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IN A "WE CAN'T" THEATER CULTURE, MY PLAYWRITING REALITY: A SELF-REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

Margaret Iha

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IN A “WE CAN’T” THEATER CULTURE
MY PLAYWRITING REALITY: A SELF-REFLECTIVE
ANALYSIS

BY

MARGARET E. IHA

B.A., Journalism, Northern Illinois University, 1997

DISSENTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Dramatic Writing

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2010
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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My Playwriting Reality: A Self-Reflective Analysis

BY

Margaret E. Iha

BACHELOR OF ARTS IN JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATIONS
MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN DRAMATIC WRITING

ABSTRACT
This essay examines the effects of a “we can’t” theatre culture as experienced by the author. I detail my experiments in discerning and enacting a "we can" way of doing theatre amidst a creative environment punctuated by unkept promises. My account examines two main unkept promises or "we can't" moments: we can't write didactic drama and we can't produce your play that way.
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IN A “WE CAN’T” THEATER CULTURE
My Playwriting Reality: A Self-Reflective Analysis
Margaret E. Iha
University of New Mexico

INTRODUCTION

A “we can’t” mentality is often present in contemporary American theater culture. It often wears the face of a critic and can thrive in a way that replicates, like cancer cells. In theater culture, where those who do not fit in mainstream culture find respite and acceptance, there is an expectation, almost a promise, of “everything goes.” “Here, you shall be well received.” And yet, once past those illusions, reality rises. The “everything goes” freedoms are revealed as masks of something else, a fear, a doubt, a lack of faith in something more, cold and timid souls, even a resistance to certain types of difference. As a playwriting student, I have found myself blunted in this “we can’t” culture. It has coiled around me and bound me, its fear cells multiplying in my members and in my work.

Coming from a prescriptive environment of politics and government, I expected something else. I expected creative bliss and rewarded impulse, support for big ideas and the will to take risks. There is a hint of these, a tease really; a vapor; more of a lacking. I have been disappointed. And I have complained. I have not been the only one.

There have been those in contemporary theater practice like Coco Fusco, Cherrie Moraga, Lynn Nottage, and Ellen Stewart who have challenged the ways in which theater culture excludes, rooted in its “we can’t” mentality, based on race, sexuality, and mainstream ideas of theater. They have challenged the voices that say, “We can’t have women of color or lesbian voices, or female voices at all for that matter, at the forefront of theater.” They have challenged it and continue to challenge it through their writings and their creation of theater that speaks to them, and many others, despite the resistances.
There are those like Naomi Wallace and Stewart who circumvented the “we can’t” mentality by taking their work to other countries, countries at various times better prepared to be “we can” thinkers. There are those like Tyler Perry whose work goes mostly unappreciated by mainstream culture. Yet, he is well received by black audiences and others who value Perry’s strident moral worldview. He created a way to write those things he feels compelled to write by building his own support system rather than waiting for the “we can’t” folk of theater to “give him permission” to be the writer he is. It has worked. There are those like Tim Robbins who have taken plays beyond the theater and attached them to their own brand of politics. Robbins has specific ideas of how the world should work not just how he wishes it would. He has his own brand of activism. He creates and attaches to his plays educational programs that inform and hopefully change minds. All of these “we can’t” theater culture challengers, Fusco, Moraga, Nottage, Wallace, Perry, Robbins, and Stewart have been the chemo for this cancer that has tried to have its way with me, this pervasive sickness that has robbed me of my joy for writing, a joy I have owned since childhood. And the “we can’t”s have tried to steal it. Of course, they will say, “we can’t” listen to this. She is just the angry type, a ranter really, selfish, insensitive, naïve. What does she know about any of it? She is the political sort…and didactic. I know enough at least to know what questions to ask. Like, for example, what exactly is a “we can’t” theater culture?

For purposes of this paper, I am defining a “we can’t” theater culture as the constant resistance by those in power and direct or indirect authority in this culture - producers, theater directors, audiences, theater program faculty, etc. - who consistently shut down or find reasons why certain aspects of theater just cannot occur, often without merit and
mostly just the product of stymied thinking. The resistors are generally those who put their own needs and ideas before the needs and ideas of others, without any real thought of the impact that may have on the others. A “we can’t” theater environment is quite unhealthy for an emerging playwright, and a challenge of its impact drives this research.

Insecurity is inherent in playwriting. Like acting, a present vulnerability exists, a peeling back of the layers to see what a person is really made of. That vulnerability is a necessary aspect of playwriting for a playwright to be effective. However, that kind of rawness in the wrong hands and the wrong environment can be likened to running a dirty jagged blade along open flesh. It does not cut smooth or provide a surgeon’s relief. It infects the rawness. I wanted more than anything to be a success while at UNM. I came with that anticipation and willingness, as is almost always the case with me, to work hard, to give 150%. But I found it difficult to succeed.

In my first semester, I learned very little. I was relieved in the second semester when I learned so much in one of my playwriting courses only to be told in the following semester that the professor would no longer be teaching. He would be the interim dean instead. There were complaints, and he attempted to teach anyway. But it was never the same. At his own admission even, his head was never completely in the game. It could not be. The demands of a dean are great. I understood that, even admired his willingness to try. Also in that first semester, I was told that we would not be given two productions as the program advertised, although the students before us had been given two. We, instead, would be given a trip to New York to meet with New York directors. We would interview them and choose one to direct our plays in Albuquerque. The students in the year before me were given this experience. When it came time for me and the other
playwrights in my year to have this experience, we were told that it would not be possible. Instead, when it came time for our production, we would get a national director. When it came time to choose that director, I was told that a national director was no longer possible but that I would be given a great local director, and I was. That director was told that she could get anything she needed for the production. The first thing we asked for, the one most important to us, was live music for my play that had evolved into a musical. We were told by those in charge, without any effort to seek out some sort of solution, that it was not possible. Was anything possible? It seemed to be for all those students in the years prior. It seemed possible the summer following their response to my request for live music to take musicians and crew and a gaggle of people to China, something not previously promised to anyone, unlike the myriad of promises made to me. Somehow, those responsible had managed to whittle away bit by bit every original design of the program, everything that had enticed me to make the journey, take the risk, and bank on their word. It was slow, almost imperceptible. But what started out as two productions became barely one, and I had had enough.

As disappointment became the norm, I questioned my own sanity for uprooting my kids and dragging them across the country for empty promises and consistent repetitions of “We have no budget” before I could get even non-budget related questions out of my mouth. But I was not and am not insensitive to the realities. As a single mother of two living on food stamps and a prayer so I could take on the responsibilities and promises of UNM’s MFA dramatic writing program, I got it then and I get it now. But where was the fire? Where was the spirit of finding a way? Where was the burden so strong for the
student that any effort to keep those promises was made or at the least, the effort made to find a way? That approach I could have respected, and that approach, I took for myself.

I left the University when the disappointments became predictable, and the only way I could manage them was to have no expectation at all. The program had lost its value for me. But I did not quit writing or lose the motivation that brought me to UNM initially. I wanted to learn more about writing plays.

I would be remiss to leave out some of the great experiences in the program like the screenwriting course taught by an award winning writer and producer of one of my all time favorite miniseries, the emotional content teachings in one of the courses, or the oft shared wisdom of one faculty member. I learned from those experiences, but they were not enough to give me the tools I needed to be the playwright I wanted to be. I did not take on the responsibilities of the program and the promised education just to get a degree. In fact, the degree was the least important to me. I wanted to learn. So after taking the time to reevaluate, I decided to prove to myself that I was worth kept promises. I decided to prove to myself that if, as a student, I had been prioritized and commitments made to me taken seriously, that more effort would have been made to guarantee those promises. As a single welfare mother with no job, I set out to make that happen, to ensure that promises made to me and broken remained a commitment to me personally, no excuses, and I did. I also recognized the infinite learning potential in the effort and made the decision to produce and direct my own final production play Red Umbrellas. It was an effort that will be forever treasured.

I have been warned not to use this research as a rant. And it is not, although some may disagree. But there is something about writing from that hole in your belly, that place
where jagged blade has scraped raw flesh and soul, that leads to raw writings, the kind that resonates across doubts, excuses, semesters, and hallways. And I have learned my lessons, how to balance anger with intellectual prowess, from Moraga, Fusco, and other contemporary theater practitioners. I am still teachable. But I am not immune to broken promises.

Broken promises seemed, at first, too mundane a term for a scholarly article; trivial; not intellectual enough, even childlike; whiny, so I wrestled with it and found myself unable to move forward. I had no real substitute for it. After all, broken promises were what I wanted to examine. It was as good a description as any. Then I heard politicians using the phrase in a televised national debate. I realized that there was import as well as historical meaning and examples behind the phrase, and, with a little unearthing, even within theater culture.

For the purposes of this paper, I use four sets of sources to explore my own body of work and the ways in which a “we can’t” mentality in theater culture can affect playwrights. The four sets of sources I use are a distilled history of didactic drama; the history of La Mama and the work of its founder/director Ellen Stewart; the works and words of other playwrights more experienced than myself, including Tyler Perry, Naomi Wallace, Lynn Nottage, and Tim Robbins; and my own work and experiences as a playwright. I explore in the first half of this paper a distilled formal history of didactic drama, followed by a section on the exploration of four playwriting styles I have defined that have been or could be labeled as didactic. Another section follows that is supported by the work and words of the writers listed, as well as other influential writers. I seek to extract an understanding from them about the ways in which the specificity of their styles
of work leads others to label their work in an effort to reject content in the play that is uncomfortable or unfamiliar. I also seek to understand from their experiences a way to respond in my thinking and my writing to the “we can’t” mentality perpetuated through claims of didacticism in my work so that I can successfully move forward, as they have, as a playwright. In the last half of this paper, I examine a set of characteristics of a “you can” mindset that I developed as a result of the production of my final play, *Red Umbrellas*. The final source, my own work and experiences with a specific focus on *Red Umbrellas*, is woven throughout the research analyzed through the didactic lens of strident, intellectual, “female voice at the center,” or activist didacticism, as well as the characteristics of a “you can” culture that I have unearthed.

These four sets of sources as organized within the boundaries of this research serve to support my argument that didacticism is a vital part of the form of playwriting. It is a part of all writing and when recognized as such rather than used as a label to silence certain voices or certain stories can serve to challenge the status quo of mainstream theatre. These sets also support my argument that a “we can” culture is definable, doable, and necessary. Therefore, this essay details my experiments in discerning and enacting a "we can" way of doing theatre amidst a creative environment punctuated by unkept promises. My account examines two main unkept promises or "we can't" moments: we can't write didactic drama and we can't produce your play that way.
YES WE CAN #1 – DIDACTICISM ISN’T BAD
OR
“I’ve Been Bad and I’m Sorry. Or Am I?”

In the modern world in which thousands of people are dying every hour as a consequence of politics, no writing anywhere can begin to be credible unless it is informed by political awareness and principles. Writers who have neither produce utopian trash. The unpardonable perversity of our fin de siècle is that of its innocence (Berger qtd. in Wallace 101).

Introduction

“Truths” Based on Personal Experiences in the Playwriting World

I am a new playwright. So my experiences are limited. Unfortunately, this makes me prey to a myriad of opinions and a laundry list of well-meaning “experts” whose only aim is to improve my work. I’ve been naïve. I believed them, all of them. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on the play of the moment and the list of well-wishing opinion givers, this is the nature of playwriting. And surprisingly, I like it. I am teachable. I recognize my limits as a playwright and have great desire to grow and excel in the field. I realize I cannot do that without the genuine feedback and constructive criticism of my peers and others in the field that I trust. The collaborative aspect of playwriting is the aspect I like most about the craft. The dilemma surfaces however when in my naïve newness I surrender my own understanding and intuition about my own work to the well-meaning or not so well meaning understanding and intuition of my critics. As a new playwright, that surrender seems only reasonable. I am learning. But surrendering does not always work even when my critics are in unison and their united voice is constant. One constant in the voice of feedback regarding my work as a playwright has been the voice that attempts to whip me with the word “didactic.” There has been no delicate delivery of the adjective or high praise for its presence. According to many of my critics,
“didactic” is a dirty word, and I have been bad. But I do not want to be bad. I want to be good, and loved, especially as a playwright. So I have accommodated, or tried, but I have come to recognize, despite my need to be well received by the playwriting world, that “didactic” is what I write. It is who I am. It is lodged in my cells and refuses to be ignored when I write, whatever I write. Plays are no exception. But isn’t all writing didactic?

The feedback from my first play, *Hopeless Spinning*, a play about street kids in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was my introduction to the world of the negativity that surrounds the meaning of didactic or didacticism. *Hopeless* criticized a lack of action in the face of poverty and children in the streets in a variety of ways. It blamed gun manufacturers in part for the easy access to guns for street kids in Rio. A large shadow outlining the Christ the Redeemer statue at the top of Corcovado Mountain in Rio filled the stage floor in several scenes. And sin of all sins in the negative world of “didacticism” in the theatre, it encouraged the audience to action, not even roused, just encouraged. But in the feedback that followed, someone brought up the word “didactic.” “It’s too didactic.” Nothing more. However, the word would keep resurfacing without any real description or concrete explanation given, just a spirit of accusation letting me know I had done something unacceptable. At that point, I was not familiar with the word, was not even sure what it meant. Now it follows me. I would not be surprised if someone tacked it on as my middle name in a review or statement about my body of work, if I am worthy of a review or statement. After all, my name is Margaret Didactic Iha. Following that first comment about my work, it would resurface periodically during production meetings or rehearsals for the play. Later, during both my first and second year as a graduate student
in the MFA program at UNM, long after I had written *Hopeless*, at another school far across the divide, it would be mentioned again, as if it were a problem that needed fixing and something I should resolve while an MFA student. I wanted to resolve it. I did. But first I had to define it, to recognize its draining presence so that I might be able to wrangle it, defeat it, and surface victorious as a didactic-free playwright. Didacticism had met its match.

**Defining “Didacticism”**

“Didacticism” is not a word mentioned often in casual settings. It is a word with heft and weight that when spoken has obvious important formal meaning, even when that meaning is unknown. Or does it?

Didacticism is defined in a myriad of ways. *Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary* and *American Heritage Dictionary* both define it as “intended to instruct, morally instructive, and inclined to teach or moralize excessively.” *Oxford American Dictionary* defines it as “giving instruction” and “having the manner of one who is lecturing pupils.” These varied definitions of didacticism feed my dilemma as a didactic playwright. In fact, a strict definition has not been agreed upon since antiquity (Denardis 173). In addition, there are debates over whether didactic writing merely has specific features and is a type of writing or whether it is a separate legitimate genre (Denardis 173). Some suggest that there are models of didacticism that create a tension or disjunction in their purpose (Latimer 167). Clearly, didactic writing as a presence has created its own brand of confusion. As a result, my work and I are perceived differently based on these individual comprehensions of the meaning and implications of didacticism in relation to the theater and playwriting. I am unable to wrangle something with no clear boundaries, no agreed
upon manifestation to grab and toss to the ground. But its presence in my plays is agreed upon. Or is it?

I have assumed, in my naïveté, that the voices I have been listening to represent all the voices or at least the voices that matter. That they are somehow appointed the representative voice of the audience even when I have no clear data to support my assumption. Audiences leave the theatre and they do not tell the playwright what they are thinking even when there is a feedback session. A select few stay. And audiences, after all, are what I want to please. Without audience approval, my plays are meaningless. Or are they? And who are the few that stay? What is their real agenda?

These are legitimate questions, the “does its,” “is its,” and “are theys,” that lead to new ones. What assumptions, based on a lack of answers to these questions, regarding didacticism in my plays have I allowed to take hold in my thinking and how do I free myself from that? Are “expert’s” ideas about audiences and what they want real? How is that gauged? In this research, I continue to consider these questions as a tension as I move forward. I have also defined didacticism for myself. For purposes of my paper, didacticism is defined as an artistic approach that emphasizes instructional and informative qualities in literature and other types of art.

**Distilled Formal History of Didactic Drama**

*Didacticism is Part of the Form and Always Has Been*

From as far back as the times of Aristotle and Plato, the role of didacticism in the world of theatre has been a source of contention. But despite the contentions, didacticism has always been a part of plays and the theater. Didacticism is part of everything. At times, the theater world has received it in greater portions and with great gusto while at
other times, like the present, it has been denied or substituted in favor of entertainment over education.

In latter times, Bertolt Brecht, whose work mine is regularly compared to, created a form of theater that some would call heavy-handed didacticism. Brecht, influenced by expressionism, collaborated with Erwin Piscator, the father of political theatre, to experiment with new technique. Brecht, certain that theatre must be an agent of social and political change, sought a new form of theater he described as Epic Theatre. (Willett) “Today (he wrote in 1931) when human character must be understood as the 'totality of all social conditions' the epic form is the only one that can comprehend all the processes, which could serve the drama as materials for a fully representative picture of the world” (Weiss 413). In Epic Theatre, the Epic poet presents the event as totally past, while the dramatic poet presents it as totally present. In Epic spectatorship, “an intellectually (and even emotionally) alert audience, which process of ‘estranging’ what has become familiar and taken for granted, thus provoking audience awareness that character and action is always embedded in, and in large measure produced by, causal socioeconomic structures” (Crow, 191).

Brecht objected to theater that was cathartic through terror and pity, theater that created identification with the actors, and illusion, representation of the present event (Willett). His idea of Epic and what he later aspired to as a playwright was theater that gave pleasure through the discovery of new truths, through an enlargement of understanding, and through a quenching of the thirst for knowledge (Weiss 415). He believed that the audience should be made not to feel, but to think” (Weiss 414).
Epic theatre is a heightened form of didacticism on stage, and, although often criticized, caused Brecht to be celebrated as a didactician. Although his ideas and plays do not resonate with me completely, his tenacious approach to creating a kind of theater he imagined as better, a theater that put political and social ideas as well as an importance on giving the audience something to think about at the forefront, and his success in doing so, inspires hope in me for a similar longevity and a determination to create theater that makes sense to me, despite the critics. Brecht will remain a companion throughout my playwriting journey as a reminder that didacticism has always been a part of the form.

**The Bias Against It Is Real**

A culture can turn nasty on us all, it can become censorious and anti-democratic, and viciously proscriptive: “not this kind of book, not this kind of play”; then audiences and readers cannot find their way to their writers and performers. The wall between the aesthetic and the political, against which so many English writers have been wrecked, is such a proscription. What to do? Well . . . a wall has come down in Europe. Surely we can dismantle a wall that is really only in our heads (Abramson 111).

Despite its history, writings labeled as “didactic” or “too didactic” in American mainstream theater are not readily embraced. The bias against the label is very real. Of the seven full length plays I have written, all of them teach a lesson, expose an injustice prevalent in our current world, or encourage activism against injustice. Of the seven, four have received either a reading or a production, and of the four, all but one has been described by at least one other as didactic, didactic as a negative. The only play of the four that has not been deemed “didactic” is a children’s play. In this play, the message is that girls can excel despite cultural or other barriers, even at things traditionally considered the purview of men, like science in the instance of the main character of the play (or playwriting in the instance of this researcher, but that is another paper.) In the
children’s play, the presence of a message is real. Science has never solely belonged to males. Females can and have excelled there too. Therefore, this too is a didactic play, which leads me back to the idea that everything is didactic. All writing is didactic.

However, I think in the world of children’s plays, lessons or morals like those in Aesop’s fables are expected, even appreciated. But perhaps it is the idea that a lesson or moral is for children, and adults determine right and wrong for themselves and are in no need of the wisdom of some “errant” playwright, and do not wish to be treated like children. Or perhaps it is in the words of Nottage, “‘I believe in engaging people emotionally, because I think they react more out of emotion’ than when they are ‘preached to, told how to feel’” (McGee 1). Is that what the label “didactic” is meant to address when it is applied to my work? These are things to consider and explore as I move forward as a playwright.

As a playwright, I have a decision to make. Do I surrender to the status quo of mainstream theatre and force my ideas into static frameworks manipulated by labels like “didactic” or do I challenge, transgress, and boldly step forward with my kind of plays, my kind of theatre, trusting that there is an audience hungry for the transformation that can come from drama often labeled “didactic,” maybe even an audience starved from years of indulgent entertainment?

**Didactic Styles as Related to My Playwriting Experiences**

For the purposes of this paper, I have defined playwriting termed as “didactic” in a way that allows me to divide it into specific styles of writing. Although another researcher could easily recognize and focus on other “styles,” I have discovered four
styles of playwriting that directly influence or inform my work as a playwright. Those four styles are strident, intellectual, “female voice at the center,” and activist.

**Strident**

*But it's the tone of his plays that's startling: a violent blend of the earthy and the Evangelical (Time n. pg.)*

I am defining “strident” as an artistic approach that emphasizes instructional and informative qualities in literature and other types of art by commanding attention through a loud or strongly expressive quality. In the successful work of Tyler Perry there is an undeniable presence of strident playwriting that addresses Christianity and promotes Christian beliefs. Perry, in his admitted didactic mode, has created characters like “Madea” and “Joe” that are strident in their delivery (“God”). In fact, it is the loud and strongly expressive qualities of these characters that make them so well received and the source of roars of laughter. I realize that everyone is not a fan of Perry’s work, but he is successful, having launched his career in the theater and then moved into the world of movies taking those same characters with him. “His first play to be turned into a movie, the 2005 Diary of a Mad Black Woman, was made for a paltry $5.5 million yet earned $22 million in its opening weekend on the way to a $50 million gross” (Time n. pg.). And he gives back, giving money to charities, getting involved in civil rights cases, and building houses for Katrina survivors (Tyler Perry.com). I admit to my own fondness of his movies. They are fun. So now I am faced with the meaning of the success of in your face loud didacticism that is embraced as fun. How does Perry make that work for him? Why is his work embraced despite its strident didacticism? Who embraces it?

In my search for answers to those questions, I discovered information that encouraged me. Perry knows he is not valued by the mainstream and that he will most likely never
win an Academy Award, but he does not care. There are other awards more important to him, awards that matter to me too. “I get that Oscar every day when I read somebody's email, when they say, 'This changed my life' or 'This helped me to live better' ” (Carter 47). Perry has learned that his cynics do not know what he knows (Carter 48). Even the actors in his works recognize something unique in Perry’s brand of didacticism. Brian White, an actor who has been in several of Perry’s films calls Perry “anointed.” “[His] voice and his gift come from a higher plane. It comes from another place” (Carter 47). I aspire to that same plane, to write from that place of profound spiritual influence. It is the most powerful place. Perry’s experiences teach me not to listen too closely to the critics because if even only one person is affected in a positive way, changed by the play, then even the worst play or one criticized with the amorphous “didactic” label has value. Strident playwriting, in anointed hands, can do wonders.

**Intellectual**

*Naomi Wallace commits the unpardonable sin of being partisan, and, the darkness and harshness of her work notwithstanding, outrageously optimistic. She seems to believe the world can change. She certainly writes as if she intends to set it on fire (Kushner qtd. in Wallace 101).*

*If writers can re-imagine language, with an effort that aspires to fluency in history and its myriad forces, then we can re-imagine ourselves and our communities – and that, for me as a writer, is the highest aspiration... I am not calling for a condescending theatre...but a welcoming, vigorous, inquisitive and brutal theatre...to get out of what I call the “wow” state of mind to a “how” state of mind (Wallace qtd. in Playwrights Foundation).*

When I read the above quotes about and by Wallace, I am inspired. I want to write plays that set the world on fire and encourage playgoers to get out of the “wow” state of mind and into a “how” state of mind. When I know this about her and read about her successes, I begin to consider her style of playwriting. There is a call for awareness, and
not just locally or nationally but internationally. I call this style of playwriting “intellectual.” Specifically, I define “intellectual” as an artistic approach in playwriting that emphasizes instructional and informative qualities informed by ideology and ideas that engage the intellect to a high degree, in Wallace’s case, politically. I feel a kinship. But I also have more questions, how is it that a writer like Wallace, distinctly different from Perry in her didacticism, gains enough attention as a writer to be given the MacArthur Genius Award, to have plays produced across continental divides, and to be given teaching opportunities at Universities and organizations, like Playwrights Foundation, across the nation? But she’s didactic…and bad. What is the difference in her work from mine that allows her playwriting style to be embraced? Is it so different?

In my search for answers to these questions, I began to recognize a common trait in both Perry and Wallace. Their work gets criticized in a “we can’t” climate of theater that resists anything that does not adhere to strict formulas dictated by others, but they continue anyway. They find alternate routes. In Wallace’s case, she even developed a unique approach in her methodology for teaching other playwrights, calling on them to use their “writing as transgression” and imploring teachers of young playwrights to “turn them into dangerous citizens” (Wallace 98). She taught this at the Playwrights Foundation in four sessions at $450 per person. She may not be banking the millions that Perry is, but she is banking money, living off her art. For a playwright who struggles for her art, that is important, a symbol of success, success achieved without selling out to the resistors of her playwriting style.

I am amazed by the power of a woman so blatantly challenging in her work, work that the entire city of Atlanta, Perry’s enterprise base, embraced enough to put on a festival
honoring her, one that ironically occurred during the time of 9/11. Ironic because much of her work focuses on the Middle East, and she is married to a Palestinian.

However, although I am amazed, of the four included in this section on styles, I connect with Wallace the most and the least. I am not quite as political in my writing as she is, and I do not always agree with her politics. For instance, her constant U.S. blaming in her plays seems to lack any effort to look at things from a U.S. perspective, no balance. Is that the effect of her didacticism? Is her approach so partisan that she seems ill informed? I do not want that. But that is not the only difference between us. She is also a genius in her “wordsmithing,” a place I have yet to reach. And she writes about ideas more than feelings (Gardner 1). I do not do that. I write my political with a more spiritual and feelings-focused slant.

What Wallace and I do share, and what keeps me coming back to her, is our need to write characters outside our culture. But her understanding of her own impulse to that has informed my own greatly:

As a white writer, I'm not interested in a white theatre. I want an Inclusive theatre. I don't just want to write for white audiences. I'm aware that it was class privilege and white privilege that allowed me to become a writer in the first place. I find it liberating to examine my privilege and make choices around it (Gardner 2).

I struggle with this but to know that there is another white female political writer who finds it liberating to explore this impulse frees me from some of that struggle.

We also share recognition of the connectedness in the world. That is a powerful theme that runs through Red Umbrellas and the motivation for its direct didactic approach. The
women hold the audience responsible in the epilogue by pointing out the connectedness and therefore complicity between women in prostitution and all of us.

   ALL. What’s our complaint?

   MILA. That when you look into, not through, the glass

   You see your faces there

   Mixed and blurred with ours

   Flawed faces all,

   And yet you turn away. (94)

According to Wallace, “the whole system works against you seeing that interconnectedness, but there are all these strings out there and we are all attached to each other somehow” (Julian 4). I agree. She also says that:

   New writers are often forced into this sentimentalized view of their own creativity—that we need to go down deep into ourselves, and that's where we'll find some authentic voice, rather than going outward from ourselves and connecting with the world and people and other experiences, and that that is how our creativity will be forged (Julian 12).

This is an interesting statement and something I had never heard before. I am intrigued. Is it true? And what about the emotional connection to the audience then, the kind that didacticism can deter? Especially when, as Moraga points out, American audiences are not ready for theater that holds its members “complicitous in the oppression of its characters” (Moraga 118). She points out that “(a)udiences grow angry […] when a work is not written for them, when they are not enlisted as a partner in the protagonists’ struggle, when they may be asked to engage through self-examination rather than
identification, when they must question their own centrality” (Moraga 118).

I plan to contemplate it all. I know intellectual playwriting that is informed by ideology and ideas is a playwriting style that affects me. It definitely informs my work. But to what degree does it affect me? Can I go even further with it like Wallace? Do I have untapped reservoirs of writing that I have avoided from the fear of being too didactic? Could my work be improved by taking a more direct stance, one on ideas rather than feelings, even a more partisan approach? It is possible. I will find out.

“Female Voice at the Center”

When I describe this style as one with a female voice at the center, I am addressing my own experiences. As a playwright who writes plays with mostly women as central characters and particularly disenfranchised voices, I am aware of the way in which this pricks up the ears of those looking to fault the work of another and to do that through the “didactic is a dirty word” megaphone. A female voice at the center of my artistic work in a world dominated by male playwrights and their versions of female characters is a transgression in itself, the kind Wallace encourages. She is not the only one.

Lynn Nottage, another female playwright with revolutionary tones and the claim of a MacArthur Genius Award, and a recent Pulitzer, also transgresses. She is the playwright of the four who I feel the most kinship with. She is a researcher and treasures that aspect of the journey of writing a play. I love the research too but have been told that too much research could be detrimental to my writing. Luckily, I did not heed that advice because Nottage is evidence of its value. While preparing to write her Pulitzer Prize winning play Ruined, Nottage traveled to Africa twice to gather data that would inform her writing. Wallace admitted to being a researcher too when she said, “I know so little about other
experiences that I need to do a lot of research and then just pray that my imagination can do the rest” (Julian 11). I will definitely stick with the research.

Originally, feeling that same compelling or possibly chosen connection to Brecht that I have experienced over the years, Nottage sought to do a remake of Brecht’s *Mother Courage* focusing on the violence of war against women in the Congo. I find it interesting that Brecht lingers in the writing rooms of all of us that seek to reveal the political and violence as it relates to women and wonder if I have gleaned everything I can from Brecht and his writings. Is there more for me there than I realize? Nottage ultimately decided to choose a different framework for her play, one that better suited the stories the women, victims of rape as a weapon of war, were telling her. This is not unlike my own experience with my play *Red Umbrellas*. My original framework was similar to that found in Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, a choreopoem, poetic monologues for women linked together by dialogue, but the framework didn’t work for the subject matter because it had no doors whereby the audience could enter, no place for them to engage. As a result, it slowly evolved into a musical, a new, better-suited framework, albeit not a traditional musical one. But there is a shared methodology between Nottage and me, the recognition that the work will have its own form, one that it will reveal over time, and that should not be forced into some traditional model. I learned that the hard way. It is possible that the wide-ranging and conflicting feedback I received concerning *Red Umbrellas* and my desire to do whatever necessary to make it a powerful and didactic play by trying to incorporate all of that feedback, has led to some of the problems still sewn deep into the

Nottage also takes time to write her plays. She seeks depth and quality, complexity and layers over quantity. In her subject matter, she seeks to give voice to the buried and unseen, and looks to cross borders of all kinds to do so. We share that focus. In my plays, I have written about Brazil’s street kids, a woman who suffered silent years of childhood sexual abuse, the extermination of the Roma in Romania during Hitler’s terror, a Korean girl who loved science and became Korea’s first queen hundreds of years ago, and global women in prostitution fighting for their rights. I want to share Nottage’s genius and write with the same impact she has had. Because of her play Ruined, she was invited to attend the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing of the Subcommittee on African Affairs, which examines the use of violence against women (Nottage xiii). These are goals of mine, to be able to do work that changes the way we think about things and therefore the way we handle them, to not let the spirit of violence that pervades our world go unchallenged. Still carrying the dream of becoming an international human rights lawyer to advocate for people’s human rights that I have carried prior to and throughout my MFA program, I am now asking is this something I can accomplish with my writing? Nottage makes me believe it is possible. And if so, what style of writing do I need to develop so that I can make that kind of impact? Is there a certain style that speaks better for the disenfranchised? Has Nottage discovered that in her own style of genius? How does she do it? How can I do it even better?
My questions for Nottage multiplied and I needed her support and her wisdom. So I sought her out. These are the questions I asked her in email correspondence through the dean of the drama department at Yale where she teaches:

1) What was the process for you, as an emerging playwright, to develop work that had meaning for you and felt right to you against the voice of the critics?
2) Has your work been called "didactic" or "too didactic?" If so, how have you responded to that, internally and externally?
3) Have you experienced the frustrations of being promised certain things as a playwright only to be let down, broken commitments, etc.? If so, how has that affected you on your journey as a playwright?

She never responded. Maybe the didactic label was something she resisted without a thought. I needed answers. So I read Ruined.

It seemed short, a smooth read, insignificant, as in light in my hands. It was well crafted and unique, a perfect example of unburying voices. But was it worthy of the 2009 Pulitzer? I loved the carefully crafted reveal of Mama’s ruined state and the use of poetry and music and cultural specific language throughout, the means for insertion, things I love to incorporate into my own plays. I loved the bird and the black pot and the setting. I could hear the generator and feel the cold rising off the lip of the Fanta. Reading it was a visceral experience. I would love to see it performed. But it was not earth shattering. And nowhere in my research did I find that the women whose stories inspired the play were somehow directly benefited by the play. The truth was no longer buried, and that is something, but is it didactic? There was no clear lesson or directed message, no call to arms really. And what are the criteria for the Pulitzer in Drama? What did they see in
Ruined that they did not see in other plays? Is it possible that they are awarding her female voice at the center play because it is female centered, because it is giving value to buried voices and smothered pain, the pain of women? I hope so. Is hers a different force, perhaps a Tyler Perry one? Maybe Nottage is anointed too. Or maybe it is the story being told that receives that blessing. Give me anointed stories! This takes me back to the truth of my own didacticism though. I like the tough stories, to wade into the waters no one else wants to wade in. Women like those in Ruined who are victims of war through rape are clear victims in this culture, if not in theirs. Perhaps that is another reason for its high praise. It challenges cultural norms, forces a look at beliefs that cement the ruination of women, of those Congolese women, a ruination of body, soul, and spirit. But these women are clear victims, like the children living in the streets and gunned down for being an inconvenience in my play Hopeless Spinning. Their stories, once unearthed, elicit compassion, empathy, and a desire to create difference. Their stories are anointed before they are even written. Of course we need to hear them, to be instructed and informed regarding them, but prostitutes like those in my play Red Umbrellas, ones who deny any victim status and who shout down anyone who dares to categorize them as such? What to do with that?

Maybe I will eventually hear from Nottage. After all, I feel the greatest kinship with her despite the difference in our writing styles. 

Activist

Ultimately, for me, just writing plays that challenge mainstream theater consciousness is not enough. Actively challenging injustice is the reason I write plays that spell out a call to action. It is the reason I get up in the morning. In the words of Gandhi, “be the
change you want to see in the world.” I cannot write plays that challenge my audience, inviting them to take a look at the real conditions in our world and to do something about it if I am not doing something myself. This is not unlike the work of Tim Robbins, Sister Helen Prejean, and their play *Dead Man Walking*.

At the 2007 Association for Theater in Higher Education (ATHE) conference, I had the opportunity to engage with Sister Prejean of the Dead Man Walking Play Project and Sister Maureen Fenlon, the National Coordinator of the project. I attended the ATHE conference as a representative of the organization Students Helping Street Kids International (SHSKI) and was designated a booth where I set up the organization’s huge display as well as a stack of DVDs of my play *Hopeless Spinning* and a constant running of the same on my laptop. My booth got attention. People were interested, curious mainly as to why there was a non-profit organization representing the needs of mostly Brazilian street children at a theatre function in New Orleans, Louisiana. What was the connection? I had answers, but being providentially located so near the Dead Man Walking Project’s booth and watching and exploring their methods for attaching activism to a play, my answers were not only supported by such a successful project but they became more elaborate. As I began to realize that my ideas were not so foreign or useless and that others believed activism had a powerful place in theater, I was encouraged and inspired to move forward. I wanted new answers for their questions about connection, and I wanted to deliver those answers with the confidence of knowing the viability of a connection between playwriting and activism. As a result, I began to study the Dead Man Walking Project as a methodology applicable to my own work, to my play *Hopeless Spinning* in particular.
In 2006, my play *Hopeless Spinning* was produced at Illinois State University (ISU). The ISU Theater Department, which had never produced a new play, not only produced it but allowed two extra weeks of production for educating the twenty-six member cast on the culture of Brazil and the realities of the street kids there. Many of the actors had no awareness of the situation for these kids. The University also invited and paid for the trip of Yvonne Bezerra de Mello to the production. Bezerra de Mello was a name I had discovered in my original research for my photographic essay on street kids in Rio. She is a Brazilian, Sorbonne educated, wealthy woman, married to a hotelier. She started helping Rio’s street kids by taking blankets out to them at night, and twenty years later, she is still the person they call first when they are in trouble. She started a school for them, Projeto Uerê (“Project Children of Light”) in one of Rio’s most dangerous slums. The school serves over 400 at-risk children in a school-like setting specializing in work with children who have been traumatized due to the violence surrounding them. She is mentioned or interviewed in every documentary on the *favelas* (slums) and street kids in Rio, and was prominent in the film *Bus 174* about the man who hijacked a bus in Rio and was ultimately shot by the police. During the film, he keeps asking policemen to call Bezerra de Mello. They ignore his pleas. She was the first person there for him many years prior, when off-duty policemen, paid by local business owners, opened fire on street kids sleeping on the steps of the Candelária Church killing many of his friends. He was a mere boy then. Bezerra de Mello knows these kids.

She came to ISU enthusiastically and spent two weeks at the University speaking to many of the different departments that relate to the work she does with street kids: theater, art, politics and government, women’s studies, education, sociology, and others.
In addition, the director of my play invited a friend, Maria Schmeeckle from the sociology department at ISU, whose research focus is on orphaned children globally, to share in the play development and production experience. As a result, she developed a connection with Bezerra de Mello that led to a trip to Brazil and a long stay at Bezerra de Mello’s school in Rio. Schmeeckle returned inspired and created an organization through ISU, Global Children Outreach, which involves her students in just that, reaching out to children globally to meet their needs in ways that are possible from their location in Illinois. It has been successful. One of their projects was to develop English language tapes for Bezerra de Mello to use at her school to assist her in teaching the children English. Bezerra de Mello has those tapes. Finally, the University invited the non-profit organization I volunteer with, Students Helping Street Kids International (SHSKI), a thirteen-year-old, successful organization focused on the educational needs of street kids, to the opening night of the production where they set up a table for audience members to visit following the performance. At the table, playgoers could get more information about street kids, the organization, and could donate money. SHSKI received over $1,000 in donations on opening night alone. These experiences, the visiting activist, the development of a non-profit organization encouraging college students to take an activist stance, and the monetary support of an already successful organization, all attached to my play, impacted me greatly and resolved my own stance as an activist playwright. These were the things that could happen when a play was “right,” not perfect, and people were engaged. “Didactic” did not seem to really mean too much to me that night, not in any negative way anyway. They participated, audience members, students, and faculty. They reached out. They took action beyond the world of the theater and its allotted number of
seats and tickets. There was a force that radiated beyond the walls that encompassed a production. And I loved that. Loved! I realized the power of plays and set out to develop that further for myself. That is what eventually led me to the ATHE conference in New Orleans.

As a budding, naïve playwright with a zeal for activism, I was trying to encourage other schools to recreate the experience we had at ISU. I offered free DVDs of my play in a packet with my business card and information about SHSKI. I encouraged them to use my play for free and to seek the same results we experienced at ISU. I handed out over 50 packets and over the days that followed got no response. Were schools just not ready for that kind of theater? They told me they were. Was it a bad play? Was it the material in the play, the guns on stage, the Christ shadow, or the call to activism? Was it true what they said, it was “too didactic?” Was it too didactic for a school setting? I would not get answers to these questions then and will probably never get specific answers to that particular event but being located so near the DMWPP table has kept me inspired to move forward with this desire to see Hopeless Spinning used as a tool for activism.

I took home the materials Sister Prejean and Sister Fenlon gave me from their table. After a week of developing a relationship with them, I was given additional materials, a list of high schools and colleges with direct contact information, schools that have produced Dead Man Walking as a theatre project, and my own copy of the Dead Man Walking script. As I looked through the materials, I realized not only my need for further development of my own ideas and approach to schools with this type of idea and project but also specific ways in which to do that. The packet held a half sheet of paper addressed to “New Dead Man Walking Partner” with a thank you to those interested in the project
and an encouragement to contact Sister Fenlon after having a chance to review the
materials; a list of other schools that had participated (no contact info.); a letter that
explains the project and what the requirements are for a school to be entrusted with the
play; Sister Fenlon’s business card; sheets that list participating costs, the royalty fee, ii
materials to order, commitments to make, a licensing agreement; and a slew of brochures
from the DMWPP and other organizations dealing with the death penalty. My Hopeless
Spinning packet had many of these things. What it did not have was the professional
forms necessary when producing a professional play, a list of contacts of other schools
that have already been a part of my project, and a name like Tim Robbins, even Sister
PreJean. Dead Man Walking had a history long before they established their project. This
led me to recognize two things. I now have a list of schools that are interested in social
issues and are engaging in activist theater. I also have partners, the ladies from the
DMWPP, who will support me along the way with suggestions and direction based on
their own experience. I realized I have names attached to the project that are influential
and amazing, SHSKI and Bezerra de Mello. They lend weight to my developing project
for sure, are even partly the impetus for it, but they are not well-known here in the United
States as in Bezerra de Mello’s case and not nation-wide as in SHSKI’s case. I can
continue my work with SHSKI and Bezerra de Mello to create awareness of them
through my project, but initially I need someone else well-known to attach to the project,
someone famous. Why not? As a playwright who wants to continue to “believe the world
can change” and who wants to be considered as a playwright who “certainly writes as if
she intends to set it on fire,” I need to think big. I do think big. But ultimately, what I
really need, is to rework “Hopeless Spinning,” to apply what things I have been able to
learn through UNM’s dramatic writing program. That is why I came to UNM.

It is an established practice to apply activism to a play. DMWPP is evidence of that.
Didacticism in that way is accepted, even embraced. It is the play I have to look at, to
consider it in my new understanding or newly developing attitude towards didacticism.
What do I do with this play now?

What style of playwriting speaks for the disenfranchised? Writing that spells the plays
messages out? Writing that is coded? These are questions easier for me to answer now
that I have explored the writing styles of Perry, Wallace, Nottage, and Robbins. I
recognize the quiet power of Nottage, the bolder strokes of Perry and Wallace, and the
direct action of Robbins. All of them speak for the disenfranchised and whether coding
their plays’ messages or spelling them out, all of them have been lauded for their work.
It’s good writing. What I’ve learned is that all the styles of playwriting explored in this
research can speak for the disenfranchised and be well received by audiences, as well as
award givers. But also, I’ve learned that it’s the strident and activist styles that most
achieve those things that interest me, the farthest from “didactic is bad” that a writer can
get. The messages do not have to be coded or quiet to be effective, although maybe to get
awards given by the same mainstream culture that uses “didactic” as a label to reduce and
silence the uncomfortable and unfamiliar. That is a powerful realization for me, and one
that I need to contemplate during the writing of all my plays, the rewrites too, especially
my next rewrite of Red Umbrellas.
Introduction

During the process of development for the production of Red Umbrellas, I discerned six key characteristics I believe are essential for enacting a "we can" way of doing theatre. With this section, I will explore each characteristic individually in relation to my experiences with the production and in relation to a “we can’t” mindset. The six characteristics are tenacity, just institutions - avoiding an institutional mindset, give them their dreams (like eggs that would hatch) - treating others dreams as important, making a difference, You Can Do It! - room to learn from failure, and inclusion.

Tenacity

Tenacity is the antithesis of a “we can’t” culture. It is a characteristic I know well and one that I needed greatly during my production of Red Umbrellas. I started the casting process early because I wanted time to develop the production. I did not want the pressure of last minute decisions and dealings. I learned the absolute ineffectiveness of that early on. During the complete process of production, the first actress I cast in the play, a UNM student who swore her commitment to the project, dropped out right before production started because she was cast in a project she wanted to do more. I believed that someone else was destined for the role and that I would find her. I did, and she proved remarkably better suited. I also had trouble finding the right actress for the character of Robyn in my play, but I never gave up or settled. Eventually, I was able to cast an Austrian woman whose father had been a diplomat and who had lived all over
Europe. She even spoke German, something invaluable for that German character. And she had red hair. I had always pictured Robyn with red hair.

Fig. 1. Alexandra Buresch as Robyn in costume I designed.

I cast the Nigerian character late in the game, a woman with an incredible voice, a true gift, only to have her drop out last minute to go home to Chicago with her children because of difficulties in her marriage. I did not give up. I cut the character from the play. It needed to be done. When some in the play refused to behave in a professional manner, I did not give up. I released them, cut one character and recast another. When my costume designer decided to give up costume designing altogether during preproduction, I did not give up. I took on the responsibility myself with the help of two hired seamstresses.
I was even able to get a donation of a high dollar corset from a local lingerie shop.

When my stage manager, who was my last resort in my long effort to find one, was unable to continue after I changed the production dates, I did not give up. I just moved forward without a stage manager finding alternate solutions as various needs arose. When
money was a problem, I solved it. When emotions ran high, I soothed them. When the light designer’s schedule did not allow him to work with our new production dates, I hired a new one. When he found it enjoyable to do a little sabotaging, I suspect, because of another issue in the play, and came late to a production, among other things, I ran the lights myself. When the choreographer’s schedule became too busy to finish the choreography of the play, I choreographed the final number myself. When some of the cast did not connect well with the voice coach I hired, I found a new one. When the second person cast in the role of Mila decided against it when she learned that her best friend’s cancer had returned, I found another actress. When two days before we opened, one of my favorite cast members quit the play because I got upset with her reluctance to remove pictures from the web showing important reveals in the play, I found someone to take her place. The one time my tenacity waned was when the parents of the child in my play refused to alter her schedule so she could actually be at two of the performances. I canceled the show then, stunned by their attitude, but later found a solution, convinced the parents of the importance of their daughter to our play, rallied the troops, and finished the production.

Those listed hurdles are only a few of the unbelievable things required to overcome when putting on a production, or this production at least. But I never gave up, and my tenacity paid off. In the safe space I created for myself, in the less than safe volatility of theater production reality, tenacity was essential. And the cast I believed for and ultimately believed in, was just as tenacious. They are the ones at the end who remained loyal to the production through their own fierce tenacity and to whom I am both grateful and admiring of.
I already knew my own tenacious spirit. It has rewarded me through the years. I did not need to do my own production to learn that lesson. What I needed was a writing program headed by tenacious people who recognized the importance of keeping their word. Instead, I got broken promise after broken promise, and every perceived obstacle became an instant “no” to most requests of support for my final production dream. “We can’t do that.” For someone who knows all too well the rewards of true tenacity, I felt devalued, not important enough to warrant any real effort, especially if it interfered with all the other priorities of the program, so many. But then, that is just the nature of an institution like a university. Or is it?

**Just Institutions**

*I am interested in honest writing and writing that's felt. I worry that an institutional context is an antithesis to a writer's reality (Shange qtd. in Anderlini 90).*

An institution is an institution. There’s no getting around that. But can an institution be more than that? Do the rhetoric and rules that keep an institution running like a “well-oiled machine” prevent it from being more, from acting with warmth and recognition of the individual, of human need? In a “we can’t” culture, “yes.” The challenge is too great, the pull of the institutional mindset too strong. People get lost, bound, trapped in its institutionalisms. It happened to me.

Originally, I just had my own experiences, ones I did not trust because those around me did not respond to them in the same way or see them in the same light. At first, some of my peers in UNM’s writing program rallied a cry against some of the machinations. They felt the same lack of value that I was experiencing. But when that experience is the kind that comes robed in well-intended smiles and promises that just never came to pass,
it is hard to know the best response or the correct actions to take. And UNM’s writing program, as an institution and part of a larger one, has strong qualities, like my assistantship with the grant writer that taught me so much, or the monies the dean would help me find for tuition costs, or the oft-needed office hours with one faculty member and his amazing ways of understanding my workings as a writer.iii But those actions were championed by the few and rare and did not add up to a strong and positive experience. As students who did not feel valued, my peers and I just continued believing, continued hoping that things would change, that the words of those in charge held weight. For some, that was rewarded, a bit. For others, just hanging on to the believing was enough. For me, it was not. I did not come to UNM to take a stance. Like the lyric from the song “Take a Stand” in Red Umbrellas, “Why do I have to stand, who just decided?” It is wearying, and I just wanted to write. But I decided. Frustration after frustration, broken promise after broken promise, made writing painful, nearly impossible. I wanted more from the program. It kept giving me less; mired in the machinations. Is the program too institutionalized to recognize its own strengths and to champion those? I do not want to pretend to know. But I could not and cannot just pretend that the program has delivered either. So it leaves me wondering, at what level are the playwrights prioritized in UNM’s Fine Arts Program, theater department, goals of the professors? Has it been personal? Are my expectations too high? And what about our playwright dreams?

*Give Them Their Dreams (Like Eggs that Would Hatch)*

(Being) broadcast to the world that we were doing something important. We were her baby playwrights and she sat on us like eggs that would hatch. She told us what we were doing mattered, and we wouldn’t get confirmation of that anywhere else (Jean Claude Itallie qtd. in Rosenthal 27).
I once decided on a Saturday to move from Austin, Texas to Chicago, Illinois and left the following Saturday with a baby in tow, in an un-lockable jeep with our few possessions stowed in the back, and about $180. Whenever I tell the whole story, I always end it with “I don’t recommend it.” After I tell the story of writing, directing, and producing my own play, a comparably daunting task considering I had no directing or producing experience, I always end it with, “I highly recommend it.” Both times, I was following my dreams.

Admittedly, I would do both again as I did them. Despite the difficulties I faced with my move to Chicago, it opened up the world to me. But the production adventure was rewarding in an instant way and on so many levels that I did not anticipate and taught me so many things that benefit me as a playwright, that I think every playwright who has not produced or at least directed should make it a necessary component of their education and development as writers, at least once. The insight is invaluable.

I had been wanting to try the directing thing and decided, with my break from UNM, that this was the perfect opportunity to do that with one of my own plays. Of course, I would pick a production with an overwhelming amount of challenges—dialects, dance, singing, originally ten female characters, spoken word pieces—to name a few. It was intense trial by fire, boot camp, and the way I learn best, by just jumping in and doing it. Of course, there were times when I would have liked the support of UNM. For instance, having spent a great deal of energy and money finding and securing rehearsal space for the production, I decided, once reinstated at UNM to seek rehearsal space on campus. It made me nervous to do so. I anticipated that there would be some disappointment attached to my seeking, as there had always seemed to be, and I did not want that now. I
was happy and enjoying the struggles and rewards of the production at that point and did not want anything to taint it. When I asked for a space through the Dean’s office, all was fine, but the room was too small for my large cast, so I went through the theater department and asked for only two nights. As was predictable, on the first night, during a run-through of the show, I had to change rooms three times because the room given me was already booked and everyone and everything took priority over my production. I suspected foul play but did not want to expend the energy to prove it. The amazing wonders that were my cast just followed their “fearless” leader patiently plodding from one room to another, interrupting one scene after another of our “run-through.” I resigned myself to that being just one of those things, but I never did rehearsals there again.

When I asked for three props for my play—a podium, guns, and a streetlight—I was told that they did not have the time because the play The Firebugs by Max Frisch was going on and clearly took priority. I was able to get the podium through other means, borrowed the guns from a kid my kid knows, and nixed the streetlight altogether for lighting that would give me a moonlight effect instead, another production story to be told later in this research. I wonder now what it would be like to have the support that left me with no doubt that my work, as new and unpolished as it might be, was important, as important as any other production, that feeling of a warm bottom sitting on the potential of my dream until it hatched forth into something vital, seeking to live, to fly. I’m sure the response would be that because I left the University and was now producing my play at a time other than the allotted Words Afire time, that I would just have to deal. Unfortunately, that attitude was the same during Words Afire and really just reinforces the idea of a “we can’t” culture. Recall the we-can’t-give-you-a-live-band moment prior
to my leaving UNM. We can't spend fifteen minutes of time for a graduate student with a 4.25gpa, clearly mature and reliable, to loan her three props for the production that is the culmination of her three years here and her required thesis play for graduation. We only loan out on Fridays, and although tomorrow is Friday, we’re busy and we can’t. We can’t prioritize that over this production, important work, but written by someone not affiliated at all with the college or not promised anything from us.

One of the most rewarding experiences for me of directing Red Umbrellas was to be able to give some of these women their dreams. Two of them secretly longed to do musicals, one young, the other a mother of a university acting student. Their longings were so strong that they had even begun taking voice lessons from a local voice instructor. That is where I found them. They proved to be two of the most professional minded women in the cast and the most committed.

One of them was a wonder on stage and the other discovered new strengths she did not know she had. Both challenged themselves in new ways and were really on the same journey I was for growth and expansion of their understanding of what they were capable of. Another actor took on the challenge of learning the guitar and singing on stage even after someone had told her the only thing that would get in the way of her acting was her
voice. Her voice unique and fresh was dazzling on stage to me, and she responded to that and grew in leaps and bounds during rehearsals. Another actor who had felt stuck in the film industry and not supported in her desire to do theater proved to be a real gift to the production with her knowledge of languages. She rediscovered her theater voice, and it was beautiful to watch her doubts of herself melt away as we moved through the process. Another actor, already professional, found a new depth in her acting, one that was recognized by most people attending the show.

![Fig. 6. Michelle Smith as Ghita the prostitute.](image1)

![Fig. 7. Smith as Ghita the hotel owner.](image2)

I received so many compliments about her performance, as did she. I loved being a part of that, giving these women chances and seeing them succeed in ways that were successful to them. That was more important to me than high praise of my play, accolades, or even the production results. These women walked away stronger and more aware of their ability to contribute to the world. I loved creating an avenue for that. In addition, the thing I have heard most in relation to the production is the way that others are inspired to believe in their own projects and to put them out there. By making a difference through dreams inspired, the effects radiate.
But in a “we can’t” culture, making a difference is not the most important focus, in fact, from conversations I have had with the powers that be, my need for that is unique in the history of UNM’s writing program. Is it really? I do not know. But I do know that without it, for me, playwriting has no meaning. The messages the lack of prioritizing that importance sends out to me as a playwright are loud and clear. We say your dream matters but when push comes to shove, we cannot prioritize your dream. Find another warm bottom. So I did - my own.

Making a Difference

I have made it clear throughout my work as a playwright, at UNM and before, throughout most of my adult life, and in the above section, that making a difference in the lives of others is the most important thing to me. It is my main objective in life and is the reason I went to law school, the reason I pursued a Master’s in Politics and Government to get back to law school, improved and better prepared, and the reason I took the detour to a playwriting program. I saw the effects a play can have on a person through the production of my play Hopeless Spinning.

The lead male character in my play was so affected by the content of the play and the role he was playing that he would cry in rehearsals. It was his story too. On one night of performance, he came in unable to perform. It seemed as if he was high, but his mother was with him. He was insisting on going on stage but everyone talked him out of it. Eventually, I held his face in my hands and told him the role was his and no one was going to take it away from him, that it would be there for him the following night. His mother, secretive, just reassured me that he would be OK. I was not sure what to think. Several years later, he had moved from acting to the ministry and was soon to be married.
I was invited to the wedding. A week before his wedding, I learned of his death. His heart had just given out. He had not been high that night of the play but had misread the dosage of morphine prescribed by the doctor for the pain he suffered associated with his sickle cell anemia, something he had been fighting for years and did not want people to know. During the eulogy at his funeral, they talked about *Hopeless Spinning*, and how important that experience had been in his life, how it had transformed him and allowed him to believe in himself in a new way that led to all the joyful things that were happening in his life when he died. It was important to the family. His mother still lets me know how grateful she is for the relationship I shared with her son, powerful stuff that continues to motivate me. I wanted playwriting as a tool in my toolbox for making a difference.

With *Red Umbrellas*, I have sought the same effect. But it has not yet materialized in the same way. How do I make it useful? How can I better create it to make a greater difference? What is impeding that? I know the play is not where it needs to be yet, but it is close, and I recognize that a play about prostitutes fighting for their rights is not going to get the same support as a play about children suffering and living on the streets. People do not feel the same compassion or empathy for prostitutes carrying red umbrellas of defiance. That is the point of the play really.
But I have wondered if the lack of direction for knowing how to use the play to make a
difference or the strength in the play to do that has something to do with the environment
the play was created in. *Hopeless Spinning* was directed and supported by university
faculty who also believed in the power of theater to make a difference. They supported
that in great ways and went to great lengths to create their own brand of difference
attached to the play. That has not been my experience at UNM.

There has not been any real resistance to the idea but no real support of it either. No
sense of that supportive familial feeling of everyone rallying around the cause like I
experienced with *Hopeless*. I am hungry for that. In a “we can’t” culture, making a
difference is not even considered. I know that kind of rallying cannot always happen, but
in a “we can’t” culture, it never does. You can’t do it!

*You Can Do It!*

In a “we can’t” culture, “you CAN do it” becomes “you can’t do it.” There is a focus
on the negatives. There is no sense of being able to do what seems impossible.
Everything becomes an overwhelming challenge, a burden, when you cannot believe in
the impossible. I believe in it. It is the reason I left on a Saturday to make my way in
Chicago. It is the reason I set out on my own to take on the challenge of producing and directing *Red Umbrellas* when I had never done that before. That did not stop me. I did not tell myself I could not do it or that I could not have a live band or find the right actors for the parts, ethnically or otherwise, or anything resembling that, especially without at first trying. I believed, as if all those who believed before me were there beside me, whispering in my ear, “you can do it!” And I did.

However, despite the many positive responses and feedback I have received about the production, despite the fact that on the night of our 2nd performance, the night when everything came together so nicely that I knew with certainty it had all been worth it and during intermission, as I walked across the stage, I received a round of rousing applause from many who had remained in their seats, despite all that, when some members of my thesis committee greeted me after the performance, they had nothing positive to say, nothing negative either, just omission. Why did I expect anything else? Why did I hope? The play was flawed. The production was flawed. I chose to keep the protest scene loud, forcing the other actors to respond like they might if it were a real protest scene, but the acoustics in the space made it hard to hear either. I asked the protestors to reduce their volume to about 60% but they did not always find that perfect volume. I did not get to use the Venetian masked chorus in the way I originally intended and mostly had to use them as crew shoving furniture into open spaces and flipping walls while cast members waited or even sang or acted.
When I lost the actress whom I loved in the role of Alice, who played everything about her role with sumptuous delight, an actress who thrived in the “we can/you can do it!” environment I cultivated, I was sad. She had changed her look entirely and learned to play guitar for the role. She had great chemistry with the male actor, and I loved the moments between them. In other contentious times, I had let her have her way. In this one, it was important to me, so I did not back down. Would I have backed down in retrospect? No. But I would have set a precedent early on by not giving in so easily to her demands. Would that have made a difference? Who knows? But it was something that did not work out as planned that I learned from. And in the end, because the cast voted to replace her, not a decision I made but backed, it is something that hopefully she has learned from too.
In many ways, there were successes, but in some ways I failed, fell short. I know that. And yet, I still see the benefits. I still see the amazing things that happened in the production, those beautiful perfect moments when telling myself “you can do it” paid off.

I have to admit, when I first went to one committee member and told him I dove into the venture of producing and directing, he did not try to discourage me from that. Instead, he recognized the learning potential that was there for me and gave me some tips. But it is the lack of understanding and embracing the rewards of failing or just falling short that I miss. I can tell myself these things. But if engaged in a program to be taught and mentored, it would be nice to be embraced with that by the people who operate the environment that I have made myself vulnerable in. After all, failure is the reward of risk, of having taken the chance, not an opportunity to remind someone of the cost of failing but of the benefit. In a “we can” culture, failure is nurtured, more than allowed, perhaps even encouraged, because it’s that experience of trying, of taking the risk, that teaches an artist to let go of unnecessary inhibitions.

Fig. 12. Alexandra Buresch, Leah Scott, Michelle Smith, and Margie Maes in confrontational scene from play.
My 16-year-old, who I give lots of room to explore and take risks and take on challenges that other 16-year-olds may never face, understands the value in failure. I try to never take his “failings” as an opportunity to chide him or to point out his less than worthiness because of it. Failure is embraced in our home, the inevitability of taking risks, a necessity for deep-lasting growth. Failure eliminates options and pinpoints opportunity. Even the great inventors of our history, Edison, Franklin, and others, express the necessity of their many failures before their greatest discoveries. There is a value in nurturing through the successes and the failures. When my children fail or fall short, I say, “OK, what did you learn from that? Pack that up, take it with you and move on.” There’s no time for self-flagellation, only an embracing of the lessons learned, because they’ll be the most memorable. But when in the midst of that failure, sometimes, despite the fact that you know it, a self-appointed voice does not carry the power of the nurturing and uplifting voice of another, especially to a nesting playwright. As my 16-year-old well understands, a place to fail gracefully is important. There is a kind of injustice without it. The self-permission to fail that is nurtured dwells richly in the “somehows,” and without it, self-doubt prevails. It is impossible to be tenacious, attain dreams, and make a difference in the lives of others when self-doubt prevails. And often, it is all about the failures.

In a “we can’t” culture, there is a need to negate, to reduce, to ignore. That can only take me so far in enhancing my writing. Is it a lack of genius they see in me? How far would a “you can do it” approach take me? Would I find new strengths? Lose old inhibitions? How high could I soar as a playwright? Would it make a difference? Do I have a right to expect that, to want that?
Inclusion

In a “we can’t” culture, there is a lack of inclusion, and inclusion is important, as evidenced in the work of Moraga:

When […] the character is not constructed within the White male imagination (neither exoticized, eroticized or stigmatized), how much harder must the playwright work to convey the character’s humanity, for she is from the onset perceived as ‘other,’ that is, not a suitable subject for identification. In this case, playing before a mainstream theater audience, how much more difficult it is to establish that emotional connection with the audience. The spectator and the reviewer don’t care about her life. She is foreign. The play is judged as inferior. ‘I wasn’t moved,’ writes the critic (Moraga 120-121).

Moraga has learned that there is a lack of understanding of her work and an unwillingness to accept representations of who she is as important, to include her. She has also learned how to challenge that. It was at an August Wilson keynote address where Moraga heard Wilson point out that “Artists who insisted on their own self-worth in what he referred to as the ‘culturally imperialist’ world of American theater” were as “warriors on the cultural battlefield” (Moraga 115). I want to be counted with warriors like Hughes and Moraga. I want to be included.

Inclusion has been an issue with Red Umbrellas. When characters are not included and instead viewed as “other” as Moraga discusses, there is an inherent difficulty in connecting with an audience that may or may not care about that “other.” In Red Umbrellas, as already mentioned, a play about angry prostitutes creates numerous
difficulties for connection. Why would anyone want to connect and how, as a writer do I change that? This is something I take responsibility for and realize that it can be a lacking in the quality of the writing that makes it difficult. But during one reading of Red Umbrellas, one directed by a white male in ways that I was not pleased with but was happy to see explored, I was told after the reading fell flat, that it was a tougher crowd than I had had before and the previous evaluations of the play had not been accurate, in a sense. That this audience’s response was the one I should trust. I am wondering if it was not that the play was inferior, but that those previous positive evaluations and responses had just come from audiences more willing to embrace these types of characters. Interestingly, in other versions, the women were not made to look so silly and stereotypically eroticized. In my production version, I am sure that audience members who came out to have their lust stroked were disappointed. It is not that kind of play. I am also wondering, if there existed a clear understanding in the writing program of the role of inclusion, and a genuine commitment to students that can only come outside of a “we can’t” culture, if there might not have been more ability to help me as a playwright to understand how to maneuver a play full of “others” rather than to just immediately fault the writing. Who knows? At this point, it is something for me to continue considering.

However, the writing program has been good about embracing play ideas that generate from other cultures, which most of mine do, despite the lack of people of color in the playwriting faculty. And we have had engaging debates in classes about ways in which to incorporate languages other than English into our plays so that an English-speaking audience can still be receptive to the content. But I have seen my peers struggle to find non-white actors for their non-white plays without a lot of support from the program.
There is an acceptance of impossibility without any real effort, without any of that tenacious belief. But that is the nature of the “we can’t” culture. That can be disheartening to a student who writes beautiful plays and needs to see them performed by the right casts in order to perfect the plays. It limits that thrust of creativity; that thrust towards greatness that is perched like a nugget on the edge of potential that any wrong move can squash. There are a lot of wrong moves in a “we can’t” culture. There are a lot of ways to consider inclusion too. And there is one that affects me more directly than discussed by Moraga.

I have at times questioned the efficacy and usefulness of theater at all but then discovered its great potential for allowing me to put all my disparate interests and talents to good use. However, in a “we can’t” culture, recognizing and encouraging that kind of inclusion does not occur, or rarely. I remember on my first arrival to UNM that there was a gathering for new students. Several faculty members from the dance department were there and someone spoke about the goal of creating joint projects between dance and theater. I was encouraged and excited by that because in *Hopeless Spinning* I had been able to combine my love of dance and music with my gift for writing and my political motivations. There was such a sense of great possibilities when I first arrived to UNM’s program. I remember that day well, but nothing came of it. Every time I tried to write in ways that allowed the coming together of all the disparate parts of me, it was shut down. I have yet to see a production where a true joint effort of both departments has taken place. *Red Umbrellas* had the potential for that. If it had been received in its fullness for the *Words Afire* production, the opportunity for that kind of effort would surely have been
available. But in a “we can’t” culture, many things get bandied about and few things happen.

I like uncharted territories; places without a map; adventuring out on my own. But it is the community aspect of developing a play that I like most, the collaborative effort. I like seeing what the genius of others can do to my best efforts, how much farther they can take the work. I do not want to feel a necessity to scrounge up thousands of dollars on my own in an effort to give to myself something that should have been given without that effort. I do not want to do a production again and be forced by lack of commitment from others to wear almost every hat. For my *Red Umbrellas* production, my goal was to learn, so I treasured the experiences from that perspective, but I lost other things in the process, a necessary loss this time, but not something I am willing to do every time. I want to be valued as a writer, and I want to feel it from the people who matter, from the ones who promised to give me that, who promised to spread their warm bottoms across the unhatched shells of my plays, full of all the tenacity and dreams and difference making that is me, and actively sit there with full intention and anticipation of who I can become as a playwright. And when it counted most, for my final, promised, longed for, complete-motivation-for-putting-up-with-all-I-put-up-with-in-the-program play production…I just wanted a safe space.
CONCLUSION

A "We CAN" Theater Culture Is Possible

Safe space

In the production of Red Umbrellas, one of the cast members, having felt that I embarrassed her in front of everyone at rehearsal for pointing her out as not having her lines memorized, called me to report that she did not feel “safe” now. We worked it out, but I realized the importance of a safe space and my duty as director to guarantee that sense of “safe” for the actors in my play. But still, what was a “safe space?” She as an actor feels the need for it, and I as a playwright feel the need for it, then what is it exactly? Is it the same for every person? The answer is probably not.

I found an article that looked at safe space in relation to education and the classroom. The focus of the article was on a symposium that had taken place at a university and was concerned with the assumptions regarding “what safe spaces are, how (to) know that they are safe, who and what they are safe for, and what they are safe from” (Stengel and Weems 506). What I learned from the article is that the concept of “safe space” is imagined, learned, and lived differently by different people, that it is possible and desirable, but also a “contested and ambiguous” concept (Stengel and Weems 507). That meant it would be difficult to define. What it also meant was that I needed to discover what a “safe space” means to me, as a playwright? And then, I discovered Ellen Stewart.

Ellen Stewart

But anything that I’ve wanted to, I always believed that somehow—I believe in the somehow—that I could find a way to do it” (Stewart 70up.org).

Institutions tie people down; they are not Stewart’s thing. It was more important for her to move around, to keep pushing her cart into more
corners of the globe. Instead of establishing La Mama as another BAM or Public Theatre, Stewart continues to be more interested and uniquely gifted in finding and helping to shape young people at their formative stages. She attends both to their artistic and their human needs (Rosenthal 25).

La Mama is a theater phenomena headed by Stewart that started in a basement in 1961 and, due to licensing, health department and fire department issues, led from one location to another. But Stewart would not give up. Eventually, through her tenacious spirit, she held on to a location, became incorporated, and then received non-profit status. This enabled her to apply for grants. And she did, receiving large ones from the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Doris Duke Foundation, which allowed her to purchase a building for her theater in 1967, to renovate, and move into in 1969. La Mama became firmly established as a focal point of the Off-Off Broadway scene, and Stewart won an Obie Award for her contributions in the 1964/65 seasons. But this was not enough. Stewart, still focused on supporting the playwrights under her care, and interested in establishing their credibility and legitimacy, began pursuing a “unique and complex international project” (Rosenthal 21). She began to bring international artists into La Mama as well as send companies of actors out to European countries. With grants she procured and with tireless efforts, Stewart developed working relationships with influential theater folk in Poland and Romania at a time “when cultural exchange between the U.S. and Eastern Europe was virtually nonexistent” (Rosenthal 23). This tenacity has nurtured playwrights like Lanford Wilson and Sam Shepard in the safe space of La Mama. Some of Wilson and Shepard’s early plays were performed internationally because of the tenacious work of Stewart (Rosenthal 21). This tenacious approach to supporting the playwrights she took under her wing, promising them that support, moved
beyond the city limits of the toughest place in America to make it as a playwright into untapped possibilities and new territories. Told by agents and editors in New York City that it would be impossible to establish the credibility and legitimacy of the playwrights she supported “without critical response and reviews (at this time New York’s mainstream critics were not interested in the plays at La Mama)” Stewart, without excuses, just looked for alternate paths to the goal (Rosenthal 21). And she never gave up. No matter the obstacle placed in those paths, she found a way to make things happen for the playwrights.

In the 1970s, Stewart’s focus shifted away from the playwrights to the directors, and in 1985, having been awarded a MacArthur Genius Fellowship, she purchased and renovated a former convent where she now holds a three-week symposium for directors every summer, since 2000, as well as a ten-day playwright retreat that started in 2007. iv

Hers is a “pushcart” philosophy that she learned from a Romanian shopkeeper, Papa Diamond, who took her under his wing when she first moved to New York, “a pushcart being the idea of pushing a cart along to help other people, but which, in the process, takes you where you want to be” (Ostroska 103). Papa Diamond always advised her to “get a pushcart and push it for other people” (Ostroska 104). And so she did, incorporating that philosophy into the dynasty of La Mama. When asked if having a pushcart was part of the spirit of La Mama, Stewart answered, “Well, it is everything” (Ostroska 103). “So this idea (it was like a vision really) came to me when I was in Tangiers to go back to New York and make my pushcart a theatre where the plays my brother and his friends wrote could be performed” (Ostroska 103-104).“ I knew nothing about theatre at that time. And that's how it started” (Ostroska 104). Perhaps Stewart is
one of the anointed too. The results of her efforts and applied philosophy certainly make it seem so. I take comfort in the fact that she knew nothing about theatre when she started. We share that.

Stewart’s dreams for those she supported were globally infectious…except in America. “The only country we’re not received in is our own country” (Ostroska 104). That was before the many successes of La Mama that forced it to be received in this country. But it used to bother Stewart, until she came to realize that American culture is “really closed - stultified in many ways” (Ostroska 105). Her travels across the globe gave her new insights into American culture. “When you travel, and you begin to see and think about what is happening in all of this world, not just this small part of it, what you see so often […] is that there is an almost inherent ability in these countries to love, respect and create. That is what we still lack in America” (Ostroska 105). Moraga agrees with Stewart when she states that “the aesthetics of Euro-American theater—what is considered ‘good art’—remain institutionally unaltered and secured by the standard theatergoer who pays ‘good money’ to see it; that is, a theater which reflects the world as Middle America understands it, a world which at its core equates free enterprise with freedom” (Moraga 116).

In Stewart’s world, the world is embraced. Plays from other cultures, like Japan, Italy, and Korea, matter, even when their concept of a “well-made” play is different. She learns from them and makes ways for them to come perform in La Mama theaters and for her own artists to travel there to perform. It is essential inclusion for the development of rich theater, something, as already mentioned in a previous section that American theater culture has yet to fully understand. Stewart, in her cultivation of safe space, has Asian
actors and composers on staff who have been there for years, generational even. She embraced one of her longtime and current composer, writer, directors at a time when, like me, this individual was not even sure that theater had any value, and Stewart showed her it did, showed her that all of her disparate sides were invaluable in making theater that was not scripted to a non-inclusive viewpoint (Ostroska 40). Stewart is an example of theater culture defined by “we CAN” and proof it is possible.

As evidenced by La Mama and Stewart, a theater culture defined by “we CAN” is possible but takes commitment. Stewart’s legacy is one to remember, and in today’s world where the institutional structures of the arts are challenging in a different way, accomplishing what Stewart has accomplished using her model may prove difficult. However, it would not be impossible. And anyone seeking to create a La Mama type of environment should not be deterred but rather encouraged to use Stewart’s model as a guide to create a new model for a “do it yourself” kind of theater that challenges the unique circumstances of today’s theater world. It is the limiting of possibility based on the circumstances where those imbedded in an institutional setting and functioning from an institutional mindset get stuck. Tyler Perry used his last dollars, including his rent, to pay for his first production, and it flopped. He was living in his car when the play took off in Atlanta, and then everything began to change for him (Symmonds). If he had focused on the circumstances and limited himself because the circumstances were limited, he would not be where he is today. Stewart would house groups of people in her tiny apartment when they traveled to New York City from other countries, sometimes for months. There was no money. She would make soup out of scraps so everyone could eat (Rosenthal 33). She found a way. She went through the circumstances, around them,
whatever it took. She still moved forward. In an introduction to Nottage’s published script for *Ruined*, its director, Kate Whoriskey had this to say:

> All of us who spend our lives in theater know that, at its core, this performing art is sacred. It has an incredible capacity for illuminating the unseen, reshaping history, bringing out empathy and providing social commentary. And yet it takes years in the trenches to develop a handful of meaningful productions. Once in a great while a project seems to get enough of the elements right that it becomes a memorable piece of theater (ix).

With so much at risk, how can the benefits of a theater culture defined by “we Can” be ignored?

My interest in returning to law school recently led to the opportunity to sit in on a contracts class at UNM’s law school. “What’s a legal enforceable promise?” the professor asked the class (Mathewson). Again, the concept of “a promise” surfaced for me as something important, not trivial like I thought when first starting this research. They discussed years of case law connected to just one promise that they were exploring together. They discussed intricate concepts related to a promise. The professor pointed out that there are fundamentals of contract law that have to be applied to determine whether a promise is legally enforceable. He discussed bargained for exchange, performance or return promise, proof of mutual assent to the exchange, detriment, record of the promise, evidence of reliance, and more. As he spoke, I paid close attention and took notes because it made me start to look at my relationship with UNM as a legally enforceable contract. Are the promises made to me and broken enforceable by law? Based on the little I learned in that class that day, possibly. But what the experience in that classroom really made me consider is, ‘Does it have to be legally enforceable in order for promises in the theater and theater education culture to be kept?” And what
about my promises? Had I made any that I had not kept? As a student dealing with a University, am I in any real position to make a promise, and if so, when the University fails to keep its promises, to what extent can they expect me to keep any, explicit or implied? I work hard to keep my promises. I do not always succeed, but it is important to me. My integrity is at stake. My good example for my children is at stake. So much is at stake. It is important to me because the consequences matter.

So then what are the consequences for theatre and for education if the culture remains content with so many unkept promises? Will it come down to lawsuits, another popular way of handling things in American culture? My interest is in human rights law, not contract law, so that is not a stance I would take, but someone might. And what about the quality of work that will be missed because students fell through the proverbial cracks? If the responsibility is theirs to learn how to deal with the realities of the theater world by enduring those things like broken promises in the school setting, then what is the point of the school setting?

I am not going to stop writing plays because of my interest in law and justice. On the contrary, I will have more inspiration. I will keep my didacticism and continue to seek out ways of writing that work for me and resonate with my audiences. And when the voices of the “we can’t”s get too loud, I’ll find a better place, a safer space, even if I have to create it myself. After all, I CAN.
For the purposes of this paper, I am defining contemporary theater as the time starting in 1965 when Luis Valdez left college to start *El Teatro Campesino*, a theatrical troupe of farmworkers focused on the experiences farmworkers, and continuing to the present.

Tim Robbins, author of the play, donates all royalty fees to Actors Gang, a non-profit theatre company which works with schools in the Los Angeles area. (Taken from the Royalty Fee note in the DMWPP packet).

Although my first semester I had to fight to get it because paperwork wasn’t correctly handled. And when the woman designated to handle it didn’t and a lesser employee took care of it, it led to squabbles within the department that I was forced to deal with. I just wanted my money. In my second semester, I was dropped from the program because moneys hadn’t gone through. After a morning of complete stress trying to deal with it, I was told it was a mistake. I dealt with something along these lines every semester except one—institutionalisms.

Nottage was 2010’s facilitator.

“(T)here I was, sitting on the other side of the world in Morocco in 1960 when my brother, a playwright, had a disastrous experience with Broadway producers-people he had trusted and gave his work to—but they financially and ethically betrayed him. It was a terrible thing for him which really ended his career as a playwright. He got a writer's block” (Ostroska 103).
Bibliography


Iha, Margaret E. Hopeless Spinning. 2006. TS.

Iha, Margaret E. Snap Out of It! 2008. TS.

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Iha, Margaret E. Eye of the Needle. 2009. TS.


APPENDIX
Red Umbrellas
For all women who make difficult choices based on reality and facts and not the assessments of others, I salute you. And I wish for you a future rooted in a universe that values each woman enough to provide only life-affirming choices.

beth iha
Red Umbrellas

Cast of Characters

SOPHEA (sup-heya) (noticeably demure in her presence and appearance but powerful in her speech)…………….29, female, Cambodian.

ALICE (like the Alice from Lewis Carroll’s stories)………………..20, female, American.

FABIANA………………………………………………………………………..26, female, Mexican.

ROBYN…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………..35, female, German.

GHITA…………………………………………………………………………………………………………..54, female, Dutch/Italian.

MILA………………………………………………………………………………………………………………..57, female, Italian.

CHAVY………………………………………………………………………………………………………………10, female, Cambodian.

BARBARA (BARB)………………………...…………………...…44, female, American.

MANDOLINIST…………………………………………………………………………………………………………18, male, Italian.

PROSTITUTE CHORUS, ITALIAN MEDIA PEOPLE, AND PROTEST CROWD………5-8 people, at least 1 male, and 1 or 2 children, diverse in age and ethnicity, must be able to sing; 1-3 speaking roles for individuals in each group

SETTING

2001, Venice, Italy, World Congress of Sex Workers; City Hall; streets of Venice; hotel room of the Pensione Villa Mancaza; and a space, where time and place are malleable

ACT I

Prologue……………………………..A strada in Venice
Scene 1……………………………..Meeting room in the City Hall of Mestre
Scene 2……………………………..Hotel room of the Pensione Villa Mancaza
Scene 3……………………………..Outside terrace of the Pensione Villa Mancaza
Scene 4……………………………..Hotel room
Scene 5……………………………..Outside city hall

ACT II

Scene 1……………………………..Outside city hall
Scene 2……………………………..The streets of Venice, near city hall
Scene 3……………………………..A canal
Scene 4……………………………..Somewhere, everywhere
NOTES

1) **Red Umbrella March note** - The red umbrella was first used by sex workers and allies in Venice, Italy in 2001. The First World Congress of Sex Workers began as an art installation by the Slovenian artist Tadej Pogacar, placed within the 49th Venice Biennale, between June 6th and 8th 2001, organized in a public tent, the “Prostitute Pavilion.” It evolved into something more and had as participants groups and individuals, involved with prostitution in various ways, from Taiwan, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Italy, Germany, the U.S., and Australia, who presented the world market situation as it related to sex work and discussed strategies to fight for civil rights of sex workers. They organized video projects, exhibitions, performances, activist street theatre, and distributed publications.

One of the activities was a Red Umbrellas March. Sex workers marched the streets of Venice using megaphones and red umbrellas, drawing attention to the bad working conditions and human rights abuses they face, drawing attention to their determination to resist discrimination, and their need for protection from the abuse they are subjected to by the police, pimps, customers, and an ill-informed and biased society. The march started at the Pavilion tent and went through the city centre. The route incorporated the geography of the social history of sex workers, from the famous Venetian courtesans Veronica Franco and Gaspara Stampa until today.

In 2005 the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) adopted the red umbrella as a symbol of resistance to discrimination. The initiative was welcomed by the community, and other sex workers’ groups from around the world followed. As a result, the red umbrella is becoming a global symbol for sex workers’ rights.

2) **The Looking Glass Theme note** – One of the themes for the First World Congress of Sex Workers was “through the looking glass.” This theme can be explored in a production but should remain understated rather than overriding. The symbolism of the looking glass/mirror is taken from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. In Carroll’s version, the looking glass portrays the subjective realm of just beyond. This is also true for “Red Umbrellas.” In Carroll’s story, Alice hastens to investigate the just-beyond-realm that actually marks an extension of consciousness. In “Red Umbrellas,” the women live in this other realm and are requiring others to recognize its legitimate existence by daring to look beyond their limited worlds through the looking glass into something they may not at first understand.

In Carroll’s story, in the just-beyond-realm, everything is not so much an actuated reflection as a self-actuating reality. In “Red Umbrellas,” the reflections the women see are not the reflections that others see. Their understanding of the just-beyond-realm is based on their need to survive and their need to look beyond the reflection projected onto them (stereotypes and preconceived ideas).
In Carroll’s version, when Alice learns not to look at spiritual/intangible things with the need to see or comprehend them as an image reflected in a mirror, then and only then is she able to build up subjective reality independent of physical reality enough to step through the looking glass. In “Red Umbrellas,” the women live in the just-beyond-realm, separated from society, and cross back and forth. This enhances their ability to comprehend what lies beyond what others claim exists or insist only exists because it’s all they’ve experienced, it’s all they’ve seen “reflected” back at them.

All of this is not to suggest that others deny prostitution exists but that they are limited in their understanding of the experience until they have actually taken the time to cross through into that world, past the accepted reflections, and into the realities as described by those who live it.

3) **Prostitution* note** – In the world at large, everyone has more power than the prostitute – the john, wife, feminist, regular worker, children, church and church people, etc. But the prostitute has found ways to carve out power for herself, ways that she is not willing to relinquish to those who try to “rescue” her in particular. She has taken the tools that have been used to reduce, judge, devalue her, etc. and made them her own, found ways to wield them that empower her within this cocoon of a lack of power. This is where the idea of choice arises. She seeks value through choice-making carved from the limits forced on her by realities, circumstances, and, in some cases, victimization. She seeks to have her work recognized as valuable and decriminalized by those with legitimate power. The prostitutes in this play, as throughout most of the world, seek justice from ineffective laws and dialogue that denies their voices.

4) **Costume note** – Color is a character and should be included in a way that highlights the ineffectiveness of “black and white” answers to complex problems that causes people to pass judgments in extremes. Red should be included because of its various meanings including passion, danger, its ability to elicit attention, and its current use by sex workers as a symbol of resistance. The Venetian masks are used to represent the emotional masks worn by women in prostitution that they are able to remove, in a sense, in this hotel room and in the street on this particular night when they are with each other. Some of the stories, or songs, are the ultimate wearing of the masks where the prostitute persona is its most fervent. Venetian masks have been used during Carnevale throughout the years and have different masks with different meanings. This should be taken into consideration.

* I’m aware of the use of “sex worker” as a preferred choice for women who practice sex work but also recognize its use as a term incorporating all types of sex work – stripping, phone sex, prostitution, etc. For the purposes of this play, I am only concerned with women and children in prostitution and therefore also use the more specific terms “prostitute” and “whore.”
Prologue

AT RISE: Instrumental “Red Umbrellas Intro” starts here. MANDOLINIST enters and begins preparing his tools – rope, gag, etc. for his next catch. He exits. Silence, pause, and projection: “This is not the story of all prostitutes, but this is their story.” After the prolonged silence, the light fades to black and the voices of SOPHEA, ALICE, FABIANA, ROBYN, AND MILA can be heard shouting phrases from all areas of the theater, ideally from seats in the audience. As they do, the lights gradually rise. GHITA watches from nearby.

ALICE

Only rights can stop the wrongs.

FABIANA

Sex workers rights equal human rights.

MILA

Criminalization of sex work is violence against workers.

SOPHEA

Decriminalize all consenting adult prostitution.

FABIANA

Make sex work safe.

ALICE

Sex workers are people too.

ROBYN

Sex workers rights are worth the fight.

Sophea, Alice, Fabiana, Robyn, and Mila move from their places to the stage as if marching the streets of Venice. They carry open red umbrellas. They enter half from stage right, half from stage left. And walk in lines where they meet in the middle forming one line across the stage. They close their red umbrellas simultaneously and hold them like canes on the ground in front of them. They address the audience as if addressing the people on the
streets of Venice. They recite “Prologue: Red umbrellas (CODE: Red).” Serious tone.

FABIANA
It’s our dream to share the theme of our parade
It’s red
Not a candy-heart red or a populace red but a shade of red that’s true
Like the blood that pulses through these veins, like the red that flows through you

ALICE
So you can see me, do you see me, do you see me, say that you do

SOPHEA
And hear our voices, red with hunger, loud with thunder, there’s no rain

ROBYN
We’re a promenade of workers, being vocal, saying look here we’re no stain
We’re just some women, doing our work, finding our way making our gain

MILA
But pay attention, to our voices, it is essential that you hear
That we want our rights, the ones owed us, we’ve been waiting here for years

ALL
Hell no!

PROSTITUTE CHORUS enters while Sophea speaks.

SOPHEA
We’re not embarrassed, or retreating, or ashamed it’s what we do
Stop trying to fix us, and to fool us, and to ram us just give us our due
Cause we’ve worked hard for a thousand centuries opening up ourselves to you

FABIANA
And it’s been hard work, and it’s real work, throbbing good work that we do

ALL
And it’s always flowed to you.

ALL AND PROSTITUTE CHORUS
And it’s always flowed to you.

Music stops.
ALICE
But the job isn’t easy. And the standing is long.

Various cast members respond with agreements as the chorus fills the stage and “Take a Stand” starts.

SOPHEA, ALICE, FABIANA, ROBYN, AND MILA

WE’RE HERE TO TAKE A STAND
IT IS, IN OUR HANDS
WE CARRY ON AND IT’S FAR TOO LONG
AND WE’RE WEARY
AS THE DAYS DRAG ON

PROSTITUTE CHORUS
DON’T SIT CAUSE THE ROAD IS LONG
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
STAND TALL

SOPHEA, ALICE, FABIANA, ROBYN, AND MILA
AND WE’RE WEARY, WE’RE WEARY, THE ROAD IS LONG

PROSTITUTE CHORUS
STAND TALL

CHILD PROSTITUTE/CHORUS MEMBER
WHY DO I HAVE TO STAND
WHO JUST, DECIDED
WHY DO I HAVE TO CARRY ON WHEN I’M SO YOUNG
AND I’M WEARY
AND THE DAYS DRAG ON

SOPHEA, ALICE, FABIANA, ROBYN, AND MILA
AND WE’RE WEARY, WE’RE WEARY, THE ROAD IS LONG

PROSTITUTE CHORUS
(2X)
DON’T SIT CAUSE THE ROAD IS LONG
TAKE A STAND
Ghita exits, unseen by the others but noticeable to the audience. As lights and music fade, all exit.

END OF PROLOGUE
ACT I

Scene 1

Lights up on Mila, Sophea, Alice, Fabiana, and Robyn. They sit in chairs placed in rows to the left and right of a podium placed center stage. Alice sits on the floor. CHAVY sits behind Sophea quietly playing. A guitar case sits by Alice’s feet, a guitar in her lap. She fingers the strings thoughtlessly throughout the scene, occasionally playing chords from “You I Adore,” working hard to get better. There are cameras and media equipment surrounding the sides of the stage. Mila stands at the podium. A conference meeting coming to a close. Sophea stands by her chair before speaking.

SOPHEA
Our rights are ignored. We want that to change. It must. And the new trafficking laws meant to protect are hurting us in Cambodia too.

FABIANA
I manhandle my way through them. But I support my sisters. But what I really want to know is what’s with the red umbrellas?

SOPHEA
Things once legal in our country, now illegal. These laws turn us into criminals and no one knows. They think it is all good. To suddenly become a criminal for doing what you have always done, what you know best, is not good.

ALICE
It’s always been illegal in LA, but I still want to fight. I’m tired of being harassed by police.

ROBYN
Unfair treatment. Thoughtless laws. We’re treated as deviants in Germany too.

SOPHEA
I have seen some women try to sell gum because they have no other thing to do. Gum is popular, but they cannot make a living wage, so they go back to prostitution, now more afraid of being arrested, jailed, beaten.

FABIANA
It’s enough. Let’s fight these bastards and win.
MILA
OK ladies. Fabiana. Well, a good first day for us, for our World Congress of Sex Workers.

ALICE
And we did the Red Umbrella March. That was cool.

Fabiana looks at her shaking her head “no.”

ALICE CONT.
So many people are here for the Art Biennale.

MILA
Yes. Our good timing in Venice, to plan this during the annual international art show. It will be fun.

As she talks, MANDOLINIST enters quietly from the back. He carries a mandolin case. He sets down his case and gets a broom from a closet. He begins quietly sweeping, unnoticed but noticing their words while they speak, especially Alice’s words.

ALICE
And we handed out the booklet things.

MILA
With two more days of the conference left. New strategies towards decriminalization. We will discuss that. Dealing with the impact of new sex trafficking laws and regulations. That too.

ROBYN
Yes. Why do they continue to treat both groups the same? This is the biggest lie of all. And the most insulting.

SOPHEA
To we women who choose it and to real victims in sex slavery. Prostitutes and trafficked women, we are not the same. There is a difference.

ROBYN
We need separate laws.

FABIANA
And smarter lawmakers. Instead of smart-ass ones.
MILA
Huge tasks. New efforts for our rights. This is demanding work. So grazie. I am happy
you have traveled here. *Molto allegro.* Some from far away. Sophea, from her non-profit
in Thailand. And the friends who came with her. Alika.
*She looks at Alika who responds with a regal nod.*
Others, from Germany, Mexico, the U.S. More arriving soon.

*The Mandolinist finishes sweeping and puts away the broom.*

MILA CONT.
We are determined. And as an old prostitute who knows you are all tired, I say
*arrivederci* until tomorrow or if you’re staying at the *Pensione Villa Mancaza* with me,
we have a *vaporetto* to catch. Oh but first, we have an invited guest. Arriving soon. Barb
Rayley. She’s from…

FABIANA
(Interrupting)
We know who she is.

ALICE
I don’t.

FABIANA
She’s another pain in the ass. An American, like you Alice. My feet are killing me.

*She kicks off her shoes.*

ALICE
I’m a pain in the ass?

ROBYN
Barb. She’s a feminist from a university on the East Coast. A radical one.

ALICE
Oh.

FABIANA
She’s trouble. Hey? Where can I get some hot water for these feet?

*The Mandolinist drops his broom, eager to help. Alice notices him. He trips over a chair noticing her.*
MANDOLINIST

I get. Scusí. I...scusí...water...bye.

He exits.

FABIANA

Gracias.

ROBYN

Sweet through and through.

FABIANA

Like a lollipop.

She licks her lips and looks him over. He’s awkward, nervous, but charmingly handsome.

ROBYN

He’s a janitor. Use your efforts on the ones with money.

FABIANA

But Fabiana wants to play.

MILA

Barb, we invited her here because we want her to hear what you have to say.

FABIANA

Well I have some things to say to her. I’ve lived in seven different countries and had sex with more men than Venice has bridges.

ROBYN

Four hundred and eleven.

FABIANA

What?

ROBYN

Bridges. In Venice.

FABIANA

Oh, sí, a lot more men.

The Mandolinist returns with a bucket and cloth. He puts Fabiana’s foot into the bucket and washes it. She smiles at him and caresses her breasts, then
Robyn’s breasts. He moves away embarrassed and goes back to sweeping. She laughs. Alice shoots glances at him.

MILA
We did not invite her here for trouble. We seek her help.

FABIANA
We need nada from that woman.

ALICE
Why do you hate her so much?

MILA
We do not. Her, we need.

ROBYN
For what? What do we need her for Mila?

MILA
Well, for...

FABIANA
(Interrupting)
For nada. And when she gets here, (singing) you know what we are gonna say to her?

Alice strums a rough, loud chord from “Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics.”

ALICE
Go away Barb?

FABIANA
Sí. Go away Barb.

“Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics.” Mandolinist stops his work and listens.

FABIANA
CALL OFF YOUR OLD TIRED ETHICS
GIVE YOUR UPRIGHT PANTIES A REST
SELL YOUR PITY PARTY ELSEWHERE
STOP YOUR MORAL JUDGMENT QUEST
SOPHEA, ROBYN, ALICE, FABIANA
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO INTERVENTION
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO RIGHT OF WAY
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO BLIND REDEMPTION
WE JUST NEED YOU TO GO AWAY

FABIANA AND ROBYN
FORGET YOUR SEWING CLASSES
KEEP YOUR SAD SKILLS THAT WE CAN’T USE
SHOVE YOUR SHELTERS UP YOUR ASSES
STOP YOUR WE’RE HERE TO SAVE YOU BLUES

SOPHEA, ROBYN, ALICE, FABIANA
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO INTERVENTION
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO RIGHT OF WAY
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO BLIND REDEMPTION
WE JUST NEED YOU TO GO AWAY

SOPHEA
SETTLE SCORES WITH OTHER WOMEN
BRAND THEIR HIDES WITH “PROSTITUTE”
TELL THEM WE ALL MAKE A LIVING
WITH THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

ALICE, FABIANA, ROBYN
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO INTERVENTION
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO RIGHT OF WAY
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO BLIND REDEMPTION
WE JUST NEED YOU TO GO AWAY

SOPHEA, ROBYN, ALICE, FABIANA
OH LADY, JUST CALL OFF YOUR OLD TIRED ETHICS
GIVE YOUR UPRIGHT PANTIES A REST
SELL YOUR PITY PARTY ELSEWHERE
STOP YOUR MORAL JUDGMENT QUEST

CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO INTERVENTION
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO RIGHT OF WAY
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO BLIND REDEMPTION
WE JUST NEED YOU TO GO AWAY

While the women talk, Mandolinist finishes
sweeping, picking up trash, etc. and puts the broom
away. He lingers a moment to watch Chavy at play,
even attempting to play with her. But she moves to Sophea. He grabs his case and exits to the steps outside the building where he lights a cigarette and smokes, contemplating.

MILA
Last year, to the UN, she was invited to speak. The year before, for research, from Kaiser, she received much funding. Politicians, she influences them. Then, the lawmakers, politicians influence them to create the laws so we are arrested and harassed. To influence for us, we need her. On our side instead, we need her.

SOPHEA
It is very foolish to think she will be on our side.

Ghita approaches the steps outside. Mandolinist watches her closely.

GHITA
Ci sono molte donne là dentro?

He shakes his head “yes.”

MANDOLINIST
Si molte.

She stares at the entrance, starts to enter, hesitates, then exits slowly, glancing back as she does.

MILA
I am sorry you feel that way Sophea.

SOPHEA
It is not about the way I feel. It is only the truth. I for one…do hate her.

MILA
This is a strong word, hate.

Alice reaches out to Chavy to stroke her hair. Chavy firmly pushes her away and moves to the other side of Sophea.

FABIANA
It’s so obvious, like the hairs on Robyn’s nipples.

Robyn takes a quick peek.
FABIANA CONT.

No one wants her here Mila.

MILA

Our needs, we want recognized. The media tomorrow arrives to televise this first ever international conference. This opportunity we cannot ignore. Barb and others, we must work hard to get on our side. This, we cannot make any mistakes about. We need her here.

“We Need Her”

MILA

IF THERE WERE ANY OTHER WAY I’D FIND IT
I’M NOT TAKING ANY OF THIS LIGHTLY
BUT THE STRATEGY WE NEED IS RIGHT BEFORE ME
IF WE CAN TURN HER LIKE A COAT THEN WE’LL BE HOME FREE

CHORUS

WE NEED HER
IT’S NOT AS CLEAR AS IT WILL BE
BUT WE NEED HER
YOU’LL JUST HAVE TO TRY TO BELIEVE
THAT WE NEED HER

SHE’S NOT THE FRIEND I’LL CALL WHEN I NEED CLEANSING
I’LL PROB’LY NEVER CALL HER FRIEND AT ALL
BUT WHEN ALL OUR PLEAS ARE POINTEDLY FORBIDDEN
HERS IS THE VOICE THAT THEY ALL VOTE IS READY WISDOM

CHORUS

SO YOU SEE THERE’S A METHOD TO THIS MADNESS
I’M NOT CRAZED ONLY CLEVER LIKE A FOX
BUT THE POWERFUL REFUSE TO SEE OUR GENIUS
SO WE WILL TEACH IT TO THE ONE WHO HAS THEIR PULSE

CHORUS

WE DO
WE NEED HER

ITALIAN MEDIA PEOPLE burst into the room.
They begin gathering all their equipment, moving
prostitutes, red umbrellas, and suitcases out of the way and exiting with equipment.

What are you doing?

MILA

Yes, what? *Oh, bon sang, bon sang.*

FABIANA

Who do you think you’re pushing?

*She pushes back.*

ALICE

What’s happening?

MILA

You will film us. Tomorrow. The news show. These things, you will not need them?

ITALIAN MEDIA PERSON

*Allora*, no news show. Mayor forbids it.

MILA

He agreed. The mayor. This space, he let us use it.

ITALIAN MEDIA PERSON

Filming is what I know.Canceled. Protest group from here and Rome this afternoon met with him. Mayor, cancel it he says.

*Italian Media Person grabs the last piece of equipment. He exits. The women, tired, just stare in that direction.*

MILA

Well, us, this meeting, he has not canceled. We will still meet, and march, and fight. We will.

*Sweet mandolin music can be heard from outside.*

ALICE

Pretty.
FABIANA
Lollipop.

Beat.

Barb Rayley put them up to it. *Yo lo sé.*

MILA
No, that, it is not possible. I don’t think she would.

*Barb enters. She immediately walks up to Mila. Alika sees Barb and quickly grabs Chavy, exiting unnoticed by Barb. Sophea is visibly disturbed.*

BARB
Mila. I apologize for being late.

FABIANA
By late, you mean busy with your little protest? And the mayor.

BARB
What? I’ve just arrived.

MILA
Just in time. At a perfect time. Our meeting, it will not be televised. The mayor forbids it. If he stops this, they will only continue in stopping us. Tomorrow, we go to the mayor, together. All of us.

ROBYN
For our own protest.

ALICE
Always a protest.

MILA
Scusi, Barb, tomorrow, you will go with us? Surely.

BARB
I don’t see that as very helpful. If the mayor forbids it. How can I help?

SOPHEA
Help? This is still what you call it?

MILA
This. To go with us. This is something that will surely help. And help is what we need.
BARB
I guess I could go with…

MILA
(Interrupting)
Good. It is decided. Tomorrow we go.

FABIANA
It’s loco Mila. We shouldn’t take her.

MILA
Of course we should. And now, to the hotel. Andiamo.

FABIANA
(Exasperated) Sí Sí. We’re coming.
She puts on her shoes.

ROBYN
(To Fabiana) With Barb here, this conference could turn to catastrophe. And no fun. If only she would leave early.

FABIANA
(Devious and calculating) She’s already gone.

Everyone grabs suitcases and umbrellas. Fabiana gives her umbrella to Robyn to carry. Alice, Robyn, Fabiana, and Sophea also carry a folded blanket. They leave the hall in a staggered manner, some with umbrellas open, some closed. Sophea forgets hers. Outside City Hall, as Alice leaves, Mandolinist plays harder to impress her. The others notice. She’s impressed but pretends not to be. All the women exit. Mandolinist sits and smokes. Barb, deep in thought, remains in City Hall. Sophea returns there to get her umbrella.

SOPHEA
(To Barb) I did not know you would be here. If I had, I would not have come.

As Sophea exits with her umbrella. Lights fade on Barb as she looks towards the direction of Sophea’s exit.

END OF SCENE 1
Scene 2

Lights up on hotel room of the Pensione Villa Mancaza. A real hotel room. There are four small beds covered in lace and quilts with candies on the pillows and a large, red, footed bathtub covered with an old quilt. There’s a small loft with narrow stairs leading up to a space only large enough for a twin mattress. A curtain hangs in front of it that can be closed for privacy. An antique folding screen for dressing behind stands in a corner. Alice and Fabiana enter, each carrying a suitcase and a red umbrella, that they both toss on the beds. Alice carries her guitar. A mirror hangs over an antique dresser.

ALICE

So many pigeons. Look at the bottom of my shoes.

She raises a foot.

FABIANA

That’s a lot of bird crap. Old Venetian woman told me the city pierces the pigeons’ eggs with a needle. Keeps them from taking over the city.

ALICE

That’s mean.

She looks at the bottom of her other shoe.

And definitely not working.

FABIANA

Probably what Barb and her kind would like to do to us.

ALICE

Pierce our eggs? That’s real mean.

Fabiana laughs.

FABIANA

Ah. Dulces on the pillows.

She picks it up. Inspects it.

They have these in Rome.

Sets it down. Lines it up.

Social workers hand them out to the women working the street.
ALICE
Weird.

FABIANA
Dumb. And intentional. Make us feel like bambinos. Cause if we feel like children, we act like them. Easier to manipulate our brains. And some of you whores fall for it.

Fabiana intentionally knocks the one on her pillow onto the floor. Alice opens and eats hers.

FABIANA CONT.
This your first time here? Italy? Venice?

ALICE
It’s my first time out of LA.

FABIANA
You like it?

ALICE
Dunno. But it’s Venice, Italy. I mean…

FABIANA
(Interrupting)
Si. It’s Venice. I come here every year during Carnevale.

ALICE
Carnevale?

FABIANA
Big party with masks and costumes. In February. A good time. Lots of dinero.

ALICE
Maybe I’ll come.

FABIANA
You could play your guitar.

ALICE
I could play my guitar.

FABIANA
You’ve gotten better.
ALICE
I try.

Alice carries clothes behind the dressing screen and quickly changes into red lingerie under a simple black robe. Fabiana changes out in the room. (Her red lingerie under her clothes.) She puts on a simple black robe too. They talk while they change.

ALICE CONT.
So, you don’t really like that Barb lady huh?

FABIANA
I’ve been to jail before but never for murder. That could change.

ALICE
You wouldn’t.

FABIANA
No. But I can think it. She needs to zip her hocico and mind her own business.

ALICE
I don’t really understand why everyone hates her. She seems nice enough.

FABIANA
She isn’t. I get naked and have sex for money so I must have been abused, raped, a junkie, uneducated, and without a soul at all. This is her story. No. I want to make money the best way I can so I do. Simple. That’s me. She’s an idiot.

ALICE
I feel kind of sorry for her.

FABIANA
Grow up güera. A girl from LA should know better. Nothing good about feeling sorry for people. Those are her tools.

Alice comes from behind the screen.

FABIANA CONT.
Anyway, don’t you have your own troubles to worry about?
ALICE

Well, yeah.

Beat

I mean…there’s this guy.

FABIANA

It’s always a guy with you white girls. Well. Go on.

ALICE

I knew him from the Starbuck’s by my house. Starbucks. You know. The coffee shop.

FABIANA

I know. It’s global. I’m a hooker, not an idiot.

ALICE

Right. Yeah. Sorry. Iced vanilla soy latte grande. His every Wednesday drink. A cop. He was just about to ask me out. I could tell. And I wanted to go. He was sooo cute. But then, I messed up.

Alice looks into the mirror above the dresser at her own image, then removes her robe, taking on the persona of the prostitute at work. Large video images of her face are then projected onto a surface behind her. Chorus members dressed as police act out some of her words. “Busted”

ALICE

IT WAS MIDNIGHT IN THE VALLEY
LA SOUNDS BLED THROUGH THE WALLS
STREET LIGHTS STREAMED FROM FLOOR TO CEILING
NEONS FLASHED THEIR DRUMMING CALLS

AS I WORKED WITH PRECISE FOCUS
SHIFTING SHADOWS OVER SKIN
I WAS DEEP IN CONCENTRATION
WHEN THEY ALL CAME BUSTING IN

DRESSED IN LA’S FINEST’S RAIMENT
DRIPPING BLACK FROM HEAD TO TOE
THEY WHIPPED OUT THEIR TINY BADGES
TURNING LIGHTS ON, MAGLITES LOW.

THERE WERE FOUR…THERE’S STRENGTH IN NUMBERS
TEN EYES STARING AT MY BOOBS
TILL THEY LET THE JOHN LEAVE EARLY
EIGHT EYES FRAMING LIPS OF DROOL

THEN HE ENTERED, TURNED TO FACE ME
STARED ME DOWN WITH DISBELIEF.
SHE’S THE ONE WE ARE ARRESTING?
NODS OF YES. A PAUSE. HE LEAVES.

SO THEY QUESTIONED AND REDUCED ME
NEVER LETTING ME GET DRESSED
MAKING SURE I KNEW MY CHEAPNESS
AND THEIR BIG WAYS TO OPPRESS.

DOING MY JOB WITH A CLIENT
IN A ROOM THAT I PAID FOR
CALLED FOR LEGAL INTERFERENCE
ON THE SCALE OF ONE TO FOUR?

WELL THEY CAUGHT ME, BAD GIRL BUSTED
DOING BAD THINGS TO GOOD MEN.
IF IT WASN’T FOR THOSE BADGES,
THEY’D HAVE PAID ME TO DO THEM.

BUT AS MUCH AS I FELT TREATED
LIKE A DUMB GIRL WITHOUT RIGHTS
THERE WAS NO WAY THEY COULD HURT ME
LIKE THE LOOK DID…IN HIS EYES.

BUSTED.

Lights return. Alice puts on her robe.

FABIANA
That’s what you get. You took him too serious. You don’t let them break your spirit, but you let them break your heart? Cabrón. You need a new song. About how you messed a guy up.

ALICE
I know. Like you said. I did it to myself. I hoped too high.

FABIANA
Not too high. Too low. He’s not good enough for you. If he can’t see you’re good like you are, forget him.
ALICE
It’s just, I think I ruined my chances for something. To ever have anyone of my own. You know?

*Fabiana tries playing Alice’s guitar.*

FABIANA
Why be a whore then? If you have the Barbie and Ken dream, why be a whore?

ALICE
Well, my parents are rich. I mean, it was a good home to grow up in.

*Niña de mierda.*

FABIANA
What?

ALICE
Spoiled.

FABIANA
Yeah. I guess. But it wasn’t about the money. Not at first. Now it is. But it was dangerous. Bad. And I liked it. Now…like I said…I don’t know. And sometimes, I don’t make much money at all.

FABIANA
*Loca.* You know. You were just more naive then. Hard to believe. But now, you understand more. It’s an adjustment.

ALICE
I guess. What about that guy today? The one who washed your foot. That was weird. He was Italian I think.

FABIANA
Lollipop?

ALICE
He was cute. And good on his instrument.

FABIANA
Kept watching you. A guy with a foot fetish who knows how to rub his fingers over those strings. He’s kinky güera. You should make yourself some *lira* while you’re here.
ALICE
I’m on a break.

Beat
It’s getting late. Where’s everybody?

FABIANA
Creatures of the night, whores sucked in by *Venezia*. They’ll be here.

*Knock at door. GHITA enters before Alice can get to it. She carries a stack of towels.*

GHITA
*Buona sera.* Welcome to Venice. I have clean towels for you.

*She looks around pensively.*
Breakfast is on the terrace at 8:00. *Zaeti* and coffee. And keep very quiet while you are here. No noise. At all. *Prego.*

ALICE
OK.

GHITA
I’m Ghita. If you need anything. Ask. Quietly. I will be here. Enjoy your evening.

ALICE
Thanks.

*Ghita exits.*

ALICE
She was nice.

FABIANA
She was weird. Next she’ll be bringing in ball gags. (Mocking) Quietly. No loud noise. At all.

ALICE
Who do you think’ll sleep there?

*She points to the open bed.*
I hope its Robyn.

FABIANA
Si. A bullish whore is what we want in here.
*Alice strums her guitar. Robyn enters carrying luggage and a red umbrella.*

**ROBYN**

*Hallo ihr Damen!* Bullish whore? Who’s calling?

**FABIANA**

If it isn’t the hooker manager herself.

**ROBYN**

Watch it.

**ALICE**

Robyn!

*She jumps up to give Robyn a hug.*

**ROBYN**

Easy *Amerikaner* don’t hurt this German or I won’t be coming back to LA, to this year’s sex workers fest. What kind of party is going on here without me? No kind of party I’ll tell you that.

**ALICE**

Are you staying with us? Where were you?

**ROBYN**

Checking out the possibilities.

**FABIANA**

So many tourists. A few looked at me with lust in their eye and intention in their pants.

**ROBYN**

As always. Speaking of pants. Do you remember Sabo?

**FABIANA**

Sabo?

**ROBYN**

The pickpocket.

**FABIANA**

The Romanian?
ROBYN
That’s him. I saw him tonight. (Telling a story.) The wallet slides out easily from the Japanese man’s pants. Japanese man feels it, reaches for it, no sound at all. Such a stash of cash. No scream, not even a note. Not like Italians. Start shouting right at the start. Sabo handed it off to someone in the crowd. Only saw his hand. It was good entertainment. Team work. I liked it.

FABIANA
Japanese men. Quiet when Sabo does them. But not when we do.

ROBYN
You working while you’re here?

FABIANA
Absolutamente.

She opens a zipper on her luggage to reveal a compartment full of red condoms.

ROBYN

FABIANA
English trick last night, didn’t like the Gummi.

ROBYN
He refused?

FABIANA
I protested.

ROBYN
Did he listen to you? I’ve seen too many girls with black eyes because someone wanted the skin to skin.

FABIANA
(With English accent.) Dumpy larker wore the Johnnie Red I’m telling you.

ROBYN
Good. Smart girl.

FABIANA
Por supuesto. Always.
ROBYN
You have a bed for a worn out *fраulein*?

FABIANA
You take that bed.

ROBYN
That the best one? You take the best one.

*She fluffs the bed. Tests it out.*

Get some good sleep. You have to keep up those looks. Get the best price.

FABIANA
I always get the best price. This one’s good enough.

*Robyn sits on the fluffed bed.*

ROBYN
I’m very tired.

*She removes her shoes then heads behind the screen, changing into her red lingerie and black robe.*

ROBYN CONT.
Good idea I think. The red umbrella march. Stirred up some curiosity.

FABIANA
Dumb. People were staring like they’d never seen a whore before. Like we had red umbrellas growing out of our *conchas*.

ALICE
I thought it was fun. I liked the chanting.

*Sophea and Chavy enter. All carry luggage and red umbrellas. Chavy carries a backpack.*

FABIANA
You guys get carried off by canal rats?

ALICE
What? I really don’t like mice. Or rats. Especially rats. They’re just bigger mice.

*Chavy crawls into the empty bed.*
FABIANA
Come up the toilets too, stinking like mierda. The whole city stinks like crap when the wind blows right. No sewage system here.

ALICE
Uhhhhh! I am not using the bathroom while I’m here!

FABIANA
What? Don’t like the feeling of a little rhodent nibble while sitting on the porcelain?

ALICE
Ewwww. *She shivers.*

No!

SOPHEA
Not canal rats. The protest group from Rome.

FABIANA
Bigger rats.

SOPHEA
They are outside. Now. Listen.

*They all stop moving to listen. A faint chant can be heard outside growing louder.*

PROTEST CROWD
(Offstage) Sex workers’ rights are the people’s plight. Sex workers’ rights are the people’s plight.

*They continue chanting to end of scene.*

FABIANA
(To Alice) See? Just waiting to pierce our eggs.

ROBYN
Come on *damen*. Follow me.

*She motions to them to follow. Chavy stays behind coloring. The others follow. Lights crossfade to terrace.*

END OF SCENE 2
Scene 3

Robyn, Sophea, Alice, and Fabiana enter the terrace. Chavy, still coloring, realizes they’ve gone and follows, hiding in the hall just outside the terrace.

FABIANA
Cállate! We’re in here minding our own business. You’re the ones on a whore-hunt.

PROTEST MEMBER #1
Prostitutes go home!

PROTEST MEMBER #2
You’re ruining our city.

PROTEST MEMBER #3
You’re ruining our families.

Fabiana throws her shoe at them.

FABIANA
Hey! I like that shoe. Go get it Robyn.

ROBYN
I’ll get it.

She exits.

ALICE
Look at their faces. They really hate us.

SOPHEA
They do not know us.

FABIANA
But we know them. The same in every town. Our despisers and our clients.

ALICE
And so many times they’re the same person.

SOPHEA
Our executioners.
Robyn appears in the crowd. She blends in and starts to chant with the crowd.

PROTEST CROWD & ROBYN

Sex workers’ rights are the people’s plight.

Fabiana throws her other shoe at Robyn. Robyn laughs. Gets both shoes and leaves the crowd. Barb enters.

FABIANA

(To Barb) Confused? Isn’t that… where you meant to be?

PROTEST MEMBER #1 (MALE)

You make me sick. Go home!

PROTEST MEMBER #2 (FEMALE)

Yes. Go home!

FABIANA

(To Protest Member #1) Can’t I go home with you sweetie? Again.

PROTEST CROWD

Nuisance, go home! You get what you deserve! Nuisance, go home! You get what you deserve! (continues)

ALICE

I’m feeling sick. Maybe those fries. There’s something wrong about mayonnaise on french fries.

Alice moves to the shadows as Ghita enters.

GHITA

No! No! Shhhhhhhhhhhhh. Vuoi prego! Shhhh.

BARB

They’re wrong to malign you like that. To say harmful things.
SOPHEA
(Sarcastic) Thank you for defining it for us. You would rather to do it yourself?

Robyn returns with Fabiana’s shoes.

GHITA
(To crowd.)
Vuoi prego. The neighbors. Shhhhhhhh. Go home. All of you.

BARB
(To crowd.)
You must stop this protest now. There’s a better way than this.

Ghita sits down in despair.

Aren’t you one of them?

PROTEST MEMBER #3

FABIANA
Anda en pedo. (Scoffing) She’s not one of us. Are you kidding?

BARB
No. I’m a researcher and professor who came to the conference to hear what they have to say. You could do that too. It’s a smarter way. Tomorrow. Come to the conference tomorrow.

SOPHEA
(Scoffing) You came to talk, not listen.

ROBYN
Do not invite them.

GHITA
I am ruined.

PROTEST MEMBER #2
We already know what they have to say. We want the doors to the conference closed. Now. And for good.

PROTEST MEMBER #1
And prostitution stopped forever.

PROTEST MEMBER #3
We can’t stand the sight of you.
PROTEST CROWD
Go home! Go home! Go home! (continues)

You go home!

FABIANA

There's a sudden loud burst of noise and sparks like fire in the midst of the crowd.

They’re shooting at us.

PROTEST MEMBER #1

Run. Run.

PROTEST MEMBER #2


Look at them run!

FABIANA

Who’s shooting?

ALICE

Firecrackers.

FABIANA

Alice moves to the terrace railing.

Who…

ALICE

Mandolinist appears from the shadows. He holds a lighter, several strings of firecrackers, and a disarming smile. He bows to the ladies.

Lollipop.

FABIANA AND ROBYN

It’s him.

ALICE
He runs off after the Protest Crowd. Sophea stares at Barb. Alice exits.

SOPHEA
(To Barb) We cannot both stay in this hotel. I want you to leave.

GHITA
I want you out.

FABIANA
What?

SOPHEA
Yes.

GHITA
Out! I want you out! All of you! Tomorrow!

SOPHEA
All of us?

FABIANA
You want me to get that out for you?

ROBYN
What?

FABIANA
The thing stuck so far up her ass that it’s making her crazy.

GHITA
I told you please, prego, prego, please be quiet. And this! This is the other side of quiet. I knew better than to let whores stay in my hotel. Out! In the morning!

FABIANA
Your hotel? You own it?

GHITA
My hotel!!

FABIANA
OK. Tranquilo. I’m just saying I could own a hotel like this. It’s nice. That’s all I’m saying.
BARB

You can’t do that.

GHITA

Ma quando mai. I can. I am.

BARB

It wasn’t their fault. The crowd came of its own volition. They were angry and loud. Not these women. What did you expect them to do? You can’t throw them out.

GHITA

In morning…out!

She exits.

BARB

I’ll see what I can do.

She follows Ghita.

ROBYN

Do you think maybe Mila was right about Barb?

SOPHEA

No one is right about Barb.

Barb returns.

BARB

She disappeared. I’ll talk to her in the morning. Mila and Carlita should probably talk with her too.

SOPHEA

Stop interfering.

Sophea spits near Barb’s feet and starts to exit. Robyn grabs her by the arm.

ROBYN

(To Sophea) What are you doing? She seems to be trying to help. Spitting? That is not…

Sophea wrenches from her grasp.

SOPHEA

(Interrupting)

Mind your own business.
She starts to exit again.

FABIANA
Stay Sophea. (To Robyn) You’re grabbing hookers now? What?

ROBYN
She’s out of line. Spitting?

FABIANA
She doesn’t like Barb. We can relate.

ROBYN
You relate to spitting? Ever been spit on?

FABIANA
There was that Irish guy. Always drooled when he was on top. That count?

ROBYN
Always the jokes with you. If anyone spits on one of my girls, I…

FABIANA
(Interrupting)
I’ve been spit on. So what. Wipe it off. I don’t let things like that get to me.

ROBYN
Right. So we should start spitting too?

FABIANA
Oh. OK.

Fabiana acts like she’s going to release a wad of spit. Robin hits her, lightly but serious.

FABIANA CONT.
Oh but hitting is OK? Madam.

SOPHEA
You are foolish to believe Barb’s intentions are for good. Barb is a snake. Pretending to be a tiger.

BARB
That’s not true.
It is.

*She sees Chavy headed her way and quickly exits.*

ROBYN

She’s too angry.

BARB

She has a right to be.

FABIANA

See. Even she knows it. *Lo sabe.*

BARB

Victims are often filled with rage.

FABIANA

Victim? What victim?

BARB

She’s been a victim most of her life. Probably all of you.

FABIANA

(With sarcasm.) Shhh. Listen. *She cups her hand to ear.*

The sounds of pity. They toll. Like the bells of Venice. Regularly. By the hour. By the half-wit.

(Like the bell sound – ding-dong)

Pi-ty. Pi-ty. Pi-ty.

ROBYN

We’re not victims.

BARB

I have to say it, my research proves otherwise.

FABIANA

Your research? We live the damn lives. I think our research is more than yours.

BARB

Women in prostitution are victims. It’s been proven time and time again. Victims of society, of men, of police, of each other.
Of feminists. Named Barb.

You’re exploited. Your bodies are used, damaged, discarded. Exploitation is patriarchy’s mechanism. Its engine. No woman chooses to become a prostitute.

No verdad. No verdad. I chose it. I chose it. Nothing happens to me I don’t let happen.

It’s disempowering to call any of us victims Barb.

I’m sorry. But it’s true. A victim really can’t recognize her victimization. She’s unable to see clearly past her experiences.

Oh, now I’m an idiota! Where are my shoes?

Your shoes?

Si. I like to throw them. To make new victims.

You know, women in pain often use humor. As a distancing method. To separate themselves from the pain. But exploitation isn’t a joke.

Is this pendeja for real?

She holds her hands like she could choke Barb.

It has power. It’s like a vice. And if I don’t create dialogue about that. Make people listen. Then exploitation wins. There’s no such thing as victimless victims.

Robyn stares at Barb, realizing something.

Mila doesn’t know she’s like that, does she? She can’t.

Like what? You mean…
ROBYN

I mean…

They adjust themselves to look more like Barb.
“Victimless Victims”

FABIANA

She’s never been the pretty girl in men’s gestated visions and she’s always been repulsed by most males’ coddled indecisions. With all their grunts and all their groans and all her self-claimed wisdom she’s come to recognize it there’s no such thing as a victimless victim

BARB

There’s no such thing as victimless victims
There’s no such thing as fortitude
There’s no such thing when you’ve been toyed with
They’ve turned you inside out, it’s true

ROBYN

She’s honed her craft in hallowed halls of higher education and
She’s worked and slaved o’er books and paper to write all indications
With all her work and all her will and all her warranted wisdom
She’s earned the right to tell us there’s no such thing as a victimless victim

BARB

There’s no such thing as victimless victims
There’s no such thing as fortitude
There’s no such thing when you’ve been toyed with
They’ve turned you inside out, it’s true

I’ve learned that men who pay for sex are pure power abusers
I’ve made it my life’s work to show their patriarchal furor with every bone and every breath and every bantam dictum
I’ve tried my best to show them there’s no such thing as a victimless victim

BARB, ROBYN, FABIANA

There’s no such thing as victimless victims
THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS FORTITUDE
THERE’S NO SUCH THING WHEN YOU’VE BEEN TOYED WITH
THEY’VE TURNED YOU/US INSIDE OUT, IT’S TRUE

BARB
And I’m right. There’s not. Even though you may not be able to see it, I am trying to help.

FABIANA
(Mocking) Of course.

*Barb exits frustrated.*

FABIANA CONT.
Well that’s one pain we’re separated from.

ROBYN
For now. Let’s get out of here. I need some sleep.

*She starts to exit.*

Why did you do that?

FABIANA
Do what?

ROBYN
With Sophea. Before. Why did you defend her actions? She’s too angry.

FABIANA
(Sarcastic) Oh, and aren’t we all? And Sophea’s a sister.

ROBYN
Oh, and I am?

FABIANA
A nazi crone?

ROBYN
But you really know I’m just a whore who considered new options.

FABIANA
I know.

*Robyn removes her robe and adopts her pimp persona as the chorus enters. “P.I.M.P.”*
ROBYN CONT.

What do you think of this one boys?
She bites. (Points to Fabiana)
Or this one?
She’s light-skinned. (Points to chorus member #1)
Or this one? (Points to chorus member #2)

CHORUS MEMBER #3
She’s alright.

CHORUS MEMBER #2
I’m perfect.
(Growls) Come and get it.

ROBYN
For the right price.

ROBYN
P. I. M. P.
P. I. snap, snap M.P.

CHORUS MEMBER (MALE)
YAOW!

CHORUS MEMBER (FEMALE)
(Sweet female voice sings this line repeated as an underscore for all the verses.)
ICH BIN IHR ZÜHALTER GÜLTIG HEUTE ABEND

ROBYN
PROCURER OF ALL PAID SEX TONIGHT
MANAGER AND PONCE OF ALL DELIGHTS
MINING IN THE DARK FOR FRIENDS AND WHORES
ICH BIN IHR ZÜHALTER GÜLTIG HEUTE ABEND

DOCTOR OF AILMENTS PROTECTOR OF LIES
PROCURER OF BULLS READY FOR THE RIDE
SUBVERSIVE SLUICE-JUICE RODEO CLOWN
DISTRACTIBLE STIERS WITH A CASH FLOW AND A QUARTER

LOCKJAW VIBRATIONS ON QUARTER-FED BEDS
WHITE-LINED LADY-CAINE THAT SCREWS IN THEIR HEADS
MINED FIELDS OF LOVE AND HATE AND IN-AND-OUT
ICH BIN IHR ZÜHALTER GÜLTIG HEUTE ABEND
IN DARK ROOMS I GET WITH A WIT FOR PROFIT
I AM NO DUMB EUROPEAN HALF-WIT TWIT
MASCULINATED FRAULEIN STANDING SQUARE
IN THE FACE OF MASCULINATED MALES NO MADAM TO YOUR PIMP

IMPLIED REASON LACK OF SUBMISSION DOMINATRIX
STAND TALL AND LOOK AT ME WHEN I TALK TO YOU!

I’M THE NEW ONE HERE TO INFORM
EVERY OLD ONE THAT CHANGE HAS COME
THIS NEW PIMP HAS WAYS ALL HER OWN
I WON’T BACK DOWN JUST BECAUSE YOU WANT IT

PROCURER OF ALL PAID SEX TONIGHT
MANAGER AND PONCE OF ALL DELIGHTS
MINING IN THE DARK FOR FRIENDS AND WHORES
ICH BIN IHR ZÜHALTER GÜLTIG HEUTE ABEND

P.I.M.P.
IHR ZÜHALTERIN
(poke at chest a couple of times, pause, then…)
ME

Lights fade on Robyn.

END OF SCENE 3
Scene 4

Lights up on hotel room. Sophea and Chavy are already dressed in robe over red lingerie. Sophea is looking through her suitcase. Chavy lays beside her coloring with crayons and markers. Robyn and Fabiana enter, laughing.

ROBYN
Where’s Alice?

FABIANA
She’ll be all right. She’s blonde. And American. They can do whatever they want.

SOPHEA
I have heard this before, that blonde can do anything because it is better. More fun. That men want them more and pay more for them. But the men, so many, who travel to my country are not looking for blonde.

FABIANA
There’s a lot of lonelies with money who’ll travel anywhere for some. And that’s what we take them by. Their horny jugular…

She grabs Robyn by the throat.

and their padded wallets.

She swats Robyn’s butt.

ROBYN
A taste of the exotic, something new. And a long plane ride to think about it.

Beat. Robyn looks at Chavy.

ROBYN CONT.
We didn’t get the chance to meet her this morning.

She points to Chavy.

(To Chavy) Hello.

SOPHEA
She does not understand. She speaks Khmer only. She is Chavy.

She’s yours?

ROBYN
Yes.

SOPHEA
FABIANA

Your daughter?

SOPHEA

(Curt) Yes.

She turns away when she says it. Alice enters. She’s happy. Excited when she sees all the others.

ALICE

Oh, everyone’s in here. It’s like a slumber party.

She rummages around the room.

FABIANA

Where were you?

ALICE

Just looking around. I found this red lipstick in an empty room. It’s a pretty color. Called Rosso. Italian.

She holds up a tube of lipstick.

Someone must have left it.

She goes to the mirror and applies it.

Pretty.

FABIANA

(To Robyn) See? Fine.

ALICE

Sometimes, when I look in the mirror, I can’t see my own reflection. Like I’m not there. You know?

ROBYN

Maybe you’re just seeing beyond. To something else.

ALICE

Maybe.

Alice puts the lipstick in her pocket. She takes the quilt off the top of the red bathtub and lets out a tiny yelp.

ALICE CONT.

What are these?
She holds up a mask. Fabiana leaps over to the trunk, looking through the tub full of masks.

**FABIANA**

*Carnevale* masks.

*Fabiana holds up a Mezza neutra mask (mask with long nose).*

Looks like a guy I know.

**ALICE**

Traditional Venetian mask.

*Fabiana puts on the Mezza neutra mask. She lunges at Chavy playfully who runs to hide behind Sophea. Sophea takes a different mask from the chest, less scary.*

It is OK. *Law-aw. Try it.*

**SOPHEA**

She attempts to place the mask on Chavy who shakes her head “no” and returns to the bed. Alice continues looking for pillows and making everyone comfortable. Sophea returns to looking through her suitcase. Fabiana notices bruises on Sophea’s arm. She points to the bruises.

**FABIANA**

(To Robyn) Look what you did to her arm. Bruises. She should spit on you.

*Sophea covers the bruises with her robe. Alice sits and listens intently.*

**SOPHEA**

Not Robyn. The guard. No trouble for anyone at border? Italian guard. He wanted me. I said “no.” He has other ideas. He knows why I am here because I tell him.

**FABIANA**

Never tell them at the border.
SOPHEA
But…this is Venice. The city for courtesans through history.

ROBYN
Venice is not what she seems.

FABIANA
Yeah she’s more like an old woman pulling down her underwear. Sorpresa!

ALICE
You can be really gross.

FABIANA
And you really like it.

ROBYN
The pay-for-play market in Venice dried up long ago. Prostitutes, lucciole, get arrested in Venice like anywhere.

Chavy, coloring, keeps a close eye on the others though.

SOPHEA
I tell him. So he thinks I have no rights.

ROBYN
We have rights. Invisible, unrecognized. But we have them. He needs to learn that.

FABIANA

SOPHEA
I did not let him get away with it. I told him if he wants, he would have to pay. He wants. He pays. This is when he grabbed my arm. Then other guard came. He said to leave me alone. And then we crossed.

FABIANA
What about Chavy? He didn’t try to…

ALICE
No. He wouldn’t.

Alice moves to Chavy to try and hug her. Chavy pushes her away.
SOPHEA

No. No.

She looks away again.

What happened at border for you? No trouble for you?

ALICE

No trouble for me.

ROBYN

It was fine this time.

FABIANA


She puts on a fierce carnevale mask from the tub, and drops her robe taking on her prostitute persona. “Migration, Immigration, Exploitation, Globalization”

FABIANA CONT.

I SHUN THE “TIONS”
MIGRATION, IMMIGRATION, GLOBALIZATION, EXPLOITATION
THE TIONS SLIDE OVER ME LIKE THE MOLE ON MAMI’S HOT TORTILLAS
DRIPPING DOWN BETWEEN FULL BREASTS
DOIN ITS OWN MIGRATION

I SHUN THE TIONS
IMMIGRATION DOESN’T DICTATE MY LIFE TO ME
I AM THE DICTATOR OF MY OWN NATION-STATE
ROUND WITH BROWN BORDERS
AND CURVES THAT LEAD SOUTH
TO LATINA ROOTS SPICED WITH THE SCORCH OF MY LIFE
THIS BODY
MY NATION-STATE
I DICTATE

I SHUN THE TIONS
EXPLOITATION IS NOT MY GAME
I AM NOT A GOOD GIRL
WHO LOST HER WAY
WHEN SOMEONE WASN’T LOOKING
DROWNED BY THE VULGARITY OF SEXING
I LIKE IT
AND DO IT
DEARLY
AND WELL

I SHUN THE TIONS
BECAUSE THAT LEADS ME TO WHERE I NEED TO GO
MY MAMÍ’S HOUSE, BLUE, WITH A BRIDGE LIKE DIEGO’S
ONLY THERE ARE NO DIEGOS THERE
MAMÍ, MY SISTER, AND ME
STRONG WOMEN IN A COUNTRY OF FRAIL MEN
I BOUGHT THAT HOUSE

I SHUN THE TIONS
AN INDEPENDENT WOMAN’S REPUTATION IS THE ONLY TION I EMBRACE
I FULFILL MY OWN REQUIREMENTS
WITH A WORLDWIDE JUT OF THIS MOUND
AND EASE ACROSS OPENINGS
INTO LANDS AND INTO THE ARMS OF MEN
WHO PAY
DEARLY
AND WELL

MIGRATION, IMMIGRATION, GLOBALIZATION, EXPLOITATION
PFFT. YO DIGO NO A “TIONS”

Fabiana puts on her robe. Alice picks up her guitar
and begins strumming some chords to “You I Adore.”

FABIANA
No troubles huh? That’s a sad song.

ALICE
No border troubles.

FABIANA
Right. With you, it’s only man troubles.

ROBYN
Speaking of borders. Let’s cross into Barb land. Stir up some trouble there. Where do you think she went?

FABIANA
Sounds like a bad idea. I’m coming.
SOPHEA
I, we, will stay here.

ALICE
I’m not going. I don’t think that Ghita likes having whores in her hotel.

FABIANA
Probably why she threw us out.

ALICE
She did? When?

ROBYN
Tomorrow.

ALICE
Where will we stay?

FABIANA
Easy güera. Lots of hotels in Venice. We’ll be alright.

ALICE
I hope you’re right. There’s a lot of people in Venice right now.

ROBYN
Let’s go.

FABIANA
I knew you couldn’t have turned so quick. I know you. (Mocking) No spitting.

ROBYN
No. I do hate the spitting. (Mischievously) But just a little trouble. Where do you think she went?

Robyn and Fabiana exit. As they do, Fabiana grabs two mezza neutra masks. Alice rolls the lipstick along the floor to Chavy who hesitates, then picks it up. Chavy hums “âwkrawk” under her breath while she plays with the lipstick. She goes to the mirror and applies it perfectly. Alice moves next to her. She applies the lipstick too. Chavy smiles, points to a place where Alice needs to wipe off extra.
ALICE

What? Did I put too much?

Oh. I went out of the lines.

She looks in the mirror.

Alice wipes off the extra. Chavy nods her head in approval then she flees to the loft with Alika.

SOPHEA

(Making conversation.)
We have many organizations for prostitutes in Asia. Ours in Thailand is the largest. Many meetings. Many women.

But…you’re Cambodian.

ALICE

SOPHEA

Am I?

She laughs a little at her own joke.

We moved.

Alice tries to play on her guitar and hum the melody that Chavy is humming. Chavy notices and climbs down, sitting next to Alice, listening and watching intently.

ALICE

You didn’t like Cambodia?

ALICE CONT.

(Whispering) She’s coming by me.

SOPHEA

She hums that song always. Like memories and words that follow her. Sometimes she sings them. Sometimes not.

Alice is still trying to play Chavy’s song.

You didn’t like Cambodia?

ALICE

SOPHEA

Why do you say this?
ALICE
I’m asking. I mean, you left. Is it pretty there?

SOPHEA
It is very pretty. Its people. I love my country. (Pause) And I hate my country. I think more that Cambodia, it did not like me. It. Left me.

*The Prostitution Chorus enters. She drops her robe adopting her prostitute persona. “Srei Koit” Militant.*

SOPHEA
I AM SREI KOIT
POST KHMER ROUGE
PHNOM PENH TOUL KORK DISTRICT
SRE KOIT.

KHMER ROUGE
DEADLY RULE LASTING OVER FOUR YEARS
SLAVED
STARVED
TORTURED
KILLED
MY PEOPLE ENDURED.
AUTHORITY DEMANDED IT.
NAMES…POL POT, NUON CHEA, IENG SARY, TA MOK, KHIEU SAMPHAN,
MORE
LEADERS WHO CHOSE THE GOVERNMENT FOR MY PEOPLE.
ARRESTED, DEAD OR TRIED.

SREI KOIT, PROSTITUTE
MY JOB NOW LASTING OVER EIGHT YEARS
RAPED
TRAFFICKED
BEATEN
FORCED
I ENDURED,
AUTHORITY DEMANDED IT.
NAMES…UNspoken, hidden behind hugs of small children and admiration of darling wives
MEN WHO CHOSE MY LINE OF WORK FOR ME,
UNARRESTED AND UNTRIED.

TOUL KORK DISTRICT
PLACE OF LONG LASTING PHNOM PENH PROSTITUTION
ROBBED
JAILED
TORMENTED
SOLD, AGAIN
MY SISTERS AND I ENDURE
AUTHORITY DEMANDS IT.
NAMES...UNSPOKEN, HIDDEN BEHIND LIES OF PROTECTION.
POLICE AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES WHO CHOOSE MY PUNISHMENT FOR BEING ME.
UNARRESTED AND UNTRIED.

EASY SOLUTIONS
ANSWERS TO LASTING PROBLEMS STILL NOT UNDERSTOOD
EVALUATED
JUDGED
REDUCED
IGNORED
MY SISTERS AND I ENDURE.
AUTHORITY DEMANDS IT.
NAMES...UNSPOKEN, HIDDEN BEHIND CONDESCENDING SMARTS AND FALSE HELPS.
GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT SPECIALISTS WHO CHOOSE MY ANSWERS FOR ME
UNARRESTED AND UNTRIED.

POST KHMER ROUGE PHNOM PENH TOUL KORK DISTRICT SRE COIT.
CAMBODIAN PROSTITUTE
SMALL
PRETTY
POISED
TIGHT
I ENDURE.
I DEMAND IT.
NAME...SOPHEA.
ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE WHO SLEEPS WITH YOUR BROTHERS, FATHERS, HUSBANDS, AND SONS.
ARRESTED AND...TRIED, AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN.

*Sophea puts on her robe as chorus exits.*

ALICE

Does Chavy know what you do?
Yes.

ALICE

You don’t care that she knows?

SOPHEA

I care. Of course I care.

*Sophea looks away. Barb enters.*

SOPHEA CONT.

What do you want?

BARB

I’m looking for Ghita. Some boys wearing masks are outside tossing those tourist pigeon corn pellets against my window.

*Alice nonchalantly recovers the tub of masks with the quilt.*

BARB CONT.

I want her to make them stop or call the police. But I can’t find her.

SOPHEA

Always your job to get people in trouble.

BARB

Sophea, you know that’s not true.

ALICE

You can stay here if you want.

SOPHEA

She cannot.

*Alika comes down from the loft forcing Chavy to stay in it. Alika glares at Barb, threatening.*

ALICE

What’s wrong?
BARB
Sophea is angry about an article I wrote that she believes a lot of people read.

SOPHEA
Journalistic bloodletting netted with lies. This is what someone said about your article. And I agree.

ALICE
I’m going to find the others.

She exits.

BARB
I researched it thoroughly. Some of my brightest students helped.

SOPHEA
Did any of them come to me? Did you come to me? To ask me?

BARB
You’re worried about what people think of you now but conditions are bigger than you. Sometimes people get hurt in an effort to help a larger number. It’s what happens. I try to avoid it, but it happens.

SOPHEA
This is what you think. This is what your research tells you? You say it in every article you write, we are stigmatized. You fear the corn pellets at your window? Corn pellets? Protestors march around me, windows or not, wherever I go. They call me horrible things. Corn pellets? Try rocks and bricks. And this is your thought? That I am worried about what people think of me?

Robyn and Fabiana enter. They wear mezza neutra masks, backwards, on their heads. They feel the tension in the room.

ROBYN
What’s going on in here?

SOPHEA
Barb wrote her article about my organization in Thailand. She complains about the way I do not try to stop women from working prostitution but only provide to them the care to stop disease. She told how I was stolen from my home as a child and taken to a pig farm by many men. Raped over and over again in a pig stall. She told how this made me choose prostitution and that I am unable to make clear decisions because of my past. Someone in Thailand read this American article and published in Thai newspaper. When I was away to make a speech, local government closed my organization because they say
I make Thailand look bad. For six months I could not open. The women who needed help could not get it. One died. Chavy’s maebon pimp found her waiting for me on the street, stole her back to make her work again for him. I begged him to give her to me. Police only laughed because Maebon pays them to keep quiet. Three months more and much money to get her back. Barb and her article took Chavy from me and gave her to the devil. And now, I bring her here with me because I can never know what will happen. If government gets mad again, she could be lost forever.

FABIANA

Ah, the spitting.

BARB

I didn’t know Sophea. I didn’t.

SOPHEA

Because you did not want to.

Beat

Men travel to Thailand for the children. Because it is easier. And Thailand, they let them.

ROBYN

Profitable.

SOPHEA

Yes. The small ones, those without a voice, the ones who do not want it, are taken freely, but those of us who are in the business to stay, they, the people with power, the people Barb and her education and big words influence, make us illegal and create new reasons to hit us while all faces turn away. New laws to stop the traffickers who only find new ways to break them. These laws are made for the convenience of men and changed at their whim. They do not consider our needs.

BARB

And this is why Sophea, I can’t stop fighting. I can’t stop hoping you’ll leave the business. Because…you’ll never win. At the airport, I read a story in the paper about (Here include a local story. See Appendix/Sample Story/Albuquerque for guidance.) (Albuquerque story included here for out production.)

Albuquerque, New Mexico. Twelve women in their twenties with a history of prostitution, murdered, dumped and buried in an eighteen-foot-deep pit in the desert. Only discovered because a woman walking her dog stumbled on a leg bone. A leg bone, a polished nail, a pregnant one. No one knows who did it. And, like most stories, they probably never will.

ROBYN

Just dead prostitutes. Too much trouble.
ALICE
I don’t know, we keep talking about our rights. I mean, maybe we should be talking about something else.

FABIANA
Like what?

ALICE
I don’t know. But we’re just doing our jobs. And we’re nice. You. Your daughter. All of us. People are just mean.

BARB
Your daughter?

SOPHEA
Do not dare to say it.

Mila bursts suddenly into the room. She wears a simple black robe over red lingerie.

SOPHEA
Barb is leaving now.

MILA
Stay Barb. I’ll behave.

FABIANA
Says the drunk Italian whore.

MILA
I am not drunk. Just full of raucous fun. They have the best raucousing there. Palazzo Vendramin Clergi. But then, I wanted to have fun in here, with you. I wanted to be invited, so I invited myself.

Chavy sees one of the masks peeking out from under the quilt that catches her eye. She climbs down from the loft, grabs at it, a little reluctant, then pulls it out and takes it and her art supplies to Alice’s side. She decorates the mask with a “pretty girl” face.

MILA CONT.
Persone. It’s me. The Italian sexnaut globalization whore.
Mila puts on a carnevale mask and adopts her prostitute persona. Robe can stay on. “The Italian Sexnaut of Globalization” It’s a party!

MILA

PIONEERING NEW HORIZONS
ADVENTURESS OF SEX
GIVEN TO OUTSPOKENNESS
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

GARTER-WEARING
CHAIN-SMOKING
SMUT-TELLING
HARLOT

SOPHISTICATED LADY
ITALIAN SEXNAUT WHORE

COMMANDEERING OLD REPRESSIONS
VOYAGERESS OF SEX
GIVEN TO POLITICALNESS
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

MONEY-MAKING
CHAIN-SWARING
JOHN-HUMPING
STRUMPET

ORGANIZED REFORMER
ITALIAN SEXNAUT WHORE

VOLUNTEERING EXPERT WISDOM
AMBASSADORESS OF SEX
GIVEN TO HIGH-BROW INTERVIEWS
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

STRADA-WALKING
CHAIN-BINDING
TRICK-TICKLING
TROLLOP

HIGH-DOLLAR SEX WORKER
ITALIAN SEXNAUT WHORE
CONGREGATING ALL SEX WORKERS  
PROTECTORESS OF SEX  
GIVEN TO RIGHTS AND DIGNITY  
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

STILETTO-STABBING  
CHAIN-BEATING  
BUTT-SpanKING  
WHORE

MILA. YES MILA.

SKILLED INTERLOCUTOR  
ITALIAN SEXNAUT WHORE

Lights return.

FABIANA  
Nice. Where were you, sexnaut, when the protestors were trying to carve us up for kitchen tile?

MILA  
What happened? When?

ALICE  
And when Ghita threw us out of the hotel.

FABIANA  
Tonight. All of Italy’s whore haters protested outside Ghita’s terrace. She owns this hotel.

ROBYN  
Said they won’t leave us alone until we get out of Italy and close down the conference.

MILA  
We won’t.

FABIANA  
Then Ghita threw us out for being too loud.

ROBYN  
Told us to leave in the morning.
ALICE
She said she’s ruined.

BARB
Mila. I think if we talk to her together, in the morning, when she’s rested, we can get her to change her mind.

MILA
Yes. The hotels, they are all filled. The tourists. The Art Biennale. To find any other rooms, it will be impossible. Barb, you would do this?

BARB
Of course.

SOPHEA
You could do that alone.

MILA
We asked Barb here. For her help. And help is what she is offering.

FABIANA
I can help.

ALICE
No. You’re the one that told me Venice is full of hotels. With rooms.

BARB
If we talk to her, we can change her mind. I know women like Ghita. She won’t throw us out.

Ghita bursts into the room, furious.

GHITA
Out! Out! Now!

MILA
What?

Ghita points.
GHITA
I talk to myself and tell to myself, Ghita you must be patient with these women. Their lives are hard. But you do not listen! I say to you, no noise! People, so many people, all yelling at my hotel. All of Venice can hear. I say you can stay until tomorrow. Now? Louder. Singing. Dancing. Yelling! No more I say to myself. I am so angry. No more! You must leave. Now.

SOPHEA
No. Chavy must sleep inside.

BARB
Think Ghita. There’s a child involved.

GHITA
These are the things you think before you make so much noise in Ghita’s hotel. Out. Now!

MILA
Outside, we will meet. A new place. We will find one.

FABIANA
(To Mila) What about you? Can’t a few whores stay at your house?

MILA
I live in Rome. And Rome, it is too far.

Mila and Barb exit to get their belongings. The rest begin to pack up.

FABIANA
(To Ghita.) Maldita! Woman. You are mean. Someday I will buy this hotel right under your feet and put you in the street.

Ghita just watches, like a guard.

ALICE
What about the conference place? City Hall? It’s empty. We could stay there.

ROBYN
How do we get in?

ALICE
Mila opened it with a key this morning. I was early.
FABIANA
And I thought you were a dumb white girl.

ALICE
You did not.

FABIANA
A little.

She holds up her thumb and index finger to indicate - a little.

ROBYN
To city hall.

They continue packing as lights fade.

END OF SCENE 4
Scene 5

Lights up, moonlight, on all the women who sleep outside in various places and in varying degrees of comfort around city hall. There is a huge lock on the door and a sign that says “Tenga fuori!” Chavy sleeps next to Sophea under a pile of clothes and a blanket. Lights up on Alice and Mandolinist who sit under a street light on a side of the building, out of range of hearing of the sleeping women. Alice’s guitar is beside her.

MANDOLINIST

First you play. Then I play. Promise.

ALICE

Play what?

MANDOLINIST

Beautiful song. From that day. In mayor’s hall.

ALICE

Oh, I’m not very good really. But I want to be. I’d rather hear your mandolin. Italians amaze me with their mandolin playing. It’s so pretty.

MANDOLINIST

But I. No not Italian.

ALICE

Well, you play the mandolin like one.

MANDOLINIST

Uncle makes them in Romania. I learn to play and sell them here. I Romanian. Father is Sabo. He owns whole city.

ALICE

Your father does not own Venice.

MANDOLINIST

Yes.

ALICE

Sabo? I’ve heard that name…. Sabo, the pickpocket?
MANDOLINIST
Yes. You know him. Wait, he not take wallet from your pocket? If did, I get back for you.

ALICE
No.

MANDOLINIST

ALICE
It’s a love song.

MANDOLINIST
Now. This Romanian love love.

Alice plays. “You I Adore”

ALICE
IN THE LATE HOUR I HEAR LAUGHTER
IT’S NOT COMING FROM THE STREETS
IT’S THE MUSIC OF MY LONGING
IT’S JUST WHAT YOU DO TO ME

AND IF ONLY I COULD TOUCH YOU
MORE THAN BRUSH AGAINST YOUR SLEEVE
RAKE MY LIPS AGAINST YOUR SKIN
SMELL THAT SCENT OF YOU AGAIN…AND AGAIN…AND AGAIN

CHORUS
CAUSE IT’S
YOU THAT I WANT MORE OF
CAUSE IT’S
YOU THAT I ADORE
STOP THE WHISPERS OF DENIAL
CAUSE IT’S TRUE
YOU I ADORE
YOU I ADORE

I’VE BEEN PIERCED IN THE DARK ALLEYS
OF MY LIFE WITH INTENSE NEED
STRANDS OF YOU HOLD ME AS CAPTIVE
IT’S JUST WHAT YOU DO TO ME
LIKE A BOLT OF WHITE IN DARKNESS
MORE ELECTRIC VOLTS IT SEEMS
HOLD YOUR BODY TO ME CLOSELY
FEEL THAT POWER SHOOT THROUGH ME…SHOOT THROUGH ME…SHOOT THROUGH ME

*CHORUS*

*BRIDGE*
LOOK AT YOU THERE WITH THOSE EYES AND THAT STARE
HOW YOU SAY WHAT YOU SAY WHEN YOU SAY IT
LIPS FULL OF RED AND A SMILE THAT DESTROYS ME
YOU’RE LAYERS OF ALL A LOVE CAN BE

IF THE YEARS WOULD JUST RELEASE US
FROM THEIR RAGING JUDGMENT SCREAM
IT’S THE ONLY THING THAT STOPS US
IT’S JUST WHAT YOU DO TO ME

SO IT ENDS JUST AS IT STARTED
WITH A LONGING AND A STARE
PLEAD FOR HOLY FOUND PERSUASION
SHOUT RELEASE FROM WHAT’S UNDONE…WHAT’S UNFAIR…WHAT’S UNFAIR

*CHORUS*

MANDOLINIST
This is about me?

ALICE
What?

MANDOLINIST
This guy you have adore for, he is me?

ALICE
No. This guy broke my heart. I just met you.

MANDOLINIST
Then you make to him me. I one you adore. You have want of more of me.
ALICE
You know I’m a hooker right? A courtesan. A whore. I let men pay me to have sex with them.

MANDOLNIST
Yes. I know. But once you with me. You will give up. You will have no need. I make good to fix all you need.

ALICE
Oh yeah?

MANDOLNIST
Of course.

She smiles admiringly.

MANDOLNIST CONT.
See. Already. You like me. But not perfect. I not. You not perfect. I not perfect. See. We perfect to each other.

ALICE
Now you have to play for me. You promised.

MANDOLNIST

He picks up his mandolin and plays a foreboding song that fills the night with the sense of something dark.

ALICE
Beautiful.

She swoons. Chavy sneaks a peek around the corner. The Mandolinist sees her. He plays sweeter and moves stealthily near her. Alice realizes and calls her.

ALICE
Chavy.

She turns away. The Mandolinist stops playing suddenly and tries to grab her. She’s gone.
ALICE CONT.

Watch this.

_Alice picks up her guitar and begins strumming some chords and humming “awkrawk.” Chavy peeks again. Alice motions with her head for the Mandolinist not to look. Chavy comes closer. And closer. And sits by Alice._

ALICE CONT.

(Whispering) She loves this. It’s her song. She hums it all the time.

_What it is about?_  

MANDOLINIST

_I don’t know. She only hums it._  

ALICE

_She is like you?_  

MANDOLINIST

_Yes. She likes music too._  

ALICE

_No. No. Listen. She is like you?_  

MANDOLINIST

_At first, not comprehending, then she does._  

ALICE

_What? A prostitute? No. She’s just a little girl. She’s not a prostitute._  

MANDOLINIST

_OK. Just thought… There are…. Men like them too. Little girls._  

ALICE

_Yeah, the sick ones. That’s sick. And gross. And I know. But not Chavy. She’s somebody’s daughter. Sophea’s. She’s Sophea’s daughter._  

MANDOLINIST

_I just ask. Why then she has this lipstick?_  

_Alice looks at Chavy’s mouth where some stain of the lipstick remains._
ALICE
I found it. Earlier. She was just playing with it in the mirror. That’s all.

MANDOLINIST
I just ask.

He takes money from his pocket and places it on his leg. Chavy eyes it. He offers it to Chavy. She pushes it away and shakes her head “no.” He pushes it to her again. She looks at Alice, then him, embarrassed, she takes it. She moves to sit by Mandolinist. Chavy places her hand on his leg and rubs it. She hands the money to Alice who takes it, but looks unsure of why.

I think so.

MANDOLINIST CONT.

ALICE
What? No. NO.

Mandolinist’s demeanor changes to happy-go-lucky.

MANDOLINIST

He rubs Chavy’s tummy.

Mmmmm.

He mimics licking an ice cream cone to Chavy. Chavy shakes her head “yes.” He jumps up.

ALICE
But it’s like one o’clock in the morning.

He holds his hand out to Chavy. She takes it.

MANDOLINIST
Venice not sleep. I know place.

Alice is reluctant.

MANDOLINIST CONT.

Just there.
He points off in distance and pulls Chavy along. Alice follows. She looks back towards where the others are sleeping. Unsure and still holding the money, she grabs Chavy’s other hand. They exit.

END OF SCENE 5
End of Act I
ACT II

Scene 1

The women sleep. The mound of clothes and blankets beside Sophea appear to be Chavy. Fabiana stirs.

FABIANA

Hey. Robyn. Hey.

Hey. Wake up.

ROBYN

(Half asleep and angry.)

What?

FABIANA

Smell that. It’s like a big turd rose out of the water to sleep next to us. Why does anyone keep coming here? Most of all, me? This sewer hole stinks.

ROBYN

And it’s wet.

FABIANA

What?

She looks down to see sewage seeping under her.

She jumps up quickly.

What the hell?

GHITA

Acqua alta.

FABIANA

No joke.

She shakes out some of the things she was sleeping on and water pours off. She grimaces from the stench.

I think I figured out it was high tide on my own. So you can go now. Back to your warm, dry hotel.
ROBYN

Good. The water’s not over there yet.

*She points to where the other women are sleeping.*

GHITA

It will only rise higher.

FABIANA

Thanks for the news flash. *Buenas noches puta.*

*She knocks into Ghita as she takes her wet things and tosses them into a trash can.*

ROBYN

We should get them up.

*Fabiana and Robyn wake Mila. Sophea hears them and wakes on her own.*

MILA

What is it?

ROBYN

Tides rising. It’s getting wet here.

FABIANA

You got corks in your nose? Smell that.

*Mila breathes in and cringes.*

MILA

Oh, the smells of Venice. In one night, so many disasters. Next, what?

FABIANA

Ghita could show up.

*Sophea is trying to awaken Chavy and realizes she’s gone. Quietly panicked, she slips away looking for her.*

MILA

Oh Fabiana. Ghita is in her nice hotel. Not now.

FABIANA

No, that disaster is here too.
Mila looks to see Ghita standing in the middle of the women's makeshift hotel room.

GHITA
I am sorry. Sorry more than I can say.

FABIANA
Too late for that. What you are lady is mean. Meaner than any john I ever met.

GHITA
I am not mean.

FABIANA
O.K. And I'm not a whore.

GHITA
Yes. Well. I am. I was.

FABIANA
What?

GHITA
I was not always a hotel owner. I had a different kind of work.

FABIANA
Assassin?

GHITA
Prostitute.

FABIANA
Right. Lady Assassin, we’re sleeping outside in a river of stinking human shit and now you want to mock us? Look at you. No man would pay you to stand within ten feet of him.

Barb enters quietly, unnoticed.

GHITA
You are right. And I am mean. But I am not a liar.

ROBYN
You were a whore Ghita?
GHITA
Yes. I was. And now. I am afraid. Afraid that people will find out. My neighbors. My friends. Especially if they learn that I let so many prostitutes stay in my hotel. They will ask me, why Ghita? And I will say nothing. Because I will have no answer. I do not have the courage like you to have answers to the hard questions. And if I did, why would they listen? You could be quiet and stay in your rooms. But no. And now. My neighbors will ask me and they will soon see that I was a prostitute too, that an old client died and left me his money to buy this hotel. And they will not like this. I am not brave like you. Most of us are not. They will look at me with hate. Disgusting Ghita. And this. I cannot take.

FABIANA
So Ghita thinks like Fabiana. Sell the goods. Make some money, however you can. Invest wisely. Buy some property. Use the concha for some capital gain. I’m gonna own a hotel too.

GHITA
No. No. I quit. I had no money. I worked at the PIC.

FABIANA
I know the PIC. In Amsterdam.

MILA
You were a Red-Light District hooker Ghita?

GHITA
Yes. I was a Red-Light District hooker.

FABIANA
Big huevotes.

GHITA
She grabs her crotch.

FABIANA
What I had to do I did.

ROBYN
I’ve been to the PIC. We need a PIC in Berlin. I should open one.

GHITA
Ghita drops the sweater she wears over her robe and adopts a persona of memories and truth.

(Spoken over “Red Umbrellas, the Music.”)

Look at me. At this face.

Pick me.
I used to be every man’s first choice.
Supple, firm, bursting.
Pick me.
I was desired.
Men left their wives at home slouching over dinner tables with empty yellow chairs and cold asparagus,
Left Morocco and Spain and Luxembourg
To be with me.
Pick me.
They paid me well for the oral sex too beneath their proper wives
And the anal tricks too dark for regular nights.
I fulfilled fantasies and fed my own children well.
Pick me.
My husband left me and I made a well-considered choice.
Two small people depended on me
And I found the way.
Pick me.
Amsterdam’s red-light district became my home.
It’s where my memories roam
Trapped between canals and red glow reflections.
Nights in the window.
Always a new john and many repeats.
Pick me.
And they did.
Until things started to change.

*She drops her robe to reveal red lingerie.*

Gravity and reality had their way with me and didn’t pay.
Invisible scoundrels immune to a good beating or promise of one.
Desire waned.
And I wanted.
And “pick me” became my pretty song.
The only thing pretty.
My song and my red-laced thong.
Pick me
Became the loud rhythm of the polished nail drumming
When the johns of before
Looked and passed me by.
It lodged in my throat.
And stuck where many things had lodged before.
And I wanted to shout
Pick me!
But only gagged on the truth.
The money, like the father of my children, disappeared and the fears rose and
Pick me
Became the sharper nails sealing me shut,
Each driving into me through unopened places and withered skin
Pick me
Barely perceptible then.
And my red light flickered to dim, then black.
But I knew things.
Things other prostitutes, new whores, needed to know.
Pick me.
And The Prostitute Information Center hired me. The PIC.
My experience and knowledge became worthwhile.
And I was saved.
Even though the money they paid barely weighted my hand.
And although others, even like the documentary filmmaker doing his film on sex, picked me
To interview.
My worth had waned.
And no high-heeled shoe, or red-rimmed condom, or crotchless panty ever again
Made me even whisper
Pick me.
And no one did.

Lights return. She puts on her robe. Mila helps her with her sweater.

FABIANA

Getting old is hell.

ROBYN

Still a beautiful woman. Look at her.

FABIANA

Ehhh.

ROBYN

She has just lost that sense of herself.

MILA

I’m still in the business. Some clients, I have had for years.

FABIANA

(Interrupting)
All women expire. Women in the windows just expire sooner.
ROBYN
If you believe that, then you can trade up.

FABIANA
No. The pimping business is not for me. And who wants an old whore? No offense. No. I’m gonna buy me a hotel. Let my ass get dimpled and wide. And knit.

ROBYN
Knit?

FABIANA
Si. Then I’m gonna knit.

BARB
Why not knit now and make a business out of it? This is what happens you know. Yours is a fairytale Ghita. These women already have enough trouble seeing the truth, seeing their own victim status. They’ll start to believe that every woman can someday escape prostitution by living with some old man and waiting for him to die. They’ll keep ignoring every truth. You know why you’re sleeping in the streets tonight in this raw sewage? Because you don’t care enough about yourselves to want better. To believe in better. You just want to fight. You’re blinded by anger. And you have every right to be. But you deserve better. And you just can’t see it.

MILA
We just can’t see it?! Why? Because we are so stupid?

BARB
Because women like Ghita are lucky. That’s not the way it happens. You know this is true.

MILA
So every woman in prostitution is not lucky. This is true. But if she manages things well, she is certainly not stupid.

BARB
And I’ve never called any of you stupid.

MILA
Every time you explain our lives with more of your smart answers, you are saying it to us, prostitutes are stupid. You do not need to use the word.

BARB
It’s not what I mean. But you never give me a chance. You just shut me out before I’ve even spoken.
Because that risk, it is too great.

What risk?

The risk to surrender to your words.

Good. They are meant to help.

Harm, they only cause more of this.

No. That isn’t true.

We cannot force you to understand. You cannot.

We refuse you because we know. We know how our world works. We know its intricacies. We have learned to manage its instabilities. It is close to us.

But for some of them, in the space between who they are in this world they know well and all the other things they could become, the things you see as better for them, the instability that shadows them is infinite, It is multiplied by the unknown.

The risk of that unknown is too vast.

It requires us to trust.

And this, after all that has happened, how can they trust?

And the wants that we have shut away become too loud, impossible to bear, so we stay close to what we know.
BARB
Don’t you understand? Prostitution destroys. It kills. And I can’t stop.

FABIANA
Mary, madre de dios. She crosses herself.
Will this woman ever listen?

MILA
Yes, I we do understand, all of us. But if we wanted to, to do something else, to be something else, you are not the person for that task.

ROBYN
If you truly want to help us Barb, fight for our rights. It is your only way to help.

“Whisper”

BARB
PROSTITUTION CAVES YOUR SOUL
IT DOESN’T ASK QUESTIONS OR CRY FOUL WHEN THINGS GO AWRY
IT JUST MOVES FORWARD, CRUSHING
LIKE A STEEL WEIGHT OF FATE, OF MASS AND INTENTION
BONES DISINTEGRATE, LIVES EVAPORATE, FLESH FLATTENS
UNTIL NOTHING EXISTS OF A WOMAN BUT THE ESSENCE OF WHAT SHE COULD HAVE BEEN
AND AN OCCASIONAL BONE OR POLISHED NAIL
THE ESSENCE OF WHAT SHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN
THE WHISPER OF WHO SHE WAS
JUST A WHISPER

I TRY TO SAVE YOU
FROM THE WORLD
FROM MEN
FROM PAIN
FROM YOURSELVES
FROM THE CRUSHING
AND THE WHISPERING
BUT YOU REFUSE
I’M THE ENEMY

PROSTITUTION CARVES YOUR SKIN
IT LINES YOUR FACE AND DREAMS AND SCREAMS WITH YESTERDAY’S COMPLAINTS
IT JUST DIVIDES CELL, FROM CELL
DREAM FROM DREAM, REALITY FROM HOPE, TENSION TO TENSION
WILL SURRENDERS ALL, SELF ANSWERS THE CALL, MASKS HARDEN
UNTIL NOTHING EXISTS OF A WOMAN BUT THE ESSENCE OF WHAT SHE
COULD HAVE BEEN
AND AN OCCASIONAL PROUD MOMENT OR SMILE
THE ESSENCE OF WHAT SHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN
THE WHISPER OF WHO SHE WAS
JUST A WHISPER

I TRY TO SAVE YOU
FROM THE WORLD
FROM MEN
FROM PAIN
FROM YOURSELVES
FROM THE CRUSHING
AND THE WHISPERING
BUT YOU REFUSE
I’M THE ENEMY

Yes. The enemy.

FABIANA

ROBYN

Where’s Sophea?

Robyn moves to the pile of clothes, pulling them away to reveal nothing.

ROBYN CONT.

And Chavy?

Lights crossfade to a corner of the stage. Chavy is tied up and gagged. The Mandolinist talks on a cell phone.

MANDOLINIST

Listen Sabo. I did. The târfā bit me and ran off. Two of them Sabo. You should have sent me help. She’s here. No, she’s a quiet little thing.

He sits beside Chavy and strokes her hair.

We promised them two cunts. So they get only one. She’s young. Asian. Pretty. What? Well who’re they gonna kill, you or me? That’s right. Just come get her. I’m not staying out here with her forever.

He returns his cell phone to his pocket. He rubs the bite mark on his hand.
Stupid ugly slut. He gets out his mandolin. It consoles him. He plays. Chavy listens. He stops.
You like that don’t you. He sits her up. He strokes her face.
You like men like me don’t you? Men who play music? He holds his mandolin up to her and points.
You like? She stares.
I bet it turns you on doesn’t it? She stares.
Here. He removes the binds on her hands.
Shhhhhhh. He removes the gag. He puts the mandolin in her lap and moves her hand across its surface. She begins to hum.
Oh, you like it. She continues humming.
That’s your song isn’t it? Does it have words? Words? He sings out. She stares and stops humming.
Where you’re going, they will want you most. She hums again.
That’s right. If you sing for the men, you will get lots of money. That’s right. Now sing the words. Sing them.

She does. “âwkrawk”

CHAVY

MÀEMÃE, B’DÀE
LUOK KHYOM DOHR BAI
MÀEMÃE, B’DÀE
NIH REU DOM-LAI SOM-ROM THLA THLAI?
MÀEMÃE, B’DÀE
PH*LOV THOM TOO-LEE-ÂY
MÀEMÃE, B’DÀE
LEU KREH TOCH KRAI ROBOS KON

MÀEMÃE, B’DÀE
DAM-REY JREUN KRAI
MÀEMÃE, B’DÀE
KON OS KDEY SONG-KHEUM HEUY

MÀEMÃE, B’DÀE
MANDOLINIST
Beautiful. That was beautiful. You’re a sweet little girl. Very delicate. You know that?

*He tries to stroke her face and get closer to her. She bites him.*

MANDOLINIST

AOOOUUUWWW! You little bitch.

*He hits her across the face with all his might. She falls to the ground, not moving.*

MANDOLINIST CONT.

Hey.

Nothing.

Hey!

*He pushes on her. Nothing.*

Oh man. Pula mea. No! You stupid…

*He kicks her.*

He’s gonna kill me. Sabo’s gonna kill me. Hey! Hey, wake up!

*He turns away in distress. As lights fade, she stirs, without a sound, her stirrings unnoticed by Mandolinist.*

END OF SCENE 1
Scene 2

They look for Sophea and Chavy in groups of two crossing the stage in different states of distress and entering and exiting from various points. Mila enters first.

MILA
Sophea! Chavy!

She exits. Robyn and Ghita enter.

ROBYN
Chavy! Chavy!

GHITA
Sophea! Oh we must find them. The fault is all mine.

ROBYN
No it, well…. Yes, it is.

ROBYN AND GHITA
Sophea! Chavy!

They exit. The stage is empty but the voices of all the women calling Sophea and Chavy’s names can be heard offstage. After a few moments, Sophea enters. She’s angry, crying, wringing her hands. She sits on steps/something.

SOPHEA
(Screaming and desperate.)
Chavy, where are you?

She puts her head in her hands. Alice enters suddenly, beaten. Her clothes torn. A little disoriented. She walks up to Sophea quietly and touches her hands. Sophea startles. When she sees Alice, she jumps up.

SOPHEA CONT.
(Panic increasing gradually.) Alice! Have you seen Chavy? (Pause) Alice what has happened? Who did this? Where is Chavy?
Sophea. I’m sorry. It’s my fault. He took her.

*Sophea grabs Alice.*

What?

ALICE

He took her.

SOPHEA

Who Alice? Chavy? Who took her? Alice!

ALICE

The mandolin guy. The one from city hall. He said he thought she was one of us. And I said no way. Because she’s your daughter, even though…

SOPHEA

(Interrupting)

ALICE! Where is she?

ALICE

I don’t know. He was so nice. And I wanted to believe him. Then he turned into something else. He tried to take us both. He tried to tie me up too. I trusted him. I don’t know why I trusted him.

*Sophea puts her hands on Alice’s face and forces Alice to look in hers.*

SOPHEA

You must show me where she is. Where did you come from? Now Alice.

ALICE

Oh god. I hope he didn’t…

*She tries to remember. Then runs offstage. Sophea follows. Fabiana and Alika enter.*

FABIANA AND MILA

Sophea! Chavy! Where would they go?

MILA

(Tired) They are surely together. Chavy never strays far from her. Chavy!
FABIANA
Yeah, what’s with that? That’s definitely not her daughter. She said the maebon pimp stole Chavy back. Not the words of a madre. What? Sophea a pimp too?

MILA
No. Of course not. Also, she must be trafficked.

FABIANA
I knew it. Why not just say it?

MILA
This answer, I do not know.

Fabiana sees something on the ground. She picks it up and inspects it.

FABIANA
Isn’t this…

MILA
What?

FABIANA
Rosa. It is. The lipstick Alice gave Chavy. Chavy!

MILA
Chavy!

They exit. The stage is empty but the voices of all the women calling Sophea and Chavy’s names can be heard offstage as lights fade.

END OF SCENE 2
Scene 3

Fabiana and Robyn converge on the canal at the same time. As they do, they see Mandolinist. When he sees the women, he runs. Fabiana suddenly appears and trips Mandolinist. He falls, hitting his head against cobblestone. He’s unconscious.

What’s wrong Lollipop?

Taking a little nap?

Alice enters. She sees Mandolinist.

Sophea! Sophea! He’s here!

Sophea runs in.

(Screaming at him.) Where is she?

Wake up!

Where is she?

FABIANA

Sophea. No.

In a moment of rage, she runs at him, ready to push him into the water. Fabiana stops her

FABIANA CONT.

Sophea. Stop it. Sophea!

Sophea tries again to push him, forcing her body against his on the ground.
SOPHEA
Let me drown him. Let me kill him.

FABIANA
We have to find Chavy.

Fabiana fights her off, pulling her.

FABIANA CONT.
Stop. Stop! He’s already dead!

Sophea stops. She looks at his limp body. She realizes her own behavior. She rises and moves away in despair.

SOPHEA
We’ll never find her now.

Mila and Ghita enter.

MILA
What has happened? Have you found her?

Robyn points to Mandolinist.

MILA CONT.
The girl, where is the girl?

Robyn signals that they don’t know.

MILA
What about him?

FABIANA
He’s not going anywhere.

ALICE
He’s dead.

GHITA
We must go back to the hotel. All of you. Come. We will go. We can call police from there. We will find her.
Robyn, Sophea, Alice and Ghita prepare to exit.

ALICE
It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t hummed her song, she would have stayed away. What have I done?

GHITA
No Alice. Everything. It is only his fault.

_Mila_ puts her arm around Alice.

We cannot just leave him.

_Fabiana_ has found some gondola rope. Before she can get to him and anyone can exit, Mandolinist starts to hum very softly. All stop in their tracks. The humming gets louder and it’s Chavy’s song, “àwkrawk,” that he’s humming.

ALICE
No!

He rolls himself into the water. Splash! The women run to the edge of the canal to find him. Laughing can be heard drifting off, down the canal.

_Fabiana_! 

MILA
Can you see him?

SOPHEA
Get him.

ROBYN
Where did he go?

Long silence. Sophea releases a tormented scream. Alice moves tentatively to comfort her. Sophea receives the comfort until she sees Alice’s face.
SOPHEA

You. You.

She pushes her away.

SOPHEA CONT.

You caused this. She would never have moved away from my side if not for you.

Alice is crushed.

ALICE

I know.

She reaches out to Sophea again, retreats, and hurries offstage. Ghita, concerned, follows. Robyn, Mila, Carlita, and Fabiana stand in a huddle on the other side of the stage.

ROBYN

This is too much. I don’t know what to do.

FABIANA

I do. I should have let Sophea kill him when she had the chance.

ROBYN

You thought he was dead already.

FABIANA

We’re prostitutes. Not murderers. I said that to keep her from killing him. But now, I will kill him myself.

She runs offstage, towards the last sounds of the Mandolinist.

MILA

Fabiana, I do not think…. I have to do something. The police. They will know what to do.

She exits.

ROBYN

I’ll get Fabiana.

She exits. Barb enters. Sophea sees her and runs at her, lunging, and pounding Barb with her fists. Barb tries to hold her off.
BARB
What’s wrong? Stop it. What’s happened?

Sophea still punching.

SOPHEA
She’s gone.

BARB
Who?

SOPHEA
Chavy. The Mandolinist took her.

BARB
What? Where?

SOPHEA
Anywhere. Everywhere. How can I know.

SOPHEA
You did this. I would not have brought her here if not for you.

She resumes punching and sobbing. Barb, upset and moved, just holds her, holds her until the punching subsides, holds her until she collapses in Barb’s arms. Once she realizes she’s letting Barb hold her, she pulls away sharply. Sophea looks away trying to comprehend. She looks back at Barb, staring, thinking, then pleading.

SOPHEA
Yes. Go to the police. If you tell them, they will do something. They can find him. And Chavy. Yes. You must go to them now. They listen to you. They care when you speak. She shoves her.

Go.

Barb stands shaking her head “no.”

BARB
Even I know they won’t. Even I know that much.

SOPHEA
(Angrily) Even when we really do need you, she will not.
Sophea exits. Barb stands alone, helpless. She gets an idea. She’s thinking. She suddenly exits. Lights fade.

END OF SCENE 3
Scene 4

In a corner of the stage, Chavy sits on the ground dressed for prostitution, in a cage, door opened. Sophea stands in the shadows, as if in a separate space of time. Chavy sings her song while Sophea translates. As they do, CHORUS MEMBER #7, a john, passes by and checks Chavy over. Mandolinist on opposite side of stage, different locations but happening simultaneously. He fingers a wad of money, puts it in his pocket, then exits.

CHAVY
MÀEMÂE, B’DÀE
LUÔK KHYOM DOHR BAI
MÀEMÂE, B’DÀE
NIH REU DOM-LAI SOM-ROM THLA THLAI?

SOPHEA
Mama, Papa
To trade me for rice,
Mama, Father
Is that a fair price?

Chavy continues to sing and Sophea continues to translate throughout these directions. On opposite side of stage, Mandolinist backs onto the stage. Barb following, facing him. She’s trying to seduce him.

MÀEMÂE, B’DÀE
PH*LOV THOM TOO-LEE-ÂY
MÀEMÂE, B’DÀE
LEU KREH TOCH KRAI ROBOS KON

Mama, Papa
The road is wide
Mama, Papa
In my tiny bed.

He laughs at her and turns his back to walk away. She tries again. He pushes her away.

MÀEMÂE, B’DÀE
DAM-REY JREUN KRAI
MÀEMÂE, B’DÀE
KON OS KDEY SONG-KHEUM HEUY

Mama, Papa
So many elephants
Mama, Papa
And I am broken.
She finds something and hits him on the back of the head. He falls to the ground unconscious.

MÂEMÂE, B’DÂE
KON YUM YUB TH*’NGA-EE
MÂEMÂE, B’DÂE
CHAS MA-NEARK NUS KEU CHEA CHOR

Mama, Papa
I cry both day and night
Mama, Papa
The old man is the thief.

While still singing, last verse, CHORUS MEMBER #8, another john, enters and looks Chavy over. He grabs her forcefully. Barb turns the Mandolinist over, checking his breathing.

MÂEMÂE, B’DÂE
KON SREY ROUB EY ÀKRAWK MALES
MÂEMÂE, B’DÂE
KAL KON NOV CHEA KHMENG SREY

Mama, Papa
What an ugly girl I was
Mama, Papa
When I was a girl.

The john leads Chavy offstage. Sophea stretches out her arm towards her, unable to move beyond the stretching. She crumples to the ground. Barb exits in the same direction of Chavy. Lights fade.

END OF SCENE 4
Epilogue

The Chorus enters, sad, worn, singing “Take a Stand.” As they sing, they find places on the stage to sit, gradually, one-by-one.

PROSTITUTE CHORUS

WE’RE HERE TO TAKE A STAND
IT IS, IN OUR HANDS
WE CARRY ON AND IT’S FAR TOO LONG
AND WE’RE WEARY
AS THE DAYS DRAG ON

DON’T SIT CAUSE THE ROAD IS LONG
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
STAND TALL
AND WE’RE WEARY, WE’RE WEARY, THE ROAD IS LONG
STAND TALL
AND WE’RE WEARY, WE’RE WEARY, THE ROAD IS LONG

(2X)
DON’T SIT CAUSE THE ROAD IS LONG
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
STAND TALL
STAND TALL

“Take a Stand” fades. Sophea, Robyn, Fabiana, Mila, and Alice stand holding their red umbrellas, making a line across the front of the stage. Holding each umbrella like a cane. Silence. Umbrella choreography to words is needed. There’s a sadness in both, music and choreography, and yet, still, a determination.

ALL

Ours is a weary world of ifs and buts
Where shadows linger near
Where dreams and truths don’t dare take hold
For fear,

Of what’s denied.

So we deny,

And glance a gaze at our true selves, only when unseen voices silence.

There in the reflection of our individual lives
We look beyond
Past it, past ourselves,
Not unlike you,
And step beyond into our world
Of alternate existence.

In this world
Money flows, or sometimes not,
Or others hands become the flow
We never see.

But things still flow.

Blood, urine, semen, tears.

This world is dripping.

A world where people die.

Or disappear.

But it’s ours.
ROBYN

And you stand there staring through
Unable to pass, or wade through judgments and fears.

MILA

And it’s ours.

FABIANA

Keep out we shout.

ROBYN

You who know nothing of our landscape here.

SOPHEA AND FABIANA

Our ups and downs
You will never understand.

SOPHEA

And we try to explain.

ROBYN

Our choice, or semblance of such, is our power.

FABIANA

And so we dance the dance of darkness with each other.

SOPHEA

Because belonging to the dark is better than the shunning of the light.

MILA

And this landscape is harsh. No gentle rain to wet its calculated dryness.

ALL

But it’s ours. It’s ours.

MILA

What is that umbrella for, then, you ask?

ALL

And how can we still stand here when so much has gone wrong?

SOPHEA

We’re not required to answer, but we do.
Sometimes.

ROBYN
It’s not the umbrella of ladies who look through,
But of whores
Who open and close legs, lips, cheeks, and more.

FABIANA
Open, close, open, close.

MILA
The rhythm of our day.

FABIANA
Red with rawness from the in and out and in and out.

ROBYN
Harmonies that repeat themselves years after the song is finished.

MILA
But red is not just our sadness

FABIANA
Or our demand.

SOPHEA
It’s our complaint.

ALL
What’s our complaint?

MILA
That when you look into, not through, the glass you see your faces there
Mixed and blurred with ours
Flawed faces all,
And yet you turn away.

ROBYN
We reflect value too.

SOPHEA
Some of us are valued for all that we can give.
ALL
And some of us for sex.

FABIANA
We’re not here to change the things
That we carry like weight in our pockets and shoes without you,
but not your way.

SOPHEA
The rode we walk today, our red umbrella parade
Is a symbol of all that we have endured.

MILA
A loud, human shouting out of the need,

To be seen,

To be taken seriously,

To be valued,

For what we give
Because it’s what we have to give.
And we survive.

FABIANA
The lies, the truths, the days, the past, and all that lies ahead.

SOPHEA
Do not pity us.

ROBYN
Or hate us.

FABIANA
But give us the rights we crave.

MILA
For in that giving is a new reflection of our value.
Something new.

A value that says we matter too.
As much as you.
And then, oh the choices we could make.

Value.

Is there any other way?

Barb enters, Chavy with her.

Chavy?!

Sophea runs with all her might to grab and hold her. They embrace forever. The other women come around laughing and/or crying.

You found her. You found the child. How Barb?

Sophea and Barb stare at one another. Sophea softens, nods her head in approval and gratitude. Then goes back to embracing Chavy. They start exiting as a group, full of sweet joy.

(To Robyn) Did that woman actually do something good?

It seems to be true.

Barb lingers behind the group. Mila reaches out a hand and grabs her bringing her along into the group.

All exit. Empty stage, then Alice enters. She carries her suitcase and umbrella. She looks around and walks to the center of the stage. She sets the umbrella down on the ground. She looks at it a while, hesitates, then exits briskly, as if trying to escape its power. Lights fade, focused on the red umbrella. Clapping in audience. Then, blue light flashes several quick times on stage revealing... Mandolinist in cage.

End of Play
Appendix

Section 1 – Pronunciations and Translations

German

*Amerikaner* – American

*braves Mädchen* - good girl

*Damen* – ladies

*der Zuhälter* – pimp

*Fräulein* – woman

Gültig heute Abend – valid this evening

*Gummi* – condom

*Hallo ihr Damen!* - Hello you ladies.

Ich bin ihr Zühalter – I am their pimp.

*Stiers* – bulls

Italian

*acqua alta* – high tide

*allora* – now

*arrivederci* – good bye

*biennale* – biennial

*buona sera* – good evening

*Carnevale* – Carnival

*Ci sono molte donne là dentro?* – Are there a lot of women inside?

*lira* – Italian money
lucciole – prostitute

Ma quando mai.- I disagree, (lit.) but when, never

molto allegro – very happy

Montelpuciano – an Italian city that produces wine

Palazzo Vendramin Clergi – a plaza in Venice

Pensione Villa Mancaza – the name of the hotel

persone - people

prego – please

rosso – red

scusi – excuse me

sorpresa – surprise

strada – street

tenga fuori! – keep out

vai – let’s go

vaporetto – ferry

Venezia – Venice

vino bueno – good wine

vuoi prego – I beg you

zaeti – raisin biscuit

Khmer

âkrawk – ugly

law-aw – good, well
maebon – pimp
srei coit – prostitute

Spanish
absolutamente – absolutely

Amén hermana! - Amen sister!

Anda en pedo – is drunk, out of it

bambinos – children

buenas noches – good night

bueno – good

cabezas – heads

cállate! – shut up

cabrón – an insult, a base, contemptible person

concha – vagina/slang, (lit.) shell

dinero – money

dulces - candies

gracias – thanks

güera - white girl

hocico – snout; angry word for mouth

huevotus – big balls/testicles

idiota – idiot

Le voy a partir su madre.– I’m going to kick his ass., (lit.) I’m going to leave him to his mother.

Lo sabe – She knows.
Lo siento Alika. – I’m sorry Alika.
loca/o – crazy
madre de dios – mother of God.
maldita – damn
mole – a sauce in Mexican cuisine
 nada - nothing
Niña de mierda – spoiled brat
no verdad – not true
pendeja – idiot
por supuesto – of course
puta – whore
sí– yes
tranquilo – calm down
Yo digo no a “tions.” - I shun the “tions."
Yo lo sabe. – I know it.

Romanian
pula mea – f***!
târfâ - slut
Section 2 – Sample Story/Albuquerque

Sample Story/Albuquerque
(To be used for productions in Albuquerque or as a sample of a locally based story to be included in other towns/cities’ productions)

Albuquerque, New Mexico. Twelve women in their twenties with a history of prostitution, murdered, dumped and buried in an eighteen-foot-deep pit in the desert. Only discovered because a woman walking her dog stumbled on a leg bone. A leg bone, a polished nail, a pregnant one. No one knows who did it. And, like most stories, they probably never will.

*Caution – If wording here is more than 4 or 5 lines or too wordy, can take audience out of the play. Be careful when creating this piece for other cities/towns/communities.
Section 3 – Song Lyrics

Take a Stand

WE’RE HERE TO TAKE A STAND
IT IS, IN OUR HANDS
WE CARRY ON AND IT’S FAR TOO LONG
AND WE’RE WEARY
AS THE DAYS DRAG ON

DON’T SIT CAUSE THE ROAD IS LONG
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
STAND TALL

AND WE’RE WEARY, WE’RE WEARY, THE ROAD IS LONG
STAND TALL

WHY DO I HAVE TO STAND
WHO JUST, DECIDED
WHY DO I HAVE TO CARRY ON WHEN I’M SO YOUNG
AND I’M WEARY
AND THE DAYS DRAG ON

AND WE’RE WEARY, WE’RE WEARY, THE ROAD IS LONG

(2X)
DON’T SIT CAUSE THE ROAD IS LONG
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
TAKE A STAND
STAND TALL
STAND TALL

Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics

CALL OFF YOUR OLD TIRED ETHICS
GIVE YOUR UPRIGHT PANTIES A REST
SELL YOUR PITY PARTY ELSEWHERE
STOP YOUR MORAL JUDGMENT QUEST

CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO INTERVENTION
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO RIGHT OF WAY
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO BLIND REDEMPTION
WE JUST NEED YOU TO GO AWAY

FORGET YOUR SEWING CLASSES
KEEP YOUR SAD SKILLS THAT WE CAN’T USE
SHOVE YOUR SHELTERS UP YOUR ASSES
STOP YOUR WE’RE HERE TO SAVE YOU BLUES

CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO INTERVENTION
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO RIGHT OF WAY
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO BLIND REDEMPTION
WE JUST NEED YOU TO GO AWAY

SETTLE SCORES WITH OTHER WOMEN
BRAND THEIR HIDES WITH “PROSTITUTE”
TELL THEM WE ALL MAKE A LIVING
WITH THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO INTERVENTION
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO RIGHT OF WAY
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO BLIND REDEMPTION
WE JUST NEED YOU TO GO AWAY

OH LADY, JUST CALL OFF YOUR OLD TIRED ETHICS
GIVE YOUR UPRIGHT PANTIES A REST
SELL YOUR PITY PARTY ELSEWHERE
STOP YOUR MORAL JUDGMENT QUEST

CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO INTERVENTION
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO RIGHT OF WAY
CAUSE WE DON’T NEED NO BLIND REDEMPTION
WE JUST NEED YOU TO GO AWAY

We Need Her

IF THERE WERE ANY OTHER WAY I’D FIND IT
I’M NOT TAKING ANYOF THIS LIGHTLY
BUT THE STRATEGY WE NEED IS RIGHT BEFORE ME
IF WE CAN TURN HER LIKE A COAT THEN WE’LL BE HOME FREE

CHORUS
WE NEED HER
IT’S NOT AS CLEAR AS IT WILL BE
BUT WE NEED HER
YOU’LL JUST HAVE TO TRY TO BELIEVE
THAT WE NEED HER
SHE’S NOT THE FRIEND I’LL CALL WHEN I NEED CLEANSING
I’LL PROB’LY NEVER CALL HER FRIEND AT ALL
BUT WHEN ALL OUR PLEAS ARE POINTEDLY FORBIDDEN
HERS IS THE VOICE THAT THEY ALL VOTE IS READY WISDOM

CHORUS

SO YOU SEE THERE’S A METHOD TO THIS MADNESS
I’M NOT CRAZED ONLY CLEVER LIKE A FOX
BUT THE POWERFUL REFUSE TO SEE OUR GENIUS
SO WE WILL TEACH IT TO THE ONE WHO HAS THEIR PULSE

CHORUS

WE DO
WE NEED HER

Busted

IT WAS MIDNIGHT IN THE VALLEY
LA SOUNDS BLED THROUGH THE WALLS
STREET LIGHTS STREAMED FROM FLOOR TO CEILING
NEONS FLASHED THEIR DRUMMING CALLS

AS I WORKED WITH PRECISE FOCUS
SHIFTING SHADOWS OVER SKIN
I WAS DEEP IN CONCENTRATION
WHEN THEY ALL CAME BUSTING IN

DRESSED IN LA’S FINEST’S RAIMENT
DRIPPING BLACK FROM HEAD TO TOE
THEY WHIPPED OUT THEIR TINY BADGES
TURNING LIGHTS ON, MAGLITES LOW.

THERE WERE FOUR…THERE’S STRENGTH IN NUMBERS
TEN EYES STARING AT MY BOOBS
TILL THEY LET THE JOHN LEAVE EARLY
EIGHT EYES FRAMING LIPS OF DROOL
THEN HE ENTERED, TURNED TO FACE ME
STARED ME DOWN WITH DISBELIEF.
SHE’S THE ONE WE ARE ARRESTING?
NODS OF YES. A PAUSE. HE LEAVES.

SO THEY QUESTIONED AND REDUCED ME
NEVER LETTING ME GET DRESSED
MAKING SURE I KNEW MY CHEAPNESS
AND THEIR BIG WAYS TO OPPRESS.

DOING MY JOB WITH A CLIENT
IN A ROOM THAT I PAID FOR
CALLED FOR LEGAL INTERFERENCE
ON THE SCALE OF ONE TO FOUR?

WELL THEY CAUGHT ME, BAD GIRL BUSTED
DOING BAD THINGS TO GOOD MEN.
IF IT WASN’T FOR THOSE BADGES,
THEY’D HAVE PAID ME TO DO THEM.

BUT AS MUCH AS I FELT TREATED
LIKE A DUMB GIRL WITHOUT RIGHTS
THERE WAS NO WAY THEY COULD HURT ME
LIKE THE LOOK DID…IN HIS EYES.

BUSTED

Victimless Victims

SHE’S NEVER BEEN THE PRETTY GIRL IN MEN’S GESTATED VISIONS AND
SHE’S ALWAYS BEEN REPULSED BY MOST MALES’ Coddled indecisions.
WITH ALL THEIR GRUNTS AND ALL THEIR GROANS AND ALL HER SELF-
CLAIMED WISDOM
SHE’S COME TO RECOGNIZE IT
THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS A VICTIMLESS VICTIM

THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS VICTIMLESS VICTIMS
THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS FORTITUDE
THERE’S NO SUCH THING WHEN YOU’VE BEEN TOYED WITH
THEY’VE TURNED YOU INSIDE OUT, IT’S TRUE

SHE’S HONED HER CRAFT IN HALLOWED HALLS OF HIGHER EDUCATION
AND
SHE’S WORKED AND SLAVED O’ER BOOKS AND PAPER TO WRITE ALL INDICATIONS
WITH ALL HER WORK AND ALL HER WILL AND ALL HER WARRANTED WISDOM
SHE’S EARNED THE RIGHT TO TELL US
THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS A VICTIMLESS VICTIM

THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS VICTIMLESS VICTIMS
THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS FORTITUDE
THERE’S NO SUCH THING WHEN YOU’VE BEEN TOYED WITH
THEY’VE TURNED YOU INSIDE OUT, IT’S TRUE

I’VE LEARNED THAT MEN WHO PAY FOR SEX ARE PURE POWER ABUSERS
I’VE MADE IT MY LIFE’S WORK TO SHOW THEIR PATRIARCHAL FUROR
WITH EVERY BONE AND EVERY BREATH AND EVERY BANTAM DICTUM
I’VE TRIED MY BEST TO SHOW THEM
THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS A VICTIMLESS VICTIM

P. I. M. P.
P. I. (snap, snap) M.P.

(Scream) YAOW!

(Sweet female voice sings this line repeated as an underscore for all the verses.)
ICH BIN IHR ZÜHALTER GÜLTIG HEUTE ABEND

PROCURER OF ALL PAID SEX TONIGHT
MANAGER AND PONCE OF ALL DELIGHTS
MINING IN THE DARK FOR FRIENDS AND WHORES
ICH BIN IHR ZÜHALTER GÜLTIG HEUTE ABEND

DOCTOR OF AILMENTS PROTECTOR OF LIES
PROCURER OF BULLS READY FOR THE RIDE
SUBVERSIVE SLUCE-JUICE RODEO CLOWN
DISTRACTIBLE STIERS WITH A CASH FLOW AND A QUARTER
LOCKJAW VIBRATIONS ON QUARTER-FED BEDS
WHITE-LINED LADY-CAINE THAT SCREWS IN THEIR HEADS
MINED FIELDS OF LOVE AND HATE AND IN-AND-OUT
ICH BIN IHR ZÜHALTER GÜLTIG HEUTE ABEND

IN DARK ROOMS I GET WITH A WIT FOR PROFIT
I AM NO DUMB EUROPEAN HALF-WIT TIT
MASCUILNATED FRAULEIN STANDING SQUARE
IN THE FACE OF MASCULINATED MALES NO MADAM TO YOUR PIMP

IMPLIED REASON LACK OF SUBMISSION DOMINATRIX

STAND TALL AND LOOK AT ME WHEN I TALK TO YOU!

I’M THE NEW ONE HERE TO INFORM
EVERY OLD ONE THAT CHANGE HAS COME
THIS NEW PIMP HAS WAYS ALL HER OWN
I WON’T BACK DOWN JUST BECAUSE YOU WANT IT

PROCURER OF ALL PAID SEX TONIGHT
MANAGER AND PONCE OF ALL DELIGHTS
MINING IN THE DARK FOR FRIENDS AND WHORES
ICH BIN IHR ZÜHALTER GÜLTIG HEUTE ABEND

P.I.M.P.
IHR ZÜHALTERIN
ME

I Shun the “tions”

I SHUN THE “TIONS”
MIGRATION, IMMIGRATION, GLOBALIZATION, EXPLOITATION
THE TIONS SLIDE OVER ME LIKE THE MOLE ON MAMI’S HOT TORTILLAS
DRIPPING DOWN BETWEEN FULL BREASTS
DOIN ITS OWN MIGRATION

I SHUN THE TIONS
IMMIGRATION DOESN’T DICTATE MY LIFE TO ME
I AM THE DICTATOR OF MY OWN NATION-STATE
ROUND WITH BROWN BORDERS
AND CURVES THAT LEAD SOUTH
TO LATINA ROOTS SPICED WITH THE SCORCH OF MY LIFE
THIS BODY
MY NATION-STATE
I Dictate

I Shun the Tions
Exploitation is not my game
I am not a good girl
Who lost her way
When someone wasn’t looking
Drowned by the vulgarity of sexing
I like it
And do it
Dearly
And well

I Shun the Tions
Because that leads me to where I need to go
My Mamí’s house, blue, with a bridge like Diego’s
Only there are no Diegos there
Mamí, my sister, and me
Strong women in a country of frail men
I bought that house

I Shun the Tions
An independent woman’s reputation is the only tion I embrace
I fulfill my own requirements
With a worldwide jut of this mound
And ease across openings
Into lands and into the arms of men
Who pay
dearly
And well

Migration, immigration, globalization, exploitation
Pfft. Yo Digó no a “TIONS”

srei koit

I am Srei Koit
Post Khmer Rouge
Phnom Penh Toul Kork District
Srei Koit.

Khmer Rouge
DEADLY RULE LASTING OVER FOUR YEARS
SLAVED
STARVED
TORTURED
KILLED
MY PEOPLE ENDURED.
AUTHORITY DEMANDED IT.
NAMES...POL POT, NUON CHEA, IENG SARY, TA MOK, KHIEU SAMPHAN,
MORE LEADERS WHO CHOSE THE GOVERNMENT FOR MY PEOPLE.
ARRESTED, DEAD OR TRIED.

SREI COIT, PROSTITUTE
MY JOB NOW LASTING OVER EIGHT YEARS
RAPED
TRAFFICKED
BEATEN
FORCED
I ENDURED.
AUTHORITY DEMANDED IT.
NAMES...UNSPOKEN, HIDDEN BEHIND HUGS OF SMALL CHILDREN AND
ADMIRATION OF DARLING WIVES
MEN WHO CHOSE MY LINE OF WORK FOR ME,
UNARRESTED AND UNTRIED.

TOUL KORK DISTRICT
PLACE OF LONG LASTING PHNOM PENH PROSTITUTION
ROBBED
JAILED
TORMENTED
SOLD, AGAIN
MY SISTERS AND I ENDURE
AUTHORITY DEMANDS IT.
NAMES...UNSPOKEN, HIDDEN BEHIND LIES OF PROTECTION.
POLICE AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES WHO CHOOSE MY PUNISHMENT FOR
BEING ME.
UNARRESTED AND UNTRIED.

EASY SOLUTIONS
ANSWERS TO LASTING PROBLEMS STILL NOT UNDERSTOOD
EVALUATED
JUDGED
REDUCED
IGNORED
MY SISTERS AND I ENDURE.
AUTHORITY DEMANDS IT.
NAMES...UNSPOKEN, HIDDEN BEHIND CONDESCENDING SMARTS AND FALSE HELPS.
GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT SPECIALISTS WHO CHOOSE MY ANSWERS FOR ME
UNARRESTED AND UNTRIED.

POST KHMER ROUGE PHNOM PENH TOUL KORK DISTRICT SRE COIT.
CAMBODIAN PROSTITUTE
SMALL
PRETTY
POISED
TIGHT
I ENDURE.
I DEMAND IT.
NAME...SOPHEA.
ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE WHO SLEEPS WITH YOUR BROTHERS, FATHERS, HUSBANDS, AND SONS.
ARRESTED AND...TRIED, AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN.

Italian Sexnaut Globalization Whores

PIONEERING NEW HORIZONS
ADVENTURESSSES OF SEX
GIVEN TO OUTSPOKENNESS
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

GARTER-WEARING
CHAIN-SMOKING
SMUT-TELLING
HARLOTS

SOPHISTICATED LADIES
ITALIAN SEXNAUT WHORES
TIME-TRIED
OLD
EXPERIENCED
OLD

COMMANDEERING OLD REPRESSIONS
VOYAGERESSES OF SEX
GIVEN TO POLITICALNESS
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

MONEY-MAKING
CHAIN-SWEARING
JOHN-HUMPING
STRUMPETS

ORGANIZED REFORMERS
ITALIAN SEXNAUT WHORES
SINGLE
MARRIED
FOREVER
TO EACH OTHER
NO. MARRIED TO MY CROSS-DRESSING DARK-SKINNED FRENCHMAN JEAN

VOLUNTEERING EXPERT WISDOM
AMBASSADORESSES OF SEX
GIVEN TO HIGH-BROW INTERVIEWS
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

STRADA-WALKING
CHAIN-BINDING
TRICK-TICKLING
TROLLOPS

HIGH-DOLLAR SEX WORKERS
ITALIAN SEXNAUT WHORES
COURTESAN
(Calling self) TRAMP
TRUE
(Calling Mila) TRAMP

CONGREGATING ALL SEX WORKERS
PROTECTORESSES OF SEX
GIVEN TO RIGHTS AND DIGNITY
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

STILETTO-STABBING
CHAIN-BEATING
BUTT-SPANKING
WHORES

MILA
CARLITA
CARLITA
MILA
SKILLED INTERLOCUTORS
ITALIAN SEXNAUT WHORES

You I Adore

IN THE LATE HOUR I HEAR LAUGHTER
IT’S NOT COMING FROM THE STREETS
IT’S THE MUSIC OF MY LONGING
IT’S JUST WHAT YOU DO TO ME

AND IF ONLY I COULD TOUCH YOU
MORE THAN BRUSH AGAINST YOUR SLEEVE
RAKE MY LIPS AGAINST YOUR SKIN
SMELL THAT SCENT OF YOU AGAIN...AND AGAIN...AND AGAIN

CHORUS
CAUSE IT’S
YOU THAT I WANT MORE OF
CAUSE IT’S
YOU THAT I ADORE
STOP THE WHISPERS OF DENIAL
CAUSE IT’S TRUE
YOU I ADORE
YOU I ADORE

I’VE BEEN PIERCED IN THE DARK ALLEYS
OF MY LIFE WITH INTENSE NEED
STRANDS OF YOU HOLD ME AS CAPTIVE
IT’S JUST WHAT YOU DO TO ME
LIKE A BOLT OF WHITE IN DARKNESS
MORE ELECTRIC VOLTS IT SEEMS
HOLD YOUR BODY TO ME CLOSELY
FEEL THAT POWER SHOOT THROUGH ME...SHOOT THROUGH ME...SHOOT THROUGH ME

CHORUS
LOOK AT YOU THERE WITH THOSE EYES AND THAT STARE
HOW YOU SAY WHAT YOU SAY WHEN YOU SAY IT
LIPS FULL OF RED AND A SMILE THAT DESTROYS ME
YOU’RE LAYERS OF ALL A LOVE CAN BE
IF THE YEARS WOULD JUST RELEASE US
FROM THEIR RAGING JUDGMENT SCREAM
IT’S THE ONLY THING THAT STOPS US
IT’S JUST WHAT YOU DO TO ME

SO IT ENDS JUST AS IT STARTED
WITH A LONGING AND A STARE
PLEAD FOR HOLY FOUND PERSUASION
SHOUT RELEASE FROM WHAT’S UNDONE...WHAT’S UNFAIR...WHAT’S UNFAIR

CHORUS

The PIC

(Spoken over original instrumental music.)
Look at me. At this face.
Pick me.
I used to be every man’s first choice.
Supple, firm, bursting.
Pick me.
I was desired.
Men left their wives at home slouching over dinner tables with empty yellow chairs and
cold asparagus,
Left Morocco and Spain and Luxembourg
To be with me.
Pick me.
They paid me well for the oral sex too beneath their proper wives
And the anal tricks too dark for regular nights.
I fulfilled fantasies and fed my own children well.
Pick me.
My husband left me and I made a well-considered choice.
Two small people depended on me
And I found the way.
Pick me.
Amsterdam’s red-light district became my home.
It’s where my memories roam
Trapped between canals and red glow reflections.
Nights in the window.
Always a new john and many repeats.
Pick me.
And they did.
Until things started to change.
She drops her robe to reveal red lingerie.

Gravity and reality had their way with me and didn’t pay.
Invisible scoundrels immune to a good beating or promise of one.
Desire waned.
And I wanted.
And “pick me” became my pretty song.
The only thing pretty.
My song and my red-laced thong.
Pick me
Became the loud rhythm of the polished nail drumming
When the Johns of before
Looked and passed me by.
It lodged in my throat.
And stuck where many things had lodged before.
And I wanted to shout
Pick me!
But only gagged on the truth.
The money, like the father of my children, disappeared and the fears rose and
Pick me
Became the sharper nails sealing me shut,
Each driving into me through unopened places and withered skin
Pick me
Barely perceptible then.
And my red light flickered to dim, then black.
But I knew things.
Things other Prostitutes, new whores, needed to know.
Pick me.
And The Prostitute Information Center hired me. The PIC.
My experience and knowledge became worthwhile.
And I was saved.
Even though the money they paid barely weighted my hand.
And although others, even like the documentary filmmaker doing his film on sex, picked me
To interview.
My worth had waned.
And no high-heeled shoe, or red-rimmed condom, or crotchless panty ever again
Made me even whisper
Pick me.
And no one did.

Whisper

PROSTITUTION CAVES YOUR SOUL
IT DOESN’T ASK QUESTIONS OR CRY FOUL WHEN THINGS GO AWRY
IT JUST MOVES FORWARD, CRUSHING
LIKE A STEEL WEIGHT OF FATE, OF MASS AND INTENTION
BONES DISINTEGRATE, LIVES EVAPORATE, FLESH FLATTENS
UNTIL NOTHING EXISTS OF A WOMAN BUT THE ESSENCE OF WHAT SHE
COULD HAVE BEEN
AND AN OCCASIONAL BONE OR POLISHED NAIL
THE ESSENCE OF WHAT SHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN
THE WHISPER OF WHO SHE WAS
JUST A WHISPER

I TRY TO SAVE YOU
FROM THE WORLD
FROM MEN
FROM PAIN
FROM YOURSELVES
FROM THE CRUSHING
AND THE WHISPERING
BUT YOU REFUSE
I’M THE ENEMY

PROSTITUTION CARVES YOUR SKIN
IT LINES YOUR FACE AND DREAMS AND SCREAMS WITH YESTERDAY’S
COMPLAINTS
IT JUST DIVIDES CELL, FROM CELL
DREAM FROM DREAM, REALITY FROM HOPE, TENSION TO TENSION
WILL SURRENDERS ALL, SELF ANSWERS THE CALL, MASKS HARDEN
UNTIL NOTHING EXISTS OF A WOMAN BUT THE ESSENCE OF WHAT SHE
COULD HAVE BEEN
AND AN OCCASIONAL PROUD MOMENT OR SMILE
THE ESSENCE OF WHAT SHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN
THE WHISPER OF WHO SHE WAS
JUST A WHISPER

I TRY TO SAVE YOU
FROM THE WORLD
FROM MEN
FROM PAIN
FROM YOURSELVES
FROM THE CRUSHING
AND THE WHISPERING
BUT YOU REFUSE
I’M THE ENEMY
MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
LUÖK KHYOM DOHR BAI
MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
NIH REU DOM-LAI SOM-ROM THLA THLAI?

MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
PH*LOV THOM TOO-LEE-ÂY
MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
LEU KREH TOCH KRAI ROBOS KON

MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
DAM-REY JREUN KRAI
MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
KON OS KDEY SONG-KHEUM HEUY

MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
KON YUM YUB TH*”NGA-EE
MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
CHAS MA-NEARK NUS KEU CHEA CHOR

MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
KON SREY ROUB EY ÀKRAWK MALES
MÀÉMÀE, B’DÀE
KAL KON NOV CHEA KHMENG SREY

**English translation**

Mama, Father
To trade me for rice,
Mama, Father
Is that a fair price?

Mama, Father
The road is wide
Mama, Father
In my tiny bed.

Mama, Father
So many elephants,
Mama, Father
And I am broken.
Mama, Father
I cry both day and night.
Mama, Father
The old man is the thief.

Mama, Father
What an ugly girl I was,
Mama, Father
When I was a girl.