

# Performance

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I am on the stage again. I look at the trash props, the all too familiar old table and the uncomfortable chairs with glossy upholstery. I can feel the audience behind my back. It is invisible in the darkness and merciless to any failure.

The dazzling lights separate me from the audience, they caution and urge me to be on the alert, ready for a special battle. I know my trite and boring part by heart; still, I am nervous because Sophie is to turn up now. And there she is, coming onto the stage in the same old yellow dress. She approaches me, faking surprise at my presence and then she stands still in an affected posture which obviously she finds perfect. She keeps silent, probably admiring herself. In a second, she'll burst out pathetically:

"Where were you, Ricardo? I missed you so much." Sophie repeats her trite lines. I wish I could turn into an evil magician, clap my hands and make her disappear. I myself wish to disappear, too. I desperately need to leave the narrow stage and forget all the props and everything. I am dying for fresh air! But some implacable force makes me utter:

"Beautiful Sophie, the evil fate prevented me from seeing you every day! But now I find you even more joyous and lively: what a wonderful reward for my long absence!"

All the rest is painfully familiar. She would turn to the mirror on the wall and brush her artificial curls. Then another, even more foolish line, would follow:

"Oh, dear Ricardo! Your words give such consolation to my lonely heart!" She would beckon to the chair where I am supposed to sit down and the implacable force would make me obey. My little world would grow larger with the appearance of her mother carrying a round tray and three empty cups clattering on the saucers. She would serve and brief silence would follow, full of affected smiles.

I would break it with a question about her health; she would reply that her joints hurt because she has already planted a new variety of roses in her garden. She would go on in the same vein, stupid lines written by the worthless author of the play. I listen to the monstrous phrases which I have heard so many times. I am gripped by the hopeless feeling that it will continue until the end of my life.

I am a miserable prisoner chained in the fetters of my part, manipulated by the hateful force which always awakens me from a blank, deadly sleep, pushes me to the stage and dictates my behaviour, while after the performance it makes me fall asleep again. The play and my life run between falling fast asleep and awakening.

This cannot last long. After each performance my resistance mounts; my will grows stronger and ready to oppose the tyrant. I will escape from this hideous stage and forget the disgusting play. My yearning is to be somewhere else, anywhere, except for the place of my damned part! Why not try it now?

Ricardo's face stiffened with tension. He ran to the edge of the lit space, saw a narrow door which was hardly visible in the darkness, stopped in front of it and tried to push it open but his hand went freely through the handle. He stood dumbfounded, then stepped forward and his body dis-

appeared behind the painted surface. He saw endless rows of high crystal vaults which grew obscure in the vague horizon. Ricardo felt weak. Yet, before falling into another deep slumber, he felt extremely happy: he had lost the way back to the stage forever!

"We are no good in our work," the head of the production laboratory said angrily. "The records can be played only a limited number of times, claims flood this place. Claims of the plant to us and the customers to the plant! We must put an end to this unpleasant chain. We have to improve the sensitivity of the video sensory equipment and upgrade the quality of mother cassettes."

"But haven't we been doing exactly the same all these years," one of the assistants tried to find an excuse. "We have achieved what is almost unfeasible. The data memory of crystal cassettes is comparable to the one of a supercomputer, but results are growing poorer and poorer. We are witnessing unique phenomena. During the public performance of the play "Ricardo and Sophie" the main character disappeared through the door at the end of the play and the whole performance failed.

The actor K. who had recorded the part asserts that he and the producer did not even think of such an alternative and did not make any rehearsals to this effect. We checked the damaged cassette on a number of molecular levels and, surprisingly, we discovered the missing image one of them.

It looked happy but when it saw us, it got frightened and jumped out of the frame. We went on searching and finally we intercepted it on a different molecular level but in spite of all the techniques applied to synchronize and stabilize the image, it escaped again!"

The head of the laboratory for three-dimensional sensory colour recording sank into the chair and cast an exhausted glance to his assistants who bent their heads. In spite of the failures, they had to identify the reasons for the damage of the cassettes. They had discussed that matter so many times, but the straightforward answer never came because of the endless guess-work that was gradually taking shape into a fantastic surmise which nobody dared to spell out. Was it possible to attribute the failures to the sensory component of the record, was it possible to record the subconscious feelings of the actor? Could records come to a life of its own stand?

The famous actor K. stretched out on the sofa which was part of the studio props. While the assistants were taking off the supersensors hidden under the makeup and hair, he tried to relax after the tense acting in the well-known play "Yapeth's Silence".

The producer was satisfied with the emotional level of his acting and said it could be considered another success. K. relaxed and tried not to think about the next appointments but they emerged in his mind and made him fidget restlessly. Sulky and tired, he managed to get up and went to the dressing-room.

In about an hour's time, K. and the head of the laboratory were standing in front of the country's biggest three dimensional colour screen which occupied half of the show room. They intended to see the crystal cassette with the actor's

record because experts claimed it had reached the end of its usable life.

The operator placed the cassette in the receiver device, attuned the sensory equipment and the play started. According to the screenplay, at a certain point of time, the holographic image of K. had to join a group of actors and crack a joke. The image made for them, then slowed down its pace, hesitated, turned back resolutely and moved to another direction.

The well-known actor saw his own tormented eyes and felt the pain of a long subdued protest amplified by the sensory field. His double reached the props in the far end of the stage, stretched his hands out and gradually sank there. K. was overwhelmed by happiness and another, even more powerful feeling which he could not identify. The picture desynchronized, the automatic control device switched the projector off. Another crystal cassette had broken.

"What are your impressions?", the head of the laboratory broke the silence. K. stood, deep in thought, his eyes staring at the empty cubic frame of the projector.

"You know," he spoke after a while, "I have been thinking of a preposterous idea: it seems that my records commit suicide, having been played for some time, but I fail to understand why. If they damage the cassette, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to return to life on the stage?"

"On the stage," the head of the laboratory repeated gloomily. "They rather struggle to remain outside the stage," he murmured as if to himself.

"They seem to have their own perception of freedom."

"I cannot fully understand you, I'm afraid -"

"It doesn't matter. Be sure I'll make them stay where they are. We must put an end to all those claims."

"They are only records, after all," he thought just to console himself and made to the exit with a strange sense of guilt.

Filled with vague suspicion about his own personality, K. followed him.