



There was dust on the boards, the backdrops were half painted and they were all naked on the stage, with the bright lights to keep them warm and show up the dust in the air. There was nowhere to sit so they shuffled about miserably. They had no pockets to put their hands in, and there were no cigarettes.

'Is this your first time?' It was everybody's first time, only the director knew that. Only friends spoke, softly and not continuously. The rest were silent. How do naked strangers begin a conversation? No one knew. The professional men – for professional reasons – glanced at each other's parts, while the others, friends of friends of the director and needing some cash, regarded the women without appearing to. Jasmin called from the back of the auditorium where he had been talking with the costume designer, he called out in Welsh Camp Cockney,

'Have you all masturbated, boys? Well done.' (No one had spoken.) 'The first hard-on I see and out you go. This is a respectable show.' Some of the women giggled, the unprofessional men wandered out of the lights, two A.S.M.s carried a rolled carpet on stage. They said, 'Mind your backs,' and they all felt more naked than before. A man with a bush hat and a white shirt set up a tape recorder in the pit. He was scornful as he threaded the tape. It was the copulation scene.

'I want G.T.C., Jack,' Jasmin said to him. 'Let them hear it first.' There were four large loudspeakers, there was no escaping.

'Well, you've heard about the privacy of the sex-uu-aal act, Let me tell you people, just for a fact, Riiiiight accrooss the nay-ay-ation It's the in-out one-two-three Grand Time Copulation.'

There were soaring violins and a military band, and after the chorus a march in exultant two-time with trombones, snare drums and a glockenspiel. Jasmin came down the aisle towards the stage.

'That's your fucking-music, boys and girls.' He undid the top button of his shirt. He wrote this one himself.

'Where's Dale? I want Dale.' Out of the dark came the choreographer. She had a stylish trenchcoat on, tied in the middle with a wide belt. She had a small waist, sunglasses and a sticky-bun hairdo. She walked like a pair of scissors. Without turning round Jasmin called out to the man who was leaving by a door at the back of the auditorium.

'I want those wigs, Harry dear. I want those wigs. No wigs, no Harry.' Jasmin sat down in the front row. He made a steeple under his nose with his hands and crossed his legs. Dale climbed on the stage. She stood in the middle of the large carpet spread across the boards, one hand on her hip. She said, 'I want the girls squatting in a V shape, five on each side.' She stood where the apex was to be, moving her arms. They sat at her feet and she clipped up and down the middle leaving a trail of musk. She made the V deeper, then shallow again, she made it a horseshoe and a crescent and then a shallow V once more.

'Very nice, Dale,' said Jasmin. The V pointed back-stage. Dale moved a girl from the middle and replaced her with a girl from the edge. She did not speak to them, she took them by the elbow, leading them from this place to that place. They could not see her eyes through her glasses and they did not always know what she wanted. She guided a man across to each woman and pressed on his shoulders to make him sit down opposite. She fitted the legs together of each couple, she straightened their backs, she put their heads in position and made the partners clasp forearms. Jasmin lit a cigarette. There were ten couples in the V shape on the carpet, which really belonged in the foyer.

At last Dale said, 'I am clapping my hands, you are rocking backwards and forwards in time.'

They began to rock like children playing at ships. The director walked to the back of the auditorium.

'I think closer together, darling, it looks like nothing at all from here.' Dale pressed the couples closer together. When they began to move again their pubic hair rasped. It was hard to keep time. It was very much a matter of practice. One couple fell sideways and the girl banged her head on the floor. She rubbed her head and Dale came over and rubbed it too and reassembled them. Jasmin skipped down the aisle.

'We'll try it with the music. Jack, please. And remember, boys and girls, after the singing you go into two-time.'

'Well, you've heard about the privacy of the sex-uu-aal act ...'

The boys and girls began to rock while Dale clapped her hands. One, two, three, four. Jasmin stood half way

up the aisle, his arms crossed. He uncrossed them, and screamed,

'Stop. Enough.' It was suddenly very quiet. The couples stared into the blackness beyond the lights and waited. Jasmin came down the steps slowly, and when he reached the stage he spoke softly.

'I know it's hard, but you have to look as if you are enjoying this thing.' (His voice rose.) 'Some people do, you know. It's a fuck, you understand, not a funeral.' (His voice sank.) 'Let's have it again, with some enthusiasm this time. Jack, please.' Dale realigned those units rocked out of position and the director climbed the stairs again. It was better, there was no doubt that this time it was better. Dale stood by Jasmin and watched. He put his hand on her shoulder and smiled at her glasses.

'Darling, it's good, it's going to be good.'

Dale said, 'The two on the end are moving well. If they were all like that I would be out of a job.'

'It's the in-out one-two-three Grand Time Copulation.'

Dale clapped to help them with the new rhythm. Jasmin sat down in the front row and lit a cigarette. He called back to Dale,

'Them on the end ...' She put her finger to her ear to show him she could not hear, and walked down the steps towards him.

'Them on the end, they're going too fast, what do you think?' They watched together. It was true, the two who had been moving well, they were a little out of time. Jasmin made another steeply under his nose and Dale scissored on to the stage. She stood over them and clapped.

'One two, one two,' she shouted. They did not seem to hear Dale, or the trombones, snare drums and glockenspiel.

'One fucking two,' screamed Dale. She appealed to Jasmin. 'I expect them to have some sense of rhythm.'

But Jasmin did not hear because he was screaming too.

'Cut! Stop! Turn that thing off, Jack.' All the couples creaked to a standstill except the couple on the end. Everyone watched the couple on the end, who were rocking faster now. They had their own sinuous rhythm.

'My God,' said Jasmin, 'they're fucking.' He shouted at the A.S.M.s. 'Get them apart, will you, and get those grins off your faces or you won't work in London again.' He shouted at the other couples. 'Clear off, back in half an hour. No, no, stay here.' He turned to Dale, his voice was hoarse. 'I'm sorry about this, darling. I know just how you feel. It's disgusting and obscene, and it's all my fault. I should have checked them all first. It won't happen again.' And while he was talking Dale snipped up the aisle and disappeared. Meanwhile the couple rocked on without music. There was only the creaking of boards beneath the carpet and the woman's low moans. The A.S.M.s stood about, not sure what to do.

'Pull them apart,' Jasmin shouted again. One of the A.S.M.s tugged at the man's shoulders, but they were sweaty and there was nowhere to hold on. Jasmin turned away, tears in his eyes. It was hard to believe. The others were glad of the break, they stood around and watched. The A.S.M. who had tugged at the shoulders brought on a bucket of water. Jasmin blew his nose.

'Don't be pathetic,' he croaked, 'they might as well finish it now.' They juddered to an end as he was speaking. They pushed apart and the girl ran off to the dressing-room, leaving the man standing alone. Jasmin climbed on stage, trembling with sarcasm.

'Well, well, Portnoy, did you get your little poke?

Feeling better now?' The man stood with his hands behind his back. His prick was angry and gluey, it let itself down in little throbs.

'Yes, thank you, Mr Cleaver,' the man said.

'What's your name, dear?'

'Cocker.' Jack snorted in his pit, the closest he ever came to laughing. The rest sucked their lips. Jasmin took a deep breath.

'Well, Cocker, you and the little man stuck on the end of you can crawl off this stage, and take shagging Nellie with you. I hope you find a gutter big enough for two.'

'I'm sure we will, Mr Cleaver, thank you.' Jasmin climbed down into the auditorium.

'Positions, the rest of you,' he said. He sat down. There were days when he could weep, really weep. But he did not, he lit a cigarette.