

Art is Isaac

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A full-length play by Selah DeGering

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Art is Isaac  
by Selah DeGering  
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A full-length play

2 men and 1 woman

or

1 man and 2 women

or

1 man, 1 woman, and 1 nonbinary person

## Cast of Characters

- Ari            Can be played by anyone. Passionate, hungry, real. A Saphardic Jew An abstract painter.
- Nora            Woman. Hates being serious. Not a party girl per say, but she's down to have a good time. Behind the mask, she's very thoughtful. Nora and Ari can talk for hours. Nora and Luther can fight for hours. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Alcoholic.
- Luther          Man. Responsible, caring. Burdened. A grounding force for Ari, but a somehow limiting one to Nora. Black American, studying Fine Arts at UCLA.

As it is written, Ari is a man, but this is merely for clarity in reading and not an absolute.

ARI stands alone in darkness. *Ashrei prayer song.*  
During the music portion, enter LUTHER and  
NORA.

ARI

*Ashrei yoshvei veitekha, ode yehalelukha selah*  
*Ashrei ha'am shekakhah lo, ashrei ha'am she'Adonai elohav*  
*Tehilah le'david*  
*Aromimkha elohai hamelekh, v'ahvarkha shimkha le-olam va'ed*  
*B'khol yom avarkheka, v'ahalelah shimkha le-olam va'ed*

The Akedah.

LUTHER/NORA

The Binding of Isaac.

ARI

The story of a man who once bartered with HaShem, the Holy Father, to save thousands of strangers, at one time raising not a single objection at the command to slaughter his only son.

LUTHER

We see a juxtaposition in this, a contradiction that plants seeds of doubt in the faith.

NORA

Do we question and reason, or act and obey?

ARI

The God who reasons cannot command, for are His words truly commanded if they are not absolute? Are they not, rather, suggestions to be discussed between man and HaShem, just as the Rabbis interpret the Torah?

NORA

He reasons even as a man reasoneth one with another face to face.

Beat. LUTHER and ARI look at her.

NORA

Doctrine and Covenants, Section 50. Mormon book.

ARI

But art- art is ex nihilo, from nothing. Art does not possess a form capable of deliberation or dictation, it simply is. The feelings of the artist are his law, and so I am, ruled by no deity but by the coursing torrents of inspiration itself. Art isn't even from me, it's- it channels through me, like a conduit for the universe. The most valuable quality of human nature is to diverge, to change, to go his own way when faced with an array of paths- forge his own.

NORA

And the nature of art is to make no path, leave nothing for others to follow.

LUTHER

The artist only knows the step he takes. He forgets what comes before and marvels at what comes after.

NORA

Only to forget again.

ARI

And then—

The *shofar* sounds in the distance. Only ARI hears. LUTHER and NORA exchange glances, waiting for ARI to pick up his line.

ARI

There's a painting.

The front room of a two-bedroom apartment in LA.

It's half art-studio, half sitting space, half whatever-we-need-it-to-be. The heart of a home.

There's a pathetic kitchen full of cups; paint water cups or drinking water cups, no one knows. Brushes and palettes and plates and silverware all mingle together in the sink. The walls and floor are covered in drooping, splattered tarps. Canvases, frames, and portfolio holders lean against the walls. There are three easels, two with half-paintings, shoved into this space, along with a futon and a small television. The doors to the bedrooms are labeled "NORA" (in a pop-art style, the door covered in destination postcards) and "Dream Team!" respectively.

A Wednesday night in autumn, shortly before *Rosh Hashanah*.

Enter ARI with purpose, NORA following behind.

She shuts the door, watching as ARI, still in a department store uniform, marches to the art half of the room and tacks up a falling corner of some hanging butcher paper.

ARI

Dayenu, I love your mind.

ARI grabs a piece of charcoal and begins sketching aggressively. An explosion, a light, surrounded by darkness.

What'd I say?

NORA

ARI doesn't seem to have heard her, possessed by his drawing. NORA watches. What is this supposed to be, exactly?

I love your fucking mind.

ARI

ARI slams his hand against the wall and turns to NORA.

Look! You see it?

ARI

Absolutely.

NORA

(exasperated) You're killing me. Look, look, it's like you were saying, it's-

ARI

ARI takes NORA by the hand, pulling her the short distance to the wall. His hand guides hers over the bold lines.

Visceral.

NORA

Yeah. Yeah! I want- I want textures with this, like- like this gritty, expressive-

ARI

Jagged?

NORA

Yes! It's sharp but it's joy, it's joy so big it's explosive, it's- it's caustic, it *hurts*, you know?

ARI

I think I do.

NORA

ARI

It's happy but it's broken. Happy because it's broken and now- now everyone can see it.

NORA

Mhmm.

ARI has begun assembling a palette of yellows and reds. He has a small brush in his mouth (red) and a big brush in hand (yellow), painting the drawing on the wall with big strokes. NORA goes to the kitchen and checks the fridge. Finding nothing of interest, she opens the cabinet and pours herself some white wine.

NORA

Not telling on yourself at all, champ.

ARI

Whatever could you possibly be implying?

NORA

Cheers to living broken on purpose.

ARI

I'll drink to that.

ARI and NORA clink glasses, ARI having grabbed one from the coffee table. They drink. ARI coughs and spits the liquid back into the mug. NORA cackles.

ARI

Like you haven't drank paint-water, Nora.

NORA

I prefer turpentine.

ARI returns to painting. Enter LUTHER with a portfolio bag, a backpack, and a laptop bag.

LUTHER

Y'all're home early.

NORA

Ari was "sick."

LUTHER rolls his eyes and kisses NORA on the cheek in greeting. He puts his bags down just inside the Boys' door. He shrugs off his jacket.

LUTHER  
(sarcasm) I hope you don't catch anything. Lazy-itis can be fatal.

NORA  
Nope, I'm healthy as a horse.

LUTHER tosses the jacket into the bedroom and shuts the door.

LUTHER  
That's good to hear, since we live with someone so often afflicted. (beat) Hey.

ARI jolts, streaking paint across the wall.

ARI  
Damn it-

He whirls on LUTHER, still wielding the paintbrush.

ARI  
One more time, Luther, I told you, you sneak up on me one more fucking time-

LUTHER  
I can't walk into my own house?

ARI chases LUTHER with the paintbrush, over stools, around easels, over the futon, behind the TV.

ARI  
You come in here while I'm working, you're in *my* house.

LUTHER  
But you're *not* working-

ARI  
Work that matters!

NORA sips her wine. LUTHER trips on a tarp, and ARI crashes into him, trying to paint his face. LUTHER wrestles his arm, barely keeping ARI's paintbrush away.



I'm gonna ruin you.

ARI

Like I ruined your mom?

LUTHER

(shocked laugh) What- don't talk about my mom!

ARI

LUTHER uses the opportunity to flip their positions, pinning ARI- and his paintbrush -to the ground.

What was that about it being your house?

LUTHER

Shut up.

ARI

They grin at each other, a little too long. Too comfortable. Tension. ARI clears his throat. LUTHER gets up, avoiding his eyes.

Sorry.

ARI

Yeah- no, yeah, I get it.

LUTHER

You made a mess.

NORA

It's always a mess, I'm shocked you notice a difference.

LUTHER

*Brr.* What's for dinner?

NORA

LUTHER begins fussing in the kitchen. ARI troubleshoots how to fix his sketch.

Dishes.

LUTHER

NORA

Chinese?

ARI

Yes.

LUTHER

Are you paying?

NORA

I can afford Chinese.

ARI

Yes.

LUTHER

Really?

NORA

What's that supposed to mean?

LUTHER

You've got the wine out, he's using the Windsor & Newtons—

NORA

Let's just have a nice night, okay?

LUTHER

It's Wednesday, Nora, you're drinking on a Wednesday./

NORA

/Are you gonna call the police?

LUTHER

How much have you had?

NORA

—I don't have to— excuse me? Am I a child? Who died and left you in charge?

LUTHER

Barack Obama.

NORA

One glass.

LUTHER

One.

One glass!

ARI

Paint-water for him.

NORA

...Okay. And you're not gonna be "sick" tomorrow.

LUTHER

I haven't missed a single day of work! God, you're such a control freak—

NORA

Last I checked, name-calling was for children.

LUTHER

Will you get off my case for five minutes?

NORA

I'm worried about you.

LUTHER

Well, stop being worried and start being my friend. (beat) ...What do you want?

NORA

Sweet and sour chicken, please.

ARI

Luther? (pause) Lu, baby, what do you want?

NORA

We still have the, uh. The lasagna.

LUTHER

I ate that!

ARI

Beef and broccoli it is. And I'll be having the ham fried rice, anything else? Wait— I'll do egg, for leftovers.

NORA

You can get ham.

ARI

What about tomorrow?

NORA

I've never had it before.

ARI

...You do realize ham is from pigs.

NORA

It's food, right?

ARI

LUTHER and NORA exchange a look.

I...should get the egg. Cholesterol and whatnot.

NORA

Eggrolls?

ARI

No, you never eat all of them.

NORA

Lu will split with me.

ARI

Yeah...

LUTHER

Okay! I know it's a Wednesday...

NORA

And you have work tomorrow...

LUTHER

Ah, ah, but I do not, for I have been given mandatory vacation time.

NORA

What, why?

LUTHER

Manager's cutting my hours 'cause I did too much overtime last month. If I'm getting screwed anyway, I may as well get screwed up, so what are we doing?

NORA

We could play-

ARI

Absolutely not.

Why not?

I have school tomorrow, and work, and-

It'd be fun.

That's the problem.

We are not playing strip-painting on a Wednesday night, it's not even— it's not even seven.

Aw, you scared?

Scared of live figure-drawing with a hangover? Yes.

No, you're still upset about last time.

I don't know what you're talking about.

No?

We're not talking about this.

Oh, we're talking about it.

You're drunk.

I've literally had half a glass of wine.

LUTHER

ARI

LUTHER

ARI

NORA

LUTHER

NORA

LUTHER

NORA

LUTHER

NORA

LUTHER

NORA

LUTHER

NORA

LUTHER

Sure.

NORA

Every time I say something you don't like, it's like you think I'm this irresponsible alcoholic or something!

LUTHER

I never said you were an alcoholic.

NORA

You don't have to!

LUTHER

You're not supposed to drink on those pills, Nora.

ARI

...He's right.

NORA

I know that. I'm not.

ARI

You guys.

LUTHER

Nora...

NORA

I feel fine, I tapered off them, it's fine-

ARI

Guys.

LUTHER

You're self-medicating! Bipolar doesn't just go away/

NORA

How would you know?/

LUTHER

/It's not a cold!

NORA

/You're not a doctor!

ARI

What are we doing tonight?

LUTHER

...Fuck it. Strip painting.

ARI

Are you sure?

LUTHER

Yeah. Whatever.

NORA

Well, maybe you'll loosen up, it'd be good for you. You never relax, you know, it's not healthy.

LUTHER

Mhmm.

ARI stands alone in darkness. *Ashrei*. Enter NORA and LUTHER.

ARI

*Gadol Adonai u'mehulal me'od, v'ligdulato ein kheiker  
Dor l'dor yishabakh ma'asekha, u'gevurotekha yagidu  
Hadar kevod hodekha, v'divrei niflotekha asikha  
Ve'ezuz norotekha yomeiru, u'gedulatekha asaprena*

The HaShem who commands cannot be reasoned with. Our God is a jealous God; there shall be no idols set before Him in the hearts of His people.

NORA

He destroys those who fail to obey, as the Nephites of Moroni's day.

LUTHER

His word is absolute and true and unchanging. It needs no subtraction, reduction, or addition.

NORA

My works are without end, and also my words, for they never cease. (Beat) ...Moses 1:4. Pearl of Great Price.

ARI

But if HaShem can reason...if HaShem can change His mind, and all He speaks is truth, cannot the truth, then, change, if HaShem can? He brought about all this change in the world, made it from nothing into something into something else, so isn't it natural that He change, too, at His will and pleasure?

NORA

Yes.

ARI

If truth is subject to interpretation, as the Torah, is there any truth at all?

LUTHER

Art is from nothing.

NORA

The world is Heavenly Father's art, though, so if the world is from nothing, wouldn't that mean Heavenly Father is...also?

ARI

It's an Orobouros situation. Art only exists, unaware of its origin or its destiny. There is no tomorrow, only now, the ever-present and immutable now. Yesterday is hardly a memory, yesterday— yesterday isn't real.

NORA

Everyday I wake up and I'm- it doesn't matter. Nothing matters.

LUTHER

Monday, Tuesday/

ARI

/Stars burst before my eyes and I'm painting and I'm painting and when it's done I want to kill myself. Paint with my own blood, see what universes may be revealed there. My unappeasable yearning for the unattainable, the indescribable/

NORA

/It's hatred, it's unforgiving, it's ruthless, it eats and eats and then there's nothing/

ARI

/And I'm cannibalizing myself again.

LUTHER

God.

ARI

It's happening again.

The *shofar* sounds in the distance. Later that night, the apartment. The three are sitting in a semicircle with a selection of acrylic paints, some hard liquor, and a few mugs. ARI unbuttons his shirt. Luther is down to his undershirt and jeans, one sock on, with a handprint on his neck and a few



hearts on his arm. Nora is fully clothed, but with rainbow dots in her face like oversized freckles. Everyone has paint on their hands. There are three canvases with odd, fresh paintings on them, one abstract in warm colors, one of a blue ballet dancer in *fifth position en bas Cecchetti method*, and one blank. NORA, grinning, smears red paint on ARI's face. He lets her.

SAMPLE