

# **THE ZEBRA**

**Libretto**

Libretto: Kerstin Perski

Music: Tebogo Monnakgotla

Characters:

John

Edward

Disa

Anna

Kaj

## Prologue

*(A door is slammed shut.)*

JOHN *(off stage)*:

Hello, are you home?

Your mothers want us over for dinner, again . . .

*(John enters. Stops short when he discovers a suitcase, placed in the middle of the room. He notices an envelope attached to the suitcase. He hastens forward, picks the envelope, and opens it. Inside he finds a flight ticket, and a letter. Shocked, he fumbles with the content, can't comprehend what he's holding in his hands. He unfolds the letter and starts to read.)*

JOHN *(reading)*:

John. Sorry to hurt you. From today our story is over.

Your suitcase is packed. Your account is filled up.

When you read this, I have left town.

The ticket is open. You can go wherever you want.

Throw in the keys when you leave.

Edward.

Edward! No!

I love you!

*(Edward comes to sight)*

Don't you love me anymore?

EDWARD:

Not in that way.

JOHN:

I don't believe you.

EDWARD:

Sorry.

JOHN:

I came here for your sake. For us.

EDWARD:

Sorry.

*(Edward intends to leave.)*

JOHN:

I'm bleeding like a wounded dog.

Don't cut me out of your heart!

*(Edward stops.)*

My love.

Without you I cease to be.

EDWARD:

There is no other way.

JOHN:

We'll find a way. Together.

Edward! Look at me!

The siesta at the Zoo.

Remember?

Your little daughter.

Her laughter.

Pearls of light.

The Zebra in its cage.

His gaze. His kicks.

EDWARD:

A different place.

A different time.

JOHN:

We were hit by his fire.

Inflamed by his sparks.

We looked at each other and knew.

Our longing can not be tamed

EDWARD:

A life in a life.

A finished journey.

JOHN:

That night you left the door open.

EDWARD:

A door I've closed and never will open.

JOHN (*throws himself on his knees*):

You cried in my arms like a new-born child.

I am a part of you, you of me.

*Duet*

EDWARD:

Control yourself, John!

Our *we* faded away.

I look at you now and see

— a stranger.

JOHN:

You are the air, the light, the path we walk.

You are my heart, my body, my home  
and my refuge.

Without you I drown in myself.

EDWARD:

Sorry.

*(Edward tries to leave.*

JOHN (*furious*):

You left your family.

Jeopardized everyone's life.

EDWARD (*stops*):

Love came to an end, John.

Can happen to anybody.

JOHN:

You fled like a frightened animal.

Allowed them to punish you by locking me

up,

For five months I didn't see the light of day.

EDWARD:

You came here by your own free will.

JOHN:

I will end my life if you leave me.

EDWARD:

I will get over it.

JOHN:

Edward!

*(Edward disappears. John, alone and bewildered, doesn't know what to do.*

*Hyperventilates. Wants to throw himself out of the window. Hunts after pen and paper.)*

JOHN (*writing*):

No words, no prayers can reach you.  
You, whom I trusted more than myself.  
Your smile, your gaze made me stay alive.  
My love for you made me endure each lash of the whip.  
Now you are leaving me for another.  
Make love, laugh, breathe with another.  
What happened? When did I lose you?  
Where did the end begin? Where did we stop talking,  
feel, see the beauty in each other?  
You tempted me with happiness in a foreign country.  
Now you order me to fly out of your life.  
Your new zebra is white, the stripes sufficiently black.  
On me, the black one, the stripes shine like on a corpse. Fare  
well, my love!  
As long as my heart beats, it beats for you!  
John.

*(John finishes his writing, folds the letter, and slips it into the envelope. Puts it somewhere in the room, grabs his suitcase and walks out of Edward's life forever.)*

## ACT I

**Scene 1. (At Disa's and Anna's place, some months earlier).** Anna. Edward. Disa.

*(Anna shows Edward how to deep-breathe. Edward tries his best but cannot concentrate. Gives up.)*

EDWARD:

It's impossible, mama Anna. The pictures flame up  
as soon as I close my eyes.

ANNA *(with her eyes closed)*:

Accepting. Letting them pass by.  
Like clouds in the sky.

EDWARD:

They push his head down under water.  
They hang him up in his feet  
and burn his genitals with needles.

ANNA:

Breathe with me, Edward. Breathe.

EDWARD:

Is he breathing? Is he freezing?  
Is he laying naked on the floor  
like a helpless baby?  
Not knowing, makes me sick.

*(Disa rushes in.)*

DISA:

No answer yesterday. No answer today.  
And they call themselves authorities.  
They examine each other, appoint each other  
while for the one in prison, life slips away.  
We need a new strategy, something that will touch their hearts.



*(Pondering)*

An evening with John's poetry!

ANNA *(with a look at Disa)*:

Not now, dearest.

EDWARD:

I'll do what you want me to, mama Disa.

Give an impassioned speech.

Strip naked

and recite his poetry.

Whatever it takes to set him free.

*(Pulls out a worn piece of paper.)*

One of John's poems.

Smuggled out by a guard a month ago.

*(Edward unfolds the paper.)*

*The Zebra I*

EDWARD *(reads)*:

Under the dead eye of dawn

I am awakened by a voice.

*(John obviously exhausted appears)*

JOHN:

Under the dead eye of dawn

I am awakened by a voice.

” My love. Here I am”.

I strain the strings of my senses

and listen in the dark,

see the guarding shadows of night

creeping along the wall.

I brace myself against the darkness,

kick my humiliation away,

bang my head into the bars,

am thrown back into despair.

” My love. Here.

On the other side of shame.

A stone’s throw beyond the dread”

I straighten my back, lift my eyes,

hear the tempting calls from the plains,

remember the open skies.

The beats of your heart come towards me,

your scent, your breath, your burning laughter.

I yield to my anger, throw myself at-the wall.

Fleeing mothers and forefathers, flying over the earth.

I fill myself with you, quench my thirst with you.

Hold on to life with you, after you, after you

*(John disappears.)*

My love. Here I am ...

My love. Here.

On the other side of shame.

A stone’s throw beyond the dread.

DISA:

Brilliant.

I will attach the poem this very evening.

*(Anna and Edward look at each other.)*

ANNA:

He loves you.

EDWARD:

I love him.

Love. So much that the colours of life  
fade away without him.

Love. So that the pain in his body  
hollows my soul.

*(Edward is not able to continue. Disa puts her arm around him.)*

DISA:

Trust me.

John is an emergency case.

No one in the world can take care of  
people like him better than we.

ANNA: (walks up to Edward other side.):

Disa's iron will can overpower armies as well as muttonheads.

EDWARD:

John was thrown into prison because I managed to escape.

ANNA:

They are guilty – not you.

EDWARD:

His mother was chased away by her own neighbours.

ANNA:

You stood up for yourself  
and your innermost feelings.

DISA:

That is greatness.

ANNA:

The greatest.

DISA:

That is beautiful.

ANNA:

The most beautiful.

*TRIO "The right to your own truth"*

DISA:

Every human being  
has the right  
to her own truth.

ANNA:

When I dared to love Disa  
I became true  
to myself.

DISA:

Love openly and freely . . .

ANNA:

Dared to lay my ear close to my own heart ...

EDWARD:

John gave me the power to throw the lie away.

DISA:

Free oneself from slavery . . .

ANNA:

Give myself space . . .

EDWARD:

Accept the one I've always been . . .

ANNA and DISA (*look at each other tenderly*):

My love for you ...

EDWARD:

My love for you made me able to see myself . . .

DISA:

... made me eager to fight.

ANNA

...brought flavours and scents to life.

ANNA AND DISA:

My love for you...

EDWARD:

Without the love for you . . .

ANNA AND DISA:

...conquers all.

EDWARD:

...I cannot live.

**Scene 2. Memory scene. The first love meeting.**

*(The light changes. Night. John emerges from the shadows, soaked, with a stone in his hand. Edward turns around, trembling.)*

EDWARD:

We risk our lives.

JOHN *(Weighing the stone in his hand.)*:

Heavy as fear. Light as love.

EDWARD *(feeble)*:

Go!

JOHN:

Your stone cried out to me in the rain.

Waited for me in the darkness.

EDWARD:

I made a mistake.

JOHN:

A heart of clouds. A conscience of lead.

A thief in the night, pale with longing.

EDWARD:

A teacher and a student . . .

JOHN:

...intoxicated by each other.

EDWARD:

A white and a black . . .

JOHN:

. . . wild with zest for life.

EDWARD:

I'm married, John! Two children must be raised and fed.

JOHN (*holds out the stone*):

*DUET: "The Stone"*

A stone can soften, hide, silence.

A stone can kill the creeping scorpions of desire

Hardly hatched – crush them!

Hardly born – smash them!

Get rid of your puppyish bungling thinking,

blinded, stumbling, grumbling, whimpering!

Your stone called out to me,

brought me to your opened door.

Between right and wrong a flame flares,

between then and now a gap looms.

It remains in the darkness

reveals a path to a wonderful unknown room.

EDWARD (*turned away*):

The stone is yours – crush them!

I see it in the night, can't see, see,

it tempts me and promises,

whispers your name.

I turn away,

makes myself into stone against stone.

Glow in the rain,

calls out to me,

weighs heavily in my hand.

Opens a path beyond fear

– to you.

*(Edward turns around and they kiss passionately.)*

**Scene 3 In Anna's and Disa's home.** Edward. Anna. Disa. Lena. Kaj.

*(Dinner party ritual at Anna's and Disa's place. Cheek kisses and hugs. Drinks and snacks. Everyone is chatting and speaking all at once. Except Edward, who stands aloof.)*

KAJ:

Nicenicenice. And funfunfun!

LENA:

Yes, it's so gorgeousgorgeusgorgeous!

ANNA:

Isn't it? So nicegorgeousfun!

KAJ:

Yes, so tremendously good!

LENA:

So enormously goodiegoodiegood!

And so smart!

KAJ:

Yes, so smartsmartsmart!

ANNA:

Above all practical - if you ask Disa.

DISA:

Yes, of coursecoursecourse!

But one shouldn't, no one shouldn't,  
not here, not now.



LENA, KAJ, ANNA:

No, certainly not, no, one shouldn't, not now!

DISA (*checking her papers*):

Damned those naysaying nerds.

Here's another nonsense answer.

LENA (*She peeks quickly over Disa's shoulder.*):

An answer from those in charge,  
and you are telling us only now!

*(They all gather around Disa and read).*

EDWARD:

"No special distressing circumstances".

What do they mean?

DISA:

Slow-witted babblers!

Robots lacking in empathy.

John is manhandled and tortured.

His name is on the list.

LENA:

How can they say no, the evidence we deliver?

Lynching neighbours.

Bullied mother.

ANNA:

Passive aggression.

KAJ:

Frankly, it's mere stupidity.

DISA:

Those cruel lazy jerks.  
I've bombarded them with figures.  
Shot at them with facts.  
Drowned them in pictures that  
would make a fish cry.

LENA:

People with prejudices are made of stone.

DISA:

Lazy Caffè latte boozers.  
Damned lazy people.  
The radio wants to interview me about John's case.

LENA:

Oh, congrats!  
Kaj and I intend to make a news story from Edward's point of view.  
*(Quickly, to Edward.)*  
An interview about how you get on over here.

KAJ:

How about that, Edward?  
Some shots in here. Some shots out there.  
Some childhood. Some now.

EDWARD:

My mama's friends are my friends.

LENA:

The silenced must speak with their own voices.

DISA:

Most important is to rouse a strong public opinion.

ANNA:

No fiddling.

LENA:

The unknown must be given faces and voices.

ANNA:

No twiddling.

DISA:

No bogus facts.

LENA:

No faking.

ANNA:

There's no place for faking in this home.

LENA AND KAJ:

Oh no, absolutely no fiddling or twiddling in here!

EDWARD:

Mama Anna and mama Disa  
know what it is to end up in the cold.

ANNA:

Those who haven't been there themselves  
understand nothing.

DISA:

Nothing!

DISA:

*ARIA: "The pain under your skin"*

To understand is to feel the pain under your skin.  
Hear the sniggering in the school yard. Face the mockery.  
Being the last one picked when all the others have been chosen.  
Standing dark and big next to small blondes.  
Having hairy legs but being forced to trip around in a skirt.  
Anyone can come out with tender words

but the one who warms to you but does nothing  
has never fallen into the well of loneliness.

ANNA AND LENA:

The one who warms to you but does nothing  
has never fallen into the well of loneliness.

*(The women start to help themselves from the food. Kaj turns to Edward to cheer him up.)*

KAJ:

Your country looks exciting on pictures.  
Best surfing in the world.

EDWARD (*absentminded*):

Yes, the surfing is good.

KAJ:

The strong winds. *ARIOSO:*  
The wild waves.  
You forget who you are, become what you want.  
A surfing God in the shape of an animal.  
A miaowing sea gull (*Miaows like a sea gull.*)  
A talking fish. (*Talks like a fish.*)  
An avatar without dark memories  
Your partner – is he a surfer?

EDWARD:

Only in poetry.

KAJ (*more intimate*):

You could teach me.

*(Edward looks bewildered.)*

To surf in your poetry.

Ah, my poetry. Sure.  
Please, excuse me . . .

(*touches his forehead*)

... they are sawing bones in here.

*(Edward pulls away. Anna and Disa cast worried glances after him.)*

LENA:

His steps get heavier day by day.

KAJ:

You have struggled to get his friend out for months now.

DISA:

We will fight for years if need be.

Edward has become like our own brother.

And now we must get his beloved John out.

ANNA:

Our family was completed when Edward arrived.

Our male soul mate.

A part of us.

DISA:

*QUARTET:* "Resistance is the only thing"

I'm standing by his side,

I have been him.

Fought against stupidity.

Kept the passion alive.

Resistance is the only thing

that can change his destiny.

KAJ:

Be flexible as water,

go with the flow.

Resistance is old fashioned,

not Twenty-first century at all.

Time to wake up

and look around.

LENA:

The family destroyed,  
abandoned children.  
The lover imprisoned  
because he followed his heart.  
One must be grateful that one  
doesn't live his life!

ANNA:

My brother, our child,  
our spiritual husband.  
May his aura be strengthened  
by our love, our support.  
I suffer with him,  
as if I were him

LENA (*to Anna and Disa*):

When I think about your courage, I glow inside!  
(*Turns to Kaj*)  
Perhaps we too should go in for someone who is sexually deviant!

KAJ:

As many as you want. They can share your bed.

(*The scene "freezes".*)

**Scene 4.**

*(Edward appears.)*

*ARIA: "A shooting star to hold on to"*

EDWARD                      *Part I*

You, my riddle, my life,  
my secret zebra.  
John. John. John.  
Our short-lived we  
– erased from the map.  
A burning wound in the sky.  
A forgotten continent.  
In my dreams you are with me night after night,  
cuddling up close, laying your head on my chest.  
Give me a blink, a gleam,  
a falling star that I can hold on to.  
Who brought us together  
just to separate us with such cruelty?  
I should have taken your hand,  
smuggled you out,  
stopped the work of capricious powers.

*(John appears. Obviously agitated.)*

JOHN:

You must pack and leave tonight.

EDWARD:

What's happening? Calm down!

JOHN:

The porter. He saw me at the door and smiled.  
I tried with bribes. I tried with threats.  
His golden tooth shone like a snake's.

EDWARD:

We haven't done anything wrong.

JOHN:

His gaze told me that he's going to report you.

EDWARD:

No one will believe him.

I'm a university lecturer. I have a wife and children.

JOHN:

All those who want to harm you will believe him.

EDWARD:

I'm not going anywhere.

JOHN:

You are leaving tonight.

*(Edward remains silent)*

You have been unfaithful to your wife.

Your neighbours will lynch you.

There are laws in this country.

Imprisonment.

EDWARD:

If you come with me.

*(John is silent.)*

I will take care of you.

Support you until you find a way.

Forget the evil, all those years of humiliation.

Live freely with me and dedicate yourself to your poetry.



JOHN:

Two unmarried men.

EDWARD:

There are countries with more liberal views.

JOHN:

Not for people like me.

Not for a teacher and his student.

*(John tries to leave.)*

EDWARD:

John, wait!

Not like this...

*(John hesitates.)*

I love you.

*(John fades away. Edward is alone.)*

*Aria "Shooting star"  
part II*

I got hold of a star and lost my grip.

I crawled up on land and was washed into the sea.

I was allowed to taste the sweetness of life,  
the taste of grief never fades.

Erase the memories. Purify the blood.

Let me drift away into a dreamless sleep.

I wish our paths never had crossed.

**Scene 5. In Anna's and Disa's home. (*Anna and Disa come out on the balcony, pale and serious. Edward bewildered, looks at them*)**

EDWARD:

Pale as marble.

Where are our guests?

*(Anna sits down next to John.)*

EDWARD *(looking with growing concern at Anna, then at Disa)*: Why do you look at me so strangely?  
John?!

*(Anna and Disa exchange a quick glance, as if they don't know how to continue).*

DISA:

He's alive.

ANNA:

He's alive. But ...

EDWARD:

He's seriously ill ...

ANNA:

Not ill. But ...

EDWARD:

They have damaged him for life . . .

ANNA AND DISA:

He's coming here.

EDWARD:

John?

Here?

DISA:

They will release him from prison  
to restore their reputation.

I've arranged an alien's passport, the trip, everything.  
In a couple of days, he will be put on a flight here.

*(Edward rubs his legs as if he must make certain that he is alive. Touches Anna's face.  
Touches Disa's.)*

EDWARD:

We are us. Here. Now.

Anna. Disa. Me.

*(Touches his own face. Overwhelmed by sudden joy.)*

Must shave. No, grow a moustache.

No baby-face when my prince is coming here.

Here. My John.

He's coming here.

Are you sure?

ANNA:

As sure as fate.

DISA:

As sure as death.

ANNA AND DISA:

As sure as fate and death.

EDWARD:

As fate and death.

How can I ever . . . what you have done for me . . .

for us . . . I will never . . . ever

*(Stops suddenly)*

How do we know that they let him stay?

ANNA:

You will marry. Build a home.

DISA:

We'll help you with everything.

EDWARD:

My guardian angels.  
You've saved us from the jaws of the beasts.

ANNA:

A victory for love.

DISA:

A triumph for all of us.

*"Disa's triumph aria"*

The echo from your wedding will be heard all over the world,  
Collecting voices during its way,  
unheard, repressed,  
choked, silenced.

I can hear them swell and rise  
purer and purer, higher and higher, more and more confident.  
The cheers resound from all corners of the earth  
women, men, the young, the elderly.  
No one can stop the power of love.  
The transforming, embracing, uniting power.

ANNA:

The wind shifts, blows life into the soul.  
You climb up and walk out,  
leaving the humiliation behind.  
Ascend into the light and can love once again.

EDWARD:

All that mutilated yearning.  
All that confined waiting.

*(Edward pulls Anna and Disa to his chest and embraces them.)*

**"Scene 6. At the airport.** Edward. Anna. Disa. Lena. Kaj.  
(*"The welcoming committee" is preparing itself. Anxious expectations.*)

DISA (blowing her nose.):

Directly from prison to our freedom.

This is big.

ANNA, DISA, LENA, KAJ:

Our freedom! Bigger than big!

ANNA:

Thanks to the fire in Disa's heart.

ANNA, LENA, KAJ:

Thanks, Disa, for the fire in your heart!

ANNA:

And in Lena's of course.

(*To Edward*):

I haven't seen Disa so emotional  
since our wedding.

LENA (*to Kaj*):

Don't forget to take pictures!

As soon as he's in sight.

KAJ (*irritated*):

Starstruck already?

I can start the shooting right now.

EDWARD:

Five months without daylight.

What does he look like?

Hollow cheeks?

A bird's skeleton?

(*Anna adjusts Edwards's tie.*)

ANNA:

Some weeks with us and he will be his old self again.

EDWARD:

Last time we saw each other I had longer hair.

ANNA:

Breathe, Edward. Breathe.

ANNA, DISA, LENA, KAJ:

Breathe, Edward. Breathe.

ANNA (*waving all of them towards her*):

A trauma is no scratch wound,  
no broken leg.

DISA:

Anna knows, she's been stricken herself.

ANNA:

*ARIA:* "Calm, calm, calm."

You are flayed. Skinless.

A flaring flame.

A rash word, a random glare,  
- you withdraw.

Lock out.

Become a shadow of yourself.

A small obstacle  
and you will quiver in a crying fit.

We must create the right atmosphere, open our hearts.

Let him accept the pain. Heal the brain.

Remember. Three important things:

Calm. Calm. Calm.

*(Disa, Edward, Kaj and Lena nod to each other):*

DISA, EDWARD, KAJ, LENA:

Accept the pain. Heal the brain.

Calm. Calm. Calm.

*(All eyes turn to John, who appears dressed in a well-fitting suit and Italian shoes.  
Everything stops.)*

JOHN:

Edward!

EDWARD:

Oh my God! John!

*(Edward hastens to meet John and they embrace while Anna, Disa, Lena and Kaj keep a respectful distance.)*

ANNA, DISA, LENA AND KAJ *(rather perplexed)*:

Create the right atmosphere, open our hearts ...

JOHN *(tousles Edward's hair)*:

Pure prison hairdo!

What kind of new hell is this that you have  
dragged me into, Eddie?

At home the flies are dying  
because of the heat.

Here, it's ice and darkness  
as far as one can see.

Couldn't you have fled further south?

Those flamingos over there — standing guard.

What are they waiting for?

A rock star?

A president?

ANNA, DISA, LENA, KAJ:

A rash word, a random glare,  
a small obstacle and you will quiver  
in a crying fit.

A trauma is no-broken leg . . .

EDWARD *(gestures confused towards the others)*

My dear “mamas”, Anna. Disa.

Their close friends, Lena and Kaj.

If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't stand here now.

JOHN *(bowing so he almost loses balance)*:

Hello hello.

Oops!

Here I am.

ANNA, DISA, LENA, KAJ (*obviously uncomfortable*):

Hello, hello!

JOHN:

Enchanté!

(*Embarrassing silence*)

You are in the dark here.

And the silence – as among the deaf.

(*Takes Edward aside*)

I don't like her gaze.

EDWARD:

Whose gaze?

(*John's grip on Edward's arm tightens*)

JOHN (*nodding towards Lena*):

That one, in the middle.

I've been in prison,

not surfing at Cote d'Azur. Come

on — let's go!

My body is made of concrete.

Do you have a bed?

I want to hide under the quilt

and hold you for a year.

EDWARD:

You are drunk, John.

JOHN (*loses his temper*):

If you were to chew cockroaches for months,  
you would get drunk for life.



EDWARD (*glancing at the others*):

Breathe, John. Breathe.

Calm, calm, calm.

(*Turning to the others.*)

Terribly sorry.

John is tired after the journey.

We must do it some other day.

ANNA, LENA, KAJ:

Another day?!

DISA:

Eh, wait a minute now.

We have arranged a reception.

Organized an interview.

EDWARD:

Sorry.

(*Edward puts his arm around John, who is unsteady and leads him out. Looking foolish Anna, Disa, Lena and Kaj stare at each other.*)

KAJ:

Dead drunk.

LENA:

Exactly what I was thinking.

ANNA:

I thought he was sick.

LENA:

What was he thinking?

DISA:

Gulping down booze in the clouds above

when he knew he was going to land here, meet us.

LENA:

And that dressy outfit!

Where's the money coming from?

DISA:

Trauma or no trauma.

You don't do such things.

ALL:

No, you don't do such things.

ANNA:

Poor Edward.

Poor, poor, poor.

ALL (all at once):

Prepared everything, we had.

Organized everything, we had.

Fixed emergency quota and subsidiary protection, we had.

Drawn up chairs and put spoons on the table, we had.

We had done that! You had done that! We had done that!

Trauma or no trauma.

You don't do such things.

You really don't do such things.

*(They disperse, disappointed and crestfallen.)*

END OF ACT I