

A SKETCH FOR “RADIUM CITY”

The Story for Act One

ROBERT PLOWMAN

© 2004

Presented as a Staged Reading by Zuppa Circus Theatre of Halifax, Nova Scotia during the *Shifting Tides: Atlantic Canadian Theatre Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* Conference, Graduate Centre for Study of Drama, University of Toronto March 2004

Written with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts

Performed by: Ben Stone, Kiersten Tough

Directed by: Alex McLean

Musical Composition and Performance by: David Christensen



1./

He’s a powerful man. He does powerful things. At night he dreams powerful dreams. Immortality. In this perfected world of progress and more progress and more progress all that remains is to live forever. Everything as far as he can see and further still belongs to him, everybody everywhere doing everything they can to bring about the future he desires, but all of that means nothing if THE TYCOON cannot live forever. One day there may come a day when his mirror no longer announces the glory of his physical perfection. That day will never come: The Tycoon has the best minds working ’round the clock till they find the cure for death.

**Poster for *Radium City*.
Design by Stephen Bishop.**



2./

DR. SAVATINE VOX is not mad, not yet. But he knows things no one was meant to know. He knows that time is a virus. He knows that he is very close to finding the antidote. And he knows that it is through his own research that his daughter FLORA is dying. For it was in his laboratory that she was exposed to the most deadly strain of the time virus, and now it blooms like a hundred flowers in her belly. The science that Dr. Vox has discovered has made the world what it is. Thirty years ago he found a doorway to the place where ideas come from and now there is no closing this door: His fabulous inventions spawn more and more fabulous inventions each day almost without his guidance. And he is so close to finding the antidote to time. And he knows he will arrive too late to save his girl. And he is not mad, not yet.



“Is there ever any end to wonder?” Kiersten Tough as Dr. Vox, in *Radium City*. Zuppa Circus Theatre, Halifax, NS.

Photo by Robert Plowman.

3./

We need a monument. Nothing we've made has ever been enough. This is THE ARCHITECT speaking. She has a vision for a building that goes beyond anything built before. Laughing at gravity. Soaring high into the clouds. Reminding us never to stop. Radium Tower! Celebrating the human spirit. Celebrating The Tycoon and this city he's made. She has blueprints. He destroys the blueprints. Nothing she's said is new, The Tycoon tells her, he's seen a hundred other proposals just like hers. He tells her to leave. She will not go. He tells her if she stays then her life belongs to him. She stays. He will humiliate her, he promises. She will stop being her own person and in the end will build exactly the monument he desires. And in exchange she will learn the things about the world she always suspected were true but was too scared to discover herself. She stays. She knows he knows how much she desires to be exactly like him. And he knows she knows how much he needs to share his corruption. The pretense is entirely gone. And the happiness she feels is like a sickness. What is that feeling? Shame. Build that, he says. Build it high.

4./

They are poor mostly. Some of them call themselves artists. Dr. Vox pays them well for their time. Sometimes they stay for days and days at his laboratory, taking his latest wonder drugs in little white rooms, all their reactions closely monitored by machines, recorded by men in white coats. As the future is made, they test its toxicity. Willing to fall deathly ill for a few hours so they can be cured by his miracle science. Taking pills and potions designed to push the body and the mind beyond their limits or to cripple them entirely. X-ray drink. Perfect memory drug. Lobotomy in a tablet. TOM VIOLENCE is always hungry. He is a thief and a hustler and an enthusiastic test subject for Dr. Vox, willing to stay for days and days in the laboratory taking anything they'll give him. He's seen Flora walking with her father in the halls and he likes watching the deathly ill girl. She reminds him of something he can't remember.

5./

THE COUNT is a foreigner. It is not a description of nationality, it is a vocation. When Tom Violence returns to the streets, he goes immediately to a little apartment high in a tenement building

where a FORTUNE TELLER works. He asks about his future. Then the crystal ball is covered, all the blinds drawn and the lights extinguished... and The Count emerges from the shadows. Did he do what he said he would? Yes, Tom Violence took from the laboratory everything that was on his list. Many, many little bottles of powder. A meeting of conspirators over the white lace tablecloth. Utopian dreams and tea and the ingredients for a very large bomb.



“Hunger made its home inside me.” Ben Stone as Tom Violence, in *Radium City*. Zuppa Circus Theatre, Halifax, NS.

Photo by Robert Plowman.

6./

Suddenly: Spectacle! A groundbreaking ceremony on the site of what will be Radium Tower. Pomp and circumstance. The Tycoon says a few words. Sustained applause.

Meanwhile: At the back of the crowd lurk The Count and Tom Violence.

Afterwards: The Tycoon and The Architect walk the site. Under his tutelage she is discovering vast reservoirs of shame within herself. The taste of shame and she wants more. The hatred and disgust that have always been there curled inside her waiting do not need to be ignored, oh no. We are miserable creatures who crave being told right and wrong. Who crave taboos. And punishment. When the building is complete, its shadow will be dark enough to strip away the lies we tell ourselves and remind us what we have always been.

That night: Flora startles Dr. Vox. Late, in his laboratory, he thought he was alone. In her nightgown, already looking dead, demands to know if she is dying. And he cannot lie to her. Demands to know. He gives her something to help her sleep. Then let me die, just let me die.

Earlier: Fireworks. A brass band. Lurking in the crowd at the groundbreaking ceremony Tom Violence drops out of time. From outside: It will look like a seizure and The Count will briskly hustle him from the crowd trying to attract as little attention as possible. From inside: There's the needle in his chest and then he's through to a place of silence, and, ghostly, unreal, more real than anything, coming towards him, Flora. The dying girl, Flora, coming towards him, not dying anymore, no, already dead, long dead, fed to worms, returned, living again, Flora, coming through the crowd like they're not even there, only her and Tom Violence, right up to him, Flora, her hand hovering just above his shoulder, more real than anything, speaking in his ear: The future. The future is here.

The next day: The Tycoon's office. Dr. Vox bursts in. He thinks that he has found a cure for time. No one ever needs to die again. But the immortality drug must first be tested!

7./

The test. Scientists and clipboards. A momentous occasion. To bootstrap evolution, leapfrog our own limitations! Brittle history breaks off here! So long death. So the drug is administered to Tom Violence and four other test subjects. And the minutes creep by. Then peculiar things begin to happen. Bizarre ideation, the scientists scribble. Perceptual dislocation. Tom Violence says, I'm feeling the effects strongly now. Has the test begun? he asks. Whose words are these? Look at that! It's a curtain that I've slipped behind. Oh, now I'm back, he says not moving. There's a whole other room no

one told me about. I may not return for some time, he explains. And immediately he says he is back, talking as if he's been gone for a very long time. Observing at a distance, Dr. Vox and The Tycoon. Bitterly disappointed that the promised immortality drug turns people into babbling lunatics, The Tycoon storms off. But the read-outs from Dr. Vox's bank of ultra-high-tech machines indicate that, for his test subjects, time has effectively stopped.

That night: Flora in the dim laboratory light finds Tom Violence sleeping. All the test subjects have slipped into a very very long, very deep sleep from which they may or may not ever wake. Dr. Vox finds his daughter stroking the unconscious thief's dirty face. From somewhere deep inside there's a tickle of a laugh bubbling up in Dr. Vox. His daughter caressing Tom Violence. The sliver of light between her body and his. Everything seems funny to him now. Is she whispering something? Flora! I'm not yours anymore, she tells Dr. Vox, smiling. The sliver of light disappearing. You can keep me alive, but I'm already dead. No light between them now. Choking the laughter down.

8./

Anarchists! Writing letters to The Tycoon that say simply "BOOM!" in cut-out newsprint letters. Stacks and stacks of these. Damn those Anarchists, they believe in nothing! Idle threats of course. Still, The Tycoon responds with a show of force. Guards are posted everywhere in Radium City. Particularly around the site of Radium Tower. And construction doesn't stop, goes on around the clock, vast armies of workers ascending in elevators, miles up the monstrous skeleton of the monolith. The Architect is there constantly, overseeing everything, her desk perched in the airy wilds of the one hundredth floor, amid the clouds, where the ragged net of steel gives way to nothing. What was promised her is coming true. She can feel The Tycoon growing inside her day by day, looking out through her eyes, moving for her, speaking for her. She has nearly husked what little remains of what she used to call her self. It's just like she always imagined it would feel. But The Tycoon now spends more and more time with his mirror. Worried: Are those worry lines? He calls on THE HATS, his shadow men, his eyes and ears in the city, his muscle. Instructs them to take care of the Anarchists once and for all. The Hats go everywhere, break up whispered meetings in dark little rooms, learn every secret. But The Count eludes capture, always one step ahead of them, laughing.

He's awake. Just sitting there staring into space. But he's awake now. The men in white coats are watching, taking notes, asking questions. But to Tom Violence the questions and the white coats and the white room are all at a great distance, like some dimly remembered past. What's real is this curtain rustling insistently behind him, and each time he steps back behind the curtain he's in another world, a place outside of time. Voices calling him back again, drawing him further and further into this invisible landscape.

Daddy? Flora standing there with The Tycoon. There's someone here to see you, she says. Flora's brought him here. Everything is funny now. He's very interested in your research, Daddy. The Tycoon demanding, why wasn't I told when he awoke? Flora holding The Tycoon's hand, standing close beside him, shy, not shy, no, looking shy but without looking shooting daggers at her father, not her father anymore, telling him without looking, He's my father now. The tickle of laughter. Why wasn't I told? Not to laugh. Dr. Vox makes a decision: Administer the maximum dosage to Subject No. 5! But Doctor, his assistants protest, that's beyond all the bounds of good science! It's madness! Brooking no protest, pushing his assistants out of the way, Dr. Vox seizes the syringe himself and injects Tom Violence with the maximum dosage of his miraculous immortality drug.

For Tom Violence: It's a choir. Behind the curtain singing for him, singing in words from some other language, a language not of words that stand for things but of words that are things, a choir, calling to him from outside of time, calling him back behind the curtain.

Slap! Slap! Is he awake now? Can he hear us? They're standing over Tom Violence in the bright white room asking questions. Has the test begun? Tom Violence asks. He's lost his mind. Readouts from the machines. He's cured of time, Dr. Vox proclaims. He's lost his mind. It's just a curtain, Tom Violence says. It's a curtain that I've slipped behind. And saying this, he slips behind the curtain and is gone. Disappeared! Where did he—? He was just here! And standing there far across the room is Tom Violence. It's a curtain, he says, and is gone. They rush for him and grab at only air. The tickle of laughter and this time Dr. Vox lets go, does not hold it down any more, lets it bubble up, shaking his body, laughing and laughing now and no sound coming out. Shaking all over.

10./

In the land of visions. The choir of voices leading him on through the strange landscape. And then he sees who the voices belong to: Great fearsome MONSTERS with fangs and horns and claws, towering over him. Welcoming him. They've been waiting so long, they've prepared a feast in his honour. A massive monster banquet and the table's laid with dish after dish of dirt and worse than dirt. Eat, eat! they insist. But if you eat you'll stay here forever, whispers a voice. Drink, drink! they all say. But if you drink a drop you'll never leave, the whisper tells him. Give us a story! they insist. So standing on the table he tells them a story. And it's the most amazing story the Monsters have ever heard. They hang on every word and cheer when they should and jeer when they should and roar with laughter, filling the air with applause when he's done. And so he forgets himself and eats the dirt. And it's the best thing he's ever tasted. And he eats more and more, and more and more and more.

11./

The hunt. Radio broadcasts send out the message across Radium City: Please be on the lookout for an invisible man! Lock all doors! Lock all cupboards! Don't let him find food or shelter! Stay off the streets! Only search parties will be out tonight! Even work on Radium Tower will cease! The Tycoon is outraged that the promise of immortality seems to be slipping away. In his mirror it's unmistakable now: He's aging. At all costs the Invisible Man must be found! For the formula which gave birth to him has gone missing! Who could have taken it? Flora lets her father know exactly who. Still laughing, Dr. Vox is called on to brief the troops. This laughing man has a plan. But first we must bring him in alive.

12./

In the land of visions, his mouth is full of dirt. And Tom Violence realizes what he has done. Now you'll never leave, the whisper tells him. He's eaten the dirt and now he'll turn into a monster like them. And he runs from the banquet and sticks his finger down his throat and brings up all the dirt again in a great flood. But the Monsters stand over him. What do you think you're doing? I'm leaving now, he says. Oh no, you've eaten our food, you're staying. And the Monsters carry him away. Suddenly: On some sort of table. Is he back in the laboratory? Oh God. They're taking out his

stomach and feeding on it. Then the story changes. Is he living it or telling it? Oh God, whose words are these? I'm feeling the effects strongly now. Then, cool stones against his cheek, he's lying in an alley, the visions fled, underneath a blanket of garbage, hearing the footsteps of the manhunt drawing near. The white puckered ridge of scar running up his belly.

13./

Mischief. He goes everywhere. He does everything. They give chase but cannot catch him. They lay traps then fall into the traps themselves while he dances past. Beaten by an unseen assailant. Where he goes no one can follow. But wait! Who is this watching from the shadows who seems to trail the Invisible Man at every turn, taking note of everything he does?

Infamy. Throughout Radium City news of the Invisible Man's exploits is on everyone's lips. All of the bad things that happen are because of him, and half the good things too. Parents tell their children, Go to sleep now or the Invisible Man will come and carry you away. Nights, Flora dreams of him carrying her away, doing unspeakable things to her diseased young body. Each time she feels a breeze she knows he's rushing towards her.

Panic. The Tycoon has not slept in days. He's broken all the mirrors and stays in a darkened room where no one can see his ruined face. Only The Architect is allowed in. Everything he promised her has happened: They are the same person now. Go to sleep, she tells him. And he will not. She undresses him. His ruined body. Go to sleep. No. He cannot be touched. She touches him. Please. Touching him. Please. Touching. It's almost not like sex between two people because they're not two people anymore. The pretense is entirely gone. Like the third thing where you thought there was only two. I'll go to sleep now. And she helps him into the special anti-aging cabinet where he sleeps to keep him young. And then as she's helping him in: Laughter from an empty corner of the room. Laughter and there's no one there. A door slams and no one's left the room. No one watching them. No one gone.

14./

Drunken laughter. Shh! An open bottle of whiskey and each arm around a prostitute. When The Count arrives back at the squalid

little room where he's hiding out, he knows before he opens the door there's someone waiting for him. He opens the door anyway. Pistol drawn in each hand. Hello Tom. Empty room. Just the place on the bed depressed by the weight of his unseen body. The Invisible Man is tired of running. The Count knew that eventually he would arrive. The bottle is drained and then another. Plans spin out in the smoky air. If we could raise an army of invisible men, The Count muses, think what we could do! You fool, you think it's that easy? snaps the man who used to call himself Tom Violence, You don't understand the risks! Stops himself. Tries to explain: First the Monsters, plus if you eat the dirt you can't leave and then they tear your insides out. He's a lunatic. The Count adjusts his plans accordingly. Soothing voice: If we're to overcome our oppressors we need something to rally behind, a symbol of what's to come. You've been given this gift. Use it. Handing him a cardboard box tied with string. Use it. Inside is a bomb. Use it to destroy Radium Tower. A symbol. The door opens then closes. Is he gone? The Count laughs. An anonymous tip will see to it that, whether he succeeds or fails, either way we'll be rid of him forever. No one calls The Count a fool!

15./

The dying girl really dying at last. Getting her wish. All the drugs useless now. Getting her wish: In through her bedroom window comes a floating cardboard box. Him. Sitting beside her on the bed. Lightly stroking her forehead with his invisible touch. Skin, even the thought of it feels awful now but she wants it, it's her wish. She wants him. He asks her what to do, he has a bomb, sitting there beside them on the bed. What should I do? Me, she says, me, she says me. What should I do about the bomb? he repeats. Things change. The girl on top of him. Something about her reminds him of something. He knows what it is. It's something that hasn't happened yet. Things change. Who is this on top of him? Things change. She's dead. She's dying. She's alive again. Something that hasn't happened yet. The flowers of time grown inside the girl erupting through her skin. Splitting her open. No, not something that hasn't happened yet. Everything that hasn't happened. The future. In a moment, the whole future happens. In the next moment it's gone. Then the whole future happens again. Then gone. There and gone. It happens with her breathing: Heavy, fast, then not at all. Not at all. No longer dying. Really dead now. Gone.

He doesn't even see the guards around him. He is captured. He is beaten. He is thrown in a cage. He is drugged with a drug made by Dr. Vox so that he cannot turn invisible, so that he cannot escape. None of this matters. He will be executed publicly in the morning. As a symbol.

The man in the shadows. The one who's been following him, watching with special goggles. Taking note of everything the Invisible Man does, writing it all down in his notebook. Laughing, steps from the shadows, Dr. Vox. To his daughter's bedside, covers her body, puts his laughter away. Knows what he must do. Stands at the Invisible Man's cage. Sets him free. Go, he says, pencil poised in midair. Gives him back the bomb they took from him. Go. I must see this experiment through. The Invisible Man goes and Dr. Vox follows behind, writing everything.

16./

Mirrors. His skin is perfect. His body perfect. All the mirrors agree. The Tycoon had simply imagined the ravages of time. A bad dream. He will live forever. Overlooking the city, surveying the skyline, he and The Architect, watching the progress of Radium Tower. And he knows in his heart he will never die. And then the bad dream returns: The voice out of nowhere, "Boom." The cardboard box floating in midair, in the hands of the invisible lunatic. Sees suddenly skin hanging loose off his body, flesh gone grey like putty... No, pushes the bad dream down. He will live forever. Offers the Invisible Man a deal. Work for me, The Tycoon offers. Everything you've ever wanted will be yours. The Invisible Man laughs, says, Done, and tosses him the cardboard box.

The Count is arrested, betrayed by the Invisible Man. The anarchist threat subdued at last! The Invisible Man is a hero! Tickertape parades and inspirational public speeches. The very acme of the model citizen of Radium City. Children want to grow up to be just like the Invisible Man. And everywhere he goes Dr. Vox is there, recording the data of his greatest experiment.

The end of another perfect day in Radium City. The Tycoon goes to sleep in his anti-aging cabinet while the Invisible Man, his body-guard, keeps watch. Dr. Vox interviewing him. And the Invisible Man tells him of his time among the Monsters and of the banquet and how he told the story and everyone laughed and laughed and

laughed so much he forgot himself and ate the dirt, and as he tells his story the Invisible Man turns the dials on the cabinet so The Tycoon will never wake up. Now he will live forever, he says. Somewhere the Monsters are roaring with laughter.

END OF ACT ONE

