

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Broth, Bread and Bed

by Lou Beckerman

They're sitting - legs dangling - on the edge of the stage. The orchestra has retreated at the baton's final beat - it'll be last orders soon.

Rita, dressed somewhere between belly-dancer and Bollywood (thirty-seven, four babies later, but she still has the figure for it) - good-spirit Lady McGenie of the House of Shoe - sits dripping with shimmering beads and, with the slightest move, jingling hundreds of clinking metal coins (ah - the irony...).

She looks down at Sascha, clean-shaven under greasepaint. Sometimes there was a late-in-the-day hint of stubble - not a convincing appearance for Master EtonMess, a geeky, almost-but-not-quite-believable nine-year-old with a shaggy shock of bleached-blond hair. Young EtonMess already has designs on becoming Prime Minister one day. 'There's more than one way of growing into the role' was the joke (*audience: slightly uncomfortable tittering*). Sascha was always assured work in panto - usually as one of Snow White's perpetual pals - but he especially loved parts which challenged society's expectations.

"Well that went better than the matinee."

Sascha agrees, "full house tonight made the difference."

If only Rita had been Lady McGenie of the House of Shoe in real life, she wouldn't be lingering here at all after the final show, though she'd grown fond of Sascha during the season. He evoked memories of feeling maternal once upon another time.

He got up to leave.

“Don’t look so concerned - I’ll just sit here a while darling – reminisce to myself for a bit. Hopefully see you around. Take care,” blowing him a kiss.

The cast and crew had got used to her being painstakingly first in and last to leave. That she rarely left, they might have suspected, but never said.

“Darlings how do you think I’ll keep my beautiful figure if I eat with you slim gorgeous young things all the time? You know me – always looking for the perfect diet...” was her response to invitations from the company.

The irony of bedding-down in the shoe house, sleeping one eye open, never completely at ease, was not lost on her; not lost on the cheap but filling supplies she brought in when she could.

She’s thinking how things were before, and tiring of the If-Only re-creation of the past. If Only...

Narrator, stage left: There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.
 She had so many children, she didn’t know what to do.
 She gave them some broth without any bread,

Lady McGenie, stage right: **Noooooo!** ‘She gave them some broth AND A BIG
 SLICE OF BREAD!’ (If Only...)

Narrator: And whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed.

Lady McGenie: **Noooooo!** ‘THEN KISSED THEM ALL SOUNDLY AND
 PUT THEM TO BED!’ (If Only...)

Every performance, Ronald Grump, the oversized tangerine transatlantic evil property tycoon, delivers his perfect, “I evict you and your horrible children!” monologue, while peeling a Granny Smith. The ribbon of peel grows longer and longer, perfectly timed to synchronise with the end of his soliloquy. (*Applause.*) He throws the apple into a bin then coarsely scoffs the peel. (*Much audience merriment.*) Some nights she can’t get that discarded apple out of her mind, and concentrating on the script is almost impossible.

Every night of the run, later on, she’d retrieve the browning fruit. Last night too late – it had gone. Instead she went in search of the few snacks sometimes left lying around the green room.

The house is silent now and she feels like a stranger here. That's good. The more she role-plays at distancing herself, it won't be too bad. The aching fear will fade. She recalls the time, outside Brighton's trendy, 'Food for Friends', where she sank to the pavement and cried loud compelling tears.

She'd been trained after all. Clumsy feet stepped round her, and eyes, unseeing, were resolutely fixed elsewhere, anywhere. But there was one.

Across the road. Looking. Rita sobbed harder in case she moved on, though by now the weeping was for real. Through a watery blur the woman was moving towards her. Rita could embellish a story – not that it was needed – and eventually they were both blubbing, and she had enough money to get off the streets for the night. Actress on or off stage, Rita could be resourceful. And, well, she's a genie. A genie for sure, earning magical coins for her mum - where her kids had been placed.

She walks out of the Theatre Royal (*Audience: It's behind you!*) into a mid-January night, sleeping bag over one shoulder, belongings over the other, already a translucent glassy crackling underfoot. Pulling up her coat collar, she thinks she might have caught a glimpse of Sascha in a doorway. Rita hears her name being called.