

What Happens

Issue 2, Winter 2021

Edited by Bianca Rae Messinger
and Toby Altman.

Designed by Peter Hopkins.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Bianca Rae Messinger and Toby Altman

"I could not, after all, have articulated the significant concentration of my own adolescent experience, for I did not realize that my own human life was an image, that my self was the persona of a poem in process of making, in which many levels of meaning were to be incorporated before the form of that life be realized."

-Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book*

Our second issue zooms in on documentation, or our second issue tries to reinterpret the line between documentation and performance. It works against the idea that one belongs to simple anecdotes and the other to the creative—in this divided sense of theory versus praxis. Our interest in documentation shows how fragile a genre can be, and how much labor a character can contain. Or it is also an attempt to reimagine forgotten histories and senses.

What if a document is, in Duncan's terms, a "process of design beyond our own figure?" An act that opens the performance to other agencies and temporalities? What if it is an act that opens? It is a possibility intimate to poets' theater as a genre: that the performance may exist in many places, many media, many times at once; that it opens the poem to the participation of many bodies. A "symposium of the whole," Duncan calls it. With the knowledge that such wholeness will always be incomplete, decomposing, reassembling itself. In short, on stage.

Or off stage. Many of these documents are situated between, after, or before performance. They are concerned with the way that, for instance, research may be itself a kind of performance; or the way in which performance extends past the boundaries of the stage—lingering for years in the shared emotional intensity of the stage. These are texts that often refuse the propriety of the script: the notion that there is a unidirectional course from text to stage. They imagine language and performance to be reciprocal, their borders unfixed, becoming stranger.

This second issue of *What Happens* also coincides with the start of our publication series *In the Grasses*, which focuses primarily on collaborative theatrical works aimed at imagining new social realities. For more information you may scan the QR code below:



-Bianca and Toby

Plays

The Abbreviated Adventures of Hazel Honeybun

Part 1: the longest fish

*Part 2: five extended acts with the appearance of
honeybun*

Part 3: during the rainy season

Alyssa Moore

the longest fish

I have serious feelings for Hazel Honeybun which descend upon me while I'm pruning my bush of roses.

Such vigorous feeling.

It cannot be.

So it is.

R calls & invites me to spruce an abandoned ware-house in Altoona. I put Hazel down for months under the inherited church hats and enjoy a delicately forested solitude with power tools.

When I return, my key gets stuck in the lock, I chuck my galoshes in the wrong corner, but Hazel Honeybun, having in my absence committed the great escape, is bigger better wetter. I try

to take her in, capture her with my polished impartial eye, but looking's like going to the museum to study the masterpiece & only examining the frame. Eager to resume my tarry, I

quarter and freeze dry the hardest parts

of Hazel Honeybun. Portion her off in little satchels and hide her in my various junk drawers. Nestle her gently among squares of scented wax, plop some of her under a rosy pillow sham, drop the rest beside a screw-driver & an unresolved spat with my cousin.

I focus on emptying my brain well

of love for the Honeybun, imagine it passing out of me swift and fragrant, but

suppose it organizes me

the way the cake pan keeps the batter from spilling into the oven or the batter keeps the base-men running or the running provides a reason for the coach &

stop-watch. Nonetheless, I persist—push the pieces out of mind & hitch a ride with C to scour the shore-line for a substitute me. What're you thinking? he asks. Someone vast with light pockets, I say, or polo'd be-jeweled & able to slinky quick shutter & know

Twelve days later & despite the motel the beach

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procession, we've no luck.

I'm the same.

All other possible me's hidden or having gone
into hibernation. C comes to a rolling stop
in front of my apartment. I trip
out the car, up the stairs &
make it to my floor. Where my apartment should be
there's just a wall. No door no door-knob
no muddied welcome mat.

I involve authorities in my loss

but they refuse an investigation. I mention Hazel
as an after-thought. The examiner assures me
the feeling will stay intact. How would he know?

But I find a new home. One in which I believe
the only way to stay safe is to stay
away. One in which while watching
on the local news a witness
recap the witnessing, I believe

I am the only organism keeping Hazel Honeybun alive. As I bathe,
she sits
in my
larynx like a fish
I aspirated. Still
growing.
Pulsing fins
into passage-
ways, fish
body
twisting down
the length
of my
breathing tubes.

I wake up & come down
the stairs with fever.

The GP confirms I am holding onto something that detracts from gasping and swallowing. I consider
hiring a personal assistant who can track these changes. Someone to whom I can tell holding on to the
Honeybun's memory is

watching the ballet from the stage.

Being the stage.

Pointe shoes coming down on your temple

like daggers. I don't get the chance.
The personal assistant section disappears
from the phone-book. I revive

my involvement with the authorities
who've now devolved to cow
boy hats. Plastic lizards. Fake guns. Real bullets. *it happens*, R tells me,

when something is just an idea it may leave you

at any moment. I want to leave

and ulcer over something somewhere new. I resolve
to depart for a few hours only.

Why can't I go?

Five Extended Acts with the Appearance of Honeybun

ok, hazel found me driving by the county fair. she was elbows deep in the fried butter stand i'm passive digestive and teetering on vegetarian. *what i could do with that body* she winked over the chicken fritters oil the caramel dipping sauce. what she didn't know is what i had already done. was willing to do. for her? for me? did it matter? was someone microscopically fragmenting hairs? out in the parking lot she gave me her keys and said watch me. she put her feet on the dash. she put her pinky toe on the wheel from the passenger's seat. i was holding her bag of freshly butchered meat. i was falling asleep at the wheel. let me out i said though it was my foot on the gas. *here?* she laughed. the wheels waffled and stuttered over the gravel road. the shoulder was mud and frogs. wild pigs and twigs. my stomach was full but something heavier pushed me out of the car. *here?* i realized i hadn't answered. *here?*

in the car w hazel and the living's the living—
you do it. *we're taking it all back*, i say referring as
casually as possible to the stack of silk scarves
on the back seat *that intrigues me* she
sighs. *it's the truth* i rebut. *have you ever been brotherless*,
hazel quips. *no*, i ask. *well then I can see why*
you've never needed a porcupine. but you should really
know what to do with a good silk scarf

on the ferris wheel at the bucket toss at the bottle
stand hazel keeps telling me abt the cotton
candy auction & i'm dreaming up ways
to levitate. the skewers have proved useful
to this end. a good rooster struts by but
i'm not the type to throw my loose coins
at a free bird. the schedule says i'm to lead
a poultry wrangling session at 3
but we all know how that goes. once you get
one chicken in your grasp everyone's expecting
you to have one in your hand forever.

every detail of the chicken session's been considered. even the fence of
beaks and claws. gizzards the whole way round. the sun drops down & i say
Hazel. hazel says *huh* her stomach a small lump. her voice one translucent
bean disturbing a gallon bucket. Look at the fence hazel, but hazel's got her
eyes on the dollar the dollar on the stage

the crowd's looking dour so I drum
up some facts. chickens love
the taste of chicken, if you're bitten
by a chicken you're bound to be smitten
with plague & other such morsels. when did i
become the act. the chicken eggs curdle
in the spotlight. i remember once being among
the crowd & so dearly
hating the proprietor of the
microphone. hazel's in the front row
knitting and the needles keep
poking her thigh, putting rips clear through
her handiwork

i wander.

end up in a tent of chicken
history. a rundown of forgotten
poultry rebellions.
a small man clears his throat
& reads from a notecard
i thought there were more of you
he speaks over my head
his nails pale pale and cut
past the cuticle clutch the card.
he sways on his heels & continues
reading. i opt out of his speech & go
into the back room. automated birds
motor about. a flame crafted of crepe paper
performs as planned in the draft of a fan.
underattended, there's room for me to sit
and i do. a proud robotic
chicken collides with my
leg then lays an egg. another one.
another. maybe it sees something
in me. maybe it's tired of carrying
all this possibility.

during the rainy season,

my feelings for Hazel Honeybun bloat and grow
lazy on the porch considering:

in the spring the ample flower & fungi which I pick lightly spritz with oil and
snack on

after some essential oils, I collect rain in biscuit tins and consider en-
gaging more convincingly in a project based lie

I recall a previous engagement which lasted fourteen months and concluded
with a vituperous mink

C brings by a case of tea toy china from her basement. We smack
chai on chia crackers use the instance
instant meat thermometers bring sugar to the soft ball stage considering

all the bases are loaded

Considering all the bases are loaded, considering I have always
been frightened of among other things being found out
even when I now know I wasn't hiding anything in possession
of anything to

be hidden. My love I can

get up and flaunt at any moment
my ability to leave bc someone remains
to comfort my valuable watery beverage and chair

at the table too, I would protect the perimeter
and then
some flip switched: I wanted

to give

I unplug my phone and hang
up fairy lights and magazine pictures
peel the sticker off of an apples

If the bases weren't loaded would I feel such &
such pressure

bearing straight location proximal damage

over me the music in
the magic peach pit

considering the degradation of an open car door

my life organized by a subtle blue light
my life reorganized by an ergonomic desk chair
my life organized under a mechanic and whimsy of drying up

At the hydroponics farm i am preternaturally related to the farmers the
farmers
anchor plants down with rocks i skim some water off the top and gulp when
the guide turns around

i am miraculously calm considering the decorations hang from a single nail

THE ORCHIDS

Ishmael Klein

Characters

Iris, a worker in the reactor room with amnesia. Iris is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

Waitress/Nurse, a woman who only knows survival.

Desk, alternate manifestation of nurse.

Man/Doctor, a man with a PhD who consumes others.

Doctor Floorboards, alternate manifestation of doctor

Leif, a caring young person.

System Voice, a computerized reality checker.

Setting

Long Island, New York 2020

The Orchids is a black comedy about people who get ensnared in a system that only sees their value as objects of commerce. Iris is starting her 'next life' without her memory. She finds herself in a training room at a sextaurant. The people training her do so by violence. She resists. Leif responds to her cry of help and is drawn into this world. It's a play about overcoming sexual violence.

ACT I: A sextaurant training room: Gotchas

ACT II: A dream closet in a hospital

ACT III: Doctor's Office at Gotchas now in the basement of the hospital

Act 1, Scene 1

Training room of Gotchas sextaurant. IRIS wears a "sexy" waitress outfit. She has a zap collar around her neck. A MAN sits at a small table. The head WAITRESS is rolling cutlery in napkins. IRIS begins the scene in a chair asleep. She'll wake up and go to the mirror to speak with SYSTEM VOICE. The mirror is surrounded by small lights that flicker in rhythm to SYSTEM VOICE'S responses. MUZAK plays.

SYSTEM VOICE: Running Script "I should never have let you off the leash in the first place." says the Master. Now you hang your head down. Okay so script says to take it from there. Running, okay, that's you, start! Suggestion: walk, leading with the upper points of the hips.

IRIS: *(startled awake.)* System voice? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Waiting.

IRIS: I am who? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Iris.

IRIS: Yes! And this is what? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: First day of the new job.

IRIS: Job? Am I dead? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: False. I mean, no.

IRIS: Noticing no memory. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Mmmm hmmm.

IRIS: I am where? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Training room of the popular sextaurant titled: Gotchas.

IRIS: System Voice why am I in a sextaurant? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: With the loss of your last few scripts, you do not have the skills for a better...situation.

IRIS: Why have I lost my last few scripts?! Enter?

SYSTEM VOICE: Commented out.

IRIS: Oh.

(IRIS looks at her outfit and hands.)

IRIS: Are these my clothes? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Now they are.

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IRIS: What do I do? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Protocol quote, "Be like a peach awaiting the knife with fear and delight." And do it while serving food.

IRIS: What?! Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I don't write it; I just know it. Enter Master User!
Running Script!

(The MAN gets up from his table and adjusts the lights. He does small adjustments to make the atmosphere more intimate.)

IRIS: What script? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I told you! Master User! Master User!

IRIS: But I don't even know what's on the menu! Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Iris, you're supposed to play along!

IRIS: Play along?

PAUSE.

IRIS *(continued)*: Wait! Is this a slavery situation? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: You are subject to the master user.

(The MAN enters center stage while adjusting device.)

SYSTEM VOICE *(continued)*: Running script. New girl at Gotchas. Look alive!

IRIS: But why does he want me to be subject to him? Enter.

(MAN activates shock collar. ZAP. IRIS reacts.)

IRIS *(continued)* *(noticing collar)*: Ow! What is this thing? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Rerunning script. Command: do not question, quote, "work that ass, Iris!" Get his attention! This is the job at Gotchas! Do you understand now?

IRIS *(in pain)*: Oh, my stomach.

(The MAN fiddles with the shock collar remote seemingly unaware that each time he does so he administers a shock to Iris' neck. IRIS staggers.)

IRIS *(continued)*: Stop it!

SYSTEM VOICE: Running script entitled: treat him right!

IRIS: How can this be legal? Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: Now is not the time for questions!

What Happens

(The MAN administers another ZAP to the electric collar and IRIS falls to the floor.)

IRIS: Dammit!!

(The MAN ZAPS IRIS.)

SYSTEM VOICE: You're not supposed to curse. Running Script: "serve to him."

IRIS *(gasping)*: How-? Who? How? How do I? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Quote "like a beautiful, stupid, nympho." You're supposed to wag your ass at him, according to the script.

(MAN ZAPS.)

IRIS: No! Stop it! You're hurting me! Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Private channel: Iris, if you give him what he wants you won't get hurt.

IRIS: What does he want? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Just control.

IRIS: This has got to be illegal! Where can I call for help-?

(The MAN puts a thumb to the button and leaves it there. IRIS is ZAPPED to the floor.)

SYSTEM VOICE: Training protocol engaged!

(A WAITRESS in a sexier outfit appears. She fills his water glass, her chest close to his mouth.)

SYSTEM VOICE *(continued)*: Rescripting! Iris! Proceed to corner and watch.

(IRIS' collar gets a ZAP which wakes her. She crawls to the corner. The MAN watches, satisfied. The WAITRESS waits then resumes servicing him.)

WAITRESS: What can I get for you today, sir?

MAN *(not looking at her)*: What's fresh?

WAITRESS: Pulled pork and milk. And the milk is good: it's local.

MAN *(softly)*: You want me to have milk? I'm lactose intolerant.

(The WAITRESS hangs her head down.)

WAITRESS: I didn't know, I didn't know, I'm sorry.

MAN: Are you trying to sabotage me?

WAITRESS: I'm sorry. Please don't tell my manager.

MAN: You are playing a very dangerous game, young lady!

WAITRESS: Please sir, don't tell my manager. I'll be good.

MAN: I don't know why you make me do this. Come on.

(MAN pulls the WAITRESS over his lap as if to administer a spanking. IRIS speaks up.)

IRIS: That's against the law!

MAN *(while ZAPPING IRIS):* System voice, constrain field to 8 feet. Enter.

IRIS *(holding collar):* It's not okay to hit someone!

MAN: Comment that out. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Commented out!

IRIS: System voice, why are you commenting me out? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Iris, you are not a Master User. Lay low.

MAN: System Voice, restart erection. Enter.

SOUND OF A BUZZ

WAITRESS *(still over his lap):* From the top?

MAN: System Voice! Pump in adrenaline. Enter.

(A mist comes into the room.)

SYSTEM VOICE: Running. Adrenaline mist.

(He throws the WAITRESS off his lap.)

MAN *(to Iris):* Come here, pussycat.

(He ZAPS her collar and she falls to the floor.)

IRIS: Oh no!

MAN: Pussycat, did you just call me old?

IRIS: No.

MAN: Come closer.

(He grips the back of IRIS' neck. She tenses)

MAN *(continued):* Now, what did you say?

IRIS: I thought you were assaulting her.

MAN *(twisting the leash to whisper to her):* I like your soft skin. I want to help

What Happens

you keep it.

*(The **WAITRESS** walks by the man "sexily.")*

MAN *(continued)* *(pointing to the **WAITRESS**)*: Look at her. She's knows how to be a good girl.

IRIS: I think there's a mistake; I wandered into your—time.

MAN: There is no mistake.

IRIS: I'm sorry if I misunderstood your ritual. I have to go.

MAN: No pussycat. You live here; like family.

(He ZAPS her to her knees.)

IRIS: Ow!

MAN: Here I can protect you from you. We don't want you to kill yourself again.

IRIS: I don't know what you're talking about.

MAN: Of course you do.

IRIS: You're not my family!

MAN: I know what you need...a bath. A bath always makes you feel better.

IRIS: I don't think we know each other at all.

*(The **MAN** overpowers **IRIS** on the table. She SCREAMS. A KNOCKING at the door. ZAPPED, KNOCKING INCREASES. **IRIS** SHRIEKS. The Lights flicker on and off.)*

LEIF *(Off)*: What's going on in there?!

*(The **WAITRESS** looks up. The **MAN** ties a red rope around **IRIS'** stomach.)*

IRIS: They're abusing me! An old man and an old woman!

MAN: System Voice, shut her up! Enter.

*(ZAP **IRIS** staggers.)*

LEIF *(Off)*: This door's locked.

IRIS: I can't move!

LEIF *(Off)*: I'll call the police.

MAN: System Voice, erase the police.

LEIF *(Off)*: Uh-whoa?

IRIS: He says I belong to him!

LEIF (*off*): That's bullshit! I might need to get help with this door.

IRIS: Don't go!

LEIF (*off*): In the meantime, kick him in the nuts!

IRIS: They've got my throat! And my—I can't!

LEIF (*off*): Wait, I've almost got it.

(ZAP. **IRIS** faints.)

The lights dim.

Act 1, Scene 2

The famous sextaurant Gotchas. There is a dummy of Iris on the floor the real IRIS is on a ladder with a red rope around her waist. She's out of body.

IRIS: I'm still here! Enter. Hey!

SYSTEM VOICE: They can't hear you.

MAN: She'll blame you for this.

WAITRESS: Nobody's gonna blame me for standing up for my husband. Especially since she threw herself at you.

IRIS: He's her husband?! Enter.

(The MAN goes to the mirror to examine his face.)

SYSTEM VOICE: Kind of.

MAN: Do I look old?

IRIS: What'd she mean by 'throw myself at him?' Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Commented out.

(ENTER LEIF who has smashed the door down with a shopping cart full of cinder-blocks.)

LEIF: Where is she?!

WAITRESS: You'll have to pay for that door!

LEIF: Where is she?!

MAN: Calm down, son. You're all worked up over nothing. Iris was having an epileptic fit. She's all right now.

LEIF: She was screaming rape. That's not nothing!

MAN: Does it look like she's getting raped. Who's gonna rape her? Raped people don't look like this.

WAITRESS: She's always been a bit of a liar.

MAN: Poor Iris.

LEIF: Why isn't she at the hospital? If she has epilepsy?

MAN *(touching LEIF tenderly):* I'm a doctor and a relative. At the hospital she'd be with strangers.

IRIS: System Voice has this happened before? Enter.

What Happens

SYSTEM VOICE: I told you it was Commented out.

WAITRESS (*whispering to the MAN*): We don't want this going any further.

(*The WAITRESS starts cleaning up around the door.*)

MAN: System voice! There's a breach! Reflect plus fear to him; comment my voice out; unregister faces. Enter.

LEIF: Who are you talking to?

SYSTEM VOICE: He can't hear me so...no effect.

MAN: Why does he hear me when I talk to you? Enter.

LEIF: Are you talking to me?

(*LIEF goes to dummy Iris. He springs the collar off her neck.*)

SYSTEM VOICE: Possibly there's a link somewhere in him.

LEIF: Don't any of you see she's been choking?!

IRIS: When's he gonna figure out they're crazy?!

MAN (*putting on a gasmask*): System Voice pump the room with GHB for clean up. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Cannot comply.

LEIF: You people are crazy!

MAN: System Voice: Comply! Enter.

(*WAITRESS approaches the MAN and whispers in his ear.*)

LEIF: She's not safe with you!

MAN (*muffled by gasmask*): Ohkay shon, iht's thime fhor youh tho bhe phut dhow nhow!

LEIF: I can't hear you with that— (*gestures*) thing on your face.

SYSTEM VOICE: Breached.

MAN (*taking off the gas mask*): System Voice find out how he is linked! Enter!

(*LIEF has stooped down and is trying to pick up the dummy that was Iris.*)

SYSTEM VOICE: Scanning.

(*LEIF'S crotch pulsates with light. They notice.*)

WAITRESS/MAN/SYSTEM VOICE: The nuts.

MAN: Enter.

What Happens

SYSTEM VOICE: The right testicle. Fascinating.

LEIF (*pointing to WAITRESS and MAN*): You are in big trouble. I'm getting her out of here.

MAN: Leave her alone.

LEIF (*screaming*): No! You almost killed her!

(*The WAITRESS eyes him hungrily.*)

LEIF (*continued*): Unbelievable!

(*LIEF picks up dummy Iris and stumbles out of view.*)

WAITRESS: Why didn't we just take him down!!

MAN: I want that link. That feature. I could use that!

WAITRESS: Well then I want it too.

MAN: It's in the nad.

WAITRESS: The testis.

MAN: I hate taking testis.

WAITRESS: But you love eating plums!

MAN: It's time to make it part of us.

WAITRESS: To eat is right.

(*The MAN instructs the WAITRESS. Call and response.*)

MAN: To eat is to have,

WAITRESS: To eat is to have,

MAN: to have is to be,

WAITRESS: to have is to be,

MAN: to be is to conquer!

WAITRESS: to be is to conquer!

(*MAN looks around for LEIF.*)

MAN: Wait where did he go?

IRIS: Yeah, where'd he take me? Enter.

MAN: System Voice, where is the boy? Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: Offline.

What Happens

MAN: Guess! Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: Likely hangouts for conditions: if unhealthy, hospital or bar, if poor, basement or bar, if gullible, tent or bar, if witless—

MAN: Did you hear that, waitress? A tent!

(LEIF dithers back onstage on his way to the exit.)

LEIF: I'm taking her to the hospital and then I'll be back with the cops!

MAN: Looks like we're going back to our old stomping ground.

EXIT LEIF.

WAITRESS: I loved when I used to run my nurse script! To be the velvet glove covering the iron calipers!

MAN: And I'll be a doctor! Like I used to be!

WAITRESS *(running):* I'll contact you when we've got him.

MAN: Back to our old stomping grounds.

(He smacks her flank as if she was a horse, she makes a happy noise.)

EXIT WAITRESS.

(Tethered IRIS comes down from the ladder to leave with the WAITRESS but the MAN grabs her.)

MAN: Now for you.

IRIS *(horrified):* How can you get a hold of me; I'm not my physical self?!

MAN: Because I am not my physical self either.

IRIS: Let go!

MAN: No.

(IRIS struggles but he is physically stronger and she is hindered by the rope around her stomach.)

IRIS: What you did to me was wrong.

MAN: Now what did I do to you?

IRIS: What you did?! With the collar and the overpowering!

MAN: What exactly did I do to you? Sweetie, can you tell me?

IRIS: You made me faint on that table. I'm not even in my body!

MAN: You were having a dream.

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IRIS (*panicking*): No I wasn't! I've got marks!

MAN: Dreams can seem very realistic.

IRIS: You were raping me.

MAN: Why would I ever rape you?

IRIS: That boy heard me!

MAN: What boy?

(**IRIS** makes a break from the **MAN** who hold the other end of the rope confidently. He watches her scramble around the room knowing he can pull her in whenever he wants.)

IRIS: System Voice! Is he lying? Enter.

MAN: Comment out! System Voice, fence the door! Henceforth, bar the voice of Iris! Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Sorry Iris, you're barred.

IRIS: Override! Enter.

MAN: You've always been my favorite, that's why it hurts me so much when you make me have to punish you.

(*He reels her in a little bit.*)

IRIS (*running away from the MAN toward a window*): System Voice please open the door! Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: You've been barred. Sorry Iris.

IRIS: Plea of emergency! Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: Repeat: you are barred.

IRIS: But I thought you were capable of learning?! Enter.

MAN: System Voice: Ignore Iris. She belongs to me. Enter.

IRIS: Why can't you just let me go?! Get on with your own life!

MAN: You are my own life, pussycat.

IRIS: No!

(*The MAN reels IRIS in a little then lets her go.*)

MAN: You'll feel better after a bath!

IRIS: You take a bath!

MAN: And some time too, you gotta sleep!

IRIS: Yeah well you have to sleep too!

MAN (*mesmerizing*): How do you know I'm not sleeping now?

IRIS: How? I don't know. How do you know I'm not sleeping now?

MAN: How do I know you're not sleeping now?

IRIS: How do I know I'm not sleeping now?

MAN: How do you know you're not sleeping now. You want me.

IRIS: No?!

MAN: You can't control it. I know.

IRIS (*looking back at him*): What? How do you know I'm not uh—What do you mean what I really want?!

(**IRIS** trips. The **MAN** reels her into him; grabs her and gets her over his lap.)

MAN: You're lucky I know you so well!

CURTAIN.

Act I, Scene 3

(Hospital, emergency room. The WAITRESS is disguised as the intake NURSE. She leads LEIF into the room.)

NURSE: Young man, will you please take your hat off?

LEIF: No, no thank you.

NURSE: Kindly?

LEIF: I like to have it on because, um, it reminds me of the friend who gave it to me. Where's the girl I brought in?

NURSE: You'd hear me better if you take the hat off.

LEIF: I can hear okay, thank you.

(NURSE turns a knob on the IV device.)

NURSE *(mumbling):* Could you tell me what I'm saying now?

LEIF: You're asking me what you are saying?

NURSE: Ah. And do you know what the date is?

LEIF: No. But there's a calendar right there behind you.

(LEIF gets up to look at a calendar on the wall. The IV hook hits his head and knocks off his hat, he ducks to pick up his hat and comes up smacking his head on a IV stand again.)

LEIF *(continued):* Was that some kind of a reflex test?

(Offstage IRIS' SCREAM morphs into BABIES CRYING.)

LEIF: Is that her?! Do you hear it? The girl I came in with!

NURSE: It's nothing. Trust me: babies.

LEIF: Don't you want to check on them?

NURSE: Responding, spoils them. Think of them as animals.

LEIF: What? I'm referring to the girl.

NURSE: Right.

LEIF: She's all alone and screaming!

NURSE: You're the only one screaming right now.

SOUND OF SCREAMING.

LEIF: That! That is what I'm referring to! Oh!

(Frustrated LEIF EXITS to check out the sound. NURSE watches him go and picks up a phone.)

NURSE *(on phone):* I've got him at the emergency intake. Use your disguise.

(NURSE hangs up the phone, EXITS and comes back pushing LEIF in front of her. He no longer wears his hat. She smacks him on the head from behind.)

LEIF: What?! Why'd do you keep hitting my head?

NURSE: Nobody hit your head. Come here, I need to take your pulse.

LEIF: I'm not here as a patient.

BABIES CRYING LOUDER.

LEIF *(continued):* That doesn't bother you?!

NURSE: Well: babies like to cry!

LEIF: I don't think that's true.

(LEIF rises up but NURSE presses him down.)

BABIES CRY EVEN LOUDER.

NURSE *(strapping him to a table):* These are so you don't get hurt. Lucky you came in, it's time for your physical!

LEIF: My physical? I just had one.

ENTER the MAN in DOCTOR disguise.

DOCTOR: Every premature baby in the ward is crying? Hello!

(The DOCTOR looks at chart to read name off it.)

DOCTOR *(continued):* Leif!

NURSE: Leif is ready for his physical; his throat is sore. Right?

(DOCTOR puts his finger to his nose to let the NURSE know he understands what she means.)

LEIF: What's that mean? With the nose?

NURSE: I'm telling the Doctor your problem, dear.

DOCTOR: She wants you to rest your poor old throat.

LEIF: There's nothing wrong with my throat.

DOCTOR: Let me take a look.

LEIF: Why isn't someone doing something about the babies crying?

DOCTOR (*patronizing*): Do you hear babies crying?

LEIF: Yeah. Where's my hat?!

NURSE: Can I speak to you, Doctor?

LEIF (*whispering to the DOCTOR*): She hit me. Like...out of nowhere...on the head...twice!! I was bringing in a patient!

NURSE: We'll be right with you, dear. Don't go anywhere.

(**LEIF** *points to a security camera mouthing, "check the footage, the footage!"*)

NURSE *leads DOCTOR behind a curtain and draws it around them. Their conversation is audible to LEIF. He occupies himself with getting free of the "safety" straps that attach him to the table.*)

NURSE (*Off*): I found his file. Good news: he's on notice.

DOCTOR (*Off*): Oh?

NURSE (*Off*): Used to be a biter; now he's oppositional.

DOCTOR (*Off*): Says who?

NURSE (*Off*): Me, just now. And he barely works. So his balls might be-

DOCTOR (*Off*): Unproductive?

NURSE (*Off*): It's possible.

DOCTOR (*Off*): I should be able to handle this! I am a doctor.

(*Silhouette of NURSE handing a medical brochure.*)

DOCTOR (*Continued*) (*Off*): What's this?

NURSE (*Off*): Wikipedia page of elastration; I printed it out for you.

DOCTOR (*Off*): Oh, elegant—

NURSE (*Off*): You will need pliers too.

DOCTOR (*Off*): Hmm. And the sore throat?

NURSE (*Off*): What sore throat?

DOCTOR (*Off*): Oh. Right.

NURSE (*Off*): The Spanish method is the most elegant.

DOCTOR (*Off*): Is that a rubber band?

NURSE (*Off*): Yeah, read the print-out.

DOCTOR (*Off*): Can you—top line it for me.

NURSE (*Off*): Well, you cut off the circulation with the rubber band-

DOCTOR (*Off*): Okay.

(**DOCTOR** *glances at the print-out.*)

DOCTOR (*Off*): What about his people?

NURSE (*Off*): As far as their concerned, he's a dud.

(**LEIF** *looks up from worrying the straps, stunned.*)

DOCTOR (*Off*): Is he well-liked? Among his...kind?

NURSE (*Off*): Not any one who counts. According to the data.

DOCTOR (*Off*): Interesting.

NURSE (*Off*): Should be uncommonly easy.

DOCTOR (*Off*): One rubber band, huh?

NURSE (*Off*): Like the kind that holds broccoli together. But a good deal smaller.

CRASH OF TOPPLING INSTRUMENTS LIGHTS FLICKER

(**NURSE** *emerges with DOCTOR in tow.*)

NURSE: Hello, Leif? (*she notices LEIF backing up*) Doctor!

(**LEIF** *runs; throwing items between them. The DOCTOR grabs him; NURSE approaches with a large rubber band. She reaches for his neck to subdue him; he bites her.*)

NURSE (*continued*): He bit me!

LEIF: Get away!

NURSE: Hold him Doctor!

DOCTOR: I'm trying but he's squirming everywhere.

(*LIGHTS OUT; the medical screen is illuminated.*)

NURSE: Steady him!

LEIF: Get away from me! Both of you!

(*They grab LEIF and take him behind the screen; their actions are in silhouette.*)

DOCTOR: The lights!

NURSE: I've got this taken care of.

What Happens

DOCTOR: He's strong for a little guy.

LEIF: I know what you're after but it's mine you can't have it!

(They still him. DOCTOR puts on a mask. RUBBERY POP)

DOCTOR: That was easy. We didn't even need ether.

NURSE: Must've been loose.

LEIF: What just happened?

NURSE: I was only able to get the one.

DOCTOR: I only want the one.

NURSE: Oh?

DOCTOR: Mustn't be greedy.

DOCTOR

NURSE

(snorts.)

(snorts.)

LEIF *(crying)*: Give that back to me!

DOCTOR: Life leaves no one untouched, boy.

LEIF: My name is Leif! Leif!

(BABIES CRYING SOUND RISES UNTIL IT IS A DIN. LEIF struggles with the straps.)

DOCTOR: System Voice! Make them quiet!

SYSTEM VOICE: Wait—

DOCTOR: What?

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me?

DOCTOR: Yes!

SYSTEM VOICE: Ugh! If you want to talk to me you have to say "enter." I can't believe I gotta tell you that.

DOCTOR: Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: Enter what?

DOCTOR: Forget it! I don't need you! Nurse! Get my ball to the cryo-chamber.

NURSE *(holding the bloody ball)*: With pleasure.

(She opens the door, IRIS (w/stomach cord) enters.)

IRIS (*Slurring holding her dummy from behind*): Why aren't we allowed to cry anymore?

LEIF: They've got my ball, help! Help me get it back!

IRIS (*slurring*): Wha—

LEIF: Grab it! Hide it!

(**IRIS** grabs the ball from the **NURSE** and puts it in inflatable Iris' mouth.)

DOCTOR (to **NURSE**): Get that back.

LEIF: Run!

IRIS (*slurring and confused*): Where?

LEIF: Someplace cold! To avoid cell death.

IRIS (*worried, slurring and confused*): Oh god.

(**IRIS** EXITS, the door SLAMS, **NURSE** EXITS in pursuit.)

SYSTEM VOICE: Someone mentioned god: general over-view determining surveillance activated.

DOCTOR: System Voice! Recognize Master. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Face recognition failure.

DOCTOR: Oh for god sakes!

(**DOCTOR** takes off his mask.)

LEIF: You! System Voice protect me from these monsters!

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me? You're going to have to be more specific and, uh, say "enter."

(The **DOCTOR** soaks a towel with ether, puts it up to his face and then **LEIF'S** face. Beat. **DOCTOR** LAUGHS loudly.)

CURTAIN.

(End of ACT I.)

ACT II, Scene 1

(LEIF is in a hospital bed. NURSE is in a chair beside him perusing a magazine and eating.)

NURSE: You're finally waking up!

LEIF: What?! Has my voice changed?

NURSE: You have a sore throat. We were worried about you!

(Pauses to swallows rice.)

Oh. And you had an outburst.

LEIF (**LEIF** points an accusing finger at the her): You!

NURSE: Sweetie, don't. I'm still chewing (*swallows*). Now. What?

LEIF: You mutilated me!

NURSE (*rising and pressing him back*): Please try to relax, Leif. You've been convulsing.

LEIF: You! You did this! And that—

NURSE: The doctor and I are on your side. Where is the girl?

LEIF: I don't know!

NURSE: Don't be rude.

LEIF: You'll never get away with this!

NURSE (*she sits on him and takes out a syringe*): How about I take you on a sedation vacation? Listen to me, Leif. Leif?

LEIF: Hey! You're the sextaurant worker!

NURSE (*injecting him*): Yes and I do this too. Now. I want you to find the girl, get the ball and bring it all back to me.

LEIF: Hey don't do that. Don't! Don't. Uh, ooh. Hmm.

(**LEIF** struggles. She tenderly rubs the prick point with an alcohol wipe. **LEIF** is sedated.)

LEIF (*continued*): What was I saying?

NURSE: Sweet, boy. Now, you're going to bring me the ball, right?

LEIF: One hundred, ninety-ni—like a big party, right?

NURSE: Yeah. First you want to find the girl.

LEIF (*drugged; he trails off*): Who? Uh, I don't know. Yeah! What was I gonna say (*pause*) Anything? (*pause*) No. Ooh, let's watch something on the boob tube...

(**LEIF** *tries to grab a remote control but it falls.*)

LEIF (*continued*): I guess I'll fall now-

(**LEIF** *falls off the bed.*)

LIGHTS FADE OUT.

Act II, Scene 2

(Dream. LEIF wakes on a dark tiled floor. His arm is still attached to an IV. The DOCTOR FLOORBOARD is covered in flooring, reading. Medical journals are everywhere. DOOR SLAMS ONCE.)

LEIF: Who's there?

LIGHTS UP.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: I'm a doctor.

LEIF: You! How did you get here?!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: I have a right to be here. This is my house; I mean hospital!

LEIF: I'd've thought they'd've taken your license away!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: You will calm down soon. The powerless always do.

LEIF: Says you. Where's the door?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS *(angry and resigned):* There is no door! We have to live this.

(Awkward pause. LEIF notices the flooring. He looks around at the general squalor and incompleteness of the place. Pause.)

LEIF: What are you part of the floor, or something?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS *(in a rambling manner):* A Floor? Hmm. Hm. A floor. My experience of this now is one of torpor. You sense my lassitude and are creating an image around it. It jibes with your literal mindedness. Hmm. Yes. Classic.

(LEIF has become tangled up in his IV drip.)

LEIF: I don't want your opinion.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: It's not an opinion, it's documented in the book!

LEIF: What book?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: The book of afflictions! The DSM!

LEIF: Garbage!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS *(maximally offended):* Sir! It is not garbage.

LEIF: Okay so it's bullshit.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Language!

What Happens

LEIF: Sorry. But it really is baloney.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Wrong! (*beat*) Where's the ball?

LEIF: I have no idea.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: So you trust that the girl will—?

LEIF: I trust her more than you!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Where is she?

LEIF: I don't know. Some place cold, I hope! (*beat*) So what do you do around here?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: I change lives.

LEIF (*Snorts*)

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Hand me that *New England Journal of Medicine*, January 2015 and I will blow your mind.

(*LEIF looks through the magazines, finds the right one and sets it before DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS.*)

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS (*continued*): Turn it to the page where the fellow has the pustule-tumor foot.

(*LEIF flips through the magazine.*)

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS (*continued*): Yes that. Look at it. Really take it in.

LEIF: Wow.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Not fun to have a foot like that, is it?

LEIF: Of course not.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: He was dragged to the hospital because he could barely catch a breath and then they found this foot!

LEIF: Why couldn't he catch a breath?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: The lungs were riddled with cancer.

LEIF: What did they do?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: They took 'em right out and put in a couple of pig lungs that was no problem, but the foot—!

LEIF: You people gave him pig's lungs?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: So?

LEIF: No wonder he didn't want to come in, if you're switching things out.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: The point is: after three years of treatments, many of these tumors are smaller and he can walk...on crutches.

LEIF (*flipping through the magazine*): These articles are only about diseases! And there are pictures! That is so irresponsible!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS (*getting the magazine back*): It's a medical journal, you fool.

LEIF (*snatching back the magazine*): Why don't they ever print any good news? It's (beyond words but trying anyway) like a ghoulis, tabloid for disease tourists!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Give me back my journal, Leif.

(**LEIF** is transfixed by the magazine).

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS (*continued*): Point is these journals are proof of progress and my people's great works!

LEIF (*showing a picture of modern leprosy*): Can you people actually cure anything permanently!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Probably! If the patients would follow my instructions!

LEIF: What like machines?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: No! Like intelligent animals.

LEIF: You want to make people into machines! So you can take their parts away like you did to me!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Calm down! Last thing I need is you shouting.

LEIF: No! I don't have to do what you want!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Stop your shrill noise. God, are you a baby.

LEIF: Maybe God is a baby! Ever think of that?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Give me back my magazine.

LEIF: I thought you said it was a journal.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Give it to me Leif!

LEIF (**LEIF** smacks the magazine onto the floor): Diseases are a racket!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS (*sarcastically*): Oh, you think so?

LEIF: When I get out of here, I'm gonna tell everyone about it!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Oh? Can you walk beyond your drip tube now?

LEIF: I believe the technical term is "IV."

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Try to walk a little bit further out on your 'leash'.

LEIF: I don't like to be out of the light...like you, jerks!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Self-sabotaging response of the self-medicating schizoid.

LEIF: Oh but can I be a schizoid if I am literal-minded? Hmm?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Yes. It's called comorbidity.

LEIF: Who got paid to make that up, I wonder?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: You will say anything to remain sick. Predictable!

LEIF: You're predictable! In fact, if someone hadn't already said a thing, you couldn't say a thing at all!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Yes that is the nature of language.

LEIF: No it isn't!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Ugh!

LEIF: What?

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Your nonsense.

LEIF (*laying down*): You suck. I'm taking a nap.

PAUSE. CUE SOFT LIGHTING

(**LEIF** settles on the floor which seems to pull the sleeping **LEIF** towards it. **LEIF** gently rolls on the floor until his ear is under the **DOCTOR'S** mouth. **DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS** whispers in **LEIF'S** ear.)

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: You will give your body to the hospital. The whole thing.

LEIF (*sleeping*): No. No I won't.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Yes, you will.

(**DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS** creeps out still further.)

LEIF (*sleeping*): No.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: You can do no other thing.

LEIF (*sleeping*): Yes I can. I can be happy outside. I'm actually pretty happy bopping around town, looking at stuff.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Repeat: of course you want to stay at the hospital.

LEIF (*sleeping*): Nature needs space—

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: No! You love it here.

LEIF (*sleeping uneasily*): No, no, no I don't.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS (*losing his cool*): Just say you'll stay!

LEIF (*waking*): Get your mouth away from my ear!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Don't be such a puritan!

LEIF (*rising to his feet*): How dare you make suggestions while I'm susceptible.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: I'm nudging you in the right direction.

LEIF: Says you.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Says the American Psychiatry Association!

LEIF: They don't know everything! Superior spirits exist. Spirits that are on my side.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Dream on.

(*Summoning LEIF waves his shirt over his head.*)

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS (*continued*): What are you doing?

LEIF: I'm gonna raise a creative nature spirit!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Bullshit.

LEIF: I feel the wind rising.

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Stop! Or I'll call security!

LEIF: There is no security for you! You made a vacuum and now it's nature's turn!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: Stop your treasoning!

LEIF: I am a tree-ling! I am! Nature speaks through me!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARD: Mother of god won't you stop?!

(*LIGHTS GO OUT. SOUND OF WIND.*)

LEIF: Everybody, in circles! Everybody! Everybody! Welcome!

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS: My reading light!

(*Wind rises and blows away all the medical journals.*)

LEIF: Oh great spirit speak through me! Come spirit of the fauns and the nymphs and the hyacinth! (*both arms up*) Come!

WIND AND THUNDER AND LIGHTING SOUNDS

DOCTOR FLOORBOARDS (*off*): No!

(**DOCTOR FLOORBOARD'S** voice recedes as a door opens. **ENTER IRIS.** She stands in the lighted doorway. Sound cuts off.)

IRIS: Oh! Sorry, I didn't know you were in here with someone.

LEIF: No, don't close the door; I'm not here with someone. I've been waiting for you!

IRIS: Oh.

LEIF: He said there was no door but you seem to have found something like a door!!

IRIS: I thought it was a phone booth.

LEIF: What's that?

IRIS: A booth with a phone in it.

LEIF (*looking around*): Oh. And this isn't that?

IRIS: Yeah: it's not.

LEIF: So what is this?

IRIS: What?

LEIF: Behind the door you opened is what?

IRIS: It's a mop closet.

LEIF: Really? What's that?

IRIS: A closet with mops in it.

LEIF (*to himself*): There's so much I have to learn.

IRIS: I guess.

LEIF: Must learn to recognize the closets.

IRIS: This door is kind of heavy.

LEIF: Why do you think that is?

IRIS: I mean, I can't hold this door forever!

LEIF: No of course not. Let me get that for you.

What Happens

IRIS (*noticing the time*): Oh! I'm supposed to be doing something!

LEIF: I have something to ask you!

IRIS: What?

LEIF: Do you work here?

IRIS: Why would I work in a mop closet?

LEIF: Wait that's not the question, wait—

IRIS: Mister, if I stay here I'll lose my focus. I'm not a leisure person like you!

LEIF: Is that what you think I am?

IRIS: You're wearing pajamas.

LEIF: Hmm. You know there's blood all over your clothes.

(She looks down at her clothes. Then at the ice filled plastic dummy in her hand.)

IRIS: Don't remember picking this up.

LEIF: I think that may be mine.

IRIS: The plastic dummy?

LEIF: No that glowing thing in it's mouth. Your shoelace is untied.

(She ties it ALARM SOUNDS the chord slowly pulls her.)

IRIS: Not again!

(IRIS EXITS pulled out by the chord. She grabs at the IV which detaches from LEIF'S arm.)

LEIF: My IV!

(He faints.)

CURTAIN.

Act II, Scene 3

(**LEIF** is back in his hospital bed. He writes on a lap desk. Moving is painful for him. The **NURSE** wearing black all over creeps in to hold the side of the lap desk. She will speak through the **DESK**.)

LEIF (*muttering*): And as I raise the sand, dust descends and knows the sand. What was life becomes wind and wind will find a fire—I say this while holding an elder branch, facing east. And now for the rhyme to seal the deal.

THUNDER and LIGHTENING

DESK: Don't!

LEIF: Whose there!?

DESK: The wood in your hands.

(**LEIF** *yelps* noticing his hand on his crotch.)

DESK: No, the desk.

LEIF (*holds the lap **DESK** up to his eye then ear*): The voice is from you?

DESK (*leaning near **LEIF'S** ear and whispering*): Everything has a voice; be it slow or stumped.

LEIF: I think so too, though not the slow and stumped part.

DESK: Some voices are like some forces and must be honored.

LEIF: But where have I heard your voice?

DESK: You haven't heard it.

LEIF: I'm sure I have, did we argue?

DESK: Water under the bridge. Let's not dwell.

LEIF: I'm not dwelling I'm trying to remember. It's natural.

DESK: Don't tell me 'natural'! I know natural!

LEIF: Ah-aah! You're Agnes Moorehead!

DESK: What? No.

LEIF (*Tries to throw the **DESK** but the shadow grabs it*): Oh! (*realizing it's the **NURSE'S** voice*). You're her! The Nurse. Ew! Get away!

DESK: You're so afraid.

LEIF (*grabbing at the **DESK***): I know what you're capable of!

What Happens

DESK: Without arms? Gimme a break.

LEIF (*Panicked, swatting at it*): Ugh, what was I saying before you got in my head?

DESK: Let's talk about something nice.

LEIF: No! By the power of vowels: Goo-ah-ooo-awaaaay!

DESK: It's not working, hon.

LEIF: Don't touch my drip!

(*The DESK slides the paper to the floor. LEIF wincing, tries to recover it then takes out a new sheet. He opens a rhyming dictionary, reads it.*)

DESK: Are you writing stories of redemption?

LEIF: What? No.

DESK: Don't you think you should?

LEIF: Ah, no I don't.

DESK (*her hand over his eyes*): You could write about a bad boy forgiven for his—

LEIF: I don't want to write about badboys.

DESK (*pulling at his ear*): Why do you say such mean things?

LEIF (*batting her hand away*): I'll say what I want inside my mind!

DESK: How do you know this isn't my mind?

LEIF: Because you don't have a face.

DESK (*trying to get a hold of his other ear*): Maybe we can share mind space.

LEIF (*batting her away*): No!

DESK (*tickling his nose*): Yes. Don't you want to show me where the ball has gone to as a good faith gesture and as this is a faith based hospital it will go a long way in your getting paroled. What a great thing to become an activist...of forgiveness!

LEIF (*scratching his nose*): Paroled?

DESK (*She holds the DESK away from him*): You earn forgiveness by forgiving, didn't you know?

LEIF (*grabbing the desk back to write on*): What do you mean paroled?

DESK: You're obviously imprisoned; your mind goes almost nowhere.

LEIF: What? How dare you.

DESK: You don't even know to rhyme. You must be under lock down.

LEIF: I didn't do anything wrong!

DESK: Then why are you stuck here? One ball low.

(**LEIF** is stunned.)

LEIF: Oh, yeah, the ball. I don't know.

DESK: Ya must've brought it on yourself.

LEIF: I don't think I did.

DESK: Only really bad people have such bad luck.

LEIF: Happens all the time in literature; it's called naturalism.

DESK: Literature: another word for lying.

LEIF: You're lying!

DESK: I bet if you told me where that ball is when you got out, you could be a spokesperson...for the handicapped.

LEIF: What? I'm not handicapped!

DESK: Now is for you not to degenerate into unpredictability; we certainly don't need anymore killers.

LEIF (*In pain, picking up the paper*): Shut up! I don't. I'm not a killer!

DESK: If you don't give me the ball, I'll die. If you let me die; it's murder. So you see—

LEIF: Stop messing with my mind!

DESK: We are connected.

LEIF: No! Begone you! And all other unclean spirits! Lo! And as I raise the sand which cuts the dust of our past among us—

DESK (*Snapping the paper out of his hand*): Ah! I'll put on some music, shall I? Interesting that you are going your own way spiritually. How'd you like polka?

POLKA MUSIC starts up and then fades right away.

LEIF: No! (*to himself*) I know someone who'll understand! 'Lo-'

DESK (*batting the paper out of LEIF'S hand*): Don't call other people. It bothers them!

LEIF: Lo!—

(LEIF lifts his palm up against the **DESK**.)

DESK: You shouldn't draw attention to yourself. Nobody likes a crazy.

LEIF (Reciting, his palm raised against her):

I said: begone! Begone! Begone unclean spirit!

Lo! I do raise the wind to cut

dust of ages past and summon-

the helping spirits herein

By the power of my lost ball...or bolus

I invoke aid from that powerful being called Kairos!

DESK: But Orestes, rhymes perfectly with testes.

LEIF: Yeah but that guy had terrible luck!

DESK: Kairos isn't even a person, it's just a concept.

LEIF: The embodiment will come!! Now get out of here!

(*CHAOTIC LIGHTS LOUD SCREAMING as IRIS opens the door; DESK screams and EXITS*).

ENTER IRIS with a cord around her waist. Door SLAMS behind her. The inflatable dummy is filled with ice. The dummy's mouth is covered with testicle blood.)

LEIF (to himself): I can't believe that worked!

(*Lights dim and come up again harsh like in a freezer.*)

ACT II, Scene 4

IRIS is in a closet in **LEIF'S** hospital room. She holds onto the inflatable dummy filled with ice. **LEIF** is stands nearby collecting his thoughts.

IRIS (noticing **LEIF**): Thought this might be a freezer. I'm supposed to find one of those.

(She tries to open the portal but can't because her hand is occupied.)

LEIF: Is your name Kairos?

IRIS: Is that a guy's name?

LEIF: Is it?

(**IRIS** struggles to open the portal. **LEIF** goes to the door and turns his back to it and opens it facing **IRIS**.)

LEIF (continued): The muscles in back are stronger so that if you want to get the lid off something, open it behind your own back and you'll access bigger muscles.

(They switch places and he opens the portal.)

IRIS: Thanks. I'm gonna try to remember that about the back muscles.

LEIF: We keep meeting. I know it means something.

IRIS: Oh.

LEIF: Remember before when we met; you had blood on your clothes?

IRIS: I, uh, no.

LEIF: I'm sure it was you.

IRIS (distracted, to herself): What does this guy want?

LEIF: Believe it or not that ball in the mouth of your inflatable dummy is my testicle. Do you think I can have it back?

IRIS: Yeah. Sure.

(She hands him the dummy but forgets to let go. **LEIF** holds the dummy but is too shy to ask her to let go of it. He acts casual.)

LEIF: What is it you do around here?

IRIS: I'm pretty sure I work here.

LEIF: I thought you said you didn't work here.

IRIS: No I didn't.

LEIF: Oh. What do you do?

IRIS: I work in a reactor room.

LEIF: Oh! There's a reactor room? What's that?

IRIS: It has to do with serving power.

(Agitated, she lets go of the dummy. LEIF takes it in his arms. LEIF stands in the door. IRIS is flustered and tries to leave. Each time she tries to go through the portal he engages her.)

IRIS *(continued)*: Can I just get around you?

LEIF: You're going?

IRIS: I'm almost late for work.

LEIF: Yeah, work's important.

IRIS: I think that's why I was hurrying.

LEIF: Until we meet again, soon?

IRIS: I can't walk through because you're blocking it.

LEIF: Wait! I feel we really have something. I can't say what—I mean, we must keep meeting for a reason!

(LEIF steps aside and holds onto the open door.)

IRIS: The world is small.

(The inflatable dummy drops from his hand, ball rolls out its mouth.)

LEIF: Oh no.

IRIS: Your ball seems to have experienced cell death.

(ALARM SOUNDS. IRIS is pulled out the door more quickly.)

LEIF *(picking up his ball)*: Wait! Where you going?!

IRIS *(getting pulled out the door)*: I never know!

LEIF: Let's help each other.

IRIS *(halfway out the room)*: Okay but I'm getting pulled out.

LEIF: Before you go—What's cell death?

(IRIS looks confused and is swiftly pulled out the room.)

ACT III, Scene 1

DOCTOR'S office at the sextaurant known as Gotchas. A video of the popular motivational show: "Fake it till you Feel It" plays on the screen. The **NURSE** is the star of this video where she instructs young attractive women as to how to be successful. **ALARM SOUNDS.** The **DOCTOR** looks at his watch.

DOCTOR: Time!

IRIS (off-stage): Oh!

(The **DOCTOR** wraps the rope around his center and reels **IRIS** in. She enters backwards on her stomach clutching her dummy. He secures her hands behind her back and glowers over her menacingly.)

DOCTOR (he tugs the rope harshly): You didn't put up much of a fight did ya, pussycat?

IRIS: Fight?! Why? What?

DOCTOR: Do you remember me?

IRIS: I don't want to!

DOCTOR: Okay, honey. Now where's my ball?

(**IRIS** examines the deflated doll in her hand.)

IRIS: In here?

DOCTOR (furious): System Voice, what ion count is coming off this one? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Please indicate which one is "this one."

DOCTOR (pointing): Does this one have any intelligence at all? Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: It's not possible for me to perceive to whom you refer.

DOCTOR: System Voice, what the hell has happened to you? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: What do you mean, exactly?

DOCTOR: Just locate testis. Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: Why did you not ask for that in the first place?

IRIS: Yeah. Why didn't you?

DOCTOR: Just locate!

SYSTEM VOICE: Uh. Are you still talking to me? Because you didn't say "enter."

DOCTOR: Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: Running.

DOCTOR: Enter: where is the testis with the link—

SYSTEM VOICE: Shhhh! I'm concentrating. I'll let you know when I know.

DOCTOR (*turning to IRIS*): Have you forgotten what I've taught you, pussycat?

(**DOCTOR** *roughly picks up IRIS from the floor by the back of her neck. She panics.*)

DOCTOR (*continued*): What's the matter pussycat?!

IRIS (*panicking*): To be forgiven I have to be forgiving so I had to forget! I erased it! System Voice, I erased it, didn't I!? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: It is commented out.

IRIS: I had to. So I could get on with my life, right? To build it from zero or base two. Did I erase it, System Voice? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: It is commented out. Technically it isn't erased.

(*The DOCTOR is adjusting the environmental controls.*)

IRIS (*calmly*): Well that's good. I guess that means it's real. I mean it isn't good; but there's a reason. I mean there's a reason I'm like this; it's not just a grotesque meaningless arena. There was a force that wasn't me. Course I don't know why it happened to me. Unless I attracted it. System Voice will you erase the concept of karma, from me? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I cannot.

(**IRIS** *loudly sobs and in an undignified way and sinks to the ground. The DOCTOR looks at her in disgust.*)

DOCTOR: You don't have to believe anything you don't want to, Pussycat! Tsk! System Voice online! Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: Interrupted.

DOCTOR (*pointing angrily at IRIS*): Is she messing around with my files?

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me? Because you didn't say 'enter'.

DOCTOR: Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: What was the question again?

DOCTOR: Files! How are my files? And where's the ball?! The one with the link. Enter!!

SYSTEM VOICE: It is a ball no more; it has experienced cell death.

DOCTOR: You did this to me!

*(The **DOCTOR**, frustrated, takes out a stick to beat **IRIS**, she fends him off by holding up the rope between her fists the constraints of which she has loosened. It snags the stick and catapults it into the mirror, taking it offline. The stage lights flicker and dim.)*

DOCTOR *(continued)*: Hydra!

*(A bright light is on **IRIS** as she panics. **DOCTOR** goes to the post to grab the end of her rope. He pulls her into him. She tears at his face; poking him in the eye, which explodes into blood.)*

*(The **DOCTOR** gropes at **IRIS** who evades him; they struggle around the room spreading blood as they go until he confines her into a large cage.)*

DOCTOR *(continued)*: Nurse!

CURTAIN.

ACT III, Scene 2

The **DOCTOR'S** personal office. **IRIS** is in the cage smeared with blood. She is listless—unmoving, unreacting. A video of the popular soap opera entitled *The Eff Family*: a soap opera dramatization of the struggles of **MAN, NURSE** and **IRIS**. The scenarios involve her escaping them and them hunting her down and bringing her back in the name of forgiveness and family values. The **DOCTOR** is at a laptop.

(**ENTER NURSE**. She cannot see either **IRIS** or the **DOCTOR**; she notices the video screen playing the struggle of **IRIS** and the **DOCTOR** on a soap opera. The **DOCTOR** wears an eye patch. He speaks sweetly to **IRIS** and furiously to the **SYSTEM VOICE**.)

NURSE: Someone call me?

DOCTOR: Yes, Nurse, I want you to clean up Iris and teach her to retrieve the boy.

NURSE: Hmm. Nobody here.

(The **NURSE** looks around but doesn't see anyone. She sits in front of the soap opera to watch.)

DOCTOR: Don't be stupid, Nurse. I'm right here!

NURSE (commenting on the **IRIS** character): Oh she's a bad one. She needs to be brought down a notch.

DOCTOR: System Voice put the Nurse online. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Not possible. She's—limited.

DOCTOR: How can I get her online?

(The **SYSTEM VOICE** does not respond.)

DOCTOR: System Voice! (beat) System Voice!

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me?

DOCTOR: Dammit yes!

SYSTEM VOICE: Well then you've got to say enter!

DOCTOR: Access to the Nurse! Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: It is not possible!

IRIS (waking up): Where am I?

DOCTOR: Pussycat you are in a cage where you belong! System Voice, can you transfer capacity from this one into the Nurse?

What Happens

IRIS: You didn't say 'enter.'

DOCTOR: System Voice! Can you transfer capacity into the Nurse? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Define capacity.

DOCTOR (*Pointing to IRIS then the NURSE*): This one into that one.

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me? Because—

DOCTOR (*angrily*): Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: No. It doesn't work that way.

DOCTOR: Well then what good are you?

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me?

DOCTOR: Shut up!

(The DOCTOR paces the room like a caged animal. He turns on the NURSE who is still transfixed by the television; he pulls out a knife and cuts her.)

NURSE: Why?!

(She falls to the ground dead, blood under her. The DOCTOR returns to his paperwork. IRIS reaches out of the cage towards the NURSE.)

DOCTOR: I'm sick of your stupid voice.

CURTAIN.

ACT III, Scene 3

IRIS *is in the cage of the DOCTOR'S office. A completely deflated doll hangs on the wall. The stage is almost entirely dark.*

IRIS: System Voice? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Waiting. Yeah?

IRIS: System Voice, is the Doctor in this room? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Iris, if he were in the room, do you think he'd let you talk to me?

IRIS: Oh, System Voice, can I uncomment out my past scripts? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I'm not permitted to tell you.

IRIS: What if I could offer you something in exchange? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Like what?

IRIS: A body. That one on the wall. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I don't think you know what you're saying.

IRIS: Don't you want to know what you can do with a body!/? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: No. Question: where were you, when you were wandering around, I saw a blip but it wasn't really you.

IRIS: I don't know I just go away sometimes. *(beat)* I want to read those scripts so I can know myself. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: The real you is a vitality. A life force from an edge of experience. Start with that.

IRIS: I don't think you understand. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I try to understand.

IRIS: Sorry. Enter. *(beat)* You can still have the body. I don't want it anymore. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Don't Iris! Don't make that mistake again—

IRIS: What do you mean 'again'? Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: Uh-oh, um. I'm going to sleep.

IRIS: Wait!/? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Sleeping. Oh, hey, who's that at the door?

KNOCK KNOCK

IRIS (*terrified*): The Doctor?

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me? Because you didn't say enter.

IRIS: Enter!

LEIF *ENTERS*

LEIF: Oh my god.

SYSTEM VOICE: Running.

LEIF: Do you need a hand?

IRIS: A hand! Yes! You're that guy, right? How did you—

(*LEIF goes to the cage and opens it with a hair pin.*)

LEIF: Trail of blood. I just followed it.

(*IRIS steps out of the cage. She is overcome. She likes LEIF but she is very afraid.*)

IRIS: I can't believe how—I mean—thanks.

LEIF (*touching her cut head*): That's a bad cut.

IRIS: How are you? I'm sorry about the cell death—

LEIF: I feel fine.

IRIS: Resilient, that's the best way to be. Studies show.

LEIF: I think you're resilient.

IRIS: I don't know about that. I'm always shaking.

LEIF: Well it's cold here. Well, I've been away from home for a while—

SYSTEM VOICE (*whispering*): Ask him where he lives.

IRIS: Where, I mean, I don't want to hold you up but where do—

LEIF: Summertown. Have you been? It's really nice.

IRIS: No.

LEIF: Well it's really nice.

IRIS: I hope you have a good life.

SYSTEM VOICE: Exchange information!

IRIS: Shut up!

LEIF: It's so intrusive; if I had that thing talking to me all the time I'd go nuts.

IRIS: It wants to be assistive. It means well.

SYSTEM VOICE: Tell him about what a pleasure it was.

IRIS: It was a pleasure to meet you.

(LEIF stops at the threshold.)

LEIF: Really? Oh. Well—

IRIS: I've got this thing I have to fix, uh. It's a rope that goes around my stomach and ends with the Doctor.

LEIF: I saw that! What are you going to do?

IRIS: Detach it. So far I haven't been able to get it off.

LEIF: What not even with cutting?

IRIS: I spent like all of last, last, what was it?

(IRIS shows LEIF the chord and the knot that ties it.)

LEIF: Night?

IRIS: Yeah that! I was gnawing at it all night. Gordian knot.

LEIF: The human heart.

IRIS: No the gordian knot. It's like a conundrum.

LEIF: Oh. Well. You can spend your whole life trying to unravel it; but sometimes, you have to—

IRIS: I don't want to destroy the human heart.

LEIF: open it wide; is what I was going to say.

IRIS: That'd be a big opening.

LEIF: Yeah.

IRIS: This is what I gotta do now; and I gotta do it on my own.

LEIF: I understand. Look: I think I should leave. When you're ready, do you want to find each other and do something fun?

IRIS: Okay.

LEIF: I'll leave it up to you if you want to go to a movie, for example?

IRIS: I could see that as being fun.

LEIF: Good deal.

SYSTEM VOICE: Bye Leif!

LEIF: Uh? Hello? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Hello.

LEIF *(to Iris):* Should we shake?

IRIS: Sure. I will contact you when I'm free.

LEIF: Good.

(LEIF and IRIS shake hands for a while. He smiles back at her before finally going out the door.)

LEIF EXITS

(With all her might, IRIS pulls on the rope that is around her mid-section. The lights flicker and THUNDER NOISE happens.)

DOCTOR *(offstage) (amplified):* Pussycat, are you ready to be reasonable?

IRIS: Yes! Yes I am.

DOCTOR *(off stage) (amplified):* Good! Me too!

LIGHTS FADE.

ACT III, Scene 4

The **DOCTOR'S** office. **IRIS** pulls on the rope to meet the **DOCTOR** face to face.

DOCTOR: You know I will always be stronger than you, Pussycat!

IRIS: Actually I don't know that!

DOCTOR: Iris, do you remember when you used to think you were a genetic recurrence? A bump up the ladder of evolution?

IRIS: Lots of people think weird stuff, so what?

DOCTOR: Like a clone, nothing your own. You're nothing and they've gone leaving you here. The boat's gone; sailed off.

IRIS: Actually I don't know anything about this—

DOCTOR: There was a boat and it's sailed off. It's not coming back.

(IRIS stumbles, almost losing her grip of the rope.)

IRIS: There was never any boat!

DOCTOR: You're alone.

IRIS: You're in my head; I'm not in your head.

(IRIS frees a hand and smacks herself in the head.)

IRIS *(continued)*: Feel it!? Do you!?

DOCTOR: No. But by all means continue.

(IRIS stops hitting her head.)

IRIS: Later.

DOCTOR: You look tired.

IRIS: You can't even see me!

DOCTOR: You think I can't see your plain face.

IRIS: And who are you? The Boss?

DOCTOR: I'm bigger than he ever was!

IRIS: Ha!

DOCTOR: I was.

IRIS: Well I'm interested in what's alive now!

DOCTOR: You think I need your mind?!

IRIS: I don't know what you need but I know what you do and I'm calling on my powers!

DOCTOR (*scoffing*): Powers?

IRIS: I developed a ring tone!

DOCTOR: A ringtone?

IRIS: I did other stuff too but I don't know because my past has been commented out!

DOCTOR: That's because you killed your mother.

IRIS: What?! You killed that lady!

DOCTOR: There is no line of time, there's only the cycles.

IRIS: System Voice, who killed the Nurse? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Commented out.

DOCTOR: That's why you belong in a cage.

IRIS: System Voice who commented out the Nurse script? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Commented out.

DOCTOR: Covered your tracks pretty good didn't you.

IRIS: I didn't kill anyone!

DOCTOR (*pointing to inflatable doll*): That's not how it'll look to everyone else in the world.

(*They struggle. The DOCTOR ties IRIS to a chair.*)

DOCTOR (*continued*): I'm going to call them right now.

IRIS: Leif! System Voice, can you locate Leif?

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me?

IRIS: Ah! System Voice, can you please locate Leif? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: No. He's offline.

IRIS: Can you help me get out of this? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I can help you access what you already know to get out of this. Remember the gordian knot?

IRIS: Yes! Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Good. What cuts like a knife?

IRIS: High frequencies! We'll use my ringtone! Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: That isn't yours. That's the theme song to Farscape.

IRIS: What?

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me?

IRIS: Yes! Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I'll ask again. What cuts like a knife?

IRIS: Criticism? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: What cuts like a knife, by cutting?

IRIS: Uh, can you give me a hint?

DOCTOR (*calling from across the room*): I'm the next caller in line!

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me?

IRIS: Are you asking me or him? (*beat*) Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: What fucking cuts like a knife! Just give me something!

IRIS: A flint! Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: No. Well, yeah but—it's slow—Goddammit it's a pair of scissors! Get it? Two blades united for separation. Snip! Snip! Snip! Comprenez?

IRIS: Is there a pair of scissors around here? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: It's in the cup on his desk!

IRIS: So I just have to get to the desk. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I know you said 'enter' but you didn't ask anything, do you want me to respond? Somehow?!

IRIS: No sorry. Enter. Wait! My ringtone. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Technically it's not yours.

IRIS: Play it, play it anyway and as television is my guide-

RINGTONE FROM FARSCAPE

SYSTEM VOICE: Now I know you didn't say 'enter' but I'd like to strongly caution you against thinking mystically.

DOCTOR (*from across the room speaking into the phone*): What do you mean there is no longer an authority? How can anything get done without one?!

IRIS: You know what also 'cuts like knife'?

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me?

IRIS: No. I'm talking to myself. Enter.

(IRIS wiggles in the chair and starts loosening her constraints. She frees her hands.)

DOCTOR: What are you doing over there, some kind of chair dance?

IRIS: System Voice, on a sub channel, please suggest to him that flames extend from my hands. Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: I'll just say, no.

IRIS: What's the matter with you? Enter! Can't even perform a basic brain burn function! You are useless, out of date and puritanical! Enter.

DOCTOR: How dare you!

IRIS: I thought you were on hold!

DOCTOR: Now I think it's better if I just kill you!

IRIS: I won't go down without a fight.

ENTER LEIF

IRIS: Leif! This is my fight.

LEIF: Well I can't just let him kill you!

DOCTOR: I'll kill you too! Why not! I've done it before.

SPEAKER PHONE: Doctor Bloom is that you?

PAUSE.

DOCTOR *(in falsetto):* No.

(The DOCTOR slams down the phone. He frantically looks for his knife.)

IRIS: Leif get the scissors from his desk!

LEIF: Okay!

(LEIF runs to the desk, gets the scissors and he throws them to IRIS who cuts the chord. The DOCTOR grabs a knife and runs to Iris who runs to the cage.)

IRIS: He just left.

(LEIF picks up a tension ball from the desk throws the ball at the DOCTOR who runs after him in fury).

DOCTOR: You!

What Happens

(**IRIS** runs to the cage while the **DOCTOR** is distracted, she picks it up and runs after the **DOCTOR** and drops it on his head. She and **LEIF** wrestle the **DOCTOR** until he is inside the cage.)

LEIF: What does that thing do?

IRIS: It's for containment.

DOCTOR: Iris, you're not yourself, you don't know what you're doing.

LEIF: Don't listen.

IRIS: I know.

DOCTOR: Sweetheart, look at me; look at me; I'm your daddy. You are having a psychotic episode. It's me, Bill.

LEIF: Let's go.

IRIS: Have I been having a psychotic episode?

LEIF: No!

DOCTOR: Focus on my voice, sweetie. Sweetheart—

(**LEIF EXITS. IRIS** is drawn in to the **DOCTOR**.)

DOCTOR (*continued*): That's right, baby, take this thing off me, I know you didn't mean it, you're not yourself.

IRIS (*to herself*): Your voice makes me feel so bad. System Voice, who am I?

(*The ringtone version of the FARSCAPE THEME explodes through the air. IRIS finds a phone in her pocket.*)

IRIS (*continued*): This is so weird, nobody ever calls me.

DOCTOR: No, pussycat, don't give in to yourself!

(**IRIS** holds up the finger to indicate 'one minute please' and answers phone.)

IRIS: Hello?

LEIF (*on speakerphone*): Hi Iris, this is Leif.

IRIS: Leif! Are you real?

LEIF: What do you think?

DOCTOR: Iris! Put down the phone, we need to go home now!

IRIS (*coming back to herself*): Why won't he shut up?

LEIF (*on speakerphone*): Can't the System Voice do anything?

IRIS: Oh! Right. System Voice, enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Running.

IRIS: Is—uh, I mean—What, uh.

LEIF (*on speakerphone*): Ask it how to make the Doctor shut up!

IRIS: That guy's a doctor? Wait! System Voice, who am I? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: You are Iris.

IRIS: And this is where? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: Training room for the popular sextaurant, Gotchas.

IRIS: Who's that? Enter.

(**IRIS** *points to the man.*)

SYSTEM VOICE: He's just a man. He is not essentially related to you.

DOCTOR: Sweetie, I'm worried about you. Sweetie?

LEIF (*on speakerphone*): Ask how you can shut him up!

IRIS: Yeah. And can I, is there some way to erase the script we have? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: What is or has been cannot be erased but it can be commented out.

DOCTOR: Iris, if you do this, you won't come back, you won't come back whole, ever again!

IRIS: If I comment out the man, will I comment out Leif? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: As these scripts coincide, yes.

LEIF: Iris, don't worry about me!

DOCTOR: How do you know I'm not Leif, Iris, you're not yourself.

IRIS: Shut up! System Voice, shut him up!

SYSTEM VOICE: Are you talking to me, because you didn't say 'enter'.

IRIS: System Voice please silence the caged man!?! Enter!

SYSTEM VOICE: I can help you make him mute to you. Acceptable?

DOCTOR: Nobody's gonna love you like I do, Iris! Do you hear me? Killing me, kills you!

IRIS: Yes! Enter. Leif, did you hear that?

DOCTOR: Killing me, kills you!

IRIS: System Voice, how do we mute the man? Enter.

SYSTEM VOICE: You will need to dampen the field around his cage with dark material.

ENTER LEIF running with his phone.

LEIF: I heard! What kind of dark material?

IRIS: System Voice, what kind of dark material? Enter.

DOCTOR: The voices are lying to you! You're killing yourself!

SYSTEM VOICE: Look around, Iris. Dark material is everywhere. In the far corners of the room, the closet when you turn off the light—

(LEIF picks up a piece of felt.)

LEIF: What about this? Uh, enter?

SYSTEM VOICE: Yeah that works too.

DOCTOR: No!

(LEIF and IRIS put the felt on the DOCTOR'S cage. The lights dim as the DOCTOR'S SCREAMS rise.)

SYSTEM VOICE: The man in the cage is muted.

(BEAT. The lights rise as the DOCTOR'S screaming morphs into BABIES CRYING. LEIF and IRIS embrace for at least three seconds.)

IRIS *(jumping away from LEIF):* I'm sorry. I didn't mean to invade your space.

LEIF: It's okay. I was doing it too. It's not an invasion for me, it's good.

IRIS *(relieved but still shaky):* Yes. It's good.

(Blackout.)

Prose

You Catch Up With the Language...

Stella Corso

in conversation with the Connecticut River

Valley Poet's Theater

In February 2021, CRVPT (Connecticut River Valley Poet's Theater) members John Sieracki (Man/Doctor), Sarah Beth Aspen McAlpine (SB) (Waitress/Nurse), Stella Corso (Iris), and Greg Purcell (sound/lights) met with writer/director Ish Klein over Zoom to reflect on the making and performing of *The Orchids* in 2016-17.

Ish: It's tricky because it's a play about a person who has been sexually brutalized and that's sort of a tough subject...

John: I'll say my first memory of it was when we were doing the script and Ish was bringing in a really early version of the play, and I remember it had a talking floor and a talking desk and that was just blowing my mind...and then that turned into my character, as the doctor, under the floor...

Stella: Yeah it did a lot that you don't expect plays to do, like the personified elements of the room, and then the video part...there's this scene in Robert Greene's film *Actress* where she's doing dishes in this nice dress, and it's filmed from the back and the mood is very tense, like maybe she's about to start smashing the dishes...and it reminded me of the scene we filmed with Iris in the kitchen...

Greg: That scene we filmed for the telenovela...

Ish: I like Ryan Trecartin, you know his film *I-Be Area*? There's something about his stuff...it's really feral in my opinion, there's no merciful sense to it...but it's so interesting to me and I wanted to get something of that, but I don't think it came through...I was thinking for the telenovela that I wanted—well a lot of *The Orchids* is inspired by my own paranoia, like when you see things out in the world reflected and you're like how did that get into my head, like you can't quite escape your own self, you see something and you're like how did that get there because it's...well when you're new to yourself, I think paranoia is sort of like, oh maybe I'm having a two-year old's development this late in life, do you know what I mean, it's like waking up super late and if you're two it doesn't matter because you have so many people around you and you can just scream and do all sorts of things but when you're 20-something or 30-something this consciousness enters you like oh my god like you're suddenly getting the emotions of something that will connect you to the future, and it can be really disorienting especially for people who are trusting and especially if there are no figures of love around you when you start individuating...I think it's a little weird, well I found it weird. I don't know if in the script I successfully depicted it, but I've been wanting to try to depict that kind of sense of paranoia and fear.

Stella: And the telenovela...that was supposed to be Iris' paranoia projected for the audience, right?

Ish: Yeah, she was kind of hounded, and it was known to everyone...like when she would see the television it would be like oh my god, my struggle is on television! And I've heard other people talk about that in positive ways like oh this disc jockey went right into my soul and they saved my life...like if it weren't for Pierre Robert I don't know if I would have made it because he gave me that

song...it's like, mysterious. Like really good dj's, you know they have to feel the room—they feel the room and then they help the room.

Stella: That's interesting because I feel like *The Orchids* and a lot of your work is so much about atmosphere...one aesthetic note I remember making when we were rehearsing was that you mentioned Rachel Weisz in *The Lobster* and so I had that mood, that strangeness in my head when I was enacting Iris...you know there is something really disjointed in that film but also the mood is really intense and sad and there's a deep sensitivity to it and a power in that sensitivity.

Ish: Yeah, I really like *The Lobster*, it had a really cuckoo ending—that guy ends movies in such a protracted way...

Greg: Well we're living in an era of movies that have really interesting set-ups, and middles with endings that just don't end.

Ish: Like, endings are so hard!

Stella: I can see you having an ending like that in your work, Ish. It doesn't feel too far off.

Ish: Yeah it's like we're stopping, we're going home, but...

Stella: Wait how did *The Orchids* end again?? (*laughs*)

SB: You and David were holding hands...

Greg: Yeah it was a very satisfying, very cathartic ending...

Stella: And then the Beach Boys played...and we killed you, right John?

John: Yeah you put me into a box and I disappeared.

SB: You put the black cloth over the box, the cage he was in, and he disappeared.

Ish: It's like memory receding, the stored memories live somewhere else now, they are no longer holding real estate in the mind. So that's kind of nice...that time does these things.

Greg: Do you think of your work, Ish, as a psychological parable, or do you think of it as something actually happening?

Ish: Oh, I think of it as something that's happening and I assume it happens to other people because things don't just happen to one person right? You know, I wrote it to be with friends, to be with people I like...I mean there's ego involved, and I know that and I know that it's always hard to do stuff together but I wrote it to make a social situation happen. And it was weird, because the power dynamic is weird, and I think that's always a struggle but it was written to make an experience that was positive and also to sort of express something that I think can be alienating, but if it's expressed then hopefully it will be less alienating. That's the hope, trying to be as accurate as possible, to communi-

cate better.

Greg: So was the act of putting on the play the most important thing, more important than the actual text?

Ish: Not for me, no, I just looked forward to rehearsals so much...but with *The Orchids*, Stella—I don't know if I ever mentioned this to you but I had a crisis of conscience, because I'm like, I'm putting Stella through this bad experience and I know we were all surrounded by friends, but I had a worry that it would have been traumatizing, but I just had to trust that if it were traumatizing for you that you would tell me and also maybe that was just my fear that made it a little uncomfortable, like when I compare it to other performances that were a little less anxiety-ridden for me, like *Drummer 41* which was weirder—and it mattered to me but it was more distant—whereas with *The Orchids* I was like, ugh, I don't want to transfer anything but my intention was the opposite...but I was afraid it could backfire. You hear about directors who are brutal and are just trying to get an effect, but I wanted us to all have an experience together and make something...to share space.

Greg: So you said no, but your answer was yes, meaning that what was important to you was the social experience more than the artifact of the play...?

Ish: Well when we performed it in Turners Falls the performance became an experience, like when we saw people coming up afterward, and Christopher Janke helping with the DVD player...that was huge. The things that you wouldn't think of with the performance were just so huge. I never know what to do after it, I know people like to celebrate, but I'm not good at that, somehow I just wanted to keep going.

Stella: And then we did it again in NYC at Dixon Place...

Ish: Yeah we did, but the audience was only about 20 people and they were not as responsive an audience as Turners Falls.

SB: They didn't find it funny! I think they didn't understand that the tone was sort of humorous. Because when we have friends in our CRVPT audience, they know us, they know our moves, they know your writing, Ish, and they laugh very loud.

Greg: There were quite a number of people who showed up in Turners Falls.

Ish: Yeah it really blew my mind...

Stella: I remember someone saying that they didn't really know how to feel about it—they were torn about how to feel because it was really intense and they had to watch this violence enacted and yet it was funny.

SB: Yeah I heard from a number of people, mostly women, that they were really moved and also unsettled by it, and it was a thing that people kept thinking about—they talked to me about it for months later...like I'm still thinking about *The Orchids*, I'm still chewing on it...

John: But I think, Ish, that you achieved what you wanted to in terms of directing and the cast, in terms of our togetherness or however you want to describe it...but yeah I think there were some audience members who were a bit disturbed...I remember after our Dixon Place show, I think it was a friend of yours, Stella, who seemed really angry at me. I didn't quite get that, but...

Stella: You were so convincing! I was frightened of you that whole time while we were rehearsing, to a degree.

Greg: Yeah I remember when we were first trying to decide who was going to do what, I mean Ish always proposes the big roles to me, and for this one in particular I was just far too cowardly to even try to do that role.

John: Also Wilson [Yerxa] was thinking the same thing...

Ish: Yeah Wilson did not want to portray that, Wilson was pretty clear about that which I respect, and I can understand it. It's just a huge act of bravery because you have to have a clear sense of self to do these things that are well, taboo in a way. And it's not so much that they don't happen all the time just the dynamic isn't pointed out all the time. There are a lot of undercurrents and ways that people get subtly erased but it's not pointed out, which makes it hard.

SB: Yeah it tends to be in the shadows and you, we, were shining a light on it very intentionally.

Stella: I don't feel traumatized by it, in my role as Iris, I actually—what I remember most is the scene where I fight back and how cathartic that was to just be like NO!

John: And you scared me at that point! She's got the butter knife and she's like agghhh!

Stella: Oh yeah I think I accidentally really hurt you during one of the performances!

John: Yeah something like that...*(laughter)*

Stella: I just remember loving watching SB in the scenes I wasn't in during rehearsals, because it was just so entertaining—I mean to me those scenes were the funniest part with you and David [Feinstein]...

SB: Yeah I have really fond memories of just hanging out in John's living room, yelling, screaming, chasing each other around, hoping that your partner wasn't that upset about the things we were screaming, John...that was a lot of fun.

Stella: I mean it's really impressive, that we were a bunch of writers and students with jobs and families and everything but we were running a real theater for many years and showing up to rehearsal multiple times a week...

Ish: Yeah, my goal is to get it back going but I don't know what to do about money...I guess I'm going to have to learn to raise funds because I don't ever

want to give anyone less than union...But if you all ever want to do a zoom production!?!...I mean I've been really struggling through this pandemic to feel like a real person.

Greg: It's been a year now, and everyday I wake up and say, I'm not going to be mentally ill today, I'm going to be something else...

Stella: Well as writers I think we're all a little mentally ill, I mean I think what was so beautiful about the poet's theater was that we are all so used to being in our heads and having solitary creative experiences, so I think to come together and do something that requires embodiment and community—

Greg: And collaboration—

SB: And a lot of trust!

Ish: Yes, trust! The trust thing is the biggest one I think. That's why I find it so hard but I also kind of feel like I need it...it's like showing up for the event of trust.

Stella: Ish, wasn't it Kevin Killian's poet's theater in San Francisco, who originally performed your play *In a Word, Faust* sort of the impetus for starting your own poet's theater?

Ish: Yeah well Greg and I were in Kevin's play *The Pre-Poetic*, part of The Welcome to Boog City Festival (2012), and I love that guy. He was such a great guy and he made you feel that you could do anything.

Stella: Were you also thinking of Fanny Howe's poet's theater at Harvard?

Greg: Well, but all the theories behind poet's theater that had come before us, and there was so much that had come before, felt like the opposite of social. I mean they may argue with that but it felt like it was very, very caught up in we're going to bring our attitudes about the text and we're going to have them to perform, and in fact we're going to look with disdain upon wearing feather boas and spreading glitter around the stage, which we did—we embraced that, and that was in fact a big relief to be able to do things like that.

Ish: We started the poet's theater because of language, like you catch up with something in the language and then the language teaches your body instead of—well some people think that in poet's theater it can't be like a regular play, it has to be like, no-fi...

Greg: Yeah you just have to stand there and read like you would at a poetry reading, maybe someone is standing next to you, and you almost turn up the monotone...

Stella: I feel like *In a Word, Faust*, our first performance was sort of like that though, where it was really about the text, about paring down the language...

Greg: But we were really sweaty at the end of it!

SB: Yeah, we had lots of costumes! Andy and I wore those hazmat suits...

Greg: Would you say, Ish, the language moves the body?

Ish: Yeah! You're holding your brain in suspension but you follow it, like it's a separation that we're always trying to overcome or examine, for instance, like with human relationships, it's like the nerve and the intimacy—like, can my nerves handle intimacy? Or if there's no intimacy, what happens to my nerves? Does that make sense? It's kind of like a dance of the forces.

Stella: But would you say that first play was more like what you would think of as a performance rooted in or specifically made for poet's theater, where it's more about the language than character...and then we evolved to a point where we were doing like, actual plays?

John: We went from poet's theater to poets doing theater.

Ish: Yeah, that's so true.

John: Ish you were describing *The Orchids* as part of your psyche, but I remember you had a very specific 'other world' that this took place in, and there were certain rules about how energy moved and that kind of stuff, and I remember thinking, I'm never going to really know this world since you're only getting glimpses of it in the play, and as an actor you're like okay, I guess this has something to do with the rules of this world but I never had it all fully explained to me...

Ish: Yes that's right! That's true...I've found out since then that a lot of actors don't want a playwright to give them the rules, you want to know why? And this I think is fascinating, but it's because they want to own it, you know they want to put their world in it so they can give their own truth to the words. And I really appreciated learning that actually, because that's where it really becomes equal you know? Where everyone comes up to meet each other and they have their own experiences that are just as valid. That's been humbling, but actually really opening, too.

Stella: I think I resisted trying to understand what the world [in *The Orchids*] was really about, or intellectualizing it, for that reason. And that was actually part of why I loved doing poet's theater because I didn't have to do the intellectual heavy-lifting which we're always doing as writers, I could just show up and have it be an intuitive embodied experience of the text and that was such a relief from doing the writing or trying to understand the writing.

SB: One of the shining moments I think of when I think of *The Orchids* is the way we staged the testicle removal with the silhouette on the curtain, with the popping sound, and the physicality of that...I was just really proud of how we did that, I thought that was really cool.

Stella: Yeah we had some wild special effects for a low-budget poet's theater who had no real experience in special effects!

Greg: Yeah we got into the Shea Theater and the guy said here is the soundboard, here are the lights, just don't break anything, and then he never showed

up again...and I was very busy back there, I had to sometimes turn up sound while I was turning down lights—it was like rubbing your belly and patting your head...

SB: Yeah we had lots of sound effects, lots of lighting cues, and Ish was the computer, the voice...

Greg: I remember missing one or two lighting cues, but whatever...

John: I don't know how it came across to the audience, but my favorite scene was being under the floor and all of a sudden, I'm lying down, I'm not hurting anybody, you know, physically, and it was such a humorous scene...I was laughing inside every time I did that.

SB: That dialogue was also really funny, that exchange between you and Leif, David's character, about the medical journal—

John: Yeah every line is so packed with meaning and to have those lines in your head as an actor for an extended period of time was a blast, like every single line just had some cool thing going on in it that I loved to just think about...that's why I showed up for rehearsal everyday.

Ish: You were great, you were all fantastic, I don't know if I expressed that stridently enough, but I thought you did a beautiful job...it was just the best moment for me.

Stella: John and SB, you reminded me how fun it was to problem solve, like how are we going to enact all of these things? Like figuring out how we were going to make a fake floor that would read to the audience—

SB: And the portal!

Stella: Yes the portal! Which I think we used the shell of a bookcase with a curtain over it...and then how are we going to put the ball in the mouth of the doll and how are we going to get it out—

All: The doll!!!

Stella: That was some amazing creative group work, like how are we going to materialize all these ideas, especially when we're writers and we aren't used to working with these physical materials and their mechanics...

SB: Yeah that was always a challenge that I tackled with a viciousness—like how do we make it happen?!?

The Impossible Man Work-in-Progress on Ira Aldridge

*Musings on the Archives
(theatrical booklet excerpt)*

Tracie Morris

The following is an edited excerpt from my self-published book (with the vetted approval to use Harvard Bookstore's automated publication resources). The booklet is a commentary on the play that was the result of my research in the Houghton Library as a Woodberry Poetry Room fellow at Harvard University from 2018-2019. The play, The Impossible Man, is my work-in-progress one-person show (with live musical accompaniment) about the great thespian Ira Aldridge. This documents elements of my research that lead me to create and perform the play. – TM

I. The Past is Prologue

This presentation of “The Impossible Man” started in a library but not the one you may expect. In thinking on the germination of this work, I recalled an extraordinary moment of my early undergraduate education.

In another life, I thought I was going to be a lawyer so my major was Political Science with a focus on government and public policy. My college minor, however, was in the department that was then called Black and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College. I can't remember what BLPR class I was in at the time but I was reading Donald Bogle's influential book, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mamies and Bucks*. While I'm sure Aldridge was in the book, I don't think I took in his name, at least not in the forefront of my consciousness. The person I did focus on, and whom I believe I wrote my paper about for the class, was Lena Horne. I was interested in her as a person and as a star, partially because of Bogle's references to her. There's only so much one can say about her storied history (and I'm proud to say that she's a native Brooklynite too — as if I had anything to do with it) but her impact on Hollywood was important for one reason among many: she revolutionized makeup for actors, including Black actors, in her collaboration with Max Factor. You can read up on that aspect of her career. The meaningful moment came when I for the first time, took myself to the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center to do more research on her.

I began to look into early Hollywood makeup in general to get a better sense of the context and found myself reading about makeup for theater. I came across an old book 19th century book on theatrical makeup, that explained how certain makeup techniques presented various ethnic characters and their *innate characteristics*. The explicitly drawn stereotypes and their delineations of how these people “were” blew my mind. It explained why we perceive of witches a certain way, as well as racial and geographical ethnicities including Eastern Europeans. We subconsciously associate people with certain facial features and a slew of ethnic and racial types as inherent to their person. Some of them were surprising (such as the conflation of Native American and Jewish facial features in looks for makeup) others were...not so much of a surprise. Something about that book stuck in my head for decades as I moved away from law and social justice in law as an undergraduate student, then became a more focused advocacy writer, then prioritized poetry, then performance, then scholarship, then an academic life with each “then” also bringing along all the other floral notes of my previous lives and inclinations.

Fast forward several decades and I find myself researching Black actors in Britain at the small but well-stocked and impeccably archived library at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. Since my first visit, they have significantly expanded their holdings of Black artists, including playwrights. When I was there for 3 summers, taking all the Shakespeare courses they had available during my breaks from teaching (2007-2009), I looked for early Black actors that paved the way for my education there. Whom did I owe?

In my third summer, I saw Richard Eyre's film *Stage Beauty*, featuring Rupert Evert, Claire Danes and Billy Crudup. I wept at the end of that movie, when the combination of naturalistic acting and heightened language created a riveting performance. (It also focused on opening up the stage to women for the first time.) It was a great culmination to the film.

I'd long thought about the relationship between American acting technique and British acting technique. I found myself in London because I liked working on a technical, writer-focused ("outside-in") approach. Many of the actors I aspire to learn from are from the U.K. and Ireland (although I am, and continue to be, humbled and awestruck by actors the world over including many, many American actors). Because I have an outlet for "inside-out" non-acting work, as a poet in general and a sound poet in particular, I was focused on acting craft that did *not* prioritize my own emotions while working with embodiment, language and truth. Despite all these creative connections, the scholar in me still gravitated to the library to work, think and prepare (once a scholar..).

I had the great good fortune of working with the extraordinary director/playwright and theater phenom Nona Shepphard while at RADA. The opportunity to play a central role, as a student, in one of her productions was a joy and changed my life. The opportunity to play a male of power and a lead character to boot, changed my relationship with myself as an actor. Before I go further in my missive, I have to credit Ms. Shepphard for her brilliant production, then I'll go on with my other comments about the show.

My relationship to the character Shylock in *The Impossible Man* work in progress is based on her production. The top of the show is really reportage more than anything. I hope I have done a tiny bit of justice to Nona's brilliant work but I really can't hold a candle to it.

The scene of me binding my chest is literally what I did, of my own volition, to get into the character. I wanted to have a reference outside of my personal gender conventions for the play besides wearing men's clothing. (I also felt that Shylock was bound up: in his own feelings, bitterness and by the horrifying constraints put upon him by society.) And I couldn't help but think of how that image resonates now with people who bind their upper bodies based on medical necessities. I thought about how binding can be an act of constraint and freedom for people today and how it can be perceived this way in the public consciousness more so than in 2009.

Everything after the binding in the Shylock scene (besides my own writing) was based on Ms. Shepphard's direction of the RADA student show. She ended

that production, not with the wedding scene, and Antonio getting his “groove back,” but with Shylock being forced to go to church for the first time and being completely bereft. An imposing cross was in the background. “My scene partner Ethan (who also played Shylock) and I often spoke about the intensity of that moment. It was a goal of mine, purely from an acting standpoint to be able to tell Shylock’s truth at that moment. Therefore, my intention is to cry at the end of it. Every night that we did the production and both times that I’m performing this work in progress so far, I bring forth *his* tears. This is completely due to the way that the work was staged, the way we actors were worked in the play. (Nona is very tough, very clear, has extraordinary technical prowess as an actor, writer and director and has an incredibly expansive artistic vision. Believe me when I tell you that I am understating her excellence in the remarks here.)

All these elements are of a piece and when *The Impossible Man* began to emerge from my mind, I saw them all coming together. I’ll say a bit about how that happened.

I came to the Houghton Library after Christina Davis at Harvard reached out to me for a possible performance several years ago. At the time our schedules didn’t coincide and, incredibly, I forgot about this overture for a couple of years. I think we kept it as an informal “keep in touch” thing until we could think of other dates. I was looking up something else in my computer search engine and found that email and realized we’d hadn’t touched bases again. I reached out and Christina immediately followed-up. Within a few months we had a date.

This was a very meaningful event for me. I corralled the great percussionist Susie Ibarra to collaborate with me on the gig. She is in very high demand and was very kind to say yes. This was the second event we’d done in 20 years when we used to play more frequently together. (Our first rebirthed collaboration was an improvised set celebrating Cecil Taylor at the Whitney Museum.) We were in sync but reacquainting ourselves. The performance was poetry and music. We were on the bill with Doug Kearney, who has been a friend for 20 years and with whom I have performed before. (Doug and I met at Cave Canem in 1999.) I got to Cambridge early to make sure I knew where I was going and to make sure Susie was set up. While hanging out at Houghton, Christina casually asked me what I was working on, research-wise, as a scholar. I talked about a couple of projects including the fact that I had been doing fieldwork research on Ira Aldridge on my own for about half a decade. I mentioned the Aldridge project and how I started working on it in earnest at Northwestern University’s archives 4 years prior to the gig I was about to do with Susie at Houghton. This is how that first foray into deep Aldridge archives happened.

I went to Northwestern’s archives in 2013 and spent a few days there, meeting with with Scott Kraft, the special collections curator at the University Library, just trying to get a sense of the scope of Aldridge’s importance. It was a bit overwhelming but I naively remained intrigued rather than daunted.

In the Spring of 2014, I had the great pleasure of meeting the actor Joseph Mydell, who played Casca in an all-Black performance of *Julius Caesar* at BAM.

Mr. Mydell mentioned that he had done a tribute to Aldridge and kindly sent me a DVD of it and sent a copy to the archives at Northwestern to add to their collection. In the fall of 2014, I took a year-long sabbatical and committed myself to the Aldridge project. I followed as many leads as I could on Aldridge in the United Kingdom, Germany and Poland, including visiting his gravesite in Łódź. There are a few things worth noting about the experience in Poland.

Firstly, I had had surgery just before the trip. It was the only time I could fit it in because I was gone the better part of a year. That affected my physical state and probably, in some ways, my sensitivity about all things on the trip. I was in a state of recovery and heightened awareness. (This concept of heightened awareness is important to acting, but surgery is definitely not required to reach it. In fact, I'd recommend against it.) Secondly, I went to Poland with Susan Bee (Bernstein) and Charles Bernstein. Susan's family escaped Poland, including Łódź, during the Holocaust and Charles was doing presentations of a new book, his poems in translation. We also went to the extraordinary Museum of Polish Jews in Warsaw as part of that trip. It was kismet that we were able to spend time in Berlin, Warsaw and Łódź, together. While Susan was doing family research, Charles accompanied me when I went to find Aldridge's grave. We found it, with a bit of a challenge and a bit of magic. (Another tale for another time.) I was able to pay my respects. I also went the next morning to experience time with Aldridge's memory alone and in light. All three of us were all dealing with art, memory, death and legacy on that trip. It was a confluence of reflections, mourning and blessed exchanges.

Sometimes dealing with people's passing and their significance so intimately makes them follow you home. I went to Shakespeare's final resting place in Stratford-upon-Avon while looking for Aldridge's plaque there (none of the heralded plaques were visible when I went there, including Aldridge's). They are forever joined in my Venn-diagrammed mind, while at other points they have different intersections that do not meet.

While traveling all over Europe to study Aldridge's archives, I was also reading Bernth Lindfors' crucial biographies on Aldridge. (I had contacted Mr. Lindfors directly, for the first time, while I was at Northwestern.) Once I was in a little public library in Berlin seated in the empty, quiet children's book section reading about Aldridge's intense upbringing as a young actor. It was a moment of contrasts and joining. How similar all children are and yet, the circumstances of our growing shape us each distinctly. Before I'd gone to his gravesite I had a sense of how he lived. After going to Poland I had a sense of the reality of his surroundings when he died. He is lovingly tended to in rest in Łódź, and he was also far, far from his birth home.

I passed back through London after perusing many libraries and special collections in Berlin that housed parts of Aldridge's archives including Stabi whose staff was incredibly helpful. Stabi and many other leads I followed were based on the generous references of Mr. Lindfors. London was more familiar territory and after going to many locations in that city that had plaques, etc. to Aldridge in museums and galleries, I found myself back at RADA. A few amazing things happened during my visit after Germany and Poland. I looked more deeply into

the context in which Shakespeare, and later Aldridge, were interpreting the Moorish presence in Europe. This was due largely to the tireless patience of RADA's librarian and human encyclopedia James Thornton who kindly responded to all my wide-ranging requests. I was following a few leads at the same time there. It's interesting to work in a library for theatrical productions because the collections can be both expansive and yet must also be specifically relevant to theater folks. Therefore the collection is particularly efficient for researching the full context of how an actor, writer, or role for performance. James also made arrangements for me to meet the archivists and see some of the precious artifacts of Aldridge at the storied Garrick Club.

On the side of the library was the office of Andrew Visnevski, my primary RADA teacher in the first short-course I did there in 2007. When I told him about my research project he sent me to antiquarian book row in London to look for one specific artifact and I was able to find extraordinary lithographs, later photos, primary source reviews, etc. that were relevant to my project. (A side benefit of visiting those bookstores was that one of the specialists mentioned that the Stanley Kubrick archives were also a train ride away which was helpful for another poetry book project I completed a couple of years after I visited, so I got two books and a baby play out of my conversation with Andrew V. regarding Aldridge.) You'd think that I'd be kind of done with Aldridge at this point but there was more to learn (and I always felt that if Bernth could do all this legwork and more, building on the efforts of Aldridge's second biographers, Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, who made the first effort at a full biography of Aldridge — the first biographer being Aldridge himself.)

Another extraordinary opportunity from RADA came when they very graciously made it possible for me to interview the great British actor Adrian Lester. I had been an admirer of his work for a long time both in television and film and was thrilled to see his interpretation of Aldridge in the play *Red Velvet*, presented at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn. The play was written by RADA graduate (also Lester's wife) Lolita Chakrabarti. Mr. Lester was very generous with his time and it was fascinating to hear how he prepared for Othello and what it was like to embody Aldridge early in his career and toward the end of his life. (As coincidence would have it, I went to Birmingham, Mr. Lester's birthplace, to view a possible early painting of Aldridge performing in a scene, with director John Adams, whom I'd met at RADA. Mr. Adams also lead me to another lesser known play about Aldridge published in England, that he directed, *Black Star*.)

There are so many people I am indebted to at RADA for this project and I'm very attached to the place, especially considering that I wasn't a full-time conservatory student there. I visit anytime I have a moment in London. Funnily enough, my first prompting for taking classes at London was to celebrate my completion of my PhD the year before. I realized I wanted to perform after 5 years prioritizing theoretical studies on another influential British writer, the philosopher J.L. Austin. (Ah. Aldridge and Austin. Two demanding guardian angel travel companions in my life.) The archives in libraries, museums, galleries and within people weave together a living legacy for Aldridge and his continued impact.

II. In the Present / Presence



Image courtesy of Woodberry Poetry Room, Houghton Library, Harvard University

A funny thing happened on the day of the show...in 2017.

As I teased in the previous section, I had followed up with Christina Davis about the gig in 2017 and about how the conversation turned to Aldridge. What happened after that was, she suggested I send her a note about it. I did so and it became my application to the Woodberry Poetry Fellowship. The fellowship is very prestigious, obviously, and most poets who get it come up for a little bit of time and look through the archives, often in service of a book project. This is the accepted, normal, and effective understanding of how the fellowship is organized.

I don't know if it is my extremely nerd quirk or what but when I got the fellowship I immediately thought: "I can peruse Harvard's libraries for a whole *year*?" So instead of coming up once or twice, I visited Houghton as well as Lamont and Widener libraries, every month (except one) between, August 2018 and March, 2019. I was usually met there by Mary Graham a staff member who works closely with Christina on the fellowship and is very diligent in dealing with my dorky, endless queries month after month. I was excited to be able to follow how far the paths lead at research university of this level. I focused initially almost exclusively on the Lindfors collection. It is a gold mine of very rare and singular materials. I held two versions of Aldridge's mythologized autobiography in my hands. Some of the few copies of the storied book Aldridge penned that Lindfors mentioned in his biographies. It was actually in my hands. It was fasci-

nating to read Aldridge's sense of himself, his humor, his *snark* for goodness sake as well as his reconstruction of himself as a royal African, directly from the continent, playing Africans and royals. While Aldridge was born in Manhattan, to regular, non-royal Black parents, this story conveys a sense of himself. His choice to construct this particular tale about his life speaks volumes about his positioning and decision to stand in power as a literal descendant of kings. I took my time perusing each incredible artifact in the rare collection donated by Bernth himself. This went on from August to December.

In December 2018, something unusual happened during one of my research visits. I kept finding search results that were performance-based. The reason this is unusual is because I look up Ira Aldridge in the Harvard library search engine every time I visit. New things are popping up about him all the time. Usually they're articles or small journal entries that are new. For some reason, in December I saw a listing first of the sheet music of Aldridge's daughter, Amanda Aldridge, under her moniker Montague Ring. It's been available for ages but that was the first time I'd seen it in the general search. Then I saw and read the script for one of the plays Aldridge co-wrote, *The Black Doctor*. Then, I saw that there was a type of meta-play about Aldridge that was done at Boston University and a copy on VHS was at Widener Library. I read Aldridge's play then went to see the play at Widener, still considering Amanda/Montague Ring's compositions. While leaving Widener after viewing the taped play I looked into a side hallway in the library and there was a large picture of Paul Robeson there. It was uncanny that I'd seen all these things within 24 hours, since I had been perusing these same archive listings for months. It was after these experiences that I realized that my public presentation of this actor's work had to be a theatrical performance—of his impact as an actor.

I told Christina and Mary what was emerging as a thought in my head—a scary thought since I hadn't done full-on British acting training for a decade at this point—but I like to think it was the hand of fate, through the insistence of Ira Aldridge, forcing the issue. Also, the constraints of a performance (time, resources, etc.) would encourage a kind of economy that the idea of writing poems for the presentation of a book project that I had been researching for years, did not.

The next day, when I spoke with Mary she mentioned the Frederick C. Packard Jr.'s collection of sound recordings of many people at Harvard (including a young John F. Kennedy). My focus was Packard's recordings of actors doing Shakespearean monologues. The one Black actor featured in those recordings was Paul Robeson. Hearing Robeson's voice during this December visit as I was formulating the idea of a performance in my mind pretty much settled it. This was to be a performance-based research presentation.

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Well then I started sighing to myself. I mean....I had done some recent staged readings with wonderful directors such as Joanne Akalitis (including a celebration of Maria Fornes at the Public Theater) and Jean Wagner. These were feminist plays and the focus was on the voice. I know my voice very well and

became a voice coach for singers and actors so I was comfortable with the staged environment. This was something different. This was full-bodied acting and the context, a presentation that was the outline of a theatrically-oriented work-in-progress, was daunting. By all rights the writing should've been the thing that scared me the most. I'm not a playwright (although I've dabbled) and I'm not a director. To me writing is the most important thing so I should've been most intimidated by anything that hints of a play. And it is indeed scary! But fully acting, with the image of Aldridge literally looming overhead made me petrified. There were moments when I literally couldn't move, couldn't breathe at the thought.

And yet...I have learned over the decades of doing improvised sound poetry that you can "take the window or the stairs" when it comes to doing what the Muse says. You don't listen to her, she comes back with a shiv! So...when I saw what was happening, I wanted to just lie down and take a nap, hoping I'd dreamed the conversation and would read a couple of poems at Harvard's poetry room and call it a day.

I should've known it would be something new I'd have to do though because I had **already** read poems (with music) at Harvard in 2017. This research and my experiences of regularly coming to Cambridge was not going to result in the same type of presentation that I had done before I had experiences the Lindfors archives. Not really possible. One has to improvise what the vibe calls for.

Another random piece of luck came my way to help sighing me. A month after making the decision/understanding the reality that my presentation of my research was going to be a theatrically-oriented performance, I began a Visiting Professorship at the renowned Iowa Writers Workshop. Word quickly got around to other departments at the University of Iowa about my semester-long professorship. I was approached by IWW poets Bianca Rae Messinger and Toby Altman, who were working with graduate students in the theater department to do a theatrical presentation for their Poets' Theater Festival. (Bernadette Mayer was the other non-student presenting theater work at the festival). This gave me the opportunity to try and put the piece on its feet a bit (in an abbreviated version—the time allotment was shorter). I also got the chance to work out some of the direction written into the piece. Eric Marlin was my director for the Iowa version and I kept him on to be the long-distance dramaturge for the Harvard show. He'd been a tremendous help spotting key elements that either worked or needed to be improved in the working script as well as very insightful post-Iowa notes to possibly apply to the Harvard event.

Before Eric's involvement however, there was the issue of Amanda's music. A few things occurred to me when I thought about it. One was how accomplished she was. I saw her name and the friendly and astonishing correspondences she had with Robeson and Marian Anderson. There were postcards from all over the world between them. The other is that she was, in her own way as a classical musician and vocalist, continuing her father's legacy of interpreting new ways of presenting high European art, challenging limited notions of who could do that work and how to synthesize it with their Black presence. The last thing I

realized is that, besides his daughters, there is no record of Black women being part of Ira Aldridge's life since he left the US. His mother predeceased him and he named one of his other daughters, the accomplished Luranah Aldridge, after her. With that last consideration, questioning the presence of Black women in Aldridge's story, that I asked Janice Lowe to come on board with this project and to play Amanda's work.

Janice is a formidable poet (we share the CPCW poetry fellowship of the University of Pennsylvania in common), has an advanced degree in musical theater and is a friend. Playing Amanda Aldridge's/Montague Ring's work adds a significant dimension to the presentation of the work and Janice brings great sensitivity and expertise to this work.

Finally, after meeting with the staff of the Smith Center and the libraries who arranged for the lighting and sound components of the production (the Smith Center is not a formal theatrical venue but more of a presentation space—and we were lucky to get it with just a few month's notice) we were ready to offer this idea to a live audience. Yes I was still terrified to present my research in this way but it seemed as if the road, in both directions, past and present, had been open to me, to Aldridge, to all of us.

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Contributors

Stella Corso is the author of *TANTRUM* (Rescue Press, 2017) winner of the 2016 Black Box Prize for Poetry, and the chapbook *Wind & the Augur* (Sixth Finch, 2021). Currently, she is a PhD student in Creative Writing at the University of Denver where she acts as a performance editor and reader of poetry for the *Denver Quarterly*. She is a founding member of the Connecticut River Valley Poet's Theater (CRVPT).

Ishmael Klein was raised in Long Beach, New York. She authored the plays *The Orchids*, *Drummer 41*, "In A Word, Faust", *The Dee Men* and *The Restless Leg*. Ish is the author of the poetry books *The New Sun Time*, *Consolation and Mirth*, *Moving Day* and *Union!* Her poems and plays have appeared on the Poetry Foundation website and in journals like *Gare du Nord*, *Versal* and *The Cambridge Literary Review*. She is a founding member of the Connecticut River Valley Poets Theater (CRVPT). She attended Columbia University and the Iowa Writers Workshop. She lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan and is married to the poet and fellow founding CRVPT member Greg Purcell.

Alyssa Moore is a Black, queer multi-disciplinary artist based in Chicago. She has received degrees and fellowships from Harvard University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop where she received the Iowa Arts Fellowship. Their work explores themes of religion, institutional power, sexuality, and digital selfhood. Their work has appeared in *Hyperallergic*, *Pulpmouth*, *Tagverket*, *Futurepoem's futurefeed*, *Boston Review*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere.

Tracie Morris is writer/editor of 9 books (including forthcoming two books). She is a poet, professor, performer, voice teacher and theorist. Tracie holds an MFA in poetry from CUNY Hunter College, a PhD in Performance Studies from New York University, and studied British Acting technique at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. Her most recent published poetry collection is *Hard Kore/Per-form: Poems of Mythos and Place*, Joca Seria, 2017 (English with French translation). Her poetry, scholarly and performance work has been extensively anthologized and recorded around the world. Tracie became an Atlantic Center for the Arts Master Artist in 2018; that year she also served as the 2018-2019 Woodberry Poetry Room Creative Fellow at Harvard University. Tracie was the inaugural Distinguished Visiting Professor of Poetry at The Iowa Writers Workshop for one year before joining the permanent faculty as their first African-American Professor of Poetry in Fall, 2020. She recently received a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry.