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THE CANE

by Mark Ravenhill

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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THE CANE was first produced at Royal Court Theatre on 6th December 2019. The performance was directed by Vicky Featherstone, with design by Chloe Lamford, lighting design by Natasha Chivers, and sound design by David McSeveney. The cast was as follows:

ANNA Nicola Walker
MAUREEN..... Maggie Steed
EDWARD..... Alun Armstrong

CHARACTERS

ANNA
MAUREEN
EDWARD

TIME

December 2018

ONE

(ANNA, MAUREEN.)

ANNA. What happened?

MAUREEN. The window broke.

ANNA. How did the window break?

MAUREEN. This is a temporary arrangement.

ANNA. Did someone break the window or?

MAUREEN. Until a glazier arrives.

ANNA. Who broke the window?

MAUREEN. It's very difficult at the weekend to find
a glazier.

ANNA. Did someone

MAUREEN. I've been calling and calling but no reply

ANNA. Throw something through the window? Tell me.
Mother.

MAUREEN. That's right yes someone threw something
through the window.

ANNA. What did they throw?

MAUREEN. I was in the kitchen, heard the smash.

ANNA. What did they throw through the window?

MAUREEN. Lucky really that neither of us was in the room.
It was a stone.

ANNA. Did you keep the stone?

MAUREEN. Actually more of a brick. A smallish

ANNA. Brick! Have you?

MAUREEN. Thrown away in the rubbish along with the glass.

ANNA. You should have kept the brick. The brick is evidence.

MAUREEN. Evidence?

ANNA. The police will want to see

MAUREEN. Oh no

ANNA. What was used to attack.

MAUREEN. Your father won't want to involve the police.

ANNA. When someone is throwing bricks through your window

MAUREEN. A child or children, a few children

ANNA. Did you see the children?

MAUREEN. Oh no.

ANNA. You didn't see the children?

MAUREEN. I was in the kitchen, he was in his study. He's got a report very important report that he's working on in his study.

ANNA. How do you know children threw the brick?

MAUREEN. I heard them.

ANNA. What did you hear?

MAUREEN. They laughed and they you know

ANNA. What?

MAUREEN. Called names.

ANNA. What names did they call?

MAUREEN. It doesn't matter.

ANNA. Insulting names?

MAUREEN. That was yesterday. It's all very quiet today.

ANNA. Were they insulting you or him? Who was the target of?

MAUREEN. You've picked a bad time. Could you maybe come back another day?

ANNA. I could find a glazier.

MAUREEN. No thank you.

ANNA. I'd like to help in some

MAUREEN. I've given him noise blocking headphones. Whatever they throw at us he can block out the noise and carry on in his study working on his report. I bought the headphones last week for his birthday.

ANNA. Is this a pattern?

MAUREEN. Did you forget that it was his birthday or?

ANNA. Was this an isolated incident?

MAUREEN. Not altogether no. This is really not a good time. I'm expecting the Head.

ANNA. The Headteacher's coming here?

MAUREEN. That's right.

ANNA. On a Sunday morning?

MAUREEN. That's right.

ANNA. Is it usual for the Head to conduct off-site meetings on a Sunday?

MAUREEN. Not usual no.

ANNA. The Head's coming here because it's pupils from the school who threw the brick through the window.

MAUREEN. The Head's coming here to finalise the leaving do on Friday. Your father's leaving do. You hadn't thought had you? That he's now leaving the school. Forty-five years. It will be the biggest send off that any teacher has ever had. No teacher is as loved. Friday will be full of song and praise.

ANNA. But the kids are throwing

MAUREEN. A few of the kids

ANNA. Bricks through the window. Why would they attack the most popular teacher in the school?

MAUREEN. Shouldn't you be looking after your family on a Sunday morning?

ANNA. I have an au pair.

MAUREEN. An au pair?

ANNA. I pay him very well.

MAUREEN. Why have you come?

ANNA. I suppose because I missed his birthday and

MAUREEN. You've missed his birthday for years, we've missed your birthday for years. So why?

ANNA. I wanted to catch up with you. Mother. Father. Only daughter.

MAUREEN. Well, now that you've caught up.

ANNA. Who patched the window?

MAUREEN. Me and him.

ANNA. You held the ladder?

MAUREEN. That's right.

ANNA. You held the ladder while he banged in the nails?

MAUREEN. That's it.

ANNA. Why did he never let me hold the ladder?

MAUREEN. Did you want to hold the ladder?

ANNA. Yes I did want to hold the ladder yes. I was always asking to hold the ladder. But he never let me hold the ladder. Why was that do you suppose?

MAUREEN. I suppose because when you lived here you were a child.

ANNA. I was a full-grown woman when I left.

MAUREEN. I never thought of you like that yes but I suppose you were a full-grown woman when you left.

ANNA. But still I never got to hold the ladder. Why?

MAUREEN. Maybe

ANNA. Yes

MAUREEN. He never trusted you to hold the ladder. It needs a steady hand otherwise the ladder wobbles

ANNA. I have a steady hand

MAUREEN. No you were volatile.

ANNA. I don't think I was

MAUREEN. Oh yes you were a very angry child. One time you tore this room apart.

ANNA. I don't remember that.

MAUREEN. Screaming and shouting, fuck this, fuck that, I'm going to kill him.

ANNA. I have absolutely no memory

MAUREEN. And you ripped the pictures from the wall, smashed the pots, chair into the mirror.

ANNA. I think if that happened I would have

MAUREEN. Is it any wonder then if he wouldn't let you hold the ladder? You have to trust the person holding

the ladder because if you get to the top and they tug you could fall and they would break your neck.

ANNA. I would never have

MAUREEN. No?

ANNA. Have broken his neck no.

MAUREEN. Why I used to wonder is this small child so angry? Has anyone ever done anything to her that could possibly? And I thought no. It's – it must be – it's a chemical imbalance. It was impossible to love you. I suppose you've also forgotten the axe?

ANNA. The axe below the stairs?

MAUREEN. That's right yes the axe below the stairs.

ANNA. I remember the axe below the stairs.

MAUREEN. The day you got the axe from below the stairs and you were swinging the axe and screaming at him: I'm going to fucking cut your head off.

ANNA. No! That didn't.

MAUREEN. Oh yes chasing him. Axe swinging. Screaming.

ANNA. That certainly never – you are – this is a fairy story – you're –

MAUREEN. What are these marks on the wall? How do you explain these if they're not? Can you see the marks? Yes?

ANNA. Anyone else would have decorated every five years.

MAUREEN. This is where the axe went into the wall when you were aiming for your father's head. We've never had the sort of money to decorate. Au pairs. There'll be money when the endowment from the mortgage comes through, the pension then we'll finally. We'll be comfortable.

ANNA. You need both of you to.

MAUREEN. I hope you're not expecting to

ANNA. New wallpaper, new furniture, loft conversion.

MAUREEN. We're not planning to share

ANNA. I understand

MAUREEN. In case you were expecting a windfall.

ANNA. I want to see Daddy.

MAUREEN. He won't want to see you.

ANNA. Let him be the judge.

MAUREEN. He's working on a very important report and he mustn't –

ANNA. Dad! Hello Dad! It's me!

MAUREEN. The noise-defying headphones are very effective.

ANNA. Where's his study?

MAUREEN. Doesn't [matter].

ANNA. Where?

MAUREEN. Your room.

ANNA. Oh.

MAUREEN. Ten years ago we made a bonfire and we took out all your stuff out of your room and we put it on the bonfire and we burnt it all away.

ANNA. Why did you do that?

MAUREEN. I suppose we didn't want any memory of you.
I suppose because as a child you were an angry violent little girl and as an adult –

ANNA. Fuck you.

MAUREEN. This is exactly what I

ANNA. You cunt you bitch fuck.

MAUREEN. Exactly exactly. A few children throwing stones? Broken window. You see it's nothing compared to. He suggested the bonfire because he said you'd taken such a different path and you weren't coming back and we didn't want anything more to do with you.

ANNA. Different path.

MAUREEN. When you joined the opposition.

ANNA. Academy schools are not the / opposition.

MAUREEN. Oh they are.

ANNA. I joined the academy schools movement because it's the best model to turn around failing schools.

MAUREEN. Marketisation.

ANNA. To save young people who have been failed by their schools.

MAUREEN. Profits from a human right.

ANNA. In a challenging economic and social environment.

MAUREEN. Grab the money.

ANNA. To connect young people to the world of work, to prepare them for employment, to link the school to business, to the real world. There's no better offer that we can make to the next generation. If we don't give them everything they need to compete in the marketplace then we've failed them haven't we?

MAUREEN. It's time you were gone. The Head will be here any minute. It would be better.

(Noises off.)

ANNA. What's that?

MAUREEN. The children. They must be back again. They bang and they shout. I'm used to it.

ANNA. They shouldn't be allowed to do it.

MAUREEN. We can still go about our usual routine.

ANNA. If you're not going to call the police then I'll deal with them myself.

MAUREEN. How will you deal with them yourself?

ANNA. I'll talk to them, explain that this is unacceptable behaviour, that any dispute will be settled by the school and failing that by the police.

MAUREEN. Try. Open the door. Try.

ANNA. I will.

MAUREEN. You'll get what's coming to you.

ANNA. What does that mean? Get what's coming to you?

MAUREEN. It means that when you step outside the door they will spit at you, they will jostle, call names and they will throw things such as bottles, bricks and dog shit.

ANNA. They do this to you?

MAUREEN. I've stopped going through the door.

ANNA. How long have you stopped going through the door?

MAUREEN. Six days.

ANNA. You've both been trapped in the house for six days?

MAUREEN. It's been quite useful really because it's allowed him to focus on his report and it's allowed me to focus on looking after him while he finishes his report.

ANNA. I don't think the Head is

MAUREEN. He'll make it through

ANNA. He's not going to come calling when there's a mob outside the front door.

MAUREEN. He'll come. He's a very loyal. Entirely loyal man. He wants to make sure that Daddy has a wonderful send off on Friday.

ANNA. It's never best practice to hold an off-site meeting outside of working hours.

MAUREEN. Please no don't bring that bullshit in here. It stinks the place out.

ANNA. Why have the children turned against him?

MAUREEN. Children are like that.

ANNA. Why now when he's just about to retire are they mobbing the house? Listen to them. There has to be a reason.

MAUREEN. What was the reason for your anger?

ANNA. What's he done to them?

MAUREEN. He's done nothing to them but offer excellent teaching and pastoral care.

ANNA. Then why?

MAUREEN. Go away.

ANNA. Why?

MAUREEN. They claim it's

ANNA. Yes?

MAUREEN. Because of the cane.

ANNA. The cane?

MAUREEN. Go away.

ANNA. The cane.

MAUREEN. Because of all the boys that he caned.

ANNA. Where did he cane boys?

MAUREEN. Well at the school of course. Where else would you cane boys?

ANNA. When?

MAUREEN. When it was legal to cane boys.

ANNA. That was

MAUREEN. Over thirty years ago. The Head – not this Head, a much older – didn't want it as part of his duties so he made it the duty of the deputy to cane the boys. You don't remember. You were a child.

ANNA. That explains. I was teased.

MAUREEN. Who?

ANNA. "Your daddy is at the big school and in the big school you can hear the screams all day long because there's a cellar where he chains children to the wall and he flogs them until they bleed."

MAUREEN. You didn't tell us that.

ANNA. Why should I have told you that?

MAUREEN. So that we could correct you. Your misapprehension. Did you believe the other children when they told you?

ANNA. I suppose I did believe them for a while yes.

MAUREEN. It was never anything like a cellar or

ANNA. Of course not

MAUREEN. It was a widely accepted practice

ANNA. I understood later but for a few years I did think

MAUREEN. What a foolish gullible silly little girl you were.

ANNA. He's never beaten any of these children now?

MAUREEN. Of course he hasn't

ANNA. Then why are these children?

MAUREEN. Because they're snowflakes. These children now can hunt out anybody's grievance and claim it as their own. They can't stand that the past wasn't just the same as today. If something was done differently in the past they bawl and they whine, kick and spit and attack.

ANNA. Young people today are much more aware

MAUREEN. You've got the modern tone of voice.

ANNA. Of issues relating to coercion, personal space, violence.

MAUREEN. They want to be offended.

ANNA. Why now? Something after thirty years must have.

MAUREEN. With his retirement – there's been a group organising his celebration – students – and they've been given access to the school records to put together a celebration of all Daddy's achievements at the school.

ANNA. And in the records they found evidence of his history of caning.

MAUREEN. I suppose they must have done. And the word spread around the school in a few hours until every child – all a thousand of them – was in a state of outrage.

ANNA. It must be very distressing for a young person to discover

MAUREEN. Only if they want to be

ANNA. that a man who is teaching you every day was in fact a beater of children. Has the school offered counselling?

MAUREEN. I don't think so.

ANNA. Best practice would be to offer any young person affected

MAUREEN. It would only encourage them

ANNA. A safe space to discuss any feelings that arise as

MAUREEN. To indulge themselves further in their introspection and self pity.

ANNA. Has he offered an apology?

MAUREEN. Has who offered an apology?

ANNA. Has Dad offered an apology?

MAUREEN. Why should he apologise?

ANNA. In a situation like this tensions can often be dispersed by a simple apology.

MAUREEN. Oh no.

ANNA. Stand before the school, acknowledge that in the past mistakes were made, recognise the mistakes, that the mistakes have been learnt from and that they won't be made in the future and ask forgiveness and then move forward to his leaving do on Friday.

MAUREEN. That would hardly be

ANNA. How many kids have turned up outside the house for the last six days?

MAUREEN. The numbers vary.

ANNA. How many on average?

MAUREEN. On average I would say late afternoon after school there are about a hundred children.

ANNA. A hundred!

MAUREEN. Which means there are another nine hundred or so who don't

ANNA. A hundred is more than enough to stop Friday happening.

MAUREEN. Which is why I've invited the Head here today. I want his assurance that the staff will lend their full support to protect everyone attending the farewell and to prevent any disruption or physical attack.

ANNA. If he just apologises.

MAUREEN. If you leave now

ANNA. I understand how to put together a form of words

MAUREEN. Go before the numbers build.

ANNA. That will operate as an apology without recognising any legal

MAUREEN. Leave it any longer and there'll be too many

ANNA. I can write it for him

MAUREEN. Once the crowd builds they become unruly

ANNA. Or write it with him

MAUREEN. Once they reach a critical mass they will attack on sight

ANNA. Coach him on the delivery

MAUREEN. Get out now go go why are you still here? Go.

ANNA. I'm very confident that all this would go away, that Friday would still be possible if only an apology were made.

MAUREEN. That's not something he would ever do.

ANNA. How can you be so sure?

MAUREEN. I know him, I understand him. You passed through our lives without ever understanding him at all.

ANNA. I'm going to ask him myself.

MAUREEN. Go on then. Up the stairs. Up the stairs, into his study. There's no point in calling him, no point in knocking. With the headphones on he won't hear a thing. You'll have to walk straight in, stand before him. Then you'll see how much he hates you.

ANNA. He doesn't hate me.

MAUREEN. I'm the one who says to him: Yes, she seems something swapped by an evil fairy for the baby we should have had.

ANNA. Hah!

MAUREEN. But she's ours. We must have made her, played our part to make her the person she is

ANNA. I think actually I made myself.

MAUREEN. So we should try to find a way to connect with her.

ANNA. I decided very early on that I would make myself.

MAUREEN. And now that there are grandchildren, we're grandparents, I think we should play a part in their lives.

ANNA. You said that?

MAUREEN. I've said that many, many times.

ANNA. And what's he said?

MAUREEN. He's said that he has his principles and as you've betrayed his principles that he will never have anything to do with you. And I respect him for that. If those are his principles then I have to be loyal to him. That's really the only way to make any sense of life. If I start to wonder about that it quickly leads to depression and then I'm completely useless. I become immobile. His principles are fixed and sometimes harsh but they make sense. You won't change his mind, you won't soften him. So really the kindest thing to do, the kindest to yourself is to leave and go back to your children and your au pair before the mob out there starts to attack. I should never have opened the door. If I'd known it was you, I would have let the bell ring and ring. It was only because I thought you were the Head that I opened the door at all.

ANNA. Thank you for opening the door.

(Enter EDWARD.)

EDWARD. Do you see that? One hundred and eighteen of them. It's a record. And so early in the morning. But then Sunday what else are they going to do? What

better to do on a Sunday morning than to come round here and mob our house? Has the Head arrived? He's a terrible time keeper. We go on and on at the kids about time keeping but the Head's late for everything. The assembly hall is full and he's still scoffing his granola. He'll get here sooner or later. "Sorry, sorry, sorry." By the time he gets here, I'll have finished my report. One last, very straightforward section to complete and it can go off tomorrow. I can join you for your discussion about Friday. Why are you here?

ANNA. I missed your birthday.

EDWARD. And we missed yours. It's a family tradition.

ANNA. I said to your grandchildren that I'd missed your birthday and they said that they wanted to make you a card.

EDWARD. Well that's good.

ANNA. Art isn't their strength but still – as they made the card I felt I ought to – would you like to see the card?

EDWARD. Why not?

ANNA. Some of the stars fell off but it's still –

EDWARD. Well, look at that. See what they've done.

MAUREEN. Very nice.

EDWARD. Yes isn't it? That's very nice.

MAUREEN. Very nice.

ANNA. I didn't expect

EDWARD. Please say thank you to the children from both of us.

ANNA. To find.

EDWARD. And thank you for coming all this way.

ANNA. I had no idea