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SF PERUSALS

HER BIG CHANCE

A Monologue from *Talking Heads*

by Alan Bennett

SAMUEL FRENCH

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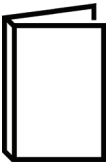
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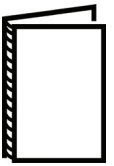
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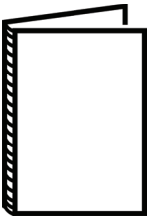
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Bennett was born in Leeds in 1934. After studying at Oxford University he collaborated as a writer and performer with Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller and Peter Cook in *Beyond the Fringe* in 1960 at the Edinburgh Festival.

He then turned to writing full time and produced his first stage play *Forty Years On* in 1968. His other plays include *Getting On, Habeas Corpus, The Old Country, The Lady in the Van, A Question of Attribution, The Madness of George III* (together with the Oscar-nominated screenplay *The Madness of King George*), an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and *The History Boys*; as well as many television plays such as *A Day Out, Sunset across the Bay, A Woman of No Importance* and the series of monologues *Talking Heads* and *Talking Heads II*.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The set should be kept simple. There is no point in constructing an elaborate set (still less a series of sets) and just putting one person in the middle of it all. Less, in this case, is more; the simpler the setting, the more the audience is required to use its imagination and concentrate on the performer. If you want costumes and scenery do *Carousel*.

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HER BIG CHANCE

First shown on BBC TV on 17th May 1988. The cast was as follows:

LESLEY	Julie Walters

Directed by Giles Foster
Produced by Innes Lloyd
Designed by Tony Burrough

Subsequently performed at the New Grove Theatre, London, as part of the RSC Fringe Festival, opening on 30th October 1992, with the following cast:

LESLEY	Kirstine Gacpar

Directed by Tim Hudson
Designed by Wendy Hodges

Meet Lesley, an actress; she was Woman in a Musquash Coat in *Crossroads* and Chloë in Tess (no, Chloë wasn't in the book). She has just completed a video ("targeted chiefly on West Germany") in which she plays Travis, a career girl who enjoys life, spends a remarkable amount of time topless and shoots a man with a harpoon gun. In *Her Big Chance* (from the *Talking Heads* series) Lesley tells all, her blindness to the sinister undertones of her story as well as to her own self-delusions and gullibility making this monologue acidly funny, bleakly chilling and a treat to perform.

LESLEY*'s flat.*

Music. The lights come up.

LESLEY *is in her thirties. It is morning and she is in her dressing gown, though she would still be in her dressing gown if it were afternoon.*

I shot a man last week. In the back. I miss it now, it was really interesting. Still. I'm not going to get depressed about it. You have to look to the future. To have something like that under your belt can be quite useful, you never know when you might be called on to repeat the experience.

It wasn't in the line of duty. I wasn't a policewoman or someone who takes violence in their stride. It was with a harpoon gun actually, but it definitely wasn't an accident. My decision to kill was arrived at only after a visible tussle with my conscience. I had to make it plain that once I'd pulled the trigger things were never going to be the same again: this was a woman at the crossroads.

It wasn't *Crossroads,* of course. They don't shoot people in *Crossroads,* at any rate not with harpoon guns. If anybody did get shot it would be with a weapon more suited to the motel ambience. I have been in *Crossroads* though, actually. I was in an episode involving a fork lunch. At least I was told it was a fork lunch, the script said it was a finger buffet. I said to the floor manager, I said, "Rex. Are you on cans because I'd like some direction on this point.

Are we toying or are we tucking in?" He said, "Forget it. We're losing the food anyway." I was playing Woman in a Musquash Coat, a guest at a wedding reception, and I was scheduled just to be in that one episode. However in my performance I tried to suggest I'd taken a fancy to the hotel

in the hope I might catch the director's eye and he'd have me stay on after the fork lunch for the following episode which involved a full-blown weekend. So I acted an interest in the soft furnishings, running my fingers over the formica and admiring the carpet on the walls. Only Rex came over to say that they'd put me in a musquash coat to suggest I was a sophisticated woman, could I try and look as if I was more at home in a three star motel. I wasn't at home in that sort of motel I can tell you. I said to the man I'd been put next to, whom I took to be my husband, I said, "Curtains in orange nylon and no place mats, there's not even the veneer of civilization." He said, "Don't talk to me about orange nylon. I was on a jury once that sentenced Richard Attenborough to death." We'd been told to indulge in simulated cocktail chit-chat so we weren't being unprofessional, talking. That is something I pride myself on, actually: I am professional to my fingertips.

Whatever it is I'm doing, even if it's just a walk-on, I must must must get involved, right up to the hilt. I can't help it. People who know me tell me I'm a very serious person, only it's funny, I never get to do serious parts. The parts I get offered tend to be fun-loving girls who take life as it comes and aren't afraid of a good time should the opportunity arise-type-thing. I'd call them vivacious if that didn't carry overtones of the outdoor life. In a nutshell I play the kind of girl who's very much at home on a bar stool and who seldom has to light her own cigarette. That couldn't be more different from me because for a start I'm not a smoker. I mean, I can smoke if a part requires it. I'm a professional and you need as many strings to your bow as you can in this game. But, having said that, I'm not a natural smoker and what's more I surprise my friends by not being much of a party-goer either. (Rather curl up with a book quite frankly.) *However*, this particular party I'd made an exception. Thing was I'd met this ex-graphic designer who was quitting the rat race and going off to Zimbabwe and he was having a little farewell do in the flat of an air hostess friend of his in

Mitcham, would I go? I thought, well it's not every day you get somebody going off to Zimbabwe, so I said "Yes"and I'm glad I did because that's how I got the audition.

Now my hobby is people. I collect people. So when I saw this interesting-looking man in the corner, next thing is I find myself talking to him. I said, "You look an interesting person. I'm interested in interesting people. Hallo." He said, "Hallo." I said, "What do you do?" He said, "I'm in films." I said, "Oh, that's interesting, anything in the pipeline?" He said, "As a matter of fact, yes," and starts telling me about this project he's involved in making videos for the overseas market, targeted chiefly on West Germany. I said, "Are you the producer?" He said, "No, but I'm on the production side, the name's Spud." I said, "Spud! That's an interesting name, mine's Lesley." He said, "As it happens, Lesley, we've got a problem at the moment. Our main girl has had to drop out because her back's packed in. Are you an actress?" I said, "Well, Spud, interesting that you should ask because as a matter of fact I am." He said, "Will you excuse me one moment, Lesley?" I said, "Why, Spud, where are you going?" He said, "I'm going to go away, Lesley, and make one phone call."

It transpires the director is seeing possible replacements the very next day, at an address in West London. Spud said, "It's interesting because I'm based in Ealing." I said, "Isn't that West London?" He said, "It is. Where's your stamping ground?" I said, "Bromley, for my sins." He said, "That's a far-ish cry. Why not bed down at my place?" I said, "Thank you, kind sir, but I didn't fall off the Christmas tree yesterday." He said, "Lesley, I have a son studying hotel management and a daughter with one kidney. Besides, I've got my sister-in-law staying. She's come up for the Ideal Home Exhibition."

The penny began to drop when I saw the tattoo. My experience of tattoos is that they're generally confined to the lower echelons, and when I saw his vest it had electrician written all over it. I never even saw the sister-in-law. Still traipsing round Olympia probably.

Music. The lights fade, then come up again on the same setting, with **LESLEY** *in the same dressing gown. It is afternoon. The music fades.*

I know something about personality. There's a chapter about it in this book I'm reading. It's by an American. They're the experts where personality is concerned, the Americans; they've got it down to a fine art. It makes a big thing of interviews so I was able to test it out.

The director's not very old, blue suit, tie loose, sleeves turned back. I put him down as a university type. Said his name was Simon, which I instantly committed to memory. (That's one of the points in the book: purpose and use of name.) He said, "Forgive this crazy time." I said, "I'm sorry, Simon?" He said, "Like 9.30 in the morning." I said, "Simon. The day begins when the day begins. You're the director." He said, "Yes, well. Can you tell me what you've done?"

I said, "Where you may have seen me, Simon, is in *Tess*. Roman Polanski. I played Chloë." "I don't remember her," he said. "Is she in the book?" I said, "Book? This is *Tess*, Simon. Roman Polanski. Chloë was the one on the back of the farm cart wearing a shawl. The shawl was original nineteenth-century embroidery. All hand done. Do you know Roman, Simon?" He said, "Not personally, no." I said, "Physically he's quite small but we had a very good working relationship. Very open." He said that was good, because Travis in the film was very open. I said, "Travis? That's an interesting name, Simon." He said, "Yes. She's an interesting character, she spends most of the film on the deck of a yacht." I said, "Yacht? That's interesting, Simon. My brother-in-law has a small power boat berthed at Ipswich." He said, "Well! Snap!" I said, "Yes, small world!" He said, "In an ideal world, Lesley, I'd be happy to sit here chatting all day but I have a pretty tight schedule and, although I know it's only 9.30 in the morning, could I see you in your bra and panties?" I said, "9.30 in the morning, 10.30 at night, we're both professionals, Simon, but", I said, "could we just put another

bar on because if we don't you won't be able to tell my tits from goose-pimples." He had to smile. That was another of the sections in the personality book: humour, usefulness of in breaking the ice.

When I'd got my things off he said, "Well, you've passed the physical. Now the oral. Do you play chess?" I said, "Chess, Simon? Do you mean the musical?" He said, "No, the game." I said, "As a matter of fact, Simon, I don't. Is that a problem?" He said, "Not if you water-ski. Travis is fundamentally an outdoor girl, but we thought it might be fun to make her an intellectual on the side." I said, "Well, Simon, I'm very happy to learn both chess and water-skiing, but could I make a suggestion? Reading generally indicates a studious temperament and I'm a very convincing reader," I said, "because it's something I frequently do in real life." I could tell he was impressed. And so I said, "Another suggestion I could make would be to kit Travis out with some glasses. Spectacles, Simon. These days they're not unbecoming and if you put Travis in spectacles with something in paperback, that says it all." He said, "You've been most helpful." I said, "The paperback could be something about the environment or, if you want to maintain the water-skiing theme, something about water-skiing and the environment possibly. I mean, Lake Windermere."

He was showing me out by this time but I said, "One last thought, Simon, and that is a briefcase. Put Travis in a bikini and give her a briefcase and you get the best of every possible world." He said, "I'm most grateful. You've given me a lot of ideas." I said, "Goodbye, Simon. I hope we can work together." The drill for saying goodbye is you take the person's hand and then put your other hand over theirs, clasp it warmly while at the same time looking into their eyes, smiling and reiterating their name. This lodges you in their mind apparently. So I did all that, only going downstairs I had another thought and I popped back. He was on the phone. "You won't believe this," he was saying. I said, "Don't hang up, Simon, only I just wanted to make it crystal clear

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