

“The Merchant Of Venice” by William Shakespeare
(or at least our best approximation)

Characters

Isadore Altshuler. Early 30s in 1944, early 70s in 1975. Formerly a geometry professor. Systematic, calculating. Would have been diagnosed with autism if he'd been born today, an autistic actor would be ideal. Playing a young, last-minute Shylock.

Valeska Bachert. Late 20s, early 30s. The princess of the Berlin stage. If the actress does not have blonde hair and blue eyes, she should have a wig/contacts/other means to give her blonde hair and blue eyes. Playing a reluctant Jessica.

Johanna "Jo" Schmidt. Early-mid 20s. A recent convert to Judaism. If you've seen Noah Wench, please let her know. Playing Portia.

Samson Wagner. 30s or 40s. A cart puller who used to own a bakery. He has long said that there is nothing as healing as kneading dough. He hasn't kneaded dough in a long time. Playing Antonio.

Seigfreid Rosenberg. 30s. An administrative worker who never quite let go of his dreams of making it big in the Berlin film scene. Playing Bassanio.

Eizig Jaffe. 60s or 70s. A former professor of political science at Friedrich Wilhelm University. Playing the Duke of Venice.

Esther Bass. 50s. She sent her three sons out of Europe back in 1933 and she'll send you even further if you don't return your script after rehearsal, you realize we're in a ghetto, right? Stage manager.

Ruth Pilzer. 60s. One of the first female theater directors of the Berlin stage.

Time

Spring 1975, recalling late summer 1944.

Place

A university lecture hall, which becomes the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto in recollection.

Notes

When Isadore speaks to the audience, he has a heavy German accent. When he speaks to the other characters, he has no accent. No other character should have an accent (unless the actor does naturally, and in that case it's fine for them to use their natural accent).

Every character wears a yellow star pinned to their clothes, except for Isadore, who should spend the whole play dressed for his lecture (he can remove his jacket, loosen his tie, etc., but his clothes are from 1975). It shouldn't be a big deal, unless you're Valeska.

Characters should be responsible for moving set pieces between acts. They should struggle under the labor of it.

Act One

A dusty courtyard. ISADORE enters. He looks around at the audience, maybe nods or waves.

ISADORE *(to the audience)*

Thank you for being here today- Or. Well. This is your regular class. I suppose you should be thanking me for being here. Hehe... Alright.

I am Dr. Isadore Altshuler. I recognize some of you from my introductory geometry lecture - oh, and Freddie there from the advanced class. Anyway. It should be obvious that I am not a member of the history department, but Dr. Fuller invited me to guest lecture.

Thirty years ago tomorrow, the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto was liberated by the Soviets. I was not there at the time, but I did spend around two months there, in the summer of 1944.

Theresienstadt was open for about three years, and during that time it served three purposes. The first was to act as a holding pen for Czech Jews before being sent to killing centers. The second was to reinforce the myth of voluntary relocation by showing the outside world that elderly, veteran, and famous Jews were being treated well. The third was to hold onto people until the poor food and sanitary conditions weakened their resistance.

The funny thing about Jews, though, is that we are born with resistance in spades.

We had a lending library, at Theresienstadt. We taught our children. And we put on plays. There was opera, I was told, before I arrived. There was Faust. And there was Shakespeare.

In the background, VALESKA and JO enter. VALESKA is holding a small, battered copy of "The Merchant Of Venice."

JO

So what did you tell him?

VALESKA

What could I have said to him? In Berlin I had an agent arranging three figures for a walk-on role, but here it's "Yes, officer," and "See you tomorrow, officer."

JO

What are they having you do?

VALESKA

Pour coffee. Like I did for those Swedes.

JO

I thought they were Swiss.

VALESKA *(to Isadore)*

Excuse me.

ISADORE holds up a “wait just one moment” finger to the audience, then enters the scene. When he enters the scene, you see the age melt off of him. He is young, in his thirties at most, without the pains that trauma and time would heap upon him. He is still the same man, though, still stiff and awkward and himself.

ISADORE

Yes?

VALESKA

We have this space reserved. Through the administrative office.

ISADORE

I was told to meet here an hour after the midday work shift.

VALESKA

Oh no.

ISADORE

Excuse me?

VALESKA

This can't be who Ruth found to replace Avraham as Shylock.

ISADORE

Yes! Yes, you're here for rehearsal, right?

VALESKA

Angels and ministers of grace, defend us.

JO

It's nice to meet you. I'm Jo, this is Valeska.

VALESKA holds out a hand for ISADORE to kiss, only to remember she doesn't particularly want this man to kiss her hand.

VALESKA

Valeska Bachert.

ISADORE

No kidding. Valeska Bachert? The same Valeska Bachert who punched a reporter at the stage door of "Faust" at the Maxim Gorki?

JO

The one and only.

VALESKA

At least I still have my reputation.

ISADORE

They call you the princess of the Berlin stage, I can't imagine you'd lose that kind of reputation too quickly.

VALESKA

Well. I suppose only time will be the judge of that.

ISADORE

I do have to say, I didn't know you were Jewish.

VALESKA

Excuse me?

ISADORE

I just meant.

ISADORE gestures vaguely towards VALESKA's shirt, towards her star, towards the place where they are standing.

VALESKA

You have a lot to learn about me, greenie.

VALESKA stalks elegantly away to work on her lines, even though she definitely knows all of her lines.

ISADORE

I said something wrong, didn't I?

JO

Her heritage is a sensitive subject.

ISADORE

I didn't think there was much of anything we considered sensitive anymore.

JO

She didn't know she was Jewish, either. Well. Jewish enough. Her mother was half Jewish. She didn't know until the Gestapo showed up at a stage door.

ISADORE

That's awful.

JO

Lots of awful things in here. She's just having a tough time believing she's one of them.

ISADORE

Whether she believes it or not, though, she's. Well. Here.

JO

I know.

ISADORE

So she'll just have to get used to it, right?

JO

You'll see, we all have our ghosts in here. Or we don't. Are there ghosts in Judaism?

ISADORE

Not quite? At least, I don't think so, but you know what they say.

Jo does not, in fact, know what they say.

ISADORE (*cont.*)

Two Jews, three opinions.

JO

Guess I still have a lot to learn.

ISADORE

Aren't you Jewish?

JO

I am. I just wasn't, until about six months ago. I converted.

ISADORE

Please don't take this the wrong way, but. Why would you convert? I mean, now of all times?

JO

My boyfriend is Jewish. They took him here, and for the first few months, we managed to sneak letters through the gates, but then they stopped. Radio silence. So I figured, the only way I was going to find him was by being sent here myself. Say, you got here pretty recently, right?

ISADORE

Two weeks ago.

JO

Did you hear anything about a guy named Noah Wench while you were out there?

ISADORE

Can't say I did. Sorry.

JO

No, it- It's alright.

SEIGFRIED enters, with more energy than anyone should reasonably have in a ghetto.

SAMSON is close behind.

SEIGFRIED

Jo! Hedda from the mailroom said she had something for you.

JO

Oh! Oh, just- if Ruth comes-

SAMSON

We'll give her a story. Hurry on.

JO

Thank you!

JO dashes offstage.

SAMSON

When did you see Hedda?

SEIGFRIED

Whole mailroom crew was up in the bookkeeping office today, dropping off a delivery.

SAMSON

Of what?

SEIGFRIED

Actual books. Can you believe it? I've been begging Herr Weber for a piece of paper that didn't have something printed on the back for months, and suddenly they're wheeling in cart after cart of books, along with all of this camera equipment to film them with.

SAMSON

They were filming books?

SEIGFRIED

They were filming us, mostly, using the books.

SAMSON

Just using the books?

SEIGFRIED

I had a whole part where I walked in from behind the camera to hand a book to an officer.

SAMSON

Why would they need to film that?

SEIGFRIED

Beats me. Come to think of it, I wasn't actually supposed to be telling you any of this.

SAMSON (*fondly*)

Of course you weren't.

SEIGFRIED

But they did give me this to buy their silence.

SEIGFRIED takes a piece of bread out of his pocket.

SAMSON

Then clearly they wasted their money.

SEIGFRIED holds the bread out to SAMSON. SAMSON gives him a Look; they've done this dance before.

SEIGFRIED

Come on, simple mathematics. It takes less energy to flip through books than it does to pull carts through the streets.

SAMSON

You had to walk with a book, too. Hand it off.

SEIGFRIED

Samson.

SAMSON takes the bread.

SEIGFRIED (*cont.*)

Want water?

SAMSON

You don't have to ge-

SEIGFRIED

I'll get you water.

SEIGFRIED heads to the spigot to get water, I guess he has a cup in his pocket or something. ISADORE is hoping SAMSON didn't notice him definitely listening in on the entire conversation, but he did, and there's some awkward eye contact that ISADORE can't quite reciprocate.

SAMSON

You're the new Shylock, aren't you?

ISADORE

That's, right. That's- Isadore. Altshuler.

SAMSON extends a hand to shake, which ISADORE does after an awkward second of not recognizing what he's supposed to do with it.

SAMSON

Samson. I'm playing Antonio. And our Bassanio is Seigfried.

Indication towards SEIGFRIED.

ISADORE

He seems.

SAMSON

Optimistic?

ISADORE

That.

SAMSON

He dropped out of university in his second year to try and make it in the Berlin film scene. He had wanted to be an actor since he was a boy, but his father had wanted him to go into medicine. Of course, he had no taste for it. He managed to pick up a few odd jobs on a few sets, but no big break. Now he is here, and living out his dreams of stardom. I suppose that when you know your last act will be the thing you always wanted to do, you at least know you will die happy.

ISADORE

That is. Considerably less optimistic.

SAMSON

He is one of a kind.

ISADORE

Do you really think we're going to be killed here?

SAMSON

Never said killed. Permitted to starve.

ISADORE

Is there a difference?

SAMSON

Why don't you tell me, Shylock?

ISADORE

There has to be.

SAMSON

Why did you take the role, anyway?

ISADORE

Ruth asked me. She and my mother were friends, before she left Mittenwald for bigger and brighter.

SAMSON

But this role? "They call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog, and spet upon my Jewish gaberdine."

ISADORE

That just sounds like half my colleagues in Augsburg.

SAMSON

What did you do?

ISADORE

I was a professor.

SAMSON

So of course that couldn't last.

ISADORE

Not as long as I'd have liked, no.

SAMSON

That's the story for most people around here.

ISADORE

What about you?

SAMSON

I owned a bakery.

ISADORE

That sounds nice.

SAMSON

It was. At least, until I signed it over in exchange for my very own apartment in the luxurious Theresienstadt.

ISADORE

They promised you an apartment?

SAMSON

Sure did. What did they tell you that you were getting?

ISADORE

My own bed.

SAMSON

Ah, if only.

ISADORE

How did you become involved in this, um-

SAMSON

Production?

ISADORE

That.

SAMSON

I made a cake for the opening night of one of Ruth's shows several years ago. She recognized me.

ISADORE

Ruth recognizes everyone.

SAMSON

Certainly a helpful skill for a career in the theater.

ISADORE

It must have been at least twenty years since she'd last seen me, but when I spotted her in the coffee line last week, she knew exactly who I was.

SAMSON

Remarkable.

EIZIG (*offstage*)

Censorship!

EIZIG enters in a whirlwind, RUTH following behind him with tired frustration. EIZIG has made himself a makeshift Hitler moustache with whatever it is he could find - a scrap of fabric, maybe, or coffee grounds smeared on his upper lip.

EIZIG (*cont.*)

Censorship, I tell you!

RUTH

Ah, yes, censorship. That is what it is called when I ask you not to mock the Führer and get us all killed. Sign me up for the Gestapo.

EIZIG

I have half a mind to do just that! Try to replace me, I dare you.

RUTH (*imitating him*)

I have half a mind to do just that. You know I'm hard enough pressed for actors as it is, so do me a great kindness by playing a plain, respectable Duke of Venice and not making my life any more difficult.

EIZIG

As you insist, Mein Führer.

EIZIG stalks off, removing his moustache. RUTH spots ISADORE and pulls him in for a sweet embrace. As nice as it is, ISADORE would clearly rather not be hugged at all.

RUTH

Oh, cookie, it is good to see you.

ISADORE

I'm not a cookie.

RUTH

You haven't changed since you were a boy. Are you getting enough to eat? No, of course you're not. Dolf in the kitchen is a bit sweet on me, though you'll never catch him saying that, so I can usually get him to throw me a little extra something if one of my kids needs it.

ISADORE

I'm getting enough to eat.

RUTH

You and I both know that's a bold-faced lie.

ISADORE

I just meant-

RUTH

Oh, cookie, I'm only teasing. Now, you haven't had a chance to swing by the library yet, have you?

ISADORE

Not yet, sorry.

RUTH

Don't be sorry, just wanted to know if you'd read the play. We'll go over everything when everyone gets here. Speaking of - where is everyone?

VALESKA

Transport yesterday, Ruth, most of the cast won't be showing up.

RUTH

Just what I need.

VALESKA

You couldn't hear the trains?

RUTH

You'll be hearing an earful from Esther, is what you'll be hearing if you don't get rid of that book before she gets here.

VALESKA

I'm not afraid of Esther.

RUTH

An actress who's not afraid of her stage manager?

ESTHER enters. She holds a crate of scripts - a bound copy or two, but most look like they've been hand written or cobbled together from several different excerpts.

ESTHER

Valeska Bachert!

ESTHER

VALESKA thrusts the book at SEIGFRIED, who takes it in surprise.

VALESKA

It was him.

ESTHER takes the book from SEIGFRIED and smacks him with it.

RUTH

Tell me we still have our Portia.

JO rushes in, a little breathless and holding a postcard.

JO

You've got her! Sorry, sorry, I know I'm late.

RUTH

In Berlin, on time is late, and late gets you fired.

VALESKA

You can't replace us.

RUTH

As much as I wish I could. Now, everybody circle up.

Everybody circles up.

RUTH (*cont.*)

Alright, a little housekeeping before we dive in. Siegfried, any luck on gathering supplies for fliers?

SEIGFRIED

Maybe once they finish filming whatever they're filming, but the office is too heavily guarded right now.

RUTH

That's alright, we're doing fine for now with word of mouth. Now, as crazy as this may sound to you who had classic theater served up with your morning cereal, Isadore, our new Shylock, has never read *The Merchant of Venice*.

VALESKA

Of course he hasn't.

RUTH

If you ask me, this is a good opportunity for a sort of cue-to-cue. Everyone, into the wings.

The company takes their places.

ISADORE

You don't have to-

RUTH

They're actors. Let them put on a show.

As the actors describe the story, they move vaguely through their blocking, speeding through bits and skipping over bits, maybe freezing in important tableaux.

SEIGFRIED

The show starts with Bassanio, coming in and telling Antonio all about how he's in love with this wonderful gal, Portia. Except he needs money if he's going to impress her, and he knows Antonio's got lots, so he asks his friend very nicely to borrow a little-

SAMSON

Only Antonio's money is all tied up in trading voyages, so they need to take out a loan. They go to a moneylender, Shylock, who already doesn't like them very much because Antonio's practices have driven his rates down.

SEIGFRIED

And because they're antisemitic.

SAMSON

Well, that.

SEIGFRIED

Shylock eventually agrees to the loan, but if it's not repaid, he insists on a pound of Antonio's flesh as payment.

VALESKA

You're skipping my scene, you know.

SEIGFRIED

Jessica doesn't enter until act two. Scene three, I think.

VALESKA

Well, since Freida isn't here, I'm assuming I'm playing Nerissa, now, too. Come on, Jo, we're doing it.

JO

Right, well. I'm Portia, and my father just died, so I need to get married. He left behind this strange test for my suitors, they have to guess the right box out of a gold one, a silver one, and a lead one. A perfectly normal thing to do to select a husband for your daughter.

VALESKA

Prince of Morocco shows up, picks the wrong box.

ISADORE

What about- Nerissa?

VALESKA

Portia's servant. She's there.

ISADORE

Wait, then who's Jessica?

VALESKA

Shylock's daughter. A man named Lorenzo wants to marry her- Do we have a Lorenzo anymore?

EIZIG (*suggestive*)

I would be more than happy to step into the role.

VALESKA

Not a chance.

ESTHER

Keep going, everyone.

VALESKA

Wouldn't our time be better spent actually rehearsing?

ESTHER

Our time is best spent how your director says it is.

VALESKA

I'm just saying-

RUTH

Fine, oh Princess of the Berlin Stage, just the highlights.

VALESKA

Jessica runs off with all of Lorenzo and all of Shylock's money, Bassanio picks the right box, which is of course the lead one because the right box has to be the plainest for some stupid

romantic purpose, and when Antonio can't pay back the loan, Shylock demands the pound of flesh.

ISADORE

He doesn't actually cut off someone's flesh, does he?

SEIGFRIED

He takes Antonio to court over it.

EIZIG

Before the Duke of Venice.

VALESKA

And he loses. They convert him to Christianity instead of killing him.

ISADORE

That's an awful way to end a play.

VALESKA

That's not the end of the play.

ISADORE

It's not?

ESTHER

The trial scene is act four, scene one. Shakespeare plays are five acts.

ISADORE

Ruth, when we met in the coffee line, you told me the play was a comedy.

RUTH

It is a comedy.

ISADORE

It's not funny.

RUTH

A Shakespearean comedy.

VALESKA

We still haven't gotten through the end.

ISADORE

It should be over by now.

VALESKA

Shakespearean comedies end with a wedding. Happily ever after.

ISADORE

It's not happy.

RUTH

Valeska, Jo, why don't we run through act one, scene two while Samson and Seigfried get Isadore up to speed on their first scene together?

VALESKA

So I'm playing Nerissa, then?

RUTH

Considering this is what's left of our cast, sure. Why not?

VALESKA

Well, based on what you said to me at my audition-

ESTHER

You can give lip or you can rehearse, your choice. Isadore, grab a script from the crate. The rest of you should be completely off book for the first act.

The group disperses. ISADORE takes a script from the crate. JO and VALESKA take their places for the scene.

RUTH

Valeska, don't you need a script for Nerissa's lines?

VALESKA

I've memorized them.

RUTH

Already?

VALESKA

Can't be too prepared.

RUTH

Why am I not surprised? Let's get started.

They get started. JO definitely has a case of Shakespeare Voice, but she's good for someone with little experience.

JO

By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world.

VALESKA

You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are...

Shift in focus, downstage to the men working on their scene.

SEIGFRIED

No, over here- right. There. You're standing there when you deliver the monologue.

ISADORE

What's a monologue?

SEIGFRIED

It's just when one person is talking for a while. If it's a soliloquy, that means you're talking directly to the audience, but monologues are to other people.

ISADORE

So how do I know if it's a monologue or just a long line?

SEIGFRIED

How- It's a feeling. Monologues just. Feel more important. Do you get it?

ISADORE

No.

SEIGFRIED

Right. Well. Give it a try, yeah?

This next part, where ISADORE is reading? Should be excruciating.

ISADORE

Signor Antonio! Many a time and oft! In the rialto you have rated me! About my moneys! And! My usances!

A moment. Recognition of the awkwardness.

SAMSON

You haven't acted before, have you?

ISADORE

It's that obvious?

SAMSON

I needed some time to adjust, too, don't worry. Like I said, the closest I'd been to the theater before this was delivering a cake to one.

ISADORE

How did you do it, then? Adjust?

SAMSON

It's in the rhythm. Siegfried explained it to me.

SEIGFRIED

Iambic pentameter.

A blank look from ISADORE.

SEIGFRIED *(cont.)*

da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM.

Still, a blank look from ISADORE.

SEIGFRIED *(cont.)*

The words follow that rhythm. It's like a heartbeat.

SAMSON

You work with formulas, right?

ISADORE

Formulas?

SAMSON

In geometry. There are formulas. Equations.

ISADORE

Yes. There are.

SAMSON

Iambic pentameter is like a formula for Shakespeare. Five sets of two syllables, emphasis on the second syllable. Once you learn the formula, you can use it however you need to.

ISADORE

That. Actually makes a lot of sense.

SAMSON

Everything has a rhythm. If I could teach my daughter how to knead dough when she was three, I can teach a grown man to recite a few lines of Shakespeare.

ISADORE

You have a daughter?

SEIGFRIED

Wait, I know this. Her name is Tovah, she's seven, and her favorite treat from the bakery was the chocolate babka.

SAMSON

I may have mentioned her a few times.

ISADORE

Do you know where she is?

SAMSON

If I could tell you, I would.

ISADORE

I'm sorry.

SAMSON

Let's try the monologue again.

ISADORE begins to speak, following pretty steadily with the da-DUM da-DUM rhythm.

ISADORE

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
in the Rialto you have rated me
about my moneys and my usances.
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug
(For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe).

ISADORE pauses for a moment, looks up from the text - sees the stars pinned to the chests of his new friends, thinks about the badges of their tribe, thinks about the sufferances. When he resumes the speech, he starts to find a flow for the first time. He gets it, more and more as he continues. It's not brilliant, but it's honest.

ISADORE (*cont.*)

You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help.
Go to then, you come to me, and you say,
"Shylock, we would have moneys," you say so—
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard,
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold; moneys is your suit.
What should I say to you? Should I not say,
"Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" Or
Shall I bend low and in a bondman's key,
With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,
Say this:
"Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday last,
You spurn'd me such a day, another time

You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys"?"

By the time ISADORE reaches the end of the speech, the rehearsal upstage has paused, all eyes on him. When he looks up from the text, he realizes this, and his face flushes. RUTH clears her throat.

RUTH

Let's take five, everyone.

VALESKA

Thank you, five.

The cast disperses for their five. ISADORE comes downstage, a professor again.

ISADORE

I was never one to take well to a change in my circumstances. When they discontinued my brand of shaving soap, for example, I did not shave for a month. The beard, mind you, was horrendous. But I simply could not shave it.

My first two weeks in Theresienstadt were spent in sort of a daze. I went from place to place, task to task, slept on a wooden board with another two men because I was told to. That first pass at the monologue, that was the first time since arriving at the ghetto that I felt like a person again. And the person I was, was angry.

It was not as though I was completely unused to speaking in front of people - a professor can't exactly be afraid of a lecture hall. But I could prepare a lecture. I had studied the material I lectured on for years. I had not studied my anger.

I suppose that to act is to study anger. Perhaps. Ruth could have said it better, of course. She said most things better than I could.

RUTH

If you show up to rehearsal in that mustache again, I will reach up your ass through your mouth and yank it off myself.

ISADORE turns to look back at the cast, who has been milling about in their five throughout the last speech. The following conversations overlap with each other.

EIZIG

Censorship! Censorship, I say!

VALESKA

Werner Krauss is a darling, you know.

SEIGFRIED

Is he?

VALESKA

An absolute sweetheart. Good with his hands, too.

JO (*reading from the postcard*)

“I heard the violins coming from the hills when I stepped off the train, and I thought of you. I will be thinking of you for as long as I’m here.”

SAMSON

Did he say where he was?

JO

No, but doesn’t it sound romantic?

RUTH

No, no good. We’ll have to reblock the entire trial scene.

ESTHER

We spent hours on the trial scene.

RUTH

And we’ll spend more.

EIZIG

If you change my trial scene, I will drop out!

SAMSON

I could have sworn Eve mentioned violins in her last letter.

JO

Eve?

SAMSON
My wife.

JO
Where-

SAMSON
She stopped writing months ago.

SEIGFRIED
I'd sell my left arm to have seen him in *Tartuffe*.

VALESKA
When we get out of here, I'll have to give him a call.

JO
I'll have to ask Noah if he's heard of her.

RUTH
I'll have to find the time.

ISADORE (*as the professor*)
They all certainly knew how to speak. Eventually, they became a more comforting background noise than silence. Not that there was ever really silence in Theresienstadt.

ISADORE holds up a finger to the lecture hall, goes to take a drink from the spigot. The water is metallic and awful.

SAMSON
How is it?

ISADORE (*as the prisoner*)
Fresh.

SAMSON
Fresh?

ISADORE

As the sore on my foot.

SAMSON

How's your first day?

ISADORE

I feel like I'm in way over my head.

SAMSON

We all do. You'll get your footing back.

ISADORE

You think so?

SAMSON

No clue.

SAMSON looks at SEIGFRIED, who does not see him.

SAMSON (*cont.*)

But sometimes you just have to say it.

SAMSON drinks from the spigot. ISADORE steps away, looking down at the script, and bumps into VALESKA.

VALESKA

Eyes up, greenie.

ISADORE

Sorry. I was. Looking over my lines.

VALESKA

And I will not contest that you need to do so, just make sure you're not doing it while walking.

ISADORE

I could probably use some help. Learning them. And in exchange, I could, well-

VALESKA

What?

ISADORE

Tell you. About your faith. My grandfather was a rabbi, so I'm kind of an unwitting Jewish encyclopedia.

VALESKA

It's your faith, Isadore. Not mine.

ISADORE

Isn't it?

ISADORE's eyes drift to her star. VALESKA stands a bit straighter. She is a professional. She is the princess of the Berlin stage, regardless of whether or not she has been dethroned.

VALESKA

It will never be mine.

VALESKA strides away. ISADORE stands for a moment, dazed, blinking a bit when he notices the lecture hall again.

ISADORE

"Never" is a long time. If there was going to be anyone in Theresienstadt to speak as if they had nevers to consider, it was Valeska Bachert.

ISADORE clears his throat, dry and dusty again, as though he did not just drink minutes ago.

ISADORE

Take five, everyone. We will resume our lecture then.

End of Act One.

Act Two

A barrack room of the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto. It is like summer camp, except not. The room is so full of three-layered bunk beds, it is hard for a person to pass between them. The bunk beds look rough, like they were built quickly and would give you splinters. No mattresses, only some blankets and pillows. Maybe a few personal items (personal items in this case refer to bowls or forks or cups, a toothbrush if you're lucky or maybe even a cigarette, though no one would leave that behind if they were smart). EIZIG is asleep on a bunk far enough upstage that he blends into the scenery.

ISADORE the professor comes onstage again. He is working on the last of a Nature Valley bar, a new and exciting product in 1975, one which will be a staple of his pantry until he dies in the year 2000. Is this too much information about Nature Valley bars for a stage direction? Perhaps, but it's the information ISADORE would want you to have.

Anyway, ISADORE comes back in, finishes the Nature Valley bar, and brushes the crumbs from his hands and his clothes.

ISADORE

Upon arriving in Theresienstadt, I was assigned to a construction crew for my work detail. My father had been a carpenter, but he never wanted me to study his craft. My brain was meant for mathematics, he said, and so he didn't want me to have a backup plan. If I didn't have anything to cushion my fall, the only option would be to fly. And so, when I joined the construction crew, I had no idea what I was doing.

I enjoyed the construction crew. That is, as much as one could enjoy their work assignment in their prison. It was geometry I could make with my hands. My first assignment with the crew was to build a playground in the same dusty courtyard where I had been packed in with two hundred other new arrivals just days earlier.

The playground was finished in about a month, but the children were not allowed to play on it. The day we finished it, though, I didn't care. All I wanted was to return to my room for some sleep. It was a hot summer, the kind of wet heat that simmered you alive. It salted your skin with sweat like you were being seasoned to be served.

ISADORE is young again, and tired. He sits down on the bunk he shares with two other men, a bottom bunk on a downstage set of beds, and is about to lie down when SEIGFRIED and SAMSON come bursting into the room.

SEIGFRIED

Just take the bread.

SAMSON

I don't need the bread.

SEIGFRIED

We all need bread.

SAMSON

Then you eat the bread.

SEIGFRIED

What is wrong with you?

SAMSON

What is *wrong* with me?

SEIGFRIED

Melancholy is one thing. I've seen you melancholy. This isn't melancholy. You're angry.

SAMSON

Mazel Tov, you've got it. I'm angry. Isadore, call the rabbi, we'll bless this day.

ISADORE

Oh, I wasn't trying to get involved-

SEIGFRIED

You're blowing this out of proportion.

SAMSON

I'm not blowing this out of proportion. You're not blowing this enough- into proportion.

SEIGFRIED

What?

SAMSON

You're not filming for them.

ISADORE

Wait, what are you filming?

SAMSON
Propaganda.

SEIGFRIED
It's not propaganda.

Upstage, EIZIG jolts awake.

EIZIG
Propaganda?

SEIGFRIED
It's not propaganda!

EIZIG
What isn't propaganda?

SAMSON
When was the last time we had the buchteln with plum jam?

EIZIG
Two summers ago.

ISADORE
Wait, there are buchteln?

SAMSON
With plum jam.

EIZIG
Not since two summers ago.

SAMSON
Try two hours. They sent me up from the south fence to the courtyard with a cart full of film canisters, of all things. And when I get there, I find our one and only Seigfried Rosenberg, chatting with Herr Strauss like an old friend about the way the camera caught the plum jam sparkling in the sunlight.

ISADORE

Why were they filming buchteln?

SAMSON

They weren't just filming buchteln, they were filming children eating buchteln.

EIZIG

Ah. Propaganda.

SEIGFRIED

It's not propaganda!

EIZIG

So they just want footage of children eating sweets for posterity?

SEIGFRIED

How am I supposed to know? Herr Strauss said the footage of the bookkeeping office turned out well, so he wanted me to work on some segments of the children. I got half a loaf for it - without mold spots, mind you - and I got to make a few real artistic decisions. Samson wouldn't even have known about it if it weren't for his delivery.

SAMSON

And that would have made it alright?

SEIGFRIED

Well, for one, you would have eaten the bread.

SAMSON

Enough with the bread!

SEIGFRIED

I know being here has taken a different kind of toll on you.

SAMSON

I said enough.

SEIGFRIED

But I thought you were doing better.

SAMSON

This has nothing to do with my condition when we first got here-

SEIGFRIED

Doesn't it? You wouldn't eat then, either.

SAMSON

Does it not occur to you that I don't want to take handouts from the Alf Sjöberg of propaganda?

SEIGFRIED

I wouldn't consider myself an Alf Sjöberg!

SAMSON (*sarcastic*)

Exactly the point.

SEIGFRIED

What is the point, then?

EIZIG

The peeling back of the curtain on a failed democracy.

SEIGFRIED

Right, because nothing signals a failing democracy like buchteln with plum jam.

ISADORE

And a playground.

EIZIG

Is that right?

ISADORE

We just finished it.

SAMSON

Where did you build a playground?

ISADORE

In the courtyard by the train tracks.

SAMSON

Why would they block off that area? It would cut off access to the trains.

ISADORE

The supervisor told us it won't be up long. Two weeks, at most.

SEIGFRIED

Like a set piece.

EIZIG

Because a fake city is a harbinger of good to come.

SEIGFRIED

Herr Strauss told me to report for work duty up by the train tracks tomorrow. Maybe we'll be filming the playground.

SAMSON

You don't see anything suspicious about that? The first luxuries these malnourished, miserable children have had in years, and they're all on camera?

SEIGFRIED

It's not up to me! They would be filming it anyway. They want my opinions, and I want to give them. Is that so bad?

EIZIG

They want your opinions? Not something we're asked for often around here.

SEIGFRIED

Often?

EIZIG

Or at all. No one wants to know what an old man thinks.

ISADORE

What is it you think?

EIZIG

Are you calling me old?

ISADORE
Nevermind.

EIZIG
I'll tell you what I think. I think they don't build a set unless they want to cover up whatever's behind it.

SEIGFRIED
That's not what sets are for.

EIZIG
Isn't it?

SEIGFRIED
Did you do anything at all in the theater before this production?

EIZIG
I was a professor of political science at Friedrich Wilhelm University.

SEIGFRIED
So you wouldn't know anything about sets.

EIZIG
No, I would only know about facades.

SAMSON
I need a cup of coffee.

SEIGFRIED
Take the bread.

SAMSON
I said I needed coffee.

SEIGFRIED
They were barely serving coffee this morning.

SAMSON

Then I'll go and see if there is any left.

EIZIG

I'll join you. We can talk about crumbling democracies.

EIZIG and SAMSON exit. ISADORE returns to the lecture, as the professor.

ISADORE

While Seigfried only had creative control over a few scenes, he would continue to refer to it as "his film" as long as I knew him. The film, *The Führer Gives A City To The Jews*, was screened privately a few times in 1945, just before the end of the war. The full version no longer exists, but approximately twenty minutes of footage remain in various archives. Your university library should have just under five of them. It is, in fact, propaganda.

SEIGFRIED

Are you trying to sleep?

ISADORE is back in the scene.

ISADORE

I was.

SEIGFRIED

Have you gone back over the scene we rehearsed yesterday?

ISADORE

Was I supposed to?

SEIGFRIED

Well. There's always tonight to sleep.

ISADORE

I wasn't that bad, was I?

SEIGFRIED

You're not bad. You've been getting the hang of it, but you're still new. I'm not exactly fantastic, either. If I were better, I'd have actually gotten cast in something back in Berlin. I had a few production assistant jobs, but Ruth was the first to put me on the stage. I want to do it right.

ISADORE

I feel like “doing it right” should involve a real theater.

SEIGFRIED

Are you kidding? I’d never even get hired as an usher for a Ruth Pilzer play if we were in a real theater.

ISADORE

You have an interesting way of looking at things.

SEIGFRIED

Samson says I’m the same kind of optimist as his wife. He says it like it’s a bad thing. Or at least, not a good one. I guess if I’d been married to an optimist and then left her, I’d be more of a pessimist, too. But if I can’t look forward to tomorrow, what am I supposed to do today?

ISADORE

Survive?

SEIGFRIED

That’s sad. And boring.

ISADORE

No one else I’ve met here has not being bored that high on their priorities.

SEIGRFRIED

Why else would we be putting on a play in the ghetto?

RUTH, JO, and VALESKA enter. VALESKA is holding a piece of moldy bread.

JO

Wait, how can you be so sure?

VALESKA

Because Malka sleeps in the bunk above mine. Trust me when I say I have it on good authority that Chaim’s been sneaking in for some late night visits.

ISADORE

Women aren’t supposed to be in here.

VALESKA

And yet, here we are.

RUTH

It's Herr Bauer on barrack check, he's a teddy bear. We'll be fine.

ISADORE

And why is it you're not in your own barrack?

RUTH

A woman in our barrack is being checked for typhus, there's no being too careful when it comes to my cast. Nasty stuff.

JO

Noah mentioned it in one of his letters. Back in the early days.

RUTH

Must have been early days, if you were getting all these letters on the outside.

JO

I'm still getting postcards. Another came this morning.

VALESKA

You're joking.

JO brandishes the postcard.

JO

Just this morning. He says he still hears the violins, and he can smell meat smoking in the kitchens, and he will see me again one day.

VALESKA takes the postcard from her.

VALESKA

I don't know how you can read this chicken scratch.

JO

Don't be insulting just because you don't have anyone you love waiting for you outside of here.

VALESKA

Because love has made you so kind.

JO

He says he wants to meet me in Prague when this is all over, in the middle of the Charles Bridge.

ISADORE

That sounds wonderful.

JO

Do you have anyone waiting out there for you, Isadore?

ISADORE

No, unfortunately. I was living with my mother, but she was taken before I was.

JO

I meant someone special.

ISADORE

I think my mother is rather special.

RUTH

I'm not arguing.

ISADORE

What?

JO

I meant, do you have a woman?

ISADORE

Oh. No. No women.

SEIGFRIED

Same here. Couple of confirmed bachelors, huh?

RUTH

I had a woman.

!!!

RUTH

A close. Friend. Frieda. She owned a bookshop, just down the street from the grimy little theater where I directed my first show. I would spend hours, looking over the same twelve scripts she kept in stock, just for an excuse to be near her. The next show, I had Esther place the order for the scripts from Frieda's shop, and she got it in her head to slip a note into the order asking her to dinner on my behalf. Leave it to a stage manager, I suppose.

JO

I didn't know you and Esther were together in Berlin.

RUTH

She was my stage manager from the beginning. It was our take on *Sturm und Drang* that got us our first SS citation. When Frieda and I moved in together, into this little flat above her shop, we had the citation framed and hung it on our wall. It all burned down the night we were sent here. By what miracle we ended up here together, I do not know. Every moment with her was a miracle. Right up until she died. During the last outbreak of typhus.

RUTH finishes her monologue with a deep breath, the kind a leader must take. To everyone's surprise, it is VALESKA who goes to her side.

VALESKA

Wherever Frieda is, she knows you are well, and she is grateful for it.

RUTH

Thank you, Valeska.

VALESKA

Of course.

RUTH

Hold onto him, Jo. As long as you have him.

JO

I will.

RUTH

Well. I'm supposed to meet Esther, talk marketing. We've been trying to find a way to keep word of mouth from going through the rumor mill, we've got three different dates for opening night that people are taking as fact - Anyway. I should go.

JO

Can I come?

RUTH

You'd better. I want to hear more about your Noah.

RUTH and JO exit. ISADORE watches VALESKA with a horrified/intrigued sort of fascination she just reads as horrified.

VALESKA

I worked in the Berlin theater, she is hardly the first homosexual I've known.

ISADORE

I wasn't-

VALESKA

Love isn't a geometry proof, Isadore. There is no one answer.

ISADORE

Proofs don't have just one answer, they- I'm not offended, or-

VALESKA

Then what?

ISADORE

Your acceptance just seems a little. Incongruous.

VALESKA

Incongruous with what?

ISADORE doesn't answer. He doesn't quite stare, but VALESKA stares right back. SEIGFRIED is very uncomfortable with the whole thing.

SEIGFRIED

Hey, Valeska! Can you grab the script up on my bunk? Isadore was going to practice some more.

VALESKA
As he should.

VALESKA climbs up to SEIGFRIED's bunk, an upper one on the other side of the stage, and picks up the script. Instead of carrying it down with her, she throws the book to SEIGFRIED and remains sitting on the bunk. SEIGFRIED looks between VALESKA and ISADORE, comes to the conclusion that things will not get any less awkward.

SEIGFRIED
I should go see if Samson had any luck with the coffee.

SEIGFRIED hands the script to ISADORE.

SEIGFRIED (*cont.*)
Act three?

ISADORE
Act three.

SEIGFRIED exits. ISADORE opens the script to the proper page. VALESKA picks the moldy spots out of her crust of bread.

ISADORE
I am a Jew. *I* am a Jew. I... am a Jew. I am a *Jew*. I AM a Jew.

VALESKA
If you keep it up like that, the dead men in the trenches will know you are a Jew.

ISADORE
I thought I needed to practice.

VALESKA
Believe it or not, greenie, a monologue consists of more than a single sentence.

ISADORE
It begins with one, doesn't it?

VALESKA

A quick wit will only propel you faster into an early grave.

ISADORE

Valeska Bachert is telling me to hold my tongue?

VALESKA

She is telling you to hold it before she cuts it out.

ISADORE

And there's the Valeska I knew from the papers.

VALESKA

That Valeska died in Berlin.

ISADORE

That's a sad way to look at it.

VALESKA

I wouldn't expect a mathematician to be so judgemental. Particularly not one who looks and acts like a nearsighted owl.

ISADORE

Well, if there's anything the last month has proved, it's that I have a particular talent for bothering you.

VALESKA bites into her bread, spits it out almost immediately.

ISADORE (cont.)

Not good enough for the princess of the Berlin stage?

VALESKA

Not good enough for the rats in the wings of the Berlin stage.

ISADORE

If the rumors are to be believed, we and the rats are one in the same.

VALESKA

You, maybe. Not me.

ISADORE

Which one am I, a rat or an owl?

VALESKA

A bit of both.

ISADORE

Better a rat than a self-hating Jew.

VALESKA

Excuse me?

ISADORE

There are plenty of things I have spent my life being ashamed of. My appearance, my manner, any of it. No one has ever been shy to let me know that I am abnormal, but the one thing I will never let them make me ashamed of is the fact that I am a Jew.

VALESKA

I...

ISADORE

Rat got your tongue?

VALESKA

I am not a Jewess.

ISADORE

I should hope not, it sounds like a sea serpent. Jewessssssssss.

VALESKA

One Jewish grandmother does not a Jewess make.

ISADORE

She was your mother's mother, right?

VALESKA

Why does that matter?

ISADORE

It's a matrilineal faith. So if she were your grandmother on your mother's side, then one Jewish grandmother would, in fact, a Jewess make.

VALESKA throws a bit of moldy bread at ISADORE. ISADORE picks it up, eats it, and continues reading from his script.

ISADORE (*cont.*)

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath... Hath *not*... a JewEyes.

VALESKA

You're lucky Avraham was shot, otherwise you never would have gotten this role.

ISADORE

I thought he was sent out on a transport.

VALESKA

He was supposed to be. Didn't get on the train fast enough for the guard's liking.

ISADORE

That's disgusting.

VALESKA

No more disgusting than anything else here. Moldy bread and rusty water until we're coughing up spores.

ISADORE

How do I make it better?

VALESKA

You don't. You wait until it kills you.

ISADORE

The monologue, I meant.

VALESKA

You want my help?

ISADORE

I'm not Avraham, but I might as well try not to be awful.

VALESKA considers him. ISADORE looks up at her, earnest.

VALESKA

Only because I have put too much of my life into the theater to see you bring my craft to ruin.

They meet in a middle bunk, in the middle of the stage.

VALESKA (*cont.*)

A good actor is not an imitation. You must be an original. And you find the originality in your soul. It is in the pain you travel with instead of a suitcase.

ISADORE

They didn't let us bring suitcases.

VALESKA

Hush. In this speech, what does Shylock want?

ISADORE

A pound of flesh.

VALESKA

Look under the pound of flesh.

ISADORE

Bone?

VALESKA

What are *his* bones? What does he really want?

ISADORE

I. Thought he really wanted the pound of flesh.

VALESKA

Look deeper.

ISADORE

You said it yourself, I'm nearsighted.

VALESKA

Even if Shakespeare wrote Shylock as a villain, you can't see him that way. You have to look at the play from his perspective.

ISADORE

Is that something you can do?

VALESKA

I should hope so, I've spent long enough learning to.

ISADORE

What do you see?

VALESKA

I see a man who wants to be recognized. A man who wants to be treated like a man.

ISADORE

I don't see it.

VALESKA

I can't open your eyes for you.

ISADORE

Can you show me?

VALESKA

Must I?

ISADORE

I can't make you do anything, but it would help you prevent your craft from coming to ruin.

A Look. A moment. VALESKA begins to read the monologue. The more she reads, the more she feels it stabbing her.

VALESKA

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?

If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?

By this point, VALESKA is crying.

ISADORE

Valeska-

VALESKA pushes past his concern, past her tears. The words tear their way out of her stomach, like a bad meal or a baby or a knife.

VALESKA

And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

VALESKA breaks down sobbing. ISADORE does not know what to do, but eventually, he holds her, and she lets herself be held. When the sobs quiet, VALESKA sits up again. ISADORE takes a handkerchief from his pocket (to Valeska, barely more than a scrap of loose fabric) and dries her tears.

VALESKA (*cont., half-joking*)

Get away from me with that filthy thing.

ISADORE

Not until I can see your face again from under all those tears.

VALESKA

I do not know where that came from.

ISADORE

It came from your pain suitcase.

VALESKA

That was supposed to be a metaphor.

ISADORE

That's just Judaism. A bunch of metaphors we take literally.

VALESKA

I don't know how I let Ruth talk me into Jessica, out of all roles. "Good for me." She doesn't know what's good for me.

ISADORE

It has to be better for you, confronting things. Instead of keeping them packed away.

VALESKA

In my pain suitcase?

ISADORE

Exactly.

VALESKA

I hate her, you know.

ISADORE

Ruth?

VALESKA

My grandmother. For making me into this thing. And I hate my mother, for keeping it from me. But most of all, I hate myself. I hate myself for being like her, and I hate myself for hating myself. I hate my hair that is not like my grandmother's and I hate my nose that is not like my grandmother's and I hate my eyes that are not like my grandmother's. It's funny. It's funny, because I lived all my life hating those features, and now I would give anything to possess them. Because I am not in Berlin, and I am not a princess. I am an actress, and I am a fraud, and I will live out the rest of my life crammed in like a sardine with hundreds and thousands of people who know exactly who they are. And I do not know myself. All I know of myself is that I hate her.

ISADORE

Well, clearly the invention of the mirror never reached Berlin.

VALESKA

How do you suppose that?

ISADORE

Because no one who has ever seen Valeska Bachert has been able to walk away hating her.

VALESKA kisses ISADORE. It is hot and salty and wet with tears, and hot and salty and wet with something between love and hatred. The kiss lasts several seconds, but ISADORE is the first to pull back.

VALESKA

What?

ISADORE

You don't want this.

VALESKA

Does that matter to you?

ISADORE

Of course it matters.

VALESKA

Tell me you don't want me.

ISADORE

It doesn't matter if I want you, if you don't want me back.

VALESKA

I want you.

ISADORE

Do you? Do you want the thing I really am, or do you want a warm body beneath you?

VALESKA

What is it you really are?

ISADORE

I am a Jew.

ISADORE kisses VALESKA. It is still wet and salty, but mostly hot.

ISADORE (*cont.*)

(*into her lips*)

I am a Jew.

(into her ear)

Hath not a Jew eyes?

(between her eyes)

Hath not a Jew hands,

(into her ear again)

organs,

(into her neck)

dimensions,

(into her collarbone)

senses,

(into her chest)

affections,

(into her)

Passions?

Violins. Lights fade as ISADORE and VALESKA begin to undress each other. End of Act Two.

Act Three

The same dusty courtyard where rehearsals were held in Act One. The dying light of a dying day. Still dusty and chokingly hot. When ISADORE reenters, he needs to loosen his tie. It is opening night, and it feels like opening night, even though it is still 1975 and he is still giving a lecture.

ISADORE

My final night in Theresienstadt was what was supposed to be the opening night of *The Merchant of Venice*. It was my first time performing in front of an audience, so I was nervous. I had never been nervous before my university lectures, but this felt different. I knew geometry. I knew it better than I knew my own name. But the script, I never felt like I quite learned. I spent that last day stumbling over the trial scene right until arriving on set, and even then I still felt as though anything I said could and would be used against me.

Hehe. An awkward sort of beat.

ISADORE *(cont.)*

Watching the others act was one of the most fascinating experiences of my life. They would slip so seamlessly between themselves and their roles. I've never understood how they could do that. Especially in that place, where we were a set or two of clothes, a bed we shared with two strangers, a star and a number. We were positions in the coffee line, in the bread line, in line for the spigot in the morning when we were exhausted and bleary-eyed and didn't know anything about ourselves besides the place where our feet touched the ground.

It was not the sort of place I could picture myself making friends. Finding love. Having sex. I thought you needed to be a person to do those things.

VALESKA enters in a storm of fear and fury. She whizzes right past ISADORE, and he watches the trail she leaves. When he speaks again, it is halfway between past and present.

ISADORE *(cont.)*

Valeska Bachert was beautiful like an avalanche is beautiful. I loved her the way I beat my breast on Yom Kippur.

EIZIG *(offstage)*

Blasphemy!

ISADORE

Prayer.

EIZIG enters in a flurry, followed by ESTHER and RUTH, both in varying stages of frustration.

EIZIG

It is a disgrace! An outrage!

RUTH

Every day, the same argument.

ISADORE, realizing that he has well and truly been pulled back into the scene, walks over to VALESKA.

ISADORE

Are you alright?

VALESKA

I'm fine.

ISADORE

Fine.

VALESKA

This isn't the place.

ISADORE

So, not fine.

VALESKA

Isadore-

ISADORE

I just want to know what I'm supposed to do.

VALESKA

There's nothing for you to do.

ESTHER

The show has been frozen for a week, you can't go adding the mustache.

EIZIG

You never told me I could not wear it.

RUTH

I said that if you wore it, I would smack it off of your face.

EIZIG

Exactly! You never said no.

VALESKA

Ruth, no one's out there.

RUTH

They have time to show up.

VALESKA

Not much.

ESHTER

Evening work detail ends any minute, they'll show up.

VALESKA

But-

ESTHER

Don't go working yourself up, it's not good for you.

VALESKA

I'm not working myself up.

ESTHER

Valeska.

VALESKA grits her teeth, but does not say anything.

EIZIG

Well, I'm working myself up!

ESTHER

We don't have time for an argument, Eizig, we don't have access to the space forever. And even if we did, the show is frozen.

EIZIG

We're not in Berlin. We have no lights, no costumes, no sets. What is there to have frozen?

ESTHER

You never would have had a career in Berlin. You're impossible to work with.

EIZIG

I refuse to be silenced.

ESTHER

Asking you not to mock the Führer in front of an audience is not silencing you.

EIZIG

What else could they possibly do to us, Esther? What do we have left to lose? They took our property. They took our businesses. They took our jobs. Fifteen years, I taught political science at Friedrich Wilhelm University. Fifteen years, and how was I thanked? A boy that I taught shoved me out of my office and burned my books. One of my students! And you are going to look at me, look me in the eye, and tell me to keep my mouth shut.

ESTHER

You are not the only one of us to know loss.

EIZIG

All the more reason to let me speak for us.

ESTHER

Speak for us! What a statement to make.

EIZIG

What is the point of doing Shakespeare, if there is nothing new to say?

ESTHER

And this is your grand take on the Bard? A caricature?

EIZIG

A statement. A condemnation.

ESTHER

A cheap laugh.

EIZIG

Why should we not be allowed to laugh? All of us, with nothing left to lose.

ESTHER

We still have our lives to lose.

EIZIG

Not lives worth living.

ESTHER

It is a life! It is a life, and that alone is enough to be worth living. Ten years, I have not seen my sons. Ten years ago, I sent them off to Canada on a cargo ship, and as much as it kills me to be away from them, I would do it again in an instant. Do you know why? Because you can take everything from me. You can spit on me and cut out my tongue and send my heart across an ocean and as long as I am alive, and they are alive, it will have been worth it. We are testing our luck enough as it is by putting on a show at all, let alone this one. And if you decide pushing your agenda is worth the risk you would be posing to all of us, I will not give you the kindness of a cargo ship to catch you when I throw you to the ocean.

A moment to breathe. ESTHER crosses to the spigot and drinks.

ESTHER (*cont.*)

Where is the rest of the cast?

ISADORE

They're not here yet.

ESTHER

If this were Berlin, I swear.

ESTHER exits.

EIZIG

I will not hold my tongue.

VALESKA

Why start now?

RUTH

I'm going to- Do me a favor and don't cause any more problems until I'm back.

RUTH exits after ESTHER. EIZIG harrumphs upstage.

ISADORE

I guess we're all fine tonight.

VALESKA

Isadore.

ISADORE

Talk to me. Please.

VALESKA

I'm late.

ISADORE

We're here early.

VALESKA

No, I'm *late*.

ISADORE

What?

VALESKA

You have a masters degree, but you can't understand when the woman you're sleeping with is trying to tell you she's pregnant?

ISADORE

Oh.

VALESKA

"Oh."

ISADORE

Are you sure?

VALESKA

Am I sure.

ISADORE

You could just be late.

VALESKA

I run like a train schedule.

ISADORE

Oh.

VALESKA

I didn't want to tell you about this tonight.

ISADORE

When were you going to tell me?

VALESKA

I wasn't.

ISADORE

I would have found out eventually.

VALESKA

I had planned to take care of it before you could find out.

ISADORE

Valeska, why-

VALESKA

I was not about to condemn a child like my grandmother condemned me.

ISADORE

Is that how you see your life? A condemnation?

VALESKA

Look around us. Are we not condemned?

ISADORE looks around. By this time, SEIGFRIED has entered and is teaching EIZIG some kind of warm up. RUTH is by the entryway with ESTHER. It is tense, maybe, but there is so much love in this courtyard.

ISADORE

Maybe. But I would rather have this kind of condemnation than any other kind of peace.

VALESKA

Isadore. I'm afraid.

ISADORE

We are all afraid.

ISADORE pulls VALESKA into an embrace.

ISADORE *(cont.)*

But that has never stopped a Jew from being happy before.

VALESKA pulls back from his arms, just enough to kiss ISADORE. When they part from the kiss, it is with new resolve. Suddenly, ISADORE turns to RUTH.

ISADORE

You should let him do the impression.

RUTH

Isadore-

ISADORE

Maybe it's foolish. But so are we.

A moment.

RUTH

You are your mother's son.

ISADORE

Is that a yes?

RUTH

Eizig, have the mustache on in the next five minutes or I scrap it again.

VALESKA

Here, let me help- it'll look better than the original.

VALESKA crosses to EIZIG. SAMSON enters. SEIGFRIED sees him, they find their way to each other.

SEIGFRIED

How was today?

SAMSON

I should be asking you. I heard production wrapped on your little motion picture.

SEIGFRIED

My part of it, anyway.

SAMSON

Eh, your parts are the only parts that'll be any good.

SEIGFRIED

You don't have to placate me.

SAMSON

I'm not placating you. If it were anything else, I would be there to see it on opening night.

SEIGFRIED

I'm sorry it upset you so much.

SAMSON

The upsetting parts weren't up to you.

SEIGFRIED

Still.

SAMSON

It does make me a little sick. Thinking about who will see it.

SEIGFRIED

Who knows. Maybe all of Germany.

SAMSON

All of Germany will see children eating buchteln with plum jam. They won't see the brilliant man behind the camera who starved himself of bread rations to keep his friend fed.

SEIGFRIED

You've needed my ration more than I did.

SAMSON

No one here can say they don't need food.

SEIGFRIED

Maybe. But I am going to keep giving you my bread. I am already sated.

SEIGFRIED kisses SAMSON once, sweetly. Pulls back, flushed and nervous and not at all regretful. SAMSON dives back in to kiss him again.

JO bursts onstage, breathless and holding a postcard.

JO

I'm here!

ESTHER

Johanna, I swear to-

JO

I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Herr Weber had a postcard for me, he stopped me on my way.

VALESKA

Herr Weber hand-delivered your mail?

SEIGFRIED

What does it say?

JO

It's from Noah. He says he can hear the mourners wailing for Tisha B'av, but the day is green and bright and the air is full of hope.

ISADORE

Tisha B'av was two months ago.

JO

What?

ISADORE

It's the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av. We're nearly at the end of Elul.

JO

But the postcard is from today.

SAMSON

Can I see it?

JO hands the postcard to SAMSON.

SAMSON (*cont.*)

The date is in different writing. The text is messy, but the date is written clearly.

RUTH

Wait, the postcard is dated for today?

JO

Yes. Why?

RUTH

How would he have gotten the card to you so soon?

JO

Maybe they put a rush on it.

SAMSON

A rush on Jewish mail?

RUTH

I don't think he wrote this card today.

JO

Yes, he did.

RUTH

Jo.

JO

My Noah wrote this for me today.

ISADORE steps forward, the professor again. In the background, RUTH coaxes JO into her realization, holds her as she cries.

ISADORE

A year after I moved to Brooklyn, I finally decided to look for the people I had met at Theresienstadt. I discovered that Noah had spent three months at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. On his last day, a guard sat him and several others down with family in ghettos like ours, and instructed them to write several months worth of postcards. The postcards were backdated, and Noah was sent to the gas chamber.

RUTH

Alright! Circle up, everyone.

ISADORE returns to the scene.

RUTH (*cont.*)

Why is tonight different from all other nights?

Bittersweet laughter from the cast. In the distance, the sound of trains approaching.

RUTH (*cont.*)

Tonight, we are opening our show. I cannot thank you enough for the dedication, the sweat, the pure and delightful love you have put into this. *The Merchant of Venice* is an old play, and probably not the one that would be expected of us in our situation. I've been asked why I would choose this play. Why now? Why for us, when we're already the joke to everyone around us? But if we are going to be the joke, we might as well be laughing, too. Laughter is too rare in this place... Alright. I won't waste any more time on sentimentality, we have a show to put on. Warm up, everyone. Stretch. Esther, how many people are waiting for us?

ESTHER ducks her head offstage, returns.

ESTHER

No one.

RUTH

Very funny.

ESTHER

I'm not joking.

Offstage, the sound of a train pulling in. A sharp whistle.

ESTHER (*cont.*)

Ruth? What do we do?

Offstage, shouting, boots on the ground. Someone is crying.

RUTH (*cont.*)

Places, everyone.

CAST

Places, thank you.

Another sharp whistle. The shouting and boots and crying stop, but they are not over. You can feel them waiting in the wings, just offstage.

RUTH

On with the show.

ISADORE walks downstage, the lights settling on him. Behind him, the cast lines up, in the order in which they will be mentioned in the following speech. When each character is done being referred to, they exit.

ISADORE

That was the last night we were all together. Three trains arrived to take away anyone involved in the production of *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*. We had seen that the paradise the film portrayed was a fantasy, and so we could not be allowed to live.

Siegfried was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, along with everyone else directly involved with the film - directors, actors, the like. He remained alive for a month, digging graves, before he was eventually sent to the chambers.

Johanna was sent to Auschwitz as well, but she never arrived. She leapt out of the train as it moved and was shot in the back trying to run away.

I never found out exactly where Eizig, Ruth, and Esther ended up, but due to their age, I must assume they were brought to death camps.

Samson, Valeska, and I were brought to the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp, a subcamp of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Samson was injured during the work he was subjected to, which led to infection, which led to his death. Five years ago, I was contacted by Tovah Wagner, his daughter. She made it out alive, and had seen her father and I in a photograph. We are still in touch.

Valeska Bachert was killed by an officer when she could no longer conceal her pregnancy.

I remained at Mittelbau-Dora until its liberation on the 11th of April, 1945. Since then, I have not made any attempt to return to the theater.

VALESKA pauses on her way offstage, holds out a hand to ISADORE. He holds up a finger, telling her to wait, then turns back to the lecture hall.

ISADORE *(cont.)*

Now. Are there any questions?

End of play.