

# Nemo ooo

ooo **y** Joseph Kierland

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

*Just so you know, J.S. Kierland's NEMO has nothing to do with an animated clownfish, although there is a clown in the picture. The Nemo in this play is a circus dwarf who's gone missing from a ragtag crew of circus folk who alternately fantasize about his return and what (or who?) they're going to eat for dinner. Set in a barren snowscape, the characters, Boco the juggling clown, Bata the large man, and Bella the bareback rider, are stragglers in a story of survival where nobody can be trusted and dropping the ball portends an ominous fate. The balls may be imaginary, but the tension in this weird and haunting play is real. This script will take your breath away. If you've ever thought about running off and joining the circus, this family of outcasts will make you think again. And wherever Nemo has gone, there's no doubt that he's running for his life.*

*Trigger warning: There is a clown, but you already knew that.*

*Five stars.*

BELLA

The dwarf isn't coming back because he knew what we were going to do to him!

(BATA & BOCO suddenly freeze in their dance, and the howl of the wind circles them. BELLA moves down to the edge again and speaks into the wind.)

I can feeeeeeel him. Smell him. Taste him. He's somewhere near ussssss.

(BOCO calls into the wind--)

BOCO

Ne-mo. Neee-moooo. Neeeeeeeeee-moooooo!

NEMO

Black. Wind.

From the darkness comes a dreamlike laugh, as the lights begin to rise on three sleeping FIGURES hunched together under the cold howl of a rising wind.

The strange laugh is coming from the one in the Clown suit and makeup. As the lights slowly rise his laugh ends abruptly, and HE moves with the rising light, and says -

BOCO

At lasssst, it's riiiiiiising.

(HE nudges one of the hunched FIGURES with him.)

The light, Bella...the liiiiiight.

(BELLA wakes and lifts her head to squint into the growing light. SHE'S still in her bareback rider's costume and performance makeup.)

The Show is about to begin. Can you hear the crowd? The animals sense it too. And the orchestra, Bella...the orchestra -

BELLA

Do you see him?

(THEY stare out, and the wind HOWLS as the light rises.

The large man, BATA, stirs and joins their long stare. HE is wearing a worn baggy suit, a tie, no shirt, and a high hat that sits tightly on his head.)

BATA

It snoooooowed again last night.

BELLA

Do you see him?

BATA

You can't see the road or the truck anymore. His tracks are gone too.

BELLA

The little bastard isn't coming back.

BOCO

We know better, don't we, Bata? Nemo is trustworthy.

BELLA

I never trusted him!

BOCO

You most certainly did. It was your idea to let him go back to the truck.

BELLA

I'm so goddamn cold and hungry I didn't want that little creep out of my sight.

BOCO

Nemo is trustworthy. I'm almost sure of it.

BELLA

You can never trust a dwarf! Dwarfs work against you! How do you think they survive in this world? If you could trust a dwarf he wouldn't survive.

BOCO

You're being unreasonable, Bella. Nemo just drove the truck down the mountain to get help.

BATA

He couldn't drive anywhere in all this snow.

BELLA

If the stinking little shit stood on the seat he couldn't look out the window.

BOCO

He'll be back. I know he'll be back! He promised he'd bring food and more clothes.

BATA

He did say that, Bella. I heard him say it. "I'll bring back food," he said. "I'll bring back food."

BOCO

Of course, he did. I'm certain he went to find the others. That's it. He went to find the others.

BATA

Sure.

BELLA

Then where is he?

BOCO

He's out there. Somewhere out *there!* And when he comes back we'll get on with the show. Won't we, Bata?

BATA

Yes, and everything will be just like it was! The crowds of people, the colored lights going on and off...on and off...on and off.

BOCO

And Bella will ride three...*four* new horses  
at the same time while Nemo crashes the  
cymbal on his head!

BATA

And I'll have every machine going for the  
celebration! The carousel spinning around,  
the wheel climbing up and up! And the people  
laughing and shrieking!

BOCO

And the puppets...always the funny puppets!

BATA

Every machine at the same time...think of  
that.

BOCO

And the calliope!

(HE begins to dance with BATA and  
imitate the tooting oom-pah-pah of  
the calliope.

BELLA has not moved from staring  
out at the light, and pays no  
attention when BATA and BOCO begin  
to sing:)

BATA & BOCO

All around the mulberry bush,  
the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush.  
All around the mulberry bush,  
On a cold and frosty morning...

(BOCO stops dancing and sets  
himself. HE takes three imaginary  
balls out of his pockets and  
begins to juggle them, and BATA  
APPLAUDS enthusiastically.)

BOCO

Announce me! Announce me!

BATA

Oh, I can't do that. Only Nemo announces!

BOCO

Then give me a drumroll! Quick! Quick!

(BATA begins to beat an imaginary drum, and imitates its rolling sound.)

Wonderful! Wonderful!

(BOCO juggles the imaginary balls, then MISSES, and they scatter, and HE runs to retrieve them, as BATA beats his imaginary drum.

BOCO resets himself, and attempts to juggle the imaginary balls again, but this time HE has difficulty even starting...and they scatter.

BATA stops drumming as BOCO again has to retrieve his imaginary balls.)

BELLA

Hopeless fools!

BOCO

Some day I'll juggle fifty-six balls like the Ugly Zorino.

BELLA

Impossible!

BOCO

There's nothing impossible to the artiste! But what would you know? You're nothing but a bareback rider! You've never known the agony...the torture-

BELLA

Who the hell is the Ugly Zorino anyway? I never heard of him!

BOCO

You see? And she tells everyone she's been in the carnival business for over twenty years!

BELLA

Ten years! TEN years...no more!

BOCO

Listen to her! The Ugly Zorino's been around for generations. You can ask anyone!

BELLA

Never heard of him!

BOCO

He worked the Florida Coast doing a flame-swallowing act...but his genius was with the balls!

BELLA

Did you ever see him?

BOCO

Nemo worked with him.

BELLA

Nemo? You can't believe a dwarf!

BOCO

Nemo always announced the Ugly Zorino with trumpets. Zorino *demande*d trumpets.

BELLA

There's no such thing as an Ugly Zorino!

BATA

And cymbals! I remember Nemo saying that.

BELLA

Nemo's a liar. He always lies!

BOCO

Nemo steals a little. But he never lies. Never lies! Never lies!

BELLA

He's a stinking dwarf that lies and steals!

BOCO

He appreciates the artist. That's more than I can say for you.

BELLA

He's not coming back! That's how much he appreciates. Once we decided to do it, we should've never let him go.

(Long pause.)

BOCO

He has to come back. Where else can he go?

BATA

He's right, Bella. Nemo probably went to look for the others. The Great Romero and the Fat Lady were in the truck behind us. They're down there somewhere.

BOCO

Nemo will bring us back some food. He appreciates. That's why he offered to go.

BATA

And when he comes back he'll teach you to juggle fifty-six balls like an expert.

BOCO

An artiste...a great artiste.

(BATA and BOCO begin tooting like a calliope again, and THEY dance about taking mock bows.)

BELLA

The dwarf isn't coming back because he *knew* what we were going to do to him!

(BATA and BOCO FREEZE in their dance, and the HOWWWWL of the wind circles them. BELLA moves down to the edge again and speaks into the wind.)

I can feeeeeeel him. Smell him. Taste him.  
He's somewhere near usssssss.

BOCO

(Calling into the wind-)

Ne-mo. Neee-moooo. Neeeeeeee-mooooooo!

(...and the wind rises and  
fades with his call.)

BATA

It's beginning to snoooooow again!

BOCO

Neeeeeee-mooooooo!

BATA

Snoooooow. Snoooooooow.

BOCO

Neeeeeeee-mooooooo!

(THEY stare out waiting for an  
answer, and the WIND FADES into  
silence.)

BATA

Let's go down to the truck and bring him  
back.

BELLA

He doesn't want us to find him.

BOCO

You mean he's playing hide and seek?

BELLA

He's not in the truck. He just waddled out  
there and sunk. I could see it in his face.  
The little bastard knew there was no food in  
the truck. He just made that up so we'd let  
him go. He knew what we were going to do.  
The little bastard knew.

(A long silence.)

BATA

I knew thee was no food in the truck.

BOCO

Why didn't you say something? You let him go!

BATA

There's nothing but heavy machinery in the truck.

BOCO

And you knew all the time?

BELLA

And so did Nemo!

BOCO

You're both crazy! Nemo will be back before the light goes down. He's got to come back!  
(HE moves upstage and sets himself to juggle the imaginary balls again and demands - -)

Give me a drumroll!

(BATA and BELLA move upstage, but neither gives the CLOWN his drumroll. BOCO takes out the imaginary balls and begins to sing as HE prepares to juggle the balls.)

Sour grapes, sour grapes,  
All the apes eat sour grapes,  
Pick a bunch, pick a bunch,  
And we'll have a picnic  
lunch.

Louder with the drumroll, Dummies!

(BATA and BELLA stare at him as HE begins to arc his imaginary balls. One, two, three, and they scatter before HE can even arc them. The imaginary balls roll toward BELLA and SHE picks them up. There is a long silence as they watch her holding the imaginary balls.)

BELLA

Give me the high hat, Bata.

BATA

My hat?

BELLA

Give it to me!

BOCO

Don't do it, Bata. She's up to something.

(BATA holds the hat on his head.)

BATA

Take the Ringmaster's jacket if you want.

BELLA

I want your HAT!

BATA

I'll give you the tattooed man's tie!

BELLA

THE HAT!

BATA

The Great Romero himself gave me this hat.

BELLA

Give me the goddamn hat!

BOCO

She's got the balls! If she gets the hat, who knows what she'll do? She might even try to drive us out of the Carnival. She's an ambitious and ruthless bareback rider. You saw what she did to Nemo!

BATA

What did she do to Nemo?

BOCO

She made him go out in that storm! Can you imagine a Dwarf surviving that storm?

BATA

She didn't make him go. He went by himself!

BOCO

She'll do anything to get her way!

BELLA

Give me the hat, Bata!

BATA

You can't keep it.

BOCO

Don't do it, Bata!

BATA

I always wanted this hat and when the Great Romero gave it to me-

BELLA

We're just going to play a game with the balls.

BOCO

Ahhhh, the truth comes out. She's trying to take the Center Ring. She wants your hat for the horses to wear.

BATA

A lot of people in the carnival have tried to steal this hat.

BOCO

You can't trust a selfish and cruel bareback rider! She stole my balls...she'll steal your hat!

BATA

Nobody steals this hat!

BOCO

You see? You can't fool *him* that easy...and I'll get my balls back!

BELLA

Hold the hat.

BATA

Hold it?

BELLA

Take it off and hold it in your hand.

(BATA removes his hat and holds it  
in his hands.)

BOCO

Be carrrrrrful, Bata.

(BATA grips the high hat tightly  
as BELLA moves toward him and  
drops the imaginary balls, one by  
one, into the high hat.)

BELLA

Green. Yellow-

BOCO

My balls! My balls!

BELLA

And Red. The one who picks the red ball  
takes the Dwarf's place!

BOCO

NO! Give me back my balls!

BELLA

If you don't pick...then you'll take the  
ball that's left. Shake them up, Bata!

(BATA reaches into his high hat  
and stirs the balls. Then he  
offers the hat to the frightened  
BOCO, who puts his hand halfway  
into the hat and pulls it back.  
BELLA sneers at him, reaches  
quickly into the hat, chooses an  
imaginary ball, and hides it  
behind her back.

BOCO reaches out again. HE is  
terrified and closes his eyes as  
his hand sinks into the hat and

comes out with one of the "balls,"  
but HE's afraid to open his eyes.)

BOCO

Which one is it? Is it the red one?

(Silence.)

You vicious bastards! It's the red one,  
isn't it?

(HE drops the imaginary ball and  
opens his eyes.)

It's the yellow! I picked the yellow one! I  
picked the yellow one!

(BOCO realizes that BELLA and BATA  
are staring at each other. BATA  
edges his hand into the hat and  
pulls out the last imaginary  
ball.)

BATA

GREEN!

(HE is ecstatic, and BOCO laughs  
with him, until THEY realize that.  
BELLA is holding the last ball  
behind her back. SHE suddenly  
holds it out and says-)

BELLA

BLUE!

(For a moment THEY stand in awe of  
the event. BATA turns the high hat  
over...but there's nothing in it.)

BOCO

The red ball is gone! It's gone!

BELLA

Gone where?

BOCO

It's a sign! A good sign!

BATA

It's the Great Romero's trick hat. It's magic!

BELLA

Don't give me that shit!

(BELLA grabs for the high hat, but BATA pulls it away, and jams it back on his head. In the confusion BOCO grabs his imaginary balls back.)

BOCO

The red ball has gone to Nemo...gone to Nemo...to Nemo!

Sour grapes, sour grapes,  
All the apes eat sour grapes-

BELLA

We'll do it again without the red ball!

BOCO

Go get your own balls!

Pick a bunch, pick a bunch,  
And we'll have a picnic lunch.

(HE sets himself to juggle his imaginary balls again...looks over at BELLA...decides against it and puts the imaginary balls back in his pockets.)

BELLA

This time we play Blind Man's Bluff!

BOCO

We don't know how to play Blind Man's Bluff.

BELLA

I'll teach you!

BATA

Blind Man's Bluff is my favorite game!

BOCO

I don't want to play! He's the one it should be! Not Nemo...not you...not me! HIM! He doesn't belong in the carnival. He's an outsider...a Mechanic! We can find a mechanic anywhere! They're a penny a bunch...a penny a bunch...penny a bunch! But how many great bareback riders are there? How many magnificent juggling Clowns? He doesn't belong with us! We don't need him! He's the one it should be! Not me...not you! HIM!

BATA

How can it be me? The carousel and the flying wheel are mine! I break them down...I build them up...I make the people laugh and screaaam! MEEEE! Baaaaaaa-taaaa! My machines are the greatest things in the carnival! Without my machines you have nothing! Nothing!

BOCO

No carnival needs those stupid machines when they have artists!

BATA

You only make the crowd cry with your bad dancing and awful juggling! We keep you here because we feel sorry for you!

BOCO

That's a lie...that's a lie...that's a lie! Soon it will be fifty-six balls in a spinning rainbow above me! The orchestra will soar and Kings and Queens will come from all over the world to see me! ME! Not your dirty, noisy, smelly machines!

BATA

No one ever juggled fifty-six balls at the same time! Tell him it's impossible, Bella!

BOCO

Bella knows anything is possible for an artist! Someday Bella will jump through burning hoops on four galloping stallions! Someday...someday!

BATA

You can't even juggle three balls! You can't do anything! Even Nemo said you have no talent! He never knew where to put you in the lineup!

BOCO

Another lie! I worked with the trapeze acts!

BATA

Nemo just put you there because the crowd watched the high-wire act and didn't have to look at you!

BOCO

Make him stop, Bella...make him stop!

BELLA

Show him you can juggle the balls and he'll stop.

(There's a long pause, and THEY stare at the CLOWN as HE takes out the three balls...and HIS arms rise and fall, rise and fall, and the balls begin to arc. Once, twice, three times...and then they fall and scatter. BELLA laughs, and BATA picks up the balls.)

BOCO

They never looked at the high wire! They looked at me! Meeeee!

BATA

Give me the drumroll!

(HE sets himself.)

Louder on the drums!

(BELLA laughs and begins to beat an imaginary drum.)

BOCO

No! Stop it, Bella! He'll make a fool of himself! He doesn't know what he's doing!

(BATA arcs the three imaginary balls and begins to juggle. One, two, three, four, five, six, arcing in a steady pattern that he controls with ease and assurance.)

BELLA

Bravo for the stupendous BA-TA!

BOCO

No! Stop him...stop him!

BELLA

He'll juggle fifty-six balls in no time!  
BRAVOOOO!

(BOCO rushes at BATA, pushing him off-balance. The imaginary balls scatter, and HE runs about retrieving them.)

BOCO

You have no style! It's all technique! No style. You don't belong with us. You're not an artist!

(The light begins to FADE as BELLA and BATA move toward the terrified BOCO.)

BATA

It should be you! YOU!

BOCO

No! Nemo will come back! He has to come back!

(The light is nearly gone now, and BELLA and BATA reach out for BACO, as HE calls into the wind - -)

Neeeeee-moooooooooo...

(The light fades into the darkness, and only the call is left...)

oooooooooooooooooo...

(And then there is only the  
silence.)

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...** *When I read what FOTD was looking for I laughed...thought about how "what they are looking for isn't being written" and what do I have when writing things like they were asking for was accepted. It was to be a test: the "old days" vs. FOTD. So I sent in what you just read, NEMO. That was the answer.*

*The question is: "What is different about now and back then...were they better then, or worse for writers? Or, what happened in the interim? I don't know...but what I do know is that I haven't sent NEMO out into the world for decades. So, here was a chance to test FOTD...and they're real. And I suppose the secret to the mystery of what was and isn't now is what they accept for their Journal. Things are always changing and they seem to be ahead of them, if you get the gist. Maybe it's happening again.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** J.S. Kierland is a graduate of the University of Connecticut, and did postgrad at Hunter College where he won the New York City playwright's award and was admitted into Sigma Tau Delta. He was also given a full scholarship and Fellowships to the Yale Drama School and after receiving his MFA became playwright-in-residence at Lincoln Center, Brandeis University, and the Lab Theatre. He has published a novella, edited two books of one-act plays, and over 125 of his short stories have been published in literary anthologies, reviews and magazines in the U.S., Europe and Asia, including, Playboy, Fiction International, Colere, Trajectory, International Short Story, and other leading Literary Reviews. "15" of his BEST SHORT STORIES was published in 2014 by Underground Voices, and his novella HARD TO LEARN was published as an e-book.

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