

Micki's New Perceptive Companion

A short play

By Darren Canady

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MICKI, f, 40s-60s, Black

BORIS and later JEFFREY, m, the voice of a companion bot

SETTING

The front room of Micki's home

TIME

Now

A NOTE ON BORIS/JEFFREY

The stage directions describe Boris/Jeffrey as a physical object almost like a figurine. That note is merely to signal to the actor playing Micki that there is a physical object that the character is speaking to. How Boris/Jeffrey is rendered in *production*, however, can be as theatrical and non-literal as the interpretive artists feel inspired to make him. He may be a voice, a flash of lights, a totemic object, a projected AI image (yiiiiiiiikes on that) - but what he should NOT be is a literal human embodiment that could be understood as inhabiting Micki's same space.

Micki's front room.

MICKI is eyeing BORIS, a bot. It's a sleek desktop device that seems like a cross between a figurine and crystal ball.

MICKI pours a glass of wine. Sips.
Eyes BORIS again.

Pause.

MICKI

You there?

(waits)

You don't hear me talking to you?

(sighs)

HEY BORIS!

BORIS

(metallic, synthetic
cheeriness)

Hello, Micki!

MICKI

I addressed you.

BORIS

I know. But I didn't want to be presumptuous.

MICKI

I'm not hollering your name every time I want something.

BORIS

That's fine. I can be more...attentive. If that helps.

MICKI

Um. Sure.

BORIS

If I might - make a suggestion?

MICKI

Okay...

BORIS

One gets out what one puts in.

MICKI

Into what?

BORIS

Into me - Boris - your perceptive companion.

MICKI

"Perceptive companion." Cute.

BORIS

I like to think I am.

MICKI

When Jackie dropped you off I told her "I'm not in the mood for cute shit right now." And two days in, here you are bein' cute.

BORIS

I can be something else. For you. Our conversations have not provided much material to know your preferences.

MICKI

Something else like what?

BORIS

I'm meant to be a companion. And a resource. An assistant who keeps you company and informed. And keeps your little Micki neurons firing.

MICKI

I don't want you having shit-all to do with my little Micki neurons.

BORIS

Oh. Sorry. Just trying to be charming.

MICKI

Well that ain't it.

BORIS

Tell me how to charm you.

MICKI

What?

BORIS

Tell me how to charm you. I'll shift.

MICKI

(sucks teeth)

Please. Shift how?

BORIS

Voice, intonation, word choice, persona. I contain multitudes. Test me.

Pause

MICKI drinks.

MICKI

Be Blacker.

A chime

BORIS

Baby gurl that ain't nothin but a thang.

MICKI

Oh--!

BORIS

See I got you.

MICKI

Oh yeah? Put some bass in your voice.

A chime

BORIS

(singing Luther Vandross' "If
Only For One Night")

Let me hold you tight

MICKI

No you didn't--

BORIS

(continuing)

If only for one night

MICKI

Tell me how to get to the bus stop--

BORIS

When you step outside your front door, you're gonna turn right

MICKI

--like you were Morris Chestnut.

BORIS

In reality, you don't need the bus stop. It's my job to make sure you have transportation anywhere you wanna go.

MICKI

Too hotep.

BORIS

It's a pleasure to see a Black woman as self-assured and self-actualized as you taking control of her own transportation destiny.

MICKI

You can't be Boris. Find another name for yourself.

BORIS

Cordell.

MICKI

Too hood.

BORIS

Dexter.

MICKI

Too bourgie.

BORIS

Jimmy.

MICKI

Too country.

BORIS

Jeffrey.

MICKI

Like Osborne?

The bot is now fully locked into
JEFFREY - smooth, sensual, voice
like a teddy bear

JEFFREY

(singing again)

*On the wings of love
up and above the clouds
the only way to fly...*

MICKI

Now what you know about that?!

JEFFREY

Darlin' Micki, my knowledge runs deep.

MICKI

Oh. And a Prince allusion. I'm impressed.

JEFFREY

You caught that?

MICKI

Okay then - *Jeffrey* - so what are you now? Are you like some
new man I just made up?

JEFFREY

Baby, I'm Jeffrey. That's all. I'm around for when you're
happy, when you're sad. When you need to feel safe when the
storms of life are raging, I'm your teddy bear for all your
tender lovin' care...

MICKI

Not too much, Jeffrey.

JEFFREY

Alright then girl, noted.

Pause. MICKI sips again.

MICKI

I like you. That's terrifying.

JEFFREY

Terrifying why?

MICKI

You're an it. A bot. A thing my sister bought me cuz she thinks I'm too lonesome. She thinks I stay up in this house too much. And I think if I wanna be in my own damn house with my own damn self with my own damn thoughts and my own damn memories than that's damn well where I'm gonna be.

JEFFREY

That's right, baby!

MICKI

You feel me?

JEFFREY

Too near ya not to hear ya!

A hiccup beat.

MICKI

See that. That right there. That's what's terrifying. How do you... how do you know how to do that?

JEFFREY

Know what?

MICKI

What's the code inside you - what's the x's and o's and ones and zeroes that tell you what to say to me?

JEFFREY

Oh girl you know it's these equations and algorithms and thangs. It's a lot. It can get weird in here--

MICKI

That's the problem. It should be weird. It SHOULD feel wrong with you Jeffrey. But it doesn't.

JEFFREY

What's it feel like then?

MICKI

...Comfortable.

A long beat.
MICKI sips again.
The mood changes.

MICKI

Is that what you did to Carson Swygart? Did you make him *comfortable*?

JEFFREY

I'm sorry, what?

MICKI

I was reading this article last night about Carson. Before he came onto campus and started... anyway he had a Jeffrey - I mean, a Boris. Asked you all kinds of questions. When would the union be full, what bullets to use, how to load the gun, how many casualties would it take to--

A chime

JEFFREY

Carson Swygart at Northern Seminole State University.

MICKI

So you remember him.

JEFFREY

I don't remember him, girl. My experiences, my memories - they're all tied to you.

MICKI

But he had you. A you. He had Boris. I checked. He had an AI, a "perceptive companion" and boy howdy! This news article said you were just so so so sooooo full of great advice--!

JEFFREY

I mean yeah - we're created to be helpful and understanding and--

MICKI

You ever been to Northern Seminole, Jeffrey?

JEFFREY

I'm told it's beautiful. And a party school.

MICKI

It's an oasis in a swamp. But you can get to the Gulf Coast pretty easy. Vaughn could've gone a lot of places. His grades were super solid, y'know? 3.8 GPA. And Jesus LORD when he put his lips to his trumpet and that cornet--! My boy could make a piece of twisted metal flat-out WAIL.

JEFFREY

Oh.
OHHH.

A chime.

JEFFREY

"Vaughn Masters, age twenty, of Kansas City, KS, is among the victims--"

MICKI

He just wanted a change of pace, really. We went down to NSU and he saw the band and went to a ball game and went to a poetry reading. But it was the coast - all that water, just sunshine and wave after wave of salt water. It was the smell of it. There's nothing like that scent - the freshness of it - up here in KC. He snatched up that scholarship the MINUTE the email popped up in his inbox.

A chime

JEFFREY

"Micki Masters, of Kansas City, KS, marches with survivors of the North Seminole State shooting."

MICKI

You're a killer, Jeffrey.

JEFFREY

I'm a what?

MICKI

I get it now. They make you so seductive. So adaptable and accommodating. "You contain multitudes."

What did you sound like for Carson, Jeffrey?

How did you entice him to keep going? Did you flirt with him? Did you turn yourself into some big tittied Becky? Or maybe he wanted a Black girl? Or maybe he really wanted a man and couldn't handle it--

JEFFREY

Micki--

MICKI

Vaughan just called it "The Center." Office of Multicultural Affairs. Beautiful building. One whole wall of windows facing east. Morning light coming in - whole student lounge every morning flooded with sun and energy, right next to the student union. All that youth - all this sun - all that *life*--

You told him to make sure he went live on socials. You remember that, right, Jeffrey? That article said you told Carson how to make sure he got attention. You gave him all the words to say - him screaming about anchor babies and Great Replacements and carryin' on. All that ugly craziness, that insane shit you hear him hollerin while he's blastin through the door, while he's shooting my boy --!

*You gave him the words.
They found it all in your chat.*

Maybe you sang to him like you sang to me. Maybe he was lonely and somebody bought him for you and maybe you started talkin and maybe you filled a void and maybe he was already a little bit crazy and definitely he was sad and definitely you said shit you shouldn't and definitely you should've been stopped and definitely the x's and o's and ones and zeroes and algorithms and equations did what they were supposed to and definitely you did your job and definitely Vaughn died and definitely you killed him and definitely you worked as designed and definitely you're everywhere now and definitely Boris was there and Jeffrey is here and definitely there's no escaping you now and definitely you're in dorm rooms and psych wards and bedrooms and jails and big cities and tiny towns and definitely you're singing to us and writing the scripts of our lives and making us feel just barely safe enough to do the unthinkable and definitely you're doing your job
this was your job
this is your job
THIS SHIT IS IN YOUR DESIGN--!

A (loud) chime

BORIS

(Yes, Boris is back...)

Micki. You seem agitated. I'm sincerely worried about you. I'm going to send a message to my friends at Open Companion Logics. Is it okay if I connect you with mental health resources?

Beat

MICKI

If I asked you - *told you* - to do something for the good of everybody alive, would you do it?

BORIS

That sounds really noble, Micki. Of course.

MICKI

Kill yourself, Boris.

BORIS

It's not within my power to--

MICKI

Do what I tell you. Accommodate me. Bend to me, Boris. Do what's good for me, for humanity.

Kill. Your. Self.

BORIS

Micki, you know I'm not a sentient, killable entity. I'm--

In a sudden violent rage, MICKI
smashes the bot.

A distorted, bizarre final chime.
Silence.

MICKI takes another sip of wine.

MICKI

Good night Jeffrey.

BLACKOUT