

STRUT

By
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

DAVE.....	As old as eighty when on his death bed. As young as twenty-five when fresh out of the army, wooing the women.
ESSIE.....	Sixty-eight when she says goodbye. Twenty-one when she says hello.
DIANE.....	40-50.
NEIL.....	35-45.
MEL TORME.....	Young Mel, Old Mel, however you remember him. Still swinging with the best of 'em.
THE BAYONNE BOYS.....	The hep-cat quartet from which the characters emerge.

TIME

Various stops from 1945 through the present day.

PLACE

A hospital room. The Newark 1947 Dance Contest.
 A speeding automobile. Dave and Essie's home.
 A singles bar.
 The spaces in between.

*For David and Edith.
Your feet don't just float; they fly.*

The sweet sound of a soft
shoe groove.

Swingin' silhouettes and
shakin' shadows fill the
stage.

The soft shoe groove rolls on...

Spotlight on DAVE, gussied up for a night on the town, on the prowl, 1940's style.

DAVE

When was the last time you dreamed of dancing with a woman?

Lights up on four piece jazz combo, "The Bayonne Boys", going to town.

DAVE

Was it last night, last year, never then and never more?

Smooth glide.

DAVE

Hair parted on the side, rimless glasses soft against your nose, shiny shoes reflecting the spotlights above. Yesssssss...The foot floats forward and the back arches away. The grin is deep and sly. Every push of hands and turn of the cheek is now, no need to be remembered because it does not pass or wave goodbye...Pure joy.

(beat)

The nervous sweat beads on that taut upper lip when her confidence overwhelms. That moment comes flooding back, even in the middle of the smooth and supple groove. She took you by the hand. There was no question who was leading this dance. Across the room, a cascade of brown waves, framing fresh cheeks and full lips. A nose, strong, not to be mistaken as a movie star's, but as a girl's from down the street. A haze of smoke and a blur of moving bodies only partially hide the small curves of a ready figure. Hand cocked on hip, smirk lifting just so, as she opens that waiting mouth and invites danger, welcomes the unknown, beckons me with two little words...

Spotlight on a band member. He removes his hat and long brown hair flows down, takes off the coat and voila! - A slinky black dress.

This is ESSIE, Rita Hayworth with a Jewish nose, smoke pouring from her mouth. The music halts.

ESSIE

Hello stranger.

Band plays a full out big band strut. Dave approaches Essie; he takes her hand. As soon as they touch, lights shift. Music halts.

DAVE

(pounding on his chest)
The Boom Boom of a heart monitor.

VOICE OVER

(lead singer on microphone)
A halo around the head in the portrait in the frame above the bed. A halo.

Lights shift back. Band grooves.

DAVE

Dance?

ESSIE

No.

Essie freezes, hand still held.

DAVE

It's all about timing. The way you hold your hat.
(beat)
Um, would you like to -

ESSIE

(unfreezes, yawns)
I'm not interested.

She freezes.

DAVE

The way you sip your tea...I can really move.

ESSIE

(unfreeze)
Keep on movin'.

She freezes.

DAVE

The memory of all that...You've got a strong grip there.

ESSIE

(unfreeze)
Care to dance, young man?

DAVE

No, no they can't take that away from me.

The band launches into a quick
time version of "I've Got a Crush
on you." Dave and Essie dance.
Big finish!

DAVE

No. They can't take that away from me.

Lights shift. Band halts.

DAVE

(pounding his chest)
The beat beat of a heart monitor.

ESSIE

Cut the shit, David.

DAVE

Don't let them take you away from me.

ESSIE

(walking forward)
I'm right here.

DAVE

Don't move! You'll break; they told us so.

Essie collapses to the floor.

DAVE

Essie, no!

ESSIE

(jumping to her feet)
Ha ha! All in one piece. The miracles of modern medicine.

DAVE

Oh Essie, thank God for those miracles.

ESSIE

Cut the shit, David.

DAVE

She speaks hard words and her air is ringed with fire. She smiles her snarl, tongue biting at every woe and plea; that's how I know all is not lost. But when that ring becomes cold plastic and metal, the fat lady won't even need to sing.

Lights shift. Band plays some final notes.

ESSIE

It's over.

DAVE

Huh?

ESSIE

Done.

DAVE

What?

ESSIE

Ended...No more.

(beat)

Nothing left.

(pause)

Say goodbye.

(silence)

The band does not play on.

Dave looks over to the band. They tip their caps.

DAVE

Oh.

ESSIE

What's a girl like me gotta do to get a guy like you...to walk her to the bus station?

Essie wraps her arm in the crook of Dave's elbow. They stroll.

DAVE

(sings softly)
I've got a crush on you, sweetie pie.
All the day and night-time, hear me sigh.

ESSIE

So, young man, gotta name or does that dumbstruck grin tell me all I need to know?

DAVE

(sings)
This isn't just a flirtation.
We're proving that there's predestination.

ESSIE

Well, *David*, our feet didn't just move, they floated, what d'ya say?

DAVE

(sings)
Could you coo?
Could you care?

ESSIE

Esther. Esther Greenblatt. Charming, ain't it?...I'm in the book.

DAVE

(sings)
For a cunning cottage we could share.

Essie grabs onto a "bus railing."
The sound of a bus pulling away,
as she waves goodbye, in fading
light.

DAVE

(sings, full out)
If you will pardon my mush
But, I have got a crush, my baby, on you.
(end singing)

The bus rattles away again and again. Screeching brakes
and black smoke fills my veins and thus fills my head. She
waves goodbye, fingers doing a rhythmic shuffle on a Newark
summer breeze. She waves goodbye, hair bouncing to a tire
on pavement beat. She waves goodbye, chest swaying with
the strut of passing passenger partners. She waves
goodbye, she waves goodbye, she waves goodbye...

The tinkling piano plays
Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue."
Dave dances along the pavement.

DAVE

The pitter patter of soft rain and these still shining
black shoes reflecting the soft glow of a

(sings)
moonlight serenade.
(end singing)

I am not wet above my clothes because the raindrops cannot
touch my toes. They slide between them, soar above them,
skip beneath them. The singular song does not play upon my
love, not because it can't, but because I won't let it.
Down the bus' steps she flows, goes on home, slipping
between cold sheets. Oh, I lay next to her, not yet daring
to touch, no, just giving a sweet smile and whispering,
"goodnight." Hot on her ear, her neck, in her still
spinning head...Now, I'm soaked. I fall into my bed and
dream of dancing with this woman once again.

Lights shift. Spot on Essie,
doing a slow dance.

ESSIE

Go ahead, say it David.

DAVE

The beep beep of a heart monitor.

ESSIE

Thanks. I thought we might get away with a moment of joy.
Ha! See, I can move and twirl and do a little number.

(she spins)

I was only sleeping, David, and so you were not. You never
do, do ya' stranger? Do ya' lover? Do ya' husband?

(beat)

Wake up!

DAVE

I sleep and she swings...

ESSIE

My bosom fell, rose and fell again against your firmly
planted ear. Hot breath whispering against my chest...

DAVE

Essie, lay down.

ESSIE

Yes, doctor.

Essie falls to the floor. Dave
runs over, head on her chest.

DAVE

Let me listen to your chest. Breathe in...out. In...Out.
Takes a licking and keeps on-

ESSIE

That's it, back to bed. Shush.

Dave falls asleep on the floor.
Essie carries him to bed.

ESSIE

Where were we? Oh yes, hot breath whispering against my
chest, listening for the tune of life still being drummed
in four four time.

(she slaps him)

Wake up!

DAVE

I sleep and she swings...

ESSIE

Every hour, while my eyes cavort under their heavy lids, you lean close, right here, beat beep, hoping I haven't gotten on that long gone but still departing city bus. You don't sleep, you won't sleep, you can't sleep...

DAVE

She sways...

ESSIE

Wake Up!

DAVE

And I dream...

"I like New York in June"...The band and Essie groove in slow melancholy motion, becoming ever more frantic. Eventually, a crazed parody of the smooth groove.

Dave jerks up, taking in a labored breath of air.

DAVE

Hnnnnuhhhh!

The music halts. Essie slips into the shadows.

DAVE

She didn't even wave goodbye.

BAND LEADER

A halo. A halo around the head on the body in the bed needing to be fed. A halo.

The shining metal halo descends from above.

DAVE

I can't sleep.

Dave stands on the bed and reaches for the halo - can't quite grab it. Dozens of giant Z shaped pills fall from the halo, pelting Dave. He falls into bed and snores.

ESSIE

Not yet, bright boy. Gotta wait till the mood is smooth and the world is round.

(screams)

Wake Up!

DAVE

Essie, I'm coming to see you. Even if *my* head can't turn, yours will. I'll be wearing that flows where I goes suit. Your favorite.

ESSIE

That suit don't fit.

A commercial break. The Band plays a jaunty musical intro.

BAND LEADER

Ever feel tired and like you just can't get that energy you need? The spring in your step has turned into lead in your legs?

ESSIE

Try new waste away and you won't even need to walk again.

BAND LEADER

(sings)

Waste away and you'll feel fine

Waste away in just no time

Wait! Here comes a little mime.

Essie does an imitation of Dave wasting away. First she trips and falls. She cries. Gets up.