

Star Turn

A monologue by Eric Presland¹

TO IAN McKELLEN

The time is the early 1980s

[We are in a dingy waiting room, an adjunct to a small provincial repertory theatre. Off to the stage left is the door to the larger room/small studio where the waiting actors will go to audition. A single spot. A man in his later fifties is combing his hair in a mirror. He has the look of a faded matinee idol, rather run to seed. He is thinning on top. He is in waistcoat and shirt sleeves. As he combs his hair he runs over a speech:]

Oh, thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter?
Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her.
For I'll refer me to all things of sense
If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,
So.... So....

Damn

[He runs to a copy of 'Othello' to check the speech. He has great energy. Satisfied, he returns to his combing.]

So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,
Run from her gardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou...

[To himself:] Of such a thing as thou....

[He surveys the ravages in the mirror bleakly, but then shrugs and puts on his jacket. He exits from the spot, humming 'It ain't necessarily so'.

¹ Eric Presland changed his name to Peter Scott-Presland in 2000. This has made it difficult to identify references to him on the internet. On this site, all performances, scripts etc prior to 2000 are attributed to Eric Presland, later ones to Peter Scott-Presland

[Crossfade to general state. He is in the green room of a small regional rep, waiting to audition. He wants the attention of another of the actors:]

Don't tell me, let me guess. Emilia, Well, 'Othello' is hardly bursting with parts for women, is it? And they're bound to have cast Desdemona already from some ghastly soap. Besides – I hope you don't mind me saying this – you're hardly ethereal enough for Desdemona. Too – sturdy. You have the air of a woman who likes her steaks rare, and that would never do for Little Miss Innocent. Still, Emilia's a good part for the woman with enough guts to get her teeth into it.

[He looks around the hall.]

These places don't change, do they? Old schools, warehouses, church halls. The smell of mould and failure. They were the same in the Fifties. Cigarette?

[He turns and sees the No Smoking sign.]

I'm sorry, I didn't see that. You can't smoke anywhere these days, can you? Sometimes I think the entire membership of Equity has gone macrobiotic. Personally, I blame Jane Fonda.

I hate auditions; don't you? Of course, I never used to have to do them, not in the old days, not before... They used to come crawling to me – "Would you consider doing *Henry V* at Stratford? We'd throw in *As You Like It* as a makeweight...."

No thanks, I prefer to pace. Back problems. I was doing this telly – a special – a few years back, based loosely – very loosely – on the life of Dick Turpin, and like an idiot I insisted on doing my own stunts. By the time I realised I was too old for that sort of lark, it was too late. Off the horse, onto the bum, with a cracked vertebra for my pains. Serves me right too. Vanity, thy name is Actor.

It's Helen, isn't it? Actually we've worked together, but you probably don't remember it. That frightful flick about the Dieppe raids. What was it called? "The Path to Glory". The Path to Nowhere, more likely. Cast of thousands and not a decent part in sight. The sort of film where

instead of paying you properly, they appeal to your patriotism and promise to put your name above the title. Then of course everybody's name is above the title and no-one can remember a damn one of them.

I remember you came rushing out of a farmhouse in the pouring rain and cut me down from the tree where my parachute was caught. Stuck in Cornwall in the middle of February, and we had wait three weeks for it to rain. No wonder the British film industry died on its feet. It's all the fault of the weather.

No need to apologise, I was covered in camouflage blacking at the time. Anyway, people don't recognise me so much these days. Sometimes I have to give my name, and people say, "Not *the* Dick Babbage?" and I say, "No, just *a* Dick Babbage."

You know, a woman actually came up to me in the street last week and said, "Didn't you used to be Dick Babbage?" I thought that sort of thing only occurred in Hollywood. What do you say?

I drew myself up and I boomed in my grandest manner, "Madam, you are correct, but now I am mere ectoplasm. Be off with you." I've never seen a woman cross the street so fast in my life.

Still, it's better than being spat at in the street. Or being told, "Hanging isn't good enough for your kind."

Oh yes, I've had all that. You remember the case, of course?

No, please Helen. Please. No sympathy. I can handle everything except pity, it just makes me want to blub. And actually it wasn't that bad really. Inside it was really quite – peaceful. It was good to get away from it all – a positive relief, in fact. And most of it blew over quickly enough. The public has a very short attention span. The papers were the worst, of course, but nobody expects them to be anything else.

No the worst – the absolute worst – was seeing him in the witness box, starring for the prosecution – the looks he gave me – as if it was all my fault. But it wasn't – I couldn't do anything. I was in no position to protect him. I tried to keep him out of it, I even offered to plead guilty, if only they wouldn't put him up. He could have been kept anonymous. But no, the Great British Public was going through one of its spasms of

self-righteousness, and demanded blood. There had to be a sacrifice. Two sacrifices. I haven't seen or heard anything of him from that day to this.

Still, I don't want to burden you with my troubles... I'm sorry, I don't know what made me talk like that. Hey, that's your call, isn't it? Break a leg...

[She exits. To himself:]

Oh yes, they had to put him in the witness box. As if he hadn't been through enough already, poor little devil. Questioning. Medical examination. The gloved and greasy finger of the police surgeon up the bum. The tests. The swabs. No wonder he'd say anything in the end, just to make it stop.

[The memory makes him want to cry.]

Now don't blub, Babbage. What will people think? Silly old bugger.

[To audience:]

It really was the most awful old rot, what he said in court. As a script it might have come out of a Victorian melodrama.

"He was poor but he was honest
Victim of a rich man's game."

[He catches the eye of another of those waiting to audition. It is a young man whom he obviously finds attractive.]

I hate auditions; don't you? Don't worry, you'll get used to them. In time we grow the callouses we need. The careless shrug, the rueful smile, the raised eyebrow. I was always very good at the eyebrow. Parker Tyler described me as a virtuoso of the eyebrow. Parker Tyler? A critic. Before your time.

Are you a drama school graduate? Which one? Really, that's good. When did you finish? So recently? You must have done well to get as far as this so soon.

Never went, myself. Straight out of school at fifteen and onto the boards. They don't call it that any more, do they? 'The Boards'. Very Victorian. Actually it wasn't straight onto the boards, it was ASM. Folkestone under Arthur Brough. But he took a shine to me – to my potential, you understand. Bashing coconut shells and firing pistols and what not hardly shows one's prowess, but he saw something...

Of course, I haven't done auditions for *years and years*. Never had to in the old days. They were queuing up for me. Remember *Educating Rita*? They offered me that. No, not the play, the film. But I was tied up with a grisly biopic – Italian co-production, say no more – a biopic about Suleiman the Magnificent on location in Turkey that went *weeks* over schedule, so of course I lost it. So in the end it went to the Guv'nor. Not really his part, of course. Way out of his class.

Tony used to handle all that for me. That's Tony Page, my agent. I was with him for years. Tony would never have let me come for a thing like this. Fussed like a mother hen. A great man, a great agent. A great loss. The house feels empty without him...

Suleiman? I played Elizabeth I's ambassador to the Ottoman Court. Very flowery. Do you know, I can't remember what the film was called. There were so many. No, you wouldn't have. It was a complete dud here. Straight to video. Although funnily enough it went down very big in Japan. They thought it was all very cultural.

What's your name? Stuart Gregg. Mmm. Change it. No, honestly, I'm serious. You don't look like a Stuart Gregg. It's a hopelessly 1950s sort of name; RAF fighter pilots and decent coppers. They don't write many parts like that these days. You need something more – not decadent exactly – more knowing. Yes, that's the word. You look knowing. Are you? Knowing? Louche, even? Rupert – that's a knowing name. I know it's ridiculous, but I'm dead right. Otherwise you'll get a series of wimps and then you'll be stuck with it and it will be too late. What are you up for? No, let me guess. Roderigo. See, I'm right. A classic Shakespeare wimp. If you were Rupert Strong you'd be up for Cassio.

Oh, my dear boy, you flatter me. Nothing so grand. Besides, they daren't do Othello in blackface these days. Anyway, they'd never audition for the principals, they'd get them under contract in advance, preferably off some popular television series, for maximum product

recognition', as the yanks say. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd got Lenny Henry².

Brabantio. I thought I'd go for it while I still have to age up for it. It's got a couple of decent speeches, at least. Good audition piece too. *Oh, thou foul thief...* You don't know it? You haven't read the play? Who does, these days?

Oh thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?
Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her.

[He loses himself in the speech, goes into full flight.]

For I'll refer me to all things of sense
If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,
So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, t'incur a general mof,
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou – to fear, not to delight.
Judge me the world, if 'tis not gross in sense
That thou hast practised on her with foul charms,
Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals
That weaken motion; I'll have't disputed on;
Tis probable and palpable to thinking.
I therefore apprehend and do attach thee
For an abuser of the world, a practiser
Of arts inhibited and out of warrant.
Lay hold upon him.

They don't change much, parents. Foul mouthed, foul minds. They're the last people who ought to have charge of children, really. Believe me. I should know.

Babbage. Dick Babbage. No, not Buggage, Babbage.

[He waits for a reaction, but there is none.]

² At this time Henry was a well-known stand-up associated with *The Comic Strip*; BBC1 started broadcasting *The Lenny Henry Show* in 1984. Despite Babbages's scoffing, Henry had the last laugh. He made his Shakespearean debut in a widely-admired performance of *Othello* in 2009, at the West Yorkshire Playhouse.

You have no idea what a relief that is. Well, it's obvious you've never heard of me. No, there's no reason you should have. All the same, you have no idea how pleased I am. Oh, nothing. Forget I said it.

[He looks at his watch.]

They're way behind schedule, as usual. In the old days of weekly rep. they knew time was money. I just caught the end of it. I remember once I went up to audition at – I think it was Grimsby; some godawful town up north, anyway. And the train actually ran out of coal on the way up. True. The steam enthusiasts forget things like that. And the dirt – smuts everywhere. Anyway, I was due on at 2.10 – they were very precise about things like that in those days – and we staggered into Grimsby – or Doncaster – or wherever – at five past two. I leapt into a taxi, just got to the stage door on time, rushed in, flew onto the stage in a fearful lather, just as they called my name.

"What are you going to do for us, Mr. Babbage?" – Voice at the back of the stalls.

[Panting] "I thought I might give you a little *Hamlet*, sir." – We were very polite, always called the director 'Sir', or 'Mr', none of this modern democratic chumminess.

"As long as it is just a *very little* Hamlet, Mr. Babbage."

"Yes sir." I had about ten seconds to get my breath back. "To be or not to –"

"Next!"

I'm not exaggerating. I was in and out of that theatre in thirty seconds flat. Straight back to the station. The train was still standing there, waiting to go back to London. I quickly got back on it, and we were off. I wasn't in Grimsby more than fifteen minutes at the outside.

That's better. You've got a good smile. Use it. Relax. And watch those shoulders – far too stiff. Smile again. Mmm. And get those canine teeth filed.

Hey, that's your call. Break a leg, Stuart Gregg. Or should I say Rupert?

[The young man exist. To audience:]

Last one, it seems. Better chance of a lasting impression. Or so they say...

Grimsby... Hadn't thought of that in years... Nowadays directors like to pretend we're all chums together. All equals on the journey of the play. Except some are more equal than others. "I'm the director, call me Tom." All those false Arts-Council-South-Bank-Show smiles. Warm ups. Group encounters.

"Don't think of this as an audition; think of it as a day of interaction and communication." But someone still ends up eating cold chips in their bedsit. Doesn't make the rejection letter any easier to take. Or phone call, more like. Nobody writes letters any more, except for computerised mail-outs from the Dole Office. You can't escape those these days, not even in prison.

Mrs. P forwarded everything, bless her heart. "To Babbage, D., number F/107773, Wandsworth Prison. And nearly everything was junk. Unbelievable. "Buy a share in a holiday home, and you too could win £50,000." Just what you need when all you can see – if you pull yourself up to the bars – is the tarmac of the exercise yard, the kitchen dustbins and the grimy wall of the Prison Officer Duty Hostel.

Three years³... If I'd been his parents and starved him to death, I'd probably have got less. I'd certainly have been treated better by the other prisoners. They have their own ways of dealing with – that sort of person. Eventually I had to request solitary.

But I never – forced – anything. He never said I forced him. That was all insinuations from the prosecution. It was all so – innocent, that's what I couldn't explain, couldn't get them to understand.

We were on location for *Turbulent Priest* – you remember, that IRA thing. Channel Four co-production, done on a shoestring, but I needed

³ This sentence would be far more severe in 2020.

prestige more than money at the time. We had four days' work on some housing estate in Brent, and you know the way people hang around whenever there's filming. Especially kids. Every day there was this little knot of estate kids, all ages, laughing and pointing. Nicking, if you weren't careful. It was the devil's own job to get quiet on set. They would have cleared that bit of the estate except they wanted bodies in the background on occasion. No money for extras. As I said, on a shoestring.

I first noticed Sunil because he was very tall. Beanpole in fact. And that seemed to give him authority over the others. The Assistant Director would yell 'Quiet', and the boys would take no notice, but Sunil just had to go 'Sh!' and they all went shtum.

The other thing I noticed was his BMX. They were all the rage at the time. Those bikes with the big front wheels and heavy tyres. Fearsomely expensive. And this beanpole boy had one. It looked way too small for him. You know how kids get a bike to stand up on its back wheel, at traffic lights and things like that, and hover on it, twisting and turning to keep in position. It's fiendishly difficult on a BMX because of the weight of wheel, apparently. But this dark-skinned boy would be watching us, standing up on his bike like that, absolutely motionless. He seemed to hang in the air. I have no idea how he managed to do it. And so curious. He reminded me a little of a meerkat, up on his back wheel.

Stillness is priceless in the cinema. I thought "this one is one to watch." I mean, he made you watch him.

So you see, he was different from the others. He followed the proceedings as if he was really interested in what was going on, as if he were trying to understand it all. The others were watching the stars, asking for autographs and so on, but no, Sunil was watching the director and the cameras. Then, the second day, I saw him acting: watching his reflection in the window of the local off-licence. He was so absorbed in it, he didn't realise I'd crept closer. He was acting me – I mean, my part, using the lines I'd had the day before. Then he caught my eye, in the window, and blushed furiously, and then we both burst out laughing.

When I found out how old he really was, I ran a mile. He looked at least eighteen, maybe even twenty – still illegal, of course, but... certainly over the threshold, if you know what I mean.

By then he'd been round to the house quite a few times. He was obviously interested in cinema, though I could tell from talking to him he didn't know that much. I offered to show him my scrap books, and that led to talking about the industry, the films I'd been in, and stories about other stars, and so on. He'd flick through my albums for hours, never seemed to tire of it.

At first he was rather overawed by it all. The sitting room alone was larger than his family's entire flat. He'd sit on the edge of the sofa, hardly daring to move. It took all the famed Babbage charm to get him to relax. But gradually he began to explore. It was rather like a kitten in a new home.

It was talking about the BMX which was the giveaway. I assumed his father had got a good enough job to pay for it, because obviously he wasn't working or he couldn't hang around all day. But no, his father was a sailor, he said. No love lost there, apparently.

So he couldn't have the money – his family didn't have the money. It took a little time to sink in that the bike must be stolen. And then some more time to see what the implications might be. If he'd stolen a bike, was stealing a habit? What else did he get up to? It was a pretty rough estate. Drugs? Worse?

I couldn't find a way to tackle him about it. We were getting on so well, I thought we were chums. It was a terrible dilemma. So I just stopped inviting him round. He phoned, but I hung up on him as soon as I heard the pips. I know that was cruel, but it was too risky. I had a career to think of.

But one night, there he was, stood on the doorstep, in the rain. If I'd left him there, the police would have picked him up. Bound to – a black kid in the middle of St. John's Wood at two o'clock in the morning. He was lucky he hadn't been picked up already. What can you do? I could see the bruises, purple in the lamplight.... His dad must have been back on shore leave.

He begged, he pleaded. The only alternatives he had, he said, were going on the streets or going into care. In fact, it turned out, his mother had already fended off the Social Services. I suddenly realised how little I knew about this – waif. How old are you, I asked? Seventeen, he replied.

Well, what would you have done? Told him to push off? Go back home and let his dad beat him again for being a pouf? Packed him off into a children's home, to be abused by care workers and stigmatised for life?

It wasn't as if I couldn't afford it. It was a large house, set well back from the street, a high brick wall. I have always protected my privacy. It was – manageable. No-one need know.

I waited till his father went back to sea. His mother was fine. She was Irish, she knew the score. She knew what I could offer him. It was a chance to get out, a chance she'd never have, because of the kids. And with four others, she couldn't cope with Sunil too. He was the oldest...

She came round, had tea, saw the house. I think it was the piano that clinched it. Anyone who had a baby grand in their drawing-room must be a gentleman. She was quite remarkably old-fashioned in that respect, more than the British. But in other ways – well, it was part of the culture, I suppose. She was used to priests adopting boys, becoming mentors. She knew I'd never hurt him – and she knew where she could find him. I made it quite clear she could see him whenever she wanted. It was the least I could do to reassure her.

And I knew she'd find the money handy.

It was better than having him on the streets. Which he would have been. The problem was, of course, that he liked the streets. At least the streets of the estate. It was where his life had always been. But we couldn't have that, not now. Luckily I was able to get him a job – more like an apprenticeship really. An old mucker of mine from National Service, Jackie Bergman, great friend of Tony and me – kindred spirit and all that – do anything for you – totally discreet – anyway, Jackie ran one of the largest fabric warehouses in London, and needed a cutter. A quick word, and it was a shoe-in.

At first it worked quite well. Every morning we'd leave together, me for the studio, Sunil for Camden Town, both in our Saville Row suits. It was funny, in a way, but very sweet.

It didn't last, of course. I couldn't keep an eye on him all the time, I had filming. Jackie started ringing me up complaining he was late, his mind wasn't on the job, he was making mistakes measuring and cutting. Expensive mistakes, cloth was being wasted. Sunil got bored quickly. And I couldn't bring myself to bawl him out, not seriously. I was his lover, not his father, dammit.

[Pause.]

Well, of course we were lovers. What else do seventeen-year-old boys think about?

He had eyes you could drown in, and skin as soft and sweet as ripe damsons....

[Stuart returns]

Oh, hello. How did it go? Nonsense, everyone feels like that. I'm sure you did just fine. And even if you didn't, what the hell.... What does the song say? "Pick yourself up, dust yourself down, start all over again." I should know, believe me.

Look, I'm the last one, so I won't be long now. Do you fancy hanging around till I've done my bit, then we could catch the train together and – I don't know – have a spot of grub together somewhere in town. Or whatever takes your fancy... Well, never mind. Another time, maybe. Here. Here's my card. Give me a tinkle if you ever – need any help – or even if you just feel like it. And – you never know – maybe see you back here in October. Oh, don't mention it. Be off with you. Ciao.

[Stuart goes]

That's the worst of being queer, not having any children. Facing the future as a void. You want to hand it on. Something. Whatever it is. I don't know – experience, talent, enthusiasms. I got so much from Sunil, he cracked the shell. He made me feel young again – a cliché, but true.

I'd turned fifty, Tony'd died of cancer, and I was distinctly passé as far as the critics were concerned.

And I felt useful. And wanted.

And what did he get from me in return? The trouble is, you can never know. It's invisible, it can flower long after you've gone. In the end, not a lot, I suspect. Except a nightmare he'll live with all his days.

It was the father, of course. Came home on leave suddenly without telling anyone, and found one of his kids had gone AWOL. He started asking awkward questions. He must have beaten the address out of her. It took four policemen to hold him back. I honestly thought he was going to kill me. One or two of the policemen would have liked him to kill me.

I'll never forget that evening. There was something ominous in the atmosphere, I'm sure I'm not imagining it. The air was heavy. I was fagged out, I'd been on set since six that morning. Mrs P had left us a dal and a lamb pasanda to heat up – she had the idea that Sunil preferred his hereditary North Indian cuisine, and no amount of argument could persuade her that he was actually happiest with egg, beans and chips.

So he fiddled at it, and there's nothing I find more irritating than people who fiddle with their food. I was snappy, he was restless – we could never have gone out together anywhere, it would have caused comment.

So we had a row. Same old thing. He didn't want to be a tailor or cutter, he wanted to go to RADA, but I told him it was too chancy and he should knuckle down to a real job and learn some discipline. Yes, I know. I was turning into my father.

Though I can see now it was what he'd always wanted, it was too close to home, professionally. People might know me, make the connection, and wonder about the two of us. We could never be seen in public together. It was all out of the question.

And he said, 'What about you?' And I said I was the very lucky exception that proved the rule, and luck was the one thing I couldn't

buy him. And he said something about connections, and I said he was out of his mind – what would people think? I could hear myself saying it, and felt a terrible cad, but – You can see the problem, can't you? Unfortunately he couldn't, so that particular gramophone record was getting pretty worn by then. Later we made it up – I backed down as usual. The young can be frighteningly inflexible.

So it was yes, I would talk to Jackie and square it with him. And yes, if he could get into a drama school on his own merit, I would back him, but keep my name out of it. He was happy then. And I remember lying there, listening to his breathing, and thinking, "I'm going to lose him. He's growing away from me." The thought made me hold my breath in panic. And I hated a world which made us hide away in darkened rooms, that forced us to claw at each other, that gave us no space to exist in.

Then, right on cue, the brick came through the window.

He was still in his sailor's uniform, and he was tight as an owl. And he stood there, swaying, holding on to the railing, and screaming – oh, the most filthy things.

"Oh thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my – son"

I should never have called the bobbies. That was the big mistake, I realised afterwards. The police could never, ever, be on the side of the likes of us. But I thought my name would mean something... I wasn't thinking....

"He may be a bit the worse for wear, Mr Babbage – we'll handle that – but he is the boy's father... You don't mind if we have a look round, do you? Well, if there's no truth in the father's allegations, sir, I'm sure you'll have no objections ... And which is the boy's room, sir?... I see....

"And this is your room, sir?... And whose are these underpants sir? They look a bit small for you, if you don't mind my saying so.... On *your* bed? Why are they on your bed?... I think you'd better come with us, sir...."

I saw the headlines on the newsstands next morning. Through the window of the Black Maria, on the way to Bow Street. "BABBAGE – YOU

FILTH!" said the Sun. "BABBAGE IN CHILD PROSTITUTE RACKET" – Daily Mail. "SCUM OF THE EARTH" – The Star. I can see them all now, but at the time I didn't seem to notice them at all. It was the shock.

Later, when I could read them all and take them in, it was the *Telegraph* that hurt the most – "FORMER MOVIE STAR CHARGED". Former!

[Someone has come to fetch him.]

I'm sorry. I didn't hear the call. My mind was elsewhere. Dick Babbage. Brabantio... Yes, the Dick Babbage... Well, I have been released. That's all behind me know.... I really don't think there's any need to go into all that again, it's none of your business. You have my CV.... And what's wrong with it? I did start in the theatre, you know. I got my first break on the strength of Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*. The Lyric, if you must know, it's all written down there. *[Pause]*

Nothing is beneath me. *[Pause]*

If I wasn't a professional in search of work, I'd take you outside and ram your teeth down your throat for that.... But you're not the director, are you? You're a snotty little assistant with a vicious little narrow mind and ideas above your station, and at the moment you are preventing me from doing my job. I've been invited here to audition, and that is precisely what I intend to do. Do I make myself clear?

[He goes through to the stage. He is aware of the director's assistant watching him. Lights change. He's talking over the footlights to the director and his entourage out in the audience.]

Dick Babbage. Brabantio. Well, I suppose I am a little out of touch. I thought I'd ease myself back in gradually. No, not a thing yet. About twenty. I'd forgotten how demoralising the whole process was, to be honest. I'm a little rusty, I'm afraid.

[He has lost confidence. The director's assistant unnerves him. He is unsure whether he wants the job.]

There is one thing ... If you don't mind my asking ... I assume you've cast the principals? In that case, might I know..? Ah yes. I worked with her father on several films... And Othello? ... Not a name I know...

Well, I'm all in favour of new blood. Gold medallist, you say? Very impressive.... Really?... May I? ... Oh, thank you.

[He goes to a side table where there are photographs of the principals they have been talking about. He flicks through them, until he comes to the actor who is to play Othello. It is Sunil. He sways with shock.]

[To himself] O'Hara? Well, of course he'd change his name... *[To Director]* No I'm fine, I'm fine. *[He has to work hard to stop himself laughing with joy.]* It's just that I've had a bit of a shock. *[To himself]* I've done it. I've handed it on... I never thought... *[To the Director]* He's someone I once was...

[He looks at the Director's Assistant, and decides against honesty.]

I thought I recognised him. For a moment I thought he looked like someone I knew. That is a stage name, of course? I think you'll find it's pronounced 'Sunni', not 'Sonny'.

[He takes a last look at the photo, returns it to the pile.]

No, it's nothing really. I'm quite ready.

[Now he badly wants the part, but is still aware of the director's assistant. He knows he must pull something spectacular out of the hat.]

I thought since I was auditioning for the part, I'd give you a bit of Brab - *[He makes a decision]* – I thought I'd give you Sir Thomas More... No, not many people do. It's the only bit of Shakespeare we have in his own handwriting, the autograph's in the British Museum⁴. He only wrote about three pages of the play, and it wasn't done for over three hundred years...

Anyway, there's an angry mob of citizens coming to demand that foreigners be expelled from the country. They smell, says the mob, they're taking our jobs and houses, they're different from us, they're – immoral. Kick them out, says the mob, send them back where they belong, take all their goods, burn down their houses, lynch them. Only

⁴ At the time the play was written, the British Library hadn't been built. The manuscript is now in the British Library.

the mob doesn't call them foreigners, it calls them 'strangers'. The English have always hated anything strange, unfamiliar, different. And More faces the mob and says:

Alas, poor things, what is it you have got
 Although we grant you get the thing you see?
 Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise
 Hath chid down all the majesty of England.
 Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
 Their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage
 Plodding to th'ports and coasts for transportation,
 And that you sit as kings in your desires,
 Authority quite silenc'd by your brawl,
 And you in ruff of your opinions clothed,
 What had you got? I'll tell you; you had taught
 How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
 How order should be quelled, and by this pattern,
 Not one of you should like an aged man,
 For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought,
 With self-same hand, self-reason and self-right,
 Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes
 Would feed on one another. You'll put down strangers,
 Kill them, cut their throats, possess their houses,
 And lead the majesty of law in lyam
 To slip him like a hound.

Alas, alas, say now the King,
 As he is clement if th'offender mourn,
 Should so much come too short of your great trespass
 As but to banish you – whither would you go?
 What country by the nature of your error
 Should give you harbour? Go you to France or Flanders,
 To any German province, Spain or Portigal,
 Nay, anywhere that not adheres to England,
 Why, you must needs be strangers. Would you be pleased
 To find a nation of such barbarous temper
 That breaking out in hideous violence
 Would not afford you an abode on earth,
 Whet their detested knives against your throats,
 Spurn you like dogs, and like as if that God
 Owed not nor made not you, nor that the elements

Were not all appropriate to your comforts,
But chartered unto them? What would you think
To be thus used? This is the strangers' case,
And this your mountainish inhumanity.

[There is a moment of impressed silence. It should feel as if BABBAGE has clinched the part, if only on merit. The audience should finally feel that here is a formidable talent, beyond the self-deception and self-pity. Out over the footlights.]

Was that all right? I'm sorry, I shouldn't ask such a question. Well, it's getting late, I'm sorry to have kept you. Is there anything else? No, I have the dates, thank you. No, there's no problem. Call me any time.

In that case, I suppose I'll be hearing from you. Thank you for your time.

[He exits. Fade to Blackout.]

5th July 1988