Acting Edition

Spain

by Jen Silverman

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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www.concordtheatricals.com
www.concordtheatricals.co.uk

FOR PRODUCTION INQUIRIES

United States and Canada
info@concordtheatricals.com
1-866-979-0447

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SPAIN was commissioned by and premiered at Second Stage Theater (Carole Rothman, President and Artistic Director; Lisa Lawer Post, Executive Director) in October 2023. It was directed by Tyne Rafaeli, with scenic design by Dane Laffrey, costume design by Alejo Vietti, lighting design by Jen Schriever, original music and sound design by Daniel Kluger, and props by Ray Wetmore. The production stage manager was Lisa Chernoff and the stage manager was Kaitlin Marsh. The cast was as follows:

JORIS. . . . . Andrew Burnap
HELEN . . . . . Marin Ireland
DOS . . . . . Erik Lochtefeld
ERNEST . . . . . Danny Wolohan
KARL . . . . . Zachary James and Tom Nelis

The production was supported by a generous enhancement from MacPac Entertainment LLC and was the recipient of the Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation Theatre Visions Fund Award.

CHARACTERS

JORIS IVENS – man, 30s, wants to be liked, easygoing, an infiltrator

HELEN – woman, 30s, sharp, pragmatic, an infiltrator

JOHN DOS PASSOS (DOS) – man, early 40s, a deeply decent man who can be naïve

ERNEST HEMINGWAY – man, late 30s, charming, secretly self-hating, overcompensates

KARL – man, can be 40s–60s, should speak Russian, also plays **IVOR**

SETTING

The West Village. Sort of.

In the stage directions, I describe a giant, soaring back wall into which are built secret panels and windows. The wall serves as a delivery device for characters, moments, world-size shifts. Other designs are possible and encouraged. In fact, in *Spain*'s world premiere, though we built a wall, we facilitated a number of the sudden reveals via a turntable and focused lighting instead of wall panels.

What is crucial for your set is a sense of intimidating mystery, an unchanging façade of some kind – and its ability to shift into sudden and surprising revelations.

TIME

1936…ish

AUTHOR'S NOTES

(Words in parentheses) are an aside or a sub-thought.

Words in bold are spoken into a microphone.

The spacing is a gesture toward indicating rhythm: how thoughts change, escalate, or get supplanted by other thoughts as we talk. The line breaks often signal shifts, but do *not* indicate a beat or pause except where written.

This is not
A history play.

This wants to feel
Anachronistic. Shape-shifting. Contemporary.

A note on historical context

In 1936, the Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens was hired to make a movie about the Spanish Civil War, which was underway. Though Joris was the front-man, there is some proof that the movie was conceived and engineered by Soviet agents of the propaganda bureau.

The revolutionary Spanish government was full of high-level Soviet military pulling the strings, and they intended for Joris to create a piece of skillful, visceral propaganda that would garner American sympathies, undo Roosevelt's non-intervention policy, and direct American donations to the Spanish communists. Joris and his girlfriend were deeply and knowingly embedded in this Soviet machine. The American writers that Joris hired were not.

The context above provided the seeds from which this theatrical fiction was built. But most crucially, *Spain* is not about history – it is in a sideways, theatrical conversation with the contemporary moment, in which we too are navigating questions of art and power and disinformation.

One

(A West Village apartment from 1936.)

*(**JORIS** talks to us. Conversational but urgent.)*

(We are going to help him make the biggest decision of his life.)

JORIS. The way it happened was

the KGB called me in

(they weren't calling themselves that, obviously, it was

the Office of the Branch of International Cultural Socialist Whatever Whatever

but – the KGB)

and they said: Make A Movie About Spain.

I said: I've never been to Spain.

And they said: You Don't Have To Have Been To Spain

To Understand What Spain Is.

(Genuinely wondering.)

Is that true?

(Hmm, well, what <u>is</u> Spain:)

I'm thinking…uh…tapas. And…bull fighting. And…

Don Quixote!

And…

Rioja! Right?

Tempranillo?

But anyway, the basics, I just think of the basics.

We're having this conversation at an expensive hotel

on the East Side, far away from the Village

so that nobody I know would see me and wonder who I'm talking to

and we order the steak

(I get mine well done, he gets his rare)

and then my handler –

ugh, I don't like that word, "handler"

let's say my *dinner companion* –

my Dinner Companion says:

Joris.

Joris, As You Know, There Is A Civil War In Spain

And War Can Get So Complicated If You Try To Understand All The Different Bits

Who Did What To Whom –

But Your Movie Will Keep It Simple!

The War In Spain Is A War

Between The Rich And The Poor

The Noble Peasant Crushed by The Rich Fascist

See?

A Single-Sentence War

And a Single-Sentence War is a Perfect Opportunity for...

– and then he said: ART

but we both knew that wasn't the word he meant.

(A spotlight comes up on the wall behind **JORIS**.*)*

(A panel opens to reveal: a **MAN** *seated at a table, cutting and eating bloody steak. We can't see his face. We might not even be able to see his entire body. Our vision should be focused – whether via the architecture of the set, or the lights – on that bloody steak.)*

(This is Joris's handler, **KARL**.*)*

(He rhythmically cuts and eats steak all through the following:)

He said:

Joris, This Movie Is About

How Hard It Is For A Farmer To Till The Blood-Drenched Soil.

He said:

It Must Be Very Moving, Visceral and Moving

Americans Should Feel Sadness And Pity And Sympathy

And The Desire to Send Money

(Despite This Whole Non-Intervention Thing.)

He said:

But You Can't Mention Russians.

No Russians.

Nobody Can Even Think About Russians.

If There Are Russians In Spain, They're Just Visiting.

They're Entirely Uninvolved In Governmental Decisions

And They Have Nothing To Do With The War.

Write About Spain. As Metaphor.

And then he said: Let's Make This Movie Long.

*(**KARL** vanishes. **JORIS** is alone again.)*

I'm a filmmaker. What can I say? I *love* metaphors.

And I love the working-class

(in theory, obviously)

and look, I've been working with Russians for a long time

this particular branch of Russians,

and yes, they sort of specialize in middle of the night secret assassinations but

they've funded a *lot* of my films, which –

you know, financing is complicated

when it comes to the arts –

So when he said *Make This Movie Long*...

(Genuinely excited, film-nerd side emerging.)

Like, who gets to make anything *long*?

My last film? Fifteen minutes.

The one before that? Ten.

How long is *Long*? You know? Like...forty minutes?

(A beat.)

But, like I said, I've never been to Spain.

I need to be honest about that. So I said:

Maybe there's a Spanish guy who might, you know, be better for this?

And my ha–

(Catches himself as he starts to say "handler.")

dinner companion

looked me in the eyes and said:

(We reveal **KARL** *again. As before, we do not see him fully – perhaps a panel opens and we see only his hands. Or* **KARL** *appears, but his face and body are in shadow.)*

(Either way **KARL***'s hands are pouring wine. The glass seems to be bottomless because he's just pouring and pouring and pouring wine through the following:)*

We Don't Need A Spanish Guy.

They'd Add Too Many Details

Or The Wrong Details.

We Need You.

Make A Movie, Joris.

*(***KARL** *vanishes.)*

(Oh, **JORIS** *forgot to clarify:)*

That's me: Joris. I'm Joris.

I'm Dutch, and I'm talking to you with a light Dutch accent –

(He isn't, he speaks with an accent standard to wherever this play is being done.)

– and as I've said, I make documentary films. I live for my art. And though my recent work has been, uh, a collaboration by necessity with the KGB – someday, I'll make work that's mine alone again.

But today it's 1936, and I'm in a hotel on the East Side

in which there are at least five special agents

lurking in five different suites

who could hunt me down and assassinate me at any moment –

so I consider my dinner companion's proposition

for about as long as he might expect me to pretend to consider it

but it's not like there's too much to think about.

And we both know it.

(**JORIS** *shrugs.*)

Spain!

What's not to love about Spain?

Two

*(**HELEN** enters. She's his girlfriend.)*

(Also works for the KGB. Also a filmmaker.)

(They were sort of assigned to each other, but also, there's real chemistry even when they're arguing.)

(Mid-conversation.)

HELEN. – But we've never *been* to Spain.

JORIS. No I know…

HELEN. I mean, I don't even know what they –

JORIS. Spanish. They speak Spanish.

HELEN. I *know* they speak Spanish

oh my god

I was gonna say, I don't even know what they're *like.*

JORIS. *(Shrugs.)* People are people everywhere.

HELEN. Is that the thesis for our little movie?

"People are people everywhere"?

JORIS. Uh, no Helen, the thesis is: The Working Man Tills The Blood-Drenched Soil.

*(**HELEN** finds she actually likes this.)*

HELEN. Oh, that's nice.

JORIS. *(Surprised, then pleased.)* You think?

HELEN. Yeah. We could do a lot with that.

JORIS. *(Coaxing.)* I'm noticing the "we."

HELEN. You know I'm a filmmaker too.

I'm not just your assigned girlfriend.

JORIS. *(Re: "assigned.")* Careful with that.

I never said you were *just* anything.

HELEN. Next time you have dinner with Karl, remind him that I'm a filmmaker too.

(This makes **JORIS** *very nervous. Lowering his voice –)*

JORIS. We're not supposed to say his name.

HELEN. Oh come on, you know it's not his real name.

JORIS. Even so. My Dinner Companion –

HELEN. Karl.

JORIS. My Dinner Companion –

HELEN. Karl.

JORIS. Helen!!

HELEN. You think he's gonna pop out of the chimney?

JORIS. Helen, I'm telling you.

HELEN. That's probably not even *my* name.

(A surprised and fragile silence between them.)

*(***JORIS** *is stung. She's opened a can of worms she shouldn't.)*

...Kidding!

*(***JORIS** *is silent.)*

Don't look like that.

I was kidding.

Joris.

Come on.

You *know* my name is Helen.

JORIS. *(A little stiffly.)* I only know what you tell me, Helen.

HELEN. OK are we doing this again? Let's not do this.

JORIS. Do what? You started it.

HELEN. Well I'm sorry I ever brought up K–

your *Dinner Companion.*

You know my name is Helen.

JORIS. Frankly, it shouldn't matter, should it. What's in a name.

Shouldn't matter what we go by if we want the same things.

HELEN. Your name might not even be Joris.

JORIS. ...My name *is* Joris.

It's not the kind of name you make up.

HELEN. No I know.

JORIS. *(Back to work.)* Anyway, Our Dinner Companion said we have to fast-track this.

HELEN. ...Also I vetted you, so I know.

*(***JORIS** *is knocked off-balance again.)*

JORIS. You *vetted* me?

HELEN. When Karl – sorry! (Sorry. But he said I could call him Karl, so I'm just gonna call him Karl because I feel like a fucking idiot calling him Your Dinner Companion so)

ANYWAY

when Karl introduced you to me as a concept

(before he introduced you to me as a person)

We were having dinner

and he said: There's This Filmmaker I Would Like You To Meet

Who Is Going To Be Very Important To The Movement

His Name is Joris Ivens.

And I said, Sure, Karl.

And then I left that hotel and I walked fifteen blocks north and three blocks west

to a different hotel

where I checked in under a different name

and made a call to a different guy, let's call him Ivor –

> *(A door in the wall opens to reveal: a shadowy* **MAN**. *We can't see his face. We might not even be able to see his entire body. He clips the end off a thick cigar: Shhk! He lights the cigar and smokes.)*

– and I asked Ivor about you. *And* about Karl.

He said Karl is an asshole, and obsessed with opera, and maybe gay?

and technically his subordinate, although they're in different branches of the same branch,

and Karl can't know he exists,

and I should never say the name Ivor to anyone,

and then he said that you were really named Joris.

And that everyone liked you.

> *(***IVOR***'s door shuts with a thunk.)*

> *(A beat between them. So much about this is shocking that* **JORIS** *defaults to the nearest, least consequential question:)*

JORIS. (He said everyone likes me?)

HELEN. (Yeah.)

(This is a pleasant surprise.)

JORIS. (Oh.)

HELEN. (You're the life of the party, you know that you're liked, it's your secret weapon.)

JORIS. (No, I know but)

HELEN. (You're likable, you're deployed to be likable

I'm hot, I'm deployed to be hot

– I guess I also have to be likable

but it's different / for –)

*(***JORIS** *has regained himself enough to ask the largest and most combustible question. He cuts in:)*

JORIS. "Let's call him Ivor" or "His name is Ivor"?

HELEN. ...What?

JORIS. You said: "Let's call him Ivor."

But then you said: "I should never say the name Ivor to anyone."

(A moment between them. He's horrified.)

Oh my god is his name really Ivor?!

HELEN. Look, it just...came out.

JORIS. Helen, you can't say their actual names!!

You can't *know* their actual names!

How do you know his actual name?!

*(***HELEN** *opens her mouth.)*

– Don't answer that. Actually don't answer that.

HELEN. I just –

JORIS. Oooh just don't for a second don't say anything.

This is bad, this is really bad.

(A beat.)

(This is not the case, but **HELEN** *tries it as a suggestion:)*

HELEN. You're overreacting?

JORIS. *(Comforting himself.)* He couldn't have told you his name. They never do that.

I've known Karl for five years and I know he's never once told me a real thing about himself.

HELEN. I knew Ivor back in Moscow. When I was studying abroad.

Before he started working for the whole…

Before *I* got really pulled into the whole…

JORIS. Oh god.

HELEN. And then *he* pulled *me* in, actually.

JORIS. He…?

HELEN. We had dated.

JORIS. Oh God.

HELEN. For two years and we were gonna get married –

JORIS. Oh GOD.

HELEN. – this was when I was still making my own movies.

And then he dumped me and then he joined the Bureau of Propaganda and then he called me in and I thought I was gonna be arrested because I was making some pretty weird shit back then at the time, like some really intense shit – but deeply cinematic –

(but also our break-up had been rocky, frankly)

but instead he was like: How Would You Like To Work For The Party.

And then he said Everyone Calls Me Gregor Now.

But obviously I knew his name was Ivor.

*(**JORIS** has been staring at her, open-mouthed.)*

What?

JORIS. *(Dazed.)* I have spent so long trying not to know anything I shouldn't.

*(This is the wrong answer. It is much less brave than **HELEN** would have hoped.)*

HELEN. Kidding.

JORIS. ...What?

HELEN. *(Flat.)* I was kidding.

JORIS. ...No you weren't.

Were you?

You weren't.

Were you?

HELEN. Made it all up. I'm still good for a cover story on the spur of the moment.

JORIS. Wait so

wait so

HELEN. Gotta keep you on your toes.

JORIS. *Is* there an Ivor?

(Straight to his face, but she's lying, isn't she? Is she?)

HELEN. There's no Ivor.

(A beat between them.)

(They study each other.)

(They have been together for some time and every once in a while they remember that they are complete strangers to each other in certain ways.)

JORIS. If you weren't kidding –

HELEN. I was.

JORIS. *(Spiraling a bit.)* Okay but if you weren't… I would want you to – to tell me

if there was something that involved me somehow –

if I was being handled by more than one handler, for example –

or if there were doubts, doubts in Moscow about me –

HELEN. Hey. Hey. Joris.

(He looks at her.)

You're OK. Everything is OK.

JORIS. We need to be able to trust each other. Don't we?

HELEN. Let's talk about Spain.

Three

(Time shifts.)

(Another night.)

*(**HELEN** and **JORIS** are having a nightcap/ brainstorming session. A big piece of butcher paper is stretched across the big wall.)*

JORIS. Sangria!

HELEN. Yes!

Bulls?

JORIS. That's on the list.

(He goes to the wall and underlines BULLS.)

HELEN. Paella!

JORIS. On the list.

(He underlines PAELLA.)

HELEN. *Don Quixote.*

JORIS. *(He's never read it.)* Right…

HELEN. As metaphor?

JORIS. "The insanity of the aristocracy."

HELEN. I think it's about chasing your dreams?

Dreams of working class liberation?

JORIS. I've never read *Don Quixote.*

HELEN. Ugh, me neither, it seemed boring.

Do we have time to read it?

JORIS. My Dinner Companion said we should be ready to make the movie fast.

HELEN. We should get someone who's read it to tell us about it.

JORIS. Flutes.

HELEN. Flutes?

JORIS. *(Suddenly uncertain.)* Flute music?

HELEN. ...Are flutes Spanish?

JORIS. Maybe not.

HELEN. Tambourines?

JORIS. Are tambourines Spanish?

HELEN. Guitars! *La guitarra!*

JORIS. *(Pensively.)* Guitars...

(They think but nobody writes anything.)

HELEN. Fiestas.

JORIS. *(An epiphany.)* SI-estas!!

HELEN. The naps?

JORIS. Afternoon naps. For everybody! Not just babies!

Super Spanish.

HELEN. *(Pitching the scene.)* "A late hot afternoon. Flies buzz. Bulls whip their...tails. And toss their horns. A farm. The working-class Spanish peasants are asleep, having their...

HELEN & JORIS. *(Together.) Siestas!"*

HELEN. "On the splintery wooden table in their homely kitchen: olives! Olive oil! An earthen jug of...*vino!*"

JORIS. *(How did I not think of that.)* "Vino"!

HELEN. "While the peasants sleep...the crushing machine of war rolls closer."

JORIS. *(Searching to replace "war.")* "The crushing machine of – of –"

HELEN. War.

JORIS. No, war is the good thing.

(Writes EL WAR. As he writes:)

War is the thing that will save the working people. War is the thing that we need the Americans to throw money at, in order to uphold values of – of humanism.

HELEN. No no

war and revolution are two different things.

It goes like: "War is terrible, war is coming, war is the Fascist boot crushing the noble poor, the noble poor must RISE UP! Rise up and stage a revolution!"

You see?

(A moment between them.)

*(***HELEN** *is good at this.* **JORIS** *is a little unsettled.)*

(She writes: LA REVOLUCIÓN.)

JORIS. I… Yes, of course… When you put it like that, I can…

(A beat. He clears his throat. Onward!)

My Dinner Companion said that we should target Ernest.

HELEN. *(She doesn't like him.)* …Hemingway?

JORIS. He's very famous, obviously.

HELEN. Right…

JORIS. Mass commercial appeal. Ticket sales through the roof.

HELEN. Hmm.

JORIS. Girlfriend has ties to Roosevelt. Which is *huge*.

HELEN. His wife?

JORIS. No, the girlfriend, the new girlfriend, she's very close to Eleanor.

But most importantly you've got the whole – you know, the Voice Of America thing.

HELEN. Right…

*(***JORIS** *can tell she is not saying that she hates him. But it's palpable.)*

JORIS. You don't like him.

*(***HELEN** *shrugs.)*

My Dinner Companion said Moscow is *very* invested in Ernest.

HELEN. Great! Ernest. Love him.

Are we turning him?

JORIS. No no. He can't be seen as a Member.

He needs to stay – you know, *all-American*.

HELEN. Uh huh.

You know he can be…tricky.

JORIS. Tricky?

HELEN. Ornery.

Whatever you want him to do, he wants to do the opposite.

JORIS. I was thinking we could just…invite him over? To talk about…

HELEN. Spain?

JORIS. He likes Spain. A lot.

(Beat – he can tell **HELEN** *isn't buying this.)*

We shouldn't invite him over?

HELEN. Not at first.

If we want Ernest, we should invite John Dos Passos first.

JORIS. Dos? Isn't he a little bit...?

HELEN. What?

JORIS. I don't know...

Like. He thinks too much? And those stupid *glasses*?

HELEN. He's very In right now.

JORIS. If we want Ernest, we should call Ernest. What's Dos have to do with this?

HELEN. Friends with Ernest, twenty years,

this weird competitive friendship, haven't you seen them at parties?

Dos starts talking and Ernest has to interrupt.

Ernest starts talking, and Dos goes for a smoke.

JORIS. He does??

HELEN. Joris, you need to watch people more carefully.

JORIS. I watch people! I watch the people I'm targeting.

HELEN. Right, that's fifty percent of the people you should be watching.

You need to observe *everybody* at *every* second.

JORIS. I still don't see why we're talking about Dos.

HELEN. Dos has that whole Spain connection, backpacking as a youth,

fell in love with the red Spanish soil, the bright Spanish sun, etc,

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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