

A STARMAN'S RATING IN THE SKY

a satire in one act

by

Swan Morrison

SYNOPSIS

It is dawn on the day after the first manned mission to Mars has landed on the planet.

Mission commander, Tom, and female pilot, Ziggy, admire the Martian landscape through a window of their spacecraft, Mars One.

In under an hour, Tom will be the first human to walk on Mars, but Ground Control has yet to provide the script for his initial, historic words.

Tom contacts David, mission controller on Earth. David explains that disagreements between corporate sponsors mean that the speech remains unfinalised.

The agreed script arrives seconds before Tom enters the airlock.

Tom steps onto Mars and is overcome by the awe-inspiring landscape and a glimpse of Planet Earth in the sky. This, and despondence about excessive commercialisation of the mission, lead him to deliver an unplanned, heartfelt, inspirational speech. He disregards David's increasingly hysterical pleas to follow the script.

Back on board, Tom is concerned about having ignored Ground Control. David reports, however, that millions of people were moved by Tom's words, and thus no advertiser would dare to sue for breach of contract.

Character names relate to David Bowie or his work, and there are many affectionate references to specific phrases from *Space Oddity*.

A STARMAN'S RATING IN THE SKY

a satire in one act

by

Swan Morrison

A STARMAN'S RATING IN THE SKY

CHARACTERS:

TOM Male. A Major in the British Army. Commander of the first manned space mission to Mars.

ZIGGY Female. Pilot of the first manned space mission to Mars.

DAVID Male. Controller of the Mars mission at Ground Control on Earth.

TIME: The year 2020. It is the day after the first manned mission to Mars, Mars One, has touched down on the surface of the Red Planet.

SETTING: The surface of Mars – inside the spacecraft, Mars One, and outside the spacecraft on the surface of Mars.

SCENE 1

It is dawn on the day after the first manned mission to Mars has landed on the Red Planet. TOM and ZIGGY stand at a window of their spacecraft, Mars One. DAVID is at Ground Control on Earth. DAVID is not currently in contact with TOM and ZIGGY.

TOM: *(Looking out at the Martian landscape through a window of the spacecraft)* You know, Ziggy, I've seen this view of the Martian landscape hundreds of times in photographs and during simulations, but nothing prepares you for standing here, looking out from this spaceship at the real thing.

ZIGGY: *(Points into the distance)* Look Tom, the rising sun has just lit Olympus Mons. It's astonishing to see that extinct volcano towering three times as high as Mount Everest. It's got a footprint the size of Sweden. I used it to visually check our position from orbit yesterday when I was beginning the landing sequence.

TOM: It's a truly amazing landscape.

ZIGGY: And it's so beautiful. *(Looks at her watch and then at Tom)* Your initial walk on the surface is scheduled for less than an hour from now, Tom, and you still don't know what David wants you to say when you've taken your first step.

TOM: He's cutting it pretty fine. I'd better contact Ground Control and talk to him.
Computer, call David Jones at Ground Control.

DAVID: Hello Tom. How's it going?

TOM: Everything's fine, David. I took my protein pills twenty minutes ago, and my helmet's ready to put on. I'll be walking around out there in less than an hour, and you still haven't told me what I should say to the millions on Earth who'll be watching and listening.

DAVID: Yes, I know. I'm really sorry about that, Tom. It's not been easy.

TOM: *(With mild impatience)* I do understand the issues, David, but Ziggy and I have been sitting in our tin can, heading for Mars, for the last seven months. Surely you've had enough time to agree a simple speech.

DAVID: We've approved all the phrases, Tom. There's just some last minute wrangling about the order in which you should say them. Don't forget - your first words will go down in history. It was easy for Neil Armstrong: the "One Giant Leap" speech just had to be memorable. This time, with the mission being funded by so many corporate sponsors, they've all been demanding priority for advertising. It's been almost impossible to get any agreement.

ZIGGY: Hi David. Is Coca-Cola still insisting that Tom starts his speech with the words: "Planetary landings taste better with Coke?"

DAVID: They backed down on that one.

ZIGGY: What persuaded them?

DAVID: Starbucks pointed out that Mars One already had the profile of a Coke bottle, which is a huge advert. Coca-Cola has now conceded that point – despite the word “Google” being written on one side of the spacecraft and “Amazon” on the other. The problem now is that General Motors and Boeing say McDonald’s are being ridiculous.

ZIGGY: What are McDonald’s asking for?

DAVID: They want Tom’s first words on the Martian surface to be: “After seven months in space, I could sure use a Big Mac”.

TOM: *(With mild exasperation)* Everybody seems to forget there’s important science to do here, not just advertising. Is there life on Mars, for example? Look, David, I have to prepare for my walk. Call me when you’ve sorted out the script. You’ve got until I enter the airlock, otherwise I’ll just wave at the cameras and say: “Hello Mum”.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 2

It is fifty minutes later. Inside Mars One, TOM and ZIGGY stand near the open internal airlock hatch. TOM holds his space helmet. DAVID is at Ground Control on Earth. DAVID is not currently in contact with the spacecraft.

ZIGGY: Well, you're ready to go out there, but we still haven't heard from David about your speech.

TOM: Computer, call David Jones at Ground Control.

DAVID: Hi Tom. Great news. We've almost got agreement.

TOM: *(In amazement that agreement is still not finalised)* Almost?

DAVID: Just hang on.

TOM and ZIGGY stand in silence for a few seconds.

DAVID: OK, we're there.

TOM: About time. What do you want me to say?

DAVID: You'll start by saying you arrived at Mars with the speed, comfort and safety of a Ford motor car. Then you'll talk about the mission having been executed with managerial expertise as fine as Walmart. Then you'll mention taking photographs on Mars as good as those captured with your iPad. I won't read the whole script. It'll appear on the heads-up display in your helmet. Good luck, Tom.

ZIGGY: *(Placing a hand on Tom's shoulder)* Good luck, Tom.

TOM puts on his helmet and steps into the airlock.

ZIGGY presses a button to close the airlock hatch.

ZIGGY: The internal airlock hatch is sealed.

ZIGGY walks to the window of the spacecraft and looks out towards the area of the Martian surface where Tom will stand.

ZIGGY: A human is about to walk on the surface of Mars for the first time, and I've got the best seat in the house.

TOM: The outer airlock hatch is open. *(Pause)* I'm stepping through the door.

TOM exits the airlock and steps onto to the Martian surface.

DAVID: OK, Tom, we've routed communications so that people all over the Earth can now hear your voice. No one, other than you, can hear us.

TOM gazes around him at the Martian landscape in silent awe. He then looks up at the sky.

DAVID: *(With slight anxiety)* Tom, you've been on the surface for nearly half a minute. I haven't heard you say anything. Is your circuit dead? Is there something wrong? *(Pause)* Can you hear me, Major Tom?

ZIGGY: Tom's fine, David. He just hasn't spoken yet.

DAVID: *(With increased anxiety)* This would be a good time to begin speaking, Tom.

TOM remains silent for several further seconds.

DAVID: *(Urgently)* Start talking, Tom.

TOM: I'm sorry. It's taken me a while to compose myself. When I stepped onto the Martian surface and looked around me, I was overcome. I'm not ashamed to tell all of you back on Earth that I cried.

DAVID: *(In surprise and with a slightly raised voice)* What the hell are you saying, Tom? What about Ford motor cars?

TOM: It's definitely the Red Planet. I can see more shades of red around me than I can recall hues of greens in my beloved English woodlands. It's majestic. It's breath-taking. In that first moment, it felt more beautiful than anything I'd ever seen in my life.

DAVID: *(With increased desperation)* Jesus, Tom, if you don't get back on message now, Ground Control will be overrun with corporate lawyers, baying for blood.

ZIGGY urgently and purposefully presses some buttons.

TOM: Then I caught sight of planet Earth in the sky. I realised that, despite the wild, desolate splendour of Mars, it doesn't come close to what we have back home. I guess we've become so familiar with our own planet that we just take all its wonders for granted.

- DAVID:** *(Beginning to panic)* We don't have any damned eco-sponsorship, Tom.
- TOM:** We spend so much of our time fighting each other or trying to close the next deal that we lose sight of the big picture.
- DAVID:** *(With increasing panic)* Tom's lost his mind, Ziggy. Terminate the broadcast. We can't end it from Earth because you seem to have overridden our control. Receivers all over the world are still picking up what he's saying.
- ZIGGY:** No need to terminate the broadcast, David. It sounds just fine to me.
- TOM:** Up here, you can't miss that big picture.
- DAVID:** *(With increasing panic and anger)* For Christ's sake, Tom, just mention the fucking McMars Burger and McMartian Meal Deal.
- TOM:** If we just looked up at the stars more often, we might come to see our own lives in perspective. We could catch a glimpse of what humankind can achieve. I hope this mission will mark the beginning of seeing ourselves, our Earth and our universe in a new way.
- DAVID terminates his contact with the spacecraft.*
- DAVID:** *(In evident distress)* No, no, no. How could they do this?

END OF SCENE

SCENE 3

TOM is back on board the spacecraft with ZIGGY. DAVID is at Ground Control on Earth. DAVID is not currently in contact with the spacecraft.

ZIGGY: I'm really proud of you. It was a very brave thing you did out there, bearing in mind that billions of dollars of advertising revenue were riding on what you said.

TOM: The Space Agency will probably spend next year's budget defending breach of contract lawsuits. David will hate me for this.

ZIGGY: *(Taking Tom's hand)* Maybe, but your wife still loves you very much.

TOM: I know. And I love you very much. The psychologists didn't expect this outcome when they recommended a married couple for the mission. I couldn't have defied ground control if I hadn't been sure of your support.

ZIGGY: David would certainly have terminated the broadcast if I hadn't overridden Earth's control of the transmission. Did you plan what you were going to say before you left the ship?

TOM: No, I didn't. You know that I'd felt deeply saddened by the way advertising was trivialising this mission. I thought there was nothing I could do about it. Then, when I was standing on the surface, I looked up. The stars look very different today, and I saw our home planet rise over Olympus Mons. Planet Earth was blue, and I suddenly realised there was something I could do.

DAVID: Ground Control to Major Tom.

- TOM:** Hello David. I'm sorry if I've ruined your day.
- DAVID:** *(With excitement and relief)* It's OK, Tom. It's OK. Thank God it's OK.
- ZIGGY:** What's OK, David?
- DAVID:** Millions of people all over the world were moved by what Tom said. People are hugging, crying, cheering and dancing in the streets. The Space Agency lawyers say it would be commercial suicide for any sponsor to sue for breach of an advertising contract. International public opinion is with you, Tom.
- ZIGGY:** Now that's what I call one giant leap for mankind.
- DAVID:** You've really made the grade, Tom.
- TOM:** Maybe, in future, the world will focus a bit more on what's important and become less obsessed with marketing.
- DAVID:** I wouldn't count on it, Tom. Which reminds me: whose shirts do you wear?

END OF SCENE

END OF PLAY