

GIVING NOTES

By Michele Siebler

As inspired by Victoria Wood

ACT I

The stage is empty.

The music playing is "Big Mouth Strikes Again" by The Smiths

The stage lights come up as...

Music fades out.

Enter Alma through the audience, speaking to audience.

NOTE: The audience members become her "cast".

ALMA: Right. Bit of hush please. Thank you. Now, I'm going to start by giving _just one or two notes from last rehearsal. unfortunately, once the paramedics were finished it had gotten a wee bit too late and we were in danger of setting off the alarm! Oh, by the way, if anyone is interested in Maurice's funeral arrangements see Connie during the break. You did speak with Maurice's widow, didn't you Connie? Yes, and just see if she wouldn't mind returning his costume and script as soon as possible.

Right. Well, there were a few raised eyebrows when we let it slip that the Marlowe's Players were having a bash at Shakespeare. And I can't say this too often: it may be Hamlet but it's got to be Fun Fun Fun!

Now we're still very loose on lines. Where's Gertrude? I'm not so worried about you - if you `dry' just give us a bit of business with the shower cap. But Barbara - you will have to buckle down. I mean, Ophelia's mad scene, 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance' - it's no good just hanging a few herbs about and saying, 'Don't mind me, I'm a loony'. Yes? You see, this is our marvelous bard, Barbara, you cannot paraphrase. It's not like Pinter where you can more or less say what you like as long as you leave enough gaps.

Right. Let's see, ahh ... (*she crosses off three pages in her notes*). It appears after last rehearsal we'll be needing a ghost of Hamlet's father and a gravedigger- doubling up on roles seemed such a good idea at the time - so keep your ears open for a replacement. Oh, and the back legs of Hamlet's donkey as well. Well, we don't know he didn't have one, do we? Why waste a good cossy.

Good, Act One, Scene One, on the ramparts. Now I know the card table is a bit wobbly, but it seems Stan has worked out how to adapt the Beanstalk so we'll be giving that a go in today's rehearsal. Connie! I don't see the Beanstalk, we do have it don't we? It's not still holding up your car port, is it? No? Good. Right, what's this? Atmosphere? Yes - now what did we work on, Philip? Yes, it's midnight, it's jolly cold. What do we do when it's cold? We go 'Brrr', and we do this. (*Slaps hands on arms.*) Right, well don't forget again, please. And cut the hot-water bottle, it's not working.

Hamlet - hello, David. Sweetie, drop the lisp, it's not coming over. Your characterization's very good, David, but it's just far too gloomy. Fair enough, make him a little bit depressed at the beginning, but start lightening it from Scene Two, say from the hokey-pokey onwards. And perhaps the, er, 'Get thee to a nunnery' with Ophelia - perhaps give a little wink to the audience, or something, because he's really just having her on, isn't he? Oh, and he should probably have his shirt off for that scene as well.

Polonius, try and show the age of the man in your voice and in your bearing, rather than waving the bus-pass. I think you'll find it easier when we get the walking frame. Is that coming, Connie? Good.

The Players' scene: Did anyone else feel it stretched a bit? Yes? I think we'll go back to the tumbling on the entrance, rather than the Moulin Rouge trapeze. You see, we're running at six hours twenty now, and if we're going to put those soliloquies back in ...

Gravediggers? Oh yes, gravediggers. The problem here is that Shakespeare hasn't given us a lot to play with - I feel we're a little short on laughs, so Harold, you do your dribbling, and Maurice - oh right... dead. (*Pause, in thought*) Any news on the skull, Connie? I'm just thinking, if your little dog pulls through, we'll have to fall back on papier mache. (*Shhes her*). All right, Connie, as long as it's dead by dress ...

That's about it - oh yes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, you're not on long, make your mark. I don't think it's too gimmicky, the tandem.

Right, has everyone chosen their animal? What's that sweetie? No, no it's not your character's pet Barbara. It's who Ophelia would be if she were an animal. I know you're terribly fond of corgis but that wasn't the exercise. Don't worry, we'll find a good home for it ... Connie, you'll be needing a replacement for "our skull", er, your little dog soon . . . see, all worked out.

You see, Ophelia could be a humming bird, (*physicalizing*), flitting about, fragile and vulnerable or perhaps an ostrich sticking her head in the ground, or, while we're down under, how about a kangaroo, that would be jolly fun, or if you're feeling a little low on energy why not a three toed sloth. Why I remember being a camel for an entire day. You get up, drink some water, spit at a few people, go and have a lie down. Do that for a few hours and let me tell you, you really begin to understand ahh ... well, you certainly know where ... the point is that you ... right, let's see what we can come up with next week.

Right, before we begin today's rehearsal let's start with a few vocal warm-ups and stretches, shall we? (*Fill light on audience comes up*) Everyone on their feet. Come on, don't be shy.

Up. Up. (*She goes into audience and makes every get up*). Good. Blubbering on pitch. (*She performs this, not noticing that not everyone is doing it*). Moving on to the backwards K. (*She performs this*). Really get the whole body involved. (*She repeats*). And on "Ahh". (*She sings scales in operatic style, pausing and waiting for the audience to repeat, continues until a good number of audience members are participating*). Tongue stretches. (*Holding tongue with, fingers, various tongue stretches including "tongue power"*). Very good and shake it out.

Oh, I've had a bit of a revelation for sponsorship funding. Polonius, sweetie, Act I, Scene II, your speech to Laertes - (*Consulting text in play*) Give every man thy ear, but, few they voice; blah. blah, blah, ah yes *For the apparel oft proclaims the man* I thought you could open your jacket to reveal a large label which reads, *THIS WEEK ONLY 20% OFF AT "TOM'S PLACE" IN KENSINGTON MARKET*. And in that same speech *Neither a borrower nor a lender be*; you hand him your ... (*as she draws it from her clipboard*) VISA card. That should buy us a few more cod pieces.

Now let's get started. No, no, no sweeties. You are still rehearsing in the seats. What did I say last week? You must earn the right to be on stage. You can't just jump up on these sacred boards and start bashing out Shakespeare. Why I remember when I was in RADA, that's the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, you know. It's in England. Yes at RADA, (*under breath as she sits*), Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, it wasn't until my third year that I got on stage and that was to do the sweeping up. (*She takes a beat as she remembers how she wasn't good enough*). You must want it, need it, be hungry for it, allow the stage to nourish you. (*She brings out a bag of potato chips*).

We'll start with Act III. Scene I. Esther, will you be alright? How are the hot flashes, dear? Well, just say your bit and then you can run off and splash some water on your face, (*under her breath*) whatever it takes to keep your brazier on this time. Good? Remember our cuts... and begin.

Sound of rehearsal comes on. She watches intensely for 20 seconds, opens the bag of chips, begins to eat them and starts looking bored and looking around. Notices something is stuck in her teeth she takes out a mirror and tries to dislodge it.

Cell phone begins to ring inside preset bag behind a chair in last row of seats. She looks out annoyed to audience. Starts to wander through audience trying to pin point where it is coming from. She may make a few remarks to audience i.e. That's a lovely blouse, where did you get it. OR Did the two of you arrive together, you really must be careful, people will talk. Carries on, finds the bag, realizes it's her new cell phone and answers it very important like.

Hello, Alma speaking. (*As she walks down through audience with bag to Stage Right*). (*It's her mother, immediately her energy becomes tense and uncomfortable*). (*Whispering*) Hello Mother, I'll be home as soon as rehearsal is over. It's not a waste of time (*Loudly*) It's an absolute marvelous cast. (*She gestures for them to keep going*). (*Whispering*) Well, that's why I'm directing this one isn't it Mother. (*Loudly*) And it's all taking shape beautifully. (*She stumbles up on stage and starts crawling across the stage while Whispering*) Mother,

no man will be taking advantage of me before, during or after rehearsal. (*Her bag spills out comes tampons, gel and a vibrator while she continues speaking she is hurriedly returning items to bag*). No you can not speak to Martin. (*Loudly*) Martin is busy... (*Whispering*) I'm sorry Mother, yes, I realize you're looking out for my... welfare. How's your balance? Is the dizziness come back. Well, just make sure one foot is always on the ground. (*She is acting this out as she is speaking*) And stay close to the walls. I said, stay close to the walls, I said... Mother turn the hearing aid back on, I said turn your hearing aid ON! (*As frustration mounts*) Just stay in the chair. Stay in the chair and watch the telly. Stay in the chair you are sitting in. Stay in it and when I get home I'll... (*To audience*) Not you Barbara, you can move about. (*To phone*) I have to go. I have to go, Mother. The Queen's just arrived. (*indicating rehearsal but playing with Mother*) Yes that's right, the Queen of England she's just come to check on how things are going. Oh look, I really must go the Pope is with her, oops sounds like the Luftwaffe, must dash. Bye, Mother. (*Hangs up phone*).

(*To "cast"*) Thank you. Thank you. (*Rehearsal sounds fade off*). That was very good. Hamlet, I think that cut works very well there, "To be, or not to be" then Ophelia comes straight in. Moves it right along, much more pacey. Now Guildenstern, (*She bows as she's addressing an Indian or someone Japanese*). I'm not believing you're English. But I think I've found a way, (*Bows again*), round that. Try this, "The king, sir - WHAT?" Yes? Yes? (*Bows again*). "My lord, I cannot. WHAT?" You see. "What, my lord? WHAT?" Just tack the word "what" at the end of every sentence. Good enough?

Right, (*she beats on her chest, makes a vocal sound and shakes it out*). Hamlet, David, that one little speech of yours. I really hate doing this, but bear with me. Could you try saying the opening line like this? (*Goes to audience member who will be David*). "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt," (*She says "melt" like the Wicked Witch of the West*). Now you try it, sweetie. Come on, I know you can do it. "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt," (*She urges the audience member on and on until they do it and keep repeating it until they are saying it in unison*). Yes, see, I think you've got that. Oh, and I think you should have your shirt off for that bit.

Now Harold, would you mind filling in for the Ghost? (*She does the jaw relaxing exercise*). Just a few notes to think about. "Murder most foul," hold your nose. (*She holds her nose*) Really gives the impression of rankness. And I'll need you to give the "Swears" from the wings. Do you think you can manage that? Shall we try? "Swear" (*she crosses her heart*), Cross my heart and hope to die. "Swear" (*she holds her fingers up in scouts honour*), I pledge to do my duty to the Queen and my country. Got that? Good.

Oh, and Gertrude, darling, I've been racking my brain on how to get this across to you, but, the bit with the drink. Really sell it. I was hoping for something like this.

She has her juice in hand and acts it out. "The drink, the drink! I am poison'd." She does a wonderful job. Hand shaking, drops to knees, foaming at mouth, convulsing ... then.. . it becomes one of the longest dying scenes ever. She flips and jumps and gets up and hangs off the wall and crawls with hand outstretched and, of course, just when you think she's expired

she kvetches some more. She will lie dead for 10 seconds and then jump up as if she just finished an Olympic skating competition.

(She goes down to audience member). Would you like to give that a go? Alright, take it home with you and we'll have a look at it next week.

Right, Act IV, Scene III can we give that a run through. And remember your colours. Begin.

(Rehearsal sounds) Alma is watching intensely. She starts to flip through her notes. She smacks her lips as if they were quite dry. She begins to dig through her bag. She comes out with an oversized make-up bag and starts taking out lipsticks. She unscrews the tops, looks at the colour and then reads the colour on the bottom of the tube. She does this twice.

Freeze. *(Rehearsal sounds stop)*. *(She digs in her make up bag and draws a lipstick, reads the colour as if calling Bingo numbers)*. Everyone make the scene "Plum" and GO! *(Rehearsal sounds stop)*. *(She watches intensely)*. Freeze. *(Rehearsal sounds stop)*. *(She digs in her make up and comes up with a lipstick for each colour she calls)*. Gertrude, "Taupe". Ophelia, "Sweet Honey", Laertes, "Black Lily". ...and ... begin. *(Rehearsal sounds start)*. *(She sits back down and starts to apply lipstick and pulls out her compact looks in it's mirror)*. *(Rehearsal sounds fade out - the scene is over. She looks up from mirror as if being caught)*.

Excellent, really smashing. Laertes remember you've just come back from France. You're very weary. *(She physicalizes "weary "for him)*. You've been going for days. There was no Eurorail, darling. You came by horse. *(She demonstrates bow-legs)*. No, donkey!! Excellent, that's another scene for you, Elliot. *(She jots notes)*. Laertes arrives on donkey.

Moving on. Act V, Scene I - Do we have our Gravediggers? Harold, if your incontinence acts up and you need to dash off to the loo, just give a sign to Randall and he can give us a bit of business, maybe play "Chopsticks" with some bones, or something. And, anytime you're ready. *(Rehearsal sounds begin.) (Four seconds pass)*. Oh, before we get into this, *(Rehearsal sounds stop)*, have you all handed in your bios to Connie? Keep them short and to the point. Barbara, you may just want to say something like, "Having had no previous acting experience you're thrilled to be playing Ophelia in Marlowe's Players production of Hamlet. " Then just add some bits about your previous waitressing. Fair enough. Good.

Carry on. *(Rehearsal sounds start)*. *(Alma is watching intensely when she begins to detect an odour)*. There certainly is something rotten in the state of Denmark. *(She sniffs around trying to find the cause. She digs out a box of matches. She lights them trying to defuse the odour and tosses them about the stage. She walks to Stage Left door takes in a rank odour)*. Oh, Harold. *(She makes a big flourish of tossing a lit match in the door and down the stairs)*

(She calls in a loud whisper). Connie, Connie. *(Connie is in audience Stage Left)*. Oh, there you are, what are you doing? *(Rehearsal is still going on)*. Never mind that. Have you got in touch with that other actress yet? The one. The one who's going to be replacing ... you-know-who. *(Trying not to let cast hear)*. The one who's photo and resume I gave to you.

Well, will you get on it please. And whatever you do, don't let on to anyone, (*Rehearsal sounds cut out*), especially ...

FIRE ALARM SOUNDS VERY LOUDLY.

Ahhh. (*She runs frantically around the stage*). Not to worry. Don't panic, nobody panic. Probably just a drill. Do carry on.

She runs into wings Stage Left. Comes out coughing. She frantically runs through the audience asking for water. She picks up a planted water bottle. Carries it on stage and sees there's only a sip left in it. She unscrews the top and drinks it. She dashes up the aisle into front of house where there is a bucket of water preset. She clomps back down the stairs with the bucket of water. She runs to Stage Left and tosses water. She regains her breath and FIRE ALARM STOPS.

Right. All's good. I just wanted to ... ahh, yes. Why don't you take a bit of a breather while I just, ... (*she indicates wing of Stage Left. She goes into wing and comes out with a cardboard box painted as a castle turret. It is completely waterlogged and will not stand up. She attempts to make it stand several times in various positions until she just loses it and starts kicking it, and jumping on it, and pouncing on it and ripping it with her hands and her teeth until she realizes people are watching her and she recovers and composes herself. Drags it offstage and comes back out with a kids pop-up castle and with the flick of one wrist it pops-up*).

Good. We've covered just about everything I wanted except the ending. You see it's not very plausible, is it really. Rather melodramatic everyone dying like that. I mean, "*The rest is silence*". Doesn't leave any room for a sequel, does it. And this Fortinbras character. Where'd he come from? Just marches in and takes everything over? I don't think so. I'm sorry. I won't have it. So Hamlet, sweetie, I would like for you to ... wake up to find it's all a dream. Yes? Ties everything into a neat little package and everyone leaves feeling good about themselves.

That's it for tonight then; thank you. I shall expect you to be word-perfect by the next rehearsal. Have any of you realized what date we're up to? Yes, July 5th! And when do we open? November! It's not long!

(She turns to collect her belongings and as she's turning back around). I'd be happy to join you all for lovely cider down at the pub. *(She becomes dejected as she realizes everyone is dashing out and pretending not to hear her)*. Shall I just tag ... along.

Lights fade out except for spot on centre stage.

Hello?... Hello? (*Nobody's there. She summons the courage and begins to speak*).

The quality of mercy is not strain'd
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to
 Render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant
 there.

She turns and walks out of light to turn off light switch by Stage Left wall when we hear Martin come out of the booth and say,

Martin: Alma, that was pretty good. *(Alma walks back into light)*. Did you want to grab a pint?

Alma takes in this kindness and is filled with joy. Then she says,

Alma: That would be lovely. It will give us a chance to discuss next season's *Macbeth On Ice*.

Closing music comes up. Martin slams door and makes "running away" footstep noises.

Alma: Martin? ... Martin? *(Alma dashes up through the audience to catch up with Martin)*.

Closing music comes up louder. Lights go out.

Stage lights come back on, for curtain call.