

AT THE MOULIN ROUGE
Stephen Gnojewski

Character

HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

Setting

The Moulin Rouge, a cabaret in Paris, France

Time

Late 19th Century

The text for this performance is taken from the letters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and from a description of the Moulin Rouge in the 'Guide des Plaisirs a Paris for 1900'.

SETTING: The Moulin Rouge, a cabaret in Paris, France.

AT RISE: Lights reveal the artist at work before an oversized easel. Seated on a folding chair, he uses his sketchpad as a palette and occasionally cleans his brush in a glass of water. In the distance are two more oversized easels, which help to dwarf the actor in comparison. Can-Can music plays.

RECORDED VOICE

“From ten o’clock at night until half past twelve the Moulin Rouge presents a very original and quite Parisian spectacle that is well worth seeing...”

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

All my life, I’ve never been anything more than a pencil... To think I would never have painted if my legs had been just a little longer!

(Laying aside his brush and palette) I fell off a low chair onto the ground and broke my left thigh... I have to call upon my mother for help in order to write to you, and, believe me, this is not easy or pleasant. As you’ve been told, I broke my left leg. They’ve tied me up in an apparatus, and all I have to do is be still. In this way my leg doesn’t hurt... although I am having pains in my calves.

The surgical crime was consummated on Monday, and the fracture, very admirable from the surgical point of view—not from mine, needless to say—was brought to light. The doctor was delighted and left me in peace until this morning. Then this morning, using the deceptive pretext of getting me up; he made me bend my left leg at a right angle, thereby causing me atrocious suffering... If I were not a painter, I should like to be a doctor or a surgeon.

I am sure you will be pleased to hear that I am as well as can be expected and that I have no pain. Everything is steadily improving. The appetite has more than come back, it’s ravenous, and the doctor is delighted at the prospect of a cure. I have more free time now because Mama has taken me out of the professor’s classes so they can give me the electric brush treatment that once cured my Uncle Charles. I’m not too bored and hope you won’t fret too much about my case because a clumsy fellow like me just isn’t worth it. I have been feeling much better the past four days. However, I am awfully tired of limping with my left foot now that the right one is cured. Hopefully, it’s only a reaction after my treatment. The doctor says not to get up yet to be on the safe-side, but probably he will allow it tomorrow. I haven’t gone outdoors yet, and Mama still hasn’t made up her mind about it. In any case, I devote myself all morning and afternoon to my brush. I just had a silly notion that if I could leave my legs here and go off in an envelope (just to kiss you) I’d do it.

(He opens his sketch book and reads.)

“Always remember, my son, that the only truly healthy life is a life out in the daylight and open air. Whatever is robbed of its liberty becomes distorted and soon dies. This little book on falconry will teach you to value life out in the free open spaces of Nature. If ever you should become acquainted with the bitter-side of life remember that the horse will be your loyal

companion, and the dog and the falcon will stand by you too, to help you overcome the injuries you suffer.”

(Closing his sketch pad.) Papa came the day before yesterday and was satisfied with my legs, also with my health. Today I am stuck in the house because of the rain. It’s very hard to keep oneself shut up indoors. I am completely alone all day long. I read a little, but ultimately I get a headache. I draw and paint as much as I can, so much so that my hand gets tired of it. And when it starts to get dark, I wait to find out whether Jeanne d’Armagnac will come near my bed, sometimes she comes, and I listen to her speak, not daring to look at her, she is so tall and beautiful and I am neither tall nor beautiful.

(Standing) I shall always remain a thoroughbred harnessed to a gallows cart.

(Stacking the easels on top of each other to suggest the Eiffel Tower.)

I am going to tell you about the various stages I’ve passed through on the road to art since you’re the one who lit the sketching spark in me...

I had no idea of the pain that a person feels when he is leaving his mother; I call out for you constantly and would be very happy to see you again. Paris is dark and empty. All the same, you can be sure that I’m working as hard as I can to please you. Princeteau is getting more and more friendly. As for me, I’m trying to get ready to work, because painting is definitely not a sinecure... Princeteau took me to see Bonnat. I brought along two or three daubs. The Master stared at the perpetrator and the work, and said to me, “Have you done drawing?” “That’s the only reason I’ve come to Paris.” “Yes. You have some sense of colour, but you would have to draw and draw. Fewer artist and more good workers.” In a word: “Tek-nik.” Where upon he gave me his card and a note for the student in charge of his studio... Are you interested in hearing the type of encouragement Bonnat gives me? He tells me, “Your painting isn’t bad, it’s stylish, but your drawing is simply atrocious.” And I have to pluck up my courage and start all over again. Draw, draw, draw, that’s the rub.

(Arranging the easels side by side in a straight line to form a landscape of easels.)

You’re going to think my menu is very varied, but that’s not the case at all, far from it! You have a choice between horses and sailors. The former are better. As for landscapes, I’m completely incapable of doing them. I can’t even do the shading. My trees are spinach and my sea looks like just about anything at all. But you see for me, only the figure exists. Landscape merely is, and must not be anything more than an addition: the pure landscape painter is a barbarian. Landscape should only serve to help us understand the character of the figure better. Corot is great only on account of his figures, and the same is true of Miller, Renoir, Manet and Whistler. When figural painters do landscapes they treat them as they would treat faces. Degas’s landscapes are *incredible* because they are human masks! In any case, write and tell me as soon as possible what you want from the three of us—me, my palette and my brush—and I will send you a crust you can live on.

(Can-Can plays. Bringing an easel downstage, the artist begins to paint using the glass of water to drink, as well as, to rinse his brush.)

RECORDED VOICE

“After you have surrendered your ticket in the foyer, you pass through a corridor, with red walls covered with photographs and posters, to the great dance-hall. The first view of it is far from commonplace: high and enormous, it looks like a railway station miraculously transformed into a ballroom. During the intervals in the program of dances men and women promenade up and down in a double stream as on a railway platform, jostling, rubbing elbows, forming eddies, under a bewildering confusion of hats of all kinds. Gay bodices of cerise, green, yellow, white, and blue satin, as well as skirts of all colors, provide a feast for the eye and fascinate the observer.”

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

I would like to tell you a little about what I doing, but it is so very special, so *freewheeling*, that if Papa knew he would no longer consider me a member of the family. I'm living a Bohemian life... and I can't get used to this atmosphere. The fact that I feel hemmed in by a number of sentimental considerations that I will absolutely have to forget if I want to achieve anything makes me more ill at ease on the hill of Montmartre...

(The music grows louder.)

I went to work at night at the Bar. There were musicians, a piano, a cello, and a violin. Jing-boom-boom, and the dance began, with four women dancing. Perfect... People were beginning to hum... Jing, boom, boom. What a magnificent view... an extremely impressive show. Jing, boom, boom. Jing, boom, boom. The Madame made me sit down and had four different glasses brought to me so I started with just a sip. (Drinking from his paint water.) Boom! Nice, isn't it? Rum and water, an awful mixture. Well, you know the first glass is the hardest... (He drinks some more.) Things were going along fine... Jing, boom, boom... Toasts were made... Jing, boom, boom... shouting hip, hip, hip, hurrah!!!, while I had a splitting headache. Something was wrong. Ah-ee, I felt strange!!! Just as I was beginning to wonder whether it would last long, suddenly a powerful Bea-aou-rra! (Spitting up water onto his easel.) Put an end to my indecision. I needn't say more. I will paint to my heart's content. (Raising his glass as a toast.) Every man to his poison! (He drinks.)

Bonnat has let *all* his pupils go. Before making up my mind I wanted to have the consensus of my friends and by unanimous agreement, I have just accepted an easel in the atelier of Cormon, a young and celebrated painter. A powerful, austere, and original talent. He often drops in on us and wants us to have as much fun as we can painting outside the studio... I have realized that working outdoors in the sunshine is an amazing thing and resting in the shade is a pleasure of the gods. But I'll spare you the recital of my ruminations in the sun with a brush in hand and spots of a more or less spinachy green, pistachio, olive, or shit colour on my canvas. Did I lose anything when I switched from Bonnat to Cormon? I should be tempted to answer, "No." The truth is that while my new boss doesn't yet have the astonishing prestige of my old boss, he is contributing to my training all the freshness of his early illusions. Well, I'm getting to know Cormon better, he's

the ugliest and thinnest man in Paris all because of his necrosis. People even say he drinks. Cormon's criticisms are much more lenient than Bonnat's. He looks at everything you show him and gives you a lot of encouragement. This will amaze you – but I don't like it as much! The fact is that my former master's lashes put some ginger into me, and I didn't spare myself. Here, I'm a little bit on edge, and I need a lot of will-power conscientiously to do a drawing when something not quite as good would do just as well in Cormon's eyes. Still, in the past two weeks he has reacted and has expressed dissatisfaction with several students, including me. So I've gone back to work with vigour.

The breeze of Impressionism is blowing through the studio. Vive la Revolution! Vive Manet! I'm overjoyed, because for a while I've been the sole recipient of Cormon's thunderbolts. Rain, ping, ping, slush, mud, botheration. The sky is unsettled and is sprinkling us with an unconcern that proves how little feeling the Eternal Father has with regard to outdoor painters. Disgusting, isn't it? For two days I've been in a ghastly mood and don't know what's going to come of it. I'm not in the process of regenerating French art at all, and I'm struggling with a hapless piece of paper that hasn't done a thing to me and on which, believe me, I'm not doing anything worth while. I'm having a kind of reaction of laziness, which is very distressing because struggle brings with it a febrile work that is worthless, and it might be better to let things go. I wish I could have confidence about what I'm doing. Degas has encouraged me by saying my work this summer wasn't too bad. I'd like to believe it, but I don't. I don't believe it!!!... I have to play deaf, to beat my head against the wall! Yes, and all that for an art that evades me and perhaps will never appreciate at all the troubles I've gone to for it... Ah, dear Mother, you'd be wise never to get involved with painting. It is as difficult as Latin, when you take it seriously! Which is what I'm trying to do.

(Setting an easel center stage to be used as a full-length mirror.)

I'm still in a lazy mood and waiting for inspiration. I try for truth, not the ideal. This maybe a mistake, because I don't look with favour upon warts and I like to decorate them with playful hairs, make them round and give them a shining tip. I don't have control over my pen, when my pencil is moving I have to give it its head or crash!...deadstop. Too bad I have pimples that make me lose a lot of time scratching. Look at that shape absolutely totally lacking in elegance, that big behind, that potato nose... He is not good-looking... My chin is like an old shoe brush. Ha! I should like to see the woman on this earth who has a lover uglier than me. Celibacy does have its charms. (To his reflection.) One is ugly oneself, but life is beautiful.

(Can-Can music plays.)

RECORDED VOICE

"On each side of the room is a raised platform, a broad open gallery from which you can watch the dancing without taking part in it and enjoy a general view of all the women in full regalia, strolling about and parading before you in this veritable market-place of love..."

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

I've been having a very good time lately...very lively at the Moulin Rouge. The amount of beer we're drinking is incalculable...We organized an orchestra and got people dancing. It was great

fun, only we didn't get to bed until 5 in the morning, which made my work suffer a little. No, don't worry about it, drinking doesn't do me any harm... What, I'm so close to the ground? What of it? I drink only the best. How can it be bad? To drink little but often.

(Balancing the easels on top of each other to represent a crude printing press.)

The Independents have no gallery and are having no luck trying to find somewhere to leave their daubs. Personally, it's all the same to me as I'm wrapped up in lithography. I'm very busy and printing with might and main. I have just invented a new process that can bring me quite a bit of money. Only I have to do it all myself... having to keep watch over three machines and working flat on my back under the Printing Press.

(Crawling through the easels.)

My experiments are going awfully well. I've finally finished and believe I have success at hand. What's new that I can tell you? I'm living a monotonous life. I'm working on a big poster, and I eat my meals at the Bar Americain, which means that I'm living on roast beef. Otherwise my life's dull, and I swear to you that evenings out on the town are not always completely joyous occasions. Which means that even though I'm such a bad son, I miss you.

Your natural kindness will inevitably be stirred by the luck I've had. My poster of La Goulue at the Moulin Rouge is pasted today on the walls of Paris. Things are going wonderfully for me. I am just about to be given a commission, and I did a small drawing at the Café Americain. Maybe this will be the lucky break I've been dreaming of. My poster has been a success on the walls, despite some mistakes by the printer, which spoiled the product a little. The newspapers have been very kind... written in honey and ground in incense, for once they have come close to telling the truth. As for the public—even though I pay no attention—it would be entitled to criticize if it were paying. But yesterday... yesterday, in Yvette Guilbert's dressing room she asked me to make a poster for her. This is the greatest success I could have dreamed of – for she has already been depicted by the most famous people. This... this just to show that if good luck comes while you're sleeping, sometimes it comes while you're drinking. I'm so happy that you're satisfied with what I am doing... The family won't take any pleasure in my joy, but with you, Mama, it is different. I find it terribly provoking the stubborn way most of the family insists on making fun of me. Kiss the grannies and the other ornaments on our genealogical tree for me.

(Can-Can music plays. Arranging easels to suggest the woman of the brothels.)

RECORDED VOICE

“To the left, at little tables, sit the *petites dames* who are thirsty, and who buy drinks for themselves while they are waiting for somebody to buy drinks for them. When that happens, their gratitude is so overpowering that they immediately offer you their hearts – if you are willing to pay the price. A few English families, with a dozen children, are scandalized by the sight of these women who dance by themselves, without male partners, and whose muscular

elasticity, when they spread their legs wide a part in the *grand ecart*, betokens a corresponding elasticity of morals.”

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

I have finally found an extraordinary apartment, *don't tell a soul*. I hope to end my days in peace there. I am pitching my camp in a brothel.

Ugliness always and everywhere has its enchanting side and it is exciting to hit upon it where no one has ever noticed it before. I shouldn't dare offer them 100 Sous for sitting for me, but God knows they're worth it. Professional models seem to have been stuffed, whereas these girls are alive! They loll and stretch on divans like animals... They are utterly without affection. Imagine. Just imagine...when you see the way they love...eh? The 'tek-nik' of tenderness. All I hear is brothels! What of it? There's nowhere I feel more at home. Here, I have found women my own size. They have a good heart. True education is a matter of the heart, and that is good enough for me. And yet you imagine you're talking about love? You're only talking about what happens between the sheets, Mother... Love is something else. A woman's body, a beautiful woman's body, is not made for love, you see...it's too beautiful, isn't it? I must be wicked indeed... (This horribly abject being, who is your despair.) What you say to me about my friends leads me to believe that you think I'm downright stupid. From now on I shall come to your house only as a guest. Those who say they don't give a damn really do give a damn, because those who don't give a damn don't say they don't give a damn.

(Can-Can music plays. He raises his glass.)

I can sin to my heart's content since my mother supports an old tower full of nuns whose only duty is to pray for me and my salvation. Another round for everybody. Another round, another dance, another song, another dance...

(He drinks. In a drunken revelry, he dances madly with an easel. Kicking higher and higher, he performs a grotesque Can-Can until his legs collapse beneath him.)

Help me!

(Music stops. Reciting by memory, as he interlocks the easels side by side.)

“Always remember, my son, that the only truly healthy life is a life out in the daylight and open air. Whatever is robbed of its liberty becomes distorted and soon dies.”

(He crawls inside the cell he has created.)

Help me! This is the chance to do the decent thing. I have been imprisoned, but everything that is imprisoned dies! Have you broken your arm, or have you forgotten that your offspring exists? I hope you're not going to delay coming here to see your son whom you leave in the lurch as casually as you please. But it seems to me that the hour for making amends has come... You've

probably learned from the newspapers about my confinement in the hospital. Everything here is ugly and uncomfortable. I can't do anything whatsoever outdoors, and am sick and tired of working in-doors. They have no right to lock me up. I want to get out. I'm asking you one last time to come instead of behaving like an ostrich.

Forgive my silence, but this silence was due to a state of irritation that is beginning to go away. I saw my mother. There's still a little friction, but I believe things will be all right. I have been feeling much better the past four days, but I haven't gone outdoors yet and Mama still hasn't made up her mind about it. Send me some grained stones and a box of watercolours with sepia, brushes, litho crayons, and good quality India ink... and paper. Also bring me a bottle of rum. Bring me the whole lot in a locked valise and ask to see me. Once I have done a certain number of drawings, they will not be able to keep me here. In any case, I devote myself all morning and afternoon to my brush. Painting and sleeping, that's all there is. The Prisoner. In short, it's better not to paint the future too black, when it's already black enough naturally without any additional colouring... (Stepping out of easels.) I fled from prison...I bought my way out with my drawings.

During the difficult period I am just coming out of, I fight everyday against sleep. It's tough to get back to work, and what I'm doing up to now doesn't interest me much. But it's a necessary stage...I'M GOING TO WORK HARD AND TRY NOT TO DRINK.

(Arranging easels around his chair.)

It mustn't be forgotten that in art, we found what we looked for in vain elsewhere, a home... Let us embrace, you will not be seeing me again. I wish you a prosperous year, and from a ghost like me that counts double, for what my wishes are worth. My life is dull. I drudge along sadly. I'm living on nux vomica, so Bacchus and Venus are forbidden. But I have begun to work again!!! I work all day long. I paint and even sculpt. If I get bored, I write poetry. I'm having pains in my calves again, but I'm receiving electrical treatments. My painting itself is suffering, in spite of the works I must get done, and in a hurry. I am sweating like a bull. These people...these people get on my nerves. They want me to finish my work. But that is how I see things, so I paint them that way. After all, it is so easy to finish things. There's nothing simpler than to finish a painting in an external sense. It's the very glibbest of lies. I seek the true, not the ideal. Say what you have to say, each person has the right to paint as he wishes, and it's nobody else's business. I paint what I see.

(Placing each easel directly in front of the audience almost as an offering.)

The first human being to invent a mirror put it upright, for the simple reason that he wanted to look at himself full-length. A mirror of that kind is all well and good, more than useful. To invent it was a necessity, and everything that happens from inner compulsion is good, and justified. Later, other people came and said: Up till now people have set up their mirrors perpendicularly without ever wondering why they did so. They found that mirrors can be put horizontally on their sides – naturally – though the question is whether there is any point in doing so. They did it because it was novel, and it was the novelty that appealed to them; but nothing is ever beautiful merely because it is novel. In our time there are many artists who go for novelty,

and see their value and justification in novelty; but they are wrong – novelty is hardly ever important. What matters is always just the one thing: to penetrate to the very heart of a thing, and create it better.

(Can-Can music.)

There you have all my empty head can conjure up...

RECORDED VOICE

“From ten o’clock at night until half past twelve the Moulin Rouge presents a very original and quite Parisian spectacle that is well worth seeing... After you have surrendered your ticket in the foyer, you pass through a corridor, with red walls covered with photographs and posters, to the great dance hall. The orchestra, big enough for a circus, sounds the charge for the battalion of quadrille dancers who leap forward with skirts lifted and legs uncovered.”

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

The fact is that all the unsightly features of this unpleasant place are erased like a charcoal sketch in a gust of wind...you’re going to say, that I’m getting sentimental, but it’s the true truth. Mama, it’s a great life. It’s damned hard to die.

(Lights fade. Can-Can music crescendos.)

END OF PLAY

HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC 1864-1901: A CHRONOLOGY

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| <p>1864 Henri-Marie-Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa is born on 24th November, the eldest son of Count Aphonse de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa and his wife Countess Adele-Zoe-Marie-Marquette Tapie de Celeyran. His parents are first cousins.</p> | <p>1887 Exhibits in a group show in Toulouse (using the anagram pseudonym "Treclau"). Together with van Gogh, Anquetin and Bernard he founds cloisonnism. Studies Japanese coloured woodcuts. "Portrait of Vincent van Gogh".</p> |
| <p>1878 Here breaks his left thigh-bone.</p> | <p>1888 Separation from Suzanne Valadon. "Cirque Fernando: The Equestrienne".</p> |
| <p>1879 Henri breaks his right thigh-bone. From this time on, both legs stop growing.</p> | <p>1889 The "Moulin Rouge" is opened and Henri becomes a regular. "At the Moulin de la Galette".</p> |
| <p>1882 Joins Leon Bonnat's Paris atelier. When it is closed, he becomes a student of Fernand Cormon. "Young Routy at Celeyran".</p> | <p>1890 Paints "Marie Dihau at the piano", "At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance".</p> |
| <p>1884 Moves to Montmartre and lives at Rue Fontaine 19, where Edgar Degas has a studio. "Fat Maria" and the Cormon portraits.</p> | <p>1891 Joins an Impressionist and Symbolist exhibition. First printed graphic works, including the Moulin Rouge poster. "A la Mie".</p> |
| <p>1885 He frequents clubs and bars in his quarter ("Elysee Montmartre", "Moulin de la Galette") and is a welcomed guest at Aristide Bruant's cabaret club "Le Mirliton". "Portrait of Emile Bernard".</p> | <p>1892 Posters for Bruant and Jane Avril. Series of lithographs. "Englishman at the Moulin Rouge".</p> |
| <p>1886 At Cormon's he meets and becomes friends with Vincent van Gogh. He meets Suzanne Valadon, who is both his model and lover. First drawing published in magazines.</p> | <p>1894 First album of Yvette Guilbert lithographs. For a time he lives and paints in a brothel. "The Salon in the Rue des Moulins".</p> |
| | <p>1897 Increasing problems with alcohol. "Nude Woman Standing at the Mirror".</p> |

1899 After a breakdown he is confined for three months to an asylum. A polemical campaign against Toulouse-Lautrec is launched in the newspapers. Draws a circus series from memory. Toulouse's alcohol intake goes up again. Evolves his late style: "'The English Girl' from 'The Star at Le Havre'", "In a Private Room at the 'Rat Mort'".

1901 Signs of paralysis in his legs. From mid-April he spends last three months in Paris, putting his affairs in order. After a stroke, he is paralysed on one side. He dies on 9th September. He is buried in Saint-Andre-du-Bois; the body later transferred to Verdelaix. Final pictures: "The Medical Examination", "Admiral Viaud".

1900 Money squabbles with his family. "The Milliner", "Maurice Joyant".

"He wears my clothes, but cut down to his own size."

Edgar Degas

"But for heaven's sake don't make me so terribly ugly! A lot of people let out horrified screams when I showed them the coloured sketch. Not everybody sees the artistic angle. A thousand thanks from your very appreciative Yvette."

Yvette Guilbert

"Without a doubt I owe him the fame I enjoyed that very first moment his poster of me appeared."

Jane Avril

"I was always struck by the way Lautrec changed his way of talking when art was being discussed. On any other subject he was cynical and witty but on art he became totally serious. It was like a religious belief for him."

Edouard Vuillard

An obituary notice which appeared in one of the larger Parisian newspapers the day after the death of Toulouse-Lautrec in 1901.

"A Name. A master who disappeared too soon; one of those rare ones who grab you and make you shiver. He was rich and free from the yoke of life's hardships. He could apply himself to observing life. What he saw is not flattering to his time, the end of the century, of which he is the true painter. He looked for reality, disdainful of the fictions and vain imaginings which falsify ideas and unbalance minds. He saw not what we seem to be but what we actually are. Then, with a steady hand and a boldness both delicate and firm, he showed us to ourselves. Oh, it certainly isn't flattery! There is something for everyone here: grand concerts, public balls, theaters, circuses, coffee houses, wet horse tracks – all the places where the fever of living pushes men and women to hunt for any kind of pleasure. It is all here fixed forever by the pitiless pencil of the artist."