

Comeback
(My Callas Play)
By John Fisher

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Characters

MAID, twenty
MARIA, a retired soprano, forty-nine
ARI, sixty-seven, a Greek shipping magnate
SEPI, a retired tenor, fifties
SUZY, a society columnist, fifties
SOL, a producer/agent, eighty-five
IVOR, a pianist, eighty-one

Setting

Act One – Turin

Act Two – Amsterdam

Time

The late-sixties

Note: This fictional play is based on Maria Callas's final comeback tour. It does not purport to be factual but is a riff on that tour and its possible implications.

The Title: Terrence McNally wrote a wonderful play that was essentially about Callas *The Lisbon Traviata* in which he captured the obsessive nature of Callas worshipers in the character of Mendy. Then he wrote another where he put the old gorgon herself onstage *Master Class*. Charles Ludlam, the great Off-Off Broadway master of camp, wrote a vehicle for himself and his lover Everett Quinten *Galas* that was a biography in camp of Callas. Even more than his masterpiece *Irva Vep*, *Galas* was admired by the New York culturati, most notably *New York Times* critic (aka “The Butcher of Broadway,”) the impossible to please Frank Rich. All of New York loved *Galas*. This then is *my* Callas play, as much fiction as those of my predecessors, as much worshipful as the previous works. The play is based on the writings of Koestenbaum, Stassinopolis and . It is also a play about Sepi and Ari, two larger than life characters who were actually the right size for Maria. (And that sounds smuttier than I intended.)

The comeback tour and Maria's relationships with Sept and Ari are well documented in several sources, though the specifics I have made up with almost complete abandon. The whole Ari conspiracy was inspired by 's book but I have gone much farther with it, much farther. Thus the play might as easily be titled *My JFK Play* as everyone has written one of those as well. Here then is my own little conspiracy theory.

The Speech: MARIA, ARI and SEPI have specific speech patterns to give them a “foreignness.” The English is not always “correct,” but it works and it demonstrates a high level of comfort with the language. They should speak with appropriate accents.

Act I

Scene 1

SETTING: Turin. Maria's apartment, the living room, rich but tasteful.

AT RISE: The stage is empty. The phone rings and a MAID enters hurriedly as if she's been awoken from sleep, straightening her uniform. She composes herself and answers the phone.

MAID

Si? Pronto? Si? Yes, yes, of course, he may come up.

(MAID hangs up the phone and looks indecisively towards off-stage left. Before she can make a move, MARIA enters. She is forty-nine and dressed for the evening, the previous evening. Obviously she has fallen asleep in her clothes.)

MARIA

Who was that?

MAID

Miss.

MARIA

Who was it?

MAID

I beg your pardon. Mr. Kourtakis.

MARIA

Ari? Why don't you wake me?

MAID

I-

MARIA

I told you to wake me. Always, when he calls.

MAID

I-

MARIA

You stupid girl. How could you be so-

(MARIA stops because the MAID has burst into tears. MAID whimpers.)

MARIA

I'm sorry, that was rude of me.

(MAID sputters.)

MARIA

(Childishly)

I'm sorry. Mi scuzi. Sorry sar-sars?

(MAID smiles, stops crying, wipes her eye. MARIA looks suspicious.)

MARIA

Are your underclothes pressed? Are they?

MAID

Madame?

MARIA

Panties and slip, are they pressed?

(MAID whimpers, smooths her uniform guiltily.)

MARIA

You know how I feel about that. The world might not see, but it knows. It can read it on your face. Your face looks like unpressed panties. Are they pressed?

(MAID whimpers.)

MARIA

Answer me. Are your panties pressed?

MAID

It's the middle of the night.

MARIA

So it is. Mi scuzi. That was irrational of me. Sorry sar sars?

(MAID smiles.)

MARIA

Go ahead.

(MAID sputters.)

MARIA

I said go ahead. Avanti!

MAID

It wasn't Mr. Kourtakis. It was the desk. The porter.

MARIA

The porter?

MAID

He's here. He's coming up.

MARIA

(Confused)

Are you involved with the porter?

MAID

Mr. Kourtakis. He is here and he's coming up.

MARIA

Oh, for God's sake. You stupid, slow, unpressed thing.

(MAID bursts into tears.)

MAID

Stop that at once! Stop all that snot and noise. Stop it!

(The doorbell rings.)

MARIA

Damn it! Stay here, get him a drink. I have to... hell... I have to comb my hair.

(MARIA starts to run out. She turns to MAID.)

Well wipe your nose and get the door!

(She leaves. MAID wipes nose on apron.)

MARIA

(off)

Not on your uniform!

(MAID cries more. Doorbell. MAID crosses to door sniveling and opens it. ARI enters. He is sixty-seven, short but robust, though right now he looks diminished. Obviously he has not slept in a while. He is

not at his best. He wanders into the room looking about, not noticing the MAID's tears.)

ARI

Where's your lady?

MAID

She will be here soon.

ARI

Can I have a glass of water?

MAID

Yes.

(MAID exits wiping her eyes with her hands. He sits. Stares. Suddenly he is crying, sobbing, the tears shake his body, he is shaking with grief, helpless. MAID enters with glass of water on a tray. Seeing ARI sobbing she doesn't know what to do. She stands watching him. She immediately recognizes the depth of his grief, contrasted with the childishness of her own tears. MARIA enters, in a dressing gown looking much more herself. She is stopped by the site of ARI racked by grief. She looks at the MAID, both are helpless to know what to do. ARI does not notice them. He has thrown himself back in the chair and is actually keening. MARIA indicates for the MAID to leave, which she does. MARIA decides to interrupt ARI's grief.)

MARIA

Ari.

ARI

Maria. My God.

(He tries to recover himself.)

Jesus.

MARIA

Oh, my Ari.

ARI

Oh, no please.

(Standing)

I'm... I'm [fine]...

MARIA

No, you must...

ARI

(Wiping his eyes with handkerchief)

It's... It's...

MARIA

No, here now.

(MARIA takes his hands. Her contact dissolves him in more tears. He grabs hold of her as another paroxysm of grief waves over him. He is again racked by grief, but now in her arms. She holds him tight, but her concern for the depth of his pain is obvious. She seats him again on the chair and kneels beside him. She holds his hand, strokes his face, but he is inconsolable. His keening is quite loud now, frightening. She looks concerned, desperate. She snaps her fingers towards the MAID. MAID re-enters with water. MARIA shakes her head, indicates "not water but something for the mouth." MAID understands and exits. She quickly re-enters having added a pill bottle to the tray. MARIA takes pills and offers one to ARI. She is trying to put it in his mouth. Realizing what she is doing ARI savagely throws the pills away. They spill across the floor. He fumbles for something in his jacket pocket, but can't find it. MARIA reaches in the pocket and finds another bottle of pills. She hands it to the MAID who removes two and hands them to MARIA. MARIA feeds them to ARI and then makes him drink water to wash them down. His grief continues to hold him. But slowly it subsides enough for him to again indicate he wants something, his handkerchief from the floor. MARIA retrieves it and wipes his eyes. She indicates for the MAID to leave.)

ARI

Oh, my God.

MARIA

Ari.

ARI

It comes like that. Unexpectedly. Like an attack. Like I'm being assaulted. I'm helpless. I tried injections, one after another, but the Doctor said it would affect my heart. He said I'd go into a coma. I have to come down he said. From the sedatives. It's horrifying.

MARIA

When did you get here?

ARI

I don't know. An hour ago. I don't know.

MARIA

How did you-

ARI

Gerry drove me, or Tamas, who gives a shit? Cocksuckers! Shit! They killed him. Fucking murderers. They killed him. There was a bomb. The detective and I spent an hour at the site, just staring at the wreckage. After the bodies had been removed. He said it could have been a bomb.

MARIA

Oh, Ari.

ARI

I'll find out who. I will. Fucking Teddy. Giancanna. I'll find the cocksuckers and fucking blow them away. It's revenge. I know it is. It's not a warning, it's revenge. It's the Kennedys. I figured that out on the plane. It's revenge for John.

MARIA

Ari.

ARI

I'm sorry. Motherfuckers! Oh, God. Why. Why on earth this way? He was a lovely boy. Lovely.

MARIA

He was.

ARI

Beautiful.

MARIA

Yes.

ARI

He made me laugh. No one made me laugh. No one. He was gorgeous. My little Aley.
(He tears up again.)

Oh, shit.

(He wipes his eyes. The drugs must have kicked in, he's able to control it now.)

Damn.

MARIA

Come and sit.

ARI

I'm fine. Better.

MARIA

Come.

(He crosses back to her and sits.)

MARIA

Ari.

(She holds him. He relaxes, holds her.)

ARI

Maria.

MARIA

Oh, Ari.

(He loosens his grip. He is relaxing. Having controlled his grief, he now looks old, tired, a men spent.)

MARIA

My Ari. Can I get you something?

ARI

Nothing.

MARIA

Where are you headed?

ARI

Here. Nowhere.

MARIA

You came to see me.

ARI

I had to see someone.

MARIA

Who is with you?

ARI

No one.

MARIA

No one?

ARI

I have no one.

MARIA

Not...

ARI

No, they're all on the *Iphegenia*, or somewhere. Who gives a shit? I left that cunt in Athens. I want her dead. If I find out this is the Kennedys, I'll kill her. With my own hands. I'll strangle her. Take her head off, keep it as a trophy. Bitch.

MARIA

Ari!

ARI

I'm sorry.

MARIA

It's ok.

ARI

You don't like rough talk.

MARIA

Don't worry.

ARI

(He smiles.)

I'm here for your opening.

MARIA

Oh, Ari.

ARI

I am.

MARIA

Please, I know...

ARI

No, it's tonight.

MARIA

I know what you're feeling, but please...

ARI

What? It's why I came.

MARIA

Please...

ARI

What?

MARIA

(She moves away)

Nothing.

ARI

Maria.

MARIA

Let's not... I thought...

ARI

What?

MARIA

I thought the service was lovely.

ARI

The service?

MARIA

Yes.

ARI

I couldn't go...

MARIA

Everyone, everyone talked about how much they adored him.

ARI

Yes.

MARIA

They said beautiful words...

ARI

Of course. He was my son, my heir. I ran. On the way to Torpos. I got as far as Athens, we were transferring to the helicopter... And I bolted. Like a kid running from a crime. I was halfway to the chopper, with the girls around me, almost carrying me, then I realized, "I can't get in that thing, go to the burial, go to a party. I'm in trouble. I've killed someone. I've killed my son. And now I'm going to a party."

MARIA

Oh, Ari.

ARI

No, I ran. I ran for miles. They were all shouting after me. But I ducked around something, a mausoleum, some mausoleum. Like I was running from the Turks, in Smyrna. Like the old days. I kept changing my route, so they couldn't follow me, couldn't guess my next move. I think. I think Gerome shadowed me though, he knows me. I think I was always safe. I ran to the middle of Athens. To the Acropolis. It was amazing, no one recognized me. Well, people did, some people, but they dismissed me. It couldn't be me, so it wasn't. They looked, blinked, then shook their heads and looked away. Kourtakis? Running like a crazy man? Not possible. I was anonymous. I walked for hours. I killed him, you know I did.

MARIA

Ari.

ARI

No, it's true. If he hadn't been in the plane it couldn't have happened and I told him to test the new pilot. He was there under my instructions.

MARIA

He was there because he was doing his job. He was disciplined that way. It's what you always wanted from him: focus, discipline, reliability. He was a good boy.

ARI

He was. And handsome.

MARIA

Divine. Handsome because he was loved. You adored him.

ARI

I did.

MARIA

And the love showed in everything he did. All he was. He was a saint.

ARI

That's why I buried him among saints. Where he belonged.

MARIA

He loved his life. He worshipped you. These last few years he became a man. It's what you wanted and he did it.

ARI

Yes, you're right.

(Welling up.)

Oh, Maria.

MARIA

No, now.

ARI

It's ok. My magic drugs have kicked in. I can... I can cry on them. It's ok.

MARIA

You must be starving.

ARI

Am I? I don't know.

MARIA

When did you last eat?

ARI

Tuesday. Maybe Monday. I don't-

MARIA

Monday?

(She rings bell. MAID enters.)

MARIA

Some breakfast.

ARI

No, no.

MARIA

Ari, you must eat.

ARI

Some toast.

MARIA

Toast and juice and coffee. Pronto.

MAID

Miss.

MARIA

What is it?

MAID

I need to...

(MAID gestures off stage.)

MARIA

Oh, what is it now?

(MAID sputters.)

MARIA

Scuzi. Come, whisper in my ear. Come.

(MAID crosses and whisper in her ear.)

MARIA

I can't understand you when you're whimpering. Get the juice, get a grip on yourself and come back and tell me.

ARI

What is it?

MAID

I'll be right back.

ARI

She can say. Go ahead. I don't care.

MARIA

No, it's...

ARI

Just say it, what is it?

(MARIA indicates for her to speak.)

MAID

It's Mr. Giuseppe. He's...

MARIA

Oh, that's ok.

MAID

Should I ask him to...

MARIA

Yes, no, whatever. I can't see him now.

ARI

Sepi? That wop? Is he here?

MARIA

Yes.

ARI

How did he...

MARIA

He has the adjoining suite.

ARI

You fucking Di Sepi again?

MARIA

Ari.

ARI

Sorry.

MARIA

Tell him to come back later, I can't meet now.

ARI

Meet?

MARIA

Ari.

ARI

That's what you call it, meeting?

MARIA

It's business. For the opera.

ARI

Oh, oh, yes. That's why I'm here.

MARIA

(To MAID)

Go ahead.

ARI

No, no, tell him to come in.

MARIA

Ari-

ARI

No, I don't want to interrupt.

(To MAID)

Tell him to come in.

MARIA

It's not appropriate.

ARI

Of course it is. You have work to do.

MARIA

Ari, please.

ARI

(To MAID)

Tell him to come in, damn it. Go ahead.

(To MARIA)

Sorry. I'd like to see him. I would. Please. Maria.

(MARIA nods her assent. MAID exits.)

ARI

I came for your opening. Life goes on.

MARIA

Please, Ari.

ARI

This is important to you.

MARIA

Please.

ARI

What?

MARIA

Please don't make fun of me

ARI

How am I making fun-

MARIA

I know you hurt, I know...

ARI

You know nothing.

MARIA

Ok.

ARI

I'm here to show my support.

MARIA

Ari...

ARI

You were a lousy singer, now you want to be a director. I'm in your corner.

(MARIA stares at him. She walks away. SEPI - enters. A handsome man in his fifties, a little tubby yet not as formidable as ARI. A light weight. Charming, affable, probably frightened of men like ARI but joyous and a man of the world in his own right. He enters timidly.)

SEPI

Maria. Ari.

ARI

Giuseppe.

SEPI

Ari, I am so sorry.

ARI

Thank you.

SEPI

A great loss. Alexander was a prince.

ARI

Did you know him?

SEPI

Of course.

ARI

Had you met?

SEPI

I only knew him as an admirer.

ARI

Jesus, Sepi, you talk to me like I'm a columnist.

(Silence. MARIA looks upset.)

SEPI

Ari, whatever you're feeling, and I know anything I say is... not enough, unfitting. But whatever you're feeling my feelings are with you. My daughter, Sophia is dying, she has cancer.... Maybe you didn't know that.

ARI

I didn't.

MARIA

Sepi.

SEPI

She is Alex's age, too young. I can never stop thinking about her, calling her... I can never stop thinking about her.

ARI

I'm sorry. Maria used to call me a pig and so I am. I didn't mean...

SEPI

It's fine. Never apologize when you are in grief.

ARI

Sepi.

(ARI holds SEPI's hand. There is a moment between the three of them. Everything is ok.)

ARI

You two fucking again?

MARIA

Aristotle!

ARI

What? It's a legitimate question.

MARIA

You are a pig. A pig! I'm sorry for Alexander. I am. I know what he meant to you. But for you to come here and lash out at me, at Giuseppe, who you barely know, to relieve your grief through attacks-

ARI

(Suddenly on fire, ravenous)

Relieve my grief! Relieve my grief! What the hell do you know about relieving grief? You think this is relieving my grief? This? You two are ants! Peons! You mean nothing to me. Nothing! I have a contract out. A contract on Alex's murderer. And those who hired him. I will kill people, dozens to relieve my grief. The whole fucking planet will pay for this... this assassination. Relieve my grief? On you two? A two-bit singer and his whore?

SEPI

Ari! You will not talk this way to Maria.

ARI

Fuck off, wop!

SEPI

You will not!

ARI

I said butt out, you two-bit, b-list, third rate tenor faggot!

SEPI

Ari, I cannot allow it. I cannot. If you have something you want to say to me, something you want to do, then please let's go somewhere and do it, but not here, not in front of Maria.

ARI

Not in front of Maria? Not in front of Maria? You know what she used to do, this whore, before she'd even divorced her husband? She used to blow me in my limo. Between Covent Garden and the Dorchester, she used to suck my cock. And then she'd wipe her

mouth and give an interview about her voice, the demands of the singer, the trials of art. Art fart. Her voice was coated in cum half the time she went onstage.

SEPI

Aristotle, this is outrageous.

ARI

Of course it is. Our whole life together was outrageous.

SEPI

You will stop this, you will!

ARI

Or what? Or what, Di Monaca?

SEPI

Aristotle, I am a small man, a “nothing” as you say. But I am a man and you will not talk to Maria this way.

ARI

Or what?

SEPI

You will not!

ARI

What will you do?

SEPI

You’re behaving childishly.

ARI

What the fuck will you do, little man?

(SEPI slaps him across the face. ARI is stunned for a moment, then he roars and grabs SEPI, throwing him to the floor with a ferocious growl. MARIA screams. MAID enters. ARI has SEPI on the floor with his arm twisted behind his back.)

ARI

I’ll break your fucking arm, you piece of dago shit! I’ll break your arm!

(ARI somehow realizes the absurdity of what is happening and begins to relax, still holding onto SEPI.)

I’ll break it...

(But his anger is subsiding. He begins to cry again, losing strength.)

SEPI

(Calmly)

Let me go, Ari. Let go of my arm.

(ARI does, his body slackens. SEPI takes him in his arms and holds him. ARI is keening again. SEPI holds him tight, like a child, rocks him. MARIA and MAID are holding one another. The lights dim to black.)

Scene 2

SETTING: Same. Later that day.

AT RISE: ARI and SEPI sit calmly in chairs holding cocktails, a very different scene from what we just left. ARI is focused, rational.

ARI

The Kennedys did it. I'm convinced. They had him killed. My Alex. They ordered it.

SEPI

Why, Ari? Why would they do that?

(ARI just looks at him. He can't go on. MARIA enters. SEPI looks at her.)

MARIA

(to SEPI)

You should change.

SEPI

Yes.

MARIA

There's just time.

SEPI

I'll do it. You are coming tonight, Ari?

ARI

Yes, yes of course.

SEPI

I'm glad. I'm glad you're here.

ARI

Thank you, SepI. I'm sorry, about before.

SEPI

You have apologized enough. All day in fact. Every half hour: "I'm sorry, Sepi. I'm sorry." Boo-hoo. Boo-hoo-hoo.

(ARI laughs.)

Basta. You are a great man. If knocking me down and breaking my arm helps you, then I consider it my duty. Va bene.

(ARI holds SEPI's hand and smiles at him. It is ok between them.)

ARI

Thank you... On your opening night, your debuts as ils directores, to put up with me...

SEPI

Soon, more than just directore.

MARIA

Sepi.

SEPI

Ah, she is so reluctant. Thinks she can only teach at this point. She directs, you will see. Like DeMille she directs. And she will sing, like no one, again, con mio. A comeback.

ARI

Really?

SEPI

Si, soon Maria and I, we return to the stage. As singers.

MARIA

Giuseppe, per favore.

SEPI

Si, I go. I go. Back in a flash. Big night. Big opening.

(SEPI leaves. MARIA and ARI regard one another.)

ARI

I like him.

MARIA

I know you do.

ARI

I always have.

MARIA

Of course.

ARI

Why do you say of course?

MARIA

He's like you. He always was.

ARI

You mean we're both pigs.

MARIA

He's an Italian pig, you're a Greek Pig. There's a difference.

ARI

Is it true? Comeback?

MARIA

No. He dreams. I let him. It is false.

(ARI smiles.)

I have given up singing, or, I should say... it has....

ARI

Thousands would come.

MARIA

To see a mummy, not to hear music.

(He smiles. She kneels beside him.)

MARIA

Ari.

ARI

Yes, Princess.

MARIA

You can't...

ARI

Yes, yes, I know, my anger, my anger...

MARIA

No, it's not that.

ARI

It's not?

MARIA

I mean yes, your anger, you're a brute. A bully. I hate it. You know I do.

ARI

I know.

MARIA

You must not.

ARI

I'm sorry.

MARIA

But, beyond that, you can't... You can't talk to him that way.

ARI

I regret that.

MAIRA

No, not what you said about him, that was cruel but that's not what I'm referring to.

ARI

What then?

MARIA

About the Kennedys. You can't talk that way. Not to him.

(ARI looks at her. He stands up and crosses the room.)

MARIA

Do you understand what I'm saying?

ARI

What... What am I supposed to do?

MARIA

I don't know. I refuse to know. But don't involve him. Don't make him a witness.

(He strides to other side of the room. Impatient, itchy. He finally stops.)

ARI

I made mistakes. Big mistakes. I didn't understand what I was...

MARIA

Ari, please, enough of this. I don't want to hear.

(He paces.)

MARIA

You can stay here. I must go. Whatever you're feeling I cannot stay, not tonight. I'm sorry.

ARI

It's ok.

MARIA

You're welcome to come.

ARI

No, it wouldn't be right.

MARIA

Probably not.

ARI

Maria...

MARIA

Yes.

ARI

She's... she's killing me, strangling me. She's grotesque, insufferable, she... she feels nothing, she's incapable of feeling. All through his death, the services, the burial, she was a vacuum, a non-person. She did nothing for me. A blank face, a hollow voice saying, "I'm so sorry." She was like a ghost.

MARIA

She's in shock, Ari.

ARI

Shock? She couldn't care less. She never did. She didn't even hate him. She never bothered to get to know him, she was... absent, out to lunch. A woman like that, who makes them? Who creates them? Shock?

MARIA

Not about that.

ARI

About what then?

(MARIA just looks at him.)

ARI

It's been years. Ten years.

(Pause.)

She didn't love him. She didn't.

MARIA

The father of her children.

ARI

We were sleeping together before it happened, she hated him. It's what she wanted.

MARIA

Ari, nobody wants that, even for a man she hates.

(ARI is silent.)

MARIA

I don't know. I can't help you, not with that, not with her.

ARI

This is a big night for you.

MARIA

Not really.

ARI

Your directorial debut.

MARIA

It will fail. It already has. I know that. I didn't know what I was doing. I stepped on the stage and it was nothing like singing, nothing like teaching even. One hundred and twenty faces looking to you for guidance, asking questions, gently disagreeing. I lost all my confidence, like that!

(She snaps.)

In a flash, it was gone. I muddled through. Giuseppe and I. He came to my rescue. He's a saint. Ari, he saved me.

ARI

Did he?

MARIA

Yes, Ari.

ARI

I need to be saved.

MARIA

Oh, please.

ARI

By you.

MARIA

Ari, that is impossible.

ARI

It can't be.

MARIA

You always do this.

ARI

It's a mess. I'll be dead in a week on these pills. The grief is suffocating, I can't breath. I can't sleep. I know I'm responsible, I know I did it. I killed him. And it's strangling me.

MARIA

I cannot help you.

ARI

You can. You're the only one.

MARIA

Please stop this. You cannot blame yourself. It was an accident.

ARI

It wasn't. Listen to me. What I said to Sepi, what you said I must not say, I cannot control myself. But you can, you always did, you can control me. Listen to me. In Smyrna, the year the Turks came, the year the city burned, the year they locked my family in that church to make them burn-

MARIA

Ari, you've told me these stories, I don't like them.

ARI

No, I haven't. I told you the children's version, not the truth. I became afraid and I didn't tell you the whole story. Listen to me. They rounded up my family, locked them in that church, and those Turk bastards watched them burn, they said they were victims, of the larger conflagration, but they were killed.

MARIA

Yes, Ari, I know...

ARI

But you don't. There was this Turk pig colonel, the man in charge of it all. But you couldn't get at him, surrounded by security, soldiers crawling over his headquarters, his car, his everywhere. Except his family, in Ankara. I was smart. I went to Ankara, where he had a house, a house with a wife and a daughter. They died Maria, I killed them, but before I killed them, first I-

(MARIA can't listen to any more. She moves away from him.)

MARIA

Ari, you're sick. You live in a confused sick world. A world of hate and revenge and anger. A world where you can kill a man and then marry his wife. It's sick. Your son is dead. He's dead. Why do you come to me with these stories? They're disgusting. Alexander loved his life. He loved it. You should be grieving his loss now, celebrating his life. Not coming to me, begging me to save you from... I don't even know what this is, this sickness of yours, this bestiality you insist on living.

ARI

I grew up on a hill. An animal. If I lived like a beast it is because I had to survive against beasts.

MARIA

I lived through a war also, Ari. I know about survival. A teenager, in Athens, under the Nazi's? How do you think I survived? I know everything those women in Ankara knew. Everything except death. Everything.

ARI

I know you do.

MARIA

They rejected me in America. Rejected me. What do they know of survival? What have they survived? Nothing. A depression? Big deal. Sons lost overseas? Who cares? They think dying in a war is awful, what about surviving in one? That they don't know.

Occupation. Torture. I brought them gifts. The gifts of my survival. My art. My music. They spat on it. They loved it for five years, five, then they spat on it. The Germans tried to take away my dignity, they failed. Now the Americans have tried to strip me of my confidence. They too will fail. You have to draw yourself up, Ari. "Save me. Save me." I cannot save you. Save yourself. Stop talking, stop scheming, stop trying to level the playing field, set things right. Grieve your son, that's enough for now. Let that be enough.

ARI

I'm in too deep.

MARIA

Then crawl out.

ARI

I need to be restrained.

MARIA

I can't do it. I am a survivor. Giuseppe is part of that survival. He needs me. Tonight, he has no idea. He thinks magic will strike. That the opera will be a great success and we will be transformed into Producers, opera directors. I know we have failed. But I will go tonight, and smile and be his Princess and hold his hand when the reviews come out and the columnists sneer. I am here for him. Not you. I'm sorry.

ARI

Why won't you help me?

MARIA

Because your problem is too great. You need a Medea, a Clytemnestra, a goddess. You want to destroy and you need a Hera to hold you back. I am not a Hera. I am a woman. I can only help men. Men. And I've chosen my man to help.

ARI

He'll need more help than he's getting.

MARIA

Then he will get it. From me.

ARI

Can you give it to him? Whatever he needs?

MARIA

Yes.

ARI

Now *you* look nervous.

MARIA

Yes, Ari, I know this. Sometimes, as now, I see it. One day I will destroy myself to help a man. It cannot be you Ari, not again, not this time.

(She exits. ARI sits, drained of energy. He looks about him. He smiles. He gets up and crosses to phone.)

ARI

(into phone)

Pronto. Paris. The Muarice. Allo. Quatre-cent douze. Oui. Bien sour. (He lights a cigarette, takes a deep drag.) Hello. Let me speak to Hamshari. Ari. Don't worry. I'm nowhere. It's safe. (Pause.) Mahmoud, you fuck. Howareyou? Yeah, well listen... I... I want to go ahead with it. Yeah, I think we can still win this war. (**reference later**)

(Lights fade to black.)

Scene 3

SETTING: The same. 2 A.M. the next day.

AT RISE: MARIA paces the room nervously. She wears a beautiful evening dress, black, simple but elegant. SEPI enters, also in elegant evening dress.

SEPI

How are you? What happened? Everybody left? There's nobody upstairs.

MARIA

Oh, Sepi.

SEPI

It was glorious. A glorious party.

MARIA

It was very nice.

SEPI

Here, I've brought Suzy with me. I had to drag her.

MARIA

Suzy! No, Sepi

SEPI

Yes, here she is.

(SUZY KNICKERBOCKER – aka SUZY, the social columnist of the moment – enters. She is in her early fifties and dressed to the nines, overdone to the nines in fact. She crosses directly to MARIA and takes her hands.)

SUZY

(With exaggerated sympathy)

Maria, darling.

MARIA

Suzy!

SUZY

You must be exhausted. Cara, Maria. Dear thing. Can I get you a sedative?

MARIA

No, thank you, Suzy.

SUZY

I have everything. Something that will knock you down.

MARIA

I don't need to be knocked down but thank you.

SUZY

You look awful.

MARIA

I feel fine.

SUZY

So brave. So strong. Tell me the worst part of it. What hurts the most?

MARIA

This moment, right now.

SUZY

Maria, you poor, wounded child. Don't be afraid to tell me how bad it feels.

SEPI

Suzy's been like this for the last half hour. I don't know what came over her.

SUZY

Dear, Sepi. Get us a drink. Anything. Anything with alcohol in it.

SEPI

Of course.

SUZY

Bring in the cart. Let's mourn together.

SEPI

Pronto.

(SEPI exits to bedroom.)

SUZY

Dear Maria. He doesn't get it at all, does he?

MARIA

Why should he?

SUZY

He's ruined. Finished in opera. The papers screaming, literally screaming about the scandal of that production. The worst *Vespri* in history. Did you read the *Times*? "An Historical Catastrophe Worse than the Massacre on Which the Opera is Based. Di Monaco and at La Suprema at Their Lowest. The end of two great but sordid careers."

MARIA

I'm sure that's not what it said.

SUZY

I'm paraphrasing.

MARIA

He was there when the reviews were read?

SUZY

He wouldn't listen, he kept drinking. He moved out on the balcony with the children, the party crashers.

MARIA

Why should he listen? He's survived this far, why should he care what they think now?

SUZY

You're right. He's been lambasted his whole career. It must just be like more poo thrown on the shit heap.

MARIA

Suzy, you always had a way with words. And he hasn't been lambasted his whole career. You know that.

SUZY

You're taking this all so well.

MARIA

I was paid for my work. I showed up on time and I did it. I have nothing to be ashamed of.

SUZY

Verdi's masterpiece ruined. The public outraged.

MARIA

If we failed, *we* failed, myself and the entire company. Sepi and I are not the only ones at fault. Also the audience, the critics, they failed as well. It is a collective failure. Over the years I've learned that about art.

SUZY

The critics? They've triumphed. They'll dine out for years on this scandal. They were there for the last of La Suprema's failed comebacks.

MARIA

Suzy.

SUZY

Yes, dear.

MARIA

That's enough.

SUZY

Is it?

MARIA

You came here, I think, because I asked you. Am I right?

SUZY

Yes.

MARIA

And I appreciate it. I was foolish to think I might get lucky with this one, so I invited you because...

SUZY

Because you like my coverage.

MARIA

Yes. You reach many people.

SUZY

Everybody. I reach everybody.

MARIE

Yes.

SUZY

That's why you called me.

MARIE

Yes. So having gambled and lost, you are perfectly entitled to do what you're doing. You came a long way, you deserve something.

SUZY

I do.

MARIA

But you're not going to provoke it and it's not going to happen.

SUZY

Then why did I come all this way?

MARIA

You can write what you want. I won't deny it. I promise.

SUZY

Give me a hint.

MARIA

"Maria in tears. Maria distraught. Shaken."

SUZY

"Humiliated. Disgraced. Demeaned--"

MARIA

Whatever you think best.

(SEPI returns wheeling the drinks cart – three pink martinis already poured.)

SEPI

Such a success! Bravissima, Maria. Bravissima, Suzy. Did you see that finale? Has *I Vespri* ever made your spine tingle like that? I was shivering at the end, shivering!

SUZY

Yes. That theatre was cold.

SEPI

Sweet Suzy. Shivering with fright. For those poor Frenchmen. Murdered by the Italians. “Vendetta! Vendetta!” Did you see how Maria handled the chorus at the end of Act One? That was all Maria. People complimented me on that, me! But I told them, I told them all, “It was Maria, Maria!”

SUZY

Who was that odd little man in the pit? He didn’t come to the party.

SEPI

Oh, the conducting. Yes, awful. Awful. Maestro’s assistant. Il maestro took ill, He had to send on his assistant. The cast and the orchestra were leading him, leading him. I don’t think he had the right score in front of him. At one point I was convinced he was conducting *Tannhauser*, by the wave of his baton. It said to myself, that’s *Tannhauser*. He’s conducting *Tannhauser*. He was still conducting after the curtain calls. Maybe he thought we were doing to the *Ring*.

SUZY

Fortunately it seemed everyone ignored him.

SEPI

Yes, that was fortunate. An opera without a conductor. It made it more real, more immediate. Verismo.

(Handing out drinks.)

Now all of you. A special drink. My own creation. Martini Di Sepi!

(SUZY sips and almost gags.)

SUZY

Ahhh! It’s awful.

MARIA

(Also having trouble)

Sepi!

SEPI

Good, si?

SUZY

Terrible.

SEPI

How terrible?

SUZY

It's full, it's stiff with sugar.

SEPI

Yes. Perfect for the early morning. Like breakfast cereal for kids, full of sugar, wakes you up.

SUZY

It's a merciless concoction.

SEPI

(Taking her glass)

Here. I'll drink yours.

SUZY

You are truly a Renaissance man, Sepi.

SEPI

Si, this I know.

(ARI enters, casually.)

ARI

Hello.

MARIA

Ari.

SUZY

(Truly amazed)

My goodness. Ari.

ARI

How are you, Suzy?

SUZY

Flabbergasted.

ARI

I thought you might be.

SUZY

Where have you been? Since the funeral?

ARI

Tonight I was here. At the opera. I came for Maria's opening. And Sepi's.

SUZY

(Indicating SEPI and ARI)

I didn't know you knew each other.

ARI

Of course.

(He crosses to MARIA and holds her.)

It was beautiful, Maria. A beautiful production.

MARIA

Thank you, Ari.

ARI

And you too, Sepi. Beautiful work. Isn't that what they say? In the theatre? You both did beautifully.

SEPI

You see, Suzy. Someone who understands what happened tonight.

SUZY

Well if one person understands then something has been achieved.

ARI

Many understood. Watching the performance. Almost everybody I should think.

SUZY

You felt that way?

ARI

I know that way. Anyone who's been through an occupation, who's felt the strangulation of tyranny, who's fought back against fascism, they understood. The people of Turin understood. A Greek, a Frenchman, a Russian, they would understand. It was directed by someone, by two people who know. The spirit of resistance. That's what I saw onstage tonight.

SUZY

Ah. I missed that.

ARI

You were in America during the war, weren't you Suzy?

SUZY

I had relatives in Europe. In concentration camps.

ARI

They must have suffered a lot.

SUZY

I'm glad you enjoyed it.

SEPI

And he hates opera. Don't you, Ari?

ARI

Well...

SEPI

A true philistine our Ari.

ARI

No, just a nationalist. If Aeschylus wrote an opera I'd be a fan.

SEPI

But he did. And your people lost the music. So clumsy, the Greeks.

(They all laugh.)

SUZY

It's a mutual admiration society.

ARI

Of course there were problems. The conductor.

SEPI

Ah, si, the tempi, the tempi. We were just saying.

ARI

And the ballet.

SEPI

Terrible. The choreographer. A modernist. And drunk half the time.

ARI

And the costumes.

SEPI

From a second hand store. I swear.

ARI

But the movement, the shape of it, the energy, all magnificent.

MARIA

Thank you, Ari.

SUZY

Well, tonight has been full of surprises.

ARI

Not all disappointing ones I hope.

SUZY

No, it seems there are many opinions on any artistic event.

SEPI

That's what keeps it interesting. Like democracy.

ARI

A minority report is often the only one heard.

SUZY

If it comes from the voice of greatest authority.

ARI

That's of course what I meant.

SUZY

I would love to chat tomorrow, Ari. Catch up.

ARI

Why not right now?

SUZY

Of course, that would be splendid.

ARI

Your coverage of tonight's triumph would be read by everyone if your column also carried an exclusive.

SUZY

I was just thinking the same thing.

ARI

Good night, Maria. Brava.

MARIA

Thank you, Ari.

ARI

Sepi.

SEPI

But, Ari, stay here. Talk to Suzy tomorrow. You must be exhausted.

ARI

No, I've been disappeared for a week. It's time the world knew what I was up to. Come on, Suzy.

SUZY

We'll go to my hotel.

ARI

Nonsense. We'll paint the town. Drink with the workers. With my people.

SUZY

You'll be interviewed in a saloon?

ARI

I can't control what you write but I can control where you write it. Come on, Suzy I'll show you some grief.

(They exit, SUZY laughing in spite of herself.)

SEPI

See. Suzy's a friend. A good friend.

MARIA

We tag teamed her.

SEPI

No. She wants to help. I know she does.

MARIA

Have you ever read her column?

SEPI

Never.

MARIA

You don't read newspapers, do you? Never?

SEPI

Why should I? I always know when I'm covered. People come up to me and say, "Sepi, Sepi, I saw you were in the paper!" and I know I was covered.

MARIA

What else do they say?

SEPI

Oh, different things.

MARIA

Do they ever say, "I'm so sorry?"

SEPI

Sometimes. But I know they're just sorry for themselves. They're jealous.

MARIA

What do you say to them?

SEPI

I hold their hand and I say, "I'm sorry too." You have to feel sorry for the defeated.

MARIA

(Smiling affectionately for him)

Sepi.

SEPI

Maria.

MARIA

What now?

SEPI

Now we pack. Always the best solution.

MARIA

Solution to what?

SEPI

Wanderlust. We've done our work, a good job of it too.

MARIA

Sepi.

SEPI

No, a magnificent job. It will say so in Suzy's column, read the world over. "A triumph." Now we move onto the next challenge.

(SEPI crosses to phone.)

MARIA

Ah, yes. More master classes. Tokyo, so far away.

SEPI

Si.

(Into phone)

Pronto. 453.

MARIA

But that's not for months.

SEPI

We have work to do, people to meet. Asia is the new frontier.

MARIA

Sepi, I'm exhausted.

SEPI

We'll go on vacation. Bali. There was a revolution last year, now a whole new government. It's paradise again.

(Into phone)

Hello gorgeous. Who? It's Sepi. Come on up. Si.

(He hangs up.)

See, it's all set.

MARIA

Who was that?

SEPI

Man coming to get our bags.

MARIA

Our bags? I'm not packed.

SEPI

He'll help us.

MARIA

I haven't slept. I haven't eaten.

SEPI

I ordered breakfast. You can sleep on the plane. In Bali.

MARIA

Sepi.

SEPI

What?

MARIA

You'll sweep me off my feet.

SEPI

I hope so.

(Doorbell. MAID enters.)

SEPI

(Running off)

I'll get it!

(MARIA laughs. She spins and sits on sofa. She is strangely happy, even after all that has happened. MAID crosses to her.)

MAID

Madame.

MARIA

Yes, child.

MAID

I'm pressed.

MARIA

(Taking her hand)

I'm proud of you.

(MAID smiles and exits happily as SEPI re-enters followed by a man pushing the breakfast cart. The man wears an expensive suit and is very large, also very elegant. At eighty-five, he is clearly not a waiter. The man is SOL, the American producer/agent. But MARIA hasn't looked at him yet.)

SEPI

Eccola! And such a handsome waiter.

MARIA

(Not looking up)

I think... I think I finally want that glass of champagne I've been avoiding all night.

SOL

In Italy you get prosecco!

(Recognizing the voice, MARIA stands up startled.)

MARIA

Sol!

SOL

Principessa!

MARIA

Sol!

(She runs into his arms. They embrace ecstatically. She suddenly breaks from him.)

MARIA

Oh, Sol, no!

SOL

Yes.

MARIA

You weren't.

SOL

I couldn't resist.

MARIA

Oh, Sol. You brat!

SOL

How could I stay away?

MARIA

I'm glad you didn't tell me.

SOL

I knew that was best.

MARIA

I'm still glad to see you.

(Hugging him)

I love you, Sol.

SOL

And you're still the most beautiful artist on the planet.

MARIA

Not woman?

SOL

Second. After the present Mrs. Sol.

MARIA

You gentleman.

(They hug and laugh.)

SOL

You two, that opera was terrible. Terrible.

SEPI

I know, we're so proud of it.

SOL

The staging, the acting, you had nothing to do with it, right? You just put your names on it, as a favor.

SEPI

Yes, we weren't even here. We just got in yesterday morning.

MARIA

Sepi, stop it.

SOL

So who really directed it? A student, right?

SEPI

It's so sad.

SOL

Who?

SEPI

Zeferelli.

SOL

No!

SEPI

He begged us, begged us to put our names on it.

SOL

You had no idea how bad it was?

SEPI

How could we? We arrived just before the runthrough and watched, in horror, horror!

SOL

Didn't you say anything? To the director? To the management?

SEPI

What could we say? It was a final dress. There was no time.

SOL

You said nothing?

SEPI

The only thing we could say: "Drinks?"

SOL

Well, I'm glad you two got that out of your system. This food's getting cold.

SEPI

Help yourself.

(He perches and begins to devour the food. He will finish the entire cart during the rest of the scene.)

SOL

Directing, it's for nerds.

SEPI

I was just telling Maria. And co-directing, for masochists. I'd have a great idea. Brilliant. And Maria would quash it, strangle it, out of pure jealousy. It almost ruined our relationship.

MARIA

What do you mean almost?

SEPI

Ah, she's such a kidder.

MARIA

How long have you been here?

SOL

Got in yesterday.

MARIA

When do you leave?

SOL

In an hour.

MARIA

Sol.

SOL

Please. Turino? City of car factories, it's like flying half way around the world to visit Detroit. Anyway, I'm a damn busy presenter. There's the new season, Tebaldi's tour begins Monday, busy time.

MARIA

(In horror, realizing what's happening)

Sol.

SOL

Yes?

MARIA

Oh, Sepi.

SEPI

What?

MARIA

You two.

SEPI

What?

MARIA

(She is near tears.)

I...

(She starts to cry.)

Excuse me.

(She runs out of the room.)

SOL

You idiot.

SEPI

Don't talk to me that way.

SOL

You told me...

SEPI

I said don't speak to me that way.

SOL

Ok.

SEPI

Wait in the other room. Go on. Please.

SOL

Fine. Damn it, Guiseppe.

SEPI

Just be patient.

SOL

Damn it. Why do I fall for this shit? Time and time again.

(He leaves, of course taking the cart with him and eating as he goes.)

SEPI

Maria. Maria.

(The bedroom door opens and she enters. She crosses to the sofa.)

MARIA

I am just going to say this, once. And I refuse to beg. I am exhausted. Exhausted, Sepi. The opera, the opening, Ari's showing up here, everything...

SEPI

It doesn't happen for months. Months.

MARIA

I cannot. I cannot, Sepi.

SEPI

We will vacation. I meant that. I wasn't joking.

MARIA

Sepi, you misunderstand. I cannot. Not "will not," "Can not."

SEPI

Not now.

MARIA

Nor ever. Not ever again.

SEPI

Maria, with rehearsal-

MARIA

No.

SEPI

He's here.

MARIA

Send him back.

SEPI

Maria.

MARIA

I'll send him back. I'll explain.

SEPI

Maria.

MARIA

Sepi.

SEPI

Maria.

MARIA

Sepi, please listen. I've never said this because... well, I didn't want you to... to take it the wrong way. If I wanted to sing, if I was able to sing, I could go back. To L'Opera, to

Rome, even to the Met. They have asked me. Many times. Even Bing. In his way. I could go back and sing. And they would come. And it would be fine. Can't sing the roles any more, I know that... I mean, I can sing them but... I cannot sing them as they are meant to be sung. I'm not sure I ever could, but I certainly can't now. But I could do it. I could go back and sing them and it would be fine. Many others have. Many go on and on. Some until they die. It is ok, please understand, the audience wants them to succeed so they do. Most of them. But, Sepi, it is not right... It is not fair. Not to those who truly know. Who understand, as I do. As we do. It is wrong. The point is though, if I wanted to sing it would not have to be on a tour, in a recital. I could go back onstage, in a production.

SEPI

But I can't. They have not asked me.

MARIA

I didn't think so.

SEPI

This tour. It is how I can sing. The only way.

MARIA

Then you should go on it. You should make the tour.

SEPI

Maria.

MARIA

Do it, Sepi. Your voice... your voice is much stronger than mine. You could actually get it into shape. The way it was. I cannot.

SEPI

Maria... They don't want me. They do, of course. But they want you. You with me.

MARIA

That's not true.

SEPI

It is true.

MARIA

Go on the tour. They'll love you. You'll see.

SEPI

I can't.

MARIA

You can.

SEPI

No.

MARIA

Caruso toured alone. Corelli.

SOL

They won't sign me.

MARIA

Who won't?

SOL

Sol. No one.

(She can only look at him.)

MARIA

Is this so important?

SOL

I was a pig, Maria. For years. To the managements. But I got to sing. Now I cannot. They will not let me. Because I was a pig. I never knew they would take that away from me. It's all I've ever wanted to do. Because it's all I ever did well.

MARIA

And if you can't?

SEPI

I'll go back to my wife. I don't know.

MARIA

Sepi...

SEPI

Si.

MARIA

Your voice.

SEPI

My voice. Maria, I have failed as a husband, I have failed as an artist, and now my daughter, my sweet daughter is dying of cancer. So much truth, so much truth to face, to accept. Don't ask me to also face the truth of newspapers, of... my voice. When I sing I hear my voice in here, through my bones. It is loud, it is confident, it is brave. I am

Alfredo, Marcello, Cavaradossi, I sing to the heavens. That is my voice. If God can hear me, if I sing loud enough for him to hear me, then I have a voice. That is enough.

MARIA

Then it is enough.

SEPI

But I need people, the audience. They are God on earth, evidence that he is listening, them. All of them.

(She is silent. She walks away, thinking. Then she decides.)

MARIA

Not Bali.

SEPI

Not Bali.

MARIA

To Paris. I want to lie down. In my own place. For a rest. A good long rest.

(He smiles.)

SEPI

I won't thank you.

MARIA

Why should you?

(She walks back to him.)

You are a great man, a great voice. You should be heard. It's absurd you have not been. And I am the only one you can sing with so it is obvious.

SEPI

Yes.

(She crosses to the double doors and opens them. SOL is standing right there, obviously he's been listening. He holds a piece of bacon and looks embarrassed, but he covers well.)

SOL

Maria! Welcome back!

(She goes into Maria mode, all business.)

MARIA

I want Ivor as our accompanist.

SOL

Acccompanist? You'll have Bernstein and a full orchestra.

MARIA

No. Absolutely not. These are recitals, not concerts. We will be accompanied on the piano only.

SOL

They'll never go for Ivor, he's ninety.

MARIA

Ivor.

SOL

The insurance will be murder.

MARIA

I'll choose the repertory and there will be only nine duets.

SOL

Nine? That's only a forty-five minute evening!

MARIA

With applause it will be two hours.

SEPI

And I can sing some encores!

MARIA

And Sol this is the most important point.

SOL

What is that?

MARIA

Tebaldi. I want exactly what she is getting paid. To the penny.

SOL

You'll have double.

MARIA

No. That's not fair. Just the same. She is a great lady, she deserves that.

SOL

Very clever, she might be your rival but...

MARIA

Sol! I am La Suprema. I have no rivals.

(Blackout. End of Act One.)

Act II

Scene 1

SETTING:

During the intermission part of the audience has been moved on to bleachers on the stage, surrounding a grand piano and creating a performance area in the round, as seen in the clips of the Callas/Di Stefano tour. Although the audience assumes this position, the characters will treat the space as if it is empty of audience members during this scene.

AT RISE:

Bare stage. SEPI enters. He is dressed in a casual suit. He holds music. He contemplates the space. He exits and re-enters as if he is practicing his entrance, pretending MARIA is on his arm, presenting her to the crowd, applauding for her, and then accepting his own ovation. He is “humble” in his acceptance, smiling at the audience and then preening at their applause. MARIA enters behind him, holding music that she studies. Her outfit is very businesslike.

MARIA

I always loved *Carmen* but I hated singing it. I can't believe I agreed to this duet. Here let's run it.

(Looking at the piano)

Where's Ivor?

SEPI

Probably sleeping.

MARIA

At five-fifteen?

SEPI

Napping.

MARIA

(Sitting on the piano stool)

Here, let's take it from “C'est toi!—“

SEPI

Not in the theatre, not in the space.

MARIA

What?

SEPI

I never sing on the stage before the opera. Certainly not before the premiere.

MARIA

It's hardly a premiere.

SEPI

Our first concert.

MARIA

(Looking at the bleachers)

Are they really going to sit there?

SEPI

Yes, right there.

MARIA

It's so close.

SEPI

Does it make you nervous?

MARIA

Nervous? I'm choking with fear just having to sing in front of them tonight. Where they sit is immaterial.

SEPI

You sounded beautiful yesterday. At the rehearsal.

MARIA

Did I?

SEPI

Better than the last time I heard you sing. More power. More authority.

MARIA

And the notes?

SEPI

Crystalline.

MARIA

Thank you, Sepi. You are a lazy actor but your musicianship I have always admired.
Above anyone else.

SEPI

Cara.

MARIA

Don't push. You get enthusiastic, in front of the audience, and you push.

SEPI

I don't.

MARIA

You did it for Sol, on Monday. You did when you saw those janitors watching us
yesterday. You push.

SEPI

Si, it is a failing.

MARIA

Remember my signal.

SEPI

(Annoyed)

Maria.

MARIA

No, remember it. I won't sing the music cheaply, flashily.

SEPI

Oh, honestly.

MARIA

Sepi. Remember.

SEPI

Yes, yes, yes.

MARIA

Then what is the signal?

SEPI

Maria.

MARIA

Sepi.

SEPI

Yes, yes, yes. If you do this:

(He makes an exaggerated cutting gesture across his throat.)

It means "tone it down, you piece of prosciutto!"

MARIA

That is not the gesture. I would never do that in front of an audience. If I do this:

(She throws her right hand up regally, then points at the floor.)

Which is something any one of my characters might do, it means return to the music, give the notes the quality only as the composer has indicated.

SEPI

Yes, yes, yes, maestra, doctore, mistress of music!

MARIA

Stop it, Sepi.

SEPI

I am not a student. This is not a master class.

MARIA

Oh, for God's sake.

SEPI

I'm sorry. I'm nervous.

MARIA

So am I.

IVOR

(Entering)

Nerves are for amateurs.

MARIA

Ivor!

(Enter IVOR, eighty-one and looks it. He wears a suit but whatever bounce he once had in his step is long gone. He is a classical music accompanist who has seen it all. He crosses directly to the piano.)

MARIA

Did you rest?

IVOR

I never rest. Never sleep. My doctor says lay down, I lay down. My doctor says sleep, I close me eyes. But I never sleep. I haven't slept since 1932. March 14. I had three hours of sleep on March 14, 1932. Outside of Mantua. Monday, March 15 I stopped sleeping.

(He sits.)

Who's been fucking with my stool? I ask one thing, one. That my stool travel with me and that no one fucks with it. I sat on this stool forty-one years and every motherfucker in Western Europe fucked with it. Mussolini. Mussolini was the only man who ever respected my stool. He asked if he could sit on it, to know what it feels like to sit as a virtuoso sits, and he plopped his fat ass down on it, plop! Plop! Put his fat fingers on the keys and smiled at me like a shit eating banshee. I said, "Get your sloppy cheeks off my stool or I'll kick you." He popped up like a clown at the circus. Hurt puppy face. Mopped around for a month after that. Didn't perk up until Hitler let him invade France. But he never again tried to sit on my stool.

(Making an adjustment.)

There. That's better.

(He hammers out some impressive passages.)

Molto bene. Maria, stay off my stool. I can feel your boney ass impressed on the cushion.

MARIA

Si, Maestro.

(IVOR noodles on the piano, the final duet from *Carmen*.)

SEPI

Maria, cara...

MARIA

Si, Sepi?

SEPI

Carmen.

MARIA

Si?

SEPI

What for staging?

MARIA

Ah. Simple, but passionate.

SEPI

But the finale, the ending. La morta.

MARIA

What of it?

SEPI

I must stab you. You must die.

MARIA

It's a recital, Sepi.

SEPI

But Carmen dies, in the dust, like a pig, like the filthy whore that she is. That is the climax, no?

IVOR

He has a point.

SEPI

We cannot act the scene and then not act the death. Here I show you. Come. We sing, we sing, we sing, I hold up the knife and I plunge it in you, comme ça.

(He plunges a mime knife in her, she doubles over.)

I twist the knife, eccola!

(He twists the knife in her, viciously.)

MARIA

(Uncomfortable)

Sepi, Sepi!

SEPI

I shove your bleeding slut carcass away-

MARIA

Sepi!

SEPI

Si?

MARIA

I will be in a gown.

SEPI

Si?

MARIA

You will be in white tie and tails.

SEPI

Si?

MARIA

It is preposterous.

IVOR

You'll look like Fred and Ginger in a horror flick.

SEPI

It is appropriate to the scene.

MARIA

Sepi-

SEPI

Pronto, I won't throw your bleeding carcass away, I'll lower your lifeless tramp torso down, comme ca.

(He lowers her body sliding down his body.)

IVOR

Now it's like the bullet hit Jackie, not Jack.

MARIA

Ivor!

IVOR

Sorry.

SEPI

I'll lower you down, down-

(IVOR vamps.)

SEPI

Down, down, into the dust, the filth, down, down, you bloody, shit smeared wench, you prostitute! You zozzona!

(SEPI finally releases her and she collapses lifeless on the floor, on her back. SEPI still holds up one arm.)

IVOR

Don't forget to wear your panties, Maria.

SEPI

Ivor, basta! Basta!

(Saying this he lets her arms flop down as he advances on IVOR,
slapping the piano.)

MARIA

(On the floor)

Sepi.

SEPI

Ah, mi scuzi.

(He helps her up.)

MARIA

Sepi, it's impossible, we'll look ridiculous.

SEPI

But we must. How can I feel the passion without the stab, the stab. Vendetta! Vendetta!

MARIA

Ah, si, Sepi, no vendetta, per favore. We'll just drift apart at the end.

SEPI

Drift apart? No, no, Maria. We'll look like a couple of middle-aged people fighting at
some cocktail party

IVOR

Method acting! Brilliant!

SEPI

Ivor, you are not so old that I will not thump you.

MARIA

Sepi, dearest. Keep the scene simple. Si? And if I give you this gesture.
(She starts to execute the gesture.)

Remember, this gesture-

SEPI

Yes, yes, I know, I am not stupid.

MARIA

I don't think you're stupid-

IVOR

I think you're stupid.

SEPI

Ahah!!

(SEPI lunges at IVOR, who springs from his seat and runs to the other side of the piano.)

SEPI

Don't poop your pants tonight, old man.

IVOR

I wear a diaper as insurance against poop, Sepito. What is our insurance against your ham.

SEPI

Bastardo!

(He chases him about the piano.)

SEPI

I sing with passion to keep you awake, Ivor. I bark to wake you up!

IVOR

I'm narcoleptic as an antiseptic to your epileptic.

SEPI

(To MARIA)

What does this mean? I don't understand what this means?

MARIA

It's an insult.

(SEPI lunges at IVOR.)

SEPI

(Chasing him)

Come here, Ivor! Come here!

MARIA

Sepi!

(SEPI stops chasing him.)

SEPI

He talks to me like a wife.

MARIA

Sepi. Control yourself. Now and onstage, tonight. Keep it simple. Si?

SEPI

Si. Bien sur

MARIA

Now, go rest. Even Don Jose needs to rest.

SEPI

Si, bella.

IVOR

Guiseppe, leave us.

SEPI

Why?

IVOR

Because I have to talk to Maria about you.

SEPI

Behind my back?

IVOR

No, not behind your back, with you out of the room. Avanti!

SEPI

I'll go find a cheeseburger.

(He kisses her and starts to exit. As he exits he gives one last bark at IVOR, who flinches.)

IVOR

Is he going to sing like that?

MARIA

Like what?

IVOR

Like he did in rehearsal?

MARIA

I talked to him about that.

IVOR

If he sings like that I'll walk off the stage.

MARIA

No, Ivor, you mustn't. I have a signal for him, to remind him to stop.

IVOR

I have signal for him. This.

(The finger.)

And this.

("Up yours!")

And then I walk off the stage.

MARIA

Ivor, please. You don't mind the audience being so close?

IVOR

No, I like them close. That way I can keep an eye them, give them dirty looks when they cough or sneeze.

MARIA

Ivor.

IVOR

Si, cara?

MARIA

My... My voice... My singing.

IVOR

Like the birds.

MARIA

With the power of birds, yes?

IVOR

With the power of a hawk, a mountain lion.

MARIA

I can't hear it. To me it sounds... hollow, not there.

IVOR

That's the Maria sound, the distance, that's your character, your stamp.

MARIA

No, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the notes.

IVOR

They are there.

MARIA

As they were before?

IVOR

When before?

MARIA

Before Paris, before London. My Lucias.

IVOR

You know what I think.

MARIA

Tell me.

IVOR

It was never what it was after you lost all that weight. Your first Lucia, your second magnifico.

MARIA

I know.

IVOR

Your weight was your strength.

MARIA

I know.

IVOR

I've never stopped thinking that.

MARIA

But my third Lucia? My fourth? It is that strong?

IVOR

Yes, of course.

MARIA

Good. That's all I ask.

(She is suddenly near tears. She runs off the stage. IVOR looks after her, then looks at his music. He flips a page and then immediately dozes off in his chair. He sits upright, but dozes. SOL and ARI enter.)

ARI

My God, Sol. The audience is on the stage!

SOL

Shhhh.

(He indicates IVOR.)

ARI

Who's that?

SOL

The accompanist.

ARI

Is he all right?

SOL

No. He sleeps constantly. Dozes off all the time. We think he has narcolepsy.

ARI

I think he has death.

SOL

We're hoping he doesn't doze in the concert.

ARI

You're kidding.

SOL

Maria knows how to handle it.

ARI

How?

SOL

She bangs on the piano. You promise she knows you're here.

ARI

Sure. She invited me. She always invites me. I just never come.

(IVOR is suddenly awakened and playing a sonata.)

SOL

Ivor, how are you?

IVOR

How am I other than the fact I haven't slept since 1932? Great.

SOL

Do you know Aristotle?

IVOR

Heard of him.

SOL

Be polite, Ivor. He's a very dangerous man.

IVOR

Dangerous man. I played for Hitler.

(He plays some more.)

I played for Stalin.

(A little more.)

I played for Walt Disney. Dangerous man.

(He stops playing.)

You still funding the PLO?

ARI

Sure.

IVOR

And Israel?

ARI

I'm an equal opportunity employer.

IVOR

Fucking hypocrite. You're an equal opportunity despoiler.

(ARI and SOL laugh.)

SOL

We have a seat for you. At the back. Discreet.

ARI

(Indicating a spot in the front row)

I'll sit here. Where Maria can see me. She likes that.

IVOR

You mean *you* like that, media hog. Why don't you just sit onstage? You can sit next to me, with your hand on my knee, show everyone what a faggot you are.

(SOL looks nervous, but ARI roars with laughter. SOL joins him laughing. ARI crosses away to the bleachers and climbs them to take a seat at the top.)

SOL

(To IVOR)

Did you just rehearse?

IVOR

No.

SOL

Ivor, will she sound that way? The way she did in rehearsal? Yesterday?

IVOR

That's her voice, her sound, that's how she sounds.

SOL

No, I don't mean that. I mean, the notes...

IVOR

Those are the notes...

SOL

I mean the quality.

IVOR

The quality was correct. She is a supreme musician.

SOL

I mean, they sounded... wobbly.

IVOR

Ah, that's Maria's rehearsal voice. The wobbliness disappears. In performance.

ARI

(From his seat on high)

She can't sing. She knows that.

SOL

You were listening?

ARI

I'm always listening. She could never sing. She wasn't meant to. Before I knew her maybe, when she was fat, but not later.

IVOR

(Sincerely offended)

That is not true. Not true. She is a supreme artist.

ARI

Oh, artist, I don't deny you. A great actress. She got me, didn't she? But she can't sing.

IVOR

You're a pig, Ari. The world knows that.

ARI

Doesn't matter. I mean about her singing. She's a star. They'll all love her. She transcends quality. All the walkouts, breaches of contract, temper tantrums, it was all a performance.

IVOR

She walked out only when she couldn't fulfill the music.

ARI

She could never fulfill the music. She knew that. So she'd make a scene every once in a while to distract people, send up a smoke screen. I know about all that. I'm a businessman.

IVOR

And a swine.

ARI

I was a smoke screen. Our relationship, meant to distract attention from her singing.

SOL

That's not true, Ari. She loved you... she loves you deeply.

ARI

I didn't say she doesn't love me. I know she loves me. That's why I put up with it.

SOL

I hope you're here to support her.

ARI

I've always supported her.

SOL

I hope you won't say anything like this to her.

ARI

I'll say whatever I want to her, Sol.

IVOR

How's the business, Ari? Still going down the toilet? Still in a nose dive?

ARI

Yep. I'm fucked.

SOL

I'm surprised you show your face at an event like this.

ARI

Don't imagine for a second that because I let an incontinent old fool like that piece of shit run at the mouth I'll let you do it. I step on people like you, Sol. Like bugs.

IVOR

(Standing and exiting)

Don't feel bad, Sol. You still scare him. He wouldn't get pissed off if you didn't.

SOL

Where you going?

IVOR

Get a drink. I forgot what a drama it was playing for Maria.

(He exits.)

SOL

I have a lot riding on this, Ari. She's just barely holding herself together. I'm the only one who knows that. I hope you don't... I'm asking you to please not say anything to her, anything that will upset her.

ARI

My world's gone down the toilet, Sol. I'm worth half what I was six months ago. You think I care about your pipsqueak operation?

SOL

Please, Ari.

ARI

I think it's time she made movies. I'll see how this goes. If it goes belly up, maybe we could shove her into movies. I need some income, Solly. Some income with exposure. I need to be out there, be seen.

SOL

What about your wife?

ARI

What about her? You seen her lately? I haven't.

(MARIA enters and spots ARI in bleachers.)

MARIA

Ari.

ARI

Mary. How are you?

MARIA

Thank you for coming.

ARI

Wouldn't have missed it.

MARIA

Sol, would you excuse us?

(SOL leaves.)

MARIA

Is Suzy here?

ARI

Yes, I saw her.

MARIA

Saw her?

ARI

Before she saw me fortunately. I dove into a bush.

(MARIA laughs.)

ARI

In Turin, she stuck her tongue down my throat.

(MARIA laughs.)

ARI

It wasn't funny. It was disgusting. She had a lizard's tongue. Scaley.

MARIA

I didn't ask her to come this time.

ARI

She's like me. A fan.

MARIA

You're not a fan, Ari. You only come out of need.

ARI

That so?

MARIA

How bad is it?

ARI

What makes you think it's bad?

MARIA

You're here.

(Pause.)

ARI

She's left me. She's finally left me.

MARIA

Good.

ARI

Good?

MARIA

Yes, good. It's what you always wanted.

ARI

I couldn't believe the things you said about her.

MARIA

You don't get it, do you? You never did?

ARI

I always got it.

MARIA

No. You threw me over for her. I wanted marriage, babies, a life, you wanted a party. I could give you that, to a point. She could give it to you, big time. I attracted a certain level of guest, she attracted a much greater level. I brought Elsa Maxwell, she brought you Khruschev.

ARI

Is that what you thought was happening?

MARIA

It's what you told me was happening. You shouted it in my face.

ARI

So you'd stop talking about it.

MARIA

What on earth did she have, other than her name, to give you that I couldn't give you?

ARI

Jesus, Maria.

MARIA

Just tell me.

ARI

I shouldn't have to.

MARIA

I want to know.

ARI

Forget it.

MARIA

Money? Prestige? Power? I had all that.

ARI

It's not important.

MARIA

A good body? A great brain?

ARI

Protection.

MARIA

Oh.

ARI

She gave me protection.

MARIA

That again.

ARI

Yes.

MARIA

I don't believe those stories.

ARI

Because you don't know what it is to do what I did.

MARIA

You regret it.

ARI

I can't conceive of it. Not now. How could I do it then?

MARIA

I don't know. You never talked to me about it. First he was killed and you seemed the same, then his brother, and you... suddenly you seemed scared. I never pieced it together.

ARI

I got cocky.

MARIA

I'll say.

ARI

Jack was such an easy... so easy. Robert. God, that took months, years to figure out. And then everyone knew. I could tell by the way people spoke to me, by the way she spoke to me, that they all knew. That they were all waiting for the shoe to drop. For me to disappear one night, or the *Christina* to blow up suddenly. I couldn't sleep. For months. Then nothing happened. I kept waiting and waiting and nothing happened. So I relaxed. Then Alexander.

MARIA

You still don't know that.

ARI

I do. It was a warning.

MARIA

You can't blame yourself for him.

ARI

Blame? I don't care about blame, I care about me. They've taken him, now they'll come for me. They gave notice with him. That I'm past due. I figured... I thought, so long as she's here, with me, they can't do anything. She's my protection. Now she's gone. Left, Moved back to New York.

MARIA

So you've come here. My God, Ari. How do you think? What possible protection can I offer you?

ARI

They'd never touch you.

MARIA

What were you thinking? In '63. What went through your head?

ARI

People do it.

MARIA

The President? President of the United States?

ARI

You learn to fight, you learn not to let yourself be stepped on, nobody's too big. And you learn that if you step on the big boys you will inspire fear. They fucked with me, so I got revenge.

MARIA

It's crazy.

ARI

It worked. For a time. And it was heady. I impressed even myself. Wanting things. You. Revenge. His wife. I got it all. And when they wouldn't stop I went for his brother. But they're a big family. They've learned to master their fear. So now they're striking back.

MARIA

I am an artist, Ari. Just an artist. "Vissi d'arte." What are you doing here, putting me in the middle of this?

ARI

What do you live for?

MARIA

To live. I used to live to sing, Now I live to simply live.

ARI

So you're not doing this for the singing?

MARIA

I can sing in halls much nicer than this.

ARI

So for that runt Guiseppe.

MARIA

He is a life.

ARI

He's a has-been. A wash-up.

MARIA

But he is a life.

ARI

I was a life. To you.

MARIA

Always too crazy, too dangerous, you were like a flame that fascinated me but I knew would eventually burn me. I can't love like a moth, Ari. I need to live in the light but not near the flame.

ARI

He's nothing. He's unworthy.

MARIA

He is something, I give him a little and he becomes a little bit better a man. I've seen that. Life is built upon little sacrifices that add up to a large sacrifice that engenders a sacrifice in someone else. He lives with me, he feeds me, he takes me out, we go to movies, for God's sake. Movies. At night, on our own we can pass for ordinary people. Someone recognizes us, there's a flurry, we can enjoy it, then we can run away, find a dark café and become anonymous again, normal. With you, it was always something to prove,

someone to buy out, impress, outmaneuver, murder. It's horrifying your energy. Like a meteor, a shooting star.

ARI

A falling star.

MARIA

Yes. So fall, Ari. Hit the bottom. Turn yourself in or let your empire collapse. You might find something you never found in this... this shark like motion of yours.

ARI

With you I could.

MARIA

Too late. You... I couldn't believe it... You killed that man, that good man, then married his wife, took her like a prize of war. It's horrifying ... my God, it's like something out of the Trojan War. Like a Greek Tragedy.

ARI

Yes.

MARIA

This is why you always disdained my career. You hated the artifice, the imitation, of something you wanted to live. You felt insulted by the effort to make Greek safe and artistic when you felt it was real, you felt I was mocking you, with my artistry and my desire to be normal.

ARI

I made a mistake.

MARIA

A mistake? Like Zeus. Zeus makes a mistake and the world collapses. That kind of mistake.

ARI

Close to you, they wouldn't touch me, they wouldn't dare.

MARIA

You're wrong about that. You would just get me killed in the process.

ARI

Let me try. Try to protect me.

MARIA

No, It's too frightening, And I have something I need to protect. I have other responsibilities. It's all... it's all become too complicated.

(She runs off. He looks after her, he whistles "Vissi D'Arte" as the lights fade and his voice is replaced by that of SEPI singing "La Donne Mobile" from about the middle of the aria.)

Scene 2

SETTING: The same. The Concert.

AT RISE: We are in the midst of the concert. SEPI is finishing "La Donne Mobile." He sings atrociously. He knows the melody of course, but his pitch is way off, rarely on the notes, and his volume is booming. Still, he understands the character of the song and phrases with aplomb, "selling" the number as would a Venetian gondolier or a singer in a pizza restaurant. He obviously enjoys singing. He reaches one of his high notes and unleashes an outrageous falsetto to get there. As he sustains the hideous note IVOR tries to get him back on pitch by pounding the appropriate key but SEPI ignores him, screeching up and up shamelessly. The aria ends. The real audience (hopefully) applauds and SEPI absorbs the ovation graciously. ARI shouts "bravos" from his seat in the front row onstage, laughing wildly at his own antics. SEPI bows to him. When the real audience's applause stops there is a pause and we hear what SEPI hears: the ovation of a huge crowd, stadium sized, screaming out their adulation. He looks truly happy. This fades and all is quiet. SEPI addresses the audience.

SEPI

When you are starting out as a singer you can be very fortunate or very cursed in your partners. When I made my Scala debut I was very fortunate to sing Rodolfo with La Suprema. That was, well I won't say how long ago, a few years.

(He laughs.)

But I am still very fortunate to be here tonight singing with her still. Ladies and gentlemen, La Divina.

(MARIA enters, looking absolutely stunning with her hair done magnificently and wearing a beautiful gown. She acknowledges the

applause graciously but soon puts a stop to it, raising her hand to indicate “enough.” This is not about her, it is about the music. Sotto voce, she tells IVOR what they will sing – “O soave faciulla” from *La Boheme* and IVOR starts playing the introduction. They begin quietly, intimately, and, it must be said, the acting of the scene is impeccable. With MARIA, SEPI drops much of his grand manner and relates quietly and tenderly with her in the context of the scene – they seem truly in love, truly affectionate with one another. The singing? This is complicated. The duet starts so quietly there is no evidence of straining, The music is simple, achievable, and the two of them, within the needs of the duet in its early passages, are spot on, SEPI perhaps straining a bit, but MARIA impeccable in her grasp of the notes and the sustaining of those notes to their absolute need. But as the duet continues, the musical demands grow and MARIA is more and more placed “outside her comfort zone” to put it kindly. More ruthlessly, she doesn’t have the power and reliability to sing Mimi properly. She wobbles, she strains; she doesn’t slide from note to note, she leaps; there are abrupt shifts in register, and, on the sustained notes, she sharps gratingly. She never hams it up, as SEPI cannot resist doing though only subtly here – but she is clearly no longer capable of singing this music, the music of grand opera. That said, her musicianship is scrupulous. If she strains and sharps it is because she wants to give the music the quality it demands; if she wobbles it is because she knows she must sustain notes beyond her ability to sustain them prettily.

Her acing, always, is electric. She has lost nothing in this department, and it is that which truly, as opposed to falsely as in the case of SEPI, sells the song and makes her inadequate musical performance of it completely satisfying. We forgive many mistakes in art if we have a sentimental attachment to the artist and especially, as in this case, we feel that the artist is committed to entertaining us truly, simply and honestly. MARIA exists to entertain, to tell the story of Mimi in love at this moment, and she succeeds absolutely in that respect. The overall effect? If she were a musical comedy star of the American stage she would be considered to still possess a completely adequate voice for the stage and her acting would make her a still electric star. If she were onstage in an opera she would still get away with it because she would sell tickets. The reviewers would probably just stay away. Many in any audience who don’t know much would be fully satisfied with what they’re hearing. People with any ear for music would be appalled. All those in between would be satisfied by her celebrity and her commitment. That means that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the audience listening would love what they’re experiencing. Bottom line: she is Maria and she is here, right here, in the round, close and making her comeback, that’s enough for anyone.

They complete the first duet, applause. Applause ends and we hear what she hears, which is the same as what SEPI heard: an outrageous ovation. But she does not soak up this ovation. She hears it, acknowledges it to herself, then discreetly brings it to an end. It's time for the next number. This is the final duet from *Carmen*, which we saw them rehearsing in previous scene. After a short introduction from IVOR, they begin singing. At first SEPI is professional, focused. The connection and the passion is strong between them. It is not hammy, but has a true ferocity, a nice contrast to the passionate love making of their *Boheme*. At one point IVOR doses off. MARIA pounds the piano to wake him, but she integrates it into the action of the scene so it passes unnoticed. Well... for the most part unnoticed. IVOR pops right back into his accompaniment. As they continue, SEPI begins to overact, at first subtly, then grossly. MARIA gives him her signal. He immediately dials back. But he cannot resist his passion, he once again starts overacting, mugging horribly. MARIA once again gives him the signal and, after a flash of resentment, he dials back to an absurdly small performance that he quickly shakes off to resume his mugging. IVOR begins to drift, MARIA pounds the piano to awaken him. They are now approaching the ending. SEPI has removed his mime knife and sings to it. MARIA looks worried. He moves towards her and she begins to back away. He pursues her slowly, menacingly around the piano. Not wanting him to plunge the knife into her, she retreats. Finally he grabs her about the waist and gets ready to plunge in the knife. Thinking fast she grabs his knife hand, draws his clenched fist to her lips and kisses the fist. She then, as he sings, slowly opens his fist, and draws it to her face, lovingly. It is a beautiful gesture, absurd in the context of the scene, but performed with such conviction that it somehow works. SEPI has a confused look on his face, briefly, but then goes with her and ends the scene in an embrace. Applause. SEPI shrugs it off, annoyed by the ending, but willing to absorb the fulsome applause. MARIA speaks to the audience.)

MARIA

“Ah, mio bambino caro.”

(Applause. SEPI steps to one side, giving MARIA the stage. She sings this final aria simply and sincerely. There is all the vocal wear and tear audible, but then she smiles radiantly and all the Maria magic is evident. She is a memory of herself, but enough is in place to make the memory bright. The aria ends and SEPI leads the applause. He kisses her and indicates for the audience to get quiet.)

SEPI

Today is a special day. Everyone: “Happy Birthday to you...”

(SEPI starts singing “Happy Birthday” to MARIA and gets the audience to join in.)

SEPI ET AL

Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday day, Maria,
Happy birthday to you.”

(MARIA is overwhelmed, tears in her eyes. The song ends, applause, the lights fade to black.)

Scene 3

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: It is after the performance. ARI stands near the piano, waiting. He crosses to it and plunks out “Mary had a little lamb...” and smiles at his joke.
SUZY enters.

SUZY

Ari.

ARI

Darling.

SUZY

I was surprised to see you here.

ARI

You always say that. When will you not be surprised to see me?

SUZY

When you’re dead.

ARI

I might be diminished, Suzy. But I’m not so small a bug that I can’t squash you if I feel like it.

SUZY

You’re sweating, Ari. If I know it, everyone knows it.

ARI

Then why don’t you write about it?

SUZY

I don't need to. It's all over the financial pages.

ARI

I've bounced back.

SUZY

You won't from this.

ARI

It's only money.

SUZY

That's not what I'm talking about. You're sweating from a lack of confidence. In you. Investors won't invest in a tomb.

ARI

You seem offended, Suzy. Did I offend you? Do you have a code of behavior I've breached? You?

SUZY

You were very cruel to me in Turin.

ARI

Don't make me laugh, Suzy.

(She moves away from him. He stares at her. She cannot return his look. SOL enters.)

SOL

Suzy. Darling. How are you, dear?

SUZY

Sol.

SOL

You're going to devastate us. Devastate us.

SUZY

I'm not a music critic, dear.

SOL

Bless you.

SUZY

I thought she looked spectacular. And so clever to sing with that ham Sepi. Made her look like Joan Sutherland. Note perfect.

SOL

Rip him to shreds. He hasn't read a paper since 1954. I think he's lost the ability to read.

SUZY

Good work, Sol. You've got a hit.

SOL

Her voice will get better. I know it.

SUZY

She's been off the stage eight years.

SOL

Yes, exactly.

(SEPI enters, all smiles. IVOR is behind him.)

SEPI

(Kissing her)

Suzy, mi cara.

SUZY

Sepi. Bravo. Bravissimo.

SEPI

Ari. Did you like it?

ARI

Good work, kid. You look like you had a good time.

SUZY

Like the old days.

SEPI

Ivor says I was flat. When? He won't tell me.

IVOR

All night.

SEPI

But when? I want to improve.

IVOR

You started singing at eight, we finished at ten. In there you were flat.

SEPI

But when was I not?

IVOR

“Happy Birthday” was nice. With three hundred people singing along you could stay on pitch.

SEPI

What are you saying?

IVOR

More choruses, more sing-along.

SEPI

He won’t tell me. What kind of feedback is that? Suzy, was I flat?

SUZY

Flat? I heard range in those arias I’d never had before.

SEPI

You see.

SUZY

Dynamism I didn’t think possible.

SEPI

Cara.

SUZY

You made Bizet sound like Wagner.

IVOR

Like Scott Joplin.

ARI

Schoenberg.

SUZY

The Beatles. You made him sound contemporary.

SEPI

Bella. People ask why I don’t read your column. I’ve already heard it.

(MARIA has entered. They turn and look at her. ARI starts clapping, the others join him.)

MARIA

Stop it. It will get better.

ARI

It can only get better.

SUZY

That's not why we're clapping. You were radiant.

MARIA

Thank you, Suzy.

SUZY

When you were young... when you were starting out, they liked you for your voice, now they like you for you.

MARIA

I will surprise them. Even tonight, as we continued, I felt my voice growing stronger, more reliable.

SEPI

I felt that too. You dragged me back on key, several times.

IVOR

Kicking and screaming.

SEPI

Kidder.

SOL

You did a very brave thing tonight, Maria. Very brave.

SEPI

She almost didn't come on stage. All week, she's been panicked, terrified.

SOL

Like a novice.

MARIA

It's such a relief. I think that's why I did it, to feel the magic of this moment.

SUZY

You feel good?

MARIA

I do. I know there is so much more to give, that I can sing so much better. But I wouldn't know that, I would have no idea of the challenge before me if I hadn't taken this first step. And I took it. Now I can grow, achieve new heights. I might even... well, way down the line, I might even return to the stage. L'Opera, La Scala, who knows, even the Met. Ponselle sang till she was 67. I have another twenty years in me.

(They all clap. She seems transformed.)

SEPI

Here we are standing around congratulating each other when there's a huge party to congratulate us on the roof.

SOL

Yes, I've paid for a party and I want my money's worth. Come along, Suzy. Maria, dear, you'll sing with Ivor, something light...

MARIA

Oh, Sol.

SOL

Some Gershwin. Porter. For me.

MARIA

Of course, let my hair down.

SOL

Thank you.

IVOR

Did you ask me if I'd play it? Does anybody ask if I'll play it?

SOL

Of course you will. It's in your contract. Opening night party.

ARI

Good night, Ivor.

IVOR

Good night, Ari. Try not to shoot me. I'm only the piano player.

SOL

(To ARI)

And I'm only the producer. I'm sorry for what I said. Earlier.

ARI

I've already forgotten it. Woops, I guess not.

SUZY

(To ARI)

I'm not sorry, for anything I've ever said to you.

ARI

You're a small woman, Suzy. It's too bad. A journalist should aspire to be big, to bring change. You settle for gossip. You'll never scare me.

SUZY

See you upstairs, Maria. Sepi.

SOL

I'll take her. Sepi is the man of the hour, Suzy, You can't expect him to escort you to his own party.

SUZY

Leave me alone.

(She stomps out in front of SOL, leaving him in her wake laughing awkwardly. It is an unfortunate exit.)

SEPI

Maria...

MARIA

Sepi. Don't say anything. Just...

SEPI

What?

MARIA

Before you go upstairs, phone your daughter. Tell her it went well. Tell her how handsome you were and how much the audience loved you.

SEPI

Can I tell her you're pleased?

MARIA

Of course, Sepi. And I am. Give her my love.

(He kisses her and then starts to leave.)

MARIA

Sepi. Thank you.

SEPI

Thank me?

MARIA

You brought me here, you made this happen. It was a glorious. A glorious gift, from you to me. Thank you.

(SEPI runs back to her, takes her in his arms.)

SEPI

Excuse me, Ari.

(He gives her a deep, loving kiss.)

SEPI

I love you, Divina.

MARIA

And you are a star, Sepi. There is none brighter. Not even me.

(He smiles, nods to ARI and runs off.)

ARI

That was quite a performance.

MARIA

You mean just now?

ARI

You have to keep them going, keep their spirits up. They know better but they have to ignore it.

MARIA

They'll keep coming, to see me. They won't get what they heard ten years ago, not even that. But they'll get me.

ARI

Like a freak show.

MARIA

I'm not a freak, Ari. I'm an artist. Once I was a singer, then I was lucky enough to be a singer-artist, now I have to settle for artist. Artifice. Style and substance over precision. It is enough. Churchill made a comeback. A final reign. It made people feel good . It

reminded them of a more civilized era. Their glory days. That's what I'll do. Remind them. I'll never sing the roles again. That was a fantasy. Make them think I was truly going to improve. The voice will get a little better with practice. But it will never be good enough to sing with an orchestra, on a stage. I wouldn't do that to the other artists. So long as it's me, Sepi, Ivor and the audience, this is ok. This is enough.

ARI

It's a pale shadow of what it was before.

MARIA

You never thought it was much to begin with.

ARI

I lied. It's the greatest voice of all time. The most character, the most power, the most precise. There'll never be another like it.

MARIA

Thank you, Ari.

ARI

I knew that tonight, listening to what it lost, hearing so much of what it lost, I knew it has lost so much. It made me sad.

MARIA

That is cruel of you, Ari. But you've always been cruel. You have also always been right.

ARI

It made me sad. Hearing what you lost reminded me of what I was losing, how hard I'm fighting not to get off the horse because I know how impossible it will be to get back on, as you tried to tonight.

MARIA

Ari, you can't get back on the horse. They'll leave you alone, eventually. They're not Sicilians, or Greeks. But you've got to stop. Alex was truly that, a warning. Take the hint and they'll stop.

ARI

He's my son.

MARIA

You never cared for him. You only cared for your vanity. Your pride.

ARI

Something's brewing. With Nixon. With the Chinese. There's some new nexus of control. They've got their fingers in everything, now there's détente and a cordiale with the Chinese. In five years they'll have control of everything, there'll be no more arms

race, no more sides. Just one big side. And all the rest of us. That's what they're warning me about. All of us. They're warning all of us who made a mark. They're telling us to behave ourselves.

MARIA

I think...I think you're right. When I first sang at the Met, 1954, America was ready for me. They wanted to prove they had culture, they were in competition with everyone, they wanted to show they could love opera, love me, love the old world and present better than the old world could. They needed me as proof.

ARI

And they tried to muscle me. Show me the new world order. But I wouldn't let them. I wouldn't lay down.

MARIA

Now they want to remember the old days. The days when they were young and brash and not quite sure of themselves. It's like a midlife crisis, they want to harken back to their days of innocence.

ARI

Now they can make me lay down. I wouldn't let them bight me, I bit back. Now it's like biting a steel bridge or a concrete foundation. I'll just break my teeth.

MARIA

You have to stop. It's wrong. It's immoral.

ARI

You know I don't believe in that. There are only Gods on earth. Here. And when we're dead, we're gone. There's no reward, there's no beyond.

MARIA

Then you should stop because if you continue it will eventually kill you. You know that.

ARI

Can you stop?

MARIA

It's not as dangerous.

ARI

Even more so. No one will kill you, but you'll kill yourself.

MARIA

Stop that talk.

ARI

You have such standards. You know the truth. You've tasted perfection, you've defined it. And you can only tolerate squalor so long before you truly start hating yourself.

MARIA

I've already started, Ari.

ARI

I knew you had. What you did tonight... it was... tacky.

MARIA

I knew it.

ARI

You kept falling off the horse and getting back on. It must have been exhausting.

MARIA

It was horrible.

ARI

Singing with that ham. You say you're doing it for him, you're doing it for yourself. You keep thinking some miracle will happen, lightening will strike, and the notes will come back to you. Poof! Like magic.

MARIA

They didn't tonight.

ARI

No. And the longer you keep up this tour, these engagements, the deeper you'll bury yourself. How many people did you embarrass yourself in front of tonight, how many people now have a tarnished memory of you? And every time you sing the number will grow, it will multiply. Eventually, there will be no one left who remembers anything about the way you were. You have to stop. Tonight. Right now.

MARIA

I can't.

ARI

Leave with me.

MARIA

With you?

ARI

We'll go back to Greece. We'll live on the Skorpions. We'll throw parties and get drunk and argue, and break up and get back together again, and live. We can write our memoirs.

We'll be glorious has-beens, washed-ups. But with Suzy behind us, feeding on our decline like a maggot, plus every tabloid journalist in the world, we'll be the most famous washed-ups on the planet.

MARIA

You're joking, You could never live that way.

ARI

I could. With someone like you, I could.

MARIA

What about money?

ARI

There's always money. You can direct, teach, judge competitions, shit you could act in movies, sell decaffeinated coffee and underwear on television, anything, Anything but sing, that's the only thing that will truly diminish you, diminish what you were. I can consult, make deals, be the face for other people's money. I've done my great work. We can sponge, live on our stories. Christ knows I've supported enough spongers in my life. I'm entitled to sponge a little back. A lot back. We can live off our past, like a couple of vampires, as opposed to letting other people live off it now, like vultures, taking a little bit of us until there's nothing. The vultures will eventually become sharks.

MARIA

You could never live that way.

ARI

You said I can't live the way I'm living, always trying to outdo myself, outdo my past. Just as you can't live this way.

MARIA

You're asking me to give up, admit defeat.

ARI

With me. Now maybe we can truly be together.

(She looks at him. Remembers something, something off-the-wall.)

MARIA

There was a night. Off Thessalonika. Do you remember this?

ARI

I think I do.

MARIA

You discovered bed bugs. In the cabin, in the bed.

ARI

Oh, God.

MARIA

After a glorious night of love, you had ravished me, ravished.

ARI

Yes, I remember.

MARIA

And we fell asleep, in each other's arms. And I thought to myself, "I have him. I have a Greek. Not only a Greek, but *the* Greek. The world's greatest Greek. A Zeus, a Prometheus, a Dionysus. And he loves me."

ARI

I did.

MARIA

And I lay there, basking in your arms, the greatest man on earth, and a respected singing career-

ARI

Respected? "The greatest man on earth and the greatest singer on earth." Come on say it.

MARIA

Very well.

ARI

Say it.

MARIA

The greatest man on earth and the greatest singer on earth.

ARI

Yes.

MARIA

I thought, "I have it all. What more could I ask?" And suddenly you bounded out of bed, threw on the light, tore back the bedding and shouted, "Bed bugs! Little vipers!"

ARI

Ugh. This story.

MARIA

And you started swatting the bed, smashing it with your hand. And I said, “Ari, Ari, for God’s sake calm down.” And you said:

ARI

(Remembering the story word-for-word)

“I spent half my life with bed bugs, vipers, and now they’re back. The richest man on earth and they found even me!”

(She laughs.)

ARI

Nice story.

MARIA

And I said-

ARI

Oh, no.

MARIA

I said, “Ari, for God’s sake we’ll change state rooms, have them fumigate this one, calm down.” And I reached for the bell.

ARI

And I grabbed your hand.

MARIA

Yes. And you said, “No. If the staff knows they’ll think I brought them on board with me. They’ll laugh at me. Just a Greek sheepherder at heart. All the money in the world but he still has bed bugs.”

ARI

Yes, yes, yes.

MARIA

So I said, “What will we do?” And you said, “*Raid*, I’ve heard of this thing called *Raid*.” And next morning we put on dark glasses, took the launch into town, and snuck around for an hour looking for *Raid*. I felt like I was on a secret mission. And you spent the rest of the day secretly spraying them.

ARI

Ok, funny story.

MARIA

And next morning Winston Churchill announced, in front of everyone, he announced:
“Aristotle-“

ARI

Wait, no, you have to do the voice.

MARIA

Oh, no.

ARI

Yes, please, you did it so well

MARIA

(Imitating Churchill)

“Aristotle! There’re bugs in my bed! This boat’s infested!” And you looked at him like you didn’t know what he was talking about. And he said, “Damn it, Ari, tonight I’m sleeping on my battleship.” And he took the launch to the *Rodney* and only came back on board for the parties. And you told the crew, as his launch puttered away, “Must have brought the filthy bugs with him. Fumigate the boat. And that’s the last Englishman who sleeps on this vessel.”

ARI

And it was.

MARIA

Except for Paul McCartney.

(They laugh, hold each other.)

MARIA

Ari.

ARI

Maria.

(They kiss.)

MARIA

I should get to the party.

ARI

Keep singing?

MARIA

I’ve loved you since the day I heard about you.

ARI

And I've loved you as much as a man like me can love a woman, one woman.

MARIA

I know.

ARI

But I guess neither of us can lay down, lay down and die.

MARIA

For me... For me it's best not to think about such things. Tomorrow I sing, beyond that...

ARI

You're saying the future is none of our business.

MARIA

For me.

ARI

Some create the future, some merely live it.

MARIA

And my future is upstairs, at the party. Will you come?

ARI

No.

MARIA

Be careful.

ARI

For me life is full of care. Not to worry.

(They kiss, a final time - tender, not passionate. She withdraws, smiles at him, and exits. He looks about the stage, feeling nothing, nothing for the artifice of performance. A man of action, he exits the arena of make believe. STAGE MANAGER enters and places the ghost light, turns it on and exits. The lights go black, leaving only the ghost light. After a moment it blacks out. End of Act Two. End of Play.)