

Acting Strangely

Martin Jarvis

My role in the Ghost of Christmas Future, was a character I felt I could really get hold of. Although the part contained no dialogue I looked forward, every night, to my one scene.

Jon Finch, in charge of the dry-ice machine, ensured that the stage was covered by a low-lying cloud so that my feet were hidden from view. It seemed that this huge cloaked figure, a hood obscuring its face, was floating slightly in space as it moved towards the cringing Scrooge and pointed, inexorably, to the future. Scrooge, in the person of Laurence Hardy, would then grab me by the shoulders, crying, ‘Oh Spirit, Spirit, say this is not so. Tell me this is not the future.’ Miraculously, the phantom would crumple in his hands and there would be nothing left but the cloak, falling empty to the ground.

The effect on the audience was gratifying. The trick worked like this: under Terence Fitzgerald’s tuition I had spent hours constructing a large head-shaped cage made of chicken wire. In preparation for my entrance I held this contraption above my own head on a steel rod, with one hand. Jon Finch then placed the voluminous cloak over the top of the cage so that the hood concealed all but the shape of the wire head. The illusion was of a ghostly monk, eight feet high. In my other hand, inside one of the lengthy sleeves, I held a huge flesh-coloured false finger (on a stick) which emerged, when raised, to point towards the future. Because of the heat engendered by the heavy serge I wore only underpants. The cunning of the operation was that when Scrooge grasped my shoulders and began to shake them he was, in reality, taking hold of the base of the chicken wire beneath the cloak. At this moment I would sink swiftly to the ground while Scrooge still seemed to be wrestling with the fearsome creature. As he reached the climax of his speech he would let go; cloak and cage fell on top of my crouching form beneath the swirling mist, the lights blacked out, followed by applause. In the dark I would gather up cloak, cage and finger, and make for one of the exits.

One particular night everything seemed to be going right. As the *sprechstimme* turkey seller I had managed to speak my lines absolutely on the beat for the first time. And now, after a speedy costume change, here was the mute Christmas Future, spookier than ever, floating on the dry ice. Even the feet and ankles of the nearest audience members were lost in the seeping mist. Perfect. The wraith wafted silently towards centre-stage. Implacably it raised a cloaked arm and pointed its great digit. From the interior of the fetid outfit I heard Scrooge cry out, felt him grasp the wire. Expertly I dropped down— false finger and all. He relinquished his hold, the whole thing crumbled away, the audience gasped, the lights went out and from my position on the floor I heard the applause.

As usual, I scooped everything up and felt my way along the side of a raised block of seats towards the exit. But tonight was different. I couldn’t locate the wooden panelling that normally acted as my guide. With my bundle under one arm, I groped along — stretching out with my free hand for clues. At last - something. Thank God, the lights would be on again any second. Suddenly I heard shrieks and giggles. I felt legs, knees. ‘Get off!’ somebody cried. I realised what had happened. In the blackness I had taken a wrong turning and was now heading along one of the front rows. I daren’t turn back or I’d be caught like a rabbit in the oncoming headlights of the next scene. I floundered on, the screams and giggles becoming louder. Then, thankfully, something solid. I shoved — and, with a clang and a crash, half fell through some sort of gap and hit the ground. The bundle broke my fall. I could hear full-blown laughter now. As I began to pick myself up, I was stupefied to find that I had actually burst my way through the emergency exit doors at the side of the auditorium. I was on the pavement in the street outside the theatre and most of the audience could see me through the open door. I could see *them*. They were pointing me out and cackling hysterically. This was a comedy bonus they hadn’t expected: a crazed-looking youth standing under

a lamp-post in his underpants. As I sprang forward to close the double doors the audience burst into spontaneous applause for the second time.

I snatched everything up again, moved swiftly round the outside of the building and, ignoring the searching glances of several passers-by, walked up the alley to the stage door. It was locked. I rang the bell and stood shivering until, finally, it was opened by the courteous Terence Fitzgerald. There was a curious expression on his face as he stood back to allow this near-naked, goose-pimpled apparition — carrying a pile of old clothes, a load of chicken wire and a gigantic finger-on-a-stick — to re-enter the theatre. ‘My dear Martin,’ he exclaimed with ineffable good manners, ‘do come in!’ But I sort of knew that, despite his unfailing civility, he had to be thinking, ‘Here really is a prizewinning turkey.’