

TALKING TO VEGETABLES

a ten minute play by
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CHARACTERS

Fossarius *In a suit, with dirty boots.*

René *In the 21st century equivalent of 17th century formal garb.*

The Confessor *A robot.*

Setting: A bare stage. Center, the robot: an impy cylindrical beast, mounted just above waist height. The robot articulates like a desk lamp, capable of fluid turn, tilt, twist, swing, etc. It has a light at the end of its snout behind a mechanical iris. The light can cycle though a spectrum of colors.

Time: Universal.

A note about the performance of the robot: Though the robot in *Talking to Vegetables* is programmed to follow a script, it dynamically reacts to the its scene partners. It is neither a puppet nor a sophisticated tape-recorder, but an equal performer. The gestures given to the robot are written both as a physical description and as the interpretation made by the characters.

The robot was designed by Guy Hoffman and John McBean, and programmed by Guy Hoffman.

Talking to Vegetables was workshopped as a part of MIT's Playwrights in Performance festival, May 2007. Direction by Kate Snodgrass and stage management by Emilie Slaby. The cast of the production was

Fossarius Jonas Kubilius
René Laurel Ruhlen

[Dark stage. The confessor glows. It examines the audience in the dark, sweeping back and forth, perhaps picking on one unfortunate audience member for extra scrutiny. Satisfied, it returns to an attentive pose as lights rise. Fossarius speaks to the confessor.]

FOSSARIUS

Buried Alfredo today. Shallow grave. Earth. The dirt. Still frozen. You ever dig though the frost? No. Course you haven't. Earth comes up in chunks. If you can crack it at all. Chunks, they're unwieldy. Crackly and fractal like. Hell. It was damned cold. Wrapped'im in plastic. Put him in and you can't even cover him proper. Those bricks of dirt: like rebuilding from a demolition zone. Nothing fits. Big cracks in the dirt, can see right down to the...body, I guess. Corpse?

CONFESSOR

[Looks away.]

FOSSARIUS

Hey, you think I'm happy about this? Would have dug deeper had I known. Hope we get rain soon. Softens the soil. Cover'im up. Keep the animals out. Least give him something decent. I'm not—I'm no monster.

CONFESSOR

[Disgust.]

FOSSARIUS

You get it? Why we want all the parts underground? Keep the soul contained? Shove it on to that next place. Usher'em on. Unembodied souls keep out! Out of this world! Out from the living! Huh. Would you know? Would you?

CONFESSOR

[Beat. The iris narrows.]

FOSSARIUS

You look at me like that! What's that? Pity? Patroni-zay-shun?

CONFESSOR

[The glare brightens.]

FOSSARIUS

Nevermind. Patronized by a mute. Great.

CONFESSOR

[Turns away.]

FOSSARIUS

Hey, hey! I didn't—didn't mean to... I'm sorry.

[Lights out. When they rise again, the Fossarius is gone, replaced by René. She grooms and preens the confessor. With a rag, she sops up a small puddle of liquid.]

RENÉ

He buried Alfredo in a shallow grave today. The earth was still frozen. I know, you've never dug a grave before. Been outside even, but, well, the dirt doesn't dig easy. It cracks into cakes with snowflake edges. It must have been cold. I saw the body, all wrapped in plastic, and him all alone, trying his best to give a proper burial.

CONFESSOR

[A comforting gesture.]

RENÉ

I hope it rains soon. Spring softens the soil and there'll be flowers. I'll plant violets and buttercups.

Do you understand? Understand why we imprison the body in earth so the soul can be free? Help usher them on. To that next place? Could you tell me? Would you tell me if you knew?

CONFESSOR

[Beat. A slow nod. The woman stares at the confessor. The confessor stares back.]

RENÉ

Why do you look at me like that? Do you pity me?

CONFESSOR

[The stare continues.]

RENÉ

[An accusation:] I loved him.

CONFESSOR

[*A gesture of embarrassment. Or shame.*]

RENÉ

Hey, hey! I didn't—didn't mean to... I'm sorry.

[*The lights dim. As Fossarius emerges, the confessor looks skyward and dells. René and Fossarius look at each other haltingly.*]

TOGETHER

I...

FOSSARIUS

Sorry, I—

RENÉ

No. Please...

FOSSARIUS

Well.

RENÉ

Oh.

FOSSARIUS

Wanted to—

RENÉ

—what?

FOSSARIUS

[*Meaning the confessor:*] I added fluid.

RENÉ

I know.

FOSSARIUS

Oh. How—

RENÉ

You spilled.

FOSSARIUS

Can we...

[He tries to touch René. She steps back.]

RENÉ

What.

FOSSARIUS

Nothing.

[Lights out. René withdraws.]

FOSSARIUS

I'm sure that if— What do they call it now? The verb: to Schiavo? Would have held my hand if he could. Would have pleaded with me to. Suicide assistance with a pellet of rat poison. Would've— not that it matters. No. Nothing's permanent.

CONFESSOR

[An incrimination.]

FOSSARIUS

I killed him. Murdered him. Happy? Waited till she [*meaning René*] was gone. Broke it up. Powdered it. Mixed it and put it in his mouth. I killed him. What? Am I responsible? Yeah, I'm responsible. Arrest me. Fine.

Fine! [*He offers his hands.*] Hoh ho! You want to know something? You want to know something? He was already dead. Just lay there. Eyes: glazed over. He breathed yeah, he farted yeah—God knows he still farted—but was he there? Really there? You ricochet off a bumper, get dragged on pavement thirty feet like—Go limp but still breathe.

Hey! Knock knock!

CONFESSOR

[Annoyance.]

FOSSARIUS

Got a soul in there?

[The lights cycle. As do the characters: Fossarius now René.]

RENÉ

What they call it? Kevorkianize? I would have held him in my hands if I could. I would have pleaded to. Assisted suicide. Is there anything permanent? [*Beat. Meaning Fossarius:*] What did he tell you? That he was responsible? That he passed painlessly? Something made up?

CONFESSOR

[*The iris dilates.*]

RENÉ

Liar. He would say anything. I came in there was foam at his mouth, so... So. [*beat.*]

I didn't just find him. All bloodied. Sometime—sometimes I just go. Get in the car and go. Go: nowhere. Just to feel like I'm moving. Getting out of here. Feeling movement. Or the world running—screaming—by. Time I came back, it was late. I was tired. Dulled by the motion and I couldn't stop. I couldn't stop.

[*beat.*]

Happy? I confess. I confess but I look in the mirror, I still recognize myself. Like the crows. Like dolphins. Do you? Do you see you?

[*Fossarius on stage now, opposite. He and René face each other, with the confessor in between them. Fossarius faces the confessor. René faces Fossarius.*]

TOGETHER

Will you forgive me?

[*René withdraws.*]

FOSSARIUS

Alfredo. Named a pasta sauce. Garlic and Parmesan. Her favorite. That's how we named him. Stupid huh? Maybe it was the smell.

[*beat.*]

I wish you would say something.

[*beat.*]

Alfredo. He was a good listener too. Always...respectful. Will it get easier?

CONFESSOR

[Maybe a nod? Maybe a shake?]

FOSSARIUS

You'll be here though? You'll still listen?

[He goes to groom the confessor.]

CONFESSOR

[An affectionate gesture.]

FOSSARIUS

You'll listen.

[Lights fade, except for the confessor. End of play.]