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MANDELSTAM

A Play

by **Don Nigro**



**SAMUEL
FRENCH**

FOUNDED 1830

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Characters:

Pasternak
Stalin/The Devil
Nadezhda/Mrs Pasternak
Mandelstam

Setting: Russia in the 1930s and after. A simple unit set includes a desk with telephone stage left for Pasternak, and another stage right for Stalin. A kitchen table with chairs up center for the Mandelstams. There are also wooden benches down right and down left. Above the kitchen area is a platform reached by steps on either side of the table, and on the platform is a cot with a window behind it. There is a round wooden stool down center.

Scenes:

ACT ONE

- 1 The Voice Of God From Out Of The Darkness
- 2 Lenin's Funeral
- 3 Secrets
- 4 The King Of A Rainy Country
- 5 A Definition Of History
- 6 Cockroaches And Maggots
- 7 The System Of Dante's Hell
- 8 A Knocking At The Gate
- 9 Guilt Among Crows
- 10 Interrogation
- 11 Where The Crayfish Hide In The Winter
- 12 An Open Window Is An Invitation

ACT TWO

- 13 In The Purgatory Of The Birds
- 14 The Dream Of The Answered Call
- 15 Ode To Stalin
- 16 The Tolstoys At Home
- 17 Anna Karenina On The Railway Platform
- 18 Animal Farm
- 19 The Return Of The Death's Head Moth
- 20 The Poet At Work
- 21 Darkness At The Stray Dog Cafe
- 22 The Ravenous Hunger Of Carrion Birds
- 23 Just Sign This Piece Of Paper
- 24 A Translation Of King Lear

ACT ONE

1: THE VOICE OF GOD FROM OUT OF THE DARKNESS

(Sound of a telephone ringing in the darkness. Pasternak stumbles out in the dark and turns on a lamp, which makes a small warm circle of light, and picks up the telephone.)

PASTERNAK

Hello?

STALIN

(A voice from the darkness.)

Hello? Boris?

PASTERNAK

Yes.

STALIN

This is Joe.

PASTERNAK

Joe who?

STALIN

Your old comrade, Joe.

PASTERNAK

I don't know any Joes.

STALIN

Oh, you know me, Boris. You know who I am.

(Pause.)

So, Boris, how are you?

PASTERNAK

I'm a little sleepy. It's four in the morning.

STALIN

Is it? Wait, let me look at the clock. I'm sitting here farting in the dark like a Cossack.

(Stalin switches on a lamp and we see him sitting at his desk in his own circle of light.)

You're right, Boris. I loose all track of time. Old Bolsheviks never really sleep. A dog pissing on dirt can wake us up. It's true. Poets sleep.

PASTERNAK

Apparently not tonight.

STALIN

Well, good. Listen, Boris, there's something I want to ask your opinion about.

PASTERNAK

You want to ask my opinion?

STALIN

Yes. It's about your friend Mandelstam.

(Pause.)

Mandelstam the poet. I know how close to him you are.

PASTERNAK

Actually, I'm not all that close to Mandelstam.

STALIN

You're neighbors, aren't you?

PASTERNAK

I suppose you could say that.

STALIN

Of course I can say that. Who's going to stop me? So, what do you think of Mandelstam?

PASTERNAK

Mandelstam is a fine writer.

STALIN

Yes, but what do you think of him?

PASTERNAK

I think he's a good person, if that's what you mean.

STALIN

I'm very happy to hear that, Boris, because, frankly, I've been having some serious doubts about your friend Mandelstam. So I'm extremely pleased to hear that you think he's a good person. Tell me, what does he like?

PASTERNAK

What does he like?

STALIN

What is his weakness?

PASTERNAK

I have no idea.

STALIN

Oh, you always have an idea, Boris. You have way too many ideas. Your head's packed as full as a hundred year old shithouse. You writers always know each other's weaknesses. You pretend to be

friendly, but in your hearts there is malice, the malice of small animals in a hole. It's all right, Boris. I'll keep your secret. Just tell me about Mandelstam.

PASTERNAK

I really don't know what to say about him.

STALIN

He recited a poem to you, didn't he?

PASTERNAK

A poem?

STALIN

Didn't Mandelstam recite a poem to you?

PASTERNAK

Well, it's certainly possible that, once or twice, at an informal social gathering, perhaps, Mandelstam might have recited something. We're poets. Sometimes we share. But usually we don't.

STALIN

But this wasn't just any poem, Boris. This was a poem was about me. Does that ring a bell?

PASTERNAK

Well, many of us have written poems about you, celebrating your achievements and—

STALIN

But this particular poem I'm referring to said my fingers are fat like maggots, and my mustache is like a cockroach, and that I take a psychopath's delight in butchering people. This is what I heard, Boris. Is that what Mandelstam said?

PASTERNAK

I don't remember what he said.

STALIN

You don't remember if your friend Mandelstam called my mustache a cockroach?

PASTERNAK

A poet uses symbols.

STALIN

So my mustache is a symbol for a cockroach? Or is a cockroach a symbol for my mustache? Which is it, Boris? Because there's a big difference, you know. Because you can't eat symbols, Boris, but you can eat a cockroach. And frankly, Boris, I'm shocked you don't have a better memory. I thought poets were like elephants—they eat peanuts, shit everywhere, and remember everything. I can shake hands with a man I met thirty years ago in a brothel in Tiflis

and ask him how his one-armed uncle Yuri is, and whatever happened to his little dog Jasha, and praise the exquisite beauty of the flowered birthmark on his wife's right buttock, and you can't even remember what Mandelstam said about my mustache?

PASTERNAK

Probably there were many people talking at once.

STALIN

There were people talking while Mandelstam was reciting his poem about my mustache? That wasn't very polite of them, was it? If there's one thing I hate, it's rudeness. Don't you hate rudeness, Boris?

PASTERNAK

Yes, but you must understand that--

STALIN

Who were these people?

PASTERNAK

What people?

STALIN

These people who were jabbering away all at once while Mandelstam was reading his poem about how my mustache is like a cockroach. Who were they? What are their names?

PASTERNAK

I don't know. Perhaps there were no other people. Perhaps it was just Mandelstam and me.

STALIN

Listen, Boris. Let me tell you. I love writers. In the West they don't get this. They think art is something pretty to waste your time with, a kind of hobby for old ladies. In America they're too busy screwing each other's wives and shoving money up their asses to worry about the arts. But you and I know better, don't we, Boris? We know how insidious these things can be, because poems linger in the soul, and whatever lingers in the soul is dangerous. But art belongs to the people, Boris. And as the servant of the people, I must watch over art as I watch over history, because history also belongs to the people, Boris, and everything ever written, and everything that ever will be written. I take this responsibility very seriously. So if your good friend Mandelstam writes lies about my mustache, it's my duty to see that this sort of thing is not encouraged. Because lies can kill, Boris. You know that. This miserable little gargoyle Mandelstam, do you think he knows it?

PASTERNAK

It's possible, you know, that Mandelstam hasn't been feeling well lately, and is not entirely responsible--

STALIN

Yes, it's true that these people don't usually live very long, do they? Writers tend to have weak constitutions. Of course, Tolstoy lived a long time, but he regretted it. And, frankly, if I'd been married to Tolstoy's wife, I'd have blown my brains out before I was fifty. What is Mandelstam's wife like, Boris?

PASTERNAK

She's very intelligent.

STALIN

Does she have nice tits?

PASTERNAK

I really don't know.

STALIN

Oh, come on, Boris. We all know what an eye for the ladies you've got. Does Mandelstam's wife have a nice set of knockers or doesn't she?

PASTERNAK

I'm not in the habit of staring at the breasts of my friends' wives.

STALIN

Oh, Boris, what a kidder you are. Tell me, do you think it's better to have an intelligent wife, like Mandelstam's, or a stupid wife, like yours? Your wife is stupid, isn't she, Boris?

PASTERNAK

My wife is a lovely woman.

STALIN

Yes, my wife was stupid, too. What a shame she's dead. Boris, do you think we might be doing Mandelstam a favor if we send him on a little vacation from that intelligent wife of his whose breasts you are much too noble to stare at?

PASTERNAK

I think that would be a great waste.

STALIN

Not if he learns something from it. Often it's the best a person can hope for in this life, to learn something before he dies, don't you think so?

PASTERNAK

Yes, but--

STALIN

No. Wrong answer. Actually, that's stupid, counter-revolutionary crap. Let me tell you, Boris, it's not easy, being the servant of

the people. You have no idea how many dump trucks full of shit I've got to wade through every day. You write about this and you write about that, a butterfly here and a pair of breasts there, but I have flesh and blood to decide about. So I'm asking you, Boris, man to poet, what should I do?

PASTERNAK

You have so many poets at your disposal. Why are you asking me?

STALIN

Because, just between you and me, the rest of them are a bunch of sycophantic imbeciles. They would say black is white, up is down, Minsk is the capital of France, they would fornicate with dead hippos if I told them to. But you're different, Boris. I respect your opinion.

PASTERNAK

I don't know if I deserve all that much respect.

STALIN

Come on, Boris. Modesty is always a lie.

PASTERNAK

This is a difficult time for a poet to respect himself in.

STALIN

And is that my fault?

(Pause.)

Hello?

PASTERNAK

No. It's not your fault.

STALIN

Well, Boris, that's a relief to hear. You had me really worried there for a second. So what should I do about Mandelstam?

PASTERNAK

There are times, you know, when it's better to do nothing.

STALIN

Only when you're dead.

(We hear the funeral march as lights begin to fade on Stalin, who remains where he is, and Mandelstam and Nadezhda appear from down left, drinking tea and talking quietly to one another, moving down center to look out an invisible window. Pasternak puts the phone down and joins them.)

2: LENIN'S FUNERAL

(Mandelstam, Nadezhda and Pasternak are standing by an invisible down center window, watching Lenin's funeral procession go by in the street below.)

NADEZHDA

There he goes.

MANDELSTAM

Poor Comrade Lenin.

PASTERNAK

A great man, all things considered.

MANDELSTAM

Um.

PASTERNAK

You don't agree?

MANDELSTAM

Um.

PASTERNAK

Great men break eggs.

NADEZHDA

Why do men need so badly to worship other men?

PASTERNAK

Nadezhda, have you no heroes?

NADEZHDA

I'm a woman. What do I need with heroes? Heroes are crap.

PASTERNAK

Mandelstam has heroes.

MANDELSTAM

All my heroes are dead poets.

NADEZHDA

A fraternity I hope you won't be invited to join any time soon.

PASTERNAK

Whether we like some of the consequences or not, the Revolution is here to stay, because only in a society run by the workers themselves--

NADEZHDA

The workers don't run anything here. Only a small group of power-crazed jackasses.

MANDELSTAM

Nadezhda, watch your tongue.

NADEZHDA

But how can you stand there calmly watching the corpse of that reptilian murderer go by in the street below and listen to Boris call him a great man? Even he doesn't believe it. What's the matter with him?

MANDELSTAM

Boris is a poet. He has many voices in his head.

NADEZHDA

And several faces hanging on his hatrack, and some of them I don't like very much.

PASTERNAK

I'm sorry I disappoint you.

NADEZHDA

I'm sorry you disappoint me, too.

PASTERNAK

Your husband also has many voices in his head.

NADEZHDA

Yes, but none of his talk bullshit.

MANDELSTAM

Some of them do. The voices are simply the voices. For good or ill, all you can do is listen to the voices and write down what they tell you.

NADEZHDA

That's what your comrades at the Writers' Union do. Only the voices they listen to aren't in their heads—they come out the collective anus of the Party.

MANDELSTAM

Will you have some respect? A human being is dead.

NADEZHDA

Yes. You're right. I hear they're going to embalm Lenin and put him in a glass display case. A perfect symbol of the Revolution—the embalmed corpse of a murderer under glass.

MANDELSTAM

Perhaps things will be better now.

NADEZHDA

Yes, now it will be Stalin. A wonderful improvement. What's the matter, Boris? You look like you're at a funeral. Well, that IS a funeral, but it's Lenin's funeral. What are you so sad about?

MANDELSTAM

It's always the same reason. His love life is a mess.

NADEZHDA

Oh, poor Boris. Always playing the lovelorn poet.

PASTERNAK

There is a deep melancholy built into the fabric of love. You see a person at a certain time and you love her, but then after a while you realize that what you love is not the person in front of you now but the memory of a moment that isn't there any more, that you can never get back again, and was probably a misunderstanding in the first place. That's what love is: the misunderstood remembrance of an illusion.

MANDELSTAM

No it's not. That's rubbish.

PASTERNAK

What do you know about love? You're married.

NADEZHDA

Thank you very much.

PASTERNAK

What I mean is, it's different with you and Osip. You have an intellectual communion.

MANDELSTAM

Do you mean to say you've never loved an intelligent woman?

PASTERNAK

Only once, and it was a terrible mistake.

MANDELSTAM

Boris, if it was a mistake, it wasn't because she was intelligent.

PASTERNAK

No, it was because she was intelligent enough to see that I wasn't good enough for her.

NADEZHDA

A woman doesn't need to be very intelligent to see that.

PASTERNAK

Whenever I'm feeling discouraged, you two always seem to cheer me up. I have no idea why. But you're right, I should be happy. It's a great time to be alive.

MANDELSTAM

Soon perhaps it will be a great time to be dead.

NADEZHDA

We keep hoping somehow things will be different. But in the end it never is.

PASTERNAK

But this is different. This is much different than before the Revolution.

NADEZHDA

Yes. The Czar had secret police. Now they have these loathesome people they keep sending to our kitchen, pretending to be writers. Big fans of Osip's poetry, who ask questions and then scuttle off to report back to their cockroach masters. I've come to the reluctant conclusion that a very high percentage of people who call themselves writers are little better than raw sewage. To these people, to write means only to betray. My husband is not a writer like those people.

MANDELSTAM

No. Those people get published.

NADEZHDA

They get published because they're morons.

PASTERNAK

I get published. What kind of writer do you think I am?

NADEZHDA

If you don't know, you'll soon find out.

3: SECRETS

(There is no break here. As the light comes up on Stalin and he speaks, Pasternak remains looking downstage, out the invisible window, and Mandelstam and Nadezhda make their way upstage, talking and arguing as they go, to the kitchen table, where they eventually settle, drinking tea and talking quietly. There is no rush: they're still getting there as this conversation with Stalin is happening. Stalin still speaks into the telephone, but now Pasternak replies without one, and without even at first turning around. Stalin is drinking vodka.)

STALIN

Well, Boris, you know, I must respect the opinion of any man who calls me a genius. You did call me a genius, didn't you?

PASTERNAK

Yes. I did.

STALIN

Did you mean it? Or was it bullshit?

PASTERNAK

Of course I meant it.

STALIN

So you meant it, but it was still bullshit. Do you want to know a secret, Boris?

PASTERNAK

Can it get me killed?

STALIN

Secrets always kill. Keeping secrets also kills. Telling kills from the outside. Not telling kills from the inside.

PASTERNAK

Like a poet who can't write, or doesn't, for fear of the consequences.

STALIN

My secret is that when I was a young man, I also wrote poetry. At one time, I actually wanted to be a poet, like Pushkin. I did. I swear.

PASTERNAK

Really? What happened?

STALIN

What happened? I grew up, that's what happened.

PASTERNAK

Ah, well, then, you see, that's the difference between you and me.

STALIN

Besides, somebody shot Pushkin. So who is better off, Boris? Me, or Pushkin? Or you?

PASTERNAK

I'm better off than Pushkin, because nobody's shot me.

STALIN

Well, not yet. Just kidding, Boris. What a jokester I am. I could have been a circus clown. It's true. People think I have no sense of humor, but how could a man with no sense of humor govern a bunch of Russians?

PASTERNAK

What were your poems about?

STALIN

God, who knows? Roses. The moon. Decapitation. The usual thing. Now I read your poems over and over again, you know.

PASTERNAK

Do you? I'm honored.

STALIN

And as I read them, I keep asking myself, what the fuck is he talking about? Is he talking about beer, or is he talking about the ocean? And if he's talking about the ocean, why is he writing about beer? Why the hell don't you just say what you mean?

PASTERNAK

How can I know what I mean until I hear what I say?

STALIN

What?

PASTERNAK

I'm quoting Yeats. A very great Irish poet.

STALIN

You shouldn't be quoting Irish poets. You should be quoting somebody who says what he means.

PASTERNAK

Sometimes the best way to describe something is to describe something else.

STALIN

Then you don't think much of Socialist Realism, do you, Boris?

PASTERNAK

I have no quarrel with Socialist Realism, except for the fact that it's not socialist and it's not realism, and most of the people who write it are imbeciles. Besides that, it's fine.

STALIN

You're a very interesting fellow, Boris. Sometimes you want to please me, and other times you go out of your way to get yourself in trouble. You always want two different things at once. That's why people like you can never be trusted. A person obsessed with politics, him you can trust, because you know you can't trust him. You know where he stands, because he doesn't stand anywhere. He's stopped thinking and joined the party. Criminals I can work with. Political types you eventually need to kill. Poets are more interesting, but how can you trust a poet? He admits he's a liar, just by his choice of profession. And yet most of my favorite people are liars. It's a paradox, and I hate paradoxes, but you can't shoot paradoxes, you can only shoot people, which is another paradox. You didn't know I was such a deep thinker, did you, Boris?

PASTERNAK

I had my suspicions.

STALIN

That's something else I like about you. You keep trying to understand me. Most people either just kiss my ass or spit in my eye and run for the woods, but you stay and try to understand. You are drawn to me like a moth to a candle flame, like a beaver to an oak tree. I hate metaphor, and yet I am a walking metaphor. I named myself for steel. I am full of steel. Among other things. So tell me, Boris, all this stupid fucking metaphor aside, what should I do about Mandelstam?

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