

The Tour - A One Act Play

By Peter Hains and Steve Parker

Set in Cambridge in the present day and 10 years previously. The various settings in the play should be suggested by the use of simple props, rather than through complex scene changes.

Dramatis Personae:

Tom:	Early 70s. Married to Helen. Retired 10 years. Tour guide.
Mr Martin:	Tourist in Cambridge . Middle-aged.
Mrs Martin:	Tourist in Cambridge.
Helen:	Early 70s. Married to Tom.
Allie:	Age 25 - 35. Visiting Cambridge.
Lou:	Age 25 - 35. Visiting Cambridge.
Michael:	Early middle age. Boss of the tourist office
Rebecca	Tom's boss in his earlier career, at the Post Office.
Phil	Tom's colleagues in his earlier career at the Post Office
Sean	
Sharon	
Ellie	
V 1 :	Disembodied computer voice, female.
V 2 :	Disembodied computer voice, male

(Rebecca, Phil, Sean, Sharon and Ellie could 'double' for Mrs Martin, Michael, Mr Martin, Allie and Lou)

Scene 1:

The play opens in darkness. Phil, Sean, Sharon and Ellie enter through the auditorium. They are on their way to Tom's retirement party and it has been arranged that the guests will surprise him. They carry wine or beer and glasses. They (stage) whisper to each other across the heads of the audience, and also involve the audience in their scheming and subterfuge so that, by the time the party begins, the audience should feel part of the action.

The Director and the actors can develop the dialogue in this opening section, but it could include lines like:

Sean: *Wooo-hoo. Hi Ellie.*

Ellie: *Hi Sean, all right ?*

Sharon: *Sshhhh*

Sean: *Sshhhh yourself*

Ellie: *You've had a drink then ?*

Sean: *Just one to get me in the mood*

Phil: *Evening all....*

Sean: *All right Phil ...*

Phil: *(Not sleazy, just a compliment) You're looking lovely Sharon...*

Sharon: *Thanks.*

Sean: *Smooth talking bastard*

Ellie: *Sshhh*

(They have reached the stage. Lights come up very slightly. They still speak quietly).

Phil: *Here we are then...*

Sharon: *Isn't this brilliant ! I love surprises.*

Sean: *(sleazy) I'll remind you of that later.*

Ellie: (Telling him off) *All right Sean.*

Sharon: *I know your sort of surprises, and I'm not interested thanks. I'm going out afterwards on a date anyway, so....*

Sean: *All right, all right...*

Sharon: *And he's half your age, so.....*

Phil: *Right, come on. We're supposed to be hiding.*

Ellie: *Yes, come on.*

(They hide, as well as they are able, still drinking from beer bottles, or pouring glasses of wine).

Sean: (Looking at his watch, beginning to become a bit impatient) *What time did she say?*

Ellie: *Staff in position at 7.25*

Sean: *Including her?*

Ellie: *Yes, I suppose so. She's staff isn't she. Then Tom and his wife come at 7.30.*

Sharon: *I don't get how it's a surprise...*

Phil: *He thinks it's just a presentation from management; he doesn't know it's a proper party.*

Sharon: *It's lovely though isn't it ? I hope they do one for me when I retire.*

Sean: *Don't be daft. He's done 40 years. You'll never do that. You'll probably be up the duff after this date tonight and we'll never see you again....*

Sharon: (Not whispering) *Sean !*

Ellie and Phil: *Sshhh*

(Rebecca enters. She is the Manager of the (Royal Mail) Mail Centre where they all work. She whispers; she wants to try to be part of the staff team this evening).

Rebecca: *Good evening everyone. I'm so glad you're all here.* (The Director may decide here that Rebecca, with a gesture, seems to include the audience as members of the large group of staff at the party).

Phil: *Hello er, Mrs...* (He doesn't quite know how to address her this evening).

Rebecca: *Rebecca..... It's a social occasion, (straining to remember his name) er, Phil..... please call me Rebecca.*

Phil: *Thank you.*

Sean: (a bit cheeky) *Good evening Rebecca.*

Rebecca: *Hello..... Well, let's get ready shall we. Oh (remembers) I brought these.* (She gives out party blowers).

Sharon: *Ooh thanks. I love these.*

(Rebecca hides and the others resume their hiding places).

Helen: (Offstage) *I think it's this one....*

Ellie: (Whispers) *They're here...*

Tom: (entering). *She said the Madison Room.* (He is interrupted in saying this by the deafening cries of the staff).

All: *Surprise !*

They all gather round Tom and Helen, blowing party-blowers, shaking their hands, taking their coats, introducing themselves to Helen and making sure Tom and Helen have a drink in their hands. Tom is surprised and moved. The lively, noisy greeting calms down.

Tom: (To Helen) *You knew about this didn't you.* (The others are laughing because Tom has fallen for the ruse).

Rebecca: *Helen has been very helpful Tom. She's even provided a few biographical details for later.*

Tom: *That sounds worrying*

Rebecca: *Right, a chair please for our guest of honour.*

(A chair is provided for Tom, centre stage, and another for Helen, off to the side).

(She takes out some prompt cards).

Well Tom, the time has come. Retirement after all these years, 40 years to be precise, and I hope you didn't think we'd let you go, just like that, without a bit of a do!

So, in a little while, we're going to whisk you and Helen off; there's a nice meal laid on, and there's a disco, and, as you probably know, some of the staff in the sorting office have a band, 'The Post-it Notes'; I don't know if you've heard them?

Tom: *(Smiling) I'm sorry to say I have...*

Sean: *They're not charging Tom !*

Tom: *I'm not surprised.*

Rebecca: *But, before all that, a few words from me..... Tom, you started work here, at the Mail Centre, almost exactly forty years ago. Let me take you down memory lane for a moment.... forty years ago.... very early computers were around, with Windows version1 on the screen, and Pac-Man was the game everyone was playing. There was no internet; we had never even heard the word. The Berlin Wall came down; John Lennon was gunned down in New York, and Mrs Thatcher was in Number 10.*

Sean: *Boo !*

(Rebecca gives Sean a look).

Rebecca: *Michael Jackson was an international superstar, and Punk Rock was the big thing in Britain. After you went home from your job at the Mail Centre, Tom, you could relax with Dallas or Neighbours on TV. The Rubik's Cube was the thing that children wanted for Christmas but, being that little bit younger, for me it was my Cabbage patch doll. (Sharon smiles: the boss is human).*

So, against that back-drop, you joined the staff here as a Postie. I do not say 'a humble postie', because it is the men and women who deliver the mail, in all weathers, who are the front line of our service: whatever goes on back here at base, Tom the postman is the person who the public relate to and appreciate...

Sean: *And the one the dogs bite ...*

Rebecca: *(Ignores the interruption: the others give him a withering look).*

But you have moved through the organization Tom; Looking through your file, I think you have had just about every job in the place: Customer Service; Project Manager;

Operations, ending as Mail Centre Shift Manager, deploying 300 staff in a variety of roles and coping with all the challenges of managing personnel.

And you have seen so much change: When you arrived, letters were sorted and forwarded by hand, but you have seen the arrival of Optical Character Recognition, with a machine 'reading' the post-codes, and Intelligent Letter Sorting machines that process 36,000 letters per hour. And, you're leaving us now at an exciting time, as we introduce the new 'Extension of Life' super computers; it seems as though the sky really is the limit.

(The staff exchange glances: this is all going on rather long, and is more like something from a marketing conference. Sean opens another bottle and the others start to refill glasses).

Well, back to the point... To sum up: a very different time; a period of rapid change, but the constant, throughout, has been you Tom. A hard-working colleague; always reliable; dependable and solid in every respect. You are highly thought of Tom: you have spent the last 10 years managing staff, having some difficult conversations, and the word people always use to describe you is 'fair'. You are not the office joker; work is a serious place for you, but you have a ready smile, and I know that you have been kind and thoughtful when staff have spoken to you about personal issues or worries.

We are going to miss you Tom, and the staff have clubbed together to get you a small token of our appreciation and to wish you a happy retirement. I hope you will like it; Helen told us that your watch has given up the ghost, and this is a very special one. (She passes him the expensive-looking watch-box, which he opens.)

This is a hybrid watch.... have you seen one before? On the face of it (Sean laughs, a bit too loud. No-one else heard the 'joke'). On the face of it, it looks like a very nice gold watch, but it also contains a heart-rate monitor, a step-counter and an activity tracker. It will even tell you when your stress levels are too high. I hope you enjoy it....and I hope that you and Helen will enjoy a long and happy retirement together. (She backs away, leaving him as the centre of attention).

(They all clap, then cries of 'Speech'. Tom stands. He hands the watch, in its box, to Helen)

Tom: *Well, thank you Rebecca, and thanks to all of you for coming out this evening. Er... as you can probably tell, I haven't prepared anything.... that's the trouble with surprises: I didn't know I was going to have to say much tonight.*

Erm... but just to pick up on what you were saying Rebecca... er... 40 years, yes. I have seen a lot of changes in that time, but... if I'm honest, I suppose that's partly why I've decided to go now ...I could have done another two years, but there is this

new system coming along, as Rebecca said, and I'm not sure I could have gone through another big upheaval. (Deep breath) So, now's the time to go. As you said, I have had just about every possible job here, except yours of course, and... Er....I must say, I couldn't do your job. I had enough on my plate looking after this lot with all their various issues (mock serious), especially some people who don't seem able to get to work on time in the morning.

Phil: Who could he mean Sean ?

Sean: No comment.

Ellie: You're the one who needs a new watch.

Tom: *I won't mention any names.....I am going to miss this place... Just looking around at all of you tonight... makes me realize I've enjoyed feeling part of something... erm...bigger, you know... well, part of a big team. Coming in in the morning, and seeing all the faces; some people are up, and some are a bit down, and... I don't know. You get used to it..... It's a routine as well. It sort of gives you a pattern for your life; you know you've got to get up for something and you know that people are waiting for you and relying on you, especially when you're doing the shifts..... And I shall miss all that, but I'll be much more free now.....*

I think this is the time to tell you what I'm going to do next because from all the cards I've had, it seems like you think I'm going to sleep all morning, and watch telly all afternoon, but that's not what I'll be doing at all. I've got a bit of a surprise for you. I've got a bit of a secret: for the last 12 months I've been preparing for this; I've been going to classes and.... I'm going to be a tour-guide. I'm going to walk round Cambridge three or four times a week, with tourists and visitors, and tell them about the history of the city, and the colleges...I'm looking forward to it. I've been practising, and I've passed a couple of exams, so... on your days off, you might see me with my badge on...I hope you'll say hello.

So, the tour guide thing is going to keep my brain active. It's going to get me out of the house, so I don't get under Helen's feet too much... And there's a small income attached to it... not much, but every little helps..... So, that's the next stage, and I can't wait to get started actually. It's.... sort of rejuvenated me a bit.,

Er...I just mentioned Helen, and I'd like to thank her...

Sean: Behind every great man !

Tom: *There's nothing great about me, Sean, but you're right... she's always been right behind me... helping me and keeping me on track, and I don't know what I'd do without her, so... (Looks at Helen). Thanks luv.... Well, with that, I hope you all enjoy the rest of the evening... Thanks very much. (Helen comes across and hugs him).*

Rebecca: *Well done Tom... I must say....*

(Sound of a dinner gong)

Rebecca: *Ah, right.... dinner is served. Let's go through. (She leads Tom and Helen off)*

Sean: (Once they're off, trying to sound like a tv programme) *Well that is the end of our demonstration: how not to give a speech...*

Ellie: *Don't be so rude... what are you on about ?*

Sean: *She sounded like a marketing brochure, and he was just rambling.*

Phil: *I think he did all right, considering he hadn't prepared.*

Sean: *I wish I had a quid for every time he said 'Er'.*

Sharon: *You're horrible. I'd like to see you try it...*

Ellie: *You don't like him do you ?*

Sean: *Well, 'Fair' is not the first word I'd think of. I don't know where she got that from.*

Sharon: *So what are you doing here? You didn't have to come....*

Sean: *Free food and a subsidised bar. I'm not stupid.*

Ellie: *Plus the new girl in the office is here... I've seen you looking...*

Sean: *Once again : No comment.*

Sharon: *Well I like Tom.... He did my induction when I started, and he was really kind...*

Phil: *The only reason Sean doesn't like him is because Tom had to dock his money when he was late....*

Sean: *Not once did he turn a blind eye*

Sharon: *No, because he's fair.*

Ellie: *I feel a bit sorry for him.... He's got one child, and he's in Australia. They've got a grandchild there as well.... it can't be easy.*

Sean: *If he was my dad, I'd be in bloody Australia as well, unless there's somewhere further.*

Phil: *Anyway, talking of free food...*

Ellie: *Yes, come on... (They finish off their drinks and move off).*

Scene 2

(Ten years Later).

(Lights up on Tom, reading the newspaper, seated in the dining-room of a small, comfortable home. Photos of family and wedding-day. It is breakfast time. Sound of pips on radio; we hear a news-reader announce "The time is 8 o'clock. This is BBC Radio 4...." But, we hear no more because Tom switches it off).

Tom: *There's enough bad news in here (the newspaper).....What a way to start the day ! Global threat to fish stocks. That's a new one on me.*

Helen: *(Calls from kitchen) Do you want more tea ?*

Tom: *Please, and a biscuit.*

Helen: *You've just had your breakfast.*

Tom: *I need to keep up my energy levels.*

Helen: *(Enters with 2 mugs). You don't do so badly..... (Noticing) You turned off the radio. That's not like you.*

Tom: *I knew what was coming, and there's enough in here to make me feel depressed ! (Holds up the paper). No fish, more jobs lost to computers, climate change round the corner. What's next , I ask you...*

(Pause. They sip their tea).

Tom: *Any post ?*

Helen: *Just one. (She hands him an official looking letter. Tom opens it).*

What is it ?

Tom: *From the bank..... About the savings plan we took out when I retired....*

Helen: *Oh right.*

Tom: *(Reading) 'The 10 Year Fixed Rate Bond' .. It's going to mature on the 1st September, and we have to decide what to do with it.*

Helen: *(Surprised) Ten years since you retired ?....How much is in there ?*

Tom: *When it matures there'll be just over £6,000*

Helen: *Lovely. We could give some to the kids...*

Tom: *Or we could reinvest it....*

Helen: *We could fly out to see them, see Alice on her birthday.... Oh Tom, this is brilliant. See, it's not all bad news....*

Tom: *Well, keep it to yourself for the moment. Let's talk about it tonight....OK....Don't tell Kath, not yet.*

Helen: *Spoil-sport.... I'm seeing her later.*

Tom: *Are you ? What are you up to ?*

Helen: *I'm swimming this morning, then I said I'd go round to Kath's for a sandwich. Probably do some gardening this afternoon, and I'll make Fish pie for tea.....*

Tom : *Delia's ?*

Helen: *Of course.... you can't go far wrong with Delia.....You're working today aren't you.*

Tom: *I am ...Two hour tour, 'The Best of Cambridge'. Weather forecast is good.*

Helen: *I should think you could do that tour in your sleep.*

Tom : *(Going into his patter) Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this extraordinary city. My name is Tom, and I will be your guide for the next two hours.....*

Helen : *Doesn't it get boring though: just going over the same old stuff week after week ? I'd go crackers. I'd have to stick something daft in to keep myself interested.*

Tom : *No, I can honestly say it doesn't. They always ask different questions, and there's always something new that you think of, something you've just read up on...*

I love it, you know that. It's given me a new interest: all the training, and learning all the tours. Keeps my brain active as well.

Helen : *Not to mention the pay.*

Tom : *We won't get to Barbados on that.... No, I don't do it for the money. I'd do it for nothing.*

(Helen looks at him, slightly surprised)

Tom : *No, I would.... When I retired I was worried to death I'd just mope about, not much interested in anything, and nobody very interested in me. But with the tour guiding, I feel like I'm doing something worthwhile; I'm still worth listening to, even if only for a couple of hours.*

Helen : *And I listen to you for the rest of the time.....*

Tom : *You have to.... you signed up for that 30 odd years ago*

(Helen tidies up the breakfast things).

Helen: *We could go to Australia for our anniversary...*

Tom: *We're discussing that tonight.*

Helen : *Well, good luck with it today.... take your phone in case I need you later on, and don't forget your badge this week; they won't believe a word if you don't have your badge on.*

(Tom fishes his tour guide badge out of his pocket and holds it in the air to show he has it; Helen takes it from him and places it round his neck, as though presenting it to him. She shakes his hand in mock seriousness).

(Tom collects his belongings, including his shoulder-bag, gives her a kiss and exits. Helen tidies up. She checks that Tom has gone, then switches the radio on again, re-tuning it to a music station. She hums along with the pop music, as she finishes clearing things away. Music fades as lights fade to **blackout**).

Scene 3

(Sound FX. City centre. Sound fades down as the scene begins)

(Lights up on Tom holding a clip-board. He has been taking the register for a tour; the 'illusion' is that members of the audience are members of the tour party, and

that he has been speaking with them before the scene begins. They are waiting for the last 4 people to turn up).