

The New Charles Paris Mystery

Simon
Brett
The
Cinderella
Killer



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THE CINDERELLA KILLER

A Charles Paris Novel

Simon Brett



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all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely
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To
Caro,

*with love and thanks for directing
my pantos so sympathetically*

*FAIRY GODMOTHER: So welcome! Everything is grand
In good Prince Charming's happy land!*

'Sure, I know what pantomime means,' asserted Kenny Polizzi.

'Really?' said Charles Paris.

'Hell, yes. It's all that whiteface shtick, isn't it? Stuff that kids at theatre school do, before hopefully growing out of it. Pretending they're locked in boxes and feeling their way out, leaning against invisible bars, garbage like that. Who's that French guy who did it all the time? Marcel Somebody?'

'Marcel Marceau. But no, that's not pantomime. That's mime.'

'Pantomime – mime – what's the difference?' The large man shrugged. He seemed unaware that everyone in the Sea Dog pub in Eastbourne, while pretending not to, was looking at him. Maybe he genuinely hadn't noticed. More likely, it seemed to Charles, Kenny Polizzi was just used to being recognized everywhere he went.

He was the star of the American sitcom *The Dwight House*. Though the show had been discontinued some five years previously, so many episodes had been made during its glory years that there wasn't any time day or night when one wasn't being screened somewhere in the world. Dwight Bredon, played by Kenny Polizzi, had the same kind of brand recognition as Ronald McDonald.

He was trimmer than he had been in *The Dwight House* years. His formerly ample figure had suited the slightly slobbish character of Dwight Bredon, whose house was home to his children from three marriages and, as the writers became increasingly desperate for storylines, any number of cousins, school friends, waifs, strays, dogs, cats, gerbils and even an alien.

Though Kenny Polizzi was probably about the same age as Charles Paris himself, in his late fifties his body's contours suggested habitual attendance at a gym (not a venue ever frequented by Charles). The gingerish wig he wore exactly copied the style adopted by Dwight Bredon in all those marriage episodes. It was a very good wig, though not so good that Charles was left in any doubt it was on. Having been an actor for so long, his antennae for unnatural hair enhancement were particularly sensitive. He was fortunate still to have a good covering on top of his head, so Charles Paris only wore wigs when – as female actors say when justifying taking their clothes off – 'the script demanded it'.

His hair was getting increasingly grey at the temples – still hopefully just on the side of *distinguished* rather than decrepit – and he hoped when the grey had colonized all of his head he'd resist the temptation to dye it. So far as Charles could see from the evidence of other actors, the only tint available for men was the colour of conkers. And he didn't fancy going around looking like that. He had his pride.

Charles was drinking a large Bell's with ice. Kenny had a sparkling mineral water, without even ice or lemon. Though he had been through the phases of hellraising, alcohol and other substance abuse required for the CV of a major star, all that was now apparently behind him. The body of the new squeaky clean Kenny Polizzi was a temple (whereas that of Charles Paris was more like a small deconsecrated chapel in need of restoration).

Kenny had just arrived in England. He had been due the previous day, Monday the twenty-sixth of

November, for the first rehearsal for the Empire Theatre Eastbourne's Christmas production of *Cinderella*, but a terrorist alert had closed Heathrow. As a result he'd arrived in a limo at the end of the second day's rehearsal, by which time the producer, director and most of the cast had left. So the limo had drawn up at the rehearsal venue, St Asaph's Church Halls, virtually next door to the Empire Theatre, to find only one young harassed stage manager.

She knew it was a fairly safe bet that Charles Paris would be in the Sea Dog, so she had taken the American star to meet him there, while she tried to sort out what had happened to the PR companies who were meant to be looking after him.

Given all these upheavals, Kenny was remarkably laid-back and gracious. Many considerably smaller stars might by this stage have been stamping their little feet and throwing their toys out of the pram, but Kenny seemed almost serene about the delays and disruptions.

When Charles mentioned this, he was rewarded by a Dwight Bredon smile and the words, 'Man, I just needed to get outta the States. Now I'm outta the States everything's cool.'

'And it was the prospect of acting in *Cinderella* that lured you away?'

'Charles, I didn't need no luring. I was gagging to get away. I told the agent, "Find me some work as far away from Hollywood as you can get it." He came up with *Cinderella* in Westbourne – great.'

'Eastbourne.'

'Whatever. Just so long as I'm outta the States.'

'You make it sound like you're on the run from the Mafia,' said Charles with a chuckle.

Kenny's eyes narrowed. And with a new level of seriousness he said, 'You might not be a million miles from the truth there.'

Charles was a little shaken. Was Kenny joking? Or was he serious? Probably not the moment to dwell on Mafia connections, so Charles asked, 'So you really don't know what pantomime is?'

'I told you – it's black tights and white faces.'

'No, it isn't. Didn't you ask your agent what you were letting yourself in for?'

'I did not. I just checked with Lefty that the money was OK – which it is – and got on a plane. (Charles) rather didn't get on a plane till twenty-four hours later because Heathrow was closed.'

Charles looked at his watch. 'Your car'll be here soon to take you to the Johnny Martin recording.'

'Is that a big show?'

'Probably our most popular late-night chat show. Used to just be on a Friday and pre-recorded and live. Now it's three nights a week, still pre-recorded, though, a few hours before it goes out.' Kenny nodded with satisfaction. 'And Bix thinks it's important you know a bit about pantomime before you talk to Johnny.' Charles referred to *Cinderella*'s director, the former choreographer Bix Rogers.

'Sounds reasonable. But it can't be that difficult. We're talking *Cinderella* here, aren't we? I know *Cinderella*. Everyone knows *Cinderella*. If you're my age, there's no way you got through grammar school without having seen *Cinderella*.'

'You're talking about the Walt Disney version?'

'Sure. Is there any other one?'

'In pantomime there are quite a lot of other ones.'

'OK, tell me about them.'

'Well, the basic story is much the same as the one you know. *Cinderella* is the downtrodden youngest daughter of three, and the older two are her Ugly Sisters – stepsisters, actually. She wants to go to Prince Charming's ball, but—'

'Charles, I know this stuff.'

'Yes, I'm sure you do. But what you don't know is that in pantomime Prince Charming is played by'

a girl.'

'A girl?'

'And the two Ugly Sisters are played by men.'

'Yeah?'

'And then Dandini, who's Prince Charming's friend, is usually played by a girl too.'

Kenny looked dubious. 'So pantomime's some kind of kinky transgender thing? It's not going to do my image much good to get involved in—'

'No, pantomime's the ultimate all-age entertainment. Part of the regular Christmas ritual for many British families.'

'Oh.' Kenny thought for a moment, then asked anxiously, 'Does this mean I'm going to have to drag up for the show?'

'No, no. The character of Baron Hardup is a man, and he's played by a man.'

'Thank the Lord for that. And where does he fit into the story?'

Charles was surprised by how little Kenny seemed to know about the job he'd agreed to take on. 'He's Cinderella's father. And of course stepfather to the Ugly Sisters too.'

'Is he one of the good guys?'

'Yes. I've played the part. It's quite fun.'

'When did you play it?'

'Oh, years ago.' Charles thought nostalgically of that production in Worthing. And of Jacqui, the dancer who was playing A Villager, White Mouse and Court Lady (for the Finale). He had fond memories of the time they'd spent together back then. No commitment on either side, just very nice sex for the duration of the run. He had less fond memories of the review his performance had received from the *Worthing Herald*. 'Charles Paris played Baron Hardup, and lost.'

'So what does the Baron do?' asked Kenny.

'He often gets involved in the slapstick routines with the Ugly Sisters.'

'Slapstick? Hell, I thought that went out with the Three Stooges.'

'It lives on in pantomime. It's one of the traditions.'

'Are there a lot of these traditions, Charles?'

'You bet. Built up over three centuries. Where shall I start? As I said, there's the slapstick scene. Then there's the transformation scene, and at the end you have special costumes for the Walkdown. And there's the audience-participation song, for which the song sheet is brought down from the flies. The Good Fairy always enters stage right, the Demon stage left. Then there'll be a "Behind you" exchange with the audience, and at least one "Oh yes, it is!/Oh no, it isn't!" routine. And of course, don't let's forget the pantomime horse, where one person's the front and one's the back.'

'You're kidding me,' said Kenny Polizzi.

Charles Paris didn't normally watch chat shows. He found that the guests rarely had anything interesting to say, and when they were actors it just rubbed in how much more successful than his the careers were.

But he did watch the *Johnny Martin Show* that evening. He wanted to see how much Kenny Polizzi had taken in from his crash course in the mysteries of pantomime.

In the event Johnny and his star guest said very little about the subject. There was a statutory platitude in the intro, the news that Kenny Polizzi would be opening in *Cinderella* at the Empire Theatre, Eastbourne on Friday the seventh of December, running till the middle of January, but that was it. There was much more interest in the glory days of *The Dwight House*.

Johnny Martin was a very straight, almost old-fashioned, interviewer. The vogue for outlandish ga comedians fronting chat shows – and making the encounters more about them than about their guests – seemed to be on the wane. Which was very good news as far as Charles Paris was concerned. Johnny Martin's approach, by contrast, was in the traditional style pioneered by David Frost, Michael Parkinson and Terry Wogan. His research was impeccable, he cued his guests seamlessly to wheel out their well-oiled anecdotes and could almost be said to take a back seat during his interviews. It was a refreshing change after the rash of egotistical exhibitionists who seemed to Charles to have commandeered the air waves recently.

But Johnny Martin was not a complete pussy cat. He was very good at soft-soaping his guests, lulling them into a sense of serene bonhomie and then snapping a controversial question at them. Whatever agreements might have been made before about the subject-matter for interview, Johnny would disregard them. He was particularly adept at this method with politicians. He knew all MPs, love appearing on television and love even more talking about things other than politics, their hobbies and little quirks that make them come across as regular, normal, even nice people.

Then, just when the discussion was at its cosiest, Johnny would throw in a barbed dart of a question which really got under his interviewee's skin. Some issue of an expenses irregularity, a well-paid consultancy with a company of dubious morality, an inappropriate closeness to a lobbyist, the hint of sexual misdemeanour ... these would suddenly be raised without any change in the mask of the interviewer's bland smile.

As a result, though politicians always preferred appearances on chat shows to programmes of serious debate like *Newsnight*, quite a few of them chose never to appear on *The Johnny Martin Show* for a second time.

The host's early questions about *The Dwight House* were predictably lightweight. Johnny catalogued the show's amazing statistics, the awards it had won, the stars whose careers had been quick-started by appearances as Dwight Bredon's children, the number of countries round the world the show had been sold to.

Kenny Polizzi was used to this routine. He had a few finely honed humorous responses to the familiar facts. He said what a privilege it had been to work on the show, how no one knew at the start of the huge showbiz phenomenon it would become, how the whole company had been like one happy family, and how *The Dwight House's* success had had nothing to do with him. It had been a team effort and though he was the show's figurehead, he would never forget the important contributions made by every single individual connected with it.

This was all standard stuff, much of which Kenny had wheeled out in various award-collecting moments. It was bland and self-congratulatory, but he managed to inject a little of the bewilderment which had been so much part of his character in the show. Dwight Bredon was a lovable goofball, a man to whom things happened, who was in a state of constant surprise at events erupting around him. Cleverly, Kenny gave the impression that that was what had happened to him too. He's just been standing there, doing nothing in his usual way, and he'd been offered the part. And he was still a little in shock from all the wonderful things that had followed from that initial piece of good fortune.

What came across to the audience of *The Johnny Martin Show* was exactly what was intended to come across. Kenny Polizzi was a regular guy who you'd happily meet in a bar and have a beer with. There was no side to him. And given the scale of his international success, he remained a very modest man.

It was then, just when interviewer, interviewee and audience had achieved the cosy warmth of friendly chat, that Johnny Martin threw in the first of his loaded questions.

‘Kenny, I must say you’re looking very fit.’

‘Well, thank you for that, Johnny. I have been working out a bit. I have this very good personal trainer back in the States, and he’s worked out a programme that I’ll be following while I’m over here. Yes, I’m glad to say I am very fit.’

‘And very clean?’ asked Johnny slyly.

But Kenny wasn’t going to be caught out that easily. ‘Perfectly clean, thank you. I shower regularly – as I hope you do too.’

This got a friendly laugh from the audience, but it did not divert Johnny from his line of questioning. ‘I was meaning “clean” in the sense of “clean from all substance abuse”.’

‘Well, I’m clean that way too.’

‘Good news.’ A little pause. ‘Because that wasn’t always the case, was it, Kenny?’

That he was annoyed by this was shown by the slightest change of expression, so minimal that only a behavioural psychologist – or a fellow actor – would have picked up.

‘What’re you saying here?’ asked Kenny Polizzi.

‘Just that you had a reputation in the past for being a bit of a hellraiser.’

‘I don’t know about a hellraiser. I did have a reputation in the past for being considerably younger than I am now. But I guess that goes for all of us, Johnny boy.’

‘So how long have you been completely free of drugs?’

It was a question so leading that it would not have been allowed in any British court of law, but Kenny was wise to it. ‘I’ve been free of any but prescription drugs since I emerged from my mother’s womb.’

‘What about alcohol?’

‘I don’t recall there being any around in the maternity suite.’

That got a big laugh. Unusually, Johnny Martin was being turned over in the contest. And he didn’t like it. ‘Kenny, there were lots of rumours in the gossip columns about you partying rather heavily and —’

‘Sure, I liked to party. Name me an actor who doesn’t. I dare say even you in your time have been something of a party animal, Johnny boy.’ Having coined the diminishing nickname, Kenny was going to stick with it.

‘Well, I, er ...’

‘Anyway, do you believe stuff you read in the gossip columns? If you believed everything that’s been written about me, then you’d think I was a drug fiend and alcoholic who’s been to bed with every woman in Hollywood.’

‘Is that not true?’

‘No, I couldn’t manage *all* of them.’

It was a good riposte. Again it made Johnny look silly. And the implication was there that, although Kenny hadn’t bedded *every* woman in Hollywood, he’d had his way with a good many of them.

‘So your hellraising days are behind you, are they, Kenny?’

‘You could say that ...’

‘I just did.’

‘... but because there never were any hellraising days, it’s kinda hard to put them behind me.’ There was a twinkle in the actor’s eye; he was actually teasing his inquisitor.

‘So how long is it since you last had a drink, Kenny?’

‘If you’d been looking, Johnny boy, you’d have noticed that I’ve just had a sip from your excellent water on the table right here.’

‘I meant an alcoholic drink.’

‘Well, you should have said that, shouldn’t you, rather than confusing me?’

‘How long is it, Kenny, since you had an alcoholic drink?’

‘It’ll be two years on Thursday.’

The directness and the seriousness with which this was said almost threw Johnny. The audience applauding the feat did little to settle him either. He stumbled a little over saying, ‘Congratulations’ then moved on. ‘And may I ask your current marital status, Kenny ...?’

‘I am currently unmarried.’ He turned to face his public. ‘Footloose and fancy-free. On the mark once again. *Available.*’ This was greeted by some raucous shouts and cheers from the female members of the audience.

‘But you have been married?’

‘Don’t know why you bother asking me that question, Johnny boy. You know the answer. Or if you don’t, it doesn’t say much for your researchers.’ Kenny was virtually taking over the interview now. ‘Yep, I’ve had four marriages. I should be getting good at it by now.’

‘And have you got a fifth Mrs Polizzi lined up?’

‘Still sorting out the final paperwork on the divorce from the fourth.’

‘That being Lilith Greenstone?’

‘Yes, your researchers have been doing their stuff.’

‘She’s almost as big a star as you are.’ Polizzi shrugged. ‘And seems to be rather busier than you are at the moment. Was that one of the problems with the marriage – that her career was doing rather better than—?’

‘I’m not going to say anything about Lilith in public. If I do one of her lawyers might hear it and screw another coupla million dollars out of me.’

‘You say you’re currently fancy-free, but you have been seen at some Hollywood events recently escorting the lovely British actress Ann Jordan. Is there anything there?’

‘There’s a very pretty girl there. Who I happen to know. But if I married every pretty girl I happen to know ... hell, I’d have to have a camp bed at the wedding chapel.’

‘So you’re not going to tell us any more about you and Ann Jordan?’

‘Dead right I’m not, Johnny boy.’

‘Hmm.’ The host recognized he wasn’t going to get any further there, and did something almost unprecedented. He looked at his notes before starting on a new tack. ‘Kenny, there’s been a lot of controversy recently over American gun laws.’

‘Sure.’ His expression showed he was ready for this one too.

‘And you know that over here we have rather different views on the right of citizens to bear arms.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘You have your Constitution ...’

‘And the Second Amendment, yeah.’

‘And you have spoken out in public in support of your current gun laws ...’

‘I have.’

‘And I believe you have quite an extensive collection of guns ...’

‘Yup. With some folks it’s stamps or butterflies. With me it’s guns.’

‘Well, Kenny, now you’re in England, do you wish you had the right to carry a gun here?’

It was a good question, just controversial enough to allow Kenny Polizzi to show himself up. His reply could have quite an effect on his image this side of the pond.

‘Well, there’s a bit of me – a bit of most Americans, Johnny boy,’ he said, ‘that always feels kind

naked without a gun. But the United States, I'm sorry to say, is still quite a violent place. The one reason I need a gun over there is because everyone else I meet will also have a gun.' Ingenuously, he spread his hands wide. 'Self-protection. Whereas here in this cute little island of yours it's only the bad guys who got guns. What use would I have with a gun over here? What could I use it for? To start my afternoon tea with before I make a start on the cucumber sandwiches – what-ho?'

He said this last sentence in the English accent of a Wodehousian silly ass. The *Johnny Martin Show* audience loved it.

And back in his digs in Eastbourne, Charles was also impressed by Kenny Polizzi's media savvy.

*FAIRY GODMOTHER: Now I will use my magic arts
To summon help from foreign parts.*

As he was about to enter the rehearsal room, Charles Paris looked at the new *Cinderella* poster with practised cynicism. Since time immemorial ‘billing’ – literally where your name appears on the playbill and in what size lettering – has been very important to actors. It’s the kind of detail the agents wrangle about endlessly with managements (or they do if their agent is someone other than Charles’s – Maurice Skellern).

And the rule of thumb is that the more the performer is being paid, the more prominent he or she will be on the poster. In the theatre, billing is an unarguable reflection of success or failure. The highest peak attainable is a position ‘above the title’. The artiste who reaches that level is an undoubted star, more important than anyone else in the show, more important than the show itself (and certainly more important than the show’s writer).

But then sometimes a show has two stars, each of whom has the right to appear in that coveted position. In that situation the wrangling between agent and management becomes even more heated.

The *Cinderella* poster left no doubt as to who was the star. The size of Kenny Polizzi’s name suggested that he must be being paid about fifty per cent of the production’s budget. This implication was endorsed by the way his photograph dominated the space. The internationally recognized face of Dwight Bredon beamed out, a tribute to expensive dental work, five times the size of any of the other cast pictures. He was dressed in a shabby eighteenth-century frock coat, whose slight misalignment suggested that his head might have been superimposed on the costume by some photographic wizardry. And below his name was the legend: ‘As Baron Hardup’.

The poster was new because of his relatively late booking. Earlier versions had been dominated by the names and photographs of two British soap stars. *Cinderella* was being played by Tilly Marcu ‘from TV’s *Gatley Road*’ while one of the Ugly Sisters, Nausea, was to be Tad Gentry ‘from TV’s *Frenton High*’. Furious negotiation between the two actors’ agents and the theatre management had led to them being given exactly equal billing, in terms of font and photograph size. But Tilly Marcu, whose name appeared on the left-hand side of the poster and would therefore be first to catch the eye, might feel that she had gained a tiny advantage over her soap-star rival.

The actor playing the other Ugly Sister, Dyspepsia, was called Danny Fitz and he was way down the poster, both in position and font size. The fact that he was one of the most experienced and brilliant pantomime dames in the country went for nothing – he didn’t have any television credits.

The show’s Buttons was to be Felix Fisher, who had plenty of TV panel shows to list after his name. He had started out as a very gay foul-mouthed stand-up, wearing flamboyant costumes and heavy make-up, and was now negotiating the difficult passage towards lovability and hopefully hosting a television game-show. The theory was that Buttons, the cheery kitchen boy of whose adoration *Cinderella* is unaware, would be a perfect stepping stone on that journey. And no one in the production company putting on *Cinderella* seemed to have seen anything incongruous in casting in the role someone whose shtick was his gayness. Maybe the thinking was that the kiddies in the audience would not find anything odd in his avowals of love for *Cinderella*, and the older members would find humor

in its irony.

Certainly nobody involved in the production seemed to have thought that changing round the casting of Tad Gentry and Felix Fisher might have been a good idea, thus achieving a straight Button and another camp Ugly Sister. But no, the thinking had not gone that far. All the production company wanted was names with television credits to put on the poster.

Charles Paris was amazed that they'd even found a couple to put by his name. Neither series had been much of a success, and both had been an extremely long time ago, but sure enough under his name was the byline 'from TV's *The Strutters* and *Stanislas Braid*'. Mind you, in the lowly role of one of the Broker's Men, he didn't justify a photograph.

His fellow Broker's Man, however, did. In the bizarre manner of celebrity casting for pantomime the part had been given to an ex-boxer. A promising light-welterweight as an amateur, Mick 'The Cobra' Mesquito had turned professional at the age of nineteen. Having moved up to the welterweight division and defeated most domestic opposition, he had had one shot at a world title, when he'd been humiliatingly thrashed by a Puerto Rican. He continued fighting against ever less distinguished opposition until a detached retina caused him to hang up his gloves.

It was then that a pushy management company decided to promote the media career of Mick 'The Cobra' Mesquito. He was initially put forward as a pundit on boxing coverage, but they had ambitions for him to go further. He was good-looking and the genes from his Caribbean father had given him a colour that was very attractive to television companies in search of diversity. The fact that he was not good at any of the presenting roles he'd been given had not so far impeded the progress of his new career.

Whether Mick 'The Cobra' Mesquito was any good at pantomime remained to be seen. But his fellow Broker's Man Charles Paris was not overly optimistic.

Kenny Polizzi was remarkably affable at rehearsals. He didn't play the big star. He didn't seem worried that, in spite of his top billing, Baron Hardup was a relatively small part in the Cinderella story. Maybe he thought he'd achieved enough not to have anything to prove.

And when he was introduced to his fellow cast members, his modest charm was maintained. He twinkled for the girls, and was bonhomous to the boys. There was only one moment of slight awkwardness when he was introduced to Tad Gentry ('from TV's *Frenton High*'). The younger actor gave the star a huge bear-hug and said, 'Great to see you again, Kenny.'

This prompted a look of puzzlement. 'Have we met before?'

'Yes. In LA. At the premiere of that Julia Roberts movie.'

Kenny shook his head. 'Sorry, don't recall it.'

The disruption was a very minor one. Kenny had been perfectly courteous, but the peevish expression on Tad's face showed he felt he'd been the victim of a major public snub.

Kenny's lack of starriness did not mean, however, that there were no conflicts at rehearsal. Though the imported big name was behaving himself, there were plenty of others in the company who were capable of making trouble.

The two soap stars, for a start, didn't see eye to eye. Tilly Marcus reckoned that because she was still currently in *Gatley Road*, this gave her automatic superiority over Tad Gentry, whose regular role as sexy villain in *Frenton High* had been curtailed by a spectacular fictional motorbike crash some three years previously. Also, Tilly was playing the name part in *Cinderella*, which by her reckoning meant she was the show's real star. And being the star gave her automatic full flouncing rights.

Nor was there much warmth between Tad and his fellow Ugly Sister. A large man whose bulk

body tapered down to very tiny feet, Danny Fitz was a legend amongst *aficionados* of pantomime. His name was mentioned in the same breath as those giants of the role, Dan Leno, Nat Jackley, Arthur Askey, Billy Dainty and Jack Tripp. But such names meant little to the contemporary television-obsessed world.

Nor did the traditional pantomime routines over which Danny Fitz had such mastery. Previously whenever he'd done *Cinderella*, his fellow Ugly Sister had been a comic actor called Bobby Crowther. Though both had been gay, their partnership had never been anything but professional. In fact they hadn't even liked each other very much, but the magic they created together on stage was hailed by audiences and critics alike. With Bobby's death the previous year, this was the first time Danny was doing the Ugly Sisters without him.

And Tad was not proving the ideal substitute. Like many soap stars, he couldn't actually act ... perhaps it would be more accurate to say he could only act one part and that was himself. Which was fine and indeed simplified the process of the soap-opera production line whereby endless indistinguishable scenes were being recorded at great speed, but it didn't help a lot when Tad was playing an Ugly Sister.

He made no attempt even to change his voice. Each time Danny suggested that he might try a bit of falsetto, Tad would say, 'No, if I do that, my fans won't know it's me.'

'But they'll be able to see it's you.'

'No, I'm not putting on a funny voice.'

'It's not a funny voice,' said Danny, his large body looming over Tad. 'It's a voice that's right for the character.'

'No, that's not the way I work.'

This kind of disagreement could have been sorted out by a strong director, but Bix Rogers didn't fit that job description. Showing his background as a choreographer, the only bits of *Cinderella* that really interested him were the musical numbers. He lavished rehearsal time and attention on those and basically reckoned the actors could work out the dialogue scenes on their own.

This behaviour was not as unusual in pantomime as it might have been in other areas of theatrical performance. Pantomime scripts had always been rather fluid, passed on year by year. Charles Partridge remembered being in an *Aladdin* in which the gap between two songs was simply marked 'Trombone Biz'. It turned out that the previous year's Abanazar had been an elderly comic whose speciality was a routine with a trombone, which had been duly shoehorned into the story. The year Charles was in it the Abanazar was an elderly comic whose shtick was making animals out of balloons. No doubt, the gap between the two songs in the following year's script read 'Balloon Biz'.

Pantomime songs also frequently had very little relevance to the story that was being told. In the days of music hall, comedians in pantomimes would simply insert the songs that were a regular part of their act. And in the age of pop stars a slot was usually found for the character's latest single. When the number was belted out, the plot would simply be put on hold.

The situation wasn't quite that bad in the Empire Theatre Eastbourne's *Cinderella*. There was a basic script and there was even reputed to be a writer. Certainly someone must have created the routine in which Kenny Polizzi used all of his *Dwight House* catchphrases. And the songs, though not original, had been standards chosen more or less to fit in with the mood at various points in the storyline.

The exception to this of course was the song that Cinderella sang when left alone in the kitchen after her father and the Ugly Sisters had gone off to Prince Charming's ball. Normally for that moment a wistful ballad of loneliness is selected, but the Empire Theatre production was scheduled

feature the single from Tilly Marcus's first album, which had only recently been released. Called 'Dance With Your Body', its connection to the *Cinderella* story was tenuous to say the least, but it did give Bix Rogers a wonderful opportunity to choreograph a big number with a chorus of rats, microwaves, kettles and saucepans.

At the afternoon tea break of that Wednesday's rehearsal Danny Fitz was clearly still very upset about having to work with Tad Gentry. He slumped wearily into a seat next to Charles. 'God, what I thought was going to be my dream job is clearly going to be a nightmare from start to finish.'

'Why was it so much your dream job?' asked Charles.

'Well, I always love doing the Sisters. They're different from other dames, because most of those are basically benign characters. But no, the Ugly Sisters are pure evil. Oh, they may get forgiven at the end of the story and they may have lines during the Walkdown where they say they're going to reform but don't believe a word of it. They're at least as bad as Regan and Goneril – to whom of course they bear an uncanny resemblance ... you know, if you think of King Lear as Baron Hardup, the Fool as Buttons, Edmund as the Demon King – oh, *King Lear* really works as a panto. But that's by the by.'

'So it's because you like playing an evil character that this is your dream job?'

'Well, partly that, but also geography.'

'Sorry?'

'I actually live here in Eastbourne.'

'Oh, do you?'

'Yes, I run a very neat little B&B, you know, to keep the pennies coming in when the National Theatre fails to ring yet again. I really just do the pantos these days. Used to do summer season as well, but that's dead in the water now. They don't want variety bills any more. Why bother? Much cheaper to set up a tour for some foul-mouthed comedian off the telly, have him effing and blinding around all the number-one venues. Yes, so it's great for me that this show's in Eastbourne. Not so great that I've been paired up with Tad Gentry. I've seen planks of wood with more acting talent than he's got.'

'But presumably you knew this was going to be difficult – the first year you've done the Ugly Sisters without Bobby Crowther.'

'Maybe, but surely they could have cast someone with some instinct for panto. I mean I know a number of old actors who could be brought out of retirement and do better than Tad. He's just destroying everything I've worked for all these years. He and Kenny Polizzi are ruining what I'm trying to do. God, I'd like to kill the bloody pair of them!' Danny concluded with petulant bitterness.

In spite of the level of textual embroidery going on elsewhere in the show, Charles Paris, as one of the Broker's Men, tended to stick to the script as written. This was partly because Mick 'The Cobra' Mesquito, whose hold on the lines was never going to be strong, might be thrown by any changes to his cues, but also because Charles wasn't that keen on improvisation. His distaste for it dated back to a long three months he'd spent with one of those directors who say their scripts are 'created in the mutual white heat of improvisation with their ensemble', and then claim for themselves all the royalties for the published text and subsequent productions.

The play that emerged was too long (as improvised shows always are) and would have been better with a writer giving some shape to it (as improvised shows always would). It was set on a failing family farm in Devon and Charles had bleached all recollection of it out of his mind. All recollection that is except for the review he got from the *Hampstead and Highgate Express*. 'It was hard to tell

whether Charles Paris's curled nostril was a response to the farmyard smells or to the script.'

Because of Bix Rogers' background as a choreographer, the Eastbourne *Cinderella* featured more dancers than many pantomimes. And they were professional dancers, not children from the local ball school (which had proved a cheap way of filling out the cast list of many a pantomime). The casting of adults was partly because of Bix's choreographic ambitions, but also because new rules about the chaperoning and protection of under-age performers in a theatre made booking them more trouble than it was worth.

Charles had been in shows with dancers before. Indeed the Jacqui with whom he'd such a rewarding time in Worthing had been primarily a dancer. And he was always struck by how different they were from actors. Their priorities obviously included physical fitness and a mechanistic discipline. And although they were outgoing and friendly to the rest of the company, socially they tended to stick together.

They also talked in a choreographic shorthand which was hard for a non-dancer to understand. For example, there was usually one dancer called the 'swing'. He or she was a kind of universal understudy, knowing everyone's choreography and able to step into the shoes of any dancer who was sick or injured. Then there was the 'dance captain', a member of the chorus line who during the run of a show acted as the choreographer's representative. The dance captain led the warm-ups before performances and generally ensured that the choreography kept up to the standard with which it had started the run.

In the Empire Theatre's *Cinderella* this role was taken by a dancer called Jasmine del Rio, who was likely to have been born with that name as she was with her ash-blond hair. Like most dancers Jasmine had a fabulously slender body and looked wonderfully glamorous on stage. Seen closer to, the effect was less stunning. In spite of heavy make-up, her face had that papier mâché skin quality which marks out a heavy smoker. (Charles was constantly amazed by how much dancers smoked. For the time the fitness was clearly a relative term.)

Because of Bix Rogers' background, the chorus line for *Cinderella* was bigger than it would be for most pantomimes, where savage cost-cutting and cast reduction were primary concerns. (Charles remembered being told by a fellow actor of one particular cheapskate production of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* which contained the line: 'You come with me. You thirty-nine wait out there.')

And Bix Rogers' chorus line, following the *de rigueur* trend of all West End musicals, had a multi-ethnic composition. Although, except for Jasmine del Rio's mid-Atlantic twang, most of the accents derived from Essex or Liverpool, many of the dancers' forbears had African or Asian origins. There was one particularly gorgeous Chinese – or perhaps half-Chinese – girl called Kitty Woo who Charles had difficulty in tearing his eyes away from during rehearsal. Supple of body and golden of skin, her image of oriental exotica was only let down by the cockney rasp which emerged every time she opened her mouth.

Kitty seemed to be a particular friend of Jasmine del Rio. The two of them bustled off together out of the St Asaph's Church Halls whenever there was a break, instantly picking up an uninterrupted flow of gossip and fags.

A recurrent factor in rehearsals for all the pantomimes Charles Paris had been involved in was that there simply weren't enough of them. The Eastbourne *Cinderella* was not unusual in having less than two weeks to get the show together. The result of this would be that the first week's performances (two a day, afternoon and evening) would really be a work in progress, a continuation of rehearsal witnessed by paying audiences. By the second week of the run the cast would have settled into the proper routine, though the amount of ad-libbing the comics indulged in meant that no two

performances were ever the same.

Kenny Polizzi seemed to have attached himself to Charles Paris, a situation to which Charles had no objection at all. At the end of his first day's rehearsal, Kenny said, 'Time for a quick one?', and they ended up in the Sea Dog, where they had first met. It was the nearest pub to the St Asaph's Church Halls and aspired to Victorian cosiness. There was a lot of coloured glass in the decor, stuffed birds in glass cases and monochrome photos of old Eastbourne on the walls. In the hearth a log fire blazed, and you had to look at it for a long time till you realized that the logs weren't being consumed by the hissing gas.

When it came to liquor, Charles was amazed at Kenny's restraint. In the unlikely event of Charles himself ever giving up the booze, the last place he'd want to socialize in would be a pub. Too much temptation all around. The very smell of the place would be a challenge to his resolve.

But Kenny Polizzi liked the atmosphere of what he called 'a genuine English pub'. Meekly ordering mineral water, he showed no signs of discomfort in the environment. Maybe he regarded these visits as some kind of challenge, proving to himself how complete was his victory over the demon drink.

They were in the pub after Wednesday's rehearsal, Charles restoring the tissues with a large Bellini and Kenny with his eternal mineral water, when they were joined by someone Charles hadn't met.

The newcomer was a rubber ball of a man who moved across the bar with great urgency. It soon became apparent that he did everything with great urgency. He wore a grey suit, tight and crumpled, though he had slept in it. His bald dome was inadequately covered by an untidy comb-over which he kept unconsciously trying to flatten with his right hand.

'Lefty!' cried Kenny Polizzi, rising to envelop him in a man-hug. 'Lefty, I'd like you to meet Charles Paris. He's acting in *Cinderella* too. Charles – Lefty Rubenstein. Lefty's my agent.'

'“Agent” don't cover it,' said Lefty, sitting down at the table. His accent was Californian, but not the laid-back kind. He sounded busy, urgent. 'For “agent” read “minder”, “fixer”, “gopher” and “nursemaid”.'

'Don't forget also, Lefty, that you source all the stuff I need.'

There was clearly more significance in that line than might appear. Lefty Rubenstein nodded vigorously and said, 'Yeah, yeah, I got what you asked me to get you.'

Kenny spread his hands wide. 'Hey, isn't this great? One of the few advantages to being a star. You get a Lefty Rubenstein to organize everything for you. All good news for everyone.'

'Not for everyone,' the agent grumbled. 'Certainly not if you happen to *be* Lefty Rubenstein.'

His boss grinned. Clearly this kind of badinage was part of some long-established double act between them. 'It's true, though, Charles,' he said, 'Lefty runs my life – but don't start feeling sorry for him because he gets very well paid for doing so.'

'You think any amount of money could begin to compensate for the aggravation you put me through?'

'Can it, Lefty. You love the job.'

'Oh yeah? Only one hundred per cent wrong there, Kenny. I hate the job. You never understand this. Not love. Hate!'

'Lefty, you are just so full of shit.'

'You're fuller of shit than I am any day.'

The two Americans were clearly enjoying insulting each other, so Charles Paris asked if he could get Lefty a drink.

'Diet Coke, please.' He looked across at Kenny Polizzi's mineral water. 'You got a gin or vodka in

that?’

‘Nothing. I’m officially off the booze – period.’

‘Huh,’ Lefty snorted. ‘I heard that one before.’

‘This time it’s for good.’

Another ‘Huh.’ Then he called out to Charles, who had just got up on his way to the bar, ‘Just don’t be around when he falls off the wagon.’

‘I’m not going to fall off the wagon,’ Charles heard Kenny protest. ‘I’ve found out where and when the AA meets right here in Eastbourne’

When he rejoined them with the Diet Coke, Charles was treated to a lot more about Lefty Rubenstein. He was one of those people who felt he had to give a complete résumé to everyone he met. Having told Charles he had just arrived from Los Angeles that day, he then went a long way back into his personal history. The ‘Lefty’ nickname came from when he had been a devious pitcher in college baseball ... though the idea of his roly-poly figure ever having played any sport was not totally incongruous.

He’d trained as a lawyer and it was in that capacity that he first met Kenny Polizzi. But he had found he was spending so much of his time arguing the details of his client’s professional contracts that he might as well ace out the existing agent and take on the role himself. From that time he had handled all of Kenny’s business and personal affairs. ‘And let me tell you, dealing with all those sharks in the television industry is a breeze along the boardwalk compared to the personal stuff. Jesus, all those ex-wives.’

‘They were perfectly nice women when I married them,’ Kenny contributed, in a pose of bewildered innocence.

‘Yeah, well, something happened when you wanted to unmarry them. They all turned into monsters.’

‘That’s true, Lefty. Strange – who’d a thought living with me would have that effect?’

‘Anyone who’d spent five minutes in your company, Kenny.’

‘Oh hey, that’s a bit harsh.’

‘Harsh, but true.’ The agent appealed to Charles. ‘Before I met this bastard I had hair to comb over my comb-over. Look at it now.’ So at least he had a sense of humour about his coiffure.

‘Dare I ask,’ said Kenny, ‘whether you’ve heard any more communication with the Plague from Palm Springs?’

‘Yes.’

‘And?’

‘And she’s still mad as hell at you.’

‘I know that, Lefty. But are she and her posse of lawyers any closer to signing the agreements?’

The lawyer shook his hands from side to side in an equivocating manner. ‘They’re still playing edge with that. One day they’re about to sign the whole thing off, next day something’s come up.’ He turned to Charles to elucidate. ‘The lady we’re discussing—’

‘Who certainly doesn’t qualify for the title of “lady”,’ said Kenny.

‘... is the most recent Mrs Polizzi. Indeed, until she signs on the dotted line, she is the *current* Mrs Polizzi.’

‘She was mentioned on *The Johnny Martin Show*,’ said Charles.

‘Sure she was. Lilith Greenstone.’

‘Easy to recognize,’ said Kenny. ‘Ten per cent sugar candy, ninety per cent vitriol. Hey, you’ve never said, Charlie boy ... are you married?’

‘Erm ... I’m not unmarried.’ It was the nearest he could come to defining his on/off relationship with Frances.

But fortunately Kenny wasn’t really interested in further details. He was still absorbed in his ongoing sparring match with his agent. ‘So what did the fragrant Lilith say when she last communicated with you, Lefty?’

‘Well, needless to say, she didn’t communicate with me direct. Everything comes through her lawyers. You know ...’ Lefty’s tone became sentimental ‘... a lot of nasty things are said about lawyers. All those unkind jokes comparing the profession to various predators. You know, like “Who won’t sharks eat lawyers? Professional courtesy.” I don’t like to hear lawyers being described like that ... but for Lilith Greenstone’s lawyers I’ll make an exception!’ he concluded viciously.

‘Come on, though – what did she say?’

‘She said you were the worst kind of skunk, to run away to England.’

‘Hey, I haven’t “run away to England”,’ protested Kenny, mock-aggrieved. ‘I’ve come over here to work. I’m extending my range by taking on the onerous role of Baron Hardup in a very fine production of *Cinderella*.’

‘Well, you can tell Lilith that when she arrives.’

‘“When she arrives”? Hell, is she planning to come over here?’

‘I think she’s bluffing, but that’s what she said. She said she thought you two might have to meet face to face.’

‘She wants to sort out the final details of the divorce?’

‘No, I think she just wants to sort you out.’

‘Oh.’ Kenny’s expression suggested that encounter was not one he would enjoy.

And so the double act went on. Charles was content just to sit and listen. Though he was quite capable of being the life and soul of any party, it was just an act (like most things in his life, he thought in his less cheerful moments). But he was also happy to be entertained by the conversation of others.

They had another round of drinks – large Bell’s for Charles, mineral water for Kenny, Diet Coke for Lefty. (Charles was to discover that the agent was almost never seen without a bottle of Diet Coke in his hand – he seemed to need an intravenous drip of the stuff.) Then Kenny said he should take Lefty to his hotel – the agent’s bags had been delivered there, but he hadn’t checked in yet.

‘Are you in the Grand, like me?’

‘Hell, no. The *Cinderella* production company’s picking up your tab. My company, using my own money, has opted for somewhere slightly less grand.’

‘I’ll walk you round there.’

The two Americans went out of the pub together, but Charles needed a pee. Having not been since lunchtime, he’d needed one when he first arrived in the pub, but not for the first time alcohol had diverted his intentions. By now, with two double Bell’s inside him, the need was quite urgent.

He crossed the bar from the Gents, giving a half-hearted wave to the barmaid, who didn’t notice the gesture. He was about to leave when something he saw through the bubbled glass of the window made him stop.

It had come on to rain and the seafront of Eastbourne looked particularly drab and Novemberish. Protected from the rain by the awning over the pub’s door stood Kenny Polizzi and his agent.

Lefty was giving something to his boss.

It was a semi-automatic pistol.

Within seconds it was hidden in Kenny’s coat pocket and the two men were walking away.

THREE

FIRST BROKER'S MAN: I've just read a book about three holes in the ground.

SECOND BROKER'S MAN: Well, well, well.

FIRST BROKER'S MAN: Yes, that was the title.

Charles picked up a tuna sandwich from a convenience store on his way back to his digs. The accommodation, recommended by the Empire Theatre, had been described as 'self-catering', but Charles wasn't much of a one for cooking. He rarely aspired beyond a tin of baked beans on toast. That evening a tuna sandwich would do him fine ... so long as he'd got a bottle of Bell's by way of accompaniment. And he was confident there was one back at the digs.

In spite of the rain through which he splashed, the front at Eastbourne still retained the Victorian elegance which had once seen it called 'the Empress of Watering Places'. Lights still shone from the pier, with its blue and white paint, its Victorian Tea Rooms, its Atlantis night club at the end. Charles loved the tacky charm of English seaside towns out of season.

He felt sure he'd come to Eastbourne with his wife Frances when their daughter Juliet was tiny. Hadn't they travelled on the trackless Dotto train with her along the seafront? Or was that in Hastings? Whichever, it had been a good memory. Mixing an actor's life and marriage had seemed very simple then. That reminded him – he must ring Frances.

By the entrance to the pier he turned away from the front, towards the shabbier hinterland of the town where his digs were. And as he did so, Charles thought about the scene he had just witnessed outside the Sea Dog. He felt pretty sure that the handover of the pistol followed on from what Lefty had said to Kenny, 'I got what you asked me to get you.'

Charles also remembered Kenny saying on *The Johnny Martin Show* that he felt naked without a gun. Maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe, as someone with such a high public profile, Kenny Polizzi was genuinely worried about crackpots and stalkers and carried a gun for self-protection.

Charles concluded that there probably wasn't anything sinister about what he had just witnessed. And it wasn't his business, anyway. But he couldn't completely clear his mind of the memory.

The tuna sandwich he found when he got to his digs wasn't very nice. Though the label carried the day's date, it tasted like it had spent rather longer on the refrigerated shelf than it should have done. The bread had certainly had time to get very soggy. Hard to tell where the brown bread stopped and the tuna started.

Perhaps he should have stayed in the Sea Dog after Kenny and Lefty went, ordered something to eat there. It was a decision Charles had to make quite often in his life. Though some of his meals were boozy, boisterous affairs with other actors, his chosen lifestyle meant that he usually ate on his own. Over the years he'd had a lot of sad sandwiches and melancholy microwaving in his Hereford Road flat or in anonymous digs all over the country.

Of the bleak alternatives, he actually preferred eating alone in a pub, with only the *Times* crossword for company. Being with other people – even other people he didn't know or talk to – was better than being contained within the all too familiar parameters of what he rarely called 'home'. But he couldn't do it too often. Even lowly pub food was getting increasingly expensive, and he wasn't being paid that much as a Broker's Man.

In his capacity as a Broker's Man it had been a bad day's rehearsal. The Broker's Men don't have a lot to do in *Cinderella*. Indeed in many pantomime versions they don't even figure. But in the Empire Theatre version they were involved in all the big scenes and had a few moments to themselves. The biggest was near the beginning of the show, when they appeared at Baron Hardup's shabby castle threatening to turn him and his daughters out on to the street for non-payment of rent.

But since this scene also involved the first entrance of Baron Hardup, Charles' and Mick 'The Cobra' Mesquito's parts had been severely truncated. By the time Kenny had come on, done his routine about Dwight Bredon with all his catchphrases from *The Dwight House* and sung the show's signature tune, there wasn't much time left for the Broker's Men. Or for much of *Cinderella*'s plot to come to that.

In some ways this was a relief to Charles. Though no actor likes having his lines cut, having to be on the stage for less time with Mick 'The Cobra' Mesquito was a definite bonus. Charles had worked with quite a few actors who weren't very good, but never with one who had as little sense of the theatre as Mick Mesquito. Maybe it was a legacy of the cauliflower ears he had received from boxing, but he certainly had a tin ear for dialogue.

To Charles, having been an actor so long, intonation and emphasis were second nature. He also had an instinctive sense of the rhythm of a line.

Mick 'The Cobra' Mesquito lacked all of these qualities – particularly the sense of rhythm. Which mattered more in the Empire Theatre's *Cinderella* than it might in other shows because most of the script was written in rhyming couplets. Which Mick Mesquito drove through like a bulldozer.

For example, take a simple exchange like ...

FIRST BROKER'S MAN: If you don't give your castle yard up ...

SECOND BROKER'S MAN: We will make you, Baron Hardup.

It doesn't sound so good if the second speaker ignores the punctuation and makes his line sound like a dire threat of infertility. 'We will make you barren, Hardup.'

But that was the kind of thing that came up constantly in rehearsal. If a line could be mangled, the Mick 'The Cobra' Mesquito would mangle it. Charles tried very gently to push him in the direction of the right intonation, but to no avail. The former boxer wasn't offended by these attempts to help; he just clearly couldn't hear the difference between the way Charles said the lines and the way he did. And, needless to say, their director Bix Rogers was far too busy staging another massive musical number to devote any attention to the spoken bits of the script.

So Charles didn't reckon being half of a double act with Mick 'The Cobra' Mesquito was going to be the most fulfilling role of his theatrical career. It reminded him of being part of another pairing, *Hamlet* at Hornchurch. And of the review that that performance elicited. 'Charles Paris seemed unsure as to whether he was Rosencrantz or Guildenstern and, quite honestly, the way he played the part, who cared?' *Romford Recorder*.

After finishing his soggy sandwich, Charles poured himself a large measure of Bell's. He'd have liked some ice in it, but although his self-catering digs did boast a fridge, he had omitted to refill the ice tray. He would have liked to settle down to the *Times* crossword, but there had been sufficient longueurs for him to have completed it at rehearsal.

The digs boasted a television too, but a quick zap through the available channels told him that there was nothing he wanted to watch. That seemed to happen increasingly. Particularly with drama. The effort of engaging his interest in a new set of characters was becoming more and more difficult. Was that just a sign of age? Or was it the old thing of feeling jealous of actors who'd got lucrative

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