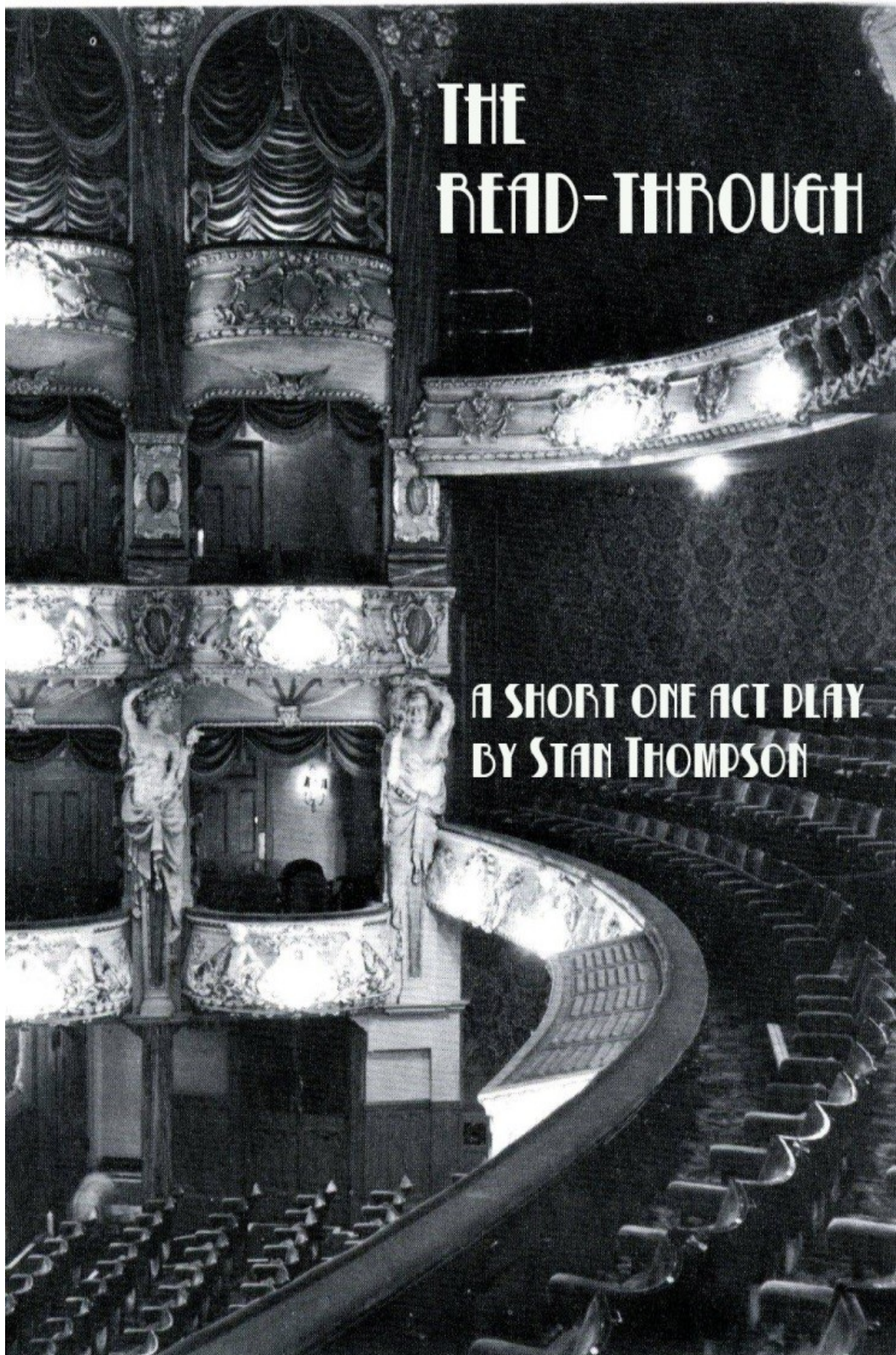


THE READ-THROUGH, a short, one act play by Stan Thompson, MMXX



THE READ-THROUGH

by Stan Thompson

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THE READ-THROUGH

This play is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and locales are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

CAST

Gemma Swanson: A young stage actress in her mid-twenties

Elliot Blake: A distinguished actor, of stage, screen and television, in his late-seventies

Jacob Kramer: An aspiring stage director in his early forties

Recommended intro music: 'Someone to Watch Over Me' – 1926 piano version played by George Gershwin (if the rights are available). Runs for three minutes.

ACT ONE

The action takes place on the stage of the [fictional] dilapidated, Victorian, Queensbury Theatre, in central London, summer, present day. The cast of a new production of Oscar Wilde's 'Lady Windermere's Fan' are meeting for their first read-through, following auditions.

There is no elaborate set or scenery: the stage is almost bare, except for a table and two chairs (stage right), and a pile of wicker, costume baskets (stage left). The stage's rear brick wall is visible. A large 'NO SMOKING' sign is on view, together with another sign: 'DRESSING ROOMS' pointing stage left. The faded safety curtain is suspended half mast. Tattered drapes and ropes hang haphazardly. The lighting is sparse and uneven. An air of neglect and decay pervades the fabric of this once-magnificent theatre.

At curtain-rise, ELLIOT BLAKE is sitting by the side of the table, staring out towards the rear of the auditorium. He is wearing black leather shoes, dark trousers with a white shirt and cravat. He appears contemplative.

After about five seconds, GEMMA SWANSON enters, rushing in from stage left. GEMMA is wearing jeans, white tee-shirt and trainers. A large, brown, leather handbag is slung over her left shoulder.

GEMMA *(catching her breath as she enters)* Oh, hello, everybody. Sorry I'm late. I'm Gemma Swanson. Hope I haven't kept you all waiting?

ELLIOT *(genteel and looking towards Gemma)* Good morning, Gemma. I'm Elliot Blake. So very pleased to meet you. But please excuse me if I don't get up – my bones aren't what they used to be. *(a moment)* "Swanson", did you say? You're not related to the legendary, Gloria, I don't suppose?

GEMMA *(deliberately overacting and with an affected voice)* "Alright, Mr DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up. I am big! It's the pictures that got small."

ELLIOT *(chuckling)* Ah, yes, Norma Desmond as played by Gloria Swanson in Sunset Boulevard. They don't make pictures like that anymore.

GEMMA *(laughing)* Everybody asks me if I'm related to Gloria. But, no, my agent chose the name for me. He thought it sounded more theatrical than "Gemma Ramsbottom", my actual name.

They both laugh. GEMMA is surprised to find only ELLIOT on stage.

Anyway, good to meet you, too, Elliot. *(looking around)* So, no sign of Jacob or the rest of the cast?

ELLIOT *(with a perplexed look)* Jacob? Should I know him?

GEMMA Jacob Kramer? Our director?

ELLIOT Oh. No. You're the only one here, apart from me, of course.

GEMMA They're probably having trouble finding the place. I got lost coming out of Tottenham Court Road tube station. I had to ask a traffic warden for directions. And even he was unsure.

ELLIOT Yes, we are a little off the beaten track, aren't we?

GEMMA So, this isn't Soho, then?

ELLIOT Oh no. Fitzrovia. Although the area was once regarded as a northern extension of Soho. But we're on the other side of Oxford Street.

GEMMA "Fitzrovia"? It sounds like an imaginary country in an Ealing Comedy.

ELLIOT *(laughing)* No, a locality originally built for the upper classes - many of its aristocratic houses were designed by Robert Adam. But now it's mostly known as the home of that ghastly, Post Office Tower carbuncle.

GEMMA *(staring at ELLIOT)* Don't mind me asking, but you look really famous?

ELLIOT *(amused and chuckling)* Well, I have been around for some time, for my sins.

GEMMA On the stage?

ELLIOT Yes, stage and films. And a little bit of television. But all that was a long time ago. *(a moment)* And what about you? It can't be easy for a young actress these days?

GEMMA I've been working in rep mainly, and have had some walk-on parts at Stratford. But nothing really meaty, so far.

ELLIOT Well, the important thing is that you take whatever work is offered; it's all good experience for when that big break comes knocking.

GEMMA *(a moment)* So, have you been waiting long?

ELLIOT I've been here a while.

GEMMA There was nobody out front, so I let myself in through the stage door. It was unlocked - no sign of any life.

ELLIOT There rarely is.

GEMMA This is **the** Queensbury Theatre, I suppose? This is the address Jacob gave me. But there's no actual signage out front.

ELLIOT Yes, this is the Queensbury. You are in the right place. All the signs were removed years ago under the orders of the local health and safety brigade; they would sway dangerously whenever the wind got up.

The stage lights flicker.

GEMMA *(looking up and pointing)* Were the lights switched on when you got here?

ELLIOT No. I turned them on. I am very familiar with the workings of this theatre, although the electrics here seem to have come out of the ark!

There is a brief, awkward silence.

GEMMA *(excited)* Are you looking forward to the read-through today? It's a terrific play, don't you think? Audiences just love Oscar Wilde, don't they? Which part did you read for? Lord Windermere, I bet? But I don't recall seeing you at the auditions?

ELLIOT *(somewhat vague)* No, you didn't. *(a moment)* I don't get invited to auditions anymore...

GEMMA shows surprise but does not pursue it with ELLIOT. Instead, she moves downstage centre and makes an exaggerated point of surveying the width and height of the vast auditorium.

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GEMMA This really is a massive barn of a place. It must have been quite something in its heyday?

ELLIOT It certainly was - the architecture's Victorian Gothic. One of the largest theatres in the land when it first opened its doors - nearly four thousand seats in the house, eclipsing the dear old Coliseum by a long chalk.

GEMMA Really? You seem to know a lot about this theatre?

ELLIOT I should do; I have trodden these boards, many a time. I know every nook and cranny – from the gods to the vaults.

GEMMA (*impressed*) You've performed here, on this stage?

ELLIOT Oh yes, with all the great thespians: Robson, Wolfit, Olivier, Gielgud....