

## **The Ballad of Isosceles**

*Alison Matthews*

*This piece was created as part of a residency at Contact Theatre (Manchester) for its 2015 Sensored Festival of Performance. It has gone on to be developed at the University of Salford and Catalyst Arts's FIX15 Biennale of Live Performance (Belfast).*

**Preset: LX 1. SFX 1: 'Smoke Rings'.**

**LX 2 as Performer enters. SFX 2: slow fade down on song as Performer looks upwards.**

<A woman enters barefoot in a long blue dress and approaches a mic. She is spotlit, and a column of light joins her world with the audience's. Her appearance conjures Greek mythology and *Der Blaue Engel* (1930). There are two audience members at the other end of the space, seated in chairs with hands tied to their sides: one is A, and one is B. A larger 'shadow' audience can watch from behind each of these 'primary audience members'.

**LX 3 as Performer press loop station.** Performer presses a loop pedal at her feet and sings over her own pre-recorded vocal backing track, a kind of siren song.>

'While other animals look downwards at the ground, he gave human beings an upturned aspect, commanding them to look toward the skies and, upright, raise their faces to the stars.'

**<She presses the loop pedal twice to stop the backing track. She speaks into the mic, and towards both of us.>**

I am Isosceles, the forgotten tenth Muse. Love child of Zeus and Marlene Dietrich. There are nine other Muses, all legitimate products of Zeus's marriage to Memory. These Muses, my half-sisters, are in charge of epic poetry, lyric poetry, love poetry, astronomy, history, comedy, tragedy, dance, and sacred song.

I am the forgotten tenth Muse. I am the Muse of envy.

**LX 4 as Performer steps forward from the mic.** <She slowly walks downstage towards a corridor of light, stopping at a point equidistant from (but much closer to) A and B.>

**LX 5 as Performer turns and moves closer to A, ignoring B.**

My father fucked Marlene Dietrich after seeing her sing one night. He said he felt like she was singing only to him – that no one else was there. He cheated on Memory – that's his wife - for one night in the lunar pull of my mother's moon-like face.

But Zeus was never good at keeping secrets. He kept returning to Marlene's door. Night after night, he begged to see her. But she had moved on to Yul Brynner.

Sometimes, Zeus would watch through the window as she mounted Yul's body.

**<She perches on B's knee, bobbing up and down to mimic Marlene's movements, but never touching or looking at B, all the while looking directly at A.>**

Sometimes, Marlene would turn towards the window as she rode atop Yul, and Zeus could have sworn that she was looking straight at him.

Zeus could have sworn that she liked for him to watch.

Eventually, he'd turn around and slink home, kicking lager cans in the street, stinking of her Turkish cigarettes. Back at home, Memory **< nodding towards B as if B stands in for Memory, and then sniffing A>** could smell transgression on him and see another woman in his eyes, but she couldn't make the woman out exactly, so she just made him sleep on the pull-out settee.

**LX 6 as Performer turns upstage and returns to the mic.**

**LX 7 once she is  $\frac{3}{4}$  way to the mic.**

**<The Performer returns to her mic post, far away, and activates the loop pedal. LX 8 as track comes in from the loop station. She sings 'Falling in Love Again' to A, ignoring B.>**

'Falling in love again  
Never wanted to  
What am I to do  
Can't help it.

Love's always been my game,  
Play it as I may,  
I was born that way,  
Can't help it

Men flock around me  
Like moths around a flame  
And when their wings burn  
I know I'm not to blame

Falling in love again  
Never wanted to  
What am I to do  
Can't help it.'

**< LX 9 as she turns off loop pedal/song ends. She pauses.**

**LX 10 as she begins to walk downstage from the mic, stopping at the same equidistant point as before and pausing.**

**LX 11 as she turns towards and moves towards B, ignoring A.**

One night, Zeus and Memory went out for a slap-up meal. <joking> Trying to rekindle their romance. Getting ‘the spark’ back, they said. Afterwards, while walking the back streets, they heard music drifting from inside a club. A woman’s winsome voice. Zeus knew, but it was too late – Memory just wanted to dance, and so she pulled him through the door.

Onstage, a pregnant Marlene stood basking in the spotlight. She was barefoot, in a negligee, and she belted out tune after tune, accompanied by a trained monkey in a top hat on a tinny piano. When Zeus walked through the door, hushing his wife <indicating A as Memory> from humming along, Marlene spotted them, and began singing directly to Memory. Memory went from humming and swaying, to standing still, transfixed, like a bird stunned by the first bullet.

The last song of Marlene’s set was a mournful one, directed to Memory’s <casting B as Memory now> ears only, about love and its inevitable plurality. At the end, Marlene blew a kiss to Memory, ignoring Zeus, and walked offstage.

Memory turned towards Zeus and spit in his face. The spittle left a tender scar on Zeus’s cheek. And that was the first recorded moment of regret in humankind – regret, when memory spits in the face of power.

**LX 12 as she turns upstage and returns to the mic.**

**LX 13 once she is  $\frac{3}{4}$  way to the mic.**

**LX 14 as track comes in from loop station.**

**<Performer sings ‘Falling in Love Again’, again, this time to B, ignoring A.>**

‘Falling in love again  
Never wanted to  
What am I to do  
Can’t help it.

Love’s always been my game,  
Play it as I may,  
I was born that way,  
Can’t help it

Men flock around me  
Like moths around a flame  
And when their wings burn  
I know I’m not to blame

Falling in love again  
Never wanted to

What am I to do  
Can't help it.'

< **LX 15 as she turns off loop pedal/song ends** She pauses.

**LX 16 as she steps forward from the mic and travels downstage one last time, stopping at the same equidistant point and pausing, looking at both A and B.**

**LX 17 as she begins to speak to both A and B.**

That very night, I was born backstage. Isosceles, the Muse of envy, with the monkey as a midwife.

The Muses had always been peaceable children. Memory had raised them well. The poetries shared their toys, and history bunked together with comedy, of course. Suddenly, as my nine half-sisters crowded 'round my cradle, squabbling broke out among them. Love poetry and tragedy began to argue over who goes closer to the heart of the matter. Dance began to covet astronomy's stars for her own devices. Sacred song cursed at history.

Marlene soaked up this strange Nativity scene, and her smile was cold and hard. She carried me outside and left me there on the curb, a squirming babe, to fend for myself on the streets ever after.

Isosceles, forever torn between two points. Forever doomed to wander this vast world, refracting the hearts of those in my path.

**LX 18 as she turns upstage and returns to the mic.**

**LX 19 as she reaches  $\frac{3}{4}$  way to mic.**

<She returns to her mic and stares up into the artificial smoke as it billows around her. **LX 20 as track comes in from loop station.** She begins to sing one last time.>

'Falling in love again  
Never wanted to  
What am I to do  
Can't help it.

Love's always been my game,  
Play it as I may,  
I was born that way,  
Can't help it

Men flock around me  
Like moths around a flame  
And when their wings burn  
I know I'm not to blame

Falling in love again

Never wanted to  
What am I to do  
Can't help it.'

**LX 21 beats after song ends/she turns off loop pedal.**

**<Performer exits offstage.> SFX 2: 'Smoke Rings' fades up as the light fades down and as Performer exits.>**

**LX 22 after Performer leaves the stage, wait 5 beats then go.**