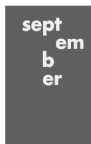


**MARK  
THOMAS**  
**THE LIAR'S QUARTET**

**BRAVO FIGARO!  
CUCKOOED  
THE RED SHED**

Annotated Scripts and  
New Material



An extract from  
September Publishing

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**BRAVO  
FIGARO!**



CREDIT: JANE HOBSON

## MY DAD AND I

In the second week of March 2000, my dad, Colin Alec Todd Thomas, was diagnosed with a disease called Progressive Supranuclear Palsy (PSP) a degenerative and incurable condition, which is often misdiagnosed as MS. Now, he is nearly blind, can't walk, can barely talk, can't swallow properly, has diabetes and dementia and last week, my mum, his carer, was told she could add gout to the list. In most likelihood he will die of hyper-static pneumonia.\* Frankly he was a grumpy bastard to begin with and none of this has improved his mood.

I have responded to witnessing this cruel slide downwards with the appropriate dignity and written a show about it for the Edinburgh festival, *Bravo Figaro!* now on tour. Book now while tickets last!

It's about my dad and me, love, death and opera. It came about as the result of a series of coincidences: an interview on Radio 4 about music led to a commission by the Royal Opera House, which became this show's starting point.

This much is true. Ish. True-ish. Like many performers I have plundered my family for inspiration over the years but the fuller truth of *Bravo Figaro!* started one Friday night

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\* Caused by the build-up of fluid in the lungs.

24 years ago when Ben Elton introduced me to a live TV studio audience.\* Sweaty with fear I stared at the crowd, then mangling vowels in a youthful mockney accent indignantly shouted one word,

‘What!’

I paused, waited, rode out a few titters, then glowering into the darkness continued,

‘Are they talking about ...’

I paused again, held it, made the wait significant, then bellowed incredulously,

‘... in opera!’

This opening line was the springboard for a torrent of filth sung fast and furious, a paean to obscenely bad sex,† belted out in alternating falsetto and tenor tones; thus reducing an entire art form to a series of grunts, shafts, shags and squelches.

Though not the stuff of legend the routine was then my calling card on the comedy circuit, regarded at best as comedic filth with a dash of righteous toff bashing. Hardly anyone knew that the routine was actually aimed very squarely at my dad.

Colin Alec Todd Thomas was a working-class Tory and self-employed builder who discovered a love of opera as an adult and like many a late convert his zeal burnt brightly. On Sunday mornings our neighbours were blasted with Rossini and Verdi played at such a level that even now I have an impulse to apologise. He even took a cassette player to work, playing his favourite operas across the

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\* *Friday Night Live*, 1988.

† Imagine Bryn Terfel Jones mid-Wagner eulogising on jism.

rooftops and building sites of south London. It was excruciating. As a teenager working alongside my dad I would cringe in embarrassment but I would be revenged when I spat and sung my way through my obscene parody of his beloved opera on national telly.

In social attitudes my father was born in the wrong century; he wanted a world where men were masters, women were quiet and children had rickets. When he said, 'They should bring back the death penalty and if no one else will do it I'll throw the switch,' not only did he mean it, but he would have brought his own set of jump leads and a car battery as back up.\* It's not surprising that he was frequently the focus of my early routines and became a foil similar to the old-school comics of my youth who would parry at their mother-in-law.

However, over time my shows became increasingly political and theatrical and over that same period he became just slightly more tolerant. As the well of material he provided dried up so did my desire to draw from it. It was not my intention to return to my family as source material again. We had reached some kind of agreeable stand-off, I went off and did exposés on arms dealers and expounded the virtues of the right to protest and in return he stopped wincing every time a lesbian character appeared on TV.

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\* I did a show called *The Manifesto* where the audience could submit policy suggestions to create a blueprint for a better world and during the tour, at every single show, someone would submit 'bring back hanging'. I got so sick of it I eventually agreed. 'Fuck it, we should bring back hanging but let's do it on a voluntary basis. So if you agree with the death penalty, you sign up to a public register and then if you fuck up, we kill you.'

Ten years after the diagnosis, Colin Alec Todd Thomas sits in the corner of the room with his eyes shut, shaking, sweating and unable to remember what he had for lunch. I'm drawn to opera, the art form he loved, in an effort to reach out to him before he vanishes. So the decision to do *Bravo Figaro!* was more instinctive than rational but with so personal a story it raised the question of how I represent him onstage: should I treat him differently this time around because his time with us is short? Well, yes and no. Once again my dad is resolutely lambasted as there seems no point in telling so private a tale without trying to tell the truth ... and to be honest the stories of him being a bastard are comedy gold.

It is not all one sided and my dad speaks for himself in this show as audio interviews with him and my mum have been woven into the script and they help tell the stories. But there is one significant change in how I represent my dad this time around, thirty-odd years later, and it is this: now, the image of him standing on the scaffolding singing opera across the rooftops of south London is the image of him I cherish the most.



## FOREWORD

This is the first script I have written onto paper, which may possibly make it a play but don't be put off by that.

Normally I write shows by performing them, going to small venues and doing 'work in progress' shows to an intimate crowd. It is a trial and error process so the tickets are cheap and the audiences come on the understanding that I might be crap, some nights I am, just so they get their monies worth.

The scripts for these shows remain only as a series of headings, flow charts and single word aide memoirs. These aide memoirs are temporary and are worthless within eighteen months of the last performance of a show.

One old notebook has a twenty minute routine written in it. It reads: Alpha. Virgin. Dad. Book. Scopes Trial. Sabina Guzzanti. Pope. Erection.

If anyone can remember how that routine went please don't remind me.

*Bravo Figaro!* was scripted because people kept shouting at me. Technicians shoutest loudest, demanding to know when to play sound cues and turn lights on and off.

The Traverse Theatre,\* being a theatre of new writing, thought it might be a good idea if there was some kind of script too.

Is it a play? Well, I like to think of it as a series of precise lighting and sound cues broken up with stories that might change from night to night.

One technician described it as 'a bit jazz', which I am assured could be an insult.

If *Bravo Figaro!* is a play, others can perform it, on condition they give me money.

The recordings of my mum (Margaret), my dad (Colin) and my brother (Matt) are real recordings and no actors of any kind were harmed in the making of them.

Mark Thomas

July 2012

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\* *Bravo Figaro!* was massively rewritten after its first outing at the Royal Opera House and opened in its current form at the Traverse Theatre during the Edinburgh Fringe. The Traverse was my first and only choice – it's a great venue, with a seriously brilliant tech and stage crew. Not to mention you're sharing a bill with a set of performers and writers who make you up your game.

## BRAVO FIGARO!

*Onstage left: To one side five packing boxes and a sack barrow with boxsets of opera records piled on it, an electrician's lamp\* hangs from it. A wooden lamp† protrudes from another box and medical packages‡ are stacked on another. Next to the sack barrow with records is a small stool.*

*Onstage right: A wooden ark toy on wheels is surrounded by toy dinosaurs.§*

*The electrician's lamp fades up when MT's dad speaks, the wooden lamp in the box lights when MT's mum speaks and the ark lights up whenever Matt speaks.*

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\* The authenticity of the props was very important, the barrow was actually my dad's old sack barrow. When the show opened in Edinburgh we had a backdrop of a skirting board and wallpaper that exactly matched what we had at home at the time, and a massive frame into which we projected a picture of my dad.

† It's an old elephant lamp belonging to my nan. She left it to my mum who gave it to me. The lamp is made of old hardwood, the statue is an elephant lifting its head and trunk upwards and the bulb goes at the end of the trunk. It's more likely to appear at a car boot sale than the *Antiques Roadshow*. Before touring the show in Australia, my tour manager removed the small remnants of a white tusk – just as well or we would have been arrested for ivory smuggling.

‡ The actual packaging of my dad's medicines.

§ The dinosaurs were my children's.

THE LIAR'S QUARTET

*SFX: SCAFFOLDING CLUNKS, COMMER VAN ENGINE AND ANGLE GRINDERS, WHISTLING SLIGHTLY NONDESCRIPT AND OCCASIONAL SNATCHES OF PUNK SONGS*

*The show starts with the sound of my dad breathing.*

*SFX: HARD AND LABOURED BREATHING*

*LIGHTS UP AROUND THE BOXES AND MT SITS NEXT TO THE SACK BARROW.*

What did you think to the event, Dad?

*SFX: MUM AND DAD VOICES*

*DAD: BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP* It was smashing – really brilliant.

*MUM: ELEPHANT LAMP LIGHTS UP* It was brilliant.

What did you enjoy about it?

*MUM: ELEPHANT LAMP LIGHTS UP* I don't think he can express himself, love.

*DAD: BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP* The music.

Did you recognise the tunes, Dad?

*DAD: BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP. COUGHING* All of them, love.

*MUM: ELEPHANT LAMP LIGHTS UP* Eh?

**DAD: BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP** I recognised all of them.

**MUM: ELEPHANT LAMP LIGHTS UP** What was that? You recognised all of them – oh that was good, love.

**DAD: BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP** Yeah.

This is what my mum and dad sound like and this conversation was recorded at the end of last year but let's start the story nearer the beginning.

I started performing in professional stand-up venues in 1985,\* when poets, ranters, musicians street performers, circus performers, cabaret artistes, magicians, performance artists, the leftovers of left-wing theatre, the Manchester University drama department and anarcho counter-culture of squatters of Ladbrooke Grove collided to create the white heat of alternative comedy.

In rooms above pubs you could see any combinations of acts, the first act could be a low wire act, the second a squeeze box orchestra and the third a performance artist trying to melt a massive block of ice with his body heat in twenty minutes in a homage to the myth of Sisyphus.†

My favourite was Bob Boyton,‡ he performed in sharp suits

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\* Some of my fellow drama students may care to date the start of my stand-up career to performances at college, in particular the profound and moving 'fart sketch'.

† The Iceman – the *nom du guerre* of performance artist Antony Irving – is still performing but tends to paint more these days.

‡ He's an ex-comic now, turned author and Camden tour guide and still a good friend.

and a fist full of sovereign rings, when he walked onstage half the audience thought he was a character comic. He would walk on holding the mic at a right angle, club comic style.

‘Good evening ladies and gentlemen, my name is Bob Boyton and I’m a communist, Marxist Leninist. A lot of my comrades say football is the proletarian sport but that is bollocks. The proletarian sport is motor racing, few quid to get in, sit with your mates, a few beers, a nice day out and if you’re lucky you watch some rich fucker burn to death.’

That was his opening gag! And I loved it because the audience were either on board the train and going the whole distance with Bob or you were leaving the room. At the time I had signed up to the alternative cabaret agenda. We believed that we were fighting a cultural war, against sexism and racism. We were fighting those who mocked the disabled, gays and immigrants. I was watching *Little Britain*\* and realized that we lost that war. Quite badly too. Our frontal attack on the conservative right left our flank completely exposed to postmodernism.

But, in the trenches of alternative comedy we attacked new targets, the bigots and the illiberal, mocking them for their hatred and stupidity. And there was no greater bigot than my father.†

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\* When the show toured in New Zealand and Australia, the audience there were unfamiliar with *Little Britain*. I was left looking for an example of reactionary, boorish humour. It is the only time I have been thankful for the existence of Jeremy Clarkson.

† There were a lot of bigots to choose from in the 1980s – these were the days of James Anderton and Section 28.

*LIGHTS ON BOXES*

Some of the music here was from *Tosca* ... do you remember going to see *Tosca*?

**DAD: BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP** Yeah, yes.

Do you remember where?

**MUM: ELEPHANT LAMP LIGHTS UP** Take that away from your mouth, darling, then they can hear you. Where did you go and see *Tosca*? Was it at Covent Garden?

**DAD: BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP** It was Covent Garden.

**MUM: ELEPHANT LAMP LIGHTS UP** He saw it at Covent Garden.

How long ago was that?

**DAD: BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP** Oh, forty-five years ago.

My father's name is Colin Alec Todd Thomas and I was born under the shadow of his character.

We used to say he looked like Moses with a hangover though not to his face. And when his beard went white we called him Santa with syphilis for variety.

My dad was a Wesleyan lay preacher,\* a self-employed builder and the rudest man in south London – therefore Europe.

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\* My dad used to preach in the street in Clapham Junction and on Northcote Road. My uncle Norman told me that, as a young Teddy Boy, he once saw his mate sitting in front of my dad while he was preaching. My uncle bent over and asked him what he was doing. His mate replied, 'I've been saved.' Norman said, 'No, you fucking haven't, you're coming with me.'

He was a mass of contradictions and happy with them. Hypocrisy is what makes us interesting, frankly people who possess a unity of thought, word and action are the dullest fuckers to walk the earth. Hypocrisy is a humanising foible that is merely given a bad name by politicians.

He was happy with his contradictions. My dad was a religious man and righteous. He could recite the books of Bible literally backwards but watching him swear was to see a man shoot a thesaurus from the air and hear the words scream as they fall to earth.

He swore like a jazz bebop player, improvising around common themes. Fuck-arsehole-shit-wank-arsehole- bastard-fuck-shit-wank.\*

He was essentially Cleo Lane with tourettes.†

He was quick with his fists and was fifty before he lost his first fight and came home with blood on his shirt.

There was a period of time when he was bound over to keep the peace on a yearly basis. He would do something silly, get bound over, make it to the end of the ban and then do something stupid and start again.

You remember the Moonies? Religious cult, big in the seventies. One year my dad had a theological dispute with the Moonies that resolved when he kicked them up the street. He was charged.

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\* This section is improvised on a nightly basis and cannot be regarded as word for word accurate – but you get the jist.

† One of my genuinely treasured memories of my dad is of him leaning out of the Commer van window and shouting, ‘Oi Cuntymbollocks!’ It was something he did quite a lot while driving.



Now our next door neighbour at the time was a Salvation Army captain\* – who for some reason liked my dad. When he heard of the court case he said,

‘Would you like me to be a character witness?’

‘That’s great. Very kind.’

‘Shall I wear the Salvation Army uniform?’

‘Well it can’t hurt.’

In court† the Salvation Army man stood in the dock and says, ‘Colin Thomas is a good man, a family man, a God fearing man, honest trustworthy hardworking and a pillar of the community.’

We were sitting there going, ‘I wish we knew this bloke, he sounds bloody great.’

My dad left school with no formal qualifications – it sounds trite but try doing it‡ – he did a four year apprenticeship in carpentry and joinery and then set up as a small works contractor, he became a self-employed builder.

He was old school. Everything had to be done the proper way. If a cupboard was to be made it had to be made the hard way – the proper way. That ark, *MT POINTS TO STAGE*

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\* My mum says they were called Betty and David and she used to give them a lift to the cash and carry.

† Magistrates’ Court, Lavender Hill, Battersea.

‡ The situation has improved since his day. Back then, half of the working adult population in England and Wales had no qualifications. Now it’s a fifth. A fifth. In the fifth largest economy in the world. In the twenty-first century.

*RIGHT AND ARK* my dad made that for me when I was one year old. That ark is forty-three years old. Alright, it's fifty but it could play forty-three.\*

Everything had to be done the difficult way, if something had to be carried on site, he had to carry the heaviest load. If something was moved up a ladder he had to move fastest. When we were kids he put his hand through a buzz saw. Some said it was an accident, I tend to think it was showing off. 'I'm the best chippie in South London and I haven't even got five fingers!'

**MATT: *ARK LIGHTS UP* I found them ...**

This is my younger brother, Matt. I interviewed him separately from my mum and dad and I should explain that the emphasis is on *younger*.†

**MATT: *ARK LIGHTS UP* I found them ...**

You found Dad's fingers? When you were cleaning up the sawdust?

**MATT: *ARK LIGHTS UP* I found his fingers.**

What did you do with them?

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\* The ark is a large wooden boat on wheels, sturdy enough for a child's rough play. It looks a little more like a military landing craft than the vessel of every animal, which is entirely in keeping with my dad to create a paramilitary Bible toy. It survived the tour and is now in my office.

† He's eight years younger and a building site manager. In my best man's speech at his wedding I described how we used to share a bedroom as kids. I said we used to sleep in bunk beds and I slept on the top which I hated because I got motion sickness.

**MATT: *ARK LIGHTS UP*** I think I found quite a considerable bit of one finger and the tip of another and put them in a cigar box and took them up to Mum.

‘You gave Mum a cigar box with Dad’s fingers in it?’

When it comes to Mother’s Day Clintons just don’t cater for the imaginative child.\*

Every family has its own stories and one of ours was that my dad was dyslexic though he could have been illiterate. Either way my mum would check all his paperwork because on more than one occasion a customer was offered 15 per cent DISOCUNT. Now if you are in the market for disocunt you want 100 per cent or nothing. You don’t dabble in disocunt.

He had four kids and I was the eldest. Mark, Elisabeth, Ruth and Matt. All good biblical names.

My father rarely took us on holiday but one year he took his family of six on a narrow boat to the Coventry basin. Now at that time Coventry was a very industrialised area ... Sorry, for the younger members of the audience:

‘industry’ ... we used to make things and sell them and have communities. The by-product was pollution. The canal water was black with oil and chemicals.

One afternoon as he navigated the black waterways he was in a full blown Captain Hornblower reverie, sitting against the rail, tiller in his hand, when he heard this sound.

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\* After the accident, the third finger on his left hand came to a nail-less point and the tip of the first finger bent over like a hook, which he used to clean his ears with.

*SFX: SPLASH*

It was the sound of his wallet falling out of his back pocket. We had no credit cards and he turns to see the holiday money floating out across the water.

His instinctive and immediate reaction is to grab my sister Ruth who is eleven.

*MT MIMICS THROWING SOMEONE INTO WATER*  
'Get the money!'

She is paddling through the black water towards the floating notes and smiling. The rest of us are, 'We want to go in!' So we all pile into the canal swimming in the black water and a dead dog floats past.

But that just about sums up my dad's relationship with everything, which was 'Get the money!'

*LIGHTS ON BOXES*

Would you call yourselves opera fans?

**DAD: *BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP*** Yes.

**MUM: *ELEPHANT LAMP LIGHTS UP*** Well I suppose so, we like opera.

Did many builders go to the opera?

**DAD: *BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP*** No.

Did you meet other people who were like you?

**DAD: *BUILDER'S LAMP LIGHTS UP*** Don't think so, son.