

Dismantling Prospero

a play with dance

by Tom Rowan

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[OPENING SEQUENCE ONLY]

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CAST OF CHARACTERS:

GRIFFIN BATES: Male, 50s, white. A choreographer who heads the Dance Department at the University.

FRANCINE THORNTON: Female, 50s, white. A costume designer; the Dean of Performing Arts.

DALE CHEN: Male, 30s, Chinese-American. A composer/pianist and Assistant Professor of Music.

WANDA HAYES: Female, 40s, black. A high school English teacher and former dancer.

SARA HAYES: Female, early 20s, mixed-race. A dance student; Wanda's daughter.

MARCUS MONTGOMERY: Male, early 20s, black. Sara's boyfriend; a Phys Ed major and star of the wrestling team.

EMILY GILMORE: Female, early 20s, white. A ballerina about to graduate.

JAKE LEVISON: Male, early 20s, white. A dance student.

CHRISTINA LEE: Female, 30s, BIPOC. A Diversity Facilitator and instructor.

SETTING: A university town in Middle America.

The primary setting is a dance studio, including tall mirrors with ballet barres attached and substantial open floor space for dancing. Around the perimeter are a few moveable furniture pieces (a lectern, a table, a desk, a few folding chairs) that will be used to anchor scenes set in other locations.

TIME: Now.

ACT ONE

In the Dean's Office

(Mid-conversation. FRANCINE is seated behind her desk; GRIFFIN is standing.)

FRANCINE

I see. And just when did you come up with this brilliant idea?

GRIFFIN

To tell you the truth I've been toying with it for years. Even back when I had my company. It was always too big. But I think this year is the right time.

FRANCINE

Why?

GRIFFIN

The students need something exciting to get them reenergized. After a whole year of no public performances—and trying to figure out how to teach dance classes on Zoom for Christ's sake—we need a full-scale project to inspire us and pull us back together as a department.

FRANCINE

The Spring Dance Concert was supposed to be a program of short pieces choreographed by the adjuncts. A ballet piece, a modern piece, a jazz piece...

GRIFFIN

We've done that too many times. This year we need to be more ambitious. And I have a vision for it that utilizes all the different disciplines. It's a way to cross-pollinate with other departments too, which you've been saying we need to find more ways to do. I've been talking to Dale Chen in Music about writing an original score for it, and he could not be more excited.

FRANCINE

(Raises an eyebrow.) Before the project has even been approved?

GRIFFIN

I have faith in you, Francine. You'll come through. *(He grins conspiratorially.)* And it's a rare opportunity for the costume designer.

FRANCINE

I'll ask Mary Jane if she has time.

GRIFFIN

Come on, Francine. She's never done a ballet. I need somebody who understands how fabric moves. Someone who can design a majestic cloak, and make me believe it has magical powers. It's a rare chance to let your imagination run wild.

FRANCINE

(Trying not to look tantalized.) You know I haven't designed a show since they made me Dean of Performing Arts. I'm practically drowning in bureaucratic paperwork half the time.

GRIFFIN

It's important to remember that you're an artist first. There's not another designer on campus who could pull this off. *(Beat.)* If it's approved, of course.

FRANCINE

I'll bring it up tomorrow with the budget committee. Don't get your hopes up, Griffin. *(He just smiles at her.)* Now don't you have a class or something to get to?

Class in the Studio

(DALE is at the piano playing Mozart; SARA, EMILY, and JAKE, dressed for ballet class, sail onto the stage in unison, dancing the final bars of a combination across the floor. GRIFFIN turns to face them.)

GRIFFIN

Chin higher, Sara. And Jake, that's great, just lower your shoulders a bit, you're still carrying tension. Good, good. That's all we have time for today; thank you very much. And thank you as always, Dale. *(The students applaud.)* Couple things. Those of you who haven't scheduled your midterm evaluation appointments yet, make sure to do that post haste; the sign-up sheet is on the door to my office. We'll be making a big announcement by the end of this week about plans for the spring production, and it's going to be something different this year: a full-length original work involving most everyone in the department. I'll be setting up meetings with some of the advanced students to discuss specific roles, so watch the callboard. And have a good evening; I'll see you Wednesday.

(GRIFFIN leaves and the students break their formation. EMILY takes down her bun and fluffs out her hair in one of the mirrors. SARA sits on the floor and pulls off her ballet slippers. DALE starts to gather his sheet music, and JAKE grabs a towel and wipes the perspiration off his face and arms.)

SARA

A full-length original work? I thought some of the adjuncts were already proposing short pieces.

DALE

Change of plans. Griffin decided he wants to choreograph a major new piece. He hasn't done one in five or six years.

EMILY

Griffin Bates choreographing a new ballet? On us? This could be interesting.

SARA

And I bet you know what it's about, Dale.

DALE

(Nods.) He's asked me to compose the music, actually. But I'm not allowed to say anything until the title's been officially announced.

EMILY

Come on; just give us a hint.

DALE

(Smiles.) Sorry; you know Griffin. He'd have my head if I said one word. It'll all be public soon enough. Enjoy your evening. *(He exits. SARA turns and looks at JAKE.)*

SARA

What are you smiling about, Jake? You know something the rest of us don't?

JAKE

Possibly.

EMILY

And??

JAKE

Trade secrets; sorry.

EMILY

Why would Griffin tell you and not the rest of us?

JAKE

We have a special bond.

EMILY

Apparently.

SARA

Teacher's pet.

JAKE

All I'll say is... it's going to be based on a famous play.

EMILY

Another Greek tragedy? He loves those.

JAKE

I promised not to say.

EMILY

Okay, be that way. I'm going to go get changed.

SARA

Where are you headed?

EMILY

Library first; I've got that paper to work on.

SARA

Oh, right; shit! When are those due?

EMILY

Monday.

JAKE

Whose class?

SARA

Christina Lee.

EMILY

(Overlapping.) Social Justice in the Performing Arts. Weren't you in that class?

JAKE

Yeah, um, I pretty much stopped going when she put all the white students in a discussion group and made us draw up charts "deconstructing our identities as racial oppressors."

EMILY

Uh-oh. That's your white fragility showing.

JAKE

Calling *me* the oppressor? Get real.

EMILY

You couldn't help but be. It's the system we were born into.

JAKE

Um, at the risk of pointing out the obvious, I happen to be a member of three of the most persecuted groups in history! Hitler would have slapped me with the yellow triangle and the pink, both! I've got enough intersectionality to confuse a traffic cop.

(Beat. SARA and EMILY look at each other, then back at JAKE.)

EMILY

Okay, and? You said three.

JAKE

What?

SARA

Gay and Jewish is two. What's the third persecuted group?

JAKE

Dancers!

EMILY

(As SARA laughs.) There are some things that shouldn't be joked about. Not in today's world.
(Beat.) Have a good night, Sara. See you tomorrow in Advanced Jazz. *(She leaves.)*

JAKE

Aargh. Could she be any more full of herself?

SARA

She's just... Emily. So: what's the scoop on the ballet?!

JAKE

(He makes a show of looking over his shoulder to make sure no one is listening.) It's going to be based on a Shakespeare play. *(Beat.)*

SARA

Okay. Which one?

JAKE

I could tell you. But then I'd have to kill you.

SARA

Whatevs. *(She turns to go.)*

JAKE

(Running after her.) Okay okay! It's *The Tempest*.

SARA

I don't think I know that one.

JAKE

I saw the movie. It's fab. A desert island romance with a fairy and a monster and... a few goddesses. That kind of stuff.

SARA

Great. So you'll be the monster and I'll be the goddess.

JAKE

Shut up! No; you'll be Miranda! Daughter of the banished Duke. Who falls in love with the noble Ferdinand, shipwrecked Prince of Naples! *(He does a pirouette and alights at her feet on one knee, hand outstretched like a classic balletic cavalier.)*

SARA

And that's the part Griffin promised you?

JAKE

Well, not in so many words... (*He smiles slyly.*)

SARA

It'll be you and Emily, probably. She's the best classical dancer in the department.

JAKE

Maybe *technically*. But she doesn't really get Griffin's style; it's closer to Tharp than Balanchine. You, on the other hand, dance from your center; you dance like you mean it. Griffin sees that.

SARA

He told you this?

JAKE

No. But he's seen you and me dance together. The pas de deux in Francesca's piece? That was pure chemistry. He won't forget.

SARA

Keep thinking those thoughts.

JAKE

Don't tell anybody I told you.

SARA

Mum's the word. What are you doing tonight?

JAKE

Cramming for an anatomy test.

SARA

Library?

JAKE

Dorm. There's a new R.A. and he's kind of hot. If he's around tonight, I think I might pretend to be having an emotional crisis and ask him to hold me.

SARA

You're horrendous.

JAKE

No you are you are! Where are you headed?

SARA

Home to change. Then dinner and a movie with Marcus.

JAKE

Oh right, the wrestler! So when do I get to meet him?

SARA

Maybe in six months.

JAKE

Sara!

SARA

He doesn't know dancers! I need to introduce him to our world gently and... gradually. You'd probably scare him off.

JAKE

I'd try anyway. Love you.

SARA

Love you back. *(They exit separately.)*

Christina Lee's Class

(CHRISTINA is at the podium, addressing her students.)

CHRISTINA

This is a time of exciting possibilities. Can you all feel that? Coming out of the pandemic, we have choices to make. We could try to recreate the broken system we had before, or we can choose to work together to break down barriers and achieve transformative change. Performing arts organizations all over the country are beginning to accept accountability, and working to redress the systemic racism that's permeated the industry for so many decades. As college students, you're the next generation; you can choose to be leaders in the field, but the first step in that process is to take a long hard look at who you are and where you come from. And what your biases might be, conscious or otherwise. That's where your work starts! Papers due Monday.

Sara and Wanda at Home

(WANDA is sitting at the kitchen table, grading papers. SARA enters, having changed clothes.)

SARA

Hey Mom, what can you tell me about *The Tempest*?

WANDA

The Shakespeare play? Oh, it's lovely; one of my favorites. Why do you ask?

SARA

Just something I might have to research for school...

WANDA

I used to teach it in my advanced placement classes. Lately it's been *Julius Caesar* instead, but I've always liked *The Tempest* better.

SARA

What's it about?

WANDA

I have a paperback copy somewhere; I'll find it for you.

SARA

Just give me the two-minute version.

WANDA

Child, you're as bad as my ninth graders! Always in such a hurry. (*She thinks for a moment.*) It all takes place on an enchanted island. Where Prospero, a deposed Italian Duke—I've always thought he was one of Shakespeare's most fascinating characters, and so complex!—has been living in exile for years. He raised his daughter there, and he's been studying, teaching himself magic! So he's... he's become a powerful sorcerer, and he conjures a storm to shipwreck all his enemies on the island. But instead of punishing them, as he had planned to do, he ends up forgiving all of them. Which I think is kind of beautiful.

SARA

It sounds weird.

WANDA

(*Smiles indulgently.*) I suppose it is strange in some ways. Ambiguous! It was one of Shakespeare's last plays, maybe *the* last. Some people think Prospero is a sort of... self-portrait. He renounces his magical powers at the end, symbolically, and goes back home.

SARA

(*Dubious.*) A self-portrait, really? So Shakespeare thought of himself as having magic powers?

WANDA

Being a writer—an artist!—being able to create new things, yes. That's magic! And when you give that up, it's hard, there's emptiness and pain, but beauty too. You have to celebrate what's been lost, and know it will always be a part of you, deep down. (*She has become more emotional than she expected to.*) Which class is this for?

SARA

It's not a class. Griffin's choreographing a new full-length ballet for the Spring Concert.

WANDA

Based on *The Tempest*?

SARA

That's the rumor. The official announcement's coming up in a few days, we think. I just wanted to know something about the characters.

WANDA

A full-length piece; that sounds very demanding. Do you think you'll have time with a full course load?

SARA

Mom, I'm a Dance major. This stuff is my priority.

WANDA

(*Wary.*) I suppose.

(*The sound of a doorbell.*)

SARA

That's Marcus. (*She hurries out. WANDA tries to focus on the essay in front of her but looks worried. SARA comes back in with MARCUS.*)

MARCUS

Good evening, Miz Hayes.

WANDA

Hello, Marcus. And please call me Wanda. Can I get you a Coke, or an iced tea?

MARCUS

No thank you. The movie's at seven forty-five.

SARA

(*Checks her watch.*) Then we should run if we're going to eat first.

MARCUS

Pizza place by the cineplex is pretty fast usually.

WANDA

Pizza? Oh dear. Sara, we've talked about this: As a dancer—

SARA

I know, I know.

MARCUS

Yo, pizza be healthy!

SARA

That's right, Mom. (*Playfully.*) If you get sausage and peppers, it's all four basic food groups.

WANDA

(*Raised eyebrow.*) Well I suppose that's one way of looking at it.

SARA

I don't want to feel rushed though. I've been racing around all day. What if we eat after the movie?

MARCUS

Either way.

WANDA

Don't stay out too late now.

SARA

Mom, I'm not in high school anymore! (*To MARCUS.*) See what I get for living at home?

MARCUS

(*Teasing.*) Nothin' wrong with bein' a townie.

WANDA

Are you living in one of the dormitories, Marcus?

MARCUS

Frat house. Pi Alpha Kappa.

WANDA

I hear Midwestern's become quite the party school.

MARCUS

We do a'ight.

WANDA

Sara has to be careful with that.

SARA

I know, Mom. (*Explaining to MARCUS.*) Ballet class at nine in the morning five days a week. The teacher gets on your case right away if your energy or your focus is off.

MARCUS

Time management; I hear ya.

SARA

And since *somebody* insisted I declare a double major, I'm exhausted half the time as it is.

WANDA

A degree in dance won't secure you a future. Even if your career takes off, it's all over by the time you're thirty-five, maybe forty at the outside. And I don't want Sara having to start over like I did.

MARCUS

You was a dancer too, Miz... Wanda?

WANDA

I was, yes indeed. For a time.

SARA

Mom toured with the Griffin Bates Contemporary Ballet Ensemble. (*She points to a photo on the fourth wall.*) This is her in a dance called "The Myth of Circe."

MARCUS

Bates had his own group?

WANDA

(*Nods.*) It was a lifetime ago. Before he started teaching at the University.

SARA

(*Confused.*) Wait: Marcus, do you know Griffin?

MARCUS

Sure. (*He grins.*) I'm takin' a dance class too.

SARA

What?? You are not!

MARCUS

Yeah I is. Thought I toldja.

SARA

You did not. And you're a Phys Ed major!

MARCUS

Coach told me try a dance class. Bunch of us on the team be takin' it. 'Spose ta help with balance and focus or whatnot.

SARA

What class?

MARCUS

Interpretative Movement 101.

SARA

Interpretive Movement?? That class is a joke. An easy credit. Non-majors playing musical chairs or pretending to be animals.

WANDA

Sara, be nice now.

SARA

Usually taught by grad students.

MARCUS

(Nods) Miz Lopez.

SARA

But how did you meet Griffin? He's the head of the department; he only teaches advanced classes.

MARCUS

He come in Thursday to "observe" on Miz Lopez. She's like pissin' her pants 'cause he watchin' her, takin' notes and shit; excuse my language. But it seemed like he kinda liked what I did.

WANDA

What did you do?

MARCUS

We all was doin' what she call "animal studies." (*Shrugs.*) I danced like a bear and then I danced like a turtle.

SARA

That's what I mean; it's kid stuff.

MARCUS

I was just playin' round. Professor Bates kinda dug me though. He said I had a "coiled, concave energy."

SARA

What does that even mean?

MARCUS

Search me, but it sounded cool. He said I had a "instinctive way of sharing energy with the ground."

WANDA

(*Smiles.*) That does sound like Griffin.

SARA

Yeah it does. What was he like in those days, Mom?

WANDA

Oh, that man was trouble. Brilliant, but...

SARA

You hardly ever talk about it.

WANDA

I was a different person then. It was a precious time. But those things don't last. That's why it's important to...

SARA

"Have something to fall back on." I know, Mom.

WANDA

You two are fortunate, being in college. I didn't have that experience.

MARCUS

I thought Sara said you was an English teacher.

WANDA

That's right. Truman High School.

MARCUS

How you get a job like that you didn't even go to college?

WANDA

Well, eventually I did go. Much later, when I realized my career as a dancer was not... progressing. By then I was married and we had Sara, so... *(Pause.)*

SARA

I told Marcus about Dad moving to Philly. For his new job, and all. *(MARCUS nods.)* He said he wouldn't pay for my college if I majored in dance.

MARCUS

That's harsh. *(To WANDA.)* You helped talk him into it?

WANDA

We got loans. A partial scholarship...

SARA

Plus work-study. Eight hours a week in the costume shop.

MARCUS

Damn girl, you busy! That's why I don't hardly get to see you.

WANDA

And that's why I don't think you have to audition for this Shakespearean ballet, or whatever it is.

SARA

Mom!

WANDA

There will be time for performing when you've finished your training and have your degree.

SARA

You know what I think? I think you don't want me working with Griffin.

WANDA

He can be very...

SARA

What? He's a fantastic choreographer. With a national reputation!

WANDA

A "reputation" yes. Mm-hmm.

SARA

Mom! Creating a role in a big new ballet? For him?? It's an amazing opportunity! It's exactly the kind of thing...! It's the reason I'm at Northwestern!

WANDA

Alright now, dear. You've made your point. We shouldn't argue in front of our guest. (*She smiles at MARCUS.*) So... what film did you say you're going to see?

MARCUS

(*Grins.*) *Aquaman Three: The Tsunami!*

Back in Christina's Class

CHRISTINA

(*At the lectern.*) My office door is always open; remember that. It's a safe space; a brave space. It's your space. It's part of my job as Diversity Facilitator to ensure that the whole Division of Performing Arts is living up to our revised mission statement, the EDI initiatives, the pledges students and administration and faculty drafted and signed last year in the wake of the BLM protests. Accountability is key! We're committed to breaking down oppressive systems, challenging patriarchal power structures, elevating underserved voices. But change happens slowly sometimes, doesn't it? So if you ever have concerns, or questions, or are feeling unheard, or unsafe, I'm here to be a resource. To listen. To advocate. I'm here for all of you.

END OF EXCERPT