

The Lady Onstage (working title)

by

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CHARACTERS (1F).

OLGA	30. The Moscow Art Theater actress.
MASHA	40. Chekhov's sister, and the keeper of his legacy.
MOTHER ON THE TRAIN	40's. A huge Knipper/Chekhov fan. Easily star-struck
CHEKHOV'S MOTHER	Late 60's, or older. Chekhov's mom.
THE EX-PAT	Early 60's. Russian, living in Paris.

SETTING

A sitting room, a study, a cafe, a kitchen table.

TIME

1902, with glimpses of 1906-1910-ish.

(Olga becomes the ex-pat, and paces.
She pauses.)

THE EX-PAT

A revolution
Loves
a secret.

.
It is
What
a revolution is built on.
Secrets.

.
I did not love that revolution, and I did not keep its
secrets.
So you understand why it is I live here.
Bienvenue a Paris.

(she stops pacing, comes closer.)

THE EX-PAT

I have seen Olga Knipper only once in the thirty-five
years since I left Moscow.
Would you like to know where?
She was just over there,

(begins to point, lowers her arm.)

THE EX-PAT

On second thought, it is better not to point.
I will go there, and then come back.

(She goes, gives a significant look,
comes back.)

THE EX-PAT

Did you mark the place?
That is where I saw her, while I was myself sitting-
Come, I will show you from where.
It is better not to point.

(She goes, sits. Gives a significant
look, comes back.)

THE EX-PAT

So you can see, from where I was, to where she was, a
direct line of sight.

I saw her,
and she saw me,
and I saw her see me, and in my excitement to greet a
beloved friend, I made a mistake.
Perhaps you already see my error?
Come. I will show you where I saw it for myself.

(She stands, walks towards the place
where she showed us Olga was sitting,
stops partway there to give a
significant look, and comes back.)

THE EX-PAT

It was very plain, for as I approached, my eyes on
hers, hers on mine, the moment I reached - you know
where - she averted her gaze. Like this,

(She demonstrates looking away.)

THE EX-PAT

And I knew she could not greet me.
She did not sit there freely.
Or alone.
Do you know why?
If you don't, I do not think I can explain it all,
there is so much to it.
There is so much to Her, I do not know if you can
understand it.
You were not there at the beginning.
You did not see her building the foundation of the
Moscow Art Theater,
Which in turn has become the foundation for the
theaters of Europe,
For the theaters of America.
She has inspired a Continent of artists. At least.
But by the time I saw her here, her theater was no
longer what it had been in the beginning.
Nothing like it at all.
It had become-
but I will not speak of that here.
I will only say,
I am very, very sorry you never had a chance to see
her before.
Or hear her.
We used to sing together, and in that moment I dreamed
we might share a song right there like we once did.

(She hums a piece of Bayushki Bayu)

(The Ex-pat finishes humming a piece of Bayushki Bayu)

THE EX-PAT

I would teach it to you, but-
It is better that we do not do it here.
To speak in a language is one thing, but to sing it?
That is when you must be the most careful.
Because,
To sing without showing your soul is not singing.
That
is just making noise.
And we must be careful where we show our souls.
Generally, I do not recommend it if you are Russian.
There is a problem we have.
When you are Russian, it is especially difficult to
hide the parts of yourself that get us into trouble.
This inability of ours to keep pieces of ourselves
hidden? It is, I believe, one of the reasons why she
is as great as she is.

.
Why they all are.

.
It is why our artists rise to the top, why they are
some of the greatest the world has ever seen.
What the country is now, we will not speak of.
But her people, her artists -
See them, if you can.
Soon.
I can speak of them, but until you see one fully
immersed in her art and ideals, until then you can not
understand.
You will only have words about an idea, but you will
miss everything of the experience itself.
And words, no matter how carefully chosen, are not an
experience.
It is being in the same room that changes you.
It is sitting there, and knowing that what is in front
of you is different.
That what you are seeing is a profound moment of
truth, in a place where profound truths will not be
allowed to last.

.
 I was here, and could not speak to her,
 But in that moment we communicated in quieter ways
 than words.
 Shall we drink to her?

(She pours out a shot of vodka, raises
 her glass, checks her surroundings. The
 ex-pat gives a whispered toast.)

THE EX-PAT

Za prav-du.
 To truth,

(She takes a sip, puts it down.)

(A quiet, empty room, full of the
 detritus of the actress: vases of
 flowers of various age, a desk with a
 pile of opened letters scattered about,
 a couch with piles of scripts on it,
 all marked up and dog-eared. Near the
 couch, a bottle of vodka, or two, half
 gone.)

(The sound of women's shoes coming
 quickly up the stairs. The door opens,
 and slams shut.)

(Olga leans against the closed door, so
 wrapped up in winter clothes you can
 barely see her nose. She catches her
 breath.)

OLGA

Good god, what a nightmare.
 I'm sorry to have kept you waiting,

(Olga deposits her outerwear on the
 couch.)

I couldn't bear to leave when I knew I was going to
 have to look every one of them in the eye, and hear
 their small talk, and pretend they weren't all trying
 to avoid talking about the fact that I was a disaster
 tonight.

So I shut myself up in your dressing room until
 everyone had left and I was alone with the scenery and
 the guards.

train-self, which she becomes again,
chugging toward her own photograph.)

And an Olga Knipper is blocking the track! She's going
weak! She won't move!

Stop the train! Emergency Break!

Too late!

Brace yourselves!

(She derails herself as the train, and
makes appropriate exploding sound
effects.)

(She laughs.)

Only that would have been more entertaining.

(She drinks.)

•
What was the point of the years of work we've put into
this, if I can still be
utterly and completely derailed by a moment of
absolute simplicity?

It is the simplest moment, and I never second guessed
a word.

(She picks up a much used script of *The
Cherry Orchard*, and finds the spot.)

I have half a mind to rip this page out of the damned
play.

(She laughs, and rips out the page. She
reads.)

Why did I go to town for breakfast?

That horrible restaurant of yours, the tablecloths
smelled like soap.

Why did we drink so much, Leon? Why did we eat so
much? Why did we talk so much? You kept talking so
much today about nothing. About the seventies, about
decadent art forms. Who was listening? Talking to the
waiter about decadent art!

(She stops. Shakes it out. Starts
again, this time trying to get in
character.)

OLGA AS RANEVSKAYA

Why did I go to town for breakfast?

That horrible restaurant of yours, the tablecloths
smelled like soap.

Why did we drink so much, Leon? Why did we eat so
much? Why did we talk so much? You kept talking so
much today about nothing.

(She doesn't like it, and stops. Tries again.)

OLGA AS RANEVSKAYA

Why did we drink so much, Leon? Why did we eat so much? Why did we talk so much?

(It's all wrong. She stops, goes to another part of the room and tries it in a different way.)

OLGA AS RANEVSKAYA

Why did I go to town for breakfast?
That horrible restaurant of yours,

(She hates it. Tries another tactic.)

OLGA AS RANEVSKAYA

Why did I go to town for breakfast?
That horrible restaurant of yours, the tablecloths
smelled like soap.
Why did we drink so much, Leon? Why did we-
(It's still all wrong.)

OLGA

Blyat!

(She tries again)

OLGA AS RANEVSKAYA

Why did we talk so much? You kept talking so much
today about nothing. About the seventies, about
decadent art forms.

(It's worse.)

OLGA AS RANEVSKAYA

About why Olga Knipper-Chekhova is a Suka actress with
no technique, who can't make something work sometimes
to save her life.

OLGA

Suka idiot actress!
Huy idiot writer!
Why can't he just explain himself!
Clarity!
For the love of god!

It's-

Blyat Suka!

.

There's no point.

I'm a failure.

I'm out of ideas.

.

My idea bank is as empty as this glass.

At least I can refill one of them,

(she pours more vodka, drinks.)

I am despairing.

This

Is despair.

My face, my hands, my eyes.

The way I hold this glass.

I can feel the despair weighing down my legs, and my back.

If only I had to perform despair, right now, I could do it perfectly.

A perfect truth.

Just sitting here.

Drinking.

Exuding despair in its stupidest, finest form.

(she laughs)

Maybe,

Maybe we should write the next play ourselves.

2 women,

Drinking vodka,

Exuding despair.

(she laughs)

You know what the men would say, if they were here.

Actually, I can tell you exactly what Anton's words would have been.

If I've already read this one to you before, indulge me and pretend you've never heard it.

(She pulls out a letter from Chekov that is in an easy to reach place, and reads it out loud in her best Chekhov impression)

OLGA AS CHEKHOV

Once and for all, you must stop worrying whether you will succeed or fail. Your job is to work, bit by bit, day in and day out, steadily, and to be ready for the mistakes and failures that will inevitably come.

Follow your instinct and let others get wrapped up in the competitions of success and failure.
 What is important at the beginning is to write or act and know that you are not yet doing it well enough.

(She laughs.)

OLGA

So, my dear writer, I am definitely not yet doing it well enough.
 I know I am not yet doing it well enough, so you will be pleased.
 Still, I apologize to you, dear writer, for ruining your words.

(She bows in apology to imaginary Chekhov)

OLGA

And to you, my teacher.

(She bows in apology to imaginary Nemerovich-Danchenko.)

OLGA

And to you, my director. For not yet doing it well enough.

(She bows in apology to imaginary Stanislavsky.)

(Olga grabs a hat or sock or some other nearby object, and turns it into a simple puppet as she jumps into an impression of Stanislavsky. It is a game she plays often. The puppet gives a moving speech.)

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

You will do it well enough.
 And you will get there.
 Remember - there are no small roles! Only small actors!

Today, Hamlet, tomorrow peasant #4, but even as
 peasant #12 you are an artist!
 Lateness!
 Laziness!
 Caprice!
 Hysterics!
 Ignorance of the role!
 They are all equally harmful, and must be rooted out!
 Do you know how long we discussed, how deeply we felt,
 how thoroughly we investigated every question before
 us before we began to begin?
 Well!
 I will tell you:
 The peace conference at Versailles did not consider the
 dilemmas of the world with the clarity and exactitude
 that we brought to the discussion of the foundation of
 this Great Enterprise:
 the Moscow!
 Art!
 Theatre!
 The questions we pondered were of the utmost
 importance.
 They were questions of pure art!
 Artistic ideals!
 Scenic ethics!
 Organizational plans!
 In short - everything.

(Olga quickly forms another puppet,
 operates it with her other hand. This
 one is Nemerovich-Danchenko. The 2nd
 puppet enters the scene.)

OLGA AS MOCK NEMEROVIC-D.

This is all true.
 You talked a Great Deal.

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

A great deal about Olga Knipper!

OLGA AS MOCK NEMEROVICH-D

That is true, a great deal about Olga Knipper.

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

And many others.
 Like actor A.

OLGA AS MOCK NEMEROVICH-D

Oh yes! I remember actor A.

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

We examined each other:

Tell me what you think of Actor A.

OLGA AS MOCK NEMEROVICH-D.

Actor A,

Do you consider him to be talented?

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

Very much so.

OLGA AS MOCK NEMEROVICH-D.

Shall we take him into the troupe?

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

Certainly not.

OLGA AS MOCK NEMEROVICH-D.

Why?

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

Because!

He has adapted his whole self to his career,
his talent to the whims of the public,
his personality to the whims of his manager,
and whatever is left to theatrical cheapness.
A man so ruined cannot be saved.

OLGA AS MOCK NEMEROVICH-D

And what about actress B.

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

Actress B?

She is decent, but won't do for us.
She does not love art.
What she loves is herself in art.

OLGA AS MOCK NEMEROVICH-D

I quite agree.

(beat. The puppets think.)

OLGA AS MOCK NEMEROVICH-D

What of Olga Knipper?

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

Olga Knipper!

(the puppets examine Olga.)

OLGA AS MOCK STANISLAVSKY

Yes.

Yes, we must pay a great deal of attention to her.
She has ideals for which she is fighting.
She is a woman of her ideals.

(Stanislavsky puppet gives a nod of approval. Nemerovich-Danchenko gives a nod back, and begins to carefully and meticulously add Olga to an imaginary list.)

OLGA

When I was in your dressing room tonight, waiting for everyone to leave, I was thinking about choices. Big choices, life choices. To be or not be. To act, or not act. I was thinking about Anton, about the choice to be married and not married at the same time. And maybe that's why our being married never made sense to some people. Because some days, I was The Actress. And some days, I was The Actress Wife. Most days, it was just The Actress. Who wrote long letters, and did nothing to take care of her husband.

.

(she laughs)

Yes, I was the perfect sometimes wife. All fun when I was there, all conveniently quiet as soon as I left. But it did feel like an impossible opposite:
Absent Wife.
The Absent Wife isn't usually a thing.
The Absent Husband, that's a thing.
Absent Husband
Absent Father
Absent Brother
Absent Son, novels are built on them.
All gone to war, or gone to sea, or off on some adventure that will make him a hero.

But the Absent Wife!

She isn't a category of hero.

She isn't a category at all, she's just:

Gone.

Gone, gone, gone.

And because she is, everyone thinks nothing but the worst of her.

.

But really, I am very lucky.

Because I had love,

I had Anton,

And I also had the theater.

Anton And the theater.

Wife And Actress.

And why not? I never needed it to be an Or, and Anton didn't need it be either.

Writer And Husband worked just fine for him, nobody ever wondered why he never made it an Or.

Can you imagine?

"Anton, now that you are a husband, don't you think it's time that you stopped this whole writing thing?"

(She laughs)

No, of course he never heard that.

But how many times do you think I heard "Now that you are a wife, don't you think it's time to give up this acting thing?"

They should be grateful.

Look at all the wonderful letters Anton left because we never gave up the And for an Or.

(Olga folds the letter she took out,
and opens the drawers packed with
letters.)

(Olga becomes Masha.)

MASHA

You see?

My brother kept every letter that was ever written to him in here. This drawer for personal correspondence, this one over here for business.

(She closes the first drawer, and opens