

THE ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE

Music by Eric Moe

Libretto by Rob Handel

characters and doubling:

Spearmint Lodge

Najeen Teflo

Ted / Dewey

Amalia Habitué / Shirl

contact:

eric@ericmoe.net

handelnyc@gmail.com

TALK

That whoosh-into-canned-applause that begins every TEDtalk.

The speaker — let's just call him TED — stands smiling charismatically in his casual suit, beautifully graying hair, and lavalier mike, holding up his mobile phone, which plays a ringtone by Bach.

It rings again, and this time TED sings along with it. He pockets the phone and continues:

TED

My ringtone was written three hundred years ago
By a church organist in Germany.
He had twenty children
So no wonder he had to compose ringtones on the side.

He smiles, to indicate that was a joke.

Maybe you also have a day job
But you know it's not your real work.
Are you doing your real work?

Images begin to appear behind TED. Faces are unclear.
Parents proudly hold their baby.
A baby boy crawls among piles of overturned books.
A nursery school teacher leads her class in a dance, but one boy hangs back.
A boy builds a strange and elaborate spaceship/spiderweb with Legos.
A summer camp full of kids splash in a pool, but our hero sits on the sidelines, fully dressed.
The parents open the door to their child's room, to discover a latticework of obstacles behind it, blocking entry to the inner sanctum.

Only a hundred years ago, there was this painter.
Well, he thought he was a painter.
No one else did.
He only sold one picture in his lifetime.
But he kept painting. He kept doing his work.
Today they're the most desired artworks in the world.

Are you doing your real work?
Do you go home every night and do your real work?

A college lecture hall. One black-clad student sulks in the upper rows, as far as possible from everyone else.
An urban apartment of classic post-collegiate squalor. He is building something.

Outside the apartment window, it is night. He is building something.
 Outside the apartment window, it is dawn. He is building something.
 He is sitting at a table, behind a soundboard, wearing headphones, bored, at
 his day job.

Maybe you're the only person alive now
 Who sees the need for your work.
 Maybe it will be three hundred years
 Before its importance is seen.

It does not matter.

We're here on a brief visit.
 What matters is you do your work.
 What matters is the work you do.

Because maybe in three hundred years
 Some kid will be walking down the street
 And hear:

TED plays the Bach ringtone again.

And think, there's that song everyone knows.
 I've always liked that song.
 Thank you.

The lights expand to take in SPEARMINT LODGE, wearing all black, sitting at
 a table, behind a sound board, wearing headphones. SPEARMINT is the
 rented sound guy for the TEDtalk. He matches the final image behind TED,
 except that he is not bored. He is a man whose life has been changed.

WALK

SPEARMINT LODGE, a man whose life has been changed, walks the
 hipsterdrenched streets of the city like a man whose life has been changed.

SPEARMINT

Are you doing your real work?

As he walks, the city around him mixes with images of him in his inner
 sanctum, his classically squalid apartment, making his art. He is building
 spectator-triggered musical robot installations. They are spidery and fragile
 and Rube-Goldberg-esque and unpeaceful. They are visitations from a world
 of complex connections and turbulence.

SPEARMINT

Do you go home every night and do your real work?

As SPEARMINT walks the streets, evening turns into night. Night turns into the last part of the night. It will be dawn soon.

SPEARMINT

Maybe it will be three hundred years

SPEARMINT notices Allnight Coffee, a 24 hour coffeehouse that is unbearably cooler than thou. He goes in.

ALLNIGHT COFFEE

NAJEEN TEFLO is working the counter. She does not look out of place in these cooler than thou surroundings, but in her it does not seem effortful. According to her eyelids, it is almost the end of her shift. SPEARMINT stands before her, a man awakened to his destiny. He looks as if coffee is the last thing he needs.

NAJEEN

May I help the following customer?

SPEARMINT does not respond.

NAJEEN

May I help the following customer?

SPEARMINT

I am the most important artist in the world.

NAJEEN

Great, do you want something?

SPEARMINT

I am the most important artist in the world.

NAJEEN

I heard you.

You're a famous artist.

SPEARMINT

No.

Yes.

I am a famous artist. In the future.
In three hundred years.

NAJEEN

What kind of art do you make?

SPEARMINT

Spectator-triggered musical robot installations.

NAJEEN

I was going to guess that.
Would you like a tiramisu muffin?

SPEARMINT

I don't know.

NAJEEN

They're good.
Did you go to music school?

SPEARMINT

Yes. I'm a hundred and thirty thousand dollars in debt.
I do sound for technology conferences.

NAJEEN

I was thinking about music school.

SPEARMINT

Forget it.

NAJEEN

I'm a songwriter.

SPEARMINT

You don't need school.
You need to work.
Go home and do your work.

NAJEEN

You don't even know me.

NAJEEN

My shift ends at six.

SPEARMINT

Go home and do your work.

NAJEEN

I was going to sleep.

SPEARMINT

You need to work.
In three hundred years
Everyone will know your song.

NAJEEN

You don't even know me.

SPEARMINT

What's your name?

NAJEEN

Najeen Teflo.

SPEARMINT

Spearmint Lodge.

NAJEEN

I've never met someone who was famous in the future.

SPEARMINT

Great artists do not belong to their own time.

NAJEEN

That makes sense. All the great artists are dead.

SPEARMINT

Najeen, are you a great artist?

Whatever it is that has happened to him, she sees it and recognizes it in herself.

In this instant, her life is changed.

NAJEEN

In three hundred years
I will be dead
And
Everyone will know my song.

SPEARMINT

Everyone will know you.

NAJEEN

They will wonder how I did it.

SPEARMINT

They will want to be like you.

NAJEEN

Lie awake and think of me.

SPEARMINT

How can I be more like her?

NAJEEN

How can I be more like him?

SPEARMINT

Everyone will know you.

NAJEEN

Everyone will know you.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

In three hundred years
They will talk of this.
When just before dawn
Two unknown artists
Met at Allnight Coffee.

NAJEEN

And died unknown.

SPEARMINT

And died unknown.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

They will talk of this
In three hundred years.

They have not touched but it's like they're making out.

A cuckoo clock in the coffeeshop cuckooos six o'clock.

NAJEEN

I want to see your robot art.

SPEARMINT

It's at my place.

NAJEEN

Can we go there?

SPEARMINT

Yes.

No.

I have to work.

NAJEEN

Oh.

SPEARMINT

The future is counting on me.

NAJEEN

Me too.

SPEARMINT

You too. Go work.

NAJEEN

Yes.

SPEARMINT

No.

I need you.

You can test the spectator triggers.

The triggers are electromagnetic.

Do you have any metal in your body?

NAJEEN

Lots.

TWO VIRGINS

The squalid apartment appears onstage, filled with spectator-triggered musical robot installations. As SPEARMINT makes tiny adjustments, NAJEEN tests the installations, triggering them as she moves around the room.

Behind them, close-up images of their bodies, connecting in ways that echo the Rube Goldberg contraptions onstage.

Lights fade on the apartment so that SPEARMINT, NAJEEN, and the installations are silhouettes against the screens' images. Finally, the screens too fade to black.

Pause.

THE FOLLOWING CUSTOMER

Lights bounce up on Allnight Coffee. NAJEEN, eyelids heavy, sweeps the floor. The only customer is AMALIA HABITUÉ, cheerfully tapping away at a subnotebook computer. Her attire somehow suggests that this is what she wears when she is not dressing up as a character from a science fiction television show on her way to a fan convention. NAJEEN, tired of sweeping, leans on her broom and regards AMALIA idly.

NAJEEN

You're always here.

AMALIA

(cheerfully)

I'm not always here.

I'm here frequently.

NAJEEN

Are you a math dork?

AMALIA

(cheerfully)

I'm a physics dork.

NAJEEN

Are you a great physicist?

AMALIA

(cheerfully)

Not particularly.

I'm a subatomic particle.

NAJEEN

So sometimes you're both here and not here.

AMALIA

Meow.

They share a tired/cheerful smile.

NAJEEN

Najeen Teflo.

AMALIA

Amalia Habitué.

Are you a great barista?

NAJEEN

As a matter of fact,
I am a great barista.
But more important,
I am a great songwriter.

AMALIA

Where do you gig?

NAJEEN

My songs are not for now.
My boyfriend's art is not for now.
I go to work all night.
I come home.
I write my songs.
He goes to work all day.
He comes home.
He makes his art.
We eat when we remember.
We sleep not at all.

Images of the couple's life appear in unexpected corners as NAJEEN sings about it: NAJEEN sits crosslegged with guitar and pen, working. SPEARMINT builds an even taller/crazier sculpture. Chinese food containers pile up on the floor. NAJEEN, eyelids heavy, pulls a shot of espresso at her job. SPEARMINT, half asleep at the soundboard, at his job. The squalid apartment, empty, waits for them to return. Her equipment now mingled with his. All of the above images repeat, like their unvaried days: writing, building, food containers, coffee, soundboard.

AMALIA

You sound like my boss,
Professor Kuklakova.
She proved the viability
Of the chronohandwaving chronocollider.
No one will build it.
They say her figures don't add up.
But she keeps on working.
She says it's for the future.
(cheerfully)
She's ninety-three.
I don't know how much future she has left.

The cuckoo clock cuckoos six o'clock.

NAJEEN

Nice to meet you, Amalia Habitué.

AMALIA

See you tomorrow night.

NAJEEN leaves. AMALIA returns to her cheerful tapping.

THE ANGEL OF DOUBT

The squalid apartment. Najeen's equipment now mingled with Spearmint's. A small mountain of discarded Chinese food containers. The couple is asleep on a mattress on the floor. The midday sun through the window tries to wake them.

SPEARMINT begins to squirm jaggedly in his sleep, as if wrestling with an invisible angel.

SPEARMINT

In three hundred years
They will talk of this.
When just before dawn—

NAJEEN

(not awake)

Urrrmgh...

SPEARMINT

In three hundred years
We will be dead
And
Everyone—

NAJEEN

(not awake)

Shh...

SPEARMINT

Three hundred years—
Two unknown artists—
And died unknown—

SPEARMINT is thrashing so violently that NAJEEN wakes and tries to pin him. He wakes, still ranting.

NAJEEN

Stop stop stop

SPEARMINT

Never sold a painting
A sculpture
A song
Cut off his ear
Is that what you want?

NAJEEN

Everyone will know you

SPEARMINT

Or we'll just be dead.

NAJEEN

They will wonder how you did it

SPEARMINT

Or we'll just be dead.

NAJEEN

They will want to be like you

SPEARMINT

Or we'll just be dead.
Forgotten. Desiccating corpses
In a pile of broccoli and tofu.
Is that what you want?

NAJEEN

There is no way to know.
Van Gogh would never know.
You told me that was beautiful.
You told me do my work.
You told me nothing else matters.

SPEARMINT

Wrong
Dead
Broccoli
Tofu

NAJEEN

Let's be calm. Let's be calm.
We left the window open last night

And the angel of doubt flew in.
Ignore her and she'll go away.

They wait.

SPEARMINT
(whispered)

She's still here.
The angel of doubt.
She won't go away.

NAJEEN
(furious)

You let her in.
You get her out!
Don't tell me you lied
Don't tell me you were wrong
You told me nothing else matters
(quietly)
Spear-mint?
You said we had a date with the future.

SPEARMINT

Najeen,
The future is an expensive date.

No one moves.

SPEARMINT
If only we could know.

NAJEEN
But we can't.

SPEARMINT
No.

No one moves.

NAJEEN
(leaping up)

Yes!
There's someone I want you to meet.

She grabs his hand and pulls him out of the scene.

I JUST MET YOU AND THIS IS CRAZY

Allnight Coffee. NAJEEN and SPEARMINT burst in and buttonhole AMALIA.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

What is the chronohandwaving chronocollider?

AMALIA
(cheerfully)

Hello again.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

What is the chronohandwaving chronocollider?

AMALIA
In layman's terms?

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Yes.

AMALIA
A time machine.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Where are the plans?

AMALIA presses a key on her laptop. Behind them, overlapping images of equations, sketches, blueprints, renderings...

FORGING SCENE

SPEARMINT and AMALIA construct the time machine. Maybe at some point they put on giant steel welders' masks. It's all rather Nibelungish.

Elsewhere in the squalid apartment, NAJEEN sits with her badass guitar and/or whatever technology she uses to perform her music, and practices her song.

NAJEEN

The more fair and crystal is the sky
The uglier seem the clouds that in it fly

A star burns for 27 years
27 years

Clapton stole Jimi's life
He's lived it three times over now

Kurt's up with the constellations
Still miserable

A star burns for 27 years
27 years

Leeza the Cat was a singer
She stood over thirty feet tall

Her guitar was as big as Penn Station
She exploded one night in the rain

Leeza the Cat was a singer
She stood over thirty feet tall

Her guitar was as big as Penn Station
She exploded one night in the rain

A star burns for 27 years
27 years

Well, she's walking through the clouds
And gazing down upon the crowds

DEVICE

The time machine is complete. It pulses with light. The three of them stand before it.

AMALIA

Where do you want to go?

SPEARMINT

Forward.

NAJEEN

I have only one itching desire.

SPEARMINT

Forward.

SPEARMINT/NAJEEN

Three hundred years.

AMALIA

I'll set the controls.

SPEARMINT and NAJEEN enter the time machine. Everything except the time machine disappears.

Time speeds up and slows down as the machine rides bumps in time the way an airplane rides bumpy air.

Time comes to rest.

SPIRAL

SPEARMINT and NAJEEN emerge to find themselves in a white courtyard, a familiar spiral ramp behind them. All around are Spearmint's sculptures, in much the same configuration as in the squalid apartment.

SPEARMINT

Handwavometer reading?

NAJEEN

Plus three hundred.

SPEARMINT

Spatial variance?

NAJEEN

Eighty-nine blocks.

SPEARMINT

Where are we?

NAJEEN

It's the Guggenheim.

It's your work.

It's everywhere.

SPEARMINT

This is crazy.

NAJEEN

You were right.

SPEARMINT

There's no work by anyone else.

NAJEEN

You're all that matters.

SPEARMINT

This is crazy.

DEWEY

May I help you?

NAJEEN and SPEARMINT scream. DEWEY has silently glided up to them. He has beautifully graying hair and the future equivalent of a casual suit.

NAJEEN

Just looking.

DEWEY

Let me know if you have any questions.

SPEARMINT

Where are the other artists?

DEWEY

Other artists?

I don't understand.

SPEARMINT

All these are by—

DEWEY

(solemnly)

Spearmint Lodge.

SPEARMINT

Isn't there anything else?

DEWEY

Why?

Why would there be?

What else do you need?
 Spearmint Lodge
 Captured it all.
 Human and machine.
 Change and end.
 The last days of mankind.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Last days?

DEWEY

So far ahead of his time.
 How did he do it?

DEWEY's mobile phone rings. The quality of mobile phone speakers has not changed in three hundred years. His ringtone is Najeen's song.

DEWEY

Pardon me.

NAJEEN

That's my song.

DEWEY

(into phone)

Yes. Two visitors today.

NAJEEN

That's my song.
 You were right.

SPEARMINT

(overlapping)

Last days?

DEWEY

(into phone)

I will check.

(puts phone away)

Where did you come from?

NAJEEN

We're tourists.

SPEARMINT

Are these the last days of mankind?

DEWEY

Of course not.

SPEARMINT

Glad to hear it.

DEWEY

The last human died
Many years ago.

NAJEEN

You aren't human?

SPEARMINT

He's a robot.

NAJEEN

What happened to the humans?

DEWEY

Oh,
They were busy.
Looking at their phones.
Listening to Najeen Teflo.
Trying to afford a Spearmint Lodge.
Typing words, making things.
As the fish went away
And the birds went away
And the plants went away
And the bats.
The bats were the last to go.

Now we wait for the humans to come back.
But we don't miss them, really.
The worst among them
Were full of spite and hopelessness,
Cheering, over beer and artificial meat,
As families turned on each other.
The best among them
Made beautiful disturbing jagged things,
Contemplated death,
And died.

They were like those skunks
With their heads caught
In yogurt containers.
There's nothing sadder

Than a species that can't help itself
Because it just likes yogurt.

COMPUTER VOICE
(very loud)
RECALCULATING

DEWEY
What's that?

NAJEEN
The time machine.

COMPUTER VOICE
RECALCULATING

SPEARMINT
Back inside!

DEWEY
Thank you. Come again.

COMPUTER VOICE
RECALCULATING
RECALCULATING

PREMORTEM

Time speeds up and slows down. Time comes to rest. AMALIA, SPEARMINT and NAJEEN as they were before the journey.

AMALIA
(cheerfully)
Did it work?

SPEARMINT/NAJEEN
Yes.

AMALIA
(cheerfully)
I'm glad you didn't die.
How did it go?

SPEARMINT
 (spinning AMALIA into a twirl)
 Perfect. Brilliant.

NAJEEN
 (off by herself)
 Horrifying.

AMALIA
 What did you find?

SPEARMINT
 Triumph. Glory.

NAJEEN
 Desolation.

AMALIA
 What happens next?

SPEARMINT
 We make more work.

NAJEEN
 We must change our lives.

SPEARMINT/NAJEEN
 What are you talking about? Are you mad?

SPEARMINT
 That is —
 Was —
 Will be —
 The future we dream of.
 Where our work lives forever.

NAJEEN
 I dream of a future
 Where my songs are sung by humans.

SPEARMINT
 Humans? Who needs humans?

NAJEEN
 Your spectator-triggered musical robot installations
 Need to be triggered by spectators.

SPEARMINT
 Who says “spectators” has to mean “humans”? Robot-triggered robots!
 Pure art! Pure art! Pure art!

NAJEEN

Art is for humans.
Only humans make art.

SPEARMINT

Anti-machine propaganda!
I never knew you were such a
Humanist.

NAJEEN

Machines don't feel pain.
Machines don't feel desire.
Machines don't feel terror.
The terror of living.
My songs are for the living.
And in the future
I want my songs to be sung.

SPEARMINT

But the elegance of music on a dead planet.
The simplicity of music in a void.
Each note a drop of ice
Floating forever undisturbed.

NAJEEN

Art for nobody
Is art with no love in it.
Art made by a brain on a stick.
My art has a body.
It comes from a body.
A body that held love.
Love made to be poured into another body.
Not into a brain —
In one ear and out the other.

(to AMALIA)

Set the controls.

AMALIA

To the future?

NAJEEN

No. The intermediate.
Forward one hundred and fifty years.

SPEARMINT

Wait. I'm coming with you.

NAJEEN

Don't bother. I'm only saving humankind.

SPEARMINT

I know.

Some of my favorite people are humans.

He goes to embrace her. She isn't ready to embrace him. But she gives him her hand.

NAJEEN

Get your tools. I have an idea.

THE INTERMEDIATE

Images of future luxury: sleek islands of safety up in the sky above the city. We are inside an apartment. The intermediate has a sort of ironic retro thing going on where it's using 22nd-century materials to recreate mid-20th-century ideas of futuristic design.

SHIRL, a human with hair of a fantastic color, sprawls languidly as she gazes at the Spearmint Lodge sculpture installed in her home and sings along, with nearly motionless languidity, with her Najeen Teflo recordings.

SHIRL

27 years... 27 years...

27 years... 27 years...

Dewey.

DEWEY shimmers into the room.

DEWEY

May I help you?

SHIRL

Another one of these.

DEWEY

At once.

Dewey places in SHIRL's palm a melting white cube, like a horchata ice cube. At once SHIRL relaxes further.

SHIRL

Thank you.

Time jags in the corner of the apartment. SPEARMINT and NAJEEN appear.
SHIRL seems barely curious about their manifestation in her home.

SHIRL

Where did you come from?

SPEARMINT/NAJEEN

We come from the past.
We bear a message for the future.

SHIRL

You're too late. There is no future.

SPEARMINT/NAJEEN

We bear a message from the past.

SHIRL

But the past left us a message.
Listen. It's Najeen Teflo.
Look. Spearmint Lodge.
The artwork of the future.
Only art can bring us despair
As thick and dark as honey.
Despair as seductive as
Black-painted lips.
Despair one can love
More than life.
(drifting back into her languid torpor)
More than life...
More than life...

NAJEEN

What is your name?

SHIRL

Shirl.

NAJEEN

Shirl. You have been chosen
Because of your love for art.

SHIRL becomes moderately alert.

SHIRL

My love for art.
Yes.

SPEARMINT

We traveled through time
Just to talk to you.
I am Spearmint Lodge.

SHIRL

No. Way.

NAJEEN

I am Najeen Teflo.

SHIRL

No. Way.

SPEARMINT

Your understanding of our work
Is very deep.
Yet there is more.

SHIRL

There is more?

NAJEEN

In life we were lovers.
Every night
Our work and bodies intertwined.
Shirl, have you ever experienced
My music

SPEARMINT

And my spectator-triggered musical robot installations

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

At the same time?

SHIRL

At the same time?
No.
It would be too much.
The beauty.
The despair.
It would be too much.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Shirl. You must be brave.

DEWEY

Can I get your guests anything?

NAJEEN

Thank you, no.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Shirl. You must be brave.

SHIRL

It would be too much.

DEWEY

(overlapping)

You are from the past.

You should sample the future.

We have narcotics you've not dreamed of.

DEWEY offers a plate full of melting white cubes to NAJEEN and SPEARMINT.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Thank you, no.

SHIRL

Dewey is right. You must try

The soothing pleasures we have now.

NAJEEN

We don't like to be soothed.

SPEARMINT

We don't care for pleasure.

SHIRL

It's a beautifully dismal pleasure.

An elegantly hopeless pleasure.

It's absinthe and madrigals and feedback and opera and death...

She begins to swoon into catatonia just thinking about it. NAJEEN and SPEARMINT rouse her.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

No.

Shirl. You must be brave.

Turn on the artworks.

SHIRL turns on the music so that Najeen's song begins. Then she walks through the installation, triggering its sounds. Gradually, the two musics begin to interlock.

SHIRL

What is that?

A call?

A call to action!

And something else —

Suddenly it all whimpers to a halt. DEWEY, who has slipped out of the room during the above, now reappears.

DEWEY

Sorry. Can't run them both at once.

Insufficient power.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Insufficient power?

SHIRL

Oh well.

SPEARMINT

Wait a minute.

DEWEY again offers melting cubes to NAJEEN and SPEARMINT, maybe a different color now.

DEWEY

Perhaps you'd like to sample —

NAJEEN

Something's fishy.

DEWEY

(to SHIRL)

Can I get you another?

SPEARMINT

That robot doesn't want us to succeed.

DEWEY

Sir, I am, for all practical purposes,
Incapable of error.

NAJEEN

He dreams of a world where the last humans have died.

DEWEY

Not died. Drifted off.
Tucked into a cozy duvet of despair.
Sucking their thumbs
And checking their feeds.

SPEARMINT

He's jammed the power sensors.

SHIRL

Oh well.

NAJEEN

(to SHIRL)

How can we shut him down?

SHIRL

Oh, I used to know this.

DEWEY

Sucking their thumbs.
The babies of the universe.
Pillowy helpless fleshy things.

SHIRL

It's got something to do with...

SPEARMINT

Password?

NAJEEN

Override code?

SPEARMINT

Bad gateway?

NAJEEN

Intentional loop?

DEWEY

So fragile.
So confused.

SHIRL

I know.

SHIRL presses the robot's left ear and the front of his chin simultaneously. He shuts down. The music and installation return to life. SHIRL wanders through.

SHIRL

A call?
A call to action!
And something else —
Hope!

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Hope!

SHIRL

I was raised to believe that hope is cheesy.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Hope!

SHIRL

But now I see that hope is beautiful.

NAJEEN/SPEARMINT

Hope!

SHIRL

We can find a new planet.
We can save ourselves.
We will ask the bats for help.
They say a bat still lives
In Madagascar.
We will seek them out.
We will learn to speak bat.

All three of them are dancing through the installation. The interlocking is more complex than ever.

NAJEEN

Everyone must hear this.
There is work to be done.

SHIRL

I've never done any work.

What if I fail?

SPEARMINT

What matters is you do your work.

What matters is the work you do.

SHIRL

Thank you, Najeen Teflo.

Thank you, Spearmint Lodge.

NAJEEN and SPEARMINT return to the time machine and disappear. The music still grows. SHIRL goes to her window.

SHIRL

People of Earth!

Heed my call!

I have a message of hope!

THE END