

MAG – 116 – The Show Must Go On

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode One Hundred And Sixteen
The Show Must Go On

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

(Click)

ELIAS

Thank you all for coming.

(Begrudging noises)

ARCHIVIST

Well, you said it was important.

ELIAS

Will Melanie not be joining us?

BASIRA

No. She won't.

ELIAS

Very well. I suppose that's understandable.

ARCHIVIST

What do you want?

ELIAS

To help. You have your recorder running?

DAISY

Course he does.

ARCHIVIST

I... Yes.

ELIAS

Well, then I'll speak clearly. You will soon be attempting to stop something few have ever witnessed, and fewer still have survived.

ARCHIVIST

Not alone.

BASIRA

We're, um, I think we're all going.

ELIAS

Yes. And I believe your plan, simplistic as it may be, does have a reasonable chance of working.

ARCHIVIST

Well thank you.

MARTIN

Sorry, sorry, did we— I thought we'd actually only got as far as, ah, well, we, we sneak in, plant bombs when they're distracted and then—

ARCHIVIST

Detonate them when the ritual starts and they're vulnerable.

BASIRA

I mean, I've got some plans of the museum and the area around it, but yeah, that's... that's it.

DAISY

Should work. Doesn't need to be fancy.

ELIAS

Well, quite. But given there is every likelihood that some or all of you might end up confronting The Stranger in a rather direct manner, I thought it best you have an idea of what you might encounter.

MARTIN

Oh.

ELIAS

During the... 'difficulties' with your initial absence, John, I took Gertrude's tapes into my safe-keeping.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I thought about as much.

ELIAS

There is one, I feel, it may be a wise for you to hear. All of you. If I may?

(Cautious, mumbled assent)

(Click)

(Click)

GERTRUDE

Case 7870211 – Abraham Janssen. Incident occurred in the Court Theatre, Buda, October 1787. Statement taken from journal entry dated 2nd November of that year. Committed to tape 4th October 2013. Gertrude Robinson recording.

GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

Some months have passed now since the sights and sounds that excited in me that unknown and hideous mania, yet still my hand shakes in the writing of it, such that I can scarce understand myself the marks I leave upon the page. I would hold myself the most ill-used of men, were I not certain of others who left that theatre with wounds far graver than a tremor. I curse the name of Wolfgang von Kempelen and all his vile machinery, and there is no greater hope within me than that I should never again be required to lay eyes upon the Mechanical Turk.

I have always refrained from writing of it, but some years ago, at its creation, Kempelen prevailed upon me to play the Turk myself. I agreed, considering it a grand old joke and a worthy use of my aptitude for chess. And some aptitude I had indeed: in my youth I even played a match against Philidor himself in Old Slaughter's coffee shop, though he thrashed me soundly. Most who would dismiss the Turk as a simple ruse or deception would posit that only a child could have crawled inside the base of it, but at almost half a century I was quite delighted to work my way between the gears and play the venerable puppet master to Wolfgang's infamous chess-playing automaton.

Most who would discover that a human mind directed the Turk found that fact cause enough to dismiss the marvel of the thing, but to do so would have been a grave disservice to Kempelen's singular skill. For though I may have chosen the movements and played the game that unfolded above my head, the motions of the machine were the result of an ingenious array of gears and mechanisms that I could never hope to understand. It was an astounding feat of engineering, even if the mind behind it could not be replicated by clockwork and springs. At least, not when it was first constructed.

I must not, however, allow my regard for Wolfgang's intellect to distort the most appalling horror that his creations precipitated upon that stage, nor to hide his complicity and guilt in what occurred. He was a strange man. For as long as I knew him his manner caused me disquiet, and I attribute the continuation of our acquaintance in no small part to our difference in language. We had some commonality in French, but I often felt there to be much nuance in his words that was simply not conveyed between two men,

neither of whom were speaking his mother tongue. Indeed, on some few occasions when I observed him conversing in Hungarian or German, the expressions I observed upon the faces of his interlocutors were invariably those of discomfort or alarm. Wolfgang von Kempelen had within him some strange dream, I think, some secret ambition that might be glimpsed when his eye fell upon his automata, but it always eluded me.

Our initial meeting was civil, even pleasant. He had by then completed his construction of the Turk, and had requested several of his compatriots to seek out those who might have some small skill at the game of chess. I was at the time travelling in Austria, and introductions were made by a mutual acquaintance by the name of Langthorne. Wolfgang explained to me the concept, that I would be secreted within the base of the machine and direct the figure on how to play the game taking place upon the table. I agreed almost immediately. Perhaps I would have had more reservations had I known the unveiling would take place before the Empress Maria Theresa. Or if, when I agreed, I had actually laid my eyes upon the Mechanical Turk.

What description of it should I give? Should I speak of its costume, the rich Ottoman colours lined with fine fur? Or the dreadful stillness of its dark, shining face? The unmoving, painted eyes that met mine and could not see me recoil? The torso simply ended as it disappeared below the table, and when I held my nerve enough to climb into the tiny chamber below it, some small part of my soul cried out that I was devoured within the belly of the cruel device.

Despite this, our exhibition to the Empress was a triumph, and I retreated from it both elated and utterly unsuspected. Indeed, such was the breadth of my

success, it carried me through another year travelling with Wolfgang and operating the Turk. I will not pretend that there was no joy to be had in my position, both displaying the marvellous engineering and using my own prowess at the game of chess to fool great crowds of onlookers. Yet even then nothing could fully quiet that odd anxiety I felt when I looked upon the Turk, nor the strange and intricate dreams I had of it.

But eventually my business in London required my return, and Wolfgang had other projects to which he wished to devote his attentions, most notably a grotesque “speaking machine” that he insisted would someday be capable of mastering human speech. I saw many of his designs: the bellows that aped the work of lungs, the wooden box of valves and pipes, and that most grotesque ‘mouth’ he had constructed of some awful undulating substance he claimed was derived from an Indian tree. To dissuade him from his conviction that it would someday be capable of rendering intelligible speech was impossible, but hearing the mournful wail that came from the spasmodic thing he called a mouth, I fervently prayed I would never have to be there when it did so. A prayer that went unanswered.

Wolfgang von Kempelen and his automata were far from my mind when I received the invitation from him, some fifteen or sixteen years having passed since we had any cause to foregather. I was once again in Austria, through coincidence, and received his letter in the dying days of summer, imploring me to attend a “grand performance” at the newly completed Court Theatre of Buda, many miles east in Budapest. It was not an insignificant journey from Vienna, but Wolfgang’s letter pleaded that I be there. I was, so it would have me believe, indispensable in my attendance as “the oldest friend of the Turk”.

This line, I will confess, filled me with an apprehension that bordered almost on bone-deep fear, though at the time I had no cause to heed such a feeling. My reason told me there was nothing to this but an oddly insistent invitation from an old friend, and I resolved to attend, if only to conquer the unaccountable terror that had taken residence within my heart. A terror I now know I should have heeded in every respect.

I shall waste no time detailing my journey to Budapest, nor my numerous failures to locate Wolfgang once I arrived. I did make some small enquiries about the Court Theatre, and learned something of its history, namely that it had formerly been a Carmelite monastery, until Joseph II had had it dissolved three years prior and commissioned Kempelen to convert it into the city's first theatre. The cells had now been taken for the actors' dressing and the crypt remade into a trap room beneath the stage, which had itself been placed where the high altar of the chapel once stood. Perhaps this should have stirred some further apprehension within me, but the changing fortunes of eastern churches seemed so far away from Wolfgang and his strange machines that I paid it hardly any mind.

The date came at last, and it was with no small trepidation that I made my way to the Court Theatre of Buda. No tickets had been issued to me, nor had I seen any way in which they might have been acquired, but upon my approach, I noted several other figures, finely garbed, making their way towards the theatre with expressions that mirrored my own. The doors of the theatre were open and standing either side of each entrance were things that on first appraisal appeared to be men. As I approached however, I recognised the stiff motions and lifeless faces I had marked so sharply on the Turk. Dressed as

gaudy footmen, automata silently gestured us inside with unnatural, jerky motions of their arms and heads, so violent that I would have thought it no surprise had they been hurled from their sockets.

More were within, and I was struck by the absence of any flesh and blood ushers. Everywhere I turned there seemed to be more ticking, whirring figures of clockwork, wood and metal. Seeking some reassurance, I tried to make some comment to another guest beside me, but found a cruel brass hand, awful in its strength, gripping me by the shoulder and leading me away. I was walked to a balcony where I was, I supposed, to be seated. Fearful and confused, I acquiesced to the silent instructions of, what I had begun to consider, my captors. Even when other equally alarmed spectators were seated beside me, I refrained from addressing them, feeling as I did the unchanging faces of those mechanical beings staring down at me.

Before each seat there stood a small metal cage, within which hung a minute mechanical bird, as might be used to delight children. But the angles of the creatures had been worked to a razor's sharpness, and there was something in the metal orbs that stood for eyes that I could not bring myself to look at. The theatre fell silent, every seat filled with quiet watchers curious as to what might be about to take place, but dreading the answer we were to receive.

Then all eyes fell upon a figure in the centre of the stage, and I immediately recognised the Mechanical Turk sat at its false table. Its head raised itself slowly, shuddering from side to side, and looked out over the assembled crowd. Its coat was not as I had seen it, the fine fur now gone, and in its stead something hairy, coarse and brown that hung loosely about its shoulders.

There was a single nod and a crack like brittle steel, and every false bird began to sing. It was not the gentle chimes of a hidden music box, rather the horrendous piping wail of creatures in pain, at such a pitch and volume that it seemed no two birds could be anything but discordant. Had I dared raise an arm I would have covered my ears, but I am certain that would have been no protection.

As the sound echoed through my skull, I saw the Turk lift something inch by inch over its head. A long, curved sword was gripped in its rigid fingers, the point aimed squarely at the chessboard in the table before it. The arm rose as the chirping intensified to a scream. Then came a single, swift downward motion of such force that it pierced right through the wood and buried the blade deep into the space beneath. The birds ceased their infernal chorus for a long moment, as blood began to flow gently out from beneath the base, pooling under that device that had haunted my dreams for fifteen years, then they began again, louder and more furious than before.

At this, the machine moved once more, faster now, and with a shaking and shuddering that did nothing to slow its motion. It placed something upon the table. I saw bellows, a wooden box, and a soft and hideous throat that seemed to twist and pucker on its own. Then the Mechanical Turk did something that I do not believe will ever fully leave my thoughts no matter how fervently I might wish it.

It stood up.

It had no legs and made no secret of it, yet still it stood, stepping away from the table that was its very being, and it began to dance. As it did so, the bellows left upon the bleeding table started to pump, and I heard again that mournful wail of Wolfgang's "speech machine" as the end of it flailed and bulged until at last it shrieked its words to the audience. I do not know what it said, and I thank almighty God that I speak no Hungarian.

There was then a moment of absolute nothing, wherein I swear that none of us existed within the world. When I returned to being, the mouth upon the altar was speaking English, but I no longer understood it, and I cried to the jailer in a language all my own to let me out of my chair, but the chair was nothing but a stone and his face was too much of skin not to scream. The wooden man in the seat next to me tried to seize my hand but I no longer possessed any, so I curled my legs into a fist and struck it again and again until my eyes were full of sweet sherry, and the part of me that sang no hymns bit down and choked upon the soft wood. I staggered, falling up onto the door and opening it to a screaming clockwork heart that begged me to stop as I unscrewed it from its moorings and set it adrift upon the sky that dropped away before me. Nothing was anything, and nobody was what they did not pretend to be. I desperately wished to cry, but no longer had any understanding of what a tear was.

And then there came a noise I did know. Into the nothing that was everything came a thing that was most clearly a battle-cry, though I did not understand the words of it, only the sense. I looked away to see inside a man who was a soldier. I was sure he was a soldier and he was nothing but a soldier. His blades were blades and forged for killing, and his mouth was a mouth and was made to order death. Beside him were four who were also soldiers, though their

weeping eyes were empty sockets, and the captain led them by rope around their necks. They dragged a thing that wasn't a thing, but instead a mouth upon a tree that hated the Turk and all it brought upon the world. The soldier carved and cursed its way through a horde of vicious clockwork flesh-men with faces that cannot not have been my father and shouted a command to the sightless followers that even I understood to be an order of attack. They took the burning sun from their pockets and placed it upon the tree, and the mouth spat a curse so heavy it flew towards the altar and struck the Turk square in the chest.

And in that moment, everything was real once again. The sightless men and the unknown soldier in his bloodied uniform turned and dragged the cannon from the theatre, paying no mind to the carnage that surrounded them on every side, the limp and unmoving bodies of automata and patron alike, nor the destruction they had wrought upon the stage. The cries and pleading of the wounded and dying rose up like an awful chorus where before the air had been filled with the piping of metal birds. And God may damn me for a coward, but I ran.

GERTRUDE

Final comments.

The Stranger and its ritual have proved remarkably hardy in many ways, resistant to most of the standard interferences and flexible in such a way that, while the Unknowing is relatively easy to delay, full disruption seems borderline impossible. And yet here we see what I assume to be an avatar of

The Slaughter end an almost fully realised ritual with, if not ease, then at the very least a direct simplicity.

Perhaps... that's it? Could it be that the closer The Stranger comes to emerging, the more damaging a physical disruption to its focus becomes? More research is needed, but if that's true, then the task becomes at once less complicated and significantly harder. Disrupting the others has been successful largely because I was able to do so before they had reached any form of culmination, and from the description of Abraham Jannsen, I would not be confident enough in my senses to attempt something similar once the Unknowing has become in earnest. It could probably stand as a solid plan B, at the very least, and I might make inquiries about getting my hands on some... 'appropriate ordnance'.

This also confirms that they're still using that ancient skin as a focus item. If it wasn't destroyed by cannon fire, I imagine it will take some effort on my part to do so. But I am now sure I know where they're keeping it, and if I am able to take care of it, that may buy me a reasonable amount of time to research alternate methods. All I can say for sure is that when the Unknowing begins, I certainly don't want to be inside it.

(Click)

(Click)

ARCHIVIST

Right.

DAISY

That's it, then?

ELIAS

It's unlikely to be identical. The Stranger is not known for its consistency.

BASIRA

But something like that? We can't trust what we see?

ELIAS

The familiar may seem strange, the strange, familiar.

ARCHIVIST

One long category error.

MARTIN

Isn't, but isn't... I thought that's what The Stranger wants? For us to doubt everything?

ELIAS

No-one said it would be easy.

ARCHIVIST

Brilliant.

ELIAS

I have been doing my best to prepare you, John, to See. You should hopefully have it a bit easier than the others.

ARCHIVIST

Another of my... powers?

ELIAS

More... an aspect of your becoming.

DAISY

You don't say.

ARCHIVIST

Uh... Right?

ELIAS

Regardless, it should, I hope, give you an edge. Otherwise I would never suggest you go yourself.

(Archivist sighs)

ARCHIVIST

What about Martin?

MARTIN

What about me?

ARCHIVIST

He should stay behind.

MARTIN

What?

ELIAS

Really?

MARTIN

Why?

ARCHIVIST

Too many people might attract attention.

MARTIN

No, no, I can help; I've been reading the statements.

ELIAS

Quite right... Probably best he does stay behind.

BASIRA

What, so you have a back-up if John doesn't make it?

ELIAS

I'm sure that won't be necessary.

MARTIN

What? No!

ARCHIVIST

Martin, just... You can do more good here.

MARTIN

What, sat around drinking tea until the world ends? Or, you know, it doesn't.

BASIRA

We hope.

ARCHIVIST

Melanie's not coming either. I think... I think she'll need you here.

MARTIN

Fine.

ELIAS

Glad that's sorted. Now, unless there's anything else?

ARCHIVIST

Not if, uh... No.

ELIAS

Excellent. Well, it's a three hour trip up to Great Yarmouth. I had Rosie book you all into a bed and breakfast near the museum.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

ELIAS

Oh and, John, technically I can't stop you, but I would heavily advise against bringing any... rogue elements.

MARTIN

You can just say Tim.

ARCHIVIST

I will take it under advisement.

ELIAS

Hmm. Anyway, don't worry about staying in contact; I'll know when it starts.

ARCHIVIST

Naturally.

ELIAS

That reminds me, make sure you keep any receipts for expenses. Assuming you wish to claim them back.

ARCHIVIST

And assuming we don't... you know, die.

ELIAS

Yes. If you die, I'm afraid you probably won't be able to claim your expenses.

Now, if you'll excuse me.

(Elias leaves, closes door behind him)

(Everyone exhales)

BASIRA

Do you think he bought it?

MARTIN

(Urgently) We'll talk about it later.

ARCHIVIST

I doubt there'll be time; we need to go.

MARTIN

It's fine. We've got this. Ok?

ARCHIVIST

(Reluctant) Okay.

DAISY

Come on.

BASIRA

Yeah... Sure.

(Click)

(Click)

TIM

So?

ARCHIVIST

He doesn't want you there.

TIM

And you?

ARCHIVIST

I... would rather have you where I can see you.

TIM

Good.

ARCHIVIST

You listen to the tape?

TIM

Yup, sounds like fun.

ARCHIVIST

Do I need to be worried about you?

TIM

You reading my mind again, boss?

ARCHIVIST

I'm watching your face. Do you— Are you going to keep it together?

TIM

Look, if you're worried I'm going to go all Redrum and start hacking at random waxworks, don't be. I'm not going to give us away. I want this to work.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you.

TIM

But I don't think it will. So, I'm going to take that axe of yours and, when it all goes wrong, I'm going down swinging. And when I do, you'd better take the chance and stay out of my way.

ARCHIVIST

(Sighing) Okay, just... Okay.

(Click)

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.

It featured: Jonathan Sims as the Archivist, Sue Sims as Gertrude Robinson, Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood, Ben Meredith as Elias Bouchard, Mike LeBeau as Tim Stoker, Frank Voss as Basira Hussain and Fay Roberts as Alice 'Daisy' Tonner.