OCTOBER 2020

Friday 9 October

It's a terrible thing to see a star struggling on stage, as I have witnessed tonight.

I suppose it happens to the best of them. I'm sure that once in a while Gielgud or Dame Maggie Smith would have momentary pause to try and remember a line or perhaps even have stumbled over a polystyrene rampart. But this evening the lead performer merely seemed distracted, wondering where she should be – at one point drifting aimlessly from one wing to another, before standing at the front of stage, mouth open and staring blankly into the lights. Thankfully this was when a member of the audience in the front row spotted an opportunity, rose from their seat, came forward and gently stroked her ears.

I'm not sure that anything we have experienced so far sums up the oddness of the Olive and Mabel thing quite like today – an appearance on stage at the Everyman Theatre in Cheltenham as part of the town's famous Literary Festival. I didn't know quite what to expect – or rather wondered what the audience might have expected. One hundred had been allowed in under current guidelines and the tickets had disappeared fast. My concern was that half of them would get up and walk out after a few minutes,

perhaps shouting obscenities while hurling their popcorn at us, to my shame and Olive's delight.

The surreal nature of the whole event had been evident from the moment we arrived at the hotel, where we were met by a very excited organiser and one or two people wearing headsets who were soon delegated to arrange a bowl of water for 'the headline act'.

The headline act had in the meantime decided that it was more in their interests to crash into the adjoining green room, where serious and seasoned authors were milling around and now having their serious and seasoned discourse interrupted by a dog or two appearing at their feet. On a few occasions it did look as if Olive was trying to sidle into the conversation with an amusing anecdote of her own, or more likely see if they might drop some crumbs her way – or even, such is her hopeful nature, that they would offer to fetch her a platter of assorted snacks from the buffet.

Then, after a couple of interviews, it was on to the theatre itself where we were escorted to a dressing room and Mabel padded nervously around as if trying to remember her lines, or where she was supposed to be during the opening number. I was more concerned that people would simply be bored and that, after the videos which had been enjoyed around the world, this live performance would be something of an anti-climax. Largely because there was no real performance planned – we were just supposed to sit on stage and talk.

But I needn't have worried. After I ambled out to a smattering of polite applause and took my seat with the moderator, friend and fellow broadcaster Jill Douglas, I settled into an armchair and we began our conversation.

Sparkling though our chat was, if we had carried on like that, I'm sure there would have been one or two raised eyebrows in the audience and perhaps even an audible muttering of 'Twenty quid

for this bollocks?' but the more observant would have spotted the dog beds either side of my chair and I thought it best not to leave the crowd waiting too long. So, after a minute, we paused and I summoned the real stars from the wings where they were being held by my partner Caroline and they trotted happily onto the stage, to a noise that wouldn't have been heard in the theatre since Bobby Davro's seminal Hercule Poirot in *Death on the Nile* in 1987.*

What takes me aback is that this is the first time I have seen a mass reaction to these two dogs in real life. When you get the laughter and the pleasant messages from thousands online, there is an acknowledgment but also a detachment. Here, the enjoyment is live and right in front of us. So when Olive rather loses her way – or realistically it is more that she is hunting for edibles – it is all part of the entertainment. As Mabel tenderly chews the stuffed rabbit beside me – possibly still hoping for some sort of prompt – Olive returns to her own bed, circles twice and collapses with a heavy sigh. All of which is enough for a round of applause.

We then show some of the videos on the big screen, I talk about the making of them, talk about the dogs, talk to the dogs. I do feel that the crowd deserves a little bit more after parting with their hard-earned cash, so every now and again I prod the dogs to life by stealing the rabbit, waving a bag of treats in front of their noses, or just lifting up an ear and folding it over to comic effect. But in truth it doesn't really matter what Olive and Mabel do, it is enough just that they are there. I think everyone involved was simply happy to escape from screens and enclosed lives and get into the real world, to have a night out and feel normal again – feel

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* *I'm pretty sure that such a production never took place. But it's late and I haven't got the energy to look up historic performances at the Everyman Theatre in Cheltenham.*

normal by purchasing a ticket to watch two dogs curled up in their beds.

Stranger still is to come as, once we have finished, we leave by the stage door to be greeted by dozens of audience members. Excited exclamations and chatter are followed by requests for photos. For a few minutes we are the Beatles – maybe not at the very height of the mania, but certainly getting close to the early days in Hamburg.

So I become Brian Epstein, gently easing myself out of the way and telling Olive and Mabel to sit properly as, one by one, the disciples move cautiously forward to say hello. Mabel looks rightly baffled and not a little concerned, Olive as if she has fully expected this attention and that it is entirely deserved. Eventually we have to pull ourselves away and walk down the street, dropping the dog beds every few paces, with just a few stragglers jogging after us and hoping for their own chat with the stars.

Back in the hotel I can reflect on it all. Nothing is normal at the moment, but this wanders ever deeper into abnormality by the day. Yet there's no denying it's great fun as well – to actually encounter some of the people who have enjoyed Olive and Mabel and to see their reactions upon meeting the dogs.

Meanwhile Lennon and McCartney are out for the night, twitching away and processing events, taking everything in their strides as they always do and happy to simply be with us.

Although now that I think about it, Mabel is probably Ringo.

Sunday 11 October

Michael Hutchence, Radiohead, Margaret Thatcher, Björk, Stephen Fry, Martin Scorsese, Lenny Kravitz and the Spice Girls.

While it does have the air of a guest list for nibbles and drinks at Richard Branson's house circa 1996, these are in fact just a few