

HE WHO GETS SLAPPED

A New Opera in Two Acts | **Currently in progress**

Music by Alex Burtzos | **Libretto by Daniel Neer**

DETAILED SYNOPSIS

ACT I, Scene i

It is an autumn morning in 1922 on the outskirts of an unnamed city. Lights go up to reveal the backstage environs of a small, run-down circus. “Papa” Briquet, the gruff manager and surrogate father to his troupe, is counting the receipts from the previous evening’s performance, while Polly and Tilly, a genderless clown duo, rehearse a new song for their act. Count Mancini, a self-purported noble and small-time swindler, enters the tent. Mancini brags to Briquet about his womanizing and shows off a stiletto sword hidden inside his cane. He complains about the effects of such a rough environment on his daughter Consuelo, who is a successful bareback horse rider at the circus. Briquet does his best to ignore all of this. As Mancini shamelessly begs Briquet for money, Zinida, a lion tamer and Briquet’s common-law wife, enters. Zinida admonishes Mancini for using Consuelo as a means of earning income, citing Mancini’s newest prospect: the wealthy Baron Regnard. Mancini insists the Baron is interested in Consuelo’s beauty, but fears her lack of education may be a turnoff. Briquet responds that books and education are an unnecessary distraction, and do little to prepare a young person for the harsh realities of the real world.

Thomas, the circus strongman, informs Briquet that a disheveled stranger from the outside has arrived. Briquet agrees to see him, and the stranger is shown in. The newcomer tells Briquet that he wishes to join the circus troupe as a clown. Conceding he has no real skills as a performer, the stranger reveals that he has spent many hours watching the troupe from outside through a hole in the canvas. Mancini suspects that the stranger is, in fact, an educated gentleman, and immediately tries to enlist him as a tutor for Consuelo. Jackson, the alcoholic chief clown, enters the backstage area, and is fascinated by the stranger’s aura of mystery. He leads the newcomer through an impromptu audition.

Consuelo enters from her morning rehearsal with the brooding Bezano, her riding partner. Consuelo and the mysterious stranger form an immediate connection. Responding jealously to this, Bezano berates Briquet for adding yet another clown to the troupe and angrily slaps the stranger in the face. Instead of backing down, the stranger turns the tables on Bezano, using satire and an improbably large vocabulary to elevate the situation from one of humiliation to one of humor. Polly and Tilly become inspired, and engage the stranger in an improvisatory sketch in which the punchline to each joke is accompanied by a stinging slap. The stranger’s deadpan delivery and comic timing soon has everyone laughing.

Recognizing the promise of the gimmick, Jackson encourages Briquet to hire the stranger on the spot. From this point on, the stranger will be known as “HE Who Gets Slapped.” Briquet and Zinida agree to add HE to the troupe, further kindling Mancini’s growing curiosity about his background and pedigree. When Briquet and Zinida ask HE for the details of his true identity, HE reluctantly hands them his last remaining calling card, stressing that he no longer recognizes his former name and title. Briquet and Zinida agree to protect HE’s former identity. Jackson takes HE under his wing and promises to train him.

Meanwhile, Mancini leaves in a huff after Consuelo declines an invitation to have lunch with the Baron. Zinida corners Bezano and reminisces about their secret trysts in the days before Consuelo’s arrival. Her failed attempt to rekindle the fling raises Bezano’s ire. Bezano insults Zinida by implying that even her own lions hate her. After witnessing the final moments of this argument, HE explains to Zinida that he's well-acquainted with loneliness. Zinida offers him shelter in the stables, and they stand side by side, watching Consuelo and Bezano rehearse.

ACT I, Scene ii

A few weeks have passed. The stodgy and ill-humored Baron Regnard is now actively courting Consuelo, and visits her backstage during a performance. He admits not only contempt for her father, who he views as a penniless social-climber, but also a deep disdain for the clowns, particularly HE. Consuelo dutifully defends Mancini and her fellow performers, while unintentionally confirming the Baron's suspicions that she has romantic feelings for Bezano. Confessing that he has long been unlucky in finding romance, the Baron professes his love for Consuelo and makes known his plans to marry her as soon as a suitable arrangement can be made with Mancini. He awkwardly tries to kiss Consuelo, but is interrupted by everyone exiting the ring for intermission.

The backstage area buzzes with excitement. HE has had a particularly successful night, breaking his own slap record. The troupe toasts HE's meteoric success. In spite of their cheers, HE is obviously being worn down by the punishment he receives on a nightly basis. He vacillates between stinging physical pain, emotional numbness, and moments of manic instability. This is further amplified by Briquet and Jackson's insistence that he stick to the act with no modifications.

HE takes advantage of a quiet moment with Jackson to share a few details of his troubled past, but is quickly shut down when Jackson admonishes him for being vulnerable. Jackson reminds HE that "the first rule of the circus is to mind your own business." Mancini arrives and manages to steal a private moment with HE, who he probes for gossip. HE derides Mancini for his shameless attempts to curry favor with the Baron. Mancini inadvertently lets slip that Consuelo is not his biological daughter. Vexed at having accidentally revealed this information, Mancini produces HE's calling card from weeks earlier and threatens to reveal HE's true identity. The two arrive at an uneasy truce.

Thomas bursts into the room with news that Zinida has been cornered by Red, one of her lions, in the middle of her routine. Once the danger is averted, Zinida confesses that she was attempting to hypnotize the lions after reading about the technique in a book. Consuelo comforts Zinida, who is grudgingly touched by her compassion.

Consuelo confides to HE that she loves Bezano, not the Baron, but fears her fate is sealed. HE jokingly offers to read her palm, and predicts that marrying Bezano will bring her a life of misery, while marrying the Baron will result in her death. As Consuelo grows increasingly uncomfortable, HE insists that her palm dictates she must instead choose *him* - HE, the clown. Unnerved by HE's increasingly erratic behavior, Consuelo slaps HE across the face before making her entrance into the ring. HE is left alone.

At this moment, a well-dressed Gentleman from HE's past arrives unannounced, insisting that they talk. Reluctant to do so, but desperate to get rid of the Gentleman and protect his anonymity, HE suggests that they meet early the next morning. The Gentleman agrees and departs. HE twists his face into a smile and enters the ring to the wild applause of the audience.

INTERMISSION

ACT II, Entr'acte and Pantomime

It is early the next morning. HE emerges from his sleeping quarters, pondering his love for Consuelo.

ACT II, Scene i

The Gentleman arrives, expressing shock at having discovered HE alive. The Gentleman explains that he spent months searching for HE after his disappearance nearly a year earlier. HE declares that he has no desire to see the Gentleman, who at one time was not only his academic mentor, but also a trusted colleague and friend. HE points out that the Gentleman betrayed his trust twice: first, by stealing HE's research to write a popular book, and second, by having an

affair with Sarah, HE's wife. The Gentleman begs for forgiveness, saying that he is tortured by visions of his former pupil. HE refuses to forgive his visitor, instead slipping into a trancelike silence. Dejected, the Gentleman leaves.

As the Gentleman departs, Jackson emerges from a makeshift canvas bed in a dark corner of the room. He has overheard everything. The two clowns briefly commiserate. Mancini arrives and addresses HE as Jackson hides in the stable entrance and eavesdrops.

Mancini needles HE about the Gentleman, who he has just passed outside the circus tent. He then insists that HE assist in the scheme to marry Consuelo off to the Baron. The sooner Consuelo marries the Baron, Mancini rationalizes, the faster HE and Mancini's respective secrets can be buried. To emphasize the threat, Mancini again brandishes the sword hidden in his cane.

Zinida enters with an enormous envelope of cash. Briquet trails behind, fretting. Zinida has made a financial arrangement with the Baron to fund a special one-night gala performance in honor of Consuelo's birthday. Consuelo is touched by Zinida's kindness, but uncertain about life with the Baron. Meanwhile, an ecstatic Mancini intuits that the Baron is sure to propose during the party. Briquet is shocked to find the tarps Jackson has been using for a bed, and Zinida confirms that Jackson been sleeping in the tent for weeks. Briquet points out that sleeping in a circus tent is bad luck. Zinida admonishes him for passing judgement, repeating that "the first rule of the circus is to mind your own business." Leaving the packet of the Baron's cash unattended on the desk, Zinida checks on her lions and Briquet attends to errands. Consuelo tells her father about the Baron's awkward advances the previous evening. Mancini defends the Baron and denounces Bezano, Consuelo's other prospective suitor.

Left alone, Consuelo fantasizes about leaving the circus and never looking back. Eyeing the huge envelope of cash on Briquet's desk, she considers stealing it and cutting out on her own. Ultimately, she decides against the theft.

Zinida enters, shouting that Red, the lion, is very sick and may be rabid. Briquet instructs Jackson to keep an eye on Red, noting that he has a vial of poison in his desk drawer, should he show signs of getting worse and require euthanasia.

Consuelo approaches HE to smooth over their awkward exchange from the night before. Ignoring Mancini's threats, HE begs her not to marry the Baron. With newfound confidence, Consuelo asserts that even though she is uneducated, she is no fool, and can make her own decisions. Bezano arrives. HE begs Bezano to intervene in the situation. Bezano refuses, arguing that his intervention would make no difference. Bezano stalks into the ring to rehearse with Consuelo. Finding himself alone, HE sneaks unnoticed to Briquet's desk. With defiance, he steals the poison out of the desk drawer and conceals it in his pocket.

ACT II, Intermezzo and Divertissement

It is evening and Jackson sits draped in a piece of canvas, whiskey in hand. Nearby, several members of the circus orchestra rehearse and two ballerinas practice a new dance. Jackson sings about his previous wanderings, the importance of living with no regrets, and the bittersweet qualities of a life on the run.

ACT II, Scene ii

Consuelo's birthday performance is in full swing, and the Baron has spared no expense. In addition to cake and champagne, there are hundreds of roses backstage and a carpet of red rose petals covering the ring. Jackson drinks heavily as Polly, Tilly, and Thomas discuss Consuelo's prospective engagement to the Baron. When they question Bezano's seemingly aloof attitude towards her impending departure, Jackson chastises them for being too judgmental.

Briquet is distressed to learn that Red the lion is still acting strange, and reminds Jackson that euthanasia might be the only possibility. Bezano finishes his solo act and berates Zinida for covering the ring in rose petals, which has made the

surface dangerously slippery for his routine. Bezano leaves in a huff as Jackson, Polly, Tilly, and Thomas run into the ring to perform.

HE enters, looking gaunt and acting erratically. HE tells Zinida that he has been in the stables, conversing with Red the lion; she isn't certain whether he's telling the truth. HE and Zinida argue about Consuelo's situation, each of them calling the other a hypocrite.

Mancini swans in to settle the details of Consuelo's contract. Briquet and Zinida confront him with a stack of receipts for all the handouts they've given him. Mancini feigns sadness that his days of slumming it with circus folk have come to an end.

Jackson comes offstage, lamenting the reserved and snobbish behavior of the upper-crust audience. He and Mancini bicker. Thomas runs backstage to announce that the Baron has demanded a command solo performance by Consuelo on horseback. Anxious that he is losing control over the evening, Briquet directs everyone to prepare for the intermission party. In the melee, only a handful of people notice HE, who has begun singing and dancing by himself, as if in a trance. Certain that HE is losing his mind, Briquet asks Jackson to keep an eye on him.

It is intermission. The Baron arrives backstage with Consuelo on his arm, followed by Mancini and a small entourage. Mancini confirms that the Baron and Consuelo are to be married, prompting a series of toasts. As Consuelo makes an emotional speech, Bezano returns, but refuses to take part in the festivities. Polly and Tilly step forward, announcing that they, along with HE, have written a special song for Consuelo's birthday. Halfway through the song, HE begins to improvise, hurling insults at the Baron. The tense situation is interrupted when the circus orchestra strikes up a march, signifying the end of intermission. As the party wraps up and the troupe prepares to make their entrance, Consuelo asks the Baron if she may say goodbye to the distraught and half-crazed HE. The Baron agrees.

HE wishes to make one final toast to Consuelo, and suggests that they share a glass. They toast to love, each drinking half of the champagne. Consuelo collapses in pain, and the troupe rally around her. Jackson becomes suspicious of HE's behavior. Mancini grows increasingly impatient that Consuelo is holding up the proceedings. As Consuelo's condition worsens, HE calmly announces that he has poisoned Consuelo.

Confusion reigns. Jackson runs to Briquet's desk and is horrified to realize that the poison is missing from the drawer. Consuelo asks HE if it's a joke. HE confirms that it *is* a joke: what could be funnier? Consuelo dies. HE, also dying, collapses at her side. A furious Bezano attacks HE and begins slapping, then punching his face, relenting only when it's clear that HE is dead.

Mancini attacks Briquet, whom he blames for Consuelo's death, choking him as Briquet yells for help. Jackson pulls the stiletto out of Mancini's own cane and stabs him with it. Mancini collapses and crawls to the Baron, begging for help. The Baron declines, announcing he cannot be a party to such barbarianism. Ignoring the dying Mancini, the Baron leaves. Mancini dies. There is stunned silence. Eventually, Briquet pulls out the envelope of cash and thrusts it into Jackson's hands. Zinida confirms that Jackson must go now, before the police arrive. Thomas takes the stiletto from the floor and places it in HE's dead hand, framing him for Mancini's murder. Jackson looks around the room one last time, staggers to the door, and leaves.

ACT II, Scene iii

Six months later. The lights go up to reveal the same backstage environs, now bathed in Spring sunshine. "Papa" Briquet is counting the receipts from the previous evening's performance, while Polly and Tilly rehearse a new song for their act. Thomas enters with a box of pastries from the bakery, while workers go to-and-fro, completing their daily tasks. Thomas and the clowns discuss Zinida's string of successful performances, especially complimenting Red.

Bezano enters cheerily from the ring, hand-in-hand with Rosalinda, the new bareback rider. Bezano and Briquet briefly confer with one another: the police have been asking about Jackson. Rosalinda is curious about what they're saying, but Bezano silences her with a kiss. Zinida enters from the stables, watches Bezano and Rosalinda with longing.

The bell rings. Sarah enters from the outside. She asks if anyone has seen her husband, who she is certain spent some time in the circus. Exchanging a glance with Briquet, Zinida tells Sarah that she must be mistaken: her husband was never there. Sarah grudgingly departs. Rosalinda feels bad for Sarah, and expresses hope that she'll find who she's looking for.

The troupe disperses. Bezano and Rosalinda go back to the ring to rehearse, Polly and Tilly head to the stables, and Thomas departs to unload a shipment of hay. Zinida curls up on the sofa with Consuelo's shawl wrapped around her. She lights a cigarette, picks up a book, and begins to read.

END OF OPERA