

Extract from *Ballerino*

Written by

Anjun Jia

December 1st, 2022

CAST

TIM (he) is a repressed young man with something to prove.

M (she) is the next great opera artist.

The Narrator (he) is there.

SET

This takes place in the Aman Summer Palace, also known as the "Gardens of Nurtured Harmony", in Tim's imagination of M's afterlife.

PROPS & COSTUMES

M has a pot of rouge, blush brush, & hand mirror.

She is meant to wear comfortable feminine pajamas, such as a tunic, nightdress, or bathrobe.

Tim is meant to wear a hospital gown over a plain t-shirt and pants.

All actors in this reading should wear **white dress shirts** and **black trousers** or **skirts**.

TEXT

Dual dialogue columns indicate characters speaking in rapid succession.

Stage directions [in square brackets] indicate actions meant to be interpreted literally.

All other stage directions are to be read out loud. Underlined text indicates a sound cue.

Content warning: Body image.

Playwright's Note

Dear reader,

My best memory of when, exactly, I found the inspiration to start to ideate about *Ballerino* was the night my friend and I got out of a classical Asian opera performance. The singers performed ancient poetry by the likes of Li Bai, and the experience of hearing them give their all to these old-but-not-forgotten texts was beautiful to say the least. On the subway ride back home, we talked about the pathways our young adult lives had taken, about counterfactuals, what-ifs, about why we stopped going to the dance and music classes that formed such a huge part of our childhood memories together.

I became interested in trying to imagine what the personal and behind-the-scenes lives of working dancers, musicians, and performers of all kind might be like. Do they take care of themselves? Do they love their friends and family? Do they love their work?

Since then, this play has grown into being about a lot more than the performing arts; I like to think it's about the parasocial attachments young people form with their idols, how colonization and internalised capitalism inform high art circles, and about one's relationship with the body, with ambition, with the self.

This scene in particular is about a term originating from neurodevelopmental studies called "time-blindness", which is to say, the difficulty or inability to sense the passing of time or recalling when certain memories took place. I am of the firm belief that time is not rational.

Writing this play while here in London this semester has given me an appreciation for art histories and the biographies of successful and unsuccessful artists. It's also been fun sprinkling in local slang and cultural intricacies, sometimes without realising (Canadians still spell a lot of words in British English).

Thanks for reading my work—whether you're part of the production, a peer of my writing practice, or a much appreciated patron of the arts—I am endlessly grateful for you. Take care of yourself and others. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Anjun

SCENE SEVEN

“The next Great Opera Artist, or Pas de deux.”

—

Someday in the early 20th century.

It’s sunny out.

An imaginary pavilion stands by an imaginary body of water.

Towels are strewn out along the ground.

M, 11, sits by the water, rouging her cheeks.

[She gazes into her hand mirror.]

Enter **TIM, 25**, a strange air about him.

[M drops her brush, startled.]

M

Who are you?

TIM

Nobody. Who are you?

M

...The next Great Opera Artist.

(beat)

Formerly known as mademoiselle.

[She picks up her brush and continues.]

TIM

You seem familiar, like I’ve seen you before, sometime.

M

I just have one of those faces.

[She blends the blush upward.]

Why were you in the water?
M (CONT'D)

Don't quite know...
can I borrow your mirror?
TIM

Why?
M

To see if I've gained weight.
TIM

No.
M

Fine.
I'm not sure how I got here.
I remember lying in a bed, counting lines on the floor.
TIM

Like dying.
How much did you count to?
M

Seven.
TIM

[M taps excess powder off the edge of her pot.]

Everyone dies. But I won't.
M

Why's that?
TIM

I'll be remembered forever. Won't matter how much time passes,
I'll be a household name you can't mention high opera without.
M

I believe you.
TIM

Thanks.
M

[They let a silence fall over them.]

Tim shakes imaginary water out of his
imaginary shoes.

M looks down.

She's not wearing shoes either.

Tim dries himself with a towel,
wrings out the towel,
and lays it out to dry under the sun.

[M scans him up and down.]

[Tim notices this.]

What are you looking at?
TIM

Your soul.
M

Is it beautiful?
TIM

...It's a diamond in the rough.
M

And your own soul?
TIM

I don't need one.
M
(to mirror)

Because, you know, I'll be around forever.
My work at least.

Even if I had forever, I'd still try to get everything done quickly.
TIM

What's the rush?
M

TIM

What if one day, when you're not around, it all fades away?

M

...Can I sing for you?

TIM

Sure.

[M clears her throat.]

[She straightens her posture.]

[She takes a deep breath, and counts to seven.]

M

(SING or CHANT)

*To disappear, I am ready,
To leave it all behind.
What was, what will, come back to me,
Move forth and clear my mind.*

The pitter-patter of mild rain.

They huddle under the imaginary pavilion.

TIM

Where do you picture yourself in a year?

M

You mean right now?

She carries herself differently, as she is 12 now.

TIM

Has it really been a year?
I got so used to the idea of you being 11. But now you're 12.

A drop of water falls through the pavilion roof.

[Tim touches his face as if it landed on him.]

M

12 is the upper median age of the Midas Cichlid.

TIM

Midas the golden touch guy?

M

Cichlid the fish.

TIM

Weird name for a fish. How many calories are in a Cichlid?

M

Don't be mean.

Fish aren't around too long.

And when you see them , travelling in their schools,
in the ocean underwater...

I just think they're beautiful when they're all moving.

Together.

A second drop of water falls. Then a third.

[Tim wipes them off.]

TIM

I want to be beautiful.

M

What's your favourite fish?

TIM

Salmon.

A fourth drop of water falls.

M

Caviar.

TIM

Do they take attendance at fish school?

M

Everyone should take attendance. Even outside of school.

A fifth drop of water falls.

M (CONT'D)

How old are you again?

At least 25.
TIM

[M looks at Tim like a bouncer would an underage boy.]

M
Then take attendance. For yourself.

A sixth drop of water falls.

M (CONT'D)
Sea turtles take attendance. They take account for every thing before they move.
What if we tried out that way of life? Took our time? Weren't afraid to stay?

TIM
I'm not afraid of staying, I just-
(abandon thought)

Tim paces the perimetre of the pavilion.

The rain quickens.

M sits in place, in the centre, under the roof.

TIM (CONT'D)
I get your point. Turtles move slow so they live for centuries.
But what if I don't want to hold myself back?

M
I wasn't telling you to slow down.
I'm telling you, it doesn't matter what pace you go at.
As long as you keep going.

She's 18 now.

The rain clears for a minute.

M (CONT'D)
Adulthood feels different than how I imagined it.

TIM
18 was a rough one for me too.

M

It's not that anything changed, really. I was born an adult,
but I miss being able to play, without guilt.
But I was born an adult. That's my superpower, really. I stay the same. Like a coral reef.

TIM

Coral reefs move. They bristle, and sway... and grow.

M

But stay. Mostly,
the same.

TIM

What if you don't like yourself? Can you change then?

M

I'm not here to instruct you on how to live your life. I'm only 24.

This is true now.

TIM

(aside)

Is it?

(to M)

My mom was 24 when she had me.

M

Yeah?

TIM

That's all I'm going to say about her.

A seventh drop of water falls.

M

Time out. Thought experiment:
let's say you don't get tomorrow.
Not everyone is entitled to a tomorrow.

TIM

What are you saying?

M

I'm saying let's say all you have,
all you get, as in that's all there is -
is right now, here, today.

TIM

What day is it?

M

Enough for you to know what to do, or at least, just, arrive at a conclusion.

TIM

But... I don't know yet.
Do you know?

M

I'm just treading water for the time being.
And I'm 32 years old, I've earned my right to rest.

She adjusts a pair of imaginary reading glasses.

The rain returns, harder this time.

M (CONT'D)

Have you met my husband? He's a real handful.
I love him though, I do.
I have a secret.

She turns her back to Tim.

M (CONT'D)

I'm expecting.

TIM

...Congratulations!!! That's great news! ... right?

M

The doctor told me I'm about five weeks along.
I thought I looked rosier around the cheeks these days. Naturally, I mean.

She puts away her makeup but keeps her mirror.

The sound of a little splash in a shallow pool, as though a toddler went down a kid's slide.

M (CONT'D)

I never thought this would be part of the plan. It's not like I lose anything by keeping to this arrangement. Babies won't wear out my voice. Or affect the trajectory of my life. I hope.

TIM

You never know until you try, I guess.
Your decision entirely. I don't even know you .

M

...I think I will. Have this child.

TIM

Have you given any thought about a name?

M

I don't want any nonsense. Stephanie
(Tim reacts)
if she's a girl. If not, we'll figure it out.

TIM

You could call her Steph for short.

M

Steph. I like that. A good woman's name. She'll be a great mother one day.

TIM

(indignant)

The next Great Mother.

M

Equally honourable a profession as an opera artist. Might even take more discipline.

TIM

No doubt.

It's pouring out.

Drops of water hit pavement and grass.

The sound of a hospital monitor beeping.

TIM (CONT'D)

I'm soaked. Aren't you?

M never left the shelter of the pavilion.

M

It's been nothing but fair weather since I got here.

...I have to leave.

TIM

Good luck.

M

You too.

TIM

He walks away. M remembers something.

Wait. Before you go.

M

[Tim stops.]

Exercise every day and you'll live to 150. Do some Da Vinci Mans with me.

M (CONT'D)

Da Vinci Mans?

TIM

She mimes doing a jumping jack.

You mean Jumping Jacks?

TIM (CONT'D)

That's what they call them in America?

M

I don't think I'm in any shape to exercise right now... much as I'd like to.

TIM

Just do seven. We can count together.

M

...Okay.

TIM

Ready?

M

Ready. Three, two,

One.	M	Two.	TIM
Three.	M	Four.	TIM
Five.	M	Six.	TIM
Seven.			M

[They stop. Tim catches his breath.]

M has aged into her 50s.

Tim gently descends to lay on the ground.

M
See? That wasn't so awful. Now you can go on your merry way.

He shuts his eyes.

She is 70. Plus minus 7 years.

Are you alright?
M (CONT'D)

He floats in the imaginary water, arms
outstretched.

The hospital monitor beeping and raindrops
intersperse each other.

A light jazzy beat accompanies the noise.

M ambles on over to shake Tim's arm. No
response.

She takes his pulse. It's there.

She lifts him out of the water.

M (CONT'D)
(aside)

...The next Great Grandson
...of mine.

She leaves.