

The E-**X**-ECUTRI-**X!**

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By Barry Jay Kaplan

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

In The Executrix, Barry Jay Kaplan has crafted a chilling one-woman piece featuring an intoxicating claret that evokes flavors of Poe with a hint of Faust and notes of insurance fraud. Monologues are hard, but Kaplan makes this shit look easy. Oh, how I admire the cool and sensible way his “EXECUTRIX,” lays out her sordid tale of an obsessive, and yes, abusive relationship between master and muse. Artists and writers, beware; you may see yourself reflected in this story – or what’s left of you. That is, unless you find yourself in the role of the EXECUTRIX. There you go – swirl it around in your glass, lean into the aroma, and have a taste of your own. I promise you’ll want more...

Pours claret into the glass and sips.

Perfection. I brought it back in my arms. I’ve given it three months to settle. A claret bottled the year of his birth. You’ll understand if I don’t offer to share. It is...my one pleasure. No, I won’t cry.

Spacing is playwright’s own. JEC

The Executrix

The EXECUTRIX is a woman of vast experience and indeterminate age. Her manner is theatrical, poetic. She is spirited but grieving a loss. She is dressed in black, including black lace gloves and a shawl across her shoulders. She sits in a throne-like chair. Beside her, on a small table, is a bottle of claret and a glass. On the floor next to her, is an enormously high manuscript. A man has come to see her, sits opposite her. She addresses him.

EXECUTRIX

Come in, come on. I had no idea you would come in person to collect the manuscript. Imagine: the editor-in-chief himself. I'm a bit unprepared. And I'm so flattered that you've come. To see me. For I am no one. Except as I served him. I have been content to do just that. I know my place. That is the thing, don't you think? Finding and knowing one's place? There are too many sad people who spend their lives in the search. These are not my own opinions I see you writing down. I have no opinions. They are all his, contained in the masterwork you've come for.

She is referring to the pile of manuscript pages on the floor beside her.

If I give the impression of having an identity of my own, you musn't be fooled. I'm stubborn, perhaps, but I have no original thoughts or ideas.

It would have been a waste of time trying when I have sat at the feet of the master.

Excuse me. Do you mind? I'm parched.

Pours claret into the glass and sips.

Perfection. I brought it back in my arms. I've given it three months to settle. A claret bottled the year of his birth. You'll understand if I don't offer to share. It is...my one pleasure. No, I won't cry.

Pause

I was his landlady, did you know that? My parents had died and left me a tiny house near the river. He arrived at dusk, neither of us could see the other very clearly, both our faces were grey. We wore haloes of despair.

Laughs.

I'm quoting him, yes. You've found me out!

Clears throat.

I was frightened...oh of everything. I preferred the quiet of my room. His was in the back, facing a wall, a pallet of straw on a narrow board. How his young back ached. But as he breathed, so did his hand move across a page. I would pass his room and hear only the scratch of a pencil on paper. I would squat outside his door and try to decipher the scratches. You know the early work, the sheer raw terror...oh but the hurricane of their creation! Now I am going to cry.

Cries for a moment.

I brought oranges, all I had to give. He never touched me. It is difficult to imagine him hammering his flesh into anyone. He was a master, eventually, of the evoked orgasm. Excuse me. If I...

She sips the claret.

I swept his room when he went to the soup kitchens or to give away shreds of his work on a corner. His clothes were disintegrating. He coughed at night. Winter would never end. Hunger is a drug. He was dying. The masterwork was about to be born.

Pause

But the first time really was an accident. Really.

Pause

He came home that day. I assumed my position outside his door. But there were no scratches, only a...keening. I opened the door. There was blood on the floor. He held up his hand to me, rags soaked in blood were wrapped around it. The story poured out like prayer: He had a job doing manual labor that left his mind free. And then the accident...the small finger of his left hand had been severed. I only wish I'd had the presence of mind to preserve it. I mean, knowing what we all know now. Can you imagine the value? Ah well...missed opportunities are a way of life for most people. I can't complain.

Sips the claret, pour some more.

I handled the insurance claim myself. He would've ignored it and we'd have had nothing. Instead he was awarded two thousand dollars. He

bought a bottle of wine, a pair of Italian shoes and a chair. I asked for nothing, he pressed flowers on me, a canned ham, a scarf. He got through the winter, the pain not so bad, the work healed him. By next winter there was not enough for an orange. The work...faltered. There was another accident. The whole hand--the left one, of course. He bled profusely. I handled the claim myself. Ten thousand dollars.

Pause.

We went to Europe by boat. He ran a fever. I fed him antibiotics, he watched the sea. The masterwork proceeded. Two years later we were down to a pencil stub in the barrio Chino of Barcelona. A government grant got us home. My house had been repossessed, we were on the streets. There was another accident, fortunately near a hospital. This time the legs. Twenty-five thousand. Each. He was fitted for a prosthetic device. I strapped him in and out while he sat at the window and worked. He had a view of the park. We had a telephone. We had a carpet, a cat. The masterwork proceeded. I'm going to weep again.

Pause.

No. It's passed.

Sips the claret.

Four more years until the baying of the wolf. The masterwork on the verge of completion. Another accident. This time the arms. I learned to take dictation. The insurance company counter sued. We only got thirty-five thousand. For both. I exercised for strength in my back. I was lifting

him in and out of the basket. He was a veritable trunk. A bust in his own time. And as he began to disappear from view, these last words...

Indicating the manuscript at her side

...the light, the clarity.

Pause.

Yes. He created the masterwork. He, he, he! And I...I am his...savior and destroyer, isn't that what they say? Now how can I be both? I am neither. It is much simpler than that. I am his executrix.

Sips the claret.

He lost his tongue. Dictation became translation. I was more than useful, I was...essential. Essential. Essential in that I...partook of his essence and that he relied on mine. We had transcended emotion and reason. And when there was no more that I could understand...I cut the artery in his neck...and let his blood...flow...

Pause

This claret is the last of it.

Sips.

This is the end.

Throws head back and drains the glass.

Aaaaa.

The end

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *A few years ago, I spent some months living in Los Angeles, having been hired to write a script for a successful television series. The*

experience I had there, the comments made by the producers, as my work progressed, the pats on the back alternating with criticism when I had certain character speak as the producers knew he would not speak, made me feel as if the skills for which I'd been hired, along with my self-confidence, were being whittled away a little at a time. Although I did not put that way of being treated together with the intention to write a play about them, after I had written the play and had an actress friend read it to me, I saw, in fact, that is exactly what I had done. So the play comes to be an expression of the way an artist, with only his art with which to speak, undergoes the demands of the powers that be in order to pursue his greatest work. In the play, when the poet is finished with his masterwork, this power, who had apparently supported him all the way through the creation of the work, now considers the work done and her support no longer needed, ends her participation with the tip of a blade and a sip of claret.

AUTHOR BIO: My short stories have appeared in Descant, Bryant Literary Review, Central Park, Appearances, Talking River, Kerouac Review, Northern New England Review, Upstreet, Brink, Amarillo Bay, Perigee, Apple Valley Review, Drum, Brink, New Haven Review, Club Plum, Blue Mountain Review, Fleas on a Dog and others and have three times been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. One of my stories was selected as one of five Best Stories on the Net Anthology and nominated for the Million Writers Award. I am the author of three historical novels Black Orchid (with Nicholas Meyer), and Biscayne (Simon and Shuster) both selections of the Literary Guild and That Wilder Woman (Bantam Books). With co-author Rosemarie Tichler, I have written and edited the interview books Actors at Work and The Playwright at Work. I have an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop where I was research assistant to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. I am currently working on a novel about the Jews who fled Germany in 1938 and found safety in Shanghai.

As a playwright I have won the Whitfield Cooke Best Play Award from New Dramatists and a grant from New York State Council on the Arts for my history play, Blood and Water. Landscape of Desire is published by Smith and Krause and was the American representative to the 25th Australian National Playwriting Conference. My musical biography of Rock Hudson, Rock and Roy (music by Stephen Weinstock), was developed at New Dramatists with grants from the Frederick Loewe Foundation and the Cameron Mackintosh Foundation and had workshop productions at New Dramatists in New York and at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, both directed by Simon Callow. The musical Step Aside had workshops at the York Theatre in New York, and at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Like Love (music by Lewis Flinn) won a DramaLeague New Directors/New Works Project Prize and premiered at the New York Musical Theatre Festival. His story **Amsterdam too** was published in **Issue 9** (Fiction)