

The Funeral Show

By Rob Bullen



Image: Shutterstock / Damir Khabirov

“I’ve got a feeling this one’ll be good”. Sam pushed her hair back as she flicked over the pages of the briefing sheet. “Suicide. At 58. He was a musician. We’ve got a brother, a friend who played in his band, and some student. Seems like he taught saxophone somewhere. How long till we arrive, Danny?”

“Fifteen minutes according to Our Lady Of The GPS. St Martin’s Church Eastwood, right?”

“Wasn’t it Earlwood?” came Niki’s voice from the back of the van.

“Don’t think so,” said Sam. “Let me check. Oh fuck fuck fuck. Danny it’s Earlwood not Eastwood. How long?”

The van veered to the left across a stream of traffic and pulled up in a “No Stopping” zone. After 30 seconds of button-pressing Danny announced “Fifty-five minutes.”

“Make it forty.” Sam pulled out her mobile. “Reverend? It’s Sam from The Funeral Show. Listen, we’ve been unavoidably delayed. We’ll be there by nine, but we’ll need access to the church for at least 45 minutes. Yes I know it’s going to be a bit of an inconvenience, but if you could just ... Yes, OK, we’ll do our best.”

After hanging up, Sam muttered “Jesus Christ, who has a funeral at 10 am anyway?”

This show was tricky enough as it was. Everything must be low-key and respectful. No big production truck, just a small broadcast van normally used for news. No lighting crew. Two cameras max. Set-up and tear-down must be on the day of the funeral. And now this.

The van lurched through Sydney’s peak hour traffic, with five people in the back each staring at their screens. Suddenly Tomasz – shoulder-length hair, deep brown eyes and fashionable stubble – spoke.

“Hey, reviews for episode one, just in. Want to hear them?”

“What do you reckon?” said Sam, looking up with her mouth open.

“How about this from Alan Gossling.” Tomasz adopted a low, gravelly voice. “Creepy isn’t nearly strong enough to describe this abhorrent new addition to the reality genre. A team of ghouls record funeral services, seeking out grief and pain wherever they can find it and turning it into fodder for their weekly show. The unlucky stiff receives ten minutes of confected ‘tribute’ while the audience receives an eyeful of other people’s suffering, which may or may not be genuine, but who cares? It’s TV, right? This show deserves to be binned, immediately.”

Niki’s face turned pale, despite layers of makeup.

Sam laughed. “A team of ghouls. Should that be a graveyard of ghouls? Put on your black hats, brothers and sisters, and welcome to the team. But hey, did he say ‘the stiff’? Not very respectful yourself, Mr Gossling. Any more?”

“Yeah, here’s Trinity Corby.” Tomasz adopted a soft, sympathetic voice. “Real people, real feelings, real lives. They are ordinary people, the people whose stories are never told, whose contributions are never acknowledged save by those closest to them. This beautiful, respectful production allows us all to share what these ordinary people have meant to those around them, and to share in the sorrow of their passing. I love it.”

Niki’s face lightened up again. “She gets it, doesn’t she?”

Sam’s smile had just the faintest hint of irony. “Yes luv, she gets it.”

The van pulled up at 9:10. “No time for the usual set-up. Tomasz and Danny, get your cameras inside. You’ll have to find locations yourselves. Mattie, get your mics wherever you can. I’ll set up in the van. Niki, you’ll have to do your interviews after the service. And your piece to camera. We’ll just hope the preacher can stall them until we’re set.”

Danny’s camera was the first on. A long view from the rear left of the church, with the chance to focus on the speaker, and also to get close-ups of the audience. As usual, Tomasz took longer. He shuffled his camera position trying to get the perfect angle, with the cross on the wall just above the speaker’s left shoulder. Several guests had to move to make way for his equipment. By 10:10 Sam said through the headphones “Just make do, Tom. The preacher’s going to start.”

“It’s the lighting,” he whispered. “It’ll be too harsh on the talent’s face.” He walked to the front of the church, found a power point and over five minutes installed two floor flood lights, just in front of the deceased’s family in the first pew. He walked back to his camera past rows of mourners who had been watching less than patiently.

“You’re a pain in the ass mate,” said Sam, “but you’re a true artist.”

The minister rose and read some nondescript Bible verses in a monotone, and the congregation sang “Nearer My God To Thee”. Not an auspicious start, and Sam was tempted to make a comment over the headphones about the Titanic, but she didn’t want any laughter from the cameramen. The good stuff was still coming, though – the eulogies.

“Everyone I’ve spoken to has told me that Nicholas was a kind, gentle man with a huge passion for music,” intoned the minister. “He put his soul into his saxophone, and he blew it out for everyone to hear.”

At that last phrase, Danny tried to stifle a snorting laugh but didn’t quite succeed, and the image from his camera was blurred for several seconds. “Easy there, Danny boy,” said Sam. The image from Tomasz’s camera was, as always, rock steady.

“We have three people who will offer their own reminiscences of Nicholas Gantry, as we attempt to make some sense of his life and of his tragic, untimely death. First we will hear from his brother Anthony.”

A man in a striped suit stood up from the front row, stepped over Tomasz’s lights, walked to the lectern and turned to face the congregation. Danny showed a head-and-shoulders featuring his deeply lined face. Tomasz focused on his hands, which were shaking uncontrollably.

“My brother was a good man,” began Tony.

Oh come on, you can do better than that thought Sam.

“We were mates. Always mates, from when we were little. We trusted each other, and we never let each other down. If there was a fight, I’d be there to help him and he’d be there to help me. Usually.”

There was an uncomfortable titter from the congregation, and Tony’s hands shook even more, rustling the notes that he was holding.

“But even then you could see Nick was the talented one. Me, I played footy and listened to AC/DC on dad’s ghetto blaster. Nick was drawing stuff in these little notebooks that he kept. He’d write things down, you know, stuff people said or some words that came to him – I dunno what they were. He seemed like he belonged somewhere else. And he got all the girls.”

More laughter from the congregation, less restrained, and Tony appeared to relax a little.

“Yeah, even in primary school, all the girls wanted to come up and chat to him. He had some kind of magnetism, I dunno.”

Tomasz focused closer on Tony’s hands – leathery and calloused. The hands of a worker.

Beautiful shot, Tom.

“Then he started pestering mum and dad to get him a musical instrument. Uncle Kenny played sax, so mum went out and got him this tenor sax. It was like SO big, he could hardly reach the mouthpiece, but as soon as he blew one note on that thing he was off. He’d sit in his room for hours just making sounds. I never knew if they was good or bad. In high school he grew his hair long and hung out with the cool kids, but he never made me feel like I was inferior. He invited me whenever his band was playing. They played rock and roll, and then they’d play this weird jazz stuff and everyone went ‘oh that’s cool’ and I thought ‘yeah, that’s not for me’.”

Danny panned over the congregation, catching smiles of recognition from several people.

“After that we lost contact a bit. He was in New York and Berlin and all sorts, trying to make a living playing his music. There were lots of women. One was called Marta. He talked about her a lot after he came back, how she got him off the drugs, how she used to wear a beret and a black skirt and ballet shoes like a 1950s beatnik. I never met her of course. There’s a lot of things I’ll never know about now.”

Tony hesitated, drew a deep breath and brushed the corner of his eye with his finger.

“When he came back to Sydney he was still friendly, still a good mate. We went out to Rockpool once, for his birthday or something, and he shouted us all. But it was like something was eating away at him. Maybe it was not making it with his band. Or his girlfriends that never lasted. Christine says he just needed a boot up his bum to tell him he’s not doing so bad compared with lots of other people.”

Good one, Tony. There’s a lot of viewers are going to agree with you on that one.

“But then I guess it just got too much for him. I’m not going to judge him for that. I just hope that wherever he is he can get whatever it is he was looking for. And they’d better have a damn good sax there, because Nick was VERY particular about that.”

Danny picked out a woman who had been crying softly and who smiled a lovely, gracious smile after the last sentence. As Tony walked down from the lectern there was a smattering of applause.

Nick’s gig had finished three hours ago and Marta was pacing the floor of their Belin unit. He’d PROMISED. A hundred possible scenarios filled her head, but one hung over all the others like a dense, black cloud.

A key turned, the door opened and Nick walked in with a big smile and a bunch of freshly-bought flowers. But his quivering hands and the look in his eyes told a different story.

“You’re wired, aren’t you?”

Silence.

Marta grabbed the flowers, threw them on the floor and tried to stamp on them with incongruous soft-soled shoes. As she did, her face contorted into a grotesque mask.

“You’re a liar, you’re a liar, you’re such a fucking liar, Nick. You said you loved me but you just forgot to mention that you love all this other stuff more. Don’t you? Don’t you?”

Then she fell, breathing heavily, onto the sofa. She touched her belly, and muttered “What have we done?”

“Next we will hear from Josh Greenway and Sal Coratolo, two members of Nicholas’ band,” said the minister in his drone-like voice. The two men shuffled up to the front of the church, looking definitely out of place in their freshly-hired suits.

“We’re just musos, we can’t talk much.” said one, “But Nick was such a great man. We thought this would say what we feel for him better than words.” He picked up a saxophone from the front row of seats while the other man walked to a piano on one side.

Oh no you don’t. This isn’t the X Factor. You don’t get to perform on TV like that. We’ll cut this bit in the editing.

“It’s a song that he’d play over and over when he was feeling bad. It seemed to mean a lot to him.”

They played a slow, blues-inflected version of “Over the Rainbow”. At the end Sam was mouthing the words - “Birds fly over the rainbow, why then oh why can’t I?”

Nicely done. Maybe I’ll think about including it.

Nick had been clean ever since the Night of the Trampled Flowers. He’d stayed with Marta, through all the vomiting and the aching and the mood swings that just kept getting worse. And then he’d been with her on another night - the one when he found her stretched out on the bathroom floor, sobbing, in a pool of blood.

But now whenever he touched her, she moved away and turned her head. There was a cold sore on her upper lip that she was ignoring. He didn’t know what she wanted any more, and he didn’t know what he wanted, either. The band had been touring for most of the year, with not much success. It was time for a decision.

“An old mate rang me yesterday. He can get me a teaching job back in Australia. I’m thinking it’s better than just killing time here.”

“Yes, you’re probably right. There’s no real reason for you to stay in Belin now, is there?” No real reason? Nick had thought there was a reason.

“Will you come with me?” There was nothing in the tone of Nick’s question, nor in his face, nor in his gestures, that could possibly have given away the fact that Nick’s entire life, his entire existence, depended on Marta’s answer.

“No.”

“Finally, we will hear from Francine Delaney, one of Nicholas’ students.”

Sam was seriously considering asking Mattie to dub the minister’s voice with someone a bit more lively.

Tomasz picked her out just as she was standing. Early twenties, blonde hair in a ponytail, loose black low-cut top, loose cotton pants tied at the ankle, flat sandals. And those eyes. Intense,

light blue, like searchlights. Tomasz caught one of the church lights reflected, flashing in her eyes as she turned her head.

“Hold that shot, Tom. Danny, move a bit left and catch the moment she passes the window. Yeah, great work. Tom, when she turns I want the face, the neckline, the shoulders. I want viewers to gasp. Yes! Mate, you are brilliant.”

Francine’s voice was surprisingly quiet.

“Everyone at the Institute wanted to be in Nick’s class. He was so gentle, so understanding, so uplifting. ‘Ease the note out,’ he’d say, ‘don’t push. The sax wants the music to come out, you just have to help it a little.’ Everyone played better after they’d been to a couple of his classes. But I don’t think he ever knew.

“When he introduced himself to a new group of students he’d say ‘I’m Nick Gantry. I’m a sax player who tried hard but never made it, and now I’ve washed up down here. It’s a tough gig out there, people. But if I can help some of you, somehow, I guess that’s better than nothing.’”

She’s good

“I was in the first group of students he ever took. When the term finished I couldn’t bear to be without him, so I asked if he could give me some private lessons. And that doesn’t mean what you think. I know he had a reputation with women, but in all the times I was at his house he never once made a move on me.”

Speaking even more quietly, she added “I wish he had.”

“Every week I came and we played for hours and drank whiskey and talked about music and life and where he’d been and what he’d done. He talked about Marta and how much she wanted kids, and how that all went wrong. He talked about how he once played with Miles Davis. ‘I was floating on this sea of shimmering music’, he said.”

“But when I closed the door, I know he just went back into his head, and that was telling him all these stupid things about how worthless he was. I just felt so powerless.”

Lovely, darlin. Stoic, holding back the tears. But come on, let’s have some soon.

“Then one day I opened the door and there he was, on his favourite lounge, an empty bottle of pills on the floor and John Coltrane on endless repeat. Such a waste. Such a stupid, stupid waste.”

Francine stepped down from the lectern and over Tomasz’s lights. She walked slowly back toward her seat. The minister stood up and Danny moved the camera onto him. But Tomasz followed Francine. He sensed what was about to happen.

“No, wait,” she said, much louder now, from the centre of the church. “There’s something else I need to say. I loved him. I loved him more than I’ve ever known how to love anyone.”

Her face was contorted, and her eyes, slightly damp, caught the lights even more strongly.

“I couldn’t save him. But he knew I was coming that afternoon. He knew I’d open that door. He wanted me to be the first person to know. That must mean something. That must mean I was important to him.”

A single tear traced a path down her left cheek. Danny caught it best, but Tomasz’s head shot with quivering lips was also fabulous. He just wished he’d been prescient enough to put floor floods all down the aisle.

“I’ll take that with me. In all his desperate loneliness, the person that he wanted to find him was me.”

Oh my darlin, you have just won us the ratings war.

Niki’s post-funeral interviews were fairly predictable.

“Tony, did you know about Nick’s friendship with Francine, how important it was?”

“He kept a lot to himself. He did mention a student that came around sometimes. But toward the end he didn’t say much at all to tell you the truth.”

Niki didn’t interview Francine. Sam said it would detract from the power of the performance. But Sam did come up to Francine afterwards, while the others were packing up.

“That was very moving.”

“Thank you - um, I mean, yes, it’s just unbelievably tragic isn’t it?”

“Where do you work?”

“I do gigs with a couple of bands. Mostly people from the Institute. Nick used to come and listen sometimes.” Francine looked at the ground, a little sheepishly. “And I did an acting course last year.”

Sam smiled slowly, reached into her bag and pushed a piece of paper into Francine’s hand.

When the episode aired five weeks later, it was followed by a call for donations to a support group for musicians with mental health issues. They received \$73,000 in fifteen minutes.

Six months later Francine took a part as a sax-playing waitress in “Home and Away”.