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Five Dollar Ticket

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Five Dollar Ticket

By

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Abstract

Despite the fact that American culture seems to hold tightly to the notion that happiness is only deserved by those who work for it, experiences which require some work to fully appreciate struggle to survive due to an apparent unwillingness to undertake said work by the vast majority of American consumers. In *Five Dollar Ticket*, I examine the struggles of such experiences to find purchase in the American market and offer suggestions on how to make the “work” aspect of their appreciation more appealing and valuable. Specifically, I use the examples of attending foreign language operas and eating spicy foods to illustrate the inherent values of such a “pain for pleasure” relationship.

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Chapter 1: Analysis

The following is my Graduate Thesis document, analyzing the creation process and performance of my one-man show, in accordance with the University of South Carolina's departmental requirement for such. The script for said piece, titled, *Five Dollar Ticket*, can be found in Appendix A.

At the very outset of our work on this project, I was unfamiliar with the art form, casting about without much real momentum in any particular direction. In retrospect, my basic approach to creating this work from square 1 was to find something about which I had something important to say, and to explore the origins of its importance through examples I'd noticed in my own life. Through the course of several free writing sessions, I found that I have a lot of strong feelings around the concept of "trading" pain for pleasure, and the myriad ways in which our culture propagates the mentality that that is the only respectable way to "earn" pleasure or comfort of any kind. As my example, it seems ridiculous to me that some of the same people who spend their entire lives in careers that don't interest them as part of the plan to "trade" that life of tedium for a comfortable retirement, will refuse to eat spicy foods or engage in entertainment that requires critical thinking or some occasional legwork to fully enjoy.

I am often frustrated by the lack of willingness in my fellow Americans to engage with media that requires anything beyond a shallow level of engagement on the part of

the viewer, a phenomenon evidenced by the bulk of American media which survives and thrives in our culture today. I am a passionate believer in the notion that stagnation is one of the worst fates a human being can fall into, and I feel let down by my fellow citizens and content consumers that the media with which our culture is currently flooded is so pandering to the lowest common denominators. The most economically sensible way to structure a film or television show is to cast famous people in roles they're already known for, and spend huge amounts of money on special effects and gimmicky cliches that create loud, flashy spectacles but don't necessarily need to advance the plot or inform character development. It is universally accepted as a major risk whenever an actor wants to portray a new type of role, a network wants to air a different genre tv series than it's known for, or anyone wants to break from the stale but low-hanging fruit which is the established norm.

With the ludicrously high production values available to the American media colossus, I view this trend as a great tragedy. What is perhaps most worrisome is the fact that those of us pulling for diversity and creative expansion are often in such a financial minority within the entertainment sphere that I fear we will lose irreplaceable pieces of culture like we have lost so many now-extinct species--with not enough people even realizing the danger until it is too late. We are in real danger of losing opera as an actively practiced art form; nearly all professional American opera companies are supported mostly by private patrons and advertising sponsorships, not from ticket sales. For English-speaking audiences, the vast majority of standard repertoire operas are deemed "inaccessible" due to the fact that so few natural-born citizens are multilingual.

As is mentioned in the script of my piece, doing some “homework” before seeing an opera in order to better follow and understand its beats and subtleties will invariably deepen one’s experience as an audience member; but it can seem like an impossible task to convince American audiences to take even that small extra step when there is so much vapid but easily understood media being churned out on a daily basis.

In the same vein, people unaccustomed to eating spicy food often recoil at the thought of trying anything that falls into that category. That fear and apprehension leads them to avoid spicy foods whenever they can, which in turn leads to a natural decrease in the prevalence of spicy foods in our culinary culture as a whole, ultimately resulting in a nation-wide loss of those recipes in favor of blander, more common tastes. In restaurants, I often order my food with the spiciest sauce that establishment carries; the vast majority of the time, I’m disappointed with the lack of heat in these sauces, even with names like, “lava” or “tongue scorcher.” It’s perfectly understandable on the part of the restaurant; it doesn’t make sense to keep a sauce in stock that the majority of its customers aren’t ordering. But when that approach is taken by the vast majority of restaurants, then it becomes more and more expected by the average patron and less and less feasible to hold out as a destination for spice lovers, and the entire society suffers from that loss. How often do we pass an authentic Vietnamese, Thai, or Cuban restaurant versus yet another burger or fried chicken shack? The apathetic complacency of the average American consumer is actively starving out what examples of cultural diversity and creative innovation we have left--and spicy foods and opera are only two of many examples.

This solo show is my attempt to bring some awareness to these vanishing treasures, and the combination of the pepper and the aria seemed a natural way to blend my love for both. The challenge of eating something spicy and then performing some other task is far from original, but I've never seen anyone attempt to sing as the challenge. It especially intrigued me because taking deep breaths in the wake of eating something very spicy exacerbates the burning feeling, and (especially operatic) singing requires huge amounts of breath. Given this, I wasn't entirely sure I would actually be able to make the concept work, which ended up giving me a sense of somewhat reckless abandon that I feel can be heard in the voice of the text and ultimately benefits the piece as a whole.

In getting the piece on its feet, I found that the piece itself naturally outlined the staging more than anything else. I highlighted each narrative beat of the monologue in a different color, totaling four basic themes. The first two and a half pages comprise the introduction section, in which I stand on my "soapbox" to explain the basic aim of the piece around trading pain for pleasure. Then I briefly mention the pepper before transitioning into talking about opera. I return to the pepper in my discussion of spicy food, followed by a detour to a conversation about smoking and the pain/pleasure balance inherent in that practice, before returning to my silver platter as I explain my blending of spice and singing. Each section was given its own area of the stage, with the introduction and smoking sections both taking place down center stage while standing on the downstage block, the opera section being set on and around the downstage left blocks, and the pepper/spicy food bits take place either standing near or sitting at the

table. This process of looking to the text to inform the staging in turn led to the staging informing the text, and necessary edits were made in response to this to trim some of the fat and concentrate the points I felt needed to be made into clearer-cut sections which could be grouped in the ways described above.

There was relatively little “research” done in the writing of this solo show, as the vast majority of its content arises from observations and ruminations I have personally made from the whole of my life experience up to the time of its writing. The only material I needed to look up was the chemical nature of capsaicin and its effects on the body, which can be found here: <https://helix.northwestern.edu/blog/2014/07/your-brain-capsaicin>. The process of revision and rehearsal was done through dialogue between the other members of the Graduate Acting Company and our overseeing professor, Robyn Hunt. It was Professor Hunt’s personalized critiques that most helped to guide the direction of the final product, though the chance to read aloud and bounce off of the other members of the company offered perspective that can’t be found in silence.

I am certainly interested in bringing this show to a new audience, albeit with some significant changes. My first reaction was to anticipate it growing somewhat in length, but after leaving the project for several months and now coming back to it, I think it may end up slightly shorter due to cuts. There are many places throughout the monologue which make use of descriptive imagery or multiple adjectives in ways that are ultimately detrimental to the overall momentum of the piece and feel like they could be distracting to a first-time audience member. I think the smoking bit can be

trimmed. I like its place in the piece both for how directly I find audience members have connected with it and for the way in which it sets up the next section, but it's enough of a tangential point in relationship to opera and spicy food that it feels a little "fatty" the way it stands.

Additionally, I would cut out the accompaniment in the *Toreador* section, and only sing, "Toreador, en garde! Toreador, Toreador," cutting the following, "et songe bien..." lines. I still think that the references to those famous tunes are worthwhile and productive, but adding the accompaniment and full stanza to the *Toreador* excerpt now feels self-indulgent. I do like that singing full out for those few lines of the *Toreador* gives the audience a look at how the actor sounds without the pepper, so as to provide as impactful a contrast as possible once the pepper is introduced at the end. I would also add orchestral accompaniment to the aria. Originally I was worried about being so occupied with the pepper that I wouldn't be able to "keep up" with the orchestra as it played on a track. However, in watching it back again I realize that this was a prideful fear, and that in this show's most effective form, the impact of the aria comes not from being impressed **that** the Actor knows all the German words and **can** get through the aria with the pepper, but rather **how well** the Actor can keep up with the orchestra relative to the pepper. It is less impressive to modify a challenge so that the challenger can accomplish it completely than it is to keep the challenge authentic and watch the challenger struggle against it with an added stressor. Especially for audiences who aren't familiar with the aria before attending my show, the a cappella rendition invites more scrutiny and head scratching than engagement and enthusiasm.

There is a small venue in my area called Dog Story Theater that specializes in hosting works of this kind by local artists. The pandemic has forced them to close their doors to artists and audiences alike, but if they are able to open again then I hope to put this show on there before moving out of Michigan to pursue wider career opportunities. I am hoping that Dog Story's intimate setting and relaxed atmosphere would inspire audience members to participate in a post-show talkback/Q&A, which I could use as a further step in refining this piece into its most effective form. This was a type of project that I almost certainly never would have come to of my own accord, and I am eternally grateful to Robyn Hunt and Steve Pearson for including it as part of our core curriculum for the University of South Carolina's Graduate Acting Company.

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Appendix A: Script

[Lights up on Actor standing next to a low table which is set with a loaf of bread on a cutting board, a knife, an empty wine glass, a set of panpipes, a pitch pipe, and a silver platter with covering tray concealing a ripe Jamaican scotch bonnet pepper, all neatly arrayed. A chair is pushed into the table. Four small, asymmetrically-sized wooden boxes stand positioned around the stage. The largest stands downstage left of the table, and its top face stands at about a 30° angle rising toward downstage left, rather than flat like the other cubes. The smallest box sits flush with the upstage face of the biggest box, hidden from view. The second largest stands directly downstage of the Actor, downstage right from the table. The second smallest stands just upstage of the Actor, slightly stage right of the table. A half gallon of milk in a wine chiller is hidden behind this box. Actor begins once Lights are up, walking slowly toward the downstage right box.] “I’m going to ask you all some questions tonight, and the reason that I’m going to do that is that these questions are like taxes. The whole point of taxes is that it is worth paying part of your own income in order to live in a society that cares about things like educating the next generation that’s gonna take over the reins from us, or building a system of healthcare that doesn’t bankrupt entire families when one member gets sick. No one wants to pay taxes, but if you don’t, then nothing gets done and you go to jail, and tend to miss out on things. You won’t go to jail if you don’t ask these

questions, but you will miss a lot of life that the rest of us are free to experience. The 20th Century civil-rights activist Howard Thurman has a great and famous quote, “Don’t ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” If you feel somewhat stagnant, and don’t particularly feel like you’ve been doing much “coming alive” lately, or even just want to be doing more of it, then you are exactly who I had hoped would come to this. Not to be that old actor-on-his-soapbox stereotype, but [steps up onto downstage box] a great way to start coming alive is to start coming to see live theatre.

What is a fair price for an experience? Objects that have great value, or that last a long time are often more expensive than cheaply made, more immediately disposable options. The price of food is especially intriguing in this regard. Never mind shelf life or prep time, the experience of enjoying food has almost entirely to do with the eating of it—an experience that lasts, at most, for the duration of one meal. Even if it’s a French banquet with seven courses—an entire, roasted suckling pig, slow-smoked for four hours over a hickory wood fire with a vibrant blend of rare spices, creamy, whipped mashed potatoes with garlic butter with extra garlic, fresh, perfectly cooked asparagus with that amazing crunchy crispness, baptized with ripe lemons and christened with parmesan shaved off the block—a meal that takes five hours to complete, it is still a relatively brief moment when one considers allocating the price of admission to something else, like a reliable coffee pot or a good book.

People go to the supermarket and get a whole cartload of *stuff*, bring it to the checkout counter, and the clerk prints out a long ticket and says, “that’ll be \$74 please,”

and everyone feels depressed. Because they have to give away \$74 worth of paper, even though they've *got* all the stuff, the actual *wealth* is in the cart, all you gave away was the paper! But in our society, our economic system, the paper becomes more valuable than the wealth. Because the paper represents power, potential spending, on...whatever you like. Whereas the wealth, you think, "ah, well. That's just necessary." You have to eat, you have to keep the air conditioner working, you have to buy a Christmas present for Todd in HR.

Even the really good coffee pots, and the best books ever written, that change you as a person and stay with you for years after you read them, cost a fraction of the price of your standard 7-course French banquet; so how can we justify trading so much literal, tangible potential for one evening of food and wine? What's a fair price for an experience? When you go to see a major Hollywood motion picture, the movie producers seem to be offering quite the bargain. They freely volunteer* to front the hundreds of millions of dollars required to build the entirety of Middle Earth or the Millennium Falcon and bring the whole world to life, and all they ask from us in return is 9 dollars apiece, 5 for students on Tuesday afternoons. It costs them nothing to hit "replay" and collect another 9 bucks a head; unless you count paying the employee his or her minimum wage to hit the button, the electric company to keep the lights on, and the government to continue to own the land on which the theater stands, but that's just how capitalism works and we know all about that.

But that's why live theatre is so expensive. There is no "replay button," it relies on the archaic principle from the days before recorded sound, where if you wanted to

listen to music you had to find a live person who knew how to sing or play an instrument and convince them to do it for you. Each night in the theater, the producers have to pay the actors and everybody else to do the whole thing all over again, each part of which had its own designer in the form of the director, set designer and such. And none of the designers are even in the building during the performance, but all of them must be paid for the entire rehearsal process, during which exactly \$0 of revenue are coming in from ticket sales, so they have to raise all the money beforehand, just like the movie producers. In making a movie, there are literally ten times as many designers, and a hundred times as many actors—but they also get literally millions more “performances” out of their front-loaded overhead costs than do live theaters, because each “performance” only costs as much as it takes to push a button.

So: why ever come to a place like this and pay currency for some guy to talk at you for a while, when you could be watching Captain America beat up Nazis with nothing but a shield and patriotism, and punching tanks until they explode?

Well, for one thing, [steps off of downstage right box] you can’t watch me eat a spicier pepper than anyone in their right mind should ever eat, live, in real time, unless *you* come to *me* on a night I’m going to do it and buy a ticket. What’s it worth? We’ll see...

[crossing to downstage left box] And that’s just for straight theatre. What about something like the opera? Not only is the ticket often more expensive than even other forms of live theatre, but most of the best ones require some homework before even

walking in the door. [takes “Captain Morgan” stance facing downstage left with one foot each on the largest and smallest boxes] As an art form with most of its history in Europe, the famous ones that everyone’s heard of or at least recognizes tunes from—*Die Walküre*, “The Valkyries,” [Actor sings Flight of the Valkyries theme] *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, “The Barber of Seville,” [Actor sings overture theme] *Carmen*, [Orchestral accompaniment begins and Actor sings Toreador snippet, then jumps off downstage left box and crosses stage right as accompaniment stops]—they’re all in different languages, right? I mean there are translated versions, but then not only are you undermining the composer’s very intentional setting of the rhythm of the music and the rhythm of the language together to complement one another, which takes originally beautiful writing and makes it sound clunky and awkward because you’re messing with stuff like syllabic emphasis; but you change the whole syntax, the “rules” of the relationships you’re watching on stage so that what was a tense and subtly menacing interrogation is now a casual inquiry; what was once a casual inquiry now implies repressed feelings of lust in a relationship in which they were never intended, and which pervert and cheapen the entire relationship in the context of the story. [sits on downstage right box]

If you do go to see a non-English opera in its original language, the “real,” “true” version, nowadays theaters will project a line-by-line translation on a screen above the stage. But if you want to watch what’s happening onstage instead of being glued to the translations, or even if you already speak the language it’s in, operatic singing is hard to understand and some homework on your part, before even entering the theater, will make you get a lot more out of it. You really should Google an opera you’re about to see

and read the Wikipedia synopsis of the plot, scene by scene. Don't worry about spoilers too much, the plots are usually pretty predictable anyway, and the ones that aren't usually *are* the original versions of every "mistaken identity" or "secret betrayal" trope story you've already seen a hundred times. The intrigue of watching the plot unfold is not the primary reason you go to an opera, the music is; and once you realize that, then the reading up beforehand doesn't even feel like homework. Knowing that any particular scene is coming does nothing to lessen the enjoyment of the actual performance. In the read-through we get none of the real atmosphere of the thing—carpeted by lush orchestration and the sweeping swells of cellos and trombones as the sinister baritone weaves his plan for revenge, the playful dancing of flutes and violins, illustrating the prima donna's masterful command of toying with men's hearts, the mournful oboe moaning out the agony of the tenor's despair at his own desperate and unrequited love. Operatic writing, in general, and especially in the works of certain composers, like Mozart, is largely structured as, "the words say what the character is thinking, while the *music* is how he feels about it. So the ways someone might feel, and the relationships in which people find themselves, saying, "I love you," or "I'll kill him," or "if only," have as many possible depictions as there are composers to set them and singers to speak them, and they do so with a tension and a depth that could simply never be achieved through words alone.

In this way, watching an opera is a lot like eating spicy food. [crosses upstage left around the table to stand directly upstage of the chair] We, in this country, seem to have convinced ourselves that in order to deserve anything fun or pleasurable, we have

to undergo some kind of hardship or trial, which in some way “pays” our universal, karmic “dues” as human beings. Generations of institutionalized Catholic Guilt probably have something to do with that [adjusts chair to be centered on the table], but it still applies to eating spicy food very well. Any spicy thing has both the heat, *and* whatever actual *flavor* is in that pepper or spice or hot sauce or whatever, and you have to brave the heat to get at the flavors underneath. There’s actually a molecule in spicy foods called capsaicin, which registers in our brains as “hot,” because the way capsaicin interacts with the cells on your tongue is the same as when they’re exposed to intense heat. So spicy food and heat burns *are* actually similar at the molecular, cellular, and sensory levels.

I never used to eat spicy food. [sits at table and cuts one slice from the loaf of bread] I balked at anything that challenged my culinary comfort zone of chicken fingers, mac & cheese, and candy, and regarded flavors like hot dog mustard or “table shaker” pepper similarly to how I regard gory slasher films or, veganism—certainly enjoyable for some people, but a little too extreme for me. Aside from straight-up masochists, why would anybody invite suffering into their lives for their own enjoyment? What appeal could there possibly be in setting your mouth on fire with spice, watching the unspeakable acts of violence depicted in the Saw movies, doing...all it takes to be a vegan?

Part of the answer, of course, is that the pain lessens over time. [crosses to downstage right block and steps up on it] Those of you who smoke, can you remember the first cigarette you ever had? We’ve all heard those stories: drawn to the appeal of

inclusion in that “club,” the sentinels standing guard just outside the doors of restaurants, house parties, offices, whether leaning over a guardrail to catch the soft breeze in the languid evening air of June, or huddled together to keep ourselves and our feebly glowing red tips alive as snow whips around our backs; drawn to that tiny flame like a curious and ostracized moth, isolated by our own choice not to partake—up until that day. We finally give in to our own curiosity only to find that the shroud of mystery has been covering the horrible and disgusting reality of burning ash scorching the soft, sensitive flesh of your mouth, throat, and nose. The deep and muscular coughs that wrack your body with tremors and aftershocks, making your throat feel like the torn and tattered tail of an old wind sock—buffeted and blown out by winds far harder than those for which the sock was ever intended. We endure all that, and even go back for more, in pursuit of whatever image of ourselves we may have—to be more...rebellious, masculine, to care less about our own health and better judgement than we do about sex, getting drunk, blowing off steam—whatever it is that we feel will be enhanced by cigarettes. Eventually the pain does lessen, as does the novelty of our own participation in it, as does that head rush, after which we’ve all seen people so desperately chasing, decades into their own smoking careers—to the point that men and women are literally willing to have holes drilled into their own throats, just so they can keep gasping smoke into their lungs without further assaulting the parts of their ragged, withered windpipes that still have working nerve endings.

But this concept [gets off box and crosses to upstage right block, pours milk into wine glass, and sits in the chair], that we have to endure pain in order to “earn” the

experience of pleasure, is a very old one, and one that deeply pervades American culture. The cigarette example is perhaps one of the more extreme, making a potentially huge sacrifice over a long period of time in exchange for a relatively very mild and brief exhilaration. There are, of course, many others readily available: “eat your vegetables before you can have dessert,” “work a double shift on Thursday so that you’ll have money to go out with on Friday,” “spend your life in a career that doesn’t interest you so that you can have a comfortable retirement once your body is too old and tired to enjoy it.”

In some cases, the decrease in how painful something is over time can go even further. [sits at table] What we originally experience as pain can even turn into strength. This is very much the case with spicy food. People that eat lots of spicy, capsaicin-rich foods build up a tolerance to it. A small jolt of capsaicin excites the nervous system into producing endorphins, and the higher your tolerance to capsaicin’s “heat,” the more of it you can “jolt” yourself with at a time. This endorphin lift actually, chemically, makes spicy foods mildly addictive. I love spicy food now. At some point I realized that I was voluntarily excluding myself from an enormous genre of flavors by avoiding anything spicier than mayonnaise. You simply cannot taste the floral, fruity, pungent sweetness of a perfectly ripened habanero pepper without also facing its heat. Drawn to those enigmatic, underlying flavors, locked away beneath the thin but fierce shroud of heat and pain, I started mild, probably with that wonderful spicy garlic sauce they make over at Buffalo Wild Wings; but soon I found myself searching out increasingly spicier food. I love the fact that adding spice to a meal means that the experience of enjoying it

continues even after leaving the table. That lingering burn on your tongue after bathing it in acidic excitement lets you know that you've faced something formidable, and conquered it— it's similar to the endorphin rush one gets after a particularly strenuous workout. Now I find myself eagerly seizing the opportunity to try any new sauce with a name like, "Jet Fuel," "Fire in the Hole," or "Insinerator," with an "S."

Come alive with me, won't you? Do some homework before you go see your next show. Dare to order food with one more pepper emoji next to it than you usually do. Find *experiences* that require so much of your incredible, evolutionarily unique human perspective that you are forced to be fully present in both mind and body at once. That is precisely what this is going to do. [removes silver platter cover] This is a Jamaican Scotch Bonnet. It is a cousin of, and has the same heat range as a habanero, with the mildest of them coming in at 100,000 Scoville units, which is what they use to measure capsaicin. Eating one of these is the spice equivalent of eating between one hundred, and three thousand, five hundred raw jalapenos at once. It cost me 25 cents. I am going to eat this [cuts off stem], and then attempt to sing one of my favorite arias, from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*). Papageno is the character, and he has spent the whole opera helping the tenor pass a series of trials in order to win them both their own perfect brides. Despite the tenor's success and Papageno's best efforts, Papageno himself fails every test. In this scene, Papageno has just failed the final trial by being too talkative, and is despairing the subsequent loss of his promised bride-to-be, named Papagena (Papageno, Papagena). He decides the only reasonable course of action is of course to hang himself. Don't worry, he gets saved right at the end, but

that's its own scene and you'll have to watch the rest of the opera for that. And a one, and a two...[Actor eats pepper, blows a G on the pitch pipe, and sings Papageno's suicide aria, searching the stage for Papagena. The aria is sung in German with English translations projected on a screen above the stage.]

'Papagena! Papagena! Papagena!	Weil das Leben mir missfällt.
Weibchen! Täubchen! meine Schöne!	Gute Nacht, du schwarze Welt!
Vergebens! Ach sie ist verloren!	Weil du böse an mir handelst,
Ich bin zum Unglück schon geboren.	Mir kein schönes Kind zubandelst,
Ich plauderte, - und das war schlecht,	So ists aus, so sterbe ich:
Darum geschieht es mir schon recht.	Schöne Mädchen, denkt an mich.
Seit ich gekostet diesen Wein -	Will sich eine um mich Armen,
Seit ich das schöne Weibchen sah -	Eh' ich hänge, noch erbarmen,
So brennts im Herzenskämmerlein,	Wohl, so lass ichs diesmal seyn!
So zwickt es hier, so zwickt es da.	Rufet nur - ja, oder nein! -
Papagena! Herzenstäubchen!	Keine hört mich; alles stille!
Papagena! liebes Weibchen!	Also ist es euer Wille?
'S ist umsonst! Es ist vergebens'	Papageno, frisch hinauf!
Müde bin ich meines Lebens!	Ende deinen Lebenslauf.
Sterben macht der Lieb' ein End	Nun ich warte noch; es sey!
Wenns im Herzen noch so brennt.	Bis man zählt: Eins, zwey, drey!
Diesen Baum da will ich zieren,	[blows panpipes]
Mir an ihm den Hals zuschnüren,	Eins!

[blows panpipes]

Zwey!

[blows panpipes]

Drey!

Nun wohlán, es bleibt dabey,

Weil mich nichts zurücke hält!

[steps up onto downstage right box and
mimes putting head through noose]

Gute Nacht, du falsche Welt!’

[extends leg as though to step off of the
box]

Blackout”