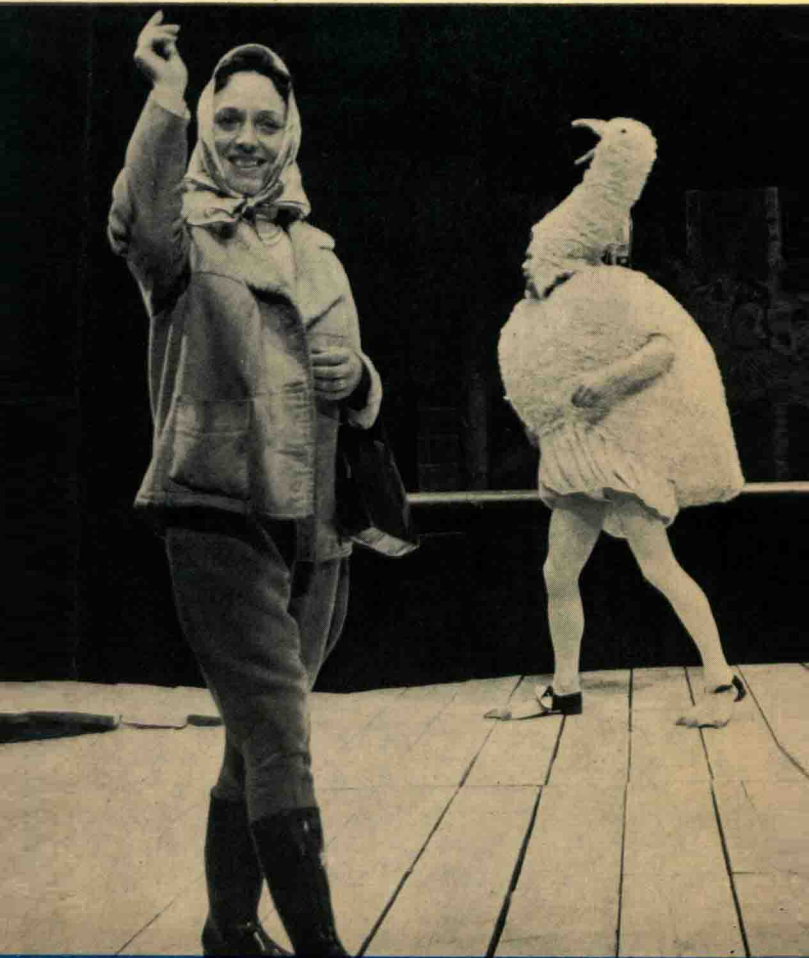


Barrie Keeffe

A Mad World, My Masters



Barrie Keeffe

A MAD WORLD, MY MASTERS



EYRE METHUEN · LONDON

First published in 1977 by Eyre Methuen Ltd, 11 New Fetter Lane,
London EC4P 4EE

This edition 1980 by Eyre Methuen Ltd.

Copyright © 1977, 1980 by Barrie Keeffe

Set IBM 10pt Journal by  Tek-Art, Croydon, Surrey

Printed in Great Britain by

Whitstable Litho Ltd., Whitstable, Kent

ISBN 0 413 47410 0

CAUTION

All rights whatsoever in this play are strictly reserved and application for performance etc. should be made to Harvey Unna and Stephen Durbridge Ltd, 14 Beaumont Mews, Marylebone High Street, London W1N 4HE. No performance may be given unless a licence has been obtained.

This paperback is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published, and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

William Gaskill had the idea to make a modern Jacobean play, the sort of city comedy Thomas Middleton might write if he were still alive. He and Joint Stock Theatre Group asked me to write it. It was autumn 1976; it became not only Joint Stock's first comedy, but also mine.

I was set ten weeks in which to write the script after an intensive three week workshop period when the actors researched and created a number of characters which appear in the play, received crash courses in conjuring and talks from both police and villains on the art of the confidence trick. Verbal games of spiralling lies and experiments with Ben Jonson's 'humours' led to improvised comic scenes, sometimes inspired by a collection of newspaper cuttings on con-tricks that had led to court cases.

The storyline for the play suddenly clicked while I was reading a series of stories about the sale of Trafalgar Square to American tourists during the 1951 Festival of Britain and simultaneously listening to a radio programme about the (then) forthcoming Silver Jubilee Celebrations. We stole the title from Middleton (later a medium who had been consulted for purposes of research told us Middleton did not object, although he'd have preferred the play to be performed by a more prestigious company).

I don't think there is ever such a thing as a final script, but with this play it tended to change nightly: because it opened during the actual Silver Jubilee celebrations in London, lines were often altered to joke about an item in the evening newspaper. Usually the only actor alerted to the changed line was the actor delivering it.

All this contributed to make the play timely, but nothing dates faster than an 'up-to-the-minute' play. For subsequent productions in Britain, and especially overseas, some lines have lost all meaning; for overseas theatres, TV newsreader Angela Rippon and the Silver Jubilee Festival are distinct handicaps.

On occasions, I have worked with foreign directors tackling the play in an attempt to make it work for an audience in their theatre as it apparently worked for audiences at the Young Vic in the summer of 1977.

Whereas the changes made are sometimes quite drastic, in the

case of the 1978 production in San Francisco, for example, they were minor. Apart from 'translating' some British slang to Mid-Atlantic, and Doc's Indian disguise Lime Pickle becoming a Chinaman called One Hung Low, the only substantial alteration was replacing Claughton's Angela Rippon fantasy with President Carter's faith-healing sister Ruth Carter-Stapleton; thus, Claughton's obsession for her began when he mistook her best-seller *Healing Hands* for a piece of pornography. The striptease scene took place during a faith-healing ceremony (to the disquiet of the theatre's landlords, a local church).

As I write this, the most drastic change is in Amsterdam where for the Centrum Theatre Rob Scholten, a translator who has the knack of so adapting my plays to Dutch locations and situations that not many people who see them realise they are British to begin with, is re-creating *A Mad World, My Masters* to fanfare Queen Juliana's abdication. This may require Claughton becoming the Queen's husband, Prince Bernhardt.

For companies considering altering or up-dating the text, the changes made for the Canadian première at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Toronto, in January 1980 are included in an appendix to this volume, as an indication of the revisions undertaken with Des McAnuff, with whom I had previously worked on a New York production of *Gimme Shelter*. His highly visual style owes as much to rock 'n' roll shows as theatre tradition; it was in stark contrast to Joint Stock's uncluttered and, by comparison, austere production.

In Toronto the Silver Jubilee Celebrations were changed into a fictitious festival to celebrate Britain's self-sufficiency in oil; this was suggested by the gasoline crisis in North America. Angela Rippon became Margaret Thatcher, since the play opened during the election campaign which saw the Conservative defeat, and a prologue was added and printed in the programme as an essential piece of setting-up.

To these revisions, some of Mr McAnuff's stage business has been added since his production seemed to work exceptionally well converting a play which was written for a small, in-the-round theatre into an extravaganza for a very large auditorium with an impossibly wide thrust stage.

I especially liked his opening 'con' in getting an audience not known to stand for God Save The Queen before a play to do just that. It involved playing enough of 'O Canada' until the entire house was on its feet before switching to Britain's National anthem.

March 1980.

A Mad World, My Masters was first presented by Joint Stock Theatre Group at the Young Vic Theatre, London, on 1 May 1977, with the following cast:

GRANDMA SPRIGHTLY, <i>a grandmother of Hackney</i>	Jane Wood
DOCTOR O'FLAHERTY, <i>a medical practitioner</i>	Tony Rohr
VI SPRIGHTLY, <i>a housewife and mother of Hackney</i>	Gillian Barge
BILL SPRIGHTLY, <i>a professional sportsman</i>	Robert Hamilton
HORACE CLAUGHTON, <i>a gentleman of The City</i>	David Rintoul
JANET CLAUGHTON, <i>a friend of the poor and needy</i>	Cecily Hobbs
MR FOX, <i>a gentleman of the press</i>	Will Knightley
RONALD SAYERS, <i>a superintendent of Scotland Yard</i>	Simon Callow
MR ROBERTSON, <i>a Trades Union official</i>	Paul Freeman
CHARLIE, <i>a minstrel</i>	Paul Freeman
ELIZABETH, <i>a most noble noblewoman</i>	Jane Wood
GUARD, <i>of Buckingham Palace</i>	Tony Rohr

Directed by William Gaskill and Max Stafford-Clark

Designed by Hayden Griffin

Lighting by Rory Dempster

Company & Stage Manager Alison Ritchie

Deputy stage manager Donna Rolfe

Assistant stage manager Alastair Palmer

Note: Robertson and Charlie should always be played by the same actor.

This production subsequently played The Round House, London and toured Britain. The Joint Stock Company was unchanged.

ACT ONE

Scene One

Before play: Music loud. Graham Parker's 'That's What They All Say' from the album Heat Treatment, as lights go up on Hackney Marshes, Sunday morning, very early. Enter GRANDMA beating her hands with the cold.

GRANDMA. I shouldn't be up this time of morning. Not at my age. I shouldn't be up, let alone out. No-one believes how old I am. 'Cause I've got me own teeth. Never cleaned 'em. Just rubbed salt in with me fingers. Now I don't bother. Seven o'clock on a Sunday morning, up here, at my age! Cold as a fart and the wind whistling round inside me corset. Never mind, never mind. Got on me long flannel drawers. Keep *that* warm and the rest of you'll be all right.

DOC *enters*.

DOC. Ah, morning to you Mrs Sprightly.

GRANDMA. What did you say?

DOC (*raised voice*). I said good morning.

GRANDMA. I'm hard of hearing. You should know — you're a doctor.

DOC (*shouts*). Good morning Mrs Sprightly.

GRANDMA. He told me six times I was hard of hearing. I didn't do nothing about it. I couldn't hear him.

DOC. Jesus in heaven preserve us. It's cold enough, bloody freezing.

GRANDMA. Bloody freezing.

DOC. I'll say —

GRANDMA. Pardon?

DOC (*loud*). It's bloody freezing!

GRANDMA. Learn lip reading they said. Why learn lip reading at

2 A MAD WORLD, MY MASTERS

my age? He said what I already know. I know everything that goes on round here. Rather read the back of me rent book than other people's lips.

DOC. I've never attended one of these before.

GRANDMA. What?

DOC. I've . . . never been to one of these before.

GRANDMA. I've seen hundreds.

DOC. This is me first time. I hadn't realised that it still goes on.
An old sport, I thought.

GRANDMA. You got money for a bet?

DOC. Yes.

GRANDMA. In your pocket?

DOC. Yes.

GRANDMA. Keep your hand on it.

DOC. I will.

GRANDMA. As long as you've got your hand on it, it stays there.
They're a thieving lot of bleeders.

DOC. Ah, right.

GRANDMA. If you keep your hand on it, to nick your money
they've got to move your hand, right?

DOC. Right.

GRANDMA. If you find your hand's in a different place to where
you left it, you'll know your pocket's been picked.

*She has demonstrated this; she hands him back the wallet she's
stolen. He smiles unsurely, checks its contents.*

I like you.

DOC. That's a very nice thing to say, Mrs Sprightly.

GRANDMA. You're doing me son a favour. You're straight, I like
that. If you're having a bent quack in on a job, for Christ's
sake make sure he's straight, I say. You could make a fortune
in Harley Street.

DOC. When they legalised abortions, the bottom fell out of my world.

GRANDMA. In Harley Street, the bent quacks are so straight they knight them. One got a knighthood for enlarging the prick on the Queen Mother's corgi, so I heard.

DOC. You're a foul-mouthed old bag aren't you?

GRANDMA. I can't hear when it suits me. Here they come, here they come.

DOC. You're sure that's them?

GRANDMA. Look at them, look at them . . . a bigger gang of rogues and villains would never be seen tramping the mud on a Sunday morning . . . Pakki bashers and handbag robbers and —

Enter two men with a sack.

GRANDMA. Let's have a look, let's have a look . . .

MAN. Here.

GRANDMA. Ferocious. Ferocious. That's a fighting bird right enough. O, that's a fighter. Look at the eyes.

DOC. Face like a plateful of mortal sins.

Enter ROBERTSON with a dog lead. He always smokes a pipe and wears a trilby hat.

ROBERTSON. Nye . . . Nye!

The men with the sacks panic, they turn their backs to
ROBERTSON.

GRANDMA. It's all right, it's only Mr Robertson from the union. Hello there.

ROBERTSON. You seen my bloody dog?

GRANDMA. Don't let it loose round here mate. How's life?

ROBERTSON. All bloody go since we voted Heath out. There he is. Come on boy, come here — hey, leave that bloody poodle alone. Man with a poodle, my arse. Never trust a man with a poodle. Never trust a woman who wears hats indoors.

4 A MAD WORLD, MY MASTERS

That's my philosophy. Here boy, here, come on. Good morning Mrs Sprightly, keep the Tories out.

He goes. The men open the sack again.

GRANDMA. Open it up again. Eyes to scare the shit out of a constipated nun.

MAN. Harry took one look at it and reckons your bird'll go under in two minutes.

GRANDMA. Harry, he don't know a fighting cock from a bloated pigeon.

Enter VI.

Hello love, how are you?

VI. I feel a bit lethargic, you know. Hello doctor. Pete's arf getting fed up with that plaster cast on his neck.

DOC. Tell him to keep it on, for Christ's sake.

VI. Yeah, I tell him. It's by the door. He never goes out without it. But he says it's strangling him.

DOC. Wait until the compensation comes through!

VI. When we get the money, we'll put it down on a deposit on a house in Harlow.

DOC. After you've paid me fee.

VI. Of course, and the bent witnesses.

Enter BILL carrying a sack. He dances round GRANDMA shadow boxing her.

BILL. Hello, hello —

GRANDMA. Morning Bill — you got it then?

BILL. What do you reckon then?

They look in the sack.

GRANDMA. Same weight, open it up — look at me then, you bleeder, let me see your eyes.

BILL. I've had me eye on this one for a couple of weeks. On me training run, down by Coronation Gardens, there's this

chicken run in the backyard. Daft cow didn't know it was a cock. Wondered why it weren't laying.

VI. Not like you then.

BILL. Watch it.

VI. Who you supposed to be fighting this time?

BILL. Some nignog from Birmingham.

GRANDMA. We going to start, or what?

BILL. Right.

GRANDMA. Got your money then doc?

BILL. The full equipment?

GRANDMA. Metal beaks and spurs, razors on their claws — tear each other to the bone . . . (*Laughs.*)

BILL. Right, bung on the hardware. Excited, doc?

DOC. Ah, o — just, you know, concerning myself with the security precautions. A man in my position, you understand, can't afford to be seen in attendance of such a err . . .

BILL. Grandma, show him for Christ's sake. See for miles up here. There's Archie ready to do a clumsy three point turn at so much as a sniff of the cops and —

GRANDMA. Relax, look —

GRANDMA takes DOC to one side to point out the security. The men are attending the cocks.

BILL. You all right then sister?

VI. Just feel a bit lethargic, you know.

BILL. Still on the librium?

VI. No, he's put me on valium now.

BILL. Variety is the spice of life. How's junior?

VI. Crawling around . . . scares the life out of me . . . seventeen floors up . . . in case he falls out of the balcony.

BILL. Keep the door closed.

VI. I can't. It's suffocating. The central heating's on the blink.

6 A MAD WORLD, MY MASTERS

Caretaker said it's hotter in our flats than it is in Majorca.

BILL. Keep taking the pills.

GRANDMA and DOC are back. The men are laying bets.

GRANDMA. You hold the bets, Vi.

VI. All right.

BILL. What we say, a score?

GRANDMA. I'm only an old age pensioner.

BILL. All right, we'll take your Green Shield stamps. What about the others?

VI. They'd be here if they was coming.

MAN. How about Harry?

BILL. Ah, see dad — our dad ain't coming this morning.

VI. Our dad ain't coming this morning, not this morning, no.

GRANDMA. This morning my son Harry — he is becoming a very rich man.

BILL. He's having his accident this morning.

MAN. A moody — on a Sunday morning?

BILL. Best time mate. He's going for the biggun, the jackpot, the number one pay-out. So better a Sunday morning — when there's not too many people in the docks.

GRANDMA. Harry's awarding himself a long service payment. For thirty years of slogging on the quays — thanks to the doc here's letter.

DOC (*with half a pint of Jamesons*). Like a drop? Then you don't mind if I do. (*He gulps from the bottle.*)

BILL. Terrible all these industrial accidents nowadays . . .

GRANDMA. The biggun, the king of cons. Be worth, let me see . . . your letter doc, saying he'll never be able to work again in his life . . . be worth twenty grand, I reckon.

DOC. Ah well, you get what you pay for. I gave him the letter meself yesterday. So as soon as it "happens" he can stick in

the claim. Ah, well. (*Gulps again.*)

BILL. It is about to happen now. He'll get himself into position. Lay down right next to the hold. The hold cover will smash down beside him . . . dad'll let out a scream and writhe in agony —

DOC. I gave him a phial of ether to sniff . . . he'll be unconscious for a bit . . . in case their own doctor is on duty . . .

GRANDMA. And then . . . the big payout.

BILL. Got to help yourself to it, no-bloody-body else'll give it to you.

GRANDMA. Come on then. We here for the fight or just to get a draft up the Khyber pass?

BILL. Got the meat gran? Give 'em a smell of blood, give them a taster . . .

GRANDMA produces some bloody dripping pieces of meat and lets the cockerels taste them. Then the birds are lowered into a pit. The men gather round, roar encouragement. From the pit feathers fly and there are screams from the cockerels, wing beats etc.

GRANDMA. At him boy, at him.

DOC. His head's coming off.

BILL. This bird is a bloody chicken.

MAN. Looks like it's laying an egg.

BILL. At him — bloody have him.

MAN. He's going, he's going . . .

DOC. His head's coming off.

VI sees SAYERS enter and stare at them. He wears a bowler hat.

VI. Bill . . . Bill, Bill . . . I can smell a bogey.

BILL. What?

VI. I can smell a cop.

GRANDMA. You couldn't smell one if he stuffed his chopper

8 A MAD WORLD, MY MASTERS

up your nostril.

VI. Over there . . .

She indicates SAYERS. All panic and the two men run off.

SAYERS. All right, all right.

DOC. Jesus and Holy Mary Mother of God.

BILL. I don't know where they come from Ronnie mate. I just happened to be passing and I saw these chickens going for each other and I was trying to separate them and take them to an old people's home for a treat.

VI. I come to feed the ducks. I thought someone had nicked the pond.

GRANDMA. I was stolen from me bed and bound and gagged and dumped here by foul smelling Pakistani illegal immigrants. I've only just set meself free.

SAYERS. Quite. I want a word with you Bill Sprightly.

BILL. I never seen them colour tellys before Ronnie.

SAYERS. I am afraid I have some bad news. In the docks at Tilbury, there has this morning been a horrendous accident. Your father —

BILL. O dad, poor dad . . .

GRANDMA. My favourite son, Harry?

SAYERS. He was unloading a cargo of spelter, I am informed. The hold cover blew down on his back. Crushing it.

GRANDMA. How tragic, how sad.

SAYERS. In crushing his back, the hold cover killed him — stone cold dead.

Pause, silence.

GRANDMA. Stupid bastard. Stupid pisspot son. He never could do anything proper.

They all exit. SAYERS alone.

SAYERS. Hello hello . . . hardly what you'd call grief with a large G. I smell a con. I smell it as surely as I smell a knocked off

car, a crooked log book. One previous owner? Who's that — Julius Caesar? My wit numbs them to speechlessness. Then I pounce with devastating questions to expose their guilt. Like Magnus Magnusson I am. An intrepid interrogator. Twenty-five years in the service, '43 murder cases. All that, and I still can't get a mortgage. No home, no mortgage, that's me. I've seen the places I want. Lovely little mock Tudor semis in the wog-free suburbs. But these mortgage companies, they don't want to know . . . Nor the councils. They say no, 'cause I've got a police house. Look, mate, I've got nothing against these Indians, Chinese, Pakistanis, Blacks you name 'em. I've got nothing against them — apart from them being here. But what I want to know is this — how come a Pakistani hot off the banana boat can get a mortgage when a decent cop with 25 years service in the force cannot? Look mate, what this country needs is someone to look up to. Someone to stop all this weak kneed nancy pancying pussy footing soft balls hard luck Jim have another large scotch. I went to Northampton to try and get a mortgage. I heard they was dishing out council mortgages left right and centre up there. If you so much as parked on a yellow line they stuffed a mortgage application under your windscreen wipers. What did they say to me? O yes, you guessed it. (*He picks up the cocks.*) I'll follow the Sprightleys. Observe them. From a safe distance.

He goes.

Scene Two

Enter JANET riding a bike and talking as she rides in circles.

JANET. Janet Cloughton the name. Crisis Intervention. I'm in a hurry. Even on a Sunday. I'm always in a hurry. I'm a social worker. Not enough hours in the day or days in the week or weeks in the year for us. Not since the rise of the nuclear family. Since the disintegration of closely knit working class families with three generations occupying one residential unit, the social problems have escalated.

She grins and cycles on. CHARLIE staggers on playing a trombone. He always has a joint in his hand and always carries a trombone.

JANET. Morning.

CHARLIE. What?

JANET. Good morning.

CHARLIE. What's good about it?

JANET. The sun's shining.

CHARLIE. Oh yeah. Good on you sun, that's a boy, keep it up.
I'm going to the public baths. For a bath.

JANET. Jolly good, that's the spirit. Cleanliness.

CHARLIE. But they won't let me take the horn in with me.

JANET. Leave it at home. It's simple.

CHARLIE. Someone's stolen me home.

JANET. Good God.

CHARLIE. Last Thursday, I went out to buy a packet of
cigarettes and a tin of Brasso and I got knocked over by a car.

JANET. Oh dear, how tragic, how sad, how shocking.

CHARLIE. I was walking across the road and it knocked me
down. I went to hospital and when they let me out I went
home — and it had been stolen.

JANET. How?

CHARLIE. The whole street, man. They knocked the whole
street down.

JANET. If I were you, I'd call at Crisis Intervention.

CHARLIE. I thought I'd better tell the fuzz. Lost Property, you
know. I've got to practise for a gig. I'm doing a big session
next week.

JANET. Have a nice bath.

He exits playing the trombone badly. She cycles in circles.

That's exactly the sort of problem we have to face. At Crisis