

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Terry Pratchett's  
**MORT**  
The Play

adapted for the stage by  
Stephen Briggs

'Alle Thee Dysk's a Stage'

## About the Book

# Terry Pratchett's

# MORT

The Play

*adapted for the stage by Stephen Briggs*

Death comes to us all. When he came to Mort, he offered him a job.

But when Mort is left in charge for an evening, he allows his heart to rule his head and soon the whole of causality and the future of the Discworld itself, are at risk. Along the way, Mort encounters not only Death's adopted daughter, Ysabell - who has been 16 for 35 years - and his mysterious manservant Albert - whose cooking can harden an artery at ten paces - but also an incompetent wizard with a talking doorknocker and a beautiful, but rather bad-tempered and dead, princess. He also, of course, meets Death.

On Terry Pratchett's Discworld, Death really is a 7 foot skeleton in a black hooded robe and wielding a scythe. He is also fond of cats, enjoys a good curry, and rides around the skies on a magnificent white horse called Binky. Stephen Briggs has been involved in amateur dramatics for over 25 years and he assures us that the play can be staged without needing the budget of Industrial Light and Magic. Not only that, but the cast should still be able to be in the pub by 10 o'clock!

Oh, and a word of advice omitted from the play text:

Learn the Words

Havelock, Lord Vetinari

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**TERRY PRATCHETT'S**

**MORT**  
*the play*

*adapted for the stage by*  
**STEPHEN BRIGGS**



**CORGI BOOKS**

# INTRODUCTION

## AN AWFULLY BIG ADVENTURE

Since the publication of *The Streets of Ankh-Morpork*, I have been drawn ever further into the Discworld universe. As well as working with Terry on *The Discworld Companion*, I was suddenly in demand – well, OK, I was in demand when I was dressed as *Death* – to pose for publicity photos. The first session was for a Discworld computer game; then *Death* was again summoned to be photographed with Dave Greenslade and Terry for his CD *From the Discworld*. I was delighted to find myself invited to ‘play’ Didactylos in the *Small Gods* track; yes, that was me – ‘Nevertheless, the Turtle *does* move’. Er ... not my *real* voice, of course.

*Death* even got an invitation to London’s flashiest Indian restaurant to have a curry with a group of journalists as part of the publicity for a Discworld computer game. A whole room full of journalists but, unfortunately for *Death*, no take-away.

My drama club has now staged *Wyrd Sisters*, *Mort*, *Guards! Guards!*, *Men at Arms* and *Maskerade*. We were even invited to act out a tiny extract from ‘our’ *Guards! Guards!* for Sky TV’s *Book Programme*.

In fact, Oxford’s Studio Theatre Club were the first people ever to dramatise the Discworld.

We had a theatre that seats ninety people. We had a stage that was about the size of a pocket handkerchief with the wings of Tinkerbell. Put on a Discworld play? Simple ...

A flat, circular world borne through space on the backs of four enormous elephants who themselves stand on the carapace of a cosmically large turtle? Nothing to it. A seven-foot skeleton with glowing blue eyes? *No* problem. A sixty-foot fire-breathing dragon? A cinch.

My drama club had already staged its own adaptations of other works: Monty Python's *Life of Brian* and *Holy Grail* - and Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue* and *Blott on the Landscape*. We were looking for something new when someone said, 'Try Terry Pratchett - you'll like him.'

So I ventured into the previously uncharted territory of the 'Fantasy' section of the local bookstore. I read a Terry Pratchett book; I liked it. I read all of them. I wrote to Terry and asked if we could stage *Wyrd Sisters*. He said yes.

*Wyrd Sisters* sold out.

So did *Mort* the year after.

So did *Guards! Guards!*, *Men at Arms* and *Maskerade* in the three years after that. In fact, 'sold out' is too modest a word. 'Oversold very quickly so that by the time the local newspaper mentioned it was on we'd had to close the booking office' is nearer the mark.

My casts were all happy enough to read whichever book we were staging, and to read others in the canon too. The books stand on their own, but some knowledge of the wider Discworld ethos helps when adapting the stories, and can help the actors with their characterisations.

The Discworld stories are remarkably flexible in their character requirements. *Mort* has been performed successfully with a cast of three (adding in an extra thrill for the audience, who knew that sooner or later a character would have to have a dialogue with *themselves*. But it turned out very well). On the other hand, there is plenty of scope for peasants, wizards, beggars, thieves and general rhubarb merchants if the director is lucky enough to have actors available.

I'd better add a note of caution here. There are a lot of small parts in the plays which nevertheless require good acting ability (as we say in the Studio Theatre Club: 'There are no small parts, only small actors'). The character may have only four lines to say but one of them might well be the (potentially) funniest line in the play. Terry Pratchett is remarkably democratic in this respect. Spear-carriers, demons and even a humble doorknocker all get their moment of glory. Don't let them throw it away!

Terry writes very good dialogue. Not all authors do. But Terry, like Dickens, writes stuff which you can lift straight into your play. Although it was often necessary to combine several scenes from the book into one scene in the play, I tried to avoid changing the original Pratchett dialogue. After all, you perform an author's work because you like their style; as much of that style as possible should be evident in the play.

We aimed to keep our adaptations down to about two hours running time - with a 7.30 start and allowing 20 minutes for an interval, that would get the audience into the pub for an after-play drink by about 9.50, with the cast about 10 minutes after them (although slower-moving members of the audience could find the cast already there propping up the bar - we are true Coarse Actors!). Also, two hours is about right for the average play. This of course meant that some difficult decisions had to be taken in order to boil down the prose.

The important thing was to decide what was the basic plot: anything which didn't contribute to that was liable to be dropped in order to keep the play flowing. Favourite scenes, even favourite characters, had to be dumped.

I had to remember that not all the audience would be dyed-in-the-wool Pratchett fans. Some of them might just be normal theatre-goers who'd never read a fantasy novel in their whole lives, although I have to say that these now are a dwindling minority.

The books are episodic, and this can be a difficult concept to incorporate into a play. Set changes slow down the action. Any scene change that takes more than 30 seconds means you've lost the audience. Even *ten*-second changes, if repeated often enough, will lead to loss of interest.

The golden rule is - if you can do it without scenery, do it without scenery. It's a concept that has served radio drama very well (everyone *knows* that radio has the best scenery). And Shakespeare managed very well without it, too.

The plays do, however, call for some unusual props. Many of these were made by the cast and crew: a door with a hole for a talking, golden doorknocker, coronation mugs, large hourglasses for Death's house, sponge chips and pizzas, shadow puppets, archaic rifles, dragon-scorched books and Discworld newspapers ('Patrician Launches Victim's Charter'). Other, more specialised props were put 'out to contract': Death's sword and scythe, an orang-utan, the City Watch badge, a Death of Rats, a Greebo and two swamp dragons (one an elaborate hand puppet and one with a fire-proof compartment in its bottom for a flight scene).

Since the Studio Theatre Club started the trend in 1991, Terry and I have had many enquiries about staging the books - from as far afield as California, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia (as well as Sheffield, Glastonbury and the Isle of Man).

So how did our productions actually go? We enjoyed them. Our audiences seemed to enjoy them (after all, some of them were prepared, year after year, to travel down to Abingdon in Oxfordshire from as far afield as Taunton, Newcastle upon Tyne, Ipswich, Basingstoke and ... well, Oxford). Terry seemed to enjoy them, too. He said that many of our members looked as though they had been recruited straight off the streets of Ankh-Morpork. He said

that several of them were born to play the 'rude mechanicals' in Vitoller's troupe in *Wyrd Sisters*. He said that in his mind's eye the famous Ankh-Morpork City Watch *are* the players of the Studio Theatre Club.

I'm sure these were meant to be compliments.

## **MORT**

We staged *Mort* in 1992, after a surprising (to us) success with *Wyrd Sisters* the previous year.

As with *Wyrd Sisters*, some difficult choices had to be made to reduce Terry's book into a two-hour play, and a number of favoured scenes had to go (including the scene in the inn where the reality interface passes through while Mort drinks scumble). Inevitably, the adaptation was written originally with the restrictions of the tiny Unicorn Theatre, and the numbers of players I'd have available, in mind. This meant that complicated scenic effects were virtually impossible. Anyone thinking of staging a Discworld play can be as imaginative as they like - call upon the might of Industrial Light & Magic, if it's within their budget. But they *can* be staged with fairly achievable effects, and the notes that accompany the text are intended to be a guide for those with limited or no budget. Bigger groups, with teams of experts on hand, can let their imaginations run wild!

The script as it appears here is now tried and tested, but it isn't the *only* way to adapt the book. Other groups have made different choices. Some have many more people available than we did, and they've looked to add in 'crowd' scenes - perhaps the Duke's Head/Queen's Head scene, build up the Unseen University scenes and readmit the Librarian. Others have chosen to drop almost all the 'narration' bits. What is important, though, is to ensure that a scene left in at one point in the play doesn't rely for

part of its humour or logic on a scene you've cut elsewhere - or that a scene you've added as a show-stopper doesn't end up just slowing it down instead!

In short, though, our experience and that of other groups is that it pays to work hard on getting the costumes and lighting right, and to keep the scenery to little more than, perhaps, a few changes of level. One group with some resourceful technophiles achieved magnificent 'scenery' simply with sound effects and lighting ('dripping water' and rippling green light for a dungeon scene, for example). There's room for all sorts of ideas here. The Discworld, as it says in the books, is your mollusc.

### *Characterisation*

Within the constraints of what is known and vital about each character, there is still room for flexibility of interpretation. With the main roles, though, you have to recognize that your audiences will expect them to look as much like the book descriptions as possible. However, most drama clubs don't have a vast range from which to choose and it's the acting that's more important than the look of the player when it comes down to it!

**Death.** On the Discworld he is a seven-foot tall skeleton of polished bone, in whose eye sockets there are tiny points of light (usually blue). He normally wears a robe apparently woven of absolute darkness - and sometimes also a riding cloak fastened with a silver brooch. He smells, not unpleasantly, of the air in old, forgotten rooms.

His scythe looks normal enough, except for the blade: it is so thin you can see through it, a pale blue shimmer that could slice flame and chop sound. The sword has the same ice-blue, shadow-thin blade, of the extreme thinness necessary to separate body from soul.

His horse, though pale as per traditional specification, is entirely alive and called Binky. Death once tried a skeleton

horse after seeing a woodcut of himself on one - Death is easily influenced by that sort of thing - but he had to keep stopping to wire bits back on. The fiery steed that he tried next used to set fire to the stables.

Despite rumour he is not cruel. He is just terribly, terribly good at his job. It is said that he doesn't get angry, because anger is an emotion, and for emotion you need glands; however, he does seem to be capable of a piece of intellectual disapproval which has a very similar effect.

He is a traditionalist who prides himself on his personal service, and can become depressed when this is not appreciated.

Death has a property not locatable on any normal atlas, on which he has called into being a house and garden. There are no colours there except black, white and shades of grey; Death could use others but fails to see their significance. And, because he almost by definition lacks true creative ability - he can only copy what he has seen - no real time passes in his domain.

There is a strong suggestion in the books that Death is somehow *on our side*.

To stage Death, even *we* had to decide to spend some money. Death, we recognised, is the pivotal character; you *have* to get him as right as you can! We had Death's head-mask and gloves, robes and weapons made for us to our design by a firm called Creative Madness (now run as Spyder's FX, Chapel Corner, Exeter Road, Winkleigh, Devon). His eyes glowed blue, and the clear perspex blades of his sword and scythe - 'sharp' enough to see through! - had a tiny blue light hidden in their handles so that, on a dimly-lit stage, they glowed eerily. To aid this, we made sure that whenever Death or Mort used their weapons the stage was lit only by a strobe and the action changed to slow-motion; this enhanced the magical happening as Death took people and ensured that the glowing sword and scythe were shown to their best effect.

To get our Death as close as we could to his seven-foot height, we had him stalking around on heavy, stacked-up ice-skating boots. The final effect was very impressive and has not only made guest appearances in our subsequent Discworld plays, but has also featured in publicity shots for the Dave Greenslade *From the Discworld* CD and for the Psygnosis *Discworld* computer game.

**Mort.** Mortimer. Youngest son of Lezek. Tall, red-haired and freckled, thin white face, with the sort of body that seemed to be only marginally under its owner's control; it appeared to have been built out of knees. He had the kind of vague, cheerful helpfulness that serious men soon learned to dread.

Despite these drawbacks Mort was chosen by Death to be his apprentice, and during that time became considerably less undirected and considerably more serious. Mort married Ysabell and became Duke of Sto Helit.

As Duke, his coat of arms was a faux croisé on a sablier rampant against a sable field. His motto: NON TIMETIS MESSOR.

**Ysabell.** Death's adopted daughter. When first introduced, she was a sixteen-year-old young woman (although the age can be changed if you don't have a suitable actress!) with silver hair, silver eyes and a slight suggestion of too many chocolates. Not, of course, a blood relation to the Grim Reaper - no real explanation has been given as to why he saved her as a baby when her parents were killed in the Great Nef.

It says a lot for Ysabell's basic mental stability that she remained even halfway sane in Death's house, where no time passes and black is considered the appropriate colour for almost everything. She certainly developed an obsessive

interest in tragic heroines and also a fixation for the colour pink.

**Albert.** Death's manservant, but also Alberto Malich the Wise, the founder of the Unseen University (1222-1289 by the city count of that time).

Although he is, in real years, only about 67, he has been alive while two thousand years have passed on the Disc.

The generally held belief is that Alberto, one of the most powerful wizards alive at the time, tried to outwit Death by performing the Rite of AshkEnte backwards. In so far as his charred notebooks hold any clue, he seemed to believe that he could obtain another 67 years of life.

Back on the Disc, Albert would have had only 91 days, 3 hours and 5 minutes left to live. That is now down to a handful of seconds, since most of it has been frittered away on shopping trips and holidays back in the world. When in Ankh-Morpork, Albert stays at the Young-Men's-Reformed-Cultists-of-the-Ichor-God-Bel-Shamharoth Association, where he nicks the soap and towels (Death has not got the knack of making towels, or soap, or anything to do with plumbing).

In appearance, Albert is a small hunched old man. This merely shows that first impressions can be wrong. Second impressions suggest quite a tall, wiry man who merely walks like the third illustration along in the usual How Man Evolved diagram. He has a red nose which drips so much that people talking to him blow their own noses out of sympathy.

**Cutwell.** Wizard in Wall Street, Sto Lat. Cutwell is a young wizard, 20 years old, with curly hair and no beard. He is basically good-humoured, with a round, rather plump face - pink and white like a pork pie. When first seen in the book he was wearing a grubby hooded robe with frayed edges and a pointy hat which has seen better days.

He lodged in a very untidy house with peeling plaster, and a blackened brass plaque by the door - 'Igneous Cutwell, DM (Unseen), Marster of the Infinit, Illuminartus, Wyzard to Princes, Gardian of the Sacred Portalls, If Out leave Maile with Mrs Nugent Next Door'.

The room inside combined the usual get-it-in-a-kit wizard's workroom, down to the stuffed alligator and things in jars, with the typical room of a student (that is to say, there are no longer any recognisable flat surfaces and the carpet parts company with the sole of the foot only with reluctance).

***Keli.*** Princess Kelirehenna of Sto Lat. When we first encountered her, she was a slim, red-haired girl of fifteen (mind you, drama clubs have used much older actresses to good effect) with a strong jawline; not beautiful, being over-endowed in the freckle department and, frankly, rather on the skinny side.

Her role in life was to fail to be killed by an assassin due to the gland-led incompetence of Mort.

She eventually became Her Supreme Majesty, Queen Kelirehenna I, Lord of Sto Lat, Protector of the Eight Protectorates, and Empress of the Long Thin Debated Piece Hubwards of Sto Kerrig.

### *Costumes*

We played most of the characters around the Renaissance period, although Ysabell was dressed in pre-Raphaelite style (apart from the pink fluffy dressing-gown), Albert was a Georgian manservant, and Keeble was somewhere around the twentieth century. Cutwell's long, green, medieval robe was set off with a college scarf (not the real UU one - they've only become available since then!); he also sported horn-rimmed specs repaired 'Jack-Duckworth-style' with sticking plaster. Mort wore a wild-looking red wig, and our

Princess Keli coloured her own hair a rather more tasteful red, to suit the book description.

### *Scenery*

Virtually none. We performed on a black set decorated with hourglasses and books and dominated by an 'oil painting' of Alberto Malich. Within that we used the minimum of furniture necessary to establish the settings. Above the stage was our screen for the shadow puppets.

### *Special effects*

Apart from Death's glowing scythe and sword, we also used flash pods for Death's entrance and exit from the Rite of AshkEnte scene and strobes for those occasions when the sword or scythe were wielded. Other little bits and pieces included:

***Albert's runny nose.*** Our budget was tiny for this aspect. We managed to run to a false hooked nose for Albert, Death's manservant, and a search of haberdasher's unearthed an opalescent teardrop bead that we stitched loosely to the tip of the nose, where it trembled most realistically!

***Binky.*** Binky gave us more worries. A panto horse would look ridiculous; so would a stuffed head appearing from the wings. Should we simply ignore this aspect of the plot? No! We decided on a series of shadow puppets, operated against a painted screen above the stage. In the event this simple device not only got over the concept of the flying horse but also, with carefully selected musical accompaniment, entertained the audience during the occasional brief bit of scene-changing.

***The Dead.*** The other concern was the need for people to die on stage; for there to be a body, but for the same