Speak for Yourself, John

Being theatrical, I’ll start with our dramatis personae:

**Geraldine** is a senior committee clerk at my local council. She was conveniently on annual leave throughout the recent scandal of the councillor and the schoolgirl.

**Noah** is a graduate trainee with the council. He is eager to please but politically naïve, and doesn’t realise that he is the obvious fall guy.

**Josh** is the artistic director of Ploughdown theatre company.

**Oscar** is Head of Music and Dramatic Arts at Valeston School and Sixth Form College. That’s me, your narrator. And since I have the conch (reference Lord of the Flies, GCSE perennial), I will add that I have reached the point where my flair for teaching theatre and my dislike for politicians telling teachers what to do, while claiming the opposite, are in combustible combination.

Now the location:

The four of us are sitting in a cubicle in the corner of the lobby of our council’s headquarters. Troubled life is displayed before us, queuing in front of main reception. We are in the ‘private interview chamber’ which has glass on all sides. The four chairs and small table fill the cubicle. It is fortunate that the door, also predominantly glass, opens outwards. Perhaps this private chamber was constructed in reaction to 9/11, as a way of keeping visitors out of the belly of the building; perhaps in a flurry of good intention when the council discovered the notion of customer service. In either case, the privacy refers to sound only. Visually we couldn’t be more on show. I may be able to craft sound and sight into a metaphor for the Leader of the Council and his problem with the schoolgirl.

Geraldine is leading a preliminary enquiry. She will report to the Head of Legal Services.

“Perhaps you could start, Noah,” she says to the young graduate trainee, “by explaining to me the thinking behind this **SPEED DATING** event you created.” She projects in bold capitals the two words which describe the start of the affair.

“Not my idea originally,” he says, as if this would surprise anyone. “The Local Government Association came up with it years ago, after Sex in the City and all that. Political Speed Dating. Good PR for Local Democracy Week. Bring Councillors and young people together in a way neither group would find so intimidating. Open a dialogue. Councillor Evergreen became interested when his daughter Jessica was elected chair of the sixth-form student committee at Valeston. He said the two of them could make it happen brilliantly, and that it would cast his unpopular administration in a more human light.”

“And what exactly did happen?”

“We had desks back-to-back in pairs, with a little elbow room between; twelve hand-picked councillors briefed to call them ‘young people’ not ‘children’; and twelve hand-picked young people briefed to call them ‘councillor’, not ‘sir’ or ‘man’.”

“Boys AND girls?”

“Almost all females actually. I hadn’t taken account of a United game playing at the same time. Mostly Jessica’s clique. And almost all male councillors, naturally. I rang a bell and the pairs started talking at once. The noise generated lots of energy which overcame nerves and rather surprisingly ensured privacy.”

“What did they talk about?”

“You name it… everything from vending machines in the sixth form common room to the need for a refuge for battered women.”

Geraldine makes a note on her notepad.

I say, “This is the safety catch, which is always released with an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me see anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy if you have any strength in your thumb.”

Josh rolls his eyes.

“Sorry?” Noah says.

“Naming of Parts. Henry Reed. The text’s on Google. Plus a film version by Robert Bloomberg which won the Student Peace Prize at the 13th annual American Film Festival, 1972.” This is my reaction to Michael Gove’s diktat that all schools should have a Combined Cadet Force. I’m setting the poem to music with my lower sixth. We’re making an opera. The Head of PE is doing the CCF thing. I wave my arm to indicate the council’s customers outside our investigative bubble and recite: “The blossoms are fragile and motionless, never let anyone see any of them using their finger.”

“How do you know what they talked about?” Geraldine asks, unmoved.

Noah says, “Councillor Evergreen told me the council had paid for a new sound lab at Valeston School just before the cut backs.”

“So you taped the conversations.”

“It’s all digital actually. We got everyone’s permission. After five minutes I rang the bell again and the young people all moved along one, for their next date. Then again. Twelve times in all. The bell was a nice touch – apparently they don’t ring them in schools any more. Then we had a break for refreshments.”

“Any alcohol?”

“Strictly tea and coffee. But still everyone was buzzing. They all wrote down the three ‘dates’ they most wanted to re-visit and I did some quick permutations. They went back for follow ups. And then we had a wash up and de-brief.”

“This is the lower swing swivel,” I recite. “And this is the upper swing swivel, whose use you will see, when you are given your slings.”

Geraldine looks at me like a disapproving aunt. The air is getting thick. Her nostrils widen briefly and I wonder if she has identified me as the one who didn’t shower this morning.

“Can we open a window?” I ask.

“I’m afraid not,” Geraldine says. “Except metaphorically.”

I point to a little device up in the corner: “Is that where they squirt in the poison gas, when you’ve got everything you want from us?”

“It’s CCTV, as I’m sure you are aware, Oscar.”

Josh is aware that I am deeply upset that my school is about to become an academy. I am aware that the council leader is attempting to blame my department for his schoolgirl scandal. Noah is aware that academies don’t have to give a damn what local authorities say. I am aware that the real world doesn’t work like that.

“Moving on,” Geraldine says. “How did you become involved, Josh?”

Josh has worn a tie especially for the meeting. He slackens the knot and runs a finger round the inside of his shirt collar. “It’s like a torture chamber. Isn’t there some health and safety rule?”

“Actually, there’s a statutory minimum temperature for council offices,” Noah says, “but no maximum. They warned me at induction.”

“No limit on the generation of hot air,” I add.

“Oscar knew I had to collaborate with the council on another youth project if I was to stand any chance of levering-in public funds for Ploughdown and he told me he had some promising material. I thought it might make an interesting piece of verbatim theatre. When I mentioned it to Councillor Evergreen, he begged me to go ahead. He saw it as a podcast on the council’s website with award-winning potential. And he wanted it quickly, so there was no time to learn lines. We decided to use a technique called ‘recorded delivery’ instead.”

“And what exactly is ‘Verbatim Theatre’?” Geraldine asks as though she’s been passed a drink in a filthy glass.

“We use exactly the same words that people used at the event, so it’s documentary style. But we cut up the order, bringing various strands together to make a story and build drama.”

“You mean you edit.” Geraldine writes on her notepad. “And who, exactly, edited the verbatim words of our councillors and these young people?”

“It was a collaborative effort,” Josh says. “Me, Oscar, and some of his students. Councillor Evergreen insisted on authorising the final script. It’s not like going through a text with a red pen. It’s about spotting four or five ideas and selecting different passages to create a narrative.”

“And this you can see is the bolt,” I say. “The purpose of this is to open the breach, as you see. We can slide it rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this easing the spring.”

Young Noah, unlike Geraldine, is warming to my contributions. He looks like he’s ready for easing a bit of spring right now.

“Tell me about this narrative please, Josh. Briefly.”

“We chose four topics: the withdrawal of vending machines so that students can only buy healthy snacks and drinks from the school canteen; the council’s insistence on investing a chunk of its staff pension fund in tobacco companies; the…

“And this makes theatre?”

“Like nothing you’ve seen or heard before. We feed the actors the real words through earpieces and they speak them aloud a second later with all the ums and errs, the throat clearing, the unfinished sentences. They don’t interpret. They’re like mediums channelling spirits and it has an uncanny effect. We have publicity-hungry councillors desperately wanting to seem with it, and idealistic students flush with their self-righteous certainties. And we’re re-creating their exact mannerisms and meaning, but we’ve milked it for passion and humour and put a spotlight on it that makes it sound movingly truthful.”

Geraldine says “Thank you, Josh,” quickly, before I can get in with my line about japonica glistening like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens.

“So where did it go wrong?” she asks. She looks at Noah, who looks at Josh, who looks at me.

“Young people insisted on being young people,” I say.

“And?”

“It turns out one of my lab techs has a crush on one of my lower sixths and thought it would be a gas to ask her for a date, live on stage, on opening night. He spliced a few extra words into one of his mate’s feed: ‘Bill says he thinks you’re gorgeous and will you go to The Destroyers at the Town Hall with him next Friday?’”

Noah beams at the memory of it.

Geraldine scribbles to get it down verbatim.

“And because it’s like he’s on a moving staircase, because he’s become like a medium channelling the spirit, his mate repeats perfectly, without thinking, ‘Bill says he thinks you’re gorgeous and will you go to The Destroyers at the Town Hall with him next Friday?’”

I repeat this on purpose, so Geraldine can report precisely. I want the exact words in her report because The Destroyers are a great band, and will get a kick out of a mention in dispatches. “But my lower sixths are well-practised in improvisation. Like mediums, come to think of it. So this one pulls her ear piece out and says ‘Speak for yourself, John.’”

“That’s a reference to The Courtship of Miles Standish,” Noah volunteers in a rush for Geraldine’s benefit. “A poem by Longfellow about how a pilgrim from the Mayflower called Miles Standish courted the beautiful Priscilla Mullins using his friend John Alden as a go-between. I Googled it. But she really loved John, and after she said speak for yourself, he did, and eventually they married and…"

“Lived happily ever after. Thank you Noah,” Geraldine says.

Josh explains that Ploughdown collaborated with Valeston Arts and Drama Department on adapting the Longfellow poem as a musical, last year.

“More to the point,” I say, “Bill’s mate, who is indeed called John, also has a deep, and now he discovers, requited crush on the said beauty in my lower sixth. He pulled out his earpiece and spoke for himself. Graphically.”

“Spare me that, please,” Geraldine says. “Councillor Evergreen has shown me the newspaper cutting.”

“It was just bad luck,” Josh says, “that we cast this young John to play Councillor Evergreen. Councillor John Evergreen.”

“Right,” says Geraldine, snapping her notepad shut. “Let’s take a comfort break. We’ll reconvene for act two in five minutes.”

“Yesterday we had daily cleaning,” I say. “And tomorrow morning, we shall have what to do after firing. But today, today we have naming of parts.”