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A Bright Swarm of Beetles

A Drama in two acts

By Don Zolidis

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Cast of Characters

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A Bright Swarm of Beetles by Don Zolidis
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Full-length drama
6M 4F, expandable

Based on actual events, A Bright Swarm of Beetles follows the breathtaking career of the greatest writer of the Soviet Union: Mikhail Bulgakov. From his beginnings in the Red revolution as a nearly homeless opium addict to the dizzying heights of literary stardom, Bulgakov struggles to write in a world fraught with madness and betrayal. After his work is denounced and banned, Bulgakov is offered a chance at redemption by the sinister dictator Joseph Stalin -- but he must choose between his art and his survival. A wild, fast-paced journey through fifteen years of one of the darkest periods of modern history.

This play is meant to be played by an ensemble of 10 actors, 6M 4f, playing the following roles:

MIKHAIL BULGAKOV, a playwright/novelist, 30s to 40s
THE FOREIGNER, a gentlemen from a distant land, 50s

TATIANA, Mikhail's first wife, early 30s
LYUBOV, Mikhail's second wife, a divorcee from Paris, 30s
YELENA, Mikhail's third wife, late 30s
YEVGENY SHILOVSKY, Yelena's first husband, a captain in the army, 30s

BORIS LEZHNEV, a publisher, 40s
ZAYTSEV, a publisher with venereal disease, 40s
ZAYTSEV'S WIFE, his wife, 30s

LUNACHARSKYA, female, a prominent critic, 40s to 50s

VLADIMIR NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO, co-director of the Moscow Art Theatre, 50s
KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKY, co-director of the Moscow Art Theatre, 50s
IVAN, an actor in the company, 20s
SVETLANA, an actress in the company, 20s
MARTA, their neighbor, 30s

JOSEPH STALIN, the General Secretary of the Soviet Union, 40s to 50s

In addition the ensemble plays various Party Guests, Critics, Producers, Soldiers, Peasants, Actors, and Guards.

Most roles may be doublecast. This play may be performed with a cast of ten.

Setting: Various locations in the Soviet Union, mostly Moscow. 1918 to 1966.

Note: This play contains some "colorful" language. If necessary, you may omit the offending words.

Act One

(Light up dimly on the attic of a building. MIKHAIL, mid- 20s, unwashed and slightly unhinged, leans against a crate, huddled for warmth. Upstage, looming abstract shapes form the broken backdrop of a city.

(Mikhail takes a syringe from his satchel and begins to tie a rubber cord around his arm. He looks about fearfully, then injects himself.

(Time slows. We hear Aida.

(From another part of the stage steps THE FOREIGNER, a smartly dressed man of indeterminate European origin. He speaks directly to the audience. Music continues.)

THE FOREIGNER

In the year of our lord 1918, the man who would become the greatest writer the Soviet Union would ever know was this unfortunate wretch. A doctor, sunk in his own sickness.

A brief history lesson to begin. This is Kiev. City of Nightmares. We are in the midst of the Russian Revolution. This once proud city is one of the major battlefields. It will change masters a dozen times – demons replaced by demons replaced by demons. Children starve in the streets. A man could grow fat on cruelty.

Oh our man our man our man. See him. You'll have to strain your eyes. There it is – the wit, the brilliance, the electricity – the man who would be immortal was yet a child – a man with an appetite for opium.

(TATIANA, dressed barely above the level of rags, enters.)

TATIANA

Misha?

MIKHAIL

…more.

TATIANA

You're needed, Mikhail. There are patients downstairs.

MIKHAIL

…more.

(He offers the syringe to her.)

Please.

TATIANA

There is no more, Misha.

MIKHAIL

I beg you.

TATIANA

There is no…

MIKHAIL

Please… I will go downstairs but I need some first—I cannot stand until…

TATIANA

All right. All right.

(TATIANA takes a vial from her dress and fills the syringe. She leans over him and injects him with the morphine.)

MIKHAIL

I love you.

TATIANA

I'll tell them you're coming.

(she exits quickly.)

THE FOREIGNER

I know what you're thinking. He's not all that impressive. But stay with me friends, for there are diamonds within all of us – well, most of us.

MIKHAIL *(seeing him)*

Who are you?

THE FOREIGNER

Don't mind me. I'm a hallucination brought on by your addiction.

MIKHAIL

Oh.

THE FOREIGNER

You'll meet me again some day.

(the lights change. THE FOREIGNER steps away.)

But let's leave Kiev, it's a miserable place at the moment. Skip forward three years. To Moscow. Capital of the new empire. And a newly sober Mikhail and his bride were about to begin their grand story -

(MIKHAIL and TATIANA stumble their way into a tiny apartment, loaded down with luggage. They look around.)

MIKHAIL

I like it.

TATIANA

You do?

MIKHAIL

It has a… it has… charms.

TATIANA

Which are what?

MIKHAIL

A ceiling.

(noises from above.)

TATIANA

My brother-in-law said it was small.

MIKHAIL

Your brother-in-law is nothing if not accurate.

(GRUBBY WOMAN enters. She looks at them.)

Hello?

GRUBBY WOMAN

What.

MIKHAIL

I uh…

GRUBBY WOMAN

Who are you?

MIKHAIL

I am Mikhail Bulgakov and this is –

GRUBBY WOMAN

Yes?

MIKHAIL

I'm sorry.

GRUBBY WOMAN

What happened to Semyon? He's dead?

MIKHAIL

Semyon?

TATIANA

My brother-in-law is Andrey.

GRUBBY WOMAN

So?

TATIANA

He said the flat was ours to rent.

GRUBBY WOMAN

Where's Semyon?

TATIANA

I don't know who that is.

GRUBBY WOMAN

Hmph.
(she walks past them. Looks to open a counter.)
He owed me twenty rubles.

MIKHAIL

I'm sure I don't –

GRUBBY WOMAN

He owed me twenty rubles.

MIKHAIL

I suppose he did.

GRUBBY WOMAN

You're saying I'm a liar?

MIKHAIL

No I – what are you doing?
(she picks up a small table.)

GRUBBY WOMAN

This is mine.
(she starts leaving with the table.)

MIKHAIL

Actually I think that was left by –

GRUBBY WOMAN

Semyon owed me twenty rubles and I'm taking this. I'll be back later for the rest of my things.

(she exits.)

TATIANA

I think we should look into getting a lock.

MIKHAIL

Or a gun.

TATIANA

At least we won't need the china.

MIKHAIL

As soon as I get a job writing we'll move to a larger place.

TATIANA

I thought you were going to continue to practice medicine.

MIKHAIL

It's the literary life or nothing now.

TATIANA

Yes, but until you find work –

MIKHAIL

I have to throw myself into to the water to see if I can swim.

TATIANA

Or drown.

MIKHAIL

This is a new life for us. A city of possibilities. We're going to turn our backs on the past now – all of it – and strike forward. I must at least try. You have to allow me that chance. Do you trust me?

TATIANA

Mostly.

MIKHAIL

That's mostly wonderful. You'll see, Tasha. We will conquer the world.

(there's a knock at the door. A MAN enters.)

MAN

What is this about Semyon being dead?

MIKHAIL

Well – I don't –

MAN

He owed me thirty rubles.

(lights change.)

THE FOREIGNER

Ah. Moscow.

(Noise and boisterous activity as CITIZENS rush back and forth, nearly pushing MIKHAIL over as he makes his way to the side of the stage. The CITIZENS part and bring on the desk of the publisher, YAKOV. He holds a sheaf of short stories.)

YAKOV

These were published?

MIKHAIL

Yes. In the newspaper. In Vladikaviakov.

YAKOV

Where?

MIKHAIL

It's a minor town.

YAKOV

This is Moscow.

MIKHAIL

I saw the signs on the way in.

YAKOV

You're a doctor?

MIKHAIL

I was a doctor. Now I'm a writer.

YAKOV

Like Chekhov.

MIKHAIL

Actually yes. Except not as successful.

YAKOV

I have no use for these.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps I can show you something else?

YAKOV

No.

(The desk is removed by the CITIZENS. MIKHAIL stumbles toward the other side of the stage, buffeted by the CITIZENS again. Another desk is placed in front of them, with the publisher, ANNA, behind it.)

ANNA

These are good.

MIKHAIL

I'm glad you –

ANNA

Extraordinarily good.

MIKHAIL

I thought so too.

ANNA

Very well.

MIKHAIL

Very well what?

ANNA

Goodbye.

MIKHAIL

I was actually wondering if you needed someone on staff to write for you.

(ANNA eyes him.)

ANNA

No.

(ANNA pockets the papers.)

MIKHAIL

Can I have that back actually?

(ANNA stares at him.)

ANNA

No.

(The CITIZENS remove the desk again and spin MIKHAIL. He stumbles again and finds himself placed before a third publisher, LEZHNEV.)

LEZHNEV

You are imitating Gogol.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps Gogol is unconsciously imitating me?

LEZHNEV

You imagine yourself a funny person?

MIKHAIL

I've been told that on occasion.

LEZHNEV

Make me laugh. Now.

MIKHAIL

Um…

LEZHNEV

This is disappointing.

MIKHAIL

No I uh… okay – um here… I wrote this for the paper –
(MIKHAIL assumes the character of Vladimir the peasant.)
Dear Editor – my name is Vladimir and –

LEZHNEV

What are you doing?

MIKHAIL

I'm reading what I wrote.

LEZHNEV

Why are you doing it like that?

MIKHAIL

I'm becoming the character.

LEZHNEV

And this is supposed to make me laugh?

MIKHAIL

Well I think it would if you give it a chance.

LEZHNEV

All right.

MIKHAIL

Okay…

(he assumes the character again)

My name is Vladimir and I am considered by many to be the wisest man in my village of M.

LEZHNEV

What village?

MIKHAIL

The village of M.

LEZHNEV

What kind of village is named M?

MIKHAIL

It's an abbreviation for the actual name of the village.

LEZHNEV

Why?

MIKHAIL *(assuming the character again)*

However, there is something which confuses even me. I have three cows –

LEZNHEV

Cows are funny.

MIKHAIL

One cow gives milk only during the day, one cow gives milk only during the night, and the third cow… the third cow only gives milk when I sing it a song. So I say to my wife one night –

LEZHNEV

Okay, enough. You read well. You should be an actor.

(LEZHNEV considers him.)

We need a man who can write humorous sketches. Can you do that? Letters from fools… illiterate peasants—

MIKHAIL

You want me to write a letter from an illiterate peasant?

LEZHNEV

Perhaps he dictated to his brother, I don't know. We have a small humor section. I can't pay you much.

(the CITIZENS remove the desk as MIKHAIL hurries home to the apartment, shivering with cold.)

THE FOREIGNER

How to describe that winter of 1921? The nights of frost, the ice creeping in through the windows. Mikhail, bundling his small literary sketches in a pack, tramping across half the city - the hint of starvation in the mirror?

(They eat ravenously, nearly frozen with cold.)

TATIANA

How much did he pay you today?

MIKHAIL

Who?

TATIANA

Lezhnev.

MIKHAIL

They folded.

TATIANA

What do you mean they folded?

MIKHAIL

The office was boarded up today. The paper is finished.

TATIANA

They only just began publishing three weeks ago. What are you going to do?

MIKHAIL

I spent the day looking for another paper.

TATIANA

And?

MIKHAIL

And I'll spend tomorrow looking. Is there any bread?

TATIANA

A loaf of bread was 800 rubles this morning.

MIKHAIL

Christ.

TATIANA

This afternoon it was 850. Can't you ask your mother for help?

(he shakes his head)

Misha.

MIKHAIL

What?

TATIANA

Swallow your pride and ask her for money.

MIKHAIL

What good would it do, Tasya? The mail is unreliable, if she sent money it would only get stolen between here and Kiev. And if I don't find something immediately, any money that did arrive would be too late anyway.

TATIANA

You're being morbid.

MIKHAIL

What about that job as a sales associate? You said they needed someone?

TATIANA

There were fifty girls in front of me.

MIKHAIL

So?

TATIANA

So there's nothing to sell and no one to buy and fifty girls in front of me.

MIKHAIL

Did you try again?

TATIANA

There's nowhere to try!

MIKHAIL

In the whole goddamn city there's not another store that would take you?

TATIANA

What do you want me to do, Misha?

MIKHAIL

I want you to try—

Skipping Forward

TATIANA

When are you coming to bed?

MIKHAIL

Soon.

TATIANA

I'm crawling back in.

MIKHAIL

Fine.

TATIANA

I love you.

MIKHAIL

I love you too.

(They share a perfunctory kiss. TATIANA gathers the blankets about herself and settles onto the small bed.)

TATIANA

Let me know when you need more water.

MIKHAIL

I will.

(MIKHAIL writes.)

TATIANA

Misha?

MIKHAIL

Please, Tasya, I need to focus on this.

TATIANA

Come to bed please. It's too cold here without you.

MIKHAIL

I need to finish this chapter.

TATIANA

Every night you're—

MIKHAIL

I need to finish it. Lezhnev runs a small literary journal now—he might be interested.

TATIANA

What is it about? Your novel?

MIKHAIL

The revolution.

TATIANA

No one wants to read about that, Misha. You need to write something people will buy.

MIKHAIL

I write what I write, whether or not people buy it is immaterial.

TATIANA

You can't keep writing things in order to provoke people.

MIKHAIL

What do you mean, provoke people?

TATIANA

These stories. They don't—

MIKHAIL

Please don't speak about things you know nothing about.
(Silence.)
I'm sorry. I should not have said that.

TATIANA

Is that what you think? I'm just a stupid girl?

MIKHAIL

I didn't say that.

TATIANA

Do you think that?

MIKHAIL

Do you ever show an interest in my work? Do you ever read it? When I first met you, when I wrote those little stories, you read them all. And now—

TATIANA

I'm exhausted.

MIKHAIL

And I'm not? I can't see straight half of the time. How am I supposed to work when I can't even see what I'm doing? Damn it it's freezing in here!

TATIANA

Talk to Anatoly—

MIKHAIL

We need to move.

TATIANA

How on earth are we going to manage that?

MIKHAIL

This apartment materialized out of hell. But Tasya…
(he stops)

TATIANA

What?

MIKHAIL

Nothing.

TATIANA

You were going to say something.

MIKHAIL

Do you remember, before the war, when I was still a student—we used to go out to dinner, at those cafes, as soon as I scraped together some money—that time you wanted to ride in the motorcar?

TATIANA

Yes.

MIKHAIL

And I said, damn it, let's do it. If you want to ride in a motorcar, we'll ride in a motorcar. Who cares what it costs?

TATIANA

I remember that.

MIKHAIL

Do you remember how happy we were then?

TATIANA

We knew nothing.

MIKHAIL

I suppose that's what happiness is, isn't it? The knowledge of love and nothing more.

TATIANA

I am still in love with you.
(short pause)
Do you still wish to be married to me?

MIKHAIL

Of course I do.

TATIANA

It's possible, you know, if you don't want me any more—

MIKHAIL

Of course I want you.

TATIANA

Do you know what I did today? I went down to the jeweler and I asked him how much he would give me for my wedding ring. A hundred rubles. And I was about to sell it to him—

MIKHAIL

No—

TATIANA

Because I thought that perhaps we needed the money more than we needed the marriage.
(pause)
Aren't you going to say anything to me?
(Lights change.)

(the CITIZENS place a new desk on the stage. MIKHAIL huddles against the cold.)

ZAYTSEV

Mikhail, Mikhail, Mikhail.
(he places a manuscript down.)

MIKHAIL

Did you read my novel?

ZAYTSEV

I did. And –

MIKHAIL

And?

ZAYTSEV

You know that I love you and I think of you like a brother, and I would in fact steal my brother's shoes to give them to you, in fact my own brother I hate him he is a bastard and you are like the brother I wish I had, but… I cannot publish this. It's not the quality of the work, you know, it is top notch.

MIKHAIL

What is it then?

ZAYTSEV

Your novel has entirely too much sympathy for the losers of the revolution – you start putting this out there people are going to think you don't like our communist masters.

MIKHAIL

Communism will be the death of Russia.

ZAYTSEV

See it is things like that that are going to get you killed someday. I don't like the Bolsheviks, but they're the ones with the guns these days, so – hey, you want stories about the grandeur of cement factories, I'll print stories about cement factories.

MIKHAIL

Even if they're shit?

ZAYTSEV

It's a story about a cement factory, what do you want, Tolstoy?

MIKHAIL

Don't we have an obligation to strike at a little bit of truth?

ZAYTSEV

No. I have an obligation to sell magazines. And I can't sell magazines if I'm being shut down. So thank you very much for your wonderful and potentially life-crushing story, I'm going to have to pass.

MIKHAIL

I'm telling you, if you publish this story, it will be the biggest hit you ever have. The people out there are tired of hearing official lies. Give it a chance.

ZAYTSEV

I'm sorry Mikhail.

(ZAYTSEV'S WIFE enters.)

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

Is this him?

ZAYTSEV

Yes. But please darling I haven't -

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

He doesn't look like a doctor.

ZAYTSEV

It is very difficult everywhere, even for doctors. But I assure you that Doctor Bulgakov is an expert in all matters of the -

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

This son-of-a-bitch said it was a hereditary condition. He didn't have the condition when we were first married, and now all of a sudden I see these –

ZAYTSEV

Doctor Bulgakov can I please talk to you for a moment?

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

Shut up and let the doctor talk. Well? You looked at him?

MIKHAIL

I did.

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

They come from his whore.

ZAYTSEV

I work very long hours and my wife has these insane suspicions –

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

Insane? You cheating drunk I'll –

MIKHAIL

Madame, I did have the chance to thoroughly examine your husband and I can say with absolute certainty that…

(MIKHAIL surreptitiously pushes his manuscript back towards ZAYTSEV.)

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

Well?

MIKHAIL

They are stress-related.

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

Stress-related?

MIKHAIL

When a man is put under an immense amount of pressure, pressure at work, and then a continuation of that pressure at home, it is possible to exhibit certain symptoms in the nether regions.

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

What?

MIKHAIL

Unfortunately, they can be harmful. If the stress is not eased… possibly fatal.

ZAYTSEV

I told you I wasn't feeling well.

MIKHAIL

So I think the best thing would be to allow your husband some peace and quiet when he arrives home. If you feel the urge to nag or to criticize, remember the turmoil that is boiling to the surface in his groin, and then simply fall silent. That is the only way.

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

I didn't know. I am so sorry Nikolai.

ZAYTSEV

Varenka, we have serious business to discuss. Please do not add more stress. I am beginning to feel the anger growing in my loins.

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

Very well.

(She leaves.)

ZAYTSEV

We'll start it in the September issue. And um… I do probably want some medical advice.

MIKHAIL

Probably.

(the FOREIGNER enters with copies of the magazine.)

THE FOREIGNER

And so… without much fanfare, on page 37 of the journal Russia appeared the first pages of *The White Guard*. And, as if he had made some kind of deal with the devil, everything Mikhail claimed came to pass.

(citizens rush up to grab copies of the magazine. They read.)

A charge went through the city. Air returned to the citizens.

(They are astonished. More citizens appear.)

Zaytsev doubled the print run. Then he doubled it again. A literary celebrity had arrived; overnight success, you know. And my friends, there is nothing like success in Russia.

(Music. The citizens swirl around Mikhail and usher him into a fabulous room. Opulent literati arrive. TATIANA is in the back.)

GUEST 1

There he is!

GUEST 2

At last a voice!

GUEST 3

A colossus!

GUEST 4

This will blow the doors off everything!

GUEST 1

I have so waited so long –

GUEST 2

At last, someone is speaking the truth –

GUEST 3

The truth!

GUEST 4

Here at last!

GUEST 2

A new Dostoevsky for our times!

GUEST 1

You must come visit me. I have a dacha on the Black Sea – pristine – a retreat worthy of your talents – please, it would be the greatest honor for me to –

GUEST 2

Can I trouble you to read a script of mine? You see, I a fancy myself as something of a writer, nothing on your scale of course, I am humbled in your presence, but still a kind word here or there –

GUEST 3

I have been waiting half my life for you – my God what a voice!

GUEST 4

I had thought you would be taller. I must confess, when I read this book I believed the author must be seven feet tall!

GUEST 2

My great uncle married into Tolstoy's family – can you believe that, so I know a little something about literature –

GUEST 3

My cousin would love to meet you, she is a beauty –

MIKHAIL

I'm afraid I'm married, thank you –

GUEST 2

How do you do it? Can you please tell me? It leaps off the page – positively leaps off the page –

GUEST 3

She comes from the most exquisite family -

GUEST 2

I cried. I cried from the first word.

GUEST 4

This is the novel I would have written, had I the ability to write a novel.

GUEST 3

May I introduce Lyubov Sergeyevna?

(GUEST 3 brings LYUBOV over.)

MIKHAIL

Hello.

LYUBOV

I love your work.

GUEST 3

She has just returned from Paris.

LYUBOV

I found it compelling, honest, and powerful. The way that you describe the atrocities of the civil war, it's… astonishing.

MIKHAIL

Thank you.

(Everything goes quiet. Light on LYUBOV. The FOREIGNER, revealed to be one of the guests at the party, stands next to TATIANA as she watches MIKHAIL from a distance.)

THE FOREIGNER *(to TATIANA)*

Do you remember when you met him? Do you remember how you danced clumsily at your wedding and how you laughed with delight at your first ride in a motorcar? Look at him now. A jewel of success.

(the guests toast him again.)

GUEST 4

And how do you know comrade Bulgakov?

TATIANA

I am his wife.

(more cheers from the guests. They take him away.)

(TATIANA returns to the apartment alone. The music fades.)

THE FOREIGNER

What is it they say about your heart's desire? Careful what you wish for?

(MIKHAIL lounges drunkenly at a party. Another GUEST accosts him.)

GUEST 2

Please, you are an important man, a word with the publisher and my story is sure to see the light of day.

MIKHAIL

I assure you I have no such influence.

GUEST 2

Let me tell you about it –

MIKHAIL

Please –

GUEST 2

It's just like yours, only I'm not copying your story, I would never copy your stories, but there are quite a number of elements in my story that are superior to yours, everyone has told me so – it just needs to get into the hands of the public – no look look Bulgakov you have to do this – for the people, for truth – I am a servant of the truth, I am a writer, we are writers together, we are brothers.

MIKHAIL

I can't help you.

GUEST 2

Bastard.

(GUEST 2 wobbles away. LUNACHARSKAYA approaches.)

LUNACHARSKAYA

The adoring public.

MIKHAIL

Locusts.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Be careful. They may devour you.

MIKHAIL

Fifty percent of Russians are failed novelists.

LUNACHARSKAYA

And the other fifty percent?

MIKHAIL

The other fifty percent aspire to be failed novelists.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Such contempt for the common man.

MIKHAIL

The common man is a wretch.

LUNACHARSKAYA

It was the common man who rose up to overthrow the tsar, you know.

MIKHAIL

Let's not discuss politics, shall we?

LUNACHARSKAYA

All life is politics. All art is struggle.

MIKHAIL

You talk like a billboard.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Allow me to introduce myself, Anatolia Lunacharskaya.

MIKHAIL

I am overjoyed to make your acquaintance. Would you like to buy me a drink?

LUNACHARSKAYA

No. I would not.

Skipping Forward

I look forward to your review!

GUEST 1

Me too! I am out of toilet paper!
(laughs.)

(lights shift to the apartment, late at night. MIKHAIL enters in the dark. He bumps into something.)

TASYA

Misha?

MIKHAIL

It's me.

TASYA

What time is it?

MIKHAIL

Why didn't you stay?

TASYA

I tried to tell you. I couldn't get a word in. You were surrounded all night.

MIKHAIL

I was looking for you.

TASYA

Were you?

MIKHAIL

Of course.

TASYA

And you came home now?

MIKHAIL

It was impossible to leave.

TASYA

Ah.

MIKHAIL

The way was blocked by an army of sycophantic alcoholics. They are quite persuasive.

TASYA

I hope you enjoyed yourself.

MIKHAIL

You didn't?

TASYA

I didn't say that.

MIKHAIL

You didn't enjoy the party?

TASYA

What was there to enjoy?

MIKHAIL

My God, what was there to enjoy?

TASYA

That's what I said.

MIKHAIL

To think how we've struggled, how we nearly starved, and now to be feted like princes?

TASYA

You were feted. I was ignored.

MIKHAIL

Next time you shall stay right near me. Glued to my hip.

TASYA

I doubt it.

MIKHAIL

Tasya, please. Don't be like this.

TASYA

You hardly looked at me all night long.

MIKHAIL

There were twenty idiots shoving manuscripts into my face! It's amazing, you get one novel published, and suddenly they believe you have the power over life and death.

TASYA

Forget it.

MIKHAIL

No what did you mean.

TASYA

I'm tired.

MIKHAIL

You can't let me have one moment in the spotlight. Is it so terrible to drink beer all night and eat some decent food for once? I'm not saying anything about your cooking, don't crucify me. You can do wonders with boiled potatoes.

TASYA

You can sleep on the floor.

MIKHAIL

What did I say?

TASYA

Good night.

MIKHAIL

What did I say?

TASYA

You're the brilliant novelist, figure it out.

(MIKHAIL thinks.)

MIKHAIL

I am at a loss.

TASYA

Good.

MIKHAIL

Shit.

(Lights up on NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO, composing a letter.)

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Dear Mikhail Afaniesivich Bulgakov—we at the Moscow Art Theatre have read your novel, *The White Guard* with profound delight. If you would be so kind, please stop by the theatre at your earliest convenience, we have a matter to discuss with you.

(MIKHAIL steps in.)

MIKHAIL

Hello?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

A ha! You are here! My name is Vladimir Nemivorich-Danchenko, director of the theatre. Have a seat please.

MIKHAIL

Of course.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I am actually co-director, I don't want to get ahead of myself. Would you like a mint? Where are the mints?

(he shouts)

YERMOLAI! A mint for Bulgakov!

MIKHAIL

I don't require a mint.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

You don't require a mint.

MIKHAIL

No.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

YERMOLAI! No mints for Bulgakov! Water?

MIKHAIL

I'm fine, thank you.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Good for you. Good for you. And you should be fine. The White Guard.

(He slaps the magazine onto his desk.)

Yes.

MIKHAIL

It's selling quite well.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

As well it should. I have read your novel. It is extraordinary.

MIKHAIL

Thank you.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Yes. Extraordinary.

(he stares importantly at MIKHAIL.)

YERMOLAI! I would like a mint now!

MIKHAIL

I'm glad you enjoyed the novel.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I did. Indeed I did.

MIKHAIL

Good.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Yes. I don't want to concern you. I am waiting for my mint.

MIKHAIL

You said you had something you wanted to ask me?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Ah yes. I would like you to transform this novel into a play. And we shall perform it here at our theatre. Good? Yes?

MIKHAIL

All right.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Wonderful. I like you already.

(NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO claps his hand on MIKHAIL's shoulder.)

THE FOREIGNER

The sun shined, the birds chirped their little songs in the trees –

(sound of birds chirping)

And our hero was not only a brilliantly successful novelist, he was on his way to becoming an outstanding man of the theatre. Now, some of you may have heard that the theatre is home to many citizens of dubious moral character, and I can assure you that this is not mostly the case. Certainly, there are some, like this person here, who have succumbed and drank deeply from the cup of sin, but he is an exception, not the rule, and I personally will have nothing whatsoever to do with him. And some of the young ladies, well… I do not kiss and tell. Be that as it may, our hero was on top of the world. He was –

(LYUBOV enters.)

I feel compelled here to address a moment of weakness on Bulgakov's part. There she is now. Now, if you were paying close attention you will recall that her name is Lyubov, she was cousin of somebody or other and she was everything Tatiana was not, cultured, witty -

(MIKHAIL approaches her. They embrace.)

Stop it. I said stop it.

(they walk hand in hand.)

This is quite scandalous here. I have to apologize for their behavior.

LYUBOV

I adore Moscow in the summer.

MIKHAIL

The rest of the year can be difficult.

LYUBOV

Which is why we should treasure this beauty as it appears. Don't you feel that life ought to be like that?

THE FOREIGNER

Forgive her. We've all said stupid things.

MIKHAIL

How so?

LYUBOV

That fleeting opportunities should be seized. Your wife—she doesn't enjoy society?

THE FOREIGNER

Ooh.

LYUBOV

Let me guess: you were very young when you married her?

MIKHAIL

Twenty-two.

LYUBOV

What did you know about the world at twenty-two? You were barely out of the cradle.

MIKHAIL

I knew some things.

LYUBOV

I'm sure you did. You know what I like most about your writing? It's fearless. Are you fearless as well?

MIKHAIL

Are you talking about my politics or my taste in women?

LYUBOV

Both.

MIKHAIL

In regards to my politics –

LYUBOV

Don't you fear being censored?

MIKHAIL

Why should I? I am not a chimp to be euthanized into silence. If they censor me, they censor me, but I'm not going to capitulate and beg for their approval.

LYUBOV

Be careful, you could become a dangerous man.

(MIKHAIL creeps into his apartment. TATIANA is waiting.)

TATIANA

You were with her again?

MIKHAIL

What do you want me to say?

TATIANA

The truth.

MIKHAIL

We went to the opera.

TATIANA

I see.

MIKHAIL

It is all very chaste.

TATIANA

Of course it is.

MIKHAIL

I would tell you if it were otherwise.

TATIANA

My heart resounds with the news.

(MIKHAIL heads for his desk.)

Would you like some dinner?

MIKHAIL

I thought I'd get to work.

(TATIANA stares at him.)

(LYUBOV appears and takes the pages from MIKHAIL, crossing. TATIANA remains on stage, alone in the apartment.)

LYUBOV

Why don't we read it out loud? Come on, it will be fun.

MIKHAIL

There aren't many parts for women.

LYUBOV

Scandalous.

(she flips through the pages and finds a scene.)

Here we are. You be Shervinsky and I'll be Yeliena.

MIKHAIL

I feel silly.

LYUBOV

A play is meant to be performed, is it not? Do you think I'd make a great actress?

MIKHAIL

No.

LYUBOV

What?

MIKHAIL

I'm joking. I'm sure you would be adequate.

LYUBOV

You are a horrible person.

MIKHAIL

I see you've been reading my reviews.

LYUBOV

Come on, let's begin.

MIKHAIL

Fine. `Do you know something, Yeliena? He's not coming back.'

LYUBOV

`Who?'

MIKHAIL

`Your husband.'

LYUBOV

`You're not supposed to say that. What business is it of yours whether he comes back or not?'

MIKHAIL

`It's very much my business. I love you.'

LYUBOV

`Do you expect me to believe you?'

MIKHAIL

`It's true, for God's sake, I love you.'

LYUBOV

`Well you can love me in silence.'

(Pause.)

I like that line.

(She is very close to him. Pause.)

What is on your mind, Misha?

MIKHAIL

A swirl.

LYUBOV

Let me see if I can guess. There's a great dark word in your mind right now, it's loyalty. You want so very much to be loyal to someone who has been loyal to you. As a payment, in a way. Yes? What you have to ask yourself is: what is your responsibility to yourself? Don't you have a right to happiness? You see, if you had ever been out of Russia, you would know that our national proclivity to enjoy suffering is not shared the whole world over. In fact, in Paris, it's quite modern for a woman such as myself to take matters into her own hands.

(She kisses him. Lights change.)

THE FOREIGNER

Gentle citizens, please do not judge him. The good Lord knows I have done some pretty despicable things in my time as well. Who can look into his heart and not recognize the influence of a devil? So our dear hero had a moment, or several moments if truth be told, of weakness. What does it matter that his dear wife had slaved for him, had suffered in the move, had spent frigid nights heating up water so that his fingers would not freeze when he typed his great novel? What does it matter that she thought only of him, that she dreamed of him, that she even worshipped him, she was not nearly as tall as this new woman. So… well, I suppose it was a rather ugly business, wasn't it?

(Lights up on the theatre. NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO has the script.)

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Your script… your script…

MIKHAIL

Yes?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Would you like a mint?

MIKHAIL

My breath is quite fresh, I assure you.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I have no reason to doubt you. Still…

MIKHAIL

I do not want a mint.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Let's get down to business then, shall we? Your script… is problematic.

MIKHAIL

What?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I want you to imagine a theatre. There are people sitting in it. An audience if you will. They are watching your play intently. The women are near tears with sympathy for the young hero. The men are prepared to take arms to defend him. They are on the edge of their seats. Now I'm going to have you picture the audience watching the play you have actually written. Their asses, if I may be blunt, are in agony. Our seats are not especially comfortable. There have been three act breaks. Men are in need of cigarettes. Women are in need of the lavatory. Hunger claws at their stomachs. Some are asleep. Some have left. Disaster ensues. The theatre closes. We all die of starvation on the streets.

MIKHAIL

You're saying it's too long?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

That is what I am saying. A play, if you will allow me, is… a novel is a fat cow—it wanders through fields, it munches here, it munches there—you befriend it, you call it names, it keeps you warm at night—a play—is the steak. Yes?

MIKHAIL

So you want me to—

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO *(referring to the script)*

Skipping Forward

don't feel that I get that from you—I feel that I have to hide my work, that I have to somehow ask permission to be the artist that I must be, and I'm… I think that it might benefit our marriage if she were to… stay with us from time to time.

TATIANA

Stay with us from time to time?

MIKHAIL

Perhaps I haven't phrased that properly. She is divorced, and… she is need of a place to stay.

TATIANA

And this would help our marriage?

MIKHAIL

I believe so, yes.

TATIANA

This is what you wanted to say to me? After twelve years of marriage, this is what you wanted to say to me?

(they freeze)

THE FOREIGNER

If I may, I'd like to pause this for a moment. I would like to speak to the husbands in the audience. Mikhail is a brilliant novelist, of that there is no doubt. He is about to become a sensational playwright, take my word for it. His expertise with women… let's say you're planning on leaving your wife for another woman – this is an example of a poor way to do that.

TATIANA

I think you're a goddamn coward. I think you want to leave me, but you don't have the balls to do it, and you've cooked up this scenario as a way to force me into leaving you. This way, you become the wronged man instead of the egotistical shit that you are. I have moped around here for long enough, I hate Moscow, I hate our life here—

MIKHAIL

You hate my success—

TATIANA

How can you say that?! I slaved for you—I sold every ounce of silver my family owned, I pawned my jewelry, I stayed up nights, I did anything and everything, only for you, only for you, and as soon as you tasted a morsel of fame you pulled away from me. You want me to take another woman under this roof?! Did you honestly think I would agree to that? Do you know me so poorly? You want me to leave you, is that it?

MIKHAIL

That's not what I was trying to—

TATIANA

Lies! Fine! That's it, then! No more lies for us. No more illusions. Goodbye, Mikhail.

MIKHAIL

Where will you go?

TATIANA

What do you care? Twelve years and this. Twelve years and I am tossed out.

MIKHAIL

I am not tossing you out.

TATIANA

Replaced, then. Replaced and offered the opportunity to remain, like some kind of phantom haunting the living—you shit! I'll give you what you want. Goodbye. Get out while I pack. You heard me. Get out. I'll be gone by the time you return.

(Lights fade on her. The street. LYUBOV waits on a public bench. MIKHAIL enters, shamed. He sits next to her soundlessly.)

THE FOREIGNER

That went well. Three days later, they were married. I suppose you could say that he so enjoyed the last marriage that he didn't want to be bereft of one. There was no time for a honeymoon, however, rehearsals for the play

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Day of the Turbins –

MIKHAIL

Why are we changing the title?

THE FOREIGNER

Had begun.

(Lights rise on the Moscow Art Theatre. Rehearsal is in progress. NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO is barking orders at two actors, SVETLANA and IVAN, who are acting out a scene in Act Four of Day of the Turbins.)

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

What are you doing?

SVETLANA

I'm listening.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

And what do you hear?

SVETLANA

Nothing.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Wrong. You hear horse-hooves. You hear the rough voices of men who are going to set fire to your house. You hear your husband dying. You hear everything you ever knew about to be torn asunder—they are coming, do you understand that? They are coming, and you hear them.

IVAN

But that doesn't actually happen for a few pages yet—

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Am I speaking to you? Am I speaking to you? Shut your mouth. Do it again. Both of you.

IVAN *(acting)*

I think this star should go…
(he listens)

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

No! No. No. That was abominable. Do it again.

IVAN *(acting)*

I think this star should go…
(he listens)

SVETLANA

What is it?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

You know what it is!

SVETLANA

What is it?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Ag. Terrible.

MIKHAIL

Here.
(MIKHAIL jumps in.)
Like this.
(MIKHAIL plays both parts. He is extraordinarily good at it.)
`I think this star should go…' `What is it?' `No, it must be my imagination… Yeliena, I'm absolutely certain this is the end. They are going to take the city.'
(he takes a pause as YELIENA's character. It is breathtaking.)

You see?

IVAN

That's quite good.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Take a break. I'm having an aneurysm watching you watch him. Bulgakov and I have things to discuss.

(The actors bow and leave.)

Mikhail, I have spoken with the censor.

MIKHAIL

And?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

They won't pass the play in its current form.

MIKHAIL

Why not?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

You know why not. The portrayal of the Bolsheviks is—

MIKHAIL

Accurate.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Which is of course the problem. You're going to need to rewrite the play.

MIKHAIL

Christ. I've rewritten it three times already—

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Perhaps if you put something at the end—an addendum…

MIKHAIL

Saying what?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

They see the error of their ways, they join the communists. Everyone gets a bunny, I don't know.

MIKHAIL

Shit.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Listen, Mikhail—there are always censors. There will always be censors. What we do… we compromise, yes? Otherwise no art appears at all. Change the ending, alter a line here or there, obscure the message a little more, they'll pass the play.

MIKHAIL

No. They can rot.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Be sensible.

MIKHAIL

If we surrender an inch, we may as well lay down and lick their boots. Here it's one line, tomorrow they don't like a character, soon they will dictate all that we think and write—What is the purpose of art if not to expose the truth? Why should that be so dangerous to these men?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

The truth is always dangerous. You know that.

MIKHAIL

I'm not changing the script. Convince them.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I'll see what I can do.

(Lights change.)

THE FOREIGNER

Opening night.

(The FOREIGNER points, and a Marquis lights up, proclaiming "Day of the Turbins" by Mikhail Bulgakov. Noise. Energy. Anticipation. The FOREIGNER begins to dress MIKHAIL in a tuxedo.)

Nothing like opening night.

MIKHAIL *(to the FOREIGNER)*

Hmm?

THE FOREIGNER

I said nothing like opening night.

MIKHAIL

This is my first.

THE FOREIGNER

They say the General Secretary will attend.

MIKHAIL

Who said that?

THE FOREIGNER

Word on the street.

MIKHAIL

Stalin? He's coming?

THE FOREIGNER

You know he's such a fan of the arts. Especially those that celebrate the common man.

(MIKHAIL turns pale.)

I'm sure he will like it immensely. Yessir, nothing like the theatre. You never know what's going to happen.

MIKHAIL

Indeed.

THE FOREIGNER

If I may sir, I have an idea for a story for you.

MIKHAIL

I find my own ideas, thank you.

THE FOREIGNER

Of course. but this story will make you immortal. It's about the devil.

(LYUBOV enters in an extravagant dress.)

LYUBOV

Are you ready?

THE FOREIGNER

Of course. Oh you meant him. He's ready too.

(the FOREIGNER points and the lights change to the theatre. The actors assemble in costume. They wait for a moment. Then STALIN appears, with handlers. The audience grows silent. The actors stand and salute him. He sits. The lights fade on them.)

Here you must use your imagination. The grand Moscow Art Theatre, two thousand seats, all filled with the elite of the city, opulent, the jewel of the empire, the stage a hundred feet across, the actors, dozens of them, trained for months, no expense spared, and in the back, the writer, pacing and nibbling on his fingernails. It was a grand night, my friends, emotions rocked the audience, men wept openly, women fainted, this man fell in love with a woman who sat three rows in front of him, this couple went home afterwards and made passionate love which resulted in the first of their nine children, and the finale, the end, the glorious, culmination of the ecstasy in the theatre?

(Lights shift to IVAN, SVETLANA, and others performing the final moments of the play.)

IVAN

We're alive… yes we're all together again…

(distant gunfire)

SVETLANA

Surely not more fighting?

ACTOR

No! That's a salute!

(The "internationale" begins to play.)

IVAN

Do you hear that gentlemen? The reds are coming!

SVETLANA

At last!

ACTOR

This has only been the prologue. Tomorrow… is a new day.

(the lights fade. No one moves. STALIN slowly stands. The AUDIENCE holds its breath. He begins to clap. The audience claps with him. THUNDEROUS cheers from everyone. Lights fade on him as MIKHAIL enters backstage, searching for NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO.)

MIKHAIL

You gutless son of a bitch.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

The audience loved it, Misha.

MIKHAIL

It's not what I wrote, you ass.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Stalin himself was here. Did you see?

MIKHAIL

I saw him. I saw him watching that trite piece of garbage you tacked—

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Did you want to see it performed?

MIKHAIL

Not this way! Neutered like an unwanted dog!

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
It would not have passed otherwise! There would be no play without my ending!

MIKHAIL
With your ending there is no play!

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
You want me to remove it? I'll take it off, see how quickly the censors descend on us. See how fast this production is cancelled. We have a hit, Mikhail.
(a boisterous and happy crowd gathers.)

GUEST 1 *(outside)*
Where is Bulgakov?!

GUEST 2 *(outside)*
Where is the master?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
There will be other plays to mete out the unsparing truth.
(MIKHAIL turns his back on them and turns to the cheering crowd.)

GUEST 3
A triumph!

GUEST 4
Seventeen curtain calls!

GUEST 1
Twelve of them by Stalin himself!

GUEST 2
My God I nearly died tonight!

GUEST 3
My wife is in love with you comrade!
(LYUBOV sweeps in on him.)

LYUBOV
Tell your wife to go to Hell, the master is mine!

GUEST 3
I tell her to go to Hell most nights, Ma'am. She doesn't listen!
(laughs and applause from the crowd. Music.)

GUEST 4
Someone get this man a drink! Why is there no vodka in his hand?

LYUBOV

That was incredible, darling. The crowd was in awe.

GUEST 1

Comrade, if I may trouble you for a moment, I have written a play myself –

GUEST 2

Damn it leave him alone!

GUEST 4

I have heard, comrade, that you are the most exquisite interpreter of your own work. The actors swear to it.

IVAN

It's true!

SVETLANA

He plays my part better than I could myself!

LYUBOV *(laughing)*

This begins to worry me.

GUEST 4

I would be honored, comrade, if you could read a scene for us.

GUEST 2

He's no trained monkey you idiot!

GUEST 3

Leave the master alone!

GUEST 1

I'd like to see the scene with Yeleina and the captain.

LYUBOV

A love scene!

GUEST 4

Please, Mikhail Afanasievich!

THE FOREIGNER

We'll come back to this later.

(lights dim on the party.)

The remarkable ascent of Mikhail Bulgakov was not yet finished. In the space of two years, three more plays appeared, each one an explosion, each one a glorious re-imagination of what was possible in the theatre.

(the dismal apartment is transformed. Fine furniture is brought it. An expensive fur coat is draped over Lyubov's shoulders. They glitter.)

Crowds flocked to every performance. Royalties poured in. It was said in some jealous circles that he had made a deal with the Devil. Untrue. With any great writer, of course, there were those who grumbled and disagreed. They were called critics.

(lights up on LUNACHARSKAYA, typing.)

LUNACHARSKAYA

Citizens, last night I had the misfortune to attend a scurrilous and ugly lump of would-be drama, *Day of the Turbins,* written by a man who is no friend of our nation, Mikhail Bulgakov. Not content with slanderous lies against the heroes of the revolution, he turns his simian eye to the enemies of the Russian people, the tsarists, who –

THE FOREIGNER

But who cares what she thinks?

(he claps his hands and the sound of applause drowns her out.)

Unfortunately.

(one of the guests transforms into a CRITIC.)

LUNACHARSKAYA

This new comedy of Bulgakov's, *Zoyka's Apartment*, is a treatise on the habits of prostitutes, fine subject matter for such a gutter-dweller. This play is a hunk of excrement thrown at the face of decent society

CRITIC #2 *(overlapping)*

Barely rising above the level of pornography, this miserable comedy is pure rubbish. I would rather eat my own dog than view another one of these theatrical experiments.

(the FOREIGNER claps his hands again, and louder applause drowns them out.)

(another guest transforms into a CRITIC.)

LUNACHARSKAYA

The Crimson Island is nothing but a thinly veiled attack on communism—how much of this Bulgakovism must we endure? Can we dare to allow this man to continue to preach his madness from every streetcorner?

CRITIC #2 *(overlapping)*

Fellow comrades, he is not one of us, he is a traitor, he sits on the sidelines and points to the progress being made and shudders

CRITIC #3 *(overlapping)*

A cancer of the brain must be cut out before the patient can hope to recover

(Again, the FOREIGNER summons APPLAUSE to defeat them A fourth CRITIC appears.)

LUNARCHARSKY

Bulgakov's latest odium, Flight, is infantile, puerile, counter-revolutionary in nature, a boil on the ass of -

CRITIC #2

I would rather eat my friend's dog than watch another bothersome drama like -

CRITIC #3

The only thing to do with Bulgakov is to take a basin and smash him in the head with it.

CRITIC #4

Citizens, he is not one of us. He will never be one of us. There is no place for him here.

(The FOREIGNER is about to summon applause again when an AUDIENCE MEMBER leaps up.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER *(screaming)*

TRAITOR!

(MIKHAIL steps out of the theatre, pulling his coat around him. LUNACHARSKAYA intercepts him.)

LUNACHARSKYA

There you are.

MIKHAIL

You wanted to see me?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Please, comrade Bulgakov. Allow me to take you to lunch.

MIKHAIL

No thank you.

LUNACHARSKAYA

It is the least I can do for one of your extraordinary talent.

MIKHAIL

You have done a fine job extolling my extraordinary talent in the papers.

LUNACHARSKAYA

I am a critic; I criticize. Think nothing of it.

MIKHAIL

What do you want with me?

Skipping Forward

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
Things are different now. The regime is growing paranoid. They think there are traitors behind every corner.

MIKHAIL
There aren't!

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
I know that. You know that.

MIKHAIL
My play does not make traitors.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
I agree with you completely.

MIKHAIL
Stage the play in secret.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
I cannot do that.

MIKHAIL
Move it then. Put it in another location.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
No, Mikhail.

MIKHAIL
Play it in the street then. People will come.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
The police will come.

MIKHAIL
So?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
You want to be arrested? Be thankful they just banned your work.

MIKHAIL
Why do we do this then? There is power here, yes? Let me tell you – I was in Kiev through the revolution –

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO
I know this –

MIKHAIL

Just listen to me. All I tried to do was stay alive. First the whites were there, then the Ukrainians, then the reds, over and over, every month the damn city changed hands. I was just a doctor – I offered my services to whoever was in charge. It didn't matter to me who. And so… there was a child who lived on my street, a boy of about six named Kolya, and his father had been an officer, he was killed – so Kolya lived alone with his mother and they were – we were all living hand-to-mouth then we gave them what we could, but he was close to starving. I used to read stories to him… he didn't know anything, he was just a child – one day he asked two red soldiers for something to eat… I was in my apartment, I could see the street from where I was – one of the soldiers, he was barely more than a child himself – he took a knife… they cut him – they cut him to pieces in the middle of the day. I watched. I watched as that child died in the road. I said nothing – the shout died in my throat. The soldiers moved on. Why does a man have a voice if not to use it?

(pause)

The only strength I could summon was to write it down. I swore to myself I would not be silent forever. All you need to do, Vladimir, is have courage.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I am sorry. I cannot help you.

(lights change.)

LUNACHARKSAYA *(writing)*

Dear citizens, today it is my pleasure to write the literary obituary of one M. A. Bulgakov, whose nefarious plays have finally and justifiably vanished. Our city breathes a collective sigh of relief. I will waste no more ink on that pig.

(MIKHAIL returns to his apartment.)

THE FOREIGNER

A man lives but by a thread, his prosperity mere illusion, and when that guise is lifted, how swift our descent into the abyss.

(The FOREIGNER summons a group of MEN who rework the apartment, removing the expensive items and replacing everything with shoddy furniture.)

(Voices of producers from off-stage.)

PRODUCER 1

It is with great dismay that I must write to you today

PRODUCER 2 *(overlapping)*

If you look at our contract, you will note that in paragraph six, subparagraph d, it clearly states that if a play is banned by the authorities, the author is required to remit the full value of his advance

PRODUCER 3 *(overlapping)*

The sudden removal of your play has left us with financial obligations which you are responsible—

PRODUCER 4 *(overlapping)*
You knowingly and with extreme malice perpetrated a fraud on this theatre

PRODUCER 1 *(overlapping)*
Our debts must be repaid

PRODUCER 2 *(overlapping)*
The sum of 1,000 rubles

PRODUCER 3 *(overlapping)*
Our budgets have been devised to account for

PRODUCER 4 *(overlapping)*
Knowing full well the risk you were exposing our theatre to
(The FOREIGNER holds up his hand and they are silent.)

THE FOREIGNER
And so, in the ruins of his life, Mikhail took his first steps… toward immortality.
(MIKHAIL is writing.)

LYUBOV
What is it about?

MIKHAIL
Pontius Pilate.

LYUBOV
Do you think it's likely it will see the stage?

MIKHAIL
It's a novel, not a play.

LYUBOV
Oh. Do you think it will pass the censors?

MIKHAIL
Not a chance.

LYUBOV
Then how are we to make any money from it? Misha? How are we to make any money from it if it's never going to see the light of day?

MIKHAIL

Not everything is mercenary, Lyuba.

LYUBOV

Perhaps you could take a break from that and write something that will pass the censors. You have legions of fans out there. Strike now while they remember your name. Just –

MIKHAIL

I can't do that.

LYUBOV

We can't pay the rent, Misha. Do you hear me we can't pay the rent.

MIKHAIL

Could you give me a moment please?

LYUBOV

We can't pay the goddamn rent.

MIKHAIL

Just give me a moment –

LYUBOV

Why don't you ever listen to me?

MIKHAIL

You say the same damn thing every time you open your mouth.

LYUBOV

Then respond!

MIKHAIL

What do you want from me? They won't let my plays be produced –

LYUBOV

Then write something else! They haven't banned you, they've banned your plays – you need to -

MIKHAIL

That is banning me!

LYUBOV

We will be evicted. Do you want us to live on the street?

(lights change to the theatre.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I'm afraid we don't have any places open for a new show.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps we could do a commission then. You could give me the subject matter and I could -

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Our finances are not… you understand.

MIKHAIL

I've made this theatre a lot of money.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I know.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps I could write a new play that –

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

You are a very gifted writer. The best, I believe. But…

MIKHAIL

Please, Vladimir.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

We cannot produce your work.

MIKHAIL

Forget it then. What if I… you know my skills as an actor –

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

You are an excellent actor.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps you could hire me as an actor then.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I hadn't considered you for our repertory before.

MIKHAIL

Consider me now. I'm a quick study, I used to do a bit of acting when I was much younger.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I cannot just hire actors.

MIKHAIL

Maybe I could audition.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

We hold auditions in the spring.

MIKHAIL

You could hold a special audition.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

Mikhail, no.

MIKHAIL

The spring then?

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I cannot hire you.

MIKHAIL

Did someone tell you this? Maybe it only applied to my work as a writer -

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I cannot hire you.

MIKHAIL

I need money, Vladimir.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I could give you a small loan.

MIKHAIL

A salary of some kind. What if I was – what if I worked as a janitor? I could be hired under a different name, work at night – no one would know I was here.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I don't think that would work.

MIKHAIL

I'm begging you.

NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

No.

(MIKHAIL slinks back home to LYUBOV.)

MIKHAIL

They mean to starve me. No Siberia for me. They'll make Moscow Siberia and freeze me to death right here on the street. You have friends in Paris, yes?

LYUBOV

It's been years since I've been there.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps they could help us.

LYUBOV

How?

MIKHAIL

We could leave the country.

LYUBOV

No no no -

MIKHAIL

The bastards were right. There is no future here for me. Russia belongs to the rats. But if we escape, we could start over –

LYUBOV

Listen to yourself.

MIKHAIL

We could appeal to your friends, they could take us in for a time.

LYUBOV

I don't think so.

MIKHAIL

Surely some of them have some money. We would pay them back –

LYUBOV

No, Misha, this is crazy. You're not going to flee the country. Be serious.

MIKHAIL

They're going to starve us.

LYUBOV

We'd starve if we left!

MIKHAIL

All we have to do is make it to France -

LYUBOV

That's impossible.

MIKHAIL

Come on! We'd simply need to –

LYUBOV

I have no friends in Paris.

MIKHAIL

What?

LYUBOV

There's no one there that can help us.

MIKHAIL

But we can –

LYUBOV

Misha. I was a governess in Paris. I didn't – I didn't have any money there, I don't have any rich friends - I don't – I'm sorry. It was all fiction.

MIKHAIL

You—you lied to me?

LYUBOV

I told you stories, that's all. They were things I'd read in the papers. My cousin introduced me like I was some kind of socialite and that's what I thought you wanted – you wanted to believe it.

MIKHAIL

You never thought the truth would be important?

LYUBOV

It's the past. This is the present. Who cares if I was a governess? I made you laugh, didn't I? I always thought you saw right through me.

MIKHAIL

No.

LYUBOV

Perhaps because you have always been more interested in yourself than in me.

MIKHAIL

Not true.

LYUBOV

You liked the way I looked next to you. I'm not going back to France. I'm not going to be a refugee. I've had enough of being poor in my life.

MIKHAIL

Well what do you expect me to do then?

LYUBOV

I can't live like this.

MIKHAIL

They don't mean us to live like this, they're trying to –

LYUBOV

Just stop talking for a minute and listen to me.

(pause.)

I don't want to live a life of hardship, do you understand? My soul is weak. So… you can go on whatever journey you feel is necessary, I will not be there with you.

MIKHAIL

Have you met someone else?

(Pause.)

LYUBOV

I would like a divorce. Let's part friends, shall we?

(no response.)

Mikhail. This is for the best.

MIKHAIL

How much of it was lies?

LYUBOV

I don't intend on starving.

MIKHAIL

Did you love me?

LYUBOV

Often.

(Lights change. She leaves. MIKHAIL sits at the desk.)

THE FOREIGNER

And what was it our dear friend wrote then? Was it a page from his new, most glorious work? A suicide note perhaps? A letter to Tatiana, whom he had abandoned for this very different woman?

(The FOREIGNER takes the letter.)

To the Soviet Government:

I appeal to your sense of mercy and duty. I am denied every opportunity to support myself, denied the simplest and most menial of occupations. I appeal to you, in your kindness and wisdom, to allow me to leave this country so that I might follow my life elsewhere. There is nothing for me in the Soviet Union but destitution, the street, and death. M. Bulgakov.

(MIKHAIL looks at it, takes out a match and sets fire to it.)

Ah, but some things are not burned so easily, are they?

(THE FOREIGNER blows it out and folds it into his coat. MIKHAIL returns momentarily to his desk, shivers, then puts some water on to boil. He begins to rummage through his things, tossing out garbage and other useless items until he discovers what he needs: a syringe.)

An old friend. Morphine. Perhaps a few rubles for the wedding ring? Enough for one final taste? But as our hero was on his way to meet his death, he had a most extraordinary vision.

(MIKHAIL spots THE FOREIGNER.)

MIKHAIL

Who are you?

THE FOREIGNER

I believe you know who I am.

MIKHAIL

What do you want with me?

THE FOREIGNER

I wanted to let you know that I have read your novel.

MIKHAIL

Which novel?

THE FOREIGNER

The one you are about to write.

MIKHAIL

What the devil are you talking about?

(The FOREIGNER removes a thickly bound manuscript from the folds of his overcoat.)

THE FOREIGNER

I found it enthralling, beautiful, and laced with a touch of such hopefulness that it made my soul smile. I have to say to you: this is my favorite novel ever. Which is why I plan on helping you now.

MIKHAIL

How can you possibly—what could you do?

THE FOREIGNER

That letter you wrote—

MIKHAIL

Foolishness. I burned it.

THE FOREIGNER

I'm afraid not. I mailed it for you. That's all.

(The PHONE rings.)

THE FOREIGNER

I'd answer that if I were you. It might be important.

(The FOREIGNER exits. The PHONE rings. It rings again. It rings again. Shaking, MIKHAIL answers it.)

(Pool of light on STALIN, on the phone.)

STALIN

Mikhail Afaniesivich Bulgakov?

MIKHAIL

Yes?

STALIN

This is Joseph Stalin.

(short pause.)

MIKHAIL

General Secretary?

STALIN

I take it we are not amusing you?

MIKHAIL

I'm sorry?

STALIN

You are not amused by your treatment?

MIKHAIL

Comrade General Secretary, I cannot find work. My plays are banned. My novels are banned.

STALIN

Have you tried applying for a job at the Moscow Art Theatre?

MIKHAIL

I have, comrade, no one will hire me, I have—

STALIN

Why don't you apply again?

MIKHAIL

No one will take me—

STALIN

Why don't you apply again?

MIKHAIL

I'll apply again.

STALIN

You do that.

(Pause.)

MIKHAIL

Thank you.

STALIN

I have done nothing. By the way: Day of the Turbins was a great play.

MIKHAIL

Thank you comrade.

STALIN

First-rate. Good-bye.

MIKHAIL

Good-bye.

(MIKHAIL hangs up the phone.)

(Lights up on STANISLAVSKY, at a desk.)

STANISLAVSKY

I am Stanislavsky. I think you'll make a fine assistant director, my friend.

(Lights down. End of Act one.)

Act Two

(light up on the apartment. It has grown dirtier, perhaps. The light is fainter.)

THE FOREIGNER

Now let us begin the second half of our tale. Our hero had reached the pinnacle of stardom, then was reduced to the trashheap, and was tossed one last sliver of life, a toehold to the world. Here we are in the year of our lord 1930 – he lives alone with a black cat the size of a small automobile –

(GRUBBY WOMAN is shouting at her husband off-stage. Banging noises.)

I see the neighbors are at it again.

GRUBBY WOMAN

I'll cut your goddamn throat! You cheat!

THE FOREIGNER

Let's not listen to her. So here he sits, curiously scribbling one more play. Now as you recall, he had recently been offered a job by none other than Konstantin Stanislavsky himself.

(light up on STANISLAVKSY.)

Look at him. Jesus. Ah I see his name rings a bell with a few of you in the audience. Yes, it is none other than the founder of the theatrical method, the spiritual father of Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, and Sean Penn, who I have been employing for several years now. In these days he was a towering figure in the Moscow theatrical scene and a complete jackass. We'll get back to him in a minute.

We must make a small digression back in time first. There is one more player in this story we must introduce, perhaps the most important one of all.

(lights up on the apartment of YELENA.)

Her name was Yelena Sergeyevna. At the age of nineteen she had married the dashing Captain Yevgeny Shilovsky, a man who had gained renown during the second Revolution. He was admired by all who knew him, and their apartment comprised the entire upper floor of a stately building. Yelena's husband was devoted to her, they had produced two lovely children, and her life was the envy of all her friends.

(YELENA enters.)

And yet… and yet. There was a feeling that overtook her, in the moonlit glow of a solitary night, when a well of darkness opened inside her, and all happiness and light was but an illusion. On these nights she would take to wandering.

(The scene shifts to a brightly lit literary party.)

As so it turned out, that one summer night in 1927, she arrived at a most fortuitous place: a party.

(the GUESTS, including LYUBOV surround MIKHAIL.)

GUEST 3

My wife is in love with you comrade!

(LYUBOV sweeps in on him.)

LYUBOV
Tell your wife to go to Hell, the master is mine!

GUEST 3
I tell her to go to Hell most nights, Ma'am. She doesn't listen!
(laughs and applause from the crowd. Music.)

GUEST 4
Someone get this man a drink! Why is there no vodka in his hand?

LYUBOV
That was incredible, darling. The crowd was in awe.

GUEST 1
Comrade, if I may trouble you for a moment, I have written a play myself –

GUEST 2
Damn it leave him alone!

GUEST 4
I have heard, comrade, that you are the most exquisite interpreter of your own work. The actors swear to it.

IVAN
It's true!

SVETLANA
He plays my part better than I could myself!

LYUBOV *(laughing)*
This begins to worry me.

GUEST 4
I would be honored, comrade, if you could read a scene for us.

GUEST 2
He's no trained monkey you idiot!

GUEST 3
Leave the master alone!

GUEST 1
I'd like to see the scene with Yeleina and the captain.

LYUBOV

A love scene!

GUEST 4

Please, Mikhail Afanasievich!

MIKHAIL

You wish me to make love to myself then?

GUEST 1

Not in my apartment!

LYUBOV

Come on.

MIKHAIL

Who has a script?

GUEST 3

Someone get him a script!

GUEST 2

You don't have your own play memorized?

MIKHAIL

I'm a writer, not an actor. Who knows what I wrote?

GUEST 1

I am the same way. Every time I publish a novel, I look at it and think, who was the man who wrote that? How did those words manage to arrive on the page? It is like a trance—a hallucinatory state, you know?

(Someone returns with a script.)

GUEST 2

Shut up you old gasbag.

MIKHAIL

I have it. Here it is.

(MIKHAIL finds the right page.)

GUEST 1

Quiet everyone.

(MIKHAIL acts out the scene. Just as before, he is an exceptionally gifted actor. The effect is comic but extraordinary nonetheless.)

MIKHAIL

`This is really a nightmare, all these dirty plates. Everyone drunk…

GUEST 2

This is just like this party.

LYUBOV

Shhh!

MIKHAIL

My husband's left me.' `Listen, Lena, I love you very much. And I'm not going to let you go. You're going to be my wife.' `You slide up like a snake… like a snake.'

GUEST 1

Ha!

LYUBOV

Shh!

GUEST 2

There's your symbolism for you, Andrei!

MIKHAIL

`Why am I like a snake?' `Because you lead me into temptation. Go away, I'm drunk. And you got me drunk on purpose. You're notorious. The whole of your life is collapsing. Everything's falling apart, Leonid.' `Don't be afraid, Yeliena. I won't abandon you at a time like this. I'll stay beside you.' `Let me go.' `Leave him altogether and marry me. Will you divorce him?'

(Lights change. Everyone FREEZES except for YELENA. MIKHAIL is now speaking to her.)

YELENA

Me?

MIKHAIL

Don't be afraid, Yeleina. Don't be afraid. I won't abandon you at a time like this. I love you very much. And I'm not going to let you go. You're going to be my wife.

YELENA

I…

(Lights back to normal. MIKHAIL resumes the role of YELENA.)

MIKHAIL

`Oh to hell with everything!'

(MIKHAIL's two characters kiss.)

(The guests applaud. YELENA stands apart.)

Skipping Forward

MIKHAIL
Former enemy of the revolution. Current non-entity.

YELENA
I'm sorry to hear that.

MIKHAIL
But I shall rise again. Like Christ. Or a corpse in the river.

YELENA
That sounds quite positive.

MIKHAIL
Both are dead. Perhaps it's prophetic.

YELENA
May I ask you a question?

MIKHAIL
Of course.

YELENA
Why are you following me?

MIKHAIL
Because when I saw you I realized that I have loved you my entire life.
(short pause)

YELENA
Do you think I'm some silly girl who will flop into bed with you at the drop of a line?

MIKHAIL
Truthfully? I hope so.

YELENA
I have two children.

MIKHAIL
Don't bring them. They might be shocked and horrified. And if they weren't shocked and horrified, I'd be quite worried about them.

YELENA
You're awfully vulgar.

MIKHAIL
It's one of the reasons I've been banned, apparently.

YELENA

Goodbye Comrade.

MIKHAIL

I meant what I said.

YELENA

I'm sure you did.

(She exits. MIKHAIL watches her leave.)

THE FOREIGNER

And on the next day.

(YELENA returns. MIKHAIL spots her. They look at each other.)

MIKHAIL

Tell me your name.

YELENA

Why do you think I'm lonely?

MIKHAIL

Tell me your name and I'll tell you.

YELENA

No deal. I want the knowledge first.

MIKHAIL

You don't believe me? Or you do believe me?

YELENA

Whether or not I believe you isn't the point. I want to know why you think that way.

MIKHAIL

I'm quite perceptive.

YELENA

I'm a married woman.

MIKHAIL

Marriage is the most isolating predicament of them all.

YELENA

Is it?

MIKHAIL

I've been married twice before.

YELENA

You're an expert then. And how many of those were the love of your life?

MIKHAIL

One.

YELENA

One out of two isn't bad.

MIKHAIL

When I look at you I see an ocean, a dark, sunless expanse of water, unbounded on every horizon—and that water is a dream unfulfilled, unguessed at even, a life completely unknown to you which still causes you to ache at its absence. You are not who you were meant to be.

YELENA

All that from the way that I walk?

MIKHAIL

I recognize the walk. It's the same as my own.

YELENA

Are you so desperately sad as well?

MIKHAIL

I told you I am the living dead.

YELENA

You are getting on quite well for a dead man.

MIKHAIL

Appearances are deceiving.

YELENA

I suppose they are. Goodbye, Mikhail.

MIKHAIL

Goodbye.

(She leaves. The lights shift. YELENA waits. MIKHAIL enters.)

MIKHAIL

Would you object if I put you into my new novel?

YELENA

What is it about?

MIKHAIL

The Devil.

YELENA

Well, in that case then. Be my guest.

MIKHAIL

What name should I give you in my story?

YELENA

If you were to give me a name, what would it be?

MIKHAIL

Let's see…
(he studies her.)
You are no Anna.

YELENA

Of course not. Anna is far too young and simple.

MIKHAIL

You are a woman of experience in the world.

YELENA

Should I be offended at that?

MIKHAIL

At your experience? I suppose that depends on what your experiences have been.

YELENA

Rather pedestrian, I'm afraid.

MIKHAIL

No, you strike me as someone with an exotic soul.

YELENA

An exotic lonely soul, no doubt.

MIKHAIL

True. I will name your character Margarita.

YELENA

Margarita?

MIKHAIL
Would it offend you terribly if she appears naked quite often?

YELENA
Would it offend me if in your novel about the devil I appear naked?

MIKHAIL
I assure you it's quite literary.

YELENA
Is my character in Hell?

MIKHAIL
Not at all. The Devil is loose in Moscow.

YELENA
And what is he doing in Moscow?

MIKHAIL
Vacationing. He's heard it's fun.

YELENA
I think propriety demands that my character be clothed.

MIKHAIL
Oh no, it's a very proper nudity.

YELENA
Is it with my husband then?

MIKHAIL
Doubtful.

YELENA
This seems like an entirely wicked story.

MIKHAIL
On the contrary, it will be the most beautiful love story ever written.

YELENA
About me?

MIKHAIL
Yes.

YELENA

I thought you were a playwright.

MIKHAIL

My plays are too dangerous to be performed.

YELENA

Ha. I thought they were wonderful.

MIKHAIL

They were. But now I have a novel; it's all I have left.

YELENA

I suppose you want me to come over to your apartment so that you might show it to me.

MIKHAIL

That sounds like a terrific idea. How about tomorrow?

YELENA

I think that would be wrong. Don't you?

MIKHAIL

No.

YELENA

Goodbye, Mikhail.

MIKHAIL

Goodbye, Margarita.

(Lights change to MIKHAIL's dingy apartment. While the FOREIGNER speaks, YELENA and MIKHAIL fall into bed together.)

THE FOREIGNER

For those of you who worry about our hero's immortal soul, rest assured that his passion for this woman was the most proper, the most sacred, the most god-fearing –

(a tossed article of clothing lands on him)

For she was a woman of breeding and taste, a married mother of two who would never dream of –

(another tossed article of clothing strikes him.)

Oh godamnit! You're like a couple of rabbits.

(They separate in post-coital bliss.)

YELENA

Yelena.

MIKHAIL

Ah. I should have known.

(Lights shift to the Moscow Art Theatre and STANISLAVSKY, holding a script.)

THE FOREIGNER

Things were beginning to look up. No I didn't mean it that way. You have such sordid minds. I mean theatrically, of course. In between bouts of work on his novel, Mikhail had finished one more play and the Moscow Art Theatre had cheerfully accepted it into their repertoire with the legend, Konstantin Stanislavsky slated to direct.

STANISLAVSKY

No no no no no no no. No. No! No. Nonononononononono.
(he takes a big, sniffling breath.)
This is not the script.

MIKHAIL

This is the script.

STANISLAVKSY

This is not the script.

MIKHAIL

No I'm afraid this is the script. I wrote it. I know what the script is.

STANISLAVSKY

You think you know what the script is.

MIKHAIL

No I'm quite confident I do in fact know what the script is.

STANISLAVSKY

Mikhail, you are a dear friend and we have agreed to do this play about Moliere because we love the project –
(pause)
But this is not the script.

MIKHAIL

What is wrong with it?

STANISLAVSKY

I have made a few brief notes.
(He takes out a thick stack of papers.)
This play in its current form will not pass the censors, because it is obviously about you and not about Moliere.

MIKHAIL

The play is about Moliere.

STANISLAVSKY

The play pretends to be about Moliere but is in reality about you. Every page I think Bulgakov – on this page, Bulgakov, on this page Bulgakov -

MIKHAIL

You know why you think that? Because I wrote the damn thing!

STANISLAVKSY

Yes but we cannot do a play about Bulgakov! We cannot do a play which seeks to link the French Court with Stalin, we cannot do a play in which the hero writer is killed by a shadowy conspiracy to keep his plays from exposing the truth – your play is a masquerade, and it will get us shut down, so I am telling you again that this is not the script.

MIKHAIL

I showed it to Nemirovich-Danchenko and –

STANISLAVKSY

Do not mention that apostate's name in my presence –

MIKHAIL

And he believed that it would pass –

STANISLAVSKY

And he believes that angels shit diamonds so what is your point? Do not show this play to that man, he is the Devil incarnate, do you hear me? This is my project. This script needs a complete rewrite.

(MIKHAIL takes the notes.)

(lights up on MIKHAIL's apartment and SHILOVSKY's apartment simultaneously.)

SHILOVSKY

Where were you?

YELENA

I went for a walk by Patriarch's Pond.

SHILOVSKY

You seem to go for a lot of walks lately. Is something troubling you?

MIKHAIL

He's the devil.

SHILOVSKY

Yelena?

YELENA

Hmm?

SHILOVSKY

Is something troubling you?

MIKHAIL

Rewrite this, rewrite this, eliminate the third act, what the hell does he think I am? `The play is about Bulgakov' of course it's about Bulgakov what the hell else would it be about?

SHILOVSKY

You know what I would like to do soon?

MIKHAIL

It's like I'm an errand boy! Fetch me more dramatic irony in act two! Bring me back a seven minute scene! Wash my underwear in act four!

YELENA

What's that?

SHILOVSKY

See a play.

(lights fade on SHILOVSKY's apartment and remain on MIKHAIL's.)

YELENA

Take a break, Misha.

MIKHAIL

That's what he tells the actors! Every ten minutes they take a break to rest their fucking spirits.

YELENA

Read to me from the novel.

MIKHAIL

I haven't added anything to it. My brain is full of blisters.

YELENA

I don't mind hearing the old stuff again.

MIKHAIL

All right.

YELENA

Tell me something: does the story end happily?

MIKHAIL

I'd hate to spoil the surprise.

YELENA

For Margarita at least?

MIKHAIL

Well… first she must leave her husband – leave him for the writer.

YELENA

But that is very difficult to do.

MIKHAIL

It is.

(Pause)

YELENA

Mikhail…

MIKHAIL

I think it's time. I love you very much.

YELENA

No.

MIKHAIL

No to what?

YELENA

I can't do it. I can't –

MIKHAIL

You have to have courage –

YELENA

He suspects us.

MIKHAIL

Your husband?

YELENA

He knows.

MIKHAIL

How does he know?

YELENA

I don't know. He makes these comments – it's like he's a spider, waiting in its web.

MIKHAIL

Tell him then.

YELENA

It's not so simple.

MIKHAIL

Why must we crawl around in the darkness?

YELENA

I have children, Misha.

MIKHAIL

Who you never see.

YELENA

Who I love very much.

MIKHAIL

Who have been taken from you—

YELENA

He'll do something terrible to them.

MIKHAIL

Bring them here.

YELENA

I don't have that kind of power. They're away at school, if he suspects I'm going to leave him he'll… He pretends not to be jealous, but he's a stormcloud gathering now, I can feel it when he touches me –

MIKHAIL

Please don't talk about –

YELENA

Who else can I say it to? You expect me to lose everything to be with you.

MIKHAIL

Listen to me: All these things that you imagine you'll lose, they don't exist. I know. They're just… ribbons around our lives but they mean nothing. I've already lost

everything and yet – these have been the happiest days of my life. I can't imagine any better existence then to wait in this tiny, humid little apartment, scratch out a few sentences and listen for your footsteps on the steps outside. I'm telling you I am resurrected. You have done this. The moments you're here with the sun streaming in and the sounds of the birds outside – it's all the beauty of the world shrunk down and solidified right here. And then you leave, and the door shuts, and I'm a sad failed person again.

YELENA

I cannot continue to do this.

MIKHAIL

You don't need to live in some marvelous apartment, you don't need –

YELENA

I have to end this. I'm so sorry Misha.

MIKHAIL

No no no, don't say that.

YELENA

I have to go.

MIKHAIL

No please God don't go.

YELENA

He knows about us.

MIKHAIL

Do you love me?

YELENA

You know that I do.

MIKHAIL

Do you love him?

YELENA

I love my children.

MIKHAIL

Do you love him?

YELENA

Why ask me? You know that answer.

MIKHAIL

Tell me.

YELENA

No I don't love him.

MIKHAIL

That's all you need to decide, isn't it?

YELENA

No it's not.

MIKHAIL

I'll find a way to get your boys here, we can all live together –

YELENA

He's a very powerful man, Misha, you can't possible hope to –

MIKHAIL

I have powerful friends too.

YELENA

Goodbye, Mikhail.

MIKHAIL

Please don't do this.

YELENA

I have to.

MIKHAIL

Please stay.

YELENA

I'm sorry.
(she gets up.)

MIKHAIL

When will I see you again?
(she leaves.)

(lights shift to SHILOVSKY's apartment.)

SHILOVSKY

Have you had a nice afternoon?

(she nods.)
A good walk today?

YELENA

…yes.

SHILOVSKY

I didn't hear you.

YELENA

I said yes.

SHILOVSKY

Good. Have you been crying?

YELENA

No.

SHILOVSKY

It makes your skin blotchy.

YELENA

I haven't been crying.

SHILOVSKY

You can tell me, you know.

YELENA

I miss the boys.

SHILOVSKY

Would you like to arrange a visit to go see them?

YELENA

I want them here with me.

SHILOVSKY

I don't think that would be best for them.

YELENA

I'm their mother.

SHILOVSKY

And you would coddle them too much.

YELENA

I want them to come home. We can find a school in Moscow.

SHILOVSKY

The best schools are in the country.

YELENA

There has to be something here –

SHILOVSKY

You're being a little hysterical about this.

YELENA

I'm not – I just want to be with them.

SHILOVSKY

I don't think so.

YELENA

But I –

SHILOVSKY

I don't think so. Enough. We can arrange a visit but they will remain in Nygorsk. If you fear they aren't receiving enough affection my sister is only a few miles away. She can provide anything they need. Now stop with this nonsense.

THE FOREIGNER

So here she remained – with him – and here he remained – alone. And so 1931 dawned a lonely, miserable year -

(lights shift to the rehearsal.)

(STANISLAVSKY, IVAN, SVETLANA and others are practicing a scene.)

STANISLAVSKY

Close your eyes. I want you to imagine you are a cup of water.

(IVAN imagines he is a cup of water.)

What kind of cup are you? Is there a silky film at the top of your glass? Yes… Think. You're not thinking about it.

IVAN

Yes I am.

STANISLAVSKY

No you are talking to me, you are not thinking about it. If you were thinking about it, you would be unable to talk because you would be a cup of water. Svetlana – yes. I now want you to imagine a tiny flame beneath your cup. First a tickle. Ivan that is terrible. And then

– is it a bubble? Yes. Coming to the surface? Pop. There it goes. Another? Could it be another? Stop. Stop. Ivan.

IVAN

Yes, Konstantin?

STANISLAVSKY

That was terrible.

IVAN

I am sorry.

STANISLAVSKY

Do not be sorry. Do it better.

SVETLANA

How was I, Konstantin?

STANISLAVSKY

You do not yet trust your talent, my dear. Take a break. We shall return to this tomorrow.
(MIKHAIL approaches as the actors take a break.)
We are making progress.

MIKHAIL

What does being a cup of water have to do with Moliere?

STANISLAVSKY

I think the connection is obvious. Now, Mikhail… the draft you sent me—

MIKHAIL

The script I sent you—

STANISLAVSKY

The draft—it… you continue to miss the mark. First, there are too many words—think of the unspoken—

MIKHAIL

I have already rewritten it four times. First you suggest one thing, then you suggest its opposite, where is the—

STANISLAVSKY

You need to transform act three and act four.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps we aren't communicating properly. I sent you a script and you believe I sent you an outline.

STANISLAVSKY

These are minor changes—

MIKHAIL

They are not minor changes, there is no such thing as a minor change with you—

STANISLAVSKY

Why are you raising your voice?

MIKHAIL

Because we have been supposedly rehearsing my play for six months and you seem to be preparing the actors to *drink themselves*!

STANISLAVSKY

This is a legitimate technique –

MIKHAIL

Here's a technique! This is a script! Learn your damn lines!

(IVAN and SVETLANA slink off.)

STANISLAVSKY

I do not want their minds poisoned by an incomplete draft.

MIKHAIL

It's complete! The draft is complete!

STANISLAVSKY

I do not agree. You are the writer. You are inside the play right now. You cannot see its whole.

MIKHAIL

Yes I do.

STANISLAVSKY

Let me put it to you this way: If you would like to have it performed, you will make the changes.

THE FOREIGNER

And did our hero stand up for the truth of artistic expression? Did he tell this man to go to Hell and take his theatre with him? No. He did not do that. He returned to his miserable apartment, gritted his teeth, and tore the heart out of it.

(MIKHAIL returns to his play.)

And every day he would walk the same street where he once met the love of his life, and wait on the corner, and he would look this way and that, and he would hope that he might see her…

(MIKHAIL waits on the corner.)
Months passed. Rehearsals continued. And still…
(YELENA approaches behind him.)

YELENA
Excuse me? You seem to be the loneliest person I have ever seen.
(he turns to her.)
I would like to know the end of your novel, if you don't mind.

MIKHAIL
I haven't finished it.

YELENA
You should.
(she kisses him.)

THE FOREIGNER
Captain Yevgeny Shilovsky was not pleased to hear the news that he was about to be divorced. But this man here is not a monster, as much as we would like to believe that. He was simply a man in love with his wife. He did not strike her. He did not torment her. He did not allow her to see her children either. And he sank into a great despair worthy of a Russian novel.
(lights shift to rehearsal. MIKHAIL watches and says nothing.)

STANISLAVSKY
I want you to imagine that you are eating a bowl of soup. It's savory. The best bowl of soup you have ever tasted. Take your spoon, lift it—Ivan, what are you doing?

IVAN
I'm not sure I understand.

STANISLAVSKY
You are not seeing the soup.

IVAN
I saw the soup. I did.

STANISLAVSKY
I did not see you seeing the soup.

THE FOREIGNER
One year passed. Then two.
(MIKHAIL continues to watch rehearsal.)

STANISLAVSKY
Your character is four years old. I want you to –

THE FOREIGNER
Three years of rehearsal. Four years of rehearsal. Five.

STANISLAVSKY
Ivan you are a squirrel today.

THE FOREIGNER
Luckily for Mikhail life with his new bride, well, formerly new bride, now quite established, was blissful. Despite his difficulties in the theatre, despite the psychic toll it took on his own writing, he remained in a state of happiness – I know, many of you will find this strange in Russia, but he was happy and content –

MIKHAIL
Do the fucking play!

STANISLAVSKY
Could you excuse us for a moment?

IVAN
Of course. Am I still a squirrel?

MIKHAIL
No you are not a squirrel you are a man.

STANISLAVSKY
Take a break.
(IVAN and SVETLANA retire.)
I sense that you are getting upset.

MIKHAIL
How perceptive of you.

STANISLAVSKY
There are a few changes to the script I would like to discuss with you.
(he hands the script to MIKHAIL)
These lines need to go.

MIKHAIL
Nothing is permitted? Is that it?
(pause.)
Take it out then.

THE FOREIGNER
And then, after six years, miraculously, the play was scheduled for performance.

Skipping Forward

ZAYTSEV

I, Anatoly Zaytsev, confess to being part of a vast conspiracy designed to undermine the sovereignty of the Soviet Union. I was approached by Trotskyites and was instructed to place coded messages in the novels I published, giving instructions to my co-conspirators…

(the GUARD shoots ZAYTSEV in the back of the head.)

(Lights on ZAYTSEV's wife.)

ZAYTSEV'S WIFE

I was the linchpin of the organization, I await whatever punishment -

(the GUARD shoots her in the back of the head.)

(lights on IVAN.)

IVAN

My performances were intended to give secret messages to those in the audience – I confess to being part of a –

(the GUARD shoots IVAN in the back of the head.)

(lights on SHILOVSKY)

SHILOVSKY

I, Yevgeny Shilovsky, have been a traitor to the nation. I have sabotaged…

(the GUARD strikes him and he continues.)

I have personally sabotaged the development of the Soviet Army… I have conspired to murder the General Secretary… I have… I am guilty.

(the GUARD shoots SHILOVSKY in the back of the head.)

(Lights down on them.)

(lights up dimly now on the apartment. YELENA is on the phone.)

YELENA

Thank you.

(she hangs up.)

MIKHAIL

Well?

YELENA

The children are safe. They're staying with his aunt in Smolensk.

MIKHAIL

Is there no hope for him?

YELENA

They printed his confession in the paper today. They plan on murdering him. They were holding him at the Novibrankya Prison. Would you mind if I tried to see him?

MIKHAIL

Of course not.

YELENA

If he's still alive.

MIKHAIL

Why arrest him?

YELENA

He was intelligent and good at his job. That's why. A threat. The serpent is eating its own tail.

MIKHAIL

Let's hope it eats its own head.

(YELENA is after him quickly.)

YELENA *(a fierce whisper)*

Don't be an idiot. They have ears everywhere.

(he nods)

MIKHAIL

Do you think the boys are safe?

YELENA

They're at school. They're the sons of a traitor now.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps you could send for them –

YELENA

I don't want them here.

MIKHAIL

We could make space –

YELENA

There's no space! What could we feed them?

MIKHAIL

Perhaps there is a way –

YELENA

Misha. They weren't with Yevgeny when he was taken. That's why they live. Smolensk is a good place for them.

MIKHAIL

So far away?

YELENA

Why are you being so dense?

MIKHAIL

I don't understand.

YELENA

If they were here, and something happened… to you… how would that look? The sons of a traitor and the stepsons of a… I don't want them to be here if they come for you.

(MIKHAIL nods.)

(pause.)

MIKHAIL

Let's not talk about that.

YELENA

I'm sorry.

MIKHAIL

I find myself as surprised as you are. Men have been killed for reporting the wrong weather.

(there's a knock at the door. YELENA and MIKHAIL freeze.)

(wordlessly, MIKHAIL hides the scraps of the novel he's been working on.)

(Another knock, louder this time.)

(YELENA opens the door. MARTA, a neighbor, is there.)

MARTA

Yelena Sergeyevna. Mikhail Afaniasievich.

YELENA *(not really letting her in.)*

Marta. How are you?

MARTA

How is anyone. A miserable day today, wasn't it?

YELENA

I can't wait for spring.

MARTA

And how are you Mikhail?

YELENA

He is not well.

MARTA

So sorry to hear that. Are you working on a new play?

YELENA

He no longer writes.

MARTA

Probably for the best. Such trouble with the plays.

YELENA

Do you need anything?

MARTA

I was wondering if you had any tea I could have?

YELENA

Of course. Stay right there. Mikhail is quite contagious.

MARTA

What is your sickness, Mikhail? I hear many people in Moscow are ill these days. Perhaps you should see the doctor.

MIKHAIL

I'll see the doctor when I'm better.

(YELENA returns with some tea.)

MARTA

I heard about your old husband. Such a shame. And you never knew it was going on under your own roof, I suppose?

YELENA

It was a shock to me.

MARTA

Of course.

YELENA

Goodbye Marta.

MARTA

You need to keep alert, you know? I hear there are traitors everywhere.

YELENA

We'll keep our eyes peeled.

MARTA

I've heard the theatre is a hotbed of it.

YELENA

Goodbye.

MARTA

I'm a little short on money these days.

YELENA

We have nothing to give you. Now go.

MARTA

No need to be rude.
(she exits. YELENA locks the door behind her.)

YELENA

Bitch. She'd condemn her own cat.

MIKHAIL

They'll be arresting cats next.
(YELENA sits heavily. She kicks at something.)
It's all right, Lena.
(he approaches her.)

YELENA

Devils everywhere they're –

MIKHAIL

We're still here. I'm still here.

YELENA

They're going to –

MIKHAIL

They're not going to take me.
(pause)

Should I read to you from the novel?

YELENA

Please. It's the only thing that keeps me going.

MIKHAIL

This will change one day.

YELENA

I can't let myself believe that.

MIKHAIL

The fire will burn itself out. It has to. And we'll grow old together. No, we will both be old one day.

YELENA

Stop. Read the story.

MIKHAIL

And there will be sunlight and a soft breeze, and we will never speak of these days. You will see. I see such things in the future, my love. Such bright and wonderful days ahead of us.

YELENA

You're being ridiculous now.

MIKHAIL

You'll see. People will read this novel on every street corner and say, "by God he was right all along." Don't you believe that?

YELENA

I can believe anything you say.

MIKHAIL

There's the fool I married.

YELENA

And what else does the future hold if your vision is correct?

MIKHAIL

Apples.

YELENA

Apples?

MIKHAIL

Apple trees. Fields of them. We shall live out in the country somewhere and in the fall you will find those apples – and bring them home to us – I'll become like Tolstoy and grow a beard below the waist – won't wear clothes any more, just wrap it around myself like a grey blanket while I sit on the porch –

YELENA

Contemplating your next great work, no doubt?

MIKHAIL

Oh I will be finished then. Mostly it will be nude compositions of poetry. And thinking of the past. Old friends. And the surprise of that one masterpiece.

YELENA

Show me.

MIKHAIL

Page 102. the Devil's banquet.

THE FOREIGNER

It was quite a harvest in those years.

(gunshots)

So many taken away. So many people extinguished. We were quite in awe of him, I have to say. We always knew his potential, but to have it so displayed – well, Mikhail was quite sure they were coming for him. Every day he waited. Expecting to hear it. Every day another one of his associates vanished – and yet he still waited, until –

(there's a loud knock at the door. MIKHAIL begins to feverishly hide the writing.)

MIKHAIL

One moment.

(another knock, more insistent.)

One moment I –

(two NKVD officers enter.)

NKVD OFFICER 1

You are Mikhail Afaniesivich Bulgakov?

MIKHAIL

I must write a note for my wife.

NKVD OFFICER 1

You are him?

MIKHAIL

Please let me –

NKVD OFFICER 2

Wait here.

THE FOREIGNER

And what was he writing?

(takes the paper.)

I love you. Perhaps the truest thing he ever wrote.

(LUNACHARSKAYA enters.)

LUNACHARSKAYA

Comrade Bulgakov, how good it is to see you.

MIKHAIL

You?

LUNACHARSKAYA

I see you're surprised to see me.

MIKHAIL

It's –

LUNACHARSKAYA

Fortune has smiled upon me. I am now the People's Commisar of Enlightenment. You see, hard work and loyalty pays off.

MIKHAIL

They send you.

LUNACHARSKAYA

May I sit? It's as hot as Hell out there today.

MIKHAIL

I thought you didn't believe in Hell.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Well of course it's a bourgeois concept invented to keep the workers in line, but it has its uses as a metaphor. Please, sit down. Let's chat.

(the officers begin searching the apartment.)

Anatoly. Boris. Please. This man is not a criminal.

(They stop.)

In fact, could you please step out into the hallway?

(they walk into the hallway.)

You seem nervous. Is something troubling you?

MIKHAIL

A visit from the Chekists is usually bad news.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Only for those people who have done something wrong. You haven't done anything wrong, have you? Your plays, of course. That is true. But we take pride in allowing freedom of expression.

MIKHAIL

Ha.

LUNACRHASKAYA

Can't help yourself, can you?

MIKHAIL

Are you here to arrest me or not?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Why would I be here to arrest you? Please. You are a national treasure. The greatest playwright of the age.

MIKHAIL

I am no longer a playwright.

LUNACHARSKAYA

What are you, then?

MIKHAIL

I am nothing.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Pity. I could use a playwright. So how is your marriage? Yelena Andreeyevna, no? Sad about her ex-husband. You just never know where the traitors are. I suppose it made you happy to see him go.

MIKHAIL

No.

LUNACHARSKAYA

You weren't happy that a traitor was discovered? That's odd. I would think most true citizens would be happy to see the saboteurs and criminals removed from society.

MIKHAIL

There are a great deal too many foreign agents.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Which is why we are eliminating them. Cleansing society. The Soviet Union which emerges will be stronger than ever. We are continually weakened from within, you know. People out of step with the future. But I am not here to discuss that.

MIKHAIL

What are you here for?

LUNACHARSKAYA

I wish to offer you a commission. To write a play.

MIKHAIL

What?

LUNACHARSKAYA

The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment wishes to commission a work for the stage.

MIKHAIL

You're not serious.

LUNACHARSKAYA

I am.

MIKHAIL

None of my work is allowed to see the light of day. I am banned everywhere.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Nonetheless, you have been chosen for this great task.

MIKHAIL

Write a play about what?

LUNACHARSKAYA

As I'm sure you're aware, the General Secretary's 60th birthday is rapidly approaching.

MIKHAIL

I'm sure the remaining people alive in this nation will rejoice.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Indeed they will. And we are preparing a celebration for him. And part of that celebration will be your play.

MIKHAIL

You wish me to write a play for Stalin?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Celebrating his early life.

MIKHAIL

You wish me to write a play celebrating Stalin's early life?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Yes.

MIKHAIL

You're joking.

LUNACHARSKAYA

I am quite serious. You have three months to complete the first draft. It will be subject to official review of course.

MIKHAIL

Are you insane?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Are you?

MIKHAIL

You have said yourself in print that –

LUNACHARSKAYA

A long time ago. I'm sure you have learned from your mistakes.

MIKHAIL

Why me?

LUNACHARSKAYA

You are the greatest playwright of the day. It is only natural that –

MIKHAIL

Why me?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Are you so stupid? Don't you know why?

MIKHAIL

I confess I have no idea.

LUNACHARSKAYA

He asked for you.

MIKHAIL

Who did?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Stalin did. He loves you, you know. Why do you think you're still alive?

MIKHAIL

I can't do it.

LUNACHARSKAYA

You can and you will. You will have the play in three months. I will leave you to your writing.

MIKHAIL

What if I refuse?

LUNACHARSKAYA

I think we both know there are a great many people who will be disappointed by that. Goodbye.

(she leaves.)

(lights fade.)

YELENA *(in the darkness)*

You cannot be seriously considering this.

(lights up on the apartment.)

MIKHAIL

I have no choice in the matter.

YELENA

It's a trap, Misha.

MIKHAIL

Don't you think I know that!?

YELENA

Don't step into it then.

MIKHAIL

What am I supposed to do, Lena?

YELENA

Say you are having difficulty. Stall.

MIKHAIL

Until when?

YELENA

Until we can… perhaps we could try to leave the country.

MIKHAIL

You don't think they'll have us watched?

YELENA

How do they know how long a play will take to write?

MIKHAIL

What do they care for the process? These are people who say grain production is up while the people starve. Reality is what they say it is. If they say a play takes three months to write, a play takes three months to write.

YELENA

You're thinking about it?

MIKHAIL

If I refuse, I die. If I accept –

YELENA

Your reputation dies.

MIKHAIL

Please –

YELENA

That's what they want. They want to silence you. They want to steal your voice and shackle you –they'll put you on a pedestal and say, look, the great Bulgakov has broken, they'll have that play performed everywhere and your fate will be sealed.

MIKHAIL

What fate?

YELENA

As a collaborator. And when the regime is finished, you'll be cast into the dustbin along with the other weasels.

MIKHAIL

I think you are overstating my importance.

YELENA

It's the same thing as a confession Misha. Write the play and you are confessing, just like all the others. Except it will mean more. That's why they want you to do it.

MIKHAIL

They could just as easily beat a confession out of me –

YELENA

But they can't beat a play out of you. They need you to do that to yourself.

MIKHAIL

I cannot be so important to them.

YELENA

You are. You cannot do this, Misha. Please.

MIKHAIL

You're asking me to die.

YELENA

I'm asking you to stand up for what you believe in.

MIKHAIL

I'm afraid.

YELENA

I am too.

MIKHAIL

Will you stand by me no matter what I do?

YELENA

You know that.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps I am not the man I believed I was.

(pause.)

(lights down.)

THE FOREIGNER

And so he wrote his final play, Batum. A celebration of the life of Stalin. I won't bore you with the script. Let's just say… it was not his finest hour. Lots of steel metaphors, the engines of industry, rise of the peasants, fires of the revolution, that sort of thing. It was quite similar to the rest of the work of the day, boring, dispirited, rather tedious affairs with happy occasions to quote statistics. Ugh. I was not impressed. Neither was he. In fact, as he wrote it he began to a feel a piercing pain deep in his stomach – his conscience? No. His kidneys. But, in any event –

(another knock at the door.)

(LUNACHARSKAYA and NKVD OFFICERS enter.)

LUNACHARSKAYA

The great writer at work.

MIKHAIL

It's finished.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Brilliant. I hope for your sake you have avoided your earlier eccentricities?

MIKHAIL

There is a despicable lack of prostitutes in this play. Although I suppose if you were to play a role –

LUNACHARSKAYA

The fine Bulgakov wit. Culled from the gutter.

MIKHAIL

Take it and be done with me.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Happily. Unfortunately, that will not be possible.

MIKHAIL

Why not?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Stalin wishes to hear it read.

MIKHAIL

Call Stanislavsky, perhaps he can find some actors –

LUNACHARSKAYA

Impossible. The play must remain a surprise for the people.

MIKHAIL

Why?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Because the play is a surprise.

MIKHAIL

Even to the actors performing it?

LUNACHARSKAYA

Even to the actors performing it.

MIKHAIL

What?

LUNACHARSKAYA

There is only person who could possibly do this play justice. You will play the parts for him.

MIKHAIL

No.

LUNACHARSKAYA

I've seen your talents. You're quite an excellent actor. You will do a superb job.

MIKHAIL

I can't do that.

LUNACHARKSAYA

Yes you will.

MIKHAIL

I wrote the play –

LUNACHARSKAYA

I know. And we are eternally grateful. Still, we must hear it. And we must decide if it is acceptable.

MIKHAIL

Read it and discover it for yourselves. There are no subversions in it.

LUNACHARSKAYA

Excuse me if I do not believe your claims at face value. Stalin would like to hear you read it.

MIKHAIL

Surely he has better things to do with his time.

LUNACHARSKAYA

There is always time for art in the Soviet Union. Come with us.

MIKHAIL

Allow me to write a note to my wife.

LUNACHARSKAYA

There is no time for that. Stalin is a very busy man.

MIKHAIL

Please –

(the agents grab him. MIKHAIL knocks something over.)

LUNACHARSKAYA
Careful. You wouldn't want to hurt him before his performance.

(lights up on the theatre.)

(MIKHAIL is led onto the stage, holding his script.)

(STALIN enters. He sits in his seat. He says nothing for a moment.)

STALIN
Comrade Bulgakov, it is a pleasure to finally meet you in person.

MIKHAIL
The pleasure is mine, General Secretary.

STALIN
I saw a play of yours many years ago.

MIKHAIL
The Day of the Turbins.

STALIN
It has always been one of my favorites.

MIKHAIL
Thank you.

STALIN
Quite divorced from historical fact, you know.

MIKHAIL
As a playwright one must take artistic license.

STALIN
Provided that license takes you in the direction of truth, no?

MIKHAIL
Of course.

STALIN
I see. And do you feel that your plays advance the cause of truth?

MIKHAIL
I hope that they do. I am, of course, imperfect.

STALIN

Yes.

MIKHAIL

So the…

(MIKHAIL swoons in pain.)

STALIN

Are you all right, comrade?

MIKHAIL

I have not been well lately, a kidney ailment, nothing terribly acute.

STALIN

One must suffer for art, yes?

MIKHAIL

Yes.

STALIN

And have you suffered?

MIKHAIL

I have. I am not starving or anything -

STALIN

No one is starving in the Soviet Union. Our glorious revolution is universally improving living conditions for every citizen.

MIKHAIL

It is.

STALIN

Read your play.

MIKHAIL

Your excellency, I have written this play, Batum, in honor of your 60th birthday.

STALIN

Is it sixty already?

MIKHAIL

Of course you could decree that you are 45 and it would be so. What are the laws of mathematics to Stalin? Numbers change themselves when you desire it to be so.

STALIN

There are facts, Bulgakov.

MIKHAIL

Of course. I want to begin by saying that I have taken liberties in this play -

STALIN

Liberties?

MIKHAIL

There are deficiencies in the historical record, so I was forced to invent certain things.

STALIN

We do not invent. We speak the truth.

MIKHAIL

Of course.

STALIN

I lived it. I am the truth.

MIKHAIL

Yes. And I hope that I have portrayed -

STALIN

Read the fucking play.

MIKHAIL

Of course.

(he takes the script in his hands, shaking.)

Batum. By Mikhail Afaniesivich Bulgakov. Act one. Georgia. A hot and dusty summer day. If we could see the clouds of shimmering dust leaping into the air, the land would appear to be on fire. A young man, Joseph, enters.

THE FOREIGNER

And so it went, the artist forced to dance upon his own grave.

End of Excerpt.
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