

An Escape Act

Sean Dockray

The lighting is even and cool. It is morning. A mirror hangs midstage, indicating a wall; a window is suggested to the left. In the center, a long oak dining table and bench littered with the remnants of last night's party.

Two men, A and B: A is barefoot and wears jeans and a white T-shirt. B is older, in a white terry-cloth robe and brown leather house slippers. The two could equally be played by women, in which case A is still barefoot, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and B is older, in a white terry-cloth robe and black army boots. Around B's neck, in either case, is a clunky string of wooden beads.

There should be a clear sense of distinction between "what" is said and "how" the actors express it. Their manner should reference a romantic melodrama or telenovela, whereas the general delivery of the lines is sober; they should not sound like complaints.

It is up to the director or actor to distinguish the difference between a gesture and verbal delivery.

A is seated at the table sipping tea. B enters, sits, and lights a cigarette.

A. [to B] For decades we have spoken about the death of the author, but no one really believes it. Every disavowal of authorship is seen as a stroke of genius, a clever new take on a timeless concern. The less we see the hand of the artist in the work of art, the more we want his or her signature or at least a voice. Even the formation of collectives is not so much a renunciation of authorship as an overinvestment in it. The less there is to say, the more important it is who's speaking.

A stands, crosses the stage, and halts abruptly in front of the mirror.

B. I am speaking to you today to make a proposal. Just first let me elaborate.

A. [to the mirror] The most sustained critiques of authorship have been made from the spheres of art and education; however, not coincidentally, these spheres have the greatest investment in the notion. Credit and accreditation are the mechanisms for attaching symbolic capital to individuals via degrees and other lines on CVs. That curriculum vitæ—[to the audience] the course of my life?—is the paperwork I keep because nobody else does! [turning dramatically to B] It's an inverted credit report, evidence of underpaid work, kept orderly with an expectation of some future return.

A takes a few tentative steps toward the table.

Today, authorship is the singular connection between my life and my CV, my self-presentation. More than that, it is my inability to break that connection, which hardens with time.

A turns to look over the audience, worried. Clearly this is not the first time A has been jilted.

B. [*icy mockery*] But I've invested so much.

A. [*wringing hands*] This is by no means restricted to the professionalized fields of art and education. One familiar example marches hand in hand with the increasing prominence of the CV: "social spaces" on the Internet, which historically would include bulletin boards, chat rooms, forums, and now social networks, have become progressively less anonymous.

Moving behind B, caressing shoulders, soothing.

Now Facebook compels us to attach our real identities to a single "profile," and we work on maintaining that profile for whoever is watching. All of this work, this self-documentation, this fidelity between our selves and our papers, is for what, for whom?

A bends low to kiss B's cheek. B is unmoved.

What is the consequence of a world where every person is armed with their *vitæ*, if not a "war of all against all"? It's that sensation that there are no teams, that everyone has got his or her own jersey, not to mention all those reports of feeling "stuck," "paranoid," "depressed," "floating," and "wanting to get out." My intention here is not moral judgment but unblinking description. What if authorship were not just another slain metanarrative, but rather the neoliberal foundation for the slogan Everyone is creative?

A strides toward the audience, then stops, arms akimbo.

B. [*rubbing the countertop in circles*] Outsourcing, crowd-sourcing, any way to get work done cheaply, maybe even pay

by giving them credit. Money doesn't matter as much when they've got credit cards.

A. [*moving to be seated*] Rather than taking authorship as a monolithic foundation of contemporary capitalism, to be affirmed or opposed—and the possibility, let alone the efficacy, of opposition is a question here—perhaps we can think of it as a mechanism, or a process, or a point of intervention? My proposal is for the formation of something in between a school, a collective, a secret society, and a union. Let's call it an escape act.

B. [*taking A's hand in something like goodwill*] Assuming everyone here is willing.

A. [*rapidly, to the audience*] First, we lose our real names. This isn't an absolute change of identity; instead, we'll count our numbers and invest in that many fictional individuals. Second, all of our cultural activity, whether individual or collective, will be done under one or more of these fictional names. It's not simply that each of us will have an alter ego, but that we'll have a multiplicity of alter egos available for use. Third, when one of these characters is offered an exhibition, residency, lecture, interview, performance, teaching position, or whatever, then any of us, and any number of us, might go. It will be a matter of joint discussion or convenience. Fourth, when any money is earned through sales, salary, commission, or stipend, it is shared equally.

B. [*luxuriating in the cigarette, eyes fixed on A*] Fifth, if one of us wants to exit this arrangement, then we'll "kill" one of the fictional individuals. The specifics are up to those who remain.

A. There's no doubt our system will come into irreconcilable conflict with the dominant one. To pick a mundane example, under present conditions none of us could realistically receive

an MFA. Perhaps one of us could contribute one? My point is that this act of ours is as much a learning process as it is an intervention. We will need to generate our own analysis of the art market and the art world; we will need to generate that knowledge that is otherwise known as collectivity; we will need to develop theories of contingency and sharing.

A stares out at the audience. Long pause.

B. [*to the audience*] I appreciate your patience and attention. Are there any questions? Shall we begin?

A and B take questions from the audience, avoiding any speculation as to Sean Dockray's intentions. They may even make it clear that this is a rule set up by the author. This Q&A should be considered continuous with the performance. When questions subside, the lights dim, and A and B leave the stage.