

ONE

London, one evening not so long ago.

Suffering a mild sweat of panic, Miss P leant against the narrow strip of London brickwork that separated a tourist shop from 'Dirty Dick's Deli', clutched her knees, and gulped air. A few deep breaths and a rummage through her extensive memory later, and she decided that she had not been left so disturbed by an event since witnessing the death of Leonardo.

Not *that* Leonardo. *That* Leonardo had died with a satisfying sense of achievement in the Château du Clos Lucé in Amboise back in fifteen-nineteen. Apart from that stroke-induced event, it had been one of her favourite years, unlike nineteen-ninety-three when the other Leonardo had died.

The Leonardo in question hadn't gone as quietly as *that* Leonardo. It struggled on for a month before it was humanely euthanised by ticket sales, and no-one had been happier than the cast and crew. For this Leonardo had been, in polite terms, a musical, and like the one she had just witnessed, was, in less polite terms, a pile of poo. To give the failed venture its full title would be to invoke, 'Leonardo: A Portrait of Love,' an appellation which suggested a heart-pounding story of genius and passion set in the High-Renaissance of the early sixteenth century. In reality, it was a four-hour disaster about how dear little Leo fell in love with the grouchy Mrs Giocondo (nee Gherardini), as he painted her as the Mona Lisa.

'Moaner? She wouldn't shut up!' Miss P gasped at the memory, and found the involuntary intake of car fumes somewhat restorative.

Just as Mrs Giocondo had twitched and fiddled, tutted and bum-scratched her way through a several-hour sitting, so the audience of 'Leonardo: A Portrait of Whatever' had sat through four hours of a non-musical musical directed by a man who couldn't stand the art form, with dear little Leo horribly portrayed by a man who couldn't sing a note. The only thing that made that particular top-price torture bearable was knowing that the entire production had been funded by the island of Nauru. Funds which, appropriately enough, came from the island's chief export; bird poo.

'Should have called it *Leoguano*,' she muttered to the memory. 'Execrable.'

Such a lovely word, and one which could just as easily have been applied to what she had just been put through inside the King's Theatre in the name of entertainment.

However, where 'Leonardo: A Doodle of Disaster' had been back then, 'Unforgivable!' was now, and it was to the present that she needed to address her strengths and attentions.

Even the theatre's marquee said so. "Unforgivable! Is Now!"

The exclamation marks screamed as loudly as the actors who had recently died on stage. "A Cut-Throat Masterpiece", another banner lied, and on the other side of the title (designed in the manner of a blood splatter), "Kill to get a ticket!"

Many of those who had suffered the spectacle from the gallery were still killing to get out, and falling onto the pavement in such a jumble it was easy to imagine the theatre itself was clearing its tubes before expelling the show itself.

Miss P shuddered as she reclaimed her senses from the play-out music still earworming its way through her skull like meningitis, and her head shaken, and her hat replaced to a jaunty angle, stood up straight to face what she had just seen.

A little like the on-stage victims of the performance, it was likely to scar her for life, and that was not a good look for someone who didn't age. Images from the past few hours flashed before her eyes like the lights of an express train through a railway station at night, and all she could think of to think was, 'Those poor people.'

The distorted faces. The bodies twisted into unimaginable positions. The tragedy and suffering. She would never be rid of the desperate voices. The wailing and the gasping, the thump of feet, the clunk of machinery, the moans and groans of agony. The cries of anguish as women, bent double under the burden of their lives, staggered from side to side, begging for mercy from men who spat at them and bellowed for silence.

And that had been in the auditorium. What had taken place on stage was far worse.

Recovering as slowly as the tempo of the alleged tap dance number, she fanned herself with her souvenir programme, the only decent thing to come out of the whole messy experience.

Who on earth chose to write a musical about the early life of Jack the Ripper? That was another great question for the universe, as was, why?

The plot, carelessly mislaid before the end of the overture, flashed back and forth between a boy's depraved childhood, his even more depraved ripping years, and his retirement career as a bed and breakfast proprietor in Worthing.

'Who on earth could conceive such a travesty?' she asked of her programme, but it was a rhetorical question, because she knew. The cover proved it. 'Paul Anderson. That's who.'

The country's (once) foremost composer of popular musical entertainment was solely responsible for the carnage; book, 'music', lyrics and nightmare included, and he'd done it for one reason only: he wanted to earn more money.

'Wanted,' Miss P noted. 'Not needed.' She considered what would be her ultimate critique of the show, and decided upon, 'Unforgivable.'

At least the title was honest.

Miss P would never forgive him, and nor would the other poor souls still clawing their way from the theatre like passengers fleeing the Titanic. Claspings their pearls as if to save what little dignity the evening had left them with, and hoping no friends saw them, they threw themselves at the mercy of black cabs as if they were lifeboats. Those who could not find or afford one, threw themselves at the number thirty-eight bus to Anywhere-but-Here, bouncing off the nearside back window because the number thirty-eight was no longer an open back Routemaster. The humiliation of being rejected by London Transport was nothing compared to what they had just suffered, and they slunk away into the night to seek medical attention in the White Horse, or for the better dressed and more discerning, Comptons of Soho.

'Ah well,' Miss P sighed, because the phrase had a knack of drawing a line. 'You find yourself in London for a purpose. But what is it?' For some reason, she was flicking through the souvenir programme. 'It cost me fifteen pounds, so I might as well look.'

The images did nothing to settle her stomach, but somewhere in the glossy, ink-smelling carnage was the cause of her appearance in row A of the dress circle, and she had to discover what she had been put there to sort out.

Something had drawn her to the King's Theatre that night, and it hadn't been the desire to leave it humming such memorable moments as, 'A Cut Above.' That number had been a rumba purely so the lyricist could drag up a rhyme, and it came during a scene that mixed the delightful Penny Dreadful story of dear little Sweeny Todd with the random slayings of an adolescent Jack, played, in the name of equality, by an African woman in her sixties. Act one had also offered a pastiche with the title of 'Killing me Softly with His Seven-Inch Kukri,' which had the coach party ladies from Eastbourne first sitting up in giggling anticipation, and, by the middle eight, vomiting into their box of Bertie Bassett's. There had been justified grumblings during the end of act one climax, 'Everyone Say Jack Off,' and all the way through the opening of act two, 'Cut Your Losses,' by which time the sensible had — some even left their interval twenty-pound gin and tonics in their bid to escape —, and as for the grand finale, 'On Mary Kelly's Doorstep (I left a Kidney)' there were no words.

‘The answer is not in this heavily sponsored programme,’ she said, and donated it to a surprised passer-by with the prediction, ‘One day it might be worth the paper on which it is printed, dear.’

The weather, predicted to be fair, had predictably turned to the opposite, and it had begun to rain. Her umbrella was in a sulk and refused to rise to the occasion, so she gave it one last chance, which it ignored, before forcing it into an overflowing Westminster Council litter bin, saying, ‘Straight to bed with no supper.’

As a last defence, she hoisted her shoulder bag, turned up the collar of her mackintosh and tightened the belt.

‘Come on, you can do it,’ she encouraged, sucking herself in at the waist, and when it succeeded in making her waspish, rewarded it with a, ‘Bravo.’

Straightening her wide-brimmed Marty Quant original so the hat sat *just so*, she left the tragic scene, and set off down the glittering avenue towards Piccadilly Circus. The only cure for witnessing such a tragedy was to witness another as soon as possible, because it never hurt to be reminded that no matter how badly off one may be, there is always someone worse than oneself. Indeed, there were several hundred, and they were fleeing the Temu Theatre (previously, the Disney), which was presenting a revival of a nineteen-seventies farce. The unfortunates had suffered much more than she had, and she passed by on the other side in the hope of finding the elusive reason for her West End presence.

Reaching the covered arches on one side of the circus, she was about to muster the courage to cross the road when her astute ears snuffled out one sound from those made by the hundreds of people nearby, and her nose told her she was nearing that evening’s *raison d’être*.

It was a gentle sound, and it weaved poignantly through the thronging throng that had no idea where it was collectively going except directly in her path. The airwaves were awash with racket; the splat of wet feet, the rustle of rainwear, much tutting, mobile phones pinging, cars chugging past, accelerating for one second and then swooshing to a stop, the rattle of loose change dropped into an open guitar case and...

‘Ah! That’s it.’

The sound of youthful fingers picking expertly at a perfectly tuned, metal-string, six-string guitar.

Sensing purpose, Miss P stood as solidly as a rock in a flooding stream while peripatetic pedestrians gushed around her, and in her stillness, appreciated the music. She knew where it was coming from, and she knew it was important to listen, because she felt the calling enter her.

On behalf of Miss P, it should be pointed out that she didn’t call her abilities a “Calling,” and there was no sense of the Divine about them, either. The only things she found divine were fine cigars and satisfying acts of revenge carried out on the overdogs of the world by the underdogs. The calling wasn’t so much a vocation, but more like a suggestion, and she knew when she was needed, because the back of her thumbs itched in a way that could not be scratched. It was as if negative and positive charges emanated from her body just there, and rejected each other in the space in between. She remembered the Bearing Sea with Russia on one side glowering the short distance to America on the other. On her last visit, the turbulence between them had felt roughly the same as the clashing magnetic points in her thumbs, but she couldn’t think on it for too long because if she did, her ankles would start doing the same thing. Instead, she drifted towards the music maker to see who was playing, and to wonder why she was drawn to her.

To *him*, she corrected herself when she came closer.

Long hair was so easily confusing, but beneath it hid an underfed, scrag of a youth, with sallow features, a grubby face, ripped jeans and a floppy dark fringe that hung from a woollen cap.

'Now, apart from some decent barbering, what are you in need of?' she mused, because he was clearly in need of more than that and a decent meal. A wash wouldn't have hurt. 'And what part must I play in your story?'

Claiming another convenient resting post, she lit a slim Panatela, and leant a shoulder against the wall to listen. There, with the brim of her hat lowered, she peered from beneath with large, soft-focus eyes, and ensured the collar of her raincoat covered most of her face.

A puff, and the cigar smoke rose and coiled around the brim of her hat, twisting as it searched for its target, before spiralling towards the guitarist.

A flashback. The night Humphrey Bogart had seen her standing like this in Los Angeles in nineteen-forty-one. He said, years later, that the hat and coat were simple to copy, and the cigar became a cigarette very easily too, but the soft-focus eyes had taken hours of camera and lighting work to achieve. They came naturally to Miss P.

The music continued to play as she continued to study the lad, and absorb what she could sense. Recently turned nineteen, he was not quite homeless, but was very close to it. He'd left a rural village to follow his passion in music, seeking late-night jobs in bars where he might have a chance to play while paying his way through music lessons and sharing one room with...

'Oh dear,' Miss P said, glancing at the cigar smoke which was returning from its sortie to deliver a second debrief. 'Really?' she quired on hearing the report. 'Then we must help.' She nodded sharply towards the guitarist, and told the drift of smoke to return for more information.

As she waited and puffed some more to give her messenger a helping billow, a rumbling began in her stomach. It had nothing to do with the tightens of her belt, nor even to do with the recently withstood on-stage bloodletting. It was a feeling she knew well and rather looked forward to, because it indicated that another piece of the puzzle was gradually approaching, albeit from a different direction. It would be found among the faces of the passers-by, but on watching them, none worsened her digestive condition. However, it would when the piece appeared, and she chewed a Rennie in readiness.

The music came to an end, and although no-one but Miss P clapped, a few dopped something into the boy's guitar case. Miss P slid a little closer to count his evening's takings, and was concerned to see a dearth rather than a glut.

'Worth far more than five pounds, two slot-machine tokens, and a Vietnamese đồng,' she muttered. 'We shall have to see what we can do.'

Surprised by her applause, the lad looked up, and Miss P nearly took a touch of the vapours. Despite never having seen the face before, she had seen the face before a thousand times. He was the romantic hero of many a Hollywood classic, an ex-Disney Club teen star from the nineties, or a young X-Man of the prequels. He was the smooth-skinned rascal who won the hearts of grandmothers watching Sunday night dramas on BBC Two, the cutest of the boy bands infesting Saturday night talent shows, and the teen idol on whom women in their forties denied having an embarrassingly obvious crush. Except he was none of those things. He was a gifted wanderer with so much to give but no opportunity, alone, down on his luck and more likely to be the subject of a Ralph McTell song than the winner of Saturday night's 'So You Think We're Remotely Interested?' or other nation-storming, audience-dumbing reality nonsense.

'Yes, we must help,' Miss P decided, and gave the guitarist an encouraging twinkle.

The boy smiled weakly in gratitude, and broke her heart a little more as he sat cross-legged to play again, just for her.

As soon as he began, Miss P's stomach lurched and rolled.

'Much like both acts of Mr Anderson's unforgivable "Unforgivable!,"' she grumbled, and louder, was compelled to cry, 'That music!'

She was referring to what she had recently been beaten about the head and face with in the theatre.

'It didn't rock, and it hardly rolled. It pitched a little, out of pitch, and like a drowning man who'd given up the will to struggle on, it sank. Sank and stank.' A passer-by looked at her in shock. 'Not you, dear,' she said. 'Sorry, was I preaching? Ever since that dinner with Mr Tyndale...'

The passer-by passed by gabbling about drunk old ladies.

'I think there were several in the chorus,' she called after the woman. 'At least if they weren't they deserved to be.'

That distraction over, she again turned her attention to the guitarist, and a strain of returning cigar smoke brought with it one of the most delightful passages she had heard come from anyone's imagination.

'Gorgeous,' was the only word to describe it, and closing her eyes, she pictured the lad's light blue ones, wide with hope, but shadowed by misfortune.

Before it evaporated, the smoke told her the boy was called Cole Aston, or Aston Cole, the smoke could not be sure because the young man's head was so filled with clutterage it was hard to tell.

'Clutterage?' Miss P queried.

Apparently so. He had so many issues that there was barely room for his harmony, let alone his voice which, she realised, was now in use. The melody was plaintive, and carried by a pure but insecure high baritone that was capable of much more. She didn't recognise the song, but it spoke of hopes and dreams and the usual, but with very little reference to love. At least that spared him having to think of other rhymes for that tricky word. There weren't many, and those that existed were over-used standards to do with doves above and gloves. Her favourite (but rarely used in a successful love song), was shove, and it was situationally appropriate.

The young musician's talent was trapped by circumstance, and all he needed to thrive was a little shove. In the right direction, of course.

'Young Mr Cole Aston, even if actually Mr Aston Cole, is but the overture.' She spoke to no-one in particular, because if they wouldn't listen to his beautiful music, they were not going to listen to her thought process. Unbothered, she continued. 'Who you are, and how we fix you, are matters to investigate.'

Since the arrival of mobile communications, so many addicted souls had taken to wandering the streets taking to themselves, and it was such a popular pastime, no-one was sectioned for it anymore.

A disappointing, but unnecessary thought, and with it dispelled, she became more aware of her itching thumbs and turning stomach. The guitarist was her mission; that was made abundantly clear by the deaf and definitely self-absorbed Piccadilly throng insistently ignoring the beauty of the boy's musical creation.

However, her internal workings refused to settle, and that could only mean that where the guitarist was the variable in one of fate's complicated equations, there remained missing a constant. A person who needed to change, but was unable; an opposition who should have connected with the variable, but had not.

The person who continued to disturb her internal workings was close by. A burp confirmed it, and she scanned the arches for the culprit.

It didn't take her long to locate a middle-aged man, reminiscent of a grey poplar in winter, slouched against a pillar, with his arms crossed. Shoulders down, he was listening to the busker as if attending his own funeral mass, and, according to her Panetela, his life was in freefall. His expression suggested a mood of suicidal contemplation, and he had about him

the look of a man who has lost everything. Not only his home, his job, his wife and other replaceable things, but his ambition. His *joie de vivre* and his... His...

'What is that word?' Miss P asked, and the smoke whispered the answer. 'That's it!' Someone who had lost his mojo.

Her gaze drifted between the young, talented and forlorn guitarist to the older, once talented and just as unhappy human poplar tree. They and Miss P were the lead players in whatever her mission turned out to be, and the chorus of those desperate to be somewhere other than where they were, rushed, grumbled and talked to themselves around them as if they didn't exist.

'Interesting,' she mused, noting that the rain had given up its cry for attention.

Now knowing she had been called to London's West End to help the young musician *and* the middle-aged composer with no mojo, she could officially begin the whatever was to come. Somehow, she needed to find, forge or fabricate a link between the two that would assist both while teaching a fundamental lesson of human life yet to be decided.

The lad was called a variation of Cole Aston, and the older man...?

'Ah ha!; She exclaimed and the feather in her hat twitched excitedly because it too understood why the man was crying. He was none other than the (once) foremost of British composers, Paul Anderson.

'Oh dear,' she sighed, preparing herself for their imminent future. 'And he hasn't even read tomorrow's reviews yet.'