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Another Person is a Foreign Country

by CHARLES L. MEE

A vast, decaying, abandoned building in a "border" neighborhood of New York City. A former nursing home where people were shut away years ago and forgotten-now a squatters' building for homeless people.

The audience is welcomed into the courtyard of the building by fifteen people who might have Downs Syndrome. They are dressed as waiters or servants.

We are inside and outside at the same time.

We are outdoors in a courtyard, facing the ninety degree angle at which two wings of the building meet. At this angle is a doorway into the building. One wing of the building is covered in scaffolding. All the windows have been knocked out.

But we are inside, too: at the center of the performing area is a large dinner table, covered with a white linen table cloth. Two silver candelabra are on the table, and it is set with dishes, crystal, silver.

As the audience is seated, they hear music, and singing by a choir of blind people with seeing-eye dogs.

After the audience has settled down, the ushers take their places as waiters around the dinner table, and the cast enters: the cast are all outcasts, marginalized people of one sort or another-Mike, a three-foot-tall man; Ethyl; Twin 1 (Millicent) and Twin 2 (Melody), identical (or conjoined) twins; Ajax, a deaf man who signs; Jimmy, a giant African American who carries in his arms Isabella, a one-and-a-half foot tall woman; a bald woman opera singer, dressed in a man's double-breasted brown suit of the 1930's; Fergie, an extremely old woman; Jennifer, a startlingly (freakishly?) beautiful and "normal" woman.

They take their seats and for a moment look like Rembrandt's painting of the Syndics of the Drapers Guild. Isabella is seated on the table.

The piece will consist of four parts:

1. a dinner party, which drifts into
2. postprandial entertainment at microphones, which drifts into
3. Commedia del Arte lazzi of birth, copulation, and suicide, which drifts back to
4. a reconstituted dinner party.

There will also be interstitial pieces of music and choreographed movement.

PART ONE

TWIN 1 (taking time with this)

There was a girl in Paris one time, more than a hundred years ago. [silence]

Do you know this story?

MIKE (agreeably)

I don't know.

TWIN 1

In 1860 was it?

MIKE

How would I know?

TWIN 1

You might have heard about it.

TWIN 2

Or 1840.

TWIN 1

I don't remember.

MIKE

It doesn't matter.

TWIN 1

Anyway, there was a young woman in Paris named Herculine Barbin—you might have read about her—who lived in a convent school with a few dozen other young

schoolgirls, and she discovered that she was, in fact, not a young woman at all but a young man. Or not a young man either, but a young woman and a young man together-in short, a hermaphrodite.

MIKE

Right.

TWIN 1

You might say: what has this to do with me?

MIKE

Yes.

TWIN 1

I'm not a French school girl.

I'm not a person of the nineteenth century.

MIKE

Right.

TWIN 2

What would be wrong with that?

MIKE

Right.

TWIN 1

You could say, I'm not a hermaphrodite.

MIKE

No.

TWIN 2

What would be wrong with that?

MIKE

Right.

TWIN 1

And yet, this is how these tragedies so often begin.

[silence]

ETHYL

People lack a sense of the exquisite.

JENNIFER

I wish I had a sense of the exquisite.

MIKE

An Oriental sense.

JENNIFER

Yes. For instance, to think there are some things that you can't compare to anything else. For instance, when you've stopped loving someone, you feel as though the person you love has become someone else completely, even though actually he is still the same person.

MIKE

A sense of the uniqueness of things.

JENNIFER

Or sometimes you look at the branches of the camphor tree, and you see how tangled they are. They make a person feel estranged from the tree in a way and yet it's because the tree is divided into so many branches that sometimes the image of the tree is used to describe people in love.

[As the dinner continues, the ushers deploy themselves variously about the scaffolding and in the windows of the building, to watch, or to pursue their own interests, when they are not waiting on the dinner guests.]

ETHYL

I miss postcards.

You know.

Postcards are unique, and no one sends them any more. It just isn't done. And I often wonder: why not? Has someone taken a moral position?

With a novel or a book you always come to the end, but you can just keep reading or writing one postcard after another and never come to the end. Each one of them unique—and never an end This is a kind of pleasure we simply don't know any more, though it seems harmless enough when you think about it. There's no point to it, and yet it's such a pleasure. It's not what you would call goal-oriented, that's the pleasure of it, I suppose, you just take it for it's own sake.

And I like that you can never tell which is the front and which is the back of a postcard.

And then sometimes when I write letters and put them in an envelope. I'll enclose some pressed flowers or some grapes, but usually I don't write at all because I can't keep all my sentences in the proper tenses. And one never worries about that with a postcard.

And then sometimes when I read a book—which is a more sort of sustained adventure—I get very involved in the words, but I don't know what's going on.

You'll notice how—when you begin a sentence, all the words depend on each other. It's like when you move your arms.

[Watching the gesture as she makes it]

You can't get from here to there without going in between.

And you might take away one word,
and then everything you say is nonsense. This is linguistics in our time, and everything depends on it. You define something in a certain way; you put it in your definition or not, and poof there you are:

you've created your society, really, haven't you? And what did Aristotle say? Men are social animals: we become what we make of ourselves in our relationships.

I've been around.

I've been around.

It makes me dizzy.

But then, sometimes, when I think about it, I have trouble with the meaning of things.

For instance, I was talking to someone the other day who was saying you might name a dog Queen Victoria, and then you could say "Queen Victoria" in quotation marks is the name of your dog Queen Victoria, and also that "Queen Victoria" in quotation marks is the name of the name of your dog. But then let's say, when you say the name Queen Victoria, how can you tell whether you're using the word to call your dog or just mentioning the word, just naming the name of your dog as a word in quotation marks. Can you only know what you meant if the dog comes or doesn't come? And if that's the only way you can know, how do you know whether or not to put it in quotation marks when you first say it, before he does or doesn't come? This is how people think of language these days, you know, how one defines things. And what do you make of it?

ETHYL

Take shoes, for example. I often worry whether I have enough pairs, or too many, or the wrong sort, whether they go with things, or no one wears them any more—you know, the heels are too high, or they don't wear red, or alligator—whether things are, you know, too short or too long or you know they shouldn't be embroidered, you know or too baggy or it shouldn't have a fur collar—this is wrong, or in what way it's wrong, it's more than I can worry about all the time, so now I just get what I want and sometimes I don't wear it.

Or think of skin. Some people attach no value to it at all. Some people never even think about their skin, about its smoothness or its color or the way that it ages, but I think about it all the time. I think of what I can put on it or do to it, and how some people do such violent things to it...

[silence for a moment]

TWIN 2

Like cut it up, punch it out. Put on fat, take it off. Put it on here. Take it off there. Rouge it up, powder it off, give it a little of the old milk bath, the seaweed wrap, lather it up with yoghurt, mud, avocado oil, rub it with loofas, leaves, slap it around with a little leather, put on the moisture surge, herb wax, sea salt, orange juice, chicken skin, chili peppers, guava pith. I do that.

TWIN 1 (sotto voce)

Shh! Shh! Sit! Sit!

TWIN 2

I was doing my exercises in the pool one day, when this woman said to me, will your exercises help a person lose weight? And I said, well, yes, I suppose so— meaning that if you burn some calories you'll lose some weight, although what I was really thinking was: I've never seen anyone eat while they're in the pool.

[silence]

TWIN 1

You know the biggest mistake I ever made?

TWIN 2

What's that?

TWIN 1

I should have been a submarine captain.

TWIN 2

Why's that?

TWIN 1

Because then when you are out in the middle of the ocean you can look up through the periscope, turn it around 360 degrees, and everywhere you look there's no one there.

ETHYL (resuming)

It's like 200 years ago, like Marie Antoinette, when all the women covered their faces with white lead so their hair fell out and they went completely mad. It's simply what they did. They thought they should. And those who didn't were beneath contempt. These are simply things one does. I don't think you can say there's some fundamental rule, something basic to human nature in all times and all places.

I had a bedroom once that was like an underwater kingdom, all blues, with coral branches floating on the walls, and there were shells and crabs on the rugs, but then I thought: I'm just drowning here, and I had to leave. When I look back I see one time after another in my life when I went almost completely under.

[silence]

MIKE

Have you ever done any piercing?

JENNIFER

What?

TWIN 2

Piercing?

JENNIFER

Oh. You mean, like, pierced my ears.

MIKE

Right. Or your, you know, nose, or breast.

JENNIFER

No.

MIKE

Or even your, you know, more...more intimate parts....

JENNIFER

Certainly not.

MIKE

Many people do.

JENNIFER

I haven't done it.

TWIN 1

I don't think anyone does that any more.

TWIN 2

I think they do.

TWIN 1

I wouldn't do it.

TWIN 2

That doesn't mean it isn't done.

TWIN 1

Well, I wouldn't know who would do it.

TWIN 2

Lots of people do it.

TWIN 1

I don't think the people I know would do it.

TWIN 2

Do you mean to say we don't know the same people?

MIKE

Some people like it.

JENNIFER

Have you done it?

MIKE

Just a little sport piercing from time to time.

[SILENCE]

JENNIFER

I haven't.

TWIN 2

Why not?

TWIN 1

One doesn't do it, that's why. There are certain things that are done and others that are not done.

ETHYL

Things that are in and things that are out.

TWIN 1

Pleasurable and disgusting. Everybody knows this.

ETHYL

It's been in all the papers.

JENNIFER

Sometimes when I'm at the dinner table with company I try to remember my face should not be sad or gloomy or insolent or changeable but pleasant, and— controlled—modest, respectful when I look at another person, that I should always look at the person I speak to, I should keep my feet together, my hands still—if I'm standing I mean, if I'm having cocktails before dinner—I shouldn't shift from foot to foot or gesticulate with my hands or bite my lip. I shouldn't chatter mindlessly, and, if I am offered something at the dinner table, I should say thank you and if a toast is proposed, I should raise my glass to my lips even if I'm not thirsty. Look pleasantly at those who speak to you, don't disparage others or put on airs or boast about yourself or belittle another person, don't accuse anyone of anything or let your tongue run away with you.

TWIN 1

Of course, these are delicate and intricate matters: to remember that there are different customs in different places, as, for instance, in our country, one holds the knife or fork with a few fingers only, and not with the whole hand.

And one never throws eggshells or bones on the table. Or smells the meat and then puts it back onto the common platter. Or scratches themselves with their bare hands.

TWIN 1

No. Or, when you have to share a bed—you lie quietly so as not to disturb your sleeping companion and not to expose yourself, and you mustn't lie so closely as to touch the other person or put your legs between those of the other person or sleep with a person of the opposite sex: unless of course you're married or the person is a small child.

Or sometimes: Even then.

ETHYL

What country is this?

TWIN 1

This was in another time.

TWIN 2

I like a lover who kisses my fingertips.

TWIN 1

Or even better: my wrists.

JENNIFER

I like a lover who kisses my face and my eyelids, who spends a lot of time kissing my eyes and running his fingertips around my nose and running his tongue along my lips.

ETHYL

I like a slow, deliberate touch.

JENNIFER

I like a lover who plays with my feet.

TWIN 2

I like a lover who's a little bit rough, who grabs my hands and holds them so tight I can't get away or messes up my hair and pins my legs the way a wrestler might.

JENNIFER

I like a lover who holds my buttocks or enters me from behind, not anally, you know, but from behind.

ISABELLA

I like to have the lights on.

ETHYL

I like to have it last a long time.

ISABELLA

I like to start with a few clothes on and be undressed slowly .

TWIN 2

I like to have my thighs massaged.

ISABELLA

I like to hear a man groan with pleasure.

MIKE

When I was a boy, I went to a school for "special" students. And I became the emperor of the school, because I told the boy who sat next to me in school that I was receiving instructions from Mars—and word got out.

We had our instructions, and our language, we had certain things we had to do, the universe that we all lived in at that time.

And after that, I went to a university and studied biology, and, when that didn't work, I changed to philosophy, and when that didn't work I changed to physics and got a job with NASA. But after a while, everyone there seemed too strange to me, and so I came here.

And I went out one night, because I like to go to clubs. And I was in a club, and a woman came up to me and said: [beat] Can I pick you up? And I said: [beat] well, [beat] I'm heavier than I look.

And she said, [beat] I'm pretty strong. So I said: [beat] go ahead. And she picked me up and took me out on the dance floor and put her arms around me and held me three feet off the ground and danced with me, and whispered in my ear: it's okay, baby, mama is going to take care of you from now on. And I thought: [beat] well, I'm into it now; [beat] this is big time.

MUSIC

THE OPERA SINGER SINGS AN EXCERPT FROM RIGOLETTO, THE OPERA OF THE DWARF

PART TWO

The ushers clear the tables the cast take up brandy and cigars. The mood shifts to a post-prandial one of story telling.

A drift to a different state and place begins.

MIKE

There is a kind of animal, they say, called a gulon that feeds on carcasses.

ETHYL (aside)

Unlike human beings.

MIKE

And whenever it finds a carcass, it eats so much that its stomach stands out like a large bell. Then it looks for some narrow space between two trees where it can pull its body through the space between the trees in order to push out the food it has eaten. And so, being emptied, it can feed again. And so it continues eating and emptying itself, until everything has been eaten. It seems a little odd to some people, and yet, it's part of nature.

ISABELLA

There's a kind of wolf, they say, whose brains grow larger and smaller with the moon and whose neck is on a bone that's very straight and won't bend, so that when it wants to turn and look at something, it has to turn its whole upper body. And sometimes it will eat a kind of earth to make its body heavy so that when it attacks a horse or an ox or an elk or some such strong animal, it will take the big animal by the throat and hang there, and it will be heavy enough finally to bring the big animal down.

TWIN 1

There's a certain female hyena that will come to a man in his sleep and put her left hand or forefoot into his mouth. And then, while she keeps him silent, with her other feet she will dig a hole like a grave—I don't know how she does this—and cover his whole body with earth except for his throat and head, and then she will sit on him and suffocate him.

MIKE

You hear these stories, and then you wonder, what is it to be a human being? Not so long ago, there was a fashion for dissecting things to find out their interior designs. And everyone went around talking about anatomies of political systems, anatomies of a poem, anatomies of melancholy— not so long ago as things are sometimes measured.

And then you think, well, why look at a book, when these things are all around us in our daily lives. Really each one of us is a little walking textbook. You might say, for instance: let's have a look at you .

ETHYL

Well, no, thank you anyway.

MIKE

But why not?

ETHYL

I don't think of myself as a textbook.

TWIN 1

As a guinea pig.

MIKE

As a specimen.

ETHYL

No. Yes—not as a specimen.

MIKE

And yet, of course, we're all specimens.

MIKE

I can well imagine, for example, if you were to raise your dress one might find on the pubis an abundance of long, curly black hairs— which also cover the perineum and the parts that simulate the labia majora.

TWIN 1

It's a marvel in its way.

MIKE

And, in the place that it normally occupies would be seen a penis,

[beat]

five centimeters long, let us say,

[beat]

one and a half centimeters in diameter,

TWIN 1

[beat]

in a state of flaccidity.

MIKE

Exactly.

[to Jennifer]

Am I blocking your view?

JENNIFER

No, thank you.

MIKE

This organ ends no doubt in an imperforate glans, flattened on both sides, completely exposed by the prepuce. In size, I should say, the penis does not exceed the clitoris of some women.

TWIN 1

slightly curved underneath, merging and vanishing into the folds of skin that form the labia majora and the labia minora.

MIKE

The vagina on the other hand

is, I would say, six and a half centimeters long,

on each side of which are two little cords that are the ejaculatory ducts.

[silence]

The mucous membrane of the vagina is very smooth and congested.

[beat]

One may easily penetrate the full length of the vagina with an index finger,

[beat]

although,
at the tip of the finger, nothing is to be felt that recalls the formation of
the cervix uteri;

[silence]

on the contrary, one has the impression of a cul-de-sac.

[Resuming briskly]

Thus, in short, what we have is neither a man nor a woman but some other sort of
being, whatever label you may wish to apply.

TWIN 1

To be sure, this is not the only case that s been reported. The famous case of Dr.
Schweikhard had to do with an individual who was registered as a girl and regarded
as such until the time he asked permission to marry a girl he had made pregnant.

TWIN 2

And there's the story of a woman whose midwife made her pregnant.

MIKE

No doubt it would be a help to have all such cases collected in a single work. It
would be a valuable guide for physicians.

TWIN 1

Of course, as a boy or girl approaches puberty, the inclinations of his or her true sex
are revealed....

MIKE

And, true enough, by observing these traits in people who had been subject to
some error it would help considerably in marking out their place in society, if the
state of the genital organs and their different functions were not sufficient for this
purpose.

There are those who say that most people go through life in fear that they will have
a traumatic experience, that they will be violated somehow in their bodies or in their
innermost selves. And that those who were born with their traumas have already
passed the test in life. They are the aristocrats. And it may well be. In which case
[gesturing toward Ethyl] here is certainly one of those aristocrats.

ISABELLA

People say compassion is a wonderful thing, and I suppose it is, really, but to me, pity has most often been a weapon that people have used against me, a way to keep looking down on me.

And yet, for all these people know, my life may be far more extraordinary than theirs. It might better be a cause of amazement, wonder, even envy, conceivably even admiration—rather than pity. I'd have to say, more than compassion, I love reality.

[Mike has moved away from table, and ushers bring him an easy chair to continue talking as he sits and lights a cigar. And as the conversation continues, the ushers bring in, for someone else to sit in, another easy chair—but this one, oddly, with straps on it, and, from the top of its backrest, a steel headcap emerges.

[The atmosphere has now completely taken on that of the postprandial occasion, the sleepy, almost dreamy after—dinner atmosphere where people converse and tell stories and, as the stories are told, the ushers bring in other pieces of furniture.

[The ushers set down a shower contraption, which emits steam from its shower head and also from several circular pipes that surround whoever stands in the shower.

[The ushers also bring in bathrobes and towels.

[The ushers lift wooden manhole covers from several pits—steampits, into which, eventually, some of the cast members descend.

[So the playing area looks as though it is about to take on the appearance of a living room after dinner, but gradually, instead, assumes the appearance of a health club—but a health club whose appurtenances have an ominous character, like instruments of torture: a health club at Auschwitz. And the members of the cast are the prisoners.

[Now, too, the event takes on the aura of nightclub entertainment as each one of the cast members steps up to a microphone downstage center and does a "turn."

[Between each turn, the ushers break into frantic, choreographed movement, accompanied by music. One of the cast members hoes the ground incessantly.]

TURN:

ISABELLA

There is a story I was told one time of a man named Benjamin who had a small son, and the son had a pet tortoise. One day the father decided to roast the tortoise, so he put a burning stick against the tortoise's belly. The tortoise kicked and jerked its head and urinated, and the heat of the stick caused the shell on the tortoise's belly to split. So the father put his hand up inside the shell, and while the tortoise struggled, the father slit its belly with his knife and pulled out his intestines. By this time, the tortoise had pulled a little into its shell and was trying to hide there, with his head between his knees looking out. And meanwhile the little boy had come to see what his father was doing, and when the boy saw the tortoise, he put his own arms up beside its head and looked out—just the way the tortoise looked out of his shell. And now the father reached in and took hold of the tortoise's heart, which was still beating, and flipped the tortoise over to the ground and while the man pulled out its heart the tortoise jerked violently. And the father said to the son, you see, the tortoise-like the earth itself—or like a man—is a slow, tough creature that can live on a while even after its heart is gone.

TURN:

TWIN 2

One summer, I was told, a man went to the country with a friend. What they had in mind was to cross the river by a bridge that was marked on a map; but when they got there the bridge was gone.

TWIN 1

When was this?

TWIN 2

This was late in the afternoon. The friend called to a man who was sitting on the other side of the river next to a small boat. And the boat man came and rowed them across. The two friends walked for half a mile—until they came to a small village—and there they got on a cart that was harnessed to a big draft horse and piled high with logs. They went out along a rough road, through a thick woods, and then came into an open clearing. In the clearing, the soil seemed sandy—and more grey than brown. The first man got down from the cart and knelt in the dirt, and ran the soil through his fingers again and again. This earth that ran through his fingers was coarse and sharp: and filled with the fragments of human bone.

These things you hear about: you think, well, that could have been anywhere.

TWIN 1

Yes.

TWIN 2

But that's not the case.

TWIN 1

No.

TURN:

MIKE

There are those who say that the structures of society, and language, and politics are not given, but made. That human nature is not discovered but created. That this power of creation is what distinguishes human creatures from animals.

JIMMY

I know of a young boy, when he first arrived, he got down from the truck, he looked around and said, "Has anyone ever escaped from here?" That was enough. He was stripped naked and hung upside down for three hours—but he was young and strong enough that he was still alive. So they took him down and lay him on the ground and pushed sand down his throat with sticks until he died.

One time, they rang the doorbell; they smashed the glass windows in the doors; they walked right in. They pushed the upright piano out onto the balcony, smashed the balustrade, and shoved the piano over the edge. It hit the street below. The wooden casing splintered away, and left the insides of the piano standing upright on the street in the middle of the wreckage—looking like a harp.

Once there was a father who took his son by the hand. Both of them were crying. And when they got outside the door, the old man began to run. But he ran with clumsy steps. they didn't have the strength to run properly. But they stumbled toward the margin... and they didn't run straight and clean into the electrified fence. They blundered into it, and then, after the great blue flash, when they fell, their bodies were entwined.

There was a rumor that a woman was holding a baby in her arms. There was a crowd on the other side of the fence, raising their hands to take the baby if it should

be passed over to them. The woman was about to hand the baby to the crowd, when the policeman took it from her, shot her twice, and then took the baby in his hands and tore it as one would tear a rag.

And once, when we dug down into the earth, we suddenly saw a little boy, two or three years old. He had little white shoes on, and a little white jacket, and his face was pressed against the face of his mother.

MIKE

One day in the middle of summer, in the midst of sunshine, I saw the snow fall for quite a few minutes. We watched it in silence. And I thought: it's difficult to tell the difference between what the scientists call noise and what they call information.

TURN:

AJAX

(the signing actor; he also speaks this text but to make his words entirely clear, one of the ushers stands at some distance behind him and quietly speaks each line into a microphone, so that the two of them do a duet of sorts) Music! Music means almost nothing to me. When I was little, I was forced to take music lessons in an effort to make me average. The teacher would put me up on top of the piano, sit me there, and start to play. I could hear nothing, but I felt an irritating tickle on my buttocks, and I would smash my feet against the ivories. But that only increased the tickling, and the teacher would swat me and put me underneath the piano and force my hands in between the wooden rods there. She would scream at me: keep your hands there! And then she would go back to her seat. But no matter how hard she played, and how hard I squeezed the wooden rods, nothing happened. Just a tickle again. Then she would drag me out and put me face down, spread-eagled on top of the piano. She would play once more, and again I would felt the tickle. She would look at me, bare her teeth, and mouth the words: "Do you hear the lovely music?" I would shake my head no. She would drag me off the piano and make me run my hands over the piano, touching every nook and crevice, every curve and every cold, flat glossy surface. And so she played more furiously always more furiously, hammering on the piano with her fists, asking me again and again, enraged, "Do you hear the lovely music?" And I would shake my head no. So, in the end, she gave up.

Do you know: if she had asked me if I felt the music, I would have said yes, because it was true.

And, in fact, I grew to love the piano for its shape, and its beauty, and its silence.

TURN:

TWIN 2

Did you ever do experiments in college?

ETHYL

You mean, for example, dissect a frog.

TWIN 2

Right.

ETHYL

I dissected a frog.

TWIN 2

I dissected the brains of 25 mice.

Nowadays experiments are more sophisticated. They do things, well, you know: You can keep calves in stalls that are not much bigger than the calves themselves, for example, and it keeps their flesh a little on the pale side. People like that.

Chickens, of course, they'll get a little anemic, have a little bone weakness, that sort of thing, retarded growth, other things—kidney damage, that sort of thing, and worse: this comes from crowding. Of course you have to clip their beaks.

Whereas pigs: you can keep a thousand pigs, limit fed, and take them to 220 pounds in twenty weeks, fattened up in a total confinement system no bigger than your own house. Knowing all this is a result of experimentation.

TURN:

JIMMY

I had a friend, a psychologist, who did an experiment on rats when he was a student in the university, and when he finished his experiment he was faced with the problem of what to do with the rats. He asked his advisor, and his advisor said, "Sacrifice them." My friend said, "How?" And his advisor said, "Like this." And his

advisor took hold of a rat and bashed its head against the side of a workbench. My friend felt sick at once and asked his advisor how he could do that—even though, in fact, as my friend knew, this was not exactly a cruel way to kill a rat, since instant death is caused by cervical dislocation. And his advisor said to him, "What's the matter? Maybe you're not cut out to be a psychologist."

[as the dialogue continues, the ushers help Mike—taking his cigar and assisting him into a white robe and then down into one of the steam pits]

ETHYL

How would you kill a rat?

JIMMY

I don't know.

ETHYL

If you had to.

JIMMY

hanging by the wrists

[silence as he thinks]

burning with cigarettes

burning with an iron

hosing with water

[silence]

hitting with fists

kicking with boots

hitting with truncheons

hitting with whips

[silence]

exposing to cold showers

depriving of sleep

depriving of toilets

depriving of food
subjecting to abuse
beating with fists and clubs
hitting the genitals
hitting the head against the wall
electric shock used on the head
on the genitals
on the feet
on the lips
on the eyes
on the genitals
hitting with fists
whipping with cables
strapping to crosses
caning on the backside
caning on the limbs
inserting sticks
inserting heated skewers
inserting bottle necks
pouring on boiling water
injecting with haloperidol
chlorpromazine
trifluoperazine
beating on the skull
cutting off the fingers
submerging in water
breaking of limbs
smashing of jaws
crushing of feet
breaking of teeth
cutting the face
removing the finger nails
wrapping in plastic
closing in a box
castrating
multiple cutting

TURN:

ETHYL

I think: well, you hear these stories, you know, and I think, it just reminds me of the time this man said to me when I was a good deal younger, you should be in the movies, and asked me to take my clothes off, which I refused to do—well, anyway, I said, I have to keep my hat on, which was stupid, of course, but it was all I could think of saying, so I said that, and I took my clothes off, and then, you know he wanted to take pictures of me, and it got very ugly and I ran out and then, when this friend of mine said he would bring charges, no one could find this man, because, I guess, he had just gotten the key to the office somehow and snuck in. So to me it seems like a hopeless situation, it's just, you know, how men are.

TURN:

JENNIFER

Well, I grew up in Montana, which was very normal except that my mother and father were divorced, and no one lived alone with two children except unwed mothers. So I guess I always felt a little odd myself.

And my father was an artist with one eye who lived in Vermont, and when he came to visit I was just embarrassed, you know he was just a one-eyed wildman, poverty stricken, dressed in Spanish clothes, and he didn't look like anyone else's father.

And in a way, my father's whole life was shaped by his eye, really. For a while he had a glass eye, and then he decided to wear a black patch, and he sort of looked like a pirate, and his whole persona came from that. And then, finally, he just took off the patch and walked around with a hole in his head.

[on the verge of tears]

And my mother always said: you know, you'll have to get hold of yourself, you're just too emotional, she said: it isn't normal.

And one time my brother suddenly jumped up into the arms of a security guard to get the guard to smile at him, and the guard just punched him in the stomach. And my mother worries about him all the time.

[silence]

but then, at a certain point, you think: well, after all, I'm not just like everyone else in

Montana. I mean, I'd been to England. But the idea of being normal is a sort of unfinished project you always carry around with you, no matter who you are.

And sometimes I pray that people will evolve. But then I think: well, there's no point in praying: people will evolve whether they want to or not.

MUSIC

THE OPERA SINGER AND THE POET SING A DUET—THE TEXT OF JIMMY'S "ONE TIME THEY RANG THE DOORBELL..." SET TO MUSIC

This time the music that follows the song goes on for a very long time

It is accompanied by slow dancing—maybe a whirling dervish begins the dancing, and gradually, one by one, the whole cast, emerging from pits and showers and massage tables, joins in so they are all slowly whirling.

Jennifer whirls herself down to the ground, where she stretches out, as though asleep.

One by one, the others all leave, until just the single dervish is left whirling, with Jennifer stretched out asleep.

PART THREE

The dervish whirls on out.

Six or eight members of a jazz band surge up out of the audience, invade the stage, take it over, and play a loud and raucous piece filled with whistling, stamping, and shouting.

In the early part of this music piece, Mike enters, looks at Jennifer, who has fallen asleep. He mimes a touch as though to wake her, and then a hug, as though he would take advantage of her being asleep, and then some dance steps, and finally a whole series of dance steps.

This will develop, as it goes along now, into the classic Commedia lazzo of miming making love to the motionless partner. So the tone here is farcical, and also surreal,

and filled with pathos and sorrow, so that we are laughing and crying at the same time.

A man on his knees, with old wooden crutches, drags himself in. He has a cast iron pot upside down on his head, and a rope around his waist that is tied to a cart or wagon (with a false bottom, as we see later) on which there is a naked woman inside a transparent glass ball from which only her legs emerge.

The potman stops, "looks" at Mike miming caresses and dancing, turns and "looks" at the woman on the cart, turns back and "looks" at Mike, stops, moves back toward the cart and begins to mime caresses with the glassball woman, who remains motionless, odalisque-like, on the cart.

The lovemaking-dancing develops into hotter and hotter mimed motions. Each time, perhaps, the one making love will turn and start to leave and then turn back and initiate another session, each session building in intensity and, maybe, absurdity, until there is miming of outrageous humping, bumping and grinding.

It might begin with Mike doing the touching and kissing, which passes along to the next couple and the next, as Mike moves on to the next level—and so on—so there is an overlapping effect in the beginning. And then maybe it gets more and more like a free-for-all, and maybe even, in the end, partner switching and group sex.

Another man on his knees, with crutches, a deer head, and a tree branch emerging from his back drags in another cart with a man on it. The second man has the body of an insect and the head of a wild boar or dog or frog. This man, too, stops, looks at what is going on, considers it, and then, he, too, begins to mime touching and hugging and dancing with the person on the cart.

Up above, in the rear wall, a beautiful five year old boy, wearing a crimson velvet suit with a wide cream-colored satin sash around his waist, steps into a window and stands silently watching those below. He has a beautiful exotic bird on a leash that stands at his feet.

A woman enters with another woman, facing in the opposite direction, tied to her back. They will take turns walking, so that one's legs are in the air while the other's are on the ground. From the head of the first woman emerges a tree branch with a huge owl on it; and the owl has one claw on the face of the second woman. Both women and the owl are silently shrieking.

The couples move through their lovemaking miming and dancing, until one of the first couples has an offspring, giving birth to an enormous fish that emerges from the womb with another enormous fish in its mouth, which also has a fish in its mouth, and so forth.

The second couple gives birth to a beehive body without legs.

A huge giant's eyeball might gradually move to occupy an entire window of the real wall. But, if we do this, the eyeball must be round and glistening, not merely be painted on paper or wood.

The third couple gives birth to a giant ear.

In one corner sits a man rocking back and forth silently laughing so hard he cries and crying so hard he laughs.

The fourth couple gives birth to a naked headless man.

The first couple gives birth to a large upside down head on a pair of legs. The head looks as though it hangs from the person's groin. And where the asshole should be is the mouth, with a spoon poised in the air just above it.

The second couple gives birth to a bird head with legs coming out of its mouth.

The third couple gives birth to a naked dead man

The fourth couple gives birth to a pig in a doctor's white coat.

Through all this, we hear continuous music.

And gradually, the stage has been taken over almost completely by people who are disabled in one way or another-mentally or physically disabled, with Downs Syndrome or some other disability, people who are able only to sit to one side and draw a single line over and over again on a pad of art paper and people who are able to dance or play the guitar or drums, people who join the jazz band as part of the group, or as soloists.

But, in any case, the stage is filled with people all doing different things. And, while the audience's initial reaction to all this may well be one of dismay at all the chaos,

the sense should grow on them that here are people who are doing what they can do, rather than being constrained to perform some action they are not adept at performing—and the feeling is one of liberation and exhilaration as these performers come and go as they wish and perform as they will.

This should be the celebratory centerpiece of the evening, and it should go on for a long, long time.

At some moment in the midst of this, we will hear this text along with, and above, the music, spoken in clear, bell-like tones by the boy in the red suit, as though it were his school lesson, as though he were reading from a book: (in his pre-recorded voice if it is too much for him to memorize). After the presence of the text is established, we may be unable to hear most of the latter part of it.

THE BOY

Most of us labor under a false impression about the pattern of human evolution. We view our rise as a kind of global process encompassing all members of the human lineage, wherever they might have lived. But really, we are an improbable and fragile entity, a fortunate success after precarious beginnings, a remarkable event, an item of history, not an embodiment of general principles.

If we had failed, would the Neanderthals have taken up the torch so that some other embodiment of our intelligence would have originated without much delay? I don't see why.

We are descended, in fact, from a wormlike chordate named Pikaia that survived the Middle Cambrian epoch only by the sheerest chance—not by being smart, not by being fit, not by being well adapted to the way things were or the way things were becoming, but by the sheerest luck, contingent on a thousand thousand bits of chance. And had it not been for that extraordinary piece of luck, some other form of life entirely would have survived to design the world to suit itself and to enforce its standards of normality on the rest of us, the standards of the normal dolphin, perhaps, if that had turned out to rule the world, or the standards of cockroaches, of annelid worms or some other myotomes as it may be in the future, the standards of their physical norm, the standards of their IQs, the standards of their ways of perception, of their sight, of their olfactory lobes, their tastes and preferences and pleasures, not because they are superior but because they have come by chance to predominate. And then how shall our narrow little enforcement procedures seem if not the most extravagant exercise of vanity, and ignorance, since the very idea of

normality is a contingent idea, the product of the merest chance, that rests finally upon the contingency of our ignorance to preserve and enforce it and that could vanish in an instant if we were only to change our minds. And when you look now at an oddly shaped man, a woman with fish scales on her hands, a child with a misshapen head, you might say to yourself there but for the grace of sheerest luck, goes the human species—and who can say it would not have been a superior civilization if it had? And who can say it might not yet take that turn, that our future existence may be in the hands of some deviant form? For these lifeforms are all the planets treasures, and all the treasures that we have.

The preceding text could also be signed by AJAX, a signing actor, who does not merely translate but who acts passionately, with his whole body, interpreting the text he delivers.

In any case, whether he signs the preceding text or not, he moves on into signing the story of Aesop that follows. He signs not just with technical skill at signing but with an intense and intensely physical emotional performance: a story of immense personal anguish.

AJAX

There was once, more than two thousand years ago, a dwarf named Aesop. And because his fellow townspeople couldn't abide having a dwarf living in their midst, they ran him out of town. So that he went to live in the woods. And there, getting to know the other creatures who lived in the wilderness, he wrote his fables about the tortoise and the hare, the fox and the crow, and the other animals. And after he had written a number of these fables, thinking that he would share this treasure with his fellow townspeople, and that they would welcome him back because of the gift he had to bring them, he returned to his native town, and there he was stoned to death.

And Ajax goes on to perform, solo, another classic set of *Commedia lazzi*—the lazzi of committing suicide.

The first attempt is to hang oneself with a rope, and he attempts this in various ways.

The second attempt is to throw away the rope and strangle oneself.

The third attempt is to suffocate himself with his own hands or clothes or shoes.

It may be that one or two others join in these lazzi.

The last attempt is to tickle oneself to death, and he laughs silently as he does so.

Our central cast—Mike, Jennifer, Ethyl, and the other dinner party guests—have all made their way back to the dinner table during these suicide scenes. And everyone watches Ajax in silence.

Ajax sinks to the ground in exhaustion.

The other performers exit, or take up their places as homeless people around the walls.

And the dinner party is reconstituted.

PART FOUR

MIKE

I don't think you can say there's such a thing as an eternal or absolute truth, you know, a set of values or measures that apply in all times and places.

ETHYL

What?

MIKE

I don't think people have such a firm grasp these days on some notion of the universal.

ETHYL

Oh, right, yes.

MIKE

And so when some monstrous cruelty occurs, there is nothing to be said any more along the lines of: "There is something within us, some human nature, or some other nature, something fundamental, or that there is something beyond these practices that condemns us." We can only say: well, now we know a little more just who we are.

ETHYL

Who we've become.

JENNIFER

Or who we might have been if we hadn't been so busy becoming who we did.

TWIN 2

I'm sorry?

ETHYL

I think where you grow up affects the kind of person you are.

JENNIFER

Like the eskimos. The eskimos have about 50 words for snow.

Because they have so much of it, and they have to, you know, distinguish between the different kinds. But they don't have a word for I.

Because they're not, I guess: egotistical.

ETHYL

To me, when it comes down to it, the most important thing is color. It just totally influences the way people think: how much you can take in, you know, how rich your life is going to be, how big a person you are going to be, how much you'll have in your life. I mean, when I was a child, you couldn't begin to get all the colors you can get today. Everything was cream, and I think I always just felt starved for color. And so, when it came down to it, and it was my choice, I may have made the blue in the dining room a little too strong, but I think really I was right to do it. Of course, it's all a matter of feeling. I suppose. And then we didn't have a red room, so we had to make the north drawing room the red room. And for the south drawing room the color is pink for evening, which is a good color for women wearing silk dresses, and for making people stand up straight. You know, Sam and Victoria Newhouse had their place done over by an Italian, from Milan. And he tore it up for three years, and after he was finished, it was just amazing: it looked exactly the same as it had always looked, except that, where everything used to be soft, now it was hard—you know, the suede had been replaced by terra cotta, but everything was beige, and it was obviously incredibly expensive, but it all just looked like burlap. What was the point?

And I must admit, for me, I like antiques from an ancient time. I mean, of course, all antiques are from an ancient time, but I like things from a time that's gone completely, like Egypt, or early America. You think: these were precious times. And then you think, well, all times are precious times.

[long silence]

JENNIFER

There are some things that give you pleasure just because of their size. Like a large horse. Or a large piece of fruit.

ETHYL

Or a large priest.

[long silence]

MIKE

I saw Genet once in Tangier.

ETHYL

Who?

MIKE

Genet. Jean Genet.

ETHYL

Oh.

MIKE

You remember who he was.

ETHYL

Of course. The...uh...playwright. The playwright.

MIKE

Yes. I saw him in the Cafe Central in Tangier. I was there with Gerard Beatty, and suddenly he said: Look, there's Jean Genet And I saw him—he was walking very slowly, his hands in his pockets. And I said, I've got to meet him, and Gerard said, don't even try, and I said, why not, and so later, when he got up to leave. I Just went over, and he stopped, his hands in his pockets, and leaned forward slightly,

and I said, you are M. Genet, aren't you? And he looked at me sort of searchingly and said who are you. And I introduced myself, and he held out his hand and said, Enchante. And I left the cafe with him and walked up the Siaghines in the direction he was going, and I asked him if he liked Tangier, and he said, Ca va, sort of noncommittally, but then as we walked to the Hotel Minzah where he was staying we talked about Moroccan writers and about some of the problems they must confront and that sort of thing and then when we got to his hotel he put out his hand and said I always take a nap, and so we said goodbye. But I saw him two or three more times in the cafe, and we always said hello, and once we exchanged a few words again about one thing or another. I mentioned Camus and he said, Camus writes like a bull. And one or two other things he said—about how sensitive Arabs are on matters of morality, and one or two other observations—not so significant, but things I've never forgotten. He was a good person. I thought.

THE OPERA SINGER SINGS A REPRIEVE OF JIMMY'S SONG "THEY RANG THE DOORBELL..." WHILE JIMMY BRINGS AJAX BACK TO LIFE WITH A KISS ON THE LIPS

JENNIFER

I've known an elephant who could draw. They say birds could sing even before there were human beings on earth. Complicated songs—songs that had complicated ideas, and even thoughts and feelings. Some people say that people learned to sing and dance by watching the birds, so it may be that today we sing thoughts and feelings we don't even understand, but that birds do understand.

ISABELLA

As far as that goes, for all you know, plants have souls. I mean there's nothing that proves animals are a higher form of life than plants. In fact, I think plants are the highest form of life there is. All plants do is come from a seed and take in the sky and take in the planet earth and grow. That's all they do. That's the most efficient and friendliest form of life there is. You know, plants don't need us; we need plants, but they don't need us.

ETHYL

Well, I can imagine stepping off the earth, stepping out into the constellations, into the clouds of star dust, the comets and cocoon stars—and out there. You might find 100 million planets inhabited by living beings—this is possible—where the plight of a world such as ours, may seem no more significant than the most ordinary little accident of daily life seems with us.

TWIN 2

In the beginning, all human beings were half human and half animals, like the ichthyocentaur, which was half fish and half centaur. They were human down to the waist, they were dolphins from the waist down, and they had the feet of horses or lions. They were related to sea horses.

MIKE

Where did you hear this?

TWIN 2

This is evolution.

JIMMY

When you think how we used to live in the ocean, in the salt water, and you think we don't live there any more: really we just took the ocean with us when we came on land. You know, the womb is an ocean really, babies begin in an ocean and human blood has the same concentration of salt as seawater, and no matter where we are, on top of a mountain or in the middle of a desert, when we cry or sweat, we cry or sweat seawater.

ISABELLA SINGS A SOLO.

ISABELLA

No lake is so still but that it has its wave;
No circle so perfect but that it has its blur.
I would change things for you if I could;
As I can't, you must take them as they are.

SUSTAINED MUSIC

WATER CASCADES DOWN THE SIDE OF ONE WING OF THE BUILDING.

SUSTAINED MUSIC

THE DINNER GUESTS HAVE GONE, ONE BY ONE, BACK INSIDE THE BUILDING— WITH JIMMY, CARRYING ISABELLA, THE LAST TO LEAVE-LEAVING THE USHERS IN THE PERFORMING SPACE.

The End.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT:

Portions of the text for Another Person Is a Foreign Country were inspired by or taken directly from stories of members of the company, especially from Bruce Hlibok and Jennifer Rohn, and from Mike Anderson, Mohammed Choukri, William "Fergie" Ferguson (whose stories were gathered by David Greenberger for Duplex Planet), Michel Foucault, Martin Gilbert, Stephen Jay Gould, and Richard Rorty, among others.

The poet's four poems were written by Susan Jane Brace, Marie Mirabelli, Paul Erritt, and Sheryl Matsik, respectively.

The closing song from a Chinese proverb, was translated by Arthur Waley.

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