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CONCORD
THEATRICALS

HANSARD

by Simon Woods

SAMUEL FRENCH

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FIRST PERFORMANCE

Hansard was first performed at The National Theatre on 22 August 2019. The cast was as follows:

DIANA	LINDSAY DUNCAN
ROBIN	ALEX JENNINGS
DIRECTOR	SIMON GODWIN
MOVEMENT DIRECTOR	SHELLEY MAXWELL
SET AND COSTUME DESIGNER	HILDEGARD BECHTLER
LIGHTING DESIGNER	JACKIE SHEMESH
SOUND DESIGNER	CHRISTOPHER SHUTT
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR	EMILY BURNS
COMPANY VOICE WORK	JEANNETTE NELSON
VIDEO CONTENT	ISSAC MADGE
MUSIC	MICHAEL BRUCE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There are stage directions in the text that correspond to Hildegard Bechtler's design for the original production. They suggest that the action all takes place in one room and they demand an Aga, curtains, cupboards and so on. Please feel free to ignore them.

The only thing that feels important is that the characters come and go in some way, so that each of them has moments alone on stage.

If it's practical, then two or more distinct spaces might be ideal. I often had the feeling as I was writing that conversations were happening between rooms – that there was an apartness to their proximity.

The only other thing to say about the design is that the clutter under the table is important. The pulling out of boxes and bags and *stuff* acts both as a kind of scene change and a visual metaphor. As does tidying away at the end. I suppose this could be achieved with a cupboard instead.

The final thing to say is that variety of tone and pace and pitch feel like the key to the play. As important as sharpness of the dialogue and the ferocity of the emotions, and the moments of stillness and silence and tenderness. It should feel like a continual game of approach and retreat, as they test each others limits, and their own.

Simon Woods, June 2020

CHARACTERS

It doesn't really matter how old they are. Somewhere between fifty and seventy, I imagine. I've taken out most of the dates from their back story so that age isn't an issue. The important thing is that you should believe that they once adored each other, and that it might be possible again.

ROBIN – has the almost hysterical verbal energy of a man who has never confronted his feelings. He speaks in a series of verbal jack-in-a-box escapes from emotional intimacy or truthfulness. There has to be a relish and a verbal exuberance to him.

DIANA – is dazzling. She ought to have been something wonderful. But somehow, unbearably, here she is…

Saturday 27th May, 1988.

Some time after 11 o'clock. It's a sunny morning, but the curtains are still closed.

We are in a country house in Oxfordshire. Georgian. Good bones, but not large.

Some suggestion of the reality of the building feels as though it might be useful: this is a house with a porch full of battered Barbours, wellies, sleeveless puffers, an assortment of walking sticks. An AGA. It's a house with good furniture. Cupboards full of inherited china.

If a naturalistic set feels right, then there should be something that prevents it from feeling like a home, though. No photographs anywhere, none of the cheerful carnage of a family house. Not quite enough furniture, perhaps?

Perhaps we glimpse what is beyond the house? The gold and green of the Cotswolds? Some gesture of the garden? Of the trees that surround the building?

Perhaps not.

Perhaps none of this.

The only thing that's indispensable is a long dining table that is used for storage rather than entertaining. There should be stuff crammed underneath it, spilling out onto the chairs around it: an ancient toy car, a lamp, an old cine projector, lots of plastic bag... and then boxes – as many as possible, and of all different shapes and sizes.

Something about the way things are arranged on top of the table must show us that this set-up is permanent.

There's an Anglepoise lamp, perhaps even more than one, bent over some trays of puzzle pieces. Piles of books and of post. A tablecloth that looks as though it's been in place for years.

All this belongs to **DIANA** *and* **ROBIN HESKETH.** *Both are in late middle age.*

If **DIANA** *had her ambitions nurtured and her intelligence taken seriously, she would have been a successful publisher. Or maybe a broadcaster in the Joan Bakewell mode. She probably had a book in her too, though she never found it. Certainly she's too bright to have lead the life she has. The result is a complex combination of capability and regret. Part sumptuous intelligence, part brittle self-loathing.*

ROBIN*'s ambitions, on the other hand, have always been taken seriously. Every door he has ever encountered has been held open for him. Eton, Oxford, the bar, Parliament. He hardly even had to learn to push. Now a Conservative MP and junior minister in Margaret Thatcher's recently re-elected government, he has the absolute, unquestioning self-confidence of the successful public-school-educated Englishman. He is patrician without being pompous. Powerful without having to demonstrate his power. Privileged without being aware of it. He is also charming.*

When the play begins, he is just returning home from an overnight trip to Leeds, where he appeared, the night before, on Any Questions.

As **ROBIN** *enters, he is humming snatches of "Happy Birthday" to himself. Cheerfully, he puts his things down. Suddenly he catches sight of something out through the window. Horror-struck.*

ROBIN Oh no!

Looking out into the garden / the audience.

Not again.

LEAVE ME ALONE!

DIANA They never will, you know.

ROBIN *hasn't been aware of* **DIANA***'s presence until now and ideally nor have we.*

ROBIN Diana?

DIANA 'Fraid so, darling.

ROBIN *(exaggerated amazement)* My God, she's still alive!

This makes **DIANA** *laugh.*

DIANA Still breathing away.

ROBIN Well done you –

DIANA Still hauling my carcass round the kitchen.

ROBIN Ah, but what a carcass it is. Look at that, ladies and gentlemen! She's still got it –

DIANA Do I really?

ROBIN Age shall not weary her, nor the years condemn...

ROBIN *has put down his bags and is heading back towards the hall.*

DIANA There we are.

Miss Havisham, eat your heart out.

ROBIN *(offstage)* Miss what?

DIANA Never mind.

That's the hope, though, is it? Get back one weekend and find me face down in the catmint. Drowned in the bath. I can see it must be terribly disappointing.

ROBIN *(offstage)* I'm spending a penny –

DIANA Especially when one thinks of the poor old health service.

ROBIN *(offstage)* I can't hear –

DIANA Because you're turning them away in droves, aren't you? They're dying in the corridors, and I can't even catch a bit of shingles.

You know what I blame?

ROBIN *(offstage)* Me, I imagine.

DIANA The Cotswolds. Look at them. The cow parsley frothing along the hedgerows, the scent of freshly cut hay. Christ, one could go on forever.

ROBIN *re-enters.*

You know what we need? If you're ever going to get rid of me. A dual carriage way.

ROBIN An –

DIANA A road. Steady stream of heavy goods vehicles. Right down the middle of the valley.

ROBIN *is looking at* **DIANA**, *trying to work out what's going on.*

You could make it happen, couldn't you? It's your constituency.

ROBIN I missed the beginning.

DIANA Open up the ozone layer –

ROBIN Are you alright?

DIANA I'm thriving, Robin. This is it!

ROBIN You're not dressed –

DIANA The odd self-inflicted fracture aside, I'm in relentlessly good health –

ROBIN It's after eleven.

DIANA No getting rid of me –

ROBIN And you know what day it is –

DIANA I suppose there's always smoking.

ROBIN I'm sorry?

ROBIN *gives up and goes to open the curtains.*

DIANA How many do you think one would have to get through a day to give oneself a really good shot at cancer –

ROBIN Oh for goodness sake!

DIANA Ten do you think? Twenty?

ROBIN Don't be disgusting –

DIANA No, you're right – course you are. *(As though full of remorse)* I'm sorry.

ROBIN Anyway –

DIANA Because it's such an unattractive way to go, isn't it? All that hair tufting out in the shower. There we are.

Dazzling smile.

Vanity prevails yet again.

ROBIN Are you going to be like this all day?

DIANA Do you know? I think I am –

ROBIN Oh good… excellent.

Suddenly **ROBIN** *is walking purposefully towards* **DIANA**, *peering right at her.*

DIANA But then you didn't think you'd get away with it, did you?

ROBIN Sorry?

DIANA I mean, the news does reach us out here in the provinces – what is it?

ROBIN *is looking at* **DIANA***'s face.*

ROBIN I'm just…

DIANA*'s hand instinctively goes to her cheek –.*

DIANA What?

ROBIN No, it's no good.

DIANA What are you doing?

ROBIN I was trying to remember why I married you.

Despite herself, this makes **DIANA** *laugh. In this moment in which her guard comes down,* **ROBIN** *approaches.*

And why I still come back to you like this. That's the real question. Week after week. Flogging my way down the motorway. Why do I put myself through it?

DIANA Oh I don't know, Robin.

Guilt, I imagine –

ROBIN Sorry?

DIANA Well it's either that or the garden –

ROBIN Oh *don't.*

DIANA What?

ROBIN It's unbearable –

DIANA The guilt?

ROBIN The garden.

Off **DIANA***'s quizzical look.*

Don't tell me you haven't noticed?

DIANA Noticed?

The damage! Look at it!

Oh the *damage* –

ROBIN Again –

DIANA No I did see that – of course I did. I'm so sorry.

DIANA *has joined* **ROBIN** *at the window.*

Because it's heart-breaking –

ROBIN Well I think so –

DIANA To see it in that sort of state –

ROBIN Exactly –

DIANA Ravaged like that –

ROBIN Yes –

DIANA Decimated –

ROBIN I know –

DIANA Whole country in tatters –

ROBIN What? –

DIANA And yet for some extraordinary reason they all keep voting Conservative.

Dazzling smile.

What's wrong with them? Because you think they'd learn, wouldn't you? At some point?

ROBIN Ha ha.

DIANA And I'm always telling them not to vote for you –

ROBIN Oh are you –

DIANA I wander the streets of Witney, telling them –

ROBIN Oh good –

DIANA I accost them in the supermarket –

ROBIN I'm so pleased –

DIANA If you'd just stop and look – this is what I say as I totter the fruit and veg aisle – you'll notice that the natural party of government is in fact unbelievably bad at it. Hopeless! One catastrophic act of national self-sabotage after another –

ROBIN Yes I was talking about the garden –

DIANA And yet like a battered wife they keep coming back to you –

ROBIN Oh do shut up, Diana –

DIANA I tell you, it's the great mystery of our time. The insatiable desire of the people of this country to be fucked by an Old Etonian –

ROBIN I was talking about the fox.

DIANA I'm sorry?

ROBIN As you know perfectly well. Look at my poor lawn.

DIANA Oh I *see* –

ROBIN It's like the Somme out there –

DIANA *(all innocence)* Oh I can't bear it, Robin – how embarrassing – because I thought you were talking about the country, you see –

ROBIN Yes alright –

DIANA This blessed plot –

ROBIN Yes –

DIANA This England –

ROBIN Oh don't start up again! Not sure I can take any more.

DIANA Go on – I can have one more go –

ROBIN No you can't!

DIANA No, alright. *(Brightly)* Wasn't bad though, was it? This stage in the day.

ROBIN It was alright.

DIANA Without a warm up.

ROBIN It was fine.

DIANA Just a sort of... standing jump.

Dazzling smile.

ROBIN Sorry?

DIANA Isn't that what it was called? No run up. Both feet together and they just hurled themselves out into the sandpit.

ROBIN I don't –

DIANA Of course you do. The standing jump, Robin. Oh come on – the moments of sporting triumph in our family have been so few and far between, you can't possibly have forgotten. That final sports day at The Dragon. The banks of the Cherwell, the distant sound of cricket balls, the car parks full of Volvos –

ROBIN What are you doing?

DIANA Nostlagia, darling. Well don't give me that look – it's more or less the entire electoral strategy of the Tory Party...

ROBIN *has had enough. He heads off upstage to do something – fill the kettle? Put it onto the hot side of the AGA?*

And he won a rosette! Didn't he? Come on, darling, make an effort –

ROBIN I suppose there's always AIDS.

DIANA I'm sorry?

ROBIN What do you think?

DIANA AIDS?

ROBIN Only you said you wanted to catch something.

ROBIN *does* **DIANA***'s dazzling smile.*

In the absence of an A road. And of course it's *terribly* infectious. Trouble with cancer, it's so hit and miss.

DIANA Yes alright –

ROBIN Go on – a bit of intravenous drug use. Some unprotected sex. You might even enjoy it. And you know what? *(Gasps – really thrilled with this idea – hand on her arm if he's close enough)* I bet we could get you a visit from Lady Di!

DIANA Sorry?

ROBIN Because she's mad about them! Isn't she! Can't keep her out of the AIDS wards. So many photographers in there, the nurses can hardly get at the patients.

DIANA Yes alright –

ROBIN Bring some press along – it could be your big moment! I'm seeing you on the front page of all the papers. And God knows you deserve it, my darling. You've waited in the wings for long enough!

DIANA Is that what I've been doing –

ROBIN All these years you've been there in the background, cheering me on. The torrents of support.

DIANA Ha –

ROBIN It's your turn to shine.

DIANA Thank you, darling –

ROBIN No it's a pleasure. It really is. I shall drive you into Cirencester after lunch –

ROBIN *turns to head back to the front door, where he has left his bags.*

DIANA You're too kind, Robin.

ROBIN *(in the doorway upstage, centre, taking the compliment with a kind of pained sincerity)* Well I am.

DIANA Too thoughtful –

ROBIN No, it's a failing. It really is.

ROBIN*'s left the room by now.*

It's why the great offices of state have eluded me.

DIANA *is alone on stage.*

DIANA I thought they'd eluded you because you didn't have the right sort of wife.

ROBIN *(offstage)* What?

DIANA That's what you normally imply.

ROBIN *(reappearing)* My dear girl, I'd never *dream* of implying that –

DIANA Poor old Robin. That's what they all think, isn't it? Lumbered with that frightful left wing woman –

ROBIN Nobody thinks that.

DIANA Of course they do.

ROBIN No, darling, I promise you. They don't think you're left wing. They think you're highly strung.

DIANA Oh fuck off –

ROBIN *exits back again.*

Beat.

And anyway, I'm not highly strung. I'm profoundly unhappy.

ROBIN *(offstage)* What did you say?

Beat.

(offstage) I didn't hear.

DIANA It doesn't matter.

Silence. **DIANA**, *alone.*

We should feel that there is something more she might say. She doesn't.

ROBIN *re-enters carrying two plastic bags and his ministerial red box.*

ROBIN *(offstage)* You know what I was trying to remember in the car.

ROBIN *reappears in the central doorway.*

Who was it that had his brain preserved?

ROBIN *has a huge pile of newspapers in his arms.*

Couldn't bear the thought that when he died, all the wonders of his mind were just going to evaporate. So he had it pickled. Do you remember? It was one of the philosophers –

DIANA *(quietly, almost to herself)* Bentham –

ROBIN We saw it at the fundraiser. UCL –

DIANA *(louder)* Bentham.

ROBIN That's it. Well done, old girl –

DIANA All still there, you see –

ROBIN I was thinking it's not a bad response, is it? Set oneself in aspic. Live on in the larder.

ROBIN *flops the papers down on the table.*

Because what will one leave behind otherwise? Really? In the final reckoning?

DIANA Oh I don't know...a deregulated financial services industry –

ROBIN What's that?

DIANA A less equal society –

ROBIN I mean it!

DIANA So do I –

ROBIN A bag of one's clothes trundling down to the charity shop. Is that the best we can hope for? One may be dead, but one's suits will still be worn.

DIANA Who needs God when you've got Sue Ryder.

ROBIN There's always Hansard, I suppose. That's some consolation. That one's been transcribed. Live on in the library of the House of Commons. Throw in an obituary of some sort, presumably. Good chap. Never quite fulfilled his early promise.

ROBIN *is walking towards the door now.*

DIANA You know who I blame?

ROBIN Ted Heath? Me too, darling. Frightful man.

ROBIN *exits very briefly again to collect his post, but it doesn't stop the flow of the dialogue, they just speak louder when he is offstage.*

Colonel Nasser possibly –

DIANA I mean your lawn. The fox.

ROBIN Oh yes?

DIANA I blame your mother.

ROBIN *(offstage)* Mummy?

DIANA All her fault –

ROBIN *(in the doorway, huge pile of post in his hands)* Diana, my mother's been dead since 1979. I'm not sure you can pin this one on her. Oh my God – unless you've had her moved?

DIANA What?

ROBIN You have! You've had her dug up and reburied in the garden. No wonder they're going beserk –

DIANA I mean because she wore one.

You remember. Awful thing with its face still on. Whiskers. Glass eyes. Slung over one shoulder –

ROBIN Oh I see –

DIANA Petrified Tom when he was small –

ROBIN And you think they're getting their revenge do you? Been looking for me ever since –

DIANA That's it –

ROBIN Sniffing their way through the home counties?

DIANA Well come on – isn't that always the story in our family?

ROBIN What?

DIANA The sins of the parents, Robin. Something rotten in the state of Lechlade. They've worked out that if you really want to

upset a middle-aged Englishman of slender emotional means, it's his lawn you want to go for. It's his little wicket.

ROBIN *stops doing his post for a moment and looks up at* **DIANA**.

ROBIN Diana?

DIANA Yes.

ROBIN What are you doing?

DIANA I'm discussing the state of the garden.

ROBIN You're not dressed.

DIANA I'm thinking it must be a metaphor for something. Mustn't it? This little patch of ground. Torn to shreds like that. Family life, do you think? State of our marriage –

ROBIN Well I wish they'd leave my analogy alone, that's all I know. *(Enjoying himself)* Go on – get the fuck off my metaphor!

ROBIN *laughs. It subsides into a kind of melancholy.*

What *do* you think it wants? In all seriousness. What do you think it's hoping to find?

DIANA I honestly don't know, Robin.

Beat. **DIANA** *can't resist.*

Roman coins, do you think?

ROBIN You don't care at all, do you?

ROBIN *looks at* **DIANA**. *He is suddenly struck by a terribly thought.*

Oh my God, you're probably feeding them!

This makes **DIANA** *laugh.*

I don't know why you're laughing. Because it was a labour of enormous love, making that lawn –

DIANA I know it was –

ROBIN And if you remember what it was like when we first got here. Great lumpy patch of field –

DIANA No I do remember –

ROBIN And all the hours I spent out there with the roller. Back and forth, week after week.

DIANA Yes I'm agreeing with you –

ROBIN And every few hours I'd come in and tell you I was ready for an inspection.

Beat. This is a moment of tenderness, of approach.

And you'd wander out in your bare feet. Babe in arms. Very serious. I've found a lump you'd say. Point at it with your big toe. More rolling required.

This makes **DIANA** *look over at* **ROBIN**. *The flicker of something soft between them. A beat.*

DIANA *(quietly)* Yes, alright.

ROBIN There we are, you see! You never believe me, but we were.

DIANA Were what?

ROBIN Happy.

DIANA Happy? No, darling, you're getting confused. That was the other one.

ROBIN The other what?

DIANA The first Mrs De Winter.

Oh lord, you haven't forgotten her as well? *(Then, as though speaking to an extremely elderly relative)* Susannah, she was called –

ROBIN Oh don't.

DIANA Lipstick. Lot of blonde hair –

ROBIN She was a very a nice woman.

DIANA I know she was –

ROBIN To whom I behaved extremely badly.

DIANA Well I know that too...

ROBIN What do you mean?

DIANA What do I...

(under her breath) Oh dear this is awkward.

(elderly relative again) I was the girl in the hotel, Robin! I was the bit on the side –

ROBIN *(laughs, playing along – mock incredulous)* No!

DIANA I know! Can you bear it. It was me, clattering against the head board. Bum in the air!

ROBIN Yes alright –

DIANA Bun in the oven. Well don't do that face. That was the high point of it all. The two star hotels. The Berni Inns.

Gorgeous smile.

It's been down hill ever since...

DIANA *moves to exit, but* **ROBIN** *stops her at the door with a shift in tone:.*

ROBIN *(tender)* We did have fun, I think. At the beginning. Didn't we? Made each other laugh.

DIANA *(sincere, quiet)* Yes.

ROBIN Those terrible suppers. And my God, you were beautiful.

DIANA *smiles at* **ROBIN**. *A kind of tenderness.*

DIANA I was desperately in love with you, Robin.

ROBIN Oh well –

DIANA And I felt lucky. I did. That you'd chosen me.

(jaunty) And the rest, as they say, is tragedy.

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