



June 2016

Read with your ears

Neil Wilson

It's not often you encounter someone with cricket pads strapped to their chest and crossed hockey sticks sprouting from their headgear like antlers.

An exponent of a strange sport or unusual martial art, maybe? An unfortunate victim of a mental derangement or weird cult, perhaps? Even an illusion or delusion?

Happily none of these but the ever exuberant Barrie Rutter acting out a particularly comic-eccentric Falstaff in the final act of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds in April. He clearly relished this role (though a cynic might snipe that this was merely the façade of brilliant acting). Indeed all the other actors in Northern Broadsides – the troupe Barrie Rutter formed in 1992 – brought Shakespeare's last play to glorious life not just with the body language of appropriate grimaces, shrugs, laughter and so forth, but by conveying such fulsome meaning and emotion in their delivery of the text.

Of course plays are meant to be heard rather than read but it's striking how professional writers of prose (and particularly poetry) urge authors to declaim their draft work out loud: certainly I have found – often to my surprise – that doing so has exposed, for example, over-long

sentences, commas that should be omitted (or inserted), words which jar, and so on.

As the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins declared: “Read with your ears”. Happy writing – and listening!

Four all who can read and right..... English!

We'll begin with a box, and the plural is boxes
but the plural of ox became oxen not oxes.

One fowl is a goose, but two are called geese
yet the plural of moose should never be meese.

You may find a lone mouse or a nest full of mice
yet the plural of house is houses, not hice.

If the plural of man is always called men
why shouldn't the plural of pan be called pen?

If I spoke of my foot and show you my feet
and I give you a boot, would a pair be called beet?

If one is a tooth and a whole set are teeth
why shouldn't the plural of both be called beeth?

Then one may be that, and three would be those
yet hat in the plural would never be hose, and the plural of cat
is cats, not cose.

We speak of a brother and also of brethren
but though we say mother, we never say methren.

Then the masculine pronouns are he, his and him
but imagine the feminine, she, shis and shim.

Let's face it:
English is a crazy language.

There is no egg in eggplant
nor ham in hamburger;
neither apple nor pine in pineapple.
English muffins weren't invented in England.

We take English for granted.
But if we explore its paradoxes
we find that quicksand can work slowly, boxing rings are square
and a guinea pig is neither from Guinea, nor is it a pig.

And why is it that writers write but fingers don't fing,
grocers don't groce and hammers don't ham?

Doesn't it seem crazy that you can make amends
but not one amend?

If you have a bunch of odds and ends
and get rid of all but one of them,
what do you call it?

If teachers taught
why didn't preachers praught?

If a vegetarian eats vegetables
what does a humanitarian eat?

In what other language do people recite at a play
and play at a recital?

Ship by truck and send cargo by ship?

Have noses that run and feet that smell?

How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same,
while a wise man and a wise guy are opposites?

You have to marvel at the unique lunacy of a language in which

your house can burn up as it burns down;
in which you fill in a form by filling it out
and in which an alarm goes off by going on.

Author unknown

The Tree

Marie Caltieri

Strong, majestic, wide, deep-rooted, reaching oh so high,
Inviting all to climb its branches, feel the touch of sky.
Nest-providing, bee-inviting, blossom laden now,
Rosy clusters, pollen-scented blossom on the bough.
Squirrel refuge, home of bird song, nestlings to be fed.
Burst of springtime, conker promise, so much life ahead.
Endless days of joy and laughter, play and games and fun.
Spring that seems to last forever for the very young.

Days of sunshine follow swiftly, gentle summer breeze,
Giving lovers shade and shelter, hand-shaped, deep-veined leaves.
Tree alive with bird and insect, busy humble bee,
Wrapped in wonder of each other in their minds they see
Mother, father, children, babies, little ones around,
Magic lilt of childhood voices, toys strewn on the ground.
Sweet fulfilment, happy family, precious summers pass.
Held together, love enfolded, - would these days might last.

Autumn colours, yellow, russet, saffron, scarlet, brown,
Glowing jewels, as the wind-tossed leaves come whirling down.
Standing by the tree together, loving partners gladly share
Memories of family scattered, no more in their care.
Thanking God for His great goodness, gift of happy years,
Gathered safely in His keeping, present joys and future fears.

Tracery of questing branches, charcoal trunk and sullen sky,
Frosted patterns, muted colours, winter flurries drifting by.
Bare the tree now, yet enduring, rooted firm and reaching high.
Lonely figure standing silent, lost in thoughts of days gone by.
Aging fingers trace the pattern, feel the life within the tree.
Rough dry bark and moss-damp hollows, promises of what will be.
Thoughts of Easter, Resurrection, images that faith can bring,
Feels the longed-for, certain promise of a new eternal spring.

Conversation

Pat Farley

There are mutterings in the kitchen that I can't translate.
I believe it's my fridge-freezer trying to communicate.
At times I hear it crooning in soft melancholy tones,
But other times, as if in pain, its murmurs sound like moans.

I feel perhaps I ought to ask 'Whatever is the matter?'
But then, as if in agitation, it begins to chatter.
It chuckles to itself, then maybe makes a pleading whine;
A screaming gull, a gurgling baby, whimpering canine.

At night its agonising wailing does give me the creeps,
Then, as I lie awake in silence, I presume it sleeps.
I wonder if a terrified hobgoblin's trapped inside,
Or is it just a message from a kindly spirit guide?

But in the kitchen I prefer to think it is my friend
Who likes to have a chat with me, and maybe to pretend
That while my human innards might spontaneously rumble,
And my words appear an unintelligible jumble,

Its working bits - its pipes, its pumps and ventilating fan,
Can make more varied compositions than mine ever can,
So tries to bridge the culture gap between refrigeration
And me, by making sounds it thinks that pass for conversation.

Two into one won't go!

Eugenie Normanton

We were so close, the four of us,
Like Musketeers, each one for all;
But now you say you want to go
Alone to this fine Christmas ball.

Your dress is fancier by far
Than anything you wore with me;
We went for coffee with our friends,

Or cinema's new film to see.

But now a glint is in your eye,
Your dewy cheek with make-up tinged;
Off-hand with me, with Mum and Dad –
I trust your young wings won't be singed!

So is he tall? Dark? Handsome too?
For some boy must've caused this change.
What is his special hold on you
My twin? - our lives to re-arrange.

Well, go your way; be happy, dear.
Don't fret my heart is torn in two.
The bond of twins is strong, we hear;
But clearly more for me than you!

Cutting remarks

Neil Wilson

“No-one's going anywhere till I find out from you – doc – why I get violent”.

He is sitting bolt upright, with his right arm held oddly behind his back. Only after I sit down at the other end of his three-man sofa does Jim reveal what he is holding in his right hand: a long carving knife, its broad shiny blade glinting as he turns it over. And over, and over.

They say fear is protective. It alerts you to danger and fires up your fight and flight reactions. I gulp hard, but in disbelief not fear. Maybe this is some sort of joke, or even a film set? I am not being brave - just denying reality.

Then the rational part of my brain assumes command. The adrenaline flows. I look to escape but Jim is between me and the door out of his bedsit. My mouth dries up but I manage to croak “how – er, often do you get violent?” as I recall advice I had read somewhere that a hostage's best hope was to ask his captor about his past. Expressing an interest in this would apparently kindle a connection – even a relationship of sorts – that should weaken aggression.

“Oh, not that often, doc – mebbe once a week” Jim replies, in a tone somewhere between a growl and a sigh. He leans back and the tired sofa creaks as his burly frame sinks into it. His eyes flash as he adds “Then I get angry really quickly, but that ain’t surprising when you think of the drongos I meet”.

I am in Australia, working for an out-of-hours GP locum agency. It is midnight on a balmy spring day in 1979. An hour earlier we – that is the driver of the agency’s car and I – had been directed to visit “a 40 year-old male with a bad headache”. Picking up on that symptom I now say “So I guess you get pains in your head when you get angry?”

“Too right, doc, especially here”. Jim jabs a nicotine-stained finger at his forehead. “Makes me lash out”.

“Ah, so have you ever injured someone?”

Jim grins. “You bet! But only when I’ve been really wound up, like last week when I was minding me own business in Paddy’s bar when in came this little guy who orders a Coke in a girly voice. Must be a queer I thought – can’t stand ‘em y’know.” Jim’s upper lip curls in distaste and he punches his right fist into his left palm. “Anyway he kind of tripped up and fell onto me - ugh! Dunno if it was on purpose or not but boy, did it make me mad! I gave him a right hook, then a left and I’d have done more but he just lay there, groaning. No fight in the little pansy at all.” Jim took a swig from the “tinnie” – the can of Fosters – that stood on the table beside him and sighed. “Serve him right! but some folk there said ‘Jeez Jim - that was a bit hard’ and I guess that’s kind of what happens now and then”.

“You mean you overreact?”

“Yeah - it’s as if my brain throws a switch. Does it mean I’m mental, doc?”

“Not really. More that you’ve got a very quick temper. Maybe you had a rough time as a kid?”

“You can say that again!” Jim goes on to explain that his mother – an Irish immigrant – had “taken to the bottle real bad” and beat him when he was a boy. His father – an Aussie docker – had also hit him hard when he was drunk. Such a stormy background is surely not a surprise as violence so often seems to beget violence.

As Jim appears to be ready and willing to answer my questions I decide to continue – with “I guess you left home as soon as you could?”

“You bet! Soon as I was sixteen and left school – not that I was there much anyway – I legged it. Got work on the railways on a line gang out in the bush, near Alice Springs. Jeez, it was hot there and then there were all them Abbo’s laid out in the street with the grog. Dirty bastards I thought at first but some of them were alright once you got to know ‘em.”

“And then?”

“Ah, then!” Jim suddenly relaxes, even smiles. “*Then* I got to join the circus! Helping out with all the heavy stuff at first. Then this real beaut sheila – Kylie – kind of took pity on me and showed me how to throw knives. We even got an act together: she’d dress up in a sparkly outfit and stand against a target board and I’d throw the knives all around her. Did that for a few months till her old man threw me out.”

“Oh!” I fear memories of that event could upset Jim but I risk asking him “Why did he do that?”

Jim glares, grunts, then smashes his fist down on the table, sending the empty beer cans flying. “ ‘Cos he thought I wasn’t good enough for his lovely daughter. I wanted her to run away with me but she wouldn’t ‘cos she was only fourteen.”

“So since then?”

“Since then be bugged! So many bloody questions, doc, but no answers – ‘cos you’ve still not told me why I get violent!” Jim points his knife towards my face. “A quick slash with this across a cheek might help, mebbe? I mean, come on doc, if they can land a man on the moon a smart Pommie bastard like you should be able to gimme some answers!”

Only a month ago the World – though especially the USA – had celebrated the tenth anniversary of Mankind’s first steps on our moon. Wondrous though that achievement is understanding the human brain’s workings is a much more challenging mission. Explaining that to Jim however strikes me as futile and risks his exploding with fury. Before I can murmur something conciliatory instead Jim mutters “Look! I’ll show you how sharp this blade is” as he draws it lightly across the back of his left hand.

“Impressive” I mumble as a little blood seeps from a vein and spreads over his sun-creased hand. I try not to imagine the far greater mess – and pain – of that knife piercing *my* body. The escalating tension is suddenly broken by a cheerful “Hey, Jim – you thirsty, mate?”

We look up. The doorway is filled by a giant of a man standing there.

“Whoa, Bill!” Jim roars. “I thought you was way out in the sticks with your mates. Good to see you back – especially if you’ve got some grog. My mouth’s a dry as an Abbo’s arse!”

“Come and get it then” Bill says and as Jim levers himself off the sofa he adds – with a wink – “no worries, doc, we’re old mates. I know what he’s like – just leave it to me”. Jim snorts but still lumbers through his doorway and out across the corridor to Bill’s flat opposite. Bill follows closely behind and as he passes the open stairway he turns to me and jerks his head – briefly but emphatically – towards this escape route. I am on it immediately, scrambling down the stairs but as I do so a final fear strikes me: what if Jim turns round and throws his knife at my fleeing back? Does he still have the skill to so skewer my torso?

But I stumble out into the street without any sudden pain between the shoulder blades, straight into a crowd of police and onlookers. I answer a few questions from the police and then Dave – “my” driver – ushers me to his car. Before I get in I am dazzled by the flash bulbs of the assembled press, who ask me to relate what happened (and later I am indeed the subject of a report in the local newspapers). At last I sink into the Holden’s passenger seat and we speed homeward but as I start to relax I realise I have not heeded the locum agency’s motto. This has been impressed on all British locums by the agency’s director – a typically blunt, swaggering Aussie – who was worried at our possible lack of commercial zeal. “Always remember” he would repeat, “In God we trust but others pay cash”.

(Winner – I’m chuffed to report! – in the non-fiction section of the 2016 Society of Medical Writers competition)

Future Events

June 14th: Invited speaker Noel Moroney will tell us about “Past Times in West Yorkshire” and John Roberts will launch his latest novel – “Walking on Air” – with copies for sale at the meeting of course.

July 12th: Members’ evening: the various possibilities for the format for this to be discussed at the June meeting – the choice is yours!

Any Other Business

If you haven't paid your annual subscription you may be surprised to receive this newsletter! To ensure continued membership of AWC please do this at the next meeting or by contacting Chris Manners (email cmanners99@gmail.com or letter to "Wingfield", Hollins Lane, Keighley BD20 6LU). If you no longer wish to remain a member then PLEASE let us know.

As ever copy always welcome for future newsletters, however short and in whichever genre. We'd particularly like new members to consider composing their potted autobiographies (literary and otherwise) so that we can get to know you better. Please email n.d.wilson@hotmail.co.uk

And Finally...

It seems appropriate in this year of celebrating 400 years since his death that Shakespeare should have the last word, courtesy of the famous journalist, author and broadcaster Bernard Levin (1928-2004).

On Quoting Shakespeare

Bernard Levin

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare "It's Greek to me", you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger; if your wish is farther to the thought; if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise -why, be that as it may, the more

fool you , for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then - to give the devil his due - if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I was dead as a door-nail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then - by Jove! O Lord! Tut tut! For goodness' sake! What the dickens! But me no buts! - it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.