

SOTTO VOCE

A Short Film Written by

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Draft 3

We hear the clacking of "Newton's Cradle" pendulum balls. Tik tik tik tik. Now we see the physics gadget, the little metal balls swinging in an even rhythm. [Surrounded by mirrors?] Quick cut to a metronome sitting on top of a piano, clicking at the same tempo, the arm swinging back and forth. Now a giant speaker amp on a festival stage thumps to the same beat. Back to the balls clacking. SAM (presents as male, 19-20ish) is running full out on a treadmill, staring straight into a mirror, psychotic determination and sheer pain co-mingle on his face. The pain takes over. The tempo suddenly double times---

JUMP CUT TO:

SAM is laying on his side in bed, recording himself, not terribly worried about his lighting or the angle of the phone camera. He is deep in thought, his eyes in the distance as he reaches for the words to explain what's happening inside of him.

SAM

... Of course it fucking hurt. It still hurts, in a way, but let me tell you something.

(he looks into the camera
with a tiny smirk)

My trauma is literal gold.

He holds up his hand and blows golden glitter into the camera.

SAM is sitting in the pew watching the induction of a new chorister. Various clergy and a choir teacher in full regalia bring forth a boy of 8.

CHOIR TEACHER

Reverend Father, I present to you,
Theodore Wilson Lee, to be admitted
as a Chorister of this Church.

RECTOR

Do you desire to be admitted as a
Chorister of this Church?

BOY

I do.

RECTOR

In the Name of the Father, and of
the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I
admit you, Theodore, as a Chorister
of this Church.

The ceremonial robes are draped over the boy. Sam looks down at his phone. We see a long scroll of green texts all sent by him, with no one responding on the other end.

RECTOR (CONT'D)

Remember always that what you sing
with your lips, you should believe
in your heart and what you believe
in your heart, you should practice
in your life. Amen.

Sam and his long legs strut away as the choir and organ begin to soar. His gate is confidence manifest, but we see him wipe a somber tear from his cheek.

4 EXT. LINCOLN CENTER - DAY 4

Sam walks briskly across the plaza en route to rehearsal. He stops to smoke a cannabis cig in front of a poster with his face on it.

5 INT. THEATER STAGE - DAY 5

People are milling impatiently, waiting for Sam. He bursts onto the stage. The conductor pops his head up from the pit.

SAM

Sorry, sorry, sorry.

CONDUCTOR

Are you warm?

Sam is wearing a loose tank that says: Not My Tempo. He places a large costume crown on his head and holds a scepter.

SAM

Yes.

The conductor taps his stand with his baton.

CONDUCTOR

(grumbling to the
orchestra off camera)
'Der Holle Rache Kocht in Meineem
Herzen'. Tutti. Tutti. 3 - 4

Sam belts out an impossibly high-pitched Mozart aria.

6 INT. THEATER STAGE - DAY

6

Sam is huddled with the conductor and the director going over blocking. BLAKE (30s) is sitting in the house seats making huge gestures with their watch. Sam looks over at him and shrugs. (BLAKE is wearing Sam's latest merch)

BLAKE
(mouthing)
We have to go!

Sam ignores them. So BLAKE goes up and interrupts.

BLAKE (CONT'D)
So, so sorry. But I have to steal
him away.

CONDUCTOR
Are you joking? We're not nearly
finished. And your client was 20
minutes late.

BLAKE shoots Sam a nasty look.

SAM
Sorry. Sorry everyone. I really am.
I have to go. It's sounding good
though right?

CONDUCTOR
(begrudgingly)
It sounds unbelievable, yes.

7 EXT. LINCOLN CENTER - DAY

7

Sam and BLAKE walk together towards the taxis.

BLAKE
What has gotten into you lately?

SAM
Nothing.

BLAKE
You told me you could handle the
album press and the opera. You
promised me.

SAM

I can! Jesus. Have you heard from my mother?

BLAKE

No. Should I have?

SAM

I just really need to speak with her and she won't text me back.

BLAKE opens the car door for Sam who slides in. BLAKE closes the door.

BLAKE

And we hate it when people don't text back.

8

INT. GREG'S OFFICE - DAY

8

Sam and BLAKE enter. There's a sound engineer/producer for the radio show Fresh Air on a laptop, hooking up a microphone.

SOUND 'GUY'

Hey. Have a seat. Grab a headset. She's waiting for you.

SAM

Wait, where is she?

SOUND GUY

She's in Philadelphia.

He points to the headphones.

SAM

Oh. OK. Random.

SOUND GUY

(to BLAKE)
You need a pair too?

SAM

(to the interviewer O.S.)
Hi Terry. Nice to meet you too.

BLAKE

Is it possible to listen--

SOUND GUY

In the next room? Yeah sure. I set up a speaker.

SAM

I am so sorry. I need to use the bathroom. I will be right back.

9 INT. BATHROOM - DAY

9

In a stall, Sam downs some vodka. Hits a vape and coughs. More vodka.

10 INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

10

BLAKE sits down at a conference table in the next room with the team: BLAKE, the manager. ANDREW Social Media Director. Andrew's assistant, Sharon.

We cut between the conference and Sam's interview. The interview begins over the speaker. [All Terri's lines are off screen]

TERRI (O.S.)

My guest today is Sam Moreschi. At age 19, he is already one of the world's most sought after countertenors, noted for his impressive range and power. His debut at La Scala as the titular role in Philip Glass's Akhnaten was a cultural phenomenon, that broke a 200-year attendance record. Sam is also a song writer, and successful DJ and has a new EP out called "Before the Bloom". Sam, welcome to *Fresh Air*. You're amazing.

SAM

Thank you. It's such an honor. And I'm turning 20 next week. So, not a teenager anymore.

TERRI

Well, happy early birthday. So let's start out with what does it mean to be a countertenor?

SAM

Well, it's a biological man who sings in his falsetto or head voice. It's that really breathy high voice. Like, think of Michael Jackson or Justin Bieber.

(MORE)

SAM (CONT'D)

The only difference for a countertenor is that we have developed that falsetto such that it sounds, like, really strong, really rich and full.

TERRI

And high. You can sing in a range many female sopranos struggle with.

SAM

On my good days. We're all doing the same thing, physiologically. It's just pushing air through the vocal chords and training the muscles to shape the sound.

TERRI

And you will be the first biological male to sing the famous Queen of the Night aria on the Met stage with that famous high F coloratura.

CUT TO:

11 CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

11

BLAKE speaks over the interview which is piping in through speakers.

BLAKE

He sounds genuinely honored to be doing the interview right? I had to explain who Terri Gross was on the car ride over.

The team nods their heads.

Back to interview:

SAM

The muscles in your throat are involuntary, so I can only control them through visualizations. It's sort of like texting a meme to myself via my brain. My teacher would say like, "imagine that a flower is opening when you open that note."

BEGIN FLASH
BACK:

12 INT. SCHOOL - DAY

12

Young Sam (11) is standing at the piano singing. HANS (teacher, mentor, 40s-60s) who is accompanying him suddenly slams on the keyboard.

HANS

No! I said picture a flower not a cat in heat. Again.

They begin again.

HANS (CONT'D)

You're fucking sharp. And I don't mean clever. Again.

Sam tries again.

HANS (CONT'D)

OK, Was that sharp or flat?

YOUNG SAM

Um. Flat.

HANS

No. It was on pitch. Again.

END FLASHBACK

13 BACK TO INTERVIEW

13

SAM

So I use that image in my mind to will my muscles to do what I want them to do and so when I go on stage, all I have to do is picture a beautiful flower gently opening.

CUT TO:

14 INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

14

TERRI (O.S.)

And do you use the same techniques in your pop music?

BLAKE turns down the volume so you can barely hear the interview.

BLAKE

We're definitely hitting the grandmas and 'guncles' demo. Where are we with the coming out strategy? Socials, talk to me.

ANDREW

Right. So, we thought a dressing room, dress rehearsal, getting ready kinda thing. Non-chalant, but earnest, but like casual.

BLAKE

Like a throw-away, almost. Not too big of a deal, but still giving it the gravity it requires. OK what else?

ANDREW

Or the tone could be more flippant, 'I guess this is important to everyone' meanwhile I'm making serious art ... kind of thing.

BLAKE

I like that too. Maybe more on brand for him. What else?

ANDREW

The easiest way is the notes app coming out. Courier font. Maybe Calibri. Tried and true.

BLAKE

Wait, but he's dating someone no? Why can't we just do, "Instagram official" and call it a day?

ANDREW

They broke up.

BLAKE

Motherfucker. OK. Have you pitched him these options yet?

ANDREW

Yes.

BLAKE

And?

ANDREW

He was annoyed, but agreeable.

BLAKE

Well, fuck my life. Obviously he can't be the first ever male Queen of the Night at the Met AND drop his power-bottom popper anthem AND not have something on the record about his sexuality.

Andrew's assistant SHARON chimes in.

SHARON

OK, what if we just like, update his Wiki page? Like, Personal Life: Sam identifies as gay. Done. Easy peezy.

BLAKE

I kinda of like it. Identifies as gay. Classic. Simple. Elegant.

Back to interview:

Sam is distracted by his phone. He looks again at the one-sided text chain with his mom.

TERRI

So before we talk about your new album.

SAM

EP. It's just an EP.

TERRI

Sorry, EP. I wanted to talk about the tradition of countertenors which began in the 1600s? Earlier?

SAM

Well, it doesn't begin with countertenors. It begins with the castrati, who first showed up in the Vatican logs in 1599.

TERRI

And remind us what a castrati is?

SAM

A castrato is a young boy who has been castrated before he hits puberty in order to preserve the high singing voice.

(MORE)

SAM (CONT'D)

The testicles are either removed or crushed which means the vocal chords don't drop, but the rest of body develops into a man's body and they were like the ultimate singing machines. Something about the lack of hormones allow the bones to grow longer and so the rib cage is bigger and more powerful. Anyway, they became famous through opera, which was all the rage across Europe. And the public loved them. Worshiped them like gods. It was a sacrifice for a chance at fame and fortune.

TERRI (V.O.)

That's a big theme in your own music isn't it? This idea of sacrifice and suffering for your dreams.

Sam is a bit loopy now, drugs and alcohol starting to show through.

SAM

Well, yeah. I know exactly what they went through. Let me tell you from experience, it takes real balls to have them cut off. That's what they call ironical!

The 'Sound Guy' in the room who wasn't really paying any attention is suddenly dialed in and nervous.

TERRI

What do mean from your own experience?

SAM

Puberty was like a ticking time bomb. It's what I had to do to stay in the conservatory. To keep singing and I wanted to keep singing more than anything. Let go to hold on. You know?

BLAKE and the team aren't listening, but the sound guy is and is really getting stressed.

TERRI

I'm not sure I'm following you. Are you saying that you were actually castrated as a young boy to preserve your singing voice?

Sam's words are starting to slur ever so slightly.

SAM

When I was 11. Yes.

TERRI

By whom?

SAM

My teacher. He was more than a teacher I guess. But it's a thing, ok. It's all kept hush, hush. But you would be shocked if I told you some very famous names.

SOUND GUY

Um, I'm sorry, you can't joke about something like that. This is for public radio. Need to keep it family friendly.

Sam's face is dazed. He is clearly quite drunk and stoned now by this point.

SAM

What? I'm not joking. My team is over there discussing how I should "come out", but oh boy, they have no fucking idea.

You can hear Terri start to whisper to her producers.

SOUND GUY

(over the phone)

Yeah. Yeah. OK.

(to Sam)

We're gonna have to wrap this up early and reschedule for another time. Maybe when you're feeling better.

15

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

15

You can see through the window to the conference room BLAKE picks up his cell phone. A look of complete confusion and disappointment spreads across his face as he looks over to Sam. Sam's face has gone beat red and is frozen in terror.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

16 INT. HANS' OFFICE - DAY

16

Hans is seated in his book-lined office. Young Sam is seated across from him. They sit awkwardly waiting, listening to the clock ticking.

HANS
Is your mom usually late?

SAM
Yeah. Kinda.

HANS
Five more minutes?

Sam shrugs.

HANS (CONT'D)
Time is always against us isn't it?
It's one of the great cruelties of
life. And a voice like yours, we
can barely spare an extra minute.
How can something that summons the
eternal suddenly disappear over
night, and always just when the
technique is coming into place.

Sam is suddenly holding in distraught.

SAM
Will I be expelled? When my voice
cracks, will I be expelled?

HANS
It's a crap shoot I'm sorry to say.
There's just no way to know. Many
go on to have fabulous voices and
great careers. But, some just ...
don't. The magic is gone.

SAM
If you think I will lose the magic
then why even bring me here?

Hans stands and leans against the desk.

HANS
We brought you here because we
think your voice is worth saving.
(MORE)

HANS (CONT'D)

We brought you here because we have a way to make you sing like no one ever gets to sing.

SAM

You do?

Hans gets down on his knees in front of Sam.

HANS

You will make the angels weep. The world will love you for as long as you live. You have that gift Sam. You have it. But only if you want it.

SAM

I do. I do want it.

HANS

It takes a commitment, a true, true TRUE commitment. For the rest of your life, you will be devoted to this. [Touches Sam's heart]. Not just your voice, your instrument, your body. But Here. This. [He keeps tapping at Sam's sternum] What comes out of here, that's what will touch billions. And break hearts and genres and windows! Wagner, Verdi, Mozart, Michael even! - they will be crying in heaven, because you will have sung their music in a way even they couldn't have dreamed. But you have to want it.

SAM

I want it.

HANS

Are you sure?

SAM

Yes!

HANS

Are you sure!

SAM

Yes! Yes! Yes!

There is a knock at the door. Sam's mom slides sheepishly into the room.

SAM'S MOM
Hey. What did I miss?

Sam runs over and hugs his mom with enthusiasm.

MOM
Hey my love.
(to Hans)
Did you tell him yet?

SAM
Tell me what?

HANS
I was just getting to it. I trust
the wire went through?

Sam's mom nods and smiles trepidatiously.

END FLASHBACK:

17 INT. HOTEL CHELSEA - NIGHT

17

The elevator opens. Hans emerges carrying a bouquet of flowers. He arrives at the hotel room door answered by Andrew.

ANDREW
Can I help you?

HANS
I'm Dr. Hans Donzanetti. Here to
see Sam.

Barely looking from his phone.

ANDREW
Doctor? Oh, ok come in.

The hotel suite is filled with groupies, members of "Team Sam". He walks past them and into the bedroom.

Sam is sitting on the bed chatting with some people. (Or sitting in the bathtub?)

HANS
May we have the room please?

Sam nods ok. They leave and it's the two of them alone.

HANS (CONT'D)

You don't call. You don't write.

SAM

So, here I am.

HANS

There you are. I heard about your little melt down on Fresh Air. Good thing that will never see the light of day.

SAM

Yeah well. Funny how these things boil up at inopportune times. I suppose lucky that everyone just chalked it up to "exhaustion."

HANS

You have to stop with this bizarre hallucination you have about being a castrato.

SAM

Hallucination? What are you talking about?

HANS

No. What are YOU talking about?

SAM

Oh, right, I got it. You're dimming the light when I'm not looking and telling me it's brighter.

HANS

Sam darling, the only one dimming your light is you. The more you speak your "truth," the quicker your career will be over.

SAM

I'm fine. I'm thriving.

HANS

You would give it all up? All that we worked for. Years and years of training. If you keep at this nonsense, there's not a company in the world that will book you.

SAM

Oh fuck right off. Is that why you're here?

(MORE)

SAM (CONT'D)

So I don't leak your little secret.
What was the fucking point of it
all!?

HANS

Remember our first lesson, the
first time you sang for me. You
remember what I told you about?

SAM

The benefits of life without
children.

HANS

The voice within the voice.
Remember? There's the pitch of the
note, and then there's that second
sound that lives inside the note,
the sound, the hurt, the ache that
lives in and around the pitch.
That's what makes you special.
That's what sets you apart. You're
not a freak show. I won't let you
be.

Sam sits by Hans. Sheepishly.

SAM

Maybe you're right.

HANS

It's not too late.

SAM

I think it might be though.

Suddenly, Sam wraps his arms around Hans in a big bear hug and holds him tight and then belts his highest note at full volume directly into Hans' ear. Hans desperately tries to wiggle free, but Sam holds strong. And THEN, he unleashes, rising even higher in pitch and volume. Hans screams in pain. A tray of glasses break.

Sam stops and lets him go. Hans falls to the floor writhing in pain. A muffled cacophony of barking dogs and car sirens can be heard through the window.

SAM (CONT'D)

Welcome to the freak show.

END

