The Paradox of Realistic Dialogue

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Abstract

The type of novelistic dialogue that is often considered “realistic”, or analogous to actual conversation, is not only a highly artificial construct but often tends towards caricature. This paper, which considers the opinions of 20th and 21st century novelists, their work, and the reactions of certain reviewers, is supplemented by an extract from The Final Weeks of the Critic. This is a novel produced as part of an M.Phil with Macquarie’s Media Department. The novel attempts, through creative practice, to answer many of the same research questions as its accompanying exegesis. The halves of the research project together highlight the paradox of dialogue: although authors usually attempt to make reported conversations appear realistic, in general it is only by giving conversations between fictional characters special (and decidedly unrealistic) attributes that readable, enjoyable fiction can be produced.
“He’s dead. I read it in the paper yesterday.”
“No. Not really?”
“Yes. Bryan’s dead.”
Bill laid down the egg he was peeling.

Ernest Hemingway (1926: 92), *Fiesta (The Sun Also Rises)*.

The distinctive dialogue of Hemingway is often described with terms such as “tough”, “gritty” and “authentic”. American reviewer Paul Davis (2009) calls it “terse, clipped, the quintessence of realistic speech”. As engaging and influential as Hemingway’s dialogue is, the truth is that very few people – probably not even Hemingway himself – spoke consistently in such a stylised, economical manner. What is being proposed in this paper is that novelistic dialogue generally hailed as “realistic” (which is to say, analogous to how people actually converse), is anything but. It is only by giving dialogue an exaggerated consistency, conciseness and richness of information, that a novelist can fulfil the requirements of producing readable, enjoyable fiction. This paradox has provided one of the major research questions during my M.Phil, a degree that has involved an exegesis (in progress) which investigates various schools of thought about dialogue and other challenges in the creation of a novel. The second component of the degree is a major piece of research by creative practice: a novel entitled *The Final Weeks of the Critic*. This investigates similar questions by experimenting with the boundaries of dialogue, point-of-view, tense and internal monologue. However it is the dialogue question to be addressed here, both with a discussion of the complexities of creating purposeful dialogue (and how even seemingly authentic dialogue tends toward caricature), and with an extract from *The Final Weeks of the Critic* that demonstrates an attempt to meet some of these challenges.

A review of Saul Bellow’s final novel, *Ravelstein* noted: “It acquires depth and authenticity through its realistic dialogue carried on between a matched pair of minds exchanging views with the elegance of philosophers and the terse candor of gangsters in collusion.” (Battersby, 2000). Yet to serve the needs of fiction, the dialogue in the novels of Hemingway, Bellow and other successful writers must do all the things that real conversations would rarely ever do: provide back story and context, further the plot, reveal things about the characters, make sense to someone overhearing it and, perhaps most of all, entertain. Most real conversations are filled with subtext and diversions, plus jargon and abbreviations covering shared experiences. Many are filled with grammatical flaws which, if not for the inflections of the speakers, would be near-impossible to either understand or derive the full meaning from. Real conversations are also, generally, mundane and if too much of this “reality” makes it onto the page, it will confuse and bore the reader.

Novelists present dialogue not just with the words that are “spoken” but with the words that frame them. One school of thought suggests there should be no description of how dialogue is delivered, because adjectives, adverbs or highly descriptive verbs add artificiality and authorial intervention. American crime writer Elmore Leonard has formulated rules for writing that suggest – in accordance with the views of English novelist Graham Greene and others – that “he said” or “she said” is preferable to “he shouted angrily”, “he said meekly”, or any similar construction. Leonard said “who does the adverb belong to? It belongs to the writer, and he’s telling you this and I want to remain invisible…” (RN Book Show, 2009). Graham Greene’s stylistic minimalism went beyond keeping descriptors for dialogue brief, as he explained (Marie-Françoise Allain, 1983: 132):

“When I construct a scene, I don’t describe the hundredth part of what I see: I see the characters scratching their noses, walking about, tilting back in their chairs – even after I’ve finished writing … I can’t see any need for writing ‘she sat down’ because I
know that that’s just what she’s done. I think the readers can make their own descriptions. Let them.”

A strong contrast to this approach is provided by DH Lawrence, whose reported dialogue was accompanied by varied verbs and adverbs. John Mullan, Professor of English at University College, London, and author of How Novels Work, said “it is extraordinary how many different words [Lawrence] will give for how people speak; he shouted, he declared, he grumbled, he asseverated. It’s like a series of instructions as to how you would read it out.”

(RN Book Show: 2007)

Although Leonard’s rule is seductively simple (and perhaps effective with certain types of stylised writing), it can serve to make the dialogue seem more artificial, because it requires leaving out certain information (such as conveying to the reader that a line was delivered, say, sarcastically), with an associated risk of ambiguity. Alternatively, it can require the writer to extend the “natural” dialogue to explain its tone solely within the quotation marks. In various drafts that were shaped into the novel extract below, various approaches were tested. Although I avoided the often florid descriptions of Lawrence, I couldn’t convey the full required tone without some further explanation, for example:

“I never said I didn’t like it,” he said overly quickly and overly defensively. “I merely wondered, well, whether you had extracted everything you possibly could from the material…”

(The Final Weeks of the Critic, 2009/2010: unpublished manuscript)

The words framing this “spoken” dialogue do not necessarily “belong to the writer” because in this case the author has attempted to make readers aware that the character concerned has the habit of analysing every sentence as he says it, in effect editing himself as he goes. Leonard and others believe each character’s way of speaking should be unique and immediately identify him or her. We can cast light on this by looking at children’s books, where dialogue provides a very effective way of distinguishing characters for younger readers. Although the words are often exaggerated to the point of blatant caricature (catchphrases for each character are common, for example), any writer of fiction for adults whose characters are recognisable from almost every line they utter are engaged in a more subtle form of the same practice. Whether it is Marlowe’s slick one-liners in The Big Sleep, or Fitzgerald’s Gatsby peppering his conversations with “old sport”, the idea is the same.

Practicing novelists including Fay Weldon have discussed the difference between the conversations of real people and conversations in novels. Weldon said: “Fictional characters you can recognise. Real people are not consistent, either in their appearance or their behaviour. Put them in a different setting and you’ve no idea who they are.” (Roberts, Mitchell, Zubrinich, 2002: 11)

This furthers the argument that a writer needs to create “caricatures” rather than “characters” if he or she wishes to keep dialogue recognisable. Irish playwright and novelist Jennifer Johnston said “When you write dialogue in a novel, you write the sort of dialogue that people think they speak, but not actually the dialogue they do speak. These are the words we like to think we say, and people recognise it and say, ‘Your dialogue is wonderful’ but in fact nobody really talks like that at all.” (Roberts, Mitchell, Zubrinich, 2002: 113).

The dialogue in The Final Weeks of the Critic is deliberately concise, which is another fictional conceit. Australian novelist Luke Davies said: “If you listen to real dialogue, it’s very strange.” (Roberts, Mitchell, Zubrinich, 2002: 123). Part of the reason that real dialogue
is very strange is because it contains so much verbiage. Writers almost instinctively edit back the extraneous material that most conversations carry. This is something readers accept and even demand; therefore it requires an unspoken conspiracy between author and reader to uphold that the “false” is “authentic”.

Another complication is that conversations are often between people who know each other well; much that an outsider would require for the conversation to be comprehensible is left out. Conversations also carry specific tensions which are left unvoiced. Almost all families have an internal language for certain things. They know exactly what they are talking about, but others might not. American author Lisa Lutz put it like this: “…there is always a subtext no matter what, especially between people who know each other well.” (RN Book Show, 2009). This further highlights how hard it might be to identify a person from one conversation alone. Real people aren’t consistent. Characters in a book, however, do need a certain amount of consistency to be perceived as “lifelike”, particularly if they are introduced only a few times and the reader needs to be able to readily identify them for plot reasons. A real person can behave differently on three occasions, depending on their moods or the circumstances. Consistent characters, conversely, seem realistic in fiction. EM Forster (1927: 73) wrote: “When we say that a character in Jane Austen, Miss Bates for instance, is ‘so life like’ we mean that each bit of her coincides with a bit of life, but that she as a whole only parallels the chatty spinster we met at tea.”

Irish novelist, short story writer and essayist Elizabeth Bowen gave an explanation of the work that dialogue has to do in her article “Notes on Writing a Novel” (Orion II, Autumn 1945: 18-29):

Dialogue requires more art than does any other constituent of the novel. Art in the celare artem sense…

What are the realistic qualities to be imitated (or faked) in novel dialogue? – Spontaneity. Artless or hit-or-miss arrival at words used. Ambiguity (speaker not sure, himself, what he means). Effect of choking (as in engine): more to be said than can come through. Irrelevance. Allusiveness. Erraticness: unpredictable course. Repercussion.

What must novel dialogue, behind mask of these faked realistic qualities, really be and do? It must be pointed, intentional, relevant. It must crystallise situation. It must express character. It must advance plot.

So dialogue, like so much of novel writing, is ars est celare artem (“art to conceal art”), as I increasingly discovered while trying to meet the challenges of reporting conversations in The Final Weeks of the Critic. In this novel, an esteemed theatre reviewer, Melvyn Barker, begins to review his own life with all the brutality and acerbic wit he has previously directed at those on stage. While this is happening, other events unfold, complicating his life and his mission. The book has a layered structure, therefore a complicated voice. The dialogue is often filtered through memory, the character’s editing or deliberate misreporting, and his memoir writing (some of it is “recorded” in a book within a book). But, as the reader is with each character in the novel only for selected scenes, the internal logic required Barker (and others) to talk with a consistent voice. In Barker’s case, this held true whether his voice was heard in dialogue or internal monologue, and even when his inner thoughts were rendered to the reader by more obtuse means, such as the “free indirect style” that blends the attributes of first and third person. Barker had to consistently display an idiosyncratic wit, an exotic vocabulary and an obsession with the theatre. The minor characters too had to stay steadfastly true to their voice. Like life? No. Yet in the tradition of the novel, it will be likely perceived as “realistic” nonetheless.
The courier leaves in a white van squeal. The envelope is from work. Very formal: Registered; Confidential; Urgent.

“Not another frivolous bloody action,” Barker declaims as he lumbers up towards the front door. “Another lawsuit from another incandescently aggrieved playwright or producer. That would be just the thing to make a bad week worse.”

He can think of few other reasons for the office to bother him while on holidays. Unless there has been another balls-up with his super. Perhaps it’s to do with the replacement, temporarily filling the Theatre page. The woman whom The Critic hand-selected as sufficiently inoffensive and unambitious. “Perhaps she simply can’t live up to the justifiably high expectations of our beloved readers.”

Yes! The magazine needs The Critic’s expertise back in its armoury straight away, it must have that Sultan’s wealth of Barkerian experience. The hint of a satisfied smile makes its way along Barker’s lips. No more days at home, no more of this ridiculous writing project. And money. This was one envelope he was going to open.

Barker fiddles with the package. It has been taped shut as well as glued. Odd that it is so thick, as if containing a wad of cardboard rather than merely a letter. Maybe it isn’t salvation, hand-delivered by VIP courier. Maybe the duffer on the front desk has forwarded a press pack for some new big budget production, thinking Barker was working from home.

He makes it to his desk, slides the keyboard forward and tears the envelope, rather than stuffing around with the tape. He flicks the contents onto the desk, between the piles of bills.

A glossy blue folder falls out. There is a sheet attached to the front. Barker recognises the letterhead of the company that owns the company that owns the magazine. Strange. He fingers the large paperclip atop as he runs his eyes in a blur over the covering letter. Then he focuses. All sound stops. A mordant odour — sugary, burning rubber — strips the back of his nostrils. His knees are knocking. His temples pound to the rhythm of panicked blood. Now he is hovering above, silently watching a stout, sweaty man in a cap reading a letter and taking in the contents with increasing alarm. The man is pushing his thumb onto the sharp edge of the paperclip with such force that a small circle of bright red blood is expanding at the top of the letter.

One word stands out of the text, despite a scaffolding of jargon and sop words erected around it to ensure that the word’s plainness, its brutality, its angular ugliness is at least partially shrouded.

The Critic’s eloquacity is reduced to one word. The Bard of Avon would not have said any different. OK, maybe fucketh. But The Giant Hand is already reaching down for the tiny, unwanted mound of nothingness known as Melvyn Barker.
It was a year ago. Exactly a year ago. Of course The Critic signed the contract. It came with a pay-rise. It came with an accompanying letter detailing a bright new future for the magazine and the expanded company. It came with the new Group Managing Director calling Barker into his lavish office and personally, effusively, explaining in a heavy brogue what a genuine, long-time fan he was.

The phrase “Reviewed by Melvyn Barker” was one of the magazine’s most important sub-brands, confirmed the brawny former Olympian yachtsman. Barker was a marquee writer no less, his beautifully turned phrases a lynchpin of the very quality that had attracted the new owners to the magazine group in the initial phase.

The Critic glowed with the praise, and such luminosity was apt, as Barker was a beacon that showed a modern commercial publication could still operate without fear or favour, the sort of radiating talent that brought in readers and advertisers alike and, to go a wee bit further, gave the masthead access to other talented writers and photographers.

“They want to be seen along with the likes of you, Melvyn,” MacDougall added. Barker waited for the laddy, but it never came.

It was being laid on thick, but The Critic had no complaints about that. It was the sort of backslapping monologue that, in an earlier age would have resulted in the GMD closing the door of his office, pouring two large whiskies and lighting two fine Cuban cigars. In the face of such, Barker happily overlooked the jargon, the clichés, and the fact that this self-declared lover of finely turned phrases clearly wouldn’t recognise one if it rogered him.

“No doubt you’ve heard the rumours, Melvyn,” said this squat Scot, this plastic platitudeurian. “And no doubt you’ve seen the Alliance’s circular telling you to stick with the industry award, saying that you should not sign an individual contract under any circumstances. In other words, you should accept less money, you should hand over your negotiating power, indeed your very future, to a trade union … an outdated body run by people with no business experience at all.

“It makes no sense, Melvyn. It’d hardly be canny to pay top dollar for a publishing group – as we have just done – and then dismantle the very thing that gives it value. Our people, and most specifically our heritage bylines, are our most valuable resource. You best believe it.”

MacDougall shuffled through the pile of papers in front of him. He slid Barker’s contract across the desk. “A private equity buyout is not a negative thing, Melvyn. It’s a chance for new cashed-up owners to refresh, and invest, and invigorate, and use our proven commercial skills to make this operation what it deserves to be.”

Melvyn never did ask the GMD what the operation deserved to be. Nor did he bother dragging up what little he remembered from his unfinished economics degree, including the fact that so-called private equity was usually private debt. And it was usually cashed-down not up.

As for being part of MacDougall’s “most valuable resource”, it should have been as clear then as it is now, in the early morning light, once again sitting on these cool sandstone steps.
“People are our most valuable resource,” Barker mumbles to himself in a half-hearted Glaswegian accent. To the birds. To the trees. “What is it that you do with valuable resources? You mine them, crush them, extract anything of worth and leave their hulk on a slag heap. You then move along, looking for more.”

Barker has no intention of writing anything today. He has brought his glass of Ricard with him, but even holding the chilled Mediterranean coast in his hand provides little consolation.

There have been four days in a row above 40 degrees. Smoke from the bushfires up north still clogs the air. Now heavy black clouds press down on the entire city, shortening Barker’s breath, bringing his skin up in tiny bumps, moistening the back of his neck in expectation of an almost Biblical deluge.

Barker lifts his glass and breathes in the anise. He swings his head from side to side slowly. Everything has been singed. The hydrangeas are brown and paper-dry, a large frond from one of the palm trees is lying half across the steps and half across a garden bed, looking as burnt as toast. Yet, in this air that is almost hissing with unshed rain, every shade has been turned up full tilt; the climatic carnage of the previous days is as vibrant as the green, green moss on the surrounding rocks.

It is almost too much for Barker’s throbbing head. His vision is restricted, as if staring through a length of pipe. His muscles are aching; to even walk outside was a Homeric effort. He feels like everything is over, finished, kaput. There is nothing to be said, done, wished for. He would happily just seep into the stonework and stay there, to be walked over again and again and again.

We warned you, those union people will say, smugly. We can’t do anything for you once you’ve willingly left the protection of the group. They will add, no less smugly, that they warned every employee from the start that the new contracts gave the owners the right, at any time, to cut staff. Or, as the Scotsman’s roneoed letter put it, to facilitate a headcount realignment to create greater synergies.

Barker’s weekly news magazine was dead, chopped, given the arse. Or, to put it another way, it was becoming an exciting new online product. The new editor would be inviting readers to submit their own reviews of restaurants, films, music – and plays. All about inclusion, apparently. Taking advantage of the democracy of the worldwide web. Where every idiot is given the same number of column centimetres.

This reduction of focus on the non-core parts of the group would enable more resources to be put in to developing the dynamic new strands of our business. In other words, the online dating site, the web porn crawler and the new tabloid freebie filled with showbiz gossip.

Barker reflected on the sins you can negate with a glossy blue folder. Such as sacking someone by post, while they are on leave. The folded cardboard and fateful envelope contained the paperwork for counselling and financial services, all from a new type of one-stop shop designed to cater to the army of the unloved. Entirely optional, fully confidential, all paid for by your employer. Sorry, ex-employer. Corporate conscience thereby rendered as clear as the rows of desks in their magazine office.

The Ricard now has a smoky bouquet, as does everything else. Barker clinks the ice for reassurance. Sure I’ll just walk into a new job, people will assume. Except that everyone has
their home and this was mine. Most of the other homes have already been bulldozed anyway.

I knew there were dangers, but to question the new management was in itself to risk the job. Anyway, they were my friends, my fans. How was I to know such a **strategic move will make the group stronger and better**?

The grass is tinged with yellow, only a few of the agapanthuses have maintained their shape or hue, the others have their purple pouches hanging off in shreds like old rags. No need to make a comparison, Barker thinks.

Employee number AM563T, it said, would be paid out his holiday pay and other entitlements. Problem is, he’d already received the lion’s share at the start of his enforced leave. Yes, there are sundries: a few hundred dollars here and there, a day-in-lieu or two to be paid out, and a small number of shares via some recent and ridiculous employee equity plan; a plan designed without doubt to seed the culture of greed and rapacious cost-cutting into every heart from admin through to the senior editors’ desk.

Barker sits on the steps thinking ever more deleterious thoughts. He focuses on a tube of native ginger working its way across the path. In his mind, he stamps on it as if it were a snake, and rolls it underfoot until it sheds a couple of its flapping leaves. Then he stomps across the straw coloured lawn just to hear the pleasing crunch of damage being done. But in the physical world he can scarcely build up the verve to move up or down a single step.

“Unwanted,” he shouts loudly to a flock of galahs. He has as few inhibitions as the beaked-and-winged recipients of his message. “Surplus to requirements. Sacked. Of no use. A liquidated asset. A content non-provider.”

Barker’s cry inspires an energetic call and response across the canopy. Birds build to an argument, then pull back, then raise their voices again in strident defence of Barker, or the company that has elected to do without him. Each is trying to get in the first word, the last word, and every one in between.

“At least last time I was sacked, I got something out of it. Yes, it was a third-rate editor’s second-rate wife. But it was something. Not that you’d care, you feathered fools.”

# 4

Barker had already set his topic: parental neglect. But time had passed without words being produced. It was meant to be one subject for review per week. That was a schedule no longer achievable or desirable. It was hard to face the computer when he felt like he’d lost everything. The fact that everything seemed like so little, provided no comfort.

The only thing anyone enjoys losing, this **almost exact small-scale replica of a human being** found himself writing on the blank page inside his head, is virginity. After that it is your eyesight, your hair, your teeth, your momentum, your hope … your job.

Not that there was anything Barker could do with this, or any other potentially interesting thought, except repeat it to himself or write it out for no-one. He was now unemployed. What does one do in such a circumstance? One goes out for milk, without doubt. He can engage later with parental neglect.
The mobile ratters then shrieks, “Number Withheld.” The Critic leans back at his desk, curious and half pleased at the interruption. The writing has not been going well. The subject matter, as he puts it, has let him down. “Barker here. Who’s interrupting my important labours?”

“Natalie.” The voice is young, reedy, nervous.

“Not a lot of information.”

A pause. “Sorry. Natalie Watts. I did work experience at the magazine a few weeks ago … on the admin desk.”

“Where did you get this number?”

“You gave it to me, Mr Barker. Said it was a closely guarded state secret, but that you might be able to look at the play I’ve written. It’s for my drama course.”

“Oh, that Natalie Watts.” It was weeks ago. The whole world had changed since then. His memory of her, or any half-hearted and probably lecherous offer he may have made, is almost non-existent. The voice is soft and appealing though. He just can’t put a face to it.

“Did you find time to read it, Mr Barker? I know you’re very busy.”

“You emailed it to work didn’t you?” he guessed. “I did a preliminary pass but I’ve been, ah, on leave. So I haven’t been able to get back to it. Could you could resend it to my home?”

“Of course, Mr Barker. If you give me your personal email, I’ll do that right now. I was very nervous about ringing. But I have to hand it to my supervisor on Friday and I have been waiting, waiting, waiting – hoping that you’ll be able to give me some insights.”

“If you send it this morning, Natalie, I’ll read it and meet you tomorrow.”

Well, what the bloody hell-else did he have to review? And, frankly, who the bloody hell-else did he have to talk to?

It was the small café next to the train station. Dark wooden benches, a few small round tables and a couple of leather lounges. A healthy queue for take-away but only a few customers sitting. One of them looked vaguely familiar.

“Natalie?”

“Mr Barker!” She looked younger and prettier than she had in her work clothes. Or, to put it another way, he didn’t remember anyone looking so young and pretty at his office. Sorry, their office. She looked slightly Asian perhaps … had he noticed that? Maybe her long, straight black hair was up in bun.

“Call me Melvyn. What are you drinking?”
“I already have a green tea.”

“So you do.” It was a relief. All Barker had on him were coins. He was so unused to owning a credit card that he’d not even found it a place in his wallet. He ordered himself a coffee and sat on a bench opposite her. “So, a playwright of the future!”

“Well, I hope to be, Mr Barker, but everybody I know thinks I’m dreaming.”

She was dreaming. He had set eyes on The Blue Girl for the first time this morning. It read like a woman in her very early twenties writing her first play about a women in her very early twenties – and her equally uninteresting friends. A slice of life pointlessly carved with a blunt knife from an existence that neither soared above the mundane and commonplace, nor was so much a part of it, that universal truths were relayed. The Blue Girl amounted to less than television gave you for free.

“So what do you think of my play, Mr Barker?” She was literally on edge: the rear legs of her chair lifting as she nervously awaited judgement.

Someone needed to tell this young woman that she had no feel whatsoever for dialogue – a major problem as theatre plays tended to require large quantities of it. Her’s wasn’t really dialogue at all. It was monologue separated by prompts. But, god, she had an exquisite face.

“Call me Melvyn, please.” He paused to consider his angle of approach, but his mind was not totally on the job. When she leaned, the movement of air threw forward her perfume. It brushed his face like a scented web and somehow made the world seem tolerable. “My first question with such things, Natalie, is what were you trying to achieve?”

She looked down at the table and breathed out heavily. Under Barker’s now nervous glare, this young Natalie seemed to be almost folding in on herself. The Critic felt he had smothered all her unborn children.

“I never said I didn’t like it,” he said overly quickly and overly defensively. “I merely wondered, well, whether you had extracted everything you possibly could from the material. Whether you had truly come to terms with what you were trying to make the audience believe, or consider, or feel, or long for?”

Her eyes – wide enough in repose – became wider still. There was a noticeable quiver in her voice. “I didn’t think of it like that, Mr Barker. I thought of it in terms of Carla’s journey.”

A journey. He should have guessed. Who needs a structure, or a plot, or a point worth making when you can have a journey? What do they teach these young folk?

“And that’s perfectly legitimate, Natalie, but…”

A train rattled past. The coffee machine hissed. The perfume lingered cruelly. Other conversations became apparent for the first time, though only to highlight the new silence. Barker realised that in just a few minutes his entire being had become a concatenation of lust, pity, jealousy, nurturing, lust and more lust.

It was normal, he told himself. She was beautiful. She was disturbingly, tantalisingly fragile. He was complying with natural instincts. But a face-to-face meeting was not conducive to a fair review. Objectivity had withered at the sight of a thin white cotton strap coiling over the
flawless skin of a delicate shoulder. Pity had swelled in the face of blazing brown eyes that pulsed with optimism and inquisitiveness, but didn’t have a clue, and were not likely to get one soon.

The jealousy was at least partly a matter of teeth: original issue, crisp white, fluoride generation molars, almost certainly unfilled. Perfectly aligned incisors and bicuspids sitting deeply in bright and healthy gums. She has probably never considered how great a gift it is to have teeth like that, or tight, unblemished skin, or clear vision without any need for the focals or bifocals that The Critic would wear if he were less proud. Gifted with a body that is not held together by pins and surgical meshes, which hasn’t been edited with scalpels.

More than anything, Natalie has surely never had a job pulled from under her for no logical reason. How could she be expected to contemplate in her play such weighty matters as a sudden unjust decline, an undeserved crashing and burning, further undercut by the malice of advancing years?

Barker wanted to hold Natalie and protect her, but also to cry on that soft and exposed shoulder and ask her to save him. He wanted to tell the truths she needed to know so forcefully that she’d realise that her looks alone counted for nothin’ (if only it were true!), to guide her single-handedly from incapability to competence, to beguile her with the experience of his years, to lie about his age and attempt what in his current mental and physical state seemed frankly implausible.

“It has been said, Natalie, that the best plays – the best artworks of any kind – are those you can sum up in a single word. I know you don’t have much time before you submit your play, but maybe try to find that single word. And when you have, do one more pass of The Blue Girl, making sure every scene brings it out.

“You have the talent, Natalie, you have the drive I’m sure. Try to think what that one word might be: friendship, dependence, ambition, desire…”

Hell, where did that last word come from? Indeed, where did that drivel come from? Barker had turned into the talking book version of a first-year creative writing text.

“You are right, Mr Barker. I need to go back. To work at it some more.”

“You must!” The Critic said. Barker was in the power seat, and yet it didn’t feel like power. He was working on instinct. An anecdote suggested itself. “Two or three months ago we had a builder over to give an opinion on the sagging lintels. You don’t want to hear stories of dampness and subsidence, Natalie [was he saying her name too often?], but the builder told me – as everyone seems to – that ‘I’ve got this terrific idea for a play in me, a real hit.’

“I said ‘And I’ve always thought I have a block of very nice luxury apartments in me.’”

He waited for her to laugh. There was an uncertain smile at most.

“He didn’t seem to understand my point,” Barker added. He added it tentatively though, for he suspected the builder wasn’t the only one. “If you want to write plays it simply has to be the thing in your life you most want to do, that you are prepared to compromise or even bury everything else for. The Bard almost certainly didn’t knock off The Scottish Play between installing damp courses, or rerouting the roof plumbing.”
Barker was looking the whole time directly at Natalie’s faultless face, needing her approval at the end of every line, hoping against hope she knew what The Scottish Play was and why it was called that. Or even that she knew which Bard he was talking about. Wishing desperately, pathetically, that she was as engaged by the sound of him as he was by the sight of her. He had scarcely touched his coffee.

Natalie gently flicked her hair behind her shoulders then leaned forward to empty the last of her small pot of tea. “I showed it to my partner…”

Another waft of perfume. But this time, Barker instead felt the wave of sadness that coursed through him when a beautiful female, no matter how unattainable, mentioned her husband, or boyfriend. This was even worse. How can you compete with something as undefined as a partner? It could be anything. A giraffe even.

“But I couldn’t excite the slightest interest,” Natalie continued with the same infuriating lack of pronouns. “No car chases.”

“Yes,” sighed Barker, half wanting to pull his cap down over his entire being and disappear. “So very few plays nowadays do feature car chases. Maybe there’s a niche you could explore.”

The leaving was awkward, partly because everything about Natalie was young and slightly awkward. Partly because, on standing, she proved far taller than he expected. But mainly it was because Barker really had nowhere sensible to go afterwards. He knew the sheer lack of possibility that this scene had raised would do him no good.

“You’ve inspired me,” she said. “I want to launch myself straight back into it. Thank you so much for your generosity.”

“It was nothing,” he lied. And generosity didn’t come into it.

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