

SWAN SONGS

A one-act play

by

Graham Large

Graham Large
10 Belgrade Road
Hampton
Middlesex
TW12 2AZ

Tel: 0208 941 7750

Mobile: 07947 834909

E-mail: urbanlarge@blueyonder.co.uk

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SYNOPSIS

Two former professional singers, Berenice and Jackie, who have just performed a programme of light opera and popular standards for an audience of old people at the Sunshine Hall day centre under the name of The Two Songbirds, have different ideas about the way the act should be going. Jackie, with her jazz background, is exasperated by Berenice's lofty attitude towards her, and reveals that she has discovered that Berenice has exaggerated her career background and that she has never sung with the top opera houses as she has always claimed.

During the discussion, they are interrupted by a visitor called Harry, who says he is an London impresario who is putting on a show about the big band days and would like Jackie to play a leading role in it.

Sally, the manager of the day centre, being told about what has happened, says that Harry is a regular attender who has dementia and lives in a care home. Jackie, her hopes of belated stardom seemingly dashed, and Berenice, now revealed as a chorus singer, are reconciled.

But when the men's clothes are described, Sally realises that the visitor to the dressing room was not the Harry she thought he was. Examination of the man's visiting card shows that he is what he has claimed and the offer to Jackie was genuine.

Jackie tells Berenice that whatever happens she would like to continue their singing relationship and Berenice, for her part, agrees to add some modern material to the act.

CHARACTERS:

BERENICE: Sang with various provincial opera companies throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s she became a freelance music teacher and in 2010 teamed up with **JACKIE**, whom she met while buying tickets for 'The Mikado' at London's Coliseum (English National Opera). The two singers appear regularly at a variety of venues, entertaining groups of old people with songs from light opera and popular songs from vintage musicals under the name 'Two Songbirds'. Berenice has been married three times, each marriage ending in divorce. Singing is her life. She considers herself an expert in the art of classical singing.

JACKIE: A more laid-back woman than **BERENICE**, but of a similar age. She has spent her life as a singer, but performing more popular material including jazz. Her favourite singer is Ella Fitzgerald, who she has always tried to emulate, and her singing style echoes the famous singer. She started out performing with the big dance bands. Since then she has appeared with small jazz groups. When work in the jazz field became more difficult to find, she developed a stage act and appeared in provincial cabaret clubs. After meeting Berenice she has changed her style of singing to suit the demands of the act. She is married to Oscar, a former jazz saxophonist.

SALLY: Manager of the Sunshine Hall for older people. In her mid-20s, she has ambitions to be a singer.

HARRY: A theatrical producer.

SWAN SONGS

SCENE 1

The Sunshine Hall, East Thurrock, a day centre for senior citizens. Black out. The sound of applause fades up with applause and voices shouting for more. Lights fade up revealing a small stage lit by two coloured spotlights and a backcloth of two curtains. BERENICE and JACKIE, dressed in glamorous evening dresses, are standing before two vintage-style microphones on stands. They have performed the last song in their programme. The audience is treated as the audience in the play.

APPLAUSE CONTINUES AS BERENICE AND JACKIE BOW TO THE AUDIENCE, WAVE AND EXIT THROUGH THE CURTAINS. SALLY, THE MANAGER OF THE HALL, ENTERS STAGE LEFT. THE APPLAUSE CONTINUES AND SUBSIDES. SHE TALKS INTO ONE OF THE MICS.

SALLY: Jackie and Berenice, our two lovely Songbirds; weren't they wonderful, ladies and gentlemen? Do you think we should get them out here to do another one for us?

CRIES OF 'YES'.

I'm sure if we shout loud enough they'll come back. Do we want another song?

APPLAUSE AND CALLS FOR MORE. JACKIE
AND BERENICE EMERGE THROUGH THE
CURTAINS. THEY SCAN THE AUDIENCE WITH
APPRECIATION AND RAISE THEIR HANDS IN
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.

JACKIE: Thank you. You've been a wonderful
audience.

BERENICE: Thank you so much. Thank you.

JACKIE: We've really have enjoyed singing for you
tonight. Would you like another one?

CRIES OF 'YES' FOLLOWED BY MORE
APPLAUSE.

I didn't quite hear you.

JACKIE PUTS HER HAND TO HER EAR.
LOUDER APPLAUSE FOLLOWS. JACKIE MIMES
BEING STAGGERED BY THE NOISE.

I think we'd better sing another song for
these good people, Berenice.

BERENICE STEPS FORWARD, MOTIONING FOR
QUIET.

BERENICE: Thank you all so very much. It's been a
wonderful evening and you've been a
marvellous audience, you really have. We'd

like to do one more song for you, if we may. It's one you all know, so please join in if you'd like to, and we look forward to being back with you very soon. Thank you.

BACKING TRACK OF 'WE'LL MEET AGAIN'
STARTS AND JACKIE AND BERENICE
PERFORM THE SONG. JACKIE IS MORE
ANIMATED WITH HER BODY MOVEMENTS THAN
BERENICE, WHO IS MORE STAID. THEY
ENCOURAGE THE AUDIENCE TO JOIN IN THE
CHORUS WITH HAND GESTURES.

We'll meet again
Don't know where
Don't know when
But I know we'll meet again some sunny day
Keep smiling through
Just like you used to do
Till the blue skies
Drive the dark clouds far away

So won't you please say hello
To the folks that I know
Tell them I won't be long
They'll be happy to know
That as you saw me go
I was singing this song

(JACKIE MOTIONS TO THE AUDIENCE TO SING
WITH THEM)

We'll meet again

Don't know where
Don't know when
But I know we'll meet again some sunny day

Keep smiling through
Just like you used to do
Till the blue skies
Drive the dark clouds far away.

So won't you please say hello
To the folks that I know
Tell them I won't be long
They'll be happy to know
That as you saw me go
I was singing this song.

JACKIE: All together now!

We'll meet again
Don't know where
Don't know when
But I know we'll meet again some sunny day

AT THE END OF THE ENCORE JACKIE AND
BERENICE TAKE THEIR BOWS, WAVE AND
LEAVE THE STAGE. SALLY, MANAGER OF
THE DAY CENTRE, ENTERS HOLDING AN ICE
BUCKET ON WHICH ARE BALANCED THREE
RAFFLE PRIZES. SHE PUTS THEM DOWN IN
FRONT OF HER AND APPLAUDS LOOKING
BACKWARDS TO WHERE THE TWO SINGERS
HAVE EXITED. SHE APPROACHES A

MICROPHONE AND LIFTS IT OFF ITS STAND
AND ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE.

SALLY: Thank you ladies and gentlemen – Jackie and Berenice, The Two Songbirds. Weren't they wonderful? We'd all like to see them back here again at the Sunshine Hall, wouldn't we? (CRIES OF 'YES'). Our two wonderful Songbirds...But before they fly back to their nests I'd like to ask them to come back here on stage to draw tonight's raffle.

SALLY GOES TO GAP IN THE CURTAIN AND
CALLS FOR JACKIE AND BERENICE. THEY
REAPPEAR TO ANOTHER BURST OF
APPLAUSE.

Before we draw the raffle I'd like to say a very big Sunshine Hall thank you to Frances, Deidre and Hazel for their help in organising last week's jam and chutney sale which raised the grand total of (WAITS FIVE SECONDS AND ANNOUNCES THE TOTAL LIKE A DARTS COMMENTATOR GIVING THE '180' SCORE) £97.60! (APPLAUSE STARTS AGAIN). So, on with the raffle.

SALLY PICKS UP THE ICE BUCKET AND
OFFERS IT TO BERENICE WHO PICKS ONE
OUT.

SALLY: This is for third prize – the big tin of Quality Street (OR SIMILAR).

BERENICE: Number 78 blue.

AN AUDIENCE MEMBER IS ENCOURAGED TO COME UP TO THE STAGE AND COLLECT THEIR PRIZE.

JACKIE: This is for second prize – (EXAMPLE)the set of tablecloths and matching serviettes – really nice.

SALLY OFFERS THE BUCKET TO JACKIE, WHO PICKS ONE OUT.

JACKIE: Ticket 43, also blue.

AUDIENCE MEMBER APPROACHES THE STAGE AND COLLECTS THEIR PRIZE. THE BUCKET IS AGAIN OFFERED TO BERENICE WHO PICKS A TICKET. SHE HANDS IT TO SALLY.

SALLY: And now for first prize – (READS FROM CARD) a dinner for two at The Ritz. How exciting!

BERENICE: Ticket number 60, blue.

SALLY LOOKS UP TO THE BACK OF THE STALLS AS IF HER ATTENTION IS CAUGHT BY

A STAFF MEMBER. AFTER A PAUSE, SHE
TURNS THE CARD OVER.

Er, at the Ritz Cafe, Lower Pond Street.
But I'm sure it'll be just as special.

AUDIENCE MEMBER MOUNTS THE STAGE AND
COLLECTS THEIR PRIZE.

Thank you Jackie and Berenice for helping
us today (JACKIE AND BERENICE WAVE AND
LEAVE THE STAGE THROUGH THE CURTAIN).
Thank you to you all for coming and please
don't go home straight away as Deidre has
tea and coffee available at the back of
the hall. Those of with wheelchairs could
you please wait a few moments before you
go out to your transport as we'd like to
get the other mini-buses away first. Thank
you and good night. (APPLAUSE)

BLACK OUT

SCENE 2

A dressing room at the back of the stage at the Sunshine Hall. It has two tables, chairs and a wall mirror.

JACKIE AND BERENICE ENTER. JACKIE
COLLAPSES IN A CHAIR.

JACKIE: Weren't they lovely? And they managed to
clap in all the right places for a change
(LAUGHS).

BERENICE PACES UP AND DOWN THE ROOM.

BERENICE: Why did we have to go through that damned
raffle business? They'll get us to call
the bingo numbers next. The whole thing's
too common for words.

BERENICE SITS DOWN. JACKIE TAKES OFF
A SHOE WITH A PAINED LOOK.

JACKIE: Oh, these shoes. I never learn. I'm like a
flipping magpie, attracted to anything
shiny. It'll be carpet slippers for me
next time, I'm telling you.

BERENICE EXAMINES HER NAILS AS JACKIE
MASSAGES HER FEET.

BERENICE: At least there's no bodily contact. That
would be awful.

JACKIE: You'd change your tune if George Clooney was in the audience. I'd be happy to give him a peck any time (LAUGHS). Fat chance though.

JACKIE LOOKS UP AT BERENICE. BEAT.

Is everything all right? You seemed a bit, well, off, out there, even before the raffle.

BERENICE: I'm fine.

JACKIE: You don't seem fine. I don't think I missed anything out this time.

BERENICE: It was fine.

JACKIE: That sounds ominous coming from you. Come on, out with it. What's on your mind? Was I too loud?

BERENICE: It's got nothing to do with volume.

JACKIE: Well what is it then? Hell's bells, it's like pulling molars with you sometimes.

BERENICE: It's nothing.

JACKIE: For god's sake, Berenice, what's the problem?

BERENICE: Well...as you must know by now, what gets me not a little irritated is our – your – reluctance to involve yourself in the meaning, the spirit, of the song.

JACKIE: Oh, no. Here we go again.

BERENICE: Well I have to keep saying it, as you seem increasingly reluctant to take things on board these days. You see, it's not good enough to just deliver the words in the right order, Jackie. It's all about body language. Our facial expressions should be telling the story. (POINTEDLY) We should be acting as well as singing, you know... as I have said a number of times before...

JACKIE: (STARTING TO REMOVE HER MAKEUP IN THE MIRROR) I hear you, Berenice. I'm just not as good at hamming it up as you are. All those Sarah Bernhardt impressions; it's just not my style, that's all.

BERENICE COMES TO A HALT AND FACES JACKIE.

BERENICE: What are you talking about? I have never 'hammed it up' as you call it; I just change my expression to suit the emotion of the music, as I've been trained to do over many years by some of Europe's finest opera teachers. It's all about communication, Jackie – projecting what

we're doing to the back row of the stalls, and that's the way it's been since theatre started.

JACKIE: Last week you told me to tone it down, which I did, and now you're picking me up on this again. You never seem to stop.

BERENICE: Please Jackie, could I just ask that you try to be a bit more, well, 'nuanced', if I may put it like that.

JACKIE: But the old folks enjoyed it, didn't they, and that's the main thing, bless them. Did you see that bald headed one in the second row ogling us? His eyes were like organ stops. He must have been ninety if he was a day.

BERENICE: It's a thyroid problem.

JACKIE: Oh, that's it! I wondered how he managed to go for an hour without blinking.

BERENICE: Anyway, apart from our individual performances, I thought the whole thing was awful. It's no good us coming to these places if they're going to play the backing tape so loud we can't be heard over the top of it. Do they want us to bring megaphones or something? That boy in the control room should be sent on a course.

JACKIE: He got it right for the last three songs anyway.

BERENICE: It's the first eight he should have done something about. At my age I can't start bawling at the top of my voice. Another week of that and I'd be finished. Career over. It's disgraceful. I'll have to have a strong word with the manager, what's her name?

JACKIE: She's Sally. I don't know how these modern-day singers do it, all high Cs at 500 decibels. They won't last long if they keep on like that. They should listen to how Billie or Ella phrased a song. They'd show them how it's done.
(SINGS HUSKILY) A foggy day
In London Town
Had me low
And it had me down...
(STOPS SINGING) Berenice, I've been meaning to ask you how you'd feel if I said I'd like to do another solo jazz number. People do seem to like a bit of swing.

BERENICE: Now look Jackie, you're very good at that style, I'm not denying it, but it takes away from the atmosphere we're trying to create. We can't jump from Sigmund Romberg to, to Dizzy Gillespie, or whatever his

name is, and then back to Fleidermaus in one fell swoop. We're trying to embody a lost age of style and elegance, not a jazz club in Harlem!

JACKIE: I'm not talking about us doing a jazz concert, just maybe adding something a little bit livelier in the middle to push the show along.

JACKIE SINGS A SNATCH OF 'FASCINATING RHYTHM'

'Fascinating rhythm
You got me on the go
Fascinating rhythm
I'm all a-quiver
Fascinating rhythm etc etc

I could really strut my stuff in that one!

BERENICE TURNS HER EYES TO HEAVEN.

BERENICE: Strut your stuff! Jackie, we agreed that we'd stick to the light classical repertoire and now you're wanting to change it. Well, I'm sorry; I'm putting my foot down. You've got one solo number. Thus far and no further! And while I don't want to always seem to be carping – which I'm not, in case you're thinking of levelling that accusation at me – there

are one or two areas of the performance that could do with a bit of brushing up.

JACKIE: I thought you said we sounded fine.

BERENICE: Look, I know you haven't had as much experience as I have in the classical repertoire, but – may be blunt?

JACKIE: I reckon you're going to be whether I like it or not.

BERENICE: It's increasingly evident to me that your aspirate attack is becoming more pronounced these days. I don't want talk too technically as you might find it difficult to grasp, but I have to say you are losing coordination of your laryngeal musculature as well.

JACKIE: My god, that sounds painful!

BERENICE: They're all things that can be corrected if they're caught early enough.

JACKIE: You make it sound like I've got a disease. I haven't noticed anything different.

BERENICE: Well you wouldn't, you see. Only a trained singer like me would pick it up. You're very fortunate I'm able to point it out while there's still time for you to put it right.

JACKIE: I'm very grateful.

BERENICE: No need. But you should do something about it, that's all I'm saying.

JACKIE: Now look, Berenice, you might still have ambitions to sing Aida at the Met, but we're at the Sunshine Hall Day Centre, East Thurrock, for crying out loud, doing 'gems from Gilbert and Sullivan and Ivor Novello', not St Matthews' Passion at ruddy Glyndebourne!

BERENICE: You're missing the point. It doesn't matter which hall we're in – the Sunshine Hall or, or, the Albert Hall. Our standards have to be maintained at all times. That was drummed into me forcibly by Professor Santini, when I first started in the business.

JACKIE: Who was that?

BERENICE: My mentor, Professor Luigi Santini, the great Sicilian tenor. Oh, he was wonderful. He was a dear, dear man. He took me under his wing (BEAT) for a while. He always said you should be true to your audience, be they prince or peasant. It's a question of morality, he said, which was wonderful advice.

JACKIE: Morality! Don't talk to me about morality in this business. That bloody Lennie; if I could have caught up with him I'd have beaten his brains out.

BERENICE: I can't believe you'd have trusted anyone with a name like Lennie! It just shrieks corruption!

JACKIE: Don't I know it now. Three years hard work down the drain because of him. It hit me hard, I can tell you. But it was a good lesson never to trust anyone with my money ever again.

BERENICE: It was such a pity that no-one was interested in putting opera on the television when I was at my peak. Too highbrow, that was the attitude then. Absolute balderdash! I was in high demand anyway, so it wouldn't have mattered much to me, but it might have helped some of them further down the ladder.

THERE IS A KNOCK AND SALLY ENTERS.

SALLY: Hello, may I come in?

JACKIE: Oh, hello Sally, excuse the mess.

SALLY: I just wanted to check that everything was all right.

JACKIE: Yes, it was fine. They were a really good audience, which makes—

BERENICE: —well I have to take issue here. It wasn't all right. Really not. You must tell that boy on the sound that he's playing the tapes too loudly. It's ruining all our hard work. Has he got something wrong with his hearing?

SALLY: Oh dear, I'm really sorry about that. Kieron's more used to heavy metal shows. He does the sound mixing for the Death Cult when they're not on tour.

JACKIE: He's working in the right place here, then! (LAUGHS).

SALLY: Pardon? Oh, I see what you mean – the Death Cult, yes. (LAUGHS) Oh, he'll like that when I tell him. But, too loud, yes, I'll have a word with him. Sorry. Otherwise was it all right?

JACKIE: They were a lovely lot of people and they probably didn't notice anyway.

BERENICE: It's got to be right, or it's wrong, there's no middle course.

SALLY: I'll make sure he knows how you feel about it.

BERENICE: We would be so grateful.

SALLY: Could I just say I thought you were really good tonight. (HURRIEDLY) That doesn't mean you weren't good last month, too, honestly——

JACKIE: ——Ah, thanks Sally. We do our best in our declining years, don't we Berenice?

BERENICE: We could do better.

JACKIE: (TO SALLY) She's feeling a bit peaky today.

BERENICE: I am not peaky. I just want things done properly. That isn't much to ask is it?

SALLY: I liked that one about the highwayman. I've never heard it before.

JACKIE: Highwayman Love; yes it's a bit of an odd one, but it's got a nice tune.

BERENICE: By Ivor Novello, from a musical called Perchance to Dream, and it's a quotation from Hamlet.

JACKIE: There she goes, a mine of information. I never knew that. But why should I? My background's a bit different.

SALLY: Don't you enjoy singing it, then?

JACKIE: I enjoy singing everything, but I think we could add a few jazz standards. Give them something to jig about to. What do you think?

SALLY: Well, whatever you did would be good. But I did like the one you did on your own. A Foggy Day, I think it was.

JACKIE: (BEGINS SINGING)
'A foggy day
In London town
Had me low and it had me——'

BERENICE: ——I really don't think it's fair to ask Sally here about our choice of repertoire.

JACKIE: Sally, you were at the back when I was singing that one. Did you notice them nodding their heads and tapping their feet?

BERENICE: We're best sticking to what we know. And what we're good at.

JACKIE: Isn't the idea of us doing this to give people enjoyment they don't usually get? And if that means changing the programme from time to time to keep it fresh I think we should do it, whether it fits the mould or not.

BERENICE: Mould? What mould?

JACKIE: The mould. The pudding bowl you've set us into, like a couple of, of, fruit jellies.

BERENICE: It's ridiculous to say that I've forced us into a mould? What are you talking about?

JACKIE: Look, we do the same thing each time — Lehar, Romberg, Offenbach — 11 songs in 45 minutes, with some patter in between. We could do the whole thing in our sleep. We're like two pieces of cold toast and we're sounding bored. We need freshening up.

BERENICE: I'm not bored, and I don't see what you've got to be bored about either. If you worked a bit harder on your——

JACKIE: ——My laryngorical (NOTE MISTAKEN PRONUNCIATION) musculature, or whatever you said. Yes you've told me. Berenice, I tell you now, I'm getting fed up to the back teeth with the way you refuse to even consider doing other things. I mean, if I'm getting jaded what's the audience feeling? You said yourself it was all about communication. People are going to notice we're sounding tired. We've got to change or we'll fall apart.

BERENICE: Is that an ultimatum you're giving me? If it is, then I'm going to dig my heels in. I am not about to—

SALLY: —Well, I'll just slip out now and see you before you go. Oh, I nearly forgot.

SHE PULLS A SMALL BROWN ENVELOPE OUT OF HER BAG, PUTS IT ON THE TABLE AND EXITS. BERENICE PICKS IT UP DISDAINFULLY. SHE HOLDS UP THE ENVELOPE AT ARMS LENGTH.

BERENICE: I can't believe what I'm doing sometimes, working for this.

BERENICE MOVES AROUND THE ROOM, ANGRILY PUTTING THINGS IN HER BAG.

JACKIE: Berenice, look I'm sorry, I didn't mean to start an argument. But really, we've got to sit down and discuss it over a drink one evening. Let's face it, this is all we've got, so we might as well enjoy it.

BERENICE: I do enjoy it. It's the only thing I ever wanted to do and I'm still doing it.

JACKIE: (BEAT) Do you ever wonder about the things that might have been? You know, if you'd have taken that phone call, or got back to someone instead of putting it off because you were nervous about what they were

going to say? I torture myself sometimes thinking about the chances that went out of the window just because I was frightened of turning left at the crossroads rather than going straight on.

BERENICE: Well, we're different. I worked hard and took all my chances. Everything that came my way I grabbed with both hands. And I've played big roles in the major venues. I've got nothing to reproach myself with.

JACKIE: You've told me.

BERENICE: That night I sang Aida with Morello Tuchi at the English National – what an occasion it was. I came through, with flying colours – that's what they said in the reviews anyway, and who am I to disbelieve them? And the applause, I'll never forget it. It just went on and on, like waves rolling in from the ocean. It's something that stays with you forever.

JACKIE: I'll bet it does.

BERENICE: I'm proud of everything I've achieved and no-one can take it away from me. My record stands for itself. So when you start saying we should change everything I refuse because I know I'm right. And if that sounds arrogant, I'm sorry.

JACKIE: There you go again. You're not being straight with me.

BERENICE: I've always been honest with you.

JACKIE: I'm sorry, but you haven't.

BERENICE: Are you suggesting I'm not being equitable with the money? Because if it is I'll demand an apology – it's always been straight down the middle, even though with my training——

JACKIE: ——No, it's nothing to do with money.

BERENICE: Then what is it?

JACKIE: Look, Berenice, don't be angry, but I know.

BERENICE: Know what?

JACKIE: Are you going to force me to say it?

BERENICE: What?

JACKIE: (EXASPERATED) Oh, please!

BERENICE: I don't know what you're getting at.

JACKIE: All right, you asked for it. (BEAT) Look, ever since I've known you, you've been telling me about your career, about how

you've played the top opera houses, here there and everywhere, singing with the great maestros and divas at the height of their careers.

BERENICE: What of it?

JACKIE: For god's sake, Berenice, you're not making this easy for either of us. So here it is, straight from the shoulder. (BEAT) Look, I know that you never played any lead role at the Coliseum, or anywhere else, for that matter. It's all a complete myth, a figment of your imagination. I've been wanting to say that for a while now and now I have.

BERENICE: I can't believe that you can be so insulting as to call my career into question. It's disgraceful!

JACKIE: I don't want to undermine you, but I can't stand this desperate need you have to be superior all the time. It gets me down, it really does. And if you have to make up fairy tales to bolster your self-esteem you really ought to see someone about it.

BERENICE: What do you mean? Are you calling me a liar? This is just too horrible (STARTS CRYING AND RUMMAGES AROUND FOR A HANDKERCHIEF). I can't believe you could be so hurtful.

JACKIE: I never wanted to bring it up, but you can't go on like this, fooling yourself into thinking you've done things you haven't. I've known for quite a while. I know you and computers don't see eye to eye, but it's all well documented on the internet, you see. All the facts about everything.

BERENICE: Facts? What gives you the right to go around checking facts?

JACKIE: All you have to do is to ask for a list of singers who have appeared in leading roles for the English national Opera and up they come. In a matter of seconds. And you're not among them. (BEAT) I'm sorry Berenice, but I had to say it.

BERENICE: What list are you talking about? Of course I'm on it. They must have made a mistake.

JACKIE: I don't think so.

BERENICE: What made you want to start delving into the past, checking up on me? You should be ashamed of yourself for being so distrusting.

JACKIE: You're in denial Berenice. Look, perhaps you weren't given the breaks or maybe you're like the rest of us, not quite all

we think we ought to be, and you've invented a past that didn't exist. Oh, I know over the years we've all pretended that we were successful in things when we were anything but. But you've come to believe your own lies—

BERENICE: ———They're not lies!

JACKIE: There you go again. You can't stop deluding yourself, can you? The time's come to start being honest with each other for once. Otherwise we might as well pack it in.

BERENICE: Why do you have to go on like this? It's horrible.

JACKIE: It's the only way to clear the air. You can't keep pretending that you're something that you've never been can you? I want us to be equal partners, but your attitude, well, it makes it very difficult.

BERENICE: So, based on your erroneous conclusions about my professional career, you'll want to throw everything away now, will you?

JACKIE: It doesn't have to be like that. All I'm asking is that you stop patronising me and recognise me for what I am. I mean, I'm

good – we're both good – in our different ways.

A LOUD KNOCK ON THE DOOR (A JAUNTY RAT-A-TAT-TAT). AN OLDISH MAN WEARING A LIGHT COLOURED SUIT WITH A ROSE IN THE BUTTONHOLE AND A TRILBY HAT PUTS HIS HEAD ROUND THE DOOR.

JACKIE: Hello. Can we help you?

HARRY ENTERS.

HARRY: Good evening, ladies, may I come in? Blimey, it's a bit cramped in here. Is this the broom cupboard?

JACKIE: This really isn't the best time.

BERENICE WIPES HER EYES AND HEADS FOR THE BATHROOM.

HARRY: Look, I'll be quick. Let me introduce myself. I'm Harry Hemsley of Hemsley Enterprises. Call me Harry. A long time in the game, no show's the same! It's on my card.

HARRY HANDS OVER HIS CARD. JACKIE TAKES IT AND GLANCES OVER IT.

JACKIE: (AMUSED) That's a good one.

SHE HANDS IT BACK TO HIM.

HARRY: Used it for years. Snappy. It got me noticed. Opened doors that were shut to other people. Yes, it was very useful.

JACKIE: You're a publicity man?

HARRY: No, not exactly, but it's an important part of what I do. Get it wrong and it's curtains. Yes, publicity, the elixir of show-business life. Yes, indeed.

JACKIE: I once had posters printed saying: 'Jackie Tempest – that was me – Sings the Booze'. The bloody booze! I knew I should have gone to the printer myself instead of leaving it to Lennie to phone it through – he was my manager, by the way.

HARRY: You should have sacked him on the spot for something like that.

JACKIE: Trouble was the booze bit was truer than anyone realised at the time. I could have killed him.

HARRY: Very important to get the facts right. Remember Dickie Romaine, Wakefield's answer to Tony Bennett? No, you probably wouldn't. Not many people do these days. Anyway, it was his first big date in London and the headline on his poster read

'I've got you under my ski'. Ski, see, instead of skin. Sloppy, very sloppy that. Made him quite big in Aviemore but a joke anywhere else. He was finished overnight because of one missing letter. Thank god I had nothing to do with it.

JACKIE: His career went downhill after that!

SHE LAUGHS, BUT HARRY JUST STARES AT HER.

Downhill; his career must have gone downhill; skiing. You know, downhill skiing... (TURNS HER EYES TO HEAVEN). Give me strength...

HARRY: Yes, well, he threw himself in front of the Leeds to London express a couple of years later.

JACKIE: Oh, I'm sorry.

HARRY: No, it was the best thing that could have happened to him. An artist tortured by his genius and all that. It gave him a depth he never had in life, see. He's very popular on Radio Lithuania these days and his widow lives off the royalties.

BERENICE ENTERS.

BERENICE: So, how can we help you?

HARRY: Ah, yes. Down to business. I was in the hall tonight – not as part of the audience, of course, I've a few years left before I join that particular clan – no, I brought an old acquaintance of mine along to give him a night out. And, I have to say, I was pleasantly surprised with what I saw. Very pleasantly surprised.

BERENICE: You enjoyed it?

HARRY: Perfectly adequate for the audience in question, I'd say. But it wasn't the two of you I was interested in.

TURNING HIS ATTENTION TO JACKIE.

I heard somebody say you sang with the Eddie Smithers Big Band.

JACKIE: Who told you that?

HARRY: Let's just say I heard it through the grapevine.

JACKIE: Well, you're right; I did, yes. Didn't think I'd mentioned it to anyone.

HARRY: (STILL ADDRESSING JACKIE) I thought so. It doesn't matter which little bird told me, your voice just spoke of the big bands and those ballrooms with polished floors –

Glen Miller, Goodman, Basie, the Duke and our own dear old Ted Heath – all of them. You seem to be a living, breathing relic of that era.

JACKIE: A relic! Thanks very much. (LAUGHS)

HARRY: You've got a lovely smoky tone. And you sang with Eddie – one of the best in the business.

JACKIE: Yes, they were good times – while they lasted. Three years later it was all over and I was left kicking my heels and fancy free.

HARRY: That's a real pity.

BERENICE, WHO HAS BEEN FEELING LEFT OUT, DECIDES TO GET BACK INTO THE CONVERSATION.

BERENICE: When you're young you put up with all sorts of things. When I was in Nabucco, I remember it so well, we had to——

HARRY: ——Yes, well opera's one thing and jazz is another. All a bit stuffy, if you don't mind me saying so. People wandering about in cloaks and togas and singing in Italian. It doesn't talk to the kids, you see, and that's where the money is these days.

BERENICE: Not for youngsters? Absolute nonsense. If more young people were persuaded to listen to serious music instead of the rubbish swamping the airwaves the world would be a better place. It's a living art form.

HARRY : I'm sorry, but it's dead as far as my associates are concerned. We're looking at something different now, something old that can be brought back to life, given a whole new treatment.

JACKIE: Not Frankenstein on ice! (LAUGHS)

HARRY: No, no, I assume you're joking. No, it's swing. That's where the action's going to be now. Glittering lights, Brylcreamed hair, banks of trumpets and saxes, tuxedos, music stands with the band's name on, and the leader on the piano, giving a nod to his musicians to start their solos, and all the rest of the razzamataz.

JACKIE: I like it!

HARRY: It's going to be great, believe me.

BERENICE: Loud, anyway.

HARRY: And that's where you come in (LOOKING AT JACKIE). We're going to recreate all the excitement of the big band era at a major

London venue, the name of which is going to remain secret until the legal niceties have been finalised – I'm sure you understand. That's all I'm going to say about it at this juncture. Now, er, please help me out...

JACKIE: Oh, Jackie. Jackie Martin.

HARRY: Jackie, thank you. Now I want you to think before you answer my next question: How do you fancy playing a leading role in this project? It's going to be big, I'm telling you and I'm giving you plenty of warning. You're one of a dying breed and you can still put a song over.

JACKIE: Nice of you to say so.

HARRY: My pleasure. Rehearsals start next June and I'm arranging a provincial tour before the big London opening the following January. And if all goes well, we'll be transferring it to Broadway once all the legal wrinkles have been ironed out. Are you up for it? I'm warning you, it'll be a big challenge.

JACKIE: I can't tell whether you're joking or not.

HARRY: I've never been more serious in my life.

BERENICE: Just one moment; let me get this absolutely straight. You came in here two minutes ago and now you're offering her a part in a West End musical? We don't know you from Adam. What have you been involved with before?

HARRY: Perfectly legitimate question. You're absolutely right to ask it. Remember 'The Birds Are Singing' with Tottie LaWren? That was huge. 'Dream Lover', the Bobby Davidson story? But the one I'd rate above all the others is 'Dance Follies'. I took that all over the world. A wonderful show that was and, what's more, it made me a fortune.

BERENICE: And she'll be guaranteed a part? How can you be so sure?

HARRY: Well, there will have to be auditions, of course, but as I'll be sinking the lion's share of the money in the venture, what I say goes, wouldn't you say? (TURNING TO JACKIE) Anyway, how does it strike you?

JACKIE: Well, of course I'd be interested in discussing it. What's the part?

HARRY: You'd be Dolores, the older singer who's ousted by the young whipper-snapper. Then you try to get your revenge by sabotaging her big night. A lovely part; plenty of

scope for plucking the heart-strings. And you'd be singing some good songs, I can tell you that. It's going to be a big hit, here and all over the world. I never miss!

BERENICE: Just one moment. You can't entice my partner with promises of goodness knows what, and waltz off into the sunset with her, leaving me on my own.

HARRY: Come on. You know the game – you look as though you've been in it long enough.

BERENICE REACTS.

BERENICE: How dare you!

HARRY: All's fair in love, war and show business, my love. You know that.

BERENICE: This is ridiculous!

HARRY REACHES INTO HIS WALLET AND
EXTRACTS HIS CARD AGAIN AND OFFERS IT
TO JACKIE. SHE TAKES IT.

HARRY: Scribble your number down on something, would you? I'll phone you first thing tomorrow morning with a view to setting up a meeting in London next week. I can tell my associates that we won't have to look any further for our Dolores. After that we get the lawyers involved. Easy isn't it?

JACKIE FINDS A LEAFLET ADVERTISING
THEIR SHOW AND WRITES HER NUMBER,
THEN HANDS IT TO HARRY.

Thanks. So, I'll talk to you tomorrow.
Jackie. (READS THE LEAFLET) Jackie
Tempest? It's got a nice ring to it.
Anyway, must fly...

HARRY PICKS UP HIS HAT, SHAKES HANDS
WITH JACKIE, NODS TO BERENICE AND
EXITS. HE POPS HIS HEAD ROUND THE
DOOR AGAIN. HE SIGNALS WITH HIS HAT.

One last thing. Keep everything I've told
you under your bonnets, I beg you. It's
going to be big, I promise you. Lovely to
meet you both. Arrivaderci!

HARRY PUTS HIS HAT ON AND EXITS. THE
TWO WOMEN SIT AND STARE AT EACH OTHER
FOR A BEAT OR TWO.

JACKIE: Well...

BERENICE: Good grief...

JACKIE: How long have I been waiting for something
like this?

BERENICE: When I think of all the offers I never got
over the years and you've just been given

the chance to fly to the moon and
back...Just don't get your hopes up too
high before you sign on the dotted line,
that's all. I'd hate to see you—oh
god...

BERENICE SUBSIDES INTO TEARS AND SITS
SLUMPED IN HER CHAIR. SILENCE, FOR A
FEW BEATS.

JACKIE: I'm really sorry, Bernie. Something will
come along; it will, if you can just hang
in there. I can feel it.

JACKIE MOVES TOWARDS BERENICE AND
PUTS HER HAND ON HER SHOULDER.

You deserve a break after all the years
you've put in.

BERENICE: Oh, yes, all those years. Those bloody
years! I thought it was just bad luck when
the chances seemed to pass me by, but it
wasn't really; you know it deep down, but
you don't admit it to yourself. That's the
problem. (BEAT) And you never called me
Bernie before.

JACKIE: No I didn't (LAUGHS).

BERENICE: You'd better go on home now and tell
Oscar. And don't worry about next week; if

you're tied up sorting things out I'll do it on my own. I'll be fine.

JACKIE: Thanks for being so understanding. I wouldn't walk out on you, but...you know.

JACKIE QUICKLY GATHERS EVERYTHING TOGETHER AND HEADS FOR THE DOOR. SHE THEN COMES BACK AND HUGS BERENICE.

We'll talk soon. I'm getting excited thinking about it.

BERENICE: Yes, phone me and let me know how it's going, won't you. I mean it.

JACKIE EXITS. BERENICE SITS THERE FOR A WHILE THEN SLOWLY STARTS CHANGING OUT OF HER STAGE CLOTHES. HAVING DONE THIS, SHE SITS BACK DOWN ON THE CHAIR SUNK IN THOUGHT. IT'S AS THOUGH HER PROTECTIVE SHELL HAS FALLEN AWAY. SHE LOWERS HER HEAD AND WEEPS SILENTLY. THERE IS A QUIET KNOCK ON THE DOOR AND BERENICE WIPES HER EYES AND EXITS TO THE BATHROOM. SALLY ENTERS CAUTIOUSLY. SHE LOOKS NERVOUS.

SALLY: Hello.

BERENICE: (OFFSTAGE) Hello Sally. I won't be a minute. I'm just tidying up. Did you have a word with your sound man?

SALLY: I did, yes. Apparently his earphones were playing up. He says he's sorry and he'll get some new ones.

BERENICE ENTERS TUCKING HER
HANDKERCHIEF IN HER SLEEVE.

BERENICE: Oh that's good. He might need a new pair of ears to go with them. (BEAT) Well, we'll see you next month then.

SALLY: Before you go, there's something I'd like to ask you, er, if that's all right?

BERENICE LOOKS AT HER WATCH.

BERENICE: I've got a few moments. What's on your mind?

SALLY: I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoy hearing you every time you come here. I look forward to it, like it's a special treat.

BERENICE: That's very nice.

SALLY: I love your voice, and those songs – I've heard one or two before, but you make them come alive. I leave here singing them, and they're in my head all the next day.

BERENICE: That's the thing with good music – you don't ever forget it.

SALLY: The thing is – and please tell me to go away if I'm being annoying – but I'd really like to learn how to sing, properly. Could you teach me? I mean I can sing in tune, and I seem to be able to do that wobbly thing with my voice.

BERENICE: Vibrato, you mean? Well, if you can do those two things you're on the first step.

SALLY: I'd practise like mad, I really would. I wouldn't want you to think you'd be wasting your time.

BERENICE: Well, I can show you what to do, then you'd have to work really hard at it. I mean it. That's the only way. Are you prepared to devote yourself to it, or is it just a passing fancy?

SALLY: Oh, no. I want to do the sort of things you and Jackie do. But I think I'd be better trying to sound like you rather than her, if that's not being rude.

BERENICE: (LAUGHS) No, not at all. It's a different style, that's all. Look, why don't we have a preliminary session this time next week. I can come here and you can show me what

you can do. Then we can arrange some regular lessons. How does that sound?

SALLY: That would be wonderful. But I'd better ask how much you charge first.

BERENICE: Oh, let's not worry about that for now. You can have the first few lessons for nothing and then we can discuss it.

SALLY: That's really generous. Thank you.

BERENICE: So don't you go hanging about in the chorus, like I did (LAUGHS). You've got be up there with the eagles, not down with the turkeys.

SALLY: (LAUGHS) Waiting for Christmas.

BERENICE: Oh, by the way, a man came in this afternoon. Did you see him? Harry something or other. I just wondered whether he'd been here before.

SALLY: Harry? Oh, Harry, yes, I know him. Why are you asking?

BERENICE: Well, he said he was a producer in the music business and offered Jackie a part in a new musical he's supposed to be putting on.

SALLY: He did what?

BERENICE: He said he wanted her to play a singer in a musical about the big dance bands.

SALLY: Dance bands?

BERENICE: Yes, the ones with the all the blaring trumpets and saxophones. Why, what's the matter?

SALLY: He told you all this? Oh lord, it sounds as though he's been at it again.

BERENICE: What do you mean?

SALLY: Well, he was in the entertainment business years ago, but he's been getting a bit confused recently and thinks he's still involved in it. I hope he didn't cause you any problems.

BERENICE: Oh no! I had a feeling he wasn't all he said he was. He sounded very convincing, though, I'll give him that. Poor Jackie, she will be disappointed.

SALLY: Harry, yes, he's one of our regulars. We try to keep an eye on him, but he obviously got away this time. Anyway, he's on the bus now on his way back to the home. I'm terribly sorry.

BERENICE: It really wasn't a problem. But I'd better phone Jackie to let her down gently.

SALLY: So, I'll see you next Wednesday, for my first lesson. I'd better let you get on now.

BERENICE: I'll look forward to it. Goodbye Sally, and thank you. Thank you very much.

SALLY EXITS. BERENICE FINDS A PIECE OF STAGE GEAR HANGING BEHIND THE DOOR AND PUTS IT IN HER BAG. SHE FINDS HER MOBILE PHONE AND IS ABOUT TO PHONE JACKIE, BUT THE DOOR OPENS AND JACKIE ENTERS.

JACKIE: Bernie! Thank goodness you're still here. Five minutes down the road I realised I couldn't just walk out on you like that. We're a partnership, after all, and I just want you to know that I want the two of us to keep going whatever happens. Even if I appear in this musical I really want us to carry on doing this.

BERENICE: Jackie, I was just trying to get hold of you to say——

JACKIE: ——You don't have to say anything, you really don't. I shouldn't have gone on the way I did. I wish I could take it all

back. You're right; it was unforgivable of me.

BERENICE: No, Jackie, you were right. It's hard when someone tells the truth to your face, but it clears the air wonderfully – like sunshine after a thunderstorm. But what I was trying to tell you was that there's a problem with our friend Harry.

JACKIE: A problem? He hasn't had a heart attack, has he? That would be just my luck!

BERENICE: No, he hasn't had a heart attack. But he's not who he said he was.

JACKIE: I might have known it.

BERENICE: He's not an impresario. He's not even in the business any more.

JACKIE: Oh, for god's sake! Who is he then?

BERENICE: He's got dementia and lives in a care home. He's gone back there now.

JACKIE: And I believed him. What a complete idiot I must be!

BERENICE: We're probably not the only ones he's taken in. You were lucky he didn't ask you for a cash advance. I'm really sorry.

JACKIE: Lucky I've become a cynical old bird after all this time, otherwise I might have been hit for six. I'm not surprised – that hat! How could we have believed the old buzzard when he was wearing something like that?

BERENICE: Yes, ones like that went out with the ark. So you're not too disappointed then?

JACKIE: No, not really. (BEAT) Of course I bloody am! What do you think? But it was just too ridiculous when you think about it – him just happening to be at an old folks day centre and spotting the star of his next show. That's the sort of thing that happens every day, isn't it. (BEAT) I would have been good though.

BERENICE: You'd have been fantastic.

JACKIE: Do you know, it's the one big thing I miss – walking out on stage under the spotlight while the band's playing the chorus and I'm waiting for the cue. God, I used to get nervous; I couldn't stop my knees knocking together and I hoped that no-one noticed. And then moving up to the microphone stand, trying to get myself under control, and singing the first phrase, hoping it would come out right. But I was in too late in the game and it was all over before I knew it. (BEAT) And this was going to be my chance to have a

last bite of the cherry. The story of my life!

THERE IS A KNOCK ON THE DOOR AND
SALLY ENTERS.

SALLY: I saw you come back and wanted to apologise for Harry, you know...

JACKIE: There's nothing to apologise for, honestly. I feel like a complete fool, but that'll wear off when my natural arrogance kicks in.

SALLY: That's the problem – Harry can be so convincing.

JACKIE: Well he had me on a plate, I'll tell you that. I swallowed it hook, line and sinker. But he'll have to get rid of that hat – it's a real giveaway.

BERENICE: He reminded me of that old comedian, you know the one who used to play the violin in between jokes. He used to wear a hat like that.

JACKIE: All that stuff about, what was it, 'Dance Follies', and 'The Birds Are Singing'. And what about the Dickie Whatsit story – Wakefield's answer to Sinatra or someone. I've got you under my ski! (LAUGHS) I'll

be able to dine out on this for the next
10 years.

SALLY: Yes, you've got to look on the bright
side, haven't you.

JACKIE: If I didn't I'd have to top myself, the
way things are. What a mug I must be...Oh
never mind. All water under the bridge.
We'll all be like Harry one day. I'll tell
everyone I'm Lena Horne or someone.
That'll be fun.

BERENICE: I think I'd say I was Callas.

JACKIE: You always have been.

BERENICE AND JACKIE BURST OUT
LAUGHING. SALLY STANDS THERE
THOUGHTFULLY.

BERENICE: (STILL LAUGHING) My mother never really
liked music. She used to say that Kathleen
Ferrier – the greatest contralto this
country's ever produced – sounded like a
rag and bone man (IMITATES A BAD
CONTRALTO) 'Oh for the wings, for the
wings of a dove...

JACKIE: (LOW VOICE) Rag a' bone, rag a' bone
(LAUGHS)

SALLY: Just a minute. You mentioned a hat, didn't you? Which hat are we talking about?

BERENICE: That brown trilby he was wearing. He kept taking it on and off and waving it around. (MIMICKING) 'Keep it under your bonnets, it's gonna be big!' (LAUGHS).

SALLY: I didn't think he had one on when he arrived.

JACKIE: What about the brown suit, then? Double breasted with a rose in the button hole. Very dapper, our Mr Hemsley. (MIMICKING) A long time in the game, no act's the same! (LAUGHS). It's hilarious thinking about—

SALLY: —Who was the person you saw — Harry who?

JACKIE: The great Harry Hemsley.

SALLY: Hemsley? Oh, no, sorry, the one I've been talking about is Harry Oakshott. And he was wearing a blue blazer.

BERENICE: Blue blazer?

JACKIE: Our Harry definitely had a brown suit on, and the hat to match. So we're not talking about the same person then?

BERENICE: So who is he, our Mr Hemsley? Where's his card? I don't think we've given it a glance yet.

JACKIE FISHES IN HER HANDBAG AND
FINDS THE CARD.

JACKIE: (READING) Harry Hemsley MBE, Impressario.
Producer of the smash hit 'Dance Follies'
and his phone number.

JACKIE LOOKS UP IN ASTONISHMENT AT
THE OTHER TWO WOMEN. THEY STARE AT
EACH OTHER.

He couldn't be the real deal, could he?

BERENICE: Well he's certainly not the man we thought
was.

JACKIE: My god.

BERENICE: You shouldn't get too excited, but I might
be tempted to phone him tomorrow.

JAVKIE: Oh, my god...

SALLY: I'm so sorry to have given you the wrong
end of the stick. Just as well you
mentioned the hat, otherwise...well...

JACKIE: Well, I'm not doing anything until I've
looked our Mr Hemsley up. I'm not taking

anybody's word for anything after this.
You'd have thought I might have learned
something after dear old Lennie turned me
over! What do they say? There's no fool
like an old fool...

BERENICE: I say, there's that little wine bar just
down the road. I think this calls for
drinks all round.

JACKIE: That's the best idea you've had for a long
time.

SALLY: I'll go and get the place locked up.

SALLY EXITS.

JACKIE: By the way, Bernie, I still want to be a
Songbird, just in case you were thinking
of going it alone.

BERENICE: Alone? No, I'd like it to carry on being
the two of us. As you said, we're good
together, in our different ways. And I've
been thinking, why don't we add a few
songs. What about this one?

Grab your coat
And get your hat (JACKIE LAUGHS)
Leave your worries on the doorstep
Life can be so sweet
On the sunny side of the street
Etc, etc

JACKIE: (LAUGHS) Hang on, I've got one that sums us both up.

BACKING TRACK STARTS AND JACKIE SINGS
THE INTRO TO 'LET'S CALL THE WHOLE
THING OFF'

Things have come to a pretty pass
Our romance is growing flat
For you like this and the other
While I go for this and that
Goodness knows where the end will be
Oh I don't know where I'm at
It looks as if we two will never be one
Something must done!

You say either and I say either
You say neither and I say neither
Either either, neither neither
Let's call the whole thing off

Now it's your turn!

BERENICE: (SINGS) You say tomayto and I say tomarto
You say potato and I say potarto etc

SONG CONTINUES WITH JACKIE AND
BERENICE SWAPPING VERSES AND ENDING
IN UNISON (LENGTH TO BE DECIDED).
THIS SEQUENCE TO BE DONE AS A STAGE
ACT, POSSIBLY USING THE SMALL STAGE
AND MICS. AT THE END APPLAUSE RISES

IN VOLUME AND THE TWO LADIES JOIN
HANDS AND BOW TO THE AUDIENCE. THE
APPLAUSE TURNS TO CHEERING AS THEY
EXIT AND THE LIGHTS FADE.

BLACK OUT AND CURTAIN