

MAG – 108 – Monologue

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode One Hundred and Eight
Monologue

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

(Click)

(Martin exhales)

MARTIN

Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 0092008, statement of Adonis Biros, given August 20th, 2009.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

It's been so hot recently – that sticky sort of hot you only really get in the city. On the beach, watching the clear blue waters swell and recede, it would be wonderful, to simply sit, still and alone, to experience it. But in the city, there is no stillness, no privacy. The swell is that of rank, sweaty humanity, and to press through them is to work the dirt and dust that infuses the air into your own skin. The stink is deeper than just a simple smell.

I suppose I am lucky that my work takes me out only rarely during the middle of the day. I am an actor, by trade, and both skilled and fortunate enough to find myself employed more often than not. I am not sure I would say I enjoy it, necessarily, but I do find a certain fulfilment in it. I remember the first time I felt the calling. I was nine years old, visiting my grandparents in Athens, and my parents had taken me on a trip to see the great amphitheatre. It was winter, not the season for tourists, my parents were off in a corner somewhere arguing, but just for a moment, I had the place entirely to myself. And I felt it, that strange centring. That spot at the core of everything where you, and you alone, speak. Your words heard by no-one, and in that no-one, the entire universe.

Yes, I am aware that normally there is, unless something has gone badly wrong, an audience, or at the very least other actors with which to trade dialogue. And that's fine, but that is not what I live for. I live for the monologue, when all others fade away and the light tightens on me, excluding all else. Have you ever had stage lights in your eyes? The brightness steals everything else, and if it's strong enough, you can look out into the audience and see nothing at all. Just you. I am a fine actor, and a very capable physical performer, but all that is simply the dues I pay to earn my way to a monologue.

For the last two weeks I have been performing the part of Jaques in *As You Like It*. Do you know your Shakespeare? Well, it's not the greatest production of the play, which can be very funny if done right. The director, a man named David Austin, has neither the vision nor the spark to turn it into something truly memorable, and the reviews reflect that. I don't care, though. That's not why I do it. You see, there is one part of *As You Like It* that almost every English-

speaking person will know. And that is a monologue by Jaques: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women on it merely players. They have their exits and their entrances and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.”

I told you you’d know it.

And for all his failings, Mr David Austin made one directorial decision for which I cannot praise him enough. During this soliloquy, he has the other actors in the scene walk upstage, beyond the lights, and has me delivering the lines out, into the audience, alone. For the play it’s a bad decision. The scene is supposed to be Jacques performing, joking, for the amusement of the Duke and his friends, so this staging makes something that should be light and energetic into a serious and soulful meditation, and it doesn’t work from a dramatic point of view. But for me? Declaiming, casting my voice out, surrounded by people watching me, yet completely alone – I have rarely had part that feeds my soul like this one.

It helps that we’re performing at the Duke’s Theatre in Covent Garden. It’s about as traditional a theatre as you’re likely to find, and when the light shines the audience is rendered as mere silhouettes, completely anonymous. At least, until four nights ago.

It was my big moment, act two scene seven. The others had vanished, the audience was gone and it was just me. At least, at first. I remember, it was as I began to talk about the Justice, the fifth age of man, that I saw it. It was a mask, a theatre mask, not one of the happy/sad ones you might associate with

the stage, but like an old Greek chorus mask: neutral, with a faint aspect of mourning about the mouth and eyes. It sat on the top of a thick black cloak, draped to completely cover whoever might be wearing the mask. But I knew it was empty. It was a hollow shape of a man that had no life, no presence to it. And I saw it in the middle of the third row, as clearly as if it were lit by a second spotlight.

I stumbled, of course I stumbled. I don't believe anyone in the actual audience really noticed, though the other actors offered their faux-sympathies over it afterwards. I did make it to the end, and pushed on through the rest of the performance, but the mask did not disappear, and watching the other actors quickly convinced me that either they did not notice the thing in the third row, or they simply could not see it.

Oddly, I never feared for my sanity. I've always been superstitious, and I had no doubt that what I had seen was some sort of spectre or omen. Of what, however, I had absolutely no idea. To be perfectly honest, I still don't. This is one of the reasons I am here, because I have this deep and gnawing fear that it portends nothing but itself, and within that there is some strangely awful fate waiting for me.

I have never been quite as social as I am told an actor should be. Rehearsals have always been a professional thing for me and have rarely resulted in friendships, and I actively avoid after-show drinks. It will perhaps not surprise you to discover I instead prefer to walk the city, to find those streets and places where the night crowd does not gather, and wander those empty lights, clearing my head as I leave the heat and cloying conversation behind. In the

summer months, this ritual is almost a necessity for me to remain stable, my steps taking me through the echoing streets and artificial lights – an edifice to humanity, uncluttered by the messy existence of actual people.

The mask and cloak did not appear at the theatre the following night. I looked for it, yet saw nothing but an audience of silhouettes, quiet and intent, save for when applause was required. It wasn't my best performance, on edge as I was, but I got through it. Afterwards, Patrick Dunlevey, who played Orlando, was more insistent than usual that I join them for drinks after the show, and it took all my composure to keep my excuses polite, as the sticky heat of his presence pressed though over the fading warmth of the stage lights and the high summer that pervaded even the Duke of York.

But I did escape him, and fled into the cooling dampness of the city streets by night. The streets which I knew were less likely to be populated were mercifully deserted, and the windows of the buildings either side were lit, but empty of anybody visible. My breathing began to slow, my steps became more sure, and the oppressive thickness of the air lessened just enough for me to relax. I began to look up at all the darkened windows above street level. It is a strange truth to realise that for all the throng of humanity that exists in central London, almost nobody actually lives there. The apartments and residences that sit above the bustling shopfronts and businesses are almost all empty, bought as investments by the financiers and oligarchs who have no desire or need to live in them. If you raise your eyes upwards in central London and count the lit windows, it is not at all unusual to see none at all.

But that night, as I caught my breath and levelled my head, there was a lit window on the second floor. And within it, a masked mockery of a human figure.

My face fell, until I had the odd certainty that my expression matched that of my pursuer, and panic began to settle over my brain, pinprick crawling from the back, inch by inch over my skull, and I knew that when it reached my eyes I would run. The figure didn't move. Of course it didn't, there was nothing to it that could move. No will that could make it follow me. And yet it still watched, its hollow, empty eyes drawing me into it.

I ran for some time, through streets I knew should be humming with drunks and nighthawks and insomniacs, but they were all silent. I was alone. Sometimes, when I turned a corner, at the far end I could see it, waiting for me, and I would turn away. Sometimes, when I looked over my shoulder, I would see it there, following me with its stillness, its absence. Once I looked up, and the windows were full of it. I don't know how long I ran, but in the end, I fell, physically spent and sunken in despair. Raising my head, I saw it before me, waiting. So I stood and began to walk slowly towards it. It gave no reaction, simply awaiting my arrival.

As I got closer, I saw it more clearly: the heavy weave of the black woolen cloak; the shining porcelain of the mask; the hollow empty space behind the eyes, inside the mouth. I faced my demon, and there was nothing there. In a fit of sudden rage, I struck out, my arm catching it on the side of what should have been a head, but the cloth crumbled beneath my blow, the mask fell, and

the figure collapsed into a heap. Inside was a simple wooden stick, once propping the thing up, but now fallen to the ground and lying motionless.

I went home quickly, my eyes downcast and furtive, and went to bed. I only once looked out of my window at the street below.

I don't think it's going to stop. Last night was the worst yet. I knew they were coming, but how do you prepare for something like that? The first was there in the audience before I even set foot on the stage. By my second entrance, there were five that I could count. When I began my monologue, the whole auditorium was full of masks. All the world's a stage, and it was empty, my only company the mocking grotesques of pantomimed humanity: the mewling infant, the schoolboy, the lover, the soldier, the judge, each eliciting such a roar of nothing from them it took my breath away. Perhaps I should have stopped, fled the stage, quit acting entirely, but it was like a lonely avalanche and it flowed out of me in a wave. And I reached oblivion, an absence of applause that nearly deafened me. Sans everything.

After the show, David came up to me. He wore his best director's smile and made as to shake my hand. His mouth moved, telling me how much this performance had meant to him, how right the energy had been and how, whatever I had tapped into within myself, I should reach for it again at the next performance. I tried to listen, to nod, but his eyes were hollow and I knew that he wasn't really there.

I have another performance tonight. In less than four hours, I will be on that stage again, speaking those empty lines to emptier ears. I could run, of course,

but I won't. Where would I run to? All the world's a stage, and I can't escape my monologue.

Statement ends.

MARTIN

(Sighing, muttering) That wasn't so bad.

Uh, not sure there is much to say about this one. John's got us looking into anything that might involve theatres or the circus, but to be honest I don't think this is really what he's looking for. The strangers here seem ... different, I guess? And it doesn't have any clowns or dancing or ... skin. I wanted to ask Tim about it, but he hasn't been around much the last week or so, says he's working on something, which is ... I mean, it could be fine, I guess? He's just quite ... intense at the moment. He scares me sometimes.

Truth be told, none of us are doing great, but it's actually Melanie who seems ... something's happened, I think. I don't know. Her work's been kind of off lately, and any time I talk to her, she just finds some reason to leave. I asked her to look into what happened to Adonis Biros, the actor from the statement, and she hasn't bothered as far as I can tell. John called. He's in America now, wanted her to help with something, but I had to make an excuse for her. He, he doesn't need that kind of thing on his mind right now. I just hope he gets back soon.

You know, saying it out loud, I, I think I'm actually really worried about Melanie. I... You know what, Basira knows her better than I do. I've been too awkward to ask, but I need to. I really think I need to—

(Strange creaking noise, Martin exhales shakily)

(Door opens)

MARTIN

Basira? Melanie? Tim?

(Door closes)

PETER

Martin, isn't it?

MARTIN

(Surprised and scared) It's you! Don't move. Uh ... Um ... Don't you come any nearer. I, I have a knife.

PETER

Do you? That would seem ... wildly out of character, from what I've been told.

MARTIN

Ok, but— You stay back.

PETER

Please, Martin, I'm not going to hurt you. I just thought we might have a chat.
Alone.

MARTIN

Oh. You're one of them, aren't you? A, a Lukas.

PETER

(Surprised) Yes, that's ... Peter. Pleased to meet you. Now, how did you know that?

MARTIN

I, I was just reading, uh... John left some notes, and—

PETER

Ah, I see. I'm sorry to have disturbed you. It's one of Elias' little jokes.

MARTIN

I don't— What?

PETER

Did he suggest you record a statement today? One that mentioned me?

MARTIN

Uh, yeah. Sort of? I mean, not you specifically, but ...

PETER

Right. I have a meeting with him today. He suggested ... I'm sure he's watching from his office, grinning from ear to ear.

MARTIN

Uh, I don't...

PETER

I almost thought he genuinely wanted me to meet the team. Ah well.

MARTIN

I'm really sorry, I don't, uh...

PETER

Do I scare you, Martin?

MARTIN

Yes.

PETER

Hm. Probably for the best. And what's Elias like to work for? Aside from orchestrating unsettling encounters.

MARTIN

Um, that's a lot of it, to be honest.

PETER

And that's not something you look for in an employer, I assume.

MARTIN

Well, he's ... I mean, you've just— You've just said he's watching us?

PETER

Almost certainly. How is he as a boss?

MARTIN

Fine, I guess? I mean, not so much with the manipulation and ... sometimes the murder?

PETER

Oh. That doesn't sound like the Elias I know. He killed people himself?

MARTIN

I mean, I wasn't, uh, I wasn't there, but that's what he said. And I did see the body. Bodies.

PETER

Elias Bouchard getting his hands dirty. Well, well, it must be the end times.

MARTIN

I, I don't ...

PETER

So, your advice would be less murder?

MARTIN

I, I suppose?

PETER

No, no, it's a good observation. I thank you for it.

MARTIN

You're welcome.

PETER

Well, I'm sure I've disturbed you quite enough for one day, Martin. I have a meeting to get to, and a few things to tell Elias to his face about wasting both our time. Be seeing you, as it were.

MARTIN

Yeah, uh, bye.

(Door opens and closes)

MARTIN

What?

(Door opens)

BASIRA

Did you call me?

MARTIN

Yeah, uh, I ... Did you see anyone?

BASIRA

When?

MARTIN

Out there, just now.

BASIRA

Um, no?

MARTIN

No?

BASIRA

No.

MARTIN

That figures.

BASIRA

So, did you need anything or?

MARTIN

Does the name Peter Lukas mean anything to you?

BASIRA

Oh! Yes, actually! I've been reading a bunch of the old statements; he's the creepy boat captain, right? From that family Elias doesn't want us bothering?

MARTIN

Yeah, well, apparently that warning doesn't go both ways.

BASIRA

He was here?

MARTIN

Yeah, I, I think so.

BASIRA

Was he ...

(Basira makes spooky sound)

MARTIN

I mean, a bit, yeah.

BASIRA

Oh. Oh dear.

MARTIN

Maybe? I don't know. Honestly, he was just a bit ... weird.

BASIRA

Yeah... Is that why you wanted me?

MARTIN

Oh, no, I, uh ... are you busy?

BASIRA

A bit. I was reading through a bunch of stuff about the Church of the Divine Host. Did you look into that statement about the chapel in Hither Green? Because apparently right around that time there was a full solar eclipse going on in, guess where.

MARTIN

I, uh, I don't know.

BASIRA

Ny-Ålesund! And when Natalie Ennis talked about it being 300 years, well, how much do you know about the relationship between Edmond Halley and John Flamsteed?

MARTIN

Halley like the comet?

BASIRA

Exactly.

MARTIN

Look, Basira, that's *really* interesting, but that's not why— Look, you're close to Melanie, right?

BASIRA

Uh, I guess so. Closer than anyone here, I think.

MARTIN

Is she ... is she doing ok?

BASIRA

(Wary) Why? Did she say something?

MARTIN

No, no, it's just her work's been ... Look, she's always been quite, you know, conscientious. But then recently ...

BASIRA

(Lowering voice) Ok, look. I don't know what the situation is. She won't tell me. But she's not doing well. We were meant to go for a drink last week, but ... I think it has something to do with Elias.

MARTIN

Elias? Oh, god.

BASIRA

Yeah.

MARTIN

Well, well maybe we can— What?

Oh, right.

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Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.

It featured: Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood, Alasdair Stuart as Peter Lukas and Frank Voss as Basira Hussain.