“The World A Stage” by Aubrey McNiel
1st Place, Short Play 13-15
The World A Stage

Characters:

- **Mara**: Actress who, because of her appearance (tall, gaunt, with jet-black hair), is always cast as the villain; her mindset offstage begins to reflect that. She envies the protagonists’ lives, but is blind to the goodness of her own.

- **Doc**: Talented, older director who mentors His actors both on *and* offstage. He considered a degree in the medical field, but was led to *direct*- He helps, though, if one of his actors is physically injured, and His other healing nature will present itself. No one knows how old He truly is, but the laughter in his eyes keeps Him young.

- **Davion**: Actor who, because of his appearance (muscular build with the stereotypical prominent jawline) always is cast as the male protagonist; his mindset offstage reflects that of his role.

- **Ella**: Actress who, because of her appearance (blonde haired- blue eyed, etc.) is always cast as the heroine; her mindset offstage reflects that of her role.

- **Mara’s Mother**: Sweet, elderly woman who supports her only child in everything she does.

- **Ella’s Fiancée**: briefly mentioned for a symbolic purpose

Scene One: backstage, before their opening performance

*(there are presumably more actors on the stage, but the spotlight focuses on the leads listening intently to* **Doc**, *who has presumably been speaking for a while- Mara sits offside, rubbing her ankle)*

**Doc**: (breathes in, beaming, basking in the anticipation of the moment) This, my friends, is the *magic* of the theatre, for you and for everyone. Enjoy this moment- enjoy this *story*. How often in life can you say that you’ve slewn a giant? Rescued a lover? How often do you get to live a life in someone else’s shoes? When we leave this place, we have countless worlds of grief awaiting us- characters to slip into, expectations to be met… but here, none of that matters. The stage- this stage- is the only place where you can lay down everything- every name you’ve ever answered to, every lie you’ve ever believed in,
everything—all for the sake of the story. You’ve all learned your parts—you all know when the spotlight is yours to take—but what I’ve waited to teach you until tonight is the importance of rediscovering the wonder waiting for you out there. It’s not something you can rehearse—no, it’s something you live, every day. Now, go out there—give your audience a taste of this… wonder, whisk them away to this very same story with you. Each of them aches for an escape. Go on out there… give them what they came for.

(everyone claps except for Mara, looking to Doc in admiration. Doc steps down from his place of speech to signify he is done, smiling at his students. Suddenly, he sees Mara, sitting offside, and his face shadows with concern as he approaches her)

Doc: Mara, are you alright?

Mara: (biting her lip) I’ll be fine. (then, under her breath) Just what comes with being vanquished every day. (sends a shooting glare at Davion)

Doc: (pulling an ankle wrap from his bag, pretending to ignore her glare) We stacked another mattress backstage left, today… did that help?

Mara: (surprised by his ignorance) Oh, that was fine. (shifts her gaze to Ella; quietly, to herself again, innocently) If it weren’t for the princess “stacked” in the way…

Doc: (taking her ankle and wrapping it firmly) Mara, you know there’s no other place for Ella to cross without being seen—she was off to her quickest costume change, yet. You can’t blame her. Nonetheless, I’ll see that she pays better attention tonight. (finishes wrapping, patting her ankle softly) There. Now, (looking into her eyes seriously) Is there anything else I can do for you, Mara?

Mara: (looking away, into the distance) I’m fine, thanks.

Doc: (softly) Break a leg, Mara. Break a leg.
(Doc looks for Mara's acknowledgement, but finds none, and shakes his head sadly as he walks away, leaving Mara to stare into space. He approaches Ella and Davion, who have been talking together. They look up, acknowledging him.)

Ella: (noticing his concern) Everything alright, Doc?

Doc: (sighing) It's Mara. I'm worried about her. Ever since she was cast in this season's show, something's been not quite right about her, and I just can't figure out what.

Ella: Me too. (reminiscently, smiling sadly) When we all first started out here, we were the best of friends. And Mara- why, we came to her when we needed cheering up. And you could never catch her without a smile, her raspberry tea, and some sort of surprise.

Davion: (sighing, distantly) But I haven't caught a smile from her since I tripped over that cloak a few weeks ago- (with slight frustration) everyone laughed, though, so I don't blame her. Not a wink, since, much less a word. Now she just kind of stares at us like we're the bad guys.

Doc: (seriously) I know what you both mean... but, in a way, we are, every one of us. (Ella and Davion look at him confusedly and seriously) We've let poor Mara suffer too long - we've just stood out of the way, when I know that your hearts (points at Davion's chest) are those of heroes. And what do heroes do with their good intent that makes them so special? They do. They don't- they can't- just stand to see injustice anywhere that they can help. So, do something. Mara needs you- she needs someone to rescue her. I'm a bit old for such a mission- she'd never listen to me- but I firmly believe that you're in the perfect position to be the friends to her that you always have. Can I trust you?

(Ella and Davion nod, heartened, each giving Doc a friendly, firm handshake before lining up in the wings.)

Doc: Break a leg, tonight. Break a leg.

(Doc walks off to sit and watch the show. Scene fades to black.)
Scene Two: after the performance

(Mara’s Mother waits patiently for her daughter, holding a bouquet of roses, smiling with pride. Mara comes from backstage, still in her villain costume, and gives her a stiff hug not unlike that of a young teen trying to escape their peers’ notice. In the background, Davion anxiously keeps glancing at his phone, looking for someone. Ella’s Fiancée, in the background, warmly hugs Ella and congratulates her.)

Mara’s Mother: (welcoming the embrace, despite its stiffness; taking Mara’s hand and squeezing it in excitement) You were absolutely marvelous, Mara! Absolutely marvelous!

Mara: (gazing at Ella and her fiancée) Thanks, Mom. Glad you could make it, again. (reaches out to accept the roses that she knows are coming, tugging the corners of her mouth into a little smile)

Mara’s Mother: (hanging Mara the flowers ceremonially, and looking her up and down) My, darling, you get more beautiful every day. (her face twists into confusion as she sees that Mara is still in costume) Oh, Mara, don’t you need to change out of that?

Mara: (looking down at herself for a brief moment, letting out a stiff laugh) Ha! Why bother? (laughing more softly, now and more remorsefully) I’ve got another showing in a few hours, anyway, and I never have costume changes…. I never change out of this old thing, anymore. It is my style, nowadays.

Mara’s Mother: (shrugging gently, disregarding her daughter’s rudeness and comment) Well, I just remembered that you and your sweet little friends Ella and Davion always go out to-

Mara: (exhausted) I’m not so sure we’re doing that this time.

Mara’s Mother: (disappointed) Oh. Well, maybe you and I could... to make it up... (looks at Mara for a few moments expectantly, but Mara never makes eye contact, as she watches Ella and her fiancée...; she gives up) I’m sorry, dear.
Mara: (distantly) It's fine, Mom, there's nothing you can do.

Mara's Mother: (seeing Mara's gaze) I was afraid of that. Well, I'll leave you be... to get ready for your next show. Break a leg, dear. (gives Mara a fierce hug, and squeezes her hand before walking off slowly and painfully, often looking back to see if her daughter is alright or has changed her mind.)

(Mara walks in a different direction to the background, and Davion, pacing, comes to the front. His phone rings, and he picks it up frantically.)

Davion: Dad? (pause) Are you okay? (pause) What's wrong? (pause) Mom? (pause) Is she- (pause, becoming frantic, eyes welling up with tears; he bites his lip, hard, and stares at his phone in disbelief) No... (pause) No... She had seemed so well the last time I visited... She couldn't... (pause) I'm so sorry, Dad... I'll be there as soon as I can... (pause) I have an understudy. I can tell Doc- (pause) I'll finish out tonight's show... somehow... then I'll- (a single, small sob) I love you, Dad... it'll be okay. (stares at phone, and sits in an audience chair, setting his face on his hands.)

(Shift to focusing on Ella and her Fiancée. Her Fiancée squeezes her hand and leaves, smiling. Then, her phone rings, and she picks it up frantically. Her smile fades.)

Ella: Dr. Rabkin? (pauses, holding her breath) Yes, yes, this is Ella. (pauses, her foot beginning to tap) Yes, this is an okay time. (pause) You have the results? (voice rising) And?... (longer pause. Everything about her collapses, and tears well up in her eyes) No... (pause, sitting down in an audience chair; clearing her throat) Thank you... for telling me. Is there anything you can do? (long pause; she collapses further; her every word after this is slightly breathy) How much does that cost? (pause; a small, single sob) How long would I- (pause) I'm sorry. I need some time to think about this... I'll schedule an appointment when I get the time... Bye. (sits in silent tears for a few moments before straightening up with an inhale) Mara, Davion, I promised.... (defeatedly gazes into space for a moment before shaking her head and settling back into focus) ... It's going to be okay. (rises)
Scene Three: at Mara’s favorite restaurant, where she, Davion, and Ella always meet on opening night

(Mara, Ella, and Davion sit around a table. Mara pretends to be engrossed in her menu, while Ella and Davion keep inhaling softly, swallowing, blinking away tears, and running their fingers through their hair. All are unaware of each other. All are engrossed in hiding themselves. They each squirm as they sit in silence for several uncomfortable seconds.)

Ella: (sitting up straight with an inhale of resolution; looking between them; clearing her throat politely, pasting on a small smile; softly) Isn’t it funny how we manage to get the exact same table every time? (she settles after breaking the silence into a polite, attentive calmness, looking between them for a smile to share)

Davion: (meeting her gaze; smiling and chuckling nervously) And that I’m ordering mushroom ravioli again?

(Ella laughs briefly, and then, having taken their turn in speaking, suddenly remembering their mission, both glance to Mara, who looks up and nods casually before studying her menu once more. Ella and Davion attempt making eye contact with Mara, who hasn’t even bothered to paste on a smile.)

Mara: (suddenly; casually; Ella and Davion look at her with too much interest as she speaks, making her look back down) They still have my usual alfredo, they just changed the name…

Ella: (too eagerly) I wonder why.

Davion: (chiming in) To what?

Mara: (seeing their intentions; sadly, and slightly impatiently) Thank you both, very much, but you don’t have to pretend everything’s like it was. It isn’t.

Ella: (seriously, giving up her facade) We know it isn’t. But we don’t know why… you… (glances down at her lap for a moment, and then looks to Mara only, suddenly candid) We’re worried about you, Mara.
**Davion:** We’re here for you. If there’s anything you need to tell us- (swallowing hard)

**Mara:** (snappily, suddenly looking up, blind to their pain and good intent) That’s it. You’re your own kind now. “We’re” used to include me. Now “we’re” is “you’re” and “you” … (throwing up arms in frustration of her own words)

**Ella:** (pleadingly, tears welling) Mara...

**Davion:** (pained) It’s not like that. We’ve all grown apart, somehow. I miss you, our friendship… nothing’s changed about Ella… nothing’s changed about- (catches himself) I’m still the same friend I always was…

**Mara:** (looking up into their eyes, seriously and sadly) Nothing’s changed. That’s what’s the problem. (motioning with her hand, impatiently) Waiter...

**Davion:** (motioning the waiter away, although they never appear) Nothing’s got to be something. Please, Mara, if you could tell us (stops himself)- if you could tell Ella and I what’s wrong, maybe we all can figure it out, together.

**Mara:** (frustrated) I don’t know why either of you are still pretending to care so much (Ella and Davion both open their mouths to speak, hurt, but Mara continues passionately), because you both know it’s not worth it. Don’t you remember we’re cast as parts we truly deserve? Look at you— always the heroes, on and offstage. Everybody loves you. Davion, you’re always someone’s best friend, always someone’s confidante… you’re probably someone’s dinner company every other night, as well... the kind they talk about for an hour beforehand and rave about into the morning... Ella, you’re just the same. You...you...

**Ella:** Mara, you have no idea-

**Mara:** And look at me. Look at me. You’ve all known this whole time that I’m meant to be vanquished, crushed, slain- every single time. (tears form in her eyes) And you only feel pity for me. Nothing more. Except maybe pride in your noble selves for ever having pitied a villain...
(Mara looks up to see that Ella and Davion are both in tears, too, as deeply hurt as she. She’s slightly confused, but joins them as they all sit, crying alone, yet together for a few aching moments.)

**Ella and Davion:** (sighing and straightening with candid resolution) If only you knew, Mara… (they then look at each other in confusion; motioning for each other to speak, but Ella insists that Davion begin)

**Davion:** Mara- and Ella- (seriously) You both know my mother, right? (they nod, leaning forward)

How she always takes her daily stroll and how she always makes tea for everyone… whether they like it or not? (they smile reminiscently) Well, she… (their smiles fade) passed away this morning. (Tears spark into his eyes, and Mara looks at her lap, fidgeting with the string of her costume cloak; Ella takes his hand and squeezes it in sympathy; he looks around, seeing that everyone has gone silent, and continues) My dad called to tell me just an hour ago. It was completely unexpected. It was… (he searches for words, but gives up and puts his other hand on his heart; everyone looks down in silence for a while)

**Ella:** (seriously, softly, as though trying to carry on a casual conversation) You both remember those headaches I’ve been having, don’t you? (everyone looks up palely; she nods, confirming their fears; tears begin to form in her eyes) The doctors confirmed it just this afternoon. I have a brain tumor… and it’s cancerous. (Mara takes off her villain’s cloak hastily, shaking her head. Davion’s eyes grow wide and he looks off into space; Ella sees their grief, so she painfully shrugs and continues, her face lightening a little bit, tugging the corners of her mouth upward) But there’s a slight possibility it can be removed. (face falling as she pauses) … But, the procedure is so dangerous that few doctors are willing to do it. And my job with this company doesn’t give me enough for much more than pain pills, never mind that. (tears form as she pauses) The doctor says I have a year. It’s just…

**Davion & Ella:** So… (they look at each other)

(Mara finally looks up at them, fidgeting with the cloak on her lap. They look at her rather expectantly, their hands already outstretched to grab hers as though she were about to share her burdens)
Mara: So... (face reddening) Sorry. (slightly surprised at her own words, yet she settles into seriousness, sitting up straight; she nods at herself) I'm so sorry. I didn't know- and here I was...

(Davion, seeing Mara's hands gripping the table, takes one of them and squeezes it, understanding and smiling. Ella takes the other.)

Davion: (looking at the circle of hands around the table) It's okay, Mara. It's going to be okay, for all of us. (smiles slightly, blinking back tears)

Ella: (smiling) But, for tonight, the show must go on.

Mara: (smiling genuinely for the first time) The show must go on.