

Theatre and Storytelling News
from Leon Coleman

Let me introduce myself.

In addition to acting and directing I specialise in offering theatre and storytelling activities for older people in Bedfordshire and the surrounding counties.

I visit day centres, care homes and community groups. These are relaxed activities often sitting round a table with a cup of tea and sharing a story or a text from a play.

When things settle down again in the near future I plan to resume these events providing all sorts of play readings, songs and discussions, plus plenty of laughter .

In the meantime I thought I'd use this opportunity to give you an insight to the range of stories and plays that I've been researching and adapting for these type of activities :

On the following pages you'll see a summary and script extract from one play, information about some true stories and details of my new Panto project.

We travel to the USA for the first play followed by another American story then up to Scotland, and finally back home to Bedfordshire:

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PLAZA SUITE – The Wedding Scene

Imagine. It's the day of your daughter's wedding. You are the father of the bride, the guests are ready, the flowers look fantastic and even more important , your wife is looking radiant.

Problem ! Your daughter has locked herself in the bathroom and just won't come out !

Written by Broadway screenwriter Neil Simon, Plaza Suite is a trilogy of short plays set in a posh bedroom suite at The Plaza Hotel New York.

'The Wedding' is the third of these plays and features proud parents Roy & Norma Hubley who are getting ready to welcome their special guests to share in the celebrations of their daughter's marriage.

As with all good drama there's a problem !

With all the guests waiting and the clock ticking Mimsey their daughter has locked herself in the bathroom and doesn't look like she's coming out.

What follows for the next thirty minutes is humorous, touching, tense and gently slapstic.

In the film version the father was played by Walter Matthau. His character was a salesman who spent his working days getting exactly what he wants from other people. In domestic life his wife and daughter aren't always so submissive !

Want to know how it ends ? Turn over to page three to see a summary of the plot. Then all will be revealed on pages four and five where you can read , enjoy and perhaps play out loud the script of the final scene.

Plaza Suite Summary

**The characters: Roy & Norma Hubley the parents
Mimsey their daughter
Borden - Mimsey's fiancé**

A typical gathering of guests are waiting in a smart hotel function room as they eagerly await the arrival of Borden Eisler and Mimsey Hubley where they will witness and celebrate their wedding .

Whilst the guests wait there is a crisis going on in the upstairs bedroom suite where Mimsey and her parents, Roy and Norma have been getting ready for the big day.

Mimsey has locked herself in the bathroom and she's not coming out !

At first her father Roy thinks this is a joke . When he realises it's serious he's almost more concerned about the cost of the drinks that he's bought for the occasion and the waste of time booking the musicians.

His wife Norma has banged on the bathroom door , shouted and tried to reason with her daughter. Suddenly she tears her stocking and has a new crisis on her hands ; "How am I supposed to go the wedding reception with torn stockings" !!

As the parents discuss the reasons for their daughter's cold feet they agree that she could be worried about the future. "What's to worry about" they say. She'll get married , have kids, grow up , be like us"

At this point they look at each other and maybe realise that Mimsey doesn't want to grow up and be like them. Incriminations are then the order of the day as the play highlights the tensions between Roy and Norma.

More desperate measures take place to try and get Mimsey out of the bathroom and Roy even manages to get out on the ledge and look into the bathroom window – a failed attempt as a thunderstorm starts !

Finally they can't stall the guests anymore and they call Borden the fiancé to come up to speak to Mimsey.

And to see how the play ends have a look at the script on pages 4-5.

Plaza Suite – The Wedding

This is the script for the final scene of the play.

Directions and scene information are given in italics

The final scene in the bedroom suite.

In their desperation Roy and Norma call Borden on the phone and ask him to come up to the bedroom suite for a chat.

A minute or so later there's a knock on the door....

Norma opens the door. Borden enters.

NORMA: Borden, how handsome you look today. Come in, come in.

BORDEN: Hi.

Speaking now to Borden very gravely...

NORMA: We have a serious problems on our hands.

BORDEN: How so ?

ROY: You're an intelligent young man and we're not going to beat around the bush. We think Mimsey is worried... perhaps worried about the future. Worried about marriage.

She's locked herself in the bathroom. She's not coming out. It's up to you know.

Borden thinks about this briefly.

He then goes up to the bathroom door and says firmly:

Mimsey.....This is Borden..... Cool it.

After which he turns round and slowly walks out of the bedroom watched by an open mouthed Roy and Norma.

As they gaze at the departing Borden they turn towards the bathroom as they hear the door open.

Mimsey appears , looking beautiful in her wedding dress

MIMSEY: I'm ready now.

ROY: *(with pent up anger)* Now you're ready, now you're ready

NORMA: Roy please.....

ROY: *(talking to Mimsey)* "COOL IT". That's the way young people communicate with each other: "COOL IT"

I almost die and you come out for COOL IT !

NORMA: You're beautiful darling, just beautiful. Now take your father's arm. I want to look at you together.

ROY: What kind of person is marrying my daughter ?

NORMA: I'm warning you Roy don't spoil this day, just walk with your daughter.

arm in arm Roy and Mimsey start to leave the bedroom.

as they leave you hear Roy shouting very very loudly:

ROY: A boy like that. Oy. She was better off in the bathroom.

.....Your hear me, she was better off in the bathroom !

- END -

THESE SHINING LIVES by Melanie Marnich

This play, set in the early 1920s, chronicles the true story of a group of women who were employed by the 'The Radium Dial Company' to paint the hour markings on clocks and watches with a compound that glowed in the dark.

Based in Illinois USA the company offered a very rare opportunity for women at the time to gain well paid work.

The paints they were using contained radium !

Even so the company claimed that this work was safe and sound. However the women did suffer, they were poisoned by the materials used for this work.

The play firstly portrays the camaraderie of a small group of working women and their growing friendship.

Later on we witness the brave efforts of the women to face up to the might of a giant corporation, to sue the company and gain the damages that were so rightly deserved.

- This story is very similar to the awful conditions encountered by mainly poor women who manufactured matches for Bryant & May in the 1880s. (not connected I hasten to add to the current company of the same name)

They had to use phosphorous which was highly dangerous and caused many illnesses.

A prolonged campaign to stop it's use began in 1888 and it took nearly twenty years for the process to be finally outlawed in 1906 -

A BUNCH OF SWEET PEAS by Henry Donald



In 1911, in the Scottish Border village of Sprouston, a young parish minister entered a competition run by 'The Daily Mail' newspaper.

WHO COULD GROW THE BEST BUNCH OF SWEET PEAS IN THE COUNTRY

The top prize was an enormous amount
ONE THOUSAND POUNDS !

The plants had to be sent down to London for judging. Entries were far higher than expected and growers overcame an unexpected drought that threatened the existence of the sweet peas that would be grown.

“This true story was told by Henry Donald in his book ‘A Bunch of Sweet Peas’. The account gives us a taste of life over one hundred years ago and follows the progress of the sweet peas grown by the young Scottish Parish Minister specifically for this competition”.

- *I discovered this story when researching radio programmes in a 1960 edition of The Radio Times. At first I thought the story was pure fiction but a bit of research revealed that it was completely true. I've also had the pleasure of visiting the border town of Sprouston where the residents to this day are enthusiastic growers of Sweet Peas -*

Stories from the Bedfordshire village of Cockayne Hatley.

Story no. 1.

Why was Peter Pan's Friend called Wendy ?

Cockayne Hatley is a small village just east of Potton in Bedfordshire. It's a peaceful landscape set up high and overlooking the neighbouring county of Cambridgeshire.

It's more of a hamlet than a village and I believe the population is just about a hundred people.

The churchyard contains a handsome monument over the grave of the poet W. E. Henley, who was a frequent visitor to the village around the end of the nineteenth century.

Henley was friends with the author J.M. Barrie and indeed used to address him as "friend".

Henley's only daughter, Margaret had a speech impediment and only had a short life just surviving five years. However she also addressed J.M. Barrie as friend but mispronounced this as "fwend" later playing with the name and changing it to 'fwendy-wendy'.

As a tribute and in memory of a short but special friendship J.M. Barrie created the name of "Wendy Darling" which later became the Wendy of none other than *Peter Pan* !

"It's nice to know that J.M. Barrie never forgot his times visiting our part of the world"

Stories from the Bedfordshire village of Cockayne Hatley.

No. 2

The remarkable story of the Apple Orchards in Cockayne Hatley from 1929-1946

This activity is based on the true story of John Whitehead a larger than life entrepreneur who in the 1930s created one of the largest Apple Orchards in Europe.

Once a quiet backwater the village of Cockayne Hatley became a bustling centre of activity and the landscape a sea of blossom in the spring.

He raised money by selling tree ownership to wealthy customers. In return special events were organised and the treeholders were invited to visit the orchards for special events.

The main event of the year however was Apple Blossom Day in mid-May. Hundreds of tree owners would be invited to see their trees in blossom – and this would be an ideal opportunity for Mr Whitehead to persuade them to increase their investments !.

The whole enterprise lasted from 1929-1946 and today the village has returned to become a peaceful backwater .

“I’ve developed a storytelling project based on these events and this includes a wonderful video interview with Mary Stribley formerly of Biggleswade. In 1936 Mary as an 18 year old worked at the orchards doing everything from typing to looking after motor cars. In 2012 when she was 95 years of age Mary gave her account of working at the orchards, her memories of Mr Whitehead and the unforgettable day that she was declared ‘Apple Blossom Queen’”

MY NEW PROJECT COMING SOON !

It's Panto Time

OH YES IT IS – OH NO IT ISN'T

Although it's not even summer yet it's normally the time of year when theatrical companies both professional and amateur will be coming together to plan their annual Christmas Pantomime.

Whether it's The London Palladium or the local Village Hall, Panto is a big money earner for theatres and a great fund raiser for local communities.

It's also a great starting point for children to have their first experience of theatre, either watching or dressing up and taking part.

My new themed project is now being written and will look at the way a Panto is written and the use of stock characters.

For instance there will nearly always be a Dame. She'll be played by a man and hopefully not a very nice character thus ensuring plenty of boos !!. Once the project is finished I'll include a short script , the usual range of corny jokes and a device enabling participants to start thinking of their own panto ideas. It'll be fun !

And just to let you know that during this lockdown period I am able to offer all these projects and more as virtual activities via Skype and Zoom. If you'd like more information and have any drama related questions do please contact me on 07841 562275 or look at my website www.leoncoleman.co.uk

I do hope you've enjoyed sharing some of my projects.

Stay safe

Leon Coleman