

≈ [almost equal to] (2014)

By Jonas Hassen Khemiri

Duration 2 hours, 30 minutes, including intermission

Excerpt

CAST

MANI (man, 35)
CASPARUS VAN HOUTEN (old man)
ANDREJ (man, 25)
PETER (man, 30)
LIQUOR STORE EMPLOYEE (woman, 50)
SILVANA (woman, 60, ANDREJ'S mom)
IVAN (boy, 13, ANDREJ'S little brother)
EMPLOYMENT AGENCY LADY (older woman)
EMPLOYMENT AGENCY MAN (older man)
JOB APPLICATION (a piece of paper)
THE EMPLOYERS (men/women)
LAURA LORENZO (woman, 20)
MARTINA (woman, 35)
MARTINA 2 (woman, 35)
CUSTOMER 1, 2, 3
THE JOB COACH (woman, 45)
ANGELIKA (voice)
THE REVEREND (man/woman)
THE INTERMISSION SPEAKER (a man/woman with strong arms)
FREJA (woman, 60)

ACTORS

Up to you. 4-20 in total.

TIME

The present.

SETTING

Here.

Go now, little paper, around the world, and destroy the tyranny of money such that gold, silver, and precious gems may one day cease to be the idols and tyrants of our world!
August Nordenskiöld (1789)

ACT I

This act takes place in ANDREJ'S memories of the period when he was unemployed. We follow his struggle to find a way into the economic system.

SCENE 2: ANDREJ (1)

PETER stands center stage, ANDREJ and SILVANA enter.

PETER

I'm sorry to bother you, but . . . my name is Peter and I am homeless and I have a little problem. I just found out that my sister has been involved in a car accident.

ANDREJ snorts.

PETER

She was run over, she's in the hospital, and she is in serious but stable condition, I just talked to her and she's probably going to be okay, but . . .

ANDREJ

Don't believe him.

PETER

It would really be awfully kind if someone could help me out with a little bit of money so I can travel down there and visit her. It doesn't have to be much, just a dollar or two. Or maybe a five?

ANDREJ

He says that all the time.

PETER

Maybe someone has some loose change in their pocket? Or their purse? No one? Just a few cents? So I can travel down there and visit my sister? A dollar or two or maybe a five?

ANDREJ

"A dollar or two or maybe a five?"

PETER

She was run over. She was on her way home from work. Someone shoved her into the street. I need money for a train ticket. I just want to travel down there and visit her. No one? Oh. Well, thanks anyway, have a nice evening.

ANDREJ approaches the audience.

ANDREJ

It started last fall.

PETER

Hi. I'm sorry to bother you, but . . .

ANDREJ

I was on my way home, I was going up the escalator, I passed through the turnstiles, and there . . .

PETER
My name is Peter.

ANDREJ
There he was.

PETER
And I'm homeless.

ANDREJ
He had blond hair, tattoos on his hand, and piercings in his face.

PETER
I am in need of a little money for food and shelter.

ANDREJ
After that I saw him every day. When I was on my way to my night class, when I was buying food, when I was picking up my little brother from some friend's house.

IVAN enters.

PETER
Hi, my name is Peter and I'm homeless.

ANDREJ
And it didn't take long before I caught on that this dude, he was a fucking pro.

PETER
Hi, my name is Peter.

ANDREJ
Nothing about his behavior was left to chance.

PETER
Hi, my name is Peter and I'm homeless.

ANDREJ
In the daytime he stood between the flower shop and the bakery so that his stench would be masked by the scent of flowers and fresh buns. In the evenings, when there weren't as many people around, he stood further down the tunnel and held open the door for people who were trying to make it to the bus.

PETER
Here you go. Have a nice evening.

ANDREJ
And on payday he always stood over by the ATM.

PETER
Hi, my name is Peter. A little help for the homeless?

ANDREJ

Or: a little help for a bogus homeless dude who knows exactly how to cheat his way to as much cash as possible? And every day, that same goddamn mantra.

PETER

Hi, my name is Peter.

ANDREJ

Yeah, we know.

PETER

Hi, my name is Peter and I live on the streets.

ANDREJ

No, you don't.

PETER

A dollar or two, or maybe a five?

ANDREJ

Okay! That's enough! (to the audience) I was the only one who saw through him. Sure, maybe he smelled bad and had scars on his arms, but at the same time . . .

PETER

A few cents for a warm meal?

ANDREJ

He had a cell phone.

PETER

A little help so I don't have to sleep out in the rain tonight?

ANDREJ

No, for real. A seriously flashy phone. And every time he got a call he would walk off a little ways so people wouldn't notice.

PETER

Maybe a five?

ANDREJ

Honestly: what kind of homeless dude has a phone like that? And sure, he had a shopping cart full of returnable bottles, but guess what was hidden underneath? Just guess. A guitar case. With a guitar in it.

PETER (*well-mannered*)

No, okay then. Well, thank you anyway, have a nice trip.

ANDREJ

And plus there was something wrong with his voice.

PETER (*even more well-mannered*)

No, okay then. Well, thank you anyway, have a nice trip.

ANDREJ

Instead of slurring his words and cursing, he talked like . . . sort of like this, with his voice up high. Kinda like an actor.

PETER (*even more well-mannered*)

No, okay then. Well, thank you anyway, my dear sir. Do have a pleasant day.

ANDREJ

That's exactly how he talked. But I was the only one who saw through him. Everyone else just drowned him in ones and fives and one time I saw an old lady give him a ten just because he had made up some lie about how he needed the money to go visit his sister.

PETER

Oh, thank you so much. This will go straight to my travel funds. She will be so happy.

ANDREJ

That's exactly what he said.

PETER

SOOOO happy.

PETER exits.

ANDREJ

Sure. Like he had a "sister" who had been "run over." It was so obvious that he was lying, and I promised myself I would never be like him. I was going to finish my night class, learn the system, and get myself a job with a huge salary, Christmas bonus, beautiful secretary, and flashy company car. But of course I would keep helping out my mom with the rent so she would never again have to sit up at night with her calculator, worrying about the next power bill.

SILVANA, ANDREJ'S mom, enters.

SILVANA

But you have to watch out for Mamona.

ANDREJ

What did you say, Mom?

SILVANA

Mamona. Don't let Mamona get her sharp claws into you.

ANDREJ

No worries.

SILVANA

Because what would happen then? What will happen if Mamona gets into your head?

ANDREJ

I would start to see the world through Mamona's eyes.

SILVANA

And your hands?

ANDREJ

They would become Mamona's.

SILVANA

And your thoughts?

ANDREJ

They would become Mamona's.

SILVANA

And soon you can't do your friends a favor without asking for money and you can't help your own mother without sending an invoice and your pupils turn into tiny little black dollar signs.

ANDREJ

Don't worry.

SILVANA

Your morals will turn into a balance sheet.

ANDREJ

No problem, I'm not going to . . .

SILVANA

Your family will turn into inheritances.

ANDREJ

Okay! I get it! I'll watch out for Mamona. I won't end up like Dad. I will stay myself and I won't think only of money.

SILVANA

Good. That's all I ask.

SILVANA exits.

ANDREJ *(to the audience)*

I will not buy an apartment where the elevator opens directly into the front hall and there's a sound system that knows when I arrive home and turns itself on and there will not be a TV in the kitchen and the bedroom will not have a real walk-in closet, the kind with a light that comes on as soon as you open the door, with rows and rows of shiny, polished shoes and soft ties on special hooks and jackets that still have price tags on them and brand-name shirts sorted by color on wooden hangers. I will keep cutting my own hair and I will never order an entrée without checking the price first. Just a plain old job. That was my plan. But nothing went as planned.