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SF PERUSALS

The Coarse Acting Show 2

(Further Plays for Coarse Actors)

Michael Green

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THE COARSE ACTING SHOW 2

INTRODUCTION

In the previous volume, *Four Plays for Coarse Actors* (*The Coarse Acting Show*), also published by Samuel French Ltd, I asked: "What are Coarse Actors and why write plays for them?" Since it took about 3,000 words to answer that question I can hardly repeat all I said then, so for those who don't know what Coarse Acting is, I'll refer them to my book *The Art of Coarse Acting*. Here are several definitions of a Coarse Actor, such as:

One who knows when to come on stage but not where.
One who knows everyone else's lines but not his own.
One who addresses the scenery instead of the audience.

There are other qualities too numerous to repeat, but one infallible sign of Coarse Acting is that no matter what has gone wrong with a show—such as the collapse of a set or the failure of someone to appear on stage—the cast firmly believe no-one noticed. "The audience didn't notice a thing" is the hallmark of Coarse Drama, as is the firm belief that every show was "much better than they did it in the West End" (or on Broadway).

Coarse Theatre may be seen flourishing not only in church halls and community centres but at respectable Little Theatres and even at famous professional theatres sometimes. A Coarse Cast do not always have trouble with their lines, but if they don't they will have trouble with something else; whether it be the props, the characterization, or a scenery door which refuses to open.

Then there is Coarse Direction (or production), revealed by ghastly groupings and cliché moves (as in the Shakespeare history I saw where the King never spoke without jumping on to a rostrum). There is also Coarse Stage Management, which may force itself to the attention of the audience by a curtain which moves four feet and then sticks. A Coarse Stage Manager can turn the most serious piece of drama into Coarse Theatre, which is why good actors and actresses sometimes get caught up in it. As at a London production of *Tamburlaine the Great* when the wheels of the chariot drawn by the four degraded kings jammed on the line "Forward to Persepolis, ho . . .!" For some seconds the kings struggled without effect, and then the famous actor playing Tamburlaine resolved the situation by hissing "Stop pulling and lift the bastard . . ." There are many similar occurences which show that the baleful influence of Coarse Theatre can penetrate to the very pinnacles of drama.

These four plays, like those in *Four Plays for Coarse Actors*, are written to display various aspects of Coarse Theatre. If anyone said they were spoofs of amateur dramatics I wouldn't disagree, except that they are also spoofs of some professional dramatics too. They were taken to the 1979 Edinburgh Festival as a sequel to the original 1977 *Coarse Acting Show* under the title of *The Coarse Acting Show 2*, and performed by the same company from the Questors' Theatre, Ealing. After the Festival, Brian Rix

selected four Fringe shows to go to the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, for a six-week season under the general title *Lunatic Fringe*, and *The Coarse Acting Show 2* was one of these. This was the first official appearance of Coarse Acting in the West End, although unofficially they've had it for years. H.R.H. Prince Charles was kind enough to see one performance, and proved how universal Coarse Acting is by telling the cast of an experience of his own, when the school music master was asked to direct *Richard III* and did so in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan with disastrous results.

The deliberately staged version of Coarse Acting has now been around since the original World Coarse Acting Championship was held to raise funds for the Questors' Theatre at Ealing in 1972, and a certain amount of experience has been gained. The first lesson we have learned is the need for sincerity. It is not a competition in hamming it up. Really, Coarse Acting is a representation of a company struggling to do their best and being defeated. In real life most Coarse Actors would indignantly deny they were Coarse. They are trying hard, it's just that the scenery keeps falling down, or the sound cues are all wrong, or they chose the wrong play. Earnest incompetence is the keynote.

Nothing kills the humour in a Coarse Acting show more quickly than overdoing it. Understatement is far funnier. A flicker of the eyes is often enough to convey the predicament. Over-acting is just embarrassing. This also applies to the technical side. The lights and sound don't want to be wrong *all* the time. It is far funnier if they nearly get it right with occasional spectacular lapses.

A production doesn't need to be *all* Coarse. There must be some straight background to provide contrast. If in doubt about directing one of the plays in this book, start straight and go from there, rather than begin with everyone sending up the whole thing. If everything is going wrong all the time the play stops being funny.

I find it helps sometimes to ask: What would a bad director do here? We used to discuss the question among the cast and it is surprising what ingenious ideas come out, such as the horrible moment in *The Cherry Sisters* when Footrotski and the Stationmaster both turn and retire up stage in perfect unison—one of those supremely artificial moves which are the trademark of the bad director. The same technique can be applied to props, wardrobe or any backstage department. It was through asking ourselves what a bad wardrobe department would do that Ishmael got a costume so small he could only move with difficulty.

It may seem rather pretentious to analyse the humour in a Coarse Play but there are several layers. One strand is the predicament of people who are trying to do something they are incompetent at, such as poor Footrotski in *The Cherry Sisters*, who is one of those non-actors who stands up every time he speaks, and delivers his lines in a monotone. But equally important is the situation of those who can act to some extent but who are defeated by external circumstances, such as the leak which develops in the samovar in the same play. Another aspect was represented by Lorna Duval when she played Veruka at the Shaftesbury Theatre. It was a performance of great sincerity—perhaps rather over-intense but desperately sincere—as

it might have been given by Mrs Venables, the chairman's wife. Only one thing marred it—she played it with a speech defect that caused her to shower spit over the other characters every time she spoke the letter "s".

Another level of humour is represented by the stock characterizations of the Coarse Actor, revealed in old men such as Elijah in *Moby Dick* or villains like Wolverhampton in *Henry the Tenth*. A further strand of humour lies in the pastiche element of the plays themselves, which are written to exaggerate certain characteristics of the original authors, especially those which have become almost clichés, such as Shakespeare's battle scenes and Chekov's long silences. So some plays are best done almost straight (although always with the tongue in the cheek). Others can take a broader treatment. Thus, any Coarse Play contains many elements, not the least of which is the sense of burlesque of the original. A good example is *The Cherry Sisters* where in Footrotski we have a non-actor playing opposite one or two others who (almost) get there. On the other hand, *Streuth*, in the first *Coarse Acting Show*, had a cast of which fully half were appalling actors (including one man who read his lines from a cigarette case and another who ran all his words together), because this was a different piece of satire, aimed at a typical village-hall murder mystery production. It is important to decide who is the target of your burlesque.

It sometimes helps if the company adopt an identity and imagine themselves as (say) the Ministry of Defence Players or Lewisham Co-Operative Society Arts Club. Some of our players used to work out their positions in an imaginary group. We decided a certain actor was an unpopular little man who got all the rotten parts, while the King in Shakespeare was treasurer of the society (and a senior bank official). Naturally his wife took the female leads. The actor who played the much-abused Herald in *Henry the Tenth* played him as Old Reg, who was always being kicked around on and off stage.

Some groups give a theme to the evening, and perhaps start with an introduction by the "Vicar" or the "College Principal" together with announcements about the toilets being out of action. Watching performances of the first show (*Four Plays for Coarse Actors*) I've been very impressed by the ingenuity of directors and actors in introducing their own ideas. I hope they won't hesitate to do the same with this collection, although the plays don't need a stream of gimmicks to help them along.

What a pity, though, that some directors omit essential business because it's difficult. I have seen *Moby Dick* done without Ahab's absurd wooden leg, which is the whole comic focus.

Incredible though it may seem, some people don't realize Coarse Acting shows are designed to go wrong. Like the old dear who said, "I liked the plays very much but I didn't think the acting was very good." So try to give some idea of what it is all about in the programme.

Just a word on casting. The enormous numbers of characters in the script can be shaved down with judicious doubling (which is a hallmark of Coarse Theatre, anyway). Some scenes and characters can be cut, of

course. The professional Gemini Company, of Dublin, actually achieved the miracle of doing the show with a cast of six (plus help from stage staff). Not that one would recommend this. The more like a genuine production the plays are, the better.

The above are general tips on tackling the show, and individual advice for each play is given in the production notes. But one final warning: THESE PLAYS ARE DANGEROUS. It takes a good actor to mimic a bad one. The plays have been proved to be funny when they work, but like so much comedy they rest on a razor's edge and a cast which can't cope will be embarrassingly unamusing. Even a cast which *can* cope will be equally unfunny if they go over the top. Unfortunately Coarse Acting works like a drug on a cast and a director will find he (or she) will have to work hard to keep the cast under control as a run goes on. Which just proves we are all Coarse Actors at heart.

The plays are given here in what I believe to be the best order of performance:

1. *Moby Dick*
2. *The Cherry Sisters*
3. *Last Call For Breakfast*
4. *Henry the Tenth* (*Part Seven*)

When the plays were performed at Edinburgh and in the West End, however, for technical reasons the order was: *Moby Dick*; *Last Call*; *Cherry Sisters*; *Henry the Tenth.*

Some groups may find part of the programme is difficult or unsuitable for their audiences. I would suggest in that case making a combined show of plays from *Four Plays For Coarse Actors*, which is the published version of the first *Coarse Acting Show*, and this volume. A good programme would be: *Moby Dick*; *The Cherry Sisters*; *Streuth*; *Henry the Tenth.*

The principal authors of each piece are given but most of them contributed to each other's work. The authors are all members of the Coarse Acting Company from the Questors' and I am also grateful to other members of the cast who contributed their ideas. I am especially grateful to Michael Langridge, associate director, for his help and suggestions.

Michael Green

Credits

Normally, published plays list the original cast but not the stage staff and technical crew. This always seems a little unfair to me. In any case, ninety per cent of the Coarse Acting Company backstage workers appeared on stage, glued to the back of a collapsing flat, as an arm handing in a prop or moving the tortuous scenery. Even the front-of-house manager was pressed in to wipe the fore-stage after the watery ending to *The Cherry Sisters* (she usually got the best applause of the evening). In Coarse Theatre, the lighting and sound crews too, have a specially big role to play in creating the show and may give as much amusement to the audience as the actors and actresses (more, says a friend bitterly). So here is a list of our technical and backstage crew as an acknowledgement of the part they played:

Stage Manager	Lesley Montgomery
Deputy Stage Manager	Alec Atchison
Assistant Stage Managers	Phil Dean, Vicki Gaunt, Chris Lejeune, Nina Robinson
Lighting Designer	Pete Walters, assisted by Sue Kendrick
Sound	Colin Horne, assisted by Elaine Stanley
Props	Beth Crowley
Wardrobe	Grace Lacaille
Construction	Phil Dean, Geoff Moore, Bob Ricket
Transport	Richard Lewis
Prompt	Monique Fare
Business Manager	Richard Johnson
General Staff	Chris Sydenham, Rita Fenoughty, Carole Begent

MOBY DICK

MOBY DICK

By Michael Green and Michael Langridge

(Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Southampton Maskers Company for the use of certain material)

First performed at the George Square Theatre, Edinburgh, on August 20th 1979, and subsequently at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, with the following cast:

Ishmael	Michael Langridge
Landlady, an old crone	Anne Johnson
Starbuck	John Turner
Queequeg	Robin Duval
Preacher	Richard Lewis
Elijah	Tony Worth
Ahab	David Pearson
Carpenter	Brian Pickles
Seamen	Paul Collins, Richard Gaunt, Richard Johnson, Richard Lewis, Tony Worth
Serving Wenches, Inhabitants of Nantucket, etc.	Lorna Duval, Anne Johnson, Sonia Pearson, John Stacey, Maggie Turner

The play directed by Michael Green

Setting by John Stacey

(Herman Melville wrote the novel *Moby Dick*. It is 685 pages long)

PRODUCTION NOTES

The essence of *Moby Dick* is the sheer audacity of a small and not very good group tackling this vast epic (the novel is 685 pages long) and reducing it to a series of quick-fire scenes. This over-ambition is typical of Coarse Theatre. I feel *Moby Dick* might well be the product of a teachers' training college with a director who wanted to impress the Principal and a script written by a lecturer in English who fancied himself as a writer.

The prime essential in producing the show is pace. Pace above all. It must whip along at great speed, since half the fun is the absurd way in which events follow one another. Ishmael, the narrator, is a key character. Our Ishmael played him as a man who had learned his acting from a book. Almost every word was enlivened with a stock gesture or a pointing finger (usually in the wrong direction). He was hampered by a costume which was too small. An appalling false American accent caused him to emphasize all the wrong words, so his opening lines went something like this: "Call *me* Ishmael; some years ago having little or *no* money *I* thought *I* would sail about and *see* the oceans of *the* world . . ."

The crew and the other all-purpose characters represent total Coarse cliché. They are the archetypal Coarse Chorus, waving cardboard beer mugs and revealing the hand of an unimaginative director in every stilted move (see any amateur production of *The Student Prince*). They continually react in unison to whatever anybody else is saying, and punctuate dialogue with meaningless cries of "Aaaaah, uuurgh, oh ho", etc., because this is how they believe stage seamen ought to behave (for examples listen to the crowd in a BBC radio production). Props and costumes reflect the acting. Southampton Maskers gave everyone two-dimensional beer mugs; our beer mugs had plastic foam which fell off. We gave them all eye-patches on the principal that all Coarse seamen are blind in one eye ("Got to get some character into the part, old chap . . ."). There's no reason why the serving-girls shouldn't have eye-patches as well.

Elijah and Queequeg are similar stock performances. Queequeg may be based on something from *The Black and White Minstrel Show* or not, according to taste. Elijah looks like an advert for sardines.

Ahab is a sad figure. One feels he can probably act a little in a rather hammy way and this was his big opportunity. Unfortunately, his efforts are ruined by a badly designed wooden leg, four inches too short, which he cannot control. Needless to say he didn't receive it until the dress rehearsal, so there has been no time for practice or alteration, and he simply lurches about the stage trying to keep his balance.

Ken Spencer, who master-minded the original version by Southampton Maskers, says it was first conceived as a multi-media production with slides, film, back projection and so forth. This idea was later dropped but it seems a good suggestion if facilities are available, and gives great scope for things to go wrong. Corny live effects are another good wheeze. I recall

a school play in which waves were imitated by ten small boys crouched underneath a stage-cloth. We toyed with using the idea but did not have ten expendable little boys. But any gimmicks must be the sort of thing a real production might have. Authenticity is all-important.

Don't skimp the whale. It should be huge and two-dimensional. We had four operators—three in the front and one in the back. The more bits that move, such as eye, jaw, etc., the better. For a spout, a spray of powder may be found more effective than water. The whale must completely hide the operators, except for their feet twinkling underneath. Actors not on stage can be the whale's crew.

Finally, as with all Coarse Drama, remember the basis of truth. No matter what goes wrong, this must still remain a production of *Moby Dick*—a misplaced production, an over-ambitious disaster, but still a coherent attempt to tell the tale. Afterwards the college Principal will praise the show and ask who built the whale. And someone else will say, "I think it was even better than that version they did in the West End . . ."

(*Footnote:* The seamen's disastrous hornpipe is an important part of the deck scene. The two dancers should be holding opposite ends of a length of rope and dance traditional hornpipe steps round each other in a figure-of-eight pattern, so that they become completely bound up in the rope and can hardly move, although they struggle to continue the dance. Music is at the director's discretion, although we simply had the rest of the crew whistling and clapping. This dance reveals the fatal hand of the dreaded Mrs Venables, wife of the society chairman.)

MOBY DICK

A bare stage, except for an inn-sign for the "Try Pots Inn". Warmers light the stage while the House Lights are up

The National Anthem is jerkily played in fits and starts on what sounds like a thirty-year-old record. The House Lights fade, and the introductory music starts. This is something stirring but not quite right, such as the theme from "Star Wars" or Mendelssohn's "Fingal's Cave". As the music swells to a climax, the warmers snap out and are replaced by a blinding follow-spot. Unfortunately, Ishmael, whom the Spot is supposed to pick up, is not there. The Spot wanders slowly over the stage searching for him and then goes out. There is the sound of a tape-recorder being played backwards, the House Lights go up and the whole process begins again

As the House Lights come up, Ishmael, sea-bag over his shoulder, marches confidently on stage, stares horrified at the audience for a moment and then flees. Shortly afterwards, as the music draws to its end again, he is seen creeping furtively on stage in the light of the warmers (one of the more pathetic beliefs of Coarse Actors is that they can't be seen if they tip-toe). He takes up a commanding position and strikes a pose. Then he looks at his feet and decides they are not on their marks. He moves from his position to one side and strikes his pose again. After a few moments, he decides he is still not in the right position and moves again

As he stands shifting his feet uneasily, the Spot comes on, neatly bisecting him. He does not move into it, but addresses the audience with his face almost invisible

Ishmael Call me Ishmael. Some years ago, having little or no money in my purse I thought I would sail about and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen. Whenever it is damp, drizzly November in my soul, whenever I feel like knocking people's hats off in the street, then I account it high time to get to sea again. The sea . . . the sea . . . the sea . . .

There is a sudden outbreak of sea noises. Ishmael peers into the Spot, is blinded, and retreats into darkness again

Which like a magnetic compass draws men on to it. Thus it was that I duly arrived at the whaling island of Nantucket, Massachusetts, on a stormy night late in the year eighteen forty-one.

He goes to exit one way, changes his mind, and exits in the other direction

The Spot fades and the Lights come up on the interior of the "Try Pots Inn". The Seamen enter, singing as they come, together with the Landlady and the Serving Wenches. The men all have eye-patches and look like

something out of a bad production of Gilbert and Sullivan, except that they wear wellington boots and a few have strange odds and ends such as rugby shirts and donkey jackets with "Wimpey" on the back. They carry in benches and a trestle table which they have difficulty in erecting. They arrange themselves in carefully prepared positions and sing "What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?" with much waving of cardboard mugs. One of them plays a fake concertina so vigorously that it breaks in two. They then break into a howl of meaningless grunts and cries

Ishmael enters and watches the scene

The Landlady, a fearsome crone of about 95, approaches him

Landlady Welcome to the *Try Pots Inn.* I am Mrs Hussey.

The Seamen interrupt her with a chorus of growls. She repeats the line with savage emphasis

Welcome to the *Try Pots Inn.* I am Mrs Hussey.
Ishmael Who are these cheery fellows, my good woman?
Landlady They're goin' whalin' in the mornin'.
Seamen Aye, whalin', in the mornin', goin' whalin'.

The trestle table collapses with a terrible crash

Ishmael I intend to offer my services if I can find a suitable berth.
Landlady You'll have to ask them.
Seamen Aye, ask us, ask us . . . *etc.*

They re-erect the table

Landlady The sea belongs to Nantucketeers, they own it as Emperors own Empires . . . other seamen only have a right of way through it.

A hideously scarred Seaman approaches. His disfigured and useless arm swings to and fro alarmingly. He sniffs at Ishmael

Scarred Seaman He don't smell like a whaling man, lads. (*To Ishmael*) You must know, whalemen always smell of sperm . . .

There is an awkward pause. Ishmael looks highly embarrassed

Ishmael (*hissing*) Oil!
Scarred Seaman Oil. Sperm-*oil*, he don't smell of sperm-*oil!*
Seamen (*relieved*) Aye, oil, oil, sperm-oil.
Scarred Seaman Are you from Nantucket?
Ishmael No, I am not from Nantucket. (*As always with difficult words he gets his tongue caught round "Nantucket"*)
Scarred Seaman Not from Nantucket and goin' whalin'?
Ishmael Yes.
Scarred Seaman Shall we take him, lads?
Seamen Aye, aye, take him.
Scarred Seaman Then let's drink to our new shipmate.

They drink with much waving of mugs. Once more the table threatens to collapse and is saved at the last minute. Ishmael crosses to the table and in doing so swings his sea-bag over his shoulder, catching the scarred Seaman on the face. He staggers back and most of his disguise falls off, including his wig, his false nose, his straggling beard, and perhaps some of his warts and scars. He also loses his contact lenses and gropes blindly on the floor. Suddenly there is a clap of thunder for no reason at all. In the ensuing silence the "thump-bang" of Ahab's artificial leg, obviously done by a stage-hand in the wings, is heard. The Seamen register fear, crossing themselves etc.

Seamen It's Ahab! Ahab!
Ishmael Who the devil is Ahab?
Starbuck Our master, Captain Ahab. Seek to know no more. But here comes the harpooneer you're to sleep with!

The Seamen growl their agreement

Queequeg enters. He is inadequately made up as a cannibal. His facial make-up finishes abruptly in a neat line round his neck; his legs are encased in black tights with holes in them; his body is covered in a black pullover; and he wears a grass skirt which is short enough to reveal the sagging crutch of his tights. His face is probably made up like Al Jolson about to sing "Mammie". He has a bone clipped to his nose as if it was piercing it. This sometimes slips off, and is replaced like a pair of spectacles or given to someone to hold. He wears a belt from which dangle tennis balls made to look like shrunken heads

Ishmael So I'm to sleep with thee?

More stage laughter from the Seamen

Queequeg Me Queequeg the cannibal.
Ishmael Well Queequeg, what is that thing dangling in front of you? (*He points at Queequeg's loins*)
Queequeg Queequeg sell shrunken heads. You wish to buy from Queequeg? (*He fiddles with his belt to show them and a head drops off, and with any luck bounces over the footlights*)
Ishmael Are you a good harpooneer, Queequeg?
Queequeg Queequeg best harpooneer in Nantucket. Me show. You see spot of tar on water outside window?
Ishmael You can't hit that, can you?
Queequeg Queequeg hit it. Me show.

He waves his harpoon wildly. Everyone flees for safety. With tremendous energy he hurls it off stage from whence there is a strangled cry of pain. A pause. Queequeg draws in his harpoon by its rope. It comes in with someone's shoe on the end of it. Another horrified pause

Ishmael Well Queequeg you've convinced me of your skill as a harpooneer.

The Seamen laugh mirthlessly, and then all, apart from Ishmael, exit, taking the props with them. As Queequeg goes, he tries to remove the shoe from his harpoon

The Lights dim. Ishmael moves to the centre of the stage and once more is expertly bisected by the Spot

How it is I know not but there is no place like bed for a confidential chat between friends. Thus, then in our heart's honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg, a cosy loving pair, Queequeg now and again affectionately throwing his long brown leg over mine . . . In the morning I experienced a desire to go to church. (*He moves across the stage, the Spot following with difficulty*) Now in this same town there stands a whaleman's chapel and few are the fishermen shortly bound for the Pacific who fail to pay it a visit.

As he speaks, the congregation enter in the half black-out, carrying a pulpit, which they position on stage. The congregation is mostly women, but hopefully includes some of the Seamen from the previous scene. They kneel

Its chaplain is Father Mapple, a famous harpooneer in his youth, who preaches from a lofty pulpit approached by a ship's rope ladder up which he climbs to deliver his sermon . . .

The Spot on Ishmael fades and the Lights come up. Ishmael joins the congregation and they sing the first verse of "Eternal Father, Strong to Save". None of them know the words except one woman whom they struggle to follow, usually one line behind. As the last notes die away, a strong Spot shines on the pulpit, and all, still kneeling, look towards it. No-one appears. There is a ghastly hiatus. All look at one another, and then sing "Eternal Father" again

During the singing, one of the women, still on her knees, goes off into the wings and returns shaking her head

There is another confused pause, broken by a woman who decides to save the situation

Woman To the Quay! To the Quay!

All (*thankfully*) Yes, to the Quayside, to the ship, to the docks, let us go, to the quay . . . *etc.*

They exit, shouting as they go, leaving Queequeg and Ishmael still kneeling and looking puzzled as this hasn't happened before. After a short pause the woman comes back and repeats her line while jerking her thumb towards the wings, where the others are beckoning, visible to the audience

Woman To the Quay! To the Quay! To the Quay! The Quay!

Ishmael } The Quay! { *Together*
Queequeg }

Queequeg and Ishmael get the message and leave. The Lights fade and then come up again almost immediately, as Queequeg and Ishmael return. "Good King Wenceslas" is heard, as some of the Seamen enter, remove the pulpit, and set up bollards for the Quay scene

Ishmael Queequeg, it's Christmas Day! Shall we ever see another, here in Nantucket? Maybe we shall spend our next on your very own Pacific island of Coqo . . . Coqovo . . . Coqovin . . .

Ishmael fades away as the Preacher, who should have been in the church scene, hurries on, confidently strides to where the pulpit was, and starts to bless the congregation. He realizes there is no-one there and looks round, bewildered

Queequeg moves to him

Queequeg (*sotto voce*) Piss off!

The Preacher leaves hurriedly

Ah yes, Coqovocco . . . Coqovocco . . . (*He laughs maniacally and attempts a war dance which ends in disaster. Probably his grass skirt falls down*)

Elijah enters. He is dressed in a long oilskin and to hide the fact that he hasn't made up properly he wears a huge beard and sou'wester hat which reaches down to his mouth. He has a hook in place of one hand (the actor should hold the shaft of the hook in his clenched fist, covered by a sock). Nothing can be seen of his face

Elijah Avast there.

Ishmael We're just going on board the *Pequod*, we sail this morning.

Elijah The *Pequod*? The *Pequod*? (*As he says this a cloud of make-up powder explodes from his beard*) Ye have shipped in that ship?

Ishmael We have just signed articles.

Elijah Anything down there about your souls? (*He waves his hand mysteriously and the hook gets entangled with his beard. He tries to free it as he speaks*) Or perhaps ye don't know about Captain Ahab?

Ishmael What's wrong with Ahab?

Elijah Wrong? Wrong? Let this stiffened arm of mine testify what's wrong.

He eventually manages to free the hook from his beard and waves his arm like a scythe, catching the hook on Queequeg's harpoon shaft. This time it falls off and is salvaged by Ishmael

They didn't tell ye about his leg being taken off according to the prophecy?

Ishmael I know all about the loss of his leg.

Elijah And what about the loss of his soul? Mark this. Ahab sails to his doom and so do all that sail with him.

Ishmael But what is your name, old madman?

Elijah They call me . . . (*He forgets his name*)

Queequeg (*prompting him, sotto voce*) Elijah!

Elijah They call me . . . Jeremiah.

He begins to move off. Ishmael slips him his hook as he goes. He replaces it and exits with his stiffened arm in front of him

Ishmael Never mind him, Queequeg. This looks like the good ship, the *Queequeg*, Pequod—the *Pequeg*, Queequod . . . the one we've signed for. (*He has some difficulty with this convoluted sentence*)

The side of a ship glides on. Or it can be carried by its crew. It is the

"Pequod". Ishmael and Queequeg board it and the Crew come in with a crowd of women who have come to wave the ship good-bye. Wives and sweethearts kiss rather over-enthusiastically. There is much growling and shouting and rhubarbing

Seamen All aboard! All aboard!

The shout is taken up by the crowd. The last Seamen go aboard

Starbuck Cast off fore and aft! Cast off and hoist the mainsail!

Everyone takes up the cry. The mooring ropes are cast off from the bollards on stage. All wave good-bye, cheer and weep, etc. The Seamen sing. To give the impression the ship is moving the crowd walk backwards, towing the bollards with them on string and waving vigorously

The Lights fade and all exit. A loud trampling sound indicates that the ship is being removed to the detriment of an actor with his face stuck in a porthole

Ishmael re-enters. As he speaks, the next scene, representing the deck of the "Pequod", is set behind him (deck-rail, capstans, ropes, etc.). This time he misses the Spot completely and it pursues him round the stage. Sometimes he becomes entangled with the scene-setters

Ishmael And so, after sailing from the little harbour, and dropping the pilot, the *Pequod* blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic. How it is, there is no telling, but islanders seem to make the best whalemen. They were nearly all islanders in the *Pequod.* They came from all the isles of the sea, and the ends of the earth, and they were a lively set of lads.

The Spot on Ishmael fades, and the Lights come up

To a background of sea effects, the Crew enter and perform various nautical tasks with complete incompetence, pulling on ropes, turning capstans, etc. Two start a figure-of-eight hornpipe while holding a length of rope. The dance ends in disaster with both men enmeshed in rope and tied face-to-face, while the Crew clap hands in time and whistle the tune. Moving together, the entangled pair hobble to one side

For several days after leaving Nantucket nothing above hatches was seen of Captain Ahab. It was only at night he could be heard walking the deck . . .

The thump-bang of Ahab's leg is heard off stage. All register fear

Then one day came the order we had waited for . . .

Starbuck Everybody aft! Everybody muster aft! Mast-headers come down and muster aft!

The Crew gather expectantly

Ahab enters, preceded by the thump of his leg. His wooden leg is just what you would expect from an amateur dramatic society. It is sewn on to the knee of his trousers, and it is four inches too short so he has difficulty in getting it to the ground at right angles. It skids in front of him as he tries

to walk. His real leg is inadequately strapped up behind him and the foot can be seen underneath his captain's long coat. He has a crutch. For the first few moments he is totally out of control but gradually regains some sort of balance although the slightest move is fraught with danger and he clings to the proscenium arch for support

Ahab Men . . . what do ye do when ye see a whale?
Seamen We yell, Captain.
Ahab Good. And what do ye yell?
Seamen There, there she blows!
Ahab And what do ye do next, men?
Seamen Go after him.
Ahab (*starting to pace the deck precariously*) And what do ye sing?
Seamen A good whale is a dead whale.

Some of them start to sing "Drunken sailor" but are silenced

Ahab All ye mast-headers have heard me give orders about whales, a white whale especially.
Seamen White whale . . . white whale . . .
Ahab Look ye then . . . (*he produces a coin from his pocket*) . . . see this Spanish sixteen dollar gold piece . . . do ye see it? (*He nearly falls and is saved by some of the Crew*)
Seamen Aye, aye.
Ahab Whosoever raises me the white-headed whale with a crinkled brow and a crooked jaw, he that sights this whale shall have this gold ounce.
Seamen Gold ounce . . . gold ounce.
Ahab Carpenter, your maul! I'll nail it to the mast myself.

Taking the hammer from the Carpenter, Ahab turns to nail the coin to the mast, but the mast has failed to appear from the flies. Both he and the Carpenter look wildly round for it

Here, Carpenter, you do it.

The Carpenter begins an investigation about the mast

It is the white whale that I seek.
Ishmael Is that the same whale that some call—(*he turns his head to the audience*)—*Moby Dick!*
Ahab Aye, aye. Moby Dick.
Seamen (*also turning their heads significantly to the audience*) Moby Dick! Moby Dick!
Ahab Aye, men—Moby Dick . . . the white whale with the enormous spout . . . he fantails like a slit jib in a squall . . .
Starbuck Was it not that same Moby leg that took off thy Dick?

There is a pause. Everyone looks embarrassed. Starbuck corrects the line carefully

Was it not that same Moby Dick that took off thy leg?

Ahab Aye, it was Moby Dick that dismasted me . . . Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on. (*He teeters about*)

The mast appears slowly from above, hesitates a moment and then goes up again as the Carpenter rushes towards it

Thunder and hell! 'Twas Moby Dick that tore my body and soul until they bled into each other. I'll chase that white whale round the oceans of the world until he spurts black blood and rolls dead in red foam.

Several Seamen register disgust as this unpleasant description

Optional

The following scene, down to the exit of the "Rachel", is an addition to the original production. It has been inserted for the benefit of those who want a longer show

Seamen A ship! A ship!

Ahab Let me see! Let me see! (*He leaves the support of whatever he is clinging to and hops to the rail, where he overbalances and crashes through it. He is helped to his feet and the set is re-erected hastily*)
'Tis the good ship *Rachel.* Ahoy, *Rachel!*

The "Rachel" may appear or not as the director pleases

Voice (*off*) Ahoy, there! This is the *Rachel.* Have you seen one of our boats?

Ahab Not a sign. Have ye seen the white whale?

All White whale, white whale.

Voice (*off*) Aye, Captain Ahab, we have, just after we parted from you yesterday. It towed one of our boats out of sight and the Captain's little son in it, too. Will you help us look for the boat?

All His son, his son.

Ahab (*after an inward struggle*) No. I must seek the white whale. Leave us.

All register horror of the deepest kind

Starbuck Then we are doomed, lads!

Voice (*off*) Curses on ye, Captain Ahab. May the white whale strike ye dead!

The "Rachel" exits jerkily. End of optional scene

Ahab Come, lads, let's pledge ourselves. Get the great measure of grog! (*He takes the grog bottle from one of the Seamen*) Now drink and pass! Drink and pass. God hunt us all if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!

Seamen (*passing the bottle round*) Aye, drink and pass, drink and pass, Pass and drink, pass and drink . . ., *etc.*

Suddenly there is a ghastly cry from Ahab who throws away his crutch in agony and hops wildly round the deck

Ahab Cramp! Cramp! Oh God, my leg. Quick untie my leg!

There is a rush to help him. He is carried face-downwards to one side of the stage while one of the Crew unties his leg and massages it. Meanwhile, the rest of the Crew ad lib "Pass and drink" until Starbuck brings relief with his line

Starbuck Man overboard! Man overboard!

They all rush to the rail, leaving Ahab to collapse on the deck. A dummy hurtles from above and lands on the deck. The Crew realize the mistake, seize it and shove it overboard. There is a loud splash, followed by a cry. A hand with a cup of water appears from behind the scenery and throws water in someone's face

Seaman Not a sign of him. The sea has swallowed him up.
Starbuck Aye . . . the first victim. But not the last.

The Crew growl and register fear yet again. The Lights dim and the Spot comes up. Ishmael steps into the edge of it

Ishmael After this ill omen we were hit by a terrible storm.

Lightning and thunder. The Crew hurl themselves from side to side, imitating effects of a storm. This should be organized into a corny semi-dance routine obviously directed by Mrs Venables

And this was followed by an endless calm . . .

All cease rocking and sway gently until finally stopping, except for one who is brought into line with a savage prod of an elbow

Seamen Becalmed! Becalmed!
Ishmael It was if the Gods were warning us not to go on. But Ahab heeded no warnings. Night and day he paced the deck until one day came the cry he had waited for . . .

The Spot fades on Ishmael

Seamen Thar! Thar! Thar! Thar she blows!

Ahab, who has been crawling round the deck, lurches to his feet and staggers across to the rest of the Crew, walking on his own legs while the wooden one hangs obscenely from the knee of his trousers. The Crew are excitedly shouting and all pointing in different directions

Ahab Did you see his crooked jaw?
Seamen Aye, crooked jaw.
Ahab And did you see his snow white hump?
Seamen Yes, hump, hump.
Ahab And the glittering teeth?
Seamen Teeth. Teeth.
Ahab Then it is surely Moby Dick! I'll ten times girdle the unmeasured globe; yea and dive straight throught it, but I'll slay him yet!

The Lights dim. Stirring music plays as the deck scene is struck and the next scene is set with a certain amount of confusion. The Spot comes up on Ishmael

Ishmael And so Ahab gave the order to man the boats, and they set off to leeward in pursuit of the white whale.

The Seamen carry in their whaling boat, striking Ishmael as they pass

After a while they halted over the spot where the great beast had sounded and waited, patiently.

The Spot fades on Ishmael. The Lights come up on the Crew seated in the whaling boat, with Ahab standing in the prow with his harpoon. Two of the Crew are facing each other. Both change over so one of them is still wrong. They all row. A smaller cut-out of the "Pequod" is set at the back of the stage

Ahab Thar she blows! Thar she blows! Row lads and split your lungs!

The Whale appears. It squirts

She breeches! She breeches!

The Whale squirts again and charges Ahab, who ignores the fact that he is at sea and rushes all over the stage

Aye, breech your last to the sun, Moby Dick.

The Whale dances uncertainly about. It loses its eye and a hand gropes for it

Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale. To the last I grapple with thee. From hell's heart I stab . . . I stab . . . at thee. (*He stabs at the Whale*)

The Whale splits in half

The front part exits

Ahab attacks the rear part, which dithers uncertainly

Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale. To the last I grapple with thee. From hell's heart I stab . . . I stab . . . at thee.

The tail flees hastily off stage and exits with difficulty after first running into the scenery or some other obstruction

As Ahab looks off stage waving his harpoon the front of the Whale appears on the other side of the stage. Ahab turns on it

Towards *thee* I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale. To the last I grapple with thee . . .

The head forces Ahab down stage nearly to the footlights. He desperately knocks on it and it retreats

From hell's heart I stab at thee. Thus I give up the spear. (*He stabs the Whale*)

The Whale's jaw seizes Ahab's arm and drags him off. He shouts. His shouts continue into the wings for an unnecessary length of time

Queequeg The ship! The ship! The *Pequod* is sinking!

The small cut-out of the ship stands on end

Starbuck The suction. The suction. We are going down with the *Pequod.* We are destroyed.

All The suction. The suction. We are going down with the *Pequod* . . . down . . . down . . .

The Crew leave the whaler and mime being sucked down by a whirlpool. This is another of Mrs Venables' dances, perhaps to music

The back half of the Whale enters, crosses the stage in confusion and exits on the other side

Ishmael enters. As he speaks, the back half of the Whale enters again and tip-toes about uncertainly

Ishmael The drama's done . . . the great shroud of the sea rolls over the *Pequod,* her crew and Moby Dick, and I alone escaped to tell the tale, saved from the sea by the good ship *Rachel* . . .

He turns to leave the stage but treads all over the drowned seamen. Oaths and cries are heard

Lights fade, music swells. The Lights come up suddenly to reveal everybody fighting to get into position for the curtain call

Ahab enters, his leg now strapped up, and takes a bow. He overbalances and knocks down the line. Suddenly he is assailed by cramp again. He is dragged off

THE CHERRY SISTERS

THE CHERRY SISTERS

By Michael Green, David Pearson,
Michael Langridge, Richard Gaunt and John Turner

First performed at the George Square Theatre, Edinburgh, on August 20th, 1979, and subsequently at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, with the following cast:

Veruka (Lenina Zuleika Bologna)	Lorna Duval
Basha (Yeliena Oblonska Nogoodska)	Maggie Turner
Gnasha (Alexandra Stalina Schokolata)	Sonia Pearson
Babushka, an old crone	Anne Johnson
Footrotski (Romanov Beria)	John Turner
Piles, an old servant	Michael Langridge
Captain Sodov (Vladimir Pederastovitch)	Robin Duval
Schoolmaster (Pantograf Ivan Feverovitch)	David Pearson
Stationmaster (Peter Stravinsky Behanovitch Porkin)	Tony Worth
Prompt	Monique Fare
A hand pushing a chamber pot	Beth Crowley

The play directed by Michael Green

Setting by John Stacey

PRODUCTION NOTES

Absolute sincerity is the key-note of this piece. The cast are very anxious about doing a Chekov and they are desperately trying. In fact Mrs Venables, the wife of the group's chairman, is taking the lead part herself, and it is not her fault that she has a speech impediment which turns Veruka's tragedy into farce. Lorna Duval, who played our Veruka, is a speech therapist and used her professional knowledge to play as if suffering from what is technically known as a "lateral 's' ". This means that every time the sufferer says an "s" they make a horrid clucking noise and spray spit everywhere, as Veruka does over Gnasha. If this is difficult, a lisp might be substituted.

Incidentally, the local paper committed a happy solecisim when reporting therapist Lorna's appearance at the Shaftesbury. It had the headline

LORNA THE-
RAPIST STARS
IN WEST END

The girls should make a typically Chekovian trio, Veruka heart-broken and suffering, Gnasha serious and protective and Basha absurdly *ingenue* in white dress and ribbons, always playing with flowers or jumping up and down excitedly. This is the sort of part that is often grabbed by someone too old to play it ("rubbish, of course I don't look 40 on the stage, and anyway I'm only 39 . . .").

Footrotski was played as if the part had been given to a very wooden actor, who stood up every time he spoke and then sat down. He looked permanently puzzled. He marched about stiffly, swinging his left arm with his left leg, and had one squeaky shoe, too (buy a squeaker from a joke shop and tape it under the shoe. They wear out quickly, so get several). Piles is the archetypal stock Russian peasant, a part usually given to some long-serving member of the society who will play Piles exactly the same as he does all old men from Polonius to Desdemona's father.

Our Sodov was portrayed as being acted by a very pompous chap (perhaps Mrs Venables' husband) who obviously revelled in playing such a colourful role, only to have his evening wrecked because his spurs kept getting entangled. The spurs are very important. They must catch the eye of the audience, so they need to be *enormous*. We had to construct our own, from metal. As regards the entangling, this can usually be cheated. As long as they *seem* to be entangled that is enough. Sodov can help by being obviously aware of the menace of his spurs (which probably make him walk as if he had a severe rupture).

The samovar is crucial. We used an oil drum, suitably disguised. Or an old tea-urn would do. The whole tap fitting was attached to a cork so when Piles struggled with the tap he pulled off the whole fitting and the cork came too. It is important that the audience realize Piles is having trouble before the calamity. In the Questors' production we had the handle of the spigot come

off first, then the the rest of the fitting. If you use a cork don't have hot tea—it makes the cork swell and one night in Edinburgh it wouldn't come out, a situation which was genuine Course Theatre, and poor Piles wrestled desperately with the samovar. Fortunately, he won. Make sure the samovar is placed prominently. It is important that the audience can see the constant stream of tea all the time. Lots of rehearsal is needed to get the flow correct and for Piles to become an expert in thrusting his various containers under it. An absorbent mat, painted to look like grass or stone, can take any spillage.

The business of passing round the cups as they fill, while ad libbing demands for more tea, must be well-rehearsed. In our production, everyone was left with two cups and the surplus were passed to Babushka, who sat with a pile on her lap (she had a waterproof apron) and eventually teetered out with them. But I saw another production in which Basha finished up with eight, four in each hand.

The ending must be played not only with complete seriousness, but with all the stops out. In fact it would be a tear-jerker but for the fact that Veruka is addressing an empty bench and Piles is dying standing up with his thumb blocking the leak in the samovar. One likes to think what they will all say in the dressing-room afterwards. My guess is that everyone would congratulate Piles on saving the situation. As Sodov would tell him, "Believe me, old man, the audience didn't notice a thing . . . Did you notice the clever way in which I covered up that trouble with the spurs . . .?"

Acknowledgement

I am deeply grateful to descendants of the late Anton Chekov for not trying to interfere with this production.

MG

THE CHERRY SISTERS

A typical Chekovian exterior. The suggestion of the veranda or garden of a provincial house in Russia. There are several chairs, a bench and a small table, on which stands a samovar. Music plays (probably the theme from "Dr Zhivago")

The three sisters and their brother Footrotski are seated. Basha, the youngest, is playing with a ball made of flowers. Gnasha sometimes sighs. Veruka, the eldest, sits, tragic and sombre. Babushka, an old crone, sits to one side, knitting furiously. There is a long silence. The girls sigh. Footrotski rises and walks a few paces, revealing that his boots creak appallingly and don't fit. He looks at his watch, winds it, sighs and sits down again. Suddenly there is the grinding noise of a tree falling. Babushka cackles. Everyone else jumps

Basha Will we never get to Moscow?
Gnasha One day, Basha, we will get to Moscow.
Veruka (*who has a speech defect*) But how can we get to Moscow, Gnasha? We must stay and look after the estate.
Footrotski (*standing up*) Moscow, Moscow, always Moscow. (*He sits down*)

There is the sound of a tree falling

Gnasha Already they are chopping down the trees to build a railway. How will we live when there are no more trees. We should sell the estate.
Veruka But who would buy an estate with no trees?
Footrotski And a railway running through it?
Gnasha Perhaps Peter Stravinsky Behanovitch Porkin, the Stationmaster, would buy it. He retires next month. Perhaps he would like to spend his twilight days sitting in the living room watching the trains.
Basha (*jumping up and clapping her hands*) Oh, Gnasha! How clever you are! We must ask the Stationmaster to buy the estate. And then we could get to Moscow! How happy I am!
Veruka But how can we get to Moscow? Yesterday Grisha broke his leg and we had to shoot him.
Basha Poor Grisha! I am heartbroken.
Footrotski And then we chopped the troika up for firewood.
Veruka With no pony and no troika, how could we get to Moscow?

There is the sound of a tree falling

Gnasha We could go by train!
Basha (*jumping for joy again*) Oh, Gnasha, how clever you are! When the railway is finished, we can go by train. How happy I am!
Veruka But the line will only go in one direction. East, towards Siberia.
Basha I am heartbroken!

Gnasha Then we must change at Vladivostok.
Basha But how can I go to Moscow with a broken heart?
Veruka Oh, Yeliena Oblonska Nogoodska!
Basha Oh, Lenina Zuleika Bologna!

They embrace. There is the sound of a tree falling

Piles enters. He is aged 109

Piles The Schoolmaster, Pantograf Ivan Feverovitch, and the Station-master, Peter Stravinsky Behanovitch Porkin, have come to tea.
Veruka They came to tea yesterday.
Basha And the day before.
Gnasha They come every day.
Veruka Nothing changes.
Basha Nothing. Nothing.
Gnasha Nothing.
Footrotski Bring the tea, Piles.
Piles At once, young sir. (*He starts to exit*)
Veruka Piles!

Piles turns in surprise. Veruka makes a series of encouraging grimaces and gestures, then imitates someone riding a horse, clucking her tongue as she does so. Piles watches, fascinated. Suddenly he understands

Piles Oh, yes. Oh, and Captain Sodov is here as well. On his horse.

Veruka swoons rather delicately, making sure she falls gracefully

Basha Alexandra Stalina! The smelling salts!
Piles You ought to burn some rhubarb under her nose. That's what my mother used to do in the old days. We did that when my father had spotted fever.
Gnasha And he recovered?
Piles No, he died.
Footrotski (*standing up*) One feels so useless. If only there was something to be done. We are all doomed. (*He sits down*)

Veruka recovers

Gnasha There, there, my little nightingale.
Basha Perhaps Captain Sodov has come to ask for your hand.
Veruka I don't want to see him! I detest him! Oh, no! Gnasha, I love him! I love him! Do you really think he'll ask me to marry him? Suppose he doesn't. I can't bear it! I don't want to see him! I hate the sight of him!

She showers spit on Gnasha, who flinches. Horse effect is heard, off stage

Gnasha Hush, hush Veruka. He's here.

Captain Sodov enters in the full uniform of the Imperial Hussars. He walks with difficulty because of his huge spurs

Footrotski Good afternoon, Vladimir Pederastovitch.
Sodov How lovely to see you, Romanov Beria. (*He clicks his heels*)
Veruka How lovely to see you, Vladimir Pederastovitch Sodov.
Sodov Delighted, Lenina Zuleika Bologna.

He turns as he speaks to greet her but his enormous spurs have become entangled and he falls forward clutching at Veruka's skirt, which rips open revealing a suspender-belt and stockings. She retires to one side to repair the damage temporarily

The Schoolmaster and Porkin, the Stationmaster, enter. Porkin carries a large bag

All three visitors then shake hands with everybody else and call them by their full names so that the stage is a babble of noise for some time

Gnasha And how are you, Peter Stravinsky Behanovitch Porkin?
Porkin How do you do Alexandra Stalina Schokolata? And you, Yeliena Oblonska Nogoodska.
Basha So pleased to see you, Peter Stravinsky Behanovitch Porkin.
Porkin And you, my dear Lenina Zuleika Bologna?

Meanwhile, everyone else is conducting a similar introduction. They then all move round and start again

Piles enters with a tray of crockery and goes to the samovar

Veruka (*to Porkin*) How is the railway progressing?
Porkin Very well. Yesterday it progressed by six versts. We hope it will reach the station this year.
Gnasha But will it ever get to Moscow?
Porkin In fifty years. Who knows? Perhaps never.
Footrotski At least we can go to Vladivostok in the spring.

Footrotski and Porkin both retire up stage, perfectly together, as if on strings. They take up new positions with mechanical precision. Piles is trying to turn on the tap on the samovar

Basha How futile it all seems!

The Schoolmaster leads Basha down stage

Schoolmaster Will you marry me, Yeliena Oblonska Nogoodska?
Basha No. (*She sobs and goes to sit on the bench*)

The Schoolmaster retires and collides with Gnasha as she crosses to Porkin. She takes Porkin by the arm and drags him to one side

Gnasha Peter Stravinsky Behanovitch Porkin, did Moron Leputkin the Bank Manager, give you any message for me today?
Porkin Yes.
Gnasha What did it say?
Porkin No.

Gnasha weeps. She retires to join Basha sobbing on the bench

Veruka You may serve the tea, Piles.

We now become aware something is wrong with the samovar, with which Piles is struggling. Suddenly the tap fitting comes away

Piles Shit!

A spout of tea comes out. Piles desperately catches it in a cup and when that is full grabs another and passes the full one to whoever is standing nearest. He then repeats the process rapidly. The cups are frantically passed round until everybody has one but still the stream continues. Meanwhile, to cover the crisis, everyone ad libs dialogue as if it were all intentional

All Let me pass you some tea . . . Have another cup of tea . . . This tea is delicious . . . Do have some more . . ., *etc., etc.*

Piles (*as he continues to fill cups*) There is plenty of tea for everyone . . . Here, young sir, do have some more . . . More tea anyone? . . . The tea is still hot . . ., *etc.*

Eventually most people have two cups but they continue to come so they are passed round and finish up with Babushka who gets the lot. Then Piles runs out of cups. As the last one is filling he grabs the hat off the Schoolmaster's head and holds it under the spout

Schoolmaster Well, I'm afraid I must be off.

He tries to take the hat from Piles, who resists. A tug of war, then Piles drags Porkin's bag towards him, opens it to catch the spout and relinquishes the overflowing hat

Good-bye.

All Good-bye, Pantograf Ivan Feverovitch.

The Schoolmaster goes to put on his hat, thinks better of it and exits, carrying his hat carefully

The others gradually unload their crockery, probably on Babushka again

Gnasha We have something very important to ask you, Peter Stravinsky Behanovitch Porkin.

Basha We want you to buy the estate!

Porkin But, dear ladies! Buy the estate? I don't understand.

Veruka Life will not be the same when they have chopped down all our trees and built a railway through the house. It will be unendurable!

Basha But you have lived with trains all your life, Peter Stravinsky. Think how nice it would be to sit in your living room and watch the trains go through.

Porkin But I have no money, only a small pension. How could I afford . . .

Basha Oh, Peter Stravinsky, I'm so unhappy. (*Crying*) Why do they want to build a railway?

Porkin Let me explain, Yeliena Oblonska. I have the plans for the railway in my bag.

He turns to find a stream of tea running into the bag, which is, of course, under the samovar. He tries to take it but Piles blocks him. Piles then notices a small flower basket which Gnasha is holding. He snatches it from her, hurls out the flowers, and substitutes it for Porkin's bag. Porkin takes this and begins his explanation

These plans were produced by the Board to show the proposed route of the railway to Moscow. I'll pass these copies round to each of you.

He pulls some sodden pieces of paper out of the bag and passes them round. All try to look seriously at them, but they keep falling apart

As you can see, the route to Vladivostock runs right through this estate . . . There is no alternative . . . To the north there is the Tamoslit river and to the south the Vrustuk mountains . . . To avoid this area would mean making a loop a hundred miles to the north from Treblinka in the east to Bratislav in the west . . . Already the trees in your orchard are being felled for sleepers . . .

Basha (*covering her ears, crying*) I don't want to hear any more!

She throws away her sodden plan and it hits Porkin

Piles I don't hold with railways. I remember in my father's time when the trains used to stop at the junction to take on board the dead serfs. It was winter, you see, and the ground was too hard to dig graves so we just collected a few every day and drove over to the junction. The rhubarb doesn't grow anymore, not since the great calamity. (*He hastily replaces the almost full basket under the samovar with a vase*)

Gnasha You must not worry, Peter Stravinsky. We will find a way. We will survive.

Porkin Alexandra Stalina, I kiss your hand. (*He does so and also kisses a mass of soggy paper*)

Sodov (*taking Veruka aside*) Lenina Zuleika, I have something to say to you.

Veruka Yes, Vladimir Pederastovitch?

Sodov I have to tell you that my regiment is being posted to Siberia.

Veruka Siberia!

Sodov This is the last time that I shall be able to visit this estate. I must take my leave of you.

Veruka How can I bear to go on living! Will we never see you again?

Sodov Perhaps. When the railway is built you might come to Siberia.

Veruka But Siberia is so far away. And perhaps we will go to Moscow. Who knows?

Sodov So then, we must part. Give me leave to kiss your hand.

Veruka is still holding two cups so he kisses those instead

Goodbye, Lenina Zuleika Bologna.

Veruka goes to reply, but dries

Veruka Goodbye . . . er . . .

Prompt (*off*) Vladimir Pederastovitch . . .
Veruka Goodbye Vladimir Pederastovitch . . .
Prompt (*off*) Sodov.
Veruka Sodov!

Sodov bows. His spurs entangle again. He sways and nearly falls, clinging to Veruka for support. But he recovers and exits hopping on both legs

Porkin I'd better be off too.
Basha I'll see you to the door.
Gnasha We'll all see him off, won't we Veruka?
Veruka Yes, we'll all see him off.
Footrotski Wait for me. I need some more billiard chalk.

All except Piles exit. Babushka does so with difficulty, as she is still holding a lot of cups in her apron. As she disappears into the wings, a crash is heard, off

Piles is left alone on stage with the leaking samovar. He has run out of containers and is stopping the leak with his thumb. But he has to make a dying speech while resting on the garden seat, so he moves to it and leaves the water dribbling into the nearly-full vase

Piles So I'm all alone. They've forgotten about old Piles. I'll just lie down on the bench and rest for a moment . . . My heart's not been too good recently . . . How dark it's getting.

Veruka enters

Veruka Piles!

She rushes to the bench just as Piles realizes the container under the samovar is nearly full, and gets up to plug the leak with his fingers again. Veruka kneels by an empty bench, hesitates and decides to make the best of it

Piles! Are you ill? What's wrong? Why are you staring at me like that? Why are your hands so cold? Why are you trembling?

Piles gives a series of death rattles and tries to die standing by the samovar

Piles! Oh Piles, don't leave us! (*She sobs on the empty bench*)

A chamber pot is pushed in to Piles, who snatches it gratefully and pushes it under the leak. He subsides, as the Lights fade to a Black-out

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