

Venus Macabre

By Eric Brown.

Devereaux chose Venus as the venue for his last performance for two main reasons: the stars cannot be seen from the surface of the planet, and Venus is where he first died.

His performance parties are the event of the social calendar on whichever world he visits. The rich and famous are gathered tonight on the cantilevered patio of Manse Venusia, deep within the jungle of the southern continent: film stars and their young escorts, ambassadors and ministers of state, artists and big-name critics.

They are all here, come to witness Jean-Philippe Devereaux perform what *Le Figaro* once described, before the Imams invoked the sharia on Earth and censored the reporting of such decadence, as 'an event of diabolical majesty!'

Devereaux wears a white silk suit, Italian cut, long-lapelled. He moves from group to group with ease and grace. He converses knowledgeably with politicians and film stars, scientists and karque-hunters alike. His reputation as a polymath precedes him; intellectuals queue to fox him, in vain, with the latest conundrums of the age. He seems to have an intimate understanding of every vocation, philosophy and theory under the three hundred-and-counting suns of the Expansion.

Many guests, hoping that they might fathom the mystery of the man, find after a few minute's conversation that he is an enigma too deep to plumb. A paradox, also. He talks about everything, everything, but his art. The implication is that his art speaks for itself. Guests speculate that his pre-show ritual of socialisation - a bestowing upon them of his brilliance - is a ploy to point up the disparity between the urbanity of the man and the barbarity of his act, thereby commenting on the dichotomy inherent in the human condition. At least, this is the theory of those who have never before witnessed his performances. The guests who have followed his act from planet to planet around the Expansion know not to make such naive assumptions: his art is more complicated than that, they say, or alternatively more simple. One guest alone, beneath the arching crystal dome, speculates that his creations are nothing more than a catharsis, a blowing-out of the intense psychological pressures within his tortured psyche.

"By the way," Devereaux quips, almost as an afterthought, to each clique, "this will be my very last public performance."

He registers their surprise, their shock, and then the dawning realisation that they will witness tonight that pinnacle of performance arts, the ultimate act.

Devereaux moves from the marbled patio, up three steps to the bar. As he pours himself a cognac, he disengages from his Augmentation - that part of him he calls the Spider, which he employs in conversation with his guests - and descends to the biological. The descent is a merciful relief. He leaves behind the constant white noise of guilt which fills the Spider with despair. As he settles himself into his biological sensorium, he can tolerate the remorse: it simmers in his subconscious, emerging only occasionally in berserker fits of rage and self-loathing. He downs the cognac in one.

Devereaux turns to the guests gathered below and experiences a wave of hatred and disgust. He despises their ignorance. More, he despises their lack of understanding, their

easy acceptance that what he lays before them is the epitome of fine art. He tells himself that he should not submit to such anger. Their very presence, at one thousand units a head, more than subsidises the cost of his therapy.

Across the crowded patio he catches sight of a familiar figure, and wonders if he is the exception. He did not invite Daniel Carrington; he came as the friend of a guest. Carrington stands in conversation with a Terraform scientist. He is tall and dark-haired. The perfection of his face is marred by a deep scar which runs down his forehead, between his eyes, over the bridge of his nose and across his left cheek. He was attacked six months ago by an irate subscriber to Venus-Satellite Vid-Vision, on which he hosts the most watched, though at the same time most hated, prime-time show. Carrington films suicides in the act of taking their lives. He employs an empath to locate potential subjects, and a swoop-team of camera-people and engineers. He films the death and follows it up with an in-depth psychological profile of the individual's life and their reasons for ending it. Wherever he is in the Expansion, Devereaux makes a point of watching the show. There is no doubting Carrington's sincerity, his humanitarianism, and yet although the programme is watched by everyone, he is universally reviled: it is as if his viewers, needing to transfer their guilt at their voyeurism, find in Daniel Carrington an obvious scapegoat... When he was attacked last year, he chose not to have the evidence of his mutilation repaired. He wears his wounds as the ultimate exhibition of defiant iconography.

Devereaux thinks that Carrington might be the only person in all the Expansion capable of understanding him.

He lays his glass aside and claps his hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you please. I beg your indulgence."

Faces stare up at him.

He begins by telling them the story of the benign dictator of Delta Pavonis III, who loved his people and whose people loved him; a man of wisdom, wit and charm, who was assassinated long before resurrection techniques became the plaything of the ultra-rich.

"Tonight you will witness the tragedy of his demise."

He leads them from the dome and out onto the deck of the split-level garden, into the balmy sub-tropical night. On the lower deck is a stage, and before it the holographic projection of a crowd. The guests look down on a scene long gone, something quaint and maybe even poignant in the odd architecture of the stage, the costumes and coiffures of the colonists.

Devereaux descends to the lower deck, walks among the spectral crowd. They respond, cheer him. Something has happened to his appearance. He no longer resembles Jean-Philippe Devereaux. Projectors have transformed him into the double of the dictator. He mounts the stage and begins a speech - addressing not the crowd with a litany of policies and promises, but speaking to his guests. He recounts the life of the dictator, his theories and ideals.

The social elite of Venus watch, entranced.

Devereaux gestures.

Seconds before he is flayed alive in the laser crossfire, he sees Daniel Carrington staring

down at him in appalled fascination. Then all is light as a dozen laser bolts find their target.

Purely as visual effect, his demise is beautiful to behold. His body is struck by the first laser; it drills his chest, turning him sideways. The second strikes laterally into his ribcage, compensating the turn and giving his already dying body the twitching vitality of a marionette. Then a dozen other bolts slam into him, taking the meat from his bones in a spectacular ejection of flesh and blood. For a fraction of a second, though it seems longer to the spectators, his skull remains suspended in mid-air - grotesquely connected to his spinal cord - before it falls and rolls away. Then darkness, silence.

After an initial pause, a period during which they are too shocked and stricken to move, the guests return inside. They are quiet, speaking barely in whispers as they try to evaluate the merit of the performance as a work of art.

On the darkened deck below, the hired surgeons and their minions are conscientiously gathering together Devereaux's remains. Hovering vacuums inhale his atomised body fluids; robot-drones collect the shards of bone and flaps of flesh. His skull has come to rest in one corner, grinning inanely.

From the circular orbit of the left eye socket, a silver ovoid the size of a swan's egg slowly emerges. A polished dome shows first, then pauses. Next, a long, jointed leg pulls itself free of the constriction, then another and another, until all eight are extricated. The Spider stands, straddling the ivory, grinning skull. Devereaux, with a three hundred and sixty degree view of the surrounding deck and the salvage work going on there, tests the Spider's spindly limbs one by one. When he has mastery of their movement, he hurries off towards the dome. The legs lift high and fast with an impression of mincing fastidiousness as he skitters through the bloody remains.

Locked within the digitised sensorium of the Spider, Devereaux is a prisoner of the guilt that suffuses the analogue of his mind. At least, when he inhabits his physical self, the guilt shunts itself off into the storage of his subconscious for long periods. The memory of his sins, his remorse and regret, have no refuge in the Spider: they are all up front, demanding attention. He cries out in silence for the refuge of his biological brain. He does not know how he will tolerate the next seven days, while the surgeons rebuild his body.

He scuttles up a ramp, through the garden and into the dome where the guests are gathered. A dozen of his spider-like toys scurry hither and yon, affording him the perfect cover.

He finds Carrington and climbs onto the back of an empty chair. He stands and watches, his body pulsing on the sprung suspension of his silver limbs.

"Perhaps," Carrington is saying, "rather than viewing his art from the standpoint of trying to work out what he means, what we should be asking ourselves is why? Why does he employ this macabre art form in the first place?"

There is silence around the table.

"Maybe," Carrington goes on, "the answer lies not so much in Devereaux's attempting to come to terms with the outside world, but with the monster that inhabits the darkness of his inner self."

Carrington turns his head and looks at the Spider, but his eyes do not dwell long enough for Devereaux to be sure if he knows for certain.

"I've heard it said that our host was once a starship pilot."

The Spider climbs down from the chair and skitters across the marble floor towards the darkness of the manse.

For Devereaux, the seven days he is captive in the Spider seem like as many years. Never has he known the time to pass so slowly. While he exists within the Spider he cannot sleep, nor shut down the process of intellection. The unbearable recollections from all those years ago howl without cessation in his awareness.

On the eighth day he is restored to his biological self. It is like coming home, returning to a familiar, comfortable domicile. He hurries to the lounge and checks his video and fax for calls. There is a communique from Daniel Carrington. Will Devereaux care to meet him in Port City, to discuss a business proposal?

That evening, Devereaux sits in a leather armchair overlooking the jungle. He is aware of the degeneration of his body. He is exhausted. His bones ache. He is beset by irregular muscular spasms, hot and cold flushes and bouts nausea. This is to be expected. How many times has this body died, and been put back together again? Fifteen, twenty? Devereaux gives thanks that soon it will all be over. He looks ahead to his rendezvous with Carrington, the confession he will make to someone he feels sure will understand his guilt.

Devereaux hires a chauffeured air-car to transport him the five hundred kilometres to Port City. The metropolis has changed since his first visit to Venus, twenty years ago. Then it was little more than the beachhead settlement of an infant colony, struggling for autonomy from Earth. Now it is a thriving community the size of Tokyo or Rio, grown rich from the mining of the planet's many natural resources.

The air-car descends and speeds through the twilight streets to the headquarters of VenuSat, the station with which Carrington has his show.

He takes an elevator to the penthouse suite. A servant shows him along a corridor and into a large, glass-enclosed room, more like a greenhouse than a lounge, filled with a riot of brilliant blooms and vines. A white grand piano occupies an area of carpeted floor before a view of the illuminated city. Black and white photographs stare at him from every wall. He recognises them as the late subjects of Carrington's shows.

Carrington himself, urbane in a black roll-neck jacket and tight leggings, emerges from behind a stand of cacti.

He smiles and takes Devereaux's hand.

"So pleased..." he murmurs. The livid, diagonal scar that bisects his face is wax-like in the dim lighting.

"I conducted a little wager with myself that you would be in touch," Devereaux says.

"I found your final performance-" Carrington pauses, searching for the right word "-fascinating. Would you care for a drink?" He moves to the bar and pours two generous cognacs.

"Of everyone present that night," Devereaux says, "your speculations came closest to the

truth."

Carrington affects surprise - but it is just that, an affectation. "They did?"

"You saw through the charade of the so-called 'act' and realised that it was nothing more than a rather self-indulgent form of therapy."

Carrington makes a modest gesture, not owing to such insight.

"I presume," Devereaux goes on, "that you summoned me here to find out why - why for the past twenty years I have indulged in such psycho-therapy?"

He suspects that Carrington is wary of coming right out and saying that he wishes to record his very last act. Devereaux has the reputation of a temperamental recluse, an artist who might not view kindly the trivialisation of his death on prime-time vid-vision.

But why else did Carrington summon him, other than to secure the rights to his ultimate performance?

Carrington surprises him by saying, casually: "But I know why you have resorted to these acts."

"You do?" Devereaux walks to the wall-window and stares out at the scintillating city. Surely, even so celebrated a journalist as Daniel Carrington could not successfully investigate events so far away, so long ago?

He turns, facing Carrington. "Perhaps you would care to explain?"

"By all means," Carrington says. "First, Jean-Philippe Devereaux is a non-de-plume, the name you took when you began your performances-

"Bravo!"

"Please, hear me out. Your real name is Jacques Minot, born in Orleans, 2060. You trained at the Orly Institute in Paris, graduated with honours and joined the Chantilly Line as a co-pilot on the bigship Voltaire's Revenge."

Devereaux - although Carrington is correct, he will be Devereaux to his dying day - hangs an exaggerated bow. "I applaud your investigative skills, M. Carrington." He is oddly disturbed by the extent of Carrington's knowledge. He wanted to confess to him, admittedly - but in his own time.

Carrington continues. "You served on the Voltaire for ten years, then twenty years ago you were promoted to pilot and given your own 'ship, the Pride of Bellatrix. The same year you made the 'push to Janus, Aldebaran, and on the darkside of that planet something happened."

"But you don't know what?" He feels relief that Carrington does not know everything, that he will after all be able to confess.

"No, I do not know what happened," Carrington says. "But I know that it was enough to make you quit your job and perfect your bizarre art."

"I must applaud you. I never thought I would live to hear my past delineated with such clinical objectivity." He pauses. "But tell me - if you know nothing about what happened on Janus, how can you be so sure of my guilt?"

Carrington smiles, almost to himself. "You were a little insane when you landed on Venus all those years ago - perhaps you still are. You found a street kid. You gave him your laser and a lot of creds and told him to burn a hole in your head. You told him that you deserved it. Not that he needed any justification - all he wanted was the cash. But he couldn't bring himself to laser your head. He put a hole in your heart instead, figuring it was all the same anyway - you'd be just as dead. Except it wasn't the same at all. When the medics found that you were carrying a pilot's Spider Augmentation and had the creds to pay for rehabilitation, they brought you back. After that..." Carrington shrugs. "I think you developed a taste for dying as a way of assuaging your conscience. You turned it into an art form and it paid for your resurrections."

Devereaux says: "I take it you found the boy?"

Carrington makes a non-committal gesture, as if to say that he cannot divulge his sources.

Outside, lightning zigzags from the dense cloudrace, filling the room with an actinic stutter. Seconds later a cannonade of thunder trundles overhead.

"How did you find out?" Devereaux asks. "About my past, about what I intend to do-?"

"What do you intend, M. Devereaux?"

Carrington's attitude surprises him. What might he gain by feigning ignorance?

"Let me proposition you, M. Carrington. You can have the exclusive rights to my absolute suicide, if you will listen to my confession..." Such a small price to pay.

"Your suicide?"

"Not just another performance - this will be the real thing. I have played with death long enough to know that nothing but true extinction can pay for what I did. Or did you think I planned an ultimate physical suicide, and that I intended to live on in my Augmentation, immortal? Now that would be a living hell!"

But Daniel Carrington is shocked. He stares at Devereaux, slowly shaking his head.

"No..." he says. "No, I can't let you do that."

Devereaux is flustered. "But come, isn't that why you wanted to see me? To arrange to broadcast the ultimate event?"

From the inside of his roll-neck jacket, Carrington withdraws a pistol. It is a karque-hunter's dart gun. He holds it in both hands and levels it at Devereaux.

"Do you think for a minute that I like what I do, M. Devereaux?"

"Why, my dear man-"

"Do you think I enjoy living with death? Christ, everyone on the planet despises me. I have this-" he gestures to his scarred face "-as a continual reminder."

Devereaux tries to be placatory. He is non-plussed.

"You didn't want to meet me to ask my permission-?" he begins.

"I asked you here to kill you," Carrington smiles.

Devereaux is sardonic. "With that?" he says. "My dear man, you'll need more than a dart gun to destroy my Spider." He pauses, peering at him. "But why?" he whispers.

"I've hated you for so long, Devereaux," Carrington smiles. "Of course, I naturally assumed you were dead - but I still felt hatred."

"You...?" Devereaux says. He recalls the kid he picked up, all those years ago.

"I didn't realise you'd survived, you see," Carrington says. "All I could think about was that you'd used me to kill yourself." He pauses. "Then I saw your picture on the vid, read about your forthcoming trip to Venus - and I knew I needed revenge. I had to kill you."

He fires without warning. The bolt hits Devereaux in the chest and kills him instantly - kills, that is, the body, the meat, the biological entity that is Jean-Philippe Devereaux. As the body falls to the floor, Devereaux finds himself in the sensorium of his Spider.

"Monsieur Carrington..." His transistorised voice issues from his unmoving lips.

"There is a laser in the inside pocket of my jacket. If you set it at maximum, it will despatch my Augmentation."

Carrington is standing over him, staring down.

"But first-" Devereaux pleads. "First, please, let me confess."

"No!"

Carrington steps forward, slips a small laser from his jacket.

"That-" the Spider says "-is hardly powerful enough."

"For the past five years I've dreamed of this moment."

"Please, my confession!"

"I dreamed of putting you to death, Devereaux - but that would be too good for you."

Devereaux screams a hideous: "No!"

Carrington lifts the laser and, with an expression of revulsion, fires and separates Devereaux's head from his shoulders. He grasps the a hank of hair and lifts the head. Dimly, through failing eyes, Devereaux makes out on Carrington's features an expression of supreme satisfaction. "That would be far, far too good for you."

Time passes...

Devereaux has known seven days as a prisoner in his Spider - in one case ten days - but always these periods were made tolerable by the knowledge that soon he would be returned to his body. Now there is no such knowledge. Upon killing him, Carrington bisected his head and fished out the Spider, bound his limbs and imprisoned him within a black velvet pouch, so that he did not have even the compensation of vision with which to distract his attention from the inevitable...

He had only his memories, which returned him again and again to the darkside of Janus.

At spiraldown, his co-pilot had pulled from the net, left Devereaux - or Minot, as he was then - to oversee the simple docking procedure. Devereaux had disengaged from his Spider a fraction of a second too soon, forgetting that he was on the darkside of Janus, where icy, hurricane-force winds scoured the port. He had not been paying attention, looking forward to his leave instead. The Spider would have been able to save the ship - calculated the realignment co-ordinates pulsed from the control tower - but Devereaux had no hope of processing so much information in so short a time. The Pride of Bellatrix overshot the dock and exploded into the terminal building, incinerating a hundred port workers, as well as the ship's three hundred passengers, beyond any chance of resurrection...

Devereaux alone had survived.

His dreams are forever filled with the faces of the dead, their screams, and the unremitting stars of darkside illuminating a scene of carnage.

Devereaux calculates that one week has passed when Daniel Carrington unties the pouch and daylight floods in. He expects Carrington to have devised for him some eternal torture: he will entomb him in concrete and pitch him into the deep Venusian sea, or bury him alive in the wilderness of the central desert.

Carrington lifts him from the velvet pouch.

Devereaux makes out the turgid Venusian overcast, and then the expanse of an ocean far below. They are on a chromium catwalk which follows the peak of a volcanic ridge. This is a northern tourist resort; silver domes dot the forbidding grey mountain-side.

Carrington turns and walks along a promontory overlooking the sea. Devereaux knows, with terrible foresight, what Carrington has planned.

Carrington holds the Spider before his eyes. Devereaux tries to struggle, realises then with mounting panic that his legs have been removed. Even his only means of psychological release, a scream, is denied him.

"I've had a long time to think about what I should do with you," Carrington whispers. "At first I wanted to kill you."

Devereaux cries a silent: No! He knows now that Carrington will pitch him into the sea, and that he will remain there for ever, alone with his memories and his remorse. He tries to conceive of an eternity of such torture, but his mind balks at the enormity of the prospect.

"And then, when you told me that you intended to kill yourself anyway, I decided that there was another way of punishing you."

No! Devereaux yells to himself.

Carrington is shaking his head.

"But to do that would be as great a crime as doing what I thought I had done to you twenty years ago." He stares off into the distance, reliving the past. "Perhaps the only way I can cure myself, Devereaux, is by saving you - and the only way I can save you is by destroying you."

Carrington turns then and strides along the catwalk. Seconds later he is standing on a railed gallery overlooking a fumarole brimming with a river of slow-flowing lava. With little ceremony, Carrington hefts the remains of the Spider and pitches it from the gallery.

Devereaux gives thanks to Daniel Carrington as he tumbles through the air. The seconds seem to expand to fill aeons. He experiences a surge of relief, and for the very last time the pain of guilt.

Devereaux hits the lava, and the casing of the Spider melts in the molten stream, and then he feels nothing.