

THE UNDERSTUDY (2019)

by Freya Dooley

Monologue excerpt

Don't take this personally, but I've been dreading today. It's been a while and having to perform again has caught me off-guard. My friend Polly, a professional, was supposed to perform this text. But instead, here I am, am-dram, because Polly's not here. She can't travel.

I'm sure she won't mind me telling you that she's picked up this really nasty parasite. It's just eating her up from inside, it's swallowing up whatever she can stomach. She was gutted actually, mostly because she needed the work. She's having to say 'yes please' to everything and she's exhausted, it's exhausting her. The yes and the please is exactly how she caught the parasite.

Other understudies will fantasise openly about the peril of their parallels, but I don't find jealousy productive. More than anything, you have to be organised: it's tiring to inhabit multiple, dormant characters, and to keep track of them all. If I envy anyone, it's Ian Beale. His entire life, Ian Beale has only ever had to be Ian Beale. Adam Woodyatt, Ian Beale's offscreen identity, will probably never get cast in another role because those two people are so inextricably linked. No audience will ever believe in him as anyone else. Maybe even *he* doesn't know the difference between his two selves. The persistence of Ian Beale's existence on Albert Square offers him security in perpetual drama: there's no end in sight, there's no grand narrative arc, there's no moral, there's no resolution. Ian Beale has lived multiple lives through this one character. And he's not even likeable.

When you're an understudy, you become accustomed to the anxiety. Waiting and waiting for something that might never happen. I'd gotten used to living in a steady state of preparation. If you ever do get your moment- the moment you say you want but you secretly dread- you get up there and quickly realise that not one person in the audience wants to see you perform. They're not here for you. They've paid to see Martine McCutcheon, or whoever.

You might be satisfied in the role, you could even hope to be great. But your performance, at least in the first half, is clouded by collective disappointment at your very presence on stage. The second half is always easier, because the audience have adjusted their expectations.

It's a well-known fact that actors are, in reality, very boring people with no personality of their own. You see the famous ones playing themselves in interviews, being their funniest and most charming versions, chatting to Graham Norton in rehearsed anecdotes. Everyone is all ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha but, give me your unfulfillment. I want to hear about the ways in which you disappoint yourself everyday.

I find performing quite embarrassing, all this earnest pretending. When I was at college, the worst thing you could be in your performance was rehearsed, because theatricality points to inauthenticity. When I'm up here, talking to you, like this, you assume I'm talking about myself, all self-absorbed, or worse, you don't believe me, or worse, you don't care. It's all very exposing and the exposure is very inhibiting.

For most understudies, the role is a compromise, or a promise of something better. There's a lot of rejection but I don't take it personally. I find the rejection a comfort, it's almost erotic. You won't believe me, but I'm satisfied with the dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction is what keeps me going: no flowers, no applause, no thanks. I keep myself for myself. I just don't really like the attention.

*Commissioned for New Writing with New Contemporaries
Performed in two iterations at Leeds Art Gallery (Nov 2019)
and South London Gallery (Jan 2020)*