

ACT ONE

[MUSIC under. 'Walk Away, Renee' processional quiets the audience.]

[MUSIC out.]

ANNOUNCER: [off] ... And now, please welcome the Lord of Fleet Street, the darling of Wall Street, the champion of Main Street, the Chairman of the Board of Biggar International, Mr Lionel K. Biggar!

[MUSIC in: Nancy Sinatra, 'These Boots Were Made for Walking'.]

[Single SPOT: a lectern.]

[LIONEL BIGGAR enters the light dressed as Lord Nelson: wig, bicorne hat, frock coat, ruffled shirt, velvet breeches, silk hose, knee-high black patent leather boots. The MUSIC swells. Flashbulbs pop. Biggar vamps for the audience, demonstrating the power of his boots. Here is a man who takes enormous pleasure in the spotlight.]

BIGGAR: Ladies, gentlemen, fellow stakeholders of Biggar International, we have been accused of stuffiness at our Annual General Meetings. This year I decided to do something about that. Since our colleagues in the soft-left media delight in portraying me as a myopic eighteenth-century baron, I thought, why not play the game?

[Biggar throws up his arms, gestures for applause. More flashbulbs.]

BIGGAR: According to the gurus of the 'Information Age', no one at this Annual General Meeting should be smiling.

It is our misfortune to own 437 newspapers and, as the experts are quick to remind us, in the Electronic Age print is a dead donkey. A sunset industry. Long term, our enterprise is doomed; we'll be swallowed whole like a chunk of carrion in some megadeal that trades on the magic words 'convergence' and 'synergy'. *[pause, smile]* I think not. You see, we thrive where others sicken and die. We have doubled in size twice in the last ten years. Some thirty million subscribers worldwide. Everywhere that sunshine falls upon this earth people are reading our newspapers. It is called 'clout' and we purchased it at knock-down prices.

We will not apologize for our successes. Life is about winning. Show me a good loser and I will show you a loser.

My friends, if we succeed it is because we take our responsibilities as publisher seriously. You are my shareholders. I am your servant. Together, we are the custodians of precious freedoms. We must speak to the perils of our day – which brings me nicely to the central thrust of my remarks this afternoon. Other owners of media outlets may choose to espalier their public pronouncements along the picket fence of the reigning liberal orthodoxy. That sort of relativistic equivocation is not my style. *[pause]* I prefer plain speech. What needs to be said is that our society teeters on the brink of a New Dark Age.

I will not stand by and watch as the lights of our great civilization are put out one by one. It will not happen. Not on my watch.

We have our enemies, people who wish to thwart us – some of them are here in the hall with us ... Mr Salutin ... Mr Saul ... Ms McQuaig ... *[whipping his back]* chh-chhh-chh.

[A man in the front row, TRENT, wearing a toque and a greasy bathrobe, cranks around to look into the audience.]

BIGGAR: Who are these so-called citizens who would thwart the will of you, my shareholders? They swarm under the linoleum in our publishing houses, television stations, museums, art galleries and universities. They are the pusillanimous pussyfooters who crowd the corridors of our bureaucracies. They are the unctuous cultural hucksters who manufacture and manipulate symbols for a living. They are the envious. They are the mediocre. Their empty slogans – [*mocking*] ‘North-South’, ‘the politics of meaning’, ‘the Third Way’ – are an ideological bathtub ring left over from the sixties. They unleash upon us the howling mob of compulsive do-gooders and guilt-mongering victims who would strip you of the profits of our enterprise! Let me enumerate them, the fallen angels who goose step on the head of the proverbial pin: [*accelerating cadence*] militant homosexuals seeking civil liberties for deviants, sagging feminists whining about the evils of patriarchy, abortionists playing God with the unborn, chinless eco-geeks wringing their hands about the ozone hole, welfare addicts showing us their bedsores, native people mewling about paleolithic utopias, jackbooted union thugs – the whole seething mob of ‘victims’ swarming up in tribal rage, shrieking with one shrill voice about compassion and caring and sharing and ME – ME – ME! [*pause*] SILENCE! ALL OF YOU! BE FOREWARNED!

[*Pause.*]

BIGGAR: You have snatched the hood from a falcon ... The central question: How do we defend our civilization against the me-Me-ME-ism that threatens to destroy it?

The simple answer: A qualifying exam for adulthood.

Why should all the hard-won freedoms of citizenship be a gift of birth? This is a crusty old proposition tested these several centuries and found wanting. It is time to stop the madness. The world is not fair. People are not as

sweet and responsible as we thought they were. The democratic experiment needs a new set of rules.

A qualifying exam for adulthood!

You can't drive a car without a driver's licence, why should you have the right to vote, own property or bear arms, much less children, without proving, in a well-crafted written exam, that you are capable of assuming the duties and responsibilities of adulthood?

TRENT: *[interrupting]* HORSE SHIT!

[Trent stands up in the aisle.]



TRENT: Justify your pay packet, Biggar.

BIGGAR: Aha, aha, yes ... Mr Trent, former syndicated columnist, recently fired by the *Chronicle*. It's been thirty-two years, has it not? Photographic memory.

TRENT: EWWW, Lionel K. Biggar's brain. We are soooo afraid. We've had it with the pontification, okay? Justify your pay packet, Big Guy! We're all listening.

BIGGAR: You are an unemployed journalist, and you have come to disrupt these proceedings. Is that a bathrobe? How picturesque.

TRENT: Your company is awash in debt. Your stock is in the toilet. You paid yourself fifteen million bucks last year. You spent forty-five million on a new corporate jet. *[to audience]* He laid off nearly four hundred journalists last year!

BIGGAR: Three hundred and sixty-two.

TRENT: Hates democracy! Too much noise and confusion! Shut it down! *[brandishing manuscript]* I've written a book about you!

[Biggar gestures grandly, throwing a SPOT on Trent.]

BIGGAR: Evict this man from the premises!

TRENT: I – I – I ...

[Trent waves his open palms in a panic. LIGHT shifts, Biggar freezes. We are in a different space-time. Trent is caught in his pool of light.]

[AUDIO HALLUCINATION: *hospital beeps. Trent looks around, confused: his bathrobe, the manuscript, the surrounding darkness.*]

TRENT: Nurse? Nurse!

NURSE: [*off*] I'll be right there, Mr Trent.

[*Trent thumbs his manuscript in a panic, looking for his place.*]

TRENT: [*muttering search*] You stand accused – you stand accused – you stand accused ... the run-in ... here ... I – I know nothing of your book, sir. I am merely trying to restore order at a public meeting ...

[*Trent waves his arm again. LIGHT shifts to AGM levels. Biggar comes out of his freeze.*]

BIGGAR: I know nothing of your book, sir. I am merely trying to restore order (at a public meeting).

TRENT: [*interrupting*] No publisher in the country will touch it. 'Oh no, Mr Biggar might sue for libel. Even if you're totally innocent it would cost hundreds of thousands to defend you.' Can't say this, daren't say that – he shuts down public debate!

BIGGAR: Mr Trent –

TRENT: You stand accused!

[*Trent gasps for air, drops to one knee.*]

BIGGAR: Of what, my dear man, having more than you? I could not have less, for you have nothing at all except an overweening envy that masquerades as moral indignation –

TRENT: [*gasping*] No – no – no, that’s not how it goes ...

[*Trent tries to balance his breathing.*]

TRENT: Nurse ...

BIGGAR: I achieved and you did not, therefore I must be thwarted. The world doesn’t work that way any more, Mr Trent. You have lost touch.

[*Trent stands, struggles for breath. He takes off his toque. Chemo has denuded him.*]

TRENT: You, sir, are a danger to democracy.

BIGGAR: [*gentle*] Please take note, envy and moral superiority do not issue from the underclass, but from our so-called intellectual elites. These rabble-rousers have held centre court for the last fifty years masquerading as guardians of some self-serving ‘common good’. One wearies of their intellectual hooliganism. [*secret smile*] Sooner or later, someone had to drown the kittens.

[*SOUND: supportive applause.*]

TRENT: NO!

[*Trent waves his open palms in a fury. LIGHT shifts to vignette Biggar, who freezes. Trent mounts stairs to the stage. He examines Biggar like a statue in a museum.*]

TRENT: You’re a hard man to get at, Lionel K. Biggar. We rabble-rousers shoot our arrows over the castle wall and hope for the best. On a personal level, I can tell you there comes a time when that isn’t enough. I’m storming your palace of lies. A writer’s freedom, sir, to stir time and space

with a fingertip. The world order you embrace – economic freedom without social responsibility – is not inevitable. Your ideology is not only wrong, it is dangerously wrong. All of this will be revealed ... in the pages of my book ...

[He prepares to release him.]

TRENT: Even here, under my total control, you are a wily and dangerous adversary. New setting! ‘Nor can I give you back your job, Mr Trent ...’

[He waves his open palms again, releasing Biggar from his pose. The light doesn’t return to AGM levels.]

BIGGAR: *[mid-thought]* – nor can I give you back your job, Mr Trent, or promise I won’t sue you if you ... *[Biggar looks around, confused]* ... if you libel me. Anything else? Good. Let’s give this poor chap a warm round of –

[Biggar starts to applaud, turns to the surrounding darkness. He’s spooked now.]

TRENT: *[pleased]* So ...

BIGGAR: Wait a minute ... who? Where? Security!

TRENT: We’re in my brain, Biggar. Hating you keeps me alive.

BIGGAR: What a terrible curse upon your life, my dear fellow. That wristband – you escaped from a mental hospital. I want you to just be calm. You are clearly in some distress at the present moment. I know a thing or two about acupuncture points.

[Biggar stalks him, holding out his thumb like a weapon.]

TRENT: The oncology unit. Small cell tumour, anterior lobe of the right lung. Cisplatinium chemo. Radiation. Morphine speedballs. Pack my sinuses with rat poison, I said, it's not about quality of life. Keep me on this plane of being until my manuscript is published; after that, bring down the vultures!

BIGGAR: We shall see what my security detail has to say about your presence here on this 'plane of being'.

TRENT: *[mocking]* 'My security detail'. Do you ever listen to yourself, Biggar? The grandiose assumptions! The boundless arrogance! Who do you think you are?

BIGGAR: I am one of the most powerful men on this planet.

[SOUND: a deep rumble from the bowels of the earth.]

[They are both startled. The floor starts to shake. LIGHTS flicker.]

TRENT: Holy shit. Holy shit!

BIGGAR: Earthquake!

[SOUND: Treated guitar riffs from 1968. The birthing cries of the earth. A dangerous radiance. Steel girders creak and groan. Dogs bark. Roosters crow. The lectern topples. Biggar grabs Trent for support. The big shock hits. Trent and Biggar are knocked to their knees.]

[SOUND: a crack of thunder; a lightning flash knocks out the LIGHTS momentarily. They come back on to reveal EVE, lithe and agile as an acrobat, as she lands in front of Biggar and Trent. She is wearing a camouflage jumpsuit, a mask over her face.]

EVE: ON THE FLOOR! HANDS BEHIND YOUR HEADS!

TRENT: Who – who, what – ?

EVE: SHUT UP! You are under MY control!

BIGGAR: Help! HELP!

[Eve hits Biggar's arm with an injection device. He clutches Trent and topples sideways.]

TRENT: I have nothing to do with –

EVE: SHUT UP!

[She injects Trent. He goes down atop Biggar. She puts her boot on them.]

EVE: NO GOD! NO MASTERS! NO LAWS!

[SNAP TO BLACK.]

[MUSIC: electronic musical ramp to indicate shifting space and time. This music cue is built around a sampled/looped version of the descending bass riff from 'These Boots Are Made for Walking'.]

[LIGHTS shift.]

[Biggar and Trent are sprawled on the floor, hooded and handcuffed back to back. They come around slowly, groggy with drug hangovers.]

[SOUND: cooing baby.]

TRENT: *[coming to consciousness]* Who? What? When? Where?
How? *[pause]* Why?

[Trent struggles, arousing Biggar.]

TRENT: Help! HELP!

BIGGAR: Shut up!

TRENT: Where – where are we?

BIGGAR: Hush!

[SOUND: a roll of distant thunder.]

[A GIRL sings the opening lines from ‘These Boots Are Made for Walking’.]

[SOUND: the tinkle of wind chimes. The storm has passed.]

TRENT: Holy shit, what is happening? We’re spinning out of control here ... help, HELP!

[Trent’s breathing shortens, he flops around. Biggar struggles to sit upright.]

BIGGAR: BE STILL! *[to himself]* This thirst ...

[SOUND WITH ECHO: drip-drip-drip of water to create the audio illusion of a dank cave. The CUE plays intermittently through the rest of the act.]

[SINGLE on a white plastic pail. A luminous icon.]

EVE: *[whisper, off]* Who ... tells ... the story?

[Drip. Drip. Drip.]

TRENT: Can't breathe ... this hood ... are you hooded?

BIGGAR: You can drop the bloody charade. I know your game.

TRENT: Pardon me?

BIGGAR: You were the decoy.

TRENT: Excuse me?

BIGGAR: I am not naïve, sir. You were part of the snatch team.

TRENT: Rest assured, this is entirely beyond my control, Biggar. We're in uncharted territory here.

[Trent fights to take off his hood.]

TRENT: No air ...

[The hood comes off. Trent is no longer wearing his toque. He looks dreadful.]

BIGGAR: How much money did they offer you?

TRENT: I had nothing to do with this ... I mean, granted, I set this scenario in motion, the Annual General Meeting, you in your cocked-up Lord Nelson rig with the Nancy Sinatra soundtrack ... I – I was in control but then the story sort of twisted back on itself. *[pause]* My mind is a hall of mirrors.

BIGGAR: Your mind is a puddle of curdled dog vomit. I am soooo glad I fired you, Mr Trent. I did, you know, personally. It's one of the reasons I purchased that nickel-dime chain of newspapers. To get at hacks like you. The mocking class.