

THE BIG ISSUE

A 45 Minute Stage Drama

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CHARACTERS

Max Johnson A 33 year old Big Issue seller and aspiring journalist. Also plays himself aged 12 to 14.

Alice Johnson His sister, a 28 year old novelist. Also plays herself aged 7 to 9.

Actor 3 Plays various characters, including a social worker, an editor, an older neighbour and a 12 year old school boy.

SET

The play is set in 2001, with flash-backs to the early 1980s. There is an open set to allow for multiple scene changes, which are conveyed through acting and lighting. An optional projection screen stands down-stage right onto which video footage may be projected.

SCENE ONE

Screen *[Images of a family Christmas]*

Sound of children singing Christmas carols. Lights rise on Max, dressed in warm winter coat and woollen hat, holding a pile of Big Issue newspapers]

Max *Big Issue! Get your Big Issue! Only a pound! [a snowball hits him in the back] Ow! [to kids off stage] Piss off, you little bugger! That hurt! [off stage two children laugh and shriek. A boy, muffled up warm, and pulling a small sled runs straight across the stage, knocking over Max's pile of Big Issues, exits]*

Max *[scrabbling on the ground to pick them up] What the . . . ?*

Alice *[off stage] Max, Max! I'm coming too Max! Mummy, says I can come. Wait for me! [Alice, aged 8, in winter clothes, runs on stage after the boy, holding a large teddy bear under her arm. She halts momentarily to look at Max]*

Max *[As if seeing a ghost] Alice? [the girl appears totally oblivious and carries on running across the stage, seemingly from another world]*

Alice *Wait for me! [exits, following boy]*

Max *[Max stands deep in thought] Teddy Grump Bucket. He went everywhere with her. [he rummages in his pocket and takes out a bottle of medicine] Yugh. [takes a swig]*

Alice *[off stage]* Max. Max! Davy Anderson's taken Mr Grump Bucket hostage.

Max *[thoughtful]* Davy Anderson. Huge boy, ears full of brown wax. Used to roll it into pellets and set fire to them in chemistry.

Alice *[enters, aged 7, in summer dress]* Max. He won't let me have Grumpy back unless I give him three sherbet dips and a look at my knickers.

Max The sherbet dips we could negotiate. But the knickers . . .that was war.

Davy *[hurtles on stage and rugby tackles Max from behind. They tumble about on the ground]*
Banzai!

Max *[aged 12]* Give him back, give the bear back!

Alice Don't hurt my brother. Don't hurt him! *[jumps on top of the two boys, and tries to bite Davy's leg]*

Max Alice! Get out the way.

Davy She's got my bloody leg.

Max We can't fight with you on top of us.

Alice I'm not letting go.

Max Alice, go home.

Davy I've just seen her knickers!

Max Liar ! *[redoubles his efforts]*

Alice I'm not letting go.

Davy They're blue. She's got blue knickers.

Max Bloody liar! *[semi throttles him]*

Davy Alice Johnson is wearing blue knickers!

Max No-one says my sister's name and knickers in the same breath.

Davy Alice 'knickers' Johnson. Alice 'knickers' Johnson.

Alice I'm not letting go, Max. I'm not letting go!

- Max *[all three collapse in an exhausted pile. Alice remains prone until she next speaks. Max sits up as an adult]* Alice was a liability, all right. She was like one of those holy places everyone's always fighting over.
- Dave *[to Max]* There's only one way to settle this, Johnson Fart contest. Tomorrow, after school, back of Tesco's. Longest fart, wins. Hasta la vista, Baby. *[exits]*
- Max *[pause]* I was strangely fond of that bear. He arrived the week before she was born. Dad took me into Manchester. It was the first time I'd been anywhere big without Mum. We went all round the toy shops. £19.50 he cost. That was a lot of money in those days. That would have bought you a Scalectrix. Dad was usually careful with money. I realised something new was coming into our lives.
- Screen *[scenes of Alice playing with Dad]*
- Alice *[sits on floor in front of screen playing with her teddy Grump Bucket]* Look, Grumpy, you're smaller than me now. Rockabye baby on the tree top . . . You're my baby now. If you don't eat your cabbage, you'll never grow. Do you want to stay that size for ever? Isn't it lucky Daddy bought me a tea set for Christmas? The cups are just the right colour. *[pours out 'tea']*
- Max What didn't Daddy buy her?
- Alice *[reciting a list]* A Barbie with blonde hair and a bridal outfit and a pony. And a bike with proper wheels, and some pink kickers with the badges on, and some red leggings, and an electric pen with the magnet on the end, and a Blue Peter Annual, and a make-up bag with opal nail varnish . . .
- Max It was just the same when we went on holiday. All my stuff got shoved in with Dad's, but she had her own little vanity case. She'd get that excited she couldn't sleep all week before we left. In and out of my room like bloody a yoyo.
- Alice *[rushes up with a small, bulging weekend case]* Max.
- Max *[aged 11]* I'm reading.
- Alice Can you sit on my case for me?
- Max *[aged 11]* Alice, I've told you. You'll have to dump something. It won't all fit.
- Alice But what can I dump?
- Max *[pulls out nurses hat]* This for starters.
- Alice I can't do without my Nurse's outfit.
- Max Why not?

Alice Someone might get ill.

Screen *[scenes of family on holiday in Spain]*

Max *[A moonlit night, sound of crickets, whispering, aged 11]* Alice. You're supposed to be in bed.

Alice *[kneeling in her nightie with Teddy Bear, whispers]* Mum and Dad won't be back 'til late. They're at the Fiesta.

Max They're coming back in half an hour.

Alice No they're not.

Max If they find you up, what am I going to say?

Alice It's boiling.

Max I'll fetch you some water. *[Alice shines a small torch around]* What are you doing now?

Alice Can't you hear him? *[sound effect of mosquito]*

Max Not another one. I'll get it. *[failed attempt to squash mosquito between his hands]*

Alice *[distressed]* Don't!

Max You hate mozzies.

Alice If you kill him he'll die. *[shines torch around vigorously]* He might fall asleep if I tire him out a bit.

Max You're the one that's supposed to be asleep.

Alice Don't you think Mum looks lovely in her Ra Ra?

Max She's all right.

Alice Do you think they're in love?

Max Who?

Alice Mum and Dad.

Max Don't be daft. Mum's nearly forty.

Alice I think Dad loves her, though.

Max What makes you say that?

Alice He holds her hand when he doesn't have to.

Max That's what married people do when they're too old . . . *[stops himself]*

Alice Too old?

Max When they've had all their babies and that . . . and you know . . .

Alice Too old for what, Max?

Max Never mind.

Alice Too old for what?

Max Alice, you're too young to understand. Now shut up.

Alice *[pause]* You can see Mum likes it.

Max Of course she likes it. She's nearly forty. Who else is going to hold her hand?

Alice *[pause]* Mr Emberton?

Max *[they both explode with laughter]* He's got a false hand. How can you hold hands with a false hand?

Alice Mum doesn't seem to mind.

Max That 'cos she's polite. Besides, how else is she going to get her degree? She's hopeless at maths.

Alice I wish he'd stop coming all the time. I don't like the smell.

Max *[adult]* We prayed for him. *[kneels, and young Alice joins him. Priest intoning]* We prayed for all sinners, especially atheists like Mr Emberton.

Emberton *[walks across stage, very upright, in Trilby hat, northern accent. He wears a black glove on one hand]* If you believe in God, young Max, make him lift that table. *[triumphant pause]* You can't, can you? *[walks to extreme stage right]* You can watch that table as long as you like - it won't move. You have my word on it.

Max The table never moved. I knew God had more important things to do, but in my book Emberton needed taking down a peg. Always helping Mum in the study and then afterwards a small sherry between those great fat fingers of his. Sherry! Our Dad wouldn't have been seen dead with a sherry. It was John Smiths or nothing.

Emberton How are the equations going, young Max ?

- Max All right.
- Alice Have you brought any jelly babies?
- Emberton *[pulls out a packet]* All things are accountable through number, Alice.
- Alice Can I have one?
- Emberton Do you know which is the most fascinating number of all ?
- Alice *[pause]* Six ?
- Emberton The number, Alice, is zero. *[he eats one of the jelly babies. She sinks down by his feet, crest fallen]* Strictly speaking, of course, zero is not a number. But it performs an extraordinary function in the mathematical universe. *[takes out a second jelly baby]* Observe this jelly baby.
- Alice *[yearningly]* It's a lovely red colour.
- Emberton If I divide it by zero, Alice, what happens?
- Alice *[still more yearningly]* I don't know.
- Emberton Divided by zero, this jelly baby becomes infinite. *[pointedly to Max]* A little like a communion wafer, I believe. *[holds the sweet up]* Tongue, Alice. *[she puts out her tongue and he drops a jelly baby onto it]* Just like your Mummy. *[exits]*
- Screen *[images of Alice's first communion]*
- Max Alice loved praying.
- Alice Mummy, can we go to St Peter's ? Father Russell says prayers count double today. I might get someone out of purgatory.
- Max She was a great one for confession too. Father Russell must have dreaded the sound of her footsteps. She'd be in there for hours
- Alice *[kneeling by the chair]* . . . and I've encouraged blasphemy in others and in my own heart, by egging my brother on to do a . . . to do a competition for . . . is it blasphemy to say the word fart, father ?
- Davy *[rushes on stage, aged 12]* Are you ready, Johnson?
- Max *[aged 12]* Who's judging?
- Alice I will.
- Davy Bloody hell, she's followed us.

Max Go home, Alice.

Alice I don't want to go home.

Max You're a pain in the arse.

Davy I can't perform in front of girls.

Max Do as I say, Alice. Go home.

Alice I'll tell on you.

Max Just go !

Alice *[pretending to leave them] I'll tell Mum . . . [stays watching from the sidelines]*

Dave Are we agreed on the three categories?

Max Length of fart. Loudness of fart. Artistic merit.

Dave Name your tune?

Max When the Saints Go Marching In.

Dave Take up positions. *[they turn their backs to the audience and squat] Bombs away. [loud raspberry sounds]*

Max *[slowly straightens up. As adult]* My secret technique was a squeegee bottle. I got the idea off Blue Peter. *[explanatory]* The squeegee bottle, not the farts. It would pump you up a treat. *[pause]* I was always the plodder, though. It was Alice who was the fire cracker. She was alive. Bursting at the seams.

Alice *[sings and tap dances across the stage]* One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive. Six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Then I put it back again.

Screen *[images of young Alice dancing and playing]*

Max *[Max spots a potential customer and jumps down off stage]* Big Issue ! Latest copy ! Only a pound ! *[he moves through the audience, attempting to sell to individual people]* Great article on Martin Amis. I wrote it. Look, there's my by-line. *[mightily pleased]* Max Johnson uncovers the new-look Martin Amis.

[to member of audience] Big Issue, sir? *[sardonic laugh]* Sheepish smile. Look them in the eye and they can't look away. *[eye-contact with member of audience]* Can you? But they can rummage. Lots of rummaging. *[demonstrates]* 'It's in here somewhere, all tangled up in the lining of my capacious handbag. Help, I've lost my purse. Send out a

search party!' [pause] No hypocrisy from you, though. You'd never use the 'I'm so poor' smile. The 'I simply can't give to everyone' smile.

And then occasionally, someone pays up. The heavens open and you've got a sale. Sometimes they're friendly, chatty even. But usually they don't look at you. They don't like to touch you either. They let their money sort of 'dock' into the palm of your hand. [demonstrates gingerly retracting fingers] Like so. [he returns to the stage] It's mucky stuff, someone else's need. You're well shot of it for a pound.

Screen *Lights fade. The sound track and image of Alice dancing starts to degenerate, and the video winds down to freeze frame. Black Out]*

SCENE TWO

Interv. Radio [Sound of a radio interview fades up] "That was Bernardo Bertolluci talking about his latest project 'Pinnacle of Desire'. [pause] Now less than a year ago she was a complete unknown. But all that's set to change. [lights slowly rise on adult Max sitting by a word processor, listening intently to a tape recorder. There are office sounds around him. A large poster for The Big Issue is on the wall. The Editor stands extreme stage left flicking through a hard back book, entitled Man Machine.] "Alice Johnson joins me this evening to talk about her Whitbread nominated first novel - Man Machine - and her hopes for the future. Alice, good evening to you."

Alice Radio "Hello."

Interv. Radio "First of all, congratulations on your nomination."

Alice, Radio "Thank you."

Interv. Radio "This is an extraordinary tale, isn't it? The brain of car crash victim, Jack Stone, kept alive in a machine, forced to use a surrogate body - Daniella - who offers him a kind of emotional dialysis. Strong stuff for a first novel."

Alice Radio "It's how I write."

Interv. Radio "Some are hailing you the new Anita Brookner. Others, and I quote The Spectator, say Man Machine is "psycho babble at its most pretentious."

Alice Radio "Well, we're all pretending, aren't we?"

Interv. Radio "Are there echoes of your own life in Man Machine?"

Alice Radio "There are always echoes of yourself in your work. How else do you write?"

Interv. Radio “Your brother, for example?”

Editor *[walks casually over to Max, holding the book]* How’s it all going, Max?

Alice Radio “Yes. My brother. He meant a lot to me.”

Editor *[Max hastily switches off the recording. The Editor pulls out hard copy of Man Machine]* Have a read of that. She’s a big fan of The Big Issue, you know. Might even write us a short story and waive the fee. Here’s her number.

Max I . . . I can’t.

Editor Sally’ll sort out your traveling expenses.

Max I can’t do it, Rob.

Editor Sorry?

Max Put someone else on the job.

Editor Bollocks, Max. Martin Amis was a far bigger fish.

Max This is different.

Editor She’s happy to talk. She needs the publicity. Great angle about her brother.

Max Yes. *[pause]* Great angle about her brother.

Editor I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t think you could do it. You’re a good writer, Max. Do you want to stand on street corners for the rest of your life?

Max I can’t do it! *[he switches the radio back on to illustrate his point]*

Alice Radio “My brother was a big part of my life back then. In and out of institutions all through my teens, then finally he went missing. AWOL. One postcard, and then silence. For twelve years. *[Max glares at Editor, and switches it off]*

Max One postcard. From Earls Court.

Editor *[the penny drops]* Alice Johnson. She’s your sister.

Max *[pause]* I can’t do it.

Editor Ok ok. We’re on a tight deadline. I’ll get another writer in.

Max *[looks at the piece of paper]* 769 833. It’s the same number. They’re all still there.

Editor If you want to do it, of course . . .

Max What would I say to her?

Editor What do you want to say? *[long pause as Max tries to construct an answer. Editor sits down next to him]* Think about it, Max. The Guardian would die for this sort of thing.

Max *[pause]* Twelve years is a long time.

Editor It could be your big break.

Max *[thoughtful]* Twelve years.

Max You can't run away from the past, Max. Use it. *[taps the book]* She has.

[Fade to Black Out]

Screen *[A still image of young Alice running towards the camera. The image very slowly starts to move into slow motion]*

For more - please contact Claire Booker