

Lenny, you slay me

A 10-minute play with music and film

By Gordon Kalton Williams

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

LEONID (LEON) WALDSTEIN, a German composer, in his mid-late 60s

FLORENCE TANZ, his wife, in her late 30s/early 40s

CHUCK, a young American composer, in his late 20s

SETTINGS

PACIFIC PALISADES, CALIFORNIA mid-late 1930s.

PRODUCTION NOTES

A grand piano sits in the middle of a playing area which is darkened by heavy drapes drawn right around. Lamplight only. There are a number of chairs, over one of which is draped a towel. The drapes stop at a door or portal to the side leading upstairs or outside, at any rate to another part of the house.

Leon's quote "Great Star, what would your happiness be, if you had not me for whom you shine?" is his version of the first line of Nietzsche's *Thus spake Zarathustra*: "Du grosses Gestirn! Was wäre dein Glück, wenn du nicht Die hättest, welchen du leuchtest!"

Please contact the author for the music.

Scene: Pacific Palisades, mid-late 1930s

(LEON WALDSTEIN (mid-60s) sits at the piano, playing. He is playing swift-moving, heavy but heaving, early 20th-century German atonal music. CHUCK EAGGER, early 20s, sits to one side, listening with a filmscript open on his knee. Leon rushes through the final grinding chords, leaving a gaping silence and turns around to Chuck.)

LEON
So?

CHUCK
It's wonderful of course.

LEON
This I know.

CHUCK
But...

LEON
“But”?

CHUCK
It's supposed to be a love scene.

LEON
Yes?

CHUCK
Tender. Passionate...

LEON
And this is not passion? How much more do you ask? It 'out-Tristans' *Tristan*.

CHUCK
Yes, but -

LEON

I thought here was a country of 'ands', not 'buts'.

(Leon gets up from the piano. Chuck flicks back through the script to the title page, getting nervous as Leon approaches him.)

CHUCK

It's supposed to be a light comedy and -

(Leon rests a hand on Chuck's shoulder as Chuck looks up anxiously.)

LEON

But - the *romantische* pulls out a gun and threatens to shoot himself.

CHUCK

(nervously)

But that's just a joke. It's kind of ironic -

LEON

Irony!

CHUCK

And this is...well, heavy.

(Leon moves away)

CHUCK (CONT.)

Say if this were...

LEON

Yes?

CHUCK

Professor, I really don't want to offend you...

LEON

And yet you are about to say, "If this were a horror film - "

CHUCK

Well -

LEON

"If this were a horror movie, it would 'fit the bill'. It would 'make the cut'."

CHUCK

(trying to joke)

I guess you've "got it in one".

LEON

Such a tragedy what I am known for here, Chuck. Is this all now - Leon Waldstein, composer of horror movie music?

CHUCK

Oh, professor...

(There is the sound of a splash on the other side of the drapes. Chuck glances eagerly in its direction. Leon notices Chuck's look. Chuck realises he must recover.)

CHUCK (CONT.)

I was about to say...in awe...you are way ahead of any of us. This is music that novices like me -

LEON

In Vienna, Mahler told me that I was the voice of the future. But that future never came.

CHUCK

Professor, the studios will pay serious dough for horror movie sequences. It's just that for Lubitsch this is too...intrusive.

LEON

Ah, intrusion!

(The drapes are flung open, pitching bright light into the room. Haloed by the Californian sun, FLORENCE enters dripping in a two-piece bathing suit of the era. In her late 30s/early 40s, she still cuts a shapely silhouette. The modesty skirt is unlaced quite high. Chuck almost gasps.)

LEON

If she were a dog, she would now shake herself off and spray water every where.

FLORENCE

Ach Lenny, you slay me.

LEON

“You slay me” - she has adopted all the Californian expressions.

(He walks over to wrench shut the drapes. Before he does so, he notices the sun setting over the ocean.)

LEON (CONT.)

"O Great Star! What would your happiness be, if you had not me for whom you shine?"

CHUCK

Nietzsche!

LEON

I am not playing ‘guess the quotation’.

(to Florence)

I go to seek drier ground.

(He heads toward the door.)

FLORENCE

And I will not lie here and die.

LEON

(pausing, with his hand on the door handle)

No, because we came here for fear of our lives.

(He goes. Florence throws away the towel. Chuck throws away the script. Chuck rushes her.)

CHUCK

Oh God, I could see your nipples poking through the fabric.

(She undoes his belt and unzips his trousers. He hoists her up onto the grand piano)

FLORENCE

I'm still wet from the pool.

(But she succumbs)

Quiet.

CHUCK

Who cares if he hears?

FLORENCE

You will.

(In their tossing, she accidentally kicks the keyboard.)

Scheisse!

(They stop for a moment. He is back on her, though, almost immediately, trying in vain to be quiet.)

Won't there be plenty of time for this from tonight?

CHUCK

Is he still going?

FLORENCE

Of course.

CHUCK

And he doesn't expect you to?

FLORENCE

Do I really want to drive to Pasadena to listen to a lecture on the morality of war? It is not plausible. I am the empty-headed one, the one who is therefore successful.

(She needs a breather)

CHUCK

I'll have the car parked up the hill, outside 1305.

FLORENCE

Alright. Ssh.

CHUCK

(quietly)

An end to months of plotting. You were right. I couldn't have kept scheduling more sessions. Oh God, when I saw you walk in from the pool, I remembered my parents saying how they saw you at the Marmorhaus that first time and everyone in the audience yelled, "Florence Tanz!"

FLORENCE

(laughing, but quizzical)

Stop it!

CHUCK

People gasped.

(They start again. The sounds of a harmonium upstairs, a similar atonal music. She stops.)

FLORENCE

Listen!

CHUCK

What?

FLORENCE

Ssh!

(Leon can be heard singing:)

LEON (OFFSTAGE)

"BEI SONNENSCHEN, SPREIZTE ICH MEINE
BLUETTENBLAETTER ZUM LICHT..."

(The lamplight flicks off and they are in darkness.)

CHUCK

What happened? Florence?

FLORENCE

Ssh!

LEON (OFFSTAGE, BUT CLOSER)

"...IM WINTER, FAERBE DIE FEHLEND WELT ICH
NICHT."

(An old German silent film starts up on the drapes. We see Leon's song subtitled under a sequence of a younger Florence farewelling her lover and moving through a montage of graveyards, battlefields and morgues. The subtitles read: 'In sunshine I spread my petals to the light/ In Winter, I leave the world uncolored.')

FLORENCE

That bastard!

CHUCK

What's going on?

FLORENCE

(crying)

This is our beginning. When we first met. We were both doing so well. Of course he would do this to me. *Arschloch!*

CHUCK

But...tonight you're free. No more dry retching at the sight of those "skinny white" -

(The lamp turns back on and Leon is standing beside it. Chuck and Florence are more dishevelled and undressed than we might have expected. Chuck's pants are around his ankles. Leon is holding a gun. They stare at him silently. Then he cocks the trigger. Florence and Chuck both remonstrate loudly, speaking at the same time; Florence is angry and contemptuous; Chuck is scared.)

FLORENCE (WITH CHUCK)

What are you doing with that thing
Lenny? Are you stupid, or just pathetic?
How typical of you to think you can solve
everything by pointing something at
people and thinking you can scare them
off.

CHUCK (WITH FLORENCE)

Professor I am so sorry. I know I've taken
advantage of your kindness and stepped
over a mark. I know what a heel I am. I
have no reason to deserve your forgiveness
but I am so very, very sorry. Ashamed
even. Look, I hope that we may continue
to be the most respectful of colleagues.

(Florence catches Chuck's last sentence, scowls.)

LEON

Enough.

(He points the gun at Chuck).

Play.

CHUCK

What?

LEON

Play. That wonderful piece that you wrote, that the studio was so happy with.

CHUCK

Is this really the moment - ?

LEON

DO YOU WANT THAT I SHOULD BLOW YOUR HEAD OFF?

CHUCK

Alright, alright. Of course, Professor, yes.

(Chuck sits at the piano, trousers half mast, and
plays - an Al Jolson/George Gershwin-type number
with a quick, jumping left hand.)

CHUCK

TAKE IT FROM ME

THE SUN IS GONNA COME OUT AGAIN.

STORMCLOUDS WILL PASS
AND WE'LL ALL HAVE SOME FUN AGAIN.
YESTERDAY'S BLUES WILL SEEM A THING OF THE
PAST.
LOOK AT ME BOYS, I TELL YA WE'RE SET TO BLAST -

LEON

Stop! That's enough.

(Chuck stops playing)
(withering)

So nourishing.

(Leon aims at Chuck and pulls the trigger, but it
merely clicks. Chuck starts gasping in shocked
reaction.)

That is irony. A German who is not a murderer.

CHUCK

Lunatic!

LEON

You may leave.

CHUCK

But...Florence and I are leaving together.

LEON

Really?

CHUCK

Florence?

FLORENCE

Get out.

CHUCK

Huh?

FLORENCE

Scram.

CHUCK

What?

(Chuck starts crying but Florence is not swayed.)

FLORENCE

Geeeeeeeh!!!

(Chuck gets up and starts walking)

LEON

(to Florence, as Chuck heads to the door)

Even a dog does not relieve himself in the house.

CHUCK

(at the door)

Miss Tanz?

(She does not look at him. Chuck leaves, sniffing.
He is trying to pull up his trousers but keep
moving.)

LEON

(to himself)

Curious. It *was* his music I heard at a moment like this.

(He puts the gun down on the piano.)

Don't ever leave me for someone who is less worthy than me.

FLORENCE

Oh great man, what would my happiness be if I had not you for whom I shine?

LEON

Not Nietzsche!

FLORENCE

No, Tanz!

(Shivering, she walks into his arms. He embraces
her. Off goes the lamp.)

END