

forgeries

It is in the wings of a new theater. In the back we see some blacks hung, perhaps some pieces of scenery in overnight storage positions, and a naked light bulb on a rolling pole – a ghost light. In the foreground there is a large box full of old scripts, a pile of folded black curtains, a heap of discarded costumes, odd bits of lighting equipment and so forth. From under the pile of discarded costumes the actor first speaks.

THE ACTOR

(from The Sea Gull)

It started that very night, when my play was such a dreadful failure. Women don't forgive failure. I burnt it all, right to the final bit. If only you knew how very unhappy I am. That you are increasingly cold to me is frightful, incredible. It is as if I awoke one day to see this lake dry, or seeping away into the earth. You say that you're too simple minded to understand the likes of me. Oh, tell me now, what is there, really, to understand?

God.

Chekhov.

A translation of one of the great playwrights of all time and it sounds like a language lesson.

Where are you going? To the library. May I come with you? Do you have a pencil? No, but I have a pen.

What have we got against the Russians? When they don't fail on their own, we do our best to help them.

He sits up, bursting out of the pile of rags, and scatters them everywhere. He is a slight man in his early thirties, not unattractive, but with an unusual, taught appearance. He talks to himself very rapidly and with complete abandon, enjoying his words and the sounds he can make with them. Were someone else around he would be embarrassed to speak in this way. He's dressed casually, is slightly bruised on the face and has a loop of ties around his neck. He's a bit unsteady on his feet, giddy and disoriented.

Where the hell am I?

Each change of subject gets a new character, and his characters talk to one another. Each character is strongly defined and specific. He is an excellent and flexible actor.

(yelling) Anybody home? Only the echoes. I must have fallen asleep.

Checks his watch. It is missing.

No time. Damn. Must have dropped off somewhere. Why was I lying under a pile of old costumes, I mean other than that I was probably blocked that way? (*a director*) "Bollingbrooke, you go lay under that pile of old costumes, then when you kill Richard, jump out and just kind of let whatever sticks to you hang there..." Shakespeare as dirty laundry. "What we're trying to say here is that history is nothing but a heap of old costumes, think about it."

That was my Rolex! Shit! That cost me a full weeks goddamn pay, that watch! Shit!

Searching through the costumes

How could I be so stupid to lose...

Well, it's got to be here somewhere! (*each phrase a different character*) Oh Bou-liv-a! Where are you? Goddamnit, girl, show your face, right now! I've had about all I can take, and I've certainly no time for this. No time for serchin's. Hah,hah,hah. (*almost in tears*) Please be in here. I can't lose that watch. (*recovers*) Why not? What's Timex to him, or he to Timex...

(from Hamlet)

*That he should weep for her?
What would he do had he the motive and cue for passion
that I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
and cleave the general ear with horrid speech...*

"The evening's performance was quite a success except for the horrid speech delivered by Kenneth Livingston which proved him to be completely ineffective as an actor." Critics.

God.

(tearing again) Just let me find the watch and go home.

Please.

(*to force a recovery*) I bet there was a party and I got drunk and flap, bzzz, out like a light. A little party to kick off the brand new theater. The brand new, never been used before – at least not very well yet, but that's the director's fault, and the critics never know what they're talking about anyway, but we'll show them, the next show'll be great, and in the meantime we'll all screw around with the wardrobe assistants – theater. I bet that's it, and I acted like a complete fool and got drunk and gave my watch to some ingenue in the hopes that she'd give up the staggeringly handsome and talented good-for-nothing she thinks she's in love with, when really she's only attracted to his magnificent body, charm, athletic bearing and sonorous singing voice, abundant wit, wealth and spiritual integrity. She'll learn. (*violently frustrated*) Where's my watch?

(*to recover*) A party. An reckless orgy of diabolical proportions, a wallowing in illusion so

profound that we thought for a woolly, wistful moment that we could have our cake and eat it too, that clichés were in the eye of the beholder, and that truth was meant to be broken and subjugated, to be made the willing, happy servant of life as it should be. But the result is, my neck is sore and I lost my watch and I want to be home in bed. Alone.

I don't believe they opened this place with a production of *42nd Street*. How tasteless. A classical acting company trying to tap.

Mind! Account for thyself! What art thou making up and what is left thereby? After Mind, this remarkable chaos, goes away, is there anything left? I don't want to know.

Where's that watch?

He dives into the box full of old scripts. He throws them out and scans them through, grabbing ideas, lines and themes at random, all the while searching for his watch.

Scripts! Verbal instructions for the re-creation of a reality that never existed in the first place. Hundreds of playwrights, lives invested in fantasy. Billions of words, spoken thousands of times by dozens of actors on one stage. That glorious stage! Gone! Food for a bulldozer! God. And now we're starting all over, and I can't believe we opened with a production of...

choosing a script at random

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolfe? It's been done, you know? Everyone who wants to see it has seen it already. So what if we flood the theatre at the end to symbolize baptism and remission of sin? So what we make the audience scan a Reader's Digest version of Virginia Woolfe's complete works during intermission? And who cares if Martha and George really are a married couple who really do act that way in the privacy of their own home? Gimmicks! Will any of that nonsense transcend mundane existence of life on earth? No!

Ah, now here's a play! Boy, could Shaw write.

(from St. Joan)

THE INQUISITOR Heresy begins with people who are to all appearance better than their neighbors. A gentle and pious girl, or a young man who has obeyed the command of our Lord by giving all his riches to the poor, and putting on the garb of poverty, the life of austerity, and the rule of humility and charity, may be the founder of a heresy that will wreck both Church and Empire if not ruthlessly stamped out in time. The records of the Holy Inquisition are full of histories we dare not give to the world, because they are beyond the belief of honest men and innocent women; yet they all began with saintly simpletons.

Wish I'd had a better part in this one. What a dingbat that director was. "I cannot use you, Mr. Livingston, Shaw cannot sustain such intensity, the British are never intense." These are Frenchmen, idiot. And who says the British are never intense, rocks-for-brains? As a generation we are so lost.

Must have been a party. I probably tried to seduce Molly MacIntyre. I usually do, and

with the same lack of results. Then I probably flirted with Sheldon Whittier – he has a smile that can stop time. And I don't say that just because he's the artistic director and holds my creative life in the hollow of his hand. It's just true. Sheldon's smile could sell me a bridge.

But it stops at that. I mean, it probably does, stop at that. I mean, what would I do with him if I had him? Look at him? Watch him move? Watch him smile. Admire his grace and demeanor. I mean, he actually has a demeanor. Most people don't. I certainly don't. That's it, I covet his demeanor, it's nothing even remotely sexual. Yeah! Redeemed. Knock it off, no one's watching. Nobody melts at a smile when you're only after someone's demeanor. I don't even know what a demeanor is, except that Sheldon most definitely has one.

And then he probably excuses himself so he can mingle sociably, and I stand watching him, exhilarated that such a one as he could co-exist with such a one as I. And then the exhilaration turns to disgust. Disgust with the choices I've made for this character I play so pretentiously and so ineptly and with such lack of confidence, day in and day out, year after endless year, and maybe – who knows? – lifetime after lifetime. Disgusted that I am forever starting out the act on the wrong foot, stretching the metaphor a bit too far until finally, strained beyond all endurance, it snaps, catching me by the neck, whipping me into a spin until I am hurled by the momentum of my own confusion into a void so total that I finally see myself for the first time!

So, a party.

I must have gotten smashed. So drunk I knew nothing, recall nothing, and hopefully, did nothing. And it obviously was not held here, there are no glasses, there are no wasted cigarettes, diminished joints, spent vials, none of the usual detritus and leftover folderol of conviviality in the fashion of the beginning of the New American Century. So I obviously wandered off, leaving the happy revelers behind, to sleep out my frustrated passions and spoilt dreams under a heap of forgotten identities.

(from Hamlet)

*to sleep perchance to dream, aye there's the rub.
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
when we have shuffled off this mortal coil
must give us pause.*

That's it! I understood that! God. Why is it that the real meaty revelations only ever happen years after they could do you any good?

I have memorized millions of words, by hundred of playwrights and spoken them for tens of thousands of people on thousands of nights under dozens of lights on one stage. One actor, one stage. Gone! Thrown cruelly into the collective memory!

God! There are thousands of lines I've never really understood. Thousands of revelations waiting for me. Thousands of pointless revelations, revealed too late to use them. Who's ever going to let me play Hamlet again? "Too intense, the Danes are never intense, besides Shakespeare was a faggot and never wrote intense characters." Screw 'em all.

(exasperated) Where's my watch?

So what's the big deal about Molly MacIntyre or even Sheldon, for that matter? I can flirt if I want, doesn't hurt anyone, it's not like I'm really involved with... shit. What's her

name? You know... her, the one I'm in love with. How could I forget? I don't believe this! She's... dark brown hair, fiery blue eyes... and her name is... music to my ears.

Well, so what if I did flirt with Molly and Sheldon? I always flirt with Molly and Sheldon, it's a habit. She knew that when she met me, so it's part of the ham; you want the meat, you get some fat.

Let's see, she's dark haired, slim and her skin has just a hint of lavender and her name is... Wait, wait, no... her hair is chestnut... more red than chestnut... and she's slim but she's heavier in the bosom, but that's my taste, exactly my taste, and her name is... lavender skin? Really? And I like that? Anyway, when I see her I say... name. My watch, her name, what's happening to me? I'm fine. Just a little fuzzy with the details, but after God knows how long under a pile of smelly rags, what do you expect? Okay.

*He finds a remote lighting control panel
and playfully manipulates the slides.*

Shine a little light on the subject!

To his astonishment, lights come up.

Some jerk techie left the dimmers on. Huh? Lights? Oh, right, side lighting. I should go out on stage. No. Not after that horrible opening. *La Fortuna del Uomo* can you believe it? Opening a popular mainstream theatre with a performance art piece in Dante's Italian expressing the essence of French existentialism? So what everyone was naked? Aging actors and actorines prancing about in their original costumes, screaming and muttering and trying to present their best angles to a subscription audience that was convinced they were all fools for not seeing the magnificent new costumes mentioned in the advance publicity. So what it saved us money? Starting over is a dangerous business, you can make fatal mistakes, you can fail to find the right rhythm and blues (*rapping*) to get you throughs the muck and ooze, you always lose unless you choose to refuse to capitulate. So-- what-- is-- her-- name?

(singing, from The Beggar's Opera)

*When the heart of a man is oppressed with cares,
then the mist is dispelled when a woman appears,
like the notes of a fiddle she sweetly, sweetly
raises our spirits and charms our ears.*

"When a woman appears" The line begins... "When a woman appears..." Damn. Can't remember how the rest of it goes. There's the piece. Right in there somewhere, if only I could... Watch, watch, watch!

Where was I? Right. Her name. Don't think about it. Think about something else.

grabbing a prop

This goblet. Think about this plastic made to look like medieval Scottish bronze goblet. (*firmly*) I remember this goblet. This goblet was held by... what's his name in the Banquo's ghost scene... years ago.

(from Macbeth)

MACBETH Which of you have done this?

LORDS What, my good lord?

MACBETH *Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake
Thy gory locks at me.*

ROSS *Gentlemen, rise, his highness is not well.*

LADY MACBETH *Sit worthy friends. My lord is often thus.
And hath been from his youth. Pray you, keep seat.
The fit is momentary. Upon a thought
He will again be well. If much you note him
You will offend him, and extend his passion.
Feed, and regard him not. Are you man?*

MACBETH *Aye, and a bold one, that dare look on that
Which might appall the devil.*

A reconstruction of an imagined interpretation of a supernatural event that may never have actually occurred, and I wasn't even in the scene, and I remember every word. What a life.

Damn! Almost had it! Slipped away like love from the lonely. God! It starts with an "f"... no a "t". Don't think about it.

*Grabbing a sword and immediately
beginning an appropriate scene from A
Midsummer Night's Dream*

DEMETRIUS *Do I entice you? Do I speak you fair?
Or rather do I not in plainest truth
Tell you I do not, nor I cannot love you?*

HELENA *And even for that do I love you the more.
I am your spaniel, and Demetrius,
The more you beat me I will fawn on you.
Use me but as your spaniel spurn me, strike me,
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.
What worsser place can I beg in your love--
And yet a place of high respect with me--
Than to be used as you use your dog?*

Oh, such a delicate pain. Carefully nourish that pain or it will melt away, leaving joy its place. An unattached joy, a joy that clings to no one and nothing but its enjoyer. Oh, dreadful joy that lingers, reducing all pain and stress and hope and struggle of life to a pointless exercise in distraction. To be avoided at the cost of life itself if necessary, that joy, that licentious, libidinous, wanton, merciless joy. But memory, which fails you at the most peculiar times, oh, precious never-loving memory, memory, memory, cleave to that redeeming, ever-so-delicate pain, that twinge in the guts, the wrench, the vague knowledge that everything is wrong, about to fall into the sea. It's memory that saves you. From joy. God.

*Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.*

I love the women's parts. Especially Shakespeare's women.

That's right! Idiot, stupid actor, idiot, self-destructive, simpering, actor, dumb-ass, miserable idiot actor. *She* gave you that watch! Karen did. Shit. I can't have lost it, it must have cost her a... Week's pay? That's *my* week's pay it cost. How come she... if I paid...? God. I hate this. Who gave what to whom? Maybe I gave *her* a watch. Then if I gave the watch to her why should *I* be wearing it? That's it, I wasn't, it's her watch after all. Then if I wasn't wearing a watch how could I lose one? No actor can survive in the profession with a memory like this!

Pain! (*forcing it, then a pause*) The watch.

I saw it and I knew, it would make those fingers look like ribs of fresh snow tipped with sliced almonds. Black satin band, silver case, silver face with crimson glass at noon, four and eight. Black hands with silver inlay. Her name and my name on the reverse, bracketed with stars. Karen, for you. She blushed, she stammered, she gave all the outward signs of love. I wept with joy! – Well, I teared-up a little bit. I would have wept if it had been cool to weep, but as it was I was afraid even to cry much less weep. – "I... I..." couldn't say it. Then it was too late, now she'll just think I'm being sentimental, manipulative, trying to bed her. So instead... "Karen, this watch is you! I saw it and said, I got to get this watch for Karen, I don't care what it costs, I just got to see her wearing it." Not too shoddy for the aughts, but not exactly a declaration of love either. At least the grammar was fashionably bad. Then she... she said, "no, really, that's sweet, but well, this is getting too serious, bo-diddly, and well, if I accepted this it would be like taking a bribe. I can't." My fault for hesitating. I should have insisted. "No, you must, because I love you, honestly I do, it's not a passing thing. I am staking everything I have, feel, know, want and remember on loving you. I only paused once, and it was just now, cause I was taking a risk way over my risk limit, and that's all, but really, I do, I really, really, do love you. Considerably." But no. I laughed nervously, and pretended that it didn't make any difference, like how can I be hurt, you kiddin' me? "You kiddin me? I just thought you'd like it that's all. No biggie. Somebody else. I'll wear it myself! Looks great don't it?" Arch!

You're perfect! You are exactly what I have always wanted! Don't run away from me! Don't go away, shield me. From death. Death. Time.

Yeah, well, I'll hurt for awhile, but I'll get over it cause time blunts all feeling, and the next time I see you nothing will induce me to think for a moment that you're beautiful – even in funky clothes and your hair in strings and your body gone to flab – like I think now that I would, cause time passes, and so do you. And so will I.

Karen! I remembered! Karen! I'm not mad after all! Karen. Karen. Brown hair, touch of red, fiery blue eyes. Karen. Cruel Karen. "I like you, I really, really do. I adore you. You are my ideal man, but I can't." Is that crazy? I adore her and I can't say it. Simply. Say it straight from the heart without trappings, without a bribe or a rider or a pork barrel. Can't do it. If it wasn't a watch more exquisite than any master of time has ever before crafted, then it was kisses and whispers and excited conversations.

And it was showing off at the river, it was a replay of every little boy stunt I ever performed to impress my mother, of every arcane bit of trivia memorized to elicit the ahhs and nods of admiration from the cousins and aunts assembled at Christmas. It was lots and lots of work. Worship without faith, prayer without reverence...

(*from A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

*...the forgeries of jealousy,
and never since the middle summer's spring
met we...*

...but that my fear has left me mad, my desire in want, my eagerness in yearning. I'm jealous of you. You told me "Go away. And take your watch with you.", you cut me off without a trace of hesitation, and you made it seem so easy. I could never do that. But I wish I could.

We opened with *Summer and Smoke* and the tables were turned with a vengeance. You played Alma. I lost myself in my role. I saw nothing before me but dissipation and despair. The critics tore me to shreds and I... hung myself.

*He stops, hears what he said, and looks
around. He sees things for the first time.
He feels his neck, his face. He finds the loop
of ties. He sits.*

Did I?

(from A Midsummer Night's Dream)

*BOTTOM The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath
not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive,
nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter
Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called...*

forgeries,

...and I will sing it at the latter end of the play, before the Duke.

I lost her, I lost hope, I lost resolve, and I lost my mind, trollop that it is, it still serves me; so to lose it, was to lose.

God.

Alone with my characters.

(from Swan Song)

*And that's the story in nutshell. Whether or not I want the role,
the only one left for me now is the victim of the murder. The man
with the sickle lurks in the wings. He waits. And funny, I have
been on stage for forty-five years, yet I believe this is the very
first time I have ever been alone in a theatre at night. How about
that? The first time.*

And here I am in the wings, and here are all the costumes I've ever worn, all the scripts I've ever rehearsed, all the props I've ever leaned on, all the lights that have ever lit my stride across that stage that is no more, my ravings, my lunacy, my antic past before the public eye. All here. Like a pharaoh with his household items to see him safely to the other side.

I guess the watch never made it.

*He throws himself down onto the pile of
black drapes. When he lands the pile gives*

forth a loud grunt. He stands, puzzled, looks at the pile and sits again. The pile groans again, then shifts. He stands up fast, retreating a few steps, his heart pounding through the top of his head.

Hello? Somebody here? Hello?

The pile shifts again. A curtain is heaved aside and a youngish looking man with a brilliant smile and a stunning demeanor sits up in the middle of the tangled cloth. It's Sheldon Whittier and he's wearing the watch.

Sheldon! What are you doing here?

SHELDON

What am I doing here? I'm proud of you. You never were one to get right to the point like that, but that question is right to the point. I feel dusty.

THE ACTOR

I thought I'd died, that I'd gone the way of all flesh, that I'd popped the cork, kicked the bucket and croaked. I'm so glad to see you, I... How long have you been there?

SHELDON

Also to the point. *(to us)* Hi, I'm Sheldon and I'm being played by [name]. For the sake of surprise I'm not in the program, but if you'll pass these around, that'll satisfy the union requirements. Thanks, and please don't tell anyone about me, even if you're a critic or just reading the play, my entrance is supposed to be a surprise.

THE ACTOR

Who're you talking to?

SHELDON

The audience.

THE ACTOR

There's an audience?

SHELDON

You, of all people. There is always an audience.

THE ACTOR

Where?

SHELDON

Where are they usually?

The actor, still in a state of deep shock goes out towards the stage. He looks out towards where the house should be, peers

mightily, but can see no one. He tries a little funny acting, waving his arms and doing prat falls, trying to get a laugh. All this time, Sheldon talks to us.

SHELDON

You'll have to excuse him. His imagination has run away with his reality. For those of you have never seen him act, he's really a fine actor. Everyone around him, audience, actors, technicians, are always startled by the intensity of his performances. The critics are startled too, and react like startled critics often do. I don't think he'll ever get used to that.

A mystified actor returns to the wings.

THE ACTOR

There's no one out there, Sheldon.

SHELDON

My mistake.

THE ACTOR

So who were you talking to?

SHELDON

Myself.

THE ACTOR

Oh. Hey, it's okay, I do it all the time. I am so happy to see you. I really did, I had convinced myself that I'd hung myself over being jilted and panned and that now I was dead and this was wherever you go to wait out whatever it is that comes next. I never did figure out where that is. Oh, Sheldon, it's so good to have company. So what're you doing here? I mean, I don't even know what *I'm* doing here. So what *am* I doing here?

SHELDON

Recognize it?

THE ACTOR

That's my watch! *The* watch. That's the watch I gave... the woman I love... what's her name.

SHELDON

Karen.

THE ACTOR

No, something with an "f"... or a "t"... Karen! That's it, Karen. Is that what you just said?

SHELDON

You've good taste.

THE ACTOR

It's nice, isn't it? Yeah. I guess she didn't much care for it. There's no accounting for... et cetera. So, how come you have it?

SHELDON

You don't remember? Kenny, I'm crushed.

KENNETH

Remember... oh, sure... uh. No. No, can't say that I do. Remember. Uh. You want to tell me?

SHELDON

Let's reconstruct the evening.

KENNETH

Okay.

SHELDON

Good. *(pause)* You start.

KENNETH

Uh. Well, I tried to give her the watch. I remember that pretty clearly... Sheldon?

SHELDON

What, Ken?

KENNETH

How long were you there?

SHELDON

Where?

KENNETH

There, in that pile of curtains?

SHELDON

Well, I must have turned in around one, one forty. It's three fifteen now.

KENNETH

Were you awake?

SHELDON

Not until you sat on me.

KENNETH

Sorry. Okay. So I gave her that watch, and she said she didn't like it, and I took it back and put it on myself. I guess. Then I had a drink. And then...

SHELDON

Well?