THE PECULIAR MATTER
(OF THE HAIR ACROSS CYRIL'S ASS)

A playlet
By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

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Synopsis

At the opening of a small-town art gallery, three self-important art enthusiasts spend their time finding deeper meaning in an unseen mixed-media artwork until its creator, the unassuming Seraphina, arrives and casually explains that she simply enjoys making art from reclaimed, sustainable materials. But when an outspoken “art critic” insists she's lying, claiming the piece is made from environmentally harmful materials and heavily borrowed from other artists, the room quickly turns against her. As opinions harden into facts and speculation becomes truth, Seraphina watches her reputation unravel in a sharp comedy about art, authenticity, certainty, and how easily a crowd can decide someone is guilty without the slightest concern for the truth.

Characters

ASTRID MILLER Female, 40 or under, Any Race
JASPER COLLINS Male, 40 or under, Any Race
ISADORA BENNETT Female, 40 or under, Any Race
SERAPHINA BROOKS Female, 50s to 70s, Any Race
CYRIL MERCER Male, 40 or under, Any Race

Location

Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Time

Present

Setting

A small art gallery in a quiet Midwestern town. White walls. An unseen mixed-media artwork is on display just offstage with a placard beside it. A table off to the side holds wine, wine glasses, and appetizers for the opening reception.

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Lights up on a small art gallery in a quiet Midwestern town. White walls. Soft instrumental music plays. Just offstage is an unseen mixed-media artwork. ASTRID, JASPER, and ISADORA stand facing it in reverent silence, studying it with the intensity of people determined to have the most insightful opinion in the room.

ASTRID

What're your thoughts, Jasper?

JASPER

Stunning. It almost refuses to exist. It feels suspended… not physically, though it is physically suspended, but philosophically. Hovering between revelation first and then collapse.

ASTRID

Interesting. I see collapse first. It's crushing. Tectonic. But beneath all that weight… there's an unmistakable urge toward flight. As though despair itself has become aerodynamic.

JASPER

So… hopeful?

ASTRID

Not hope. The memory of hope.

JASPER

Ah.

ISADORA

I didn't read hope at all. I read remorse.

ASTRID

No. Remorse apologizes. This refuses.

JASPER

Exactly! It doesn't seek forgiveness. It stands in judgment of it.

ISADORA

That's precisely what I was trying to articulate.

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ASTRID

Of course it was. What's remarkable is how the artist weaponizes negative space.

ISADORA

It's almost entirely negative space.

JASPER

No, that's where you're mistaken. It appears to be negative space. But metaphysically… it's positive space.

ASTRID

Thank God, someone finally said it.

ISADORA

I almost said exactly that.

JASPER

Did you?

ISADORA

Internally, yes.

ASTRID

The strongest observations should remain internal.

JASPER

Otherwise, they become criticism.

ASTRID

Or worse… accessible.

ISADORA

What’s the title?

ASTRID

I intentionally didn't look. Titles tend to contaminate interpretation.

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JASPER

I couldn't agree more. Unless the title is indispensable.

ISADORA

Of course.

JASPER

Perhaps we should look at the title.

ISADORA

I agree. We should.

ASTRID

It's called…

(Squints at the placard.)

… “Untitled”.

JASPER

Perfect. Only an artist with supreme confidence could burden a work with such specificity.

ASTRID

Calling something “Untitled” is an astonishing act of vulnerability.

JASPER

And incredible arrogance.

ISADORA

The best artists always possess both. Who's the artist?

ASTRID

My goodness, Isadora. Her name is Seraphina. She’s everywhere. Where have you been? She is an emerging artist extraordinaire. Surely to be named Best Newcomer. And one day soon a legend of her craft. Collectors are stalking her. Museums are already circling.

JASPER

They're tripping over themselves to get their hands on a piece.

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ISADORA

As they should. I mean, everyone deserves a piece.

ASTRID

Here she comes now.

(SERAPHINA enters carrying a beer. She is dressed simply and comfortably. To the other three, she is practically ancient.)

Seraphina! There you are. It's so good to see you. And I mean… look at what you've created here. You really have outdone yourself. I've been trying to explain to everyone the tension between rebellion and remorse.

SERAPHINA

The what now?

JASPER

The existential suspension.

ISADORA

And the imprisoned optimism.

SERAPHINA

I… I don't know what that means.

ASTRID

She's so humble.

JASPER

The truly brilliant always deny intentionality.

SERAPHINA

No, I mean… I literally don't know what you're talking about.

ASTRID

Magnificent. She's refusing ownership.

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SERAPHINA

I’m really not.

JASPER

She's allowing the work to exist independently of the creator.

ISADORA

How courageous.

SERAPHINA

You’re scaring me.

ASTRID

Remarkable. Can you walk us through your process, Seraphina?

SERAPHINA

Oh. Uh, sure. Well… I don't really start with an idea so much as… a pile of stuff. I've gotten into the habit of using whatever's been discarded or left behind. It seems a shame not to. Most of what I use has already had a life somewhere else. Fallen branches, old lumber, driftwood, recycled paper, hemp when I can find it, bits of natural fiber. I stay away from plastics, resins, and all those chemicals whenever I can. They always seem like more trouble than they're worth. Most of my colors come from the ground or from plants. Ochres, umbers, walnut stain, coffee, tea. I even made pigment from onion skins once. Smelled awful, but it worked. I use linseed oil and beeswax when they make sense. They're simple, they work, and that's usually enough for me. I don't really think of it as making a statement. I just don't like wasting things. And if I can make something people enjoy looking at without leaving the world a little messier than I found it… well… that just seems like the right thing to do.

(A voice from behind them.)

CYRIL

If only the materials agreed with you.

(They turn.)

ASTRID

Cyril Mercer? What're you doing here? I assumed you'd be in rehearsals for the Little Miss Friday Night Fish Fry Pageant. You're hosting, correct?

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CYRIL

Not hosting this year. I'm judging the talent competition. And I expect those young ladies will curdle like broken cheese. Anyway, I'm sorry, but I couldn't help overhearing.

(Re: the artwork.)

Unless my eyesight has completely abandoned me, that isn't entirely hemp paper, now, is it? I can see conventional wood pulp underneath. Those bindings are synthetic. There's acrylic medium throughout, unless acrylic has suddenly started growing on trees. That sheen isn't beeswax. It's epoxy resin. Commercial-grade. Petroleum-based. Lovely finish. Shame about the planet. And over there, that's PVC. Vinyl. Polyester resin holding the whole thing together. I wouldn't be surprised if there were a healthy serving of microplastics mixed in for good measure. And those aren't earth pigments. That looks suspiciously like cadmium red with just a touch of cobalt. Gorgeous colors. Environmentally catastrophic. No, this isn't sustainable. It's performatively sustainable, which is something else entirely. And while we're at it, let's not pretend the materials are the only thing you've recycled. I'm seeing Rauschenberg. A dash of Arte Povera. Joseph Beuys. El Anatsui, if one squints. The driftwood is practically quoting Andy Goldsworthy. It's less an original work than a polite thank-you note to artists who had the good sense to get there first. Derivative would be generous. I'd call it plagiarism, tastefully illuminated.

SERAPHINA

I'm… sorry, but that's… that's just not right. I know where these things came from because I collected them myself. I don't really have any reason to pretend otherwise. If I used something that isn't natural, I'd say so. I just haven't here because I didn't. I understand if the work isn't to your taste, or if you think it's been inspired by someone else's. That's perfectly all right. But I can't agree with what you're saying because it isn't true. I know how this piece was made. Because I made it myself.

CYRIL

You're defending your story more passionately than the work itself.

SERAPHINA

I'm defending the materials.

ASTRID

So… you admit you're being defensive.

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ISADORA

I've had my doubts from the beginning.

JASPER

(Having drifted closer to the piece.)

I think Cyril's onto something. I'm almost embarrassed I didn't see it sooner. Looking at it now… I mean… well, it looks exactly the same as it did a moment ago, but that's probably because I don't have Cyril's eye. Still… yes. The longer I look, the less authentic it feels.

ASTRID

Disappointing, to say the least. Shameful, if I'm being honest.

SERAPHINA

I don’t know what more I can say.

CYRIL

You needn't say another word. Your work speaks for you. Regrettably, it has nothing coherent to say.

JASPER

It mumbles.

ASTRID

It stammers.

ISADORA

It lies.

CYRIL

It’s flammable.

SERAPHINA

Do you mean inflammatory?

CYRIL

I mean flammable.

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SERAPHINA

Well… yes. I mean, of course it's flammable. But I'm not sure what that has to do with–

CYRIL

The kindest thing you could do for this piece is to set it on fire. Once you've done that, I'd encourage you to withdraw from the art world entirely. Find a profession less dependent upon authenticity. Accounting, perhaps. Telemarketing. Politics. Somewhere dishonesty is less of a liability. I've come prepared.

(Cyril reaches into his jacket and produces a small box of matches, which he offers to Seraphina. After a hesitant beat, she takes it. He then reaches into the same pocket again and removes several heavy-duty respirator masks. He offers one to Seraphina. She declines. He distributes the remaining masks to Astrid, Jasper, and Isadora, who put them on without hesitation. Seraphina strikes a match and slowly crosses toward the artwork as the others finish securing their masks. End of playlet.)

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