

THE MIRACLE OF BREASTS

Miss Adam-Jones' breasts always walked into the room first. Enormous and conical like embroidered traffic cones. As a child I could never understand how she remained upright. The breasts totally eclipsed her stork-like legs.

'Look after your tongue and your tongue will look after you,' was one of her many enigmatic statements. I used to go home and look in the bathroom mirror with my mouth open and wonder what she meant. It was three years before I discovered metaphors.

'Dud dud dud dud dud dud.' She enunciated each glottal stop perfectly. But the class of six flat-chested girls and four underdeveloped boys found it difficult to concentrate on glottal stops with the breasts wobbling to a wild erotic rhythm of their own.

'Practise your glottal stops every night, girls. It will pay untold dividends when you are women.' Then she put her hands dramatically on her diaphragm and breathed in. The breasts lifted. The boys' jaws dropped. So that's what a dividend is, I thought. I practised endless glottal stops, hoping my flat chest would suddenly inflate. 'Dud dud dud dud dud dud.' After three nights, the neighbours started banging on the radiators, thinking there was an air lock and my breasts were still flat.

Each Thursday I dashed down the road to Miss Adam-Jones' house in case any one saw me. Like the erks. Small, beetle-like creatures with enormous feet wearing the black uniform of a nearby Borstal. They lurked behind leylandii and pounced as I ran for the cover of her porch.

'Oh, Miss Hoity-Toity's going for another helocution lesson, is she? Ordinary vowels' not good enough for 'er? 'as to 'ave special ones, she does. Go on then, Hoity - show us your vowels?'

'Oh, do piss off,' I'd drawl, lengthening my vowels in Miss Adam-Jones' inimitable fashion. And each week, they'd fall into the bushes in hysteria. Why did such a simple request create such a response, I wondered?

'Good afternoon, boys and girls.' Miss Adam-Jones' breasts launched themselves into the room and we all stood to attention.

'Good afternoon, Miss Adam-Jones,' we chanted in well-enunciated unison.

'Today, children,' she moved in and out of us like some vast figurehead, occasionally anointing someone with a cantilevered breast. 'We are going to practise vowel number one. I have heard a number of you slipping into slovenly speech whilst stepping outside the precincts of this room.'

She paused for a moment to survey each one of us, trying to decide who was responsible for defacing the English language. My heart square-danced as she searched my face. 'You were not one of those despoilers, Bethan, were you?' Everyone looked at me as if I'd been caught tripping over a triphthong in Harrods.

'No, Miss Adam-Jones,' I whispered. 'I've been practising my glottal stops every night and I'm onto my aspirates now.' The boys made vomit-like movements with their mouths beneath Miss Adam-Jones' breasts. She pirouetted on stork legs and caught them in the act.

'Ah, John, I see you are practising your fricatives.' John slammed his mouth shut. 'So it couldn't have been you.' She paused ominously. 'Could it?'

John, the colour of a terracotta statue, stammered. 'N-n-n-n-n-o, Miss Adam-Jones.'

'It's NO, John. NO, John. NO, John. NO. Say it.'

He repeated. 'noJohnnoJohnnoJohnno.'

'Appalling enunciation.' The breasts moved on to Michael, a small thirteen year old, notorious for dropping diphthongs. 'Time spent on developing diphthongs, Michael, is never wasted.' She gave him a chart to practice at home in the privacy of his bedroom and glided to the front of the class.

'Are you all ready? Using the diaphragm, breath in through the nose.' The breasts lifted majestically as she breathed in. 'Then out through the mouth... so.' Her voice dropped an octave. After five minutes of deep breathing, the room started swaying. From a vast distance, I heard her intone. 'Bethan - vowel number one if you please.'

Everyone turned to smirk at me, relieved that I'd been singled out. I searched my memory banks and vowel number one suddenly materialised. 'Arm, Miss Adam-Jones,' I stretched my vowel like a piece of elastic.

'Good, Bethan... Now John, vowel number one from you.'

She waited, tapping one stork leg elegantly. John searched the ceiling as if vowel number one would suddenly descend and drop into his mouth.

'Uh... uh... uh..'

'Stop!' The ugliness of his sound momentarily robbed her of a sentence. The breasts circled him in disbelief.

'John could have chosen calm or half or dark or even starve, but no, John chose uh ... a sound usually emanating from a creature on four legs and living in a cage.' A small splutter of quickly suppressed laughter. 'Appalling boy.' She dismissed John with a swift pirouette. 'The exercises, children. Then and only then, will I tell you some rather splendid news. Each line after me, ensuring every 'a' is long and every mouth moves wide.

Father, father, do not starve her,
Do not starve her, father, pray!
Carve her, father, please, a rather
Larger portion for her tray.

We repeated this exercise until our vowels were perfect; our goldfish mouths moving wider and wider until I felt in danger of lockjaw. At last we finished and she stood in front of us, her hands trapping her diaphragm.

'Last week, children, I had dinner with the Mayor and Mayoress.' She swept us with her eyes, waiting for our stunned response. Surely, this wasn't the 'splendid news' I'd been looking forward to for half an hour. 'The Mayor and Mayoress,' she continued after a protracted pause. 'I have asked me to stage a performance of our work for the Mayor's banquet. This is a wonderful honour. The local newspapers will be reporting on the evening and there will be photographers and local dignitaries. And, of course, your parents. Imagine, children, you will be performing in front of hundreds and hundreds of very important people.'

Suddenly, I felt violently sick.

'The Mayor has asked if his son Paul can join our class. He is a little older than the rest of you, and hasn't been as fortunate as you in having elocution lessons. However, his father assures me he is well versed in public speaking. A few of you will be chosen to recite Shakespearean passages and the others will recite some of the verse we have been practicing this term. Remember - you must be a credit to the Mayoral banquet, a credit to your parents, but above all, children, a credit to me. Now listen carefully...'

The road was a blur as I walked home. There were no birds, pavements, flowers, trees or people. I was going to play Lady Macbeth at the Mayor's Banquet. In four weeks, I would become the first flat-chested Lady Macbeth since women were allowed on the stage. I prayed that God would strike me dead before the performance.

Mum was out when I got home. When I told my ecstatic father, he rang up the entire family. I heard him on the phone, bribing them. He would give anyone who came a percentage of his gambling profits.

'But, Dad,' I wailed. 'You never win on the horses and the family only like musicals.'

'That's irrelevant, Bethan,' he said and went upstairs to tell Granny.

I heard her shouting that she'd only come if she could bring her ear trumpet; she'd been having signals from outer space on her hearing aid for four days.

Worse was to follow. My fourteen-year-old cousin Roger, he who followed the dictates of Tomás de Torquemada in his love of persecution, insisted on coming. I would be racked with his memory of Lady Macbeth forever.

*

'I'd like you to meet Paul. He is going to play Macbeth. His father, the Mayor, tells me he is perfect for the part. Are you listening, Bethan?'

How could I listen? I had fallen in love for the first time in my life. In front of me stood a man of the world. Tall and sophisticated in his dark-blue school uniform. Nonchalantly, he held a copy of "Macbeth" in fingers strong enough to tear Shakespeare apart. He turned to smile at me and his deep, brown eyes crinkled at the corners. The room flooded with light.

'Bethan - wipe that expression off your face immediately. You can't play Lady Macbeth looking half-witted, child. You'll make me a laughing stock.'

She'd called me 'half-witted' and 'child' in front of the man of my dreams. That's when I decided to show her I was neither. I was going to give the performance of a lifetime and grow breasts.

I studied the pink carnations on the carpet; incapable of looking at Paul and controlling the hormones rampaging round my body. Adonis cleared his throat, opened his lips and started to speak.

One of Miss Adam-Jones' eyelids twitched violently. I'd never seen her less in control. But then, she'd never heard the Mayor's son massacre a passage from Shakespeare before. He hurtled through one of Macbeth's speeches at roller-coaster speed. Not only was his delivery truly awful, but his voice was high pitched and squeaky. I discovered how transitory love was.

'How was that, Miss Adam-Jones?' my former idol squeaked.

The Grandfather-Clock chimed five times before she could speak.

'Paul,' Miss Adam-Jones stretched his name across the silence. 'I'd like you to listen to Bethan's delivery. Remember, Bethan, you are admonishing your husband for his lack of courage. Be measured, yet passionate.'

I delivered my lines with perfect, measured passion.

'Wouldst thou have that
which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
and live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would",
Like the poor cat i' the adage?'

'You see, Paul. Bethan is full of controlled passion. And yet -' she paused dramatically - 'comprehensible.' She strolled around the room, then pirouetted, catching Paul off guard as he gazed at the breasts. 'Audiences have strange quirks like ... wishing to distinguish one word from the next. Idiosyncratic, perhaps, Paul, but one must oblige one's audience. This... Bethan has learnt.'

I expanded under her praise, but there was one passage I couldn't possibly perform in public. Not without breasts. God had created me for some purpose. Surely it must be to give me breasts in time for the performance in two weeks?

*

The house was feverish as each breastless day moved relentlessly forward. My father insisted on performing Macbeth's lines to help me. My mother insisted on being the prompt.

'No, don't tell me, Gwen,' he said to my mother as she tried to prompt him for the fortieth time. 'It's on the tip of my tongue. "Bring forth" - now what the hell does he bring forth? No, no, don't tell me.. give me a clue? Is it Banquo's ghost, the witches or Lady Macbeth? Duw, you wouldn't believe I had the line perfect yesterday, would you?'

'Dad... can I -?'

'Good God - she's interrupted again. I've lost the flow now... let's start from the beginning.'

In spite of the help my father gave me, I had the words perfect two nights before the performance. But no faith in God. I still had no breasts. Added to this trauma were two more: Paul seemed only marginally better than my father at learning his lines and Miss Adam-Jones' twitch was accelerating alarmingly. My dreams became Dali-landscapes in which Lady Macbeth galloped across a blasted heath with the witches, the leg of a lizard and the tongue of a dog. She was fleeing from the bloody sight of her husband, Paul, whom she had murdered.

The day of the performance arrived. Two hours before my ordeal and my father and mother were roaming round the house obsessively quoting passages as an aide mémoire for me.

“Are you a man?” my mother screamed up the stairs to him.

‘What! Less of the lip, woman!’ he roared back from the bathroom, then he laughed. ‘Oh, sharp as a razor, is it? ... “Aye and a bold one which dare look on that which might ...” no, don't tell me - don't tell me... I've got it – “which might appal the devil.” Oh bloody hell, Gwen - where've you hidden Mum's dentures this time?’

I phoned Miss Adam-Jones and asked her to collect me, then wrote a message to my parents. “What's done is done.” See you after the performance.

One hour later, Paul and I were standing behind red velvet curtains, dressed in Elizabethan costumes. There was a large table in the middle of the stage. Paul was hanging on to it. We could hear hundreds of people in front of the curtain, greeting his parents, the Lord and Lady Mayoress. He didn't seem able to speak; his Adam's apple jerked repeatedly as he tried to swallow, and his costume hung off his emaciated frame like a deflated balloon. I was having difficulty remaining upright under the enormous purple weight of my costume. But I did have breasts. I had thrown God out of the window and used the

mother of invention: ten of my father's monogrammed handkerchiefs stuffed down the front of my dress. My cleavage was hardly in Miss Adam-Jones' league, but at least I felt more ready to tackle lines like: "Come to my woman's breast ..." with something to hang on to.

Miss Adam-Jones appeared on the stage dressed in a tight, black, low-cut sequinned dress which was probably the reason Paul couldn't speak.

'Now remember both of you. Loud measured delivery and lots of deep breathing to calm the nerves.'

She swept off the stage and left us like sacrificial victims. I attempted a smile.

'Well, at least your parents will enjoy seeing you play Macbeth, Paul.'

'They hate Shakespeare. It's all for publicity.' I looked up at him in horror. What had happened to his voice? The first sentence was falsetto and the second, bass. I prayed for a quick death.

In front of the curtain everything had gone quiet. Miss Adam-Jones was introducing us.

I heard my grandmother shout. 'Speak up, woman! I can't hear a word!' I held onto the table for support.

Miss Adam-Jones, enunciating each syllable for the benefit of my grandmother, set the scene we were going to perform. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are dining with guests when suddenly Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost and is terrified.'

I looked at Paul. He wouldn't have to act, I thought. Sweat was cascading down his costume.

'Don't be nervous,' I whispered. 'Miss Adam-Jones knows your part like the back of her...' I didn't have time to finish the sentence. Paul passed out, knocking his head against the table. I couldn't move. Banquo's ghost came on stage, saw what had happened and rushed off again. I still couldn't move. One minute later, Paul had been dragged off and a twitching Miss Adam-

Jones was standing by my side, hissing: 'Dear God – my reputation will be ruined!'

Granny had always told me I was born to be a leader, ever since she had read my tea-leaves when I was ten. I'd waited four years to prove her right.

'You'll have to play Macbeth, Miss Adam-Jones.'

She stared at me in horror. 'Perhaps you haven't noticed, Bethan – I'm wearing a sequined dress. Macbeth was not of that persuasion.'

I rushed into the wings, rummaged in the costume box, found a suitable costume and threw it at her.

'Put it on while I announce that there's been a change of character.'

I walked out in front of the curtain and Granny started banging on the floor with her walking stick and chanting 'Beth-an! Beth-an!' in a loud voice. My cousin Roger joined in before Auntie Flo clipped him round the ear. But I was not Bethan – I was Lady Macbeth. I raised my hands imperiously.

Unbelievably, Granny fell silent.

I took a deep breath before projecting my voice far into the room. 'Ladies and gentlemen.' My enunciation was perfect. 'Unfortunately, our lead actor, Paul Chambers, has succumbed to a sudden throat infection and therefore cannot play the part of Macbeth this evening.'

The Mayor jumped out of his chair. 'I'll give him throat infection when I get him home!' The Lady Mayoress thrust him back into his seat before smiling at everyone.

'However,' I continued. 'Miss Adam-Jones has agreed to step into the role at a moment's notice.'

'You can't have a woman playing a man's part!' The Mayor shouted.

'Why not?' I shouted back. 'How long did men play women's parts on the Elizabethan stage?'

'Too long!' yelled Granny who'd never seen a Shakespearian play in her life.

The Mayoress started the clapping. I waited for it to subside before speaking.

'Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, we are going to redress the balance of power. Tonight, you will see two women with one goal... Macbeth.'

I withdrew behind the curtains to thunderous applause to discover a transformation. There he was - standing in the wings, waiting for me. Every inch a Scottish nobleman. My jaw dropped. He was looking at me with – yes, admiration.

'Well done, Bethan. You have the courage to become a fine actress.'

'But how?...where...?' I stammered, looking for the breasts.

'Drama is about illusion, Bethan.' Macbeth whispered as Banquo's ghost weaved across the stage. 'Tonight, my dear, you are going to give the audience a performance they will never forget.'

Then he turned and smiled at me. I felt a tingling in my breasts. It wasn't possible, was it? The curtain lifted, we walked forward and the audience gasped in surprise.

[This story was published in the QWF magazine. [Edition 40]]