

The Middle

[Sound of waves. Michael and Tony take off shoes and set up the space. Michael covers Tony in bubble wrap. When Shipping Forecast plays Tony begins soliloquy under bubble wrap. It is important to note that in real life Tony is Michael's father.]

Tony: To be, or not to be – that is the question;
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep –
No more – and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep –
To sleep – perchance to dream. Ay there's the rub.
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause.

[Pause. Michael unveils Tony.]

There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

[Elgar plays. Tony stands.]

Tony: This story
Takes place in the interval
In a theatre
There is one man in the foyer
This man
In a theatre
And he is standing

[Michael stands. Tony sits.]

Tony: This man is sitting down
He is telling a story
This story
In a theatre
This theatre
In the interval
This interval

He is drinking

[Michael brings drink.]

He is possibly drunk

[Michael brings drink.]

He watches

He waits

He drinks

[Michael brings drink.]

He walks up and down

He is drinking

[Michael brings drink.]

He is possibly drunk

[Michael brings drink.]

He watches

He waits

He drinks

[Michael brings drink.]

He is repeating himself

He is waiting

In a theatre

In a foyer

In an interval

He is waiting for something to happen

Something to end or to begin

Something to be or not to be

Something in between

[Tony waits for Elgar to finish. Tony drinks.]

This man is someone you might have heard of

He has seen it all

He has lived through it all

He has stood on many stages

He has faced many audiences

This man is an amateur who is trying to be professional

An actor trying to be Hamlet

He could be a father

He could be a grandfather
He could be your grandfather
He could be you.
He could be me.

This man is in the middle of a stage
This man in the middle
I am this man
This middle man
Between a writer and an audience
This page and this stage
But I am not the writer
I am the writer's father
The writer is the actor's son
He is writing this now
Sitting on the stairs
In the middle of the night
Listening to the Shipping Forecast
Wondering why he can't work at normal hours
Why he has never had a proper job
I've always wondered that too
(That isn't in the script)
He is sitting on the stairs
In the middle of the night
Wondering why he can't sleep
I used to sing him to sleep
A song about a rabbit

*Cotton tail, Cotton tail
Sitting in the sun
Cotton tail, Cotton tail
You're the lucky one*

*Dig no well, plant no beans
Make no pumpkin grow
Say your prayers
Thank the Lord
That he made you so*

*Shine no shoe, bake no bread
Don't go split no rail
Sometimes wish I could be
Like old cotton tail*

And now I sing it to my grandchildren

*Cotton tail, Cotton tail
Snoozing in the shade
Cotton tail, Cotton tail
That's the way you're made*

*Two leg folk, work and slave
Guess that's why they're born
Work and slave till the day
Gabriel blows his horn*

*In the land far away
Down the starry trail
All the Lord;s children play
Like old cotton tail
Lazy Cotton Tail
Oooh oooh oooh oooh
Lazy Cotton Tail (and repeat)*

And by the end of the song my son, or grandchildren, would be nearly asleep.

My son asked me here to help him out
Because I have been here before
And I know how this works
I have read Hamlet before
Not just for this show
But when I was a young man at school
Younger than he is now
Sitting at a desk like this one

He is here now
Watching me read this out
Hoping I can read his handwriting
Hoping I can read it out the way he wrote it
Hoping that you will enjoy what you hear
He is hoping
And so am I
That you like classical music

[Bach's *Air on a G String* plays.]

This is the interval
This is when you usually drink

[Tony drinks.]

This is when you possibly get drunk

[Tony drinks.]

This is when things start to unravel
When things become unclear
When you turn to someone next to you and say
'Is this part of the show?'
And they say

Michael: I don't know

Tony: This is when you light a cigar

[Michael brings cigar.]

This is when I usually light a cigar
But because of health and safety
I am not permitted to smoke today / tonight

[Michael removes cigar.]

I don't smoke anyway
I don't know how to smoke a cigar
So you will have to imagine that I am smoking
I am smoking a Hamlet cigar
I am Hamlet
It is 2013 [whichever year in which this is performed]
I am onstage
In the middle of a stage
Waiting to perform in front of **you**
I am in the middle
Between having learned what to do and having to do it
Between practising and performing
Not knowing how you might receive it
Between remembering and forgetting
I am in the middle of talking to you
In a theatre
In a foyer
In an interval
In the middle of a show
You are the audience
Like a tide
You come and go
You ebb and flow
Walk in and walk out
Stand up and sit down

[Tony drinks. Michael blindfolds Tony who stands on chair.]

I am in the middle of walking the plank
Over a beach in Malta
On a student holiday in 1967
I am in the middle
Between studying and working
Between learning what to do and having to do it
I am in the middle of talking to my friend
Who is taking a picture of me
Walking the plank

Between sky and sand
And I am laughing while I am talking
I am in the middle of jumping and falling
Between the memory and the photograph

[Tony sits down. Michael removes blindfold.]

I am in the middle of an exam room in 1960
I am sitting at a desk in the middle of a test
I am in the middle between learning what to do and having to do it
Between a practice test and an important exam

[Michael writes on the desk with chalk: 'To be or not to be'.]

Our English teacher has written on the blackboard in chalk
Extracts of Shakespearean text
It is A Midsummer Night's Dream or Hamlet or The Winter's Tale
We are to write who is saying what and why they are saying it
The teacher is in the middle of handing out the questions

[Michael hands out paper.]

I turn the page over
I am in the middle of working out the answers
Between success and failure
Between being treated like a boy and being treated like an adult
I memorise as many of Hamlet's soliloquies as I can
As a bank of quotations to use in an exam
And here I am recalling them on this stage
Fifty years later.

[Michael removes paper.]

I am in limbo
A middle aged man
In the middle of a stage
Emerging from a chrysalis
Hamlet in bubblewrap
A neo-geriatric in aspic
In the middle of being a father and being a son
Michael's dad and Harry's lad
Between spending time caring for elderly parents
And spending time with our grandchildren
Between helping with childcare
And organizing residential care
Between dealing with the sadness of a parent's departure
And sharing the joy of a new arrival
Between trying to keep memories alive
And creating new memories
I am in the middle

A middle generation
Squeezed between beginnings and endings.
Just like today / tonight.

[Bach stops playing. Tony drinks.]

This is the interval
People are drinking

[Michael brings drink.]

People are taking their coats off
Putting their handbags down
Talking. Coughing. Sneezing. Laughing.
Putting sugar in their coffee
Salt and pepper on their food
People cry
People don't want to cry
But people do
People leave during the interval
Because people cry
Because people do
People go to the toilet
Because people have to do
What people have to do
People are still drinking

[Michael drinks.]

People are still laughing
Still talking
Still eating
Talking while they are eating
Talking while they are laughing
There is music playing

[Dvorak plays. Tony waits until end of fanfare.]

It is too loud
Or maybe I am just sitting under the speaker
The writer turns to the middle of his notebook
And starts to write about what people do during the interval
He is writing this during the interval now.
In a foyer.
In a theatre.

A woman finishes her coffee
Another woman has just started hers.
In this foyer
Someone is always standing up

When someone else is sitting down
And the music accompanies it
As if the interval is as choreographed
As the performance that bookends it
But the actors are not here
They are somewhere else
The Front of House staff check their watches
The programme sellers give it one last push
The ice cream sellers have shut up shop
The tannoy comes on and a voice says:

‘Please return to your seats
The second act is about to begin’

And you do because it is
People put on their coats
Pick up their handbags
Scrape their chairs across the floor
Finish their drinks

[Tony drinks.]

People make phone calls

[Michael brings phone.]

To say ‘Where are you?
I’m waiting. What shall I do?
Shall I go back in without you?’

[Michael takes phone.]

People look out of the window
Wondering where their friend is
Wondering what to do
Because people wonder
Because people do
And now only my son is left
His handwriting becoming more and more like mine
The music is playing to itself
The empty bottles on the empty tables
With the empty cups and the empty glasses
Wait to be collected
By the waiters who are looking forward to the end of the show
So they can all go home

[Michael removes drinks.]

And everything here will be returned to normal
None of this will be here when you leave

Just as it was when you arrived
I am just here
Where one thing ends
And another thing begins
In the middle.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen
Will you please take your seats
As this evening’s performance is about to resume
Thank you’

[Michael covers Tony up with bubble wrap. Tony delivers soliloquy whilst covered in bubble wrap.]

Remember thee? Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter. Now to my word:
It is ‘Adieu, adieu, remember me.’

[Dvorak stops. When Shipping Forecast starts Michael uncovers Tony from bubble wrap and they reset the space and put shoes back on. The sound of waves plays.]

THE END