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SF PERUSALS

Straight and Narrow

A comedy

Jimmie Chinn

Samuel French - London



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for PETER

STRAIGHT AND NARROW

First presented by Theatre West Four in October 1987 with the following cast of characters:

Bob	Peter Rose
Jeff	Mick Cawson
Nona	Pat Nicholls
Lois	Debbie Ardrey
Vera	Betty Price
Bill	Tim Webster
Arthur	Brian Aldred

Directed by Joanne Burnett

The play was subsequently presented at the Duke's Head Theatre, Richmond, Surrey, in May 1989 with the following cast:

Bob	David Gillies
Jeff	George Phillips
Nona	Wendy MacAdam
Lois	Sally Campbell
Vera	Helen Barnaby
Bill	Peter Dawson
Arthur	Noël Hill

Directed by David Gillies

It was presented by Linnit Productions Ltd and Allan Davis Ltd at Wyndham's Theatre, London, on 18th March 1992 with the following cast:

Bob	Nicholas Lyndhurst
Jeff	Neil Daglish
Nona	Anna Keaveney
Lois	Melanie Kilburn
Vera	Carmel McSharry
Bill	Peter Jonfield
Arthur	John Hartley

Directed by Allan Davis
Designed by Carl Toms
Lighting by Kevin Sleep

CHARACTERS

Bob
Jeff
Nona
Lois
Vera
Bill
Arthur

The play takes place in the home of Bob and Jeff, just outside Manchester

Time—a Saturday afternoon in July, not so long ago

Other plays by Jimmie Chinn
published by Samuel French Ltd

But Yesterday
From Here to the Library
In Room Five Hundred and Four
Interior Designs
Pity About Kitty
A Respectable Funeral
Take Away the Lady
Too Long an Autumn

ACT I

The lounge/sitting-room of Bob's and Jeff's semi-detached somewhere on the outskirts of Manchester. A Saturday afternoon in July, not so long ago

The set should be skeletal, suggesting two rooms which have been knocked into one. At the back (once a narrow passageway/hall) we can see the stairs leading up to the bedrooms, etc. Unseen is the street door and also unseen is the door to the kitchen. On one wall of the room are patio doors leading to a small back garden; in the opposite wall maybe a bay window overlooking the street. The fireplace, we assume, is in the fourth wall, above which is "The Picture". Other paintings by Bob hang in the room. There must be a space, on either side, downstage of the set for an entrance and exit. There is a small table with a telephone and answering-machine. The room is tastefully furnished, modern but cosy and comfortable rather than elegant

The CURTAIN *rises in darkness and we hear Vera singing "Home, Sweet Home". A light comes up to reveal Bob,* DL, *on the telephone, his back to us*

Bob (*ending the call into the phone*) We'd love to—but we can't . . . sorry. (*He replaces the receiver and turns to the audience. Alone in his light*) The trouble is—nothing's simple in life, is it? I mean, nothing's simple. The most ordinary, everyday, humdrum little things can turn out to be so complicated—no? And everybody tells lies, have you noticed? I don't mean great huge whopping lies—the sort real liars tell—but the inoffensive little lies we all tell to get out of ordinary awkward situations. (*He crosses to* C) I mean, why can't we just say "no" when that extremely boring friend asks us round to dinner? "No, I'm sorry, I can't come—I don't want to come!" Why can't we just say it? But we don't, do we? We either say, "Oh, how lovely, I'd adore to come", and hope he drops dead before the appointed day then we can say, "Oh, would you believe—and there was I due to go to dinner on Friday!"

It's always a Friday, have you noticed? It's because they've something better to do on Saturday, and Sunday they have to work the next day.

Or we make an excuse, don't we? Another lie of course. "Oh, would you believe—we're due at Fred and Joan's that night—what a pity!" And what do they do? Change the bloody date to catch you out!

And the stuff they give you to eat—have you noticed? God help us. And you don't eat all day just to make sure you're simply bloody ravenous by the time you get there. And you know, don't you, as soon as you enter the door? You can smell it. Wafting across the hall from the kitchen.

You see, I like my food simple. Chops and things. Roast beef and Yorkshire, gravy and peas; lamb with mint sauce or pork with crackling;

steak, well done with chips . . . stuff you can actually eat! And everything separate on the plate. I hate a mess, don't you? A congealed mass—cooked three weeks ago, kept in a freezer and warmed in a microwave for two minutes. (*He pulls a face*) Yuukk!

And you sit round that table and chat—small talk while she keeps nipping to the kitchen smiling and saying, "It's only simple—nothing fancy—a recipe I got in Venezuela!" And your heart sinks, doesn't it? I long to cry out, "If it's filth I'm sodding off home!" But you don't, do you? We all tell lies again. "Smells delicious, love." Then it arrives, after the avocado with gunge, and there it sits—a huge earthenware dish containing God knows what—and she takes the lid off—and it's pink! Pink! With brown bits floating menacingly on top. And we all look at it. And what do we say? "How wonderful, Margo—what is it?" And I long to cry out: "Don't tell us—for God's sake don't tell us!"

But she does, doesn't she? She goes through every detail and says that it's best left sixteen weeks before it's eaten and that the mouldy bits are a real delicacy in Mozambique . . . and we all tell lies! (*He moves* DL)

I mean, at Sunday School they always said, "Tell the truth and shame the devil", but you can't, can you? It upsets too many people. So you sit there, forcing this stuff down your throat hoping the pudding's going to be chocolate sponge with chocolate sauce . . . but it never is.

More lights start to come up on the room

Jeff enters from the hall. He is dressed in running shorts and vest and is breathless and sweating from running. He goes into the kitchen. He comes back from the kitchen with a can of drink

Bob watches him for a while

(*To the audience*) He'll eat anything. He will. Anything. "As long as it's healthy." He's marvellous. My Auntie Trish used to say, about my Uncle Cedric that is, "He'd eat kippers and custard if I gave it to him!"

Jeff, exhausted, flops down on the sofa

(*Still to the audience*) Take no notice. He's been jogging or whatever they call it. And mark my words, he'll kill his soddin' self before he's much older. He likes to pretend he's fit. Fit, I ask you! Stubs his toe and he's in bed a fortnight!

He smiles at us warmly

I'm Bob. Robert Swift. Robert Henry Samuel Swift actually—but I don't tell everybody—and you can call me Bob.

Jeff (*unaware of the audience*) Jesus, I'm knackered!

Bob (*to the audience*) What did I tell you? That's Jeff. Jeffrey Shotter. He's only got the one name, and actually between you and me, he's lucky to have that—and you can call him anything you like!

"Shotter and Swift". Sounds like a double act, doesn't it? And, to tell the truth, we are a double-act . . . in more ways than one. For a start, we run a

business together. "KITCHENS". That's right—kitchens. We design them, fit them, everything in fact. We've been at it for years. He's a plumber by trade and I'm a joiner—carpenter—call it what you will. Plus, I have an artistic side to my nature. I went to tap and ballet till I was nine, see—hence why I'm good at the designing side of the work. (*He goes to Jeff*)

Jeff What's for tea? I'm starving.

Bob "Kippers and custard and see if you like it!"

Jeff (*not listening, rising to go*) What time? (*He takes an apple from a bowl on the table*)

Bob Half an hour.

Jeff exits, upstairs

More lights come up and the room grows warm with afternoon sunshine. Bob walks about the room showing it off

Jeff and I have been partners now for yonks, and this is our lounge—living-room—call it what you like. This is our couch, and our carpet; our tables and chairs, and these are my paintings—I mean I did them—good, aren't they? Actually, it's just like a real house, isn't it? Tell you the truth, we have a friend called Marion who was heard to whisper, "they've got a double bed—just like a real couple!" She did. Funny, isn't it? Women can be like that, can't they? You know, part of my trouble is: I've always been surrounded by women. My mum—Vera—what else? You'll meet her later on. My two sisters: Nona, she's the eldest, and Lois, she's married to Bill. He's lovely—I hope you'll like him . . . (*He leans against the* R *proscenium*)

Nona enters from the hall, carrying shopping

Nona (*calling off*) I'm through here in the lounge, Lois. (*To herself*) God, it's sweltering in here. (*She puts the shopping on the sideboard and opens the patio doors which lead out into the garden*)

Bob That's Nona, she's older than me, married to Arthur—but don't mention him whatever you do. (*Lowering his voice*) He's gone off with a younger woman—Brenda Brierley who works in Boots!

Nona (*obviously unaware of Bob's presence*) It's like an oven in here, Lois.

Lois appears

Lois Hey, Nona, this key's stuck in the lock—I can't shift it.

Nona (*calling*) You have to twist twice—give it a shove—then pull. It's supposed to be burglar-proof. (*She goes around the room watering plants*)

Lois exits

Bob I should mention by the way—Nona's very highly strung, which has got worse since he went off with "you-know-who".

Nona (*to herself, slightly dizzy*) I'm all light-headed here. I think I'm going through the change.

Bob That's not true—Nona went through the change when she was sixteen and she's never been the same since.

Lois enters carrying more shopping. She is slightly younger than Nona and is rather heavily pregnant

Lois (*entering*) What a funny front door, Nona. I'm sure I've wrenched my shoulder.

Nona (*on her hands and knees waving a box of Go-Cat*) Puss-puss—here, kitty-kitty . . .

Lois What are you doing, Nona?

Nona What d'you mean, what am I doing? What does it look like I'm doing? I'm looking for the cat. He's usually sitting right here. (*She looks for the cat*)

Bob (*to the audience*) Oh, yes, we have a cat. Butch. But he isn't—we've had the poor bugger done!

Lois (*putting down her shopping on the sofa table*) Oh, leave it. I don't like cats—I never did.

Nona (*worried*) It's all right for you to say leave it—while they're away, that cat's my responsibility, Lois.

Lois (*looking about the room*) Hey, they've had it beautified, haven't they? Done up.

Nona It's been redecorated for weeks.

Lois Well I haven't been for weeks, have I? The last time I came it was brown, wasn't it?

Nona Course it wasn't brown, Lois. It's never been brown.

Lois Well, it wasn't this colour.

Bob (*to the audience*) Actually, it was *café au lait*.

Lois Well, I don't dislike it I suppose. I expect they've nothing better to do than keep decorating. (*Sitting on the sofa*) God, I must sit down—I'm exhausted.

Nona You should get your weight down, kid. I looked at you in Marks. Like the side of a bloody house.

Lois (*pretending to be offended*) Thank you! I am several months pregnant, Nona.

Nona All the more reason why you should watch what you're eating. It can bring on your heart can that.

Bob (*to the audience*) Nona's inherited my mum's optimism—she always looks on the bright side.

Nona (*still concerned about the cat*) Pussy-pussy . . . Come to Auntie Nona. (*She looks for the cat near the windows*)

Lois Oh, for God's sake leave it. It's probably dead down by the rhubarb.

Nona (*lacking Lois's humour*) They haven't got any rhubarb.

Lois (*inspecting her feet*) Here, look, are my ankles swelling?

Nona You're swelling all over—are you sure it's right? (*She stands near Lois*)

Lois I'm having a baby, Nona. A baby, dear. People have been known to swell a bit when they're having babies.

Nona You've had three and you've never been that big all over. Are you sure it's not twins?

Lois (*dreading the thought*) Don't . . . I can only handle one at a time. (*A packet of cigarettes in her hand*) Here, have a fag and shut up.
Nona Not for me. I've been cutting down since . . . (*She fills up*) Since . . . (*She gets a tissue from the bag*)
Bob (*to the audience*) Here she goes.
Lois (*without sympathy*) Now don't start—we've had a quiet day so far. (*She lights a cigarette*)
Nona (*holding back the tears*) It's all right for you, Lois. Just wait till Bill leaves you helpless. (*She sits on the stool*)
Lois Let him go. I'll never be helpless. (*She stands to inspect the "painting" on the fourth wall*) Here, that's a funny painting, isn't it? What's it supposed to be?
Nona (*busy tidying the room*) I think it's a couple. Doing it.
Lois (*looking at the "picture" from all angles*) Doing it? Doing what?
Nona Oh, Lois—you know!
Lois (*fascinated*) Hey, they're not! Are they? Oh, yeah.
Nona It's one of Bob's—you know what he's like.
Bob (*to the audience*) Oh yes, I told you I paint. Well, occasionally—on and off. The artistic side again, see.
Lois (*with sudden realization*) Hey, Nona—it's two fellas! See. They've both got little do-dahs!
Nona (*joining Lois*) I got a lemon cream sponge and I bet Jeff won't touch it. It's all yogurt with him.
Lois (*only to get Nona going*) Well, I'm very shocked by that painting and I'm going to say something. Mother won't like it.
Nona She's seen it—now come on, let's get this lot in the kitchen. (*She collects the shopping bags*) Did you get a lettuce?
Lois I got two while I was at it—and a loaf.
Nona (*going to the kitchen*) Another! Why didn't you say, Lois! I got two.
Lois (*taking her shopping bags and following Nona*) Oh well, we'll be able to feed the five thousand. Where's Mum?
Nona Chatting up the taxi driver. Come on, Mum!

Nona and Lois exit to the kitchen

Bob (*to the audience*) See what I mean? About women? I've been smothered by them ever since I was born. The only son, see. And no dad. He died—quite unexpectedly—on a Wednesday just after *This is Your Life*. They got him to hospital but——

Vera storms on. Her clothes, whilst smart, are an odd assortment of the wrong colours. She wears a hat at all times. She puts her bags on the sofa table

Vera (*shouting off to the kitchen*) If your dad was alive this'd kill him!
Bob (*to the audience*) They all say that, don't they?

Lois comes back and sits in the armchair

Vera I don't know what I've done to deserve a family like this—I don't. You've never gone short: you went to St Hilda's—special uniforms an' everything—and what for? Look at you: my Robert, well into his prime and still not married; Nona, her marriage in tatters—and you!

Lois Now don't start on me, Mother. Bill and me are perfectly happy, thank you.

Vera I should hope so—judging by your condition. How many's this?

Lois You know very well how many, Mother. It's only the fourth.

Vera You're too old to be having babies, Lois. I can't think what Bill's doing. It's all right for him: football this and football that—cricket this and cricket the other. If he was my husband I'd insist he stayed at home more often. Your father, bless him, he used to wash up for me, Hoover round, do the nappies, hang them on the line.

Bob (*imitating her*) "Still, he was a man in a million."

Vera (*unaware of Bob*) Still, he was a man in a million. (*She sniffs*) I can smell that cat. I've said it before, they should never keep a cat—not in a beautiful house like this. (*She produces a can of air-spray and proceeds to spray the room*)

Lois (*ducking to avoid the spray*) Be careful, Mother—it can kill you, can that stuff.

Vera D'you know what he charged me for this? Ninety-five. Ninety-five! Daylight robbery. Still, they're darkies—open all hours. (*She gets a shooting pain in her back*) Oh, I've got that pain again—in my back, Lois. It creases me.

Bob (*to the audience*) Ever since I can remember, Mum's had a pain in her back—but will she see a doctor?

Lois (*helping Vera to the sofa*) Have you been to the doctor?

Vera Doctor. I daren't. I dread to think what's wrong with me, Lois. They'd whip me in that hospital like ninepence. Look at your dad, bless him: "Vera," he said, "I won't be leaving this place alive." (*Without a pause*) Is this cardigan all crumpled at the back? (*She goes to the mirror*)

Lois (*smoking*) Looks all right to me.

Vera Well, you'd have to say that—you'd have me walking round like a bundle of rags.

Lois (*to herself*) You can't win.

Bob (*to the audience*) You can't win with my mum.

Vera What time's Bill picking them up from the airport?

Lois About three, I think—but they're bound to be late, you know what planes are like. (*She sits in the armchair*)

Vera I wouldn't go up in one. I like my feet firmly on the ground. (*Sitting on the sofa*) Did I tell you I was nearly run over outside Tesco's a week last Tuesday?

Lois (*with no interest*) You weren't.

Vera Without a word of a lie, Lois—I came down Albatross Street, crossed over by the library, up Chipping Alley and this fool came round the corner—must have been doing ninety—and if some woman hadn't grabbed my arm I'd have been a gonner now. I know I wouldn't have

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