

Dying on Stage

By Dan Gibbins

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Cast

Johnny Rayner: Host/creator of Variety Invasion. Every day he has two priorities: keep the Invasion going, and try to score with Mera.

Mera Lucas: Producer of Variety Invasion. Every day she has three priorities: get to the end of the day without having a drink, keep the Invasion going, and fend off the advances of Johnny.

Finnian “Finn” Shayle: The company’s resident comedienne. Always on the lookout for the next great act. Although there is some debate over whether or not she’s found the first great act yet.

Gareth Gardner: Star of stage and screen. Doing a guest appearance that could make or break Variety Invasion.

Hubert “Bucky” Parson: The resident intern. Primarily acts as a gopher for the entire company.

Suzie Setzer: Resident actress. Is constantly second fiddle to Veronica Horne, but does her best all the same.

Veronica Horne: Vampish ingénue. Views everyone else in the show depending on what they can do for her career. Not afraid of using her sexuality.

Frankie Merch: Arrogant actor. Has recently come into possession of the Token of Old Vic, a legendary lucky charm said to be the key to success for any performer or theatre that possesses it. Manages to offend nearly everyone prior to his death.

Stefan DeMassey: Choreographer. Feels his dancers are neglected.

Cliff Franklin: Stage hand. Gets thrust onstage to replace dwindling cast. At first reluctant and somewhat clueless, becomes more and more involved in the acting process as the show progresses.

Stage is split into two sections: the Stage and the Wing. The Stage is, simply enough, the characters' performance area, where all the sketches take place. Ideally, it can be blocked with a curtain. At the moment, it is either blocked or empty. The Wing is the backstage area. There are several tables, a mirror and one microphone. Lights come up on Johnny and Mera.

Johnny: *(into microphone)* Five minutes to curtain! Actors to first positions!

Mera: Big house tonight.

Johnny: Sure is.

Mera: The sort of house we've been needing the last six months.

Johnny: I told you we'd turn it around.

Mera: Don't get cocky. Tonight goes badly, or if Mr. Gardner starts bad-mouthing us, this all evaporates like morning dew and we're right back on the chopping block.

Johnny: The bluebird of happiness just flew smack into your window and died, didn't he?

Mera: Johnny...

Johnny: We'll be fine! And so will Mr. Gardner! He had fun in rehearsals, didn't he?

Mera: It's hard to tell with him.

Johnny: Tonight will go great, this show will get on the map, and this time next month we'll be on the cover of magazines as the couple who brought variety shows back to the big time!

Mera glares at him.

Johnny: By which I mean the two people who brought back variety shows. Two people. No inferences. Although, I was thinking—

Mera: I doubt that. Didn't you just call first positions?

Johnny: I did.

Mera: And where is everyone?

Johnny: Oh... erm...

Mera: *(into microphone)* Pretty sure your first positions are somewhere near the stage, people! Not the liquor cabinet!

Finn enters.

Finn: Johnny! Mera! Just the people I want to see!

Johnny: What's up, Finn?

Finn: I've got a great new routine you've got to hear!

Mera: Oh no.

Johnny: Sounds great, Finn, really, but I've got a show to get started just now.

BUCKY! CLIFF!

Finn: *(disappointed)* Oh. Right.

Johnny: So why don't you run it past Mera?

Mera turns to Johnny, anger and confusion in her eyes.

Finn: Great!

Bucky enters as Finn leads Mera away.

Bucky: Yeah?

Johnny: Are the water bottles set up, Bucky?

Finn: So this family shows up at a circus, right...

Finn and Mera exit, Mera looking angrily at Johnny. Suzy and Cliff enter.

Bucky: Getting the last ones now, chief.

Johnny: Okay. *(into microphone)* Four minutes!

Bucky exits.

Suzy: I'm here!

Johnny: Glad to hear it, Suzy.

Cliff: You wanted me, boss?

Johnny: Finished checking the set?

Veronica enters, wearing something slinky and revealing.

Veronica: Oh Johnny, darling...

Johnny: One second, Veronica!

Cliff: First thing we do is the opening. It's you on a blank stage.

Johnny: Yeah, but—

Veronica: I had a question for you.

Suzy: *(checking the mirror)* Do I look okay?

Veronica: Please, Suzy, he's dealing with the important people.

Johnny: Just a sec, ladies. *(to Cliff)* But after the intro, and correct me if I'm wrong, we usually do a sketch of some sort, do we not?

Veronica: Or at least he should be.

Cliff: So you want me to check the set for that?

Johnny: If it's not too much trouble.

Cliff: Right.

Cliff heads for the exit. Frankie enters, shoving past him.

Frankie: Out of the way, set monkey.

Cliff exits.

Veronica: Now, Johnny...

Frankie: BUCKY!

Johnny: What is it, Veronica?

Bucky rushes on, carrying water bottles.

Bucky: Yes, Frankie?

Veronica: Show's about to start—

Johnny: I'm aware of that.

Frankie: You call this coffee?

Veronica: And I'm wondering where you've stashed our special guest.

Frankie: Honestly, Bucky, I'm trying to get into my groove here and you're feeding me this weak-ass piss-water.

Bucky: Sorry, Frankie, I'll get you another in a few—

Johnny: He's not stashed anywhere, he's just—

Frankie: Better hurry, Buck. Show's about to start. Right, Johnny?

Johnny: Yes, Frankie.

Veronica: Just where?

Bucky: I'm going, I'm going... *(exits)*

Suzy: Seriously, do I look alright? I hear it's packed out there...

Johnny: He's in the VIP dressing room.

Frankie: Let me have a look, Suzy.

Veronica: What VIP dressing room?

Johnny: The one that used to be my office.

Veronica: I see then. BUCKY!

Frankie: Ah, you're fine, Suzy... *(rubs her shoulders)*

Bucky bursts in with coffee filter and water bottles.

Bucky: Yes, Veronica?

Veronica: Are my flowers positioned outside my dressing room like I asked?

Johnny: Two minutes!

Bucky: The ones that showed up, yeah...

Veronica: See that there are more by intermission. And that Mr. Gardner notices them.

Frankie: You just gotta relax, remember to smile...

Bucky: I'm on it...

Bucky exits, Frankie undoes Suzy's top.

Frankie: And show off the goods.

Suzy: *(pulling away)* Frankie!

Frankie: Hey, these people paid good money for this show.

Finn and Mera return.

Finn: "What do you call yourselves?" And the guy says "The Aristocrats!" What do you think?

Mera: That's not a joke. That's a punishment from an angry god.

Johnny: Dammit, Frankie!

Frankie: Ronnie knows what I'm talking about.

Veronica: It's Veronica, not Ronnie, and yes. Yes I do. *(arranges her outfit to show off her bosom)*

Finn: So I should work on the timing?

Mera: That or kill it with fire. *(sees Suzy fixing her top)* And what the hell is going on in here?

Johnny: I'm on it, Mera. Suzy, you look fine, Frankie, leave Suzy alone, and Veronica, put those things away. We have seniors in the front row.
STEFAN!

Frankie: Just having a little fun, boss. No need to get snippy.

Mera: Honestly, Frankie, sometimes I don't know why we keep you around.

Frankie: You'll miss me when I'm gone, babe.

Veronica: When is Gareth coming out?

Stefan enters.

Stefan: You rang?

Finn: You want to run over our scene, Frankie?

Johnny: Mr. Gardner will come out when we need him, Veronica. Dancers in place, Stefan?

Frankie: Can't imagine why. Two of us on stage, not much I need to do to look good.

Stefan: Half-crazed from the nicotine, but ready to go.

Finn: What's that supposed to—

Johnny: Don't worry about it, Finn. We're up in a matter of seconds, Frankie. Can you manage not pick on anyone that long?

Frankie: I don't know, I'm on a roll tonight.

Mera: See this? See what's happening here? This is what I was talking about.

Johnny: It's fine, we're fine, PLACES, everything's fine, Mera. BUCKY!

Suzy, Stefan, Finn and Veronica begin to move offstage, Bucky, shaken from his errands, returns with water bottle, coffee cup, and flowers.

Bucky: What?

Johnny: Cue Mr. Gardner. And try not to act so twitchy around him.

Frankie grabs the coffee cup as Bucky exits.

Johnny: *(to Mera)* In fact, tonight's going to go so well, we should go out after and celebrate. You, me, a bottle of wine... *(Mera is glaring at him again)* Although that would just be for me, since you don't... I mean, with the recovering... in fact, I should not as well, so there's no...

Mera: We've discussed this, Johnny. It wouldn't be a good idea.

Johnny: Sure. Yeah. Hey, it's 8:00. Why don't I go start the show?

Mera: Why don't you. *(exits)*

Frankie: Smooth, boss.

Johnny: Shut up, Frankie.

Johnny exits the Wing and heads to the front of the Stage

Johnny: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! I'm Johnny Rayner, and this is the Variety Invasion! We've got an amazing show for you tonight, and I promise

that I'm not just saying that. We've got the comedy stylings of Finnian Shayle—funny name, funnier girl. Always a favourite, Veronica Horne will be saluting her fans with her fan dance—the act guys would give a standing ovation, if only standing were possible. But tonight, tonight you are in for a treat, for we have a very special guest here at the Variety Invasion. So please join me in welcoming legendary star of stage and screen, Mr. Gareth Gardner!

Gareth enters.

Gareth: Hello, all.

Johnny: Gareth, thanks for being with us.

Gareth: Oh, it's my pleasure, Johnny, really it is. As an actor, it's a joy to do work of meaning, of substance... work that you can just tell is going to change the way we think, and feel... but sometimes you do get sick of it, and it's nice to have something like this to fall back on.

Johnny: So I've heard. There are those out there, possibly in this very audience, that think you're doing our show because you lost a bet or something.

Gareth: Oh, no, perish the thought. Horrible business, gambling. However, on a completely unrelated note, I would like to say that we are even, Mr. McKellan.

Johnny: Okay. Like I said, we've got a great show. I'm going to leave you with the VI Dancers for a moment, but just sit back and brace yourselves... as the Invasion begins!

Johnny and Gareth move to the Wing. Mera is waiting.

Johnny: Great stuff, Gareth.

Gareth: The audience did seem to enjoy it, yes.

Mera: Wonderful job, Mr. Gardner.

Gareth: Why thank you, Ms. Lucas.

Mera: Please, it's Mera.

Gareth: Then I insist you call me Gareth, Mera.

Mera: Okay then.

Veronica and Frankie rush in, Bucky trailing behind them.

Veronica: *(moving in as close as possible)* Wonderful opening, Gareth. Truly, I was moved.

Frankie: Yeah, good stuff.

Gareth: Veronica. Franklin.

Johnny: Didn't I put you two in places?

Frankie: Ah, they'll be dancing for a little while. No harm.

Veronica: Maybe if you'd given us a moment to properly connect before the show—

Johnny: Just get back in your places before Frankie decides what joke to make about you "connecting," okay?

Frankie: Just so you don't wonder, I had it down to two but either way the punch line is you're a whore.

Veronica: Hilarious.

Veronica sweeps out.

Bucky: Sorry, sir, I tried to stop them. Sorry, Mr. Gardner.

Gareth: Don't worry, mister... what was your name, young man?

Bucky: Oh, I'm just the intern, sir.

Gareth: Even interns have names, lad.

Bucky: I'm Hubert, sir. But everyone just calls me Bucky.

Gareth: *(considers)* How kind of them. *(exits)*

Stefan bursts in.

Stefan: And so what, my girls are supposed to make up dances until the actors are ready to do their bit?

Frankie: I've still got a minute left.

Stefan: Couldn't you just stay in place until your cue? It's not like you have a hard job!

Frankie: Hey, let's not forget who the star of this show is!

Stefan: Yeah, a star so big they had to spend half our budget on a special guest.

Frankie: Watch it, fruit loop!

Johnny: Mera, little help?

Mera: *(leading Stefan away)* Tell you what, Johnny will get Frankie in place, and we'll just have a nice cup of tea in my office, okay?

Mera and Stefan exit.

Frankie: Tea. Huh. Damn alkies never have the good stuff.

Johnny: Just going out of your way to piss everyone off tonight, aren't you?

Frankie: What can I say? I've got a gift. By the way, I've got your problem figured out.

Johnny: Or you could just stop talking and get in place for the sketch.

Frankie: You should chat up Mera on the stage. 'Cause out there, you got charm, but the second you walk through the curtain it vanishes and you turn into a babbling idiot. I tell ya, it's like a magic door.

Johnny: Lovely. Get in place.

Frankie: Tell you what, in a couple of months when I'm the toast of the town and you're all talking about how you knew me before the big time, I'll hit that and tell you how she was.

Johnny: And how the hell are you going to be the toast of anything?

Frankie: Ever heard of the Token of Old Vic?

Johnny: No.

Frankie: You will.

Frankie exits, Johnny sighs and moves to the mic.

Johnny: And we're in place. Cue lights.

Johnny exits. Lights shift to the Stage. There is a table, chairs, and a Christmas tree in the background. Frankie is sitting at the table. Veronica paces behind him.

Veronica: Let me make this absolutely clear. You are not ruining this dinner for me. Not this time.

Frankie: But I—

Veronica: I don't want to hear it. Just... just don't. Don't do... *that* again.

Doorbell rings.

Veronica: Guests are here. Just stay calm, and behave!

Suzy goes to the "door." Gareth and Suzy enter.

Veronica: Hello, you two! So glad you could make it! Aren't we, honey?

Frankie: Yeah. Yeah. Glad.

Gareth: It's our pleasure to be here.

Suzy: Of course it is. Oh, and wait until you see what I've made for dinner!

Suzy pulls out a large mushroom.

Suzy: Stuffed mushroom surprise!

Gareth: Just wait until you try it. It's absolutely exquisite.

Veronica: Oh, it looks wonderful! I'll just set it on the table.

Veronica places the mushroom on the table. Frankie stares at it, wide-eyed.

Veronica: No.

Frankie: But—

Veronica: No.

Frankie looks away, seeming edgy. Doorbell rings.

Veronica: I'll get it. *(moves to door)*

Gareth: *(to Frankie)* And how are you doing?

Frankie: Better.

Gareth: Good to hear.

Finn enters.

Finn: Hi, everybody!

Everyone greets her.

Veronica: Tell us, have you brought us anything interesting from your travels?

Finn: Just this souvenir turtle shell. *(pulls out shell)* Pretty neat, isn't it?

Gareth: Lovely, truly.

Suzy: Wow, and big, too...

Veronica: It'll make a wonderful centerpiece.

Veronica places the shell on the table. Frankie looks at it nervously.

Veronica: Don't even think about it.

Doorbell rings, Veronica moves to the door. Johnny enters.

Johnny: Happy holidays, everyone!

Veronica: Johnny, welcome. What have you brought for us?

Johnny: It's a surprise.

Johnny holds up a box with a large question mark on it. Frankie becomes even more tense, visibly squirming.

Veronica: Well, now that we're all here, we can put the finishing touches on the Christmas tree.

Gareth: Wonderful idea!

Veronica produces a large star. As the others place it on top of the tree, Frankie bends over, disappearing behind the table.

Veronica: Isn't that lovely, dear? Dear? *(turns to Frankie)* Oh no. No, don't... don't—
Frankie leaps up, now sporting a moustache and red cap.

Frankie: IT'S-A ME! MARIO!

The Super Mario Bros. theme plays as Frankie stomps on the mushroom, hurls the turtle shell at Johnny, and begins punching the question box yelling "Ding! Ding! Ding!" Finally he turns to the tree.

Veronica: Stop him! STOP HIM!

Frankie leaps on the tree, grabbing the star from the top as everyone else wrestles him to the ground.

Frankie: But I'm invincible! INVINCIBLE!

Gareth: What you have seen here today is a cautionary tale of a plague sweeping across our nation! Each year videogamitis claims more minds, more lives! Be on the lookout for symptoms including irrational desire for bonus points, the need to collect stars or rings, and poorly constructed plotlines. Be ever vigilant! Scenes like this are playing out in homes across the country! Yours! Yours! And yours!

Lights down. Set is cleared. All move to the wing, except Frankie, who is lying on the Stage. Mera and Bucky are peering through the curtain, Stefan is hovering nearby. Gareth exits.

Johnny: Nice work, everybody. Get ready for—

Mera: What's Frankie doing?

Stefan: If he's bothering one of my dancers again...

Veronica: Didn't he exit with us?

Bucky: No, he's... he's on the stage.

Suzy: I thought there was less shoving than usual.

Veronica: And less groping.