

An overly pious rendition of Schubert's "Ave Maria" is heard as Larry sweeps ceremoniously onto the stage carrying matching his and hers ersatz granite headstones under each arm. One is marked "Viv" and the other "Larry", although his is considerably taller than hers.

Larry places them next to Kit and Ralph's: Viv's on the left, Larry's on the right. Looks at them for a moment, then moves them slightly away from the other two.

Then he switches them: Larry on the left, Viv on the right.

JOHN

Still quibbling over billing, I see.

Larry glares at him, studies the headstones a bit more. Then he moves his away from hers slightly, and into a pool of downstage light.

A long beat.

RALPH

Costume?

LARRY

Oh, sorry.

Gets his pair of gossamer wings and a long white robe from behind his headstone, slips into them.

JOHN

Ah, Larry, how stunning. As my dear friend Dorothy once said, "All in white, you look as pure as the driven slush."

(at podium)

Let me begin my remarks with an important clarification. As I look around this magnificent edifice, filled with the cream of the establishment crop, world-famous luminaries, actors, politicians and other sundry hangers-on, I note with some amusement the conspicuous absence of a very important young English actor who many believe is destined to become one of the greatest actors on the world stage, past or present. Now, rumor has it that this young man was banned from attending services this morning.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

Guards were supposedly given his photograph so that, if he dared appear, which he most certainly wouldn't dream of doing, they could bar him at the door.

It is alleged that, before his death, Larry left explicit instructions with his solicitors not to allow this young titan within a thousand kilometers of Westminster Abbey because his appearance would defile, in some way, the grandeur and solemnity of the occasion. In other words, one could surmise, Larry was ferociously jealous. And while neither the solicitors nor anyone from the family has confirmed the reason for such a ban, or even that such a ban exists, I can quite honestly tell you now that this is all just twaddle.

The young actor was invited. In fact, his name appeared on a short list of dignitaries who were to serve as pallbearers, drawn up just hours after Larry's death. But the young man declined the invitation, because, ironically enough, as he said yesterday in a television interview, he didn't want to take away from the importance of the event. Now I can't say much about his acting ability -- he's still at what I call the mumble-stumble stage of his development. But of this I am quite sure: the kid's got balls and his opinion of himself is clearly on a par with Larry's opinion of himself. So if ego still means a damn, I hereby crown him heir apparent to Larry's imagined throne.

Larry glares up at John for a long moment. Then utters a dismissive little giggle.

Larry and I were not friends. We worked together a good deal, socialized frequently and in the end, grew to respect each other. But we were never friends. And I hardly knew Vivien. One could not get close to her because Larry simply would not allow it. I was never quite sure whether he was trying to protect Vivien from me or me from Vivien. Some have said she was a delicate, tainted rose whose bloom was so incredibly exquisite, it could not possibly last. But I don't think that's the case at all. She was not a rose. Not anything like it. More of an exotic -- a succulent, perhaps. A Haworthia cooperi variation leightoniae, I imagine. All fiery red and sharp-spiked with an almost liquid, syrupy center that invited you inside and then held you fast like an insect on flypaper, never letting go until your very marrow was exhausted, drained.

I was of course aware of Larry for some time before we actually met. My Aunt Ellen saw him play Katherine the Shrew six years earlier when he was just a dewy-eyed thirteen year old at All Saints and gushed about his performance for weeks.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

And, of course, dear Ralph positively raved after seeing him in *Private Lives* with Noel, which was very surprising since, to the best of my knowledge, Larry possessed neither breasts nor wheels at the time, and these were the only attributes known by anyone ever to raise Ralph's pulse much above dormancy.

In spite of these glowing reports, (or perhaps because of them), I felt a certain unease when I engaged Larry to play Horatio in my first London *Hamlet*. At our first rehearsal together, Larry acted with great enthusiasm -- and little else.

But as I watched him leaping about the stage on that long ago rainy afternoon, doing absolutely everything wrong and sounding like an adenoidal Stradivarius, the hair on the back of my neck stood straight up on end. Everyone, from the usher to the wardrobe mistress, left what he was doing and assembled in the house to watch him. "Watch" can hardly describe it. They couldn't take their eyes off him. Nor could I. It was most alarming.

The *Times* virtually launched my career when it called my *Hamlet*, "A work of towering genius -- definitive and unparalleled." But the accolade turned out to be bittersweet. For buried in the last paragraph was an almost offhand note which would plague me for the rest of my life. Quote "As a newcomer to the professional stage, the young man in the part of Horatio stunned the audience with an interpretation that was something entirely new and rather important." Unquote. After *Hamlet*, I resolved never to occupy a stage, or, if it could possibly be helped, a continent, with him for the rest of my life.

We were of course immediately cast together again because of our immense popularity, alternating the role of Romeo in a new production, highly anticipated by the critics and the public. They saw what we apparently did not. An almost historic conflict of competing dramatic interpretations, each of us driven and yet trapped in our own triumphs and limitations. My Romeo, all tortured and sick with love for Juliet, pining and poetical, exemplifying all that is fine and noble -- and I can admit it only now, a bit clichéd -- about our ideal of young love. Larry's was fresh and earthy and randy as a mountain goat. Dear Peggy who played Juliet confessed to me that she was quite sure he, to her continuing distress, frequently achieved orgasm during the bedchamber scene.

Thus began a fifty-year battle that neither of us really wanted or owned up to, driven by the press and fueled by our own vanity. But it was a battle we both fought tooth and nail nonetheless.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

Romeo, Mercutio, Richard, Lear, Iago, the Henrys and the murderous Scot -- in the next few years we played them all and more. If I attempted a part one season, Larry would tackle it the next and visa versa, each of us trying to top the other. All very maddening. And all very wonderful somehow.

No, we were not friends. We were rivals, plain and simple, with the gloves undeniably off and ready for a brawl to the death. If we were merely friends, I might never have been compelled to learn how to act just to keep up with him. Might never have become anything more than what I was before I met him: a pretty voice and a headpiece filled with straw.

The music ends. Silence. Ralph and Larry applaud. John coughs nervously and takes a step away from the podium.

LARRY

Not so fast, old man. One more.

JOHN

Unavoidable, I suppose. Which of you wishes to do the honors?

A beat.

JOHN

Very well. You can each have a go at it. But, please, keep it short.

Glances out at the audience, shielding his eyes from the light.

JOHN

I see more than a few heads nodding off.

RALPH

You must do it, Johnnie.

JOHN

What, my own eulogy?

LARRY

No false modesty. You often said, "I suppose I'll have to speak at my own funeral. No one else could do me justice."

JOHN

I did say that, didn't I?

Steps to the wings. Brings out a carved rococo silver urn, sets it down next to Larry's headstone. Returns to the podium.

LARRY

You always have to be different, don't you?

JOHN

I'm not trying to be different. I just don't care for the idea of slowly rotting into a cold porridge in the soggy earth of Mother England. I'd rather have my ashes scattered to the four winds.

A beat.

JOHN

Well, then. Where does one begin?

Larry walks to the urn, pulls out a set of wings from behind it.

LARRY

Haven't you forgotten something?

JOHN

I refuse to wear that get-up, so don't even bother.

RALPH

I think it's required, Johnnie.

JOHN

I'd sooner appear in my birthday suit.

LARRY

You have appeared in your birthday suit, and just recently.

JOHN

I don't know what you're talking about.

RALPH

That strange little film about the old man reading his books in the bathtub.

JOHN

Oh, dear, you had to remind me.

Silence.

JOHN

So, where does one begin? Surely not at the beginning. Dull as ditch-water, don't you agree? I mean, we all begin as shitting, slobbering infants born on some fancied cusp of history, to wealth or poverty or madness or of a dead drunk slut in the gutter. Not very interesting, I'm afraid, when you get right down to it.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

And, as far as the rest of it goes: well, one grows up and is taught to the tune of a hickory stick, one's responsibilities to church and state, usually by reluctant parents, dim-witted schoolmasters and desolate vicars who are themselves utterly faithless and devoid of anything even remotely resembling a soul. My perception of what real people call real life is that, for most, it is a dreadfully sordid business at best. And that is why I cloistered myself away in the make-believe world of the theater and made it a point to avoid reality entirely. That is -- until Martin.

(struggles for control)

I'm sorry.

Surveys the row of headstones and his urn.

JOHN

This is all wrong. I want his music played -- now!

Ralph points a cue to the booth. Cathy Berberian's zany, crazed version of Lennon/McCartney's "Ticket to Ride" is heard. John walks quickly into the wings, returns with another fake headstone. But this one bears no name and, instead of carved garlands or stylized Greek goddesses, it is ringed in colorful skeins of Mardi Gras beads and brightly colored ribbons.

He places it next to, but slightly apart from the others. Takes out a large magic marker and scrolls "Martin" in large letters in the center.

JOHN

We, all of us, whatever else we may have been, were all unbearably British, from our very first immaculately starched knickers to our gloomy mourning coats and chic gray cravats. Well, Martin was not British. He was from --

RALPH

Montana.

JOHN

(pronounces it for the first time as an American would)

Montana.

(A beat)

Martin combined the best of American cowboy with the worst of piss elegant faggot in an endless blaze of color and whimsy, which kept me alive long, long after I should have been dead.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

And it was his death, only a short year ago that led unrelentingly to my own demise.

John kneels and speaks directly to Martin's gravestone.

JOHN

I loved you, dear Martin. I love you still, so very much. I know I hardly ever told you. I was always so dreadfully self centered but somehow you never seemed to mind. Or did you mind terribly and I just didn't notice? Probably the latter. Unaccountably, you found my insufferable self-preoccupation, and indeed all of my countless character flaws, endearing.

(A beat)

You were, for all of your prissy, affected girlishness, a far better man than I. Our first meeting was the happiest accident of my life. I can't remember the name of the actor who dragged me to that disreputable little West Hollywood bar. I spotted you immediately. I wanted to approach you but didn't dare. I was fifty-three at the time, balding, paunchy and much too vain to risk rejection by someone as handsome and fresh as you.

I was on point of slipping away, indeed, was just collecting my coat, when I felt what can only be described as a furiously indignant tap on my shoulder. I turned round and was confronted by my tight-lipped friend who sneered, "This fellow is apparently called Martin. He thinks you are wonderful and demands an introduction. And, when I have introduced you, I'm sure you can manage without me. I'm off to Studio One. I'll ring you tomorrow." And, without another word, he turned on his heels and marched briskly out the door, whereupon, you took my trembling hand and looked at me with your indescribably lovely brown eyes and I melted into a puddle of desire at your feet where I happily remained for more than thirty years. I was so very proud of you, Martin. I understood your battle, and, even though I was very angry at your leave-taking, I rejoiced at your victory. Your beauty was not hidden. You made me happier than any man I know. Our love was a circus, center ring attraction, a comedic, acrobatic balancing act: me, one toe hooked to the ground, my body stretching to grasp your hand as you flew upward into the misty air. We held each other that way, until each of us was sure he could perform solo. Then we let go.

A long silence.

RALPH

That was lovely, Johnnie. Martin would be gratified.

LARRY

Especially since you barely noticed him when he was alive.

JOHN

If Martin had possessed half the intelligence God gave him, he'd have run screaming from me on the day we met. The truth is I treated Martin with the same utter lack of regard which I employed in my treatment of absolutely everyone. I wish I could have been a stronger man but the truth is I simply did not have the balls. I disgust myself regularly. And I am fearfully self-centered. It just never occurs to me that anyone else could possibly be as fascinating as I.

RALPH

No one is.

JOHN

I think somehow without Martin, my life would have been so much sillier.

THE STAGE LIGHTS DIM

leaving only the worklight and a pin spot on John's urn. He rises, faces the urn.

JOHN

I don't suppose I could be spared the final bit.

RALPH

'Fraid not old man. Ready sound cue fifty. It's your own cup and you must drink it all, even unto the bitter dregs at the bottom. And sound cue fifty, go.

Samuel Barber's lovely and haunting "Adagio for Strings" is heard.

RALPH AND LARRY

(sotto voce)

Look on this your servant, lying in great weakness, and comfort him with the promise of life everlasting.

JOHN

Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Now, that's a laugh line if ever I heard one. The mighty Sir John. By my fault --

RALPH AND LARRY

Have mercy on your servant.

JOHN

My own fault. Dress him up in purple robes and put him on a pedestal for all to see and wonder at and worship.

RALPH AND LARRY

Have mercy on your servant.

JOHN

By my own most greivous fault. The greatest actor of his generation. A prince of the stage.

RALPH AND LARRY

Have mercy on your servant.

JOHN

Well I shall tell you. Tell you all. Reveal, at long last, what was beneath the rich purple robes and the long flowing gowns and the fabulous hairpieces and the story-book hats.

RALPH AND LARRY

Deliver your servant, John, from all evil, and set him free from every bond; that he may rest in the eternal habitations.

JOHN

I trod the boards for more than half a century, on all the fabled platforms, small and grand, in all the countries and on all the continents of the world, in gilded, overheated theatres and the vile sewers that pass for theatres; and in the fainthearted, flickering images of myself, in absentia, on the tattered screens of murky cinemas, displaying myself, my own most greivous self, for everyone to see and pity and suck up to and curse and marvel at. There I stood. A consummate, yellow-bellied coward and a monumental fraud, sweating like a swine for fear of being found out. A cringing mediocrity who never accomplished anything real or fine or honest or simple in the whole of his worthless, wasted life.

RALPH AND LARRY

A sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming.

John snatches the funeral urn.

JOHN

This. This is all I ever was. Or ever could be.

Rips off the lid. Shakes the urn savagely, flinging its contents into the air.

The lighter ashes dance like dust on sunbeams. The heavier cinders fall to the stage in a fragile chatter, like rain on parched earth.

JOHN

Dirt! Filth! Nothing!

Falls to his knees.

JOHN

I loved the words, you see. Loved them more than my sanity or life itself. I began when I was very young. With my mother reading to me from Dickens and my father listening to the radio. It was all sound and fury and it signified everything to me. Phonograph records of distant divas and hot swing and the drone of high Anglican mass direct from Westminster Abbey.

I knew as many words as my little head could hold. I read nursery rhymes and paperback Shakespeares, flimsy western novels by Louis L'Amour, the dreary back panels of cereal boxes and the stitched-in labels on the inner seams of my trousers. Read them all and held them close to my heart. Never let them go. And always I learned and yearned for more, until by the age of ten, my appetite had become greedy and unconditional.

I loved the circumference of words and the magnitude of them and the breadth and depth of them and how they hung in the air like obscenities and bad debts, before transforming without warning into something that was thoroughly part of the other. Another time, another place, another face, a state of grace. Any where or any time from where I found myself. And the sound! Oh, the crisp, lovely rattle and the slow slur and the rush and rant so much swifter than any rocket.

I learned early that words were contrived by adults to explain and cajole, created by wickedness and deceit to negotiate and contain. I also noticed that words were sturdy and constant in a world that was as unpredictable as death and as high-strung as the moon. And somewhere along the way, in school, I think, it happened. Bit by bit and scarcely heeded, I had forgotten the small-minded purpose of words and begun to live only for the words themselves. I had abandoned myself to the lust of the adjective and the free ranging, rollicking romp of the adverb, unchained and without limits.

I violated the cardinal rule, the solemn pledge to my own kind, and sought out the sound and beauty of the words, ignoring to my peril their shading and subtlety, their miraculous ability to beguile and capitulate. I became a denizen of the dictionary, hiding myself from my fellow man and retreating into a world that only I, if I could manage it, would inhabit, bereft of contact and friendship. And, yes, of love itself. Ah, but such an exquisite loneliness it was! And how tightly I held onto it.

Grasps the urn to his chest like a man
defending a child against cruel winds
or the rising waters of a terrible
flood.

JOHN

Until in the final hours, I came to know in all its terrifying intimacy, the howling, crushing darkness of the absolute -- terrifying -- nothingness -- the nothingness that lurks for each of us just below the words in another world not of our choosing. Scared the bloody hell out of me. Scares me still.

His hands tremble. He looks as though he might fall.

JOHN

So. Finally. I know what the play is. And the play is finally a tragedy.

His trembling hands shake the urn slightly. He holds it to his ear.

LARRY

May angels surround him.

RALPH

And saints welcome him in peace.

John is dazed. He shakes the urn again.

JOHN

There's something left inside --

RALPH

That's right, Johnnie. Dig down deep.

LARRY

In the grand finale, pull the rabbit out of the hat.

RALPH

Works every time. Just when you thought there was nothing, you discover something more at the bottom of the cup.

John reaches inside the urn. Pulls out a handful of iridescent, metallic dust, the color of gold.

LARRY

Revelation, deus ex machina, denouement!

RALPH

You've found it!

JOHN

Found what -- what have I found?

Pours the glittering substance back and forth between his trembling, cupped hands, sobbing.

RALPH

The metaphor, Johnnie. The blessed divinity of imagination. You see and you make us see what was never really there. The provenance of saints and poets, mostly. But every so often, even we poor players get to have a go at it.

The WORKLIGHT comes up full, bathing the stage in a rich and lovely bloom.

John stands. Flings the glitter into the light like a delighted child.

JOHN

We are made of this. Dust to be sure. But such a glorious and golden dust.

Ralph signals off. A lattice of wires descends from the fly space above the stage. Ralph attaches the urn to a wire.

RALPH

Wonderful, Johnnie. Lovely.

The 'gravestones' and urn begin to fly away on the wires.

JOHN

The magic of theatre.

Halfway up, Larry's gravestone gets tangled and crashes to the stage in a cheesy cloud of dust.

LARRY

Of course it had to be mine.

JOHN

Well, Larry, that's because yours is the heaviest.

LARRY

You mean, the weightiest, don't you dear boy?

The sound of the BULLDOZER again, and men's VOICES.

RALPH

What's that? What time is it?

JOHN

Must be dawn. Destruction always begins at dawn.

LARRY

Let's stay and watch.

JOHN

I bet you pulled wings off of butterflies as a child.

VOICE

(off)

Move them in. Slowly, please. Slowly. Give me some slack.

ANOTHER VOICE

(off)

I need three men on wheel loaders ready to roll. Take it easy and heads up, boys.

THE STAGE LIGHTS FADE.

The worklight casts the shadows of the three actors on the back wall.

JOHN

Going to miss the old place.

RALPH

I fancy the place will miss us too.

LARRY

Probably end up as one of those dreadful shopping arcades.

RALPH

Brood all you want, you can't take it with you.

LARRY

I hate this drafty old monstrosity. Why would I want to take it with me?

JOHN

He means the melancholy. The pain of everything that has gone wrong in your life. The unrealized dreams, the small, meaningless insults. You get to leave them all behind.

RALPH

That's not all there is to it, John, and you know it.

JOHN

Blind hope is for the living, my friend.

RALPH

Shall we, gentlemen?