

Oh no he didn't!

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The pantomime horse containing Mandy the nurse and Colin the technician slid inexorably towards Buttons standing downstage centre. A moment, and a thunderous if muffled crash of dental team members and costumes later, all three ended up dazed on the village hall floor...



There had been considerable debate about the friction, or lack of it, between the unusually over-polished stage and Clopperty's hooves since the costumes had been delivered to the practice, and been unpacked amid much excitement, the previous day. Despite the fact that Mrs Davies was being kept waiting for her denture fit appointment, the anticipation of getting so close to the actual performances was temporarily obscuring everyone's judgement.

Not that the process had been plain sailing from the start. The initial enthusiasm for the idea of a practice pantomime in aid of local charities had worn off quite quickly, Christmas seeming so far away in March. There were, of course, practice members who leapt at the chance, the extroverts that you might easily have guessed. Amina the Monday/Thursday hygienist was straight onto the cast list and already planning what to wear, although perhaps more surprisingly Adam the new associate had all but climbed into tights and make-up before the staff meeting was over. Equally predictably Leonard, the older partner, had reservations about the practicality of it all and Margaret the receptionist, who had been at Smile More longer than the name itself, expressed a distinct thumbs down to anything that remotely involved 'theatricals'. Oliver had tentatively seen himself in the roles of producer, director and writer but in the event a friend from school days, an actor who was 'resting', offered to direct and Oliver got on with writing the script. Settling on 'Cinderella — A Christmas story for the Chairside', he proceeded to create a dental version around Baron Fang, a nasty dentist, and Adrena and Lynn his two Ugly Sister daughters who served as his despicable nurses. Casting proved to be more of a headache than anticipated, the main problem being that there just weren't enough people in the practice to fill all the parts. Much against his better nature, as he spent the rest of the year telling everyone, Leonard grudgingly agreed to be Baron Fang. Amina was the unchallenged lead part

as Cinderella the downtrodden trainee nurse who eventually marries the handsome Prince Ian Cisor. There was considerable rivalry for the part of the Prince. Gary, nurse Mandy's boyfriend had been suggested but associate Adam was also up for it. In the end Gary was promoted to fictional royalty while Adam manfully (as it were) settled for Adrena as half of what was to become an amazing double-act with Deborah the normally rather glum, dungaree-wearing technician. With the script completed before the

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summer holidays, everyone was expected to learn their lines while stretched out on a Costa del Sol beach, in Amina's case, rambling the Pennine Way for Deborah and cruising the Norwegian fjords for Baron Fang. Of course, no one did, so that when rehearsals started in September there were tears and tantrums and several days in the practice when the dark cloud that followed everyone around was taken by patients to mean that someone had either died or at the very least gone into a coma. But rehearsals gradually got underway and great fun was had by all as the scene in Baron Fang's practice developed way beyond the boundaries of the script. The director encouraged everyone to suggest their worst experiences and all the things that they'd like to do, or say, to patients but never could:

'You've had toothache for three days? Well waiting another three's hardly going to matter then.'

'Of course it's expensive, how else do you think Baron Fang affords two Porsches and a yacht?'

'Hurt? Will it hurt? What do you think we're running here a health spa?'...and so on. Oliver mused that this was all worryingly accurate but couldn't help noticing that the staff in question became much more 'patient focused' in the weeks that followed.

In mid-October, crisis struck when Gary started to get irritated by back-end of the pantomime horse Colin taking what he thought to be rather more than an equestrian interest in girlfriend and front-end of Clopperty, Mandy. And while this seemed to have been sorted out after a few well chosen words and a pint or two at the somewhat appropriately named Horse and Groom, the intensity of the 'instant' attraction between Gary and Amina in the Ball scene caused Mandy to use some rather less romantic threats against Gary's own anatomy of the same name. Strange then that the four of them ended up spending Christmas together in a cottage in a remote part of Exmoor. Ah well.

Line learning had provided a tricky moment when Adam and Amina had spent a cancelled appointment running through their dialogue which was overheard by a patient passing the, admittedly closed, door. 'Get your grubby little hands into that spittoon and scrub 'til it shines' demanded Adam, aka Adrena, in a wobbly falsetto. 'Oh you're so nasty to me. Can't I just have one evening off this week?' pleaded the hidden Cinders. The patient, asking to speak to the practice manager to complain about the staff conditions was confidentially put in the picture and given a complimentary ticket for the first night on the promise that the matter went no further.

As the project progressed Margaret, despite her early misgivings, offered her services as box office and publicity lady and volunteered her husband Ralph for set construction. This, on the basis that she'd know what he was doing at least a couple of evenings a week and that it might encourage him to finish the wardrobes in the bedroom he'd been 'on' for about three years.

Amina fairly blossomed as Cinders, sen-

tenced by her ugly sisters to stay behind washing out the aspirator bottle while they made off to the Ball. The only real hitch was her complete phobia of mice, so that the traditional six white ones ordered up by practice manager Shona as the Fairy Godmother had to be a half-dozen boxes of medical wipes instead, which did just stretch the imagination a tad too far.

For weeks before the performances the Smile More patients were bombarded with publicity material by Margaret, who had discovered the wonders of email (having been 'dead against' computers for years). Initially the uptake had been sceptical and slow until Margaret and Shona had hit on the idea of a free check-up for anyone who booked a ticket before the end of November. Takings were down but ticket sales were buoyant. Ralph's carpentry turned out to be 'of the old school'. Which would have been fine had he been actually building a real coach fit for a princess instead of a stage prop. A work of considerable skill with solid four-by-two timber, tonguing and grooving, dovetail joints, independent suspension and a fully upholstered back seat it was so heavy that the spirited efforts of ten Clopperties would have hardly moved it, let alone the pulling power of Mandy and Colin. In fact it was probably the strain of trying that had put Mandy's back out at the dress rehearsal precipitating the heart searching at the practice when she rang in sick on the day of the first night.

Thank goodness for Margaret who reluctantly stepped into the horse costume at the last minute and made such a cracking job of it. Complete coincidence of course that Ralph had been volunteered by her in the first place. Yes, of course. So, with Ralph's coach-work rapidly desecrated to become the plywood facade that it should have been all along and with set-alginate glued to the hooves for extra grip, Cinder's transport to the Ball was drawn on to huge applause, especially as it was local knowledge that Margaret and Ralph's wardrobes still

weren't finished.

Come the great night there was tension a plenty. Backstage, make-up was applied in trowel-loads by cosmetic and design consultant Gloria, a close friend of Deborah. Amina declared secretly to Adam that the whole thing had been worthwhile as she'd just seen Gary in his boxer shorts (yeah, right) and Colin took up smoking again.

Oliver was made to promise that Margaret could have a new perm paid for out of the expenses as Clopperty's head was about to crush her coiffure into hat-hair from which her reputation may never recover. Shona had clearly been indulging in rather

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too much Fairy Godmother's ruin, although at this point the medical wipes finally came into their own in a way the mice could never have done. Some things are just meant to be.

In the event it was a triumph. Dour Leonard's audience participation spot was the talk of the town for weeks afterwards. 'Baron Fang never keeps his patients waiting' he bellowed with glee, 'Oh yes he does' belted back the children (and the adults too, curiously) from the body of the hall, 'Oh no he doesn't'. The practice team had never seen Leonard in so glowing a form. The money raised, nearly three thousand pounds, was divided by team consensus and despatched to various charities and the local paper carried not only a news story but also a feature on the practice and a review of the show. If the headline was tiresomely predictable, 'Practice team not down in the mouth' then the puns were

agonising: 'Hygienist Anna's [sic] Cinderella scaled new heights of polished delight'; 'respected dentist Leonard Bingham — fangs for the memory'. And at the end of it all, despite the bad words and upset egos, bruised bodies and torn ligaments, no one doubted that it had been the best few weeks that they'd ever spent together in the practice. In fact as Cinders herself said as she was reunited with the glass slipper 'More like a dream than a nightmare...'

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Oliver was woken by the crash of the front door closing, a gust of cold air and the sound of someone sweeping past the Christmas tree causing the decorations to jingle lightly as they swayed in the wake. 'How was your evening?' Oliver's wife sighed, returning from her amateur dramatic group and sinking into a chair.

'Erm, I, erm,' Oliver rallied out of sleep, that dozing, catnap type sleep that leaves you with a dry mouth and a confused sense of place. 'Erm, it was fine. And your panto rehearsal, how did that go?'

'Dreadful. Are you OK, you look a bit confused?'

Oliver thought for a moment. 'Yes, it's just that I nodded off and had the most extraordinary dream, at least I think it was a dream. I dreamt that someone in the practice had suggested doing a panto and...'

'What your practice? Hah!'

'Well, actually, it didn't seem such a bad idea. In fact it was rather good. I don't suppose next year, the village hall would be free, I mean if we were actually to...?'

Oliver's Christmas was spent turning over a few plans in his mind and adding an item to the agenda of the next staff meeting under Any Other Business: i.) Ideas for charity fund raising.

Oh yes he did! Merry Christmas.

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