

EPISODE 1 - ACTION

Written by

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OVER BLACK: EDINBURGH. MARCH 1828

EXT. LEITH DOCKYARD - DAY

Burke and Hare are within a large group of men surrounding the FOREMAN [45]. They are all talking amongst themselves. The foreman is a square jawed, burly man with a thick moustache. He hold a piece of paper. To his side stands his ASSISTANT [30].

FOREMAN

Alright boys! A bit of silence if you don't mind.

The men quieten and give the foreman their attention. The foreman looks at the piece of paper then at the men.

He begins pointing at one man after another.

FOREMAN (CONT'D)

You. You. You and you. Yard 51.

The chosen men step out from the crowd and are handed a token from the foreman's assistant. The foreman continues.

HARE

(whispers)

If that bastard passes us again, I'm gonna speak my mind.

BURKE

(whispers)

I don't think he likes our kind.

Hare holds his gaze firmly on the foreman as he allocates jobs until, eventually, he begins to fold up his piece of paper.

FOREMAN

Right. That's it for today.

The remaining men grumble as they begin to disperse, while the foreman turns to leave.

HARE

You have a problem with us?

The foreman and his assistant pivot towards Burke and Hare.

FOREMAN

In what way...paddy?

Hare walks towards the foreman followed by Burke.

HARE
 Weeks we've been coming here and I
 can count on one hand the times
 we've got work.

FOREMAN ASSISTANT
 We've -

HARE
 Us two worked on the Union Canal.
 We worked hard. Got the job done.

Hare is almost in the foreman's face.

HARE (CONT'D)
 Yet you seem to think maybe we're
 not up to it?

FOREMAN
 Round here, it's our own first.
 When we need the Micks, we'll let
 you know.

HARE
 Is that right?

Suddenly a fist from Hare slams into the cheek of the
 foreman who staggers back before falling to the ground.
 Burke is surprised at first, then bursts into laughter. The
 foreman's assistant reels back in fear.

BURKE
 Yeah.

Hare bends down towards the foreman.

HARE
 I ain't no Mick, Jock.

Burke and Hare turn and walk away as the foreman groans on
 the ground.

HARE (CONT'D)
 (to Burke)
 He had it coming.

Hare feels a hand on his shoulder. He pivots to receive a
 fist to the face, causing his legs to buckle and fall to the
 cobbled ground. The foreman turns to Burke.

FOREMAN
 You want the same paddy?

Burke answers with two blows in quick succession. The foreman staggers back in shock then a third blow floors the foreman.

In the distance a group of men spot the incident and begin running towards them, shouting.

Burke glances at Hare who is rising to his feet while rubbing his bruised face.

BURKE

We need to go.

Hare sees the advancing men. He raises two fingers into the air and laughs.

HARE

Feck you, ya bastards!

The two men run to escape the scene, laughing with pride.

INT. SURGEONS HALL/KNOX'S STUDY - DAY

DR. ROBERT KNOX [37] stands between a desk and the window as daylight crosses the dark oak panelled room.

A painting of The Death of Major Peirson by John Singleton Copley adorns the wall with bookshelves lined along one side. A globe is positioned in the corner. The room emits an educated life.

Opposite the desk, ARCHIBALD JOHNSON [28] leans forward from his chair, clasping his pencil and notes, with a frown on his face.

MR. JOHNSON

(confounded)

But your science doesn't comply
with this age of enlightenment.

Knox responds with a voice as stiff and erudite as his posture, sneering at his inquisitor.

KNOX

(indignant)

You refute my objectives?

MR. JOHNSON

(defensive)

Only the means.

KNOX

(anger)

Our government does little to help
the cause of the Anatomist with
this infernal Murder Act that
stymies and stifles our
understanding of the human body.

Knox turns round to face Johnson. Dressed in black with a red scarf cravat, he wears spectacles, one lens tinted to hide his disabled eye. He holds his pipe in one hand and a business card in the other. He looks at the card.

The card reads:

Mr. Archibald Johnson, Journalist, Edinburgh Courant

(an address is in small print)

KNOX (CONT'D)

But perseverance, is a skill I have
had many years to hone.

Knox places the card on the desk. Johnson is scribbling notes.

Like the goddess Theia, it shines a
light on the path of my deliverance
to blight the illls and disease the
people of these islands suffer.

There is a knock at the door.

KNOX (O.C.) (CONT'D)

(robust)

Enter!

The door opens and DAVID PATERSON [35], Dr Knox's assistant, enters.

MR PATERSON

Sir, your students await for class
to begin.

Knox walks around the desk and looks down at Johnson, who waits for some prompt.

KNOX

Would you care to accompany me to
where my work is appreciated?

Johnson leans down and retrieves a satchel to which he places his notebook and pencil. He remains seated, waiting for Knox to lead the way.

MR. JOHNSON
I would be delighted, sir.

KNOX
Then follow me.

Johnson rises but remains behind Knox as they advance to the doorway.

EXT. WEST PORT STREET - SAME TIME

Facing away, BURKE [28] and HARE [29], with a noticeable bruise under his eye, walk along the cobbled street lined with buildings that have seen better days. This is the cramped, destitute quarter of the West Port, where the poor and desperate live a daily life of survival. Dressed in well-worn clothes the thin, wispy Hare walks side by side with Burke, thick jowled and broad shouldered.

Burke spits a glob of flem onto the roadside to the disgust of passers-by.

As they continue, Hare helps himself to an apple from a crate outside a fruit and veg shop and crunches into it.

INT. SURGEON'S HALL/CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Paterson walks in front of the two men, passing medical illustrations that hang on the walls of the wide corridor.

KNOX
I am no believer of the faith but
like Moses climbing Mount Nebo, I
have spent many years striving to
reach my own Promised Land.

The three men continue along the hallway. Knox looks straight ahead while Johnson watches him.

KNOX (CONT'D)
From tending to the wounded at
Waterloo, my climb to the peak has
taken me to Paris and London,
working with the greatest minds.
Here I am acknowledged as the
'primus et incomparabilis'.

At the end of the hallway they take a left turn. A lady dressed in nursing attire steps out of a door.

NURSE
Good day doctor.

Knox nods in acknowledgement but does not speak to her.

MR. JOHNSON

Does that mean you have achieved
all that is possible?

Two suited young men walk past in the opposite direction.
They acknowledge Knox with a nod. Knox reciprocates.

KNOX

Far from it. There is much work
still to be done before the name Dr
Knox will be synonymous with
anatomy a hundred years from now.

MR. JOHNSON

That is indeed a bold statement.

Knox stops in his tracks and looks at Johnson, perplexed.

KNOX

There is nothing bold in
acknowledging the skills one
possesses.

Knox points to a picture on the wall of "The Anatomy of Dr
Willem Roell"

KNOX (CONT'D)

Understanding the human body is my
passion. Leading others into that
light is my elixir. That is not
bold. That is fact.

Johnson is impressed. He looks closer at the painting.

EXT. WEST PORT STREET - CONTINUOUS

Burke and Hare approach a general store called Rymer's that
sells food, alcohol and utensils. Barrels of grain and
crates of vegetables line the front of the shop, its window
peppered with leaflets and posters.

MR. JOHNSON (V.O.)

What about the appropriation of the
bodies?

Hare stops to look in the window, gripping the shoulder of
Burke to draw his attention to something on display in the
shop.

KNOX (V.O.)

What about it?

As Burke and Hare look in the window, Hare throws away the remainder of the apple into the street then proceeds towards the doorway of the shop followed by Burke.

MR. JOHNSON (V.O.)
Your lectures seem unaffected by the restriction of bodies, yet hallowed ground is repeatedly parted to take those who rest in peace.

As Burke and Hare enter the doorway of the store, Hare looks back, his face in full view. He possesses the look of a man with evil in his veins.

KNOX (V.O.)
You refer to those body snatchers, do you not?

Hare holds his gaze then, with Burke, he pivots and enters the shop.

INT. SURGEON'S HALL/CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Johnson and Knox stand face to face.

MR. JOHNSON
I have reported such incidents on too many occasions to count.

KNOX
(abrupt)
All across these lands, charlatans attempt to obtain, by any means, subjects for their cause.

MR. JOHNSON
And you do not fall into that category?

KNOX
(indignant)
I do not dig bodies in the middle of the night.

MR. JOHNSON
(apprehensive)
But do you facilitate it?

EXT. WEST PORT STREET - CONTINUOUS

Burke and Hare exit the shop with each holding a jug of whisky. Hare has a lit cigarette between his lips.

They stop at the doorway. With his free hand, Hare grips the cigarette and exhales.

KNOX (V.O.)
(aloof)
I am an anatomist. It is not for me
to investigate every subject that
comes my way.

Burke and Hare take a few steps to the close adjacent to Rymer's which (above the entrance) reads "Tanner's Close".

MR. JOHNSON (V.O.)
But from somewhere, they come.

Burke and Hare begin to make their way down the close.

INT. SURGEON'S HALL/CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Paterson, Knox and Johnson stand at a set of double doors behind which can be heard the murmur of voices.

KNOX
(jovial)
If you care to follow Mr
Paterson...

Knox gestures to a side door. Knox smiles menacingly.

KNOX (CONT'D)
...you will witness the wonders of
the anatomist.

Paterson grins. He opens the door for Johnson to enter.

KNOX (CONT'D)
Good day, Mr. Johnson. I look
forward to reading what you have to
say.

INT. SURGEONS HALL/LECTURE THEATRE - MOMENTS LATER

Rows of students form a semi-circle around the focal point of a plinth where a dead body lies under a white sheet. Facing the audience with his arms outstretched, a scalpel in his right hand, Knox dramatically pulls the sheet to reveal a body lying on the table for his audience of students to view while Johnson watches.

KNOX
Shall we begin?

There is a rapturous response from the students with clapping and whooping.

EXT. GRASSMARKET - DAY

Through the street of the Grassmarket we hear the clapping and cheering of an audience watching a puppet show. The street is busy with hawkers and stalls. Men buy and sell cattle, while coaches and horse-drawn carts pass by.

Moving through the street, the sound of people slowly dissipates as we enter the West Port.

An old man can be seen bent over, walking slowly up towards Tanner's Close.

The man turns into the close and proceeds down into the dimly lit lane. Sewage runs downhill past the tenement doorways.

EXT. TANNERS CLOSE - CONTINUOUS

The sound of voices singing can be heard from inside the house as OLD DONALD [72], dressed in worn, bedraggled clothes walks towards the door of the house,

Grey-faced, he reaches for the handle with his shaking hand while emitting a throaty cough. Jovial voices can be heard inside. He slowly opens the door.

INT. MAIN ROOM IN HARES' LODGINGS - CONTINUOUS

The room is sparse with a simple bed, chair and a stool occupied by Burke, who is stuffing a hole in his shoe in front of an unlit fireplace.

Hare dances on the spot in the middle of the room holding a jug of whisky.

MARGARET HARE [33] sits on the chair, breast feeding an infant with her back to the others.

HELEN MCDUGAL [24] sits on the floor facing the fireplace drinking whisky from a jar.

The Hares and Burke speak with an Irish drawl, while Helen McDougal sports a Scottish accent.

HELEN MCDUGAL

Ah Donald, you've decided to join us after all?

DONALD

Aye, but I'm feelin' richt poorly and will no be havin any o' that whisky this day.

The old man shuffles over to the vacant bed. Hare stands and watches Donald cross the room.

HARE

Just remember you still owe us rent
old man.

Donald, slightly bent over, coughs persistently.

DONALD

(gruff)

Aye, well my pension will mend your
troubles come two days from now.

Hare advances towards Donald with a sense of intent.

MARGARET HARE

(abrupt)

Leave him be. The old man is
poorly.

Hare stops and turns to Margaret.

HARE

There are times, woman, when you
remind me of me old army sergeant.

Margaret removes the child from her breast and pulls over her shawl.

MARGARET HARE

(firm)

Well Old Donald is good to his word
and just remember who's lodging
this is.

HELEN MCDUGAL

You landed on your feet with this
place Maggie.

MARGARET HARE

Aye, I did that.

HARE

(sardonic)

Maybe Helen would like to know how
you came by this palace.

INT. FLASHBACK TO: MAIN ROOM IN HARES' LODGINGS - DAY

Superimpose: One Year Earlier

The lodgings look cleaner as a fire glows in the hearth.