

# The Scenes Speak for Themselves

by Dirk van Nouhuys

We are the images, the *tableau vivant*, the one-person shows, the scenes from scattered plays. We wait for the Caretaker who prompts us to play and replay one by one on her rounds.

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Look, there is one of us: in a mountain meadow a girl encumbered by the copious skirts and hooded bonnet of a dairy maid pulls at the horns of a cow lying in a soggy meadow. Higher peaks are arrayed behind them, and to the left lies the reedy central pond of a water meadow. The girl's back bends with desperation. The cow, seemingly unable to rise, looks at us with large, patient eyes. We see again the cowherd's face contorted with effort; hear her rough breathing; feel the twisting wrench in her shoulders and back; smell the green mix of cow dung and meadow grass sucking around her boots groping for footing in the muck. The Caretaker enters. She scans the scene. Above the meadow floats the pass, brighter sun beyond, where perhaps a hunting horn sounded not so long ago. The scene brightens under her attention. She brushes the straining cheek with a tear.

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There is another, a *tableau vivant* seen through the eye of a box camera on a tripod: a full-bodied young woman in a bathing suit that wraps her from armpit to mid thigh but does not conceal her youthful voluptuousness. She is standing ankle-deep a river waving a motionless hand at the camera. We can smell the slightly sour scent of a slow-moving stream. Behind her, the ripples are motionless and, beyond, willows seem to float on the opposite bank, shedding their green smell. She has straight, dark-brown hair parted and cut to the bottoms of her ears and large, dark eyes, made darker by makeup, which shine at the camera. The Caretaker slips under

the black hood of the camera, eyes the scene. All is still; there is nothing to add or subtract.

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Some of us endure because our token endures. Here the actress walks energetically through a Woolworth's. The wooden floors, the table tops so full of things! The swish of tumblers in pneumatic tubes magically rushing sales slips and cash. She has come to college and found she did not bring a darning egg. She picks up one of them. Smooth brown wood-: the hand-filling, hard roundness. The Caretaker can change it but never ignore it, not this token.

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Sweat is running from every pore; the actress' brow is sopping wet. She is speaking to shadowy figures, her words not quite her own. The smell of medicine wounds the air. The words play again, helpless: "Move my legs so I can just lean and breathe and push." "I'm going to vomit." Someone asks, "When?" The answer is the taste of bile in her mouth. The doctor tells her to put her hand down there and she feels a baby's head for the first time. The doctor says to cut the talking and push. ...The Caretaker has erased something... Someone tells the actress to open her eyes and she has the baby in her hands. Then someone asks her if she wants to cut the cord, and the actress grabs the scissors. They are heavy and awkward in her hand. The blood sprays out and onto her thigh; — the warmth, the smell. ...The Caretaker has erased something... Cold, bone-chilling cold, shoulders hunching and shivering all over. The doctor complements her on a job well done and she asks if that means she could remain as her patient. The baby's mouth puckering at her nipple. He is so awake and alert! His eyes are dark pools that follow sound and light. They fix on hers.

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We crowd around her clenching our teeth. It is late afternoon in a bedroom half lit by sunlight falling through Venetian blinds. The walls have flowered paper; the trim and ceiling are gray in the shadow. A closet door is closed, and the door to the hall ajar. The actress sits in a straight chair beside a bed, with a white quilt

carefully made up. There is a white chest of drawers with flowering vines in gay colors painted around the pulls and the corners. Above it a mirror; on the top a white doily; the picture of the boy looking at the bubble; a picture of her father by a harvester; the darning egg, no longer used; a vase with her most successful glaze, lavender, a rare color. She is sitting by these things icy with tension, her shoulders locked like the jaws of a fox on a chicken's throat.

Steps are coming down the hall. They want to pass.

"Come here!" she commands.

The man who looks like Humphrey Bogart peeps in hesitantly.

The Caretaker slips another one of us from her bag: *it is the actress in a cabin, shouting, "Where have you been, where have you been!" The man who looks like Humphrey Bogart is standing straight dressed in khaki "It's none of your business," he says. "It is my business. You've been sleeping with Stella haven't you, haven't you?" The man who looks like Humphrey Bogart turns his back.*

In this scene the actress says, "I don't have to tell you how furious I am."

"I'm sorry; you know how sorry I am," He answers, hangdog.

Your sorrow is not enough," she says passionately, her voice throbbing. "Your sorrow is not enough by a long shot," she says shaking her head toward him. She wants scorn him to death. There is nothing for it.

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The actress is peeking out the second story window of her bedroom at the farmhands bleeding a pig by the barn. The smell of blood makes her yawn. The weighty carcass of the porker rises in jerks by the winch above the barn door. A lean Indian with long hair tied at the back, a Crow or a Blackfeet, is heaving up the carcass with strength that his trim shoulders belie. The Caretaker carries her thoughtlessly into the yard. It is bright outside and easy to breathe; the farm hands are laughing loudly as they butcher the big hog. They are matching their strength by the length of rope they can heave the carcass. 'She is stronger than she looks," boasts the foreman to the young Indian. The Indian looks at her frankly,

challengingly, and hands her the rope, which is locked by the winch. She takes it imperiously; he gives it up without surrendering it. She heaves a good length up. "Do you want to wrestle?" the Indian asks.

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The darning egg is always somewhere. One of us is the actress is sitting beside her mother, a large warm being beside her. It is winter; the smell of the coal stove fills the room. The sock is stretched over the egg close before her eyes, her mother's fingers on her fingers, guiding them. The agony of love and of self doubt: could she ever have her mother's fingers? They are talking about the girl down the road. "She is not good enough for us, really, but neighbors are neighbors." It is the actress' red sock. Angry, she knows her mother will never let her darn her father's socks.

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What is the relation between the actress and the Caretaker? Does the actress employ her to keep us up or does the actress hang supported in her whim? Which? Who cares for the other? Where do they lead us? Who leads? Would the Caretaker seek out the actress in a lonely place? What is her story? We would stage her story if we could.

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The Caretaker has forsaken the sweat and the doctor. The actress feels a baby's head for the first time. The scissors are heavy and awkward in her hands. The blood sprays out and onto her thigh, the warmth, the smell. The baby's mouth puckering at her nipple. His eyes are black pools that follow sound and light. They fix on hers.

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One or another of us always has the egg, passing one to another like the eye of the three goddesses who shared an eye, a tooth, and an ear, the Grææ. Who came searching to learn their secretes? Was it the man who looks like Humphrey Bogart? Here is the actress striding through a Woolworth's, the musty wooden floors, the gusty message tubes they used to have. She has come to college and found she does not have a darning egg. She decisively chooses the best,

maple, the hand-filling oval, a present for herself - it must be the best.

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Here is a tableau vivant seen through the eye of a small camera heavy in the actress' hand. It is the boy, perhaps 10, fair haired, wearing a striped tee shirt and shorts sitting on a window sill. The Caretaker merges her eye with the actress' eye and draws from her bag the image of the flaxen haired man. The boy is holding a thin plastic loop where tremblingly balances a soap bubble as big as his head. His dark pool eyes now stare half into, half beyond the bubble, dreaming of the world as himself.

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We are a group of women sitting in chairs around the wall of a meeting room. The unwindowed walls are gray white; the dark wood chairs bruised. We occupy about 10 of 20 chairs. A woman with a corvine face is speaking at a desk, marking time. There is knock on the door; then it is opened unbidden. The actress twists her neck to see. There is a short, energetic man in a tweed jacket and pants but no tie. He has rusty red hair, a foxy beard, and smells of sweat. He is carrying a briefcase. He steps up briskly to the desk and begins to speak. He speaks of justice, of hope, of action. He tells them about the struggle for a better, more just, world. He lifts their hearts. After the speech he chats with each woman. He shakes the actress' hand. He challenges her.

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The streamside picture again. The willows, the water, the ripples, the scent of the willows, but the Caretaker has brushed way the figure, empty there, neither an absence nor a presence. She draws something from her bag into the picture, a figure to fill the emptiness; it is the actress her self when she took the picture. The Caretaker puts her eye to the viewfinder. All is still; there is nothing to add or subtract.

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We hold our hands up to rain falling gently. In the farmyard the actress feels the soft air form the south and the sweet rot smell of

fields newly ploughed and dressed. The countryside is brown under the spring rain, and mist drifts half way up the hillsides. Sheep bells sound along the brimming river where the flock nibbles the budding grass. It is his favorite weather, the end of cold for people and for the stock, the animals set free from close quarters and scant forage. The actress' tears mix with the rain.

The Caretaker moves her to the main room. The dying man is lying slack under a coverlet on the alcove bed. The farmhands come forward one by one and the dying man shakes each one by the hand, even the Indians. He is thanking them for their work, saying goodbye, and asking them to forgive him if he has wronged them in any way. The skin is snow white around his nostrils and lips and the circles around his eyes are bluish. His hair lies in damp strands over his moist forehead. His voice is indistinct and low.

He calls his children next. She and her brother step up. He asks them to bend over so he can kiss them. He wishes them long and happy lives. Each is weeping; her brother throws himself in her arms, then, with arms around each other's waists, they got to two chairs waiting by his feet. Her brother turns again and buries his face in her breast.

Next the man who looks like Humphrey Bogart. His face quivers, and tears run down over his cheeks when he lifts the dying man's hand and kisses it. He begs his Father-in-law in a low voice to forgive what he has done to him. The dying man says, "Yes, with all my heart."

Her mother comes last, a short woman with a long, sinewy salt and pepper gray braid. The Caretaker draws her normal brisk walk and alert shoulders as a veil over her present bent back and hesitant step. They whisper to each other; no one can hear. They exchange a kiss. Then she kneels beside the bed, her face near his face. All wait. The dying man breathes. The Caretaker folds some hours into her bag. He lies with half-shut eyes. Now and again he moves his head and restlessly gropes a little with his hands on the bed cover and breathes heavily and moans. The doctor gets up from his chair by

the wall and leans over him. "He cannot speak," her mother announces, and the doctor returns to his chair.

It grows dusk. A few people come and go from the chairs along the wall. The rain drips and trickles off the house. Her husband sits on the floor leaning against her chair, his head on her thigh. She can sense her brother's sweetheart sitting by the wall, too diffident to stand with him, and senses his wish that she were with him. She is jealous that her mother is closest to the dying man.

Unrest comes over him; his body shakes; a blue shade comes over his face, and he seems to struggle for breath. Her mother rises and puts her arm around his shoulder. He draws a long, last, rattling breath.

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We are playing a warehouse room full of women sitting at benches assembling telephones. The actress sits at the end of a long bench where assembled instruments pass to her; she checks them and, with a rolling, repetitive motion of her shoulders, puts them in a waiting cart. A messenger taps her on the shoulder and gestures to the office. She knows it is union business because she is the shop steward, and work can be interrupted for union business. The Caretaker moves her to a dingy waiting room where a prim receptionist garrisons a wooden desk. A woman in a dour business suit stands by the door embracing a large Manila envelope. The Caretaker, draws from her bag the woman tête-à-tête with her man, the short man with the foxy beard, but does not bring forth her name. The actress is afraid she looks confused. The woman holds out the envelope and says, "Here are the papers." The actress says, "I don't understand". "You don't understand?" the woman echoes. "I'm not expecting any papers," the actress says. "I've lost my drop," the woman says distressed, jerks back the envelope, turns and leaves. The receptionist looks on. The Caretaker fans fear into the room like a scent of blood.

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Here we are clinging to the useful thing. Here it is in the lap of the boy. He and the actress are bending over it, his side pressed

against hers, his fingers under her guiding fingers — the dusty smell of his hair. The Caretaker draws from her bag her mother's face when she would not let her darn her father's socks. The actress is trying to feel inside the boy beside her: does he have that anger? No, he has no rival.

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Here the expectant women are sitting in chairs around the wall of a meeting room. The unwindowed walls are gray white; the dark wood chairs chipped and scratched. The Caretaker has darkened the corvine face of the chairwoman, brings out her sharp cheekbones and jaw. The door opens of itself. The actress is afraid to look at the visitor. He has rusty red hair, a foxy beard, and smells of sweat. He is carrying a briefcase. He steps agilely to the desk, parks the briefcase at his feet, and begins to speak. He speaks of justice, of hope, of action, frightening actions redolent with distant powers. After the speech he chats with each. He shakes her hand. He scares her. He is exciting.

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We play the death again. The skin is snow white around the nostrils and lips of the man in the alcove bed and the circles around his eyes are bluish. Hair lies in damp strands over his moist forehead. The Caretaker strengthens his voice; it is soft but clear and commanding.

The actress steps to the bed. He asks her to bend over so he can kiss her. He wishes her a long and happy life although she is crying. Her brother, throws himself in her arms, then, with arms around each other waists they got to two chairs waiting at his feet.

The man who looks like Humphrey Bogart: his face quivers and tears run down over his cheeks when he lifts the dying man's hand and kisses it. He begs his father-in-law in a low voice to forgive what he has done to him. The dying man says , "Yes, with all my heart." The Caretaker draws the actress' voice from her bag: "Your sorrow is not enough. Your sorrow is not enough by a long shot."

Her mother and father whisper to each other; no one can hear. They exchange a kiss — the kiss of death. The Caretaker steals



hours. Unrest grips the dying man; his body shakes; a blue shade comes over his face, and he seems to struggle for breath. Her mother rises and puts her arm around his shoulder. He draws a long last rattling breath. The actress knows she is alone forever.

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We all love the maiden with the cow. The Caretaker comes; she draws a scrim over the scene. On the scrim appears a handsome, broad-shouldered round-headed man with lank blond hair sitting smiling down beside a little girl in bed. He is telling her a story, which plays behind the scrim. They can smell the coal stove from downstairs. He describes mountains in a distant country and the flat meadows between them. He tells about a dairy maid searching anxiously through the grass in a long summer evening. The girl in the bed looks up at him carefully, anxious to grasp each distant, precious detail. She sees the scene in his voice. She sees them as he tells how the dairy maid finds the cow ill or old in a bad way in a soggy part of a water meadow. She smells sour water and grassy cow dung. She feels in her hands the horns as the maid, desperate to get her up and moving, straining against the despondent weight of the beast, feels in her neck how the maid looks back over her shoulder hoping for help. The Caretaker draws a curtain around it all, wraps it in the warmth of the round-headed man, of story telling.

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We sigh. We each desire that she will never omit us from her rounds. We do not mind how she touches us. We turn away and clutch our skirts. One time she forsakes us; another she draws us from afar. She holds the actress in her net. Are we her net? When will she let go the lank-haired man, forsake the actress, forsake herself?

*3250 words*

