

marx in soho

House lights up part of the way. Light on center stage, showing a bare stage, except for a table and several chairs. Marx enters, wearing a black frock coat and vest, white shirt, black floppy tie. He is bearded, short, stocky, with a black mustache and hair turning gray, wearing steel-rimmed spectacles. He is carrying a draw-sack, stops, walks to the edge of the stage, looks out at the audience, and seems pleased, a little surprised.

Thank God, an audience!

Music Out!

He unloads his supplies from the draw-sack: a few books, newspapers, a bottle of beer, a glass. He turns and walks to the front of the stage.

Good of you to come. You weren't put off by all those idiots who said: "Marx is dead!" Well, I am . . . and I am not. That's dialectics for you.

He doesn't mind joking about himself or his ideas. Perhaps he's mellowed over all these years. But just when you think Marx has grown soft, there are bursts of anger.

howard zinn

You may wonder how I got here . . . *smiles mischievously* . . . public transportation.

His accent is slightly British, slightly continental, nothing to draw attention, but definitely not American.

I did not expect to come back *here* . . . I wanted to return to Soho. That's where I lived in London. But . . . a bureaucratic mix-up. Here I am, Soho in New York . . . *Sighs*. Well, I always wanted to visit New York. *Pours himself some beer, takes a drink, puts it down.*

His mood changes.

Why have I returned?

He shows a little anger.

To clear my name!

He lets that sink in.

I've been reading your newspapers . . . *Picks up a newspaper*. They are all proclaiming that my ideas are dead! It's nothing new. These clowns have been saying this for more than a hundred years. Don't you wonder: why is it necessary to declare me dead again and again?

Well, I have had it up to here. I asked for the right to come back, just for a while. But there are rules. I told you: it's a bureaucracy. It is permissible to read, even to watch. But not to travel. I protested,

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of course. And had some support . . . Socrates told them: "The untraveled life is not worth living!" Gandhi fasted. Mother Jones threatened to picket. Mark Twain came to my defense, in his own strange way. Buddha chanted: Ommmm! But the others kept quiet. My God, at this point, what do they have to lose?

↳ Yes, there too I have a reputation as a trouble-maker. And even there, protest works! Finally, they said, "All right, you can go. You can have an hour or so to speak your mind. But remember, *no agitating!*" They do believe in freedom of speech . . . but within limits . . . *Smiles*. They are liberals.

You can spread the word: Marx is back! For a short while. But understand one thing — I'm not a Marxist. *Laughs*. I said that once to Pieper and he almost croaked. I should tell you about Pieper. *Takes a drink of beer.*

We were living in London. Jenny and I and the little ones. ~~Plus two dogs, three cats, and two birds.~~ Barely living. A flat on Dean Street, near where they dumped the city's sewage. We were in London because I had been expelled from the continent. Expelled from the Rhineland, yes, from my birthplace.

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I had done dangerous things. I was editor of a newspaper, *Der Rheinische Zeitung*. Hardly revolutionary. But I suppose the most revolutionary act one can engage in is . . . to tell the truth. ⑥

In the Rhineland, the police were arresting poor people for gathering firewood from the estates of the rich. I wrote an editorial protesting that. Then they tried to censor our paper. I wrote an editorial declaring that there was no freedom of the press in Germany. They decided to prove me right. They shut us down. Only then did we become radical — isn't that the way it is? Our last issue of the *Zeitung* had a huge headline in red ink: "Revolt!" . . . That annoyed the authorities. They ordered me out of the Rhineland.

So, I went to Paris. Where else do exiles go? Where else can you sit all night in a café and tell lies about how revolutionary you were in the old country? . . . Yes, if you are going to be an exile, be one in Paris.

Paris was our honeymoon. Jenny found a tiny flat in the Latin Quarter. Heavenly months. But the word was out, from the German police to the Paris police. It seems that the police develop an internationalist consciousness long before the workers . . .

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So, I was expelled from Paris, too. We went to Belgium. Expelled again.

We came to London, where refugees come from all over the world. The English are admirable in their tolerance . . . and insufferable in their boasting about it.

He coughs, which he will do from time to time. Shakes his head.

The doctors told me the cough would go away in a few weeks. That was in 1858.

But I was telling you about Pieper. You see, in London, the political refugees from the continent marched in and out of our house. Pieper was one of them. He buzzed around me like a hornet. He was a flatterer, a sycophant. He would station himself six inches from me, to make sure I could not evade him, and he would quote from my writings. I would say, "Pieper, please don't quote me to myself."

He had the audacity to say, thinking I would be pleased, that he would translate *Das Kapital* into English. Ha! The man could not speak an English sentence without butchering it. English is a beautiful language. It is Shakespeare's language. If Shakespeare had heard Pieper speak one sentence of English, he would have taken poison!

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But Jenny felt sorry for him. She liked to invite him to our family dinners. One evening, Pieper came and announced the formation of "The Marxist Society of London."

"A Marxist society?" I asked. "What's that?"

"We meet every week to discuss another of your writings. We read aloud, examine sentence by sentence. That's why we call ourselves Marxists — we believe completely and wholeheartedly in everything you have written."

"Completely and wholeheartedly?" I asked.

"Yes, and we would be honored, Herr Doktor Marx" — he always called me Herr Doktor Marx — "if you would address the next meeting of the Marxist society."

"I cannot do that."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because *I am not a Marxist.*" *Laughs heartily.*

I didn't mind his bad English. Mine was not that perfect. It was his way of thinking. He was an embarrassment, a satellite encircling my words, reflecting them to the world but distorting them. And then he defended the distortions like a fanatic, denouncing anyone who interpreted them differently.

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I once said to Jenny: "Do you know what I fear most?"

And she said: "That the workers' revolution will never come?"

"No, that the revolution *will* come, and it will be taken over by men like Pieper — flatterers when out of power, bullies and braggarts when holding power, Dogmatists. They will speak for the proletariat and they will interpret my ideas for the world. They will organize a new priesthood, a new hierarchy, with excommunications and indexes, inquisitions and firing squads.

"All this will be done in the name of Communism, delaying for a hundred years the Communism of freedom, dividing the world between capitalist empires and Communist empires. They will muck up our beautiful dream and it will take another revolution, maybe two or three, to clean it up. That's what I fear."

No, I wasn't going to have Pieper translate *Das Kapital* into English. It represented fifteen years of work — in the conditions of Soho. Walking every morning past beggars sleeping amidst the sewage, making my way to the British Museum and its magnificent library, working there until dusk, reading,

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reading . . . Is there anything more dull than reading political economy? *He thinks.* Yes, writing political economy.

Then, home through the darkening streets, listening to the vendors calling out the prices of their wares, and the veterans of the Crimean War, some blind, others without legs, begging for a penny in the noxious air. The poor-smell of London, yes.

My critics, trying to minimize what went into *Das Kapital*, would say, as they always say about radical writers, "Oh, he must have had some dreadful personal experience." Yes, if you want to make much of it, that walk home through Soho fueled the anger that went into *Das Kapital*.

I hear you saying, "Well, of course, that's how it was *then*, a century ago." Only *then*? On my way here today, I walked through the streets of your city, surrounded by garbage, breathing foul air, past the bodies of men and women sleeping on the street, ~~huddled against the cold~~. Instead of a lassie singing a ballad, I heard a voice in my ear . . . *plaintively*: "Some change, sir, for a cup of coffee?"

Angry now: You call this progress, because you have motor cars and telephones and flying machines

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and a thousand potions to make you smell better?
And people sleeping on the streets?

He picks up a newspaper and peers at it. An official report: the United States' Gross National Product (yes, gross!) last year was seven thousand billion dollars. Most impressive. But tell me, where is it? Who is profiting from it? Who is not? *Reads from the newspaper again.* Less than 500 individuals control two thousand billion dollars in business assets. Are these people more noble, more hard-working, more valuable to society than the ^{single} mother ~~in the tenement~~, nurturing three children through the winter, with no money to pay the heating bill?

Did I not say, a hundred and fifty years ago, that capitalism would enormously increase the wealth of society, but that this wealth would be concentrated

Do you know Oliver Goldsmith's poem "The Deserted Village"?

Recites: "Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey/
Where wealth accumulates and men decay." Yes, *decay*. That's what I saw as I walked through your city

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this morning. Houses decaying, schools decaying, human beings decaying. But then I walked a bit farther, and I was suddenly surrounded by men of obvious wealth, women in jewels and furs. Suddenly I heard the sound of sirens. Was violence being done somewhere nearby? Was a crime being committed? Was someone trying to take part of the Gross National Product, illegally, from those who had stolen it legally?

Ah, the wonders of the market system! Human beings reduced to commodities, their lives controlled by the super-commodity, money.

Blackout

Lights up after a long beat

Was it something I said?

His tone softens, reminiscing. In that little flat in Soho, Jenny made hot soup and boiled potatoes. There was fresh bread from our friend the baker down the street. We would sit around the table and eat and talk about events of the day — the Irish struggle for freedom, the latest war, the stupidity of the country's leaders, a political opposition confining itself to pips and squeaks, the cowardly press . . . I suppose things are different these days, eh?

After dinner, we would clear the table and I would work. With my cigars handy, and a glass of

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beer. Yes, work until three or four in the morning. My books piled up on one side, the parliamentary reports piled up on another. Jenny would be at the other end of the table, transcribing — my handwriting was impossible, and she would rewrite every word of mine — can you imagine a more heroic act?

Occasionally, a crisis. No, not a world crisis. A book would be missing. One day I could not find my Ricardo. I asked Jenny: "Where is my Ricardo?"

"You mean *Principles of Political Economy*?" Well, she thought I was finished with it and she had taken it to the pawnshop.

I lost my temper. "My Ricardo! You pawned my Ricardo!"

She said: "Be quiet! Last week didn't we pawn the ring my mother gave me?"

That's how it was. *Sighs*. We pawned everything. Especially gifts from Jenny's family. When we ran out of those gifts, we pawned our clothes. One winter — do you know the London winters? — I did without my overcoat. Another time, I walked out of the house and my feet began to freeze on the snow, and then I realized: I was not wearing shoes. We had pawned them the day before.

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more! But in doing so, it creates, unwittingly, a world culture. People cross borders as never before in history. Ideas cross borders. Something new is bound to come of this. *Pauses, contemplatively.*

When I was in Paris with Jenny in 1843, I was twenty-five, and I wrote that in the new industrial system people are estranged from their work because it is distasteful to them. They are estranged from nature, as machines, smoke, smells, noise invade their senses — progress, it is called. They are estranged from others because everyone is set against everyone else, scrambling for survival. And they are estranged from their own selves, living lives that are not their own, living as they do not really want to live, so that a good life is possible only in dreams, in fantasy.

But it does not have to be. There is still a possibility of choice. Only a possibility, I grant. Nothing is certain. That is now clear. I was too damned certain. Now I know — anything can happen. But people must get off their asses!

Does that sound too radical for you? Remember, to be radical is simply to grasp the root of a problem. And the root is *us*.

I have a suggestion. Pretend you have boils. Pretend that sitting on your ass gives you enormous

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pain, so you must stand up. You must move, must act.

Let's not speak anymore about capitalism, socialism. Let's just speak of using the incredible wealth of the earth for human beings. Give people what they need: food, medicine, clean air, pure water, trees and grass, pleasant homes to live in, some hours of work, more hours of leisure. Don't ask who deserves it. Every human being deserves it.

Well, it's time to go.

Picks up his belongings. Starts to go, turns.

Do you resent my coming back and irritating you? Look at it this way. It is the second coming. Christ couldn't make it, so Marx came . . .

Play Exit Music (Mozart)