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Play **THE TRUMPETER**
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***A play for one Actor and Trumpet
Inspired by real events***

The action takes place in the basement of the warehouse of a large enterprise during the Russian-Ukrainian war in May 2022

It's dark. I can hear explosions above. To occupy myself for a few minutes, I try to work out exactly where they are coming from. 'Hailstorm' - bang, mortar - bang, airstrike - uh-uh! It's just an automatic sequence: ta-ta-ta-ta.

Kolya comes by. He looks at me carefully, then asks quietly: "What are you singing there?"

A Symphony of War.

"A Symphony of War? Well, well...A Symphony of War... Well, well..."

He looked at me as if I was crazy. They all look at me a little like I'm crazy. The only survivor from the band...

When I studied at the conservatory, I didn't know that every brigade in the army has a band, or almost every one. We usually play at celebrations and holidays.

I am a trumpet player in the band. I actually wanted to be a composer. But you have to be dead lucky to earn a living as a composer in Ukraine. So when my mum heard about a job opening in a brass band, I sent in my resume, went to an interview, and eventually, started playing the trumpet in bands - a long way from home. Why not, because the brasses are my favourite instruments. When you're young, you can play the trumpet for a regular salary.

Can I play? Yes, I can, and not too badly. But I like creating much more than playing. Like all composers.

Oh! Again: bang, whoah, bang, bang, bang, ta-ta-ta

I've been trying to write. I always have my notebook with me – compact, slips into a pocket. I'm sketching out musical notes by hand: Bang-bang, bang, ta-ta-ta, uh-uh, ta-ta-ta-ta.

A Symphony of War. If I finish it and stay alive to arrange and play it, it will be ... a bomb. In a positive sense. If this word can have a positive meaning. I'm not doing it for fame, but to understand. To gain insight. Into the nature of war. Its origins, its essence, the restrained low pain of defeat and the sweet high note of victory.

Ta-ta-ta-ta. Then silence again. No, it's from far away, you can barely hear it: bang-bang-bang.

"Trumpeter, shut up. It's boring enough here without you banging on – your bah-bah-bah are too much. You're driving me mad. Shut up, for God's sake!"

Talking of God. I think God forgot the way to our basement, or never knew it at all.

We have no connection here. So no contact for a long time. It's only occasionally we can go out on top and talk.

Bang-bang-bang, ta-ta-ta!!!

"To put it bluntly, please be quiet, at least for half an hour."

I'll try. Trumpeter is my call sign. I wanted it to be 'composer', but that's too vague and highflown for most people. So I'll be Trumpeter. Yes Trumpeter. And the brasses are my favourite instruments. I think I already said that. And I am writing my symphony specifically for a brass band - our brigade brass band. For our band, of which I'm the only survivor. You see - one day the war will end, and our brigade will have a band again. And we will play at celebrations and holidays. And also at weddings.

Before the war, when I was studying at the conservatory, I played weddings. Musician for hire. A bit of bread. So what - the job is relaxed and the pay is ok. Our people say that up there, despite the war, musicians still 'play' weddings. And children are born... There, above... And there are weddings in the army.

I also have a girlfriend up there. Beautiful. Intelligent. A vocalist. We studied together at the conservatory, but we didn't meet back then. Didn't even say hello, because we didn't know each other. We often passed each other in the corridors of the conservatory. Sometimes our eyes even met. But no 'hello'.

Soon after I graduated from the conservatory, I was invited to the philharmonic hall by a conservatory classmate for a concert in which he was playing in a quartet, and she, Lyuba, was singing. She sang romances by various composers: Ukrainian, Russian, Gypsy, Italian songs, French chansons. Lyuba has a very pleasant soprano. I listened and loved the sound of her voice - and the look of her face: her clear features, distinctive nose and big eyes of uncertain colour.

After the concert, I went up to my friend to say hi, and he introduced me to Lyuba. I walked her home and we started dating. Every day I thought that she was probably my destiny. That love is my lot. I don't know what she thought about this, because we never had time to talk about it. We didn't have time before the war. And now, who knows when we will be able to talk? About anything.

Mum says Lyuba is somewhere in Italy. Singing. She went there a few days before the war on a tour. Of course, she's singing - what else can she do? Sing her nice soprano. Mum tells me that Lyuba wants to return to Ukraine as soon as the war ends. Maybe even earlier. And then we will get married. Whether it will happen or not - only God knows. And most likely, he doesn't know either, because he forgot the way to our basement a long time ago. Or never knew it. I think I already said that too.

Bang-bang-bang-bang-ta-ta-ta!!!!

“Trumpeter – have you no conscience! Thanks, please!”

It's Kolya again. He looks at me. After all, that's the duty of a personnel officer, a lieutenant who graduated from the military institute – and I'm the only one left alive from the band. I know that he treats me like a child sometimes, even if I am a few years older than him. A trumpeter - well, what can you expect from him! Apart from music at celebrations and holidays. Maybe even weddings. If Kolya gets married, I will definitely play at his wedding. And it won't be the War Symphony, of course, but Mendelssohn's wedding march. Or Lysenko's Cossack March. Or a romance... And my Lyuba will sing with her pleasant soprano - for our Kolya we call Snout. Because he often blows his nose. He has chronic sinusitis or something. I am a zero in medicine. Total zero. And Kolya carefully hides his illness.

Whoah! A rocket or a bomb?

I want to ask Kolya - he knows more about that.

I hear screaming. Kolya!

I tear through the entrance basement and run up to him.

Kolya!

“Trumpeter, for heaven's sake stop wailing like a trumpet. Everything will be fine. Call the lawyer, he has everything in his pharmacy. There, around the corner. Run!”

So I'm running to the lawyer. Yes, before the war, he was a lawyer. But the lawyer is also lying wounded. Our nurse NighKngale is kneeling beside him. She silently indicates not to make a sound. I nod and point to the first aid kit and somewhere else. Where Kolya is. Wounded.

“Alive?” the voice of this NighKngale sounds like music - dolce.

Alive. She takes a bandage bag from her pocket, not from the first aid kit. And hands it to me without a word.

But I know zilch about medicine!!!

I'm flying back to Kolya. Alive!!! He groans very quietly. He's clenching his teeth to quieten his groans.

Kolya, my dear, I don't know what to do with in bandages and dressing! The NighKngale is treating the lawyer – he's also badly wounded!

And again completely silently, Kolya directs my clumsy actions with sad brown eyes.

Kolya was born in Crimea. His mother is a Crimean Tatar, and his father is Russian. He served in the Black Sea Fleet in Soviet times. Kolya considers himself Ukrainian. But his mother is a Crimean Tatar, and his father is a Russian. This is normal, almost typical for Ukraine. I am similar: my father is Jewish, my mother is half-Polish, half-Ukrainian. We have a host of such people.

Go to sleep, Kolya, go to sleep!

He closes his eyes and finally falls asleep, despite the acute pain. His breathing is uneven, but he is breathing - rubato. I sit next to him and all the lullabies I once knew fly through my head: from 'Sleep my joy, go to sleep' to 'SummerKme'. Kolya is clearly beyond the cradle now. But he sleeps soundly and even smiles in his sleep. And I, the Trumpeter, who knows nothing about medicine, skillfully manage to bandage him, and actually save him. I fall asleep next to Kolya feeling quite proud of myself.

Buh-buh-buh-buh-ba-ta-ta-ta!!!

I slowly open my eyes. It's dark. I don't know if it's morning yet. It's always dark in the basement.

I look at Kolya. He's not moving. I lean towards him. Praise God, he's alive! He breathes: not very evenly, but he's breathing, and that's the main thing now. Survival! This is the main task of each of us, no matter where we are: in the basement of this cursed industrial monster, in the occupied territories or right in the middle of hostilities. We all have to survive, because this war was intended by the enemy to destroy us. If we simply survive, it's already a big victory.

Ta-ta-ta. Bang-bang-bang!

"You're off again, Trumpeter!" Kolya opened his eyes, and a slight smile appeared on his lips.

Composer, Kolya. I am a composer. You probably can't even for a minute imagine being a composer. When you have musical notes in your head not letters. When your mind is filled with musical phrases not words. Even in explosions and shooKng, you involuntarily look for the harmony. To write A Symphony of War for a brass band. The brass band of our brigade, which usually plays at celebrations and holidays.

Well, yes, I'm off again, Kolya... Because I'm a composer. Do you want me to play you the overture to my symphony? You're lucky - the first performance! A solemn moment. Ready? Ta-ta-ta-ta!

Kolya barely shakes his head.

“Let it roll!”

He takes out a small recorder and sets it playing. But it sounds like a cacophony.

“Trumpeter!” comes Kolya's voice. "Enough! You'd beVer play someone else's music! Play someone else's music, please!" he's saying, as I spit - infurianto.

He puts the recorder away

Amazing! In my head, I built the overture carefully and it sounded completely different: the structure was clear and carried the harmony.

Kolya groaned again and said quietly to me: “Try to talk to me. Say something - it's beVer not to lose consciousness from the pain.”

What should I tell you, Kolya? Maybe about how wonderful spring in Kyiv is... It's spring, there, in Kyiv - right now. It is there. And I am here. I am here with you in a dark basement, where the sun does not shine, and even God has long forgoVen the way here. Yes, I already said that. Not to you, Kolya, but I said it. Because if God knew the way to this basement, then we would have been upstairs a long Kme ago - at least all those who remained alive.

No, I'm not biVer. It's okay, Kolya! I'm thinking. And spring in Kyiv is really beauKful. Lilacs and chestnuts are blooming right now. Blooming abundantly. And irises. The smells are simply dizzying! Even more strongly, you want to breathe deeply, to build plans. Girls emerge in their summer dresses, perching on heels.

“Take these! AnKbioKcs. We only have a few of them.” This is the NighKngale. She is flying towards us, puts two pills in my hand then disappears again around the corner of the neighbouring room. Why did she tell me that we don't have enough anKbioKcs? We don't have much of anything here. So there is no need to explain. It's just good that we sKll have at least something. A few days ago, aber a long, long pause, Ukrainian helicopters were able to break through to us. I don't know – no, it's fair to say, no one knows – how they did it. They even brought supplies. Of course, medicines and food. Water too. That's why we live. Live for now.

Bang, bang, uh-uh, ta-ta-ta-ta, bang-boo! – I slept behind the explosions in a whisper so that Kol would not hear. - Bah-bah Whoah! Whoah! Whoah!

“Don't be shy, sing something! It's beVer than keeping quiet. It's definitely beVer now.”

Kolya, I'm not a NighKngale to sing. By the way, the NighKngale just flew in while you were sleeping. Here, for now, one pill – to reduce the inflammaKon. You already swallowed two yesterday.

He smiles: “That's probably why I'm sKll alive.”

Not for that, Kolya, not for that. You have to live because you are young, handsome, with big brown eyes, a drunk Crimean Tatar, drunk Russian, but actually Ukrainian. Because you were born in Ukraine. Because you consider Ukraine your Motherland. Because for you, freedom is vital. As for me. As for the lawyer - I don't know whether he is still alive or not, with the NighKngale.

"You know, I like her – our NighKngale."

Me too – you discovered America! Kolya – who doesn't see that you like her? But we all like her.

"No, you don't understand," Kolya tensed and sat down. "I like her as a woman, not as a NighKngale."

Then tell her about it, Kolya! To a woman! But you just stare at each other! Don't just tell me! I will get her.

And I fly to the NighKngale in her grove - the room around the corner. Or around the bush...

I find her on her knees, bending over the lawyer, who has just died from loss of blood.

Bang, bang, uh-uh, ta-ta-ta-ta, bang-boo!

We lean forward against the ground. Then I grab the NighKngale firmly by the hand and drag her to Kolya.

Thank God, nothing more hits, nothing more falls – and Kolya is alive. He is sitting, leaning against the wall.

Kolya, speak, quickly!

He is silent.

Kolya, speak, quickly!

He remains shyly silent.

Ok, I'll go. Just say it, please, say it!

And then to the whole basement he shouts: "I love you!"

Fuck it! Finally!!!!!!

I see the NighKngale leaning over Kolya. Kissing Kolya who can hardly manage love in such a state. Who cares?

However, I return to my place.

I'll play the trumpet at your wedding! Kolya and the NighKngale agree silently.

She goes off to help the wounded - to do her job. And Kolya stays with me.

"You know, I've never been to Kyiv..."

So, Kolya wants to conKnue the conversaKon about spring, about girls in summer dresses and high heels.

I was born there - in Kyiv. I grew up there and studied there. First in a regular high school, learning music along the way. Then in a specialized music school named aber Lysenko. It's in Sirets, in the park with the children's railway. It's a beauKful park. And it looks even more beauKful from the train. Oh, I forgot you don't know where Sirets is. It's a district of Kyiv, quite an old district, close to the centre. Can you imagine – the train in Syretsky Park is driven by children who are specially trained – it's a kind of school for a young railwayman. And everyone rides the train: both children and adults. When I was studying at the Conservatory, I oben went back to the park to ride the children's railway.

The Pyotr Tchaikovsky Conservatory, or Music Academy, is located in the very centre of the city on Independence Square. It's a beauKful, majesKc classical building. There are many chestnut trees near it on Khreshchatyk. They are blooming now. It's very beauKful when the chestnuts bloom! First chestnuts bloom, then acacia, and then jasmine. There are many musicians in my family. My mother is a teacher, who teaches children to play the piano. My aunt, my father's sister is a vocalist, mezzo-soprano – quite well-known in musical circles. She's now working in Austria. My grandfather is a film music composer, – and believe it or not he's sKll alive! Old, but alive. And very energeKc. When we walk around the city, I can barely keep up with him... When we walk...

"What is a mezzo-soprano?" Kolya suddenly breaks my long monologue.

It's a female voice - lowish. There is also soprano. It is high. My girl is a lovely soprano. A very nice soprano.

"We don't know anything about each other," Kolya moaned.

And you don't know anything about music! Music is the most harmonious thing you can create. Music is everywhere: in the beauty of chestnut candles and acacia bunches, in puddles on the asphalt aber the rain, in the blue sky, in the silence of the NighKngale, in the grace of girls in summer dresses and high heels, in the sound of cars speeding along Khreshchatyk, and even in this bah-bah-bah-ta-ta-ta. Can't you hear it? – Sounding somewhere very close... It's good that it's not for us.

"No, Trumpeter, there is no music in bah-bah-bah!!!"

Kolya laid down again, and I quickly put some kind of pillow under his head.

Music is in everything!

"Maybe there's something, but there's no music in bah-bah-bah!!!" Kolya's voice became harsher – risoluto - commanding notes.

But I'm a composer! And I know everything about music! And you, Kolya, know nothing about music! You don't even know what a mezzo-soprano is. Or my soprano either.

"Oh I already know! A mezzo-soprano is type of female voice - lowish. Soprano - high. Your girl Lyuba has a nice soprano voice. It's good you have a girlfriend. She will wait for you, and you will get married."

Lyuba is in Italy. Who knows if I will ever see her? At least the NighKngale is here, nearby. And you love each other. I envy you, Kolya, I must confess – I envy that you can touch the NighKngale's hand, say something gentle, warm, touching to her. And I can do it for Lyuba only in my imaginaKon. Perhaps I'll never be able to do this, not in my imaginaKon, but in reality. Maybe I will never again look into her eyes, never say that I love her, and never hear her sweet soprano again. And maybe I'll never graduate. And the brass band of the marine brigade will not play Mendelssohn's March at our wedding, because there will be no wedding. And our children will not be born...

"Is that what you believe?" Kolya lies back again, leaning on the pillow.

I'm just facing the truth. We've been sitting in this basement for many weeks. And our helicopters have only managed to break through to us a few Kmes... Twice, I think... Or three... I don't know if there are skill chestnuts on the mountain, or there is nothing there!!!

"Yet you go on looking for harmony in the sounds of war?! Bang-bang-bang and ta-ta-ta!!!!" - Kolya shouts even louder than me.

Yes, because if I stop looking, I will die. Aber all, I'm a composer, not a soldier. I am a composer, Kolya! Do you understand?! A composer!

Can I try one more Kme?... To play... One-and-a-half Kmes! The last Kme!

Kolya nods - roll again! An aVempt Number 2.

He picks up the recorder and starts it playing. It sounds like a cacophony again

"Now you understand that YOU don't know anything about music!" Kolya is not mocking, he is quite serious. He does not mock, but feels sorry for me. I sincerely regret that my aVempt Number 2 also failed.

No, Kolya! This music knows nothing about me!

But I will do it: I will write A Symphony of War. And the band of our brigade will play it at the celebraKons in honour of the Victory. And it will be a bomb.

“Over my dead body,” Kolya whispered. “Over my dead body,” And then loudly and commandingly: “And I'm not going to die!”

You must not die, Kolya. You have to live! This is for each of us, the main task, no maVer where we are: in the basement of this cursed industrial monster, in the occupied territories or right in the middle of hosKliKes. We all have to survive, because this war was intended by the enemy to destroy us. If we simply survive, it's already a big victory. Yes, I already said it... I said it! But it should be like a mantra for all of us who are here in the basement.

“I'm not going to die!” Kolya repeated without the passion of a commander, then closed his eyes.

You don't have to die, Kolya! No need! Aber all, the guys who broke through before said that several regions have already been liberated, that the enemy didn't make it to Kyiv, and that Kyiv is already reviving... So, now the people of Kyiv can enjoy the blossoming chestnuts, acacia and jasmine. And the girls can wear summer dresses and high heels.

“Then why do you believe that you will never see Lyuba?!”

I'll see you, Kolya, by my side! Yes, we will get married and invite you and the NighKngale to visit us in Kyiv. I will introduce you to my mother. And she'll play Tchaikovsky's 1st piano concerto of for you or Beethoven's Passion. Mum plays very well...

“My mother came to Simferopol from Uzbekistan. No, not like that. She was taken there from exile, because she was sKll a teenager, so she couldn't decide for herself. Her parents didn't decide to leave Crimea either, and she didn't play any part in their decision to return to Ukraine. But we all decided together at a family meeKng to leave Crimea in 2014, when Crimea was annexed. I was 16 then, and I decided to become a soldier – to protect Crimea...then it surrendered. To be honest, I regreVed it a hundred Kmes in this basement: the decision to join the military. It turned out that there is no heroism in war. Only blood and suffering. And also - a lot of disappointments... For myself, for those around me, for the commanders...”

Tell me, Kolya, tell me! Aber all, we don't know anything about each other, Kolya! But Kolya falls silent – probably Kred.

Whoah, whoah, bang-bang-bang-bang-bang! Things are pelKng down on us from all sides. A large fragment of broken girder falls on my leg. My whole body, not only my leg, is wracked with severe pain.

Kolya, how are you?

He calls out: "It's ok. Everything is fine. It didn't touch me."

Yes! I know you're 'ok'. But alive is already good. I look at my leg. There is no blood. There's no jagged wound. But the dull pain is not subsiding. My whole body is collapsing, and my leg continues to throb. I'm creeping up to Kolya - it's better to be close. It is better to be together.

Kolya curses, very quietly through his teeth - probably so that I won't hear.

I don't like swearing - the whole team knows that. Rather, I live with it. In our family, no one ever swore. You could say I grew up in a warm bath, as it is now fashionable to say. My creative organism just does not perceive swear words; it rejects them on a physical level. And I have not changed in this - the war has not changed me. They say that in wartime people become ruder and crueler. But I am sure that war does not actually change people. It only shows their best and worst traits. A coward remains a coward. A bootlicker remains a bootlicker. A grass goes on grassing. And a guy who is light stays light even when it is dark around, very dark - like now in our basement. When debris and dust are falling from all sides, when at any moment each of us can die without saying a word of love to someone.

The Nightingale is coming towards us.

"Guys, are you alive?"

At the same time Kolya and I pronounce in one breath: ALIVE!

"Thank God! Then I will crawl away" The Nightingale then disappears into the smoke. She actually vanishes like in the theatre when there is artificial smoke and flashes and bangs, and everything is according to routine. Sometimes it