

Surface Torture I-II Matt Thorne

[The following is the initial duologue for two actresses inspired by Tibor Hajas's Felületkínzás / Surface Torture I-II, 1978. It would be good, though not essential, if the actor playing 'A' is older than the actor playing 'B'. This is the starting point for the first section of the show, which will be built from improvisation and rehearsal extending out from this duologue. This is Surface Torture I. Surface Torture II follows below this.]

As the audience enters the gallery, the actresses playing A and B play a four-handed duet of Schubert's 'Fantasia in F Minor'. [If the actors cannot play this, it's fine to play this over the speakers.]

A: When we're together, I can't even see you. My eye-rods and cones are burnt straight through.

B: Scratch out his name with your nails. Write mine in its place.

A: When we're apart, the only way I can sleep is to recreate you—

B: You told me nothing would happen.

A: Pixel by pixel.

B: There was no reason to be scared.

A: I start with your feet.

B: Just a tantrum from a straight guy.

A: Those big old metatarsals.

B: They don't fight dirty.

A: How experience views youth.

B: It's all unsharpened words.

A: So many years of accident and refinement and good choices and bad—

B: He would never use his fists.

A: That led to your feet beneath my sheets.

B: Just his brain and his penis.

A: Those cute little cuts.

B: And he'd care more about perception and reputation than anything else.

A: The small temporary one on your cuneiform bone.

B: He knew he didn't have to fear you—

A: And that strange sickle-shaped one on the back of your heel that kept reappearing.

B: Or what you'd say—

A: New shoes can attack in the same way, it's true.

B: Or anything you do.

A: But the skin blisters. Or bunches up in a bloody ribbon.

B: I wanted him to be—

A: I don't rush ahead—

B: Someone sinister behind closed doors.

A: I do not cheat.

B: A father of the old school.

A: Disallowing myself to bring your body to life—

B: A husband who made you approach him—

A: Through action or drama.

B: On all fours.

A: Those developed diamonds—

B: An emperor who remained dissatisfied—

A: That curve round—

B: Even when you fulfilled—

A: To the backs of your knees.

B: His most deviant demands—

A: OK, a small cheat. I recall—

B: With unflagging good humour.

A: How shocked you were.

B: But he wasn't that man.

A: When I settled in—

B: One time, the weekend after it began—

A: Behind your haunches.

B: I watched you at dinner.

A: That wide, undulating space—

B: No matter how much it hurt—

A: Made just for me.

B: To see you kiss him—

A: How happy I felt—

B: I forced myself to suffer.

A: Clasped against your rump.

B: I needed to know—

A: And still fighting insomnia, I'd roll over in bed.

B: What I was up against.

A: And turn you with me. Your perfect belly-button, a baby's pout—

B: When you were cruel.

A: Not a dragged-down medieval keyhole—

B: You told me I didn't understand—

A: Like mine.

B: How it was—

A: My memory would bury you in sludge.

B: Between women and men.

A: Pour blackness over your sides—

B: As if I'd never had a mother.

A: And silver over your shoulders.

B: Or father.

A: Your face and hair. Obliterate you forever.

Both: As if nothing had happened between us. Or ever would again.

The improvisations should follow out from this for the first hour of performance. The performance is also promenade around the gallery, so the audience will get a sense of eavesdropping on an incomplete performance but gradually put together the whole story.

[INTERVAL]

Surface Torture II

[This second text is to be first read out as a duologue, then used as a starting point for improvisation. Although there are several characters in the action, it should all be performed by the same two actors in Surface Torture I. Certain sections, such as the phone conversation, can be reinterpreted as monologues and performed in different corners, rooms, floors of the gallery. Before the performance begins, the two actors should be arranged in chairs facing Hajas's photographs as if they are watching a film on TV. If budget allows,

some of the film moments described in the monologue could be shot and shown on TVs. It should come as a slight shock that the same actors are on screen as in the room], increasing the senses of the uncanny.

A should start out in a relaxed, urbane tone, walking around and through the audience, trying to grab their attention as if confessing to them direct. B should remain more aloof throughout.

Although the actors will be taking on different characters through this piece, they should always try to focus on two of the characters talking at once (e.g. Shelley and Nick, Nick and Yardley), dropping one personality and taking on the next in a conventional improvisational manner.

A: The film was called *Surface Torture*, prompting Miles to make a couple of crass jokes about S&M. For a moment, I was concerned it might be a horror movie. The credits had clearly been designed to emulate some Italian *giallo*, blood-lettering over what appeared to be a castle wall. But this was a feint, a modish film school joke. I noticed the director had written the screenplay and felt a little disappointed: if she was an auteur it seemed unlikely she'd need a middle-aged man to write scripts for her and it made tomorrow's dinner feel less enticing. The film proper began at an airport at night—I assumed it was probably Stansted's filming area made up to look like Gatwick rather than a soundstage—with a fiftysomething man approaching a woman in her early twenties as they both waited for their luggage to appear on the carousel. I recognised the man, but wasn't sure where from. Shelley and I exchanged a glance, then both grabbed our phones to identify him from the IMDb.

B: As he was a character actor with big gaps in his filmography, I assumed he must've been delighted to receive a script with such a sizeable role. His character was named Hunter,

which seemed a little too on-the-nose. Both Hunter and the twentysomething, Dolly (again, too much) were returning from a fashion show, possibly in Milan. Dolly's clothes seemed almost comically ugly and ill-fitting. Her coat resembled two car-seat covers stitched together, and at first I assumed the director had made the rookie mistake of hiring a friend instead of a proper costume designer. Slowly, however, I realised the director had more sinister intent, wanting to make this actress seem younger than she was. Gauche. Prey. She'd dressed Hunter in an oversized fur coat: he was the wolf, she the girl in the woods.

A: In a long, overly theatrical scene, Hunter persuaded Dolly to share a cab with him. Nervous about this, Dolly pulled out a phone and Facetimed a friend, getting Hunter to hold up his passport to the camera and promise he wasn't a serial killer and swear no harm would come to her. Once they were in the cab, there was another long scene, only this time the unease was established via the absence of dialogue, the two protagonists observing the play of light over each other's throats and cheekbones as they rode through the wildernesses of outer London. Over these images a gentle but insistent synthesizer hum evoked a slowed-down heartbeat. Then, just as the director had lulled me into a temporary calm, Hunter reared forward so his body filled two-thirds of the screen, as he told Dolly he wanted her to have a late supper with him and his wife.

B: I know who you are. I've read all about your problems.

A: Then you know how easy it is for us to change your life.

B: Dolly laughed and kissed him on the cheek. A slow dissolve left us in darkness and I became aware of both Shelley and Yardley's breathing: one deep, the other shallow.

A: Is it just me or is anyone else finding this deeply unsettling?

B: I'm gripped.

A: I had to admit the fool had a point. *Surface Torture* was unusual in its single, unyielding intelligence. What impressed me most was how forcefully the director drove home her rhythms. I felt a shudder of sympathy as I pictured all the script development meetings she must've sat through, how hard she would have had to resist all the gentle nudges to quicken her tempo, from the first read-through to the final edit.

B: These warm feelings began to dissipate, however, when the film continued with a flashback, an unexpected scene that prompted in me a deeper sense of unease that would have lasting consequences. I didn't realise it yet, but letting this film into my *kopfkino* would have almost as dramatic an impact on my immediate future as opening the door to my father the other evening. In this scene, a young Dolly, aged around seven, stood in a tatty vest and underpants with a stern-faced woman in front of a wooden trunk. The woman slipped a key from around her neck, unlocked the trunk and instructed Dolly to take something from inside. Dolly chose a plain black dress that was clearly too big for her and a red plastic belt. But when she reached inside for a cardigan, the woman slapped her hand and told her not to be greedy and to leave something for the other children.

A: I looked over at the reflection of the screen in Yardley's glasses and wondered whether the scene was impacting on her in the same way. Then I felt her stockinged toes find mine in the darkness and push down upon them and knew exactly what she was thinking.

B: As the film passed the midway point, a narrative seemed to coalesce, and it was one that was making me increasingly uncomfortable. Something had happened between Hunter, Eva and a previous woman they'd toyed with that Eva was trying to redress in their new triad. Whether Hunter was also sleeping with Dolly remained ambiguous, but her sexual relationship with Eva drove the story, although the director portrayed this in a subtle way through scenes of physical intimacy rather than graphic sex sequences.

A: But what dismayed me was the continued flashbacks to Dolly's deprived childhood—which made me think of the Treehouse—and an ill-conceived attempt to suggest her upbringing had left Dolly with a susceptibility that allowed this couple to use her as their plaything. When the film entered its final third, this subtext became increasingly explicit—much to Miles's moronic delight—and I found myself turning against the film still further. So when my mobile rang and I saw it was Emily, I was grateful for the escape.

A: Do you want us to pause it for you?

B: Oh, come on, you can't expect us to stop it now.

A: No, no, let it play. Hi, honey, what's wrong?

B: We'd been surprised when Emily announced her intention to audition for the school play. Shelley had taken her to film sets and fun-in-the-foyer previews since she was old enough to hold a box of popcorn, and we'd often joked about Shelley representing her if she did ever

become a child star, but she showed little interest in performing, being so intently focused on her schoolwork that we'd begun to worry that her lack of extra-curricular activities would count against her when she applied to university—although Yardley said since fees had been introduced in England and home office shenanigans had scared off the lucrative overseas students, it was possible to get in almost anywhere you wanted. She also had the example of her aunt to contend with, although I wasn't sure whether Rachel's spotty résumé was a discouragement or if her life still seemed as glamorous as it had when the kids were younger and appropriately star-struck to see a relative on TV, even if it was usually a commercial.

Rather than do something the students might actually like to perform, such as *Hamilton* or some other contemporary piece, the principal Mr Shrubs, who, the kids liked to sing *could get no love* had let the loony drama teacher Dr Eden produce a play of his own, based on his favourite film, Fritz Lang's 1953 thriller *The Blue Gardenia*, which he claimed could be updated to say several interesting things about the #metoo era. As part of the nightclub chorus line—a straight lift from the 'Hot Box' girls in *Guys and Dolls*—Emily would be dancing in era-appropriate underwear. She was much younger than the rest of the chorus. They were all sixth formers and she'd been cast mainly because at five foot six by the age of thirteen, she already dwarfed those girls, let alone her classmates. I understood why Emily felt reluctant to discuss her new interest with Shelley, but had been disappointed she didn't want me to help her run lines (although she only had three), practice songs or rehearse dances. Instead I'd noticed her going around the house with her earbuds in, silently mouthing the overly complicated lyrics the music teacher Ms. Swanson had written to accompany the action of Dr. Eden's drama. She practiced the steps alone in her room, the ceiling creaking as she did so. It saddened me when she confided that the other girls were getting together but not inviting her, so she was always out of step when it came to rehearsals. But now Emily explained that she didn't want to do the play anymore and wanted Shelley to call Dr. Eden to

get her out of it. When I asked why, she offered some lame excuses so I gave her some gentle encouragement and by the end of the call she seemed much happier. I looked up to see Yardley had come out to check on me.

A: You OK?

B: Yeah, it was only Emily. Butterflies about tomorrow.

A: No, I mean, the film.

B: I always think I know what to avoid.

A: Soaps, domestic thrillers, any documentaries about little kids.

B: But then something unexpected shows up and punches me in the guts.

A: Do you remember how upset you got about that horse?

B: The night we met. I'll never forget.

A: That director is a dick.

B: I know. And I have to meet her tomorrow.

A: Give her a tongue-lashing from me.

B: She linked her fingers with mine and it was no longer my forty-something neighbour in front of me, but a twelve year old girl wearing a short-sleeved black shift dress over a red-and-white striped top, her eyes hidden behind translucent blue-framed NHS specs and the fringe of a mess of tangled black hair, her thin fingers clutching the apple she carried with her everywhere to gnaw and suck on whenever she felt hungry.

A: My Dad's staying with us at the moment.

B: Oh...you didn't say anything.

A: It was a surprise visit.

B: And is he being OK?

A: That's the thing, he's behaving oddly, and it's got something to do with...

B: What happened after I left the Treehouse?

A: I think so. But, listen, this is so strange. He showed me a photo of Mabel someone sent him in the post.

B: OK...

A: And now there's this man he wants me to get in touch with. Some guy I vaguely knew when I was a kid. But I don't think he had anything to do with...that part of our lives. I don't think you ever met him.

B: Say it.

A: I know it. I don't have to say it.

B: Bullshit. Say it.

A: Again, I was back to my childhood, but two years on, the two of us alone in a corner of the courtyard, away from the giant cedars and under the black cherry plum tree. (to B) I am not powerless.

(pause)

She kissed me on the cheek and we went back into the living room to watch the end of this wretched film. On screen, Eva cradled Dolly in her arms. Although it resembled a tender *pietà*, her words were hard. Eva now spoke directly into Dolly's ear, and even her positive appraisal of the young woman's body sounded accusatory, as she spat out consonants like pips.

B: Your perfect belly-button. A baby's pout. Not a dragged-down medieval keyhole like mine.

A: You told me I didn't know what it was like between women and men. As if I'd never had a mother. Or a father.

B: In my dreams, I'd bury you with sludge. Pour blackness over your sides, and silver over your hair and shoulders. Obliterate you forever.

A: As if nothing I'd said had any impact on you or ever would again.

B: As if to emphasise the whole thing was a joke we shouldn't take seriously, the film ended with Eva and the Dolly at the piano, playing a four-handed duet of Schubert's 'Fantasia in F Minor' as Hunter turned the pages for them (at least she'd resisted the 'Flower Duet' from *Lakmé*). The credits played out in the same ludicrous font that they had at the beginning, now even more incongruous. Miles's face was sickly aglow, as if he'd absorbed all the light from the screen and now wanted to spew it back out. But in a reverse of the usual scenario at the end of his and Lilian's parties, everyone else appeared dazed and eager to get home.

A: Our gathering broke up and we wandered back through the neighbourhood at night. In the sky above us a full moon was obscured by an inky wash of cloud and in my usual superstitious way I wondered whether it was a bad omen. I felt eager to hear Wystan's opinion, but he seemed alert to Yardley's disapproval and simply said to Shelley.

B: You realise there's no way Miles's going to keep quiet about this film?

A: I don't think there's much chance of his civil service colleagues spreading the word about an obscure art movie.

B: What about his message-boards?

A: What?

B: Didn't Nick tell you about this? He posts on message-boards under the alias 'King Klang'. Not about films, he just gets into arguments about politics below the line on tabloid newspaper websites.

A: But *why*?

B: We watched them descend down the grass verge to the rear entrance to their home. As soon as they were out of earshot, Shelley said...

A: Congratulations, Nick, you and Yardley managed to completely ruin another evening.

B: Hey, we weren't the ones who hijacked a pleasant party and turned it into a work occasion.

A: Come on, you were as bored as I was. Besides, I thought they would enjoy watching something they wouldn't otherwise get to see.

B: Well, Miles certainly did.

A: I don't think you can hold his enthusiasm against Miranda.

B: She created the fly-paper.

A: I don't understand why you're getting so worked up. There's no reason to be jealous. I'm sure she'll read one of your scripts.

B: You think I'm jealous.

A: Fine. You think it's shit.

B: What did *you* think of it?

A: Instead of replying, she grabbed my wrist.

B: I see you're still not wearing the watch I bought you. So that was a complete waste of money.

A: Why would I wear a watch with an engraving saying you literally don't care about me?

B: What on earth are you talking about?

A: 'Somebody loves you.' How the hell was that supposed to make me feel?

B: Oh my God, stop, wait, Nick, please. I told Zak you wouldn't get it.

A: Get what? Was this whole thing his idea?

B: No, you idiot, it was my idea. Don't you remember how you used to take the piss out of my tatty old record collection when we first met? Who sang 'Somebody Loves You'?

A: I've no idea.

B: Crystal Gayle. Crystal anniversary. Get it? When I ran it past Zak, he was convinced you'd understand.

A: Oh I see.

B: A voice came from the darkness.

A: Nick! Shelley!

B: I looked up. Midway down the street was a small area we'd dubbed 'smokers' corner' as it always stank of dope. At any hour of the day or night, there was always a small group of people gathered here: young mothers, teenagers pausing after school or religious leaders giving private instruction to community members. There was only room on the bench for three, but there'd often be others sitting along the brick walls surrounding the Pac-Man-shaped flowerbeds, crushed cans of Zubr underfoot. The voice belonged to Barnabé, who'd stayed out too late and found himself some new neighbourhood companions, two ne'er-do-wells whose presence gave Shelley pause.

A: Come join us. Random Bread is teaching us about chaos magic.

B: This did not surprise me. Random Bread (whose Wystan-coined nickname derived from his love of everything obscure and his almost entirely sandwich-based diet) was obsessed with finding every possible means of challenging the limits of perception, from Jodorowsky marathons to Vollmann novels to Russian cosmonaut drugs, a full-time expert in pharmacokinetics. Sitting next to Random Bread was his regular Sancho Panza, Ken the Bolter. Ken's nickname, another Wystan coinage, had nothing to do with his job.

A: The first time I'd encountered him, at a gig at the Grotto, he'd stared back at me in bafflement when I'd quizzed him about bridge construction)

B: But was prompted by his inability to make it through a single social occasion without making a French exit, usually after whatever party favours Random Bread had gifted him played havoc with his nervous system and caused him to overheat.

A: After cutting out, he was almost always to be found in smoker's corner.

B: Is Nathalie away?

A: No, no, I'm just decompressing.

B: Oh, OK.

A: I noticed several small snails—presumably drawn by the chaos magic—crawling across Ken's belly and arms.

B: Well, we'll leave you to it.

A: See you tomorrow.

B: Yes you will, assuming you're still alive.