

CROWDING ME IN by JENI WHITTAKER

CAST

ONE = FELIX, the new boy in the office, very enthusiastic

TWO = BEN, nervous

THREE = SEB: a young family man, twins and another on the way, pushing himself too hard

FOUR = ARRAN, the would-be poet

FIVE = JACK, the resident cynic, keeping a low profile

All five of the cast are in their twenties, Jack verging on thirty, Felix twenty-two.

Ideal as an examination piece, the cast have monologues/ thought-tracks built into their scripts and plenty of opportunity for physical theatre.

The pressures of an office are explored, following the break-down of one of their number. The crisis causes different characteristics to emerge in all of the cast.

Running time: approx. one hour, but it is easy to pick and choose scenes, or alter monologues, to reduce the length.

EXTRACT ONE

In a line behind the cast, acting as the back 'wall' of the tube are five identical office-type tables [light aluminium legs, plastic top, neutral colour] with matching-style chairs on top of them, side on. Some of the cast are using the sides of the chairs as the bar which they hold to keep balance in the tube.

Group of people on their way to work on the tube. There is standing room only. One speaks directly out to us. The others create the sound of ...

The underground.

ONE It's the same every day. I leave home for the office at six o'clock a.m. I park my car in the station carpark. I catch the train to London. It is supposed to take 45 minutes but it is often delayed. Next I catch the tube and travel four stops. After that it's a quarter of an hour walk and I'm there. We are supposed to be there by eight o'clock in the morning. And there are rewards for those who stay later in the evening than five or five thirty. We are watched. For the one who is prepared to go the extra mile. The one who arrives early and leaves late.

TWO This is my stop. There are people hemming me in. A barrier of briefcases. A fence of I-pads and the like. I didn't position myself well. And now I'll pay for that. I'll miss my stop. I'll be late. Oh, God!

THREE **talking to Four** So my boss said to me, that if I can prove myself with the way I handle this job, there'll be something in it for me.

FOUR A rise?

THREE **excitedly** Maybe. But from the way he was talking...

FOUR A promotion?

THREE Well, that'd be useful, what with Milla being pregnant again.

FOUR Already? I thought you were stopping with the twins?

THREE That was the general plan, but you know what they say... 'The best laid plans of mice and men ...'

FOUR 'Schemes...'

THREE What?

FOUR 'The best laid schemes o' mice an' men/ Gang aft a-gley...' Robbie Burns.

THREE Eh?

FOUR It's one of those quotes that people always get wrong.

THREE Except you, it seems.

FOUR **embarrassed** Sorry. It's one of the things I obsess about. Accuracy. **Somewhat apologetically** I like poetry.

THREE Well. Whatever.

FOUR **trying to lighten the tone** Anyway... Another one on the way. Boy or girl?

THREE **still cold** Whatever. Too soon to tell.

FOUR Perhaps it's twins again.

THREE Oh, God!

FIVE There's Dave over there. Hope he doesn't spot me. Last thing I need in the morning is his brand of smutty jokes. There's something about that kind of smuttiness that needs a couple of pints in a warm bar to lubricate the laughter muscles. I'm not good at that kind of thing at the best of times. It's hard being one of the lads. All I want is peace. A quiet day and then the journey home dreaming of the evening. Waiting for the week-end.

The Tube comes to a stop. Sound of doors opening. People get off and reform.

The take-out coffee bar....

EXTRACT TWO

The group become the office foyer, acting as the swing doors through which they all pass. A couple become the doors while the others push through, reforming and passing through, so that doors and employees keep changing, giving the impression of a large number of people. They speak the following as they push through the doors, in a constant flow, but exploring all the different ways this greeting can be said.

From now on there is a background sound, a kind of grinding noise.

Good morning.
Good morning.
Morning!
Morning!

The above continues until the swing door effect has been fully explored. Then the group split off and perform the next as they set up desks and chairs, as if part of a machine-like morning duty. As they move furniture they call out the following, again giving the impression of numbers of people.

Nice day.
Is it?
Happy Monday!
Thankyou. Good weekend?
Blinder.
Might rain.
Surely not?
It's muggy.
Forecast said hot.
Hottest day of the year.
Thank god for air conditioning.

The group reform behind desks, well spaced out, facing front , with chairs behind them.

TWO steps out from his place behind the desk Of course, Sir. I'm sorry, Ms, no I know you like to be called Lavinia only... yes, I do find it hard to remember. No, I daresay it's not such a hard name to get a handle on but ... Of course I think it suits you, it's not that. It's a pretty name. It's feminine. Yes, like you, M - Lavinia. Yes, I understand you have a discerning palate. No, I do not have such a discerning palate, it's true. I dare say it could be said that I have no palate at all. I can't tell good espresso coffee from instant. I can't tell a bagel from a pain au chocolat. **With a touch of spirit.** They'd run out of bagels. Had a run on them this morning, they said. **He laughs nervously.** Sorry. Sorry, M - Lavinia. I'll do better tomorrow. Only - only the train was late. Blood - an animal - a dog I think - they said - on the track. It got in the way. It was mown down. No, I quite see that. The wildlife of England cannot be allowed to get in the way of the business commitments of Patterson, Helbite and Chung.

THREE I believe I have what it takes, sir. Yes, I understand this is a rush job. I will devote every minute of this week to making sure it is accomplished satisfactorily. Oh, oh, yes, of course. Not just satisfactorily... of course, that is not enough, I can see that. To the best of my ability. What do you mean, is that enough? I believe

it is, sir. You picked me for this job. You must have thought me capable. The best of my ability is the highest standard I or anyone can hope to achieve. How can I improve the time, surprise the clients and be ready first thing on Friday morning? I don't know, sir. I've already said I'll put in every spare minute ... what more can you possibly ...? The last train goes at ... Yes, I have heard that. I have heard that some people bring in night things, sleep in the office... but I do have a wife and children. Twins, sir. It's hard for her ... No, no, I'm not prevaricating ... no, I'm not going back on my word. You can't expect ... yes, I do, sir. I want this job and all that comes with it. Hanging on its coat-tails. Ha, ha! very wittily put, sir. It's only for a week, isn't it? Of course I'll do it, sir. I'd never let you down.

ONE Mr Keen, that's me! Haven't been here long, but I'm eager to show I can cut the mustard. What did that guy - Jack - mean, to keep a low profile? How can you succeed if you're just a grey blur in the background? You've got to shine and I mean to do just that. I won't be ignored. I'll shine like the tail of a rocket. I'll go places and do things that the company won't have dreamed of. I can see my future, lying ahead of me like a beacon, beckoning as I was taught at school, ever onwards, ever reaching beyond the ordinary, the mundane. I can hardly wait! Mum and Dad will be so proud. My old headmaster. And Zoe. Mustn't forget her. Soon as I've made my mark here, I'll pop the question. I can hardly wait!

FOUR By Wednesday of this long hot week, we're all struggling. No more popping outside for a quick sandwich, it's too hot. The ice compartment of the water dispenser has broken down again. The air conditioning is a constant rumble at the back of our consciousness. Surely it's breaking down too. The strain on it is too much. I try to write deathless poetry about our condition. Here's an example of the latest:

The office jangled white
its dance bright and sharp
snappy as plastic, faces dehumanised
yapped; machines rattled and hummed **He stops and makes a note on his jotter.**

Want to get the sounds in but I haven't quite got it. The office, the office - its constant background, the inescapability of it all, the repetition, the noise. Was there ever a poet of the office? T.S.Eliot perhaps. Larkin? Don't know much about his life. Did they escape? Is there such a thing as escape? Trouble is, no one makes much of a living as a poet I don't suppose.

The phone goes on Three's desk. Three ignores it. Two looks at Three.

TWO **trying not to draw too much attention** Seb. Hm. Seb - your phone.

THREE Not now, not now. **He takes the phone off the hook.**

The phone goes on Two's desk. Two picks it up.

TWO Yes? Patterson, Helbite and Chung, Ben Brown speaking. Oh, yes of course. I think he's busy ... I mean, of course we're all busy, but he wasn't at his desk... I don't know. Perhaps in the cloakroom? Yes, sir, yes. Of course. I'll make sure he gets the message. At once, sir. Larry who, sir? I don't know anyone ... oh, I see - you're Larry. Call ... *you* ... Larry. Well, I'll try. Yes, I understand that, no sirs here! All first names! I know. Yes, s ... Larry, I'll give him the message.

He replaces the phone receiver cautiously, gets up hesitantly and goes over to Three.

TWO Seb? Message for you.

THREE Not now, not now. **He flaps a dismissive hand at Two.**

TWO But ...

THREE You still here?

TWO Yes. You see ...

THREE **without taking his eyes away from his [imaginary] screen, moving and clicking his [imaginary] mouse** I'm very busy so leave me alone. Deadlines, deadlines. Must come up with the goods before Friday or I'm done for.

TWO Well, maybe the message is about that.

THREE **finally looking at Two** What message?

TWO The one from ... er ... Larry. To go and see him - um - straightaway - now, that is.

THREE **getting up** Oh God, what now? Haven't I already got too little time?
Beginning to stumble hurriedly off. What does he want? Blood?

EXTRACT THREE

FIVE **taking One aside** It's a question of them and us. Don't be too eager to go to Them. It makes enemies. Wait for Them to come to Us.

ONE And what if I don't care? About making enemies?

FIVE Oh, but I think you do. Remember they're are no guarantees of being noticed, of being promoted. And all the while you are passed over you have to continue living with the rest of the bottom rung. Us.

FOUR **who has joined them** And a day can be very long, when you're surrounded by people who you've made no bones about wanting to leave behind. Beware of Jealousy, the green-eyed monster, when you show you're happy to crunch underfoot the bones of your erstwhile companions in misery.

ONE You seemed pleased that Seb had been noticed. That he had a chance of something - promotion, perhaps.

They turn to look at Three, still staring into space at his desk.

FIVE So look at him now. Like what you see?

FOUR What we were offering him was pity.

FIVE We've seen many a good man picked out like Seb there and then buckling under the strain. Remember what I said? Keep your head down.

FOUR It's the only way to survive.

ONE So what you're saying is, don't go for promotion, don't be ambitious? It's crazy. It's self-defeating in the most profound sense. I'm not listening to you any more. Any of you. **He goes back to his desk.**

Everyone returns to their work for a moment or two. The silence is blissful after the previous grinding sounds.

But into the silence, Three begins gradually to rock and moan. Everyone stops work. Two immediately jumps to his feet.

TWO You all right, Seb?

As the moaning gets louder and the rocking of his chair more pronounced...

Seb? Get a doctor someone.

ONE Where should I go?

TWO Oh ... go to Reception. They'll find someone.

One hurries off. Four and Five hurry to either side of Three and take a shoulder each, as the rocking becomes more extreme.

The following speeches overlap:

FIVE Get a grip, old chap.

FOUR Don't let them get to you.

TWO Pick him up. **He gestures.** That's right. We'll put him on the floor.

They lay him down carefully, but as soon as Three is laid down and the others step back, he begins to shudder and his feet to drum on the floor as his body stiffens and jerks.

FIVE **stepping back, as if repulsed** Oh God.

ONE What's happening?

TWO He's having a fit of some sort. Hold him still. Make sure that he's not biting his tongue.

FOUR **hanging back** How the hell do you do that?

TWO **bending over Three** Like this, I think.... There.

FIVE **still apart, but trying to act his usual self** Where did you learn that?

TWO Years ago - when I was a boy scout.

FIVE **mockingly** A scout! I might have guessed.

TWO It taught me useful things. As you see.

FOUR Where's that bloody doctor? **He heads for the exit.**

ONE He's getting quieter. Look.

Four turns back.

FOUR Is he coming round?

TWO He still doesn't look good. He needs checking over.

The phone rings. Two takes it, his movements sure and precise.

Hello, Larry. It's Ben here. Immediate emergency over, I think. But a doctor or medic of some kind would still be advisable. Yes, he's come round. A kind of fit I think. Epileptic? I'm not sure; I'm not qualified to say. I dare say we could help him to the medical room if you think that would be best. Yes - they'll be able to look him over there and keep him quiet. By the way, Larry, I do think the heat isn't helping. Our air conditioning has broken and there's no way to get air in.

As he speaks, Four and Five help Three to his feet and then, as his coordination seems groggy, to a chair, where they loosen his tie and generally fuss over him.