

PICTURE PERFECT

Book & Lyrics by
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Music by
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Picture Perfect

CHARACTERS:

JESSICA	A painter.
MICHAEL	Her boyfriend/husband.
CLOWN	A mythical creature. Embodiment of an unfinished painting and the demonic thoughts in Michael's head.
CHORUS	Eight additional actors to sing backup.

TIME & PLACE:

An apartment, present.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Landon and I were selected to participate in Prospect Theatre Company's Musical Theatre Lab in October 2015. Nine groups were commissioned to write short musicals to be performed together as a Halloween production. By the luck of pulling two "scary" words out of a hat, our prompt for the evening was "haunted" and "clown." I had the most challenging time creating a reason for a singing clown that didn't come off as comical or insincere. The concept for this show finally came to me when I was laid off from my first job. After losing my career, I also lost my entire social circle and felt very alone. I wanted this show to highlight the internal feelings of a man who just needed someone to be there for him. The show was written as an operetta, so I decided not to differentiate lyrics from dialogue or add song cues. Because of the breakneck speed of writing and producing this fantastic night with The Prospect Theatre Company, Landon and I never had a chance to go back and make any edits. It's a shame. I'm sure there are a few lines I could have cut. I'm also disappointed we never had an opportunity to record a studio album. I was delighted with the show and thought it was some of the best music Landon and I had ever written.

An easel faces upstage. JESSICA (late 20's) enters, picks up a paintbrush and begins painting. She hums...

JESSICA

Hmm...
Hmm...

MICHAEL (late 20's) enters, looks at JESSICA for several moments as if he is taking a picture in his mind.

MICHAEL

It was autumn, 2012.
Jessica.
She was a painter,
I didn't have an artistic bone in my
body.
And we were very much in love.

Oh---

CHORUS

MICHAEL enters the scene. He sits in his chair and looks at JESSICA.

MICHAEL

Is it done?

JESSICA

Not yet.

MICHAEL

I want to see it. Let me see it.
(beat)
I'm already proud of it.

JESSICA

Okay, Holland Cotter. You haven't seen it yet.

MICHAEL

But I know it's perfect.
(beat)
You're perfect.

JESSICA

Try telling that to your mother.

MICHAEL

Sitting in this armchair.
On a lazy afternoon.
Watching all your hand strokes.

(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Telling you some bad jokes.
On a lazy afternoon in August.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

I want to stay here--
In this moment.
Frozen in time.
Just me and you.
I want to stay here--
In this moment.
In this picture perfect moment
Of mine.

CHORUS

Here--
In this moment.
Frozen in time.
Me and you.
Here--
In this moment.
Picture perfect moment.

CHORUS

(under JESSICA)

Hmm---

(cont'd...)

JESSICA

Standing at this easel.
And you're acting like a dog.

MICHAEL

I'm excited to see it!

JESSICA

Jumping on the arm chair.
Wondering what I'll share
On a lazy afternoon in August.

MICHAEL + JESSICA

I want to stay here--
In this moment.
Frozen in time.
Just me and you.
I want to stay here--
In this moment.
In this picture perfect moment
Of mine.

CHORUS

Here--
In this moment.
Frozen in time.
Me and you.
Here--
In this moment.
Picture perfect moment.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Okay, are you ready?

MICHAEL

I am so ready.

*JESSICA turns the easel to face downstage. It's a
jubilant painting of a clown, almost finished.*

Most noticeable, where there should be a bright red nose, there is a white blotch.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
(disappointed; maybe surprised)

A clown.

JESSICA
(ignoring his disappointment)

What?

MICHAEL approaches JESSICA. He wraps his hands around her from behind.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Clowns make ya smile.
They brighten your day.
Clowns make ya laugh,
And take troubles away.
Clowns are just goofy!
And their noses say:
"Despite this shitty world.

(she laughs)

It will be okay."

(beat)

Okay?

MICHAEL

Okay.

JESSICA

I've gotta go. I'm out of red paint and need to finish his nose.

(beat)

Better hurry, or the art store will close.

I'll be fine on my own.

JESSICA grabs her car keys and exits.

MICHAEL
(to audience)

If only I'd known...

Lights shift. With the unfinished clown painting still facing the audience, the chorus all turn upstage.

PRIEST

(facing upstage)

Friends. We are gathered here today to
celebrate the life of Jessica Williams,
who was taken from us so young last
Sunday evening in a tragic car
accident.

CHORUS

Ave Maria.
Mmm...

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

If only I'd known...

*Lights dim to leave only MICHAEL sitting in his
chair, looking at the unfinished painting.*

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Sitting in this armchair.
And the days are getting longer.
Make yourself a coffee.
Make yourself some dinner.
Sitting in this armchair.
And the days are getting longer.
And the days are getting longer.
And you're counting down the hours.
'Til you can make another dinner.
As you're sitting in this armchair.
And you're counting down the hours.
So you can fin'ly go to bed.
And you can't start another day.
A day that surly will be longer.

*MICHAEL spins the painting upstage away from
the audience.*

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

What are you looking at..?

And where are you? Stuck.
In this moment.
Frozen in time.
Me and...

(to the painting; almost angry)

You!
In the never ending darkness
Of my mind.

CLOWN

I don't like it when you're sad.

MICHAEL spins around.

From the darkness upstage comes a figure. In a sudden movement, it is all to clear it is the unfinished clown. He is accompanied by unidentified creatures in black cloak called "the darkness."

DARKNESS

Ahh!!!

MICHAEL

It can't be! Oh my God, I'm losing it. You can't be real.

CLOWN

But I am real, Michael.

MICHAEL

What are you doing?!

CLOWN

I'm here to help.

There's one thing no one ever talks about
When it comes to death.
It's what happens to the people
Who are left to clean the mess.
In a flash, a sudden end
To all you've ever known arrives.
They think, "Oh, that's such a pity."
Then they go about their lives.

MICHAEL

What do you want?

CLOWN

No, they'll never understand
The pain you're going through.
No, They'll never understand
The pressure placed on you.
As they go about their lives
And the world moves on.
You're the one who's dealing
With the fact she's gone.

MICHAEL

I'm doing the best I can.

DARKNESS 1

You need to talk to someone.

DARKNESS 2

Or you're going to unhitch.

DARKNESS 1 + 2

But the people you confide in
Think you're just a whinny bitch.

CLOWN

So, in your daily conversations

CLOWN + 2 DARKNESSES

You pretend you're not in pain.

+ MORE DARNSESSES

But you're constantly reminded

ALL DARKNESSES (WITH CLOWN)

Things will never be the same.

No, they'll never understand
The voices in your brain.
No, they'll never understand
The constant beating strain.
As they go about their lives
They don't think of you.
You're the one who's left here
With no hope in view.

MICHAEL

You don't think I already know that?! It's all that's going
through my mind!

CLOWN

That's why I'm here to help you.

MICHAEL

How are you helping?

CLOWN

I'll make ya smile.
I'll brighten your day.
I'll make you laugh
And take troubles away.
The world may be shitty,
But I'm here to say:
"It's the world not you.
That should pay."

MICHAEL

What do you mean? The world should pay?

CLOWN

I can see into your soul. I can see you're not angry. You're sad. Always sad. A sadness that cannot be healed. Why be so sad? You have the power to take the sadness away.

THE DARKNESS

(growing in intensity)

Ahh---

Ahh---

Ahh---

CLOWN

Why you? What have you done? Why are you the one to have to deal with this? Do you think your friends care? They go about living their lives. They don't understand what's happened to you. If they really cared, wouldn't they be here? If they really cared, wouldn't they stop what they were doing to help?

THE DARKNESS

(growing in intensity)

Ahh---

Ahh---

Ahh---

If you ended the sadness, then they would understand. They would know the pain you were going through. They would finally make time. Then, you wouldn't be alone. Why is it only in death we finally take the time to contemplate someone's life? You don't have to bear the weight alone. I'm here for you. I want you to be happy.

Ahh---

Ahh---

Ahh---

The clown takes a knife from his breast pocket and holds it in front of MICHAEL, handing it to him.

DARKNESS

Don't you want to be happy?

CLOWN

You don't have to wake up tomorrow morning with that feeling in your soul.

DARKNESS

Don't you want to be happy?

(echoing)

Happy..?

CLOWN

You don't have to count down the hours in that armchair.

DARKNESS

Don't you want to be happy?

(echoing)

Happy..? Happy..?

CLOWN

You have the power to choose. Do you want to be sad or happy?

DARKNESS

Don't you want to be happy? Happy..? Happy..?

Don't you want to be happy? Happy..? Happy..?

MICHAEL holds the knife; tempted.

DARKNESS (CONT'D)

Don't you want to be happy? Happy..? Happy..?

Don't you want to be happy? Happy..? Happy..?

A hand reaches forward and grabs the knife from MICHAEL's hand. It's JESSICA, now dressed in all white.

MICHAEL

Jessica? The more and more pressure placed on me, the easier it becomes to sit in my chair and do nothing. I just watch the days pass without you. I don't know how much more I can take.

As MICHAEL looks up, the clown and "the darkness" are gone.

JESSICA

You can not stay here---

In this moment.

Just frozen in time.

JESSICA leads MICHAEL to the easel and replaces the knife with a paintbrush.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

All by yourself.

(she guides his hand in painting)

Learn how to live---

In the moment.

Finish what we started.

Start another chapter.

Go on an adventure.

Fall in love again.

(MORE)

JESSICA (CONT'D)

But keep these picture perfect moments
Of mine.

*MICHAEL turns the easel around and we see a
finished painting: a happy clown with a bright red
nose.*

JESSICA (CONT'D)

It's perfect.

(she kisses him on the cheek)

Clowns make ya smile.
They brighten your day.

MICHAEL

It was autumn, 2012.

JESSICA

Clowns make ya laugh,
And take troubles away.

MICHAEL

She was a painter.

JESSICA

Clowns are just goofy!
And their noses say:

MICHAEL

I didn't have an artistic bone in my body.

JESSICA

"Despite this shitty world."

MICHAEL

And we were very much in love.

JESSICA

"Everything will be okay."

He exits.

END OF PLAY.