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The Sociable Plover

A play

Tim Whitnall

Samuel French — London
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THE SOCIABLE PLOVER

First presented by Feather Productions Ltd at The Old Red
Lion Theatre, Islington, London in June 2005 with the
following cast of characters:

Roy	Alex Macqueen
Dave	Tim Whitnall
Voices	Howard Ward and David Carling

Directed by Howard Ward
Designed by Chrystine Bennett
Lighting by Alex Gill
Produced by Anna Murphy

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CHARACTERS

Roy, early 40s. A bird-spotter, mildly obsessive-compulsive. Old before his time.

Dave, late 20s/ early 30s. A traveller, good-looking, northern, searching, edgy.

BBC Radio Announcer, M/F. Warm, reassuring tone. Voice only.

Trawlerman, lusty, Russian. A singer. Voice only.

DCI Weston, late 40s. Police officer, gruff. Voice only.

Armed Response Officer, 30s, commanding, professional. Voice only.

The action of the play takes place inside a wooden bird hide on the Suffolk coast.

Time—the present



For Lorcan Devine



THE SOCIABLE PLOVER

Pre-show music

A timbered bird-spotter's hide, coastal Suffolk, eastern England, early winter. Morning. The stage is in darkness

A winter thunderstorm, British east coast; a vicious easterly wind and unrelenting rain blow in from the North Sea. Great reed beds buckle and sway in the strong gusts as sea birds cry, battling the full force of Mother Nature and her epic powers

A BBC Radio Announcer brings news of continued rough weather

BBC Radio Announcer *(voice only)* Attention all shipping — there are warnings of gales in all areas except Bailey, Hebrides and Malin. Humber Thames: south or south-east, veering west seven to severe gale nine. Rough or very rough. Rain or squally showers. Moderate or poor. Dover: west or south-west gale eight to storm ten ...

The sound fades

The Lights come up gradually to reveal the hide. The atmosphere is dark, dank and foreboding; the hide rotten and weather-beaten, dark moss scaling its walls and wind screaming through gaps in the planking. Raindrops on its corrugated-iron roof crack and ricochet like automatic fire. There are two doors UL and UR. A waist-high wooden shelf runs DL to DR behind which sit two wooden benches, effectively forming the “front” of the hide and turning the audience into the watched as well as the watchers. Trash litters the floorboards; beer cans, chip packets, cigarette cartons and porn mags testify that this remote, unholy place regularly serves passions other than watching wild birds. A chalk board — titled “Recent Sightings” — hangs on one wall defaced with obscene graffiti. Three small hooks adorn the walls

Suddenly, shards of light crackle through the cracks in the door. Someone approaches

Roy Tunt — clad in a one-piece, green plastic weatherproof — enters through the door UR, torch in one hand and an overloaded shopper bag in the other

He derobes, revealing a prematurely middle-aged, bespectacled, bald man dressed in greens and greys — a hunter's waistcoat over plaid shirt and tie and unappealing catalogue trousers. He shakes off the raindrops from his weatherproof and hangs it on a hook. Methodically, Tunt then removes his muddied rubber boots, stands them by the door UR and, producing a pair of moccasins from his bag, places them on his feet. From his bag, he next takes out a pair of surgical rubber gloves, pulls them on and unfolds a (meticulously folded) carrier bag from a waistcoat pocket. He tidies, muttering as he fills the bag with trash. He halts behind the bench DL, grimaces and picks up a used condom — dropping it into the rubbish and hanging the bag on another hook beneath the chalk board. He next takes out a small dustpan and brush and fastidiously brushes the shelf DS. Job done, he hangs the pan and brush on the third hook

Tunt then picks up his shopper bag, places it on the bench DR and removes the following, purposefully placing each on the shelf before him: a tube of moistened hand-wipes, binoculars, a camera with zoom lens, and his personal journal, festooned with bird pictures and field notes. He then removes a framed picture of a woman which he holds aloft and kisses tenderly. He gently places it on the shelf, pride-of-place amongst his other possessions. Tunt mimes opening two shutters DL and DR. Pearly daylight floods the gloom as he “opens” each, creating the observation slat which allows him his secret “window on the world”. He squints out, wincing at the inclement conditions. He next removes a soft cushion and sits on it very gently. He then takes out a portable radio transmitter/receiver and activates it

Tunt Sexgod, this is Leviathan. Sexgod, this is Leviathan. Over.

Static crackles

Oh, come on, Dennis. You're only half a mile away, for Pete's sake.

More crackles. The radio silence serves only to emphasize his solitude. Thwarted, he decides to communicate instead with the framed picture on the shelf. His tone seems affectionate

It's those old radar masts on the headland, Pumpkin. Built to bamboozle the Luftwaffe, and still bamboozling me and Dennis. And to think

Churchill was a birdwatcher! (*He tries his radio again*) Have assumed position at Tanglewood One. Are you in place at Humperdinck Two? Over. It's now seven-o-six and ... thirteen, fourteen, fifteen seconds. Wind gusting in brisk and cold from the East as forecast. No sighting of a Sociable — “you-know-what” just yet. Will try you again after I've had my Nutrigrain. (*He puts down the radio and picks up his binoculars*) Righty-ho, Manilow. Gentlemen, start your engines! (*He scans the horizon*) Mmm. *Numenius arquata*, adult male ... *Haematopus ostralegus*, four pairs ... all good, solid, agricultural fare.

A rarely-seen Ring Ouzel flies past, piping away

(*Pleasantly surprised*) — Ooh, *Turdus torquatus*! One for the board, I shouldn't wonder. Haven't logged one of those for a while.

He stands, removes some obscene graffiti from the chalk board and writes “Ring Ouzel” with a stub of chalk

(*To the picture*) I won't put the Latin, Pumpkin. You get some proper lemons in these hides. You could tell 'em “flycatcher” but they wouldn't know a pied from a spotted. (*He writes on the board*) “Cock. Twelfth December. Tunt”. That'll show 'em. (*Beat*) Phew! It's all go! (*He sits again and talks to the picture*) I got turned down for *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*? again Pumpkin. All that training. Dennis firing the questions from the fridge so that I could get the full sweep of the studio from my seat at the breakfast bar ... (*He plays out the game in his mind. As the host*) “Starting with the most recent and working backwards, which countries were the last four winners of the Eurovision Song Contest? A — Germany, B — Russia, C — Norway, D — Serbia?” (*As himself*) Oh, I know it wouldn't have come close to the real thing but at least I'd have been primed had I had the call. The egg-timer acquired a new menace, I can tell you. Preparation is everything, Pumpkin, isn't that so? Apparently, some contestants hear the phrase “fastest finger” and melt like April snow. But not me. I've remained abreast, up-to-speed ... Well, you have to ... (*Back in the game*) Safety off, line up both barrels ... PULL! A ... C ... B ... and D. The correct order, I think you'll find, and all delivered inside five seconds. Cue the music, light the lights and show me those twinstools.

He is interrupted by the crackle of the radio-set. He picks it up, growing optimistic

A-ha! Radio Free Dennis, I presume? Dennis? Come on, let nation speak unto nation ...

Bizarrely, a snatch of Soviet baritone (a passing Trawlerman) hijacks the airwaves

Trawlerman *(voice only, singing)* Evening bell, evening bell!
 How many a thought it inspires
 Of youth days in my native land
 Where I loved, where my father's house is—

Tunt Blimey, the Russians are coming! *(Into the radio)* Stick to your own herring, Vladimir! And your own frequency! *(He waggles the handset, trying for a better reception)* Dennis?

The radio remains silent

Dennis? *(He sighs)* I'll give it another five ... four ... three ... two —

Without warning, Dave John crashes through the door UL. He is a good-looking, charismatic man in his late 20s/early 30s, exuding presence and physical menace. He is unshaven and soaked through in a mud-splattered black suit and open-necked white shirt. A cheap gold chain glints around his throat

Dave catches his breath. Tunt shines his torch into his face

Dave Jesus! You nearly gave me a heart attack!

Tunt *(hissing)* It's called a "hide", so one can do precisely that!

His torch beam catches a tattooed flying swallow on Dave's neck and a small bloodstain on one of his shirt cuffs

I might have known it.

Dave Known what?

Tunt *Vanellus gregarius?*

Dave Eh?

Tunt An "accidental tourist".

Dave looks nonplussed

One is anticipating the ... Sociable Plover?

Dave "One" hasn't got a "Scooby-Doo" what you're banging on about.

Tunt turns away, unsettled, divesting his attention through the lenses of his binoculars. Dave nods at the second bench curtly

Is this pew taken, Vicar? (*He sits anyway*)

Tunt (*mouths*) Go. Away.

Dave Good for ducks, eh?

Tunt Ducks?

Dave Nice weather for ducks.

Tunt What ducks? Wigeon? Pochard? Teal?

Dave grows bemused

Dave Ducks. You know: “quack”, waddle, an orange up its ar —

Tunt Let’s cut the cow-pasture, shall we? You know why you’re here.

Dave I’m just passin’ through, mate.

Tunt — assuming Dave to be one of the “new breed” of aggressive, trendy bird-watchers — grows disdainful

Tunt The Italian suit? Your “branding mark”? I don’t need binoculars to spot the enemy.

Dave “Enemy”?

Tunt It’s as plain as the *Hirundo rustica* emblazoned on your neck. I might have known you lot would catch on.

Dave What “lot”?

Tunt Cyber twitchers! With your four-by-fours and “Me-Phones”, tweets and immediate messaging ...

Dave shrugs

Dave Came on foot, mate. Travellin’ light.

Tunt Shortwave, then? Leviathan and Sexgod? Tanglewood One?

Dave fails to grasp Tunt’s accusations

I know when I’ve been “Tangoed”, Cocker. I dare say the rest of you will descend at any second.

Dave (*ominously*) There is no “rest of us”. (*He reminds himself to tread more cautiously*) I was just ... stayin’ with a friend up there in the village and he said if I got up early, a bracin’ walk out on the marshes might blow away the hangover so I thought —

Tunt — will you be staying long?

Dave Friendly lot, you birdwatchers.

Tunt There’s more for you to see up at the warren. It wouldn’t take you long to walk, even in this weather. Another mile or so up the coastal path. They’ve just installed a crèche at the Visitor Centre.

Dave Ooh, is there a bouncy castle an’ all?

His sarcasm is wasted

Thanks all the same, but I'm stoppin' here 'til this rain goes off.

Sensing that his territory is under siege, Tunt starts to bristle

Tunt Oh, you are, are you?

Dave As long as it's all right with MI6. I thought this was a free country.

Tunt For the time being. Or so I keep reading.

Dave Come on mate, look at me. I'll just sit tight out of your way and let you carry on with your whatsit — twatting.

Tunt If you mean "twitching"...

Dave Twitchin', yeah. (*He sniggers*)

Tunt feels undermined. He puffs out his chest

Tunt (*grandly*) I am an ornithologist. (*He turns away theatrically*)

A crack of thunder. A squall whips across the roof

Dave It's getting worse. *Siling* down now. (*He pulls out a pack of Marlboros from his pocket and proffers them towards Tunt — a possible "olive-branch"*) Oily?

Tunt I'm sorry?

Dave Oily rag?

Tunt I don't follow.

Dave Cockney rhymin' slang.

Tunt I tend to stick to the Queen's English, widely accessible courtesy of Messrs Chambers, Roget and the entire Oxford University Press. (*A beat, then*) You don't sound as if you were born within earshot of Bow's legendary bells.

Dave You're not wrong there, pal. (*A beat, then*) Are you havin' one, or what?

Tunt "One" what?

Dave Oily rag. Fag. (*Spelling it out*) Would one care for a cigarette?

Tunt spins, furious

Tunt No one most certainly would not! Illegal. Banned by law in any place of public entertainment.

Dave That's all right then, 'cos this place isn't entertainin' in the fuckin' slightest.

Tunt It's a timbered structure. Poof!

Dave I don't think anythin's goin' "poof" on a day like this, do you?

Tunt I'd have to report you.

Dave gets menacingly close up to Tunt's face

Dave To who?

Tunt Whom.

Dave "Whom"?

Tunt I know people.

Dave You don't even know my name.

Tunt But I know your type.

Dave And what type's that then?

Tunt (*constipated*) A yo — (*He's not brave enough to complete his answer, his mind whirring for a safe alternative*) Ba — (*He seeks another*) A ju — (*And another*) Cha ... ff ... (*His nerve falters, causing his eloquence to desert him*) Th—the ...

Dave Are you callin' me a "The"?

A little victory for Dave. He backs away, trying in vain to light his damp cigarette. The tension breaks. He palpably softens, considering any "attack" on Tunt pointless

Listen, for what it's worth, I wouldn't know a heron from horseshit, let alone your ... "Sociable Pullover". It's not really called that is it?

Tunt (*still suspicious*) The Sociable Plover is native to the Asian Steppe.

It often winters in Pakistan and the Middle East.

Dave Why would it come here?

Tunt softens — slightly — and points out across the water

Tunt See that flock of lapwing out on the high marsh?

Dave Them black and white birds?

Tunt's shoulders drop, territory reclaimed

Tunt It seems I owe you an apology. You are clearly not an ornithologist. Up close, the lapwing is a palette of delicate colour; bottle green, purple, snow white, a creamy orange. The bird I'm anticipating is entirely different. At this time of year he appears grey and fairly unremarkable. Betrayed by nature and blown wildly off-course on winds such as these, he arrives alone, and finding himself in isolation pals up with his closest relation.

Dave The lapwing?

Tunt Precisely. Searching through all those *Vanellus vanellus* you may hit the jackpot with a stray *Vanellus gregarius*.

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