

## PREFACE

January 28, 2023

It has been two years since it started: the writing of a play that now becomes a not-play, a splash of not-quite black words upon the light gray of my computer screen, word sounds roiling in the openings of my ears and cascading over rocks of meaning and rushing into my brain's caverns before I can catch them, examine them, claim them.

My eyes are heavy. My body is tired, has been for a long time: too much work, too little sleep—an unconquerable and relentless problem. When I try sleeping, voices of my creations talk: Dave, Jack, Matt, Fool among them. Sometimes they talk in languages I can't understand—a code that makes some kind of sense but for which I can't find words in my own tongue. Though I like them and want to spend time with them, I wish they would quiet down and let me sleep, rest, deal with them from a fresh perspective.

It's this brain of mine. I bring these characters into my world and then they won't shut up until I do something with them. I try to convince myself that they are better than other voices competing for my attention—voices like those of my literary progenitors who constantly demand that I find more of me than I have ... or more accurately, more than I've been able to find in myself thus far. It feels to me sometimes that there is an unnamed something I am expected to discover hiding in a grocery-bag-wrapped package hidden behind a locked door to some unused room somewhere in the folds of my brain. If there is such a space—a hidden room—I don't know which hallway it is down or on which floor or fold of the multi-tiered, multi-roomed gray mass to begin looking. An architectural drawing of the

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space I inhabit in my head might be helpful, but if I ever had one, I must have lost it somewhere along the roads of my life experiences.

As if I didn't have enough distractions related to trying to be a writer, I have to deal with the voice of negativity always ready to toss a bomb into what little confidence I have. It is merciless, knows every trick for using my own self-doubts and fears against me: "You aren't good enough ... never will be," "Nobody cares about what you have to offer," and many other quite disturbing statements that I have to over-talk with ego statements, "Why not?" "You lie!" "Shut up!" "I'm doing it anyway!" and "The worst that can happen is it's a flop, and it's my flop to make!" Now, don't get me wrong, sometimes they help me figure out what I need to do. I like looking at things from different points of view and I like having to rethink what I previously thought I meant—sometimes having to rearrange my world around new ways of

thinking, but I wish they—those discordant voices—would come at me one at a time instead of their usual trick of talking all at once; and, though I need and want to be humble, I wish the negative voices would tone it down a bit ... quite a bit, actually.

Of course, I know the voices are my own, my way of trying to figure out what makes the art of saying versus the skill of putting words together in sentences. When I am at my best, I think of art as a way of being and becoming rather than as a profession. Fame and riches have eluded me, and I have eluded them, and I think that best. Some people seem to think of art as a means for an artist to gain some kind of immortality, but it strikes me as a silly concept, a self-aggrandizing fantasy that rots in the ground beside the carcasses of its believers. For me art is about living my brief moments upon this planet as honestly as I am able and making things that go beyond the utilitarian and that attempt to answer, “Why?” My time is spent in trying to understand who I am and who we humans as a species are beneath the façades we show to one another—the good, the bad, and

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the downright ugly, our self-delusions and the mental constructs created for us through coercion and judgments of others—that which we call “culture”—“others” telling us who we are, were, might be, and should be, much of it steeped in mendacity. So many layers of lies lie between thick tungsten-skinned layers of fear and self-loathing. Lies are much easier to deal with than truth. Truth is maddeningly difficult to find, and often, when we think we’ve found it, it escapes and becomes something else that later becomes something other than that. As far as I am concerned, being an artist isn’t so much about finding the truth as it is about seeking the truth and marking steps along the way to remind ourselves—and interested others, if they exist—where I and we have been. Being an artist is about trying to find something worth saying in some symbolic form—something that I can use as a touchstone to inspire me to carry on when I am discouraged by my fellow human beings (which is quite often). If others are inspired by what I make, all the better; that’s a gift for my ego, but I maintain that it must be irrelevant to the act of making art honestly.

This thing that I am about to create is a book-I-want-to-read-but-which-hasn't-been-written-so-I-have-to-write-it (a la Toni Morrison), and it frightens me. It’s not my first attempt. The words, stories, and experiences behind it have written themselves into and out of existence like grocery lists over the past two years, yet my mind returns incessantly to the sounds and images that demand I write them. If you are reading this, it probably means they succeeded, and I liked the book I wrote.

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## Chapter 1: PROLOGUE

January 6, 2022.

*[Enter the fool.]*

*(A middle-aged man carrying a half-full bottle of whiskey steps out of a doorway into the faint blue light of the backstage like a man set ashore by Charon at hell's entrance with nowhere to go but forward in search of the red-orange light of fire and the sound of Hades' mournful song. He scrunches his eyes and cheeks, holds his shoulders high and tight, turns his neck and head from side to side as he puts one foot cautiously in front of the other without tripping over something he cannot see. Guided by the ever-so-faint yellow light creeping in between the stage curtain and the proscenium wall, he stops at the hand-lock device holding taut draw ropes stretched between the bolted casing's pulleys and the immense weight of the grand drape hanging upon the batten overhead. He grips the hard rasp-like skin of the rope, holds it as if to honor how much depends upon the multitudinous fibers and its stack of counterweights. He tries to remember how and by whom the Harlequin's hat has been placed upon his head, one of its prongs dangling a woolly ball just above his brow. He releases his grip on the rope to tuck the whiskey bottle between his knees, then reaches up, pulls the fool's crown off his head. He stares at it, studies the three floppy, conical shoots that burst from the band and bend happily like thin-stemmed, bloom-heavy peonies. The hat turns round and round in his hands as he follows the flawlessly placed diamond patterns on the hat's cloth: black diamond, white diamond, alternating, perpetual circles around the stems*

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*maxing in red pompoms at the top. Black, white, red he assumes, but knows that blue light tells lies about what the light of day says.)*

FOOL: *[Looking at the hat.]* Thou art a flaccid trinity bowing before a Fool!

*(As he squeezes his knees upon the whisky bottle, it is beginning to slide from its thick belly to its neck; he lowers one hand to catch it and set it ever so gently like a child on the matte black floor—a floor made to kill light and swallow it whole. As he straightens, the bottle fades to black. Frightened, he, reaches down to feel for it, makes note of where it is in relation to his feet. When the crown is reset on his head and the bottle's neck is safely back in his hand like a Christmas goose in a Dickens' tale, he stares into the barely visible space before him. Though he might not say it, he has long thought of this eerie necessity of staging as a sadness*

*of lights grudgingly given. But it takes getting used to even for the young with good eyes. Blue light is meant to serve, prevent his or anyone's human propensity for self-destruction, destruction of property, and harm to one another—actors crashing into crew members standing in gloomy shadows or actors arriving out of the bowels of the building thoughtlessly to the call for "Places!" However, until the eyes adjust, It is like awakening in a lightless room, far from the light switch, and no one in the bed to cling to. As he waits for whatever is or isn't to come, he speaks softly in a Shakespearean dialect.)*

FOOL: A tittering tease of light, thou art, that leads us all-too-soon to sunlit fame ere thou taketh us home into eternal night.

*(He lifts the bottle from the floor, holds it belt-high on his waist, unscrews its cap, tilts his head back and takes a drink, then wipes his*

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*lips on his stained shirt sleeve. The act of dropping his head as it follows the bottle downward to its place on the floor causes one of the hat prongs and attached pom to drop; his first instinct is to catch it like a falling coin, but he is a whippet chasing a mechanical rabbit in a race it needn't run for a prize it will never get and lying down to rest once the running is done. As he lifts himself off the floor, his eyes catch a hint of white light sneaking through the minute space between the massive drape and the stage floor. It is a beckoning from the other side, the side where the people are—an evening's voyeurs waiting like him for whatever is or isn't to come. With his back against the stone and concrete of the proscenium wall, he takes hold of the thick, most-likely-red-or-blue-or-purple velvet curtain and pulls it back just far enough to see that there is a spotlight shining on the center of the wide drape he is holding. It is a powerful light, one that makes an orb of rose ringed by shades of coral, orange, and reds, reds that deepen in the residual light escaping from the edges of the focal point into the blackness made by the absence of Lekos, Ellipsoidals, and Fresnels. He steps away from the wall to stand behind the drape, using it to cover his body as he pulls it slowly, as unnoticeably as possible, far enough back for him to peak around its edge and look briefly into the house, hears an old admonition playing in his head.)*

*"If you can see them, they can see you!"*

*(But he cannot see them. He sees only black beyond the spot's relentless blinding beam coming from somewhere high above the house. Releasing the drape slowly, he listens for subdued coughs, shuffling of feet, sounds of any life beyond himself. But there is nothing, no discernable sound, nothing but the spotlight waiting, nothing but him deciding what to do*

*with the nothing he is in. He looks backstage once more, hoping someone comes into view who knows what*

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*to do, someone who can point him to an exit for an inconspicuous escape, or someone who will push him out onto the stage. Someone to do something.)*

***But there is no one beyond himself except for me, and I will not interfere.***

FOOL: Do something, Fool! Anything! Anything is better than nothing! Act!

*(The beating drum of self-abuse continues, raises his hackles, makes him want to lash out against it, having to make sense of this place, this strange now that he can't seem to escape. He takes a slug of whiskey, looks back at the dark behind him, turns back to the light, pushes the curtain back and steps onto the stage, feels the sudden warmth of the spot on him, hears uproarious applause, whistles, shouts, and stamping feet—the "Huzzahs" he had called such things in the old days. The spotlight follows him as he walks unsteadily forward to the center of the stage, turns to face the blackness emitting the sounds of appreciation for his arrival, shakes his head in an attempt to clear the effects of the alcohol, and then bows before the din of appreciation. He feels the pull of the sloshing bottle lowering toward the stage floor, hears it clunk briefly on the wood. He smells the odors that cling to his worn, wrinkled, and holey clothes and the odors of his unwashed and sockless feet showing through the rips and tears in his canvas shoes. He rises from his bow as the applause, whistles, and shouts continue the adulation.)*

FOOL: *[Speaking quietly to himself.]* They expect something of me; they think I know what to say, know what I am about to do, and why I am doing it. I don't.

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*(He is standing in the light, having brought his mind and body, his bottle and, perhaps, a few dust-made footprints onto the stage).*

***Perhaps he is somehow aware of my presence, and it is to me that he speaks, expects me to help him. Or perhaps it is another self to whom he speaks, a more confident self, a remembrance of that self from some past time. Or perhaps he confesses his inexorable emptiness to a god unnamed.***

*(The bottle weighs heavily in his hand; he looks at the label, "Maker's Mark." While unscrewing the bottle's black plastic cap, he looks out into the black mass that has proclaimed its existence in a collective clinking, clunking, and clanging of human anonymity. The words, "Anything is better than nothing," rattle like ghosts in the many rooms of his brain until they coalesce to demand an action. He makes a cartoon-like smile, his mouth suddenly bigger, his teeth suddenly bigger and taking up half his face, his body somehow taking up space it hasn't taken prior to this moment. With his left hand he lifts the bottle and holds it two or three inches off to the side of his face. Simultaneously, he raises his right-hand to just below his chin with his rigid pointer finger aiming at the bottle, listens to the laughter the gesture makes.)*

FOOL: Prost!

*(He switches the whiskey to his right hand and thrusts the bottle forward to the phantoms filling the theater; then he drinks, pretending to drink deeply while holding his tongue against the rim to hold the whiskey back and allowing only enough liquid encouragement to get through to wet his tongue and coat his throat. Then he wipes*

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*his bottom lip and his chin on a grimy sleeve and waits for the house to quiet.)*

FOOL: *[Speaking directly to the audience.]* So ... What are you doing here? *[Again, he waits for the laughter to subside.]* Seriously. Who let you in here? I've been hanging out backstage for a while; haven't seen a soul. Hell, I don't even know who let me in here. I didn't know you were out here until just a minute ago. Ever feel like you're a puppet just hanging out in life? I do.

*(As he ends the line, his whole body begins to move in herky-jerky fashion, his body parts attached to strings of imagination tied to a cross of wood. He is a Pinocchio imposter dancing in the spotlight amidst the roar of an approving crowd. At the moment just before the audience's laughter is fading, he steadies himself again and goes on.)*

FOOL: Most of the time, that's what I feel like. I never know what's going on. This happens to me all of the time. I'm one place doing something, then I'm somewhere else doing something different. There I was a little while ago sitting in a nice quiet neighborhood bar ... well, really ... sitting on the steps outside the bar ... after the bartender threw me out. So, I was sitting out there in the cold, in Ohio. Of all the goddamn places on earth anybody would ever think to be on a January night in 14-degree weather, that's where I was. Hell! Just minding my own business, and Poof! Here I am. By the way, where am I right now?

A VOICE: *[An echo of his own voice.]* You are still in hell, man!

FOOL: Ohio, Eh? Hell? You must be a Democrat! Oops! Probably shouldn't have said that. It's been like this my entire life, but

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it's gotten worse with age: Never knowing when I'm going to get dropped into something I'm totally unprepared for at the whim of some hack playwright. Don't even know what I'm supposed to be saying now. I'm making it up as I go .... You're laughing. You think I'm joking. Okay, whatever. You'd think the ass who wrote whatever it is you're here for would have written some lines I could have rehearsed. No. I'm left flopping around out here on my own. Shakespeare never would have done that. He'd have me saying something worth saying even if I was saying it to some villain who is pulling the bloody sword out of my belly! Now, there's a guy who could write! Shakespeare! Remember this one? *[He strikes a noble pose.]* "To be, or not to be, that is the question." Probably the most important question ever asked, by the way. *[He relaxes his body, makes three snapping noises with the thumb and middle finger of his right hand, shifting his body from side to side—a 'cool cat' imitation of Sinatra before stopping to say,]* Some days I'm into Frank Sinatra's take on the subject; he was toasting someone and said jokingly, 'May you live to be 100, and may the last voice you hear be mine.' Other days, I'm with Redd Foxx of Sanford and Son fame" *[plays out the staggering movements of the TV show character]* "holding his chest, staggering around his living room, looking upward for heaven, and saying, 'This is the big one! I'm dying! You hear that, Elizabeth! I'm coming to join you, honey!'

*(After mimicking Sanford, he drops his free hand from his chest and goes on.)*

FOOL: Another one of my Shakespeare favorites, and the one that really hits home for me is this one; I'm sure you know it: *[He again strikes a noble pose.]*

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All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts ...

I mean, is that the sum of it all, or what? It's true, you know. We're all players. The only issue is whether we get stuck with endless bit parts or get to play a big juicy role every now and then. And a whole lot of that depends on whether or not the director likes your looks or your ass; to hell with your talent. It's a racket.

Old Will was a pretty smart guy. Why doesn't anybody write like that anymore? The man was always getting at powerful stuff. He would have a field day with what's been going on here—the big “here” as in our time and place—right now, with what we've been going through.

Here we are, you and me, and we don't even know why we're here. At least I don't. Does anybody know what's going on?

Are we supposed to be here for a play? If we are, does anybody know what it's called ... the plotline ... anything at all? I sure as hell hope you don't think I can keep you entertained for an hour and a half! Come on, you must know something, or you wouldn't have wasted your money to get in here. Or are you as lost as I am? All of us at once?

These writers! I tell you. I've had to put up with lots of them, been dragged into so many goofy plots. And always playing the fool or some version of one. Do I look like a fool to you? Never mind. Don't answer that. I forgot about the hat. I'm going to assume there is a play going on here tonight since you are out there, and the spotlight is on me up here and it's following me around. If it isn't a play, and nobody's coming out here to take my place, we've got no reason to be here, right? I'm running out of material, can't dance for beans,

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and believe me, you don't want to hear me sing, especially acapella—can't find a key to stick to from one note to the next.

One thing I can do is make up a story. How about I make up a story? You okay with that? Yeah? Okay. Here goes: Once upon a time ... by the way, why is it so many stories start ‘once upon a time? What's wrong with telling about right now? We've got stories going on in the here and now, don't we? I've got one going on about me trying to figure out why the hell I'm here, but we already talked about that one, so I'll come up with a new one.” *(He bows his head for a moment, pulls his free hand up to his chin, his fingers sliding up to the edge of his bottom lip. After a moment, he says,)* Okay, I've got it! *[He speaks rapidly but clearly.]* So ... thousands of people were standing outside in the January cold and waiting. They had been waiting all morning, many of them holding their places in a too-long line to get into a theater that likely wasn't going to open a moment before the advertised time ... *[He slows down the speed of his speech.]* people freezing be damned. *[Speeds up again.]* Others were waiting too, but they had no intentions of entering like cattle down a chute and were content to see images on huge outdoor screens and hear whatever words might eventually be said through the speakers fastened to the structure's exterior walls. They were waiting for reasons all their own. Some appeared to be military types. Most did not. Many were out-of-shape, non-descript men and women flapping their arms across their chests to stay warm; their bodies



were rocking back and forth to keep their joints from freezing up. Each of them was defiant of the cold as if freezing made a statement all its own.

When the theater's wide double doors opened at last, the people who had been waiting in line like hungry soldiers at the mess hall pushed all discipline aside to break into the space as fast as possible to get some heat and to find the best places to sit—preferably as close to the proscenium as possible.

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They had come for the show that is Pantaloon—the merchant king—the entertainer who had invited them. There was no playbill. It didn't matter. Whatever was done in the name of Pantaloon was enough. The lights went out. A set of Timpani—large bowl and small bowl—began to pound out a rhythm that moved from a series of single beats to a faster rhythmical pattern of five beats alternating between the two drums and then becoming a drum roll on the large bowl which grows in intensity until the drumstick was lifted away and only the reverberations carried over into the clash on a huge brass gong. The sound of the curtain being pulled was heard as the lights faded up on a simple, cartoon-like representation of a village.

What they were about to see was a version of what is called *commedia dell'arte*, not that anybody had used those words. Slapstick or Skit is more likely the more palatable name the audience would use to describe it to their friends when they finally got home. Probably for the best not to call it what it was: some of them wouldn't have known how to pronounce it, maybe would have thought it “too high-falootin'” for their tastes, but—to be fair—maybe they just hadn't cared what it was called as long as it was fun and easy to understand; they hadn't come for theatre. They had come to hear old Pantaloon and had not known—and would not have accepted—that he too was but a character from the genre.

This particular performance started off with three conquering heroes entering the stage. They might have been thought of as heroes, but they were also what I would refer to as loud-mouthed braggarts! The audience quickly learned that these so-called heroes recently returned from putting down a revolt that had arisen in many parts of the kingdom of Rebutlica. Apparently, some blackguards had declared their displeasure with the king's decrees and had launched attacks to defeat and remove old King Bigbritches—formerly a wealthy

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merchant—who through the magic of a playwright’s invention, had gained the title of leader of the realm ... with a few specific limitations placed on him: Bigbritches had to deal with a powerful house of lords and with a council of the judiciary, either of which could undermine his rule if he did not appease their most essential demands upon him. Of course, the king had been plotting to kill them off as soon as possible, but until that happened, he had ignored them as much as possible and put up with what he couldn’t control until such time as assassinations could commence.

Shortly after the heroes got on the stage, actors portraying the populace started coming from behind the curtains and out of the wings. Their characters were excited and happy to welcome the heroes and asked them to tell of their conquests. The braggarts exclaimed, “We have conquered! Made fools of foes, deflowered their virgins, and cuckolded their old men! We have whipped the arses of the young men and left them whimpering while they cooled their afflictions in the troughs of horses.”

AS WOMAN: Doth that make them horse’s arses then?

AS HERO: Aye, it doth. ‘Tis pity I have for thirsty horses who then drink the arse-spiced water.

FOOL: The audience roared with laughter! They were a low-brow humor crowd.

AS YOUNG MAN: [Asking the leader of the heroes.] How didst thou defeat an army larger than thine own?

FOOL: As you can see, this troupe was really into using “thee,” “thou,” “thine,” and such ... and let’s not forget “arse” ... all those cool

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words ... a bit surprising considering the audience they were playing to ... but I’m digressing, aren’t I? Sorry.

So, anyhow, the response to the guy’s question, “How didst thou defeat an army larger than thine own,” was this:

AS HERO: It is said that a bull doth defeat a hundred flies with a single sweep of his tail. Tis true! Yet, it is also true that a great many bulls can be driven to madness by the loss of their tails!

FOOL: The guy who asked the question wasn’t catching on. So, the whole troupe jumped into action to show him what the riddle meant. A young man—skinny, homely, dressed like a fop ... you know what a ‘fop’ is, right? It’s a guy who would be on many a gay guy’s gaydar, except

he—this particular fop—would have to lose layers of lace and face paint before any self-respecting gay guy would touch him. By the way, Commedia dell'arte didn't have a character called a fop, it's just the best word I can come up with right now. At any rate, this fop guy and his well-dressed and beautiful wife came walking onto the stage and into the crowd. The woman, seeing one of the handsome heroes, immediately began to flirt with him. One of the heroes picked up on the flirtation and walked as if in a trance to the woman, pushed the husband aside like he was a sheer curtain, took the woman by the waist and pulled her close to him, kissing her deeply and practically making love to her right there in front of her husband and the audience. The angry husband, half the hero's size, put up his fists like a pugilist.

*(The Fool sets the bottle down on the stage and puts up his fists and starts dancing like an overeager inexperienced boxer.)*

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—the fists dangling out of his lace cuffs, mind you. The hero turned to face the fop.

*(The Fool stops dancing.)*

And, then, the fop punched the hero's midsection as hard as he could punch. [Fool pretends to be punching something.] The punch had absolutely no impact on the great battle-worn hero. It was as if the fop had punched a two-inch thick steel plate, and his arm and body began to reverberate with the pain rushing throughout his body causing him to go rigid and vibrate like a cartoon character that had stuck its finger into a light socket.

*(The Fool mimics a cartoon character, his arm frozen in front of him, his body experiencing waves of painful reverberations as he spins in a circle and almost falls down before continuing the story.)*

Okay! So! When he—the husband—the fop—was done with his antics, a street person came up to him and pointed to the fop's shoe, which, as you can guess, has supposedly gotten dirtied in the scuffle. So, of course, in the world of commedia dell'arte, the fop was obliged to bend over to clean the shoe before returning to the fight. As he bent over, he got kicked in the backside—the 'arse' if you will—by one of the characters. That kick drove him into the arms of the two braggart heroes who had been standing by enjoying the humiliation of the fop. They simultaneously punched the fop in the nose and let him fall to his hands and knees; then, they kicked his arse all the way across the stage as he tried to escape his tormentors as quickly as possible while squealing like a pig until he was booted off stage.

Amidst other interweaving mini stories, there were a few more attempts on the part of the husband to come back on stage and avenge

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his treatment and to convince his wife that he was the stronger and better man. At one point, he—"Foppo," we'll call him—wish I'd thought of that earlier—Foppo came in with weapons that were easily taken away from him and broken over his head as he was chased off stage. In his final attempt he brought a couple of friends—also fops—we'll call them "The Fop Squad"—on stage. They were flexing their skinny arms and posing like pugilists until the three so-called heroes stepped in front of them blocking them from the audience's view as they pummeled the fops to the ground. When the huge men stopped and stepped aside, the three members of "The Fop Squad" team were scuffed up, naked except for knee-length women's underwear flapping about their legs.

*(The Fool puts his hands over his crotch, scrunches his body up, lifts his leg as if trying to hide the laughter coming at the fops' humiliation. After a moment, he relaxes the comedic pose, bends over, retrieves his bottle and stands up straight.)*

I'll tell you about one other scene and then I'll wrap this up. How am I doing? You still with me? Yeah? Okay, so, in this scene, a woman—a regal woman—dressed to the nines walked out onto the stage. Her face showed disdain for the heroes. "She's a traitor," someone yelled. The street people turned their backs on her all at once, but she was undeterred, walking like a queen oblivious to the reactions of the crowd. She was quite noble looking except that she seemed to be having difficulty keeping her wig from sliding off her head.

Of course, the heroes saw her as another potential conquest... if you know what I mean. They exchanged ribald banter amongst themselves about her desirable body until one of them said, "Methinks I shall kiss the lady." As he came within kissing distance, he looked longingly into her face. He hesitated, stepped back, his face suddenly

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puzzled, then suspicious, and said, "Doth seem thy face is gray in part 'neath thy powder and paint, a most unnatural shadow on a morn such as this. What art thou?" At that moment, the wig began to slip again. The hero said, "Allow me to help thee with that, my lady." As he said the word "lady," he reached toward the wig and snatched it from her head and tossed it to one of the other heroes. As the befuddled woman (now completely bald) ran around trying to get the wig that was being tossed from one hero to the other, stuffing began to fall out of

the swollen bosom of the dress, leaving a deflated bodice and a flat chest. That was when the audience figured out that she was not a “she,” but a “he.” With that, the ‘he’ who had been a ‘she’ picked up his skirts and ran off the stage screaming for help with the entire troupe of actors in pursuit. Lights went out, came back up, and the troupe came out to take its bows to the whoops and yowls of the audience. And that was that!

Now, here’s the really important part. Remember that everything I just told you is a prelude to what the audience had actually come for. When the applause for the comedic entertainment ended, the house went dark and stayed dark for ten seconds while timpani once again built from a soft rumbling to a pounding crescendo ... very dramatic. A spotlight hit upstage left. Multiple trumpets started playing a triumphal sound—you know? Like Rocky’s Theme?—and then Pantaloon stepped from the dark wings of the stage into the spotlight that followed him as he moved about, the audience now standing, applauding, shouting all kinds of praise, whistling those two-fingers-halfway-down-their-throat whistles that pierce the eardrums of anyone within fifty feet of the ass who does it. They love him. His rotund body is draped in finest cloth; his face shines, the gold crown on his head holds his coiffed hair perfectly in place. He is swollen with self-satisfaction coming from the effusive, almost-hysterical adulation of the people, many hoisting banners to express support for

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his reign. Amidst the thundering expressions of love hurdling against his ears, Old Pantaloon raised his arms as a gesture of appreciation like a diva who had given a bravura performance worthy of historical note. He strutted before the audience, held their clamor in his death grip until they could no longer sustain it. When they finally quieted, he spoke.

AS KING: [*Taking on an air of pomposity.*] Loyal subjects, I beseech thee to listen well, for our hour is at hand! Wickedness hath slithered into the muddled minds of our lords. This day, they prepare to take our crown and your fruits of a war so nobly won. They prepare to crown a lesser king and to empower a scourge of a people, a despicable people deserving of nothing but god’s eternal damnation. I tell thee, that if we do not take up arms, infidels shall soon swarm over our lands, our freedom and fortunes ... stealing all that we have fairly gained during my most benevolent reign. I tell thee, it is time to fight! The lords have forsaken us! I shall not be forsaken! Nor shall thee or thine! I ask thee, “Wilt thou ride with me this day against the house of lords? And, wilt thou fight? ‘Aye! Aye,’ ye say. Aye, my faithful subjects! This day we ride to glory, smite the traitorous lords, and regain our rightful reign at whatever price must be paid. Art thou with me?”

AS FOOL: As you can guess, the people in that audience had been getting worked up almost from the beginning of Pantaloon's speech. The realization of the pre-speech spectacle had begun to make sense to them. They were standing, cheering, yelling, "We are with you!"—all proclaiming their love.

AS KING: Then let us ride!

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AS FOOL: The people were cussing and making threats and demands upon the air in support of their beloved king. Those outside watching on the monitors and listening to the monstrous speakers hanging from the sides of the buildings were also ranting. Clubs, knives and other weapons people had brought with them started coming up out of pant legs and pockets, from underneath hats, out of lunch sacks and other bags people had brought. Pitchforks were pulled from behind trees and brush where they had been hidden. People inside the theater pushed one another forward to the exit doors, each wanting to enter the fray. Once outside, they moved as quickly as possible to catch up with the others who had already gained a quarter-mile lead on the road to where the House of Lords met. Off they went, looking for a fight, which, by the way, they couldn't possibly win despite the bloviation of old Pantaloon, because, contrary to what he said, he hadn't won the war at all, hadn't even come close to winning, and the victors had the power to defend themselves against Pantaloon's undisciplined, rag-tag army. Pantaloon had sent them on a fool's errand, maybe destruction, needless death while he returned to his castle and slept.

*(He opens the bottle and takes a long drink, wipes his mouth, and then proceeds.)*

FOOL: Folks, I'm really tired, and I don't know what else I can give you. I told you from the get-go I didn't know why I was here, and—no offense—you haven't been much help telling me why any of us is here. My best guess is that we're in a rough draft of another tale told by yet another idiot signifying nothing. *[He drinks again and again as he talks becoming more obviously inebriated by the moment, struggling with words now, pausing in awkward places to catch the thoughts that want to escape him.]* As my mama always

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that makes you think it's the 'is', but 'is'—big IS—is somewhere else. This 'is' thing is making me dizzy. Maybe Shakespeare knew what he was doing after all when he didn't write it. said, 'It is what it is, Fool.' Used to think ... you know, like 'Duh!' when people said. ... But you know? Damned if she wasn't right. People are the way they are. Life ... is what it is. Chance is

chance. ‘Takes a hell of a lot of time and effort to change ‘is’ to ‘was’ ... if you know what I mean. Luck ... some people born with it; some of us can’t find it with a flashlight in daytime with a magnifying glass ... a map ... a paid guide. Maybe ‘It is what it is’ is dumb ... but sometimes the best collection of words ever! I mean ... think about it. If Shakespeare said those words, we would carve them on porticos of great buildings. Best we can do is scribble them on a restroom wall ... something to stare at when you’ve got nothing else to do but wait. I don’t know. Guess it depends on what you make of it. But maybe that’s the point! Everything kind of depends on what we make of it. I mean, ask yourself, “Is anything actually what people say it is?” *[He drinks again. The full effect of alcohol has kicked in.]* Speaking of ‘is,’ you know this whole theatre thing ... it’s just smoke, mirrors, and cardboard, right? I mean, Duh! All art’s that way. Not in the thing. In what we make of the thing. You know what I mean? It’s an is

*(He opens his bottle again, this time taking a long drink that makes the liquid bubble in the bottle before he stops and screws its cap into place.)*

*[Speaks.]* This bottle has gained weight. *(He looks at it again. There is only a small amount left.)* What the hell! *(He drinks the bottle dry, then throws it; it makes a hollow clunk on the stage floor and the sound of heavy glass rolling to a stop against the curtain. He is trying to keep his eyes open, his body upright and can’t maintain it.)*

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*He sags to the floor and lies down as if to sleep. After a few seconds, his eyes open. He hears the deadly hush of the audience.)* I’m sorry. Just joking. *(Somehow, with a great deal of effort and lack of coordination, he gets back on his knees, then tries to stand. He cannot. He tries to claim a noble stance like Hamlet’s Claudius on his knees praying, but he is unable to sustain it. The whiskey has caressed his brain, rocking him like a baby toward sleep—a baby fighting the idea, a baby wanting to get free of the constraints of its mother’s arms one more time before giving in. He stares into the darkness, listens to a somehow-altered silence—not the sound of a hushed audience—but an unutterable emptiness, a hollowness of a life badly spent, a loneliness waiting somewhere below his chin as he tries to look down over his nose at something out there beyond the stage that cannot and will not be seen.)*

*[Speaks sheepishly. Drunk.]* Are you there? Is anyone out there?

*(Only the echo of his own voice returns from paint-peeling plaster walls of an unexplainably familiar space. The spotlight is gone. A dull light from behind his eyes brings the room into view, shows the heaps of debris where the seats had been, illuminates the stage apron beneath him layered in dust and chunks of fallen plaster. He turns around to face a*

*curtainless and empty proscenium lit in a meager gray light coming from a broken window high above what were once fly rails and rigging. He reaches up to feel for the prongs of the hat that is no longer on his head.)*

FOOL: Goddamned writers!

*[Exeunt the fool.]*

•••

*“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child!”*

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## **Chapter 2: THE PLAYBILL**

### **June 2021**

*Dave’s Place was going to be a risky play, and I didn’t care ... or at least I told myself I didn’t care. Even as I wrote it, I doubted anyone would produce it. Like my other work, it was probably too far outside the safe clichés to be considered, and it doesn’t have the requisite number of roles for women (a la Bechdel-Wallace decree)—in fact, no women appear in it at all except by the telling of stories. ... This is not because I don’t like women, but because it is about three men. It brings in political issues related to the January 6th insurrection and deals tangentially with the existence of COVID. It was probably going to be a loser all the way around for making money. But then, moneymaking had never been the important thing about writing it.*

*Despite my fears about its acceptance, a version of my script managed to make it as a finalist in an international award competition. It didn’t win, but the fact that it was chosen from nearly 1,000 scripts as a finalist was enough for me to hope the play had a future. However, after reciting my mantra of “Your loss, Chump” to the rejections, I returned to my original thoughts: The play was written because it had to be written, and there had never been any guarantees that it would become more than an ink-splattered stack of paper in a desk drawer that someone would throw away or burn up in the fireplace after I die. “Better to have written and failed to find a kindly reader than never to have written at all” ... or, at least, that’s what I told myself.*

*Funny how things work themselves out: fate fell like a wall upon me, and I happened to be standing where the empty window space landed amongst the brick and concrete crashing on the grass. A phone*



*call. A desire to stage the play, contracts, rehearsals, opening night, playbills in the hands of audience members to fill the time before the play begins:*

## CAST

### **Brad Michaels: Dave Singh**

Brad Michaels has appeared in productions in New York, Chicago, and London. He has been highly praised for his performances as Hal in William Inge’s *Picnic*; Biff in *Death of a Salesman*; Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; Joe in *Sunset Boulevard*; Hamlet with the London Shakespeare Troupe; and many other major roles. He has performed for film (*Marcus in Sunflower*; Julian in *Last Night*, and Everett in *Lost Cause*) and television (“Crank’s” and “Livid.”). Mr. Michaels was listed by Entertainment News Magazine as one of the top ten up and coming actors of 2021.

### **Kevin Lane: Jack Ingram**

Kevin Lane’s first major role was as Alan Strang in Peter Shaffer’s *Equus* (San Francisco, 2017). Since that time, he has portrayed Tom Wingfield in a revival of Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (2019); Romeo in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (New York production 2020); and Edmund Tyrone in Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (Chicago production 2020). Over the past two years, Mr. Lane has performed on several television programs and special project films.

### **Matt Connor: James Lathrop (Banker) and Bill Hagerty (a bully)**

Matt Connor makes his return to Broadway after a brief hiatus. Matt has performed in numerous stage productions, television programs and movies. His most famous stage role was in Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, a New York production of the Beckett

*Society of America*. In this production, Mr. Connor takes on two very different and difficult roles.

**SETTING:** The play takes place in a bar in Pierlight, Ohio, a small city 70 miles southeast of Columbus. The action of the play occurs from late afternoon, January 7, 2021, until 1:30 a.m. January 8th. The COVID pandemic has caused businesses to struggle for survival; many have already closed their doors and accepted the loss of their livelihoods. It is the day after the

insurrection—attempted coup—in Washington, DC. There is a fear that is spreading across the country that democracy itself is on the verge of collapse.