

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Six

Always Professional

By Alex Lynch

Headsman:

You know, there are many different ways to be executed; you can be pressed

-where they place a large plank over your body and steadily add weight until the you can no longer breathe. Then there's boiled alive where you get strung up and plunged into a vat of boiling liquid - sometimes tar, oil, molten lead - you get the idea, it's hot and not pleasant.

Hanging from the noose - that's a classic. Hanged drawn and quartered, that one's more for the big dogs, y'know, high treason and all that. It's basically hanging with the addition of total disembowelment. You get chopped up into 4 pieces and those quarters of your body being scattered across town as a warning to others. It does the job. Certainly, gets the message across.

Where did I get to? Lost my train of thought. Oh yes, Um...

Burned to death is another - I think that one's pretty self-explanatory and last - but definitely not least - beheading. And that's where I come in.



You could say I'm valuable to the monarchy, I have a skill. Over time I've mastered my – I suppose you'd call it my craft. I'm not glorifying it. It's just business. It's not a path people would aspire to follow. It's more a job that seeks you out.

It's a role that requires strength, precision and immense focus. Especially if you're to take the head off in one clean sweep of the blade. You have to know the right spot to hit. There's no margin for error. Avoid eye contact with the prisoner, and certainly with the audience... I mean crowd and never be complacent.

It doesn't end when the axe comes down, well not for me, the head rolls, the body spasms, the heart continues to pump and paint the boards, it's pretty grim. People, crowds, rabbles gather to watch this as some form of entertainment – and yet as far as they're concerned, I'm the barbarian. I suppose you do become a little desensitised. And if you're one of the clumsier ones whose either been on the sauce or are just too damn nervous (or both) and they find the first stroke doesn't cut it – pardon the pun – it gets even more gruesome. But through it all, you just have to remain professional. Or things can go really wrong.

Not on my shift of course.

Margaret Pole, the Countess of Salisbury should have been mine. I don't mean that I desired to kill her. I just mean it should have been under my axe. I could have guaranteed her a better send off. A death with dignity. Quick, painless, professional.



As it was, I was up in York and not here so they put Tom up there, poor boy was so nervous he even wore a hood! Tom is the apprentice, he's a good lad but he still has a great deal to learn about finesse, the axe, the technique!

Normally I'd agree it's good to be thrown in the deep end when it comes to a new job. Sink or swim and all that. Unfortunately, our young apprentice well and truly sunk. But of course he did, because this was all carried out in too much haste. This is not how it's done.

The King didn't have to send me up North to deal with the rebels. He could have sent anybody. He could even have sent the bloody the apprentice and it would have been fine, but instead...(Sigh)

Look I won't go into the grizzly details of the event.

Actually, you know what - I will because then you'll understand just how much of a botched job it was and maybe you'll start to understand why it's been plaguing me quite so much.

So full chapter and verse. King Henry VIII, sends me up North to deal with the rebels - the backlash that came from his dissolution of the monasteries. Backlash is putting it mildly, populous up in arms and too much work for the locals to deal with, they have to send the Kings executioner up, that make a statement I'll tell ya- but I digress.

So whilst I'm gone, Lady Margaret Pole is told she is to be executed that day that she would be dead within the hour. The hour. They've kept her locked up for two and a half years and now suddenly they can't wait to get rid of her.



So mid-morning comes and she's led across to the block. Not on Tower Hill, not the usual bear-baiting crowds who gather to look upon and jeer at the soon-to-be-deceased, but a block inside the Tower. Inside. I mean, this is rare to the say the least. Actually it's virtually unheard of. An execution inside the Tower of London.

Clearly no one wanted this to be 'an event'.no big fuss A very small elite crowd were invited to watch. The atmosphere such a far cry from the daily dose of mutilations. It's not a show. It's not entertainment. It is a much more sombre, darker affair. An execution that commands respect rather than condemns it. Margaret would at least manage to preserve her dignity. Or so you'd think.

I suppose you've heard the 'rumours' going round about the execution - rumours. Seriously. Gossip in the Gallows. Has it really come to this? All the fishwives having a natter over who heard what about the bungled executions.

Anyway, one of these 'rumours' was that the blundering youth missed Margaret's neck and hacked at her shoulder instead. Suffice to say, her hair and make-up were ruined. And then after failing with - not one, not two, but - ten blows of the axe, he finally managed to mangle the head away from the body. Christ almighty. I mean how does this make me look? I'm supposed to be teaching the boy and he take 10 swings on the axe. It would have been blunt by the end.



The other rumour flying about, and this one completely takes the piss, is that Margaret would not keep her head still, writhing around dodging the blade. Then she actually escaped the block and was chased by Tom wildly swinging his axe and, again, hacked at her about 10 or 11 times until she was finally beheaded – albeit with mountains of blood coating the boards. And her face and hair. I tell you chasing her round the block? Missing her neck? What a fucking farce. It makes an absolute mockery of what I do.

I am here to essentially retain order. To convey to the public that there always consequences for actions. That no one gets away with murder – or theft, or treason. An execution is the evidence of that. The head in the basket is solid proof. When someone is able to ridicule this you no longer have a grip on that order. You've lost them. They don't take you seriously.

If you can be out-smarted once, you can be out-smarted again. Gradually having your credibility whittled down until your status reaches the nadir. As I said before, you have to remain professional. So tell me, how is any of that professional?

Margaret Pole. She deserved better. It should not bother me. It is just another corpse for the pile, but it does, it bothers me. Not even a shred of dignity in that death.

Two and a half years she'd been sitting in that tower. Two and a half years. Never bending to questions, never suffering fools gladly, and never showing any sign of intimidation from her interrogators. This is what I always heard from the warders. No one had seen that kind of resilience in a woman before.



I overheard the warders say 'it was like they were speaking to a confident man'. I admired her. I think we all did, in secret. At night, they said she would sit and quietly scrawl her writings, her thoughts on the walls of her cell. I've got a copy here somewhere.

For traitors on the block should die; I am no traitor, no, not !!

My faithfulness stands fast and so, towards the block I shall not go!

Nor make one step, as you shall see; Christ in Thy Mercy, save Thou me!

He did not though. I believe that Margaret refused to lay her head on the block. She was such a stubborn battle-axe of a woman that I can just see her kneeling by the block looking up at that poor wretched lad and challenging him as if to say 'go on boy, I dare you'. Very old versus very young - it was one hell of a mismatch.

That is what I find so infuriating, in these instances, you have the high-ground, you hold the power - you hold the axe - you literally hold the power. You are in control - not them. The ones who are dying do not get to have one up on you. They can't intimidate you. They should not be able to unnerve and intimidate you. They're about to have their head cut off - by you! It beggars belief. This woman has single-handedly humiliated the order of executioners. I am angry, livid, and yet at the same time... Impressed. That level of resistance, of refusing to comply with order.



She was 67. How many people live to 67? No one lives to 67. And then to go like that... It does merit some respect. Even if it is begrudging.

Not that I have much of a golden reputation to live by anyway.

They hate me, the people – they do. They revile me, despise me, because to them I am a symbol of authority. An oppressor. But it's a job, one that has to be done. There has always been an executioner.

I do wonder where this country is heading sometimes. Religion is changing, government falling apart, economy is in crisis and social order has been brought to its knees. Just look at how quickly the rebellions escalated – first Lincolnshire, then Yorkshire, Cumberland, West Moreland, Lancashire. Civil unrest in practically every single Northern county in the land. All because the people, us, we can not handle change. We are afraid – of course we are afraid. I am afraid. I am terrified...

But rather than learning to adapt and work together to strive through our fear of something new, we instead panic and regress to this primitive stage – we start rioting, robbing, raping – society just winds up a crumbling mess, as one by one we fall into the slathering jaws of a rabid dog-eat-dog world. No collaboration. Because we are only looking out for number one. Survival. But it can make us so short sighted



I mean clearly the King wasn't thinking straight when he had Margaret Pole arrested. She had been nothing but loyal to him, even though she was a Catholic at heart she had stuck by his decisions and even with the political rivalry between her son, Cardinal Pole and the King she still stood by her monarch.

But by that point loyalty didn't matter a damn. Henry was wrapped up in his own state of paranoia, he was obviously shaken by the state of the country, though he would never show it. 50,000 rebels across Northern England. That of course it's bound to rattle you.

But the thing is - this isn't the end. There will be more uprisings, greater ones, ones with more at stake, ones with a higher death count. And not just in the North but all over. Who's to say it could not spread to the South, East, West. The whole country up in arms. I am telling you now. This is not the last rebellion of this century - or the next.

Now I'm not here to pass judgement, certainly not on the king but also not on Margret or any other poor soul who come to me the block- I merely enact it, but I have to say the decision to behead Margaret Pole was completely senseless.

I wonder if she was shocked or scared by the fate awaiting her, you would never know. Even at her age, she did not letting anyone have the satisfaction of seeing her break.



I can relate to that you know. You cannot get emotionally involved. In a fate you can't change to use a clunky metaphor - and boy is it clunky - you have to be the head and the body separated- detached, severed, and removed. I mean every day I cleave a body, I cut short a life and then I go home - That is not a normal job. That is not a normal at all.

And who do I go home to? It is just me. I have no wife. You honestly think I can hold down a marriage? Even a relationship? Not everyone appreciates the Gallows humour. A bit too dark.

But it is bound to be when the last thing I see when I go to bed is a human head, rolling across wooden floorboards, into a starving crowd.

So why do I do it? Well, it is a living, but I suppose most importantly it keep me on the right side of the axe. But that's not to say that cannot change, I am not infallible. Nobody is. I mean if anyone knew I talked like this? It would not stay that way for long. But you are not gonna tell anyone are you. Good.

You have to possess a tough skin, a hard shell. Not just in a job but in any walk of life - you show weakness, any sign, and you have had it. You'll always have vultures hovering, scavengers skulking, opportunists trying to locate the chinks in the armour, only you can keep them covered.

But what do I know? I'm just a headsman. An oppressor...



(Bell Rings) Anyway, duty calls. Best get on with it then.

Now remember just lay your head down nice and centred, do move about and it will all be over quickly. I will take care of the rest, as I said I am a professional.

