The Lines
By Stephen Michaels

Eddie Morelli, a wiry man in his mid-seventies, was standing on the lip of the shabby, little, third-floor proscenium of the American Theater of Actors. He held a glass of fake Scotch, and looked out over the audience, as if through a picture window at the sunset. He was speaking, presumably, to the beautiful, blonde young woman seated on the Chinese red couch behind him.

It was opening night of "Private Island," a new play in which Eddie had the leading role—an aging and unscrupulous lawyer who had made a fortune planning takeover strategies for large corporations. The role was a stretch for Eddie, a retired printer who had grown up in Brooklyn, and sounded like it—but the artistic director, Jed Jensen, was sure he could do it, and Eddie took on the challenge. He'd never played a part this large: the play was a hundred and twenty pages, and his character never stopped talking.

Things were going surprisingly well. Eddie had remembered all his lines—well, he had bobbled a couple in Act I, but he'd recovered. The lines had been his chief concern. Eddie, who never went to college, and who only began acting in his early sixties, always worried about lines. They were hard to learn, and harder to retain. But he'd worked five hours a day for weeks, and had them down.

He had the character down, too. Eddie felt wealthy, powerful, and ruthless—he was none of these things—in his dark blue, satin dressing gown. The audience was with him, and he was cruising.

"Poor James, he's always been a hothead," he said, snickering. He was referring to his son, who had just stormed off stage, after his father—Eddie—refused to finance his screenplay, leaving his girl friend and his father alone together. Later, she would try to seduce the old man, to get him to put up the money.

Eddie looked out the imaginary window. He was dimly aware of the tiny opening night crowd—fifteen or so, friends of the cast. The theater ran on a shoestring and couldn't afford publicity. Nor had Eddie, who had done over twenty shows there, ever been paid.

"Tell me, Mr. Marsden—" said the girl.

"Call me Arthur," said Eddie. He was approaching his big Act II monologue. Her next line was his cue.

"Arthur.—How did you get to be so…unforgiving?" Eddie smiled, and looked back at her. She was also sipping Scotch, and smiling, seductively.

Cheryl in the play, her real name was Sandra. She was twenty-three, a graduate of the Neighborhood Playhouse—and thought she was the next Naomi Thornton. Her arrogance offended Eddie, who had learned the lesson of humility, but she was good in the part. She was tall, slender and sexy, with a narrow face, sharp nose, fleshy lips, and long, straight blond hair. She wore tight jeans, and a white blouse, unbuttoned to show her cleft. Her long legs were pulled up on the couch, and she was barefoot.

"I'm a realist, my dear, that's all," said Eddie. "But, I had to learn the hard way." He paused, and stared wistfully into the distance, as if considering the best way to explain. At seventy-five, Eddie—as well as the character he was playing—had a lot of past to look back on.

"I was third in my class at Yale Law—and breathing down the necks of the first two. Plenty of offers from big law firms. I was on top of the world—young, brilliant and bursting with idealism. Oh, yes, I was going to *help* people! I was going to make the world a *better place*!"

He shook his head, and laughed, as if remembering the follies of his youth, and then, since the moment had gone so well, made the mistake of glancing into the audience, to see if they were with him. Scanning a line of faces floating in the darkness, he thought he saw—Jesus, was it Larry Thornton, his acting coach? He didn't say he was coming opening night! He was so critical! With those damned *eyes* of his, he'd see right through Eddie's performance!

Eddie went blank. He couldn't remember the next line, or any line, or where in the play he was, except he remembered it was Act II. Seeing a moment later that it *wasn't* Larry after all, didn't help. Eddie stood there, terrified, as an abyss opened before him. He ransacked his brain, trying to come up with a line, any line—nothing. The abyss was becoming a gorge. He had to say something! He tried to remember what the character had been *doing*, so he could improvise, but he couldn't remember *that*, either. He felt no impulse to go in any particular direction. He was lost! The audience was staring at him. The pressure was mounting; he could hardly breathe. This was the possibility he always dreaded: a complete lapse of memory!

The audience began to rustle. A few people looked around. Unable to face them any longer, he turned and walked to the bar at one side of what was supposed to represent the sumptuous living room of his mansion on his private island—the set, put together with no budget, required too much imagination. Besides the couch, there were two worn easy chairs with elegant-looking material tacked on, a glass coffee table, a rug and a standing lamp. It all came from the theater's storehouse of old junk.

The actress followed him with her eyes. She knew something was up. He wasn't supposed to move until later.

"I think this merits another drink," he said, stalling for time. Her eyes flashed—he could tell she was angry. She'd shown her irritation in rehearsals several times when he'd had trouble with the lines. He poured himself more Scotch, and tried to look like he was ruminating, while he racked his brain. If only he could remember *where* in the play he was—he was talking to the girl, obviously—but about *what*? The words "a better place" popped into his mind—that was it! "I was going to make the world a better place"—referring to his youthful idealism, of course! But what was the *next* line? He strained, but it wouldn't come.

"Ah, yes, I was going to make the world *better*," he said, stalling. "A ridiculous idea, don't you agree?" He looked at the girl, and sipped his Scotch. If she threw in a line or two, it would give him time. It was a cheap shot, putting the ball in her court, but he was dying! She stared at him. She looked furious.

"I really don't have any opinion on the matter, *Arthur*," she replied, icily. "Why don't you tell me what did you did after you graduated from Yale?" Eddie's cheeks burned. Hadn't she made it obvious to the audience that he had forgotten his lines? But, she had given him a clue. What *did* he do after graduating? He remembered the facts, but not the *lines*. He had no choice but to improvise, again.

"I went down to New Mexico, to work on an Indian reservation," he spluttered. Eddie didn't like improvising.

"Ah, but what happened to make you do that?" This was an interview, not a conversation! She was feeding him, but in a way meant to humiliate him in front of the audience. But he had to continue.

"Well, I, uh, worked as a public defender, then married, and had a child—a son, and then—I met this American Indian, who became my best friend, and"—he stopped. He couldn't just recite the backstory. If only he could remember!

"Was it he, by any chance, who suggested you go down to New Mexico?" said the girl. He thought he heard someone in the audience snicker. But he had to go on.

"Yes, his people were being forced off their land by a coal company, and needed lawyers to represent them, so I…took my wife and child, and we went down there."

His words sounded nothing like the character's—and the author was in the audience. What would he think of the hash Eddie was making of his dialogue? Eddie knew he had lost the character's voice. He sounded like a printer from Brooklyn, now, not a graduate of Yale Law. He'd been worried all along that he'd been miscast. Now it was obvious to everyone!

But the clock was ticking. The girl fed him his cues, and he struggled to piece the monologue together. He got it out, in the end—badly mangled.

"Later, they were both killed, in a car accident. It made me bitter. I gave up my dream of helping people, came back east, and—well, to make a long story short, I decided to make a lot of money. And I did." It sounded dumb, put this way.

"I'm so sorry, Arthur," she said. She looked disgusted—but he felt she was enjoying it, somehow. He limped to the end of the scene, remembering a line here and there, but mostly faking it, and dashed off stage, covered with sweat, his heart pounding, his face flushed.

He stood in the little darkened area offstage, which was also used as storage. A few old, painted canvas flats were leaning against one wall. There was sawdust on the wooden floor, which had been painted, and repainted, black. He was shaking, and gasping for breath. His back and armpits were soaked. He felt dizzy, and his head

ached, as if he'd been hit. It felt like it might explode. He wondered if he was in shock. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of one hand.

He tried to absorb what had just happened. He had dropped a few lines now and then, but never in his whole career—he'd done close to forty shows at little theaters like this one, mostly in New York—had he gotten so lost. He'd ruined the opening night performance! He'd let down the cast, the writer, everyone! In his whole life, he'd never felt so ashamed.

He leaned his forehead against the wall—it felt cool against his burning brow. He should never have taken the part. It was his pride, really. He had wanted to prove to himself he could play a really big role—that he could remember a lot of lines—and look what happened! Besides, he was miscast. This guy was educated, wealthy, arrogant—and Eddie was from a poor Italian background, and never finished college. And he had been beaten down all his life, how could he look arrogant? But Jensen had insisted he could do it—Eddie had been good in every show he'd done. And it was true. Everyone always said how terrific he was after the show, didn't they? And so, he'd taken the plunge.

Everything went wrong. The rehearsal time was shortened, because of the rewrites, and the director, a woman—a girl, really—with hardly any experience, didn't show up for rehearsals, and didn't direct, when she did. And then Jensen wouldn't let them have space, because he was renting out the top floor of the theater and was short on rooms, and they were stuck in Ruth's apartment, which wasn't big enough for them to go through the blocking, even. They just sat around reciting lines. Eddie was in a panic. He needed more rehearsal to get the lines and the blocking to come together. He called Larry a few days before opening.

"For Christ's sake, Eddie, they're not paying you," Larry said. "What are you getting out of it, anyway? The director is fucking up. She should be at rehearsals, and she should make sure you have space, no matter what. They're a bunch of amateurs! Tell her you want another week of rehearsal, in a real space, period. If she doesn't like it, she can get someone else. You have all the power."

But Eddie didn't have the nerve to confront anyone. Instead, he took the burden on himself, and went on trying to achieve the impossible. And now, the worst had happened, and—but he couldn't afford to think about it, now. He had to go back on in a couple of minutes, for the Act II finale. He had more long speeches—would he fall apart again?

He had an impulse to run out the side door, through the drab, carpeted lobby, down the two curling flights of metal stairs, and out onto West Fifty-seventh Street. His car was parked a few blocks away, he could just—but no. The show must go on. He was an actor, and that was his code.

He tried to remember his entrance line—he couldn't at first, felt a stab of panic, then it came—"Still here? Isn't it past your bedtime?" He could hear the girl talking on stage to his son. He glanced out at them from the wings.

"I think he's cute," she was saying.

"He's seventy-three, Cheryl. 'Cute' hardly applies. Besides, he's a bastard," said the young man. Donald in life, he was dark-haired, and slender, with bushy eyebrows and big, vulnerable eyes. He sounded angry. Was it because Eddie had ruined the performance?

"Bastards can be cute," said the girl. Despite his shame, Eddie couldn't help thinking of the stage kiss he and Sandra would share. He never could help looking forward to it, though he always felt her holding back. How would she react tonight,

after what he had done?—but that was later in the play, which he still had to get through. He was supposed to interrupt them talking about him, and pretend not to notice. He had his entrance line, thank God. The cue came. He took a breath, and stepped on stage.

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An hour later, Eddie took his curtain call in a daze, unable to meet the eyes of the audience. The rest of the show had gone well enough—he'd acted as well as he could—but the damage was done. He hurried offstage, and down the narrow, junk-filled corridor to the dressing room. He kept his head down, trying to make himself invisible.

He bumped into Marsha, the female stage manager, who gave him a look of compassion. She was a tall, frizzy-haired young woman with big glasses and a professional manner. He couldn't meet her eyes. She put her hand on his arm, as if about to say something, but he rushed away.

He stopped at the door to the dressing room, and peeked inside. He felt like a criminal. No one else was here, yet, thank God. The row of unpainted wooden chairs facing the mirror that ran the length of the wall, was empty. The line of bare bulbs above—some of them burned out—glared at him, hurting his eyes. The faded lime green walls, peeling in places, looked even more depressing. The room felt like an interrogation chamber. He scurried to his place and sat down.

He stared in the mirror. He looked older than he had before the show. His narrow face, with its flat nose, high cheekbones, thin lips and square chin, was paler than usual, and covered with beads of sweat. His flesh looked like wax—he was reminded of a corpse. He could see the pain in his blue-gray eyes. His curly, gray hair, combed back, looked greasy—thank God he still *had* his hair. The males in his family

never lost it—their only positive quality. They were miserable alcoholics, mostly, like his father, who had beaten him at the slightest provocation. Eddie had been a drinker, too, but he had gone straight, after his first wife died.

He studied his reflection in the mirror. He could see the resemblance to his father. Except his father had balls. Eddie shivered. It was like facing the old man, again. He remembered him, drunk, coming up to Eddie one evening in their little apartment sixty-five years ago, or more, and swatting him, hard, on the top of his head. It stung.

"You're so stupid!" he was saying. His breath reeked of Scotch. "I told you to buy some milk on your way home! You can't remember nothing! Stupid, stupid, stupid!" He swatted him with each epithet. It made Eddie dizzy.

Eddie shook his head, to get rid of the memory. But his headache was worse. The lines etched in his forehead, and the furrows running from his nostrils down to the sides of his mouth, seemed to have deepened. Black eyeliner was smeared across one cheek—he must have wiped his eyes with his hand. It looked like dried blood. He ripped a tissue out of a nearby box, and wiped.

He noticed his hands—they looked old, too. He held them up to the light. The skin was tight, and criss-crossed with tiny lines, the finger joints swollen, the nails flat and brittle. Every day he got older. His heart was weak. His lungs weren't getting enough air. He got winded climbing stairs. He could die anytime, couldn't he?

He heard a voice in the distance. He had to hurry—the others would be coming in. Should he remove his makeup, or just change and get the hell out? He was glad his wife Daisy hadn't been there tonight. He never let her come to openings. He made her wait until the show was going well. This one never would. There were only four performances, and he'd fucked the first one up, totally.

He heard footsteps, and looked up. It was Sandra, entering briskly. She glanced at him, sharply, then away, tossing her hair to one side. She went to her chair and sat down. She held herself erect. He glanced over at her, apologetically, but she ignored him. He could feel an icy cold coming off her. It almost made him shiver. She began removing her makeup. She applied cold cream, and rubbed it in, and removed it with a tissue. He couldn't help admiring her profile. He remembered the kiss near the end of Act II, and how her lips had felt—so soft, so moist, so warm—so *young*. His own lips, he knew, were dry and hard—another sign of age. And then, she could remember her lines, and he couldn't. Memory problems were a sign of old age, too. Wasn't he too old to be doing this anymore? Didn't tonight prove it?

The silence was unbearable.

"The hell with makeup," he thought. "I'll just change my clothes and leave." He got up, went to the costume rack at one side of the room, and untied his dressing gown. Donald, the young man who played his son, walked in. He looked at Eddie and tried to smile.

"Hey, man, you OK?"

"Fine," said Eddie. Donald looked at him.

"Don't worry about a few lines. The audience didn't even know." Sandra made a sarcastic face in the mirror.

"I'm not worried," said Eddie, turning away. He busied himself at the costume rack, untying his dressing gown. He'd let Donald down, too. The kid was doing such a good job—his scenes with Eddie were always full of emotion. He really gave a lot. Eddie had flubbed a couple of lines with him, too.

Donald went to his place, sat down, and cleared his throat. He began taking his makeup off. Eddie hung up his dressing gown, and started unbuttoning his shirt.

"Shitty show, wasn't it?" said Sandra to Donald. Eddie knew she was referring to him. He flushed again, and took his shirt off as fast as he could.

"I'm sure it'll get better," Donald said, glancing at her, awkwardly. He didn't sound sure.

"Do you, really?" said Sandra. "We only have *three* more performances." She was brushing her hair violently, pulling the loose hairs out of the brush and dropping them to the ground. "Thank God nobody who is *anybody* was here tonight. Just fucking relatives. But I've got agents coming tomorrow, and other people…I worked very hard on this!" Her cheeks were red. Eddie caught her eyes in the mirror—a frightful moment—but they both looked away.

"We all did, Sandra," said Donald, sighing.

"You wouldn't know it."

"It wasn't that bad. We needed more rehearsal."

"You have to make do with what you get! It's Off-off Broadway, for Christ's sake!" Eddie felt that she was talking to him, while ignoring him, totally. It was chilling. If she was so angry about it now, why hadn't she helped him at the time, instead of ridiculing him in front of the audience?

He put his own shirt on and buttoned it as fast as he could He unzipped his pants, and pulled them off, catching them on one shoe, and almost falling over onto the cement floor. He had to slow down—he didn't want to make more of a fool of himself than he already had. And then, if he fell, he might break something. His bones weren't as supple as they had once been. He freed his pants, hung them on the rack, and stood there in his pinstripe boxer shorts. His legs were spindly. His knobby knees looked ridiculous. He shivered—he was especially vulnerable to cold, another sign of old age. He felt goose bumps forming.

Ruth, the older actress who played his wife, came in. She looked exhausted. He'd acted in other plays with her, at ATA. She looked at him, a little sadly, and placed her hand on his arm, but didn't say anything—that hurt. She was in her sixties, plump, gray-haired, with a round, fleshy face. Her hair was tied in a bun in back. She was wearing a peach-colored gown from the last scene, with strings of fake pearls—she was supposed to be a woman of wealth. She slumped in her chair.

"I'm done," she said. She began taking off her white, high-heeled shoes—she was always complaining how they hurt.

"Ow. These shoes get smaller, or my feet get bigger, every night." She rubbed her feet. Eddie glanced at her twice, but she would not reciprocate. She was too busy with her feet. She was ignoring him, too—and they were supposed to be friends. She began taking clasps out of her hair and dropping them on the table—click, clack. Each sound added to the insult.

Eddie pulled his pants on, carefully. No one said anything more. An eerie silence descended upon the dressing room, punctuated only by tissues being ripped out of boxes, clasps dropping on the tabletop, throats being cleared, and the rustle of clothes being removed. They got up, walked to the costume rack and back, in silence. They were freezing him out. But he deserved it, didn't he? He had ruined their work, too.

Marsha, the stage manager, appeared at the door. She looked at them, and cleared her throat.

"The call tomorrow is for 6:30. The director wants to run the lines before the show." No one said anything. She looked worried, and went out.

The director, Carol, appeared. She was twenty-three, and just out of Hunter College. She was slender, with short brown hair, a sharp nose, and an efficient manner.

"Well, we got through it. OK, I know, it wasn't perfect. We can do a lot better, and we will. Consider this our real dress rehearsal. Tomorrow, we launch. Carol told you about the 6:30 call, right? We need to run the lines. Too many gaffs." Eddie felt like throwing his chair at her. "OK, get a good night's sleep, everyone. You need to be sharp tomorrow evening. Some important people might be coming." She whirled and rushed out, before anyone could respond.

"Useless bitch," said Donald.

"Aren't they all?" said Ruth. "Directors. Ugh."

"It wasn't *all* her fault," said Sandra, cuttingly. Eddie knew that was directed at him. He buckled his belt, grabbed his coat, ran for the door, and didn't stop until he was safely in his car, blocks away, with the doors locked.