

Audition Piece #1 — Moon & Birdboot.

THE REAL INSPECTOR HOUND / 2787

Birdboot.

He turns over the page and reads.
He turns over the page and reads.
He turns over the page and reads.
He looks at the back cover and reads.
He puts it down and crosses his legs and looks about. He stares front. Behind him and to one side, barely visible, a man enters and sits down: BIRDBOOT.

Pause. MOON picks up his programme, glances at the front cover and puts it down impatiently. Pause. . . . Behind him there is the crackle of a chocolate-box, absurdly loud. MOON looks round. He and BIRDBOOT see each other. They are clearly known to each other. They acknowledge each other with constrained waves. MOON looks straight ahead. BIRDBOOT comes down to join him.

Note: Almost always, MOON and BIRDBOOT converse in tones suitable for an auditorium, sometimes a whisper. However good the acoustics might be, they will have to have microphones where they are sitting. The effect must be not of sound picked up, amplified and flung out at the audience, but of sound picked up, carried, and gently dispersed around the auditorium.

Anyway, BIRDBOOT, with a box of Black Magic,³ makes his way down to join MOON and plumps himself down next to him, plumpish middle-aged BIRDBOOT and younger taller, less-relaxed MOON.

BIRDBOOT [Sitting down; conspiratorially.] Me and the lads⁴ have had a meeting in the bar and decided it's first-class family entertainment but if it goes on beyond half-past ten it's self-indulgent—pass it on . . . [And laughs jovially.] I'm on my own tonight, don't mind if I join you?

MOON Hello, Birdboot.

BIRDBOOT Where's Higgs?

MOON I'm standing in.

MOON AND BIRDBOOT Where's Higgs?

MOON Every time.

BIRDBOOT What?

MOON It is as if we only existed one at a time, combining to achieve continuity. I keep space warm for Higgs. My presence defines his absence, his absence confirms my presence, his presence precludes mine. . . . When Higgs and I walk down this aisle together to claim our common seat, the oceans will fall into the sky and the trees will hang with fishes.

BIRDBOOT [He has not been paying attention, looking around vaguely, now catches up.] Where's Higgs?

MOON The very sight of me with a complimentary ticket⁵ is enough. The streets are impassable tonight, the country is rising and the cry goes up from hill to hill—Where—is—Higgs? [Small pause.] Perhaps he's dead at last, or trapped in a lift somewhere, or succumbed to amnesia, wandering the land with his turn-ups⁶ stuffed with ticket-stubs. [BIRDBOOT regards him doubtfully for a moment.]

BIRDBOOT Yes. . . . Yes, well I didn't bring Myrtle tonight—not exactly her cup of tea, I thought, tonight.

MOON Over her head, you mean?

BIRDBOOT Well, no—I mean it's a sort of a thriller, isn't it?

3. Brand of chocolates.

4. I.e., the other theater critics.

5. As issued to a theater critic.

6. Trousers leg cuffs.

MOON Is it?

BIRDBOOT That's what I heard. Who killed thing?—no one will leave the house.

MOON I suppose so. Underneath.

BIRDBOOT *Underneath?!?* It's a whodunnit, man!—Look at it!
[*They look at it. The room. The BODY. Silence.*]

Has it started yet?

MOON Yes.

[*Pause. They look at it.*]

BIRDBOOT Are you sure?

MOON It's a pause.

BIRDBOOT You can't start with a *pause*! If you want my opinion there's total panic back there. [*Laughs and subsides.*] Where's Higgs tonight, then?

MOON It will follow me to the grave and become my epitaph—Here lies Moon the second string: where's Higgs? . . . Sometimes I dream of revolution, a bloody *coup d'etat*⁷ by the second rank—troupes of actors slaughtered by their understudies, magicians sawn in half by indefatigably smiling glamour girls, cricket teams wiped out by marauding bands of twelfth men⁸—I dream of champions chopped down by rabbit-punching sparring partners while eternal bridesmaids turn and rape the bridegrooms over the sausage rolls and parliamentary private secretaries plant bombs in the Minister's Humber⁹—comedians die on provincial stages, robbed of their feeds¹ by mutely triumphant stooges²—
—and—march—

—an army of assistants and deputies, the seconds-in-command, the runners-up, the right-hand men—storming the palace gates wherein the second son has already mounted the throne having committed regicide with a croquet-mallet—stand-ins of the world stand up!—

[*Beat.*]³ Sometimes I dream of Higgs.

[*Pause. BIRDBOOT regards him doubtfully. He is at a loss, and grasps reality in the form of his box of chocolates.*]

BIRDBOOT [*Chewing into mike.*] Have a chocolate!

MOON What kind?

BIRDBOOT [*Chewing into mike.*] Black Magic.

MOON No thanks.

[*Chewing stops dead.*]

[*Of such tiny victories and defeats. . . .*]

BIRDBOOT I'll give you a tip, then. Watch the girl.

MOON You think she did it?

BIRDBOOT No, no—the girl, watch her.

MOON What girl?

BIRDBOOT You won't know her, I'll give you a nudge.

MOON You know her, do you?

BIRDBOOT [*Suspiciously, bristling.*] What's *that* supposed to mean?

MOON I beg your pardon?

7. Revolution (French).

8. Reserve players on cricket teams with eleven members.

9. (Make of) car assigned to a government minister.

ter.

1. Cue lines.

2. Foils or subordinate partners.

3. Short pause.

BIRDBOOT I'm trying to tip you a wink—give you a nudge as good as a tip—for God's sake, Moon, what's the matter with you?—you could do yourself some good, spotting her first time out—she's new, from the provinces,⁴ going straight to the top. I don't want to put words into your mouth but a word from us and we could make her.

MOON I suppose you've made dozens of them, like that.

BIRDBOOT [*Instantly outraged.*] I'll have you know I'm a family man devoted to my homely but good-natured wife, and if you're suggesting—

MOON No, no—

BIRDBOOT —A man of my scrupulous morality—

MOON I'm sorry—

BIRDBOOT —falsely besmirched.

MOON Is that her?

[*For MRS DRUDGE has entered.*]

BIRDBOOT —don't be absurd, wouldn't be seen dead with the old—ah.

[*MRS DRUDGE is the char,⁵ middle-aged, turbanned. She heads straight for the radio, dusting on the trot.*]

MOON [*Reading his programme.*] Mrs Drudge the Help.

RADIO [*Without preamble, having been switched on by MRS DRUDGE*] We interrupt our programme for a special police message.

[*MRS DRUDGE stops to listen.*]

The search still goes on for the escaped madman who is on the run in Essex.

MRS DRUDGE [*Fear and dismay.*] Essex!

RADIO County police led by Inspector Hound have received a report that the man has been seen in the desolate marshes around Muldoon Manor.

[*Fearful gasp from MRS DRUDGE.*]

The man is wearing a darkish suit with a lightish shirt. He is of medium height and build and youngish. Anyone seeing a man answering to his description and acting suspiciously, is advised to phone the nearest police station.

[*A man answering this description has appeared behind MRS DRUDGE. He is acting suspiciously. He creeps in. He creeps out. MRS DRUDGE does not see him. He does not see the body.*]

That is the end of the police message.

[*MRS DRUDGE turns off the radio and resumes her cleaning. She does not see the body. Quite fortuitously, her view of the body is always blocked, and when it isn't she has her back to it. However, she is dusting and polishing her way towards it.*]

BIRDBOOT So that's what they say about me, is it?

MOON What?

BIRDBOOT Oh, I know what goes on behind my back—sniggers—slanders—hole-in-corner innuendo—What have you heard?

MOON Nothing.

BIRDBOOT [*Urbanely.*] Tittle tattle. Tittle, my dear fellow, tattle. I take no notice of it—the sly envy of scandal mongers—I can afford to ignore them, I'm a respectable married man—

MOON Incidentally—

4. Working in theaters outside London.

5. Charwoman, house cleaner.