Mirror Worlds

Neal R. Wagner

. . . the purpose of playing is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature . . .

Stage directions for the internal play, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare

Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehen,
dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird.
Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst,
blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein.

Spruch, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*

Whoever fights with monsters, should watch out
that he doesn't himself become a monster.
And when you stare too long into an abyss,
the abyss stares right back into you.

Proverb, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Friedrich Nietzsche

. . . Hitler represents a radical evil, an eruption of demonism into history that places him beyond even the extreme end of the continuum of human nature.

. . . attempting to explain Hitler [can be] not only difficult in itself but dangerous, forbidden, a transgression of near-biblical proportions . . . [these] explanations [are] inevitably obscene rationalizations, not merely exculpations, but virtually justifications for Hitler's behavior.

Explaining Hitler, Ron Rosenbaum

1

The casting was in its second day and not going well, though the only ones who knew this were George Steiner, the Assistant to the Director, and of course the Director himself, sitting next to George in the dingy casting room. They were going through a list of callbacks arranged the previous day, while they waited for several good prospects. These callbacks would be a waste of time for everybody.

They hadn't expected major problems on the first day, with the all-important lead role sewn up. The actor Rick Taylor had already agreed to take the part, but his tryout, instead of a formality, had been worse than he had any conception of. George could recognize the signs—when James Wechsler, the Director whom he'd known for fifteen years, started to shift around and squirm.

The role called for a Jewish concentration camp victim, for someone defeated, at the extreme bottom of all his resources. Rick Taylor was an

exceptional actor, famously and luridly described as having a "lithe energy" and a "magnetic personality," whatever those phrases might mean. Add to them an evidently hackneyed name. In any event, he certainly looked everything but defeated. George had to give Rick's clever agent credit. He understood there were problems, and contacted Wechsler at the end of the first day. His client wanted this part, really wanted it. He knew he needed to diet, and he would do it. He would work on his accent. He was a great actor and would master this difficult part. Standard agent bullshit, blah, blah. But the reality was: George had almost laughed as Rick read. It was that bad.

You needed a big name, a well-known star, in the main role. Wechsler turned to George. "Phone the agency right away. Get the word out about roughly what we need. Do any names come to you?" George went over a few possibilities and promised to contact several of them after calling the agency. They'd get some lined up for casting on the next day.

The second day was here and George was sweating, waiting for the new prospects to show up. George looked over the resumé of the next callback from the first day. It was total crap—some plays in college, a few in the summer. A bleeding amateur. Did he even have an agent? Who had decided on a callback? George looked at a note from Lorraine. "Check this one out," it said.

Wechsler was old school, always polite with tryouts of amateurs even though there was no chance. George looked for the name: Michael Spiegel. The name sounded Jewish, which was what they needed. Wechsler asked this Spiegel guy to tell them about himself. It developed that he was a college professor at NYU, a mathematician for God's sake, a complete unknown. The guy looked nervous, too.

"So, Michael, I imagine you know the role calls for three accents in three different parts played by the same actor. American, British, and German accents. The American accent is clearly no trouble for you, so let's try the British accent." Wechsler asked him to read one of the sides where the actor was supposed to be British.

Michael started reading from a scene where the main character, well, the second part of him, the British version, would talk to his girlfriend just after she had met his parents. They had gotten one of the staff to read the girl's part.

"Oh, no. Those aren't my birth parents," Michael was reading. "I think I told you I was German, from Berlin. I barely knew my real parents. I remember my father reading poems to me and my mother fixing me soup in the winter. When I was four years old or so, maybe around 1939, groups of Jewish children were shipped to England, rescued from

Nazi Germany. I have few memories of that time, just the chaos and later the bombing in England. I was extraordinarily lucky, taken in by the wonderful British couple you just met—not Jewish—and raised in England. I learned English and forgot much of my German, and here I am, still in England."

Spiegel read on for awhile. The reading was excellent, especially for this amateur—firm, confident, well-paced. To George the accent sounded British. Later, if it mattered, they could get Andrew to give them a native Brit's evaluation.

Next was the reading where he played the third part of his character, the German part, the father of the British part. For George, this was evidence of the writer's craziness: the play was to be a hall of mirrors, with reflections in reflections. A key requirement was for the same person to play the three main characters.

Michael paused before starting. You could tell he was working to shift gears into a German accent. This was where the fancy star Rick had tripped up. Rick's British accent had been fine, or at least okay, but he had stumbled and faltered with a painful something of a German accent, almost a parody. George and the director had talked about it—that one of their dialect coaches wouldn't be good enough for Rick.

This Michael Spiegel person started the second reading—more mirror reflections—the father talking about his son after the son talked about his father, well, about his parents.

"Yes, now that you ask," Spiegel read, "I have a son. I thank God that we got him off to England before it was too late. It was a terrible choice, but we heard he had arrived. He was filled with life, filled with light. He would be nine years old. I have hope for the future through him. I have no hope for myself, not even for my poems which I still create. I see them clearly with my mind, floating in the air, but no one else will ever see or read them." The reading went on for several minutes.

Spiegel did the accent very well—a light accent, not overdone. For the first time George looked at him carefully. He spoke with strength, with authority, but he was so thin, so frail, already looking the part of someone living in a death camp.

Wechsler asked for another reading, and then another. Spiegel probably didn't know that the Director never asked for extra readings from the likes of him.

"You almost seem familiar with the play, you read it so easily," Wechsler said.

"I managed to borrow a copy of the script three days ago," he answered. "I went through the play several times. I hope that was all right."

"How did you end up coming to the casting call?" Wechsler asked.

Now Spiegel did sound nervous. "I have a friend who's an actor. He noticed the open call, and knew the German Nazi period was a hobby of mine. He also thought I was a natural for the part, so he talked me into coming. My friend's agent helped me get the script."

"How is it you can do the three accents so well?"

Spiegel hesitated. "I was raised bilingual in German and English, American English, that is. But I spent two years in Manchester. I worked on a British accent for fun, as a hobby. My friends kept correcting me."

"And you're fluent in German?"

"Yes, it was my first language. My mother is German. I lived in Dresden before I got an appointment to NYU."

Wechsler asked for two more readings. Then he abruptly asked of Spiegel, "Can you come back at three, that is, three pm today?" Of course Spiegel said he would. The two of them went on to the next actor, and the next, and so on for hours, but now they were looking at some of the reasonable prospects for the lead, lined up yesterday. There seemed to be something wrong with every one. One guy could do the accents really well but didn't look remotely Jewish and was heavyset. None of the others fit the role at all.

During a break, George was thinking how much he disliked the play itself. Of course the old play-within-a-play gimmick was almost a guaranteed loser, but this one was even more complicated. It sure wasn't Hamlet. Months ago he'd tried to talk Wechsler out of it: "How the hell is the audience going to make sense of it?"

"You've read the script," Wechsler had said. "The first scene is a casting call, and they explain the play pretty well right there, as they explain it to the prospective actors."

"I *tried* to read the script," George said. "Very confusing." He knew something similar had already been done long ago with Harold Pinter's brilliant film adaptation of *The French Lieutenant's Women.* There the action alternated between actors in modern England getting ready to shoot scenes and—using the same actors with completely different personalities—actual scenes in Victorian times. And of course the two different endings of the novel.

In this play though, there were three kinds of scenes: First in the present time actors performed as actors getting ready for different parts of the play. The second kind of scene took place in the late 1950s, just before the Beatles came along. Here the son of a concentration camp victim was shown living in London and also shown visiting the camp where his father had died. And the third kind of scene was during World War Two, in the

midst of Nazi Germany, portraying the father living in that same camp. The lighting was to shift dramatically as the scenes changed, with bright stage lighting for actors rehearsing, soft yellowish lighting for the British scenes, and harsh blue-tinged lights for the concentration camp. They were going to use a fancy rotating stage that shifted around though the three times and locations, right out of a Bertolt Brecht play. It was crazy. Audience members would walk out in the middle.

By the end of the day Wechsler was seriously considering using Michael for the part. With luck they would get well-known actors for the other parts, and you could play up the "discovery" of a new talent. Starting at three o'clock they had talked with him for almost two hours. At one point George whispered to Wechsler, "You know what 'Spiegel' means in German?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. A coincidence. I thought this guy might be playing games, so I looked him up online. Nothing personal available, but a whole lot of stuff about him as a mathematician. He's a big-wheel in his field—current work cited and work from years ago. His real name is 'Spiegel.' "

"We ought to keep looking, all right," Wechsler continued. "Before we settle on Spiegel I want to find out a lot more about him. About his commitment, his personality. Does he have any skeletons in the closet? Stuff like that. We'll call his references, and I know someone at NYU I can contact. Research him on LexisNexis. A quick background check. And here even more than usual we will need the best understudy we can find. Also I haven't had time to talk with Lorraine about how she and Debbie are getting on with the other two parts." He sighed. "We've got many busy days ahead."

"And Klein," Wechsler said as an afterthought. "Our most important backer. Very influential on the others. I must talk with him this evening. I plan to have Klein see our discovery during another session. Get him used to the idea of a lesser star for the lead. I'll tell Spiegel how important it is to make a good impression—increase the pressure. See if Spiegel will crack."

Wechsler paused. "And George, in front of Klein we must not use words like 'amateur' or 'newcomer,' but instead 'natural talent,' 'perfect for the part.' That sort of crap." Another pause. "But a light touch. Klein's smart and experienced. In the end Spiegel will have to sell himself."

2

The play was in its second week on Broadway, after four weeks off Broadway. It had done better than George had thought possible, somehow generating interest. Spiegel himself was the main source of the play's popularity. It was more than just an actor in his perfect role, but beyond that George had no explanation.

They had of course made a number of adjustments, small and large, in fact more than George had ever seen with a play. Because Michael could actually speak unaccented German, his first appearance in a camp scene now started out in German and shifted to accented English after a few sentences. This was an unexpected bonus from Michael, as experience had shown that even actors with a nice German accent could seldom pass as native speakers.

Physically, the set designers had accomplished a miracle with the rotating set and scene changes, also managing to reassemble it after the move. Using a rotation of one hundred twenty degrees in the proper direction, the play could shift with one short rotation from any one scene to any other. One trick they inserted came when the British version of Michael visited the Sachsenhausen site as a tourist. This Michael stood outside a barracks building looking into a window. The stage rotated halfway, the tourist version of the camp darkened, and the historic wartime version grew brighter. In the end, the camp version of Michael was looking out the same window from inside the barracks as the rotation concluded. They did a clever sort of switch using a double as the lights dimmed so that it looked like the same person faded from one scene and appeared in the other.

The writer, Aaron Meyer, had played the Jewish card big time, in one interview after the other. He liked to talk about how the play presented four different kinds of Jews as the main character: the adult in the camp as a fervent believer and also a poet, in a state of crisis from the extreme mistreatment God seemed to allow. His grown son, Jewish by Hitler's racial definition, knew little about Judaism, but still was interested in his heritage. The third one, the actor's character in the play, who played the other two characters: a normal liberal New York Jew. Those three were all fictional, inventions of the writer.

Finally, there was that same actor as a real person, a non-practicing Jew, who was raised Jewish. This real person, Michael Spiegel, was hyped as a perfect choice for the role, one who was directly influenced by the play itself, starting to rediscover his Jewish faith and attending a synagogue for the first time in years. A Jewish actor had always been a requirement by the Director.

Michael didn't want to give interviews of any kind, and they came to think of that as good. He was something of a mystery for the audiences, generating stories and even headlines: "Famous NYU Mathematician Gets Role of His Life." He'd taken a leave to concentrate on the play. They'd thought about asking him to use a stage name, but decided getting the weird publicity would be better. Another plus was the coincidence of his last name, which they also played up.

Meyer talked in interviews about the play itself. His original title for it had been "Into the Black Hole," using the shared properties of Black Holes and Nazi Concentration Camps: any object could easily enter the hole or camp. but could never leave it. Not even information could get out of a black hole, and the same was mostly true of the camp.

Except for voices offstage, there were just two other characters in the play, each one taking three separate parts just like the main one, and each of the individual repetitions were quite different from one another, even though the same actor performed each part. The writer cleverly didn't use names for any character—three separate names for each one would be hard to manage. An audience could easily keep it all straight because only one actor played all three and no actor was ever referred to by name—one more reason George had thought the play would be a loser, since the script was so hard to figure out, even as an actual performance turned out to be easy to follow. They'd hired two top dialect coaches for British English and for German. Michael benefited from some corrections of his British English, and he even got some good suggestions for his version of a German accent.

In the stage scenes, a director was an offstage voice. In one British scene, the writer had truly gone too far. George thought it was ridiculous: the British version of Michael and his girlfriend attended a play in London—a staging of a play titled *JB* by Archibald MacLeish, modeled after the biblical Job. The play was new and popular at the time of the British scenes. A play within a play within a play—completely insane. In this case, just a few small parts of the play's dialog appeared using an offstage voice. For example:

> I think it stinks!
> One daughter raped and murdered by an idiot,
> Another crushed by stones, a son
> Destroyed by some fool officer's stupidity,
> And all with God's consent!—foreknowledge!—
> And he blesses God!
>
> It isn't decent!

> It isn't moral even! It's disgusting!
> His weeping wife in her despair
> And he beside her on his trembling ham-bones
> Praising God! … It's nauseating!

George had only contempt for Meyer, using a recursive stack of plays within plays, probably without knowing about such things. Michael was a mathematician; you could be sure he knew about objects containing copies of themselves. The author also may not have known that JB had actual quotes from the Book of Job in it. So here was the Bible's Job, within a play, namely JB, within a play within a play.

Besides Michael, the two other actors were much more experienced. First was David Friedman, who in the play was a good friend of the British version of Michael, and was also a Nazi guard in the labor camp overseeing the German version. Similarly, Joyce Levy was the girlfriend of the British Michael, while she was his wife in the camp, mostly kept apart in the camp from her husband. Each of these two actors also used the three accents for the three types of scenes. As actors in the stage scenes, David and Joyce were portrayed as husband and wife.

The actual David in the world was a well-known British actor who was quite comfortable with an American accent, while Joyce was an American, another professional who had often needed a British accent. With some coaching, they had each developed a good, understated German accent.

For George, producing a play was similar to pregnancy and childbirth. A play started with an idea, which was combined with the means to fund and support the idea as a play. The resulting fertilized ovum became an embryo and needed an implantation if it was to move forward. The play developed much the way a fetus grew in the womb, getting more complex and sophisticated. Opening night was the birth of the play, an exciting time that often went well. (Or plays could be stillborn—best not to think about them.) Sometimes a bit later came the postpartum depression, especially to less experienced actors. George was worried about this with Michael. He could see his signs of boredom and dissatisfaction—as if there had to be more to the experience than this.

So George was particularly glad for the two professional actors who were willing to work with Michael, help him out, maybe cheer him up. The real person David helped Michael in lots of ways, among others coaching him about acting issues. He had even worked to prepare Michael for a letdown after a few weeks. The real Joyce had become good friends with Michael, who was a loner with few close friends and no relatives.

She was older than the part she was playing, had been happily married for years, with grown children. She took Michael on as a special project to try to keep him happy.

George had been watching every performance of the play since its start off Broadway. He'd sometimes done this before, but he especially wanted to with the present play because of the amateur lead. Over time it had gotten increasingly hard for him to stay focused, let alone awake, so that one evening he woke up with a jerk as the British version of the lead talked with both his friends about a letter he'd received from New York City. "It's from a survivor of Sachsenhausen who knew my father in the camp. He talks about his poetry and about his death. I already knew he'd been a successful poet, and I'd heard he'd died. But—this was completely unexpected—he mentions poems my father had written while in the camp. Or not written exactly, but composed and repeatedly recited to his friend. After his rescue from the camp, this person carefully copied down six poems that he knew from memory. That was maybe twelve years ago, but he kept them, and now he's mailed them to me. He'd just located my name as the son of his friend. It's lucky I'd kept my family name. The poems are in German, but with a dictionary I can make sense out of them."

The son became even more animated. "One poem seems particularly promising: First it talks about the future, the terrible unknown and uncontrollable future, or else the inescapable future that is your destiny or your fate because of your nature or the life you have lived. Next comes a part about the present, filled with anxiety from all its uncertainties and misunderstandings, its constant need for crucial choices and decisions. Finally, the poem says that the past is just as bad as those two or worse. The past is known all right, but truly uncontrollable, unchangeable, and your only recourse is remorse, for whatever good that might do. The poem uses the German word 'Reue,' the word for remorse. I had to look up that one and a few others, but the rest was pretty clear. My dictionary says 'Reue' can also mean repentance, a slightly different word in English, involving more action, engagement, and perhaps more useful in dealing with the past."

He paused for breath and continued with equal enthusiasm: "A second interesting poem compares the scars on a person's body with scratches on an old bottle, each set testifying to an active history of getting banged around. Individual scars might recall a time of drama or of a great challenge. 'Narbe' in German is the word for scar; I had to look that one up and some others as before. At its end the poem talks about the redemption ('Einlösung' in German) of the bottle for money, even though it was old with many scratches, and in the same way, redemption of the body from

its sins, represented by all the scars. He used a clever word play here because this second meaning of the English word redemption is a slightly different German word: 'Erlösung.' An English translation might work even better.

3

Six weeks had passed and George had begun to relax, with the play seemingly on autopilot. He didn't know about the small problems that were going to accumulate and grow and grow until these problems overwhelmed them all. David was the first to realize that Michael was making small alterations to the script—little changes that didn't stand out. David loved improvisation and almost never got to do it, but it was happening nightly before him in a major production. David was so completely familiar with the play that he could adapt to Michael's changes creatively, cleverly. He wasn't nervous at all but was having a wonderful time with this ad lib.

Later, during one of the stage scenes, Michael added comments about the counterfeiting of British currency that was a part of the work in Sachsenhausen, as well as other dialog about all the medical experimentation on prisoners. He only put in these comments part of the time, but still the changes grew more significant. George was embarrassed that he hadn't noticed even the larger changes until online fan commentary called his attention to them. Michael was becoming a kind of cult favorite, and these variations were part of the appeal. It was rare and of course much valued for an actor to get this kind of following by fans. George didn't want to object, but the situation made him nervous about the play—easily the most successful one he'd ever worked with. Soon the writer, Meyer, also heard about the changes and was upset that Michael was messing around with his play. Meyer demanded that George do something about it.

George didn't want to confront Michael, so he asked David what was going on. "Michael's been reading up about Sachsenhausen," David said. "And about the Holocaust in general. He says Meyer was just lazy, writing what sounded nice or fit his plot without regard to what things were really like. Meyer only used two books as source material, neither one specifically about Sachsenhausen, and the main one he used is full of errors. Michael's just straightening things out a bit, like how important the counterfeiting was in Sachsenhausen and how nasty the medical stuff was—things Meyer knew nothing about, and even worse didn't care."

"You can't change the dialog in a play without permission, especially from the playwright," George said.

"Yeah I know that, but Michael doesn't. He's new to this game. You must know about all the mistakes Meyer made with the German, simple errors that Michael corrected before the opening. He got some of the Jewish stuff wrong, too. Why, you yourself helped Wechsler hire the two consultants to straighten that stuff out, all that on top of the two dialect coaches you hired. Anyway, the German expert was a waste of money since Michael had already corrected those errors. Besides, Meyer didn't bother to come to early readings or any rehearsals. He was 'busy writing his next play.' If I were you, I'd talk Meyer and the others into letting these small changes stand. Tell them the one about a goose and some golden eggs."

In fact, Michael was making at least weekly day trips to the Holocaust Museum in DC, studying, reading, who knew what. On days with a performance, he would get back to New York by train in plenty of time.

George felt he had barely gotten the others on board with the small and not-so-small changes, when he suddenly had other worries. David was getting concerned about Michael's health, particularly his weight—he seemed thinner, starting from an already thin frame. He said Michael seemed quiet, abstracted. Sometimes he didn't respond to a greeting.

George got a similar story from Joyce when she also gave concerns about Michael. "We used to go to lunch together twice a week, and he's stopped that. I mean, it's not a formal thing—he's just busy or not interested in lunch or off to DC. He said that he's trying to understand certain things about the Holocaust, stuff related to the play. I asked for specifics, and he, um, sort of reluctantly, said he's looking at issues of 'Why': Why Hitler did what he did. Why the German people followed him. To hear him tell it, there are endless theories buried in the achives in Washington, each theory more bizarre than the previous one." George thought Joyce looked stressed herself. She continued, saying, "I don't think it's healthy for him to be thinking about such questions, especially not so obsessively as he seems to be doing. It's not a good idea. I also worry that he's not eating enough. He seems so sad, so morose."

As George sat for one more performance, the British Michael was going over with his friends the latest news from the camp survivor who'd known his father.

"Look at this letter, the fourth one," he said, holding up a large envelope. "My father's friend managed to contact several other survivors from Sachsenhausen. My father had recited other poems to each of them, over and over again until they knew them by heart, and they're mailing copies to me. There were so many poems; some were duplicated but most were new. I've been studying my master list all afternoon. I count forty-one

separate poems, with a few variations among some of the duplicates. This is just amazing."

George was startled at Michael's delivery of the lines, which were supposed to be triumphant, uplifting, exciting. Instead he sounded as if even delivering the lines was a great effort, a burden. His delivery had probably been changing gradually, but George hadn't noticed.

4

Joyce cornered George two weeks later. "Michael's having, um, emotional problems. You must have noticed changes. He confided to me that he's having dreams, dreams with repeated nasty comments in them, asking him to do bad things, like something evil talking to him. He says he's always had nightmares sort of like this, based on whatever was happening to him at the time. Nightmares about taking courses or exams, or about teaching courses and forgetting to go to the class. It was no big deal. And I promised not to tell anyone, but I'm worried."

George felt sick inside. "Jesus, I don't want to hear this. You're saying he's a schizophrenic, hearing voices."

"Uh, George, I didn't know you were a psychiatrist. It's nice to get such a quick diagnosis."

"Hearing voices, that means schizophrenia, everybody knows that."

"No, 'everybody' doesn't know that. That's just armchair psychiatry talking. I'm no expert, but I'm sure it's not schizophrenia. Michael sounds quite rational, even if unhappy. I think he's an extreme neurotic, obsessed with the Holochaust, which he is trying to 'understand.' And he needs our help."

George wasn't giving up. "Did he tell you more about his dreams? What were they saying?"

"I listened carefully to what he said and I tried to remember it. I wrote some of it down. Speaking out of a 'black void,' voices insisted how worthless he was, how ineffectual, how weak, doomed to destruction. That he should kill himself. There was something like: 'You are forgotten like a dead man, as useless as a broken pot.' Here's one I wrote down: 'Packs of dogs will close you in, and gangs of evildoers circle around you. They will pierce your hands and feet. You have no chance.' And finally: 'You will only be happy when you take little children and dash them against rocks.' " Joyce was trembling. "I admit that this is scary."

"Okay, professional help. Right away."

"I said that to him. He's refusing any idea of help. He doesn't think it's important—just a result of reading about the Holocaust."

George and Joyce went back and forth this way, but they didn't come up with any plan or even any ideas.

Later George watched that evening's performance. In theory the performance was fixed, unaltered from night to night, but in practice successive performances were quite different, given regular changes to the dialog by Michael, and with his steadily more gaunt appearance. But it was more than that and George continued to be disturbed by Michael's delivery. He had become so much more dispirited, more frail.

George listened to the British Michael talk about his plans for his father's poems, and this was all positive and uplifting, since it was written that way, but the delivery no longer sounded so ennobling; instead it was sad and depressed. "I'm going to come out with a book of his poems that he composed in Sachsenhausen. It's all I can think about right now. A week ago I located a resource at the university, a German scholar interested in this project." The script called for a *wonderful* resource. Michael went on, "He'll be able to edit the poems into a more consistent form. He and I together will produce translations into English. After all, I'm a writer, too. I plan fairly literal translations. And we'll keep the German in the book, on pages facing the translation. I've even come up with a title: 'Boxed In: Poems From Inside Sachsenhausen.' In German that could be perhaps: 'Eingeengt: Gedichte von innderhalb Sachsenhausens.' "

On this night the end came in the usual way, with Michael's final speech, his collapse, and stage death, and then a rise to applause. This time, though, as he rose he held his hands with palms out, clearly indicating no applause. Then he said, in quite a different voice, sort of matter-of-fact, "Because of the seriousness of this subject matter, we are asking you to withhold your applause at the end. Thank you."

Of course they followed his request, with quiet conversation as they filed out. The fireworks came the next day, when the director called a meeting of those involved in the play, minus the actors. Klein, the main backer, immediately railed against the "unprofessionalism" of such a speech at the end. He, and even more so the writer, were incensed. Barbs flew back and forth until George got in his word. "Have you people seen this morning's paper? There's a story about our play on page one, above the fold. Of course it's about the request to hold applause, and the tone is positive. We could not possibly have paid for this level of notice. We'll make a simple change to our program for the play—put in Michael's request: 'The audience is asked to, et cetera.' " Complete silence followed as he left the meeting.

5

The winter months were past and spring had come exactly a month before, with another performance that evening. They were all terribly worried about Michael, his physical and mental well-being. Joyce was practically a basket case, even as Michael still insisted he was fine. One of Klein's people had done a short informal study after a performance, letting a small random group see the understudy do some of Michael's lines. They uniformly disliked him—some were quite vocal about it. For Klein this meant that if they tried to commit Michael to some institution, as Joyce repeatedly suggested, the play would be dead. It was in a very profitable phase, always sold out, many seats sold at scalpers prices. George had never understood this popularity, but it was all due to Michael, with his following of fans who watched the play over and over, enjoying the substantial changes with each performance. Klein had given them a "you'll never work on Broadway again" warning if they tried to ship him off to a mental ward.

As George headed into the theater earlier than usual, a group of anti-gun protesters were demonstrating outside, with signs reminding people of the Columbine high school shootings. Inside, George waited patiently for the play to start, He was coming to a decision—that they owed it to Michael to help him, no matter what the consequences.

The final scene came at last, where Michael revealed perhaps the main point of the play: that even though he himself would die, he had found a way to get his poems out of Sachsenhausen, which was elsewhere compared to a "black hole," from which nothing could escape. After this last line he was supposed to, as always, collapse on the floor and die a stage death. Instead he remained standing, stepped forward to the front of the stage, stepped right out of the inner play, out of the containing play, and then on into the real world of the audience. Into their world as a person, using none of his three accents, but instead a kind of generic English. The audience was obviously shocked, bewildered; George was terrified, thinking how this might move forward. "I have been looking at the dreadful shadow of the Holocaust, at the reflection of evil in a twisted mirror. Inside this shadow I discovered an entity or idea or memory, whatever it might be, so malevolent, that it can reach out across more than half a century, reach out and celebrate a birthday by killing again. I am told I must hate, kill, and worse. Then afterwards I must kill myself. Anyone who looks into these issues attracts this creature, draws its attention—it will demand either your suicide as a weakling or your allegiance to follow its evil yourself. I tried, but I am not strong enough for this, to withstand this onslaught, these attacks. This entity will never leave me be. It will live

forever, spreading hate and fear, killing over and over."

Instead of collapsing on the stage, he sank down to the floor and sat there, totally wasted, devastated. George looked at his program with a terrible premonition. He already knew what he would find: the date, that day's date, April twentieth, not just the anniversary of Columbine.

David and Joyce came out from the wings, helped Michael to his feet, and led him off the stage. George dialed 911 and asked for an immediate ambulance. These EMS techs would ignore Michael's statements about how good he felt. Get him to a hospital, to physicians and other professionals, get him the care he needed, contact his new theater friends and others to come visit him. And finally shut down this ridiculous play that had done so much harm to Michael, calling forth in him such a vision of the abyss.

End
End

Characters in the Story (actors in ***bold italics***):

- George Steiner, Asst. to the Director.
- James Wechsler, Director.
- ***Rick Taylor***, well-known actor, not used.
- ***Michael Spiegel***, actor and mathematician, main character.
- Joe Klein, Producer and backer, the most influential person.
- Aaron Meyer, writer.
- ***David Friedman***, actor, friend of Michael in the British Part, guard in the Camp Part.
- ***Joyce Levy***, actress, girlfriend of Michael in the British Part, wife of Michael in the Camp Part.

  Friedman and Levy are a married couple in the Stage Part.

Afterword

This story concerns a play which doesn't exist, and indeed probably *couldn't* exist in the sense that as described it wouldn't work at all or be a reasonable play.

The short story "Garden of the Forking Paths," by Jorge Luis Borges (in Spanish, English translations available online), includes inside it the description of a novel that has infinite forkings of action. Such a novel obviously couldn't exist. Some people consider this the best short story ever written. You must read it to the end, even when this seems like a fruitless task. There are many copies online, along with a huge amount of analysis.

As another example, *The King in Yellow* is a book of horror stories written by Robert W. Chambers in the late 1890's. Many of the stories refer back to a mythical book also titled "The King in Yellow." Reading this book supposedly resulted in madness and death for the reader. The book was "monstrous and suppressed, whose perusal brings fright, madness, and spectral tragedy."

Version: August 10, 2020. Time: 10:11.