

A Comedy in Two Acts

By Willie Porter

ACT ONE

The action takes place in the Parish Hall of the village of Steeple Heath. The walls have rolls of honour, fading photographs etc. Doors lead out of the main hall to the outside and to the kitchen (both of which give access to the site), to an annex room being used as a dormitory, and centrally, facing the audience, to the caretaker's room. There is a window in the outside wall. A large scale plan of the site stands on an easel. The room is dressed with the impedimenta of a dig, ranging and scale poles, rusty catering size jam tins, shovels, picks, survey kit and a broken wheelbarrow etc. There are three or four bent tube and canvas chairs, and a wooden table covered in drawings and papers, under which is a camp bed.

On one of the chairs are draped Gordon Harlech's clothes.

Gordon is asleep in the camp bed. A cock crows. Enter Howard with a collecting box.

Howard *(Looking round.)* Hello? Good Morning?

(Gordon groans and starts. Howard sees him and rattles the collecting box near his head. Gordon groans again, stirs, gropes for his spectacles, bangs his head on the underside of the table, etc.)

Howard Ah, there you are! Good morning. Organ Fund.

Gordon Eh?

Howard Organ Fund.

Gordon I'm sorry, I'm not quite with this. Who are you?

Howard Howard Threemile. I'm the church organist here in Steeple Heath. I'm sorry if I woke you, but if you knew the state of my organ, you'd know why I'm here.

Gordon The state of your organ?

Howard I'd not have taken the post here if I'd known what a state the organ was in. It was virtually false pretences. Within a week of starting I found the organ had severe structural problems and serious technical deficiencies. *(Rattles tin.)* So can you help us, please?

Gordon It's a bit difficult at present. I don't seem to have any money on me. Could you come back later?

Howard Yes of course. Would any particular time suit you?

Gordon What's the time now?

Howard Oh, after seven. I felt sure you archaeologists would be up and about by now.

Gordon We haven't started the dig properly yet. We brought the tools and so forth down last night, but none of the volunteers has arrived yet. We're expecting them today.

Howard Should I arrange collections from the volunteers with you?

Gordon Professor and Mrs Neyland are in charge. They've brought their caravan to live in, I expect you saw it outside. I'm sort of second in command.

Howard I hope we'll be able to count on the Professor and his wife for contributions.

Gordon I should catch them later if I was you. And now, if you'll excuse me, I may as well get dressed.

Howard Right. I'll be back later. Remember - GOOF.

Gordon Sorry?

Howard Give Often to the Organ Fund. I made that up myself. *(Exits.)*

Gordon *(Looks at his watch.)* Good Grief.

(Gordon settles back in bed. When he is comfortable his alarm clock, on the table, goes off. Gordon groans , gropes for his spectacles, bangs his head on the underside of the table, etc. Enter Prof Neyland, out of breath and in jogging gear.)

Prof Anyone up and about? Is the kettle on for tea?

Gordon *(Groans.)* Uh , Morning Professor.

Prof Not up yet? *(Goes to window.)* Lovely morning, - you've missed the best of it. Where's the tea? *(Exits to kitchen.)*

(Gordon falls out of bed, and again catches himself on the table.)

Gordon *(Loses temper.)* Bloody table!

(Gordon is trying to dress modestly when Marty enters. Her track suit matches the Prof's. Gordon squirms and tries harder to dress modestly.)

Marty Morning, Gordon. Tea up yet, Max?

Prof *(From kitchen.)* Kettle's just on. Gordon was still in bed.

Gordon Morning, Marty.

Marty I used to be able to sleep through anything when I was a student. Nothing disturbed me til the alarm went.

Gordon I should be so lucky.

Marty *(Looking at book on table over Gordon's bed.)* The Scarlet Blade. What's this, Gordon? I hadn't got you down as a reader of light literature.

Gordon It's not mine really. I've borrowed it.

Marty *(Reading the dust jacket.)* A thrilling adventure full of clues to a valuable treasure in a real life location.

Gordon Yes. The author's supposed to have buried a treasure somewhere, and if you can work it out and get there first, you get to keep the treasure.

Marty And are you hot on the trail?

Gordon No. But a friend lent it to me and wants to know what I think about it.

Marty How exciting. *(Reads cover.)* Aurora Deathsblade. That's too good to be true. It must be a pen name. Either way, I've never heard of her.

Gordon Apparently she's done two or three others like that, and none of the treasures have been found yet. It's fairly heavy going though, all literary and historical allusions and so on, and it's a bit bloodthirsty for my taste.

Prof *(Putting head round kitchen door.)* This kitchen will be barely adequate when Baines' volunteers get here.

Marty How many are you expecting, Max?

Prof *(Enters with three mugs of tea, which he is stirring with a teaspoon on the end of a chain, and toast.)* Baines said he was quite certain of three besides himself, and he's put the word around the village so we may get some more.

Marty Now he is a strange man. I'm surprised you put the recruiting in his hands. You're usually so fussy about who you will or won't have on site.

Gordon I've not met him. He sounds quite a character.

Marty I think there's something wrong with him. He seems to exude an air of disbelief in what's going on in front of him.

Prof You'll have an opportunity to meet him soon enough. That's his field we shall be digging in, and from what I understand, he intends to lend a hand in the excavation himself.

Marty I can't say I altogether trust him.

Prof To be fair, he did come to me with the hoard of coins which set this thing off. A lot of people would have torn the site apart looking for more. He actually suggested we dig it.

Marty But why have you left so much of the organisation in his hands, Max? That's what I can't understand.

Prof I didn't think we'd be able to get anyone at short notice, and he insisted he could find volunteers, so I left him to it.

Gordon He actually found the coins himself did he, Professor?

Prof Yes. As fine a hoard of late Romano- British coins as any I've seen. And what with our digging season in Bratislava having fallen through only the day before he came to see me, I didn't take a lot of persuading that we should undertake this site.

Marty I suppose you know what you're doing, Max, but it seems to me we're going to be a bit short of people who know what's what.

Prof Well, it'll be good experience for Gordon. And beggars cannot afford the luxury of choice. Especially if they have a Vice-Chancellor breathing down their necks to attract new money into the department.

Gordon Anyway, Professor, I'm grateful you asked me to supervise. It'll give me a chance to get some decent experience for my cee vee.

Prof Yes, well - I thought this dig would suit your talents.

Gordon Its good of you to have faith in me, especially after what happened on the dig last year.

Prof That was unfortunate. But the canal was going to be drained anyway. You weren't to know your trench would undermine the aqueduct.

Gordon That's not quite how it seemed at the time.

Marty Or what the couple on the narrow boat said.

Prof No. But it's not possible to prepare an omelette without removing the eggs from their shells. I just hope you live up to my current expectations.

Gordon I'll certainly try to. *(He knocks over a pile of implements.)* Whoops, sorry. It should certainly improve my prospects of a decent job.

Marty What sort of job are you looking for?

Gordon Well, I really want to get a job in archaeology, preferably digging rather than deskbound, but I've applied for all sorts of things. No luck so far. The nearest thing to an offer I've had was as management trainee in a firm of undertakers.

Marty Burying them instead of digging them up!

(Prof starts and knocks his tea over.)

Gordon I'll get a cloth. *(Knocks his own tea over.)* Bother. *(Goes to kitchen, comes back and mops up.)*

Prof Sorry, I'm rather clumsy today. Anyway, Gordon you know you can count on me for a reference for your job applications.

Gordon Thanks, Professor.

(Enter LB from outside.)

LB Good morning, lovely morning.

All Good morning.

Prof Ah, Mr Baines. Let me introduce you. You know my wife, Marty, and this is Gordon Harlech, our site supervisor. It was Mr. Baines who found the gold coins. So all in all we owe him a debt of gratitude. Would you like a cup of tea, Mr Baines?

LB No, not me, not this time, thanks. And please call me Lamplew, my forename, my first name.

Prof Thanks, er - Lamplew. Have you any idea when your volunteers are likely to arrive?

LB Depends how they travel, do they have a car, are they on the train or will they come by bus? I told them to arrive today, as soon as possible, at the earliest hour they could manage. Here's a list of their names.

Marty *(Taking the list.)* Aurora Deathsblade?

Prof Someone you know?

Marty That's the same name as the author of Gordon's book. I wonder if it's the same person.

LB Who knows? Now, have you got everything you need, want, require here?

Marty *(Holding up a chained kitchen implement.)* I was wondering why they've tied down everything in this place which isn't actually bolted to the floor.

LB We had a lot of stuff stolen from here a couple of years ago, pinched. They put a lot of the kitchen tools on chains then. Did someone explain about the geyser, the water heater?

Marty No. It seems to be all right, though the water does come out a bit hot.

LB It is a bit temperamental, has a mind of it's own. Nearly as old as I am, it is. When the wind's in the South West, it can sound a bit exciting, give the old dears a bit of a fright. But its all bark and no bite.

Marty Thanks for the warning.

Prof Well, there are things we can be doing even before the volunteers arrive. The site needs setting out for instance.

LB Ah, yes. The field out there will be familiar to you, sir.

Prof What? No. No, not at all.

LB It will be familiar in no time. Like you've been digging in it for years, *deja vu*. If you get my meaning, sir.

Prof *(Weakly.)* I'm not sure that I do.

LB That field fascinates me. It holds secrets. Like a parcel waiting to be opened, unwrapped. It's all there waiting for us to find it.

Prof What?

LB We don't know yet. But whatever is there, it can't be changed. There may be a..... Roman Fort. Or, nothing of historical value. We don't know. But whatever is there, is there. And truth will out.

Prof Ah, yes. Yes. A droll thought, er.. Lamplew.

LB I've one or two things to attend to now. Things to do. Jobs to complete. I'll be back soon, before long, shortly. *(Exits to caretaker's room.)*

Marty What a peculiar man.

Prof *(Uneasy.)* Yes. Yes.

Marty Gordon, would you mind fetching me a local paper? I want to see if we're in it.

Gordon Oh. All right. *(Exits.)*

Marty Max, what is going on?

Prof What do you mean?

Marty You know what I mean. There's something very peculiar about this dig.

Prof *(Defensively.)* For example?

Marty For example, what's Gordon doing here as site supervisor? You swore after that episode with the canal last year that you would never have him within a hundred miles of any site of yours. Once a week you come home from the University with news of some cack-handed exploit he's been involved in. The man is a walking disaster area.

Prof Well, he's a bright student, even if he is a little clumsy.

Marty All right, he's fairly bright under that gormless exterior, but he's outstandingly useless. And he's got such a temper. You're jeopardising the dig by having him here.

Prof Yes, but...

Marty Any of your final year students would have been happy to supervise, and any of them would have made a better job of it.

Prof Yes, but...

Marty And then there's the volunteers. I've never known you take people on without some sort of reference before, but this time you've let that peculiar Baines man look after the whole thing.

Prof Yes, but...

Marty Oh, come on! You don't even know how many people are going to turn up. We can't organise the digging, we can't organise the catering, and we've no idea if the accommodation is going to be adequate.

Prof There's plenty of room in here. *(Falls over a bucket or other impedimenta.)* We've even got separate rooms for the men and the women, and you don't always get that.

Marty But there's only one shower, and we haven't got that to run hot yet. And it doesn't alter the fact that we've no idea how much food we're going to need.

LB *(Enters from the caretaker's room with an opaque carrier bag.)* There's one dead in there now.

Prof What! What?

LB They eat anything, put anything away. I've seen to that one though.

Prof Eh?

LB Rats. You be careful with your food now. Don't leave it lying around, spread about. Though I think you'll be all right now. I've put poison down, sprinkled a bit of cyanide around.

Prof Good. Thanks.

LB I'll put her in the incinerator. It's not like getting rid of something larger, something with more flesh on it, is it?

Prof No. No, I suppose not.

LB *(As he exits to outside.)* Nasty little creatures. Unpleasant.

Prof *(Sticks his head around caretaker's door, there is an explosion of buckets, mops and brooms.)* Hellfire. *(He puts them back.)*

(Enter Gordon, carrying a newspaper, who ushers in Amanda and Doris. Amanda is wearing combat kit, with an animal welfare T-shirt. She is carrying a kitbag, a large but elegant suitcase and an elaborately wrapped parcel {nominally containing a bust}. Doris is (over)dressed as Aurora Deathsblade, with elaborate make up, long nails, and a generally flamboyant appearance.)

Gordon The volunteers have started to arrive.

Marty Are you for the dig?

Doris Certainly we are. And is this it? *(To Amanda.)* You can put the bags down over there.

Marty Yes, this is it for what it's worth. I'm Marty Neyland, this is Max who's the dig Director, and you've already met Gordon, our site supervisor.

Prof Hello.

Doris I am Aurora Deathsblade.

Gordon Aren't you the -- ?

Doris That is so. However hard one tries to go incognito, people find one out. One learns to live with it.

Marty *(To Amanda.)* And have you come to join us too?

Amanda Yes, I'm Amanda Marr, Miss Deathsblade's secretary.

Marty Well, welcome, Amanda. Just shove your stuff through there. *(Points to annex, Amanda puts the bags through.)* Would you like a cup of tea?

Amanda Lovely - What sort is it?

Marty I don't know. Max, what sort of tea is it?

Prof I don't know. Harrogate Special Blend?

Amanda Oh, fine. Only I don't drink China tea. You know - what's happening to the panda.

Marty What?

Amanda You know - destruction of its habitat. So I avoid using anything Chinese as a protest.

Marty I see. Is your protest effective?

Amanda Oh yes, I hardly ever buy anything Chinese.

Doris Really, girl, do stop drivelling. We would like some Lapsang Souchong.

Gordon I'll see what I can get you. *(He goes to the kitchen.)*

Doris It's so important to maintain standards, especially in difficult times. Don't you agree Professor?

Marty *(When Prof does not reply.)* Wake up, Max.

Prof What?

Marty Aurora said its important to maintain standards.

Prof Yes, we must keep flying the flag, mustn't we?

Gordon *(Returns with two mugs.)* I'm afraid it's getting a bit stewed.

Amanda Is that soya milk?

Gordon No. Is that a problem?

Amanda Well never mind. It's just - you know - animal exploitation.

Marty Are you a vegetarian?

Amanda Well, yes. I think most people are these days, aren't they?

Marty Not in my experience. This could cause some problems with the catering. How do you feel about sardines?

Amanda Sympathetic. Look, if it's a problem I can go into the village for some pulses or whatever.

Doris For heaven's sake girl, stop fussing. *(To Gordon.)* I'll have just the tiniest drop of homogenised semi-skimmed milk in mine.

Marty We'll sort something out. Have you had breakfast yet?

Amanda Oh, yes. But I don't mind having another, if it'll help.

(Doris looks at her mug which bears a slogan such as 'Australians Don't give a XXXX'.)

Gordon I hope that tea isn't too stewed?

Doris *(Reads legend on mug.)* Well really! This mug is hardly in the best of taste.

Gordon Sorry. Shall I change it?

Doris I shall manage.

Prof We'll let you two settle in while we go and start sizing up the site. Gordon, can you bring a couple of ranging poles, and Marty, would you get the theodolite from the caravan, please.

(Gordon picks up a couple of ranging poles.)

Marty Come out and find us when you're ready.

(Prof, Marty and Gordon go outside.)

Amanda This tea is revolting. Doris, go and make some fresh please. *(Doris goes to the kitchen, sound of kettle being filled.)* I expected something better than this. I like my comforts when I'm roughing it.

Doris *(Enters.)* It's not quite what I'd expected. But at least the water's hot.

Amanda Yes. There ought to be something useful for a future book in this. I imagine they'll explain the dig to us.

Doris Probably. Would you like me to unpack?

Amanda Leave it a bit. I'm gasping for a decent cup of tea. (*Pauses.*) I do wish you wouldn't use your position to mock animal welfare. It makes things very difficult for me.

Doris Well, what about me? It isn't easy to carry it off you know.

Amanda Phooey. You enjoy every minute of it. You know, this place is really awful.

Doris I suppose they have to take what they can get. If the country was run properly then the important things, like archaeology and real literature, would be given the money to run at a suitable standard. Standards are so important.

Amanda What's that supposed to mean?

Doris What it says.

Amanda You aren't going to start on your hobby horse about real literature, are you? It's easy for you. You can stop and leave me in the lurch at any time. It's me who would be embarrassed.

Doris Oh, come on.

Amanda But then, I'm the goose that lays the golden eggs. If you stop being Aurora Deathsblade, you'll have to earn your living properly, doing a real job, and that doesn't appeal much, does it?