

Artistic License

A short play by Jake Lewis



First draft: 12/18/23

CHARACTERS

George (M identifying) – 20s/30s – nice enough guy, a little cocky and maybe not so interested in being an academic

Renee (F identifying) – 20s/30s – George’s girlfriend, art-lover, trying not to be too judgmental

Magritte (M identifying) – 40s/50s – famous French surrealist painter, Rene Magritte

War (F identifying) – any age – an elegant woman, high-class

Bowler (M identifying) – any age – regular in appearance, perhaps slightly forgettable.

SETTING

A gallery in an art museum

Present day

“Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.” – Degas

Lights rise on: three paintings – Magritte’s “Son of Man,” “The Great War,” and “Man in a Bowler Hat,” except each painting is actually a real person obscured by the item in front of their face.

RENEE, blindfolded, and GEORGE, leading her, enter and approach “Son of Man,” at right.

GEORGE: Annnnddd....! *(He removes her blindfold.)* Ta-da!

RENEE: *(Not really surprised, but trying to cover it.)* Oh! Wow! An art museum!

GEORGE: I know how much you love art, especially the artist Rene Magritte *(incorrectly pronounced “Reen Ma-gritty”)*, and when I saw that this exhibit was coming through town, I thought we should come!

RENEE: *(Pronouncing it correctly, as “Re-NAY Ma-GREET” without trying to make him feel stupid,)* Rene Magritte, you mean. You know, Rene, like my name?

GEORGE: No duh! I was just saying it like all the kids do these days. So, did you have any idea?

GEORGE thinks she had no idea. RENEE is trying not to burst his bubble.

RENEE: I mean...when I heard the guy say, “Welcome to the Rene Magritte Exhibition,” I had a slight idea?

GEORGE: Ah. Right. Well, anyway. I know how much art means to you, and how little I know about it, so, this being our third date, and things starting to get serious, I wanted to show you I care about your passions.

RENEE: Aww!

GEORGE: Yeah, I’m a sweetheart! So, unbeknownst to you, I took a free online art class about this lady–

RENEE: *(Confused.)* Who?

GEORGE: This lady. *(Trying to pronounce it correctly.)* Rene Magritte.

RENEE: Oh! I see! But, um. Rene Magritte was a man.

GEORGE: Are you sure? I mean, the first name is Rene.

RENEE: Yeah, like Descartes.

GEORGE: Who?

Beat.

GEORGE: I was just testing you! I mean, how could I go through a whole 45-minute seminar on this guy and get that wrong?

RENEE: They must've packed a lot into 45 minutes. What else did they teach you?

GEORGE: Well, this one here. (*Approaching "Son of Man"*) it's pretty famous.

RENEE: Yes, they got that part right.

GEORGE: Did you know that this painting is how Apple Computers got their name? Yeah, sort of like a homage (*incorrectly pronounced "HAWM-midge"*) to the painting.

There is a male's scoffing noise heard from onstage, but not from GEORGE or RENEE, however only RENEE seems to hear it.

RENEE: Did you hear that?

GEORGE: Hear what?

RENEE: Like a...(*makes a scoffing noise*).

GEORGE: We're the only ones here. So it's probably the heating system or something.

RENEE: It's the middle of July, George!

GEORGE: Then the air-conditioning! As I was saying...Apple Computers was obviously not around in the early 1900s—

RENEE: Or in 1964 when this was painted.

GEORGE: Right, not then either. So, get this: the apple symbolizes his grandmother.

RENEE: (*Sarcastically, but GEORGE doesn't pick up on it.*) Was her name Smith?

GEORGE: (*Serious.*) How did you know?

Now, an offended noise from a male is heard.

RENEE: There it is again! That noise!

GEORGE: I bet it's a security camera with one of those speaker things. Some docent is trying to scare us.

RENEE: Why would they want to do that?

GEORGE: They're probably bored. It's like some little joke they all have to make the day go by faster.

RENEE: That must be it. So I bet you're going to tell me why the apple was hiding his face. Was he hideously grotesque?

GEORGE: No, of course not! (*Beat.*) He had an awful unibrow, though.

MAGRITTE: (*in a ludicrous French accent*) Non! I say, non, non, non!

MAGRITTE steps out from behind the apple, smacking it aside. He does, indeed, have a unibrow.

MAGRITTE: (*A ridiculous caricature of a French accent.*) I no longer can listen to your vile drivel concerning moi!

RENEE: (*To GEORGE.*) Did the painting just come to life?

GEORGE: I didn't know this was part of the exhibit.

MAGRITTE: You start talking foolishness about my work, and I can no longer stand by to see you lie further! Apple Computer! Ha, I say!

GEORGE: I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to offend you—

MAGRITTE: And what did your so-called esteemed professors say about this one? (*Indicates "The Great War."*)

GEORGE: Oh, well, this woman here—

MAGRITTE: Yes?

GEORGE: She is on her way to—

MAGRITTE: On her way to where?

GEORGE: ...on her way to...a war. (*Inspired.*) The Great War! Which, of course, was The Korean War, as we all know.

RENEE: Oh, honey, no, that's not right. At all.

GEORGE: And she's dressed all fancy because if she were in a regular military get-up, she wouldn't be able to slip behind enemy lines! It's like that saying, "Hidden in plain sight."

RENEE: George, I think you should stop talking now.

MAGRITTE: No, madam, I am finding his interpretation very amusing. Proceed, monsieur. What of the flowers?

GEORGE: Oh, the flowers? That's easy.

MAGRITTE: I am all a-quiver with anticipation.

RENEE: Me too.

GEORGE: They're purple, right?

MAGRITTE: Blue violet, actually. But don't let that stop you.

GEORGE: (*Like a teacher.*) And what does purple symbolize?

RENEE: (*Hopeful that GEORGE might actually have this one right, or trying to help him out.*) Femininity!

GEORGE: What? No! Dinosaurs! Obviously!

MAGRITTE: You gotta be kidding me.

WAR emerges from behind her painting now. She, too, has a unibrow. She takes the flowers and smacks them on GEORGE'S head. She speaks in a ludicrous French accent as well.

WAR: Sacre bleu! I am no dinosaur!

RENEE: He didn't mean *you* are a dinosaur. (To GEORGE.) Did you, George?

GEORGE: No, not her!

RENEE: See?

WAR: What did you mean, then, may I be so bold to ask?

GEORGE: Just that your face is covered by purple flowers to convey the idea that your beauty, like the dinosaurs, is timeless.

ALL except GEORGE are a bit surprised at this pleasant answer.

GEORGE: And that it died out.

WAR shrieks in upset and stamps offstage, while MAGRITTE throws down his hat and moans at the injustice of the interpretation of his art, exiting the opposite side of the stage. RENEE looks deeply embarrassed.

RENEE: George, I can't believe you! You're simply amazing!

GEORGE: (*Bashful.*) Well, all I did was learn a little art history—

RENEE: No, I'm being sarcastic! You have somehow managed to insult two surreally, reanimated paintings by my favorite artist, who my parents named me after, by the way. And now, I don't know if I can continue to date you, based on this complete ignorance about art! No, not even ignorance – perversion of art, is a better description!

GEORGE: Are you serious? You think I don't understand art? Well, maybe I do see it differently than you do – or even differently than the painter himself! But so what? Isn't that what art is all about? Seeing whatever it is you see? I might not have learned the real reason why Magritte did what he did, but I do know that art is about interpretation.

RENEE: That's...true.

GEORGE: And really, isn't my version of "The Son of Man" more interesting than just telling you what you already know? That it's really a reflection on the loss of innocence, hearkening back to The Fall of Man, when Eve ate the apple from the Tree of Knowledge? Or, how "The Great War" was really Magritte coming to terms with the elusiveness of love,

just as how he struggled to see the face of his part in World Wars I and II? Or this one here, "Man with a Bowler Hat." I could tell you that it was painted in reaction to the popularity of "The Son of Man," and how the recurrent use of bowler hats in his works had to do with his fasciation juxtaposing the ordinary alongside the extraordinary, but wouldn't it be a better story if I said that the man in this painting was a magician who had just pulled that seagull out of said bowler hat?

RENEE: It would. You're right.

GEORGE: Damn straight.

RENEE: Oh, I'm sorry, George! I never wanted to become an art snob. And you don't have to like art just because I do! Just like I don't like all those Marvel and Star Wars things you enjoy so much.

GEORGE: Well, you know, May the Fourth is next week...

RENEE: What happens on May the Fourth?

GEORGE: Never mind. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you in front of Rene Magritte.

RENEE: That's OK. He was pretentious, anyway. But I have a little idea for some dress-up when we get home. *(She picks up the bowler hat MAGRITTE dropped and flirtatiously puts it on his head, then grabs the flowers from WAR and sulkily saunters off stage.)*

GEORGE: Man, I love modern art! *(Runs after her.)*

BOWLER steps out from his painting, the seagull flying off into the section above the stage or pulled offstage. He also has a unibrow and French accent.

BOWLER: *(Annoyed.)* Magician! Do I really look so low as a simple magician? *(Calling out to the departed couple.)* That's *illusionist* to you! Hmph!

Lights fade to black.

The End