

Perikles Monioudis

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By Perikles Monioudis

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This is the story of an individual, an artist, Frederick, who thought he could resist me, and I've let him believe this for quite long enough, isn't that right Frederick? It is a nice little story. Ladies and Gentleman, I hope you enjoy it!

From your devoted friend,

At The Waldorf Astoria, New York

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He had been instructed to sit right at the back on the folding chairs and so that is where the little boy sat, staring straight ahead at the stage. Frederick acted as if the whole thing left him quite cold – the audience's eager excitement before every number, the ovations for the half-naked women, the half-naked women themselves, the ridiculing of the elderly dance duo, the lewd introductions from the director who, quite the impresario, insisted on being the one to welcome the acts on, just so he could immediately talk about himself. The crowds in the dingy auditorium went wild for his vulgar gestures. Apart from Frederick – he did not bat an eyelid. He was not trying to appear grown up, in any case no-one was taking the slightest bit of notice of the little boy in the baggy tweed suit. Frederick's only concern was his sister Adele, who was two and a half years older than him and who could barely stay on the folding chair next to him for laughing. She was crying tears of ecstasy.

Under no circumstances did he want to behave like his sister, not even right here at his first, compulsory visit to the vaudeville theatre. A childlike instinct, a burgeoning pride, enabled him to distance himself from the goings-on around him, the smirking bachelors in the front row, the elderly women sitting at little tables, each equipped with a telephone and reserved just for them.

Frederick was not able to hear the ringing over the noise in the auditorium but he could not help noticing that the red, damask-covered telephones were receiving calls constantly. Some had a little yellow light that flickered on when someone rang. The elderly women looked around the room, the receiver clamped to their ear. Frederick followed their gaze. The callers, receiver pressed to their ear, gave a brief and effortless wave of their handkerchief and the women waved back or hung up or did both at the same time. Frederick did not quite understand the whole thing.

The only thing Frederick found embarrassing was Adele doubling up with laughter next to him. It irritated him because he felt he had been betrayed. In her childlike exuberance she was not in the slightest bit different from all the other visitors. That was precisely why he wanted to tell her off, though he knew she would not stand for it, especially not from her younger brother.

Frederick continued to behave with indifference, taking care not to reveal his growing repulsion, even when he noticed that his mother, who was sitting next to Adele and still had her hat on, had allowed a faint smile to flit across her face. It did not trouble him. Or at least that was what Frederick wanted to think. He tried to tell himself that his mother could see right through the deception and for this very reason would not dream of talking to the spineless director about him and Adele. In fact that was Ann's sole intention.

The audience fell silent. Frederick looked over to the stage where, now that the elderly couple had made their exit, an old dancer was preparing to perform his act. But after his first few twirls he was mocked by the audience, crude insults were thrown, and shortly after coins were pelting his way too, at which point he gave an unfazed bow and left the stage without further ado. It seemed to the boy, who was being afflicted by the cigarette smoke in the auditorium, that the dancer had looked at him before bowing. He found that disconcerting, both due to the uncertainty of whether the bow had really been directed at him and to the fact that it had made him feel embarrassed. Why would someone bow to Frederick?

The old dancer, an almost bald, scrawny man in baggy tails, appeared to have smiled at him too before leaving the stage. Or so it seemed to the boy. Isn't that right, Frederick? Perhaps he still did not realise that it really had been meant for him, meant personally, but he already had a strong foreboding sense of what was to come for the old codger up there – a presentiment of future misfortune, a horrible end? At that point Frederick had only just started out and it seemed to him in that moment as if this washed-up dancer had something in store for him, something great, immeasurable. *What'll it be, Frederick?*

This was a world away from the ladies' socials for which Adele and Frederick would twirl and tap-dance in colourful costumes as required. It was a world away from the little ballroom of the *Alviene Master School of the Theater and Academy of Cultural Arts*, the dance school where they spent every day, often from morning until evening, rehearsing steps and practising jumps in front of the wide mirrors, occasionally performing short numbers together with the other, much older, pupils. In fact, the two siblings could not be less alike; Adele took what she could from life, whereas from an early age her brother kept his distance from the world – or at least from his sister's world. They looked a strange sight when they danced together, this young boy, a head shorter even in his top hat, and his sister, who had already learnt to flirt with her reflection. She was his superior, not just in this respect: her inner fire also seemed to burn brighter.

Ann had them practising over and over. She wanted to be able to make do without the financial support of her husband in distant Omaha and in doing so seemed to have her hopes set, just like the alcohol-loving Fritz, on Adele. Frederick played his part so the children could continue to perform, both as a dance duo and as an attraction. Ann could hardly have known that Frederick would soon surpass his radiantly joyful yet easily distracted sister and would subsequently leave all his contemporaries far behind him too. Who can foresee these things? Who can say what will be? Who will cultivate and care for this young boy, and then later this young man, so he can truly achieve maturity and perfection as an established dancer? *Say something, Frederick!*

Ann smoothed down the collar of his tweed jacket. Frederick stood up, pinched his sister on the shoulder, together the three of them left the auditorium through the rear door and followed the small brass arrows which led them through the stuffy, black-painted corridor to the artists' dressing rooms. The corridor opened out into a dingy room that had been divided into several compartments with long curtains. The compartments were equipped with round mirrors and wardrobes.

The hurly-burly of the auditorium could no longer be felt here. As if overcome by a great weariness, a sense of melancholy, all the artists were sitting around, smoking, casually putting on their street clothes and turning their – naked – backs on showbiz, or what they and their audience perceived it to be. Ann asked a little man for the director and indicated she wished to speak to him in his office. He requested the children wait outside. Ann insisted on at least taking Adele with her. She looked at Frederick, smoothed down the

collar of his tweed jacket once more and gave him to understand that he should sit in one of the empty compartments.

The bare bulbs around the mirror blinded him. He did not want to imagine what it might be like to have to come back, or perhaps to have to keep coming back to this unspeakable place. He sat down on a wooden stool, alone, and leafed through the programme. The pencil sketches portraying the artists depressed him. *If your own name doesn't appear first even in this kind of vaudeville show why would you perform at all? Isn't that right, Frederick? Or were you still too young then to be nauseated by that?*

These portraits made the boy feel stifled, even though he could only guess what it meant to feel stifled and nauseated by the ambitions of those less talented than himself, those whose meagre talents were only good for providing entertainment in farcical shows. Was there anything more pleasurable than watching an amateur fail? Indeed, the only thing that really equals true failure is following someone with talent as they fail. To be present for the complete collapse of someone talented, for the tragedy, for their tragedy, that is the greatest thing of all. *Cultivating and caring for a great talent – to the very end.*

Until that point the boy had not had the opportunity to experience the world of showbiz, as Ann put it, let alone to move in it, to measure his hopes and dreams, hidden from his own self as they were, with what he had just seen in the auditorium and certainly could not yet miss. The performances had not left the slightest lasting impression on him; *Showbiz* was yet to enter his little, little soul.

As he examined his face in the round mirror he resolved to think about the events that had taken place on- and off-stage later, at home, in the little guest apartment they had moved into in the city of all cities after leaving Father. That was Frederick's way. He liked to shut himself in his room and mull things over. However, in this metropolis, which, at times like these was more thrilling than frightening, he no longer had a room at his disposal. In comparison to his parent's house in Omaha, Nebraska, where it was a given, here he had to do without the privilege of having his own room.

Nevertheless, Frederick still preferred being alone. In the afternoon he was allowed to go to the little park nearby, which was usually completely empty. If he had to be with other people, then in front of them, if you please, and dancing. Often Frederick only had himself for an audience, albeit an enormous, clamorous one, and he would watch himself as he hopped, ran and tap-danced along the path through the park. He experienced the greatest happiness on this short path which offered neither tourist attractions nor window displays, only the promise of being alone and being able to lose himself in his thoughts, which revolved around dancing, around him as a dancer, a great dancer who would win over the masses, quite without his sister.

Aside from the path, the little park and the sunshine, which blazed down on his pallid face and warmed him in his coarse tweed, Frederick had very little. He spent his time in the ballroom of the dance academy, the *Alviene Master School of the Theater and Academy of Cultural Arts*, forever with Adele and Ann, who did not have much either, other than the dancehall and practice and the associated hope of getting one or more highly profitable performances, big performances that would get them their big break or at least – as Ann hoped – would secure them an income. For Ann everything revolved around dancing, and Frederick revolved with it. He had been dancing since he was three years old, at first hesitantly as if in the dark, then faster and skipping, before finally learning to jump. He displayed his pirouettes and now went around, even outside the ballroom, with a straight back, hands held close to his body.

Frederick sat down on the park bench and looked at the thin branch he had just picked up. His gaze slid down it and came to rest briefly on his thumb, before continuing down to the wrist. He stretched out his fingers quickly, as quickly as he could, just as he would when opening his body into position every time he practised, throwing his legs and arms away from him when he jumped, before pulling them back in and finding a new equilibrium with the ground once more under his feet. Frederick opened and closed his enormous hands several times, as if he hoped to learn something about his movements through the air.

Claude Alviene, his dance teacher, never failed to remind him that every movement began with the hands and flowed back to them, back to Frederick's far too large hands and far too long fingers. Even years later he would notice them with suspicion and hide them behind the waist of a Ginger Rogers or a Rita Hayworth, in the hip scarf of a Betty Hutton or a Cyd Charisse, or in stills he would hide them behind Eleanor Powell or place them on top of one another in such a way as to make them appear shapely. *Follow your hand* Frederick heard Alviene say time and again, *follow it and tell it what you want to dance.*

The boy wanted to follow his hand but he was still unsure of what to tell it. The whippersnapper that he was, every movement or gesture that appeared elegant, perfected, refined or beautified in some way seemed not entirely suspect or affected, but neither did it seem wholly natural – though his concept of the natural was still far from developing erotic undertones, let alone sexual ones, despite him blushing when he practised with the teacher's almost grown-up daughter, Aurora, feeling her strangely close to him, wanting nothing more than to spin into her arms and take her in his much-too-large hands.

The boy's initial horror at the rowdy vaudeville atmosphere had faded and his irritation had given way to a sobriety that Frederick had adopted since early childhood. It was with this sobriety that he detected from a glance in the mirror that his side parting was not perfectly parted at the back – and that was certainly only due to the fact that he would go bald one day. Bald people do not lose out on stage, they just have no luck in life. Frederick knew that from his mother, who was not bald herself – in fact she was rather attractive in appearance – but she always wanted to remind him about baldness, as if in doing so it could be prevented or wilfully influenced somehow. As if dance, in its perfect form, was not above baldness, as if dancing perfection was not able to outshine all the inadequacies in a person's appearance.

The boy glanced back and forth between the mirror and the portraits in the programme. He imagined what his own pencil portrait would look like. He became immersed in the illustrations. He wondered what Adele and his mother could hope to achieve by meeting the director. As he glanced back in the mirror once more he noticed the old dancer there, in the distant, somewhat unreflective edge.

The dancer was looking in the mirror too, in his own compartment, at what exactly Frederick could not quite be sure; at least the old man was not looking over at him. Frederick watched as the man very slowly, though not laboriously, removed his bow tie and undid the top button on his shirt. Everything he did appeared to the boy to be in slow motion, the man seemed to have all the time in the world. He kept his top hat on. So he had gone bald over the years, to some extent on stage, Frederick thought and turned away. Without looking he threw the programme on the stool under the dressing table, which was really just a storage cabinet. He leant on it and stood up quickly.

He did not want the old man to spot him in the mirror. He sensed that the man only spelled trouble, but dismissed this as nonsense, and indeed that is what it was, absolute nonsense. What could an old, used-up

dancer, who in all respects had turned his back on himself and the rest of the world, do to him? A person without any hope of care or even affection, someone completely lacking in joy or authentic joy or any form of authenticity in the broadest sense, a washed-up dancer with little talent and a limited capacity to inspire.

Frederick had blue make-up stuck to his fingers. He wiped them on his trousers. Why he was heading for the compartment occupied by the old man he could not say. The man in tails gave the impression of being irritated, though certainly not dangerous. It was not curiosity that led him to peer into the old man's compartment, rather Frederick wanted to get something over with, some sort of discussion. The boy strode bravely into the compartment although just moments ago he had felt a kind of dread at the old man's appearance, a repulsion, a vague but powerful sense of disgust.

He wanted to confront him about the look he had given him from the stage just a moment ago; he wanted to be the one to make demands of the man in tails, Frederick, who was standing there with a straight back and raised chin, hands in his trouser pockets looking into the nearby mirror and finding the old man's reflection.

The old man ignored him. But then, however, it seemed to Frederick as if he had been waiting for him, for a minute, for an eternity, for an eternity and a minute. The old man dampened the little sponge he had clamped between his thumb and forefinger and wiped the make-up carefully from his right cheek with it by raising the sponge to his cheekbone and then drawing it towards to his jawline; downwards, it seemed like all the old man's movements had a tendency to go downwards, in a precisely downward direction – precise like his dance steps, downwards with the weight of a gravitational pull, or rather with the kind of weight gravity produces; a heavy, dark core. That the old man is still sitting here, is still being held by the stool, by the floorboards, is an odd thing, Frederick thought.

Frederick observed the old hand with its nearly translucent skin and, excepting the sharp contours of the finger joints and knuckles, the mess of red and blue lines it revealed which seemed to him to be merely held together by his many age spots. And the hand was so heavy; it appeared to Frederick that it was only able to move the comparatively feather-light sponge with great difficulty.

Instinctively the boy stretched the fingers on his right hand out and circled them several times from the wrist. Then he hid them in his trouser pocket.

The old man rinsed the sponge out painstakingly in a glass dish on his dressing table. He poured a few drops of alcohol onto the sponge, which had been squeezed of the last drop of liquid, positioned it against his left cheekbone and held it there firmly. To Frederick it looked for a moment as if the old man were supporting his heavy hand against his face. What an ugly chap, the boy thought, as their gaze met.

Make-up dissolved under the damp sponge and gathered at the artist's jaw. The old man smiled, rather pityingly it seemed to Frederick, who did not yet know that envy often manifests itself in facial expressions and gestures in a way that can be interpreted as pity. But Frederick also could not know for what reason – *for what talent, for what virtue, let's say, Frederick, isn't that right?* – this miserable old man would envy him. What was enviable about him?

The boy did not recognise pity, and besides, he was not impressed by this old man, whose ugliness could hardly be surpassed. He looked at the man's toothless mouth and said, without thinking: *No*.

No, the boy said again and smiled straight ahead, laughed in the old man's face, swayed his hips. The urge to dance overcame him, he skipped a few times, elegantly and effortlessly, stretched one leg out, just skimming the floor with the tip of his shoe, he extended his arms, turned on his supporting leg, brought the arms back in, turned three times at terrific speed and came to a halt, laughing. Never ever, he said. He accompanied the two words with a tap dance, as he held his imaginary cane over his shoulder.

The ugly old man would never ever stop him from being able to dance. The boy tap-danced a series of steps that, while unspectacular, were impressive in their ease and perfectly executed. The old man looked away, smiled into the mirror, his heavy hand resting on the storage cabinet, incapable of lifting it once more to his cheek. He had that pitying look on his face once more.

The old man closed his eyes, the lids – black as night, isn't that right? – still needed to be wiped free of make-up. He seemed annoyed. He would have liked to give the boy a smack, but he knew all too well that would bring disadvantages for him. Frederick would remember him. By giving him a clip round the ear he would write himself in the memory of this sensitive youth, and that was the last thing the old man wanted. He had the intention of seeing Frederick again, not here and not today but soon enough.

The boy threw his imaginary top hat at the old man's feet and his cane after that, he peeled himself out of his tails, folded them and placed them on the storage cabinet. The old man did nothing to stop him. He typically valued bravado – but not right now.

He looked away as Adele appeared by the curtain. An outraged Ann announced – as if it concerned the old man too, perhaps even addressed him, as Frederick imagined for a moment – that the director only wanted to book Adele and that this was out of the question for the family.

Frederick returned the old man's gaze. Their eyes met in the mirror, which was unreflective in places, and in which the old man had shoved the made-up half of his face. Once again Frederick sensed a kind of gravity that seemed to affect the old man to an inordinate degree, making him hunchbacked and pulling him down; and the boy still could not quite say if it came from the man in tails himself, from his heavy, dark core.

Frederick did up the first of the two buttons on his tweed jacket and took Adele's hand, just as he would if he were inviting his sister to dance. She was not in the mood; her liveliness had given way to a sadness that, since leaving Omaha, would sometimes overcome her and darken her disposition for hours.

Frederick and Adele reached the stage door hand in hand with their mother. Their first contract awaited them elsewhere; soon the children would be on the road performing as a dance duo. Taking the train right across the country, right across the continent, out into the provincial towns with their dilapidated vaudeville theatres.

Ann kicked open the door. Just a few steps from the red canopy of the variety theatre she was hit by the bad breath that New York exuded at the time. Broadway, 1905, in the exuberance of the bright lights.