

Acting Edition

ALBERT'S BRIDGE

BY **TOM STOPPARD**

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CHARACTERS

Bob

Charlie

Dad

Albert

The Chairman

Dave

George

Fitch

Albert's Mother

Kate

Albert's Father

Fraser

Voices in the Darkness

*The action of the play takes place on a bridge, in offices,
a boardroom, the Eiffel Tower, a bedroom, and two
living-rooms*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Albert's Bridge was written for radio, and little or no attempt has been made to adapt the script for the stage; this edition, therefore, might be described as a director's challenge. A very free approach to the printed stage directions, seems to me to be warranted, particularly to avoid pauses between scenes and to keep the thing flowing. To take one example, it may not be necessary to furnish Fitch's office with a desk and chairs; a couple of "spots" on the faces might be enough, for the conversation does not *have* to take place in an office. Alternatively, where back projection is available, a slide of a filing cabinet and a wall-chart is enough to say "office" to the audience. Furthermore, again in the interests of flow, I doubt that, for example, the "bridge area" and the "home area" need be considered as rigidly separate worlds: Albert on the bridge could talk to Kate at home. Feel free.

T. S.

ALBERT'S BRIDGE

SCENE 1

Part of a big girdered railway bridge.

Four men are painting the bridge, in ascending order: Bob, Charlie, Dad, Albert.

Bob Char-lee!

Charlie Hel-lo!

Bob Right, Charlie?

Charlie Right! Comin' down! Hey, Dad!

Dad Hel-lo!

Charlie Bob 'n me is done down here!

Dad Right!

Charlie Have you done?

Dad Comin' down! Albert! Al-bert!

Charlie Albert!

Bob Al-bert!

Albert (*crooning softly, tunelessly amid various tunes while painting*)

How high the moon in June?

How blue the moon when it's high noon—

and the turtle doves above

croon out of tune in love

saying please above the trees

which when there's thunder you don't run under—
those trees—

'cos there'll be pennies fall on Alabama

and you'll drown in foggy London town

the sun was shining—on my Yiddisher Mama.

Bob Albert!

Charlie Albert!

Dad Albert!

Albert Hel-lo!

Dad Bob 'n me 'n Charlie's done!

Albert Right! Dip-brush-slap-slide-slick, and once again, dip, brush, slap—oh, it goes on so nicely. Tickle it into the corner, there, behind the rivet. No-one will see that from the ground; I could cheat up here. But I'd know; so dip, brush, slap, slide and once again for the last time till the next time—every surface sleek, renewed—dip, brush, slap, slick, tickle and wipe—right in there with the old rust-proof, rust-brown—all glossed and even, end to end—the last touch—perfection!

He stops painting

Oh my! I could stand back to admire it and fall three hundred feet into the sea. Mind your heads! (*He laughs. Climbing down*) Mind your head, Dad!

Dad I'm not your dad. Keep off the wet—work down the slope to the middle—and watch your feet.

They all slowly start climbing down

Going down for good, oh, yes, I'm not facing that again. Ten coats I've done, end to end and now I'm done all right. I had ambitions, you know . . .

Charlie Mind my head, Dad.

Dad Watch my feet, Charlie—comin' down . . .

Charlie I'll watch your feet—you mind my head. Watch your head, Bob . . .

Bob Watch your feet, Charlie . . .

Charlie Mind my feet, Bob—watch my head, Dad . . .

Dad I'm not your dad, and mind my feet—that's my head, Albert.

Albert Comin' down. Doesn't she look beautiful?

Dad Looks the same as always. There's no progress. Twenty years, twenty thousand pots of paint—yes, I had plans.

Charlie I thought we'd never see the end of it.

Bob It's not the bleeding end.

Charlie There's no end to it.

Dad Ten coats non-stop, one after the other, and it's no improvement, no change even, just holding its own against the weather—that's a long time, that's a lot of paint. I could have made my mark.

Albert Continuity—that's hard to come by.

Dad I've spread my life over those girders, and in five minutes

I could scrape down to the iron, I could scratch down to my prime.

Albert Simplicity—so . . . contained; neat; your bargain with the world, your wages, your time, your energy, your property, everything you took out and everything you put in, the bargain that has carried you this far—all contained there in ten layers of paint, accounted for; now that's something; to keep track of everything you put into the kitty, to have it lie there, under your eye, fixed and immediate—there are no consequences to a coat of paint. That's more than you can say for a factory man; his bits and pieces scatter, grow wheels, disintegrate, change colour, join up in new forms which he doesn't know anything about; in short he doesn't know what he's done to whom.

Dad Watch your feet, Albert. Mind your head, Charlie.

Charlie You mind my head. Take care my feet, Bob . . .

Bob Watch your feet, Charlie . . .

Charlie Mind your feet, Dad . . .

Dad That's my head, Albert . . .

Albert Coming down . . . Ah, look at it up there, criss-crossed and infinite, you can't see where it ends—I could take off and swing through its branches screaming like a gibbon!

Dad Mind where you're putting your feet, Albert.

Charlie Watch my head, Dad.

Bob Train coming, Charlie.

A distant train is heard approaching

Charlie I've seen it.

Bob (*jumping down on to the gravel*) And down.

Charlie Mind where you jump, Dad.

Dad Seen it.

Charlie (*jumping down*) None too soon.

Dad Train coming, Albert.

Albert I'm with you.

Dad (*jumps down*) Finished.

Charlie Like hell.

Bob Well, that's another two years behind you.

Dad A feller once offered me a half share in a very nice trading station in the China Seas. I had it in me.

Albert Mind your toes. (*He jumps down*) Now that's a good way to end a day—ending so much else.

Charlie All right for some. Students.

Bob Slummers.

Charlie Pocket-money holiday lads, oh yes.

Albert One bridge, freshly painted—a million tons of iron thrown across the bay—rust brown and even to the last lick—spick and span, rust-proofed, weather resistant—perfect!

Dad Other end needs painting now. A man could go mad.

The train passes overhead

The scene closes

SCENE 2

A committee-room.

The Chairman, George, Dave and Fitch are seated round the table. Fitch wears rimless spectacles and is confident in manner, with a clipped, distinctive voice.

The Chairman Let us not forget, gentlemen, that Clufton Bay Bridge is the fourth biggest single-span double-track shore-to-shore railway bridge in the world bar none.

Dave Hear, hear, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Thank you, Dave.

George I've been studying these figures, Mr Chairman . . .

The Chairman Just a moment, George. We've got an amenity here in Clufton, that bridge stands for the whole town, quite apart from the money earned in railway dues . . .

Dave Hear, hear, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Thank you, Dave.

George According to the City Engineer's figures, Mr Chairman . . .

The Chairman Just a moment, George. When my grandfather built this bridge he didn't spare the brass—and I for one, as Chairman of the Clufton Bay Bridge Sub-Committee—entrusted as we are with the upkeep and responsibility of what is a symbol of Clufton's prosperity—I for one do not begrudge the spending of a few extra quid on a lick of paint.

Dave Hear, hear, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Thank you, Dave.

George I know it's a symbol of your prosperity, Mr Chairman, but . . .

The Chairman That's a highly improper remark, George. Clifton's prosperity is what I said.

Dave Hear hear, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Thank you, Dave.

George My mistake, Mr Chairman—but if Mr Fitch's figures are correct . . .

Fitch My figures are always correct, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Hear that, George? The City Engineer's figures are a model of correctitude.

Dave Hear hear, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Thank you, Dave.

George Then this new paint he's recommending is going to cost us four times as much as the paint we've been using up to now.

The Chairman (*after a pause*) Four times as much? Money?

Dave Hear hear, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Just a moment, Dave. I don't think your figures are correct, George. Mr Fitch knows his business.

George What business is he in—paint?

The Chairman That's a highly improper remark, George—er, you're not in the paint business, are you, Mr Fitch?

Fitch No, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman No, no, of course you're not. You should be ashamed, George.

Dave Hear hear, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Shut up, Dave. Now what about it, Mr Fitch—is this right what George says?

Fitch Well, up to a point, Mr Chairman, yes. But in the long run, no.

The Chairman Don't fiddle-faddle with me, Fitch. Does this new-fangled paint of yours cost four times as much as the paint we've got, and if so what's in it for you?

George Hear hear, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Thank you, George.

Fitch To put the matter at its simplest, Mr Chairman, the new paint costs four times as much and last four times as long.

The Chairman Well, there's your answer, George. It costs four

times as much but it lasts four times as long. Very neat, Fitch.
George What's the point, then?

Fitch Apart from its silvery colour, Mr Chairman, which would be a pleasanter effect than the present rusty brown, the new paint would also afford a considerable saving, as you can no doubt see.

The Chairman Everybody see that? Well, I don't.

George Nor do I.

Dave Hear hear, George.

George Shut up, Dave.

Fitch If I might explain, gentlemen. As you know, in common with other great bridges of its kind, the painting of Clifton Bay Bridge is a continuous operation. That is to say, by the time the painters have reached the far end, the end they started at needs painting again.

Dave I never knew that!

The Chairman } (*speaking together*) Shut up, Dave.
George

Fitch This cycle is not a fortuitous one. It is contrived by relating the area of the surfaces to be painted—call it A—to the rate of the painting—B—and the durability of the paint—C. The resultant equation determines the variable factor X—i.e. the number of painters required to paint surfaces A at speed B within time C. For example . . .

The Chairman E.g.

Fitch Quite. Er, e.g., with X plus one painters the work would proceed at a higher rate—i.e. B plus, e.g. Q. However, the factors A and C, the surface area and the lasting quality of the paint remain, of course, constant. The result would be that the painters would be ready to begin painting the bridge for the second time strictly speaking before it needed re-painting. This creates the coefficient—Waste.

The Chairman W.

Fitch If you like. This coefficient belies efficiency you see.

The Chairman (*indulging in schoolboy humour with George*) U.C.
 You see, George?

George O.K., I see.

Fitch To continue. Furthermore, the value of the coefficient—Waste—is progressive. Let me put it like this, gentlemen. Because the rate of painting is constant, i.e. too fast to allow

the paintwork to deteriorate, each bit the men come to requires re-painting even less than the bit before it. You see, they are all the time catching up on themselves progressively, until there'll come a point where they'll be re-painting the bridge while it's still wet! (*He pauses*) No, that can't be right . . .

The Chairman Come to the point, Fitch. Wake up, Dave.

Dave (*waking up*) Hear hear, Mr Chairman.

Fitch To put it another way, gentlemen, that is to say, conversely.

With one too few painters—X minus one—the rate of progress goes down to, let us say, B minus Q. So what is the result? By the time the painters are ready to start re-painting, the end they started at has deteriorated into unsightly and damaging rust—a coefficient representing the converse inefficiency.

The Chairman Pull yourself together, Fitch—I don't know what you're drivellin' about.

George In a nutshell, Fitch—the new paint costs four times as much and last four times as long. Where's the money saved?

Fitch We sack three painters.

The Chairman (*after a pause*) Ah . . .

Fitch You see, to date we have achieved our optimum efficiency by employing four men. It takes them two years to paint the bridge, which is the length of time the paint lasts. This new paint will last eight years, so we only need one painter to paint the bridge by himself. After eight years, the end he started at will be just ready for re-painting. The saving to the rate-payers would be three thousand, five hundred and twenty-nine pounds fifteen shillings and ninepence per annum.

George Excuse me, Mr Chairman . . .

The Chairman Just a moment, George. I congratulate you, Mr Fitch. An inspired stroke. We'll put it up to a meeting of the full council.

George Excuse me . . .

The Chairman Shut up, George.

Dave Hear hear, Mr Chairman.

Fitch Thank you, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman Thank you, Mr Fitch.

The scene closes

SCENE 3

Albert's bedroom.

Albert is in bed. His mother stands by his side.

Mother Aren't you getting up, Albert? It's gone eleven. Are you listening to me, Albert?

Albert What?

Mother I'm talking to you, Albert.

Albert Yes?

Mother Yes—what?

Albert Yes, Mother.

Mother That's better. Oh dear, what was I saying?

Albert I don't know, Mother.

Mother (*sighing*) I was against that university from the start.

Albert The country needs universities.

Mother I mean it's changed you, Albert. You're thinking all the time. It's not like you, Albert.

Albert Thinking?

Mother You don't talk to me. Or your father. Well, I'm glad it's all behind you, I hope it starts to wear off.

Albert I wanted to stay on after my degree, but they wouldn't have me.

Mother I don't know what you want to know about philosophy for. Your father didn't have to study philosophy and look where he is—chairman of Metal Alloys and Allied Metals. It's not as if you were going to be a philosopher or something. Yes, you could have been a trainee executive by now. As it is you'll have to do your stint on the factory floor, philosophy or no philosophy. That university has held you back.

Albert I'll have to get myself articulated to a philosopher. Start at the bottom. Of course, a philosopher's clerk wouldn't get the really interesting work straight off, I know that. It'll be a matter of filing the generalizations, tidying up the paradoxes, laying out the premises before the boss gets in—that kind of thing; but after I've learned the ropes I might get a half share in a dialectic, perhaps, and work up towards a treatise. Yes, I could have my own thriving little philosopher's office in a few years.

Mother (*after a pause*) Would you like to have some coffee downstairs?

Albert Yes.

Mother Yes what?

Albert Yes, please.

Mother (*after a pause*) I still think it was mean of you not to let us know you had a summer vacation.

Albert I thought you knew. I've had one every year.

Mother You know I've no head for dates. You could have come home to see us.

Albert I'm sorry—there was this temporary job going . . .

Mother Your father would have given you some money if you'd asked him.

Albert I thought I'd have a go myself.

Mother You'll have to get up now.

Albert It was fantastic up there. The scale of it. From the ground it looks just like a cat's cradle, from a distance you can take it all in, and then up there in the middle of it the thinnest threads are as thick as your body and you could play tennis on the main girders . . .

Mother Kate will be up in a minute to make the beds.

Albert It's absurd, really, being up there, looking down on the university lying under you like a couple of bricks, full of dots studying philosophy . . .

Mother I don't want you getting in Kate's way—she's got to clean.

Albert What could they possibly know? I saw more up there in three weeks than those dots in three years. I saw the context. It reduced philosophy and everything else. I got a perspective. Because that bridge was—separate—complete—removed, defined by principles of engineering which makes it stop at a certain point, which compels a certain shape, certain joints—the whole thing utterly fixed by the rules that make it stay up. It's complete, and a man can give his life to its maintenance, a very fine bargain.

Mother Do you love me, Albert?

Albert Yes.

Mother Yes what?

Albert Yes, please.

The lights fade. A gavel is heard banging on a table

Mayoral Voice (*in the darkness*) Number forty-three on the order paper, proposal from Bridge Sub-committee . . .

First Voice (*in the darkness*) Move . . .

Second Voice (*in the darkness*) Second.

Mayoral Voice (*in the darkness*) All in favour . . .

An absent-minded murmur of fifty "Ayes" is heard

Against (*Pause*) Carried. Number forty-four on the order paper . . .

The lights come up on Albert's bedroom. There is a knock on the door, which is opened

Kate (*off*) Oh, I'm sorry, Mr Albert.

Albert Hello, I was just thinking of getting up.

The scene closes

SCENE 4

Fitch's office.

Fitch is at his desk, talking to Bob.

Bob What—by myself? It would take years.

Fitch Eight years, yes.

Bob No. I demand a transfer.

Fitch I thought I'd give you first refusal.

Bob I want to go back to painting the Corporation crest on the dustcarts.

Fitch I could fit you in on the magenta.

Bob On the what?

Fitch It's one man to a colour nowadays. Efficiency.

The lights fade, then come up again on Fitch and Charlie

Charlie You must be joking.

Fitch It's an opportunity for you.

Charlie I'd go mad. What's it all about?

Fitch Efficiency.

Charlie I'm not doing that bridge on me tod.

Fitch It's no more work than before.

Charlie I'd jump off within a month.

Fitch Oh. Well, we couldn't have that. That would be only one-ninety-sixth of it done.

The lights fade, then come up again on Fitch and Dad

Dad You mean it's a cheaper way of doing it.

Fitch More efficient.

Dad We've been doing a good job.

Fitch Efficiency isn't a matter of good and bad, entirely. It's a matter of optimum use of resources—time, money, manpower.

Dad You mean it's cheaper. I'm an old man.

Fitch You've got eight years in you.

Dad It might be my last eight. I haven't done anything yet—I've got a future.

Fitch Well, I could put you on yellow no-parking lines.

Dad Yes, all right.

The lights fade, then come up again on Fitch and Albert

Fitch But do you have any qualifications?

Albert I've got a degree in philosophy, Mr Fitch.

Fitch That's a little unusual.

Albert I wouldn't say that. There were lots of us doing it.

Fitch That's all very well if you're going to be a philosopher, but what we're talking about is painting bridges.

Albert Yes, yes, I can see what you're driving at, of course, but I don't suppose it did me any harm. Almost everyone who didn't know what to do, did philosophy. Well, that's logical.

Fitch You're an educated man.

Albert Thank you.

Fitch What I mean, you're not the run of the mill bridge painter, not the raw material I'm looking for.

Albert Well, I did it in the vacation.

Fitch Yes—yes, I did have reports of you. But surely . . .

Albert I know what you mean, but that's what I want to do. I liked it. I don't want to work in a factory or an office.

Fitch Is it the open-air life that attracts you?

Albert No. It's the work, the whole thing—crawling round that great basket, so high up, being responsible for so much that's visible. Actually I don't know if that's why I like it. I like it because I was happy up there, doing something simple but so grand, without end. It doesn't get away from you.

Fitch The intellectual rather than the practical—that's it, is it?

Albert Probably.

Fitch I'm the same. It's poetry to me—a perfect equation of space, time and energy . . .

Albert Yes . . .

Fitch It's not just slapping paint on a girder . . .

Albert No . . .

Fitch It's continuity, control—mathematics.

Albert Poetry.

Fitch Yes, I should have known it was a job for a university man.

Albert Like me and you . . .

Fitch Well, I went to night school myself.

Albert Same thing, different time.

Fitch That's what I say.

Albert I'm your man, Mr Fitch.

Fitch You'll stick to it for eight years, will you?

Albert Oh, I'll paint it more than once.

The scene closes

SCENE 5

Living-room at Albert's home.

Albert, Father and Mother are seated at breakfast.

Father Now then, Albert, you've had your fun. When I was your age I'd got six years of work behind me.

Albert Well, I'm starting work now, Father.

Father Quite so, but don't think you're going to start at the top. You'll get there all right in time, but you've got to learn the business first. Is there any more tea, Mother?

Mother Ring for Kate, would you, Albert?

Albert Yes, Mother. (*He rings the bell*)

Mother That reminds me . . .

Father You'll start where I started. On the shop floor.

Albert Well, actually father . . .

Mother I don't want to sound Victorian, but one can't just turn a blind eye.

Albert What?

Father Yes, I never went in for books and philosophy and look at me now.

Mother I suppose that's the penance one pays for having servants nowadays.

Albert What?

Father I started Metal Alloys and Allied Metals—built it up from a small biscuit-tin furnace in the back garden, small smelting jobs for the cycle-repair shop.

Mother I've suspected her for some time and now one can't ignore it. Even with her corset.

Albert Who?

Father You can come in on Monday and I'll hand you over to the plant foreman.

Albert I've already got a job. Actually.

Father You haven't got a job until I give you one.

Albert I'm going to paint Clifton Bay Bridge, starting Monday.

Mother What colour?

Albert Silver.

Father Just a minute . . .

Kate enters

Kate You rang, madam?

Mother More tea, Kate, please.

Kate Yes, madam.

Mother And a word.

Kate Yes, madam.

Mother Are you ill?

Kate No, madam.

Mother I believe I heard you being ill in the bathroom this morning.

Kate Yes, madam.

Mother And yesterday?

Kate Yes, madam.

Albert What's the matter, Kate?

Kate Nothing, Mr Albert.

Mother Leave this to me. Cook tells me you fainted in the kitchen last week.

Kate I came over funny.

Albert Kate . . .

Mother Let's not beat about the bush. Is it the gardener's boy?

Kate No, madam.

Mother Then who is it?

Albert Who's what?

Mother Well, I'm sorry. You can have a month's wages, of course. You'd better make sure that the young man does the right thing by you.

The lights fade. A wedding march is heard—but a "Muzale" version suitable for a civil wedding; not a church organ. The lights come up again to reveal Kate and Albert alone together

Kate I never thought you'd do the right thing by me, Albert.

Albert We'll be all right. It's a nice room.

Kate Your mum didn't like it.

Albert My mother's got no taste. I'll make a fire.

Kate And wrap up warm when you go out—it'll be freezing up there.

Albert Only a breeze.

Kate It'll be ice in a month. If you fell I'd die, Albert.

Albert So would I.

Kate Don't you ever fall. They shouldn't make it a year-round job. It's dangerous.

Albert No—you don't know how big it is—the threads are like ladders and the cross-pieces are like piers into the sky.

Kate You hold on tight, for the spring, and the baby.

The scene closes

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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