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BORDELLO

A Thesis Presented

By

Barbara Lynn Bellman

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Literature

Stony Brook University

December 2012

BORDELLO

By Barbara Bellman

Original Musical Libretto

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Barbara Lynn Bellman

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Abstract of the Thesis

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From the late 1800s to the 1930s, an Orthodox Jewish mafia (known as the Zwi Migdal) trafficked in white slavery on three continents. In the 1920s, this organization owned over 3000 brothels in Buenos Aires alone – mostly populated by the ignorant Jewish girls who had been duped into sham marriages before leaving Eastern Europe. These marriages often took place in the *shtetls* (poor villages) in what were called “*shtile chuppahs*” (or quiet weddings), and were quickly conducted in an area of a house called a “*shtibl*” (a small corner of a room separated by a curtain). The girls’ parents were deceived their daughters were going to Argentina for respectable jobs and/or marriage, and often were compensated with rubles, silk stockings, candy, and assurances that their daughters would be safe from pogroms and poverty.

However, once aboard ship bound for Buenos Aires or Rio de Janiero, the girls were brutally forced into prostitution. They couldn’t read or write and without sponsorship, legal rights or documents, they were at the mercy of the Mob.

The 1920s was a time of great social challenge in terms of immigration, unemployment, white slavery and political corruption. Against this backdrop, a young Ukrainian émigré by the name of Israel Zeitlin became a part of a group of writers and intellectuals called the Boedo Boys. Many of the group wrote under assumed names, and Zeitlin chose two different noms de plume: Cesar Tiempo and Clara Beter. His first success was a collection of poems titled, “Versos de Una...” under the Clara Beter appellation, and “Clara Beter” became the literary sensation of Argentina in 1925.

The poems sympathetically described the life of a Jewish prostitute forced into white slavery such that prominent men wanted to save her, marry her, or rescue her from her sad life. Once the deception was revealed that the poems had been written by Cesar Tiempo and that Clara Beter was the invention of a seventeen year-old boy, the hoax became an embarrassing scandal.

In researching the context of the times when Tiempo wrote this collection, I discovered a rich historical backdrop and chose the format of a dramatic musical to tell the story. Despite references to actual events and people, the play is a work of fiction. As I listened to Tango, I imagined the blending of Latin and Eastern European musical themes that informed the development of Tango from the bordellos of South America. The melting pot of rhythms and melodies brought these cultures together, and suggested the genre for this show.

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Acknowledgments

I didn't start out to write a musical, but my thesis seemed to want to go in that direction. Could I have found a more challenging genre? With the encouragement of Professors David Keplinger and Jeffrey Middents (American University in Washington DC) and William Burford, Stony Brook University in Southampton, New York, I was heartened to pursue this format. Like me, they heard the rhythms of Tango and the sorrowful tunes of Klezmer as this story emerged, and they urged me on. I'm grateful they did as it brought me to such luminaries in Musical Theatre as Marsha Norman, Sheldon Harnick, Ira Gasman, Graciela Daniele and Ned Paul Ginsberg – from whom I've learned so much in the crafting of this libretto.

Ernie Joselowitz of the Washington DC Playwrights Forum provided sage dramaturgical advice as the script evolved. Karen Hartman and Kim Sherman helped me refine characters and structure. Friends Marshall and Linda Ackerman endured draft after draft of the show, offering useful feedback as to what worked and what didn't. And friend, Tim Jerome, was a constant cheerleader throughout the writing of this story.

But the one person who cheered me on when I needed it most – who edited every version multiple times and never complained is my husband, Seth Koch. Not once did he waver in his excitement for the story, or begrudge a moment of my time in writing it. As my “biggest fan,” Seth kept me going with his candor, his praise, and his love, and he is both a writers' treasure and a wife's blessing.

BORDELLO
By Barbara Bellman

CHARACTERS

Katya (Age 19) – Serious, independent and determined young woman.

Cesar (Age 19) – Earnest, sensitive, kind and brave young poet.

Tatiana (Age 18) – Impulsive, naïve, flirtatious young woman and Katya’s sister.

Manuel (30-ish) – Brooding Bohemian writer and intellectual.

Berte the Millionaire (45-ish) – Showy and pretentious “Madam” who presides over a large bordello empire in Buenos Aires.

Grigor (Mid 20’s) – A dandy and pimp who tries to be tough but isn’t entirely bad.

Ivan (Mid 20’s) – Stocky, menacing pimp, who seems angry and out of place.

Matchmaker (60-ish) – Greedy and cunning woman who ingratiates herself to everyone.

Mama and Papa (40-ish) – Poor, hardworking, ignorant and humble Jews.

Police Chief (40-ish) – Officious, self-important, cruel and corrupt.

Police Aide (20-ish) – Arrogant and cruel petit fonctionnaire.

Elias Castelnuovo (50-ish) – Portly but educated, influential editor of literary magazine.

Mrs. Castelnuovo (40-ish) – Fashionable wife and society lady with a heart.

Assorted passengers, customers, pimps and prostitutes

ACT I

PRELUDE: SPLIT STAGE, BEFORE CURTAIN RISES (IN FRONT OF CURTAIN)

Lights up as music opens, playing bits of Tango and Klezmer, rhythmically following the typing and sewing gestures of our protagonists, CESAR and KATYA. The set is sparsely furnished on each side of the stage.

On one side, CESAR is furiously hard at work at his typewriter, stopping to read, pulling out the paper and tossing it aside, then starting again.

On the other side of the stage, we see KATYA draping fabrics on her sister, TATIANA. KATYA is frustrated and places and replaces the fabrics.

They each speak, but to themselves, on their own sides of the set.

The background shows newspaper headlines of the day, revealing the year – 1924.

CESAR

(Frustrated)

Not political enough!

KATYA

(Disappointed)

Not pretty enough!

CESAR

(Hunches over typewriter)

Not angry enough!

KATYA

(Rips off a sash)

Not elegant enough!

CESAR

Not fresh enough!

Not clever enough!

KATYA

(SONG: SOMEDAY)

CESAR
SOMEDAY MY WORDS WILL MATTER.

KATYA
ONE DAY THEIR HEADS WILL TURN.

CESAR
SOMEDAY MY PITTER PATT
WILL BE EVERYONE'S CONCERN.

KATYA
ONE DAY I'LL SEE MY DRESSES,
DRESSING UP THE LADIES ON PARADE.

CESAR
SOMEDAY MY FLAME OF TRUTH
WILL BE MORE THAN AN IDLE MAN'S TIRADE.

KATYA
ONE DAY MY DREAM WILL HAPPEN
DOING WHAT I LOVE, LOVING WHAT I DO.

CESAR
I'M NOT JUST ANOTHER WRITER
WHO IS CHASING AFTER FAME.
SOME DAY MY WORDS WILL MATTER.
AND PEOPLE WILL KNOW MY NAME.

BOTH
SOMEDAY PEOPLE WILL KNOW MY NAME.

TATIANA

Are you almost done?

KATYA
Yes. Be still. Oh, why do I bother?

SCENE ONE: THE PORT OF ODESSA (UKRAINE) – ON THE DOCK

A Clarinetist plays Klezmer music on stage. There is dancing. A large passenger ship is in the background.

BERTE, IVAN and GRIGOR are expensively dressed passengers who have just disembarked the ship. GRIGOR furtively pays off the captain, stewards, police and dockworkers. Each one he pays nods in the direction of the MATCHMAKER.

KATYA and TATIANA enter, excited and girlish and joyfully dance until KATYA pulls TATIANA away to get a glimpse of the passengers' beautiful clothes.

TATIANA notices GRIGOR but KATYA only notices the fashions of the passengers. As they talk to each other KATYA is fixed on the clothing; TATIANA is fixed on GRIGOR and IVAN.

(SONG: I COULD LOOK AT THAT ALL DAY)

KATYA
LOOK AT THAT DRESS! LOOK AT THOSE STITCHES!

TATIANA
(Ignores KATYA'S glance)
Never mind the dresses! Look at those men.

KATYA
(Ignores TATIANA'S glance)
LOOK AT THOSE COATS! LOOK AT THOSE BRITCHES!

TATIANA
THEY MUST HAVE RICHES.
RICHES TIMES TEN!

BOTH
I COULD LOOK AT THEM ALL DAY.

KATYA
LOOK AT THOSE GLOVES! LOOK AT THOSE HATS!

TATIANA
LOOK AT THEIR COATS, AND THEIR SHINY SPATS.

BOTH
I CAN'T BELIEVE MY EYES.
I COULD LOOK AT THEM ALL DAY.

KATYA
I'VE NEVER SEEN SUCH GORGEOUS FABRIC
WHO CAN DO SUCH FINE DESIGN?
EVERY ONE IS A BIT OF MAGIC.
EVERY ONE IS SUBLIME.

TATIANA
I'VE NEVER SEEN A FINER SPECIMEN
NOT FROM AROUND HERE.
HE'S WORTH MORE THAN ALL THE REST OF THEM,
HE IMPROVES THE ATMOSPHERE.

KATYA
NEVER HAVE I SEEN SO MUCH TO LIKE.
I COULD LOOK AT THEM ALL DAY.

KATYA looks at her own dress. Is clearly disappointed. Looks at TATIANA and realizes they have been talking about different things and that TATIANA is clearly interested in GRIGOR.

While I dream of velvet and lace, I think your dreams will get you in trouble.

(SONG: YOU COULD DO A LOT WORSE)

TATIANA
YOU HAVE A SKILL.
I NEED A PLAN.
WITHOUT ANY TALENT, I NEED A MAN.
ONE OF US HAS TO THINK OF THE FUTURE.
WE COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THEM.

KATYA

I can just see your life now . . .
A MOTHER AND A WIFE WITH SOME TOTS IN TOW–
A LADY PUSHING A CARRIAGE.
FROM A SHTETL GIRL EVERYONE ONE WILL KNOW –
AT LAST, YOU MADE A GOOD MARRIAGE.

TATIANA

Yes!

KATYA

I know . . .but . . .I want so much more.

TATIANA

Then you'll be disappointed. Without a husband, what more can you expect?

KATYA

DRESSING THE LADIES FROM HEAD TO TOE
AND THE GENTS FROM SIDE TO SIDE,
WANTING TO STAND OUT FROM THE CROWD,
THEY'LL COME FROM FAR AND WIDE.

TATIANA

WITH YOUR NAME ABOVE THE STORE.

KATYA

WITH A FAMILY YOU ADORE.

TATIANA

HOW COULD I WANT FOR ANYTHING MORE?

KATYA

WHY SHOULD I BE SOMEBODY'S MISSUS?
DESIGNING MY OWN LIFE IS WHAT THIS IS,

TATIANA

THERE'S SO MUCH MORE OF LIFE TO SEE.

KATYA

THERE'S SO MUCH MORE FOR ME TO BE.

BOTH

WE COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THIS.

IVAN, GRIGOR and BERTE observe the Girls. GRIGOR primps with his pocket scarf, smoothes his hair, straightens his jacket. IVAN fixes his hat in a gesture of preparation.

The MATCHMAKER follows their gaze and sidles up to them, extending her palm upward, as payment for an introduction.

GRIGOR

Tell us about them.

MATCHMAKER

Lovely girls, aren't they? It's a shame they come from such a poor family.

ONE HAS TALENT; SHE CAN SEW.
THE OTHER'S PRETTY, HEAD TO TOE.
THEY'RE RIPE AS PLUMS – SWEET, UNTASTED.
YOU COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THEM.

ONE IS SERIOUS. BUT . . .SO WHAT?
ONE'S IMPULSIVE, THOUGH THE OTHER'S NOT.
THE GLEAM IN YOUR EYE SAYS YOU LIKE WHAT YOU SEE.
YOU COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THEM.

THEIR PROSPECTS MAY BE SLIM.
AND SUITORS MAY BE DIM.
THE COSSACKS SEEM TO RUIN EVERY DANCE.
BUT. . .IT'S A GOOD DAY FOR ROMANCE.
A DAY TO TAKE A CHANCE . . .OR TWO?
THEY'LL DO.
YOU COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THEM.

I swear . . .
YOU COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THEM.

MATCHMAKER holds out her hand. IVAN drops a few coins that she pockets quickly. He adjusts his hat and stands straighter.

BERTE hands an even larger purse of coins to the MATCHMAKER.

BERTE

Introduce us.

KATYA sways to the music, unaware, while TATIANA glances back at GRIGOR and smiles.

KATYA turns toward IVAN and GRIGOR, and then looks away, embarrassed.

KATYA
(Scolds TATIANA)

Don't stare!

BERTE and MATCHMAKER notice TATIANA looking at GRIGOR.

MATCHMAKER
Katya . . .darling. Come here and bring your sister.

KATYA and TATIANA look startled, and embarrassed, but tentatively approach them.

(To Girls)
Come closer. Let me see you. (They step closer) That's better. My bad eyes, you know.
(To BERTE) Aren't they lovely? (To Girls) Tatiana and Katya . . .meet my new . .
.friends. I just met, but they seem nice. So well dressed, eh?

MATCHMAKER turns to BERTE for her to introduce herself and GRIGOR and IVAN.

BERTE
I'm Berte Mendelsohn. And this is Grigor and Ivan, my . . .business associates.

BERTE nudges IVAN and GRIGOR so they exaggerate their courtliness; doff their hats, bow and smile.
I couldn't help notice you looking at the ladies coming off the boat. Are you waiting for someone?

KATYA
No . . .no. I just like to see what the ladies are wearing.

TATIANA
Katya is a dressmaker! The *best*!

BERTE
A wasted talent, I imagine, around here.

KATYA

Well . . .perhaps . . .but one day . . .

BERTE

Yes . . .one day . . . But never here. Buenos Aires though . . .that's different. Did I mention I grew up not far from here? But . . .

(SONG: NOTHING'S CHANGED)

THAT WAS YEARS AGO,
AND NOTHING'S CHANGED.
THE ROADS ARE STILL UNCOBBLED –
NOTHING'S BEEN REARRANGED.
THE STENCH OF POVERTY STILL FILLS THE AIR.

THERE'S THE SAME OLD MEN
AND THE SAME OLD STORES –
THE SAME OLD BATTLES
AND THE SAME OLD SCORES.
NOTHING CHANGES.

YET, WHERE I LIVE
THERE'S CULTURE AND ART
AND LADIES AND GENTS
WHO DRESS THE PART.

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, SISTERS, AND COUSINS
WOULD BUY YOUR DRESSES BY THE DOZENS.
AND WHETHER OR NOT WE SHOULD,
THERE'S A PARTY EVERY NIGHT,
TO CELEBRATE SOME PUBLIC GOOD.

THERE'S NO BATTLING THE BUGS
OR HIDING FROM THUGS –
IN A COUNTRY WHERE EVERYTHING IS NEW.
YOU COULD TAKE YOUR PLACE,
SEWING VELVET AND LACE.
ARGENTINA IS THE PLACE TO LIVE, IT'S TRUE.

BERTE pulls out a pamphlet about
Argentina and hands it to KATYA.

See for yourself.

KATYA looks at it curiously then hands it
back.

KATYA

I'm sorry . . .I can't read it . . .yet.

BERTE

Three weeks by ship, and a new life. (Sadly) But travel can be lonely. (Gestures to IVAN and GRIGOR) Poor fellows. Without a wife the journey is long.

KATYA notices it's getting late.

KATYA

(Worried)

I'm sorry. We have to go. It's not safe to be out after sundown.

KATYA pulls TATIANA away and they turn to leave. The group watches them go.

(SONG: CONCLUDE YOU COULD DO A LOT WORSE)

GRIGOR

MAYBE THIS IS OUR LUCKY DAY.

IVAN

MAYBE NOW WE CAN SAIL AWAY.

BERTE

MAYBE THE GIRLS WILL BE READY TO DANCE.

MATCHMAKER

(Hollers after the girls)

YOU COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THEM.

TATIANA smiles back at GRIGOR as they hurry off.

SCENE TWO: A SHTETL HOUSE, THAT EVENING

TATIANA primps at her vanity while
KATYA buries herself in sewing, brooding.

TATIANA

(Scolds)

You could have been friendlier! (Flirty) What did you think of them?

KATYA

Who?

TATIANA

You know who! Those men!

KATYA

I didn't notice.

TATIANA

Well, *I* did. (Pause) What's wrong?

KATYA

That woman was right. We have *nothing* here. You heard her . . .nothing ever changes.

TATIANA

Our only hope is to marry and get away from here.

KATYA

Why is that our only choice?

TATIANA

They weren't so bad . . .

KATYA

If we marry them, who knows *what* awaits us?

TATIANA

What do we need to know besides that they're *rich*! They dress like gentlemen . . .not like the peasants *here*. And . . .they have clean fingernails. Did you see their fingernails?

KATYA

Why are they interested in us? They don't have girls in Argentina?

Suddenly, screams are heard from the next
room.

KATYA and TATIANA rush to the doorway as PAPA stumbles into the house; his head is bleeding. MAMA rushes to minister to his wounds. He sits down heavily. TATIANA and KATYA kneel by PAPA'S feet.

TATIANA and KATYA

Papa!

MAMA

Sit! How bad is it?

Upset, dabs at the blood with her apron.

PAPA

PAPA pats TATIANA'S and KATYA'S heads, looks at his clothes, and shakes his head sadly.

We'll have some mending to do, eh Katyala? (To himself) Those *goniffs*. (To MAMA) I'm sorry Mama, but they took everything . . . even the wagon. (Points to his head) And gave me *this*! I don't know how long I was knocked out, but I had some amazing dreams! Good dreams!

KATYA lovingly touches his shirt, and then buries her face in his shoulder. PAPA kisses her head.

MAMA

Dreams?

(SONG: WHAT GOOD ARE DREAMS?)

WHAT GOOD ARE DREAMS
WHEN EVERY DAY'S A NIGHTMARE?
WHAT GOOD IS HOPE
WHEN HOPE IS JUST A LIE?

WHAT GOOD ARE DREAMS
WHEN LIFE JUST ISN'T FAIR?
WHAT GOOD IS HOPE
WHEN LIFE'S A STRUGGLE TIL YOU DIE?

(To Girls)

WE HAVE NOTHING TO GIVE YOU

BUT A HOPE YOU'LL FIND YOUR WAY.
THE SHTETL'S NOT YOUR FUTURE –
YOU CANNOT STAY!
ESPECIALLY NOW OUR FAITH IS SHAKEN.

ALL YOUR HOPES WILL SHATTER
IN YOUR STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE.
SOON, THE ONLY THING THAT'LL MATTER
IS TO GET YOU OUT OF HERE ALIVE.

I HAVE MY DREAMS
TO SEE YOU SAFELY MARRIED.
I HAVE MY HOPES
YOUR LIVES WILL BRING YOU JOY.
I HAVE MY DREAMS,
YOUR BURDENS WILL BE CARRIED
ON THE SHOULDERS OF YOUR HUSBANDS–
AND WITH LUCK, YOU'LL HAVE A BOY.

Door knocks.

Now what? As if we don't have enough to contend with!

Annoyed, MAMA opens door. BERTE,
IVAN, GRIGOR, MATCHMAKER and
REBBE are at the door. MATCHMAKER
hustles her way into the cottage.

MAMA

Gestures toward PAPA'S injury, then
notices the others and steps back, flustered.

Rebbe, please . . .come in.

REBBE

How is he?

PAPA waves a weak hello.

MAMA

(To MATCHMAKER)

This isn't a good time.

MATCHMAKER

After a pogrom, is there ever a good time?

MATCHMAKER beckons for BERTE,
IVAN and GRIGOR to enter.

PAPA tries to get up but stumbles back into
his chair. MAMA rushes to catch his fall
and waves for the guests to sit down, and
barks orders.

MAMA

All right. Come in. Come in! No need to stand out in the cold.

MAMA dabs at PAPA'S wound with her
apron. GRIGOR and IVAN step inside.
They offer MAMA flowers and candy and
remove their hats as they stand.
MATCHMAKER looks closely at PAPA'S
wound.

MATCHMAKER

It looks like God had his arms around you. (Nods to BERTE, smiles) In more ways than
one.

PAPA appraises the visitors, as he holds his
head. He's weak, but wary. REBBE gets a
closer look at the wound.

REBBE

God must love you a little . . .at least today.

PAPA

Well . . .God has a strange way of showing his affection. Sit! SIT! I'm sorry I greet you
in this condition.

They all sit around the table. MAMA hands
KATYA the flowers to get a vase. GRIGOR
gives box of candy to TATIANA. She
quickly opens the box, starts to take one, but
MAMA glowers so TATIANA just places
the box on the table and retreats to stand
with KATYA.

MATCHMAKER pops a few candies into
her mouth, and drops a few in her pocket;
then notices the Rebbe and offers him a
candy.

MATCHMAKER

Delicious . . .but, a shame to live with so much uncertainty. You don't mind I found the Rebbe walking home and invited him along? But where are *my* manners! This is Berte Mendelsohn, and her *colleagues*, Grigor and Ivan. They're visiting on business. Good people . . .you can see. Respectable. So well dressed! I can vouch!

PAPA struggles to talk.

PAPA

(To MAMA)

Mama. Some tea. Our guests look thirsty.

MAMA starts for the stove.

(To BERTE)

What brings you to our miserable village?

BERTE looks at the girls, appraisingly, up and down. Nods. Sighs. Shakes her head.

BERTE

Opportunity. These are difficult times, eh? So . . .unpredictable. It's a pity you don't have sons to help you in your business. But what can you do with . . .daughters? (She shrugs) Still . . . God has a way of bringing good fortune out of bad, isn't that true? (Nods to GRIGOR and IVAN) I'll get to the point. Argentina is a beautiful country . . .a growing country . . .but to grow, we need families. And frankly, between you and me, there aren't enough good Jewish girls to marry. We thought . . .perhaps . . .only if you agree of course . . .to solve our mutual problems with the same solution, eh?

No one speaks. BERTE places a bag of money on the table. Everyone stares at the money.

After all . . .one man's misfortune . . .is another man's . . .bride. Do we understand each other?

REBBE lifts the bag. Is impressed with its weight, nods to PAPA.

MAMA and PAPA exchange resigned looks. They stare for a long time at GRIGOR and IVAN.

PAPA

(To IVAN and GRIGOR)

Come closer. Let me get a better look at you.

IVAN and GRIGOR step up to PAPA, respectfully. PAPA appraises them.

Bar Mitzvah?

They nod.

Attend Synagogue?

They nod.

Study Torah?

They nod.

Keep the Sabbath?

PAPA looks at TATIANA and KATYA who are nervously waiting. PAPA motions for the girls to come to him, and when they do, they kneel and he holds their heads to his chest, and kisses each one tenderly. MAMA kneels down and joins them in a family hug.

KATYA

Mama?

MAMA

(To Girls)

THEY SMILE —YOU SHYLY LOOK AWAY.
THEN LOOK AGAIN, AND PERHAPS ONE DAY
YOU MAY SEE SOMETHING GOOD.
A SURPRISE. A DELIGHT!
MAYBE, IF YOU'RE LUCKY,
SOME PLEASURE IN THE NIGHT.
THEN YEARS WILL PASS,
AND YOU'LL AGREE –
YOU COULD DO A LOT WORSE THAN THEM.

In the distance, some slow Klezmer music is played.

PAPA and MAMA and GIRLS turn to look back at IVAN and GRIGOR. TATIANA smiles. KATYA is serious. They both stare.

MAMA

(Turns back to PAPA, sighs)

Papa?

PAPA motions to the corner of the room where there is a small curtain.

PAPA

We have only this . . . *shtibl*. This . . . poor corner of the room. Not much of a wedding celebration.

REBBE

May all your problems be so easy to solve!

MAMA and PAPA look at each other. MAMA shrugs, relieved. PAPA shrugs, resigned.

Offstage we hear a single clarinet playing a melancholy Klezmer tune.

The REBBE moves to the corner of the room. MAMA helps PAPA to stand; BERTE and the MATCHMAKER each grab a corner of the tablecloth to hold over the heads of TATIANA and KATYA, to serve as a canopy (*chuppah*). A small sheer curtain is drawn and we see the silhouette of the “*stille chuppah*” (quiet wedding) taking place. It is somber and silent but for the breaking of the glass. All heads are bowed. Not even a celebratory “*L’chaim*” is heard.

The only movement, besides the breaking of the glass, is TATIANA reaching out to hold GRIGOR’S hand. KATYA jumps, startled at the sound of the glass as the Klezmer music suddenly stops. Lights down.

SCENE THREE: A CAFÉ IN BUENOS AIRES (LA BOCA) – ONE MONTH LATER

CESAR and his older friend, MANUEL,
having coffee in the Café Tortoni.

CESAR shows his newest copy of the
literary magazine, *Revista Claridad* to
MANUEL.

CESAR

I read your article! Congratulations!

MANUEL

Yes . . .but it's buried in the back.

CESAR is impressed, and hopeful.

CESAR

But you're in here! (Pause) Maybe . . .one day . . .my poems will be published too.

MANUEL

(Sarcastic)

Your poems? Hah! About what, eh? What's so important you're burning to write about? Whether your mother fixed you a hot breakfast? That your clothes are last year's fashion? Or that your invitation was late to the opening of Teatro Colon?

CESAR

You think that because I'm not a starving artist that I don't have anything worthy to say? That my voice doesn't deserve to be heard?

MANUEL

What have you suffered? What are your struggles? Huh? Look around you. Men can't find jobs. The streets are crowded with immigrants swarming through the mouth of La Boca, and every day there's a threat of strikes. People are angry! They're scared. And you? When you leave here you'll go home to a nice hot meal in a safe neighborhood and not have to worry about where the next one . . .or the next will be coming from. Your problems are not . . .problems.

CESAR

Do you think I'm that shallow? That I don't see what's happening? That I don't care?
I DO care!

MANUEL

(Dismissive)

OK. You care. But you know nothing about life. *Nothing!* (Pause) You've never even *lived* yet. Forget *politics*. I bet you've never been with a *woman*, have you?

CESAR

(Embarrassed)

I'm trying to be serious here!

MANUEL

(Exaggerates)

I thought so! You know *nothing!* Until you've held a woman in your arms, you don't know the meaning of *serious*. A woman makes you a man . . . builds you up . . . or tears you apart. Until you've drowned in her mysteries . . . or felt the sting of her treachery . . . your writing will never have the passion . . . the perspective . . . you need to be taken seriously. Until you love a woman, you don't know what real suffering is.

CESAR

You make it sound like torture.

MANUEL

Exquisite torture. After that, everything else is . . . *politics!*

CESAR

I'm sure one day . . .

MANUEL

One day. *One day!* With you, everything is *one day!* What about today? Look around. Everywhere . . . there are women ripe for the taking . . . *Polacas* . . . fresh from the boat. Take your pick!

MANUEL pulls CESAR up from the chair.
Come on . . . let's go . . . It's time you learned to suffer like the *rest* of us!

They exit the café.

SCENE FOUR: PARLOUR OF A BORDELLO IN BUENOS AIRES – SAME DAY

Lights up on the parlor of a bordello.
MANUEL shoves CESAR into the brothel
and goes off with one of the girls. CESAR
stumbles. Men are dancing the Tango
with each other waiting their turns with
the women. CESAR tries to leave, but one
of the men pulls him into the dance.
GRIGOR directs the men to the
prostitutes.

IVAN and KATYA argue in a corner. IVAN
raises his fist to her. She cowers, and then
stands up to him, defiant.

IVAN

Get out there and earn back my investment.

KATYA

You deceived me! The *Rebbe* . . .! The *Chuppah*!

IVAN laughs.

IVAN

(Scoffs, sarcastic)

The Rebbe . . .the Chuppah . . .! You *shtetl* girls know *nothing*. Girls like you are fooled
every day.

KATYA

Well . . .I'm not fooled now, and I won't do it.

IVAN

You too good for this? You think you got a choice? Here's your choice . . .*what you*
won't do . . .we'll make sure your sister will. And I wonder how long she'll last . . .eh . .
.covering your shift? Shall we find out?

KATYA

Leave Tatti out of this.

IVAN

Then get out there and earn your keep . . .or else . . .Tatiana *will*.

IVAN grabs KATYA'S arm and forces her
into the room where she bumps into

CESAR, who has just been pushed aside
by one of the male dancers.

CESAR and KATYA each turn away from
each other out of shyness and shame.
CESAR turns back to her to shake her
hand, which she rebuffs.

(SONG: DON'T GO)

CLUMSY OAF!
WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING.

KATYA

Sorry

CESAR

SILLY BOY.
YOUR INNOCENCE IS SHOWING.

KATYA

I should go.

CESAR

Wait.
WHAT'S YOUR HURRY?

KATYA

But

CESAR

IF YOU GO,
HE'LL MAKE ME WORRY.
IF YOU GO,
I'LL BE IN TROUBLE.
IF YOU GO,
I'LL BE HUNGRY.
IF YOU GO . . .
PLEASE, DON'T GO.

KATYA

YOU'RE NEW, I GUESS?

CESAR

IS IT MY DRESS?

KATYA

CESAR

I WRITE POEMS . . .SIMPLE RHYMES.
BUT WHO READS POEMS
IN THESE DIFFICULT TIMES?
I should go.

KATYA

PLEASE DON'T.
ME . . .I MAKE DRESSES FOR A RICH FEW.
BUT WHO BUYS NEW DRESSES
WHEN OLD ONES WILL DO?

BOTH

IT SEEMS THERE'S MORE TO KNOW ABOUT YOU.

CESAR

THE MAN I AM BECOMING . . .

KATYA

AND THE GIRL I WAS . . .BEFORE.

CESAR

I'm sorry . . .

KATYA

Don't be sorry . . .

CESAR

CESAR turns to leave.

I should go.

KATYA

KATYA turns around and takes his arm to
stop him from going. She's scared and
looks over at IVAN who is watching her.

Wait. Don't . . .go.

CESAR

(Laughs)

You're not good at this, are you?

KATYA

(Miffed)

So what? Are you?

CESAR

(Amused)
Do you have many . . .customers?

KATYA

IVAN watches her as KATYA tries to look the part of a whore, but she's awkward. She drapes an arm around CESAR'S shoulder.

Of course! Why do you ask?

CESAR

It's just . . .I guess . . .I don't know what I expected.

KATYA

Have you been with a prostitute before?

CESAR looks around the room, then back to KATYA.

CESAR

It's that obvious, huh? Still (looks around) . . .well . . .you don't seem to be much like the others, but . . .I'm new at this . . .

KATYA

(Lowers her voice)

I am too . . .if that's what you mean. I mean . . .I am now . . . I have to be. But that's not who I am. I mean . . .oh, never mind. (Takes his hand) Shall we just get this over with?

CESAR

Is there a rush? Can't we just talk awhile?

KATYA

What for? Don't you . . .? Aren't I . . .attractive enough for you?

CESAR

(Laughs)

Of course . . .but . . .

KATYA

(Defensive)

But what? Are you scared?

CESAR

(Mock wounded)

I'm not man enough?

KATYA looks him over. Shrugs. CESAR
adjusts his glasses.

KATYA

(Softens)

A little bookish, maybe.

CESAR

I *am* . . .bookish. As my friend says, I haven't experienced life . . .*yet*. I'm a writer with nothing *important* to say . . .*yet*. But . . .what about you? I mean . . .if you're not really a . . .you know . . .who . . .?

KATYA

I'm Katya. I'm from the Ukraine. I used to be a dressmaker . . .maybe I will be one day . . .again . . .we'll see . . .but.

CESAR

I'm Cesar.

CESAR extends his hand again. This time
KATYA takes it and pulls him toward
IVAN who's waiting to be paid.

KATYA

I'm Katya. *Pretend* you're my client. Give four pesos to the man.

As CESAR passes IVAN, he gives him
money and follows KATYA off stage.

SCENE FIVE: KATYA'S ROOM IN THE BORDELLO - LATER

The room is sparse, but for a small bed, washstand, table, two chairs and a curtain. CESAR and KATYA sit and talk, knee to knee.

CESAR

Tell me how you got here.

KATYA

Why bore you with my stupidity?

CESAR

I *want* to know.

KATYA

My sister and I were married . . .or so we thought. But once we were on the boat to Buenos Aires, our honeymoon turned into a nightmare. It seems a lifetime ago . . .

Curtain lifts to reveal a ship's deck (as flashback).

SCENE SIX: FLASHBACK ON THE PIER, ONE MONTH EARLIER

A clarinetist moves across the set playing a Klezmer tune.

BERTE stands with GRIGOR and TATIANA at the bottom of the on-ramp as they hug MAMA and PAPA goodbye. IVAN and KATYA enter the scene, bringing their luggage.

The MATCHMAKER moves among the small crowd, waves goodbye; absently jingles her coin purse.

BERTE leads the girls onto the boat as the men take the luggage away.

TATIANA stands at the rail, breathes in the sea and grabs KATYA'S hands, excited. KATYA looks away, worried. BERTE waves to the family on deck.

We're on our way!

TATIANA

No turning back

KATYA

GRIGOR and IVAN return with a basket of fruit and a bottle of champagne.

For tonight . . . a little celebration.

GRIGOR

A honeymoon celebration!

IVAN

How *thoughtful!*

BERTE

Grabs the bottle from GRIGOR.

If only Mama could

TATIANA

GRIGOR

Yes, it's too bad.

GRIGOR wipes the rail with his
handkerchief before leaning on it.

One can't be too careful.

TATIANA
(Starry-eyed at GRIGOR)

No, I suppose not.

KATYA
Grigor, do you know that Tatiana is a wonderful cook? (To IVAN) I burn water.

IVAN
(Laughs)
Humph . . . Evidently I overpaid . . . ! But then . . . I expect you'll have other skills to
compensate, eh?

KATYA blushes and turns to TATIANA
who quickly hands KATYA an orange.

TATIANA
Katya! Look . . . an *orange*!

TATIANA clutches the orange to her nose,
smelling deeply. KATYA shoves the orange
into her pocket.

TATIANA
A ball of light.

KATYA
A taste of heaven.

IVAN
It doesn't take much to please you shtetl girls.

KATYA
That's true.

GRIGOR
When we get to Argentina, you'll have all the fruit you want.

TATIANA

TATIANA reaches out to touch GRIGOR'S arm.

You're a prince.

GRIGOR

(Smiles proudly)

Well . . .we'll see.

GRIGOR guides them to the upper deck.
KATYA and TATIANA admire the elites in their fine gowns promenading.

TATIANA

(Points)

Oh . . .Katyala! Look!

KATYA nods, wistfully.

IVAN

(To KATYA)

The Matchmaker said you're clever with a needle.

KATYA

Yes . . .I *DO* have some skills!

Ship sounds its horn.

Musical Dance Sequence.
Clarinetist strolls by, playing Klezmer.
KATYA sways with the music, lost in the rhythms.

IVAN takes KATYA into his arms, and
TATIANA pulls GRIGOR to dance.

BERTE leans against the rail, watching the dancing with contempt and amusement.
Other women are being herded and shoved onto the ship in the background as BERTE watches with contempt.

BERTE

(Derisively, to herself)

You *Polacas* are all alike. You believe the lies even when you *know* they are lies.

KATYA overhears the comment.

KATYA

(To IVAN)

What does she mean?

IVAN

(To KATYA)

Ignore her.

KATYA

But . . .

IVAN

Never *mind!*

(SONG: TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE)

THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE,
FROM TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS.
TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE
AND TWO KINDS OF RULES.
THOSE WITH MONEY, THOSE WITH NONE,
THOSE WHO LOSE AND THOSE WHO WON,
THOSE WHO PROSPER, THOSE WHO DON'T -
THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE.

GRIGOR

WHETHER BORN TO THEIR STATION -
OR BOUGHT FOR A PRICE,
THEY HAVE ALL THE RIGHT ANSWERS.
THEY DON'T HAVE TO THINK TWICE.
THEY DINE WITH THE FINEST
AND THEIR CLOTHING IS THE BEST.
THEY'RE THE RIGHT KIND OF PEOPLE -
CLEARLY BETTER THAN THE REST.

IVAN

THEY'RE THE RIGHT KIND OF PEOPLE
FROM THE RIGHT SIDE OF TOWN
IN THE RIGHT KIND OF HOUSES
WHICH THEY HAVE TO SURROUND
WITH THE RIGHT KIND OF FENCES
TO KEEP THE WRONG PEOPLE OUT.
THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE, WITHOUT ANY DOUBT.

The CHIEF OF POLICE and his aide appear on deck and beckon to GRIGOR to bring KATYA and TATIANA to him. The sound of a slow, seductive Tango gets louder.

(To KATYA and TATIANA)

The Police want to see you. Come.

KATYA

(Frightened)

Why? What did we do?

GRIGOR

Quiet! Don't keep him waiting.

TATIANA

(Frightened)

Why *us*? We've done nothing wrong!

GRIGOR

I said, be quiet!

KATYA and TATIANA are escorted to the Police. They are nervous and confused. IVAN and GRIGOR speak quietly to the CHIEF.

CHIEF

(To GRIGOR)

New *remonta*?

IVAN

Never worn.

KATYA

(To IVAN)

What does he mean?

IVAN ignores her question.

IVAN

(To POLICE CHIEF)

Twenty rubles. Each. It's a long voyage.

KATYA

(To TATIANA)

Is he talking about *us*? (TATIANA shrugs, confused)

CHIEF

I accept. I'm eager to taste this tender fruit.

CHIEF snaps his fingers at TATIANA to come forward. She hesitates, and GRIGOR pushes her into the CHIEF'S arms. The Clarinetist enters to play a Tango, starting slowly at first, and then picks up the pace and the music becomes aggressive and fast. TATIANA turns back to GRIGOR, surprised, but the CHIEF yanks her back into his arms.

TATIANA

I . . . Please, I've never . . .

CHIEF

You'll learn.

The CHIEF dances, controlling TATIANA'S moves. Her dress tears.

TATIANA

My dress!

CHIEF

You don't need it.

An AIDE grabs KATYA as she goes to help TATIANA. Music builds.

KATYA

Leave me alone!

AIDE slaps her face. TATIANA tries to go to KATYA but the CHIEF yanks her hair back to hold her in his embrace.

The music becomes more menacing, faster, and violent. The girls struggle. BERTE stands aside, laughing. IVAN watches,

serious, but doesn't move. GRIGOR turns away. He can't watch.

TATIANA

ENOUGH! STOP! GRIGOR, help me!

KATYA

(Tries to escape)

HELP! IVAN . . .HELP! Berte, make them STOP!!!

The AIDE steps on KATYA'S dress and her skirt rips.

TATIANA

STOP . . .*please!* No more! *GRIGOR!!!!!!*

The pins from TATIANA'S hair fall out and her hair is disheveled.

KATYA

I can't do this!!!!!!

KATYA stumbles and falls and tries to crawl away, but the AIDE grabs her by her hair and pulls her up.

TATIANA

Let me go! LET ME GO . . .!

GRIGOR, IVAN and BERTE slip away to leave the girls with their "dance."

The GIRLS are dragged offstage, and we hear them scream as the music fades.

KATYA and TATIANA

STOP!!!! *STOP!!!!!!!* HELP!!!!!!!!!!!!

Clarinetist returns to the stage, stopping to play a melancholy tune.

SCENE SEVEN: THE FOLLOWING MORNING

KATYA and TATIANA re-enter. Their clothes are ripped, they are disheveled and they desperately cling to each other at the rail, their shawls wrapped around their shoulders. TATIANA wants to jump overboard, but KATYA won't let her.

KATYA

KATYA notices the blood on TATIANA'S skirt. She clutches it roughly in her hand.

You'll *never* get rid of this stain.

TATIANA rushes to the rail to jump.
KATYA stops her and holds her close.

TATIANA

I can't bear the smell of my own skin! Let me go! I want to *die*! Go! Leave me!

KATYA

NO! Today is not the day to say goodbye.

**(SONG: HOW COULD I SAY
GOODBYE?)**

WE MUST SURVIVE THIS DAY.
WE'LL LEARN TO FIND OUR WAY.
WE'VE NOTHING LEFT EXCEPT EACH OTHER.
HOW COULD I SAY GOODBYE?

WHAT DO WE HAVE IF NOT EACH OTHER?
WHO WOULD I LAUGH WITH – OR CRY?
NO, I WON'T GO ON WITHOUT YOU.
HOW COULD I SAY GOODBYE?

OUR LIVES ARE STITCHED TOGETHER
LIKE A TIGHT CROCHET,
WE CAN'T UNDO IT.
NOT TOMORROW. NOT TODAY.

WHO WILL SHARE MY HOPES AND DREAMS?
WHO IS CLOSER THAN SISTERS?
ALL WE HAVE LEFT IS EACH OTHER, IT SEEMS.
HOW COULD I SAY GOODBYE?

I COULD NEVER FIND MY WAY WITHOUT YOU.
NEVER GREET EACH DAY WITHOUT YOU.
WE MADE A VOW TO LAST FOREVER.
HOW COULD I SAY GOODBYE?

TATIANA

(Spits on the ground)

How will I ever get rid of this bitter taste in my mouth?

KATYA notices the loose oranges that have fallen from the basket the night before. She picks up an orange and peels back the rind as she hands it to TATIANA.

KATYA

Tatti . . .we're like this . . .tough on the outside . . .bitter, even. But inside . . .still sweet.
(Pause) Inside, safe.

TATIANA

(Bitter)

(SONG: IT'S JUST AN ORANGE)

A BALL OF LIGHT.

KATYA

A TASTE OF HEAVEN.

TATIANA

WHAT A LUXURY!

KATYA

A SIMPLE ORANGE,
PLUCKED FROM A TREE.
ONE FOR YOU AND ONE FOR ME.

TATIANA

A SIMPLE ORANGE.
A PIECE OF FRUIT.
A LITTLE PLEASURE PRESSED INSIDE
ITS GOLDEN SUIT.

KATYA

A SIMPLE ORANGE,
PLUCKED FROM A TREE.

ONE FOR YOU AND ONE FOR ME.
IT'S JUST AN ORANGE.

KATYA

(Consoling)

A TASTE OF HEAVEN
TO GET US THROUGH THE DAY.

TATIANA

(Resigned)

IT'S JUST AN ORANGE.
A SIMPLE ORANGE.

KATYA

WE'LL DO WHAT WE MUST TO SURVIVE.

BERTE enters and finds them together.

BERTE

So . . . ladies. I assumed I'd find you eventually. Or the sharks would.

KATYA

We've no place to hide.

BERTE

Ah . . . yes. But I didn't come to exchange pleasantries. I'm here to offer you an *alternative*.

KATYA

To what? Being a prostitute?

BERTE

To being a *COMMON* prostitute.

KATYA

There's a difference?

(SONG: IN THE SHTETL)

BERTE

IN THE SHTETL THERE'S A SHTIBL
WHERE THE YIDDL COME TO MARRY OFF THEIR DAUGHTERS –
TO THE DANDIES WITH THEIR TOP HATS
AND THEIR RUBLES PLUCKED FROM PIRATING THE COFFERS
OF THE LADIES AND NOBLES WEARING DIAMONDS AND OPALS–
WHILE THEY SWAGGER AND PREEN

THEY ARE FOOLED BY OUR OFFERS.

WITH FLATTERY AND CHOCOLATE,
SILK STOCKINGS AND CHAMPAGNE –
ANY VIRGIN WITH POTENTIAL
WILL HAVE TO REGAIN
THE MONEY BACK AND PAY HER PASSAGE.
BOO HOO. . .WHAT A SHAME.

I USED TO HAVE A DREAM LIKE ALL YOU OTHERS,
I WAS A LIVING INVENTORY, TAKING LOVERS.
SO I USED MY WITS – AND FLASHED MY TITS.
THERE’S NOTHING I HAVEN’T DONE.
SO, DON’T SING THE BLUES, GIRLS,
YOU’VE NOTHING TO LOSE, GIRLS.

YOU COULD STARVE OVER THERE, IN THE STICKS,
OR THRIVE OVER HERE DOING TRICKS.
I MAY BE BAD, BUT I’M VERY GOOD.
AND I’LL TREAT YOU BETTER THAN THEY WOULD.
I’LL KEEP YOU SAFELY OFF THE STREET,
MAKE SURE THERE’S ALWAYS FOOD TO EAT.

I’M THE BEST FRIEND YOU’LL EVER KNOW . . .
unless you cross me

YOU WERE BORN A GIRL
THOUGH IT COULD BE WORSE!
IT’S A SAD, SAD TALE – A DOWNRIGHT CURSE.
BUT ALL MEN WANT IS A LITTLE PLEASURE.
A LITTLE COMFORT THEY CAN TREASURE.
IT COSTS YOU NOTHING - IT’S NOT PERVERSE.
MEN MAY HAVE THE WALLET,
BUT WOMEN HAVE THE PURSE.

(To KATYA)

You have a talent for dressmaking . . .and I need a front. If you sew for me by day, and .
. . .entertain a few customers by night . . .just to keep the mob off my back . . .nothing too
tiring, you understand . . .I’ve got plenty of others who can work the street.

(To TATIANA)

And *you* can sell. You have the personality.

Roughly squeezes TATIANA’S face in her
hand.

A pretty girl like you . . .I’ll send the . . .old goats. (To KATYA) And you . . .the babies.
Easy money.

TATIANA

(Shakes her head)

I won't do it!

BERTE steps up close to TATIANA.

BERTE

(Sarcastic)

No? You got better *prospects*? (Pause) What did we pay for you? Ten rubles? Twenty? Ladies, I tell you the truth. It's a long, long way from the *shtetl* to the city and I'm all there is between you and starvation.

BERTE grabs what's left of the orange and roughly squeezes it dry.

BERTE shoves the girls off stage as the curtain closes on the ship.

Clarinetist returns to play a more menacing tune as the lights dim on a spare stage.

SCENE EIGHT: FLASH FORWARD BACK TO KATYA'S ROOM

When the song finishes, lights up on the present, in KATYA'S room where CESAR writes furiously in his journal as KATYA finishes her story.

(SONG: WHO WANTS ME NOW?)

KATYA

So, you see . . .
WHO WANTS ME NOW?
WHO WANTS A BROKEN HORSE TO RIDE?
WHO NEEDS DISHONOR AT HIS SIDE?
WHO WANTS ME NOW?

CESAR

How many of you are in this . . . situation?

KATYA

WE'RE COMMON AS DUST.
MERE DIRT BENEATH YOUR FEET.
TABLE SCRAPS INTO THE STREET.
TO SATISFY YOUR LUST.

CESAR

How can this be? You were deceived . . . by your own kind?

KATYA

What is *my kind*, anymore?

CESAR

People need to know the truth.

KATYA stands and turns away from CESAR.

KATYA

They already *know* the truth!
OPEN YOUR EYES.
IT'S ALL AROUND YOU.
THIS VICE SURROUNDS YOU.
WHETHER TRUTH OR LIES.

WHO WANTS ME NOW?
THIS STORY'S TRUE.

IT'S NOTHING NEW.
WHO WANTS ME NOW?

CESAR

I won't use your name. I won't even use *mine*!

KATYA

What difference would that make?

CESAR

I promise to tell your story . . . a story that will shame the city . . . and buy you back your dreams.

Lights down.

SCENE NINE: BERTE'S DRESS SHOP - LATER THAT MONTH

TANGO music plays on a phonograph.
KATYA finishes a fitting for MRS.
CASTELNUOVO. TATIANA tidies up.
MRS. CASTELNUOVO dances around the
room in her new gown as KATYA and
TATIANA watch.

(SONG: THE MAGICIAN)

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Katya! I want a *closet full* of your gowns!
SUCH FINE PRECISION!
YOU'RE QUITE THE MAGICIAN!
THE MISTRESS OF VELVET AND LACE.
I'LL BE THE ENVY OF ALL,
THE BELLE OF THE BALL,
THE TALK OF THE PARTY ALL OVER THE PLACE.

KATYA

Please, Mrs. Castelnuovo . . .you flatter me!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

SUCH INSPIRATION!
I'LL BE A SENSATION!
I LOVE TO FEEL THIS GAY AND PRETTY.
AND SOON THEY'LL KNOW
HOW YOU CAN SEW!
YOU'RE THE BEST KEPT SECRET IN THE CITY.

KATYA

Thank you, Madam. You're too kind.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

THIS IS DELICIOUS!
MY FRIENDS ARE SUSPICIOUS
A WIZARD HAS MADE ME MY GOWN.
YOU'VE AN EYE FOR DESIGN.
YOUR SECRET IS MINE
UNTIL IT'S ALL OVER THE TOWN.

Your designs will completely transform the Buenos Aires fashion scene! How would you girls like to be my guest at the benefit? Carlos Gardel will perform.

TATIANA

(Thrilled)

What I'd give . . .!

KATYA

KATYA glowers at TATIANA. Shakes her head NO.

That's very generous but . . .we have so much to do . . .

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Surely you can break away for a *concert*! (Laughs) You're not *slaves*, are you?

KATYA and TATIANA exchange glances.

KATYA

You're very kind, but still . . .Berte . . .

BERTE has been listening at the door, then bursts through the front door, throws her coat on a chair, and knocks the phonograph so the needle skids across and ends the music.

Berte!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Oh. . .you startled me!

TATIANA

Berte, this is Mrs. Castelnuovo.

BERTE

How good to meet you . . .at last. That gown looks amazing on you. You should buy a dozen more! (Glowers at KATYA) But don't let me interrupt. You were saying . . .?

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

I was just telling them about the concert this weekend. It's a fundraiser. My husband is a sponsor . . .or . . .his magazine is . . .*Reviste Claridad* . . .you've read it? (No response) I could get tickets . . .for all of you . . .if you'd like to come! I could show you all off . . .introduce you to new clients.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO steps behind a screen to remove the dress and hands it to TATIANA who begins to wrap it up while KATYA puts things away for the night.

BERTE

Why haven't I heard about it . . .before now?

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

The invitation list was . . .exclusive. But you can come as my guests!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO steps out from behind the screen in her own clothes.

BERTE

That's very considerate of you to invite all of us . . .but I'm afraid there is so much work to do. So many new customers, you understand. (Pause) But I would love nothing more than to enjoy the evening as everyone admires you in your new dress! It's really quite stunning on you.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Very well. It's at 8 at Teatro Colon. But if you change your mind, about the girls . . .

MRS. CASTELNUOVO gathers her gown and leaves. BERTE roughly pulls the CLOSED sign down in the window.

BERTE

Angry, BERTE confronts KATYA and backs her into a corner.

(SONG: continued – THE MAGICIAN)

AREN'T YOU QUITE THE CHARMER–
A VERITABLE DISARMER
CLIMBING THE WALLS OF SOCIETY, AS YOU DO.
YOU'RE SO CLEVER WITH THE NEEDLE
YOU NEEDN'T HAVE TO WHEEL
INVITATIONS TO THE PLACES THAT I'M NOT INVITED TO.

INDEED, YOU'RE QUITE THE MAGICIAN!
YOU'VE NO COMPETITION.
SEEMS OUR LITTLE PLAN IS WORKING LIKE A CHARM.
BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE.
WHAT I MAKE I CAN BREAK.
BUT FOR NOW, I DON'T SEE THE HARM.

KATYA

You were invited.

BERTE

Yes . . .well . . . as an *afterthought*. Don't think that because you make dresses for the ladies that you *are* one. And if they ever discover your other duties, maybe they won't be so eager to include you. Don't forget . . .this is *MY* shop! (Pause)

Now . . .we mustn't neglect our *other* business, either . . .later this evening . . .after *Havdala*. See to it you're home in time to entertain them.

TATIANA

(Wryly)

How *thoughtful* of them to wait until after the Sabbath.

BERTE

They take their religion *very seriously*. (To TATIANA) Marchik . . .the Boss . . .is coming. *Charm* him. Convince him he's still up to it. (To KATYA) And for *you* . . .a *special* prize tonight . . .a *bar mitzvah* boy! Give him a Mazel Tov and five minutes . . .and you can go about your business. (Pause) Now . . .don't I look after you girls?

KATYA

But I'm better at *this*.

BERTE

You mean, you're *better* than this . . .right? Is that the thanks I get for being so generous to you?

KATYA

I didn't mean . . .

BERTE

I've heard enough. Now go prepare yourselves for your *next* clients while I'm in such a good mood.

BERTE examines one of KATYA'S dresses, and rips the shoulder off. KATYA and TATIANA are speechless as BERTE exits.

SCENE TEN: KATYA AND CESAR, IN HER ROOM, DIFFERENT DAY.

CESAR is excited to share one of his poems
with KATYA. They sit, knee to knee.
KATYA holds his hand.

CESAR

I wrote a poem . . .for you . . .

KATYA pulls her hand away, confused.

KATYA

Why must you do it?

CESAR

It's what I do . . . It's what I *have* to do! Don't you want to hear it?

KATYA

Let me try to read it. You help me, eh?

CESAR leans over to share it with KATYA
and together, they take turns reading it
aloud.

CESAR

*The street is like a felon's grasp . . .
reaching out in the dark,*

KATYA

As . . .though . . .blind –

CESAR

Good! A cunning grip . . .that with one hand drags us . . .

KATYA

Down . . .down . . . into the . . .what's this word?

CESAR

Abyss . . .into the abyss.

KATYA

What's . . .abyss?

CESAR

A big dark hole you can never get out of.

KATYA

Abyss. Yes. That's what this is. Let's go on.

CESAR

And pretends, with the other,

KATYA

To . . . paint a . . . joyous . . . sky.

CESAR smiles and takes her face in his hands.

CESAR

Good! Very good! I call it *La Calle*. The Street. I'm going to send it to a magazine. Maybe they'll publish it!

KATYA

You're an old soul to see the devil in the smile.

KATYA moves away from CESAR.

But . . . you're not supposed to be here just for poetry . . . or to teach me to read.

CESAR

What does it matter what I pay for?

KATYA

Don't be sentimental.

CESAR takes her hand and holds it to his chest. KATYA pulls it away.

KATYA

One day your innocence will be gone, like mine . . . and then . . . but never mind. Let's dance, eh?

KATYA goes to a phonograph player and plays a Tango. KATYA beckons CESAR to step into her arms and she moves to position the two of them to dance. CESAR stands close and lets KATYA position his hands around her body. The music quiets down as KATYA begins to teach.

That's right. Good.

CESAR

I'll be your clay . . . mold me.

At first, CESAR stumbles as KATYA shows him certain moves but is an expert dancer by the end of the lesson.

KATYA

Can you just *dance*?

CESAR

You bend like a branch on an autumn day.

KATYA

Always the poet! Concentrate!

CESAR

I feel the power in your touch.

KATYA

Words . . . words . . . words! (They dance) Move with me. Move with me.

CESAR

The scent of you fills my every breath.

KATYA

Pay attention! Poetry is for later. For now . . . just feel the rhythm of Tango.

CESAR

Tango . . . in the longing, belonging . . . to the music.

KATYA

Move with me. Feel with your heart . . . it's a start.

END ACT I

ACT II

SCENE ONE: LA BOCA - "STREET" HUSTLERS OUTSIDE BORDELLO

IVAN and GRIGOR lean against the wall, in the center of the two scenes, smoking, taking the clients' money, and directing them to the girls. BERTE walks around, surveying the scene, playing MADAM.

CESAR and MANUEL stroll over to the other side, "B", where the pimps and whores are hustling "johns."

(SONG: THE PERFECT GIRL)

GRIGOR

(To MANUEL)

CAN YOU REMEMBER WHEN?
FIVE PESOS AND YOU CAN, AGAIN.
I'VE GOT THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.

ALL ALONE IN HER ROOM,
YOU CAN BREATHE HER PERFUME,
I'VE GOT THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.

MANUEL leaves CESAR to go with one of the prostitutes.

While the other customers wait their turns with the girls, they pass the time dancing Tango together.

IVAN

TODAY YOU'RE A BOY,
BUT SHE'LL FILL YOUR HEART WITH JOY.
I'VE GOT THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.
THOUGH YOU'RE JUST A LITTLE SINNER
YOU'LL BE HOME IN TIME FOR DINNER.
I'VE GOT THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.

BERTE

GENTLY CARESS HER
AND SOON YOU'LL POSSESS HER.
I'VE GOT THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.
FROM A MASTER OF DECEPTION,

GET A WARM RECEPTION,
I'VE GOT THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.

PROSTITUTE 1

I'M THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.
YOU CAN HUNGER FOR MY CHARMS –
AND DIE IN MY ARMS . . .

PROSTITUTE 2

I'LL TRY TO IMPRESS YOU . . .
CARESS AND UNDRRESS YOU

PROSTITUTE 1

IN ONE NIGHT OF SURRENDER,
MY KISSES YOU'LL REMEMBER.

PROSTITUTE 2

FOR AN HOUR OR A NIGHT
I'LL DO NOTHING BUT DELIGHT.

PROSTITUTE 1

IF IT'S TENDERNESS YOU SEEK
I'LL BE KIND.

PROSTITUTE 2

IF IT'S DANGER YOU DESIRE,
I'LL BE WILD.

PROSTITUTE 1

I'M EVERYBODY'S DREAM.

PROSTITUTE 2

TO SATISFY THAT GLEAM
IN YOUR EYE . . .

PROSTITUTES (BOTH)

I'M THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.

GRIGOR

FOR A FEW PESOS MORE,
WE'LL OPEN THE DOOR,
TO A LITTLE BIT OF PLEASURE,
A MEMORY YOU'LL TREASURE.

BERTE

THEY WILL QUENCH YOUR THIRST . . .

MAKE YOU FEEL YOU'RE THE FIRS!
I'VE GOT THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.

ALL

WE'VE GOT THE PERFECT—
GOT THE PERFECT—
WE'VE GOT THE PERFECT GIRL FOR YOU.

CESAR sees KATYA, hands IVAN some
money and goes to her. They exit together.

Lights down.

SCENE TWO: INTERIOR, THE EDITORIAL OFFICE OF ELIAS CASTELNUOVO

CASTELNUOVO impatiently sorts through a pile of literary submissions – articles, essays and poems – picking them up, reading, and tossing them aside. MRS. CASTELNUOVO tries to tidy up the mess.

CASTELNUOVO

Amateurs! Poseurs! Everyday, the same as before. These poems bore me! These articles are tedious! Politics! Conspiracies! (Reads) The communists hate the military (tosses a poem) . . . (reads) the military hate the anarchists (tosses another poem) . . . (reads) the Catholics hate the Russians (tosses another) . . . (reads) and everyone hates the Jews (wads all of them up and throws them aside). Not a fresh poem in the lot of them!

Throws up his hands in despair. MRS. CASTELNUOVO scurries to stack the submissions carefully in a pile.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Perhaps you're too critical, dear. Let me get you some tea.

CASTELNUOVO picks through the papers, annoyed, and dismisses her offer with a wave of his hand.

CASTELNUOVO

Never mind. (Pause) So many hopefuls . . . so little talent.

CASTELNUOVO pauses, and concentrates on a submission.

Hmmm . . . !

CASTELNUOVO forages through the rest of the submissions. MRS. CASTELNUOVO picks up the submission he was just reading, and reads.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

(She's touched)

It's sad. Such . . . resignation. Such sorrow. (Pause) Lovely writing though.

CASTELNUOVO finds another submission and reads it quickly.

(SONG: FINALLY A VOICE)

CASTELNUOVO

SHE SAYS HER NAME IS CLARA BETER.
A WOMAN . . . A JEWESS! A . . . POLACA?
AN HONEST POEM . . . CLEARLY BETTER
THAN THE REST.

CASTELNUOVO finds another and reads.

FINALLY, AMIDST THE CHATTER
COMES A VOICE THAT SEEMS TO MATTER—
A VOICE TO PIERCE MY HEART!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

She says,
“IT’S WHAT I AM . . . DON’T PITY ME.”
IT’S NOT A PLEA FOR SYMPATHY.
HER VOICE IS LIKE A BIRD,
A SIMPLE MESSAGE TO BE HEARD.
A VOICE TO PIERCE MY HEART!

CASTELNUOVO

(Reads)

Listen . . .
“DON’T KISS MY HANDS, LITTLE SISTER –
THESE HANDS, SOILED BY SIN HAVE FELT TOO MUCH –
HANDS THAT KNOW EVERY IMPURE TOUCH.”

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

THERE’S NO SIGHING AND NO SHAMING
NO BITTERNESS . . . NO BLAMING,

CASTELNUOVO

(Reads)

“THESE HANDS PICK MONEY FROM THE DIRT
TO BUY YOUR BREAD, YOUR SLUMBER, YOUR JOY.
BUT . . . LITTLE SISTER . . . YOUR LIPS
MUST NEVER TOUCH THE HANDS OF A PROSTITUTE.”

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Where is she from?

CASTELNUOVO

Who can she be?

BOTH

FINALLY, A VOICE.
FINALLY, A CHOICE.
FINALLY A VOICE TO PIERCE MY HEART.

CASTELNUOVO finds another and reads.
Jumps up.

CASTELNUOVO

Call the typesetter! Tell him I have something new for this issue!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

But dear, it's already gone to press!

CASTELNUOVO

Then . . .send fifty pesos to . . .this address . . .with a note that I want to see everything she's written. *Everything!*

Lights down.

SCENE THREE: A MONTH LATER, INSIDE CAFÉ TORTONI

MANUEL sits at a café table, sipping coffee, brooding, reading the literary magazine, *Reviste Claridad*. CESAR enters and cheerfully joins him. Assorted people are reading the magazine, nodding, shaking their heads, deep in thought.

CESAR

Reading anything interesting?

MANUEL gives CESAR a look like it's a dumb question. He's reading now. Motions to all the others reading too. CESAR looks around. MANUEL puts down the magazine.

MANUEL

Who is this Clara Beter? (CESAR shrugs) Castelnuovo practically gushes with praise for her poetry. I must admit . . . it's good. Fresh. But he's *never* said anything like this about my work. Dammit! She's good!

CESAR

Jealous?

MANUEL

MANUEL nods and tosses CESAR the magazine.

Read this! You might learn something.

CESAR

(Laughs)

Do you think so?

MANUEL

It's good. You can always learn . . .

CESAR

Good advice. But now, I've got to go.

CESAR pays for his coffee and a poem falls from his pocket. MANUEL picks it up, reads and looks surprised, as CESAR leaves.

Lights down.

SCENE FOUR: LA BOCA – STREET, INSIDE KATYA’S ROOM

KATYA and CESAR hold hands as she brings CESAR into her room. They briefly hug. He’s excited.

KATYA quickly peeks out the curtain. She points to the clock and then sits down facing CESAR, knee to knee.

CESAR

Another poem was published today! Look!

CESAR hands her the magazine and some money. KATYA puts the money in a jar and pours CESAR a cup of tea before sitting down to read the magazine.

KATYA

Which one?

CESAR points to the poem and starts to read. KATYA leans over to follow along. Their heads almost touch as CESAR reads the poem and looks at her expectantly.

CESAR

*“Don’t kiss my hands, little sister –
These hands, soiled by sin and suffering”*

KATYA

(Shrugs, smiles)

I know the one.

KATYA stands as though she would like to kiss CESAR, but turns away instead. She goes over to a dress on a hanger and starts fiddling with articles of clothing to drape on it, distracted: a hat, a scarf, a shawl – putting them on, taking them off, tossing them aside.

CESAR

*“These hands pick money from the dirt
To buy your bread, your slumber, your joy.
But . . . little sister . . .”*

As CESAR reads the poem, he is unaware of KATYA'S discomfort. She stops to listen, looks at her own hands and quickly puts them in her pockets.

KATYA

(Ashamed)
Good for you. Congratulations!

CESAR

I could never have done this without you.

KATYA

No. You're a good writer. But what am I? What have I become? I'm . . .nothing.

CESAR sees she's hurt and kneels down at her knees, looking into her face.

(SONG: SOMETHING IN YOU)

CESAR

You're everything . . .to me.

SOMETHING IN YOU SPEAKS TO ME,
TOUCHES MY HEART, MAKE'S ME SEE
THAT I AM . . .

SOMETHING IN YOU SEES SOMETHING IN ME.
BUT FOR YOU, I'D NEVER BE
MORE THAN I AM.

SOMETHING IN YOU MAKES ME SEE
THERE IS MORE TO THIS LIFE
AND MORE TO ME.

SOMETHING IN YOU REACHES OUT TO ME,
TOUCHES MY HEART, AND MAKES ME SEE,
YOU'RE EVERYTHING TO ME.

KATYA

GO ON, AND WRITE ABOUT ME –
JUST . . .DON'T GO ON WITHOUT ME.
YOUR TENDER WORDS HAVE TRULY CHANGED MY LIFE.
I'M YOUR MUSE. YOU'RE MY FRIEND.
PLEASE, DON'T LET THIS END.

CESAR resumes his writing and doesn't really hear her last line.

YOU'RE EVERYTHING TO ME.
CESAR

YOU'RE EVERYTHING TO ME.
If never . . .(whispers) your wife.
KATYA

KATYA stands to get CESAR some tea.
CESAR reaches into his satchel and pulls out a sheaf of poems he's written, notices KATYA is sad.

What's wrong?
CESAR

To you it's poetry. To me it's a nightmare.
KATYA

CESAR rips the paper from the tablet just as IVAN knocks on door. KATYA is frightened.

Go now.
KATYA

CESAR gathers his papers into his satchel. As he leaves, he rushes past IVAN but bumps into MANUEL who takes him by the arm and sits him down at a table outside Katya's room.

MANUEL
You spend a lot of time here . . .with Katya. I had no idea!

CESAR
You wanted me to be with a woman. So I am! Besides . . .I pay my way.

MANUEL
And you pay very well from what I hear. You can afford it. But . . . (Looks in IVAN'S direction) some people are . . .concerned you're getting a little too . . .attached. A nice

boy like you . . . a man of means . . . shouldn't get too attached . . . if you know what I mean.

Pulls a chair out and sits down. Motions for CESAR to sit as well, and he does.

You shouldn't get hurt.

CESAR

She's my *friend*!

MANUEL

Around here . . . she's *property*. And *friends* can cause problems. Listen *boychik* . . . I've known you since you were born. We're like family. But some people might think you'll give Katya ideas.

CESAR

Wait a minute . . . !

MANUEL

(Interrupts)

I know about these things. Maybe you should just be a *customer*. (Leans close) It's enough that Berte lets Katya make her little dresses. It makes Berte feel like she's sort of respectable . . . got a legit business . . . you know. But . . . a little freedom for Katya . . . and her sister . . . and there could be trouble . . . *Farstayst?*

CESAR gets up to leave. MANUEL stops him. CESAR pulls his arm away.

I don't want to be sitting *Shiva* for you. (Pause) I won't always be here to protect you.

CESAR

Since when do I need your protection?

MANUEL

Nods his head in IVAN'S direction.

You're not from this side of La Boca, so it's natural you wouldn't know. As I said, you've lived a sheltered life. But even if you're not afraid, maybe you should think of your . . . *friend*. Maybe it's not your safety I'm worried about.

MANUEL pulls one of CESAR'S poems from his pocket and slides it toward CESAR.

The Zwi Migdal is looking for a prostitute named Clara Beter! (Nods to IVAN) They're going door to door.

CESAR

What's that got to do with me?

MANUEL

This fell out of your bag at the Cafe . . .and I sort of put things together. Two and two. *Farstaysf?* Some people . . .some *powerful* people are getting nervous. If the Zwi Migdal finds out Katya is your . . .inspiration . . .(shrugs). It's bad for business! Their kind prefers to live in the shadows . . .and your poems shed too much light.

CESAR

I never thought . . .

MANUEL

Of course you never thought . . . But maybe you should start thinking *now*. I wanted you to get a little . . .experience . . .but not get *killed!*

CESAR

I must go.

CESAR rushes out.

SCENE FIVE: OUTSIDE CAFÉ TORTONI – LATER, SAME DAY.

GRIGOR dusts off imaginary lint, preens;
IVAN wipes at coffee he spilled on his shirt.
They sit outside watching the action.
GRIGOR is preoccupied with his
appearance; looks at his cuffs.

GRIGOR

Too much starch this time.

IVAN

We've got bigger problems than your wardrobe.

GRIGOR

It wouldn't hurt to pay a *little* more attention to *yours*.

IVAN

Berte's nervous about this . . . *Polaca* everyone's talking about . . . Clara.

GRIGOR

GRIGOR lifts a silver mug to admire his
reflection in the shine.

So she's nervous.

IVAN

Stops GRIGOR'S preening; pushes down
the mug.

Listen, you peacock . . . quit playing games. Can't you feel it? The Police are worried.
Trouble is brewing with some of these girls.

GRIGOR

All the more reason to sit this one out. Our days are numbered – you know it's true. We
need to save our own skins.

IVAN leans over the table and grabs
GRIGOR'S lapels, pulling him into the
table. The coffee spills onto his sleeve.

IVAN

This is our job!

GRIGOR

Today.

IVAN shoves GRIGOR away. GRIGOR
straightens his jacket and tie.

IVAN

Yes . . .today. What else do we got?

GRIGOR

Maybe it's time we think of going legit. You said yourself, trouble is brewing.

IVAN

Get off your ass. We'll pay a visit to the magazine that's printing those poems . . .and
find out what they know.

GRIGOR points to the coffee stain on his
cuffs.

GRIGOR

I need to change my shirt.

IVAN

Who are you trying to impress?

GRIGOR

It doesn't hurt to look like a gentleman.

IVAN

You're a pimp.

GRIGOR

Today. But you'll *always* be a punk.

IVAN starts to hit. GRIGOR stands up to
him. IVAN backs away.

GRIGOR

You're a fool to threaten me for a few pesos.

IVAN

You underestimate me. I'd do it for nothin' . . .

They leave the Café, but not together.

SCENE SIX: OUTSIDE BERTE'S DRESS SALON – SAME DAY

KATYA and TATIANA enter, bringing some new fabric to the shop. KATYA carries a large package under her arm and sets it on the steps of the shop. KATYA stares up at *BERTE'S* sign.

Unseen by the Girls, IVAN hides to listen.

(SONG: TO GET AWAY)

KATYA

We do all the work but it's her name above the door.

TATIANA

SHE PAYS THE RENT.
IT'S HER NAME ABOVE THE DOOR.

KATYA

THE DAY IS SPENT
AND YET, SHE STILL WANTS MORE.

TATIANA

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK WE'LL EVER GET AWAY?

KATYA

I'VE BEEN SAVING FOR THIS DAY.

TATIANA

Do you think we'll just say *please*, and Berte will let us walk out the door?

Frightened, TATIANA grabs KATYA and pulls her closer.

KATYA

KATYA steps free of TATIANA'S grip.
Hands her the bundle she's been carrying.

She doesn't want a scandal. Open it.

TATIANA tears off the paper, revealing a sign that says, *KATYA'S*. TATIANA tries to hide it in her skirt but it's too big. She turns it face down on the ground.

TATIANA

You're asking to be killed!

KATYA picks up the sign to admire it.

KATYA

EVERY DAY THAT'S NOT MY OWN
IS RANSOMED FOR ANOTHER.
EVERY DAY THAT'S NOT MY OWN
IS JUST LIKE ANY OTHER.

THERE WILL NEVER BE A PERFECT MOMENT -
A TIME TO GET AWAY.
LIVING LIES, A PERFECT TORMENT
THAT WILL KILL US IF WE STAY.

TATIANA

But how?

KATYA

I have money for both of us. From Cesar.

TATIANA

Cesar will sit *shiva* for you! We belong to Berte.

KATYA

THE MORE WE KNOW,
THE LESS WE OWE TO OTHERS.
WE CAN READ,
AND LEAVE THIS LIFE BEHIND.
IT'S OUR WAY OUT.
IT'S TIME TO TAKE OUR FREEDOM
IT'S OUR WAY OUT,
TO LEAVE THIS LIFE BEHIND.

TATIANA

Wrings her hands, and paces.

This is my fault . . . I should never have been so impulsive. I curse the day I flirted with GRIGOR!

KATYA

Hugs TATIANA back, then pushes her
away.

What choices did we have? To stay and be killed in the next Pogrom? To starve to death slowly . . .like the others? At least here we've found a friend . . .in Cesar. And customers . . .who buy the dresses we make. At least now . . .we can be something more. Cesar says . . .

TATIANA

Why should Cesar care what happens to us?

KATYA

He thinks he owes me.

TATIANA

He paid for every visit . . .in advance . . .to be . . .*with* you.

KATYA

No. Not for that. It's *never* been like that. It's for my help with the poems.

TATIANA

What poems? What are you talking about?

KATYA

When he comes to me, we just talk. And dance. And he writes poems about what it's like to be . . .us . . .you and me. But he writes them under a different name . . .and the money he earns he gives to me.

TATIANA

What name?

KATYA

Clara Beter.

TATIANA

Clara Beter? Oh God . . .Katyala . . .everyone is looking for her! Haven't *you* heard?

IVAN steps out of the shadows and approaches KATYA in a threatening way. She backs up into TATIANA.

IVAN

And here I thought you had some special *magic* under your skirt that kept your lover coming back for more.

IVAN gestures lewdly.

KATYA

Of course, *you* would think that.

TATIANA steps in front of KATYA to protect her.

TATIANA

It's *Cesar's* fault! He used her! She didn't know what she was doing!

IVAN

So he did . . .but not the way we *thought* . . .eh, Katyala? Still . . .money's money isn't it.

KATYA steps out from behind TATIANA and pushes her away to confront IVAN.

KATYA

(To TATIANA)

Don't blame him. He's just a poet.

(To IVAN)

Why do you care what he pays me for? You've gotten rich off of him, haven't you? Haven't *all* of you?

IVAN closes in on her. Gets more threatening until he's practically whispering into her ear, mocking.

IVAN

Maybe you've gotten even richer, eh? Won't Berte be interested to see what you've become, eh? A *dressmaker* . . .an *inspiration* . . .and now . . .*what?* A *shopkeeper!* Such ambition! You girls really think you're something, *don't* you?

IVAN grabs the sign. KATYA tries to take it away from IVAN, but he pushes her away. She stops, defiant.

KATYA

Yes, we *do!* And you don't scare us anymore. We're *more* than this *fear* . . .more than this life you deceived us into. *WE* refuse to cower . . . afraid . . .any more. Yes. *WE* are something and we're no longer *afraid*.

TATIANA

(To IVAN)

She doesn't mean that. (To KATYA) Be *quiet!*

KATYA

NO! I *won't* be quiet. I *DO* mean it! Cesar helped me find my courage . . .my voice . . .through his. And I'm not giving it up. I can't. And neither can you, Tatti, even if I have to be strong for the both of us.

TATIANA

(To IVAN)

She doesn't know what she's saying!

KATYA

I mean every word! Cesar's poems changed my life. People are reading . . . paying attention . . . They . . . *care*.

TATIANA

(Apologetically, to IVAN)

Would you listen to her?

(Cautiously, to KATYA)

No one *cares*, Katya. We're on our *own*!

IVAN

You should listen to your sister. She's right. No one cares. You're just prostitutes.

KATYA

No. We're *not*. You may have forced us into this, but it's not who we are. Not who we'll be . . . not anymore.

IVAN

Berte will be thrilled to know it.

TATIANA

(To KATYA)

Cesar used you!

(To IVAN)

Don't you see? It's not her fault!

KATYA

(To TATIANA)

Stop it, Tatti! Don't blame Cesar! He gave me back my life and I intend to keep it! And I'm fighting for yours, too! Don't you see?

IVAN turns to leave, with the sign.

TATIANA rushes after him, grabs his arm.

TATIANA

Wait . . . Ivan . . . please don't . . . !

IVAN pulls away, exits, taking the sign with him. KATYA looks off, defiant. TATIANA is upset, frightened.

Why did you provoke him? Now, Berte will . . .

KATYA

Will what? Kill us? I doubt it. She can't afford a scandal. What are two whores to her when she has a legitimate business to run? You blame Cesar for filling my thoughts with possibility . . .but I *bless* him for it! With every poem, every visit, I know we can *never* let the Berte's of the world use us again. Today . . .*TODAY* . . .I declare us . . .*free*.

(SONG: A TREE-LINED STREET)

A TREE-LINED STREET,
A QUIET LITTLE STREET
WITH A RED BRICK HOUSE AND A CHIMNEY.
A LITTLE CHILD PLAYS,
ANOTHER ONE PRAYS
ON A DAY AS BRIGHT AS A PENNY.
AN AUTUMN BREEZE
ON AN AUTUMN DAY
AND A SMALL VOICE CALLS FOR HER MAMA.
IS IT TIME TO COME IN?
IS IT TIME TO BEGIN
TELLING ME ALL THAT SHE SAW?

TATIANA

I CAN SEE HER FACE IN THE CLOUDS.
AND HEAR HER VOICE IN THE AIR.
I CAN SPOT HER SMILE IN THE CROWD
AND FEEL HER TOUCHING MY HAIR.

I WILL ALWAYS SMILE WHEN SHE'S LAUGHING.
I WILL ALWAYS CRY WHEN SHE'S SAD.
I WILL ALWAYS FEEL HER HEART SINGING,
WHETHER IN GOOD TIMES . . .OR BAD.

KATYA

SHE WILL LOOK LIKE ME,
SHE WILL LOOK THE SAME
WITH A SHOCK OF RED HAIR ON HER HEAD.
SHE'S A PRETTY LITTLE GIRL,
A FREE LITTLE GIRL
WHO WILL LIVE A LIFE WITHOUT DREAD.

The Girls enter the Shop. Lights down.

SCENE SEVEN: CASTELNUOVO'S OFFICE – LATER THAT DAY

CESAR barges into the reception area at the office of ELIAS CASTELNUOVO, startling MRS. CASTELNUOVO.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Oh! You startled me!

CESAR

I'm sorry. But it's urgent that I speak to Mr. Castelnovo.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Is he expecting you?

CESAR

No. But it's urgent I speak with him. Please.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Your name?

CESAR

Cesar.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Just a moment. Let me see if . . .

Impatient, CESAR brushes by her into CASTELNUOVO'S personal office. MRS. CASTELNUOVO runs after him.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

I'm sorry dear, but . . .

CASTELNUOVO looks up. MRS. CASTELNUOVO remains quietly by the door.

CASTELNUOVO

Do I know you?

CESAR

You know my poems. I'm Clara Beter.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

You . . .? But you're . . .

CASTELNUOVO stares at CESAR for a long moment; leans back in his chair; folds his arms across his chest. MRS. CASTELNUOVO comes around to CASTELNUOVO'S side.

CASTELNUOVO

Why should we believe you?

CESAR

Because I have more . . .if you still want to publish them.

CESAR pulls new poems out of his satchel. CASTELNUOVO takes them to read.

CASTELNUOVO

Yes . . .I see these are the voice of Clara. Simple but compelling. (Sizes CESAR up) Frankly, I'm curious how such a young man could write these. You had us convinced these were true . . .that Clara was real.

CESAR

I'm sorry, but . . .Clara Beter is a *fiction* . . .a name I invented to tell the *Polacas'* stories.

CASTELNUOVO nods. Points to a pile of letters on his desk.

CASTELNUOVO

Your Clara may be a fiction, but our readers love her. We've gotten letters from people wanting to save her. (Pause) In all my years of publishing this magazine, I've seen nothing like it. You've made people *feel* something. That's powerful writing, son.

CESAR

No one would take them seriously if they knew *I* wrote them.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

And you're so *young* . . .to be so familiar with . . .that *life* . . . You had us fooled.

(SONG: THE TRUTH IS BURIED IN THE LIE)

CESAR

IT WAS THE TRUTH I SOUGHT.
IT WAS THE TRUTH, I THOUGHT.
I DIDN'T MEAN TO LIE.

CASTELNUOVO

Picks up a poem and reads.

You're quite convincing though. Like this simple one . . .

*I give myself to everyone
But belong to no one.*

CESAR

SHE SAYS I GIVE HER HOPE.
ONE POEM AT A TIME
REDEEMS HER STOLEN LIFE.
IT WAS THE TRUTH I SOUGHT.
IT WAS THE TRUTH, I THOUGHT.
THE TRUTH IS BURIED IN THE LIE.

CASTELNUOVO

(Reads)

*I want to open my heart –change my life.
My poems speak a truth I can't deny.*

CESAR

I'VE NO REGRETS,
UNTIL TODAY.
IT'S HOW SHE LET ME KNOW HER . . .
IT WAS THE ONLY WAY.
IT WAS THE TRUTH I SOUGHT.
IT WAS THE TRUTH, I THOUGHT–
THE TRUTH IS BURIED IN THE LIE.

MRS. CASTENUOVO

How old are you?

CESAR

Eighteen.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

So young! But how . . .?

CASTELNUOVO leans forward. Steeples
his fingers. Ponders.

CASTENUOVO

Important people are asking, “*Who is Clara Beter? Where can I find Clara Beter?*” Frankly, son . . .the mystery’s added to her appeal. Subscriptions are up! The novelty of *your* story makes this even *more* lucrative.

CESAR

I know this hoax is embarrassing to you . . .and your readers . . .but . . .please, I beg you . . .tell them there *is* no Clara Beter or an innocent woman will be hurt!

CASTELNUOVO

You mean an innocent *prostitute*?

CESAR

That’s not who she really is.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

But . . .*how* can we help you?

CASTELNUOVO

A better question is . . .*why* should we help you?

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Elias!

CASTELNUOVO turns to his wife in mock confusion; throws up his hands.

CASTELNUOVO

But what can *we* do?

CESAR

Publish the truth. (Pause) Reveal that *I* am the prostitute.

CASTELNUOVO indicates all the fan letters on the desk, pondering, then brightening.

CASTELNUOVO

Scandal is the heartbeat of the city. Soon, everyone will be talking about your clever ruse.

CASTELNUOVO gets up to pace around the desk, and stands looking out the window. Turns to face CESAR.

What’s her name?

CESAR is silent.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Elias, stop playing cat and mouse! It's clear he's trying to protect her.

CASTELNUOVO shrugs. Sits back down at his desk.

CASTELNUOVO

I can't do anything until the next issue comes out.

CESAR

(Frantic)

But that's too late! We need to help her now!

CASTELNUOVO talks to himself, thinking of solutions, and opportunities.

CASTELNUOVO

I suppose . . .there *could* be a *special* edition! This could be an interesting *development*! Sales could *double*!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

(To CASTELNUOVO)

Honestly dear! This boy needs our help! (To CESAR) Does she need a place to hide?

CASTELNUOVO

Now see here . . .we're not running a boarding house!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Oh Elias . . .don't be so . . .*tedious*. If we ignore this, we're as bad as everyone else.

(To CESAR)

I'm sure we could make her comfortable for a few weeks.

(To CASTELNUOVO)

We *must* help her. We *WILL* help her!

CASTELNUOVO

This is preposterous! We shouldn't get *involved*. It's enough that I'll consider a special edition!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

We're *already* involved, dear. Your magazine's been raving about the plight of poor Clara. "*Who's to help the desperate girl? How can we turn our backs on this blight on our city?*" Now's the chance to do something about it . . .to put our *own* words to *action*. (To CESAR) Bring your friend to us. (Pause)

CESAR nods and rushes to kiss her hands.

CESAR

How can I thank you? But . . .Katya has a sister, too . . . and . . .

CESAR stops mid-sentence, alarmed at
MRS. CASTELNUOVO'S realization.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Katya? (Pause) Is her sister . . .Tatiana . . .?

CESAR hangs his head, nods.

MRS. CASTELNOVO sits down, confused.

The dressmakers? (Pause) I just saw them . . . I invited them to join us for the concert . .
.though they declined, or rather . . .Berte refused. (Pause) I just don't know what to say . .
.. I had no idea!

(To CASTELNUOVO)

How blind I've been!

CESAR

Berte *owns* them.

CASTELNUOVO

Berte . . .the Millionaire?

CESAR nods.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

I'm supposed to pick up my new gown . . .

Distracted, turns to CESAR.

Are you in love with her?

CESAR

(Pensive)

Love her? I haven't given that much thought . . .

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

It doesn't matter. Elias . . .these girls need our help.

CESAR

(To himself)

Love her?

The conversation between the
CASTELNUOVO'S goes on without
CESAR, as he is lost in thought.

**(SONG: I NEVER THINK ABOUT
HER)**

I NEVER THINK ABOUT HER MUCH.
JUST ONCE OR TWICE.
I HAVEN'T GIVEN HER MUCH THOUGHT.
JUST EVERYDAY. DOES THAT SUFFICE?

IT'S ONLY WHEN THE SUN SHINES
I SEE HER FACE.
AND IN THE SHADOWS,
THERE'S STILL A TRACE.

SHE DOESN'T REALLY CROSS MY MIND.
THERE ARE MORE PRESSING THINGS.
I'M SURE.
EXCEPT . . . THE PLEASURE
THAT SHE BRINGS.

SHE LIVES INSIDE MY SOUL,
THOUGH I'VE NEVER KISSED HER FACE.
I'VE HELD HER IN MY ARMS –
THE TANGO, OUR EMBRACE.
SHE'S LYRICS TO MY PROSE.
HER VOICE GUIDES MY PEN.
SHE.GIVES ME LIFE.
BUT THEN . . .
I NEVER THINK ABOUT HER MUCH.

CASTELNUOVO

This is too *dangerous*!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

I've never known you to be a coward, Elias, and you're not going to start now.

There is loud banging on the door. GRIGOR
blusters his way in, exaggerated, as if
showing off for IVAN. IVAN listens at the
door, arms folded.

CASTELNUOVO

What's the meaning of this?

GRIGOR

You have information we want . . . about a certain . . . *Polaca*.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO steps forward,
unafraid.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

Polaca?

CESAR

He means, Clara Beter.

GRIGOR

Appraises CESAR, slaps him on the
shoulder.

Smart boy. Yes . . . Clara Beter. Who doesn't exist . . . unless she does, eh? Perhaps it's
true . . . in every man beats a secret desire to redeem the prostitute.

CESAR

That's my business.

GRIGOR

Don't be stupid. Buenos Aires is a small town. Sooner or later, your business is
everybody's business. There's *too much* talk on the Street . . . too much attention.

GRIGOR inches closer to CESAR.

Consider this a friendly warning. Maybe people are getting tired of reading about the
Polacas, eh? As I said . . . too much attention is bad for business.

CESAR

Does Berte know?

GRIGOR

Berte knows *everything*. Including your friend's plan to quit. Berte isn't happy.

CESAR

Katya's in danger! I must go!

CESAR rushes out.

GRIGOR

(To IVAN)

No need for you to stay. I'll follow him and catch up with you later!

GRIGOR exits one way, IVAN the other.

SCENE EIGHT: INTERIOR OF BERTE'S SHOP – LATE THAT AFTERNOON

TATIANA stocks shelves with bolts of cloth. They are moving slowly, sadly. Katya is at her sewing machine, and looks around at the shop.

KATYA

It's strange, but even though this room is so small, I feel like this is the only place where my life feels big. And safe . . .surrounded by what I love.

TATIANA

So why would you risk it all?

KATYA

Because I'll never really feel safe until it's my own Shop. This is my world, Tatti. (Points to dresses) These are my friends. My children. My . . .hope. But more than that . . .they are our freedom. Please understand.

GRIGOR enters, breathless, and locks the door. KATYA stands up, frightened.

TATIANA

Why are you here?

GRIGOR

You need to leave!

KATYA

And go where? Customers are coming to get their gowns for the gala!

GRIGOR

Berte's on her way . . . (Turns to KATYA) She knows about you . . .your plans.

KATYA

Why do you care what becomes of us?

GRIGOR

Listen to me . . .I looked out for you . . .as best I could. But now . . .you must go to the Police. Maybe they can protect you.

KATYA

(Scoffs)

The *Police? Protect us?* Hah!

TATIANA

You're trying to deceive us . . .again.

GRIGOR

I came to warn you. Berte won't let you quit . . .she'll make an example of you!

KATYA

Why would she risk the attention? And why should we believe you? You've already proven whose side you're on.

GRIGOR

I don't blame you for not trusting me . . .but they can't ignore *all* of us. (To TATIANA) I want another life . . .too. But . . .difficult times . . .difficult choices.

Loud banging on door. CESAR hollers and tries the door.

CESAR

Katya . . .!

KATYA unlocks the door. CESAR rushes in. Startled to see GRIGOR, he pushes KATYA behind him.

CESAR starts to say something to GRIGOR, but turns to KATYA instead.

CESAR

I just came from Castelnuovo's. I told him the truth . . .to stop this madness . . .this crazy hunt for Clara Beter. (Pause) Mrs. Castelnuovo knows who you are!

KATYA shrugs, points to the dress she made for MRS. CASTELNUOVO. Sits down, worried.

KATYA

Who I am . . .or *what* I am? Well . . .does it matter now? The truth would have come out . . .eventually. But . . .*you're* in danger here. *You* must leave.

CESAR

I belong here . . .with you.

KATYA

No . . .not like this. I can't protect you. I don't belong in your world, and you don't . . .belong in mine.

CESAR

But you *are* my world.

CESAR takes KATYA'S hands in his.

Every day, I awake to tell your story . . .to help people see what they don't see. Your courage. Your dreams. I don't know where my world starts and ends . . .unless you're in it.

KATYA

What do you possibly see in this damaged woman?

CESAR

I see someone with . . .a fire inside. (Pause) Before you, I was just a struggling writer, trying to find a story to tell . . .a privileged member of the upper class . . . *You* became that story . . .and so much more.

KATYA

So . . .how does this story end?

CESAR

I don't know, but now, there are others who care about you.

KATYA

You mean . . .Clara.

MANUEL rushes in, sees GRIGOR and stops, wary. GRIGOR holds up his hands, disarmingly.

GRIGOR

I came to help.

BERTE and IVAN approach the shop. BERTE shouts for KATYA to come out. We see both sets at the same time (inside and out)

BERTE

Katya! Or is it *Clara*?

MANUEL and GRIGOR move to stand on either side of the door. KATYA goes to the door but TATIANA bars her exit.

TATIANA

NO! She's crazy!

It's *me* she wants.

KATYA

Come out . . .or we'll come in!

BERTE

NO! (To CESAR) *Stop* her!

TATIANA

CESAR tries to block the door.
IVAN hollers from outside.

Where's the *puta*, *Clara Beter*?

IVAN

KATYA moves toward the door, gently nudging CESAR away but before she can exit, TATIANA steps onto the porch. She starts to speak, but KATYA pulls her aside and begins to answer. But before she says anything, CESAR steps forward.

I am Clara Beter.

CESAR

MANUEL and GRIGOR step out of the store taking positions on each side of the porch.

So . . .it seems everyone's wants to be famous, eh? But if anyone's going to be famous . . .it'll be *me*!

BERTE

For what? A dress shop? Running a brothel? Or for killing two useless prostitutes? You'll be famous . . .for sure . . .but . . .for what?

KATYA

Aren't you the clever one? Do you think I'll just let you walk away? (Snaps her fingers) Like *that*? I paid good money for you! You belong to me!

BERTE

Not anymore! We're not for sale . . .

KATYA

Hah! Everyone's for sale!

BERTE

IVAN muscles up, belligerent.

IVAN

This is the Zwi Migdal you're dealing with, not some small time . . .

CESAR puts his arm around KATYA'S
shoulders.

CESAR

You think they want the publicity?

BERTE

It's easy to be brave now, isn't it! But now, I know *everything* . . .

BERTE dangles the KATYA sign and flings
it to the ground.

KATYA

Then you know that we won't work for you any longer . . .in any way.

BERTE

When I'm through with you *everyone* will know you're nothing but a common whore.
No one will buy your fancy dresses and you'll starve in the street like a dog!

The CASTELNUOVOS enter the scene and
hear BERTE'S threat. They approach
BERTE, who is taken aback.

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

You needn't concern yourself with Katya's future. Or Tatiana's. They won't starve. But .
. . as for *common*, Berte . . .despite your *pretenses* . . .I've never known *anyone* more
common than *you*.

BERTE

Mrs. Castelnovo! Why concern yourself with the petty grievances of a couple of simple
dressmakers. They're nothing special. I can find others tomorrow . . . *today* . . .who'll
keep my Shop in business. Don't you worry!

MRS. CASTELNUOVO

I'll be taking my business elsewhere.

CASTELNUOVO

I have a solution to your problem, Berte. No doubt, you don't want a scandal. Publicity can be so . . .inconvenient . . .especially when you prefer to work in the shadows.

BERTE

(Contemptuously)

You're the editor that's been praising that *sentimental crap!*

CASTELNUOVO

I see your tastes don't skew to the literary. No matter. I heard you run . . .what . . .400 brothels alone! You're quite the businesswoman, aren't you? But . . .there's nothing like a little celebrity to make headlines and shed light on what a cockroach you are.

BERTE

You don't scare me! You think you can just take your shoe and swat . . .*SWAT* . . .and we're gone? Hah! We're never gone. As long as there're customers . . .and there will *always* be customers . . .*we've* got the merchandise.

KATYA

They're going to have to shop someplace else.

BERTE makes a move to attack Katya, but GRIGOR blocks her.

CASTELNUOVO

It's hard to run a business from the inside of a jail cell. The Police will be really interested in your activities. Maybe you don't want to involve them.

BERTE

The police are *my* friends. Not *yours!*

CASTELNUOVO

Maybe they aren't as eager as you to let everyone *know* that.

IVAN

(To BERTE)

He has a point.

BERTE

Go on . . .

CASTELNUOVO

Why not let these two girls go their own way . . .with your blessing . . . Show how you're helping these girls to a new start. A sponsor! What a generous woman . . .don't you think . . .and no one need be the wiser about your other ventures. From what I hear . . .you won't really miss these two.

BERTE

(To KATYA)

Buenos Aires is *my* town. I can't promise you won't find enemies if you stay.

KATYA

We'll take our chances.

IVAN

You're just going to let them make a fool of you?

BERTE

You're the fool. I'm the benefactor. Castelnuovo has given us an elegant retreat. (To KATYA) I underestimated you. (To CASTELNUOVO) Be sure to spell my name right when you describe how I've liberated these poor girls from their plight, and given them the opportunity to live respectable lives. That *IS* the story you'll tell, right?

CASTELNUOVO

CASTELNUOVO picks up the sign and looks at it. Then charms BERTE.

How about a photo of the three of you, posing in front of the shop? I'll bring a photographer around. But first, perhaps tomorrow we could sit for coffee and you could tell me your story?

BERTE softens at CASTELNUOVO'S attention, and is almost flattered.

BERTE

Coffee? That would be lovely. Yes . . . I would like that very much. Tomorrow . . .

BERTE and IVAN exit together. GRIGOR and MANUEL leave as well.

KATYA

(To CASTELNUOVO)

That was clever!

TATIANA

(To CESAR)

That was . . . brave.

CASTELNUOVO

That was interesting!

KATYA

(To TATIANA)

You could have been *hurt*!

TATIANA

Look who's talking!

CESAR

(To CASTELNUOVO)

What a solution!

CASTELNUOVO

I'll write a special edition . . . a series . . . it'll sell millions of copies! (To MRS. CASTELNUOVO and TATIANA) Shall we celebrate with a drink?

The CASTELNUOVO'S exit with
TATIANA.

KATYA

(To CESAR)

Your words helped me find my voice. Now . . . has everything been said between us?

CESAR and KATYA reach out for each
other's hands.

(SONG: SOMETHING IN YOU)

CESAR

There's so much more to write about you. I can spend a lifetime . . .

SOMETHING IN YOU REACHED OUT TO ME,
TOUCHED MY HEART, AND MADE ME SEE
I'M A MAN.

WHEN I NEVER KNEW I COULD,
WHEN I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD,
YOU WERE ALWAYS BY MY SIDE.
YOU BELIEVED IN ME.
HOW COULD I GO ON . . . WITHOUT YOU?

KATYA

SOMETHING IN YOU MADE ME SEE
THERE WAS MORE TO THIS LIFE AND MORE TO ME.
BUT FOR YOU I'D NEVER BE
THE WOMAN YOU SEE STANDING HERE TODAY.

I WAS LOST BEFORE YOU.
TOSSED INTO A WORLD THAT DIDN'T CARE.
THEN I FOUND YOU, AND FROM THAT MOMENT,
YOU WERE ALWAYS THERE.

CESAR

MY MUSE.

KATYA

MY FRIEND.

KATYA

HOW WILL I GO ON . . .SHOULD THIS EVER END?

CESAR

I WON'T GO ON WITHOUT YOU.
THERE'S SO MUCH MORE TO WRITE ABOUT YOU –

BOTH

WHEN I NEVER KNEW I COULD,
WHEN I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD,
YOU WERE ALWAYS BY MY SIDE.
YOU BELIEVED IN ME.
HOW COULD I GO ON . . .WITHOUT YOU?

Clarinetist enters and plays an energetic
Tango and CESAR and KATYA embrace
for the first time.

END ACT II