

UNIVERSAL TRUTHS

ACT I: SCENE 1: A college apartment. It's cheap. It's shabby. Nothing matches. We open with two of the three roommates present. GEORGIA, tall, thin, blonde, wearing a watch-cap with RISE UP and the HAMILTON logo printed on it, is working on a painting, downstage center, while ARMSTRONG (also tall, also thin, with long brown hair) is practicing his trumpet further upstage left.

GEORGIA: (teasing) You're flat. Flat. You're *always* flat.

ARMSTRONG: Ski-doo. Ski-doosh. Dwi do be do bee dweee do bop bop bop bop. Bweee dot dot dot.

GEORGIA: (gesturing with her paintbrush). What does that even mean? Seriously. It was bad enough when you chose to skip the mute after dark – but then you had to adopt scat as your only form of speech.

ARMSTRONG: (chastised) Dweee boonnnn. (There is a pause as he walks around behind her, to look at her painting.) Skeeee-boooo! Skeee-dot! Skee-dot. Dot!

GEORGIA: (annoyed): Please tell me that means you think this one doesn't suck?
(ARMSTRONG shakes his head indicating that no, it doesn't suck.)
Well. Thank you for that. (She reaches out and pats his arm) Really.

ARMSTRONG: Be deep (points to her palette) be dopp (points to her painting) dopp dopp!

GEORGIA: More red in the man's beard? You think? (She picks up her paintbrush and starts working again.) I was considerin' that but then I wasn't sure... red can be too much sometimes, you know? But then there are times when red is the only color you can ever even dream of usin' like when you're tryin' to capture the perfect sunset and the sky and sun are all peachy-soft like and... you know what I mean, don't'cha, Army? Cuz you play like that sometimes, like you're playin' the colors. Hey, can you play that tune you were workin' on the other day... somethin' about... Somethin' in Tunisia? Wasn't it that?

ARMSTRONG: (softly) Ski-doosh, Georgie... just for you.

(He picks up his trumpet and begins to play "Night in Tunisia" softly. He's no Dizzy Gillespie, being, you know twenty, and a student, but he's decent. While he plays, GEORGIA continues to paint.)

GEORGIA: (as she paints) I love it when you play romantic stuff, Army. I mean. I know you're all into hardcore jazz now, but this stuff... this is how you woo women. Win them, even.

(ARMSTRONG gives her a look while playing that clearly says he knows that, and he already knows which woman he wants).

(AS the music continues, the lyrics to the song are heard, first faintly, off stage, and then louder, sung by KATE as she enters from the door to the apartment, upstage right. She is ARMSTRONG's older sister, and while she's shorter and curvier, she's also got his same dark hair.)

KATE: (singing) The moon is the same moon above you
Aglow with it's cool evening light
But shining at night, in Tunisia
Never does it shine so bright

The stars are aglow in the heavens –

(ARMSTRONG abruptly stops playing, and KATE ceases singing along)

GEORGIA: And peaceful artistry ends as our resident drama queen arrives. (beat) Hello, Kate, how was your day, dear?

KATE: (cheery, she and GEORGIA really are best friends, even if the artsy doesn't always like the brash, brassy actress) Why, just super, sweetie. And yours?

GEORGIA: Oh, you know. Painted a lot...

KATE: Flirted with my brother a lot...

GEORGIA: (blushing) It's possible there was mutual flirtation.

KATE: Oh, I don't doubt it. You two are perfect for each other. Armstrong, darling are you using your words yet?

ARMSTRONG: Dwi-bon ke-bop, bop, be bop boom.

KATE: (drily) I guess not. So, anyone hungry? I'm craving Chinese, and the place around the corner's open late. I'm willing to treat, but if you want beer, you'll have to play me for it.

GEORGIA: Hands of poker for free beer?

KATE: Cards're for geezers and frat boys, Georgie-licious. You want booze, you have to beat me at Scrabble.

GEORGA: (setting down her paints and throwing a damp cloth over her work) You're so on, Katie. Scrabble time!

Blackout!

SCENE 2: The same apartment, a few minutes later.

KATE and ARMSTRONG drag a table and two chairs into the downstage center space of the apartment, while GEORGIA moves her easel away and returns with a Scrabble set. Silently, ARMSTRONG reclaims his trumpet, which he puts in his case. He makes it clear he wants to go play downstairs on the corner while his sister and roommate have their game.

GEORGIA: Army, wait. It's chilly out there. (She takes off her watch cap and puts it on his head. It makes him look adorable and she gets all blushy and embarrassed.)

ARMSTRONG: Bwe du-buh, du-buuuuh. Bop. Bopppp! (He takes off his chambray shirt and wraps it around GEORGIA's shoulders, then nods and smiles. A fair trade.)

GEORGIA: Okay, fine, we traded. Find another shirt to put on before you step outside. You can't blow your horn if you catch your death of cold. Make sure it's something warm. (She gives him a playful shove toward his bedroom.)

(ARMSTRONG heads offstage. The action pauses, as if Georgia isn't willing to do anything else until she's sure he's dressed appropriately. He returns a few minutes later in a crew-neck sweater with a white t-shirt peeping out from under it, and still wearing her hat. They make eye contact. She nods her approval. He leaves the apartment through the door KATE entered in the previous scene.)

KATE: You ready to play, now, Georgia?

GEORGIA: (distracted) Huh? Oh? Yes. I'm... I'm ready.
(GEORGIA and KATE sit opposite each other across the scrabble board.)

KATE: Since I chose the game, I suppose it's only fair that you have the first choice of tiles. (She offers the bag to GEORGIA). And the first play. Unless you *want* to play by the standard rules?

GEORGIA: I'm fine with what you said. (She reaches into the bag and selects her tiles and begins arranging them in front of her while KATE selects hers. Then she places them down.)

KATE: Triple word score. Nice. My turn.

GEORGIA: (eyeing Kate's added word) Double letters... I'm ahead of you.

KATE: For now, perhaps, but only just...
(They continue to play. As they do, we hear ARMSTRONG playing his trumpet offstage)

GEORGIA: (referring to the music) Army's really improved over this last year. Fifteen points for me. He'll do well, when he decides he's ready. I hope he's auditionin' for tours and stuff. Shame if he wasted his talent.

KATE: He plays that way because of you. (beat) He's in love with you; you do understand that, don't you? (lays down more tiles) Seventeen points. Plus what I already had. I think I'm ahead by twelve.

GEORGIA: Thirteen. (scans the board) It's mutual. I... I'm in love with Army, too. I just... don't know how to tell him. (plays a word) I tried to paint what he was playin' earlier. But I'm just not ...

KATE: You can't find the words, or you don't feel your art is good enough? Five more points.

GEORGIA: I feel like my art's not as ready for the world as his music is... does that make sense? I feel like until it is, I can't really be his partner.

KATE: First. That's nonsense. Second. I win.

Blackout.

SCENE 3: The same apartment, a few days later. It's essentially the same except that now, upstage center, there is a large floor lamp. The floor lamp is obviously being played by a human being, but right now it's just a black floor lamp. It's wearing a dusty beige shade and a sign that says free.

KATE: (entering from her bedroom) Armstrong, get out here! Right now!

ARMSTRONG: (v/o) Ske-bop! Duh-dot bop bup-bup-bop dwee-yeeehhhh mmmmyyyyyeeehhh.

KATE: I don't care what you're doing, just get out here. That monstrosity you dragged up here from the curb is still in my apartment and it has to go. Seriously. Lose it.

ARMSTRONG: (enters from his bedroom with GEORGIA. Don't get excited. She's got a chunk of his hair in her hand and a pair of scissors in the other. About a quarter of his hair has been cut short.)

GEORGIA: Katie, darlin' what's your issue? I'm doin' delicate work here! Army has to look suave on Friday.

KATE: (realizing) Oh my god. His hair's gone.

GEORGIA: Not all of it. Not yet.

ARMSTRONG: Dwee doo be do be dot!

KATE: You got the gig? For real?

GEORGIA: He did. Fridays and Saturdays at Ike's. Some Tuesdays if school allows. How seriously cool is that?

KATE: It is *seriously* cool, and I cannot wait to hear him play, but if that... thing... isn't removed from my apartment within the hour he may not live to Friday. It's hideous. It's.... gross. It's... you don't have any clue where it came from or who used to own it. And it's all scratched and scuffed and dirty and... it can't be sanitary. Please remove it?

GEORGIA: We need the lamp, Katie. It's super dark in here after sunset, even with the chandelier and table-lamps and stuff. But, what if I fix it up. What if... (she eyes the lamp, considering the possibilities, and thinks back to her conversation with ARMSTRONG from when she was working on her painting) What if I paint it red, buy a new shade for it... I could even make it look like a vine was trailin' up the from the base and windin' around the stem and the actual lamp part could be a flower. And... and I kinda think maybe that's why my art isn't workin'. Like, I'm not supposed to be paintin' pictures I'm supposed to be decoratin' real stuff. Makin' functional art.

ARMSTRONG: (excited) Squeeee-doosh! Skee-doosh! Beee-bop! Doo-bee bop bop!!!!

GEORGIA: You see? Army thinks so, too.

KATE: I guess it couldn't hurt to try. Sure, Georgie. Give it a shot. If it doesn't turn out well, we can always put the free sign on it and set it out again.

GEORGIA: (doing a little dance) Oh! Thank you! Thank you, Katie!

KATE: Don't be grateful just yet, sweetie. (leaves)

GEORGIA: (to herself) Is it just me is or is Kate becoming cantankerous? (to Armstrong) Alright, let's finish what we started, Army. (she steps toward him and gives him a push toward his room)

(There is a pause, and then they disappear, only to reappear a few minutes later, with his haircut complete. He no longer looks like the shaggy music student, but is kind of hot, and Georgia can't help but shiver.)

ARMSTRONG: Mmm. Georgie... oooh, oooh.. mmmm. (He takes off the knit shirt he's wearing – a different one from the other night, and gives it to her. Now he's wearing a tight black t-shirt and jeans.)

GEORGIA: Army... (she takes the shirt and pulls it on) thanks for takin' care of me. I should start work on that lamp before Kate decides - (he stops her with a kiss)

(ARMSTRONG and GEORGIA KISS for a long time. While they are kissing the Lamp lights up.)

GEORGIA: Is it just me, or did it just get super sunny in here? Like switch –

ARMSTRONG: ...got flipped? We kissed. Electricity struck.

GEORGIA: ARMY! You're using words.

ARMSTRONG: For you, Georgie... ske-doosh, bop bop.

Blackout

ACT II

SCENE 1 Crew quarters in a spaceship. Time indeterminate. QUIVER (played by the actor who played Armstrong is a silver alien with antenna and wings. They are gender-neutral. ZEPHYR (played by the actor who previously portrayed the lamp) is blue but otherwise seems human and male. XANTHE is a metallic-gold android, who appears female (played by the actor who played Georgia). Voiceovers from the ship (KIT) are provided by the actor who played KATE.

Downstage center is a round table with three chairs. Everything is silver-gray and metallic. High tech. There is a couch center stage right and a work table center stage left. We open with XANTHE and QUIVER sitting at the table, each working with some kind of computer. ZEPHYR enters carrying a rusty old trumpet.

ZEPHYR: Guys! Hey, guys! I found something!

QUIVER: What is that thing? And why did you bring it to our quarters? It looks unclean. And very old. Are you quite certain that it is not a hostile life form?

ZEPHYR: It's metal. Inert. It's not alive.

QUIVER: Stranger things have been discovered before.

XANTHE: Quiver is correct. The planet Seraglyth Five is home to a species of paperclip that is capable of contorting itself into rude shapes without the aid of assistance from other intelligent life forms.

ZEPHYR: And I thought my dog had no survival skills. (beat) In any case, this isn't alive. It never was alive. It's an artifact from old Earth. I think it's a musical instrument.

XANTHE: (scanning the item, then surprised) You are correct. It is a 'trumpet.'

QUIVER: What's a trumpet? Isn't that the sound that humans make from their nether orifice when they have eaten too many legumes? Or am I confusing that with the sound they make from their nasal orifices during sleep? Zephyr, you have human ancestry. Why do you not explain these things to us? You are an endangered species and we cannot protect you if we -

ZEPHYR: (cutting QUIVER off) Would you stop that? I am not a science experiment. I'm your crewmate. (beat) And your friend.

XANTHE: Quiver was merely being over-eager. Again.

QUIVER: I am sorry. We *are* friends.

ZEPHYR: And I'm not a science experiment.

QUIVER: And you're not a science experiment. (beat) But this 'trumpet' may well be. Perhaps I can... clean it?

ZEPHYR: Buddy, you're welcome to try it.

Lights fade out.

SCENE 2: The same quarters, a few periods later. ZEPHYR is on the couch listening to a letter from home when XANTHE enters. They no longer appear female, though their appearance has not otherwise changed.

KIT: v/o) It was so good to hear from you, son. Be brave, and write as often as you can. Remember, space is only as vast as you allow it to seem. Love always, Mother.

ZEPHYR: Thanks, Kit. Save message. No reply.

KIT: Request confirmed. Any further requirements, Zephyr.

ZEPHYR: Not right now. (notices XANTHE) You changed... something.

XANTHE: If you are observing that I have altered my outward feminine appearance, you are correct. I have noticed that it makes you uncomfortable to live in close quarters with me when I appear female. Therefore, I no longer will. Did I interrupt your letter from home? I did not mean to intrude. (beat) I have never received a letter. My creator is not the chatty type.

ZEPHYR: Aww, Xanthe. I never meant to make you feel bad. You were pretty as a female. Really.

XANTHE: Does being pretty improve my function?

ZEPHYR: No. And you're equally attractive now.

XANTHE: Thank you. I believe you are also considered attractive for your gender and species. However, you did not answer my query about mail. Is it beneficial to receive letters from home?

ZEPHYR: It... it's a form of connection. It reminds us there are people out there who care what happens to us. It's nice to know that. Sometimes being in space can feel... kinda lonely.

XANTHE: Even though you have fulfilling work?

ZEPHYR: Even though. Work is only... isn't making personal connections part of your programming? Isn't that why you live with us in crew quarters instead of being stuck in some closet somewhere?

XANTHE: I am programmed to attempt personal connections; however, I do not believe I am succeeding. So far, I have made you uncomfortable, and I have driven Quiver away. Their 'trumpet playing' was interfering with my concentration and I was forced to ask that they practice elsewhere. (Xanthe hesitates for a long moment, then admits.) The sounds that issued from the metal tubing disrupted my internal harmonics.

ZEPHYR: Ouch. I'm so sorry, Xanthe.

XANTHE: (goes to sit next to ZEPHYR on the couch and rests a hand on his knee). It is not your fault, Zephyr.

The lights fade out.

SCENE 3: Crew quarters a few hours later. ZEPHYR and XANTHE (who is female again) are on the couch. XANTHE is wearing large silver ear muffs. QUIVER has returned, and has the cleaned up trumpet with them.

QUIVER: Zephyr, the computer informed me that today is your birthday, so I have been practicing a song from your human ancestors to play for you today. I hope you like jazz.

ZEPHYR: Hey, I'm a blue guy. Mom always said I was born backstage at the Blue Note. (He waits for laughter and gets none.) Wow, tough room. You know. I'm not gonna explain this one. What's the song, Quiver?

XANTHE: I hope it will not hurt!

QUIVER: The earmuffs should protect you.

ZEPHYR: And the song? C'mon? Tell us.

QUIVER: It was written by Dizzy Gillespie. My version was interpreted by an artist from the twenty-first century... Armstrong "Army" Tate. He used to play it for the artist Georgia Rae Hutchinson.

ZEPHYR: I'm not familiar with either name.

QUIVER: It is no matter. Just... listen.

(QUIVER lifts the trumpet to their lips and begins to play "A Night in Tunisia." As they play their wings unfurl and they are lifted above the audience. They play the song a second time and that's when ZEPHYR stands up and gestures to XANTHE)

XANTHE: I do not understand this gesture.

ZEPHYR: I'm asking you to dance, Xanthe.

XANTHE: Is not dancing for romantic partners?

ZEPHYR: Sometimes. But sometimes it's just for friends, too. And right now, it's my birthday and we're all friends, and Quiver's all airborne, so dance with me and call it a new experience, okay?

(As ZEPHYR and XANTHE start to dance KIT/KATE's voice comes in singing the lyrics to the song, and the lights fade out. There is a long pause. And the scene shifts)

SCENE 4: An art gallery. The actors are all in their original parts, except that the lamp/Zephyr is now PHIL, who is looking at a painting of the scene we just saw. GEORGIA is showing her work. KATE and ARMSTRONG are there to support her.

PHIL: Are you the artist? Georgia Hutchinson?

GEORGIA: Yes. Only it's actually Tate now.

PHIL: (smiling) Well, congratulations! Listen, I'm a big fan of science fiction art, and I've been following your work at cons for years. Is this piece for sale? What do you call it?

GEORGIA: "The Starship *Tunisia*." It's inspired by the song. My partner is a musician, and I used to paint while he practiced. (she blushes) Actually, I still paint while he practices. For a few years I was convinced I wasn't meant to do this sort of art. (beat) Apparently, I was mistaken. (she laughs) Did you know, the first piece I ever sold was this ancient floor lamp found on the curb!

PHIL: (also laughing) That's wonderful. Well, I'd really like to buy this one. Congratulations, Georgia, on your first gallery show.

(PHIL writes a check, which Georgia takes. ARMSTRONG and KATE come to congratulate her on the sale and as the lights go dark we hear the original Dizzy Gillespie version of A NIGHT IN TUNISIA being played.)

FIN

