

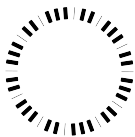
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CONCORD
THEATRICALS

THE CAGEBIRDS

A Play

by David Campton

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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CAST

THE LONG-TONGUED GOSSIP

THE MIRROR-EYED GAZER

THE MEDICATED GLOOM

THE REGULAR THUMP

THE CONSTANT TWITTING

THE GREAT GUZZLER

THE WILD ONE

THE MISTRESS

The action takes place in a room with a single large door

PRODUCTION NOTE

Although no character is based on a specific bird, they could have bird-like characteristics, particularly in movement. Bird-like appendages could be translated into human terms: there need be no beaks or plumage, but a long beak, for instance, could be indicated by a walking-stick, or extravagant plumage by a fan.

Although each bird seems to have its own particular song, the intent behind the words should be made plain. It is possible to say “pass the salt” aggressively, longingly, with passion or fear: so with these speeches, even though the meaning of the scene cuts across the words.

A room with a large, locked door.

Several Ladies sit or stand around the room. This could almost be a committee meeting, except for the fact that each lady is totally absorbed in her own thoughts.

There is a long, long, pause.

*Suddenly the **THUMP**, in response to some brooded-upon indignity, says “Huh!” very loudly. Then she is lost in her thoughts again.*

Pause.

*The **GAZER** gets out a compact mirror, and looks at herself in it – almost as though she needed urgent reassurance that her face was still there. She touches a curl or smooths an eyebrow, then puts the mirror away again.*

Pause.

*The **TWITTING** clears her throat as though about to say something, then changes her mind.*

*The **GLOOM** puts a hand to her forehead, and sighs.*

*The **GOSSIP** has a sudden intake of breath as of someone receiving dire and important news.*

*The **GUZZLE** burps.*

Then there is a pause again.

All of which, in entirely human terms, should try to suggest the occasional tweets and shuffles of birds roosting.

GOSSIP So she said to me...

Slight pause.

GLOOM Camphorated oil.

Slight pause.

GAZER Rinse and set.

GUZZLE With double cream.

THUMP Disgusting.

TWITTING I don't know, I'm sure.

THUMP } Ugh! {
GAZER } Ah! { *(speaking together)*

GUZZLE } Not forgetting the cherry on top. {
GOSSIP } All of which is a matter of opinion. { *(speaking together)*
GLOOM } What else can I expect at my age? {

TWITTING I don't know. I really don't know.

Pause. The THUMP gets up; strides to the other side of the room; looks around with mingled suspicion and aggression; then strides back and assumes her original position as though nothing had happened.

GLOOM *(suddenly, to no one in particular)* It's the knee, you know. It locks. Rigid. *(She sticks her leg out in front of her to demonstrate)* In the most awkward places – where one hesitates to call a boy scout for assistance. Even supposing a boy scout happened to be handy. And the chances of one having a first-aid badge are astronomically against. What use is woodcraft when dealing with a locked knee-cap? It's the cap that's responsible, of course. The cap. This. The lining wears. Lubrication helps from time to time. Embrocation. Rubbed in with vigour. But can one ask a boy scout to embrocate with vigour? After the home help refused. "Table legs, yes" was the reply. "Other legs, no." She advised an elastic bandage. "Only the angels know what a

comfort my elastic bandage has been,” she told me. But when a knee-cap locks, it locks. There’s no permanent relief short of amputation. One hesitates to have one’s knees removed. There’s nothing for the rest of the leg to hang on to without the knee. Who’d sacrifice half a leg to a locked knee-cap? Not that there’s much to lose – corns, bunions, ingrowing toe-nails, fallen arches, athlete’s foot. Legs are a trouble from one end to the other. Yet one hangs on to them. For sentimental reasons, I suppose. They *have* supported one. Except when the knee locked. (*She subsides, thinking about knee-caps*)

TWITTING You’ll have to put me down among the “don’t knows”.

THUMP Organization. That’s what’s lacking. I’ll organize ’em.

The GUZZLE and the GAZER appear to converse with each other. In ping-pong dialogue one makes a statement and the other seems to respond to it. It just happens that they are talking about different subjects.

GUZZLE Gravy is most important.

GAZER Oh, indeed. Never back-brush too hard.

GUZZLE Dark brown and smooth it should be.

GAZER That’s what I tell them. There’s no point in spending a small fortune on a permanent if you brush it all out again.

GUZZLE Exactly. How can bumps get into the gravy? Criminal carelessness.

GAZER Not that I expect a permanent to be too permanent.

GUZZLE No, indeed. There’s no excuse for lumps.

GAZER This year’s fashion is next year’s old hat. But I have such fine hair.

GUZZLE Even in times of economic stress my gravy was exemplary.

GAZER Mine is like spun gossamer.

GUZZLE Speaking as a consumer.

GAZER Bobby pins tomorrow.

GUZZLE A gravy user.

GAZER With gossamer.

GUZZLE Gravy.

GAZER What there is of it.

TWITTING I was never given to opinions.

The THUMP rises and strikes an attitude as though about to deliver an important announcement, then changes her mind, and sinks down again. The GOSSIP stands.

GOSSIP No use coming to me with your tales, I told her. I'm not one of your lines of communication. I really don't know where she gets it all. Though I've seen her myself with an ear to the bedroom wall. Don't ask me how, because I've never been one to divulge a source of information. A secret with me is as safe as the graveyard. Not like some people we know. We've seen their telescopes, haven't we? And their periscopes. To say nothing of gyroscopes, microscopes, and thermometers. We know who conveys those tasty titbits from keyhole to keyhole. Don't look at me. I'm not one of your talkers. You won't catch me hanging round the cooked-meat counter. I keep myself to myself – which is the safest place when all's said and done. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.* You've heard that one, haven't you? Of course you have. I'm always coming out with it. It's from the French. Not that I'm given to the French. Not like someone we all know. It's in *her* blood. You don't have to take my word for it; you can see by the way she carries on. Oh, I could tell you a tale or two. I know. *(She returns to her place)*

TWITTING Don't ask me. Please.

The MISTRESS's voice is heard off. Ideally this would be an amplified whisper.

MISTRESS (*offstage*) Sweeties. Sweeties, sweeties, sweeties.

The Ladies look at each other, then immediately try to appear as though they had not.

(*offstage*) Where are my sweeties?

The Ladies get up and move about rapidly, but aimlessly – talking, but never listening.

GUZZLE Surely it must be tea-time. Where are the muffins and crumpets? Where are the toasted tea-cakes? Where is the thin-cut bread and butter? Where is the tea?

GLOOM Warm wrapping. That's the only answer. Lagging, if you look at it from the plumber's point of view. Why should we cosset our pipes, but neglect our torsos? Medicated wool is the answer. Yards of it.

GAZER I've been experimenting with underwater shades – pearl, coral, and anemone. Youthful tints. Far too youthful to be left to mere youth. Pearl, and coral, and sea something. Has anyone noticed?

GOSSIP Only one leg. That's a fact. I heard it myself. That makes you think, doesn't it? Someone has some explaining to do if you ask me. All those years and only one leg.

THUMP The rot must be stopped. That's what a dentist does with a decaying tooth. He stops it. This is a decaying society. It must be stopped before the rot spreads.

TWITTING This is all so unsettling. Nothing stays the same for more than two seconds running. Even the barometer goes up and down like clockwork. How can one trust in anything when everything is always changing?

Pause. There is the amplified sound of a key being turned in a lock. The Ladies move about and talk even faster.

GUZZLE Tea-cakes. Tea-cakes. Tea-cakes. Cream buns and puff-paste. Tea. Tea. Tea.

GLOOM Warm. Warmer. Warmest. Wrap up. Avoid draughts.
Keep warm. Warmer. Warmest.

GAZER Beautiful for ever. Health and beauty. Home and beauty.
Sleep. Beauty. Sleep.

GOSSIP No. No. Not a word. Listen to this. Did you ever? No, no.

THUMP Stop. Stop. Stop. Down with it. Out with it. Away with
it. Stop. Stop. Stop.

TWITTING Not again. Oh, not again. This is too much. Much
too much. Not again.

The door is opened. Everyone stands very still, very quiet.

*The MISTRESS stands in the doorway. She is a smiling
and benign, but authoritative person, older than the
Ladies, and, if possible, taller than any of them.*

MISTRESS Here are my sweeties. (*She shuts the door behind her
and advances into the room*) How are my sweeties?

*The Ladies move about again, but in turn come up to
the MISTRESS.*

TWITTERING It's the uncertainty that bothers me. If only I
could be sure about anything. But I'm not. One day I think
one way, and the next day I think the opposite.

MISTRESS That's because you're a permanently floating voter.

TWITTING Am I? Am I really? Oh, thank you so much.

THUMP Sex and violence. You've seen it, haven't you? Even in
comics. I've made a study of comics. Lurid with lust and
bad jokes. It's a problem.

MISTRESS But in such safe hands.

THUMP The censor. That's what we need. Bring back the censor.

GLOOM Have you been inoculated against rabies?

MISTRESS Against everything.

GLOOM How wise.

GOSSIP Have you heard?

MISTRESS Whisper.

The GOSSIP does so.

MISTRESS Incredible.

GOSSIP Nothing but the truth.

GAZER Have you noticed?

MISTRESS Beautiful.

GAZER I think so, too.

MISTRESS And I have something for my pet Guzzle. (*She hands GUZZLE a macaroon*)

GUZZLE A macaroon? I was just thinking about a macaroon.
I shall keep it always to remind me of you. (*She eats it*)

The MISTRESS claps her hands. The Ladies react with gasps, squeaks, and snorts according to their nature.

MISTRESS Listen.

The Ladies listen.

You have a new playmate. You will be kind to her, won't you?

GAZER It's this light. Not the kindest to my complexion.

MISTRESS I know you will. You'll have to be specially understanding because she is a Wild One. Her little ways may not be your little ways. But I know you'll be understanding.

GLOOM I wonder if it isn't all in the mind.

MISTRESS Remember when I first introduced our little Twitting.

TWITTING I would if I could, but...

MISTRESS You made her at home almost at once.

GUZZLE Why is it impossible to get old-fashioned tripe and onions?

MISTRESS So I know you'll all do your best for our Wild One.

GOSSIP I've heard. I'm passing nothing on, you understand. But I've heard.

MISTRESS I know, my sweeties. Just a minute while I fetch your new companion. Isn't this exciting?

The MISTRESS goes out, shutting the door after her.

THUMP Wild? Wild? The magistrates aren't severe enough. Let off with a caution instead of the cat.

GUZZLE Wild things are oppressively expensive. Rice. Strawberries. Because they are luxuries. Are they luxuries because they're expensive, or are they expensive because they're luxuries?

MISTRESS (*offstage*) This way, my sweet.

THUMP Wild.

GUZZLE Rice.

GOSSIP Paper.

GAZER Hat.

GLOOM Stand.

TWITTING Aside.

The door opens and the MISTRESS ushers in the WILD ONE. The WILD ONE is possibly a little younger than the others. What really distinguishes her from them, though, is her attitude. She is receptive to what is going on around her.

WILD ONE So this is my prison.

MISTRESS Your home.

WILD ONE My cage.

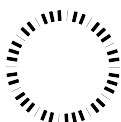
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