

PROBE

A short play by Emma Payne

(TWO YOUNG MEN, ED AND HECTOR, ARE SITTING SIDE BY SIDE ON TWO CHAIRS)

ED: I bet you've spent yours already, haven't you.

HECTOR: Some people have to pay rent. Some people can't live with their mums their whole lives. (PAUSE) We should be getting more, you know. What if it goes wrong? We could end up with scars on our brains.

ED: It's not dangerous.

HECTOR: How do you know?

ED: They'd be paying us more. Relax. So what if you get a scar on your brain? Like anyone's going to see it! It'll just take you a few more goes at scanning those tinned peas in. (He mimes swiping products at a supermarket checkout)

HECTOR: They could mash your brain up and it wouldn't make a difference, I know, but...

(AVA, A SCIENTIFIC RESEARCHER, ENTERS AND ATTACHES HEADSETS WITH ELECTRODES AND WIRES LEADING TO ON/OFF SWITCHES TO ED AND HECTOR'S HEADS.)

AVA: It's not a painful process. The purpose of the experiment, I'll just quickly tell you, is to explore the existence of the phenomenon colloquially known as the 'godspot'. This is a tiny area of the brain that, when stimulated with a small electrical current, is said to give people a religious experience or vision.

HECTOR: (putting hand up) I'm not religious, is that a problem?

AVA: Well, the idea is it works on everyone, but we'll see, shall we? Now...

(SHE PRESSES THE SWITCH ATTACHED TO ED'S HEADSET. ED STANDS UP AND LOOKS AMAZEDLY INTO THE FAR DISTANCE)

AVA: What are you seeing, er (consults file), Ed?

ED: Nan!

AVA: Right. (she writes something down)

ED: I like PINK custard with my ice cream. All these pens don't work, they've been left with their tops off. I haven't got a blue for the sea. Sparky's got loose! We'll never get him back in the cage!

AVA: Oops. (flicks the switch) Sorry, I must have stimulated your cortex by accident there. It's quite close to the spot I'm after. It's just a memory being triggered. They can be quite vivid.

ED: (dazed) I saw a ghost! She was reading the People's Friend.

HECTOR: I think I've changed my mind... (standing up)

AVA: Don't worry. Anyway, you can't back out now – we've paid you in advance.

ED: And he's spent it. Sit your skinny arse down. It doesn't hurt. It's weird. You'll like it.

HECTOR: I don't want to see my nan's ghost.

AVA: I'll try to be more accurate this time.

HECTOR: I didn't even like my nan when she was alive.

ED: Aw, he's just a timid little girl isn't he... what's your name?

AVA: Ava.

HECTOR: That's a nice name.

ED: He's so polite, isn't he Ava? (pinching Hector's cheek) So well brought up. Look at those chubby cheeks.

HECTOR: (hitting his hand away) Don't touch the goods!

AVA: Shall we get on? I've got a lot of subjects to get through today.
We'll try you this time (to HECTOR).
(presses switch attached to HECTOR's headset)

HECTOR: Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque,
et quantum est hominum uenustiorum:
passer mortuus est meae puellae,
passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.

AVA: I don't know what I hit then.

ED: What the fuck was that?

AVA: Latin.

HECTOR: I don't know Latin.

AVA: Well, it was in there. I can't get out what isn't already in there.

ED: Where'd you think he'd learn Latin? I went to the same school as him and there definitely wasn't any Latin.

AVA: You'd be surprised what's in your head. Let me try again, I'll slightly reset this...
OK. Are you ready?

(AVA presses switch on HECTOR)

HECTOR: I hate Ed.

(Pause. AVA and ED stare at HECTOR speechlessly)

HECTOR: I... I dunno where that came from.

AVA: Perhaps a... just a blip.

ED: But what...

AVA: We'll press on. The mind throws these things up. Don't worry about it. (She makes a note)
Now! Let's try again. Sit a bit stiller, perhaps.

HECTOR: Your equipment's not working, you know. Something wrong with it. I'm serious. You need to take a look at it.

AVA: It's working fine.

(ED is still staring silently at HECTOR.)

AVA: Look. (she goes to press switch on ED again, but he takes his headset off)

ED: No. Do him again.

HECTOR: No, man...

ED: Do him!

(AVA presses switch on HECTOR again)

HECTOR: The Queen does a good job, you know. It isn't easy. All she gets is grief. I wouldn't do that, go round shaking everyone's hand, always be nice, open fetes, watch

morris dancing or whatever, every single day. And it brings everyone together, isn't it? Like the jubilee.

(Pause)

ED: You've never said that before. You said you hated the Royal Family.

HECTOR: I never said I hated them.

ED: I've had this conversation with you fifty times! About the Royal Family! We were talking about this yesterday! Saying they were a waste of skin? Yes? I said they should be hanging in a row off Tower Bridge, with all their little lovely Gucci shoes dangling? You nodded! You always nod. You've never said you liked them.

HECTOR: I've said it loads of times.

ED: Never once.

HECTOR: Just not to you.

ED: What?

HECTOR: I've said it to other people.

ED: Why not me?

HECTOR: Because... I just didn't want to get into it.

ED: What do you mean, you didn't want to get into it?

AVA: (who has been writing all this down) Shall we move on?

HECTOR: I don't know why.

ED: Do him again. Go on. Blast him some more. I want to get to the bottom of this.

AVA: Don't be absurd. This isn't what we're here for at all.

ED: You should stand up for yourself, if that's what you think.

HECTOR: I stand up for myself.

ED: And why would you say, I hate Ed? That was in your head, man.

HECTOR: It wasn't.

ED: That's where it came out of! Isn't it? (to AVA) It's got to be true, it came straight out of his own mind!

HECTOR: She made me say it!

AVA: This machine is not a lie detector, I can't say if it's true or not. It doesn't put thoughts into your head, though, that's true.

HECTOR: I don't hate you. Don't be ridiculous. Why would I hate you?

ED: I'll tell you what's fucking ridiculous, being friends for ten years with someone you hate. That's ridiculous. Following someone around, bleating like a little sheep, when you don't even like them and you don't even agree with anything they say. That's ridiculous.
AVA: (consulting her file) Maybe I should just get some new subjects in.

ED: Yes! Get some new ones in! These ones are MALFUNCTIONING. (He tries to grab her file, and she resists) Give me that file!

AVA: Get off! This is unpublished data!

ED: What's your experiment about? Ay? Tell me that!

HECTOR: She told us...

ED: She told us a crock of shit.

HECTOR: No, I've heard of that thing she said, the godspot...

ED: You've heard of it? You've heard of it? What, you're a scientist now, are you? You been studying science on the quiet have you, along with Latin and the Royal Family? Did you go to Eton, Hector? Are you really a lord? I'd like to know, I really would. Perhaps you're like a king, who puts on disguise and goes and lives with the scum and works in Asda just to see what it's like.

HECTOR: Are you going to calm down?

ED: No! I'm bloody not! (Pause)

(He hesitates and sits down)

I want to know what this experiment is really testing. Because you see the trouble with you, Hector, is that you're too trusting. Isn't it? You trust the Queen, for God's sake! That's a bad start. And now she (points to Ava) comes along and gives some shit excuse and you let her wire your head up no questions asked!

HECTOR: So did you!

ED: Well I'm asking now! (to AVA) I would like to see that file, and all that stuff you've been writing down when you think we're not looking, since according to you nothing's even properly happened in this experiment yet.

AVA: I have to make a note of the procedure and the result, whether successful or not.

ED: Do you reeeeeeally?

HECTOR: What else can she be doing?

ED: She's trying to suck out what's in our heads! Look what she's got already!

HECTOR: You're just being paranoid...

ED: I am telling you, she is culling... what's the word... harvesting what's in here (he taps his head) for her own purposes.

HECTOR: Which are?

ED: I don't know do I! It's obviously secret! Probably something to do with the government! Who you probably support, by the way.

HECTOR: Don't be sick.

ED: Probably sponsored by... the Women's Institute, something like that! (grabbing Hector's headset) Take this off! Take it off!

(to AVA) That's it! We're not bowing down before your oppression! That's your lot! We may not have much but we've got our own thoughts.

(squares up to AVA, face to face) Now we're going. We're going to Stamford Bridge, where we go every Saturday. We're going to watch the match and cheer our team like we have done for the last ten years and think our thoughts, away from YOU. And people like you. Come on, Hex. Let's go.

(Pause)

HECTOR: (to himself, too quietly for the departing ED to hear) I don't even like football. (He follows ED)

(AVA CONTINUES WRITING IN HER FILE, SMILING AND NODDING TO HERSELF, CLEARLY PLEASED WITH THE RESULTS OF HER EXPERIMENT.)