

## NEXT TIME NEXT VENUE

A little stage fright. You take in lots of air before you make your relatively casual entrance.

And you're on.

Instantly you're in character. All alone on the street perhaps you managed to get away with anonymity. Not here. You walk in through the door and you're a somebody. You're a theatre-goer. You're a twenty-something theatregoer. Two steps further and you're a twenty-something female theatregoer who's friends with another theatregoer, a thirty-something well-dressed good-looking theatregoer. A good-looking theatregoer who's friends with that guy over there. Don't assume all of these people don't know you. They know you. They've been watching you and they know you.

But you knew it all along, and didn't forget to put your costume on.

In fact, the physical costume is quite a modest one. You combed your hair, put on the pair of pants that looks slightly less worn out than that other pair, maybe a nice shirt, decent shoes. You're a theatregoer today. And proud of it. Taking a glance at the buzzing crowd while stepping in through the door you wonder if you

should've gone all out like most of the other actors. But no. Too many feathers are too many feathers. Can't overplay it. That's not on the menu today.

You arrived 15 minutes before the performance, so approximately five to ten minutes too late in total. But early enough to dodge the bullet from the slightly annoyed glares – the are-you-really-a-true-theatre-goer-glances. You notice quite a few familiar faces from the corner of your eye but look away. No time now. Not in the programme yet.

You make your way to the cloakroom. There's a queue now. Luckily just a few people. You take off your coat and place it on your arm. The person right before you handed over his over-clothes and, while turning around, passed a slight nodding smile your way. You respond by blinking your eyes smilingly. Just a little. Time for your first lines now. You step up to the counter, greet the staff member, reach out your arms with the coat, and, again smilingly, take the cloakroom number in return, politely thanking him.

That was an easy one.  
So far so good.

Making your way towards the stairs, you realise your shoes pinch quite a bit. You haven't worn these shoes in a while and so you'd forgotten they're actually a size too small. As a matter of fact you noticed it already ten metres from your house, on the way to the bus stop. But

it was too late. If only the costume hadn't taken so long.

Small steps, no rush. You'll be fine.

You desperately crave a glass of wine but there's only ten minutes or so left. And you still have time for a dialogue or two. With your self-inflicted speed limit you head upstairs. Slowly, calmly. Very confident.

Half way up, a familiar character catches your attention. You quickly go through your cue cards one by one. You can do this; you've rehearsed this.

Haphazardly, you make a few steps to your right so he'd stumble right into you. You crash into each other rather awkwardly, but nonetheless pass on friendly smiles expressing only a slight discomfort with facial expressions. A casual exchange follows. How are you; how are you; how's this; how's that. Nothing unexpected. Brief uncomfortable silence, broken by a bold move from player two.

How are those shoes working out for you, he asks. Instant blush. How does he know; what gave it away? Think fast. You stall by silent laughter and tuck your hair behind your ear. But that won't hold you long. If only the gun would go off now.

Slightly raising your eyebrows you smirk and respond: You clean up nicely as well. Really? That's all you've got? Missed opportunity.

But it seems like it's your lucky day - the first call to find your seats fills the hall and overshadows your failed attempt at revenge.

You exchange a few more lines about nothing much and go your separate paths.

Not a bad performance at all.

A few more smiles and waves and you're ready to enter Act Two.

\* \* \*

You're sitting down now. But no time to relax. Shut off your mobile phone, sit with a straight back, don't make any noise, don't turn around. Don't breathe too loudly. Don't sneeze, don't cough. OK cough if you really must. Don't wander around in your thoughts, stay focused. Concentrate. Pay attention. Critique. Enjoy or don't enjoy. It's all on you.

Always at work.

That's never the full story. You want to wander around. You have to wander around. To stare at the people around you. Are they paying attention? Who are they? Why are they here? Someone seated in the rear is having a bad cough. There's always somebody with a bad cough, unless there's a crying baby. That's a hilarious haircut over there. One woman has already dozed off. You've also done that role once. Only once. First person just got up,

closing the door with a bang just loud enough to draw attention. Can't be he's already expressing his thoughts on the material. But some roles are like that.

Lord, you did forget to turn off your mobile phone! Where is that bag now. Why does it always seem to be the size of a potato sack when you need to find something in it. That tune. It's the one that gets louder every time it rings. It's really quite loud now. Really quite loud. All these stares. The coughs. The silence. Why does it need to be so silent? Why does this moment feel like it's a hundred years packed into a few seconds.

You've found it. It's over. How are you ever going to get out of this one. More smiles, even straighter back. Don't move at all.

Or wait, no. That's not your role today. Today you're the actor whose phone rings during the show. Whose phone rings during the show and who doesn't care at all. Confidence at work. That phone was supposed to ring. What makes you think it wasn't?

You carry on. You lean forward and hold on to your chin, because you're interested and because that's what you do when you're really interested. You move your left leg on top of your right one and then switch. Sometimes you smile, knowingly. Sometimes you look worried.

It is not your first time on the stage after all.

But you can't hold that for long. Wandering again. Same position, leaning forward holding

on to your chin, you gaze up towards the ceiling where a whole new world opens. Two guys are walking around behind the railings, playing their part. You stop to wonder what the performance below would seem like from their perspective. Do they care? Do they pay attention? If only you could once play that role.

Your wanderings are disrupted by a fellow actor. The lady next to you appears to be the sigher. You know those ones - the ones that express their thoughts by releasing excess air from their lungs in a loud manner. You're not particularly fond of that role, no-one is really. And today you're going to make her stop. Not once and for all but just this once. Right after one of the louder type of air-outings, you raise your head, turn it 90 degrees in her direction and frown a bit. Just as a true theatregoer would. She acts as if she had no idea what you're talking about it. But she hears you. She hears you. But so was she - heard. Mission accomplished; no, take two for that scene.

You sit back and give yourself some time off.

\* \* \*

Act Three. You clapped long and loud, drawing yourself some uncalled-for attention. A true theatregoer.

Everybody is getting up now. You sit and wait. Check that damned phone of yours. You leave

your chair when the space is almost empty. You enter the hallway and begin the presidential handshake routine. Hello, hi, how's life, what's new, weather is nice, spirits are high, hi, hello, hello, hello. With some you engage in longer conversation but you've heard it all before. How dull some performances are, how routine.

You look around you to see if you've missed somebody important but seems like you can call it a day. With a slightly sore throat you victoriously retreat to the bar. White wine, not red today. The shirt you're wearing obviously isn't interested in the type of embarrassment red wine guarantees to bring upon it.

You step up to the counter to order your long-awaited glass of wine. You open your mouth to place the order, you're confident and well prepared. What comes out is a sentence that sounds like a line from an unidentified opera. Quite some stares. Instantly your face is lit like the falling sun, very red indeed. You cough and cough again. The lady behind the counter politely asks you to repeat your order. You give it another shot but half way forget what you wished for. With your mouth half open you roll your eyes to the left and up and to the right and to the left again. You close your mouth. All eyes on you.

But you're as calm as ever. You know there's only one way to go about this situation. You slowly turn around to face the other actors

in order to finish off what you had started:  
you open your mouth once more and sing a full  
song from that unidentified opera.

And then there's silence. Everybody is looking  
around, searching for clues of how to react.

And then they applaud, unanimously.

You turn around again and order yourself  
a glass of white wine.