

## The Middle

[Sound of waves. Michael and Tony take off shoes and set up the space. Michael covers Tony in bubble wrap. When Shipping Forecast plays Tony begins soliloquy under bubble wrap. It is important to note that in real life Tony is Michael's father.]

**Tony:** To be, or not to be – that is the question;  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep –  
No more – and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep –  
To sleep – perchance to dream. Ay there's the rub.  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil  
Must give us pause.

[Pause. Michael unveils Tony.]

There's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life.  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action.

[Elgar plays. Tony stands.]

**Tony:** This story  
Takes place in the interval  
In a theatre  
There is one man in the foyer  
This man  
In a theatre  
And he is standing

[Michael stands. Tony sits.]

**Tony:** This man is sitting down  
He is telling a story  
This story  
In a theatre  
This theatre  
In the interval  
This interval

He is drinking

[Michael brings drink.]

He is possibly drunk

[Michael brings drink.]

He watches

He waits

He drinks

[Michael brings drink.]

He walks up and down

He is drinking

[Michael brings drink.]

He is possibly drunk

[Michael brings drink.]

He watches

He waits

He drinks

[Michael brings drink.]

He is repeating himself

He is waiting

In a theatre

In a foyer

In an interval

He is waiting for something to happen

Something to end or to begin

Something to be or not to be

Something in between

[Tony waits for Elgar to finish. Tony drinks.]

This man is someone you might have heard of

He has seen it all

He has lived through it all

He has stood on many stages

He has faced many audiences

This man is an amateur who is trying to be professional

An actor trying to be Hamlet

He could be a father

He could be a grandfather  
He could be your grandfather  
He could be you.  
He could be me.

This man is in the middle of a stage  
This man in the middle  
I am this man  
This middle man  
Between a writer and an audience  
This page and this stage  
But I am not the writer  
I am the writer's father  
The writer is the actor's son  
He is writing this now  
Sitting on the stairs  
In the middle of the night  
Listening to the Shipping Forecast  
Wondering why he can't work at normal hours  
Why he has never had a proper job  
I've always wondered that too  
(That isn't in the script)  
He is sitting on the stairs  
In the middle of the night  
Wondering why he can't sleep  
I used to sing him to sleep  
A song about a rabbit

*Cotton tail, Cotton tail  
Sitting in the sun  
Cotton tail, Cotton tail  
You're the lucky one*

*Dig no well, plant no beans  
Make no pumpkin grow  
Say your prayers  
Thank the Lord  
That he made you so*

*Shine no shoe, bake no bread  
Don't go split no rail  
Sometimes wish I could be  
Like old cotton tail*

And now I sing it to my grandchildren

*Cotton tail, Cotton tail  
Snoozing in the shade  
Cotton tail, Cotton tail  
That's the way you're made*

*Two leg folk, work and slave  
Guess that's why they're born  
Work and slave till the day  
Gabriel blows his horn*

*In the land far away  
Down the starry trail  
All the Lord;s children play  
Like old cotton tail  
Lazy Cotton Tail  
Oooh oooh oooh oooh  
Lazy Cotton Tail (and repeat)*

And by the end of the song my son, or grandchildren, would be nearly asleep.

My son asked me here to help him out  
Because I have been here before  
And I know how this works  
I have read Hamlet before  
Not just for this show  
But when I was a young man at school  
Younger than he is now  
Sitting at a desk like this one

He is here now  
Watching me read this out  
Hoping I can read his handwriting  
Hoping I can read it out the way he wrote it  
Hoping that you will enjoy what you hear  
He is hoping  
And so am I  
That you like classical music

[Bach's *Air on a G String* plays.]

This is the interval  
This is when you usually drink

[Tony drinks.]

This is when you possibly get drunk

[Tony drinks.]

This is when things start to unravel  
When things become unclear  
When you turn to someone next to you and say  
'Is this part of the show?'  
And they say

Michael: I don't know

Tony: This is when you light a cigar

[Michael brings cigar.]

This is when I usually light a cigar  
But because of health and safety  
I am not permitted to smoke today / tonight

[Michael removes cigar.]

I don't smoke anyway  
I don't know how to smoke a cigar  
So you will have to imagine that I am smoking  
I am smoking a Hamlet cigar  
I am Hamlet  
It is 2013 [whichever year in which this is performed]  
I am onstage  
In the middle of a stage  
Waiting to perform in front of **you**  
I am in the middle  
Between having learned what to do and having to do it  
Between practising and performing  
Not knowing how you might receive it  
Between remembering and forgetting  
I am in the middle of talking to you  
In a theatre  
In a foyer  
In an interval  
In the middle of a show  
You are the audience  
Like a tide  
You come and go  
You ebb and flow  
Walk in and walk out  
Stand up and sit down

[Tony drinks. Michael blindfolds Tony who stands on chair.]

I am in the middle of walking the plank  
Over a beach in Malta  
On a student holiday in 1967  
I am in the middle  
Between studying and working  
Between learning what to do and having to do it  
I am in the middle of talking to my friend  
Who is taking a picture of me  
Walking the plank

Between sky and sand  
And I am laughing while I am talking  
I am in the middle of jumping and falling  
Between the memory and the photograph

[Tony sits down. Michael removes blindfold.]

I am in the middle of an exam room in 1960  
I am sitting at a desk in the middle of a test  
I am in the middle between learning what to do and having to do it  
Between a practice test and an important exam

[Michael writes on the desk with chalk: 'To be or not to be'.]

Our English teacher has written on the blackboard in chalk  
Extracts of Shakespearean text  
It is A Midsummer Night's Dream or Hamlet or The Winter's Tale  
We are to write who is saying what and why they are saying it  
The teacher is in the middle of handing out the questions

[Michael hands out paper.]

I turn the page over  
I am in the middle of working out the answers  
Between success and failure  
Between being treated like a boy and being treated like an adult  
I memorise as many of Hamlet's soliloquies as I can  
As a bank of quotations to use in an exam  
And here I am recalling them on this stage  
Fifty years later.

[Michael removes paper.]

I am in limbo  
A middle aged man  
In the middle of a stage  
Emerging from a chrysalis  
Hamlet in bubblewrap  
A neo-geriatric in aspic  
In the middle of being a father and being a son  
Michael's dad and Harry's lad  
Between spending time caring for elderly parents  
And spending time with our grandchildren  
Between helping with childcare  
And organizing residential care  
Between dealing with the sadness of a parent's departure  
And sharing the joy of a new arrival  
Between trying to keep memories alive  
And creating new memories  
I am in the middle

A middle generation  
Squeezed between beginnings and endings.  
Just like today / tonight.

[Bach stops playing. Tony drinks.]

This is the interval  
People are drinking

[Michael brings drink.]

People are taking their coats off  
Putting their handbags down  
Talking. Coughing. Sneezing. Laughing.  
Putting sugar in their coffee  
Salt and pepper on their food  
People cry  
People don't want to cry  
But people do  
People leave during the interval  
Because people cry  
Because people do  
People go to the toilet  
Because people have to do  
What people have to do  
People are still drinking

[Michael drinks.]

People are still laughing  
Still talking  
Still eating  
Talking while they are eating  
Talking while they are laughing  
There is music playing

[Dvorak plays. Tony waits until end of fanfare.]

It is too loud  
Or maybe I am just sitting under the speaker  
The writer turns to the middle of his notebook  
And starts to write about what people do during the interval  
He is writing this during the interval now.  
In a foyer.  
In a theatre.

A woman finishes her coffee  
Another woman has just started hers.  
In this foyer  
Someone is always standing up

When someone else is sitting down  
And the music accompanies it  
As if the interval is as choreographed  
As the performance that bookends it  
But the actors are not here  
They are somewhere else  
The Front of House staff check their watches  
The programme sellers give it one last push  
The ice cream sellers have shut up shop  
The tannoy comes on and a voice says:

‘Please return to your seats  
The second act is about to begin’

And you do because it is  
People put on their coats  
Pick up their handbags  
Scrape their chairs across the floor  
Finish their drinks

[Tony drinks.]

People make phone calls

[Michael brings phone.]

To say ‘Where are you?  
I’m waiting. What shall I do?  
Shall I go back in without you?’

[Michael takes phone.]

People look out of the window  
Wondering where their friend is  
Wondering what to do  
Because people wonder  
Because people do  
And now only my son is left  
His handwriting becoming more and more like mine  
The music is playing to itself  
The empty bottles on the empty tables  
With the empty cups and the empty glasses  
Wait to be collected  
By the waiters who are looking forward to the end of the show  
So they can all go home

[Michael removes drinks.]

And everything here will be returned to normal  
None of this will be here when you leave



Just as it was when you arrived  
I am just here  
Where one thing ends  
And another thing begins  
In the middle.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen  
Will you please take your seats  
As this evening’s performance is about to resume  
Thank you’

[Michael covers Tony up with bubble wrap. Tony delivers soliloquy whilst covered in bubble wrap.]

Remember thee? Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat  
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?  
Yea, from the table of my memory  
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
That youth and observation copied there,  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmixed with baser matter. Now to my word:  
It is ‘Adieu, adieu, remember me.’

[Dvorak stops. When Shipping Forecast starts Michael uncovers Tony from bubble wrap and they reset the space and put shoes back on. The sound of waves plays.]

**THE END**