

STAGE FRIGHT

It wasn't until I was six years old that I took a life. It was perfect timing – they'd said I was in my prime.

Yet, Old Frank still didn't suspect a thing; he'd bid me goodnight after each performance, buttoning his cagoule and bracing himself for the relentless lashings of London rain. A warm potpie washed down with bitter ale was all that was on his mind after the madness of opening night.

Left to ruminate in my own thoughts, I decided to bide my time before the next attack: suspicions would arise if there was even one slight miscalculation.

Before I knew it, the summer months crept by and October had stolen the sun. With each weary shake of sodden umbrella or crunch of aureate leaf stuck to the sole of a boot, I could sense the audience were ready for something great. Something exhilarating. What kind of monster would I be if I denied them this pleasure?

It occurred to me during a mid-afternoon recital of The Grey Lady. I watched as Thomas - portraying a young Anthony DeMarkes – whispered empty promises into his mistress' ear. I watched as his fair lady melted into the confines of his strong arms. I watched, with a perverse sigh of pleasure, as his knife plunged through the core of her being, leaving her twitching like a rabbit in a snare. Suddenly, the actors reverted to reality, back to their mundane selves.

“Stunning! Absolutely stunning, Thomas darling,” gushed the ensemble, doe-eyed.

Thomas grinned at us, basking in the golden, but quite frankly unnecessary, applause.

It was then that I knew what to do.

Ideas echoed around the chambers of my mind, an endless cycle of cruel possibilities. One thing was certain: I'd need to get Old Frank out of the way – although his official duties consisted of issuing tickets and peeling gum from underneath seats, he'd taken a fancy to lurking backstage long after curtains down. I had no desire to involve him in the antics. He had always been kind to me.

Although it pained me greatly, I waited until the most miserable evening of the month; it tied in splendidly with All Hallows Eve too. The crowd were lusting for a bloodbath. Oh, if only they knew.

Rows upon rows of ticketholders formed a snake in the queue underneath the sombre columns of the Lyceum Theatre, huddled together for warmth. High-pitched chatter spilled out into the street, musings of whether The Grey Lady would ricochet from the stalls and elicit shrikes from unsuspecting spectators. An electrifying shudder ran through me. What a turnout!

I turned my attention to props. Even after a strained, but successful, conversation with the armourer, I had to make sure everything was in order. Never rely on others – an invaluable lesson I've learned all too often in this dog-eat-dog world. With great care, I scrutinised both blades: the foam blade sat next to the gleaming steel. Thomas would be too drunk on cheers of validation to notice the discrepancy. Still, it would be foolish to take the risk. I stowed the former into a worn coffer, reassured by the knowledge that nobody would care to rummage through the musty gauze sheets housed within.

As I stood on the empty stage like a greedy King surveying my realm, I noticed a slight protrusion under the thinning rug. A small padlock. It was a shame that they'd decommissioned the trapdoor, but he got what he deserved - a clichéd end for a clichéd actor. I couldn't help but lick my lips as I remembered the satisfying crunch of his corpse colliding with the cold basement floor. It was almost poetic.

Alas, that was old news! My new scheming was certain to rid this damned place of Thomas once and for all.

A surge of heat trembled through me – Frank must have increased the temperature to appease our drenched guests. I had to keep my cool. I would simply not tolerate any spanners in the works.

Floods of ticketholders, some dressed in costume, burst through the deathly silence. Every bizarre combination of human one could ever imagine stumbled to their seats: an elderly couple with (badly) painted faces resembling skeletons; two young gentlemen on a first date, both wearing nothing more than Grecian togas; an exasperated mother who should've known better, towing three little, pumpkin-clad children behind her crying pram. A curious father and middle-aged son in the dress circle admired the cold, stone relief of Jason throwing Medea aside. Yes, I was satisfied. The turnout was tremendous.

When empty, the blood-red seats threaded around the auditorium were uncannily similar to the network of veins and capillaries inside one's own body. Now, however, hundreds of eyes took their place.

I swept my gaze hesitantly across the room, watching for any suspicious activity amongst the cast. They seemed blissfully unaware. Thomas, especially, used this time to practise his low bow to an invisible audience. Little did he know that he wouldn't even make it that far into his performance. I chuckled to myself, fuelled by manic revenge. After his fall from grace, I would be the star of the show again. Things would change this very evening.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Lyceum's very own production of The Grey Lady. Please take your seats and enjoy the show!"

This was it. Finally. There was nothing more I could do. Even the notion of being powerless led to a flutter in my chest. I could barely contain myself.

Dressed in the finest attire of Victoria's reign, the egotistical Anthony DeMarkes played to the crowd: every round of applause sending him further and further into a false sense of security. I watched as he strode along the promenade, hand-in-hand with his darling

Lady. His slow regal bow to the duke, asking for his daughter's hand in marriage, was sickening. How could they favour him over me?

And then the moment arrived; the one I'd be yearning for. DeMarkes began to caress his mistress' soft skin. Just as they had rehearsed, she sank into his arms like a broken butterfly, too overwhelmed by his charm to do much more.

I sat rigid in anticipation.

Right on cue, and without blinking, the unknowing man gored his courtesan, piercing through her abdomen effortlessly. She sank to the stage floor. Instantly, any trace of colour had drained from Thomas' face; he held the knife in horror as frothy puddles of blood spewed from the actress' middle. There were no words to describe the sound which emerged from this man – if all the mothers in the world, who had simultaneously witnessed their children being slaughtered, began to bawl, Thomas had emulated this tenfold.

It was entrancing: the crowd rose to their feet in acclamation. Members of the audience were frozen in twisted delight. They were hypnotised. What a remarkable moment!

"Help! Someone... please, help!"

More rounds of applause followed.

It wasn't until the theatre lights flicked on and the stage crew rushed out from behind the curtains that everyone realised the harrowing truth. Old Frank must have sounded the fire alarm soon after. The deafening squeal juddered through my bones, interrupting my thoughts like an uninvited intruder.

Chaos ensued: ushers swept the public out as quickly as they could; men, women and young children alike were screaming, tears running down their faces; backstage, the crew succumbed to hysteria.

Thomas knelt by the body. He stiffened when the lighting technician placed a hand on his shoulder. "Thomas, love. We need you to stand up. The Old Bill are here."

Sure enough, I viewed the entire arrest from my vantage point. He was pulled away by four armed officers, his robes soaked in sticky claret. It roused a sensation in me that I haven't felt in many years: a mixture of solace and sorrow. A sense of peace. He was gone. It was just like the good old days.

That evening, however, ruined me.

Frank shuffled back in once the crowds were dispersed and the police had long gone. He sighed deeply. Despite protests from the previous incident, he'd fought tooth and nail to keep my doors open; unfortunately, this time, he hadn't won.

"Sorry, old friend" Frank's words wobbled as he turned the key for the very last time, "Goodnight."

