

Trouble In Store (A Sort Of Ring Cycle)

By

Francesca & Alastair Murdoch

An Original Screenplay (Short)  
Revised - With Thanks To All Reviewers

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Alastair J. Murdoch.  
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wmirec@aol.com  
319 Oakland Beach Avenue  
Rye, NY 10580  
+1 (917) 680-5618

FADE IN: The interior of a jewelry store that has seen better days, sometime in the early eighties. The lettering in the window reads "Brumblebotham - Purveyors of Fine Jewelry Since 1884". A Wagner opera is playing on a tinny cassette player.

INT. JEWELRY SHOP. DAY.

LETTITIA (70, gravity-defying blue-rinse hairdo) is dusting and singing. CURTIS (25, scruffy) is rummaging through an ancient wooden box, pulling out trinkets which he studies through a loupe.

CURTIS  
(Holding aloft an enormous  
diamond ring)  
Whoa!

LETTITIA  
How on earth did that get in here?

CURTIS  
It was in this box at the back of  
the storeroom.

Curtis studies the stone closely.

CURTIS (CONT'D.)  
Hey, Aunt Lettitia, you don't  
think...

LETTITIA  
Curtis, dear, is it the comic-books  
or the video arcade-games?

CURTIS  
What?

LETTITIA  
That would lead you to believe you  
might actually find a real diamond  
of that size just lying in a  
store-room box?

CURTIS  
Yes, but this is a jewelry store.

LETTITIA  
Curtis, dear, a real diamond of  
that size would be worth hundreds  
of thousands of dollars - perhaps  
even a million!

CURTIS  
You really think?

LETTITIA  
And it would have a history of its own, a documented provenance, and it wouldn't just appear in a small town store.

CURTIS  
But this isn't just a store, Aunt Lettitia. You're always saying so yourself. We are purveyors. Purveyors of fine jewelry.

LETTITIA  
That's as maybe, but a stone like this. By which I mean a real stone of this size. Well, you wouldn't see it outside an auction house in New York or Amsterdam or London, or a major museum or perhaps even a royal collection.

CURTIS  
But, Aunt Lettitia, what if...

LETTITIA  
No, Curtis, that thing is too preposterous even for costume jewelry. It's a theatrical prop, dear. What would your great-great-grandmother would have made of such a thing in her emporium, I wonder?

CURTIS  
A tidy profit, if the family stories are anything to go by.

LETTITIA  
Curtis! How many times? Those stories are exaggerations. Cruel distortions for the most part.

CURTIS  
Ah, my Great Uncle Curtis...

LETTITIA  
...was a very bitter man. I never did understand why your father named you for him. Curtis never had a good word for my namesake.

CURTIS

The original Lettitia Brumblebotham? Oh, but he did have some great names for her.

LETTITIA

Lettitia Brumblebotham was a pioneering businesswoman in her own time, and a role model even in mine, dear.

CURTIS

She was sharp. Uncle Curtis said she'd have been a great bootlegger - only the mark-up on illicit booze would never have been big enough to tempt her away from the jewelry biz.

LETTITIA

Curtis! How could you? Don't forget, Lettitia was well known for her charity work, too. I do my best, but living up to her name is no easy thing, you know.

Lettitia turns and realizes she has been talking to herself. Curtis has taken the box into the back.

The doorbell rings as RANDOLPH (40's) and VERONICA (20's) enter, brushing snow from their matching fur coats. Both have fake tans and a lot of polyester. Lettitia rolls her eyes. Curtis re-enters the store.

CURTIS

(Not noticing the customers)  
Ah, yes - Lettitia Brumblebotham's charity work. Where would the Middletown Young Men's Physical Improvement League have been without her?

Curtis notices customers have entered the store.

CURTIS

Oh...

The Randolph raises an eyebrow, and gives a Curtis a conspiratorial wink.

RANDOLPH

Good afternoon! Tell me, do you...

Randolph nods toward the sign in the window

RANDOLPH (CONT'D.)  
 ...purvey refined engagement rings?

Randolph snickers and winks at Veronica.

VERONICA  
 Randy!

Lettitia clears her throat.

LETTITIA  
 Good afternoon, Sir. Yes, I believe we may be able to assist you in that respect. Did you have anything particular in mind?

RANDOLPH  
 It will have to be a very special ring...

He takes Veronica's left hand and raises it toward Lettitia.

RANDOLPH (CONT'D.)  
 ...to fit this very special finger.

LETTITIA  
 (To Veronica)  
 Ah, you are the...

VERONICA  
 The future Mrs. Randolph Hardy, yes. And I'm here to make sure my fiancé-to-be picks out something classy. Something that'll bring my mother around when he proposes at my family's New Year's Eve party.

CURTIS  
 Surprise, surprise!

RANDOLPH  
 My Veronica. Ain't she a trip?

LETTITIA  
 (Opening a drawer)  
 I see. Well, Sir, Madam, let me show you what we have.

Lettitia takes a ring from the drawer and hands it to the Middle-Aged Man, who places it on Veronica's finger. They study the ring, but it is clearly not to their taste.

LETTITIA (CONT'D.)  
No? Well, how about this?

Lettitia takes another ring from the drawer and repeats the process with the same result.

VERONICA  
Naaa...

Lettitia shows her another ring.

VERONICA (CONT'D.)  
Meh...

Series of fast cuts showing Lettitia offering the couple a series of rings, none of which meet with mutual approval. Lettitia's face moves from hopeful to annoyed to desperate as the rings become more and more ostentatious, until finally...

VERONICA (CONT'D.)  
Don't you have anything with some, you know, pizzazz? Class and pizzazz?

LETTITIA  
(Suddenly brightening)  
Do you know, I think we might have just the thing for you! Curtis, dear, would you be so kind as go to the safe and fetch out the ring we were just discussing.

CURTIS  
Huh?

LETTITIA  
Curtis, dear, the ring we were just dis-cuss-ing before Mr. Hardy and his charming fiancée came in?

Lettitia stares at Curtis and gestures with her head toward the store-room, giving him a conspiratorial wink.

CURTIS  
(Finally picking up on his Aunt's intentions)  
Oh! That ring. Well, yes Dear Aunt, let me go to the safe. The Special Safe.

Curtis disappears into the back and returns with the enormous diamond ring. He presents it with a flourish. Veronica practically swoons. Randolph smiles, then leans across the counter, grabs Curtis by the shirt collar and pulls him across the counter.

RANDOLPH

Tryin' to be funny, Curtis? Or do you really think you can pass that paste diamond off on me, cos it's soooo big, and it's soooo shiny, my girl's just gonna have to have it?

CURTIS

No. No I promise. I didn't think...

RANDOLPH

No, you didn't think, did you, Curtis? Listen, pal, if a stone that size was real ice, it would come with its own armed guards.

VERONICA

But, Randy! I kinda...

RANDOLPH

You little snob, you can thank your lucky stars there's at least one real lady present!

VERONICA

Randy! No! I mean. What? Do you think so?

LETTITIA

Oh, but it's a genuine antique, I assure you! And it is beautifully set.

CURTIS

(Choking)

Please, Aunt Lettitia! Not now!

Randolph releases Curtis, who collapses onto the counter.

RANDOLPH

Come on, Ronnie, Let's take our business elsewhere.

VERONICA

No, Randy, wait. Are you sure..?

He leads her out of the store. She resists a little, looking back longingly at the ring. He slams the door behind them.

LETTITIA

Well, really. You know, I think I need a lie-down after that little encounter. Curtis, will you be a dear and lock up for me?

CURTIS

(Still gasping for breath)

Sure.

Lettitia fetches her coat and breezes out of the store. Curtis locks up behind her and then examines the diamond ring, which has been in his hand all this time. He sighs, and turns to go into the back room.

INT. STORE-ROOM. SEMI-BLACKNESS.

Curtis flicks the light switch, though nothing happens, so he stumbles through the store-room and bends to put the ring back in the box. There is a noise outside - it's muffled, but recognizable as Randolph, calling out. Curtis starts in surprise, bangs his head against a shelf and collapses.

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN: Still in the semi-lit store-room. Curtis comes to and moves to the door, which he is amazed to see in its Victorian glory, with chandeliers, a uniformed DOORMAN and a small number of well-to-do clients. As he watches, the doorman opens the door for Randolph and Veronica - now resplendent in Victorian attire. Randolph walks with a cane.

INT. SHOP. DAY

DOORMAN

Good morning, Senator! Good morning, Miss LaFontaine!

Lettitia, also in Victorian attire, rushes toward them.

LETTITIA

Ah, Senator Hardy, Miss LaFontaine, what a pleasure! I cannot tell you how excited I am to show you the ring.

VERONICA

Oh, Mrs. Brumblebotham! I am beside myself with anticipation! Is it ready at last?

LETTITIA

Oh, it is, Miss LaFontaine, it is. And the stone sits so well. The most magnificent diamond I have seen in all my years purveying the finest jewelry.

RANDOLPH

Thank you, Mrs. Brumblebotham. Much obliged, I'm sure.

LETTITIA

A privilege, Senator, an absolute privilege to have it set for you and your beautiful, err, your beautiful...

RANDOLPH

Yes, well Mrs. Brumblebotham, service on the Senate Foreign Trade Committee does have its benefits.

LETTITIA

A stone fit for the Queen of England, if I may say so, Senator.

RANDOLPH

Or the Empress of India!

LETTITIA

Senator?

RANDOLPH

Victoria - Queen of England and Empress of India.

LETTITIA

Of course...

RANDOLPH

You know, this beauty might well have ended up on her fleshy English finger or her fat English head if I had not struck a deal with one of her disgruntled Maharajahs. Had it smuggled out in a case of tea and shipped to Boston I did!

VERONICA

Oh, Randolph, you rascal! Pay him no heed, dear Mrs. Brumblebotham, he is making mischief, of course. I have seen the paperwork.

RANDOLPH

(Addressing Lettitia)

Truth be told, I think he was glad to see the thing safely out of India. Some cockamamie story about a curse.

VERONICA

Oh, that curse, Randolph! You don't think...

RANDOLPH

No, my dear, I do not believe a word of it. Superstition has no place in our modern age. I know for a fact it was the three trainloads of US Cavalry surplus that convinced the bastard to sell!

VERONICA

Randolph!

LETTITIA

Well, shall we? Curtis, dear, will you please fetch Miss LaFontaine's ring from the safe?

A young store-clerk looks up, it is Curtis in Victorian garb. Modern Curtis is astonished. Victorian Curtis walks toward the store-room - modern Curtis ducks into the shadows.

Victorian Curtis re-enters with a jewelry box. He hands it to Lettitia, who opens it with a flourish. It is the ring from the opening scene. As Veronica fans herself the doorbell rings and two heavy-set "ladies" (actually, males - ELIJAH and EZEKIEL) in Victorian garb enter. Their faces are obscured by large bonnets and scarves.

RANDOLPH

(Still looking at ring)

Well, I say!

VERONICA

Oh, Randolph!

Elijah and Ezekiel lean forward and reach into their skirts, from which they pull shotguns that they then brandish. They pull back their bonnets to reveal rough, unshaven men's faces.

ELIJAH

Ladies and gentlemen! Your attention, if you please.

Gasps from the women in the store. Mutterings from the men.

EZEKIEL

You are all good Christians, and we know your souls are troubled by the wealth you are obliged to display, like sinners' marks branded upon your bodies for all to see.

ELIJAH

For these are not gemstones you wear. No! They are millstones!

EZEKIEL

Rejoice, then, for we are here to redeem you, just as we relieve you of these burdens.

ELIJAH

And where others teach you must give until it hurts, we teach you how to give without getting hurt.

VERONICA

(Swooning)

Oh, Randolph!

EZEKIEL

Now, brothers and sisters, you will save your souls by removing your jewelry and placing it together with all cash donations in my associate's collection bag.

ELIJAH

You will then retire to the rear store-room with your arms raised, speechless and joyous in the certain knowledge of your salvation.

EZEKIEL

For you shall now pass more easily into the Kingdom of Heaven - at least as easily as the biblical camel passes through the eye of a needle. Hallelujah!

Elijah moves toward the rear door and opens a large clutch-bag into which customers drop jewelry and money-clips as they pass into the store-room. Curtis hides in the shadows, watching them pass. Back in the shop, Elijah notices Lettitia clumsily hiding the jewel box with the diamond ring from his accomplice.

ELIJAH

Ma'am! What do you have there?

LETTITIA

Why nothing. Nothing at all.

ELIJAH

Then, Ma'am you will not mind showing me you are truly empty-handed.

Lettitia reluctantly brings her hands from behind her back and opens them, revealing the ring in the box.

EZEKIEL

Well, upon my soul!

Ezekiel takes the ring from Lettitia and examines it closely.

EZEKIEL (CONT'D)

This must be the largest, the most lustrous, the most brilliant, most preposterously, fantastically, grotesquely over-proportioned decoy I have ever seen, Ma'am. My compliments, but we are no rustic rubes, and we will not be deceived or detracted from our original, true purpose. Here!

Ezekiel throws ring to Elijah.

EZEKIEL (CONT'D)

(Now addressing Elijah)

Do you you see that, brother? Are we so uncultured that we might be deceived by such a fake?

ELIJAH

We are not! Remember, Ma'am, just as you purvey, so we purloin. Only the finest jewelry, Mrs. Brumblebotham, only the finest! I will, though, take this as an amusing souvenir.

Elijah places the ring into the top of a now very-full bag. Lettitia and the remaining customers are marched into the store-room, muttering protests. As Elijah is closing the door behind them, Ezekiel whoops and fires into the ceiling,

EZEKIEL

Hallelujah!

The shot causes Elijah to jump and a chandelier to drop. As Elijah jumps, the ring pops out of the bag and bounces through the door into the storeroom (unnoticed by either robber among the shattering crystal). The robbers replace the guns in their skirts, close the bag of loot, draw their bonnets back down and exit the store giggling in falsetto tones.

ELIJAH

Was that really necessary?

EZEKIEL

You mean the chandelier? Did I overplay it?

ELIJAH

Well, everything else in this store is gilded, so why not the lily, too? Exeunt!

INT. STORE-ROOM. SEMI-BLACKNESS.

Curtis's hand reaches out in the dark to grab the ring.

RANDOLPH

I say! Who's there?

VERONICA

What is it, Randolph?

RANDOLPH

There! In the corner! Another plugugly, here to slit our throats, no doubt! So that is what they meant about passing into the Kingdom of Heaven! You Sir, show yourself. Who are you?

Curtis hurriedly tosses the ring he has just retrieved into a brand new version of the wooden box he was sorting through in the opening scene. He emerges from the shadows with hands raised. Victorian Curtis squints through the darkness and does a double-take mirroring the look Modern Curtis gave upon seeing him. Randolph takes his walking cane and pulls

it apart, revealing it to be a sword stick, which he points at Curtis.

CURTIS

Wait! No! There's been like a huge misunderstanding! I'm not...

Randolph takes a swipe. Curtis barely has time to duck under the blade.

CURTIS (CONT'D.)

(Standing, arms still raised  
Please! I'm unarmed. Let me...

Randolph lunges, and Curtis is only just able to step aside.

CURTIS (CONT'D.)

Dude! Cut it out!

RANDOLPH

I shall cut you Sir, I shall!

Randolph takes another swipe.

CURTIS

Hey! Knock it off!

There is a metallic clang. Curtis's eyes roll and he crumples. Standing behind his body is Veronica, holding a fire bucket.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN: Back in the darkened store-room. Sound of doorbell ringing. Modern Curtis is lying on the floor. He opens one eye and then the next, groans and rubs the back of his head. As he moves his head he catches sight of the wooden box, reaches in with one hand and retrieves the ring. He examines the ring briefly, groans again and gets up, still rubbing his head as he enters the shop, which is now back to its 1980's appearance.

INT. SHOP. DAY

Modern Lettitia is fussing around the store.

LETTITIA

And what time do you call this to come stumbling in to work, Curtis?

CURTIS

Oh, sorry, Aunt Lettitia, I was just tidying the store-room.

The doorbell rings, and modern Randolph and Veronica reenter the store, again brushing snow from their coats. He is looking sheepish; she is looking determined as she pushes him forward to speak.

RANDOLPH

Ah, Ma'am, it's about that ring you was showing us yesterday - the big sparkler? Seems I was a little hasty, and I got to apologize if I gave offense.

VERONICA

Go on, Randy, go on.

RANDOLPH

My fiancée, I mean we, was wondering if we might see it again? You ain't sold it? (Turning to Curtis) Morning, Curtis! No hard feelings, eh?

Curtis, watching and listening to the exchange, palms the ring behind his back just as the doorbell rings again. A small group troops in, wearing Victorian garb, lead by the top-hatted doorman. Curtis recognizes the group as customers from the previous scene - his face betrays his bemusement.

DOORMAN

Season's Greetings! We are the Middletown Wagner Society, and in a departure from our usual repertoire, we bring you a selection of carols, as thanks for your support over the past year.

The singers launch into a jaunty carol. As the carol comes to an end, TWO LADIES push to the front. They are dressed exactly as Elijah and Eekiel were. The two complete the carol with a piercing, drawn out Wagnerian flourish. Both reach into their skirts. Curtis raises his hands.

CURTIS

Noooooo! Not again!

Cut to each of the main characters in turn, each looking at Curtis, their eyes moving up to the ring in his hand, each with an appropriate facial expression. Cut back to the "robbers" who really are ladies this time, and who are

holding out pamphlets entitled "Middletown Wagner Society -  
Keeping the Cycle Going".

END.