

PORTRAIT OF DEATH
ACT ONE

Scene One. *Late morning to midday. The curtain rises to show **PIERCE THOMPSON'S** and **PETER LOCKLEY'S** combined living room and studio. Stage left is the front door of the house, leading to the porch, and upstage of it is a staircase leading to the first floor of the house. The staircase is separated from the rest of the room by a partition wall that extends just far enough to establish the fact that the hall is separate. Immediately right of the partition wall is an easel, facing upstage and with a table cloth covering it up. There are two seats next to it. Upstage centre is an armchair. Upstage right is the room's window. Underneath it is a small corner table with a waste paper basket underneath. The waste paper basket is lying on its side and several pieces of paper are strewn in front of it. Stage right is a doorway leading through to the kitchen but the kitchen need not be visible. A second armchair is positioned downstage of the kitchen door. **PIERCE** enters through the front door. He is neatly dressed and has a slightly world weary look. He sighs as he notices the overturned waste paper basket.*

PIERCE I mean why? How I manage to hang onto my sanity in this place is quite beyond me. They should give me a medal.

He tidies the paper back into the bin and rights it. He looks out of the window.

Flowers are wilting away out there I see. Can't say I'm surprised. I've only been away for two days. Housemates, who needs them?

***PIERCE** exits into the kitchen and, as he does so, **PETER** comes down the stairs. He is dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. He is hungover and looks dazed, but he notices the waste paper basket.*

PETER Oh, no. After all the hours I slaved over that.

*As he starts to reposition its contents as they were before, **PIERCE** appears at the window. He sees **PETER** and looks murderous. **PETER** is oblivious to the fact that he is being watched until **PIERCE** bangs on the window. **PETER** looks around him and eventually sees **PIERCE** who makes a threatening gesture before disappearing from sight and re-entering from the kitchen.*

PIERCE You do it on purpose!

PETER I do it on purpose?

PIERCE I'd just cleaned all that up, not two minutes ago! I've only just got back from seeing the folks and...

PETER And the first thing you do is engage in wanton vandalism.

PIERCE & PETER *(To each other.)* You do it just to annoy me!

PIERCE What possible excuse can you have for leaving the flipping bin overturned?

PETER You, of all people, a fellow artist supposedly, ought to have some respect for other people's work.

PIERCE Work? Oh, I suppose you were being creative just now were you?

PETER The creative bit was last night. This is repairs. Now give it a rest, my head hurts. Where's that hangover cure got to?

PIERCE Same place as always. Let me, you're obviously in no fit state to mix it yourself.

PIERCE goes back to the kitchen whilst PETER continues arranging the bits of crumpled paper. PIERCE returns with a glass of water with the hangover cure dissolved in it.

Here you are, drink that.

PETER Thanks.

He drains the glass and puts it on the table.

Eurgh! Why can't they invent a hangover remedy that doesn't taste like somebody's drunk it before you?

PIERCE They have, it's called sobriety. Now perhaps you could see your way clear to explaining what all this is in aid of?

PETER It's my latest work.

PIERCE Kicking the bin over?

PETER Have you any idea how long it took to put that piece together?

PIERCE Ooh, let me think, about thirty seconds?

PETER More. Much more.

PIERCE Forty?

PETER Never mind the actual practical side of it. Consider the creative thought that I had to put in before I finally conceived it. Have you any idea of that?

PIERCE I'll hazard a guess. (*A beat.*) About 10 pints?

PETER I make no apology for the source of my inspiration. Didn't Van Gough use absinthe?

PIERCE I'm surprised you even know who he is.

PETER You're not the only one who's been to art college, you know?

PIERCE It's a constant struggle to remember that. Do you even know which end of a brush has the paint on it?

PETER Do you? You haven't picked one up in yonks. Except when someone crosses your palm.

PIERCE Where we differ, Mr. Lockley, is that I only open my proverbial mouth when I've got something to say. You, on the other hand, never miss the opportunity to produce rubbish. If this upturned bin is really your latest creation then congratulations. You have discovered honesty.

***PIERCE** surreptitiously reaches into his pocket. The distant sound of **PETER'S** mobile phone is heard. It has a tuneless, trendy ringtone.*

PETER Well I'm afraid I've no more time to waste on this debate, Mr. Thompson. The outside world takes an interest in some of us. Now where did I leave it?

PIERCE Upstairs unless my ears deceive me.

***PETER** goes upstairs. **PIERCE** pulls his own mobile phone out of his pocket and grins.*

PIERCE That's got rid of him. Now I'm going to get rid of this mess. This is not art, I don't care what anybody says.

He tidies the crumpled paper back into the waste paper basket.

So help me, one of these days I'll kill him.

*He takes the glass and the waste paper basket into the kitchen. There is the sound of a knock at the front door. **PETER** comes back downstairs glowering at his mobile. He walks right past the front door, not having heard the knocking.*

PETER I suppose you think that's funny, Pierce! Sending me gallivanting off like that. What have you done with the bin? You've gone too far this time!

His phone rings again.

I'm not falling for it! Does he think I'm a complete idiot?

He suddenly realises the phone is displaying a different number.

Hang on, this one's real. Call back, call back, how do I work this thing?

He returns the call.

Hello, Alex.

ALEX (*Off.*) So you are awake then?

PETER Sort of, yeah. I'm in a state of creative semi-consciousness.

ALEX (*Off.*) Can I come round and see you sometime?

PETER Of course. It'll be a pleasure.

ALEX (*Off.*) Business actually.

PETER Whatever. I'm in all day. How soon can you be here?

ALEX (*Off.*) In about five seconds.

PETER What? Where are you now?

ALEX (*Off.*) I'm in the porch.

PETER Well why didn't you say so in the first place?

PETER goes and opens the front door and ALEX TURNER enters. She is smartly dressed and carries a briefcase.

ALEX Your doorbell doesn't appear to be working.

PETER Tell Pierce, it's his turn to buy the batteries.

ALEX I did knock but nobody seemed to hear.

PETER When you wake up with a hangover like the one I had this morning you tend to assume that sort of sound is coming from somewhere inside. So what have you got for me?

ALEX sits in an armchair.

ALEX Some stuff for both of you actually. I'll do you first since you're here. I've been approached by some people from the Lycett Gallery who are interested in putting on a display of some of your work.

PETER Really?

ALEX The big time beckons, I think.

PETER I like this, I like this a lot. You're a wonderful agent, do you know that?

ALEX Thanks. Now I've got a list here of the works they want.

She removes a notepad from her briefcase.

Firstly, there's your seminal piece commenting on the advent of digital broadcasting.

PETER Come again?

ALEX You know, the one where you got a TV and poured acid over it.

PETER Oh, yeah, I remember now. 'Television, it's dissolving!'

ALEX They also wanted...

There is the sound of a crash from stage right. PETER winces.

PETER Now what's he broken?

PIERCE *enters.*

PIERCE Hello, Alex. Mr. Lockley, would you care to explain why there is a stuffed bulldog in a striped sweater and beret in the lobby?

PETER Because I thought if I left it in here, people would go tripping over it. Underestimated your unerring ability to destroy every piece of work I come up with.

PIERCE I haven't! It damaged me, not the other way round. But I'd still like to know what it's in aid of.

PETER I thought that was obvious, even to you. Alex, tell him.

ALEX Oh, yes it's done to promote, erm...

PETER Cross cultural understanding.

ALEX Exactly!

PETER Bringing the peoples of Europe together through art. I am calling it 'Entente Cordiale' in which the British Bulldog, by wearing traditional French clothing...

PIERCE Widens the channel by about 150 miles I shouldn't wonder.

PETER It's ironic!

PIERCE You can say that again. Your attempt to bring them together ends up driving a

wedge. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to unpack my suitcase.

PIERCE goes through the front door, returns with a suitcase and takes it upstairs. Meanwhile PETER takes the list and looks through it.

PETER Good selection of stuff. Oh this could really make my name. No more renting. No more stropy housemates.

ALEX I knew you'd be pleased.

PETER And it'll make it a lot easier to have friends over. If you get my meaning.

ALEX I certainly do. Come here.

They hug.

There is just one thing, darling.

PETER Mm?

ALEX They would like to premiere some new works alongside the existing ones.

PETER My pleasure. My head is just bursting with ideas. Or is it last night's booze throbbing away? Those hangover cures aren't strong enough.

ALEX They, er, had some specific ideas as to what sort of new works they wanted.

PETER I'm all ears.

ALEX They said it would be nice to have a couple of paintings. You know, just to balance things out. Provide a contrast with the avant-garde stuff.

PETER Oh, dear.

ALEX What's wrong?

PETER Please don't ever repeat this in front of Pierce but deep down all his jibes are true. The reason I don't do paintings is because I can't. I can't even begin to do it.

ALEX Oh, is that it? But you keep telling people that the paintbrush is passé and you want to move on and take art forward and...

PETER All of which is perfectly true. I freely admit that if I had the skill I wouldn't choose to use it much but the fact is I don't. Deal breaker I suppose?

ALEX Don't be downhearted. I'm sure I can persuade them to take you on anyway. If I explain to them how important it is to you to break moulds and challenge preconceptions with your work and that you can't do that except by employing new ways of expression. That

sort of thing.

PETER But if only I could put my name to a painting. Just one to prove to people that I can. We both know that sooner or later everyone's going to get sick of the trendy stuff and start demanding traditional art again. I don't want to be frozen out.

ALEX I can still get you this exhibition.

PETER But only half the fee it's always the way. It won't be the breakthrough. I've had work displayed before, I've won an award before now but I've never quite made it. I want to make my fortune and move out. Get away from Pierce.

ALEX You never know, Pierce could make his fortune and move out. Then I could rent in his place and...

PETER That's not going to happen. It drives me mad because we both know how good he is. He's got a masterpiece tucked away upstairs.

ALEX Do you mean his painting of the Grim Reaper?

PETER The Portrait of Death, yes.

ALEX Speaking as his agent, it irritates me. I could earn a nice bit of commission selling that for him. He's had offers you know. Tens of thousands of pounds but he won't sell.

PETER & ALEX Because it's not a question of how much they'll pay, it's a question of how much they'll value it.

PETER And that's Pierce's problem. Convinced he inhabits a world full of philistines who won't appreciate his genius and he won't let anyone prove him wrong. Now if only the Portrait of Death was mine to sell, I'd wring every last penny out of the buyer. Just think what I, what we could do?

In the pause that follows, PETER'S face betrays evil intent. He wrongly assumes that ALEX is with him.

ALEX But we have to cut according to the cloth. I can say yes to this exhibition then?

PETER If they still want it without any paintings. Don't let them knock too much off the fee will you?

ALEX Darling! I do happen to be an exceedingly good agent!

PIERCE *re-enters.*

PIERCE That's the unpacking done.

ALEX Oh, good. Can I speak to you?

PIERCE Of course.

ALEX I've got a possible customer. In fact a definite one if you're interested.

PETER I'll go and lie down whilst my head clears. (He goes upstairs.)

PIERCE So what am I being offered? It had better not be a waste of my talent.

ALEX Well...

PIERCE Because this studio is where great works of art are born and I don't like to see it become sullied by such a vulgar thing as commerce.

ALEX Yes, I do appreciate how much you value the sanctity of your...

PIERCE Sharing with Peter is barely tolerable without my becoming like him.

ALEX Yes, yes I'm...

PIERCE Let him take the road to hell, I'm not following. If this customer's after some of that trendy alternative nonsense, I'm not interested. In fact he can take his commission and shove it up his...

ALEX Pierce, I'm not trying to argue!

PIERCE Oh, right. Sorry. What is it?

ALEX It's a painting.

PIERCE Good.

ALEX It's a portrait.

PIERCE Oh.

ALEX Do I take 'Oh' to mean no thank you.

PIERCE It's just disappointing when I'm capable of so much more than just painting people's pictures.

ALEX Like your Portrait of Death, to name but one?

PIERCE That at least is a different sort of portrait. It's art as opposed to a mere painting. It has something to say.

ALEX If you'd let people see it.

PIERCE When I find a gallery worthy of it, then it can be shown. In the meantime I have bills to pay like everyone else.

ALEX So you'll do it?

PIERCE I'll do it. I won't enjoy it, but I'll do it. As long as you understand that I haven't sold out.

ALEX Of course not.

PIERCE Events may conspire to force me into bed with the Devil but, whilst my brush has bristles, I will not do so in the context of a meaningful relationship.

ALEX But surely that's worse? I never saw you as being a cheap stop out who goes with anyone.

PIERCE It's just a throwaway figure of speech. Not the green light for a morality debate.

ALEX Sorry. And please be assured I wouldn't dream of troubling you with something beneath your dignity.

PIERCE So, whose portrait am I doing?

ALEX Her name's Lisa. Lisa Horton. To be painted on the instructions of her boyfriend, Wayne Garratt. He says she's so beautiful her image must be recorded for the future.

PIERCE And is she really or do I have to paint something untruthful?

ALEX I don't know. She wasn't with him. But he seemed very keen to get started.

PIERCE Ours is an age of instant gratification. As luck would have it I'm not otherwise engaged. They can come tomorrow.

ALEX Splendid. I'll bring them round. Is 10:30 a.m. all right?

PIERCE Yeah.

ALEX See you tomorrow then. *(She calls upstairs.)* Bye Peter!

She exits. PIERCE watches her go.

PIERCE Portraits, portraits, portraits. Where did it all go wrong? The sixth one this year and none of them are ever worth painting. I can draw them but it won't say anything! I only wish I didn't need the money so badly. If only I could rediscover my inspiration. A muse. What I need is a muse.

He exits looking forlorn.

Blackout.

Scene Two. *The following morning. PIERCE comes in and finds his easel overturned.*

PETER wanders in from the kitchen, eating toast.

PIERCE Peter? Might I enquire as to why my easel is upside down?

PETER I woke up this morning and had a brilliant idea.

PIERCE Two things which stretch credulity to its very limits. One, that you wake up before noon...

PETER Do I look like I'm sleep walking?

PIERCE As I was saying, incredible though it may be, I am forced to accept what my eyes are telling me. You are indeed awake.

PETER Oh ye of little faith.

PIERCE However, I think it's asking a bit much of my credulity to ask it to believe the second unlikely suggestion in as many minutes. Exactly what is your allegedly brilliant idea?

PETER The easel! It occurred to me that it's symbolic of where art used to be, not where it's at now. Hence my latest work, 'The Overturning of the Old Order.' I didn't think you'd mind the easel, you so rarely use it these days.

PIERCE Wrong actually.

PIERCE rights the easel.

Credulity, you're dismissed. Brilliant idea, ha! Perhaps I should get some empty drinks cans or crisp packets, skewer them to the wall with paint brushes and call it 'The Old Order's Revenge!'

PETER Good, good, that's the most creative idea you've had since...

PIERCE I was being sarcastic.

PETER Even better! Learn how to be sarcastic and you're well on the way to being ironic! Pierce, we'll make a modern artist out of you yet!

PIERCE Thank you, but no. I'll carry on with my painting and leave the alternative stuff to you. 'The Overturning of the Old Order', we can't teach you anything about minimalism can we?

PETER I do believe you've paid me a compliment.

PIERCE I do believe you're right. I know my compliments like the back of my hand!

PETER So, if you are still using the easel, what's on it today then?

PIERCE Nothing as yet, apart from a load of toast crumbs. Give me strength! I happen to be starting somebody's portrait today and I'm not being paid to produce crummy work.

PETER My crumbs not good enough for you?

PIERCE Nothing in anyway connected with you is good enough for me.

PETER Pardon me for breathing. I suppose my breath's not good enough either.

PIERCE When you've been on one of your benders it'd kill at 10 paces.

PETER (*Aside.*) Don't I wish. (*Normal.*) Think I'll go out in the garden. Might even have a walk.

PIERCE Good. I can see my client in peace.

PETER exits back to the kitchen.

If I was a carpenter I'd have finished his coffin months ago.

There is a knock at the door.

It's open!

ALEX enters. She is accompanied by WAYNE GARRATT. He wears casual clothes and looks scruffy.

ALEX Good morning. Allow me to introduce Mr. Garratt. Wayne, meet the artist.

WAYNE Hello mate.

PIERCE and WAYNE shake hands. WAYNE is evidently not PIERCE'S idea of an art lover.

PIERCE Delighted to meet you.

WAYNE So this is where it 'appens then is it?

PIERCE Yes, this is my humble studio. The birthplace of not quite so humble works of art.

WAYNE Yeah, right. Sort of arty and creative, yeah.

He looks around the room.

PIERCE (*To ALEX.*) This is our connoisseur?

ALEX Yes.

PIERCE This is the same man you were telling me about yesterday?

ALEX Yes.

PIERCE Are you quite sure? He looks like he couldn't tell his art from his elbow!

ALEX I know. But he did say he had a list of possible artists to approach about the painting

and you were at the top of it.

PIERCE Did he now? That's reassuring. He's clearly not as dumb as he looks. Where did he get the list from?

ALEX He sought the advice of an expert.

PIERCE Who's that?

ALEX Me.

WAYNE Yeah, love this sort of, this sort of, well it's a studio, yeah. I can see you on one of those great journeys of the mind that you artists like to do in this room.

PIERCE That's the idea. No distractions, just me, the brush, the canvas, a pallet full of paints and most important of all, subject.

He looks expectantly at WAYNE.

WAYNE Cor! Where the blummin' 'eck has she got to? Women, eh? What are they like? Could have a house on fire and they'd be brushing their hair or something. Vanity mirrors in cars, what a stupid idea.

He crosses to the front door.

Come on darlin'! 'E's waitin' for you! Ah, here she comes.

LISA HORTON *enters. She is casually dressed and has her hair scrunched up. Her make-up is overdone. She carries a branded shopping bag.*

WAYNE Finally! We haven't got all day, you know.

LISA I was just making sure I had the make-up right. You want me looking nice for it, don't you?

WAYNE You overestimate how long it takes you to get yourself looking nice. Anyway, this is Pierce who's going to paint you.

PIERCE and LISA meet. They are clearly attracted to each other.