

# Gossage gets out from under

SIMON KELLY

For Bruce Beckwith, provisional Equity member and quarter page in Spotlight magazine, the wolf was at his door so frequently he was thinking of calling it Rover. Since leaving Drama School last year all he had done was ASMin on a tatty tour with a miniscule walk-on part. Since then, not so much as a sniff at a greasepaint stick. If he didn't work soon, he thought he would go mad. Then, as the season of good will to out of work actors hove itself sluggishly over the horizon, he was summoned to his agent's office.

His agent, Stella Frisoli, was an ex-actress of the old school; for many years she had been thinking of retiring. Bruce wasn't by any means the only actor on her books. He and three hundred other people had to scrap about for whatever accidentally found its way to her cluttered desk. When Bruce arrived, she was stirring her mid-morning cup of Horlicks and talking to the two men seated opposite.

'This is Mr. Ben Fenton, and Mr. Gossage of Surprise Productions, dear,' she said. 'Bruce is one of my clever boys. I think that he would be very good for a part.'

Bruce looked at the pair on the overstuffed sofa, his nerves tingling. A Part? Fenton, a bloodshotly large person in need of a shave, leaned forward.

'Can you sing and dance, that sort of thing?' he asked. Bruce noticed that he had apparently had a few.

'Yes. Well, I can move, if someone choreographs me a bit . . .'

'He's very good,' said Stella, putting the Horlicks down.

They all looked at him. Gossage, a mild man with rabbit teeth, smiled.

'Is there a part for me?' ventured Bruce, 'In something?'

Fenton hiccuped.

'I'm mounting a Panto. Aladdin. Palace Theatre in Colne, Lancashire. Gossage here is putting up the money. You'd do for one of the Chinese policemen and ASM. Are you free to do it?'

Was Bruce free? Do monkeys dangle from trees?

'I'll take it!' said Bruce.

Fenton stood up abruptly.

'I need a drink,' he announced. 'Gossage will sign your contract and tell you where and when.'

'Just sign here, dear,' said Stella, rummaging for an Esher Standard contract form.

Bruce went down the creaking stairs as if floating on air. Working! Great!

The Palace Theatre was situated in a prominent corner position atop a steep hill that led up from the station. The wintry northern sleet was sticking to Bruce's back as he found the dirty stage door. A riot of institutional green and brown paint greeted him in the dingy ill-lit passages that led to the stage. The resident Stage Manager, a vacant fat man holding a 'Yankee' screwdriver greeted him.

'Tha'll be from t'Panto company. All t'others are in t'Green Room, tha knows.'

Bruce lugged his heavy suitcase down the stairs and joined his new colleagues. Gossage shook his hand and introduced him all round.

'Ben hasn't arrived yet, unfortunately,' he said. 'He was supposed to be here last night.'

Four hours later and several phone calls, Fenton still hadn't materialised. They found a cafe in a nearby street and had lunch.

'My dear,' said Jeremy Bennett, a camp elderly 'Dame', laying a fatherly hand on Bruce's arm, 'The man's an absolute disaster area. He drinks, you know. He is a hissing, dear boy, and a byword in the profession. Frankly, I don't suppose we shall see him today. Not if he was on the sauce last night; and knowing him, he was.'

The other members of the cast began to vie with each other with Ben Fenton horror stories to which Gossage listened, eyes bulging in amazement. A man who believed the best of everyone, his world began to crumble.

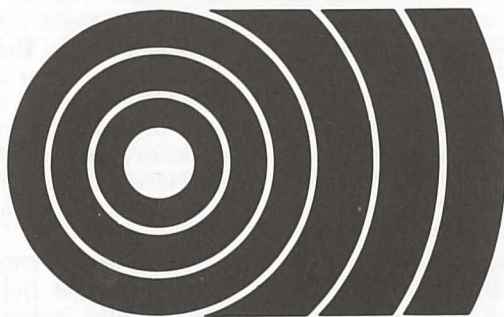
'I had no idea he was like that,' he said in hushed tones. 'My God, I've put every penny I've got into this show!'

Bruce spent the afternoon with Annie Piper, an attractive blonde who was playing the 'Aladdin' part, looking for digs. They eventually put up in a Pub near the station. The next two days everyone spent looking over their scripts and watching poor Gossage going to pieces slowly. Eventually one of the frantic phone calls bore fruit. Fenton had been arrested in Bournemouth for abusive behaviour, assaulting a constable and causing damage to a police vehicle. He had been fined and sent down for two weeks. No director. No show.

The Resident Stage Manager brought a message from the Theatre Manager.

'He says that t'advance bookings are goin' well. Hadn't tha better start rehearsin'? Tha've only got two weeks, tha knows.'

The MD, Julian, who was to play the an by way of being the band, button-



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