"The Greatest Escape"

by

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FADE IN

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Huge queues stand outside a theater, people dressed in 1940's garb. Posters show images of The Tremendous TARQUINIO (30's) ESCAPE ARTIST, athletic and dressed in an all in one white body suit.

INT. THEATER - NIGHT

We travel through the FOYER and along a SLIM CORRIDOR that holds the dressing rooms. We stop outside a door with a star on it. A HAND raps on the door.

STAGEHAND(OS)
Five minutes Mister Tarquinio

We move through the door and into

TARQUINIO'S DRESSING ROOM

Tarquinio is sitting opposite a mirror that has lights around the border. SCRIVENS (50's), Tarquinio's faithful aide and something of a deformed midget, stands back, almost in the shadows. Tarquinio watches him in the mirror.

TARQUINIO
Cheer up Scrivens. Everything will be fine.

SCRIVENS
It could always go differently this time, sir.

TARQUINIO
Have I ever failed yet?

SCRIVENS
If you had then you would not be here to talk about it, sir.

TARQUINIO
There is always a way out.

Tarquinio stands and faces him.
TARQUINIO
If I do not return then you get to keep it all. You'll be a very rich man.

SCRIVENS
I don't care about the money, sir. I was happy living on pennies.

TARQUINIO
It is not about the money for me either.

SCRIVENS
I know sir, I know.

A rap on the door.

STAGEHAND(OS)
One minute.

TARQUINIO
Thank you. We are ready!

Tarquinio and Scrivens look at each other. Tarquinio puts out his arms and Scrivens accepts the embrace, they hug.

TARQUINIO
It is all about the strings you pull.

Tarquinio winks and they separate. Scrivens wipes a tear from his cheek. Tarquinio guffaws.

TARQUINIO
Come on old friend. The people are waiting!

Tarquinio leads Scrivens out of the dressing room.

INT. STAGE - DAY

The HOST majestically strides up and down the stage in a show of grandeur. A huge red curtain behind him.

HOST
Beautiful ladies... and esteemed gentlemen.

The Host pauses for effect.
HOST
We have brought you ferocious lions...

The sound effect of lions roaring gives the audience slight concern as they turn expecting to see lions jumping out at them. A lady gasps.

HOST
Powerful elephants... men of mystery. And women... of desire.

The men in the audience chuckle, their female partners slapping them playfully.

HOST
Now...

Drum roll.

HOST
We present...

The audience sit mouths open.

HOST
Our Saturday night spectacular. The Tremendous Tarquinio!

The Host walks to the side as the drum roll gets faster, building to a crescendo as the curtain lifts.

Tarquinio stands with his arms raised, absorbing the excited applause as the audience stand. Scrivens hangs back.

TARQUINIO
Thank you. Ladies and Gentlemen of London.

Tarquinio turns to the ROYAL BOX.

TARQUINIO
Your Majesty.

Tarquinio bows low, delighting the QUEEN.

Scrivens helps wheel out a door-shaped block of wood that is stood upright on a metal stand. Two pairs of Metal handcuffs are attached to the top of the wooden block.
Tarquinio nods to Scrivens who produces a scroll that he unrolls and hands to him. Tarquinio takes it and holds it out with two hands.

    TARQUINIO
    I, Tarquinio, do hereby allow my good friend Scrivens to shoot me until I am dead.

The audience gasps. Tarquinio pauses.

    TARQUINIO
    I am of sane mind and in the case of misfortune I ask that my friend Scrivens be totally absolved from any wrong doing.

Tarquinio looks pointedly at the Queen who nods her acquiescence.

Tarquinio takes a deep breath and then hands the scroll to Scrivens who quickly rolls it up and tosses it to the back of the stage.

Tarquinio makes a meal of walking to the wooden block. He stands in front of it and raises his arms upwards.

    TARQUINIO
    For this I will need some help from the audience.

The audience gasps.

    TARQUINIO
    Don't worry. I just want you to handcuff me to the wooden block and you can go back to your seat.

A DRUNK gentleman stands, swaying. His friends try to pull him back down.

    DRUNK
    Right here.

The spotlight lands on him and he smiles awkwardly before rudely climbing past people to get onto the stage.

    TARQUINIO
    Thank you. Please make sure they are nice and tight.
Tarquinio flattens his back to the block while the Drunk saunters over. The Drunk leans in close to Tarquinio's face.

**DRUNK**
Should I do it tight?

Tarquinio moves his face away, offended by the Drunk's breath.

**TARQUINIO**
As tight as you like. Remember though, it is not the cuffs

The Drunk snaps the cuffs on tight, causing Tarquinio to wince.

**TARQUINIO (CONT.)**
that I am escaping from.

The Drunk double checks both cuffs are secure.

**DRUNK**
That it?

**TARQUINIO**
Are you happy that the cuffs are secure?

The Drunk cheekily turns to the audience.

**DRUNK**
Yes, yes I am.

The audience chuckles.

**TARQUINIO**
Then you may return to your seat.
Ladies and gentlemen please, a hand.

The audience applauds. The lights go down, aside form one spotlight kept on Tarquinio.

Dramatic music plays and suddenly another spotlight comes on, centering on Scrivens.

Scrivens is now wearing an executioner's hood and carrying a gun. He walks slowly across the stage.

Unseen hands turn the wooden block so that Tarquinio is facing Scrivens. Scrivens keeps walking until just a few feet away from Tarquinio.
The audience sit on the edge of their seats in muted expectation as Scrivens slowly raises the gun till it is pointing directly at Tarquinio's heart.

**TARQUINIO**

Shoot true my friend.

Tarquinio closes his eyes. Scrivens fires.

The bullet rips through Tarquinio's chest and becomes lodged in the wood behind him.

Tarquinio's eyes open in shock and he stares straight ahead as life leaves him.

The audience members are completely shocked, some scream, one lady passes out.

The Drunk stands.

**DRUNK**

Fraud.

His friends, embarrassed, try to drag him back into his seat. The Drunk escapes them and runs onto THE STAGE.

Scrivens tries to stop him but is pushed roughly away.

The Drunk walks up to Tarquinio's slumped body and slaps him in the face to the shock and horror of the audience.

**EXT. LIMBO**

Tarquinio's, almost transparent body, floats aimlessly in an empty black space, his eyes closed.

Suddenly his eyes open. A skeletal face appears and disappears almost as fast as it arrived.

**TARQUINIO**

Death! It is I, Tarquinio. We have met many times. It is time for us to duel again.

A wind picks up from nowhere and we see other souls floating past.

The Skeletal Face reappears almost nose to nose with Tarquinio and then disappears again.
Tarquinio opens his mouth and emits a strange humming sound that gets louder and louder causing the souls to vibrate.

As everything vibrates we see the appearance of shiny strings hanging from each of the souls. The strings are of varying sizes and hang loose as though snapped. Tarquinio has one too.

Other strings appear, millions of them. These strings are attached to something unseen, sturdy and unmoving like taut piano wires they stretch either side of him further than the eye can see.

Tarquinio turns his body to face back the way he has came, reaches out a hand and feels the taut strings.

The Skeletal Face appears in front of him, hissing in displeasure. Tarquinio ignores it and hums some more, strengthening his view of the strings.

INT. STAGE - DAY

The Drunk sways while staring at the bullet hole in Tarquinio's chest. He reaches a finger forward, meaning to stick it in the wound.

Scrivens rugby tackles the Drunk to the ground but the Drunk is too strong for him and easily pushes him away. The Drunk stands back up.

DRUNK
I just want to check it's a real bullet hole.

The Queen stands, showing her displeasure at the Drunk. She points her finger down at the stage.

EXT. LIMBO

Tarquinio selects a certain string and gives it a little tug.

INT. STAGE

The Drunk reaches a finger forward and suddenly clutches at his chest. The pain subsides and he rubs it, breathing a sigh of relief.
EXT. LIMBO

Tarquinio relaxes the string and then pulls it again, this time much harder.

INT. STAGE

The Drunk clutches at his chest and staggers backwards, falling into a seated position, his face paling.

EXT. LIMBO

Tarquinio tugs hard at the string, over and over again, until finally he feels it give. He begins following it back, pulling hand over hand on the string.

INT. STAGE

The Drunk dies as a couple of the Queen's GUARDS drag him off the stage.

EXT. LIMBO

Tarquinio follows the string, using his arms to pull himself along even faster.

As Tarquinio travels he passes the Drunk who is floating past him, traveling the other way.

The Drunk opens his eyes and sees Tarquinio.

   DRUNK
   You! It's you! What is happening to me?

Tarquinio pulls himself further along the string. Looks back and sees that the drunk is gone.

Other SOULS fly past him, all of them reaching out their arms for help. Some of them try to pull themselves forward but their strings are too short and floppy.

Ahead, Tarquinio sees A LIGHT. The sound of birds singing.
INT. THEATER - DAY

A DOCTOR in a fine suit walks onto the stage and faces the Audience.

DOCTOR
I am the Royal Doctor. If this man is dead then there isn't a better man alive that can say so.

The Doctor allows the Audience to absorb the impact of that statement before moving to Tarquinio.

First the Doctor listens at his chest. Then he pulls out a mirror and places it beneath Tarquinio's nose, timing it on his pocket watch. After approximately a minute the Doctor removes the mirror and once again turns to face the crowd.

DOCTOR
This man is dead.

The Audience is stunned into silence.

A COMMONER, from the back row, stands rudely.

COMMONER
I aint avin this. He's bloody dead. I knew it would be a waste of a penny.

EXT. LIMBO

Tarquinio pulls himself towards the light, so close now that a breeze blows, wafting his hair.

Then, he runs out of string.

Tarquinio looks at the end of the string in his hand and at the final short stretch into the theater. His momentum slowing considerably... he kicks out. Finally he pushes through the ceiling of the INT. THEATER - DAY

Some people are leaving already. None of them can see Tarquinio's soul float back to his body. Nor do they see him tie the string somewhere inside his corpse's gut. Tarquinio's soul melds back into his body.
Suddenly Tarquinio's eyes shoot open and he inhales deeply, loudly.

The Royal Doctor turns in shock at the sound. People that were leaving do likewise.

Scrivens hurries over to Tarquinio and unlocks the cuffs.

    SCRIVENS
    Welcome back, Sir.

Tarquinio takes his place at the head of the stage, bows to the Queen and then accepts the rapturous applause gracefully.

FADE OUT