

PROXIMITY

A 15 minute play

By Aysha Zackria

Lights up on the stage at New York City's Town Hall, 8:45 pm on October 28, 1938.

ANNOUNCER

(heard, but not seen)

Ladies and gentleman, tonight you have the pleasure of seeing the famed virtuosa pull a melody out of the air with her sister Nadia Reisenberg at the piano. Performing on the theremin ether-wave instrument, I give you Clara Rockmore.

A wave of applause as CLARA ROCKMORE enters to stand behind her theremin. She flips the switch, and pauses for a moment, allowing the tubes to heat. She takes a look out at the audience and raises her hands. In an instant, 1929's LEON THEREMIN enters, but she does not acknowledge him yet. The scene is rosy with nostalgia.

CLARA

We met when I was seventeen. It was pure luck someone would introduce us. The migrant community isn't as small as you may think. I was known for my violin performance after graduating from the Saint Petersburg Conservatory at such a young age. He had his own circle. Everyone heard about his inventions, experimenting with new electric technology. He was becoming well known, and I felt so special in his attention. As my shoulder pain was becoming worse, I needed a new direction, another instrument to learn. And so it would be his. On my eighteenth birthday, he shared another piece of that magic with me.

It is March 9, 1929. CLARA transforms into her 18 year old self when she notices LEON.

CLARA

Leon!

LEON

I have something to show you.

CLARA

What is it?

LEON

You will see.

A birthday surprise?
CLARA

Maybe.
LEON

You shouldn't spoil me.
CLARA

You have not seen anything!
LEON

As they turn a corner, CLARA notices a beautiful birthday cake. As she approaches it, the cake begins to spin and the electric candle in the center illuminates.

Oh!
CLARA

She turns to Leon in surprise.

Happy birthday!
LEON

Laughing, CLARA tests the mechanism by moving toward and away from the cake, causing it to spin and light up with her motion.

You like it?
LEON

It's incredible. How did you get it in here?
CLARA

Your sister is a sneaky one.
LEON

You talked to Nadia?
CLARA

She was very helpful.
LEON

CLARA

I cannot believe you both hid this from me!

LEON

It was not easy.

(beat)

CLARA

Can I eat it? I don't want to destroy your work.

LEON

It's your birthday! I would be offended if you don't eat it.

CLARA

What a sweet gesture.

LEON

Only the best for you.

CLARA

How can it know I approached?

LEON

The same as my Thereminvox. It detects you in its electromagnetic field.

CLARA

But how?

LEON

You are electric. It can sense your presence in a certain proximity.

A brief tense moment.

Clara, would you like to go to dinner?

CLARA

Of course.

LEON

We can dance.

CLARA

I would love to.

LEON
Have you been to the Hotel Astor?

CLARA
I do not have a dress for that.

LEON
You look beautiful now.

CLARA
Thank you.

LEON
So you will come?

CLARA
I must ask my father.

LEON
He is a kind man.

CLARA
Then the answer will be yes.

LEON takes her hand and kisses it before
happily exiting.

CLARA
For a few years, Leon was courting me. He took me to the ritziest places. This was a different era, very romantic. As wonderful as he was, I did not share his feelings. But there was no ill will between us. We were often together, working, talking, enjoying each other's company. But I began to be serious with Robert, and Leon eventually understood. People said I was only using him for his invention, I played without a heart. The theremin isn't like other instruments. It can sense every movement. Playing violin, expression is physical, you sway and turn with the music. The theremin requires perfect stillness. You may hear the emotion, but you will not see it. You learn to separate the feeling from yourself.

LEON enters again. It is March 31, 1932.

LEON
Have you thought about it?

CLARA
I have.

And what do you say? LEON

My answer has not changed. CLARA

You are certain? LEON

Yes, but– CLARA

No, it's alright. I am not sure why I expected this time to be different. LEON

We will remain friends? CLARA

I cannot imagine life without you. LEON

I do love you. CLARA
(beat)

But this lawyer– LEON

Mr. Rockmore. CLARA

He is good for you? LEON

Wonderful. CLARA

And he will let you persue performance? LEON

He would never take that from me. CLARA

Good. LEON

CLARA

Even if he wanted to, I would not let him.

LEON

You have surpassed me now. Greatly.

CLARA

Only because I practice so much.

LEON

Your technique is remarkable.

CLARA

I learned from the best.

LEON

No, you must understand, I have nothing left to teach you. Your presentation of the instrument is almost beyond my comprehension. And certainly beyond any hope of my replication.

(beat)

CLARA

I have started a new piece.

LEON

For Sunday?

CLARA

Yes.

LEON

Will you be ready?

CLARA

Everyone asks me this.

LEON

Well?

CLARA

Would you ask Rachmaninoff? Or Gershwin?

LEON

Yes?

CLARA
I am ready.

LEON
And Rachmaninoff?

CLARA
No one asks the men if they can play.

LEON
No, I suppose not.

(beat)
What are you learning?

CLARA
Tchaikovsky.

LEON
A tribute to Russia?

CLARA
They requested I play something more delicate.

LEON
They did not approve of the Kreisler?

CLARA
It did not suit my feminine nature.

LEON
And yet, there is no man who could play it as you do.

CLARA
They would not hear it.

LEON
Let me speak to them.

CLARA
No. I will earn their respect in my own right. If I have to perform Tchaikovsky, that is what I will do.

LEON
(beat)
Will you play it for me now?

CLARA

I don't have the time. I am meeting Robert for dinner.

LEON

Oh. I will see myself out then.

CLARA

Perhaps tomorrow?

LEON

If I am not preoccupied. Goodbye Clara.

LEON exits.

CLARA

A year later, I married my Bobby, and Leon married Lavinia shortly after. Our friendship continued, and we remained close even as our circumstances changed. I often performed for large crowds of people, always with his support. At this point, I had played the instrument for years, but I felt the same pressure when I walked onstage, that however I performed would be seen as a reflection of Leon. I became the primary conduit for his vision to reach a broader audience. As I attempted more demanding repertoire, the capabilities of the instrument no longer suited my needs. If I was to convince the public of its worth, I required a clearer sound.

LEON enters. It is June 13, 1936.

LEON

You wanted to speak?

CLARA

About the instrument.

LEON

Yes?

CLARA

There is no exact break in volume.

LEON

That is a problem?

CLARA

The left hand is.. like molasses. The notes are muddy.

LEON
Everything is glissando.

CLARA
You put it nicely.

LEON
So you need to play staccato.

CLARA
Yes, the Dvorak requires precise articulation.

LEON
Dvorak. A challenge.

CLARA
It is not beyond my capabilities.

LEON
Oh, no. A challenge for my own engineering.

CLARA
If it is possible, it must be done.

LEON
I will see to it then. I wouldn't want to dismiss your dedication to this invention.

CLARA
They must know I am a serious musician playing a real instrument.

LEON
A noble goal.

CLARA
They see me waving my hands in the air, and nothing else. Only the spectacle of it.

LEON
To them, it is just a novelty.

CLARA
Sounds from space.

LEON
I fear that belief will persist.

CLARA

(beat)

So how will you fix the articulation?

LEON

There must be a method to increase the sensitivity of the electric field's bounds. Heighten the response.

CLARA

I see.

LEON

Is that all?

CLARA

The lower range is limited. I would like two more octaves.

LEON

Are you certain?

CLARA

I would not ask if I was not certain.

LEON

If I fix that, it does mean the control will be more difficult.

CLARA

I will adjust.

LEON

I have no doubts. You are more suited to play the instrument than I am to fix it.

CLARA

You are a genius.

LEON

With physics and mechanics, yet the invention means nothing without you to bring the music to life.

CLARA

But you are still its creator. It wouldn't be without you.

LEON

You have given me much to think about. I will let you know when it's ready.

CLARA

Thank you.

LEON exits.

CLARA

When we lived in the USSR, it was not particularly kind. Neither of us expected life in America to be easy. Even after I lived here almost two decades, the old Russian life was present, at a distance: our language, the food, the community. Still, we could pretend to be true Americans with expensive dinners and beautiful concerts. But the worse parts began to creep back in. The economic and political freedom were uncertain. A month ago, Stalin's Russia was just outside Leon's door.

Leon enters. It is September 27, 1938.

LEON

(looking out the window)

The same car. They are waiting for me outside.

CLARA

How do they know you're here?

LEON

They have eyes everywhere.

CLARA

Even in the United States?

LEON

Yes.

CLARA

What will you do?

LEON

Do I have an option?

CLARA

You will not go out there.

LEON

What else?

CLARA

What will they do to you?

I do not know. LEON

If you leave now, you will not come back. CLARA

You cannot be so sure. LEON

They never come back. CLARA

I will. LEON

Isaac Babel, Boris Pilnyak, Vsevolod Meyerhold... CLARA

So you know then, I have no choice. LEON

Hide in the basement. I will tell them I do not know you. CLARA

They will use you to get to me. LEON

How do you know? CLARA

I can only imagine. LEON

Let me help you. CLARA

It is too late. Even if you lie, they see the equipment. LEON

We could run. CLARA

And they would follow. LEON

CLARA

We walk to a busier street with people to witness.

LEON

Even that would not matter. They will do what they want.

CLARA

The law does not protect you?

LEON

What do they care for American law?

(beat)

I will go speak to them.

CLARA

Leon.

LEON

I cannot risk you. I will do what they want.

CLARA

Please.

LEON

When I walk out, I need you to go. Quietly, when they have their backs to you.

CLARA

You cannot leave me.

LEON

I am sorry.

LEON exits. CLARA is again alone on stage.
The weight of these memories looms heavy on
her. They play on an endless loop just behind
her eyes. She lifts her hands and begins to play.
The sound is ethereal and deeply melancholy.
End of play.