

THE REPLICA

By Andrew Biss

An abused wife reflects on her past and deconstructs the emergence of the replica that now haunts her present.

CHARACTER

WOMAN: Stoic, contemplative, with a noticeably sardonic edge. Mid 30s-40s.

SETTING & TIME

SETTING: A dark room illuminated by a single spotlight.

TIME: The present.

The Replica premiered in Montréal at the Théâtre SainteCatherine in 2006, produced by Unwashed Grape Productions and directed by Paul Hawkins.

At Rise: A light comes up centre-stage, revealing a woman sitting in a chair staring out ahead. She is dressed simply, her hair and face unembellished. She speaks in a somewhat detached, observational manner.

WOMAN: When I got up this morning the first thing I did was use the bathroom, just as always. Afterwards, as I washed my hands in a liquid soap scented with chamomile, I happened to glance up ... and there it was, ever so sheepishly looking back at me. I wasn't shocked or surprised. It's there every morning. Sometimes I look at it, sometimes I don't. But it's always there...there in the mirror ... the replica.

(Pause.)

I'm not exactly sure when I first started seeing it. It wasn't as if it appeared overnight. It took shape gradually, over time. But I couldn't tell you when it began. When I see it now it almost feels as though it's always been there. But it hasn't. That's what makes it hard to look at.

(Beat.)

I think the earliest I can recall it beginning to take shape was about four years after I'd married Karl. Nothing too pronounced at first; nothing to set off any alarm bells. Just a slight stiffening around the mouth, the eyes ever so slightly less...curious. It's strange how these things creep up on you without you noticing. Until it's too late, of course.

(Pause.)

I married Karl in a fit of existential panic, and, like most decisions made in a state of panic, it wasn't a particularly wise one. He was older and colder, and quite successful. He ran his heart, mind, and business with ruthless efficiency. Not to be outdone by anyone, his rivalrous nature sought supremacy in all things - all but a popularity contest, that is, shrewd enough as he was to know that that was one battle he had no hope of winning. The very fact that he didn't give a damn what those around him thought of him made him doubly despicable to those who were unfortunate enough to

have the pleasure - including most of my family. Unburdened by the need to please, he was free to treat people in whatever way would best achieve his goals, however callous the method.

(Beat.)

Why, then, would I have married such an autocratic bully, I hear you ask. Ah, but that's a trick question, you see - because I didn't. Not the person you see now. Not the one I can barely stand to look at anymore. No ... it was a very different person that married Karl, as she wandered through the woods with her little basket, on her way to granny's house.

(Beat.)

She was ... well, she was many things, but most of all she was lonely. Lonely and unloved. Yes, I know, I can almost hear the strains of a violin in the background myself, adding its cloying accompaniment to those hackneyed words. How pathetic it sounds now - especially now. And how ironic that the emptiness I felt then took me firmly by the hand and led me to this hollow place I now dwell in.

(Beat.)

Back then, she was the middle child of middle-class parents with middling expectations of her. They loved her, I suppose, as best they could. But in truth, they were both so busy resenting each other there was very little emotion left to go around. Rather than their child, she sometimes felt they regarded her as an all too real and unwelcome reminder of a time when they were once intimate.

(Beat.)

Nevertheless, despite their indifference, she'd decided she was destined for greatness and before long would be celebrated and adored the world over — as a novelist. First a bachelor's in English at a prestigious university, followed by her master's, then on to a hectic life of publisher's deadlines, endless book tours, interviews, children, more deadlines, more interviews, more children, holidays in far-flung corners of the earth in order to reclaim her sanity, then back to more of the same, and so on.

(Pause.)

When she met Karl she fell for him in an instant. Not because of anything he said or did - though he could be very charming when he wanted. No, it was his face that sealed her fate. It wasn't particularly attractive or handsome — not by accepted standards. But it almost broke her heart to look at it. It was so pitiful and forlorn - despairing, even. He had the sort of features that gave one the impression he was perpetually on the verge of tears.

How could she resist? She wanted to make it all better.

(With a sigh.)

Ah, the treachery of images.

(Pause.)

She wasn't accepted into any of the colleges and universities she'd applied to, but higher education or no, she was determined that she would be a writer. Six months later, she'd completed her first novel and felt a level of pride and self-fulfillment that she's never imagined possible. After a flurry of rejection slips from all the publishers and agents she'd sent it out to, she felt decidedly less so. Still, unbowed, she continued to write, pouring her thoughts and feelings into her little worlds of love and longing.

(Pause.)

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night in great pain as Karl enters me from behind using a mouthful of spit and a great deal of force. Sometimes I have to bite the pillow to stop myself from crying out as he thrusts into me with increasing fury, muttering insults and abuse under his breath as he does so. It's not directed at me, I don't believe. It's directed at whoever he's imagining me to be at the time. I often wonder if it's always the same person or if it's someone new each time. Once, just as he was coming, I distinctly heard him say, "Fuck you, Cohen, fuck you!" I wondered if it was the same Cohen I thought it was.

(Beat.)

It hurts a lot ... he's well-endowed. Sometimes _ I bleed.

(Pause.)

She began writing children's stories. After her second novel was rebuffed as unanimously as her first, she imagined this might provide a slightly easier route into the business. It didn't. Most of the comments she received referred to her lack of understanding of a child's imagination and of the somewhat trenchant tone of most of her tales. Clearly, the accumulation of rejection had taken its toll. It was around this time that she first met Karl.

(Pause.)

On a good day I'll ponder on what I might do to earn a living if I ever found the courage to leave here. On a bad day I'll think of nothing. Nothing at all. Hardly moving. Hardly breathing. Just being. And on a very bad day I'll sit and contemplate the number of pills I'd need to swallow in order to ensure success. My greatest fear is ending up as a vegetable - something not dead, but not alive either - and aware of it. Then again, degree or no degree, it may be just the role I'm most highly qualified for. I've made a few discreet inquiries on the matter from time to time, but there appear to be very few resources on the subject.

(Pause.)

A proposal of marriage finally brought an end to her roundelay of rejection. For the first few years things went relatively smoothly. Karl didn't want her to work, so she didn't. He made very good money - what was the point? She stopped writing, too, the impetus having abandoned her after the resounding thud of her initial efforts. About all she did do after a while was smile and nod at Karl's side at every party and business dinner he paraded her at. She wanted to get pregnant, but Karl said the timing was wrong for children. It would have been difficult anyway, as they rarely ever made love, and even then Karl always seemed to have trouble reaching orgasm. He told her he had a low libido. She believed him. It made her feel better.

(Pause.)

If I stare at it long enough long enough to get beyond the taut features and the dull, expressionless eyes - I can sometimes make out faint traces of the original. They're small and hard to distinguish, but they're there - like little nail holes left in a wall by a former tenant.

It pains me to see them. It hurts to be reminded of the original when all you have now is a worthless reproduction. How could I have squandered that so easily? How did I let it slip through my hands? Didn't I see it happening? Sometimes, I suppose. But it's all so gradual, isn't it? And then one day you look in the mirror and there it is. It's already happened. It's already too late. That's why most days I choose not to look. It's just easier.

(Pause.)

The success of Karl's various business ventures grew at an astonishing rate, as did his loathsomeness. Gradually, visits and phone calls from family and friends grew less frequent. She hardly saw Karl now, so busy was he making money and enemies. Her days became filled with television and tranquilizers - as prescribed by her general practitioner. She discovered that one seemed to compliment the other surprisingly well. She rarely went outside unless she had to. A quick trip to the supermarket or to get a prescription filled was all she could cope with. People always seemed to be looking at her strangely...as if they knew something she didn't. Once, the woman in the bakery told her she'd seen Karl late the other night stop his car and pick up a skinny blond boy a couple of streets away, and inquired if it was their son. She told the woman she must be mistaken, as they didn't have any children. The woman insisted it was Karl, and added that she'd seen him putting his arm around the boy, so obviously they were close. "Perhaps it was a nephew?" the woman suggested. "Perhaps it was," she replied. She stopped shopping there after that. She'd make do with sliced bread.

(Pause.)

Today being one of my better days, I'd been giving more thought to how I might support myself in the unlikely event I should ever regain consciousness. With a nonexistent resume there would, on the surface, appear to be little option for anything that didn't involve washing dishes or scrubbing floors. I did, however, have an inspired idea this morning that might just provide me with a viable alternative to a life of low-paid drudgery - as a make-up artist. I don't know why I didn't think of it before. I'm actually quite good at it, and could be quite successful, I think, if given the opportunity. Perhaps I could work for a theatre company or in a television studio. I don't have any formal training in it, of course - I'm completely self-taught. I did buy a couple of books on stage make-up techniques, but otherwise it's all been a process of trial and error ... and that's certainly no stranger to me. I've become quite adept at it, even if I do say it myself.

(Pause.)

It got to the point where she'd let both herself and the house go to such an extent that even she couldn't stand it anymore. One morning, she got up and showered first thing, just like normal people did, made a little effort in her appearance - for what purpose, she wasn't quite sure, but she did it anyway - and began the task of reclaiming some

sense of order out of the chaos that was now her habitat. With a zeal that surprised even her, she swept, dusted, cleaned, sorted, and organized. The bedroom, in particular, had become a shrine to neglect, and the piles of dirty clothes and discarded folderol seemed never-ending. Still, she persevered. Nearing the end of her task, she decided to make sense of the stack of business papers and printed e-mails that Karl routinely emptied from his briefcase onto the floor of his closet. As she stacked and tidied, she came upon a pornographic magazine filled with pictures of naked teenagers, all with Russian names. Dimitri, Vladimir, Igor, Kostya, Alek. She pushed the magazine back amongst the pile of papers as surreptitiously as she imagined Karl must've done on numerous occasions and banished the thought of it from her mind. She'd never seen it.

(Pause.)

He'll be home soon...or perhaps not. Perhaps he'll be working late: If not, it'll be a grudging grunt of acknowledgement and precious little else...if I'm lucky. Two strangers cohabiting with absolutely nothing in common bar the fact that both found life to be a bitter disappointment, despite all the hype - albeit for different reasons.

Hardly a common bond, though, is it?

(Pause.)

The first time he hit her he seemed genuinely horrified at what he'd done. He appeared, in his anguish, and much to her surprise, to actually take a step back and re-examine himself and the person he'd become. The second time, less so. The third and thereafter it became a matter of routine.

(Beat.)

Like anything, I suppose, the more you do it the less you think about it. Familiarity breeds contempt...and contempt becomes familiar. It's all what you get used to, isn't it?

(Beat.)

Before long, she found her face to be hardening almost as fast as her heart. She thought about telling someone. She thought about a lot of things. It's all she ever seemed to do - stare out at nothing in particular ... wondering if it would change.

(Pause.)

Lavender. I use lavender the most. Sometimes green, but mostly lavender. It's like magic. I can have the most unsightly yellowish-brown bruise on my face or my arm and with a little patience and a few brush strokes of lavender concealer beneath my foundation you'd never know it was there. It's a godsend. It's best to use a nylon brush, though, as natural hairs tend to soak up the concealer and not work as well. A yellow-based concealer works best for the eyes - black eyes, that is. It doesn't have quite the miraculous effect of the lavender, but at least you end up looking merely sleep-deprived rather than punched. The redder bruises require a more green based concealer, which also seems to work rather well. When the situation calls for it, I can appear very colour coordinated. Even Karl's impressed. I sometimes wonder who's the better concealer.

(Pause.)

On the night Karl was arrested she was watching "The Bridge on the River Kwai" on the television. As she sat contemplating Alec Guinness' blind commitment to a construction that could only serve to perpetuate his imprisonment, Karl was being finger-printed and having his picture taken. He'd been caught engaged in a sex act with a young man with a pierced lip in the men's room in one of the larger department stores. Mr. Buchenroth was summoned, conversations took place, smiles were exchanged, hands shaken, and nothing more was heard of it. As she'd reminded herself while sitting in Karl's brand new Porsche 924 just a few weeks earlier, it's amazing what money can buy. When the bridge finally exploded, tumbling down into the river, her sense of catharsis was palpable. Ah, the magic of the movies.

She switched off the television and went to bed.

(Pause.)

I suppose I should do the same. No point in waiting up. A couple of pills and a sip of water and I'll soon be slipping off to that pleasant place of dark nothingness that has no facts waiting to be faced or eyes to be avoided. If I could, I'd sleep forever. In sleep I'm unassailable ... unaccountable.

(Beat.)

I sometimes wonder - in more cogent moments - if that's not the reason I can hardly stand to look at it any longer...why I turn away when its tired, fraught gaze catches mine in the mirror. Not because of what it is, but for what it's become. Am I the one that did that? Is that my handiwork? In the grand scheme of things, am I the one ultimately responsible? By simply letting life happen to me, did I somehow become the unwitting architect of my own fate? Perhaps I did. That's not to let Karl off the hook. He has his own demons, it's true, and doubtless as many excuses as the rest of us, but at the end of the day it isn't the repressed hands of fate that blacken my body.

(Pause.)

But when I look back upon it all, a little part of me cannot help but think about all the times I seemed to let life simply wash over me, drifting along in whichever direction the current took me. It just seemed natural, somehow --- easier. Why swim against the tide when you can lay back and drift? "Go with the flow," isn't that what they always say? Depends on which way it's flowing, though, doesn't it?

(Beat.)

Anyway ... best not to think about it, I say. It only makes it worse. And the less you think about it, the less it hurts...and the better it all is. And the best part is, if I close my eyes ...

(Closing her eyes.)

I can make it all go away.

(The lights slowly fade to BLACK.)

END OF PLAY