

As we join the action, the director, Gordon is about to begin the first read-through of his self-written panto, Dick Whittington, printed from the society's new word processor...

Gordon Margaret, Joyce - you're both on. So, curtain, lights, overture, and...let's go!
(*There's a bemused silence as they both look at the scripts*) Problem? You can read, can you?

Margaret We can read, Gordon. But we don't understand.

Gordon (*already getting tense and patronising*) Well, I'll try and help you, Margaret. Tell me, which word are you stuck on?

Margaret Well, Cas, for example.

Gordon Cas?

Margaret Yes, Cas, there look.

Gordon (*he struts over to check Margaret's script*) It's cat, Margaret. I'm terribly sorry if the odd typo has slipped through, I did do it in a rush. But I'm sure if you read it in context it's not so terribly difficult. Cat, Margaret. Dick Whittington and his Cat.

Joyce Whissingson.

Gordon What?

Joyce It says here, Dick Whissingson and hit Cas.

Margaret It's not the odd typo, Gordon. The whole thing's riddled with mistakes.

Bernard This new word processor of yours. You didn't get it from Brian Maynard, did you?

Gordon Might have done. Why? (*Bernard bursts into laughter*) Something amusing you, Bernard?

Bernard He tried that one on me.

Gordon He tried what one on you?

Bernard Dodgy software, mate. He got stuck with a job-lot. It's all right till you try and print it out - then all the T's come out as S's.

Joyce And what do the S's come out as?

Margaret T's by the look of it.

Gordon Wait till I get hold of him. All right, all right, we'll just have to battle through. I'm sure it won't be too bad if you keep your wits about you. I'll sort it out for next week. Come on, let's take it from the top of page one. Margaret's entrance.

Margaret "Here we are, old friend, London Sown."

Gordon Town.

Margaret "I muts tay, shit it..."

Gordon This is, Margaret.

Margaret It says "shit it", Gordon.

Gordon Just use your brain, Margaret. S's are T's, T's are S's. "This is..."

Margaret "This is...noshing like I wat expexsing".

Gordon Is that the best you can do, Margaret?

Margaret My fault, Gordon, I was expecting it to be in English.

Gordon All right, Joyce, you're on.

Joyce Right. Where from?

Gordon From where we just left off, Joyce.

Joyce Sorry, I must have missed it.

Gordon From the beginning of your first line.

Joyce Right.

Gordon And don't panic, Joyce. It's just one word, and it's got no S's or T's in it, so you should be off to a flying start.

Joyce Okay, here goes, then. *(Pause)* Ready?

Gordon Yes, Joyce, we're all here.

Joyce *(woodenly, after a preparatory cough)* Miaow.

Gordon Hold it, hold it. Cat, Joyce.

Joyce What?

Gordon Cat, Joyce. Cat.

Joyce What are you talking about, Gordon?

Gordon You're a cat, Joyce.

Joyce I know I'm a cat, Gordon.

Gordon Then do what cats do, Joyce.

Joyce I said miaow, Gordon, what more do you want me to do?

Gordon *(getting very wound up)* I want you to feel like a cat, Joyce! I want you to look like a cat!

Joyce Well I'm terribly sorry, Gordon! I'm sorry I haven't got four legs. I'm sorry I wasn't born with fur and whiskers.

Bernard Oh, I don't know - you've got the whiskers.

Gordon Think about the role, Joyce. Think what you are! It's not just what you say, but the way you move, the way you react. Become the part, Joyce. Adopt the essential feline characteristics.

Joyce I'm sorry?

Gordon Act like a friggig cat, Joyce.

Margaret Gordon! There's no need for that!

Gordon Well I'm sorry, Margaret, but it's no good her just standing there like a stuffed librarian and saying miaow, now is it!

Joyce Are you getting angry with me, Gordon?

Gordon *(ranting)* No I am not getting angry with you, Joyce! You wouldn't like me if I got angry with you.

Joyce Because you promised you wouldn't, Gordon, we had a deal.

Margaret (*aside*) Think of the accounts, Gordon.

Gordon (*with trembling self-restraint*) That was...excellent, Joyce. A good base on which to build. Perhaps, as we progress, you'd like to think about some of the finer details of the character.

Margaret Here's a little something I do, Joyce. Ask yourself this, "How would Meryl Streep say miaow?" It works for me.

Gordon Let's just...move on, shall we. Bottom of the page. Bernard, we're on.

Bernard Where?

Gordon Pantomime horse.

Bernard Which end am I?

Gordon The non-speaking end.

Bernard Suits me.

Gordon But I want you to do the sound effects of the hooves - there. Right?

Bernard Right.

Bernard crouches behind Gordon to form the horse, having just peeled another banana.

Gordon And watch what you're doing with that banana. Here we go.

Bernard bites into the banana, then starts saying "Clip-clop" with his mouth full.

Bernard Hip-hok...Slip-shok..

Gordon Bernard...Bernard. Let me give you a little acting tip. One of the finest thespians I ever had the pleasure to witness in live theatre was Sir John Gielgud. Now there, Bernard, was the consummate master of the English language. For sheer clarity of expression he was unsurpassed. His diction was impeccable. And guess what, Bernard? And I noticed this particularly. He hadn't got a banana in his mouth. Do you think there could be a connection?

Bernard This is my bloody tea. I don't have time to go home, you know, not like these part-time teachers.

Margaret I beg your pardon!

Gordon All right, all right. Let's compromise, can we, Bernard? What about if you only eat a banana between sentences. Okay. Let's try it again.

Bernard (*woodenly*) Clip-clop. Clip-clop. Clip-clop. Clip-clop.

Margaret One more.

Bernard What?

Margaret You've missed one.

Gordon It doesn't matter, Margaret.

Margaret Fine. If you're happy with sloppy performances, Gordon. I know if I were directing I'd come down on that sort of thing like a ton of bricks.

Bernard Clip-bloody-clop.

Margaret Thank you.

Gordon Happy now, Margaret?

Margaret If you can't be true to the essential text on the first read-though, Gordon, when can you?

Gordon Well, now it's your turn to be true to the essential text, Margaret.

Margaret What?

Gordon Read the words.

Margaret Oh, erm..."Woah, Neddy. Where are you going in tuch a hurry? My, my. You're a fine-looking animal.

Gordon "Thank you, kind sir".

Margaret This is a talking horse?

Gordon This is a talking horse, Margaret, yes. Do you have a problem with that?

Margaret Well, let's face it, it is a little fantastic, isn't it, Gordon - but, oh well, as it's a panto.

Gordon Thank you, Margaret.

Bernard Hurry up, my bloody back's killing me.

Margaret Does it talk at both ends?

Gordon Just get on with it.

Margaret "Would you like so t...s...roke...stroke...to stroke!" I'm getting the hang of this now. "Would you like to stroke my putty". Oh, Gordon, I can't say that!

Gordon Trust me, Margaret. It'll go straight over the kids' heads.

Joyce I don't get it.

Gordon Don't worry about it, Joyce.

Joyce Why would a horse want to stroke a cat?

Margaret She has a point, Gordon. The whole scenario is seriously flawed. It simply isn't grounded in reality.

Just then, the middle area of the stage goes black, accompanied by a crackling noise.

Gordon What's going on?

Bernard I've been trying to tell you for the last hour. The dimmer rack's knackered. It's blowing the bulbs.

Joyce Well, as Treasurer, I would like to point out that we certainly cannot afford to replace them.

Gordon Why the hell are the stage lights on for a rehearsal anyway? What's wrong with the working lights?

Bernard They're not working.

Gordon This is ridiculous. How many lamps have we got left?

Bernard (*squinting into the lights*) Three. (*There's another crackle, and another area of stage goes black, leaving just two lit areas on the extreme sides*) Two.

They all huddle into one spotlight corner of the stage, looking dolefully up at the lights.

Gordon How much to replace the bulbs, Bernard?

Bernard What, that lot? About three hundred quid.

Gordon What?

Bernard That's if you can get the spares. Some of these lamps are so old they probably work on gas.

Joyce Well, as Treasurer, I would like to point out that we can't afford three hundred pounds, Gordon.

Gordon All right, all right. Let's not panic. Joyce, how much have we got in the kitty?

Joyce Well, as Treasurer, perhaps this would be a good time to remind you that your membership subscriptions are now due. Five pounds each, please.

They all groan.

Gordon Come on, let's cough up.

Joyce Thank you, Gordon. Thank you, Margaret. Thank you, Bernard. Mine's already in.

Gordon So, how much have we got?

Joyce Twenty-two pounds.

Gordon Terrific. How much is one bulb, Bernard?

Bernard About thirty quid.

Gordon Good. Good-oh.

Bernard Course, unless we fix the dimmer rack, it could be a waste of money. You could put new lamps in and they still might blow. (*There's a crackle, and their spotlight goes out*) Like that.

They all crab across into the opposite spotlight area.

Gordon How much for a new dimmer rack?

Bernard About two grand.

Joyce Well, as Treasurer...

Gordon Shut up, Joyce! Let me think. Now, five performances, three pounds a ticket, times by...(*he mumbles some figures to himself, and then sighs thoughtfully*)

Margaret Well?

Gordon Well, I reckon if we don't do the panto, we might break even.

Margaret And if we do do the panto?

Gordon Don't even think about it, Margaret.

Margaret So it's all off, then.

Gordon Not quite. While there's light, there's hope. Bernard, I want you to re-focus that lamp.

Bernard Where to?

Gordon Everywhere, just fill the stage with it.

Bernard Don't hold your breath.

Bernard exits.

Gordon Margaret. There's obviously going to be no money for costumes, is there any chance...

Margaret My students are very busy, Gordon. It's coming up to their exams.

Gordon Please, Margaret. You know I only say please when I really, really want something.

Margaret Oh, I'll try and slip it through as a special end of term project.

Gordon Brilliant!

Margaret Though how I'll manage to pass off a pantomime horse as an exercise in haute couture God only knows. I'm sure they saw right through me last year.

Joyce We didn't get you into trouble, did we, Margaret?

Margaret Let's put it this way, Joyce. One minute I'm putting up Snow White posters in the canteen. The next minute I'm asking my students to start work on an ankle-length velvet dress with paper-doiily sleeves, and seven matching outfits with pointed caps specially tailored for the shorter man. You don't exactly have to be Einstein to work it out, do you?

Bernard Just do the horse's body. I'll knock up the head.

Margaret Suits me. What else do you need?

Gordon Not much. An old dame for me - usual thing. Outrageous dress, monstrous breasts, stupid hat...

Margaret Joyce, could you ask your mother again?

Joyce I'll try.

Gordon Dick Whittington for you, of course, Margaret - tights, hankie on stick, cap, feather - oh, and a cat costume for Joyce - whiskers, ears, tail...*(he sighs)*...and the word CAT in really big letters across the back.

The spotlight cross-fades to a weak general light centre-stage.

Bernard *(shouting from the lighting box)* That's the best I can do.

Gordon Well, it's not exactly Pink Floyd in concert, but it'll have to do. Right, let's get on with the rehearsal. And let's all just pray, that it doesn't blow.

There a final "ping" and the stage is completely black. A cigarette lighter illuminates Gordon scrabbling in his pocket. He pulls out a cheque book.

Gordon Bernard. Go and buy us two hundred pounds worth of bulbs.

Joyce Gordon! Where are you going to get that sort of money?

Gordon I'm expecting a refund on a word processor.

Rousing pantomime music takes us into the next scene. It's the opening night, and excitement and confusion reign. Bernard is making a few last minute running repairs. He starts by hastily touching up a badly-made bench with white paint. Then he dashes off and returns with an equally badly-made sign, pointing the way to "LONDON, 1 MILE". He tries desperately to make it stand up next to the bench, but it continually falls.

Bernard Come on, you bugger. Stand up. *(He wedges it under the bench to make it stand)* That'll do.

Gordon, wearing heavily rouged cheeks, wig and hat, comes dashing in carrying a large colourful dress. He immediately sits on the bench in order to slip into the dress.

Gordon There must be two hundred people out there.

Bernard *(now diverted by another last-minute job, painting the eyes on the head of an awful paper-mache pantomime horse head)* Two hundred and thirty eight. Don't sit on the bench by the way.

Gordon Why?

Bernard *(looking round and seeing Gordon)* Doesn't matter. Fixed it now. I still say we should have tried this horse costume at the dress rehearsal.

Gordon It'll be all right.

Bernard What if the head doesn't fit?

Gordon Look, you just worry about your end, okay?

Bernard And you promise you didn't have a curry last night?

Gordon Just come and zip me up.

Bernard I can't, I've got that stage flat to mend yet.

Bernard, having finished decorating the now cross-eyed horse, dashes off momentarily to grab a length of wood. Joyce enters, wearing a cat costume, complete with springy tail.

Joyce How do I look?

Gordon Like a librarian wearing a cat costume.

Bernard (*re-entering with the wood*) Give me a hand, Joyce.

Joyce There's loads of people!

Bernard Hurry up. Just put your weight on there. That's it.

Joyce is directed to sit on a small workbench, across which Bernard has put the piece of timber, ready for sawing.

Gordon Has anybody seen my breasts?

Bernard (*sawing the wood*) What do they look like?

Gordon Two pink cushions.

Bernard Oh, sorry mate. I thought they were rubbish. I chucked 'em on the skip.

Gordon You did what?

Bernard It's all right, they're only outside, I'll dig them out in a minute. Okay Joyce, that'll do.

Joyce gets up. In Bernard's hand is a sawn-off piece of wood and also, as he suddenly notices to his horror, Joyce's tail. He gulps, and quickly hides the tail behind his back before Joyce notices.

Gordon I can't believe you threw my breasts on the skip.

Bernard I'm going, I'm going. Keep your hat on.

Bernard exits hastily.

Gordon My hat! Where's my hat?

Joyce It's on your head, Gordon. You're more nervous than I am!

Gordon There's a lot at stake. Now, remember what I told you, Joyce. Bend your legs, slink about the stage, use your claws like this, and don't forget to waggle your...Joyce! Where is it??

We hear Bernard shouting off-stage, pantomime style:

Bernard Look behind you!!

Gordon Bernard!!!!

Bernard enters, with a cushion, Joyce's tail and a roll of heavy-duty adhesive tape. Joyce, meanwhile, tries to take a look at her ex-tail, but succeeds only in spinning herself around like a dizzy kitten.

Bernard I've found one of them.

Gordon You've sawn Joyce's tail off!

Bernard It was an accident. I'm working on it. *(He shows Gordon the tape)*

Gordon Forget it. There's no time. She'll have to be a manx.

Bernard *(presenting the cushion)* Here. Watch out for the potato peelings.

Gordon Find the other one, Bernard! And hurry up!

Bernard What's the panic?

Gordon Bernard, it's quarter past seven!

Bernard Yeah, but you're not the dame till the second half. It's the horse first.

Gordon Shit!

He tears off the dress, back to audience, revealing that all his dark clothes underneath now have white paint stripes, courtesy of the bench. Bernard concentrates on taping Joyce's tail back on.

Joyce When's the zebra come into it?

Bernard Keep still, Joyce.

Gordon Horse costume. Where's the bloody horse costume!

Bernard Over there. There you go, Joyce. Good as new.

Gordon Ten minutes!

Bernard I'll have another look in the skip.

Bernard exits. Gordon thrashes about getting into the horse costume, managing only to get legs and arms all into the wrong holes.

Gordon Twenty-past seven! Come on, Margaret, where the hell are you?

Joyce lets out a huge gasp of horror.

Joyce Oh no!

Gordon What?

Joyce Stay calm, Gordon.

Gordon *(suspiciously)* Why?

Joyce Because if you don't, you're going to get very angry.

Gordon Why, Joyce?

Joyce Well, I've forgotten to tell you something, Gordon.

Gordon *(keeping his temper just under control)* Yes.

Joyce And it's like...a really, really important thing.

Gordon Carry on, Joyce.

Joyce Oh, you're going to kill me, Gordon.

Gordon No, I'm not going to kill you, Joyce. Not yet.

Joyce Oh you will, Gordon.

Gordon Possibly when I hear it, Joyce, but not until.

Joyce When you said, like, you know, about Margaret, it reminded me.

Gordon Reminded you of what, Joyce?

Joyce She rang me last night, Gordon.

Gordon And?

Joyce And...she can't come, Gordon.

Gordon She can't come.

Joyce No.

Gordon I'm taking this very calmly, Joyce, as you can see, because I have no doubt it's a very bizarre, albeit slightly pathetic little first night joke between you and Margaret, in order to wind me up.

Joyce Well, you know how, after the dress rehearsal on Wednesday, Gordon, how you said to Margaret, "Break a leg".

Gordon Yes.

Joyce She's broken a leg, Gordon.

Gordon She's broken a leg.

Joyce And an arm.

Gordon Here we are, Joyce, five minutes before curtain up - our leading lady is not coming because she's broken two rather vital limbs - and you forgot to tell me?

Joyce I was too excited, Gordon.

Gordon I'm still being very calm, Joyce. You're not going to make a fool of me, do you understand? I am not going to blow my top, and then have Margaret suddenly step out here and...oh my God. I've just realized. You look frightened, Joyce. Which can only mean one of two things. Either you really are frightened, or you're...acting. She's not coming is she, Joyce.

Joyce No, Gordon.

Gordon What happened?

Joyce She slipped on a banana skin.

Gordon (*finally exploding*) Nobody slips on a banana skin, Joyce! What is this? What's happening to me? Am I living in a cartoon?

Joyce She did, Gordon. Apparently, after the dress rehearsal, there was a banana skin on the steps outside, and she...

Gordon Who the hell would leave a ban.....Bernard!!!!!!

Bernard enters, eating an almost-finished banana, and carrying the other cushion.

Bernard Got it! Bit smelly though.

Gordon snatches the cushion, and grabs Bernard by the scruff of the neck.

Gordon Get your tights on!

Bernard Do what?

Joyce What are you saying, Gordon?

Gordon There are two hundred people out there, Joyce. And thanks to the Apeman of Little Grimley, our leading lady has broken her leg. *(He grabs the banana skin from Bernard, and tosses it across the stage, angrily)*

Bernard Oh, dear.

Gordon Bernard, you're playing Dick!

Bernard On your bloody bike, pal!

Gordon We have no choice.

Bernard I don't know the words!

Gordon That's no excuse. Margaret didn't know the words.

Bernard I can't act!

Gordon Ditto.

Bernard But who's going to play the back-end of the horse?

Gordon We'll manage, Bernard.

Joyce You can't have a man playing Dick Whittington, Gordon, it's perverse.

Gordon The decision's made, Joyce. Bernard is playing the lead.

Bernard Oh no he isn't!

Gordon Oh yes he is!

Bernard Oh no he isn't!

Gordon Oh yes he is!!

Then, from off-stage, a booming voice:

Margaret Oh, no he isn't!!

Margaret enters dramatically, dressed in her Dick Whittington costume. She walks with the aide of a crutch. Her one arm is in a sling, and bulging under her tights is a huge bandaged leg.

Gordon Margaret!

Margaret Did you honestly think I would just lie down and let this...this... banana-eating baboon ruin all my good work? I couldn't do it to my public.

Bernard Margaret enters carrying a limp.

Margaret One more word from you and this walking stick enters your mouth, sideways.

Bernard Come on, Margaret, show us your crutch.

Margaret swings for Bernard with the crutch. Gordon intervenes, hearing music.

Gordon Shut it! Listen. That's the overture. We're on! Can you do it, Margaret?

Margaret I'm ready, Gordon. Let's give 'em hell!

Gordon Positions everybody. Quick, Bernard, get in!

Bernard tries frantically to get into what holes are left in the tangled horse costume.

Gordon The head, Joyce! Put the horse's head on!

Joyce puts the horse's head on herself.

Joyce Right!

Gordon Not on you, you fool, on me!

Joyce Oh, right. Now?

Gordon Yes, now, Joyce! Quickly! Are you in, Bernard?

Bernard I can't get my leg over.

Margaret I'm hardly surprised.

Joyce finally rams on the head. Bernard is still struggling desperately, and the horse runs amok, dragging Bernard behind.

Gordon What's going on?

Bernard My bloody leg's stuck.

Gordon I can't see.

Bernard Neither can I.

Margaret Watch where you're going. Arrgh!

They crash into Margaret, knocking her over and leaving her sprawling. Joyce runs around screaming, being chased by the horse.

Gordon Stop pushing, Bernard!

Bernard I'm not pushing. It's you!

Margaret My crutch. I need my crutch.

The tangled mess careers towards the bench, knocking the sign over. Chaos reigns.

Gordon Bernard, where the hell are you?

Bernard Where the bloody hell do you think I am?

Gordon You forgot to put the eye holes in, you prat.

Bernard I can't think of everything.

Margaret Watch out for that banana skin!

The horse slips and collapses or, even better if possible, falls off the front of the stage. The music swells to a climax as the lights fade and the on-stage panic reaches its climax.

Joyce Gordon! The houselights are going down!

Gordon Get up, Bernard!

Bernard I think I've broken my bloody leg.

Joyce Gordon!

Gordon Don't panic, Joyce.

Joyce The curtains are opening!

Margaret Will somebody please grab my crutch!

The lights come up full. There's a huge crackle and, with the exception of one tight spotlight go out. The spotlight catches Joyce, frozen like a rabbit staring into a car's headlights.

Gordon Do something, Joyce. Do something!

There's a moment's silent panic, before Joyce finally seizes the moment, throws out her arms flamboyantly, and lets rip with "There's No Business Like Show Business..." Music swells. Lights to black. Curtain.