

The Beautiful Machine

by

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Pop Theater Productions

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COLORED LIGHTS indicate ring location. A map of the city hangs on set.

Cast of Characters

Characters wear the color of their ring, except the Freechildren, who wear dark Steampunk attire. Soldiers wear Blue uniforms. Diversity is very important in casting, as this speaks to the theme.

BEN PHOENIX - MALE, 19, MIXED-RACE, AMBER RING: Mild mannered and intelligent, often a target for bullies.

XAN JACKSON - FEMALE, 34, AFRICAN-AMERICAN, FREECHILDREN: Assertive and fiercely authentic, she cares as much about human rights as she does androgynous steampunk fashion.

ROMAN KEYSER (KAI-SER) - MALE, 55, WHITE, SAPPHIRE RING: Arrogant, brusque, and driven, he'll let no one stand in the way of his pursuit of humanity's purification.

CLARITY PROVIDENCE - FEMALE, 34, ASIAN, DIAMOND RING: Professional, intelligent, and level-headed, she is the president's daughter, and voice of the people.

ROBERT PHOENIX - MALE, 44, AFRICAN-AMERICAN, AMBER RING: A gifted engineer and Ben Phoenix's father, his inventions aim to improve the city and its people.

ZOE - FEMALE, 21, AFRICAN AMERICAN, FREECHILDREN: Compassionate but confident, she is a skilled medic.

ZUGHEILY (ZOO-HEY-LEE) - FEMALE, 22, LATINX, FREECHILDREN: Tough and eager to fight, she's a classic realist.

ZUAN - FEMALE, 22, ASIAN, FREECHILDREN: Bubbly and overly positive, she always finds a silver lining.

ANNA PHOENIX - FEMALE, 42, WHITE, AMBER: The headstrong single mother of Ben Phoenix.

PRESIDENT PROVIDENCE - MALE, 73, ASIAN, DIAMOND RING: Fair and honest, he strives to maintain the balance.

ACT IVideolog 1 - Opening

AT RISE: A camcorder stands on a tripod.

(ROBERT enters and presses the record button.)

SPOTLIGHT ON ROBERT

ROBERT

Videolog, January 19, 2179. Embersphere trial #38.

(Holds up Embersphere)

The math looks good! But, since I can't actually leave the city and test it outside in a real radioactive environment, the results are only theoretical. But, it's just a matter of time, really. I'll crack the access code to the exit hatch one way or another. Actually, I'm heading out to Onyx Ring again tonight for another attempt, so we'll see what happens.

FADE TO BLACK

1-Ben waits for the train

AMBER RING - TRAIN STATION

SPOTLIGHT ON BEN PHOENIX

(BEN stands downstage, uncertain of his future. ANNA enters and approaches him from behind)

ANNA

He'd be proud of you, ya know, your father. Very few people from Amber Ring ever get to promote. You've achieved something he never could.

BEN

Because he was cheated. His academic score was in the top *one percent*, and yet he was still rejected because of some inhumane genetic test. It's not fair.

ANNA

Life isn't fair, Benji, just look at *me*.

(Puffs her inhaler)

But the sick shouldn't envy the healthy, for neither is the other's fault. Besides, LIFE scores keep the city in order, it's just the way it is. Now, enough about your father, today is your day.

BEN

It's been five years, you know, to the day.

ANNA

I know...

BEN

I'm going to continue his work, Mom. I'm going to solve the food crisis, you'll see.

ANNA

Of course you will, honey. Here, so you don't forget your family.

(ANNA hands Ben a photo)

CONWAY (OFFSTAGE)

All aboard, new recruits!

ANNA

(Hides her inhaler)

Best not to get caught with this. It's my last one, after all, can't afford them confiscating it--

ANNA

(Smiles)
--again.

BEN

(Smiles)
Again.

I know, I know.

BEN

You want me to get you more inhalers?

ANNA

I got a guy in Amethyst, I'll survive. Go on, kid, don't wanna be late.

BEN

Love you, Mom.

ANNA

Love you more.

(ANNA exits)

*2A-Society

AMBER RING - TRAIN STATION

LIGHTS UP FULL

(Amber RECRUITS wait near a train car. ONYX AMPUTEES scrub graffiti that reads "Long live the Firebird!" SOLDIER #2 supervises.)

SOLDIER #2

Quit whining, low-life. Be thankful you got a job at all.

(BEN bumps into ONYX WOMAN's wheelchair, she drops her rag.)

BEN

Sorry.

(BEN reaches for the rag, SOLDIER #2 stops him.)

SOLDIER #2

She's still got arms.

SHAUN

Well if it ain't Little Benny Phoenix. I guess they're just lettin' *anyone* promote now.

BEN

I don't want any trouble, Shaun.

SHAUN

Such a loser. You won't last one day as a soldier.

AMBER RECRUIT

He'll be cryin' for mommy on the first night!

(AMBER RECRUITS laugh. CONWAY enters.)

CONWAY

Quiet. Tickets out, eyes up.

(CONWAY scans Amber Recruits' tickets and retinas with his datapad as each enters. The others' tickets are blue, Ben's is green.)

SHAUN

(Overly confident)

Ready to serve, sir. Trust the process.

CONWAY

Sit down.

(To Ben)

LIFE ticket.

(Scans Ben's retinas)

Phoenix, huh? Interesting. And a green ticket, don't see many of those.

BEN

I plan to be an engineer, sir, in Emerald Ring.

CONWAY

Good for you, kid.

BEN

Do you think we'll see Emerald today? From the train, I mean. I've never, um...

CONWAY

We'll see every ring today, all the way to Diamond at city center. Ever see the Sun Pearl up close?

BEN

No sir. Its light doesn't reach us way out here.

CONWAY

Then today's your lucky day. But don't count those emerald chickens yet, you gotta put two years in the service, first.

BEN

Right, I know.

CONWAY

Hop in, son. Don't want to keep the General waiting.

(MUSIC STARTS)

AMBER RING

BEN (CONT'D)

THEY USED TO SAY WE LIVED IN PEACE. WE WERE EQUAL IN THE CITY'S SEVEN RINGS.

WITH THE WORLD OUTSIDE IN RUIN, WE WERE SAFE WITHIN OUR HAVEN.

BUT THE FRANTIC FIGHT FOR FOOD HAS PULLED US TO THE EDGE OF CIVIL WAR.

CONWAY

Congratulations, ladies and gentlemen, you're now contributing members of society.

(To recruits)

THE MEANING OF LIFE ISN'T PERSONAL GAIN, WE EXIST FOR THE SERVICE OF SOCIETY.

AND EVERY SACRIFICE THAT WE TELL YOU TO MAKE, IS SEEN AS A COURTESY TO SOCIETY.

ONYX AMPUTEE MAN

BUT IF YOU GROW TOO OLD OR YOUR HEALTH DECLINES, THEN YOU SUFFER THE PROCESS OF SOCIETY.

ONYX AMPUTEE WOMAN
 FIRST THEY LOWER YOUR SCORE, THEN YOU'RE REASSIGNED AN
 INFERIOR JOB IN SOCIETY.

AMETHYST RING - HOSPITAL

(ONYX AMPUTEES and SOLDIER #2 exit.
 AMETHYST FOLK and Outer Ring
 PATIENTS enter. Emerald BIOLOGIST
 enters, she cares for a sick
 child.)

AMETHYST FOLK
 CUZ IN OUTER RING LIFE NO ONE'S HOLDING YOUR HAND, YOU GOTTA
 DO IT YOURSELF IN SOCIETY.

FEMALE SINGERS
 SO IF YOU WANNA GET BY

MALE SINGERS
 YOU GOTTA TAKE WHAT YOU CAN

ALL
 CUZ YOU WON'T GET HELP FROM SOCIETY.

AMETHYST FOLK
 OOOHHHH

BIOLOGIST
 SINCE I WAS YOUNGER I'VE HAD DREAMS OF BEING A BIOLOGIST. I
 WANTED ALL OF IT.

A LIFE THAT WAS HONEST, AND PROMOTION HAD PROMISED TO MAKE
 ME FEEL UNSTOPPABLE. THAT'S WHAT WE'RE ALL TOLD.

THEN I LOST MY ARM, WAS NEARLY TOSSED ASIDE. SO I TOOK A
 RISK AND WAS MODIFIED SO THE DREAM WOULD NEVER DIE.

(KEYSER enters with SOLDIERS,
 scanning people. The wand beeps
 next to BIOLOGIST's arm)

KEYSER
 SELECTION IS THE ANSWER, IF WE DON'T KEEP OUR STANDARDS

KEYSER AND CONWAY
 HOW DO YOU EXPECT US TO
 KEEP ORDER?

SOLDIERS
 SACRIFICES, THEY HAVE TO BE
 MADE.

(KEYSER rips off BIOLOGIST's
 glove.)

BIOLOGIST
 No, please!

KEYSER
RANK AND STATUS CAN'T BE BARGAINED

(SOLDIER #1 takes BIOLOGIST off stage)

KEYSER, CONWAY AND SOLDIERS
DON'T ASK QUESTIONS PLAY YOUR PART AND TRUST THE PROCESS!

KEYSER, CONWAY AND SOLDIERS
(CONT'D)
ORDER AND JUSTICE ARE VIRTUES OF LAW AS THEY SERVE AS THE
BACKBONE OF SOCIETY.

HONOR THE PROCESS FIRST ABOVE ALL, IT'S CONSIDERED THE
CAPSTONE OF SOCIETY.

(KEYSER and SOLDIERS exit. EMERALD
MAN enters.)

EMERALD AND RUBY RING

EMERALD MAN
I HAVE A PRIVILEGED LIFE IN THE COMFORT OF EMERALD.

(RUBY FARMERS enter with rakes.
EMERALD and RUBY ensemble enter)

RUBY FARMERS
WE ENJOY ALL OF RUBY'S SUNLIGHT THIS CLOSE TO THE SUN PEARL

DIAMOND RING

EMERALD MAN, RUBY FARMERS
IN THE INNERMOST RINGS WE HAVE WONDERFUL THINGS

EMERALD MAN, MALE RECRUITS, CONWAY
STILL WE DON'T CONTROL OUR DESTINY

ALL
HERE IN SOCIETY.

(ALL exit, except those in train
car.)

CONWAY
Alright recruits, welcome to Diamond, seat of the
Providence. Ready! Forward march!

(BEN and RECRUITS pass TEACHER and
STUDENTS)

TEACHER

Look, kids. Recruits on their first day of promotion. Who can tell me what LIFE score stands for?

STUDENT

(Raises hand)

Longevity, Intelligence, Fit and Efficiency. They get it through academic and genetic testing.

TEACHER

Very good, this career organization system is called "the process".

CONWAY

Ten hut!

(BEN and RECRUITS line up at attention.)

BEN

IF YOU MARCH TO THE BEAT OF A DIFFERENT DRUM, THEN YOU WON'T FIND A PLACE IN SOCIETY.

BEN

AND EVERY CHILDHOOD DREAM YOU WERE COUNTING UPON IS SLOWLY ERASED AS SOCIETY MAKES YOU FORGET.

RECRUITS

SOCIETY MAKES YOU FORGET

CITIZENS (NOT RECRUITS)

IF YOU SHOULD GROW DISILLUSIONED.

CONWAY, SOLDIERS

FILE A COMPLAINT, WE LOWER YOUR SCORE

ALL

BE GRATEFUL THAT YOU HAVE A PLACE AT ALL IN SOCIETY! SOCIETY!

(ONYX folk stomp and knee slap, AMBER folk provide the bass.)

AMETHYST SINGERS

SOCIETY, SOCIETY, SOCIETY, SOCIETY...WELCOME TO...

SAPPHIRE SOLDIERS

BREAK YOU DOWN TO BUILD YOU BACK UP, BREAK YOU DOWN TO BUILD US ALL UP.

EMERALD SINGERS

SPARE THE ROD, SPOIL THE CHILD, GIVE THEM AN INCH AND THEY'LL TAKE A MILE.

RUBY WOMEN

SOCIETY MAKES YOU FORGET...MAKES YOU FORGET..

(PRESIDENT and KEYSER walk by everyone, citizens snap to order as they pass)

KEYSER, PRESIDENT
DON'T BITE THE HAND THAT KEEPS YOU ALIVE! THE GRASS IS NEVER GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE!

ALL
SOCIETY!

(Everyone exits but RECRUITS, KEYSER, and BEN. RECRUITS reform the line)

2B - The Briefing - (CONT'D)

DIAMOND RING

KEYSER
Good morning recruits, welcome to your first day. For those of you expecting a continental breakfast and a meet and greet, you can forget it. We're in the middle of an uprising and we have a city to protect.

(KEYSER snaps, SOLDIER #1 enters with a bag. KEYSER pulls out a mechanical arm.)

KEYSER (CONT'D)
This, boys and girls, is an artificial body modification, liberated from its owner not moments ago. Our intel suggests that these "Grinders", are a faction of the Freechildren, whereby ordinary citizens are fitted with mechanical weapon enhancements; it's called "Bio-hacking". After which, they're told to lay low and carry on as normal until some inevitable call to revolt. But unfortunately for them, our most recent raid in Amethyst not only led to the largest cache of weapon enhancements so far, but the discovery and execution of their creator: a man you all know as the Firebird.

(RECRUITS are awestruck.)

KEYSER (CONT'D)
Now, on your way here, you were offered a glimpse into the rings which you are now fortunate enough to protect. And with the Firebird finally extinguished, we are that much closer to reestablishing balance.

SHAUN
We didn't see Onyx Ring.

KEYSER
Excuse me?

SHAUN

Onyx Ring, we didn't see it.

KEYSER

I don't remember giving you permission to speak!

(KEYSER hits Shaun, he falls.)

KEYSER

Onyx Ring is not worth defending. It is the essence of putrescence, proliferated by Xan Jackson and that disease she calls the Freechildren. In my opinion, no one deserves protection who openly speaks out against the Process. Or don't you agree?

SHAUN

Yes, sir.

KEYSER

Speak up.

SHAUN

Yes, sir!

KEYSER

Good, now get up. Well then, I look forward to the results of your training exercises this afternoon. Congratulations, class of '85, and welcome to Sapphire Law Enforcement. Trust the Process.

CONWAY, AMBER RECRUITS

Trust the Process!

(KEYSER exits)

FADE TO BLACK

3 - The Presidential Meeting

DIAMOND RING, PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

AT RISE: (A desk stands at center. TERENCE measures the PRESIDENT for a suit. CLARITY paces.)

(KEYSER enters)

PRESIDENT

Ah, General Keyser. What's the news?

KEYSER

President Providence, the news is good. We have a handle on the Grinders and demonstrations have diminished since the Firebird's execution.

PRESIDENT

That is good news. Looks like we'll squash this revolution yet.

KEYSER

There's still more work to be done, sir. Our next move--

PRESIDENT

Demonstrations have ceased, Roman, you said it yourself. I say we can call this one win and move on.

KEYSER

Mr. President, with all due respect, she's not just going to back down--

PRESIDENT

She? I thought the Firebird was a man.

KEYSER

I'm talking about Jackson, sir.

PRESIDENT

That farmer out in Onyx Ring?

KEYSER

And leader of a notoriously defiant gang, yes.

PRESIDENT

Oh come now, Roman, they're no more than an hippie social club. I mean, what kind of "gang" calls themselves the "Freechildren"?

CLARITY

What's your evidence?

KEYSER

Excuse me?

CLARITY

You say Jackson's behind this. What's your evidence?

KEYSER

Thought you'd never ask.

KEYSER tosses photos onto the desk.

PRESIDENT

What is this?

KEYSER

Bootleggers, moving produce out of Onyx to the other six rings through some kind of "smuggler's tunnel". Those boxes are filled with Jackson's produce. And the workers? All outfitted with mechanical body modifications.

PRESIDENT

Interesting...

KEYSER

This proves her intent to weaponize the Freechildren. We shut down her farm in Onyx, we starve this revolution out, before it takes hold.

CLARITY

The city is already starving, General, and you want to outlaw a viable new food source? Your theories may be compelling, sir, but they're nothing more than that: theories. So until you do have something concrete, we should do no more than thank Jackson for her contribution to the city's food supply.

KEYSER

Her produce is unregulated, Clarity, who knows what poisons it contains?

CLARITY

Well maybe if you actually read the report--

PRESIDENT

Enough squabbling. Roman, get to the point. Thank you Terence.

(TERENCE exits.)

KEYSER

Sir, it's time The Providence sends a message, one that reminds the Freechildren of whom holds power.

PRESIDENT

A message. What are you talking about?

KEYSER

We destroy their tunnel. With explosives.

PRESIDENT

Absolutely /not.

CLARITY

/The damage it'll cause!

KEYSER

Jackson's defying the law, we have to be firm handed!

PRESIDENT

I can be firm handed, Roman, but not at the expense of my citizens, be them from Onyx or Diamond Ring. My daughter's right, we should be grateful for Jackson's work. She's found an effective, albeit crude, solution to a burgeoning food crisis and one day we will push for regulation. However, I do agree that she face discipline for illegal trafficking. So, your orders are to seal the tunnel and be done with this.

KEYSER

Explosives give a stronger--

PRESIDENT

The answer is "no", and that's final. Well, now that my food is cold I guess I'll move on to *important* business. The centennial is the day after tomorrow and I've got a speech to write.

(Smiles)

Be prepared for a big announcement.

KEYSER

And the Grinders, sir?

PRESIDENT

Go shake up Sector 81 in Onyx, see what Jackson knows.

(Sips coffee)

Come to think of it, while you're out there, procure some more vanilla bean for me, will you? I can barely stand the taste of this government sanctioned swill.

KEYSER

Of course, sir.

PRESIDENT

Trust the process.

(PRESIDENT exits)

KEYSER

Trust the process

CLARITY

...

*4 - Basic Training

AT RISE: (SHAUN and RECRUITS brag about the training, BEN is silent. SERGEANT enters, she carries her datapad.)

SERGEANT

Alright, quiet down recruits. If you look at your datapad, you'll see the results, and yours only, of this afternoon's training, as each test is called.

(Taps her datapad)

Alright, test one: Physical fitness.

SHAUN

(Looks at datapad)

Nine out of ten, let's see someone beat that.

SERGEANT

Test number two: Maps and compass reading.

SHAUN

Oooooh, 99 percent.

SERGEANT

Quiet. And lastly, virtual hand to hand combat.

SHAUN

Hello!

SERGEANT

Those are the numbers. And in fact, we have one recruit who earned the highest cumulative Day 1 score in Sapphire history. Congratulations, to Benjamin Phoenix.

SHAUN

What?!

SERGEANT

Off to the barracks. We begin field training bright and early tomorrow.

(SHAUN approaches her)

SHAUN

With all due respect, you clearly misspoke.

SEARGENT

Are you questioning a superior officer, Mr. Detroit?

SHAUN

No, ma'am.

SERGEANT

Good, now off to the barracks, *recruit*.

(SHAUN heads to exit)

SHAUN

(While passing Ben)

You got lucky, loser. Better watch your back.

(SHAUN and RECRUITS exit, BEN remains)

SEARGENT

I have to say, perfect scores, I've never seen numbers like these. Nice work, Phoenix, you've earned you a place with the Lieutenant tomorrow.

BEN

(Trying to hide a smile)

Thank you, ma'am.

SERGEANT

What ring did you score into again? Emerald?

BEN

Yes ma'am.

SERGEANT

Fits you right. Congrats again.

BEN

Thank you, ma'am.

(SERGEANT exits)

(MUSIC STARTS)

BEN

LIFE IS HARD WHEN YOU'RE TOLD THAT YOU'RE DIFFERENT. YOU DON'T BELONG THEY SAY YOU DON'T FIT IN WITH THE NORMAL CROWD, IT MUST BE SOMETHING IN YOUR EYES.

AND SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A SHIP WITH NO ANCHOR, NO MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD TO HELP ME REMEMBER THE TRUTH OF WHO I REALLY AM.

MAYBE NOSTALGIA IS ONLY FOR MEMORIES WORTH KEEPING AROUND.

HERE I AM, MOVING UP, FATHER I HOPE YOU CAN SEE ME. EVERY STEP MORE EXCITING, I'M CLOSER TO FINDING MY WAY.

STILL I'M CHASING A MYSTERY DRAWING ME CLOSER TO YOU, I'M COMING HOME!

(BEN grabs the photo from his pocket)

BUT I CAN STILL HEAR THE SOUNDS OF THAT FATEFUL NIGHT THE KNOCK AT THE DOOR AND THE NEWS THAT YOU'D DIED.

THE HOPELESS DESPAIR IN MY OWN MOTHER'S EYES WILL HAUNT ME FOREVER.

SO I KNEW THEN AND THERE WHAT MY ROLE HAD BECOME, TO PUBLISH THE WORK THAT YOU'D SELFLESSLY DONE FOR A CITY THAT TOSSED YOU AWAY.

SO THAT THOSE LIKE MY MOTHER WOULD NO LONGER SUFFER IN VAIN.

HERE I AM, RISING UP, FATHER I HOPE YOU CAN HEAR ME!

MY CHANCES OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE ARE NOT JUST A DREAM!

BUT TO GET TO THE END IS TO START AT SQUARE ONE, AS EVERY GOOD STORY HAS ALWAYS BEGUN

BY COURAGEOUSLY CHASING A MYSTERY! I'M COMING HOME!

(BEN is kneeling. CONWAY enters)

CONWAY

Phoenix, there you are.

(BEN jumps up, dropping his photo)

BEN

Lieutenant Conway, sir. I was just leaving.

CONWAY

Relax, recruit, I came to congratulate you. We'll be investigating the tunnel tomorrow morning, it'll be good to work with a top soldier like yourself.

(BEN salutes, heads to exit, CONWAY picks up the photo)

CONWAY

(Disbelief)

Phoenix.

BEN

Yes, sir?

CONWAY

You dropped this.

BEN

Thank you, sir.

CONWAY

Not a problem. Enjoy the rest of your afternoon, soldier.

(BEN salutes and exits. CONWAY grabs his radio)

CONWAY

General Keyser, come in. I need to see you about an interesting encounter I just had, sir.

FADE TO BLACK

Videolog 2 - Robert Meets Xan

(ROBERT enters)

ROBERT

Videolog, January 20, 2179. Well, last night's attempt at cracking the access code was successful, but not quite in the way I expected. I was caught, actually, by a most fascinating woman. Another researcher: Xan Jackson. And I'm humbled to say that her farming operation is much more successful than any of my projects. So, well, we kind of struck a partnership. In fact, I think I'm going to help her with an interesting problem. Yeah. Basically, she's run out of resources to make grow lights, and needs an alternative source of artificial sunlight. So I thought--why not grow food outside, in real sunlight, under the protective dome of the Embersphere. I admit my promise was a bit premature, but she said she could get me through the exit hatch, so I jumped on it. Here's hoping.