

A

Strong Smell of Burning

a comedy in one act
by Graham J. Evans

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by Graham J Evans

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First performed by The Players' Theatre, Gelligaer
at Theatr Felinfach, Ceredigion, 26th April, 2003

Hilda	:	Claire Bowen
Agnes	:	Mavis Gibbs
Mildred	:	Julie Hole
(subsequently played by Chris Moore)		
Cedric	:	Jonathon James
Oswald	:	Clive Fellows
A Stranger	:	Gabe Torrens
A Hermit	:	Gareth Gibbs

Directed by Gareth Gibbs

Sound & Lighting	:	Sarah Rees
Stage Manager	:	Carol Williams
Assistant Stage Manager	:	Andrea Stephens

Note: NO PERFORMANCE MAY BE GIVEN WITHOUT A LICENCE

Performance Fee Code: Ch

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THE CHARACTERS

OSWALD: A Saxon peasant.
AGNES: Wife to Oswald.
HILDA: Daughter to Oswald and Agnes.
CEDRIC: Son to Oswald and Agnes.
MILDRED: Next-door neighbour and friend to Agnes.

A STRANGER

A HERMIT

The stage is set as the interior of a ninth-century Saxon hovel. The overbearing impression is of poverty and straw: straw walls, straw roof, straw scattered about the bare earth floor and, long one wall, a straw bed. There is a rough wooden table and four stools. On the table are a small basket and various wooden bowls and eating utensils. Against one wall is a meagre fire incorporating a stone oven. Over the fire is a cooking pot suspended from a wooden framework. (Note: the oven should have an open back in order that the cakes can be set alight). On the floor stands a large bowl full of salt and a water pail. In one corner there is a small pile of firewood. Hilda is sitting at the table gazing into a small wooden chest; she is every schoolboy's dream: buxom, sexy and not very bright. Smoke is billowing from the oven.

HILDA: Ooh, Dad's gonna be ever so pleased with me.

(ENTER AGNES)

AGNES: What the hell do you think you're playing at?

(HILDA HURRIEDLY CLOSES THE CHEST AND DROPS THE KEY DOWN THE FRONT OF HER BLOUSE)

HILDA: I ain't playin', just lookin' that's all.

AGNES: What you doin' uncovering the treasure chest at a time like this? There's eighteen groats in there an' hundreds of blood-thirsty Danish savages chargin' about outside.

HILDA: (COVERING THE CHEST WITH FIREWOOD) They're miles away by now chasin' our lot what ran away.

AGNES: Our lot have not run away! Tactical withdrawal, that is. Which is what you're gonna need to do. Look, you've burnt the cakes.

- HILDA: Oh dear. So I have... Must've been cookin' too long... That's what does it.
- AGNES: Well don't just sit there, girl. Get rid of 'em. There's a strong smell of burning all over the village. I won't have people thinking I can't cook.
- HILDA: You can't! It's your 'orrible stew what caused it. It smells so bad I wouldn't notice if the whole county were burnin' down.
- AGNES: And none of your cheek, my girl. Go on; get rid of 'em. Take 'em down to the widow t'other side of the wood, she'll be glad of some good wholesome home cooking.
- (TAKING THE BASKET FROM THE TABLE, HILDA FLOUNCES OVER TO THE OVEN AND ATTEMPTS TO REMOVE THE CAKES. THEY ARE TOO HOT. SHE SPITS ON HER HANDS AND PUTS THE CAKES, ONE BY ONE, INTO THE BASKET)
- HILDA: They're too heavy to carry all that way! You're always pickin' on me. 'tain't my fault if you can't never get the fire right for cookin'.
- AGNES: Out!
- (EXIT HILDA. AGNES STACKS THE FIREWOOD AND MAKES HER WAY TO THE FIRE. COUGHING INTO THE COOKING POT, SHE STIRS THE CONTENTS, TASTES IT, PULLS A FACE, FISHES AROUND MORE CAREFULLY, PRODUCES SOMETHING SMALL AND SKELETAL, THROWS IT AWAY, ADDS A HANDFUL OF SALT FROM A WOODEN BOWL, TASTES AGAIN, SMILES, NODS AND SITS DOWN TO MASSAGE ONE FILTHY FOOT. SHE HAS BEEN SITTING QUIETLY FOR A FEW SECONDS AND IS BEGINNING TO NOD OFF TO SLEEP WHEN THE DOOR OPENS A LITTLE AND A WOMAN'S HEAD APPEARS. THE HEAD IS WEARING A HORNED VIKING HELMET. MILDRED – FOR IT IS SHE – IS CARRYING A SACK FULL OF LUMPY OBJECTS AND A BUCKET)
- MILDRED: Moo!
- AGNES: (SHOCKED) What the... Blimey, Mildred. You frightened the life out of me. (INDICATING THE HELMET) I see you've taken to wearing one of those stupid things too.
- MILDRED: (ENTERING AND ADOPTING A POSH VOICE) This, my dear Agnes, is what hall the best-dressed peasants will be wearing this year! (SHE PARADES CATWALK-LIKE)
- AGNES: Very nice. Now take it off. It'll ruin your hair.

(MILDRED REMOVES THE HELMET TO REVEAL FILTHY, MATTED GREY HAIR)

MILDRED: Was that your Cedric I saw down the battlefield just now?

AGNES: Yes, he's gone down to see what he can find.

MILDRED: He's too late. All the best stuff went ages ago.

AGNES: Well... never mind. It'll give him a chance to see what a real battlefield looks like. He loves it when his dad tells him stories about his old war exploits. Gives him a chance to show off to the village girls.

MILDRED: Girls?

AGNES: Yes. Well it's only natural for a boy of his age.

MILDRED: Yes... How old is he now?

AGNES: Twenty-seven.

MILDRED: (HASTILY CHANGING THE SUBJECT) I, er... I didn't know your Oswald had ever been in any battles.

AGNES: Oh yes, hundreds. Nothing Oswald likes better than being in the thick of a good battle.

MILDRED: Hmm, funny that, 'cos as I recall, when that Nobleman bloke came round this morning looking for volunteers to fight, your Oswald told him he was far too busy to get involved. Re-thatching the inside of the privy, wasn't he?

AGNES: He wasn't the only one! Half the men in the village was re-thatching the inside of their privies this morning.

MILDRED: Handy that. Doing the insides I mean. What with 'em all developing a sudden attack of the trots like!

AGNES: All of 'em?

MILDRED: All of 'em! Let me tell you, Agnes, There are times when the post of Emptier of the Village Privies does not hold the fascination it once did.

AGNES: Hmm, rather you than me. Anyway, I don't know about the others but that's all part of my Oswald's...

MILDRED: 'Trouble'. That 'trouble' comes in handy now and then don't it!

AGNES: My Oswald says it's lucky for them Danes that he's not quite feeling himself today or he'd have sorted 'em out.

MILDRED: Oh, really? Pity he didn't sort 'em out when he was feeling himself an' they were camped in the wood all week waiting to ambush our boys. And if half our poor, sick menfolk had turned up when the fight was actually going on, our side would've won easy and the village would not be stinking of burnt wood and stewed shrew.

(BEAT)

AGNES: That's our tea!

MILDRED: What?

AGNES: The stewed shrew. It's our tea. Don't tell Oswald, I've put plenty of salt in so's he'll think it's mutton.

(MILDRED LOOKS AT AGNES, AT THE CAULDRON, AT AGNES.
OPENS HER MOUTH TO SPEAK BUT THINKS BETTER OF IT)

MILDRED: Still, it's too late, now. Them Danes are winning fair and square, so it's them what'll be in charge from now on. Mind you, I can't say I mind too much. Good looking blokes most of 'em. And (DONNING THE HELMET) they look lovely in their uniforms. And... they are not averse to handing out the odd present to friendly girls (SHE LIFTS THE HEM OF HER SKIRT TO SHOW HER LEGS ENCASED IN ROUGH, BROWN WOOLLEN TIGHTS)

AGNES: Oh, Mildred... They are lovely!

MILDRED: They're called 'Hose'. Made of pure goatswool they are. They scratch a bit and they get a bit smelly but they're ever so warm. I've got another four pairs at home!

AGNES: Real goatswool? What did you do for 'em?

MILDRED: Nothing out of the ordinary. I'm a good girl, I am.

AGNES: Yes, I've heard.

BOTH: Ever so good! (THEY LAUGH)

AGNES: I haven't seen real goatswool since before the invasion.

MILDRED: Well, there'll be a lot of them Danes living around here from now on, so now's your chance, my girl. You've only got to be nice to 'em.

About the playwright

A former soldier and coal miner, now self-employed as an Itinerant Poet and Window Cleaner to the Gentry, Graham was born in Aberystwyth but raised 'down South' in the Rhymney Valley. This play, his first, won the coveted Crawshay Cup in the 2003 One Act Festival Season in Wales and was runner-up in the Geoffrey Whitworth UK-wide competition. His wife, Maeve and daughter Donna, are struggling to 'keep his feet on the ground', as he now considers himself a 57 year-old overnight success and '*enfant terrible*' of the literary world!

A Strong Smell of Burning

It is 9th Century Saxon England and the invading Vikings have fought a fierce battle and moved on, leaving a casualty in the cowshed that belongs to Oswald and Agnes. Who could it be? As the mystery unravels, so too do the unsavoury schemes and aspirations of the cowardly Oswald.

The originality of this piece is striking and effective... a very funny play that keeps the audience intrigued and amused... different, good fun and unconventional... a real success. Geoffrey Whitworth Review.

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