

NIJINSKY

A Game of Solitaire for Two

By Alexei Burykin

Translated by John Freedman

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John Freedman
jfreed16@gmail.com
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NIJINSKY — ACT I

A Few Words on the Entity that Is *Nijinsky*

Nijinsky is an improvized meeting between Genius and that Actor which every one of us is; an "eye-to-eye conversation—we certainly have met in the other world."

The Actor's thinking mechanism, though not uninventive, falters and ultimately grinds to a halt beneath the rush of those waves (rhythmic waves included) whose source is *Nijinsky*. My *Nijinsky*. The signature of genius, one is inclined to think, is distinguished by its list—it's all a matter of degrees. *Nijinsky* is the Actor's center of gravity; that spiritual burden which is not so easily revoked. (After Vaslav *Nijinsky* had long since abandoned the stage due to his diagnosis of "schizophrenia," Alexander Benois said of him: "That terrible sight arouses in me envy, not pity.")¹ However, the tormenting quest for understanding provides the Actor new moorings, insofar as poetry can be that. What remains is the sound of rain tapping out the rhythm of solitude.

These few words are not a cover letter for a perspicacious reader. More likely, they are a sketch without shadings.

- Alexei Burykin

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACT ONE

(Vaslav Nijinsky tumbles out on stage head over heels)

NIJINSKY

I'm free! I'm free! Those voices! I can't stand them! I can't take it anymore! *(Goes into a telephone booth, picks up the receiver and dials a number)* Hello, police? Help! Some maniac has been following me all morning! Evening? So what? What's that got to do with anything? You mean if I don't tell you, you're going to leave me unprotected? All alone? One on one maybe even with murderers? How should I know!? I'd be happy to tell you. But I don't see any street signs or store names. There's nothing. Except for this phone booth. The number? *(Erases the phone number)* I can't read it. I said, somebody completely erased it and I can't make it out. Same goes for you, buddy! You're more dangerous than my maniac. We haven't even made it to the Second Coming yet and you've already lost your mind! *(Humming gaily, he hangs up the phone. Dials another number)* Hello? Oh, what a velvety voice. Yes, yes. You know, I can tell what someone looks like just from their voice. You don't believe me? Hmm... You have blue eyes, a cute little nose, thin lips and a little dimple on your chin. Am I right? What charming laughter! Who are you, by the way? No, you tell me first. No, no, no... The fire station? I totally forgot! I called to tell you that I'm trapped in a raging fire. Where? All around me! Everything is consumed in flames. The whole world is trapped in a conflagration! Oh, yeah? Your voice changed. You have a disgusting figure and you're flat-chested! *(Hangs up the phone and hums happily. Dials a third number)* Hello, doctor? I'm dying. Of love. For mankind. That's not important. Listen to what I made up today. "God grant I don't go nuts!"² Thank you. Everything you know about the soul and the brain adds up to nothing. Less than nothing. Because there's nobody else to call! Oh, all right. Hey, wait a second! I mean, you are a first aid service, aren't you? Quick, give me the number of the Central Public Whorehouse! I can't find it listed in the emergency section!

(Nijinsky hangs up the phone and leaves the booth, bumping into the Actor, who is carrying a small suitcase. Pause)

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

Got a match? I got separated from my lighter somewhere. Oh, that's right! You don't smoke! Basically, me neither. But sometimes, like whenever we meet, I can't help it. I mean, cigarettes are pure evil, but I can't do a damn thing about it. Too bad? Too bad! Too bad. Then it'll have to be a cigarette break without cigarettes. Kinda like music without sound or a play without words. But, we will be healthier, won't we? What's that? No, no, no. I have this thing against hotels. That's why I came straight to you. I thought through everything I have to say and I know all about your illness. I'm a big fan of peace and quiet. Just like you. (*Puts down his suitcase*) Have a seat.

(Nijinsky sits down)

Get up!

(Nijinsky doesn't move)

(The Actor holds out his hand) What's that? Rain? Here? I must have imagined it. (*Sits on his suitcase next to Nijinsky. Takes out a cigarette, a lighter and lights up*) I once was acquainted with... Well, not really acquainted, but during my rounds I used to run across a certain, you know, client who, were it not for certain alarming dreams, would have thought he was a king. Not of the world, mind you, but of endless space! The entire universe, so to speak. And you know, all he needed to convince him of that was to close himself up inside a nutshell. (*Laughs*) He was brutally betrayed and then they killed him. I think he was crucified.

(Actor locks a grip on Nijinsky, who doesn't react. The actor lifts Nijinsky's arm and turns his face to the side. Nijinsky remains in that pose)

And so, basically, all his dreams revolved around one thing. He kept getting on a train to go to his own funeral. How's that for a story? But then he'd realize he wasn't the one who had died. It was his name had died. Then he'd either stop the train or, in one of the other variants, he'd break out a window with his body and hurl himself out with the train still charging down the tracks, get up.

(Nijinsky stands up)

ALEXEI BURYKIN

(Nijinsky drops his arm)

Or, maybe I got it all mixed up? Maybe there were two patients. I mean, clients. Maybe one had dreams and the other closed himself up in nutshells. Tell me prince, are you much of a ladies' man? *(Laughs)* I ask because just recently, by total coincidence, I ran into an old acquaintance. A remarkable lady. A striking brunette who is always in pants and a straw hat. She is simply crazy about athletics and athletes. You, uh, no? Yes? No? Well, it doesn't matter. That's the image you project. Naturally, she's not married. I recommend her highly. I'd be happy to relinquish her. Don't bother thanking me. *(Leans towards Nijinsky)* Or, perhaps brunettes aren't your type? *(Suddenly leaps up and starts racing around Nijinsky)* Then I'll find you a blonde or a red-head! Believe me, right here, backstage of life, there are more good-looking broads than you can shake a stick at! And if you're indifferent to the female sex in general, that's no problem either! *(Stops and wipes his brow with a bright handkerchief)* Whew! You do keep a pace! I can't keep up with you! What a pleasure that you're so silent. There's nothing boring about you! As the, uh, ancients used to say, "Silentium significare." Now, in the arts this very silentium is extraordinarily valuable, don't you think? "Stop the racket, won't you people? Let's recapture silentium primeval!" Splendid! However, my preferences lie elsewhere. Prepare yourself for a real blow. You see, of all the arts, I prefer the ballet. Do you enjoy the ballet? Isn't it a wonder? Not long ago I attended the debut of a totally unknown young dancer. My, but how he galloped across the stage! Frisky, gracious and handsome! But I just can't remember his name. It's one of those names, you know, a little like... Ah! I can't remember! They say they found him in the corps de ballet. How could I have forgotten that? I think it starts with an "m." Wait a minute! I have the program with me!

(Nijinsky falls off the suitcase. Pause)

Why so silent? You really don't think your silence will stop me on the road to truth? Believe me, nothing is simpler than reconstructing everything. Everything! Your labors, your liars *(gets carried away)* your loathers, your loonies, your lackeys, your loners, your losers. *(Suddenly snaps out of it)* My dear man, there are untold numbers who can easily testify to the truth about you. Do you hear me? The truth. About what happened wherever it was you really were. It's elementary

NIJINSKY — ACT I

(Nijinsky and the Actor speak simultaneously, paying no attention to one another)

NIJINSKY.

I see through all.
find them all.

I don't need talk
don't have the money.

To grasp what's up:
up on a tempting

I see through all.
take a different

They disagree:
myself. Who cares

"You do not know him,
worth it. But that

Or her or us,
just drop you in

You cannot know me!"
even accuse me

I see through all.
other hand, if

I see the truth
headed...

In deeds uncouth.

As plain as that.

What's that you say?

ACTOR.

It would be a hell of a job to

And, to tell the truth, I

Still, I'd hate to just give

idea like that. Maybe I'll

tack. Go visit them all

what it costs? It'd be

wouldn't be very smart. To

a spot like this. They might

of being a traitor. On the

you're going to be pig-

ACTOR

What did you say? I'm not joking. By the way, it was a coincidence brought me to you. Not even a coincidence, really, a fluke. I'll tell you about it later. You'll get a kick out of it! It's a great story with a real fantastic flair! However, from the point of view of our little case, so to speak, the most important thing is for you to calm down. No nerves. No stress. I'm going to help you get back on your feet. How's your diet? What medicines are you taking? Do you sleep well? Are you bothered by nightmares? How about voices? And, finally, how are your bowel movements? Relax and close your eyes. Shut them, I said! We'll take care of this all by ourselves. Now, imagine a seashore caressed in sunlight. The scent of seaweed, the cry of sea gulls, the rustle of waves and surf, the sea, the sea...

(Nijinsky leaps up and begins running around the Actor, roaring)

ALEXEI BURYKIN

you! Why upset yourself like this? What are you doing?!
(*Running out*) Wait right there! I'll be right back! Only...
You won't even be able to count to sixty, and I'll be back.
(*Disappears*) No more than sixty!

(*Nijinsky stops running. He opens the Actor's suitcase. It is empty. Nijinsky's vision of his parents, Tomasz and Eleonora*)

NIJINSKY

Flesh and dust—
Threat and fear!
Shall I disappear? Or shall I let him in?
Or, maybe, kick him out of here! But without
Your word—bereft of your consent—
I know I'm doomed to
Shouts
And screams
And bitter discontent!
Now, here I am! I'm whole again!

TOMASZ NIJINSKY

To break and sunder fate, my son, that is my art.
Don't waste your time: evil brooks each glancing blow.
Don't copy me. Allow for all to be and then
Seek to forgive. Find peace in your own heart.
Live a king unto yourself. Why disavow
Your solitude, and thereby violate those laws
You make yourself? I swear:
Nowhere will you find a crueller lot in this drab life.

ELEONORA NIJINSKA

How can I describe
My shapeless fears in words?
My speech has died.
My sounds are poor.
I cannot say it right!
O son, dear boy,
Safeguard your precious life!
Danger, pass him by!
Shield my boy from shame!
Show him love, not hate!
Spare him pain!

NIJINSKY

The circle is complete. And now
My goal's to leap from it!

NIJINSKY — ACT I

The universal aggregate,
But where's the out?
Does a duel with this pretense
Have any chance of making sense?

(The Actor runs in holding a straight-jacket. He doesn't see Nijinsky)

ACTOR

(Indecisively) Now, I got y... Hey! Where are you? Ha-ll-oo! Come out, come out, wherever you are! I won't hurt you... You just can't turn your back on him! Where did he disappear to? Weird, weird, weird... There's no way... Where could he have gone to? He's gone! He's gone! Well then, here goes. It's all or nothing! *(Flips a coin)* I'm either a prince or a pauper! *(Catches the coin and looks at it with satisfaction)* Aha! Call me a prince! All right, then... *(Begins looking for Nijinsky)*

NIJINSKY

My Lord! What grace and wonder —
Renouncing people and the words
They speak! Breaking free
Of gods! Sensing musical vibrations
With every fiber of the body!
Silence! Silence! Silence!
To softly blend with Nothing, Nil and Never,
In the mirror of mirages!

(The Actor spreads his arms and shrugs his shoulders. Flips a coin again, catches it, looks at it)

ACTOR

Bah!

NIJINSKY

One minute, thirty-seven seconds.

ACTOR

(Startled) What?

NIJINSKY

Is that how you keep your word?

ACTOR

What do you mean?

ALEXEI BURYKIN

NIJINSKY

I counted up to ninety-seven.

ACTOR

So what?

NIJINSKY

You didn't keep your word!

ACTOR

I didn't give my...

NIJINSKY

You promised to return promptly in one minute.

ACTOR

(Finally gathering his wits) Obviously, you should have counted more slowly. Where were you?

NIJINSKY

In Kiev. That's where I was born. During Shrovetide. That day I received my first-ever gift from my father when I was just a few hours old.

(The Actor fumbles with a straight-jacket, pretending he's paying no attention to Nijinsky)

My father was a better dancer than I. But he was a drunk and never accomplished anything. The last time we saw each other, he gave me some cuff links made out of stones from the Ural Mountains. I remember him standing on the dock. He was waving a blue handkerchief at the steamer I was leaving on. I never saw my father again.

ACTOR

What about your mother?

NIJINSKY

I learned to walk, talk and dance all at the same time, and my mother—who kept track of every new tooth I got—would never be able to say when I had my first dance lesson.

(Pause)

ACTOR

Please, go on.

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

In a madhouse!

NIJINSKY

Yes, I had just turned...

ACTOR

Eight-teen-years-old.

(Pause)

NIJINSKY

We always liked each other. And I loved working with my sister. She always understood my slightest gesture. For a long time I had no news about either her or my mother. The absence of information for several years was terribly painful. Then I just didn't care anymore.

(Pause)

ACTOR

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! It's the absence of information that determines our actions, isn't it? But what about your daughter?

NIJINSKY

I was enraptured by her singing. She would sing like this—"ah-ah-ah-ah"—and I was happy. Because it meant that everything is joyous and nothing is terrible. As for my son, things were more complex...

ACTOR

You mean you had a son?

NIJINSKY

I know very little about him. He hasn't been born yet.

ACTOR

I see. You have been through a lot, haven't you, sir? May I call you "sir"? But you should know I truly want to help you.

NIJINSKY

(Becoming animated) Really? Are you rich?

ACTOR

(After a pause) How much do you need?

NIJINSKY

ALEXEI BURYKIN

make money on its collapse!

ACTOR

Undermine the World Stock Exchange?! What do you mean? What for?

NIJINSKY

Death! The World Stock Exchange represents death! But I will win and God will help me.

ACTOR

(Taking out a check book) Well, I am indebted to you for saving me a good deal of trouble. How much do you need? Don't be shy.

NIJINSKY

Couldn't you make it in cash?

ACTOR

Sorry, but I don't have much with me. I'm afraid it wouldn't be enough to get you a taxi ride... *(sniggers)* down to the World Stock Exchange.

NIJINSKY

Don't worry. I've got two-hundred and fifteen francs of my own hidden away.

ACTOR

Two-hundred francs...

NIJINSKY

Two-hundred and fifteen!

ACTOR

What do you need money for? Let's just imagine that you amass an enormous sum on the market—although the market isn't a game of roulette, you know.

NIJINSKY

I am convinced I will win, because I am life.

ACTOR

(After a pause) And what are you planning to do with your earnings?

NIJINSKY

I'm thinking about going to a bordello.

ACTOR

NIJINSKY — ACT I

NIJINSKY

I know it sounds crazy, but I always wanted to learn more about the psychological make-up of prostitutes. I'll take on a couple...

(The Actor grunts in surprise)

I get overwhelmed by an amazing sexual excitement and a terrible fear at the same time. Blood rushes to my head and I'm afraid I'm going to have a stroke. But if that's what God wants, then I'll give the women all my money for free. I won't ask them for anything.

ACTOR

How gauche! That's despicable!

NIJINSKY

Despicable? Of me? I hate despicable acts. *(Pause)* And if I've ever done anything despicable, it's only because at that moment I was blinded to the presence of God in my soul.

ACTOR

Listen, what right do you have to talk about God in the same breath with bordellos?

NIJINSKY

Hmm... Do you happen to wear a monocle?

ACTOR

Pardon me?

NIJINSKY

A mo-no-cle.

ACTOR

No. I do not wear a monocle. I only wear glasses when reading.

NIJINSKY

What do you usually read? Public relations prospecti?

ACTOR

Words, words, words...

NIJINSKY

So, do you refuse to give me a loan?

ACTOR

No. What are you worried about? Of course I'll give you a

ALEXEI BURYKIN

NIJINSKY

The good sir is serious! *(He suddenly grabs the Actor)*

ACTOR

What are you doing?

NIJINSKY

Shhh!

ACTOR

What is going on?

NIJINSKY

Quiet! I hate people bothering me when I'm working.

ACTOR

Working? *(Explodes)* What are you doing, for God's sake!?

(Pause)

NIJINSKY

I am a master at reading expressions. I can tell a liar just by looking at his face.

ACTOR

(Wiping off his face with a handkerchief) What am I, pray tell?

NIJINSKY

Let me give you some advice: Dedicate your money to love.

ACTOR

Are you saying I'm a liar?

NIJINSKY

Love is the oldest word!

ACTOR

So, who am I? Who am I? Who do you think I am? Who am I?

NIJINSKY

Life is not sex and sex is not God.

ACTOR

Oh for Christ's sake, would you quit invoking the Lord's name everywhere you shouldn't be? Quit playing the parrot: God, God, God!

NIJINSKY — ACT I

sneaking around behind my back! You think I'm afraid of you? Get out of my sight! You were always hiding out and sneaking around keeping an eye on me! I didn't invite you! And I don't need your filthy money! They sent you to kill me, didn't they? To destroy my life. It won't work! Get out! Get out of here! I suspected you from the very start! The air itself quivered when you came in here. I could feel it constrict my throat. But God wants me to stay. And as for the errors I have committed, I, more than anyone, have redeemed myself through my life and my suffering!

ACTOR

(Shouts) Name! Whose name shall I make the check out to? Come on! First name! Last name! Be quick about it!

NIJINSKY

No, no. I don't know. No, no, no.

(A long pause)

ACTOR

Well then, do you know the exact amount you need to get your game started? Don't refuse my money, because, as I understand it, God himself is sending you off to the World Stock Exchange. And who else is going to help you besides me?

(Nijinsky is silent)

You see?

NIJINSKY

(Softly) Y-e-s, I suppose you're right. Everything is just as you say. Forgive me, please. I wasn't being fair.

ACTOR

Oh, let's cut the sentiment. So...

NIJINSKY

I really don't know how much I need exactly.

ACTOR

Here are a thousand francs. Go on, take it. *(Offers Nijinsky the money)*

NIJINSKY

Thank you very much. You are a very noble and a very cunning person. I accept this money from you as a loan and I will immediately go down to...

ALEXEI BURYKIN

NIJINSKY

I would ask you to step out. A change of clothes is in order. I have many very nice suits, travelling suits included.

ACTOR

But it's nighttime.

NIJINSKY

Are you sure about that?

ACTOR

Well, everything is relative of course.

NIJINSKY

Perhaps, in truth, it is evening. Or, for example, morning. Last evening I saw Mars and it was absolutely uninhabited. I know this planet well, although I am not under its influence. And you?

ACTOR

What? Mars? You mean "that planet covered in ice, which, one million years ago, was just like our planet Earth, and which risks a similar fate if no one listens to me"—that is, you, of course—"and if no one closes all the factories"? Uh! Did I quote you properly?

NIJINSKY

Yes, yes, that's the planet. Nobody ever paid any attention to me! If God had ordered me to go, I would have done what Tolstoy did in his time. He ran away from his wife. I read his books and it always seemed to me I understood him. He wanted to save the Earth, too.

ACTOR

But you, where would you go, sir?

NIJINSKY

Oh, my political platform is extraordinarily simple. It merely consists in being at one with the entire world.

ACTOR

(Smiles) Are you able to do that?

NIJINSKY

What?

ACTOR

Are you able to be at one with me?

NIJINSKY — ACT I

NIJINSKY

Don't laugh, you miserable cur! What I want to know is, what are you doing here? I was wrong! They were right! Don't touch me! Don't even come near me! How can you go anywhere in shoes like that? Can't you see what they look like? That's disgusting—to come bursting in here in filthy shoes like that! Maybe you're right. Maybe it is nighttime, but don't expect a farewell handshake from me! I wouldn't even consider touching a person in shoes like that!

ACTOR

What about my story? Don't you want to hear my story?

NIJINSKY

What story?

ACTOR

The one that brought me to you. I was out taking a walk...

NIJINSKY

I don't care about your story.

ACTOR

...the sun was shining on the shrubbery...

NIJINSKY

I've got enough stories of my own.

ACTOR

...and suddenly I noticed blood...

NIJINSKY

I am inundated in stories like... What? What did you notice?

ACTOR

Blood on the grass. A tiny trail of bloody spots.

NIJINSKY

And then what?

ACTOR

I followed the trail.

NIJINSKY

The what?

ACTOR

The trail.

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

You know, I don't really know. But the sight of blood, somehow, just attracts attention.

NIJINSKY

I see.

ACTOR

Uh, I started walking around the woods, like a real sleuth bloodhound, until I came upon a precipice. And at the very brink, the trail broke off. I leaned over to look and—you wouldn't believe it!—there wasn't anybody there.

NIJINSKY

Who did you think you'd see?

(Pause)

ACTOR

Maybe a person... But you know what amazed me more than anything? This was the real killer. When I turned around—you won't believe it!—instead of blood, there was a pile of goat manure! Imagine that! All that time I had been fooling myself, following a false trail. I don't know if my imagination just got the better of me or if I suffered a sun stroke. But the reality was plain to see: goat manure! Nature is the greatest genius! I burst out laughing and went back to my hotel.

NIJINSKY

The same thing happened with me!

ACTOR

That's just what I wanted to verify.

NIJINSKY

Only, I was moved by God's will and it was winter.

ACTOR

Winter, was it?

NIJINSKY

Yes. I followed the trail of blood, fully convinced that this was the place where the murder had taken place. I stopped at the edge of the precipice and looked down. And, in fact, there was no one there.

ACTOR

NIJINSKY — ACT I

NIJINSKY

I'm no biologist. All I knew was that God was testing me. On my way back, I shouted, "I fear Thee not! Thou art Life, not Death!" Suddenly, I saw blood in the snow again. That's when I got angry.

ACTOR

You were, so to speak, beside yourself?

NIJINSKY

Yes, on occasion I step out of my... I mean, I escape... But He said to me, "Stop!" and I stopped. "Stop reasoning," and I stopped. I stood there so long my hands started aching from the cold. And then I heard His voice one more time: "Go!" He said to me. And I went.

ACTOR

Were you alone?

NIJINSKY

(With irritation) I already told you!

ACTOR

All right, all right, all right. Only, why all these intricate fabrications?

NIJINSKY

This is all very close to me. It could never have happened to you! You're just a silly fool who turned what happened to me into a joke. The only thing that has any significance in reality is whatever God commands.

ACTOR

I presume God will not be insisting on the committing of any murders?

(They both stare at one another)

NIJINSKY

(After a pause) I looked through the evening papers and, while I don't know German, English, Italian or Hungarian, they are all accessible to my understanding. And I understood that there had been no murder. French, a little bit.

ACTOR

And so, it was winter.

NIJINSKY

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

(Sarcastically) How about autumn?

NIJINSKY

Or spring. I know you don't believe me, but I'm not angry with you. I absolve even my murderer of everything. Goodbye.

ACTOR

Are you kicking me out?

NIJINSKY

Why is it that I always have to explain to anyone and everyone why I want to be left alone with myself?!

ACTOR

I'm not just anyone. And anyway, I think you're better off not remaining in such dangerous company.

NIJINSKY

That's none of your business. Farewell.

ACTOR

What about your trip?

NIJINSKY

What trip?

ACTOR

(Grinning) To the World Stock Exchange.

NIJINSKY

I just received a telegram. I've been invited to Paris. To perform...

ACTOR

(Interrupting him) Who invited you?

NIJINSKY

I have to get myself ready.

ACTOR

May I have a peek?

NIJINSKY

Why should I have to lean on the printed word to prove what I said?

ACTOR

That's not the point *(Snatches the telegram from Nijinsky)*

NIJINSKY — ACT I

NIJINSKY

(In confusion) I will not tolerate anyone messing in my affairs! I don't need an impresario!

ACTOR

There is a date here. March 9, 1914. When was that?

(Pause)

NIJINSKY

I can see by my never-failing watch that it's time for you to go. And please do have a shoeshine boy clean your shoes!

ACTOR

What do you want to know the psychology of prostitutes for?

NIJINSKY

What?

ACTOR

You led me to believe that you are interested in the psychology of prostitutes. I can offer you several brochures on the topic. It makes for fascinating research!

NIJINSKY

Who did the research?

ACTOR

I did!

NIJINSKY

You? What do you have to do with it?

ACTOR

I'd like to ask you the same thing.

NIJINSKY

It's crucial for me, because I... When I was... Uh, weren't you just about on your way out?

ACTOR

Curiosity kept me here. Now, you were saying—when you were...

(Pause. Nijinsky takes off a shoe and throws it at the Actor, who ducks)

NIJINSKY

Excuse me but I had no other choice. God ordered me to do

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

And what if God... orders you to kill? Me, for example. What will you do?

NIJINSKY. I will obey him. *(Takes off his other shoe, throws it at the Actor, hitting him squarely)*

ACTOR

This is not farewell. *(Disappears)*

(Nijinsky's visions: his wife Romola Pulska, and Sergei Diaghilev)

ROMOLA PULSKA

Don't worship him! He poisoned you.
And ever since, his iron grip
Won't let you slip away.
You do not owe him fame,
His stamp is shame.
And I, for evermore, will be your slave.

NIJINSKY

That's a pretty tune! What say we play
A little game, a double comedy?
Who now is in the suit of prostitute?
Dance married us. Hear that?
The music plays! The time is up!
Your cue! Let's cancel all the gossip!

ROMOLA PULSKA

O, dance! A hymn to flesh and prancing
Life! A simpleton could never understand the
Dance! A wild, writhing path
That leads the heart into an avalanche
Of earthly passions!
Dance, thanks to you...
I thank you, Dance!

SERGEI DIAGHILEV

Prancing life? Whose lips
Have uttered that? Your hissing,
Lispings voice bears naught but death.
Until you shut your trap no one shall ever
Understand the soothing sounds
Of him so pure... The heavens themselves
Would sooner crack, you snake, than you
Admit: The blame is all your own!

ROMOLA PULSKA

I must say dear man your fitful gust

NIJINSKY — ACT I

SERGEI DIAGHILEV

You lie. It hurts!
Say now: Did you
Not steal him,
Tricking me by hunting out
My weakness?
And did you not, my friend, with your own hand
Effect his plummet from the heights
Back to oblivion?

ROMOLA PULSKA

Oh, but how I love him!
I am his pulse, his extra sense.
And you are fear, the persecuting fear of misery.
You know the art
Of burning others in yourself and turning them to ashes!
You love...

SERGEI DIAGHILEV

Enough.

ROMOLA PULSKA

You love...

SERGEI DIAGHILEV

Enough!

ROMOLA PULSKA

You love another now!

SERGEI DIAGHILEV

Enough, I say!!!

ROMOLA PULSKA

I love it when he hurts so much,
When he can't bear to look me in the eye.

NIJINSKY

I am the bone of contention; the arrow
Striking to the marrow of the human soul,
In hopes of splitting open that ripe
Fruit. Yes, we know that good remains
The eternal root of evil.
How silly are their efforts!
The picture of pure madness!
No matter how you spin it,
Virtue ever runs in step beside the Devil.

(Enter the Actor in a woman's

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

I welcome you on behalf of the Central Public Whorehouse!
Reservation number double-0, 0, 0, one. Privacy is
guaranteed.

NIJINSKY

Let me get a better look at your face. Come closer.

ACTOR

You don't think I'm trying to deceive you?

NIJINSKY

I should warn you. Everyone everywhere (*hesitates*) considered
me insane.

ACTOR

You don't say!

NIJINSKY

I'll tell you a little secret.

ACTOR

I adore other people's secrets!

NIJINSKY

I don't like to be around people or among grown-ups. I don't
know how. The only thing I like is to be with children.

ACTOR

Our institution is not equipped to help you with that.
Farewell.

NIJINSKY

Farewell.

ACTOR

(*Offended*) I am so young! One might even say unsullied!

NIJINSKY

Answer one question.

ACTOR

Money up front.

NIJINSKY

Money is evil.

ACTOR

NIJINSKY — ACT I

NIJINSKY

I'll teach you how to use make-up.

ACTOR

What's wrong with mine?

NIJINSKY

You have to transform yourself from within. Turn yourself completely into another being. You don't have what it takes for that.

ACTOR

(Wiping off his make-up) Why? I can try.

NIJINSKY

(Harshly) Tell me immediately! How far is it to the sun?

ACTOR

How should I know?

NIJINSKY

I'll kill you.

ACTOR

(Quickly) 150 million kilometers.

NIJINSKY

How about to the moon? Come on.

ACTOR

Three hundred and eighty-five thousand. What the hell are you driving at?

NIJINSKY

Both, to tell you the truth.

ACTOR

Is that so? Allow me to introduce myself: Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev. Vaslav, my dear boy, don't you recognize me? How have you been?

NIJINSKY

(In disgust) Don't try taking him on. That's no role for you.

ACTOR

Do you remember that hotel?

NIJINSKY

Drop him. I said!

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

We had just been introduced and you were so weak...

NIJINSKY

(Aloofly) I fainted.

ACTOR

Yes! You just plopped on the floor. I was so afraid for you that I called the doctor.

NIJINSKY

The doctor found nothing wrong and you brought me an orange.

ACTOR

I took your hand in mine...

NIJINSKY

(Suddenly) I was out of money! How many times do I have to tell you? I need pocket change for minor expenses! I can't be bothered with that every moment of the day!

ACTOR

(In confusion) But I... I gave you a thousand francs. That's all I had with me.

NIJINSKY

I need two thousand francs by tomorrow. And I have no desire to wait any longer! I am a free man and I do as I please!

ACTOR

Of course, of course. But who pays your bills?

NIJINSKY

I don't need support like that! I want my own money and I want to spend it however I want. You don't even allow me the most basic needs.

ACTOR

What do you consider the most "basic needs?" Where did you go last night, just to spite me?

NIJINSKY

I didn't do anything to spite you! Yesterday, the day before yesterday, or the day before the day before yesterday. I'm sick of constantly being followed.

ACTOR

You can do anything your heart desires.

NIJINSKY — ACT I

changed more often? Tell them I want the bed changed every morning!

ACTOR

What are you talking about? Vasily is in charge of that.

NIJINSKY

Vasily follows me! Get him away from me! I see his disgusting face everywhere I go!

ACTOR

A face no worse than any other.

NIJINSKY

A mug.

ACTOR

A face.

NIJINSKY

A mug!

ACTOR

A face!

(Long pause)

NIJINSKY

Now comes the blow with the walking cane. Like this! *(Hits the Actor)*

ACTOR

(Shocked) What are you doing? That hurts.

NIJINSKY

It hurts me, too.

ACTOR

You scum! *(Flies at Nijinsky, begins beating him)* You scoundrel! You liar! Do you know who you are? You're a two-bit hooper, that's who! Your madness is hereditary. And if you hadn't made such a huge, mysterious legend out of it, you would have been nothing but fine print in a ballet encyclopedia. The only time anybody would ever remember you would be when some teacher in a kid's ballet school was showing some kid how to jump! You're an ape! *(Walks away)*

(Long pause)

ALEXEI BURYKIN

NIJINSKY

I wonder whether we are nothing but lonely rhythms?

ACTOR

Shut up. I'm asking the questions, and you're answering. You got that?

NIJINSKY

When?

ACTOR

What do you mean, when? Now! Now! Now! I'm asking you: Is that clear?

NIJINSKY

Is that already the first question?

ACTOR

Don't get smart with me!

NIJINSKY

I need time to collect myself. It's been ages since I gave an interview.

ACTOR

What can I do to help? Pop you in the face?

NIJINSKY

Very funny. All right, I get you.

ACTOR

What?

NIJINSKY

(Making faces) You... are going... to ask... questions... and I... am going... to answer. Question, answer. Question, answer. Question...

(The Actor slaps Nijinsky)

ACTOR

Idiot!

NIJINSKY

Now that's a whole different story. Only I have to say interviewers are usually better behaved. But, comparisons can be quite illuminating.

ACTOR

NIJINSKY — ACT I

NIJINSKY

I don't like your being so familiar with me!

ACTOR

(Threateningly) And now!

NIJINSKY

I will not tolerate that tone!

ACTOR

(Angrily) And now!!!

NIJINSKY

(Shouts) Where is my lawyer?

ACTOR

(Shouts) What do you think God is?

NIJINSKY

(Not hesitating) God is a human being who fertilizes a woman and from that one and only woman he begets children.

(Pause)

ACTOR

You... What?

NIJINSKY

I don't know.

ACTOR

You mean you seriously believe that God is a human being? And specifically, a man? Any healthy man?

NIJINSKY

God is God. And human beings came from God, not from apes. And apes came from apes who were created by God.

ACTOR

Wait, wait, wait! I didn't ask you about apes. And so, God is the power capable of producing...

NIJINSKY

Love.

ACTOR

What did you say?

NIJINSKY

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

You are not listening to me!

NIJINSKY

On the contrary. People usually say that humans are born from the seed of the father in the womb of the mother. But I am saying that the seed descends not from the first human, but from God himself. A human is flesh and feeling. If a human is made of flesh, then that's what he comes from.

ACTOR

What you are saying is that humans develop like apes.

NIJINSKY

In fact, it's just the opposite. It was God who created flesh. The similarity between humans and apes is purely organic and has nothing to do with spirituality. God is not an ape and a human is a part of God.

ACTOR

So. Let's begin from the beginning. You say that God is a human being?

NIJINSKY

Life.

ACTOR

In that case, it follows that good and bad are the essence of God.

NIJINSKY

My God is the God of good. However, I can't be responsible for a bad person.

ACTOR

Aha! You mean that there are many different manifestations of God in the world!

NIJINSKY

I wish you no evil, but my wife's father committed suicide because he thought too much. Believe me, I wish evil upon no one! And my mind is not damaged.

ACTOR

What does your mind have to do with it?

NIJINSKY

Absolutely nothing. People used to say about Diaghilev that he didn't have a single sou but his mind was worth an entire

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

I have a soul, too!

NIJINSKY

You see? And you keep talking about apes! I hate polemics. Silence is the best tactic in any argument.

(Pause. The Actor is on the verge of saying something, but Nijinsky stops him with a gesture. Pause)

ACTOR

(Carefully) What happened?

NIJINSKY

(Standing motionlessly) I dance.

(Pause)

ACTOR

Wait a minute! You say that God...

NIJINSKY

(Interrupting harshly) What do you want?

ACTOR

Wait, wait, wait, wait! I'm the one asking questions.

NIJINSKY

I'm tired of you.

ACTOR

That's not funny. Now, listen. Listen very carefully! Whoever He may be, God only exists apart from humans, right? Isn't that so? I'm asking you: Isn't that so?

NIJINSKY

(Speaking at a break-neck speed without pauses) I am a human a human and God I am a red-skinned Indian a black man an Egyptian a foreigner an alien a Chinaman I am the God of any living creature I am a sea bird and the bird above the land I am a bear a bison a dolphin...

ACTOR

Shut up.

NIJINSKY

ALEXEI BURYKIN

fire air water motion and life wisdom and feeling...

ACTOR

(Grasping his head) Shut up!! I demand that you shut up!

NIJINSKY

...I am Buddha I am Christ the spirit in flesh and flesh in spirit I am a butterfly I am a flower I am a man and a woman I am one whole I am anywhere and everywhere I am love and eternity I I I I...

(The Actor seizes a bottle of cognac and, after clasping Nijinsky's head firmly between his knees, empties out half of the bottle. Nijinsky immediately goes limp and topples on the floor. The Actor takes a sip from the bottle. Pause)

ACTOR

Now I understand. You belong in a museum of oddities. I'll marinate you and send you to Zurich. *(Laughs)* Or to Paris. Or, maybe, London. You'll be right at home with all those two-headed freaks and hermaphrodites! They'll give you your own shelf with your own name-tag on which they'll write...

NIJINSKY

(Interrupting) Good cognac.

ACTOR

What?

NIJINSKY

(Leaping up in one deft motion) Shh!

ACTOR

What?

NIJINSKY

Shhh!

ACTOR

Quit goofing off!

NIJINSKY

(Insistently) Shush!

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

(Whispering) What's going on?

NIJINSKY

That moment will never happen again. Ne-ver.

ACTOR

It's always like that.

NIJINSKY

Particularly here.

ACTOR

Especially here.

NIJINSKY

I have to warn you of impending danger. *(Takes the bottle from the Actor, takes a sip and gives it back)* If measures aren't taken, it will be too late.

(A puzzled look comes over the Actor's face)

I see how you suffer. It's because you theorize too much. My wife theorized a lot, too. And you know what that led to. I gather you eat meat?

ACTOR

(Decisively) I don't see the connection.

NIJINSKY

Connections are always invisible. You can only sense them intuitively. For example, I can see without looking. Can you?

ACTOR

How do you do that?

NIJINSKY

Eyes aren't all you need to see objects or people's actions.

ACTOR

Liar!

NIJINSKY

I help myself through feeling. The blind understand me perfectly. The blind and the mad. They are the ones I communicate with

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

Ha! It sounds to me like you're theorizing, yourself.

NIJINSKY

No, I'm telling you that I feel. And anyway, you're the one who started all this.

ACTOR

Me? I am but the consequence. You are the cause.

NIJINSKY

The cause is in God.

ACTOR

There you go again!

NIJINSKY

There are times when it even seems that all those who live in me actually exist independently. All on their own. But I can't verify that. How could you verify that?

(The Actor drinks from the bottle)

ACTOR

I remember ab-solute-ly nothing!

NIJINSKY

Fool.

ACTOR

Take that back.

NIJINSKY

Loof. You're a phony.

ACTOR

(Stubbornly) Take that back!

NIJINSKY

I can't.

ACTOR

Why?

NIJINSKY

Because you are neither blind nor mad.

ACTOR

NIJINSKY — ACT I

NIJINSKY

No you're not.

ACTOR

Yes I am!

NIJINSKY

No you're not!

ACTOR

All right then! I'm blind.

*(Nijinsky carefully looks over
the Actor)*

NIJINSKY

(After a pause) Yes, you're blind. However, you can see. That means your blindness isn't real.

ACTOR

What is it, then?

NIJINSKY

You don't lose your sight just because I call you blind. That's not the point.

ACTOR

What is the point?

NIJINSKY

I already told you.

ACTOR

No you didn't.

NIJINSKY

Yes I did.

ACTOR

No you didn't.

NIJINSKY

Yes I did.

ACTOR

Well, in that case, I wasn't satisfied with what you said! Basically, you haven't given me a single satisfactory answer to any one of my questions!

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

(Happily) There! You see how useful it is to theorize? Now I know who I am.

NIJINSKY

Who are you?

ACTOR

(Offended) I'm not saying.

NIJINSKY

Is that so?

ACTOR

That's right! What's it to you?

NIJINSKY

Do you have a name?

ACTOR

What of it?

NIJINSKY

Names create fates.

ACTOR

Fates create names.

NIJINSKY

Or the other way around.

ACTOR

(Shaking his head in agreement) Yeah, or the other way around. *(Drinks some cognac)* But I still can't figure out whether you're faking or not.

NIJINSKY

Faking.

ACTOR

Aha!

(Both grab for the bottle)

NIJINSKY

Thoughts are useless if they aren't dangerous. That's why I don't like Hamlet. He's always theorizing instead of trusting his feelings

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

I can't stand Hamlet either! *(Sobbing)* Maybe I was a blind man and now I can see?

NIJINSKY

Maybe. Only that was a long time ago. You are very sick. All of you. You poor, sick star. *(Drinks)*

(The Actor weeps)

Only don't act like a woman. They're always crying. Knock it off. *(Removes a handkerchief from the Actor's pocket and wipes his face with it)*

ACTOR

(Sobbing) Don't you ever cry?

NIJINSKY

All the time. But even if they plucked out my eyes, I would still be able to cry, because my tears flow in my soul. What would you do if they plucked out your eyes?

ACTOR

Knock it off!

(Nijinsky gets up)

(Severely) You just wait.

(Nijinsky stops)

Take back what you said.

NIJINSKY

About what?

ACTOR

What?

NIJINSKY

What specifically?

ACTOR

Everything. You hear me? Everything! Everything! Everything!

(Nijinsky leaves. The Actor drinks from the nearly-empty bottle and laughs)

ALEXEI BURYKIN

then he's gone! What is... *(Gets confused)* Hands up! *(Raises his hand)* I'm arrested. For life. *(Laughs)* Let somebody else finish out the game. I've had it!

(Nijinsky peers out)

NIJINSKY

Hey you! Nameless!

ACTOR

Huh?

NIJINSKY

I thought about it and did it.

ACTOR

Did what?

NIJINSKY

Took it back. All of it. *(Disappears)*

(The Actor roars violently)

ACTOR

Now wait a minute! If I don't... then who will? We are still... *(Gives himself commands, fulfilling them uncertainly)* Ab-out face! Hut, two... *(Falls. Gets up)* Try it again. Ab-out face! Hut, two, there you go. *(Drinks the last of the cognac and tosses the bottle away)* Take it from the top. Ab-out face! *(Disappears up stage)*

ACT TWO

(Nijinsky alone)

NIJINSKY

I am here and there,
Imagination everywhere,
A shimmering reflection
Of a lost, wayfaring face.
I am here and there. Snared
In a magical game of my own making,
I am the talk of the town
On earth as in heaven!
I am everywhere! I sparkle, I hide,
I will always return
'Til the day the world, love and I
Shall plunge into oblivion!

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

First name, middle name, last name?

(Nijinsky is silent)

Date of birth?

NIJINSKY

Eighteen eighty-nine.

ACTOR

Aha! Or was it 1890?

NIJINSKY

I don't remember.

ACTOR

Place of birth?

NIJINSKY

Kiev.

ACTOR

Or was it Warsaw?

NIJINSKY

I was baptized in Warsaw.

ACTOR

What do you love most in the world?

NIJINSKY

Lobster.

ACTOR

What do you hate?

NIJINSKY

Myself.

ACTOR

Your favorite subject?

NIJINSKY

My comb.

ACTOR

ALEXEI BURYKIN

Lilac. NIJINSKY

Flower? ACTOR

Rose. NIJINSKY

Don't lie! ACTOR

Sorry. Baobab. NIJINSKY

That's not a flower! ACTOR

The baobab blossoms once a year. For one night. In June. NIJINSKY

February. ACTOR

June! NIJINSKY

All right. In June if it's June. Favorite book? ACTOR

The Idiot. NIJINSKY

To whom are you referring? ACTOR

Dostoevsky. *The Idiot.* NIJINSKY

The Idiot. Dostoevsky. All right. Your most treasured dream? ACTOR

To forget everything. NIJINSKY

You mean, everything? ACTOR

NIJINSKY

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

Don't try avoiding an answer.
NIJINSKY

What was the question?

ACTOR

Shall I repeat it?

(Pause)

Well?

NIJINSKY

Well, what?

ACTOR

All right, let's go on. Your ideal?

NIJINSKY

Magic.

ACTOR

That's an answer to another question.

NIJINSKY

Which one?

ACTOR

Are you tired or are you faking?

NIJINSKY

No good! By the way, who are you?

ACTOR

(Laughing) Napoleon!

NIJINSKY

Where did you come from?

ACTOR

A funeral.

NIJINSKY

Mine?

ACTOR

What do you think?

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

There's nothing to tell. I don't even know where to begin.

NIJINSKY

I know what you mean. I've been buried so many times, I myself don't know how many times I've been buried. In honor of my death they staged benefit concerts, learned lectures and gala balls! Only they didn't invite me. But let me give you some help.

ACTOR

How?

NIJINSKY

For example. Was everyone in mourning?

ACTOR

Almost.

NIJINSKY

How about flowers? Were there a lot?

ACTOR

I don't remember. I suppose so.

NIJINSKY

Was anybody crying?

ACTOR

Of course! I was.

NIJINSKY

Where was all this, by the way?

ACTOR

I think it was in London.

NIJINSKY

Or Paris?

ACTOR

Maybe it was Budapest.

NIJINSKY

But it definitely wasn't in Petersburg, was it?

(Both laugh)

NIJINSKY — ACT I

(Pause)

Why aren't you laughing?

ACTOR

I don't know. What day is it today?

NIJINSKY

Day? You mean, of the week? Yesterday was Tuesday, so that means today is Sunday.

ACTOR

To-day is your birth-day!

(A prolonged pause)

NIJINSKY

Where's my present?

ACTOR

Right here! *(Puts a myrtle wreath around Nijinsky's neck)*

NIJINSKY

Where did you get that?

ACTOR

What's the difference?

NIJINSKY

Where did you get that today is my birthday?

ACTOR

You mean, it isn't?

NIJINSKY

No, I'm happy to... What do you think was in the beginning?

ACTOR

Everybody knows: the word.

NIJINSKY

You see, but it wasn't the word!

ACTOR

What was it, then?

NIJINSKY

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

What about dance?

NIJINSKY

Dance... I replaced it.

ACTOR

I see. When a name dies, memories about a person come to life. When a person dies, his name is on everyone's lips. Isn't that so?

NIJINSKY

What did they diagnose you with?

ACTOR

What did who diagnose me with?

NIJINSKY

You know who.

ACTOR

Uh, you know... slowly progressive schizophrenia. What about you?

NIJINSKY

Mine's rapidly progressive. Have you ever tried eating China?

ACTOR

China? N-o. But I devoured America and Europe.

NIJINSKY

All of America?

ACTOR

I didn't leave a crumb.

NIJINSKY

Well, I ate Mongolia. "Hello, how are you feeling?" The main thing is to let them think you are an egoist. Only don't accept any medications!

ACTOR

I can get out of here any time I want!

(Pause)

NIJINSKY

Well you won't find me when you get back

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

I'm not coming back!

NIJINSKY

Don't you understand? They'll bring you back.

ACTOR

Where are you going to be?

NIJINSKY

They're going to take me away.

ACTOR

Will we ever meet again?

NIJINSKY

If we look for each other.

ACTOR

We will look for each other!

NIJINSKY

And maybe we'll even find each other! I know a place to hide.

ACTOR

Where?

NIJINSKY

In rhymes. For example: Love!

ACTOR

Glove!

NIJINSKY

God.

ACTOR

Dog. Now let me. Life!

(They stare at each other)

Oh, all right, all right. Death!

NIJINSKY

Stock Exchange!

(They stare at each other)

ACTOR

ALEXEI BURYKIN

Politics!
NIJINSKY

Penitentiary!
ACTOR

Critics!
NIJINSKY

Theorization!
ACTOR

(Stare at each other)

Prostitution!
NIJINSKY

Revolution!
ACTOR

Lean meat!
NIJINSKY

Leonid Myasin!³
ACTOR

(The two stare at each other)

NIJINSKY
That doesn't rhyme at all. *(Turns away)*

(Pause)

ACTOR
Well, well. Please do pardon me, my dear Prince Myshkin!⁴
I've done a bad thing. If you want, I'll kiss your hand right
now!

NIJINSKY
I would never have thought you were like that! I thought you
were incapable of confession.

³ Leonid Myasin (1895-1979), whose last name is very similar to the Russian word for meat—"myaso"—was the dancer who replaced Nijinsky in the Ballets Russes in 1919. He went on to a long, brilliant career as a dancer, choreographer and artistic director.

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

What is it has given me the idea recently that you are an idiot? You notice things nobody else notices. One can talk to you, but it's best not to!

NIJINSKY

For some reason, everybody considers me an idiot! It's true I once was so sick that I was as helpless as an idiot. But how can I possibly be an idiot now, when I am perfectly capable of understanding that others consider me an idiot? Huh?

ACTOR

Huh?

NIJINSKY

I come in here and think: "People say I'm an idiot. But I'm smart, and they don't suspect that." I often think that.

ACTOR

Pardon me, but with whom am I speaking?

NIJINSKY

Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin, at your service.

ACTOR

You mean, Vaslav Fomych Nijinsky?

NIJINSKY

Who's that?

ACTOR

Repeat!

(Pause)

NIJINSKY

Is this some kind of joke?

(Pause)

ACTOR

I don't get you...

NIJINSKY

Is today really my birthday?

(Pause)

ACTOR

ALEXEI BURYKIN

NIJINSKY

Thank you. I spent my favorite birthday with Chaplin. We talked about his mother. He loved her very tenderly.

ACTOR

But you don't speak English!

NIJINSKY

Yes, nor he Russian.

(Pause)

ACTOR

What do you love most of all on earth?

NIJINSKY

Most of all on earth? *(Laughs)* Insects and parrots.

ACTOR

Unfortunately, I don't like either one. What do you hate?

NIJINSKY

Ringing telephones.

ACTOR

Your ideal?

NIJINSKY

Nietzsche.

ACTOR

Your favorite object?

NIJINSKY

A mirror... no, wait. Yes, a mirror.

ACTOR

Your most treasured dream?

NIJINSKY

To see the light.

ACTOR

In what sense.

NIJINSKY

Next question!

ACTOR

NIJINSKY — ACT I

NIJINSKY

You mean, like an *idée fixe*?

ACTOR

(Startled) Yeah, sort of.

NIJINSKY

A circle. Not a square, but a circle. Like an eye. The theater must be like that, you know?

ACTOR

Uhuh. Do you believe dreams?

NIJINSKY

I don't believe life!

ACTOR

Do you believe dreams?

NIJINSKY

Not all of them.

ACTOR

Favorite flower?

NIJINSKY

Narcissus.

ACTOR

Don't lie.

NIJINSKY

Rose.

ACTOR

Don't lie!

NIJINSKY

Narcissus!

ACTOR

All right. Color?

NIJINSKY

Coffee.

ACTOR

Me too! Smell?

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

I can't stand it! Season?

NIJINSKY

(Falls into thought) I am not sufficiently prepared to answer that question. Winter in Europe.

ACTOR

Winter in Europe. Favorite dish?

NIJINSKY

Aren't you going to ask about my favorite breed of dog?

ACTOR

No.

NIJINSKY

Pomegranate.

ACTOR

That's not a dish!

NIJINSKY

Then what is it?

ACTOR

(Offended) It's just a fruit.

NIJINSKY

Sometimes you are completely unbearable. It's impossible to talk to you!

(Pause)

Why so silent?

(The Actor mutters something)

Oh, all right. A pomegranate is just a fruit. Are you happy, now? Although it's not true. Happy birthday!

(He hangs the wreath around the Actor's neck)

ACTOR

What do you mean?

NIJINSKY

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

Ha! Thanks. What can you tell me about the ballet?

NIJINSKY

Which one?

ACTOR

Any one.

NIJINSKY

Nothing.

ACTOR

Happy birthday! Why so capricious?

NIJINSKY

I don't know what to say. Thanks. Give me a hint!

ACTOR

Let's say, plot, choreography.

NIJINSKY

Oh, plot! It's always the same. "What's the plot of your story?" There is none.

(The Actor laughs)

That's right. You've either got to have a plot that nobody knows at all or that everybody everywhere knows. It's like looking at a painting or listening to a symphony. For example, I could devise a dance for a hunchback, could you?

ACTOR

Me? No!

NIJINSKY

There, you see? You just waved me off with your hand. That was an expressive gesture. Choreography makes use of the very same gesture, only in an artificially created environment. That's all there is to it. What's it to you?

ACTOR

I heard something about the ballet once. But I don't remember it now! Something about a pretty castle.

NIJINSKY

Yes! The castle of beauty. Yeah. That's not bad. It's only a game, of course. But I know one thing, there is no such thing as a dance that is independent from death

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

(Tossing off the wreath) No such thing as a dance that is independent from death? *(Pause)* What about this? *(Does a rock 'n' roll dance)*

(Nijinsky laughs)

Say, how was it that you could hang in the air at the top of a leap?

NIJINSKY

That's simple. You just get a bit of a running start, take off, and then, for a minute, you just stop in the air.

ACTOR

(Stopping) What do you mean, just stop?

NIJINSKY

It's easy. Try it.

ACTOR

Me? Come on! I don't have any experience.

NIJINSKY

So what? All experience does is kill a good leap. Come on, come on! Go over there to that curtain.

ACTOR

What are you doing? It won't work.

NIJINSKY

You need room to build up speed. Go on over there. The most important thing is to think of nothing. Absolutely nothing.

ACTOR

Cut it out! This is crazy!

NIJINSKY

Don't worry!

ACTOR

What's the point? This is stupid!

NIJINSKY

Try it. Just try it. O.k., right here. You start running and... I'll stand right where you should start your leap.

(Pause. The Actor prepares to leap)

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

Uh, when should I start?

NIJINSKY

(Thinking) As soon as you're ready, I'll wave my hand.
(Pause)

ACTOR

(Walking away) This is pointless. Plus, I'm afraid of heights.

NIJINSKY

Take your position! Quick! Push off from where I'm standing. Ready? Go!

(Nijinsky waves his hand, the Actor starts running. He leaps and flies into the air. Both carefully watch the trajectory of the Actor's leap and laugh at that moment when they imagine he comes back to earth)

ACTOR

I can't! *(Pause)* I can't do it.

NIJINSKY

No need to get upset. Nobody can do it. I'm probably the only one. You should have seen how the critics ate me alive! They couldn't wait to find a reason to destroy me! Just think. An artist devotes his entire life to art and the critics—even if they aren't prejudiced—don't think twice about moving in to destroy him.

ACTOR

Ha! They think they're smarter than actors. They like making the poor devils shiver and tremble.

NIJINSKY

What did you say? Poor devils? That's exactly right. I've got to write that down.

ACTOR

To listen to critics, you'd think that without them there is no such thing as art and that no one had the right to express an opinion about anything without getting their approval first!

ALEXEI BURYKIN

ACTOR

I guess their... work, that they get money for, requires a certain, uh, diligence. But it doesn't have anything to do with love of art!

NIJINSKY

Love?! What love?! They don't do anything but theorize!

ACTOR

You know, all this time I've been wanting to ask you...

NIJINSKY

About what?

ACTOR

About, you know, the most important thing.

NIJINSKY

Well, go ahead. Ask me!

ACTOR

I forgot everything!

NIJINSKY

Try to remember.

ACTOR

(Shaking his head) I forget. I forgot everything.

NIJINSKY

I'll be happy to answer. What was it you wanted to know?

ACTOR

I don't remember.

NIJINSKY

But isn't that why you're still here?

ACTOR

Maybe. It doesn't matter now.

NIJINSKY

Freeze!

(The Actor freezes)

NIJINSKY

From here you look just like me

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

From where?

NIJINSKY

Come here!

(The Actor goes to Nijinsky)

From right here!

ACTOR

But I'm not there.

NIJINSKY. What do you mean? You mean, you can't see? There was even a photograph where I looked just like that. And now you are all illuminated, too!

*(The Actor stares harder.
Pause)*

ACTOR

I see. No I don't. No, I see it. No I don't. This is stupid! What do you keep harassing me for? Now you see it, now you don't! Are you satisfied now? How did this happen to me? Somehow I got mixed up in something incredibly absurd! What kind of rules are you playing by? And here I am like a fool playing along! This is dis-gus-ting. You hooked me, you pathetic slob! *(Laughs)* Here I am playing this humiliating role! For who? The "prima ballerina!" Ah! *(Pause)* By the way, one sick weirdo like you said that the word God stands for Galactic Organizational Director. *(Laughs)* I think that's more clever than all your nonsense about God!

(Long pause)

NIJINSKY

When I was a boy...

ACTOR

Shut up.

NIJINSKY

...I used to copy out Pushkin's poems, hoping I would learn to write like he did. Something like, "I'm sitting on pins in a dungeon so damp..."⁵

ACTOR

"God grant I don't go nuts."

ALEXEI BURYKIN

NIJINSKY

That's right! I wrote several poems myself, but nobody,
nobody ever read them.

ACTOR

No wonder! What rhymes with "existence"?

NIJINSKY

Nijinsky.

ACTOR

What?

NIJINSKY

Vaslav Nijinsky.

ACTOR

Again!

NIJINSKY

Nijinsky. What was in the beginning?

ACTOR

In the beginning was a sound. An unfamiliar one.
A hum. And then came lines of letters.
I slept. And swarms of hands traced out a word. I've
lost it now.
I woke and saw a pitch-black door and nothing more.
An uninvited guest then joined the agonizing native
Of that undesired night that was so tender!
Merciless life, that unforgiving tempter,
Flew into a madhouse with a leap,
And for a moment stopped being mere life,
Transforming into something more! My soul—which no one
can
Humiliate—spinning like a bright snowflake,
Is ready to do servitude!
It waits its future incarnation with impatience!

NIJINSKY

You speak? He speaks! It can't be true!
That's not the outcome I was working to!
And it's your fault. You are the one who lacked
The love that would have gained you loss...
It's nothing but a sleight of hand —
He cannot change. I don't believe he can!
Oh, as I played, I tightly drew the knot.
Don't delay! The move is yours! Your shot!

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

There's a plot for you! Who could have guessed it would...

NIJINSKY

(Interrupting) It's the resolution. The finale.

ACTOR

But we're absolutely out of time. Whose resolution?

NIJINSKY

The only one possible. The time has come.

ACTOR

Yes, the time has come to finish with this... visit.

NIJINSKY

Well then?

(Pause)

ACTOR

Agreed.

(Pause)

NIJINSKY

All right. *(Takes out two pistols and loads them)* Antiques. They are quite reliable.

ACTOR

I do hope and willingly trust that's so.

NIJINSKY

The choice, sir, is yours.

ACTOR

What's the difference? However, I'll take this one.

NIJINSKY

This?

ACTOR

Yes. It better suits my attire.

NIJINSKY

That remains to be seen.

ALEXEI BURYKIN

NIJINSKY

How many is the usual? I must admit, I am not well versed in the arithmetics of duels. How many did Lermontov use?⁶

ACTOR

It seems I've danced a duel or two... Let's just say ten.
(Goes to measure out the paces and establish the barrier)

NIJINSKY

(Takes out money) I do not wish to remain in your debt.
(Throws the packet of money at the Actor)

ACTOR

What a shame you never made it to Paris or to Zurich.

NIJINSKY

(Pointing to the wreath) By the way, you were wrong. Today is not my birthday.

(Pause)

ACTOR

Would the gentleman care to be my second?

NIJINSKY

I see no other choice. And in turn, good sir, if it wouldn't be too much trouble...

ACTOR

My goodness, no! I would be pleased and honored. And now, what about a doctor?

NIJINSKY

I think that is unnecessary.

ACTOR

But it is tradition!

NIJINSKY

I can take on that function myself.

ACTOR

Won't that be a bit much for one person?

NIJINSKY

Not at all. Don't you worry!

NIJINSKY — ACT I

ACTOR

As an honorable second, I am obliged to offer a peaceful settlement. Perhaps the gentlemen will apologize to one another and shake hands?

NIJINSKY

And then what? *(Pause)* I have nothing to apologize for.

ACTOR

That goes doubly for me.

NIJINSKY

Then, let's dispense with the formalities!

ACTOR

Yes. Let's dispense with these horrid clichés. Are you ready?

NIJINSKY

Sir! We forgot to determine whose shot shall be the first!

ACTOR

One moment! *(Takes out a coin)*

(Nijinsky approaches)

Heads or tails?

NIJINSKY

Call it tails or nothing.

ACTOR

Tails it is. We shall see who is the prince and who's the pauper! *(He flips the coin)* He laughs best who shoots last. *(Looks at the coin)* It's heads.

NIJINSKY

You, sir, are having uncommon luck.

ACTOR

Shall we take our places?

NIJINSKY

Yes. It would be silly to shoot at the distance of a single pace.

ACTOR

Why does sir say that?

ALEXEI BURYKIN

all, then what would be the point of dueling?

(Pause)

ACTOR

I see your point! How is your eyesight?

NIJINSKY

Better than yours.

ACTOR

We shall see.

NIJINSKY

Enough dallying! To our places!

ACTOR

As regards your reference to the passage of time, I heartily agree. However, I dare note that our place is one and the same.

NIJINSKY

Depends on your point of view!

(Nijinsky goes to one side of the stage, and then suddenly whirls around and goes to the other. They separate. The stage is empty. Pause. From offstage the Actor's voice is heard: "Begin!" They begin walking toward each other. Nijinsky lowers his pistol)

ACTOR

What's the matter?

NIJINSKY

Just look at yourself! You can't go fighting a duel in such filthy shoes! *(Takes out a pair of shoes)* Try these on.

(The Actor puts on the shoes)

Excellent! A perfect fit! I'd be happy to give them to you, but now is not the time for gifts.

ACTOR

Thank you.

NIJINSKY — ACT I

Hey! You forgot your pistol!

(Nijinsky returns and takes his pistol. They separate again. Pause. The Actor's voice is heard: "Begin!" They walk toward each other)

I have the feeling my pistol isn't loaded.

NIJINSKY

That's impossible. I loaded both of them.

ACTOR

In your haste you might have forgotten one.

NIJINSKY

Who's the one who showed up with an empty suitcase?

(They stare at one another)

ACTOR

I'll check. *(He checks his pistol)*

NIJINSKY

To our places!

(They separate. The Actor shouts: "Hut!" Nijinsky answers: "What do you mean, 'hut'? This isn't a circus act. Begin!" They approach one another. A telephone rings. The duelists freeze)

NIJINSKY

You get it. And tell them I'm not here, nor will I be.

ACTOR

Why me? Maybe we just shouldn't answer?

NIJINSKY

Then I won't be able to concentrate on you!

ACTOR

(Approaches the telephone) All right, we'll call it your last wish. Hello? Hello? Speak up! *(Slams down the receiver)* For the love of God!

ALEXEI BURYKIN

DAUGHTER

No need to fear. Everything is bliss!
I'm all astir, although I know it's time to sleep!
Can you count the stripes that paint a rainbow?
That's how many hours I want to sleep!

NIJINSKY

Sleep, my sweet girl, I am your guard.
Rest beneath my loving heart!
May sleep bring you a magic dream
The likes of which are never seen!
I love with equal poignancy
Those timeless sisters, life and death.
For time's a fool: Who, if not we,
Knows best the hour that now is striking?

SON

I know you by your footsteps,
Your silence and your sorrow.
Let's plant a little garden on my star
That always will be near, even if it's far.
This little star of mine is, oh, so small
It never shined. It is so small, this star,
It truly shined forever.

NIJINSKY

The blinding speed of death is much too quick to wait
for.
In life, I knew no peace. I heard the titillated chatter
About my rumored trysts. But then,
When midnight passed, the mornings always were much
kinder.
I saw the world—a blur—from the windows of hotels.
(It always had the feel of a double-bottomed cell.)
With my own eyes I saw the aging William Tell,
But there was just one thing that had the power to make
me weep:
Not on a seething Paris street
Nor on a steaming Venice square
Could death, so swift and spare,
Cut short the soaring flight
Of my low life...

(Pause)

I hear an organ grinder playing... Do try to look after
yourself better. Going around in filthy shoes is a nasty
habit. No. I guess I didn't hear anything after all.

NIJINSKY — ACT I

(The telephone rings. The Actor answers it, muttering to himself, "I'm not here, nor will I be")

ACTOR

Hello? No. Sorry. This is not a theater. *(Hangs up the phone. Extends his hand and looks upward)* Is that rain?

(Rain begins pouring. The phone rings again. The Actor covers his head with his handkerchief)

CURTAIN
END OF PLAY

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