

# JOCK TAMSON'S BAIRNS



**Cally Phillips**

## **Jock Tamson's Bairns.**

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a Scottish saying 'we're all Jock Tamson's Bairns' which more or less means we are all equal under the skin. I believe this. We are not the same. But we are equal. There is a scientific model which is called The Bell Curve. It's the way we work out what is 'normal' in any given situation. It is defined as follows:

**Noun:** A graph of a normal (Gaussian) distribution, with a large rounded peak tapering away at each end.

Traditionally the Bell Curve has been used to judge 'intelligence.' This is fraught with a number of difficulties. In the first place defining 'intelligence' is very difficult. Nevertheless, people labelled with learning difficulties (intellectual disabilities or in the bad old days mental retardation) are considered outside the Bell Curve by very dint of them having an intellectual 'abnormality'. The question I ask is: Who 'judges' whether they are 'normal?' The answer: The 'normal' people of course. Do you see a potential problem with that?

We can bandy about words like 'same' and 'equal' and 'normal' till the cows come home. None of this actually helps my many friends who are stuck with this label. It is a label backed by a power stronger than the strongest superglue. Once you've got it you cannot lose it. This label is for life.

Ten years ago I knew nothing about intellectual disability. Then I met 'labelled' people. I started to work creatively with them. I learned about them. I learned that we 'are' all different but yes, we are all Jock Tamson's Bairns. And since then I've made it my aim to tell other people what I've learned. I was ignorant. I'm less so now.

I had something in common with the learning disabled. I don't fit under the Bell Curve either. But, my friends, I was lucky enough to be on the 'high' side outside that normal distribution curve. As far along the spectrum from my new found friends as it was possible to be. And yet I discovered an interesting thing. Something I'd always suspected if I'm honest. That spectrums can be viewed in a

non linear non two dimensional way. And if you look at a spectrum from another perspective you'll find that those far away ends actually join up, so that I was very, very close to my friends. None of us fitted under the Bell Curve. And more than that, none of us believe in the Bell Curve.

Jock Tamson's Bairns is a series of stories about some of these 'labels' and the people who are stuck with them. Real people. Different to you and me but 'equal' to us in every important respect.

And if you enjoy these free stories you might well give a try to my earlier work, A Week With No Labels. I've appended a free chapter of it at the end of this free ebook so that you can try before you buy.

These are fictional stories based on factual experience. I respect the real life experience of the people whose lives I've fictionalised and the aim of the fiction is to teach insight for those of us who so badly need it.

*Cally Phillips, July 2013.*



## **GARY GETS TO BE GOD**

I've been working in this little group for some weeks now. And things are starting to gel. We've even got some interest from people not in the group. I'm trying to remain positive by calling it 'interest' but actually it's more like distractions. However, being committed to inclusiveness above all and to the mantra that 'there's no challenging behaviour, only creative behaviour' I have to risk being hoist with my own petard, or go with the flow when Gary hoves into view.

Let me tell you all about Gary. Which really means just list what I 'know' about Gary and which tells you next to nothing of his reality. Of his individual lived experience. It's a comment from the outside. I feel uncomfortable even attempting it. But what else can I do? I have no other way to introduce you to each other. So let me give you the 'facts' as we see them. Gary is blind. Gary doesn't talk. Can't talk? His hearing is suspect. His means of communication are therefore quite limited. As is his mobility. Despite being a huge lad, Gary's preferred method of movement is to shuffle along on his bottom. He's usually holding a sort of scruffy security blanket looking thing in one hand, which is actually used to wipe drool because he's not good at keeping his mouth shut, and making some kind of a noise between a squeak (happy) and a scream (unhappy.) He is usually accompanied, at least here, by a care worker. Not exactly in hot pursuit, but usually in some level of distress or bemusement. Gary is not an easy lad to 'care for.' Because communication is so limited.

Gary is known for exhibiting 'challenging behaviour' all too frequently causing 'incidents' that have to then be 'reported' and so whoever is attached to Gary knows they are not in for an easy ride. To

me it seems fairly obvious that Gary will exhibit this ridiculous term 'challenging' behaviour. Think about it for a minute. What is Gary's world like? Or more importantly, what is Gary's experience of our world like? At best it must be hostile and worst terrifying. Can you imagine having to move around shuffling through the dark on your bum without the ability to tell someone what you want or know what's round the corner. I wouldn't like it, and I'm sure you wouldn't. I suspect we might exhibit 'challenging' behaviour in such circumstances.

But today, Gary has shuffled his way into our group circle. And is determined to stay there.

'Sorry,' the care worker mouths, 'Didn't mean to disturb you.'

We are playing some kind of game, I can't remember what now, because Gary has kind of pulled focus.

'Don't worry,' I say. I'm about to say, 'if he wants to join in...' and then realise that Gary is actually the person I should be addressing.

'Gary,' I say, 'You're welcome to stay and join in.'

I pause, waiting for a response. It might have been the wrong thing to do, to address him directly. Imagine it. Out of nowhere some voice you don't recognise talks to you. It'd scare me witless I'm sure.

But Gary's made of sterner stuff. He's here because he wants to be here. He's heard the noise, mainly laughter I'll admit, and he wants to be part of it.

'eeeeee' he says.

And I take that as an 'I'm happy to join in the group.' I know that it's a bit like creating a whole story of civilisation out of a tiny shard of pot, but what can I do? You've got to start somewhere. And Gary is here and I think he's happy enough to be here. He's not moving anyway.

So. We get down to the business of the day.

'We are going to work on a little improvisation,' I say to the group. I don't like to talk down to them. I could have said 'we're going to do a play,' but that wouldn't be strictly accurate and why shouldn't they know that what we're doing is called improvisation not 'a play'?

There is a mixed response.

I plough on.

'Where would you like to go?' I ask, throwing it out to the group in general.

Adam lifts up his hand. He can't get over the fact that he's NOT in a school setting here, he doesn't have to lift up his hand. So he lifts up his hand and I play the teacher.

'Yes Adam?' I say.

‘Toilet,’ he says.

And the group erupt into laughter.

‘Okay, fine, you go to the toilet Adam and the rest of us will stay here and decide what imaginary journey we are going on, okay?’

Adam is already headed for the door.

Gary’s carer looks worried. Should she follow Adam? Divided loyalties. She’s meant to stick like glue to Gary, but she knows that Adam may well go off on a wander, either before, after or instead of his intended trip to the toilet.

‘I’m fine,’ I say, ‘you go.’ Giving her the green light and placing myself in total responsibility for Gary.

Is this a risk? Should we have done a risk analysis before making the decision. Get real. This is what life is like with the ‘learning disabled’ you have to think on your feet. You have to be pragmatic and just get on with it. You have to use, dare I say it, common sense. And as long as I don’t do anything that’s going to upset Gary, I’m sure he’ll be okay. But I feel I should tell him that Carol has just left the room. It seems only polite.

‘Right,’ I say, ‘so Carol and Adam have gone off to the toilet, but the rest of us are all still here and we can decide – so where do we want to go on our imaginary journey today?’

‘Picnic,’ says Martin. Martin likes food. Even imaginary food.

‘We went on a picnic last time,’ I say. Not that I’m trying to put him down, just inject something different into what threatens to become less and improvisation and more a habit forming experience.

‘Moon,’ Victor says.

Which is unusual. For Victor to say anything. Often I wonder whether Victor actually wants to be here at all. He’s stuck in a wheelchair and his contributions are generally limited to ‘no’ when asked if he wants to do anything and a stolid and silent refusal to take part in any of the ‘games’ – which of course is his right – especially if he’s just been parked here rather than chosen to attend of his own free will. And the jury is still out on that one. Victor goes beyond the description of ‘challenging’ behaviour and is generally just dismissed as ‘difficult.’ I actually quite like his strength of character to resist all attempts to be part of a group or have ‘fun.’ And so, while I’m pretty sure that saying ‘moon’ is actually a spoiling tactic on his part, it’s all ‘creative’ behaviour right, so now we’re going to give Victor his moment of glory. He’s made himself part of the action by default.

‘Right,’ I say, ‘let’s go to the moon.’

‘And have a picnic,’ Martin says.

‘If you like, Martin,’ I say. ‘We can have a picnic on the moon. We can do whatever we like, remember, it’s an improvisation.’

But I like to get my folks into character and we have the big build up to the moon journey. We discuss what the moon is – when it comes out – how it’s not the sun – and then we get onto the path of who lives in the moon.

‘The man in the moon,’ Victor says. I’m just about cheering to have got him off food as he adds, ‘made of cheese.’ And I’m brought back down to earth with a bang.

‘No. The moon is made of cheese, not the man in the moon,’ Adam states. Because yes, Adam has made his way back here, complete with Carol the carer and now we are full compliment again and Gary never so much as squeaked. He may be in his own little world, or he may be hanging on every word that we are saying. You can’t tell. At least he doesn’t look agitated.

These improvisations are about empowerment and it occurs to me that Gary is the least empowered person I have ever met. We’ll have to do something about that. A plan formulates. But it’s hard to think when you’re being hit on every side with ideas and Adam appears to have got Stacey into a tizzy.

‘What is it?’ I ask her.

‘He said devil,’ she says.

‘What?’ I ask, bemused.

‘Devil. On the moon,’ Stacey cries. ‘Don’t want to go.’

‘Oh, I say.’

Adam is quite obsessed with devils and bad men and all that sort of thing so I should have seen it coming.

‘Does the devil live in the moon?’ I ask Adam directly.

‘Don’t know,’ he replies. He knows he shouldn’t have upset Stacey.

‘God,’ Victor says.

‘God lives on the moon?’ I say.

‘Yes,’ Victor says.

Now whether Victor is still trying to be what we might term ‘difficult’ or just ‘creative’ and what it is that made him even deign to take part today, even if he thinks he isn’t taking part, I don’t know, but I’m going to milk it for all I can.

‘Stacey,’ I say, ‘who do you think lives on the moon, God or the Devil?’

‘God, silly,’ she says.

‘Right,’ I say, ‘So we’re going on a picnic to the moon and God will be there.’

‘Who else?’

‘Moon dog,’ someone shouts. ‘Astronaut,’ someone else shouts and gradually we build up a cast.

Adam agrees to be an Astronaut. Callum agrees to be the moon dog, Stacey is going to be a pilgrim, not that I’m sure she’s clear what a pilgrim is and then I hit my master stroke. Empowerment, right. That’s what this is about. And who is the most powerful person in this picture? You’ve got it, God. And who is the most disempowered person in this room? Right again, Gary.

So I go over to Gary, who is still sitting rocking just slightly in the centre of the circle and I crouch down beside him and speak while putting my hand on his shoulder as I’ve been instructed, so that he can feel me and hear me at the same time.

‘Gary,’ I say, ‘we’re going to the moon on a picnic. Would you like to be God?’

I don’t know what response I expect. Not the one I get.

Gary’s whole face lights up. He issues the most incredible happy ‘eeeeee,’ noise I’ve ever heard and which words cannot put any proper expression to for you here so you’ll just have to believe me. He throws his arms back and just yells for joy. This is the real definition of the word ‘glee’ if you ask me. Gary is going to be God. He knows what it means and he’s up to the task. He’s going to play GOD on our moon picnic and it’s made his day. It’s made my day too



## **JONJO CAN'T SIT STILL**

Jonjo is a boy who can’t sit still. From being very little he was like a whirling dervish. Into everything. Some would say that’s just being a normal little boy, but spend an hour with Jonjo and you’ll know his activity level would best be described as normal plus plus plus. XXL. And then it got a label. ADHD. That’s Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder if you really want to know. But Jonjo couldn’t sit still long enough to even hear out past the Deficit bit.

The ‘problem’ started when Jonjo went to school. No one expects kids to sit still and behave themselves at nursery now, do they? But when you go up to primary school. Well that’s different. You have to start ‘behaving’, by which they mean behaving ‘normally’ because if you don’t behave ‘normally’ you’re behaving badly, right?

That’s the problem. Jonjo’s ‘behaviour.’ Which was largely manifested by his inability to sit still. Among other things.



When Jonjo was seven it got so bad that they decided they had to ‘do’ something about it. Find a cure. Or at least a workable intervention. So. When he was seven he had all these tests

When he was eight they tried behaviour modification therapy. When he was nine they tried dietary modification – mum lost loads of weight. Dad got really grumpy. Sally and Bruce (Jonjo’s brother and sister) got really pissed off with him. It meant they couldn’t eat crisps and chocolate or drink pop either. All because Jonjo couldn’t sit still. Eventually everyone got so unhappy they decided it wasn’t worth the daily grind. So they abandoned it and went back to the ‘normal’ routine.

When Jonjo was ten they tried meditation. Just mum and Jonjo this time. The rest of the family had walked away from the problem. However fast Jonjo ran after them they just kept walking away. Turning the other cheek. And not in a good way.

And Jonjo still couldn’t just sit still.

No matter that every year they’d tried out something different. Nothing was working. And the question started rearing its ugly head, ‘what’s wrong with Jonjo?’

When Jonjo was eleven and about to go up to the really BIG school, people stopped saying, ‘Jonjo, sit still,’ or even ‘Jonjo, why can’t you just sit still,’ and became ‘what’s wrong with Jonjo?’

The medical assessment, as we’ve said, was ADHD. And extreme enough that (since everything else had been tried and we’ve got to keep him into mainstream education) the only thing left (or so it seemed) was Ritalin. Because they’d tried everything else when he was seven and eight and nine and ten.

So Jonjo became the Ritalin kid.

And this is where our story really begins. But I’ll let Jonjo tell you himself.

*My name is Jonjo and I’m twelve. Last year I was eleven and I started at the secondary school. It was big. I liked it at first because the corridors were really long and when you ran along them your shoes (even if you were wearing trainers) made a good rackety noise. Trainers made a more squeaky noise which was best because shoes with hard soles make a sort of clattery noise and I like squeaks better. I don’t like loud noises unless I’m making them though. If I’m not making them I put my hands over my ears and I shout so that I’m shouting louder than the noise. People don’t understand that. They just shout at me more and then I shout more and then – I’m in trouble.*

*I was in trouble a lot at that big school in the beginning. Well, there were a lot of corridors and a lot of people and my mum said there was lots to distract me and I am easily distracted. Like now, I want to go and run around outside not sit here and tell you my story. But I can’t.*

*I’ll tell you why. Because in the holidays from Big school, something happened to me. Some people will tell you it’s something I did. But mum says it was an accident. Dad says I am an accident waiting to happen. All I know is that accidents do happen and when they do they aren’t your fault because – duh – they are an accident. And this was my accident.*

*I was running. I like to run. It makes me feel sort of swooshy and like I'm free and there's nothing wrong with me. I run away from people who keep saying 'what's wrong with you Jonjo?' 'Why can't you sit still, Jonjo?' I don't know why I can't sit still, I just can't. I was born to run, my dad says like that Bruce Springsteen song. My mum said maybe they shouldn't have played that to me when I was a baby. I don't know. I just know I like running.*

*So that day, I was running. And no, I wasn't looking where I was going. Where's the fun in that? I just run. I don't look. And I broke a rule. My sister Sally says everyone who's not a baby knows the rule which is 'look before you cross the road.' I probably even did know that rule. I just wasn't thinking about it. You don't think about rules when you run. You don't think when you run. That's what's so good about it. You just run.*

*But breaking a rule is a bad thing to do. And accidents do happen, my brother Bruce says. And one happened to me. While I was running. I don't really remember it that well because I was in the middle of the happening so I couldn't see what was going on, but Bruce says that I hit the car and bounced off the windscreen and nearly flew over the roof (which is kind of cool because I didn't think kids could fly unless they were Peter Pan and he's not real) and then I crumpled on the ground. Like a rag doll, Bruce says. Or it might have been a rag dog. I can't remember. Either way. I like the flying bit of the story more than the rag bit. And I didn't feel much like a rag. I felt like something which had been squished and flattened. Like when I dropped a big bit of concrete on my finger, but all over my body. Next thing I knew I was in this bed in the hospital. And it was nice and white and the sheets were crispy and the lights were sort of floody and there was another boy in the next bed. And I wanted to get up and run. And I couldn't move. I couldn't run. I was stuck. Like in a prison. But the prison was my own body. It wasn't nice. It was my accident. Well, dad says it was the 'consequence' of my accident.*

*And everyone wanted to know 'the reason' why it had happened.*

*'There is no reason to an accident,' I said.*

*And then they all started on the same old story, 'what's wrong with Jonjo?' 'Why can't Jonjo sit still?' except now I couldn't even sit at all. I had to lie down. It was awful.*

*This person came to talk to me and she was nice but a bit flowery and she asked me to tell her the story of what happened immediately before that last running. I couldn't really remember at first but then I did and here is that part of the story now. I'm sorry it wasn't at the beginning but I don't always pay attention to things in the 'proper' order. That's part of my 'problem' you see.*

*'Had you taken your Ritalin?' she asked me, the flowery lady.*

*'No,' I said, and started to remember why I had started running.*

*I didn't want to take my Ritalin because it made me feel not like running but like, I don't know, what people call calm but what I call, stupid. So that even if I did want to run I couldn't – just like I was lying in the hospital bed – and sometimes it made me not really want to run and I didn't like that because I like running. It's what I like to do.*

*And the reason why I hadn't taken my Ritalin was because I heard mum and dad having an argument. And it was about me. The usual topic of conversation. 'What's wrong with Jonjo?'*

*'It's genetic,' mum said, 'It's in the genes.'*

*'It's not my genes,' dad said and he sounded really shouty and cross.*

*And then I had looked at my jeans and wondered why it was that these jeans got me into all this trouble. I liked my jeans. Especially that pair, because that was a pair that hadn't been passed down to me from Bruce, they were new for just me. Because mum said I was having a growing spurt. My jeans. All my own. Not Bruce's and certainly not my dad's. My dad's jeans would never fit me so I don't know what he was talking about.*

*But suddenly I didn't like my jeans any more. Because it was the jeans that were causing the argument. So I put my pyjamas back on. It was that or my school trousers and they are a bit itchy. And it wasn't a school day. It was the holidays.*

*And then, maybe something I shouldn't have done, but I don't really think before I do things sometimes. My mind does running even when my body isn't doing it. I set fire to the jeans. I thought that might solve the problem. No jeans. No problem. You can't have a problem of something that isn't there. I thought.*

*The flowery lady couldn't keep quiet when I told her that. She sounded sort of shocked but in a quiet kind of way, not a shouty kind of way.*

*'You set fire to your jeans?' she asked me.*

*'Yes,' I said, 'I'm telling you the truth. I'm not a liar. That's not my problem.'*

*'Do you know what your problem is?' she asked me.*

*And she looked like she was nice and wanted to help and I didn't want to just say 'I can't sit still,' because that's what people are always saying. And anyway, now I was still, wasn't I? So it didn't seem the right thing to say. So I said what I remembered mum saying to dad, just before she came in and found me and the jeans and the fire. Just before I started the running that led to the accident.*

*'I have low self esteem,' I said.*

*That stopped her in her tracks. Not that she was going anywhere. But it made her face kind of shrivel up like a prune or something for a bit. Like people's faces go when they don't know what to say, so I thought I'd done what my dad called 'hitting the nail on the head,' and I said,*

*'Sorry, I didn't mean to hit the nail on the head.'*

*And she smiled at me and asked me if I knew what it meant 'low self esteem.'*

*And I thought for a bit – I thought – if I could run now I would run because I don't like these*

questions. But I couldn't run, even when I tried to move my legs I couldn't even feel them. So I was sort of stuck. And I wanted to put my hands on my ears and shout but the flowery lady wasn't being loud and...

... 'Does it mean your legs are close to the ground?' I asked.

'No, you mean a low centre of gravity?' she said.

'Maybe,' I said because I didn't know what she was talking about.

'Where did you hear that phrase?' she asked me.

'Mum said it,' I said, 'Just before...'

And then I wondered if I was about to get mum into trouble because really I ran because of the jeans and the fire and the trouble and because I just had to run. Sometimes I don't think about it I just have to do it and I just had to do it that day.

'Maybe I was meant to have the accident,' I said, trying to be helpful and get mum out of trouble.

'What do you mean?' the flowery lady asked.

Why do people always ask you what you mean when you've just told them something? I mean what I say, my granddad always says. Then he says 'mean what you say and say what you mean' and he laughs.

No one was laughing now.

'Dad says I'm an accident waiting to happen,' I said, 'so maybe I had to run to my accident. Because it was there, waiting for me.'

And then I wondered if I'd got mum and dad in trouble now. But there was nothing I could do about it so I cried. I'm not proud to admit it because I know that when you're eleven years old and a boy you should be able to sit still and not to cry. But I run so I don't cry sometimes and in the hospital bed with the flowery lady there, I couldn't run and so I couldn't stop crying.

'What's wrong with me?' I asked the doctor when he came in on his rounds.

'You've broken your ankle,' he said.

'Is that all?' I asked him.

'Well, you have some bruising and are a very lucky boy to be alive, but yes, a broken ankle won't hold you back for long.'

And he was right. They gave me crutches and when I got back to school I learned to run quite fast with the crutches. Until. And this is the stupid thing. Another accident happened. I think dad might be right, I am an accident waiting to happen. Bruce says I'm an accident magnet but that's just cause he thinks he's smarter than dad which he isn't. Even though he's nearly taller than him.

*It was running that did it. Once again. I was running away from the Ritalin. Ritalin slows me down. Crutches slowed me down a bit but Ritalin slows me down on the inside too and crutches only slowed me down on the outside.*

*Anyway, I had another accident. It wasn't as dramatic as the one before. There was no road or car or anything. It was just the stairs. I didn't see them coming. I wasn't looking ahead. I told you I don't do that when I run. And I fell down the stairs and the next thing I was back in that hospital again but in a different bed and with a different lady who wasn't flowery at all but had her hair all pulled back so that her forehead was all stretched and what my mum would say 'anguished looking.'*

*And this time I didn't want to tell her anything. I didn't want to get anyone in trouble. Not even Bruce. Even though he's horrible to me a lot of the time. I just wanted to get out of that hospital.*

*I asked the doctor again 'What's wrong with me?'*

*And he said some long words that didn't make any sense to me and my mum cried a bit and my dad said 'be careful what we wish for eh?'*

*And mum cried a bit more.*

*Because what he'd wished for had come true it seemed. I couldn't run any more. I might never run again they said.*

*And then I think I wanted to die. I wanted to run and now I couldn't run. Because I was an accident waiting to happen and my dad's wish had come true even though we aren't in a fairy story and I had burned my jeans.*

*And when I came out of the hospital they gave me wheels. And wheels aren't as easy to work as crutches and I couldn't run any more. Only in my head and that made me unhappy. And they told me I had to take the Ritalin again. This time they said it would be just in the morning and when I got home, not when I was at school. Because even with my wheels I had to go to school.*

*Sometimes I tried to run in my wheelchair along the corridor. But I couldn't go fast and I didn't really feel like it most of the time. And anyway, I had this person, like a bodyguard my sister Sally said, who was there to look after me. They all had a meeting and decided I couldn't look after myself so I needed this woman to look after me. But she wasn't a bodyguard because everyone knows that bodyguards are men. I don't know what she was. I know one thing she was. Not nice.*

*And life kept going on like that for a long, long time and I was more and more unhappy and mum said it was because of my wheels and dad said he wished I could run and he wished he'd never wished I couldn't run. And I wished I wasn't an accident waiting to happen and that I'd never burned my jeans because your jeans are your destiny and you can't cheat destiny, my brother Bruce says. Lucky for me the woman who wasn't a bodyguard wasn't my destiny and she went away. I was glad about that.*

*But it looked for a long time like my destiny was to be in a wheelchair and never to run again. I*

couldn't believe that because I liked running so much and I was so good at running that it didn't seem fair. But dad says life isn't fair. And mum says it never rains but it pours. But then she also says that every cloud has a silver lining. Well, that's what she says when we met Mr Cooper.

Mum thinks Mr Cooper is my silver lining. But I think Mr Cooper might have been my destiny. Mum says I might have been running towards Mr Cooper all my life, but I don't know how because I never even met him till I was twelve and in my wheelchair and he came to teach at my school. But when I met Mr Cooper. I liked him. He liked me. He wasn't like the woman who wasn't a bodyguard and he wasn't like any other teacher. He was like a nice person who would be my friend as well as my teacher and he never got impatient with me and he never told me off for being me and he just really helped me a lot. Mum says he helped me find my self-esteem again, even though I didn't know I'd lost it or I was looking for it. I probably wasn't paying attention though. I'm still not too good at that.

Mr Cooper helped me in lots of ways. He helped me to stop running in my head. Not all the time, but most of the time and to try and be aware of when it was happening and how to control it. And once I'd got the running in my head under control, he started helping me to think about how I would stop running with my legs once my legs might work again. No one thought they would and I think they wanted me to stay in the wheelchair because that way no more destiny could happen to me and no more accidents and NO MORE RUNNING. And then no one would say 'Jonjo, why can't you sit still?' But Mr Cooper said that if we take it slowly and work with a purpose, maybe one day I'll be able to run again. And he said when I get older I'll learn how to control the running and only do it on the sports field or to catch a bus, instead of just all the time to get away from things or get towards things. He's helping me to learn to pay attention which no one else has ever been able to do. But Mr Cooper can, because he told me a secret. And that secret gave me hope. And it turns out hope was what I was looking for all along. And so were mum and dad.

My story isn't really ended because I'm only twelve years old and your story isn't over when you are twelve. Not unless you get so squished by a lorry and you're under the earth in a coffin. Which is worse than a wheelchair by a long chalk my dad says. And could have happened to me if I'd been hit by a lorry not a car in my first accident. But mum says we've come to the end of a chapter and that's thanks to Mr Cooper. Everyone wonders how Mr Cooper has helped me. It's because of our secret. Mr Cooper told me. And I'll tell you. I told mum and she cried. I told dad and he laughed. I don't know what you'll do when I tell you. Mr Cooper helped me because our secret is that Mr Cooper also has ADHD and he's managed to 'control' it not let it 'control' him and he's teaching me how to do that to. And the hope is two hopes. One is that when I grow up I'll be like Mr Cooper and the other is that I'll be able to run again.

'Don't run before you walk,' Mr Cooper says to me. 'But walk, Jonjo. Walk. As fast as you can. Don't let anyone tell you you have to sit still all your life.'

And I won't. Because I'm Jonjo. The boy who can't sit still. That's my destiny.



## HEATHER HOLDS MY HAND

We have this little group. You might call it a drama group. You might call it an activity group. You might call it therapy. I don't like the word therapy. It suggests (to me) that there is something wrong. I know some people don't see therapy like that, but believe me, I'm keen for people to do drama, not drama 'therapy.' Sure, I know drama can be therapeutic, but for me it's about being creative, about being alive, about self expression. And above all, about communication.

Heather is in the 'group.' When I tell you that Heather is a wheelchair user who has incredibly limited movement you may instantly start labelling her. Paraplegic? Quadraplegic? Oh no, it's much worse than that (someone might whisper to you). Heather's 'not all there.' What? What do you mean 'not all there?' Whenever I meet Heather and hold her hand (as I do frequently in this group setting) she is certainly all there. She's not a ghost. She's real. Visceral. With (I imagine) hopes and dreams and likes and dislikes just like you and me. The only difference is she can't convey them easily. Which means that she's stuck with the label of 'learning disability.' Actually, it's worse than that. Her label is 'profound and multiple disabilities.' That means A LOT. We are not using the word profound in terms of 'intellectual depth' here (though sometimes I wonder if we might not be better to use it that way and try to plumb the depths to understand rather than to be so quick to label).

Well, the practicalities of this situation mean that for one hour a week Heather and I sit in a circle with a few others – usually between four and eight – and play drama games. Not for therapy. For fun. It's not even fun therapy. But it is usually fun. I think there's more to it than fun though. I think it's about communication. Not communication therapy you understand. Just communication.

Now you may wonder how it can be that Heather can communicate in such a setting. I'll admit it's not easy. For any of us. The first problem we face is making sure Heather actually gets wheeled into the group. I am still raging about what happened this morning. That's why I'm writing this piece. It's my way of communicating something I find unacceptable. Something I have limited control to do anything about. I'm luckier than Heather. I have ways of communicating, even if people don't listen to me any more than they do to her. What happened this morning was that Heather wasn't at the group as we were about to start. Sharp at 10 am. I asked where she was. There was a bit of shuffling and lack of eye contact and eventually I found out that she was 'still on the bus.' The bus in question is known as the 'blue' bus. It's the one which goes round picking up all the people with learning disabilities who come to the activity centre each day. Why is Heather stuck on the bus? Because the ramp which takes her wheelchair down to ground level had stuck.

I'm glad I asked; because when I did, and okay, maybe I made a bit of a fuss, I discovered that the 'plan' such as it was, was to leave Heather on the bus till the end of the day. Okay they'd come and feed her and presumably change her pads or whatever 'personal' care she requires, but hey, the plan was just to leave her there. Because it was broken.

Because she was broken? Who else would be left on a bus for eight hours simply because a piece of machinery was stuffed and no one could be bothered to get someone to fix it. I know people get left on trolleys in hospitals for hours on end and maybe, maybe you do think I'm over-reacting here, but I'm sorry, I think it's profoundly and multiply iniquitous that someone with limited communication and massive 'needs' is just going to be left on a bus like so much broken machinery. Not if I have anything to do with it.

I don't like conflict. I don't like making a fuss. I don't like to complain if I get poor service. But sometimes I realise that you have to stand up for what is right. So I did. I made my feelings fairly clearly known. Well, actually I just suggested we might either a) try to get the ramp fixed or b) carry her off the bus or c) we'd move the drama circle to the bus and do our session there. Doing nothing and leaving her on the bus was not one of the options I outlined.

I think it was the third comment that got them. They could see chaos that is our drama circle (which frightens a lot of them though they don't admit it), moving from the circle out to the bus and that sounded a bit too out of control for the authorities to handle. So they did what I suggested second and managed to lift Heather out of the bus and then lift her chair out of the bus and it was a bit of hard work and some sweat and yes, possibly someone had to fill out a risk assessment form but you know what, in ten minutes Heather was back with the group, in her chair, in the drama circle, holding my hand.

Ready to play the game. The game Heather likes to play is Animal Noises. And since she'd had such a poor start to the day, it seemed only fair to start with that. You may think you see a problem here. Heather can't make any recognisable noise. And she can hardly move. Note 'hardly.' It's all a question of how deeply you look. How profoundly you pay attention. Over time we have noticed that there is some movement. She can hold my hand. She doesn't squeeze hard but she is doing the holding, it's not me holding her. She can wave that hand about a bit, for a short time (when she's not holding mine obviously) and she can stretch her neck and put out her tongue. With effort. Beyond that, like so many people with profound and multiple disabilities, she talks with her eyes. I'm still learning how to read eye-talk, it's not that easy, but believe me, it can be done. It just takes more effort. Well, you don't just leave someone on the bus now do you? You don't just ignore the only way they can communicate? You learn. You try. You go to where they are. If you can't meet them half way, you go as far as it takes to meet them. Well, that's what I do. That's nothing other than common sense and common decency in my book.

So back to the game: animal noises. Colin goes first. He's a tiger. He roars. Then Chris. He does a mean monkey. Then Bob who is a frog today 'ribbit ribbit'. No, actually Bob is Kermit the frog so he gives us a rendition of 'it's not easy being green.' We are flexible in our interpretation of the rules of this game. Our game. Our rules. Yes, it may scare you, but I have to tell you, largely we make it up as we go along. That's how life works isn't it? That's how our group works anyway. Steven is also in a



chair with limited movement but he has one of these Augmented Communication Aids and he can push buttons with his finger and he chooses to be a dog and has a good bark noise on his 'board.' Then we come to Heather. Heather is a giraffe. Being a giraffe means making no noise at all and just stretching your neck as far as you can and sticking out your tongue. Heather does that. She likes to do it. As much as you can smile with your neck stretched and your tongue out, she smiles. And she smiles with her eyes. Look profoundly enough and that's easy to see.

So there we are. For one hour a week a group of 'labelled' people make their own rules and play their own game and have fun and there's not a bit of therapy in sight. Heather has had a long journey this morning. From being isolated and stuck on the bus, she's come into the group and taken her turn at playing 'animal noises.' When it's not her turn she holds my hand. When she likes someone else's noise she does the smallest squeeze, or makes the smallest kind of squeak that she *can* do, with a lot of effort, if she's really, really happy – like when Chris does his monkey noises and jumps round the circle like a monkey would do. Heather loves that. She loves to be taking part. I can read eye-talk enough to know that.

We've all come a long way in this one small hour. We are all learning to communicate with each other in more meaningful ways. And we are learning to watch each other's backs as well. Colin tells me that if Heather gets left on the bus again he's going to roar like a tiger till they let her off. Bob goes close to Heather and despite not liking eye contact, he makes it with her and says: 'Heather, you are the best giraffe in the world,' and she smiles with her eyes. I hold her hand. And we speak to each other with our eyes. I'm not telling you what we said. Some things are too private. But I can tell you, it isn't therapy. It's friendship.



## **ANGUS ISN'T INTERESTED?**

Angus speaks in a high monotone whine. He doesn't give you eye contact. He has a face only a mother could love. To be honest most of the time I think his mother would find it hard to love him actually. It must be hard to be such a mother. It must be harder to be Angus.

Angus has Aspergers syndrome. He's on a spectrum. Poor Angus. Until you think that perhaps you and I are on this spectrum too. He's at one end of it; far away from the comfort of the Bell curve of normality. So he knows where he stands. My question is: Where are you on the spectrum?

That's an unsettling thought I know. But maybe one should think less in terms of spectrums (would that be spectra) and more in terms of people. Because models and facts and terminology don't give us enough to go on when we are trying to live a life together in a confused and confusing world.

For example: Let's look at 'the facts' such as they are. About Angus and whether he is interested.

Angus can remember dates and events and pictures and what people said on TV and can (and will) repeat them ad nauseum without being prompted. If he wants to. Problem is, they are usually not the things you want to hear. His particular interest is in war. Dates. Places. Equipment. Battle strategies. It's not his only interest though. He has an interest in computers which would give Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg a run for their money. But they all got to college. No one labelled them with Aspergers. No one checked whether they fitted under the Bell Curve. Unlike Angus. Angus was 'diagnosed' on 'the spectrum' and his life went down the toilet. He's stuck in school in the 'Behaviour' unit with no chance of getting into college. Because he has 'behaviour' issues. A euphemism for saying he doesn't behave in the way the Bell Curve would deem 'appropriate.' He isn't interested like he should be. No one questions what we are doing to make him interested. The blame is laid firmly at his door for being 'difficult' and by 'difficult' they mean 'different.' In their infinite wisdom, (You know they. We all know who they are. I don't have to define or describe them to you now, do I?) they noted that he couldn't 'fit in' with ordinary day to day life and then they spent ten years trying to force him to do just that. Are you surprised it didn't work? If you had no arms would you appreciate people spending ten years trying to teach you to touch-type? No. You'd want them to get you prosthetic arms wouldn't you? Or adapt the things you had to use on a daily basis to be stump friendly. It only makes sense. But with Angus, they just spent year after year trying to bang this square peg into a round hole two sizes too small. Any surprise he's not interested in what you have to say to him today?

On a good day Angus can hold focus and concentration on a task for hours at a time. If he's interested. He won't thank you for reminding him he needs to eat, or maybe he should take a break to have a walk or give his eyes a breather. He's busy, he's happy and he's not interested in what you have to say. He's working. They don't see it that way though. They think he's just 'messing around' or 'being difficult' or 'not engaging socially.'

On a bad day Angus goes into meltdown. Funnily enough, a bad day usually comes when they don't allow him to engage on what he'd call a 'good' day. On a bad day, he can throw a tantrum with all the extremes of a two year old and all the power of the seventeen year old he is. Angus is, they say, the master of 'challenging' behaviour. But only when he is 'challenged.' Otherwise, he's a pussy cat. But no one can be bothered to work out what it is that makes the pussy cat turn into a ferocious tiger. No one has learned what makes him flex his claws. So he gets left alone a lot. Angus spends most of the day stuck in the corner of a room. Away from people. Alone. Isolated. People say it doesn't matter because 'Angus isn't interested.'

The 'facts' as they are written down on his 'profile' are thus: 'Angus acts like he isn't interested.' What value 'facts' eh? Of course, in a way he's not interested. He's not interested in many of the things you and I are interested in, but he's very interested in the things he's interested in – things you and I can't be bothered to spend time on. For example, would you spend hour after hour looking at tin foil? Would the telephone area codes across the world be fascinating to you? ... but what harm is Angus causing by his interests? Okay, when he blurts out some facts about the D-Day Landings randomly in the middle of a conversation on something seemingly unrelated it can be annoying but just because he's 'inappropriate' doesn't mean he's not interested. He just has poor social skills. And I

suggest that in dealing with Angus most of us exhibit pretty poor social skills. We don't give him credit. We expect him to fit in with us. Why should he? Who is to say that his interests are more or less worthy than my interest in nineteenth century popular fiction or your interest in embroidery/horseriding/sports. Each to his own, eh? We're all Jock Tamson's Bairns.

So if Angus isn't interested in us and we aren't interested in him, isn't that how the isolation is continued. We need to find common ground. And his brain isn't wired to be the instigator of such a conversation. So we need to meet him where he is, not be stubborn and demand that he meet us half way. He hasn't got the fuel to make the 60 mile journey. He's only got fuel for 10 miles. We have fuel for 120 so why not just take the trip all the way to his house, where he feels safe, and start from there? Do you begrudge him that? Shame on you.

Let's try coming at the 'facts' from a different angle. Angus likes computers, Not the way you and I might like computers. He likes the patterns in algorithms. He likes to see that all the lines of a programme are 'right'. This is a useful skill properly harnessed. If he's left to get on with it on his own Angus could hack right into the security services within half an hour. He wouldn't do it to find out secrets, he'd do it to check the 'coding.' But aren't there better ways for him to spend his time on computers? You bet there are. And he could be paid for doing them. It's up to us to see his talents and to employ them to the best advantage of both Angus and the society he lives in. Give the boy a living wage rather than benefits. Play to his strengths, don't dismiss him because he's on 'the spectrum.' Don't patronise him by calling him 'high functioning.' Give the boy a job he can do and he'll do it all day quite happily. Treat him like a reject and he'll behave like one. It's a simple enough equation isn't it? Forget the Bell Curve. Forget the models. Forget the spectrum. See the boy. And learn to treat him like a man.



## **A Week With No Labels**

The following is an excerpt from the full novel available in ebook and paperback format. This is the first 'episode' in the No Labels story.

**BEFORE WE BEGIN** What you need to know

NO LABELS is a fictional drama group. I have worked for 10 years with a 'real' drama group run 'for and by' adults labelled with learning disabilities and many of the experiences fictionalized here happened to us. Many didn't. But in this story I am a fictional character too! If there is any resemblance to real people in these fictional characters I'd say it's only the good bits which are 'real', I've made up the bad bits!

Each of the 'days' in this series represents a specific period of time (more than a day) in the life of the fictional group.

About Boalian drama.

NO LABELS owes a debt of great gratitude to Boalian Theatre of the Oppressed /Forum Theatre method which has been liberally adapted to suit the particular circumstances of a creatively anarchic bunch of people.

*Meet the team.*

Our cast of characters remains constant throughout the books so you might as well get to know them here: Here are some thumbnail sketches, developed from fictional 'hot seating' techniques employed by the group. They want you to know that while they don't have labels, they are 'real' characters. What is a 'real' character? Who knows?

**ANNIE** Is a forty six year old woman NOT a child so please don't treat her as one. She is an excellent natural actress and could give Meryl Streep a run for her money.

**BARRY** Is in his sixties and loves a good drama. He is the leader of the gang and demands the same high level of commitment from others as he puts in himself. Some may say he's a dreamer, but he certainly gets things done

**BILBO** is in his fifties and likes to dance. Oh how he loves to dance. And no, he's not a hobbit. Here's the story. He was christened William Robert. He was known as Billy-Bob by his dad. His brother misheard this and called him Bilbo. The family compromised on Bilbo. It was just a hobbit they got into and it stuck.

**DEIRDRE** Doesn't like being called 'spazzy'. Okay so she's got a 'lazy' arm but that's no reason for abuse. She suffers from tunnel vision (and when she's around it seems to be catching) She likes to read, write and organise others.

**DUNCAN** Is always happy. He loves drama. He plays games his own way and is the joker of the group. Everyone loves Duncan. A man of few words but a comic genius none the less.

**LAUREN** Is a princess. Always a princess. She lives in a world of her own and sometimes she lets us share it. If we're lucky.

**KELLY** Loves birds. And all animals really but birds most of all. She has a very good memory and likes to show it off.

**KATE** That's me. I'm the one who 'writes it down.' My label is 'facilitator.' **MANDY** Takes everything literally. Everything. Which can get her into a lot of funny situations. And some not so funny ones.

**PAULINE** Is everyone's mum. Her label is 'volunteer.' But she's so much more than that. Often we think she's the glue that holds us all together. She thinks of the important things like biscuits and juice.

Like all mums we take her for granted.

**STEVIE** Is in his twenties. He likes colours. He doesn't like talking but he's a whizz at mime. His favourite colour is brown and his favourite texture is crinkly.

## **MONDAY**

*Are you sitting comfortably?*

This is the start of our dramatic journey together. You've had a chance to glance at the cast. But this is where we'll really get acquainted. Get to know each other. Learn something from each other. And most of all – have fun

So here we are on the Monday morning of our dramatic journey. Dealing with the thorny question of name and identity.

No Labels Drama Group was founded out of an advocacy group run for and by adults who are labelled with 'learning disabilities.' It's a funny label (unless you have it). For a start, it's not a fixed label (unless you have it – because believe me, you can't wash it off). What I mean is that no one can decide whether to call this label:

Learning disability

Learning difficulty

Intellectual disability or the OLD names (which we cannot say out loud now for fear of political incorrectness) which are

Mental retardation or

Mental Handicap.

That's a lot of labels for a 'condition' which is both hard to pin down and covers a broad range of things that can euphemistically be called 'impairments.'

And more importantly I wonder how important the specific 'label' is to the labellee (if such I can call them) because I know that if you can't see you don't give a bugger usually whether you are called blind, visually impaired or a speccy git, what you do care about is how you live your life round the problems that not being able to see gives you. And whether people make your life easier or more difficult. It's not the label that's the most pressing problem. It's the problem – you can't see.

I wonder is this the same with the many labels for those who are considered to be 'challenged' intellectually? Whatever that may mean. Because I look around the room and of the ten other people sitting there I can't really make a pattern, a connection between what each is supposed to have 'wrong' with them. Except that they are labelled. We're all labelled I guess. My label is 'normal' and theirs is 'abnormal' which I find somewhat unjust. I don't think of myself as 'normal' well, actually not until I'm in their company when I feel just 'one of the gang' and as close to being normal (in terms of accepted) as I ever do anywhere. But I digress...

We don't dodge the difficult issues in this group though. We talk about labels. More than once. Often. A lot. For example, this Monday, Barry draws pictures on flip charts and writes up things and (those of us who can read) nod sagely and agree that labels are usually A BAD THING.

We talk about what learning disability means as a label. It isn't a pretty subject. I go round the group, eager to get everyone's individual opinion because in an advocacy situation that seems to be the right and proper thing to do. Give everyone a voice. Even those like Duncan and Lauren who aren't that bothered about people hearing their voice.

To give you a flavour of things, this is what it goes like.

I say, 'so what do the words learning disability mean to you Annie?'

'My nephew has a learning disability,' she replies.

'Does he?'

'Yes, he can't read very well and he gets in trouble at school.'

She doesn't seem either to want to talk about whether she has a learning disability or not so I leave it at that. I can come back to it. No point upsetting her yet.

'What about you Deirdre,' I ask.

She rubs her glasses with her biscuit-ey fingers,

'Some people have a problem in that they are not normal,' she explains. 'They can't read or write and so they have a difficulty. We don't call it disability. We call it difficulty.'

'Okay,' I reply, corrected. 'A difficulty. Is it just reading and writing?'

'They call you spazzy,' she says.

'Sorry,' I am bemused. This is a word I've not heard since the primary school playground.

'At school,' she continues, 'They used to call you spazzy.'

I note that she uses the word 'you' not 'I' in this context. Perhaps significant. I have a qualification in conversation analysis. I know that narrative voice is psychologically important. I decide to probe further. Deirdre can take it.

'So they call you learning disabled, sorry, say that you have a learning disability because you have a bad arm?'

'Yes,' she confirms. 'I can read and write.'

It is clear to me that as far as Deirdre is concerned her 'abnormality' is purely her 'spastic' arm.

'But I have tunnel vision,' she adds.

‘But these are really physical disabilities aren’t they?’ I question, ‘not what you’d call a learning disability?’

She looks at me out of her bottle bottom glasses and nods her head, sagely, as if to say, what can you do?

And what can you do? Indeed. Good question Deirdre. I am about to move onto Kelly but she pre-empted me.

‘They say I have epilepsy. But I don’t, she states firmly.

She does. I know she does. I also know it’s a source of embarrassment and shame to her and I don’t want to make her cry. She cries quite easily. And loudly.

‘Is that a learning disability?’ I ask. ‘I’d think that’s another physical condition?’

‘They are mean,’ she says. ‘People are just mean. They don’t like me.’

‘We all like you Kelly,’ I say and the rest of the group chime in their approval. Annie even says,

‘Kelly, you are my best friend.’

So, today Kelly is Annie’s best friend. I can’t keep up with her. She has more best friends than... well... than I don’t know what. But it is a nice gesture all the same. And shows she’s still listening.

We keep on going. I keep hoping I’ll find someone who will explain to me what they think the label learning disability actually means. And they probably hope I’ll shut up and get on with something more interesting. A game perhaps. Or an early lunch. But I’m relentless. I’m being paid to do a job here. And after all, the group was constituted as a group run ‘for and by’ people with learning disabilities. It is their label. Why don’t they acknowledge it in any way? Or understand what it means? Or is this the ultimate irony? Not having a clear understanding of the label is one way that they can suggest that you need that label. Except that I don’t have a clear understanding of the label either.

(You’ll probably hear a lot about ‘Them’ and ‘They’ in this little journey. We are always up against the invisible force. They can be all sorts of things. Watch out for them. They pop up at the most inconvenient moments to spoil the fun. )

As expected, there is little joy to be had out of Lauren or Duncan on the subject. When I ask Lauren she simply answers ‘Don’t know,’ which is a good result really. Usually she just says ‘sorry.’ In fact today she says, ‘don’t know darling,’ which is (according to her ‘notes’) indicative that she’s in a good mood. No wonder, her face still bears the marks of a very messy chocolate biscuit eating frenzy. But she doesn’t like wiping her face and Pauline hasn’t noticed it yet. So I let it go. Surely it’s her right to have a chocolate stained face if she wants. Unless there’s a wasp or something around. It is November. There are no wasps.

‘Duncan, what do you think a learning disability is?’ I ask, determined to give him his right to voice

his opinion. Even if that is likely only be ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ or ‘happy,’ which is the extent of his verbal repertoire with questions like this. He doesn’t like talking about this sort of thing. He doesn’t much like talking. I think it’s because he’s got a lot more interesting things going on in his head than my stupid questions. That’s my theory. Yet to be proven, or disproved.

Silence.

‘Does it mean anything to you?’ I press. Why? I know he’s not going to answer.

Silence.

Okay. It’s a question he doesn’t want to address. I finally get that message. Fine. I’ll leave it.

‘Mandy,’ what about you? I ask. ‘Do you know what learning disability means?’

And her reply makes me want to cry. And gets me angry at the same time.

‘They call me a vegetable,’ she says.

‘Who?’ I ask. She is distressed.

‘Horrid people,’ she says, ‘Ugly sisters.’

I don’t think she’s talking in pantomime speak – Mandy is much too literal a person to do that.

‘Oh,’ I am stumped.

‘They say I’m a vegetable. That’s learning disabled. Not nice.’

I am seriously taken aback. And Mandy is upset. Time to take control.

‘Mandy,’ I say. ‘How can you possibly be a vegetable?’

I call on the group for back up.

‘Is Mandy a carrot?’ I ask.

‘No,’ they chorus and laugh.

‘She was a broad bean,’ Annie says, reminding me of when we did a healthy eating project.

‘And she was a red coffee bean,’ Kelly says, remembering even before that, when we did a Fair Trade project.

This must be hell for literal Mandy. I explain that that’s different because then we were ‘pretending’ to be vegetables and beans and it’s not the same thing.

It does not feel like the time to talk about how calling someone a vegetable is effectively a way of saying that they are brainless and that being brainless might well be a description of a person with a learning disability. In the world that passes for normal. Here it is just exposed as the cruel jibe it is



and the harmful consequences are plain to see. Damage limitation comes before explanation.

‘You are NOT a vegetable,’ I tell Mandy. ‘And anyone who calls you that is not just wrong but very rude as well..’

‘She is a human bean,’ laughs Bilbo. ‘We are all human beans. Aren’t we?’

We all laugh. Good old Bilbo managing to retrieve the situation.

Time to move on.

‘It seems to me,’ I say ‘that most of you don’t think that learning disability is a good label?’

‘No,’ they shout. Even Lauren. Though she shouts ‘no, darling,’ raucously. Definitely in a good mood today then. Until, in drawing attention to herself, she draws Pauline’s attention to her messy face and Pauline, being the good mum-like figure she is to us all, wipes it clean. With a tissue. That takes the shine off Lauren’s day, that does. But she withstands it manfully with just a bit of teeth grinding.

‘But it also seems to me, that most of you don’t seem to know what it actually means to say someone is learning disabled. Am I right? You think it’s can’t read and write?’ I press on.

Bilbo breaks into song (an Adam Ant classic rap) ‘Can’t read, can’t write, what can you do?’

Which makes everyone laugh. Again.

‘Can’t see properly,’ Annie says, remaining remarkably focussed.

‘Can’t move around properly,’ Deirdre says. She’s obviously worked out that I’m going to keep at this till I get the answers I want.

‘Wait. Hold the bus, back up the truck’ I say. It’s part of my trying to teach Mandy not to take things literally. I avoid digressing into ‘what bus?’ ‘what truck?’ territory by adding quickly,

‘Those are physical disabilities. It’s different isn’t it? Learning disability?’

‘What does it mean then, if you don’t mind my asking?’ Deirdre asks. She’s getting fed up and I don’t blame her. This is beginning to seriously drag for all of us. But I need to press on. It’s my job.

‘Yeah, it’s a good question, Deirdre,’ I reply. And think but don’t say out loud: What exactly is a comfortable definition for the many descriptors of intellectual ‘abnormality.’

‘Well,’ I say. ‘I don’t know that I understand it properly either.’

What a cop out.

‘But do you all know that in this group, this is a group where everyone is given the label of learning disability?’

They mostly nod their heads. Duncan shakes his head, but it is because he is tuned into the humming of

the lights. More interesting by far than my wittering. I sympathise, perhaps even agree with him.

‘Where’s Stevie?’ asks Bilbo.

‘Dentist,’ replies Kelly. She lives with Stevie and they usually come in together.

We risk getting off track. We’re good at that. I pull us back on track. (Figuratively speaking, Mandy, before you ask what track?)

‘So. We are all supposed to be people with a learning disability but no one really knows what that means?’

No one sees a problem with that. Labels. Who needs them? It seems pretty much to me that the consensus of opinion is that now stated by Barry,

‘They put labels on you,’ he says. ‘Nothing you can do about it.’

Except ignore it, I think. Which is the ‘resistance’ strategy that seems most at play here. Unless they are really confused between the physical and mental nature of disabilities.

And because I can’t just let well enough alone, can I? I want to make sure that everyone ‘understands.’ Is this because I don’t believe that ‘learning disability’ means that people just can’t understand some things? Am I trying to empower them or just to reinforce my own belief that really they are not ‘stupid,’ they just need things explained in a way they understand.

That it’s environmental, a conversational impairment between both parties, not a cognitive impairment on the part of the ‘abnormal’ partner. Whatever, I keep on going.

‘I think that what people mean when they say someone has a learning disability, is that they have a problem thinking,’ I say. ‘Does that make sense to anyone?’

They look at me, blankly. It was my best shot. But once the words are out of my mouth I realise how stupid they are.

‘What I mean is,’ I add, ‘that if you are labelled as having a visual disability it means you can’t see as well as other people. If you have a problem hearing it means you can’t hear as well as most people and if you have a learning disability label it means that people think that you don’t think as well as other people do.’

I pause, for us all to take in the enormity of the statement. Or even grasp the analogy. And then it hits me. How would you know? How would any of us know if we don’t ‘think’ properly. What does it mean, to think in a ‘normal’ way? Okay, I know this is what lots of tests are set up to do, to reveal whether people have a ‘cognitive impairment’ but I also know that Duncan has taken and failed every single one of these tests and that he’s actually a very intelligent person. I know that he’s been the only audience member to laugh at the subtle jokes in one of my more obscure plays. He laughed, without prompting, in all the right places. He’s not stupid. He defies ‘labelling.’ He just doesn’t like tests. And no, he doesn’t think like everyone else (though how can we be sure of that, or that we all think alike in any substantial way?) but does this make him learning disabled? Is he unable to ‘learn’? And

what does that even mean?

You could look forever for a satisfactory, all encompassing definition of Learning Disability and still come up wanting (that says something in and of itself doesn't it?) but here is what the 'general consensus' seems to encompass.

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life. (Thank you Mencap)

It is certainly a life-long condition. There's no 'recovery' possible. Somehow, before, during or after birth, while the brain is developing, something doesn't go 'right' in the central nervous system. Or it can be genetic. Or caused by childhood illness. Do you see that we're moving away from the specific pretty rapidly here?

But the facts are that at some point, usually fairly early on, you get diagnosed with an abnormally developed brain. Impaired cognitive function is at the base of it. According to 'Them.' They do admit that it's hard to get a diagnosis and that some people might never get an accurate diagnosis (like Duncan) or be diagnosed at all - yes, there are people walking around as 'normal' who may well be 'learning disabled.'

How would you know? How do any of us know? What is 'normal' cognitive function? How do we know we think normally? We're going round in circles here. A fact that Mencap is not afraid to state baldly (and how could they avoid it?) is that people labelled with learning disabilities are usually treated as 'different.' That means as 'abnormal.' In some particularly mean contexts (Mandy's ugly sisters for example) a 'vegetable.'

So, to summarise. A learning disability is a diagnosed abnormal development of the brain which cannot be 'put right' and means that the diagnosed (fancy word for labelled) person has difficulty acting 'normally' in a range of everyday situations as a result of impaired thought processes. Easy huh? Now... who is going to buy this one?

'Look,' I say, 'this is the best way I can think to describe it. If being blind means you can't see properly and being deaf means that you can't hear properly, then learning disability means you can't think properly. And you might need some help to do things that require thinking.'

They sit there. Unquestioning. It's what they do. It's turned into schoolroom mode and no one wants to appear stupid. Or no one really cares. What does it matter to them what the justification of the label is. They just have to deal with the consequences. And I haven't got anywhere near the consequences yet. I'm still in the realms of pointless definition.

'So,' I try my trump card to win them over. To make them understand (there's that word again) that I may not 'understand' but I can empathise with their position. (Can I ever possibly empathise with them?) Perhaps in so far as I have always felt outside the label 'normal' too. In my head at any rate. I can pass for 'normal' in everyday social situations and this is what seems to set me apart from Duncan or Stevie or Kelly or Lauren.

‘Who thinks that they can’t think properly?’

Of course a silence follows. It’s a deeply philosophical question. I am using philosophy to show them that there is no such thing as ‘normal’ and therefore no such thing as ‘learning disability.’ What a showman. But am I right? I go round the group to prove my point to us all. Of course everyone thinks that they can think properly. How would you know? It’s the whole point isn’t it? The machine cannot question its construction. Perhaps I’m missing an important point here though. It’s to do with ‘needing help.’ Because when I come down off my philosophical high horse and ask a more sensible question –with ancillary questions – who needs help? (in a range of domestic tasks) I get quite a different answer.

Everyone who ventures an opinion (that means not Duncan or Lauren and not Stevie, who has turned up but not actually joined the group yet, he’s too busy going round the room touching everything that is brown) admits (quite happily actually) that they do need help with things like washing and cooking and dealing with money. Now, how many ‘normal’ people would admit to that? That they need help?

‘But,’ says Barry, ‘We need to be helped how we need to be helped. Not how They want to help us.’

Barry does live in a world of conspiracy theories I think, but equally he has a pretty profound point. If you’re going to ‘help’ someone you need to do it the right way. Don’t just haul old ladies across the road at will.

Annie knows all about how to get people to ‘help’ her. And this is where I wonder about exactly what learning ‘disability’ actually means. ‘Divergence’ might seem like a better word when you hear this example. Because, as Bilbo has so eloquently put it in the past ‘just because I have a learning disability doesn’t mean I’m stupid.’

We laugh. Though I think to myself, sadly, Bilbo, that’s exactly what it does mean. If you delve deeply enough into the label. But is he stupid, or insightful? Or just divergent?

Back to Annie. This is my best shot for why Annie is not stupid. She is manipulative, cunning and often stubborn, but never, to my mind, stupid. This is Annie’s moment.

Annie doesn’t have any friends. (Apart from all her ‘best’ friends of which, today, remember Kelly is one) She lives in independent accommodation and she is lonely a lot of the time. So she goes out to find friends. This is her plan. She stands beside the busy road, usually at traffic lights (she has been taught to cross at the lights – she can learn something then) waving her white stick around. Most of the group have white sticks which seem to function more as a weapon to bat off potential attackers, or indeed to draw attention to their perceived ‘infirmity’ and thus elicit ‘help’ from the general public or passer by. It is as such a weapon of infirmity that Annie uses the stick. She can see perfectly well. She can walk perfectly well. She knows that if she walks out into the traffic she will most likely get hit by a car and end up in hospital. She’s not stupid. But she wants friends. So, she stands at the traffic lights, waving her stick, acting like she can’t walk easily and when someone comes up to the lights she asks them to press the green man button for her. They do so and invariably feel compelled to ‘help’ her across the crossing. She latches onto their arm. A vice like limpet. And during the length of time it takes them to ‘help’ her across the road, she becomes their ‘friend’ engaging them in as much

conversation as she can get away with before they finally escape. I know this is true. I've watched her do it. And watched her cross the road simply to stand at the other side and wait for someone to 'help' her back. I'd say Annie has some complex cognitive functions going on there, wouldn't you? Okay, it's not what you'd call 'normal' behaviour, but what it is, is the behaviour of an extremely lonely woman, desperate for human contact. Is this a cognitive or a social problem?

There is a darker side to Annie's antics though. I've seen it for myself. I've nearly been run over by a car trying to prevent it! Irony of ironies. Because sometimes the crossing thing just doesn't work. On those occasions, Annie is not above flinging herself onto the ground by 'tripping' off a kerb, in order to get a person to help her up. I was across the road one day (on my way, as Annie was) to the No Labels meeting, when I saw her do it. I saw her deliberately trip. I saw it. She judged it very carefully (except for not seeing me across the road) so that a passerby would not be able to avoid helping her. I wonder if Annie is familiar with the Good Samaritan Bible Story.

Of course my instinctive reaction to seeing her take a swan dive (even though I could see it was intentional) was to rush across the road to pick her up. At which point I was nearly toast myself! I got there second to the passerby and was treated to one of Annie's best dramatic performances. With my arrival she pretty much dusted herself down and held my arm across the road, none the worse for wear. She didn't need a plaster. She didn't have a graze. She was fine. She didn't want the fuss I made when we got her inside to check if she was okay. She'd just wanted someone to talk to. That is learning disability, folks.

So. On Monday morning, we all agree that we all think that we think properly (go philosophy) but that we do all need some help sometimes. Especially with that pesky thing, money. (There's a whole other story about that but I won't go into it now).

And all that leaves is how we 'feel' about the label. Because now the group largely seems to acknowledge that they do have this label. But they're not happy about it. However much I suggest that it may have benefits because it means that they can get help when (and how, Barry) they need it, they still see it as a fundamentally bad thing. A way for people to be horrid to them. And I have to say, in practical terms, I can see their point.

In a heated discussion about labels we come up with the following points (written up on the flipchart by Barry with a flourish) under the heading: What we think about labels.

They are for tins not people

They can be very hurtful

They can be used to oppress people/ to put them down

You might need them sometimes.

Barry puts the last one down only because I insist. No matter how hard I suggest to the group that a label might have a use (other than on a tin) they resist the idea. It's as if they were trained. In the face of this unanimity of purpose I decide the best (and easiest) thing to do is go with the majority

decision. And that's why the group is called NO LABELS. It's not quite eleven thirty and we're making progress. Now, we need to look at aims.

The aim of the NO LABELS Drama Group (we have a constitution and everything) is agreed to be to use drama as a means of showing other people that labels are for tins not for people. So that we can turn the joke

Q: What are you looking at?

A: I don't know, the label's dropped off. (drum roll and beat.)

From something that might have been insulting into something that makes people think. Turning a negative perception into a positive experience. That's the point of NO LABELS. That's what we do.

So. It's eleven thirty. Time to reflect. We've all been in and said our hello's and we've all had a cup of coffee (or tea) and a biscuit. Two biscuits. Three biscuits. We've more or less worked our way (as we always do) through a barrel of assorted biscuits during our 'discussion' session. I'm left wondering who buys the biscuits? But that's one of life's imponderable questions and not one I think I should start on now. We need to get away from biscuits and back to the business of the day. Which is the thorny question of names, identities and labels.

'So,' I say. 'Put your hand up if you're happy with the name NO LABELS for the drama group?'

Everyone puts their hands up. Lauren puts her hand up twice. Well, she puts both hands up at the same time, you know what I mean. If I was at a union meeting this show of hands would be fine. But with learning disability? Can I be sure this means they all agree? Or are some of them just following the others in order to act 'normal'. It's always a possibility. I decide to accept their first action. Anything else is patronising. Maybe I should ask them twice, ask them if they're happy for another name, go round the houses, or... but while I'm thinking Bilbo moves us on. He begins to chant 'Labels, huh, huh, what are they good for – absolutely nothing.'

I have to agree with him.

He gets up and dances. We all laugh. No Labels it is then.

Annie is relieved that we have got that out of the way and are able to get back to more important matters. She asks, portentously, 'Why are there no chocolate biscuits left? Who ate them?'

It's going to turn into a murder mystery if we're not careful. I try to deflect.

'Is this the most important thing to talk about at the moment?'

Ah, sarcasm. Never a very good tool. And pretty rude really, wouldn't you say? Not funny certainly. Annie puts me in my place.

'It's important to me. I want a chocolate biscuit.'

Bilbo is on a roll, he sings, Listen, do you want to eat a biscuit, do you promise not to sell. He sings

to the tune of Gerry and the Pacemakers, Listen, do you want to know a secret and Duncan joins in the chorus (singing the proper words – I'm in love with you-ou-ou..). Bilbo gets up and dances again. There's no stopping him. This is the makings of a great double act.

At this point I suppose I should let you all into a little secret. Listen up Bilbo, I'm going to tell you a secret. While we're talking about labels. I'm an anarchist. Drum roll. Explosion (of wild rapturous applause?) Or just confusion.

I'm an anarchist. No not a bomb throwing, dressed in black, kick in bank windows and never wash my hair sort of anarchist. No. I'm a 'proper' anarchist. A philosophical anarchist. I have a degree to prove it. The dissertation in my first degree (moral philosophy) debated the links between anarchy as it is evidenced in 'primitive' tribes and the international legal system. And very enlightening it was too. I managed if not to prove conclusively (it's arts not science after all) then to argue very strongly for my stated position that anarchists have to be pacifists because their most fundamental belief is the inviolability of the individual. And killing another person is pretty high on the violation stakes isn't it? For me, anarchism is about taking personal responsibility for one's actions. For not relying on rule of law set down by 'Them' (I told you they creep in everywhere) and so I suppose it's not surprising that it's a pretty good place for the 'outsider' or should that be the 'abnormal' to reside.

Which leads me to an interesting thought about the anarchy that No Labels Drama Group exudes on a daily basis. Because, all labels aside, this is a group of people who, for whatever reason, have been positioned 'outside' the norm. So is it any surprise that for them, normal rules don't apply. Whether that be in the playing of drama games (see later) or in the modes of conversational turn taking or... you get my drift. I think this may bear some deeper exploration. They're not stupid, they are reluctant revolutionaries.

Maybe this rests on the distinction between whether they 'cannot' follow the rules of society because they don't understand them, or whether they 'don't' follow the rules of society because they've been excluded from them. My second degree (in science, or is that social science?) is in applied psychology and this equips me to analyse discourse and conversation and suggest reasons 'why' for a range of everyday odd things that happen when you talk with or to people labelled with learning disabilities. Yes, I'm a polymath.

Which is all very well, but having gone off into a reverie worthy of Duncan, I am pulled back (literally by the sleeve) by Annie. Demanding a chocolate biscuit.

'Okay,' I say, hoping to pacify her and I rummage through the biscuits till I find one that might pass for chocolate.

'I don't like chocolate biscuits,' pipes up Lauren, her face giving the lie to her comment. There's a bit Pauline missed.

'You're sitting there, your face covered in chocolate and you're trying to tell me you don't like chocolate biscuits,' I laugh.

'Yes, darling,' she replies and cackles at me.

Annie is not looking so charmed.

‘That’s the best I can do right now, Annie,’ I say. ‘Will that do?’

She gives me her best withering look.

‘I suppose it’ll have to,’ she says.

That’s me put firmly in my place. But after all, we shouldn’t really still be eating biscuits this late should we? I look at my watch. It’s nearly time for lunch. For goodness sake. We need to move on. Where’s Stevie? Oh, over there with Pauline, touching blue things.

‘Shall we get started on the drama?’ I ask, generally.

There’s a chorus of approval.

‘Stevie,’ I shout. ‘D’you want to come and play a game?’

And to my amazement, he stops touching blue things and comes across to me. Where he touches my blue No Labels sweatshirt. Well, it was a partial triumph.

So what’s the point of drama games? You thought this was a group of adults and now I’m telling you we waste our time playing games. Okay. Let me enlighten you. We are a drama as advocacy group at No Labels. We use dramatic performances to show people some of our problems and sometimes offer solutions - or at least another way of seeing things. The ‘games’ referred to are part of the armoury of a famous drama practitioner, the late, great Augusto Boal who founded the Theatre of the Oppressed movement. I’m not sure, but as far as I’m aware we are the only group labelled with learning disabilities who use TO as their primary ‘method.’

We use these games as a prelude to forum theatre ‘experiences.’ We also use them to support our more traditional ‘performances.’ Because it’s easy enough for an audience to miss the point of Boalian ‘style’ drama delivered by adults labelled with learning disabilities, and unless we teach them that we are not performing traditional mainstream theatre, they tend to think we are and that we are failing. So we need to educate them twice over. Once in what they are about to see and once by what they see. Open eyes and open minds.

The game for today that I’m keen to get Stevie interested in is called Columbian Hypnosis. Well, our variant of it which is called Magic Circles. Stevie likes Magic Circles. Here’s what happens. You get into pairs and each person has a brightly coloured cardboard ‘magic circle’ attached to their hands via a stuck on cardboard strap. Pauline helped everyone make the magic circles and everyone coloured in their own. Pauline did the sticking for Annie because Annie doesn’t like the glitter and glue and getting her hands sticky. Lauren on the other hand just dumped a pile of glue and glitter all over her magic circle and it shines and sparkles like a princesses tiara. Which pleases her. I digress.

Everyone puts on their magic circle and they stand in their pairs. One leads by making movements with their circle – sometimes small, sometimes dramatic, sometimes calm, sometimes frenetic. The aim is for their partner to ‘follow’ or ‘copy’ their movement. Then we swap over and the other one



gets a shot leading. There's NO TALKING (though sometimes a lot of giggling) during this game because it's meant to help concentration. The no talking probably pleases the likes of Stevie, Duncan and Lauren who aren't big on verbal communication anyway. It is torture for Annie and Kelly and Deirdre who love talking. The louder the better.

We try to make sure that each member of the group takes responsibility for their own favourite game. Magic Circles is Stevie's favourite game so he is 'the leader.' Effectively this means that he decides the parameters of the game – such as when to stop and when to mutate. Because the beauty of these drama games is their flexibility. This means we can change the rules to suit us. And we do. Often. Sometimes too often. Then the game descends into a kind of chaos. But that's fine too. It's creative chaos.

Inevitably, because Stevie doesn't like being in one place too long, even with all the colours of Magic Circle being waved in his face; he needs to go and touch things. So, after a few minutes of stationary concentration (and a bit of giggling) we're off and running.

The first time Stevie took off during Magic Circles, Deirdre got annoyed. Deirdre often gets annoyed when people 'don't play the game properly,' and I have to explain to her that the games are for 'everyone' and everyone can choose to bend the rules. Deirdre doesn't like this. She's not quite the anarchist some of the others are. She's quite a normalist at heart is our Deirdre. And we love her for that.

'If you don't mind my saying,' she says, 'Stevie isn't playing the game properly.'

'Or maybe,' I reply, 'he's adding something to the game. Let's see.'

So what we do when Stevie abandons the game in favour of 'a wander' is everyone follows him. He got to be a regular little Pied Piper and that gave us the idea for one of our first plays. It was called Peter Pan and the Pied Piper of Hamelin. And it goes something like this.

This is just a rehearsal you understand. Anything can (and will) happen.

'Once upon a time in a land far away,' says Bilbo, who does like a good Star Wars inspired fairy tale,

'Peter Pan had killed Captain Hook and was looking for something new to do.'

Bilbo is cast as Peter Pan and he gets his band of Lost Boys together (anyone else who is paying attention) and they head off to Hamelin. Bilbo, I will admit, isn't a natural Peter Pan, he looks a lot older than his fifty odd years, and to imagine that he is a boy who hasn't or won't grow up requires the sort of suspension of disbelief rarely seen in drama. Unless you are of the belief that all those labelled with 'learning disabilities' are actually 'children' or 'innocents' in some way. But Bilbo is neither a child nor an 'innocent.' He's playing Peter Pan because he demands to wield a sword. He was Captain Hook to Mandy's Peter Pan, but it was too dangerous so we changed tack and allowed him to be Peter Pan and Mandy was promised a better role... did she get one? Hmm...

Anyway, now Bilbo Peter Pan takes hold of Annie/Wendy and leads her on a journey.

‘He’s my boyfriend,’ says Annie. Well it’s a variation on ‘my best friend - or fwendy which of course is the derivation of the name Wendy- a child of J.M.Barrie’s acquaintance who couldn’t pronounce ‘r’s’ being responsible.

Bilbo isn’t too keen on being a boyfriend, especially if Wendy/Annie is going to stop him from charging at folk with his cardboard sword.

We switch scenes. We are now in Hamelin. Where they have a plague of rats. Which Bilbo/Peter is very keen to kill one by one with his cardboard sword. Which is brown. Which attracts Stevie. For a bit.

Basically, we develop the play out of the following improvised actions. Stevie touches the sword. He utters a kind of squeak which is as close as he gets to talking and Bilbo/Peter resists him trying to take the sword. Chaos is but moments away when I suggest that Bilbo/Peter go with Stevie, following him. I even, in a rare moment of control, manage to get him to give Stevie the sword. You can’t please all the people all the time. Stevie happy, Bilbo less so. And as Bilbo follows Stevie I suggest that Stevie is like the Pied Piper and perhaps everyone should follow him and copy what he does. So they do. Everyone crocodiles behind Stevie (we learned crocodiling when we were improvising Peter Pan) and tries to copy as closely as they can how he moves, what he touches etc. It works. For a long time. Even without music. But eventually it palls. Barry has been fiddling with the karaoke machine (he’s keen for us to do some singing) and he switches a dial the wrong way (intentionally?) and we get some music. Not loud enough to hear the words but loud enough to be a distraction. Except that it’s not a distraction. Stevie starts to move in time with the music. It’s like some kind of Tai Chi. It’s amazing. Very moving. Quickly, I suggest to the others that they stand facing Stevie, and copy him. They do so. And that’s how Stevie becomes the Pied Piper. It never develops into a full performance, but sometimes we do it as a warm up to an event, to show people how the group are in tune with and can work together as a group. We lost the cardboard sword though.

This gives you a flavour of what we do. This Monday though, we need to have lunch.

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And after lunch we are rehearsing another game for our show.

Duncan’s favourite game provides us with the material for another of our little Boalian inspired theatre pieces. It’s called King John’s Journey. Someone, it might have been me, trying to show off to Bilbo, might have been reciting some A.A. Milne – you know ‘King John was not a good man, he had his little ways...’ which led us into a discussion about power. And it got linked with another drama game called ‘Keep or Kill.’ Bilbo does like it when there’s a bit of ‘jeopardy’ in a game. It keeps him interested. And we like to oblige all our members where we can. So we develop the game Keep or Kill into a short play (with music for Duncan) called King John’s Journey. This is what happens:

The set opens to Robbie Williams soundtrack ‘Millennium’ (and before you ask, we probably don’t have the required public lending rights, but we kind of figure if we asked Robbie, he’d be quite happy for us to sing along Karaoke style to his song without giving him money we don’t have. I hope so. I’d like to think Robbie was that cool.)

So – Millennium is playing and there are a bunch of peasants with brooms brushing the floor almost in time to the music. The peasants are: Deirdre, Kelly, Lauren, Annie, Mandy, Stevie and Pauline.

The advisors (played by Bilbo and Barry) and the King (played by Duncan because he's the best at shouting 'kill' really loudly, even though Bilbo likes shouting it too.) watch them. I am the jester, which means I wear a ridiculous hat with bells on and generally run around like a blue arsed fly. Pretending to keep things in order. Pretending to marshall the anarchy. Note the word 'pretending' here. It's very important.

At the point in the song where the words 'come and have a go' are sung, Bilbo and Barry stand up and square up to each other. Bilbo likes this bit of it because he's the 'bad' advisor and thinks this is more fun than sitting down under a cardboard crown being King. Luckily for us. And then, because people who come to a dramatic performance tend to like to have words, I introduce the story:

I say, 'Once upon a time there was a King called King John. He had two advisors, one was good and one was bad. He also had a lot of peasants. Singing was banned in this country. When the people worked there was music, but they were not allowed to sing and the music just dragged them down.'

At which point if we are lucky and everyone's still paying attention and no one has decided to change the rules this early, the peasants take their brooms and stand at the back of the stage. Stevie sometimes takes his broom off into the audience but that's okay too.

I say, 'One day the King decided that he had too many mouths to feed and called upon his people to see who he would keep and who he would kill.'

And the audience start to get the idea of what they're about to see. Which is organised chaos set to music. Because this is the cue for the peasants to come up one after another and offer their services to the king. And I get to introduce them.

The first one up is Deirdre. She's the King's cook.

She makes a big deal of bowing before the King, who pretty much ignores her and she gives it her best shot...

'I will cook and clean for you, your majesty,'

She rarely gets further than this (unless Duncan is humming to the lights in which case she might get a few more words out) before he breaks into her speech with his favourite line,

'Kill.'

He shouts at the top of his voice. A voice we very rarely hear. And are overjoyed when we do. Even if it is shouting Kill. When we started playing this game there was a point in time when Deirdre asked me if I would tell 'the people we live with' (because Deirdre and Duncan live in the same group home),

'Would you tell them why he shouts kill all the time, if you don't mind.'

I didn't mind at all. I didn't want them to think Duncan had suddenly lost control of his mind or was exhibiting 'challenging' behaviour. Oh no, that would never do. And we don't believe in 'challenging' behaviour here now do we? No. We call it 'creative' behaviour and we applaud it. When Stevie goes on 'a wander' we don't think he's being disruptive, we think he's being creative and we all follow behind him to see where he'll lead us. Our Pied Piper remember. And the same with Duncan. He shouts 'Kill' because it's his preferred 'in character' choice. He loves the power. He is power crazed in the play. That's fine because he has little enough opportunity to exercise power in his everyday life. In all the years I've played this game with groups I find that the people who get most out of it are the ones with the least power in their everyday life. So we positively encourage it. But we do suggest to Duncan that he doesn't upset his 'carers' by yelling it too often, too randomly at them. Unless he really wants to. In which case – go for it Duncan my boy!

So, Deirdre never really gets used to the idea that the King might want to kill her and she always takes a bit of what Barry calls 'hombrage' at the scenario – so Barry (the good advisor) sympathises with her and ushers her out to where Bilbo is standing with a rather scary looking cardboard implement that he can't wait to use to chop off her head with. He glowers at her most convincingly. Poor Deirdre. Being normal amongst the anarchists can have its downside.

Next up is Kelly the King's Driver. I point out to the audience (in case they haven't got it yet) that the King is the supreme power and that this is a story developed out of a game which shows power imbalances and aims to resolve them. And – for Kelly, who is never quite sure what is acting and what isn't - remind her that this is 'only a play.' So up she comes.

'Your majesty. I'm your driver. I will drive you around...'

'To the chip shop,' Barry the good advisor butts in (he loves the comedy ad lib) 'because you've just killed your cook and you're going to be hungry.'

If this is meant to appeal to the King's better nature it fails miserably and inevitably he shouts out clear as a bell one more time,

'Kill.'

It's like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead this play. In so far as however many times you like to guess which side the coin will fall, it will always be 'kill' (that's heads). It's somehow comforting to have that level of certainty in what is essentially a devised piece. Though worrying that Duncan feels the need to exert this power without ever considering if anyone else is actually worth keeping.

So that's Kelly the driver despatched.

Bilbo grins even more and usually says something like,

'It's going to be a busy day, your majesty.'

And if he's lucky the King doesn't shout 'Kill' at him because hey, if you kill the executioner what're you gonna do?

Next up is Annie, she's still clutching her broom to show that she's the King's Housekeeper. Now you know, I don't think that if he's offered a driver and a cook he's going to have much time for a housekeeper so it seems pretty inevitable what comes next, and indeed,

'Kill,' he shouts and sends Annie over to Bilbo, usually muttering under her breath, 'I never got to say anything,' as she goes.

The pace picks up as Lauren and Stevie and even Pauline are despatched the same way as the others with a shout that's turned into a bellowing roar. 'Kill, Kill, Kill.' Duncan would make a great King Lear I think (which gives me an idea for Tuesday's play). But for now I need to keep the audience up to speed so I point out to them what's happened.

'So all the peasants were doomed to death. That only left the advisors,' I say and you can hear Bilbo give it a 'da, da, dah' in the background. Which always gets a giggle if not a belly laugh from the crowd.

The advisors go up to give it their best shot. Barry can talk the hind leg off a donkey and charm a snake charmer. Surely things are about to change and the King will show mercy?

'Sire, I have been your good advisor all my life. I have known you since you were a small boy. I advised your father Good King John, before you...'

'Kill.' He's cut off in his prime.

We are all a little bit shocked. After all. Barry is the good guy here. Oh well, now for the bad advisor. He and the king have some things in common so surely...

'Your majesty,' Bilbo wheedles, 'There's a lot of killing to be done and I will kill them for you, so you have to keep me.'

The King doesn't even draw breath. Well, maybe a moment's pause for dramatic effect. Or not. Depending on his mood. But whether we get suspense or not the answer is the same one.

'Kill.'

I don't think I've got much of a chance. But I give it my best shot.

'Your majesty. You've killed all your people. Will you not be lonely?'

This line of reason isn't going to wash. The King doesn't know what being lonely means. He has no need of other people. He's above all that. He kills me too.

Which is possibly where his plan goes wrong. There is a saying that you may not be able to please all the people all the time, but if you are a monarch, even a despotic one, you've got to try and keep some of the people on your side or... revolution.

Bilbo delivers his devilish plan with much cardboard implement waving.

‘I have a plan. If we all band together and rise up against the king we can kill him.’

The peasants agree. Bilbo goes off to sharpen his cardboard implement. Leaving Barry as the voice of reason

‘I have a better plan,’ he says.

Can there be a better plan than killing a crazed, despotic monarch who has lost all sense of reason? Oh yes, there can. But the peasants aren’t convinced. They ask,

‘What plan?’

And Barry fills them in. He’s Gloucester to Duncan’s King Lear. It is moving. If you squint and suspend quite a bit of disbelief and have a weird and strong imagination. And don’t believe in learning disability.

‘There has to be a better way,’ he continues.

‘What way?’ They chorus. At least those who are still paying attention do. Stevie is probably off touching Bilbo’s cardboard implement because it’s brown and he likes brown and Lauren is probably giggling about and giggling and Kelly is still a little bit worried that someone might be coming to kill her, and Deirdre and Annie are still a bit miffed that they haven’t been kept. But they’ll get over it. Mandy and Pauline are keeping quiet. Like good revolting peasants. I think that’s everyone accounted for.

‘There is a song...’ Barry begins as I cue up the next track on the karaoke machine.

‘We’re not allowed to sing,’ Annie says, importantly. No one is going to prevent her from saying her ‘big’ line this time.

‘Yes,’ agrees Deirdre, ‘if you don’t mind my saying so, singing’s banned.’

Then Barry states the bleeding obvious.

‘What more can they do to us?’ he asks. ‘We are going to die anyway so we may as well stand up for ourselves.’

This is the kind of logic that you would think couldn’t be ignored, but they are not fully in line with the plan and they shout together,

‘Kill the king!’

‘No,’ Barry says. The voice of reason to the ugly broom wielding mob in front of him.

‘No. We don’t want to kill anyone. I remember what the old King said, he had a saying ‘the only thing needed for evil to triumph is that good men do nothing’ and are we good men?’ (and women implied).

It’s a speech worthy of Olivier and there’s only one response to that of course. The peasants shout out

‘Yes,’ with heartfelt gusto.

‘Then jester, play the song,’ Barry commands.

And the song starts. It is ‘No Matter What They Tell Us’ that Boyzone favourite of Mandy’s and she starts the singalong. Once again, no PLR is in evidence. Once again, apologies. Desperate times. Desperate measures and all that. So sue us. And just how would you sue a bunch of people ‘with mental incapacity?’

Across the stage, still sitting on his plastic throne, alone but not lonely, the tune wafts in the direction of Bad King John and he starts shaking his head in time to the music. Then... he starts to sing. It gets the audience every time. Never a dry eye in the house. Timing is one of Duncan’s best theatrical attributes. And his singing voice of course. He’s a big game player and here he’s in his element. He sings, in tune, with feeling.

Barry points out to the peasants, in case anyone isn’t paying attention, (who could not be captivated by Duncan at this point?) ‘The King is singing, I think our plan will work.’

And they all go over to join the King. Bilbo lurks beside the King, not looking happy. He doesn’t like Boyzone and he can see his chance for a bloodthirsty killing spree about to go a begging.

‘We want to talk to you,’ Barry says to the King.

‘Come on, we can kill him now,’ Bilbo, ever the opportunistic optimist says.

‘No,’ Barry says, ‘We’re going to sing with the King. Teach him to sing.’

Okay, this is a weak point in the plot because any fool can see that Duncan is perfectly capable of singing without any help from Barry who does have a problem holding a tune that isn’t quite being tone deaf but is definitely tonally ‘impaired’ and in need of ‘appropriate help.’

But you have to suspend disbelief in drama, at least once in a play, and this is the moment. Bilbo fights a manful rear guard action saying sulkily,

‘The King doesn’t want to sing.’

‘Oh yes he does,’ retorts Barry.

And this is Bilbo’s cue to leave the stage in as big a theatrical huff as he can muster. Which is usually pretty big. Often he takes Stevie with him. When Stevie is in his ‘brown’ phase at any rate.

‘We have a new song to teach you,’ Barry says to the King. ‘If you keep us, we can all sing together. Do you want to...?’

And the King doesn’t shout ‘Kill.’ Instead he shouts out just as loud, ‘Yuss.’ And, if I’ve managed to cue up the music properly without having had my ear chewed by Annie and/or Deirdre asking me if I think it’s going okay, we commence our finale song. Eternal Flame. The Bangles. Same PLR story.

It's the go for broke finish. Where we 'engage' the audience. Moving across the stage to the King, I, the jester, start the song,

'Close your eyes, give me your hand,' and then the group move off into the audience to display their carefully, (but simple) choreographed moves. The simplicity is due to the fact that choreography is not my strong point. They each pick out a member of the audience and take hands with them while singing the rest of the song. Even the most hardbitten audience member is sorely pressed not to at least let their guard down, and most fully embrace what follows.

And if they possibly can, Annie and Kelly at least manage to get some audience members up on stage with us to join in the final chorus. And then it's time for the moral. Boalian drama is about putting right wrongs and so we feel compelled to offer some kind of a moral statement. Just in case someone wasn't paying attention or goes away missing the point. Which is that sometimes you can reward evil with good and if you are good enough, you can convert even the most hard hearted round to the way of happiness and light. I wish.

Cue curtain and rapturous applause. Another performance over. Another audience exposed to our No Labels approach. No one asks for their money back. Even though we usually perform for free. They take away the message: Go home and think about how you treat people. And be careful if you are in a position of power. Chickens can come home to roost.

And that's the end of Monday.



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