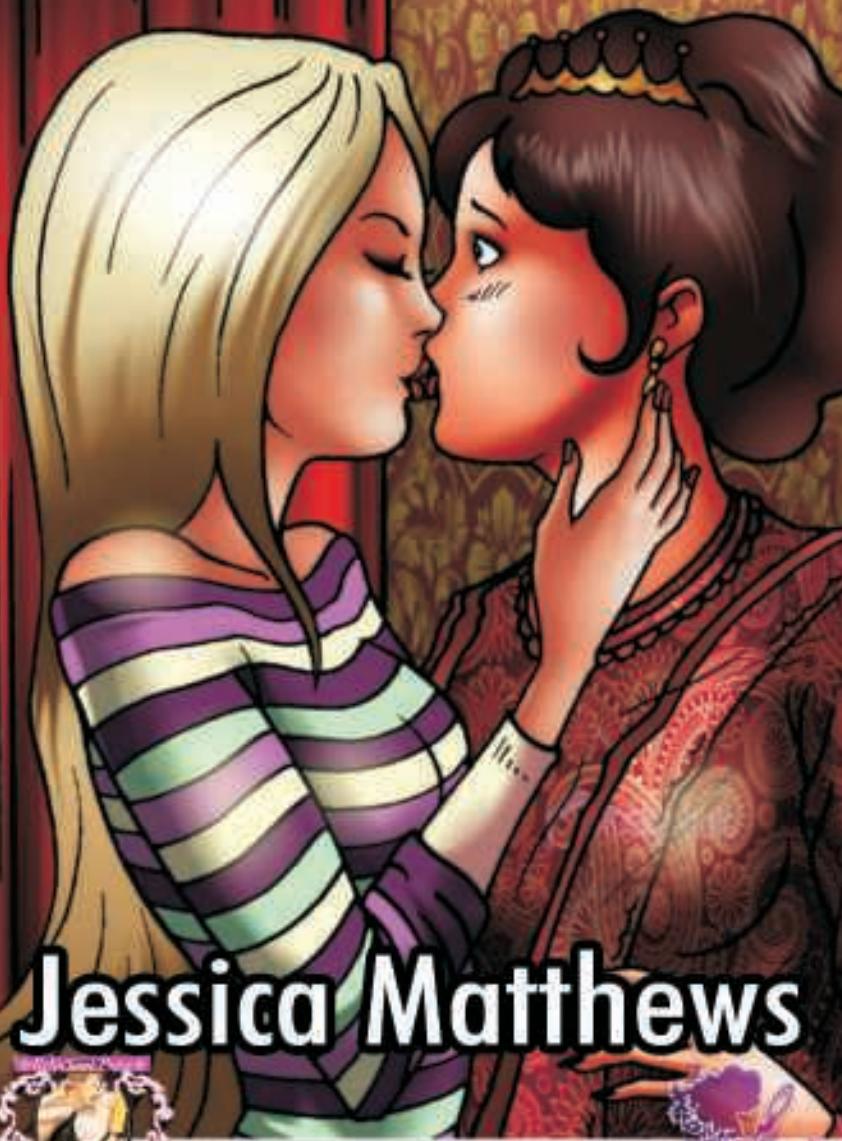


The Repertory Company



Jessica Matthews



An "Adult Tv" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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The Repertory Company

by Jessica Matthews

The theatre was old, but a fixture in the town. It was built many years earlier in a different economic age, when tourists were plentiful, and actors were willing to work their way through the provinces. Now it was largely amateur, with a core of stalwarts from other professions. There were some wives and daughters of the wealthy, and the others were those who caught the theatre bug early and fitted their lives around productions, going from job to job, and coming alive when on stage. The building was placed into a family trust to protect it from financial ruin, but still had a precarious existence.

‘Could I have your attention, everyone?’ Marshall Hemming came onto the stage of the tiny theatre clapping his hands.

He waited until he had the silence he wanted. ‘Our trustees have appointed Melanie Baxter as our guest director for the next production. As you know, her work is nationally reviewed, and we are grateful this this is to be sponsored by our Arts Board, otherwise we couldn’t afford someone of her stature.’

He stood aside and held out his arm to the wings. Right on cue, Miss Baxter stepped forward. The small theatre troupe applauded. A spotlight cut in, holding her as she stepped to the front of the stage.

'Hello,' she said, smiling broadly. 'I've been away from small theatres for too long, and I'm really pleased to be coming back to direct your summer season production. I know that this is an amateur group, and that most of you have to make a living elsewhere, but I'm sure that together we can do something special.'

She stood back, smiling and waving. Marshall shook her hand and they kissed the air as the rest of the committee and sponsors joined them on stage.

'We invite you all to an informal reception in the bar, and hope you'll all have the chance to meet Miss Baxter before the evening is over.' Marshall beamed over the members of the theatre group.

'What do you think of that?' Courtney Roberts pouted into the huddle at the back, ever the ingénue.

'I think she'll be fun.' Daniel Stone, leading man in so many productions, offered an opinion to general agreement.

Courtney took his arm; they moved away towards the bar and the excited voices moving the same way.

'And what does it mean for *you*?' Henry Potter, oldest member and stalwart of many productions, grinned.

'I guess I'll be painting scenery, lifting and carrying props, and filling in a prompt just like always.' Ian Morgan shrugged his shoulders. 'I really don't know why I joined. I may get past the first readings once in a while, but they always dump me after the audition. Perpetual understudy for everything other than a lead, that's me.'

'Come on,' Henry replied. 'They also serve who only carry a spear.'

'And hold the prompt book,' Ian added, as they followed into the bar.

They pushed through the small crowd, consisting mostly of amateurs, with a few who were 'resting' long

term, having married into money in the town's tourist trade.

'I'm Melanie Baxter.' Ian was surprised by her hand offered to him as he reached the bar.

'I'm Ian Morgan.' He spluttered. 'Prompts, spear carrying and scenery painting a speciality.'

'I'm sure that's not why you're here.' Melanie looked directly into his eyes.

'No, that's true.' He replied. 'I don't seem to fit with the productions our previous directors have chosen.'

'We shall see how you fit into mine.' She replied, turning back with a wave rather than a dismissal.

'I could get on with her.' Henry said as she walked away. 'Just what this place needs: a bit of a shake-up.'

'Couldn't agree more.' Ian nodded. 'I wonder what we'll be doing.'

'What we'll be doing is several weeks of rehearsals, with Daniel getting ever more pompous, and Courtney ever more simpering.' Henry predicted. 'We'll get to the week of the show, five performances, Tuesday through Saturday, and then we'll have a party.'

'And Daniel will be condescending and apologetic, Courtney will be charming, and then we'll all wake up with bad heads and do it all again for another show in three months.'

'Oh, the joyous life of the amateur theatre.' Henry sighed. 'At least we have a proper director this time.'

'Is she really good?' Ian asked.

'She seems to be, and she's well connected.'

'I've looked through the suggestions you sent,' Melanie said slowly. 'I've also looked through the financial statements. If your group is to survive, you need to make some serious money in the next summer season.'

'That's why we thought of the classics.' Marshall nodded. 'Ibsen or Chekhov, something uplifting.'

'It's hardly amusing in these recessionary times, though,' Melanie said cautiously, watching the reaction of some of the other committee members around the table. 'We don't have to make a decision tonight, but I have in mind something lighter.'

'I don't think we should pander to the lowest tastes,' Marshall replied.

'I don't care what taste we pander to, we need bums on seats.' Melanie said. 'The Casey Trust gave me a remit to do all I can to make this venture viable. That's why they gave you this sponsorship. You only have one chance, and I'm determined that I won't be leaving here with a failure on my back.'

'So what do you have in mind?' Marshall's displeasure was barely disguised.

'I don't know, and that's the truth.' Melanie replied. 'I have a few ideas, but I really want to talk them through with the cast I have to work with. I want it to be something fast and funny; it's got to be familiar enough to bring in the crowds, and it needs a feel-good factor too.'

'I don't know how the cast will take to that idea,' Marshall cautioned.

'Oh, don't be an old fuddy duddy, Marshall,' said a voice from the far end of the table. The attention shifted to that end of the room. 'I'm sorry, Miss Baxter, we haven't been introduced, but I'm Harriet Casey, and my family have owned this building for generations. I'm fed up with old ideas which have brought the place to near bankruptcy. If you want to get bums on seats, as you say, then I'm on your side.'

'Thank you, Mrs Casey.' Melanie was grateful for an ally. 'Perhaps you'd like to tell me about the theatre's past productions.'

'Oh, don't get me started on all that.' Harriet laughed. 'I could bore you with my scrapbooks for a week or two.'

The meeting rambled on, as these things do. There was no helpful suggestion and no real direction.

Melanie sat quietly, catching a sympathetic look from time to time from Harriet. Marshall closed the meeting when it became obvious that his suggestions were being stonewalled.

'I would like to talk one afternoon if you could spare the time.' Harriet handed a card to Melanie. 'I'm mostly at home, so just call to say you're on your way.'

Harriet Baxter, in her elegant home representing a grand style from the previous century, graciously greeted Melanie when she called the next day.

'I guess the Casey Trust must belong in your family.' Melanie waited as Harriet poured tea from a flowered pot.

'Grandpa actually.' Harriet replied. 'He made a fortune in the stock market, but all he really wanted was to be on the stage. It wasn't *done* in the Casey family, though, and he was always a man to do his duty. Father, on the other hand, always wanted to be a stock-broker, and nearly killed himself chasing bigger pots of gold.'

'And did he catch them?' Melanie couldn't resist the question.

'Yes and no. He did really well, but it almost killed him. After mother died, I came back to look after him, and now there's only me.' She hesitated. 'Me and the theatre trust, of course.'

'And the trust picked me.' Melanie looked quizzically at her host.

'Well, I am the trust, really, so you are my choice.' She replied. 'Of course, I don't go round telling everyone that—the lawyers are ever so discreet when the awards are announced—but I really did want you to come.'

'And did you have a project in mind?' Melanie caught the twinkle in the older lady's eye.

'I thought we should try something really light and easy.' She replied, picking up a folio from the rack beside her chair. 'It was one of the first productions years

ago, and I thought a revival, with your touch of course, would go down well. I know they'll hate the idea, but really this is a vacation town. We need something light. Entertainment isn't a rude word.'

'Okay, so what is it?'

Harriet looked at the folio again, and then passed it over. '*Charley's Aunt.*'

Melanie gasped.

'By Brandon Thomas, 1892,' Harriet said. 'Out of copyright and due for a revival anyway.'

'Yes, I know the piece, but I've never seen it performed.' Melanie flipped through the pages of the yellowing folder.

'It's entirely predictable really, but with the right setting, and decent casting, it could work,' Harriet continued. 'I think it should be updated a bit too, you know, given a modern setting. Do take it away and see what you think.'

'Do I *need* to think?' Melanie asked.

'Well, not really. I am on the board, and as this is being underwritten by the trust, I think this time they will defer to my wishes.'

'What will Marshall Hemming say?'

'Leave him to me, my dear.' Harriet smiled. 'More tea?'

* * * * *

'I believe you took tea with Miss Casey.' Marshall Hemming's demeanour shouted his displeasure. 'Really, we can't have this. A low farce, indeed! We have better things in mind, surely?'

'I've looked at the balance sheets, and if Miss Casey feels that a low farce is appropriate, then a low farce it shall be.' Melanie wasn't going to give any ground to this pompous tirade. 'We need something to bring in the crowds or this place is going under.'

'Miss Casey would never allow it.' Marshall spluttered.

'She may not want it, but the figures really tell their own story. You may have chosen the programme in the past, but now I'm here, it's my turn. I'm sorry if you don't like it, but *Charley's Aunt* it shall be.'

'I shall protest to the board!' Marshall replied.

'I'm sorry you feel that way.' Melanie tried a softer approach. 'I value your experience and all you've done here. The board brought me in to do something different. I want your support, but there can be only one director here, and believe me, I'm it.'

Marshall stood back, his thought processes visible to anyone who might have looked. He took a deep breath. 'Of course,' He said. 'I will not stand in your way. We both want the best for the theatre.'

'I'm glad you said that, Marshall.' Melanie took his arm and walked towards her office. 'I want to discuss some casting ideas with you.'

* * * *

'*Charley's Aunt*.' Henry announced. 'Better than all that social issue, tragedy stuff we've done recently.'

'I've heard of it.' Ian replied. 'It's a period piece. I can't see Daniel Stone in the leading role, though. He's not going to be happy.'

'No, that's true.' Henry laughed. 'It won't do him any harm to come down off his high horse for once.'

'Bet he still gets to be the lead, though.' Ian scoffed. 'I'll get the smallest part again.'

'Melanie has auditions planned, though. She and Marshall Hemming are trying to pretend that they're together on this, so he's sitting in.'

'I can't see Marshall getting a say in her decisions, though. She's a tough reputation, and from what I hear, her cast do wonders for her.'

'I'm just pleased to see Miss Casey and her trustees making such a brave decision,' Ian replied. 'I really

want to have some fun here, and it's time we lightened up.'

'So you're going to audition?' Henry asked.

'Of course.' Ian struck a pose. 'I may be only a spear carrier, but I have aspirations.'

'Er—there are no spears in this one.'

'You know what I mean; I'll probably be the servant who has two lines in act three.'

* * * * *

'Come in,' Melanie called, standing up as Ian came into her office. She held out her arms and greeted him warmly.

'That's more than I expected.' Ian blurted out in surprise. 'Are you sure you know who I am?'

'Of course I do.' Melanie sat down. 'I wanted to hear you read and to see if you'd fit into my plans.'

'Plans?' Ian asked.

I'm told you could do comedy, and that you never got a chance before. I know your old tutor at college, and you're the right physical shape for what I have in mind.'

'Okay.' Ian said slowly. 'So what part would that be?'

'Lord Fancourt Babberly; Babbs for short.'

'Isn't that one of the leads?' said Ian, shocked.

'It is *the* lead.' Melanie replied. 'Babbs is Donna Lucia, from Brazil – where the nuts come from, as the play keeps repeating. You're Charlie's Aunt.'

'And you don't want me to audition?' Ian asked.

'No, I want to know if you're willing to do it.' Melanie handed him a folder. 'Here's the edited script, and my plans for the production. These are only notes, and I hope you won't discuss them with any of the other members of the company until we get into rehearsals.'

'Wow, thanks for trusting me.' Ian took the folder.

'There's more to it.' Melanie said slowly. 'I'm updating the play to modern dress, despite the old-fashioned nature of the plot. Of course, there are some inconsistencies in the way society worked when the play was written, but it's a farce and it can take it.'

'I'm confused. Where do I fit in with this?' Ian asked.

'I want a glamorous and believable Charley's aunt. I think you could do it. It's going to be a lot of work and some of it may not be comfortable, but if you're willing, it could lead to better things.'

'Well, there's not a lot of career development in carrying a spear, or a tray.' Ian said. 'I don't know that my reputation has grown in the last few years. It could get me a career in pantomime, or burlesque.'

'It could be fun.' Melanie's expression was encouraging.

'What would I have to do?'

'First you say nothing. We do the rehearsals, and the dress rehearsals as normal, and then before the first night, we really work on Charlie's aunt herself. I have some sketches here.' Ian walked round the desk to look. 'They're rough sketches, but you get the idea if you look at this sequence. Take it away, keep it secret, read it tonight and we'll talk tomorrow.'

'I think I get the idea.' Ian said, handing the folder back to Melanie.

'I thought you would.' She replied, 'but could you do it for me?'

'I think so. Even if I fail, it's going to be fun.'

'Is it going to be difficult for you when we get to the performances? The idea is that you're going to be a very feminine Charley's Aunt. I envisage the first scenes with you as Babbs are going to be the most problematic. You'll have a wig and maybe a beard to look quite manly, and then with a change of clothes and make up, hey presto, female.'

'I don't think I know how to act female.' Ian said slowly.

'Don't worry. By the time we get to that stage, you'll have learned.'

* * * * *

'You're doing *what?*' Henry asked next day after Ian had returned the script outline to Melanie. He was clearing away old scenery in the wings.

'I'm not going to spell it out,' Ian replied. 'Largely because I don't know how it's going to work.'

'But you've got the lead role.'

'But I'm not sure that I got it on my ability as an actor,' Ian said. 'Melanie hinted that it was because I was the right size for something she had in mind.'

'Lots of leading men have been small in stature but huge in talent.' Henry replied.

'Maybe in the movies, but on the stage I can't stand on a box so that the leading ladies aren't taller than me.'

'Stop worrying. It sounds a lot more adventurous that all that worthy stuff Marshall and his cronies have planned in the past.' Henry said. 'I wonder how she's managed the rest of the casting, though.'

'I saw Daniel and Courtney earlier. They looked like they were plotting something, but as soon as they saw me they started whispering, so I don't know what they think about it all.'

'There are roles for them, surely.'

'There are four substantial male parts and a valet too, apart from Babbs,' Ian explained. 'And four female, including the real Charley's Aunt. When it's explained, I hope Daniel won't think that he should have played Auntie. He's not the right presence.'

'Presence, that's a good word to describe him.' Henry replied. 'What you mean is that he'd be a Neanderthal aunt. From what you told me, that's not what Melanie has in mind.'

'I'm not really sure what she wanted, but you're right.'

'Hello there.' Harriet Casey appeared before they could say more. 'I've come to see Melanie, if she's available. Are you excited by our new production?'

'Yes, I am, Miss Casey.' Ian replied.

'I think you should be. Melanie told me what she has in mind for you. And between you and me, I am so pleased that we're doing something like this. It's not been a lot of fun in watching the audiences as we've depressed them with morally uplifting classical theatre.'

'I'm sure we've not depressed them.' Ian replied.

'So maybe it's only me.' Harriet smiled. 'Theatre should be about so much more.'

'Harriet, I thought it was you.' Melanie came into the auditorium. 'I expect you want to know far more than I want to tell you.'

Harriet laughed politely. 'I really want you to tell me that we've a cast, and that they're going to work together on this.'

'We have and they are.' Melanie replied. 'I was about to put up the cast list and the rehearsal schedule.'

* * * * *

They took the first act carefully, each actor taking their place with greater or lesser comfort. Daniel accepted his role with grace. Courtney was easily accommodated as there was no rival for the female lead, and slowly an ease developed as lines were memorised and direction choreographed.

'Jack and Charley.' Melanie called. 'Remember, you really are in love with Kitty and Amy, so let's see some hidden passion. You are undergraduates, hence the need for a chaperone, because you're also irresponsible. Remember too that you're a bit bumbling and frustrated. This is a period piece even if we're doing it in modern dress. Babbs, you're a bit worldlier, but mischievous rather than an out-and-out rogue.'

'So why does Jack have a costume in his room? In the original, it was supposed to be for a play. Are we staying with that?'

'Yes, he's a student, so why shouldn't he be doing silly student things?' Melanie replied.

'So why does Babbs try it on?' Daniel asked.

'He's playing it for laughs,' Melanie answered. He doesn't think, he simply does it, perhaps to embarrass Jack. Now we come to the next bit. Babbs is persuaded to dress as Donna Lucia, who really is Charley's aunt from Brazil, where the nuts come from. She has to impress both Jack's father, Sir Francis, who knows she's a wealthy lady, and also to appear safe to Amy and Kitty.'

'In the script, Babbs seems to get familiar with Amy and Kitty,' Ian said. 'At the same time, he has to both attract and appall Sir Francis. When Sir Francis is repelled, Amy's father comes onto her, attracted purely by her money. I have no idea how I can do all that.'

'Part of it is costume, part timing.' Melanie replied. 'Don't worry; it's all going to come together.'

'Now then we come to the second act. This is going to be fast and furious.' Melanie stood and walked round the cast. Babbs is charming Amy and Kitty. The boys are worried, knowing who he is, whilst the girls clearly have no idea. Sir Francis proposes. Babbs, instructed by Jack, turns him down. At the same time, Amy's father becomes more insistent.'

'It's going to get really physical. The real Charley's Aunt arrives from Brazil, where the nuts come from, and pretends to be someone else to discover her impersonator. Her ward and Babbs are lovers anyway, which puts Babbs in a ludicrous situation, compounded when he's told to be nice to Amy's father because he holds the trusts which would allow the girls to marry.'

'In act three, Babbs is with the girls. We can hint that they know who he is, but they don't let on to taunt him. The ward, who is called Ella, realises that Charley's Aunt is her beau, and she likes this version of him. Tricks abound, and Babbs gets marriage consents for Jack and Charley. The real aunt is revealed as Charley confesses. At this point, Charley's Aunt is going to act all coy and girlish, and leaves with Ella.'

'So Babbs gets the girl?'

'That's right. We're doing a happy ending. It's a change for this company, I know.'

'It's fiendishly difficult to pull off well, but simple in the end. There's no intellectual content,' Daniel said. 'It's hardly worthy of our talents.'

'It may not be what you expected to do, but low comedy takes as much skill as high tragedy, if not more. The roles are unbelievable, the characters are cyphers, but the situation is full of energy and opportunity to show real stagecraft. I'm sure you'll give me a good Sir Francis.'

As she said this, the thought slipped through her mind that he was so stiff and pompous, he couldn't help but play it the way she wanted. 'Better not to tell him this,' she thought.

'I think Melanie's right.' Courtney chipped in. 'It's camp, but what's the harm in that. The play's been revived and revived. It's over a hundred years old, but we all know about it, so let's do it.'

'Thank you, Courtney. I'm sure you're going to be beautiful as Kitty.' Melanie handed out cast sheets. 'Here's a rehearsal schedule, and a breakdown of the scenes and rough directions. You all know how to block your lines, and we don't have too much time to waste, so let's stick to it and be ready to roll. You're all on file for costume sizes, except Ian, so I'll see the rest of you at first rehearsal later.'

* * * * *

'Are you working at the moment, Ian?' Melanie asked as he followed into her office.

'Yes and no,' Ian replied. 'I'm working from a tiny office on the ground floor of the building where I live, doing remote helpdesk and software stuff for various companies.'

'So you don't have to go into an office or factory every day?'

'Goodness, no. I work alone usually and see no one. It fits around this place, and because it's dealing with remote computer access, I can do it almost any time of

day.' Ian held out his bag. 'I've got my laptop here, and I can work through the bits of rehearsal when I'm not needed.'

'That's better than I could have ever hoped.' Melanie clapped her hands in delight. 'That means no one will know what we're doing.'

'But what *are* we doing, apart from rehearsing?' Ian hesitated.

'We're going to create the best Charley's Aunt that's ever been.' Melanie replied.

'You'd better explain.' Ian sat down. 'I'm beginning to think that I've let myself in for more than I realised.'

'Possibly you have.' Melanie agreed. 'But you're going to have fun, I promise.'

'I'm not sure that I liked the way you said "fun" there.' Ian said. 'Perhaps you'll tell me the secrets before I get too far into this.'

'You're into it already.' Melanie said lightly. 'I can't go changing the cast now.'

'Okay, but it's just because I like you.' Ian laughed too.

'I don't want this to get round the rest of the cast.' Melanie confided. 'But I want the most glamorous aunt possible. I want to get through the rehearsals without them suspecting what we're planning.'

'I can't tell them. I don't *know* what we're planning.'

'Okay, we're going to create Charley's Aunt without them seeing you as Auntie in rehearsal.' Melanie explained. 'Don't cut your hair, slim a little if you can, and keep it secret. I plan that you should be a fabulous aunt, and to do that, we're going to have to work hard to get you ready. I want you to be able to walk, talk, act and even think as if you were the aunt, so that the secret of the disguise becomes compounded.'

'Okay, I'm with you so far.' Ian wasn't really following as much as he pretended.

‘So in effect, we’ll be disguising you as Babbs for the first Act, and then removing the disguise as you become the aunt.’

‘But I’m still male, aren’t I?’ Ian was more confused.

‘Yes, it’s the illusion that I want to be crucial.’ Melanie replied. ‘You’re the right size, well, more or less, and height. With hairdressing, makeup, voice and posture lessons, you’ll be perfect—at least, that’s the plan.’

‘I think I understand.’ Ian paused. ‘I work alone, so I could practise female things at work and no one would see.’

‘Correct, and no one would notice if you were wearing heels and make up, if your hair changed colour. You’d have to remember to disguise yourself as Ian when you came to rehearsals, but we can work on that easily.’

‘Hair changing colour?’ Ian asked. ‘I’m not sure I want to go that far.’

‘Oh, come on now.’ Melanie grinned. ‘Do you really want to play this role full-blooded, and give it your all?’

‘I guess, when you put it that way,’ Ian replied with a dramatic wave and bow. ‘I shall do it and never mind the consequences.’

‘What consequences would they be?’ Melanie softened her tone. ‘You live and work alone, no one’s going to see you, and apart from me, no one’s going to know what we’re doing until we reveal all. You come to rehearsals normally; we work on the changes in the way I want you to act in secret. Who’s to know?’

‘I think they’d notice if I came to the dress rehearsal in a real dress.’ Ian laughed.

‘Sure, but you’re not going to.’ Melanie replied. ‘The plan is that we get you ready for the part, and every time you come to the theatre before the first night, you just look like Ian.’

‘Won’t they spot me for a fake?’ Ian asked.

‘I’d guess that Daniel and Courtney have hardly noticed you in previous productions.’

'They never spoke to me much, unless it was to say something like 'get out of the way.' Ian remembered past insults.'

'You're here because you enjoy the theatre rather than for the companionship of your fellow cast members.'

'That's not true,' Ian said. 'They're just distracted, with bigger roles.'

'And petty jealousies too,' Melanie interrupted. 'I know these theatre people.'

'I don't mind them. Henry and I carry on regardless.'

'Yes, there's Henry. He'd spot anything different. Had I better ask him to join the conspiracy?' Melanie asked.

'Leave him to me.' Ian got up and went towards the door. He opened it and hesitated. 'Whatever you've planned, I'm in. I'll do whatever you want. I promise.'

'I'm sure you'll remember those words.' Melanie smiled and waved him away.

* * * * *

'Rehearsals started almost immediately. I don't want anyone watching old movies,' Melanie ordered. 'They cut the text differently, and weren't confined to the stage as we are. I want your interpretations to be fresh and individual.'

'Fat chance.' Daniel scoffed rather too loudly.

'You're free to walk away any time you want to.' Melanie snapped back. 'Comedy is a skill every stage actor needs, from your credits, there's not a lot in that category.'

'This is farce.' Daniel replied. 'It's hardly comedy.'

'No; just listen to the laughs if you get it right.' Melanie softened her voice. 'There's plenty of space for you to develop your craft here, and for us to go together as a team.'

'Can I say something, please?' They turned to see Harriet Casey, walking forward from the rear of the auditorium. She mounted the stairs in the wings and came onto the stage. 'I love this theatre; that's why my trust has subsidised it for so many years. Now, we're less well off than we used to be, and there has to be some income. The site is valuable, and developers are sniffing around. I want it to continue, but theatre only lives for the audience. It can't live in a vacuum.'

A silence followed, as Harriet looked them over. 'I wanted Melanie to bring a fresh look. I chose the play. It's the first thing I played in when I got the theatre bug, and before I went into the family business. Daniel, I know you're a good person and a serious actor. I want you to stay and help out. Please give Melanie your support. Give her an easy time.'

Daniel blushed. 'I guess I was a little hasty.' He muttered almost inaudibly. 'I'll play it for all it's worth.'

'I want you to play it for all the theatre's worth; no weasel words; in or out wholeheartedly. There's no half-way.' Harriet's voice rose. 'If there's not a decent balance sheet, there may be no theatre in this town.'

'Please, Daniel.' Courtney took his arm. 'You're a great actor; you can make it work for us all.'

Daniel sighed, and looked around the company. 'I guess I'm in; I'm with you,' he said with a slight smile.

* * * *

'That was a scary moment,' Henry, who got the valet's role, said to Ian as they tidied up and cleared the chairs away after rehearsal. 'I thought Daniel was going to be difficult.'

'No, he was simply throwing his weight around,' Ian replied. 'He knows that if he's not acting here, he's not acting anywhere.'

'That's true,' Henry agreed.

'And he'll do it justice,' Ian said. 'He wants to be the star. He wants a good review, and a bit of fame, even if it's only in this town.'

'The acting accountant,' Henry muttered. 'Still, we all have to have a day job in the amateur theatre, or some other means of support.'

'You could have a rich husband instead.' Ian waited for a response.

'Courtney, you mean.' Harry nodded. 'She's a good kid, a bit over the hill for the *ingénue*, but she loves the place and she'll keep Daniel on side.'

'They have a thing going? I never noticed.'

'It was before you came here.' Henry explained. 'It was a minor scandal, but Daniel's business needed Courtney's husband, so it cooled and now it's become quite amicable.'

'I wonder who's going to get the *ingénue* part. If I'm supposed to be in love with her, I would hate it to be Courtney.'

'Never fear, she's going to be Kitty or Amy, whichever has the most lines. I think you should wait and prepare to be surprised.'

'You know something,' Ian accused.

'My lips are sealed.' Henry turned out the lights and led the way towards the exit.

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'Ian, I'd like you to meet Charlotte,' Melanie said as Ian came into her office. 'She's going to be your Ella.'

'Wow, that's wonderful,' Ian blurted out without thinking as he looked at her. Charlotte was small, blonde, and perfectly proportioned. She looked about twenty. 'I mean that it's good to meet you. I couldn't guess who could take that role.'

'I'm new in town.' Charlotte explained.

'That's going to cause confusion,' Ian said. 'You'll get called Charlie too.'

'No, I'm usually Lottie.'