



TRP40

The Usher

by Babs Horton and Laura Horton

The Usher

A poem by Babs Horton and Laura Horton

Take a fistful of stars
Throw into the night sky
Season with velveteen bats
And watch them fly

Sprinkle with frost
Add the pinch of an owl
The wily bark of a fox
And a cat on the prow

A night broth on simmer
Under a silvery moon
A plate on a conjurors' stick
That spins to a midnight tune.

This our dreaming ocean city
The Barbican exhaling history
Weed and ivy bind the cracks
Ancient, modern, secret and mystery

Chip stuffed gulls on chimney stacks
Mermaids' songs from Firestone Bay
Dolphins plumb the inky waters
The silky slither of a seal at play

In darkened doorways lovers' kiss
Skinny dippers stir the waters
Dark and sleek in Tinside Pool
Songs of brave Argyle supporters.

A lobster in his restaurant tank
Dances with his own reflection
A ghost in New Street sobs
For a lover's cruel rejection

Stella Maris in her lofty niche
With prayers and many a plea
Waiting for her sailor boys
Lost long, ago at sea.

Down in Davy Jones's locker
Bones as white as marble now
Never will they trim the mainsail
Watch the waves from stern or prow.

Hear the footfall on the steps
As the hungry ocean heaves
Willing Pilgrims set their sail
And the Mayflower sighs and leaves

But listen, now for Beryl's girls
As they teeter on their heels
Wobbles on the cobbles
Their laughter, raucous squeals

As they stumble past The Dolphin
They know the night is young,
That all this world's a stage
Their many songs unsung.

Smeaton's tower blinks
As the wash of daylight dawns
Over in misty Mutton Cove
King Billy wakes and yawns

New light whispers through the city
Hear the chime of Derry's clock
The windows of the Guildhall glow
And the Bretagne in Millbay Dock

The theatre opens to test acoustics
And four women stand proud and tall
To sing Sondheim's Side by Side
Audience's breath bated in the stalls

Soon more excited crowds will gather
Noisy folk and school kids grinning
The Royal princess pulls the curtain
Stage door opens on a new beginning

I'm starting a job in the theatre today
Not a proper job my father said
None of that greasepaint and rouge
Your lips painted scarlet red

Don't be a dreamer, head in the clouds
Become a trained nurse, a busy barista
A steady job that pays the rent
Or teach, like your sensible sister

You've got me wrong, I said and grinned
No treading the boards or blusher
I want to work behind the scenes
I'm off to be an Usher

And off I sailed on the 40 bus
Through Mannamead, Mutley Plain
Down North Hill, past the Poly
Up Royal Parade in the rain

I'm full of nerves and unprepared
But full of good intent
I've got my lunch and uniform
Clean pants in case of accident

There's a Handbook just for ushers
That shows us what to do
Aisle five, seat six, madame
And this way to the loo.

I'm here to meet and greet you
And settle seat disputes
In charge of lost and found
And emergency exit routes

My job's to make your visit smooth
With torch and tact and poise
I sell programmes at the start
And try to curb the noise

I'm excellent at soothing fears
And to your seats escorting
But my beady eyes are on you
To prevent undue cavorting

And in the intermission
Midst the usual toilet trek
I'll be standing at the front
With a tray around my neck

I sell delicious ice cream tubs
To mums and dads and kids
I must have said a million times
THE SPOON IS IN THE LIDS!

You'll never guess the things I find
The stuff that folks mislay
Intimate gadgets, handkerchiefs
And once a brassiere 36, double A

I pick up litter when you've gone
From your seat and underneath
Wrappers, crisps, and sandwiches
On occasion someone's teeth.

But when the curtain rises
And you're cosy in your places
I marvel at the wonder
On your expectant faces.

Cocooned here in the darkness
Your cares will disappear
Hopes and dreams, and fantasies
Will chase away your fear

Worlds anew will soon unfold
Transport you to the past
The future, other foreign lands
Making memories that last

You'll lose yourself in Elsinore
With lovers in old Verona
Deep in a wood in Athens
In Venice with Desdemona

I hear your feet a tapping
Watch Granny shed a tear
While Grandpa sings with gusto
To Cats, Blood Brothers, Mamma Mia

Father what were you thinking
Are you off your flipping head?
Gran thought it a play about the Queen
Regina Monologues you said.

I've not seen puppets like that before
Avant Garde, I must suppose
I was expecting Orville the duck
Not men without their clothes.

Ballerinas in feathered plumes
flock down the corridor
engulfing a comedian
attempting the exit of stage door

"That was blooming marvellous"
"How do they dance like that?"
"Learn all those lines, amazing"
"Next year I want to be the
pantomime cat."

I listen to your fading talk
As you head off to the bar
The long walk home, the bus,
the coach, a taxi, or your car

I love the days when schools arrive
Rucksacks brimming, ties undone
Eyes alight and faces glowing
Eager for a day of theatre fun

"Chip chop! Keep up. Hush now!"
Says Miss with a weary smile
"Where's Ryan? Oh there you are.
Please stay in your crocodile."

Listen up says Sir, finger to lips
Pipe down now Joe and Molly
Remember what I said,
You can't climb in that woman's trolley.

The naughty ones are close to Miss
Under her roving eye
Sir's ears peeled for the rustle of crisps
Or the hiss of a ring pull, nearby

There's an energy among them
Their eyes are all ablaze
Shuffle, rustle, curtain up
Mouths open, steady gaze

Transported to a blustery day
Tigger, Piglet, Winnie the Pooh
Flying with Mary Poppins
Swift visits after to the loo

The secondary schools are on their way
On the train down from Torquay
A minibus from Tavistock
And a coach from Buckfastleigh

I listen to the scurrying feet
Their voices high and low
Teachers hissing warnings
And rushing to and fro

Here's Sean, all fresh of face
Hamlet in his blazer
The Romeo of Year Eleven
Awash with charm, Lynx, a chewed-up
eraser

There's Juliet in her rucked-up skirt
With knee length socks and kickers
Smelling of Charlie and chewing gum
Flask of cider in her knickers

That Ophelia is a bit too wet
Mrs Macbeth a proper cow
I'd like to be like Emilia
Beatrice, Rosalind or Viola now

Sean snuggles up to Juliet
Elbow to elbow, knee to knee
But her heart is lost to Laertes
Push off Sean, can't you see

Keeping an eye, torch on hand
I watch them all with glee
There is no funny business
They're all caught, transported, it's plain
to see.

Suddenly I've been here decades
How on earth did I get here?
The uniforms have altered
Swipe cards, auditorium, brands of beer

Thought I'd only stay a while
get a steady shop job
But I'm smitten with drama
I'm addicted, simply cannot stop

Night after night, I dance with swans
With plié and pirouette
Pas de Deux and arabesque
Working up a sweat

I'm Mimi in Paris, looking for light
I'm Feisty Brunnhilde
Tosca, Carmen, Leonore
Or perhaps I'm Bob the Builder

I'm Billy Elliot dancing the streets
The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas
I'm upside down in Kafka
Having a ball with Funky Llamas

I'm Shirley talking to a rock
Cooking chips n eggs in a bar
Or Rita reading Ferlinghetti
No Good Boyo on the Zanzibar

Every time I think of leaving
Another wonderful show comes up
I have a moving conversation, a belly laugh
I realise in my heart I'm really stuck

On my days off I still come to watch shows
A patron just like you,
I see Quadrophenia four times
I just really like The Who

I Love Love Love new writers in the Drum
Lovesong, The Green Man, Mercury Fur
Post show Q&As and conversations
The rush as you feel the collective stir

The seasons alter outside, Spring Awakening
Summer Nights, Slava's Snowshow, Singing
in the Rain
But nothing changes inside
The joy remains the same.

The theatre spreads its wings
On the estuary pops-up TR2
Bronze pods and huge windows
Props, sets and costumes, all new

I walk along the river, between rocks
And rehearsals rooms
People's Company playing in one
In another, the building of Egyptian Tombs

Companies all say they love to come here
The beauty of walking to work by the sea
The quick trek up the Hoe
Eating sandwiches with that view and
drinking tea

The Lab opens for experimentation
A space for new work to take flight
Creating the theatre of tomorrow
Often running late into the night

Other things happen while I work here
I fall in love over chianti at the bar
She works in the costume department
Her passion is dressing the stars.

We swap stories over breakfasts together,
who's lovely, who's an absolute arse
who got off with who at the panto party
the real-life green-room farce

We Whistle down the Wind together
As time moves us all on
A theatre re-branding from blue to red
Some original people now gone.

She's coming here at daybreak.
Arriving by sea on a barge
She's fashioned in bronze
And amazingly, quite large

She's brought on a lorry
Right up Royal Parade
She's potent and powerful
And not one bit afraid.

I love it says a woman
Ugly says a chap
And hundreds of children
Wave their flags and clap

And a small girl looks at me
Eyes alive and bright
Imagine, she says
If she comes alive at night.

Sometimes when I'm in my bed
I imagine Bianca waking
Walking past Saint Andrews
Stepping over Dingles, over-taking

On through Derriford, Roborough
To stretch her legs on the Moors
Dip her toes in the icy river
Cartwheel over Tors.

Our Messenger, guarding the building
Ready for children to run under her legs
Stance strong and poised, no-nonsense
Here to stay, a beacon of strength.

Then the world turns on its axis
The theatre forced to close its doors
Sad decisions are made for its future
Lights out, curtains closed, un-trod floors

Digital takes on new meaning
Workshops and meetings on Zoom
Dusty and dark auditoria
No one knows how to navigate gloom

I find myself sad during lockdown
The connections to theatre almost shot
I worry for it's beautiful future
And if I'm honest, that I'll be forgot

I watch things online, read the play texts
Dream of greeting audiences back in
I send in my Theatre Story
Try to quiet my brain's din

As we emerge very slowly,
Masked up for NDT2
It feels weird and wonderful to be back here
Collective crying as we exit the loo

Shows are taken to schools With Flying
Colours
All groups resume face-to-face
People just glad to be together
Back feeling inspired in the space

The CEO waves goodbye after decades
A new one arrives to take lead
Planning and prepping the next stage
Ascertaining what communities need

Sometimes people leave
They may find another ways
The theatre may change on the outside
But the heartbeat and ethos stays

Hold the sun like an orb
Spin it four times in your hand
Pepper with rain,
and watch the rainbow land

Feel your chest heave as you sit here
Monitor the speed of your breath
Enjoy the suspension of reality
Forget we're all moving towards to death

On my first ever shift at the theatre
I was told heartbeats sync up in the dark
It will be the same as your neighbour
that knowledge, I think, is beautifully stark

Tonight is my last shift as an usher
I'm weighed down with retirement gifts
So don't forget your bags, phones, dentures
Please warmly leave us, as out you drift

Thank you for coming this evening
For sharing the fortieth year
Let's look ahead to the next chapter
And remember to us you're all dear.

The end.



Theatre
Royal
Plymouth

40 Extraordinary Years

The Usher was commissioned by James Mackenzie-Blackman
as a way of helping to bring to life the last 40 years
of Theatre Royal Plymouth.

Thank you for joining us for our celebration
of theatre and thanks.

Theatre Royal Plymouth
Registered Charity Number 284545



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

