

Dig

by Michael Olsen

Characters: DOUGLAS KING—M, mid 60s, an experienced actor
 DIG—M, mid to late 20's, Douglas King's personal demon

Lights come up on a dingy dressing room which looks like it's in a basement. We are backstage at a production of King Lear.

Upstage and to one side is a mobile costume rack stuffed full of costumes that fall all the way to the floor.

Centrestage there is a table and chair. On the table is a make-up case, a vase of fresh flowers, a framed photograph, and a program for the show.

Sitting at the table is 65 year-old DOUGLAS KING. He is preparing not just for his last performance as Lear, but his last performance ever. He has makeup on, and is dressed in Lear's costume. A large cloak hangs atop the mobile costume rack.

Douglas performs a vocal exercise, clicking his tongue and chirruping like a bird. He repeats this a couple of times. Then he stands, stretching first one side of his body and then the other: he doesn't seem to achieve what the textbooks prescribe, but he clearly doesn't care. Finally, he does some deep breathing exercises, breathing in and holding his breath, but he winds up coughing, and a pain starts in his chest.

He taps out two tablets from a bottle but doesn't take them. Instead, he drinks the last of the water in his water bottle. He slowly starts to feel better.

DOUGLAS: "I will be jovial: come, come; I am the king; / Masters, know you this?"

He repeats the line a couple of times, as if psyching himself up.

DIG: (off) "I will be jovial: come, come; I am a king; / Masters, know you that?"

DIG steps out through the costume rack. He is dressed in Renaissance-era tights and top.

DOUGLAS: Shit.

Dig takes a huge ceremonial bow.

DIG: No need to be like that, Douglas. You'll be fine now that I've told you the right words. Mind you you've been forgetting bits and pieces, lately, haven't you? Remember that long speech of Shylock's last year? "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" You jumped around that one like a rabbit on a hot plate.

DOUGLAS: Piss off.

DIG: Do you like my outfit this time? I thought I'd try and blend in.

DOUGLAS: Bloody hell.

- DIG:** Come come you are the king!
- In answer, Douglas throws himself at Dig and strangles him. It takes a couple of minutes. Dig struggles, writhes, tries to free himself, but Douglas's grip is maniacal and nothing could loosen it. Finally Dig sags, apparently lifeless.*
- DOUGLAS:** Didn't see that coming did you?
- Quickly Douglas drags Dig behind the costume rack. There is a feeling of relief as Douglas re-emerges. He feels his chest again: everything's OK.*
- DOUGLAS:** "Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish."
- Douglas returns to the table.*
- DIG:** (off) Forgive? Forgive?! You've never forgiven anyone anything.
- Dig emerges from behind the costume rack, dusting himself off.*
- DOUGLAS:** Why the hell are you here?
- DIG:** You know why.
- DOUGLAS:** No I don't know why! I wouldn't be asking if I knew why! I don't know how your mind works.
- DIG:** Huh.
- DOUGLAS:** Why tonight of all nights?
- DIG:** You know why.
- Pause*
- DOUGLAS:** This is my last performance.
- DIG:** (shaking his head) After all this time you still think you can lie to me.
- DOUGLAS:** I'm not lying! I am retiring from the stage tonight.
- DIG:** You said that about *The Iceman Cometh*. The last tour, you said. Where did we wind up again?
- DOUGLAS:** You know where.
- DIG:** It was freezing down there. Why can't we live in Queensland? You seriously considered it once.
- DOUGLAS:** For a moment!
- DIG:** Isn't there something rather wilful about the idea of doing Eugene O'Neill in the tropics? God knows your reception down here was—
- DOUGLAS:** I gave it everything I had that night.
- DIG:** Yes yes and what did they say?
- DOUGLAS:** I can't remember.

- DIG:** (*pulling out a notebook*) "Lacking the necessary conviction to play the part, Douglas King tried admirably to demonstrate an understanding of the role but it was beyond him. There was no sense of risk in this performance."
- DOUGLAS:** (*covering his ears*) I'm not listening! I'm not listening!
Douglas snatches at the notebook but Dig gracefully eludes him.
- DIG:** (*reading*) "A valiant attempt, nevertheless."
- DOUGLAS:** Wanker.
- DIG:** Well, the old fella was in his 70s, wasn't he? That's right: the town accountant.
- DOUGLAS:** You think I'm a bad actor.
- DIG:** I don't think you're a bad actor at all.
- DOUGLAS:** Really?
- DIG:** I think you're the worst kind of actor.
- DOUGLAS:** And what kind is that?
- DIG:** A selfish one.
Douglas bristles.
- DOUGLAS:** Well I certainly don't suffer fools gladly, if that's what you mean.
- DIG:** Then theatre's not for you, is it? Oops, sorry, you've already spent 40 years of your life in it, haven't you?
- DOUGLAS:** Then so have you—but I've been the one out there under the footlights, taking the risks.
- DIG:** You make it sound like a matter of life and death. I mean, really, no-one will die if you fluff a line.
- DOUGLAS:** I have rarely "fluffed a line," and when I have—
- DIG:** What about Barbara Pearson?
- DOUGLAS:** Who?
- DIG:** 1979? *The Crucible*? The beginning of Act Two, so simple and quiet—and as she was talking to you, and handed you a bowl, she froze, and nothing came out of her mouth! She stared at you, terrified, pleading, and you did nothing.
- DOUGLAS:** She never did it again.
- DIG:** She never spoke to you again. The look in your eyes! The silent contempt you hurled at her!
- DOUGLAS:** No great loss.
- DIG:** This is the problem: you don't want to be an actor—you want to be a star.
- DOUGLAS:** What?

- DIG:** You didn't give a shit about Barbara. You were just worried about her stuffing you up and making *you* look bad. You can't play monologues all your life.
- DOUGLAS:** If you're trying to make me stop you're doing a lousy job.
- DIG:** You didn't want to do Lear when it was first offered to you.
- DOUGLAS:** I was playing hard to get. How else could I get my own dressing room?
- DIG:** It looks like someone's garage.
- DOUGLAS:** Well it's all mine.
- DIG:** I know why you knocked the role back initially. You were scared—so scared you didn't even count the number of lines. How many are there? 500? 600?
- DOUGLAS:** I don't know. I didn't count them.
- DIG:** 697.
- DOUGLAS:** Really.
- DIG:** You've had more.
- DOUGLAS:** This is Lear, for godsake. The pinnacle.
- DIG:** It's beyond you. There's no way there's been enough in your life to bring to this role.
- DOUGLAS:** It's beyond every actor then.
- DIG:** So why attempt to do something you know you can never truly achieve?
- DOUGLAS:** Why live when you know you're going to die? It's about the challenge. It's the struggle. Something you've never had to do.
- Dig smiles.*
- DOUGLAS:** What are you so happy about?
- DIG:** I can see possibilities.
- DOUGLAS:** I'm only human. It's inevitable I'll fail.
- DIG:** You don't believe that, just as you don't really believe this will be your last ever performance.
- DOUGLAS:** No, this is my swansong. This is it. Finito.
- DIG:** You only lie well on stage.
- DOUGLAS:** I told you, this is it. The end.
- DIG:** And what will you do instead? You don't know any other life. You have no skills. You have no desire to do anything other than go on that stage
- DOUGLAS:** I have skills.

- DIG:** Like what? Watching infomercials at 2 in the morning when the mogadons don't work?
- DOUGLAS:** I do not need career advice from the likes of you.
- DIG:** You should have retired years ago, but now the decision's been forced upon you, hasn't it? That wonderful body of yours? Feeling more twinges in your fingers? It hurts when you have to carry little Cordelia in, doesn't it?
- DOUGLAS:** I've had worse.
Dig studies Douglas intently.
- DIG:** You want to die for your art, make some grand statement as you shuffle off the mortal coil. Most people make no grand statements at all. They just go, like that (*snapping his fingers*) and that's it.
- DOUGLAS:** Well. I'm not most people and neither is Lear.
- DIG:** You've really identified with this role, haven't you?
- DOUGLAS:** What are you talking about?
- DIG:** You know what I'm talking about.
- DOUGLAS:** No I don't. You'll have to enlighten me. Isn't that one of the reasons you're here—to show me the error of my ways?
- DIG:** The great tragedy of Lear isn't that he loses Cordelia, but that he fails to see how like Goneril and Regan he is.
- DOUGLAS:** I don't have any other daughters.
- DIG:** Have you forgotten the twins? You haven't seen them for fifteen years.
- DOUGLAS:** Snivelly little brats.
- DIG:** They're 32 years old now.
- DOUGLAS:** As bad as their mother. They were born bad.
- DIG:** That's a terrible thing to say.
- DOUGLAS:** I often wondered if they were mine.
- DIG:** Of course they're yours.
- DOUGLAS:** Delia is mine.
- DIG:** So why did you disown her too?
- DOUGLAS:** I didn't. It was Daniel. He pushed me out. Poisoned her against me. That's why they moved to the country.
- DIG:** And that's why you started touring. To run away.
- DOUGLAS:** I've never run away from anything in my life!
- DIG:** You do it all the time.
- DOUGLAS:** That is bullshit.

DIG: Especially now. The funny thing is, you're just like Lear: you've given everything away and you can't see it.

DOUGLAS: That's deep.

DIG: What about Joanne Thompson?

DOUGLAS: Joannie Thompson?

DIG: Joanne Thompson. Don't you remember?

DOUGLAS: Who is she?

DIG: The girl you should have married. (*Douglas frowns.*) You know it's true.

DOUGLAS: I knew her for one day—in Venice—35 years ago!

DIG: You had the most wonderful time with her. It was like—it was like your souls connected.

DOUGLAS: Oh please.

DIG: I was there! We both felt it. It was so real.

DOUGLAS: She was OK.

DIG: You were scared.

DOUGLAS: Of what?

DIG: Scared of how you felt. It might actually mean taking responsibility.

DOUGLAS: It was a holiday fling. Nothing more. She knew that.

DIG: Did she? You abandoned her in St Marks Square.

DOUGLAS: I did not abandon her. I just couldn't make it, that's all.

DIG: You met that other one. What was her name? Suzy?

DOUGLAS: Suzy Carpenter. Now she was *very* nice.

DIG: She was an excuse.

DOUGLAS: For what?

DIG: For not growing up.

DOUGLAS: What?

DIG: Joanne was the road you should have taken.

DOUGLAS: Oh please. You can't go down every road in life.

DIG: No, but the trick is to go down the right one.

DOUGLAS: That was the right one? Joanne Thompson?

DIG: Yes. (*Pause*) She's dying now, you know.

DOUGLAS: What?!

- DIG:** She has breast cancer and it's killing her.
- DOUGLAS:** This is really low. This is just—you don't know any more than I do. You don't know where she is, what she's doing, even if she's alive at all. She could very well be happily married with three children.
- DIG:** You might have been that husband. You might have been that father. Of boys, I think.
- DOUGLAS:** No. I will not look back. I will not wallow in regret.
- DIG:** Ah, so you do regret it.
- DOUGLAS:** If I went with Joanne I wouldn't have what I have now.
- DIG:** And what's that? A pokey one-bedroom apartment, many acquaintances, but not many friends, and a woman who barely sees you twice a week, the wonderful Renée.
- DOUGLAS:** It's more convenient for her to stay in the city during the week.
- DIG:** That's not the real reason and you know it!
- DOUGLAS:** (*vicious*) Well, why don't you enlighten me again.
- DIG:** She's going cold on you.
- DOUGLAS:** (*chortling*) And just what makes you think that?
- DIG:** You saw her!
- DOUGLAS:** What do you mean I saw her? When? Where?
- DIG:** In the city last week! I wasn't the only one there.
- DOUGLAS:** What are you talking about? I often go to the city. Just *when* exactly are we talking about?
- DIG:** She was having a very schmoozy tête-à-tête with that guy from her office. Dennis? We both saw her. Don't you remember?
- DOUGLAS:** She was having coffee with him, that's all.
- DIG:** You just about knocked his block off. If it hadn't been for Renée getting in between you two and calming you down—well, you could possibly be facing an assault charge by now.
- DOUGLAS:** I had a thirty second chat with the man. You're making a mountain out of a molehill.
- DIG:** I don't think Renée will see it like that. In fact, I doubt she'll be around next week.
- Douglas once again launches himself at Dig, only this time Dig is ready. As Douglas tries to strangle him, Dig manages to hold him back. There is a brief struggle, the two locked in a tussle neither can win. Finally Douglas pushes Dig away, collects himself and returns to his preparations.*
- DOUGLAS:** I will be jovial: come, come; I am the king! A king, a king, a king!

- DIG:** I think it's sad, really. So sad. Most people have something to show for their lives, but you—you have a box full of theatre posters and programs signed by people whose faces you've forgotten.
- DOUGLAS:** I've got everyone's signature this time (*tapping the program*)
- DIG:** (*picking it up*) It's a wonder some of them didn't spit on it—including your “daughters.”
- DOUGLAS:** What are you talking about?
- Dig flicks through the program.*
- DIG:** They all hate you. The whole cast. Can't stand you. The fernickety attention to detail in rehearsal, dig dig dig, pick pick pick, never ending, as if one step too far really mattered.
- DOUGLAS:** Well it does!
- DIG:** The worst of it is, I can tell you like your little Cordelia.
- DOUGLAS:** What?
- DIG:** I feel that stirring down there whenever you see her.
- DOUGLAS:** You are perverse.
- DIG:** You're old enough to be her grandfather!
- DOUGLAS:** For Chrissake just drop it!
- Douglas advances menacingly on Dig again.*
- DIG:** OK OK.
- DOUGLAS:** You never know when to stop, do you?
- DIG:** I'm just pointing out things you already know but don't admit. I mean, *Lear* is hardly the wonderful swansong production you wanted.
- DOUGLAS:** The show is fine.
- DIG:** What about your Edmund? They had to recast him a couple of times, didn't they? You think Justin is an idiot who couldn't direct traffic. You're always correcting him. I'd be careful walking home tonight.
- DOUGLAS:** Why?
- DIG:** Well the show will be over and Justin would finally be free to kill you. I'd say every bullet he's got has your name on it.
- DOUGLAS:** The only thing that matters is what happens out there. A bit like life, really: 99% of it's rehearsal, the 1% that matters you just have to say the right line at the right time and you're through.
- DIG:** So at the end of tonight you'll go home and curl up in bed with your little program alone and happy.
- DOUGLAS:** Yes.

DIG: No regrets.

DOUGLAS: No.

DIG: Not even January 7, 1959?

DOUGLAS: When? January what?

DIG: January 7, 1959. Mary O'Reilly.

DOUGLAS: I haven't thought about her for years.

DIG: She's in a wheelchair. She can never have children.

DOUGLAS: That was 40 years ago.

DIG: You were driving the car!

DOUGLAS: I was young and inex—

DIG: You were drunk!

DOUGLAS: I had my licence a week!

DIG: You were pissed!

DOUGLAS: I only had —

DIG: Ten, Douglas. Ten!

Pause

DOUGLAS: Well, s*h*i*t happens.

DIG: With talk like that I wonder if you are mad.

DOUGLAS: Your being here is the best evidence of that.

DIG: I'm the thing that keeps you sane.

DOUGLAS: Oh really? Is that what you call it? You've popped up at the most inopportune times.

DIG: When?

DOUGLAS: Right before my first marriage.

DIG: I told you she was going to be nothing but trouble.

DOUGLAS: Right before the twins were born.

DIG: You were in the pub! No wonder they felt rejected.

DOUGLAS: Right before I went on in *Hamlet*.

DIG: You got the worst review of your life. I tried to tell you you weren't ready.

DOUGLAS: You put me off!

DIG: Not for the whole season!

DOUGLAS: You keep doing this, time and time again. I'm sick of it.

- DIG:** How do you think I feel? I want to be happy and you think going out there is what it's all about but it's not. That's the big problem as I see it.
- DOUGLAS:** What's that?
- DIG:** The difference between us.
- DOUGLAS:** Which is?
- DIG:** You can take responsibility for things. I can't.
- DOUGLAS:** Is that what this is all about?
- DIG:** You've never taken responsibility for anything in your life.
- DOUGLAS:** And you're here to remind me. OK, tell me. Tell me and then piss off.
- DIG:** There's only one thing, really.
- DOUGLAS:** And what's that?
- DIG:** Delia.
- DOUGLAS:** Delia?
- Dig picks up the framed photo and studies it intently.*
- DIG:** Lucky she takes after her mother in the looks department. She's just like you—only completely different.
- DOUGLAS:** What the hell does that mean?
- DIG:** Well she's selfish—like you—but she includes others, like Daniel and Thomas.
- DOUGLAS:** She's—she's got responsibilities.
- DIG:** That's a classic coming from you.
- DOUGLAS:** I did my bit.
- DIG:** You were never there, even less after the divorce. You were there when it suited you, not her.
- DOUGLAS:** You can't be there all the time.
- DIG:** What about the important stuff? The occasions, like graduation, Thomas' birth—the stuff that mattered to her?
- DOUGLAS:** I did my best. She knew that.
- DIG:** Did she?
- DOUGLAS:** She's out there tonight.
- DIG:** Really?
- Douglas sniffs the flowers.*
- DOUGLAS:** She bought me these.
- Dig sighs a huge sigh, shaking his head.*