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Habeas Corpus

A Play

Alan Bennett

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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HABEAS CORPUS

Presented by Michael Codron in association with Stoll Productions at the Lyric Theatre, London, on May 10th, 1973, with the following cast of characters:

Arthur Wicksteed	Alec Guinness
Muriel Wicksteed	Margaret Courtenay
Dennis Wicksteed	Christopher Good
Constance Wicksteed	Phyllida Law
Mrs Swabb	Patricia Hayes
Canon Throbbing	Roddy Maude-Roxby
Lady Rumpers	Joan Sanderson
Felicity Rumpers	Madeline Smith
Mr Shanks	Andrew Sachs
Sir Percy Shorter	John Bird
Mr Purdue	Mike Carnell

The play directed by Ronald Eyre
Setting by Derek Cousins

The action takes place in and around the Wicksteeds' house in Hove

The play is divided into two Acts, the action being continuous

Time—the present

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The text printed here is as first performed at the Lyric Theatre, London, in May, 1973. In the rehearsal version of the play I included no stage directions in an effort to achieve as fluid a presentation as possible. In the printed version I have marked a minimum of entrances and exits to make the action more readily comprehensible to the reader.

The play was presented on an open stage furnished with three chairs. All props, telephone, parcel, etc., were handed in from the wings. Much of the dialogue was delivered straight to the audience to an extent that makes it tedious to indicate all remarks taken as asides.

I would like to thank Ronald Eyre for his invaluable assistance with the text.

ACT I

*A bare stage, the only furnishings are three chairs
As the CURTAIN rises, Dr Arthur Wicksteed enters*

Wicksteed Look at him. Just look at that look on his face. Do you know what that means? He wants me to tell him he's not going to die. You're not going to die. He is going to die. Not now, of course, but some time . . . ten, fifteen years, who knows? I don't. We don't want to lose you, do we? And off he goes. Sentence suspended. Another ten years. Another ten years showing the slides. "That's Malcolm, Pauline and Baby Jason." Another ten years going for little runs in the car. "That's us at the Safari Park." "So what did the doctor say, dear?" "Nothing, oh, nothing. It was all imagination." But it's not all imagination. Sometimes I'm afraid, it actually happens.

Mrs Wicksteed (*off*) Arthur! Arthur!

Wicksteed exits as Mrs Swabb enters from the opposite side with a vacuum cleaner

Mrs Swabb It's all in the mind. Me, I've never had a day's illness in my life. No. I tell a lie. I once had my tonsils out. I went in on the Monday; I had it done on the Tuesday; I was putting wallpaper up on the Wednesday. My name is Mrs Swabb (hoover, hoover, hoover) someone who comes in; and in all that passes, I represent ye working classes. Hoover, hoover, hoover. Hoover, hoover, hoover. Now then, let's have a little more light on the proceedings and meet our contestants, the wonderful, wonderful Wicksteed family.

Wicksteed enters, followed by Mrs Wicksteed (Muriel), Dennis and Constance

Eyes down first for tonight's hero, Dr Arthur Wicksteed, a general practitioner in Brighton's plush, silk stocking district of Hove. Is that right, Doctor?

Wicksteed Hove, that's right, yes.

Mrs Swabb And you are fifty-three years of age.

Wicksteed Dear God, am I?

Mrs Swabb I'm afraid that's what I've got down here.

Wicksteed Fifty-three!

Mrs Swabb Any hobbies?

Wicksteed No. No. Our friends, the ladies, of course, but nothing much else.

Mrs Swabb Do you mind telling us what your ambition is?

Wicksteed Ambition? No, never had any. Partly the trouble, you see.

When you've gone through life stopping at every lamp-post, no time.

Mrs Swabb Next we have . . .

Mrs Wicksteed I can manage, thank you. Elocution was always my strong point. Speak clearly, speak firmly, speak now. Name: Wicksteed, Muriel Jane. Age? Well, if you said fifty you'd be in the target area. Wife to the said Arthur Wicksteed and golly, don't I know it. Still potty about him though, the dirty dog. Oh, shut up, Muriel.

Mrs Swabb And now—this is Dennis, only son of Arthur and Muriel Wicksteed. And what do you do, Dennis?

Dennis Nothing very much. I think I've got lockjaw.

Mrs Swabb Really? Whereabouts?

Dennis All over.

Mrs Swabb Are you interested in girls at all?

Dennis If they're clean.

Mrs Swabb That goes without saying. You don't want a dirty girl, do you?

Dennis In a way, I do, yes.

Mrs Wicksteed Dennis!

Mrs Swabb And now we have the doctor's sister, Miss Constance Wicksteed. Connie is a thirty-three-year-old spinster . . .

Connie I am not a spinster. I am unmarried.

Mrs Swabb And to go with her mud-coloured cardigan Connie has chosen a fetching number in form-fitting cretonne. Have you any boy friends, dear?

Connie No.

Mrs Swabb Connie, you big story! What about Canon Throbbing, our thrusting young vicar? Why! That sounds like his Biretta now.

Throbbing crosses the stage on his power-assisted bicycle and exits

Now, Connie, would you like to tell the Audience what your ambition is? Go on, just whisper.

Connie I'd like a big bust.

Mrs Swabb And what would you do with it when you'd got it?

Connie Flaunt it.

Mrs Wicksteed Connie!

Mrs Swabb Three strangers too are in the town. A lady and her daughter . . .

Sir Percy Shorter enters and pushes his way forward

Sir Percy Out of my way, we're wasting time: I am Sir Percy Shorter. Shorter, Percy, K.C.B., President, British Medical Association. Venuing this week at Brighton.

Mrs Wicksteed Percy!

Wicksteed My wife's sometime sweetheart.

Mrs Wicksteed The man I spurned.

Sir Percy Well? Aren't you going to ask me what my ambition is?

Mrs Swabb President of the British Medical Association! What more can a man want?

Sir Percy Revenge.

Mrs Swabb I don't like it. Two strangers now are in the town, a lady and her daughter . . .

Lady Rumpers appears

Lady Rumpers England, my poor England. What have they done to you? Don't touch me. That's one thing I've noticed returning to these shores. There's a great deal more touching going on. If I want to be touched I have people who love me who can touch me. Touching is what loved ones are for, because loving takes the sting out of it. Delia, Lady Rumpers, widow of General Sir Frederick Rumpers. Tiger to his friends and to his enemies too, by God. Does the name Rumpers ring a bell?

Wicksteed Very, very faintly.

Lady Rumpers Time was when it would have rung all the bells in England. Rumpers of Rhodesia, Rumpers of Rangoon—when the history of the decline of the British Empire comes to be written, the name Rumpers will be in the index. For many years we were stationed in Addis Ababa. Tiger was right-hand man to the Lion of Judah.

Mrs Swabb Haile Selassie.

Lady Rumpers There followed a short spell in K.L.

Mrs Swabb King's Langley.

Lady Rumpers Kuala Lumpur. Then we fetched up in Rhodesia. In a green meadow on the outskirts of Salisbury, roses bloom and the trees are alive with the songs of multi-coloured birds. There we laid him.

Dennis sniffs

I am upsetting you?

Connie He has hay fever.

Lady Rumpers From end to end I've searched the land looking for a place where England is still England.

Wicksteed And now she's hit on Hove.

Lady Rumpers My daughter Felicity . . .

Everyone looks but no-one enters

At present changing her Hammond Innes. We had a terrible experience coming down. We had to move our compartment three times to avoid a clergyman who was looking up her legs under cover of the *Daily Telegraph*

Mrs Wicksteed And such a respectable newspaper.

Lady Rumpers I lie awake at night in a cold sweat wondering what would happen if Felicity's body fell into the wrong hands.

Mrs Swabb But this is a doctor's. Doctors can touch anybody, because they don't have the feelings to go with it. That's what they go to medical school for.

Lady Rumpers Rubbish. Doctors are as bad as anyone else. I could tell you of a doctor who once touched me and I will never forget it.

Mrs Swabb There's no need to tell me, I know.

Mrs Wicksteed You know? How do you know?

Mrs Swabb Because I am Fate. I cut the string.

I know all goings out and comings in.

Naught escapes me in a month of Sundays:

I know when they change their undies.

Hoover, hoover, hoover.

Hoover, hoover, hoover. (*She hands off the vacuum cleaner*)

All except Mrs Swabb exit

(*Moving the chairs*) Now a scene setting scene to set the scene and see the set, set the scene up and see the set up.

Wicksteed and Throbbing enter

Wicksteed A thorough examination? Are you ill?

Throbbing Never felt better. Your sister, Connie, and I are about to get married.

Wicksteed She hasn't told me.

Throbbing Probably because I haven't told her. But this is her last chance.

Ten years of courtship is carrying celibacy to extremes.

Wicksteed Poor girl.

Throbbing And I thought before I embarked on the choppy waters of the *vita coniugalis* I'd better have the vessel overhauled. If I can stretch my metaphor.

Wicksteed Ah well, drop your trousers.

Throbbing What for?

Wicksteed The longer I practise medicine the more convinced I am there are only two types of cases: those that involve taking the trousers off and those that don't. I'm waiting.

Throbbing I'm a bit shy.

Wicksteed Why? No-one will come in.

Throbbing drops his trousers

Mrs Swabb instantly enters with her vacuum cleaner

Throbbing pulls up his trousers again

Mrs Swabb Hoover, hoover, hoover.

Wicksteed Get out.

Mrs Swabb Hoover, hoover, hoover.

Mrs Swabb exits

Throbbing Couldn't I go behind a screen?

Wicksteed In the course of thirty-odd years in pursuit of the profession of medicine, Canon Throbbing, a profession to which I unwittingly yoked myself in my callow youth, people have been taking their trousers off in front of me at the average rate of five times a day, five days a week, fifty-two weeks in the year. This means that at a conservative estimate and allowing for some duplication I have seen twenty-five thousand sets of private parts. The most conscientious whore could not have seen more. In the light of such statistics you are displaying not so much modesty as arrogance. TAKE THEM OFF.

Throbbing goes off

Wicksteed (*following him to the side of the stage*) We were taught many things at medical school, padre, but seeing through several thick layers of winecette was not one of them.

Off.

Yes.

Turn round.

Bend over.

Got any feelings of nausea at all?

Throbbing (*off*) No.

Wicksteed Well God knows I do. It's all guesswork you know. I delve in their ears, I peer up their noses. I am glued to every orifice of the body like a parlour-maid at a keyhole.

Throbbing (*off*) May I get up now?

Wicksteed Shut up. And so it goes on. Day after day. Week after week. They troop in with their sore throats and their varicose veins. They parade before me bodies the colour of tripe and the texture of junket. Is this the image of God, this sagging parcel of vanilla blancmange hoisted day after day on to the consulting-room table? Is this the precious envelope of the soul? Is this . . .

Throbbing enters

Throbbing Is this on the National Health?

Wicksteed No. Why do you want to get married, anyway?

Throbbing Because—because I look up girls' legs.

Wicksteed Marriage won't stop that.

Throbbing Won't it?

Wicksteed I'm afraid not.

Throbbing You mean, you still do?

Wicksteed Me? No. I'm a doctor.

Throbbing Well, I do, and I'm a clergyman.

Wicksteed My poor sister. Because she's flat-chested he thinks she's religious.

Throbbing climbs on his bicycle and exits. Connie and Mrs Wicksteed enter

Connie I don't love him.

Mrs Wicksteed Love? You look on the shelf and you'll find it cluttered with dozens of spinsters gathering dust and all of them labelled "I was waiting for love". I married Arthur for love and what did I get? The mucky end of the stick. I could kick myself.

Wicksteed Do you know who I could have married?

Mrs Wicksteed Do you know who I could have married?

Wicksteed Sir Percy Shorter.

Mrs Wicksteed Sir Percy Shorter.

Wicksteed Twice the man Arthur ever was.

Mrs Wicksteed Twice the man Arthur ever was.

Wicksteed Or will be.

Mrs Wicksteed Or will be. I get to look more and more like the Queen Mother every day.

Dennis enters with a large book

Dennis Mother.

Mrs Wicksteed Yes?

Dennis I've got some bad news.

Mrs Wicksteed Yes?

Dennis I've only got three months to live.

Mrs Wicksteed Three months? Two months ago you only had ten days.

Dennis I made a mistake.

Mrs Wicksteed And what's happened to the galloping consumption you had last Thursday? Slowed down to a trot I suppose. What is it this time?

Dennis I've got a very rare disease.

Mrs Wicksteed You've got an extremely common disease. You've got a dose of the can't help its. You'd better ask your father.

Dennis He doesn't care.

Wicksteed That's true enough.

Dennis It's called Brett's Palsy. (*He shows her the medical book*)

Mrs Wicksteed (*reading*) Tiredness, irritability, spots, yes. And generally confined to the Caucasus. If this germ is confined to the Caucasus what's it doing in Hove?

Wicksteed Over here for the hols, I suppose.

Wicksteed exits

Mrs Wicksteed Tragic. And he came through puberty with such flying colours.

Mrs Wicksteed exits

Connie Every day and in every way they're getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

Dennis I'm going to die, Connie.

Connie Every day and in every way they're getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

Dennis I'm dying and no-one will believe me.

Mrs Swabb enters with a magazine and a postcard

Mrs Swabb Listen to this. "Lucille is from Sydenham. Her hobbies are water-skiing and world peace."

Dennis That's my magazine.

Mrs Swabb Someone hid it on top of the wardrobe.

Connie If I had those I wouldn't need hobbies.

Mrs Swabb No, dear. Look. "Send off this postcard and a beautiful bust can be yours this summer for only five pounds."

Dennis Two fifty each.

Connie False ones. Do you think so?

Dennis I would, Connie, if it were me.

Mrs Wicksteed enters

Mrs Wicksteed Connie? Connie? Who's Connie? I've told you before, Dennis. Connie has a title. She's your Aunt Connie.

Connie Aunt isn't a title.

Mrs Wicksteed It's the nearest you'll ever get to one. Calling your aunt by her Christian name. I knew a girl once who called her parents by their Christian names. She had a baby before she was seventeen. And what was the father called? She hadn't even bothered to ask. So much for names.

Mrs Wicksteed exits

Mrs Swabb fills in the postcard

Connie It's no use. Look at my legs.

Mrs Swabb Very nice legs, if you ask me. There are people running about with no legs at all, who'd be more than happy to have yours.

Connie By rights with me it ought to be all lemon tea and neutered cats. But it isn't. I look like this on the outside but inside I feel like Jan Masefield.

Mrs Swabb No, dear, Jayne Mansfield.

Connie No. Jan Masefield. She was a girl in the front row at my school. Actually it was the second row but it looked like the front row.

Mrs Swabb I'll post this postcard personally

I'm sure it's for the best

You wait she'll be a different girl

With the Cairngorms on her chest.

Dennis Is that a lump there?

Connie Yes.

Dennis Oh God.

Connie Your fountain-pen. You want to say: look, this body doesn't

really suit me. Could I move into something different? But you can't. The body's a tied cottage. At birth you're kitted out with mousey hair, bad legs, and no tits . . .

Mrs Swabb That's right, dear. You get it off your chest. Look out, it's the priest with five fingers.

Mrs Swabb exits

Throbbing enters

Throbbing Precious. Dr Wicksteed's given me a clean bill of health. Isn't it wonderful?

Dennis I've got Brett's Palsy.

Throbbing How interesting.

Dennis Three months to live.

Throbbing As long as that? It's the green light, Connie.

Dennis She hasn't said yes yet.

Throbbing With you sitting there she hasn't had much chance. Haven't you anything to do?

Dennis No.

Throbbing If I had only three months to live I'd have a hundred and one things to do.

Dennis Like what?

Throbbing Take my library books back, stop the papers, warn the milkman . . .

Dennis Death isn't like going away on holiday, you know.

Throbbing Oh yes it is. It's going away for a long, long holiday to a place by all accounts every bit as nice as Matlock. For some of us anyway.

Connie Dennis doesn't believe in heaven, do you, Dennis?

Dennis No. I don't know what it means.

Throbbing Nor did I till I met you, dearest. You'd better not sit near me. I've just been visiting the sick.

Connie Dennis!

Dennis exits hurriedly

Throbbing Alone at last.

Connie Yes.

Throbbing Just you and me.

Connie Yes.

Throbbing The two of us.

Connie Yes.

Throbbing How old are you, Connie?

Connie Thirty-three.

Throbbing What a coincidence.

Connie You're not thirty-three.

Throbbing No, but my inside leg is. Oh, Connie.

Connie Canon, please.

Throbbing Forgive me: I was carried away. Connie. Will you marry me? Will you marry me?

Mrs Swabb enters

Mrs Swabb Right now it's make up your mind time for thirty-three-year-old "I keep myself to myself" Connie Wicksteed, a spinster from Brighton's Hove. Does she accept the hand of slim, balding "Just pop this in your offertory box" Canon Throbbing, no dish it's true, but with a brilliant future on both sides of the grave

or

does she give him the elbow on the off-chance of something more fetching coming along once her appliance arrives?

Mrs Swabb exits

Connie Oh, Mr Right, where are you? Just give me a few more days. Until Thursday.

Wicksteed enters

Throbbing Very well. After all, what is two more days in Purgatory if it's followed by a lifetime in Paradise?

Connie exits followed by Throbbing

Wicksteed You silly man. You silly woman. Handcuffing yourselves together. Don't do it. What for? I'd rather have a decent glass of sherry any day. Of course, I despise the body. Despise it. Stroking faces, holding hands, oh it all looks very nice on the surface, but look inside: the pipes are beginning to fur and the lungs to stiffen. We're all pigs, pigs; little trotters, little tails. Offal. Show me a human body and I will show you a cesspit.

Felicity enters in a pool of rosy light and to shimmering music

I eat every word.

Felicity I was passing the door and I came over rather faint.

Wicksteed I feel just the same. Is there anything I could offer you?

Felicity If I could just sit down.

Wicksteed Perhaps you would like some tea—or would you prefer me to clap my moist lips over yours and plunge my tongue again and again into your mouth sending you mad with desire—or would you prefer coffee?

Felicity Anything.

Wicksteed What is your name?

Felicity Felicity.

Wicksteed Felicity what?

Felicity The Hon. Felicity Rumpers.

Wicksteed Indeed? Connie, fetch in the delphiniums will you: I think we have a private patient.

Felicity I'm feeling much better now.

Wicksteed Are you?

Felicity I like it here.

Wicksteed Yes?

Felicity The atmosphere. The feel of the place.

Wicksteed I'm glad. It's—it's a bit untidy. It could do with smartening up a bit. Old, I suppose, without being old-fashioned. Carpets a bit thin. Plumbing's a bit noisy sometimes too. Bit smelly, even. Tobacco. Drink. But I tell you: it's a good deal better than a lot of these cheap gim-crack things you could pick up these days, even if it is a bit run down.

Felicity Yes?

Wicksteed Yes.

The telephone rings. Wicksteed goes to the side and brings it on

Excuse me, Miss Rumpers, one moment. (*On the phone*) Hello. Dr Wicksteed's surgery. Wicksteed speaking. . . . Ah. Mr Purdue. . . . Yes. One moment. (*To Felicity*) This is an interesting call, Miss Rumpers, and one that illustrates how vital a part we doctors play in the community. I have always made a point of making myself available for anyone who cares to call, anyone in trouble, in despair, anyone in particular who is contemplating suicide.

Felicity Suicide!

Wicksteed This patient, Mr Purdue, is on the brink of self-destruction. But before he actually attempts to take his own life, he calls me, his family doctor, knowing I will be here.

Felicity The poor man.

Wicksteed A kind voice, a friendly word will often just tip that delicate balance between life and death, will turn back the patient from embarking on that journey to that far country from whose bourne, as Shakespeare so well put it, no traveller returns. So if you'll excuse me, I'll just have a word with him—strictly speaking, of course, I shouldn't, as you're a private patient and he isn't. . . .

Felicity No, no, not at all.

Wicksteed That's most magnanimous of you.

Felicity No. I'm quite happy.

Wicksteed Well I only wish Mr Purdue was. (*On the phone*) Hello, Mr Purdue. Mr Purdue, hello. . . . He seems to have—hung up. I am wondering whether I ought to give you a little examination.

Mrs Wicksteed (*off*) Arthur!

Wicksteed Though now would not appear to be the best time. Excuse me one moment.

Wicksteed exits

Felicity (*referring to her stomach*) It used to be so flat. Can you tell?
(*To the tune of "On the Isle of Capri"*)
T'was on the A forty-three that I met him.
We just had a day by the sea.
Now he's gone, and he's left me expecting.
Will somebody, please, marry me.

Dennis enters

Dennis I didn't know anyone was here.

Felicity Hello.

Dennis I've got a disease called Brett's Palsy. I've only got three months to live.

Felicity Really?

Dennis Yes. At the outside.

Felicity But that's tragic.

Dennis I'm glad somebody thinks so.

Felicity You're so young.

Dennis Don't touch me. You're sure you haven't got any disease?

Felicity No, you have.

Dennis Yes, but I don't want any complications, do I?

Felicity You poor boy. Poor frightened boy.

Dennis Don't tell my father. He's a doctor.

Felicity Perhaps he could heal you.

Dennis Him? He couldn't heel a shoe.

Felicity This disease: you say there's no cure?

Dennis None.

Felicity And in three months you'll be dead?

Dennis I'm certain.

Felicity Look, I'd like to see you again. Can I?

Dennis Me? You must be peculiar.

Felicity I would, I would really.

Dennis When? I don't have much time.

Felicity Thursday two-thirty. Where?

Dennis Here.

Felicity My name's Felicity. What's yours?

Dennis Dennis.

Wicksteed enters

Wicksteed Trevor, what are you doing here. You've no business in the consulting-room.

Dennis Good-bye, Penelope.

Felicity Felicity.

Dennis Yes.

Dennis exits

Wicksteed My son, I'm afraid. Trevor.

Felicity He said his name was Dennis.

Wicksteed Did he? Then it probably is. Look, the doctor-patient relationship is such an important one, one of mutual trust and respect. And here are you such a young, shy innocent creature and I'm—somewhat older. It would be helpful, I think, it would help me, if we could break the ice a bit and maybe perhaps sometime go for a spin in the car sometime, anytime, say Thursday at two-thirty?

Felicity My mother's very strict. I . . .

Wicksteed Splendid, I'll meet you at the end of the West Pier.

Mrs Wicksteed (*off*) Arthur!

Wicksteed You won't be late?

Felicity I'm never late.

Felicity exits

Wicksteed Coming, my love.

No. Not too old at fifty-three.
 A worn defeated fool like me.
 Still the tickling lust devours
 Long stretches of my waking hours.
 Busty girls in flowered scanties
 Hitching down St Michael panties.
 Easing off their wet-look boots
 To step into their birthday suits.
 No! I am abusing my position
 As their trusty old physician.
 Virtue be mine, I will not do it
 Just to pacify this lump of suet.

Mrs Swabb looks round the corner of the proscenium arch

Mrs Swabb I see it all. His ruse I rumble:
 That spotless girl he means to tumble.

Mrs Swabb disappears. Mrs Wicksteed enters

Mrs Wicksteed Who was that?

Wicksteed Only a patient.

Mrs Wicksteed Man or woman.

Wicksteed They're all the same to me.

Mrs Wicksteed How old are we, Arthur?

Wicksteed You are fifty-one and I am . . .

Mrs Wicksteed Fifty-three.

Wicksteed Fifty-three. And it doesn't seem five minutes since I was sixteen.

Mrs Wicksteed When did the fire go out, Arthur?

Wicksteed What?

Hungry for More?

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