



Sharks In The Custard

a comedy

by

Tony Layton

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Preview Script (Based on SA-0182)

Sharks In The Custard

Synopsis

The cleaning ladies in the municipal art gallery enjoy their work. Not only does it provide them with an escape from the mundane reality of their lives outside the marble halls, but they have grown to love and appreciate the objects in their care, although certain aspects of avant-garde art does worry them.

Rumours of government cut backs threaten to upset their cosy regime. However, in the face of adversity they come up with a solution that not only secures their futures and helps to save the gallery, but also ensures that their lives will never be quite the same again.

The Time

The play is loosely set any time around 1990 to allow Liz and Vera to be old enough to reminisce about the wartime radio programmes they vaguely remember listening to as children.

The Set

Three large paintings adorn the set representing a tin of sardines, a packet of soap powder and a television set with square eyes painted on the screen and a mouth dripping blood.

To stage right there is a pile of tin cans forming a sculpture called 'Food For Thought'. To stage left is a pile of sand with a Union Jack stuck in the top of it called 'Empire'. Centre stage is a bench.

Characters (4f, 3m/f)

Principals (3f)

Liz – late 50's, a Scot

Vera – late 50's, northern English.

Mair –40-50, Welsh

Support (1f, 2m/f)

Bridget – 30-50, Irish, the curator.

Guest 1 & 2 – visitors to the Art Gallery (m/f).

Cleaner – a non-speaking role (m/f)

Sharks In The Custard

Liz enters with a feather duster. She is singing 'These Foolish Things' loudly in her own inimitable style. She dusts around the paintings then approaches the 'Food For Thought' sculpture. She gives it a quick flick with her duster which knocks a couple of tins out of place.

Liz Ah ye bloody awkward thing ye.

She places the tins back in position but is unsure of their exact place. Vera enters with a mop and bucket.

Vera I saw that.

Liz Wha'?

Vera You'll cop it.

Liz Wha'?

Vera That's valuable that is. Worth a few bob. You damage that, they'll have you.

Liz I flicked it. That's all I did. Flick, flick!

Vera 'A milestone in contemporary sculpture'. That's what they called it.

Liz Who did?

Vera Them in papers.

Liz Get away!

Vera Thirty-thousand pounds that lot.

Liz Thirty ... you're 'avin' me on.

Vera You damage that and they'll ...

Liz Away! I hardly touched it.

Vera You'd be forkin' out from now until doomsday.

Liz They'd 'ave to wring it outa me, I tell ye that.

Vera You'd pay.

Liz Nay, I would nae.

Vera Either that or they'd lock you up. They'd lock you up and throw away the key.

Liz That'd do me. I would nae mind tha'. Perhaps I'd get a bit of peace and quiet for a change.

Vera What's that supposed to mean?

Liz Wha'?

Vera You gettin' at me? You referring to me?

Liz You? I can put up with you, nay problem. I can just about tolerate you.

Vera I'm the one who needs peace and quiet. I could hear you right up there. It were bouncing off the tiles in the Greek temple.

Liz Gettin' away from my old man was what I was meanin' He gives me the heebie- jeebies. A year in solitary would do me fine.

Vera You'd go round the twist.

Liz I'm already that. Ye gotta be mental to work here. They're from another planet this lot.

Vera You're not wrong. There's a few queer beggars around. I reckon they must advertise for 'em. Wanted, long-haired prats for cushy overpaid position in museum.

Liz You took your time. I expected you fifteen minutes ago.

Vera It's no joke up there at the moment. I tell you, Liz. Talk about dust. It's thick and it's everywhere.

Liz Dust, my arse!

Vera It's all blown in from't building site ... from the new soddin' extension.

Liz I've seen ya ... with your wee cloth rubbing up those Greek athletes. Gives ya a thrill I bet. Brings back a few memories, eh Vera?

Vera You jealous old cow.

Liz I watched you last week. I saw ya ... having a good old natter.

Vera That's not your area. That's my official area. You shouldn't be up there. Keep your snotty nose out of it, sunshine

Liz I was nae trespassin'. I was comin' up to tell ya you we had a brew on.

Vera You don't see me creepin' around contemporary art. We agreed ... I keep to my boundaries. Mind you, I started off Greek, Roman and Egyptian. Now I'm Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Medieval and Renaissance. That's a bloody lot that is. It's a lot of responsibility for one.

Liz They asked me to take on Abstract, ya know.

Vera They never.

Liz Oh ay! I told 'em, I said, look here, I said I canna see myself in Abstract. I only took on the Impressionists as a favour because Katy went sick.

Vera Give 'em an inch...

Liz I said I've got my hands full with the Baroque, Chinese, Contemporary, Impressionists and 20th century sculpture.

Vera You don't want no more. They want blood this lot.

Liz Ay, they want it, but they're no gettin' it from me. I told 'em, I said, it took me weeks to get used to the Impressionists.

Vera It does. It can take weeks. You've got to adapt haven't you.

Liz And I said, you put me in there with that lot and I don't know what I might do.

Vera They've got no idea what we've got to put up with you see, Liz.

Liz No idea. How many of 'em could stick our job for more than ten minutes?

Vera They wouldn't have a clue.

Liz I did try. I walked around Abstract. Took a good look.

Vera You couldn't stomach it, though.

Liz Don't know what it was but I had to get out.

Vera That used to happen to me in Egyptian. Personally, I think they should leave those mummies buried. What do you think, Liz?

Liz You're right, Vera.

Vera When I'm shoved under, I don't want to be dug up again for all to see. It's not decent.

Liz It's the furnace for me. I'm not gonna risk it. *(Pause)*. You always chat to the Greeks d'ya?

Vera When I've got time.

Liz That's a fact. I could hear every wee word.

Vera Not surprised ... the size of your lug-holes.

Liz "How are you my love? Let me massage those aching limbs. Let me ease away the pain". That was to 'Reclining Greek Warrior. Circa 550 BC'.

Vera I like to look after my boys. If I don't ... who will?

Liz Your boys? Christ almighty!

Vera Pointless talking. You're about as sensitive as a ... as a ...

Liz As a manic rapist in a nunnery.

Vera You're sad, you know that?

Liz I'm sad? Whose going around gabbin' away with statues? No me hen! I've got all my marbles, ta very much.

Vera Hard as nails!

Liz An' you're as soft as shite.

Vera Why you work here I don't know.

Liz Tell you wha', hen. They see you hobnobbin' with Atlas and the lads, and you'll be gettin' your marchin' orders, no messin'.

Vera Oh, ay!

Liz Double quick time. Left, right, left, right, left, right. *(Pause)*. You're nae sulkin' are ya. I canna bear tha'. *(Pause)*. So you call them your boys?

Vera Don't try to draw me, Liz, I'm not in the mood.

Liz Do they ever talk back to ye?

Vera Where's Mair? She should be up here by now.

Liz I had this pal, in Drumchapel. Threw herself off a high rise. Fell onto a car. Hell of a mess. You remind me of her.

Vera Oh, yes.

Liz She had these dolls. Dozens of 'em. Everywhere she went she'd take one of these dolls.

Vera I never had dolls as a kid.

Liz Well, she had dozens. You'd see her in the park, in the supermarket ... chattin' away to this doll, nineteen to the dozen. She never stopped. Jabber, jabber, jabber! All day long.

Vera You think I'm mental, don't ya.

Liz I would na go as far as tha’.

Vera Sometimes I need to talk ... to somebody, to something ... something that’ll listen.

Liz I can understand tha’.

Vera Everyone’s rushing these days.

Liz Everywhere you go. It’s true.

Vera Rush, rush rush! Even on the radio. There’s no time to talk to people. They’ve always got to move on, have you noticed?

Liz I’m no a radio fan, actually. Not now.

Vera How many people do you know who’ll stand and listen to you?

Liz I used to be. Oh ay! ‘Housewives Choice’ ... ‘Take It From Here’ ... ‘ITMA’ ...

Vera ‘ITMA’! ... “Can I do ya now, sir?”

Liz Mrs Mop.

Vera Mrs Mop. Aye! “Doesn’t matter what you do as long as you tear ‘em up”. Remember that?

They laugh at this.

Liz Frisby ... whatsit!

Vera Frisby Dyke.

Liz Frisby Dyke! That’s ‘im. The posty. “Doesn’t matter what you do as long as you tear ‘em up”.

They laugh louder and longer.

Vera “I go! I come back!”

Liz “I go! I come back!”

The laughter slowly subsides.

Vera “I go! I come back!” We’d laugh.

Liz Who said that? “I go! I come back!”

Vera We all used to say it. We said it all the time. That and “TTFN”.

Liz I said tha’. I was always saying tha’. “TTFN”. But who said, “I go! I come back!”? What was his name?

The laughter stops.

Vera Can’t remember.

Liz When you think about it, wha’s funny? I mean, “I go! I come back!” is nae funny.

Vera On its own it’s not funny. It’s all in the voice in’t it like. “I go! I come back!”. You’ve got to do it fast ... with a foreign accent. “I go! I come back!”

Liz It’s no the same now. It’s all ‘F’ this an’ ‘F’ tha’. Even my wee gran’ children are at it.

Vera Never!

Liz I tell ye, I canna stand tha’. I canna tolerate it.

Vera I’m the same.

Liz They so much as breathe it in front o’ me, and they get a clip across the ear. No messin’.

Vera Nowt wrong wi’ a good clip occasionally.

Liz They think twice when I’m around, I can tell ye.

Vera I bet. *(Pause)*. I’ll tell you why I talk to my boys. Promise not to laugh?

Liz May the Pope roast in hell.

Vera I can go to them with any problem and they all listen.

Liz You take your problems ... to them!

Vera All the time. Last week I had a row with my next-door neighbour so I went up to my Greek lads and asked them straight out what I should do.

Liz And they told ya.

Vera Not in the way you're thinking. Of course not. No, it was more like a spiritual experience. The answer seemed to filter through, through the ether, slowly like.

Liz What did they say?

Vera They told me to take her round a basket of plums, which was handy as we've got a plum tree and they're ripe for pickin' just now.

Liz Very handy.

Vera I don't always talk to the boys. There's Aphrodite. I'm very close to her. She deals with matters of the heart. She's been very helpful lately.

Liz Ye have nae got trouble at hame, have ya?

Vera Me? No! Harold's not bad ... on the whole.

Liz They're all slime bags if you ask me. I would nae give them housin' room, so I wouldn't.

Vera Harold's not so much a slime bag ... as a lazy bastard. He's always too tired to listen to me.

Liz Don't tell me. Mine's in front of the telly with a can of lager all day long. When he looks at me, he has this weird hypnotic stare. It's uncanny, so it is.

Vera Thought he had a job with the council.

Liz Not any more. He's on the sick, at least that's wha' he tells them. During the day he's too sick to move out of his chair. In the evening he's down with the lads playing darts and snooker ... every night. So what's this trouble of the heart you've been having?

Vera You don't want to hear about that.

Liz That bad!

Vera We've all got our load to bear.

Liz You can tell me.

Vera It's all so ... mucky.

Liz What is?

Vera Relationships an' tha'. You know wha' I mean? Mucky and tacky.

Liz I've had some of that. Been sharing it about has he?

Vera Might have.

Liz Might have? You're not sure.

Vera Let's say, I'm almost certain.

Liz That's not good enough.

Vera Okay! I'm positive.

Liz How positive?

Vera Very positive.

Liz How positive is 'very positive'?

Vera I caught them at it in the back of a car in the Bingo hall car park.

Liz That's positive. Did ya speak to him?

Vera I was too choked to speak. I mean, there he was with his backside going up and down in the back of this estate ... What could I say?

Liz I'd have said somethin'. Who was the woman?

Vera Couldn't see her. At least I know why he's tired all the time.

Liz D'ya know what I'd do? I'd find out who she is and I'd tell her. I'd say you want him, you have him. And don't bring him back.

Vera I never knew he liked bingo. That's about as exciting as Harold gets.

Liz Och, they're all the same. They've no idea so they have nae. When I wed Angus we spent our weddin' night watchin' football on a black an' white portable telly in a leakin' caravan on the Isle of Arran. That's as good as it got. All down hill after tha'.

Vera We did go to Morecambe once, but it rained. He spent the week in a drunken stupor.

Liz Ay, they love to do tha'. Angus is the same. He says, I've nae had a good time unless I've had a good spew. Do ya credit it? They're like wee bairns so they are.

Vera Listen!

Liz What?

Vera Listen!

Liz Somebody there?

Vera No! What can you hear?

Liz Footsteps somewhere. Going through Landscapes in the direction of Seascapes, I'd say.

Vera Peaceful that. That's why I like working here. It's peaceful. I get a few hours of peace every day.

Liz Until they open the bleedin' doors, then it's like the Glasgow January sales, so it is. And it's as bad at hame, what with the telly and the hi-fi and the computer games. ... Kids under my feet ... scrawkin' and bleetin'

Vera Kids? Not your kids.

Liz Grandchildren. Four of the little beggars. Talk about bleet. When one starts they all start. The neighbours bang on the walls. What can I do? So I bang back. All night it's bang, bang, bang!

Vera Where-ever you go, it's there. Noise! I tell 'em you know. If they come in 'ere crashin' and bangin' I tell 'em. Oh ay! I give 'em an earful.

Liz They would nae gi' you any mind.

Vera That's what you think. I put on this posh voice ... "Excuse me, would you mind showing some consideration for other members of the public. This is a museum and not a football ground. Please desist!"

Liz Desist! Eh, that's nae bad. Eyes closed, it's Maggie Thatcher. Ye could do the clubs wi' tha'.

Vera I got a bronze medal for elocution.

Liz Get away! You're 'avin' me on.

Vera Straight up! I were fifteen. Talk about shittin' yourself. Thought they could hear my knees knockin'. I can remember, I did Juliet's balcony speech. "Oh, Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art though Romeo?"

Liz I could nae be bothered wi' all that' fussin'. If folk don't like the way I talk they can stuff themselves.

Vera It were me mum's idea. "If you want to get on, you've got to talk proper", she said. It nearly worked an' all. I had a pal who went to grammar school. She said there was this job going in the Building Society. Good pay and prospects. The interview went right well. I think they liked me. I was putting it on, you know, bags of swank. Where I got it from, I don't know. Anyway, then they asked me about GCE's an' that. Course, I didn't 'ave any, did I.

Liz They don't know they're bloody born today, so they dunna. They dish 'em out with cornflake packets, these so called degrees.

Vera I wanted to be a teacher like my Auntie May.

Liz You're well out o' that' lot. Can ye imagine it ... fartin' bairns under your feet all day long. Four's about all I can manage.

Vera Don't know what she'd say if she could see me now.

Liz Bit of a snob was she, your mother?

Vera She put on airs. Never had anythin' herself, mind. Always countin' pennies.

Liz D'ya know wha' I think? Ye could do a lot worse than this place.

Vera I wouldn't want to work anywhere else. Where's Mair?

Liz She's buffin' Surrealism. It needed a good going over. They had a big meetin' in there last night.

Vera Now that's the one I like. Surrealism!

Liz Not my cup of tea at all, hen.

Vera I don't mind doing in there. I could spend the day there. I lose myself in all that.

Liz All looks rubbish to me.

Vera You need imagination see. I've always had lots of that.

Liz Oh, yeah?

Vera Some people are gifted with it. I've always being told that ... since school.

Liz You're gifted?

Vera It runs in the family actually.

Liz You'd never know ... lookin' at ye.

Vera It was mainly on my father's side. If it hadn't been for the war he could have been a great photographer, I'm sure.

Liz Box Brownie I had. Took many a good photey with tha'.

Vera I'm talking photography here, Liz. Not holiday snaps stuff. I'm talking artistry.

Liz So am I. We were into all of that.

Vera Who was?

Liz Our lot. The gang. There was this shed at the bottom of Duggie's garden. That's where we did it.

Vera Did what?

Liz It was Duggie's idea. His big sister went to Art College in Glasgow. She told us about these nudes lying around the studio. So we did it. We all did it in turn. All of us nude ... starkers in the shed.

Vera You took nude photographs?

Liz Old Mackie, the chemist, was a mean old bastard so he was. He would nae let us have the prints and he told my father. That was a day that was. My father gave me a real leatherin'. Belt off ... wham!

Vera My father was a gentleman. A gentle man. He'd never do anything like that to me. Not that I'd give him cause.

Liz Ay, I can imagine. I bet you were a right borin' skunner.

Vera If by boring you mean that I didn't run around vandalising the neighbourhood, you're right.

Liz I've got a sister like you. She did a paper round so she could go to these elocution lessons. Fooled everyone. Married a stockbroker in Edinburgh. Never brought him home. Too scared. Does nae work. Your roots are your roots. There's no changin' it.

Vera Exactly! You are what you are. I am what I am.

Liz Ya ken that woman swimming around in custard with a crown on her bonce and sharks all around her?

Vera In Surrealism?

Liz That says it all. Sums it all up. Tha' is life. We're all up to our necks in shark-infested custard. That's it!

Vera I'd never thought of it like that.

Liz *(Shouting)* Mair! Mair!

Mair *(Offstage in the distance)* Yes?

Liz You still in Surreal, hen?

Mair *(Still Offstage)* I'm in Abstract.

Liz She's in Abstract. Get her in there you won't get her out. *(To Mair)*. You got the milk?

Mair *(Still Offstage)* Yes!

Liz That's a marvel. She's got it. That makes a change. *(To Mair)*. Bring it up here. We're gaspin'.

Mair *(Still Offstage)* On the way.

Liz She's on the way she says.

Vera You should have seen the state of Impressionists this morning. Don't know what's been going on there. Whatever it was they left it in a right mess. I reckon it were wine or something. It were all over. It's parties every week.

Liz Wha' ye say?

Vera I said they're having parties every week.

Liz That's what I need. A bloody good knees up.

Vera Where's the kettle?

Liz The last time I saw it, it was in Cubism.

Vera What was it doing there?

Liz Don't look at me.

Vera No wonder I couldn't find it. I don't know. Good job someone's got their head screwed on.

Exit Vera. As she does so, Mair enters from the opposite side. She is carrying a brush and pan in one hand and a pint of milk in the other. She places the milk down in front of the bench.

Mair The leprechaun's here.

Liz What she doing here? It's only half past seven. She's never here at this time.

Mair My back's killing me. I've done all round the main stairway ... all round there and the main entrance. And you should have seen the mess in Surrealism.

Liz More fool you.

Mair I don't mind it. It's invigorating. I enjoy it.

Liz For gawd's sake dunna tell 'em tha'. They'll have ya workin' for bugger all.

Mair There's some sort of panic on.

Liz No again.

Mair The trustees are coming in. Emergency meeting. Where's Vera?

Liz Hunting the kettle. Here Mair! Look at this lot. I mean, has the world gone mad or what? You're educated ... *(she points at 'Food For Thought')* ... what's that worth?

Mair Thousands probably.

Liz Thirty thousand. D'ya credit it. My grandson could do that. I could give him a pile of the cat's old tins and he could do that.

Mair Maybe. The trick is thinking of it first.

Liz And what a title eh? 'Food For Thought'. It's no even catchy, is it. He did nae stretch the old brain box on that one.

Mair It's a she. A woman did it.

Liz Get away. A woman did that. That a fact?

Mair Margo Blair.

Liz That a fact. Well, well! Menopausal is she?

Mair Young. Very young.

Liz Young. That does surprise me. Come here, Mair. Stand here! Now, you tell me, what does it say to you?

They both scrutinise it carefully.

Mair Well ...

Liz Yes?

Mair I'd say ...

Liz Thirty thousand pounds remember.

Mair What it's trying to say ...

Liz Yes?

Mair ... is ... here we have empty food tins in no particular order ... there's no symmetry anywhere ...

Liz And no food.

Mair And no food. So ... all we have is thought, hence 'Food For Thought'!

Liz What are we supposed to think?

Mair Nothing. You are simply being asked to stand still and observe something for a few seconds of your time. You might find a solution. There might not be a solution. It could possibly give us an insight into empty tin-ness.

Liz Bollocks! Sorry, Mair, but really. You telling me that's art? And what about that ... (*indicating 'Empire'*). I mean! That is crazy. (*She goes over to the exhibit*). That is ridiculous. I was doing that sort of thing on Dunoon beach when I was a wee bairn. Look at it. What's that got to do with Empire? I ask ye. A pile of sand with a flag in it. Can you imagine that on your front room carpet. You bring visitors into the room ... can you see it? "Please come in. Can I get you some tea and a bun? Oh, by the way that's our latest treasure. A work of art you know. Very rare. Only twenty thousand pounds. A wee snip".

Mair It's probably saying that ... when it comes down to it ... all empires are built on sand. It's all symbolic, Liz.

Liz Ay! I'm sure it is. Symbolic! Sham-bloody-bolic more like. What sort of mind is it that sits down and creates something like that? I mean ... is it me or is it them?

Enter Vera with the kettle and three cups on a tray.

Vera The leprechaun's down there.

Liz Ay! We know.

Vera She's early.

Mair Something's up.

Vera (*To Liz*) I got it ... you make it.

Liz Ask properly and I might.

Vera You refusing to make the tea?

Liz Don't try giving me orders. I had enough of that in the army.

Vera (*To Mair*) She's in a mood. (*To Liz*). Will you please make the tea, madam?

Liz goes about making the tea.

Liz As my friend Mair here has been working her guts out, and as I've got a throat like the inside of a vacuum cleaner, I will.

Mair Didn't know you were in the army, Liz.

Liz Five years. Loved it! Loved it! Be back like a shot. That's what some of these artists need ... a dose in uniform. A few weeks in Bosnia would sort 'em.

Vera They can take Harold an' all.

Enter Bridget, busy and breathless.

Bridget (*Handing out brown envelopes*) Pay, girls. Sorry I can't stop. There's a meeting with the Trustees. Tell me what you decide. I'll see you later. One of you have a look at the café area would you. Someone's been sick. It's been there all night.

Exit Bridget.

Liz Talk about the Irish Mail. She'll meet herself coming.

They open the envelopes. There's a letter inside which they read carefully.

Vera What does yours say?

Liz I don't believe this.

Mair Should have guessed. That extension's soaking up the funds.

Liz A job for life they said.

Vera I can't see a thing. I haven't got my specs.

Mair It's saying that due to government policy they've got to make cutbacks.

Vera You're jokin'!

Mair "... the general maintenance budget has been tightened and all cleaning work was put out to tender. From now on Atlas Cleaners will take over the cleaning of the museum. They are prepared to take on one of the present cleaners". They are leaving it up to us to decide who stays and who goes.

Liz That's easily sorted. You two bugger off. I stay. *(Vera looks severe)*. Joke, Vera! Joke!

Mair Typical! No negotiation. Nothing ...

Vera *(To Mair)* You're all right. You can get a job anywhere.

Mair I'm happy here.

Vera You wouldn't catch me hangin' around if I had a degree. I'd be off.

Liz *(Handing Vera a cup of tea, she speaks an aside to her)* Vera, hen! Shut your gob.

Vera What?

Liz Just shut it! *(Louder)*. Hope that's strong enough for ye. It's no tea unless it's like treacle. So girls, we got a wee problem. Mind you, I saw it coming. *(Mair begins to exit)*. Hey, Mair! Where you off? Tea!

Mair Back in a tick. I'll sort out the caff. *(She exits)*.

Vera So? What's to do with you?

Liz *(Mimicking)* "You wouldn't catch me hangin' around if I had a degree".

Vera Well, you wouldn't.

Liz I wonder about you sometimes. There's more sense in a mop head.

Vera I only said ...

Liz Don't ya think she's tried?

Vera All I know is she's got a degree. I don't know what she's done and hasn't done. I've hardly spoken to her. I mean, she's only been here a few weeks.

Liz You did nae ken she'd had a breakdown.

Vera I know nothing about her. I don't even know where she lives. As I say, I've hardly spoken to her.

Liz In that case, you're let off with a caution.

Vera So? What happened?

Liz Ye ken tha' computer place ... on the industrial estate ... big grey buildin'.

Vera Bloody monstrosity that is.

Liz She ran it. Chief executive.

Vera You're havin' me on.

Liz No kiddin'. Chief Executive. High flyer! That's her.

... in this Preview Script, the remainder of the play has been deleted from here ...

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