

## **JOURNAL OF A HIGHLAND TOUR**

Carola Hicks, 2006

“The Students’ Theatre Group was formed this year. It is an independent project, intended to educate the members in all aspects of theatre work under the most exacting conditions possible – those of a touring company. It is a non-profit-making venture: any extra money will be given to charity. We hope that our education has been your entertainment”.

*Extract from the programme of “Twelfth Night”*

The reunion. A room of middle-aged people in party mood. As a precaution, we are wearing name badges but hoping they will not be needed. Indeed from a distance, some of us appear completely unchanged. And close up, the surprising thing is being able to recognise the earlier face that hovers behind the present one, as if we are all holding up transparent carnival masks painted with life’s furrows, the little lines, sagging jowls, greying or receding hair. But the viewer’s mind can tilt the mask sideways and let the past take over: memory is more truthful than the unconvincing impersonation in front of you. Then these once intimate companions become their real selves again, their appearance just a temporary aberration from their real selves, revealed again today because they have been preserved forever within our collective nostalgia.

More people arrive, there are big hugs, shouts of greeting, the formation of little groups which constantly dissolve and flow into others, for we can hardly bear to keep still amongst so much excitement. We have brought our memorabilia, the trophies of the past – photographs, programmes, scripts, the tangible remains of the transient, ephemeral experience of having been in plays together, whose number, chronology and impact we cannot even agree on but argue about energetically.

For me, there is just one production which stands out from that happy haze of auditions, smoky rehearsal rooms, shambolic first nights, cruel or kind reviews. Amongst the thespians reunited in that babbling room, reminiscing about of ancient triumphs and disasters, the Ionescos and Brechts, Wildes and Pinters, I can recognise a special inner circle, an elite, the few, the happy few, the members of the company that went on the very first Highland Tour.

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### **The Journal**

*Monday 1 July 196- : Dalmally*

We set off from the grey city in the morning: our first performance would take place that evening in a Highland village. I had not had time to imagine what it would be like at all, beyond moaning with the other girls about having to survive for a month with the minimum of luggage. We had given no thought to meals except for providing a mug and a plate each, and were resigned to the idea of sleeping bags. Materially we considered ourselves well organised. The costumes were neatly packed in labelled polythene bags, the scenery, consisting of four pillars, two rostra and a little flight of steps, had been ingeniously loaded into the van together with the lighting equipment, Orsino's chair and a versatile bench. The van, an ancient, unreliable but essential member of the Dramatic Society, had been

overhauled and painted in bright scarlet and cream, with “Twelfth Night” in large letters along each side and “The Play’s the Thing” on the back. The second vehicle, whose matching cream and scarlet livery had been applied to cover up the words “Linzi’s Ice-Creams” rather than to provide an elegant twin, was loaned courtesy of the producer’s father. It provided more passenger seating than the big van, since there were side windows and leg room where the refrigerator had been removed. Then there were three cars of varying comfort and trustworthiness, owned and driven by members of the company,

Our time of departure was scheduled for nine o’clock. Each morning during the previous ten days of rehearsals I had arrived punctually, which only resulted in having to wait for half an hour while the producers got up and breakfasted. Today, I was slightly late because of ruthless packing, and so was disconcerted to learn that more than half the party had already left. In fact, I was particularly irritated because the two people I liked best, the boys playing Feste and Aguecheek, had already departed. Not that I had any justification for this grievance because we were all practically strangers to each other, a group recruited for a particular show, whose busy rehearsal schedule had not provided time to get to know anyone at all well.

There had already been a setback because the ice-cream van had broken down the previous evening and was now being inspected in a garage, so we would just have to wait. At least I was not the last to arrive. Jilly, a tall untidy girl who had the distinction of being someone’s fiancée, with a real engagement ring to prove it, came rushing in with a plastic sack of clothing and a sleeping bag which she had taken without permission from some poor stranger in her flat. Pete, a plump little Canadian with gleaming black eyes, who played Sir Toby Belch and intended to go on the stage professionally, was already there, and about an hour later, the even-unpunctual Gaye, whose bee-hive and make-up were immaculate, strolled in with several items of luggage, some of which she was compelled to leave behind though with very bad grace. We four waited gloomily in the Dramatic Society’s untidy office while the production team – Gerard, Jack and Sue – made shopping expeditions to Woolworths and cut-price grocers. The whole idea of the tour was Gerard’s and he had been planning it for a long time. Jack was co-producer and played Malvolio, and they were both in love with Sue. She was an intense American girl, towards whom I felt some hostility because gorgeous Gerard, the languid star of the Dramatic Society, was my hero but he always seemed to be physically entwined with her: she was a very tactile person, liable to give massages and liking to be stroked liked a cat. The next late arrival was the shy Lisa, whom I had only met once at the auditions and then feared in case she obtained my part of Olivia. She and I made friends while shopping for an emergency lunch of bread, chocolate, cheese and ginger beer. We

agreed that the hanging about was unbearable and that, as she was one of the car-owners, some of us should try to set off as soon as possible.

The production team, however, as an inseparable trio, decided that they would all stay behind and that Lisa must also stay to drive them in case the van was not ready. So the rest of us set off in the Volkswagen driven by Milo, an architecture student in charge of publicity, a small car whose cramped interior already contained the tape recorder and a large wooden loudspeaker, to which was now added five people's luggage and sleeping bags.

The journey north took over four hours. It was extremely uncomfortable for we were too crowded to move and either stuffily hot or unbearably draughty when the roof was open. We chatted with some restraint, for the cheery familiarity of rehearsals and random university acquaintance now seemed a seriously inadequate basis for the imminent reality of a whole month in the enforced company of the same group of people.

It started to rain some way out of the city and the windows steamed up. The scenery began to change, no longer gentle arable fields and rolling hills, but harsher profiles and isolated settlements. We passed through Callendar, where the Queen was expected, all traffic jams and damp bunting. Gaye announced that she was suffering from car-sickness; she would become very silent, leaning her head against a window and then we would have to stop while she stood miserably at the side of the road in the pouring rain, taking in great gulps of air. We eased ourselves out of the car – no small achievement – for a drink in a dark pub and then drove on and on, totally dependent upon the map.

“If this is the road, there ought to be a loch on the left.” “No but there's one on the right.” “Not on the map there isn't.” “Let's stop and ask someone.” This was easier said than done. There was nothing – no houses, turnings or cars in sight, only hazy mountains, wet grey walls and rushing streams. We pulled up by a quarry where there were workmen, bleak huts and a crane, and Milo got out to ask the way, looking immensely English with his neatly furled umbrella. Good news, we were on the right road and had not far to go.

By about five in the afternoon, a signpost announced *Dalmally 1½ miles* and the rain began to ease off. Gerard had said that Dalmally was a small place, just two streets, but I had pictured it busy with shops and people, and not the crossing of two bare Highland roads marked only by a few houses. Milo suddenly stopped the car behind a gaudy vehicle which I did not immediately recognise as our own Twelfth Night van and said “Well, here we are.” We did not seem to be anywhere.

“Where's the theatre?” On the dripping hillside above, we saw there was a very small wooden building, approached by a narrow path which zig-zagged up a steep slope. This was

our theatre. We were truly in the wilderness. Inside, the Dalmally Boys' Brigade Hall was dark and narrow, with a steeply pitched roof supported by metal struts. Entrance was via a tiny vestibule where our booking office, a table for the tickets and programmes, had been set up. The rest of the company greeted us warmly and proceeded to show us the rest of the facilities, waiting with pleasure for us to repeat their own horrified reactions. The stage was a tiny platform two feet off the ground, with room for no more than three actors on it at once; there were no curtains at all but merely two sliding partitions to cut it off from the auditorium. The dressing room for the cast of fifteen was a scullery at one side of the stage dominated by a massive wooden-framed sink. Beyond, there was a cubicle containing an equally outsize lavatory.

After the initial shock, I was surprised to realise that I felt both happy and amused. It was a huge relief to be back in the group again: having been part of the company for nearly two weeks, its pull was already magnetic. And the atmosphere in the dim little hall was exciting; someone suggested we were like a group of Elizabethan touring players. Preparations for the performance were well under way. The lighting expert, Jay, was doing a kind of circus act, dangling by one arm from one of the cross-ribs of the ceiling to fix the spotlights and providing a reproachful running commentary to those watching below. The stage managers were trying to arrange the scenery on to the little platform so as to leave a few clear feet of walking space. This was so impossible that they had to extend the stage by several rows of wooden benches, which creaked alarmingly when walked upon (and when Malvolio threw the ring at Viola, it dropped right through onto the floor below).

Gaye, still looking green, sank down on a chair and made repairs to her hair and face. I went back out to fetch our luggage from the car, for we had not even been sufficiently sure that it was the right place to start unloading. Ned, who played Aguecheek, came to help and we climbed up and down the slippery path several times in the gentle drizzle. I was pleased at this mark of attention, although I was marginally more interested in Anthony, who played Feste. The slight impression of them that I had formed at rehearsals was that Ned, although charming and funny and immensely likeable, was perhaps rather a shallow person, while Anthony appeared aloof and self-contained, therefore presenting more of a challenge. But Anthony, now forced into the group, already seemed more friendly. He asked me to hear his lines, then we went through his songs on the piano.

People were getting hungry and I was on the cooking team, which was headed by Jilly. There were no facilities in the hut at all, but we had brought with us a large saucepan and a portable electric ring, on which we made soup from a packet. It was the sort that should

have simmered for twenty minutes but was not allowed to. There were not enough mugs to go round, but neither was there enough soup.

The producers arrived in Lisa's car with the bad news that the ice-cream van was not fit for immediate travel and that they had left behind another member of the cast, Matt, who would drive it up as soon as it was ready. Matt's part, Antonio, would therefore have to be read for this performance by poor Milo who, however talented at posters and publicity, was no actor. He started to panic and protest, and ask people if he was good enough but there was simply no alternative.

It was time to prepare for the performance, which meant that all personal luggage had to be cleared out of sight of the audience; there was a small cupboard behind the front door where we stowed our unpleasant collection of damp sweaters, rucksacks and sleeping bags. We dressed in stages in the cramped scullery, feeling some embarrassment at the enforced communal undressing, which was a far cry from our now luxurious university theatre with its spacious dressing rooms, bright lights and hot water. I got into my uncomfortable black dress, its layers of cheap satin still partly held together by safety pins, and put on my make-up in the relative peace of the porch. Then I helped a trembling Milo into the costume made for Matt, who was a good few inches shorter and somewhat wider, further complicated by orange slashed sleeves and a loose white shirt with an involved system of lacing which no-one could understand. When he had powdered his eyebrows grey and drawn lines on his youthful forehead, he sat gloomily on the lavatory, the only peaceful place, while Pete took him through his lines and suggested more dramatic intonations. Gerard the producer, who played Fabian, was the very last to get ready, operating the tape recorder during the first half still dressed in modern vest and Elizabethan breeches, with only an initial layer of make-up on his face.

It was not a large audience, only about thirty people, who were very silent at first, but warmed up hearteningly during the comedy bits. These were certainly the best parts of the play. The rest was a shambles. One problem was that the smaller parts were played by people recruited for skills other than acting, compounded by the fact that we were all seriously under-rehearsed. Stage manager Martin, who played Orsino, had not learned many of his lines at all, and there was total chaos in the Act Five denouement scene. Another handicap was the difficulty of getting from one side of the stage to the other behind the gauze backdrop which hung only about nine inches from the back wall. While on stage, you could see a billowing bulge moving slowly across and at least knew that the next person to enter would be on cue. All my entrances and exits seemed to come from that far side, where there was

even less room in the wings than on the other for Jay and Baz were operating the lighting board fortified by cans of beer.

After the performance, we somehow managed to serve coffee to those of the audience who remained; this was intended to be a feature of the tour, to make a little money and enable us, rather patronisingly, to get to know our audience. But it was hard work because we were tired and embarrassed and there were not enough mugs. And we had not fully appreciated how removing make-up and costumes at the end of the show should symbolise the end of responsibilities and not the start of new tasks.

It was very sordid in the scullery-alcove beside the stage. The sink had only one slow-trickling tap, cold of course, and quickly became filled with disintegrating scraps of tissue, fragments of orange-stained cotton wool, hairpins and broken Leichner sticks, while everyone struggled to use the one small wall mirror. Alice shifted from her role as saucy Maria to that of bossy wardrobe mistress and began the awful task of making the actors take their costumes off, put them on the named hangers, and then slip them back in their polythene bags; these were then laid carefully in one of the upturned rostra and immediately loaded into the van. Most of the boys then worked on stage dismantling the back cloth, arches and lights, to much bustle and shouting, accompanied by loud music on the tape recorder.

Someone's mother had donated an enormous gingerbread which Jilly and I tried to cut into twenty equal portions, more coffee was drunk - fortunately we had bought one of those catering-size tins the size of a small drum - and we began to sort out our possessions for the night in a panic of missing bags and cases. As a light sleeper and most reluctant room sharer, I was dreading the night. Gaye, who liked to put rollers in her hair and things on her face, also sought privacy and we decided that the stage, whose wooden partitions sealed it from the auditorium, would be the best spot. The other girls, even Sue of the production trio, joined us and the small space, when covered with rugs and sleeping bags, took on an atmosphere of exotic comfort.

Then someone suggested going for a walk. The idea was ridiculous: it was cold and wet and we were all exhausted, but at the same time too exhilarated to think of going to sleep. Outside it had just stopped raining, but the ground was damp underfoot and the trees and grass heavy with wetness. We set off along a road which sloped towards the floor of the valley then ran beside the loch. Strange birdcalls came from the undergrowth and there were pinpoints of light from cottages on the far side of the water. We came to a crossroads, one group split off to the left and the others kept on downhill towards the loch. There was a concrete track at the side of the road which led to a sort of blockhouse - something to do with

the war, we wondered, though it was hard to imagine tanks or guns in such a remote spot. At this point, Jilly and Alice announced that they were exhausted and were going back. I was now feeling wide awake and energetic. Anthony had slightly irritated me up to this point by walking alone, either striding in front or dawdling behind the rest of us. He now climbed over a fence beside the road and Ned and I followed him. We seemed to be in a field of tussocks of coarse grass which became increasingly marshy until we were walking in mud almost up to our ankles, and it was hard not to think about leeches or Sherlock Holmes and the Grimpen mire. But then there was a spur of higher ground, a miniature forest of pine trees and the dark water beyond. A strong wind had got up and we had to battle our way down the last steep slope to the sound of great waves breaking and the roar of the gale in the tops of the pine trees. To our surprise, there was a small tent erected by the shore, its occupants happily unaware that they were not alone, and the boys both said how much they wished they were under canvas. This shed a new, sporting light on them but I could not agree. We made our way back across the field by a slightly drier route, felt rather than seen. The road, when we regained it, was shrouded by a thick mist which seemed to hover a few inches off the ground and cast an eerie greenish light; it was like walking through dense cloud. There was a pleasant feeling of intimacy and shared adventure between the three of us and although they had been old friends since school, I did not feel an outsider.

Entering the hut was so different from the first arrival a few hours earlier. It was no longer an unfamiliar and alien place but now represented home-coming, warmth and sleep. The performance already seemed distant in time and the hall looked like a refugee camp. Some people were already asleep, motionless unrecognisable mounds with clothes and luggage strewn around. Jack and Gerard lay side by side smoking cigarettes, their bed formed by a row of benches draped with a large blanket. Sue, wearing a raincoat over a long Victorian-style nightie, tucked them in and kissed them goodnight.

It was even more peaceful on the stage, where a dim light was cast over the slumbering bodies, although there was barely any room left to unroll my sleeping bag. I did not bother to wash in the filthy sink, but merely cleaned my teeth in it, side by side with Ned. It was not a good night's sleep. Sue snored first, gentle and rhythmical and not really disturbing, but from the auditorium came some really awful noises - moaning, whimpering, wheezing (the asthmatic Kenny), even cries and shouts. The floorboards creaked and people rustled as they tossed and turned. It was quite strange to realise how many of us there were spread out in that small space.



*Tuesday 2 July. Dalmally to Oban.*

I woke very early, chilled, because of having rolled half way out of my sleeping bag, stiff and feeling very dirty. But I was too tired to move, and was just beginning to get warm and comfortable when a series of loud bags on the partition meant that it was time to do something about breakfast.

Getting up in the morning would clearly be a fascinating test of character on tour. As a lark rather than an owl, I had no problem and also grasped that rising early would be the only way to wash in peace. But some of the others seemed capable of remaining sound asleep until almost departure time, when they crawled out of their bags and complained that there was no breakfast left. Others went through the motions of getting up but looked as if they were still asleep. Gerard lit a cigarette and put his glasses on, but his eyes remained firmly shut.

Of course there was nothing for breakfast because we had not thought that far ahead. Jilly and I claimed food money from Gerard and went to find the village shop, mercifully just a few minutes walk up the road. It was quite amusing to ask for twenty eggs and six large loaves, but these supplies were surprisingly heavy, and I began to suspect that being on the kitchen team might not be the innocuous task it had appeared.

Breakfast consisted of a first wave of bread and marmalade, followed much later by unpleasantly hard-boiled eggs. In our inexperience of bulk catering, we had not realised how much longer it took to cook large quantities. The water in the saucepan, heated on our portable ring, never seemed to come to the boil yet still produced bullet-like eggs. We also learned the useful rule that it is a mistake to make coffee with the water you have boiled eggs in because it will taste of salt. There was a surprising amount of washing up after such a basic meal, and it had to be done in the disgusting sink. We had not thought to bring a dishmop, and I vainly scrubbed at congealed egg yolk and sugary dregs with a disintegrating piece of Kleenex. Then the hall had to be cleared, sleeping bags rolled up, clothes and possessions packed, and the set carried down the slippery path to the van. This was when Malkie suddenly came into his own. He had joined the company only three days before we set off, because we still lacked a Sebastian. His acting skills were minimal but he displayed a real flair for organising our bulky equipment into the van's limited interior as well as checking its uncertain engine.

That morning I travelled in the open-topped sports car owned by the lighting man, Jay, together with Ned and Brendon, who played the two parts of Attendant Lord and Priest. The car was unpleasantly wet from the previous day's rain because when there were passengers in the back, the hood could not go up. There were actually puddles on the floor, and we had to

sit on newspapers. The other two cars set off and were well out of sight when Baz, stage crew and the van's main driver, announced that it would not start. Everyone climbed out and stood around for half an hour while he and Malkie played with the engine, got through a number of oily rags and endlessly cranked the starting handle; at last it made suitable noises and its passengers came rushing from the woods and hillside to leap in, like something out of an old silent film.

It was a beautiful morning, all scrubbed and clean looking after the rain. The sky was clear blue with a few dazzlingly white clouds scudding along, and the hills and fields were a vivid fresh green. The little car felt alarmingly close to the ground, and we crouched together for warmth, arriving in Oban, our next booking, rather stiff and shivery.

Oban was a bright, busy, windswept town. Our theatre was well sited at the end of the main street. The large banner announcing "Twelfth Night" was already hanging across the front and Sue was selling tickets to a small queue which had formed beside her table outside the main entrance. After Dalmally, this was luxury. The building was actually the local church hall, with Gothic windows and religious pictures on the walls, but the auditorium and stage were spacious and the curtain worked by just pressing a button. Beyond the stage were two rooms with carpets, gas fires, lots of chairs and tables and, beyond them, a real kitchen and a wash room.

The first thing to do, it seemed to me and, unfortunately to several of the others as well, was to locate and stake the most comfortable place to sleep. The best spot here was the smaller of the backstage rooms, where the wire guard around the gas fire was already draped with people's damp socks and jerseys. Then a meal had to be prepared, the choice of menu depending upon the facilities offered by the kitchen. This meant that it was difficult to plan meals in advance, especially as none of us had any idea how much we ought to be buying for such large numbers. After a rapid discussion in terms of pounds and packets, Gaye and I set out with some money in an envelope and two large bags. Oban was a delightful town, or so it seemed so that day because the sun was shining. There was a relaxed holiday atmosphere, the shops sold sandals, sunhats and bathing costumes and visitors were just strolling around enjoying the day. The high street ran parallel to the sea front and every few minutes we caught glimpses of sparkling water and white sails. Buying food, however, was difficult because it was mid-day and the serious shops were shut for lunch. And we discovered a strange feature of Highland towns, that milk could only be bought from milk machines, which might be empty or out of order and required more sixpences than there ever were in the small change.

Laden with food, we returned to the hall and prepared lunch. Jilly instructed me to make a rice pudding, something I had never done in my life because I hated it so from school dinners. The gluey white mass demanded more and more milk and I poured in quantities of sugar, stirring it interminably and feeling martyred. The other part of the meal was mince, which had to be cooked in the tin basin from the sink because there was nothing else large enough. We ate in the auditorium seated on long trestle tables and it tasted all right, but by then we were all very hungry.

Our main publicity strategy was to do a costume tour of the venue on the afternoon before the evening's performance. So the three cars, with posters attached and the hoods back, were filled with gaudily dressed members of the cast and we drove through the town three times, attracting a great deal of attention. The children were the most impressed, cheering and waving at us, their elders rather more reserved. We then drove a little way along the coast road, found it suddenly completely uninhabited, reversed and made for one of the large hotels. It was interesting to see what a wild driver the gentle Lisa became, going far too fast and nearly getting stuck in a ditch. We hoped to do more publicity by talking to the natives, so we entered a great baronial-looking hotel which had plush tartan carpets and old ladies taking tea in the lounge. No-one paid any attention to us: with true British politeness they averted their eyes and went on talking golf. We explained ourselves to the barman, bought whiskies and stood in an embarrassed group. It was my first taste of Scotch, strange and strong, but not unpleasant. We went to another hotel bar after that – this publicity was great - and I reeled back through the busy high street with my black heavy skirts trailing on the pavement.

The hall felt warm and friendly. The stage crew had blacked out the windows with cardboard and erected the set in a larger and more elaborate version than that of the previous night. I settled down on a pile of rugs in the inner room to sober up and read, but Ned came to sit beside me and tease. I was still intrigued by Anthony, because he had refused to come on the publicity tour on the grounds (correctly, it seemed) that it would be embarrassing, and he now walked through the room once or twice watching but not joining us.

That evening's show attracted a large, enthusiastic audience and we gave a much better performance. Matt, who had been left behind with the ailing ice-cream van, arrived, ominously by train, in the middle of the last act and, as people crowded round him for news of the van, Milo forgot his entrance as Antonio: there was an awkward silence on the stage for a few minutes while Orsino bravely volunteered "Methinks the clown is in good fooling

today” and Viola replied “Er, yes.” By which time Milo had been pushed onto the stage and lost his place in the script. Jay, working the lights and tape recorder in the wings, poured a pint of real beer into Sir Toby’s tankard which Pete swallowed down without missing a beat.

When the curtain fell, we could give proper attention to Matt’s news that the van would not be available for another week and he would have to travel back later on to collect it. It was very pleasant to see Matt again. His enthusiasm and relief at being back with us were touching, and the group, which was already forming patterns of behaviour, modified itself to incorporate him. I had been in a history tutorial with him for the past year and had got really annoyed with his eagerness and interest in everything, his indecently long essays and excited questions, which I put down to his being American and which contrasted so strongly with the reserved boredom of the other students. But now all these qualities were a force for good, and his presence lifted our group spirits.

This was in contrast to the impact of Jay, another American. He was rather older than the rest of us and was not a student at all, but had come over from the States to make a documentary, had become involved with the Dramatic Society and had decided to make our tour the subject of his film. On his own admission, his real reason for coming was to observe the effect the group experience would have on our personalities, and he intended to interview us all individually at different stages in order to “test our reactions” as he put it. Although there was no obvious reason, I felt uncomfortable in his presence. Yet he was an entertaining, somewhat dominating companion, tall, and quite attractive with a sensuous mouth but curiously weak chin. It was already obvious that he liked a drink.

We felt the usual sense of gaiety and relief when the show was over, enhanced by the arrival of Matt and by our profitable audience. After a brief snack, the idea of a walk was brought up again, and we decided to do this every night. We headed for the milk machine, and downed icy cartons till it was emptied. Then the party divided up, some wanting to go down to the harbour and others to explore inland; Ned went towards the water, while Anthony’s group turned into a side street. A dilemma for me, and, after a moment’s hesitation, I followed Anthony. We climbed up a steep lane with a metal hand-rail running along the middle, good for somersaulting over and sliding down. The path was very dark, enclosed on either side by tall walls and silent houses. It turned into a sandy track which twisted and climbed through gorse bushes until the town was left far below. In front of us we could see a huge, mysterious building, a vast circle of arches towering one row on top of another; had the Romans got to Oban and built the colosseum? \* In the darkness, it was

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Next day we learnt it was a folly constructed by command of a Victorian philanthropist to create employment.

curiously sinister. We stood in the very centre of the circle and listened to the resonating echoes of our voices. This hill dominated the whole coastline; through the black arches we could see rows of tiny lights along the horizon, the distant outline of mountains, stars reflected in the sea and the flashing of the light-ships. There was also a bird's eye view of the town and we watched the movement of ant-like people in the streets far below. The boys tried to climb the structure but could get no further than the first storey. Getting back down the hill was not so easy, as we attempted a direct route down the east face instead of following the encircling path; this involved sliding down a vertical bank, clinging to tufts of grass and saplings, then carefully getting over a barbed wire fence and a stone wall, ending up in a private back garden. We pretended to be escaping prisoners, tiptoed down a flight of wooden steps underneath a lighted window, and achieved the garden gate without incident. An alleyway led to the harbour and I flung off the game for a few minutes to walk by the sea and think of – one of them, but I wasn't sure which. Two figures approached hand and hand, slender Jack and the more amply built Sue. Outside the hall we came across Baz, slightly drunk, for some reason rolling a large tin barrel along the path. It made a hideous noise and a member of the public opened a window across the street and shouted something abusive.

It felt pleasantly lethargic inside the hall, where several people were already in their sleeping bags and half the lights were out. Gerard, in his pyjamas but waiting up jealously for Jack and Sue, had calculated our net profit, which should have been substantial after the big audience but when set against expenditure was only a few pounds.

Ned and Anthony went to bed side by side in the larger room; I whispered good night to them both and retired to the small inner room which was in a state of girlish untidiness and mess from the performance. Someone had spilt a whole tin of powder in one part of the floor and there was a drift of used tissues by the fireplace.

### *Wednesday 3 July. Oban to Fort William*

I passed another restless, uncomfortable night and woke early with the symptoms of a cold. After a while it felt unbearable to stay in the bag any longer, so I got up (first again, I noted smugly), dressed and crept through the dormitory-like hall to go food-shopping. The porch was very dark and as I fumbled with the heavy bolt on the door to get out, I was alarmed to see what appeared to be the table suddenly sit up and complain at the noise: it was only Baz, who had an obsession about sleeping off the ground.

Oban in the early morning was just as enchanting as it had been yesterday. I walked along the harbour then went down the high street, now so bright and busy. In the baker's shop, I bought a large quantity of morning rolls, those flattish floury baps so distinctively

Scottish, and took them back to the hall where people were starting to get up. We had a leisurely and comfortable breakfast which all took a very long time because the scrambled eggs had to be cooked in shifts and then, since there was a cooker with a grill, there was much demand for toast in addition to the rolls.

Packing and clearing up took an alarming amount of time. Those of us who were ready sat around on the grass outside and made daisy chains, while a number of small children came to watch and even ask for our autographs, which made us feel like real professionals. I said to Anthony, "Why don't you come in Jay's car today?" and, to my delight, he agreed, taking Ned's place however; while I had intended that he should replace Brendon so that they would both be travelling with me. We were the first to set off for Fort William, about two hours' drive away. The route was far more attractive than the previous day's journey, for it followed the spectacular coastal road for much of the way. As we approached a long steep hill leading up to a modern bridge over one of the many inlets of the sea, the car began to show symptoms of distress then jerkily stopped. Jay managed to free-wheel back down to a providentially sited garage and we all had to climb out while our other vehicles swept past, the occupants waving and jeering. The garage man thought that things would be all right if the passengers got out and walked up the hill, and so we did, watching anxiously while the car made tentative runs at the foot of the slope and finally overtook us on the way up, spluttering a little but making steady progress. There was similar apprehension at the Ballachulish ferry, where we had to join a long queue of cars which inched forward in a series of stops and starts. This was made more distracting by knowing that the big van, which was equally capable of breaking down, was some places ahead of us.

The ferry crossing provided a beautiful few minutes of stillness after the queuing and noisy revving of engines: even that of the ferry boat was switched off before it reach the further shore, and the oddly shaped craft swung round as if it was drifting into the clear water beyond. There was an anxious moment when we had to drive off the boat up a steep ramp but the car coped.

The route looked a long journey on the map, in and out along the twisting coast line, trapped between mountain ranges and sea, but it was so beautiful that the time passed quickly. Anthony knew the area and indicated a cottage where he had once stayed. He still felt a remote person, but he had appeared pleased to come in the car and now sat very close to me in the back seat (not that there was much option), with one arm carelessly extended along the back, almost touching my shoulders. Jay, with sly looks in the mirror, seemed to have

penetrated my thoughts, but I decided this must be my imagination because he scrutinised everyone like that.

Fort William was the first proper settlement after Oban. As we drove inland along the shore of a long loch, houses suddenly mushroomed, docks, piers, a large garage, a whole town. It was all so big we were not quite sure where to go, but as the performance was to be in the Town Hall, felt that this should be easy enough to find. Fort William appeared to have one main street, narrow one but bustling with traffic and life. It was lined with tourist shops festooned with tartans and woolly products, there were sweetie shops, grocers, banks and even a cinema, and a permanent traffic jam. But no Town Hall. Too soon we found ourselves heading into open country again, turned with difficulty, got lost up a hill, came down another and found ourselves accidentally in the right place. The hall was a large stone building with a classical façade, which formed one side of a small square with a civic statue in the middle and a little local museum opposite.

As there was no sign of the others, we assumed they had stopped for a coffee on the way and were secretly relieved. There was rather a special feeling about being the first to arrive in a new place because it meant a brief suspension of responsibilities: the burden of shopping and cooking could not start until the relevant equipment had been unloaded. In fact I had the completely disloyal and inexplicable hope that the van might fail to turn up at all, which, considering the remote and rugged countryside, was not absolutely unlikely. For now, the door to the Town Hall was locked and as only Gerard knew who had the key, we could do nothing but adjourn to the pub across the road, because it would be convenient, as Jay pointed out, for keeping an eye on the square. It was very pleasant to sit there sipping our drinks like normal holiday makers. Jay was in a very good mood and boasted to us about his theatrical experiences in the States; he was certainly doing a great job with our lighting.

After this interlude, we returned to the Town Hall where Lisa's car and the van had arrived, and people were starting to unload the set and costumes, surrounded by a mob of children. This was a better theatre than at Oban, for there was a proper stage with real lighting equipment and a good-sized auditorium which even had a gallery at the back for an overflowing audience. The building had long dark passages and the whole interior was panelled in heavily varnished wood. The generous dressing room could be divided into two by a sliding partition and there was the remarkable refinement of separate Ladies and Gents lavatories, of which there were a good many, both inside and out, since the town's public conveniences were situated on either side of the Town Hall. The kitchen was feasible too, with trestle tables and a hot water urn, but it was occupied by a hostile caretaker who did not

intend to let us to use it. So lunch had to be hastily prepared in the dressing room, a snack of unpleasantly gritty (because unwashed) lettuce and tinned spam. We carried our plates outside to eat, though unsuitably dressed for a picnic in the surprisingly hot sun, only interrupted by an occasional tourist stepping through us on their way to the lavatory.

There was the usual drifting away of people when we had to do the washing up, inconveniently in a small hand-basin in the Ladies. Anthony and Ned had vanished and I wandered through the hall looking for them in vain. The auditorium was dimly lit, and the stage crew was erecting the set, enjoying the luxury of the most space yet. I decided to start a letter home since so much seemed to have happened since we set out three mornings ago but had not been writing long when I was interrupted by Jaan. He was an irritating Dutch boy with a sparse gingery beard and rabbit-like front teeth who had been recruited at the last minute to gabble his way through the part of the Sea Captain. His lovely line, ‘This is Illyria, lady’, came out as ‘Zizzizzlirralay’. He lounged up, peered rudely over my shoulder and commented on the inadequacy of my handwriting, which became an excuse to expound upon his own fascinating and distinctive script. It occurred to me that he might have been drinking. To my relief, Ned appeared out of the gloom, followed by Anthony, and regarded Jaan with malicious amusement. Jaan sensed he was being laughed at and left in a huff.

I turned rather petulantly on them and asked where they had gone: exploring the town and having an ice-cream. I felt hurt that they had left me out and, at the same time, wondered at myself that I, who had known them for such a short while, should presume to be included in their long-standing friendship. Two of the quieter members of the company, they stood in contrast to prickly Jaan, earthy Baz, boisterous Matt and sinister Jay, yet made a slightly incongruous pair: Anthony seemed to have a stronger, or harder to read character, whereas Ned was mercurial, with a surreal sort of humour which was starting to reveal itself and was expressed in his fine and subtle performance as Sir Andrew Aguecheek. During rehearsals, he had appeared a quiet and subdued person, like me perhaps being overawed at having obtained a part on the tour, but now, like me, beginning to find his feet.

Gerard came fussing up, uneasy at seeing people not doing anything useful. It was interesting to see how having to organise all of us had transformed the lazy Valentino of the Dramatic Society into a nanny-like figure determined to enforce the duties of his charges. He now ordered me to go and help with publicity. . Milo and Lisa were in charge of this department of the tour, which meant that they were always one town ahead of us mentally, and sometimes physically too. They had taken over a little room upstairs where sunlight streamed through the windows, and were hard at work, watched with awe by the caretaker’s



children, making our unusual economy-style posters. The letters were cut from newspaper headlines glued in collage to stiff cartridge paper. I was not much help to these proper artists, having laboriously made two posters before realising that there was an F in “Twelfth” and becoming deeply discouraged, though gaining increased respect for the art college. Lisa showed the same unexpected confidence in her artwork as in the driving of her car; she became commanding and assured, in contrast to the nervous, silly sweetness she displayed in the company of a larger group. Milo worked with a kind of slapdash efficiency. I had initially thought him shy like Lisa but was coming to realise that his diffidence sprang rather from a lack of interest in other people.

That afternoon, we had time to do a long costume tour as there was no performance until the following night. This resulted in complications with the luggage, because we were not permitted to sleep in the Town Hall but had been allocated a boy scout hut some way out of town in the direction of Ben Nevis. This meant that all personal possessions, sleeping bags and food had to be transported there by the van, resulting in some agonising decisions to be made about kitchen equipment and clothes. Eventually we put on a selection of costumes and set off. I made a determined effort not to pursue Ned or Anthony and travelled beside Matt in the back of Lisa’s car, which was stuck all over with posters; we perched high on the folded-back hood, waving at the people in the streets and shouting out the time and place of the performance. While driving around, we noticed a small funfair on the road out of town and determined to return to it that evening. After circulating the streets a few times, we returned to the car park outside the theatre and Gerard tried to organise us into groups to circulate the pubs. Our entrance into a crowded pub in the high street was in distinct contrast to the bored but polite reaction we had raised at Oban, for we were greeted with incredulous stares, scathing comments and jeers from the hard-drinking occupants who did not seem the sort who wanted to attend a Shakespearean play. Ned and Pete were so embarrassed that they slunk into a corner and refused to move on. The rest of us pressed on to find a better class of hostelry, another baronial hotel up a steep hillside, reached by impressive flights of steps. The bar was almost empty, but the barman was friendly and we sat there in peace, agreeing that the costume tours were tiring and futile. Time drifted on until we decided to give it up and go to the fair, the thing I had been waiting for all evening, tormented by the thought that Ned and Anthony might already be there, and that I was missing something.

We collected the others, still parading the streets unhappily in their costumes, and drove to the scout hut to change. This was some way out along a narrow country road, a simple building with a main hall filled with rows of tiny benches, and the walls plastered with

useful information about knots and butterflies. A little passage at the end led to midgets' washrooms and a doll's kitchen: a further tiny room beyond had a cupboard containing the works of Arthur Ransome and a lot of well-thumbed paperback whodunits. We retrieved our kit, dumped the costumes on the floor, changed back into everyday wear and at last set out for the fair.

It was in a small field at the back of a housing estate on the outskirts of the town, not large but an apparently popular annual event. My first thought was to find Anthony, who I spotted with some dismay sharing a swing-boat with Lisa. The most popular attraction was the dodgem cars, besieged by new occupants each time they stopped. Brendon and I rushed for one and he coiled his long body uncomfortably into the driver's seat. We were unlucky in our vehicle, which suffered from constant power failures and had to be restarted by the attendant climbing recklessly over the barrier to give us a shove before we were thumped again by more mobile cars. We wouldn't have had much success in retaliating even if the car had worked properly for Brendon had far too nice a nature to enjoy the aggressive game and I hated loud noises. Jack and Gerard sat together, Jilly and Matt, Gaye and Baz, all whirling around and constantly crashing into us. At last it all slowed down and we reeled to the side, where Anthony and Lisa were waiting. Eagerly I proposed another ride to Anthony, but he said he had a headache and was going to lie down in the van. So I went on the swingboats with Matt. I was annoyed at Anthony's feebleness, and when I wandered alone through the side-shows, they suddenly seemed dull.

Then there was a caravan labelled "Fortune-teller" which I thought might help my indecision. I was greeted by a very, very old lady whose skin was a complete network of soft wrinkles. She ushered me to a cushioned bench and conferred with a younger lady who had just shown in Matt by the other entrance; they then started to whisper our separate fortunes, just a few feet from each other. This was extremely distracting, for I was simultaneously trying to listen to what Matt was being told while keeping my own voice too low for him to hear. My fortune-teller was not inspiring: her technique was to ask me leading questions about myself and then agree with them, and then to make statements of such amazing generality that I had no option but to agree with her. She observed that I was interested in someone who was "not far away" and who had either light or dark hair, a description fitting Ned and Anthony as well as all the other boys in the company very accurately indeed. Matt was getting much the same treatment, and saying "Gosh, yes" politely at intervals. I crossed her palm with half a crown and departed with my fate unresolved. The other girls started queuing to learn their destinies and received similarly tenuous prophecies about life and love.

Back in the scout hut, someone discovered a pile of old mattresses in the store-room. There was an unseemly struggle for possession but they were not much of a prize because most were affected by damp and mould. I suddenly longed to sleep alone like Pete, who had staked his claim to a tiny cubicle leading off the passage: he said that this was purely unselfish behaviour since he was such a bad snorer.

Having given no performance, we were unusually alert and wakeful and nobody felt ready for sleep. After bread and coffee, we lay around on the floor telling stories and playing word games. Even Anthony, who had retired to his sleeping bag as soon as we got in and refused refreshment in a martyred way, now revived and tossed in an occasional answer. He certainly had no chance of sleeping until we all got tired. Baz began to make his usual elevated bed on the seats of several little chairs which he had dragged together, and their slatted backs made it look as if he was in a giant cot. I realised the craved-for solitude could be achieved by sleeping in the kitchen. It made a sordid bedroom, with barely room to unfold my sleeping-bag on the floor between the sink, defunct gas cooker and dustbins, which had not been emptied by the previous residents. The water pipe from the basin was particularly noisy and, if I moved sideways, my head was in danger of bumping the dustbin. But it was mine alone.

*Thursday 4 July: Fort William*

As usual I awoke very early, but for once did not immediately want to get out of the bag, which felt quite comfortable for the first time; I wondered whether there was an art in breaking them in. The only incentive to get up was the thought that the others might come bursting in for breakfast. It was another fine morning and the sun poured in despite the dirty glass of the kitchen window. I made a leisurely toilette and even put on a cotton dress, a pleasant change from the usual jeans. Washing last night's dishes and setting out the breakfast things, I felt ridiculously light-hearted as well as morally superior, the only person up and working hard too. The main hall remained silent and the only sound was Pete's snores from the next room.

The company instinctively sensed that food was available, and started getting up, stumbling around and looking very unlike their elegant stage characters. Breakfast was the usual squalid cosy meal, consumed on the floor of the hall in the half-light of the paper window blinds, some people remaining in their sleeping bags and lending an orientally decadent air to the meal. Baz reclined in his nest of chairs and demanded breakfast in bed. Lisa stayed sound asleep, just a hump in a rug, and Jilly and Jaan were not much better.

There was a wonderful sense of leisure and liberty, for we had nothing to do until the evening performance.

Around midday, we travelled back into town to sort out the costumes and prepare the set. Alice washed all the detachable white collars and cuffs and the paler tights, which she then hung damply across the girls' half of the dressing room. They remained wet all day and she had to try and iron them dry just before the performance, which was not comfortable for the wearers. Gerard was threatening a run-through on stage to get used to the new position of the set, as we were meant to do every day, and Jilly was worrying what to do for lunch. I could not face the thought of preparing another meal and slipped out by the side door. Crossing the square, I found Ned, who was just sitting in the sun. "Where are you going?" he said eagerly, and I explained about wishing to avoid the kitchen for a while. "Let's go for a walk then", he suggested. We didn't risk going very far, being tied by that umbilical cord to the group, but just down to the harbour, where we leant on a wall and watched the fishing boats, the gulls and the mud, set against a background of clear hills on the other side of the loch. Then back towards the hall, interrupted by an exuberant Cairn puppy which yapped at us from a front garden then came bouncing over to play. We hardly even spoke but I felt a complete warmth and amity with Ned, with none of that acquisitive and jealous interest that I had in Anthony. Altogether, the tour was becoming a revelation in that I was sensing a happiness and self-confidence that I had never experienced before, being with people whose company I enjoyed and who seemed to like me in return. I was almost reckless with high spirits.

After the lunch to which I had not contributed, Anthony, who had been absent for a while, turned up accompanied by two smiling ladies. These he introduced as his mother and a friend who were touring the Highlands and were coming to the show that evening. The mother seemed devoted to him, and he behaved towards her with a gallantry which I found charming. Ned was fetched, already an old acquaintance, and we all went to have a drink the seedy pub across the road, where we boasted about our hardships and exaggerated the physical horrors of Dalmally.

There was a run-through on the stage later on, then Gerard and I put up the foyer display boards. This was my favourite task, not just for the pleasure of contemplating my own lovely photograph – big hair, satin gown, chin resting on bejewelled hand - but because I also adored looking at the images of the rest of the company, which seemed to characterise them far more strongly than their actual physical presence. The camera had captured their very essences in black, white and grey, grainy of texture and already slightly rubbed at the edges:

Ned, angelic-looking in his floppy lace collar, leaning drunkenly back to back with Pete, Baz looking like an early Christian martyr with heavenward eyes, although he had no acting part whatsoever, Jack, Gerard and Sue in a typical huddle together, Sue alone looking curiously like an Indian squaw.

I did not much enjoy that evening's performance, because my embryonic cold was threatening my voice, and I was afraid of straining it or starting to cough. Ned was very forthcoming that night, but I only had eyes for Anthony, who seemed particularly evasive. The audience was kind but sparse for the size of the town and our extensive publicity campaign, and had a lot to put up with in the last scene when Martin as Orsino, who had never learned his lines for the end of the play, went completely to pieces, even worse than on the previous occasion. The show was also memorable for Anthony as Feste quite unconsciously remarked "Cheerio" to Viola as he made an exit. After the performance, Anthony's mother, who was very complimentary about the performance, donated several bottles of wine, Jay fetched his cinecamera and we got very merry on the stage.

When the time came to vacate the hall (the poor caretaker pacing up and down rattling his keys), there was the usual slow business of allotting places in all the vehicles. I was in Jay's car when it typically stopped and everyone had to get out and push. Anthony lent a shoulder then seemed to making off in another direction. "Aren't you coming with us?" I called to him, trying to make it sound casual. "No", he said, "we're going for a picnic". Slight pause. "Would you like to come?" I accepted like a shot, then suffered agonies of wondering whether I was really wanted – presumably not, or he would have asked me earlier and not on the random chance of Jay's car stalling. Still, that was not so bad as having learnt that they had gone and I had not been there. So Ned, Anthony and I sat in the back seat of his mother's car and drove first back to the scout hut to dump our things and acquire some bread, which Jilly objected to as there was not much left. I felt suddenly sorry for the rest who were sitting around on their sleeping bags eating bread and margarine and syrup.

We drove a little way up the mountain and stopped for an elegant snack of pate, tinned mussels, washed down with whisky from a little flask, which seemed an incredibly sophisticated thing to travel with. Like me, Anthony had had his first taste of whisky on the tour, which his mother pretended to be delightfully shocked about. When we returned, the usual somnolent atmosphere had settled over the hall and most people were asleep. I prepared my nest in the cramped kitchen (so undesirable a spot that no-one else had attempted to claim it) and had already been in my sleeping bag for a few minutes when there was a sound of whispering outside the door: "She'll be asleep", "No she won't", then a tapping and Ned's

voice, "Have you got a cigarette?" So they both came in and sat down, partly on the floor, mainly on the bag, and we chatted for two hours about nothing at all. It was so comfortable there in the darkness, the three of us, Anthony with his back propped against the door and Ned sprawled by my shoulder. There were companionable silences while our cigarettes glowed and ebbed. At one moment, Jay, on his way to the wash-cubicle, popped his head around the door and professed to be shocked: "Two men at once!" But he didn't try to join us.

Anthony eventually announced that he was going to bed. I protested, reluctant for him to leave, and not necessarily wanting to be left alone with Ned. "Ned wants me to go" he said rather abruptly, and left. I felt indignant with him and suddenly shy. If Anthony had decided to leave us alone, it was either because he thought that Ned wanted him to go, or that I wished to be left alone with Ned. This was all rather confusing. My reaction was to attempt to get Ned to leave as quickly as possible. He was now occupying the greater part of the bag and pretending to be asleep. I shook him gently and said "Goodnight" several times, without effect. At last he rose, appeared to make for the door, then suddenly turned, gripped my shoulders and tried to kiss me. I stiffened in his arms and could not respond because I was so surprised. He let go and stood up again. I took his hand and kissed it to express apology, he murmured something and left. I lay down, alone at last, but even more confused. Would I have resisted Anthony's embrace? Presumably not; because it was annoyance at his departure that had made me suddenly resentful towards Ned. Anthony was the one I had wanted to stay. But I had not expected this of Ned, for I had genuinely not imagined that he felt for me anything more than comradeship. This however made me view him in a completely new light. I lay awake for a long time, replaying the scene in my mind a number of times and letting him stay. If only we were in that J.B.Priestley play where you have a chance to go back and have another start. But this was real life.

*Friday 5 July: Fort William*

I was woken out of a sound sleep very early indeed. It was Ned again. "Do you want to climb Ben Nevis?" he asked. Pete and some others had been planning this climb since yesterday. Although the sleeping bag had never seemed so warm and comfortable, I did not want to miss a moment of the day. Shivering and sticky, I put on my heaviest sweater and was soon huddled in the front seat of Milo's car as we drove upwards into the mists, already starting to regret my rashness. For one thing, Anthony wasn't there and however I had rewound the film in my mind last night, I still wanted to see him that morning. And I now

felt some constraint in Ned's presence, which he appeared to share even though it was he who had asked me to come. And their professional approach to the climb was daunting; the boys were all quite serious about it, Milo had brought oranges to be eaten on the summit and chocolate for the way back.

Too soon the road came to an end and we had to get out of the car into the damp chilly morning. The grass was sodden, the air wet and heavy and a solid white mist hid most of the mountain from our view. We climbed over a wall into a field and were immediately uncertain which way to go, Ned heading left up a steep slope and the rest of us initially ploughing straight on into mud which turned into marshland so that we had to backtrack. Then there was a path which got steeper and narrower until it was possible to believe that we really were climbing a mountain. The valley floor extended beneath us, looking exactly like a diagram in my geomorphology text book (I had just taken an exam in the subject), the rippling indentations of eskers and moraines, all wreathed in low cloud. We were already quite high and seemed to be cut off from everything below. The only sound was the rushing of a nearby stream and the steady dripping of water from the rocks. Sheep loomed up out of the mist, stared and rushed away. The path sometimes petered out all together and we had to scramble up slippery rocks. I was not really enjoying myself. The pace was far too hard and it was obvious, after half-an-hour's climbing, that there would be no view at all from the cloud-covered summit. So I announced that I had gone far enough, was given an orange and started to retrace my steps. My spirits instantly lifted. It was beautiful to be completely alone so early in the morning in this gigantic landscape, going down was much pleasanter than going up, as was being able to pause for the overwhelming view, whenever this was actually revealed, and revel in the noise of the water and the oddly deafening effect of the swirling mist. I ate my orange sitting on the gate which led back to the road. The mountain already looked miles away.

It was a long walk back to the hut although it had seemed all too quick in the car. The only sound was the humming of the wind in the telegraph wires, that high pitched, monotonous, sinister noise so typical of moorlands. I loved the sense of isolation that it gave: there was only me, detached from time and from people, walking along a deserted road, my feet dabbling in the heavy dew in the grasses at the road's edge, and I picked a bunch of damp buttercups and lacy white flowers. The top of the Ben was completely invisible. It was only half past seven in the morning. Back in the hut, there was total stillness. I tiptoed to the kitchen, boiled up some water and had a leisurely wash. Then I moved my sleeping bag into the hall, wriggled in and went back to sleep. Some time later, there was sudden noise,

shouting and laughter, and I awoke to find Pete shaking damp heather over me. They claimed to have reached the top, which was all mist and pieces of orange peel.

We had another lazy breakfast which lingered on till midday and were just starting to load the van when Anthony's mother drew up outside the hut. He went to chat to her and, a few minutes later, I felt horribly jealous to hear him invite Jilly to drive with them to Fort Augustus, our next venue, to do some advance publicity. Jilly indeed! She was engaged to another, and I had never noticed that she and Anthony were particularly friendly. Ned was also asked, but declined because Gerard and Jack had called a rehearsal that afternoon; they were starting to become touchy about the parts of the show which were still inexplicably going wrong. I was probably lingering and looking wistful, because Anthony asked me if I would like to come too. We asked Gerard when we would be needed to rehearse, decided there was enough time, so Ned agreed to come too. I was happy again.

The main company travelled back into Fort William where they were performing the other item in our repertoire, Fry's one-act play "A Phoenix Too Frequent" that night, so possessions and food had to be transferred back to the Town Hall. Jilly, as head cook, was worrying what to do about lunch, and whether to come to Fort Augustus or not. I was not very sympathetic, having no desire for another girl to disrupt what I saw as the close trio of Anthony, Ned and myself, although Jilly herself was eminently likeable. Gaye nobly offered to take control of the day's cooking but Jilly's conscience prevailed and she decided to stay behind.

So it was just the three of us in the back seat again on the way to Fort Augustus. The road was bleak and sombre, winding through a dismal glen, with glimpses of steep slopes and black pine-clad hills across a gloomy loch as the windscreen wipers whirred back and forward against in the drizzle. We halted at a monument surrounded with charabancs for another fine picnic, and reached Fort Augustus in about an hour. It seemed a drab little town, but I was beginning to realise how the weather on arrival affected impressions of a new place. We located the hall, a faded orange-painted shack roofed with corrugated iron, at the end of a steep lane on the outskirts of the settlement. The door was locked, but we peered in through dusty windows and established that the kitchen had a hot water urn, a promising sign. Then we went down the main street and distributed posters to a café, a garage and various Highland craft shops full of the usual fleecy rugs, socks and things made of deer horn. Ned was very silent. I walked beside him and tried to make cheerful conversation, but he had remained wrapped in gloom, which I felt must be my fault because he was aware of my interest in Anthony. Yet seeing him in this new aloof mood, I felt just as attracted to him.



After more attempts to get rid of our posters, which was difficult because few places seemed to be open, we gave it up and had a home-made tea in the parlour of a little house at the head of the loch. How shabby and untidy we three seemed to be in those genteel surroundings. It was a shock to realise how out of touch we had become from the niceties of daily life. Normal people were clean, used tablecloths and saucers and had a teaspoon each.

Ned began to worry about getting back for the rehearsal. In the car he slept, his head nodding against my shoulder. When we reached the Town Hall, the run-through of "A Phoenix" was still going on, so we went for a drink, accompanied by Jaan who was in one of his aggressive moods. He could never stop talking about to himself, making fantastically conceited and dogmatic statements which it was best to agree with, while he glared suspiciously with his little beady eyes. Ned was greatly entertained by Jaan and made a particular point of enticing him into long tortuous comments on life expressed in idiomatic English. Jay was also with us, and his penetrating eyes seemed to be reading my innermost thoughts. He had a very disconcerting effect on me.

The stage was cold and draughty, the rehearsal dull and our performances unimproved. That night, "A Phoenix Too Frequent" played to an audience of ten, who did not laugh at all. I watched it from the back of the hall and was impressed with this little gem of a play. Gaye was excellent, but it was perhaps not a good choice for a touring play and Sue's flat drawl (for it was her acting debut) not at all suitable for Fry's crisp verse.

For our last night in the scout hut, we cooked an unappetising supper of sausage meat and baked beans, garnished with bread and margarine. It was a wretched meal to have to make for twenty people in our frying pan, and took a very long time indeed, with interruptions from desperately hungry people kept coming into the kitchen and clamouring to eat. At last we finished, and I sank on the floor exhausted and sticky. Spirits were low all round for we had barely broken even in Fort William and there was hardly anything in the emergency float for buying food. Gerard sat with his head in his hands, being consoled by Sue who sprawled over him and stroked his brow; while Jack sat close by looking tense. The situation was bad, with little money, no adequate advance publicity and the infectious depression which was spreading; doubts were even expressed about carrying on.

*Saturday 6 July: Fort William to Fort Augustus*

I had an uncomfortable journey travelling in the large van and having to sit on the part of the engine that projected between the two front seats and became uncomfortably hot. Also in the van travelled the hard-working stage crew and technicians who liked to be with their equipment and scenery all the time, and Alice, a large and sometimes over-hearty girl, in order to protect the costumes. They all sang university rigger songs and I did not feel part of them at all. Baz drove with boisterous energy, sometimes shouting rudely out of the window at drivers he disapproved of. At Fort Augustus, the iron-roofed hall which looked so small from the outside turned out to be surprisingly spacious. As well as auditorium and stage, there were various anterooms and cloakrooms, and a stone-flagged kitchen. The whole interior was panelled in dark-varnished wood, which gave an overwhelmingly depressing effect, the gloom however relieved by large electric fires set high on the walls, which threw out welcoming light and heat once we located the fuse boxes.

Some of us went to distribute more posters. We strolled down to the canal and lock system which joined Loch Ness to Loch Oich, where a boat was passing through. There were a few shops here, all with revolting souvenirs of the Loch Ness Monster, and Sue bought a lot of postcards. We then found the town's Roman Catholic school and abbey, and went to explore the grounds. With incredibly unfortunate timing, our performance coincided with the school's Open Day, when the boys put on their own annual play. This would obviously deprive us of a huge potential audience. A broad drive swept towards the picturesque school buildings, cricket was being played, well-dressed parents and old boys drifted around the lawns. The white flannels and bright frocks created a distinctively English scene, which clashed strangely with the towering hills and black water beyond. Jack had actually been to this school and was there, looking oddly respectable in a suit and tie, mingling with old friends. He joined us and we walked down to the loch where a jetty provided a small harbour for rowing boats. It was all curiously still. The purple slopes of the steep hills seemed to run straight down into the water; miles away, at the far end of the narrow loch, blue shadowy mountains, piled one behind the another, appeared to stretch out to infinity.

When we got back to the hut, there was a palpable buzz of excitement, a sense of lifted spirits, of whispering groups, of conspiracy. Amy, who moved around as demurely as a little cat and was in everyone's confidence, told me about it. A few days earlier, a national daily newspaper had published the seasonal image of the Loch Ness Monster, with standard horned head and humps protruding from the water. The only novelty of the story was that the local photographer claimed to have snapped it in Loch Oich, which posed the intriguing

question as to how the monster had managed to pass through the lock and canal system which separated the two lochs. The paper called the beast “Wee Oichy”. This was all perfectly straightforward and quite boring and I could not understand why there was so much excitement in the hall. Amy expounded. The barman at one of the big tweedy hotels, who had met our advance publicity tour a few weeks earlier, had tipped off a newly arrived reporter that the current monster thing was connected with “thae students up at the hall.” So the reporter had come to see us, and it soon became clear that he knew perfectly well that we had nothing to do with it and that we knew that he knew. But a story and an image had to be created, and he would be returning in two hours with a photographer, when we would hold a press conference and confess that he had penetrated the latest monster hoax. This would be a scoop for him and would provide urgently needed publicity for us.

Lisa, our most experienced artist, began to create fake monster plans, convincing-looking diagrams with arrows, pencilled measurements, sketches of floatation sacs and the like, while the boys manufactured a lumpy head out of hessian, wire and newspaper. Once this had been saturated with tap water to represent its long immersion in Loch Oich, we were ready for the press. The reporter returned, interviewed the monster-makers and took photographs of its moist head, proudly held up by Lisa, Matt and Baz. He then presented bottles of whisky and cigarettes all round and promised that we would be in the papers.

This ridiculous incident brought back good humour and optimism and that evening’s performance had a lot of pace despite the small audience. After the show, we happily lazed around, drinking and chatting into the early hours. As it was Saturday and we were not travelling on till Monday morning, we were allowed to stay on in the hall, so there was no pressure to load up and no need for an early night. The tape recorder churned out the familiar tunes – we already knew the scores of Oklahoma and High Society by heart. The hall was practically dark, lit by a few dim lights and the glow of the electric fire. The monster team huddled around a table planning further ramifications to the hoax, we were all at ease with each other, pleased with the fillip of publicity, and generally feeling that the tour, which was not quite a week old, was a success.

I was particularly aware of Ned that evening as we lounged side by side on the stage, laughing at Jay, who was very drunk and ebullient, stimulated by the contact with the outside world of the press and a real excuse for drinking. As people were starting to make a move towards bed, Jay summoned me into the dressing room where I followed rather apprehensively. But it was only for one of his interviews, the survey he was making of all the members of the cast: he pulled out his black notebook and proceeded to interrogate me over

my views upon acting, although, as usual, it turned into Jay expressing his own opinions to a captive audience. Happiest when, slightly drunk, he seemed obsessed about the way that people reacted to him, though I could never work out what the criteria were meant to be. There was nothing personal about any of these interrogations: they were conducted more as a tribute to his own opinion of himself as a great judge of character than from a genuine interest in other people. We had a heated discussion, he being passionately in favour of the most extreme form of “the Method”, myself having no more than lukewarm support for Stanislavsky.. Then Anthony and Martin came to join us, and they began an animated argument on theatre techniques generally, Martin maintaining that it was possible to put on a play without actors, scenery or sound. I was in a stupor of sleep by this time and left them to get on with it for my sleeping-bag, in a fairly private corner underneath the stage and hidden by the curtain.

*Sunday 7 July: Fort Augustus*

I awoke to a great shaft of sunlight pouring in along the side of the hall, and lay in my bag savouring the quality of life: fine weather, no show, no travelling, Sunday, Ned, Anthony. Chatting with Gaye, whose bag was nearby, we decided – again - that we could not face cooking another meal and really wanted a proper Sunday lunch in a hotel. So a luncheon party was formed, Gaye put on stockings and stilettos, Alice and I managed cotton frocks although with pallid bare legs, Brendon produced a proper, although slightly crumpled suit from his luggage, and Anthony wore his less bad jeans. I begged Ned to come too, but he turned mulish: he didn't have enough money, he said, and he wasn't going to dress up, and nothing I could say would move him. As we went down the main street, we met Jack returning from Mass wearing the smart pair of trousers that he and Gerard, being the same height, had brought to share for emergencies and formal occasions; in fact, Gerard had mislaid his own jeans that morning and was having to wear bathing trunks until the trousers came back.

The choice of hotel was tricky because it had to be moderate enough in price for our slender pockets yet sufficiently grand to justify the excursion. We found just the right sort of place, with tartan carpets and a ponderous dining room, where we did full justice to the set lunch, then got our money's worth by lingering over coffee in the deep leather armchairs of the lounge. I was very happy with the assembled company. Gaye was already a friend - we had just been in another show together, spent more time on our clothes and make-up than the other girls, and were planning to share a flat next year. Alice too was amiable, inclined to

take her wardrobe duties a little too seriously on occasion, but with a great sense of humour. I fancied that she was attracted to Brendon, which seemed eminently suitable since they were both kind and gentle people and both quite large – Brendon in height and Alice in breadth. And, quite apart from my designs on him, Anthony made a civilised companion, courteous and amusing.

It was strange to be out of the tour ambience for a while, to be reminded how physically comfortable and pleasant the outside world was yet how easily it could be done without. Our touring company was cut off from radio or newspapers and dependent on box office receipts for food and transport. We were sleeping on hard dirty floors and our staple diet was bread, margarine and cornflakes, but we were coping without things that had previously seemed an essential part of daily life. We ate because we were ravenous, slept because we were exhausted and washed (sometimes) because we were extremely dirty. The visit to the hotel had been a treat, if only as a reminder of an unnecessary lifestyle. It was quite a revelation.

There was a performance of “A Phoenix Too Frequent” late that afternoon for the boys from the school, who had recently performed it themselves. The rest of us went for a walk, including Ned, who was not being too friendly and who made a particular point of going to fetch Jaan; they seemed to be getting quite close. A path at the back of the hall led us straight into open country. When it forked; Anthony and I went to the left but the rest turned to the right. I could feel Jaan leering at me and was annoyed at his presence; if he had not been there, Ned would have come with us. As a result, I did not feel entirely at ease in Anthony’s company and wondered if this were proof that our friendship was something more than casual. We found ourselves on the upper slopes of a hill, heavily wooded below and increasingly steep and bare except for clumps of purple heather. There were voices ahead, Lisa’s giggles, Brendon’s deep tones, Alice’s laugh, and we decided to stalk them. This was difficult because there were patches of open grass, slender young saplings, and only low clumps of bracken and thick tussocks of grass and moss. Jaan and Ned suddenly appeared behind; they had been stalking us. We all lay on the grass and stared at the view, but I found Jaan’s presence disturbing and was relieved when he and Ned left, pushing back into the undergrowth. It was calm and sunny. I still felt I did not know Anthony well, though there was now a degree of familiarity between us. His grave though friendly behaviour was quite different from Ned’s exuberant teasing. Anthony was not one who took girls lightly. I had occasionally seen him around the University with a proper girlfriend, a large-bosomed person who wore (voluntarily!) the unflattering Women’s OTC uniform. During the rehearsal period,

she had sat possessively beside him in the student refectory while the rest of the company chatted around another table. In fact, I recollected, there had been one occasion during rehearsals when he was late because, Ned informed us, he had been saying goodbye to her before the tour. Of course, she was the reason I had not originally felt an acquisitive interest in Anthony, assuming him already spoken for, and had therefore been able to behave in a completely relaxed way in his presence. But now ... well, he never mentioned her name, unlike the way Jilly talked all the time about her Ian. We lay and looked at the sky and the hills, and talked until the sun went in and we began to feel that irresistible pull back to the group to find out what was going on.

Back at the hall, Lisa was crouched in the long grass sketching, and Gerard, Sue and Gaye, still wearing their "Phoenix" costumes, were sitting outside on the steps recovering from the performance. There was hardly anyone else around, for the barman from the hotel, to whom the Loch Ness monster reporter had also been generous, was standing the company drinks. We helped take down the set, then Jilly began to fuss about supper and I re-entered the prison-house of the kitchen. It was in a particularly repellent state because people had been helping themselves to food all day. There were unwashed plates, cups and cutlery everywhere except in the sink, there were bits of damp lettuce on the floor, scraped margarine papers, several opened loaves and a gritty pool of water where someone had not properly turned off the tap of the hot water urn. We made packet soup and scrambled eggs (realising again that this was not a suitable dish for large numbers) and served the meal to those who were around. Ned came bounding up a very good mood. He had left Jay and Jaan getting very drunk at the hotel; away from Jaan, he seemed perfectly friendly again. But I was feeling gloomy, depressed by the awfulness of the kitchen and jealous at having overheard Anthony volunteering to accompany Gaye on a steamer trip up Loch Ness. After the usual slow washing up, both boys had disappeared and I could not be bothered to pursue them any longer. I tried to relax in the auditorium with the Sunday papers, while the stage crew were loading the van for next morning's departure but Malkie was making a nuisance of himself playing around with the spotlights, alternating beams of light with darkness, endlessly talking and making his terrible attempts at jokes. I could not stand the noise any more and felt the usual overpowering (though always short-lived) need to get away from them all for a while. So I left the hall and walked down to the shore of Loch Ness. The sun was just setting, but it wasn't one of those lurid pink, orange and thundercloud Highland sunsets. The sky was a pale chilly blue, the same colour all over till abruptly cut off by the hard, dark silhouettes of the hills on either side of the loch. The water reflected only the sombre tones of the hillside

and not the light in the sky; the surface was glassy smooth, occasionally scarred for a few seconds by a rippling streak of movement, a phenomenon which made it almost easy to believe in mysterious aquatic creatures. There were great mossy boulders at the water's edge and tufts of grass and flowers. Some way along the shore the jetty of the school protruded, and the sound of distant conversation echoed across the loch.

Two lines by Wordsworth, whom I had hated during 'A' level English Literature, quite suddenly came into my head: *It is a beauteous evening calm and free/The Holy time is quiet as a nun*. He was spot on. It really was 'beauteous' - the word was so aptly chosen to express the still, peaceful quality of the scene, the whole calming effect enhanced by the proximity of the abbey. I stood and stared entranced for a long time, feeling all my annoyance seep away in the awesome presence of the loch and the view. It seemed so ridiculous to be worrying over whether I preferred Ned or Anthony. Exalted by the cathartic effect of the landscape, I romantically decided to let the problem solve itself by settling for the first one to meet me when I got back to the hall.

And so it was Anthony.

Of course, if I had not decided to wander off alone, I would have spent a merry evening in the hotel bar, probably with Ned, and as a result would have remained just as undecided the next day. But I was irritated with him because of his apparent preference for his "mates", as Jaan called their gang of drinking companions, including Jay and Pete, who had been in the bar all afternoon and evening, and felt that he had abandoned me for them. When I entered the hall, I looked anxiously around to see which of them was there and felt a tremor of relief mingled with excitement when I recognised, amongst the group sitting in the corner, the familiar blue and grey patterns of Anthony's sweater. The die was cast (*Julius Caesar*, 'A' level Latin, how useful my schooldays had been.)

The company was already tending to split into different groups, and the eager, hearty ones were setting themselves up in opposition to the hard drinkers. A few had, that very morning, driven all the way back to Fort William to climb Ben Nevis in order to prove that the previous expedition, which I had so early abandoned, could not have reached the summit in the short time they claimed. They were still lively, and Baz announced a drive in the van. I sat beside Anthony, who said he had been down at the hotel bar earlier, where Jay was becoming quite aggressive. I took it as a good omen that he had decided to come back. Jilly was there, and the inevitable Malkie, Alice, who threw herself into any communal activity, Amy and Milo, who seemed to have something going between them but were both such silent and self-possessed people that it made little difference, and Gaye, back in her Sunday best

tight skirt and heels, who sat next to Baz in the front on the grounds that she could not possibly scramble up into the back. We tied the doors open against the sides of the van so as to see the view, which was now becoming like a real picture postcard as the sun set, but made the van draughty and bitterly cold in addition to its normal discomforts. We trundled along the side of Loch Ness for about half an hour while it grew darker and darker outside, and the mountains were no longer visible but only the surface of the loch and the glimmering of the further shore.

Down by the water there was a long building with lots of lights on. The hungrier members of the company thought it might sell food and some of us climbed down to investigate. But it was only a youth hostel, and we lurked from window to window, peering in at the unsuspecting occupants. Then we made our way down to the beach, over slippery rocks leading to a pebbly shore, where we sat on boulders and played ducks and drakes, listening to the strange night noises of unidentifiable creatures. Anthony wandered off on his own. Back in the van and about to set off, there was a shout, "We've forgotten Gaye!" and there she was, still clambering up the slope, slowed down by the tightness of her skirt and weeping because she thought she had been abandoned.

It was now even colder in the back of the van and we were in almost total blackness. We smoked, for warmth and light, and there was an attempt, mercifully unsuccessful, at community singing: some people really were like that. Quite suddenly, Anthony put his arm around my shoulders. I hardly dared to breathe but wriggled closer to him. We did not speak or look at each other, but sat there, bodies touching, in the dirty jolting van. I kept having to tell myself that this was real, that I was getting what I wanted: this was a triumph.

Back at the hall, we walked uncertainly, side by side amongst the group, back into the pool of light thrown by the bulb in the tin porch and into an atmosphere of unwelcome and violent celebrations rather than the usual somnolent dormitory. Ned wandered up waving a bottle of gin and announced, unnecessarily, "We're having a party!" There were a lot of bottles, strangers, music and dancing, for after the hotel bar closed, Jay had invited everyone back to the hall. There was our ally the reporter, the barman who had provided the drinks, and a number of local girls. I had some gin out of a plastic mug and then danced with some of our boys, feeling as if I was moving on air. Lots of people were dancing, making blurry reflections in the mirrors which hung all along one wall, while the glow from the wall heaters cast strange shadows on the ground. Anthony and I gravitated together and sat entwined, half-hidden behind a pile of chairs. Jay passed by and briefly filmed us as a typical moment of tour life, but it was spectacularly important for us. I felt that this was going to mean a lot to



Anthony, but was not fully prepared to examine my own feelings. His fingers explored my face. We did not speak. At last the party subsided and people started to prepare the hall for bed, the lights gradually put out till just one was left. It did not occur to us to sleep near each other and a sort of tour etiquette had been established that the two sexes tried to avoid each other at night: there was so much enforced companionship in the dressing rooms and while travelling that a respite seemed psychologically necessary. So Anthony and I said tender goodnights and made our way to the different zones in the hall. Going into the outer vestibule to retrieve my kit from the mound of communal luggage, I switched on the light and was surprised and not pleased to disturb Ned and Gaye in an embrace so passionate that her long hair had tumbled down from its usual chignon. I muttered an apology and scabbled my sleeping bag out of the pile. Ned said, "That's quite all right" in a slightly defiant tone, and looked rather pleased with himself. I was altogether too dazed by the whole evening's events and the gin to think much about anything and went very rapidly off to sleep.

*Monday 8 July: Fort Augustus to Shiel Bridge*

The morning was grey, damp and chilly. I woke early and had a long gossip with Alice in the kitchen. She recounted indignantly how she had been washing her feet in the kitchen the previous evening and Jay had come in and tried to kiss her; she was worried he might be getting serious about her because he had tried to film her changing into her costume in the dressing room in Fort William. It was just like romantic Alice to imagine that Jay was interested but the truth was probably that he had failed to get off with any of the local girls (though not for want of trying) and was forced to try his luck within the company, where none of the girls much cared for him. We had a peaceful breakfast until the rest began to get up, and I took coffee to Anthony and Ned in their sleeping bags, anxious to see them both again. I did feel fully committed to Anthony then, but still wanted to see Ned's response. However, it was all too early in the morning for such analysis.

We tackled the too familiar routine of clearing everything out of the hall. The kitchen was always the worst. There were never enough containers for all our litter because we always forgot to ask for extra cardboard boxes while shopping. If there was a proper dustbin, it was usually half full when we arrived; and although none of the cooking team could be described as experienced, we were starting to take pride in leaving tidy rubbish behind. But after the last basket had been packed away, someone would always find a couple of unwashed mugs in some corner of the hall when there was no hot water left, and the wet and filthy dish-towels had been put away.

Anthony and I, now publicly together, travelled in the van, which was flaunting the Loch Ness Monster head tied to the roof. Indeed, we were thrilled to find that we had made it into the morning paper, although the story was even more untruthful than we thought possible. Our own alleged version, that we had deliberately made the monster to advertise our Highland tour, was embellished by the ace reporter's claim that he had caught us out during secret trials in Loch Oich before Loch Ness itself. But the story provided national coverage for ourselves and the play: "For this, whisper it, is the true story of the pop-eyed plesiosaur that sent Nessie sulking in her own loch next door. Wee Oichy was in league with a Sassenach – William Shakespeare". And so on for about three columns, together with a splendid photograph of Lisa and Baz showing off their creation.

We took a long time to set off owing to a number of false starts when people imagined they had left things behind in the hall after the doors had been locked and the key returned. In fact, we were leaving a great trail of stuff behind at every place, socks and combs and toothbrushes and, worst of all, the adaptor plugs for those most essential items, the kettle and the electric ring, with the result that the cooks would have to interrupt the electricians in the middle of a lighting rehearsal with urgent requests to fasten the wires dangerously and directly into one of the wall sockets.

As I had already learned, the van was not comfortable. We sat on the narrow bench behind the driver's seat, Malkie was on the gear box and Brendon even had to stand, clinging to one of the set's white pillars. The road from Fort Augustus to Shiel Bridge seemed, that grey day, to be one of the bleakest in the Highlands. At first there were gentle slopes, trees and a sombre loch, then it grew barren and rocky, and the narrow road with its endless bends uncoiled for miles and miles through Glen Shiel. Here there were great crags on either side, a thin trickle of traffic coming in the other direction, drizzle, the hum of the windscreen wipers, lorries, quarries and mud. Up to this time, we had seen moderately good weather, but how sinister and infinitely gloomy the mountains appeared once the mists rolled in. The road dragged on and on, we sat huddled together in a sort of suspension of time and feeling, and nobody felt like talking.

At last the glen flattened out, there were clumps of trees, one or two cottages and then a signpost announcing *Shiel Bridge*. We passed through a tiny settlement and found ourselves on a stretch of white road in an exquisitely beautiful setting which contrasted in every way with the jagged landscape we had just come through. To the right towered a procession of mountains, the Five Sisters of Kintail, a series of giant peaks which almost seemed to be floating, one behind the other, to the left there was a huge, green sea loch, steeply bordered

by hills and in the far distance a misty void concealing the sea and the Western Isles beyond. There was such peace in the scene, the calm and beauty increased by the lush grass and dense undergrowth bordering the water. A few upturned boats lay on the pebbly beach, and banks of seaweed lapped gently with the tide.

We were puzzled where a theatre might be in this idyllic but apparently deserted landscape. Then, to the right, we saw a low white building and our cars parked on its drive. This looked like the perfect hall in the loveliest setting yet, brand-new building, sparkling clean and bright, the moment of realisation enhanced by the sun suddenly coming out. It was not large but painted a cheerful yellow inside, with a proliferation of small rooms, and a decent-sized kitchen with adequate working space and a large hot water urn. There were splendid, separate Ladies and Gents, a rare treat, with hot water and the luxury of full-length mirrors, which unkindly revealed our crumpled travelled selves. And there was even the refinement of two proper dressing rooms behind the stage, again well equipped with mirrors and basins, though neither more than six feet square.

It was puzzling why there was such a recently built hall in this unpopulated area, particularly in comparison with the old and unattractive buildings we had used in much larger places. If we had failed to attract decent audiences in the towns, what hope was there in the middle of nowhere? But Shiel Bridge was special. First, the mobile shop van arrived, saving the lives and reputations of the cooks, who had assumed there would be a proper food shop and so had bought no provisions in Fort Augustus. "I thought you'd be needing something", said the driver, nodding his head wisely; he had heard about our coming and had timed his visit deliberately. Then, as we were happily descending the steps of the van laden with supplies, two women on horseback came up the drive and welcomed us to their hotel, which they pointed out on the tree-lined promontory jutting into the loch just across the road. They offered such hospitality – sheets, baths, anything they could do to help, and, best of all, promised to tell all their guests about tonight's performance and to lay on early suppers. The next delight was discovering another low building next to the hall, discreetly labelled "Highland Crafts" but so unlike the tacky tourist shops in Fort William and Fort Augustus. There was a bare wooden floor displaying skin rugs, carved wooden animals, and a pile of sweaters the colour of oatmeal and heather. The proprietress was a girl about our own age. She too seemed delighted at our arrival and poured her heart out: she wanted to go away to art college, but her father, who was an artist, did not approve, it was he who made the wood carvings, she ran the shop in the summer months, they lived across the loch, her name was Susan

After lunch, a meal for once enjoyable to prepare in the neat sunny kitchen, Anthony and I went for a walk. We set off strolling behind Lisa, who was already riding one of the hotel's horses. The scenery was bare yet not bleak because of the rich green of the hillsides, which gave a general impression of wild balminess. There was a sprinkling of cottages and then a river crossed by an elaborate stone bridge. It was the first time we had been alone together. We poured out our respective life stories, and I began to learn of Anthony's deep lack of self-confidence and almost morbid sensitivity. Leaning on the parapet of the bridge, looking down in the clear, fast flowing water, we were completely happy and at ease with each other, both believing that this relationship was going to be something serious.

Along the peaceful road appeared Lisa's car, driven by Kenny, who claimed, implausibly, that he had been to tea with the minister. Rather reluctantly, we accepted a lift back to the hall. I think that we were both anxious and a little guilty about Ned and were at pains to retain the old camaraderie. The three of us went to the craft shop and I bought a white sheepskin rug that I had been coveting since the morning. Susan gave us all generous discounts and was doing a roaring trade. Alice bought a heavy Highland sweater, which did not flatter her ample figure but was a magnificent thing; Jilly, unable to decide between two scarves, borrowed them to wear alternately for the rest of the day, asking people incessantly which suited her best, and eventually bought both. Even some of the boys were inspired to buy chunky socks.

Our audience that night was the largest ever. This was not really due to our ineffective advance publicity and the pointless costume tour (appreciated mainly by sheep) which some had made that afternoon, but because – we came to realise – the smaller the village, the greater the sense of community. In a tiny place like Shiel Bridge, the locals simply turned up for whatever was going on in the village hall. This of course explained the new building; the demand was so great that it had been necessary to replace the previous hall, a very small adjacent structure now used as an annexe to the hotel. Despite the remoteness, there was an event almost every night. There was the mobile cinema, which sometimes came twice a week, there were Friday or Saturday night dances, ceilidhs, bands, in fact a constant cycle of entertainment which drew people from miles around. It was at first mildly insulting to realise that the audience was there not because of their passion for Shakespearean comedy but because we were simply that night's "show" at the hall and they would come to anything.

The one design flaw in the hall was its low ceiling. While this was not a problem in the auditorium, it had a disastrous effect upon the stage, a platform raised about three feet off the ground, its top demarcated by a low-hanging pelmet. This meant that our scenery was too tall

to go on the stage itself, but had to be placed on the floor of the narrow backstage passage, leaning forward at a slight angle. Our two tallest actors, Brendon and Martin, even had to bend a little for their faces to be seen below the pelmet, and we must all have given the impression of being over life size, like huge puppets in a Punch and Judy booth. A further complication was having no space to hang the backcloth because of the scenery in the way, which meant that the only way to make an entrance from the other side was to have to go outside and round the back of the building. But cows and sheep grazed all around the hall, and had churned the ground into a mire of mud and dung, so we had to lay wobbly duckboards to protect our Elizabethan hems and satin shoes as we hurried through the sunny Highland evening back into Illyria. (Performances always started in daylight and it was never truly dark outside until well after the interval). These processions were of considerable interest to the cows and to passers-by. At least it was not raining. Another potential hazard was the electricity supply, which depended upon a slot meter. Luckily, the stage managers had discovered this before the performance started, although there were one or two anxious moments during the play while fresh coins were hunted for in purses and pockets. The dressing room accommodation was amazingly cramped and I had to crawl under a table for unimpeded view of the mirror in order to put on my make-up and hairpiece.

It was a good performance. We achieved consistency of pace and style for the first time, mainly because it was so heartening to see heads stretching all the way to the back of the auditorium. It was a little unnerving to be so very close to the front row of the audience, a group of giggling, sweet-munching children, but they were on our side from the beginning and seemed to enjoy the play thoroughly. And all our new friends - the hotel lady, the minister, Susan from the shop - were there laughing and clapping enthusiastically, cars were parked all the way down the drive, and we were in profit again. When we were not on stage, Anthony and I sat close together in the wings on my beautiful new sheepskin in the wings, and after the show slipped out into the semi-darkness for a first long kiss. Then we rejoined the others and we all just lay around eating bread and syrup into the early hours. It was a wonderful evening.

Amy, Gaye and I claimed the larger of the dressing rooms to sleep in, the one with the basin and the mirror. Here Gaye performed her bedtime rituals which, on this occasion, included over-zealous foot washing, but I was so sleepy and happy that I was just about aware of drifting off into unconsciousness, even with the light still on, the sleeping bag unusually warm and luxurious because of the sheepskin underneath.

*Tuesday 9 July: Shiel Bridge*

The day started at midday with a cup of coffee brought to us by Milo, who was leaving the tour shortly, since he had only come to help with initial publicity, and now wanted to make the most of his remaining time with Amy. He crouched down beside her bag and they whispered to each other. I lay there, feeling the same drifting sense of pleasure and well being as the night before, while the sun streamed in through the window. There was no immediate reason to get up and it was so late that breakfast had obviously been managed without me. Eventually I felt I had better start the day; and was aware of the faintest tremor of irritation, which I could hardly put into words, at the sight of Anthony sitting on the fence outside the hall clearly waiting for me. We admired the view, then explored the grounds of the hotel. People were sunbathing on the jetty and the sporting Alice was about to swim. The water felt bitterly cold to our bare feet after the hot stones, and Gaye, who was modelling a striking orange sun suit, decided not to go in. Again I felt a twinge of discontent at being with Anthony, quite illogically resenting the fact that I appeared to be with him rather than being free to swim with Alice or sunbathe with Gaye: being half of a pair felt somehow incompatible with being a member of the group.

Too late, the cooks learned that it was early-closing day in Shiel Bridge's one shop, a mile or so down the road, and Lisa reluctantly drove a foraging party to the nearest town, Kyle of Lochalsh. But it was early closing there too and they returned only with two packets of frozen fish fingers, which had to form the core of an unappetising meal later in the afternoon. Yet there was just as much washing up as ever. Owing to the leisure, sunshine and supplies of hot water, everyone washed their clothes, the ladies' room was full of steam and garments dripping water on the floor, and the wire fence around the drive was hung with laundry to left and right. I assembled my unpleasantly damp towel and sponge bag and ventured into the hotel, murmuring my request for a bath as if it was a guilty secret. The smiling receptionist led me upstairs into a large, clean, white-tiled bathroom with mirrors on the walls, a cork mat to stand on, and hooks to hang my clothes (such simple luxuries, so appreciated now). That was the best bath I ever had, the bliss of being able to lie down in hot water, especially when compared to my last wash, at Fort Augustus in a cold trickle from a rusty tap, no plug in the sink and the light bulb missing.

Refreshed and proud, I joined the boys in the bar of the hotel, a stunning room glazed on three sides to provide a panoramic view of the loch and surrounding mountains. The floor was of pale polished wood with no covering but one black and white skin rug, the walls were plain white and there was a piece of modern sculpture in honey-coloured wood on a pedestal.

The only furniture was a bookshelf, a couple of low tables and some (admittedly rather uncomfortable) designer chairs. The minimalism of the ensemble served to focus attention on the spectacular scenery outside, and was in staggering contrast to the stags' heads and tartan kitsch of all the other hotel bars we had visited.

But I was no longer at ease with the other boys. Anthony was there and I knew that he would resent it if I behaved in my old flirtatious way, yet I was not sufficiently detached from them to be able to act in the friendly, uninvolved manner that the affianced Jilly and, interestingly, shy Lisa achieved. So, for the time being, uncertain how to play my new role, I was rather silent. Ned and Pete got very merry and became more and more like their stage personae. Pete found a poetry anthology in the bookcase and showed off his Canadian familiarity with English literature by reading out tantalisingly familiar quotations which we were generally unable to identify. Jaan sat at a little table with a tray of tea before him, demurely pouring himself cup after cup from a silver teapot to the accompaniment of hot scones. He claimed to be testing his willpower by giving up alcohol for a week, following the debauch at Fort Augustus.

That evening we hosted a dance in the hall, which we had hired for two days before our next booking, so it seemed a good way of raising extra revenue. Dances in the Highlands do not start until ten-thirty in the evening because the long summer light means that work in the fields goes on till well after nine. That was the theory anyway, and the delayed start did provide a sense of anticipation combined with the feeling of keeping wickedly late hours. We had music prepared on the tape recorder, but Susan from the crafts shop announced that she could provide a live band and would play the drums herself. The hotel supplied crates of glasses and bottles of soft drinks on a sale or return basis, we swept out the hall, tidied the chairs against the wall and dumped all our possessions in the dressing rooms.

Gaye and I withdrew to the room with the biggest mirror to put on our best frocks and do our hair and faces. She back-combed her beehive with professional dedication, but expressed no expectation of Ned's company that evening; when I came to think about it, I had not seen them together at all since interrupting their embrace at Fort Augustus. Amy slipped in to pop on a dress and was out again in two minutes, looking infinitely more elegant than all our preparations could make us: it was an infuriating gift she had. Anthony came and knocked on the door to escort me formally into the auditorium where the band was making an enormous amount of noise, but hardly anyone was dancing. A group of local girls sat giggling together, eyeing up those of our boys who had not escaped to the hotel bar for the evening. All our girls were there, envying those strangers who had enjoyed the space and

leisure to prepare properly for a social event and who had obviously had their hair in curlers all day in anticipation.

Anthony and I danced together rather tensely and I was ashamed to realise that I was missing the old excitement of wondering whether the person I was fancied was going to ask me to dance or not. Somehow he sensed this, and kept apologising for his clumsy feet and asking if I didn't want to dance with anyone else. And of course I had to say no, I didn't. The party livened up when the others came back from the hotel. Jay and Jaan were very drunk again, Jaan's willpower having collapsed soon after his tray of tea. Jay eyed all the local girls and announced that he intended to sublimate himself that night. Anthony had gone to fetch a couple of soft drinks for us when Milo came up and asked me to dance. Suffering like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* on a similar occasion (more 'A' level English Literature), I accepted, feeling guilty, and was terribly aware of Anthony watching me reproachfully as we circulated the floor. Gerard, who was a beautiful lithe dancer, spent most of the time closely entwined with Sue while Jack, pale with jealousy, paced up and down the passage, then counted the takings in a martyred manner. Alice danced again and again with one of the local men, deep in conversation. She deserved a romance, however he did not look like a glamorous Highland laird but quite old with a sad little moustache. Susan became more and more flushed with excitement as she pounded away at the drums, which she didn't play at all well. Ned pulled funny faces at me while he danced a comical pas de deux with Lisa. Jaan insulted the minister's wife.

Eventually Anthony and I made our way backstage, where we had a much happier time on the sheepskin in the semi-darkness, occasionally talking in an emotional way about the past but for the most part wrapped in each other's arms and oblivious to all around. Except at one point I was aware of Ned quickly walking past us but showing no sign of our existence.

It was almost dawn before the dance ended. Martin and Matt were leaving by the early morning bus to retrieve the now repaired ice-cream van, essential for our transport once Milo and his car had gone. Jay went off with one of the local girls, but turned up later in a furious temper. He thought he had made a conquest, but she turned out to be a hitchhiker from the youth hostel and had made him drive her and her girlfriend to Kyle of Lochalsh, then his car kept breaking down on the way back. Alice had certainly made a conquest, and received much praise because her man with the moustache had offered us the use of his house for the following night when we had nowhere to sleep because the hall was booked out to the mobile cinema.



*Wednesday 10 July: Shiel Bridge*

It was drizzling outside and the Eden-like sunny valley became into a sinister basin of mist. The day consisted mainly of scrubbing, ironing, tidying, packing and trying to leave no evidence of our occupation, but as we had spent two days in the hall, there was a good deal of mess and dirt, made worse by the dance. The hotel bar was a great comfort because the owner kindly regarded us as honorary residents and let some people stay all day, in particular Jay, Jaan and Pete who, although he did not get ostentatiously drunk like the first two, got through quite a lot in the traditional Scottish manner of a pint with a whisky chaser.

The mobile cinema, run by the Highlands and Islands Film Guild, was an attraction which drew an even larger audience than either of our entertainments. Cars and vans poured into the drive and even created a small traffic jam in the road outside, the occupants ranging from very young children to ancient farmers and their wives. There was an extremely convivial atmosphere and the buzz of conversation continued well into the first film, an out-of-date newsreel which we had all seen weeks ago in the city. The main film ('The Big Country') was interrupted by many pauses when the lights had to go on so that the reels could be changed, then the soundtrack gradually speeded up again like an old-fashioned wind-up gramophone. The whole evening was entirely enjoyable because for once it was our turn to sit back and be entertained.

The man with the moustache had formally escorted Alice to the film and now waited to take us to his house: the girls would sleep there, while the boys were allocated to the stables next to the crafts shop. Susan had indeed kindly volunteered the shop itself, but it would have been far too risky for the lovely rugs and pieces of pottery. The house was on the far side of the loch and we stood around in the wet arguing about the transport arrangements while the doors of our hall were locked against us. Lisa drove off with the first load and I went to inspect the stables. The lower part stank of manure, but a ladder led up to the loft, which felt quite cosy with its bales of hay. In fact Amy was planning to spend the night up there too, because Milo was off in the morning, and they made an ostentatiously furtive exit up the ladder. Again, I had a twinge of misgiving over the level of my affection for Anthony, which certainly did not extend to sleeping in smelly straw just to be near him. As a counterweight to Amy, the comfort- and privacy-loving Pete became an honorary girl in order to sleep in the house.

This turned out to be a sad and lonely dwelling. The man with the moustache had been living there for over a year, when he began work with the Forestry Commission, yet there

were barely traces of occupation in any of the rooms except the kitchen, where we wolfed down sausages, one fork shared between six, and strong sweet tea. Although he seemed to be on the same wavelength as Alice, to whom he talked quite easily, our host was a wistful character, living alone for weeks on end amongst the magnificent pine plantations of Glenelg, which he spoke of without enthusiasm; indeed with a sort of blank misery. “It’s very lonely” was the way he put it, expressed with no feeling at all, but all his utterances were muted and spoken with his head slightly lowered, never looking you in the eye. I suppose in our grubby way we represented a break in his routine. There were so many rooms that I had a whole one to myself. Only there was no light bulb and it was hard to sleep because of the noise the wind made flapping the strips of torn, peeling wallpaper. And the window didn’t shut properly so the room was cold and draughty too.

*Thursday 11 July: Shiel Bridge to Portree*

It was bleak getting up in the morning. The rain still fell, Gaye monopolised the bathroom for ten minutes and Lisa could hardly be persuaded to wake up and ferry us back in her car, which caused Jilly and me real anguish as we were desperate to get back to the hall (where we were permitted to return just to make breakfast) and supervise things before the boys made chaos of our carefully packed food. However they were all having their cornflakes peacefully and tidily by the time we arrived and Milo, presumably seduced by Amy’s blandishments in the hay, announced that he would stay on for another day or two. It was typical of his rather selfish attitude to life that he had been unwilling to commit himself for the whole month, having had intellectual doubts about being stuck on an enterprise with uncongenial companions. He and Lisa sat on the floor and created a pile of new posters for distribution along the route, while the rest of us loaded up and tried again to leave the place as we had found it – no grease in the sink, rubbish packed as inoffensively as possible, drying up clothes wrung out before being screwed up into little grey lumps like dough and placed on top of the cutlery basket. I had come to hate that basket. It was one of those greengrocery containers with a flimsy tin handle which was gradually working loose, and a bottom made of two thin slats of wood with a substantial gap between them through which knives frequently fell. A large jar of green mango chutney lived in there; despite our normally vulture-like appetites, no-one actually liked this but the penny-pinching cooks could not bear to throw it away. It was very sticky and frequently fell over.

Anthony and I travelled in the back of Milo’s car, preferable to the van for a long journey. I was excited to be going to Skye but sad to leave Shiel Bridge, which, in the

memory, became a haven of sunshine, warmth and relaxation as the present rain fell remorselessly and we mounted the series of hairpin bends which led to Kyle of Lochalsh, a dull little place not improved by the long queue of traffic waiting for the ferry. It was quite alarming to realise there were so many cars with the same destination. We paused in Kyle to distribute a few posters to the shops, and then joined the slow queue which seemed to progress by inches until it was our turn. Once on the boat, we walked around the damp deck and then sat in the uncomfortable circular cabin, reading alarming notices about what to do in case of shipwreck. It was bitterly cold, and it seemed impossible to imagine ever being warm and dry again.

I had built up enormous expectations about Skye – the Cuillins, Bonny Prince Charlie and Flora Macdonald - thinking that if Oban and Shiel Bridge were beautiful, then Skye must be infinitely more so. Arrival was inevitably an anti-climax. The discomfort of the ferry, the jam of cars on the other side, the straggle of low unattractive buildings were all unpromising. And the longed for Cuillin hills, blurred by mist and rain, looked no more impressive than the other mountains we had passed, inferior even to the solemn bulk of Ben Nevis. The very place names echoed the bleakness of the scene – Sleat, Sligachan. The roads were awful. There were frequent single-lane systems where necessary road works were in progress and, at one stage, we had to wait in another long queue controlled by a man who waved his soaking red and green flags as if tolling the bell for a funeral. The journey to Portree seemed endless. First we crossed a volcanic moorland scattered with huge boulders ripped haphazardly by ancient glaciers from the higher slopes, then we followed the sea for mile after mile along every indentation of the coastline. My heart sank as yet another jutting headland came into sight, the track so narrow that when a car came from the opposite direction, there seemed only the choice between dropping into the sea or scraping the hewn out mountain side. We drove on and on, speculating whether the large van and Jay's car would ever be seen again as they had both been playing up in the morning, and all the stopping and starting in the ferry queue added to the strain.

At last there was a sprinkling of houses on either side of the road, and we were suddenly in Portree. It was like being in a different world again, we were driving along an attractive tree-lined road where new bungalows were being built and there was even a small roundabout under construction. We stopped outside a modern post office to distribute a poster and collect the company's poste restante mail, a tricky job which involved trying to remember everyone's surnames, some of which were foreign sounding and difficult to spell.

However the kind postmistress simply gave us everything she had and we extracted the relevant ones.

Our theatre was located just off the main square, a large area full of parked cars and coaches. Access to the building was problematic because the main entrance, adjacent rooms and auditorium belonged to the Territorial Army, while the stage and dressing rooms, demarcated by a sliding wooden partition which took the place of the curtain, belonged to someone else and remained firmly locked until the relevant key was tracked down much later. However, the hall was large and quite comfortable, when judged by our ever-expanding standards. Down one dark passage was a small, cosy sitting room with an electric fire, carpets, deep leather armchairs and magazines which I had earmarked as an admirable bedroom until the serious snorers Jay and Jaan fetched in their sleeping bags too. The kitchen was an enormous room running the length the auditorium, its outer wall a row of windows looking out onto a square of grass. There were cupboards, working tops, storage space, an electric cooker, and lots of cups and plates. Its one drawback was that there was no running water or sink, so that all washing up had to be done in the tiny hand basin in the ladies' lavatory, and this could only be done after filling the electric kettle from its narrow trickling tap, heating up the kettle in the kitchen, then fetched it back again. This all took a lot of time.

On the other side of the auditorium was a rifle range and gym, with thick mats on the floor, a vaulting horse, sand bags, a wooden target, and a mound of less predictable junk which included a stuffed bird in a cage, a pair of antlers, old musty books and a damp mattress. The atmosphere was appropriately military, with instructions for rifle drill pinned up, and a pile of tin hats, which of course people would put on and wear to meals. We explored the building with delight but again I was feeling slightly irked by Anthony's presence: he stayed beside me all the time, yet I wanted to be free to make my own moves and conversation, and found myself quite inhibited by the fact that I seemed to be turning into 'we' rather than 'me'.

The other cars arrived but not yet the van; this caused the usual guilty relief that we could do no unloading or kitchen work so we set out on a tour of publicity and exploration. Portree felt large and busy after the remoteness of Shiel Bridge. Its shops were clearly geared to the tourist trade with the usual tartan souvenirs, cheap jewellery and paperback holiday reading, but there was one old-fashioned draper's shop which sold ugly knitted hats and objects made of sea shells. We tackled the main street, going into likely looking shops: "Good afternoon, we are the students on tour. Would you be kind enough to let us hang a poster in your shop?" They all agreed politely, but when asked whether they would actually

be coming to the show, looked incredulous and replied, with true Scottish caution, “Oh well, we’ll have to see about that.”

At the end of the high street the road curved sharply round and down to the harbour, and we noted a useful clump of milk machines at the bend. There were two large hotels and a pretty sea-front row of bright coloured villas. Further along the quay was a modern café with a blaring jukebox, then a working zone of Macbrayne’s lorries, fish crates and oil drums. We distributed posters wherever we could. I somehow became separated from Anthony during this exercise and walked back to the hall alone, following Ned and Jaan, who seemed to be very good friends. I was wishing, and for the first time admitting it to myself, that I was free again.

The van arrived at last but instead of kitchen slavery there was liberation for the boys, taunted by our nagging and bad temper, volunteered to take over the cooking in Portree. Milo, celebrating his impending but delayed departure, made an excellent cheese fondue which used two whole bottles of wine and made a delightful change from our staple diet of rice and sausage meat. It was amusing to watch someone else becoming flustered and tense while the food was cooking. Having to create a daily meal for twenty people is no mean feat even under the most civilised and hygienic circumstances, and we were always handicapped by budget, facilities and equipment.

After the meal, Anthony and I adjourned to the sitting room fire for a game of chess with the set that had turned up amongst the eclectic contents of the rifle range, I am not much of a chess player, but I speedily beat him. This was an awful, culminating moment. To add to my anguish, Jaan came in, planted himself in the armchair and started talking about himself, which he believed to be a topic of general interest. He was a world standard bore and there was nothing to do but sit tight until he had finished. He would now permit Ned to laugh at him a little, but if anyone else dared, he would flash a hostile stare from his narrow little eyes, disgusted by the frivolity of the English.

There was a performance of “A Phoenix Too Frequent” that evening and, to our astonishment, the play attracted a huge audience of over a hundred, breaking all records and undermining the principle of the smaller the place the larger the crowd. This must have been because Portree was a town obviously intended for tourists yet which provided no evening entertainment at all. Unlike Fort William and Oban, there was no cinema, and there were surprisingly few pubs (though our drinkers still managed to get very merry).

Alice and Jilly decided to hire a rowing boat from the quay and asked if we would like to join them. Anthony said that he wanted to see how “A Phoenix” was coming along. As I

had watched it on the previous occasion, and loved the idea of rowing out into the bay, I joined the boating party. As we walked down to the sea, Alice remarked that Anthony had looked rather upset at my not staying with him and wondered that we could bear to be parted. And I heard myself replying that he was much fonder of me than I was of him; that the relationship had been at his instigation and that I really preferred Ned all the time. These terrible remarks were made with the intention of shocking the romantic Alice rather than expressing my true feelings, but speaking them to others made them real for me and I felt a glorious surge of freedom.

In the boat, out in the bay, we were remote and peaceful. The evening clouds threatened rain, but only a few drops fell. Portree, viewed from the distance, was really very small, hardly more than a village huddled into a sheltered inlet of the coast. There was a feeling of sinister gloom about the whole landscape. Behind the stately sweep of the mountains, a blue-black sky threatened, the air was dank and heavy, and layers of misty islands merged into one another on the horizon, so shrouded with mist that it was impossible to distinguish Skye from the mainland.

We took it in turns to row, changing places carefully and trying to avoid the pools of water in the bottom of the boat. It was one of those occasions for pleasant intimacy which rarely occurred on tour, when there were so few opportunities for private conversation. Alice confessed what had been apparent to everyone else, that she had fallen for Brendon (the lonely Forestry Commission man was just a passing fling), who was a particularly modest, self-effacing person, to whom nothing was more embarrassing than Alice's obvious devotion. Jilly gave soothing advice with all the maturity that came from being a real fiancée; we kept off my affairs but discussed the rest of the company with detached interest.

Too soon the allotted hour came to an end and we had to return to the real world. We paused for an ice cream on the pier, the café with jukebos now the throbbing heart of Portree's night life, and then walked slowly back up the hill behind an agitated sheep which was rushing unhappily from one side of the road to other although it did not look at all out of place. To my silent dismay, Anthony suddenly appeared outside the hall, where I had been hoping to merge into the group, took my hand and said, "Let's go for a walk." I agreed unenthusiastically, because I really needed to rejoin the group, which was already asserting its umbilical pull after two hours' separation, quite apart from the new reluctance to be with him. Because, of course, he did not know that it was over and I did not know how to tell him. So I tried to act cheerful and normal, but it was a strain and I could hear myself sounding like a polite stranger. We walked along the bay, crossed a rocky stream and squeezed through a

gap in a hedge into what appeared to be a private estate. I wanted to explore further, but he got tiresome about trespassing: we almost had an argument but I was reluctant to hurt his feelings by persisting on this minor matter, being too aware of the greater hurt that was going to be inflicted. Then there was a mournful hillside dotted with withered tree stumps which must once have been a pine forest. At the foot of the slope lay a beautiful but abandoned house. As we stood, hand in hand, admiring the building I felt such regret that the happiness had gone. Awkward silences lengthening, we returned to the hall. Anthony wanted to stop outside and talk, but I pushed on through the door.

Inside there was warmth and friendship, the tape recorder playing Oklahoma, coffee, bread and syrup on the go. Someone had found a real bed in the shooting range, and this was now in the middle of the stage. Sue and Jilly both desperately wanted to sleep in it but as neither particularly liked the other, they were both unwilling to give way. So they slept in it together after a solemn couchée while the partition was slowly wound shut. Jack and Gerard shared a pit of blankets just below the footlights.

I decided to sleep in the kitchen, which would be spacious and private. But as I was unrolling my bag, Anthony came in, ominously shutting the door behind him. "Are things different?" he asked outright. "Well, yes", I replied. After a moment's hesitation, I told him that I had made a mistake. I couldn't possibly explain that I had been equally fond of him and Ned, and only taken the relationship with him further because of a stupid moment of random choice. So there was little to say, and I just wanted to be left alone. And he did go, slamming the door behind him in a way which I thought petty.

But peace and sleep were still postponed, first by the arrival of Jilly, who had left her state bed in order to borrow a cigarette and stayed to chat, and then by Lisa for an uncharacteristic heart to heart: she was afraid that Jay was interested in her, but she only had eyes for Kenny. I sympathised with her feelings about Jay, whose piercing stares and probing personal comments were getting tedious and offensive. It was ironic that he, who thought he was such a success with women, was now disliked by all the girls in the company, and interesting that he was targetting Lisa, shy and elusive as quicksilver and still something of an unknown quantity. Yet Kenny did not seem her type either. Although a graceful dancer, he was not a particularly sensitive character, although his occasional asthma attacks provided a romantic vulnerability. Lisa also revealed her annoyance with Jack and Gerard as producers, for they had invited her on tour to alternate the role of Viola with Amy, but now seemed to have forgotten this and were just using her as driver and poster-maker. "It's not fair", she hissed, and we agreed to press for her to rehearse the part the very next day.

At last, I was able to lie down in solitude and listen to the faint noises from the hall beyond, the scrape of a chair, the squeak of a bench, coughing, murmuring and snoring, realising that, half way through the tour, I was not the only one with relationship problems. Those who had been strangers such a short time ago were now intimate acquaintances, irritating or congenial. Malkie, for example, so annoying and complacent when in charge of the van, had turned out to be the most helpful person in the kitchen, always willing to lend a hand with the dishes and never turning down a request for help. Whereas Gerard, whom I had worshipped from a distance for the whole of the previous term, was becoming a tarnished figure - it was difficult to adore someone who was quite so slow at waking up, and who would keep getting in the way when we were trying to cook. Jay and Jaan, who had seemed interesting and full of potential, were now figures to be avoided, though it was of course virtually impossible to stay out of anyone's way for long. As I lay there, I decided that, despite my guilty knowledge of Anthony's pain, life on tour was fascinating.

*Friday 12 July: Portree*

There were two things bothering me when I woke. One was how to behave in Anthony's presence, whether to act as though nothing had happened between us, which would be heartless, or to try and keep out of his way, very difficult under our intimate living conditions. The other was the reaction of the group, and of Ned in particular, to our splitting up. I feared I would look ridiculous in not knowing my own mind, having so determinedly pursued Anthony, and then not wanted him any more.

At breakfast, it was possible to avoid him. He sat close by Ned at the far end of the room, and it seemed to me that there was a shrewd gleam in Ned's eye as he looked at me. After the meal, the cooks tackled the awful chore of washing up in the ladies' lavatory. This put us in such bad tempers that we called for a volunteer to cook the main meal of the day. Malkie offered to make his special stuffed cabbage à la boy scouts, a responsibility which made him almost unbearably smug. Despite his genuinely good nature, there was a persistently irritating streak about him, always seeming to need other peoples' company and approval, always trying to make a joke, On this occasion, he became very bossy and issued commands for the shopping, which he did not deign to do himself (although this was the most essential and arduous part of preparing a meal), yet scorned our experienced advice on the quantities needed. When presented with the food we had bought, he panicked completely and



had to be helped by Milo who, as a more sophisticated cook, complained, too late, about the choice of menu.

Gaye went in search of a hairdresser; there was a tiny salon in a side street advertising Marcel waves, very unlike the open-plan, magazine strewn places we were used to. She came out in a minute, pinkly indignant. "They were full up!" I just wanted to stay away from the hall, now experiencing more guilt than relief, so we walked through the familiar streets and shops and stepped into the real world for a morning coffee.

Malkie's stuffed cabbage was awful, far more cabbage than mince and more stalk than cabbage, all undercooked. We cooks were secretly pleased about this because, although amateurish and resentful, we were certainly acquiring speed and proficiency in serving moderately appetising meals: we felt it enhanced our cuisine to have someone else make a meal that was so much worse. Poor Gaye was actually sick afterwards and had to lie down all afternoon.

Then we had a rehearsal, partly to tidy up the play, which was bulging and sagging all over the place, and partly for Lisa to practise her Viola. She had tackled Jack and Gerard that morning, who intended no offence but had actually forgotten that she was meant to be playing the part as well. I think Jack sensed the perceived isolation of the production team from the rest of us, for he did sometimes try to "mingle" and break it down a little. But he had a tense personality which, although it enhanced his edgy Malvolio, made people a little uneasy in his company.. Sue was either shy or totally unfriendly – I could not decide which - and she perhaps contributed to their remoteness by not wanting to share Jack or Gerard with anyone else.

The session was long and fascinating. We should have been doing a run through every day, if only to get used to each new stage, yet this was the first proper rehearsal we had managed. We were so preoccupied with the mechanics of touring - packing, eating, clearing up and always travelling on - that there had simply not been time. Or perhaps time had not been made. We had all developed bad habits. Lines imperfectly learnt at the beginning had crystallised into the wrong words, moves carefully worked out in rehearsals then abandoned on the first tiny stage at Dalmally had never been restored, the denouement scene in Act 5 was always rushed because, being at the end, we had never got round to rehearsing it properly and no-one was entirely sure of all their lines. The rehearsal was also complicated by the absence of Orsino and Antonio, for Martin and Matt had not yet returned with the repaired ice-cream van, although meant to arrive in time for the evening performance.

Lisa was so good as Viola, especially as she had only learned the lines but had never gone through the moves. She was taller than Amy and more boyish, and I found it enthralling to be undertaking the familiar exchanges with such a different personality. Jack, who was conducting the rehearsal, then set to work on my interpretation of Olivia; it emerged that he visualised her as something like his mother, which shed a strange light on all of us. I thought hard about this and tried to produce something a little more mature and sophisticated, a bit Noel Cowardish. I was distractingly aware of Anthony, whose sardonic Feste received high praise and no criticism at all from the producers, sitting in the gloomy depths of the hall with his eyes fixed on me as I sat on the bench in the garden scene. This mournful scrutiny was unnerving and I tried all the harder to make Olivia a cruel, brittle creature. Jack seemed to like the final result and I felt that there had been some improvement.

It was a good hall for acting. There was a high stage, space in the wings and the luxury of access from one side to the other behind the backcloth. And there were two decent-sized dressing rooms, one on each side of the stage, lined in the now standard gloomy varnished wood. But when it was time to get ready for the performance, we were still lacking Orsino and Antonio. While we dressed and made up, encouraging messages came from Sue front of house about the size of the audience – fifty, eighty, hundred and ten, hundred and fifty, hundred and ninety. This was magnificent. We had not known what numbers to expect in Portree since of the other proper towns, Oban had been good and Fort William poor. At ten minutes to curtain up, there were over two hundred in front but minus two actors backstage. The producers had to make rapid decisions. The start was postponed by ten minutes and Brendon, previously Attendant Lord, was upgraded to Orsino. He was fairly familiar with the lines, having stood beside his master night after night, so he now had to don a costume made for a shorter person a wig which, given his very dark complexion, made him look unnervingly like Charles II. Milo had to repeat his Dalmally performance as Antonio, which quite pleased him this time. So the play started with its revised cast.

We had got through the first half quite well, all things considered, when the missing pair at last arrived with the van. The audience must have been puzzled, after the interval, to be confronted with an Orsino who had become six inches shorter. But Brendon did not know the later part so well so the producers thought it would be safer for Martin to resume his proper part. It was also confusing for the actors, especially as we had been working with Lisa's Viola in the afternoon but were now performing with Amy again.

There were various moments during the play when I had been accustomed to have offstage chats with Ned and Anthony in the wings or dressing room; this was now tricky

because I still wanted to be with Ned, but clearly had to avoid Anthony. Fortunately, the girls' dressing room was fairly comfortable, with the luxury of chairs to sit on (rather than being used as clothes hangers or make-up tables) so I stayed there for safety. Ned dropped in during the interval, on very matey terms with Amy though none too warm towards me. It was good to have Matt's bouncy presence back anyway; he told us the saga of their anxious drive north and panic-stricken queuing for the ferry as the start of the performance got nearer and nearer.

*Saturday 13 July: Portree to Kyle of Lochalsh*

We left Portree early in the hope of avoiding the ferry queue at Kyleakin, but found a long line of vehicles already waiting. It was drizzling. I looked back at the gloomy, shrouded hills and thought that I would not be sorry to leave Skye. The tour was half way through. I had behaved badly. I wanted to recapture that earlier sense of exuberance but realised that it was too late.

Milo finally left, taking with him the most comfortable and reliable of the cars. Its substitute, the repaired ice cream van, now worked all right but only had narrow benches that cut into the calves and the small of the back, as Jilly and I learned, as we sat painfully in it and tried to plan menus for the next few days; this was difficult without knowing what the cooking facilities would be, if any, or the scope of the shops, if open. Extracting food money from Gerard out of the float to which we had all contributed was becoming increasingly hard. He would wrinkle up his forehead, say "Oh God" when we specified an amount, then try to haggle us down. We had learnt never to pay for food from our own purses and then try to claim it back. Only the threat of no dinner at all and resulting mutiny by the company got us real pound notes.

Kyle of Lochalsh was not promising. It seemed to be a place with no existence at all in its own right but only a starting point for the Islands, bisected by rail and road, and cursed with a permanent traffic jam on the road which led down to the quay. Our theatre was the local Masonic lodge, a cabalistic sign over the front porch and the worst hall yet, dank, poky and badly lit. There were no dressing rooms or backstage space except for a zone beside the stage which held a sink and rusty cooker, and beyond there was a cubicle containing a lavatory, from which a suspicious trickle of water oozed over the uneven surface of the kitchen floor. We had to put down duck boards, improvised from planks found in the ruinous dump of a garden behind the hall, to cover the floor. To make things even worse, this was some distance from the town centre, not far enough out to demand a lift for the food shopping, but sufficiently remote to make carrying things back an ordeal. It went on raining.

Going shopping was marginally better than staying in the hall, so Jilly, Gaye and I walked down into the town and made for the nearest tea shop, where we had a good moan over lengthy morning coffee and cakes, the latter provided free by the friendly waitress when we asked permission to put up a poster. Appalled by the hall, dirty, tired and a little depressed, we watched normal women with tidy hair and clean clothes, whose most arduous task that day might be to cook a meal for four in a proper kitchen, if not just selecting something from a hotel menu. We had filthy finger nails and a huge shopping list which began 'twenty bananas, six large sliced loaves'. The guilt drove us on, the shopping was as difficult and tedious as ever, the climb to the hall backbreaking, the only welcome the usual shouts of "When's it going to be ready then?" There wasn't one hygienic surface to put things on and the cooks had to fight for space with Alice who, in her role as wardrobe mistress, had attempted to take over the whole area for the costumes.

The worst thing was that we were meant to spend two whole nights there before travelling to Dingwall on Monday. A rebellious deputation to the producers demanded that we should move on the very next morning, but Gerard coldly pointed out that if we were known to have travelled on the Sabbath, there would be no audience at all at Dingwall. He then revealed that we had nowhere to stay there anyway, as the hall was for acting only, and they hadn't managed to fix up anywhere for us to sleep. Hostility flowed between company and producers, but there was nothing to be done.

The hall was just as unpleasant to act in as to live in. The windows were set too high in the walls to be blacked out properly, so we could disconcertingly see the smallness of the audience and the expressions on their faces. The leak from the lavatory grew worse and the entire floor became saturated. Because the kitchen was also the dressing room, many of the cast helped themselves to bread and syrup throughout the performance, leaving sticky knives, crusts and empty margarine papers on every available surface; and our greasepaint, powder and tissue scraps got in amongst the food.

We couldn't face doing anything after the show except that Ned held an impromptu party in the garden, where we sat around in the dark and pretended to be meeting each other for the first time. This eased the embarrassment with Anthony for we were able to exchange a few words in our role as guests, the first time we had spoken since the night at Portree. Jay, who had been drinking, was paying attention to the reluctant Lisa, and Gaye, it seemed to me, had her eye on Ned again. We were all getting quite merry on our mugs of tea when an outraged voice bawled from a nearby window that we were breaking the Sabbath. The patch of garden had seemed isolated, but was, we realised, bordered by the backs of houses. Jaan shouted

back but the rest of us surrendered to the Scottish Sunday and, unwashed and chilly, took to our sleeping bags. For solitude, I braved the damp of the kitchen-cum-dressing room and slept on the duckboards, surrounded by food boxes and the general debris of the performance.

*Sunday 14 July: Kyle of Lochalsh*

I was woken by stealthy movements, and became aware that Ned, Anthony and Kenny were washing and having breakfast in the stark yet gloomy light of the naked hanging bulb. Ned brought me coffee and explained that they were borrowing Lisa's car to go ahead to Dingwall to put some posters up and try to find somewhere for us to sleep on the Monday night. Although slightly relieved at the removal of Anthony's presence, the news depressed me for it showed how things had changed from the earlier days, when I might have been going with them. But now I felt that Ned was probably as glad to escape from my company as Anthony was. And Lisa, who normally did the advance publicity, would be losing the chance of a day with Kenny, because she would be rehearsing Viola before her debut in the part the next evening.

It was another day of dense drizzle, and Skye was nothing but a greyish haze on the horizon. They had gone, the friendships were over, no romance was left. The day stretched endlessly ahead. The filthy hall added to my misery by its murky corners, filthy surfaces and chilly atmosphere. There is nothing more soul destroying than being unable to wash properly when it is cold and you know that you are very dirty. I boiled a kettle of water, took such soap and clean clothes as survived and locked myself in the lavatory, hoping that no-one would get up for a while. It was a feat of agility and endurance, for the floor was too wet to put anything down and of course there were no hooks on the door or even a lavatory seat. Washing my feet was hardest. Curiously, I did not yearn for the civilised bathroom at home, but merely wished that this one was not quite so horrible and that the next would be better. The state of the place did not shed a good light on the habits of the Kyle of Lochalsh masons.

The wash was cathartic however. Feeling sadder but wiser, I had a blissfully solitary breakfast and felt ready to face the future. No-one else was up. Judging by the weather and amenities, there was not much incentive to do so. How different it all was from the previous Sunday morning in the sunshine at Fort William when everything was still new and exciting. The weather did so affect our states of mind in the Highlands; sunshine was crucial in making our gruelling existence bearable.

The day was very long and very dull, punctuated by preparing meals, washing up and rehearsing. Many of the scenes did not involve me but I sat in the auditorium throughout on

the pretext that I might be needed soon. It gave the illusion of having something to do. Someone went to buy the Sunday papers, which didn't reach Kyle till late in the afternoon; we swooped on them, snatching several pages each which we could then not be bothered to read because all outside news seemed so irrelevant. The drinking set were especially glum because the pubs were shut all day, and they were refused drinks in the hotels because their scruffy clothes marked them out firmly as non-resident. And the absence of three of the company somehow unbalanced the rest; Anthony's dry humour and Ned's wild gaiety had their place in our amorphous blend of characteristics and they were missed.

The afternoon crawled past but there was still a whole long evening to get through. We had never packed the van so far in advance of departure: loading it up contributed to the feeling of moving on, as did tidying away most of our personal luggage, sweeping the floor, and clearing the kitchen, with only the basic necessities left out for breakfast, the bread even counted out in slices and the rest stowed away. By mutual agreement, we had an exceptionally early night, and I had never so welcomed the end of a day. The morning would bring action, new surroundings and reunion with the two whom I was so missing: even Anthony's reproachful presence was, I decided, better than his absence.

*Monday 15 July: Kyle of Lochalsh to Dingwall*

We set off for Dingwall uncomfortably crowded because Lisa's car, which usually took five, had taken the advance group of only three, so there had to be two extra passengers in the cramped ice-cream van. But Kenny would drive back to meet us on the far side of Strome Ferry in order to relieve spread the load. Morale was still low because of the exceptionally uncomfortable night combined with the doped sensation of having had more sleep than we were used to. It was still drizzling, there was a long drive ahead, a performance that evening and no guarantee of anywhere to sleep at the end of the day. The large van was playing up badly, becoming increasingly difficult to start, and Baz's usual pessimism about its getting through the day for once sounded convincing.

Our convoy drew out of hateful Kyle of Lochalsh through bleak, deserted roads. Travelling in the ice-cream van, I could see nothing of the scenery because the bench seats faced one another so that your back was to the window and the main view was the faces of the people sitting opposite, whose heads completely obscured the steamed up glass behind them. And we were far too squashed together to try and turn round. After an hour or so of this torture, the van slowed down and then stopped in what appeared to be a traffic jam in the middle of nowhere, as dense as the London rush hour. We crawled forward in two lanes and a

long tail of cars built up behind us. Consulting the map suggested that, although in the middle of moor and mountain, we were also on the approach road to Strome Ferry, the only way to cross Loch Carron, a long arm of the sea which cut many miles inland between the mountain ranges. The ferry, whatever it consisted of, was still a long way ahead and was obviously of extremely limited capacity, for every ten minutes or so a batch of only four or five cars would pass on the other side of the road. There was no way of calculating the length of the queue. After about half an hour of stopping and starting, the van reached the summit of a hill, and we could see before us hundreds of vehicles queuing all the way down the road to the quay at the far bottom of the valley. The ferry consisted of two very small boats, which looked like little water beetles floating across a pond, and were obviously totally inadequate to the demand. If it was not morally acceptable to travel on a Sunday, it was a mistake to do so on a Monday morning in company with all the other wretched tourists trapped on Skye without fresh food or alcohol.

The view was lovely, a magnificent panorama of bluish shrouded mountains stretching away into the distance and, in the foreground, the dark narrow waters of the loch; the sun came out and gave a sparkle to the river of car roofs ahead. We had three hours in which to appreciate this scene. The absurd little ferries seemed to make no impression on the length of the queues and there was an identical tailback on the other side of the loch. At one alarming moment, one of the ferries seemed to change its mind and set off purposefully to the left, watched in astonishment by the waiting customers, now strolling, picnicking or taking photographs. A rumour spread up the line of cars that it had broken down and was drifting inexorably towards the open sea with helpless passengers, but whatever had happened, it slowly corrected its course and made for the far bank where it rested for a while. There was a curiously good-natured atmosphere amongst all the people around us, which we could not share. They were just on holiday, free to drive from place to place, stop and start and picnic wherever they chose. We had a show to put on that night.

People were getting hungry, and this caused financial problems because we had planned to cook a meal out of the usual cheap ingredients at Dingwall and had certainly not budgeted for expensive snacks from the stall beside the quay, which only sold biscuits, crisps and exorbitantly priced apples. Jilly and I grudgingly bought and distributed small portions of these, reminding people that starchy things were not good for them. Then a message was passed up the line of cars that there was a telephone call for the Twelfth Night company in the hotel opposite the quay. This was a surreal moment. How could anyone know where we were, when we should have been seventy miles further on, and what could they want to say? Some

of us walked down to the hotel, rather self-conscious because we were being watched by all the people in the queue, who knew it was our phone call. I joined the group in order to use a real lavatory with hot water and mirrors. The hotel had the usual dark tartan décor, long passages and empty chilly rooms: strangely, hardly any one from the creeping queue had dared to come inside and relax in case of some miraculous speeding up of the ferry. Martin took the call while the rest of us had a quick drink in the dismal bar. It was from Kenny, who was waiting for us on the other side of the loch. The bad news was that they had had an accident in Lisa's car and although no-one was hurt, the car was being repaired in a Dingwall garage and could not pick up any people as been arranged. But a kind lady from the local dramatic society had driven him over and could take three passengers when we eventually got to the other side. This was a shock for Lisa, who had lent the car with considerable misgivings in the first place, and alarming for the tour because it would further complicate our transport arrangements.

We crawled down the hill until we could start counting the cars ahead and trying to work out how many more crossings would have to be made until it was our turn. The ice-cream van had caught up with the large van, which did not at all like all the stopping and starting, and we were afraid of having to share the ferry with it, because if it broke down on board, we would never be able to get off. At last it was our turn to embark, together with the big van, plus two cars whose passengers looked askance at the tattered posters stuck to the sides of our vehicles (this was not a successful way of advertising, for they never stayed put for longer than a day). Approaching the opposite shore, it was a slight consolation to see the huge queue waiting to cross and know that it would soon be our turn to go speeding past them.

We all pulled into the car park, where Kenny was sitting on a wall waiting for us, and he ran up to Lisa to explain and apologise: Ned, who had not yet passed his test, had been driving and they had gone into the side of the road, badly denting one wing. They did not know how long the repairs would take. His companion, the local dramatic society secretary seemed delighted to meet us and was most sympathetic. Three of the ice cream van's passengers transferred to the back of her car, and the rest of us were able to stretch out a little. We were at last about to set off when Baz announced that the big van would not start.

"I think", he said, in the proud tone of a prophet whose most gloomy predictions have just been fulfilled, "but I'm not sure, mind you, that the big ends have gone."

Everyone climbed out of all the vehicles and stood around looking anxiously at the brightly painted van. Malkie felt his moment had come to save the tour. He plunged under



the engine with a dirty rag and began to give a running commentary on what he could see there. Gerard pushed back his spectacles, rubbed his sleepy-looking eyes and said, "Oh God." Sue began to massage his back. The rest of us slumped down on the wall again. Our position was dire for it was now the middle of the afternoon and we were still a long way from Dingwall. As a final complication, it was to be Lisa's first night as Viola and it was essential to run through all the moves on an unknown stage.

Rapid decisions had to be made. The mechanic from the mercifully adjacent garage) said that the van could not be fixed until the next day. Jack, Gerard and Sue urgently discussed what to do. Although we sometimes criticised their leadership, on this occasion no-one else fancied taking the responsibility. Baz, as stage manager, and the local lady were summoned to their talks. The rest of the cast sat sadly around, imagining the further hours to be spent waiting; we seemed to be stuck forever at Strome Ferry, tired and stiff, unsatisfyingly fed on biscuits and chocolate, and with no apparent prospect of performing that night, which made the whole dreadful journey pointless anyway.

Gerard announced his plan. All lighting and scenery would be left behind in the dead van, but we would travel on in the remaining vehicles in order to perform that evening. Actors and costumes had priority over non-actors, personal luggage and sleeping bags. If there was time however, Jay and the local lady would drive back to collect the people and luggage left behind. This involved major repacking. Our activities were watched with delight and incredulity by the queue of traffic for, to our regret and embarrassment, the car park was right beside the main road and the bored motorists at last had something to look at. They wound down their windows, and some even got out of their cars and leaned on the wall, taking photographs of us and commenting unfavourably on our appearance and equipment. All the girls flatly refused to be parted from their personal luggage: the battered grips containing our make-up and clean underwear were the last bastions of self-respect and we would not let go. However everyone was quite cheerfully prepared to abandon their sleeping bags, for the night still seemed a long way off and anyway we had nowhere to sleep. The polythene bags of costumes took up so much space that it seemed as if some of the minor actors would have to be left behind too. Jilly and I agreed that there was one silver lining: we could not be expected to make supper, since all the cooking equipment and food had to be left behind in the van.

So we set off again. Although it looked a long way on the map, we made good progress and reached Dingwall in the early evening. The town felt large and impersonal in comparison with our venues in the western highlands, the people in more of a hurry,

unfriendly and incurious. Ned and Anthony appeared as soon as we arrived: they had been waiting for us all afternoon, reluctant to go far from the hall, and becoming very anxious over our non-appearance. There was a flood of conversation about the awfulness of the day and I was able to talk quite easily to Anthony, the need to share the news being more powerful than the barrier between us. Ned apologised humbly to Lisa who, however, was in such a state about her first night (she had been going through her lines all day) that she was no longer bothered about such a mundane matter as a damaged car.

That night's theatre was a room on the first floor of the Town Hall in the main street. There was certainly a platform at one end, the type that might be used for speech-making and prize-giving, but no backstage area at all. The only place for us to change or wait offstage was a small room at the far end of the hall, behind the rows of chairs laid out for the audience. Jack and Gerard called an urgent rehearsal and we walked through the beginning and end of each scene, plotting all major entrances and exits down a flimsy flight of steps in the centre of the platform and then by the centre or side aisles to the dressing room beyond. Those who had to come on again quite soon had to step into the wings, climb down from the steep platform with the aid of a box, and lurk until it was time to clamber back up again behind almost transparent hangings which did not quite reach the floor. Walking through the moves revealed terrible complications, with people being stuck at the back of the auditorium when meant to be making a snappy entrance from stage right. The set was inevitably stark, consisting only of some scaffolding which was already there. We just had to pretend it was meant to be modern and in fact it looked quite attractive. The furniture on stage – Orsino's throne, Olivia's bench – had to be chairs from the audience, and properties were borrowed from the local amateurs, who had a good stock of tankards and trays. In fact we were totally dependent on their assistance because we also had to borrow their lighting equipment. This was mortifying because the company had imagined themselves bringing sophistication to the world of the one-act play competition, but had just proved themselves incapable of putting on a performance without help.

We were agonisingly hungry so Gerard, after much haggling, distributed money for everyone to buy their own suppers. Most got pie and chips, which we had to eat in the street as Alice would not allow greasy food near the costumes. But Jaan bought beer and Ned bought cigarettes, and then they martyred on about being hungry, saying they had no money for the luxuries of life like the rest of us, and thought the tour was going to look after them, and so on. They were quite boring. The start of the play was postponed for a nerve-racking half-hour until the outstanding costumes had been ferried from the stranded van. In the

meantime, some of those who had been left behind turned up, having successfully hitch-hiked their way.

Despite all the events of the day, the show went really well. It was stimulating to enter from the back of the hall and walk right through the audience: by the time you were on stage and under the lights, your character was fully assumed because of those extra moments spent approaching. Walking past the rows of seats caused the audience to rustle and murmur, and although all their upturned faces were so close, they were also completely separate because they believed in your character. It also enhanced concentration on stage for it was essential to work out where the next entrance was to come from, to get off in the most unobtrusive manner, and not impede the other advancing actors. The only disadvantage was having to step down from the high platform and stand motionless in the non-wings. At one moment, when I was standing at the back of the hall waiting to come on in a blackout, there was a terrible crash: the short-sighted Gaye had missed the step and fallen right off the stage. The other exciting thing was Lisa's Viola, which was a constant delight. She was no more experienced an actress than I, but her diffident personality, which just occasionally revealed a hint of strength, was just right for her interpretation of Viola. Amy's version was more confident, feline and knowing, in fact totally different, yet here was Lisa, wearing the same red satin and white lace, saying the same lines. It was very confusing but, like the ad hoc moves, invigorated us all.

There was a large audience that night, for Dingwall was a cultured town, and after the performance we were greatly relieved to be offered hospitality for the night via a girl from university, whose parents lived nearby. There would be a bedroom in someone's house for the girls, a cellar in another for the boys and before that a party would be held in our honour. Somewhere to sleep was good but a party was the last thing I felt like after that gruelling day. As well as the usual exhaustion, hunger and dirt, there seemed little point in an enforced social occasion with the others because we were together all the time, and a couple of hours away from them would have been far more attractive. Nor was there much point in meeting a handsome stranger across a crowded room when we were travelling on next morning. The other normal reason for going to a party was to get closer to someone you fancied, and I had thought that person was Ned. But he no longer seemed to be the Ned for whom I believed I had dumped Anthony: his charm and openness seemed to have gone and he was becoming just another member of the tour, boon companion to the unpleasant hard drinkers, Jay and Jaan. As well as all this, I felt a strong sense of resentment towards the girl

holding the party, jealous that she was trying muscle in on our tightly knit group. I did not feel proud of myself for any of these thoughts.

The party house was a few miles outside the town. We were given lifts or squeezed into our own vehicles. At least there was no van to pack. I had been imagining civilisation, a carpet and deep leather armchairs, perhaps even some antlers over the mantelpiece, but the cellar we entered was an too familiar space - white-washed walls, candles in Chianti bottles, movie posters, in fact the recreation of a typical student flat which felt jarringly out of place in the middle of the silent hills and starry sky. There was loud music playing, bottles of Spanish wine and a very few plates of titbits, which we cleared like locusts before the first bottle had even been opened.

No-one had the energy to dance and although we tried to talk politely with the other guests, pleasant people who had all been to the play, we all ended up collapsed in heaps on the floor, accepting refills in our mugs whenever the bottles circulated. The wine was harsh and sweetish, and extremely potent on our empty stomachs and tired heads. I was trying so hard with Ned. I sat close to him, attempting to chat in the old way, but it was no good. There was a restraint and a stiffness between us, perhaps even hostility on his side, and I had to accept that it would never again be possible to achieve the gaiety and spontaneity of our friendship at the beginning of the tour. Also, he was cuddled up close to Amy, whose arm was round his neck and she looked at me, her eyes gleaming, in a complacent sort of way (this was the Amy who had been bidding such tender farewells to Milo only yesterday morning). In fairness, she had had a rotten evening, her Viola superceded by Lisa's acclaimed interpretation, and the latter, now lively and cheerful, was the heroine of the evening, petted and cuddled by the producers and by Kenny.

Being in the presence of strangers always seemed to strengthen, if temporarily, our group loyalty. We felt the need to exaggerate our behaviour by showing off a bit, and this affected our attitudes towards each other. It was possible then to feel affection even towards Malkie and Jaan, who took on the roles of the lovable eccentrics who were an integral part of the company. There was also a tendency to overplay our own characters in order to make our roles as merry student actors convincing. The wine helped too.

After a final rebuff from Ned, who turned his back on me to whisper and giggle with Amy, I leaned against the wall and was quietly unhappy, only exchanging a few remarks with dear Matt, who genuinely seemed to be enjoying himself and was carrying on bubbling conversations with everyone around him. Anthony was sitting a few bodies away, like me not really taking part in things. I looked at his profile and remembered how the once unknown

personality had fascinated me. What was he thinking about now? Was it me? To my great surprise, I felt a powerful wave of regret that it was over. I hadn't grown into my new part of independent woman, I had got used to being with him, the restrictions of being in a mutually dependent relationship were suddenly attractive again. I wanted him back.

For about fifteen minutes I sat on the floor, covertly watching him and rejoicing at the feelings inside me. What delightful things the emotions are, so utterly unpredictable. My normally logical mind would not have believed such a change of heart possible, but through the tiredness, the intimate atmosphere of the dimly-lit cellar and the rough wine, that mind did not seem to be in control any more. I knew I should think it through sensibly, but just as surely realised that I was about to cross the few feet of floor between us and ask to begin again. Suppose he did not want me any more? And what would the others think? My heart was pounding and my throat tightened, causing me to swallow and lick my dry lips a number of times. Unsteadily I got up and stumbled across the floor, trying to clamber unobtrusively over other people's legs, and crouched down again beside him. He looked at me in a friendly and enquiring way.

"Anthony", I said, with a sense of being about to utter a gigantic cliché. "Can you ever forgive me?" "Of course I can", he said and put his arms round me. It was so easy.

We were both overcome with English embarrassment at this reconciliation and said nothing for a while. Anyway, it was not possible to talk with so many people around and such loud music. But the room looked very different from the shelter of his arm.

It was now extremely late and Jack, who had a greater sense of responsibility than Gerard over these matters, began to fuss, getting us all off the floor and shooed upstairs to extract our luggage from the cars. The boys stayed there to sleep while the girls were ferried to another house. Here we were led up to a large room which looked like a luxurious hospital ward, full of beds and mattresses. They all had clean sheets. We protested to our hostess at such generosity, but she insisted that we enjoy it. This was unimagined luxury, with carpets on the floor, shades on the lights and hot water in the taps. We agreed that as seven baths would be too much for any hot water system, nobody would have one, but it was a sensuous pleasure to be able to undress and wash in a warm, mirrored room, and to drop clothes on the floor without fear of dirt and damp. Gaye volunteered to use the bathroom last and was gone a good half-hour; she returned rosy and triumphant, having, most unfairly, taken a proper bath. I was too light-headed to mind, and sleep came easily, with the unfamiliar cleanliness and comfort no deterrent at all.

*Tuesday 16 July: Dingwall to Dornoch*

The luxury extended to breakfast: we had bacon and eggs, served on clean white china on a table with a tablecloth, and saucers under the cups. I was longing to see Anthony again and we met calmly and happily, while Gerard briefed everyone on the complicated arrangements for getting to Dornoch, that evening's venue. Jay and passengers drove Baz back to the Strome Ferry garage so that Baz could retrieve the now mended large van with all our scenery, lights, food stores and cooking equipment. The ice-cream van, agonisingly overloaded with people and luggage, set off for Dornoch. Anthony and I were to travel with Lisa and Kenny in her repaired car, which she was to collect from the Dingwall garage. We waved the others off, grateful not to be travelling under such discomfort, and strolled towards the garage, feeling that all disasters had been overcome and that the tour was on its feet again. But Lisa came storming out: the car would not be ready until the following day. What was to be done? We had no idea where Dornoch was or how far off, and doubted if it could be reached by public transport, the rest of the company could not be contacted by telephone for hours. The only good thing was that our luggage was in the ice-cream van so there was nothing to carry. We would just have to hitchhike, so we set off on the main road out of town, along the edge of a sea loch and past a whisky distillery, before getting into open countryside.

Anthony and I started off walking about a hundred yards ahead of Lisa and Kenny, a tactical error, we soon realised, because they had first call on any car going in the right direction. Except that no-one wanted to stop. This was ridiculous, actors having to beg lifts in order to get to the next performance, and it got more irritating when Lisa and Kenny got picked up. Then a bus approached which had 'Dornoch' on the front. We waved it down and climbed aboard: we had gone through the motions of hitchhiking but felt that our duty to that night's audience came first. We sat up at the front and watched the countryside, green, mellow and pleasant here, rolling past. The driver seemed familiar with the doings of all his passengers, and they all chatted away amongst themselves. We also talked, much more open and relaxed with each other than before, for I felt that, having seen me behaving badly, Anthony was no longer idealising me, so I was able to be more like myself.

When we reached Dornoch, instead of immediately seeking the company, we delayed a while over tea and scones in a café on the quiet high street, with no sense of guilt because we might still have been twenty or thirty miles away. There were yellow chintzy curtains, highly polished chestnut-coloured tables and sunlight illuminating brasses hanging on the wall. It felt wonderfully anonymous to be sitting there, unknown to anyone and no-one knowing where we were.

Dornoch was a peaceful little place, on a much smaller scale than Dingwall, and felt much further north. The wide streets were bordered by low houses and there were few shops. I was soon assailed by the usual guilt about food - I did not seem to have cooked anything for days - so we tracked down the company in the Town Hall, a small building next to a majestic hotel with turrets like a French chateau. Our hall was not attractive, being dark brown, dingy and with a strange smell, but it did have a decent stage with wings and proper curtains. But there was not enough space to suspend the backcloth (which, in any case, was still in the large van) so that actors could not get from one side to the other except in view of the audience. Once again, all our exits and entrances had to be replotted and since the only dressing room was again at the back of the auditorium, we all had to be dressed and made up before the audience could be let in, making subsequent costume changes in the cramped wings.

Baz and the big van turned up late in the afternoon, so we had scenery again, and the show proceeded uneventfully to a sparse and sullen audience. We were booked to hold a dance there on the following night but did not feel this would be much of a success either. We were not allowed to sleep in this hall and so were booked into a school in a village some miles away. After the performance, there was the usual complicated dividing up of luggage and food; plus anguished discussions on whether to wash or not, since the facilities were poor enough here but might be even worse in the schoolhouse.

Once more we drove through inadequately signposted roads into the vast darkness of the Highland night in search of sleep. After much slowing down and peering at the map with a torch, the convoy passed the dim outlines of unlit houses in a village street, and stopped at the only building with lights on, which turned out to be the house of the school caretaker who had kindly waited up. He handed over the key and indicated a path through wet grass to the school. This was a tiny building consisting of two rooms full of minuscule old-fashioned desks, wall charts and blackboards, and it was warm and snug. It was possible to rearrange the desks so as to make a private sleeping den, and the seats and tops served as useful storage areas. In no time we turned the neat classrooms into our usual refugee camp, with bundles of luggage, rugs and carrier bags all over the floor and our damp clothes hanging from the dear little coat pegs and window catches. There were no cooking facilities at all except our own electric kettle, so the evening snack could only be the perennial coffee, bread and syrup. Lavatories, however, were in generous supply, except that they were in a row outside in the blackness, extremely small and low with abbreviated wooden doors which, in the daylight, revealed your feet and the top of your head.

There was a lovely atmosphere in the schoolroom. The building felt cosy and intimate after the recent dingy halls we had occupied, and it was good not to have to travel or perform the next day. We were all feeling friendly towards each other, brought closer by the stressful journeys and events of the last few days. It was also relaxing to be sleeping in a different place from where we had just acted, because the tension of the performance seemed normally to linger on in the building.

*Wednesday 17 July: Dornoch*

The morning sunlight revealed a spectacular setting. Beyond the school's little back garden, springy bright green turf led down towards miles of white sands and the greyish ocean beyond. Further down the coast were the caravans, hundreds of them, bright gaudy specks of metal in a massive encampment. The publicity team was furious with itself at having neglected such a huge potential audience, and decided they must be informed about our dance that night. Posters were hastily drafted and we made for the main entrance to the site, which was entirely surrounded by a deep ditch and a barbed wire fence and resembled a movie impression of a prisoner-of-war camp. Iron gates defended the entrance, one of which was embellished with a large oval plaque, bright yellow in colour and painted with imitation tree rings. This welcomed us to "Granny's Hieland Hame". Beyond the gates was a concrete bunker where the caretaker lived. He gave grudging permission for us to hang a poster in the main office and tour the site to tell people about the dance. The caravanners were not interested. Perhaps they already knew Dornoch Town Hall, or perhaps we looked too scruffy and incompetent to run anything. Whatever it was, we were met with unfriendly stares, hostile repartee or, worst of all, were totally ignored. They were so very busy, running around with buckets, tinkering with wheels, hanging out washing, that no-one was actually sitting in the sunshine to admire the view.

We recognised failure and made our way over huge sand dunes and tussocks of razor-sharp grass to the irresistible beach. It was completely deserted, this huge great arc of pale sand stretching to the horizon on either side. I had forgotten the simple pleasures of the sea-side, the high tide line of shrivelled, blackened fragments of seaweed, the tiny perfect shells that remained in the fingers after sifting a handful of sand, the sudden firmness underfoot after each retreating wave. And there was the sea, a half-forgotten ally, infinitely satisfying, always changing. We began, almost involuntarily and without buckets and spades, to build a castle, crouching, scraping, digging, patting and moulding and produced a magnificent edifice with walls and turrets, lookouts, blockhouses, stables, and moat. Anthony became quite



masterful and showed a fine understanding of the volume and density required to extend the moat under the drawbridge. The sun shone on us all afternoon.

Jay had driven Lisa back to Dingwall to collect her car, a task for which he had firmly volunteered. I think he was getting bored with the tour. He had certainly been observing us all, and noting down involvements, disagreements, the formation of small groups, hostility to the producers and so on in his black notebook, and he had held long interviews with most of us about our views on acting and our responses to the tour. But to do that sort of thing effectively – and I did realise now what he had meant at the beginning when he said that he intended to study us – he should have remained more detached, which he was far too vain to achieve. He had gained some influence over Jaan and Ned, but they tended to go off together, because they seemed to me to be slightly in awe of him. Jack, Gerard and Sue did not have much to do with him at all, aware of his constant snide comments on the organisation of the tour but too preoccupied to stand up to him. The girls tried to give him a wide berth, which was not always easy when he was paying what could be very gallant attentions. Lisa had been trying to fend him off since Portree; following her debut as Viola she had gained in assurance and her firm but offhand behaviour was driving him wild. Jilly was the only one who managed the right tone of flirtation and badinage, but she was longing to get to Inverness to meet her fiancé, from whose frequent letters she would read us extracts in a special squeaky voice. I was a little puzzled why Jilly had come on tour at all for she was not a member of the dramatic society but just a friend of Gerard, invited along as head cook. She was certainly maintaining flamboyant control over the kitchen despite being splendidly slutish; always one of the last to get up in the morning, she would sit straight up in her sleeping bag and, without washing her face, would start to apply thick orange foundation from a Matt Factor panstick, while the first cigarette of the day hung from the corner of her mouth.

The evening dance had the usual late start, and was marked by the total segregation of the sexes at the beginning. Local girls danced together, while lads sniggered in a corner. Jack looked after the bar (soft drinks only, sale or return from the grocer's shop) in his worriedly efficient way, while Gerard and Sue danced joyously together. The dingy Town Hall, with its harsh central lighting, was not an ideal setting, but when the music was loud and more people were dancing, it became quite jolly. I danced with some of our boys with no sense of guilt, for Anthony was with the small group who had taken themselves off to the hotel bar, and decided that they were a nice bunch of people, even Malkie. They were all so familiar, these people whom I had barely known three weeks ago but it now felt like a lifetime's experience. In contrast, dancing with the local boys was an unnerving experience, with long silences,

clammy grips and unrhythmical steps. After closing time, the rest of the company returned and the dance livened up considerably. Ned seemed to be dividing his attentions between Amy and Lisa, and Gaye was very much with Baz. I danced with Anthony, but not exclusively, and was delighted to feel pangs of jealousy when he took the floor with somebody else.

*Thursday 18 July: Dornoch to Bonar Bridge*

The journey was so short that it hardly seemed worth all the packing up and unloading again half an hour later. Bonar Bridge was an odd place, more for passing through than for staying in, since it was at the junction of two main roads. The hall was a grey stone building on the central street, decorated inside with the usual dark panelling. As we explored the interior, we were surprised to discover the ladies' dressing room occupied by the local solicitor as a temporary office while his premises next door were being redecorated. Having had no warning of our coming, he was as astounded as we were, and initially insisted on his right to stay; but after we started hanging up costumes and discussing menus, he crossly gathered up his papers and abandoned work for the rest of the day.

Bonar Bridge happily confirmed the small place, large audience rule but my performance was less than confident because I had taken out my contact lenses, hurting after the dazzle of yesterday's white sand and sun. Everything was a blur. This meant having to negotiate all moves very carefully, trying not to fall off the steps and hoping that I was addressing my remarks to the right characters in the crowded last scene.

As we were allowed to sleep in the hall and had no booking for the next day, we were all very slow moving after the performance and postponed all the packing and washing-up till the next day. By now, we had completely abandoned the idea of going for a walk or a drive after the show, and the wonderful surroundings often seemed to make so little impression that we might as well have been touring the London suburbs. During the day, if there ever was spare time, the sensations of guilt about going to explore were powerful, for help was always needed in the kitchen or wardrobe or on publicity and having spare time was proof of shirking. And even if escape was achieved, anything more than a ten-minute stroll was ruined by anxiety to get back to the hall in case of a disaster. Still, we were aware of the presence of the mountains and sea, even if just driving past them, and it was quite magical at night to step from our tinsel and stage lights into the long glowing sunsets and see the dark hills silhouetted against the reddish gleam of the sky.

Exhausted but wakeful, we stayed in the hall and were entertained by a game of ouija, organised by Jilly, who had found a card table in one of the many side rooms. None of us had

ever done this before, and few in fact had even heard of it. Jilly, looking like a gypsy with her long tousled red hair and a bright shawl round her shoulders, wrote the letters of the alphabet on pieces of paper, placed them in a circle around what should have been a glass tumbler but was actually a tin mug, then made us sit round the table and hold hands while she called up the spirits. Then we all placed one finger on the top of the mug and waited for the answers to our questions to be spelled out. There was a lot of giggling and embarrassment at first, because no-one could think of a really interesting question without fearing a truthful reply. There was no reaction at all to the trite “will it be a fine day tomorrow?” Jilly spoke sternly to the spirit and demanded to know if it was there. The mug jerked. “Baz is pushing it!” someone complained. “I was not! Did you see me pushing it? Did you?” He rose from the table, insulted and refused to return to the circle, but drew up his chair up very close to the table and peered at our massed fingers for the rest of the session.

As no-one liked to accuse anyone else of cheating, the mug started to get active. There was an eerie feeling when it kept slipping around, and I found that I had to move my finger to keep up with it. Presumably the movements were being produced by someone’s unconscious pressure, and then the other fingers added to the momentum. Seeing Ned’s cherubic face and Jaan’s sly leer across the table, it was doubtful whether the pressures were spontaneous. Yet we were all staring at each other’s wrists for signs of tensing muscles and none could be spotted. The spirit rightly provided gibberish answers to silly questions but when Gaye, who had left her purse behind in the schoolhouse, asked if she would get it back, the fairly legible reply was: “Yes, if she gets up in time.” In fact, Baz had promised to drive her back the next morning if there was enough time; and he did not have his finger on the mug at all. More frivolous questions were asked, until Jilly, after much beseeching the air around her, announced that the spirit was offended and had gone away.

*Friday 19 July: Bonar Bridge*

Gaye, who had been worrying about her purse, was so relieved that she had a good night’s sleep, rose early, woke Baz, got driven back to the village and retrieved it safely. We all took this to prove the power of the spirits.

There was solid drizzle; so the rest of us got up late and slumped around in the semi-darkness. We wanted to postpone the shopping until the weather improved, but Gerard declared that he wanted a good lunch, voluntarily produced money and drove us out into the wet. In Gaye’s absence, Jilly and I tried to commandeer Lisa to help with the shopping, but she turned mulish, Viola having gone to her head, and announced that she had come to do the

posters and the driving but would have nothing to do with the food. We had now learned to go shopping with a suitcase to hold the bulky supplies, which meant taking it in turns to dump your clothes in a pile on the floor and hope that it didn't get scattered in the interim.

The standard meal had become sausage meat, onions, rice and baked beans, which could be cooked in our one enormous pan. Serving out twenty portions from two or more separate containers simply took too long, nor was there ever enough space on top of the cooker, when there even was a cooker. Otherwise we had to use the portable but slow-heating electric ring. For lack of pans and space, we seldom cooked fresh vegetables, which in any case were rarely available in the shops – the Scots did not care for greens. Lettuce was messy and hated by the boys (“rabbit-food!”). Potatoes were hopeless because, apart from the peeling, they were impossible to cook in bulk without producing a soggy exterior around a bullet-hard core. And with the weight of the pan and all that boiling water, draining them was extremely dangerous. The stodge was partly offset by individual pieces of fruit as a healthy pudding but these presented their own problems because some inevitably vanished from the kitchen during the day so that when the meal came there were never enough to go round. Apples and bananas were popular for stealing, oranges less so because of the mess and the pungent smell. Bread spread with golden syrup remained our favourite food: we must have needed the sugar to replace all the energy we were using, and were getting through about two cans a day, a post-performance addiction for no-one could relax until they had downed several oozing slices. As a fine example of failure to learn through experience, we still occasionally made scrambled eggs after the show. It always seemed a good idea, nourishing and cheap, but was uniformly nasty when made in bulk. Our eaters did have a lot to put up with, but they were generally too hungry to be fussy.

#### *Saturday 20 July: Bonar Bridge to Tain*

Setting off in the morning made the end of the tour feel closer because we were now retracing our footsteps and travelling south. Tain was another quiet little place, the hall some way out of the centre, and we would have to act in the round because there was no proper stage. But we had all learned to be so flexible that this caused no panic at all.

However, our finances were perilous. The repairs to the various vehicles had swallowed up any profit from the big audiences and we were not even fully booked for the next few days, with an unscheduled free evening because one venue had cancelled at the last minute. Gerard and Jack decided we must do an extra performance, in a field if necessary (“Hey kids, let's do the show right here”), because all the halls in the area were booked up by the busy round of ceilidhs and film shows. Since the local amateur dramatic societies had been so

helpful during the planning stage, the producers decided to appeal to the regional secretary, with whom they had already corresponded, who lived nearby and was married to a Famous Scottish Novelist. They decided that visiting her for a talk could magically solve our problems, either by finding a hall at short notice or whipping up larger audiences for our existing bookings. As the drive to Tain had been so short and there was no set to put up, we had time to spare that afternoon. Perhaps we had wild fantasies of being offered champagne, and invited to perform on the premises, anyway most people decided to come in the van, washed and wearing respectable clothes. Baz drove through twisting roads, thickly and neatly forested on either side (the countryside was more prosperous looking and tidier here), found a tree-lined drive and approached a startlingly pink house, large, bulging and turreted, looking like an elderly blancmange.

We now all felt bashful about this uninvited visit, and so ashamed of each other's clothes that no-one was even willing to get out of the van. It was partly anxiety at the idea of contact with prosperous strangers from whom we needed a favour. Sue, less sensitive to such nuances, and Jack, his hair sleekly combed, went up the steps to the front door. It was answered by a servant, but after some delay, the lady herself appeared and flung her hands in the air at the sight of us all skulking like a bunch of poorly paid extras at the foot of the stairs. She said, "Oh, I must fetch my husband to have a look at you all." After a few minutes of what must have been domestic argument, the great man, presumably interrupted in mid paragraph, was propelled into the doorway. He stared at us and we stared at him, then he grunted and scuttled back into the house like a badger back into its den. Mrs Novelist expressed lots of sympathy for our plight but offered no tea, or any constructive suggestions for the hypothetical extra performance. As we drove back, we felt a great sense of anti-climax.

The hall at Tain presented the greatest challenge yet. The raised 'stage' area at the end was simply not large enough to act on, but playing in the round was complicated by problems of access to the dressing room and the inconvenient position of the auditorium door. Martin eventually decided to seat some of the audience on the stage and place the remaining chairs in the corners of the room, leaving a diagonally shaped acting space in the centre. This meant providing less seating than we intended, but the audience turned out to be so small that this was not a problem. To make things worse and reveal the sparseness of the house, there was no way of blacking out the row of dusty windows on either side or the skylights in the ceiling. Despite the best efforts of the stage crew with cartridge paper and sticky tape, the rays of the setting sun obstinately shone through the glass, even though we postponed the start of the

play by fifteen minutes in the hopes of dusk and more audience. Mrs Novelist and other smartly dressed ladies from the amdram committee sat in one of the front rows.

Despite all this, it was very stimulating to act in the round, and Lisa, no longer suffering from first night nerves, did an even better Viola than before. In fact, however safe it felt to be separated from the audience by the proscenium arch, there was something far more intimate and honest in doing it this way, with the spectators so close that you could actually see their mouths opening and their throats wrinkling as they began to laugh. This audience, however, was perhaps inhibited by the closeness and was not very responsive. But it was a good performance. Mrs Novelist clapped the hardest and longest, rather overdoing it we thought, and insisted on getting up and making a speech at the end. She thanked our brave young selves and regretted that not more people had come to the show, a point which had not needed attention drawn to it. We skulked in the dressing room and longed for her to finish so that we could clear up.

#### *Sunday 21 July: Tain to Inverness*

Even though it was a Sunday, we did risk the fairly short drive to Inverness. It was strange to be in a proper town again. There were factories, distilleries, busy roads and even suburban outskirts. We were not allowed to sleep in the theatre and so were booked to stay in an Army hall. This had caused some apprehension but turned out to be astonishingly luxurious. It was a large modern building, red brick on the outside and much plate glass and chrome within, with highly polished parquet floors. The spacious entrance hall was like that of a hotel, with a welcoming flower display and low black leather sofas. Here we dumped our baggage and grabbed the pile of post waiting for us. This brought the sad news of examination failure for some, but exams were poor remote things compared to our hard-working daily lives and no-one was disconsolate. The kitchen was another revelation, huge, with quantities of shiny equipment and two modern electric cookers which had wide grills (toast at last) and deep ovens. This was the very first time we had facilities suitable for our numbers. And the kitchen was overshadowed by the shower rooms. We all abandoned luggage, publicity and thoughts of dinner and wallowed in apparently unlimited hot water, privacy, cleanliness and space. It was glorious to get really clean again. Even making the meal, necessarily simple because there were no shops open, was not the usual chore. Those who had passed their exams would have like to celebrate but of course, no pubs were open either. Anyway, it would not have been tactful.

The strictness of Sunday observation was unpleasantly rubbed in that afternoon. As there were no tasks to do and the theatre was not available until the next day, Anthony and I

went out to explore with completely clear consciences. As we crossed a deserted street in the grey and windy town, an old woman in a long mackintosh approached us. We thought she wanted to ask about the play. But she delivered a completely unexpected stream of abuse at us for dishonouring the Sabbath. Was she upset because we were holding hands, or wearing jeans (we may not have been well dressed but were exceptionally clean), or just out for a walk? Whatever it was, she went on and on, with real hatred in her nagging Scottish whine. After the shocked realisation that this was actually happening, we turned and walked off, trying not to go too quickly but longing to put as much distance as possible between us and the madwoman, whose crazed voice followed us down the street. Inverness went sour after that. We were both embarrassed and upset by the incident, trivial though it was, for it seemed a form of contact with the true Highland mind, an instinctive reaction against cultural intruders, a torrent of protest against alien ways. The whole town now seemed hostile. We did some miserable sight-seeing for a couple of hours, cold and bored but reluctant to go back to the hall and admit the cause of our return. At the top of a hill were some unconvincing ruins labelled "Macbeth's Castle", being photographed by a huddle of tourists. I felt some sympathy for Lady Macbeth's ambitions to move on.

Jilly was going to play Olivia the following evening. She had suggested this rather tentatively to me a couple of days earlier and although I had not much liked the idea - we had been cast for our acting abilities and were not just there for fun - it would have been awkward to refuse, and anyway I had assumed that the producers would not agree. On stage each night as lady in waiting, she already knew most of my lines, so when she approached our too amiable producers, they did agree, and there was nothing I could do. I watched some of the rehearsal and felt jealously that our standards were being lowered.

It was Jilly's day altogether because her fiancé arrived that evening. She had been waiting for him all day, and had tried to make an especially interesting meal out of the stale fragments we had brought from Tain. She shrieked "Ian!" and quite literally jumped into his arms, and he stood there swinging her up and down (no mean feat as she was a hefty girl and taller than he was). He had a merry, relaxed personality, appeared not at all overawed by there being so many of us, with such established relationships, and by the end of the evening, was no longer a new face but a member of the company.

*Monday 22 July: Inverness*

It was always a relief when Sunday was over. Food was available again from a wide selection of shops; the only problem was buying enough for the day's meals out of the pittance cajoled from Gerard. There was always miscellaneous shopping to be done too, replacing the usual combs, toothpaste and soap left behind at previous halls. And none of the company seemed capable of buying their own postage stamps, so that all food-shopping expeditions were complicated by requests for various permutations of stamps for which no-one ever proffered the right change. Our publicity tour did not arouse much enthusiasm amongst the inhabitants of Inverness. Some of the shopkeepers refused outright to display a posters, despite the offers of a free seat. The theatre was not well-placed but was tucked away down a side street. And the local amdram society, whose possessions were all over the place, were unco-operative about lending parts of their lighting equipment.

During the afternoon, Susan from the Shiel Bridge crafts shop turned up. She had noted down our dates and had promised to come and visit us, although no-one had given her a second thought since then. But for her, trapped amongst those beautiful, lonely mountains, we clearly represented escape; she had been waiting for the last fortnight for us to come within reasonable travelling distance again. So much had happened to us during that time, and in our collective memory, Shiel Bridge was just one of many past venues. But for Susan, we had meant an utter break in her routine and the intimation of a different way of life. Her pink eager face shone with excitement and she plunged happily into kitchen and wardrobe duties. I had been going to take Jilly's place as Olivia's attendant that evening, but this was an ideal chance for Susan to appear on the stage. She almost burst with pleasure when offered the role and I, who had found the idea of walking on degrading, was thankful to bow out.

The theatre was not inspiring, as the auditorium was narrow and cavernous, but there was a proper stage with wings and dressing rooms, and an effective lighting system. It had not been too bad watching Jilly rehearse, but after Sue and I had sold tickets and programmes to that night's audience, I sat in the back row to watch the play and entered a disturbing dream. There was a stranger wearing my black dress and saying my lines; there was the newcomer Susan wearing Jilly's costume, and there was Amy as Viola again, just when we had got used to Lisa in the role. It was like watching through a distorting mirror. Jilly was obviously nervous and although she did not forget any lines, she gabbled through them as if glad to reach the end of each speech. This unsettled the other actors, whose performances I



knew so well, and I felt great resentment towards Jack and Gerard for having consented to the stupid scheme.

Being able to watch the whole play from the front, I could also see that a lot of slackness had crept in again, with lines skipped or altered, some terrible acting in the minor roles, inconsistent make-up (the cast seemed to go in for all or nothing on their faces) and tatty-looking costumes. It was all quite depressing and made me wonder for the first time what right we had to come up here and inflict ourselves on paying customers. Yet the audience loved it, the children in the front row roared with laughter and everyone clapped so enthusiastically at the end that there must have been some justification. But it could have been so much better.

*Tuesday 23 July: Inverness*

The end of the tour was now seemed very close. We were all tired and run down, but it was difficult to imagine a life without perpetual packing up and moving on. It was even hard to see people as individuals anymore rather than members of the company identifiable by their clothing: Ned was the brick red cotton shirt, Gerard the dirty cream Aran sweater, Gaye the green cardigan with the belt. We could even identify the owners of abandoned plimsolls and vests. Jaan and Malkie were no longer offensive, but were just extreme expressions of the group norm, whereas Matt's exuberant bonhomie had become rather wearing and Jay's trouble-making and malice were now muted, although he had consistently been trying to undermine the influence of Gerard. Jack, Sue by snide little comments and hints. Perhaps they were not the most efficient of people, but they had put us and kept us on the road and were never bossy. Gerard and Jack were in low spirits because of our negative finances, and were still talking of fitting in an extra performance by extending the tour for a day in a desperate attempt to recoup losses, but the rest of us were now against this idea. People had holiday arrangements and some of us were going straight into rehearsals for the Edinburgh Festival.

It was a long boring day in Inverness with no performance to look forward to, and we mooched around feeling irritable and resenting the lull in activity when we were geared up to travelling on forever. In the afternoon, a group went to the cinema, which seemed a pleasant indulgence when planned but in fact did not feel quite natural. The evening passed slowly, while we made thorough use of the Army's excellent facilities, though curiously we were not too sad to see the last of these modern conveniences for they made the whole thing too easy and deprived us of the hardships we boasted of in the cause of Art.

Wednesday 24 July: Inverness to Grantown on Spey to Kingussie

Grantown was another low-built, grey-roofed town with wide deserted streets. I was finding the north-east far less sympathetic than the western highlands. There was something incomplete and barren about all those ranges of towering mountains without the proximity of the sea. In the west there was so much more beauty and complexity in the sight of islands trailing on towards the horizon. Here, there was a greater sense of prosperity, of grouse moors, shooting parties and large cars (not that this had been reflected in our audiences.) This town was famous for its local pearls, which were prominently displayed in most of the shop windows, and we girls duly coveted them, wishing for once that we were rich adults rather than poor students.

As our theatre was the Town Hall, we not allowed to sleep there; since it had proved impossible to find any other accommodation in Grantown, we were to travel immediately after the show to Kingussie, our next and last booking. The Grantown audience was small but enthusiastic, our penultimate performance passed too quickly and it was agonising that the tour was so nearly over. Perhaps because of the two days' rest or the very short journey, we were really good that night. People seemed to find a new confidence in themselves and a greater depth of meaning in the lines. The first week of the tour had really been just a series of dress rehearsals, the next fortnight a time of consolidation, but this evening there was a hint that we were capable of getting much better. How I regretted having missed even one performance.

It was unsettling to know that we would have to pack up and travel on immediately after the show. That was usually the best part of the day, everyone hyped up but winding down, stripping the set and packing costumes, carrying things out buoyed up by the thought of being nearly finished and then able to stretch out on the floor with bread and syrup, the only task ahead being to unroll the sleeping bag and postpone washing till the morning. Instead, we were faced with the awful clearing up, followed by travelling at night, exhausted, for an indefinite length of time to a new destination with unknown facilities. There was apparently a dance being held in the hall at Kingussie that evening, so there would still be people up to let us in and a promise of any left-over sandwiches. But this meant we might have to wait ages to get into the hall, for highland parties could go on till dawn; so should we arrive washed and smartened up in order to join in? And would there really be any refreshments left? The question of food was crucial, because we would not let people eat after the show because of having to clean the kitchen, and there would be mutiny at the other end if nothing was available there either.

I travelled with Anthony in the acute discomfort of the large van, so badly and hastily loaded that there was even less space for passengers than usual. It was the last to vehicle to set off and took a very long time, although the journey was only about thirty miles. Being squashed there in the jolting darkness was like a foretaste of purgatory, worn out but too uncomfortable to doze off, aware of dirty clothes and face sticky with improperly removed make-up, and the thought of having to enter a brightly lit hall full of dancing strangers. I really longed then for the tour to be over and thought that tomorrow could not come soon enough.

We reached Kingussie in the early hours. The town was so still that we felt like criminals on the move. The last vehicle to arrive always drove hopefully up and down the streets until the other cars were spotted, but this was much harder in the dark and it took quite a while before we found the hall's unassuming and unlit doorway. Despite our fears, the dance was over and the hall only occupied by ourselves. Mercifully there was a great tin tray of sandwiches, with enough left even for the last comers. The auditorium had rows of red plush seats which must have started life in a cinema, battered but comfortable, and we lay back in the semi-dark, almost too tired to search for sleeping bags from the mound of luggage dumped in the lobby. The only consolation was that there was no need to get up in the morning and travel on because we were already there.

#### *Thursday 25 July: Kingussie*

It was strange to wake up and realise that this was the very last day. On one hand, there was a great sense of relief in not having to plan any more meals, and know that the food shopping expedition was the very last. In fact we were positively encouraging people to eat up the leftovers and Baz heroically finished up the mango chutney. And it was no longer necessary to maintain a tidy suitcase or try and wash underwear because by the next evening we would back in our flats and digs again. But far more powerful was the sense of puzzlement and impending loss. These people had become part of daily life, as had the play, and it was painful to stop. Even those who had come on tour out of curiosity rather than the desire to act had achieved a sense of purpose by the sheer hard work which had held us together. Without the play, none of us would have survived the others' company for more than a week but with it, we had been able to keep going.

A lot of merry nonsense was planned to celebrate the final performance, such as Jay coming on as one of the waiting women, or neat whisky in the beer tankards, but none of these things happened. There was a large audience and we gave them an excellent show.

When not on stage, instead of chatting away in the dressing rooms, most actors sat in the wings listening to every word. How I then regretted then all the evenings that had gone before, the beginning when there was so much time ahead that the thought of a whole month's touring was daunting, all the times I had not bothered to appreciate the performance. It had all slipped by. Leaning in the wings, watching the group on the stage, Ned's gentle Aguecheek, all pink satin and white lace, blonde wig slightly askew, Pat's stubborn and aggressive Sir Toby, Anthony's detached cynical Feste, I wished that time would stop. Too soon we formed the final tableau, Jay dimmed the lights to a misty mauve, and the exquisite music for the last song was played. Anthony sang the verses standing alone at the front of the stage, while the rest of us were posed on the rostrum at the very back. On the lines "But that's all one, our play is done and we'll strive to please you every day", he turned his back on the audience and began to walk very slowly towards the back of the stage as the curtain fell.

And that was that. It was over. We lingered on the stage for a while, everyone reluctant to take their costumes off, but old habits won and we were instinctively driven to get on with the clearing up, the stage crew starting to dismantle the set and Alice agitating for the costumes to be put away.

There was to be a gala supper that night to celebrate the end of the tour. Jay had volunteered to cook the meal in an uncharacteristic burst of kindness: I think he was quite knowledgeable about food and had been suffering under our well-meaning but inexperienced endeavours. He announced he was going to make a beef stew with beer, which outraged most of the company who had not heard of carbonnade flamande and thought it was a nasty idea and a wicked waste of meat and alcohol. But he remained determined, and it was a great relief not to have to rush into the kitchen after the performance. Instead, I helped to carry bundles of costumes out into the darkness until the hall was cleared and we prepared to wash and dress for dinner. The sadness had worn off and there was now a sense of gaiety. Gerard had, for once, been generous with the housekeeping money and there was a lot of beer, fruit and cheese. Jay dominated the kitchen, wearing an apron and smirking with pride. As there was no pan large enough for his stew, he had made it in the hot water urn. (We never managed to wash this out properly because it was too large and heavy, and suffered from some guilt at the thought of the taste of the next women's institute tea.) Despite forebodings, the dish was excellent, the only criticism being that in the absence of potatoes, the meat and sauce had to be poured over horrible Highland sliced wrapped bread which absorbed the delicious juices like a soggy sponge.

With the aid of the beer we were festive but too tired to be rowdy, sitting in groups on the floor, bound in fellowship with those people we had been complaining about, from whom we would be parted tomorrow evening, some perhaps forever. We could have gone on all night. But there was an unpleasant interruption when the door burst open and a man, one of those who had welcomed us the previous evening and who was in charge of the hall, stormed into the room in a frenzy of anger. He lived nearby and must have been disturbed by the lights and our no more than moderate noise. We did not realise that we had been heard and were naturally prepared to apologise and tone it down, but he was in such a state that it was quite impossible to talk to him. His eyes were set and staring and, although not quite foaming at the mouth, his words came pouring out in a torrent: he accused us of drunkenness, violent behaviour, obscene orgies, he would never let the hall to students again, he would never trust “you people”, he would never have thought it of us. Martin bore the main brunt of this because he had happened to be nearest to the door and had politely stood up when it became clear that the man was not just making a social call. The tirade ended with a final crescendo of fury and John Knox stood glaring at us, waiting for his words to take effect. Then he turned abruptly and strode out. There was some jeering and muttering of protest, but most of us were temporarily stunned. This was the real face of the Highlands again, the one which Anthony and I had already glimpsed in the old woman at Inverness. The landscape was reflected in the people; there was no pleasure and relaxation here. You did what you had to do and you spoke your mind and that was virtuous. No-one had the heart to carry on with the party after that. And it was not even the Sabbath.

There was a further disturbance some hours later when Kenny, who had been in poor health for several days (and the Grantown hall had been exceptionally dusty), succumbed to a bad attack of asthma and Lisa had to make a dawn mercy dash to fetch a doctor. I slept through most of this and awoke to find Kenny white and wheezy, surrounded by anxious enquirers. He was just about fit to travel and Anthony and I went with him in Lisa’s car with the hood back. Gerard, Jack and Sue were taking the ice cream van to spend a night en route with Gerard’s parents somewhere in Aberdeenshire, a device to retain her company for another day, for she was about to return to America, apparently without a backward glance, and had been remorselessly making her travel arrangements throughout the tour. If either could be said to have won her, it was probably Gerard, but I do not think that she made much distinction between them. It was just that Jack had less self-confidence.

We drove back in windy sunshine, brisk Scottish air blowing through our hair and reddening our cheeks. It was snug in the back of the car, luggage on our feet, blankets tucked

around and the sheepskin rug over our knees. As we left the last hills and the grey outlines of Edinburgh came into sight, I knew that I had never been so happy; Anthony's arm was around me, there was a whole free weekend ahead, then rehearsals for another play. On the tour I had found friends, love and a vocation. Everything seemed possible.

### **Epilogue**

Despite the careful planning, the emails, the linking up of the various circles who had kept in touch with each other, not all of us made it to the reunion party. Some chose not to come, some remained untraceable. Jay, for example, disappeared not long after the tour. Did he ever get round to completing his film? If only we could have watched it that day, a concrete, though hardly objective record of events, a chance to have seen those remembered images of our youthful selves made real as in an old black-and-white newsreel. Despite so many grand ambitions, the only one who became a professional actor was Pete, who died of a heart attack in his thirties. However Gerard's long, successful career as a television director must have been stimulated by trying to cope with the tour's many sudden challenges. Jack has gone into the church, as has Alice – perhaps that is a way of showing off in public too. Gaye, still immaculate, has turned from party girl into a high-ranking educational administrator, Jaan is no longer the malevolent, humourless drunk of my memories but a trim, polite and urbane stranger in a dark suit. Baz has not aged at all.

Ned was there too. I still felt some constraint in his presence and I knew that he remembered everything as well as I did. But when I asked some of the others what were their chief memories of the tour, they looked blank and could not recall anything I mentioned: clearly the events which had been so important to me had not been of such engrossing interest to them. And they went on to cite incidents of which I had no recollection at all. Lisa, who became a professional artist, didn't come, but someone said she had written her own journal of the tour. How would this differ from mine? Better not to know. Anthony wasn't there either. Our romance didn't even survive the summer; it belonged to the tour and the Highlands only.

Meeting these pleasant, middle-aged, settled people again, this seemed to be the ultimate phase of our adventure, the need to put in context those parts of the past that we had once joyously shared. But it hasn't really brought closure, rather the realisation that our present is inseparable from our past, that youthful agonies and ecstasies can mature into memories that are pure gold.

**Carola Hicks, 2006**