



CANAL TALES

a play for 9-10 year olds



CANAL TALES

This play is based on real events in the history of the Regent's Canal. It was written for the Young Actors' Theatre Islington's (YATI) Islington Canal Project with support from the National Lottery's Heritage Fund. The play was performed by students from the Blessed Sacrament School at the Angel Canal Festival, the Cally Fest, in YATI, on a boat in Granary Square, and within the school.

The play is free for use in other schools. It is suitable for children aged 9-10 and lasts about 20 minutes in performance. Canal songs can be used between scenes and recordings can be downloaded from Regent's Canal Heritage's website.

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regentscanalheritage.org.uk
youngactors.org.uk

CAST - ASSUMING 20/21 INDIVIDUALS IN
ACTS 1 & 2

Act 1 Blow Up Kids (BUK)

BUK 13
Sir V D Majendie
Policeman

Boatmen:

Ready
Jane
Dee
Tilbury
Limehouse
Hawkesbury

Act 2 Ice Cream Capers

Carlo Gatti

The cast is split into four groups with joint and speaking roles. The individual speaking roles are 4 per group. This can be handled or adapted as required. The groups are:

Workers
Ice Cream Sellers
Dreamers
Toffs

Act 3 The Islington Tardis

Cast of four young people and Nobby and his horse

I have taken the names from some of Dr Who's companions. If not felt appropriate please adapt. I am assuming two boys and two girls:

Kat
Dot
Ben
Steve

Nobby
Ginger

ACT 1 SCENE 1 THE BLOW UP KIDS (BUK)

EXT. ON THE TOWPATH OF THE REGENT'S CANAL
ISLINGTON - DAY PRESENT

It is a summer morning on the Regent's canal. The cast stand with their back to the audience. These are **the blow up kids**, come to tell the story of the worst explosion ever to happen on the canal which took place in 1874 when health and safety was a very different concept than that of today. The cast turn to face the audience and throw a fish each into the air and sing this paraphrase of "It's raining men."

FULL CAST

It's raining fish hallelujah
It's raining fish oh yeah
We're out (and about) in it
And we are
Absolutely soaking wet
It's raining fish hallelujah
It's raining fish, every specimen
Bream, perch, eel and tench
Fat, thin, round and flat
It's raining FISH!

BUK 1

Regent's canal where the worst thing that might happen is that you are mown down by a banker on his bike who is late for work.

BUK 2

Or a jogger running whilst staring at their mobile phone.

BUK 3

Or a clutch of mothers with prams like tanks coming at you in a solid unbreakable line.

BUK 4

But in the Victorian age it was very, very, different.

BUK 5

Not leisure, or pleasure on the towpath, it was used to carry cargo from far way.

BUK 6

Anything you fancied from the British Empire came up from Limehouse Basin on the Thames, along the canals, and went all over the country.

BUK 7

Ivory, spices, marble, mahogany wood and things that go bang in the night.

Enter Major Sir Vivian Dering Majendie who was the first bomb disposal expert ever.

BUK 8

This is the first ever bomb disposal expert. Major Sir Vivian Dering Majendie the Royal Artillery's Inspector of Gunpowder Works for Queen Victoria.

Sir VDM reads from a document

*SIR VD
MAJENDIE*

Ladies and gentleman I have the honour to furnish the following Report on the Explosion of Gunpowder which occurred on board a canal boat in the Regent's Canal, on the 2nd October 1874, by which three lives were lost.

BUK 9

And because of that explosion fish rained down on London.

BUK 10

True, they didn't land on Islington, but dead fish did hit the West End and who let's specifics ruin a good story?

BUK 11

And it is a good story, gruesome, scary and it happened at night.

BUK 12

Which is why the fish landed on the streets and not on people.

SIR VD
MAJENDIE

If I may? As I was saying. *I was thus enabled to examine the scene and neighbourhood of the explosion within a few hours of its occurrence.....*

BUK 13

Sir, Major, could you loosen up a bit and give us the one line version? More or less?

SIR VD
MAJENDIE

Loosen up?

BUK 1

Relax

SIR VD
MAJENDIE

You do not relax about explosives.

BUK 2

I suppose not. I bet it caused a stir though, this event?

BUK 3

I bet there was a crowd.

The rest of the cast
bunch together and
beginning murmuring. One
by one they break out
and speak.

BUK 4

Here I am in my pyjamas, blown out of bed I was.

BUK 5

I got no windows in my house.

BUK 6

My old grandma died of fright

BUK 7

The animals in to zoo bellowed and screamed

BUK 8

Some had to be shot so scared they was

BUK 9

My pub, the Eyre Arms the roof's come in

BUK 10

We heard the bang 20 miles away

BUK 11

The Langham hotel had its windows shattered

BUK 12

Oh poor Lords and Ladies woken up was they?

BUK 13

What caused it?

The cast reform into a
mob and call out the Sir
VDM

FULL CAST

What happened? What blew up? What nearly
killed us all? Was it a bomb, the Irish? Was
it the Fenians?

*Note: The Fenians were
active at this point
blowing up buildings in
London*

BUK 1

Look out here come the guards on horseback to
keep us back.

Sounds of hooves and
shouts from the
remainder of the cast.
The crowd huddle
together.

SIR VD
MAJENDIE

It was none of those things.

FULL CAST

Tell us.

SIR VD
MAJENDIE

It was a mishap.

FULL CAST

Mishap, smish-hap.

SIR VD
MAJENDIE

Yes. This sorry tale begins in Islington at the City Road Basin where the boat in question was loaded alongside four others.

ACT 1 SCENE 2

EXT ON THE REGENT'S CANAL 1874

It is a dark, cold, October night. So cold that breath comes out in a plume of mist. A small flotilla of barges, pulled by a tug boat is moving slowly along by Regent's Park.

The cast line up to represent the small flotilla of 5 boats and the tug which pulled them all using a steam engine. They were in order The Ready (tug), Jane, Dee, Tilbury, Limehouse and Hawkesbury. A tow rope joins the crew members.

SIR VD
MAJENDIE

There were six boats in all and there were three crew on each; separated by 20 yards of rope apiece.

ACT 1 SCENE 3 EXT CANAL NIGHT AFTER THE EXPLOSION

The crew members stand shivering in the cold.

A policeman (maybe SVDM) has a notebook open.

POLICEMAN

All right, give me your names and roles in this mis-hap. This not so small explosion.

READY

My name is Francis Clark the skipper of the tug boat. That night we were pulling five 70 foot long cargo boats.

POLICEMAN

And part of your cargo was gunpowder?

READY

Yes. The gunpowder aboard was to blast quarries.

The policeman nods to each character to give their testimony.

JANE

I am skipper of the Jane we had gunpowder aboard.

DEE

I am the skipper of the Dee we had gunpowder and petroleum.

TILBURY

Skipper of the Tilbury gunpowder and petroleum.

LIMEHOUSE

Skipper of the Limehouse gunpowder and petroleum.

HAWKESBURY

Skipper of the Hawkesbury gunpowder and petroleum.

POLICEMAN

Other than that what goods were you carrying?

READY

Sugar, walnuts that type of thing.

POLICEMAN

And the explosives.

READY

Well.....

POLICEMAN

There are rules?

READY

Yes, but you know companies?

POLICEMAN

Profit before lives? You, Tilbury what occurred?

TILBURY

We'd done these trips before and nothing had happened but this night there was a small explosion aboard my boat and a "bursticle" of blue flame. Up ahead of us on the Dee the Captain calls out to us.

DEE

Tilbury something has gone off on your boat.

TILBURY

Yes, I'm very nearly blown out of the hatches already. Stop her please.

DEE

Stop her the Tilbury's afire.

Stop her is shouted up to the Ready who cuts her engine.

READY

All done, stopped.

Ringing a bell. Pause.

TILBURY

Go ahead steady.

DEE

Sure?

TILBURY

Go ahead.

DEE

All safe?

TILBURY

Yes, go ahead.

Almost immediately a huge explosion takes place. The crew of the Tilbury fall flat, the crew of the Limehouse kneel. The captain of the Dee slowly collapses.

BUK 1

The three crew of the Tilbury were all killed.

BUK 2

The Limehouse sunk and the master of the Dee injured.

BUK 3

The blast was heard 20 miles away and Macclesfield Bridge destroyed.

POLICEMAN

Mr Clark of the Ready, would you tell us what happened on your boats?

READY

The cargo was packed in tight. The gunpowder at one end and the petroleum at the other. So as they didn't come into contact.

BUK 4

But they did. Petroleum is a spirit, not an oil.

BUK 5

An oil is safe, it stays in its bottle.

BUK 6

But this spirit wandered through the air and wrapped itself around the explosive.

BUK 7

Yeah, someone lit a match and within a whisper five tons of gunpowder exploded. That's what happened.

BUK 8

And our good friend the Major got the
explosives Act of 1875 passed.

BUK 9

And Macclesfield Bridge will forever be known
as Blow up Bridge

BUK 10

And it was the last time fish rained down on
London town.

ACT 2 SCENE 1

EXT CANAL DAYTIME PRESENT

Reprise of it's raining
fish which morphs into
the jingle "Just one
Cornetto." with a twist.

FULL CAST

Just one Cornetto, give it to me
Delicious ice cream, of Italy
Creamy vanilla and chocolate dream
From Carlo Gatti's amazing team

Sung until a cast
change. The song become
Ice Ice Baby (Vanilla
Ice)how much of the song
is sung and danced is up
to the environment they
are in. Chorus of ice-
ice-baby sung softly
under the initial
dialogue.

The cast are now in
groups Workers,
Dreamers, Ice cream
sellers, Toffs. Four in
each group.

The workers enter
holding up their hooks.
Butchers hook, ice
tongs, dockers hooks,
bale hook.

WORKERS

We are the workers we move the stuff around.

WORKER 1

Here's a Butchers hook. Look at it. Tie a rope on it chuck it into the canal and pull out old mattresses full of wriggling eels. Yum.

WORKER 2

Bale hook, a bale hook's good, you can do anything with it.

WORKER 3

Dockers hook's better.

WORKER 4

Ice hook (Holds it up)

WORKERS

Sacks of coal, sacks of grain, sacks of wool and spices. Drag them off the boats and chuck them on the dock then onto the barges up the canals they go. Stuff from everywhere.

Enter the group of Dreamers.

DREAMERS

We're the dreamers and we don't like the workers.

DREAMER 1

They don't see the romance on the canal.

DREAMER 2

Except him with the ice hook. Give it here.

The ice hook is handed over.

DREAMER 3

Here, here is the romance.

Holds up the ice-tongs.

DREAMER 4

There's the ice cream sellers. Quick.

The group of ice-cream
sellers enter carrying
(or miming) small glass
cups, spoons and a
bucket of water. As they
cry out they mime
filling the cups with
ice cream and washing
them in the water and
recycling them.

ICE CREAM
SELLERS

Come on penny licks, all flavours, come on.
Give us your money.

One of the dreamers
makes to take off with a
glass.

ICE CREAM
SELLER 1

Give it back, I got to wash it.

Dunks it in the bucket.

DREAMER 1

That water's dirty.

ICE CREAM
SELLER 1

So?

ICE CREAM
SELLER 2

So, the water spread TB, killed people.

ICE CREAM
SELLER 3

No romance in that was there?

ICE CREAM
SELLER 4

Lots of ice came from the frozen Regent's
Canal in winter.

ICE CREAM
SELLER 1

And who knows what was in that.

ICE CREAM

SELLER 2

All them rats weeing in it. Yuk.

ICE CREAM

SELLER 3

Not to mention dead dogs.

ICE CREAM

SELLER 4

Or other unmentionables.

DREAMER 1

But this (holds up the tongs) and the barges made life beautiful. Made lemon sorbet, dark chocolate, vanilla with double cream.

WORKERS

We handled vanilla pods. Sent them over to Carlo Gatti for his ice cream.

ICE CREAM

SELLERS

For that you needed the clean ice. From Norway.

WORKERS

And to get that you needed ice saws.

The cast hold up cardboard replicas of ice saws and sing again ice-ice baby whilst making downward cutting motions. The workers mime moving the blocks as the narration continues.

DREAMERS

Norway to here?

ICE CREAM

SELLER 2

In winter in Norway everything is frozen.

ICE CREAM

SELLER 3

You cut the blocks. Pack em on to steamers, bring them to London, put them on barges

and up the canal into the Carlo Gatti's Ice well . Tell them Mr Gatti.

GATTI

It seemed an incredible idea but the profits, the profits. In my homeland of Switzerland we dig pits in the glaciers and store goods in them. It gave me an idea.

ICE CREAM

SELLER 3

For something deep and cold.

ICE CREAM

SELLER 4

And central.

GATTI

Yes, so I built ice pits 12 meters deep, 10 meters wide and filled them with the Norwegian ice. (Pause)

SCENE 2 IN THE ICE HOUSE

GATTI

Get a move on I need the ice out and in the factory.

WORKER 1

The pit's nearly empty.

GATTI

So? (Throws them silk scarves) Get in.

WORKERS 2,3

&4

Lads, this will keep us warm.

Unfurl long white scarves which they wrap around one another.

WORKER 2

Silk?

GATTI

What else keeps you warm and dries fast? Get on with it.

Workers mime dragging
out the ice blocks into
the pit. Using the ice
dogs.

WORKERS

Ohhh the frost bite in our fingers.

One of the workers rubs
his fingers and topples
into the pit with a
scream.

WORKER 3

He's hit the bottom.

WORKER 4

His blood is all over the ice.

DREAMER 1

Let me see. All that red, how beautiful!

DREAMER 2

Like the raspberry ice

ICE CREAM
SELLERS

That's just water and red colouring. Like
all the other scams.

GATTI

My ice cream is pure.

WORKER 1

Let's get this clear, your ice cream is pure
only if you are a Toff. (Pause) Oh here they
are all the way from the West End.

Enter the Toffs

TOFFS

Mr Gatti, can we order some more sorbets,
gateaux, ice? So wonderful, wonderful. Such
flavours.

TOFF 1

Lady Margaeret Ponsonby-Farty had a lovely
cherry ice. I want that.

TOFF 2

And Lord Spivington-Crumbly had an ice-sculpture in the shape of a horse.

TOFF 3

And her Majesty is rumoured to love your pineapple whippy.

TOFF 4

Ice to keep my champagne chilled , don't you know?

DREAMERS

See, it was lovely, the colours, the flavours, like they say.

WORKERS

Class war it is.

TOFFS

Why?

WORKER 4

Ever been to Shoreditch or Bethnal Green?

WORKER 3

Whitechapel?

WORKER 2

Or even Islington?

TOFFS

Of course not!

WORKERS

Let us tell you a little story.

DREAMERS

Please don't.

ICE CREAM
SELLERS

We need our jobs.

WORKER 1

What about your lives?

GATTI

I gave people what they wanted.

Spice girls song Wannabe
paraphrased

WORKERS

Tell us what we go what we really, really,
got.

FULL CAST
(POSSIBLY
MINUS THE
TOFFS)

In our ice creams we got
Lice
Bed bugs
Fleas
Straw
Human hair
Cat hair
Dog hair
All sold deliciously cold.

WORKERS

What else did you get, did you really, really
get?

FULL CAST

We got
Diphtheria
Scarlet Fever
Diarrhoea
Enteric fever
All mixed up with our chocolate
All spread in with our favourite
Taste!
And we got sick, we died
That's what we got, what we really, really
got

WORKER 4

In 1875 Gatti's antics were banned by
Parliament.

GATTI

But by then I was a millionaire. Islington
was very kind to me.

ACT 3 - EVENING by the canal

Cast sing a paraphrase of Waterloo sunset.

Dirty old water, keep on a rolling, rolling
into the night
Canal so busy, make me feel dizzy, pub lights
shine so bright
But I don't, need no friends
As long as I gaze on Islington Sunset, I am
in paradise
Every day I look at the world from my window
and
Islington sunset's mine, Islington sunset's
mine...

Kat, Dot, Steve and Ben
are sitting by the edge
of the canal nearby the
tunnel entrance on the
Islington side. It is a
late summer's afternoon.

DOT

So you don't want an ice cream then?

The other three shake
their heads vigorously.

BEN

Think about all that stuff Gatti put in it.

KAT

My mum took me to the ice wells, they are
still there.

STEVE

I know. Hey those old people who came to
school knew loads about the canal didn't
they?

DOT

Things not in history books.

BEN

Like jumping over the walls and getting onto
the canal to swim in it.

STEVE

Or nicking planks of wood from the mills and setting them up so you could have races across the canal.

KAT

Or horses. Big, strong horses.

DOT

They were no use in the tunnel.

BEN

No. You had to leg it. (Pause) What's that?

He points.

KAT

Looks like a boat.

STEVE

It's an old barge. Nobody's on it. Grab the rope can you?

DOT AND BEN

Got it.

STEVE

Looked as if it was going to drift into the tunnel. (Beat) Come on, let's leg it, through.

BEN

Yeah, great idea. Come on.

KAT

It's a long tunnel.

BEN

880 meters, but if we get tired the drift'll take us though. We can walk back on the street.

They pile onto the barge and begin legging it through.

STEVE

Lie on your backs with your legs in the air and use your feet to move it along.

DOT

Phew it stinks of sulphur.

BEN

And it has cobwebs, I hate cobwebs.

KAT

Be clean on the other side. Come on don't moan.

STEVE

I can see daylight, keep going.

They have acted out legging it and travelling through the tunnel. As they act coming out at the other side. A man is standing with a horse. As they emerge the sound effect from Dr Who is played briefly.

DOT

It looks different. Look at them big stacks of wood.

NOBBY

Well hello and what good's that to me and empty barge?

The cast are staring around.

NOBBY

Where's the cargo?

STEVE

I'm sorry mister, but where are we?

NOBBY

How'd you mean?

BEN

All them old buildings and piles of stuff, what are they doing there?

NOBBY

You soft in the head? You was supposed to be bringing me stuff for Limehouse.

Steve has his mobile phone out.

STEVE

Hey, there's no phone signal, nothing.

Waving his mobile phone

NOBBY

What's that?

Looks at the phone.

NOBBY

Look at all them colours. What's it for?

STEVE

To phone your mum, play games.

NOBBY

Games? Phone, well I never.

He shakes it.

STEVE

Hey stop.

DOT

Play him something.

Steve takes the phone and plays a tune (choice for director)

NOBBY

What's that.

BEN

A song.

NOBBY

Well that ain't music in my books.

KAT

He's seriously weird. We should go.

DOT

But there's a fence all along the canal we can't get on the road.

NOBBY

Daft kid, course you can't. Stealing's bad enough without letting you scallywags run riot.

BEN

Mr...

NOBBY

I'm Nobby Clark and this here is Ginger. Isn't she grand?

Pats the horse and takes a piece of velvet from a pocket and begins polishing her coat.

NOBBY

Her coat gleams in the sun. People laugh at me, using scraps of velvet to polish it, but she likes it. Don't you girl?

DOT

Where'd you live?

NOBBY

South side of the tunnel. Mile End way. Listen if I give you tuppence apiece, will you look after Ginger while I nip in the pub for a drink?

DOT

Tuppence?

NOBBY

Now don't be asking for more. I'll give it you when I come out of the Narrow Boat. All right?

The four nod

BEN

Mr Nobby, what year is it?

Nobby ties Ginger to a post.

NOBBY

1952 of course. Got a new Queen, Elizabeth,
haven't you heard? Back in a tick.

Exits

STEVE

If it really is 1952, we could dive in and go
for a swim.

KAT

What about the bugs?

Stands to take off a
top.

DOT

I ain't diving in there. No way.

BEN

So, is it like 2018 on the other side of the
tunnel and the 1950's here?

STEVE

Maybe.

KAT

I'm scared.

Ginger starts whinnying.

DOT

What's up with her?

KAT

Probably hungry.

STEVE

Sun's going down see. Mum'll be worried

Looks forlornly at his
phone as Nobby emerges
from the pub. He's had
too much to drink. He
sits side saddle on
Ginger (probably not
possible) and begins
singing "Show me the way
to go home etc..."

NOBBY

Come on girl, home we go. Bye kids.

DOT

He forgot our tuppence, whatever that is.

KAT

How do they get under those low bridges. Ah
he leans with the horse.

The cast lean in
mimicry. They follow
Nobby replicating the
movement at two more
bridges. Nobby begins to
snore.

BEN

He's asleep. Nobby, he's snoring.

Ginger loses her footing
and falls into the canal
with Nobby following
her. Much confusion and
neighing and shouting.

NOBBY

Come on girl, try and swim. That's it. You
lot up there, there's steps just there.

STEVE

I don't see them.

NOBBY

They are there, cut into the canal, just for
this. Come on girl.

The four of them help
Ginger up onto the tow
path.

NOBBY

Oh Ginger, I'm sorry.

Nobby weeps.

KAT

She looks different.

BEN

Really big.

DOT

Like pregnant

NOBBY

It's the water, she's full of it. What we going to do?

STEVE

Make her cough? Like lifesavers do.

BEN

Mouth to mouth. No way.

KAT

There's four of us. Two on each side. We could squeeze it out. Couldn't we?

They get two a side and start squeezing. Much wheezing pushing and shouting.

NOBBY

And push. And push. Come on girl.

They keep pushing until Ginger coughs up some water.

NOBBY

There you go. See it's all alright. Thanks so much. Here. Have sixpence apiece. Buy another one of them phones each.

Hands out the coins. The stage is flooded with sunset.

NOBBY

Come on Ginger.

Nobby and Ginger walk away.

DOT

I've heard of sixpence, they are worth two and a half pence.

STEVE

It'll be dark soon.

BEN

Better be going home.

KAT

Back to 2018? How we gonna do that?

DOT

Find a hole in the... it's going.

STEVE

The barrier it's disappearing with Nobby. I can see the street.

BEN

Let's go.

DOT

It's quiet here. No traffic. I like it.

STEVE

No wifi

KAT

No central heating.

BEN

No Computer games.

DOT

I still like it. It's different.

BEN

Look, the factories have all gone. It's now again.

A phone rings.

STEVE

Yeah mum, I'll be home soon. I know it's getting late. Bye. Where have we been? Just by the canal.

BEN

Reckon we dreamt it. Nobby and all?

KAT

Must have. There's nothing to see is there.

STEVE

No, nothing from 1952. Come on Dot let's go.

The other three exit
leaving Dot on stage.
Dot turns to the
audience and holds up a
sixpence. Nobby
reappears and looks at
her. He winks and waves.

NOBBY

Maybe see you another time?

KAT

Maybe. 1952?

NOBBY

Who knows?

Sounds of the Tardis and
Nobby disappears.

Reprise of Islington
sunset.

END