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NEW ANATOMIES

by
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(NEW ANATOMIES)

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NEW ANATOMIES

**A Full Length Play
For Five Women and a Musician
(The roles are distributed as follows:)**

CHARACTERS

- 1. ISABELLE EBERHARDT and, in her Arab persona,
SI MAHMOUD**
- 2. SEVERINE / ANTOINE / BOU SAADI**
- 3. NATALIE / EUGENIE / MURDERER / JUDGE**
- 4. JENNY / SALEH / LYDIA / COLONEL LYAUTEY**
- 5. VERDA MILES / ANNA / SI LACHMI / YASMINA
CAPTAIN SOUBIEL**

THE TIME: The turn of the century.

THE PLACE: Europe and Algeria.

A Note On The Staging

The role of PASHA (Act Two Scene One) is silent, and should be taken by the musician.

Except for the actress playing ISABELLE, each actress plays a Western woman, an Arab man and a Western man. Changes should take place in such a way as to be visible to the audience and all five actresses should be on stage at all times.

The songs in the play ought to be popular music-hall songs from the turn of the century. Songs 2 and 3 belong to the repertoire of the male impersonator, and Song 1 to that of the *ingénue*. The songs, except for the one beginning Act Two, are optional.

T. W.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Ain-Sefra, a dusty village in Algeria. ISABELLE EBERHARDT looks around, none too steady. She is dressed in a tattered Arab cloak, has no teeth and almost no hair. She is twenty-seven.

ISABELLE. Lost the way. (*Steadies herself.*) Detour. Closed. (*Pause. As if an order to herself.*) Go inside. (*Sings, softly, Arabic modulations, but flat:*) "If a man be old and a fool, his folly..." (*Burps.*) That's what it is. (*Takes out a cigarette and looks for a match through the folds of her cloak.*) Match. (*Forgets about it.* *Sings:*) "If a man be old and a fool, his folly is past all cure. But a young man..." What it is is this: (*Looks around.*) I need a fuck. (*Pause.*) Definitely. Yes.

(*SEVERINE enters. She is a slightly older woman, dressed uncomfortably for the heat in a long skirt and jacket.*)

ISABELLE. Trailed...(*To SEVERINE.*) Trailing behind me. SEVERINE. Come inside.

ISABELLE. Inside? Trailed: the story, I know. Stealing it.

SEVERINE. You have a fever. (*ISABELLE remembers her cigarette.*)

ISABELLE. Matches. Stolen. (*Louder.*) You stole my matches. (*SEVERINE finds the matches, tries to light*

ISABELLE's cigarette. Apologetic.) Desert wind: makes the hand shake. *(SEVERINE lights two cigarettes and sticks one in ISABELLE's mouth.)* Pay for my story with a match. European coinage!

SEVERINE. You need rest.

ISABELLE. No, later. *(Burps.)* Found out what it was. What was it? Ah, yes. It was: I need a fuck. I need a fuck. Where am I going to find a fuck? Bunch of degenerates in this town. Sleeping WHEN I NEED A FUCK. It's the European influence. Keeps them down.

SEVERINE. Come inside, Isabelle.

ISABELLE. "Please go inside, mademoiselle, and stay there." Out of the wind. Saw a couple of guards earlier. That'll do. One for you, one for me. I'll give you the younger one, rules of hospitality. No? Sevvy the scribe prefers a belly dancer, eh, dark smooth limbs and curved hips. Or the voluptuous tale. Your face looks like a big, hungry, European cock. No offense: not your fault you look European. Must find those guards. *(Stares.)* Coolness of the night as it filters through the sand. The smell of sand, Severine, do you know it? It's like the inside of water. Smell...*(She leans down and falls flat.)*

SEVERINE. Isabelle, please...*(They struggle to get her up.)*

ISABELLE. You going to write I couldn't walk straight enough to find a fuck? They'll want to know everything. I'm famous now, not just anybody, no, I'll be in History. *(Near retch.)* They hate me, but I forgive them. You tell them...that when the body drags through the gutter, it is cleaved from the soul. Tell them the soul paced the desert. They take baths, but lice crawl through the cracks of their hypocritical brains. Bunch of

farmers. Wallowing in the mud of their plowed fields. Turnips, cabbages, carrots, all in a line, all fenced in. (*Cries.*) Why do they hate me so? I didn't want anything from them. (*Pause.*) Si Mahmoud forgives all. Si Mahmoud paced the desert. Heart unmixed with guile, free. Why aren't you writing all this down, chronicler? Duty to get it right, no editing. (*Burps.*) Edit that.

SEVERINE. Please, Si Mahmoud. Let's go in.

ISABELLE. Listen. The dawn's coming. You can tell by the sound, a curve in the silence and then the sand in the desert moves...Write down: a third of a centimetre, they'll want to know that in Europe. (*Pause. SEVERINE, resigned, sits with ISABELLE.*) When I was growing up in the Tsar's villa in St. Petersburg...

SEVERINE. Geneva.

ISABELLE. What?

SEVERINE. You said Geneva earlier.

ISABELLE. Did I? Yes, ducks...must have been Geneva.

SEVERINE (*delicately*). Your brothers...

ISABELLE. Didn't have any.

SEVERINE. You said...

ISABELLE. I was the only boy in the family.

SEVERINE. Your brother Antoine...

ISABELLE. Beloved. (*Makes a gesture for fucking.*) Didn't. Would have. Nasty little piece got her claws in him first. No, did.

SEVERINE. Si Mahmoud, the truth.

ISABELLE. There is no god but Allah, Allah is the only God and Muhammed is his prophet.

SEVERINE. What brought you to the desert? (*ISABELLE makes a trace on the ground.*) It's in Arabic.

ISABELLE (*reads*). The Mektoub: it was written. Here. That means, no choice. Mektoub.

SEVERINE. Your mother?

ISABELLE. No choice for her either. The Mektoub.

SEVERINE. You told me she was a delicate woman.

What gave her the courage to run off?

ISABELLE. Even the violet resists domestication.

SEVERINE. But in the 1870s...

ISABELLE. Severine, it is a courtesy in this country not to interrupt or ask questions of the storyteller. You must sit quietly and listen, moving only to light my cigarettes. When I pause, you may praise Allah for having given my tongue such vivid modulations. I shall begin, as is our custom, with a mention of women.

SONG I

VERDA MILES as a Victorian girl in frills.

SCENE TWO

Geneva. A house in disorder. VERDA MILES takes off her ribbons, puts up her hair and covers herself with a shawl, becoming ANNA, a woman in her late thirties, with remnants of style and charm.

ANNA. And then the children...They won't stay.

(ISABELLE and ANTOINE appear. ISABELLE is thirteen, dressed in a man's shirt and a skirt much too big for her. ANTOINE is sixteen, frail and feminine.)

ISABELLE. Antoine, Antoine. Don't let him frighten you.

ANTOINE *(near tears)*. Drunken tyrant.

ISABELLE. Let's dream.

ANTOINE. He threatened to hit me. Brute. I have to go away, now.

ANNA (*paying no attention to any of this*). First Nicholas, not a word...He must have come to a bad...Too many anarchists in the house. It's a bad influence on children.

ISABELLE. Oh yes, let's go away. We're in Siberia. The snow is up to our knees, so hard to move. Suddenly, look, shining in the dark, a pair of yellow eyes.

ANTOINE. I have no choice. I'll have to run away and join the army.

ISABELLE. I'll come with you, we can take Mama.

ANTOINE. The army's only for boys.

ISABELLE. We can't leave Mama.

ANTOINE. I wish I was a girl. He doesn't treat you that way.

ISABELLE. I'm strong.

ANTOINE. He'll kill me.

ANNA. If only Trofimovitch had allowed some fairy tales, even Pushkin...not all these Bakunin pamphlets at bedtime.

ISABELLE. It's snowing again. Darkness. Another pair of yellow eyes, glistening. Another. We're surrounded. Are they wolves?

ANTOINE (*joining in reluctantly*). No, those are the eyes of our enemies.

ISABELLE. You're shivering.

ANNA. And now Natalie...

ANTOINE. I'm cold. It's too cold up there. I want to go further south.

ISABELLE. The Crimea, lemon groves.

ANTOINE. "Knowst thou the land, beloved, where the lemons bloom..." No, I want to go further south. Far away. The Sahara.

ANNA. And Natalie's so good with...

ISABELLE. Our camels are tired.

ANTOINE. That's the sort of thing Natalie would say.

ISABELLE (*offended*). The transition from Siberia was too sudden. I haven't acclimated.

ANTOINE. Acclimatized.

ANNA. It's all so difficult. (*Flute music.*)

ISABELLE. This stillness.

ANTOINE. Dune after dune, shape mirroring shape, so life...weariness.

ISABELLE. How rapidly the sun seems to plunge behind the dunes. This stillness.

ANTOINE. Let us rest, my beloved.

ISABELLE. I'll build our tent. There's a storm coming, I can see the clouds.

ANTOINE. There aren't any clouds over the desert.

ISABELLE. That's what Natalie would say.

ANTOINE. You don't understand, the corners of a dream must be nailed to the ground as firmly as our tent: no rain in the desert.

ISABELLE. A wind then. Listen, the wind's galloping over the dunes.

ANTOINE. It's a sandstorm.

ISABELLE. Quick. Where are you? I can't see you.

ANTOINE. Here, come here, my beloved. (*They throw themselves into each other's arms, roll on the floor.*) Beloved. (*Their embrace lingers.*)

ANNA. Natalie mustn't...she's too good with (*Notices the two children.*) Antoine, I'm not sure you should...with your sister...like that.

ISABELLE. We're playing, Mama, we're dreaming.

ANNA. Are you too old? I don't know. The poets...But Natalie...

ANTOINE. Wants us to behave—

ISABELLE. Like Swiss clocks. Tick tock.

ANTOINE. Tick tock.

ANNA. You mustn't...She is sometimes a little...but she's the only one, she's so good with dust. I don't seem to manage very well. There's so much of it and it's complicated finding it. I wasn't brought up to...But this new world of Trofimovitch, where it's wrong to have servants, well yes, but what about the dust? I suppose when the revolution comes, they'll find a way, deal with it.

ISABELLE. We don't mind.

ANNA. Natalie...wants to leave us.

ANTOINE. Even Natalie can't take the beast any more.

ANNA. Isabelle, she's always been very fond...Tell her she absolutely mustn't...

ISABELLE. She's free.

ANNA. But Trofimovitch...

(NATALIE enters. She is a tightly pulled together young woman. An awkward silence and a sense that this is not unusual when she comes into a room.)

ANNA. Natalie, I was saying...to abandon your home...

NATALIE. How can you call this pigsty a home?

ANNA. Darling, a young lady's vocabulary shouldn't include...Your family...

NATALIE. Family. *(Looks around at them.)* In a family you have first a mother who looks after her children, protects them, teaches them...

ANNA. Didn't I? You knew several poems of Byron as a child.

NATALIE. A mother who teaches her children how to behave and looks after the house, cooks meals, doesn't let her children eat out of a slop bucket—

ANNA. Trofimovitch says meals are a bourgeois form of...But don't we have...

NATALIE. When I cook them. And secondly in a family a brother is a brother, a boy then a man, not this snivelling, delicate half girl. You've allowed him to be terrorized by that drunken beast.

ANNA. Natalie, his mind, philosophy...

NATALIE. Philosophy, don't make me laugh. Yes, and finally in a family you have a proper father, not that raving peasant, who's driven us to this misery and filth, who's now trying to get into my bed at night.

ANNA. He's not always very steady at night, he must have thought...He didn't notice it wasn't his...

NATALIE (*exploding*). And you defend him. My mother defends the man who's ruining all of us, you defend the man who's trying to seduce your own daughter. You won't leave that filthy lecherous drunk, you prefer to ruin us.

ANNA. Leave him...go...where?

ISABELLE. Natalie, love forgives.

NATALIE. Love, that spittle of stinking brandy. Love?

ISABELLE (*gently*). "Love has its reasons..."

ANTOINE. ...which reason cannot fathom."

NATALIE. The two of you with your books!

ANNA (*feebly*). Isabelle is right...She doesn't mind...

NATALIE. At her age you love anybody, even beggars, even a snivelling brother. (*To ISABELLE.*) I'll come back and get you later, then you can come live with me in a real home, with a real family, with my husband.

ISABELLE. A husband, Natalie. That's different. Is he dark? Is he foreign? Does he visit you only at night and wrap you in a blinding veil of torrid passion? A secret husband, how wonderful, like Eros and Psyche. Does he let you look at him?

NATALIE. What are you talking about? I'm marrying Stéphane.

ANTOINE. Stéphane, the shopkeeping weed. He's driven you to that?

NATALIE. You're one to talk, you fine figure of manhood.

ISABELLE. He does look like a dandelion, you said so yourself.

NATALIE. He'll soon be my husband and I'll have him talked about with respect. We'll be very happy.

ISABELLE. How? If he knows you don't love him.

NATALIE. Love, look where that got us. Oh, I tell him I love him, men like to hear that, sometimes I tell him I adore him.

ANNA. To lie...I'm not sure...

NATALIE. I can't have you at the wedding. I explained he was too ill. Stéphane's family's a little upset I'm foreign. But they'll see, I'll make a wonderful home for him. *(Pause.)* I must get my things. Don't tell him, it won't do any good. *(She leaves.)*

ANNA. I don't understand, what have I done? But you, my babies, you'll never leave, no, you couldn't now. What did you say, Isabelle? Torrid passion, yes, I think, with Trofimovitch, it was...He was so strong, so convinced, impossible to think clearly...And then, how wrong it was to have servants, husband, hypocrisy of the sacrament, he said, and how my life made millions suffer. Would you have preferred a big house? You see,

there are so many rules when you...The doctor says a frail heart...There's no choice when your heart is...
(*She drifts off.*)

ISABELLE. At last the silence descends on the darkening dunes. How still is our solitude, my beloved, how still the desert.

ANTOINE. Let's stop here.

ISABELLE. Yes, let's grow old together and watch the hours stretch on the ground.

ANTOINE (*moving away*). Beloved, forgive me, but I must.

ISABELLE. I can't see you. You sound so far away.

ANTOINE. I don't have the strength any more, forgive me...

ISABELLE. Where have you gone? Oh, please. Abandoned, alas, nothing to do.

ANTOINE (*from off*). But wait.

ISABELLE. Wait...and all around me, death. (*Screams.*)
Dead.

SCENE THREE

Geneva, a few years later. NATALIE and ISABELLE.

NATALIE. Dead?

ISABELLE. Dead. Both of them. Mama first, almost immediately after she received Antoine's letter. It broke her heart, those years of silence, not knowing, her frail heart. And then the letter from the Legion! Antoine a Legionnaire, he'll never survive.

NATALIE. It might be just the thing for him. Turn him into a man.

ISABELLE. He didn't even tell me, the coward, the traitor. He must have planned it for months in secret. And then a cool letter describing life in the barracks and, now, marriage. I'll have to find him before it's too late.

NATALIE. And him? Drank himself to death?

ISABELLE. Poor Trofimovitch. He'd begun to put his ear to the ground listening for the sound of the revolution. He said he'd hear it when it came, he still had the ear of a Russian peasant. And he despaired of the silence. When Mama died, he...turned and twisted, crumpled himself into a knot and kept his ear to the floor, but this time I think he was listening for her. "Three be the ways of love: a knitting of heart to heart—that's Antoine and me—a pleasing of lips and eyes, and a third love whose name is death." That's Trofimovitch and Mama. It's from an Arabic poem. Trofimovitch taught it to me. There's a similar one in Greek...

NATALIE. Mama should have taught you to sweep instead. If I'd learnt properly when I was young my mother-in-law wouldn't have found so much to complain about. But Stéphane has been very patient. I'm lucky. (*Takes in the disorder.*) We can start on this house. Stéphane thinks we'll get a lot of money for it, sell it to some English aristocrats. They like these gloomy old places.

ISABELLE. The house belongs to Antoine. He'll want to come back here and live with me.

NATALIE. He'll want his own little home now.

ISABELLE. "And the screen of separation was placed between us."