

BEN AND IMO

by Mark Ravenhill

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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ISBN 978-0-573-00074-4

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BEN AND IMO was first produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, on 21 February 2024. The performance was directed by Erica Whyman with design by Soutra Gilmour, lighting design by Jackie Shemesh, music by Conor Mitchell, and sound design by Carolyn Downing. The producer was Sarah-Katy Davies and the stage manager was Lindsey Knight. The cast was as follows:

BENJAMIN BRITTEN.....Samuel Barnett
IMOGEN HOLST..... Victoria Yeates
Understudies..... Richard Keightley, Isabella Marshall
Piano Connor Fogel

CHARACTERS

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

IMOGEN HOLST

SETTING

Benjamin Britten's work room in Crag House, Aldeburgh.

TIME

1952–1953

1952

One

IMO. Help? No. You mustn't help me. I'm here to help you.

BEN. Help you find somewhere to stay.

IMO. I've found somewhere to stay.

BEN. Just like that?

IMO. Just like that.

BEN. Somewhere to stay tonight?

IMO. Somewhere to stay for nine months.

BEN. Imo!

IMO. That's how long you've got, isn't it? To write the opera.

BEN. Your job at Dartington.

IMO. Packed it in. When you telephoned. I said goodbye Dartington and came to Aldeburgh as soon as I could. I didn't altogether fit in at Dartington. I was a puzzle. My students – excellent results and yet I never stuck to the curriculum. That pissed off the pen people. What am I to be called?

BEN. I hadn't thought.

IMO. What is my role? I don't mean billing. You can leave my name off anything you want. But what is the part that I'm to play in the making of the opera? So I don't overstep the mark.

BEN. I don't see how you can.

IMO. Oh I can. I can overstep the mark awfully. That's why a title's important. Keep me in line.

BEN. Where are you staying?

IMO. Not so far away.

BEN. When does your stuff arrive.

IMO. It's arrived.

BEN. When did it arrive?

IMO. Here. With me. Now.

BEN. Three bags. Your stuff is three bags?

IMO. Once upon a time I could get everything into one bag. May I put my coat on here?

BEN. Of course.

IMO. I read *Elizabeth and Essex* on the train.

BEN. I've barely looked at my copy.

IMO. I've marked up what I think are the key scenes. We can work from my copy. Of course my markings – only my first, random impressions. To get a grip of the story.

BEN. I don't want you working on the libretto.

IMO. I see.

BEN. Just the musical side of things.

IMO. But if one isn't engaged with the words how can one ever –?

BEN. Yes?

IMO. No. Line overstepped. Mouth shut. But. What is my role to be?

BEN. Do you like the story?

IMO. I should say: It doesn't matter if I like the story.

BEN. I want to know. Is *Elizabeth and Essex* the right subject?

IMO. It's your subject. How about musical assistant?
Would that sum up the role I'm to play? Surely that will do it? Musical assistant.

BEN. Sounds menial.

IMO. Then what?

BEN. Drink?

IMO. Just a small one for me. I can't take it like I used to.
Young woman: I'd drink a bottle of wine and then be at the piano at eight the next morning but now I –

BEN. I'm the same.

IMO. You? Still a young man.

BEN. Only a few years younger than you. Thirty-nine.
Cheers.

IMO. Cheers. I'm an old spinster. If I'm going to get everything done, if you're going to write *Gloriana* in time for the coronation gala, then I shall have to be jolly careful with the drink.

BEN. Will you make sure that I'm jolly careful with the drink?

IMO. I shan't be a gaoler. I shall confine myself – as you have suggested – solely to matters musical. Assisting with the music. I wonder...

BEN. What?

IMO. Why you chose me. To be your...whatever I am.

BEN. Ah well. I didn't want anyone at all.

IMO. I was forced upon you?

BEN. Harewood gave me a stiff talking to. I couldn't take on such a huge undertaking by myself. I got cross with him. I get cross an awful lot – you'll have to watch out for that – told him to fuck off. There was no one I could trust to be so close to me when I was composing.

IMO. I understand. I can leave now if you'd rather.

BEN. No no.

IMO. If someone will drive me to Sax.

BEN. Last train's gone.

IMO. I can sleep on a bench and catch the early one.

BEN. To where?

IMO. Ah. There you have me. Homeless. Well there's Mother, only...mothers are the hardest work of all.

BEN. Harder than composers? I lay awake in the bed for hours and I turned to Peter – woke him up – and I said: What am I to do? Is there anyone I can allow to work alongside me on *Gloriana*? And Peter said: You've got to have Imogen Holst. She's quite brilliant and I said: By God you're right, she is, it has to be Imo.

IMO. Oh Ben. How thrilling! Did Harewood say what I was to be called?

BEN. Maybe. I don't recall. When the rage descends I don't catch much.

IMO. Is Ronnie Duncan on libretto?

BEN. God no. I couldn't put myself through Ronnie Duncan again. Plomer.

IMO. Plomer? Well. That's good.

BEN. Is it?

IMO. Definitely. Plomer will do well. With guidance.

BEN. Is there anything good I wonder about writing an opera for the coronation? I've banged on about a national opera. British national opera. And now they've come to wave it in my face. Look now we've got an Arts Council. Covent Garden. Royal coronation gala. Everything here for Benjamin Britten's national opera. Now Benjamin Britten better bloody well write one.

IMO. Don't you want to write *Gloriana*? If you don't now's the last chance. Ditch it.

BEN. I couldn't.

IMO. Write whatever you most want to write.

BEN. I can't.

IMO. Why?

BEN. The public schools of England. They drill it into one: duty duty duty. Damn them! I can't tell anymore. Am I writing *Gloriana* for art or for duty? I'll only know when I've done the bloody thing and if it's duty it will be the dullest opera you can imagine. I get so ill. When I have to write. Aches all over, pains tearing through.

IMO. My father was the same. I've been through it all before. You don't scare me.

BEN. You seem very sure of that.

IMO. I am. My father was always impressed. I'm a very good composer's assistant. I brought you a present.

BEN. Imo. You shouldn't have.

IMO. To thank you for bringing me to Aldeburgh. No wrapping. That would be silly. Here.

(**IMO** gives **BEN** a book.)

You haven't read it already have you?

BEN. Ah. I meant to –

IMO. But then you probably know everything about my father that you need to know.

BEN. I'll read it now.

IMO. Save it until *Gloriana's* done.

BEN. Book writing, Imo. That's hard work.

IMO. I started writing it as soon as Holst died. I felt I must get it down while his memory was fresh. It carried me through five years. Sometimes writing it I felt I was more him than I was me. When I finished it – horrible. But there we are. The living go on.

BEN. You must sign it.

IMO. Oh yes! Sign it! Yes! I haven't a pen!

BEN. Here.

IMO. What shall I write?

BEN. Write: For Ben with love from Imogen, September 1952.

IMO. Love from feels rather forward.

BEN. Write it all the same.

IMO. You think? (*Writes.*) Love from Imogen.

BEN. Imo. When do you think you'll die?

IMO. Gosh. What a question!

BEN. Don't you think about it? Ever?

IMO. My own death? No. I thought a lot about Gussie dying.

BEN. Gussie?

IMO. It's better than Gustav. I thought about Gussie dying, then Gussie did die. And it was awful. But with composers it's different. There's still Gussie's music.

BEN. You're a composer, Imo.

IMO. I can make arrangements.

BEN. An evening at the Wigmore Hall entirely of your own compositions. You're a composer. Say it: I'm a composer.

IMO. Stop that!

BEN. I'm a composer.

IMO. Stop right now!

BEN. Why?

IMO. I'm not good enough.

BEN. Says who?

IMO. Says me. A composer is a very special thing like Gussie or you. I'm just not one of those special people. I don't know quite know what I am. Which is I suppose why – sorry – I keep banging on about what is my role in the making of *Gloriana*?

BEN. What do you want it to be, Imo?

IMO. I suppose... I'm a helper. I helped Gussie to compose and now I'm here to help you compose.

BEN. We can't call you 'helper' in the gala programme book, June the eighth.

IMO. I'm happy with musical assistant.

BEN. I went to see my lawyer today and he said to me: The most likely thing is that you and Peter will die together in a plane crash.

IMO. Well, that's cheerful!

BEN. His way of saying I suppose that Peter and I will always be together. Even in death.

IMO. Do you believe that?

BEN. No. One day Peter will find the right girl. Off he'll go. Get married. I shall just have to lump it, won't I?

IMO. Maybe you'll be the one to find the right girl.

BEN. And maybe you'll find the right boy, Imo.

IMO. Oh I tried. Matters of the heart, the body. At the time it was all rather wonderful. My twenty-fifth year, I decided to have a series of six photographs taken. In each of them I was in a different attitude from the dance. Like so and so and so and so and...I was entirely nude.

BEN. Well!

IMO. Each photo I gave to a different man. One of them wrote to me later. Called up to the war. He'd destroyed the photo as being 'unsuitable'. My body was so very beautiful. Then one day I just sort of knew that I was finished with all that, that I was to be a spinster from now on. Really, I've been very much happier ever since. My heart is still. Free to give my life to music. To composers. I was watching this evening.

BEN. Watching?

IMO. Watching you. Hid myself away at the back of the hall. Your choir practice for *Timon of Athens*.

BEN. It's still ragged.

IMO. I'd had – I'll confess it – some doubts on the train. Impulsive has got me into trouble before. But when I saw you there, making music, the September light, I thought: Imogen Holst, you've done the right thing. Where else in the world could you possibly be than Aldeburgh? Gussie dreamed of a renaissance in English music. But still the composers wrote their careful little tone poems. Brahms with the wrong notes. But you. The renaissance. Shall we toast her?

BEN. Who?

IMO. Queen Bess.

BEN. How about amanuensis?

IMO. What?

BEN. Your role. We could call you: Amanuensis.

IMO. I don't like the sound of amanuensis at all.

BEN. Then what?

IMO. Tomorrow.

BEN. What am I to pay you?

IMO. Tomorrow. To *Gloriana*.

BEN & IMO. To *Gloriana*.

Two

(BEN is playing the entry music for Elizabeth from Gloriana on the piano.)*

BEN. *(Calling out.)* And the trumpets!

(He finishes.)

Well, I think it's a start, isn't it? I mean there's a terrible danger with this sort of thing that one falls into a pastiche. I want you to watch carefully for that and if you think I –

IMO. Oh no no no! *(She hugs him.)*

BEN. Oh.

IMO. Am I embarrassing you?

(Pause.)

Would you rather I let go?

(Pause.)

It's just sometimes the words won't – and only a –

(Pause.)

Only a jolly big hug will actually get the job done. I should let go.

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