THE TWENTY-SEVENTH MAN

BY NATHAN ENGLANDER

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DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

For Nora Ephron, in memory

THE TWENTY-SEVENTH MAN was presented by the Public Theater (Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director; Patrick Willingham, Executive Director) in New York City, opening on November 18, 2012. It was directed by Barry Edelstein; the set design was by Michael McGarty; the costume design was by Katherine Roth; the lighting design was by Russell H. Champa; the sound design was by Darron L West; the fight direction was by Thomas Schall; and the production stage manager was Monica A. Cuoco. The cast was as follows:

YEVGENY ZUNSER ..... Ron Rifkin
MOISHE BRETZKY ..... Daniel Oreskes
VASILY KORINSKY ..... Chip Zien
PINCHAS PELOVITS ..... Noah Robbins
AGENT IN CHARGE ..... Byron Jennings
GUARD ..... Happy Anderson

CHARACTERS

YEVGENY ZUNSER

MOISHE BRETZKY

VASILY KORINSKY

PINCHAS PELOVITS

AGENT IN CHARGE

GUARDS

PLACE

A prison cell in Russia.

TIME

1952.

THE TWENTY-SEVENTH MAN

Scene 1

A rural prison cell, windowless and made of plank. There is a door in one wall. There are two narrow benches, and a crate that can serve as a stool. A bucket sits in a corner. A bare light bulb hangs from a wire in the ceiling. It is, for the prisoners, the sun.

The curtain opens on "night" in the cell. We see the prisoners. The light bulb is off.

Yevgeny Zunser (very old) sits on a bench, covered by a tattered blanket. He's dressed up in an old-man way — not formal, but proper. His suit is worn.

Moishe Bretzky is huge, slovenly, and sports a big, tangled beard. He is on the floor, sprawled, unconscious.

Vasily Korinsky sits on the other bench. Trim and well-cared for, he is elegant in a muted professorial manner.

The light bulb goes on.

Dropped onto his bench in darkness, it's the first time Korinsky is seeing the cell and the other two men in it. He looks to Zunser for support.

Zunser is awake and deep in thought. After a glance at Korinsky, he stares at the bulb, uninterested in engaging.

KORINSKY. Are you really going to sit there and do nothing? *(Zunser looks over and again returns to his thoughts. Korinsky heads for the door and raises a fist to bang.)*
ZUNSER. I wouldn't. *(Korinsky checks his fist.)* They will beat you mercilessly, these bonebreakers.
KORINSKY. *(Gesturing toward Bretzky.)* You have seen?
ZUNSER. Heard. In the dark. Another cell.
KORINSKY. How long —
ZUNSER. Not much more than you. A few hours. A day. Hard to tell. *(Beat.)* Time, in a place like this.
KORINSKY. And him?
ZUNSER. Soon after me. An hour or two at most.
KORINSKY. Well, they should move him. Even with the cold, he's going to start to smell soon. They should come in and take him away.
ZUNSER. Take who?
KORINSKY. Who, old man? Look. Right there. You just addressed — Oh, God! Locked up with a senile and a corpse. It's too much to bear!
ZUNSER. You can see. His chest moves up and down. He's just passed out … and plenty pickled. If he dies, I wouldn't worry. He'll keep for a lot longer than you.
KORINSKY. Me? I'm not dying anytime soon. I'll be out before you know it. My Paulina, my wife, she is working. Letting those in the know, know right now.
ZUNSER. A shame. Then you'll miss meeting Bretzky when he wakes. He's shellacked himself but good this time. Varnished to a nice shine.
KORINSKY. Who?
ZUNSER. Moishe Bretzky, the poet.
KORINSKY. I know, I know. But — *Der Glutton*. Is that him?
ZUNSER. Of course.
KORINSKY. Why would he? Are you sure — Moishe Bretzky? *(Studying.)* Then he's gotten even fatter and drunker than before. It looks like — twice the size. Like one Bretzky swallowed another. *(Beat.)* And this one, passed out. How to know — Bretzky?
ZUNSER. You spoke first. How to know to address me in Yiddish?
KORINSKY. You? Oh, my. Really? A face couldn't be any more kosher if it was made of gefilte fish and had a herring poking out of each eye. I've never seen such a Jew in my life.

ZUNSER. And what of your face?
KORINSKY. You know my face. If you know him, you know me. The most recognizable writer in this nation.
ZUNSER. So that's a writer's face?
KORINSKY. You're being difficult because I've insulted. What it is, is a Korinsky face. I'm Vasily Korinsky. Don't tell me that you you haven't heard the name. *(Trying to wake Bretzky.)* Up, you oaf. Explain! Your fault, I can only imagine. *(To Zunser.)* Well, if you ever get out, old man, you can tell them, "Locked up with Korinsky! Spent a day in jail with him before the authorities discovered it." They'll have a laugh every time you tell it. I'll be laughing too, I bet, when I'm on my way.
ZUNSER. I wouldn't rush it. *(Beat.)* Sent home in a box, if we're lucky. Or trotted out in the belly of a dog if they leave us hanging too long.
KORINSKY. Us? Are we a trio now?
ZUNSER. I wasn't talking about us alone. There are others. We are twenty-six. Twenty-seven altogether. One still on the way.
KORINSKY. Nonsense! *(Korinsky is still rousing Bretzky, who finally wakes.)*
BRETZKY. Off me, Korinsky. Give a man a minute.
KORINSKY. You see? With his eyes closed, he knows who I am. From the sound of my voice alone.
BRETZKY. That, and you said your name.
ZUNSER. Good to have you with us, my friend.
BRETZKY. An honor. Always.
KORINSKY. *His* voice you recognize as well?
BRETZKY. You can't, not really, not know. *(Korinsky studies Zunser, suspicious.)* The man you are addressing is Yevgeny Zunser.
KORINSKY. My lord. Zunser here? Well, it is, yes, an honor, I'll admit. You are, sir, still a legend. Remembered as one of the giants. I just … I'm surprised you're still alive. Your style from such a different era, and your last book so long ago, I forget —
BRETZKY. Behave, Korinsky. I swear, if I have to, I'll close that mouth myself.
ZUNSER. It's all right. Let him talk, let him be the big *macher*. I'll just be Melman. That's what I do at home. The pen name sits out on the steps like a pair of muddy boots. Inside, Melman has always been enough for me.
KORINSKY. As you wish.

BRETZKY. Still as private as always. No one's done better at keeping lives separate.
ZUNSER. Until now. When they hang Zunser, they'll have to hang Melman too. There's only the one neck between us.
KORINSKY. Who has said a word about hanging? *(Beat.)* No. They will have to — my Paulina! — they will discover their error soon … *An innocent man!*
ZUNSER. My blessing for you. May the door swing open for Korinsky alone.
KORINSKY. Do not — Don't dare! No one wants your benevolent tone. *(Sounds are heard from outside the door. Korinsky prepares to leave.)* A pleasure, gentlemen. Truly, all mine.
BRETZKY. A backup plan, Korinsky. What if it's only the dessert cart being rolled our way? Hurry, decide what you want. They may not stay long with so many to serve.
KORINSKY. You know what? I wish you luck, both of you. I wish you fair judgment, and — for you too, Bretzky — a speedy release. The teasing. It has always been your way. *(The sound of keys.)* I wish you well. *(Korinsky steps towards the opening door and is driven back by a pair of* bare feet. *A man, rolled up in a carpet, is carried into the cell by the guards. The prisoner is trying to communicate from within.)*
GUARD. This one comes wrapped. *(The guards exit.)*
ZUNSER. *(To Bretzky.)* Help me unroll! *(Korinsky is absorbed in his disappointment. Bretzky and Zunser rush to free the man, unrolling the carpet. The man — half suffocated — is Pinchas Pelovits.)* Are you all right?
PINCHAS. A piece of paper! A pen!
ZUNSER. What?
PINCHAS. A pen. Do you have anything to write with?
ZUNSER. I think water. If you were going to ask for something, water, really, should have been first.
BRETZKY. Or shoes — over pen and paper. If I were him, shoes are what I'd be after. *(Pinchas looks at his bare feet.)*
PINCHAS. I'm fine. I'd much rather have a book than shoes. *(The comment captures their attention.)*
ZUNSER. Yes, it would be much better to have a book.
BRETZKY. That would depend on whose book, wouldn't it? *(To Pinchas.)* You fly in on this thing, kid?
KORINSKY. Ignore him, boy! Now pay attention. *(Beat.)* Tell us who you are.

ZUNSER. He is the twenty-seventh. As I said, one more on the way. *(To Pinchas.)* Come. Sit. We've been waiting.
PINCHAS. For me? *(After a beat, Pinchas sits.)*
KORINSKY. *(To Zunser.)* Hold on, hold on. It's one thing to recognize Bretzky, but this? How is it, Melman, that you know so many things?
BRETZKY. Were you first in this cell, Korinsky? *(Beat.)* Maybe every story doesn't start when you enter the room.
PINCHAS. *(Wide-eyed.)* Did you say, "Bretzky"? And … "Korinsky"?
KORINSKY. We already know who *we* are, boy! It's who *you* are that we're after. It's who the other two dozen are that I want to know.
PINCHAS. There are another two dozen?
ZUNSER. Nearly. We are twenty-seven all together. That was the order from Stalin himself, signed by his hand. Twenty-seven dropped into this cell at the very same time. Read it with my own eyes — spread out before me on the kitchen table before they took me away. *(Pinchas is stunned at the mention of Stalin.)*
KORINSKY. If the great leader wanted twenty-seven in this cell — they'd be here.
ZUNSER. Moved. The whole gaggle of them. This cell for late-comers alone.
KORINSKY. Is that it? Am I late? I'd have rushed to get here earlier if I'd known.
PINCHAS. Can it really be…? An order from Stalin, *the* Stalin?
ZUNSER. Is there more than one?
BRETZKY. I've heard five or six, all across Russia, each sporting that same push-broom mustache.
PINCHAS. *(Studying the others.)* And these … these are writers, these men — famous writers? And you?
ZUNSER. Yes. A writer too. *(Beat.)* Does it make better sense if all the others are, and not just the three in this cell?
BRETZKY. *(Shocked himself.)* Everyone?
ZUNSER. Yes! And Yiddishists, to boot. *(Beat.)* The last of the literary greats delivered up together, all enemies of the state and all of one tribe.
BRETZKY. My god!
PINCHAS. *(To Korinsky, after a beat.)* Are you really him — the actual? The Korinsky who wrote "Stalin of Silver, Stalin of Gold"? *(To the others.)* It is said to be *his* favorite.
KORINSKY. I am. And it is.

THE TWENTY-SEVENTH MAN
by Nathan Englander

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The setting is a Soviet prison, 1952. Joseph Stalin's secret police have rounded up twenty-six writers, the giants of Yiddish literature in Russia. As judgment looms, a twenty-seventh suddenly appears: Pinchas Pelovits, unpublished and unknown. Baffled by his arrest, he and his cellmates wrestle with the mysteries of party loyalty and politics, culture and identity, and with what it means to write in troubled times. When they discover why the twenty-seventh man is among them, the writers come to realize that even in the face of tyranny, stories still have the power to transcend. In his last act of storytelling, Pelovits asks us: Who writes the eulogy when all the writers are gone?

"Nathan Englander … asks some potent questions about the nature of the writer's art … dark reflections on the brutalities of the Stalin regime, the death of Yiddish culture and the nobility that inheres in the act of creation, even in the face of apocalyptic destruction." **—The New York Times**

"An understated, quietly powerful meditation on identity and culture … THE TWENTY-SEVENTH MAN is a meditative look at an attempt to eradicate a civilization by getting rid of its writers." **—The New York Post**

"A truly powerful examination of the slow suffocation of words, culture, and, ultimately, truth that occurs under despotic rule." **—Entertainment Weekly**

"Nathan Englander's exquisite THE TWENTY-SEVENTH MAN is in some sense a kaddish for a Yiddish world that was systematically erased, first by Hitler's ovens ('My readers are smoke,' Zunser notes) and then by Stalin's purges (including the massacre known as the Night of the Murdered Poets). But Englander's play doesn't just mourn that sensibility; it reproduces it with profoundly beautiful layers of irony, resignation, righteous anger, gallows humor and philosophical disputation … as chilling and haunted as a ghost story. The final scene brought tears to my face, not just in the theater but in writing this sentence: for what was lost, and even more, for all that was never to be." **—Time Out (New York)**

"Englander has written a play — his first — that has the steady, considered narrative propulsion of his stories, and their delicacy, too … exceptional thought, and original dramatic gifts … one hopes that he writes, in addition to his moving prose tales, play after play after play, because what he does is rare: he marries thought to action." **—The New Yorker**

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