

Stage Door Secrets

The stage door closed with a soft click as the dust swirled around his feet. Aleksey had been the stage hand at the old theatre for several years now, but hated being in the building alone. For some unknown reason he just couldn't shake the feeling that there were an an ethereal presence watching his every move.

As he slowly moved through the backstage area he lit each of the gas mantle lights, turning the knob just enough to throw a little light so that he might see. As he reached the front of the stage he stooped to light the clam shell floor lamps that would be used for rehearsal that night. A loud crash behind him sent his body lurching forward landing him face down splayed out on all fours. Cautiously he turned his head, his mind filled with fear as to what might be lurking behind him. A large ladder lay inches from where he lay frozen in fear.

BANG! the front of house door flew open and the booming voice of the Director Richard Clarence echoed throughout the theatre,

“The silly man wanted to rework the entire scene, but it works beautifully.....” his voice trailed off as he saw Aleksey, terrified and prone on the stage.

Mary Conley rushed forward to help, “Whatever has happened Mr. Duch?” she anxiously asked and she helped him to his feet with the assistance of stage manager William Moore. William handed Aleksey his hat that had left his head in the forward thrust and landed several feet away. William then crossed the stage to right the ladder that had caused the chaos only moments earlier.

Aleksey slapped his hat on his leg to remove the sawdust.

“Something, pushed that ladder over and tried to hit me!” he responded in his thick Polish accent. He pointed at the ladder, his eyes scanning the theatre as if searching for the culprit.

Frederick Morgan shook his head,

“Oh Aleksey, you and your fanciful tales. You don’t expect me to believe the theatre is haunted do you? Ridiculous!”

“You believe what you like Mr. Morgan, but I have seen many strange things happen here; I know what I know!” snapped Aleksey as he stormed off leaving the rest of them staring after him.

“Well!” Richard clapped his hands together, “Shall we get to work?”

“You should not mock Mr. Duch so, he has shared some terrifying stories of things that have happened here in the theatre, and I for one believe him!” chided Mary, as she moved to the centre of the stage to begin rehearsal.

Richard waved his hand as if dismissing both Mary and Aleksey, “It’s drivell I say, stories to draw attention to himself is all. And you Irish with your faerie tales will believe anything.”

The evening’s rehearsal continued as Aleksey watched from the door to the workshop.

Later that evening Mary was in her dressing room arranging her costuming and stage makeup, she hummed happily as she moved about the room. As she made her way behind the changing screen to hang her dress she was suddenly struck with an icy chill that ran the entire length of her spine. Her body began to shake as the hair on the back of her neck stood at attention. A most odious smell assaulted her nostrils and made her cough. She frantically searched her dress pocket for her handkerchief and brought it out giving it a quick shake then holding it to her nose and mouth in an effort to block the stench.

Looking about the room in the dim light, eyes as wide in fear she had the most uneasy feeling that unseen eyes were watching her. Fear got the better of her and she screamed and bolted from the room crashing straight into William coming down the hall.

“What in Heaven’s name is going on?” he asked as he took hold of her shoulders to steady her.

She began to sob hysterically, “Someone, Some THING was watching me in my dressing room!”

He looked to the door she had just emerged from, “That can’t be, no one is here but us tonight. Who would do such a thing?”

William entered the dressing room and was struck with the same putrescent odor that had assaulted Mary. He held his arm over his face to quell the stench and began to examine the room.

Mary stood shaking in the hallway. “Aaaaahhhhhh...Did you hear that? I hear breathing!” she yelped.

William shook his head, “I hear nothing Mary. That smell is probably a dead rat in the wall, nothing more. I will have Aleksey look for it. Come now, calm yourself.”

William led Mary out of the room and offered to escort her home.

In Mary's dressing room an eye was pressed tightly against the hole in the wall had indeed been watching her. It blinked slowly as a shadowy hand pushed a piece of card back in place to cover the opening.

The figure then moved into the pitch black of the tunnel. Blending into the shadows as it disappeared. No light was needed, as the way was well known.

"Aleksey!" shouted William shaking his head. "Why is he never anywhere to be found when he is needed?"

Aleksey came around the corner onto the stage. "Mr. Moore, do you need something?" he asked.

William nodded, "You need to check the wall between the dressing rooms, there must be a dead rat in there somewhere. There is a nasty smell in Miss Conley's dressing room." Aleksey nodded and headed for the dressing rooms.

The dream came again...

A boy stood surrounded by a crowd as he watched his father climb the wooden steps to the gallows platform. As the hangman placed the noose over the man's head the man looked to his son, a mix of fear and pain carved into his face. He then fixed his eyes upon his wife and silently formed the words "I am sorry." She held her gloved hand to her mouth to quell a sob that threatened to escape.

The Magistrate then unfolded a piece of paper from his pocket, cleared his throat and to a jeering crowd announced

"You have been convicted of the murder of Charles Watts and shall be hanged from the neck until dead. May God have mercy on your soul."

At that point he awoke screaming as the hangman pushed the lever that opened the hatch beneath his father's feet.

His screams brought the attendants rushing through the door. As they pinned him to his bed the a physician injected him with a sedative. His head began to spin as the room followed in unison. Moments later he was enveloped in a hazy fog and then blackness.

The physician stood and watched until all was quiet. He then picked up the file from the bedside table, opened it and began to write; “the dreams continue to plague and assault the patient. He is an unfortunate wretch, having witnessed the hanging of his father ten years ago. I suspect the trauma had damaged his psyche and it has left a mark within. I am hoping further sessions will assist the patient to deal with the tragedy.”

Several days later Frederick Morgan sat in his dressing room, his head in his hands. He looked up at the mirror, his face pale and wan. He opened a small envelope of white powder and stirred it into a glass of water. Hand shaking he lifted the glass to his lips and he drank. It was so long ago; yet he could not stop it haunting him.

William Moore knocked and pushed open the door. “My God man, what’s this about? You look terrible!”

Frederick stood, running his hand through his hair. “I am fine William, I could not sleep last night.”

William spied the small envelope on the table and nodded, “Maybe too much of that wretched stuff.”

“That wretched stuff, as you call it” Frederick replied, “Is the only thing that allows me any sleep at all”

William looked at his friend, "Nightmares?"

Frederick shook his head, "Memories that are the stuff of nightmares."

He clapped William on the back and headed for the door.

William followed "Can I help in any way?"

Frederick shook his head, "Something I will just have to endure. Let us rehearse!" The two men left the room and headed for the stage.

As the men moved down the hall they heard Richard cry out "Help!

Someone come quickly!"

Both men headed toward the commotion. What met them as they dashed out on the stage shook them to the core.

Hanging from a rafter above the stage was a body. A canvas sack over the head. The small group stood for a moment, paralyzed with fear, their faces frozen in horror. It was only when Mary Conley arrived and let out a scream it broke through the silence.

William made the first move and grabbed a knife from the prop table. He sliced and hacked away at the rope in an effort to cut the body down.

Laying it on the stage they loosened the rope around the neck and quickly pulled off the canvas sack horrified to discover the face of Aleksey Duch staring blankly up at them. William pressed his fingers to the man's throat and shook his head sadly.

Mary became hysterical, "He told you there was something here! He told you and none of you believed him! Now look at him!"

William moved closer to her and tried to calm her. He sat her gently on a chair. "We must send for the police" he said.

She began to cry and nodded. Richard and Frederick covered the body with a drop cloth.

Frederick excused himself and walked slowly to the dressing room. He sat and stared blankly at his reflection in the mirror. "Not again" he thought, "not again." His hands shook as he tore open yet another paper envelope and mixed it with a small glass of water. He drank it quickly, arranged himself and headed back to the stage.

The police arrived and after a thorough search of the theatre no one was found. Everyone was questioned and Aleksey's body was taken away for further examination.

Ultimately it would be ruled a suicide, however, no one there that night believed that to be true.

Several days later Mary was back in the dressing room waiting to begin rehearsal. She heard a faint rustling from somewhere behind a wall.

Was it another rat?

She crept toward the sound and pressed her ear against the wall straining to hear. She stopped behind the changing screen where she first encountered the horrible smell days before.

Then...she saw it!

A small hole in the wall, hidden in the pattern of the wallpaper. She crept up to the hole and peered in. To her horror she was met with an eye peering back at her, then a grunt followed by the sound of scuffling.

At that moment she screamed in fright and jumped back.

“What was that” she thought to herself then panic kicked in and she yelled to her companions “Come quick, Help! There’s someone here!”

William and Richard ran in to the dressing room, “What’s happened in here?” William barked in exasperation.

Mary showed the two men the hole she had discovered.

“You must catch who or whatever that was. It might be Aleksey’s murderer!” her voice wavered as she thought back to poor Aleksey.

The men began a desperate search of the theatre. They ran through the hallway and backstage, calling out for the unknown perpetrator.

William made his way under the stage. After a few moments he shouted, “Here! I have found a small door!”

Richard and Frederick followed the sound of William’s voice as they found themselves under the stage huddled around a small door none of them had ever seen before.

“Where does it lead?” Frederick questioned.

Richard tried the small door and found it locked.

William squinted in the dim light. He spied a pile of rubbish and began digging through it discovering an old iron bar. Pulling it free he wedged it under the door latch and forced it open.

Cool, stale air pushed its way out of the dark maw that opened before them.

Richard scrambled from out under the stage and dashed back to the dressing room to fetch an oil lamp. Handing the lighted lamp off to William. Richard stepped back.

William dangled the lamp at arm's length ahead of him, crouching down he entered the pitch black of the tunnel.

The tunnel was low, damp and musty. The men were forced to scramble through the darkness bent over, holding onto the walls for support. The smell was dank and unpleasant.

Ahead they could hear a scuffling sound. William motioned them in the dim light. Raising his finger to his lips he gestured for silence as they quickened their pace attempting to catch up with who or what lie ahead.

Whatever they were chasing down let loose a guttural wail.

"Hurry!" Frederick ordered as they moved closer to the sound of the wailing.

They sprang forth from the tunnel into a crude room of sorts. It was larger than the tunnel yet barely large enough to fit them all. The smell was putrid and the room dirty. They peered around in the semi darkness and were shocked to see they had nearly stumbled onto a straw bed.

Wedged in a corner was a small broken chair and a makeshift table of wooden crates. Perched on the table a small oil lamp.

Directly opposite the tunnel they had emerged from was another small opening leading out of the strange room. On the makeshift table there also sat a notebook, a quill and an ink pot along with an old photo of a young boy and his parents in a small quilt frame.

Their silence was broken by a blood curdling shriek and Frederick was thrown full force into the wall. William and Richard were so startled by the appearance of the assailant it took them a moment to realize what was happening. Frederick was on the ground, the dark figure pummeling him, yelling and ripping at his clothing.

The two men rushed forward, grabbing at the attacker's arms in an attempt stop the pernicious assault. Once able to gain control over the miscreant, they forced him into the chair.

William held the creature's arms behind the chair in an attempt to keep it still. Richard went to the aid of Frederick and helped him up, checking his wounds.

In anger Frederick rushed at his attacker yelling “What the hell do you think you were doing? Are you mad?”

Richard held Frederick back.

The figure in the chair became disconsolate, tears streaming down its face.

“You! it is your fault me father is dead!” it wept.

Distraught and pale, disheveled in appearance, the men realized it was a young man likely no more than the age of eighteen. His appearance alarming, wild eyes, a dirty face and greasy hair matted to his head. He was dressed in nothing more than a nightshirt with no shoes.

“What nonsense!” yelled Frederick, “I don’t even know who you are, you’re mad!”

The young mad began to laugh hysterically, “Of course you don’t know who I am...but you knew me father! He took the blame for you!”

William and Richard looked at Frederick with confusion.

“What does he mean?” asked William.

Frederick began to pace about the small space. “He is clearly insane! How do I know what he means?”

Richard spoke gently to the young man. "Whatever do you mean, explain yourself and tell us your name?"

The young man slumped back in the chair, as if all the air had gone out of him.

Richard looked to Frederick, "Are you talking about Mr. Morgan?" Richard pointed over to Frederick, "You must be mistaken. Who are you?"

The dirty frail figure leaned forward and placed his head in his hands. He began to sob as he spoke.

"Me name is John Hughes. When I was a boy, me father were hanged for a murder he didn't commit. He DID IT!"

Once again the pitiful figure pointed directly at Frederick.

"I saw 'im going into the theatre awhile back and began watching to be sure it were 'im. I started to play tricks in the theatre hoping to scare 'im, but he didn't scare. I had to do more. Poor Mr. Duch saw me so he couldn't live to tell me secret."

The men were aghast by story that was unfolding before them.

Frederick continued to pace the small room, his hands shaking as the colour drained from his face.

William looked at him and asked, "Are these the memories that are the stuff of nightmares?"

Frederick looked at him, "Of course not! I told you he is insane!"

The men stopped in mid conversation. Voices could be heard coming from the other opening opposite to them. The group peered to the opening, unsure of the source of voices.

John Hughes cowered in the chair.

William could see two men who appeared to be orderlies in white coats and a third man.

"He's here!" cried the man in the suit emerging from the tunnel opposite.

"We've been looking everywhere for you John. Who are these men?"

The disheveled young man looked at the men who had captured him.

"They be from the theatre" he whispered.

"And who might I ask, are you?" William brusquely asked the man in the suit.

The man held out his hand, "I am Dr. Ashdown. A physician at Bethlehem Asylum. John is one of my patients"

Frederick slammed his fist on the makeshift table, sending the wooden crates and everything else crashing to the ground.

“I told you he was insane!”

Startled by Frederick’s sudden outburst the men lurched back.

The physician looked at Frederick with distaste, “He is not ‘insane’ as you put it sir. He experienced trauma as a child and has not fully recovered from it. He has been under my care for some time now. We found him missing and discovered this old tunnel entrance in his cell. We followed the tunnel to here.”

John suddenly stood up and pointed his finger at Frederick, “It’s ‘im, he’s the one who murdered the man me father hanged for! He did it, n’ told the police it were me father what did it, LIAR!” he shouted at Frederick.

John continued, “Me father were a stagehand at the theatre, me mum were an actress, HE was an actor” his hand shaking in anger as he pointed toward Frederick again. “Me mum was beautiful and had lots o’ men what loved her. me father, and a man called Charles and ‘im!”

John sat back on the chair as the group around him were pulled into his story.

“HE,” pointing once again at Frederick, “stabbed that man Charles ‘cause HE loved me mum, jealous he was! Then he told the police it were me father what did the stabbing, HE blamed me poor father. Me father n’ mum were already married, I was only eight years old. He thought he would get me mum if me father were out of the way. Me mum wanted nothing to do with ‘im, nothing!”

All eyes turned to look at Frederick.

William was horrified, “Is this true Frederick? How can this be true?”

“Lies! All lies! How can you believe him? He resides at Bedlam for the love of God!” Frederick was uncontrollable now.

William tried to calm him. “We’ll contact the police. We’ll get the correct story. We’ll sort this out, shall we?”

Dr. Ashdown suggested they all head back to his office where they could settle John and sort the matter. The group followed the doctor through the tunnel that led back to Bedlam. They exited the tunnel into John’s cell. The doctor then told the orderlies to take his patient to a new cell. One in which he could not escape.

The police were called and everyone short of John was asked to appear the following day at the local station house.

Several days later Frederick found himself behind bars for the murder of Charles Watts. Frederick broke down hysterically sobbing and confessed to murdering Mr. Watt's in a jealous rage and pinning the murder on John's father in an attempt to win his mother's heart.

Frederick was tried and sent off to Newgate prison. While in prison he suffered a nervous breakdown and was transferred to the Bethlehem Insane Asylum for treatment with Dr. Ashdown.

John continued to reside at Bedlam even though he had murdered Aleksey Duch.

"Prison was no place for a madman" the judge responded when his case was presented before him.

John was none the wiser that he he had been officially labeled clinically insane by the court. He was pleased that his current situation afforded him the chance to have Frederick Morgan pay for his crime for many years to come!