

♣ Playing For Time

.....ARTHUR MILLER

CHARACTERS: ALMA (30's), FANIA (30's)

SETTING: A concentration camp in Germany, the early 1940's.

ALMA is a German Jew and niece of the great composer Gustav Mahler, She has been assigned the duty of conducting an orchestra for the Germans while she is in a concentration camp. Fania is a Jewish woman in the orchestra in the concentration camp, too. As the scene opens, Alma is trying to get Fania to support her rigid demands for the orchestra. Alma feels if the orchestra does not play well, all of them will die.

ALMA: Talk to me, Fania.

(FANIA keeps silent, wary of expressing herself)

There must be strict discipline. As it is, Dr. Mengele can just bear to listen to us. If we fall below a certain level anything is possible . . . He's a violently changeable man.

(FANIA does not respond, only massages)

The truth is, if it weren't for my name they'd have burned them up long ago; my father was first violin with the Berlin Opera, his string quartet played all over the world . . .

FANIA: I know, Madame.

ALMA: That I, a Rosé, am conducting here is a . . .

FANIA: I realize that, Madame.

ALMA: Why do you resent me? You are a professional, you know what discipline is required; a conductor must be respected.

FANIA: But I think she can be loved, too.

ALMA: You cannot love what you do not respect. In Germany it is a perfectly traditional thing, when a musician is repeatedly wrong

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FANIA: To slap?

ALMA: Yes, of course! Furtwängler did so frequently, and his orchestra idolized him.

(FANIA keeping her silence, simply nods very slightly)

I need your support, Fania. I see that they look up to you. You must back up my demands on them. We will have to constantly raise the level of our playing or I. . . I really don't know how long they will tolerate us. Will you? Will you help me?

FANIA: I . . . I will tell you the truth, Madame — I really don't know how long I can bear this. (*She sees resentment in ALMA's eyes*) . . . I am trying my best, Madame, and I'll go on trying. But I feel sometimes that pieces of myself are falling away. And believe me, I recognize that your strength is probably what our lives depend on . . .

ALMA: Then why do you resent me?

FANIA: I don't know! I suppose . . . maybe it's simply that . . . one wants to keep *something* in reserve; we can't . . . we can't really and truly wish to please them. I realize how silly it is to say that, but . . .

ALMA: But you *must* wish to please them, and with all your heart. You are an artist, Fania — you can't purposely do less than your best.

FANIA: But when one looks out the window . . .

ALMA: That is why I have told you *not* to! You have me wrong, Fania — you seem to think that I fail to see. But I *refuse* to see. Yes. And *you* must refuse!

FANIA (*Nearly an outcry*): But what . . . (*She fears it will sound accusatory*) . . . what will be left of me, Madame!

ALMA: Why . . . yourself, the artist will be left. And this is not new, is it? — what did it ever matter, the opinions of your audience? — or whether you approved of their characters? You sang because it was in you to do! And more so now, when your life depends on it! Have you ever married?

FANIA: No, Madame.

ALMA: I was sure you hadn't — you married your art. I did marry . . . (*ALMA breaks off. She moves, finds herself glancing out the window, but quickly turns away*) . . . Twice. The first time to that . . . (*She gestures ironically toward her violin case lying on her cot*) The second time to a man, a violinist, who only wanted my father's name to open the doors for him. But it was my fault — I married him because I pitied myself; I had never had a lover, not even a close friend. There is more than a violin locked in that case, there is a life.

FANIA: I couldn't to that, Madame, I need the friendship of a man.

ALMA (*Slight pause*): I understand that, Fania. (*She is moved by an impulse to open up*) Once I very nearly loved a man. We met in Amsterdam. The three good months of my life. He warmed me . . . like a coat. I think . . . I could have loved him.

FANIA: Why didn't you?

ALMA: They arrested me . . . as a Jew. It still astonishes me.

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FANIA: Because you are so German?

ALMA: Yes. I am. (*Slight pause*) In this place, Fania, you will have to be an artist and only an artist. You will have to concentrate on one thing only — to create all the beauty you are capable of . . .

FANIA (*Unable to listen further*): Excuse me, Madame. (*She quickly pulls open the door and escapes into the darkness.*)

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