

*(Mary shakes her head and then disappears behind the partition while Degas carefully inspects the painting. He walks away from the easel, kneels down to see it from below. Then he walks to the other side of the stage, again he kneels down. Then he approaches the painting up close. He crooks his head to each side, then nods an approval. Degas takes off his jacket, rolls up his sleeves, selects a brush, and begins mixing the paint. He then paints on the upper background of her painting, the portion that is blank. Mary comes out with from behind the partition, walks past Degas as he is working, barely noticing him, then stops dead in her tracks. She throws her envelope and letter pages into the air as she lets out a blood curdling scream.)*

MARY

What have you done?

DEGAS

*(Startled.)*

I just wanted to help it along. Why are you upset?

MARY

It is my painting! My work! My art! How dare you?!

DEGAS

It is still your painting. This is an over-reaction.

MARY

How would you feel if I painted on one of your paintings?

DEGAS

Would you paint on one of my paintings?

MARY

Never! I would never do that to you.

DEGAS

Then I don't see it as an issue.

*(Mary goes to nearby box to pull out a large carving knife. Pointing the knife at Degas, she walks towards him.)*

MARY

This time you have gone too far, you self-important bastard.

DEGAS

Mary, you need calm yourself.

MARY

Back away from it!

*(Degas moves back from the painting. Mary stops in front of it, turns towards the painting, raises the knife and prepares to slash the canvas. As she extends her arm to begin the thrust, Degas grabs her and the two violently struggle. The knife falls as Mary is thrown to the floor. Degas stands over her, enraged.)*

DEGAS

*(Shouts at her.)*

Stupide femme américaine! Avez-vous perdu votre esprit?

MARY

*(Shouts back.)*

Oui! Vous avez conduit me rend fou!

DEGAS

You are nothing! Do you understand me! Nothing! The work is everything. It is sacred.

MARY

I can't do this. I can't be with you. You don't respect me.

DEGAS

I am bleeding!

*(There is a small nick on his wrist.)*

MARY

Good.

*(Mary gets up, goes behind the partition, and brings back bandages. She has regained some of her composure.)*

I am sorry.

*(Mary bandages the wound.)*

Whatever possessed you to put your brush to my canvas?

DEGAS

If I had known --

*(Grabs his jacket.)*

I am leaving. Do what you will with it.

*(Mary picks up the knife.)*

MARY

*(Controlled anger.)*

STOP RIGHT THERE.

DEGAS

Mary?

MARY

You are not going anywhere. Finish it.

DEGAS

*(Shouts.)*

Put down that knife!

*(Mary puts the knife away. Degas sets his jacket down, sits on the stool, and resumes painting.)*

DEGAS

I am making a slight adjustment to the perspective. That is all.

*(Mary pulls up a stool to watch him paint.)*

And I do respect you.

MARY

You have a strange way of showing it.

*(Mary moves around the studio to look at the painting from different perspectives, just like Degas did earlier.)*

Alright.

DEGAS

Alright?

MARY

*(She sits down on the stool again. Degas continues painting.)*

It is better. You were right and I was wrong. You don't need to stay. I am quite capable of finishing it myself.

DEGAS

I can't go.

MARY

Why not?

DEGAS

I have a feeling that I will never see you again, if I go.

MARY

You have plenty of friends. You won't miss me.

DEGAS

They are acquaintances. You are my only friend.

MARY

You are the most popular artist in Paris. Everyone wants to be your friend.

DEGAS

No. They want to be friends with him, not me.

MARY

Who is him?

*(Degas stops painting.)*

DEGAS

*(Turns to face us.)*

Edgar Degas. They see pretty paintings of ballerinas and believe I must be a gentle and caring man.

MARY

I have the same problem with Mary Cassatt. People see my paintings of children and think I must be sweet and eager to please. I am not that woman.

DEGAS

That is true. You are not a nice person.

MARY

*(Smiles.)*

Yes. Thank you.

*(Beat.)*

You must have other friends.

DEGAS

Name one.

MARY

Edouard Manet.

DEGAS

Manet was my best friend, for a time.

MARY

What happened between you and Manet?

DEGAS

He betrayed me.

MARY

Betrayed you? How?

DEGAS

I did a painting of Edouard and his wife Suzanne, it was just a favor, a gift.

MARY

That does not sound like you.

DEGAS

Do you want to hear this or not?

*(Mary nods yes. Degas stands up.)*

I did the painting as a way of showing my appreciation for Manet's friendship. We had met years earlier when I was just another struggling artist copying the masters at the Louvre. He took an interest in my work, we became friends, and for a time we were inseparable. Manet, who was already a celebrated artist, was a great help to Degas in getting established.

*(Beat.)*

We were close, like brothers, until a few months back when I went to see him at his apartment. I knew something was wrong the second I walked in the door, I felt it. Then I saw the painting. Manet had mutilated my gift.

MARY

Mutilated? How?

DEGAS

He slashed it. Cropped a major portion of the painting, which completely destroyed it. I never thought him capable of such treachery.

MARY

What did you do about it?

DEGAS

I immediately took the painting and left without saying goodbye. Then I sent back a still life he had given me. I should have sold it instead.

MARY

How did you feel when you first realized what he had done?

DEGAS

Small. Empty. Humiliated.

MARY

That is the way I feel now.

DEGAS

It is not the same.

MARY

*(She stands to confront him.)*

It is exactly the same! You are nothing. The work is everything. The work is sacred.

*(Mary has gotten through to him.)*

DEGAS

You are saying that when I --

*(At his most sincere.)*

Je suis vraiment désolé. Can you forgive me?

MARY

*(Beat.)*

I don't know. Can you forgive Manet?

DEGAS

That is asking a lot of me.

*(Working it out.)*

I don't want to stay on bad terms with Manet. I do want to remain friends with you. Very well. Degas forgives Manet!

MARY

Cassatt forgives Degas!

*(They smile at each other.)*

DEGAS

What now?

MARY

What now? We put on the greatest exhibition of art the world has ever seen!

END ACT ONE