

A TOWN WITHOUT HEROES

A One Act drama

by

James Chalmers

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Running Time **40 - 45** minutes

Players 4 Female & 2 Male (*Alternatively 3 female & 3 male*)

Raison d'être

This play was written for a one off performance at a local Drama Festival. The actor in the leading role won the best actor award, with two other actors being highly commended for their performances. This play offers an opportunity for the actors to excel in their portrayal of the characters - characters that are each very different.

What this play is about

The house where an exiled Eastern European writer wrote his autobiography, earning him a world-wide reputation, has been turned into a museum in his honour. But what should become of this reputation, when the dark truths of his past life are revealed after his death? Murder, adultery, child sexual abuse, possible incest and the life of his most recent victim effectively destroyed.

Setting

The play is set during the cold war. The story unfolds in England (or any English speaking country) and in an unnamed country behind the Iron Curtain.

Synopsis

Vertlo has spent five years in an East European internment camp. On his release, the local gangster Zydiski arranges for Vertlo to escape to England. When Vertlo settles in England - he learns English, gets a job as a truck driver, buys a house and marries an English girl, Brenda. Zydiski gets into trouble in his own country and he flees to England. He stays at Vertlo's house, where he writes his autobiography.

Zydiski has an affair with Brenda. Zydiski returns to his own country when Brenda becomes pregnant. It isn't clear who has fathered Brenda's child. Zydiski's book comes to the attention of the authorities and he is imprisoned. Brenda gives birth to a daughter - Krystal.

Zydiski's book is published in the West and it becomes a best seller. As a result of international pressure, Zydiski is released from prison after thirteen years. He returns to England to stay at Vertlo's house.

Brenda discovers that Zydiski has been sexually abusing her daughter - 13 year old Krystal. Brenda leaves the house in a state of shock. (Her body is recovered a few days later from the local river.) Zydiski hurriedly packs his bags and goes to America.

Ten years on, the local council who know nothing about the dark side of Zydiski's life, acquire the house, and open it as a museum dedicated to the writer. Not long after the museum opens, Krystal is invited to the museum by the curator Holly. But Krystal remembers nothing about her life in this house, her parents or Zydiski. The play opens with Krystal's arrival at the museum. The story unfolds through a series of flashbacks.

Cast List

ZYDISKI (1947 - 1997)

Zydiski Zennerish. Demands that he's only known by his first name Zydiski. His own survival is his personal philosophy. Confident and arrogant, dark and chilling, but can switch in an instant to being witty and charming. Coercive and controlling.

VERTLO (1927 - 1990)

Vertlo Trenersari. Quiet and docile. Loving and caring. An almost broken man after spending five years in an internment camp.

BRENDA (1953 - 1989)

Vertlo's wife. Much younger than Vertlo. Just an ordinary girl who is very loving towards Vertlo, but she can't resist falling under Zydiski's spell.

KRYSTAL (1976 -)

Brenda's daughter. Confused about her past - a past she can remember nothing of.

HOLLY McKENZIE

The curator of the museum. Enthusiastic about all things to do with Zydiski and won't hear a word said against him. (Companies may change this to a male character if they wish - HARRY McKENZIE)

THETA (1956 -)

A young waitress at the Café Lytz.

YOUNG KRYSTAL *Played by the same actor as plays Theta*

Krystal aged 13, at the time when Zydiski returns to the house after his release from prison.

Stage Set

The minimum requirements are a small kitchen table and two chairs. The table should be situated downstage to bring the action as close to the audience as possible. If there's an empty space behind the table, this should be closed off by stage tabs or by using some free standing flats.

Scene Changes

The Play has three settings:- 1) the former kitchen of the house that's now the main room of interest in the museum; 2) Zydiski's table in the Café Lytz; and 3) the kitchen of Vertlo's house in England. Scene changes involve moving from one location to another and a shift in time. This can be achieved with a lighting-change, plus a short piece of music appropriate to the year of the scene that follows.

Notes about two key props

The Company is recommended to have 2 identical copies of Zydiski's book. This to ensure the book is in Zydiski's case/bag for scene 6. Zydiski's gun should be a traditional revolver, rather than any other type of handgun. (*The gun isn't fired during the course of the play*)

Soliloquy

This play includes soliloquy as a means for the characters to voice their thoughts, give additional background information, and to engage with the audience.

SCENE 1. A room in the Museum (1999)

CURTAINS OPEN/LIGHTS UP

ON STAGE KRYSTAL

Krystal is looking around the room - a room she does not recognise. (She has a copy of Zydiski's book in her bag.)

ENTER HOLLY

HOLLY
Well what do you think?

KRYSTAL
Think?

HOLLY
We like to think we've done a good job. Is this how you remember the kitchen?

KRYSTAL
I don't recognise any of this.

Krystal continues to look around the room

HOLLY (To Audience)
This is Krystal Trenersari. She grew up in this house - and lived here until she was thirteen. So I can't understand why she doesn't remember anything about it? After Krystal's mother died, she and her father moved out. The house then lay boarded up and empty for eight years. A couple of years ago the house was compulsory purchased by the local council. And last week it opened as a museum to celebrate the life of the Eastern European writer - Zydiski Zennerish. Oh and I'm Holly McKenzie - the museum curator.

HOLLY (To Krystal)
What do you remember about Zydiski Zennerish?

KRYSTAL
Nothing.

HOLLY (To Krystal)
What about your parents?

KRYSTAL
All that I know about my parents is what I've read on the death certificates. Mother - accidental death by drowning. Father a year later - from a stroke.

Pause

KRYSTAL
Why did you ask me here?

HOLLY

We think Zydiski Zennerish was here in 1989 for at least 2 months. You'd be about thirteen at the time. So we thought you'd be able to tell us what he was like?

KRYSTAL

I'm sorry I can't remember.

HOLLY

Perhaps it'll all come back to you - if you have a little time to think.

KRYSTAL

Where is Zydiski now?

HOLLY

He passed away two years ago. He was living in America.

Krystal takes the book out of her bag

KRYSTAL

All I know about him - is that he wrote this book.

Hands the book to Holly

I thought you might like it for the museum.

HOLLY

A first edition! In his own language. We've only got English copies. This must be quite valuable. Are you sure

KRYSTAL

I don't want anything for it.

HOLLY

There's some money left in the budget for things like this.

KRYSTAL

No. Just take it.

Krystal contemplates the table and chairs

HOLLY

When we took over the house we cleared out the upstairs rooms. But nothing has been touched on the ground floor. We're sure this is where he worked on the manuscript.

KRYSTAL

He was a womaniser, a gambler, and a heavy drinker. He smuggled drugs and alcohol over the border from Russia. He even claims to have shot a man dead in cold blood. So why does he deserve all this? A museum in his honour?

HOLLY

Where did you get all that nonsense from?

KRYSTAL

I've read the book.

HOLLY

This one?

KRYSTAL

Yes.

HOLLY

But it's not in English.

KRYSTAL

I must have learnt the language from my father.

HOLLY

Well I've read the English translation half a dozen times. And I can say without doubt - there's nothing nasty like that. The book is a masterpiece.

KRYSTAL

Did you notice that every chapter is set during the hours of darkness? Daylight gets no mention at all.

HOLLY

Now you come to mention it - that's true. But it's things like which make his book so special.

Holly comes across the hand written note inside the book's front cover

HOLLY

This looks like a note in the author's own hand. And it's signed. Wow this makes the book even more valuable. Do you know what the note says?

Krystal takes the book from Holly and looks at the note

KRYSTAL

It's a note to my father Vertlo. It says - "Vertlo your house to me is the Café Lytz".

HOLLY

It's wonderful how he captures the atmosphere of the Café Lytz. The air heavy with cigarette smoke. The smell from the wood burning stoves and oil lamps. The snow outside lying half a metre thick. When you read the book - you are there with him. That's the mark of a great writer.

KRYSTAL

The Café Lytz was a seedy barroom. No better than a brothel.

HOLLY

He was a flamboyant character - he lived life to the full.

KRYSTAL

Some of the girls he slept with were just children!

HOLLY

It can't have been easy reading the book in a foreign language. You're bound to have got some things wrong.

KRYSTAL

You've only read an edited translation. All the nasty stuff will have been taken out.

Krystal hands the book back to Holly

KRYSTAL

I'd like to take a look upstairs if you don't mind.

HOLLY

Sure, no problem. It's this way.

EXIT HOLLY & KRYSTAL

Holly carries the book off stage

END OF SCENE 1.

SCENE 2. The Café Lytz (1969)**ENTER** ZYDISKI

ZYDISKI (To Audience)

Welcome to the Café Lytz. Serving flavourless coffee and beer with the strength of water. That's why I drink Vodka. Russian Vodka - smuggled over the border at great risk. I also supply drugs for those who find alcohol not enough to dull the pain of living with Communism.

Around here everyone calls me by my first name - Zydiski. If such a thing is good enough for Michaelangelo - then it's good enough for me. For who has ever heard of Buonarroti? That's Michaelangelo Buonroti, of course. Oh yes - I am a cultured and an educated man. I could have been many things. Certainly a great artist. A nuclear physicist perhaps. Or even an opera singer. But with such occupations it is all too easy to fall out of favour with the authorities. Self preservation is my personal philosophy. And to meet that end - it is unwise to do anything too clever.

Zydiski sits down at the table

ZYDISKI (To Audience)

Here I am the king. And the Café Lytz is my court.

ENTER THETA

Theta is carrying a bottle of vodka and a glass. Theta places the glass on the table in front of Zydiski. She pours some Vodka into the glass. As she moves the bottle away, Zydiski grabs Theta's wrist to indicate he wants the glass filled to the top. Theta tops up Zydiski's glass. Zydiski lets go of her wrist. Zydiski takes a drink - draining the glass. Theta tops up the glass. Theta puts the bottle down on the table. She turns to go.

ZYDISKI

You are new here.

THETA

Yes sir.

ZYDISKI

What is your name?

THETA

Theta.

ZYDISKI

And how old are you Theta?

THETA

Thirteen sir.

ENTER VERTLO

Vertlo keeps his distance - looking over at Zydiski

Zydiski takes some bank notes out from his pocket. He thrusts these into Theta's hand.

ZYDISKI

Now you are Zydiski's girl. Not anyone else's. Do you understand?

THETA

Yes sir.

ZYDISKI

On your way out - send that man over to me.

Theta goes over to Vertlo and indicates that he is to go to Zydiski.

EXIT THETA

Vertlo approaches Zydiski cautiously. He stands a little way from the table.

ZYDISKI (To Audience)

This is Vertlo. Vertlo Trenersari. He was once the village baker. But now he is nothing.

(To Vertlo)

Come Vertlo. Sit at my table.

Vertlo sits down at the table.

ZYDISKI

It was rumoured you were dead Vertlo. But as you know - I never believe in rumours.

(To Audience)

During the war - the Nazi forces occupied this town. But they needed bread - so they didn't cause any trouble for the Trenersari family. Vertlo's father was the local baker. In nineteen forty five the Germans were driven out by Soviet troops. The Soviets needed bread as much as anyone else. So again there was no trouble for Vertlo's father. When Verto's father died peacefully three years later, Vertlo took over the bakery. He married his childhood sweetheart and they had a baby daughter. It hardly mattered that we were now part of the Soviet Bloc and we had a communist government.

VERTLO (To Audience)

On September the fourth, nineteen fifty-seven - at two o'clock in the morning there was a knock on my door. I was arrested and taken away. My wife and daughter were taken away too.

ZYDISKI

And you've been wondering ever since - why me? What did I do to deserve this?

VERTLO

I had done nothing. Said nothing. Written nothing.

ZYDISKI

Perhaps it was a jealous neighbour? A business rival? The person who thought he should have married the girl you took for your wife? The state is paranoid. Just a few false words in the ears of the authorities - that's all it would have taken.

VERTLO

Five years I spent in that wretched camp. And I didn't find out until I was released that my wife and daughter had not survived. It had been the thought of seeing them again that had kept me alive.

ZYDISKI

So why are you here, Vertlo? At the Café Lytz?

VERTLO

I need your help Zydiski.

ZYDISKI

No one ever approaches Zydiski like this and asks for favours. So either you are very brave or very foolish.

VERTLO

I have nothing to lose. If you were to shoot me in the head - that would be far better than the life I have now.

ZYDISKI

What would I shoot you with?

VERTLO

They say you carry a gun in your coat pocket.

Zydiski takes a revolver from his coat pocket

ZYDISKI (*Spoken with humour*)

Perhaps a revolver like this? Something simple. A gun unlikely to jam at precisely the moment I needed to use it. Six chambers but with just five cartridges. The chamber under the hammer empty. A wise precaution in case I fell over as result of too much Vodka. Revolvers are notorious for accidental discharge. I'd be most upset if a drunken fall resulted in me losing my manhood.

Zydiski puts the gun back in his coat pocket

ZYDISKI

But I never believe in rumours. Vertlo is dead. Zydiski carries a gun.

VERTLO

Will you help me Zydiski?

ZYDISKI

I only do things for Zydiski - you must know that.

Vertlo stands up

VERTLO

I'm sorry to have troubled you.

ZYDISKI

Sit down - I will tell you when you can leave.

Vertlo sits down

ZYDISKI

I'm curious - what is it you want? Drugs? A woman?

VERTLO

I want to escape to the West. I want to go to England.

ZYDISKI

It would take a lot to get you to England, Vertlo. Officials have to be bribed. Papers obtained. Tickets for the railway. And money to allow you to travel in the West.

VERTLO

I would repay you, Zydiski. Send you money when I get to England. Anything you wanted.

ZYDISKI

If I were to go to all that trouble - then I would go to England myself. Have tea with the Queen in London. Or sip beer in a Liverpool café and listen to a band playing rock and roll. Music, Vertlo, feeds the soul. And there's precious little of it around here. Just the old fool scraping on a violin in the town square trying to earn a crust. He only knows the one tune. And he plays that badly.

VERTLO

I'm sorry to have wasted your time, Zydiski.

ZYDISKI

Do you speak any English?

VERTLO

I learnt a little from one of the other prisoners in the camp. I know enough to get by.

ZYDISKI

I speak no English at all. If I went to England I wouldn't be able to make myself understood.

ENTER THETA

Theta has brought a glass to give Vertlo a drink. She places the glass on the table in front of Vertlo.

VERTLO

Why would you want to go to England, Zydiski? By all accounts - here you are untouchable.

ZYDISKI

That could change as easily as the wind.

Theta picks up the Vodka bottle and is about to pour Vertlo a drink

ZYDISKI

Don't give him a drink. He's leaving in a minute.

Theta puts the bottle down and turns to go. Zydiski grabs Theta by her arm to indicate that she's to stay.

ZYDISKI

I will arrange things for you Vertlo. It will take a week or two. But it will be done.

VERTLO

Thank you, Zydiski. Thank you.

ZYDISKI

Now leave us.

Vertlo gets up and starts to move away - but stops when Zydiski speaks

ZYDISKI

When you get to England don't forget to send me your address. Do you understand?

VERTLO

I understand Zydiski. I am an honest man. I will not default on my debt.

ZYDISKI

One more thing. Buy me some gramophone records and send them to me. No violin music you understand. Just Rock and Roll.

VERTLO

Yes of course Zydiski. And thank you.

EXIT

VERTLO

Zydiski takes out a pack of cards

ZYDISKI

Do you play cards Theta?

THETA

No sir.

ZYDISKI

Then I will teach you.

Theta puts her hands on the back of the empty chair

THETA

Shall I sit here sir?

ZYDISKI

No. Bring the Vodka and the two glasses. Let's go to one of the rooms at the back. Where we can be more comfortable.

Zydiski stands up. Theta picks up the two glasses and the bottle of Vodka.

EXIT

ZYDISKI & THETA

END OF SCENE 2

SCENE 3. The Museum (1999)**ENTER** KRYSTAL & HOLLY

Krystal is unwell - she is helped to a chair by Holly

HOLLY

I'll get you some water.

EXIT HOLLYKRYSTAL (*Speaking to Holly off stage*)

I'm sorry - I don't know what came over me.

ENTER HOLLY

Holly has a glass of water. She puts the glass of water on the table in front of Krystal. Krystal takes a couple of sips from the glass.

KRYSTAL

Thanks.

HOLLY

Was it a dizzy spell?

KRYSTAL

It's hard to describe.

HOLLY

The small room in the attic is quite claustrophobic.

Krystal shakes her head. Takes another sip of water

KRYSTAL

It wasn't that.

Krystal gets up from the table and walks around the room

KRYSTAL

Why all this for one man? And why here - in this miserable little English town?

HOLLY

He wrote his book here - that's why.

KRYSTAL

What about my father - he might have been a hero in his own small way?

HOLLY

Your father didn't write a literary masterpiece. I'm sorry but that's the way it is.

KRYSTAL

It's crazy - I can't remember what my father looked like.

HOLLY

Would you like to look through the file of photographs in the office? I'm sure there will be one of your father?

KRYSTAL

I don't know if that's good idea.

HOLLY

The photos might help to jog your memory - and you'll start to remember all the happy times you had in this house.

KRYSTAL

But what about the unhappy times?

HOLLY

Well the offer's there.

KRYSTAL

Ok - I don't think a few photographs can hurt me.

HOLLY

The office is this way.

EXIT HOLLY & KRYSTAL

Holly carries the glass of water off stage

END OF SCENE 3

SCENE 4. Vertlo's House in England (1975)

ENTER VERTLO

VERTLO (To Audience)

Thanks to Zydiski I had no trouble getting out of the old country. The guard who stamped my exit papers at the border didn't so much as look up at my face. I've been in England now for six years. I can speak English fluently. I have a job with a haulage company. I drive trucks from one end of the country to the other. And this is my house. But best of all - last year I got married to a local girl - Brenda.

Vertlo sits down at the table

VERTLO (To Audience)

When I used to sit in the kitchen of my house behind the baker's shop - the curtains were always closed. Even during the day. People were too ready to look in on the lives of others and report what they'd seen to the authorities. But old habits die hard as they say. Brenda is always telling me off for having the curtains closed. Here in England, she will say - no one is interested in Vertlo Trenersari.

Vertlo adopts a more sombre mood

VERTLO (To Audience)

I didn't think I'd hear from Zydiski again. But last week a letter arrived. He said he was in some kind of trouble. And he was on his way here.

ENTER ZYDISKI

Zydiski is carrying a suitcase

ZYDISKI

Did you get my letter, Vertlo?

VERTLO

Yes Zydiski - I got your letter.

ZYDISKI

You did not reply. That made me think I am perhaps not welcome here. That perhaps you do not wish to honour your debt.

VERTLO

My letter must have got lost. Thrown away by someone at the border. You know how it is?

ZYDISKI

I received a letter that gave me this address - a year after you'd left the old country. But there was nothing else. You promised to send me some gramophone records.

VERTLO

I did Zydiski.

ZYDISKI

The parcel did not arrive. *(pause)* Is this your house Vertlo?

VERTLO

Yes this is my house.

ZYDISKI

And you have a job?

VERTLO

I'm truck driver.

ZYDISKI

Vertlo the baker - driving a truck. That's good. You've done well. Very well. What about a woman?

VERTLO

I have a wife. I got married last year.

ZYDISKI

Another wife - well that's good too.

VERTLO

I don't want her to know about my first wife. Or the daughter I lost.

ZYDISKI

You're forgetting I don't speak any English. But if I ever do - then you have my promise - I shall say nothing.

VERTLO

Why are you here, Zydiski?

ZYDISKI

Do I detect an unwelcome tone in your voice, Vertlo? Can't one friend visit another without there having to be a deeper reason?

VERTLO

You said in your letter there had been some kind of trouble. I was wondering about that?

ZYDISKI

Trouble - yes there was a little trouble. Do you remember the waitress at the café Lytz - Theta?

VERTLO

Yes.

Zydiski acts out his story (without a gun)

ZYDISKI

There's a rumour going round that I killed a man. They say I killed him because he had a relationship with Theta. It is said I pulled a revolver from my coat pocket. And I made him kneel down in the snow and beg for forgiveness. But according to the rumour - I wasn't satisfied with his pleading. So I put the gun to his forehead - precisely between his eyes - and fired once. But this is just a rumour, Vertlo. And as you know - I never believe in rumours.

Zydiski sits down at the table