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SF PERUSALS

Visiting Hour

A play

Richard Harris

Samuel French - London
New York - Toronto - Hollywood



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Show Business	D
Going Home	D
Waiting	D
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VISITING HOUR

First presented as a National Theatre Platform performance in the Cottesloe Theatre on 30th September 1987, with the following cast:

Eric	Russell Dixon
Helen	Marcia Warren
Pauline	Diane Bull
Old Woman	Marcia Warren
Brenda	Diane Bull
Ron	Russell Dixon
Joan	Marcia Warren
Nurses	Kate Dyson Tel Stevens

Directed by Michael Gambon
Designed by Soraya Walton
Produced by Amanda Saunders

The revised version of the play was first presented at The Duke's Head Theatre, Richmond, Surrey, on 26th June 1990, with the following cast:

Eric	Colin Starkey
Helen	Marcia Warren
Pauline	Susan Jameson
Old Woman	Angela Rooks
Naomi	Susan Jameson
Fiona	Ganiat Kasumu
Darbon	Walter Sparrow
Nurse **Son-in-law** **Father** **Critic**	Colin Starkey
Maureen **Woman critic** **2nd Reader**	Marcia Warren

Julia **Daughter** **Mother** **Reader**	Angela Rooks
Cheryl	Marcia Warren
Tricia	Ganiat Kasumu
Hazel	Angela Rooks
Eileen	Susan Jameson
Visitor	Walter Sparrow
Husband	Colin Starkey
Old Man	Walter Sparrow
Nurse	Ganiat Kasumu
May	Angela Rooks
Arthur	Walter Sparrow
Sandra	Ganiat Kasumu
Brenda	Susan Jameson
Ron	Colin Starkey
Joan	Marcia Warren

Directed by David Gillies
Produced by Sally Campbell

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Visiting Hour was written for a company of six actors, each to play several parts in the six scenes which make up the piece. However, I do not consider it obligatory that all six scenes should be played together, so that a company might make up their performance by choosing only some of the scenes, mixing the comic and the not-so-comic according to taste.

The non-speaking Nurses are played by members of the stage management—the more nursing staff to create hospital "atmosphere" between scenes, the better. You might very happily include the tea lady and her wayward trolley . . .

CHARACTERS

ACT I

PLASTER
Eric
Helen

KEEPING MUM
Pauline
Old Woman

SHOW BUSINESS
Naomi
Fiona
Darbon
Male Nurse
Son-in-law
Father
Critic
— may be played by the same actor

Maureen
Woman Critic
2nd Reader
— may be played by the same actress

Julia
Daughter
Mother
Reader
— may be played by the same actress

ACT II

GOING HOME
Cheryl
Tricia
Hazel
Eileen
Visitor
Husband

WAITING
Old Man
Nurse

MAGIC
May
Arthur
Sandra
Brenda
Ron
Joan

The action takes place in a hospital ward

Time—the present

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(See also page ii)

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*Published separately by Samuel French Ltd

Plays by Richard Harris
published by Samuel French Ltd

One Act:
Albert
Is It Something I Said?
Keeping Mum (*from* Visiting Hour)

Full Length:
The Business of Murder
Local Affairs
The Maintenance Man
Outside Edge
Partners
Stepping Out

Written with Leslie Darbon:
Two and Two Make Sex
Who Goes Bare?

ACT I

A hospital ward

There are three doors (or exits): DR, UR *and* UL, *and three beds—one* DR, *and two upstage. Each bed has the usual bedside cabinet, visitors' chairs, temperature chart, etc., with a set of radio headphones and oxygen outlet above it. At the foot of the* UL *bed there is a bed-tray. There is a curtain rail in the ceiling so that each of the upstage beds may be curtained off*

As the CURTAIN *rises, the ward is in half-light. The* UL *bed is empty. The* UR *bed has the curtains closed. The* DR *bed contains the motionless body of an Old Woman. She lies on her side, away from us, so that all we see of her is her grey hair. But she should be so small and still that we scarcely notice that she is there*

Plaster

A Nurse enters UR. *As she does, the area around the curtained bed lights up and we hear the distorted jangle of hospital sounds: tannoy messages for doctors, ambulance sirens, patients calling for attention, etc. She crosses to pull back the curtains, revealing the bed, and straightaway exits* L

A middle-aged man with a moustache is propped up by pillows on top of the bed. He is encased from head to foot in plaster and bandages. His legs are spread wide. One of his arms is in a sling. The forefinger of that hand has a sticking plaster on it. Only his head—which is encased in a bandage helmet—is mobile. His eyes are closed in sleep

The hospital noises fade and a handbell rings

After a moment, Helen—a middle-aged woman—enters R. *She wears a topcoat and hat and carries a handbag and basket. She moves to the bed and looks down at him for a moment*

Helen Eric?

No response. She puts down the basket and leans closer

Eric?

Still nothing. She leans closer still

Eric?

And suddenly his eyes open sharply, making her start, and he jerks upright with:

Eric I can explain everything, it's quite simple actually . . . (*He realizes that*

he has come out of a bad dream. Resting back against the pillows) Who's that?

Helen It's me, Eric—Helen.

Eric Oh.

Helen You were dreaming.

Eric Give me my glasses, will you?

Helen Where are they?

Eric I don't know—on the side there somewhere.

She sees them on top of the cabinet

Helen You're quite right, Eric—as per—here they are—sorry. (*She puts the glasses on him. It isn't easy with his head encased in the helmet of bandages*)

Eric Careful, careful.

Helen There.

He focuses. She smiles at him. He groans at seeing her. She turns the chair and sits

Well. You're looking better, I must say.

Eric How can I be looking better? Look at me.

Helen What I mean is, you've got a bit of colour in your cheeks.

Eric Oh well—if I've got a bit of colour in my cheeks, no doubt they'll be discharging me tomorrow—I should hate to be occupying a bed unnecessarily.

Helen You haven't lost your sense of humour, then.

Eric No, Helen. I have lost the use of both arms, I have lost the use of both legs. I have lost three back teeth, six pints of blood and very nearly the will to live, but what I have not lost is my sense of humour, aren't I the lucky one?

A moment

Helen Anyway. It's nice to have you back.

Eric Nice to what?

Helen Have you back. Out of your coma. Did they bring you round or did you manage it all by yourself?

Eric It so happens I came out of my coma, uninduced, just before midnight. And what do I find? (*He raises his head to look down at his body*) This lot.

Helen Yes, you're going to need a lot of looking after, Eric—and I know who'll be expected to do it. I'll clean your glasses, shall I, they look a bit grubby.

And before he can protest, she stands and is taking off his glasses, none-too-gently, and cleaning them with a handkerchief she takes from her bag as:

Eric Have you been coming every day?

Helen Every day, yes.

Eric Just sitting here?

Helen Only yesterday. Before that, they'd only let me have a quick peek through the window, you being critical. But he's always been critical, I said, that's his way.

Eric Oh yes, Helen, very sharp, very witty.

She gets the glasses back on him, and sits

(*Closing his eyes*) Did you by any chance bring any titbits?

Helen No solids, she said—not for a day or two—so I bought you some nice soup and one of my trifles. Would you like a little something now?

Eric (*mock-patiently*) That would be very nice, Helen.

His eyes remain closed as she takes the tray from the foot of the bed and puts it across his legs, then takes a bowl and spoon from the basket and puts them on the tray as she speaks

Helen Can you remember anything about it?

Eric What?

Helen The accident.

Eric Not a lot—no.

Helen (*taking a Thermos flask from the basket*) That would be the shock, would it?

Eric Presumably.

She is trying to unscrew the top. From force of habit, she holds it out to him to do, then realizes that he is, of course, incapable. During the following, she will manage to get the lid off

Helen The policeman who came round said you were lucky to be alive.

Eric Did he.

Helen When you consider the circumstances, he said.

Eric (*eyes opening*) Circumstances?

Helen How it happened.

During the following, she will pour soup into the bowl and stand the flask on the cabinet and then take out a gingham tablecloth from the basket and tuck it into his bandages as a napkin

Eric I presume he didn't go into details.

Helen No, not really. He just said you'd been in a car accident. My stomach turned right over. But he's such a careful driver, I said. Ah yes, he said, but the car wasn't actually *moving*.

As they talk, she spoonfeeds him the soup—which is very hot—so that he reacts and she blows on the spoon

Eric But he didn't actually go into details.

Helen No. He didn't want to worry me, I suppose. (*Dabbing his mouth*) They found your book by the way. That's one thing you don't have to worry about. (*She continues feeding him*)

Eric What book?

Helen The little book you write your jokes in. He'll be so pleased, I said. They gave it to me with all your other personal possessions. You being next-of-kin, he said. (*A little shudder*) Ooo, it quite made me shudder.

Eric Standard procedure, Helen.

Helen Mind you, he was quite suspicious.

Eric Who was?

During the following, the spoonful of soup is poised near his open mouth and he makes unsuccessful attempts to get at it as Helen concentrates on her narrative

Helen The policeman. We found this book, he said. When they were cutting him out of the wreckage. Oh, that's his joke book, I said. His book of jokes. Oh yes? He said, how'd you mean? Well, I said, my husband is a sales executive and when he hears a good joke he writes it down so that he can tell his clients.

Eric Very good, Helen.

Helen Anyway, I put it straight into your bureau. (*She gives him the spoonful of soup and dabs his mouth*) With your wallet and so forth.

Eric Thank you.

Helen Not your glasses though. I brought those in yesterday. Knowing how lost you are without them.

Pause

That was one of the things he asked me, actually.

Eric Who?

Helen The policeman.

Eric How d'you mean—asked you?

Helen He'll be so pleased they're not broken, I said—he can't see a thing without his glasses. Does he use them for driving then, he said. Oh yes, I said, he uses them for everything. Oh, he said.

Slight pause

Eric Oh, he said, what?

Helen Oh, he said. We found them in their case in his coat pocket. Well he must have taken them off, I said. Only what for, I can't imagine. The only times he removes his glasses are when he goes to bed and during the odd moment of personal vanity. Photographs, for example.

Eric There was something in my eye.

Helen I thought that might be it—that would be why he stopped the car, I said.

Eric Correct.

Helen That's fate though, isn't it? You stop the car to get something out of your eye and the next thing you know, something's crashing into the back of you. What was it, a fly or something?

Eric No, it was a large lorry.

Helen There you go again, always joking. No, I mean in your eye.

Eric That's right, Helen. A fly.

Helen I expect it flew in through the window.

Eric No, no—it was hitch-hiking, I picked it up on the motorway. Helen, don't worry how it happened—it happened and that's all you need to know about. Don't tax your brain.

She resumes feeding him for a moment

Helen All gone. (*Returning the Thermos, bowl and spoon to the basket*) Only

what he was trying to work out, this policeman, was how a fly could have come in through a window when all the windows were tightly-closed, which was quite strange in itself, really, it being such a warm evening.

His face contorts as he considers an answer

Eric I closed the windows . . . in order to keep the little buggers out. If you yourself drove you would know how distracting and, therefore, dangerous they can be. Unfortunately, I was too late.

Helen I said that would be it. Or something like that. Anyway. You can imagine what a shock it was when he knocked on the door and told me. My stomach turned right over. When did it happen, I said. About eight o'clock, he said. Oh, I say, I said, he only phoned me at seven to say he wouldn't be back until gone eleven. Oh, he *phoned*, he said. Oh yes, I said, he always phones me when he's going to be late home, he's very good like that, wherever he is he always manages to find a phone box. Oh yes. Without fail. Half his salary must go on tenpenny pieces telling me he'll be late home. (*Of the soup*) Was that nice?

Eric Delightful.

Helen Would you like some more or will you go straight on to the trifle?

Eric I'll have the trifle. In a moment.

She puts the basket on the floor. A moment. She nods pleasantly to an unseen patient who is passing

Helen What he couldn't understand was why you were in Potters Bar.

Eric What?

Helen Us living in Ealing and you being delayed coming from Bournemouth. Why you should go via Potters Bar.

Again the facial contortions from him

Eric Bournemouth? Who said anything about Bournemouth?

Helen You did. I'm with a client in Bournemouth you said. Don't wait up, I shall be delayed, you said.

Slight moment

Eric A client *called* Bournemouth. Mr Bournemouth. Mr Bournemouth of Potters Bar. Limited.

Helen reacts: of course *that's what he said*

Helen Not only stupid but going deaf: I don't know how you put up with me. Are you ready for your trifle? I can't do much, but I can make a good trifle, even *you* say that, Eric.

During the following, she takes a plastic box from the basket, removes the lid, and spoons out trifle on to a plate, then replaces the lid

I suppose we were lucky it didn't happen on a main road.

Eric What?

Helen The accident. It could have caused a multiple pile-up. Thank goodness you had the presence of mind to turn off the main road when

that fly got in your eye. Mind you, he's always been able to think fast, I said. What's that expression you use——?

Eric —the ability to think on one's feet.

Helen Not like me, then, Eric.

Eric One can, as they say, only get so much out of a turnip.

She delicately spoons trifle into his mouth and will continue to do so throughout the following

Helen Oh yes, that reminds me—in case you're wondering about your trousers, they're at the cleaners.

He frowns, trying to work out what she means

Your trousers. The trousers to your suit.

Eric What about my trousers?

Helen You weren't wearing them. When they brought you into hospital.

Eric No . . . well . . . I—I wouldn't be, would I?

Helen He wasn't wearing his trousers, he said. The policeman. That's not like Eric, I said—he's very fastidious about things like that—there must be a reason, I mean he wouldn't just——

Eric Of course there's a reason. They couldn't get the door of the car open so they had to get me through the window. In order to facilitate my exit, I was asked by the chief fireman to remove some of my clothing.

Helen So you took off your trousers.

Eric Precisely.

Helen Anyway. He brought them round and they're at the cleaners. (*She slips more trifle into his mouth*) Nice?

He chews, can't answer. She dabs his mouth

He's already made a statement, apparently.

Eric Who has?

Helen The lorry driver. He says it was a private lane used only by farm traffic, and you were parked there in a particularly dark spot without any lights on and him crashing into the back of you was entirely your own fault.

Eric I switched off the lights in order to conserve the battery.

Helen You don't have to convince me, Eric. Some of these people. I don't know. Any excuse to get out of trouble.

Eric I've no doubt we shall settle on a knock for knock basis.

Helen Anyway. He didn't have a witness. (*She spoons trifle into his mouth*) Not like you, Eric. Fortunately, your husband had a witness, he said. The policeman. He did tell me the name but typically it seems to have slipped my mind. (*She dabs his mouth*)

Eric (*mumbling*) O'Connell.

Helen Sorry?

Eric O'Connell.

Helen That's right. O'Connell. Miss O'Connell.

He clears his throat

Eric Mrs.

Helen Mrs O'Connell. Yes. Presumably she's a business associate of your husband's, he said—she, like you, being in a coma apparently. I've no idea, Officer, I said, the name certainly doesn't——

Eric —Mrs O'Connell has only recently joined the sales force——

Helen That's why then. I knew there'd be a——

Eric —this is her first position on the sales side which naturally means that she required experience in the field.

Helen And you've been giving it to her.

Eric Quite.

She spoons trifle into his mouth and sits

Helen Now then. Let me see if I can remember all that . . . just in case someone asks—you know, the neighbours or someone.

Eric Helen.

Helen No, let me try, Eric—you know how I like to try. (*She closes her eyes, concentrating*) You were driving home late after a business meeting with a Mr Bournemouth of Potters Bar Limited when a fly, which had entered the car despite your having taking the precaution of closing all the windows, flew into your eye. In an effort to avert what could have been a serious road accident, you turned off into a side road which subsequently turned out to be a private lane leading to a farm, switched off your lights to preserve the battery, took off your glasses and were totally occupied in removing the fly from your eye when you were struck from behind by a large lorry—the impact being such that you had to be cut out of the wreckage by the local fire brigade who first advised you to remove your trousers. (*She opens her eyes, pleased with herself*) There. (*But she remembers*) Oh yes . . . luckily you had a witness. A Mrs O'Connell who has only recently joined the company and needed experience in the field and so you took her out in your car and were giving it to her. (*She beams*) How's that?

Eric Very good, Helen. Now, if you don't mind . . . I'm quite exhausted.

Helen You'd like me to go.

Eric If you don't mind, Helen.

Helen No, of course I don't mind, Eric. You're going to need all the rest you can get. (*She stands, putting the plate of trifle on the cabinet and the rest of the things into her basket*) It'll be a long time before all that plaster and things come off. You'll be quite helpless. I shall have to attend to your every little whim. (*She leans over and lightly kisses his bandaged brow*)

During the following, she mops his mouth with the napkin which is still round his neck, thereby stopping any attempt he is making to protest at what she is saying

I tell you what I'm going to do: as I'm early, I'm going to pop upstairs to the Edith Cavell Ward and see if Mrs O'Connell has come out of her coma. She'll probably be a bit confused—it'll be nice for her to have me put her in the picture. And her husband, if he's there. You know—visiting.

Eric (*finally managing*) Helen . . .

But she is already kissing his brow again

Helen I've left you some trifle, you love my trifle, I know you do. Perhaps someone can give it to you later on. 'Bye then, Eric. (*She makes to leave but stops*) On second thoughts, you can have it now. (*She takes up the plate of trifle and pushes it into his face where it remains*) I'll bring you another one tomorrow. 'Bye.

She exits L, *briskly*

Eric remains motionless as the hospital noises fade up

A Nurse enters DR, *pulls the curtains around the bed, and exits* R

Keeping Mum

The Lights change so that the bed R *containing the sleeping Old Woman is illuminated. The hospital noises fade and the handbell rings*

After a moment, Pauline enters, UR. *She is drawn, neat, fastidious. It is raining outside and she wears a raincoat. She pauses in the doorway to shake out an umbrella*

She moves in and stands for a moment, looking at the motionless Old Woman as though uncertain. She props the umbrella up against the bedside cabinet and puts down her large bag. She moves closer to the Old Woman, cranking herself up for the ordeal

Pauline (*bending low; quietly but cheerfully*) Hallo dear, how are you feeling? Feeling a bit better are you? You certainly look a bit brighter, there's some colour in your cheeks. And they've done your hair, haven't they, it looks so much nicer, really pretty. (*She is gently touching the old woman's hair*) Who did it for you, the little Irish one?

The Old Woman raises an arm, murmuring soundlessly. Pauline takes the hand in both of hers and leans close, gently stroking the Old Woman's hand during the following

What's that, dear? No, it's Friday, today's Friday. Mmm? No, you mustn't worry about that, every day's the same when you're stuck in a silly old bed, aren't they? Yes. That's right, you close your eyes and I'll just sit here for a few minutes and keep you company, mm?

She continues to stroke the Old Woman's hand for a moment, then lowers it gently and moves to sit in the chair

Sorry I'm a bit late, the buses were all over the place. I left at twenty-five past, would you believe. They're always unreliable on a Friday so I thought: right, I'll allow myself another twenty minutes, that should be ample. Nothing like it. I said to him, quite politely, why are you so late, what's the excuse this time? The look on his face, you'd have thought I'd asked him the secret of the universe. In Swahili. We've got two drivers off

sick, he said. I didn't pursue it. The truth is, of course, it's raining and we all know what that means, don't we? Two or three drops and they're loath to leave the depot, public transport my eye.

Slight pause

God knows when I'll get the car back. I phoned the insurance people this morning. It's in the pipeline, they said. It's been in the pipeline for over a month, I said, why don't you consult Dyno-Rod? That's what I should have said, anyway. They're quick enough about asking for the premium but when it comes to paying out . . . I was quite lost without that car for the first week or two. I'd forgotten what buses were all about. And the fares. I don't know how people do it, I really don't. Dennis is absolutely right. We take far too much for granted. You don't know how lucky you are, he says. I do now. Anyway, Here I am.

It has all come quickly but now the flow dries up. This moment. She looks around at the cabinet. During the following, she gets up to tidy the top of the cabinet, putting tissues, the used paper cup and straw, etc., into the wastebag which hangs inside the cabinet door. All for something to do

Look at this, they haven't cleared your cup away. Oh dear, you haven't touched it again. You must drink, you know, plenty of fluids they said, you must drink plenty of fluids. (*Confidentially*) You know what I think it is—I think it's those straws they give you. You don't like those straws, do you, that's what it is, you're not a baby, are you, you can manage, of course you can. Let's see what we can do when the trolley comes round, shall we? Nasty old straws, who wants to drink out of a nasty old straw, eh? Course you don't. Anyway. Let's have a bit of a tidy up, shall we, get rid of some of this nasty old rubbish. You'll be needing some more tissues by the look of it, I'll have a word with Nurse. Oh dear, look at this, someone's left the top off your water—when did they last change it, can you remember?

She covers the top of the jug with a tissue

There now, that's better, isn't it, we can see where we are now, can't we?

She sits, not facing the bed, more out front. She flicks imaginary pieces of fluff from her clothing: small, birdlike movements. A moment

It's nice and quiet this afternoon. Last week it was like Paddington Station. I expect they get their busy periods like everyone else. I don't suppose the nurses are complaining. Dennis says they like to have a clear out at weekends so that all these doctors can go off yachting or whatever it is they do. Still. Good luck to them, they work hard enough.

A moment

Were you in this cubicle when you first came in, I can't remember, isn't that awful? I had it on my mind all last night, God knows why but I was trying to picture which cubicle you were in at the beginning and do you know I couldn't for the life of me remember. I know the bed was round

the other way and they moved it because of the radiator but . . . All last night, couldn't get it out of my mind. In the end I had to put the radio on really loud and do a great pile of ironing. Mind you, it needed it, it's been piling up for weeks. I just haven't felt like doing it, there didn't seem any . . .

Who's on today, I wonder. There was no-one in the office. The telephone was ringing away and no-one was taking a blind bit of notice. I nearly answered it myself. Well it's not very nice, is it, phoning up to find out how someone is and not even getting a reply. It doesn't exactly fill you with confidence. People worry, it's only natural. Look at that time I phoned intensive care. After the operation. You go home and get some rest, Mrs Marley, they said—if anything happens we'll let you know, if not you can phone first thing in the morning. What happens? I telephone and I can't even get a reply from the switchboard. I was nearly out of my mind. I've got to go to that hospital, I said, anything might have happened. For God's sake, Pauline, he said, if anything's happened they would have phoned. I don't care about that, I said, I want to go now—now!

Her hands have tightened into fists as she has been re-living her anxiety. A moment

Poor Dennis. It's been so hard for him. He's had the both of us to worry about. I can say it now, and I mean it, but there have been times when I've been terrible to him, said some terrible things. You see, when someone's been ill as long as you have . . . I mean, it's not your fault, no-one's saying it's your fault, but . . . I just took it out on him, I suppose. Oh well. It's all settled now, it's all . . . sorted itself out.

A moment. She realizes she has been twisting the wedding ring on her finger

I popped in downstairs on the way in. Into intensive care. I like to say hallo, they were so nice. They still have a good laugh about that night, you know. Talk about strong as an ox, Mrs Marley—we've never seen anything like it, will-power isn't in it. I said, she's always been strong-willed, my mother. I suppose she had to be really, with someone like Daddy for a husband, all that money trouble and gambling and everything. Strange how he took to gambling. He'd gamble on anything. It's a disease like anything else, I suppose.

A moment. From somewhere, the distant sound of a telephone ringing

Tea trolley should be here soon. I wonder if I can persuade her to give me a cup, I'm parched, I really am. I could have some of yours, I suppose, but it's not really fair to mess up their charts. Sister said to me, we really have to be very accurate about the amount of fluid she's taking otherwise it's a complete waste of time.

She was quite short with me actually. Mind you, she looked tired, very tired. And I think she's having problems with her son. I heard her talking to the little Polish one. I'm beginning to sound like a right little busybody, aren't I? Oh dear. You can't help hearing things when you've been sitting

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