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An Artist, Now

Laila Rose Perlman
Bard College

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AN ARTIST, NOW

An Original Musical Inspired by Irmgard Keun's The Artificial Silk Girl

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by

Laila Rose Perlman

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

Acknowledgements

To Mom, Dad, and Zach: Thank you for being the best support system a little theater kid could ask for. Your love and patience are unmatched, and I will be grateful forever. I couldn't have asked for a better audience back in my "popular-notular" phase, and I couldn't ask for a better one now.

Gideon Lester: Jonja and I were incredibly lucky to work with you throughout our time here. I am endlessly appreciative of your feedback and guidance, and this show came to life because of our conversations. Thank you for encouraging us to keep working on this piece and I'm looking forward to the directions you've led us towards.

Jordan Becknell, Zara Boss, Scotty Hindy, Elena Stern: I will never be able to properly describe how lovely it was to work with you. You are all incredibly talented, focused, and hilarious, and your contributions to the process mean so much to me. It's nice to know that we're leaving theater at Bard in such incredible hands.

The T&P Faculty and Students: Thank you for giving me space to learn and grow and work and cry and laugh. I'll miss being together in our big spaceship.

Gavin McKenzie: My day one. It really was our year!!

Jonja Merck: Thank you for being the most incredible collaborator, composer, and friend. Your dedication and talent never cease to amaze me, and it's been such an honor to work with you. I can't wait to see all the amazing things I know you'll go on to do. I hope we will continue to come up with unhinged ideas for many years to come.

Ian Ullmann: I'd say you returned the favor. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleader and so much more.

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THE TEXT

“Tonight I’m going to write everything down in order in my book, because there’s so much material that’s accumulated in me.”¹

Irmgard Keun’s *The Artificial Silk Girl* was published in 1932 and banned by the Nazis the following year. The novel tells the story of Doris, a young girl who moves to Berlin in the early 1930s to live a more glamorous life. An early material girl, Doris uses her relationships with men to gain access to an expensive lifestyle that does not require her to have a job. Patrizia McBride writes that Doris “has put her youth and good looks to work, displaying a candid understanding of the economic logic of exchange that drives sexual relations in an unabashedly materialistic culture.”² Doris uses company as currency, allowing men to spend time with her in exchange for various gifts, without elevating her social status. She contradicts herself in her ability to retain independence while often relying on these relationships to survive. Told in the first person, Doris develops an intimate relationship with her audience as the book reads like her diary. She is both cynical and sincere, and her voice is captivating even in translation. *The Artificial Silk Girl* was popular as a representation of modern women and female experience in Berlin. As a “female chronicler and critic of the material and social realities of women in her society,”³ Keun’s honesty and stark observations were antithetical to Nazi suppression of independent womanhood. But Doris herself does not have any specific political opinions. Instead, she is an example “for so many Germans of that time who realized what they had gotten

¹ Irmgard Keun, *The Artificial Silk Girl* trans. Kathie von Ankum (New York: Other Press), 57.

² Patrizia McBride, “Learning to See in Irmgard Keun’s “Das kunstseidene Mädchen” *The German Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2011): 224.

³ Anke Gleber, “Weimar Women, Walkers, Writers: Irmgard Keun and Charlotte Wolff” in *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 192.

caught up in only when it was too late.”⁴ All copies of *The Artificial Silk Girl* were destroyed in 1933, and were not rediscovered until the 1970s. Although *The Artificial Silk Girl* was not a strictly political novel, Doris would’ve been considered an “un-German” woman by the Nazi censorship board. Despite being a best-seller, her descriptions of Berlin nightlife and dealings with men and finances would have posed a threat to more traditional feminine ideals.

In our first meeting almost a year ago Jonja suggested *The Artificial Silk Girl* as our source text. He had read the book in a class and was struck by its potential for the stage. I read the book slowly over the course of the next month or so. I had to read slowly because the book made me sad. The narrative style gives such a close look at how Doris thinks and feels, and I found the conflicting self-awareness and naivety in her worldview to be heartbreaking. I agreed to use the text under the condition that we were taking inspiration as opposed to completely adapting. I was struck by Doris and wanted to explore her as a character in our work, but I wanted to lean farther into the idea of her as a performer. I could see how the diary format could translate into this presentation for the audience, and eventually wanted to rely on that connection. I also wanted to take a different approach to her various relationships with men, by highlighting one and having it fall apart in a new way. When we began the project, I did not know the details of how or when the book was banned. Looking back, I think the fact that this book was banned speaks to its publication occurring right before a moment of extreme political turmoil. I’ve been able to connect to how Doris longs for success in the moments before the world changes again.

THE WRITING PROCESS

*“And it will do me good to be writing without commas for a change, and real language – not that unnatural stuff from the office.”*⁵

⁴ Kathie von Ankum, translator’s note to *The Artificial Silk Girl*, (New York: Other Press, 2002), viii.

⁵ Keun, 3.

Once we agreed to use *The Artificial Silk Girl*, Jonja and I set a plan for collaboration moving forward. Over the summer we met about once a week to talk about where we were headed. At the same time, we both struggled under the pressure to be productive. I was having an emotionally and physically difficult summer that made being creative feel painful. I had to accept that the summer could be a slow brainstorming time as opposed to consistent production time. We often had to remind each other of the impossibilities of collaboration on zoom/across the world, and that we needed to trust the amount of time we had left. The first time we met in person in the fall, we were immediately able to produce ideas in a way we struggled to all summer.

There is a 111-page document that contains every iteration of the script up until the final draft. Here are some things that did not make it into the final version that we considered at some point while writing: The whole show happening in an abandoned theater as Doris cleans and looks at old props; Doris's mother being a character only on video; Young Doris; lots of projections; The He's Not Song; mannequins; a mannequin head; shadow people church song (with harmonies); George forgetting Doris exists; George not being real; a newsboy; Doris not being real; Doris dying at a train station. I'm including this list and the existence of these pages to emphasize how this show was constantly changing and still will as we continue to develop it. Jonja and I were both comfortable scratching ideas we couldn't get to work, or compromising, or making decisions to best serve this exact version of the show as opposed to its final form. With these ideas out of the way, we determined the moments in the show based on what felt stable in the world that we were trying to set up. Many of the ideas listed above felt awkward to me, and in attempting to write I would continually hit walls. I found that when writing one of the scenes that did end up in the show, there was a certain flow that indicated fit. Whenever I got really

stuck, I would turn to the book. Moments that came directly from the text include the first Doris/George scene, locking the girl in the bathroom, the stolen fur from the theater coat room, and Doris spending time with men in bars. These moments, and others that we came up with that were equally specific, were the ones I found worked the best.

By midways we had most of the first half of the show, which remained similar in writing through February. The feedback we got after midways, specifically feedback about going darker, was what Jonja and I already knew was coming next in the second half and leaned into that turn. But in form we decided to emphasize Doris as the centerpiece and narrator. We developed her relationship with the audience and set up her control of the space. The idea of George destroying everything came later, and the final moments of the show were not set until mid-February. The “Ingrid Ending”, as I called it, came out of the tension between Doris’s capture of the audience in the show, and her failure in her life. I do believe in her unique perspective as an artist, but that there can still be thousands of girls just like her, at least on the surface. A lot of the moments in the show came from me approaching Jonja with what I would call an “unhinged” idea. These were ideas I wanted to try but thought might be disastrous. Many of them worked.

At the very beginning of the writing process Jonja and I took turns creating drafts of the book. Eventually I ended up writing our book, after we settled on the arc of the piece and what each scene/song would be together. We would start by discussing in practice rooms, talking through different ideas for scenes, songs, and lyrics. Then we would each go off and Jonja would work on music while I would work on book or lyrics, and then we would meet up again a week later and see what had happened. I tried writing some lyrics for fun after Jonja sent me a recording of the first song, even though I was not initially intending to be our lyricist. But we liked what I came up with for the first song and I continued to be lyricist from there. My writing

process felt strange, as I had no experience writing lyrics until this point and had only ever written plays for the intro class. I found that I would marinate on an idea for a scene for about a week, and then suddenly be able to write the whole thing in one sitting. For example, the final version of the date montage scene was also only the second version of that scene. The final version of the scene where Doris and George meet and return to his apartment is the only version I ever wrote. I also tended to bounce between using the text from the book as reference and ignoring it. As I affirmed that trying to capture specific moments from the book in the allotted time frame was hurting more than helping. Jonja and I had agreed to use the text as more of an inspiration as opposed to directly adapting, which freed us in terms of language and pacing.

On the lyrics side, I had three distinct experiences with each of the songs. Jonja would send me a recording and I would work from there, coming up with the melody as I went. The lyrics for “To Be a Star” started as an experiment, but we actually ended up liking them and they stuck with further development. We presented the first half of the second song at midways, and the final version is completely different in lyrics and mostly different in melody. I wrote most of the final lyrics while having a very “Doris” experience. I was staying in my boyfriend’s apartment over winter break. He would go to work all day and I would stay in the apartment mostly doing nothing, just like Doris and George. For the first time in over a year I had more than a month away from the Bard area. Despite my guilt, I really enjoyed having nothing to do. So I translated this experience into a song and gave it to Doris. The lyrics for the last song weren’t finished until two weeks before the show. We struggled to decide the exact purpose of this song beyond it being the “sad” one. Jonja had already written the music, but until we figured out what the final moments of the show were it was difficult to add lyrics. But eventually we decided to focus on her relationship to the audience and to the space. At this point in the show

the audience is the only thing she has left. She will keep performing for them as long as she can despite having her agency over the technical elements of the space taken away.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

“It’s always such a strange feeling to stand in front of a door when someone else opens it.”⁶

I am very proud of where the show got to in the time we had. I think we accomplished what we set out to do, which was to write an original and formally striking musical using fragments of Keun’s text. For this version Jonja and I agreed to have a contained piece in 25 minutes, rather than present the first section of a longer work. Going forward, we have ideas of places that could use more in addition to ideas for new sections. I think the end of the piece comes a little quickly, and would like to earn it more with more middle space. One thing I’d like on a formal level is to have time for other characters to sing. I think writing a duet between Doris and George or group numbers or songs for characters that don’t exist yet would be a next step. My current ideas for the future currently pertain more to big picture pieces of the show. These ideas come out of the first conversation Jonja and I had with Gideon after closing, where Gideon suggested two places to dive into that I had been thinking about myself. One was the question of why this piece is even set in Berlin. I would say the main reason right now is because that’s where the book is set, which currently outweighs the significance of the location to our specific version of the story. Going forward I would be interested in both directions that come out of this question. One would be to try setting the piece in a different location or time entirely. It could be interesting to see if what we like about the story is more concerned with Doris as a character but removed from her context in the novel. The other direction would be to work with a dramaturg to

⁶ Keun, 135.

invest the script more in the context of 1930s Berlin. This is such a rich time and place historically, and I'd be interested to see how historical accuracy and research could enhance the piece. One specific piece that might be worth investigating would be how the book was controversial then, and how it may still be considered so now.

We're also interested in looking at the gender politics of the piece. The cast of this version were all women except for Scotty, but we did not make an effort to distinguish that they were always playing men. For example, although their costumes were based on 1930s men's fashion, they also wore heels. Jordan was the girl in the bathroom and the horse date (and Ingrid) and little differentiation was made. But this was less of a conscious choice about gender in the world of the piece, and more a product of who we wanted to work with. Going forward, I'd be interested in exploring the various ways this can manifest. Are there other female characters we could introduce? Are we served by George being the only man onstage? I think this choice worked well in his destruction and forced control of Doris's space, but would be interested to see what would happen in a longer version. What if all of the dates were men? What if there was a large ensemble of men to push Doris around on the piano? Another factor that I'd be interested in that I think affects our gender decisions would be scale. Because of the LUMA circumstances, this version had an intimacy based in the small cast and band, and the minimalism of the set. I did enjoy working on this smaller version and felt that it was a helpful place to start. Going forward I would be excited to think about going bigger in every direction, including cast size, stage size, band, set, etc. Recognizing that a version like that might not be achievable anytime soon, I'd like to see it one day.

DORIS

“There has been a significant development in my life, as I am now an artist.”⁷

At one of our early advising meetings Gideon asked me if I could sing. Jonja and I had various names in mind for who might be able to play Doris, but both had doubts about the commitment and specificity she would require. Once we agreed that I would play her we also decided to have Doris be the true centerpiece of the show, as we no longer had to worry about someone being able to learn lines, or commit their time, or carry part of the burden of figuring out who she was. This decision both complicated and eased my writing process. I found that a lot of editing came from my actor brain as opposed to the writing brain. I set aside hours of studio time to work on finding Doris alone, and in these moments I could experiment with word choice and line order in a way I couldn't when just writing. But this also meant I had to stay away from cutting lines or moments that I was nervous about acting even when they served the show. This is to say that playing Doris terrified me.

I developed certain studio rituals to help me access Doris. I would play very loud party music as I memorized my lines because this required me to speak with a certain edge. In one session I wore tall clunky heels so that when I took them off, I could access a lighter walk. I decided that Doris is vertical, which specified the many arm and hand movements she uses. Another key part of finding her was deciding what she wears. I put together a slideshow of costume inspiration images to send to Moe. As Doris oversees the technical elements, I was torn between putting her in evening wear or something more casual. Would she be wearing something she saw in her dreams, or her everyday attempt at glamor? After trying on various options, I settled on the green dress as something period accurate, not distracting, and easily

⁷ Keun, 22.

removable. The reason I decided to have the shadow ensemble and George remove the dress was because this costume was something Doris was particularly attached to as a piece of the world. Losing her dress makes her cling so desperately to the fur in the final moments. For tech week and performances, I had a specific order to do my hair and makeup that made the process feel transformative. I would also dedicate some time every day to the ritual of typing out all of my lines to make sure they were easily accessible. I wanted to be surprised by the events of the show as they occurred, and checking in with my memorization allowed me to have that freedom.

Now I feel completely removed from my performance and am unsure of exactly what it felt like at the time. I have scars on my feet from my shoes and when I notice them I struggle to connect the physical experience of being onstage with my current memory of it. When I look at our production photos I struggle to connect the image of myself to my actual body that performed. Although my memories of that weekend are blurred by adrenaline, from my post-performance notes I can gather that performing in front of an audience drastically changed how I felt onstage. Doris relies on the audience for energy and I did too. To elaborate on this feeling I will provide a quote from those notes: “The adrenaline I felt after our first performance was a lot. It lasted until I found myself alone in the dressing room and I crashed pretty hard. It was exhaustion and relief hitting me at once, but underneath the tired I was incredibly content. When we saw everyone after Nilaja told me that I looked like someone who had just performed my heart out. She also asked if I could feel the love from the audience and I absolutely could. I loved performing, I love Doris, I loved our audiences, I love our cast and band and J. This piece really returned a lot of joy and love for theater that I had been missing, and the struggle to get to this weekend now feels worth it. I really do hope to do it again one day.”

I am grateful that Doris allowed me to have this sense of joy in performing back. I don't know if I still have access to it now, but the intensity of exceeding your own expectations is something I'm holding on to. One moment that I want to highlight is my ad-lib during our opening performance. The end of the show for Doris is devastating, and I felt that devastation at watching my stage get ripped apart in front of me/her. When I heard laughter from the audience that I had never considered might happen, I told them to stop. Someone afterwards told me that moment seemed like it came straight out of Doris, not from me. I think this moment demonstrated where I was able to get with Doris. She had deepened enough that I could allow myself to live through the show as it was happening, despite how familiar I was with the text. I also think that the technical way we rehearsed the show meant that each run was stable. I felt I could find authenticity in my performance because of this stability that supported me. When I've directed work in the past I've always felt the moment where I give up control to the cast. At a certain point it becomes their show and I have to accept my own removal from it. But in this show I never had to give up control, and got to operate the piece from within it. This was disorienting as it was exciting. At this point I haven't decided if I would want to keep playing Doris when we develop the piece further. As much as I remember enjoying the experience I think I might also enjoy working on the piece from the writer/director standpoint only. I think directing would be obviously easier from outside of the cast, and I'm curious about how that would feel. But at the same time I think it may be easier to potentially give up my directorial role to a new collaborator since I couldn't help but write the part with myself in mind.

THE REHEARSAL PROCESS

“Art is something lofty, and I’m suffering for it and already had a success. So I found out that the drama students are more important than those who just participate.”⁸

Rather than hold auditions, we decided it would be more productive to ask a few people if they would join our cast. We chose people we had both worked with in the past that we knew were reliable, talented, and could learn quickly. Originally we wanted to have a four-person ensemble with George played by a fifth actor. Right after winter break our George had to drop out, but at that point he had only read for us at an early showing and we had never rehearsed. Instead of finding someone else we asked Scotty if he would be willing to take the part while keeping him in the ensemble as well. I think this worked better than our original plan, and I felt fortunate to have him in the role.

November 17, 2021: We met with Scotty, Elena, and Jordan for the first time. I sketched out some choreography for the first number after dancing around my living room earlier that day. I ended up hating a lot of that blocking after watching a video we took and scrapped it.

December 6, 2021: A review/new blocking rehearsal with Scotty, Elena, Jordan, and Zara. I reworked most of the opening number and filled Zara in on what stayed the same. I remember being incredibly nervous about my monologues and could not bring myself to do them full out as we worked. Something difficult for me in rehearsals was getting in my own way. I felt a lot of pressure to prove myself as an actor and writer and director all at the same time which overwhelmed me constantly.

December 7, 2021: Our midway showing. Other than the song I hated everything about this. I was shaky and uncomfortable and hadn’t warmed up. I was frustrated with the audio

⁸ Keun, 27.

quality for the second song. I felt strange about being what seemed like one of the longer showings of the night, and just felt generally bad about everything at this point. The following difficulties of writing over winter break did not help.

January 31, 2022: We reconvened on the first day after break and my goal was to get a sense of ensemble characters. I lead the cast through an exercise about physicality where they would imagine a person on a street of a city and switch between inhabiting that person's walk and their own. After the exercise I asked them what people they had in mind going through the exercise. I was struck by how detailed and dynamic their answers were. This particular rehearsal reminded me that the show was in good hands as I battled the struggle of not being able to see what I was doing.

February 5, 2022: This was the only rehearsal for Doris and George alone. Scotty and I had helpful discussions about George that clarified their relationship. We covered how he feels about Doris, what he gets out of their relationship, and why he initiates in the first place. We also blocked almost all the George/Doris moments together while skimming through the blocking for the second song and the destruction. I appreciated the questions that Scotty brought to our conversation, and the ideas he had about who George is before and after the events of the show. Like everyone in the cast he seemed to take the process seriously and was always ready with a big choice or question.

February 8, 2022: A short rehearsal to fill in some missing parts. I sketched out prop movements for the ensemble and walked through the second song. Gideon came to watch and assured us that we still had enough time left. Jonja and I were frustrated with scheduling challenges and LUMA. At this point in the process I wanted to be done.

February 11, 2022: Costume fittings. I tried on two dresses and picked the second one. After noticing a third on the rack I asked Moe to try it because I had a feeling it would work better and it did. I was incredibly happy with what she picked for the rest of the cast based on the images I had sent. This was the first time we all felt like the show was actually happening and not just hypothetically.

February 14, 2022: Our last rehearsal before LUMA. We ran through the show for the first time and I got to try out the end in front of the cast. Until then we still were unsure of the final moments and were able to tell Jordan and try it out at this rehearsal. We discussed LUMA logistics and I communicated what to expect from the tech process so everything could go as smoothly as possible.

February 17, 2022: Spacing onstage in LUMA. We walked through the show and I started to get the sense of how it might feel to perform in front of an audience. We didn't have a band or piano so I had to sing a cappella which I've always hated. Luckily I never felt uncomfortable singing onstage again so at least I got something out of that. I appreciated how focused our cast was and finally felt the arc of the show.

February 19, 2022: A short tech but the first with lights. This was also the day I asked Kevin if I could roll in on the piano. That had always been a vision I had for the show, which I had given up when we were told we would not be getting a grand piano. To our surprise we did, and although I was doubtful of the possibility, I knew I had to ask. Doris is obsessed with self-presentation and spectacle, and I couldn't get the image of her riding the piano out of my head. Kevin agreed to make my "dream come true" and we spaced it out. I invited Gavin to sit in the audience and take notes since Jonja and I both had to be onstage. Jonja and I have experience on the lighting team in LUMA, and this actually meant we gave less input for how we wanted our

lights to work. Having worked with Stacey before, we knew we could trust her. I was particularly fond of the bar lighting and her use of warm and cold depending on the moment. Gavin's notes were helpful in that they gave us reassurance that the show was working, but also final things to think about as we prepared to perform.

February 21, 2022: The stumble through. This is when I really started to feel that the show was what I wanted it to be, and reassurance that we hit the time limit almost exactly. The only thing missing at this point was an audience.

February 23, 2022: Final Dress. I vaguely remember feeling proud and that I enjoyed the feeling of being onstage. I also remember feeling that the energy of the minimal audience was not enough and started to worry about what the opening night reception might be. I wasn't worried about how people would feel about the show or what they would say to me. At that point I was happy with the show we made and was happy to have made it so far. But I was worried about how the real time reactions would affect how I felt performing, and was anxious to find out.

February 25 and 26, 2022: I spent all morning pacing around my apartment waiting for news about the snowstorm. In my head this show is a night show and I wanted to perform at night to open. When we got the call, I began to officially prepare by completing the hair ritual and trying to relax. As I mentioned the reaction from the audience was unexpected and exhilarating. The opening applause to my piano roll in took me by surprise in the best way. I think that initial reaction held me up through the rest of it and looking back that is one of the only moments of the opening performance that I remember vividly. I also remember an audible reaction to George removing the belt which was also not something I was expecting. I felt that this performance was a satisfying culmination of the work I put into the character and the script,

and as blurry as the night was I remember feeling proud. Our second performance felt slightly different, which I was expecting. I think my energy was lower and I've always struggled with matinees. But I was still happy with how it went overall.

Post-show Sunday: What I do remember from after the show was emptiness. While there was background pride and relief, I was struggling to feel anything strongly in the days after the performance. This was not post-show depression, as I do not think the show is over yet. Instead, I think this was the start of the disconnect between me and my performance. I think my disbelief at having made it to that point resulted in an inability to own it in my body. When I received compliments specifically about my performance, I was gracious and happy to hear those things but struggled to imagine that someone was saying those things about me. In our reflection colloquium, talking about the show made me teary. I was not expecting to have an emotional reaction to reflecting as I hadn't been emotional throughout the week. But sitting next to Jonja and hearing both of us express how happy we were with this final product reminded me of the work it took to make it to that point.

REFLECTIONS

Writing this paper has helped reconnect me to Doris, and the opportunity to reflect on the process illuminated my overall feelings towards the project. I remember many moments of frustration and hopelessness. But for as many moments that were stressful, there is a memory from the process that I can appreciate. Whether it was writing bad lyric drafts in practice rooms with Jonja, rehearsing with a cast who respected the work, or looking at myself in the mirror and seeing Doris, I enjoyed so much of this experience and am looking forward to continuing the work. For my literature SPROJ I spent a lot of time thinking about what is special about theater and unique to live performance. This show and process exemplified a lot of my conclusions. I

wanted to create a show that was self-aware in its own theatricality. I wanted to work with a text and translate its idiosyncrasies to the stage. I wanted to collaborate with other students that I respect and admire, and I wanted to be proud of my work. Looking back, I believe this production process and performance accomplished these goals. I also wanted to create something unfinished to take with me into the world, and my conversations with Jonja since we closed have involved future collaboration. Thinking about my time as a theater major over four years, this project has demonstrated my growth as an artist and collaborator overall. I used many different skills to create this production, and felt as though many facets of my student and artist brain were put to good use. In one of my moderation papers I wrote that in my last years at Bard “I’ll continue to develop my own voice, continue to form bonds with my class, and get the absolute most that I can out of this program and this school.” I can’t imagine what she would think of the challenges of the last two years. I can say that I feel like I’ve accomplished these goals, and this project exemplifies how I got the most out of my time.

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Photos by Chris Kayden.

APPENDIX A: Production Photos





APPENDIX B: The Script

AN ARTIST, NOW

(VERSION 14a, final)

- A Musical by Jonja Merck and Laila Perlman -

[rev. 02/15/2022, 9:00 pm]

CHARACTERS**DORIS****GEORGE****SHADOW PEOPLE***

*Three actors embody these characters, playing multiple roles and people such as patrons at the bar or flaneurs in the city.

PLACE

Downtown Berlin

TIME

Late Summer 1933

MUSICAL NUMBERS

1. To Be A Star
2. Montage Song
3. I'm Still Here

Inspired by *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1933) by Irmgard Keun.

Conceived for The Fisher Center at Bard as part of the *Senior Project Festival* 2022 in the Theatre & Performance Department at Bard College, NY in February 2022.

OPENING NIGHT CREDITS

DIRECTOR - Laila Perlman

MUSIC DIRECTOR - Jonja Merck

LIGHTING DESIGN - Stacey Boggs

COSTUME DESIGN - Maureen Shell

STAGE MANAGER - Kevin Hanley

OPENING NIGHT CAST**DORIS** - Laila Perlman**GEORGE** - Scotty Hindy**SHADOW PEOPLE** - Jordan Becknell, Zara Boss, and Elena Stern

Scene 1: Introduction

An empty stage. DORIS enters. She is surprised, yet happy to see the audience.

DORIS

There you are! Thank you so much for joining me this evening. My name is Doris and I'm going to tell you a story. I think you'll like it. It's about my life here in Berlin, and trust me, it's quite interesting. I've even organized some music for you. How lucky you are! How lucky we all are to be here in Berlin. I do love this city. It's like Easter and Christmas combined. Ever since I got here it's been nothing but excitement. I've met some fascinating people and you'll get to meet some of them too. And I've done some fascinating things and I will tell you all about them and I promise I will be honest with you about it all. For example, the last time I did a show I locked a girl in the bathroom and they didn't find her for three hours.

Haven't you heard? I'm an artist now. This is what being an artist is. The director was about to pick one of the ensemble girls to get a line and I heard he was going to pick her because she is dreadfully annoying and won't leave him alone. Well, I didn't come here to stand in the back. If you want to be successful, you have to be willing to do anything. That includes leaving home in the middle of the night with a stolen fur. That includes getting on the train to Berlin with no place to stay and no money. And that includes locking this girl in the bathroom so I get a moment center stage.

I would really do anything to be a star. And I would do anything I've already done a thousand times over. Sometimes I spend all night wandering the streets, dreaming of that one line I got for myself by going above and beyond all the other girls, how one day that one line will turn into one hundred lines. I love it here. If you want to be an artist you must be here. It is an incredible city filled with incredible people, including me. But there is one thing..

Scene 2

#01 To Be A Star

DORIS

I'M HERE IN TOWN, BEEN HERE A WHILE

TO BE A STAR, CAN'T HELP BUT SMILE
 I HAVE JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING I NEED
 STILL MISSING ONE THING

I'VE GOT MEN AND SHOES ON MY FEET
 I'VE GOT STREET LIGHTS AND CITY HEAT
 I'VE GOT THE BAR AND ITS CHARMING AIR
 BUT WHEN THE CITY SLEEPS, I'M THE ONLY ONE THERE

CAUSE THE CITY HAS GIVEN ME EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING EXCEPT FOR A
 BED

WHEN I GOT HERE I THOUGHT IT'D BE PLAIN
 BIG SUCCESS AND I'D SING SOME REFRAIN
 BUT I SAW MY FUTURE WHEN I GOT TO THE STATION
 CAN'T BE A STAR WHEN THERE'S NO FOOD IN THE NATION

CAUSE THE CITY HAS GIVEN ME LOTS TO SAY
 I STAY WITH THE MEN WHO CHASE ME ALL-DAY
 BUT WHEN THE MORNING COMES AND I'VE HAD NO REST
 THERE'S ONE THING I THINK WHEN HE HANDS ME MY DRESS

NO BED, NO PLACE TO CALL MINE
 NO DISHES, NO SHEETS, NO BOTTLES OF WINE
 BUT I KNOW ONE DAY WHEN I STEP OUT OF THE LIGHT
 I'LL HAVE A HOME, ONE PLACE TO SPEND EACH NIGHT

I'VE GOT MEN AND SHOES ON MY FEET
 I'VE GOT STREET LIGHTS AND CITY HEAT
 I'VE GOT THE BAR AND ITS CHARMING AIR
 BUT WHEN THE CITY SLEEPS, I'M THE ONLY ONE THERE.

*The shadow people stand around DORIS for a split second, then
 realize that they are in the wrong place, rushing off stage.*

DORIS turns back towards the audience.

DORIS

That's not to say I don't have somewhere to stay. As you'll see,
 where I live now could be considered a home. But I'm getting
 ahead of myself. What I want is a permanent life in Berlin, and
 being successful will allow me to sleep each night in my own
 bed, with my own silk sheets. And I'll be an excellent host.
 I'll invite you all over and we will enjoy ourselves almost as
 much as we are right now. And then you'll leave, I'll sleep, and
 we'll do it all again tomorrow.

#01A To Be A Star - Reprise

DORIS

CAUSE THE CITY HAS GIVEN ME A NEW START
 THE CITY HAS PROMISED ME FAME AND ART
 BUT EVEN IF I SPEND EACH NIGHT ALONE
 AT LEAST I'LL HAVE A BED OF MY OWN

Scene 3: The Bar**DORIS**

Now when I'm not in rehearsal or spending time with all of you,
 I come here to this bar.

Shadow people enter with bar stools and assemble the bar.

#01B Bar Underscore**DORIS**

It is really one of my favorite places. It just feels alive in here. Like if you sit here for long enough every single person in Berlin will pass through and I want to know all of them. I really do meet the most fascinating characters. Everyone there loves me because if you buy me a drink I will say and do the most interesting things. And there are all sorts of men who want to spend time with me. If they're lucky, I'll let them. Let me introduce you to a few of the types.

For example, here is the older national.

He thinks poverty is the fault of the poor. He hates young people, and won't shut up about how we're the ones causing problems in this country. Unbelievable. But he also likes to drink. And his wife has no idea. So he'll sit across from me for a while and go on and on, and every so often I'll be a little mean to him. Which never works because he thinks I'm just being flirtatious. I promise I'm not. Everything he says is just so distasteful.

DATE 1

Call me traditional but I just can't stand it!

DORIS

Thanks for that.

DATE 1 rotates around.

Then there's the horse guy.

DATE 2 rotates around.

I've met him a few times and he tells me the same story every time I do. He wanted to buy a horse and his old girl wouldn't let him. She said it was a waste of money, he said it was a stellar investment. So he didn't buy the horse and she left. And now he comes in here every so often and tries to find someone to sell the horse to because it turns out it is completely dysfunctional and not at all what he was promised.

DATE 2

You want it? I promise you won't regret it.

DORIS

I let him pitch me the horse every time because I think it's funny. And every time he tries the horse has gained some new magical power. At first, the horse was clumsy, now he can practically hold a conversation or something. And when he reveals this incredible fact about the horse I act like this is the most spectacular thing I've ever heard. Sometimes I consider these dates to be a kind of acting exercise. But who needs a horse these days anyway?

If it isn't electric, I don't want it.

DATE 3 rotates around, pushes DATE 2 away.

DATE 3

Did someone say electric?

DORIS

Oh yes. How could I forget? This man is in lamp manufacturing.

DATE 3

I'm in lamps.

DORIS

Right. He's always trying to get me back to his apartment to see his lamps. He says the light in this bar is much too dim to see a pretty face like mine. And I'll admit, I have gone to see the lamps a few times. They are quite nice.

DATE 3 rotates around.

Scene 4: George Introduction

DORIS

But the man you really have to meet is George.

DATES 1, 2, and 3 pick up their stools and leave, GEORGE and DORIS are left.

Out of all the ones I've met he is the only one that is truly spectacular. He is smart and interesting and we have this intense and complicated relationship. I met him here one night, and now we're practically inseparable. And I hated him at first, I really did. He treated me differently from the other men. He was kind for the sake of kindness and that made me horribly uncomfortable. And while most men would tell me every detail about themselves, George has remained mysterious. I still can't figure him out.

When I introduce him, he's going to say something like "Doris I need you, what would I do without you? You've changed my life for the better and I'll never let you go." It's *that* kind of relationship. He is also very supportive of my life as an artist. He thinks I really have potential. Ready to meet him? Here he is.

He doesn't respond.

Here's George!

Nothing.

George?

GEORGE

Do you want to be an artist? Ok, so what are you doing? What is your art, Doris? Do you want to be an artist or do you want to be famous? What makes Doris different from all the other girls that come here to be famous?

DORIS

Can we try that again, please?

George gets up.

GEORGE

And what if it doesn't work out? Who are you then? And since it hasn't worked out yet, who are you now?

DORIS

I'm sorry. I don't know why he would say something like that in front of you. He's not usually like this. Let me show you.

For me, it was a moment of weakness. I was in need of some money and decided to let someone talk to me and whatever else and just take the money. Just this one time. So we're talking and eventually, he says:

GEORGE

Do you want to come with me?

DORIS

And I said yes. He tells me how lonely he is, but aren't they all? He invites me back to his apartment but he makes us take the bus. Not even a taxi. He holds my hands to help them get warm. I can tell he feels bad for me, which turns me off. I want to kick him in the shin, for being so good to me when he barely knows me at all. When we arrive he says:

GEORGE

I'm very glad you're here. I mean, I'm glad anyone is here. Would you like to stay awhile?

DORIS

I say let's go to bed and he points me towards the bathroom. When I come out, he's made a bed for me on the couch (pause) and leaves me there. In the morning there's coffee and he tells me I can stay here while he goes to work.

GEORGE

You can keep sleeping if you want. Maybe tomorrow you can wake up in time for us to have breakfast together.

DORIS

Breakfast? So I ask him how he knows I won't trash the place while he's out. Or steal something and run. And he says, first of all, he wouldn't care.

GEORGE

And secondly, I know you wouldn't do that. Please stay. I'm afraid to come home and have nobody who breathes here. This apartment is too big and lonely and sad... I'll see you tonight, ok?

Music starts to vamp.

DORIS

How could I say no? From then on we've had breakfast together every morning. And I really did hate him at first, for this

kindness. Now I need it and him. But I assure you, it's purely platonic. Isn't it nice to be taken care of for a while?

#02 Montage Song

Scene 5

The shadow people start to transform the stage into GEORGE's apartment. GEORGE sits at the end of a long dinner table. He is smoking a cigarette, reading the morning newspaper. DORIS enters the living room. DORIS starts to set the table, grabbing plates, orange juice, coffee, bread rolls, fruit, etc. She starts to sing.

DORIS

ISN'T IT GREAT
ISN'T IT WONDERFUL
ISN'T IT NICE
TO HAVE NOTHING TO DO

WE HAVE BREAKFAST
GEORGE IS THERE, I'M HERE
HE READS THE PAPER
AND EVERYTHING IS CLEAR

THEN HE'LL GO TO WORK
HE ALWAYS ASKS FOR ME TO STAY
I DON'T HAVE OTHER PLANS
I'LL PROBABLY JUST REST TODAY

FOR MONTHS I RAN AROUND BERLIN
TRYING TO NOT TO QUIT
BUT HERE IN HIGH SOCIETY
I JUST GET TO SIT

ISN'T IT GLAMOROUS
ALL THIS LUXURY
ISN'T IT GRAND
THAT THIS IS WHERE I AM

SURROUNDED BY THE FINEST THINGS
THAT I HAVE EVER SEEN
THE LAMPS, THE CHAIRS, THE TABLES
AND EVERYTHING IS CLEAN

OF COURSE I STILL HAVE A PLAN
WHAT'S MEANT FOR ME WILL BE MINE

I'LL DO ALL THAT I CAN
 FOR EVERYTHING TO FALL IN LINE
 BUT ISN'T IT NICE TO BE STILL FOR ONCE
 AND ISN'T IT NICE NOT TO WORRY
 ABOUT AUDITIONS OR FOOD OR HORRIBLE MEN

ISN'T HE FINE
 ISN'T HE GENEROUS
 ISN'T IT STRANGE
 THIS LIFE WE'VE COME TO SHARE

HE COMES HOME FROM WORK
 WE'LL TALK ABOUT OUR DAYS
 I DON'T UNDERSTAND HIS JOB
 HE TRIES TO UNDERSTAND MY PLAYS

AND YET HE'S STILL SUPPORTIVE
 GEORGE KNOWS THAT I'LL GO FAR
 HE SAYS WHEN THE PART IS PERFECT
 THEN YOU'LL BE A STAR

WE SPEND EVENINGS TOGETHER
 WHEN HE HAS THE CHANCE
 BUT TONIGHT SOMETHING'S DIFFERENT

GEORGE (unsung)

Do you want to dance?

DORIS

WASN'T IT STRANGE
 THE WAY HE HELD ME
 THE WAY HIS EYES MET MINE
 THAT WAS NEW

OF COURSE I CARE ABOUT HIM
 AND ALL HE'S DONE FOR ME
 AND MAYBE I COULD LOVE HIM
 BUT MAYBE I SHOULD LET THIS BE

ISN'T IT GREAT?
 ISN'T IT WONDERFUL?
 ISN'T IT NICE?

Scene 6: Leaving his apartment

DORIS

Now you're caught up! I didn't think it would end up quite this way. But for now I'm satisfied. I'm working on building a life,

just like I said I would. And I have George. Don't look at me like that. How could I not care for him, after all he's done to support me? And his eyes get softer when he looks at me. You saw us together, didn't it look real?

GEORGE

Doris?

DORIS

Yes?

GEORGE

You have to go.

DORIS

Go? Go where?

GEORGE

Anywhere else. I can't have you here anymore. Can you please just go?

DORIS

I don't understand. What are you doing?

He holds out a letter. She takes it and reads. He can't look at her.

DORIS

This is from your wife.

GEORGE

I didn't know how to tell you. I thought when she left she wasn't coming back. I was starting to accept she was gone and then there you were. And I thought maybe I could...I don't know.

DORIS

You should've told me. Instead you let me...

GEORGE

Let you what?

DORIS

I really care about you.

GEORGE

I know. But what's the root of that? It's loneliness, Doris. I was lonely too and that's why this arrangement worked.

DORIS

George, stop. They're still watching us.

GEORGE

Don't look at them. Look at me. I think it's time for you to go anyway. Think about what is starting to happen out there. Do you really think becoming an artist makes any sense right now? Maybe you should go home.

DORIS

No. You don't understand. I just need a little bit more time.

GEORGE

Fine. If you won't go, I'll go. Can I get some help out here?

*The shadow people enter and start removing the items on stage.
One takes the letter away from Doris.*

DORIS

What are you doing? They were mine. Why are they listening to you? Everyone stop. I said STOP.

GEORGE

He turns to the band.

You too. Let's go.

The band starts to pack up. The shadow people finish and exit.

GEORGE

I'm sorry.

He exits.

Only the pianist and DORIS are left. As the pianist begins to go, DORIS goes to him.

DORIS

Don't go, please. Just one more?

Scene 7: Doris Outside

DORIS is now thrown out of the apartment. Templates as rain?

#03 *You're Still Here***DORIS**

WHAT AM I STILL DOING HERE?
IS IT TIME TO LEAVE?
THIS CITY'S MADE IT PRETTY CLEAR
WHAT'S LEFT FOR ME TO ACHIEVE?

IT'S NOT THAT I'VE RUN OUT OF TIME
THE DIRECTORS MISUNDERSTOOD ME
THE OTHER GIRLS, THEY DIDN'T SHINE
THE MEN WERE ALL UNWORTHY

GEORGE AGREED THAT I'M DIVINE
BUT THEN HE TOOK IT AWAY
GEORGE SAID I HAD NO MORE TIME
AND YET I'M HERE TO STAY

BUT MAYBE IT'S TRUE
WHEN HE SAID I SHOULD RETURN
TO THE OLD, SAD, LIFE I ONCE KNEW

I WROTE THE SCRIPT, I SET THE STAGE
I FOCUSED EVERY LIGHT
I BOOKED THE BAND, I CAST THE ROLES
AND INVITED YOU HERE TONIGHT

HE TORE IT APART
BUT I AM NOT ALONE
YOU'VE ONLY JUST SEEN THE START

THERE'S STILL NO BED THERE'S STILL NO SHEETS
NO DISHES, NO BOTTLES OF WINE
NOW I'M BACK ON CITY STREETS
BUT LOOK AT ME I'M FINE

EVEN AFTER ALL I'VE LOST
I STILL HAVE YOUR ATTENTION
GIVE ME JUST A BIT MORE TIME
THERE'S STILL SO MUCH TO MENTION

HERE'S WHAT I KNOW
WHILE YOU'RE STILL WATCHING ME

THAT MEANS I'M THE STAR OF THIS SHOW

DORIS

I don't want to sing anymore!!!

The pianist continues to play while DORIS has lost it at this point. On the floor, she is going insane, kicking and screaming. Perhaps even rolling around.

DORIS

Stop playing! I said stop.

The pianist does not listen and continues to play. DORIS runs over to the piano and slams her hands on the lid of the piano.

Scene 8: Final Monologue

A spotlight turns on at the opposite side of the stage. She walks into it, still 'trying desperately to remain in the literal spotlight'. However, as soon as she reaches it, the spotlight fades away. She quickly reaches the new spotlight at the opposite end of the stage. Now, back in the dimmed spotlight, she says to the audience..

DORIS

Back home my mother worked in a coat room at the theater. I practically grew up there. That theater was where I learned what I wanted and what I would have to do to make it happen. The day before I got on the train to Berlin I went into the coat room one last time. I looked for the nicest fur on the rack and I took it. I promised myself I wouldn't go back there until I could buy myself something to make this one look like rags. You understand, don't you? I needed something glamorous on the outside to reflect who I am on the inside. I already know I'm a star, even if not everyone can see it yet.

Even the way that everything has gone I still have it, and no one can take it from me. George could break my heart as many times as he wants and it wouldn't matter. I can get thrown out by hundreds of horrible men and I'd still have this. As long as I have a reminder of who I am and who I will be, everything will be okay. See? You all came here to see me, and you're still watching. You can't leave because I'm not done yet. I won't let the story be done yet.

Look at me. Aren't I incredible? Who wouldn't love me? I am still a star. I still got it in me!

Lights begin to fade on DORIS. She panics, and continues to talk:

DORIS

Hello? I am still here!

A long pause. Too long maybe.

Lights begin to fade up on "DORIS 2 (Ingrid)." She is in a similar dress, walks the same way as DORIS, and begins to say the lines from the opening monologue.

DORIS 2 (INGRID)

There you are! Thank you so much for joining me this evening. My name is Ingrid and I'm going to tell you a story.

Beat.

Blackout

END OF SHOW