

ACTING ABBY by Angela Graham

There's something about an empty theatre – no matter how long you've been in the business, no matter how many wives or matriarchs or sluts you've played. I come in sometimes, in that hour or so when it's too early to be in the dressing-room but there's not enough time to go anywhere. Besides, I don't always know where I am when we're on tour; don't know what's open or where anything is. Here, out front, it's almost home, whatever the space.

I sit and look. All these seats, expectant, focused on the stage. A pub interior, this one. Centre-stage, a bar counter, backed by rows of gleaming bottles. In the middle of the shelves, an empty doorway, a narrow column of blackness. A curtain hangs over it: long beaded strings. A great touch that, I think – inspired – because the backstage draughts shiver the beads every now and then and, though everything around that curtain is static, an invisible finger glides across the curtain like a harpist's, releasing a ripple of movement. There's a perpetual suspense as to who – someone, surely – is about to emerge through that slit, through those hanging fringes and ... tell us what it's all about.

That's why people come to the theatre. To be told something. Something worth knowing. They come. I hope! They come and I step forward from the dusty darkness behind the curtain and I tell them ...

It's a good script. And the part gives me something to get my teeth into. Never met the author. A man. You can feel him trying to understand her – Abby. She's a bit of a bitch. That's what you think. Sharp little mind. Snip, snip, snip, she goes, at the husband. *Squirk!* *Squeak!* with the clean-clean linen cloth on the glasses. He hates that sound. Alan does the almost-wince really well. He grabs it back at the last moment. He wouldn't want to give her

the satisfaction. *Squirk! Squirk!* she goes with the cloth. The audience get it. Alan and me work it up nicely till they're on the edge of their seats and wanting to yell, "Stuff that tea-towel down her gullet! Go on, mate!"

And then, when they see how the pieces fall into place, they're guilty, 'cos those glasses are all she's got. Screwing the tops on bottles just-so, adjusting beer mats, everlastingly wiping the counter. He's gambled it all away and there's nothing left and now they want her to reach out and grab him by that stupid *mein host* waistcoat he wears and bang his head on the counter.

Though I don't think she's that type. She'd do something major. Flood the cellar or something. Beer everywhere. Is that possible? Beer kegs bumping into each other in the darkness – a mini Titanic! The delivery hatch flung open and a shaft of light floods down and his agonised face on the brink: "No-ooo ...!"

Actually, she'd take the car and ... Well. Where would she go? Isn't that always the problem? I can see why the author keeps it small-scale. Most people's lives are small-scale. That's what's so awful when the Bad Thing happens: the life just bursts apart 'cos it wasn't meant to contain this much pain.

Like in floods. Those pictures in the papers where someone's sitting, stunned, on a roof, with muddy water everywhere for miles. Someone's life has just burst apart and ejected him – out of his own life. Pop! Don't need you any more. Need more space. And from being the centre, he's on the edge – on the roof!

There was one bit on the news ... I couldn't watch it all ... where a teenager, some Asian teenager, all bony-limbed, was clinging for dear life to the branch of a tree and around him things were sweeping past. The water was pushing branches, a table, planks, fiercely along

towards a rocky island. Things crashed and caught on it. A cat, four legs stiff, inside a basin, getting swirled along, and the water bashes the basin up against the rock and out springs the cat, dry as a bone and you want to say to the boy – because we can see what he can't, that island – “Let go! Drop into the current. It'll take you.”

And he doesn't and the water rises and he clings and clings ... I didn't watch the end but you couldn't escape hearing about it – how he clung on till the water closed over his head and then, after a pause, you saw his body emerge – Pop! – swung out into the current and reaching the island after all. But he didn't leap up like the cat, being dead.

“What would you save?” They ask you that, don't they, in interviews. If there was a fire or a flood, like. People save such stupid things and they must be lying. Why would they tell the truth to a shiny mag? So that people like me can gloop it down and burp! They do lie. They must do. I would. I do.

No. I don't. Actually, I don't. I say, when people ask me gingerly about how I'm coping, “Well, my stuff is in people's houses, or garages, or sheds, or whatever! I just don't think about it too much when I'm touring.” But I do. Except I turn away from it because it's pointless. I'll deal with it when the run's finished.

The flood came. My flood. It was a relief, in the end. Though I can't say it was a natural disaster, an act of God. I pulled out a few bungs, a few stoppers, myself. Yes, I did. Out they came. Pop! Pop! Pop! Down we went, husband, children, pets, house and car. I floated up and away, onto the wide, muddy water.

Poor Abby. The writer doesn't let her flood the cellar. He keeps her in the spotlight – writers are like that – a dry woman, squeaky-clean. “The baby,” she says. We know about the blood, the dash to the hospital, the husband's promises – not so much as a doggie or even a scratch

card ever again. He'd have promised anything in the panic! "The baby ... Sorry. I'm so sorry ..." she says and he answers with a rustle of pages turning. The dry "flak" of newsprint shaken like a whip. Silence. The audience does the howling – in silence; in the silence where they watch her do nothing and then she lifts her hand ... and picks up that tea-towel and *Squirk! Squeak! Squeak!* What else can she do?

They want to storm the stage and rip it to shreds, tear their clothes in a frenzy, mourn and wail. Anything but this stepping into the tomb of silence. "You'll die!" they want to shout. "Don't do it! It's behind you! The great black emptiness. Behind the beaded curtain. It's waiting for you! Say no! Get out of there!"

But she doesn't and they're exhausted by the end. Worn out with pity and vowing not to ... not to ... whatever it is she did. Do they look at her choice, I wonder; really turn the spotlight on themselves as they go home; as they lie in bed later on?

Because the audience knows he'd had the snip without telling her. All that time letting her believe the not getting pregnant was her fault, pretending to be sympathetic every month. Bastard.

I'd have done it myself, if I was her, even if it had to be with a smarmy bloke from the brewery. She does it for her husband. He *deserves* a baby. That seems obvious to her. And she thinks she's sparing his male pride. He'll never know, will he? Just a question of steering clear of DNA tests! A risk worth taking anyway. Not like he'd hand a baby back!

So down in the cellar she falls, in more ways than one, stumbling about in the nearly dark with the muscle-bound delivery man. Just in case. Just in case it's him, *mein host*, who's the problem and not her.

Who's shafted who? When she tells him, coyly thrilled like you're supposed to be, he doesn't look at all pleased. He looks totally bloody shocked!

The interval's then. *Who'll do what? Who'll we side with? Would you go that far? Stupid cow. He's a prick an'a half. But lots of blokes don't want kids – he's just doing something about it. Using his initiative.*

So the second half works every time because they don't know who to back – yet. She always gets them in the end. When they see her realize that he's sent the business down the Swanee and she still tries to keep afloat. And even after the miscarriage she grieves for his grief at their lost child. But the audience has seen him downing a private whiskey in relief.

Well, they despise him. All she says is, “My little piece of happiness”. Those few months when she thought she'd made an island in the storm – when she *was* the island, sheltering its one little inhabitant. She bought baby clothes stoically – well, that's not in the script but I'm sure she would have. She'd have met other mothers in the store. “He's not with you, then?” Too busy, she'd say. But he's excited. Of course. Yes. Every time she asks him he says he is. Till she stops asking.

“My little piece of happiness”. She says that and the audience understands. That fragile thing shining over the floods like a tiny star, over the waste of waters. Tiny light. Don't take that away. Leave me that at least. I'll die without it. Don't shut the trap door on me. Don't leave me here in the dark!

That's what I couldn't survive. I couldn't survive letting that go - letting my Dave go. If I let Dave go, I'll have nothing. No, I'll have plenty. Really. I'll have the kids – when I get to see them. But my little piece of happiness, that I cling to in the storm, Dave's voice that warms to me along the phonenumber ...! After the show, back in whatever digs, there's that to look forward

to: his voice from a distance. And his shabbinesses don't matter and his dubious motives and his wife swearing theirs is an open marriage: stoically; and my husband, bitter and raging.

I can't let Dave go. If I let go, I'll sink. He tells me, "Don't let go. You're safe with me." Safe enough next year, and the next, and forever? "Don't let go!" And I don't. My little piece of happiness. It isn't enough. I know it isn't. Not for a whole lifetime. I cling to it – and you can understand?

Angela Graham