

Plaything

Libretto by Maria Reva

Music by Anna Pidgorna

Note: both HUMAN and PARROT roles are gender neutral. Names and pronouns are flexible. She/her pronouns in libretto reflect the original cast.

Scene I **“Not A Word”**

Room in an embassy. Desk, chair, door with a slot. Official-looking furniture, once welcoming diplomats, now littered with dirty dishes and clothes. HUMAN has not left this room in five years.

A ding, like an egg timer, sets HUMAN off on morning ritual.

Gets out of bed.

Flips a calendar page.

Unhooks clock from wall, winds it.

A food tray with a cloche slides through the slot.

HUMAN takes tray to table, tucks a napkin into shirt, and uncovers the tray. Not food, but a newspaper. Hungrily flips the giant pages.

HUMAN: Not a word.
 Not a picture.
 Nothing at all about me.

Forgotten.
Old news.

I gave you tasty treats,
government leaks,
secret memos.

How you all loved me.
 “Hero!”
 “Whistleblower!”

“Sexiest Hacker Alive!”

Now I’m nothing.
Forgotten.
Old news.

Stuck in this embassy
of who-knows-what country,
waiting, waiting for amnesty.
One step outside:
I’d be arrested, tried for treason.
Gave up my freedom—

Never mind that.
True freedom is freedom of speech.

(Pause.)

(Spoken) Today’s “news”?

(Reads headline): “FAMOUS TALKING PARROT, MADAME SUZUKI, ESCAPES
HOME. FELINE FRIEND DEVASTATED.”

*Disgusted, HUMAN slaps newspaper onto the teetering stack of old newspapers on the desk.
Gets back into bed.*

Scene II Visitor

*Same ritual as yesterday, but sped up. Nothing in the papers about HUMAN. Gets back into bed.
We hear noises outside the embassy window. Mournful rounded vowels, like a cat begging to be
let in or a siren.*

HUMAN: A kitty?
 A baby?

HUMAN sees PARROT outside window.

HUMAN: A birdie!
 How pretty!
 What’s your name?

PARROT: Madame Suzuki!

Remembering yesterday's headline, HUMAN plucks yesterday's newspaper from the stack. Looks from the PARROT to the photo of the parrot in the newspaper. Reads bits from the article.

HUMAN: *(Remembering yesterday's headline)* Famous talking parrot...escapes home...feline friend devastated... *(Finds the article)* "Internet sensation"?

PARROT: Madame Suzuki!

HUMAN: "An NGO mascot, fundraising millions for forest restoration"?

PARROT: Madame Suzuki!
Deforestation is spooky!

HUMAN: "Born in the jungles."
Born in the jungles...
Known true freedom.
I've forgotten, how does it taste?

PARROT mimics sounds from past life: FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! Bird screams, chainsaw revving up, toy gun pew-ing. HUMAN sings unperturbed, romantically, overtop of the PARROT's sounds.

HUMAN: You were a wild thing,
tasted forests burning,
wings brushing fire,
blood boiling,
talons claspings.
Ferocious beast
hunting mice
 (or whatever parrots eat.)

What a brave...
What a heroic...
What a brave heroic—

PARROT: What's brown and sticky.

HUMAN: *(Shocked out of reverie)* What?

PARROT: What's brown and sticky.

HUMAN: What?

PARROT: What's brown and sticky.

HUMAN: Fine. It's a—

PARROT: A stick you turd! Let a stick be a stick save the forests!
(More bird sounds, a siren, an automated alarm droning "FIRE. FIRE. FIRE. DO NOT PANIC. WALK CALMLY TO NEAREST EXIT.")

HUMAN: You were a wild thing,
Now a plaything,
Brainwashed,
Trained to entertain.

PARROT: Again! Again! Again! Again!

HUMAN: Shoo! Be wild! Fly free!
If I can't, you can!
Shoo! Be wild! Be free!

Scene III "Remembered"

HUMAN is back in bed, sleeping fitfully. PARROT is perched on windowsill again, mimicking street noises. HUMAN startles awake, exasperated, but determined to go about mourning routine. This time, HUMAN notices something in the newspaper.

HUMAN: *(Reads, squinting, because article is so small)* "Isla Frank, whistleblower, has new parrot friend."

HUMAN rips the article out of the newspaper, strip by strip, until a piece the size of a postage stamp remains.

My name.
My picture.
Remembered.
New news!

HUMAN looks at PARROT as though seeing the bird for the first time. HUMAN shakes a bag of sunflower seeds and makes kissy noises at PARROT.

Why be wild, when food?
Why be wild, when baths?
Warmth?
Why be wild,

when you can be
safe with me?
(Work for me.)
They will love you.
(They will love me.)

*PARROT lured inside by treat. Discovers that the seed bag is empty, moves onto other seed bags, rattling them. HUMAN locks the window, trapping the bird.
PARROT runs back to window, rattles the latch.*

HUMAN: (Trying to convince PARROT, but also self)
Freedom, true freedom is freedom of speech.

Outside, PAPARAZZI have assembled. Lines can be divided among instrumentalists and repeated ad lib.

PAPARAZZI: Hey Isla!
Bird got a name?
Boy or girl?

PARROT: Madame Su—

HUMAN yanks PARROT away from window.

HUMAN: Ditch that prison nickname.
You're free now,
Need a new name....a...a...
(Considering PARROT) Amnesty.

PARROT: Madame Suzuki.

HUMAN: Amnesty.

PARROT: Suzuki.

HUMAN: Am-nes-tee.

They go back and forth like this, a power struggle between them, until PARROT's "Suzuki" morphs into "Amnesty."

New name set, HUMAN poses PARROT on window, facing PAPARAZZI.

PAPARAZZI: Bird got a name?
Boy or girl?

PARROT: Amnesty.

Barrage of camera flashes. The crowd loves PARROT. A MEMBER of PARARAZZI:

PAP 1: Taking care of your human?

HUMAN tries to get in front of window, but PARROT folds out a wing like a curtain to block the view.

PARROT: Safe with me.
(Work for me.)

PAPARAZZI: *(Laughing.)*
Cute cute cute!

The world is listening again. Excited by all the attention, HUMAN gets an idea. Yanks PARROT away from window.

HUMAN: Listen up, bird. Repeat after me.

(A bad jingle made up on the spot)
"Isla is no indoor human..."

Well? Go! Go!

PARROT repeats, parroting the bad singing.

HUMAN: "She smells all your troubles loomin'"

PARROT repeats.

HUMAN: "She'll hack and leak till the bad guys bleat...
Help her be an outdoor human..."

Well? Get on with it.

PARROT: "She'll hack and leak till..."
(Birdcall) Ree-ka-tee-ka!

PAPARAZZI: *(Beat. Entranced. Eating up every word.)*
Ree. Caw. Tee. Caw?

PARROT: Ree-ka-tee-ka-tee-ca-tee!

HUMAN buries head in hands, like all is lost again.

PAP. 1: Ree. Kaw. Kaw. Kaw. Tee. Kaw. Tee?
 Code! It's code!

PARROT yells out random syllables, repeated by PAPARAZZI in call-in-response until PARROT imitates the sound of a mega-bomb exploding.

PARROT: *(Ominous)* What's brown and sticky.

PAPARAZZI: What? What?

PARROT: What's brown and sticky.

PAP 1: *(One member of Paparazzi, in hysterics).*
 Blood! Blood! Dead blood!

PAPARAZZI: It's a message.
 Coded message.
 Bombs are coming!
 Bombs are coming!
 Isla knows new secrets!

PARROT: Am.

PAPARAZZI: Am?

PARROT: Nes.

PAPARAZZI: Nes?

PARROT: Tee.

PAPARAZZI: *(Chanting, slow at first, then gathering momentum.)*
 Amnesty.
 Amnesty.
 Amnesty.
 Amnesty for Isla!
 Amnesty for Isla! *(etc.)*

PARROT directs the chanting, encouraging audience to join in before cutting everyone off like a conductor. Show over. HUMAN looks pleased with self.

HUMAN: Good bird. Want a treat?

HUMAN hands PARROT a tiny treat. PARROT is starving. Scurries away to sleeping spot with the treat.

Scene IV **Parrot aria**

PARROT sings alone while HUMAN sleeps. PARROT sings snippets of conversations and sounds from the bird's past.

PARROT: Am. Am. What am.
 Internet sensation?
 Cute cute cute cute?

We saved you from the jungles
Cute cute cute cute!
Now you'll save us
Don't bite
No treat for you

(Plucks a few feathers)
Repeat after me:
Fourteen mans
Mans hats
Fo fo fo fo
Hat mans
Fourteen mad mans
Fourteen mans hats and
Fourteen Manhattans
Good bird. Again!
Fourteen Manhattans of forest burn every day!
Good bird, want a treat?
Again, again, again.
O, boy, I could use a Manhattan!
(Laughs, as if on queue.)
Again again again again

Am. Am. What am. What am I.
Cute cute cute cute
Ree-ka-tee-ka-tee-ka!
Stop doing that! No treat for you.

In one hundred years there will be no rainforests!
Good bird, want a treat?
Again, again, again.
Do you like having a home?
Me too! At least YOU have fire insurance.
(Mechanical laughter)
Good bird, want a treat?
Again, again, again.

Eleventy five bats die every ninety apples
Two hundred percent of all human tons football fields
(Plucks feathers again)
Stop doing that! Pretty bird, stop doing that.
Stop doing that, you won't be pretty anymore.
Pretty bird you won't be
Keep it caged, keep it caged
It's good for it, it's good for it keep it
Cute cute cute cute cute cute cute cute cute

The fundraising committee has convened
It won't survive the wild again
We keep it for its own good.
Good for it
Good for us,
Good for the trees
(Still plucking.)
Stop doing that, you won't be pretty anymore!

Better here than in the wild

Scene V

"Wild Thing"

Next morning. PARROT trying to sleep. For HUMAN, same routine, sped up, happier. HUMAN suspects more media coverage to come. PARROT resumes plucking feathers as HUMAN sings.

HUMAN: So many words.
 Pictures.
 Everything about me—
 Us.
 Warning my country of an attack.

Hero, savior.
(*Imagining*) I can see it now: "Nobel Peace Prize Nominee!"
But what of amnesty?

HUMAN turns to PARROT, sees the nest of feathers at the bird's feet.

HUMAN: No no no no no!
That won't do!
Stop that! Stick those back in!
Amnesty!

*HUMAN chases PARROT around as the bird throws fistful of feathers into the air, gleeful.
HUMAN's speech is peppered with involuntary bird sounds.*

PARROT: Good bird. Again!

HUMAN: Stop it.

PARROT: Stop it.

HUMAN: Stop it.

PARROT: Stop it.

HUMAN: This isn't a game.

PARROT: Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.

HUMAN: No!
No Amnesty. *NO*.

PARROT: No amnesty.
No amnesty for you.

HUMAN: Very funny.

PARROT: No amnesty
No amnesty for you.

HUMAN: You're just a bird. What do you know?

PARROT: No amnesty.
No amnesty for you.

They go on like this, PARROT yelling “No amnesty!” until HUMAN has a panic attack. HUMAN scrunches into a ball on the floor and rocks back and forth, muttering.

HUMAN: No amnesty, no amnesty, no amnesty for me...

PARROT joins in on rocking. This calms HUMAN.

Slowly, PARROT stretches leg out.

Slowly, HUMAN stretches leg out.

PARROT sees HUMAN mimicking. PARROT stretches wing out.

HUMAN stretches arm out, as though testing it out, seeing it anew.

They continue like this, transforming HUMAN into a bird.

PARROT ushers HUMAN toward the window. As PARROT sings, HUMAN makes bird sounds.

PARROT: You were a plaything,
 now a wild thing.
 Wings slicing,
 Blood boiling, talons claspings.

HUMAN is at the window.

PARROT: *(Spoken. Now sounds human.)* Open it.

HUMAN opens window. Stands on ledge.

HUMAN: *(Looks down.)* It’s so high.

PARROT gives the HUMAN the plucked feathers. HUMAN sticks them into own arms to make wings. PARROT tilts HUMAN’s chin upward, to the skies.

PARROT: Shoo! Be wild! Fly free!
 Shoo! Be wild! Fly free!

BOTH: True freedom
 True freedom is...

HUMAN makes a bird call. Wild. HUMAN leaps.

PARROT breathes a sigh of relief, alone and at peace at last. Owns the room. Closes window, draws curtains.

The usual food tray slides through the slot. PARROT takes the tray to the table, now human-like in movement. Throws out the dead plant. Sweeps HUMAN’s trash off the table. Opens the

*cloche and the junkiest, most delicious human food spills out (Twinkies, Halloween candy, etc.).
Kicks feet up, eats.*

End.