

Audience

(from *Play, A Novel*)



Alan Singer

Act I, Scene 6: A lofty turret room of the renegade Gonzogo's castle. Stone walls, streaked with a furry dampness. Instruments of torture: a rack, pulleys, hooks.

Gonzogo is cinching Rosalinda's wrists to the rack. She barely resists.

GONZOGO: Look upon these remnants of previous leather bindings. Are they not curled against the dowels like perched birds who never flew again from these bare lime twigs?

ROSALINDA: My limbs will not survive the test. Why not cut out my tongue to soothe your wrath, since it will warble the notes of my innocence forever in your hearing?

GONZOGO: That tongue I should have cuddled with my lips? It would have been my pleasure to make it my pet, were it not such a cur to the truth.

ROSALINDA: Signore, my only falsity was the truth of my love for Fernando, whose bones your axe set to as if you were a chopper of

wood. So, you watered the tree of your hatred with his blood. We did see how it rose to the knees of your breeches, you waded so deep.

GONZOGO: I will go deeper yet.

ROSALINDA: In me, with your roughest blade. Be quick!

Gonzogo reaches for the dagger in his belt.

ROSALINDA: But stay. Do you not wish to know what it would have been like, had I parted my lips for you? Thusly, at least you might know what you have slain.

GONZOGO: What? Give me reason to do honorably that which would have otherwise have seemed dishonor? Defile a slut? By your leave mistress, I will.

Gonzogo wrenches Rosalinda's mouth toward his own by the scruff of her neck. When he crushes his mouth upon hers, Gonzogo gives out an agonized shriek and falters backwards to the floor. Rosalinda cries out. She bares her incarnadine teeth. The tip of a sewing needle glints minutely in their bloody grip. She spits.

ROSALINDA: Quicker am I to the scabbard of my tongue than you to the scabbard on your belt Signior. To be plain, the point of my blade was already unsheathed in my words-- which you mistook for the weakest flesh—and already tipped with the adder's bile. The bite at the other end of the needle was easy enough to bear, knowing how my taunting tongue, skewered on the very shaft of the needle, would bid you good death.

Marry, my tongue bleeds from the wound that wombed the needle's sting. I would not deny it. Unlike yourself, I do bleed the evidence of a murder.

But you Signore, you are dead.

“Yes. The piece has a working title. *Killer Killing Killers*. Many scenes, but all superficially disarticulated from one another. Except of course that they are all scenes of murder. One after another. Murder keeps them interested.”

How many times have I begun the conversation with my potential backers this way?

As with my surgeon, we meet in restaurants. Or in the bars that are ante-rooms to restaurants, pretexts for eating. For acting. It is an act of devotion, if I can conjure the funds from their hip pockets.

My potential backers wish to divine the meaning of their investment. It is my job to make them believers, in the very manner of the original mystery players. The devil could bare his backside on stage and no one laughed at the shagginess of the hair that whipped the swagger of that dark orifice. Well, I want them to take it on faith that their money is already a token of sacred knowledge, which no accountant could ever divulge for them. They require instead the offices of a priest of dramaturgy.

Is it not art, after all, that we are discussing, glasses in hand, our mouths quite full?

“Think of *yourself* as the meaning of the play,” I tell them. “Do you not recognize your special sensitivity to the human condition?” Then I delve into the body cavity, stroking the choicest organs. The stomach, the heart. I conjure a plot, a fate. I make a character stoop. I unfold a fabric of suffering, spread it out before them.

“The production is a sort of tablecloth upon which we will break bread. Such knowledge of the human heart we will purvey.” I inspire them to appreciate our partnership. “You in your capacity as a producer, me in my capacity as a producer of miracles.”

So, I inveigle them, knowing how insatiable the hunger for the right feeling can be. Touching human organs is a tricky business. Not to say “sticky.” Well, you want to breathe life into the idea of the play. You want them to feel the fragility, the shortness of that breath. And you want them to stomach it when you suck that breath away. But be chary of the heartstring strung too tightly. Don’t snap the bond by suturing things up too tightly. Well, I sound like a medical man myself. Not surprisingly.

Believe me, I have spent my hours on the table, dying to be the surgeon, not the rattling patient. Dying, if truth be told.

It can indeed be told.

Dr. Todorow stirred in his seat, in the fifth row, center of the *Crooked Hat Theater*, observing my high stepping entrance from stage left, though the stage set, a curved wall of mirrors, reversed that direction for the audience, held briefly as they might have been, in the grip of illusion. Not least the illusion that here was a healthy specimen of an actor.

No such illusion would have sway over the un-confoundable heart carver. As he tells it, he was already prickly with the foreknowledge that constantly hums in the fingertips of a man whose senses teeter against unpredictable densities of tissue as they yield to the sheerness of whetted steel. Such is the surgeon's preternatural attunement to what is next. We all squirm in our balcony seats with the tickle of such anticipation in our tails. Who can help it? Well, we are not doctors after all. We cannot help.

As I set my silent, tip toeing foot to the floor behind Siegfried The Magician's wand waving figure, the garrote dangling from my fingertips like a shimmering necklace, my entire physique shuddered with the first fist-thumping blows of the heart muscle that suddenly lurched within my breast. The even more massive thump of my entire body upon the floorboards of the stage, as tremorous as a sandbag plunging from the lighting grid above our heads, caused Siegfried The Magician, meant as he was to be caught unawares by the garrote that was already skittering across the stage, to flinch and cower. Precisely the response that my character's exaggerated light-footedness was intended to forestall. The director should have halted the production.

But the unsubtle foot was now stomping its way from my chest to my shoulder and down my arm, finding its mark, so that the recognition scene of a drama all too horribly recognizable to me, might unfold to its fatal conclusion.

Luckily, luckily I had a secret collaborator in the drama that I could not have authored by myself. Dr. Todorow's rush to the stage outpaced the giant foot trodding upon the life that I now imagined to be a mouse scurrying frantically to escape the enclosure of my narrowing chest. He found me athwart the mark where the stage

action was meant to have progressed, my eyes spread wide and overflowing with the light that showered from the pole-grid above our heads, my arms and legs flung away, the body trying to save itself by reckless abandonment of the convulsing torso.

He knew what to do. He seized the mouse tail. With my pulse still throbbing in his thumb he raised himself on one knee under the wash of a particularly glaring spotlight that must have made the squinting spectators wonder if this wasn't a continuation of the drama they were so engrossed in. Passing his open hand across the face of the audience, as if to wipe away the greasy film on a window, he ordered the auditorium to be cleared. The ambulance might have disgorged from his mouth it appeared with such instantaneity.

The siren of the ambulance, hovering over my lurching stretcher as we raced out of the bleak tunnel of my breast-beating terror into the salvific illumination of the operating theater, still rings in the tunnels of my hearing. Someone was holding my hand, leading me, though I was not following on my own legs. Voices spoke as if I were their echo chamber. They did not speak to me. I was scissored free of my clothes. I was shifted from gurney to table. A heavy glove was laid upon my mouth. I breathed it in as I was instructed. I felt vague fingers snuggling in my nostrils, in my throat.

As the fur grew thicker in my consciousness I was nonetheless aware that another stage was awaiting my appearance. Dr. Todorow's eyes beamed the key-light that, I chillingly recalled, only the risen dead can give report of. My complete loss of consciousness at that moment did not dim the scene of action that was about to transpire, though I was no audience for it. They discovered my heart.

I'm making an inference. I am, after all, alive.

An inference, fittingly enough, is what I ask of my potential backers, I don't deny it. For them it might be characterized as the leap of faith that one hopes will be fortuitously winged with success. I am the one, am I not, promising to make those wings sprout.

I felt the nibs of those wings scratching my throat while

we waited for the first drinks to arrive. The bardic genius who first dipped his quill into the inkpot was at the feathered end of the bargain. So, I must flock to answer their questions. I am, after all, one of a company.

“Yes, the piece has a working title. *Killer Killing Killers*. You can take it either way. Either the killer is adjectivally motivated, a killing kind of killer. Or have it otherwise. The killer kills. Of course, if you try to go one way, the other will follow.”

My potential backers are of the world that knows the difference between an adjective and a noun. They aren't cunts, as our Pinter would have his character say it. I have taken part in his audiences, at the more fashionable theatrical houses, no doubt among the ilk of the very backers who sat before me now. They sport turtle-neck sweaters, cashmere scarves, ascots. Not cowboy hats and string ties. They speak languages that did not mother them. They have traveled. They have eaten exotic meats. They have attained their full stature as men, and the occasional startlingly attractive woman. Their photographs, among the faces of other directors and playwrights and actors, stare out at us from the walls of even such restaurants as this, where I invite my potential backers to swirl the wine in the glass, to lean back against padded leather and entertain my proposal. The drinks had arrived.

“But don't get the wrong idea. There is humor. The humor, you see, is in the blood. Think of the old humours of the blood that would have bubbled in the bard's time and you're on your way to the insight that is my tickling inspiration. I seem to give you only violence in my play. Seemingly discrete scenes, like blood-soaked breadcrumbs, dropped without a pathway to remember. But my audience will pick them up. They will see the humor of it in the end because they will have no choice.

“I've been accused by my critics of worse convolutions, believe me.

“So, yes the play is one scene after another, you understand, of killing. But one thing after another implies history, doesn't it? The meaning will of course be recognizable to my audience by cues of costuming and scenery, if not by the distinct idioms echoing our hoary theatrical past. Each scene will be dressed out in the costuming and language of our Greeks, our Jacobean, our Victorians, our Moderns the whole playlist of our great masters. The

dignity of the theater itself is to be honored in these scenes, despite the rampant gore.

“So, at least seemingly it will be only one scene after another of the knife piercing the eye, the garrote nearly severing the vertebrae (there are tricks to this trade), the gunshot smoldering in the chest, the poniard twisting in the groin, the anal penetrations with the fire-dripping iron poker (tricks, as I say). But *seemingly* is the point.

“Because you haven’t heard the best part. You haven’t really understood what it is I am proposing yet. And that is as it should be. Your suspense is the audience’s suspense. You will know what they will know, unexpectedly, as it happens in the most realistic life. I am such a mimetic artist you see, quite contrary to the label “experimentalist” which my critics have stitched upon the fabric of my career and which, like all the white-coated laboratorists who so dutifully attend to our mortality, simply frightens the audience away. Some call them doctors.

“I tear that label out of the lining of every performance.

“Well, here is the proof of my plot-making proficiency. One scene after another of killing etc. One scene after another of the knife piercing the eye etc. Oh, they’ll get the gore, our audience. They may even be briefly startled by their capacity for boredom, the edge of their seats pricklingly numbing the backs of their legs. They’ll get the gore. But they’ll have missed the point of the poniard, if you catch the flourish of its twinkling in my eye. Until they have seen enough, until they have seen past the costuming, even past the face paint.

“‘But he is already dead,’ they will now mutter to themselves. One killer killed by the next in scene after scene. Such is the appearance they will have been given by us jointly, should you take my hand in this venture. Now they will feel the confidence of their smug judgment in the smile-primped corners of their lasciviously rouged mouths. Men are plumped with as much blood as women in the snide curling of their lips that accompanies the presumption to criticize.

“For the killer has, with each killing, taken a bow of sorts, slowly and deliberately turned full face toward the witnessing audience—releasing the weapon of choice to the incriminating clatter of the stage floor—before abruptly making his exit from the scene.

Until the next scene, when the actor's face will be recollected more sharply.

"So now they will be embarrassed for the actor, more so for the writer and for the producer whom they will believe have let the theatrical sleight slip from the hand.

"The same actor,' they will whisper to one another in the thickening murk of their seats. They are having to use the same actor. How are we meant to believe in these characters?"

They won't know how they were meant to mouth these criticisms until the actor speaks for herself.

"In the final scene she addresses herself directly to the audience. When her face turns over her shoulder, they feel the massive liquid queasiness of the passengers in a lifeboat lifted by a sudden swell rolling off the back of a whale. So, the memory comes to each member of the audience. In every one of the preceding scenes the killer has curiously paused, just so. Before taking the first steps towards his hasty escape, he has paused. He has turned his face to the audience in exactly this way, as if he had something to say. Then thinking better, tucking the quick tongue of himself into the folds of silencing darkness that close behind him at the back of the stage, he is gone.

"But this time, after so many scenes of carnage, he speaks. She speaks.

'I've been watching you. How did you not notice? I, I am always the killer'. What the audience thought they had unmasked as the disqualifying artifice of the performance, was, of course, the point of the performance.

"Well, this reversal of roles is what I am thinking of now. For the ending. Not bad, I admit. But much can change in the course of rehearsals and rewritings, the accidents of time that stretch before us to opening night. The final ending will come later. You must permit yourselves the suspense. What's a plot without a reversal of fate?"

Final Scene: Subject to Revision

A butcher shop. White tile walls. A high counter with a broad view of displayed meats.

Before the counter, Smartson is just leaving the stage, stepping over

the hacked corpse of his wife Sofia, his grip yet unrelenting upon the axe-handle. The axe-head bobs drippingly over his left shoulder.

SMARTSON: *He stares with a new and frenzied concentration over his right shoulder at the audience. Here commences a monologue. I've been watching you. How did you not notice? I, I am always the killer.*

You've seen me perhaps. But you haven't noticed.

And if you are keener of eye than I imagine, you knew I was always the killer in every scene, whatever the scene, whatever costume I colored it with. I was always the purveyor of this eye [winks at audience], tossed over my shoulder like a coin to sop you, to distract you, as I spirited myself from the stage. Always the same ending. At the terminus of each scene you know what to expect, so far...as far as you know anyway.

If you have the keener eye, you were not fooled by the appearance that I was always killed in the subsequent scene, an actor dressed like me, spoken like me, my name his again. If you have the keener eye, hungry for notice of your own, you might say, under your breath, mildly, laughingly to your seat-mate, *it is the same actor killing again.*

But still, you've missed a thing or two.

You thought that I, a man murderer, was a man.

Turning ever more frontally to the audience, unbuttoning the all too conspicuous fly of her pin-striped trousers, and with the violent affection of a mother plucking her toddler's arm from the curb, she releases a springy rubber phallus from the flapping vent. Then, emitting the shriek of a woman who has just stepped over a mouse, she rips open the black velour-trimmed tuxedo vest--fastened from first button to last under the suit jacket--watch fob flying, and looses one alabaster bosom from the false shirt-front now crumpled around her neck. The rosy nipple is pertly erect under her provocative fingertip, proving its authenticity, at least to the first three rows.

BLACKOUT