



## ANECDOTE OF NO PARTICULAR IMPORTANCE

BY DAVID LOWE

I don't know if you saw the film *Cinderella* which came out a few weeks ago. I didn't see it, but not seeing a film I'm writing about helps me stay objective. One of the ugly sisters is played by a young British actress called Holliday Grainger. She's not ugly by any means, but in Hollywood, when beautiful people play ugly people, they call it acting. I once worked with Miss Grainger. She played Lucrezia Borgia in *The Borgias* – not the Canal Plus *Borgia* but Showtime Networks' *The Borgias* with Jeremy Irons in the leading role and some of the most illustrious British stage actors in supporting parts... and strangely enough me. I was chosen on the strength of a French TV film I'd done (*L'Appel du 18 Juin*) in which I played the British foreign minister, Lord Halifax, who was completely bald (I'm not – what an actor!). On seeing an extract from this film, the British casting director of *The Borgias* thought I was French and cast me as the French ambassador. Michel Muller played the French king, which just goes to show what the Americans think of French kings. On my very first day, I was called on set at seven in the morning and had to wait all day to film the last scene of the evening. As the day wore on, I became more and more terrified – you never have absolute proof that you know your lines. The brains of actors about to step on stage are a total blank. Never mind their text, they can't even remember their names.

So there I was, sitting in a hi-tech, luxury trailer, dressed as a 15th-century diplomat. I wore a Mireille Mathieu-type wig that made me look like my mother. The late medieval long jacket looked more like a dress on me, and the tights and garter did nothing to improve the matter. On seeing me, the director (an Oscar winner) turned to the Italian costume designer (also an Oscar winner) and said, "He looks like a woman... give him a sword!". So they gave me a sword. I now looked like my mother with a sword.

The scene we were to film was the coronation of the pope in which I was to exchange a few canny words with a cardinal, an actor who was later to play one of the baddies in the last *Spiderman* film. The

enormous studio in the countryside around Budapest had been transformed into the St Peter's Basilica. I was to be surrounded by the cream of British stage actors, dressed as medieval clerics and anxious to get back to their hotels after a long day, and 200 Hungarian extras with faces like murderers sweltering in the studio because of the Hungarian heatwave. It was to be a long take, which meant that if I fluffed my lines, everybody would have to start again, and the director would shout at me in front of everybody. The cardinals all wore long gowns which dragged along the floor, a problem for those walking behind who tended to step on their trains, causing the abrupt braking of a cardinal. The trick, I was told, was to slide your feet along as if you were ice skating, which explains my peculiarly graceful movement in the scene.

Just before filming began, I had been transferred (by golf cart!) to a place outside the studio, where I was to wait in the shade of a non-medieval parasol, with six cardinals, Lucrezia Borgia and the pope (Jeremy Irons) himself. There was a bit of very theatrical conversation. One of the cardinals was a Russian/French/English actor who, according to Rupert Everett's autobiography, attends the first night of every London stage play. He's impossibly old and knows everybody (except me). He's the sort of man that my dad would have asked why he didn't have a girlfriend. Sir Derek Jacobi was there – I could see his knickers as he tried to fan air up his robes with his script in an attempt to keep himself cool. I'd seen Sir Derek play Hamlet 30 years earlier. At this time he was about to play King Lear in London. In fact if *Hamlet* hadn't died in Hamlet, he would have become King Lear in *King Lear*. The conversation turned to the name of the actress, Holliday. Miss Grainger explained that her parents were jazz fans and that she was named after Billie Holiday – they added an extra "L" to make it look more serious. It was here that one of the great missed moments of my life took place. I thought to myself, "It's a good job she hadn't been born a few decades later, otherwise her parents might have named her Winehouse, after Amy Winehouse."

This would have made the elite of stage and cinema laugh and I would have been accepted into this admirable company. As it was, I kept my mouth shut. Too much awe. Awe-full. I got my lines right, by the way. It was the future *Spiderman* actor that made a mistake during a take... and he got shouted at... and he got the part in *Spiderman*.