

Michael Bettencourt

Full-Length Plays: Volume 5

Block & Tackle Productions Press



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Michael Bettencourt

**The Measure Of All Things • Meet John Doe
NEA High**

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Block & Tackle Productions Press



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To María Beatriz - always in all ways

The Measure of All Things

DESCRIPTION

The search for the meter found more than the meter.

CHARACTERS

- Pierre-François-André-Méchain
- Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Delambre
- Barbe-Thérèse Méchain
- THE FRENCH REVOLUTION/THE SPANIARDS/THE SAVANTS OF EUROPE/THE STARS -- flexible crowd numbers. One of them will play NAPOLEON BONAPARTE.

THE ACADEMY

DOUBLING: two will play DEZAUCHE and the BARON in Scenes 1 and 7; all will play the Exhumed Kings in Scene 3; one will play TRANCHOT in Scene 4.

- TALLEYRAND
- CONDORCET
- LALANDE
- BORDA
- LAPLACE

* * * * *

Scene 1

September 20, 1804. Early morning. A sickroom in Castellón de la Plana, near Valencia, Spain.

PIERRE-FRANÇOIS-ANDRÉ-MÉCHAIN in the sickbed, propped up, sleeping. A.-M. DEZAUCHE is by his bedside, writing in a journal. BARON DE LA PUEBLA enters. DEZAUCHE rises.

DEZAUCHE

Baron --

BARON

Good morning.

DEZAUCHE

Morning, yes --

BARON

And?

DEZAUCHE

Not well, Baron -- not doing well --

BARON

No, I can see that. It seems this kind of fever either leaves you alone after it touches you or it rips you apart.

DEZAUCHE

I am not willing to guess.

BARON

But you're not a doctor, either, are you.

DEZAUCHE

Baron, I mean no disrespect, but I don't have to be a physician to see what's in front of me.

BARON

Proves nothing. Eyes -- not always reliable. Has he been bled?

DEZAUCHE

The leeches sing him thanks.

BARON

There's a distrust in your voice.

DEZAUCHE

I don't trust butchery.

BARON

So I've hired butchers?

DEZAUCHE

These "cures" -- bleeding, blistering -- like the Inquisition --

BARON

You're free to say whatever you want here, but I'd still be careful --

DEZAUCHE

I'm sorry -- it's been a long night.

BARON

For everybody.

(points to journal)

What are you --

DEZAUCHE

I'm cleaning up the calculations. Whether he lives or dies --

BARON

The calculations will live on.

DEZAUCHE

Yes, always.

BARON

If they're right, that is.

DEZAUCHE

Why would you think --

BARON

Have you ever known anything humans have done that has been done without mistakes?

DEZAUCHE

The triangulations have been very precise. He is a very precise man --

BARON

But accurate?

DEZAUCHE

It's the same --

BARON

I can be very precise and still be dead wrong: "I've cut the board twice now and it's still too short."

DEZAUCHE

Not the time for mock[ery] --

BARON

On the other hand, for truth --

MÉCHAIN

My venerable host is right.

DEZAUCHE

Oh, good good -- you're awake -- don't speak -- you need to --

MÉCHAIN

Don't speak? -- don't speak? -- what've I got to lose? I've been not-speaking for days -- at last a clear moment -- I'm dying -- isn't that the truth?

BARON

All are dying, Pierre -- the only difference is the rates.

MÉCHAIN

Fast track for me. Slippery. Downhill. Don't speak -- don't speak --

Transition. MÉCHAIN throws off the covers, gets out of bed. The rest of the scene goes away.

MÉCHAIN

What a miserable way to end a life -- my life -- fevered and shitting myself in Spain -- and the doctors! Bleeding me, the Spanish fly blistering my neck. I'm French and dying in Spain. I've discovered eleven comets, and my eyes are crusted shut with rheum. I'm a scientist, priest of precision, and a mistake -- an error -- is killing me off.

MÉCHAIN changes out of his sick clothes into the uniform of the Academy of Sciences. As he does so, the FRENCH REVOLUTION enters, singing as much of "La Marseillaise" as they can get through.

FRENCH REVOLUTION

Allons enfants de la Patrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivé.
Contre nous, de la tyrannie,
L'étandard sanglant est levé,
l'étandard sanglant est levé,
Entendez-vous, dans la compagnes.
Mugir ces farouches soldats
Ils viennent jusque dans nos bras
Egorger vos fils,
vos compagnes.

Aux armes citoyens!
Formez vos bataillons,
Marchons, marchons!
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons.

[Let us go, children of the fatherland
Our day of Glory has arrived.
Against us stands tyranny,
The bloody flag is raised,
The bloody flag is raised.
Do you hear in the countryside
The roar of these savage soldiers
They come right into our arms
To cut the throats of your sons,
your country.

To arms, citizens!
Form up your battalions
Let us march, Let us march!
That their impure blood
Should water our fields]

As MÉCHAIN dresses, the FRENCH REVOLUTION circles as it sings, and it sings louder and louder and louder.

MÉCHAIN
(shouting)

Beginnings. Everything is marked by its beginnings -- hark the "beginnings" -- in songs and blood -- the perfection of mankind and the terrorism of perfection. Liberté, Egalité,

Fraternité -- the ideal turning the world upside down with mankind perfecting itself right into the guillotine and Napoleon. Our progress -- our progressing madness.

Cacophony. Dressed, MÉCHAIN holds up a platinum bar, one meter in length. It shines. The FRENCH REVOLUTION falls silent. MÉCHAIN shows it around.

MÉCHAIN

Behold -- the measure of all things. Behold the meter. The meter. One ten-millionth of the arc that knifes through Dunkerque to Barcelona from the equator to the pole. Measured. Precise. Extracted out of Nature's equations. Made to link humanity in one shared measure, one shared thought. To get rid of greed and deception, grind away difference. The dream of re-planting the Garden of Eden on earth. Life without error. The Meter!

With effort, MÉCHAIN bends the bar. Then he swings the bar against the air, and a giant cathedral bell sounds. He continues to strike the air, and the bell rings out. MÉCHAIN throws the bar away as the bells continue to ring. The FRENCH REVOLUTION stares at it, then moves to encircle it.

MÉCHAIN

Beginnings. Everything is always scarred from its beginnings.

* * * * *

Scene 2

The FRENCH REVOLUTION scatters and begins the swirling CACOPHONY OF MEASURES. Each REVOLUTIONIST holds a physical measure of some sort, a multitude of different sizes: rulers, mugs, bushels, baskets, barrels, etc. As they swirl, they shout some of the names of the thousands of measures used in the Ancien Régime of France: dry, wet, length, weight. What matters most is the decibel level of the CACOPHONY.

FRENCH REVOLUTION

CLOTH	LENGTH	WEIGHT	DRY MEASURE	WET MEASURE
Elle	Pied	Livre	Setier	Metrete
Pik	Pas	Pound	Medimno	Velte
Braccio	Brasse	Rottolo	Sac	Queue
Palmi	Ruthe		Rasiere	Quartaut
Canne	Codo		Boisseau	Barrique
Vara	Pouce		Tonneau	Viertel
Archine	Ligne		Quartiere	Pintgen
Rasi	Toise		Bichet	Millerole
			Anée	Escandeaux
			Emine	Baral
			Charge	Quarte

As the FRENCH REVOLUTION parades its measures, the SAVANTS gather: TALLEYRAND, CONDORCET, LALANDE, BORDA, LAPLACE. Joining them are MÉCHAIN and JEAN-BAPTISTE-JOSEPH DELAMBRE, but they stand apart, one on each side. They watch the rabble do its rabble-thing. Then, excluding MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE, the SAVANTS make a single gesture -- a clap, a snap of the fingers, a dance move -- and the FRENCH REVOLUTION falls silent, then melts away.

A meeting of the ACADEMY OF SCIENCES.

CONDORCET

You see the problem.

BORDA

And hear it. And smell it.

LALANDE

What problem?

BORDA

Lalande doesn't see a [problem] --

LALANDE

I'll ask it again -- shrug my shoulders to show my lack of [concern] --

BORDA

No need -- I heard you -- we all heard you -- it's always very hard not to hear you --

LALANDE

Good.

BORDA

You can do this --

(shrugs shoulders)

-- all you want, but that doesn't mean there isn't a [problem]

--

LALANDE

But, really, my friend --

(shrugs shoulders)

-- what's the problem?

BORDA shrugs his shoulders up and down repeatedly.

BORDA

What's the problem, what's the problem --

LALANDE imitates him to comic effect. For a moment they duel by shrugging shoulders.

LALANDE

So what if the people measure things according to the measures of their lives --

BORDA

No modern nation --

LALANDE

Is that the term of choice now, that what we are?

BORDA

Either we are modern --

LALANDE

Or what?

BORDA

Or we die.

LALANDE

So drastic!

CONDORCET

Lalande --

BORDA

The king still hangs around -- the king's dogs still have
claws and fangs --

LALANDE gnarls his fingers like claws. Even BORDA has to smile.

LALANDE

All right - all right -- so let's declare ourselves "modern" --

LALANDE makes a "magic" gesture.

LALANDE

Or at least on the way to becoming so -- will that do? --

LAPLACE

Can we move this [along] --

LALANDE

"Speed" is also modern --

LAPLACE

"Speed" means "you not being boring" --

LALANDE

So then let's assume the king will not linger forever --
"speed" him away --

LAPLACE

His mind at work --

LALANDE

And I still don't see the problem. This whole pissing contest
about "proper weights and measures" can be easily solved
--

(to TALLEYRAND)
-- isn't that why you had him --
(indicating CONDORCET)
-- throw the best minds together like this?

BORDA
(murmuring)
More like scorpions in a bottle --

LALANDE
(to BORDA)
Ah, ah -- now, if you all just take my suggestion --

TALLEYRAND
Why should we?

LALANDE
Because, Monsieur Talleyrand, our beloved minister, it's the most efficient -- make the rest of the country use the weights and measures we use in Paris [to] --

TALLEYRAND
Efficient -- that's your argument --

LALANDE
It's "modern" --

(to BORDA)
-- isn't it -- efficiency --

TALLEYRAND
It's too small.

LAPLACE
It hath been spoken.

LALANDE
Too small? What's too [small] --

TALLEYRAND
Your "logic" -- it's too small -- too -- cramped --

CONDORCET

The people need --

BORDA

The nation --

LAPLACE
(half-mocking)

The universe --

CONDORCET

The people need something bigger, grander --

LAPLACE

Oh yes --

LALANDE

And you know this [how] --

CONDORCET

Yes, something for a nation --

TALLEYRAND

The universe we'll tackle later --

LALANDE

But how? The people -- in whose name -- might we want to
listen to them -- a little --

LAPLACE

The people speak -- without end -- and spit and mash their
vowels -- they're called a mob for a [reason] --

LALANDE

Oh my --

LAPLACE

What?

LALANDE

Oh my, oh my --

BORDA

What is it?

LALANDE

Laplace, our modern national universalist physicist --

LAPLACE

Get on with [it] --

LALANDE

-- has had a revelation.

LAPLACE

What?!

LALANDE

The people are not like his zoo of well-mannered planets and stars --

LAPLACE

Which at least obey simple [laws] --

LALANDE

-- but the people, our newly minted citizens -- our nationals
-- fraternité! -- they don't fol[low] --

LAPLACE

In fact, they do follow -- what are their superstitions or faiths
but a dirty physics -- crippled --

CONDORCET

Look, gentlemen --

BORDA

-- which is why he has us here --

LALANDE

We who are suffering selfless in the service of the new world order --

BORDA

There is now a given chance --

LALANDE

At least admire the alliteration --

BORDA

(to TALLEYRAND)

Could you move this along?

LALANDE

-- everything we do being done for them -- which means to
them -- the mob, the rabble --

CONDORCET

(to LALANDE)

-- but can we --

LALANDE

It seems I have farted. Therefore, I'll stop.

CONDORCET

Yes --

LALANDE

I didn't really -- it was a figure of [speech] --

CONDORCET

I mean, you're right about the people --

LALANDE

I do try to keep my bowels updated --

LAPLACE

You said you would [stop] --

CONDORCET

Point taken --

LALANDE

(to LAPLACE)

Consider me stopped --

CONDORCET

But there are other considerations in play here.

LALANDE

Things only we savants can know --

LAPLACE

I have worked hard --

LALANDE

-- we specialized savants --

LAPLACE

-- to bring myself to [where] --

BORDA

Your bowels may gleam, but your sarcasm stinks.

LAPLACE

Look, enough --

LALANDE

(indicating TALLEYRAND)

He now has us fighting among ourselves to make us even sharper than the rapiers we already are!

TALLEYRAND

I can speak for myself.

LALANDE

Then I beg you to do so before there's unmetaphoric blood on the floor.

BORDA

He so loves the people --

LALANDE

Then tell me why my proposal to apply the measurements we use in Paris to everybody else everywhere else in France is such a bad idea.

TALLEYRAND

Because -- as I said -- it's too small. Too small-minded. Too convenient. Which is not something I would've expected from you.

LAPLACE

I do believe we are seeing something as rare as the lining
up of the planets --

BORDA

He is made silent!

CONDORCET

So let me jump in while your vocal cords regroup. The Paris
measures -- the idea of -- is that all we've come to after
cutting the aristocrats out of the picture and even making
the king dance to a separate tune? He's right -- too small.

BORDA

Too human.

LAPLACE

Too imperfect.

TALLEYRAND

Only the earth will do.

LALANDE

Only the earth will do what?

CONDORCET

As a measure.

LALANDE

Why?

TALLEYRAND

Things human beings decide come and go with the human
beings who decide them. No one decides the earth.

CONDORCET

Fixed.

LALANDE

"Fixed" is a bull after you chop off its balls --

BORDA

Is that what happened [to you] --

LALANDE

I can't believe that --

LAPLACE

What is your problem? The earth belongs to everyone, so why not [use] --

LALANDE

You talk about the earth like it's an angel -- fixed, unchanging -- talk about dirty superstitions --

BORDA

Angels can't be measured --

LALANDE

And belonging to everyone? -- have you looked into land deeds lately --

BORDA

Maybe we should use the length of your tongue -- except it won't stop wagging long enough --

LALANDE

I'll let you compute with my penis, which at my age doesn't get that much [use] --

TALLEYRAND

(to CONDORCET)

I always thought these meetings were high-toned, you know, atmospheric in their intellectual reach --

CONDORCET

This makes the point: the earth doesn't argue, insult, backstab, or piss on anybody's shoes --

LALANDE

I guess that rules out my cock setting the measure of the universe -- damn!

Everyone falls silent. The FRENCH REVOLUTION begins seeping back onto the stage, carrying its measures, infiltrating -- not a danger, at least not yet.

TALLEYRAND

Now that we've been appraised of the length of our esteemed Lalande's member --

LALANDE

Just make it up --

TALLEYRAND

-- I think we have all the information we need to move on --

LALANDE

Just make up any damn number --

TALLEYRAND

This is what we are going to do, and so all of you -- by choice, of course -- but you are also expected to do your citizen's duty. This is a new age -- for man --

LALANDE

And woman --

TALLEYRAND

And citizen -- we will re-shape everything, bring the kingdom of God onto earth --

LAPLACE

Sans church and priest --

TALLEYRAND

Days, hours, minutes, weights, measures -- everything.
Everything!

A globe descends, illuminated. Or is an cast as an image on a backdrop.

CONDORCET

The very thing we stand on will become the very thing that stands for everything that measures us. One universal people -- one universal standard --

LALANDE

Made by the Frogs for the Limeys and the Dagos and the slant-eyes in the east -- that will go over without a pro[test]
--

CONDORCET takes a pointer or a laser pointer.

CONDORCET

I'm not listening to you -- the earth -- the earth --

CONDORCET turns to the FRENCH REVOLUTION as he points out the earth and sings his RHAPSODY TO SCIENCE. They stop to listen. There may even be cheesy heroic music in the background.

CONDORCET

We will make the earth yours! Yours! You who have never owned shall own! And science will bring this abundance to you -- not religion, not kings, but a modern science -- its logic a scalpel to castrate the dead weight of history, its rationality smoothing out your lives to make your spirits more efficient -- a pound will be the same pound everywhere, a pint a pint, all exchange clear and honest --

CONDORCET grows increasingly ecstatic. The other SAVANTS, except for LALANDE, rush into the crowd to take an instantaneous poll as CONDORCET speaks -- possibly even with microphones.

CONDORCET

-- but no, those names will be not be good enough! They stink of history! A new name, clean, razor-edged, new-born -- the meter, yes! From the Greeks, the first scientists -- the meter -- to measure -- and it shall be taken from the earth itself, which we, as scientists, will measure for you! --

LAPLACE

What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST

Don't know -- don't know my numbers --

BORDA

What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST

Would destroy the fabric of ancient --

TALLEYRAND

What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST

Anything that would allow me to get a little more --

BORDA

What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST

"Meter" sounds like a part of a pig --

LAPLACE

What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST

I think a New Age of Man has dawned.

All the SAVANTS crowd around the last respondent and raise his or her hand high, as if that person had just won the final round of a fight.

OTHER FRENCH REVOLUTIONISTS

Hey, what about [me] --

SAVANTS

This is the one for whom we create the new world order!
The rest of you can go --

CONDORCET finishes his RHAPSODY focused on that single person.

CONDORCET

Do not worry -- we know all of what you need and give it you
as our duty! It is our promise to your future!

The tide of the FRENCH REVOLUTION ebbs again. CONDORCET comes back to earth post-coital.

LALANDE

Ah, yes, we savants always know best --

TALLEYRAND indicates for DELAMBRE and MÉCHAIN to enter.

TALLEYRAND

We have bought ourselves some time. Gentlemen, I assume you all know Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Delambre and

Pierre-François-André Méchain and their astronomical work.

LAPLACE
(to MÉCHAIN)

Comets, isn't it?

MÉCHAIN
Half a dozen so far, I think, but I think people find my navigation tables are far more useful.

BORDA
(to DELAMBRE)
And I hear your calculations are continually superb.

DELAMBRE
"Continually" is important -- there is always room for improvements.

TALLEYRAND
Good -- we are done with the customary congratulations -- are you both ready to take on the commission for the glory of France and the meter?

DELAMBRE and MÉCHAIN turn away from the SAVANTS, who disappear. The globe becomes the Cassini map of France. They take off their jackets and roll up their sleeves as they pore over the map. They use measuring instruments -- calipers, compasses, rulers, etc.

DELAMBRE
France.

MÉCHAIN
We the French.

DELAMBRE
Citizen.

MÉCHAIN
The nation.

They look at each other.

DELAMBRE

All these changes --

MÉCHAIN

There are always changes --

DELAMBRE

Perhaps more difficult for you --

MÉCHAIN looks back at the map.

MÉCHAIN

Why?

DELAMBRE

You have more invested --

MÉCHAIN

I'm not ancient --

DELAMBRE

I only meant that with your seniority at the Academy --

MÉCHAIN

(points)

Cassini measured the meridian fifty years ago -- neither of us was born -- why do you think they want us to [measure] --

DELAMBRE

I didn't mean "ancient" --

MÉCHAIN

I'm also not a secret royalist -- hungering for Louis or whoever's ass is parked on the throne -- are you?

DELAMBRE

No, of course not --

MECHAIN

(peering at map)

Good -- it must be Cassini's tools -- they were not as precise --

DELAMBRE

It's just that --

MÉCHAIN

(to himself)

If we extend the meridian to Barcelona --

(to DELAMBRE)

Just that what? Give it out so that we don't waste any more time on this.

DELAMBRE

Maybe I speak out of my own fears, then --

MÉCHAIN

Why should doing new science make you afraid?

DELAMBRE

It's not doing the [science] --

MÉCHAIN

Then --

DELAMBRE

It's all the "not-science" around the science --

MÉCHAIN

(back to the maps)

All the "not-science" --

DELAMBRE

To go spending money to measure the world when that world is at war -- how do you explain that [to] --

MÉCHAIN

It's simple: leave the commission if you're afraid.

DELAMBRE

I didn't say I was afraid --

MÉCHAIN

You did say "fears."

DELAMBRE

"Apprehensions," then -- "reservations," if that is [better] --

MÉCHAIN

Call 'em what you want, I don't care. Who doesn't have them? But I won't drag my ass and machines and crew and reputation from Barcelona over the goddamn Pyrénées to meet my counterpart from the north at Rodez unless I know -- unless I am assured -- that my counterpart is ready to die to get the right numbers. Eh?

They study the maps.

MÉCHAIN

That was not harsh.

DELAMBRE

I was considering it your benchmark latitude measurement -- of me.

MÉCHAIN

If getting it right -- precise -- precise -- is not worth dying for, then what is?

They study the maps.

DELAMBRE

Dying for --

MÉCHAIN

Does that make a problem for you?

DELAMBRE

Perhaps just a matter of emphasis --

MÉCHAIN

Is there a problem with me?

DELAMBRE

Here's my emphasis -- I think getting it right is important because getting it right -- precise -- is worth living for. I. Like. Living. And I'm not afraid.

MÉCHAIN

You've said that already about your intrepid soul. As for your emphasis about "living" -- I have measured it as over-rated.

DELAMBRE

I want to say "How would your wife and family respond to that?" but I think, don't you, that it would be impolite to ask something so personal when we are, at this point, conjoined by the professional mode of being.

MÉCHAIN

Except that you just asked it.

DELAMBRE

Why, yes I did -- I can be so gauche sometimes -- one of the faults of living, I suppose.

They look at each other.

MÉCHAIN

What hot air is to the Montgolfiers' balloon? You know --

MÉCHAIN makes a gesture of uplift.

MÉCHAIN

That is my Thérèse to me.

Just at this moment THÉRÈSE enters, pushing a cart with tea and biscuits.

THÉRÈSE

Even astronomers have bodies that must be refreshed --

THÉRÈSE hands out cups, takes one herself.

THÉRÈSE

Since they are not quite as celestial as they may think they are --

DELAMBRE

Madame Méchain --

THÉRÈSE

Though I am quite celestial, right?

(to DELAMBRE)

He tells me I am all the time, but sometimes he can forget.

You must be Delambre.

DELAMBRE

I apologize for not --

THÉRÈSE

He actually likes you --

DELAMBRE

Really?

THÉRÈSE

Has followed your work in the Academy -- something about planets, right?

DELAMBRE

Not very [interesting] --

MÉCHAIN

He has mapped the transit of Mercury and the orbit of Uranus --

THÉRÈSE

That was it!

DELAMBRE

You heard about it?

THÉRÈSE

By reading about it.

MÉCHAIN

Now I'm trying to get him to focus on this world.

(hands back his cup)

That was a very welcome distraction. Are you done?

DELAMBRE slurps down his tea, hands back the cup.

THÉRÈSE

You've made him gulp it down like a fish. The taskmaster.

MÉCHAIN

It improves my digestion -- we have work to do.

DELAMBRE

It's fine --

THÉRÈSE

I hope you treat Cassini with more respect.

MÉCHAIN

He did the best that 1740 would let him do -- but he could only do it --

THÉRÈSE

To within fifteen seconds --

DELAMBRE

You know this?

THÉRÈSE

I've studied Cassini's triangulations -- I've seen his sextant --

MÉCHAIN

That sounds more dirty than it is --

THÉRÈSE

It needed a cleaning --

MÉCHAIN

We can do it to within one second -- if we can get back to work.

THÉRÈSE

I am a good actress -- I take my cue and away I go!

But THÉRÈSE does not move away. MÉCHAIN notices.

MÉCHAIN

What?

THÉRÈSE

Is this a proper way to treat a celestial body?

MÉCHAIN grabs a ball of string, cuts a length from it. He hands one end to DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN

The problem with all triangulation is determining, with exactitude --

MÉCHAIN gestures to THÉRÈSE to hold up a single finger, which she does.

MÉCHAIN

-- the exact angles, which in turn requires anchors placed --

MÉCHAIN moves her finger closer to her cheek, hooks the string around it. He indicates to DELAMBRE to hold up a finger on his other hand, which he does. MÉCHAIN hooks the string around that finger and hands the second end to DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN

-- with clear lines of sight and level planes for calculation.

MÉCHAIN moves her finger back and forth, changing the angles of the triangle, until he gets it set "right," right next to her cheek.

MÉCHAIN

Ah, that looks fine, doesn't it?

DELAMBRE

I believe it is as close to perfect as is humanly possible.

MÉCHAIN

All that is left, then, is the calculation.

MÉCHAIN kisses THÉRÈSE on the cheek.

MÉCHAIN

From the angles the sides are determined --

THÉRÈSE

-- from the sides the length of the meridian --

MÉCHAIN

-- from the meridian the meter, and from the meter the new world order. Simple, simple, so simple.

THÉRÈSE pulls the string out of DELAMBRE's hands and wraps it around her own.

THÉRÈSE

And I will settle for something much less cosmic -- which, in fact, I have already been given and don't need to find. And, thus, I leave happy.

MÉCHAIN

Good -- now we can get down to the real business at hand --

(joking)

-- the business of men!

THÉRÈSE

While I, in all my maiden simplicity, keep hearth and home together and wash out the sweaty neckclothes.

They kiss. THÉRÈSE exits. MÉCHAIN watches her.

DELAMBRE

I see what you mean.

MÉCHAIN

(in jest)

I have no idea what you're talking about.

MÉCHAIN gestures for DELAMBRE to come to him.

MÉCHAIN

Let's review what Cassini did, shall we? Since I assume it'll be you following the meridian down from the north, apprehensions and lust for life and all included in your kit?

DELAMBRE

You have every reason to believe that about me.

MÉCHAIN

Are you married?

DELAMBRE

No.

MÉCHAIN tosses him the ball of string.

MÉCHAIN

You are now.

MÉCHAIN takes a piece of chalk, marks an "X" on the floor.

MÉCHAIN

Here is Delambre, at Evaux -- he takes in a little of the hot mineral baths there, but soon --

MÉCHAIN points into the distance.

MECHAIN

He needs to triangulate his way to Puy Violent before the spring and summer are over. What's the big problem?

DELAMBRE pushes in boxes, a chair, etc.

DELAMBRE

The Massif Central, of course.

MÉCHAIN

At least you know your geography.

DELAMBRE

And from Evaux, I have no clear line of sight --

MÉCHAIN

Because --

DELAMBRE

Well, for one --

DELAMBRE piles on another chair or a box.

DELAMBRE

I've got the Puy de Dôme in my face.

MÉCHAIN

So of course you give up, go back to the baths at Evaux to rest your weary savant ass --

DELAMBRE looks around, sees one of the tall ladders, pulls it to Evaux.

MÉCHAIN

-- and spend the rest, and the money, of the revolution --

DELAMBRE

You must have the wrong savant's ass in mind, my dear Méchain --

DELAMBRE climbs the ladder. MÉCHAIN tosses away the ball of string, picks up a length of rope.

DELAMBRE

-- because I'm the kind that pushes my weary savant's ass to new heights --

Holding onto one end, MÉCHAIN tosses DELAMBRE the rest of the rope. DELAMBRE catches it.

DELAMBRE

-- until I can spy the triple towers of the church at Herment --

MÉCHAIN grabs the other ladder, pulls it over, climbs it, holding onto the rope.

MÉCHAIN

And from there?

DELAMBRE

That makes you Bort-les-Orgues.

MÉCHAIN

But you've only got the one measurement, savant, one side of the triangle -- what next?

DELAMBRE hooks the rope around the top of the ladder, then tosses the rope to the ground. He climbs down, pulls in a third ladder and places it.

DELAMBRE

I go to Salers -- here we have Salers --

DELAMBRE grabs the rope.

DELAMBRE

-- so that I can then go climb Puy Violent -- you can be me
for the moment --

DELAMBRE tosses his rope up to MÉCHAIN, then grabs its length and climbs the ladder at "Salers."

DELAMBRE

Pull it tight -- tight -- from there --

MÉCHAIN

Angle, angle, angle --

DELAMBRE

Savant already knows the length of at least one side --

MÉCHAIN

Easy to calculate the length of the other two --

DELAMBRE

And any attached triangles --

MÉCHAIN

And so on until the world submits to the calculations.

DELAMBRE

That's how this savant's unresting, but not unhandsome,
ass would do it.

MÉCHAIN climbs down his ladder.

MÉCHAIN

The sparking and sparkling cleanliness of logic.

MÉCHAIN picks up a glass of water and sips from it. DELAMBRE climbs down, moves his ladder, joins him.

MÉCHAIN

But the earth is not made so [neatly] --

MÉCHAIN tosses the water onto DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN

Heavy rains on Puy Violent --

MÉCHAIN refills the glass, tosses the contents on DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN

Very heavy rains --

DELAMBRE, looking around, sees a dish of chalk powder. He grabs a pinchful and tosses it over MÉCHAIN.

DELAMBRE

Not to mention the haze and fog --

MÉCHAIN pushes a chair against DELAMBRE's shin.

MÉCHAIN

The aches and pains of the body --

DELAMBRE pushes it back, hard.

DELAMBRE

The curvature of the earth --

MÉCHAIN moves in close and does the trick of pointing to DELAMBRE's chest -- when DELAMBRE looks down, MÉCHAIN pops him in the nose.

MÉCHAIN

The refraction of light -- boop --

DELAMBRE grabs the bellows, blows air over MÉCHAIN.

DELAMBRE

The wrack of storms --

(makes thunder-and-lightning sounds)
Kerrrr -- shzzzz --

MÉCHAIN spins the Franklin electrostatic machine, adding in sparks and crackling.

MÉCHAIN
Kerrr -- shzzzz --

DELAMBRE grabs a leather strop and loops it over MÉCHAIN's head to go around his belly. He vibrates the strop so that it shakes MÉCHAIN's body.

MÉCHAIN spins inside the strop and pulls the ends of it out of DELAMBRE's hands. He snaps it at DELAMBRE, driving him back.

MÉCHAIN
Insect bites -- branches whacking you in the eye --

DELAMBRE grabs a tray, fends off MÉCHAIN.

DELAMBRE
Rotten-toothed villagers who think you're the devil come [to]
--

MÉCHAIN
Taking a shit with nothing to clean yourself --

DELAMBRE
Hunger and thirst --

MÉCHAIN
Homesickness --

MÉCHAIN stops. DELAMBRE stops. They look at the triangle of rope attached to the ladders.

MÉCHAIN
That's what they think, don't they? That the numbers will
solve everything, dissolve --

DELAMBRE
The world's ideal.

MÉCHAIN

As if numbers don't lie. As if people with numbers don't lie.

MÉCHAIN throws the strop onto the table, takes a chair, straddles it as he sits.

DELAMBRE

You're having second thoughts. Aren't you.

MÉCHAIN

Yes. And third thoughts. And beyond. All in prime numbers.

Unseen by either of them, THÉRÈSE enters. She sits, watches, listens.

MÉCHAIN

What do you make of things these days?

DELAMBRE takes a chair, sits.

DELAMBRE

"Things" --

MÉCHAIN

Things --

DELAMBRE

"Things." Do you mean our mission -- the meter -- all things that begin with "M" -- or "things," as "in general" -- [or]

MÉCHAIN

Don't bullshit --

DELAMBRE

I was [just] --

MÉCHAIN

You don't do it well, I don't take it well --

DELAMBRE

I apologize --

MÉCHAIN

The world -- the state of the world -- that we have been
commanded to transform into numbers --

DELAMBRE

That world --

MÉCHAIN

That world --

DELAMBRE

Ah, that world --

MÉCHAIN

I asked your thoughts --

DELAMBRE

My thoughts are beside the point.

MÉCHAIN

You don't joke well, and you don't lie well. I know your
history --

DELAMBRE

And I know yours --

MÉCHAIN

So then you know that the two of us have worked very hard,
up through poverty and chance and a lot of shit --

DELAMBRE

With luck --

MÉCHAIN

-- to earn our way -- of course luck! -- don't belittle what I'm
saying -- and now -- these "things" --

DELAMBRE says nothing.

MÉCHAIN

It's safe to talk here -- I can't vouch for Paris, but in my own
[house] --

Still DELAMBRE says nothing. MÉCHAIN starts to get out of his chair.

MÉCHAIN

Maybe I was wrong --

DELAMBRE

Don't -- sit --

MÉCHAIN

Only if you trust me when I [say] --

DELAMBRE

Please -- sit -- of course I trust you -- this is not easy --

MÉCHAIN

But you feel --

DELAMBRE

I feel, yes, the threat --

DELAMBRE laughs.

MÉCHAIN

What?

DELAMBRE

It brings to my mind a circus -- no, this, this is closer: clowns
with knives --

MÉCHAIN

Murder in their eyes --

DELAMBRE

Bloody greasepaint --

MÉCHAIN

In today, out tomorrow -- out yesterday, in today -- or
liquidated --

DELAMBRE

I also think of Louis' menagerie --

MÉCHAIN
DELAMBRE

Don't get me started on my own list [of] --

MÉCHAIN gets out of his chair, acts out his next words.

MÉCHAIN

Clowns for you? This is my image -- a cleaning lady -- she wears the tri-color and comes into a room called King Louis and France and -- rag in one hand, broom in the other, pushing the water bucket along with her foot -- she is told to sweep it all away, erase every trace of everything old --

DELAMBRE

Swoosh-swish --

MÉCHAIN

-- and so we get the month named Brumaire instead of November and 100-minute hours and 400-degree circles --

DELAMBRE

Not to mention the always-there, never-going actors of war, famine, pestilence, and death --

MÉCHAIN jumps back into his chair and pulls back on it like a horse's reins.

MÉCHAIN

The four horsemen --

(sound of horse)

Eeeeeeeeee -- apocalypse!

MÉCHAIN lets the chair slam down. He jumps up, goes to the ladders, pulls them so that the rope is tighter.

MÉCHAIN

This project -- this mission -- if we get it right -- if we really make something solid that outlasts the petty niggling -- the bloody thirst -- the -- unreliability -- of everything -- everyone -- else --

DELAMBRE

It would not be bad for an epitaph.

MÉCHAIN

From the one who wants to live! Something solid -- ideal --

DELAMBRE

You can be fierce when you want to be --

MÉCHAIN

Do you agree with me?

THÉRÈSE rises, enters the scene.

THÉRÈSE

Oh, he is so fierce! My gallant number-cruncher!

DELAMBRE rises. THÉRÈSE points to the triangle of rope.

THÉRÈSE

Did you reach Rodez with your triangles? And why is your shirt wet?

DELAMBRE

A fierce climb -- up Puy Violent.

THÉRÈSE

(to MÉCHAIN)

And you -- chalk --

MÉCHAIN

(rising)

Church towers at Herment -- very dusty --

THÉRÈSE moves the ladders so that the rope tightens even more.

THÉRÈSE

Can't say much for your observation platforms -- sloppy, sloppy -- those angles! -- better -- that cleaning lady you were gabbing about -- you need her along to keep your head out of the clouds and your numbers pin-sharp.

THÉRÈSE steps back, surveys her work.

THÉRÈSE

There -- the meter. The. Meter. Done.

THÉRÈSE turns to MÉCHAIN.

THÉRÈSE

Now you don't have to leave. Your wife. Your children --
does he? -- and leave us to the clowns --

MÉCHAIN

You were -- sitting -- there for that long.

THÉRÈSE

I know you -- I live in the world, I'm not wrapped in cotton --

MÉCHAIN

No you're [not] --

THÉRÈSE

-- you think I want you away with "things" as bone-crushing
as they are right now?

DELAMBRE

I should leave --

THÉRÈSE

No -- no! -- all this has to be part of your calculations -- the
Great Calculations! -- yours and his -- the figuring -- though,
heavens forbid and the gods of rationality shiver, not
anything the Academy would fold into its equations because
such "things" -- my things -- are female and uterine and not
up to the high masculine standards of The Number --

THÉRÈSE goes to the ladders and pushes them hard -- perhaps almost
knocks them over.

THÉRÈSE

-- that cock of the walk -- the primality of the phallus as the
big hard Number One fucking the --

MÉCHAIN

Thérèse --

THÉRÈSE

I see that shock has entered the room --

THÉRÈSE stops.

THÉRÈSE

You will kill yourself -- wipe yourself out -- for something you
can't even hold in your hand -- excuse me --

THÉRÈSE exits.

DELAMBRE

There --

MÉCHAIN

Don't --

DELAMBRE

-- there are others who [could] --

MÉCHAIN

Fuck off --

DELAMBRE

Legendre, for instance --

MÉCHAIN

I said fuck [off] --

DELAMBRE

It's just that --

MÉCHAIN

I will fix things in my own goddamn house --

MÉCHAIN goes to the ladders, corrects them.

MÉCHAIN

I will fix --

DELAMBRE gives him a hand. MÉCHAIN pushes him away, finishes.

MÉCHAIN

No poetic crap about figuring "the heart" into the "calculation"
--

DELAMBRE

Your family --

MÉCHAIN

None of that "the heart has its reasons" Pascal bull[shit] --

The two men fall silent.

MÉCHAIN

I need -- I need --

MÉCHAIN reviews the ladders.

MÉCHAIN

So, you have reached Rodez -- but you, the younger, have the easy part -- to me they give the Pyrénées -- from Bar-the-lon-a [with the lisp] north -- c'mon, don't wallow --

DELAMBRE

Obviously --

MÉCHAIN

Yes?

DELAMBRE

-- the higher altitudes go to the man with the altitudinous intellect --

MÉCHAIN

Ah-ha -- I love her, you know -- my family -- but there are --

DELAMBRE

The heart does have its reasons -- just admit it --

MÉCHAIN

Here's one: one ten-millionth of the distance from equator to pole -- fixed -- for all people for all time --

DELAMBRE

Well, then, let's go hunt down the meter.

* * *

Scene 3

September 1792: the main square of Saint-Denis, ancestral burial grounds for French monarchs.

Upstage, as if in sarcophagi, stand five corpses of the French kings, looking very much like corpses.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION gathers around DELAMBRE, who is surrounded by various instrument cases and unsealed documents. The REVOLUTION is armed and not in a good mood. [NOTE: FR stands for any member of the crowd.]

FR

Who the fuck again did you say you were?

DELAMBRE

The National Convention has --

FR

Whose fucking conviction?

DELAMBRE

Convention -- actually, yours -- in your [name] --

FR

Not my fucking conviction --

DELAMBRE

Conven[tion]--

FR

And what the fuck did you say you were doing?

FR

With all this fucking equipment?

DELAMBRE

Measuring [the] --

FR

And that takes climbing up in the fucking towers?

FR

How do we know that you're not one of the fucking enemy --

DELAMBRE

As I said, I have pa[pers] --

FR

How do we know you're not --

FR

-- one of those fucking Prussian fucks --

FR

Who are fucking us up along the fucking border --

FR

Why aren't you fucking telling us what we want to know?

DELAMBRE

What do you want me to say? I mean, what the fuck do you want me to say?

FR

Explain yourself again.

FR

What again is all this shit?

DELAMBRE

Is your mayor ar[ound] --

FR

You talk to us -- he answers to us --

FR

So you have to talk to us --

FR

Because we are fucking citizens now --

FR

Citizens!

The FRENCH REVOLUTION roars its approval. DELAMBRE shrugs.

DELAMBRE

I'm here to measure the earth. That's right. It's called geodesy. These are the things I measure it with.

FR

And once more, why would anyone in their right or left fucking minds --

FR

Or up or down --

FR

-- want to do this?

FR

Right now, with the scumbag Prussians marching --

FR

To cut our balls off --

FR

-- and put the king back on the throne --

DELAMBRE

Please don't touch --

One of the people takes out what looks like a telescope.

FR

How do we know that you're not looking through this because the king has paid you?

ALL

Tell us what we fucking want to know!

DELAMBRE

(calmly)

I will fucking tell you something that you want to fucking know, even though you don't know you fucking want to know it yet.

This stumps the crowd for a moment. DELAMBRE walks up to the person holding the telescope and gently eases it from his hands.

DELAMBRE

I need this back from the citizen.

DELAMBRE replaces it in its case.

DELAMBRE

Who here has the balls to learn something new? Eh?
Anyone? Who's been to Paris?

One raises his hand.

DELAMBRE

Ah, good. When you were there, did you have a pint of beer?

FR

I did.

FR

He sucked down more than one, the pig! I was with --

DELAMBRE

One is fine, one is all I need. Ever raise a pint here in Saint-Denis?

FR

Boy, he sucks it down just like --

FR

Shut the fuck up. Yeah, I do.

DELAMBRE

Same pint?

FR

Get more here in the fucking pint than in Paris.

DELAMBRE

But they're both pints. Am I right?

FR

Yeah -- so?

DELAMBRE

Let's say I wanted to trade you a pint of Saint-Denis bière de garde for a Paris pint of lager -- how would you do it so each of us would get a good deal? Huh? Ah, got your tongue.
(to crowd)

Any bakers around?

FR

Here.

DELAMBRE

Sell by the pound?

FR

'Course.

DELAMBRE

Iron-worker? You -- good.

(to crowd)

Whose pound is heavier -- baker or ironmonger? C'mon, you all know this.

FR

The smith's.

DELAMBRE

Right -- but they're both called pounds. How'd the baker's get lighter? I leave you to ponder that. Cloth-sellers?

A couple raise their hands.

DELAMBRE

Come here. How big is an aune?

One stretches out one of his arms.

FR

They got the iron bar stuck in the wall inside the basilica that shows it.

DELAMBRE tows the man out of the crowd.

DELAMBRE

In my father's shop, my father used one aune to buy wholesale --

(shortens the arm)

-- a shorter aune to sell retail, and in the village around Amiens --

(moves the arm around)

thirteen different aunes -- one two three -- So let's say we want to sell cloth to each other -- I've got some great cambric, you have some excellent wool. But your Saint-Denis aune is different than my father's Amiens aune. What do you we do? What would you do?

(to the crowd)

What would be fair?

FR

I ain't going to Paris, so why [bother] --

DELAMBRE

But Paris is coming to you. Paris is coming to you -- the world is coming to you. And my job is to measure the world that, like it or not, is coming down your road. Look --

DELAMBRE wades into the crowd and pulls out enough people to make a circle.

DELAMBRE

Behold, the world!

FR

Fucking right, we are!

DELAMBRE

You, sir, are the north pole. Put a tri-color on his head -- excellent. You, madam, are at the equator. Another tri-color for the citizen! From one tri-color to the other -- from you to here -- something called the meridian, the French meridian -- it runs through Dunkerque --

FR

Where the hell is Dunkerque?

DELAMBRE

-- through Paris -- up north -- all the way down to Perpignan.

FR

Where the hell is --

DELAMBRE

South of here. I have been asked -- nay, I have been commanded -- by the National Convention in Paris -- by the Revolution! -- in your name! --

FR

Long live our fucking name!

DELAMBRE

-- to measure -- yes! -- this French meridian to get a number -- a special number -- a transforming number -- do you follow what I'm saying?

FR

Go on --

DELAMBRE

A number that will turn your pint and the Paris pint into the same pint, your pound and his pound into the same pound so that no matter where you go in France, we can do business and not get cheated, which you can't do because of -- so many --

Silence in the crowd.

FR

That's why you're fucking doing this?

DELAMBRE

I can see that you -- and you, and you -- so many of you -- you're going to go break your asses against the Prussians coming down from the north. Why? For what? For the king?

FR

Fuck that -- he's toast.

DELAMBRE

For the abbé or the lord up in the castle --

FR

We threw those fuckers to the pigs!

DELAMBRE

Then why? Why? For what?

FR

For the revolution, you asshole.

DELAMBRE

Exactly! For country, for patrie, for the nation, for being a citizen!--

FR

Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité -- all that shit!

DELAMBRE

And not just for you but for the whole world! This transforming number? This number that will turn that into this, not just for us but for all mankind -- a pound here will be the same pound in China, and then we can exchange everything -- beer, understanding, knowledge, peace, a length of your best wool. To the French meridian!

The REVOLUTION does not know what to make of this. Finally.

FR

You're saying that we will get all this from one fucking number?

FR

Must be some fucking amazing number.

DELAMBRE

It will be -- if you let me go find it.

The REVOLUTION thinks. Then.

FR

Let him go find his stupid fucking number. I got a better idea.

(upraised middle finger)

Louis, this your number -- a fuck to you and all your ancestors. We're gonna kill you, he knows that, so let's go kill all the fucking kings to make sure Louis's got company!

With a roar, the FRENCH REVOLUTION turns to the French kings upstage. As they do, DELAMBRE begins hauling off his equipment.

With the proper SOUND EFFECTS, the REVOLUTION pries open the coffins and drags the corpses forward and piles them up. DELAMBRE is working hard to be inconspicuous and efficient at the same time.

The REVOLUTION is none too gentle.

FR

(throws corpse down)

Here's Henry! Did you see the lead in those fucking coffins?

FR

Tons of it -- good Saint-Denis tons!

FR

(throws corpse down)

Pop goes the Sun King. What a fucking stench!

FR

Lead good for cannonballs.

FR

Here's Francois the first.

FR

Here's a coupla more -- who gives a fuck about names?

They set the corpses on fire. By now DELAMBRE has his equipment out of harm's way. The REVOLUTION is bathed in the greasy light of the end of French royalty. DELAMBRE watches them watching the fire. The SOUND of a guillotine, and a head wearing a crown comes rolling out.

* * * * *

Scene 4

MÉCHAIN in Barcelona, winter of 1793, on the roof of the Fontana de Oro. His right arm is in a sling, and physically he is in pain.

Evening, cold. Star-filled sky. TRANCHOT, his assistant, beats his arms to warm himself. There are several benches or stools around.

TRANCHOT

It won't be long now.

MÉCHAIN says nothing.

TRANCHOT

Though, to be honest, I don't know why you need more latitude measurements -- you've already got your numbers from Mont-Jouy, already sent them off to Paris -- we've been at this for two months already --

MÉCHAIN

Because, Tranchot, I have nothing else to do.

TRANCHOT

That isn't your fault.

MÉCHAIN

I know it's not my fault! I give all thanks to the glorious revolution --

TRANCHOT

Don't --

MÉCHAIN

-- in France for --

TRANCHOT

Yes, it's too bad that things of great pitch and moment --

MÉCHAIN

Slaughters, you mean --

TRANCHOT

-- couldn't wait until you fin[ished] --

MÉCHAIN

Tranchot, we are buried in Barcelona because no one in
France can control France -- heads -- everywhere --

They fall into silence.

TRANCHOT

Let me at least bring out some mulled wine --

MÉCHAIN

You've read what I've read --

TRANCHOT

A "no" to the wine, then --

MÉCHAIN

Robespierre --

TRANCHOT

Let's not --

MÉCHAIN

-- a man to make any man sick to his stomach --

TRANCHOT

Enough, please?

They fall into silence, but TRANCHOT can't help himself.

TRANCHOT

The Revolution does have its enemies -- weasels in the
henhouse --

MÉCHAIN

You're right, it's certainly a barnyard --

TRANCHOT

Let's not -- let me get some [wine] --

MÉCHAIN

I don't want wine --

TRANCHOT

The Spanish wine is good --

MÉCHAIN

I don't want --

TRANCHOT

-- even if the Spaniards are bastards for starting this [war] --

MÉCHAIN

(mocking)

"Spain started this war" --

TRANCHOT

They're afraid, they are, the Spanish, afraid, that's why --

MÉCHAIN

Of butchers? In tricolor? Chopping off a king's head --
such a brave act!

TRANCHOT

You would have spared him?

MÉCHAIN

It's being called the Terror --

TRANCHOT

I know what it's being called --

MÉCHAIN

I had no love for Louis -- for the claptrap --

TRANCHOT

But --

MÉCHAIN

He supported science -- that's all that matters to me -- ever
matters to me -- killing him got us the Terror and this war us
buried [here] -- so huzzah!

TRANCHOT

And no warm wine.

They wait in the cold.

TRANCHOT

One other thing --

MÉCHAIN

What?

TRANCHOT

Your arm -- you really should rest it --

MÉCHAIN

The arm is what it is --

TRANCHOT

And that "it" is not much --

MÉCHAIN

That's not for you to say --

TRANCHOT

You can't even tighten the screws, can you? I have to do it for you --

MÉCHAIN

If you're suffering, Tranchot, go to your wine --

TRANCHOT

-- and how precise do you think [that] --

MÉCHAIN

Stop blabbering, will you? It shows you don't understand.

TRANCHOT

I understand cold, I understand pain --

MÉCHAIN

But not --

TRANCHOT

Not what? Not what?

MÉCHAIN

This -- this is the anchor of all of it --

TRANCHOT

Any first-year grunt at the Observatory can plot a latitude --

MÉCHAIN

But not like we can do it if we want to -- the most precise in 4000 years --

TRANCHOT

That's what's keeping [you] --

MÉCHAIN

Why wouldn't you want that?

TRANCHOT

It's not that I wouldn't --

MÉCHAIN

So what's the problem?

TRANCHOT

I don't see the "why" of doing it if the figures you got at Mont-Jouy are good enough --

MÉCHAIN

"Good enough" is not good enough for me.

TRANCHOT

Which makes me wonder if anything would be good [enough] --

MÉCHAIN

Maybe a new assistant --

TRANCHOT

Not a chance -- if nature is God's handiwork --

MÉCHAIN

Please --

TRANCHOT

-- it's pretty slapped-together -- jury-rigged -- just look at our bodies, you one-armed, clavicle-broken, and me with my aching joints --

MÉCHAIN

I'm fine --

TRANCHOT

Doubted -- so why do you think you can do any better than nature when maybe "better"'s not even a condition out there to be met? It's not like nature worries about being precise --

MÉCHAIN

I do -- it's what I do --

TRANCHOT

To the nth --

MÉCHAIN

-- it's what I am --

TRANCHOT

You can't be a "precise" -- you can't be an adject[ive] --

MÉCHAIN

And that's why you think good enough is good enough --

TRANCHOT

If what "works" works --

MÉCHAIN

That's not why we have intellect -- we have it to go one better, two better, a thousand better -- it's glorious -- we should get [ready] --

TRANCHOT

And my perfecting intellect reminds me that there is "good enough" mulled wine and chorizo downstairs -- at war with Spain, perhaps --

(mocking)

Hijos de puta! But, I admit, they have taken care [of us] --

MÉCHAIN

Here's why -- you want a "why"? Here's a "why."

TRANCHOT

Why?

MÉCHAIN

I miss my wife and children -- I miss -- my right arm is mashed from the accident -- my ribs, my collarbone -- military death in the mountains -- heads lopped off -- but then --

(points overhead)

Polaris and Thuban and Kochab and Mizar sliding along on their numbers -- why not give myself over? Give myself away?

TRANCHOT

Polaris and friends are cold -- "precise" is cold --

MÉCHAIN

They rise -- indifferent and regular -- but I can bring them home to me by their numbers -- I can bring everything, eventually, home by the numbers --

TRANCHOT

It's what you do -- it's what you are --

MÉCHAIN

Without family they're family --

TRANCHOT

And brother Polaris is rising and the wine will have to wait --

MÉCHAIN

It will. Arm or no arm, I will not be replaced on this mission, I will leave everybody with nothing to question about what I've done --

Shift to MÉCHAIN in his workspace. His coat is off, his arm is out of the sling, his body healed, his manner energized.

Around him hang large sheets of brown kraft paper covered in calculations. A roll of kraft paper to one side, with what looks like a squeeze bucket and a mop-sized paintbrush or calligraphy brush.

A cup of wine on a table.

MÉCHAIN

-- and it's come down to a simple matter -- simple, simpler, simplest -- comparing numbers to numbers and extracting the answer --

MÉCHAIN drinks from the wine -- he now clearly loves the taste and the act of drinking. He shakes out his body, like a fighter preparing to get into the ring. He pulls down various papers as he speaks and drinks.

MÉCHAIN

(pulls paper)

All right, I've got the latitude data from Mont-Jouy -- I've already sent it to the king-killers in Paris, so they know I've been working and working hard and they can't bump me from the mission --

(another paper)

The latitude data from the Fontana de Oro -- all-hail to that bastard Tranchot for his help!

(another paper)

I know the distances between the two from our triangulations -- all-hail again to the bastard --

MÉCHAIN arranges the large sheets of paper on the floor. He rolls out a sheet of kraft paper, tears it off, slides the bucket and mop over.

MÉCHAIN

Now -- the dessert of it all, the pièce, the coup. Delambre, up north -- you prick, you already have your latitude done -- but it will not be as precise as mine, it can never be as precise as mine, because no one observes, records, computes, understands like me --

MÉCHAIN swirls the mop in the bucket.

MÉCHAIN

The southern anchor of the meridian -- my calculations -- my latitude -- with it, the definitive French meridian --

MÉCHAIN squeezes out the liquid.

MÉCHAIN

From this, the definitive world meridian -- and then the definitive meter -- no more approximations, guesses, conjectures, suppositions, lies anymore, the numbers will not lie --

With the mop MÉCHAIN begins to set out his formulas. He is quite fastidious about this, wetting and squeezing as needed, until he gets to the answer. He freezes. He stares.

MÉCHAIN grabs the roll of kraft paper, rolls another length, rips it off. He re-does the calculations with much less care. He freezes. He stares.

MÉCHAIN does it a third time. He freezes. He stares.

MÉCHAIN

That can't --

MÉCHAIN drops the mop. He pulls out the previous sheets with the figures on them, reviews them, looks at the other results of his calculations.

MÉCHAIN

Wrong -- wrong -- but which? Which ones? Which are wrong? Which are -- Mont-Jouy? The Fontana? Maybe I've --

MÉCHAIN reviews the scroll of his calculations.

MÉCHAIN

-- put down -- the -- wrong -- the wrong -- they're not -- wrong --

MÉCHAIN speaks to the audience.

MÉCHAIN

It's really -- it's really a simple matter -- simple --

MÉCHAIN holds up one sheet.

MÉCHAIN

The latitude at Mont-Jouy --

MÉCHAIN holds up another sheet.

MÉCHAIN

The latitude -- at Fontana de Oro -- my arm crushed -- I still did all the work --

MÉCHAIN holds up a third sheet.

MÉCHAIN

The triangulations -- Mont-Jouy here, Fontana there, the lighthouse there to anchor the two -- simple -- one-point-one miles between the two -- a one-point-one mile arc -- really, it's tiny -- small --

MÉCHAIN returns to the roll of calculations.

MÉCHAIN

But but but but -- it can't --

MÉCHAIN turns back to the audience.

MÉCHAIN

Mont-Jouy -- 41 degrees, 21 minutes, 45-point-one-zero seconds -- yes, I got it that fine -- Fontana -- 41 degrees, 22 minutes, 47-point-nine-one seconds -- fine fine fine fine -- according to the simple requirements of -- take one from the other -- that's all it takes -- simple, simple --

MÉCHAIN is stunned.

MÉCHAIN

3-point-2 seconds. Not 3-point-2 seconds to be folded into 600-mile arc from Dunkerque to Mont-Jouy -- that would be --

(figures)

One one-hundredth percent. Small, close to nothing. Nothing. But over one-point-one miles -- that's --

(figures)

Five-point-four percent -- I'm off by three or four hundred feet -- which one is wrong? which one has proven me wrong? Which one, which one, which one, which one -- I've got to go back, I've got to re-do --

THE SPANIARDS arrive, oozing in. They rough up MÉCHAIN and his calculations.

MÉCHAIN

-- everything -- don't -- please -- and I've already sent -- to
Paris -- they'll use the Mont-Jouy figures -- don't --

SPANIARD

The bastard Frog is still here --

MÉCHAIN

You have to, you have to let me go back -- check over --

SPANIARD

Your goddamned revolutionary armies --

MÉCHAIN

I don't control the armies -- please --

SPANIARD

They want to make Catalonia a "sister republic" --

MÉCHAIN

Please -- please --

SPANIARD

Goddamn atheists trucking in their filth --

MÉCHAIN

Please -- just a little more time --

SPANIARD

It would be a smart thing for a smart man to get his smart
ass out of Spain while he's still got his smarts in one piece
in one place in his body --

By this time, MÉCHAIN is in no position to argue.

MÉCHAIN

I'll go. I'll go!

THE SPANIARDS leave.

MÉCHAIN

I'll go -- where?

MÉCHAIN picks through his calculations, now trampled by THE SPANIARDS.

MÉCHAIN

It's all wrong -- it's all wrong -- the figures they have in Paris
-- the meter will be --

MÉCHAIN pulls the paper into himself, almost as if he were shrouding himself.

MÉCHAIN

The truth can eat your heart --

Several bursts of lightning and thunder. Smoke. Wind. The cries of ravens.

INTERMISSION

Scene 5

Several bursts of lightning and thunder. Smoke. Wind. Luminescent STARS float through the darkness [can be carried by actors on long poles]. Perhaps there is also a music of the spheres. MÉCHAIN appears, smeared with his calculations. He watches the STARS -- a moment of quiet fascination.

MÉCHAIN

I have given my life to digging out your truths. And I now
have no idea what that means, has meant, will mean.

MÉCHAIN reaches upward and, in a pulling motion, draws the darkness over him. The STARS continue to move in their stately flotations.

* * *

Scene 6

BORDA, LALANDE, LAPLACE, DELAMBRE. NAPOLEON to one side. In the background, the SAVANTS OF EUROPE. During the scene, they dance a stately dance.

LAPLACE

Where the hell --

(a glance at NAPOLEON)

Where. Is. Méchain?

DELAMBRE

Carcassone, I think -- it's not [clear] --

LAPLACE

You don't know precisely?

DELAMBRE

It's not clear --

LAPLACE

You are supposed to --

DELAMBRE

His wife received a letter --

NAPOLEON clears his throat. LAPLACE looks worried. He waggles his fingers for the letter. DELAMBRE does not give him the letter.

LAPLACE

Give it to me.

DELAMBRE

It's quite pers[onal] --

LAPLACE

Do I need to remind you --

NAPOLEON clears his throat.

LAPLACE

Do I need to remind you?

DELAMBRE fishes the letter from his coat, hands it over.

DELAMBRE

It should be [read] --

LAPLACE

Don't tell me [how to] --

(skims)

Where the hell is he?

LALANDE

As usual, our Laplace is being broad-minded and courteous and respect[ful] --

LAPLACE

Shut up --

DELAMBRE

It should be read with some -- discretion --

LALANDE

Because he means, where is Méchain in some spiritual sense?

LAPLACE

I don't mean that at all.

LALANDE

Ah, well --

LAPLACE

I want to know his geography. Where the hell is Pradelles? What is this shit he writes?

BORDA

May I?

LAPLACE tosses the letter.

LAPLACE

Tell me again why we're paying [him] --

BORDA reads, exchanges a glance with DELAMBRE. LAPLACE indicates the SAVANTS OF EUROPE.

LAPLACE

I asked these gentlemen --

BORDA

Ever the self-promoter --

(to DELAMBRE)

This doesn't sound [good] --

LAPLACE

-- to come put their stamp on the meter --

SAVANTS

The International Fraternity of Science!

LAPLACE

(to BORDA)

And why not?

BORDA

If the meter is extracted from nature -- the French meridian standing in for all meridians! -- eh? -- who needs them to put a stamp on it as right?

NAPOLEAN clears his throat. LAPLACE fawns.

LAPLACE

My dear General -- I'm sorry --

NAPOLEAN

My dear instructor -- I'm not --

LAPLACE

Please meet the newest member of the Academy of Sciences -- a former pupil of mine, I might add -- Napoleon Bonaparte.

BORDA, DELAMBRE, and LALANDE look at each other, then at LAPLACE.

LALANDE

What about Lenoir's candidacy?

SAVANTS

When The Money supports Science, Science must support The Money!

LAPLACE

(hissing)

His turn will come!

(to NAPOLEON)

What have you brought us back from Italy?

NAPOLEON

Other than Italy itself?

LAPLACE laughs over-hard. The others offer reluctant smiles. NAPOLEAN unfolds a large piece of paper and hands it to LAPLACE.

SAVANTS

Who will dare say this Emperor is naked?

LAPLACE

We have come to expect everything from you --

NAPOLEON

It's a new geometric proof --

LAPLACE

-- except a lesson in mathematics -- look at that!

LAPLACE hands the paper to BORDA, who glances at it and hands it on to the others.

NAPOLEON

I hope this proves the bona fides of Bonaparte.

LAPLACE

Very good!

(to the others)

Very good, don't you think --

DELAMBRE folds the paper and hands it back to BONAPARTE.

DELAMBRE

Your bona fides are quite in order, General.

SAVANTS

Sucking-up is the Better Part of Wisdom.

NAPOLEON

Delambre, right? And where is your cher maître these days?

DELAMBRE

General?

NAPOLEON

Méchain --

DELAMBRE

Ah --

NAPOLEON

-- the south to your north, the plumb line to your zenith --

DELAMBRE

He was forced to go through Italy to get back from Spain --

NAPOLEON

Roundabout --

BORDA

There was a war [going] --

LAPLACE

Méchain has stuck himself in Pradelles --

NAPOLEON

A little scut-town in the south, isn't it --

DELAMBRE

He's starting the southern triangles, to link up to what he did in Spain -- under great pressure, I might add --

BORDA

There was a war [going] --

LAPLACE

We know that!

SAVANTS

Savants can be so sauvage.

DELAMBRE

Méchain did his duty well, General, under [great] --

LAPLACE

As he should be expected [to] --

BORDA

There was a war going on --

(to LAPLACE)

-- ha! --

(to NAPOLEON)

-- which Monsieur Laplace luckily missed --

NAPOLEON

But you have already reached Rodez?

DELAMBRE

I had the easier part --

NAPOLEON

And you've gotten things ready to measure the baseline,
the northern [baseline] --

DELAMBRE

Near Melun, yes --

NAPOLEON

And your friend's southern baseline -- Perpignan --

DELAMBRE

You are well-informed --

LAPLACE

He is Napoleon --

DELAMBRE

I have every faith Méchain will complete [the] --

NAPOLEON

Faith? Science and faith?

SAVANTS

The time has come. The time is now.

DELAMBRE

When it comes to friends, yes, faith, of course --

NAPOLEON
(to LAPLACE)

I want this conference done. I want it to run on time. I want this Méchain to hand over every scrap to him --

(indicates DELAMBRE)

-- like a doctor handing over a newborn -- and if this doesn't happen, I will do away with what needs doing away with. Understood, my teacher?

LAPLACE
As you always were, and are, clear and direct.

NAPOLEON
And I guess that that now makes me the teacher, eh?

LAPLACE
I am glad to be your pupil. We are all glad --

NAPOLEON turns and leaves, taking the SAVANTS OF EUROPE with him. LAPLACE gives DELAMBRE a warning look, follows. BORDA hands back MÉCHAIN's letter to DELAMBRE.

BORDA
"I must return to Barcelona"? What does --

DELAMBRE
An obsession, apparently --

BORDA
About?

DELAMBRE
About -- hmmm -- well, it seems --

BORDA
Spain has always been an infec[tion] --

DELAMBRE
His latitude measurements, at Barcelona --

BORDA
That letter -- it's embarrassing --

DELAMBRE

And you've never felt unsure?

BORDA

Not to the point of --

DELAMBRE

He thinks --

BORDA

It doesn't matter what he thinks. Or feels. Laplace didn't bring in General Cock-of-the-Walk there because he thought [it would] --

DELAMBRE

I understand --

MÉCHAIN appears.

BORDA

The knives are back -- and they'll be stuck in backs [unless] -- and Méchain has no more latitude -- Laplace has run him out of latitude -- you are his keeper -- you are -- say no, but you are. Appointed by fate. So much money, so much time has been plunged into this -- you are his keeper --

MÉCHAIN

Will you argue --

DELAMBRE

It's not me he needs --

MÉCHAIN

-- for me to return? Otherwise, shame --

BORDA

Then find --

MÉCHAIN

I will soon cease to exist --

BORDA

-- what he needs.

MÉCHAIN

Either I will soon recover the strength and energy I should never have lost, or I will soon cease to exist.

BORDA

I don't care if we get him back. I do, but I don't -- what's a body? -- we need his data. Right now, his numbers --

DELAMBRE

I will find what he needs.

BORDA

As you usually do with everything.

THÉRÈSE appears, wearing a shawl, carrying a small bag.

THÉRÈSE

You called?

BORDA

He called.

DELAMBRE

I called.

THÉRÈSE

I came.

BORDA

And I'm going.

BORDA leaves.

THÉRÈSE

May I?

DELAMBRE hands her the letter. MÉCHAIN brings her a chair, and she sits. MÉCHAIN sits on the floor and watches her.

THÉRÈSE

We have children -- sons -- the younger will hardly remember -- six years he's been gone --

DELAMBRE

I wouldn't have asked you --

THÉRÈSE

I haven't said I'd go.

MÉCHAIN brings DELAMBRE a chair. DELAMBRE sits. The lights change.
STARS float overhead.

DELAMBRE

Of course -- I can't force you --

THÉRÈSE

Do you think I don't want to go?

DELAMBRE

I don't know what to think about a situation I don't know anything about --

THÉRÈSE

Ever the calculator --

DELAMBRE

Sometimes I wish your husband --

THÉRÈSE

So do I. So do I. "Either I will soon recover the strength and energy I should never have lost, or I will soon cease to exist." It's -- somewhat -- pathetic, isn't it.

DELAMBRE

Something gnaws at him --

THÉRÈSE

I've already sent him a letter. Telling him I am coming. Did you think -- I am not waiting around for a reply, which, knowing him, would be all about why I shouldn't --

DELAMBRE

I get letters sometimes ten pages long -- both sides -- in a very small hand -- if he worked as hard on his work as he does on --

THÉRÈSE holds up a hand to stop him. She turns to MÉCHAIN and speaks directly to him. DELAMBRE disappears. They walk together under the STARS.

THÉRÈSE

I have told him emphatically not to accommodate me by proposing a rendezvous in a town appropriate to a lady. I will not waste even a quarter-hour of his time, because he does not have the time to waste. I have told him that I will gladly meet him on the mountain-top, sleep in a tent or a stable, and live on cheese and milk; that with him, I will be content anywhere.

THÉRÈSE moves away from him.

THÉRÈSE

Six years. You haven't, in six years --

MÉCHAIN

Paris, I know, just down that road -- a week --

THÉRÈSE

A week away --

MÉCHAIN

I know --

THÉRÈSE

Six years, and you haven't --

MÉCHAIN

I know -- so they've sent the wife to collect the husband --

THÉRÈSE

None of them know --

MECHAIN

Just like them, to work against me [like] --

THÉRÈSE

Oh, yes, they're all against you --

MÉCHAIN

Delambre is going to do the southern baseline -- that's my baseline, mine to do --

THÉRÈSE

Except you aren't doing it. Except that you aren't doing anything. The triangles. Their measurements. The whole world in Paris waits for you.

MÉCHAIN

And I hate the whole world! And Paris! All of what's happened -- all of the --

THÉRÈSE

The what?

MÉCHAIN

The things I have seen -- suf[fered] --

THÉRÈSE

Suffered -- please!

MÉCHAIN

You don't know!

THÉRÈSE

You still have your head -- not like Condorcet or Lavoisier -- not that much is going on in it at the [moment] --

MÉCHAIN

Stop that!

THÉRÈSE

Maybe it should go -- it's not getting much [use] --

MÉCHAIN

You don't know anything!

THÉRÈSE

And whose fault is that? Pray tell, my sweet husband, whose fault is that for the last six years?

MÉCHAIN

It's not mine!

The STARS move away from MÉCHAIN.

MÉCHAIN

No, don't go --

The STARS disappear.

MÉCHAIN

Fault?

THÉRÈSE

Fault.

MÉCHAIN

Not mine, not [mine] -- they -- they are out to get me, you know, bury me -- Borda, Lalande, Laplace -- the savants! -- that Delambre --

THÉRÈSE

I asked you whose fault.

MÉCHAIN

Delambre --

THÉRÈSE

Don't a[void] --

MÉCHAIN

-- the darling --

THÉRÈSE

Who gets his work in on time -- Husband? Whose f[ault] --

MÉCHAIN

Stealing my thunder -- the baseline -- the southern base[line] -- whipping through his stations -- showing off! --

THÉRÈSE

And whose fault --

MÉCHAIN

Tranchot -- he's another one -- in Sp[ain] -- in Sp[ain] -- in
Bar[celona] -- he sabo[taged] --

THÉRÈSE

Tranchot is not your problem -- Delambre praises [him] --

MÉCHAIN

See? See? Together, they are, like that! And darling
Delambre didn't have to put up with Sp[ain] -- with Sp[ain] --

THÉRÈSE

What?

MÉCHAIN

With Sp[ain] -- with Sp[ain] -- aaahhh!

MÉCHAIN lets loose. THÉRÈSE motions for the STARS to appear, and they do. THÉRÈSE lays a light hand on MÉCHAIN. He notices the STARS. He calms himself. THÉRÈSE, her hand still on him, moves him, and together they move with the motions of the STARS.

THÉRÈSE

This is the only thing that has ever --

MÉCHAIN

Not the only -- but yes --

THÉRÈSE stops MÉCHAIN, turns him to face her.

THÉRÈSE

Fault. Say it.

MÉCHAIN

Sp --

THÉRÈSE

Say it.

MÉCHAIN

Sp --

THÉRÈSE
Say it.

MÉCHAIN
Spain.

THÉRÈSE
Spain. And?

MÉCHAIN turns to the audience.

MÉCHAIN
And I told her. Everything. The mistake I had made. The
mistake that had made me.

MÉCHAIN turns back to THÉRÈSE. He pulls away from her.

THÉRÈSE
And that's it? The "thing"?

MÉCHAIN
It means the whole --

THÉRÈSE goes to her bag. She takes out a ball of string.

MÉCHAIN
What are you [doing] --

THÉRÈSE
This error in Barcelona -- who's to say it's your fault?

MÉCHAIN
Who else --

THÉRÈSE
Take this and listen to me. Don't -- stop whining! -- listen!

THÉRÈSE hands him one end of the string.

THÉRÈSE
The mistake could be in your instruments --

MÉCHAIN

Never never -- I kept them calibrated, always --

THÉRÈSE

Always? Every second? Did you take them to bed with you?

THÉRÈSE loops the string around a hook in the wall.

A hook descends from the fly-space. THÉRÈSE loops it around that hook, which pulls the string upward. She unrolls it as it rises until she comes back to MÉCHAIN.

MÉCHAIN

No -- who could keep it [every] --

THÉRÈSE

Hold it tight!

MÉCHAIN

I'm holding -- no one could --

THÉRÈSE

Or maybe this mistake -- if that's what it is --

MÉCHAIN

It is!

THÉRÈSE

I'm sure you think it is -- maybe it's coiled up in the formulas, or the correction tables, or the clock for the transit, or fly's shit in your eye, or the plumb line -- here, take this -- hold it -- or your pants were too tight that [night] --

THÉRÈSE hands him the ball of string.

MÉCHAIN

It's none of that -- don't be foolish --

THÉRÈSE

It's not me crying in my beer in the scurvy French countryside
--

THÉRÈSE gestures to the STARS.

THÉRÈSE
Go.

MÉCHAIN
No!

THÉRÈSE
Yes go.

MÉCHAIN
No!

THÉRÈSE
Go!

MÉCHAIN
No!

The STARS exit. The light of dawn appears. Birdsong.

THÉRÈSE
Darkness be gone, banished -- pfft.

MÉCHAIN
What have you [done] --

THÉRÈSE
All this on your shoulders, eh --

MÉCHAIN
You've taken --

THÉRÈSE
The measuring of the whole earth depending upon the
brains and soul and sure hands of Pierre-François-André-
Méchain -- hands that by the way haven't touched me in
-- but never mind -- we're here to plead the case of Méchain
-- Méchain -- without whom the world could not spin --

MÉCHAIN
Why am I holding --

THÉRÈSE

Hold it. The great Pierre-François-André-Méchain, who gets thrown off the road by a pebble in his shoe.

THÉRÈSE sights along one side of the triangle.

THÉRÈSE

Here is the poop, husband, the skinny, the scuttlebutt --

THÉRÈSE plucks the string.

THÉRÈSE

If you don't finish your triangles --

THÉRÈSE cocks her ear to the string.

THÉRÈSE

Ah, the sound of the earth is an A --

THÉRÈSE plucks again.

THERESE

If you don't finish and hook up with Delambre soon -- and I mean soon -- they will destroy you.

MÉCHAIN

They have always wanted [to] --

THÉRÈSE

Don't talk stupid, Méchain, really --

THÉRÈSE slaps his shoulders to flatten them.

THÉRÈSE

-- really -- that's your big manly shoulders talking -- the proud savant grinding out Nature's secrets --

THÉRÈSE moves around, observing and plucking the lines of the triangle.

THERESE

-- your children live in the best house at the Observatory -- another A -- and your government salary per year -- more than anything a farmer mucking around here makes in

several -- yes, they must truly truly hate you, Méchain --
triangular harmony -- but their patience? thin, Méchain, thin
and getting thinner --

THÉRÈSE faces him directly.

THÉRÈSE

The savants from the other countries are already here --
the conference on the meter has already started -- and
everyone waits, with his breath bated, for Méchain -- my
beloved Méchain --

THÉRÈSE touches his face.

THÉRÈSE

You know, you do, in a way, hold the world on your
shoulders. And if you don't deliver the triangles and your
numbers, they will send someone to finish it off, which will
finish us off -- they don't chop heads off anymore, but they
still do -- do you hear me?

MÉCHAIN

I hear that you're one of them.

THÉRÈSE
(tenderly)

No -- no my dear one --

MÉCHAIN

You want to steal --

THÉRÈSE

Your pain? Yes. I'll eat it all.

MÉCHAIN

And make me look like a fool -- "Barbe-Thérèse Méchain
had to come pull her husband out of the shit-storm" -- I'm
going to let go --

THÉRÈSE

No! No!

THÉRÈSE grabs the end of the strings just in time as MÉCHAIN walks away. The triangle is intact.

MÉCHAIN

You want a pain to eat? You are so ready to [eat] --

THÉRÈSE

Of course -- come [back] --

MÉCHAIN snaps his fingers, but the STARS do not return. It is now day.

MÉCHAIN

Shit! Shit! I want them back --

THÉRÈSE

What?

MÉCHAIN

My stars, the ones you trashed --

THÉRÈSE

They won't seek you until --

MÉCHAIN

See, another part of [the] --

THÉRÈSE

(indicating strings)

Keep these with [me] --

MÉCHAIN

The mistake is not just numbers -- in the figures -- it's in me, is me -- is the whole me! -- you don't -- my skin is pricked by what I didn't do in the proper [ways] -- inked, drenched in a tattoo that reads to the world "Méchain has fucked up -- "

THÉRÈSE

You are not the num[bers] --

MÉCHAIN

I am! That is my world! Not this new one -- the one built on all the heads -- the skulls -- it's so hard to be part of --

THÉRÈSE holds out one of the strings.

THÉRÈSE

I am tired -- please --

MÉCHAIN takes the string. They are close together.

THÉRÈSE

To be part of?

MÉCHAIN

It -- it levels everything, this new world, flattens the universe
-- the stars my stars -- rrrrrrkkkkk! right into a -- commodity
-- a new word with the young ones -- "economists" they
name them[selves] -- and I feel flattened by all --

THÉRÈSE

You are far from --

MÉCHAIN

Creamed, squashed, rolling-pinned --

(makes a flattening gesture)

Pfft -- and these numbers I have -- will do --

THÉRÈSE

Even as you love doing the numbers.

MÉCHAIN

Even as I love doing the numbers that will kill me -- and
when they're wrong --

THÉRÈSE

Have you ever thought -- look at me -- have you ever thought
the earth may be wrong?

MÉCHAIN looks at THÉRÈSE, and for the first time he seems genuinely
stumped. THÉRÈSE takes advantage.

THERESE

Nature might be, well, lumpy? You know, porridge? Glop
glop. What numbers would be the right numbers for the
meridian of a bowl of porridge?

MÉCHAIN

I -- I --

THERESE

"Perfect" may be perfectly off the mark --

MÉCHAIN

I -- can't -- I -- don't -- know --

THÉRÈSE

You do the best you can. Why should you think can do better than that? Why do you think you can do better than the two of us here?

THÉRÈSE plucks one of the triangle sides.

THÉRÈSE

Where does this go? You set the station up -- you know.

MÉCHAIN

Lumpy?

THÉRÈSE

(laughing)

Lumpy -- like us. At the end of this, what?

MECHAIN

Perfect not perfect -- I can't even begin --

THÉRÈSE

(impatient)

Where?

MÉCHAIN

That's Rodez.

THÉRÈSE

Rodez.

Along another side.

THÉRÈSE

And --

MÉCHAIN

Lagaste.

THÉRÈSE

And the other --

MÉCHAIN

Montredon.

THÉRÈSE hands MÉCHAIN her string. She takes a notebook out of her bag. She records the numbers.

THÉRÈSE

And so these angles are done.

THÉRÈSE rips out the page of the notebook. She takes the string-ends as she hands it to MÉCHAIN. He does nothing with it.

THÉRÈSE

Aren't you going [to] --

MÉCHAIN

Yes --

MÉCHAIN folds the paper and puts it in a pocket.

MÉCHAIN

There are more --

THÉRÈSE

Something had to get you started.

THÉRÈSE pulls the string off the hooks and out of his hands and rolls it back up.

THÉRÈSE

And so you can now finish them -- finish them, like that!
And then we can [go] -- Méchain -- you'll finish them, right?

MÉCHAIN does not answer her.

THÉRÈSE

Méchain -- what is --

MÉCHAIN

Why should I?

THÉRÈSE

I thought we had --

MÉCHAIN

You thought we [had] -- if perfect is not perfect -- "lumpy"
-- God! -- then why?

THÉRÈSE stares at him in disbelief.

THÉRÈSE

What?

MÉCHAIN

Why? Why? What?

THÉRÈSE gathers her stuff.

THÉRÈSE

Nothing nothing --

MÉCHAIN

You thought porridge would --

THÉRÈSE

-- nothing nothing nothing --

MÉCHAIN

-- soothe the beast --

THÉRÈSE

I can't -- I can't --

MÉCHAIN

What you said only makes me more terrified -- stop --

THÉRÈSE

We have children --

MÉCHAIN

A world crushed to a thin paste --

THÉRÈSE

They have obviously lost --

MÉCHAIN

-- and without the rational bones underneath --

THÉRÈSE

-- one parent they don't need to lose two --

MÉCHAIN

That sense makes no sense --

THÉRÈSE

I have to leave --

MÉCHAIN

-- melts me to nothing -- dice, just dice --

THÉRÈSE

I can't compete with this other wife of yours -- your consort!

-- crush her to you! -- let her crush you, since you so [love]

-- I have to leave -- I have to leave you --

And THÉRÈSE does. She crosses paths with DELAMBRE, who is carrying a ladder. She goes to say something to DELAMBRE, cannot bring herself to say anything. She leaves.

MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE look at each other. MÉCHAIN turns away.

MÉCHAIN

Now they send in the savages.

DELAMBRE sets up the ladder, climbs it, sits on the top. MÉCHAIN snaps his fingers or claps his hands. Night comes on. MÉCHAIN snaps his fingers or claps his hands again. STARS come on but stand in a file upstage.

MÉCHAIN

Move!

The STARS do not move.

DELAMBRE

They're being lumpy.

MÉCHAIN

Shut up.

(to STARS)

Move!

The STARS do not move.

DELAMBRE

They won't.

MÉCHAIN

Why not?

DELAMBRE

Who knows?

MÉCHAIN

What are you doing here?

DELAMBRE

Waiting.

MÉCHAIN

You can wait until you die.

DELAMBRE

I work until I die. You're the one who's waiting. And dying.

MÉCHAIN turns his back on DELAMBRE. Two STARS step forward. One climbs up the ladder and hands DELAMBRE a bucket of sand. The other puts a box of some sort underneath to catch the sand.

DELAMBRE

But I also don't mind waiting. If what's waiting for is worth the wait.

DELAMBRE tips the bucket and pours out the sand. The pouring lasts 50 seconds. The SOUND is of falling sand but also of many other SOUNDS -- not quite a music, not quite a cacophony. The light on the sand shifts with the SOUNDS.

MÉCHAIN

Well, it's not -- it's rotten -- go to Paris and get your glory --

DELAMBRE

It's our glory --

MÉCHAIN

Reproaches, disdain, contempt -- everyone knows --
sending my wife --

DELAMBRE

We can only do this together --

MÉCHAIN

Laughingstock -- I'll stay in the mountains --

DELAMBRE

Your family --

MÉCHAIN

A burden to them -- a weight around their -- you think I don't
have offers from --

DELAMBRE

It is running out --

MÉCHAIN

Stop --

DELAMBRE

Without you, no glory for either of us --

MÉCHAIN

Don't hold me respon[sible] --

DELAMBRE

Without your data, no meter --

MÉCHAIN

Aarrgghh --

DELAMBRE

Without you, the world moves on incomplete --

MÉCHAIN

It already is -- a knife in my [eye] --

DELAMBRE

I do not go back without you --

DELAMBRE finishes pouring.

DELAMBRE

It's that simple.

At the end of the pouring, the STARS take away the bucket and the sand.
And they themselves disappear.

The two of them wait a minute in the semi-darkness.

DELAMBRE

The time is out. You have no place left to go.

MÉCHAIN

I have -- true.

DELAMBRE

Except Paris.

MÉCHAIN

True. True. And true.

DELAMBRE climbs down the ladder, comes to MÉCHAIN. Two DRESSERS
come on with a change of vests and coats for each man. They re-dress.

DELAMBRE

They want your data. I want your data. They want you. It's
time. It's your time.

MÉCHAIN

But not my choice.

DELAMBRE

You can't have everything.

MÉCHAIN settles into his clothes, turns to DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN

Well, then --

* * * * *

Scene 7

Paris. Light. All the SAVANTS.

LAPLACE

All Paris -- all the world -- welcomes you both to the honors
you both so richly deserve.

LALANDE

Make no mistake about it, you will get, both of you, what
you deserve.

LAPLACE

Lalande's acid nature hasn't diluted in seven years.

LALANDE

Because vinegar excellently preserves this corpse of mine.
And further because seven years hasn't done away with the
stupidity of this whole --

BORDA

And now that we have your data --

(to LALANDE)

-- thank you, your eminence, for your vinaigrette --

LALANDE

No good deed --

BORDA

(to MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE)

All written out --

(to MÉCHAIN)

-- and yours in such a neat hand --

LALANDE

-- will remain unpunished --

BORDA

-- in such compact and precise books -- what we have been
waiting for --

(claps his hands)

-- we can get started!

The SAVANTS, except for LALANDE, pull notebooks and pencils out of their pockets and become THE GREAT CALCULATOR as they move in geometric patterns around the space. Then LALANDE, unable to resist, pulls out his notebook and calculates as well.

At times through the following conversation, the SAVANTS will stop, look at their calculations, scratch their heads in puzzlement, then continue their patterned walk.

DELAMBRE and MÉCHAIN move among the SAVANTS. THÉRÈSE appears.

DELAMBRE

You're looking well --

MÉCHAIN

Everyone has been -- kind --

DELAMBRE

Yes -- I noticed --

MÉCHAIN

What?

DELAMBRE

It's a small thing, I'm sure --

MÉCHAIN

Then say it.

DELAMBRE

That you only turned in summaries of your measurements
--

MÉCHAIN

I did -- so?

DELAMBRE

Turned out in a nice hand, I might [add] --

MÉCHAIN

Is neatness also a crime now against the Revolution?

DELAMBRE

No, neatness is not a [crime] --

MÉCHAIN

The summaries are all they need.

DELAMBRE

For them, yes -- perhaps -- but --

MÉCHAIN

What?

DELAMBRE

I'll need your original notes --

MÉCHAIN

You'll need? Why?

DELAMBRE

And your original logbooks --

MÉCHAIN

And I'll say again, why?

DELAMBRE

Because I have been asked to write the official record of the expedition.

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

MÉCHAIN

Really. Who asked you to do that?

(to THÉRÈSE)

Do you see how they all work against [me] --

THÉRÈSE

No I don't.

MÉCHAIN

Really?

(to DELAMBRE)

Who asked --

DELAMBRE

The Academy of Sciences, of course -- the Bureau of Longitudes -- the government, which did pay [for] --

MÉCHAIN

Why you? Why not me? Come on, answer me.

DELAMBRE

It's not really neces[sary] --

MÉCHAIN

Why not me? Why not us together?

DELAMBRE

It's not important --

MÉCHAIN

I asked you "Why you?" and why won't you tell me?

DELAMBRE

Even if I write it, it is our work, joint discovery --

THÉRÈSE

Let it [go] --

MÉCHAIN

(to THÉRÈSE)

You are a thief -- a ball-breaker --

DELAMBRE and THÉRÈSE are stunned at this. MÉCHAIN does not notice.

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

MÉCHAIN
(to DELAMBRE)

You are junior to me in the Academy -- junior -- I have ten
more years in the Academy than you --

DELAMBRE
(indicating SAVANTS)

Perhaps we should join --

MÉCHAIN
I want to know whose ass you kissed --

DELAMBRE
This is not --

THÉRÈSE
Let it [go] --

MÉCHAIN
Tell me! Who pulled his pants down --

DELAMBRE
I really don't want [to] --

THÉRÈSE
(to MÉCHAIN)
Can't you see he's [trying] --

MÉCHAIN
Tell me!

THÉRÈSE
Tell him, if that's what he --

MÉCHAIN
Me!

DELAMBRE
(to THÉRÈSE)
This is not the place [to] --

THÉRÈSE
If it's what he [wants] --

MÉCHAIN

To me!

DELAMBRE

I surveyed -- I surveyed over two-thirds of the triangles -- I
laid down both baselines --

MÉCHAIN

You stole -- you tricked -- you forced --

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads
as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

DELAMBRE

No -- no -- and I'm afraid I need to make this clear even if I
really don't want to because I still respect --

THÉRÈSE

Don't waste your breath on courtesy --

MÉCHAIN
(to THÉRÈSE)

Who can trust --

DELAMBRE

If I stole anything, I stole you.

MÉCHAIN

Stole from [me] --

DELAMBRE

No, stole you -- it took me fifty days to pry you out of your
funk --

THÉRÈSE

I tried for five weeks and got shit [for] --

MÉCHAIN points first at DELAMBRE, then THÉRÈSE, then back and forth
between them.

MÉCHAIN

Ah -- ah --

DELAMBRE

Fifty days while you measured this --

MÉCHAIN

The two of you --

DELAMBRE

-- and fretted about that and dithered and grouched and
snarled and bitched --

THÉRÈSE

You're only seeing this now? The great logician?

MÉCHAIN

The two of you -- against me --

(points to SAVANTS)

And all of them --

DELAMBRE

What would you expect?

MÉCHAIN

Respect!

DELAMBRE

From their perspective, they have a melancholic genius
holed up in the Montagnes Noires gripping something they
need -- death-grip -- his letters sometimes ten pages of self-
pity after self-pity -- he may even be completely dissolved --

THÉRÈSE

In short, they couldn't respect a nut-case --

DELAMBRE

Please --

THÉRÈSE

I respect him, I don't have to be nice to him --

DELAMBRE

Just --

THÉRÈSE

Go on --

DELAMBRE

So, of course, yes -- the two of us, the others -- all to steal you from yourself --

MÉCHAIN

And steal my work -- steal my work --

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

DELAMBRE

Your work? What makes you think --

MÉCHAIN

I did it, it belongs to [me] --

DELAMBRE

Let's make clear between us what should've been clear to you from the start --

THÉRÈSE

Dawn comes late to the mountaintop --

DELAMBRE

-- whatever you have stashed away in those logbooks of yours, the ones you won't turn over to me or anyone else -- it's not yours -- it belongs to France, it belongs to the people, it belongs to the Revolution -- you get to hold it in trust and that's all -- and as Permanent Secretary of the Academy --

MÉCHAIN

Perm[anent] --

DELAMBRE

Yes.

MÉCHAIN

When did that hap[pen] -- when did --

DELAMBRE

You refuse to come to the Academy meetings, you miss out on --

MÉCHAIN

Napolean --

DELAMBRE

By his hand --

MÉCHAIN

So he dropped his [pants] --

DELAMBRE

Listen to me --

MÉCHAIN

Stuck out his arse --

DELAMBRE

Listen to me -- your work? In a sense, one that you have no choice about saying "yes" or "no" to, your work belongs to the Permanent Secretary of the Academy of Sciences --

MÉCHAIN

To you.

DELAMBRE

To me.

MÉCHAIN

The general's boy has done so well for himself.

DELAMBRE

As has the melancholic genius -- as unreliable and irritating as you've been, they have taken care of you -- director of the national Observatory, which you deserve -- living on the grounds, with your family, in Cassini's apartments -- do we understand each other?

MÉCHAIN

Of course you'll have them.

DELAMBRE

Have what? Yes?

MÉCHAIN

The logbooks.

DELAMBRE

And any notes.

MÉCHAIN
(to THÉRÈSE)

Why can't you see --

DELAMBRE

I'm glad to hear [that] --

MÉCHAIN

When I get them arranged --

DELAMBRE

They aren't already --

MÉCHAIN

You'll get what you want -- you don't need to question my
methods, question me!

(to THÉRÈSE)

Why can't you see --

THÉRÈSE

What I see saddens me.

MÉCHAIN

Always undercut, always --

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads
as they review their figures.

SAVANTS

Hmmm.

MÉCHAIN

What? What?

The SAVANTS ignore him.

MÉCHAIN

What?

They gather in the center, muttering, checking each other. MÉCHAIN drifts toward them, his whole body crouched in fear.

Out of the pack erupts BORDA, notebook in hand, trailed by the other SAVANTS. He beelines to MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE.

BORDA

What is this shit?

MÉCHAIN

Barcelona, wasn't it.

BORDA

Barce[lona] -- what are you talking about?

MÉCHAIN

Nothing -- no[thing] --

BORDA

I want to know why --

LALANDE

Monsieur Borda has had a shock!

SAVANTS

We want to know [why] --

DELAMBRE

Monsieur Borda, what do you want [to know] --

BORDA

Either the numbers are all wrong -- all crap --

MÉCHAIN

The numbers are [fine] --

DELAMBRE

Yes, they are, so --

LAPLACE

(smiling)

You weren't supposed to discover something completely new, is what Monsieur Borda is [trying] --

BORDA

Why are you smiling?

(to LALANDE)

And you?

LALANDE

It's not completely new but --

LAPLACE

It's new enough for "new" -- and good for a smile --

LALANDE

Agreed.

MÉCHAIN

What --

BORDA

It's a disaster!

LALANDE

Most new things are, at least to you.

DELAMBRE

Could you please let us in on the joke, or the disaster, depending on which [of you] --

LAPLACE

The extra latitudes we had you measure --

BORDA

Dunkerque, Paris --

LAPLACE

Evau, Carcassone --

MÉCHAIN

Barcelona --

BORDA

And Barcelona --

LAPLACE

We had suspicions.

LALANDE

Devious bastards, they were.

BORDA

Careful bastards --

(to MÉCHAIN)

Boscovich.

MÉCHAIN

From Ragusa, the Jesuit.

BORDA

And? C'mon --

MÉCHAIN

He measured the meridian through the Papal States. I
have his report at the Observatory.

DELAMBRE

I own it, too.

BORDA

And? C'mon, both of you -- what did he suggest?

MÉCHAIN

That the meridian through Rome did not --

DELAMBRE

-- did not match the meridian through Paris --

LALANDE

(laughing)

Absurd, right? A meridian is a meridian, right?

LAPLACE
(overlapping)

-- is a meridian -- right?

LALANDE
From the equator to the pole --

LALANDE makes irregular arcs with his hands.

LALANDE
Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!

MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE look at each other and realize. They smile and laugh.

LALANDE
Ah --

MÉCHAIN
No.

LALANDE
See?

DELAMBRE
No.

LALANDE
See?

MÉCHAIN
No.

(to BORDA)
You must have found --

BORDA
Lumpy -- the goddam earth is lumpy!

At the word "lumpy," MÉCHAIN and THÉRÈSE exchange a look and a smile.

THÉRÈSE
(mouthing the words)

What did I tell you?

BORDA stamps his foot several times.

BORDA

Like a squash.

MÉCHAIN

Like porridge.

BORDA

Boscovich -- Christ!

BORDA makes irregular arcs with his hand.

BORDA

From Barcelona to Carcassone -- a fucking broken-spined
mule -- from Carcassone to Evaux --

LALANDE

A fucking -- tree branch --

LAPLACE

From Evaux to Paris -- the broken fucking teeth of a peasant
--

MÉCHAIN

From Paris to Dunkerque -- a fucking arthritic crone!

LALANDE

I love this disaster!

BORDA

Shut up! Shut up -- I need to think --

MÉCHAIN joins THÉRÈSE, tries to kiss her -- she refuses. He moves back
to the group.

BORDA

If we don't own a smooth meridian through France, a nice clean simple arc -- why do things always have [to be] -- if what we have's as lumpy as plaster! -- we can't make the meter. Can we? Can we?

MÉCHAIN

I have a --

BORDA

(ignoring him)

A meter can't be one ten-millionth of a gourd, of shit! And if we don't get the meter -- if we can't [get] --

LAPLACE

Trying breathing in between --

MÉCHAIN

I have a solu[tion] --

BORDA

(ignoring him)

-- then it's seven goddamned wasted years and a betrayal of -- I can't even --

(indicating SAVANTS)

-- and in front of -- France will be --

LALANDE

We can go back to my original proposal -- use the Paris measurements and --

(snaps fingers)

-- it's done --

BORDA

If you don't shut up, I'll use your ugly corpse for a ruler --

LALANDE

This is great fun!

MÉCHAIN

I have a solution --

BORDA

(to MÉCHAIN)

It's not you I have to talk to.

(to DELAMBRE)

You're the Permanent Secretary -- the general takes such a shine to you -- what've you got to say to our illustrious International Commission? What the fuck should our illustrious International Commission do now?

BORDA is so agitated that he cannot even wait for DELAMBRE's answer but must pace to work off his agitation. DELAMBRE examines everyone before he speaks.

DELAMBRE

You won't like it, but here it is: fake it.

BORDA

What?

DELAMBRE

Not all meridians are equal -- I'm sorry -- well, not that sorry -- that Monsieur Méchain and I found what we found, but -- well -- what can I say -- the earth is what it is.

BORDA

Fake it?

DELAMBRE

Did I say "fake"?

BORDA

You said --

DELAMBRE

Slip of the tongue -- I meant "interpret." What we savants can do so well.

LAPLACE

Interpret what?

DELAMBRE

Our data aren't the only data lying around. There's Cassini's work from 1740 --

BORDA

Which your whole mission was supposed to make more precise!

DELAMBRE

Which it did.

BORDA

Yes, but [still] --

DELAMBRE

So don't shoot the messenger -- in any case, we also have numbers from Peru and Lapland --

BORDA

Fifty years old!

DELAMBRE

To an earth million of years old -- pfft. My point is this: you -- we -- this illustrious gathered "we" -- can have consistency -- Keep to the data! Always the data! --
(DELAMBRE laughs)
-- or we can have believability.

DELAMBRE lets this thought sink in.

DELAMBRE

Look --

DELAMBRE unbuttons his vest.

DELAMBRE

I am investigating my vest.

DELAMBRE re-buttons his vest -- but one hole off, so that it's buttoned wrong.

DELAMBRE

I can be very deliberate and very strict in my buttoning -- set my fingers just so -- like I was setting my sextant or plumb line -- move the buttons through with a calculated push -- like writing my numbers down in a clear hand -- in short, be

conscientious, clear, careful, preeeecise -- and yet, for all
my concise precision --

DELAMBRE's vest-buttons are one hole off. He shows this off to everyone.

DELAMBRE

Now --

DELAMBRE goes to another SAVANT, unbuttons and mis-rebuttons his
vest.

DELAMBRE

If we all have -- stand still -- if we all have our buttons
misarranged in the same way --

LAPLACE

If the error is systematic --

DELAMBRE

To put it in a scientific lingo --

(he finishes)

-- there we go -- then no problem --

BORDA

A shared mistake --

LALANDE

Devoutly believed in --

BORDA

-- is no mistake.

DELAMBRE stands next to the misbuttoned SAVANT.

DELAMBRE

And here we have Castor and Pollux -- our beliefs about the
way the earth should be shaped, our beliefs neat, precise,
and --

DELAMBRE pulls another SAVANT next to him, with the vest properly
buttoned.

DELAMBRE

Oh my deity, look! New information? What shall we do?

DELAMBRE looks back and forth between the two, eyes agog.

DELAMBRE

If am who I say I am, I have to follow it -- bitch and moan,
maybe, at having to change -- but -- ready?

DELAMBRE and the SAVANT re-button their vests -- make a race out of it.

DELAMBRE

Hah! And so it goes. Except, except -- if I am honest with
myself -- if I am energized by knowing -- I notice that his
buttons and my buttons, though now supposedly arranged
by truth, are not the same -- his meridian, so to speak, has
a different slant to it than mine --

LALANDE

(sing-song)

Lump-didi-dump-didi-lump-lump-lump --

DELAMBRE

Lumpiness --

LALANDE

Lumpy --

DELAMBRE

-- and if my mission is to measure the perfect "vest-button
arrangement," the Platonic ideal that spawns other Platonic
ideals, like, say, the meter -- I am up shit's creek, am I not?
What do I do? What do I do?

LAPLACE

Aren't we lying?

DELAMBRE

And I'll answer with a question. How well are the
government's efforts going to prepare the people, the
glorious people, our touchstone and beacon --

BORDA

You don't have to [mock] --

DELAMBRE

-- to eat, sleep, and breathe our revolutionary meter? And you don't have to answer -- I already know.

LALANDE

They hate the fucking thing --

DELAMBRE

An excellent scientific formulation. And I would even add that our celebrated science-loving general will not be entirely gifted with affection for the meter if it makes his subjects unhappy. So. What do we do?

LAPLACE

I can smell what's coming up --

DELAMBRE

Always a good nose, Monsieur Laplace, for wine and possibility. This is what we do: we make-believe -- excuse me again, we "interpret." We take all our vests, we mix them in, we look over the results, we say to ourselves, "Well, one set says this -- lumpy lumpy lumpy -- but this other set says this, and if we use some from there and some from there, then this new set just feels right, righter -- more like the vest we need." Not perfect, not precise, but what is perfect and precise anyway? -- just the fever-dreams of stuffed-shirt intellectuals like us. Do we need a meter?

BORDA

We need a meter.

DELAMBRE

Then let's make the meter we need, supported by the numbers we need to support it. The most precise point we'll be able to argue is that our meter isn't wrong. So says the Permanent Secretary, this April of 1799.

BORDA ponders this. The SAVANTS ponder this.

BORDA

Sometimes to serve the people, one must resolve to give them only that knowledge that will serve them well.

DELAMBRE

You could say it like that.

BORDA

(to others)

Come here.

The SAVANTS huddle and discuss. From them comes the SOUNDS of metal being cut and shaped.

MÉCHAIN

I have a solution.

DELAMBRE

To what?

MÉCHAIN

You can't honestly believe this fig leaf will --

DELAMBRE

It's not a fig leaf -- it's how science gets made.

MÉCHAIN

No it's [not] --

DELAMBRE

For all intents and purposes, this meter is the proper meter.

MÉCHAIN

But the numbers --

DELAMBRE

Are just numbers.

MÉCHAIN

But they're the wrong --

DELAMBRE

Numbers are just num[bers] --

From the SAVANTS comes forward the meter bar, which BORDA holds aloft. SOUNDS of fanfare and celebration.

BORDA

June 22, 1799, we present this platinum bar to the French legislative assemblies so that the people's representatives can consecrate by man's law what nature has rendered through its own law.

With great fanfare, whoops and hollers, the SAVANTS march off with the meter bar held high.

MÉCHAIN

Believe me, I know about wrong numbers.

DELAMBRE

Really.

MÉCHAIN

I mean, in general --

THÉRÈSE

He knows.

MÉCHAIN

-- how they can -- you know, "lumpy" -- but the solution is to get better numbers!

DELAMBRE

And that's the solution you want to talk to me [about] --

THÉRÈSE

Don't you dare.

MÉCHAIN

(to THÉRÈSE)

I have to.

DELAMBRE

Before you say anything --

MÉCHAIN

I am not --

DELAMBRE

Don't be rash --

MÉCHAIN

-- going to wait --

DELAMBRE

You have to consider --

THÉRÈSE

He won't --

MÉCHAIN

Extend the meridian past Barcelona -- extend the meridian
past Barcelona --

DELAMBRE

What, into the Mediterranean?

MÉCHAIN

To the Balearic Islands.

DELAMBRE

You just spent seven years --

THÉRÈSE

He's trying to kill himself.

MÉCHAIN

Put the southern latitude on an island, and you don't get
distortion from the mountains.

DELAMBRE

True, but --

(to THÉRÈSE)

Can't you --

MÉCHAIN

Extending it -- listen to me -- don't pay any attention to [her]
-- extending it would bring it to the 45th parallel --

DELAMBRE

Go back to the Observatory, continue your excellent work there as Director --

MÉCHAIN

The 45th parallel! Makes it easier to extrapolate the partial arc through France --

DELAMBRE

You are the nation's senior astronomer --

MÉCHAIN

Listen to [me] --

DELAMBRE

Go find more comets -- enjoy your family --
(to THÉRÈSE)

Take him --

MÉCHAIN

We can extrapolate it to a true quarter meridian -- cleaner, more exact -- don't look to her for -- we can do away with all this "interpretation" nonsense -- vest buttons! --

THÉRÈSE rises.

THÉRÈSE

I am not needed. For anything.

THÉRÈSE leaves.

DELAMBRE

Don't be a fool. I agree, it'd be a good mission to do, but give it to someone younger --

MÉCHAIN

You can talk to the general, get him to approve --

DELAMBRE

He's not my employee.

MÉCHAIN

Tell him that -- that the mission would -- cement the "intimate union" -- yes, that -- between France and Spain. Having peace on the islands would keep the sea lanes open for France, against Britain --

DELAMBRE

And when did you put "military strategy" on your résumé?

MÉCHAIN

That's the "interpretation" he wants to hear, so give it to him --

DELAMBRE

At the risk of being boring and dull through repetition, you have a family, you have important work to do, your body is not a young body anymore -- did I mention that you have a family? Who has just left you?

MÉCHAIN

I need to do this! I need -- for France --

DELAMBRE

Not for a moment --

MÉCHAIN

For my own peace of mind!

DELAMBRE

Why would this give you peace when seven years of the same kind of work has done exactly the opposite? I have watched you since we finished keep feeding your soul, bit by bit, to whatever demon ate at you for fifty days in the mountains --

MÉCHAIN

That's none of your busi[ness] --

DELAMBRE

-- for five weeks when your wife came to find you, for more days and years than I care to, or can, count -- praise, prizes, gratefulness -- none of this soothes you a bit, not one bit --

MÉCHAIN

I have to prove --

DELAMBRE

What is left for you to prove?

MÉCHAIN

That I can lay out my own goddamn triangles --

DELAMBRE

No one's ever doubted --

MECHAIN

I don't need Tranchot or Thérèse -- I don't need my wife to come save me -- and I don't need you -- I can do an arc better than the great Delambre! Triangles 120 miles long, across uncharted terrain, island to mainland -- that would be a reputation worth fighting to get!

DELAMBRE

And your current reputation -- praise, prizes, gratefulness -- none of that -- ?

MÉCHAIN

None of that!

DELAMBRE

It still feeds.

MÉCHAIN

Will you talk to Napoleon? Will you talk to --

DELAMBRE

Yes.

MÉCHAIN

Tell him it'll be great science -- he'll like that -- did you know my son went with him to Egypt, to do surveys while the general had his ass handed to him -- mention that to him -- my son, not about his ass -- this challenge will bring France glory -- put that in, too -- yes, good, that will all be good for the general to feed his ego on --

DELAMBRE

And not only his ego.

MÉCHAIN

It is always so easy for you, so easy, the gentle-tempered
Delambre, the cloth-seller's son with the soul of a humanist
--

DELAMBRE

And I have never seen you happy.

MÉCHAIN

Your conscience is so clear --

DELAMBRE

I did twice as much work on the meridian as you did and
never once felt any despair -- the mission was there, I was
here -- I kept them several healthy triangulations away from
each other -- it's just a game, anyways -- life has been good
-- but you have your demon -- I'll make the general say
"yes" -- and so it goes --

DELAMBRE leaves. THÉRÈSE enters. The scene is set as at the top of the
play. DEZAUCHE and the BARON sit by the bed.

THÉRÈSE

If you die --

MÉCHAIN

I am not going to die.

THÉRÈSE

Then let me be more exact, since you so much treasure the
exact: after you're done killing yourself --

MÉCHAIN

I am not --

THÉRÈSE holds up a mirror to MÉCHAIN's face.

THÉRÈSE

Look -- look -- and tell me again --

THÉRÈSE throws the mirror down, stomps on it.

MECHAIN

Not your face at all -- something else -- presses from behind
-- ugly and toxic --

THÉRÈSE grinds her heel into the glass.

THÉRÈSE

My eyes will melt if I look any more --

MÉCHAIN

Look at me --

THÉRÈSE

I can't -- I won't --

MÉCHAIN

Then fine! Fine! Just turn into another one who gives up on
me, abandons me!

THÉRÈSE

Yes, of course, that's who you are now -- my husband would
never say that --

MÉCHAIN

Look at [me] --

THÉRÈSE

-- but this -- thing -- speaks -- no don't touch! -- after you're
done killing yourself, you'll stay buried wherever you drop
-- don't! -- if it's here, then I'll stuff your mouth with French
dirt -- if there -- I won't bring you back --

THÉRÈSE pulls out a cloth and blindfolds herself.

THÉRÈSE

Done.

THÉRÈSE wanders away. MÉCHAIN stoops down, picks up a piece of
broken mirror. He puts it in his mouth and eats it.

MÉCHAIN

The demon's appetite [swells] --

A ladder appears. MÉCHAIN takes out his own cloth, folds the glass shards in it. He climbs the ladder. He blindfolds himself with the broken glass. He looks right, he looks center, he looks left, he looks center, he looks right -- all with increasing frustration. DEZAUCHE and the BARON walk up behind him. With a sudden collapse, he falls into their arms, and they bring him to the bed.

DEZAUCHE

Baron --

BARON

Good morning.

DEZAUCHE

Morning, yes --

BARON

And?

DEZAUCHE

Not well, Baron -- not doing well --

BARON

No, I can see that. It seems this kind of fever either leaves you alone after it touches you or it rips you apart.

DEZAUCHE

I am not willing to guess.

BARON

But you're not a doctor, either, are you.

DEZAUCHE

Baron, I mean no disrespect, but I don't have to be a physician to see what's in front of me.

BARON

Proves nothing. Eyes -- not always reliable. Has he been bled?

DEZAUCHE

The leeches sing him thanks.

BARON

There's a distrust in your voice.

DEZAUCHE

I don't trust butchery.

BARON

So I've hired butchers?

DEZAUCHE

These "cures" -- bleeding, blistering -- like the Inquisition --

BARON

You're free to say whatever you want here, but I'd still be careful --

DEZAUCHE

I'm sorry -- it's been a long night.

BARON

For everybody.

(points to journal)

What are you --

DEZAUCHE

I'm cleaning up the calculations. Whether he lives or dies --

BARON

The calculations will live on.

DEZAUCHE

Yes, always.

BARON

If they're right, that is.

DEZAUCHE

Why would you think --

BARON

Have you ever known anything humans have done that has been done without mistakes?

DEZAUCHE

The triangulations have been very precise. He is a very precise man --

BARON

But accurate?

DEZAUCHE

It's the same --

BARON

I can be very precise and still be dead wrong: "I've cut the board twice now and it's still too short."

DEZAUCHE

Not the time for mock[ery] --

BARON

On the other hand, for truth --

MÉCHAIN

My venerable host is right.

DEZAUCHE

Oh, good good -- you're awake -- don't speak -- you need to --

MÉCHAIN

Don't speak? -- don't speak? -- what've I got to lose? I've been not-speaking for days -- at last a clear moment -- I'm dying -- isn't that the truth?

BARON

All are dying, Pierre -- the only difference is the rates.

MÉCHAIN

Fast track for me. Slippery. Downhill. What a miserable way to end a life -- fevered and shitting myself in Spain --

Sickroom goes to dark. DELAMBRE steps forward. He carries three heavy leather-bound volumes. He drops them to the floor, stands on them.

DELAMBRE

My final report: Base du système métrique. Two thousand pages. A real best seller.

MÉCHAIN joins him.

DELAMBRE

I held nothing back, including how you shaved the Barcelona numbers, how you hid the deception behind those beautiful hand-written summaries you gave to the Commission.

DELAMBRE steps down, invites MÉCHAIN to stand on the books, which he does.

DELAMBRE

I also "interpreted" the fudge as a good example of how a working scientist continues to seek out perfection in the midst of the flawed and the futile.

MÉCHAIN

Nice save.

DELAMBRE

What do you see from up there?

MÉCHAIN

Nothing I want to continue seeing.

MÉCHAIN steps down. They face one another, then hold each other as dance partners.

DELAMBRE & MÉCHAIN

The Scientists dance the dance of Science.

MÉCHAIN

And a-one, and a-two, and --

They begin their dance in very formal patterns -- rigorous and exact and, in its own way, beautiful. As they move, they can ad lib statements. As the

dance goes on, it becomes increasingly less exact, more fluid, beautiful in another way. And they laugh.

Meet John Doe

Based on the screenplay (shooting draft, 1941) by Robert Riskin
and the story by Richard Connell and Robert Presnell

The original script is in the public domain.

DESCRIPTION

A newspaper wanting to increase its circulation runs a scam when it creates a fictional John Doe, an Everyman who has threatened to jump off the roof of City Hall on Christmas Eve to protest the injustices of the world. They then hire a man needing money to impersonate this John Doe, as they call him, with the stipulation that on Christmas Day, he disappears with his payment in hand. However, his "protest" catches the attention of the nation, and an inadvertent political movement begins, co-opted by the owner of the newspaper for his own political ends. It all concludes on the rooftop of City Hall on Christmas Eve.

MAIN CHARACTERS

- JOHN WILLOUGHBY - 30s, an intelligent drifter
- COLONEL - 40s, JOHN's gruff and misanthropic bosom buddy
- HENRY CONNELL - 60s, hard-boiled newspaper editor
- ANN MITCHELL - 30s, ambitious newspaper reporter
- D.B. NORTON - 60s, newspaper owner and ruthless businessman

UTILITY CHARACTER-FEMALE

- MATTIE (secretary)
- MAYOR's SECRETARY
- EDITH (photographer)
- MOTHER (Ann's mother)
- STORMY (studio manager)
- NORTON's MAID
- MADGE
- VELMA (waitress in bar)

UTILITY CHARACTER-MALE

- OFFICE CLERK
- JOE (compositor)
- MAYOR LOVETT
- ANGELFACE
- TED
- EMCEE
- DAN
- CHARLIE

- PILOT's VOICE

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Sound and image projections suggested throughout
- Scene changes should be fluid and without delay

* * * * *

Scene 1

IMAGE: Opening credits to the movie.

IMAGE: Scene in the movie where the logo of the old newspaper is jackhammered off and replaced by the new sign. Loop the clip if necessary.

An OFFICE CLERK, clipboard in hand, has a list, and as he checks it off, he points into the audience at six people. He wears a wicked grin as he does his work.

OFFICE CLERK

You. You. Yeah, you, too. Includes you. You -- ya can't hide from me! And you -- most definitely you!

OFFICE CLERK drags a finger across his throat -- he can make any appropriate sound he wants.

OFFICE CLERK

You all used to work for The Bulletin: "A free press for a free people." You now don't work for The New Bulletin, "A streamlined newspaper for a streamlined age." It is 1941, the world is at war -- again-- and you have all been streamlined into the great outdoors, care of D.B. Norton, new owner and overlord. Sayonara, you suckers.

* * * * *

Scene 2

OFFICE CLERK pivots, and he is in the office of MANAGING EDITOR HENRY CONNELL, who is on the phone with D.B. NORTON behind a desk piled high with business. ANN MITCHELL fidgets, waiting to say her piece.

MATTIE, CONNELL's secretary, has her steno pad and pencil. She waits, the complete opposite of ANN.

OFFICE CLERK hands MATTIE the list, runs his hand across his throat, sneers at ANN, and leaves.

CONNELL

Yes, Mr. Norton, cleaning out the dead-wood -- per your first order -- and your second order -- and now your third order -- full steam ahead, as you say.

CONNELL puts down the phone.

CONNELL

Right into the iceberg.

ANN pleads her case at full tilt.

ANN

Look, Mr. Connell -- I just can't afford to be without work right now, not even for a day. I've got a mother and two kid sisters to --

CONNELL

She really has a mother and two kid sisters?

MATTIE

Yep.

ANN

Then you know how it is -- I've got to keep working.

CONNELL

Sorry, Ann.

ANN

You know me, you know how hard I work.

CONNELL

I was bumped up here to clean house -- you knew that the day I had my name painted on the door.

CONNELL hands MATTIE a handful of papers.

CONNELL

Please pass these out.

MATTIE

More cleaning of the house?

CONNELL

Times four. Thanks.

MATTIE

It's not you that takes the looks that kill.

CONNELL

Put in for combat pay.

MATTIE

Honey, you're my witness. Sorry about all this.

MATTIE exits.

CONNELL

Ann, you're right, I do know you -- and I can't use what you do anymore. Your kind of column is dead -- it's just lavender and silk when D.B. Norton wants gin and nylon.

ANN

I'll tell you what I'll do.

CONNELL

Please don't tell me what you'll do because --

ANN

I get thirty dollars a week. I'll take twenty-five, twenty if necessary. I'll do anything you say.

CONNELL

It isn't the money, Ann, in the end. We're after -- Norton is after, let me be clear -- is circulation, build up the numbers. What he wants is fireworks. Maybe the readers'll get some news with that -- maybe not -- doesn't matter. He wants people who can hit with sledge hammers --

ANN

I can sledgehammer with the best [of 'em] -- I can start arguments, stir the pot --give me a chance, please, please
--

CONNELL

Ann, I do hate to say this but I have to say this: cashier's got your check.

ANN realizes she has no more arrows in the quiver.

CONNELL

And one more thing. Don't forget to get out your last column -- you won't get that check without it.

ANN's eyes flash at the last little turn of the knife. She draws her hand across her throat, just like the OFFICE CLERK, then exits.

* * * * *

Scene 3

SOUND: Reverb of a slammed office door.

ANN storms into her office, a desk piled high with business and a typewriter, a piece of paper rolled in the platen.

ANN

Aaaarrrggghhhh!

JOE, the compositor, enters.

JOE

Ann. Ann. You're a few lines shy in your column, Ann.

ANN

A big, rich slob buys a paper and forty heads are chopped off!

JOE

You got it, too.

ANN

Oh, Joe -- oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Why don't we tear this mother[fucking] --

JOE

Ah ah ah --

ANN

Tear this goddamn building down, then!

JOE

Before you re-enact the barbarians at the gates of Rome, maybe you'd better finish this column.

ANN

Yeah. Finish off my lavender and silk! Wait, Joe, just wait! Wait!

JOE

What?

ANN flops down in front of her typewriter..

ANN

Heads're rolling, heads're rolling.

JOE

Whatever that means.

ANN

Wants fireworks, huh? Gin and nylon? Okay!

ANN pounds the keys.

SOUND: Keys against platen almost as rhythmic as a music score.

ANN pounds away until -- she finishes! Tears the paper from the roller and hands it to JOE.

ANN

Here.

JOE looks the paper over.

JOE

Really?

ANN

Read it and laugh!

JOE

No typos, even.

ANN

I told you I'm good!

JOE

"Below is a letter which reached my desk this morning."

ANN pounds her desk.

ANN

Right here.

JOE

"It's a commentary on what we laughingly call the civilized world."

ANN

The barbarians at the gates.

JOE

"Dear Miss Mitchell: Four years ago I was fired from my job. Since then I haven't been able to get another one. At first I was mad at the state administration and the companies, but I realized it's bigger than them. It seems the whole world has decided to go to the dogs, and it's time someone shocked everyone so they can see this and change it. So in protest I'm going to commit suicide by jumping off the City Hall roof on Christmas Eve! Signed, A disgusted American citizen, John Doe."

ANN

Go on!

JOE

In for a penny --

ANN

In for this pound of baloney.

JOE

"Editor's note: If you ask this column, the wrong people are being made to jump off roofs." Ann, Ann --

ANN

Never mind, Joe -- I absolve you of all responsibility. You gonna show it to Connell? Remember, they've cut both our throats -- no need to be saints about anything.

JOE

No, I'm not gonna show it to Connell. Your column's finished, I'm finished --

ANN

So let's give 'em a final finish. Let's give 'em some circulation.

JOE

Circulation it is!

ANN and JOE share some "skin" as they slide their palms together. ANN stuffs a few things under her arm, and arm-in-arm they leave.

* * * * *

Scene 4

SOUND: The presses are running hard.

IMAGE: A newspaper with a huge headline: "WHERE'S JOHN DOE?"

In CONNELL's office, two days later, CONNELL on the phone. He holds a newspaper with a huge headline: WHERE'S JOHN DOE?

CONNELL

Governor -- Governor --

SOUND: We can hear the tinny voice in the earpiece.

CONNELL

Governor -- Mr. Norton would never do that -- he's an oilman -- why would he want to be governor, when you are doing such a splendid job? I've spoken with him twice over the last two days, and I assure you he has no interest in you whatsoever. Yes, yes -- rest assured, Governor, no interest at all. Not a jot, not a tittle. Yes, yes, have an excellent day of governing.

CONNELL replaces the handset.

SOUND: Phone rings.

CONNELL

Mayor.

CONNELL picks up. Lights up on MAYOR's office, MAYOR on the phone: a nervous man. MAYOR'S SECRETARY is holding the same newspaper.

CONNELL

Why, hello Mayor Lovett.

MAYOR

Connell --

CONNELL

Yes, Mayor.

MAYOR gestures for the paper, which MAYOR'S SECRETARY holds for him.

MAYOR

Are you trying your best?

CONNELL

Yes, yes, I'm trying my best -- did you see the newspaper this morning: "WHERE'S JOHN DOE?"

MAYOR

Couldn't the headline be bigger?

CONNELL

It's the biggest my press room's got. Rest assured, Mayor
--

MAYOR

Rest assured? It's my building he's jumping from! And I'm
up for reelection, too! Why, he's liable to go right past my
window -- what was that?!

MAYOR'S SECRETARY

What?

MAYOR

Out the window! Something just flew by!

MAYOR'S SECRETARY

I didn't see anything.

MAYOR

Well, don't stand there, go and look. Open the window. Oh,
why did he have to pick my building?

MAYOR'S SECRETARY opens the window, peers out.

MAYOR

Is there a crowd in the street?

MAYOR'S SECRETARY

No, sir.

CONNELL

Mayor --

MAYOR

Then he may be caught on a ledge! Look again!

MAYOR'S SECRETARY

I think it must have been a sea-gull.

CONNELL

Mayor --

MAYOR

A sea-gull? What's a sea-gull doing around the city hall?
That's a bad omen, isn't it?

MAYOR'S SECRETARY

No sir. The sea-gull is a lovely bird.

MAYOR

Lovely bird, lovely bird.

MAYOR looks at the phone for a moment, than at MAYOR'S SECRETARY.
In a stage whisper.

MAYOR

Who is this?

MAYOR'S SECRETARY whispers back.

MAYOR'S SECRETARY

Mr. Connell

CONNELL

Mayor?

MAYOR

Yes, haven't forgotten you, haven't forgotten you at all, just
a sea-gull, wonderful bird.

MAYOR waves off MAYOR'S SECRETARY, who exits.

CONNELL

Mayor Lovett, you don't have to call me again. I've got
everybody and his brother and sister out looking for him.
You saw the box I'm running?

MAYOR

Yes, but it's my building -- and reëlection --

CONNELL reads from the newspaper.

CONNELL

"An appeal to John Doe. 'Think it over, John. Life can be
beautiful,' says Mayor."

MAYOR

Yes it can.

CONNELL

"If you need a job, apply to the editor of this paper -- "" and so forth and so forth. I will let you know as soon as I have something!

MAYOR

If he jumps --

CONNELL

Just pull down the blinds, Mayor, and everything'll be fine.

They both hang up. MAYOR exits. MATTIE enters.

MATTIE

I went to Ann Mitchell's house, again, like you wanted me to.

CONNELL

And?

MATTIE

What'd'ya expect? It's in a bad way there. You know she supports a mother and two sisters.

CONNELL

Has she come back yet?

MATTIE

Nope. Her mom's worried about her. When Ann left the house she said she was going on a roaring drunk.

CONNELL

Great -- only 2361 bars to check.

MATTIE

And how would you know that number?

CONNELL

I'm the editor of a newspaper.

MATTIE

You know the biggest thing I found out?

CONNELL picks up the phone.

CONNELL

Get me the Commissioner. Yeah?

MATTIE

Remember Dr. John Mitchell?

CONNELL

Indeed I do. Lots of stories about him. He had the gift of the laying on of those doctor hands.

MATTIE

That was her dad.

CONNELL

Didn't know that. I remember running his obit. Top of the page.

VOICE comes in to CONNELL's ear.

CONNELL

Commissioner. It's been almost two days! Do I have to tell you again: She's about five foot five, brown eyes, light chestnut hair and as fine a pair of legs as --

ANN enters.

CONNELL

-- as ever just walked into my office. Never mind. Yeah, you have that same kind of day.

MATTIE

You want me in or out?

CONNELL

You've done your job -- you can go.

MATTIE

Welcome back, sister -- you are one wanted woman.

MATTIE exits.

ANN

Did you want to see me? Because I remember, distinctly, being fired.

CONNELL

Which is still the case. But you have a piece of property that still belongs to this newspaper, and I'd like to have it!

ANN

Which is?

CONNELL

The letter from John Doe.

ANN

Oh.

CONNELL

The whole place is in an uproar. We've got to find him. The letter's our only clue.

ANN

There is no letter.

CONNELL

We'll get a handwriting expert to -- what?

ANN

There is no letter. I made it up. You said you wanted fireworks, sledge-hammers. Circulation.

CONNELL

I think I just lost all of mine. There are nine jobs waiting for this guy. Twenty-two families want to board him free. Five women want to marry him, and the Mayor's practically ready to adopt him, just so he won't jump off his building. And you -- there's only one thing to do -- drop the whole business quickly. We'll run a story. Say John Doe was in here, sorry he wrote the letter -- that would it! Came in here and I made him change his mind. "New Bulletin editor saves John Doe's life." That'll work. I'll get it written it up.

ANN

Such a great big wonderful genius of a newspaperman!

CONNELL

I like my job as well as the next guy.

ANN

But you don't mind taking mine away.

CONNELL

Wasn't my call.

ANN

You got bumped up to shoot some life into this dying paper because you've always had those kinds of ideas, just that no one ever listened to you, the lowly copy desk editor, until D.B. Norton needed a hatchet man --

CONNELL

It's "Managing Editor" in gold leaf on the door --

ANN

So do some managing! You get the whole town curious about this man and then, just like that, you're going to play it safe and bury him. There's enough circulation in that man to fill the veins of 10 managing editors.

CONNELL

In what man?

ANN

In our John Doe! The one I made up!

CONNELL

Making him up doesn't make him real.

ANN

We do that all the time. Between now and Christmas Eve, when he's gonna jump, I'd run a daily post starting with his boyhood, his schooling, his first job! A wide-eyed youngster facing a chaotic world. The problem of the average man, of all the John Does in the world. Now, then comes the drama. He meets discouragement. He finds the world has feet of

clay. His ideals crumble. So what does he do? He decides to commit suicide in protest against the state of civilization. He thinks of the river! But no, no, he has a better idea. The City Hall. Why? Because he wants to attract attention, he wants to make a political statement, he wants to get a few things off his chest -- who cares what? -- and this is the only way he can get himself heard.

CONNELL

So he writes you a letter? I can't believe I'm discussing this like it's an actual --

ANN

Open your mind. Maybe he's written a hundred letters, to all the papers, no one takes him seriously. But he sees my lavender and silk, knows I have a heart --

CONNELL

A steel trap --

ANN

And I go dig him up because I am a kick-ass reporter. He is so grateful, he pours out his soul to me, and from now on we run his quotes: "I protest, by John Doe." He protests against all the evils in the world: the greed, the lust, the hate, the fear, all of man's inhumanity to man. Arguments will start. Should he commit suicide or should he not! People will write in pleading with him. We keep the question in play, right up to Christmas Eve.

CONNELL

And then?

ANN

Then he has a change of heart -- sees the beauty of it all. You can give him that job. No one dies. Christmas comes. The Lord is risen.

CONNELL

That's Easter.

ANN

Doesn't matter -- that's how people will feel. See?

ANN is awed by her scheme. CONNELL stares at ANN for a long pause.

CONNELL

Except John Doe isn't real.

ANN

So we hire somebody for the job, you --

CONNELL

Someone to say he's gonna commit suicide on Christmas Eve -- that it?

ANN

Dawn comes late to Marblehead. There's lots of desperate people out there.

CONNELL

Do me a favor, will you? Go on out and get married and have a lot of babies -- I gotta get my story in so I can repair what you did.

CONNELL picks up the phone.

CONNELL

Mattie!

ANN

You're supposed to be a smart guy! If it was raining hundred dollar bills, you'd be out looking for a dime you lost some place.

CONNELL

Listening to a mad woman -- Mattie!

But MATTIE is already entering the office, a newspaper in hand.

MATTIE

Did you see what the Chronicle is running on John Doe?

CONNELL

No.

MATTIE

They're saying it's a fake. Imagine them accusing us of that!

CONNELL

"John Doe story amateur journalism. It's palpably phony."

MATTIE comments with muted sarcasm.

MATTIE

Palpably phony.

CONNELL

"It's a wonder anyone is taking it seriously."

MATTIE

My, my.

ANN

So now go fall right into their laps. Say John Doe walked in and called the whole thing off. You know what that's going to sound like coming out after this!

CONNELL

Both of you are saying I'm pinned to the wall.

MATTIE

I have something else to tell you both as well. I got a dozen bums standing shoulder to shoulder out there. They all say they wrote the John Doe letter.

ANN

Tell them all to wait.

MATTIE

Should I?

CONNELL

I fired her, but she's not staying very fired.

MATTIE

Not my fault.

ANN

Look, Mr. Connell, one of those men is your John Doe. They're desperate and will do anything for a cup of coffee -- believe me, I know. Pick one out and you can make the Chronicle eat its words -- more circulation, more circulation --

MATTIE

If you ask me, "John Doe" is dynamite down your underwear.

CONNELL

That doesn't mean she isn't right. We can't let the Chronicle know the truth, so we've got to produce a John Doe, and it might as well be now. Go tell 'em to wait.

MATTIE exits.

ANN

And there really is no reason for the Chronicle to find out the truth, either.

CONNELL

I take it that's not being said out of the kindness of your heart.

ANN

I'd like to see The New Bulletin and Mr. Norton prosper.

CONNELL

In other words -- you get your job back.

ANN

Plus a bonus.

CONNELL

Of?

ANN

A thousand dollars -- for keeping me from writing the words "I, Ann Mitchell, hereby certify that the John Doe letter was created by me -- "

CONNELL

The going price these days?

ANN

It's the going price for my verified mom and two kid sisters.

CONNELL

Packs everything, including heat.

ANN

What's a poor girl gonna do?

CONNELL

Okay, Miss Mitchell, you've got yourself a deal.

ANN

Do you have to clear it with Norton?

CONNELL

I'll clear it with him -- I have a feeling this isn't going to bother him at all. Let's take a look at the candidates. Mattie!

MATTIE comes in to the office.

CONNELL

Tell 'em we're gonna do our interviews, then when I call you, show 'em in, one by one. We are gonna find ourselves a typical average man that can keep his mouth shut.

MATTIE

Show me one of those and I'll eat him.

CONNELL

Get the cattle in line.

MATTIE exits.

CONNELL

You ready?

ANN

A lot readier than I was this morning. You clear this with Mr. Norton -- I'm gonna look over our crop of John Does.

* * * * *

Scene 5

In a light by himself stands JOHN WILLOUGHBY, hat in hand, head down. ANN and CONNELL move to him, inspect him. They are impressed. JOHN feels awkward under this scrutiny.

CONNELL

Did you write that letter to Miss Mitchell?

JOHN

No, I didn't.

CONNELL

What are you doing up here then?

JOHN

The paper said there were some jobs around loose because of this John Doe thing. Thought there might be one left over for me.

ANN

Had any schooling?

JOHN

A little.

ANN

What do you do when you work?

JOHN

I used to pitch. Baseball. Till my arm went south.

ANN

Where'd you play?

JOHN

Bush leagues mostly.

CONNELL

Got any family?

JOHN

No I don't.

CONNELL

Just traveling through.

JOHN

Yeah. Me and a friend. He's outside.

CONNELL

What's your name?

JOHN

Willoughby. John Willoughby, Long John Willoughby they called me.

ANN

Would you like to make some money?

JOHN

Does a thirsty man need water?

ANN

Would you be willing to say you wrote that John Doe letter -- and stick by saying that no matter what happens?

JOHN

Ah, I get it. If that's what it takes, then I'll take it.

CONNELL pulls ANN into a huddle.

CONNELL

Looks all right --

ANN

He's perfect! Look at that face. It's wonderful. And a baseball player. What could be more American!

MATTIE enters with a plate of sandwiches and puts it on CONNELL's desk. She gives JOHN the once-over, then leaves.

As ANN and CONNELL talk, JOHN edges over to the desk, looks hungrily at the sandwiches. He is one hungry man.

CONNELL

I wish he had a family, though.

ANN

We'll have a hero without a family -- something new for the masses to take in. He stands alone. Against the world. People love that fairy tale, and that's what'll make them believe him. Come on. That's our man. He's made to order.

CONNELL

How're you sure he'll fall into line?

ANN

When you're desperate for money, a person can pull that string for a long time. He's our man, I tell you.

JOHN faints, and his fall to the ground gets their attention. ANN moves to him.

CONNELL

Mattie!!

MATTIE appears, takes in the situation.

CONNELL

Water!

MATTIE turns to get some water. Behind her, peeking in, is COLONEL, JOHN's companion.

COLONEL

He all right?

JOHN comes to. MATTIE comes in with a glass of water.

ANN

Are you all right?

JOHN

Yeah, yeah, I'm all right.

MATTIE

Here you go.

COLONEL

He's not all right. He's hungry. He won't say it, but I'll say it. We're hungry in the plural. You have sandwiches on the desk. Any of you mind?

CONNELL

Who are you?

JOHN

He's the Colonel. He's my pal.

COLONEL

And I say again, do any of you mind?

CONNELL gestures. COLONEL helps JOHN get up, and the two of them descend on the sandwiches.

CONNELL

Mattie -- think we're gonna need some more.

MATTIE

Yippee -- I'll get maid pay and combat pay.

MATTIE exits. ANN leaves to get more water, and CONNELL gets more chairs. JOHN and COLONEL, with as much decorum as their hunger can spare, tuck in. ANN comes back with glasses and a pitcher of water.

ANN and CONNELL sit while JOHN and COLONEL eat.

ANN

How many are you going to go for?

JOHN

It's been a while.

COLONEL

Yeah, well, thanks for all this largesse, but this John Doe business is batty, if you ask me.

ANN

Nobody asked you.

JOHN

That's never stopped him from saying something about anything.

COLONEL

Trying to improve the world by jumping off buildings. You couldn't improve the world if the building jumped on you!

JOHN

Don't mind the Colonel. He hates people.

CONNELL

He likes you well enough to stick around.

JOHN

I met him in a box car a coupla years ago. I was foolin' around with my harmonica and he comes over and joins in. Haven't been able to shake him since.

JOHN pulls out his harmonica and starts to play the overture from "William Tell." The COLONEL whips out an ocarina and joins him. MATTIE enters with more sandwiches, which she places on the desk.

MATTIE

All this, and music, too.

CONNELL

We've gotta get the photographers in here.

ANN

No, no, no! You can't take pictures of him like that -- eating a sandwich -- and needing a shave! We have to shape this thing carefully.

MATTIE nudges JOHN. JOHN pays attention to her but keeps on eating.

MATTIE

You hear what they're planning for you?

CONNELL

You're right.

MATTIE

You okay with how they're planning your life?

ANN

We'll clean him up and put him in a hotel room -- under bodyguards. We'll make a mystery out of him. You spoke with Mr. Norton?

CONNELL

Says to go for the limit. Build a bonfire.

ANN

So, it's time to talk contract.

CONNELL

It's time to talk contract.

MATTIE nudges JOHN one last time.

MATTIE

And that means you're up.

CONNELL indicates COLONEL.

CONNELL

Can we trust him?

JOHN

I trust him.

CONNELL

Can I trust you?

COLONEL

I hate everything you're doing --

JOHN

He hates everything.

COLONEL

But I got his back.

JOHN

And I got his.

ANN

So it'll be all right with the Colonel.

COLONEL

Until it isn't.

CONNELL

Mattie, got your pad?

MATTIE

I always got my pad.

CONNELL sits face to face with JOHN. MATTIE writes.

CONNELL

Now the first thing I'm going to want is an exact copy of the John Doe letter in your own hand.

ANN

We'll get it done.

CONNELL

Okay with you?

JOHN

Okay with me.

CONNELL

Now this is the agreement. We get an exclusive story under your name day by day from now until Christmas Eve. When this is done, on Christmas day you get one railroad ticket out of town.

JOHN

Two.

CONNELL

Two, sorry.

JOHN

And I won't have to jump?

CONNELL

I don't think it'll come to that.

ANN

He's on the level.

JOHN

And what about my arm?

CONNELL

What about your arm?

JOHN

It'd be great if you could throw in there that you'd pay to have Bone-Setter Brown fix my arm, so I could play again.

CONNELL

The New Bulletin will agree to pay to have your arm fixed by Bone-Setter Brown.

JOHN

Okay.

CONNELL

Mattie here is going to type this up, and then you're going to sign up. You still with me on this?

JOHN

Still with you on this.

CONNELL

This okay with you?

COLONEL

If it's okay with him.

CONNELL

Okay. Mattie?

MATTIE

Typing away, boss.

MATTIE exits.

CONNELL

Ann, get them a suite at the Imperial, get them a bodyguard.
And get John Doe some new clothes -- gray suit, simple.
From now on, you're John Doe, not Long John Willoughby.
That's the name you answer to.

JOHN

All right.

CONNELL

Now, the both of you go find Mattie. John Doe, you sign
what she types up. She's got fifty dollars spending money
for you. And let the good times roll.

COLONEL does not hide the fact that he takes two sandwiches, wraps them
in a napkin, and puts them into a pocket.

CONNELL

We'll make sure he eats.

COLONEL

Nice to know -- I'll still take two.

JOHN

"Good faith" is just another dodge to him.

CONNELL

And for you?

JOHN

I'm honest enough for you.

They pick up their stuff and exit.

ANN

Take it easy, John Doe.

CONNELL

Get them set up at the hotel so we can get the rumors started. Then pound the typewriter. We can't let the Chronicle get any traction on what they've said. We need to blast their heads off.

ANN

Before you pop off too many rounds, don't forget that grand check for a grand.

CONNELL

Even in the rush of events, a memory like an elephant.

ANN

And the grace of a gazelle -- remember, finest pair of legs -- bye.

ANN leaves.

CONNELL

Don't leave out "fierce like a viper" and "foxy like" -- a fox, I guess. A viper and a fox.

CONNELL goes to the phone.

CONNELL

Get me Mr. Norton.

While he waits for the connection, CONNELL stares. Only NORTON's voice pulls him back.

CONNELL

Mr. Norton -- everything's jake. He's signing, I'll walk it over to Legal, and Ann Mitchell's getting him out for some new clothes and a place to stash him. No, I think she's fine -- the money will keep her on the straight track, and she's all ambition, has got a taste for the game -- makes handling her easier. I agree, Mr. Norton -- it's going to be an interesting Christmas this year.

CONNELL hangs up, picks up a sandwich, munches on it.

* * * * *

Scene 6

MUSIC: "Newspapermen Meet Such Interesting People" by Vern Partlow, performed by Pete Seeger.

Living-room of a hotel suite. JOHN, nicely suited, and COLONEL, still in his road clothes, poke their heads in. Behind them is ANGELFACE, their bodyguard, holding a newspaper. Their gear is in a neat pile.

JOHN takes a deep breath, looks pleased.

JOHN

Still smells nice.

COLONEL

You still ain't gonna get me to stay here.

JOHN

Sure you are.

COLONEL

No I'm not. That spot under the bridge where we slept the other night's good enough for me. You remember, don't you, we were headed for the Columbia River country before all this John Doe business came up.

JOHN

Did your ears pop coming up in the elevator?

JOHN looks over at ANGELFACE.

JOHN

Yours? Mine did.

COLONEL

Long John -- I'm trying tell you -- this is no good. You're gonna get used to a lotta stuff that's gonna wreck you. That fifty bucks in your pocket's already beginning to show up on you.

JOHN

Stop worrying, Colonel. I got things covered for us.

JOHN flops into a chair. ANGELFACE hands him a newspaper.

ANGELFACE

Make yourself comfortable.

ANGELFACE turns to COLONEL.

ANGELFACE

I can get you a paper, too.

COLONEL

I don't read papers and I don't listen to radios. I know the world's been shaved by a drunken barber, and I don't have to read about it.

ANGELFACE

Suit yourself.

COLONEL

I'm trying to.

COLONEL crosses to JOHN.

COLONEL

I've seen guys like you go under before, you know. Guys that never had a worry --

JOHN

Except for my arm -- my means of production --

COLONEL

-- then they get some money and go screwy.

JOHN gets up and crosses to the window.

JOHN

That's not me, Colonel. Fifty bucks ain't going to ruin me. And I'm getting my arm fixed out of this.

COLONEL

He starts wantin' to go into restaurants --

JOHN

You're not listening to me again.

COLONEL

He wants to sit at a table and eat salads -- and cup cakes -- and tea -- boy, what that food will do to your system!

JOHN looks at ANGELFACE.

JOHN

Sorry -- got him wound up --

JOHN opens up the window.

COLONEL

The next thing, he can't sleep unless he has a bed. I seen plenty start out with fifty bucks and wind up with a bank account!

ANGELFACE

What's the matter with a bank account?

COLONEL

Long John, when you become a guy with a bank account, they got you. They got you!

ANGELFACE

Who's got him?

COLONEL

The heelots!

ANGELFACE

Who?

JOHN

Hey. There's the City Hall tower I'm supposed to jump from. It's even higher than this.

ANGELFACE

Who's got him?

COLONEL

The heelots!

JOHN leans out. ANGELFACE makes a beeline to him.

JOHN

Wow!

ANGELFACE yanks him back.

ANGELFACE

You ain't supposed to really jump, you know?! Wanta lose me this job?

JOHN

If it's gonna get you in a jam, then I won't jump, early or late.
Say --

JOHN flops back into the chair, picks up the paper.

JOHN

-- is this one of those places where you ring if you want something?

COLONEL

See? It's already working its way into your brain!

ANGELFACE

Just dial zero on the phone.

JOHN

I have always wanted to do this!

JOHN picks up the phone, dials "0".

COLONEL

The heelots are goin' to get you!

JOHN

Will you send up three hamburgers with all the trimmings --

COLONEL

Two.

JOHN

-- three chocolate ice cream sodas --

COLONEL

Two.

JOHN

-- and three pieces of apple pie? No, apple, with cheese.

COLONEL

Two!

JOHN

Yeah. Thank you.

JOHN hangs up and gives COLONEL a big shit-eating grin.

ANGELFACE

Who are the heelots?

COLONEL

Listen, sucker, you ever been broke?

JOHN

You asked for it now.

ANGELFACE

Sure. Mostly often. Which is why I'm doin' this.

COLONEL

All right. You're walking along -- not a nickel in your jeans -- free as the wind -- hundreds pass you by in every line of business -- nice, gentle people -- and they let you alone. Right? Then you get some money, and what happens? All those nice, sweet, gentle people become heelots. A lotta heels. They begin creeping up on you -- trying to sell you something.

JOHN

I told you.

COLONEL

They've got long claws and they get a strangle-hold on you -- and you squirm and duck and shout and you try to push 'em away -- but you haven't got a chance -- they've got you! First thing you know, you own things. A car, for instance.

JOHN

He's good.

COLONEL

Now your whole life is messed up with more stuff -- license fees -- and number plates -- and gas and oil -- and taxes and insurance -- and identification cards -- and letters -- and bills -- and flat tires -- and traffic tickets and motorcycle cops and court rooms -- and lawyers -- and fines -- and a million and one other things.

JOHN

Here it comes across the plate.

COLONEL

And what happens? You're not the free and happy guy you used to be. You gotta have money to pay for all those things -- so you go after what the other feller's got -- and there you are -- you're a heelot yourself!

JOHN gets up, pulls the money out of his pants pocket.

JOHN

You win, Colonel. Here's the fifty. Go on out and get rid of it.

COLONEL

You bet I will! As fast as I can! Gonna get some canned goods -- a fishing rod -- and the rest I'm givin' away.

ANGELFACE

Give away? You can give it to me!

JOHN

No luck -- he wants to save your soul!

COLONEL is heading out when he comes across ANN coming in.

COLONEL

And here's the queen of the heelots herself.

JOHN

I've got it covered, Colonel.

ANN ignores COLONEL.

ANN

Hello there. Well, well! If it isn't the man about town!

COLONEL

I'm goin'!

ANN

So go.

JOHN

I'll catch up with you -- be sure to give all of it away that you can give.

COLONEL

Columbia River's calling.

ANN

So answer it.

COLONEL leaves. ANN indicates to ANGELFACE.

ANN

Stand outside, okay? I've got a photographer coming, so let me know when she's here.

ANGELFACE touches the brim of his hat and leaves.

JOHN

A photographer?

ANN

It's all in what people see, John Doe -- no one reads anymore, so they don't think anymore, they just look, and then they feel, and then they have opinions, and then we

print newspapers. The great chain of being. We're gonna need some action in these pictures.

JOHN

Action?

ANN

Can you do it?

JOHN

Like this?

JOHN winds up in pitching pose -- his left leg lifted up high.

ANN

No, no, no. Not that, not something so -- ordinary. Sit down. Let me comb your hair.

She finger-combs his hair -- straightens his tie. He inhales the fragrance of her hair and likes it.

ANN

There. That's better.

She poses JOHN's face and looks it over.

ANN

You know, John Doe's got a nice face. Does he have a serious face?

JOHN

Can't. I'm feeling too good. And don't tell the Colonel that.

ANN

You are supposed to be a man disgusted with all of civilization.

JOHN

All of it?

ANN

Yes, you're sore at the world. Come on, now.

JOHN tries scowling. ANN laughs.

ANN

No! No, look. You don't have to smell the world! All right, stand up. Now let's see what you look like when you protest.

JOHN

Against what?

ANN

Against anything -- it doesn't matter to them. Just protest.

JOHN laughs, shrugs.

JOHN

You got me.

ANGELFACE opens the door, and EDITH, the photographer, glides in, equipment in hand. ANN speaks to EDITH.

ANN

Watch him close.

ANN turns back to JOHN.

ANN

I'm the umpire, and you just cut the heart of the plate with your fast one and I call it a ball. Ball! And it ain't the first one I've called like that. Ball! Ball!

JOHN suddenly becomes the angry pitcher advancing on the ump -- he's made the shift in a heartbeat.

JOHN

Oh, you did, huh?

ANN

Yeah, I did!

JOHN

Why can't you call right, you bone-headed, pig-eared, pot-bellied --

ANN

Grab it, Edith, grab it!

LIGHT: A big strobe effect as EDITH captures JOHN's mad look.

* * * * *

Scene 7

IMAGE: A PROJECTION of the JOHN DOE "angry man" picture.

SOUND: JOHN's VOICEOVER, loud and with echoes, as if he's in a large stadium.

SUPERIMPOSED over JOHN DOE's picture is a CIRCULATION CHART -- showing the circulation of The New Bulletin on a constant rise.

JOHN

"I protest against the collapse of decency in the world."
"I protest against corruption in local politics." "I protest
against politicians being in league with crime." "I protest
against welfare being used as political football." "I protest
against County Hospitals shutting out the needy." "I protest
against all the brutality and slaughter in the world."

* * * * *

Scene 8

SOUND: The echoing reverb of JOHN DOE's voice fading away.

The study of D.B. NORTON. NORTON, ANN, and CONNELL enter. NORTON is dressed in what can only be called Fashionable Fascist: a black shirt under a military-style jacket, a leather strap across the chest, leather belt -- but fashionable, tailored. The look should suggest Mussolini, but only suggest.

ANN

Personally, Mr. Norton, I think it's just plain nuts if you let him drop it now. You should see John Doe's fan mail! He's going over like a house on fire!

CONNELL goes to speak, but NORTON gestures for him to hold.

NORTON

What are you afraid of, Connell? It's doubled our circulation, on the brink of even more.

CONNELL

Because everybody knows, somewhere inside, that this John Doe thing is a phony -- and they insist on seeing the John Doe in the flesh.

ANN

So let's make him real. We've spent all this money and time building up the mystery -- let's reveal it. Mr. Norton -- why not put him on your radio station?

NORTON's reaction shows that he likes the idea.

NORTON

What good's it having a station if I don't use it?

CONNELL

Because we don't know what this bush-league pitcher will do under pressure. I walked in yesterday -- he's standing on a table flycasting and looking down in the dumps. He says he misses his Colonel. Get him out of town before this thing explodes in our pants!

ANN

If you do, Mr. Norton, you're just as much of a loser as he is! And excuse me for saying so.

CONNELL

Because you hate thinking you'll lose your meal ticket.

ANN

That meal ticket covers us both, and I like mine!

ANN turns to NORTON.

ANN

But it's also a windfall for you, who's got his own ambitions. It's not a secret, Mr. Norton, about you and politics -- why do you think the Governor's more nervous than a cow with a buck-tooth calf? That's why you bought the newspaper,

isn't it? And the station? Put John Doe on the air. He can say what we want him to say, and they'll listen to him. We can manage how anyone gets to him -- we'll script that, too. He'll have a long leash, but he will have a leash.

The two men's reactions couldn't be more different: CONNELL looks like he needs milk for his upset stomach, NORTON is fascinated.

ANN

Me? I'd forget the Governor, the Mayor and all small fry like that. This can arouse national interest! If he's made a hit around here -- he can do it everywhere else in the country! And you'll be pulling the strings, Mr. Norton!

NORTON turns to CONNELL.

NORTON

Go to the office and arrange for some radio time.

CONNELL

D.B., don't fall for --

NORTON

And I want it done as soon as possible.

CONNELL

Okay. Okay. Consider it done. Come on, let's go.

NORTON indicates for ANN to stay.

NORTON

Miss Mitchell --

CONNELL shrugs and goes. ANN waits.

NORTON

Sit down. This John Doe idea -- it was yours.

ANN

Yes, sir.

NORTON

How much money do you get?

ANN

How much money do I get?

NORTON

It's a simple question.

ANN

You can round up or round down, but it's still thirty dollars.

NORTON

And what are you after? What do you want? A journalistic career? Respect for your craft?

ANN realizes that this is a make-or-break answer.

ANN

Money.

NORTON laughs a good hearty laugh.

NORTON

I'm glad to hear somebody admit it. Do you suppose you could write a radio speech that would put this man across?

ANN

I'm sure I can.

NORTON

Do it, and I'll give you a hundred dollars a week.

ANN

A hundred dollars.

NORTON

A week. That's not enough?

ANN

Don't mistake being dumbfounded, Mr. Norton, for being ungrateful. I've just never had --

NORTON

That's only the beginning. You play your cards right, and you'll never have to worry about money again.

ANN'S eyes brighten. NORTON points at her.

NORTON

Ah, I knew it. I could read it.

NORTON pushes a button on his desk. TED SHELDON, dressed in an actual Fascist-looking uniform, enters.

NORTON

My nephew, Ted Sheldon -- he handles my security. This is Ann Mitchell.

ANN

How do you do.

TED

How do you do!

NORTON

See that Miss Mitchell gets a car to take her home.

TED

You always give me the hard work! That pleasure would be all mine.

ANN

Thank you very much for everything.

NORTON

And Miss Mitchell -- from now it'd be better if you work directly with me.

ANN

If that's what you want.

NORTON

I always say what I want.

TED offers ANN his arm, which ANN accepts. They exit. With a smile on his face, NORTON gives his suit an extra-smart tug to set it right. And then one more for good measure.

* * * * *

Scene 9

SOUND: The sound of typewriter keys pounding against the platen, paper ripped out and crumpled.

ANN in her living room, at a typewriter, a litter of crumpled paper on the floor. ANN'S MOTHER comes in looking for something on ANN's desk.

ANN

Irene and Ellen in bed?

MOTHER

And sleeping. Though with all this paper thumping around out here --

ANN

Stick a fork through me! I'm done. I'll never get this speech right.

MOTHER

Oh, yes you will, Ann dear -- you're very clever.

ANN

Clever as a lead weight. What are you looking for?

MOTHER

Your purse. I need ten dollars.

ANN

I gave you fifty the other day.

MOTHER

Yes, I know, but Mrs. Burke had her baby yesterday. Nine pounds! And there wasn't a thing in the house -- and then this morning the Community Chest lady came around and --

ANN

And the fifty's all gone. Who's the ten for?

MOTHER

The Websters.

ANN

The Websters.

MOTHER

Those lovely people your father used to --

ANN

I know who they are.

MOTHER

I thought I'd buy them some groceries. It's a shame, those poor --

ANN

You're marvelous, Ma, just like Dad used to be -- and look what that got him.

MOTHER

Don't get upset.

ANN

Do you realize a couple of weeks ago we didn't have enough to eat ourselves?

MOTHER

But these people are in such need, and we have plenty now.

ANN

That thousand dollars is practically gone because we owed everybody in town. You've gotta stop giving our money away!

MOTHER

Ann!

ANN

I'm sorry -- sorry, sorry. I'm just upset about all -- this. I have this great chance to get somewhere, get us some security, and I'm stuck. If I can put this speech over, your Mrs. Burke can have six babies and all the trimmings!

MOTHER

Stuck on what?

ANN

I don't know! I created somebody who says he'll give up his life for a principle, hundreds of thousands of people are gonna listen to him over the radio and, unless he says something that's, well, that's --

ANN gestures to mean the word "sensational."

ANN

There goes the money, there goes --

MOTHER

Well, honey, I don't know what you want to end up with, but if it's like all the others, I don't think anybody'll listen.

ANN

What do they want to hear?

MOTHER

There are so many complaining political speeches -- everyone's got a plan to fix how rotten the world is. People are tired of all the doom and despair.

ANN

It's not great out there.

MOTHER

It doesn't need to be in their faces all the time. If you're going to get people to listen to him, have him say something simple and real, something with, I don't know, hope in it. If your father were alive, he'd know what to say.

ANN

The Doctor certainly would have the cure.

MOTHER

Wait a minute --

ANN

What? You've got your "I've decided something" look.

MOTHER crosses to a desk, finds a key and unlocks a compartment. She extracts a diary from the compartment and moves back to ANN.

MOTHER

This is your father's diary.

ANN

I never knew he wrote a diary.

MOTHER

There's enough in it for a hundred speeches, simple things people ought to hear nowadays, be reminded of. Be careful with it.

ANN

You bet I will.

MOTHER

I'll let you work.

MOTHER leaves. ANN turns her attention to the diary. As she opens it, her eyes and face sparkle. She begins to type like a fury.

* * * * *

Scene 10

SOUND: The sound of typewriter keys pounding against the platen.

The hotel suite. JOHN now has a baseball glove, and he's pitching an imaginary baseball to COLONEL, who's wearing a catcher's mitt. ANGELFACE watches.

JOHN pitches. COLONEL smacks the mitt.

ANGELFACE

Ba-ll!

COLONEL

I don't know how you're gonna stand it around here till after Christmas.

JOHN

It's a job, just a job.

COLONEL throws the "ball" back to JOHN.

COLONEL

Job, nothing -- I know why you're hangin' around -- not the "job" --

COLONEL gives JOHN a signal. JOHN waves it off.

COLONEL

You're stuck on that Ann Mitchell -- that's all a guy needs is to get hooked by a woman like her.

JOHN

I am not stuck on her.

COLONEL gives him another sign.

ANGELFACE

You have a lot of opinions.

JOHN nods, winds up, pitches. This is a hit, for his eyes shoot skyward, and he quickly turns -- watching the progress of the ball as it is flung to first base. From his frown we know the man is safe.

COLONEL

Not opinions -- facts.

ANGELFACE

A single?

JOHN

First baseman dropped the ball.

ANGELFACE

Butterfingers!

JOHN keeps his eye on the man on first.

COLONEL

A woman like her you have to handle at arms-length and welder's gloves -- and LJ, your arms are not that long!

JOHN catches the "ball" from his infielder -- gets into position -- nods to his catcher -- raises his hands in the air, takes a peek toward first base --

and suddenly wheels around and whips the "ball" toward first base. Almost immediately his face lights up.

ANGELFACE

Get him?

JOHN winks. He tucks the glove under his arm and massages the "ball" with both hands.

ANGELFACE

That makes it three to two -- our favor.

JOHN

Seventh inning stretch!

COLONEL flops on his back. JOHN paces, massaging the "ball."

ANGELFACE

You must've been a pretty good pitcher.

JOHN

About ready for the majors when I chipped a bone in my elbow pitchin' a nineteen-inning game! A major league scout came down after the game with a contract, but I couldn't lift my arm to sign it. But I'll be okay again soon.

ANGELFACE

Yeah, well, wish you luck with that, but still --

JOHN

What do you mean?

COLONEL

Uh-oh.

ANGELFACE

Well, you'll never be able to really play again.

JOHN

What are you talking about? I just told you I'm gonna get --

ANGELFACE

Think baseball's gonna hire a guy mixed up in a racket?

COLONEL

Columbia River, Long John, I can hear the --

ANGELFACE

Naw, he's gotta hear this. This John Doe business. As soon as it comes out, you'll be washed up in baseball.

JOHN

I never thought about that.

COLONEL

The clear cool river, LJ.

ANGELFACE

And what about all the kids that look up to ball players? What are they gonna think about you?

COLONEL takes out his ocarina and plays.

JOHN

What d'ya think, Colonel?

COLONEL is not interested in the affairs of men.

JOHN

Colonel --

COLONEL

Elevators are still runnin' from here to the ground floor, as I understand it.

COLONEL goes back to playing.

ANGELFACE

I know how you can get something out of this mess.

JOHN

How's that?

ANGELFACE

When you get on that radio, all you have to do is say the whole thing's a frame-up. Makes you a hero for telling the truth.

JOHN

But my arm?

ANGELFACE

You're not being a hero for free. I know somebody that'll give you five thousand dollars to get on that radio and tell the truth.

COLONEL

Five thousand dollars?

ANGELFACE

And you get it right away. You don't have to wait till Christmas -- it can be Christmas now.

COLONEL

You have it on you now?

ANGELFACE

The guy paying it needs to know if he's goin' for it.

COLONEL

They're closing in on you!

JOHN

Who's putting this up?

ANGELFACE

Look, I like you. This business just uses people up -- get something out of it while you can.

ANGELFACE takes a folded piece of paper out of his jacket pocket.

ANGELFACE

Here's the speech -- take it --

JOHN takes it.

COLONEL

Five thousand dollars, Long John, five thousand heelots comin'. A whole army of them! Thirty pieces of silver and all.

ANGELFACE

It's on the level. But it's a one-time offer, limited edition. You read that -- car'll be waiting by the side door for you, money inside.

JOHN stares at the paper, at COLONEL, at ANGELFACE.

COLONEL

What's it gonna be, Long John, whose side you gonna be on?

ANGELFACE

Your friend makes some excellent points for once.

* * * * *

Scene 11

SOUND: Voices, moving equipment, phones: the radio station.

IMAGE: A big clock ticking away and an ON AIR sign that is off.

Everything shifts to the radio station. ANGELFACE disappears. JOHN puts on his suitcoat, puts the speech in an inner pocket.

COLONEL sidles in next to JOHN. ANN bustles in, bag slung over her shoulder. With ANN comes STORMY, who's got a clipboard and is all no-nonsense. CONNELL follows a few steps behind.

STORMY

Here he is.

ANN

John, John -- all set?

STORMY

We gotta keep it moving --

STORMY points to the big clock.

ANN

Okay, okay, I just need a moment.

STORMY

I can give you half of that.

STORMY steps off to the side. ANN takes papers out of her bag.

ANN

Now, look, John. Here's the speech, in caps and double-spaced so you won't have any trouble reading it. Not nervous, are you?

JOHN

No.

ANN

Of course not. He wouldn't be.

JOHN

Who?

ANN

John Doe. The one in there.

ANN points to the speech.

ANN

Everything in that speech are things a certain man believed in -- my father, John -- a kind of John Doe himself, like you.

JOHN

I'm not your --

ANN

And when he talked, people listened, just like they'll listen to you.

JOHN

Why would anyone listen [to me] --

STORMY

Half a moment's coming due.

ANN

Okay! You needn't be nervous, John. Just remember to make it sound sincere.

JOHN

That's all I gotta remember, huh?

ANN

Yes. Sound sincere, and that'll get you through.

ANN kisses his cheek.

ANN

Good luck.

ANN taps his right shoulder.

ANN

I'll be sitting right there.

STORMY steps back in.

STORMY

I gotta get him up to the mike.

ANN

He's all yours -- treat him well.

As STORMY brings JOHN up to the microphone, CONNELL joins ANN.

CONNELL

You aren't going soft on him, are you?

ANN

Not hard-boiled me.

CONNELL

Not hard-boiled you, no.

STORMY brings JOHN to the microphone.

STORMY

In about three-and-a-half seconds a nervous man comes out of that door and rings the bell that gets this train moving. So, to keep it simple.

STORMY points at his mouth.

STORMY

From that.

STORMY points at the microphone.

STORMY

Into that. With sincerity. That's the secret of radio. From that into that. I am now going to abandon you to him. Good luck, bucko.

STORMY walks away. JOHN looks at ANN's speech, puts his hand on the piece of paper that's in his suitcoat pocket. He is very much alone. COLONEL sees this and sidles up to him.

COLONEL

We can still get out of here alive, LJ. The door's right there.

As STORMY predicted, the EMCEE bustles in.

EMCEE

Hey, what are you doing here?

COLONEL

That's what I'd like to know.

EMCEE

Out. Out.

JOHN

He's a friend of mine -- I need him here, I need him close by.

EMCEE

Then stand right there and give him your silent support.

COLONEL slaps JOHN's right shoulder.

COLONEL

Long John, I'm right here, I'm right here.

COLONEL steps back. JOHN turns to COLONEL, but EMCEE pulls him back.

EMCEE

Nuh-uh -- right here.

STORMY

Stand by, everyone!

EMCEE

Like she said, from here into there.

STORMY

On my count: Three. Two.

STORMY mouths "One."

SOUND: An orchestra fanfare.

The ON AIR sign goes on. The moment the music starts, STORMY's work is done, and she exits. As soon as the music stops, EMCEE speaks dramatically, holding one hand to his ear.

At the same moment, a light comes up on NORTON, listening to the speech on the radio in his study.

EMCEE

And good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Kenneth Frye, speaking for The New Bulletin, "a streamlined newspaper for a streamlined age." Tonight we give you something entirely new and different. Standing beside me is the young man who has declared publicly that on Christmas Eve he intends to commit suicide, giving as his reason, quote: "I protest against the state of civilization." End quote. Ladies and gentlemen, The New Bulletin takes pleasure in presenting the man who is fast becoming the most talked-of person in the whole country, JOHN DOE!

SOUND: There is an outburst of music.

JOHN reaches into his suitcoat pocket as he looks at COLONEL. COLONEL gives him a pitch signal. JOHN nods at COLONEL's sign.

EMCEE nudges him, points to the microphone. JOHN pushes the paper back and starts, haltingly, with ANN's speech.

JOHN

Ladies and gentlemen: I am the man you all know as John Doe. I took that name because it seems to describe -- because it seems to describe -- the average man, and that's me. Well, it was me -- before I said I was gonna jump off City Hall at midnight on Christmas Eve. Now I'm getting all sorts of attention. The Mayor and the Governor, for instance. They don't like those articles that say what I've been talking about.

JOHN pauses -- this next part is off-script.

JOHN

And I guess because all of that, I even got a bribe tonight to come up here and say that I'm not really what people have been saying I am. I don't know who tried it, but I'll tell you it didn't work. I am who I am. I'm still here.

NORTON leans in to the radio, drawn in. JOHN goes back to his script.

JOHN

Sorry. Those articles that say what I've been talking about -- right. Well, people like the Mayor and the Governor --

JOHN suddenly laughs -- he's getting into the swing of things.

JOHN

Of course people like the Mayor and the Governor -- I like the Mayor and the Governor -- but they and the others can stop worrying. I'm not gonna talk about them. This is not about them.

ANN, COLONEL, CONNELL, and NORTON: deep into their own thoughts.

JOHN

I'm gonna talk about us, the average guys, the John Does. If anybody should ask you what the average John Doe is

like, you couldn't tell him because he -- and she -- it's John Doe and Jane Doe, really --

ANN gives him a big smile for his on-the-spot invention of "Jane Doe."

JOHN

-- they're a million and one things. They're Mr. Big and Mrs. Small. They're simple but with lots of common sense. Honest, but with a bit of larceny in the heart -- seldom walk by a public telephone without shoving a finger into the slot to see if somebody left something behind.

JOHN holds up a finger, even though he's on radio.

JOHN

I know -- I got the scars on my own finger to prove it!

Even EMCEE chuckles behind his hand.

NORTON is absorbed. Behind him, in the shadows, MAID enters without a sound, listening as well.

JOHN

We're a great family, the John Does and Jane Does. We're the meek who are supposed to inherit the earth. You'll find us everywhere. We raise the crops, dig the mines, work the factories, raise the kids, wash the clothes and cook cook cook till everyone is full and can sleep soundly.

MAID inches in. NORTON doesn't hear anything except JOHN.

JOHN

We've existed since time began. We built the pyramids, we saw Christ crucified, we've been dying in war after war after war after war! In our struggle for freedom we've always bounced back! Because we're the people -- and we're tough! And when we all pull in the same direction, nothing can stop us!

MAID and NORTON are both absorbed in the words.

JOHN

I know a lot of you are saying "What can I do? I'm just a little punk. I don't count." Well, you're dead wrong! The little punks have always counted because in the long run the character of a country is the sum total of the character of its little punks.

NORTON turns and sees MAID, who starts to draw back. He motions her closer and nods toward the radio, a question on his face, as if to say, "You like this?" She nods yes. They both listen.

At this point, it's not clear if JOHN is reading ANN's speech or making it up as he goes along.

JOHN

But we've all got to get in there and pitch! We can't win the old ball game unless we have team work. And that's where every member of the Doe family comes in! It's up to all of them to get together with all their teammates! And your teammate, my friends, is the person next door to you. Your neighbors! You're gonna need them and they are gonna need you. So check them out! If they're sick, make a call. If they're hungry, feed them! If they're out of work, find 'em a job. Tear down the fences that separate teammates, tear down those hates and prejudices! I know a lot of you are saying to yourselves: "He's asking for a miracle. He's expecting people to change all of a sudden." Well, you're wrong. It's no miracle because I see it happen once every year. And so do you. At Christmas! There's something great about that spirit, to see what it does to people, all kinds of people.

ANN and NORTON connect, though they don't really see each other. Even COLONEL has lost a little of his sour look -- but only a little.

JOHN

Now, why can't that spirit last the whole year? If each and every Doe would make that spirit last three hundred and sixty-five days -- 366 in a leap year -- we'd develop such a strength, we'd create such a tidal wave of good will, that no human force could stand against it. Yes, sir, my friends, the meek can inherit the earth, but only when neighbors start loving their neighbors. You'd better start right now. Don't

wait till the game is called on account of darkness! Wake up! You are the hope of the world!

JOHN is finished. EMCEE realizes this and that he has to speak.

EMCEE

And that concludes this evening's broadcast by JOHN DOE, hosted by The New Bulletin, "a streamlined newspaper for a streamlined age." Until next time --

EMCEE gestures to the booth.

SOUND: Musical fanfare playing.

IMAGE: ON AIR sign goes off.

IMAGE: Clock runs.

NORTON sits up, turns and looks at MAID. The spell is broken. She melts away. NORTON turns off the radio. Lights out on the study.

ANN hugs him. CONNELL and EMCEE congratulate JOHN. All this overlaps and overwhelms JOHN. [Lines can also be ad-libbed to cover the time.]

ANN

That was wonderful.

CONNELL

Good work, John, good work -- you had me by the end.

EMCEE

Well done, Mr. Doe, well done.

JOHN knows one thing: after the "flush," he doesn't know what he's feeling. JOHN turns to COLONEL with a terrified look on this face.

COLONEL catches it. He beelines to JOHN's side.

COLONEL

Excuse me, folks, excuse me, excuse, Long John and I've got a date with clear cold river!

COLONEL pulls JOHN out of their clutches and out of the studio before any of them can react and stop their exit.

COLONEL

Out of my way, out of my way, you heelots!

And off they go, leaving everyone dumbfounded and eating their dust.

* * * * *

Scene 12

SOUND: Sound collage: cacophony of congratulations and other voices, snippets of the speech, then a tailing off into birdsong, water purling, maybe a distant train.

LIGHT: Dawn.

JOHN and COLONEL are in their spot under a bridge. COLONEL stares into the embers of a fire. JOHN sleeps, coat bunched under his head.

JOHN suddenly shakes himself awake.

COLONEL

It's okay. It's okay, Long John.

JOHN

I was just remembering everything -- everything coming in like a flood.

COLONEL

Flood's gone.

JOHN

Five thousand bucks sewed up!

COLONEL

You really think there was gonna be a car by the side door with money in the back seat?

JOHN

You're right --

COLONEL

I am right.

JOHN

Such an idiot --

COLONEL

Stop beating yourself up -- it's really ugly to watch. You're hungry, you're desperate, the clock feels like it's running out on your arm -- enough to make anyone an idiot -- it's turned the whole country into an idiot, so why not you, too?

JOHN

What a sucker she played me for!

COLONEL

She's the queen heelot -- no matter what you hoped for. You're lucky she proved you wrong.

LIGHT: Getting brighter, though still a shadowy early dawn.

JOHN

And that speech!

COLONEL laughs.

COLONEL

Tear down all the fences.

JOHN

Her words, not mine.

COLONEL

She's obviously never owned a yard. Tear a picket off your neighbor's fence, he'd sue you, maybe shoot you, before he'd give you a handshake and a thanks! Try to put that into a speech.

JOHN pauses, pulls at his lower lip, looks at COLONEL, looks away.

COLONEL

Long John -- what'd'ya got goin' on the face of yours?

JOHN

Because something strange also happened while I was standing there -- it's got me confused -- for a moment in front of that microphone, I wasn't there. I mean it, Colonel, I wasn't there.

COLONEL

Where'd you go?

JOHN

I was inside the words. I knew they were her words -- who knows where she stole 'em --

JOHN takes a deep cleansing breath, shakes his body loose.

JOHN

But it was true, Colonel -- not her words any more, no matter where she fingered 'em -- I was lifted right down into them.

COLONEL

What did that give you?

JOHN

I don't know if it gave me anything, like a hard fact -- more just a release -- "John Doe" wasn't like a weight anymore --

COLONEL

You got yourself a God-blast --

LIGHT: A much brighter morning now.

COLONEL gets up, starts pulling things together.

JOHN

What if "true" was what I was feeling, Colonel?

COLONEL

You need to clean that sludge outta your system, toot sweet -- no good ever comes from a God-blast.

JOHN

It felt good for as long as it lasted.

COLONEL

And how did coming back to earth feel after that? Gotta keep that in mind, too -- God-blasts aren't built to last forever. C'mon.

COLONEL plays his ocarina. JOHN plays his harmonica. They don't play for long, but it re-connects them.

COLONEL

Come on, LJ -- we got us a river we gotta get to.

JOHN

You're right -- we gotta get away from here so that I can know what I'm thinking.

* * * * *

Scene 13

LIGHT: Lights shift -- hot early morning.

JOHN and COLONEL stand at the edge of a town, gear in hand.

JOHN

Your feet hurt?

COLONEL

My feet hurt.

JOHN

My dogs are barking. Close one back there. They looked like they knew me.

COLONEL

Your mug's plastered on a lot of newsprint.

JOHN

They just ran off, like they heard a phone ringing. How much money we got left?

COLONEL

Still four bits.

JOHN

You really did give away the fifty.

COLONEL

All but four bits.

JOHN

Which I guess makes it doughnuts for us, huh?

COLONEL

That's in our ballpark.

JOHN

I wish I could call up room service.

COLONEL

Well, ya can't, ya mug -- all's we got now is self-service.

They hesitate, then take a step.

Right into "Dan's Beanery," with DAN at the counter and MADGE, his customer. MADGE she keeps cadging looks between her paper and JOHN.

DAN

Doughnuts, right? I can tell by yer clothes and the dirt under your nails.

MADGE

Psst!

DAN

'Scuse me.

DAN goes to MADGE, who shows him the newspaper. DAN looks from the newspaper to JOHN and COLONEL and back again. COLONEL nudges JOHN.

COLONEL

We should get outta here.

JOHN sees the attention they're getting and nods "yes." But before they can move, MADGE blocks their exit while DAN hustles off.

MADGE

Don't run!

MADGE holds up the newspaper, which shows the John Doe "angry" photo.

MADGE

John Doe! I can't believe you're here. You just don't know how much what you said the other night made such a difference to us.

JOHN

That's nice, but we gotta --

MADGE

Why, I'm head of our town's John Doe Club!

JOHN and COLONEL look at each other like they have no idea what she's talking about -- which they don't.

MADGE

Dan, there, the guy who was goin' to give you your food, he's my vice-president. He's my husband, too, which makes the whole thing easier!

COLONEL

Where'd he go?

JOHN

John Doe Club?

COLONEL

Where'd your husband go?

MADGE

Make a phone call. "If you see this man, call," he saw you, and so he's gone off to call.

COLONEL

That's why they were running --

MADGE

A reward, sure, but just seein' you, hearing your voice -- it's reward enough.

JOHN

John Doe Clubs?

COLONEL

Better than Colonel Clubs. This is not good.

SOUND: Police siren. Then others getting closer and closer.

COLONEL

You think your feet hurt now.

SOUND: Cars pull up, doors open and close.

DAN comes back, sandwiches in one hand and two coffees in the other.

DAN

You fellas never got your food.

SOUND: Muttering of a gathering crowd, muscular voices saying "Stay back" and "Make room."

COLONEL and JOHN, cornered, decide to sit down and eat. NORTON and ANN appear. DAN and MADGE back off.

ANN

Hello, John.

NORTON looks over at DAN and MADGE.

NORTON

Sir --

JOHN

His name is Dan. That's Madge, his wife. They own this place.

NORTON

Dan and Madge -- would you mind waiting outside? We need to talk to Mr. Doe alone.

DAN

Sure, of course.

MADGE speaks to JOHN.

MADGE

Would you -- do you think you might be able to speak to our John Doe Club?

DAN

Madge.

NORTON

We'll see, Madge -- we'll have to see.

MADGE

Okay -- be great if you could.

DAN and MADGE edge out -- but they can eavesdrop.

JOHN

Lot of nerve chasing us down.

ANN

John, people are forming John Doe Clubs.

JOHN

We know -- Dan and Madge, they run one here.

ANN

That makes nine! We know of eight already --

JOHN

Why they do something as foolish as that?

ANN

To carry out what you said in your speech.

JOHN

Your speech, not mine. I don't care. We're on our way -- and we don't like the idea of being stopped.

ANN

But you don't know about the thousands of telegrams and letters you've received --

JOHN

Not me -- this guy you made up got them --

ANN

Are you going to tell me that you didn't feel anything when you gave that speech? That you didn't feel John Doe?

JOHN looks at COLONEL, decides to stay mum about the God-blast.

JOHN

I said I don't care.

ANN

John, you are John Doe. Mr. Norton wants to back what you started -- John Doe Clubs everywhere. He wants to send you on a lecture tour.

NORTON

This could grow into a powerful movement. It would make a difference in people's lives.

COLONEL

They mean, Long John, pitch you for nineteen innings and then throw you away, just like what happened before --

JOHN

Colonel is right. This thing belongs to the newspaper, it belongs to you -- just a bunch of whipped-up egg whites. Baseball is all I want, and I'm sticking to that.

NORTON

Good luck, with that arm of yours. And your reputation.

JOHN

Come on, Colonel, let's get out of here.

ANN

John!

COLONEL, beaming, pockets a few sandwiches. But as they move toward the door, DAN and MADGE slip into the scene. NORTON gets an idea, just as he did with his maid.

NORTON

Dan and Madge -- do you have something you would like to say to Mr. Doe before he leaves?

MADGE

You're leaving?

COLONEL

He's leaving.

JOHN

We're leaving

MADGE

He's leaving, Dan. Dan!

DAN

Okay -- okay. We got a bang out of your broadcast. Madge kept saying "That man's right, honey." And I kept saying, "Well, that's fine, but how's a guy gonna go around loving the kind of neighbors we got?"

MADGE

But we realized there was only one way to do it -- and that was to, well, just do it. So we did it. We invited people to come here and talk.

DAN

Over forty people showed up, here. None of us knew what to do at first, then we just sorta did know, and before we got through the first glass of lemondade --

MADGE

We had a John Doe Club.

DAN

A John Doe Club.

MADGE

Because of you, Mr. Doe. We've got committees that go find out about people and help them out.

DAN

You never, until you look, know what you're going to find.
And we wouldn't've done it, if you hadn't said what you said
the way you said it.

MADGE

Oh, and another thing -- no politicians. The Mayor wanted
to join the club --

DAN

Oh, that was funny!

MADGE

And we all said, polite, you know, but firm, that no politicians
could join, only John Does, because, well, you know how
politicians are.

Everyone laughs except JOHN and COLONEL. JOHN is touched but
troubled. COLONEL is, well, COLONEL. The laughter tails off.

MADGE

You're a wonderful man, Mr. Doe, and it strikes me you can
be mighty useful walking around for a while.

NORTON

Dan, Madge -- thank you. Just -- thank you.

ANN

You were great.

ANN walks over to JOHN and gives him a direct look.

COLONEL

I can see she's reeling you in. One last chance, LJ -- comin'
to the river or not?

JOHN doesn't move. COLONEL opens the door and when he sees the
townspeople gathered outside, he yells at them.

COLONEL

Gangway, you heelots!

And away he goes.

JOHN

Hey, Colonel! Wait a minute! Colonel!

But COLONEL doesn't return. There is a trapped, sad look on JOHN's face. ANN lays her hand on his pitching arm.

ANN

It is going to be a wonderful thing, John.

JOHN

Which John are you talking to?

DAN and MADGE shake JOHN's hand. NORTON smiles like the cat with the bird. JOHN looks at the empty door.

INTERMISSION

Scene 14

MUSIC: Brisk, train-traveling kind of music.

A large projection of the United States, over the top of which runs the title "John Doe Clubs." There are nine pegs scattered over the map, indicating where the clubs are.

As the following montage proceeds, pegs begin to appear in abundance on the map.

MUSIC: Still keeping up that brisk, train-traveling kind of music.

- FLASHES of banners reading: "JOHN DOE COMING" -- "JOHN DOE TONIGHT" "GOODBYE JOHN DOE, CALL AGAIN"
- CLOSE-UPS of JOHN speaking -- superimposed over long shots of audiences of various types.
- FLASHES of ANN typing.
- FLASHES of sheets of paper being ripped out of a typewriter.
- FLASHES of JOHN on the radio -- with ANN by his side.
- FLASHES of people listening.

- FLASHES of people applauding.
- SERIES of SIGNS being nailed up: "JOHN DOE CLUB -- BE A BETTER NEIGHBOR."
- SUPERIMPOSED SHOTS of JOHN and ANN riding in trains, planes and automobiles. City names zoom up: Kansas City, Chicago, Buffalo, Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York.
- Map being covered with pegs.
- A PICTURE of JOHN DOE on front page of Time magazine, with a caption under it reading: "MAN OF THE HOUR."

As these sights flash by, they are interspersed with VOICES.

VOICE

This has been growing like wildfire! If they only made demands, but the John Does ask for nothing!

VOICE

People are going off relief! If this keeps up, I'll be the one out of a job!

VOICE

As soon as he gets strong enough, we'll find out what John Doe wants!

VOICE

I'm sorry, boss. They just won't let anybody talk politics to them. It's -- it's crazy.

VOICE

We've got to get to them! They represent millions of voters!

Final image of the map. Nearly every state in the union has pegs in it. The sign over the map changes to "THE JOHN DOE CONVENTION".

NORTON is in a spotlight, speaking to the organizing committee of the John Doe Convention.

NORTON

My road crew has been doing a superb job following John Doe into every town and seeing that the clubs are properly organized and the charters issued. I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, we've received so many applications for charters to the John Doe Clubs that we're working faster than a one-armed wallpaper hanger to take care of them.

NORTON indicates the map.

NORTON

Isn't it a wonderful sight? The work you have done as the organizing committee for this John Doe convention will put our city on the map. Twenty-four hundred John Doe clubs are sending delegates! And we will roll out the welcome mat for them and honor John Doe for all his work! My newspapers and radio stations will work tirelessly to promote this convention. The biggest pin on this map up there will be our city! And now, if you will just step into the outer office and look your prettiest because there are photographers there to take pictures of this historic moment.

LIGHTS: A storm of flashing strobes, then shift to NORTON's office.

IMAGE: Map is still visible.

CONNELL in NORTON's office, looking ill at ease. He consults a list.

NORTON

Anything else?

CONNELL

We've covered pretty much everything -- the convention's all arranged just like you wanted it. And Ann and John are due to touch down from the western run in about an hour. All the pieces'll be in place.

CONNELL closes the pad of paper, slips it into his pocket, and waits.

NORTON

Forget something?

CONNELL

No.

NORTON

Then what?

CONNELL

You hired me because I'm supposed to know my way around, and so this is what I know: this John Doe movement costs you a fortune

NORTON

But?

CONNELL

I've got two pieces here and two pieces there -- but I'm a sucker if I can make four out of 'em. Other than circulation, what's the pay-off to you?

NORTON

You can know that I will have the satisfaction of knowing that my money has been spent for a worthy cause.

CONNELL stares at NORTON a moment, then picks up his hat.

CONNELL

I see. I'd better stick to running the paper and the station.

NORTON

Wise choice. And Connell -- I'd like to have the John Doe contract, all the receipts for the money we have advanced him, and the letter Miss Mitchell wrote, for which I gave her a thousand dollars.

CONNELL

Yes. Sure.

NORTON

Before they touch down tonight.

CONNELL

I'll have it couriered right over when I get back to the office.

NORTON

You do that.

CONNELL

All right.

CONNELL puts on his hat and leaves.

NORTON looks up at the map, letting his eyes roam across it.

SOUND: Sound of an airplane in flight, circa 1941. But not so loud as to drown out the conversation.

LIGHT: Some overhead light.

Two seats, John on the aisle. ANN has a pad of paper out and she's working over some figures. They both look exhausted.

Two seats behind them as well, in one of which sits CHARLIE, no overhead light on.

JOHN

How many people are you figuring there we've talked to already, outside the radio, I mean?

ANN

Looks like about three hundred thousand.

JOHN

Three hundred thousand. What makes 'em do it, what makes them come and then actually do something? I've been trying to figure that out.

ANN sighs, leans her head back.

ANN

I don't know, especially since what we've been handing them -- they've heard it a million times, it's nothing new: "Love thy neighbor," "Clouds have silver linings," "Turn the other cheek."

JOHN

You shouldn't be hard on them.

ANN

Just not sure I trust them.

JOHN

Now you're sounding like the Colonel -- wherever he is.

ANN

He's not here with you.

JOHN

Don't be hard on him, either -- he's been more right about people than I have, lots of times.

They lapse into silence.

JOHN

I never thought much about people before. Always just somebody to fill up the bleachers. The only time I worried about them was when they didn't come see me pitch. So I didn't really see them because I was using them. But now -- in their faces -- I can see -- I can feel that they are hungry for something. Maybe they are just lonely and want somebody to say hello to. I know how they feel. I think I've been lonely and hungry for something practically all my life.

ANN forces a smile. They are saved by PILOT'S VOICE.

PILOT'S VOICE

Okay, folks, about thirty minutes to touch down. I'll let you know when you need to buckle up.

JOHN gets up.

JOHN

One last visit before we pull up to the curb.

JOHN moves into the darkness. CHARLIE scoots out of his seat into JOHN's vacant seat.

ANN

What, Charlie?

CHARLIE

Couldn't help overhearing things.

ANN

Not with those ears.

CHARLIE

I gotta give you credit, Annie-girl. I've handled big promotions in my time, everything from the world's fair to a channel swimmer, but this one has got me and everyone spinning. The guy's on the cover of Time magazine, kudos to you on that, and now a John Doe Convention! If you could get him to jump off the City Hall roof on Christmas Eve, I'd guarantee you half a million people there.

ANN

Charlie!

CHARLIE

Sorry, but business is business! What?

ANN

What do you make of him?

CHARLIE

Johnny-boy? Three things. Number one, he's got great country appeal -- you know, the yokel -- but he's also actually a smart guy. Number two, he's beginning to believe he really wrote that suicide letter that you made up.

ANN

Yeah, I know.

CHARLIE

Number three, well, you know what number three is. He's nuts about you. It's running out of his ears.

ANN suddenly wheels around to CHARLIE.

ANN

You left out number four. We're all heels, me especially.

CHARLIE

So, you were expecting something different to come out of this business?

JOHN comes back. CHARLIE pops up, grandly gestures for JOHN to sit.

CHARLIE

Just keeping it warm for you.

CHARLIE goes back to his own seat. JOHN sits.

JOHN

Coming in from third to home.

ANN

Yeah.

JOHN

Then it's safe at home.

They settle back into their chairs and face forward as the plane brings them back to whatever fate is they have to face.

SOUND: Airline sound gets louder.

LIGHTS: Start to fade away.

* * * * *

Scene 15

IMAGE: The projection of the map, with dozens of pins all over the United States -- and then they all converge on Chicago for the John Doe Club convention.

Shift to NORTON's OFFICE. NORTON stands there, admiring his handiwork as ANN, bag slung over her shoulder, comes in.

NORTON

You must be tired.

ANN

Multiple cities in multiple time zones will do that to a body.

NORTON

And?

ANN

You already know.

NORTON

I always like to hear about a job well-done.

ANN

He's done his job.

NORTON

And you've done yours.

ANN

Your nephew said that you wanted to see me -- even drove me from the airport. Reports you can always get from me later, so what's --

ANN notices a fur coat flung over the back of the chair.

ANN

Am I butting in on something?

NORTON

No, no, no -- this appointment is all yours. And so is the coat.

ANN

Mine?

NORTON

You sound surprised.

ANN

A fur coat and I have never had a date.

NORTON

A little token of appreciation for a job well-done.

ANN pauses a moment, then shrugs off her bag and her coat. NORTON helps her on with the fur.

ANN

Oh! Oh, it's beautiful. I don't quite know what to say --

NORTON

Don't say anything at all. Just sit down.

ANN sits down -- and sees something in front of her that makes her look with surprise at NORTON: a jewel box.

NORTON

Ah, yes -- a little something extra.

ANN

Oh.

NORTON

Go ahead, open it, open it.

ANN opens the box and holds up a lovely diamond bracelet. All the tiredness has gone from her face and body.

ANN

Oh! Oh, it's lovely!

NORTON

I hear they are a girl's best friend.

ANN puts it on and admires it.

NORTON

And there's one more thing.

ANN

Well, come on, spring it! You've got something on your mind.

NORTON laughs.

ANN

Must be stupendous.

NORTON roars with laughter.

NORTON

You know, that's what I like about you. Right to the point, just like that! All right, practical Annie, here it is. Tomorrow night, at 9 PM, before a crowd of fifteen thousand people, and talking over a nation-wide radio hook-up, John Doe will announce the formation of a third major political party: The John Doe Party.

ANN, wrapped in fur, leans back in her chair. She rests her head on her hand, the jeweled bracelet hanging down.

NORTON

Devoted entirely to the interests of all the John Does all over the country. Which practically means, ninety per cent of the voters, or more. He will also announce the third party's candidate for the presidency. A man whom he, personally, recommends. A great humanitarian -- the best friend the John Does have.

ANN

Mr. D.B. Norton.

NORTON

And the crowd goes, "Yes!"

ANN

So that's the thing Connell couldn't add up.

NORTON gets out of his chair, unable to keep still, and begins to move around the room, performing for his single-person audience. He mimes holding a microphone and speaks like a sports announcer.

SOUND: In the background, on a rising note, are the sounds of enthusiastic crowds.

SOUND: NORTON's voice is miked.

NORTON

Even though the opening of the convention is hours off, the delegates are already pouring into the ball park with lunch baskets, banners, and petitions asking John Doe not to jump off any roof --

NORTON switches hands, and then switches voices.

SOUND: Crowd sounds are now louder.

NORTON

It is phenomenal. The John Does, or the hoi polloi as you've heard people call them, have been laughed at and ridiculed but here they are, energized and happy, having traveled thousands of miles to come here and join their neighbors to pay homage to their hero, John Doe.

NORTON switches hands and voices again.

SOUND: Crowd sounds are now loud.

NORTON

And in these days of wars and bombings, it's a hopeful sign that a simple idea like this can sweep the country, an idea based on friendliness, on giving and not taking, on helping your neighbor and asking nothing in return. And if a thing like this can happen, don't let any of our grumbling friends tell you that humanity is falling apart. This is D.B. Norton signing off.

SOUND: Crowd sounds fade away.

NORTON comes back to earth, and even ANN, tired as she is, finds renewed energy in the picture NORTON paints.

They look at each other directly, as if they have just finished a vigorous dance together.

NORTON collects himself, sits, reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out two documents. The first he slides over to ANN.

NORTON

Good things come in threes. Your new contract.

ANN skims it, and her response shows it is a very generous offer.

ANN

Every word is true?

NORTON

Every word.

NORTON slides her two copies of the second document.

NORTON

And this. This is the speech that John Doe will give tomorrow night. I want to make sure you get it into his hands.

ANN

He never reads the speeches before he gives 'em.

NORTON

Even better. He just needs to give this speech like he's given all his others: sweetly, directly, honestly.

ANN picks up the speech and begins to read it over.

NORTON

And make sure Mr. Connell gets the second copy. He'll need to have it ready for the next day's special edition.

ANN continues to read.

SOUND: Thunderstorms and rain, rain, rain -- then rain tapers off, though thunder and lightning continue.

* * * * *

Scene 16

On the sidewalk in front of ANN's apartment, CHARLIE buttonholes JOHN, who's holding a box of flowers.

CHARLIE

C'mon, lover boy, we've got to get you to the stadium.

JOHN

She was supposed to go with us. She told us to pick her up --

JOHN holds up the box.

JOHN

I had --

A shadowy figure passes by, coat collar up, hat pulled down. It's COLONEL, but he doesn't reveal himself. He's doing reconnaissance.

CHARLIE

So Mr. Norton sent another car -- so what?

JOHN

Colonel?

CHARLIE

He always changes his plans.

JOHN

Colonel?

CHARLIE

She'll be at the stadium later. Give her the flowers then.

But before JOHN can pursue COLONEL, CONNELL's voice calls from offstage.

CONNELL

Long John Willoughby.

JOHN and CHARLIE turn to see CONNELL walk onstage -- unsteadily but still under control: he's had a few.

CONNELL

Wait a minute, John.

CHARLIE

Mr. Connell --

JOHN

Hello, Mr. Connell.

CHARLIE

Mr. Connell, what're you doing here?

CONNELL

Hiyah, John. I took a taxi, followed Norton's car here. Long John, I want to have a little talk with you.

CONNELL lurches -- JOHN holds him up.

CONNELL

Safe at first.

CONNELL sees the box of flowers.

CONNELL

For me?

CHARLIE

Mr. C --

CONNELL

Just kidding. Tell me something, Long John Willoughby, did you read that speech you're gonna make tonight?

JOHN

I never read the speeches before I give them. Get more of a kick out of it that way.

CONNELL

I knew that. Charlie, go down to the office, tell Pop to give you the speech. There's a copy on my desk.

CHARLIE

Mr. C., Mr. Norton told me not to leave him, not even for a minute.

CONNELL

Go -- go, go. I'll mother the young man, right in to Jim's Bar up the street. We've got time, Charlie, we've got time. Give him the flowers.

JOHN gives CHARLIE the box of flowers as CONNELL takes JOHN's arm and leads him off. CHARLIE exits.

* * * * *

Scene 17

MUSIC: **Strains of an old-fashioned torch ballad, coming from an automatic piano.**

SOUND: **Rain has started again.**

Jim's Bar. CONNELL sits the two of them in a corner booth.

A shadowy figure sits off the side -- it's COLONEL, but he's hidden out of their line of sight.

CONNELL

Velma!

VELMA appears, tray in hand. She puts down two shots glasses in front of CONNELL, one in front of JOHN.

VELMA

At least you got a buddy this time.

VELMA leaves. CONNELL downs one. JOHN doesn't touch his. CONNELL sips from the second.

JOHN

What d'ya want, Mr. Connell? It's gettin' close to --

CONNELL

You're a nice guy, John. I like you. You're gentle. I like gentle people. Me? I come off hard and tough but I'm not because I got no use for hard people. Gotta be gentle to suit me. Like you, for instance -- you suit me.

CONNELL sips.

CONNELL

Under the hard, the tough? I've got a weakness. The national anthem. Play it, and I'm a sucker for anything. It always gets me right here --

CONNELL indicates his throat.

CONNELL

You know what I mean?

JOHN points to back of his neck.

JOHN

Start of every game -- gets me right back here.

CONNELL

Well, every man to his own location -- as long as he feels something somewhere.

CONNELL sips.

CONNELL

You weren't old enough for the first world war.

CONNELL finishes his drink, starts on JOHN's drink.

CONNELL

I was. I was ripe. And when I joined up, my old man joined up too. Got to be a sergeant. We were in the same outfit. That's a kick for you, huh?

CONNELL lifts his glass to his lips, and without drinking, lowers it.

CONNELL

He was killed, John. I saw him get it. I was right there and saw it with my own eyes.

CONNELL lifts the glass and drains it.

CONNELL

Me? I came out without a scratch. Except for my ulcers -- which I always considered a penance. Should be drinking milk. This stuff's poison.

CONNELL yells to VELMA, the waitress.

CONNELL

Hey, Velma!

VELMA appears, tray in hand.

VELMA

Yes, Mr. Connell?

CONNELL indicates the empty glasses.

CONNELL

I'm looking to renew my subscription.

VELMA

One for him, too?

JOHN

No.

VELMA

Wingin' their way to your table.

VELMA goes to get the drinks.

CONNELL

I'm a sucker for this country. I'm a sucker for the national anthem -- I lost a father for it, so I like what we got here! I like it! A guy can say what he wants -- and do what he wants -- without having a bayonet shoved through his belly. Now, that's all right, isn't it?

JOHN

No argument from me.

VELMA comes in with the drinks.

VELMA

Two for Mr. Connell, none for Mr. Doe. I know who you are, by the way.

CONNELL

Do you like what he is, by the way?

VELMA

I could learn to live with it.

VELMA leaves.

CONNELL

Where was I?

JOHN

No bayonet through the belly.

CONNELL

And we don't want anybody coming around changing it, do we?

JOHN

No, sir.

CONNELL

No, sir. And when they do I get mad, boiling mad. And right now, John, I'm sizzling! I get mad for a lot of other guys besides myself -- I get mad for a guy named Washington! And a guy named Jefferson -- and Lincoln. Lighthouses, John! Lighthouses in a foggy world! You know what I mean?

JOHN's not sure what he means, but he nods yes. CONNELL takes a drink and looks at JOHN a moment before he speaks.

CONNELL

Betrayal -- ain't that the worse sin in the world? Busting up somebody's trust?

JOHN

Yeah. I'd say that's right up there.

CONNELL

And you'd feel like an awful sucker if you found that someone had been doing something like that to you, wouldn't you?

JOHN

Colonel hates liars and cheats more than anything. "Worse than heelots" he calls them, and that's going some for him. I'm right along with him on that.

CONNELL

It's because you're gentle that you can't see what's happening. But that's what's happening, to you. You're

mixed up with a skunk, my boy, a no-good, dangerous skunk!

JOHN

Who?

CONNELL

Who do you think?

JOHN

You're not talking about Mr. Norton, are you?

CONNELL

I'm not talking about his grandfather's pet poodle!

JOHN

That's wrong, Mr. Connell, just plain wrong. He's been great about the John Doe Clubs.

CONNELL

You're sold on this John Doe idea, aren't you?

JOHN

Sure -- I've come around to it.

CONNELL

It wasn't there in you in the beginning, was it?

JOHN

No it wasn't, I have to admit.

CONNELL

A job, right?

JOHN

A job, yeah.

CONNELL

But it got to you. You believed it. I don't blame you. A lot in it that feels good to believe. But supposing a certain unmentionable worm, whose initials are D.B., was twisting what you believe, what they all believe, into an iron fist and

bringing it down hard on those lighthouses. What would you say about that?

JOHN

Nobody can use the John Doe Clubs for politics. That's the main idea.

CONNELL

Really? So why are the big political bosses in town? And the labor leaders? And a lot of other big shots who are up at D.B.'s house right now? Where Ann Mitchell is right now! Heelots, John, heelots waiting to cut up the John Does! Wait till you read that speech you're gonna spit out tonight!

JOHN

You're all wet in five different ways. Miss Mitchell writes those speeches and nobody can make her write what she doesn't believe.

CONNELL barks at JOHN.

CONNELL

She's paid to write them. And bonuses, too -- mink coat and a diamond bracelet was the last going price I heard. That vulture would double-cross her own mother for a handful of silver.

JOHN

Shut up! If you weren't drunk I'd --

JOHN grabs CONNELL by his coat, lifting him out of his seat. JOHN towers over CONNELL.

CONNELL reaches into an inner pocket and pulls out the speech. JOHN lowers him to the seat, takes the speech, glaring down at him, enraged. CHARLIE comes into the scene, empty-handed.

CHARLIE

Hey, Mr. Connell! Pops says you have the speech.

CONNELL

Yeah, I have it. I needed to get you out of the way. Read it, John -- read it.

JOHN pushes CONNELL back into the seat and exits, speech in hand.

CHARLIE

Wait a minute, Mr. Doe!

CHARLIE chases after him.

CONNELL

Read it, and then you'll know who to hit. Whom. And I should be first in line. Velma?!

VELMA comes into the scene, tray, towel, and attitude. She sits in JOHN's seat.

VELMA

Still warm.

CONNELL

That's the kind of guy he is.

VELMA

Well, what'd'ya got planned next, Mr. Connell, except the breaking of hearts and the dashing of dreams?

CONNELL

Everyone's a writer.

VELMA

So give me a job at The New Bulletin.

CONNELL

Fresh out. You better bring me a glass of milk.

VELMA

Wise choice. At least you'll get your stomach soothed.

VELMA gets up and leaves.

CONNELL

I wish it was as easy as drinking it down.

CONNELL stares into the distance.

* * * * *

Scene 18

SOUND: The sharp crack of thunder, the sharp flash of lightning.

At NORTON's. NORTON is dressed in what can only be called a Fascist-styled tuxedo. TED is dressed in the same fashion; he lounges in a chair. Beside him, on a small table, is a telephone.

ANN, dressed well, wearing her bracelet, paces, a very worried woman.

NORTON

You do not need to pace. Though it is lovely to watch her do that, don't you agree?

TED

I can agree with that.

ANN

I -- I -- just cannot believe what went on at dinner in there.

NORTON

And what is it that you think "went on"?

ANN

I saw you --

NORTON

You saw me what?

ANN

Well, D.B. -- you -- you were selling out the John Doe Clubs. I don't know any other way to say it.

NORTON

Was I doing that?

TED

You paid for 'em.

NORTON

I did pay for them. I chartered them and paid their freight here, and I can use them any way I want. After John Doe finishes talking about me tonight, in front of fifteen thousand, and I get up there and say what I have to say to those fifteen thousand, twenty million John Doe votes will come into my pocket --

ANN

Along with the labor votes and corporation votes -- I was in there, I heard it all --

TED

She has very good hearing, in addition to everything else.

NORTON

I wanted you to hear it all. I wanted you to know what all your work has accomplished.

ANN

All my work --

Off to the side, trailed by MAID, JOHN enters, hatless and soaking wet -- he is exhausted and moves so slowly that ANN, TED, and NORTON don't notice him at first. MAID has a solicitous hand on his arm and a worried look on her face.

NORTON

You know what else you heard in there, Ann? We live in daring times, with a new world order staring us in the face. This new order is vibrant, it's dynamic and electric! Democracy has run its course -- it no longer has the answers. It no longer has any light to shed! No voltage! And why? Too many concessions have been made to too many of the wrong people! What America needs is an iron hand and obedience!

ANN

Your hand. And your whip.

NORTON

And why not? Deep down what these John Does really want is safety -- they'll sacrifice much for a touch of certainty in uncertain times.

ANN

While you and your buddies get taken care of.

NORTON

Much should be given back to those who risk the most to create the future.

TED

Law of the marketplace, Annie, the marketplace of ideas -- no cash value any more for your precious democracy, for the common man.

ANN is not sure whether to laugh, attack NORTON, attack TED, or loathe herself even more than she does.

In her pacing, ANN spots JOHN. NORTON and TED see her see him. MAID, not having been told to leave, stays, a mute witness.

NORTON

The one who is all wet.

TED

What're you doing here?

ANN

I'm so glad to see --

JOHN shoves a clump of crumpled wet paper toward her.

JOHN

Did you write this? Did you write this?

ANN

No, I didn't.

JOHN

But you knew about it.

ANN

Yes.

JOHN

And you let it go out, let it get handed off to me, like it was from you.

ANN

Yes, I did, John.

JOHN

Why didn't you stop it? You should have stopped it! Maybe that bracelet got in your way.

NORTON

John -- why hasn't Charlie taken you to the convention?

JOHN

So -- a new order of things. Everybody taking a nice, fat slice of the John Does for themselves.

NORTON

John, the beautiful thing about watching you perform has been how easily you swallow everything handed to you. Don't ruin the gig now by thinking that you can think for yourself.

JOHN

You're right -- people have been paid a lot to do a lot of thinking for me. Call me the prize stooge. But using the John Doe clubs for what you want? Over my dead body. I can say that and mean that now -- I can think that now. Over my dead body.

TED

It could be arranged --

NORTON

I paid for the John Doe clubs and I'll decide how I want to spend them.

JOHN

Not after I go down to that convention and tell them exactly what you and all your "associates" here are trying to cook up for them!

JOHN crumples the papers in his hand and drops them to the floor. MAID picks up the pieces carefully and holds them.

JOHN

And I'll say it in my own words this time.

JOHN starts to leave. NORTON barks out a command in a voice that even stops JOHN in his tracks, a voice laced with ego, hatred, and power.

NORTON

Listen to me, Long John Willoughby! The great John Doe! I own you. I own every particle of you. I own every particle of everyone in this room. And I own every particle of every John Doe out there tonight because I can give them what they really want: safety and security in return for a little bit of their freedom, which they don't use anyway. You want to tell them that "in your own words"? Go right ahead. And I will lay out for them what a fake you are. I will tell them that you are such a good fake that you even had me fooled, got even me, the great and successful D.B. Norton, to lay my money down on the promise that you were sincere in your beliefs, honest in your dealings. What do you suppose your precious John Does will do when they find out that you took your thirty pieces of silver, that you never intended to jump, that you just wanted to string them along for your own sick satisfaction? You are a free man, John Doe, you can tell them whatever you want. But once you do, and then I ruin you completely -- crush you to dust -- I will kill off this John Doe movement and lay all the blame for it on your grave. You think this is the only way we've got to get what we want? What is the great and illustrious John Doe gonna do now?

JOHN stares at him.

JOHN

I'm a mug and I know it. You're a mug, and you know it. But we're not the same. I know that the John Doe idea may be

the one thing capable of saving this world from you and the dogs like you -- that's why I'm going to tell them, because it's bigger than whether I'm a fake, it's got more power than that, it deserves better than me!

NORTON

You are both charming and an idiot.

As JOHN moves for the door, TED slides in to block him.

TED

I always think my uncle's too good to the bums around him
--

TED head-butts JOHN and knocks him back. Before JOHN can recover, TED grabs a fistful of his shirt and is ready to cold-cock him. JOHN flexes his own fist, but ANN pulls back on his arm.

ANN

He's not worth it, John. He's nothing to you, to me, to anyone.

TED gives her a look that says, "You fucking bitch." JOHN catches the look. He waits, and the waiting says: either hit me or let me go. ANN slides in between them so that if TED strikes, she may get it.

NORTON

Let him go.

TED doesn't want to at first.

NORTON

Let. Him. Go.

But TED lets him go. JOHN extricates his arm from ANN's hand and pushes past everybody. ANN tears out the door after JOHN. MAID follows her.

TED

You can't let him go like that! They are going to tear you apart!

NORTON

Do you think I've only got one plan, you idiot?! Go get the girl -- chasing her seems about the only thing you're good at. Go!

TED leaves. NORTON sits in the chair where TED had been sitting and picks up the telephone, dials a number.

NORTON

Benedict, it's a go -- get your newsboys ready to roll.

NORTON hangs up, dials again.

NORTON

Arnold, we're going with the plan from Column B -- make sure the crew cuts the cables when Ted or I say "cut."

NORTON hangs up, dials again.

NORTON

Commissioner -- pick up Henry Connell, as we had discussed, and detain him until I tell you otherwise. He'll be joined by Ann Mitchell. They'll make a pleasant pair.

NORTON hangs up the phone.

NORTON

A pair of what, I don't know.

NORTON leans back, muses.

* * * * *

Scene 19

SOUND: The rumbling of thunder.

Outside NORTON's house. ANN is trying to catch up with JOHN.

ANN

John! John, please listen to me! Please -- I didn't know what they were going to do! Let me go with you, John! John, please!

JOHN turns and faces ANN so abruptly that she almost barrels into him. MAID catches up to them.

JOHN

I'm going to the convention -- you don't deserve to go. End of story.

JOHN pivots and disappears.

SOUND: Car door slams, CHARLIE pulls away.

ANN goes to follow, but MAID catches and restrains her. MAID shakes her head "no." TED shows up, shoves MAID to the side, grabs ANN.

ANN

The henchman arrives!

TED

You always miss the important stuff! C'mon!

TED pulls a struggling ANN back to the house. She really, really fights him every step of the way.

MAID takes out the crumpled paper that JOHN had handled. She looks off in the direction JOHN had left with a face of hope and despair.

* * * * *

Scene 20

Outside the stadium where the convention is being held.

IMAGE: A banner which reads WELCOME TO THE JOHN DOE CONVENTION.

SOUND: Muffled but really loud sounds of a crowd cheering and singing and stamping and having a great time.

SOUND: Rain and thunder.

JOHN wanders into the scene, looking lost and desperate. COLONEL emerges from the shadows.

COLONEL

Psst!

JOHN spins, spooked, sees his friend, runs up and hugs him.

JOHN

Man, are you a sight for sore eyes! How'd you know --

COLONEL

I've been having you shadowed, John, ever since you got back. Lotsa poor people on the street with lots of eyes watching out for you.

JOHN

You didn't go up to the river?

COLONEL

Without you?

This touches JOHN, and he gives COLONEL another big hug.

JOHN

We'll go, I promise, just as soon as I get this thing settled. But I can't find my way in -- I lost Charlie in the crowd -- I'm lost --

COLONEL

You don't want to go in there -- the heelots are on the hunt! For you!

JOHN

I don't have a choice -- I gotta go in, Colonel -- but I don't know where I am --

COLONEL

You can still get out with your skin on.

JOHN

I don't have a choice, Colonel. You hear that? I don't have a choice.

COLONEL

Yeah, that's what you look like and that's what they sound like. C'mon -- I got a way to get you in -- the brotherhood of the janitors --

They disappear into the shadows -- and almost immediately they are on the stage in the midst of the stadium.

SOUND: What had been a dull roar is now full-throated, and now the name of "John Doe" is chanted.

In front of JOHN is a bank of microphones, like a steel bouquet, studded with the names of broadcasting companies.

JOHN takes a step toward the microphones, and the crowd's voice shifts.

SOUND: Cheers, hoots, hollers.

JOHN gestures for them to quiet down. He speaks into the nest of microphones, gets feedback and reverb.

JOHN

Listen, ladies and gentlemen!

Before he can go any further, a band somewhere strikes up of AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL and immediately the large assembly begins singing it.

SOUND: A huge crowd singing AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL with a brass band.

JOHN looks to COLONEL for help, who just shrugs his shoulders: if they want to sing, what're gonna do?

The song comes to an end.

SOUND: An eerie silence falls, with the hiss of rain and the rumble of thunder.

JOHN again goes to speak.

JOHN

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, I have something I gotta say to you, something that --

SOUND: From some distance the screeching of brakes as a convoy of trucks breaks to a stop.

JOHN

Something that's gotta be said, by me, about me, about everything we're trying to do here.

SOUND: Unclear voices at first, but then louder and more distinct: "Read all about it: John Doe a Fake!" That phrase rising and rising in volume and power.

JOHN looks around, terror-stricken. COLONEL joins him to cover his back.

IMAGE: The front page of the Chronicle, with the iconic picture of the angry John Doe and the headline "John Doe a Fake!" -- cycling through the page from different angles.

SOUND: Voices clearer now, and even more voices: "John Doe a Fake. Read all about it: John Doe a Fake!" Layered in are the crowd's voices, confused, then angry: "John Doe a fake?"

SOUND: Overlaid on this cacophony of "John Doe a Fake!" and "John Doe a fake?" is the shrieking of sirens pulling up the stadium.

NORTON strides onstage, followed by TED now dressed in his Fascist-style uniform.

IMAGE: The front page disappears.

NORTON holds up a copy of the newspaper being distributed among the crowd over his head, showing it to one and all.

TED slaps a copy of the paper against JOHN's chest. JOHN grabs it, reads it, shows it to COLONEL, who reads it.

JOHN moves to the microphones, trying to make himself heard over thousands of voices, all speaking at once.

JOHN

Ladies and gentlemen! This is exactly what I came down here to tell you about tonight --

NORTON bumps JOHN out of the way. TED pulls JOHN back. NORTON signals for silence.

SOUND: Gradual quieting of the crowd. Hiss of rain, rumble of thunder.

NORTON

Don't listen to that man anymore! He's a fake!

SOUND: NORTON's amplified voices rings out over the deafening silence. Only the rain and thunder.

NORTON

My name is D.B. Norton -- you all know me! And I accuse this man of being a faker! We've all been taken for a lot of suckers! And I'm the biggest of the lot! I spent a fortune backing this man in what I believed to be a sincere and worthy cause, just as you all did! And now I find out it's nothing but a racket! Cooked up by him and two of my employees for the purpose of collecting dues from John Does all over the country!

JOHN breaks away from TED and gets to the microphone.

JOHN

That's a lie!

NORTON

It's not a lie! You can read all about it in the newspapers there!

JOHN

That's a lie! Don't believe what he says --

NORTON

This man had no intention of jumping off City Hall! He was paid to say so! Do you deny that?

JOHN

That's got nothing to do with it!

NORTON

Were you paid for it -- or weren't you?

JOHN

Yes! I was paid! But the --

NORTON

And the suicide note? You didn't write that, either!

JOHN

What difference does that make?

NORTON

Did you write it -- or didn't you?

JOHN

No, I didn't write it, but --

NORTON

You bet your life you didn't! You look in your papers, ladies and gentlemen, and you'll find Ann Mitchell's signed confession that she wrote it!

JOHN

It's a fact that I didn't write the letter, but this whole thing started --

NORTON

You see? He admits he's a fake. And for what you've done to all these good people -- they ought to run you out of the country -- and I hope they do it!

NORTON steps back, gestures for JOHN to speak if he wants to.

SOUND: Rising chorus of voices asking questions: "Is it true?", "Tell us what's the truth", and so on.

JOHN steps to the microphones. COLONEL is right beside him.

JOHN

Now that he's through shooting off his face, I've got a couple of things to tell you about --

TED stamps on the stage, and people hidden under the stage cut the cables. JOHN's voice dies away.

NORTON sneers, TED sneers, and they.

SOUND: Rising chorus of boos and catcalls and then chants of "Fake. Fake."

JOHN keeps speaking but realizes the loud speaker is dead, and looks to the COLONEL, helpless. JOHN turns back to the now-useless microphones and tries to shout over the chants.

JOHN

Ladies and gentlemen! Look -- this thing's bigger than whether I'm a fake --

Suddenly, a barrage of balled-up newspapers showers down on them from all sides. COLONEL pulls JOHN away and shouts at him.

COLONEL

John! John! Leave it to the Pontius Pilates. We gotta get outta here!

JOHN pulls away, back to the dead microphones. His voice is hoarse.

JOHN

The idea is still good! Believe me, folks! You are the hope of the world!

COLONEL pulls him away, and they exit from the mob scene.

SOUND: Rage and disappointment at an ear-shattering volume.

And then silence.

* * * * *

Scene 21

SOUND: Road noises.

DAN and MADGE in two seats, on a bus going home, dim overhead lights on. DAN slaps his thigh.

DAN

Walking my legs off digging up five thousand signatures for a phony! Five thousand names asking him not to jump off any roof!

MADGE puts a restraining hand on his arm.

MADGE

Dan -- honey --

DAN

I know, I know.

MADGE

We don't really know, do we?

DAN

But the newspaper --

MADGE

And who is this Mr. Norton? He put up the money for this, but, really, Dan -- we don't really know, do we? I think we've done a lot of fooling of our own selves.

DAN

Maybe.

MADGE

No "maybe" about it.

They ride in silence. DAN takes MADGE's hand.

MADGE

But we know one thing, don't we? Don't we?

DAN hesitates, knows MADGE is right.

MADGE

The ideas's still good, the John Doe idea. We don't have to give up our club.

DAN hesitates again, then nods in the affirmative.

DAN

It's been good.

MADGE

Better than good. And we've got to get ready to explain why. To everybody.

DAN

Why what?

MADGE

Why we didn't give that man much of a chance. We turned on him just like that.

MADGE snaps her fingers.

DAN

Just like that.

MADGE

I feel it.

DAN

I feel it, too. Ashamed.

MADGE

And we have to own up to that. And we have to tell it to everyone back home.

They hold each other's hands tightly.

DAN

That's what makes the idea still good. That we're going to tell them, admit it to them.

MADGE

And they're going to listen to us.

DAN

And we're gonna make it work. We are.

They lapse into silence.

* * * * *

Scene 22

SOUND: Road noises continue as the scene shifts.

A clearing under the bridge.

JOHN sits before a fire, head bent low, tears streaming down.

COLONEL's gear is there, but COLONEL is off getting more firewood.

JOHN lifts his eyes skyward, stares, his face pained.

IMAGE: A montage of images.

SOUND: A montage of sounds.

[Possibly use clip from the actual movie.]

Faces begin to appear one by one, to taunt him. Their accusing voices are heard.

WOMAN'S VOICE

Faker!

MAN'S VOICE

Racketeer!

2ND VOICE

Liar!

3RD VOICE

Cheat!

4TH VOICE

Imposter!

5TH VOICE

Why don't you jump!

GIRL'S VOICE

Christmas Eve at midnight! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!!

Several scenes through which JOHN has lived:

DAN shaking hands with him: "You're a wonderful man, Mr. Doe."

ANN in the station, kissing him: "Now, get in there and pitch!"

NORTON's: "You're a fake, John Doe, and I can prove it!"

Again the GIRL who laughed appears: "Christmas Eve at midnight?"

CONNELL in the saloon: "You're sold on the John Doe idea, aren't you?"

Even the COLONEL: "I can see the heelots comin'. The whole army of them! Thirty pieces of silver and all."

All of the images and sounds die away. There is just JOHN, staring into the fire, the long dark night of his soul.

JOHN stands, looks around: nothing holding him there. He glides away. The fire burns alone.

* * * * *

Scene 23

SOUND: Rising out of the darkness, a chorus of children's voices singing "Silent Night."

Lights up on CONNELL and COLONEL trying to keep warm as they stand on the 14th floor of City Hall, a light dusting of snow on the ground.

The voices fade away as the carolers move on. Almost immediately, the bells chime the three-quarter hour from over their heads.

SOUND: Bells toll.

CONNELL checks his watch.

CONNELL

11:45. At least something's working right.

COLONEL

He'd have to be a bird to get up here without us seeing him.

CONNELL

You haven't seen him for weeks -- maybe he's learned to walk on air.

A door to the area opens, throwing a rectangle of light onto the ground. It is ANN, swathed in winter gear. CONNELL sees who it is, rushes to her.

SOUND: The heavy door slams shut.

CONNELL

You should be home in bed.

ANN stumbles against CONNELL.

ANN

I couldn't stay -- I couldn't stay --

CONNELL

You're burning up.

ANN

What does it matter? It doesn't matter.

COLONEL

Looks like we all got ourselves a fever.

If there is any sound at all, it is their breathing, it is the fall of the snow, it is waiting.

The door opens again. The three of them turn. DAN and MADGE enter, hugging each other.

SOUND: The heavy door slams shut.

DAN and MADGE jump, startled.

DAN

It's fourteen floors.

COLONEL

Well, I'll be damned.

COLONEL goes to them and, in a gesture uncharacteristic for him, gives them both a hug -- awkward, to be sure, but sincere.

COLONEL

You stuck by him.

DAN

Madge thinks he's going to be here. Me, I'm not so sure, but --

MADGE

That man is gonna be on this roof. Don't ask me how I know. I just know. And you all know it as well as I do.

DAN

I said any guy that's fake isn't gonna jump off any roof.

MADGE

And I said I don't think he could be a fake -- not with that face, the one he had at the convention. And, anyway, what he stood for wasn't a fake.

DAN

No.

CONNELL

No.

ANN

No.

COLONEL

No.

CONNELL

You?

COLONEL

Not everybody is a heelot. At least not right here, not right at this moment. That's as far as I'll go.

If there is any sound at all, it is their breathing, it is the fall of the snow, it is waiting.

The door opens again. The five of them turn. NORTON enters.

SOUND: The heavy door slams shut.

No one goes to hug him. In fact, they stand farther apart from him, even deeper into their own shadows.

ANN

You should be ashamed.

NORTON

What makes you think I'm not?

ANN

I've taken money out of your hands. It's not anything I ever noticed.

NORTON

Well, I'm here.

COLONEL

The way a dog buries what it leaves behind.

CONNELL

D.B., you being here isn't right.

NORTON

Don't you think I know that?!

NORTON points at COLONEL.

NORTON

You're not wrong about the dog. But you're not 100% right, either. He may not even come.

COLONEL

You'd like that -- one less loose thread.

Without warning, the door opens again -- and it's JOHN.

SOUND: The heavy door slams shut.

No one moves. No one speaks. CONNELL is holding up ANN, DAN is holding up MADGE. It's not clear that JOHN sees the five of them or knows that they're there. But he does see NORTON because he's closer. They lock eyes. JOHN moves toward him. NORTON doesn't move.

JOHN veers away from NORTON and moves toward the parapet.

NORTON

I wouldn't do that if I were you, John. It'll do you no good.

JOHN

What do you know about my good? I saw the police all around down there.

NORTON

Why do you think I made it so easy for all of us to get into City Hall at midnight on Christmas Eve? We all have a bet on you -- don't we? We need to know how this plays out for John Doe.

JOHN

John Doe? John Doe? You don't have to worry -- that zombie's dead. John Willoughby? He's the one I don't know about. If he doesn't go over -- then he has to live with this hard nut to crack: he wants to be John Doe again. John Willoughby must be the stupidest man alive because he wants to be born into John Doe again, have it all come alive again to make him feel alive again. Sometimes the hunger just makes him want to find the ledge.

ANN

John!

ANN's voice startles him, and for a moment all of his decisiveness drains away. JOHN notices the others for the first time.

ANN staggers away from CONNELL.

ANN

John!

ANN rushes and throws her arms around him.

ANN

Oh, John -- it can live again, or Norton wouldn't be here -- he's afraid! We can start it clean now -- that old Ann is gone, too. If it's worth dying for, it's worth living for. John! You don't have to die to keep the John Doe idea alive! Someone already died, nearly two thousand years, to keep John Doe alive, so you don't need to --

JOHN

Sssh -- just sshh --

ANN

Oh, John, John -- no! No!

JOHN holds her, but he doesn't know what to do with her.

ANN

Help me!

CONNELL, COLONEL, DAN, and MADGE move forward until JOHN sees them.

COLONEL

What can we say, Long John? What can we do?

DAN

Mr. Doe -- you don't have to -- we're with you, Mr. Doe. We just lost our heads and acted like a mob. Why, we --

MADGE

What Dan is trying to say is -- well -- we need you, Mr. Doe. There were a lot of us didn't believe what that man said. We were going to start up our John Doe Club again whether we saw you or not.

DAN

And we have.

MADGE

And there are a lot of others doing the same thing. All of it'd be a lot easier with you than without. Please, please come with us, Mr. Doe!

NORTON

What's it going to be, John? What is it going to be for John Willoughby?

JOHN remains standing, thoughtful. He picks ANN up in his arms, and she clings to him.

The bells ring out midnight.

COLONEL runs to get the door.

COLONEL

We've got a car downstairs! C'mon.

CONNELL

There you are, Norton. The people. The people win. Try and lick that. Come on, Colonel.

Strains of Beethoven's Ninth play mix in with the twelve strokes of the bells. The music suggests emergence from darkness and confusion to light and understanding.

But then JOHN hands ANN to NORTON, who at first refuses to take her, then does.

Then, without warning, JOHN bolts away from them, and by the horrified looks on their faces, we know that JOHN has jumped off the building.

COLONEL heaves himself through the open door.

* * * * *

Scene 24

A ground-level exit door bursts open, throwing shards of light on the ground as COLONEL falls through, gulping air down, out of breath.

In a pile lies JOHN, crushed.

COLONEL

I wasn't fast enough -- I wasn't fast enough to catch -- you --

COLONEL approaches him, then falls to his knees -- ends up crawling until he reaches JOHN.

He embraces JOHN, rocks him, wails in lamentation.

COLONEL

Long John, Long John, you poor sucker! You poor poor
sucker!

COLONEL is inconsolable as he rocks JOHN's body and the world ends in darkness.

NEA High

DESCRIPTION

Aviva Matthews, an 18-year old senior at Northeast Ashland Regional High School, has a painting pulled from a student exhibit by the City Council chair, Jessica Helms. Art, politics, sex, and the role of the artist all come in to play.

CHARACTERS

- AVIVA MATTHEWS, 18
- BIJU MATTHEWS, AVIVA's father, originally from Haiti, 50s
- ALEXA MATTHEWS, AVIVA's mother, Caucasian, 50s
- ELTON SAVORY, principal of Ashland High School, mid-40s
- NORMAN DRAGÓN, art instructor, AVIVA's teacher, mid-50s, American citizen but of Argentinian background
- JESSICA HELMS, council president of the Ashland City Council, mid-60s or so, African-American
- UTILITY CHARACTERS (5) -- referred to for convenience as "he," but they should be two men and three women, mixed ethnicity: UTILITY 1 = female; UTILITY 2 = male; UTILITY 3 = female; UTILITY 4 = male; UTILITY 5 = female

SETTING

The small and mythical but not entirely unimaginable American city of Ashland, predominantly white and suburban, though with a "minority" population.

TIME

- Present

MISCELLANEOUS

- Set design should be kept simple.
- If possible, it would be good if the play could be done with all or part of the audience seated in the playing area.

* * * * *

Scene 1: The Tempest

On the stage: an easel, a small table next to with a palette, brush, tubes of paint, a trowel, etc. -- enough paraphernalia to set the feel of an artist at work. Also on the table is a Walkman cassette player.

AVIVA MATTHEWS sits in front of the easel. AVIVA then grabs the Walkman and turns on the cassette. A really strong rock-and-roll song comes on, and she begins to paint, which will all be done through movement and lighting, since there is no actual paint on the palette and no actual canvas on the easel. In essence, it is the dance of her creativity. The director and actor are free to use and do whatever they want to do to create the energy and drive of AVIVA's painting, but it should never verge on the melodramatic or operatic: it is a serious business for AVIVA.

At the end of the song, AVIVA shuts off the Walkman. In silence she reviews what she has created. She then moves the easel upstage right or left and exits, take the small table with her. As she does so, she turns on the Walkman again; the song choice is up to the director. It provides the transition music into the next scene. Lights out.

Alternate approach: If the theatre facilities permit it, and the director and actor feel they can do it, then actual painting could be done -- or at least paint placing/slopping/dripping, etc. No finished "work" needs to be produced, since the scene is about creative energy, not actual production, about color and movement, not museum piece.

* * * * *

Scene 2: The Art Show

Stage is dark. The cast comes on, bringing several chairs: they take their positions as a tableau in front of AVIVA MATTHEW's "painting," which is downstage center facing upstage. There is no actual painting; it is described instead.

The music crossfades into a murmur of voices. A light comes up either upstage right or left, and AVIVA comes on and places a large poster on the easel. The poster says, "The 10th Annual North East Ashland High School Art Show." Her parents enter behind her. She and her parents move into the light change that comes up on the cast.

The crowd includes ELTON SAVORY, JESSICA HELMS, and NORMAN DRAGÓN. The five UTILITY characters are the other artists in the show; they are dressed as high school students -- see Act II, Scene 1. AVIVA stands in the background, watching.

She wears the Walkman, headphones around her neck. Several chairs are around.

JESSICA HELMS stands right in the forefront. Everyone watches HELMS examine the painting.

Who painted this? HELMS

So, Councilor -- SAVORY

Who painted this? HELMS

-- you find this interesting. SAVORY

Not "interesting" at all, Mr. Savory. HELMS

Oh -- SAVORY

"Interesting" is a word for when people don't know how to tell the truth. Besides, this -- this -- is indulgent and silly -- and not art. HELMS

Not art -- SAVORY

Who painted this? HELMS

While SAVORY speaks, HELMS reads the title and the painter's name.

A little strong, Councilor Helms? SAVORY

"Abstinence Has No Substance." Aviva Matthews. HELMS

Perhaps you shouldn't -- SAVORY
(overlapping)

HELMS
(overlapping)

Where is Aviva Matthews?

SAVORY

She should be h[ere] --

HELMS

Is she here?

SAVORY

As I said --

HELMS

I want to discuss this with her right now.

AVIVA

I am here.

Everyone turns to look at her and her parents.

HELMS

The Aviva Matthews. Come here, then.

AVIVA

Good evening, Councilor Helms.

HELMS

Evening, yes. Good --

BIJU

Councilor Helms --

HELMS

And you are?

BIJU

Biju Matthews.

ALEXA

Alexa. Matthews.

HELMS
(to ALEXA)

Come here.

(indicating the painting)

Your daughter did this.

BIJU

We're very proud.

SAVORY
Perhaps this is not the best time --

HELMS
Dealer's choice, Mr. Savory.

BIJU
Has Aviva caused a problem?

HELMS
(to AVIVA)
Come here. The city council gave you money.
(to SAVORY)
Correct?

DRAGÓN
The city council did award --

HELMS
Remind me --

DRAGÓN
-- Ms. Matthews an art scholarship --

HELMS
-- who you are.

DRAGÓN
Norman Dragón.

HELMS
(with proper pronunciation)
Ah, Mr. Dragón.

DRAGÓN

Head of the Art Department.

HELMS

Right. From --

DRAGÓN

Argentina. No Evita references, please --

HELMS

Don't worry, Mr. Dragón, I won't cry for you --

DRAGÓN

Can't put Juan over on you --

They measure each other.

HELMS

So you're responsible for this --

DRAGÓN

(overlapping)

This exhibit? As I have been for the past 10 years.

(indicating the "paintings")

Aren't they good?

HELMS

(indicating AVIVA)

Did you teach her?

DRAGÓN

I've had the pleasure.

HELMS

To do this?

BIJU

What problem does this make?

HELMS

Mr. Dragón, if you think that proves your teaching skills --

BIJU
(overlapping)

What is the problem --

DRAGÓN
(overlapping)

As city council president --

BIJU defers to DRAGÓN.

DRAGÓN
You approved Aviva's scholarship.

SAVORY
Norman --

HELMS
A pig in a poke, then --

ALEXA
That's enough!

HELMS
(to AVIVA)
The people of Ashland gave that money to help an artist.

AVIVA
I am an artist.

HELMS
Then come here.

ALEXA
Aviva has done nothing wrong.

BIJU
(to SAVORY)
What makes the problem here?

ALEXA
Beeba, you don't have to go --

HELMS

I'm trying to take your daughter seriously --

(to AVIVA)

You do, don't you? Want to be taken seriously?

ALEXA

It's just a painting.

HELMS

No "just" about this painting. Right?

(to ALEXA)

You don't get the finger-in-the-eye here, do you?

(to AVIVA)

You do, though. Come all the way here.

(to her parents)

She's safe -- I won't eat her.

AVIVA comes to HELMS. HELMS takes a chair and sits in front of the painting. The five UTILITY characters sit on the floor against the legs of the audience in the front row.

HELMS

Explain this to me.

SAVORY

Councilor --

HELMS

(stops him, to AVIVA)

Well?

AVIVA

What's not out front for you?

HELMS

No aesthete with me, all right?

(indicating DRAGÓN)

Don't be him. Now, Ashland got this back as payback.

Explain this to me.

BIJU

Aviva --

HELMS
(while looking at BIJU)

Defend yourself.

(directly to AVIVA)

We await.

AVIVA
Dad, I'm geared, all right? Don't worry.

Light changes to focus on AVIVA and HELMS.

HELMS
This?

AVIVA
What do you see?

HELMS
"Student?" All right -- I see knees -- I assume a girl's knees
--

AVIVA
Why?

HELMS
It's obvious -- don't be subtle about the obvious and consider
yourself clever. Now, there. A chain.

AVIVA
Yes.

HELMS
With a padlock?

AVIVA
Yes.

HELMS
Around her knees.

AVIVA
It is what it is.

HELMS

(leaning forward)

Torn hem on the dress, smudged legs, heavy boots, unlaced
-- am I seeing clearly?

AVIVA

Factual.

HELMS

Now under the fact --

AVIVA
(pointing)

The title.

Lights up to full. HELMS stands and lifts the "painting" off its hook; she looks at and shows it to the others and the audience as she talks.

HELMS

"Abstinence Has No Substance." I think you think you're making a "really cool" criticism of the health curriculum I got through the council last year -- with a large majority vote, I will add. Do I get the prize behind door number one?

HELMS replaces the painting.

AVIVA

Yes.

HELMS

So. You meant to insult all that effort. And me.

AVIVA

Not hardly --

DRAGÓN

She doesn't mean that at all.

HELMS

Stop answering for her.

AVIVA

It's not about insulting you.

ALEXA

Aviva --

AVIVA

Mom -- my time.

(to HELMS)

I didn't make it about you -- specifically. Or about insulting anyone -- specifically.

HELMS offers the chair to AVIVA.

HELMS

Defend. Not me specifically, you said.

She gets on it and squats. The contest begins.

AVIVA

It's about -- It's about taking down a kind of -- mentality. The council's. Lots of people's. Yours.

HELMS

Name it.

AVIVA

(emphasizing syllables)

Nos-tal-gi [pronounced "jee"] - a. Nostalgic -- and disappointed. Mental/sentimental.

HELMS

That's all the "deep" we get?

AVIVA

You snap on the lock --

HELMS

Bring order to craziness --

AVIVA

"Just Say No." It's more like, "Just say no to 'Just Say No'" because it's virtual reality --

HELMS

It's a nationally recognized program --

AVIVA

It doesn't even come close to people my age.

HELMS

The whole thing's about your age --

AVIVA

About your age.

HELMS

That makes no sense.

AVIVA

About what you think you had back in the Jurassic --

HELMS

Which would be --

AVIVA

Chastity belt in every closet. Every family white and bright.
Women --

HELMS

(indicating herself)

Bright and white?

AVIVA

Women in the down position.

HELMS

I'd want down -- look at me! -- I'd want down so that I couldn't
be up doing this?

AVIVA

All things neat and square, tuned into "all Fifties, all the
time" nos-tal-gi-a. Onward, family values!

HELMS

Oh God no, not -- not -- "family values"! Not like, say, the
family of Aviva Matthews.

AVIVA

They're out of this.

HELMS

Your family loves you --

AVIVA

Leave them out of --

HELMS

-- don't they?

(to ALEXA and BIJU)

Don't you? The "family values thing," right?, works for you.
So just what are you talking about?

AVIVA

You're mad because history won't come back --

HELMS

You speak with Grade-A, prime-cut ignorance about what
I want.

AVIVA

Everybody in a box -- dated and stamped --

HELMS

Really?

AVIVA

Yes.

HELMS

Is dat so?

AVIVA

Yes.

HELMS

Bet the farm on that?

AVIVA realizes she's hit a dead-end.

HELMS

Get down. Sit down. How old are you?

AVIVA

Eighteen.

HELMS

Eight and a teen. Tell me, wise one -- have you "unlocked" that chain -- so to speak?

SAVORY

Don't embarrass --

HELMS

Answer me: abstinent -- yes or no?

BIJU

Elton, you do something --

AVIVA

What's that got to do with the painting?

SAVORY

I agree --

HELMS

(indicating the painting)

Do you practice what you have her preach?

BIJU

(goes to AVIVA)

Let's go.

HELMS

(staring AVIVA down)

Do you take the risks you're telling other people to take?
Do you?

BIJU

I trust my daughter.

HELMS

And I trust what I know of people "her age."

BIJU

Let's go.

HELMS

So you're declaring abstinence is stupid.

AVIVA

No.

BIJU

Let's go.

HELMS

That self-restraint --

ALEXA

Honey --

AVIVA
(to HELMS)

No.

ALEXA

Aviva --

HELMS

You just want to deny, deny, deny --

AVIVA

I don't deny anything.

HELMS

That's right -- I'm wrong -- you can't deny what you don't know.

AVIVA

I know.

HELMS

You do?

AVIVA

Yes.

HELMS

Were you at the council meetings?

AVIVA

No.

HELMS

Did you speak in opposition?

AVIVA

No.

HELMS

I know you didn't because I sat there for all the evidence from the doctors and nurses, your pregnant classmates -- well, enough, because, obviously --
(indicating the painting)
-- you had better things to do.

ALEXA

That's enough!

HELMS

If only that were true! She's made her critique -- here's mine. Her little act of rebellion -- very -- thin, and crude -- and not very well thought out. But, then again, she's eighteen, so the expectations don't run so high. Next paragraph.
(indicating the others)
Don't listen to them: they won't give you an honest answer. Why? Because they like you. You need more truth than they will let you bear.

AVIVA

And because you don't like me --

HELMS

I don't have to cut you any slack.

AVIVA

I told you the truth --

HELMS

You made yourself believe that --

AVIVA

So I'm a liar.

HELMS

You're incomplete -- half-baked. In other words, eighteen. Don't get angry -- just learn to defend yourself -- if you really believe, that is.

DRAGÓN

What else do you want?

AVIVA

Better to be eighteen than --

ALEXA

Aviva, we're going.

HELMS

Than what?

ALEXA

Aviva --

HELMS

Better than what?

BIJU
(to HELMS)

Don't bait her!

HELMS

I'm just bating my breath. Than what?

AVIVA keeps her mouth shut.

HELMS

I can see the fire in there -- answer to it: What will you stand for? Teach me that right now.

AVIVA

I think --

HELMS

Yes?

AVIVA

I think I will obey my parents. I think I shall be their obedient daughter.

The UTILITY characters rejoin the group.

HELMS

You blinked.

BIJU

Blinked?

HELMS

Refused to take the risk.

BIJU

What are you talking about?

HELMS

Mr. Savory.

SAVORY

Yes?

HELMS

Mr. Savory, this is what I want: I want this picture out of here.

SAVORY

Councilor --

ALEXA

You can't do that --

HELMS

Did you hear that?

SAVORY

I did.

BIJU

Elton!

DRAGÓN

You can't force us --

HELMS
(to DRAGÓN)

And you -- you need to guide her better --

ALEXA

What are you talking about?

HELMS

Guide her, Mr. Drone On --

DRAGÓN

Dragón --

HELMS

I know the name -- I was annotating your character. Guide her, Mr. Dragón, give her good instruction.

DRAGÓN

Should I bow first?

SAVORY

Norman!

HELMS

Help her do something that brings us together -- something that heals us -- shouldn't art do that, in your professional opinion? I do.

DRAGÓN

Art should always be free of "shoulds."

HELMS

Except that "should," of course.

DRAGÓN

You -- no one with power -- should impose any restrict[tions]
--

HELMS

Two "shoulds."

(still looking at DRAGÓN)

And if I did?

They measure each other.

DRAGÓN

What would you do?

HELMS

What would you do if I did?

DRAGÓN

What I have always done.

HELMS

What you've taught her to do.

DRAGÓN

I've taught her to speak her mind.

HELMS

You've taught her mind to be selfish.

DRAGÓN

I've taught her mind to be honest.

HELMS

You've taught her mind to be disrespectful.

DRAGÓN

(overlapping)

An artist has the right --

HELMS

(overlapping)

-- has the responsibility --

DRAGÓN

We can debate this forever --

HELMS

I don't intend to --

DRAGÓN

-- but that still doesn't give you the right --

HELMS

I have a power, given in trust --

DRAGÓN

Then trust it. Don't take her painting away.

HELMS

I will, because I do trust it --

DRAGÓN

You can't.

SAVORY

I think we should all go --

HELMS

A challenge?

SAVORY

Into the reception?

DRAGÓN

A plea -- for sanity.

HELMS

I didn't realize anything I said was insane.

DRAGÓN

That's not what I meant --

HELMS

Do you know yourself that well? You don't know me.

DRAGÓN

(realizes what she is thinking)

What are you thinking?

HELMS

The insults buzz thick and fast around here. It seems the palette of choice. Mr. Savory --

DRAGÓN

You can't --

HELMS

Can't what, Mr. Dragón?

DRAGÓN

You won't --

HELMS

Won't what, Mr. Dragón? Mr. Savory --

SAVORY

Yes.

DRAGÓN

Don't!

HELMS

Mr. Savory, close down the whole exhibit --

SAVORY

Close -- Close down? You really should not --

DRAGÓN

Completely w[rong] --

HELMS

(to AVIVA, indicating DRAGÓN)

Your cavalry -- too late. And really pretty bad in the saddle.

DRAGÓN

We should fight this.

HELMS

The third "should."

DRAGÓN

The noose starts with things like this --

HELMS

Mr. Dragón -- we're not sliding into fascism here -- so tell your inner Che Guevara to quiet down.

(to AVIVA)

Look at all the effect your art has created!

A pause as HELMS stares at the picture again.

HELMS

You've got talent -- But your values are unbaked -- I'm not stupid. I do know what's going on -- more than you. And it's not good -- too much self-destruction. There comes a time when "no" is the best value -- and, lucky us, I have the power to make it stick and stay. Mr. Savory.

SAVORY

As principal --

HELMS

Yes, yes -- on my desk in triplicate later. But as of now, this exhibit is closed.

Lights out on tableau. Music for the transition is the same music as Act I, Scene 1. Easel removed.

* * * * *

Scene 3: The Search for Miracles

UTILITY 1 lies down in a slightly twisted pose: this is AUDREY. UTILITY 5 holds her; together, they make a "Pieta." UTILITY 5 does not ever speak.

The other three UTILITY characters kneel around AUDREY and UTILITY 5: the PRAYERS. They pray in murmurs. AVIVA is standing upstage of AUDREY. Each grouping is in its own light. AVIVA is asleep but with her headphones on; music bumps out. She wakes up abruptly, ripping the headphones from her ears.

AVIVA

No!

She speaks to the group. The PRAYERS ignore her and continue praying.

Who?	AVIVA
Who is she?	(ignored)
Please, be quiet!	PRAYER 1
I just want to know --	AVIVA
What?	PRAYER 1
Who she is.	AVIVA
Who are you --	PRAYER 2
-- who thinks she can know anything?	PRAYER 3
I just woke up.	AVIVA
Wishful.	PRAYERS 1 & 2
Thinking.	PRAYERS 2 & 3
On your part.	ALL 3
AVIVA kneels as well.	
Who is she?	AVIVA
What she is <u>turning into</u> is more important.	PRAYER 1

PRAYER 2

This is little Audrey.

PRAYER 3

Our Blessed Virgin Mother's bright note.

PRAYER 1

She is sliding past substance -- and we want to journey with her.

AVIVA

Who is she?

They sit back on their heels, looking and sounding irritated.

ALL 3

Facts.

PRAYER 2

She wants facts.

PRAYER 3

They all want facts.

PRAYER 1

Where the unenlightened --

ALL 3

-- must begin their light.

PRAYER 2

I suppose.

PRAYER 3

Drudgery, though.

ALL 3

So, the facts.

PRAYER 1 stands behind AVIVA and puts her hands on top of AVIVA's head and begins to speak in a mock Gregorian-chant intoning.

PRAYER 1

Little Audrey Santo, of Worcester, Massachusetts, is a "victim soul."

(drops the chant)

She takes on the suffering of people who ask her to intercede with God, relaying their pleas for healing.

PRAYER 2

You could say she sends "heal-mail" to God.

A pause at the bad joke.

PRAYER 1

When she was a child, she injured herself in the backyard pool. Slipped into a coma -- what we like to think of as her "cocoon."

PRAYER 3

Her chrysalis.

PRAYER 2

Her aurelia.

PRAYER 2 gets up and replaces PRAYER 1. Also speaks in a mock chant.

PRAYER 2

After a while, she eased into what the doctors call "akineti mutism" --

(drops the chant)

-- but we know what it really is.

(whispering)

She is a hyphen.

PRAYER 1

The coma was like a comma -- a pause. Now --

PRAYER 2

A hyphenation. An umbilical to our blessed Mother. Through her --

PRAYER 1

In her.

PRAYER 3

With her.

PRAYER 2

We find the higher compassion that overcomes our egos.

PRAYER 1

(to AVIVA)

Did you hear that clearly?

ALL 3

We find the higher compassion that overcomes our egos.

PRAYER 2

She soothes the urge for self-expression.

PRAYER 1

We no longer suffer trying to find a voice: Audrey speaks for us.

PRAYER 3 gets up and replaces PRAYER 2. Mock-chant as well.

PRAYER 3

Miraculous things have happened because faith in her is our reason for living.

(drops chant)

A light-colored oil drips from statues and paintings --

PRAYER 1

The tears of Our Mother.

PRAYER 3

Blood has bloomed on the eucharistic hosts --

PRAYER 2

To show us that God works through our mouths.

PRAYER 3

The stigmata have flowered on her hands during the holy days.

PRAYER 2

With the proper mind --

PRAYER 1

The proper heart --

PRAYER 2

The proper pain --

PRAYER 3

These miracles can ease your dark fears.

ALL 3

Won't you accept her soft embrace?

They return to their original positions around AUDREY, and the murmuring continues. AVIVA rises and speaks to AUDREY.

AVIVA

Is all this true? Have you let go? No more warfare in the gut? No more weary wrestling? I feel -- afflicted by my desires.

PRAYER 1

Audrey feels the affliction of your desires.

AVIVA

My world, right now -- thickened with authority everywhere.

PRAYER 2

She is sickened, Audrey -- heal her.

AVIVA

I have to fight to keep my eyes my own.

PRAYER 3

Audrey, she wants to rise upon your blood-tide.

ALL 3

Bring her sorrow to an end.

AVIVA

Tell me! Unlock me! What is the bargain I need to make?

Each PRAYER does a gesture that makes the light on him or her go out -- one after the other, in succession. As the light goes out, he or she leaves. After the third light, then a slow fade on AUDREY and AVIVA. They exit. Transition music: Gregorian.

* * * * *

Scene 4: The Theses of Councilor Helms

Office of PRINCIPAL SAVORY. To one side an American flag on a stand. SAVORY, HELMS, and DRAGÓN.

SAVORY

I gave the picture back to Ms. Matthews. Is that a problem?

HELMS

It's just that I wanted to use it --

SAVORY

I don't understand.

HELMS

-- to talk to the two of you.

DRAGÓN

I thought you hated the picture.

HELMS

Did I say that?

DRAGÓN

The impression you gave --

HELMS

Don't believe first impressions. I didn't hate the picture -- it made me angry. Not equal. So, we'll do without visual aids.

SAVORY

Do what, Councilor?

HELMS

That's why we treasure you, Mr. Savory. You keep us on message. As I said, something to discuss with the both of you -- but in a moment. I need your help -- you and you -- to talk some things through, first. So bear with me.

(to DRAGÓN)

How long have you been teaching?

DRAGÓN

That's what you want to discuss?

HELMS

"Bear with me," I asked.

DRAGÓN

Why do you want to know?

HELMS

Why wouldn't you want to tell me?

DRAGÓN

For twenty years.

HELMS

Always about art?

DRAGÓN

Art history, techniques --

HELMS

Always here?

DRAGÓN

In Argentina, other countries. And here.

HELMS

Do you paint?

DRAGÓN

Of course. Every day. I've done, and do, everything I ask my students to do.

HELMS

You've exhibited?

DRAGÓN

My students have, so --

HELMS

Sold paintings?

DRAGÓN

-- so I have, yes.

HELMS

But in all that time -- and all those places -- you've never been the public's servant -- as an artist.

DRAGÓN

I'd like to think my art has served --

HELMS

Let me be clearer. You've never had to declare yourself in the marketplace or do constituent leg work -- What I mean is: you haven't had to answer to anyone.

DRAGÓN

Except my conscience --

SAVORY

And to me, of course.

HELMS

Mr. Savory, I don't think he answers to you at all -- or anyone. Just a pleasant illusion he's made us believe -- by the blur of his tango!

DRAGÓN

Oh Piazzolla!

HELMS

But a different tune for me. The people who sign my time card mark the ballot, too, and we partner in the most -- orchestrated of ways.

SAVORY

They haven't called for censorship --

HELMS

Thin ice, principal.

SAVORY

I am just reporting to you that parents have jammed my phone about closing the show.

HELMS

Who?

SAVORY

Mostly the parents of the artists in the show, but that doesn't inval[idate] --

HELMS

Appreciate their distress -- don't look so skeptical, Mr. Dragón.

SAVORY

I hear talk about a petition drive.

HELMS

So have I.

SAVORY

End of my report, then.

HELMS

I would even say -- in fact, I will say -- take note -- I was wrong to close the show that way --

DRAGÓN

You would go that far --

HELMS

I might even sign the petition. After all, I'm not after censorship -- I hate it as much as you do. Just as much. But I also have a higher point to make, that I need to make.

DRAGÓN

Which is --

HELMS

Which is why I'm here with the two of you. I have my -- list -- to nail to the church door.

(to DRAGÓN)

Surprised a "politico" would know Martin Luther?

DRAGÓN

I just didn't think leading us to the river of virtue came with your job.

HELMS

Right there, in thesis 96, the one Herr Luther couldn't cram onto on the door; I'm surprised you don't know it --

DRAGÓN

Thesis 96 --

HELMS

-- about my job as a public servant -- it says I have to make life mean something for the people who trust me -- tangible, practical, healing, communal -- with boundaries.

DRAGÓN

What does that have to do with --

HELMS

Follow me closely.

DRAGÓN

Why do I sense that she doesn't like me?

HELMS

Parts of you I do like --

SAVORY

Norman -- Councilor --

HELMS

I do --

SAVORY

You were saying, Councilor --

HELMS

-- so not you, as a whole, not all of you -- but your arrogant beliefs --

DRAGÓN

Which one?

HELMS

This one: you think art is about the artist, that the artist shouldn't be held back by the speed limit --

DRAGÓN

That's true.

HELMS

But to me, art isn't not about the artist at all.

DRAGÓN

That doesn't make sense --

HELMS

The artist is just a means --

DRAGÓN

A means?

HELMS

For something you probably won't like: for morality. Or before you gag on that word -- the moral life.

DRAGÓN

Art has nothing to do --

HELMS
(to SAVORY)

The retort comes right on schedule.

DRAGÓN
Art has nothing to do with morality.

HELMS
You mean my kind.

DRAGÓN
I mean any kind.

HELMS
And that mistake --

DRAGÓN
Principle.

HELMS
Childishness -- is exactly the problem we are going to fix today.

DRAGÓN
The royal "we" --

HELMS
A collaborative enterprise.

SAVORY
We were talking about the reason you were here.

HELMS
We are getting to it --

SAVORY
Could you now?

HELMS
Not yet. What can you tell me about Aviva Matthews? Your impressions.

SAVORY

Very motivated, talented -- her family supports her in everything.

HELMS

Would you consider her rebellious? Ambitious?

DRAGÓN

Ah, the police work --

SAVORY

She speaks out -- frequently. She has her causes here and elsewhere -- usually people and things on the margins. Why -- ?

HELMS

Gauging --

(to DRAGÓN)

What can you add?

DRAGÓN

Add to your dossier that she's an intelligent painter. I've known her all through high school.

HELMS

Passionate?

DRAGÓN

Disciplined.

HELMS

But not passionate?

DRAGÓN

Her work is very crucial to her.

HELMS

But not passionate?

DRAGÓN

She feels very strongly about what she feels strongly -- what are you looking for?

HELMS

Measuring, balancing -- And you would support her?

DRAGÓN

Unconditionally.

HELMS

And "Abstinence Without Substance" --

DRAGÓN

Is a good example of Aviva's work.

HELMS ponders this.

HELMS

Why have you bothered to teach art?

DRAGÓN

Is this for my dossier?

SAVORY

Norman.

HELMS

Don't misread me. I want to know why you bother teaching something that many think is just a frill -- we have them on the school board, don't we, Mr. Savory? That many consider useless. You've been doing it for twenty years.

SAVORY

Councilor, it's a busy day --

HELMS

I'm almost done.

DRAGÓN

She's gauging.

HELMS
(to DRAGÓN)

Why bother?

DRAGÓN

It's no bother at all. I'll make it simple, because it is, because in places not the United States they understand this: art, the arts, the impulse to make art -- all to help us make sense of pain, suffering, joy and love, death -- everything. Empty out the inside and give it a voice. So that nothing stays buried or oppressed.

HELMS

I can agree with you!

(to SAVORY)

See, we can agree. In the abstract, we can agree. But then we come down to the cases: A crucifix in urine --

DRAGÓN

We have many voices --

HELMS

Women smeared in --

DRAGÓN

A lot of dark vowels --

HELMS

Bullwhips inserted --

DRAGÓN

I'm not their defense lawyer -- they say what they say. They are what they are.

HELMS

"They are what they are." Well, here's my simple take on "what they are": they are mangy dogs, and they spread around a lot of dirt, and in the name of freedom you'd let them lick the food at the table because "they are what they are." Artistically free to do so, yes -- but what good will this freedom do us when we all get sick?

SAVORY

(to DRAGÓN)

You have a class coming up.

DRAGÓN

It seems I have to leave. See, he is the boss.

HELMS

Tide may not wait, but time will. Principal --

SAVORY

Yes?

HELMS

You wanted my point -- I am now nailing it to the door. I want some kind of -- restitution made by our talented and motivated Aviva Matthews.

DRAGÓN

I don't understand.

HELMS

Something that shows she understands, really understands, her -- power to give "a voice to what is inside us" --

(to SAVORY)

-- that's correct, right? that's what he says he teaches, right?

SAVORY

Restitution?

The "change of class" bell rings.

HELMS

I'll let the exhibit re-open. The others shouldn't suffer -- I'll admit, a poor decision out of anger -- and it was out of anger, because I also think she has a lot of skill in her art, which I could see, right there in front of me. As I said, I'll re-open the exhibit if she paints another picture that -- matures her point of view.

DRAGÓN

Corrects her point of view.

SAVORY

You want to give her a second chance?

HELMS

Yes -- a second chance to the fiery young girl.

DRAGÓN

You mean betray --

HELMS

From what you've both told me about her, she should do just fine.

SAVORY

I'll deal with this.

HELMS

(to SAVORY)

That's why we pay you the large bucks, Mr. Savory. Mr. Dragón --

DRAGÓN

Yes?

HELMS

I expect you to mentor her in this. As you said you would. Unconditionally.

SAVORY

To your class?

DRAGÓN leaves. SAVORY and HELMS face each other as the ringing school bell gets louder and louder until almost unbearable; then lights and sound bump out together. SAVORY removes the flag as he and HELMS exit.

* * * * *

Scene 5: The Search for Miracles Continued

The murmuring voices rise. The three PRAYERS, AUDREY, UTILITY 5, and AVIVA take up their positions at the end of Act I, Scene 3. Lights up. The PRAYERS rise and escort AVIVA back to her "bed." The lights go out on AUDREY except for one tight light on her face. The three PRAYERS force AVIVA to her knees, and then they kneel, all three with their backs to

her. When AUDREY speaks, it is in a harsh croak, as if she has not spoken very often.

PRAYER 1

You are a painter.

AVIVA

Yes.

PRAYER 2

Not important.

AUDREY

Unimportant.

PRAYER 3

Audrey places it low on the chain of being.

AVIVA

But I need to speak --

PRAYER 3

Speaking like do -- pure ego.

PRAYER 2

Pure ego: source of the world's evil.

AUDREY

Too -- much -- appetite.

The PRAYERS sit cross-legged.

AVIVA

It's about art -- I want to create art. That means something.

PRAYER 1

You are not interested in art -- you are interested in your own noise.

PRAYER 2

"Abstinence Without Substance" -- created to make people angry.

AVIVA

It was the truth!

PRAYER 3

It did not bring people to healing.

AVIVA

I wanted to make them think.

PRAYER 1

It brought them to anger.

AUDREY

Anger is not thinking.

AVIVA

But it's the highest calling!

PRAYER 1

What is?

PRAYER 2

Pigment on cloth?

PRAYER 3

Stretched on a wooden frame?

AVIVA

Self-expression!

AUDREY

Self is nothing.

The PRAYERS face AVIVA.

AVIVA

Nothing! How can she say that? What are we if not our "selves"?

PRAYER 1

Spirit.

Energy. PRAYER 2

Servants to both. PRAYER 3

Self is blinding. AUDREY

I can't! AVIVA

That's because you are stuck -- PRAYER 1

-- in the old paradigm -- PRAYER 2

-- of thinking you are -- PRAYER 3

Important. ALL 3

None -- PRAYER 1

-- of us -- PRAYER 2

-- is -- PRAYER 3

Important. ALL 3

I am! AVIVA

Then, unhappiness for you. AUDREY

AVIVA

I'll take that!

AUDREY

And unhappiness for others.

AVIVA

I'll take that on, too!

PRAYER 1 stands.

PRAYER 1

You'd sacrifice others.

AVIVA

I have to fight what stupid people do.

PRAYER 2 stands.

PRAYER 2

There is strength in letting go.

AVIVA

Strength in a fist.

PRAYER 3 stands.

PRAYER 3

In the end, none of it matters.

AVIVA

The end is at the end, not now.

The PRAYERS get on their knees in front of AVIVA and bow their heads.

ALL 3

Are -- you -- prepared?

AVIVA

For what?

AUDREY

Are you prepared?

AVIVA

For what?

AUDREY

For the pain of trying to be -- for the pain of trying to stay
-- awake. Awake.

A sound of murmuring voices rise as the lights fade.

* * * * *

Scene 6: The Gauntlet

The murmuring voices continue during the scene change into SAVORY's office. American flag. In the office are AVIVA, BIJU, ALEXA, and SAVORY.

SAVORY

That's what she nailed to the door -- restitution.

BIJU

And you didn't --

SAVORY

Didn't what?

BIJU

Straighten her out?

SAVORY

She was not open for reversal.

BIJU

Elton, Aviva can't be hammered --

SAVORY

Nobody forces anyone --

ALEXA

And I voted for her.

BIJU

So did I.

SAVORY

So did I.

BIJU

Acting like the lord of the manor --

ALEXA

Restitution --

SAVORY

(looking at AVIVA)

She was very clear about it, Biju: another picture that "matures" her point of view. Then she'll re-open the exhibit. That, in a hard nutshell, is the offer on the table.

ALEXA

I don't understand what was so wrong with the first one.

BIJU

Alexa -- it's so simple.

ALEXA

I hate when you take that tone.

BIJU

Those with power, who have tasted power, also have the taste for liking to snap it and crack it.

(makes the sound of a whip)

Simple.

ALEXA

We've now moved back to Haiti.

BIJU

An early lesson learned. They don't like the little people pointing out their faults. Just as soon break the little fingers off like twigs -- kah-rack! Lord Helms looks at her mirror, sees the face, the visage [French pronunciation], of a protector of the community's virtue. The gatekeeper, the knight in shiny armor --

ALEXA

Biju, sit down.

BIJU

Making the word flesh, that's all.
(imaginary sword stabs)
The knight in shiny armor --

AVIVA

(with emphasis)

Stop it. Everyone -- just -- stop it.

They wait for AVIVA to speak.

AVIVA

There's nothing wrong with her doing that.

BIJU

What?

AVIVA

She's not doing anything wrong by doing that.

The three adults are momentarily struck silent by her words.

AVIVA

Someone should do it. Someone should step up and do it.

SAVORY

Aviva --

AVIVA

I voted for her, too -- my first vote -- my adult ID. Pulled that lever -- ka-ching.

(to BIJU)

I've been thinking.

BIJU

You always do.

AVIVA

I've been thinking a lot. To you: family -- always priority-one -- right?

BIJU

Yes.

AVIVA

Community, too --

BIJU

Just a bigger family --

AVIVA

All those nightmare stories about Papa Doc, Baby Doc,
Ton-tons --

BIJU

Family was all that kept those dark nights away.

AVIVA
(to ALEXA)

And you, always on about healing, the spirit --

ALEXA

Your wicked Wiccan mother --

AVIVA

That tee-shirt you made me wear: "The bloom of soul -- "

ALEXA

" -- that breaks the cage of thing" --

AVIVA
(overlapping

"-- the cage of thing." From some soy chunk advertising
thing, wasn't it?

ALEXA

Yes. Remember how god-awful --

BIJU

I remember that -- oooh!

AVIVA

The cage of thing. Cage, cage, cage, break. Break the
cage to heal.

ALEXA

Clean the slate and liberate!

AVIVA

You both have always taught me how important -- all of it --

BIJU

Of course.

AVIVA

So --

SAVORY

Aviva?

ALEXA

Let us help you, Aviva.

BIJU

(to SAVORY)

What are our options?

ALEXA

Wait a second, Biju. Aviva. Aviva. Keep talking to us.
Community, healing, cage --

AVIVA

I had a dream.

BIJU

About what?

AVIVA

It confused me.

DRAGÓN appears in the "doorway." SAVORY motions him to come in.

DRAGÓN

I got your note -- what's going --

SAVORY

Aviva, if you want to talk about it, you're with friends.

AVIVA

Mr. D. This is right in your neighborhood, Mom: ring-ring the I-Ching.

ALEXA

The dream.

AVIVA

The dream --

(to DRAGÓN)

I had a dream --

(to ALL)

The dream brought me to someone named Audrey Santo -- a young girl -- in a coma --

DRAGÓN

Her?

(to everyone)

People go to her for miracles.

BIJU

She exists?

DRAGÓN

Four thousand people once came to a Catholic Mass in a football stadium while she laid out stiff in a little glass house. Constant pilgrimages to her home. Even the Church is investigating for possible miracles -- they'd hate to miss a new one. You dreamed about her?

BIJU

(to AVIVA)

How do you know about her?

AVIVA

I didn't -- I didn't think I did.

BIJU

You had a vision.

People ponder the word "vision."

AVIVA

She spoke right into my bones -- right into them. She gave me an --

(looks for the word)

-- an annunciation? Is that it?

BIJU

Ah, yes!

ALEXA

About what?

AVIVA

That being a painter was being selfish. That I was -- that I was stuck in believing that I was important. That I should let it -- the whole cage thing of it -- just let it go. If I did something to hurt people's feelings --

SAVORY

Norman --

DRAGÓN

She didn't.

AVIVA

I did, Mr. D., yes, I did. I painted -- what I painted -- even though I liked what I painted -- I painted it to stick a finger in her eye. I did do that. And she got it, right in the eye.

DRAGÓN

I can't say I feel much sorry for --

SAVORY

Careful --

AVIVA

And maybe other people got it, too -- you know

(using her finger)

-- jab, jab, jab, jab, jab. So why be surprised when they jerk in pain and go bam, bam?

(like a boxer)

I meant to trash her. I did. Meant it. Because I'd decided she wasn't in on the truth the way I was. So who am I?

Who am I to do that? Why should I get away with acting like -- like -- some terrorist?

DRAGÓN

You're not a terrorist --

AVIVA

Oh, because I'm an artist? The two can't walk in the same shoes? I think what she did was good. She was protecting the community -- what you told me we all should always do.

BIJU

But I didn't mean this --

AVIVA

Then what did you mean, Dad? Clear it up for me.

ALEXA

Hold my hand.

AVIVA

She speaks for a lot of people.

ALEXA

Here, hold.

AVIVA

And she's doing exactly what I'm trying to do: speak to people.

AVIVA does not hold ALEXA's hand.

DRAGÓN

It's not the same thing at all.

AVIVA

Look -- all of you. Friends, my friends, friends of friends, friends of friends I don't even have -- they're all fucking like rabbits.

(to SAVORY and DRAGÓN)

Sorry -- but you know this, too, don't you? And what are most of these --

(makes a hand gesture about "coupling")

Disasters. I know this, you know this -- it's like we're waiting for the balloons to blow.

AVIVA makes a gesture of a rounded pregnant belly.

AVIVA

So what do I do? What's my contribution? I sit on my prissy little "gifted and talented" high horse and say that the person advising them to zip it up is -- ignorant. When clearly she ain't. Who the fuck am I, then? Sorry. Most of these people should "just say no" -- it'd add a new word to their spellcheck.

AVIVA takes a deep breath.

AVIVA

That's what the dream was about, I think. And I don't have a clue to what I'm supposed to do.

BIJU

Well. Aviva -- I don't know what to say.

SAVORY

Nothing has to be decided right now.

ALEXA

But she does want an answer.

SAVORY

One out of two -- yes or no. By week's end. But not right at this moment.

DRAGÓN

(to SAVORY)

What are you going to do?

BIJU

That's what I've been wanting to know.

DRAGÓN

(indicating them all)

What are we going to do?

SAVORY

You can't do anything.

DRAGÓN

Doesn't anyone have a little desire to fight back?

(to AVIVA)

Don't you?

SAVORY

This is not your call.

DRAGÓN

Listen. Listen. The poet laureate of England gets about a hundred bucks a year, and his only job is to write poetry to celebrate the country that uses him. Almost without exception, the poetry is mierda. Why? Written on demand from a king or a queen who does not want to be upset. Queen Helms wants you as her laureate. Will you, won't you? That's the question on the table.

(to AVIVA)

Guernica. Remember? Remember? And Goya.

AVIVA

Quinquela Martín.

DRAGÓN

You know this drill, Aviva. They all made the world a different thing to see, which made all the "see-ers" different, too. Don't worry about your power. Worry about people like her who only want to shorten it. Disappointed, nostalgic -- you were on the nail.

SAVORY

Norman -- Look, I hate to bring this up, but, well, here is another two cents here that is a hard fact. You know the power she has over the committee -- especially the school budget. Which is coming up for review. Soon. I'm sorry, I wish I didn't have to say this -- but there is a proposal to cut back arts funding.

DRAGÓN
(to AVIVA)

There's the squeeze play.

The "change of class" bell rings.

DRAGÓN

I've got to go.

(to BIJU and ALEXA)

Call me, talk to me, if you want, okay?

(to AVIVA)

Welcome to the minefield.

DRAGÓN leaves.

SAVORY

I'm sorry.

ALEXA

Norman's just being the fiery frustrated Norman we love and know.

BIJU

When your feet are bare, you don't need a loose cannon like him around.

ALEXA

He's not the loose one -- well, the only loose one.

BIJU

Steel-toed boots for everyone!

ALEXA

Could we sue her?

SAVORY

Somebody's already working on that.

ALEXA

Run an impeachment?

SAVORY

Is strong principle a high crime?

ALEXA

A coup, then.

BIJU

We'd have to run for the hills if it croaks.

ALEXA

We'd rally the masses.

BIJU

I wouldn't do well in the hills. Neither would you. Besides, we don't have any hills around here -- and masses -- there ain't no masses around here, either!

ALEXA

I know masses of masses --

AVIVA

In the dream --

Everyone pays attention.

AVIVA

In the dream she asked me -- she asked me if I was prepared.

ALEXA

Prepared.

AVIVA

"For the pain of trying to be -- for the pain of trying to stay -- awake." Exact quote.

ALEXA

Did you understand that?

AVIVA

All I know is that it makes me feel like wanting to take a long, long sleep.

AVIVA puts on her Walkman. Lights dim, transitional music comes up. SAVORY removes flag as the PRAYERS, UTILITY 5, and AUDREY enter.

* * * * *

Scene 7: The Dream Complete

The three PRAYERS, AUDREY, UTILITY 5, and AVIVA take up their positions at the end of Act I, Scene 5: the PRAYERS on their knees in front of AVIVA and bowing their heads, AUDREY and UTILITY 5 down center. Lights up. AVIVA takes off her headphones.

AUDREY
Are you prepared?

AVIVA
Tell me for what.

AUDREY
No one can tell you.

AVIVA
Then how can I be?

PRAYER 1
It will not get easier.

PRAYER 2
Or more understandable.

PRAYER 3
It can't be avoided.

ALL 3
And you are responsible for knowing everything.

AUDREY
Do not forget.

AVIVA
What?

AUDREY

The letting go.

AVIVA

I can't.

AUDREY

The peace in letting go.

AVIVA

A peace like death.

PRAYER 1

So is this life of art -- each brushstroke a tick of the second hand --

PRAYER 2

Each color shades into decay --

PRAYER 3

Every canvas haunted by your eventual dissolving.

AVIVA

That's what gives the artist's life such weight and voltage!

PRAYER 1

Oh --

PRAYER 2

-- such --

PRAYER 3

-- confidence!

PRAYER 1

Her faith --

PRAYER 2

So touching --

PRAYER 3

Her faith --

ALL 3

Unearned.

AUDREY

If they disagree? Deny? Demean? Destroy?

AVIVA

Then I will fight.

PRAYER 1

The folly of youth --

PRAYER 2

The overpriced arrogance --

PRAYER 3

They think they have an infinite amount of skin to lose.

AVIVA

I will lose it all, then.

AUDREY

You will.

The PRAYERS gather around AUDREY, as at the top of the scene, leaving AVIVA in her own light, as at the top of the scene.

ALL 3

There is another way.

AVIVA

There is no other way.

AUDREY

You will be sliced naked to the bone.

AVIVA

Good.

AVIVA closes her eyes, as if she has gone back to sleep. Lights out on AUDREY and the PRAYERS. The murmuring continues. Then AVIVA awakens abruptly, and as she speaks, the murmuring stops.

AVIVA

Yes!

Then, with a tone of fear and realization as she sees herself along.

AVIVA

No.

To black. Music for transition into intermission.

INTERMISSION

Scene 8: The Theses Nailed To The Door

Lights up center stage, where HELMS stands at a small lectern. Placed upstage, either right or left, is AVIVA in front of a canvas on an easel. She has a palette in her hand and a brush. While HELMS speaks, she paints, but it's clear she has no enthusiasm for it. She wears the headphones. Sounds gradually fade out.

HELMS does not have to stay at the lectern; she can move about freely. However, when she moves away from the lectern, the area into which she moves should be lighted, and the light on the lectern out, and then the area darkened when she moves back to the lectern. The effect is of her causing light to shine wherever she moves. The light on AVIVA stays up.

HELMS

Breakfast with the Rotary -- always a favorite. Because I know that here I will find citizens who make things work, make this city a fine, and a finer, place to live. I also know that breakfast speakers should keep to light topics -- but -- "but" -- I'm sure you heard it coming -- I do want to -- have to -- bring up what has been swirling around like angry bees -- the art exhibit. Yes, I did what was reported -- I closed it down because one of the "artists" made what I thought -- what you all would have probably thought -- made a bad argument. She said that my effort -- on the behalf of your children -- to make abstinence the primary form of the health education we offer in our system was, well, mis-informed. She didn't say this in words, mind you, right to my face -- she didn't face me or you directly. Instead, she snuck her disagreement in under the guise of the art exhibit. It was a thin disguise.

The five UTILITY characters enter and sit on the floor in front of her, facing her; they are dressed like high school students.

HELMS

It hit the fan -- just ask my secretary. And not an easy decision to live with. I understand the power of the artist. I admire the artist -- I envy the artist. I wish I had the talent, in any medium, to do what this artist did to me: bring the mind and spirit to a boil. But the artist -- and art -- doesn't exist in a vacuum. We ask all sorts of people who do business in our society to live up to standards -- you all have to do that every day -- why shouldn't artists be asked to do the same? And why shouldn't those standards be ones that we can all agree to, that can bind us together at a time when everything in the world conspires to rip us apart? Well -- I've taken up enough of your time. Have some more coffee, and especially another piece of that pastry, and I'll take any questions.

UTILITY 1 stands and faces the audience but speaks as if to HELMS.

UTILITY 1

Councilor Helms --

HELMS

Aren't you supposed to be in school?

UTILITY 5 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 5

Homeroom is in an hour.

UTILITY 2 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 2

Councilor Helms, we have a question for you -- which is why we came here this morning.

HELMS

Well, I asked for questions, so stand and deliver.

UTILITY 3 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 3

We're some of the other artists from the exhibit, and we think that what you did to Aviva Matthews and us is unfair.

HELMS

I don't disagree. Your question?

UTILITY 4 stands and faces the audience.

UTILITY 4

We heard that you'll open up the exhibit again if Aviva paints a new picture that you like. Is that true?

HELMS

Where did you hear this?

UTILITY 5

Around.

HELMS

An art teacher, perhaps? Never mind. Yes, I said that.

UTILITY 1

We just want to say -- all of us here, all us artists -- that we think that's not right.

UTILITY 2 pulls out a piece of paper and reads from it.

UTILITY 2

The First Amendment --

HELMS

Good to see the history teachers are doing their jobs.

UTILITY 2

-- The First Amendment is not about protecting the speech of the majority but of the minority. The majority will always have the power to say what it wants to say, which can lead to tyranny --

HELMS

No one here is a tyrant.

UTILITY 2 hands the paper to UTILITY 5 to finish.

UTILITY 5
(pushing on)

The minority, like artists, need to have the right to speak freely so that the search for truth can go forward; this is the essence of democracy --

HELMS

Did you all write that?

UTILITY 3

With some help.

HELMS

The rest of you believe that?

(they agree)

I believe in the First Amendment, too, believe it or not.

UTILITY 4

Then why are you forcing Aviva to paint a new picture?

HELMS

I'm not forcing anyone -- freedom of choice. She's free to choose.

UTILITY 3

Except the picture she painted.

HELMS

Limits even on choice -- and she happened to cross one.

UTILITY 5

Artists do sometimes.

HELMS

Look, it's all a balance, isn't it? You can see that. My new curriculum is about dealing with a problem -- her painting directly undercuts that. I'm trying to save some lives -- your lives, really, to bring it down to cases -- and she's telling people that saying "no" is, well, I'm not sure what she thinks about it, only that she thinks her "no" is better than my "no."

We disagree. My job is to promote the public good. And it was in the public good to give her "no" back to her.

UTILITY 1

What if she doesn't do the painting?

During the next lines, AVIVA takes out a small pen knife and slowly, methodically, cuts the canvas to tatters.

HELMS

No exhibit. If you don't like that, take it up with her, as I said.

(to the general audience)

This is good, fruitful -- obviously some of our best standing in front of us. I think we should give them a hand for their grit.

HELMS claps. The lights go out one at a time on the UTILITY characters. They sit.

HELMS

Well, back to the business of keeping this a great city.

Thank you for having me here. Any time is fine with me -- I like playing this room.

The murmuring comes back up as the lights fade down on HELMS and AVIVA. Cross-fade sound to meditative transition music.

* * * * *

Scene 9: Aviva and Helms

HELMS's office, consisting of an American flag and the lectern she used with a huge Bible-looking book on it, open. BIJU and ALEXA enter carrying chairs; they sit. AVIVA enters carrying a chair and a canvas wrapped in kraft paper. She props the canvas on the chair. Lights up; several beats as the three wait for HELMS to enter. HELMS enters.

HELMS

Sorry I'm late. Business. Over at the school, as a matter of fact. It seems that someone has been organizing support for you, young lady. There's a tee-shirt -- have you seen it? -- "Viva Aviva!" Viva Aviva. Almost a palindrome. Well,

it's nice to know you have friends. I see you've brought me something.

AVIVA makes no move to unwrap the canvas.

HELMS

You can unwrap it.

AVIVA continues to remain still.

HELMS

(to BIJU and ALEXA)

Is she all right?

ALEXA

Aviva, honey, if you don't want to --

HELMS

I hate to push the point, but today is the deadline.

(to BIJU and ALEXA)

Have either of you seen --

BIJU

No -- she did this all in her private way.

HELMS

I see -- or, rather, I don't see -- it -- which is the point of this meeting. Ms. Matthews, would you show me what you've done.

AVIVA unwraps the canvas and hands it to HELMS: it's the canvas she sliced in Act II, Scene 1. The canvas hangs in tatters. HELMS shows the canvas to BIJU and ALEXA.

HELMS

You weren't aware?

ALEXA

No. Beeba --

HELMS is strangely moved by the canvas.

AVIVA

Do what you want with it. I can't say.

HELMS

This wasn't what I was expecting.

ALEXA

You shouldn't be expecting anything from her.

BIJU

I think we're done here. You've humiliated her far more than enough.

HELMS

(to AVIVA)

I don't want to humiliate her at all.

BIJU

Maybe we should give you your own medicine back.

HELMS

You'll have to take a number --

(to AVIVA)

What made you do --

BIJU

Let's go, Aviva.

BIJU and ALEXA move to exit.

HELMS

Wait.

AVIVA and HELMS lock eyes for a moment. HELMS looks at the canvas, then back to AVIVA, puts the canvas down.

HELMS

I think I know what's happening with you. Inside. Right here.

HELMS taps her own breastbone.

AVIVA

Then you can more of this than I do.

BIJU

Aviva.

HELMS

Mr. and Mrs. Matthews, let me just have a second with Aviva. A few seconds.

(pointing to canvas)

It's about this.

ALEXA

Aviva --

AVIVA

It's all right. I'm all right.

ALEXA

This is very painful for her.

HELMS

That's the paradox about fertility, Mrs. Matthews.

BIJU and ALEXA wait.

HELMS

You're disheartened.

AVIVA

That doesn't take a Ph.D.

HELMS

Your anger. Your pride. You can't think straight, can you?
Can you?

AVIVA

No.

HELMS

It thickens up your eyes, your ears, your laughter -- doesn't it?

AVIVA

(pointing to canvas)

That's all that seemed to come out.

HELMS

That's because those feelings are shaping you, not the other way around.

AVIVA

Your point?

HELMS

You have to shape them. You will make them more powerful that way. Right now it's --

AVIVA

Right now I've had about all I can eat.

HELMS

All right -- I understand. But one last thing.

(indicating canvas)

This is not just me, is it? Something else is digging its way through you.

AVIVA

Something, nothing. I don't want to talk about it.

HELMS

But there is.

AVIVA

You wouldn't believe me if I said it.

HELMS

It's enough for you to say what you're saying. It's enough for you not to want to be stuck on pride and anger, like so many other people.

AVIVA

It doesn't feel good.

HELMS

Then I want to throw one more thing into this stew.

AVIVA

Load it on.

HELMS

To lighten it up.

AVIVA

Throw it in.

HELMS

I admire your grit.

AVIVA

My what?

HELMS

Your grit.

AVIVA

What exactly is "grit"?

HELMS

Like sandpaper -- the rough stuff that shapes something else.

AVIVA

It sounds like an old word.

HELMS

Consider who's saying it. But a tested one. And you've got it.

AVIVA

"Grit" is good?

HELMS

"Grit" is good.

AVIVA

Why are you saying this?

HELMS

Because I admire anything that refuses to take things easy. I never had the luxury -- and I don't think you want to, either.

BIJU
(to AVIVA)

We should go.

HELMS
You've got two fights to fight. The outside fight: the world always wants to mark us down as dirt and sweep us away. Or even worse, just make us ordinary. Some resist, like you. Like me. The other fight -- that's in the privacy of your own doubt, your own terror. The fight most people medicate themselves out of. The one that's always frightened me the most.

AVIVA
You, scared?

HELMS
Ah, see? I suspect that you're no different.

HELMS holds up the picture.

HELMS
I am going to keep this -- as your first commissioned work.

HELMS holds it up against what would be the wall.

HELMS
Here?

AVIVA
Yes -- so it can be gritty in the eye.

HELMS
"Viva Aviva!" Now apply that edge.

AVIVA
To what?

HELMS
To another picture.

AVIVA
I don't understand.

HELMS

To another picture. I asked you for another picture.

(holding up canvas)

Interesting, but not sufficient.

AVIVA

I still don't understand.

HELMS

I am giving you an extension until Monday.

AVIVA

An extension.

HELMS

A second second chance.

ALEXA

Why?

BIJU

Because she won't stop until she gets what she wants.

HELMS

(indicating AVIVA)

What the two of us want -- it's not all that different, is it, Ms. Aviva Matthews? Is it?

BIJU

Well, then, I am lost -- please give me clues so that I may find the light.

HELMS

I'm in a giving mood only this far, Mr. Matthews.

(to AVIVA)

The rest you can figure out on your own.

(holding up the canvas)

I do like this, you know. The shock of its honesty. To expose yourself like that. Great pains, great gains. We'll meet in Mr. Savory's office.

BIJU

Let's go.

HELMS

Onward and upward.

Lights change to down center; HELMS exits with the painting and wrapping paper. The lectern is removed. BIJU and ALEXA each bring a chair down center, set it, and sit on it. AVIVA trails. The action is continuous; they can begin speaking before they reach the playing area.

ALEXA

I feel horrible.

BIJU

Imagine how she feels.

ALEXA

I feel -- at the mercy.

BIJU

Think of her.

ALEXA

When you unwrapped that canvas --

BIJU
(to AVIVA)

Want to know a truth?

ALEXA

What?

BIJU

I was glad you gave that to her.

ALEXA

I wasn't --

BIJU

I was proud of you!

ALEXA

Don't prime her!

That weasel!	BIJU
Don't use her!	ALEXA
Use her?	BIJU
Everyone is using her --	ALEXA
For what?	BIJU
To make a <u>point</u> --	ALEXA
No one's using her --	BIJU
Stick it there, twist it --	ALEXA
Me?	BIJU
You! A whiff of that Haitian revolutionary spirit --	ALEXA
Not true --	BIJU
-- and you're ready to push her on the barricades!	ALEXA
Not true!	BIJU
For the greater glory!	ALEXA

BIJU

As opposed to you, of the clean hands --

AVIVA

Dad --

ALEXA

I'll admit it, I'm guilty, too -- I don't want to lose my Beeba.

BIJU

Your Beeba --

AVIVA

Your Beeba --

ALEXA

Yes, my Beeba -- my little girl -- my lost, little, protectable girl.

AVIVA sits.

ALEXA

When you unwrapped that canvas -- I have to be honest -- my heart sank.

BIJU
(to AVIVA)

Me too, I must admit.

ALEXA

Boom, right down!

BIJU

Even as I thought, "Good, right in her eye" --

ALEXA

You know why? Because I suddenly saw the whole road of pain in front of you.

AVIVA

Mom --

ALEXA

Let me finish. I saw how nasty this world turns -- right between the ribs -- not like I didn't know that already -- but not to my baby. Not to my "Beeba." And I felt -- My heart sank. I couldn't protect you anymore -- if ever I could, I couldn't now.

AVIVA

I am eighteen.

BIJU

She is eighteen.

ALEXA

And eighteen has what to do with what's in here?

BIJU

Alexa --

ALEXA

As if eighteen finishes anything! Beeba --

AVIVA

Neither of you -- neither of you -- can protect me. Maybe at one point -- you know, holding me up straight on the bicycle. But then you let go and --

Her gesture should be one of "And then you released me into the world."

BIJU

So what are you going to do?

ALEXA

Biju!

BIJU

She has to make plans. On the other side of second second chances and councilors, she has to make plans --

ALEXA

The world's too quick --

BIJU

What can we do to help?

ALEXA

It's too quick! All right!

(to AVIVA)

So what can we do?

AVIVA

Begging your pardons, what am I going to do. I have three days to suss out the scene -- symbolic, huh?

BIJU

Rise, fall, and rise again.

AVIVA

That last step -- slippery.

ALEXA

Really, Beeba: what do you want?

AVIVA

What do I want ? What can I want? There's Councilor Helms, who -- well --

BIJU

What?

AVIVA

I'm not sure. But there's Mr. Dragón guilting me with Picasso and Goya -- Picasoya -- and poor Mr. Savory's pelotas squeezed between Councilor Helms and the school budget, and my fellow classmates middle-fingering me for fucking up an extra-curricular activity on their résumé. If I re-paint, I can please -- let's see -- one councilor -- maybe, one principal, five fellow canvas-biters: seven bits. Mr. Dragón -- left in the lurch.

BIJU

Us -- in the "lurch" category.

(to ALEXA)

Right?

ALEXA nods wearily.

AVIVA

The score: seven pleased, three crushed on the rocks of despair.

ALEXA

And you?

AVIVA

"Me"? At this moment, right here, this spot, this now -- who is "me" in all this backwash?

BIJU

Whatever you choose --

ALEXA

Whoever you choose to make that choice --

BIJU

-- you know we'll support you.

AVIVA

For "granite." I know. But --

ALEXA

Ah, that "but" --

AVIVA

I have to do it this way.

ALEXA

I know the agenda of that "but" --

AVIVA

Because I have "grit."

ALEXA

-- the road of pain -- single fare -- return trip open.

AVIVA

This is solo. Solo grit. Lifted, flung like dung -- voom -- right out there! That's my arc right now.

BIJU

Even Charles Lindbergh had a ground crew, hey?

AVIVA

Hey!

BIJU

Someone to do the worrying --

ALEXA

Someone ground-based. Keep the light in the window burning.

AVIVA

Well, then, you can be my ground-based techies and help me suffah for the ahts!

ALEXA

I'll post the mythic outlines for the journey --

BIJU

I'll do the hospitality.

ALEXA

The Caribbean warmth.

AVIVA

And me --

BIJU

You -- you go long!

Mock soccer kick to AVIVA. AVIVA "heads" the ball into the net, dances for the "goal."

BIJU

And we'll all cheer.

ALEXA

Which cannot be told apart from the sound of weeping.

BIJU

Well -- dinner, anyone? We can still do that one all together.

The lights come down as they remain there. Transition music.

* * * * *

Scene 10: The Solo Flight

NOTE: The next scene can be staged in any number of ways, but it is AVIVA's journey in thinking through what to do. On her "travels" she comes across a variety of characters that she incorporates. The UTILITY characters play the various people she comes across, and they will exit and enter as needed. As much of the mood and setting should be done through lighting, sound, music, and simple props.

* * * * *

As BIJU and ALEXA leave the stage with the chairs, the transition music cross-fades into the sound of a propeller plane starting up.

UTILITY 5, completely naked, upstage on a platform, in a sharp downlight, swirls her arms like airplane propellers. As they enter, the other UTILITY characters will place the following items on the platform: red panties, red bra, red garter belt, a pair of frilly white ankle socks, a pair of black patent leather shoes, and a white frilly dress. At the end of the scene, UTILITY 5, under AVIVA's guidance, will dress in these items.

AVIVA is given a sketch pad and pencil, and she wears her headphones throughout. She also wears an old leather flying helmet and a silk scarf.

As soon as AVIVA enters, UTILITY 5 stops airplaning; the propeller sounds cuts out. UTILITY 5 then collapses onto the platform into a fetal position.

UTILITY 1 & 2 walk on: 20-something academic deconstructionists, drinking coffee.

UTILITY 1 lays a pair of red panties on the pedestal.

AVIVA overhears them, begins sketching. They should strike poses as they talk, affectedly natural.

UTILITY 1

Tweety Bird or Sylvester?

UTILITY 2

Nothing appealing about either one.

UTILITY 1

Then resonates. In sympathy with.

UTILITY 2

I feel the most tragedy for Sylvester.

UTILITY 1

Not Tweety.

UTILITY 2

Too smug. I'd eat him just to delete that baby-puke speech impediment: "I taut I taw -- "

UTILITY 1

But Sylvester brings his hunger on himself --

UTILITY 2

It comes from love --

UTILITY 1

He wants to eat Tweety!

UTILITY 2

Only because that's all Tweety offers -- I mean, Tweety's stuck in an old paradigm -- cats eat birds. Sylvester wants a different union -- cross-species. But the only way he can connect is on terms laid down by Tweety -- he can either play the eating game or leave the field -- and leaving, obviously, is not a live option for Sylvester.

UTILITY 1

Because he's a --

(imitating SYLVESTER's lisp)

-- "thychotic thtalker"!

UTILITY 2

Every obsession is based on love.

UTILITY 1

Every love doesn't need to be an obsession.

UTILITY 2

Don't be so sure.

UTILITY 3 enters, a literal "bag lady," wearing a huge garbage bag like a dress and an elaborate head-dress made of a folded garbage bag; she carries a spritzer bottle. She drops a red bra onto UTILITY 5's pedestal.

UTILITY 3 squirts the spritzer bottle several times into the air, watches the droplets descend, then steps under them.

UTILITY 2

Because obsession's the only kind we are ever interested in, isn't it? Who wants ordinary when reality comes to intervene?

UTILITY 1

But he -- he is a "he," isn't he?

UTILITY 2

I don't know -- Either of them, actually --

UTILITY 1

We need some anatomically correct animation here before proceeding.

They exit as UTILITY 3 repeats her motion twice more, quickly. UTILITY 3 then blesses herself, and yells out.

UTILITY 3

I thaptize be! Messéd [two syllables] are the bleek. Ressed are the blighteous.

UTILITY 3 exits, repeating the phrases.

UTILITY 3

Messéd are the bleek. Ressed are the blighteous. Messéd are the bleek. Ressed are the blighteous.

AVIVA scrawls UTILITY 3 into her sketchbook in heavy strokes.

As UTILITY 3 exits, UTILITY 4 enters with a chair, a book, and a red garter belt. He lays the garter belt on the platform.

UTILITY 4 sits. He plays with his hair, scratches his scalp, etc. AVIVA sketches him.

UTILITY 4

I always do this -- when I'm reading a good book! -- so go fuck yourself if you can't stand a guy pulling on his brain to tie the words in so they don't leak out.

He reads frantically for a few moments.

UTILITY 4

I went to the diner, had dinner, came here subsequently -- not consequently! -- to read a good book to see if I wanted it --

UTILITY 2 enters dressed all in black wearing a dog collar, chains, and anything which can make his body look pierced. He puts one frilly white ankle sock on the platform.

Half-way through UTILITY 2's first lines, UTILITY 3 comes in with a bucket and drum-sticks and a change of clothes and begins bucket-drumming, low at first throughout, then loud at the end. AVIVA sketches.

UTILITY 4

-- and if you don't wanna know anything else about me, then shut up -- Jeez!

UTILITY 2
(to UTILITY 4)

Hey, demon spawn --

UTILITY 4

You don't wanna know anything about me --

UTILITY 2

Hey, lickspittle --

UTILITY 4

I'm just trying to keep things in!

UTILITY 2

Move your pathetic pathogens out of here!

UTILITY 4 exits. As he does, he pulls the second frilly sock out of his pocket and drops it on the platform.

UTILITY 2

Like I had a shirt that said "Let It All Go To Hell," with a copyright symbol next to it. What a goof, man! Copyright misery -- make some bucks off it, why not, everybody does, the transnational multinationals do. Fuck, I bought the tee-shirt, didn't I?

UTILITY 2 begins to talk a little louder to get over the drum.

UTILITY 2

My fucking parents wanted to know why I let everything go. Why not -- everything let me go. Work hard, buy shit, vote for suck-up politicians, die full of poisons and scar tissue.

(the drumming is louder now)

Everything's bleak, so I wear black. Everything's wrecked, so I retch. I puncture my body because beauty sucks and I can bleed out all the tox-sicks.

(drumming stops)

I got the perfect freedom. I got the perfect freedom that comes from hating everything.

UTILITY 2 starts to exit, then abruptly returns.

UTILITY 2

I'm the court jester. I'm the canary in the cave.

UTILITY 2 exits. The drumming continues as UTILITY 1 & 4 enter. UTILITY 4 lays the first black patent leather shoe on the platform.

UTILITY 1 is bedraggled, forlorn; she smokes a cigarette in this manner: her right arm metronomes up and down, she barely puffs, while her left arm strokes her hair or face or ear lobe. She never stops the motions, and smokes all through UTILITY 4's lines. She should carry some kind of ratty bag. UTILITY 4 wears a read bandana around his throat and sits cross-legged. The bucket drummer continues to drum very softly. AVIVA sketches them both.

UTILITY 4

Do you know why you don't fly off the earth? Starlight is heavy. You try to jump -- go ahead.

UTILITY 4 gets up, jumps, then sits back down, or tries to jump from a sitting position.

UTILITY 4

Going up, but something's going down. Like the gentle weight of a mother's breath --

No poetic reference to what you didn't have!

Starlight is heavy, yes. It's all in the equations, yes, but most people --

-- most people are fucking donkeys! --

-- most people don't know it. Einstein wanted to disown it. Secret knowledge --

Kabala. Kabalabalabalabala.

You can't accelerate faster than starlight, which is why it keeps you on the ground. It's obvious. The stars care about you.

Slam the door on that one Slam it Slam it

It's all in the equations --

Einstein didn't want you to know that.

UTILITY 4 gets up and goes to UTILITY 3 playing the bucket.

UTILITY 4

Stop it! You don't spike the rhythm right. You do not have a place in the equations!

UTILITY 4 kicks the drum away.

UTILITY 4

Goddamn, I wish people wouldn't get out of line!

UTILITY 3 begins playing UTILITY 4 as a drum. UTILITY 4 drops to the ground, cross-legged, and lets himself be played. UTILITY 1 continues to smoke, abstracted.

UTILITY 2 comes on with several pendants around his neck: a cross, a peace symbol, a crystal. He drops the second black patent leather shoe on the platform.

UTILITY 2

He is the way, you know -- barbecue me if that isn't the Truth.

He comes to UTILITY 3, still drumming on UTILITY 4.

UTILITY 2

You walk a path of endless sorrow, my friend. My fiend.

(to UTILITY 4)

You are drummed out of life even as I show you the light.

UTILITY 4

Let me inform you about light.

UTILITY 2 grabs the drumsticks of UTILITY 3 and crosses them, like an "X".

UTILITY 2

To the funkier rhythm of a flukier power.

UTILITY 2 flings UTILITY 3 away and throws the sticks after her. UTILITY 3 leaves with sticks; the bucket remains on stage. UTILITY 2 turns to UTILITY 1, who is still smoking.

UTILITY 2

Endless rhythmic addiction, endless suck never bringing you to fullness.

UTILITY 4

Starlight is our mother. A motherfucker! Mom!

UTILITY 2

(to UTILITY 4)

Sorrow cancels starlight.

UTILITY 4

No! Leave her alone.

UTILITY 2

Starlight is smoke -- no more, no less.

UTILITY 4

No!

UTILITY 2

The weight -- gone; the comfort -- dust; the link -- cracked.

UTILITY 4

No!

UTILITY 2

You're going -- going -- g[one] --

UTILITY 4

No!

UTILITY 4 grabs the bucket and puts it on his head, and begins beating his own rhythm. By this time, UTILITY 1's cigarette is out, but she continues making the motions.

UTILITY 3 comes on stage as a panhandler. She drops the white frilly dress on the platform.

UTILITY 3

A buck for luck? Too much drama for this mama. It's okay not to have spare change, not okay to have no sense. Get it -- cents, sense? Yeah, well, burn all my bridges all at once. You can ping me in the morning on my cell phone.

UTILITY 2

Endless prayer by the balls --

UTILITY 2 & 3 begin a slow game of patty-cake, but elaborately choreographed.

UTILITY 3

Equal op-por-tu-ni-ty -- when you have a gun. No big guy, no little guy -- when you have a gun. I hear in Florida they'll make having a gun mandatory. I don't want to be walking point down there -- when they have a gun.

UTILITY 2

Life rips through you at a higher caliber there.

UTILITY 4 pit-a-pats on the bucket in rhythm to the patty-cake, UTILITY 1 wanders, but in synch with the other rhythms.

Then lights out on everyone except AVIVA, who scrawls on her pad.

All the UTILITY people straighten and turn to watch her; UTILITY 4 takes off the bucket.

AVIVA throws down the pad, goes to the platform. She pokes UTILITY 5 with her pencil. Nothing. Pokes her again. Nothing. Goes to poke her a third time, and UTILITY 5 "wakes up." AVIVA gets on the platform with her and begins dressing her -- the artist making her next painting.

AVIVA

Whether I want it or not, it just keeps coming. My fingers drown in it -- charcoal blood, my rag-paper brain. Pours in from the outcasts cast out, line after line after line -- fire always burns from the margins in. More and more and more and more they come -- oh-pressed, dee-pressed, sue-pressed, ree-pressed, com-pressed -- seeking me for their express purposes.

AVIVA arranges UTILITY 5 into what will be AVIVA's next painting.

AVIVA

Pressed into service -- the halt, lame, salted, blind, bleak, marxed, flattened, surplused, welfared out, branded, browned, blacked -- the nothing-left-to-lose, the depopulated, vox depopuli. I take life from this thickness that won't thin out, this hereness, nowness, thingness, thisness -- reality so distilled that it will not let me betray myself. Here I am at home, Councilor Helms.

UTILITY 5 is now arranged into "Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

AVIVA picks up her pad, turns to a new page. She signs her name and speaks as she does it, then shows it to the audience and UTILITY people.

AVIVA

Aviva. Matthews.

The UTILITY people leave. Transition music: bucket drumming at first with the airplane propellers, then something quieter; the light comes down slowly.

* * * * *

Scene 11: The New Picture

A seamless transition into the scene. UTILITY 5 looks demure: knees slightly in, a stance of modesty, etc. **Whatever the stance, it must be comfortable!** AVIVA hands off her garb but keeps the sketch pad. BIJU, ALEXA, SAVORY, and DRAGÓN enter. Everyone looks at AVIVA's new painting.

DRAGÓN

So you did it.

SAVORY

And the title?

AVIVA

"Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

SAVORY

Couldn't you just -- modify -- slightly -- She won't miss the sarcasm.

AVIVA

I don't think so. It's a "grit" thing.

SAVORY

What does that mean?

ALEXA

She'll be here soon.

AVIVA

Yes, she will.

SAVORY

(to BIJU and ALEXA)

Couldn't you -- you know --

BIJU

We all had a long talk about it. She's old enough to bear her own decisions.

AVIVA

Mistakes.

BIJU
(laughing)

Interesting choices.

SAVORY

So -- you are going to go with it -- Yes. All right. Just getting a feel for where I can hunker when the artillery begins. Well, we're all here -- let me see if she's here, then.

AVIVA

Wait. Wait.

DRAGÓN

What?

SAVORY

You can still change the --

AVIVA

You all need to know something going in. Come here.

The lights dim except for a light on the "painting." AVIVA opens up her sketchbook and hands it around. People look at it as she speaks. She is free to walk around and "into" the painting as she wants.

AVIVA

Look. Tucked up under -- you can see it in the sketch. Look close -- outline of a garter belt. Red. Just a hint of red, a spit. Slipped up on high on the thigh. And here, in the frill on the hem -- "sex" spelled out in the lace pattern. See, on that page? And here. On the left kneecap -- see the outline of the bone ridge? In profile -- Councilor Helms, but also the Wicked Witch.

The lights come up. Whoever has the sketchbook gives it back to AVIVA.

ALEXA

I didn't know you were --

(to BIJU)

Did you?

AVIVA

No one will ever notice.

ALEXA

Then why do it?

BIJU

Because the resistance has to come out some way, hey?

ALEXA

But if it's not open --

BIJU

The truth will still be there. That's what's important, right?
Poking its nose out.

ALEXA

I don't know --

SAVORY

I wish you hadn't. I really wish you had just gone --

AVIVA

You all defended me before --

DRAGÓN

Aviva --

AVIVA

So let her come --

SAVORY leaves to get HELMS. HELMS enters, nods a greeting to everyone.
She then speaks to AVIVA.

HELMS

Well?

AVIVA indicates the painting. HELMS looks at it.

HELMS

What is the title this time?

AVIVA

"Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

HELMS gives AVIVA both a piercing and a quizzical look.

HELMS

Again?

AVIVA

"Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

HELMS

One more time.

Everyone fidgets slightly.

AVIVA

(deliberately)

"Abstinence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder."

HELMS

A clever thing with words, don't you?

(inspects the painting)

But I'm going to ask you a very simple thing with very simple words: Where are they?

AVIVA

Where are what?

HELMS

The inside jokes. The things meant to embarrass me.

HELMS looks at AVIVA. There is an uneasy silence.

HELMS

I know you're not deaf.

AVIVA

Councilor Helms, I delivered the picture you wanted.

HELMS

Did you?

(to ALL)

Would you all testify that she did just that?

A decision has to be made.

DRAGÓN

Councilor, she gave you what you asked for: a shift in her point of view.

HELMS

That is the sound of a hair being split.

(to AVIVA)

Let me try a different tack, since I can't get anyone to 'fess up. Do you believe in this?

AVIVA

I believe in what's there.

HELMS

In the values behind the paint?

AVIVA

I believe in everything that comes out of me.

HELMS

And what comes out of you here -- that you believe? It's a simple, simple question; I'm surprised it tongue-ties you. What's at the heart of your heart? That's all I'm asking you to deliver.

There is a hefty silence.

HELMS

Just one honest thing.

ALEXA

(half-hearted)

Just stop pushing her.

HELMS

This is barely a worthwhile shove.

ALEXA

Why treat her so badly?

HELMS
(to DRAGÓN)

Come on. Let me hear the formula.

DRAGÓN

Artists don't need to be questioned --

HELMS

I knew I could depend on you.

DRAGÓN

They don't need to be questioned.

HELMS

Yes, yes, that's what I thought you'd say.

(deliberately, to ALL)

Fuck. All. That. And fuck all of you.

Silence crashes around them.

HELMS

My mother showed more art in cooking a meal for us than any museum full of your paintings. At least she gave something of worth to someone, did it with love, and knew, right down to her eye teeth, why she did what she did. Which is more than you can tell me standing in front of what you say you believe in -- "I believe in the painting." You, believe in the painting? You don't believe a stroke in it, do you? So why betray yourself saying crap like that? Your silence testifies.

AVIVA

The painting is what you wanted. I gave you what you wanted.

HELMS

No, you didn't. No, you didn't, because there's none of your heart in it. That's what you and I were talking about just last week -- the truth in your heart. And you betrayed it for --

what? A gesture? A witticism? A pose? And as for "why,"
I can't begin to think I know.

(to ALL)

There's no heart in any of you.

(to AVIVA)

I'll ask you one more time -- where are the insults?

Reluctantly, AVIVA shows HELMS all the hidden items.

AVIVA

This hint of red --

HELMS

So you did lie to me.

AVIVA

A garter belt, underneath.

HELMS

And you all knew.

AVIVA

I spelled out "sex" in the lace.

HELMS

So very clever.

AVIVA

And this --

HELMS

It looks like the profile of a witch.

AVIVA

That's you.

HELMS

So. A joke. The picture as stand-up joke. Standing up. A
stand-up person, aren't you? Why even bother?

(with rage)

This artist, so true to her art -- Mr. Savory. This is what I
want to do. Re-open the exhibit -- the others shouldn't be
punished for her lack of character.

ALEXA

There is no need to insult --

HELMS

(overrides)

Besides, I don't want to give the lawyers any work. As for this --

(indicating the painting)

Obviously not. At least not here. Do your dog-and-pony in a place that sucks up to cheap tricks. I'm sure Mr. Dragón knows lots of them.

BIJU

You have insulted all of us enough.

HELMS

Insulted you? Insulted you? Enough? I am amazed. At this moment, right here, right now, I wish I had the power to strike you all from the face of the earth, the way my daddy used to talk about, the way he would thunder about the wicked ways of the wicked ones, when he would strike out, when he would lash out, when he would straighten all of us out with his anger, sparing no rod, spoiling no child, saving our rotten souls --

Abruptly, HELMS breaks off, and it is clear she is agitated.

SAVORY

Councilor? Councilor? Do you need some water? Something? Councilor?

No immediate response, but HELMS looks at them all with a look mixed of anguish at a painful memory and apology for lashing out at them.

HELMS

I am sorry.

ALEXA

For what?

HELMS

The bill of particulars doesn't matter.

(to AVIVA)

You do not need my father. And you do not need me remembering him.

(to BIJU)

If I've insulted you, then don't vote for me next time -- agreed? Assuming you voted for me last time. Mr. Savory? The curriculum.

SAVORY

That is my job, Councilor.

HELMS

Good.

(to AVIVA)

And then you. You betrayed a trust.

AVIVA

You don't have a deed on me.

HELMS

I gave you a second chance.

AVIVA

I took it with no strings.

HELMS

I know. That's fine. But let's finish this journey. If you really believe I'm in the way --

AVIVA

I have my own --

HELMS

-- that I'm the witch --

AVIVA

I have my own --

HELMS

-- then prove it.

AVIVA

What do you want from me?

HELMS

In two days, in my office, you and anyone else you want to bring along, you explain to me what your first picture was all about -- at least that picture has some honesty in it.

(indicating the painting)

This ranks with whale shit when it comes to honesty.

(more intimately)

You are not going to avoid what you need to do. And I promise you --

AVIVA

What?

HELMS

Neither will I. Neither will I. Two days.

(to SAVORY)

Forward me a notice about the exhibit.

HELMS leaves. UTILITY 5 breaks her pose. No one speaks at first.

UTILITY 5

They contemplate their betrayals.

DRAGÓN

An artist doesn't --

UTILITY 5

Why so bitter?

SAVORY

Stop, Norman.

DRAGÓN

It's outrageous.

SAVORY

That's irrelevant. We all stood here and lied to her.

UTILITY 5

Remembering his own failures?

SAVORY

We can hardly feel superior.

DRAGÓN

You should --

SAVORY

I should not at all, and I won't -- It was stupid of me --

UTILITY 5

If only Aviva would fight his battles --

DRAGÓN

(more to himself than the others)

Then we're all cowards --

SAVORY

You lied as well, don't forget.

(to BIJU and ALEXA)

And I have to say I am disappointed --

BIJU

Perhaps we should have --

SAVORY

I wouldn't tell you how to raise --

UTILITY 5

Have they been the best parents through this?

SAVORY

But, still, it would have all been better --

UTILITY 5

Some limits, maybe --

ALEXA

Aviva -- honey --

AVIVA

I need to get to fourth period.

ALEXA

Yes, of course.

Later. AVIVA

Right. ALEXA

Can I leave it here? AVIVA

Pick it up after. SAVORY

She must inevitably come to him. UTILITY 5

Mr. D -- AVIVA

What? DRAGÓN

To soothe him. UTILITY 5

It's all right. AVIVA

DRAGÓN
It's not all right, Aviva! You Americans -- Biju, you should know this better than anyone. For almost twenty years I have been here, and you all strike me like the frog in the pot of water. The flame gets turned up, little by little. Then, too late -- you're cooked! A little give-in here -- another stick on the fire. Another "it's all right," and you're slowly tenderized.

SAVORY
This is not the time.

DRAGÓN
(overriding)
I just can't stand to -- The things I've spent my life loving -- that I've tried to teach you, because you're one of the best I've ever had -- all turned into little nothings that can be

tossed away like orange rinds. I came from where, once,
your life could be on the hook for the very thing you did --
dare make your voice loud and singular. Blood spilled into
the wind over what you take for granted -- to pick up a brush
and paint what you want! And you're telling me "it's all right"
for this woman to declare that "You may only do this, and
nothing else!" Incredible pain in those words for me, the
pain of friends, of a country -- Don't expect me to act like
the frog. I know the water's boiling -- it's always boiling! --
and don't expect me to shut my mouth!

AVIVA

(in synch with PAINTING)

What do you want me to do?

UTILITY 5

(in synch with AVIVA)

What do you want her to do?

DRAGÓN

I don't know. I don't know. My heart says "fight" --

UTILITY 5

"Fight my battles for me" --

DRAGÓN

My head says --

UTILITY 5

"I don't want to lose my job."

DRAGÓN

My head says that this councilor casts the shadow of a flea
and that you can live past her, past all this.

UTILITY 5

Sound the retreat.

BIJU

Save energy for the real battles.

DRAGÓN

This is a real battle --

UTILITY 5

I am worth it!

DRAGÓN

-- but some will be more real. Just don't forget when it comes to those!

UTILITY 5

Don't forget me!

DRAGÓN

Don't pick up the habits of the frog!

UTILITY 5

I was your second rebellion!

AVIVA

I have your voice in my head --

DRAGÓN

Pretty annoying, isn't it?

UTILITY 5

It's a good voice, but used-up.

DRAGÓN

I should go.

DRAGÓN leaves.

UTILITY 5

(to AVIVA)

You, however, are not used-up. Fight my battles, not his!

SAVORY

The home counties have been heard from.

UTILITY 5

In two days make my sister transform the witch.

AVIVA

I gotta book.

UTILITY 5

Two days.

SAVORY

Yes --

UTILITY 5 assumes its former position.

UTILITY 5

Now they will stand here, dumbfounded by their own complexities, and look at me for answers. None here. Try a mirror.

There is a moment when they all stand there, at a loss for words. Then AVIVA exits. The lights come down on the three adults looking at UTILITY 5. A single light stays up on UTILITY 5 briefly, and then all lights out.

* * * * *

Scene 12: The Deposition

Lights dim. Transition music. UTILITY 1 now becomes the first PAINTING, the one hanging in the art show but unseen: a similar frilly dress as UTILITY 5 but in a darker color and with a torn hem; a pair of construction boots or Doc Martens, unlaced; and a length of chain wrapped around her knees and locked. The legs can be smudged. AVIVA has her sketchbook and wears her Walkman. UTILITY 2, 3, & 4 also bring out chairs, and the American flag in its stand is set. The UTILITY characters sit. Lights up.

NOTE: In blocking this scene, AVIVA is allowed to move in any way she wants; her movements must match the force of her words. Also, after AVIVA undoes the chain, UTILITY 1 can move freely in her space.

UTILITY 2

What do you want to do?

UTILITY 3

What do you want us to do?

UTILITY 4

What can we really do?

ALL 3

Why are you even doing this?

AVIVA

No one ever asked me before.

UTILITY 2

To what?

AVIVA

Explain myself.

UTILITY 3

She hates you.

AVIVA

"Loved ones" don't whack you hard enough sometimes.

UTILITY 4

You want pain?

AVIVA

I want to spill the truth.

UTILITY 2 & 3

Whatever --

UTILITY 4

-- that is.

AVIVA walks to UTILITY 1.

AVIVA

I don't think I've ever really looked at her before.

To the UTILITY characters.

AVIVA

Hey, muchas gracias for coming --

(lacing her hands into a stirrup)

-- for giving me a step up -- but, you know, I think this is a go-alone.

UTILITY 2

We rehearsed.

AVIVA

Dog-and-pony.

UTILITY 3

But we agree with you. Right?

UTILITY 2

Mostly.

UTILITY 4

Yeah, mostly.

AVIVA

If you're just "mostly," we'll be road kill. I need your complete and utter devotion.

UTILITY 3

Oh great one!

AVIVA

Get back to me in twenty years on that. No, look you've all been ace, "butt" --

(pointing to her posterior)

-- in the end -- you know, it really is just me and the dragon lady.

UTILITY 4

(relieved)

WWF-style. Atomic pile driver and all.

UTILITY 2

You sure?

AVIVA

(looking at UTILITY 1)

She's the only who really needs to be here. Wants to be here. Either we work this together --

(making a sign of the cross)

I release you.

The three UTILITY characters rise and start to exit. As they do, HELMS walks in.

HELMS

You're leaving?

AVIVA

I asked them to bear me witness -- but now I've "unasked" them.

HELMS

And you understand why she's done this?

UTILITY 2

I think so.

HELMS

You were at the Rotary.

UTILITY 3

Yes.

HELMS

Stay for the second round. I'd like them to stay.

AVIVA

Not necessary.

HELMS
(shrugs)

Your call.

AVIVA

And the call is "Later."

UTILITY 1

We'll stay --

AVIVA

Released.

The UTILITY characters hesitate, only briefly, then exit. As HELMS speaks, she looks closely at UTILITY 1.

HELMS

They wanted to help.

AVIVA

They're like that.

HELMS

Hard to find good help today. But you seem to have no end of people saluting your flag. Why did you send them away?

AVIVA

Not their fight.

HELMS

This what we're having?

AVIVA

You want me to defend myself.

HELMS

I just want you to explain yourself, without lies. But -- if you want to see this as a fight -- fight.

If AVIVA is wearing any sort of sweatshirt, coat, etc., she takes it off, as if preparing for a round. If not, some other gesture to show the preparation.

AVIVA

All right. You ready?

HELMS

Born so.

AVIVA

Okay. My main point? I just meant to make a point.

HELMS

That's old news.

AVIVA

But that's all of it.

HELMS

You need new news.

AVIVA

I don't underst[and] --

HELMS

Your "point" -- what was it? A little rope, a little dope, a little "dis," a little "dat" -- but no punch. What did you expect people to do after you dazzled 'em with your "point"?

AVIVA

Think about it.

HELMS

Because you made it?

AVIVA

Because it was made.

HELMS

Did the "point" come out in a dialogue?

AVIVA

No.

HELMS

A Q&A where people could "punch" you back?

AVIVA

No.

HELMS

Double fault. So how would you know if your "point" punctured them?

AVIVA

I wouldn't.

HELMS
(overlapping)

And how would you know --

AVIVA

I was just trying --

HELMS

-- if the point moved them?

AVIVA

-- to make a point! I was just trying to make a point! You seem to make it my job to think about what they thought!

HELMS

You didn't.

AVIVA

I just knew what I thought! Could just barely snag that. What was in their brains -- not part of my plan.

HELMS

Exactly!

AVIVA

Don't look like you just bagged a mouse.

HELMS

It's in your words, your attitude: you didn't really care at all, at all, that they "got it" --

AVIVA

So why would I go to all --

HELMS

But you were damn clear that you wanted me to get it. Preferably right between the eyes. In front of everyone. My round.

AVIVA gestures as if to say, "Whatever."

HELMS

And you wonder why I got my knickers twisted when you, the saintly maid, watched me get your "point" right here --
(indicates between her eyes)

-- while you gave the gallery that "what, me?" look -- and then let everyone else take the heat for you. So just how courageous an artist were you? Are you?

AVIVA

So why am I here?

HELMS

Because we're going to do what you have wanted to do all along: make this all about you.

(indicating UTILITY 1)

I'm calling out a Q&A. Make her talk back to me. Make you talk back to me.

AVIVA

She's already talking -- I can't make her say anyth[ing] --

HELMS

No, no, no, no, no -- not good enough. Not nearly good enough, Aviva Matthews. You are going to spit out honest words, even if they break your teeth.

AVIVA

And if I don't want to --

HELMS

I will wait you out. I don't answer to a husband or children or cats, my well-padded ass can out-sit you, and my bladder is bigger than yours. I will wait you out.

AVIVA

I'm free to leave --

HELMS

In theory. But you know -- you know what I'm banking on -- don't ask me why because I don't have a feather of evidence to back me up here -- you know what?

AVIVA

I don't read minds.

HELMS

I'm banking on this: that you have integrity -- just like all your handlers said about you. Lover of the lost cause, disciplined by the margins -- I'm banking they're not liars.

AVIVA

They're not.

HELMS

Prove them, then. This round ain't a fight between you and me -- it's between you and you. Again. Private terror, remember? You leave -- and we can both watch you lose your spine bone by bone as you jelly off on your high horse. Stay -- and who knows how many bones you'll find in your spine?

AVIVA ponders the choice.

AVIVA

I could always use being taller.

HELMS

High horse off to pasture, then -- and now begins your third second chance. Next round.

(points to UTILITY 1)

Her turn.

AVIVA

Yeah.

AVIVA walks to UTILITY 1

AVIVA

(to UTILITY 1)

Ready?

UTILITY 1

That's how you made me.

AVIVA undoes the chain so that she can move freely. HELMS is free to address UTILITY 1 directly as one of the conversants.

AVIVA

(turning to HELMS)

Without interruption, then, for a moment, all right? You laid down --

UTILITY 1

Forced --

AVIVA

Forced on us a curriculum about our lives --

UTILITY 1

Our bodies.

AVIVA

That was a lie, that you know is a lie.

UTILITY 1

Abstinence --

AVIVA

Not saying it's a bad thing to do. But "just say no" can't begin to match our whole reality.

UTILITY 1

We fuck -- we're alive!

HELMS

Thus, your title.

UTILITY 1

"Abstinence Has No Substance."

HELMS

These -- elements -- parts --

AVIVA

The dress.

HELMS

Ripped.

UTILITY 1

Innocence dee-leted.

AVIVA

No more innocent children today.

UTILITY 1

We can't afford it.

AVIVA

And besides, you adults --

UTILITY 1

Your ge-ge-generation --

AVIVA

Have fucked over --

(backs off)

Sorry --

UTILITY 1

Don't be sorry!

HELMS

Let it bite --

AVIVA

It's all of you who's bitched up everything into garbage.

UTILITY 1

Not us.

AVIVA

Boiled down everything, everything -- it makes me sick to watch you do it! -- everything garbaged down to sex, money, power, greed -- we didn't do that.

UTILITY 1

Not us.

AVIVA

But it's us, not you, who has to eat the sewage at the end of your working day.

UTILITY 1

And we just love being morphed into a market niche.

AVIVA

And, in that case of the swanfucking corporate marketeers
-- sorry -- innocence --

UTILITY 1

And adolescence --

AVIVA

-- can be a very dangerous socially transmitted disease for
us.

HELMS

Not all of us --

UTILITY 1

You're all stained --

AVIVA

Maybe not all --

UTILITY 1

You're too forgiving --

AVIVA

-- but it doesn't take all to infect it all.

UTILITY 1

One fucking bad apple!

HELMS

The chain?

AVIVA

Your guilt --

UTILITY 1

Locking us down --

AVIVA

We're forced to live off your poison --

UTILITY 1

Head 'em up!

AVIVA

And when the children of the cesspool --

UTILITY 1

Move 'em out!

AVIVA

-- express -- spew! -- the values of your cesspool --

UTILITY 1

Columbine, my Columbine --

AVIVA

"Oh dear God!", you say, "look at the heathen!"

UTILITY 1

Tribal trash!

AVIVA

"They don't know much about --"

UTILITY 1

"History --"

AVIVA

" -- about nothin' at all, they don't!" And we get blamed for the rotten deck of cards --

UTILITY 1

So you, the dealers, lock us up --

AVIVA

Lock us down --

UTILITY 1

Lock us out --

AVIVA

Lock us in to your nostalgia for a lost innocence --

UTILITY 1

Which you never even had!

AVIVA

-- then blame us when our real lives won't tango with your nostalgia. Then -- then -- bring on the goons of "The Good Ol' Days"! Chain those knees closed! Keep those minds abstinent!

In a rhythm, with some kind of accompaniment from UTILITY 1.

AVIVA

Ab-sti-nence / ab-sti-nence / will surely bring them back /
to in-no-cence!

UTILITY 1

Surely all the days of our lives, hey?

AVIVA

But all of which really just brings us back to ignorance --

UTILITY 1

Just Say No.

AVIVA

-- and ignorance in your cesspool --

UTILITY 1

At The Mercy.

AVIVA

-- is a sentence of death for the rainbow.

HELMS moves toward UTILITY 1.

HELMS

The colors -- dark.

AVIVA

Yes.

HELMS

The legs smudged -- the color "cesspool"?

AVIVA

Yes.

HELMS

The way they're bent --

AVIVA

Tipped, knock-kneed. Used a stance most adults like you
would think is -- polite --

HELMS

Demure.

AVIVA

But make it look like painful, too --

HELMS

Legs not standing up straight.

AVIVA

Not allowed --

HELMS peers at UTILITY 1 closely.

HELMS

Good detail work.

AVIVA

I like detail.

HELMS

Did those lessons help?

AVIVA

We worked the small-brush.

HELMS

Public money well spent?

UTILITY 1

It put me on the map.

AVIVA

It put clothes on her back.

HELMS

You insulted me --

AVIVA

She deserved to breathe.

HELMS

You lied to me --

AVIVA

I apologize for that.

HELMS

At any cost for your art?

AVIVA

Not any cost -- but that's not easy --

UTILITY 1

At least I'm not a safe bet!

HELMS

It was an adolescent thing to do.

UTILITY 1

At least I'm interesting!

HELMS

And loud.

AVIVA

I am an adolescent.

HELMS

No, you're not.

UTILITY 1

No, you're not.

HELMS

Not if you're going to do this. You want reality -- be prepared for its whip. To snap it -- and get it back.

AVIVA

I've been told that before.

UTILITY 1

So what happens to me now?

AVIVA

What happens to her now?

HELMS

What does she want? You want?

AVIVA looks at UTILITY 1.

AVIVA

You really want to know?

HELMS

I really want to know.

UTILITY 1

Put me in the dark, I die.

AVIVA

She wants the chance to do what she does best.

HELMS

All right. You -- she -- not going back into the exhibit.

AVIVA

Didn't think so.

HELMS

But you and I are going to bring her to the health classes and open this up.

AVIVA

You and I?

UTILITY 1

Let the games begin.

HELMS

We stand there -- we draw out more voices --

UTILITY 1

The circle was too thin.

AVIVA

We thrash it out in public -- WWF-style.

HELMS

Face-to-face. No privileged "art for fart's sake."

AVIVA

And no queen bee from the throne.

HELMS

I won't sting --

AVIVA

I won't prance --

HELMS

We'll see how things go.

AVIVA

And we'll go from there. What now?

HELMS

I have work to do.

AVIVA

You'll talk to Mr. Savory.

HELMS

We'll work out the timing. You must have things to do.

AVIVA

Yes.

AVIVA goes to say something, but HELMS stops her.

HELMS

I'm still not convinced to like you completely -- despite the glowing reports.

AVIVA

Was "liking completely," like, part of the deal? Either way?

HELMS

No.

AVIVA

Good.

HELMS

Good for now -- I prefer to start off cold and honest.

AVIVA

We'll see how things go.

HELMS

And we'll go from there.

AVIVA

Thank you -- from the lips of a snow queen. Don't worry. Cold and honest.

HELMS

Thank you as well -- that measured zero degrees Centigrade.

AVIVA

On target.

HELMS

I have work to do --

AVIVA

So do I.

They look at UTILITY 1 for two beats, then exit. UTILITY 1, without putting the chain back on, takes up her original stance for several beats. She then shakes her knees free, stands up straight, and looks directly at the audience. Lights to black with raucous rock-and-roll music coming up and UTILITY 1 dancing for her life.

About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael's plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also looks to collaborate with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

Elfin Frederick Vogel (Producer/Director) -- Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

Michael Bettencourt (Producer/Writer) -- Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to María Beatriz. All his work can be seen at www.m-bettencourt.com

**Block
&Tackle**
PRODUCTIONS

www.blockandtackleproductions.com

