

A Matter of Time

The name, Howard Girt, had once promised thrill and adventure to nearly a billion people around the globe. But long since the exhilarating quality had vanished. In fact, it had been a while since a new Girt picture had come out at all. And now, in business again, he couldn't have been more disinclined.

Rehearsal was due in thirty minutes but the old man preferred to keep that thought securely in a box in his mind. He found great relief in how his age allowed him to lose a few urgent and worrisome concerns in the whirring of what used to be a transparent river of thoughts. Presently Howard Girt was rather happily immersed in a conversation with a middle-aged scholar of cinema, writing his biography.

However, their delightful time took a sour turn, when the question of him appearing in another movie surfaced. Yes, I'm at work again, he thought, and how shamefully at that.

"Would you say you're disillusioned with the industry?" the writer asked.

"The industry? You see, I've always had a deep appreciation for having the opportunity to make a living out of acting. It's such a wonderful trade, so I'll be very cautious not to criticize it."

"I see," came the reply.

"But I'll say this: I'd rather not come back for this picture."

"Would you elaborate on that statement?" asked the scholar, not even looking up from his laptop.

“Well, it’s no secret that I haven’t worked in decades and it’s because I haven’t felt strong enough for it, you see. I really envy those of my peers who retained a lot of energy but I’m just a feeble old man at this point. Most of us are and those active grandpas out there are really doing us a disservice.”

“Then why the unexpected return?” came the question, reinstating the original frame of the conversation.

“Well, I really can’t disclose that.”

“It’s your biography.”

“I legally cannot tell you that.”

Now looking up and into the old gray eyes the writer said, “I have to run the manuscript by the studio, so if you’re afraid of them taking action...” he paused.

“Haha,” Howard chuckled without candor, a *gotcha* on the studio’s part. “Well, in that case I will tell you because it irritates the hell out of me. I have signed a contract with Brett Germaine. It was back in fifty-nine, I believe. He used to run the place then, very talented but very hectic bloke. Eventually he died of a heart attack on a trip to Italy, he couldn’t even see through the most ambitious pictures he has taken on. Some respected and knowledgeable people said he was halfway through orchestrating the next *Citizen Kane*. Unfortunately other studio men--men with the least amount of imagination--picked it up and butchered the whole project into oblivion. Can you imagine how different modern cinema would be? Bad timing, I say. He was what, like, fifty. Too bad. But I digress, you’ll have to remind me what the question was.”

“Why the return to the silver screen?”

“Of course. So I was contracted for twenty pictures and have completed only nineteen before my retirement. Believe me, that was no small feat on its own. And about five months ago a paralegal, putting documents from one drawer to another, came across the dusty-old fine print, took it down to Mr. Morosco, the current boss around here, who sent a team of top lawyers after me to get me out of retirement.

“They’re threatening to sue my family if I should die before completing this last work. Taking into account the inflation and my negligence over the years toward fulfilling my contract, they say my family could lose everything. Can you imagine that? This story would sell a few papers... But they’re not really selling newspapers anymore, so that’s about how profitable that endeavor would be.”

A zooming golf cart with a production assistant at the wheel ended the intimacy of the conversation.

“Mr. Girt, five until rehearsal. Hop on.”

As the biographer helped Howard on the seat and accommodated himself in an awkward position in the back, the actor whispered to him:

“If you want to live long in Hollywood, get a good attorney before one is sent for you.”

And away the golf cart darted. Finally it turned into a hangar and made its way to a sound stage with several nonoperational IMAX cameras lying around and a group of loitering technicians, all this crowned with the presence of a director, Jacques Lee (going by Jack). He was tapping his feet on the ground in unmusical syncopation.

“Hello Howard,” he said, cell phone in hand, screen unlocked.

“Good day Mr. Lee,” said Howard, significantly enunciating the word *mister*.

“Just Jack.”

The biographer let out a muffled giggle at the director’s ignorance.

“Okay, so you’ve got your lines,” said Jack. “What I’ll need you to do now is just to give me a few variations. And then we’re gonna work out a final version together. So--whenever you’re ready.”

Howard gave a puzzled look, turned to his writer, then to the director, then in the general direction of the sound stage. His mouth hung half open, his eyes looked more tall than wide.

“I believe I have misplaced my script,” he finally said.

“Well, that’s all right,” allowed the director. “This is rehearsal.”

“Kindly remind me of my line,” Howard asked.

The director snapped his fingers, to which his assistant materialized.

“Line,” Jack ordered.

“Gargan, the Destroyer appears from the whirling interdimensional portal” the assistant read in a monotone. “The heroes are taken aback. Gargan, the Destroyer gives out a warcry-like roar. Gargan, the Destroyer: *Prepare for your end. Because I am death incarnate.*”

Jack motioned with his hand to the old actor then lifted his fingers to massage his chin, affecting anticipation. Howard, distraught, roared weakly, ending in a dry cough. He looked concerned, trying to make out of the director’s expression whether he was satisfied. Then miserably he said:

“What’s the line again?”

“I am death incarnate,” Jack replied curtly.

“I am--” Howard fumbled.

“Death incarnate,” the director tried to help.

“I am death incarnate?” the old man mumbled.

“Correct. Now you go.”

“I am death incarnate,” he said insignificantly and immediately went on. “I don’t see myself saying this. Director, can you help me?”

Jack was already frustrated. What’s so damn difficult about this line, he thought, I should already be working on the next scene.

“What *is* the question here?” he asked.

“Well, the line is very hard for me to comprehend.”

“It’s pretty simple, really. Just say that you’re death incarnate. Like this, I am death incarnate,” he said angrily and hurriedly.

“What I fail to understand is why a character would say this.”

“Because he’s extremely powerful and he’s a meanie. Look, it may help if you imagined what it will end up looking like,” Jack said, obscurely miming his own sentences. “So, you’ll be roughly the size of a skyscraper, your skin impenetrable and you’re this legendary baddie. Right?”

“Right, right. But it’s always been helpful to me if I could understand a little bit about who I was *pretending to be*,” said Howard. And this sentence took him back momentarily to decades ago. Around his fiftieth birthday there were glamorous parties in his honor and a myriad of pleasant interviews. It was in those days that he could say, content with his fame and status, that he was always just pretending to be someone else. It was such a nice thing to say. It made him feel charming and intelligent and artistic (even if only in the cheapest, shallowest, most

commonplace way). And ardent journalists and talk show hosts would display their unflagging affirmation in warm smiles or entertained little laughs and he would always know that this trivial idea was appreciated.

Presently, however, he was faced with a director who meant to congratulate him for nothing. One, who, in fact, was powerfully resisting the urge to yell at an old man, looking nothing more than a lost grandpa from a family trip to the studio. But he did know better and wanted to be over with it and have as little trouble as possible.

“Well,” Jack began, reasonably composed but in a touch higher pitch and at a slightly increased tempo. “You’re a ginormous monster, here to destroy it all.”

“What’s in it for me?” the actor replied. “I mean, I believe I now understand just what I’m doing but for what reasons?”

“This is your nature. You’re all about getting more and more power and dominating others. You’re the arithmetic balance to the main cast, whose eventual goals are to liberate and empower.”

“I see,” he lied. “And what about the word death?”

“What about it?”

“Why am I death? Is this a very esoteric character?”

“In a sense, I guess you might say that,” said the director dreamily. He thought this might eventually be a wonderful adjective to use in interviews. It’s more than three syllables long, he wondered.

“So, just to be sure, am I playing one of these mythological characters?” Howard continued with a question.

“Yes. Or-- No, I think you’re not very familiar with the whole universe this movie is set in, am I right?” he asked suspiciously.

“I can’t say I am,” Howard admitted.

“We have an internal mythology--you’re mythological in this modern sense, got it? A meta-pantheon, references to the franchise.”

“Got it.”

The gesture to try again came. Howard offered his sickly roar again, then paused hesitantly.

“Go on, say the line,” Jack urged him.

“What if, well--what if we dispose with the line?”

“That’s impossible. It’s absolutely essential.”

“I feel--” Howard hesitated. “I feel that if we could maybe talk to the writer, we could persuade him.”

“No, we won’t.”

“But please, let me do that. I will do the speaking, no responsibility for you. The correct coloring, a long silence, golly, even a well-done pan could be used to substitute.”

“You won’t persuade the writer because I wrote the script and this line is perfectly *in line* with my vision.”

Howard, desperate but more and more hopeless about the whole affair, exerted his tired mind to an almost unbearable degree to come up with an escape for his conundrum. He despised the line but was now too weak to go to war over it and there was an air of meanness about Jack and, most of all, there was everything to lose.

“Why don’t you just let it rest a day more and reconsider?” he asked meekly.

“Non-negotiable I’m afraid.”

“I’ll be laughed at for this.”

“Quite the contrary. Don’t you see, this is trailer material. It’s a jaw-dropper, a mind-blower--it’s the most epic entry in the history of cinema.”

“It’s in poor taste,” Howard finally said.

Jack just grew and grew in his thunderous irritation. His anger about Howard’s distaste linked to his discontentment with his own obstacle-ridden professional progress, which linked to a story he had heard about another veteran actor stunting another blockbuster production, which linked, far-reaching, to how nerds used to be bullied but how the present was an upturn of that. Suddenly this old man was the world’s ailment.

“I wish I had a real actor instead of this garbage--” Jack hissed but, unsatisfied, he went on. “I wish you died.”

“Shame on you,” said the forgotten writer, the inconsequential shadow of the actor. “How can you say such a thing?”

“Me?” Jack cried indignantly. “I was being reasonable. I was being patient. Don’t you see that this is charity for the old man here? He can keep everything he’s--by the way so undeservedly--earned in his life and he has one line to say but he won’t.”

“The way I see it he’s just trying to improve the scene.”

“That so? Do you know who this man is?”

“More than he himself does,” he said confidently but Jack talked over him.

“This man dropped out of high school to make his first feature. I teach a college course but this uneducated old dude, who by the looks of it has dementia, is instructing my writing. That’s not happening.”

“Still, he’s sincerely trying to help. Couldn’t he have stumbled upon a tiny part that may be enhanced? By accident?”

“No, I’ll tell you what this is. He’s always played the same kind of roles in the same kind of movies. All he ever got was praise and now, when there’s a new hot thing, he’ll just jeer at it because he doesn’t understand it and because he can damned well afford it. It’s not the same old formula, hence it’s poor taste--goes the logic. The same old film versus digital pseudo-intellectual nonsense. There are movies being made right now, which will be hailed as cultural cornerstones for thousands of years like the Odyssey and the Iliad were for two stubborn millennia but they are ceaselessly spat on by self-important people, who have only ever serviced a handful of spoiled old billionaires. Howard Girt for one, a man without imagination but with an estate rivaling in value the total annual GDP of South America. But let me tell you, their time is up, they’re dying and the world is better off for it.”

“You’re just imagining things at this point.”

“Oh I wish. But, *alas*--” ironically rubbing his eyes to confirm he’s not dreaming--this old dude’s here. And stifling whatever creative imagining would be going on. As if he’s ever been a part of a thing like that. No, I’ll tell you. He’s nothing but a privileged snob. Sixty years ago they happened to be looking for a handsome face and a thick pair of biceps without too much of fat in the belly area, that simple. Really. The movie wagon just happened to take him on a ride of a phenomenal streak, that’s all.”

“Don’t you think you could at least give him credit for some brilliant performances?” the writer negotiated.

“He was born at the right time. There was hardly anything in the way of competition and basically any movie that survived until distribution would become a classic. He’s due nothing. He will say my line.”

The director’s assistant finally thought best to escort out the writer and informally detain him for the rest of the day. Jack nodded approvingly and, with a rapturous expression on his face, gave the gesture to his actor to commence with his line.

Howard hesitated. The words about his beginnings still rang in his ears. Well, that wasn’t quite like that, he thought. My movies weren’t classics for a long time. No, not right away. We have been hard at work and couldn’t possibly tell whether the actual picture would turn out to be something. But we labored and labored and sacrificed our youth with all those fine people. I’ve had grandkids by the time I finally knew I’ve made it, until then I was just another sweaty bloke, who toiled eighty hours a week to make something decent. The real time of fame and appreciation arrived far after I was most eager to get it, there was no privilege involved.

Father Time must have been overrun with depraved joy. The only task is to crumple, misalign and wrinkle the strings underlying everything and the world would happen. And as things go, Howard and Jack were morosely cemented in the always current time.

Suddenly the actor decided to drop a concise retort but could not follow it up with actual words. He thought maybe his friendly scholar could inspire a witty remark but as he gazed about, searching for him he found naught. Then he foggily remembered that he had been pulled away.

The director interrupted the mighty effort:

“Line.”

A stumbling roar, then, “I am death incarnate.”

Production bustled on like a spacecraft, belittling the natural inertia of the world. Then came a wrap and hundreds of days of work in artificially lit studios, where editors toiled away doggedly with no sense of change in day and night. Finally it was time for publicity and there was a lot of that: teasers, then TV spots, then proper trailers, then panels and interviews. But to regard the tumultuous assembly line of the movie would be to concern everybody. And, while there’s no grace in denying the technician in charge of a set of reflectors her significant experience, or its reverberation through the ages, it was Howard Girt alone, who couldn’t settle with his own account of the movie.

He was made to watch the trailers. For him there was no feeling of elation. He was relieved in noting that his scene had been finally cut from the publicity material. He was also grateful for having been excused from giving interviews with a pronounced concern for his well-being from the studio’s legal department. In truth, he felt quite well. Mostly by being free from this burden. He only once made a comment, even that in confidence to his scholar ally:

“Unbelievable how gaudy this is,” he said in a hurt, nevertheless mild, manner. Although, by and by he confused this instance with the affair with Jack earlier and out of prudence he resolved to avoid the topic altogether, going forward.

However, he wasn't spared all the pain. The studio made him travel to the world premiere in London. Minimum tolerable promotion, he was told.

Howard flew over to the UK and took with him his granddaughter. They had a day for any preparation necessary before the event. The old actor relished that excess time and reminisced without a minute's pause. He wasn't feeling nearly as weak or sick as he had been made to appear in the media.

On the day of the premiere he found it the most pleasant thing to be able to wear a tuxedo for the first time after more than a decade of being limited to business suits even on the nicest occasions. His eyes shone, his brows possessed a firmer arch and his skin tightened handsomely around his cheeks. Against his distaste and reluctance, he was appropriately excited for seeing himself on the silver screen again. His fears of humiliation had virtually died and everything came very naturally.

At the red carpet he was celebrated in a fashion he had long missed. He was proud to have his granddaughter with him, as well, and pondered how worth it all had been to see this wonderful young lady share her grandfather's big day.

Even Jack, the director, was entirely transfigured. He had assumed a number of gentlemanly qualities: he was speaking up the actors (Howard included), then there were the pictures taken together, and Jack even let Howard walk in the cinema first. Now that's a director,

the old actor remarked, as his disapproval was turning. He thought to himself, quite content, that it must have been a bad couple of days back at that Hollywood sound stage.

The grand screening hall in the movie theater was first full of fatuous salutations and a ceaseless flashing revel of selfie-taking. Then the lights were damped down until only the exit signs were visible and the trailers rolled, then commenced the movie itself.

Three and a half hours later Howard was not the same man as he was upon entering the building. He demanded, teary-eyed and vertiginous, to be taken out through the backdoor and away from the keen eyes of journalists and fans.

His granddaughter sensed a catastrophe overhanging, although she had seen nothing too objectionable in the movie. But Howard had imploded into his mind and sensed not the soothing words, nor the offers of medication. Even when he saw the car window for the car window that it was, he could only return to obsessing over how he had assisted in his own humiliation that the movie turned out to be. It was a short and inescapable exclamation that took him on the nauseating waltz: “Shame!”

As soon as actor and granddaughter got back to their hotel room, Howard was placed on his bed to repose. The young woman ran back out to demand that the concierge book the earliest flight back home and call an ambulance, though she hoped that was overkill. She remained in the lobby, consulting the old man’s usual physician over the phone.

Back in the room, Howard felt his heart making a valiant effort to keep up with the singular emotion he was trapped in. As he became aware of his alarming pulse, he put his thumb to the vein on his wrist and tried to measure the beats but kept losing count. After many attempts

at monitoring his own heart, he came to the realization that it wasn't beating very rapidly anymore. He found himself to be calm. Half-consciously deciding to forget the premiere, he noted he only had things to look forward to. He would probably be flying home and his biography would be continued and there would be pleasant conversations and he would get to see his beloved family and he would still be the Howard Girt, who had once enamored the planet.

When he heard that someone was knocking on his door he opened up, expecting his granddaughter--expecting the world to be put into order as though it were simply an unmade bed. However, it was an unknown man in the doorway, explaining, quickly and without introductions, why he had come and that there was a thing Howard had to do very soon. Only the unwelcome urgency of the messenger got through to the old man, standing stupidly. When his granddaughter rushed back from the hallway, she took the burden of understanding. What ensued was a heated argument between the two youths, most often including negatives from the granddaughter and immovable persuasion from the stranger.

"I want your boss on the phone," the young woman shouted.

"You mean the studio? Or one of the producers?" came the follow-up.

"Whoever put you up to this."

"That'd be Mr. Lee but, you see, he's very busy."

"Fine, then my grandfather just won't do it."

"But Mr. Lee told me that--"

"Either you get him on the phone or you can try and see what you get for returning empty-handed."

“All right.”

The messenger walked out to the hallway, trying to reach the director. Meanwhile, Howard approached his granddaughter to find out what this business was about.

“Oh grandpa,” the young woman said. “They want you to do a livestream about the premiere. Most of the cast have done it on the red carpet after the screening but since we left early, the fans are up-in-arms to get something out of you, like a Q&A or something. This guy says just a couple minutes is enough.”

“Tell them I’m not feeling well,” the old actor said simplistically.

“No can do. The director says it’s mandatory promotion--non-negotiable.”

At this word the messenger returned, agitated and dripping with sweat, handing his phone over to the granddaughter. Taking the device she ran out, arguing on decisively and menacingly. The cellphone’s owner looked after her, hesitant as to what to do next. For a few seconds he eyed the uncomfortable actor, then started digging in his pocket and produced a slip of paper. He handed it over to Howard and decided to follow his phone wherever it had gone.

Curious about the message, Howard lifted it to his eyes. A handwritten note in unusually readable, big font, reading:

“Hi-

I sent over someone with a camera to your hotel. Will do a livestream for the fans. Just 10 mins- should be fine!

GL

Jack”

Howard looked up from the note and then around his hotel room. Even though fat summer sunbeams had entered through the windows and colored every object in a bright yellow hue, the old actor was seeing only a gray, twilight-like iteration. He felt simultaneously light and irresistibly heavy. I've lived to play the roles I played, he thought. I should have been left with those, he complained.