

THE FINAL ACT

BY ANDY HAWKES

*It is the Shadow Drama Players' after show party, traditional on the last night of any run. The party is being held in the auditorium of the theatre. There need to be two entrances to the performing area. The cast (ie all except **FRED**, **BETTY** and **GRESHAM**) can still be dressed in their stage costumes with over the top make-up on. **BETTY** is the seamstress/costume manager, so she will be wearing an overall or pinny and can be following the actors around making running repairs on their costumes. **FRED** is the odd-job man, not very communicative, he won't be mixing with the audience very much except to disturb them in order to repair tables and chairs and anything else that takes his fancy. When the action starts **GRESHAM**, the director will be addressing the assembled multitude. He is dressed 'lovey' style. **FRED** will be interrupting Gresham's first speech with hammering.*

GRESHAM Ladies and Gentlemen... your attention please... thank you. Welcome, welcome, welcome. I want to thank you all most sincerely for coming tonight. As you know, we always have a little drinky-poops backstage at the end of any of our runs and tonight is no exception. But...

*[**FRED** starts hammering]*

Fred! Fred, please. *[Hammering stops]* Must you do that now?

But... tonight's end of run party is going to prove to be a lot sadder than usual. *[The members of the company look more than a little startled]* It is my very sad duty to inform you...

*[**FRED** resumes hammering]*

FRED! NOT NOW!!

FRED You've not seen my saw have you?

GRESHAM No, I haven't... and does it really matter right now? Can't you see I'm trying to address our audience?

FRED Just making sure that everything's in good repair before the end - that's all.



GRESHAM ...it is my sad duty to inform you that the Shadow Drama Players will not be producing any more shows in this theatre. *[The members of the company gather together and talk agitatedly amongst themselves]* I know that this will have come as a shock to my gallant troop who are hearing this news for the first time, but I'm afraid that we have become victims of the current financial climate. *[FRED is the only one not looking distraught - he starts sweeping up where he has been working]* Now is not the time to make speeches about the shortcomings of the Arts Council and their funding policies, but I must say a huge thank you to our mysterious benefactor who has kept us up and running since the troop was started 23 years ago. So, all there is left for me to say is to ask you all to eat drink and be merry for, most certainly, tomorrow this company dies. *[The troop (except FRED) quickly gather round GRESHAM demanding explanations but GRESHAM raises his hands for silence. FRED lingers on the periphery]* There's no point in you all bellyaching at me. Finances are finances - I wouldn't expect any of you to understand.

[FRED resumes his hammering]

FRED! Will you PLEASE stop that. Think of our guests.

FRED And where were they when they were needed, eh? Where were they when we could have done with some support and money, eh? Oh yes, all eager enough to come and shed crocodile tears when there's a party on offer, aren't they, but otherwise? *[To audience]* You're all just a load of spongers. Pah!

[FRED storms out - Troop arrange themselves at the sides of the playing area; ALPHONSE and GLORIA to the left, DOMINIC, SUZY and BETTY to the right]

GRESHAM *[Embarrassed by this outburst - addressing the wider audience again]* I'm truly sorry about that, Ladies and Gentleman. Fred is obviously very upset. But enough of this doom and gloom... have a good evening and we'll try to get to see you all by and by.

[Turns to leave but is met by GLORIA. ALPHONSE crosses to join DOMINIC, SUZY and BETTY]

Ah, Gloria.

GLORIA Very touching, Gresham. Almost convinced me.

GRESHAM Do you think I wanted to close us down?

GLORIA Better than being found out, isn't it?

GRESHAM You're fantasising again, dear Gloria. Like that time you told everyone that I had proposed to you.

GLORIA What? You gave me a ring and everything.

GRESHAM A mere bagatelle - a trinket - a token of a mild affection, that's all.

GLORIA But it got me into bed, didn't it?

GRESHAM That was entirely your own choice, my dear.

GLORIA You are a cold fish... an insensitive, self-centred, egotistical...

GRESHAM I would be very careful, Gloria dear, publicity about your er... operation, even so long after the dirty deed, would not do your reputation much good would it? Do you really think they'd welcome you with open arms at that new job if they knew your history? Think about it. Will you be coming round to the flat later?

[Exit GRESHAM right- ALPHONSE joins GLORIA]

ALPHONSE Gloria! You look like you've seen a ghost.

GLORIA If only!

ALPHONSE Ah... the esteemed Gresham has been casting his charms again, I see.

GLORIA Esteemed by who? Apart from himself, that is.

ALPHONSE Everyone needs someone to love them - even Gresham. Since his mother died he's been a bit short of admirers.

GLORIA I can't believe it's all over. We were doing so well.

ALPHONSE Market forces, my dear girl, market forces.

GLORIA We were one of the most successful small theatre companies in the country. I know what went wrong, I just can't prove it.

ALPHONSE Our mysterious benefactor backed out, didn't he?

GLORIA There was no reason for him to back out. He should have been making a pretty good return on his investments. No, Gresham has a hand in this.

ALPHONSE All I care about is having a bit of ready in the old pocket.

GLORIA Most of your ready gets poured down your throat.

ALPHONSE I don't deny that I like a bit of a drink... now and then.

GLORIA Now and then? Now and now and now and now, you mean.

ALPHONSE Ooh, bitchy. Being ignored again, are we?

GLORIA And what do you mean by that?

ALPHONSE I'm not one to spread gossip, deary.

GLORIA Hah!

ALPHONSE And anyway, I'm not going to bite the hand that feeds me... or is arranging for me to be fed.

GLORIA What?

ALPHONSE Didn't you know? Gresham's going to get me a job with a friend of his in local radio.

GLORIA Local radio? But you love the theatre. Live theatre.

ALPHONSE Been finding it a bit hard to remember the old lines recently, dear, and Gresham has arranged this job for me, as long...

GLORIA As long as what?

[ALPHONSE pretends to just notice SUZY on the arm of DOMINIC]

ALPHONSE Ah, look over there. Suzy. *[Calls to SUZY]* Suzy! Suzy! Over here. *[To GLORIA]* Don't let me keep you, Gloria.

[GLORIA leaves looking bemused - exit stage left. BETTY leaves stage right]

DOMINIC Alphonse. Still vertical I see?

ALPHONSE You are a wicked tease, my boy, a wicked tease.

SUZY Now, now, boys. It's supposed to be a party. We should be enjoying ourselves.

DOMINIC A party? Look around you... It's a wake.

SUZY Don't be so melodramatic.

DOMINIC It's a wake, I tell you. This company is dead, and we all know who murdered it.

ALPHONSE Do tell, dear boy, do tell.

DOMINIC Well, it's obvious, isn't it?

SUZY Oh, don't start on all that again, Dominic.

DOMINIC Why not? It's all his fault isn't it?

ALPHONSE The spectre of Gresham rises again! We could do with some smoke effects and mood music.

[FRED passes through with his tool box - enters left and exits right]

FRED No-one's seen my screwdriver, have they?

[Blank looks and shakes of the head]

SUZY I've told you, Dominic, he's just a man - he likes to feel... appreciated.

DOMINIC He likes to feel all right. I've seen him fawning around you.

ALPHONSE Jealous, dear boy?

DOMINIC Jealous of him? No, I'm just sickened.

ALPHONSE Well, if you ever need comforting, you know where to come.

SUZY Oh, Alphonse, you are a one.

DOMINIC How can you two act as if there was nothing wrong? Don't you realise that we're all out of jobs?

SUZY Oh, don't get so excited, Dominic. Something will turn up.

ALPHONSE Will you excuse me? - I must find Gresham... see what might lie over the horizon for a lush like me.

[Exit ALPHONSE - stage left]

DOMINIC All right, I know he's harmless, but Alphonse still gives me the creeps.

SUZY Silly boy. Come here.
[They go into a clinch - Enter Gresham stage right]

GRESHAM How sweet.
[DOMINIC and SUZY stop kissing, but remain holding each other]

DOMINIC Gresham. That was a pretty low trick you pulled tonight.

GRESHAM Do you think so?

DOMINIC Of course it was. Dropping it on us just like that? It's inhuman.

GRESHAM Here... get this back to Fred, will you? *[hands over screwdriver]*
He's acting like he's lost a baby. *[DOMINIC stays holding SUZY in his arms]* Well?

DOMINIC OK - I want a chat with Fred anyway.
[DOMINIC takes the screwdriver reluctantly and leaves stage right]

SUZY Dominic and Fred get on really well, don't they?

GRESHAM Let's not have the 'son I never had' bit... please!

SUZY Dominic's learned a lot from Fred.

GRESHAM I'm sure - so, do you think I handled it badly?
[During this he has moved to SUZY's side and starts caressing her bum]

SUZY No... I'm sure you always have your reasons for handling things the way you do.
[She removes his hand from her person - he responds by putting an arm around her shoulders]

GRESHAM So... what are you going to do now.

SUZY I've not really had any chance to think about it, have I?

GRESHAM Surely you've not seen yourself working with a hack troop like this for the rest of your life, have you? Surely not... not a pretty girl like you?

SUZY I've been very happy here.

GRESHAM With the boy child Dominic.

SUZY I beg your pardon?

GRESHAM Well, let's face it, he is a little... how shall we say... immature?

SUZY Not at all. He's all man, I assure you.

GRESHAM Ah, you only say that because you're never experienced a REAL man.

SUZY I don't think I like the way this conversation is going.

GRESHAM Up to you, my sweet, but I could be very helpful to you in finding another job, if...

SUZY If?

GRESHAM Oh. no, my dear. I never chase women. You come to me if you want my help. But, remember, I can use my many contacts to make you sure you DON'T work as easily as making sure you DO. If you'll excuse me? *[He leaves - stage right, passing BETTY as she enters - stage right]* Betty?

BETTY Gresham. Could I have a word...

GRESHAM Not now, Betty. See me later.

BETTY Suzy? Are you all right?

SUZY Yes, Mum. I just...

BETTY Gresham been coming on to you has he?

SUZY Well, yes, he has. He'll help me out with a new job if...

BETTY And stop you getting one if you don't. Am I right?

SUZY How did you know?

BETTY I've known him a long time, my love. He can be very persuasive. I'll tell you this, though, if I thought he was trying his old tricks on you, well... I really don't know what I'd do.

SUZY You know? I admired him when he first came here. But now? Ugh! Oh, what are we going to do, Mum?

BETTY Something will turn up, love. You're a terrific little actress - and you don't need the help of the likes of Gresham.

SUZY But what about you?

BETTY I'll be fine. A good seamstress can get work anywhere. Now, go and find that Dominic of yours. Last time I saw him he looked as if he could murder someone.

SUZY He'll calm down in time. He's still got that job offer with that soap.

BETTY Why didn't he jump at it?

SUZY It's down South - he doesn't want to leave me.

BETTY Bless him. But you can go with him, now, can't you? Go on. Off you go.

SUZY OK. See you later.

[SUZY leaves - stage right and FRED enters - stage right]

FRED Hello, Betty love. You haven't seen my hammer, have you?

BETTY What is it with you today, Fred? It's not like you to be losing your tools like this.

FRED I'm not myself today, Betty. This place has been my life, you know?

BETTY I know, Fred. You set me up here in the first place... remember?

FRED *[Angrily]* Of course I remember. Do you think I'd forget something like that?

BETTY All right. all right, Fred. What IS the matter with you?

FRED I'm sorry, Betty, you're the last one I should be getting angry with.

BETTY Oh, Fred. Don't start all that again... not tonight.

FRED Why not, Betty? It may be the last chance I get.

BETTY Don't be silly. We'll all come across each other again, I'm sure.

FRED It's not the others I'm concerned with... you know that.

BETTY I know that, Fred. I've always had a soft spot for you - but...

FRED But not that soft, eh?. Not like the soft spot you have for Gresham.

BETTY I have NO soft spot for Gresham.

FRED No? Maybe not. But he still has you under his control, doesn't he?

BETTY Gresham means nothing to me.

FRED Methinks the lady doth protest too much.

BETTY Look - there's Gresham now.

FRED Excuse me - I have no desire to socialise with that man.

[FRED leaves - stage left and GRESHAM enters - stage right]

GRESHAM Are you annoyed with me as well, Betty?

BETTY I am - and for many reasons.

GRESHAM Ah, jealous of your precious Suzy?

BETTY I'm warning you - mess about with my Suzy and...

GRESHAM And you'll what? I have some friends in the film world who've already expressed a great interest in your Suzy. Just videos, you understand - but very special videos. I should stand to earn a very good introduction fee.

BETTY You wouldn't.

GRESHAM Wouldn't I? What if she can't get any other work? What if young Dominic should have an... accident?

BETTY You really are a bastard, aren't you?

GRESHAM No, my dear Betty. It's your Suzy that fits that description.

BETTY You... *[She starts drumming her fists against his chest]*

GRESHAM Now, now, Betty. Not in front of the nice people. Now, go and wash your face - you can look incredibly ugly when you've been crying.

[BETTY looks at him in disbelief then rushes off - stage left. Enter ALPHONSE - stage left.]

ALPHONSE Charming the ladies again, I see?

GRESHAM Ah, Alphonse, just the man. Any thoughts on that job?

ALPHONSE You know I'm not going to get one on my own.

GRESHAM Well, it's all your own fault, isn't it? You've upset far too many people in your time. Turning up sober now and again wouldn't have done you any harm. Turning up at all, in fact.

ALPHONSE Some of the low-life you've involved me with haven't helped much, either.

GRESHAM No? Well, I suppose your future is pretty well sunk, isn't it?

ALPHONSE Thank you.

GRESHAM There is still my way.

ALPHONSE Why do I feel that I'm not going to like this?

GRESHAM Come, come, Alphonse. We can do each other a favour here.

ALPHONSE Go on.

[Enter FRED - stage left, unseen by ALPHONSE and GRESHAM]

GRESHAM Well, my friend in the radio world owes me a favour or two. I've already put in a good word for you there. Your reputation isn't so, er, great in his circles - and, just think, you'll be able to read your lines instead of failing to memorise them. All you have to do is sign this teeny bit of paper.

[Hands it to ALPHONSE who reads it with growing agitation]

ALPHONSE I can't sign this. It's not true.

GRESHAM No, it's not, is it. However, there's nothing sadder than an out of work, alcoholic old queen, is there? Anyway - this is a bit public, don't you think? May I suggest that you meet me on the stage in a few minutes? You can sign it there - with no witnesses.

[Exit FRED - stage left]

ALPHONSE May you rot in hell!

[Exit ALPHONSE - stage left]

GRESHAM *[To general audience]* Friends, how are you all doing? Having a good time? Good, good. *[FRED starts his off-stage hammering]*

again] For heaven's sake. I'm so sorry, everyone. FRED! FRED!
STOP THAT!

[Enter FRED - stage left]

FRED Just tidying the stage up.

GRESHAM Not a lot of point in that, is there?

FRED No one's going to come in here after us and say the place wasn't looked after.

GRESHAM Will you come over here for a moment, Fred? *[FRED reluctantly joins GRESHAM]* OK, Fred. Now, how long have you been here?

FRED Since it started. Me and Betty are the only ones left of the original company.

GRESHAM So you would have known who it was who put up the money to start this place and to keep it going through the lean patches?

FRED Might have done.

GRESHAM Who is it, Fred? If I knew, perhaps I could persuade him to cough up some more money and keep you and your precious Betty in jobs.

FRED I have a few answers to that one - Gresham; Firstly, I have vowed to him that I will never reveal his identity - not to anyone - especially not to you. Second, I know for a fact that he is out of funds. Third, I also strongly suspect, although I know I cannot prove it, that you have had more than a little hand in draining him of his funds.

GRESHAM That's a very heavy accusation from someone who admits they have no proof.

FRED It is, isn't it? But, one day I'll get the evidence I need.

GRESHAM Don't hold your breath, Fred.

FRED But I'd advise you to hold on to your breath as long as you can, Gresham. Appreciate it while you still can. Oh, and by the way, I don't think much to your DIY skills.

[GRESHAM is taken aback by this]

GRESHAM Are you threatening me, Fred?

FRED If you'll excuse me - I still have work to do.

[FRED (stage right) and GRESHAM (stage left) leave separately. Enter GLORIA (stage left) and DOMINIC (stage right)]

GLORIA Come on Dominic, cheer up.

DOMINIC I'm cheerful enough. I've just been on the phone to that TV company. The job's still open if I want it and so I've told them I'll take it.

GLORIA There you are, then. It's a celebration. Let's celebrate.

DOMINIC I'll celebrate when I've got Suzy away from the clutches of that old lecher.

GLORIA That's the way he is. You just have to accept it.

DOMINIC Well perhaps not for much longer. I'm going to find Suzy.

[DOMINIC leaves stage left and SUZY enters stage right looking dishevelled and upset]

GLORIA Suzy! What ever's the matter?

SUZY Ugh! That man!

GLORIA Do I need ask who?

SUZY Gresham. Took me into his office and showed me a video some of his friends have made. It was disgusting. Absolutely disgusting. Then he starts telling me how good I would be in films like that. I ask you! Me!

GLORIA But you're all dishevelled - your makeup's all over the place. What's been happening?

SUZY He tried it on.

GLORIA He didn't...

SUZY No - but only because I managed to get a good hard knee in. I daren't tell Dominic - he'd kill him.

GLORIA I think he'd have to join the que!

SUZY Oh dear! Here comes Mom! She mustn't see me like this.

GLORIA Why not? It would do her good to have her eyes opened to Gresham.

[SUZY runs off stage left as BETTY enters stage left. They pass each other.]

BETTY Suzy? Suzy? *[To GLORIA]* What ever is the matter with Suzy?

[Sound of hammering again; followed by two pieces of heavy wood falling]

GLORIA Close encounter of the turd kind.

BETTY What?

GLORIA Gresham tried to have his little fun with your daughter.

BETTY What?? He can't... He's... Well that's it. I've had enough. Where is he?

GLORIA He was looking for Fred the last time I saw him.

[BETTY dashes off stage left and ALPHONSE returns stage left]

ALPHONSE It's all go today, isn't it?

GLORIA Everyone's in a bit of a state, I'm afraid.

ALPHONSE Not surprising, really. Still, it won't last long.

GLORIA Meaning?

ALPHONSE Well, let's just say that Gresham's reign of terror may soon be over.

GLORIA That'll be the day, I must say.

[There is a loud crashing off stage as if a trap door has opened, or a load of scenery has fallen.]

Bloody Fred. Still trying to fix the whole place before he goes.

{SUZY comes dashing in closely followed by DOMINIC and BETTY all from stage left.}

SUZY What was that?

BETTY It seemed to come from the stage. Where is Fred?

DOMINIC Speaking to Gresham on the stage, last time I saw him. Come on, Alphonse. Let's go investigate.

ALPHONSE Once more unto the fray dear friends.

[DOMINIC and ALPHONSE exit stage left and FRED wanders in with his toolbox from stage right]

FRED Anyone seen my electric drill?

BETTY Come on, Fred, get your act together.

GLORIA Did Gresham find you?

FRED Was he looking for me?

[DOMINIC and ALPHONSE return stage left looking shaken]

DOMINIC There's been a terrible accident. I admit I didn't like the man, but...

BETTY What is it?

ALPHONSE It looks as though the trap door on the stage has given way and dear Gresham has fallen through.

SUZY Is he hurt? Where is he?

DOMINIC He's dead.

GLORIA Come on. You're just trying to cheer us all up.

ALPHONSE No joke, my dear.

BETTY Just falling through the trap door?

DOMINIC There were swords piled up underneath the trap. He fell on to them. *[SUZY turns to bury herself into BETTY]* I've called the police - they should be here any min...

[Enter INSPECTOR FOOT of the Yard - stage right]

INSP FOOT Good evening. I'm Inspector Foot of the Yard. Everyone stay just where they are. Now, what's all the panic about?

ALPHONSE Oh, Inspector. Couldn't you have sent someone in uniform?

INSP FOOT Plain clothes deal with this sort of thing, sir.

ALPHONSE Plain is an understatement, ducky.

DOMINIC It's Gresham - our director. There's been a terrible accident.

INSP FOOT Point me in the right direction, sir.

[DOMINIC leads INSP FOOT to the door stage left and then returns to the others]

ALPHONSE Well, it's turned into quite a good party after all.

GLORIA That's rather insensitive, isn't it? The man is dead, you know.

BETTY Yes, Alphonse - show some respect, can't you?

DOMINIC I think Alphonse is showing more respect than the man deserves.

SUZY Oh, Dominic, don't be so heartless.

FRED Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say.

[INSPECTOR FOOT re-enters stage left looking grave]

DOMINIC Should we send everyone home, Inspector? Not much point carrying on with the party now.

INSP FOOT I'm sorry, sir, but I'll have to ask everyone to stay here for a little while.

BETTY Why, Inspector? I'd really like to get Suzy home, she's had a bad day.

INSP FOOT I'm afraid my preliminary enquiries indicate that this was no accident.

ALPHONSE You mean...

INSP FOOT Yes. It would seem that this was no accident.

ALL No!

INSP FOOT Yes. That trap door has definitely been interfered with. I think your director was meant to fall through. I am treating this as a case of murder. *[Gasps all round]* I will be making further investigations - and so I must ask everyone to stay in this room.

[Exit INSP FOOT stage left]

FRED Speaking for myself, I'd like to meet the murderer and shake him by the hand.

DOMINIC I'm with you on that one, Fred.

BETTY Fred! How could you be so heartless? The man's dead - don't you understand?

ALPHONSE We understand, all right, dear Betty, and we rejoice in the knowledge.

BETTY I don't believe this of you all. Gloria?

GLORIA Oh, don't look to me for sympathy - I've had just about enough of him. At least I know where I stand with him now. At least now I don't have to face the humiliation of him flaunting Suzy in my face. *[To Suzy]* No offence meant, dear.

SUZY Oh Gloria. I could never have gone with that man. Do you know what he was trying to get me to do?

GLORIA Films?

SUZY Not you as well?

GLORIA Oh, no, dear. I'm far too long in the tooth for Gresham to have even asked me to appear in films like that - but I know the circles he moves in.

DOMINIC What? I'll kill the bas.... *(stops as he realises it's too late)*

ALPHONSE What none of you seem to appreciate is that one of us must be the prime suspect.

ALL What? Us? Don't be ridiculous! Never! Why?

GLORIA Well, I have no motive for killing Gresham.

ALPHONSE No? Ageing actress being traded in for a new model? Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

GLORIA *[To DOMINIC]* Hell hath no fury like a jealous boyfriend, you mean.

SUZY Stop it, all of you.

ALPHONSE A dead Gresham is not going to be groping you any more, is he Suzy?

DOMINIC And a dead Gresham won't be putting a spoke in the chances of you getting another job, is he Alphonse?

ALPHONSE And you're heart broken by his death I suppose?

GLORIA Stop your fighting boys - the cavalry's returning.

[Enter INSP FOOT stage left]

INSP FOOT It's more complicated than I thought. I think a bit of food would help us all think more clearly. *[To audience]* Ladies and Gentlemen, until you can be eliminated from my enquiries I am going to have to ask you all to stay here. We will, of course, feed you and you may as well help. I will let you all have a copy of my initial findings at the crime scene. I'm sure you will find them as confusing as I have.

[Exeunt stage right]