

GREATREX

Written by

Stephen Hall

Email: shsc21441@gmail.com

www.hereandback.co.uk/screenplays

EXT. PORT PHILLIP - DAY

Under the burning sun, the convict ship Maitland is harboured at the busy Port Phillip with shackled prisoners being led down the gangway on to land. The dock is bustling with men transferring cargo between wagons to and from an array of ships lining the shore, creating clouds of dust from the dry earth that irritates the eyes and catches the back of the throat.

At six foot in height and broad-shouldered, the dishevelled figure of JOHN HENRY GREATREX [19], his tattered clothes hanging loosely from his filthy body, stands out among the motley crowd of men being led towards a line of wooden tables where uniformed officers and medics process each criminal before being dispatched to waiting wagons which will deliver them to their place of work.

EXT. PORT PHILLIP/PROCESSING TABLE - CONTINUOUS

The foreman of the Process walks up and down the line of convicts.

CONVICT PROCESS FOREMAN

You are now in the employ of the British Government. Any of you men have skills of use then now is your chance to state your worth otherwise you take whatever job is given. From this moment on till the end of your sentence, should any man be convicted of any crime, no matter how small, the punishment will be hard labour. Do you understand?

The men mumble their understanding.

CONVICT PROCESS FOREMAN (CONT'D)

Then line up and we shall begin.

The young convict stands in line and watches the processing of an accompanying criminal ahead of him.

CONVICT PROCESS OFFICER

Trade?

PROCESS CONVICT

Shoemaker.

The Process Officer hands a slip of paper to the convict.

CONVICT PROCESS OFFICER
Wagon Four. Give this to the
driver.

Greatrex shuffles with clanking leg chains to the table and takes his turn to find out what his fate will be. An officer sits behind the table, a large ledger book open in front of him, ready to document each incomer.

CONVICT PROCESS OFFICER (CONT'D)
Name?

GREATREX
John Henry Greatrex

The officer begins to write in the ledger. Without looking up at the convict he continues to speak.

CONVICT PROCESS OFFICER
Trade?

GREATREX
Actor.

The young convict pulls back his shoulders and puffs his chest out confidently and smiles as the officer looks up at him and studies the bedraggled teenager who speaks with an accentuated English brogue.

CONVICT PROCESS OFFICER
They have such in Birmingham?

The young man smiles confidently.

GREATREX
They do. Even the great bard
Shakespeare honed his skills in
those parts.

The officer looks up quizzically then chuckles.

CONVICT PROCESS OFFICER
Is that so?

GREATREX
As God is my witness.

The officer returns his attention to the ledger and begins writing before taking a slip of paper, stamping it authoritatively and handing it over to the boy.

CONVICT PROCESS OFFICER
Wagon ten.

He points towards the line of wagons with numbers painted on the side.

CONVICT PROCESS OFFICER (CONT'D)
Give it to the driver.

GREATREX
Aye sir.

The boy shuffles among the other convicts towards the wagon leaving the officer to process the next criminal.

EXT. PORT PHILLIP/WAGON - MOMENTS LATER

Sitting on the floor of the open wagon, two men sitting up front, Greatrex braces himself among the group of prisoners as they begin to depart the port, his transportation bumping along the uneven dirt road.

A fellow convict, sitting by his side, turns to him.

WAGON CONVICT
What brought you to this god forsaken place?

GREATREX
Theft...though it was money I was due.

The sallow convict chuckles.

WAGON CONVICT
Aye, they all say that. How long?

GREATREX
Seven years.

The convict ponders as the wagon rocks from side to side.

WAGON CONVICT
Eighteen fifty-three will be a long time coming. Still, there are others that will likely die in this land before they see England again.

Greatrex remains silent as he looks around at the sad bunch of miscreants who have accepted their doom.

FADE TO:BLACK

FADE IN

EXT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/STREET - DAY

The large, impressive wooden building that can accommodate one thousand customers, dominates the town that is bustling with transportation across the dirt road of the main street in the stifling heat this late morning. Pedestrians trod the wooden sidewalks that are flanked by an assortment of shops and saloons offering service to the myriad of men and women who reflect a working population diverse for a growing location.

The driver's accomplice jumps down off the wagon and advances towards the rear, unlocking the back to allow one to disembark. Holding a slip of paper, he looks up at the convicts.

WAGON DRIVER ASSISTANT
Greatrex.

The young man rises awkwardly to his feet and manoeuvres himself to the end of the wagon before jumping down on to the road.

WAGON DRIVER ASSISTANT (CONT'D)
Follow me.

The two men advance towards the theatre.

INT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/FOYER - DAY

A rich red carpet blankets the floor that leads towards a central staircase with passageways on either side all leading to the auditorium. Empty kiosks flank the circular foyer where customers would pay for their tickets while in the centre a stout, balding MR CHAMBERS [42] wearing a dark suit and white-collared shirt converses with a young girl.

Aware of the two men entering, he glances round watching them advance.

WAGON DRIVER ASSISTANT
(to Mr Chambers)
Your new dogsbody. John Greatrex.

As the young girl exits, Greatrex scans the foyer in awe as the accompanying man retrieves a key from his pocket and unlocks the leg cuffs.

The manager studies the young man with an air of authority as a slip of paper is handed over.

WAGON DRIVER ASSISTANT (CONT'D)

(to Greatrex)

You fuck this up and you'll be
breaking rocks. You understand?

Greatrex nods solemnly.

The manager reads the slip of paper then looks at the boy.

MR CHAMBERS

(surprised)

Actor?

WAGON DRIVER ASSISTANT

So he says.

MR CHAMBERS

(to Greatrex)

Follow me.

The driver's assistant pivots and leaves the theatre as the manager and Greatrex head down one of the side passageways.

FADE TO:BLACK

FADE IN

INT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/AUDITORIUM - DAY

With no windows, the light is dim as the two men walk down the middle aisle, rows of red-cushioned seats filling the floor space. Ahead, two men and a woman rehearse on the wooden stage in front of a row of gas lamps spreading a soft glow where they stand.

Mr Chambers and Greatrex, his eyes fixed on the actors, pass the front of the stage, climb some steps and enter the rear.

INT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/GREATREX'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Mr Chambers opens a door and enters a hovel of a room containing a single bed and side-table with a solitary oil lamp. A barred window partially hidden by a tattered curtain allows the daylight to expose the basic conditions to the young man. Dust sprinkles in the air of the humid room.

MR CHAMBERS

Your sleeping quarters. Three meals
a day. One shilling a week.

The manager leans over to the side-table and lays the slip of paper down and retrieves a pen from inside his jacket, as Greatrex sits on the side of the bed behind him.

The older man pulls a hanky from his right pocket, unaware that a pound note inadvertently slips out and quietly floats to the floor. He wipes his forehead, beads of sweat trickle down his temple.

MR CHAMBERS (CONT'D)

The heat is unbearable in this land
but you will get accustomed to it.

He begins to write his signature on the piece of paper as Greatrex softly places his boot over the note and draws it under the bed.

Chambers turns to the young man.

MR CHAMBERS (CONT'D)

You need to sign this so I can send
it.

Greatrex rises and takes hold of the pen before adding his signature below Chamber's, then returns the pen to its owner.

MR CHAMBERS (CONT'D)

Good. Let's get you started.

FADE TO:BLACK

FADE IN

INT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

SUPERIMPOSE: Three months later.

The auditorium is empty apart from four actors on stage, two men and two women, while Greatrex is packing a box with straw at the side. The women wear skirts and loose-fitting blouses while the men are in cotton trousers and collarless shirts. Male ACTOR #1 [37] stands centre stage with the others circled around him. Reciting their lines, they project their voices confidently across the stage.

ACTOR #1

Thou shall not bequeath such riches
in times of trouble, madam?

Female ACTOR #2 [26] sweeps across the floor, her arms waving in the air.

ACTOR #2

Not if you're heart ladens you with
guilt!

Male ACTOR #3 [25] abruptly advances towards Actor #2 and grabs her by the shoulders.

ACTOR #3
We should be gone from here...

Actor 3 stops his reciting to cough.

ACTOR #3 (CONT'D)
Excuse me.

He raises a hand to his mouth and coughs again.

ACTOR #1
Would you care for some water?

Actor 3 nods in response as the coughing becomes more persistent.

Female ACTOR #4 [25] rushes to the side of the stage as Greatrex stops stuffing the box to watch the events unfold.

The young woman grabs a ladle of water from a bucket and returns to the stage.

By now the face of Actor 3 is reddening as he grabs the ladle and drinks but he splutters through the persistent coughing.

At that moment, Mr Chambers enters the auditorium from the back of the stalls to see the actors on stage tending to their colleague. Briskly he advances.

ACTOR #1 (CONT'D)
We need a doctor!

INT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/AUDITORIUM/BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Greatrex listens to the commotion while holding a small vial in his hands which he drops in a metal bucket that contains rubbish.

INT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/AUDITORIUM - MOMENTS LATER

The manager and the three remaining actors stand on the stage watching the ill actor be led up the aisle, doubled over and groaning.

ACTOR #2
What shall become of him?

MR CHAMBERS

He will recover I do not doubt but
we have a performance to deliver
next week and time is of an
essence.

From behind the curtain, the voice of Greatrex bellows out.

GREATREX (O.S.)

We should be gone from here for
under that facade reasons a man
intent on trouble!

The group look around to where the voice is coming from.

MR CHAMBERS

Boy! Come here.

INT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/AUDITORIUM - CONTINUOUS

The young man confidently smiles as he appears on stage.

MR CHAMBERS

(angry)

You eavesdrop on matters not of
your concern?

The smile instantly disappears.

GREATREX

Sorry sir.

The manager advances as if to take a swipe at the young man.

ACTOR #1

Mr Chambers. Wait!

The manager stops in his tracks and turns to the actors.

ACTOR #1 (CONT'D)

(to Greatrex)

You have been learning the lines?

GREATREX

Aye sir but not to cause
disharmony.

ACTOR #1

You have performed before?

GREATREX

On occasion sir.

Actor 1 turns to the manager, raising an eyebrow.

ACTOR #1
We do need someone.

Chambers looks gruffly at the young man, unimpressed.

MR CHAMBERS
Give him the script and run through
it, then let me know if he is good
enough.

The manager makes his way across the stage to depart the scene.

MR CHAMBERS (CONT'D)
(to Greatrex)
It'll still be a shilling a week
for now.

FADE TO:BLACK

FADE IN

INT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

A packed audience applaud loudly as the appreciative cast bow before them. Greatrex glances across to Actor 1 and smiles. Actor 1 nods in acknowledgement.

MONTAGE:

Poster for a performance showing Greatrex as a small part actor. The poster indicates the year is 1847.

Greatrex bows with the cast to an applauding audience.

Poster for a performance showing Greatrex as a supporting actor. The poster indicates the year is 1848.

Greatrex, now with a beard, performs on stage in a scene with other actors.

Poster for a performance showing Greatrex as leading actor. The poster indicates the year is 1849.

Greatrex stands in front of the cast as they take a bow and he turns and acknowledges them to the applauding audience.

INT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

As the curtain falls down in front of the cast to rousing applause, Greatrex and the others head backstage conversing between themselves.

GREATREX
Well done everyone.

EXT. QUEEN'S THEATRE/ACTORS ENTRANCE/STREET - NIGHT

In the subdued, dark alley the actor, dressed in his normal attire, closes the door that clearly indicates Staff Entrance. Alone, he purposefully walks towards the main street that can be seen in the near distance where people walk by.

EXT. GREATREX'S SHOP/STREET - MOMENTS LATER

He steps on to the sidewalk from the main road as his landlord JAMES NEWBERRY [46], a smartly dressed individual with a thick moustache and slick black hair, approaches alongside his wife who is wearing a high-necked blouse and long dark skirt.

JAMES NEWBERRY
An excellent performance Mr
Greatrex.

GREATREX
Thank you Mr Newberry.

He glances at the landlord's wife.

GREATREX (CONT'D)
Good evening ma'am.

The woman smiles courteously.

MRS NEWBERRY
And you, Mr Greatrex.

They converge outside the shop where foodstuffs are displayed in the window.

JAMES NEWBERRY
By the way, may I remind you that
rent is outstanding for last week.

GREATREX
My apologies, sir. I will have it
for you tomorrow. Between the
theatre and running a business,
there is not enough time in the
day.

Just then, Greatrex's shopkeeper assistant, HENRIEN [25], a slight, fair-haired individual opens the entrance door to make himself present.