

J. De La Vega

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086

201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • michaelbettencourt@outlook.com

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

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DESCRIPTION

With great sadness but pain-filled love, street artist J. De La Vega does not let the deaths in the barrios disappear.

CHARACTERS

- J. De La Vega, *artist*

NOTE: The character can be played by either gender. The male pronoun is used in the script for convenience only.

SETTING

- East Harlem, New York City

MISCELLANEOUS

- Heavy-duty marker: black—the kind used by taggers
- Small boombox
- Music: various hip hop and Latino songs on two tapes
- Half mask of a skull

VEGA is a painter, and during this piece a painting must take shape. VEGA will face the audience, though, in reality, they would be behind him. The screen is off to one side or hung above him.

Four suggested ways:

1. A large frame with muslin or some material on which to project slides from behind. (The size of the frame will be determined with the slides.) There would be two projectors, with a dissolve, and slides. The slides will show the painting in various stages of completion.
2. A similar set-up, but the slides are projected from in front. This would be done if there is not enough room for rear-projection.
3. The actor is a graffiti artist and can create an actual painting.
4. The action of painting is completely mimed, with no actual image.

Option #1 is the first choice, with Option #2 the second. For the purposes of this script, Option #4 has been used.

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A small boombox sits to one side sits center stage.

Before the lights come up there is music in the house. As the lights rise, the music changes to make it seem that it's coming from the boombox. At some point it can stop. In front of his "canvas" is J. DE LA VEGA, painting. He will mime painting except at the end of the play. A heavy-duty marker is in one of his pockets.

He mimes painting; he is using brushes, spray cans, markers and needs to distinguish between them as he uses them.

I know you're from the neighborhood and all, but I usually don't like people watching. It's a private thing, you know. I like to do 'em late at night, no one around, just some heavy-duty lights hooked up to car batteries and me, alone, with my thinking, trying to figure out what my paint is gonna say. I never know until I start dressing it out.

He stops painting for a moment; his whole body slumps.

I hate having to do these.

I hate having to do 'em because they're so many to do. I'm tracking a disease. I'm a chart with a heart. These people, these names up on the walls, are dying from the disease of life in America. They're our war memorials, our veterans.

Alternates between painting and talking to the audience.

I know you know that. That's why you're here, witnessing. How many years I been doing these? I been memorializing the Barrio since 1989. Someone dies, call J. De La Vega. This one had eighteen years. Eighteen. Sammy. Sambo. A lot of you knew him. Good kid, huh? They're all good kids. He actually had a chance, don't you think? The schools hadn't bitten off his head, he actually had a mama and a papa—God give them peace!—no gangbanging, sang in the church—he had the résumé, know what I mean? The bona fides. The ticket. And here we are today, painting him out, "Goodbye from your friends and family on 102nd." Worm meat now. Goddamn!

And look at this building. You know why I can paint it here and no one's gonna care—ain't nobody lived here for years except the rats and pigeons and crackheads. The Jew landlord (or the Anglo landlord or the bank landlord—all wear the same face)—living somewhere else. This building is ours, and it ain't. In our neighborhood, looking bombed-out, but might as well be on Mars because we can't own it, we can't knock it down with the cleansing fire of anger and get it out of our eyes. Fits, don't you think, that we use it as a headstone for someone we all loved, his golden name giving glory to what is rotten and falling down around us? We'll get us some redemption out of this building yet.

VEGA flips the tape in the boombox and pops it on. A hot salsa number. For 30 seconds or so VEGA paints energetically to the music, working up a sweat, possessed. Then he stands back, turns down the music.

Destruye lo que te destruye. Heh? Am I right? That's what my father, Jaimito, used to tell me. That's his memorial over there, on the train wall. The first one I did.

Stops painting for a moment.

Destroy what destroys you. Sayings of a Puerto Rican man. See what I wrote for him: "Great Men Live Forever." And that other one, down the street, on the building that used to have the abogados, about freeing the Puerto Rican prisoners of war? Those words are Jaimito's, too: "I have lived in the monster, I know his entrails...and my weapon is David's sling." Great man, Jaimito, a dreamer, a rebel.

Begins painting again.

And a fool. Yes, you can be all of that and a fool, too. He was. That's why I loved him so much.

Insult him? I mean him no disrespect. The man spent almost every day of his life hungering for Puerto Rico, for independencia from the "monster," the gringo thief and murderer. Yes, he put food on the table and did what he had to do, but his heart—his heart was not with us. It was with some beautiful mujer called Puerto Rico, and he cheated on us all, fighting for her honor. A beautiful thing. But with David's sling? Come on—America's Goliath carries a Glock's 9 millimeters of refutation. Foolish man—a holy fool is still a fool.

Sammy was a holy fool, too. He was. He believed in the dream. The dream. The dream of white. The dream of BMW. The dream of the middle. The dream of the Declaration. Sambo lived here, but his heart was out there. He had—visions. Up and out visions. And he probably would have made it. Maybe. Time used to be that a handsome young Latino with smarts had a ticket—you know, someone could check off a lot of boxes with that one. But not anymore. We're bein' 187'd and 209'd and INS'd to death, immigrated out, deleted.

Mi tío, it is better here than there? I have respect for your bones and wisdom, but where's the payoff? It's not like we haven't sweated for them, not like we didn't help those who have the money get more money, not like we didn't build some of the glory and the power. And our reward? We're asked to hand over the family treasures as part of the admission price. Puerto Rico, once a jewel—now thrown away like the peel of an orange. All those states out west that used to be Spanish, stolen, the heritage turned into k-nick-k-nacks.

And now another treasure thrown away—Sammy Hoya, Sambo, el hermano de la sangre, brother of the blood, that blood now down in the sewers. Don't get me started, el viejo.

Goes back to the canvas.

You all heard how he died? Yeah, right over there. Gang stuff—got caught in a cross-fire coming back from the market. He was carrying rice. I remember the rice. The bag busted open and all the rice mixed with his blood, like pearls in wine. He didn't suffer much, I guess, from what the EMTs said—the first bullet sliced him right in the heart. Big heart.

Begins to paint more furiously.

But it wasn't just the bullet that took him. It was this whole—place that busted his heart. Do I blame the gangbangers that diced him? Course I do. They should pay—they did something evil and should know the price. But I know who they are, too—we all know 'em—know what's left of their families, know the dead-end in their eyes, and while I blame 'em, I don't blame 'em either. They should have memorials, too, because they're already in a kind of dead zone, that purgatory place of being half-alive and half-erased in the Barrio.

Yeah, we play our music and roast a pig every once in a while and we got the look of family and sometimes even the truth of one, one big lifeboat of people clinging to each other 'cause we have nothing else to hold on to. But look at it! We're a colony, imperialized. That's what Jaimito used to say about the Barrio. Law of the colonizer: Take out what you can, put nothing back. And, madre del Dios, have we had a lot of "nothing" put back here! "Nothing" has been our primary crop! The projects like coffins, the dead schools, no jobs, young men sacrificed to the prisons, children with babies, sickness and disease—these are the crops that grow in the vacant lots where they tore down everything and replaced it with nothing. I bet you never thought of "nothing" like it was a product. It's our biggest import.

Stops painting.

Destroy what destroys you? Nice work if you can find it, Jaimito. You can fight it in here and here—

(indicates head and heart)

—you can keep your pride, some of your heritage—maybe—you can keep your spirit alive—maybe—but the firepower ain't on your side. Look at me—I'm painting memorials to the dead, trying to make sure that people do something and don't forget. But sometimes I have this fear that I'm gonna have to paint the whole Barrio because that's how fast our best ones are slipping away, and that nothing we ever do is gonna stop the pile of bones getting higher and the wind whistling louder through our skulls.

This whole Barrio is a memorial to us, the walking dead, the zombies of the dream!

I don't want to have to paint any more of these.

Sammy. Sambo. Not too far from here is a casita in one of the lots. Some of you probably know the shack. It has paintings hanging on the back wall—I don't know where the owner got them, but they're all about places, like a forest or a hillside with cows. Definitely not from around here. Someone called the place Pleasant Valley. Pleasant Valley. Sammy, I tried to make a little pleasant valley for you, with the angels here, looking up, the doves around them—some peace for you.

For the rest of us—sign this any way you want to express your feelings about Sambo. But don't forget—as you sign it and feel your sorrow, just six blocks away from your back is the border of the dream, between midtown and here, between more money spent on a girl's dress than you spend in a month on groceries, between the colonizer and the garbage heap of everything he's finished with. The fat spider sits in its web, smiling at you through its forever hunger.

He takes out the marker and mimes writing J. DE LA VEGA across the canvas or paper.

I am finished. For today. Add it to the fucking résumé.

Changes the tape in the boom box and plays it. Pulls the half mask of a skull out of his pocket, puts it on, and dances to the music as the lights go to black. The music comes up loud.

BLACKOUT