The Year of the Monkey and other plays

Claire Dowie is a writer/performer/poet/comedian, and pioneer of ‘stand-up theatre’. After starting out on the ‘alternative’ comedy circuit, she switched to stand-up comedy and to writing plays ‘when the punchlines ran out’. Her first major work, Adult Child/Dead Child, won a Time Out Award in 1988. Other works include Why is John Lennon Wearing a Skirt?, Easy Access (For the Boys), All Over Lovely (all available from Methuen), Came Out, It Rained, Went Back In Again, for BBC2’s City Shorts season, Kevin for Central Children’s Television, and From the Bottom of a Well and The Barnes Originals (both for BBC radio and both performed by Stephen Moore). Designs for Living was produced by Ruby Tuesday for the Drill Hall, London, in April 2001. For further information on Claire Dowie’s work, see her official website at www.geocities.com/clairedowie_2000.
by the same author

Why is John Lennon Wearing a Skirt?
and other stand-up theatre plays

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Bonfire Night

If you hear a loud bang on bonfire night do you think it’s a firework . . . or a gun going off?

I’ll get Dad sorted and leave about five. Sandwiches and milk, that should do him, he knows the arrangement, bonfire-night-is-my-night-off! I’ll put him a fresh jug of water – but I’ll move it to the other side of the room in case he’s tempted to drink it. You have to think about bladders when you’re chief carer. Only carer. It used to be my mother but she died. Died? Murdered more like.

It was her hip that did it. She’d finally got a new one. The unfortunate thing was if it hadn’t been for her new hip, she would have probably been alive today, because that was why she’d gone out for a stroll, being able to walk properly after all those years and enjoying every minute of it. ‘A teenager,’ she said, ‘I feel like a teenager again.’ And I must admit it took years off her. It was a drunk-driver. Drunk? Kailoid if you ask me, not that I was there but there were witnesses. Mounted the pavement and sent her spinning about fifteen feet in the air. Quite gymnastic, really, considering a few weeks before she could hardly walk. Killed her outright, of course. I wouldn’t have minded so much if he was sorry but all he got was a fine and banned from driving for a year. I know, I was there in court. Well, I mean, I know you can’t bring them back, when they’re dead they’re dead, but who had to give up her house and her job and move back home to look after her dad? Me, of course. Muggins.


It’s a glorious evening. Autumnal. ‘The smell of cordite hung in the air.’ I love that sentence, that sentence springs to mind every bonfire night. Used to read it in all the adventure books when I was a kid. Loved adventure books: cowboys and Indians, gunslingers, outlaws, spies, war, anything with guns in it. My mother, of course, didn’t approve, thought little girls shouldn’t read such things, kept giving me books about ballet dancers.
Cordite. I have a very strong feeling that it all started for me with *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* I used to watch it, well everybody did, all my friends. Some of them had a *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* gun. It looked like a Luger but I'm not sure what a Luger looks like. I only say it looked like a Luger because a boy in my road said it did and boys know that sort of thing, or at least they pretend to. Anyway, the point is I didn't have one. I could have had one, I suppose, if I'd asked, but the trouble is when you're playing games with girls and boys, and you say you want to be Napoleon Solo or Illya Kuryakin, the boys tend to get petty and say, 'You can't, you're a girl,' and then fall over laughing in a silly fashion, which used to annoy me because of course they were right. So I preferred to pretend I wasn't really that interested in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and I used a stick.

It was a very good stick, sort of Luger-shaped. I stripped the bark off and painted it black, looked very authentic, I thought. Hardly ever got to fire it, though, because most of the time the boys only let us run around, scream a lot, get captured and then get rescued again. So I was never able to be the hero or even the starring baddie because, as the boys said, 'Girls can't be heroes or starring baddies because girls don't do that,' and of course they were right, girls didn't. I saw it on the television. All the girls on the television ever did was run around, scream a lot, get captured by the starring baddie and then get rescued by the hero. So when I found the gun I kept it hidden in my toy box, because I thought if the boys knew I'd found a gun they'd take it off me, because boys are like that. I carried on using my stick because it wasn't a Luger-shaped *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* gun, it was a real gun and it was heavy.

I fully intended telling my mother, but on the way home with the gun tucked in my knickers – because I didn't have a pocket in my dress – I started thinking what would happen when I did tell her. She'd probably whip me down to the police station and policemen frightened me. I thought they might lock me up when I told them I found it on the bombsite where we'd been specifically warned not to play. Plus the fact that I'd hidden it in my knickers on the way
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home. I don’t know why I thought that was criminal at the time, but I did.

So I kept it hidden, only played with it secretly, on my own in my bedroom, a chair propped against the doorknob just in case. Oh, yes, I’d seen all the films, all the detective series, I knew what I was doing. I also heard about people cleaning their guns, so I polished mine with my mother’s duster, polished my stick at the same time since I was still using it (well, publicly anyway). Then I saw a film with a man really cleaning his gun so I watched and copied mine. I played lots of games with my gun, secretly, on my own. I was, of course, always the hero, except when I was the starring baddie, because there was nobody there to tell me I couldn’t be.

As it turned out it was very advantageous playing with my gun rather than reading books about ballet dancers because by the time I did come to use it I knew how to hold it and point it so that I looked fairly professional. Stupidly I did make the mistake of saying ‘bang’ as I fired it, habit of course, but I don’t suppose he heard, or cared.

I was living on my own by then, had a fairly decent job, on the up and up as they say, so I got a mortgage on a little house. The area was a bit run down, a few unsavoury types, but I kept myself to myself. Mind you, I tried to be pleasant, said ‘Good morning’ and so forth, to the women mainly, I don’t like to encourage the men, even if they are neighbours — well, you never know, these strange men you hear about, they’ve got to be somebody’s neighbours, haven’t they?

Funnily enough I’d more or less forgotten about the gun. I came across it when I was sorting out my bedroom ready for moving. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t just throw it away, I mean what if a child found it? I’d never forgive myself. It’s not a toy, it’s a lethal weapon in the wrong hands. So I thought, ‘Oh well’ and popped it into my suitcase and took it to my new home.

Actually, I don’t know whether it was because I was living alone and wasn’t used to it, but for a couple of weeks after moving in I started playing with it again. I suppose it’s a bit stupid for a grown woman to be running around a house,
sidling up doorways and shouting ‘bang’ to an empty room, but I couldn’t help thinking it looked rather good as I caught a glimpse of myself in the wardrobe mirror, a gun held nonchalantly up, with my elbow resting on my palm, blowing imaginary smoke out of the muzzle. Well, it looked just as good as anything I’ve seen on the television anyway. It looks somehow more interesting when a woman does it, I think.

I was upstairs running my bath at the time. He was a noisy devil. I always thought they trained themselves to be cat-like. They always did on television, well, most of the time. They occasionally made the burglar noisy but I always got annoyed at that, thought, ‘No, that’s not right, that’s a silly plot, everybody knows burglars are cat-like.’ Well, mine wasn’t. I turned the tap off and to tell you the truth I was shaking, and my heart, well, I thought they must be hearing it at the end of the street it was beating that hard. I heard him rustling about in the living room and I thought about the gun. I thought, ‘If I lock myself in the bathroom with the gun I’ll be all right.’ I could have just locked myself in the bathroom, I suppose, but what if he kicked the door down? What if he wasn’t just a burglar? What if he was a psychopath? Well, you hear such stories, don’t you? No, I had to get the gun. It was in my underwear drawer in the bedroom. I mean, it wasn’t particularly hidden, I just put it there because I didn’t know where else to put it really, I haven’t got a gun drawer and I’m too old for a toy box. And what if he comes upstairs and finds it? He might shoot me. He might take it away and shoot someone else. I’d never forgive myself if some innocent bystander got shot with my gun. No, I had to get it. He was still rummaging in the living room so I thought even if he hears me running from the bathroom to the bedroom I’ll still be able to get there before he gets upstairs – unless he’s particularly athletic, which is doubtful, because if he were athletic he’d know how to be cat-like. So I did it. I took a deep breath, told myself to be brave and ran. Well, needless to say he heard me, I’m no burglar, nothing cat-like about me.

But why he came upstairs I’ll never know – I mean, why?