, the whole play.." Mick continued, "and, indeed, your ass, would perhaps benefit from focussing on bringing everyone together..."

Well, perhaps not.

“You want to be Hamlet don’t you Mick” Sean interrupted.

“Erm, well... I just think..”

“Mick, just tell me you want to be Hamlet”

“... well, Sean..”

“MICK?”

“I want to be Hamlet, please.”

“Fine, be Hamlet then.”

Sean felt slightly melancholy about giving up the lead role, and sacrificing his dream. Deep down though he honestly didn’t care any more. There were all Mick’s parts still to play, what’s more the events of the day had shifted his focus. Maybe it was time to concentrate on what he was good at. Maybe it was time to make the most of what he already had. Maybe even, somewhere along the line, he’d actually learned something.

“Anyway,” Sean added, “I don’t think I could kill David, not now.”

“What?” asked Mick, alarmed.

“Next scene, Mick. I was looking forward to it, but..”

“Ah I see. Well, shall we...” Mick grabbed a little sword.

“Righto, let’s crack on.” Sean said, steeling himself and preparing his own bubble of forlorn dignity for the announcement of the change in the cast.

Once again Sean gathered what was left of the group together. It had become a sorry gang, most looking for some kind of exit strategy.

“Right!”

“Right!” someone mocked. Probably Stanley.

“Look, it’s been a hard day, I know that. I think a lot of what has happened has been my fault. I’ve been obsessed with this play, but not with the people who make it happen. You. This is your play. This is your chance, for once in your lives, to do something different, something you’ll be proud to tell your kids and your grandkids about. You need to remember this for the right reasons. That’s why I’ve given up the role of Hamlet to Mick here, to concentrate on getting this right. So no more excuses, no more affairs or violence or tantrums or walkouts. Because this is about you, not me. Let’s do it.”

There was a little buzz in the room, suddenly. Mainly, truth be told, because everyone was glad they wouldn’t have to listen to Sean reading any more. But at least partly, in some cases, because they got it. This wasn’t something that happened every day, which made it special. Which would always make it special.

Hamlet: Act III, scene (iv), verses 14-33

Cast:

Hamlet – Mick Poullice
Queen – Betty Oliveson
Polonius – David Miller

QUEEN: Why, how now, Hamlet?
HAMLET: What's the matter now?
QUEEN: Have you forgot me?
HAMLET: No, by the Rood, not so!
You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,
And, would it were not so, you are my mother.
QUEEN: Nay, then I'll set those to you that can speak.
HAMLET: Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge.
You go not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you.
QUEEN: What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?
Help, ho!
POLONIUS (*behind*): What, ho! Help!
HAMLET (*drawing his sword*):
How now? A rat? Dead for a ducat, dead!
He makes a thrust through the arras and kills Polonius
POLONIUS: O, I am slain!
QUEEN: O me, what hast thou done?
HAMLET: Nay, I know not. Is it the King?
QUEEN: O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!
HAMLET: A bloody deed – almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king and marry with his brother.
QUEEN: As kill a king!
HAMLET: Ay, lady, it was my word.
He sees Polonius
Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
I took thee for thy better.

Betty read like a drain, but it didn't matter. There was a new energy in the scene. Unfortunately it had to stop, because of the amount of groaning coming from the floor.

"hmm, you're right Sean, that did feel a bit hollow" said Mick, examining the tip of his sword.

"aaaagh" groaned David Miller, who was still rolling around the floor in agony.

"Mick you're not supposed to actually kill him!" Sean chastised.

Although the swords were blunt, they could still give a nasty dig if you thrust hard enough, and Mick, hopeless ham that he was, had been a little over-vigorous with the stabbing. David hacked up some blood and crawled to the side of the stage, on his hands and knees. It looked really convincing, but Sean was reasonably sure that Mick wouldn't get the chance to repeat it on the night. David may have been paranoid, unpleasant and self-deluded, but he wasn't totally stupid. Sean didn't allow the incident to distract his cast, and threw himself into the director's role with

renewed vigour, drawing a new and unanticipated respect from his charges. Katie looked up at him, expectant and beautiful and surprisingly vulnerable, as he called her forward for the next scene, and boldly took on the role of the King. The rehearsal had been very hard for her to watch, and the scene was equally hard for her to act.

Hamlet: Act IV, scene (v), verses 37-69

Cast:

Queen – Betty Oliveson

Ophelia – Katie Slivers

King – Sean Oliveson

QUEEN: Alas, look here, my lord.

OPHELIA: (*sings*) Larded all with sweet flowers,
Which bewept to the ground did not go
With true-love showers.

KING: How do you, pretty lady?

OPHELIA: Well, God dild you! They say the owl was a
baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know
not what we may be. God be at your table!

KING: Conceit upon her father –

OPHELIA: Pray let's have no word of this, but when they
ask you what it means, say you this:

(*sings*) Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window
To be your Valetine.
Then up he rose and donned his clothes,
And duffed the chamber door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.

KING: Pretty Ophelia!

OPHELIA: Indeed, la, without an oath, I'll make an end
on't

(*sings*) By Gis and by Saint Charity,
Alack, and fie for shame!
Young men will do't if they come to't
By Cock, they are to blame.

Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,
You promised me to wed.'

He answers:

'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,
An thou hadst not come to my bed.'

There was, of course, the genuine feeling that Ophelia MKII was so fair, and so fragile, and so very convincing, that the other actors raised their level substantially. Especially Sean. Betty gently touched the girl's arm as the scene finished.

"Are you alright, dear?"

"Acting." said Katie, wiping a tear from her reddening eyes.

17)

Following the rehearsal the actors wasted no time in stripping out of their Elizabethan attire and heading for the exit, each to make their own happily anonymous way through the baying mob, back to their comfy beds. How Sean envied them. Before he left, David Miller approached Sean for a quick word.

"Sean, lad"

Sean looked up expectantly. Although he wasn't sure what to expect.

"I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, but... the state my daughter is in today breaks my heart. And after..." Sean nodded, sympathetically.

"You should come and see her. I'll let you in."

David turned awkwardly, and headed towards the exit.

"David." Sean called out after him

David turned to face him

"Thanks." said Sean.

David nodded, turned, and went home to face his own crisis.

"Sean" said Hugo.

"Yes, mate" said Sean, facing his friend.

"Maybe you should have asked David to send her down here what with the mob and all?"

"Oh bugger!" Sean said, looking at the place where David Miller was just recently standing.

"I mean, I know it wouldn't have had the same dramatic effect, but it would have been much more practical, you know?"

"I know Hugo." said Sean, irritated. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Well, I didn't like to interrupt. It WAS a great moment."

Hugo carried on with his allocated task of pushing a broom around, whilst Sean stood thinking. It looked almost as if the play might go ahead, to part time first rehearsal amateur dramatics standards at the very least. No matter how bad it was, it was definitely better than nothing. He would have felt more comfortable if they'd actually managed to read the whole thing through, but to get as far as they had was remarkable in itself, under the circumstances. The events of the day's rehearsal had revealed to Sean something new as well, something greater than the play. It had revealed to him how petty his concerns were, about being ripped limb from limb by

a malicious bloodthirsty mob and being remembered forever after his death as the sole instigator of the complete disintegration of the delicate balance of their unique space-borne society.

He had learned that he needed to focus instead on what was important. He had to see Claire, somehow. He didn't want to end up like their parents, bitter and lonely, growing apart and seeking comfort elsewhere, wondering what it was that ever drew them together in the first place. He loved her, he decided. Loved her more now she seemed so far away. He wanted to make it work. Obviously, he wanted to sleep with Katie. And indeed, at the moment he'd much rather spend time with her, all things considered. But that didn't matter, probably. Did it? Ah who said this was a morality tale?

"Hugo?"

"Yes mate?"

"I need a disguise."

Sean stole from the building through the side door, and into the corridor which led onto the plaza. He kept tight to the outside wall, desperately hoping that no-one would spot him. His maroon velvet pantaloons shimmered in the half-light, and his squiggly stick on beard flapped gently in the soft breeze from the air conditioning vents. He could see the mob spilling towards the edge of the Plaza, burning whatever they could lay their hands on to keep warm - not because they were cold of course, but because they had seen it done. Much of the burning material very much resembled Sean. He had to wonder where they got all the effigies from. The nearest section of the crowd was a mere ten yards from him as he ducked once again from doorway to doorway. Sean was understandably nervous.

Hugo's escape plan suddenly seemed ridiculous to Sean, in the harsh reality of the now. According to Hugo, if he walked straight up to the crowd wearing the maroon pantaloons they wouldn't give him a second look, because it was the last thing you'd imagine anyone wearing if they were trying to sneak out of a theatre. Genius, really. Sean breathed deep, assured himself that Hugo had never to his knowledge been brutally murdered by a baying mob, and walked brazenly towards the crowd.

"There he is!" shouted one particularly astute gentleman.

"The guy in the maroon pantaloons!" said another. "Get him!"

18)

When Sean regained consciousness, he found himself on his front, with a large and uncomfortable pointy sensation coming from somewhere behind him. His eyes popped open.

"aaaaaaahaaaaahaaaaahahahaaaaahahah" he managed to say, before a surgical mask was urgently clamped over his mouth and his eyes slid shut again.

“For god’s sake” chided the doctor “can’t you ever get the anaesthetic right?”
“I’m sorry” said the nurse, sliding her skirt up over the tops of her stockings absent-mindedly.
The doctor grinned, shaking his head, and yanked another pointy stick out of Sean’s ass.

19)

When Sean awoke again, he could see a bright light. It wasn’t heaven or anything like that though. It came from a doctor’s torch.

“Well, he seems OK – you can come in and see him now.”

Sean was face down on the bed. The doctor issued strict instructions for him to remain that way as she pulled her torch out of his face and shone it instead in the region of his ass.

“Your husband has suffered severe ass trauma.” the doctor said, turning to Claire – she had come, of course she had. “Make sure he doesn’t sit on it.”

For a moment Sean forgot that all his worst fears had come to pass, and that his ass would likely never be the same again. He had survived his worst fears, and what was more, Claire was there. He tried to crane his neck around in order to face his wife.

“I’m sorry.” he said

“So am I.” said she, meaning it.

“Let’s always be there for each other.” And although Sean couldn’t see Claire silently nodded, her eyes glistening and alive.

20)

There was a serious disturbance that evening at the Colony V Medical Bay reception area.

“Sir, I’ll tell you again, but only once more.” said the duty nurse in her best passive aggressive voice. “You leave now and you run a severe risk of ass haemorrhaging and secondary bleeding. It could even lead to total prolapse. It could be the end of your ass, altogether.”

Sean rolled his eyes and picked up the stylus. He’d heard it all before. About thirty seconds ago in fact.

“Where do I sign?” The nurse pointed, theatrically, not appreciating the irony.

“Look, if you must leave...” the nurse was beginning to show genuine concern as Sean pressed stylus on screen. “... just don’t sit on it.”

“I know!” Sean said, dismissively

He tutted and walked out of the door. Well, shuffled, wincing with pain every other step. His ass really hurt, more in fact than he would ever have thought realistically

possible. He didn't doubt that the risks involved with absconding from the hospital whilst Claire went to the toilet were very high indeed. Perhaps his actions were because he hadn't learned anything after all, or perhaps (being kind to him) it was the medication. Either way he was going to the theatre; he had a show to get to.

Sean approached the fateful Plaza in front of the theatre once again, this time moving gingerly, dressed in a hospital gown and no shoes. For some reason, in spite of having already succeeded in their aim of having a good old fashioned lynching, and in spite of there being only ten minutes to go before the start of an actual show, there was still a mob outside. A smaller mob now, but still a mob nonetheless. Oblivious to the unfortunate fact that the back of his gown flapped open, revealing the substantial dressing swaddling his abused buttocks, Sean strode towards the mob as fast as he could go. Which wasn't very fast, given the circumstances. His face was terrifying, a rictus grimace of rectal discomfort tainted by what appeared to be raw fiery ticked-offness.

"Get him!" the mob said. "again!"

Sean strode right up to the smallest man he could see and thumped him deliberately (and with extreme prejudice) between the eyes.

"Ow!" said the man.

"He punched Herbert!" said the mob "Get him!"

"This whole mob thing is getting REALLY.... boring." Sean said through his teeth, in an extremely threatening way. How right he was.

"Why are you all here anyway?" he continued.

"I would suggest it's partially a result of the sense of delirium we all feel due to the situation we find ourselves in" said one man, who looked suspiciously like an older version of Mick. "with no common goals or ancestry, and no 'destination' for our lives in a godless homeless society, people are bound to rally around causes that provide them with common ground and thus a greater sense of belonging in the absence of any other meaning in their lives."

"Right" said Sean, some of the wind taken out of his sails.

"I just missed it last night" said Herbert "I had to go to the toilet."

Sean glared at him, and he flinched.

"There is another reason" said the Mick man.

"Which is?" Sean asked, fairly.

"You broke the robots! It's all your fault! Get him!"

"WAIT!" Sean shouted forcefully, accidentally bringing his elbow down on the bridge of Herbert's nose as he spread his arms wide.

"Ow!" said the little guy in an affronted manner, spurting blood "That's probably broken you know. I could prosecute you..."

Sean ignored him and addressed the group, which were now giving him their full attention.

"Why do you even care? Have any of you ever even been to a play?" The mob looked at each other and collective shrugged.

"Did you know there's actually a play on tonight? Anyway?"

“Yeah, but we pays our money!” a large guy with a tattoo yelled.

“What?? You haven’t even seen it yet!” Sean replied, reasonably “and anyway, no you haven’t – there isn’t even any currency on board the ship, for starters.”

The man looked confused “You know what I mean.” he said, lamely.

“No,” said Sean “I don’t. Now, I’m going to come through here to put this play on – is anyone going to stop me?”

The mob looked at their feet, and let Sean pass among them.

“Watch it though, or else.” the tattooed man muttered under his breath, wagging his stick.

“It better be good!” said another, much to Sean’s general concern.

21)

Sean wanted to burst in through the stage door, because he thought that the situation demanded a dramatic entrance. It was hard to do that with electronic sliding doors, though. As he pushed the button and the door swished silently open, no-one inside batted an eyelid. Hobbling through, Sean tried to catch someone’s attention. Mick spotted him first, of course.

“Sean! How’s the... erm..”

Sean slowly shook his head in response. He didn’t want to talk about his ass.

“Well, we’ve been waiting for you.” Sean suspected that to be untrue.

Looking around, he took in the scene. The backstage area of the theatre was surprisingly small, and at that moment seemed a lot smaller. An awful lot of people were cavorting around, dressed in Elizabethan costume. In the area of the stage closed off behind the curtain, where the set was already carefully arranged, a large number of schoolchildren seemed to be re-creating the battle of Bosworth Field. Sean didn’t recognise any of them.

“Mick, there are many more extras today, it seems” Sean stated, wearily.

“Yeah” said Mick, matter of factly “our whole class, looks like. Word got out, somehow.”

In the midst of the throng, Danny stood leaning on his little sword in cavalier fashion. Sean had a good idea how word might have got out.

“So, what...”

“Army” said Mick immediately “You need a lot of extras for an army, guv. It’ll make for a really unique experience!”

Sean shrugged. It was beyond his control now, but he had felt compelled to ask.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” He said.

“Sean, lad!” David’s tone contained what, if Sean didn’t know better, could be interpreted as empathy. Furthermore, his father-in-law sounded almost pleased to see him. Almost.

“How’s the... erm..”

Sean shook his head, again. He still didn't want to talk about his ass.

"Ah....right.... do you know where your father is?"

"Erm..." Sean glanced around, looking for his mum. He spotted Betty sat in a corner, knitting what appeared to be furry handcuffs.

"I really don't know, have you asked my mum?"

"She's quiet on the subject" David said, grinning slightly at the thought of what might have happened to his love rival.

In the Oliveson quarters, a muffled scratching and what appeared to be stifled moans were coming from somewhere within the storage area. But no one was there to hear it.

Mick had by now joined them. He seemed to be taking control of the situation.

"No King?" he asked, eyeing up Sean.

"No way!" said Sean. "I'm not playing my mother in law's lover! Anyway, I'm in a lot of pain – I have this problem with my ass.... and the King's pantaloons... they bring back such terrible memories...."

Mick and David nodded sympathetically. Sean's voice trailed off. He could see they were loving this.

"A bit late to find anyone else who knows the part now, guv."

"OK" Sean relented. "I'll do it, but only as long as I don't have to sit down."

Just as Sean had managed to struggle gingerly into the reserve set of maroon velvet pantaloons, Claire walked in looking flustered. Sean had no-where to hide, so he pulled a false beard as far up his face as it would reasonably go and tried to skulk off.

Claire made a beeline for Mick, and spoke to him in a tone that didn't encourage equivocation.

"Mick, where is Sean? He's escaped from the hospital against all medical advice, and his ass could go at any time."

Before Claire had even finished speaking Mick pointed straight at Sean, unwilling to risk being physically harmed. Sean, too, feared violence, but received nothing more threatening than a tearful hug.

"Would you please go back to the hospital, Sean?" Claire looked terrified for him.

"Dad's gone missing. I have to play the King." Claire said nothing; she just turned and headed for the toilets, clearly distraught.

"right, she normally... why..." Sean muttered, confused. His wife normally favoured tough love.

"There's none so blind as those that cannot see, lad" David said, breezily. He seemed in a remarkably good mood, considering what had been revealed the previous day. So did Shirley in fact. A dinner plate sized hand slapped him

unnervingly hard across the shoulder. Sean's ass tensed in fraught anticipation of further pain, but in spite of the jolting it held together.

"A little bird tells me you're playing the King – that means you're with me tonight petal!" Shirley said loudly, into his ear.

"Oooh like father like son eh?" David cried out, and they both wandered off, laughing raucously, arm in arm.

'weird' Sean thought, glancing absent-mindedly at the clock.

"Alrighty" Sean said, noticing the time. He tiptoed up to the curtain, and popped his head around. The arena was very full.

"There he is!" someone in the audience said, and Sean ducked back around quickly in order to avoid the rotten fruit that was heading in his direction.

"I'll never know where they get all that rotten fruit from on this ship" he mused, before climbing arthritically onto one of the spotlights and clapping his hands together as hard as he dared.

"OK everyone," he said

"It's time."

22)

The first human actors to get on a stage without the intention of cleaning it in decades walked nervously out from behind the curtain. The absence of the Robot Players was far from the grand surprise that Sean had hoped for when he first started. A combination of rumour mongering from the drunk Irishman/press mole, leaks from the cast and the suspicious comings and goings at the theatre had ensured that pretty much everyone on the ship had advance warning. The sight of flesh and blood on stage still drew gasps from the audience, however, as well as a rotten tomato or two. The applause they received, although welcome, was reflective of the audience's anticipation of a rare freak show – enthusiastic to the point of irony.

Although during a solid week's rehearsal the cast had only managed a little under one slightly abridged read-through of the play, things went surprisingly well from the start. Both Hamlet and Ophelia were remarked to be particularly well cast, and many of the support's faltering lines and missed cues were viewed with sympathetic amusement. There was no riot, which had been Sean's main concern; the only glitch was that Hugo was having to sneak on between acts in order to sweep up all the rotten fruit and vegetables that were piling up on the stage.

The closer the play drew towards its finale, the more nervous Sean became. Deep into Act IV almost no one had walked out and the actors could still just about be heard above the general chatter of the audience. For some reason, a great hush descended over them as (in what was rather a nice touch) the fair Ophelia was laid out on a dais, in a rather damp and clingy sheer white gown.

Hamlet: Act IV, scene (vii), verses 163-186

Cast:

King – Sean Oliveson

Queen – Shirley Miller

Laertes – Stanley Miller

Ophelia – Katie Slivers

Enter the Queen

KING: How, sweet Queen?

QUEEN: One woe doth tread upon another's heel,
So fast they follow. Your sister's drowned, Laertes.

LAERTES: Drowned! O, where?

QUEEN: There is a willow grows askant the brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead-men's-fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious silver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and induced
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

LAERTES: Alas, then she is drowned?

QUEEN: Drowned, drowned.

The audience remained hushed as the curtain fell at the end of the scene, although a murmur grew as one by one the gentlemen realised that they were unlikely to see the fair Ophelia again, particularly not in any slinky see-through costumes. Playing the King, Sean was distracted by the ongoing sensation that his bottom was about to collapse, but he tried his best to ignore it. He knew that, above all else, it was imperative that they hold the audience's attention to the very last scene. If anything went badly wrong then the mob were still out there in the cheap seats, waiting to get him.

Hamlet: Act V, scene (i), verses 177-181

Cast:

First Clown – Sean Oliveson

Hamlet – Mick Poullice
Horatio – Hugo Spankworthy

FIRST CLOWN: This same
skull, sir, was, sir, Yorick's skull, the King's jester
HAMLET: This?
FIRST CLOWN: E'en that.
HAMLET: Let me see. Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him,
Hugo. A fellow of.....
HORATIO: Eh? Is it me? What do you mean?

Until this point, Mick had been word perfect, so he could be forgiven this minor slip of the tongue. Hugo, however, had been hanging on by his fingernails at all times, helped along by a combination of luck and the desperation of his fellow cast members to avoid a farce. Hugo's character had not said anything for some considerable period of time, and he had long been distracted, gazing out into the crowd and waving to people he knew. The sudden mention of his actual name caused him untold confusion, and left him fearful that he had missed a cue.

"Stop talking and let me carry on!" Mick whispered, urgently

"What?" said Hugo, loudly.

"That wasn't the correct line!" said Sean, losing patience, in a stage whisper that carried to all parts.

The audience chuckled, and Mike began to lose his cool for the first time. He was taking this all very seriously now.

"What am I supposed to say then? Where are we?" asked Hugo again, not letting it go.

"Nothing!" Sean snapped. "It's not your line"

"Why is he speaking to me then?" Hugo persisted

"Just shut up you bloody idiot!" Mick shouted, aggressively.

The good-natured laughter in the audience was starting to turn into something darker. An exploratory boo rang out, and a rotten pumpkin whistled past Sean's ear. Mick was struck full in the face by an anaemic aubergine. He was furious. Everything, in his mind, had now been ruined. He lobbed the skull into the crowd, hitting a little guy with a bandage on his nose full in the face, and bugged off in a prima donna strop. Claire, who could see the danger, immediately hit the controls to bring the curtain down so that they could re-organise. Unfortunately it fell in such a way as to leave Hugo standing on his own on the wrong side of it, looking utterly mystified. Before anyone else could react, and before the rotten fruit could hone in on its target, Claire reached through the curtain, grabbed him by the shoulders, and yanked him to safety.

"Where's Mick?" Sean demanded, panicking. He knew full well what these mobs could be like. The rest of the cast looked at him, blankly. No one had a clue.

Mick ducked into one of the changing rooms, locking the door behind him. Katie sat staring at him, still wearing the sheer slinky silk gown. As he gently slid his hand up her wholesome milky thigh, she looked urgently at him.

“You’re back early.” She said.

“Technical hitch, all the more time for us...” he said, grinning. ‘I love it when a plan comes together’ he thought, tenderly sticking his tongue down her throat.

Sean had to think quickly. He could hear a chorus of booing and derision coming from the other side of the curtain, and sensed it was about to turn nasty.

“Ok David, now you’re the King.”

“What?”

“They’ll know who he is!” Shirley objected, alarmed.

“They already know who he is!” said Sean. “Just.. wear a different beard, or something.”

“But...” David began.

“We don’t have time for this!” urged Sean “I’ll have to be Hamlet.”

“What a bloody surprise.” David muttered

“Be careful, Seany.” said Claire, clutching his arm. There was a catch in her voice that moved Sean very much. He looked at her worried countenance and smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way. It was going to be all right. But it wasn’t.

“I’ll be fine.” he said confidently. But he wasn’t.

Sean had made the executive decision to skip straight to the final scene. He thought that if he moved straight to the part where all the characters were killed the audience might be less tempted to try it for themselves. As the curtain was raised again, he looked out into the crowd, who were by now openly hostile towards them.

“Bring back the robots!” some of the more polite people were saying, and “Rubbish! Useless!”

The less polite people seemed to have obtained pointy sticks from no-where. Sean made out a large tattooed man standing at the back, looking excited.

Unfortunately for Sean, in his hasty transformation from the King to Hamlet, he had been obliged to remove his beard. As soon as the cast stepped through the curtains and took up their positions a voice rang out from the crowd.

“That’s not Hamlet!” the voice said.

“It’s the guy who broke the robots! Get him!” said another.

“Oh dear” said Sean.

In the face of impending chaos, Stanley said the most sensible thing that he had ever been known to say.

“Let’s get out of here!”

Quick as a flash what was a disgruntled group of theatre-goers transformed itself into a bloodthirsty baying mob. Sean just had that effect on people. The mob charged the stage. Fortinbras' army, protectors of the Norwegian king and friends of Denmark, marched onto the set way ahead of their cue and with some sense of delight. They gathered in a fearsome phalanx, brandishing pointy swords towards the onrushing crowd. As Danny's classmates viciously poked the aggressors, the main cast fell back. Literally in fact, as Hugo slipped over on the rotten vegetation that still littered the stage and stumbled into the back of the set, bringing the whole shebang down on top of them. As the crowd advanced the wooden stage groaned with the weight, and the press of the battle dislodged the lighting rig, which tumbled to hang dangerously low over the stage in a shower of sparks, before failing altogether. In the darkness Sean scrambled free, clutching his ass with one hand and dragging Claire along by the other. He hadn't let go of her for a second. As screams and yells rang out across the theatre, he considered the merits of the chainsaw dream, as compared to the current scenario. At least the chainsaws would have been quick. Stumbling out of the side door, an angry looking duty nurse and two substantial orderlies from the hospital jumped him from behind, putting a chloroform soaked rag to his mouth before pulling a hessian sack over his head and dragging him away. As Sean lost consciousness yet again he thought to himself that it had been quite a performance.

23)

Sean slowly opened his eyes. His family was gathered all around his hospital bed. His dad, Roger, looking sleep deprived, with 5 days of stubble and what appeared to be chafing around his wrists. His mum, Betty, sitting in the corner with her knitting needles. Claire's brother, Stanley, pouting in the background with a massive bandage tied around his head, and her sister, Sophie, watching doe-eyed as he struggled back to consciousness. David and Shirley, his in-laws, were stood arm in arm, their opposite arms suspended in slings across their chests. His brother Danny was there too, playing absent mindedly with the buttons on the life support machine. Finally he looked to Claire. His wife was there, stroking his head and telling him it would be alright. And he relaxed as he realised that this was no nightmare, that it would all be alright. As alright as it could ever be on their endless doomed voyage to nowhere.

THE END

Epilogue

How could it possibly have been alright, I hear you ask? Well, everything always is, isn't it? Alright one way or another. The theatre was closed for a month after the riot, by which time the robots had self-repaired and everything went back to exactly how it was before. Society didn't disintegrate in the meantime, although according to sociologists, another week and you never know what could have happened.

David and Shirley learned to respect each other for what they were. The affair transformed their sense of worth to each other, and re-affirmed the magic of their love. Which was nice. Roger, however, was forced under threat of extreme violence to spend his evenings locked in the utility room. That is, until someone called Social Services in. Betty eventually lost custody of her husband, but was allowed to see him at weekends under supervision.

Mick and Katie quickly got tired of each other. Kids, eh?

Sean and Claire lived happily ever after. As if you didn't know. Happily enough anyway. Although Sean did experience some minor discomfort for the rest of his days, when he didn't eat enough fibre.

And the Robot Players? Ah yes the robots. Well, they continued to act the classics night after night, in a string of perfect yet accessible performances. And they would continue to do so to the very end of time, somewhere in the void of space.