

A RAT'S CHANCE

by Carli Castellani

Note:

This draft play was written in May, 2020,
in response to a quarantine challenge
to write a play (up to 15 pages long) in 48 hours.

The challenge also required that the
following 5 elements
were included in the play:

*An empty store/stadium/theatre
A bottle of hand sanitizer
A virtual dance or duet
A moment of mass panic
A light in the dark*

Extra: flower or flour

CHARACTERS

Lady Anne – A Lady-in-Waiting to be (so waiting to be waiting...).

Beatnik Rat – An artsy rat of undetermined age, living in an abandoned theatre

Boy – Roughly 9-11 years old, left with Girl to manage for themselves due to some crisis

Girl – Roughly 9-11 years old, left with Boy to manage for themselves due to some crisis

Jacqueline du Pré – The ghost of a famed cellist, appears in form briefly at the end.

TIME

Slightly Vague & Out-of-Time

PLACE

An abandoned black box theatre

An estate manor, location not specified, in disrepair
1603 England, at Queen Elizabeth's death, theatres closing

NOTES

The language is not period specific to any era, even for Beatnik Rat or Lady Anne. Two actors could play both duo sets – Lady Anne/Beatnik Rat and Girl/Boy. The experience of time and place is in flux. Lady Anne's story is inspired by an actual potential lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth, the Queen having died in 1603, at the time of the plagues, and is based loosely on Lady Anne's journals.

ACT I

An abandoned black box theatre – the stage. Lighting is as a low as possible, so you only see a glimpse of the two characters, Beatnik Rat & Lady Anne.

LADY ANNE

I was too short to be an official mourner, that is what they told me.

BEATNIK RAT

How did they figure that? Certainly they didn't measure the height of your soul, because I can see your soul is quite tall, and has mourned a lot.

LADY ANNE

I could only follow the corpse as it was sent down the river on the barge, from a distance, always from a distance, me along with everyone else, the thronging masses. We hadn't distanced from *each other* then, we were only distanced from things we wanted to see up close. Things we wanted to touch. I wanted to touch her coffin. I thought it would bring good fortune. We were very superstitious. Instead I had to rub up against all those people trying to get a look at it from afar –

BEATNIK RAT

The soul has such measurements...not everyone knows the specs, but they are there, for the knowing.

LADY ANNE

I hadn't mourned much by that time, I was only 13, and we hadn't gotten the hang of it yet.

BEATNIK RAT

Mourning isn't like an amusement park, where if you aren't big enough to go on the ride, or be strapped in proper, they don't let you.

LADY ANNE

I got better at it as I grew older and had more practice.

BEATNIK RAT

At least at an amusement park, they figure it out by what the sign says. If you don't meet the mark, the mark they had drawn, so high, you don't meet the mark. You don't get to go on the ride.

LADY ANNE

I learned to keen and fight my court battles, when the courts re-opened. I sued everyone to try to get my titles back. And I mourned there too, in front of the judges – all my lost battles. I blamed her for dying when she did. It is easy to blame someone that isn't there anymore. They can't fight back.

BEATNIK RAT

You know, I lived in a few amusement parks a long time ago – they were grand places when the people were dropping crumbs of the most savory and sweet things, left and right...so much oil and fried bits and fleshes of all sorts, but mostly pigs, *oink oink* – and sticky things that made no sense to eat at all, but we were rich and greedy and gnawed and gnawed our way around those rolling grounds – ah, the gluttony of youth (*eyes rolling*).

LADY ANNE

But my mother – she was a pall bearer. She *was* much taller than me. And she knew how to mourn. She could sit vigil with the body, all in black, all night. Probably *any* body. She had practice. She thought of my father and she could burst out into tears in the most theatrical way, at the drop of a hat pin. Gulping for air, grimacing, her eyes rolling back into her head as if she was going to keel over dead herself. She keened! He wasn't even dead yet, she just hated him. I mean, really hated them.

BEATNIK RAT

Sometimes I think you aren't even listing to me, my lady. I might as well go back to practicing my cello. I will summon the ghost of Ms. du Pré, and swoon with her –

LADY ANNE

Oh, I am sorry, I forgot how to listen. I haven't had much to listen to, in some time. No one to have conversations with...I seem to have forgotten the social contract with others. But I heard what you said just now, so maybe there is still hope, in this dark place (*looking around quizzically*). And I am in your debt for letting me stay here, here...uh, wait, where are we again??? Did I ask you this before?

BEATNIK RAT

The theatre, my dear, this lovely black box theatre that has now been shuttered for some time, to everyone except those with tall souls, or those small enough to shimmy through broken floorboards. They counted us out, but there is no better place for a lady or a rat – now let me summon Jacqueline and see if she will give me a lesson or two in how to dance with a cello –

ACT II

A manor estate in disrepair. Maps and books strewn about in a large room, on the floor. Two children also on the floor, one playing with a toy theatre, the other picking up random books and flipping through them.

BOY

I can't get the trap door to work, that is where they are suppose to emerge from, from underneath the stage.

GIRL

Who emerges?

BOY:

The rats, there are a bunch of them and they take over the theatre, right during a performance!!! They swarm onto the stage from everywhere, especially from under it, but some drop from the rafters too –

GIRL:

Ooh, everyone starts screaming and running from their seats!!! (*Girl begins pantomiming the crowd running to escape the swarming rats, she is making faces, and large gestures of crowd panic*). They are climbing over each other and knocking each other down, they can't get to the doors quick enough – and the rats are coming after them, saying, wait, wait – you need to see our show!!!

BOY

And then they shut down the theatre and nobody can perform there at all, and no one can go there, it is

empty and dark. So very dark!!! People are dying and they blame the rats. It all upsets the rats, actually. They just wanted to sing and dance and eat hors d'oeuvres on tiny little plates after the show. With little napkins to catch the crumbs.

GIRL

And take bows!!! Like this – (*bowing several times, then clapping to the audience*).

BOY

Who are you clapping to?

GIRL

The audience, to let them know how much I appreciate them and their good taste in coming to see my performance. They ate it up, you could feel it in the air – so I applaud them. They recognize my hard work. There is no me without them. Not up on the stage. I need them too --

BOY

Oh, okay. They did gobble it up, they loved it so much, it was standing room only – and there are flowers everywhere, bouquets of flowers wrapped in shiny papers, being thrown up on stage, flung at the actors – and the rats are so happy because finally they have been seen –

GIRL

(*Still pantomiming and acting out a scene* –) “Wait, wait, don't run everyone – we aim to please!” – the theatre rats are yelling out at the frenzied crowd as they storm the exits. “We have been practicing this show for a very long time and we hope that you will enjoy it – we will have a discussion with the director after the show! A Q & A. You bring your Qs! We got As!” (*Girl is rolling over in self-amusement as she acts this out*)

BOY

I don't know why everyone blames the rats.

GIRL

And the bats! They blame the bats, too. And Lady Anne, she blamed all her troubles on the queen for dying too soon.

BOY

The queen was old. The old can die. That is what they are supposed to do. It is in the script. If you don't get killed off earlier, you get old and you die. Sometimes on cue.

GIRL

Well, it kept Lady Anne from being a Lady-in-Waiting, because she couldn't be waiting on a dead queen... she might have wanted to, she was very interested in dead things. But then her own daddy died, and his estates didn't go to her, his only living heir – they went to a decrepit uncle instead, the worst sort – so she spent the rest of her life trying to reclaim her kingdom, but there wasn't one to reclaim. She just made a lot of noise and wrote in her journals as if anyone cared –

BOY

(*no longer listening, distracted, fiddling with the toy theatre*). Help me with this thingy, here – I want the trap door to operate right, so all the rats have a chance to act –

(Fiddling with the play theatre's hinges)

GIRL

I cared, but it was too late, she was gone and so was everything else, and here we are and there is no one coming to check up on us anymore, and all I can do is read all these old journals and wonder what they were really thinking, when they were scribbling those words, page after page. I don't think it is the rats this time. I think it is something stranger than a rat that just wants to be in an operetta or a saucy cabaret...

(Looking at the toy theatre)

It needs a new hinge, that one is kaput – and what is all that black goo all over it?

BOY

Some stuff I put on it. I thought it would help. It didn't.

GIRL

It's sticky, ooh, its all over us too – aaack, we better go wash our hands –

BOY

There is nothing left. There is no more sanitizer. I looked. I even went down to the cellar. That is where I found the black goop – I thought it would loosen the hinge but it just made everything sticky. And there isn't anything fancy to wash our hands with anymore.

GIRL

We will have to make some sanitizer out of something, I don't remember what goes in it, only that we are supposed to use it all the time. Maybe there is something we can use that we can find outside? Maybe we can boil some leaves into some sort of concoction...we should go outside –

(They go to window and peer out, in silence).

ACT III

The rat is dancing with an unseen partner, singing and humming, smiling, flirting. There is an improvised cello nearby, it looks hand-made, a broom, and a record player with lps scattered loosely about the floor. Beatnik Rat then stops mid-step, startled by Lady Anne, who has entered the room and is looking at the cello.

LADY ANNE

Did you make this?

BEATNIK RAT

Yes, out of cardboard I found backstage. It wasn't easy. But I wanted to learn how to play.

LADY ANNE

Does it work?

BEATNIK RAT

A little bit. I am not very good yet. That is why I have to summon ghosts to help me. Ghosts love

theatres. In fact, I don't think a theatre can exist without them.

LADY ANNE

That doesn't make sense – the theatre needs actors that are, well, still alive. You can't just have pictures of them flashing across a screen, you need flesh and blood. You need breath.

BEATNIK RAT

Oh, there is always blood in the theatre – why, I even cut myself making this cello, I bled all over it. It still has some stains, see? (*showing her part of the cello*).

Then I remembered you can't be inspired without shedding something – the muse won't help if you don't make her an offering. That is how I brought this cello to life – even if it only works a bit so far. And it is how I was able to communicate to Jacqueline – you see I found these records, one is of her playing... (*he puts it on the record player and music begins to play and he dances around some more*)

LADY ANNE

(*Bemused*). What a strange place this theatre is! I have never seen instruments like these (*touching/picking up the records on the floor*), in my day, we played the lute – badly, but we played it! Did you make these too? How much blood did it take to bring to life these those sounds we are hearing now?

BEATNIK RAT

Oh, no, I told you – I found these records here, and sometimes the player works, when there is electricity –

LADY ANNE

Electricity?

BEATNIK RAT

Yes, electricity – it is something magical in the air – but you have to be careful about it, it can burn or shock you. I have had it do both to me, that is how I lost some hair!

LADY ANNE

Something in the air? Like an idea you wake up with one morning, that seemed to have come out of nowhere?

BEATNIK RAT

Yes, yes, like that, but... well... not *exactly* like that.

LADY ANNE

And sometimes the idea lifts you up and moves you about – until it does burn or shock because nobody else understands it at all, and they don't know why you keep going back to court to try to reclaim your estates, they think you are mad –

BEATNIK RAT

Yes, like that. I think. But I don't know the details. It is what lights this place, when it works. You have never seen it truly lit up, have you?

LADY ANNE

I did see a bright light when you found me – it was at the end of a tunnel...

BEATNIK RAT

It must have been working then, or maybe it was a full moon. I saw you emerge from the tunnel and knew you had been wandering for a very long time – I thought you might like some entertainment, some conversation, we still have much to discuss – oh, the plays, the plays!! There are so many scripts in back, that I would love to read through with you, and Jacqueline, and anyone else that will give a rat a chance –

LADY ANNE

Yes, I was wandering and wondering...for a long time. So did you summon me, like your friend the cellist? Do I flicker like her, but only you can see me? Was blood shed, to procure some muse? And tell me: what about you – I thought rats traveled in packs – where are the others? Doesn't your theatre need a company to perform?

(Beatnik Rat goes over to his cello and starts to play it....).

ACT IV

(Back at the estate in disrepair, the children are playing with the theatre, moving figurines around in it).

BOY

They aren't coming back.

GIRL

No. We know that. They never come back. Not on time. Not on cue. They just wander off and leave us here, to fend for ourselves. It is nothing new.

BOY

The rats will take over the theatre and put on plays. They will learn to read and stage things. Big things! Musicals, even!

GIRL

How do they learn to read?

BOY

By eating up manuscripts in dusty old museums and librarys. They will chew them up bit by bit until they start to spit out words themselves.

GIRL

It sounds so lonely and sad. So hungry! And disorganized! So disorganized –

BOY

Maybe they will learn to summon ghosts of people that once walked the earth...to keep them company and teach them things they didn't know before, like how to play a guitar, or build a pyramid.

GIRL

We should do that, we should summon some ghosts to haunt us, give us some ideas, like how to make hand sanitizer out of leaves we gathered from those bushes out there – we should have a seance...

BOY

I don't know how to play that game.

GIRL

It's simple, first you need to shed something, like a tiny bit of blood, just a prick, so the muse knows you are listening to her, and need her help....you drip a little bit of the blood into anything you do.

BOY

That makes my stomach feel funny –

GIRL

Nevermind, it doesn't matter, we need to go down to the cellar now and see what is left to eat. The muse can wait. Here, take this candle, it will help us find our way down there --

ACT V

(Entrance to a manor/estate circa 1603 where Lady Anne and her Retinue are arriving late at night)

LADY ANNE

She was dead and we were not, but we were all a bit stunned and seemed to spend the rest of the summer, into the fall, after the funeral, and all the processions, and the barge down the river, floating ourselves. I know some were jockeying for position, but I was just laying in different households, one after the other, arriving sometimes so late at night, there were no keys available to the upper rooms, so we slept in the great hall, my vagabond mother, my aunt, my cousins and me. Wayfaring nowhere. She, our great patroness, was dead and we were just flickering in a land of dreams, and some were falling victim to the great illness affecting the lands, the tents and quarantines were going up, so we kept moving from one distant relative to another, while the maps of our world were being redrawn –

(A light flickers on, brightly lighting up the stage – a spotlight is first on Rat, then moves to the others in turn)

BEATNIK RAT *(playing his cello)*

If you listen to enough of these records, you start to feel like you don't belong anywhere, that there were times and places you were supposed to be borne in, that were meant for you – but they passed before you got a chance to take that ride, you didn't measure up, and here you are trying to piece something together, from bits and pieces out of what is left, lying around –

GIRL

They didn't come back. We knew they wouldn't. They came by less and less over time and so we were left in that crumbling house on our own. They didn't tell us what happened. Only that something had. And said they would be back later, to explain it all, and make things right. I don't remember my mother or father. They were the first to fade out of view.

BOY

I kept trying to make things work, fix the hinges. They left us a lot of toys, some old maps, a lot of books. We read the books trying to figure things out. We were growing out of our clothes and having to make new things... We learned to sew!

GIRL

I learned to play the cello. It was a make-believe one, but I imagined it well.

LADY ANNE

I learned to show up for seances. If blood was shed trying to reach out to the other side, I thought it worth showing up for, passing through that tunnel –

BEATNIK RAT

I just was. I lived under stages, and on them late at night. I scattered underfoot when there were feet to scamper under. I lived in amusement parks and derelict apartments and grand old oprys. Sometimes down by the waterfront, while barges passed by, carrying leaded coffins of late, great queens, while a little girl watched, jockeying for position among the masses, all her hopes and dreams passing by on the river...

GIRL

We read their stories.

BOY

We imagined our own.

LADY ANNE

We lived for a time. We learned to birth, we learned to mourn. And then our time was done.

(Stage goes dark – rat is heard scampering off, while music playing... then lights come back on, bouquets of flowers appear on stage, and there is a cast celebration with hors d'oeuvres on tiny plates, with napkins, and many accolades – and Jacqueline du Pré is seen playing Rat's cello with many other rats on stage joining her).