



I AM TICHBORNE

A PLAY BY
DAVID SHARPE

A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

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Thanks again, and enjoy dipping your toes into the wild story of the Tichborne Claimant.

David Sharpe

I am Tichborne

A play in two acts.

By David Sharpe



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The author acknowledges the Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of the land on which this play was written and of the lands where the real-life events behind the story took place. I pay my respects to the members of those communities and their Elders, and pay respect to all First Nations people. Sovereignty was never ceded.

The front and back cover images show Lajos Hamers as the Claimant and Cooper Dawson as Roger, taken for the rehearsed reading of *I am Tichborne*, held at Wollongong Workshop Theatre, 5-6 April 2025. Photographer: McKenzie Scrine.

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CHARACTERS

Roger Tichborne - mid-twenties, slight, fey. Speaks with a French accent. When agitated, his face twitches.

The Claimant – late fifties in appearance. Large, charming and cunning. Speaks with a hybrid cockney/Australian accent. When agitated, his face twitches.

Players (at least 3) who assume multiple roles. These can be distributed among actors as required. A suggested distribution is:

Player 1 (Female):

The Dowager (Lady Henriette Felicitie Tichborne) – Roger’s mother. Sixties, slim and harsh. Speaks with a French accent.

A **Supporter** of the Claimant.

Gillespie – Scottish nurse. Formal and professional, until not. Not based on a real person.

Tredgett (Mrs Mary Ann Tredgett) – sister of Arthur Orton. Formidable, evasive.

Landy – journalist at *People* magazine. Not based on a real person.

Player 2 (Female):

Kattie (Katherine Doughty, later Lady Katherine Radcliffe) – Roger’s cousin and lover.

Mary Ann (Mary Ann Castro, nee Bryant) – The Claimant’s wife. Early twenties, uneducated, feisty.

Macalister (Mrs Sara Macalister) – proprietor of Boisdale station, Sale.

Bessie – Cockney street hawker. Not based on a real person.

Player 3 (Male):

Bogle (Mr Andrew Bogle) – elderly former servant of Roger’s uncle. Jamaican, but speaks with an English accent.

A **Sceptic** of the Claimant.

Radcliffe (Sir Percival Radcliffe) – husband of Kattie

Mackenzie (Mr John Mackenzie) – Scottish private investigator.

Onslow (Mr Guildford Onslow) – politician, banker and supporter of the Claimant.

Hawkins (Mr Henry Hawkins) – legal prosecutor. Fearsome.

Little Tich (Stage name of Mr Henry Relph) – diminutive music hall performer whose name derives from the Tichborne Claimant.

SETTING & TIME

A theatre stage, cluttered with the vintage detritus of a working house. Props, baskets, and clothing racks are scattered about — nothing modern. An old-fashioned gurney sits among the mess.

This is a liminal space in which ROGER and the CLAIMANT arrive upon death. From here, the action moves backwards and forwards in time and space to tell their stories. We visit late 19th-century London, Paris and Wagga Wagga, among other places. Finally, we return to the present day, as the SUPPORTER and the SCEPTIC update ROGER and the CLAIMANT on their legacy.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

The sound of thunder, rain and raging seas. Lights up and we see two figures: ROGER on one side of the stage, on the deck of the Bella as it sinks in 1854, and the CLAIMANT on the other, begging on a London street in 1898. The CLAIMANT coughs violently throughout.

- ROGER Help! Save me! Holy mother, hear your unworthy servant.
- CLAIMANT Spare some coins? Take pity on a dying man.
- ROGER Our lady, forgive me. I don't belong here! I should be home with my mama!
- CLAIMANT I'm not begging. I'm selling. You give me money, I'll tell you a story.
- ROGER I shall return to England and devote myself to my parents.
- CLAIMANT This is not me. I'm not meant to be here. But you recognise me, I can tell. Something in the eyes, isn't it? Something about the jawline.
- ROGER I have worshipped you since I was a child. Let me be like your blessed son, who died but lived again!
- CLAIMANT Once, my face was well-known in London. People lined the streets to get a glimpse of me. I was on the front page of *The Times*!

ROGER I wandered from the path. I walked through this godless land. But like the prodigal son, I can be saved!

CLAIMANT But I was cheated! They turned on me. Ten years in jail, and even now they deny me my birthright!

ROGER Sainte Marie, mère de Dieu, priez pour nous pécheurs. Sainte Marie, Étoile de la mer. Que je revoie ma mère! (*Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners. Holy Mary, Star of the Sea, oh to see my mother once more!*)

CLAIMANT My name? How dare you. You don't get to ask that. That name is mine!

ROGER Think of my poor Mama! Save her from grief.

CLAIMANT I'll tell you this: you jumped-up shit. It's not Tom Castro! It's not Arthur fucking Orton!

ROGER Let me go home! Take me home!

He sinks beneath the waves.

CLAIMANT I used to be somebody! I am somebody!

The coughing overcomes him.

SCENE 2

A stage. ROGER lies on the floor, the CLAIMANT on a gurney. Both are silent and still.

Unseen for now, camouflaged among the theatre's clutter are the PLAYERS. They play all the supporting characters. When needed, they emerge, find costumes and props among the theatre's stuff, and adopt each role as necessary. They retreat into the background between roles.

ROGER splutters into life. He thinks he's still drowning. Gradually, he realises he's safe.

ROGER stands and takes in his surroundings. Spots the CLAIMANT, then wanders over to him. Pokes him. Picks up a hand, which then falls lifelessly back into place. Eventually, he wanders away to explore further.

The CLAIMANT raises his head and watches ROGER walk away. The CLAIMANT gets off the gurney and silently walks behind ROGER, mimicking his movements.

Eventually, ROGER walks back to the gurney. No one there! Alarmed now... then the CLAIMANT grabs him from behind and shouts. ROGER jumps, screams, falls. The CLAIMANT laughs.

CLAIMANT Your face!

ROGER Stop it!

CLAIMANT Oh, I'm sorry... (*laughs again*) No, I'm not.

ROGER It's not funny!

CLAIMANT You'd laugh if you were me.

ROGER Where am I?

CLAIMANT Where are we. Dunno. Yes, I do...a theatre! Do you like the theatre?

ROGER I haven't been since I left... well, not for many years.

CLAIMANT I've seen 'em all. Been up and down the country.
Every rat-infested music hall.

ROGER You're a performer?

CLAIMANT No, no, no... *(looks at ROGER)* Oh, your face! That face!

ROGER What of it?

CLAIMANT It's just... ha! I never thought it could be so real. But there it is. Something about the eyes. And the way you stand.

ROGER Do I know you?

CLAIMANT No. But I know you.

ROGER No, sir. We have not met!

CLAIMANT And believe me, there's no reason to call me 'sir'.

ROGER pulls a knife from his belt.

ROGER Enough! Tell me where I am.

CLAIMANT Put that away, you've never used it in your life, you're not about to start now.

ROGER Stop mocking me!

CLAIMANT Oh, monsieur, stop mocking moi!

ROGER How did I get here?

CLAIMANT Well, what can you remember last?

ROGER I was on board a ship. There was a storm. We were sinking. We were a week out from Rio...

CLAIMANT *(joining in)* Rio De Janeiro. You set sail on the 20th of April 1854.

ROGER The ship's name was...

CLAIMANT *Bella*. You'd been travelling through South America.

ROGER For about a year.

CLAIMANT But you'd received news from England.

ROGER My uncle had died, and my father assumed the baronetcy. I was the next in line.

CLAIMANT To an enormous fortune! But you were in no hurry to get home.

ROGER How do you know all this?

CLAIMANT It's all history to me.

ROGER Who are you?

CLAIMANT Oh, don't be trivial.

ROGER My life is not trivial!

CLAIMANT Oh, I completely agree. But to you, it's 1854. To me, it's 44 years later. 1898. Like you, I was facing death. You on the high seas. Me... well, in less romantic circumstances. Sick, debased.

ROGER Plucked from the moments of our deaths...

CLAIMANT And placed in a theatre. Well, as an alternative to dying, I'll take it.

ROGER But this is cause for celebration! Both of our lives are saved. My prayers to Our Lady were granted! Your faith must be great indeed, sir.

CLAIMANT Hardly, and stop calling me 'sir'. Besides, only one of us has been saved.

ROGER There are two of us here.

CLAIMANT But only one of us – ahem – is dying.

ROGER There was no hope for me, my friend. The ship was doomed.

CLAIMANT Ah, but you were not. You see, I have the benefit of hindsight. And maybe this is why we've been brought together. So that I may be of help to you, to show you the way forward.

Because I know your future. You didn't die on that ship, boy! You lived!

ROGER I survive?

CLAIMANT Of course you do! You always do! Listen.

The ship sinks, but you cling to some wreckage. The storm abates. You hang on for your life, though the sea is icy and the night seems endless. But in the morning... another ship! The *Osprey*. It rescues you.

Are you listening to me, boy? You live! Roger Tichborne lives!

They cheer and embrace.

CLAIMANT They give you food and take care of you. But you are terribly ill. Days pass in delirium. Little do you know, the ship is taking you to the other side of the world.

ROGER Wait... it doesn't take me home?

CLAIMANT No, it takes you to Van Diemen's Land. Hobart Town!

ROGER But how will I get home?

CLAIMANT Home? What waits for you there? Here is a new country, where you can craft a future without anyone's interference. Where a man can be anyone he wants.

ROGER But what is there for me in Van Diemen's Land? Isn't the place full of fiends and savages?

CLAIMANT Don't people think the same of South America? How you loved the wild beauty of the place. How simple life was in Mendoza and Santiago. No one knows you or asks you fool questions. It's just you and that big open sky. That's what Australia is like. It's a new world.

ROGER I could be my own man.

CLAIMANT That's exactly what you do! You become a stock rider – a horseman.

ROGER I love horses!

CLAIMANT Of course you do! You travel around, like you always have. You explore. Hobart, Melbourne, Gippsland. You work on stations all around the mainland. No ties. Nothing to hold you.

You take a new name. Remember in Valparaiso? There was a fellow there you much admired?

ROGER Do you mean Castro?

CLAIMANT Why should anyone know your business? You call yourself Tom Castro.

ROGER After my friend. A new name... in a new place.

CLAIMANT And you take up a new trade! You become a butcher.

Somehow, the CLAIMANT now has the knife – he has pickpocketed it from ROGER, who only now realises it. The CLAIMANT mimes slicing meat from a carcass.

CLAIMANT You're a businessman! You set up shop in a town called Wagga Wagga.

ROGER A butcher in Wag... wait, where?

CLAIMANT Wagga Wagga, Tom Castro! Wagga Wagga!

ROGER How do you know all this?

CLAIMANT I've lived it. I'm your future.

The CLAIMANT looks at the knife. There's an engraving on it.

CLAIMANT My word, I haven't seen this for years.

ROGER reaches for the knife, but the CLAIMANT keeps it away from him. The CLAIMANT reaches into his own jacket pocket and hands ROGER another, similar knife, an oddly intimate gesture.

ROGER *(reads the engraving on the CLAIMANT's knife)* RCT.

BOTH Roger Charles Tichborne. Sir Roger Charles Doughty Tichborne!

ROGER You're me!

CLAIMANT Now you can call me 'sir'. Sir Roger!

ROGER *(taking a better look at him)* You're me?

CLAIMANT Of course.

ROGER Wait... what about Mama? Did I tell Mama where I was?

CLAIMANT You didn't tell anyone where you were.

ROGER But Mama will be so worried! She only wanted the best for me. Lord knows what this will do to her. She is the sweetest and gentlest of women.

SCENE 3

A PLAYER emerges from the frame, finds an old veil amongst the theatre's stuff, and becomes the DOWAGER.

It is February 1853. The DOWAGER screams in rage at ROGER.

DOWAGER *Non!*

ROGER *Mama!*

DOWAGER *South America? I forbid it!*

ROGER *You cannot forbid me do anything, Mama.*

DOWAGER *This is how you repay me, you ungrateful child.*

ROGER *I am 24, Mama. I will make my own decisions.
Besides, Father doesn't care if I go.*

DOWAGER *Of course, your father doesn't care. When has he cared? It's that family of his, those Tichbornes who have put this idea in your head. If it were up to them, you'd be some stuck-up officer in that ridiculous army. All that time you spend with them. When was it who raised you?*

ROGER *You, Mama.*

DOWAGER *Oui, moi! Roger, what is in South America for you? A godless wilderness. I will hear no more about this. Come to me, child.*

ROGER sits, head in her lap.

DOWAGER *You cannot leave me, Roger. I stand alone against that family. They have never thought me good enough. But your uncle is ailing, I just know he is. And then your father will have the estates, and then eventually they will be yours.*

Then it will be me, and you, and we can do without all the Doughtys and the Tichbornes. This is your destiny, Roger. You don't need to search for another.

ROGER *I'm not in the army, Mama.*

DOWAGER *We will be left in peace.*

ROGER *I was discharged, Mama. They tormented me. I was not man enough for them. How could I stay? When you had made me like a woman, Mama! Always weak and ill. And French! Because you always made me speak French! You made me like you! You taught me nothing of the real world!*

DOWAGER *The real world! Filled with men like Tichbornes? You are more than those men will ever be!*

ROGER *You made me less than a man! Dressed me like a girl until I was 12!*

DOWAGER *As a homage to Our Lady!*

ROGER *As a homage to you! No more. I am going to be my own man, Mama. I am going to Chile, and I don't know how long for. But when I return, I am going to marry Kattie.*

DOWAGER It is a sin!

ROGER No more orders, Mama.

He walks away.

DOWAGER Roger, you cannot leave me. Come back! Come back to me.

ROGER paces the stage, while KATTIE enters, and the DOWAGER exits.

SCENE 4

ROGER sits on a nearby crate with a letter, an envelope and a pen. He reads the letter, signs his name, and puts it in the envelope.

KATTIE sneaks up behind him and puts her hands over his eyes.

KATTIE Is it about me?

ROGER Everything's about you.

ROGER stands and places the envelope in his jacket. There's a short cat-and-mouse game with KATTIE trying to get the envelope, and ROGER trying to kiss KATTIE. He eventually succeeds in holding her, heads in to kiss her on the lips, but at the last minute, she turns her head so the kiss lands on her cheek.

ROGER I don't have to go, you know.

KATTIE Then don't.

ROGER Or you could come with me!

KATTIE The other side of the world? That's your dream, not mine.

ROGER I'd come back for you.

KATTIE Told your mama yet?

ROGER She's not my keeper.

KATTIE She thinks she is!

ROGER I asked your father for your hand.

KATTIE And?

ROGER He refused.

KATTIE Well, thank God for that!

ROGER Why would you say that?

KATTIE Roger, I'm not going to marry you. You're my cousin.

ROGER I don't care about that.

KATTIE It's not right.

ROGER You don't mean that. If you did, then why are we doing this at all?

KATTIE Marriage is different, Roger. This is fun, but... it's not the same.

ROGER What you mean is you don't want to.



In 1854, Sir Roger Tichborne died at sea, leaving behind an enormous fortune.

But then, years later, he turns up again, working as a butcher in Wagga Wagga.

Is it the same man? At stake is an enormous fortune, the supremacy of the upper class and one man's lost soul.

The astonishing true story of the Tichborne Claimant, brought to life in a new play by David Sharpe.

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