SAMUEL FRENCH SAMPLE PERUSAL

This sample is an excerpt - an appetiser, if you will - from a full Samuel French title.

This sample is just for you to try out, and it can't be used for performance, downloaded, printed or distributed in any way.

Take it for a whirl and see if it tickles your fancy!

For more information about licensing this or other shows, or to browse thousands more plays and theatre books to buy please visit our website.

www.samuelfrench.co.uk
or, in the US www.samuelfrench.com

SF PERUSALS

THE ART OF COARSE ACTING

Michael Green's Comic Classic

SAMUEL FRENCH

samuelfrench.co.uk

ISBN 978-0-573-11002-3

www.samuelfrench.co.uk
www.samuelfrench.com

First published by Hutchinson & Co Publishers Ltd 1964.
Reprinted three times (Arrow Books edition 1970)
Reprinted 1975, 1976, 1980, 1985, 1988, 1994, 2014

Plays by MICHAEL GREEN
published and licensed by Samuel French

Four Plays for Coarse Actors
Streuth
I Fornicazione
A Collier's Tuesday Tea
All's Well That Ends As You Like It

The Coarse Acting Show 2
Moby Dick
The Cherry Sisters
Last Call for Breakfast
Henry the Tenth (Part Seven)

The Third Great Coarse Acting Show
A Fish in Her Kettle by David Pearson
Present Slaughter by Jane Dewey and Don Starkey
The Vagabond Prince by Simon Brett with music and lyrics by John Gould
Stalag 69 by Michael Green
Julius and Cleopatra by Michael Green

Coarse Acting Strikes Back
Trapped
Oedocles, King of Thebes
Pride at Southhanger Park by Rupert Bean
Cinderella

Umlaut Prince of Düsseldorf

Haggard – An Entertainment by Eric Chappell based on characters created by Michael Green

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although the Questors Theatre, Ealing, have tried to deny it, the author is very grateful to them for help with the illustrations.

The author is also grateful to the actors' trade union Equity for not expelling him.

Permission to quote from George Bernard Shaw's work was granted by The Society of Authors on behalf of the Bernard Shaw Estate.

Permission to quote from T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* was granted by Faber and Faber Ltd as publishers.

Permission to quote from *Summoned by Bells* by John Betjeman was granted by John Murray (Publishers) Ltd.

The author would like to thank his wife Christine for her great help in producing this new edition and also David and Sonia Pearson for photographic research.

ILLUSTRATIONS

In photograph section:

Line drawings

I dedicate this book to:
The Masque Theatre, Northampton
The Crescent Theatre, Birmingham
Richmond Shakespeare Society
and
The Questors Theatre, Ealing
all of whom survived me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Green was born in Leicester, England in 1927 and started writing as a reporter on the local newspaper. He has never been a lumberjack or sold hot dogs. Since publication in 1960 of his first book, *The Art of Coarse Rugby*, he has been a full-time author specialising in telling the grim truth about such pursuits as golf, sailing, drinking, moving and acting, and his books have sold over a million copies world-wide. In 1977 he took a company of amateurs to The Edinburgh Festival with a stage version of *The Art of Coarse Acting* called *The Coarse Acting Show*, and it was hailed as the comedy hit of the season. Two years later, *The Coarse Acting Show 2* was awarded a "Fringe First" at The Edinburgh Festival and then transferred to London's West End for three months. But Michael remained modest. "I have a great deal to be modest about," he said.

FOREWORD

Why a foreword? Why indeed. Why must the show go on? Well the show need not necessarily go on, as I have tried to show in succeeding pages, but the Foreword is going on, simply for the purpose of thanking all those who have ever acted with me for their part in some extraordinary experiences. One of the most enjoyable things about my sordid acting career has been the friendships I have made, and I hope some of the friendships survive this book. Some, I am afraid, will not. While on the subject of the wonderful friendships one makes in the theatre I should like to say that I publicly forgive the man in Birmingham who borrowed several pounds off me just before he went on stage and who was never seen again; and the person at Ealing who has got all my make-up, including the vital materials for Stock Character No. 3.

Perhaps I might also take the opportunity of appealing for the return of my complete Shakespeare, the coin which I used to twist in my tights, my braces and – but why go on? The list is endless.

Michael Green

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION: 50 YEARS OF COARSE ACTING

When this book was first published in 1964 the Editorial Director of Hutchinson Publishers said, "I must warn you Michael, we have never successfully sold a book on amateur acting." So it is rather gratifying to be writing a new introduction to celebrate half a century in print, latterly with Samuel French. There have been umpteen reprints and the phrase Coarse Acting for a misplaced performance seems to have passed into the language; at any rate, it was the answer to a clue in *The Times* Crossword and a question in a BBC TV quiz.

One difficulty with a long lasting book is that life changes over fifty years. When the book was first published in 1964 "God Save the Queen" was still played before Performances, the Lord Chamberlain censored scripts and audiences smoked throughout the show, although there was no interruption from mobile phones, as they hadn't been invented. Telegrams filled the dressing-room, sometimes with a dubious message from a jealous actor who hadn't been cast such as:

GOOD LUCK DESPITE DREADFUL DRESS REHEARSAL – RODNEY

Sound effects were either produced live or played on tape or vinyl gramophone records. I must be one of the few left who has shaken a sheet of tin to imitate thunder or turned the handle of a wind machine.

But Coarse Acting is more than the mere mechanics of production. It's been around as long as drama. Shakespeare wrote the first Coarse Acting play with the mechanicals' efforts to stage the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as hilarious today as any modern spoof. Contemporary companies have their Bottom the Weaver and Peter Quince. So although I've amended the book to remove some of the more glaring anachronisms, too much revision would be out of place, rather like putting an outboard motor in *Three Men in a Boat*.

A later development has been stage versions of Coarse Acting (deliberate productions, that is, not accidental ones). This started off with Coarse Acting competitions at The Questors Theatre, Ealing, London, in which various teams competed in displays of theatrical mayhem and the idea spread. At The Questors, the Royal Shakespeare Company entered a team consisting of Roger Rees and Tony Pedley and performed the murder scene from *Julius Caesar*, with the difference that Caesar became incensed at being painfully stabbed by Brutus, and, snatching the dagger, chased him round the stage and out of the auditorium. Something not very different had actually happened at the same theatre a few years previously when a stage sword fight finished up as a genuine brawl. In a contest held to raise funds for the new Salisbury Playhouse, the National Theatre sent down a production notable for a remarkable performance by the butler, who aged ten years every time he entered the room, so he started up about thirty and ended up about ninety.

All this culminated in shows based on the book. In 1977 I took *The Coarse Acting Show* to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with a company from The Questors, and it was well received. The show simply portrayed an evening with an incompetent amateur company. Two years later we put on a sequel at Edinburgh, *The Coarse Acting Show Two*, and this transferred to the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, the first (official) appearance of Coarse Acting in the West End. Two more shows followed and all four are published by Samuel French, forming natural companions to this book.

Incidentally, The Questors' 1980 competition spawned a macabre coincidence. Timothy West very generously agreed to adjudicate and chose as the winner a play in which a character was supposed to cut his wrist accidentally on stage and gradually sink into unconsciousness. A week later exactly the same thing happened to Timothy. Playing in his one-man show *Beecham* he cut himself on a broken glass, struggled to continue, failed and went to hospital to have twenty stitches in his hand while the performance was abandoned. Which only goes to prove truth can be as strange as fiction.

If I thought the original volume exhausted the subject how wrong I was. I've received shoals of letters over the years detailing fresh stage horrors, such as the experience of an actor who rammed his spear through a scenery flat, wounding a passing ASM. A girl wrote to say she wrecked the college *Pygmalion* by getting her parasol jammed in a crack in the stage, where it stuck so firmly they had to leave it for the rest of the play. Some students from Cambridge University sent details of a club they had founded for Coarse lighting operators, The Shaft of Darkness Society.

HRH The Prince of Wales visited *Coarse Acting Two* at The Shaftesbury Theatre and revealed he experienced Coarse Acting at school, where an English master, having successfully put on *Richard III*, produced Gilbert and Sullivan in the same manner, with disastrous results. HRH also recalled a royal tour when a female dancer curtsied so deeply at the end of a performance she injured her back and had to be carried from the stage frozen in a curtsy position. My own experiences have broadened too. When I wrote the original book I never dreamed a few years later I would fall off-stage at a dress rehearsal, break a leg, dislocate my elbow, and be carried into the casualty ward of the local hospital dressed as an eighteenth-century pirate. It was the annual Christmas romp and the costume spared nothing. I was dressed in a coat and knee-breeches of the period and heavily made-up to look evil. One eye was hidden by a patch. My right arm terminated in a steel hook. The left leg was strapped up and a wooden leg attached to the knee. A parrot was sewn on one shoulder and a dagger stuck from my blood covered chest.

The nurse's surprise may be imagined but she controlled herself nobly and started to deal with the stage wounds while ignoring the real ones. After an unsuccessful attempt to make the parrot fly away she grabbed the dagger and pulled but it wouldn't come.

At this point she sensibly decided to send for the doctor who arrived all bustle and efficiency and disguised his surprise at the apparition on the bed with an effort.

"And what seems to be the trouble?" he said with masterly understatement.

"It's my leg," I explained, pawing the air feebly with my hook in the general direction of the lower limbs.

He looked down at the bottle-shaped wooden peg. "Mmmm", he muttered, "it's not a very good one. I'll make an appointment for you to have a new one fitted tomorrow."

But enough. We have all suffered in the cause of drama, and the more true the story the more unbelievable the experience. I just hope this revised volume gives as much pleasure as the original version appeared to do.

Michael Green
London 2014

PROLOGUE

(Preferably spoken by Mrs Bracegirdle)

Now doth the Muse of Drama stir this age
And thousands hear the lure of the stage.
Then see the truckling city clerk at night
Transformed into a royal and noble sight.
Bedecked in tinplate armour watch him tower,
A swelling monarch for his petty hour.
The humble typist sheds her office weeds
And lo! We have a Carmen straight from Leeds!
Fear not, all amateurs are not the same,
Some Little Theatres higher standards claim,
And hold with fervour nigh obsessional
That amateurs are equal to professional.
Yet amateur, profession'l, clown or Lear,
Someone must bear the message, grasp the spear.
With crêpe hair all askew, a parley hold,
Or tell the guests that dinner's getting cold.
It is for these poor servants of the Muse,
Coarse Actors all, that I this volume choose.
A dedication make, both brief and short
To those with cardboard spears at Agincourt.

1

An Introduction to Coarse Acting

"I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines..." Hamlet

What is a Coarse Actor? – the unhappiness with Askew – the Unpleasantness at Birmingham – instant Shakespeare – a clanger in Wagner

Many years ago I was in an amateur production of a play with a friend called Askew. He is one of those people who would like to be successful on stage but has no intention of doing anything about it. Whenever he walks on he seems to be wearing stilts inside his trousers. Together we have wrecked many a carefully planned production.

In this play four of us had a whole scene in which we were merely required to sit at the back of the stage and play cards, occasionally making some interjection or other. One night, to while away the time, we played a real game in which we became completely immersed, while the main action continued in front of us.

The only snag was Askew had not bothered to learn his lines but simply wrote them on the back of his playing cards. This was fine until he accidentally played the card with his lines on and I trumped it and shuffled it into the pack.

There was about fifteen seconds before the cue came. Playing cards flew in all directions and half the pack went under the table where Askew crawled on his hands and knees looking for the vital card. The audience ignored the main characters and concentrated on us, thinking something desperate was about to happen under the card table. Eventually the cue came with

three of us still under the table, there was a horrid pause and then with a cry of triumph Askew found his card and bellowed forth his two miserable lines from a kneeling position.

It was only afterwards that he realised he had found the wrong card and said the lines from the next act, which made gibberish of the plot. Moral: always write your lines on an ace.

That is Coarse Acting.

Coarse in this sense is nothing to do with "crude"; it is the way things get done in life by ordinary people as opposed to the experts. Thus, we are taught that yachtsmen are gallant seadogs using strange, marine language, whereas in *The Art of Coarse Sailing* I define a Coarse Sailor as one who, in a crisis, forgets all that nautical rubbish about port and starboard and shouts, "For God's sake turn left, you fool."

As for that legend about rugby players being young giants with thighs like oak trees and impervious to pain, that may be true for some, but down on the local park there will be plenty of shivering sales reps praying for the game to finish so the agony will cease. Hence the definition of Coarse Rugby: "A game played by fewer than fifteen a side, at least half of whom never wanted to turn out in the first place."

So what is a Coarse Actor? (I use the word to include actress.) It's difficult to find an all-embracing description, but since they often have trouble with their words a good definition might be: one who can remember the lines but not the order in which they come. It is perhaps not an entirely satisfactory definition and a friend suggests a Coarse Actor is one who can remember the pauses but not the line.

However, that definition falls down because most Coarse Actors don't have any pauses. They regard their lines rather as a machine gunner regards a belt of ammunition: something to be shot off in the vague direction of the enemy and then replaced as rapidly as possible. Other definitions which may prove accurate are:

One who knows when to come on-stage but not where.

One whose eyebrows are attached to their feet
(so every facial expression involves the whole body as well).

One who limps on both legs simultaneously.

One who acts with their elbows. (This is quite common. On the Coarse stage an injured leg is usually accompanied by a distorted arm on the same side which goes up and down with the leg. Some actors and actresses even *sneer* with their elbows, the joint being raised along with the side of the mouth. Try it sometime in a mirror.)

One who plays all parts exactly the same.

One who knows everyone else's lines better than their own (that is certainly true of Askew).

One who remembers the last play better than the one they're actually in. (Since writing that I've met somebody who knew the *next* play better than the one they were in.)

An irate treasurer of a theatre group wrote angrily, "Surely a Coarse Actor is one who makes the leading lady pregnant and then fails to pay their subscription," but I feel this is a special instance. In any case, it is not clear whether he objected to the pregnancy or failure to pay the sub.

Certainly, one of the infallible signs Coarse Drama is going on is that the traditional roles of actor and audience are reversed. The actor is being himself while the audience are playing a part, heavily pretending to enjoy the show, struggling to laugh at unfunny jokes and so on. Watching a bad show can be more exhausting than three hours on stage.

There are many sides to Coarse Acting. It isn't just forgetting lines or hamming it up. One of its most common forms is the cliché-performance, like those dreadful small parts in Hollywood costume epics, not to mention Shakespearean crowds. Some Coarse Actors are quite good, but accident prone. Even famous players are not immune. One is said to have had a terrible experience in *Tamburlaine* at the National during the scene when four captive kings are forced to pull his chariot. With a cry of "On to Persepolis ho!" he cracked his whip and they strained mightily, only to find the chariot had seized up (it was one of those over-realistic National Theatre props that weigh more than the original). Once more they tried and failed, whereupon he leaned over the front and hissed angrily, "Stop pulling and lift the bastard!"

For many Coarse Actors, pistols never fire, doors stick, buttons come off at vital moments. They will come on stage, bringing down the scenery by forcing a door and then march confidently round the set revealing that their trousers are undone and they have coloured underwear, oblivious to the fact the rest of the cast are cringing with embarrassment. But they have a pathetic belief the audience never noticed. "Believe me old chap, the audience never noticed a thing" is the hallmark of the Coarse Actor.

Another group can never be natural. They have to stand out at all costs. They seem to have a terrible compulsion to be maimed. Whole armies limp before they even get into battle. Complete villages of peasants – men and women – go hoppity-hop.

Perhaps it all starts in youth when, in a moustache made from burnt cork, the trembling infant is pushed reluctantly on stage to mouth his halting lines while the girl opposite bursts into tears for no reason at all. It is then the child discovers, that awful though he is, several hundred people are paying attention to him. It is too much for the immature mind.

Certainly the tendency to limp starts early. I remember a local Nativity play in which the Three Wise Men (all aged seven) entered in apparently the last stages of arthritis. As I said to the headmistress, "It doesn't say in the Bible the Three Wise Men were club-footed," but she didn't see the joke. But then school plays are particularly disaster-ridden. They are the only form of theatre where the cast are liable to be sick all over the stage.

Naturally, most Coarse Actors are amateurs, although with the growth of "professional" fringe companies in which nobody gets paid anything except a share of the loss, I'm not sure this is as true as it was. But Coarse professionals don't usually survive long. Even so, there are plenty around, like the elderly chap who was cast for a television programme I wrote. It was subtle piece of writing, of which I was rather proud. All he had to do was spit. If I remember correctly the dialogue went something like this:

ANNOUNCER But there were those who said the whole voyage was useless.

Cut to close-up of **HOUSEWIFE.**

HOUSEWIFE Seems silly to me.

Cut to close-up of **BUSINESSMAN.**

BUSINESSMAN They'll never do it.

Cut to close-up of **OLD SAILOR.**

OLD SAILOR *(spits)*

Good stuff, eh? Eventually we got to the telerecording and the director warned everyone that this was costing umpteen pounds a second, so treat it as a performance boys and girls, and good luck, etc., etc. The cameras started and all went well until five minutes from the end, when they cut to the old sailor. There was a thick silence for some five seconds and then he simply said, "I'm terribly sorry, old boy, I've forgotten what you wanted me to do."

I don't think he ever got another part. They did not ask me to write any more scripts.

Amateur acting is, however, littered with ex-professionals. It is never quite plain as to why they are ex. When asked why they quit the stage they usually have some fantastic yarn about having quarrelled with Cameron Mackintosh over a major West End role.

I once acted with an old pro who had travelled all over the globe. When he performed Shylock in Bulgaria the audience hissed. He thought he was going to be lynched until someone explained that hissing is a sign of approval over there.

This old chap had a sort of *droit de seigneur* on all our Shakespearean "heavies". The first time I met him he was in the *Merchant of Venice,* in which he was Shylock, of course, and I was astonished at the first rehearsal when he started to make a series of moves that bore no relation to the set, since one move consisted of tottering brokenly up a huge staircase, and we didn't have a staircase – he was supposed to go off left behind a curtain.

The director, rather understandably, protested.

"Laddie," came the reply, "you can't teach an old dog new tricks. These moves were good enough for Sir Barry Jackson and they ought to be good enough for you."

But there are certain basic assumptions about a professional production – such as usually having a full cast – that rule out the best in Coarse drama. In fact it is one of the hallmarks that, in the same way as Coarse Rugby or Cricket sides never have a full team, a Coarse play never has a full company.

I shall not easily forget a production of *Henry V* which coincided with an influenza epidemic. We were always one player short, in any case. It was a sort of floating gap, filled each night with whomever could get into the messenger's costume in time. If nobody achieved this then the stage manager bellowed something from the wings and the King edged his way across and held converse with an invisible man.

The epidemic, however, made things much worse. No one knew what part he would have to play next. Mysterious messages would be left at the office during the day such as "Mr Green, someone rang to say you are Lord Scroop tonight. Does that make sense?"

Worse still, you would turn up at the theatre all unsuspecting, and be making-up as Bardolph or some such harmless role, when the stage manager would approach, thrust a heap of armour into your arms and say: "Bert's ill. You're doubling the Earl of Essex tonight."

Since there was no time to learn the appropriate lines, one came on stage, usually from the wrong side, groping about in ill-fitting armour and trying to read from the script at the same time.

It is hardly surprising that as a result I died after a sword fight which I should have won. Actually it was a little awkward because the other chap also died and we both tottered away clutching our vitals without having touched each other.

There was a nasty silence and the audience became restive. I managed to roll over and look at my script, which was pasted inside my shield, and saw I was supposed to make a speech over my opponent's bleeding corpse. Fortunately I had enough presence of mind to stagger to my feet in a manner which

suggested I was merely winded and say a quick epitaph over my enemy (in view of the delay I cut the real speech and just muttered something about dust and a heap of bones).

The climax came when even with everyone doubling two or three parts there just weren't enough men to go round. The only thing left to do was to cut the play as we went along, omitting those on the sick list.

It was the quickest performance of *Henry V* on record. Whole episodes of English history vanished. I don't think the Battle of Agincourt ever took place. In the end we discovered we had done it in under 90 minutes, which as far as I know is a world record.

Yet however much Shakespeare suffers at the hands of Coarse Actors, they suffer for him too.

For me and many others a Shakespeare play is a mad whirl. I begin by rushing on stage and bellowing a line like "My Lord, the French, with ill-advised speed do..." I am never allowed to go further because the King interrupts with an endless speech about what he's going to do to those Frogs, rebels, Scots, etc.

For the rest of the evening I rush through the dressing-room, changing beards and costumes every so often as I try to carry a spear for both sides, until finally, clad in insanitary and evil-smelling armour I am spitted to death in the last battle, and die grovelling on a dusty floor with the hole in my tights exposed to the stalls.

Sometimes I die twice, or even three times. Coarse Actors are little better than sword-fodder.

Another common part for Coarse Actors is that of Shakespearean clown, or more often, assistant clown. Unfortunately, humour has changed a great deal in 400 years and Elizabethan comics can be the unfunniest parts ever written. Just compare the hilarious lines Shakespeare gives to his serious characters ("Ah me, my uncle's spirit is in these stones, now heaven take my soul and England take my bones" as he writes in *King John*) with the stuff he dishes out to the comedians.

Much of this is incomprehensible to a modern audience so the Coarse Actor will find himself trying to wring laughter from a speech something like, "By the Mass, ye are as addle-pated as

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

Please visit our website to buy the full script, apply for a license to perform this show (if it's available), or to explore hundreds of similar titles.

www.samuelfrench.co.uk
or, in the US www.samuelfrench.com

To be the first to know about new books, licensing releases, and enjoy other theatre-related larks, do follow us on our spangley social media channels.

Samuel French London

SamuelFrenchLtd

SF **PERUSALS**