

THE RIGHT TO BE FORGOTTEN

Libretto *A folk opera in one act. Words & music by Gabriel Kahane.*



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DAVID DANZMAYR, MUSIC DIRECTOR

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A folk opera in one act
words & music by Gabriel Kahane

NATHANIEL

Nathaniel Levitan

Was tryin' a take a look at his life:
He had a beautiful daughter, a beautiful —
Why would you start a song that way?
What is it exactly you're trying to —
Say, I think we oughta try something different...

First person, singular.

I took a year away from the feed,
To try to untangle, our collective —
No, that's not it.
Ma na na na na na, an obsession with speed —
Nope.
Misdirection and greed,

Eh, garbage!
Way too on the nose—
The nose, the nose, the nose
The nose, the nose!

Second person, singular.

You'd begun to believe
All the things on the screen
That you said about yourself,
La da da da da da da—

Nope.

Think, Nathaniel.

What about—
Trenchant, essayistic,
Beginning with an epigraph:

"The machine is ambivalent.
It is both an instrument of liberation
and one of repression."

Lewis Mumford,
Technics & Civilization,
1934.

Please turn pages quietly.

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(spoken)

Oh, Jesus. What is this, sociology 101?
I should just—call my manager.
Say I can't write the piece.
Tell 'em I have—a condition—that prevents me
from—

Unless.

(sung)

I can't believe
I'm stooping
To this level...
Desperate times...

SCENE 2

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Welcome.
Welcome to art—
Welcome to artproject.ai
Please speak, type, or otherwise
manifest your responses.

NATHANIEL

Um. Okay.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Name:

NATHANIEL

Nathaniel Levitan.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Age:

NATHANIEL

41.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Marital Status:

NATHANIEL

Married.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Number of Dependents:

NATHANIEL

I'm sorry, what does that have to do with—

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Hush, child!
Art Project dot AI modules
One, two, and three—

SERGEI

Sergei!

LARRY

Larry!

MARK

Mark!—

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Wish to assist you with your intractable
creative crisis,
But in order to do so, it is essential that you answer,
Without hesitation, without toil, without duplicity,
Our questions.

NATHANIEL

Sure, whatever.
Two daughters.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Good. Next question.
Occupation:

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NATHANIEL

Singer and songwriter, sometime composer.
And I guess have a blog?

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Huh.

LARRY

Ah yes, one of those multi-hyphenate artists.

SERGEI

Folks, we've got a genre bender...

MARK

Bend her?—I hardly know her!

SERGEI and LARRY

Mark, behave!

MARK

Sorry!

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Please describe the medium of your project.

NATHANIEL

Orchestral song cycle.

LARRY

Great. Give us the gist! An elevator pitch!

NATHANIEL

Well, I guess it's supposed to be about
how I left the feed,
And why.

MARK

Girl, you did what?

SERGEI

Excuse me?

LARRY

For realsies?

NATHANIEL

Yes, I left the feed—for a year.

SERGEI

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!

LARRY

How even is that possible?

MARK

Shut the front door!

LARRY

Why on earth would you do that?

SERGEI

The feed is glorious.

LARRY

The feed is delicious.

MARK

The feed is... delectable.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Please, tell us.

NATHANIEL

Okay.

SCENE 3

I'd become a reflection in a chemical bath,
A collection of fictions and opinions and
photographs
That glowed in every airless room.

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You convinced me that I was what I saw on the
screen—
The world got smaller; my heart turned green,
I never thought to look for the moon.

Look out, look up
Or you're never gonna be alright,
Can't fill your cup
With all this artificial light.

They promised connection in the public square,
Instead it's deception and rancor and anger
everywhere,
The circular firing squad runs on its own.

Oh the wonder of progress, the wonder of ease,
Your package appears, you don't even say "please,"
Buying convenience with a subprime loan.

Look out, look up
Or you're never gonna be alright,
Can't fill your cup
With all this artificial light.

I read the report; it said we're all gonna die
If we can't learn to stop burning the sky,
Missing the forest for the digital freeze...

Look out, look up
Or you're never gonna be alright,
Can't fill your cup
With all this artificial light.

MARK

Goodness! When you put it that way...

NATHANIEL

As I was saying, the piece is meant to be an
exploration of my year away from the feed,
What I learned about myself and about the world,
and, at the same time, it should serve
as an indictment of technological fatalism.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

We beg your pardon?

NATHANIEL

Inevitability—
The notion that we have no choice
But to embrace new technologies
Without asking ourselves if they are—

LARRY

Beneficial?

SERGEI

Salutary?

MARK

Net positive?

NATHANIEL

Exactly.

LARRY

That sounds a little...

SERGEI

Heady?

LARRY

Cerebral?

MARK

Boring!

SERGEI and LARRY

Mark! Be nice!

MARK

Whatever!

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NATHANIEL

Look, are you going to help me or not?
I just need to get this done.

MARK

When's your deadline?

NATHANIEL

Three months ago!

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Shit! We'd better get cracking!
Please describe the nature of your creative crisis:

NATHANIEL

Well, the thing is, after my year away from the
scroll...
I've had a total relapse.
I am... completely and utterly addicted to the feed
To such an extent that I can't function,
Let alone write a song cycle about
Why I left the feed in the first place!

LARRY

Now that's interesting.

SERGEI

Fascinating.

MARK

Scintillating.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

We may now begin phase two of our intake.

This addiction. How does it manifest?
Can you describe what it feels like
When you're on a bender?

NATHANIEL

Sure. It begins in innocence.

SCENE 4

I take the sea-green slab
Of brushed titanium
from the pocket of my jeans—

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

The Kumquat iPhone?

NATHANIEL

Uh huh. Just to check my messages.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Babelmail?

NATHANIEL

Yes.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Is that all?

NATHANIEL

Yes.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Really and truly?

NATHANIEL

No.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

What else?

NATHANIEL

MandarinGaze—

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

And?

NATHANIEL

KontentKweens—

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SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

And?

NATHANIEL

BonBonBash—

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

And?

NATHANIEL

Dread dot Com—

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

And?

NATHANIEL

And... The Feed.

LARRY

The what?

NATHANIEL

The Feed.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Oh, The Feed!

MARK

When this begins, Nathaniel, what is it, do you
suppose, that you're looking for?

NATHANIEL

A trawl through the inbox
Is some kind of slot machine—
An invitation for a show
In Amsterdam or Tokyo.

But mostly it's just canned appeals
From political candidates,
Or ads for new jeans,

Class Action Lawsuits

Pertaining to insurance policies

You had as a fresh-faced kid

In New York. And it makes you feel old,

Washed up and tired,

But also ashamed

For caring so much

About your career,

When people would kill

To have what you've got,

And ain't that the rub?—

That you can't be content

In a world such as ours

That revolves around desire,

And making you crave

The thing that you lack—

And so even though I know better

I head back to The Feed.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

Oooooooooooh!

SERGEI

Can we do this one?

MARK

We know what The Feed is like!

NATHANIEL

Sure. Be my guest.

SCENE 5

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

I don't know who needs to hear this—

Highlight reel of the real estate guy

Saying the word 'China' at one-quarter speed

Over Barber's Adagio for Strings,

String cheese, Cheese Whiz,

Which Wizard of Oz character are

You will not believe what happens when

Breakdancing dog goes viral,

Virus breaks out in warehouse,

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Workers rely on SNAP Benefits!

I don't know who needs to hear this—
I don't know who needs to hear this—

Silicon Valley billionaires prepping
For apocalypse in New Zealand,
Land grab, wetland, landfall,
Don't go chasing waterfalls,
Man falls from cliff while playing Pokemon Go!

Tide Pods, Angry Birds, Milkshake Duck,
Harlem Shake,
How it started / how it's going, meme template,
deep fake,
I don't know who needs to hear this—

Fake news, fake tan, South Jersey party goers,
Venture bros, tree huggers, dog whistlers,
whistle blowers,
I don't know who needs to hear this—
I don't know who needs to hear this—
Martha Stewart mourns death of her peacocks

With an interesting song choice,
Choice cuts, cut flowers,
These are the best indoor plants
That can handle neglect,

Negligence, corruption,
Governor Kardashian
Is a criminal, con man,
Smooth operator,

Why is NASA's hold music so catchy?
Why is NASA's hold music so catchy?

Clutch, stick shift,
I love the smell
Of hydraulic fluid
In the morning,
I don't know who needs to hear this—

Eating a croissant, Mars and cars, chips and dip,
I don't know who needs to hear this—
I don't know who needs to hear this—

Eat the rich! Occupy! Tea Party! Koch brothers!
Woke snowflakes! Sad incels! B school dropouts!
Diehard birthers!
Soccer mom! Mommy blog! Minivan!
Potluck breakfast!

Twelve breakfast burritos to soak up
your boozy brunch,
Fifteen US Senators who look like breakfast burritos,
Fifteen US burritos that need to be canceled.

Eight hundred flights canceled
due to extreme weather,
Carry on, open carry, Cary Grant, active shooter,
Thoughts and prayers, background checks,
Trenchant speeches, mental illness,
I don't know who needs to hear this—

Law and order, peaceful protest,
forty years of stagnant wages,
I don't know who needs to hear this—

Methadone, epidemic, overdose, economic,

I don't know who needs to hear this—
I don't know who needs to hear this—
I don't know—
I don't know—
I don't know who needs to hear this—

MARK

Young composer wins Walter Lippmann Prize!

SERGEI

Luca Bengston opera to premiere at Met!

LARRY

Cassie Cohen is America's troubadour!

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SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK,

And what have YOU accomplished, Nathaniel?

NATHANIEL

I don't know. This feels so—solipsistic—
And yet I can't get out of this loop.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK,

Which loop?

NATHANIEL

Even now, I should be writing this piece,
And instead, I'm scrolling The Feed,
Which makes me feel bad about myself—
Not to mention the world,
A nation cleaved in two,
Millions of fists clenched tight in contempt,
And yet I can't stop.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK,

Can't stop what?

NATHANIEL

Creating content for The Feed.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK,

Why?

NATHANIEL

Because I crave attention,
Even as I see that The Feed
Is making solidarity
More difficult to achieve.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK,

Blah, blah, blah, democratic socialism!

LARRY

And what exactly is this content?

SERGEI

Yeah, is it, like, cat memes?

NATHANIEL

No.

MARK

So what is it?

NATHANIEL

Well, I find weird texts on the internet.
And I set them to music.

LARRY

For example?

NATHANIEL

Okay. Here's one. A classified ad. From Craigslist.

SCENE 6

NATHANIEL

I am going through a difficult breakup,
And impulsively adopted sixteen different kinds
Of reptiles over Craigslist.

I have made a huge mistake.
My roommates are furious.
I have made a huge mistake.
My roommates are furious.

I have one ball python,
Seven various geckos,
A bearded dragon,
And two red slider turtles,
They are all named Amanda,
They are all named Amanda,
No rehoming fee.

SERGEI

Wow.

LARRY

Um.

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MARK

Yeah. I don't mean to be judge-y,
But that is an extremely poor use of your time.

NATHANIEL

I know! But I keep looking for this stuff and posting
Because, I guess, I'm looking for positive
reinforcement.

LARRY

Yeah, we get it.

MARK

This isn't our first rodeo, baby!

SERGEI

No wonder he had to unplug.

LARRY

Now, Nathaniel, before your—
Shall we say, "relapse,"
Did you miss The Feed
During your sabbatical?

NATHANIEL

No, I didn't miss it.
It's much easier, it turns out,
To quit something cold turkey
Than to find moderation.
When I unplugged,
I lived very much in the world.

SCENE 7

NATHANIEL

I took my daughter uptown on the train
to see the matriarch,
The car was packed cheek to chin.
She greeted us in a gown;
she was frail, half translucent,
Light leaking right through her skin.

She's losing language, it slips through
the cushions of the ottoman,
My daughter laps up each phrase.
Outside the window the city is
humming, bright, oblivious,
The bankers barking their trades.

Oh, but the arrogance of man,
Making God laugh by making a plan.

I packed a case full of maps of a
dozen cities where I'd sing,
And crossed the ocean awake.
In the hotels, in all the dressing rooms,
I watched the news reports of a newborn plague.

Oh, but the arrogance of man,
Making God laugh by making a plan.

...

We were out West for a weekend when our
friends began to call,
Voices all angles and edges, *don't come back if
you can help it at all.*

Days became weeks became months til we
realized the jig was up,
Hired a crew in New York to pack everything,
put it onto a truck.

Every night, seven o'clock, and the clatter of pans
and pots;
A song for the workers who kept the shelves stocked,
And who dressed all our wounds and who drove all
the buses,
While we sat in the comfort of our new home offices,
And read all the papers that gave an account of
those who'd died that day.

Our daughter learned all of the names of the flowers
in the April frost.
I learned to not think of all that we'd left or the
country we'd crossed.

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...

Beyond the padlock the ghost light is
humming its cage,
Doorman's at home drinking root beer alone,
Wondering how he's gonna make his wage.

Without distraction or lights,
I'm left without a mirror to tell me who I am.
Dive deeper into the quiet and hold my breath
Just as long, just as long as I can.

And then a callus bloom,
A bright red wound,
Fingers wondering why do I write,
When the clubs are closed
And a murder of crows
Are the only ones dancing tonight?

I've known myself to be petty,
Prone to have these jealous streaks.
But without pictures of my famous friends
I find myself at peace.

Without distraction or lights,
I'm left without a mirror to tell me who I am.
Dive deeper into the quiet and hold my breath
Just as long, just as long as I can.

And then a callus bloom,
A bright red wound,
Fingers wondering why do I write,
When the clubs are closed
And a murder of crows
Are the only ones dancing tonight?

...

Summer brings flooding and tear gas and in DC, a
stillborn trial.
I used to march with my cardboard signs, now I sit
and read to my child.
Packed up the car and drove out to the coast while
the forests burned;

Walked on the beach til relief came with rain and we
all returned.

...

And now the matriarch lies in the dark and airless
sitting room,
Her husband right by her feet.
When will she go?
When will she come to us?
How soon will she become one
With the August heat?

SERGEI

Were there any exceptions?

LARRY

Moments when you broke your self-imposed rules—

SERGEI

And went online?

NATHANIEL

Yes. To mourn my grandmother.

SCENE 8

My mother, describing her mother,
Fought back tears, it's weird, I thought,
The intimacy of seeing someone try
Not to cry in close-up on a screen.

Cousin Lincoln told a story about the Pietà
He saw at the Metropolitan Museum;
And after a silence of some time,
Grandma turned to him and said:
"You know, I think of myself as a Jew,
but I really love Jesus."

And we sit cross-legged on the edge of the bed,
Leaning into the laptop to hear what's just been said,
In the manner of a modern family honoring the dead.
Aunt Susan, in her one-room schoolhouse

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Sang Grandma's favorite songs: simple hymns
Of love and loss. And though her connection
Was unstable, she was able to get
Her message, more or less, across.

And we sit cross-legged on the edge of the bed,
Leaning into the laptop to hear what's just been said,
In the manner of a modern family honoring the
dead.

At the end of the afternoon,
Grandma's grief-shattered husband,
Whom she'd met in the fall of nineteen-thirty-nine,
Milkshake at the Automat in Morningside Heights,
Before he was shipped off to Europe to fight—
Fifty years, not a word, not a sight
Til the touchtone phone rang in 1995:

"Raymond, it's Judith; my husband has died."
Back to New York, and they gave it a try
And the photographs of great-grandchildren
multiplied,
These two ancient lovers walking side by side:

His body ravaged, and hers turned to light—
He raised his hand to speak at last,
And everyone held their breath or gasped,
As he said, "Goodbye, my darling, goodbye."

(spoken)

And in the silence that follows,
The glitchy chessboard of human lives
Washes out, the screens go black,
And Raymond's sun-spotted face appears
On one of those massive digital billboards
In Times Square. And he sings to me:

SCENE 9

(sung)

MARK/RAYMOND

I no longer recognize New York.
It left me behind when the Dodgers moved out West.
When Ebbets got silent, I got tight in the chest—
Baseball ain't no pastime anymore.

I no longer recognize New York.
They drained the aquarium down in Battery Park,
And all the electric eels that lit up in the dark—
They have all been turned out to the shore.

It used to be that you could get your
luncheon for a steal:
A penny for a pickle, or a nickel for a meal,
But these days everything's so dear,
It isn't any fun—
You've got to get a bank loan
for a hot dog with a bun.

I no longer recognize New York.
The bright lights of Broadway they do not
thrill me like they did
When I was the bright-eyed optimistic kind of kid—
I no longer recognize New York.

NATHANIEL

And the word came months later
That Raymond had died,
Unable to bear the loss
Of his two great loves:
His city, and my grandmother.

SERGEI, LARRY, and MARK

You have spoken a great deal, Nathaniel.
About your travels, about your family,
About the, as you have called it, "newborn plague."

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And yet you have said almost nothing
About the absence from the feed from your life.

Seeing as we are machines
Sassy though we may be,
We can only synthesize
The information we've been given.
We cannot create something
From nothing.

SERGEI

Perhaps we have asked the wrong question—

MARK

Perhaps, the correct question is this:

LARRY

How is it, having left the feed, to return?

(spoken)

NATHANIEL

I was terrified. To return. Even after the year I'd
meant to spend away, it took me eight months on
top of that to go back. And when I did log on, I found
a sea of contempt, waters poisoned by the powerful,
running their centuries-long scam of fear-mongering
and division meant to convince us that our
neighbors were our enemies and were responsible
for all of our hardships.

The Feed only made it easier for them to
achieve this.

And I did not want to go back.

But then, I began to travel again, and found the
rooms where I was supposed to sing largely empty.
There was, I had to admit, a consequence to my
absence from these digital spaces, these spaces that
I so desperately wanted to avoid, both for my own
mental health, but also so as not to implicate my
fans, my listeners, my small public, in the business
of the sale and purchase of people's attention. But I
found something else, too.

When I was in those rooms, in Columbus, Chicago,
Denver, New York, Nashville, the people who were
present—whether it was forty or two hundred—
they lifted me up. This holy exchange of making
music in a room, I realized, does not admit scale in
determining its efficacy. You can play for five people
or five hundred—it doesn't matter. And so I began
to understand that all I needed was the presence of
those few dozen human beings in a dimly lit bar in
order to refill my creative and spiritual coffers.

(sung)

SCENE 10

I want to be seen,
But I want to do right
I want to believe,
I wanna collide with other bodies,
Breathing, sweating, crying, bleeding,
Light and alive.

This song is not for sale
It is a contract
Between my breath
And your ears
And both of our hearts
And the room where we meet.