

Tomáš Horváth

THE CHAIR

(An Existential Farce in One Act.)

„If we cannot be normal , then for heaven’s sake,
let ’s at least pretend we are.“

Witold Gombrowicz

Tr a n s l a t i o n : H e a t h e r T r e b a t i c k á

C H A R A C T E R S P E R F O R M I N G :

G e y e r – No further descri p t i o n

The Boss – Fat

N u r s e – Pretty enough to attract the audience (around 25)

C o r a – Neither stupid nor wise, just normal (around 40)

L u c i e n – Handsome enough to attract the other half of the
a u d i e n c e

P r o f e s s o r – Looks just like a professor

D o c t o r – A symbol, but this may not be obvious to eve r y o n e
(b e t w e e n 35-60)

A l b e r t – The main pillar of the ideas of the theatre of existence ,
which he has reason to be (over 40)

C H A R A C T E R S P R E S E N T B U T N O T P E R F O R M I N G :

God and his Son – Who see eve r y t h i n g , are amused, but take no
a c t i v e p a r t

M a n z i n i – My other self

*(A chair. Occupied by a good-looking fo r t y - year-old with a bandage d
h e a d , dressed in striped pyjamas. The Nurse enters, holding a number
of letters in her hand.)*

N u r s e : *(Handing him the letters.)* So they’ve found you even here.

A l b e r t : *(He says nothing, just takes the letters and opens them. H e
r e a d s , sometimes with a trace of a smile.)*

N u r s e : I envy yo u . So many admirers... *(She bends over him and
c h a n g e s the bandage on his head. Suddenly she squeals.)*

Ooo! *(S e v e r e l y.)* Which hand?

A l b e r t : *(He smiles and holds out his left hand.)*

N u r s e : *(She pulls a cane out from under her apron and raps his
hand with it; a r c h l y , p r o v o c a t i v e l y.)* Just dare do that again!

A l b e r t : *(T h o u g h t f u l l y.)* I can’t move the right one.

N u r s e : *(R e p e a t i n g in an ingratiating manner.)* You just try... next
t i m e ... !

A l b e r t : Who know s ...

N u r s e : *(D i s a p p o i n t e d.)* W h a t ?

A l b e r t : Who knows if there will be a next time...

N u r s e : *(She picks up a blanket from the floor and busily cove rs him
with it.)* Stop talking like that or I shall tell the Doctor and
you’ll get an enema.

A l b e r t : T h a t ’d be a change.

N u r s e : And they’ll pump your stomach.

Al b e r t : Not on your life! At last I've had a good meal.

N u r s e : (*Pa r r o t - f a s h i o n , i t b e i n g c l e a r s h e o f t e n r e p e a t s i t .*) Yo u ' l l s p e n d a f e w m o n t h s h e r e a n d h a v e a r e s t . Yo u ' r e o n l y o v e r w o r k e d .

Al b e r t : H u h , r e s t !

N u r s e : C a r e .

Al b e r t : Care – women eve rywhere! W h y c a n ' t I c a l l s o m e o f m y f r i e n d s ?

N u r s e : A s k t h e D o c t o r .

Al b e r t : (*T r y i n g t o s o u n d i n d i f f e r e n t .*) W h y s h o u l d I i n v i t e t h e m ?

N u r s e : I t ' s h u m a n n a t u r e . W e ' l l h a v e a r e s t i n b e d a n d i n a f e w m o n t h s w e ' r e o u t o f h e r e .

Al b e r t : (*F a c e t i o u s l y .*) T h e c a l l o f N a t u r e ! T h a t ' s w h y I ' m h e r e . (*S u s p i c i o u s l y .*) A n d w h a t a b o u t m y a r m ?

N u r s e : W e g o t a n i n j e c t i o n t o p u t i t o u t o f a c t i o n . D o n ' t y o u r e m e m b e r ? A s a p u n i s h m e n t f o r c l u t c h i n g t h e D o c t o r ' s b r e a s t s .

Al b e r t : (*H e a v i l y s a r c a s t i c .*) H u h , s h e g o t a n y ? (*T h e D o c t o r e n t e r s .*)

D o c t o r : (*T o A l b e r t , i n a p r o f e s s i o n a l m a n n e r .*) H o w a r e w e ? N o p r o b l e m s ? (*T h e s e a r e c l e a r l y r h e t o r i c a l q u e s t i o n s . T o t h e N u r s e .*)

S t o p g i v i n g h i m p y t h o t h a m i n e .

Al b e r t : (*S u d d e n l y r e b e l s .*) W h y c a n ' t I c a l l m y f r i e n d s ?

D o c t o r : (*C o l d l y .*) T h e t i m e h a s n ' t c o m e f o r t h a t y e t .

Al b e r t : (*A t t h a t m o m e n t t h e e m b o d i m e n t o f d e f i a n t a r r o g a n c e .*)

H a v e y o u a n y i d e a w h o ' s t h e o n l y o n e t o d e c i d e a b o u t t i m e ?

D o c t o r : H e r e I d e c i d e a b o u t t i m e . (*I r o n i c a l l y .*) I d o n ' t k n o w i f I a m t h e o n l y o n e .

Al b e r t : (*L a u g h i n g .*) C r a p ! L o a d o f c r a p ! (*H e s i t s r e s i g n e d l y f o r a w h i l e – t h e D o c t o r s n a p s h e r f i n g e r s i n f r o n t o f h i s f a c e – t h e n w i t h r e v i v e d h o p e .*) I w a n t t o s p e a k t o m y w i f e .

D o c t o r : I t w o u l d g e t y o u e x c i t e d . Y o u k n o w v e r y w e l l w h y .

Al b e r t : W h y ? W h a t ? D a m n i t , w h a t c o u l d e x c i t e m e a b o u t h e r a f t e r a l l t h e s e , w e l l , t w e n t y y e a r s ? A n d w h a t a b o u t y o u , D o c t o r ?

D o n ' t y o u e x c i t e m e ? N o o n e h a s e x c i t e d m e i n t h e p a s t t w e n t y y e a r s a s m u c h a s y o u d i d . . . W h e n y o u h a d t h e m g i v e m e t h a t b l o o d y i n j e c t i o n . . .

(*T h e D o c t o r l e a v e s , h u m m i n g a p l a y f u l m e l o d y .*)

Al b e r t : (*M u t t e r s i n d i g n a n t l y .*) B i t c h . . . i t w a s s h e w h o t o l d t h e m t o g i v e m e t h a t v i l e i n j e c t i o n . . .

N u r s e : L a y s t i l l , M a r s h a l l .

Al b e r t : U h ? A p a r t f r o m t h a t d a m n e d c h a i r , y o u ' v e h a v e n ' t g o t a b l o o d y t h i n g h e r e . W h e r e a m I m e a n t t o l i e s t i l l ? O n t h e f l o o r ?

N u r s e : I t ' s a l l p a r t o f t h e t r e a t m e n t , M a r s h a l l .

Al b e r t : W h y ' v e y o u s t a r t e d c a l l i n g m e M a r s h a l l a g a i n ? I t o l d y o u c a t e g o r i c a l l y t h a t I d o n ' t w a n t y o u t o .

N u r s e : (*I s a b o u t t o e x p l a i n .*)

Al b e r t : (*R a i s i n g h i s v o i c e .*) T h a t I d o n ' t w a n t y o u t o !

N u r s e : I t ' s . . .

Al b e r t : (*Y e l l s .*) I d o n ' t w a n t y o u t o ! (*P a u s e .*) I t o l d y o u c a t e g o r i c a l l y . . .

N u r s e : (*W a t c h e s h i m c o o l l y .*)

Al b e r t : (*L o o k i n g a t h e r .*) W h a t ' s t h e m a t t e r ?

N u r s e : N o t h i n g . G o o n ; g e t i t o u t o f y o u r s y s t e m . W e ' v e p l e n t y o f

t i m e .

A l b e r t : Yo u 're stealing my time. Yo u 're stealing mine to add to yo u rs. M o n t h s , ye a rs , h ow long have I been here? W h at e l s e ...

N u r s e : (*C a l m l y .*) Ye s , I know what it's like.

A l b e r t : (*R e s i g n e d l y .*) O . K . go on, t h e n . (*It probably always finishes like this. S t e r e o ... t y p e .*)

N u r s e : I t 's part of the treat m e n t .

A l b e r t : W h at is? T h at I'm meant to get it out of my system? I can accept that ...

N u r s e : T h at I call you Mars h a l l . Do you understand? Your most at t r a c t i v e role!

A l b e r t : (*A g g r i e v e d .*) I wanted to play the Generalissimo himself, but it was pinched from me by ... Geyer... just because he's o l d e r .

N u r s e : (*A u t o m a t i c a l l y c a l m i n g h i m .*) Just because he's older.

A l b e r t : (*More to himself than to her .*) It all boils down to the pri v i l e g e s he got from his parents. Nothing but chance. (*He s h r u g s h i s s h o u l d e r s t h e a t r i c a l l y t o d e m o n s t r a t e h i s i n d i f f e r e n c e .*) C h a n c e . They felt like it. Two people always feel like

i t . The result – little Gey e r . P l o p , and he starts cry i n g . H e got tangled in the umbilical cord. And that 's why he playe d the Generalissimo. He churned it out without having to m a k e a n y e f f o r t . No problem.

N u r s e : (*A u t o m a t i c a l l y .*) G e y e r ... c h u r n e d i t o u t .

A l b e r t : T h at 's it! (*He ye l l s .*) C h u r n e d i t o u t ! Without any effort! Yo u c a n 't churn out the Generalissimo without any effort! Yo u h a v e t o s w e a t i t o u t ... Weep... I am the Generalissimo when I act it; I am Hamlet, a piece of soap, a chair... (*He chokes. He runs his hands down the legs of the chair he is sitting on.*)

N u r s e : Yo u 're the Mars h a l l . (*They both g a z e a t e a c h o t h e r f o r a w h i l e , t h e N u r s e s t a n d i n g n e x t t o h i m .*)

A l b e r t : (*U n e a s y , e m b a r r a s s e d .*) Where... where could I go to the....?

N u r s e : (*P a t i e n t l y .*) You know ve ry well that yo u 're not allowed out.

A l b e r t : But I must... must go. You know what I mean?

N u r s e : Of course I do. But you can't go out. We have dogs, r a d d a r ...

A l b e r t : (*E x p l o d e s .*) I need to piss!

N u r s e : (*She examines her nails .*)

A l b e r t : (*V a r y i n g i t .*) I need to go to the bog.

N u r s e : T h at 's here... (*After a moment.*) I f , o f c o u r s e , you mean the t o i l e t .

A l b e r t : (*G a z e s r o u n d t h e e m p t y s t a g e . R e s i g n e d l y d r o p s h i s h e a d i n t o h i s h a n d s , a s i f h e i s m e d i t a t i n g .*)

N u r s e : (*After a w h i l e , t i r e d l y .*) Yo u 're sitting on it.

A l b e r t : (*I n c r e d u l o u s . G e t s t o h i s f e e t a n d p i c k s u p t h e c h a i r – a h u g e h o l e i s c a r v e d i n t h e s e a t , b i g e n o u g h e v e n f o r a b u l l t o ...*) I s t h i s m e a n t t o s e r v e a s a p i s s o i r , t o o ?

N u r s e : (*She doesn't answe r .*)

A l b e r t : (*U n e a s i l y .*) Go out of the room, will yo u ?

N u r s e : I can't . You know ve ry well I can't . I wo n 't look.

A l b e r t : At least go over there a bit, will you? Go over there!

N u r s e : (*C o n s i d e r s .*) I can go over there. (*M o v e s a w a y f r o m h i m , b u t*

watches him out of the corner of her eye.)

*Alb ert : (Looks around suspiciously, then sits down and remains sitting with a concentrated look on his face for about three minutes.)*You can look now, Nurse .

Nurse : (Comes up to him and gives him a long look.) You go over there now, huh ?

Alb ert : (Gets up and changes places with the Nurse. Strikes a match at a distance.)

Nurse : (Suddenly jumps up from the... chair (?) and takes away his cigarettes and matches.)

Alb ert : (Resignedly.) Why ?

Nurse : (Looks triumphantly at the box , pulls out a notebook and jots something down .)

Alb ert : (Indignantly.) Every day... every day you confiscate one box ... I don't even get a chance to take a drag. I don't even know where I get these boxes from!

*Nurse : (Leaps at him.)*Where from? *(She 's much smaller than he is ; she grabs him by the collar and shakes him.)*Where do you get them from?

Alb ert : (Gasping for air.) Don't strangle me!!! Don't strangle me!

Nurse : (Sitting him down on the chair.) No one is going to strangle you . *(Changes her tone of voice.)* Don't worry ; no one is going to strangle you .

(A chair. Alb ert hesitantly enters the room, which looks exactly like the previous one. It, too, is empty. The Doctor is standing next to the chair.)

Doctor : Sit down .

Alb ert : (Slowly goes over to the chair.) And where are you going to sit ?

Doctor : I have a choice. I can stand, crouch , lie , walk .

Alb ert : (Slowly sits down .)

Doctor : (Lies down in front of Alb ert , uncoupling her thigh.) Now, then... Why did we strangle your wife, Alb ert ?

Alb ert : (Explodes.) For God's sake...what...! *(He gets up.)*

Doctor : (Ingratiatingly.) Come on, Alb ert . Sit down . Do you really remember nothing about it?

Alb ert : (Slowly begins to smile, looks very cunning.) Well , actually ...

Doctor : (Waiting.) Well ?

Alb ert : Well , actually... I did strangle her.

Doctor : And why, you delightful rogue?

Alb ert : She was so frail... Like a little bird. Just squeeze. All I had to do was squeeze. If only it had been enough, just hold, hold...as long as I could.

Doctor : (Suddenly shrieks.) Your wife is over there! *(She points to the other, raised part of the stage , which just then appears from behind a curtain : the interior of a modern flat . The Nurse is standing there in a see-through negligee.)*

Alb ert : (Steps up and enters the interior.) I enter the room. My hands are shaking. Little bird, my little bird. I try to behave naturally. *(He approaches the Nurse.)*

Nurse : (Good-humoredly.) Back from your rehearsal , dear ?

Alb ert : (Turning to the Doctor.) She must behave naturally, too, if

I'm to enter into the spirit of it.

Nurse: (*Tries to put on a casual air.*) Someone from the studio was looking for you while you were out.

Albert: That's it! (*He grabs her by the throat, strangling her, while calling out lightly.*) Little bird! Little bird!

Doctor: (*Watches them, then cries out.*) That's enough, Albert! That's enough!

Albert: (*Of course continues to strangle her.*)

Doctor: (*She runs over to the raised part of the stage, struggles for a while with Albert, pulls him away and bends over the Nurse, who doesn't show any signs of life. The Doctor pats and massages her, the Nurse opens her eyes.*)

Albert: (*Enthusiastically.*) For as long as I could! (*He is reeling with delight. He throws himself at the Doctor's feet.*) Madam, you are providence itself!

Nurse: (*Feeling her neck, in an exhausted whisper.*) Ah, Alby... you sensualist.

Doctor: (*To the Nurse.*) The telephone! (*It can't be heard. The Nurse goes out. The Doctor is summing up.*) So... a little demonstration.

Albert: (*Sits down on the chair cum toilet.*) Ah, she has revived me... My right hand is working, too!

Doctor: I have a feeling you are putting it on for us. (*Pause.*) You didn't strangle your wife at all.

Albert: I strangled her, I swear to God above... Well, maybe not above, but I strangled her and then suddenly... Providence, you see, providence itself tore my hand from her throat. As you did. Ever since that day my wife hasn't stopped philosophising. She claims to have discovered a kind of gradual transition between being and not being – that's when I strangled her – and not being and being – when I let her go.

She even had a discussion with Sartre... in some literary journal or other. She's gone out of her mind.

Doctor: And you're responsible for her madness.

Albert: Oh, no... Jean Paul is a decent chap and not a bugger like... you know who, I played the part of the servant in it. And anyway, everyone is the architect of his own madness.

Doctor: (*In the form of a lightning interview.*) Sumame?

Albert: (*Well-practiced.*) Schmidt.

Doctor: Nationality?

Albert: Austrian.

Doctor: First name?

Albert: Albert.

Doctor: Citizenship?

Albert: German.

Doctor: Surname?

Albert: Schmidt.

Doctor: Quicker!

Albert: (*Promptly.*) Schmidt!

Doctor: No, I mean... quicker – an antonym?

Albert: Slowlier. (*Corrects himself immediately.*) Slower.

Doctor: Quicker – a synonym?

Alb ert : More quickly.

Do ct or : Do you know any others ?

Alb ert : More quick.

Do ct or : Excellent! Healthy.

Alb ert : *(In a flash.)* Sick... synonym – not sick...unsick.

Do ct or : No, I meant: you are healthy. Mentally you are perfectly fit.

For gri e vous bodily harm and attempted murder you could

get...I suppose, a minimum of twenty ye a rs. And that wo u l d

l e ave mental harm unpunished. U n f o r t u n a t e l y , t h e r e 's no

society mature enough to punish anything except mat e ri a l

t h i n g s .

Alb ert : *(N a i v e l y .)* But I don't want... And Cora...is she angry with me ?

Do ct or : Cora was your wife, you little fool.

Alb ert : Yes... she's angry with me.

Do ct or : *(P a t i e n t l y .)* After all, you did strangle her, Alb ert .

(C o r a e n t e r s , b u t A l b e r t d o e s n ' t n o t i c e h e r y e t .)

Alb ert : Out of the question. I strangled the Nurs e .

Do ct or : I understand yo u , Alb ert , you are an incurable romantic. O f

c o u r s e , young flesh is infinitely more at t r a c t i v e , but yo u

strangled Cora. She wore nylon tights; it always irri t ated yo u .

Alb ert : *(D e s p a i r i n g l y .)* C o r a !

C o r a : *(Comes over to Alb ert , who only now notices her, hugs him.)*

A h , poor Alb ert . *(She says it rather dispa r a g i n g l y , b u t t h e r e i s s o m e m a t e r n a l f e e l i n g i n h e r v o i c e .)*

Do ct or : *(Smiling j o v i a l l y .)* Well... I suspect I'm not needed here a n y m o r e . *(She leave s .)*

Alb ert : *(Shakes his head, c r i e s a n d s n i f f s .)*

C o r a : Poor Alb ert , w h a t h a p p e n e d t o y o u ? You pounced on me;

and in front of the whole camera crew... it simply wa s n ' t

p o s s i b l e t o h u s h i t u p . J u s t i m a g i n e , w e h a d t o c e r t i f y y o u a s

i n s a n e , o t h e r w i s e t h e y w o u l d h a v e s h o v e d y o u i n t o p r i s o n .

Alb ert : *(Looking f u r t i v e l y a r o u n d a n d w h i s p e r s .)* Cora... yo u 're the

o n l y o n e I c a n t r u s t . You must get me out of here. I don't

k n o w w h a t t h e y a r e d o i n g t o m e , b u t i t 's t e r r i b l e , t h a t I d o

k n o w . *(G r a s p s h e r b y t h e h a n d .)* Ye s t e r d a y I c o u l d n ' t m o v e

m y r i g h t h a n d . . . t h e y a r e s t u f f i n g m e w i t h p i l l s a n d i n j e c t i o n s . *(P u s h e s h e r i n t h e d i r e c t i o n o f t h e e x i t .)* You can get me

o u t o f h e r e . You tell them I'm sane, t h a t y o u w a n t m e t o g o

h o m e w i t h y o u .

C o r a : *(H o r r i f i e d .)* N u r s e ! *(The Doctor and Nurse enter .)* I think i t 's c o m i n g o v e r h i m a g a i n .

(The Nurse and Doctor grasp him professionally under the a r m p i t s a n d s i t h i m d o w n o n t h e c h a i r .)

Alb ert : C o r a , a r e y o u c r a z y ?

C o r a : Alb ert , the Doctor is my good fri e n d . S h e 's s a v i n g y o u f r o m p r i s o n . You must be p a t i e n t .

Alb ert : *(I r a s c i b l y .)* H o w l o n g a m I g o i n g t o h a v e t o w a i t ?

C o r a : Do they treat you badly here? Do they beat yo u ?

Alb ert : Ye s , t h e y d o .

N u r s e : Only when he's lecherous.

C o r a : *(Announces the v e r d i c t .)* Stick it out! *(She leave s .)*

Alb ert : (*S t ruggles to free himself, but is finally tied down to the chair a gain .*)

Do ct or : It's all right now, all ri g h t . (*Pa u s e .*) We must work together, Alb ert .

Alb ert : (*Resuming a cynical mask.*) Huh! Work together! (*Th i n k s for a moment.*) H ow could we do that ... ?

Do ct or : On the basis of equality. An equal part n e r s h i p.

Alb ert : (*G r i n s fo o l i s h l y .*)

Do ct or : (*She sends the Nurse away with an impatient ge s t u r e . Th e y are left alone.*) You can make films.

Alb ert : I n t e r e s t i n g . I don't know how long you have been dru m m i n g into my head that I can't . Can I leave now ?

Do ct or : You can only do it here. You keep wanting to leave... do yo u want them to shut you up? Your colleagues will come to yo u and you can shoot your films... here.

Alb ert : (*I n d i g n a n t .*) I have n 't got to the point where I'm ready to act in films any w h e r e . And anything! Let them send me some scri p t s.

Do ct or : There wo n 't be any scri p t . Th a t 's the experi m e n t .

Alb ert : I don't believe in experi m e n t s. You say – dead horses laugh in the sand – and you think yo u 're being really ori gi n a l ...

But hundreds of horses have already used that sentence.

Do ct or : A happening. A ve ry interesting one at that .

Alb ert : And the situat i o n ?

Do ct or : We'll come to that . (*She scrutinises him.*) Will you have stage fri g h t ?

Alb ert : I'm not afraid of any situat i o n . O . K . You'll tell me lat e r .

O . K . I'll take it. L e ave me alone now.

(*The Doctor exits, the Nurse enters and Alb ert glares at her, but she looks indiffe r e n t . Her neck is in plaster. It slowly gets dark . Alb ert ru n s through all possible situations – from At the Doctor's to Up To Mischief .*)

(*Ch a i r s . A circle of chairs with one in the middle, on which Alb ert is s i t t i n g . He is alone and he looks lost in thought. The Doctor enters.*)

Do ct or : Can we start ?

Alb ert : (*N o d s .*) I'm ready.

(*The Doctor opens the door and Cora enters together with Geyer, t h e Boss of the film company and Lucien, the yo u n g e s t , looking blasé. Th e y all greet Alb ert , we ll , h ow goes it, you healthy sick man, you look better than when yo u 're sane and so on, e ven Geyer makes an effo r t to be heart y. A few moments later the Nurse enters. She stands silently in the doorway, then steps aside to let in the film crew and camera s, the lighting engi n e e r s, e t c. A technical discussion fo ll ows for a wh i l e .*)

Do ct or : (*Sh o u t s .*) Action!

(*They all try to sit down as quickly as possible, as if they are afra i d they wo n 't get a chair. But there is one for eve ryo n e , only the Nurs e remains standing. She watches the others disinterestedly. The crew m e m b e r s relax. Alb ert turns round on his chair to face wh o e ver he is talking with. But note it is not a revolving chair.*)

Do ct or : (*To Alb ert , c e r e m o n i o u s l y .*) M r . S c h m i d t , we have gat h e r e d here to inform yo u ...

Alb ert : Wait a minute! We didn't agree on your calling me by my

realign me. And you didn't let me know the topic in advance. Call me, for example... (*Maliciously.*) Ge yer. (*The latter wriggles irritably.*)

Doctor: Calm down, Albert. The question of the name is irrelevant, to say the least. We're concerned with much more serious matters. Or matter. I'm going to inform you of it after serious consideration and with the agreement of all the others. (*She falls silent. In an official tone.*) Albert Schmidt, you are sick.

Albert: You've been trying to bamboozle me into believing that for quite some time. Do you mean to say that now you are doing it for the first time with the agreement of my friends?

Doctor: You have a tumour in your brain, which is unfortunately growing in a different direction than it should. Modern medicine... hmm... can't cure... prevent... do you understand?

Make it easier for me, Albert.

Albert: (*Horrified, his hand goes up to the bandage he has on his head – he doesn't seem to be acting – Cora places her hand on his, Albert calms down.*)

Doctor: (*Continues in a firm voice.*) Why am I telling you this? We don't want to worry you, but we know...

Boss: (*Interrupts her.*) You have terrific potential, Schmidt, and so far you have made use of perhaps two thirds of it... You have wonderful potential. There isn't much time. We want you to rehearse the role of your life...

Albert: (*With a premonition.*) Time... how much time?

Doctor: That depends on you. (*She is silent for a while, giving this comic scene a somewhat more serious tone.*) The alternative: no injections for half a year. But what a half year! In pain.

Terrible pain. There'd be no question of filming. Or – painkilling injections. You will feel absolutely fit. The injections are treacherous – they consume your insides. A maximum of three months. That's just how long you have for rehearsing this role.

Ge yer: I have decided to let you have the role of Generalissimo.

Albert: (*Sp rings up with evil intent, but the Nurse jumps up and thrusts him down on the chair, Albert yells.*) How dare he, that cretin? Why drag real problems into this farce? What does he think he is?

Lucien: (*Sorrowfully.*) The tragedy is, Albert, that you don't understand anything. Everything is just too real. Where is the border between farce and life? And where is the zone between?

Albert: Lucien! (*Cora takes his hand in hers and Albert calms down. He is acting again. He begins to laugh.*) That's... not possible, is it? Tell me it's just a joke, Cora.

Cora: (*Sighs.*) How hackneyed... If you take it as a joke, then it really is a joke.

Doctor: (*Pulling an injection out of her pocket and handing it to Albert.*) Well? Am I to ask the Nurse?

Albert: (*Holds the syringe with holy awe as if it were a monstrance, then suddenly smashes it to the ground and tramples on it.*)

To hell with injections! I want to live! Live... as long as possible!

To hell with the Generalissimo, what use would it be to me there... I want to live!

Doctor: Unfortunately... the alternative doesn't include a third possibility.

Cora: (*Begging.*) Albert, this is your last chance to act.

Albert: (*Bitterly.*) What do you know about death. To act... play!

How transient. In comparison with death everything is transient.

Cora: You seem to think it is more important than anything else.

Albert: (*Continuing.*) Everything takes on a different dimension...

Lucien: Nonsense! Everything's the same. If you look at it in a strange way, then it's obvious it will seem strange. That's your new dimension.

Albert: Do you mean you aren't the least bit sorry for me?

Lucien: (*Indifferently.*) We are all sorry for you.

Albert: (*Seems to want to shout down the whole world.*) But I don't want you to feel sorry for me! You have no reason to feel sorry for me! I can already understand things that you may understand when you're lying in bed in some thirty years' time. And maybe not even then, if it's quick...

Doctor: It's all the same whether it takes a second or a year.

Albert: (*Scoffingly.*) What can you know about that?

Doctor: I've experienced it and, as luck would have it, I was pulled back from the brink. The awareness of death has a wonderfully cathartic effect.

Albert: (*His hopes rising.*) You were cured?

Doctor: Don't get any false hopes. To the very last minute I believed that it was all over with me. There's no point otherwise.

Albert: But you are cured. There's nothing you can tell me. It's useless communicating with you. Find me a person who is condemned to death just like me! I feel a need to communicate. Otherwise there'll be a complete breakdown in communication so far as my person is concerned, which means so far as everything is concerned.

Boss: (*Jovially.*) We're all doomed to extinction, but we don't let ourselves become resigned. Schmidt, we are your best friends.

Albert: But I am condemned to an early... hmm... decease.

Boss: And what about me, I'm getting on for sixty!

Albert: At least you don't know exactly when.

Boss: Nor do you. Don't think about it. Maybe it will catch you unaware in a month's time and your last word will be a surprised „Already?"; or in three month's time you will be asking: „Not yet?" Life is an eternal mystery and therein lies its magic. I personally live only because I don't know what the next hour may bring. It comes unexpectedly, even when you expect it. Believe me, at the last moment you will be surprised.

Geiger: (*With sadistic satisfaction.*) And you're much better off than someone condemned to death! They know the exact minute ...

Albert: Go away, there's nothing I want to talk to you about.

Cora: (*Kneels in front of his chair.*) Nor to me? After all, you love me, Albert. We've spent twenty years together!

Albert: (*With feeling, while gazing at the ceiling.*) Twenty years compared with eternity. (*Looks down at her.*) I really don't know what we have to talk about. I never had to force myself

to carry on a conversation; it just came naturally. But now ...

Cora: You will live on in me.

Albert: Load of rubbish. Do you remember when I strangled you? How you fought back?

Cora: (*Theretically taking a scalpel from the Doctor and handing it to Albert.*) Then stab me! Maybe I'll give you the courage.

Albert: (*Taking the knife with aplomb, lifts his arm and stops an inch away from Cora's breast, but she doesn't flinch.*) Courage!

You simply haven't understood what death is. You haven't understood life.

Cora: I understood when you were strangling me.

Albert: Shut, you understood. You walked in it.

Cora: (*Offended.*) Albert! (*She goes to sit down.*)

Geeyer: You're behaving like a madman.

Albert: (*Turning towards him.*) I am a madman! (*He gets more and more angry.*) Why the hell does it surprise you that I'm behaving as I should?! Why are you so bloody surprised?

Geeyer: You shan't play the Generalissimo, even if you're going to die four times over.

Albert: (*Laughs.*) You won't get me to do it like that. I'm a madman, but a dangerously intelligent one.

Boss: (*Apologetically.*) You know, Schmidt, we should just like to make the best use of...

Albert: (*Illy.*) I know I am of value only for as long as I can be exploited. (*He gets up.*) Enough of this! I'm fed up with it; I'm fed up with your stupid improvisation. Cora, we're going home!

Doctor: You're staying here, Albert.

Albert: No!

(*The Nurse moves closer, warily.*)

Albert: (*Leaps in the direction of the camera, grabs the microphone, glares into a camera lens and putting on the air of a hero in a dramatic situation he speaks into the microphone.*) You

know me. You write letters to me, you ask for photos of me with my autograph. I am Albert Schmidt. (*Silent pause.*) I am in a private sanatorium near Brion, where I am being subjected to coercion, even by my wife and colleagues. I demand ...

Lucien: (*Impassively.*) The cameras aren't on.

Albert: (*Sits down, as if he'd been hit by a ton of bricks.*)

Cora: (*Pats him on the hand.*) You were excellent.

Albert: (*Smiles foolishly, absent-mindedly.*) What? Mm...

Boss: It was your life's performance. Don't worry about the Generalissimo; Geeyer (*the latter puts on a modest look and makes a little bow*) will manage that now.

Lucien: (*Impassively.*) Pity it wasn't being filmed.

Boss: Not at all. It was beautiful, acting like that just for yourselves. (*They get up to go, the lights are turned out one by one; the equipment is packed up.*)

Cora: I hope we'll see you soon, Albert. When they let you out, come straight home. We'll have a little party.

Alb ert : You wo n 't be coming again?

Co ra : I 've got an awful lot to do. (*H u rries out.*)

(*Lucien is the last to leave. Only the Nurs e , the Doctor and Alb ert remain behind.*)

Alb ert : (*U n c e r t a i n .*) Luc i e n ?

Luc i e n : (*T u rning round indiffe r e n t l y .*) W h at is it?

Alb ert : Nothing really. (*Pa u s e .*) You are my best fri e n d , Luc i e n . I want you to know that . Help me.

Luc i e n : Of cours e . (*T u rns round and goes out.*)

Alb ert : (*When Lucien is already off stage .*) Come and see me somet i m e !

(*Lucien apparently has not heard.*)

(*Two chairs. The Doctor and Alb ert are sitting facing each other and watching each other. Inner tension.*)

Do c t o r : Yo u r s is better!

Alb ert : N o , I 've got the better one!

(*They exchange chairs, or in fact they run to the other's chair, t h e c h a i r s stay where they are. Their tra gedy lies in the fact that they t h e m s e l v e s cannot move. Alb ert and the Doctor are not sat i s f i e d . They soon run back to their ori ginal chairs.)*

Alb ert : At last it is as it should be.

Do c t o r : You were sitting on that one before. I t 's the same one.

Alb ert : N o , it isn't . Yo u 've already sat on it. It has taken on a new q u a l i t y .

(*They sit in silence.)*

Alb ert : I don't think they exist.

Do c t o r : W h at ?

Alb ert : They don't exist.

Do c t o r : But what doesn't exist?

Alb ert : W h at exists. A moment ago we both mentioned it.

Do c t o r : It was and now it isn't . W h at a short life a little word like that has... in comparison with a human being. But it can always come back. Humans can't .

Alb ert : It can come back only so long as there are people here...

(*Pa u s e .*) I was thinking of colours.

Do c t o r : Do you want to paint?

Alb ert : N o . I 've never painted in my life, m aybe not even as a child. I meant that colours don't exist. Not really. Take red, for ins t a n c e .

Do c t o r : W h y ?

Alb ert : B l u e , t h e n .

Do c t o r : T h at 's better. The colour of blood... my blood.

Alb ert : I say : this swe ater is blue and yo u , quite independently of m e ; also say this swe ater is blue. We agree about that... a q u e s t i o n of conve n t i o n . When seeing blue, I have certain f e e l i n g s . You too. Would you agr e e ?

Do c t o r : Ye s , I have feelings.

Alb ert : But how can you know how I see blue?

Do c t o r : As blue.

Alb ert : And what if I see it as you see red? W h at if when I see blue, I have the same feelings as you have when you see red? A l l

the rest is just a question of agreement. That's blue and that's that. Feelings don't interest anyone. Come on; let's try it. Describe this colour to me. Describe blue.

Doctor: (*Musingly.*) Sublime and cool as the lips of a marble goddess of love.

Albert: Crap! Infinite...

Doctor: End of game. (*Gets ready to go.*)

Albert: (*Ye//s.*) Why didn't you let me go home?

Doctor: (*Turning round.*) Do you want to go to jail?

Albert: Yes. Rather than this...

Doctor: A further proof that you need treatment.

Albert: (*Shaking his head.*) I don't understand. My friends and even my wife turn their backs on me, you torment me, even though you don't even know me. What is it? Envy?

Doctor: We're all doing it for your good, we and your friends. You must stay here, because you're ill.

Albert: I've heard that before. I feel O.K. Do you get that? I could enter for a pentathlon.

Doctor: Because you are having injections.

Albert: All they do is attack my right hand.

Doctor: Nothing is done just for its own sake. Neither the happening, nor those turned-off cameras.

Albert: Come to that, why were they turned off?

Doctor: It would be in too bad taste... if they filmed it.

Albert: Nonsense! What... in bad taste?

Doctor: It was a dress rehearsal. To get some idea of how you would probably react.

Albert: React?

Doctor: Nurse! (*The Nurse enters and takes up her position behind Albert. The Doctor says in a conversational tone.*) It was all true.

Albert: What?

Doctor: Your illness.

Albert: (*Nods as if it doesn't concern him.*) That's sad.

Doctor: (*Jumps up.*) For heaven's sake, man, do you realise what that means?

Albert: (*Reminding one of Lucien.*) Of course, I am incurably ill.

Doctor: (*Her face only a little way from his, she yells hysterically.*) You're going to die! Die! Die!

Nurse: (*Grasps the Doctor from behind, pulls her away; it seems she is used to such incidents.*)

Doctor: (*Chants like a child.*) Died – dead, died – dead.

Albert: (*Seems to be amused.*) From the very outset I have been waiting for you to come out with that. You're no actress.

And I'm not a guinea pig.

Doctor: (*Already cool, supercilious.*) And if your Boss should confirm it... Geyer, Lucien... and Cora?

Albert: They can.

Doctor: Will you believe it then?

Albert: Does it matter?

Doctor: Let's suppose it does.

Albert: In the last few days I have learned not to believe other

people.

Doctor: Not even your nearest and dearest? That's tragic.

Albert: My nearest and dearest! What does it mean – nearest and dearest?! A silly idea someone thought up. One of those stupid human fabrications. You can't trust anyone except yourself. And not even that is always valid. I have never been alone, I have always been dependent on others, but that's finished. Now it's only me!

Doctor: You'll die of hunger if you tear yourself away from society.

Albert: I'll make do with spiritual independence.

Doctor: That's dependent on the first. You're stuck in a bog, Schmidt, you're stuck in a bog!

Albert: I'm on a chair... and a bog at the same time.

(There is a moment of silence. The Nurse is still standing like an Egyptian mummy, like a machine waiting for someone to press a button.)

Albert: *(Calls out.)* Hey, Doctor! Bring me something to read.

Doctor: You've never asked for anything like that before.

Albert: I've never done anything like that before.

Doctor: *(Suspiciously.)* O.K. I'll bring you something. But even writers are only people.

Albert: I know, after all, they deceive as well. But bring me something. I want to be deceived.

(The Doctor leaves the room, taking her chair with her. Albert sits phlegmatically, the Nurse standing behind him, also phlegmatically. Water nymphs enter from the left and dance without music. Albert gazes at them. Their hair is all imaginable colours, from cyclamen purple to erotic green. I'll leave their attire to the imagination of the reader.)

Albert: Can you see?

Nurse: I don't carry a white cane yet.

Albert: I mean, can you see those wild women of the woods dancing. *(Points in their direction.)*

Nurse: *(Stares uncomprehendingly in that direction.)* Aha! *(Moves round in front of Albert and slaps his face.)* Any more?

Albert: No, thank you; I don't feel like it.

Nurse: I mean, can you see the wild women any more.

Albert: *(Despairingly watching the nymphs out of the corner of his eye.)* No... there's nothing there. Nothing at all.

Nurse: Are you sure?

Albert: An empty room.

Nurse: Then that's all right. *(She goes over to one of the nymphs, kicks her so she falls over. The water nymphs leave in protest.)*

You see, there's no one here. Do you feel O.K.?

Albert: *(Says nothing.)*

Nurse: Did you hear me? How do you feel?

Albert: *(Says nothing.)*

Nurse: *(Pulls out a cane and threatens him with it.)* How do you feel?

Albert: *(Says nothing.)*

Nurse: *(Breaks the cane over her knee.)* I won't let anyone meddle with my methods of treatment. *(She leaves.)*

Albert: *(Alone on the stage for the first time, he gazes absently in front of him. He is silent for a while before speaking to himself.)* You see, Cora... I can

remember every thing .They are
up to something and it's my job to find out what . I once
played Bond and Mike Hammer, too, that'll come in handy
now. I know you're not here, otherwise I wouldn't be telling
you this. If you were here, I wouldn't remember your face . I
can only confide in myself... and I'm beginning to doubt
even that .Are n't I just a big a swine as the others? I've disc
overed there's a bit of Geyer in me... a bit of every man, of
the greatest genius as well as the worst rat . If you were
here , I shouldn't remember your face . I've come to that
conclusion , but I need to tell someone.T here's no one here .
Tell myself? And what if I am only an illusion of myself? No
one has seen me... for a long time now. T here's no one here!
In fact I don't exist. *(He looks around.)*.They must be listening
to me. T hey've got microphones here, hundreds of ears ,
I would speak e rs. *(He looks around the bare floor. Suddenly he
jumps to his feet and grabs the chair.)* I've got it! A damned
gigantic microphone! *(He hurls it to the floor.)*

*(The Doctor and the Nurse are pacing up and down nervously. T hey
meet , but never bump into each other.)*

D o c t o r: You say he doesn't say any thing ?

N u r s e : I've been in to see him several times. Once I smacked his face .

D o c t o r: Could he have taken offence?

N u r s e : No, because when I was there the third time, I said to him:

Look at an inescapable situation through the prism of erot
ic is m .Then he spoke for the last time.

D o c t o r: He spoke out loud?

N u r s e : He stroked me a said:Your head's hot, like a pony's.

D o c t o r: And you let him get away with that ?

N u r s e : Ye a h , I liked that .

D o c t o r: *(T h o u g h t f u l l y .)* I think he described only too well the essence
of your pers on a l i t y.

N u r s e : Then I stroked him and he said nothing.

D o c t o r: Nothing at all?

N u r s e : H e ' s still not saying any thing . W h a t if we called his wife?

D o c t o r: Out of the question! And what did he say before that ?

N u r s e : T h a t he had lost his memory.

D o c t o r: And you ?

N u r s e : I stroked him...

D o c t o r: *(I m p a t i e n t g e s t u r e .)* W h a t did you say to that ?

N u r s e : I asked him when.And he replied:W h a t when? I said – when
did you lose your memory ?

D o c t o r: *(E a g e r l y .)* And he said...?

N u r s e : He said, he couldn't remember.T h a t ' s logi c a l , if he's lost his
m e m o r y. I did an experi m e n t . I asked him: W h a t was the last
thing I said?

D o c t o r: W h a t did he answer ?

N u r s e : S a i d .

D o c t o r: He said what ?

N u r s e : No, he answered my question with the word said.

D o c t o r: *(T h i n k s f o r a w h i l e , t h e n m a k e s h e r d i a g n o s i s .)* He is suffering

from a permanent loss of memory... He can remember a maximum of four letters of what went before.

Nurse: What are we going to do?

Doctor: (*Giggles and rubs her hands.*) It's good... It's a good thing he doesn't say anything. In that case he has made his own

diagnosis: A complete break-down in communication... a complete break-down in communication so far as his person is concerned, which means so far as everything is concerned.

Nurse: Do you think so?

Doctor: Of course. He was wasting his time pretending it's all a fuss about nothing; he knows where he stands.

(*They both visibly relax.*)

Nurse: I feel like a hot supper.

Doctor: Fine. Cook something. You can open a bottle of cognac.

We've earned it... So – here's to success! (*As if she were already drinking a toast.*)

Nurse: What for him?

Doctor: An enema, I think.

(*They both burst out laughing. The lights are dimmed, the clinking of glasses is heard, along with their carefree chatter.*)

(*The chair. It is empty and lies kicked aside on the floor. A severed noose hangs from the ceiling. Half-darkness. The light gradually becomes brighter and the Doctor and the Professor enter.*)

Doctor: So... this is his room.

Professor: (*Irritably.*) Don't change the subject. The room is all right, but you must have done something wrong.

Doctor: I must admit I had my work cut out making him lose a sense of time.

Professor: (*Scornfully.*) Huuh, work cut out... two years, that's the important thing! For two years it's a pitifully poor show!

Doctor: It isn't that easy to convince a normal person that he's mad, sick, a stranger... and I don't know what else...

Professor: If it were easy, anyone else could do it. It's a failure. Your failure. What about his wife?

Doctor: So, so. I think she expected it. (*After a while.*) She's an actress, too.

Professor: Hmm... Schmidt? I don't know her... (*Raising his voice.*) But the scandal! His colleagues...

Doctor: That's all right.

Professor: And the general public! We can't present the world with a new Schmidt.

Doctor: Why not?

Professor: Is a person like him dispensable?

Doctor: Why not?

Professor: (*Taking the chair and placing it under the noose, he climbs up on to it and stares upward for a while.*) Hmm... I don't

understand... (*Gets down.*) If that hole in the chair had been larger, he wouldn't have even needed to kick it away.

(*He ponders.*) Is anyone ever dispensable?

Doctor: Why not? We have two Schmidts in reserve and there may be... but let's not anticipate events.

Professor: Can you teach them to act?

Doctor: Maybe not, but one of them is even ready to fight anyone who says he isn't Albert Schmidt.

Professor: How long will it take you?

Doctor: At a guess... half a year?

Professor: Don't drag it out any longer.

Doctor: (*Eagerly.*) Of course not... and so far as acting is concerned... he'd forgotten how to act even before he came here...

overworked. And apart from that... catharsis can leave its mark, can't it?

Professor: (*Frostily.*) The world is waiting. (*He turns away and leaves.*)

Doctor: (*Stands alone for a while, her back to the audience, then she calls.*) Nurse!

Nurse: (*She enters and waits, smiling.*)

Doctor: Bring in Mr... (*Laughs.*) Albert Schmidt!
(*The lights fade.*)

April – May 1990