

Fiesta

An opera in one act

By

Boris Vian

Translation and preface by Uriah Kriegel

Preface

Uriah Kriegel

The present stage of human history is marked by the broad and entrenched prevalence of an economic conception of well-being, one that identifies a person's happiness with her material comfort and a nation's thriving with its economic growth. Of all the challenges presented by this economic age, perhaps the deepest is its tendency to undermine a time-proven balance between two modes of human existence: the mode of doing and the mode of being. Human agency requires the capacity to express itself in productive work, physical activity, and creative engagement. But human beings also need some time to *just be*: to lie on a beach or a sofa, staring at the sky or ceiling and taking in sight and sensation, reflecting on their life, and dwelling on subterranean feelings, in the process accomplishing exactly nothing. The perfect balance between doing and being has been the subject of philosophical debate at least since the advent of Stoicism in Western thought and Daoism in its Eastern counterpart. But in its omnipresent and relentless pressure toward economic productivity, the economic age has cornered the sphere of pure being and threatens its extinction.

At least in the developed world, the modern human is unlikely to meet an untimely demise due to material want. Still, her life is very much liable to disappear in a blaze of gapless activity. Although the accomplishment of goals is certainly a source of joy and fulfillment, for the modern Westerner who has just accomplished a goal the first order of business is to formulate the next one. Purposeless being in which one assumes not the role of agent of existence but its patient, passively absorbing life and simply inhabiting it, as it were, is increasingly foreign to our mode of living. Modern existence is a dense and interminable sequence of doings suffused by precious little being, where we essentially do our life away.

Boris Vian's curious piece "Fiesta," brought here in first English translation, is an unapologetic ode to being over doing. Ironically, Vian himself was an staggeringly productive polymath: in his life of thirty-nine years (he died of heart attack in 1959), he published nine novels, three books of poetry, and dozens of short stories, plays, screenplays, operas, translations, and critical essays (often advocating jazz), with many more materials from his literary estate appearing posthumously. Vian was also a composer, songwriter, musician (mostly playing jazz trumpet), singer, actor, painter, engineer, and inventor (inventing among other things the so-called homemade harmonica, an instrument composed of a comb and wax paper).

"Fiesta" is one of Vian's last pieces. Eight manuscript versions have survived: the first two written for ballet, the third in screenplay form, the next three as play, and the last two opera librettos. It is the eighth and final version that is translated here, whence "an opera in one act." (A score was produced simultaneously by the eminent mid-century French composer and musician Darius Milhaud, with the

result first performed at the Berlin Opera on 3 October 1958.) The proceedings unfold on a sweltering Spanish afternoon and concern three affable loafers – Mario, Pedro, and Esteban. Nothing much happens to the protagonists themselves on this idle afternoon of fishing and boozing by the sea, except insofar as they witness some dramatic events. It is not entirely clear from the text that these events truly take place, though; there are indications they are but the contents of a reverie, apparently on Pedro’s part.

The dramatic nugget itself is distinctly operatic. A picnic is set up on the same boardwalk by a group of young men and women, including the temperamental, guitar-playing Fernan (the only male character to get any lines) and his sexy and irrepressible girlfriend Mercedes (whose lines alone do not obey the syllabic rhythm imposed by Vian). When the child Julio detects an errant boat, a concerted effort ensues to rescue the castaway on board, feed and revive him. Mercedes in particular attends to him closely and somewhat flirtatiously, and starts singing and dancing for him to spark and fan his vital forces. The nameless castaway indeed regains his strength, stands up, and starts relating his adventures at sea, before grabbing Mercedes and kissing her. This turn of events doesn’t go down well with Fernan, who drops his guitar, takes out a knife, and stabs the castaway in the back – fatally. The picnic disbands in a hurry and leaves Mario, Pedro, and Esteban to handle the aftermath and ruminate upon its moral.

The castaway was as good as dead before he was rescued. The life he reclaimed was thus something of a blind gift. Sadly, he failed to appreciate this gift – life as such – and became greedy, wanting too much out of life too fast. Drawn by fleeting and superficial temptations, his lust for life dooms him. If only he rested content with just being alive, indeed just being, he would actually get more out of the gift he had been given. This, not in so many words, is our three protagonists’ conclusion. The castaway would have been wise to adopt their approach to human existence, aiming for an idle afternoon of unproductive fishing and drinking rather than chasing greater things. Thus Lau-tzu, the original Daoist thinker, wrote in his *Dao De Jing* that “the Master acts without doing anything, and teaches without saying anything. Things arise and s/he lets them come; things disappear and s/he lets them go.”

Primarily a jazz musician and composer, for much of his life Vian treated classical opera with a mixture of suspicion and distaste. He considered it overly structured and controlled and overbearingly governed by constraints and conventions – in direct opposition to his beloved jazz. In this libretto, Vian turns the operatic genre on its head, making the melodramatic action-packed core into a mere reverie and casting the “real action” as heroic inaction. It is in the uneventful part of this opera that its moral lies, in the characters’ being rather than their doing that its wisdom is dished. In this “Fiesta” is an antidote to the forces of the economic age.

Fiesta

An opera in one act

By Boris Vian

CHARACTERS

MARIO, *tenor*

PEDRO, *baritone*

ESTEBAN, *bass*

JULIO, *child*

NUNEZ, *bass*

CASTAWAY, *baritone*

PIA, *soprano*

MARIA, *mezzo*

MARIO, *contralto*

MARIO, *tenor*

Silent roles

FERNAN, *guitatist*

CARACAS, *extra*

ALBERTO, *extra*

CORTEZ, *extra*

RAPHAEL, *extra*

RAQUEL, *extra*

ORCHESTRA

Flute (or piccolo), oboe, clarinet in B flat, bass clarinet in B flat, bassoon, alto saxophone flat, trumpet, trombone, percussion, harp, 3 violins, 2 cellos, 1 contrabass

A boardwalk of white stone with a sort of lantern on lattice-like black steel at its end. Wicker fish-traps, decrepit and salt-whitened fishing materials. Blinding sunlight, almost white sea, sky of unbearable blue.

As the curtain rises, two loafers, washed-out linen trousers, torso undressed, or stitched up linen shirt, big straw hat, dozing by the lantern, sort of sprawled, hat on eye (Mario and Pedro).

Mario sits up, calls to the center of the boardwalk.

MARIO

O

Pedro calls out, without moving, lying on his back, absent-minded

PEDRO

...

MARIO

Esteban! What's taking you so long!

PEDRO

Esteban! Esteban! Come back already!

MARIO

Drinks soon, drinks soon
Esteban, Esteban,
You're so damn lazy

PEDRO

Drinks soon, drinks soon
Esteban, Esteban,
You're so damn lazy

MARIO

Esteban, Esteban,
Come back already.
Esteban, Esteban

PEDRO

Esteban, Esteban,

Come back already.
Esteban, Esteban

MARIO

We're going to die of thirst
Esteban, Esteban, Esteban! Esteban!

PEDRO

We're going to die of thirst
Esteban, Esteban, Esteban! Esteban!

MARIO

This guy will never be back

They drop back exhausted.

PEDRO

Calling him is such a waste

MARIO

...

(Esteban appears, dressed like them, cradling on his heart a nice wicker-coated bottle of more than a gallon; he approaches without the others seeing him.)

PEDRO

This just makes the thirst greater

MARIO

May he itch with the plague
May every vulture in hell

PEDRO

May he itch with the plague
May every vulture in hell

MARIO

Come and eat off his liver
May two million old bags

PEDRO

Come and eat off his liver
May two million old bags

MARIO

Come and fill up his beak
So he suffocates slowly

PEDRO

Come and fill up his beak
So he suffocates slowly

(Esteban arrives in front of them, places the bottle between the sun and Pedro's face, who sits up straight and looks down.)

MARIO

...

PEDRO

...

MARIO

...

PEDRO

Mario, I saw a bottle's shadow!

MARIO

A vision! Esteban, you sun of a gun!

ESTEBAN

...

MARIO

We were just now singing your praises

ESTEBAN, *beaming*

Bottle's full!

(They get up, delighted. Esteban put the bottle in the middle, they uncover themselves and improvise a praise song.)

MARIO

...

PEDRO

...

ESTEBAN

...

MARIO

...

PEDRO

...

ESTEBAN

A bottle of one gallon
Wicker-coated all around

MARIO

And it is full!

PEDRO

And it is full!

ESTEBAN

Made of unbreakable glass

MARIO

...

PEDRO

...

ESTEBAN

Wine totally fresh, wine totally red
Wine that sat long in its barrel
During ten

MARIO

And it is full

PEDRO

And it is full

Esteban drinks slowly, then passes the bottle to Mario who, after having drunk, passes the bottle to Pedro.

ESTEBAN

years at very least

MARIO

...

PEDRO

...

Pedro drinks even more slowly, clicks his tongue, hugs the bottle, and goes back to sleep by its side.

ESTEBAN

And that is a good day right there

MARIO

It's true that life is

PEDRO

It's true that life is

ESTEBAN

Aw, my good friends, life it is hard
It's true that life is

(They wallow.)

MARIO

hard
But we shall see the end of it!

PEDRO

hard
But we shall see the end of it!

ESTEBAN

hard
But we shall see the end of it!

Mario tickles an old guitar, the other two dream, hat on nose. Enter a kid, sweet, dilapidated, dark, thin as a grilled shrimp. He plays, hopscotch-style, with a pebble he kicks around and comes toward the three men.

It's Julio. He sings a nursery rhyme that Mario starts accompanying. Pedro and Esteban stay still.

JULIO

A cute little horse
Jumped around the town square
A cute little horse
He found a gold necklace
A little black dog
Who passed through the town square
Sniveled like a calf
He sadly lost his necklace
Give me back, give me back,
My grandmother's new necklace
Give me back, give me back,
Otherwise I'll be beaten
Jump, jump, grasshopper;
Regain my new necklace
Jump, jump, grasshopper
I'll give you some cash!

MARIO, *lays down the guitar*

Phew! What a job!

JULIO

...

(Julio notices the bottle and dances around it)

MARIO

...

JULIO

This is uncle Fernando's bottle.
This is uncle Fernando's bottle!
It is Pedro who pinched it
And it's I who will tell it:

(Pedro rises up)

JULIO

...

PEDRO

Argh, stop running around Julio, you might hurt yourself
Here, why don't you drink

*He passes him the bottle, the kid says no, teases Pedro a little,
presses the hat on Esteban's nose*

PEDRO

some...

*then goes back to playing; he approaches the dock's edge, suddenly
perceives something and calls:*

JULIO

Mario, Mario, I see a boat in the sea!

MARIO

You toss around more than a

*He scratches himself mechanically. Esteban sits up, and goes
looking, then*

MARIO

flea!

PEDRO

Julio, you're going to be beat!

comes back, drinks some, lies down again.

JULIO, *excited*

You saw it? You saw it?

PEDRO

There is just nothing to eat!

ESTEBAN

It's a

MARIO, *dances up and down*

It's some castaways! It's some castaways!

ESTEBAN

rotten boat

MARIO

We'll get them out of water

It's some castaways

I'll get Fernando over

JULIO

We'll get them out of water.

And then we'll give them a bunch of stuff to eat!

MARIO

...

PEDRO, *in echo.*

Bunch

Julio darts off.

MARIO

Bunch of stuff to eat!

PEDRO

of stuff to eat!

ESTEBAN

Bunch of stuff to eat!

All three sit up in a circle. Pedro beats out the rhyme, and they start off a nursery rhyme in the kid's style.

MARIO

Turkey legs,
Some hot wings,
Some Rice and beans.

PEDRO

Turkey legs,
Some hot wings,
Some Rice and beans.

ESTEBAN

Turkey legs,
Some hot wings,
Some Rice and beans.

MARIO

Some fresh bread,
Some sardines
Some warm pudding.

PEDRO

Some fresh bread,
Some sardines
Some warm pudding.

ESTEBAN

Some fresh bread,
Some sardines
Some warm pudding.

A distant bell starts ringing.

MARIO

Summer grapes,
Nectarine,
Fresh corn on the cob.

PEDRO

Summer grapes,
Nectarine,
Fresh corn on the cob.

ESTEBAN

Summer grapes,
Nectarine,
Fresh corn on the cob.

The three look at each other and exclaim as one:

MARIO

The bottle!

PEDRO

The bottle!

ESTEBAN

The bottle!

They stand up. Mario finds a cord lying around. Pedro ties it to the neck of the bottle, which they slowly drop along the dock's wall, invisible; as soon as they sit back reappears Julio, like a backseat driver, with a weather-beaten fisherman of fifty-odd years. Julio pulls him by boardwalk's edge and points to the horizon. Caracas looks out, slaps him on the shoulder in encouragement, and leaves jauntily, Julio in his heels. Other characters come in, women with dishes, sewing materials; on old boxes, some go set up a table of sorts; an old guy shows up dragging along some kind of iron bed, which is placed in the middle and draped with a vulgar fabric; a feast of sorts comes together in an increasingly pronounced rhythm; the women jabber all at the same time following some obscure convention.

PIA

Saint Mary, castaways!

MARIA

Saint Mary, castaways!
Twenty-five years a-

MERCEDES

Saint Mary

CONCHA

What a story, castaways!
Twenty-five years ago it was
We saw

PIA

Twenty-five years ago it was
We saw this sort of thing take place!

CONCHA

We came across the boy Julio
The child was so agitated.

PIA

so agitated.
He ran fast towards the boat
They would appreciate a bed

MARIA

He ran fast towards the boat
They would appreciate a bed

MERCEDES

He ran fast towards the boat
They would appreci-

CONCHA

He ran fast towards the boat
They would appreciate a bed

PIA

They would appreciate some wine,
They could probably use food too.

MARIA

They would appreciate some wine,
They could probably use food too.

MERCEDES

ate a bed, some wine, and some food too

CONCHA

They would appreciate some wine,
They could probably use food too.

PIA

Let us pray they are still alive.
May the Almighty be with us!

MARIA

Let us pray they are still alive.
May the Almighty be with us!

MERCEDES

Let us pray they are still alive

CONCHA

Let us pray they are still alive.
May the Almighty be with us!

PIA

Let us pray they are still alive. Ah!

MARIA

Let us pray they are still alive. Ah!

MERCEDES

May the Almighty be with us. Ah!

CONCHA

Let us pray they are still alive. Ah!

Pedro has stood up, has come over to discreetly embrace Concha, who gives him a pat on the hand as she busies herself around the table; he starts fiddling around the table and pinches various food items which he hides discreetly in his shirt. Enter old Nunez, bent over his cane, who comes sitting down, and in reaction to the women's chatter, starts singing a sort of rough lamentation.

NUNEZ

In nineteen twenty four,
I's thirty-seven
My fine boat was shipwrecked,
Far away from home
Never been in bigger trouble
I rowed for a week and then some.
In nineteen twenty four,
I's

He shrugs, the women go back to their song.

NUNEZ

thirty-seven

PIA

...

MARIA

This senior citizen has to always show up and int-

MERCEDES

This senior citizen has

CONCHA

...

PIA

He must always feel offended
If you take care of someone

MARIA

rude

He makes everything about him
He must always feel offended
If you take care of someone

MERCEDES

to always show up and intrude
He must always feel offended
If you take

CONCHA

He makes everything about him
He must always feel offended
If you take

PIA

else

MARIA

else

MERCEDES

care of someone else

CONCHA

care of someone else

NUNEZ

Yes but in the good old days
The guys were all real men
Those were real disasters
Hundreds of people dead
But our resistance was heightened
We were teasing the elements
In nineteen twenty four
I's thirty-seven.

Pushing a bicycle with one hand and holding a guitar in the other, enters Fernan. Mercedes goes to him, gives him a kiss. He takes her in his arms after putting down the bike and the guitar. Then he sits on a box and starts playing music. Pedro, well-equipped with sustenance, has gone back to his corner, where Mario and Esteban wait for him. There is general commotion, the women head toward the men who enter – Caracas, Alberto, Cortez – who carry the castaway, Julio jumping from one to the other. Behind are Raquel and Raphael.

PIA

Where's the other! He's so pale!

MARIA

There's only one? He's so pale!

MERCEDES

The poor, poor guy! He's so pale!

CONCHA

Saint Mary! He's so pale!

PIA

Lay him down here! Hold up his head! Now move away now!

MARIA

Lay him down here! Hold up his head! Now move away now!

MERCEDES

Lay him down here! Hold up his head! Now move away now!
Give the guy some fresh

CONCHA

Lay him down here! Hold up his head! Now move away now!

The four men have laid down the castaway and move away more or less as the women hurry in, Maria gives the men a wine jug. Caracas drinks, then Alberto, then Cortez, then Raphael. Fernan plays the guitar

MERCEDES

water

very softly. Old Nunez, grumbling, shrugs and turns away. Raphael offers him the jug, he drinks and starts choking. Raphael slaps him in the back.

The castaway makes a motion and tries to sit up straight, the women stand still.

MERCEDES

Hey, he opened his eyes!

She sits down next to him, supports him

MERCEDES

He is alive... I can hear his heartbeat's gentle thrive

She wipes his forehead with a red handkerchief

MERCEDES

It's so gentle I can barely hear it

Pia pours a glass of wine and water

MERCEDES

Make him drink a little wine

Yes, some pure wine.

She makes the castaway drink the wine glass, then hands the glass back to Pia.

She looks the man in the eyes. He wants to speak.

MERCEDES

He's weak as a newborn!
Don't you speak...
(to Fernan) Fernan, play on...

The guitar starts a stabbing song... Mercedes sings, then stands up and starts dancing.

MERCEDES

Don't you speak, your eyes've already called me
What I have guessed already
Before you even stood up
Don't you speak, your heart's already sung me
What I have guessed already
Before your eyes opened up!
Don't you speak, words will not accomplish squat
The sun's biting like a dog
This life is oh so fragile!
Don't you speak, instead look at me dancing.
If you see love traversing
Clutch it in your strong hands!
Don't you move, let my dance whip the ground
That makes me burning hot
Let me just hit the rock
The wind died down and the day came to a stop
Let me dance and hop.
The guitar's tormenting me. You showed up
You emerged onto this dock
Your spirit has now been propped
For the pleasure of your life
If you want me,
Take my mouth for the kissing
Take my body if y'want me
After I am done dancing

She dances. The castaway sits up, looks at her with certain interest.

Fernan too, but with a different expression. When she stops dancing, she passes near Fernan to go to the castaway

Fernan grabs her brutally and kisses her too; she let's herself be kissed, frees herself finally, looking at the castaway with a challenging expression without moving away from Fernan.

The Castaway reaches out his hand, a woman gives him a glass.

He eats and he drinks.

He reaches out with the other hand, someone gives him a fruit.

He has his glass refilled, drinks again, stands up, drinks some more, throws his glass to someone.

CASTAWAY

The sail was gone after a blast of wind.
And the current took my small boat
Give me something to drink, my friends
My blood's downright salty!
The heat of the sun was thrown onto me
And it slashed me like a wildcat!
Give me something to drink, my friends
I'll tell you the story.
The first day, far ahead of me
I saw come out the sea
A god's face, very pleased with himself
And snickering loudly
The second day, right by my side
He came and took a sit
Took my hand and started to feel my pulse
While muttering in Greek
The third day, a yellow tiger
Bit me in the gullet
If you want him, wait another second
He's here in my pocket.

*He tips his glass, drinks, bursts out laughing, and approaches Mercedes, who takes a step towards him.
He grabs her, draws her to him, and kisses her wildly. The women turn away in discomfort.*

MERCEDES

If you want it,
Take my mouth for the kissing,
Take my body if y'want me...

CASTAWAY

I have showed up,
I came out of the deep sea

MERCEDES

Your spirit has now been propped
For the pleasure

CASTAWAY

Your spirit has now been propped
For the pleasure

MERCEDES

of your life
If you want me,
Take my mouth for the kiss

CASTAWAY

of my life

MERCEDES

-ing
Take my body if y'want me,
Given

CASTAWAY

Now give me what I want
If you

MERCEDES

that my dance is done

CASTAWAY

Now give me what I want
are done with your dance

He kisses her. Fernan, who dropped his guitar, rises up slowly.

The women make signs to each other and step back. Fernan pulls a knife from his pocket, opens it quickly, and with a wild move pounds it into the castaway's back.

He then removes his knife, cleans it on the collapsing man, closes it back, and picks up his guitar. The body falls to the ground in Mercedes' arms, who lets him fall and remains silent. Little Julio is transfixed. Pia scolds him and pulls him along. The men turn back. Slowly, everybody starts taking off, taking with them the remains of the feast. Mercedes watches Fernan, who goes away without looking back.

MERCEDES, *with a scream.*

Fernan! Wait up! I'm coming!

Fernan has already disappeared, she dashes. Night has fallen, the lighthouse's lantern has come on. It's a fixed light of harsh blue.

Pedro sits up and goes foraging in the remains.

He rushes towards the boardwalk and cheers her up.

ESTEBAN

The bottle!

He hugs it and drinks.

MARIO

Saint bottle!

MARIO, *same routine.*

He's cold alright...

PEDRO, *leans over and feels the corpse*

He's cold alright...

ESTEBAN

...

(same routine) Pedro sits back on a box.

ESTEBAN

Totally dead...

MARIO

What do we do?

PEDRO

Toss him in the ocean!
But to bestow on this moment
Its suitable solemnity,
Let us give this innocent
An impressive internment.

He starts a funeral march that the others take up in chorus at every verse. Pedro stays seated, the others start frisking the dead and appropriating the contents of his pockets, then take him by his feet and carry him to the edge of the dock, their voices dropping in response to Pedro's.

MARIO

Was nice out there, in the warm air

PEDRO

In the warm air, was nice out there

ESTEBAN

Was nice out there, in the warm air

MARIO

A body came out the water

PEDRO

A body came out the water

ESTEBAN

A body came out the water

MARIO

We made a great effort trying

PEDRO

We made a great effort trying

ESTEBAN

We made a great effort trying

MARIO

To restore a human being

PEDRO

To restore a human being

ESTEBAN

To restore a human being

MARIO

The poor guy managed to sit up

PEDRO

we almost did come out of top

ESTEBAN

The poor guy managed to sit up

MARIO

For the body it's worth nothing

PEDRO

But we did give him some good wine

ESTEBAN

For the body it's worth nothing

MARIO

...

PEDRO

...

ESTEBAN

...

MARIO

A curvy young woman

PEDRO

A curvy young woman

ESTEBAN

A curvy young woman

MARIO

In front of him started dancin'

PEDRO

In front of him started dancin'

ESTEBAN

In front of him started dancin'

Mario and Esteban shake their head and pick him up.

MARIO

Really, such a pity

PEDRO

He became a bit foolhardy

ESTEBAN

Really, such a pity

MARIO

He grabbed the curvy young lady

PEDRO

He grabbed the curvy young lady

ESTEBAN

He grabbed the curvy young lady

MARIO

It's sad at such a tender age

PEDRO

He got into some sort of craze
And

ESTEBAN

It's sad at such a tender age

MARIO

It's hard to take, and in the back!

PEDRO

he got a knife right in his back

ESTEBAN

It's hard to take, and in the back!

*The voices increasingly go off into the distance, Pedro stands up,
stretches, looks at the moon.*

MARIO

...

PEDRO

...

ESTEBAN

...

(Echo in the distance.)

MARIO

Body returns to the water...

PEDRO

Was nice out there, in the warm air

ESTEBAN

Body returns to the water...

A farther and farther echo. Pedro has a drink.

MARIO

Body returns to the water...

PEDRO

Body returns to the water...

ESTEBAN

Body returns to the water...

Curtain falls slowly.