

# Never trust a cripple

*by Steve Jacobs*

The asylum was bitterly cold, the odd bar radiator giving little comfort to the visitors.

Ambrose sat frozen at the back of the large ward hogging one all to himself. At the other end of the enormous room an old woman sang off key. Shirley and several inmates joined her in a shrill attempt of an old Vera Lyn song.

Ambrose watched in dismay.

Not far from him in her usual vibrant red, Jasmin made notes. Her husband, the expressionless Guy, sat beside her staring blankly at the lunatic's version of "We'll Meet Again". Shirley took the hands of the shouting, singing woman and led her in a little dance. Patients clapped, voices got louder. Pam, another student actress, joined the chaotic chorus as the atmosphere started to turn. Everyone seemed to be having fun, in their own mad way as the room edged closer to instability.

All except Ambrose, huddled over his tiny radiator, intent on avoiding the bubbling mayhem. As he turned away from the singing throng he caught the resident psychiatrist, watching him. Short, fat and sporting a dapper moustache, the doctor stared at the actor. Ambrose, uncomfortable at this professional interest, got up and left the room.

Outside, in the corridor he heard the song end in an untidy heap and through the open door saw Shirley hug a middle aged man in pyjamas. Another inmate was touching her short, blond hair. She wasn't afraid or uncomfortable. In fact she seemed to enjoy it. The psychiatrist arrived and gently disentangled the hugging man and led him away, he had an erection. Shirley smiled.

Somewhere out of sight the old woman began singing again.

The doctor returned with Jasmin and Guy, and a huddle formed around Shirley. Ambrose strained to hear what was being said, what was next on the tour when the doctor caught him watching again and smiled.

Ambrose turned away and studied the peeling paint, tapped the thin lino with his toe, everything echoed. What a dump he thought, and dug his

hands deeper into the warmth of his jacket. He despised these forays into research.

So what if the play was set in a mental hospital. So what if he played a German psychiatrist in love with his Nazi patient. So what if he assists her suicide then kills himself as well. So what? So what! It's a lunatic with a funny accent. Full stop! Big deal. Spending a morning watching the truly disturbed was a complete waste of time. In fact, he found this sort of direct experience, unpleasant and self-defeating. Unfortunately, it was one of the school's pet principles a left over from the method approach. Couldn't understand it himself, nor the connection between reality and the pretence of performing.

Did he need to murder to play Macbeth?

Anyhow, thoughts of depression, suicide and its boring lead up, were familiar territory. He saw it in his face. *If you have to look in the mirror*, Ambrose's motto went, *make sure you see someone else*. Yet here he was on New Years Eve, trapped in a mental asylum, looking in the mirror. It all seemed to happen without his knowledge, without his consent, starting with Melissa. For some inexplicable reason things had cooled between them after *Macbeth*. Nothing had been discussed, no great argument had occurred, yet a definite distance had developed. It made him delay his proposal of marriage, wait it out until whatever nagged her had disappeared.

He suspected it was Rick, her ex boyfriend. A few years ago they had bought a house together in Bath. Rick now wanted to sell. Melissa decided to use the holidays to visit, sort out the property split and complete unfinished business.

It was odious but necessary, she reassured him, "To clean the slate darling", she said before kissing him goodbye and leaving him alone over the Christmas holidays

Fortunately, as Melissa drove out of London, Ambrose had something to do, something to keep his mind off his absent girlfriend. Jasmin had approached him with a proposal: a four week workshop over the holiday break improvising a play - of course he would be the lead. She had mentioned it months earlier, it was one of Guy's ideas. It came to him while he was sitting on a bus, naturally he called it *The Bus Driver*. Ambrose cracked up, 'brilliant', then suggested he rename it *On The Buses*. But Guy, deadpan, said it had already been taken.

On the first day of rehearsal Ambrose was told the narrative and burst out laughing, he hadn't stopped since. Which is one of the reasons they

were in the asylum, to have a break from his giggling and endless jokes. After three weeks of calling himself 'Doctor Noodle Nut' or 'Fritz *Krazy Kraut Müller*', things were beginning to wear a bit thin.

They were a perfect troupe for the holidays: a group of loners, outsiders, all orphaned over the festive season.

Shirley, after being bashed by her husband, never returned home. When released from hospital, Jasmin offered her free accommodation in a caravan on the school grounds and the role of the disturbed patient. The two kids stayed with her parents, while she had a breather from marriage and life in general.

Pam, played Nurse Schmidt - dumpy and confident she was good for a

laugh and bunked with Shirley in the caravan. Her working class parents, rich and unpleasant from a chain of laundromats, had gone on a cruise.

Then there was Jasmin and Guy, childless and spooky; old hippies with a thirst for money. Like the others - unwanted and unattached. A group of misfits workshopping alienation. Ambrose felt right at home.

The conference inside the ward ended. The psychiatrist, fingering a bunch of keys led the party past Ambrose and around a corner. The actor looked down, concentrating on his shoe tapping when Jasmin suddenly reappeared in front of him.

'The doctor has kindly agreed to take us to some of the more chronic wards. Are you coming or are you going to sulk here?' She asked. Her reprimand, as always, cold and direct.

'I've already asked all the questions I need too... I might wait out the front.'

'What have you asked? Dr Dimble is an expert in hypnosis, a technique your character uses in the play, yet I haven't heard one single question from you.'

'That's not true. I asked him, if he had sex with the patients... He denied it... But I don't believe him'. He replied blankly.

'That's it?' She quipped.

'Sure... What do you want me to do, hound the man?' Ambrose smiled.

She just looked up at him.

'When will you ever stop Ambrose?' She asked quietly, then disappeared in search of the others.

It was a good question. Ambrose didn't know, maybe never, and ambled away in the opposite direction, eventually becoming hopelessly lost.

He saw no one, the corridors were empty, the doors closed. There was no sound except the clack of his shoes, no screams or cries, no windows, just the smell of disinfectant. It was unnerving, like being in a giant intestine of bright light and cream walls. It could be night or day outside, he had no idea.

When the corridor kept weaving itself back to spots he thought he had passed, he began to feel entrapped, as if he was being buried alive. He told himself not to panic, but he did. His heart began to race. Then he turned a corner and saw in the distance a barred window through which sunlight poured. He ran to it.

There below in the car park was Jasmin's car. He suddenly felt relieved, he hadn't been abandoned, the outside world still existed and was waiting for him. He looked up and smiled. It was one of those brilliant cold days, one of those rare days in London when the lines are sharp, the colours fresh, the air clean. One of those days that said there was a possibility of something else.

The view calmed him. He thought of the luminous skies of his childhood, their uncompromising blueness. The past was generally submerged in a determined forgetfulness but he always remembered the skies, and how they occasionally stung him into optimism.

The main road that passed the hospital was busy with cars. He envied their purpose and wondered where they would be tonight, New Years Eve 1982. Indeed, he wondered where he himself would be tonight. Melissa away, Simon his flat mate, gone. There was mention of a party at the theatre but nothing definite. The prospect of being alone frightened him.

Across the highway a billboard advertised mayonnaise, he smiled.

*A slice is nice,*

*But more so with Müller's Mayonnaise.*

*The King of Mayonnaise.*

A great glob of shiny goo rested on a lettuce leaf. It made him giggle, Müller was his character's name in the play, Dr Fritz Müller the psychiatric genius. He said the slogan aloud in his funny German accent.

'A slice ez nice,

But more so vith Müller's Mayonnaizzee.

Ze King of Mayonnaizzee.'

And chuckled, he would make a joke of it in rehearsals, they would be angry at first but still laugh. Later, they would forgive him. It was all so predictable. Yes, 'Docktor Müller's Mayonnaizzee'.

Ambrose turned from the window and watched the corridor trail off to nowhere, and stopped chuckling. He had to get out of here quick. At first he walked then he marched - arms swinging, his brisk steps slapping the lino. He wondered why no one responded to his thumping stride. Surely someone should notice this manic gait and investigate, or did they think it the footfall of a lunatic, not worth a second thought. He powered on, faster and faster.

Then stopped, he had to get help, even if it was from a loony.

He came across a thick door that was ajar. Ambrose peeked into the brightly lit room, and found himself staring at what he assumed was an insane person. She lay in bed, a drip hung above her head, several machines were attached to her body. He approached. She was young, perhaps twenty-two, very skinny. Her pretty face lay deep in the pillow. Ambrose was nervous, he didn't like this, didn't like any of it, her eyes were closed. *God, she's in a coma.* The thought sent him back to Greece and his magical sleep through time. And now he faced the reality of such a journey and didn't like it. He thought of the maintenance involved, the body wiping, the cleaning away of shit and piss. He thought of the mind caught in an endless nightmare, trying to swim to the surface and wake. He watched her closed lids twitch as she travelled, trapped in unknown worlds and felt sick.

Then her eyes suddenly blinked open and she looked at him.

'What the fuck do you want?' She barked.

Ambrose went ga ga, it took him a moment to think, to collect himself.

'I... I... I...' he stuttered meekly, '... I want to get out of here.'

She looked up at the tall stranger and recognised in his confusion, a fellow traveller. Her face softened.

'Turn left at the door, first right, then the third corridor to the right. Walk until you reach a yellow door, go through it and you'll see the front desk...

Once outside, you're on your own mate.'

Then turned into the pillow and closed her eyes. For the first time he noticed the bandages on her arms, the tiny scars around her neck as if

pricked like a sausage for a barbecue. Had she done it herself? He wanted to ask, but didn't, afraid of the answer.

'Thanks.' He said shaken, and left.

It was only when Jasmin's car was speeding away from the asylum did he begin to relax. Sandwiched between the two actresses in the back, the tension fell from his body. Pam roaring in her thick lisp about an inmate who juggled imaginary balls, making Shirley giggle. While in the front, Jasmin smiled and Guy drove – expressionless, as usual.

Ambrose always found Pam's enthusiasm puzzling: plain, slightly overweight with a clanger of a voice defect and just average ability. Yet she broadcasted her opinions at mind numbing decibels. The best the industry would offer, Ambrose decided, was ridicule disguised as comedy. Perhaps the fat one in a sitcom, or a translator with an incomprehensible speech impediment. Something broad and loud. But what Ambrose really found mind boggling was that in the end Pam didn't really care, it was all about having fun.

From the front, Jasmin spoke of a black man who thought he was Hitler and the laughter stopped.

Ambrose wasn't listening, for his mind returned to the girl with prick marks

on her throat. 'What the fuck do you want?' she had asked.

But he didn't have to answer her, for the car was taking him away from all that. Like normal people he now had a destination: the school, the play, his career. He wondered if he could buy a jar of *Müller's Mayonnaise* before the afternoon's rehearsal and giggled. He would hold it up during the run – '*A slice is nice , but more so with Müller's Mayonnaise, the King of Mayonnaise*' in his best Herr Noodle Nut accent then give a spoonful to Shirley as part of her medication. Ambrose glanced at Guy's leathery profile and imagined him mumbling *clever dick* under his breath. This was better than the play Ambrose thought, this was much more fun. The best moments were like these, he decided, the laughable ones.

Jasmin moved onto another case: a drug addict and prostitute who had attempted suicide, she was in isolation.

Ambrose broke into laughter, then shook silently with a series of mayonnaise jokes. He smothered further outbursts with little snorts as Jasmin told of the girl's self-mutilation.

'She attacked her neck with a fork, stabbing at random. Then did the same to her arms and vagina. Naturally, it was sexually motivated which fits perfectly in with our play. In fact, she was Guy's inspiration for Shirley's character. Doctor Dimble kindly offered her case history as background for the initial drafts. Such a great pity we weren't allowed to meet her, she sounds fascinating.'

But Ambrose heard nothing. He was giggling uncontrollably and held a hand over his mouth. Shirley just looked at him. His shaking face turning red, as the car took them back to the real world of make believe.

With half closed eyes, the actor watched dust drift through the rehearsal space and wished he was asleep, in the background Jasmin rattled on about their morning visit as his eyes wandered. There was Felix, the stage manager, placing props and showing Pam how to work a fake syringe. There was Shirley adjusting her school uniform while Guy leered on, lighting a thin cigar.

A cocktail of clichés he thought, and shut his eyes again. The good Herr Doctor in love with his doomed, sex kitten. Then there was Pam, the faithful German nurse, just obeying orders. And of course the climatic conclusion, the suicide of the lovers, doctor and patient, Tristan and Isolde, karking it together on stage, in a pact of forbidden love. It was all too much.

But before the farcical end, was the equally comic therapy, a series of reenactments dragged up through hypnosis and memory recovery. The patient,

Heidi, traumatised as a child by an incident on a bus, has remained emotionally trapped in childhood. Ambrose suggested she may have been overcharged, but no one laughed. The re enactment treatment meant Shirley being dressed as a schoolgirl and talking like a ten year old. Ambrose was sure it gave Guy a hard on, as there was always something on his lap: a clipboard, a jumper, a box of sandwiches, even when he left the room he carried something near his crotch. Added to this was everyone's phoney German accents plus Pam's lisp. It was only natural Ambrose was constantly on the verge of hysterics.

But to top it off was the actual Bus Driver, the offender. Played by a life size mannequin dummy, uniformed, with a cap on his head and seated on stage. In a real production he would sit in a tiny, but symbolic bus, which would move around the stage on a track. In the final scene the crazy Dr Fritz realising his beloved was hopelessly round the bend, would remove the

therapy dummy and sit there himself, like a real dummy. Herr Müller of mayonnaise fame, would then invite Heidi to sit beside him, give her some pills and swallow the rest himself, then start the engine and drive the bus around the stage as they slipped into unconsciousness. Ambrose suggested they wave goodbye to the audience as they went, but again no one laughed.

Of course, it was all Guy's brilliant idea. During the endless improvisations he would sit, deadpan, sucking his thin cigar, waiting for any usable bits of dialogue or story line that would prop up his pathetic writing. With his broad, sun baked face, long hair and gold chain, he reminded Ambrose of a badly dressed monkey. At one point he suggested Guy play the dummy, if he promised not to smoke. But the author declined with his usual mumbled - *clever dick*.

The entire process was kept together by the exhausting enthusiasm and intelligence of Jasmin. As director, she set up the improvisations, came up with emotional tacts, cajoled performances and rigorously streamlined story lines. But despite her inspiring professionalism, Ambrose was convinced she was flogging a very dead horse.

Jasmin clapped her hands so hard Ambrose woke with a start. She turned to the cast and gave the premise for the afternoons rehearsal.

'Let's use this mornings visit to spur us on shall we, a last effort before the end of the year. In this scene Ambrose, you'll once more hypnotize Shirley into a trance in a bid to get her to reveal her trauma and how it relates to *The Bus Driver*. In previous attempts she has been uncooperative. Now I want you to confront her with a version of events that may or may not have happened, in order to provoke a response. I think the obvious tact is some form of sexual harassment involving the driver. Shirley you'll respond accordingly, keeping in mind what we've already discussed in Heidi's agenda. So Ambrose it's up to you to probe and Shirley it's up to you to react. Lets see how close you come to the mark.' She finished, giving the cocky actor a look, which said 'impress me'.

Ambrose smiled back, wandered up to the dummy and plucked a note from its cap, which he had planted earlier. He looked at the note then turned to the playwright.

'Parking ticket.'

Guy sucked his thin cigar, his face expressionless.

'Chop chop, let's start please.' Jasmin ordered. 'Positions.'

The actors obeyed. Shirley lay on the bed and Ambrose sat beside her.



Pam waited off stage, needle at the ready.

Ambrose dangled a crystal in front of Shirley and jumped right in. He didn't know where it would take him, he just did it.

'I vill kount backvords from ten. Ten... noin... eight... You arr relaxt...

safen... zix... goin deeper... fife... und deeper... four... three... totally relaxt... two...

Shirley's eyes slowly closed.

'Deeper und deeper... Von... You arr now in a deep tranz... You arr ten years old, you arr goin to skhool... You arr on de street. A bus approchezz, it is de von you katch every mornink, der is de familiar driver... He stops ze bus for you to get on... Now tell me vot happenz?' Ambrose said with a twinkle.

Shirley's eyes twitched beneath closed lids.

'I get on the bus, there is no one else on board. The doors close, I look at the bus driver he has a nasty leer, a creepy smile.' She said, her childlike voice innocent and anxious.

'Like Guy's?' Herr Doctor asks.

Shirley clenched her lips.

'Get on with it.' Jasmin growled.

'Vot happent next?' Ambrose continued.

Shirley said nothing.

'I know.' Ambrose says gleefully. 'Az you ver about to pay ze fare, ze bus driver touches you vith eze big brown handz. Ya... Ya... eze fingerz travelled up along your leg und under your skhool uniform. You look at zem in shock.

You zee eze thin gold chain around eze neck, eze long, limp hair, eze smell of cheap tobacco.'

'No... no... no... I don't want to...' Shirley implored.

'Ya... ya eze handz ver heading for your panties. In de meantime, he had unbuttoned eze fly und pulled out eze vinky old villy.'

'No... no... no...' Shirley squirmed.

'Ya... ya... Is diz vot you expect from public transport? Is diz vot you pay taxes for? Is dis vot you expect from your trusty bus driver?' Ambrose felt a surge of power pushing him forward and couldn't stop it.

'I don't want to.' Shirley writhed, warning him not to go on, but it was too late, the joke and the death wish had locked in.

'Okay, ze driver's penis is now erect und stands out of eze fly, like a fishin rod. Ee chazes you around ze bus. You run, ee runs after you. Eze trousers are now down round eze ankles, forcin him to do a funny duck like vaddle. Ee falls, ee gets up und keeps goin. Ze man's a machine!... Eze gainin on you. Ee continues to puff on eze thin cigar, eze long hair flies out to ze sides of eze face.'

'No... no... you're wrong!'

Shirley had dug her nails into his arm trying to make him stop, rocking from side to side in mock denial. But Ambrose didn't care.

'Kom on Heidi run, run... Eze gettin closer. Oh no! Eze cornered you at ze back of ze bus. You're trappt. Zair's no vair to go, no escape.'

'No... no... no...' She begged.

'Ya... Eze skinny legs vaddle closer, it'z a nightmare! Eze nearly on top of you. Den, as if by miracle, you find yourself alongside ze back door.'

'Please don't.' Shirley implored, thrashing on the bed, Ambrose pinning her down.

'You grab hold of de emergency releeze handle und pull, und pull with all your strength. Ze door suddenly openz, you rrush out, eze right behint you. As eze hand grabs ze back of your school tunic ze door unexpectedly concertinas shut, on eze penis. The sing juts out of the bus like an angry arrow. You swing your skhool bag off your shoulder und vack it with all your might, again und again. You look up into de bus driver's face, you look deep into eze eyes. Ze cigar as dropped from eze lips, eze mouth is vide open in ze silent scream, you ave never seen em so animated. Eze eyes begin to turn funny, you dink he's gone kompletely kross eyed. But any sympathy quickly goez, ven you remember his leering smile. Und you give his kock a final, big vack. Den snap your heels together und shoot out de Nazi salute, "Heil Hitler".'

Den rrun down ze street, you arr already late for marching practice.'

'No... no...' Shirley starts bucking and punching.

'Nurse Schmidt... Schmidt!' Ambrose screams.

Pam ran on stage.

'Yess Docktor Müller', she lisped.

'Quick. 10cc's of Müller's Mayonnaizzee.' Ambrose ordered.

She looks at him confused.

'Now! Schmidt!' Ambrose barked as Shirley's fit became more violent.

'Ya Vol, Herr Docktor.' She replied running off.

Shirley landed a hard punch to the side of Ambrose's head.

'Ver's dat mayonnaizzee!' Ambrose screamed as Pam rushed back with the fake syringe.

'Ere.' She said giving him the syringe.

Ambrose mimed injecting the hysterical Shirley with the needle and her body went instantly limp. Her heavy breathing hiding a raging temper.

'Goodt stuff dis.' Ambrose smiled at Schmidt.

'Yess doktor,' Pam blindly agreed.

'Did you know Müller's Mayonnaizzee is de King of Mayonnaizzee?'

'No I didn't', Pam replied perplexed.

'Vell now you do... Time to toss de salad. Are dose spuds ready?' He asked.

'Yess of kourse.' Pam blurted totally bewildered.

'Goodt. I'm starvin!' Ambrose declared and strode off.

Shirley snapped out of her mayonnaise induced sleep and jumped from the bed.

'He's fucking impossible!' She screamed and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

The others said nothing. There was a long silence.

Jasmin slowly stood and with both hands stroked long strands of hair from her face. Then looked up at Ambrose with those evil eyes and smiled.

'So much talent and so much waste.' She said softly.

Guy lit a cigar.

'You could have it all Ambrose, but somehow I think you'll get very little.

And that will make you very unhappy indeed... '

Ambrose was stunned, why were they taking it so serious.

'It's New Years Eve. It... it was just a joke.' Ambrose apologized.

'All I ask from this moment on.' Jasmin continued. 'Is that you don't waste our time again. Because if you do, I will stop everything at once and cancel the project on the spot. Understood?' She finished calmly.

'Absolutely.' He replied quietly.

Jasmin turned to Pam and Felix.

'I wish everyone a happy New Year.' She picked up her folders, 'I'll see you all on Tuesday morning, 9.30 sharp,' and marched out, followed by Guy.

Pam stared at Ambrose.

'What is it with you?' she asked bemused.

'This is crap.' Ambrose shouted. 'Utter crap. There's no script, we have to improvise everything because he can't write dialogue. It's a joke. Half the time we don't even know what we're saying and when we do, it's dripping with cliché, like an afternoon soap.' He could be angry with Pam, she didn't matter.

'You agreed to do it, boy wonder.' She retorted.

'I know, it's just not what I expected, that's all. It's a waste of time like...'

'... everything else?' she helped him finish.

'I didn't say that.'

'It's what you think.'

'That's not true.'

'Don't worry. I still think you're funny.' She said smiling.

'Me too dearie.' Felix giggled putting the props away. 'Like a turd in a punchbowl'.

Pam laughed and went over to the despondent Ambrose, took his hand.

'Don't be so sensitive, Gorgeous. What are you doing tonight?'

'I don't know... nothing,' he shrugged, feeling sorry for himself.

'There's a New Years Eve party in the theatre foyer, a local scout thing.

Fancy dress, would you believe. Shirley and I are going, why don't you come, build some bridges.'

'If he's going, I'm not.' Felix quipped in mock outrage.

'Oh shut up,' she smirked.

'Sure, why not.' Ambrose replied, relieved, he had somewhere to go. 'I've just got to ring Melissa and do the Happy New Year thing...'

'We'll meet you upstairs in the wardrobe department. Choose some costumes, eh. Perhaps we all could go as a theme. Escaped nutters or something, what do you think?' She laughed.

'Excellent idea. I'll be Nurse Schmidt.' Felix insisted.

Pam smiled and left the room.

Felix put a friendly arm around the actor.

'Some advice, Herr Doctor. Be wary of the one who rules us all.'

'But Jasmin likes me... Doesn't she?'

'For the King of Mayonnaise you have so much to learn'. He giggled throwing the fake syringe into a box.

The novel is available at:

[wildstrawfilms.com/three-women-one-man](http://wildstrawfilms.com/three-women-one-man)