

# **The Hippodrome Cage**

A short Play by Neil Sharman

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**The Hippodrome Cage.** A short Play by Neil Sharman.

*A theatre flat stands half painted. It's going to show an English country garden. There's a pile of papers and a candlestick telephone on a wooden table with matching wooden chairs. TOM PARK stands alone. He has a three-piece check suit on, and he puts his Derby hat on the desk.*

TOM: It will hardly be remembered. Seventy years from now, in the 1990s, an old lady will mention it briefly in a book called Remember Greenwich. It won't even be her memory, but her father's... and who knows if he remembered it correctly. The gin and ale flow freely here after all. *(Whimsically, theatrically)* Memories are the flicker of a footlight candle. *(As if delivering a crude punchline to a joke)* Or the taste of beer in a belch.

But right now, though, it's real. It's real steel. And it isn't half causing some chatter. Plus a few chuckles; my chuckles. Because a lot of that chatter is, well, just conspiracy theories. You can tell people the truth to their face, but if it doesn't chime with their view of the world, they'll make up a story that does. We like a good story here.

*HAMISH WOODCOCK and SCARLETT HUGHES, both in their forties enter, walking quickly across the stage. She is dressed theatrically in a scarlet dress. Tom watches them, amused at their haste. They aren't in his room; he's imagining them walking in the street.*

Scarlett: It is preposterous that there is a cage in a musical hall. In London, too, if you call Greenwich London. Not Glasgow, not Leeds or Bradford or Sydney or Bombay

Hamish: We don't know if it still exists. I wrote to Mr Park two weeks ago, but he hasn't had the dignity to respond.

Tom: Did he? *He checks the pile of papers and pulls up a letter, reading it quickly.* He did. *Addresses the audience in a music hall compere style.* And he's right, isn't he? Isn't he right, ladies and gentlemen? A cage in a music hall is a bit preeee-posterous. *And now more whimsically.* This was my music hall, this building that you now call Greenwich Theatre. In my day the actual Greenwich Theatre, and all its airs and graces, was on Greenwich High Road. In my day this h'establishment was the 'ippodrome. More common, but much more fun. You, ladies and gentlemen, wouldn't have been sat in tiers then, looking down on me, but on benches, down there, looking up at the stage. For a little bit more lovely money you could sit upstairs, on that side and that side, and look down on the hoy polloi in the middle. Looking down on people ought to cost more, after all.

*Scarlett and Hamish rush back, looking up. They've been lost.*

Hamish: Crooms Hill, right, it's up here. Nevada Street. There I see it. I smell it. I smell music hall.

Scarlett: Do you smell good money too?

Hamish: Always

Tom: (Still addressing the audience) It was right at the back of all the benches. A steel cage I had built. Plenty of room between the bars for those inside to see the stage. And it had benches inside it too, the same as those in front. Apart from being behind steel bars, for those inside, it was the same experience. No access to the dunny, in the cage, but they wouldn't be the only ones in here using the sawdust floor. Ladies and Gentlemen, The Greenwich Hippodrome Music Hall was, in its day, a right fucking good piss up.

*A knock at the door and Hamish and Scarlett enter*

Hamish: The door downstairs was open. Good afternoon, Mr Park.

Tom: Mr Woodcock.

Hamish: Mr Park, I'm delighted to be accompanied by someone who needs no introduction from me. She is the sweetheart of the music hall stage. A lady who holds audiences in rapture, Miss Scarlett Hughes.

Tom: (singing to Scarlett) Daddy wouldn't buy me a bow wow. Daddy wouldn't buy me a bow wow.

Scarlett: (continuing the song, flirtatiously and suggestively, leaving nobody in doubt that the animals represent genitalia) I've got a little cat, and I'm very fond of that, but I'd rather have a bow wow wow! Bow wow!

Tom: God, you're not still singing that are you?

Hamish: (With a wink) Miss Hugh's bow wow wow meets with regular applause, the length of the country

Tom: (Winks back sarcastically) But it's getting a little threadbare, is it not, Hamish? *He walks round Scarlett, like he's examining an animal at auction.* She's in fine shape and her voice sounds clear. (To Scarlett) Tipperary?

Scarlett: I don't

Tom to Hamish: She don't?

Hamish: The war is over

Tom: Not to everyone

Hamish: The war was grey and muddy. It's over. Bring the colour back, Tom. Music Hall like it was.

Tom: Nothing is like it was. (Then reflectively) Nothing is like it was. (Then with verve and showmanship) Nothing is like it was.

Hamish: Well, what a shame

Tom: If she sings nothing from before 1916, she's in. Two pounds.

Hamish: That's an interesting starting point for a negotiation, Mr Park

Tom: It's the finishing price too. We couldn't hear her last time. The punters drowned her out

Hamish: Rowdies should be ejected immediately

Tom: They were dealt with

Hamish: You put them in a cage, Mr Park

Tom: Exactly, dealt with.

Hamish: It would have been if the cage was outside the music hall, but it isn't. It's at the back. And it's STILL here. We peeked in. They might be apprehended but they can still heckle and jeer

Tom: They wouldn't heckle and jeer if she'd captured their hearts with a song that they actually want to hear

Hamish: They have hearts?

Tom: We all bleed, Mr Woodcock. Even rowdies. Booze turns the mob as easily to tears as to rowdiness

Hamish: If you're judging Miss Hugh's worth by how well you can hear her, but you refuse to eject the rowdies, then of course you can belittle her worth. We know you know; we agents all know you keep the cage there for the purpose of keeping the rowdies in to drown out the singing and drive down the price of the acts

Tom: *Aside.* There, you see. A conspiracy theory. Why would I want the acts drowned out? (to Hamish) Mr Woodcock, a cage full of rowdies becomes a cage full of the silent and spellbound when a performer worth their salt starts to sing. Miss Hughes, (he sings again) If You Were the Only Girl in the World and I Were the Only Boy? Do you do that one? It's the

new songs like that they want to hear. Or, failing that, the songs that got us through the war.

*Scarlett, starts singing If You Were the Only Girl in the World and dances off with Hamish, stage right*

Tom: to the audience: She performed that song with gusto that night, bless her but she still bombed. As soon as she came out one wag shouted, "Who let the bow wow w'out" and that was it, they were all at it, Bow wow wowing at the moon. She was fighting uphill all the way to be heard. Music hall audiences, for all their drunkenness, have long memories.

*Two dockers (FRANK and CHARLIE) enter, one from stage left and the other from stage right. Tom watches them, half amused. They're at the docks on Monday morning, not in Tom's office – he's watching them from his imagination.*

Frank: There he is. How's your head, Charlie?

Charlie: Right as ninepence, Frank

Frank: Did you get a knuckling when they let you out?

Charlie: I took a few but I gave some too. It just knocked the hangover out of me. I woke up fresh on Sunday.

Frank: I hadn't recognised her until you started bloody Bow wow wow'ing, Charlie. You stole the show, howling like a mutt like that, bloody better than some of the acts.

Frank and Charlie together, laughing: Bow wow wooooooooooooooooow! Wow wow wooooooooow!

Charlie: I got the only standing ovation of the night

Frank: We clapped you all the way to the cage

Charlie: And I had free drinks passed through the bars all night. I could have got rotten drunk, but I didn't, so I had my wits about me when they let me out and tried to give me a kicking

Tom: We never gave him a kicking. We never gave anyone a kicking, that's not what the cage was about. You can't run a music hall, in a place as rum as Greenwich, with a stick. Wags like Charlie here like to tell their stories of fights after the cage (during which he normal 'gives as good as he gets', you understand) because it gives them a bit of notoriety. Quick with their wits and quick with their fists, or so the story goes. But we like a good story here.

