Theatre of Women

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Abstract
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Then the singing began, Olivia taking the lead, followed after a few notes by Rose, whilst Sarah contented herself with a low chanting background sound. Calla accompanied on her lyre. At least she liked to think of it as a lyre, though in reality it more resembled a curious zither. She had come across it in an old junk shop, almost hidden under a pile of tattered magazines, filthy and forlorn looking. After thorough cleaning and restringing it took on new life and Calla loved the feel of it under her hand as she plucked the strings.

The singing over, the women began to make preparations for their journey into the night. They needed a special form of disguise in which to accomplish their task or drama.

It was well after midnight when Keith was attacked. They sprang on him from behind, two pinioning his arms and another thrusting a sacklike object over his head. He struggled violently but his assailants obviously knew all there was to know about Judo and Karate and they administered some skilful chops which hurt him considerably.

Eventually he stopped struggling. Perhaps better to be calm, otherwise they might decide to stick a knife into him. He wondered if he had been a woman if they might have been intent on rape. As it was they laid him down in the middle of Barnes Common and two of them sat on him.

Having received a fairly violent blow on the head he at first wondered if he was imagining things. The plaintive sound of music (could it be a harp?) and then the singing voices. If only they would take this thing off my head, he thought, I can’t concentrate, I can scarcely breathe.

Then the singing ceased and hands were pulling at him. Pulling off his jacket and warm sweater, even his shirt. And now fingers were busy with the zipper on his trousers. What the hell, he thought, what a way to die, frozen to death on Barnes Common.
A sinister thought struck him. Could it be, surely not, did these men mean to rape him? Forgetting his resolution he began to struggle again. Then he heard the voices, ‘Leave his underpants Rose and his socks.’ ‘You’re too soft Calla. After what happened to you, you should want him stripped of his very skin.’

A third voice spoke. ‘No that’s enough. Now the rending of garment. Sarah, here, give me a hand.’ ‘But you’re women,’ cried Keith in amazement. ‘You’re women. How could you do such a thing?’

At that moment someone removed the covering from his head and he had a vision of four black clad figures, two of them engaged in ripping his favourite shirt to shreds. Then they were running, one brandishing his jacket, another his sweater and a third his trousers. The fourth carried something, he could not make out what it was. The torn shirt fluttered at his feet and he picked it up in a dazed attempt to gain some warmth from its tattered remains. He would like to have run after his attackers but his head was smarting and his legs felt distinctly odd. His shoes had been removed but he was glad to find them lying a little way off (possibly left by the one called Calla?). He sped homeward, praying he might be taken for an eccentric jogger.

‘Well that’s four we’ve done,’ Olivia said, ‘three more to go.’ ‘There should really be seven of us to make the thing absolutely right, I suppose,’ Rose remarked. ‘We were lucky to get the four of us,’ Sarah said. ‘Does it really have to be seven?’ Calla queried, ‘wouldn’t just one more be enough?’ ‘Of course it must be seven,’ Olivia told her severely, ‘we agreed about that.’ ‘The magic number,’ Rose chimed in. ‘The seven deadly sins.’ ‘Never light a bonfire until there are seven standing around it.’ ‘The seven Russian riders.’ ‘The seven names for God.’ ‘Snow White and the seven dwarfs.’ ‘Now we are seven.’ ‘All right,’ Calla agreed, sighing, ‘you’ve made your point. Seven it has to be.’

She went on, shivering a little. ‘I’m glad there weren’t seven that night. Four was quite enough. And there wasn’t any magic about them.’ Rose went to her and held her for a moment. ‘And you’re the one who said we should leave his underpants and socks,’ chided Sarah, ‘after what these bastards did to you, you should be carrying around a horsewhip.’ ‘Or a branding iron,’ said Olivia, ‘though I realise it could be difficult.’
Calla laughed tremulously. 'I'm the small one of the group,' she said, 'if anyone was to carry either a horsewhip or a branding iron it should be you Rose.'

'True,' Rose agreed, 'five feet eleven might get away with it.'

The four laughed together. They were comrades, they had each suffered, they wanted revenge, though it was Calla, the player of the lyre, the most gentle of the quartet, who was not at times so sure as the others.

Keith was sauntering along by the embankment a couple of days later when he spied the two tramps. One was sporting his sweater and the other was togged up in his jacket. There was no doubt about it. He approached them. Leaning over them he was assailed by a strong smell of cider, or possibly a mixture of cider and meths.

'Look here,' he addressed them, 'that's my jacket you're wearing there, and my sweater. Where did you get them from?'

The tramps looked truculent and defensive and he hastily produced three one pound coins from his pocket. 'You can keep the clothes,' he told them, 'but you must let me know who gave them to you.'

They looked at one another and then one of them reached out and grabbed the money.

'Come from the Sally Shop,' they told him, 'they gives things to down-an-outs see. That's where we got 'em guv.'

With the help of another couple of pounds he managed to persuade them to show him where the shop was. They became quite friendly and expounded on the merits of the Salvation Army. When they arrived there the woman Keith saw was not helpful. 'A lot of people donate clothing,' she told Keith, 'I really wouldn't know who brought in these particular articles.' He pressed her but to no avail. He looked around for his trousers but they were not to be seen. On looking round he found the tramps had made off whilst he was conversing, perhaps uncertain as to whether he would demand his money back after drawing a blank. He went home and pondered over a large whisky.

Sarah, the designer, rising steadily in the large firm where she worked, amid the arrogant males in the business, sat at home making the new head. It was of papier mâché, undoubtedly the head of a man. It was the fourth of this nature she had contrived. It gave her a savage pleasure to push and prod at it as she worked.

She recalled the night she had been mugged by the three thugs. Not content with removing her wallet (and it had been fairly well stacked) they had grabbed for her jewellery, bruising her as they ripped off the gold chain bearing the scarab beetle. Her lucky charm, she thought bitterly, not much good to me then. But it was the bracelet her father had given her she really minded about. His last gift to her before he died, loved and
cherished, and then borne away by these louts. She gave the head a final pummel and ran her nails down one of its papier mâché cheeks.

She relished the drama in which she and the other women were engaged but she also realised her attackers had made a mark upon her which it might be difficult to totally erase. She always enjoyed the vicious rending of the men’s shirts (surrogate torsos). She worked steadily on.

A week later Keith was alerted when out walking with Terry. ‘Why that’s my suit in there,’ Terry cried in tones of amazement and rage, ‘it’s my suit.’ The two men were passing an Oxfam Shop at the time, where a rather dashing brown suit was displayed in the window marked at £12. Terry rushed into the shop and purchased it. When questioned by Keith he would say nothing and refused to give any indication as to how the suit might have come to grace that particular window. The incident gave Keith food for thought. He himself had not mentioned to anyone that he had been attacked and debagged by women.

Olivia sang, her voice rising strong and pure. She was practising for the concert in which she had promised to take part on the following week. Once she had thought of taking up singing as a career but she had realised it would mean a lot of hard work which might lead to nothing. She had a sneaking feeling her voice was not quite good enough for her to make it to the top. And Olivia was ambitious, she sought the top of whichever ladder came her way. She blessed the friend who had suggested she could rise high in the world of advertising, with her talent for word-making, lyricism, slick rhyming, slogans. She was good at it she thought, it came to her like a duck to water. Already she was high on this particular ladder to success and she had no intention of slowing down.

She sang on. Thank the lord her vocal chords had not been permanently damaged when she was attacked. She was glad the beasts had left her with scars lower down, which she could cover up. For an advertising executive one had to look smart and attractive. At least that was essential for a woman, men might get away with less. She wondered if Sarah had almost finished the fourth head, so that they could conduct the usual launching ceremony. The ceremony always gave her a curious thrill.

Another stroke of luck came for Keith when he was attending a friend’s wedding reception about a fortnight later. A somewhat bizarre incident occurred. He was standing around consuming champagne and sausage on a stick when a little mousy man appeared wearing a brilliant waistcoat and vivid tie under his dark jacket.

Another small man of pugilistic appearance made an immediate beeline for the first and hustled him into a corner near to Keith. ‘That happens to be my waistcoat and tie you are wearing,’ he accused the little mousy man who looked terrified. A lengthy conversation ensued and Keith learnt that
the waistcoat and tie had been purchased in a Unicef Shop, the brilliant colours having attracted the purchaser.

This third incident drew Keith to approach the men. He told them he might be able to throw some light on the mystery and asked them to join him for a drink the following evening. He then telephoned Terry and arranged for him to come along as well. When the four were seated at a quiet table in the pub, he broached the subject which he had hitherto kept secret. Mentioning strange goings on on Barnes Common he gradually got Terry and the small pugilistic chap to admit they had suffered the same ignominious treatment as himself. He explained it was the coincidence of their respective clothing appearing in a Salvation Army Shop, an Oxfam Shop and a Unicef Shop that had given him the clue. The little mousy man listened with open mouth as the other three recounted their experiences. 'I should have died,' he kept saying, 'I know I should have died.'

The other two seemed glad to be able to unburden themselves and spoke freely of the outrage. They admitted to having been debagged (Terry had even had his underpants removed) and talked of the humiliation as well as of the chill wind on the Common. The pugilistic man, who answered to the name of Leo, explained that his aunt Clare had especially made the brilliant waistcoat for him and given him the tie to go with it, so he had been in no doubt that the articles were his. The mousy man, Hugh, said meekly he had, of course, returned them to their rightful owner. A small amount of money had changed hands.

All three spoke of the tearing into strips of their shirts by the women attackers. 'Vicious they were,' said Terry, 'talk about dismemberment. There was scarcely a scrap of my shirt left.' Leo agreed wholeheartedly and Keith remembered clutching his shredded garment to him in an effort to keep warm.

They all spoke of the weird singing and chanting they had heard and the playing of some strange instrument. All agreed something had to be done.

Calla was getting ready to go to the Karate Class she still attended now and again with the other three women. They had previously gone once or even twice a week but now they were all so accomplished in this particular art they had cut down. It was at one of these classes they had met and, taking a liking to one another, had met for drinks and coffee afterwards. Gradually they had built up confidence in one another and as their friendship developed they had told the others of their unhappy experiences at the hands of men.

Calla felt vastly inferior to the other three. They seemed so clever to her, so brilliant, one working in advertising, one in designing and the other running an estate agency. She herself worked in a shoeshop, humbly placing shoes on unknown feet, and thinking herself lucky to have a job at all in these days.
She recalled how kind they had been to her when she confided that she had been viciously raped by the four men. She still had nightmares about it, perhaps she always would have. How they had hurt her, like uncaring brutal animals they had been, using her like a block of petrified wood. And how soiled she had felt afterwards, how she had washed and scrubbed her body, in an effort to remove something of the shame and terror she had felt. Olivia, Rose and Sarah were astonished that she had not gone to the police. She had tried to explain that she simply could not do this, could not undergo questioning, examination, people’s eyes upon her so soon after the outrage. She had crept back to her tiny flatlet like a wounded dog and stayed in bed for three days. Somehow, after that, she had struggled on, going to the shoeshop as usual, trying to push things to the back of her mind, at least in the daytime. At night she was unable to do this and purchased various kinds of night tablets from a pharmacist.

It was a relief to be able to confide in the other three. They had taken her under their wing. ‘I don’t believe I could ever actually use this Karate,’ she had told them, but they had been insistent that she carried on. And she had obeyed, doing all that they had told her to do. They were delighted that she had her lyre and she had learned to accompany them as Olivia and Rose sang and Sarah made her strange chanting sounds. ‘We are a team,’ they had told her and she was amazed and gratified that they treated her as an equal. She listened to what they told her, she tried to enter into what they said, the dramas they acted out, though in her heart she was unsure of their logic. She acted with them, played her lyre, watched the dismembering of the men’s shirts. After all, they were all so much cleverer than she, they understood precisely what they were doing, they knew about myths and magic. And, most important, they had told her she was one of the team.

The men were laying plans.
‘There are three of us,’ Leo the pugilist said, ‘three men should be a match for four women any day.’
‘They seemed to be Karate experts of course,’ Keith remarked, remembering the vicious blows he had received.
‘I’ll say they were experts,’ amended Terry, ‘I was stiff for days after they banged me about.’
‘I should have died,’ said Hugh, saucer eyed.

The others had kept him in their ranks as they thought he might be useful as a decoy. They had not imparted this information to him as yet.
‘Tell you what,’ announced Leo, ‘I’ll get my cousin George to come along. He’d be more than a match for any of them.’

When he introduced them to George they saw what he meant. George was six feet five and broad with it. They were glad to enlist him after he said it might be a lark. Now they must wait and watch at Barnes Com-
mon. Hugh blanched and trembled when they told him his role as decoy but they assured him they would be on the attackers like strokes of lightning.

In the meantime the four women were launching the head Sarah had made. They sang as they sent it sailing down the Thames, so that the sound floated after it. 'Gone to the home of the women,' Olivia and Rose sang, 'to the home of the jubilant women, the mighty and the gracious women.' Sarah made her deep chanting sounds and Calla plucked dreamily at the strings of her lyre as she watched the head sail on and on before it began to tilt and disappear.

Afterwards Rose told the others she wished the men who had attacked her were drowned deep in the Thames. 'I know I sound vicious,' she said, 'but if I hadn't been tall and strong I believe they'd have raped me as well as doing a fierce job of mugging. Ugh! Men!' She downed her vodka and lime in one gulp. 'Let's make it tomorrow night,' she said, 'there's no moon. A good hunting night of drama.' Calla shuddered a little. She was glad she would only be there to assist by playing on her lyre.

It was on the third night of watching that the men saw the attackers. They were all there, Keith, Terry, Leo, George and a terrified Hugh. As usual he was sent to saunter alone whilst the other four secreted themselves in various bushes. When they espied the black clad figures and saw them fling themselves upon a shrieking Hugh they sprang forth and overpowered the attackers. Placing sacks over their three heads (Keith happened to notice one was missing) they bore them away into the heart of the Common.

They had agreed that they would not strip the women as they themselves had been stripped but would merely frighten them by pulling their slacks to the ankles, holding the owners firmly and subjecting them to a severe talking to. Also it was agreed they must be made to promise that their outrageous sorties must cease.

Terry pulled down the jogging trousers of the first, Leo those of the second and Keith those of the third.

What had they expected to see? Silk lingerie, smooth tights, even a hint of suspender? All this to proclaim a degree of femininity as yet hidden by their previous assailants. What they did in fact see, by the light of George's powerful torch, was a pair of scarlet boxer shorts worn over extremely hairy legs, a black jock strap topping undoubtedly muscled male limbs and another pair of hairy limbs encased in bright blue underpants bearing the message 'Come and get me.'

Hugh whimpered in fright and the others sat back aghast. At the same moment one of their captives managed to free his head from the sacklike covering and the torch picked out a fiercely bearded face. Sitting astride them still, Terry and Leo unveiled the others, to bring to view a Yul
Brynner hairstyle over a twitching masculine snout and a spotty youth's features sporting a wispy moustache.

'But you're not women,' cried Terry, 'you're not the right ones.'

'We were sure you were women,' Keith told them, 'it was women we were after.'

'They attacked us,' Leo explained, 'they were vicious.'

'And they debagged them,' quavered Hugh, a fact that the others would not have mentioned.

George said nothing but continued to look menacing.

'Listen,' Keith told their captives, 'we mean you no harm. Just pull up your pants and go. We have no quarrel with you. If we set you free will you agree not to fight?'

'Blimey,' said the bearded man, 'we wouldn't fight you lot. You're all barmy.'

'Raving,' avowed the second, 'just let us up and we'll get back to normal life.' The third nodded his head in assent.

Hugh hid behind a bush and George stood to attention as Keith, Terry and Leo released them. For a moment they stood facing one another on the dark cold Common. Then in a flash the captives pulled up their respective trousers, extinguishing the shorts, jock strap and underpants and were off. Snatches of their conversation floated back over the still air.

'Bloody crackers – thought we were tarts – bloody insult – perverts – we'll have to change our gear.'

The five men left behind with one accord made for the nearest pub. They felt dejected and thirsty.

Meantime the four women sang and chanted and Calla played as the fifth head sailed down the river. Afterwards in their favourite coffee house they agreed it had been safer to abandon Barnes Common. 'After all four from there was enough,' Rose said, 'you never know, some louts could have ganged up on us, pals of the others I mean.'

'I was tired of the Common,' Olivia said, 'I like our new hunting theatre better.' Sarah nodded agreement.

Calla said meditatively, sipping her coffee, 'That's five we've done. Only two more to go. I wonder –'

'Well?' said Rose, 'what do you wonder little one?'

Calla stared deep into her cup. 'I wonder if you'll miss all the drama. Do you think you will? And will we still go on meeting as we do now?' She very much hoped they would say yes to the latter.

'I'm not sure,' Olivia answered, 'but yes I think I will miss it. The darkness, the planning, the excitement –'

'I'll miss it,' Rose agreed, 'there's been a sense of catharsis about it I do believe. And the singing, the floating heads, yes I'll miss it.'
We could still sing,' Calla suggested timidly. 'And Sarah you could make heads to sell. Women's heads I mean, to hang jewellery and things on. You're so clever I'm sure they'd sell.'

'Sarah shook her head. 'It wouldn't be the same at all,' she told Calla, 'I doubt if I'll ever make another head in my life. It's only for now. It's been essential for now of course, but that's all.' Olivia and Rose nodded, understanding.

'But we'll remain friends?' Calla said pleadingly, 'we've done so much together we wouldn't stop meeting would we?'

Olivia shrugged her shoulders. 'Who knows?' she said, 'after the final curtain comes down who can tell?'

'Why think about it now?' Sarah asked, 'we've still some way to go.'

'That's right,' Rose agreed, 'who's to say what's to happen in the future?' Then, noting something in Calla's face, she added, 'but I'm sure we'll have a get together at times Calla.'

They sipped their coffee reflectively.

'Tell you what,' Sarah announced, 'I'm going to make the seventh head, when we come to it, a perfect wonder, a work of art. Seeing it'll be for the last time.' She stared rapt at a point above their heads. 'Dismembered Orpheus, the floating head that sings. Only in this drama it sings for us women.'

Calla said nothing. Rose reached across and touched her hand lightly. 'Remember, it will sing for you Calla, maybe especially for you because you suffered most.'

'For what women have suffered down the centuries,' said Olivia. 'It will sing for all women, for all women everywhere.' Sarah and Rose nodded. Calla, carried away by their certainty, wondered if perhaps she should offer to sacrifice her lyre. She had a sudden vision of it, following the seventh head into its watery grave. 'But I'll decide about that when the time comes,' she told herself, 'as Sarah said there's still some way to go. I don't have to make my mind up just yet.'

They ordered four more coffees and began to make plans for the next night of the play.