

KARLOFF

A One-Person Play in Two Acts

by

Randy Bowser

-Cast-

Boris Karloff

Time

1890's-1969
(not chronologically visited)

Place

Studios and homes from throughout Karloff's life
Indicated simply by the text, lights, music and a minimum of props

The play is performed in two acts

All taped voices are recorded by the actor

This is the **Reader's Version** of the script. It contains less
information, descriptions, and technical cues than in the
Production Version. Dialogue is identical in both versions.

KARLOFF - ACT ONE

SETTING: Stage Left - A wheelchair; a wooden kitchen stool with no back; a six-foot table suggestive of the "Frankenstein" laboratory table with piles of wigs and props on and under it; and a coat tree made from dead branches. The Frankenstein Monster's jacket hangs on one branch, and the furry tunic from "The Son of Frankenstein" hangs on another.

Stage Right - A dark, simple wooden chair which serves multiple purposes sits on a warm looking oriental rug. A cotton bag hangs on its back.

NOTE: One actor performs all voices as well as BORIS.

AT RISE: The sound of thunder is accompanied by flashing lights. Far to one side, BORIS is momentarily silhouetted by lightning as he stalks on.

The storm subsides and the sound of BORIS's voice comes purring over the speakers.

BORIS (*recorded*)

Once upon a time, there was a town called - Hollywood.

(Dim light on BORIS with an old-fashioned suitcase, his back to the Audience. The famous Hollywood Sign is on the background projection screen.)

When the motion picture industry for which it would become famous was not far beyond its infancy, a certain young Englishman came knocking at Hollywood's door.

(BORIS sets his suitcase down, pantomimes knocking on a door. Beat, then politely presents himself. The door is apparently slammed in his face. He knocks on another door with the same results. This cycle continues and speeds up as the narration continues.)

With a determination beyond the ken of most mortal men, he kept on knocking, despite repeated rejection and disappointment. He kept knocking, knocking, and knocking. And as sure as his name was William Henry Pratt - his life - was a thriller!

(The gigantic door of a medieval castle comes up on the screen and BORIS pounds on it. The door opens and then the dark interior of Frankenstein's laboratory is seen with a bright patch of light coming through a high window. BORIS transforms into The Frankenstein Monster shambling backward toward the audience. Suddenly he whirls around.)

BORIS

BOO!

(Lights bump up and BORIS laughs, but stops short, his attention drawn toward the chair.)

Sweet Jesus - she's fainted!

(He lumbers down to assist, legs stiff as in "Frankenstein." Someone stops him abruptly and speaks to him.)

Yes, yes, I'll put the bag on.

(explains to the audience)

As the producers requested.

(removes the cloth bag on the chair, pulls it over his head)

Twenty years of acting. Now here I am with a bag over my head, and playing a part with no lines!

(yanks bag off)

"At last I have a break!" I said. "What a great part!" I said. - My face has "startling possibilities?" Well, thank you, Mr. Whale. - Do a screen test? - For a monster you say?

(straight out, dumbfounded)

In my brand new suit. The man wants me for a monster.

(back to WHALE)

I'd be delighted!

(shakes hands, takes out a cigarette, crosses to the chair and plops into it)

So good of you to stay late for this, Jack.

(to the house)

Being on the inside of the studio, Jack Pierce was able to postpone the screen test for three weeks while we worked on the makeup for Frankenstein's Monster.

(straight out to an unseen full-length mirror, dragging on his cigarette)

It's amazing, Jack. Look. Look at the eyes though.

(gets wire frame glasses out of his pocket)

They look too normal and alive. What have you got there? - Ah! "Mortician's Wax." Well! That seems appropriate. The Monster is dead after all! - Marvelous, yes, false eyelids should do the trick.

(sits again and leans back)

So there we were, happily working away in the cabin at Universal where Lon Chaney had applied his famous makeups: "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," "The Phantom of the Opera"...

(Grand organ music starts up as the image of Lon Chaney as The Phantom appears on the screen. BORIS stands, the sounds of a car and its horn intrude.)

Many years before "Frankenstein"...

(The car keeps honking, the annoyed BORIS peers in.)

Mr. Chaney! - Why thank you very much!

(opens a car door, and sits in the chair again)

We had a passing acquaintance, but now, here he was, inviting me to ride with him! He talked to me for over an hour. He understood the souls of afflicted people. None of us can do what Chaney did because none of us feels it just as he did. And he said, "The secret of success in Hollywood lies in being different from anyone else. Hollywood is full of competent actors. What the screen needs is individuality!"

(steps out and salutes LON as he drives away)

In the lean years ahead, his words always came back to me:

"If you're going to act, you're going to act. Never give up. It's the only way."

(Sound of a group of men and a PRODUCTION ASSISTANT.)

PA *(recorded)*

OK, everybody line up over there. Listen up! I need you all over there - now, please. We need five men today. We'll need more tomorrow, so if you're not picked today, you can always come back again tomorrow.

BORIS

For years I was just one guy in a large pool of actors. We'd hear of a film being shot and we'd all go stand in front of the studio. An assistant would corral us, then the director would come out and say, "OK, you, you, and you."

(BORIS has been chosen, he acknowledges it with a nod.)

Once in a while I'd get lucky, like when I worked on a Douglas Fairbanks film, "His Majesty, the American."

(A "Honky Tonk" piano plays frantic chase music, lights start strobing and BORIS fences with the air.)

For a week I chased Fairbanks all over the back lot! It was heaven! Ha ha ha! I was in films! I was making \$5.00 a day, and I worked for a solid week. I thought I had made my fortune!

Later I stepped up from being an extra to getting featured bits at 150 a week! And over and over, I was invariably cast as - *The Heavy*. Perhaps you understand that term? "The Heavy" is the same as "The Villain." Well, fine. I had found my niche. I was just thrilled to be working!

(Silent movie music and strobing lights again as BORIS fights his way around the stage. When the music and strobe stop, he's throttling his own neck.)

Subtlety was not a prized commodity in silent movies.

(He crosses to the table to pick up an Arabian Keffiyeh.)

Things were a bit more slapdash in the silent days. Anybody could be made to act. The great requisites for silent films were large eyes, good physique, lots of hair - that was it! They would shoot all day and on into the night. This was long before there was any screen actors union - more on that later!

(donning the Keffiyeh)

I played Indians, of both the Western and Eastern variety, Greeks, I was a Negro in darkest Africa for a Tarzan picture, and I played Middle Eastern characters, primarily Arabs.

(he poses like Rudolph Valentino)

Ladies and Gentlemen. Can you guess why I became typed in that particular way? Is there a trait you can think of these characters all have in common? Here, I'll say it for you, to save you any embarrassment. They were all dark-skinned. As am I.

(someone gets his attention, he yells in reply)

What? Ah, yes, my tan. Too much in the sun! Out of work you know!

(someone else calls to him)

How do I stay so tanned? A tight collar and plenty of gin!

(removes and replaces the Keffiyeh on the table)

The truth is -

(He sees costume Devil Horns on the stool. With a mysterious smile he moves them to the table before sitting.)

The truth is, on both sides of the family, I am Anglo-Indian. Naturally, as a child, I was teased mercilessly. My skin was different, my legs were bowed, I stammered severely - something I learned to control - under most circumstances - and - yes, I'm aware of the impersonators: "Good evening, I am Bor**ITH** Karloff." What with being very much younger than my eight siblings, and, in the eyes of other children, having so many strikes against me, it made for a rather - lonely childhood in England.

My early days in Hollywood were years of bitter oblivion, shared with my wife, Dorothy. My favorite librarian!

(he checks out books and leers at DOROTHY)