

THE GREAT IMPRESARIO BORIS
LERMONTOV WOULD LIKE TO INVITE YOU
TO DINNER

a play
by
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CHARACTERS

LERMONTOV/ACTOR L: Art above people, craft always. Lermontov is a cis white man. *The actor who plays Lermontov is NOT.*

NOA/ACTOR N: There's got to be a better way, but for now they're just trying to keep this job. According to Lermontov they "don't have the right shape" for ballet. *The actor who plays Noa is likewise not a cis white man. Noa's pronouns can change to reflect the actor's pronouns.*

SETTING

PLACE: Right here and also Lermontov's workspace - it definitely has a record player, bookshelf, table and chairs. Perhaps also: a reading lamp, a leather-bound diary, photos of famous attendees and collaborators (signed) in silver frames, a grand piano.

TIME: Right now and also the late 1940s/early 1950s

PLAYWRIGHTS' NOTES

CONTENT WARNINGS

Mentions of a former death (Victoria Page in *The Red Shoes*)
Brief mention of pressure to lose weight, being the “wrong shape”
Oppressive and occasionally threatening workplace conditions

PUNCTUATION & PRONUNCIATION

A slash (“/”) mid sentence or word in dialogue indicates the next line interrupting

M. as in “M. Lermontov” stands in for the French “Monsieur,” pronounced somewhat like muh-syoo. [Video](#).

The “p” in “princep” isn’t a typo.

CASTING & CHARACTERS

My plays do not live in an unrealistic land of all thin, abled, cis and gender-binary white people. Populate **BOTH** the stage and production team with people historically excluded from your theatre and/or your region’s theatre at large. I **WILL** follow up with you about this if you produce my plays.

The actors in this piece are always the actors and, sometimes, also the characters. Whenever possible, let the audience in on the joke, make them aware of the real and not real coexisting. When they are actors only their names are “Actor N” or “Actor L,” when the character names “Noa” and “Lermontov” are used, they are playing the characters. The difference between actor and character should feel distinct and clear to the audience, but not in a cartoonish way.

Ballet in this piece is about style and aesthetic, not technical skill. Do not be fooled into thinking “this is a ballet” means you must (or even should!) cast based on technical skill or perceived ability. A good actor can portray this aesthetic regardless of training, familiarity, body type, etc etc.

THANKS

Many thanks to Joan Cummins, development dramaturg for *Lermontov* and pal, who after reading the first draft reached out to ask “how do you feel about the actors switching places every show? Maybe they even flip a coin at the beginning.”

I also am so grateful for my dear friends and colleagues Caroline Dubberly, Tashina Richardson, Joshleigh Rowe, Toni Rae Salmi, and Ezra Tozian for gathering for an early reading and offering their valuable input, feedback, and support.

WELCOME TO THE PLAY

(Let these stage directions be A Scene.

Give them space.

The scene:

A “closeup” of the IMPRESARIO in sunglasses and a hat. We see only this. Perhaps this is an image of Boris Lermontov as played by Anton Walbrook, perhaps this is an image of a person in theatre leadership in a mustache and sunglasses and hat, or perhaps this is just a Mustache, a pair of Sunglasses, and a Hat.

*And then somewhere:
a curtain opens.*

We are in a study/office.

It looks lovely and comfortable, but we’re aware it is, conceptually, a facade - something makes this feel presentational.

A small table for dining with one chair upstage facing the audience. Perhaps there is another chair facing away from the audience, perhaps not.

A record player - ideally an ostentatious phonograph.

A bookshelf, overflowing but orderly.

And then:

Mustache, Sunglasses, and Hat move forward and perform a small dance together. It is magical and also off-putting, indication of a frightening life of their own.

They move aside and settle and then:

The two ACTORS enter. The ACTORS acknowledge each other, and the audience. The ACTORS recognize the Mustache, Sunglasses, and Hat and for a moment they both question - were the props there before? Did someone move the props? Did the props move themselves?

The ACTORS meet together, and determine who will play LERMONTOV and who will play NOA this performance. This may be a coin toss, rock/paper/scissors, or something else quick and recognizable to most audience members. This is a true moment of chance.

*Once the parts are decided:
They finish getting ready for the show - checking a prop, adjusting costumes, drinking water out of water bottles, etc etc etc. Give them time and space to prepare as much as they need to.*

Finally the ACTOR playing LERMONTOV goes to put on Mustache, Sunglasses, and Hat. The ACTOR playing NOA feels uncertain about it. They consider holding ACTOR who is not yet LERMONTOV back.

*But they are both getting paid.
And it's time for the show to begin.*

They help the ACTOR becoming LERMONTOV become LERMONTOV.

There is an acknowledgement before the final becoming.)

ACTOR PLAYING NOA
Are you comfortable?

ACTOR PLAYING LERMONTOV

Are you comfortable?

ACTOR N

Will you be okay?

ACTOR L

Yeah, I'll be great, this'll be great.

I can handle this.

I want this.

...I know / can do it.

ACTOR N

Okay...

ACTOR L

And, hey, you'll be here.

If

if I need you.

Right?

ACTOR N

I'll be here.

Just like you've been there for me.

I promise I'll be here.

I promise.

(Now the ACTOR playing NOA likewise puts on the dressings of NOA. This might be a blazer, a pencil behind an ear, dressing the part of the assistant. Perhaps there's some indication of their interest in ballet specifically. Perhaps they tie an apron over their fit.

A final acknowledgement.

A moment of frightening magic - the becoming.

*NOA nods or bows at LERMONTOV and exits.
LERMONTOV turns to the audience.)*

WELCOME TO DINNER

LERMONTOV

Are you comfortable?

Not... internally speaking, of course.

Can one ever find comfort with the internal self,
the goblin with the wheel?

I suppose being here at all feels a little
strange.

It's not often the everyday person,
the layman, the...

I'm so sorry, I'm being rude.

I just mean...

Well, you must not have expected to be here tonight.

Here here at least.

Perhaps you considered eating dinner out,
perhaps some polite conversation with an acquaintance,
but with a person such as myself?

I imagine not.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry

I'm still being rude, I'm aware.

You'll have to forgive me - it's an artist's nature to make stories for others.

A visionary's curse - I must fight my assumptions!

I'm sure you have long been friends with someone / would admire.

Perhaps...

Are you comfortable? The chairs are, they seem a little...

this one serves me fine, but I've never tried any of the others.

My apologies, again, for the coffee mishap this morning.

It's a...

difficult

anniversary for me.

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

I felt certain I'd grabbed the right cup, but clearly...

Ah. It is how it is, truly.

My reaction, clearly, outsized.

Unnecessary.

One might say I lashed out.

When they told me who you were...

well, it doesn't matter!

It was rude, whoever you were.

But a grieving man, well,

you understand, I'm certain - grief.

What person doesn't?

Some

I'm sure some

have avoided the more overwhelming of losses,

but truly even the smallest princep,

both parents intact and doting,

has broken a favorite toy.

*(LERMONTOV begins moving about the room
and deposits his glasses somewhere.)*

LERMONTOV

If you'd prefer to move about, please feel free.

I will at least. Never been one to stay still.

Do you like the room?

It's a favorite of mine.

Outside of travel, touring, of course, I spend most of my time here.

I believe this to be the best room in the whole world.

Perhaps followed closely by the theatre, the stage, the audience.

But this, *this* is where the work happens.

This is where My Work, which is The Work, happens.

Perhaps you've seen one of my ballets before?

Actually don't answer that, I beg you, I'd rather not know.

I'd love to invite you to our next ballet. I can hold tickets at the office.

If you're interested, of course.

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

Don't tell me, though.

Just pick them up or don't.

I won't mind.

Perhaps... well,

one of my colleagues...

ah...

One of my colleagues informed me you're looking for new

ah

new investments. New enterprises.

I'm not usually the one to broach such topics, forgive me.

I prefer to focus on The Work.

Let The Work speak for itself.

And does it, does it ever.

We are leading the way, not just in Monte Carlo, London, but across the world.

People look to us for innovation, for dedication, for lessons on how to live, even!

People need art, and need ballet. They need My ballet.

You're not...

you're not a dancer yourself, are you?

No secret nieces desperate to join a company?

Oh, I don't need to know, forgive me asking, I...

I often deal with dancers hoping to sneak their way into the ensemble through a social connection with me.

I couldn't bear another.

After the last...

The last time someone used a social function to try and
trick

me into surveying an aspiring ballerina was...

Well. Long enough ago.

It worked, too.

And...

I suppose

I cared for her.

And now she's gone.

But I'm here.

Dedicated.

Would you like a drink? I'd like a drink.

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)
Ah... (*towards O.S.*)
Hello?
...hello?
Uh... Assistant?

(*NOA enters.*)

NOA
Yes, M. Lermontov?

LERMONTOV
Why don't you introduce yourself to our guest?

NOA
Uh, hello. Welcome.
I'm Lermontov's current assistant
and... server, I guess.

LERMONTOV (*trying to remain casual, jovial*)
I meant by name, of course!

NOA
...I'm No/a

LERMONTOV
Noa! Of course. My assistant Noa.
While you're here, could you bring us some drinks, please?

NOA
What sort of drinks would you like?

(*A moment of confusion.*
Is this in the script?
It must be, right?
It's right here, printed on the page, isn't it?)

LERMONTOV
Oh. Whatever's... back there, I suppose.

NOA

Yes, M. Lermontov.

LERMONTOV

Or! Actually! The... the oldest bottle!

NOA

The oldest... bottle... sir?

LERMONTOV

You know!

NOA

I do?

LERMONTOV (*jokingly*)

Oh stop looking at me like that

ha ha

the oldest bottle!

NOA

Yes, M. Lermontov.

(NOA exits as LERMONTOV continues.)

LERMONTOV

This assistant was a dancer as well, of course.

Not a...

great fit

for the ensemble, but they do love to be about the ballet -

the job's perfect for them.

Free tickets to all shows and such.

They're privy to the inner mechanisms of the creative minds of each piece.

And we're very lucky to have them, of course!

Like all the staff

essential

they're absolutely essential

And they...

love

to ask questions. Very...

Curious.

(NOA enters with two full glasses of champagne and the bottle.)

NOA
Will this do?

LERMONTOV
Ah, yes! The champagne, just as I asked.

NOA
Of course, M. Lermontov.

(LERMONTOV takes a glass.)

LERMONTOV
Ahem. Yes. Well. Cheers!

NOA
Cheers.

LERMONTOV
I didn't mean...
well, nevermind.
Thank you!

(NOA deposits the second glass and bottle on the table and waits.)

LERMONTOV
Working here is like running a carnival, a circus, you can imagine, I'm sure.

NOA
Oh really, sir?

LERMONTOV
Yes. Well. Uh.
Well someone's got to do it!
And it seems I am the only one capable.

NOA
Really, sir?

LERMONTOV
Oh... no!
No
Not at all. An
Ah
An exaggeration, clearly.
I couldn't do it without people such as...

NOA
No/a

LERMONTOV
Noa!
An essential part of being a good
an excellent
impresario is hiring the right people, of course.
Which I do.
When they're available.
It is occasionally difficult to get enough people to show up for interviews.
Enough...
you know...
different people.
There have been complaints
FAIR! Complaints!
But it's easy to complain when you aren't aware of the
inner mechanisms
the turning of the machine
the gears and cogs
don't you think?

NOA
Have you tried telling them?
Being transparent about your hiring process?
I don't even know how it works -
you just brought me in one day and told me to pour drinks,

I didn't even get an orientation.

LERMONTOV

Well... thank you for that
perspective,

Noa.

We should have a more consistent system for hiring
I've long said it!

But it's about finding the Right System
you know

one that takes into account
skills

background

diversity, of course

but also cultural fit

and talent.

Ballet is such a precise machine, you know.

NOA

Perhaps there's room for people who don't fit
your

idea of ballet, though.

Maybe they could make our system stronger?

LERMONTOV

Don't you have something to do?

ACTOR N

Don't we?

...This isn't going to succeed if we don't work together.

ACTOR L

I know

I...

yes, I know.

Okay. Should I...?

ACTOR N

Go ahead.

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

Would you
could you
set the table.
Please?

NOA

Of course, M. Lermontov.

LERMONTOV

Thank you,
I do appreciate it.

(NOA exits.)

LERMONTOV

You see what I mean.

(NOA begins setting the table, entering and exiting with tableware.

*A long, awkward moment as this happens.
LERMONTOV sips on the champagne. He isn't
sure how to speak with his guest[s].)*

LERMONTOV

I'll put some music on!

*(He makes a movement towards the record
player, then, while passing the bookshelf:)*

LERMONTOV

Or actually...
how about a story?
Do you like stories?
Oh who doesn't, right?
I've been reading
I've been studying some work,
some...
some pre-existing IP,

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

if you will,

for a potential piece.

I'd love to share it with you.

Or actually.

Well, you just must promise not to tell anyone.

This will be a secret just between us until the ballet is up.

Alright?

Alright, let's see.

*(LERMONTOV searches through his
bookshelf. A very physical search of some sort.*

He can't find the book.

He grows desperate and embarrassed.

He grows more desperate,

books toss and books tumble,

his HAT falls off.

*And at some point LERMONTOV is ACTOR L
again - why didn't I check the prop before we
started?? Did someone touch my prop???*

*NOA enters with the book and hands it to
LERMONTOV.)*

LERMONTOV

Why! Why did you take it?!

NOA

I didn't, M. Lermontov.

LERMONTOV

Then whyever do you have it!

Is this a ploy?!

ACTOR N

You left it in the other room.

...I would never move it.

(Realization:)

LERMONTOV
Ah. Thank you.

NOA
You're very welcome.

LERMONTOV
Ahem.

(They stare at each other - a long moment.)

ACTOR N
Are you
sure
you can handle this?

ACTOR L
I'm fine!

ACTOR N
Will I be?

ACTOR L *(genuinely)*
Of course! I wouldn't...
I didn't mean to...
Of course.
I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.
The moment just...
It gets away from me sometimes.
I'm trying. I'll fix it.
I promise...

ACTOR N
Okay.

ACTOR L
I'm sorry, I have to... you know

ACTOR N

Go ahead.

(NOA returns to setting the table.)

LERMONTOV

As you can see, this kind of work takes everyone.
All types.
We're...
we're very proud of all the people working with us.

ACTOR N

You mean, the circus animals?

LERMONTOV

I. Didn't. Say. That.
I would never
say
that!

NOA

Of course not, M. Lermontov.
Forgive me.
A bad joke.

LERMONTOV

Ah. Ha. Of course. I didn't know...
I didn't know you were such a...
humorist.

NOA

I only dabble, sir.

LERMONTOV *(to the audience)*

I meant to tell you a story. I appreciate your patience.
Now.
The story.
Once
there was a person who wanted to be something else for someone else.

(Lights shift.)

*There is a person who wants to be something
else for someone else - does NOA play them?
This is probably not a ballet.
In fact there's not much movement at all.
Instead there's a stillness.
A settling into the tragedy of a story.
A refusal to indicate it simply for the audience.
Lights shifting across a face.
Maybe that is a ballet.)*

LERMONTOV

A person who so desperately wanted someone else, they turned their back on what they knew and who they were. They sought out a witch to transform them into something else, something the person they wanted might like.

The witch agreed but with conditions:
they could no longer do the thing they loved most.
And they could never return.
And if it didn't work out, they...
they die.

And they agreed!
Quickly and without much thought, I might add.
Didn't take much time,
didn't make a pros and cons list,
didn't discuss it with any other *interested parties*,
didn't get some opinions or input first, just jumped in, one minute they're dedicated to their craft, the next oh who cares I've got someone to chase after.

(Ahem.)

LERMONTOV

Ah. Quite right.
Ahem.
So they agreed
and traded their voice for a new pair of legs.
But when the person they obsessed over finds them...
he doesn't even know them.
And they can't communicate except through
except through dance.

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

And every time they dance it's like daggers being stabbed through the bottoms of their feet.

But he likes their dancing.

So they dance.

They dance and dance and dance.

And then he marries someone else and they even dance for him and his new wife at his fucking wedding.

Then:

just as they've resigned themselves to death,

their siblings come out of the ocean with a dagger from the witch.

And if they just take the dagger and kill the person they love,

who doesn't truly love them,

who doesn't truly know them,

his blood will turn their feet back to fins and they'll live.

So they take the dagger.

They creep through the hallways,

needles, blades through their heels with every step,

and they stand over him and his new bride...

And they can't do it.

So they throw themselves...

they

they throw themselves

into the ocean.

(Quickly:)

LERMONTOV

And they turn to sea foam, and then to a spirit, and then there's some bits about doing good and getting to go to heaven in, oh, 300 years or so.

(Shift back - pre-story mood.)

LERMONTOV

Wouldn't that be a marvelous ballet?

NOA

The Little Mermaid?
Hasn't it been done? They even had that musical.
What / if we did a piece

LERMONTOV

A *musical* couldn't compare to what I have in my head, in my soul!

(Referencing the audience:)

Look - they love it! They think it's an excellent idea! We'll start pre-production next week!

Yes it's the Little Mermaid,
yes it's been done before,
but I feel as though I truly understand this tale, better, absolutely better, than all the rest.
I *know* the Little Mermaid
I've *been* the Little Mermaid
I've felt the daggers piercing my soles,
my soul!!
What do they have to compare with my knowledge and experience?
I am particularly suited to tell a story of sorrow,
pain,
grief,
transformation...

NOA

Love?

LERMONTOV

Love.
Ugh.
Love destroys all.
It should be outlawed.

NOA

We know plenty of people who've found meaningful love in some way.
Even... almost... perhaps you, I think.

LERMONTOV

No! They have found pain masquerading as adoration!

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

Interpersonal love is to me a harbinger of doom.
The performer who finds love has only two routes -
if it works out they grow complacent,
joyful in those happy little moments of nothingness,
and suddenly their love is a priority over their performance,
can you imagine?
And if it doesn't they become a wretched thing,
practically inconsolable,
until you drive them, *inspire* them,
to use the pain for the Performance.
And even then...
even then they might....

No! Love is nonnegotiable for the performer!

I must
please excuse me
but for a moment - assistant!

*(NOA's still here.
Maybe their response startles LERMONTOV)*

NOA
Yes, M. Lermontov?

LERMONTOV
Take care of the guest

NOA
Yes, sir.

*(LERMONTOV exits, distraught. NOA looks
about.)*

NOA
Outside of eating and listening to M. Lermontov, there's not much to do in this room...
Not much
to do
for me

NOA (*cont'd*)

or for you...

I wish...

I wish he would listen more, you know?

I like to think I have some good ideas.

And he's he's not

great

at receiving them.

Oh god pleasepleaseplease don't tell him I said that

Uh

How about...

(NOA decides to put on a record.

LERMONTOV's voice plays and, in response, the place settings - cutlery, plates, placemats, drinking glasses - begin to perform a ballet.

NOA is curious at first, then grows more and more distraught as it continues.)

RECORD

In fact, the performer is much like the place setting. Each, a thing of beauty, meant to show off, brought out for the honored guests, for the paying audience. Each, also, a thing of function, meant to be used.

Both, also, vehicles for sustenance. The silverware brings food to our lips, the performer brings meaning to our souls.

But we do not concern ourselves with the interpersonal life of the place setting. We admire it, we ask the guest their opinion, and we use it to feed ourselves. Likewise I remove myself from the performer. We should remove ourselves from the performer. We admire the performer, we tell the reviewers how perfect they are, and we use them to feed ourselves.

The only relationship we should have with the performer is the same as the server to the silverware. We use all the tools at our disposal to polish them until they gleam, until any small scratch has disappeared, until they are absolutely smooth, until they are the perfect tools

(ACTOR N screams in terror - or perhaps just turns to the audience, their face in a state of overwhelming horror - and swiftly exits the room.)

The place settings fall to the table in a clatter, the record stops playing LERMONTOV's voice.

LERMONTOV reenters, a newspaper under his arm.)

LERMONTOV

What the devil is happening here?

Oh, what a mess.

How disastrous.

Did you?

Were you playing with the...

Doesn't matter. You're my guest,
my honored guest.

Assistant!

(NOA comes back. They seem fine?)

NOA

Yes, M. Lermontov?

LERMONTOV

Could you help clean this up?

...please?

NOA

Yes, M. Lermontov.

(NOA begins resetting the table, wincing each time they move a piece of the table setting.)

LERMONTOV begins to unfold the newspaper.)

NOA
Is that...

LERMONTOV
Jean-Pierre's review of the new ballet, yes!

(NOA is concerned.)

NOA
Oh... before...
Sir
before you read it...
Some of the
staff
have been chatting

LERMONTOV
Who? Who's been "chatting"

NOA
Just... some of
ussomeofthestaff

LERMONTOV
And what about?

NOA
We
Some people, I mean
No
No, I mean we
we were thinking...
The company's been a little
well, we're a little short-staffed.
We're still doing *The Red Shoes*
without... a principal dancer.
And now this new piece.
And the stagehands have been

LERMONTOV

Are they complaining?
The stagehands?
What's their problem?

NOA

No! Oh, no, they're not...
they're not *complaining*
but it's... well, it's been difficult on all of us.
You cut
or... the ballet cut half the staff in London.
We've all been working long hours,
longer hours.
And the travel, you know.
I mean, I
I alone am assisting you, handling press requests, setting up events, helping builds,
serving you dinner, and managing the *corps*
I assume I'll be dance notator for *The Little Mermaid* too?

LERMONTOV

What about the dance notator from last season?

NOA

Oh.
Uh, they had to quit.

LERMONTOV

Had to?

NOA

They... yes, they had to quit.

LERMONTOV

And you're managing the artists??
That can't be right, where's Claude?

NOA

You let her go, M. Lermontov.

LERMONTOV

Ah. Oh, yes, I remember.
With the...

NOA

With everyone you let go in London, yes.

LERMONTOV

Are you, I can't remember, my apologies,
are you qualified to manage artists?

NOA

I mean, no, definitely not, I
do not
feel qualified to do that.

LERMONTOV

Hmm. Why don't you run that management by me moving forward?

NOA

By you? Just... all of the *corps* management?

LERMONTOV

Yes. Add another meeting to the schedule.

NOA

Okay. I'll do that.
Uh. So anyways
we also haven't replaced the music director after...
uh
after *The Red Shoes*...
Do you have someone in mind for *The Little Mermaid*?

LERMONTOV

I don't want to talk about music directors.

NOA

Sure. Okay, fine.
My point is...
Our point is...

NOA (*cont'd*)

What if we...

What if we took a slightly longer off-season break?

Maybe did one less show? Give...

The Little Mermaid...

room to breathe a little.

For you to think on it some more.

For us to hire some... *really* necessary roles.

And for everyone to get a break. To rest.

I mean, people are falling asleep in the wings.

LERMONTOV

Who's falling asleep in the wings?

That's dangerous!

NOA

I know. I know, just... people.

They're not being lazy, they're exhausted.

LERMONTOV

Well

thank you

all

for that perspective.

If the roles were necessary, I wouldn't have let people go. I understand maybe, balancing feels difficult for some people, but I know if I can do my job in the time allotted, you all can do yours!

I *believe* in you!

As for cancelling / *The Little Mermaid*

NOA

Not cancelling!

LERMONTOV

As for rescheduling *The Little Mermaid* -

I can't *wait*. If I wait it may be too late!

Our funders won't be happy if someone else does a piece like this *first*, you know.

But I...

I do sympathize with having difficulty finding rest time.

And it's *very* important for me to support you all.

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

Perhaps a compromise?

A compromise!

Hmmm...

We'll move pre-production back by another week! That'll give us room to finish up our current run, and a couple of free days before the start of *The Little Mermaid*.

Hell, maybe I'll even take a few days off, go on a trip!

I'm glad we figured this out!

*(LERMONTOV is clearly expecting a response.
Finally NOA says:)*

NOA

...Thank you... M. Lermontov.

LERMONTOV

You're *all* very welcome

Perhaps I'll even set up a listening tour
have a chat with each department,
practice some radical empathy.

NOA

What do...

what do

you

mean when you say radical empathy?

LERMONTOV

Well, you know...

empathy...

...

...

...

...that's radical remind you all how

Valid

you are. Etc etc.

Now if you please

I'm looking for Jean-Pierre's review

(NOA finishes the table setting as quickly as they can and exits when possible.)

LERMONTOV continues unfolding the newspaper while speaking, searching for the review. As he does the paper grows and grows in size, until it's at least as big as him. Ideally it begins to take up the whole performance space.)

LERMONTOV

You'll forgive me
I hope
for this bit of self-indulgence before dinner.
Jean-Pierre is the only reviewer I trust these days.
The others are absolute bores,
tedious and lacking in skill,
knowledge,
basic curiosity.
They have no interest or understanding of the context of the work.
"It was quite pretty, a lovely night out."
Drivel.
Good for selling tickets and terrible for the craft.
But Jean-Pierre
ah
Jean-Pierre always understands my perspective,
can always read through the form and content and aesthetic
peers into the very soul of the work.
Jean-Pierre's an absolute gift... Ah! Here it is!
Perhaps it'll inspire you to see the ballet!

(LERMONTOV begins to read, muttering some of the phrases. He slowly begins to realize it is not a good review. In fact, it is scathing.)

LERMONTOV

"Designers' skill...
as always...
choreography... choreography...
complicated... but... no heart..."

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

ever since the loss of prima ballerina--complete disregard for loss and... grief...
boastful and blase...
in such a short time we have seen the rise and fall of the impresario...
Lermon..."

*(LERMONTOV throws the paper to the ground
and begins to trample it or roll over it or destroy
it with the chair or whatever else makes sense.
As he tramples he speaks.*

This IS a ballet.

*Perhaps NOA enters, curious about what's
happening, and quickly exits.)*

LERMONTOV

The!
hack!
The absolute hack!
The nerve!
A person who's never made a thing in their life,
never
never
fathered a creation!
Only judged others,
what!
can!
they!
know!
Boastful and blase, my... my ass!
Jean-Pierre is boastful and blase!
Jean-Pierre knows nothing!
We've sold more tickets than ever before
I'll have you know
we had to add performance nights!
Rise and fall,
rise!
and!
fall!!!

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

How dare you!
No one reads papers anymore anyways!
Trying to keep your! job! I see!
Trying to remain relevant by lambasting
by unfairly lambasting
by literally!
literally!!!
attacking me!
With this missive, this missile!
This drivell! You hack!!

(A few more attacks on the paper.

*LERMONTOV stops, the exertion showing in
his body.
He adjusts his clothing, his hair, his mustache.*

*He comes back to the table and sits, calmly.
Perhaps he lights a cigarette or drinks
champagne.
Perhaps he cleans his nails.*

The picture of having-it-togetherness.)

LERMONTOV

There are plenty of things I don't like about myself...
I wasn't always so dashing, you know.
So in charge, so admirable.

As a child I was a gifted student.
It pains me to say this experience drastically changed my life moving forward.
Looking at the children playing along the street as I trudged to school,
I always yearned for how well-liked,
how carefree they were.
Unbeknownst to them, all the tragedies in the world fell on my shoulders through years
of studying, through years of being told how clever I was.
Oh it was abominable!
The intolerable burden!

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

But I pulled myself up!
I worked and worked to get to where I am.
While others stole ideas
the same pieces produced over and over again on every stage
I paved a new path.
I created new work, all on my own.
I discovered the composers, the designers, the dancers.

I. built. this.
I built this by myself!
I Alone Built This
It Is My Success

I refuse to take it easy, to be less hard-working.
I am a perfectionist and I expect no less from every person who works for me.
I don't ask anything of them I wouldn't do myself.
I push us!
I make us better.
We are more popular than ever,
more tickets sold during this run than...
well, you...
I suppose you heard.

But I do...
But there are things I don't like about myself.

Sometimes...
sometimes when I'm sitting in the box watching a piece...
you know,
people keep looking to me,
offering a little wave,
trying to catch my attention,
and I feel so big

...and I feel so small.

I'm very grateful for what I have.
I'm white.
I'm cis.

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

I'm a man.

I'm...

(Perhaps to someone off-stage:)

LERMONTOV

straight?

I think I'm straight, am I straight?

...It seems likely I'm straight.

I know how this seems

I know I've had opportunities.

And I know I need to step back when it comes to issues that don't pertain to me, let others manage those...

things.

I know it's not my responsibility...

Uh. Place. I know it's not my place.

I make space when others need to express themselves.

I value everyone at my company!

I am grateful for what we have,

what I've been able to build.

But, yes, there are things I don't like about myself...

...Sometimes when I'm in my drawing room...

Sometimes when I'm in my drawing room

I look at the broken mirror over the mantle.

The mirror I broke.

And I think...

and I think of the dancer I lost.

And as I stare at my reflection,

broken and separated by the cracks in the glass,

I wonder...

if I could transform myself,

who would I be?

...Does it have to be this way?

But this is the way it is, I suppose.

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

I'm the one who makes the decisions.

And I *do* know what's best for the company, after all.

But there are things I don't like about myself.

(He sits for a long moment, finishing whatever he was doing. And then:)

LERMONTOV

Server!

(NOA enters.)

NOA

Yes, M. Lermontov?

LERMONTOV

Are there...

Have any other...

NOA

Would you like me to bring you the other reviews?

LERMONTOV

Yes.

NOA

Alright.

(NOA exits and reenters with a few other papers. These do not get bigger as LERMONTOV looks through them.)

NOA looks at the trampled paper on the floor as LERMONTOV reads.)

LERMONTOV

Ah, yes.

Yes!

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

They get it.

They understand the vision.

NOA

Of course they do, sir.

Should I...?

(NOA gestures at the paper on the ground.)

LERMONTOV

Hmm?

Oh yes, get that up.

Make sure to recycle it.

NOA

...Of course.

*(They clean up the paper and exit.
LERMONTOV keeps reading.)*

LERMONTOV

These reviews are much better.

Well done. Class acts.

"Lermontov has done it again!"

Did you say you had been to one of my ballets before?

Actually, no,

don't tell me, I don't want to know.

I'd love for you to come to this one.

I'll hold some tickets for you at the box office.

Do you regularly attend live performances?

Ah, actually I'd prefer not to know that either.

It really doesn't matter how often.

Everyone should attend more, in my opinion.

Art, ballet,
even theatre,
are essential
absolutely essential

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)
to survival.
They are the most important thing!

(NOA reenters with more champagne. During this exchange they hand one glass to LERMONTOV and set the other one down.)

NOA
Maybe not the most important thing.

LERMONTOV
Excuse me?

NOA
Uh...
I said...
Well
I don't think they're the
most important thing.
Like, out of all things?
That seems...
It seems to me that's...
not true.

LERMONTOV
Well, forgive me, dear, but what do you know?

NOA
Excuse me, sir?

LERMONTOV
What
do
you
know?

ACTOR N
I
know

ACTOR N (*cont'd*)

plenty.

...

...

...

I thought you said you could handle this.

You promised.

(There is a sharpness here and LERMONTOV recognizes it. To the audience:)

LERMONTOV

I ask for one, only one, thing from all my staff and it is this: their complete, unwavering devotion to the craft. What are they against the drive of genius, the will of the impresario?

ACTOR N

Sure, I just play the person who brings you your food.

(LERMONTOV is about to drink. He stops and looks at the glass suspiciously.)

NOA

More champagne, M. Lermontov?

LERMONTOV

Yes. Well...

Have you ever been to the Champagne region of France?

(LERMONTOV is asking the audience, but NOA answers.)

NOA

No.

Mostly just London and here,

Monte Carlo,

maybe Villefranche-sur-Mer, Nice

if we have an event

back and forth

back and forth.

NOA (*cont'd*)

I go where you go.

LERMONTOV

Oh, you *must* travel more.

NOA

I don't have much time for traveling
outside of the traveling I must do
when I'm with you
and the company.

LERMONTOV

Where did we pick you up again?

NOA

London.

LERMONTOV

Ugh.

London.

I come here to forget London.

NOA

We agree there.

LERMONTOV

I've discovered many ballerinas,
a surprising amount,
in London.

I'm not sure why.

But I'm a great collector,

I know what to look for.

From the moment you meet
you know if they have it.

NOA

It?

LERMONTOV

IT. If they'll succeed,
if they'll star,
if the papers will write about them.

NOA

Do you remember the day I auditioned for the company?

LERMONTOV

Ah...
Of course!
...vaguely?

NOA

Yeah?
It's uh
It's pretty clear for me

LERMONTOV

The first day of the rest of your magical life?

NOA

Something like that.
The choreographer wanted to keep me
but you said I wasn't the right shape.
And I begged for a role,
anything I could do
to be with the company
to get out of London
and finally
after staring at me
sternly
silent
for what felt like an eternity
you said you needed someone to help you around the office.

LERMONTOV

Ah, yes, of course!

NOA

I didn't know you meant bringing food for guests.

LERMONTOV

It's a multi-purpose position,
sundry tasks help you become...
well-rounded.

NOA

I thought
maybe
I'd learn how the business operates.
If I can't dance for you
I once thought
maybe I could
eventually
maybe
even assist you in running the company.

LERMONTOV

Well, you do! An impresario needs sustenance.

NOA

Of course, M. Lermontov.

LERMONTOV

Do you...
do you not dance anymore?

NOA

I still perform.
Small pieces, where I can.
Some chamber ballets.
Or I create a one-person piece to tide me by.
Perform it at a dance hall on a slow night.

LERMONTOV

That might be breaking your contract.
I'll have to look into that.

NOA

It doesn't.

LERMONTOV

It doesn't?

NOA

I mean...

I checked.

I double checked.

LERMONTOV

Ah.

Well, I better triple check.

Just in case.

You understand -

if we don't stay on top of these things

then someone will take advantage of us.

See? You're learning about company management!

NOA

Yes, of course.

I'm always learning about

Your

company management.

LERMONTOV

Yes... well.

NOA

Have you

ever

considered doing things differently?

LERMONTOV

Of course

but, well,

it's just not the best option.

NOA
It's not?

LERMONTOV
I'm an expert.
And I do prioritize some changes
but we have a budget, you see,
and donors
and goals, trajectories, metrics
a vision and a mission statement

NOA
But maybe some changes
maybe some changes would do us
all
some good.
Even the donors.

LERMONTOV
People don't change.

NOA
People can change.

LERMONTOV
But they don't.
Did you do something before this?
Or before dancing?

NOA
While I was auditioning
before meeting you
I used to work at a museum.

LERMONTOV
What did someone like you do there?

NOA
My job was in the shop
but mostly I remember

NOA (*cont'd*)

on my break
and whenever I figured no one would notice
I'd go into this new exhibit about the twilight zone
the one in the ocean
the one that goes to the bottom of the ocean
it was a small exhibit,
really just a hallway
dimly lit, dark,
good for a nap
uh so I'd usually go in there
and rest on the floor in front of this artist's depiction of
of
well
it was a whale skeleton
on the ocean floor
picked absolutely clean
by scavengers.
And I used to think it might be kinda
nice
to be spread across the ocean like that.

LERMONTOV

Do you do that here?

NOA

What, lay on the ocean floor?

LERMONTOV

Take cheeky breaks.

NOA

Oh, never, M. Lermontov.

(LERMONTOV remembers his guest[s].)

LERMONTOV

It's okay
it's okay
It's good to look out for yourself

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

self-care and all that.

I'm always saying company members should prioritize self care.

NOA

Are you?

LERMONTOV

Yes! I am!

Anyways I think

well it seems likely to me

this instinct of yours to be spread

across the ocean is very similar

to the performer's instinct to be known.

NOA

I don't

I don't think that's it.

LERMONTOV

Sometimes an outside perspective

has a clearer idea of what's going on.

NOA

Your

outside perspective?

LERMONTOV

Of course.

NOA

Of course...

What's the impresario's instinct?

Is it not to be known?

LERMONTOV

The impresario's instinct is to be right.

To hire the right team

to choose the right lead

to discover the right composer

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

to produce the right ballet
to sell enough tickets to do it all again.

NOA

Is right...
best?
Or most satisfying?
Or
what?
What is right?

LERMONTOV

What I say it is, primarily.
But yes, best might be a good marker of right.
Best possible, at least.

NOA

And is that what you want?
To be the best?

LERMONTOV

Arguably I'm already the best.

NOA

But what do you want?

LERMONTOV

I...
I can't have what I want.

NOA

I'm sorry
I wasn't thinking
I know it's a difficult time of year.

LERMONTOV

If we're talking about things
I
could

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

have
I think
when I die
or before!actually!before!
I'd like an award named after me.

NOA

You know
there's this saying

LERMONTOV

There are lots of sayings.
Sorry, being rude.

NOA

There's this saying...

LERMONTOV

Go on.

NOA

There's this saying

LERMONTOV

I'm
playing the
humorist now
you see.
Tell me more.

NOA

I'm trying.

LERMONTOV

I'm sorry, truly,
go on

NOA
Something about how
great art teaches us how to die.

*(LERMONTOV is uncomfortable and a bit
upset.)*

LERMONTOV
Is that so?

NOA
Would you say your ballets do that?

LERMONTOV
No
No
Definitely not.

NOA
Given the age of many
of your donors
maybe they should

LERMONTOV
That's rude

NOA
You know what...
it is
yes

LERMONTOV
And ageist

NOA
Oh
I'm sorry
I meant it to be rude to you
not them

LERMONTOV

In my experience

In my experience

NOA

Yes?

LERMONTOV

This is not the way to get a position in the company

NOA

I thought I *was* in the company

LERMONTOV

As a dancer

NOA

I've pretty much given up on that

LERMONTOV

Dance with me

NOA

Why

LERMONTOV

I just...

want you to...

Do

you

want to dance?

NOA

Usually

LERMONTOV

Do you want to dance now?

NOA
I suppose so.

LERMONTOV
Let's dance.

(A ballroom dance. Maybe they are the only dancers, maybe the cutlery, and books, and records, or projections or lights or other dancers join in.

It starts awkward, uncomfortable.

An icky feeling.

But after a few stumbles, NOA stops the dance, adjusts LERMONTOV, perhaps tries a different style, and now they are in sync. Now NOA feels more comfortable, more powerful. Eventually there is joy here. Shared joy. There is a moment where everything could change.

But then:

NOA hears LERMONTOV's recording again.)

RECORDING

In fact, the performer is much like the place setting. Each, a thing of beauty, meant to show off, brought out for the honored guests, for the paying audience. Each, also, a thing of function, meant to be used.

(NOA feels frightened, uncomfortable.

And then:

LERMONTOV spins off stage into the wings and it is just NOA and whoever else is dancing.

And then:

a beautiful moment -

NOA has been lifted in some way, and it is just them and the guest[s.]

*And they're not sure why,
but in this moment, ACTOR N decides to take
a break from NOA and share something.)*

ACTOR N

There are plenty of things I don't like about myself.
I pick at my lips.
I can't seem to stop picking my lips.
I use chapstick, I slather them in chapstick,
I have fidget devices,
I go to therapy
well, I went to therapy.
I plan to go back to therapy.
When I can.
But I still pick at my lips.
I've done it my whole life.

My mom
recently
my mom said she'd read that it was a sign of anxiety and trauma.
She asked me if I'd had any trauma when I was younger.
She was so worried for me.
I was glad we were on the phone so she couldn't read my expression.
How do
how could I say it was probably her?

There are plenty of things I don't like about myself
but I do speak up when I need to.
Or at least, most of the time.
I don't like that sometimes I miss things
or get too frightened
or worry about losing a job.
But I guess.
Well, I guess most of us have been through that.
And all I can do is try.
And push myself.

I probably push myself too hard.
I'm trying to prioritize rest. And grace.

ACTOR N (*cont'd*)

I'm trying to prioritize embracing joy
when there's joy
instead of waiting for something bad to happen
And I try to make room for grief
when there's grief
instead of pushing it down
I'm trying to remember people are people.
That we all need space to feel things
that we aren't machines
that we can't just workworkworkworkworkworkworkworkworkwork
that it can be okay if someone doesn't get back to me
tomorrow
or in a week.

Sometimes I'm mean.
Sometimes I'm too hard on others.
Or say the wrong thing and realize it later.
Or lean into vindictiveness
instead of trying to help things change
instead of believing people will change
People Can Change
I know they can
He's right though
I'm not sure...
I'm not sure they will.

I made a promise
I promised I'd stay
that I'd look out
that I'd be here if
if I was needed
but
how do you make someone realize
how do you open someone up to help
without shutting them down
and when are things my responsibility
and when are things someone else's

I don't like that I feel the need to ask that

ACTOR N (*cont'd*)

So, yes,
there are plenty of things I don't like about myself
but I am good at what I do.
I am good at my work.
I am a skilled performer.
I am a hard-working creator.
Sometimes I need help and support.
We all do
right?
Sometimes I need grace.
But I am *good* at what I do. And I am proud of that.
I am a skilled performer.
I am a hard-working creator.
And I can do this!

("This" is not ballet.

*This is something the actor can do that they
want to show off. Or maybe something they've
always wanted to learn that this production
finally made space for.*

This could be:

- Dancing [but not ballet]*
- Playing an instrument*
- Crafting*
- Rollerskating*
- Decorating a cake*
- Juggling*
- Crying on cue*
- Laughing uproariously on cue*
- Spinning [but not ballet]*
- Singing*
- Shuffling cards*
- A magic trick*
- Something else that feels right*

Give them as much space as they need to do the thing in a way they are proud of. Give them time to show off. Give them time to receive applause if it's given.)

ACTOR N

It took me a while to learn that.
And now I'm doing it to entertain you.
But nobody pays me for the hours it takes to learn things like this.

I work so hard to make myself hireable
so I can get insurance
so I can pay for therapy
so I can practice saying no
so I can practice saying that's not okay
so I can promise my mom I'll eat
so I can buy chapstick
so I can learn more skills

and I spend the rest of my time trying to remind myself to...
to have grace
to make space for joy
and grief
to prioritize rest.

But, sure, there are plenty of things I don't like about myself.

(LERMONTOV reappears, applauding.)

LERMONTOV

You're not a bad dancer!

NOA

Thank you, M. Lermontov.

LERMONTOV

Still not the right shape,
but that could probably be fixed.

ACTOR N

I don't need to be fixed.
...why would you say that to me?
Why
would you
say
that to me?

LERMONTOV

Well...
We don't have space for another dancer at the moment anyway.
But I do recognize
you still yearn for the applause.
I respect that.

NOA

You haven't replaced her.

LERMONTOV

Excuse me?

NOA

Her part in *The Red Shoes* - you refuse to fill it,
every night people watch a spotlight dance where she used to be.
There's plenty of space for other dancers.
You just don't want that.
You'd rather have an empty stage than me.

LERMONTOV

No one can play that part.
Not an assistant, a server, not any other ballerina.

NOA

Why?

(Suddenly remembering the audience:)

LERMONTOV

Oh, oh I'm so terribly sorry.
You aren't here for this,

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)

company changes
inner workings
people
you're here for the art!

NOA

Why don't you tell them the story?
If you're hoping they'll invest.
They're bound to ask questions eventually.
Everyone knows about *The Red Shoes*.
Or they've at least heard bits of what happened to her.
Why don't you tell them?

LERMONTOV

Do you think dinner might almost be ready?

NOA

I don't know
and I don't care.
But look at them.
They're curious.
You'll have to tell them eventually.

LERMONTOV

Who do you think you are?

NOA

Your assistant.
Just.
Your assistant.

LERMONTOV

Well.

NOA

Once upon a time

LERMONTOV

What are you doing?

NOA

Once upon a time there was a young woman
who wanted to be a famous ballerina

LERMONTOV

Stop it!

NOA

And happy. In love.
But two people
an impresario
and a lover
decided she had to choose.
So she / died

LERMONTOV

The Red Shoes!

The Red Shoes is a ballet!

A ballet I created!

A story about a girl who falls in love with a pair of shoes

NOA

How can you love a thing?

LERMONTOV

And puts them on

NOA

But they were cursed
She can't stop dancing
even though she wants to

LERMONTOV

She doesn't want to!

She never wants to stop dancing!

NOA

She dances and dances until her feet are bloody
she abandons the boy she loves to dance and dance

LERMONTOV

She's lifted in the air
like a bird
a flower
she adores it!

NOA

And at the end
as she's dying
from dancing
she begs the boy
to take off the shoes

"The shoes... take them off"

And it is tragic

LERMONTOV

And it is noble

ACTOR N

No! It's traumatic

LERMONTOV

And it is beautiful

ACTOR N

NO

this is a crisis!

This is a trauma!

This is tragedy

there is no beauty in this!

LERMONTOV

When she died,
it was beautiful.
She was lovely.
Her loss is pure, romantic,
and the strife,

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)
the difficulty made
Me
a better artist.
I have pushed through misfortune
and ended on the other side with
Transcendence, and nothing less.

ACTOR N
Your WORK
was not WORTH THIS
This Is A Crisis

LERMONTOV
MY WORK is ALL THAT MATTERS
My work is more than her
is more than me!
is more than you!
What even are you??
A fly!
On the walls
wishing you had some
say
wishing you had some
control
asking for me to make space
but YOU take up space!!!
You are an irritation, a buzzing,
nothing but a distraction,
you could not do what I do!
Perhaps you need to be removed!
Perhaps I should squash you!
Would you like to be my next inspiration?

(A long moment. This experiment has failed.)

ACTOR N
You're gone, aren't you.
It's just Lermontov now.

ACTOR N (*cont'd*)
You've failed.
We've failed.

LERMONTOV
Whatever are you chattering on about?

(And in this moment ACTOR N has one of two choices:

CHOICE A - ACTOR N remains and fully becomes NOA. NOA is terrified of speaking up again and LERMONTOV watches NOA submit. NOA performs the CHOICE A funeral.

OR

CHOICE B - ACTOR N leaves. ACTOR L watches their friend quit. If ACTOR N leaves, ACTOR N is not present until the funeral, but LERMONTOV pretends they are there and answering. ACTOR N performs the CHOICE B funeral.)

LERMONTOV
Do you think dinner might almost be ready?
We've kept our guest waiting quite a while.

NOA (*if still onstage*)
I'll go
check
M. Lermontov.

LERMONTOV
We'll need some napkins
And new cutlery - these look...
used.

NOA
Yes, sir.

(CHOICE A only - NOA exits. Maybe they return with napkins and new cutlery. Maybe they load the old cutlery on a cart. Whatever they do, they'll need the original cutlery for the funeral.)

LERMONTOV *(to the audience)*

Have you ever heard applause from the perspective of the performer?

I,

well,

I'll admit to you -

I've regularly left the box and stood backstage

just to take in the applause.

It's a magical thing.

The donors and grants keep the lights on

but the applause gives us a reason to keep performing.

I understand why the performers love it so much.

I don't know why they'd ever give it up.

I'd love to demonstrate for you.

Let me...

one moment.

(LERMONTOV goes to the record player, searches for the right record, and puts it on.

Applause begins.

He basks for a long moment, then back to the audience, applauding them as he says:)

LERMONTOV

Take a little bow if you'd like!

No need to be shy!

This is sustenance!

This is life!

This is what it is to live

and live well.

LERMONTOV (*cont'd*)
What need do we have of love
of food
of anything but applause!

(The applause begins to change to ocean sounds, waves crashing, and LERMONTOV begins drowning in it, miserable, overwhelmed, alone, and still so ridiculously proud.)

(CHOICE A: NOA puts on funeral garb - on or offstage.

CHOICE B: ACTOR N changes into street clothes offstage.)

(And now the waves are a train chugging and LERMONTOV is frightened and everything SHIFTS.

A funeral procession.

The mourners:

NOA/ACTOR N leads.

Behind them might be

-the cutlery

-the plates

-the placemats

-the drinking glasses

-the champagne bottle

-the records

-the book

Maybe NOA/ACTOR N even drags the items on a little black, veiled cart.

LERMONTOV watches from where he ended up. None of them notice him. NOA/ACTOR N takes a position near a coffin of some sort.

It doesn't need to be an actual coffin as long as the intent is clear

...but it could be.

*It doesn't need to be LERMONTOV-sized
...but it could be.*

*CHOICE A [skip to pg 64 for CHOICE B]: They
are still fully NOA. ACTOR N hasn't been able
to break the hold NOA has on them yet.)*

NOA

This is...
We're here today to...
celebrate
and
mourn
The Great Impresario Boris Lermontov
who was...
well, he was...
or...
I'm...
well,
I'm trying to be better at speaking up.
But maybe this isn't the time?
I'm sorry.
I wasn't really prepared for this?
I didn't think I'd be the one speaking.
But cutlery can't talk.
I think.

I can't really remember why I got into this field?
Some sort of romantic notions.
But then you feel lucky to be here.
And you work and
you don't let up because you're...
lucky.
Right?
Lucky?
But luck looks like getting sick from the stress of working six or seven days a week for
minimum wage
or less

NOA (*cont'd*)

on top of learning new skills to stay trendy
on top of trying to remember to eat
on top of someone asking if you could drop a few pounds for a costume
on top of worrying about keeping insurance
on top of events on top of self-marketing, self-branding, self-commodification,
and then you do it all again,
and the people in charge smile at you and wave as they pass
but you know they don't know your name
You Know They Don't Know Your Name
and you are a thing now,
a little engine chugging with no end to the track in sight.

I don't know.
Maybe I just don't know what luck looks like.

I don't know...
I don't know what to say
or how to say what...
maybe
what should be said.

(To the cutlery:)

I'm scared.
I'm tired of being scared.

*(And the cutlery responds.
The cutlery responds by somehow
magically
mimicking the skill ACTOR N showed off during
their earlier monologue.)*

*The cutlery says:
We know.
We know. It's difficult.
It's unfair even.
And it hurts.
Tonight hurt. There's no changing that.
There's no simple solution.*

*No easy rebuilding of trust.
But you're not alone.
We're here too. And we saw what happened.
It happened to us too.
And we see you.
We know who you really are.*

*And the cutlery breaks the spell.
The cutlery breaks the spell NOA had over
ACTOR N. And ACTOR N is back. Give them
as long as they need to Be Here and Be
Themselves.*

Now ACTOR N says:)

ACTOR N (*CHOICE B begins here*)

Lermontov died as he lived -
proud.
An egoist.
With both an inflated sense of self-worth
and punishing self-doubt.
Believing desperately in the importance of
ART
above all.
Including feeding his staff.
Who needed to eat.
And go to the doctor.
And have regular therapy.
And reliable transportation.
To make art.
He had a great house though.

Lermontov believed in
the Power of Individual Exceptionalism
His
individual exceptionalism
that he alone could save ballet
and us

ACTOR N *(cont'd)*

For a moment I thought that might work too
Maybe the right person could make everything different
We were kidding ourselves weren't we
That's been the problem all along
And I don't know how to fix it

But I do know this:
there's a better way.
There's got to be...

(To LERMONTOV:)

ACTOR N

I hoped we'd find a better way.
But not like this.
It doesn't work like this.
I wanted us to find it together.

LERMONTOV

I just didn't...
know
I couldn't have
I couldn't have known
it would end like this

ACTOR N

I knew it'd end up like this
From the first moment I met Lermontov
I knew it'd end up like this

(Back to the cutlery.)

ACTOR N

Lermontov died as he lived.
Grasping for more.
Bigger.
Better.
The most.
As much as his hands could hold

ACTOR N *(cont'd)*

and letting us have the granules that fell between fingers
while telling us it was for our own good,
while telling us he knew best,
while prioritizing ballet over ballerinas,
art over people.
Craft,
always.

*(The processional exits, solemnly.
LERMONTOV slowly approaches the coffin. He
looks within:*

*The IMPRESARIO lies there. LERMONTOV
falls back in horror as the IMPRESARIO rises
from the coffin.*

*The IMPRESARIO could be the Mustache,
Sunglasses, and Hat. A projection. A
hologram. Frightening, dancing lights.
Whatever it is, it is horrifying.*

*The ACTOR playing Lermontov no longer
wants to play Lermontov. The IMPRESARIO is
determined to keep the act going. The
IMPRESARIO wants to graft itself onto ACTOR
L - a final, final becoming.*

*ACTOR L is chased and hunted by the
IMPRESARIO. Shadows or lights or the
IMPRESARIO reach for him like hands,
clutching at his face, his clothes.*

*The ACTOR L screams and ACTOR N runs in,
in street clothes.*

*The IMPRESARIO fades away.
Or perhaps has fully grafted itself to ACTOR L.
ACTOR L has fallen, exhausted.*

*ACTOR N moves to them and cradles them or something similar.
ACTOR L looks to ACTOR N.)*

ACTOR L

Please...
Lermontov...
Take it off.
Please...

(ACTOR N removes the important trappings of LERMONTOV and sets them aside. They are tender. There is a long long moment before ACTOR L finally is able to say:)

ACTOR L

It didn't work.

ACTOR N

No.

ACTOR L

I wanted it to.

ACTOR N

I know.

ACTOR L

What's next?

ACTOR N

I don't know.
I guess.
I guess we'll try again.
Until it works.

(ACTOR N helps ACTOR L get to a place where they can move. Together they tenderly leave the stage.)

A SPOT:

The trappings of LERMONTOV rest on the stage.

And they are horrible.

But they are also just things.

On their own they are just things.

And they look pitiful.

Not pitiable.

Not beautiful.

Just pitiful.)

**THE SHOW IS OVER
THE AUDIENCE
GETS UP TO LEAVE
THEIR SEATS
TIMETOCOLLECT
THEIR COATS
AND GO HOME
THEY TURN AROUND
NO MORE COATS
AND NO MORE
HOME**

-Christopher Wool