

The Tiger at the White Lion

A One-Act Play

by

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The Tiger at The White Lion

Characters

The Expert

The Showman

Hannah Twynnoy

William

The Landlord

Patrons at the White Lion and Witnesses*

Gypsy (Voice Only)

The Tiger at The White Lion

From the Author.

* The “Tiger at the White Lion” has been written for five principle characters *The Expert*, *The Showman*, *The Landlord*, *William* and *Hannah Twynnoy*. These actors retain fixed roles throughout the play, although *The Showman* also doubles as *The Judge*. There is also a group referred to collectively as *Patrons* and *Witnesses*. Between them these actors need to play a total of ten roles. *Doctor*; *Captain of the Town Watch*; *Lady Patron* *Aristocratic Patron*; *Rustic Patron*; *Cleric*; *Rich Spinster*; *Nanny*; *Bull-baiting Rough*, and *Sportsman*, in addition there is a voice only role for *The Gypsy*. With the doubling of parts these roles can be covered with a further six actors, four male and two female. However you may choose to cast each role separately and so accommodate a larger number of players. The Producer has a totally free hand as to whether they choose a small number of actors to play many different parts; or whether every character has a dedicated actor. The first course gives your cast a chance to showcase their versatility. The second provides an opportunity for lots of people to display their individual talents. I suggest the *Voice of the Gypsy* is per-recorded and played as a sound effect.

Setting

The action of this play takes place in two locations. The interior of the White Lion Inn and a courtyard behind that building. The only piece of fixed scenery necessary is a square headed archway as high as a normal door and twice as wide. This needs to be set centre stage at the far back. The arch may be dressed to represent either an entrance *into* the White Lion. In which case the stage represents an interior bar. Or else an exit *from* that building. The stage then becomes the courtyard area. When the interior scenes are set tied back curtains hang at the arch sides. It is not necessary that these should be practical. Painted hardboard cut-outs would serve just as well with the added bonus that these could be hinged to swing in and out of place almost instantly. For courtyard scenes hanging lanterns are fixed, one on each side of the arch. Again these do not need to work they simply indicate that now we are outside. For Hannah's final scene with the tiger two extra lanterns are brought on stage. These are hung from hooked iron stakes, (or at least something which resembles iron). The notion is that these stakes have been thrust into some convenient patches of soft earth. In reality wood block bases keep the lanterns from falling over. When Hannah grabs hold of one

The Tiger at The White Lion

of the stakes in order to torment the tiger she simply stands on the block and pulls the stake free. The only stage furniture necessary consists of two benches and one trestle table. These are set up “dinner hall fashion” for the Patrons during the interior scenes. In the courtyard scenes the benches and table are set far back either side of the archway, as though they had been placed against courtyard's walls. In order to represent the animal cages wooden rectangles like giant picture frames need to be constructed around six feet high and wide enough so that four may stand in line across the front of the stage. Bracket feet provide stability whilst a series of vertical slats fixed within each frame are painted to resemble steel bars. When “viewing” each animal the actors look out towards the audience, who can of course see all their various reactions. As for the menagerie animals, their presence is simply suggested through a combination of suitable sound effects and the actors reactions.

Costumes

As for costumes although this drama is supposed to be taking place in 1703 historical accuracy is not of the first importance. To take our lead from the *Showman*, folk frequently prefer an exciting tale over bone dry facts. With that in mind the *Showman* really ought to resemble “Mr Chairman from a Victorian music hall” whilst the *Expert* would look best as a grey suited civil service type. As for the other characters these should be in period although whether you choose early eighteenth or late nineteenth century is up to you. I myself would follow an eclectic path as I too side with the *Showman's* assertion that people prefer an exciting story over a list of facts. Remember though that whatever styles you choose for *Hannah* and *William* she has to appear sexually provocative whilst he ought to look rather staid and conventional. Although since he fancies himself as a poet perhaps the addition of a small flower pinned to his waistcoat would not be inappropriate. If it is decided to double up on roles amongst the Patrons again I suggest that a “basic” male and female costume is devised and then the different characters defined with extra items of costume or props. For example, a top hat for the *Aristocratic Patron*, a large black bible for the *Cleric*, or a battered hat and a muffler for the *Bull-baiting Rough*. However if you take the “large cast” option everyone should dress according to their character, all mingle together during the crowd scenes and simply speak their lines as required.

Michael Hudd

The Tiger at The White Lion

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- (iv) Times and dates of performances.

A fee will be charged for this licence which must be paid prior to the first performance otherwise the licence is automatically cancelled and the performance becomes illegal.

The Tiger at The White Lion

(The stage is without scenery apart from a wide square headed arch set centre stage at the back. This has been painted to resemble time - blackened oak and acts either as an internal entrance to the White Lion Inn or else an exit from that building into the rear yard. For internal scenes a pair of tied back curtains are viable. For external scenes the curtains disappear replaced by a pair of lanterns. The stage is in blackout. The Expert and the Showman enter stage left and stage right, they stand facing the audience. A spotlight illuminated the Expert who starts to speak.)

Expert: (Addressing the audience in a dry fashion) Good evening, the first recorded person to be killed by a tiger in Britain was Hannah Twynnoy. Her gravestone stands in the churchyard of Malmesbury Abbey. This records her name and death at the age of thirty three on October the twenty third together with a relevantly long evocative poem which reads, “In bloom of life she’s snatched from hence, She had no room to make defense; For tiger fierce took life away. And here she lies in bed of clay, Until the Resurrection Day.” The parish register covering burials for that year tells us, “October the twenty forth 1703, Hannah Twynnoy, killed by a tiger at ye White Lion.” Records also exist of a plaque, since lost, displayed in Hullavington parish church, just five miles from the town. This stated that Hannah, a servant at the White Lion, took great pleasure in teasing a very fierce tiger, which happened to be part of an exhibition of wild beasts. One day the enraged creature broke from its cage and killed her.

(A second spotlight illuminates the Showman)

Showman: That sir is a bland narrative, a lack-luster collection of mere details!

Expert: But those are the recorded facts. Beyond that we know nothing.

The Tiger at The White Lion

Showman: A plague on your facts sir! What this tale needs is embellishment. It ought to be a well-rounded confection filled with incident and vigour.

Expert: Which mean that you are going to make stuff up doesn't it?

Showman: Make it up. Why the very idea! I simply intend to improve upon your rather sparse offering.

Expert: Just like I said, by making it up.

Showman: Look, that plaque called Hannah a servant. Well she might well have been a barmaid. Inns serve drink don't they?

Expert: Alright, I'll accept that ...

Showman: (**Getting into the swing of it.**) And as everybody knows an inn has to have a landlord, and that man has to have a name. So let me see... George Norman. That's got a good solid ring to it. And of course George couldn't run the place like that with just a barmaid. He would have needed at least one more, someone who could mind the cellar, carry people's bags, a sort of general handyman. (**Thinking aloud**) William ...that's it William! Now he would have started there as a boy and worked his way up. Hannah on the other hand, she would be a newcomer and always ...

Expert: (**Interrupting Showman.**) That does it! How could you possibly know all that extra stuff? I'm not stopping here a moment longer!

(Expert exits stage left. His spotlight goes off.)

The Tiger at The White Lion

Showman: (Calling after the Expert.) As you wish sir, but don't go too far. Who knows, you may prefer my tale to yours. **(Turns to audience and makes a sweeping gesture.)** And now ladies gentlemen come with me as we travel back in time to the year 1703, to the White Lion Inn Malmesbury.

(The Showman's spotlight goes off and he exits stage right. In the blackout the Patrons of the White Lion enter stage left and right, they carry two long benches and a trestle table which they set down at an angle stage right. Hannah and William enter stage left, they both carry trays of tankards and several plates of food. When the stage lights come up the Patrons are either seated on the trestle or standing in groups. Hannah and William move amongst these people dispensing food and drinks. As she serves Hannah spends much of her time flirting. The Landlord enters centre stage, the Patrons cheer, bang their tankards and applaud.)

Landlord: (Holding out his arms in acknowledgment.) Welcome my masters! To all those who know me, and also to those with whom I am not yet acquainted. I am your host, George Norman!

(Various Patrons respond by calling out, "Good old George!" And again bang their tankards.)

Landlord: Here at the White Lion we pride ourselves in providing for our clientele, the best ale, the choicest wines and the best food in all of Malmesbury!

(Cheers from the Patrons, one of them calls out, "And the entertainment George, don't forget the entertainment!")

The Tiger at The White Lion

Landlord: (With a chuckle.) As if I could forget. Yes my friends, within a short while in our garden an entertainment will commence. And all of you, for the price of a small silver coin are welcome to attend.

First Patron: What have you got for us this time George? A fire eater or a conjurer?

Second Patron: If it's old Jim Bunny and his catches he'd best not give us "The Parson's Daughter." There are ladies present!

(Knowing laughter from some of the Patrons.)

Landlord: May I assure all the ladies in this company tonight that our offerings are always of the highest moral quality. For I have obtained, for one night only, the services of Mr Taverstock, the celebrated play actor.

(General sounds of approval from the Patrons.)

Landlord: Mr Taverstock is travelling to the city of Bath where he expects to make a triumphant debut. Tonight he will be giving us extracts from the pen of William Shakespeare! So if you will now be so good to follow me out into the garden our performance can begin.

(Talking excitedly to each other the Patrons exit as directed through the central archway. As they pass the Landlord coins change hands. He acknowledges each contribution with a short bow. As the last Patron exits he follows them out. William and Hannah remain. They begin to clear away the plates and tankards. William attempts to strike up a conversation. Hannah by her actions makes it plain that she has no interest at all in him.)

The Tiger at The White Lion

William: This is a good place Hannah.

Hannah: So you keep telling me William.

William: And so it is. Mr Norman is a good master, and we have a good place here.

Hannah: But all we are is servants. We fetch, we carry, we clean. Every night we go to sleep here, and in the morning it all starts again.

William: We are servants Hannah, this is our station in life.

Hannah: Well it might be yours William Hallett, but it's certainly not mine.

William: Some are servants, some are masters, so the good Lord ordered this world.

Hannah: Maybe for you he did but not for me. I'm going to be great do you hear me? One night when everybody else was in bed a gypsy came around the back yard asking for food. Out of charity I gave her a share of my supper, and in exchange she told my fortune. "Child, fame will be yours," she said, "streets will be named in your honour. And six generations hence children will lay flowers on your grave,

(William is about to speak but Hannah cuts him off.)

The Tiger at The White Lion

Hannah: Something will happen here, that's what she told me. And it can't happen whilst I'm still a *servant*. They don't name streets after poor servant girls do they? No I shall be married to a man with money. A handsome young farmer perhaps who visits on market day. Maybe even those lords come to town to talk business with their attorneys. They'll come in here for a drink, our eyes will meet, and I shall know that *they* are the one. Then I shall get out of this place, then I shall be something in this world!

William: (Hesitantly) But you are something in the world Hannah. You are to me ...I hold you as a friend.

Hannah: (Shrugs and gives a dismissive grunt.)

William: (Trying to change the subject.) You haven't worked here long, but just you wait. Mr Norman will bring the world to us here. When I think of the wonders our master brings to those gardens. Giants, dwarfs, why we once had a man who swallowed swords.

Hannah: (Hannah continues to clear the room. She has no interest in William.)

William: And we get actors too. Sometimes we get poets.

(William moves up stage and opens the central door a few inches. The sound of Mr Taverstock finishing the king's speech from "Henry the Fifth" can be heard in the distance.)

Mr Taverstock: ... And gentlemen in England now abed Shall think themselves accursed they were not here, And hold their manhood's cheap whiles any speaks, That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day!

The Tiger at The White Lion

William: Oh I love the way those actors speak their words. I love their voices Hannah, listen, they make pictures, just like the lace makers do.

(Applause from the Patrons. William shuts the door, all is quite again.)

William: Hannah, I write poems too you know

Hannah: (Rather scornful) *You* write poetry?.

William: In my spare time I do. **(Produces small pocket book .)** Here's one I wrote this Spring, it's called "Primroses" **(Recites.)** Oh primroses upon the hill, Oh primroses I see thee still, Oh primroses down by the mill, Oh primroses beside the rill, Oh primroses I see thee still, Oh ...

(Hannah is not impressed with William's efforts. He however remains oblivious of this fact.)

Hannah: Primroses?

William: It's a bit short I know ...

Hannah: Yes.

William: I have others if you're interested.

Hannah: Another time William, maybe another time.

The Tiger at The White Lion

William: (Summoning up all his courage.) This is one you really should read Hannah. (Hands her a sheet of paper from out of his book.) I wrote it for you, and you alone.

(Bewildered Hannah takes the paper and silently begins to read. She starts to smile, it is not a pleasant expression. William is still unaware of her disdain.)

Hannah: (With mock sincerity.) Oh William, oh Will! You wrote this for me? I must have been blind. You truly think these things about me?

William: Yes Hannah Twynnoy, truly with all my heart.

Hannah: Oh Will, give me your hand ... let me place it somewhere nice and soft.

(Almost unable to believe the message he thinks he has received William holds out his right arm. Very deliberately Hannah takes hold of his hand, lifts it high in the air, and then plonks it down upon his head. Laughing to herself she then exits stage left. For a moment William appears stunned, then slowly removing his hand he returns to the task of clearing away the plates and tankards.)

William: (Speaking to himself.) I love you Hannah Twynnoy, even though you appear heartless and cruel. I love you and I always will.