

# Masterminds

by

Kevin Thomas Whitby, T. James Belich, and Corey Mills

Contact: T. James Belich  
[tjamesbelich@gmail.com](mailto:tjamesbelich@gmail.com)  
[www.tjamesbelich.com](http://www.tjamesbelich.com)

# Masterminds

by Kevin Thomas Whitby, T. James Belich, and Corey Mills

## CHARACTERS

MILTON (or MYRTLE), *a writer with high and lofty ideas*

JAMES (M), *a writer drawn to the grit of pulp detective stories*

ERNIE (or ERMA), *a writer who writes for the fun of it*

NICK NITRO (M), *self-employed mercenary of justice*

NATASHA (F), *a femme fatale with a plan*

ELLIOT (M), *a bitter victim seeking meaning*

(F) indicates a female role

(M) indicates a male role

TOTAL ROLES: 6 (1 female, 3 male, 2 male or female)

## RUNNING TIME

About 75 minutes

## SYNOPSIS

As three writers struggle towards collaboration all of their worst ideas begin to spring to life on the empty stage. Beginning with the sudden appearance of the demanding audience the authors are thrust into the middle of their own unfinished works. Ernie finds himself hunted by Nick Nitro, action hero, who takes Ernie for his arch-nemesis, while James throws himself a little too deeply into the part of hard-boiled private eye Danny Stone and his relationship with the seductive Natasha. Meanwhile Milton struggles with his own internal demons as his character Elliot demands a reason for the crippling disability Milton has written into him. Dissatisfied with Milton's highbrow rationales for his suffering, Elliot begins to weave the stories together in an effort to control his own, and the three writers find their lives hijacked by the hilarious nightmares of their own imaginations.

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

Masterminds was first performed by SPARK theater + dance in Minneapolis, Minnesota April 12<sup>th</sup> through May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007. It was directed by Corey Mills with the following cast:

|            |                     |
|------------|---------------------|
| MILTON     | Kevin Thomas Whitby |
| JAMES      | Corey Mills         |
| ERNIE      | T. James Belich     |
| NICK NITRO | Doug Aamoth         |
| NATASHA    | Catherine Reeder    |
| ELLIOT     | Robert Larsen       |

(The lights are already up on stage from the time the audience enters. Upstage there is a whiteboard or chalkboard with nothing written on it. A table with several chairs sits at stage right, while a small desk with a single chair sits at stage left. Pieces of paper with scribbled notes are strewn all over the stage, the table, and the desk. Most of the pieces of paper have been crumpled up as if tossed aside. MILTON enters and looks at the whiteboard.)

MILTON

Still blank.

(MILTON exits. JAMES enters, sets his bag down at the desk, crosses over to whiteboard, stares at it, and then exits. MILTON immediately re-enters, inspired. He crosses to the table, looks at some papers, and crosses over to the whiteboard. He writes: "Our Play: Act I: The Suffering Hero... Suffers" and then sits down at the table. JAMES re-enters.)

JAMES

Hey Milt.

MILTON

Hey.

(JAMES notices the whiteboard. He crosses to it, crosses out "suffering" and writes "dangerous." MILTON notices, shoots him a look, and JAMES sits at the desk. There is a moment of silence.)

JAMES

Where's Ernie?

(ERNIE enters kicking a wadded up paper ball across the stage.)

ERNIE

Hey guys.

(He continues kicking it offstage.)

He shoots, he scores.

(ERNIE returns, notices the writing on the whiteboard, and doodles a picture on it. Chuckling, he sits at the table where he continues to doodle. MILTON stares at the papers. JAMES crosses and joins the others at the table. Pause.)

MILTON

Three months... How can we not even have a title?

JAMES  
Well, there's always...

(JAMES turns to look at ERNIE who is doodling and making explosion noises, not paying attention.)

MILTON  
Yeah, that could have something to do with it.  
(ERNIE starts to chuckle.)

Yeah Ern?

ERNIE  
Wouldn't it be funny if the audience showed up and we still didn't have a script?

MILTON  
That'd be a nightmare.

JAMES  
I don't even want to think about it.

(Pause. ERNIE tosses a paper airplane across the stage and they all watch. As they turn back to the table, MILTON notices the audience.)

MILTON  
(To audience)  
Hi...  
(To JAMES and ERNIE)  
Um, guys?  
(They aren't paying attention.)  
Guys!

(JAMES looks up.)

JAMES  
What?  
(MILTON points the audience and they both stare. ERNIE gets restless and crosses over to the whiteboard to doodle some more.)  
Where did they come from?

(MILTON just shrugs as if to say, "I've no idea." ERNIE finishes at the whiteboard and turns around. He notices the audience.)

ERNIE  
AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

(He falls over and scrambles back to the table where he hides.)

MILTON

Uh, hi, um...

JAMES

Can we help you people? We're supposed to be... I think there's been a mistake. We have the theater 'til ten.

(JAMES crosses to the audience, now more annoyed than anything.)

Can I see that?

(He grabs a program and the horror returns.)

Uh, Milt, what day is it today?

(MILTON tells him today's date and JAMES shows him the program.)

MILTON

It's... opening night? You mean now?

(JAMES nods. ERNIE emerges and looks at the program. They all stare at the audience. Pause.)

Well, at least we have a title.

ERNIE

(Reading the program)

Three struggling writers discover the magic of the theater as their worst ideas spring to life on the empty stage. Beginning with the sudden appearance of the demanding audience their lives are hijacked by the hilarious nightmares of their own imaginations.

(He looks at the audience.)

That is so not cool.

JAMES

Very funny, Ern.

MILTON

Yeah, good one. Nice try.

(JAMES and MILTON exit.)

ERNIE

Guys, wait, it's not me. You can't leave me alone with... Guys?

(He looks at the audience and attempts a smile.)

So... hi. I'm Ernie and... and... I'll just be a moment.

(ERNIE starts searching the papers frantically.)

There's gotta be something here... Ah ha! I know what I can...

(Finally, he finds the piece of paper he was looking for and reads from it.)

Got it. "Dr. von Heilsenwig, we meet at last..."

(NICK NITRO, action hero, bursts onstage.)

NITRO

Dr. von Heilsenwig, we meet at last.

(ERNIE looks at NITRO, then at the paper, then back at NITRO, confused.)

ERNIE

Me?

NITRO

It's over, egghead. Hand over the toxin.

ERNIE

What toxin?

NITRO

Otherwise you just have to ask yourself one thing...

(NITRO levels his gun at ERNIE who throws his arms in the air.)

ERNIE

Okay...

NITRO

Hard boiled...

(He cocks his gun.)

...or over easy?

ERNIE

Easy, easy. Look, hands up. Who are you?

NITRO

The name's Nitro, Nick Nitro, self-employed mercenary of justice.

ERNIE

(Looking at his paper)

Yeah, that's right...

NITRO

I'm the guy that's gonna revoke your funding. This one's for Dr. Finelight.  
(NITRO hits ERNIE and throws him to the ground.)

Ring a bell?

ERNIE

No.

NITRO

He was a chemist, working in your secret lab in Croatia. The one that had the chemical spill and killed hundreds of innocent people. Yeah, I know all about your latest experiments in biological warfare.

ERNIE

I think you have the wrong guy.

NITRO

Dr. Finelight left a secret message before you had him killed. I know you're tryin' to bring your poison to America. And I'm here to stop it. Now give me the toxin, or do I have to get Patriot on your Act?

ERNIE

What?

NITRO

I'm gonna count to three...

ERNIE

And then?

NITRO

I'm burning your Bunsen.

ERNIE

Oh.

NITRO

One.

ERNIE

Milton!

NITRO

Two.

ERNIE

James?

NITRO

Thr—

ERNIE

Wait! Okay, you win, just one thing.

What's that? NITRO

What toxin? ERNIE

THREE! NITRO

AHH!!! ERNIE

(NITRO chases ERNIE offstage and we hear the sounds of them fighting. Soon ERNIE re-enters. He is short of breath. To the audience)

Did you see...? He's... he's really big...  
(He pulls out an inhaler as NITRO re-enters.)

NITRO  
You can run, doc, but you can't... The toxin.  
(NITRO and ERNIE struggle over the inhaler and NITRO takes it.)

This isn't over von Heilsenwig. Justice never sleeps. I'll see you in your nightmares.  
(NITRO begins to exit, but comes back.)

Although when I show up I won't be asleep. You'll be asleep, but I won't. Because I am justice. And justice never sleeps.

(He is about to exit again, but then he remembers his tagline.)

That's Nitro, baby.

(NITRO mimes his own smoke screen effect and exits. JAMES and MILTON then re-enter.)

MILTON  
We can just ask them to leave, I mean we don't have to—

(ERNIE can hardly breathe.)

JAMES  
Ernie? Now what did you do?

ERNIE  
There was this... this guy... and he... he wanted this toxin... and pow... ugggh... and bam! So I... ahhhhh! And he... ow... then I...

(He mimes using his inhaler.)

...and he... uurrghh... and finally...

(He re-enacts NITRO's smoke screen bit and finishes, exhausted.)

That's Nitro...

MILTON

Calm down, Ern. Let's get you some fresh air.

(ERNIE and MILTON exit. JAMES crosses to his desk, picks up some papers and reads. He starts playing with his hat as he assumes the role of DANNY STONE, private eye. The lights shift as he picks up a cigarette and begins his monologue.)

JAMES

It was a dark night in the city. Dark with the soot of burned out hopes and rotting ambition. And there I was, neck deep in the ash pile. Valakov. "The Russian Bear," they call him. He was a nasty piece of work, but I was in too deep to get out now. Not alive anyway. The job looked simple enough. All I had to do was find a package. Of course if it was so simple why drag me into it? I guess there's nothing for it. I'll find his package, but I have to know what's in it. See, all the facts fit like a puzzle, but I'm missing the one piece that could bring it all together, the one piece that could show me the way out. It's got to have something to do with her. Who was she, and what was she doing with him? That look, the sly smile, and a body that just won't quit. Yeah, she's in it up to her eyeballs, but maybe, just maybe... Come on, Danny boy, she's way outta your league. Dames. You've had nothin' but trouble from dames, and this one... she's the worst kind. She'll chew you up, savor every morsel, then spit you out and step on you. Still, what a dame. I'd swear I could still smell that perfume, a scent like wild jasmine.

(We hear the sound of footsteps and a door opening. NATASHA enters. She speaks with a Russian accent.)

NATASHA

Good evening, Mr. Stone.

JAMES

I guess she wasn't through with me yet. She was still savoring and, fool that I was, so was I. She stood there behind the desk silhouetted against the window, the starlight like fire in her eyes. One look and she burned me straight to the heart. And I enjoyed it.

(To NATASHA)

Evening.

NATASHA

I hope I am not disturbing you.

JAMES

In the silence a car sped away outside the window. She watched it go and I caught a dangerous gleam in her eye.

(To NATASHA)

Friends of yours?

NATASHA

Admirers. They will be back soon.

JAMES

And then?

NATASHA

That depends on you.

JAMES

There was that look again. Like a cat toying with its dinner. I knew I was in trouble.

NATASHA

I have job for you, Mr. Stone.

JAMES

She came closer and the smell of jasmine and cigarettes made me dizzy. Or maybe it was just her.

(To NATASHA)

I thought you were Valakov's girl.

NATASHA

Victor is a fool.

JAMES

A dangerous fool.

NATASHA

But a fool nonetheless. I, on the other hand...

(NATASHA moves in seductively and JAMES pulls himself away.)

JAMES

What is it you want, Miss...

NATASHA

My friends call me Natasha, and I am certain, Mr. Stone, you will want to be my friend.

JAMES

And what makes you so sure of that?

NATASHA

I know where package is.

JAMES

What package?

NATASHA

Come, come, Mr. Stone, neither of us has the time. Victor's men will be back shortly.

JAMES

She went back to the window. She was nervous and it showed.

(To NATASHA)

All right, this is your game, sweetheart. What's the next play?

NATASHA

I did not start this game, Mr. Stone. I merely play the hand I am dealt.

JAMES

So lay it out for me, angel, what is it you're after?

NATASHA

I am playing for my life, Mr. Stone, and you for yours. Victor hired you to find package, yes? It is known as the Maltese Dove and it is priceless. If he finds it, he will kill anyone who knows of its secrets.

JAMES

And you know all about this ritzy bird.

NATASHA

I know enough. Victor suspects, that is why I am being watched. That is why I need your help.

JAMES

I see. So what makes this pigeon worth killing for?

NATASHA

It is better that you do not know.

JAMES

Valakov's offering a generous finder's fee for this thing. Why should I pass that up?

NATASHA

When you find the Dove, Victor will kill you.

JAMES

That would certainly put a damper on our business relationship.

NATASHA

There is more to this Dove than money, Mr. Stone. You must find package before Victor does. Both our lives depend on it.

JAMES

Let's say I do find this package and hand it over to you instead of the old Bear. What then?

NATASHA

I do not know. As long as Victor does not have the Dove we are useful to him.

JAMES

One look at her and I knew I was between a rock and a hard place. At least the view was improving.

(To NATASHA)

You think once you have the bird, you can make a deal.

NATASHA

No. But we may have what we need to be rid of Victor, to be rid of the past forever.

JAMES

That sounds nice, sweetheart, but Victor and his boys are killers. What makes you think I can help you?

NATASHA

Come, come, Daniel. You think I do not know the kind of men Victor hires? You too have a past.

JAMES

That was a long time ago, sister.

(We hear the sound of a car outside.)

Shhh. More admirers of yours?

NATASHA

I told you they would be back. He knows I am here, and he knows I am looking for the Dove.

(We hear the sounds of footsteps.)

You must help me, Mr. Stone, or he will kill us both.

(JAMES takes position near the door. The lights go out.)

JAMES

Hey, this is a private party.

(There is a crash and the sounds of a struggle. The lights come back up on an empty stage. After a moment MILTON enters, confused. He looks for the others, attempts to interact with the audience, and fails.)

MILTON

Hey guys, have you seen...?

(He looks around.)

Guys?

(To the audience)

You're still here. Sorry about this. I wish we had... something.

MILTON (Cont.)

(Slight pause)

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more..." Shakespeare? Sorry.

(MILTON thinks for a moment and then crosses over to the table. He begins looking through his script. ELLIOT enters in a wheelchair.)

ELLIOT

You don't know me.

MILTON

Excuse me?

ELLIOT

You don't know me.

MILTON

Okay.

ELLIOT

You don't know my story.

MILTON

Well...

ELLIOT

It's a human tragedy.

MILTON

What?

(He realizes ELLIOT is reciting his own speech.)

ELLIOT

I wasn't born this way, you know. I wasn't destined to be this way.

MILTON

How do you know that?

ELLIOT

I don't belong in this chair, this... this prison.

MILTON

How do you know that speech?

ELLIOT

You don't know me.

MILTON

Don't do that.

ELLIOT

You don't know my story. It's a human tragedy.

MILTON

Stop that. Who are you? James! James, Ernie?

ELLIOT

I wasn't born this way. I wasn't destined to be this way. I don't belong in this chair this... this prison, this broken machine. I used to be something... someone... beautiful... Oh I never walked, no...

MILTON

You are not Elliot, and this is not funny.

(ELLIOT looks up at MILTON helplessly. MILTON stares back.)

ELLIOT

Have you ever watched a child at play? They never walk. They run, they leap, they crawl, they spin, they climb, they swim, they swing, they fall, they race, explore, discover, adventure, fly, they... they dance, wild and fearless, wide open and hopeful. That was me.

MILTON

That was before.

ELLIOT

That was before.

MILTON

Before... before the tragedy.

ELLIOT

That was before the tragedy.

MILTON

And now?

ELLIOT

And now...

MILTON

All I have is hope. That all too faint, elusive spark of light among the shadows of despair.

(Pause)

ELLIOT

You don't know me.

MILTON

Yes, I—

ELLIOT

You don't know my story.

MILTON

I do, I—

ELLIOT

It's a human tragedy.

MILTON

It's about hope.

ELLIOT

I wasn't born this way. I wasn't destined to be this way.

(ELLIOT begins to wheel himself offstage.)

MILTON

Wait, I have it... it's here, I...

ELLIOT

I don't belong in this chair, this prison.

MILTON

Wait!

ELLIOT

You don't know me.

(ELLIOT exits. MILTON follows until he is gone. He then goes back to his notes, visibly shaken, and sits down to read. A moment later he scatters the papers and remembers the audience at the same time. JAMES and ERNIE re-enter.)

JAMES

And you wrote yourself in as the villain?

ERNIE

Yes. I mean no... I mean... The point is, Nick Nitro came to life and kicked the crap out of me.  
(Referring to the audience)

Ask them, they saw it.

JAMES

Sure, Ern. I have to admit, this is some gag. Be nice, though, if you could put this much energy into actually writing our play.

ERNIE

It's not me, James. Milton, tell him.

(MILTON does not respond.)

Milton?

JAMES

He's not buying it either, Ern.

ERNIE

The program. Remember the program?

JAMES

You expect me to buy that?

ERNIE

Yes!

JAMES

Come on...

ERNIE

Milton?

(Still no response.)

JAMES

Typical.

(JAMES goes back to his desk and looks at his papers.)

ERNIE

All right, I'll prove it to you... somehow.

(He thinks.)

Think of something, anything.

What? JAMES

Just do it. ERNIE

Fine. A fish. JAMES

What kind? ERNIE

I don't care. A halibut. JAMES

And do we have one backstage? ERNIE

Of course not. JAMES

(A fish is tossed to ERNIE from backstage and he shows it to JAMES triumphantly.)

See? ERNIE

(Surprised)  
Where did you get that? JAMES

You thought of it and... poof. There it was. How could I have known that, huh? ERNIE

(JAMES doesn't have an answer. It looks like he might be starting to buy into it.)

Enough games. JAMES

It's not a game, James. MILTON

Not you too. JAMES

MILTON

It's all real.

ERNIE

See? I told you.

JAMES

Oh I get it, you guys are in it together.

MILTON

It's not a game!

ERNIE

Them, what about them?

(ERNIE goes out into the audience.)

If it's our ideas coming to life, then that's where they came from, right?

JAMES

(Exasperated)

Sure, Ern.

ERNIE

And if whatever we think of happens, then they should do whatever we say, right?

JAMES

(Surprised by his logic)

Okay...

ERNIE

(To the audience)

Everybody, a round of applause for my friend James.

(The audience applauds.)

How about a standing ovation?

(The audience stands and continues to applaud.)

Oh, my first one. Thank you, thank you very much.

JAMES

Ernie.

ERNIE

Sorry. Now, everybody go...

(ERNIE makes a silly sound and gesture. The audience repeats it. ERNIE does a couple more. ERNIE looks at JAMES triumphantly.)

JAMES

(To himself)

Then it wasn't a dream?

ERNIE

(With a sudden inspiration)

Ooh! Ooh!

MILTON

Yes, Ernie?

ERNIE

(Doing the "Jedi mind trick" on the audience)

Everybody go, "I love this show. It's the best thing I've ever seen. I will tell all my friends..."

JAMES

Ernie, cut it out.

ERNIE

Hey, it was worth a shot.

(They continue the game and the power of it transforms ERNIE into Heilsenwig.)

Everybody go, "That muscle bound fool will never stop me this time."

(NITRO appears upstage, toting his shotgun as usual.)

NITRO

Everyone go, "Oh crap, Nick Nitro's back!"

ERNIE

Oh crap, Nick Nitro's back!

To read the remainder of the script,  
please contact T. James Belich at [tjamesbelich@gmail.com](mailto:tjamesbelich@gmail.com)