

AND FLIGHTS OF ANGELS SING THEE

A play by

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Dramaturge
P. Plaza

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ACT ONE, SCENE 1.

A dressing room below the stage. Three makeup tables, yellowed mirrors, circled in dusty bulbs.

At center sits JOHN, back to the audience, in a tattered wingback chair. His breathing is laborious, methodical.

RALPH'S VOICE

(off)
Ladies and gentlemen, places please. This will be your final call for places.

A long pause. John sucks in a swallow of air.

JOHN

Huhhhhhnnnnnnn.

Stands unsteadily. He's quite old and his hands shake. Yet, when he walks to the dressing table, it is with an elegance and grace that seems uninformed by his great frailty. He stares into the mirror, his head darting this way and that.

JOHN

"Now is the winter of our--".

Calls out.

JOHN

Line? "Now is the winter of our -- disengagement"?

THE WORKLIGHT FLICKERS. He turns suddenly and peers up at it.

JOHN

Don't tell me the damned -- dam-ned -- thing's chucking it in. Disconnection! Line! "Now is the winter of our disconnection?" God's decaying teeth!

Climbs the stairs toward the worklight.

JOHN

Cheeky, disrespectful, thankless -- for a lifetime of service. "Now is the winter of our discombobulation." Blast!

Wanders out onto the stage, his back to us.

He's washed in a mysterious, blazing light whose source is ambiguous, and much more powerful than the flickering worklight.

JOHN

The fabulous invalid is about to piss on out of it. Right in front of my nose. Without so much as a fair thee well. Not from mediocrity or sky high prices, nor even the most vapid writing in a century.

Loudly, his voice echoing in the vast space.

JOHN

But from a chronic and obstinate failure --

Spits the words, delighting in the full, rich sound.

JOHN

-- a mis-guide-d, in-ex-plic-able failure to pay the fucking light bill!

Taps the worklight. It flutters for a moment. Goes out. Then flickers back to dim half-life.

JOHN

Make up your mind. Live or die. To be or not to be. That's the bloody question here.

(off, loudly)

Hello? Anyone here at all? What is the play? Where the hell is my tea? I've always taken tea, lemon, two sugars, no milk, no later than the half.

Makes his way back down to the dressing room.

JOHN

(sings)

And will a' not come again?
And will a' not come again?
No, no, he is dead;
Go to thy death-bed;
He never will come again.

Rifles through the costumes on a rack nearby.

JOHN

Now is the winter of our -- line!

RALPH

(off)

Discontent!

JOHN

Thank you. "Now is the winter of our discontent."

A beat.

JOHN

Damn.

(calls off loudly)

Wrong play. Don't have a bloody clue.

He sits. Slumps back in his chair as before. He breathes a long sigh.

JOHN

(barely heard)

What's the play?

THE WORKLIGHT BRIGHTENS FOR A MOMENT.
THEN FADES COMPLETELY.

A long silence.

RALPH flies into the vast space above the dressing room.

Literally flies -- on shimmering wires which the lighting makes no attempt to conceal. He wears a driving duster and goggles, a natty suit and a pair of small gossamer wings.

RALPH

What shall we play tonight, Johnnie?

He's having some trouble with the wires. Gets tangled. One of his wings breaks off and flutters to the stage.

JOHN

Oh, dear. An angel with a broken wing. I have a bad feeling about this.

RALPH

Sounds like something they say in the cinema. We don't have much time, Johnnie. Tick tock. Ticking clock.

JOHN

Something they also say in the cinema. I suppose I should now place something furtively in the drawer?

RALPH

Something to fall back on.

John stumbles to a wicker basket in the corner, opens it, takes out a pistol. Goes over to a battered old chest of drawers. Opens it. Flamboyantly places the gun in the top drawer and closes it.

RALPH

Not what I would describe as furtive.

JOHN

Don't let me forget where I put it.

RALPH

The audience will be thinking of nothing else.

JOHN

Especially if we bore them.

Ralph descends, lights heavily like an obese firefly onto the stage.

Removes the wires. Disconnects the flying harness. They disappear into the abyss above. Looks down at John, smiling gently.

RALPH

What shall we play?

JOHN

You're asking the wrong man. I can't tie my shoes or butter my toast.

RALPH

"But thy eternal
Summer shall not fade.
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade."

Waves vaguely in the air.

THE WORKLIGHT SPUTTERS BACK ON.

John startles upward in his chair.
Sucks in a long breath.

JOHN

Huhhhhhnnnnnnn.

A beat. He glares into Ralph's face.

JOHN

Well don't just stand there staring, man. What the deuce are you doing here?

RALPH

Oh Johnnie, I do so admire your dour consistency.

JOHN

Consistency can hardly be said to be "dour". Speak the Queen's English on the stage for God's sake or don't bother to speak at all.

Stares up at the worklight above them.

JOHN

Never saw anything like it. My great aunt, Dame Ellen, always told me the theatre is a temple. The actors its priests. The worklight burns everlasting. Signaling the presence of Almighty God. Well, Almighty God appears to be undergoing a slow and painful demise by electrical fizzlement

Listens again to the sound of his voice.

JOHN

Fizz-le-ment!

(to Ralph)

Different somehow.

RALPH

What?

JOHN

The house. Sound a little strange to you?

Claps his hands.

JOHN

Don't you think?

Ralph snaps his fingers. Listens to the hollow echo.

RALPH

Perhaps. Been a while.

JOHN

Hmmm?

RALPH

Since we played here.

JOHN

I don't have the slightest idea what you mean, dear boy.

RALPH

Well, it's been years, hasn't it?

JOHN

I don't even know what I mean, actually.

RALPH

Never mind. Takes time.

JOHN

Out of sorts somehow. What's the play tonight?

RALPH

Slipped your mind?

JOHN

Can't remember a bloody thing.

RALPH

Can't remember a single line. Haven't a clue who you're supposed to be. Actor's worst nightmare.

Leads John to the dressing tables.

JOHN

Stark naked. Your sagging prick lollygagging between your thighs in front of God and every groundling in London.

RALPH

But then you sit.

Sits down.

RALPH

Gaze into the glass. And there. There he is, just behind the frame, like a medieval painting, bathed in light, staring back at you.

JOHN AND RALPH

(together)

And finally you know him, as though for the first time.

JOHN

And he you I dare say.

RALPH

You smell the electric hum of the hot lights.

JOHN

And suddenly you know the play.

RALPH
Everything is clear as crystal.

JOHN
Right as rain.

Ralph tucks a paper bib under his chin.
Reaches for a jar of cold cream,
slathers a blob on his face. Hands the
jar to John.

RALPH
Start with a clean palate you used to say.

JOHN
I used to say a lot of things. But, what time is it? What --
time is -- this? What is the play?

RALPH
It will come presently.

John sits, begins to apply cold cream.
The years begin to fall away.

JOHN
What's the time?

RALPH
Oh, past the half I should think.

JOHN
Oh Lord.

RALPH
Don't upset yourself. If you're not quite ready, they'll hold
the curtain. Surely you've earned that small courtesy.
(to audience)

Ladies and gentlemen, your attention. We will be going up
just a few minutes late this evening. But please be patient.
Your kind indulgence will be rewarded by a brilliant
performance from one of the theatre's most important
thespians. And this reminder once again: please turn off all
cell phones and pagers. Thank you.

John runs his fingers through his hair.

JOHN
Who's that handsome young man in the glass?

RALPH
Surely you remember. You were a looker.

John studies his face in the mirrors.

JOHN

Do you think I'm handsome?

RALPH

There were always a dozen ripe beauties waiting at stage door to see you.

JOHN

Damned stage door Jennies.

RALPH

Johnny's as well.

John titters.

JOHN

I rather stupidly believed that I had kept my little secret hidden but apparently everyone in London knew.

RALPH

The known civilized world. Dare we go into that now?

JOHN

Might as well dispose of it right off the bat. They're all tittering on about it anyway.

RALPH

Now, Johnnie, I seriously doubt that.

JOHN

I was eavesdropping.

RALPH

You weren't! Behind the curtain?

JOHN

(nods)

Peeked out before we went up. Always do. Overheard this dreadful dowager babbling to her confidant in the front box. "I wonder if they'll mention 'The Incident'", she whispered, as though revealing the title of some sordid Italian novella. Impertinent cow!

RALPH

Very uncharitable, Johnnie. Most are here because they love and respect you.

JOHN

Of course a little titillation never hurts.

RALPH

Don't be sarcastic. Public park wasn't it?

JOHN

Public loo, actually.

RALPH

Most unfortunate.

JOHN

All this moralizing twaddle about 'public' sex. Two adults entirely alone in total darkness. Just me and an absolutely delicious looking boy -- who turned out to be a member of the constabulary. Nothing public about it.

RALPH

Same thing happened to dear Alec I gather.

JOHN

He at least had the good sense to give a false name. Some character he was playing in a movie, as I recall. They never bothered to check.

RALPH

And that pop star -- what's his name?

JOHN

I don't know anything about pop stars. I also think you have an unhealthy interest in this subject.

RALPH

In Los Angeles. Michael or George or somebody.

JOHN

Must have been before my time.

RALPH

Or after.

JOHN

I know what this is! We're trapped in that horrid Sartre play -- what's its name?

RALPH

"No Exit."

JOHN

Piss poor title. When we played it in New York, there was a veritable stampede for the exit.

RALPH

Anyway the public forgave you.

JOHN

The public has a short memory, thank God. That was the only time. And then I met Martin.

RALPH

Lasted longer than most.

JOHN

We didn't have a conventional relationship, every waking moment fawning over each other. We fawned weekdays when there was no matinee and on dark nights.

RALPH

But you loved him.

JOHN

Oh, very much indeed. The only real love of my life. You know, I can't remember where he was from.

RALPH

Montana.

JOHN

What the hell was I doing in Montana?

RALPH

You weren't in Montana. He was from Montana.

JOHN

Mon - tan - a.

Listens to the sound of his voice again.

JOHN

"Mon-taan-na". Where did we meet?

RALPH

In California. You were making a film.

JOHN

You know, I was in a little shop the other day. There was a group of very attractive young people reading magazines and taking coffee. "Oh, look" they twittered, pointing rudely at me. "It's the butler from that movie."

RALPH

Ah, The Butler.

JOHN

It brought me fan mail from a whole new generation all over the world. Youngsters who never saw a live play in their lives. I turned it down at first. I thought the script was rather smutty, a bit common. But what do I know? I, the finest Hamlet of my generation. A brilliant Lear, some say. A lethally powerful Macbeth. And God only knows what else.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

All they remember is the cursed butler. The bloody whoreson's name'll be on my headstone.

RALPH

You're being cremated.

JOHN

Am I? Who decided that?

RALPH

You did, apparently. It's in your Will.

JOHN

It is? And how do you know what's in my Last Will and Testament?

RALPH

(changes the subject)

Did you like being in the cinema?

JOHN

The food they served was very good. Little weenies in tom-AH-toe sauce. But it can be fearfully boring, terribly unglamorous. Going over and over it, hitting your marks. Drove me round the bend. "Let's have a go once more, shall we? And John, turn your head just a little, so the light hits your cheek. Oh, and could you give us just a little less, just a tad, if you don't mind?" The less you act the more money they pay you. All very curious.

RALPH

I never cared for it. What's best about the theatre is that we have the pleasure of the audience's reaction, the applause, the tributes and honours and whatever else. Much more than we probably deserve.

JOHN

You didn't answer my question.

RALPH

Hm?

JOHN

Am I handsome?

RALPH

Well-favored I should say.

JOHN

As handsome as Larry?

RALPH

Oh no you don't, dear boy. I'll not dance that jig with you.
 (looks in the mirror)
 Speaking of good-looking.

JOHN

You possessed a rustic cragginess that some found attractive.

RALPH

Thank you very much indeed. And I don't even come from Wyoming.

JOHN

Montana. There it is again. The bloody past tense.

RALPH

What are you prattling on about?

JOHN

I rarely if ever prattle. And only when it is absolutely necessary. I said "you possessed a rustic cragginess." Why did I speak in past tense? Dear God, Ralph, what is the play?

RALPH

Come, old dear. Let's get you ready.

With Ralph's assistance, John begins to make-up.

RALPH

How do you think the matinee went?

Silence. John's confusion is complete.

JOHN

The matinee --

A beat.

JOHN

You read your lines in that ghastly, ponderous monotone.

RALPH

Posies don't drip so easily from my lips as they do from yours.

JOHN

And they never will if you mix and match metaphors with such abandon. Posies don't drip. They've never dripped in all their bloody natural lives and it is highly unlikely that they ever will.