

The Taxi Dancer Excerpt

ACT 1

SCENE 1: A movie theatre

We see a projection of a black and white silent film:

A battle field. There is smoke in the background from the explosions of cannons. It's during the Napoleonic wars. A young woman dressed in upper class finery is on the ground cradling a wounded soldier. She's played by the character of MITZI. It's night so, in the style of the silent era, the scene has been tinted blue. Sad, minor key music can be heard in the background, played on a piano. (*This would have been live in the theatre.*) A TWO-SHOT shows the woman talking to the man. She's upset but trying to hide her feelings. He's dying but she refuses to believe it. CUT to a CLOSE UP of the man. Then the woman.

Movie Subtitle: "Of course, we'll go there, darling. Just you and me. Like we used to do. At our own little cabin by the lake."

CLOSE-UP of the woman.

Movie Subtitle: "And we'll paddle all around the lake on that crazy canoe of daddy's. The one that tipped you over the first time we met. Do you remember that?"

CLOSE-UP of the man. He laughs. Then grimaces in pain.

CLOSE-UP of the woman. She's crying.

Movie Subtitle: "But you've got to promise me you're not going to die."

CLOSE-UP of the man. He smiles, shakes his head and waves his hand as if to say he's fine.

Movie Subtitle: "Don't worry, my darling. It's only a flesh wound. The medics will be here soon."

A SHOT OF THE TWO OF THEM. There is an explosion behind them.

CLOSE-UP of the man.

Movie Subtitle: "You better go, my darling. I'll be fine. No sense in both of us being injured."

A SHOT OF THE BATTLEFIELD. THEN A CLOSE-UP OF THE MAN

"I'll meet you back at the field hospital. And then we can laugh about all this."

A SHOT OF THE TWO OF THEM. She shakes her head. Then kisses him.

Movie Subtitle: "Don't be foolish, love. I can't leave you now that we're finally together."

CLOSE-UP of man. He closes his eyes.

A SHOT OF THE TWO OF THEM. She is looking off into the distance, talking, oblivious that he has just died.

Movie Subtitle: "Do you remember when we first met? How smart you looked in your uniform."

A SHOT OF THE TWO OF THEM. She is talking, remembering. Then when she glances down at him, she freezes. She speaks the man's name. Touches his face. Kisses him. Then bursts into tears. A CLOSE-UP of the woman.

Movie Subtitle: "The battle raged on for another three days. But for Florentine, it raged on for the rest of her life."

"THE END"

SCENE 2

The screen disappears. We're in the audience of the movie theatre.

(Lights up on the movie audience: one row of viewers with MITZI in the middle. The man beside her is asleep. The light is too dim, however, to see any of the faces. A spot on MITZI and the sleeping man. They remain in their seats. She is still gripped by the mood of the movie's ending. The theatre house lights come on and the spot disappears. MITZI stands and edges down the row as if there isn't much room between her and the row in front of her. When she goes downstage, a spot picks her up. The audience exits taking their chairs.)

(MITZI is dressed in tawdry clothes more suited to a farm or a small town before the 1920s: a worn woollen coat undone; a floral printed dress, an old-style purse; plain shoes, one of which has a hole in it. The only thing that is fashionable is her flapper hair style. However, her hat like her clothes belong to an era before the First World War. She carries a small suitcase.)

MITZI

(playing the part of the woman in the film) Don't be foolish, dear. I can't leave you now. I'll never leave you. So you mustn't die on me. *(looking down as if cradling the man)* Mind you, hear what I say. That wouldn't be fair, now that we're finally together again. Oh, this horrible war. It's going to make widows of us all. *(looks down as if seeing her lover)* Roderick, no. You can't leave me. Not now. You said you wouldn't. *(She cries.)* But I mustn't cry. I must be brave. That's what we agreed upon when you left for the front. I mustn't cry. Oh my love, I mustn't cry!

(Enter OFFICER on the beat.)

OFFICER

(walks by her and turns; curious, a bit suspicious) Anything wrong, miss? You lost?

MITZI

(still lost in her daydream) What?

OFFICER

Are you alright? You waiting for someone?

MITZI

What? No. *(dramatically)* I don't think he'll ever come.

OFFICER

Well, you better run along then. It's late. Too late for respectable girls to be out alone. The streets can be a dangerous place this time of night. Where do you live and I'll walk you to your street.

MITZI

Oh, I don't live around here, officer. Sir.

OFFICER

You don't. And where then, miss, do you live?

MITZI

(searching for a name) Uh ... Beverly Hills, officer. I live in Beverly Hills. I was supposed to meet someone ... someone on this street. Only I guess, he isn't coming.

OFFICER

(doesn't believe her) Beverly Hills, is it?

MITZI

Yes. Where all the movie stars live.

(In another part of the stage, a WAITER pushes on a table and chair. The table is covered with the remains of the last person's meal. The WAITER clears off the table, wipes it, leaves a menu on it and then exits with the remains of the meal.)

OFFICER

Yeah? You and me both. Well, you better move along, miss. There's a street car stop up around the next block. One block north. Then right for another block. She should be along in about twenty minutes or so. Take my advice, miss. Forget your fancy man. You're too young to be looking for love on the streets. *(He tips his hat and exits.)*

SCENE 3

MITZI wanders around the stage, then looks in at the restaurant. Hesitantly, she enters, goes to the table and sits. She puts her suitcase down beside her. Carefully. She picks up the menu and reads it. Takes her change purse out of her purse. Pours the coins onto the table and counts them. When the WAITER enters, she quickly hides the coins on her lap.

WAITER

What'll it be, miss? It's too late for the daily special, but we still got some soup of the day. Beef barley. And, of course, our sandwiches are our specialties. You name it, we'll make it. Or how about our all-you-can-eat spaghetti. Get some before the mill crowd comes in. Or maybe some dessert?

(MITZI pretends to consider as she looks at the menu.)

MITZI

Oh, I think I'll just have a coffee. For now. I might be meeting someone here.

WAITER

Coffee, it is. (*He exits.*)

(MITZI takes change from her lap. She looks at the menu and counts change again. Hides change under the menu when the WAITER enters. He's carrying a tray loaded with a cup of coffee, sugar bowl, small cream pitcher, a spoon and a napkin. He sets items on the table.)

WAITER (continued)

Sure I can't get you anything else while you wait? We've got some fresh pies: chocolate, Boston cream, lemon and I think strawberry. No make that pecan.

MITZI

No. No thank you. Just the coffee.

WAITER

(He sees her change under the menu. Then notices her suitcase) The thing is, miss. I don't mean to hurry you up, but at ten, the night shift's over at the woollen mill and this place is gonna fill up real fast. And I'm gonna need all the tables I can get ... if you're only going to order coffee. Sorry. Nothing personal.

(They both look at her pile of change. She smiles and cocks her head coyly. He doesn't react.)

MITZI

Oh ... well, I had dinner already, so I just want the coffee.

WAITER

Coffee it is, then. Enjoy your cup. No need to hurry just yet. You got twenty or so minutes before this place goes crazy.

MITZI

Thank you.

(The WAITER exits. She adds several lumps of sugar to her coffee. Then some cream and stirs. Looks around the restaurant. Takes several sips of coffee. Adds more sugar and cream. More sips. She takes an envelope and a sheet of stationary out of her purse. Both are wrinkled and she tries to flatten them on the table. Takes out a pencil from purse. Starts to write on the paper.)

MITZI

(reads as she writes) Dear Uncle Bill and Auntie Emma. Thanks for the ten dollars, but you oughtn't have sent it. I'm sure you both need the money more than me. But you don't have to worry about me. I'm doing fine. I just got a job in one of them studios. And on my first day, one of them directors seen me and wants to use me in his next movie. I don't know the name yet, but when I do, I'll let you all know. The studio is gonna give me speech lessons and a whole new wardrobe of clothes. And I gots me an apartment just two blocks off of Hollywood Boulevard. So things are real good for me now. You'll never guess where I'm writing this letter from. I'm in the Brown Derby celebrating with some of the other young actresses from the studio. This is where all the stars eat and hang out. Thinking of you two, always. Your loving niece, Mitzi. P.S. Greta Garbo just walked past my table! Can you believe that?

(MITZI folds the paper, smooths it out, puts into the envelope and seals the envelope. Then she finishes her coffee. She stands, counts her change and leaves all of it but a few coins. She picks up her suitcase and moves downstage. There is a mailbox downstage. She hesitates, then puts the letter into the mailbox. While this is going on, the WAITER enters, then exits with table and chair.)

SCENE 4

We hear dance music in the background. It starts off faintly then builds to a louder level. As a door flat comes on from the opposite side of the stage from MITZI, we see, either as a projection or live, the shadows of dancers upstage. There is a sign over the door: The Dreamland Dance Hall. CHUCKY and GERTIE push the door flat on but they're hidden behind it. MITZI wanders towards the door, then looks upstage at the shadows of dancers as if she is looking through a window. When she turns, she passes in front of the door just as it opens. The door and CHUCKY bump into her. She drops the suitcase and mumbles an apology. CHUCKY is wearing his suit, no hat and his left sleeve is pinned to his shoulder. The shadows of the dancers disappear and the music fades out.)

CHUCKY

Well, it's about time. Didn't Gertie tell you, you had to be here by seven? *(looks around)* Hell, where are all the other girls? She said three.

MITZI

What? Excuse me.

CHUCKY

Damn it, you girls are all alike. About as dependable as a horse at the track.

MITZI

I'm sorry, mister, but you got the wrong —

CHUCKY

(over her response; more to himself) What a night. Lola's on the warpath again. Jane's pregnant and is throwing up in between dances. Six girls are no shows. I got a roomful of conventioneers who are threatening to leave because there's not enough girls to go around. And now it looks like the girls Gertie promised me are no shows, too. (to MITZI) All except you and you're four hours late. And you feel sorry?

MITZI

Look mister, I think you got the wrong girl.

CHUCKY

You're telling me.

(GERTIE comes out of the door. She's dressed in a modest evening gown, flapper hairstyle with a band across her forehead as was the style of the day.)

CHUCKY

Damn it, Gertie, I thought you were going to help me out. You told me three girls. *(takes MITZI's arm)* And this one didn't even show up 'til now.

MITZI

(breaks away from his hold) Look mister, you got the wrong person. (to GERTIE) Tell him.

CHUCKY

(over MITZI's lines; to GERTIE) Hell, Gertie, don't promise if you can't deliver. You said you'd have three girls for tonight. And what do I get? One girl who looks like Apple Annie. If those conventioneers walk out, Harry's gonna have a fit. And he's already having a fits 'cause he and Lola are at it again. And they're driving me nuts. It's like Dempsey and Tunney every night. Every night!

GERTIE

(She's been sizing up MITZIE.) Chucky, let me handle this.

CHUCKY

What's to handle? You said three. She's barely a half.

GERTIE

(touches his good arm like she's done it many times before) Chucky, it's just a mix-up. One girl is better than none.

CHUCKY

(shakes head) Oh hell, whatever. Just get back on the dance floor. And for petesake, find her some decent clothes. I guess we can survive for one more night. Harry says we're supposed to be getting more girls tomorrow. Chorus girl dropouts from the studios. *(looks at MITZI and shakes his head)* Make her look presentable, if you can. *(He exits through the doorway. He has to remain behind the door until end of scene unless the flat is at the edge of the stage.)*

MITZI

He's got me mixed up with somebody else.

GERTIE

I know. Masie and Rosemarie and her sister was supposed to show up tonight, but I guess they're not coming.

MITZI

(She's been eyeing how GERTIE is dressed.) You in show business?

GERTIE

(laughs) Yeah. More like show-and-tell business. *(notices suitcase)* You look like you could use a job.

MITZI

Oh, no ... I'm doing fine. I already got a job. That is, I'm meeting someone tomorrow about a job. He's taking me to lunch at the Brown Derby.

GERTIE

(doesn't believe her) Is that so? Listen honey, You don't have to act proud with me. I been there.

MITZI

I don't know what you mean.

GERTIE

Yes, you do. You're wearing last century's coat. There's a hole in one of your shoes. Your dress is something my Aunt Tilly would wear to a church social. And you look like you haven't had a decent meal all week. Maybe longer. So why don't you put off that someone you're never going to really meet until you start eating regular. *(a beat)* And I bet you don't even have a place to stay for the night.

MITZI

Well ... I got this room off Melrose ... only ...

GERTIE

Only, it's after eleven and you ain't in it. And all your worldly possession ain't in, either.

MITZI

Oh that. *(picks up suitcase)* I was just out shopping. *(a beat)* Well, nice meeting you. *(starts to exit)*

GERTIE

Listen, you heard what Chucky said. You got a job for tonight if you want it. And if all of Harry's girls don't show tomorrow, maybe Chucky'll keep you on.

MITZI

(suspicious) Oh, I don't know. This is ain't one of those ... places.

GERTIE

Places? Oh. *(smiles)* No, no. Harry is a lot of things, but he doesn't run no brothels. This is strictly a dance hall. If any monkey-chaser wants more than his ten-cents a dance, the boys throw him out. So you got nothing to worry about as long as your feet don't give out. You can dance, can't you?

MITZI

Dance? Some. A little. But I don't understand.

GERTIE

It's simple. The bozos buy a bunch of tickets for ten cents each. Then they give them to the girls they want to dance with. At the end of the night, you give the tickets you got to Chucky. He gives you a nickel for every ticket. The more bozos you dance with, the more tickets you get. And the more nickels you get. It don't sound like much, but on a good night, it can add up to a lot. And if a bozo really likes you — without getting fresh, that is — he might give you a few extra tickets as a tip. But the boys make sure that's all he ever gives you. So, there's nothing to worry about. We're all respectable here. Not like some other clubs.

MITZI

Oh, I don't know. We don't do much dancing where I'm from. My aunt and uncle are kinda strict that way.

GERTIE

Hey, what they don't know won't hurt them. What do you say? You'd be helping me out. I like to keep Chucky on my good side. That's the side of me that likes the big lug. *(a beat as MITZI considers)* I got a dress you can wear. You're about my size.

MITZI

Do any of the studio people come here?

GERTIE

Now, don't tell me. You came out here to get into the movies. *(MITZI nods embarrassingly.)* Thought so. You and almost a million other girls. Me included. Well, dreams don't pay the rent, dearie. But if it's rent you're after, this is not a bad gig. You still have your days free while you're waiting for that big break of yours.

MITZI

Oh, my breaks gonna come. That man I told you about, well ... he's a big casting director at one of them studios.

GERTIE

He is, is he? (*doesn't believe her*) What's his name. Maybe I know him.

MITZI

Oh ... I forgot his name.

GERTIE

Yeah, like all the names I used to forget when writing home to mom and dad. Look, you don't have play games with me. I been there. There's no casting director, is there? (*looks at her critically*) How long you been walking the streets?

MITZI

(*trying to make up her mind to be honest with her*) For about a few days, I guess.

GERTIE

Don't you know how dangerous that is? (*a beat*) Well, you can stay at my place if you want. For the night, anyways. Ida is away visiting her sick dad. She won't be back until tomorrow.

MITZI

Thanks. I am kinda broke, I guess.

GERTIE

Yeah. I imagine your guess is right. Good. Come on.

MITZI

Do you really think I can do this? I haven't done much dancing and I wouldn't want to get you into any trouble if I don't work out.

GERTIE

Don't worry, honey. You'll do fine. Just keep your feet moving and smile a lot. Those bozos wouldn't know a dancer from a lady wrestler. Say, what's your name?

MITZI

Mitzi. Mitzi Carpenter.

GERTIE

Well, mine's Gertrude, but everyone calls me Gertie. I used to hate my name when I first got to Hollywood. But then Gertrude Lawrence came to L.A. and I thought, hell, if it's good enough for her, it's good enough for me. (*a beat; she puts out a hand to MITZI*) Glad to meet you, Mitzi.

MITZI

(*shakes hand*) Me, too, Gertie.

(They exit through door and the door flat is pushed off.)