

Stage*scripts*

A LITTLE BOX OF OBLIVION

an absurd one act play

by

Stephen Bean

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Stage scripts Ltd, Lantern House, 84 Littlehaven Lane, Horsham, West Sussex, RH12 4JB, UK

Tel : +44 (0)700 581 0581
Fax : +44 (0)700 581 0582
sales@stagescripts.com
www. stagescripts.com

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A Little Box Of Oblivion

Synopsis

This absurd one act play features five characters : a 'cool guy', a woman in a hurry, a neurotic, a 'doom merchant' and an amateur sleuth. They have no need of forenames or surnames and are referred to in the script simply by their character trait (except for Dick, the amateur sleuth).

It is a lovely spring day in an urban conurbation. Cool Guy is settling on a park bench to read the paper when Woman rushes on with a box. Before Cool Guy can say no, the box has been left on the bench with instructions that the box cannot be moved, knocked, tilted or opened.

A series of motley characters then begin to arrive, each with a theory about the contents of the box. Neurotic, spurred on by a Government leaflet recently received, is convinced it contains a bomb. Neurotic contacts the police, but they are busy dealing with a cat up a tree! Doom Merchant is equally convinced (because of the same leaflet) that it contains anthrax. They phone the police again, but they are now dealing with a threatened suicide jumper in the local apartment block. So they take it on themselves to warn the public, much to Cool Guy's amazement and amusement.

Thank goodness for Dick, the amateur sleuth, who on arrival uses fact and logic to disprove all their theories. The problem is that Dick thinks that the box contains a severed human head from a Mafia killing! Cool Guy has had enough and waves the box above his head to prove that it is "... just a cardboard box ...", only to be caught by Woman who lambasts Cool Guy for being untrustworthy. Still, everything's all right now. Isn't it?

Scene

A park bench in a run down inner city park. Early spring.

Characters

All the following characters are designated in the script according to their particular traits. Thus, with the exception of Woman, male or female actors can play any part. All characters will be referred to as he/she. It may be necessary to slightly alter the mild expletives used occasionally, to suit the usage by a man or a woman in a particular role.

-  **Cool Guy** ('Cool') - level headed and objective with a cynical wit, dressed smart-casual
-  **Woman** - 'flappy' in character. Must have green hair!
-  **Neurotic** ('Neuro') - compulsive obsessive, house is probably immaculately tidy.
-  **Doom Merchant** ('Doom') - dour, humourless. (If young, dress as a 'Goth'. If older, dress as an 'Anorak')
-  **Amateur Sleuth** ('Dick') - has been reading too many cheap detective novels, an English Bogart

(The name in brackets denotes the abbreviated name used in the script).

Essential Properties

- A cardboard box about 30cm (12") square
- Three park benches (one smashed and broken, and one burnt but recognisable. If required, these two can be omitted)
- A rubbish bin (*US : a public trash can*)
- A newspaper
- Carrier bags (*US : plastic grocery bags*) containing tins of baked beans
- A mobile phone **Crisp packet**

Additional props and scenery should be used as required to depict a run-down inner city park.

Sound Effects

Continuous bird song (optional).

Lighting

A bright spring morning.

Conventions Used

Text in upper case is shouted, and underlined text is spoken with emphasis.

A LITTLE BOX OF OBLIVION

Lights up to reveal Cool seated on the usable park bench reading a newspaper. Woman rushes on from SL holding a cardboard box. The box is about 30cms/12" square and is tied with string. Woman is obviously agitated. Cool only gives her a passing glance then goes back to the newspaper. Eventually Woman puts the box down very carefully at the other end of the bench to Cool, who watches the operation with mild curiosity. The bench should only be big enough to house the box and Cool with just enough room for one other person to squeeze in without unduly dislodging the box. Woman looks at her watch.

Woman (To Cool) Would you mind looking after my box?
Cool I beg your pardon?
Woman My box. Just watch it for me.
Cool Er ... hang on!
Woman Please, I normally wouldn't ask but it's an emergency. Please don't open it. And ... and don't give it a sudden knock ... Don't tilt it or lift it up ... Just don't move it. I'll be back as soon as I can.

Woman runs off SR.

Cool Whoa! What's in it? Oi! I never said that I ... It's nothing to do with me. Why can't I move it? Oh great! No, nothing to do with me. I never said I'd be responsible for it. (*Enter Neuro from SL carrying two heavy supermarket carrier bags. Obviously weary, Neuro stops by the bench, sees the box, looks left and right, then back to the box and bends down to move it*). No!

Neuro (*Jumps back*) What on earth?

Cool Don't move the box.

Neuro You gave me a fright!

Cool Sorry. Just don't move the box.

Neuro Is it yours?

Cool No.

Neuro Oh well then. (*Bends down to pick it up*).

Cool No! You mustn't move it.

Neuro It's not yours.

Cool I ... sort of said I'd ... mind it.

Neuro But I want to sit down.

Cool There's another bench up there. (*Points to the broken bench or off stage to SL*).

Neuro It was smashed up by vandals last week.

Cool What about that one over there. (*Points to the burnt bench or off stage to SR*).

Neuro Someone's tried to set it alight.

Cool You can still sit on it.

Neuro I'll get soot on my clothes. Look, this is ridiculous. I want to sit here. (*Bends again and goes to pick the box up*).

Cool No! You can't move it.

Neuro Why? What's in it?

Cool I don't know.

Neuro What do you mean you don't know?

Cool I don't know what is in the box but the woman who left it said it can't be moved, opened, tilted or knocked.

Neuro (*Horror stricken*) Good God! And you just let her walk off?

Cool Yes.

Neuro Tch, tch, tch!

Cool What else could I do?

Neuro What do you think is in it?

Cool How should I know?

Neuro And didn't you even think of asking?
Cool I tried but she sort of rushed off.
Neuro Rushed off? That's not a good sign.
Cool Sign?
Neuro Rushing off. Not good.
Cool Well she probably ... had to be somewhere ... I don't know.
Neuro Or ... she wanted to get as far from the blast as possible.
Cool (*Can't have heard right*) What did you say?
Neuro The blast! ... Get away from it.
Cool What ... blast?
Neuro When it goes off!
Cool When what goes off?
Neuro The bomb!
Cool A bomb!
Neuro I can see that it hasn't even entered your mind.
Cool Let me get this right. Are you saying that there's a bomb in that box? (*Looks at Neuro expecting a smile. Neuro, however, is deadly serious*). Oh for... ! A bomb?
Neuro What else could it be?
Cool (*Laughs*) Oh, God, a thousand things.
Neuro Such as?
Cool I don't know ... er ... a glass bowl. (*Goes back to newspaper*).
Pause. Neuro stands with folded arms and stares at Cool.
Neuro That's one.
Cool Sorry? (*Looks up from newspaper*).
Neuro You said a thousand things. A glass bowl, that's one: Just another nine hundred and ninety nine things to go.
Cool You're being ridiculous.
Neuro Tell me. Does this list of yours include a bomb?
Cool Well ...
Neuro Well?
Cool Well ... I suppose it has to do ... but I mean ... a bomb?
Neuro Why not?
Cool You don't get bombs round here do you.
Neuro You wouldn't have said that ~~sixty years~~ ago.
Cool What do you mean? ~~seventy five~~
Neuro Bombs round here.
Cool What, the Second World War?
Neuro They say several bombs dropped round here. My ~~mum's~~ ^{Grandma's} neighbour, Mrs Wilkins was killed while she was sat on the privy.
Cool Well yes, but that was the Second World War.
Neuro And now we're fighting in the Third World War.
Cool (*Appearing to be very concerned*) Third World War?
Neuro (*Pleased to have got the message across*) Yes ... Third World War.
Cool Wow! I missed that one! Well, that's what you get for buying a crap newspaper. (*Examining the newspaper*). You'd have thought they'd have at least given it a mention. Who is it this time? Not the Germans again?!
Neuro (*Annoyed at being ridiculed*) It's the international war on terrorism ... actually!
Cool (*Nonchalantly*) Oh. (*Then a thought*). Are you saying that the woman who left this box is a terrorist?
Neuro She might be.

Doom Have you read the leaflet?
Neuro (*Suddenly realising*). Oh of course! Earthy, sweaty, strawy ...
Doom & Neuro ... with a hint of stale urine.
Neuro I didn't smell ...
Doom And I'm a butcher in an abattoir, smelt the lot. Foot and mouth, swine fever, anthrax. Hey, I've had mad cow disease three times.
Cool Really? I'd never have guessed!
Neuro But what can we do?
Doom Nothing.
Neuro What do you mean?
Doom Anthrax is one of the most deadly diseases known to man. Just being stood as close as we are is probably enough.
Neuro You're joking.
Doom Can you hear me laughing? No, they'll put a two-hundred metre cordon around us, then a load of blokes in nuclear, biological and chemical suits will ... (*as if relishing the thought*) ... strip us naked and scrub us all over with stiff bristled brushes until we're red raw.
Neuro Goodness gracious!
Cool Right! That's it. I've had enough! I came to sit on this bench on a lovely spring morning for some peace and quiet and to read my newspaper. I have tried to make it clear that I have not accepted responsibility for this ... damned ... box along with it's twenty megaton nuclear bomb or virus, bloody X, or whatever it is! This box is nothing whatsoever to do with me. Now, just go away, and stop bothering me! **Sit**
Neuro Well what an attitude! "Nothing to do with me!". Sweep it under the carpet. Western civilisation is facing its biggest threat since The ~~Osmonds~~, and all you want to do is read your ~~book?~~ **newspaper** ~~Spice Girls~~
Doom And what will you be doing when you're in the last stages of Anthrax?
Cool What?
During Doom's next speech, as he/she lists the various body parts Neuro sticks out his/her tongue and holds it, feels his/her neck, rubs a hand over his/her lower abdomen and finally puts a hand round to his/her backside.
Doom **This has got to be read slowly enough to allow Neuro to react.** Swollen tongue, enlarged glands, renal failure and rectal prolapse.
Neuro Oh my God!
Cool (*Thinks*) I'll be finishing off my twelve year old single malt, listening to 'Dark Side Of The Moon' and smoking the longest spliff you've ever seen.
Neuro Oh, just as I thought. Thinking of yourself. What about helping people who are less fortunate?
Cool What? You mean like looking for someone's missing rabbit?
Neuro No! Comforting others whose disease is more advanced.
Cool Oh I see what you mean. (*Thinks*). Nope. Doors locked and loaded shotgun across my lap.
Neuro What a cold person you are.
Cool At least I won't be sat farting all over the place.
Doom Er ... this arguing isn't really helping the situation is it?
Neuro You're right. We need action.
Doom Need to do something.
Neuro Be decisive.
Doom Make decisions.
Neuro Action not words
Doom The lives of thousands of people are in our hands.
Neuro Do you think so?

Doom Sorry! That's what I meant.

Neuro Anyway, I'd better call the police again.

Cool **Sit** No, no, let him/her call his/her agent first!

Doom Very funny!

Neuro (*Dials again*) ... Oh hello police? It's me again ... I called a couple of minutes ago about the bomb in the park? ... yeah ... right ... right. When is the car coming? ... oh ... oh good. (*To Cool and Doom*). The cat's out of the tree. (*Back to the phone*). Sorry? ... Yes ... Oh God! (*To Cool and Doom*). And the flasher's barricaded himself into a lift. (*To phone*). Yes? ... Oh no! ... Oh dear. (*To Cool and Doom*). They've now got some poor soul out on a window ledge of a block of flats threatening to jump. (*To Phone*). Look, there's been a development ... We now think that it's some kind of biological agent ...

Doom (*Calling over to Neuro*) Anthrax!

Neuro Yes that's right, Anthrax ... It smells like it ... Earthy, sweaty, with a hint of stale urine ... Anthrax! ... We need someone here soon really, you know, some backup ... Oh, alright then ... and we wait for you to arrive? So, what should we do now? ... Right ... Okay.

Doom Don't forget the reservoir!

Neuro Hang on a minute ... (*To Doom*). What?

Doom Reservoir!

Neuro Ooh yes! (*To phone*). Put a cordon round the reservoir ... reservoir! Yes ... because that's where they'll put the anthrax of course! (*To Cool and Doom*). Another one who hasn't read the leaflet. (*To phone*). So we'll stay put until you arrive then? ... Okay, bye. (*Rings off*). We've got to stay with the box to prevent us spreading the disease and they'll be here as soon as they've dealt with the man on the ledge of Denham Flats.

Cool Denham Flats? Did you say Denham Flats?

Neuro Yes.

Cool Well that's Denham Flats there. (*Points off to a mutually agreed point that is 'Denham Flats'*). *NOTE : In the UK an apartment building is known as a block of flats*).

Neuro Oh God, yeah!

Doom Bloody hell!

Cool Must be at the other side.

Doom Yeah, can't see him.

Neuro What if he jumps?

Cool (*Sarcastically stating the obvious*). Then he'll ... probably die.

Neuro Oh Christ!

Cool But that's what he wants anyway.

Neuro What, to die?

Cool Well ... yeah. Why else would he be up there?

Doom He'd only be avoiding the rush anyway. (*Cool and Neuro look at Doom*). He would ... don't look at me like that! If we're right about the contents of that box, and I think we are, then he'll be lucky. A quick death as opposed to a slow lingering one. Unless of course he survives, legs mashed to a pulp, massive spinal damage and serious internal injuries, rest of his life on a life support machine ... (*Shouts, as if he is a nurse trying to get through to a comatose patient*). "Wink once for yes and twice for no!". Incontinent of both faeces and urine, and fed through a tube into his stomach. In fact, in a worse state than he was when he climbed out onto that ledge ... probably.

Cool Is it being so positive that keeps you going?

Neuro If only there was something we could do.

Doom Forget him. Lost cause. The best thing we could do is stay put.

Neuro It's what the police said. Stay put.

Doom and Neuro are now transfixed on the flats.

Cool *(Looking from Doom to Neuro and back again). Losers! (He/she goes back to the bench, stopping when he/she sees Dick sat there eating crisps. Cool approaches the bench not knowing quite what to do. Stands behind the box and goes to move it, stops and glances across to the still transfixed Doom and Neuro then thinks better of it. Cool then approaches Dick, hesitates, then speaks). Excuse me but I was sat there, I had to comfort those two over there (Indicates Doom and Neuro). They've just has some ... er, bad news.*

Dick *(Looks over to Doom and Neuro). Oh? ... Oh, I see. Well, right, okay. (Dick gets up and Cool sits in his/her place. Dick looks at the box. To Cool pointing at the box). Can I move this?*

Cool You can for me.

The next sequence takes place in slow motion. Neuro sees Dick about to move the box and runs towards Dick.

Neuro *(With a deep voice to emphasise the slow motion). Noooooooo!!!*

Neuro pushes Dick off the box. Dick falls forward and to the floor, spilling and crushing the crisps on the way. The action returns to 'real time'.

Dick What the bloody hell?!! *(Gets to his/her feet, and adapts the pose of someone about to engage in karate). I can do karate!*

Neuro I'm sorry.

Dick Get back ... get away I'll bloody have you ... I can do karate!

Neuro You were going to move the box.

Dick How the hell was I to know it was your box?

Neuro It's not mine.

Dick What was all that about then?

Neuro A ... a woman left it.

Dick A woman? What woman?

Neuro I ... we don't know.

Doom She just left it, and asked him/her to look after it. *(Points to Cool).*

Cool Don't bring me into it.

Dick What's inside? *(Pause. To Cool). Didn't she tell you?*

Cool *(Irritated). No!*

Dick Well if she expects you to look after it I think you have a right to know what's inside. Could be anything. Have you had a look?

Neuro No we haven't.

Dick Don't you think you should?

Neuro We can't.

Dick Why?

Pause.

Cool *(Sighs) Because ... she said that it shouldn't be knocked, tilted, shaken or opened.*

Dick You what?

Neuro *(To Doom) He/she thinks it's Anthrax.*

Dick *(Laughs) Anthrax?*

Doom *(To Neuro) Only after you thought it was a bomb.*

Dick It gets better! *(Looks at Cool who looks up to the sky, smiles and shakes head. Dick goes back to pick up crisps). Oh bloody hell, me crisps!*

Neuro I'm sorry.

Dick I should think you are! What a thing to do!

Neuro We might have been blown up!

Doom Or infected with anthrax.

Dick *(Immediately changing into 'detective' mode). What makes you think it's a bomb?*

Cool Well she was wearing (... *describes Woman's costume ...*). I didn't notice what she had on her feet. Could have been wheels for all I know.

Dick Did she have glasses?

Cool Nope.

Dick Contact lenses?

Cool Oh, come on!

Dick I could have told you. Earrings?

Cool Don't know.

Dick Any distinguishing features?

Cool Green hair!

Dick Apart from the green hair!

Cool No. Oh, she was carrying a box. Did I mention that?

Dick Right, lets examine what we have so far.

Cool I am awake aren't I?

Dick A woman arrives and dumps this box. (*Points to box*).

Cool Just in case we get it mixed up with any other boxes that are lying around.

Dick She seemed in a hurry. (*A sudden thought strikes*). Did she give the impression that someone was chasing her?

Cool What do you mean?

Dick Well ... was she looking over her shoulder. Did she seem frightened?

Cool Not particularly. She just put the box down very carefully and hurried off.

Dick She put the box down carefully?

Cool Yeah.

Neuro Which is what made me think it's a bomb.

Dick Ah, the bomb theory. Let's look at that shall we? If we were to accept that the box contains a bomb, we must assume that the woman who left it is, by definition, a terrorist. (*Looks round for agreement*). Yes?

Doom & Neuro Yes ... of course...(*etc*).

Dick (*To Neuro*). Right. A terrorist's aim is to inflict terror and panic to the general population. They plant the bomb in an area that's going to create the maximum disruption to everyday life and cost businesses time and money. If the bomb does go off, it must cause the maximum collateral damage possible. However, a bomb placed here would only destroy a park bench, scorch a couple of trees and maybe kill a couple of squirrels.

Cool Oh no! It would all escalate from there. The squirrels would blame the door mice and the river banks would be invaded because we all know that it's the water rats who are training the door mice. The water rats will make a retaliatory attack on the squirrels and the only ones to come out on top would be those low life ... bloody ... profiteering ... gun-running rabbits.

Dick (*Obviously ignoring the last comment*). So ... a park is probably the last place a terrorist would leave a bomb.

Neuro So it's not a bomb?

Dick Probably not. No.

Neuro Thank goodness for that!

Dick Right, the anthrax theory. I can see where you're coming from.

Cool (*Under breath*). Escaped from more like.

Dick (*To Cool*). Look, if you don't like what we're trying to achieve here you are free to leave.

Cool Leave? It's the most fun I've had since me budgie died!

Dick Then stop the wise cracks ...(*waiting for a reaction from Cool*). Yes?

Cool Okay ...okay.

Dick They'll get a hit man to assassinate you.

Neuro (*Shocked*) Oh my God!

Dick Walk up to your bed whilst you're asleep, and bang, bang, bang! (*Pause. Dick approaches Neuro menacingly. He/she is enjoying this*). It's usually three shots ... genitals, chest, then head.

Neuro But I've rung the police twice already.

Dick You haven't!

Neuro Once about the bomb and again about the Anthrax.

Dick They'll be on to you then. Yes, definitely marked out for execution.

Neuro Execution? (*Buckles at the knee*). Ooh, I've come over all funny!

Cool (*Rushes up to Neuro and helps him/her back to the bench*) That's enough. Stop it!

Dick I was only ...

Cool No! (*To Neuro*). Don't listen. A ... a space ship is more likely to come crashing through your front window than ...

Doom Ah ... (*Again, quoting verbatim from the leaflet*). "Don't touch anything, don't make direct contact with any aliens, as an inadvertent contact of matter with anti-matter might destroy the universe. And, consider them hostile until it is proved otherwise".

Cool Don't tell me ... the leaflet?

Doom Yep. "What To Do In The Event Of A Third Kind Encounter".

Cool Very thorough isn't it, this leaflet. What about ... 'If You're Attacked By A ... Flock Of ... Vampires'? Covered is it?

Doom No ... Don't be silly!

Dick Look, this is all wasting time. (*To Neuro*). We've got to think about getting you to a safe house. Now I know this bloke who lives in Cardiff. Advertises his safe house on the Internet. He's got a big cellar under the house, and I've sent a couple of people there in the past that are on the run from organised crime. Never heard from them since so he must do a good job of getting them underground.

Neuro Do you think he'll be able to 'make me disappear'?

Dick No problem. Now, you can't go back to your own house, they'll be waiting for you.

Neuro Do you think so?

Dick No doubt about it.

Cool Right that's it! This has gone far enough! (*To Dick*). You're preying on this person's fears.

Dick I am only ...

Cool No ... Stop it!

Dick You've got no right!

Cool Shut up!

Dick Oi!

Cool Can't you see what's happening here? You've all fallen for it haven't you? You've all been brainwashed to think the worst! (*Moves to the box*). It's a box. A bloody ... box! A cardboard box. Left here by some woman because ... she ... had to be somewhere and couldn't take it with her ... I don't know why. I don't care! I don't know what's in the box. I don't care! But the last thing to cross my mind was that it is something sinister, something evil, something harmful. Jesus Christ! Yes ... it might be a bomb, it might be a bloody ... biological ... whatever it is. It might be a severed human head. (*A little laugh*). It might be an infinite number of things. It's like we're going back to the fifties, all frightened of being rodgered by little green bug-eyed monsters, firing lasers out of their arses. Or ... or ... bloody ... Communists or something. (*To Neuro*). Hey, get back on the phone and tell the police that the box was left by an Arab woman in a headscarf ... ha ... they'd soon be here! Twenty years ago an Irish accent would have done it! Never mind cats up trees or perverts in shopping centres or some poor bugger out on a

window ledge ... Don't get me wrong ... I don't blame you. Oh God no! No ... it's not you're fault. You sit there night after night and watch ... 'real life': Soaps, where they're all knocking the shit out of each other. (*Dramatic news announcement style*). "News as it happens, all in glorious blood-red Technicolor". Newspapers. Political scandals. Who's to blame? Who's bonking ... bloody ... who!? Even the quiz shows. (*Adopts the persona of an annoying quiz show host*). "Right ... Rita! We'd like you to take this loaded revolver and shoot, through the head, who you think is the weakest link!". We're being robbed of the milk of human kindness. (*To Doom*). What would you do if you saw a four-year old kid walking down the street, crying it's eyes out and obviously lost ... eh? (*Doom is unable to answer*). Would it be "Oh dear sonny, have you lost your mum? Here take my hand and let's try and find her"? No ... I'll tell you what ... a lump of chewing gum on the pavement would suddenly assume a fascination you didn't know existed, but only for as long as it takes the kid to walk past you ... Jesus! Looks like HG Wells got it right after all! Yes! I see it now, you are right, I agree with you, there is something evil in this box. But ... what ... we don't ... (*Snatches up the box*) ... know! (*Neuro dives to the ground covering head, Doom puts a handkerchief to face and runs to a corner, and Dick hides face*). Ha! Look at you! Have I being blown to smithereens? No! Have I died in an agony of burst lungs and a rectal prolapse? No! Has some Italian hit-man blown my face away with a Tommy gun hidden in a violin case? No! No! (*Shaking and banging the box*). It's only a bloody cardboard box!

Ends up with it above head as Woman re-enters. She sees Cool with the box and is immediately shocked.

Woman What are you doing? (*Cool slowly lowers the box and looks at her*). What are you doing with my box?

Cool I ... er ... er ...

Woman I asked you not to touch it!

Cool Yes but ...

Woman Please just put it down on the bench as gently as possible. (*Cool places the box carefully back on the bench with Woman watching*). Thank you. (*She approaches the box, and, gently opening the lid, looks inside*). Tommy!? ... Tommy!? You all right? (*With utter relief*). Oh, there you are! Phew! (*To Cool*). What were you thinking about! I asked you not to touch the box. I said I'd be back!

Cool Well ... you see ...

Woman Don't you realise what you could have done?

Cool Yes, but ...

Woman It's a very difficult time, anything could have happened!

Cool I'm sorry!

Woman I should think you are! Did you never watch 'Blue Peter' as a kid? It's a very difficult time for a tortoise, coming out of hibernation!

Woman picks up the box and carries it off. Pause. Cool is very aware that Neuro, Doom and Dick's eyes are burning into him/her.

Dick Well, that's it then. Mystery solved.

Neuro A hibernating tortoise.

Doom Who would have thought it, eh?

Neuro (*Pointedly*). She said we shouldn't touch the box ...

Doom ... lift it or tilt it.

Dick Or ... bang it.

Neuro (*To Cool, smugly*). You could have killed the tortoise.

Cool (*Mockingly*). But at least we know that it wasn't a bomb!

Doom Shaking a hibernating tortoise like that ... terrible!

Cool Ha! If you'd had your way we'd all be shot through the head now!