

A Circus of Sorrows

An extract from the play by Phil Tong

THE PLAY IS SET IN A STYLISED PSYCHIATRIC WARD IN A HOSPITAL NEAR BRISTOL. ALL THE ACTION, APART FROM THE VISITS FROM THE PSYCHIATRIST ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE TURMOIL MARTIN IS GOING THROUGH. ELSEWHERE IN THE SPACE ARE TWO OTHER CHARACTERS, ONE MALE AND ONE FEMALE. THE MALE CHARACTER LIES ON THE HOSPITAL BED AND IS REFERRED TO AS THE PROFESSOR. THE FEMALE CHARACTER, ANNIE, SITS APART ON A SINGLE CHAIR IN THE ROOM. THEY BOTH FULFIL MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS IN MARTIN'S LIFE.

ALONE

LIGHTS UP TIGHT TO REVEAL MARTIN STOOD ALONE, SINGING A MOURNFULLY SLOW RENDITION OF THE CHORUS OF 'GOING TO THE ZOO TOMORROW' ALA SLOW BLUES/FADO.

MARTIN

(sings) We're going to the zoo... How about you... You can come too... We're going to the zoo...

CARE

LIGHTS UP TO ILLUMINATE CHARLOTTE'S ENTRANCE. SHE IS A JUNIOR DOCTOR SPECIALISING IN TREATING PSYCHIATRIC PATIENTS. HER STATUS IS SHOWN BY THE BADGE ON HER TOP. SHE ENTERS DURING THE PREVIOUS SECTION AND WATCHES HIM SING THE END OF HIS SONG. SHE IS MIDDLE CLASS, EDUCATED AND WELL DRESSED.

CHARLOTTE

Hello Martin. My name's Charlotte.

MARTIN

Hello.

CHARLOTTE

I'm going to be working with you during your stay here with us.

MARTIN

That's nice. Is it like a holiday camp?

CHARLOTTE

That's a great way to think about it. And I'll be your redcoat, if you like.

MARTIN

Sounds like fun.

CHARLOTTE

And I'll do my best to make sure you have plenty of fun while you're here with us.
OK?

MARTIN

Thank you.

CHARLOTTE

Call me Charley.

MARTIN

Isn't that a boy's name?

CHARLOTTE

It can be....

MARTIN

But you're a girl.

CHARLOTTE

I am.

MARTIN

So why would you want me to call you a boy's name?

CHARLOTTE

It's a different spelling.

MARTIN

I didn't know that. It don't say that on your badge.

CHARLOTTE

No.

MARTIN

That says your name's 'Dr Charlotte Mills'.

CHARLOTTE

Because that's my job.

I used to have a job.

MARTIN

I know. At the zoo.

CHARLOTTE

Yeah. I liked it there.

MARTIN

You worked with Vicky, didn't you?

CHARLOTTE

How do you know that?

MARTIN

I spoke to her earlier.

CHARLOTTE

What did she want?

MARTIN

She came to check on you.

CHARLOTTE

Why?

MARTIN

Because she's your boss and she was concerned about you.

CHARLOTTE

That's nice of her.

MARTIN

Yes it is. She wanted to know how you were, Martin.

CHARLOTTE

I bet she did.

ANNIE

And how am I?

MARTIN

You tell me.

CHARLOTTE

Right now?
MARTIN

Yes.
CHARLOTTE

I'm.....

*CHARLOTTE WAITS FOR AN ANSWER BUT
DOESN'T GET ONE AS MARTIN STRUGGLES TO
FIND AN ANSWER.*

CHARLOTTE
Tell me about working at the zoo.

MARTIN
I liked the animals. I used to like helping out at feedin' time.

CHARLOTTE
Yes. Vicky said.

MARTIN
She used to like me to help her sometimes.

ANNIE
Leave all that now Martin, I need you up at the feedin' station.

MARTIN
What right now?

ANNIE
Yes.

MARTIN
But what about the elephants? I thought I was supposed to be muckin' them out first!

ANNIE
Well, I need you now! Alright?

*HE TURNS BACK ONCE MORE TO FOCUS ON
CHARLOTTE*

MARTIN

She was always interrupting me. Soon as I'd got myself settled on one thing there was always something else she wanted me to do!

CHARLOTTE

But you liked feeding time!

MARTIN

I did. It was quiet. Calm. All neat and tidy. Lots of plastic tubs. Everythin' laid out in a long line. Labelled. All ready.

CHARLOTTE

And when you'd prepared the food, did you get to take it in to the animals?

MARTIN

I did. And they was always very grateful.

CHARLOTTE

Were they? How could you tell?

MARTIN

They'd eat it all up. Every scrap. Lick their bowls completely clean.

CHARLOTTE

Did that make you feel good?

MARTIN

It did. It made me smile. And sometimes, it would make the animals smile too.

CHARLOTTE CONSIDERS MARTIN'S ANSWER.

CHARLOTTE

Did you have a favourite?

MARTIN

I liked the bears the best.

CHARLOTTE

Why was that?

*THE PROFESSOR SITS BOLT UPRIGHT ON THE
BED AND SPEAKS*

PROFESSOR

The bear has long been regarded as a sacred animal for the First Nation People of America; the name carried symbolic meaning for them. Many tribes considered the bear to be a gift for their mother, the Earth.

MARTIN

When my Dad used to take me to the zoo. I always wanted to go up and see the bears first.

ANNIE

We can't afford for you to keep taking that boy to the zoo, Jimmy!

PROFESSOR

But he loves it Dolores.

*THE PROFESSOR LAYS BACK DOWN ON THE
BED WITH A SNAP.*

LIES, LIES AND MORE LIES**CHARLOTTE**

Does thinking about the bears make you happy, Martin? Is that why you were singing, just now?

MARTIN

I weren't singin'!

CHARLOTTE

Weren't you?

MARTIN

No. Was I?

CHARLOTTE

I thought...

MARTIN

No. That weren't me!

CHARLOTTE

I could have sworn...

MARTIN

No. You've got that all wrong. Mind you, I do like singin' though.

CHARLOTTE

Singing's good for you... But that sounded a very sad song, Martin.

MARTIN

Sorry. I don't mean to make no-one feel 'sad'.

ANNIE

And you can wipe that miserable look off your face!

THE PROFESSOR SITS UP IN BED ONCE MORE

PROFESSOR

You wanna try being a bit more like me, Martin.

MARTIN

How's that, Dad?

PROFESSOR

Try smilin' a bit more.

MARTIN

I'm not very good at smilin'!

CHARLOTTE

Why's that Martin?

MARTIN

I got funny teeth.

PROFESSOR

If you tried smilin' a bit more, nobody would notice your teeth. Look at me, I could grin for England!

THE PROFESSOR GRINS AND THEN LIES BACK DOWN ON THE BED WITH A SNAP.

CHARLOTTE

There's nothing wrong with your teeth, Martin.

MARTIN

So why did they all call me 'Wolf Man' at school?

CHARLOTTE

Children can be cruel, sometimes.

MARTIN

That's what Ursula says.

CHARLOTTE

Who's Ursula, Martin?

MARTIN

One of the bears! At the zoo! She just had cubs. Three of them.

CHARLOTTE

Wow.

*CHARLOTTE CONSIDERS MATTERS A MOMENT,
TRYING TO TAKE IN WHAT SHE'S JUST HEARD.*

CHARLOTTE

I've been looking at your notes.

MARTIN

Was they fascinatin'?

*CHARLOTTE SMILES AT THE USE OF THE
WORD 'FASCINATING.'*

CHARLOTTE

They were actually.

ANNIE

That's why she was talkin' to Vicky. You can bet your bottom dollar they had a right laugh about it!

MARTIN

So, what did you find out? Readin' about me.... Did you find out all my secrets?

CHARLOTTE

Have you got secrets, Martin?

MARTIN

Don't everyone?

CHARLOTTE

Do you want to tell me some?

MARTIN

No! They wouldn't be secret if I told you. Would they?

*CHARLOTTE CONSIDERS FOR A MOMENT
WHETHER TO SAY WHAT SHE KNOWS.*

CHARLOTTE

Some of your colleagues have expressed concern over your need to lie to them.

ANNIE

Told you!

MARTIN

I don't lie. Never have.

*THE PROFESSOR SITS BOLT UPRIGHT ON THE
BED.*

PROFESSOR

Your mother won't like it if you don't tell the truth, Martin.

ANNIE

You weren't brought up to tell lies! Were you Martin?

CHARLOTTE

What you just said to me...Was that a lie?

MARTIN

No.

CHARLOTTE

An untruth then.

MARTIN

Ain't that the same?

CHARLOTTE

What do you think?

MARTIN

I don't know.

ANNIE

She don't know either. That's why she's askin' you!

MARTIN

Thought that was why I was in here. So you lot could tell me what's what!

ANNIE

Nice one, Martin!

CHARLOTTE

Hopefully, I'll be able to provide you with some answers. I'm hoping that things will emerge for us both as our conversations evolve.

MARTIN

And how'm I supposed to understand what you're on about if you talk to me like that?

*CHARLOTTE RESIGNEDLY ACCEPTS THIS
CONVERSATION IS PROBABLY AT AN END*

CHARLOTTE

You're getting tired, Martin. I think we should continue this later.

MARTIN

You off already?

CHARLOTTE

Try to get some rest and I'll see you later.

*CHARLOTTE EXITS AND LEAVES MARTIN
ALONE WITH HIS COMPANIONS*