

Cabin Fever

by Jim Sweeney

Bit One

Pre show

Audience enter.

Medley of muzak versions of “Sailing” Pan pipes, a la Hank Marvin, Richard Clayderman etc

When the audience are all settled and we are clear for take off...

SNAP

Total blackout and loud blast of Ethel Merman singing,

“There’s No Business like Show Business
Like No Business I Know
Everything About It Is Appealing”

SNAP

Music out and lights up to reveal the Billy in a cabin on board ship. Bed, table etc. There is an unopened vodka bottle and shot glass on the table. In an ideal world the vodka label is written in a foreign large, language. There is a large, open suitcase on the floor from which an explosion of clothes has covered the room.

The Cruise Director is sitting opposite the Billy in a wheelchair. Covered in a blanket.

The Billy opens the vodka and pours himself a shot.

The Billy drains the glass and puts it on the table.

Beat.

The Billy whips off the blanket to reveal the Cruise Director.

*He is bound up from head to toe with rope.
He has masking tape over his mouth.*

Beat.

BILLY

I think perhaps we’ve got off on the wrong foot.

He pours another shot and...

It’s not just me, is it? We have, haven’t we?

There’s a tension, isn’t there? A hint of tension between us. You and me. We’re not quite chalk and cheese. If anything, we’re both a bit chalky which is infinitely better than being a bit cheesy. Boom, boom.

...drains the glass and he pours another shot and....

Not your fault. Don't feel bad. No harm done. Touch of the old personality clash. We can't all be Ghandi. It shows that we are both strong willed, independent people. We both know something needs to be done but we can't agree how to do it.

In fact, we are like the two blokes sitting on a ark bench.

Suddenly, there's a flash of lightning, the sky darkens, the clouds part and there – bathed in a Heavenly light – are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

The first bloke says "Oh my God! What do we do now? It's the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse!"

And the second one says, "Relax. It's not the end of the world."

Beat

Actually, we're nothing like that. It was just a joke, really. It popped into my head. Would have been great if we were like that though, wouldn't it? How impressive would that have been? To sum up our relationship in a comic story like that. Very classy. Very Noel Coward, I imagine.

But no. Only a joke. It *was* spontaneous, though. A truly spontaneous thought.

.....drains the glass

We're simply two people who see things differently.

That's it. We see things differently. That's all.

It's very healthy, actually. Intelligent debate never hurt anyone. What kind of world would it be if we all felt the same about everything? Can you imagine?

Everyone loves beetroot. Everyone hates slippers.

Nobody with an original thought. It would be like living in 1984 – the film not the year. Living in a world full of John Hurts. That can't be good, can it?

I don't mean John Hurt in real life. I mean John Hurt in the film. Never rocked the boat. Did what he was told. Not only that, they could spy on him through the TV screen in his room. They could see everything he did...

Suppose you forgot for a moment that you were being watched. You're feeling a bit fruity and you have yourself a little rummage downstairs. How embarrassing would that be?

It would mean that you'd been caught having a Thomas the Tank by your Big Brother!!

Not bad, eh? Not bad.

There's a joke in there somewhere.

Anyway.

No danger of that happening here because – no TV to be

seen. It's under that shirt.

Never watch it.
Visual valium.

Why would you want to watch TV when you've got that view outside, eh?

What would you rather sit and watch?

(points at window)

That constantly changing seascape. One minute - a still, looking glass, gently reflecting the glorious blue sky; the next - an angry beast repeatedly hurling itself at your porthole while swirling black clouds seem to have swallowed the sun.

or

“Keeping Up Appearances”.

The Cruise Director thinks he has to respond

BILLY

Don't panic. It's rhetorical.

He pours another shot and...

Sorry about the mess but I don't normally have people back. I'm here on my own and as long as I can get to the bed – I'm not bothered about putting stuff away. What's the point? You're only going to get it out again.

You see usually- from the moment I walk out that door – I'm on. Scrubbed and tubbed. Polished and pressed. Chatting, photographs, giving directions. No problem. It's what I do.

But here – backstage if you will – is my sanctuary. We all need a bolthole where we can shut out the constant babble, don't we? A place to lick our wounds. A no man's land where the snipers can't get you. I can wander around here in my y-fronts, scratching the crown jewels and arguing with myself in complete privacy.

People? Here? Nein Danke.

...and I'm not one for home entertaining. Never understood the attraction of the dinner party. People from work - who you barely know or like - sitting in your chair waiting for you to feed them. *That's* madness. Having to hide the brown sauce and pretend you always eat salad. All the grown ups downstairs having fun and you're stuck in your room eating beans on toast off a tray.

Anyway. We're safe enough.
Nobody ever comes here so we won't be disturbed.
In fact – you're my first guest.
So – welcome.

...he toasts him and drains the glass

Bunny would be furious if she could see the state of this place. Furious.
Drinking like this without coasters. Red rag to a bull.
She'd stand there with a face like thunder and say, "Pigs don't know any
better. What's your excuse?"

Now, we *were* chalk and cheese but in a good way. She would have
organised this whole meeting far more efficiently. No question. There'd be
notebooks, agendas and flow charts. She wouldn't be beyond a slide
projector. I never had to do anything. She dealt with the money and the
bookings. She would write the date and time of the ship's departure in my
diary and nothing else. I said that all I ever wanted to know was where and
when because how and why would only confuse me. All I had to do was turn
up with my suit and sun block.

Yes.

She did everything for me.
Not anymore. I have to look after myself now.

*The Billy is lost in thought and memory. Cruise Director keeps his eyes fixed
on the Billy.*

An odd, uncomfortable silence.

Still. 1984, eh?
As I said, good film and I don't normally go for Sci Fi.

Twenty two years ago. 1984.
Twenty two years, eh?
Doesn't seem possible, does it?

Beat

Were you even born then?

You were probably crawling around on all fours getting your arse wiped
while I was working - gaining the experience that I needed to build a career.
Blissfully unaware that twenty two years later that baby was going to shit all
over me!

He pours another shot and....

No. Joking with you. Having a laugh. No harm.

No. You're only doing your job, aren't you? Just like everyone else. Just like
me. Doing a job as best I can. Not looking for medals or awards. Always
willing to change, take on new ideas, embrace contemporary culture and be
more spontaneous as you suggested. Very good point. Very well made. I've
taken it on board as you saw with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Yes. Spontaneuousness is my middle name.

Only joking. I know it's spontaneition.

...and you can't get more spontaneous than this, can you? Be honest. I never saw this coming so I'm damn sure you didn't.

...and drains the glass.

Talking - that's the answer. And listening. Talking and listening. You have to listen to the other person's point of view. Doesn't matter if it sounds wrong to you. Just because it sounds wrong – it doesn't mean that it isn't right. On the contrary, it might be more right than your own idea...

But if you don't listen – then that person's ignored opinion will fester. Fester and grow like a boil. A boil that will eventually have to be lanced.

So, it's good that we are having a little chat now rather than later when we'd both end up covered in pus.

The Cruise Director has relaxed slightly. He tries to speak

Cruise Director

(muffled)

Could I?

BILLY

No!

Shut up! Shut up.

I said you have to listen to the other person's point of view. I talk – you listen.

OK?

You swan around here like Bernard Delfont. And how long have you been in the business? You could have only left school about a week ago. *(Pointing to himself)* 25 years, son. 25 years. Longer than you have lived. 25 years working the ships. A quarter of a century afloat. How about you? Been at sea before? Any experience of on board life? Apart from vomiting your way to Boulonge on the school trip.

How about stage experience? Have you ever actually been on a stage? Maybe you read a poem at assembly once?

Ever died on your arse, crawled off stage covered in flop sweat and had to walk out through the audience to get your money?

Or stormed so magnificently that you walk the empty streets all night speeding on adrenalin?

No?

Then you'll excuse me if I find it hard to take any advice from a kid who has no performing experience.

OK. OK.

Simple question.

Wilson, Kepple and Betty.

Funny?
Yes or No.

Billy waits for a response but the Cruise Director – dazed and confused – stares blankly back at him.

You haven't got a clue, have you?
How can I have any respect for someone for whom the sand dance means
nothing?

Before you go scribbling all over someone's act with your blue pencil ask
yourself one question.....

..... how can I tell if this is funny?

Do you know how?

You sit in the audience.
If they laugh – it's funny.
If they don't – it isn't.
Simple as that.

But did you?
Did you bother to watch me before deciding to give me the old heave ho?
Did you?
Of course you didn't.

The Cruise Director tries to speak.

Cruise Director
(muffled)
No. That's not how...

BILLY
Shut up!
Shut up!
Shut up!

You'd made up your mind about me before we'd even had a Welcome Aboard
cocktail with the Captain.

They'd spent millions upgrading all the facilities on board.
Modernising the restaurants and bars. A brand new lighting and sound
system in the theatre. Refurbishing all the cabins to ensure an undisturbed,
peaceful night's sleep.

Millions to make The Pegasus - the jewel in the Sterling Fleet's crown.

...and they invented me on this maiden voyage.
Why?
To say "Thank You"
Oh yes.

"Sir Fred Sterling invites you and a partner to join him on the maiden voyage

of the newly refurbished Ollianda.”

“Your presence on this all expenses paid mini cruise has been requested by Sir Fred personally as a mark of his gratitude for all your hard work over the years.”

Me? A passenger like everyone else? Unbelievable.

It all sounded perfect.

But you were biding your time. Waiting for the right moment to do the dirty on me.

Judas with a P45.

What is the problem? What is it that makes me surplus to your entertaining requirements? I've had no complaints for the past 25 years.

Summer. Winter. Short break to the Med. Long haul to New York.

Done them all.
Always asked back.

The Sterling Fleet Cruises saved me. I was about to pack it all in. I'd had enough. Work began to dry up. Your lot with that alternative comedy nonsense were lecturing audiences all over the place. Nobody told jokes anymore.

Everybody hated the police. Everybody loved the miners.

You couldn't turn on the telly without one of them popping up and banging on about Thatcher and the Falklands.
Or cannabis and tampons.

They'd stand there all spritzered and quiched and all sounding exactly the same.

Smug.

But not on board ship. We didn't want any of that old clap-trap. We had normal people here - not yuppies. All they wanted was a laugh. People who'd worked all their life and now they wanted to have fun.

I'd found my perfect, performing platform.

And there were other acts - like me - who didn't fit into the new entertainment order: Stella Twinkle and her Broadway Melodies, The Magnificent Mesmero, Pascal and Mbote.

I was a bit green at first – and it wasn't the seasickness. But – once I'd cracked it - I never went back.
Did you hear that, Bernard?

I haven't played on dry land for over twenty years.

Therefore, I am sure that you can imagine my concern when you informed me that my services were no longer required.

Pause

I should have listened to Bunny, shouldn't I? Given this all up and lived happily ever after in Guildford. One of the last things she said to me was, "This could all end tomorrow. Leave them before they leave you"

But I couldn't. I only know this life. I'd be lost in a house. Too many rooms. Not enough people.
All I need is my cabin...and an audience.

So.

Perhaps you might like to suggest where I should go now?
Some of those "pastures new" you were talking about?
Explain again how this is an *opportunity* for me. How it's not the end but a new beginning.

Beat.

Cruise Director maintains eye contact but says nothing.

Don't be shy. I'm all ears. I wish I had a pen and paper. I'd take notes

Beat.

Cruise Director maintains eye contact but says nothing.

Explain again how I am going to look back on this as a turning point?

Beat.

Cruise Director maintains eye contact but says nothing.

BILLY
(shouts)
What do I do now?

Cruise Director
(muffled)
If you could let

BILLY
Didn't catch that. Would you mind repeating it?

Cruise Director
(muffled)
If you could let

BILLY
No. Sorry. Can't quite make out what you're saying. Tell you what. Let's get that tape off, eh?

He moves towards the Cruise Director.

Probably best to treat it as an Elastoplast. Rip it off in one go. Short, sharp, tug. Ready?

Cruise Director furiously trying to avoid Billy's hand.

Cruise Director

(muffled)

No.

BILLY

Yes.

Cruise Director

(muffled)

No!

BILLY

It's not going to kill you. Be a brave little sailor.

Cruise Director

(muffled)

No!

BILLY,

Take a deep breath...

Cruise Director

(muffled)

NO!

BILLY,

There's no need to panic.

Relax.

It's not the end of the world.

He starts to remove the tape – carefully and gently.

BILLY

Prepare for the worst and you will always be pleasantly surprised. See? It's not hurting, is it? To be honest, I hadn't planned on taping you up. It's my own stupid fault. "Preparation is half the job" but it was all so spur of the moment.....ah! There we are. All done. How does that feel?

C.D.

(shouts)

Help!

BILLY

My pleasure.

C.D.
(shouts)
Help!
Help!
Help!
Help!!

Beat

Help!

Beat

Help!

Beat

Help!
Help!

Beat

Help!
Help!
Help!

Beat

Help!

Pause

BILLY
Better now?

C.D
I can't swim.

BILLY
I can't roller skate.

C.D.
I'll drown. Throw me overboard and I'll drown. My blood will be on your hands.

BILLY
From drowning?

C.D.
You know what I mean,

BILLY

Why would I throw you overboard?

C.D.

Why would you throw me overboard?

BILLY

Yes.

C.D.

Oh yeah, like you weren't thinking of throwing me overboard?

BILLY

I wasn't.

C.D.

You wasn't?

BILLY

No.

C.D.

Can I go then?

BILLY

No.

C.D.

(shouts)

Help!

Help!

Help!

Beat

C.D.

You won't get away with this.

BILLY

I already have.

C.D.

Somebody would have noticed.

BILLY

Noticed what?

C.D.

A body in a wheelchair under a blanket being pushed through a ship; a ship with over a thousand passengers

BILLY

...whose average age is 75

C.D.

What's that got to do with anything?

BILLY

Old trees...

C.D.

What?

BILLY

Before we even left yesterday two ambulances were called. One heart attack; one suspected stroke.

C.D.

And?

BILLY

The ship's doctor has already dealt with two passengers who collapsed in their cabins and performed the Heinrich manoeuvre on an octogenarian at breakfast.

C.D.

Yeah?

BILLY

There are nearly 90 passengers in wheelchairs and a fully operational mortuary on board.

Beat

BILLY

Ah! The penny has landed.

CD

Can't see the wood for the trees.

BILLY

A body rolling by in a wheelchair doesn't merit a second glance round here.

Now.

Where were we?

C.D.

(shouts)

Help!

BILLY

Oh yes.

C.D.

It's only a matter of time.

BILLY
Everything is.

C.D.
Everything is what?

BILLY
...a matter of time.

C.D.
Someone will hear my shouts and then you are for it, pal.

BILLY
Your voice will not be heard.

C.D.
Why not?

BILLY
The passengers will not be disturbed.

C.D
(*shouts*)
Don't be so sure.

BILLY
They've spent millions upgrading all the facilities – including the cabins. Now each passenger can truly enjoy a peaceful night's sleep – even with a steel band next door.

Beat

BILLY
Is that the clink of another penny hitting the ground?

C.D.
The cabins have all been soundproofed, haven't they?

BILLY
(*shouts*)
Yes.

C.D.
What do you want from me?
You want your job back? Yeah? Alright. You've got your job back. There we are. All sorted. We'll never mention this again. We'll look back on this whole hostage fiasco and laugh. Kidnapped, bound and gagged, held against my will – best fun I've had in years.

BILLY
OK then.

C.D.

OK then what?

BILLY

OK then. I'll have my job back.

C.D.

Very funny.

BILLY

You started it.

C.D.

How do you imagine this s all going to end? You are going to have to let me go at some point. What's going to happen then?

BILLY

I don't know. Maybe dinner and dancing...?

C.D.

You are going to have to walk out of here and face the music.

BILLY

Not necessarily.

C.D.

Oh what? You're going to barricade yourself away in here, are you?

HROST

It's a thought.

C.D.

Oh yes. I'd love to be a fly on the wall watching you slowly morph into Ben Gunn.

BILLY

I won't be alone. I'll have you for company, fly boy. You can be my Jim Hawkins.

C.D.

You don't frighten me.

BILLY

Yes I do.

C.D.

Yes you do but that's not the point.

BILLY

What is?

C.D.

What is what?

BILLY
... the point

C.D.
The point is.....

BILLY
Yes?

C.D.
(shouts)
What do you want from me?

Beat

BILLY

Well, we have already established that shouting isn't going to achieve anything, is it?

C.D
What?

BILLY

It's that kind of behaviour that is turning our youth away from politics.

Pause

C.D.

This is a wind up, isn't it?

BILLY

It's true. Yah – Boo politics is turning our kids away from Parliament and that should concern anyone who cares about democracy.

C.D.

I've heard about the date line ceremony but not this.

BILLY

No, really. It's serious. Very serious. That's why people are resorting to direct action and now - I can see the attraction.

C.D.

Is that what this is? "Let's get Oliver on his first day."

BILLY

Oliver? Your name is Oliver?

C.D.
Yes..

BILLY

Do people shorten it to Olly? Or Olive?

C.D.

My name is Oliver. They might try to abbreviate it but I soon correct them.

BILLY

So. I can call you Olly for short....but not for long.
Oh yes! He's back and this time he's punning.

C.D.

Where are they all hiding? Bathroom? (*shouts*) You can come out now. I
know it's a wind up.

Beat

Come on. The game's up

Beat

Hello?

Beat

It's not a wind up, is it?

BILLY

Another coin drops onto the growing pile of small change.

C.D.

(*shouts*)
Help!

BLACKOUT

Blast of "Pennies from Heaven" by Bing Crosby

Bit Two

Music Out. Lights Up.

Meanwhile back in the cabin.

BILLY

It's a simple enough question.

C.D. remains silent.

BILLY

Yes or No.

C.D. remains silent.

BILLY

Honestly. Not a trap. Very straightforward.

C.D. remains silent.

BILLY

Perhaps you suffer from short term memory loss. Or can't you remember?

C.D. remains silent.

BILLY

I'll give it to you again. But I can only accept your first answer. Would you...
... like a drink??

Pause

C.D.

No.

BILLY

No?

C.D.

No, thank you.

BILLY

No need to thank me. To be honest, I've only got the one glass so your abstinence is a blessing. I'd have had to get up, wash it, dry it, give you a shot, you drink it, I get up again, wash it, dry it, have a shot myself. Be like drinking on a see saw.

The Billy pours a shot and drains the glass.

BILLY

You have never been on a stage, have you?

C.D.

No.

BILLY

That's alright. There's no reason why you should have.

Beat

No wait. Of course there is. How can you understand performers and what they do if you have no idea how it feels to perform? They don't stop people in the street and say "Excuse me. Do you fancy being the Pope?" They have to become priest, then bishop, then archbishop, then cardinal and then they can become Pope and boss all the others around.

Pause

That first gig. When you discover that it's not all stardust and champagne.

Doesn't matter how many times you practiced in front of the mirror. Doesn't matter that you think it's brilliant. Doesn't matter that you have imagined being spotted and given your own TV series.

None of that matters.

Brunel University in Uxbridge. First proper gig. A mate of a mate ran the cabaret nights. Got chatting to him in the pub one night, he thought I was funny, I said I was a comic, offered me the gig, twenty five quid – cash in hand. Lot of money. I said "Yes"

It was my own fault. I was a comic but only in my head. My body was the Assistant Branch Manager of the Midland Bank in Tooting Bec

But I'd been waiting for this day and now that it had arrived – nothing was going to stop my meteoric rise to stardom.

I phoned in sick. Mrs Williamson offered to pop rondo after work to see how I was but I managed to put her off

I spent the day running through the routine. I had crafted this routine over months in my head. I knew that it was twenty minutes of comedy gold. I knew that it might take longer than twenty minutes because I would have to keep stopping to let the laughter subside. I had already worked out how to handle the interview on Wogan.

The day flew by. One minute it was breakfast – the next I'm on the train to Uxbridge with my suit and bow tie.

Got there way too early. Sat on a bench outside the station for a couple of hours. Pointlessly ran through the routine a few times but I knew it backwards.

The dressing room was next to the bar where the cabaret was going to take place. It was a changing room. Reeked of liniment and stale sweat. I got changed into the suit and tie and waited.

The juggler arrived first. Toby. Nice bloke. He had a huge bag full of clubs and balls and oversized playing cards and these sticks that were burnt at one end. For fire blowing...and he had a unicycle.

I didn't know what to say to him but that was alright because he never stopped from the moment he arrived. He'd been busking in Holland, he was off to the States tomorrow to do some street theatre festival, he had a meeting with some bloke at BBC Radio..

I felt a bit sorry for him because I could see my career stretching out before me and I knew that by the time reached his age – I'd be doing my second season at the Palladium. He was about 30.

I didn't meet the singers until immediately before we were due to start. They'd been out front at the bar. They nodded but talked among themselves.

We were meant to start at 9:00 pm but we didn't kick off until 11:15 pm. By that time, they were unbelievably drunk. It was grim.

The juggler suddenly remembered that he had a later gig so he went on first. They kept on talking and laughing. He ignored them and started juggling. They took pot shots at the clubs with empty, plastic pint glasses. Then full, plastic pint glasses. He was supposed to do 20 minutes. He was off in 6.

I was about to go on when the acapella group pushed past me and went straight into their punk medley. For a moment, the mob fell silent. But only for a moment. Then they decided to join in. But whatever song the group were singing – the Mob sang the theme to “Rainbow”. Until the group launched into “C30 C60 C90” when the mob joined in with but kept going in batches of 30.

C120, C150, C 180..... and so on.

The group gave up at C 2280.

The show was supposed to last 1 hour.

It had lasted 17 minutes so far...

...and I was the last act.

I walked on stage and I heard one of them shout “Bring on the Christians” After that – it was a blur. Blood was pounding in my ears. Sweat in my eyes. My mouth was dry and tasted of vegiburger. I kept talking. Way off in the distance I could hear voices shouting “Fuck Off”

I finished under a hail of peanuts. 4 minutes. I'd lasted 4 minutes.

The others had got their money and left. I changed and went to look for the social sec. He was out front. I had to walk through that lot. It was disco lighting in the bar so nobody paid any attention to me.

Except one bloke who thought I was brilliant.

Pause

C.D.

What do you want?

BILLY

I want my job back. What do *you* want?.

C.D.

To get out of here.

BILLY

Long term.

C.D.

To get out of here

BILLY

How old are you?

C.D.

Twenty four.

BILLY

Twenty four? I was still in the bank. You're already sailing the high seas. Not bad, eh? Achieving your ambition at such a young age.

C.D.

It's not my ambition.

BILLY

What is?

C.D.

To work in television.

Pause

BILLY

Television?

C.D.

Yes. I'd like to have my own production company.

BILLY

Television.

C.D.

Yes.

BILLY

So. If I'd been some big TV executive waving contract under your nose – you might have treated me differently..

C.D.

When you cornered me and started blathering on about how you were looking forward to working in the new theatre – I didn't know what to say.

BILLY

I bet you didn't.

C.D.

Because I didn't know who you were.

BILLY

Why doesn't that surprise me?

C.D.

Because there is nothing surprising about not knowing someone that you have never met before.

BILLY

So that gave you the right to talk to me that way?

C.D.

Talk to you what way?

BILLY

As if I was a punter.

C.D.

I thought you *were* a punter. Once Danny the techy had tipped me the wink
– I tried to drop you some hints.

BILLY

Hints? Hints like....

“Maybe you should look elsewhere for work in the future”

C.D.

I was nervous!

BILLY

Well, when the others find out– you’ll be looking at a walkout.

C.D.

Others?

BILLY

Stella, Mesmero, Pascal.

C.D.

Pascal? I thought he was in a double act.

BILLY

Mbote?

C.D.

Yes

BILLY

Pascal’s a ventriloquist

C.D.

A ventriloquist?

BILLY

When they find out – they’ll be furious. Solidarity. We’re like a family. Hurt
one and you hurt us all.

C.D.

The entire entertainment concept is being augmented.

BILLY

What does that mean?

C.D.

Out with the old. In with the new.

Pause

BILLY

Everybody out?

C.D.

Everybody out.

Beat

BILLY

Do you plan to let them know? Or are you banking on bumping into them on deck sometime?

C.D.

I am sure that they will be informed by their agent and I am sure that they understand how the business works. It's a pity that none of them could come on the cruise.

Beat

BILLY

They were invited as well?

C.D.

Yes.

BILLY

All of them?

C.D.

Yes.

BILLY

Why aren't they here, then?

C.D.

Maybe they're working.

BILLY

Working? Do me a favour. Who'd employ that lot? Stella only twinkles when she gets the combination of gin and Prozac just right. Otherwise, it's not so much Broadway Melodies as Showbiz Hallucinations. Mesmero probably forgot and don't get me started on Pascal and Mbote. Dreadful act. Same tired, old routine night after night. Take away the Zulu dummy and all you have got is a bloke from Newcastle pretending to be French.

C.D.

Don't you tell the same jokes night after night?

BILLY

That's different.

C.D.

You *do* tell the same jokes every night, don't you?

BILLY

As Eric might have said "They are the same jokes but not necessarily in the same order"

C.D.

Eric who?

BILLY

Morecambe.

Beat

BILLY

Eric Morecambe.

Beat

BILLY

Morecambe and Wise. Tell me you've heard of Morecambe and Wise?

C.D.

The skaters?

BILLY

What?

C.D.

You do the same routine ever night. What's the difference between you and Pascal and his Zulu.

BILLY

The difference is that I use my palette of jokes to paint a different landscape each night whereas Pascal is crap.

It's not enough him sitting there and throwing his voice.

(Newcastle French voice)

"Look at the size of that splinter, like."

(African voice)

"You could have cut your nails"

Makes no allowances for the audience. Gives exactly the same performance every night - complete with rehearsed ad libs.

(African voice)

"You're barking up the wrong tree"

It's cheap, it's easy and it's lazy.

C.D.
And you?

BILLY

I play the room – always play the room. Never assume that the audience will find me funny from the off. Never assume that my material is guaranteed to work. I may have been God's gift to comedy last night but tonight I might end up disappearing down the U bend.

Know your limits.

(Points to his head) In here – I'm clever, sharp, hip, dangerous, irreverent, respected, and original and held in high esteem by my peers. But that's all in here. As far as the world is concerned - I'm pure coach party, whelks and kiss me quick hats. That's OK by me.

There is no sound finer in the Universe than hearing a punter gasping for breath and I'm not talking asthma.

Helpless with laughter because of something you said. Face wet with tears. They can't stop laughing so they can't breathe until eventually their lungs are empty and they have to suck in all the available air before the next wave hits and *that's* when we hear the most wonderful sound (*gasping for air sound*) That sets the rest of the audience off again which in turn sets off laughing boy and – for a few blissful moments – you have perpetual motion in action.

Pause

C.D.
Who's Bernard.....?

BILLY
Delfont?

C.D.
Yes

BILLY

You'd know him if you saw him. He was the bloke who always met the Queen from her car and escorted her into the Palladium for the Royal Variety show.

C.D. looks blank

BILLY

Royal Variety Show. *(Beat)* Every year? Queen sits in the box at the Palladium while every anyone in show business trots out and does ten minutes whether they have an act or not? Lasts about eight hours?

C.D. looks blank

BILLY

Bernard Delfont (*Beat*) Law Grade's brother.

C.D. looks blank

BILLY

Lew Grade (*Beat*) Cigar? Big TV producer? The Prisoner? Randall and Hopkirk.....

C.D.

Ah yes. With Reeves and Mortimer

Billy looks blank

C.D.

Reeves and Mortimer. (*Beat*) Big Night Out? Shooting Stars?

BILLY

No.

C.B.

Yes

BILLY

I don't care.

Bernard Delfont was the biggest name in variety. He could make or break a career and he started out in a double act – The Delfont Boys – and as a dancer. He knew how to deal with performers because he had been one himself.

Pause

You've never heard of him, have you?

C.D

No. Did you ever work for him?

BILLY

He died in 1994

C.D

But you said you've been in the business for 25 years

BILLY

I never worked for him.

C.D.

Right

BILLY

Or Wilson, Kepple and Betty.

Beat

C.D.
Folk singers?

BILLY

Two blokes in fezzes and big moustaches doing an acrobatic, cod Egyptian dance routine.

C.D.
And Betty?

BILLY

Dressed like Cleopatra.

C.D.
Right.

BILLY

It's true. Speciality act. The sand dance. They did the same ten minute routine for nearly 50 years. Lots of different Bettys but Wilson and Keppel never changed.

You could do that then. Tour the same routine round the music halls for a lifetime.

You can't get away with that now but nobody's told Pascal and Mbote.

Pause

C.D.
I'm sure that you will find somewhere else to play.

BILLY
Where?

C.D.
Where?

BILLY
Yes.

C.D.
Ask your agent.

BILLY
I am my agent.

C.D.
Then, you'll have to sort it out.

BILLY
But I don't know.

C.D.

So - get a new agent.

BILLY

Where?

C.D.

I don't know

BILLY

Neither do I.

C.D.

But it has nothing to do with me.

BILLY

Doesn't it?

C.D.

You're not my responsibility.

BILLY

Aren't I? You lure me with the free cruise, pour champagne down my neck and then cut me adrift without a lifeboat and it's not your responsibility?

I should have listened to Bunny.

Pause

C.D.

(genuine)

Oh God. Look, I am so sorry. I've been incredibly insensitive.

BILLY

Alright. Thank you.

C.D.

I can't begin to imagine what it's like to lose a loved one.

BILLY

Neither can I.

C.D.

Oh, I'm sorry I thought your wife had passed away. Divorce can be equally traumatic.

BILLY

Wife? What wife?

C.D.

Bambi.

BILLY

Bunny.

C.D.
Bunny.

BILLY

Bunny isn't my wife. She was my agent and she's not dead – she retired to Guildford last Christmas.

Pause

C.D.
Your agent?

BILLY
Yes

Beat

C.D.
Your agent.

BILLY
Yes

C.D.
She's your agent.

BILLY

Not any more. That's why I look after myself.

C.D.
Do you?

BILLY
Yes.

C.D.
I'd sue if I were you..

BILLY
What?

C.D.

Having spent this brief time together, I feel that I have built up a fairly accurate portrait of the kind of man you are.

BILLY
Really?

C.D.
Yes. You're mental.

BILLY
Funny boy.

C.D.
Seriously - you'd give Dr Raj Persaud a run for his money.

BILLY
Never heard of him.

C.D.
Of course you haven't. He's a TV doctor and TV is the Devil's goldfish bowl, isn't it?

BILLY
Pollutes your brain.

C.D.
Newly installed, state of the art, 40", High Definition, LCD TV up on your wall giving you 24 hour access to movies, music, sport – and you cover it with your shirt.
(baby talk) Did the nasty, magic box scare him?

BILLY
You've woken up, haven't you?

C.D.
You know what you are? You're a Luddite.

BILLY
Am I? I'm sure I should be insulted but...

C.D.
(mimicking)....I don't know what Luddite means."
Yes, you do. Before you stopped listening to the world, before you switched off the receiver in your brain and chose to live the rest of your life in sepia tinted, melancholia – you knew what a Luddite was and you'd have hated to be called one.

BILLY
You can't tell me.....

C.D.
Shut up. You have to listen to the other person's point of view. I talk – you listen.

BILLY
Well, since you seem to...

C.D.
I don't need your permission. I had nothing to do with the decision to no longer employ you.

BILLY

You mean sack me.

C.D.

No. Sacking would suggest that you were in full time employment with the company. You were not. You were on contract – not a rolling contract – an occasional contract.

BILLY

25 years...

C.D.

I was brought in - *after* that decision had been taken - to oversee the eventual transition from 50's, knees up and bingo, Holiday Camp to 21st Century, moshing and playstation, Ministry of Sound on sea..

BILLY

Was any of that English?

C.D.

Therefore, since you and the other acts you mentioned will not feature in my forthcoming schedule - I did not feel that it was necessary to see any of you work “live”.

Now, if you'll let me go – I can return to work and you can continue with the cruise and we'll say no more about it.
So. Will you untie me, please?

Beat

C.D.

I'll take that as a “No”.

BLACKOUT

Quick blast of “”C30 C60 C90” by Bow Wow Wow

Bit Three

Lights up. Music Out

BILLY

Listen to yourself, will you? A circus?

C.D.

Yes.

BILLY

You're getting rid of us and putting on a circus?

C.D.

Amongst other things – yes.

BILLY

Where are you going to keep the elephants?

C.D.

There are no elephants.

BILLY

No elephants?

C.D.

Fire blowing, stilt walking, escapology, tightrope walking
chainsaw juggling,....

BILLY

Chainsaw?

C.D.

....chainsaw juggling, acrobatics, magic, bed of nails, knife
throwing.....

BILLY

But no elephants.

C.D.

No elephants.

BILLY

Well, you can call it a circus if you like but you're fooling no
one.

C.D.

La Cirque Fantastique has won awards at theatre festivals
all over Europe.

BILLY

Theatre festivals?

C.D.

Yes.

BILLY

I rest my case. Which classic movies?

C.D.

Usual Suspects, Donnie Darko, Fight Club,

BILLY

Classics? I've never heard of any of them.

C.D.

The movie programme is only one part of the TV package which includes news, quizzes, documentaries, soaps, sport, music, reality shows.

BILLY

Reality shows! These people have come on this cruise to get away from it all. Live a life of luxury for a while. They don't want to watch a bunch of social misfits who've chosen to live in a TV pretend house and sit around doing nothing but moan about having to sit around doing nothing. Or some 15 minute celebrity giving a bull a happy ending.

C.D.

Reality TV shows are very popular.

BILLY

So is capital punishment.

Why not sling a security camera up in the corner of every room so they can lie there all day and watch themselves watching themselves.

C.D.

A younger clientele will spend a great deal more time watching television during the day as they will tend to party well into the early hours and so they will want to relax until the evening.

BILLY

They could relax on deck.

C.D.

...on the recliners – each fitted with individual, airline style, TV monitors.

BILLY

That's all very well for a young crowd. But what about that lot out there?

They won't want to loll around watching TV all day. They're up every morning at six queuing for breakfast that doesn't start serving 'til seven thirty. They want entertaining and they want it live. Every night the theatre is packed. A house full of pacemakers, Zimmer frames and Grecian 2000 – my kind of people.

Beat

Let me go on tonight.

C.D

La Cirque Fantastique will provide tonight's entertainment.

BILLY

Some bloke slinging chainsaws around in front of an audience of senior citizens? That's not entertainment – it's euthanasia.

C.D

It's out of your hands

. **BILLY**

It's when it's out of *his* hands that the bloodshed starts. Why not try me out?

C.D.
Can you juggle?

BILLY
I can compere.

C.D.
La Cirque Fanastique?

BILLY
Oui.

C.D.
You speak French?

BILLY
Oui

C.D.
Apart from "Oui"?

BILLY
Non.

C.D.
Then how will they understand?

BILLY
They don't speak English?

C.D.
Not as such..

BILLY
What happens if he loses control of the chainsaw? He's shouting "Look Out! Look Out" and they're all flipping through their phrase books trying to figure out what he's saying.

C.D.
But you can't speak French either.

BILLY
Give me a go anyway.

C.D.
No.

BILLY

See what a proper turn can do compared to a bunch of lardy French clowns.

C.D.

The decision to revamp our entertainment was taken at the highest level.

BILLY

By accountants.

C.D.

I have no doubt that you would be a huge hit with these older passengers...

BILLY

I should cocoa..

C.D.

But you would mean nothing to a younger audience and that is why we are letting you go.

Pause

C.D.

The refurbishment of the fleet has cost millions. That money has to be recouped somewhere and the cost will be passed on to the passengers. They won't pay more if the entertainment is anything other than first class. They will want to see comedians they have seen on the TV; and why not? They have a right to expect the best – they're paying for it. Why should they have to take a risk? They're not wealthy patrons being asked to sponsor some struggling artist. They are everyday people who have splashed out on a luxury cruise. They deserve to be entertained by comedians they know. A face they recognise off the telly. Not some mad, old guy with weird eyebrows. No offence.

BILLY

Taken anyway.

Pause

BILLY

OK. Let's cut to the chase. No more pussyfooting around. I've said my piece and you have said yours. Let's put our cards on the table.

Am I out?

C.D.

Yes.

Beat

BILLY

Then, you leave me no choice.

The Billy stands and exits.

Beat

C.D.

Can I go now, please?

BILLY

(offstage)

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to Anchors Away - your on board cabaret of the stars. Now please welcome your host - Billy "The Kidder" Merriweather.

The Billy skips on singing "Let Me Entertain You"- pointing and acknowledging the imaginary audience.

He plays all this to the C.D. as if he is in the middle of a packed house. He reacts to the imaginary audience with nods, winks, pointing etc.....

C.D. sits and watches in stunned silence

Billy keeps up a commentary (written in italics) in his normal voice but when he is doing the act - he goes a bit Northern.

BILLY

Hit the spotlight. Stand for a minute. Let them have a good look. Off round the whole stage. Take them all in.

Thank you. Thank you.

Move to the mike stand. Keep focussed on them. Take mike. Move stand to the left. Back to centre stage.

What a lovely welcome. You're the best crowd we've had in here tonight - **(Aside to C.D.)** *I only say that if it's the first audience waiting for the second sitting for dinner but if it's the second audience back from the first sitting for dinner then I say - you're much better than the lot we had earlier.*

They haven't all settled. People still comes in. Milling round trying to find a seat. Big group march across the front from left to right.

Is this a sponsored walk or can anyone join in?

Still settling. Lots of chatter.

Are you having a good time?

Group hanging round the balcony exit. Not all quiet yet. One more go.

I said - are you having a good time?

Balcony group quieter but still not settled. Exit sign over downstairs let door needs fixing.

I've had a day today I have. It started with my usual work out in the cabin.

Trying to work out where I left my trousers.

Old bloke two rows back keeps nodding off or is it a stroke? Keep an eye on him.

I wouldn't say I was drunk last night but the barman would. He said to me "Do you know how many vodkas you've had?" I said "Of course not. I'm drinking to forget"

Plug the Lloyd Weber singalong in the Manhattan Bar. Get Danny to do a full sound check. Getting a little feedback.

I said "Anyway, I shouldn't be drinking with what I've got" He said "What have you got"
I said "No money"

Balcony group settled. Old dear in the front row waving. Acknowledge her...

It's alright, love. You don't need my permission. The loos are over there.

Pascal is beckoning me over from the wings. He'll have to wait.

What's your name, love?

She says, "Marjorie" Make sure the whole audience know where she is sitting

Marjorie. Lovely name. Everybody say, "Hello Marjorie"

C.D.
Hello Marjorie.

Both surprised by C.D.'s response.

BILLY
What can I do for you, love?

She says, "It's my birthday" Balcony crowd has settled.

It's your birthday? If you don't mind me asking – how old are you, Marjorie?

She says" 80 today". Cable trailing downstage right.

80 today? You don't look a day over 79.

Downstage starlight special has blown. Get Danny to replace it between shows if this is the first performance or at the end of the night. Pascal flapping in the wings.

Shall we sing Happy Birthday to Marjorie?

Old bloke has started dribbling. Mesmero wandering round the back of the audience. He's come through the wrong door again.

I said, "Shall we sing Happy Birthday to Marjorie?"

C.D
Yes.

BILLY
Here we go .

Nip over and find out what Pascal wants. Can't see Mesmero.

One. Two. Three.

C.D
Happy Birthday to you,
Happy Birthday to you,

Old bloke hasn't woken up yet. Mesmero getting directions from one of the punters.

Happy Birthday, dear Marjorie,
Happy Birthday to you,

Pascal says I have to fill. Stella is backstage - delirious and covered in her own vomit.

BILLY
There you go, Marjorie. Have a great birthday. I remember mine.
My wife said, "What can I do for you on your special day?"
I said, "Surprise me"
So she had a sex change.

Stella is being hosed down and plied with coffee.

My next door neighbour gave me the keys to his house and said "Help yourself. You've borrowed everything else"

Old bloke hasn't moved for a while.

Let's all turn round and shake hands with the person sitting behind us.

(Aside to C.D) *It can't be done. When you turn round - the person behind you has also turned round so you can't shake their hands they can't shake yours...Gets a laugh, puts them at ease and the kafuffle should wake the old bloke - if he's still with us.*

That's how they do it in the E.U.

Speaking of which, did you hear about the French bloke who went to the chemists to buy some deodorant. The chemist said," Do you want ball or aerosol?"

The French bloke said "Neither. It's for my armpits"

Old bloke has spluttered back to life. His hearing aid had popped out.

Or the Scottish bloke who was walking past a Bakery in Glasgow when something caught his eye. So, he went in and said to the baker “Excuse me but – in the winnow there – is that a cake or a meringue?”
And the baker said “No, you’re right. It’s a cake”

Signal from Pascal. Stella has been cleaned up and she’s ready to go.

Alright. It’ time for me to make way for our lovely songbird Stella Twinkle.

Move left. Get mike stand. Back to centre stage. Set mike stand and adjust to Stella’s height.

She’s worked on all the cruises. Worked for them all. P & O, Thompson, Noah.

She said to me before I came on,” Have you worked for Cunard?”
I said, “Pardon?”

She said,” Have you worked for Cunard?”
I said, “I’ve worked as hard as everyone else”

Make her very welcome. She’ll sing “Like A Virgin” – her memory’s that good....

Miss Stella Twinkle.

Billy bows to the C.D. and imaginary audience

Beat.

C.D. realises that he can’t applaud because his hands are tied.

C.D.
(enthusiastic)
Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap.
Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap.

BILLY
What did you think?

C.D.
That was completely random..

BILLY
What does that mean?.

C.D.
It was good. Really. I like the accent.

BILLY
What accent?

C.D.

Never mind.

BILLY

I didn't give you the usual full bib and tucker; only a taste.

C.D.

Usual? You've done that before, haven't you?

BILLY

What?

C.D.

Given a performance in here.

BILLY

Of course.

C.D.

In here?.

BILLY

Yes. Any time I want to test some new material or run through the 20 minute spot or the full hour show.

C.D.

An hour?

BILLY

Yes. I have a one hour show that I like to keep ticking over.

C.D.

I didn't realise that you had performed a full length show for us.

BILLY

I haven't.

C.D.

Sorry?

BILLY

I haven't. But it's there if needed and I like to keep it ticking over.

Beat

C.D.

You run through a one hour show in here even though it has never been needed?

BILLY

Preparation is half the job.

C.D.

How many times have you done that?

BILLY

What?

C.D.

Given a performance in here.

BILLY

You have to keep changing the material, don't you?

C.D.

Yes but how often – roughly – would you estimate that you have given a run through like that?

BILLY

What I did then was tailored for you specifically. All off the top of my head. Obviously, the jokes are grabbed from thousands stored away up here. But the Marjorie birthday and the old guy nodding off were spontaneous.

C.D.

...and the bit about Stella.

BILLY

No. That actually happened.

Beat

C.D.

You do what you did....

BILLY

Not *exactly* like that.

C.D.

Understood but delivered with the same....intensity.

BILLY

Of course. It has to be as close as possible to actual show conditions .That's why I throw myself problems. The crowd not settling, Marjorie and the rest....

C.D.

Right.

BILLY

It's not planned. My brain throws something in and I have to cope with it.

C.D.

Like heckles?

BILLY
Like heckles.

C.D.
So you come up with put downs for imaginary heckles.

BILLY
The last time I saw a face like yours – it had an apple in it's mouth.

Beat

You look like a pig.

C.D.
I got it and apart from Bunny – who would have been your audience?

BILLY
Bunny? Bunny was my agent. She played no part in the creative process.

C.D.
Not Bunny.

BILLY
Absolutely not.
Beat.

C.D.
Who has been your audience?

BILLY
I told you. I don't have people back here. You're my first guest.

Pause

C.D.
I'm the first person to ever witness what just happened?

BILLY
I wanted to give you an idea of what I do. You can never truly know what it feels like to be on stage without actually being on stage and I think that you now have a better understanding.

C.D.
Oh yes.

BILLY
But trying to find a different person every day to come here and be the audience isn't practical. I'd have to keep the place tidy and offer them drinks and whatnot. Sometimes I hit a part in the set that doesn't work and I have to pace around trying out different lines. It can get quite heated.

C.D.

Every day?

BILLY

Yes. You wouldn't ask a footballer to play without warming up first, would you? A gymnast wouldn't go spinning round those bars unless he'd stretched beforehand. Even curling tams run the broom over the living room floor before they get on the ice.

C.D.

It is very....

BILLY

You idiot. You stupid, useless idiot.

C.D.

What did I do?

BILLY

Not you. You call yourself a professional. You're having a laugh. You think you're so clever, don't you? You think you're so good. Well, you're not. You're a waste of everybody's time. You're a sloppy amateur and I'm ashamed to know you.

Pause

C.D.

What happened?

BILLY

I forgot to plug Andrew Lloyd Webber in the Manhattan bar.

C.D.

Is it that important?

BILLY

Of course it is. If that happened on stage – if I forgot – they wouldn't get an audience. If they do not get an audience – bar sales will be down. If the bar sales are down – they'll cut the entertainment. If they cut the entertainment – that's one less slot for Stella ..and if they start cutting performance slots who knows where it'll end.

Beat

Obviously, we do know where it ends. It ends here, doesn't it?

Pause

But that's no excuse. Preparation is half the job. If you're going to do it then do it right. Otherwise you're just standing in a room - talking to yourself and what good is that to anyone?

BLACKOUT

and “Jesus Christ Superstar”

FINAL BIT
Music out. Lights up.

The Billy is alone in the cabin.

He is dressing for a gig.

BILLY
OK
OK
Nearly there.

TV Announcer

You are watching the Pegasus TV Network.

This is Channel 81.

Service will resume at 10:00 am

BILLY
Ignore them.
They're not there yet.

Everything is under control.
We are almost cleared for take off.

Looks around cabin.

Cosy? Informal? Bohemian?

or

Tip

Beat

Tip.

Gets suitcase, opens, places it on table or bed and starts to tidy away all the clothes.

See?

That's what happens with this entertaining at home palaver.

Thin end of the wedge

Start with some innocent tidying up and - before you know where you are - you'll be knee deep in scented candles.

Billy sniffs.

Actually it is a little ripe in here.

But it will take more than a scented candle to shift the smell of me. Industrial strength Glade might have half a chance but – let's be honest – it's a temporary solution at best.

Anyway it adds to the atmosphere. A breath of stale air. This cabin isn't pretending to be anything other than what it is; a big bloke's room that smells of big bloke.

I can live with it and they don't have to so....

He is folding some clothing

Look at me. I'm folding (*insert clothing name here*) for Christ's sake. I have never knowingly folded anything that didn't fit into an envelope. Now look at me. I'm folding with the best of them.

Bunny should be watching this. She wouldn't believe it.
She thought I was a hopeless case.

“What would you do without me?”
“You need someone to take care of you”
“A man like you shouldn't be on his own”

Well, look at me now, Bunny.

I'm folding.

TV Announcer

You are watching the Pegasus TV Network.
This is Channel 81.
Service will resume at 10:00 am

BILLY
...and doing the business.

Oh yes.

Sat down for a pow wow with the enemy.
Not easy.
You might not like what you hear.
It might even get a bit shouty.-
We can't all be Ghandi.
But it had to be done.

Talking and listening – that's the key to negotiating a good deal.

You have to listen to the other person's point of view. Doesn't matter if it sounds wrong to you. Just because it sounds wrong – it doesn't mean that your back won't be scratched in return.

In fact, it's getting a damn good scratching.

Publicity.

That's all it is – publicity.

They see you.
They like what they see.
They turn up for the full hour.

Simple as that.

Oh yes.

They will be getting the full Billy “The Kidder” Merriweather experience tonight.

FX Howl of feedback

C.D.
(talkback)
Can you hear me?

BILLY
Coming through loud and clear.

C.D.
(talkback)
Excellent. (beat) The room looks different.

BILLY
I've tidied. No need to air my dirty washing in public, Olly.

C.D.
(talkback)
Please stop doing that.

BILLY
I'll do my best but I can't promise, Olly.

TV Announcer
You are watching the Pegasus TV Network.
This is Channel 81.
(Followed by “Sailing By” which can run underneath)

BILLY
It's show time.

C.D.
Stand by

TV Announcer
Welcome to Channel 81 – part of the Pegasus TV network.
Now it's time for our daily dose of Cabin Fever – our unique, on board reality show.

C.D.
Here we go.

FX Fade out “Sailing By”

BILLY

Better watch the rummaging today.

C.D.

..in..

Five
Four

BILLY

Leave the crown jewels well alone.

C.D.

Three
Two

BILLY

After all.

C.D.

One

BILLY

The walls have eyes.

BLACKOUT

and “There’s No business Like Show Business”

THE END