

# Savage Arts

A #NevilleSharpMustDie 2021  
competition contribution

by

Yvette Worth Sanson



Published on behalf of the author by Bickering on Sea

© Yvette Worth Sanson, 2021

All rights reserved.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Cyril Evans clenched his fists in frustration. Allowing Neville Sharp a role in the production of ‘Savage Arts’, by Edith Squirrel, had been a huge mistake.

He rued the day he had ever listened to that do-gooder Daphne Marchmont when she’d suggested that giving Neville a role in a Bickering on Sea Players production would help to foster in the town’s foremost miscreant a sense of self-worth and responsibility.

He should have listened to Trevor Williams, the poor sod who had tried to teach Neville drama at the high school. Trev had warned him over a pint, and he’d been momentarily quite determined not to have the lad anywhere near the company, but Daphne was so persuasive. She had such huge blue eyes, such blonde hair and such a wheedling way. Neville was a diamond in the rough, just needing someone to believe in him, she’d said, and she’d paid his membership fees, signing him up before Cyril knew what was happening.

Dave Buckley, in charge of scenery and lighting, had flatly refused to have him anywhere near stage weights or tools, let alone a stock of genie-summoning pantomime pyrotechnics. Cyril had not been inclined to argue against that very sound logic, nor against the impossibility of trusting him with box office money, which was overseen by Gladys Briggs. According to Moira Henchman, costumes were also out of the question. Neville could not be given the slightest excuse to hang around the ladies’ dressing rooms. Cyril could hardly disagree.

Briefly, Cyril thought he had hit on a solution. Publicity. Savage Arts was an original piece, by librarian Edith Squirrel, in which a group of sculptors, painters and potters, all in some sort of love quintangle – if that was indeed a word – constantly vied for each other’s affections, while also indulging in fierce rivalry over their artistic recognition and success. Over several years, passions stirred and stretched to breaking point until one of

them was murdered. Small wonder, thought Cyril; he was feeling murderous after just ten weeks of rehearsal.

Anyway, the publicity assignment had been a disaster. Cyril was certain that it was Neville who had added a large freehand capital 'F' in front of the word 'Arts' on every poster. The only uncertainty was over whether he had posted the playbills first, as instructed, and then defaced them, or had made the changes at his leisure over a beer or seven at The Ann of Cleves before going out drunk to plaster them, crookedly, across the town. Cyril had been obliged to replace every one of them himself.

So, there had been only one option left. Neville was allowed to tread the boards. After all, they were, like many am-dram companies, woefully short of male actors.

For a moment there was a glimmer of hope. He was actually good. He could convey both humour and pathos, and he was so quick to learn his lines that he was soon word perfect.

Perhaps that liberal do-gooder had been right.

But, of course, she wasn't.

He deliberately disrupted rehearsals and put the other cast members off their stride. He thought it was funny to give the wrong cue deliberately, say a rude wrong word, make the wrong move, or break the tension of dramatic pauses with a fart. No-one else thought it was funny; not that that deterred him.

It frightened Cyril how much he came to hate the young reprobate.

The only possible saving grace, and the reason that Cyril had cast him in the role of the young sculptor, Sebastian, was that he only featured in the first half, after which Neville was free to slope off to the pub while the rest of the now demoralised cast struggled manfully on. He was in fact, the murder victim. He had a death scene, in which he was terribly drunk – but, unfortunately, he milked it for all it was worth.

Cyril was quite sure that Neville had adopted the method approach to his acting, swigging neat vodka from a hipflask between scenes in order to ensure absolute authenticity. The hipflask looked very like one they had used in a production two years before, and which had mysteriously gone missing

soon after closing night. Neville certainly sounded drunk, though he remained word perfect. If only he could have left it at that. He didn't, naturally. Apparently, announcing that he wasn't quite dead yet after his last line had been delivered, or adding a few extra dying groans during other people's lines, was incredibly funny – still only to him.

Cyril attempted to have a serious word with him about his behaviour. The words 'in one ear and out the other' occurred to him, although he doubted it had actually gone in the one ear at all.

The weeks rolled by and Neville's 'corpse' made the most of its final scene in a multitude of other ways. One evening it farted, on one occasion it let out an impeccably timed belch, and on another it snored loudly. It became more inventive. One rehearsal it blew a large bubble-gum bubble, while at dress rehearsal it actually blew smoke, cleverly generated from a craftily concealed ciggie.

Cyril despaired.

It was, of course, far too late to replace the young hoodlum and, besides, there was no-one, aside from Cyril himself, with whom to replace him. And Cyril had grave doubts about passing himself off as a young artistic type now that he was the wrong side of sixty.

Cyril tried taking a walk the afternoon before the first performance, hoping in vain that it might calm his nerves. He paced up and down the cliff path, wringing his hands. "Neville Sharp must die, and he must die after his final line in scene seven," he uttered in anguish.

\*

\*

\*

The auditorium of the Regent's Theatre was buzzing. As was the norm on such occasions, anyone who was anyone in Bickering on Sea was present, the audience liberally dotted with Possets, Crabbes, Penns, Greys, Marchmonts and other notables of every kind. Doctor Todd and his daughters, Miss Constance and Miss Patience, were in attendance, the local amateur play being one of the few occasions on which he let them out. Gladys Briggs had secured a private box for them at the doctor's request. She allocated the theatre's other box to her husband Charlie and her colleague Yevgeny. Yevgeny had requested a front row seat, but she had tactfully

persuaded him that those seats were hard, small and uncomfortable, neglecting to add that if he indeed sat in the front row, he would block the view for at least eight rows behind him.

The play began. As usual, all went well until the death scene. “Neville Sharp must die,” breathed Cyril, his fingers firmly crossed.

“Neville Sharp must die,” whispered Edith Squirrel, authoress, to no one in particular.

“Neville Sharp must die,” thought the rest of the cast, in a not entirely figurative sense.

But Neville played a blinder. He had never been so focused. His words, although perfect, seemed more slurred than usual, and to demand his most intense concentration. The effect was superb. The house held their breath as he was brutally shot by his lover and delivered his last line before falling inert to the floor.

Cyril breathed a huge sigh of relief as the curtain closed without incident.

It was then the interval, so everyone was expecting Neville to retire to his dressing room with a bottle of something alcoholic. He didn’t move. He lay exactly where he fell. He was out cold.

Fellow cast members tried to stir him. Neville didn’t even flinch when Cyril slapped his face – not without some enjoyment. Donald Gately, leading man, tried dragging him into the wings before throwing a glass of water over him, then shrugged.

“He’s not... I mean, we should check that he’s breathing?” suggested Moira Henchman. Neville let out a brief snore. “Oh, well, fine,” she continued.

They manhandled him back to the dressing room and propped him in a chair. He missed the curtain call.

\*

\*

\*

Next day, Neville awoke in the same chair in his dressing room, somewhat embarrassed, groggy and subdued, feeling not unlike he did after a bad trip.

His hipflask stood on the washbasin. He went to take a swig in ‘hair of the dog’ fashion, then stopped abruptly, feeling something was different about it. Scratched roughly into one side he found the words ‘Neville Sharp Must Die’. He opened the dressing room door and glanced nervously up and down the corridor. There was no-one about.

Neville delivered his lines and died obediently every evening for the next four nights. He didn’t touch the hipflask again. Neither did he attend the final night after-show party.

Miss Squirrel, as membership secretary, was not overly surprised when he tendered his resignation from the Bickering on Sea Players. “Good decision,” she said, nodding.

Cyril’s somewhat haggard look gradually faded.

\*

\*

\*

...