

STEINWAY GRAND

BY JOHN VARSZEGI

CAST

AGATHE, 60S, LONELY OLD LADY WHO LIVES ALONE WITH HER MEMORIES OF A BETTER, SPLENDID LIFE.

PRANKSTER, YOUNG MAN IN HIS EARLY 30'S, LONELY, BORED, TYPICAL CLERK TYPE WITH FULL OF ISSUES.

SCENE

Split stage. The left side shows a small room in an apartment. A table, cupboards, etc. Books and magazines strewn about the shelves, the chairs and on the floor. The disorder suggests a bachelor's rental home. A couch, a small table with a telephone on it. On the couch there is a young man, in his early 30's laying bored to death. When the spot light brightens up the left part of the stage, he turns off the TV with a remote. Yawns, then browses to the back page of the Times Colonist and begins to read the classified advertisements.

PRANKSTER

Let's see what fun we are going to have tonight.

(He holds up the newspaper and read it.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Steinway Grand piano, for sale to connoisseur. Phone 555-2341. OK, that'll do.

(He yawns again, lifts the receiver and dials. After 2-3 rings the called person picks up the receiver.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Sorry to disturb you Ma'am, are you offering a piano for sale?

The spotlight lights up the right side of the split stage.
An old, Biedermeier style furnished living room with a
Steinway Grand piano in the background. Brussels
lace everywhere, old B/W vintage photos on the wall.
In spite of simplicity, everything is tidy and neat.

AGATHE
Yes, I am. The Steinway Grand.

PRANKSTER
Cross-stringed?

AGATHE
Cross-stringed, English action.

PRANKSTER
What condition is it?

AGATHE
In excellent condition, I am glad to say. It has an
absolutely pure tone, really a top quality piano.

PRANKSTER
I see. A Steinway Grand.

AGATHE
Yes, a Steinway Grand. I've just had it tuned.

PRANKSTER
And how much are you asking for it?

AGATHE
Ten thousand dollar. Would you be interested?

PRANKSTER
Ten thousand?!...Well, The price seems a little steep.

AGATHE
As I said, it's an excellent instrument. Pre-war quality.

PRANKSTER
You did say ten thousand? Hmmm...could not you come down a
little on the price?

AGATHE
Look, I've had an expert in to value it. He said a
connoisseur would pay even more for it. If you really are
interested you come here and have a look at the piano.

PRANKSTER
No, really, I am afraid then thousand is too much for me.

(The PRANKSTER puts the receiver
down.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Ten thousand! What a rip-off! You'll come down a notch or two yet, my dear!

(Thinking hardly, nothing.
Sigh...turns on the TV with the remote and watches it. It's the civil war in the program; we can hear soldiers fighting in clouds of cannon smoke - and gunshots, soldiers hiding in the bush...He suddenly gets the idea to a new impersonation. He turns off the TV and dials again.)

AGATHE

(Tiredly, slowly picks up the receiver.)

Hello?

PRANKSTER

(He changes his voice and impersonates a military officer, like a higher rank at the Navy.)

Is that 555-2341? This is Lieutenant-Commander Gruber speaking. It's about the piano.

AGATHE

Yes, Commander, what can I do for you?

PRANKSTER

Thanks for the promotion, Ma'am, but only Lieutenant-Commander. The thing is I am looking for a piano for my little daughter. A solid instrument the child can practice on. You see, I am having her taught the piano.

AGATHE

This is a Steinway Grand with English action. A perfect cross-stringed instrument.

PRANKSTER

She's been learning for four years, and so far we have only rented a piano, a not too good one. But she's making such good progress that my wife and I thought that, what with her birthday coming up, if we could find an instrument that would suit her in every respect.

AGATHE

I am sure this would be just the thing for your daughter. It's in excellent condition. I had it tuned just a few days ago.

PRANKSTER

When could I look at the instrument?

AGATHE

Any time you like. I am always at home.

PRANKSTER

Believe me, the girl's playing is really a miracle, really a miracle. It makes no difference to her whether she's playing a folk song or Beethoven or Chopin, or anything from the Beatles, na-naa-na-naa,dim-dim...

AGATHE

Well, when will you be coming to see the instrument?

PRANKSTER

Tomorrow morning will be all right for you? Then let's say 11:30. By the way, what's the price of the piano?

AGATHE

Ten thousand dollar.

PRANKSTER

You said four thousand?

AGATHE

No, what an idea. I said ten thousand.

PRANKSTER

Ten thousand dollar? You aren't really serious, Ma'am, are you?

AGATHE

As I said before, Commander, it's a top quality instrument. A real Steinway Grand, with English action.

PRANKSTER

Do you know what the price of a normal piano is?

AGATHE

You know, Commander, pianos are different from each other as chalk from cheese cake. Perhaps for the time being, an upright or else a cheaper piano would do for your daughter.

PRANKSTER

How can you ask ten thousand dollar for a second hand piece?

AGATHE

I've told you already, it's a genuine Steinway Grand, an instrument of very superieur quality...

PRANKSTER

Are you aware of the fact that according to paragraph 823 of the Penal Code, usury is a criminal act, incurring...

AGATHE

But Commander...please...

(The connection breaks. The PRANKSTER rubs his hands and smiling.)

PRANKSTER

Not bad...not bad. Now we need some emotional work on the seller.

(He looks around to get the new idea, turns on the TV again but this time nothing but boring political talk show. He opens the window and watches the traffic. On the streets he notices an old woman walking with her little 5-year-old grandson. Suddenly he gets the new impersonation.)

PRANKSTER

Yes, that's it!

(He dials again. When the called picks up the phone, he talks like a 5-year-old kid.)

PRANKSTER

Good Morning, is it you, who's selling the piano? I'll get Granny.

AGATHE

Who is speaking?

PRANKSTER

It's Bobby speaking. Granny, Don't get out of bed, I'll bring the phone over. Here is Granny. Good bye.

(Changing his voice, now he sounds like an old, sick woman.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Hello, is the Steinway Grand still for sale?

AGATHE

Well, it is, but only for serious connoisseurs, because...

PRANKSTER

My dear, I'm a serious buyer and the matter is extremely pressing. I mean, if we could settle the terms...as I understand, you haven't sold the piano yet.

AGATHE

Is it really so urgent for you?

PRANKSTER

It's terribly urgent! Not for me, but for my daughter. I would be buying it for her.

(Suddenly changes his voice to Bobby, the little boy.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Granny, I want some peanut butter and jelly bread.

(Back to Granny's voice.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Shut up, Bobby!

(Bobby's voice again.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

But Granny, I want some PBJ bread!

(Granny's voice.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Just go on playing Bobby, and you'll get your PBJ bread afterwards.

(Back to AGATHE.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, my dear, that was my little grandson. So, back to the piano, you know this is a tradition in our family. I have four daughters and each got a piano for her wedding except the youngest one. She is the black sheep in the family and...

(Suddenly changes to Bobby's voice.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Granny! I want my bread!

(Back to Granny's voice.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Keep quiet, Bobby!

(To the phone.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

You see, I even have to look after her child!

AGATHE

You may thank Heaven for having a family! You see, I'm also old and sick, and I have nobody with me. I'm left quite alone...

SHORT EMOTIONAL PAUSE

AGATHE

(CONT'D)

So, as I understand well, you made up your mind and finally want to surprise your youngest daughter, too, with a piano.

PRANKSTER
Yes, she is our daughter, anyway. And let me ask you, how much you are asking for the piano?

AGATHE
I thought ten thousand dollar.

PRANKSTER
(Gasps for breath.)
Ten thousand?!

(On Bobby's voice.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
Granny! Granny!

(On Granny's voice.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
A Stein...Ten...(suffocating.)

(On Bobby's voice.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
Granny! Help! Help!

(He throws the receiver on the floor, then hangs up. He leans back with great laugh and satisfaction.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
So that's that a nice effective piece of work.

(Stands up, walks up and down in the small apartment and takes a drink.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
Now, let me think. What else should come to spice it even more. A high sounding name, that's what I need.

(Opens the telephone book and jumbles in it.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
Waters...Wilford...Williams...Willoughby. Sounds good.
That's It! Willoughby, the connoisseur.

(Dialing.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

(Changes his voice again.)
Hello, is that 555-2341? Were you offering a piano for sale?
Hello...hello...can't you hear me?

AGATHE

(After a pause, quietly.)
Yes, I can hear you.

PRANKSTER
Were you offering a piano for sale?

AGATHE
I'm sorry but couldn't you ring me up a bit later? I don't feel too well...just now...

PRANKSTER
I got your number from the Times Colonist...it says 555-2341,...the piano...is it right?

AGATHE
It is, it is...but may I ask you...

PRANKSTER
This is Willoughby speaking. Aristotle Willoughby. Don't tell me you've never heard that name!

AGATHE
I am sorry. Do we know each other?

PRANKSTER
(Disappointedly.) Hm...strange. I am generally used to being known. I mean in the trade.

AGATHE
In what trade if I may ask?

PRANKSTER
The piano trade, of course. Wasn't it a piano you were advertising? You must have heard the name before. Ask anybody who the leading man in the trade is. For 28 years grand and upright pianos, call Willoughby.

AGATHE
I can well believe it...but I have had many inquiries...

PRANKSTER
Madam, there are always many people inquiring, but there is only one Willoughby. And if Willoughby puts his hand to the plough...

AGATHE
I don't know what to say. If I had only known how nerve-racking and exasperating the whole affair was going to be, I would never have put that advertisement in...

PRANKSTER
Why? Aren't you the owner of the piano?

AGATHE

I most certainly am, and have been ever since I was a young girl. You know, I am a lonely, old widow, and have been living for myself for many years, and as this piano is standing here with nobody playing it...

PRANKSTER

You don't play, Madam?

AGATHE

Oh, I used to play in the old days, and people said I wasn't too bad at all. But since my poor husband died, I haven't opened it for eight years, I really didn't feel like it. My husband always wore a suit with tie when he sat in the armchair and listened my piano music. Liszt was his favourite. But now, that he is in his grave...who should I play for?

PRANKSTER

Forgive me Madam, but I think music is the purest and most exalted of pleasures. A comfort in sorrow, and particularly so, if we make music for our own delight.

AGATHE

Well, I am to understand you want the piano for yourself?

PRANKSTER

No, Madam. Although I do play myself, too, but it is for a client of mine, a most distinguished and serious buyer, who wants an instrument of unquestionable quality.

AGATHE

This is a cross-stringed Steinway Grand, with English action in excellent condition. It was tuned just recently.

PRANKSTER

And its appearance? Is it a decorative piece?

AGATHE

It has a very fine, old-time, luxury finish. Nut brown.

PRANKSTER

And what sort of price were you thinking of?

AGATHE

Please, I am not going to mention any price on the telephone. If you are really interested in the instrument, please come here, and we can continue our talk personally. I hope to see you soon.

PRANKSTER

Yes, but I would like to come with the buyer. I repeat, he is a very serious and distinguished gentleman who has absolute confidence in my discretion. So the least thing I must be able to tell him is the price we can expect.

AGATHE

I will tell you as soon as you are here...

PRANKSTER

But my dear lady, how do you think I can take him there without knowing even as much as the price? You surely don't want to ruin my reputation, do you? At least tell me a guiding price that might serve as a starting point.

AGATHE

I am sorry, there will be no starting point and no bargaining, I am not a rag-and-bone merchant. Eight thousand dollar - that's my first and last price.

PRANKSTER

You said eight thousand?

AGATHE

Why? Do you find it too much? For a genuine Steinway Grand?

PRANKSTER

On the contrary...

AGATHE

How do you mean, on the contrary?

PRANKSTER

I was just thinking that if this piano is really as excellent as you say it is, you may just as well get more for it. Why should you throw such a precious asset away?

AGATHE

I don't quite understand you. You would be willing to pay more than I ask?

PRANKSTER

Not me, Madam, but the buyer. Let's go fifty-fifty on anything above eight thousand. It's Good business for you as well, as for me. And it's also a good bargain for my client since he is going to get a top quality instrument for his money.

AGATHE

And how much would you think?

PRANKSTER

Well, perhaps ten thousand. We shall settle the accounts afterwards, anyway. If I find my customer, it might even be this evening.

AGATHE

Well, I shall be at home.

PRANKSTER

Good. Then I get in contact with my client right away. Eh...by the way, I haven't asked yet, what the tone is like?

AGATHE

It has a clear, strong tone. And a quite easy touch.

PRANKSTER

I certainly wouldn't like to inconvenience you, Madam, but for the sake of the transaction, I don't know if the piano is near enough to the telephone...would you mind doing me the favour of striking a few notes? It makes a difference even if I heard it only once...

AGATHE

(Rides the wheelchair to the piano and strikes some chords.)

PRANKSTER

It's simply fantastic! Just play something more, please.

AGATHE

(Starts to play some popular classics.)

I haven't played for ages, I told you I haven't even opened it. My fingers would get lost on the keyboard. You see...it's no good anymore.

PRANKSTER

But it is...It's really very nice. Please, don't stop playing.

AGATHE

Oh, I am out of practice. Terrible, isn't it?

PRANKSTER

How can you say that? It's a great pity, you don't play with your musical feeling. You have genuine artistic talent.

AGATHE

(Why playing talks with nostalgia.)

I, once studied for ten years and was expected to go on to the Conservatory. Would you believe that when I was a young girl, we arranged house concerts every Thursday, my younger sister played chamber music...there were always a lot of people there...we had tea, and talked about art and literature...I got this piano for my twentieth birthday...I can't tell you how happy I was.

PRANKSTER

(After a short silence.)

If I am not being too tactless, may I ask why you have decided to sell it?

AGATHE

I couldn't afford even as much as a headstone for the grave of my dear husband. I certainly don't feel like playing the piano, especially when I'm sitting in wheelchair most of the time...

PRANKSTER

But I hope it's not something serious?

AGATHE

I have had multiple sclerosis for a long time and I have learned to live with it. But lately it's my heart. Valvular deficiency, the doctors say...

PRANKSTER

Oh, if you just look after yourself, you may live to be a hundred and twenty. And you never go out?

AGATHE

Very rarely. The Handy Dart picks me up and brings home. You know, my neighbors are very kind, they do all the shopping for me, and then I have a caregiver from Island Health, in twice a week to clean the room.

PRANKSTER

See, Madam. You really need that money for the piano. Well, I'll dash out right away to fetch the buyer. I'll call you soon Madam, good bye!

(He hangs up the receiver with a contented air.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

So, that was nicely done...

(Takes a drag, walks up and down and looks out of the window.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Ugh! Disgusting weather! It's been raining for weeks. Perfectly disgraceful. Now let's see, what else can we squeeze out of this? We need some dramatic twist here...

(Thinking hardly...then goes to find something to eat. He grabs an apple and starts to peel it with a little pocket knife. His mind is away thus he cuts his finger a little bit. Some blood drops out...he hisses and swears quietly, finally wraps his finger with a piece of bandage. Suddenly gets the new idea.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

Yep! We need some excitement here. Maybe a little thriller...That'll work perfectly...

(Dials again, now he acts like a doctor.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

(With serious voice.)

Hello, is it 5-5-5-2-3-4-1? This is Doctor Goldberg from the Dunsmuir Memorial Sanatorium. Forgive me Madam for intruding, but we have an issue here.

AGATHE

What can I do for you? Is it about the piano?

PRANKSTER

No. I mean, yes...It's such an unpleasant thing...I really don't know how to put it...

AGATHE

What is it all about?

PRANKSTER

Excuse me, but haven't you been called just now by a gentleman called Willoughby?

AGATHE

Why do you ask?

PRANKSTER

Because he is one of my patients and he thinks he is a piano salesman. I was just called away to a serious case so I left him alone in the nurse room for ten minutes. Now I am back and I found my newspaper with an advertisement about a Steinway Grand piano marked in red pencil. No doubt it was him. Did he talked to you?

AGATHE

What if he did?

PRANKSTER

Oh, don't worry Madam, he is not too dangerous, he just acts like a serious businessman. I don't know what you were talking about, I guess he offered you a deal on your piano.

AGATHE

Yes, but he sounded like a real gentleman.

PRANKSTER

He is a sick man, Madam, we just finished a neurological treatment on him. He was on a sleep cure for four weeks. Typical case, sometimes he acts like any normal person, like you and me, and only gets mad and offensive if he does not get what he wants.

AGATHE

I must say I am shocked...

PRANKSTER
Oh, here we are...he is just coming.

(Talks to an imaginary person.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
Ah, Aristotle, you are here? You promised me million times not to call unsuspecting advertisers who sell pianos. You are not a piano salesman and you cannot pretend to buy pianos! Do you understand?...wait...what is it in your hand? Jeez...is it a scalpel? Hey, what are you doing?! Oh, Jeez...help...help...somebody help...he just stabbed me...arghhh...

(Gurgles like he is being stabbed. He acts it out actually, drops the phone, falls on the couch yelling, pretends like dying by murderous scalpel cuts and stabbings. He acts for a couple minutes until gets tired. He pants heavily. Time passes when he notices the phone is still on.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
(He grows alarmed, grabs the phone. In an uncertain voice.)
Hello, Madam, hello...she hung up. Hello...I do hope nothing is the matter.

(Seizes the bottle but he is unable to pour himself a drink. His hand is shaking. Then he dials nervously.)
Damn. Why does not she answer? Pick up the phone, please...eh...was it the right number?

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
5-5-5-2-3-4-1.

(Hangs up then dials again. Drums on the table with his fingers, puts the phone aside, takes a drink while continuing to listen for an answer.)
Why are you doing this? Why don't you answer? Valvular deficiency, she said, didn't she? Good Lord, nothing can happen from just a little silly joke...Please pick up the phone! All right, I'll give you three more rings.
One...two...three...

(He angrily slams the phone. Alarmed.)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)
Suppose, I haven't broken it now.

(Takes it up and tries again.)
It's all right...

empty, eternally empty room. That makes 15 hours till next morning.
90 hours a week excluding Sundays, 360 hours a month...

AGATHE

And aren't you ashamed of passing the time with such nonsense? Haven't you a family or relatives?

PRANKSTER

I lost my mother when I was still young, and I never knew my father. My foster parents died as well just after I got married. And that marriage didn't last too long either. Officially I am divorced, but I would rather say I am rejected. There was a time when I thought that loneliness was an extraordinary condition, like tuberculosis, one you can be cured of. Then I slowly realized that this was the natural form of life. Everything else was self deception. The real community, the largest on this globe is three billion loneliness...didn't you ever think how the more people are in the world, the less they understand each other? Three billion astronauts, all by themselves drifting uncontrolled in space.

AGATHE

I also live alone, but even so I don't talk like this. Because not an hour passes, not even a minute when I didn't feel the presence of God. And you are not even old, are you?

PRANKSTER

I am at the worst age: 40.

AGATHE

Young man...you might remarry, perhaps.

PRANKSTER

I lie here every night with always the same senseless, pointless brain gymnastics. So many years I've been living in a morbid state of weightlessness, where no attraction of gravitation acts on me at all. I know it's a rather dull story, the lives I invent on the telephone are certainly more exciting and that is why I invent them.

AGATHE

Well, it can't be too easy for you, either. But look, I suffer from heart trouble so let's ring off, shall we?

PRANKSTER

Oh, please, don't hang up. It's so nice talking to you. You are so calming, we even could be friends. You know what? I don't want to be intrusive, but it would be really lovely to see you...I can imagine your apartment with its fine old furniture, the lace and cushions...china ornaments, the big wardrobe, family photos on the wall, and the piano covered with a fringed cloth, and the bust of Beethoven on it...or is it Wagner? Or Schubert? And the music stand next to it.

(Dreaming)

PRANKSTER (CONT'D)

We'd have tea together, you've certainly got a fine old china service with yellow and blue flowers...I'd bring you some chocolates and then we'd talk about Stravinsky and Bartok ...or I'd tell you the latest gossip about town...and what cruise ships are passing along the coast...and what's in the shops, and so on. And you'll play for me. You could be like mother to me and I could be somebody like your always wanted son to you. You aren't cross any more surely, I know I feel that you have forgiven me, that you have understood and pardoned me...

SILENCE

Are you still there?...OK, I stop now, I promise I won't bother you any more if you don't want. But if you think you could forgive me, if you think we could be friends, and beacons for each other in the mist of loneliness, then... please call me back. My number is 544-1213. I'll be waiting for your call. By now, Madam.

(He puts down the receiver. Stands up, grabs his glass, drinks some. Walks up and down in the small room, watching the telephone. The clock on the wall ticks louder and louder, but the phone is mute. The PRANKSTER's face shows growing disappointment and sadness. Suddenly the phone rings, the PRANKSTER cheers up and quickly picks up the receiver.)

CURTAIN/fade out