



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION

2022

Highly Commended in the Open Division

Paul Rodriguez

Arrested Expression

© Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND-4.0)



2023

Paul Rodriguez

Arrested Expression

A fog of bewilderment oppressed my sparse audience. Inured to this common reception, I concluded my colourless one-man performance with an equally lacklustre bow, and shambled offstage.

A black suit thrust a crisp document at me. I scrawled a hasty signature and pressed on. A firm hand pressed back.

“Sir. That’s a warrant.”

I’d autographed programs, soiled napkins and sundry body parts. Novelty was nothing new.

“Good for you. Get it framed.”

A second suit blocked my progress.

“You’re under arrest, sir.”

I scowled at the stage manager. He shrugged and repositioned his cigarette with bloated, prehensile lips. I confronted my oppressors.

“What’s the charge?”

“Crimes against the English language, sir.”

I would have laughed, but the suits were Armani and clearly meant business.

“What crimes?”

“Your words tonight, sir.”

“Which words?”

The taller of the twins pulled at his collar and mouthed, *adverbs*.

“Adverbs!” My exclamation ricocheted through the maze of props and tattered scenery. “This is absurdist theatre! The playwright *barely* uses adjectives, let alone—”

“*Sir!* Do not compound your offence. Please come with us.”

“And you are?”

Two gleaming badges appeared. “Department of Syntactic Hygiene” surmounted a sombre crest and a pompous motto: *Puritas Linguae Super Omnia*.

I hate Latin – intensely.

A grim, dialogue-free ride ended outside a grim, concrete structure.

My companions steered me through complex portcullises and other barriers to comprehension towards a pitiless brute supervising a mediaeval contraption.

“Speak into the tube,” droned the man-monolith. “Read this. Omit parts that cause discomfort.”

I glanced at the dense, three-paragraph page and returned it.

“All done. Cheers.”

“You must recite a minimum of ten words.”

I snatched the parchment and declaimed, in my most eloquent thespian tones, “Rain ... rein ... reign. Air ... heir ... ere. Write ... rite ... wright ... right.”

The surly slab’s face collapsed as he struggled to determine whether I’d read ten words or three.

I stabbed a forefinger at him. “Thought you’d catch me with the adverbs, eh? *Clearly*, a trap for young players!”

Wall lamps flashed. Sirens squealed. Klaxons klaxed.

Two cadaverous creatures appeared and dragged me to a room with black, sponge-like surfaces. I sat at its padded table as my captors retreated in unnatural silence. My head throbbed in the dead air.

Fortunately, a distraction sidled noiselessly through the door. The miniature man stood on a chair – bringing his male pattern baldness level with my chin – and delved into a leather briefcase. He tossed me a pen and a pad of paper.

For the next half-hour we enacted a silent-movie melodrama, complete with inter-titles. He flashed question cards; I wrote replies. At one point, I slammed my fist on the table. Deprived of audio accompaniment, I scribbled, “Bang!”

This was the first of three interviews in three different rooms, each space less sound-dampening than its predecessor. In the second session I wrote a thesis on expressive

restraint, receiving mild electric shocks each time I deployed an adverb. Following my final task – penning a 500-word narrative from a list of concrete nouns, weak verbs and empty adjectives – my attitude to the key linguistic component of my alleged crime had changed forever.

By 2 am, I crouched in a cell furnished in minimalist style. The guard sniggered as he read *The Collected Works of Franz Kafka (Redacted)*.

After a short sleep haunted by split infinitives, I flew at my prison bars and demanded legal representation.

Ninety minutes later, a taut chap with narrow eyes and a mindset to match summarised my options. He spoke in terse, monosyllabic sentences, displaying monochrome illustrations to extend his abbreviated output. It was a judicial picture-book presentation, sans engaging gestures, improvisation and vocal modulation.

My circumstances were dire. Counsel suggested a guilty plea might incur a shorter sentence. I commented that the shorter sentence would doubtless be free from adverbs. My lawyer shook his head and abandoned me to a small brochure.

The faded trifold explained court demeanour, acceptable language and potential outcomes. The last included incarceration in a grammatical correction facility and a *surgical procedure*. “I promise never to do it again” was not only insufficient grounds for clemency; it also guaranteed a lifetime conviction.

While I awaited my time in court, I pondered the future. Would my acting career be littered with litigation as I modified each author’s modifiers?

What could I do?

What would Shakespeare have done?

At 10 am, the Morphology Magistrate pronounced his verdict – a judicious, exacting pronunciation, stated with care and caution, grammatically precise and concise.

“Guilty, as charged.”

Before sentencing, I sought leave to monologue.

“Granted.”

“Your Honour. The undervalued element of our English language at the heart of today’s proceedings has been in use for centuries. Despite those who insist it paves the path to perdition, the adverb continues to colour, clarify and intensify meaning. Its

detractors fail to appreciate that, in the absence of adverbs, our world would become a semantic wasteland; our communication cluttered with confusion and inconsequence. I understand calls to limit the ill-considered application of adverbs, but I abhor the notion of abolition or prohibition. Let us protect and embrace the adverb, lest we extinguish it alongside other endangered species. I propose we begin by emulating Shakespeare's approach to adverbs. Let us recast – abbreviate – the *-ly* form so we may illuminate intent and enhance emotion without fear of recrimination. To quote the Bard: 'The very mercy of the law cries out *most audible*.' Thank you."

Exhausted from my syntactic trials, I slumped in the dock.

The magistrate deliberated with prosecution and defence, then announced, "*Tis noble spoken!*"

I was sentenced to a six-month gagging order and performed the remainder of my one-man version of Beckett's *Endgame* with duct tape securing my lips. This necessitated considerable reworking of the piece: in mime, *entire*.

The season was a box-office and critical success. A fortunate turn of events, since the magistrate also imposed a \$20,000 fine for my mentioning "adverb" in court.

Who said talk is cheap?