

The Mercurian

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A Theatrical Translation Review Volume 4, Number 3

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The Mercurian is named for Mercury who, if he had known it, was/is the patron god of theatrical translators, those intrepid souls possessed of eloquence, feats of skill, messengers not between the gods but between cultures, traders in images, nimble and dexterous linguistic thieves. Like the metal mercury, theatrical translators are capable of absorbing other metals, forming amalgams. As in ancient chemistry, the mercurian is one of the five elementary “principles” of which all material substances are compounded, otherwise known as “spirit”. The theatrical translator is sprightly, lively, potentially volatile, sometimes inconstant, witty, an ideal guide or conductor on the road.

The Mercurian publishes translations of plays and performance pieces from any language into English. *The Mercurian* also welcomes theoretical pieces about theatrical translation, rants, manifestos, and position papers pertaining to translation for the theatre, as well as production histories of theatrical translations. Submissions should be sent to: Adam Versényi at anversen@email.unc.edu or by snail mail:

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Editor's Note

This issue of *The Mercurian* begins with the second of a series of conversations that took place during the Theatrical Translation as Creative Process: A Conference/Festival here at the University of North Carolina and at Duke University in April 2013 under the auspices of *The Mercurian*, the Department of Dramatic Art, and The Process Series, all at UNC, and Theatre Studies and the Performance and Embodied Research Colloquium at Duke University. As part of that event staged readings were presented of several plays previously published in *The Mercurian* including Neil Blackadder's translation of Rebekka Kricheldorf's *The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer* (published in *The Mercurian* Vol.1, No. 3). Blackadder's translation from German of *The Sexual Neuroses of our Parents* by Swiss playwright Lukas Bärfuss was staged by the Gate Theatre in London in September 2007 and published by Nick Hern Books. His translation of Rebekka Kricheldorf's *The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer* was presented in a staged reading as part of German Theater Abroad's Stadttheater New York festival in 2006. He teaches theatre at Knox College, where in February 2008 he directed students in his translation of Rebekka Kricheldorf's *Rosa and Blanca*. The conversation presented here is free-ranging and represents the ideas of a translator who has worked with a particular playwright over a range of time as both her translator and director. We will publish conversations with the translators of the other plays that received staged readings at the Conference/Festival in future issues.

The issue continues with two translations/adaptations that emerged out of academic contexts at Vanderbilt University and the University of Alberta. As Edward Friedman describes it in his introduction, *Wit's End*, written by Friedman and Jeffrey Ullom, is a play based upon the Spanish Golden Age playwright Lope de Vega's *La dama boba*. In *Wit's End* Friedman and Ullom explore what they see as Lope's own pre-feminist tendencies, ones that it would have been impossible to explore in sixteenth century Spain. The text of *Wit's End* is followed by Ullom's description of the dramaturgical and directorial problems he encountered and the solutions he found as he worked with undergraduate students on a Spanish Golden Age text. Ullom's piece is followed by Stefano Muneroni's introduction to his translation/adaptation of the early twentieth century Mexican poet and playwright Xavier Villauruttia's *El ausente*. In his adaptation, *The Absent One*, Muneroni brings Villauruttia's homoeroticism to the forefront in a way that 1930s Mexico could never have condoned, as well as explores the effect that leaving portions of Villauruttia's text in the original Spanish has upon his primarily English-speaking audience. Friedman, Ullom, and Muneroni's work raises interesting questions about how to translate theatre from earlier periods for contemporary audiences that have vastly different socio-cultural orientations, and whether or not it is appropriate to present such works in contemporary translations that seek to utilize aspects of the playwright's own ideas and actions that may have lain beneath the plays they wrote, yet could not be presented forthrightly within their own cultural moment.

The issue concludes with Anatole Bilenko's translation of Ukrainian playwright Neda Nezhdana's tragic farce, *The Suicide of Loneliness*. Bilenko's translation of Nezhdana's *He Who Opens the Door* was published in *The Mercurian*, Vol. 1, No. 4. *The Suicide of Loneliness* is

another example of Nezhdana's dark humor as a reflection of contemporary society in the Ukraine.

Back issues of *The Mercurian* can now be found under "Related Links" on the website of the Department of Dramatic Art at the University of North Carolina, <http://drama.unc.edu/> where we will maintain a permanent web presence. As the theatre is nothing without its audience, *The Mercurian* welcomes your comments, questions, complaints, and critiques. Deadline for submissions for consideration for Volume 4, No. 4 will be October 1, 2013.

--Adam Versényi

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**Theatrical Translation as Creative Process:
Sunday Morning Roundtable and Conversation with Neil Blackadder**

The Theatrical Translation as Creative Process Conference was staged during the second week of April, 2012, on the campuses of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University. It was a collaborative offering of *The Mercurian*, the UNC-CH Department of Dramatic Art, The Process Series (also of UNC-CH), and the Performance and Embodied Research Colloquium at Duke University.

Open rehearsals and staged readings of translated works were followed by lively round-table discussions. Rather than present formal lectures, conference participants drew on their collective experience in “Open Space” dialogues.

The conversation that follows tackles everything from synonyms for pudding to the problem of the intermission. Led by Yaël Prizant, participants responded to the staged reading of Rebekka Kricheldorf’s *The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer*, translated by Neil Blackadder.

ADAM VERSENYI. I’m going to ask Yaël to kick off the discussion with Neil [Blackadder] about last night’s reading of his translation of *The Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer* by Rebekka Kricheldorf.

Yael Prizant. I will start by staying that my response in general to the translation was that it was a fantastic – quite complicated and also quite poetic – without having *read* the translation first, though Adam did send it to me. I asked him for it, but I decided I wanted to hear it, not to read it. Some questions that I would like to throw out to everybody: what did that poetic form do to us as audience? Especially when the piece started with a prologue, and when it had titles, whether the numbered sections or the form, for example, “When I was Young...” – like a poem would have a title. So I’d like to start there. What did that form do to our perception of the relationships onstage?

Gretchen Trautmann. I think that what Neil did with the mixing of the registers was brilliant. I think that definitely achieved the goal of creating very different registers: a formal one, a more poetic one. And this of course shows the intergenerational differences and conflicts. When the older fellow spoke, I believed him, and when the younger fellow spoke, I also believed him. I thought that went really beautifully. I loved the fact that you left the German in there, or translated the English back to the German, or whatever you did. It added a lot – it made it foreign and yet much more interesting– it placed it more for me. The only problem that I had, and I mentioned it last night to some people, was that it was just too wordy. I think that wasn’t your problem, it’s not your fault; it’s the fault of the play. It needs editing. Sometimes it would become so wordy, you lose the fluidity and the beauty of that prose, and you lose what the hell they’re talking about. It

goes on and on and on. I think it needs some heavy-duty editing.

JOSEPH MEGEL. My suspicion is that it has something to do with the performance. So I don't trust even my perceptions of how much language there was and how it all played. When it worked, it worked beautifully. My suspicion is as much about the performance, or more even, than it was about the text.

GRETCHEN TRAUTMANN. You didn't get the sense that it was too long?

ANDY BRAGEN. I'm a little uncomfortable with making that assumption about a play that has been done and produced. I think the play is doing what it wants to be doing. To cut it is to make it something else. I don't feel like that's the job here. The play relies on excess, and I have some significant questions about how it was presented, but the work itself, I think – that is the play! Certainly, as a translator, coming into someone else's play and saying I could edit it to make it better – I would be very uncomfortable. If the translator came to me about a play I had had produced five years ago and told me "I think you need to make some cuts," I would probably tell that translator where to stick it.

JEAN GRAHAM-JONES. What it comes back to is – because Jay is making sense of the language, I was starting to asking, why is he going on? Why is he talking so much, and why is everything so damn precious? And then it became a question I was asking of the play. Whereas with the final speech, I couldn't understand it to have any kind of engagement with it, and so I couldn't presume to say it worked or didn't work, because I didn't *hear* it.

NEIL BLACKADDER. I think it's great that we've got a playwright's perspective on this, but I think we shouldn't be too precious or proprietary, saying that God forbid our texts should get cut. Directors cut texts all the time. I've directed students, and one of the things you do is that you discover that, partly because of the cast you're working with, that this scene, the momentum is dropping – rather than saying, I'd like to take a scalpel to the play and shred it down to a third, it's more that I think some of the excess flesh ...

ANDY BRAGEN. I push against that again, respectfully. I think a lot of times with plays, the parts that don't seem to work or make sense are sometimes the key to the play, the core. Figuring out the solution to that -- to reckon and wrestle with that – is terrible, but it's key.

JEAN GRAHAM-JONES. For the first production, especially. In the new play model, I don't think that the first time you do it, you should cut the hell out of it. You should try to make it work.

JOSEPH MEGEL. As a new-play director, I always take the position that it's my problem in the rehearsal with the actors. If I'm working and I'm working, and if the playwright is accessible to me, I can say to the playwright, "I've worked this four different ways. Help me here." I don't say, "Cut it." When I have a playwright or a translator in the room, I respect the domain. I like working in theater precisely because I'm not supposed to cut anything, unless I get their permission.

NEIL BLACKADDER. The writer might say, after the fourth time, "You're right," or they might

say, “You’ve got to keep doing it, because there’s something there that you’re still not getting.”

ADAM VERSENYI. There’s a corollary to this, too. Having done new play work as a dramaturg, I remember one instance in particular, Keith Reddin’s *Rum & Coke*. I was the dramaturg for its first production. And Keith was taking notes from anybody in the room, including the janitor! Constantly rewriting. I had to say to him, “Stop. Listen to what you’ve got.”

JOSEPH MEGEL. See, those kind of playwrights just piss me off! I went to school with Keith. He’s a real good friend of mine. But I also worked with Julie Jenson, who’s a lovely playwright, and she’ll go into the room and take every single suggestion and totally dilute her own play. It makes me crazy. I say, “Stop it! Take control! Don’t let everything in!” That’s why these discussions have to be very well-controlled. I want to always go back and say, “Let’s talk about what we’ve learned,” rather than taking every note that comes out of the discussion.

Yael Prizant. But the director in me was sitting at *The Ballad of the Pine-Tree Killer* thinking, this play needs an intermission. Where should it be? Because I needed a breath. I needed to take in what I’d heard and think about it, process it a little. I ask my students the same question. A lot of the plays they read don’t have any kind of intermission. I say, “Where would you put it? Because this play is two-and-a-half hours long, and you’ve got to put it somewhere.” A moment to think about what you’ve already experienced.

JOSEPH MEGEL. I also thought that the reading could have used a lot more breath.

NEIL BLACKADDER. I told them to take their time over it, but that didn’t really register.

JEAN GRAHAM-JONES. It was hard to process.

NEIL BLACKADDER. Allowing moments. I have mixed feeling about the intermezzos, but I like them as a structural device partly because it’s a total change of pace.

Yael Prizant. But then I want it to be an intermezzo. I want it to really shift the pace. I wanted to think about what I had taken in, because the language is so dense that I even want to remember those little one-liners and let them ease their way over me for a little bit before I move on to the next brilliant thought.

ANDY BRAGEN. The question there is, the play didn’t ask for an intermission, so how do I find that breath? These are the rules of the play, so does it mean the intermezzo is literally someone walking around the theater handing out biscuits? I’m being stupid, but I’m talking about trusting the playwright’s conception of what the play is as a whole. If I write a play that doesn’t have an intermission, doesn’t have an Act I or Act II, I’ve done that because I don’t *want* an intermission.

MARIA MYTILINAKI. But you’re writing it for a different audience in a different country, with a different understanding. I don’t want to stereotype, but I agree that this text was written for a different understanding, and you have an obligation to bring its culture to your audience. And maybe an intermission is what brings them closer. I think this is sometimes a translator’s work. I understand that it’s about the production, and the closer you are to the production, the closer you

work with the director, the more influence you have on the casting, the better. But even if you're not close to the production, wouldn't you consider making a change, adding an intermission, in order to safeguard the reception of the text?

ADAM VERSENYI. I think that what you're pointing to gets at the core of a lot of what we've been talking about over the last few days, which is that theatrical translation is in itself a creative process. As Andy [Bragen] was saying, as the translator, the thing that you're ultimately faithful to is how the play will work in the target theater context.

JEAN GRAHAM-JONES. But without reducing it to a formula. This is something I've seen happen a lot with British translations of Argentine texts, that are three-hour plays. The translators say, "Our audiences can't handle that. This play is going to be an hour-and-a-half, and here, half your play's gone." The whole logic of the play falls apart, and completely falls apart structurally. But it's based on an assumption that the audience can't handle it. It's dumbing down the text to fit a certain preconceived formula, instead of thinking about that journey, and getting the audience to go someplace else with you.

GARY RACZ. I'm surprised that theaters themselves don't insist on an intermission. I understand that with an hour-long play, you're going to run through it, but by an hour and forty minutes ... think what a theater night is! You're burping from dinner...the theater wants to sell some wine. I don't know why they wouldn't impose or expect an intermission. When you're thinking about different cultures and times, the corollary is the classical five-act play. Are you just going to cut that down to a snap?

Yael PRIZANT. I'll pose a little example of something that was shocking to me when it happened. Alberto Sarraín directed *Talco*, which is part of Abel [Gonzalez Melo]'s *Fugas de Invierno* trilogy. It is a brutal play. It's a very difficult play to watch. He directed it in a tiny little theater in Miami, and the audience was right on top of the stage. It was in Spanish, and it did not have subtitles because there was nowhere to put them. I've never seen a director do this, but he came out before the show and he explained to the audience that he was glad they were there, and then he said, "If you're offended and you want to leave, here's when you can leave comfortably." I was shocked that he said it, because he's not the sort. But then, that play doesn't necessarily have an intermission. I saw it in Miami and I saw it in Cuba, where it was staged in a proscenium. In Miami, the play needed an intermission so terribly, because you needed to take a breath, because you were sitting on top of this heinousness, and you needed a moment to collect yourself. In Cuba, the play was in a different setting, and it worked fine without the intermission. That taught me a great deal about the production itself, what the director's done with it aside from the script. The script remained exactly the same, but there was something about the space, and the audience being so close to it that we had to have a second. And of course at the intermission, everyone was kind of stunned and quiet, which was sort of bizarre, too. But there is that desire to make it fit the production, and that's huge.

NEIL BLACKADDER. I saw Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Kontrakte des Kaufmanns* [The Merchant's Contracts] at the Theatertreffen in Berlin. It was only four hours long, but they said, "We're going to keep going. If you want to go out, there are monitors in the lobby and you can go out and come in as you see fit." I left, had a drink in the lobby, watched a bit of it on the monitors, then went

back in. It's interesting that that didn't really affect my experience of the play.

But I wanted to get us talking a bit more about the nitty-gritty of the translation, which is something that we don't do that much of. It's been about six years since I did the translation of *Ballad of the Pine-Tree Killer*. I've done a lot of translation since then, and one of the things that has happened is, I've become much bolder about getting further away from the text. I tend to want to find a way to get everything that's in the original into my translation in some way. The responses that you've given me on the question of register have been pleasing for that reason. That's all in the original. There's one example that stood out for me. Anna is talking about the ring, and she says, "Should I get something in gold without anything, or something in silver with something?" That sounds so banal, especially compared to the "fangled growth of pragmatism." But Rebekka did that deliberately : uninteresting words in the one case, and interesting words in the other.

Part of me kept saying, "That doesn't sound very interesting in the English," but then I'd say, "That's ok. It's not interesting in the German either." So anyway, I just wondered what thoughts you have about that. There were moments where I found myself thinking, maybe I should have pushed that a little farther.

ADAM VERSENYI. Neil, what do you mean by "finding yourself moving farther from the source text"? Are you saying in terms of the language choices that you're making, or in terms of the theatricality of your translation? Because those seem to me to be two different things.

NEIL BLACKADDER. I think I'm speaking more of the language choices.

JOSEPH MEGEL. I got your example. I just feel unable to answer the question, which is very rare for me. Not that I'm always right! But I think that the way this play works, I need to get inside of it to understand what those differences are doing, and then to analyze whether that's what the differences *need* to do. So that example is perfect, because I actually remember both of those moments, and there's a lot of moments I don't. This is the problem of readings that I feel go off, is that I just have no insight into your question based on what I received yesterday. I'd rather go back and reread the text, looking at it as a director, saying, "This moment is doing this, this moment is this style, this shifts this way," and then really start looking at it. I know that's not helpful.

NEIL BLACKADDER. No, it is. I've talked about this myself, especially in contexts such as BANFF where I'm talking as the only drama translator in the group, talking about how my work is different from what they do, and how much it has to do with actors needing to understand what the language is *doing*. What is that person *doing* to the other person in the room? Not something poetry translators have to think about.

ANDY BRAGEN. It's spoken language. It's got to both be something that you can imagine writing in English were it your play, and something that reflects the German.

GARY RACZ. A few things that I think are tangential to this. Neil, you said that the source text in German had some English words, and then you traded off or peppered the text with German words. I'm not sure how much I like that, particularly at the end. A comment was made, "Is this a

German play? Has it been Americanized enough? Has it been de-Germanized?” And I don’t think that’s the question in this play, particularly because the framework on which the play hangs or is painted is, if not a universal myth, a very well known legend – Don Juan has sort of universal impulses. So I didn’t think that that was an appropriate question. I think at one point the actor even pronounced German words in a funny English way, he was playing with pronunciation – that I thought was a little bit strange. I wasn’t sure what it was doing in the text or why it was there. But I agree with Andy and others about the bravura linguistic performance in this text. I’m not sure how much you blew on it. After all, it’s relatively compact, just an hour and forty minutes. But I wonder what you thought about the German, which is what’s getting me – does the play exist in a place between the languages?

Yael Prizant. It’s so curious that you say that very thing. Early on, one of my notes is, “Where are we?” I appreciate that so much – I appreciated it feeling open. I was able to say, “It’s Pittsburgh,” or wherever. But we’ve talked about place a lot – with *Huddersfield*, with this play, and with the Japanese piece, and yes, even my piece. Those questions of place and what they do to an audience, and to a scenic designer! – to me, there was a wonderful openness to this play. It doesn’t start out hammering you about the place. The relationships were much more important than the place. I wondered what others thought of that, in spatial terms, or imaginatively... ?

Jean Graham-Jones. It always felt like Germany to me. Not that it was important that it was Germany, but it felt like Germany.

Adam Versenyi. I agree with that.

Jean Graham-Jones. But it didn’t pull me out with that question. With *Huddersfield*, I felt that I was being pulled out of the play to deal with the question of place. That never happened to me in *Ballad of the Pine-Tree Killer*.

Andy Bragen. When did the German first come into the play in your translation, Neil? About halfway into the play? The reason I ask is to get at the idea of teaching us to see your play. If the German is going to function, we’re going to hear it differently based on how you teach us to understand it. Is it something that pops up in a simple way at certain points so that when it really comes in later we have a relationship to it?

Yael Prizant. Those character names are not shockingly German. Jan is an Eastern European name, it’s Polish. The names didn’t do it for me, they weren’t the thing.

Maria Mytilinaki. But I was definitely in that part of the world, culturally if not linguistically. Now I had moments where I felt where I was, and moments where I didn’t, but it didn’t really matter.

Gary Racz. Quick question on the Don Juan myth. Of course Jan can be correlated to Juan, Anna to Elvira, but Rudy? I know Leporello.

Neil Blackadder. Leporello is Rudolph, yes.

GARY RACZ. I'm wondering why.

NEIL BLACKADDER. I think, at one point, that Rebekka told me that calling him Leporello would make Don Giovanni too present.

GARY RACZ. These are not criticisms at all. I thought the translation was wonderful. As I'm going through my little thing, I'm asking, "What's jarring in the language?" I couldn't pick anything up.

YAEL PRIZANT. I don't know why I got tempted to count meter. But I mean that positively. It was *interesting* enough to me that I was tempted to count meter.

GARY RACZ. That's something that I wanted to ask too. Are you sure that's not another kind of formal nod, either to the opera or to Don Juan as poetry, that we have this kind of lineated prose?

NEIL BLACKADDER. Well, I talked to a few of you about this last night. But there's probably meter in that passage in particular.

ANDY BRAGEN. I was thinking about the question you asked at the beginning, Neil, about the banal language – the clinical stuff is so sharp and clear. Is there a way to be equally sharp in a different way with banality, to make us understand that? Is that an adaptation choice where you make that contrast? Watching the Marius von Mayenburg play, *The Ugly One*, which is clean and spare in a different way from this one – the experience was reminiscent. There may be a similar crispness in yours, though it's hard to see through the reading.

NEIL BLACKADDER. That's helpful. Something I want to think about a bit more.

YAEL PRIZANT. How does that – maybe I'm just thinking about it because Andy was the one who just said it – how does the question about silver and gold become, "Want apples? Want an apple?" It seems so banal but there really is a layer there that we're not necessarily getting, directly from the language.

ANDY BRAGEN. Is it something like, "Do you want your gold unadorned, or your silver with stuff?" That's out of the air, but something where a word pops: "stuff!" rather than "nothing," or maybe nothing is the word that pops. But you put your ear up. Certainly, Caridad [Svich, translator of *Huddersfield*], using "in the can," "motherfucker" – it's a banal language, but somehow unfamiliar.

NEIL BLACKADDER. Rebekka is so deliberate that if she had wanted, she could have made those lines have language that pops, but she didn't. I feel that there's a reason. And later there's horrible inhuman talk about "optimizing relationships," almost in monosyllables.

ANDY BRAGEN. So maybe it's a monosyllabic vocabulary that is even more banal, even simpler than what you've already got.

GARY RACZ. You made a comment in the talkback about the horrendous commercial language,

but I think you caught that really beautifully. It was really snappy – as you say, the horrible language used in commercials.

NEIL BLACKADDER. But it's also kind of not very well done. It doesn't rhyme. It's horribly commercial, but it's sort of stumbling over itself. It's not slick.

ANDY BRAGEN. What does it feel like if you're hearing that play in German?

NEIL BLACKADDER. I paid attention to that. It's almost as though the character, Tina, is improvising. She hasn't quite got the pitch down.

Yael Prizant. Is it a script that she's reading, from the cellular company? I didn't get a sense of whether it was hers or whether it was the company's script, and that's why it's so awkward for her?

NEIL BLACKADDER. There's no real way to answer that question.

Jean Graham-Jones. It felt canned, and it felt like somebody who still hadn't learned the script, who was out on the street trying to sell this stuff, and doesn't quite understand what she's doing, so is just repeating.

Scott Williams. What did you all think about the very different staged readings? People in a row up front vs. more directed, more movement, more in-and-out the door.

Adam Versenyi. Jody [McAuliffe] did stage to a much greater extent than either Kathy [Williams] or I did. That's a different philosophy as to what a reading ought to be doing. And the Brody Theater itself – the space is a very awkward space. I think she was trying to do something to mitigate against that.

Yael Prizant. But it did make it more absurdist, or surreal, than I think the play actually might be. And I wonder if imposing a naturalistic style on it might make it that much more fractured and interesting, in a way that would illuminate the text.

Andy Bragen. I thought that there was a naturalistic style put upon it by the guy who played Jan, and coupled with the staging, it was interpreted in a way that I didn't find useful. It a) didn't seem right to me, and b) seemed too much for a reading. A reading demands less, it demands simpler choices.

Neil Blackadder. The other thing that we haven't talked about all that much this weekend is the whole business of acting styles in America, what Americans are trained to do. We've talked about European playwrights being asked questions by American actors: "What's my process? What's my backstory?" And playwrights saying to the cast, "I don't know. All there are, are the words on the page. That's all you have to work with." And actors who aren't familiar with that approach are freaked out.

Adam Versenyi. Neil, could you talk a little bit about the process of working with Rebekka

[Kricheldorf] and creating this translation? You mentioned earlier that you've done several with her since. How have things changed in the continuing relationship? This is the first time at the conference that we're looking at something where the translator has worked quite closely with the playwright. Well, Andy did as well ...

ANDY BRAGEN. But Neil has an ongoing relationship for multiple plays.

Yael Prizant. I'm going to ask you to back all the way up, Neil, and tell us how you met Rebekka.

Neil Blackadder. The first play that I did that was presented publicly in any form, I was asked to do for German Theater Abroad. I'm not sure they even exist anymore – they've been sort of off again, on again. I think it was in 2006 that my reading was presented, as part of a festival that included two full productions, and then a series of readings. My reading was at HERE [in NYC]. I was just invited to translate it – well, I submitted a sample and convinced them I knew what I was doing. Then I had a whole interesting contractual saga that I won't go into, but it had to do with deciding to take less money but keeping more control. I guess we academics can afford to do that, since we're not doing it for the money. Anyway, I was initially put in contact with Rebekka [Kricheldorf] and exchanged emails with her. I got on top of all this in the last week or so in preparation for coming here. I'd forgotten just how many email exchanges we've had, about very precise things. I often end up asking her, "Is this a *festendung Redewendung*, an established idiom, or is it something you've invented?" It's rarely an established idiom or fixed phrase.

Yael Prizant. Are you asking her in German or in English?

Neil Blackadder. This is all in German.

Yael Prizant. So you discuss only in German. I'm always curious about these things.

Neil Blackadder. Yes. I mean, her English is decent. We could do it in English, but I've just found that it works best in German, and that's what we've established doing. She often says, "It's not a fixed phrase, it's sort of a twisted version, it's close to a fixed phrase, but I like the sound of it." So I've got moments like that throughout the script where I've had that kind of exchange with her. And there's another level in this play, more than the other one of hers that I translated, this whole background of the 60's. And we're obviously getting to grips with this whole pine tree killer story. Understanding that was important, and the pudding terrorists – various other references like that. I find it very rewarding and interesting because I find her very good at doing what she does. In theory all playwrights can talk intelligently about their work, but I suspect that some can't do so as well as I find she does.

I translated another play of hers a couple of years later, which I directed with students at Knox [College]. We brought her over, which was a great experience, for the students as well as for me. She participated in post-show discussions afterwards and she was very good, even with sort of ok English, she was very good at talking about her own play. She's always got very clear answers. I think one of these times she's going to say, "Oh, I dunno, it just sounded good," but she never says that.

She gave me of all of this material to work with. Then I had difficult choices to make. Can I capture what she's just told me, or do I need to sacrifice that and try to find the same thing elsewhere? The sort of stuff that as translators, we all do all the time.

Since *Ballad of the Pine Tree Killer*, I've got to know her more in person, and I've seen her in Berlin a lot. But the conversation about this translation was mostly a back-and-forth over email.

So, it was presented as a staged reading in New York, and I had some exchange with Sam Gold who directed it there, who had a few questions. And then I went to rehearsals and some other things came up. All of which had to do with the whole British-American thing. It amazes me how hard it is for me to iron out all of those Britishisms. Andy told me about one he caught last night, that even Jody hadn't spotted. Not that it matters that much ...

Yael Prizant. Which one?

Andy Bragen. "Rose-tinted glasses."

Adam Versenyi. You think that's British?

Andy Bragen. It's not American. "Rose-colored glasses." I mean, it's not *British*, but it didn't bother me. You should just know that the phrase that would be customary is *rose-colored*. It's not that it's wrong – just worth noticing.

Scott Williams. Do you say in American English, "Do you want *a* coffee?"

Various chime in: "cup of coffee," "cup o' coffee," or "just coffee." "There's a little flexibility."

Neil Blackadder. But it's hard ... for instance, if you say, "Do you want to go for *a* coffee?" but really you're saying "Nudge, nudge, wink, wink, I don't mean a coffee...". It would be hard to get that to work by just saying, "Would you like ... some coffee?"

Yael Prizant. No, no, but you'd say, "Do you want to go for coffee?" And not "a coffee."

Gary Racz. Yeah, but you can replace "coffee" with another noun if it's "a...noun." So you know, this is not for "a...coffee."

Yael Prizant. Watch Eddie Izzard on that. He talks about what that means, to ask someone "to go for coffee." Nudge, nudge, wink, wink. Eddie Izzard actually talks about it being a particularly British thing, to say to someone, "Want to go for a coffee?" And everybody knows what it means! But if the president of Burundi asks you that question, it really *means*, "Do you want some coffee?" It's funny, that exchange, because of course he's a comedian, but he's making a very specific point about British culture! So that's why I would even say it.

Neil Blackadder. But I wonder which came first – it suddenly occurs to me that it's probably an allusion to, "Do you want to go for a pint?" As someone was saying last night, that

never means *a* pint.

Yael Prizant. It means many pints.

Tom Simpson. What about “a cup” of coffee?

Gary Racz. That came up at an ALTA conference, too, in a poem. “It’s not a coffee,” someone said, and I thought, wow, in that short line, “a cup of coffee” requires a lot of extra syllables.

Neil Blackadder. There are definitely things here that I’m being alerted to but I may decide to keep the same anyway because it’s sort of more interesting for the actors. A lot of these things ... I mean, it’s not like all Americans agree about the way they speak, and all Brits agree about how *they* speak.

Scott Williams. I heard some of this, and I wondered if it was British, or if it was the German word.

Neil Blackadder. Oh, no, I think it was mostly British.

Yael Prizant. Or is it the article question? Which is so horrible, because in English there are no articles in that way!

Gary Racz. You know, we were talking about – and I didn’t see the script – that everyone has an age next to them, a *Jahr gung*?

Adam Versenyi. Just in the cast list.

Gary Racz. So “The Dad, 50” or something?

Neil Blackadder. Well, it says, “Born such-and-such a year.”

Gary Racz. Oh, yeah, ok. Because they were talking about whether the registers would be different, and I didn’t think that was such a fuss. I mean, everyone seemed to speak naturally except when they would be stilted commercially. But there were at least a couple times in the play where somebody called somebody else on his language, said, “You’d better dust off your...” ?

Neil Blackadder. He says, “Come to the party at 9 sharp.”

Gary Racz. “You’d better dust off your idiom.”

Iride Lamartina-Lens. I just have a question about process again. When there are other translations of a particular work, for example if an English translation exists already, a UK translation, and we’re trying to do the American translation, just to know the process, do you guys read the English UK translation first before you begin yours, or do you want to start from scratch and say, “I’m just going to go with mine, and maybe later I’ll compare it.” I’m interested in what you guys do with that.

NEIL BLACKADDER. I haven't had that experience, so...

ADAM VERSENYI. I would not read somebody else's translation before doing mine.

IRIDE LAMARTINA-LENS. So you don't want to be influenced at all.

PHYLLIS ZATLIN. I think I asked that question of the translators I surveyed for my book, but this is my own peculiar experience (and it's probably in the book – I'll have to think about the time frame). We had the contract for Eduardo Manet's *Lady Strass*, signed and paid for by a team of three British directors, and then they decided that they really needed a UK translation. So they handed it over to one of their people, who changed a word here, a word there, and maybe two other words, and sent the revised first act that said it was copyrighted in his name, to Manet. Genevieve told me that it was very unusual, because Manet said, "Phyllis is my friend, and I am not letting someone else undercut her translation." She said that normally playwrights will do absolutely anything to get a West End production – they're not even going to remember the previous translator! Well, I kicked and screamed and fussed and of course they'd signed the contract – they had accepted my translation. I met with them in London. We sat down and we discussed more or less in a friendly tone. There was actually very little that needed to be changed. And I came back and Caris went through it for me. You change "cookie" to "biscuit" and "John" to "Lou," I mean it's not a big deal. A flashlight becomes a lantern. And for this he was going to copyright my translation? So, they went with my translation. Except that they never got the theater or the actor. But other than that, I mean, it would have gone! Acknowledging the help of Caris and a score of others.

GARY RACZ. It's interesting in that case how little was involved in Anglicizing. Often it's more idiomatic...

Yael PRIZANT. Stylistically? It's the same question of syntax in the original language. Because of course the sentence would have completely different syntax, and you have to deal with that. This idea of the *Jahr gung* – is that what it's called? – is especially curious to me, because writing that someone was born in a certain year instead of them being their sixties, seems to take on the question of past and present, which in this play is so mushy in some way.

PHYLLIS ZATLIN. Have you read German tombstones?

Yael PRIZANT. No. Is it the same?

PHYLLIS ZATLIN. Yes.

ADAM VERSENYI. But I think Yael's point is that we're talking about a cultural perception and a way of thinking about time, and that's incredibly important.

GARY RACZ. But say that play gets picked up a hundred years from now, and now the father is 150 years old. That's why it's better to keep the age – say, 50's – rather than the date.

Yael Prizant. But to me, it becomes the weight of your history, in the sense that the year you were born becomes more important than the age you *are*, in terms of your experience and the historical events that have happened within that context. And to talk about it that way, to start the play that way – “When I was young...” – in a play that does all that, it seems particularly deliberate. Clearly, it’s deliberate to begin with. Setting out from the beginning that the generations are important, and when they are inserted, when are they born, when do they show up on the scene? And yet going to back to “When I was young” right from the beginning almost gives you the cycle. Immediately. From birth to looking backward.

Adam Versenyi. It’s the equivalent of what we do in the States, of talking about – “I was Class of ’75.”

Yael Prizant. But in the States, I think, when we say “I was Class of ’75” – if that’s your college or your high school class, depending – that’s marking a very specific time in history as if that was the real you. That’s your real moment, right?

Adam Versenyi. Exactly. That’s what I’m saying.

Yael Prizant. But it also changes in the United States in your context, if you’re talking about your reunion, you’re going to say, “Oh, I was Class of ’75.” If you’re talking about your army service, you’re going to say, “Oh, I was Platoon Such-and-Such or Such-and-Such in Such-and-Such War.” So how we do that changes, but we certainly don’t start it with, “I was born in...” unless there’s a reason. And that may be particularly American, I don’t know, but there’s something about that process...

Scott Williams. But when you say, “I’m a Baby Boomer” or “I’m of the X Generation” –

Adam Versenyi. “Generation X.”

Neil Blackadder. I was struck by this also, by Rebekka’s bio. I think I’m right in saying that it tells you the year she was born in. Most writers don’t say born in so-and-so year. I think there’s a highlighting of the start of your life in German culture.

Yael Prizant. Well, but in the States if there is a particular interest – for interest, sometimes they’ll say with Abel [Gonzalez Melo] that he was born in 1980, because it’s shocking to people that he’s thirty-something years old. That he’s young. So they’ll do that to bring that out, or they’ll say, “Only in his thirties, he’s blah blah blah blah.” So it seems so telling to accent it.

Adam Versenyi. Even when we sent you the lug lines, Neil, for the staged reading, you changed the line to “young playwright.”

Neil Blackadder. Did I? I know I talked about this with somebody: how long can [Rebekka] be “young” for? I don’t quite know.

Adam Versenyi. What I had written as the original lug line was “A wry updating of the Don Juan story.” You then added, “by a young playwright.”

PHYLLIS ZATLIN. Don't you think I'm still young? ... After all, I think the program could say "The action takes place in the decade of ..." and that solves the problem so that fifty years from now you don't make the young man seventy years old instead of twenty years old. But I do repeat that this is very German, in my limited experience, to put those exact dates. I've read the tombstones. My mother's maternal family was German, and they're buried in a German cemetery in Wisconsin, and every tombstone gives you the exact birth-date and death-date, and in the case of many of the members of the family, it will tell you the exact age. I have a "poor Uncle Edward," as my mother always talked about her littlest brother. He was six years, eleven months, and three days old when he died, and it says that on the tombstone.

SCOTT WILLIAMS. It's also common in German documents. My diploma will say when you were born. It's a way of identifying you on the official document.

NEIL BLACKADDER. Can I ask about another passage? It was actually – I remember saying to Rebekka that it was actually the hardest part in the play in some ways. I'm just wondering what comes to mind when I mention it to you. The part where Jan is trying to seduce one of the women, and he goes into this whole thing, he gets down on one knee and says, "I'm a salesman, I'm in sales, my father was in sales..." Did that work for you? Did it make sense?

ADAM VERSENYI. Did for me.

NEIL BLACKADDER. OK. Because, actually, there's a pun in the German. *Werben* means both "to woo" and "to advertise." I had to come up with something else, and it's a shame to have lost what's there.

GARY RACZ. Pitch. "Here's my pitch. You wanna hear my pitch?"

ADAM VERSENYI. Yes, but that doesn't have the seductive quality to it.

Yael PRIZANT. I think just Jan's father being in advertising and him having that whole conversation, already set that scene up for me.

NEIL BLACKADDER. And that's there in the German, too. I wish that the English had a better way of saying it. If we had the same word to mean "advertise" and "woo," it would have been much neater.

Yael PRIZANT. But just the concept of selling oneself in the wooing, yes.

SCOTT WILLIAMS. You can court a customer, can't you?

NEIL BLACKADDER. Yeah, you can, but it's used so much. "Pitch" or "court."

GARY RACZ. Or "line." "I'm descended from a long line. My mother once listened, too." There's the pun. But if it keeps coming up, it's not funny, it's clunky, right? Even one time.

Yael Prizant. But I hadn't made that connection before. That wooing is, in some way, selling a product. Packaging. I had not thought of that before.

Adam Versenyi. Except that in terms of the structure of the play, and particularly in the playing of it last night, which may have been off register, that's exactly what Tina does to Jan in the earlier scene. So to see him turn around and do it back to another woman makes perfect sense within the logic of the world of the play.

Yael Prizant. But conceptually, that was an interesting, new concept to me. I'd never actually put the two together. Wooing as selling yourself as a package, as a product, showing off your good qualities, presenting your stats.

Gary Racz. You know, in English, sometimes we use the German word, "spiel."

Phyllis Zatlín. Well, certainly for selling. I don't know that we'd use "spiel" for the seduction, though, would we?

Yael Prizant. Not as a pick-up line. Maybe for closing the deal. "Closing the deal" is a good one. But it's more than just wooing, it's sex, right? "Closing the deal," you'll hear guys say, or "seal the deal."

Andy Bragen. This feels very contemporary. Internet dating is a sort of advertising or packaging. People putting themselves as a piece of information and cultural capital online.

Phyllis Zatlín. I'm interested in how you're all using the word, "woo." I believe I read a line I had translated to my daughter and another teenager, who had never heard the word. So you're dating yourself, I think, on the generations. And I think there really are differences between generations. I translated a play from French where they were three characters: an elderly woman, a middle-aged woman (I translated it when I was still middle-aged) and a young woman. I made the elderly woman sound like my mother, the middle-aged woman sounded like me, and the young woman – who is flaky, and you can't trust her for anything, and my God, she's going to do terrible things – it was my daughter! I don't know how we got her written into the script. But I differentiated language that way. That's a play the *Mercurian* has published.

Gary Racz. And "woo" came up...?

Phyllis Zatlín. I don't remember where "woo" came up, but it's the context. My mother would have known the word, I know the word, and my daughter said, "What?"

Yael Prizant. Well, students think of it as a word that comes from Shakespeare.

Iride Lamartina-Lens. A younger generation would never use the word.

Phyllis Zatlín. They're not going to court, either. These are not the words. They're going to "come on." I believe. Unless that's dated now!

MARIA MYTILINAKI. We talked briefly last night about the title, and how this is explained in the play. Is this something people got? I didn't get it, I didn't understand where the title came from, and there was a moment where Jan mentions the pine tree, but I didn't understand it.

GARY RACZ. And why is it a ballad, on top of everything else?

MARIA MYTILINAKI. Do you want to explain, as the translator?

NEIL BLACKADDER. Well, it's not really my choice. That's something that I had to understand, but there's not much I can do as a translator to make the playwright's insertion of that critical story into her own script clearer than it is. It would be crucial in a production for the director and actors to make that land. It's complicated at the best of times. But what comes to mind for you with the idea that it's called a ballad? Does it make sense to you that it's called a ballad? What does a ballad suggest?

ADAM VERSENYI. "The Ballad of Frankie and Johnnie" ?

Yael PRIZANT. Exactly. To me a ballad suggests a sad song story.

MARIA MYTILINAKI. But it's also a love story.

ADAM VERSENYI. Yes, very much so. Frequently a ballad is that. It's "Barbara Allen."

PHYLLIS ZATLIN. There's a poetic underpinning to it, and you did make the point later on, Neil, that the language without punctuation, the short lines, looks at first glance to be a poem, so there's perhaps a connection that way.

ANDY BRAGEN. A mythic yarn, I guess, is what comes to mind for me.

NEIL BLACKADDER. We've been talking about the effect of the prologue, and Andy's been talking about teaching the audience how to read your play. The title does that already. If it was called *Fathers Against Sons*, or something, it would have a totally different message.

ADAM VERSENYI. We did the Canadian George F. Walker's adaptation of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. The adaptation is a brilliant piece, it's wonderful, but its title is *Nothing Sacred*. It captures a lot of what is going on in the novel, but *Fathers and Sons* as a title for a play certainly sends you in a different direction than *Nothing Sacred* does.

GARY RACZ. We were talking about teaching the audience, bringing the audience along. [I can get at] what the Pine Tree Killer is – there's the pine tree episode with the fire at the end and that at least makes it at least kind of a loop. But was there also a mention of pudding? "Pudding-terrorists"? That could be glossed a little bit. Even after your talkback, Neil, I still don't know what that is.

NEIL BLACKADDER. That's actually one of the parts where sitting in the audience and seeing how you all reacted to the play was interesting to me. It struck me that the pudding-terrorist thing

works even though no one has a clue what it refers to.

General affirmation: “Yes, it works!” “Absolutely.”

NEIL BLACKADDER. There was a particular incident. I would have to look up the details, but it was someone throwing pudding at a government minister.

GARY RACZ. Like a pie in the face.

NEIL BLACKADDER. That was the idea. That’s the actual story behind it. And yeah, I’m disappointed that [the character’s] father actually wasn’t a pudding-terrorist.

ADAM VERSENYI. What was it? The whipping-cream pie in Margaret Murdoch’s face.

Yael Prizant. Or, the anti-fur people throwing blood. It’s aggressive in that way, because of course, you don’t know that it’s pudding, right? The question is, is it something else? When it goes flying, for that moment the minister is wondering, what is this that has gotten all over me? I got the pudding-terrorist, and I got that it was a protest idea against money, power, whatever.

ADAM VERSENYI. And that it was a Yippie kind of Abbie Hoffman-Jerry Rubin performative incident.

ANDY BRAGEN. I think that what I like about it is that it’s not simple, it’s not direct and literal, it’s not the “Cream Pie Terrorist.” Pudding is such a great word, and I think that you moved it just far away enough that it lands. We understand what it is, but it’s not literally *that*.

Phyllis Zatlín. It would be easier to throw a cream pie than to throw pudding, but in that I didn’t catch a lot of the dialogue -- the elderly with her hearing problems or something, I don’t know-- blame it on the actors or blame it on me, I really don’t care – I would spin through and wonder if the pudding was poisoned, like the Tylenol episode in the United States years ago. You buy pudding and it’s been opened, and there’s poison in it. That to me might be the more direct use of pudding as a terrorist act than throwing pudding, which would be hard to do.

NEIL BLACKADDER. But they’re talking years later about something he actually was or was not, and it turns out he was not, involved in. If it was something that had led to someone’s death, the whole story would be different.

GARY RACZ. What you just said, is that mentioned in the play?

Yael Prizant. Jan is hopeful that his father *was* a pudding-terrorist?

GARY RACZ. That’s still a little detail that threw me a little bit. I hear you talking about the pudding-terrorist, but what’s the alternative? The cream pie flinger? The lexis, just the words, are tough to –

NEIL BLACKADDER. Well, Gary, you seemed to originally be saying that maybe I could have

made that clearer. And I think that maybe there would have been a way to do it. I could have had the characters say, “Were you the one that threw the pudding at the minister? Were you the pudding terrorist?” That would explain it to the audience, but I don’t think it’s necessary.

ANDY BRAGEN. We got it. The word “terrorist” – it’s clear.

Yael Prizant. Well, tell me if you all feel differently, but as an American, pudding is chocolate.

Phyllis Zatlín. Oh, no! Pudding is tapioca!

Yael Prizant. No, no, the visual! I’m not saying what we eat, or what we like, I’m saying the visual of that brown stuff being thrown at the minister –

Gary Racz. Shit.

Yael Prizant. Right! Was enough for me.

Phyllis Zatlín. I would almost think that if you wanted it to be chocolate pudding, you’d have to say chocolate pudding, because my first temptation would be to think tapioca.

Adam Versenyi. Well, bird shit.

Laughter.

Neil Blackadder. In German it was probably yellow. Custard.

Andy Bragen. Sloppy-joe slinger.

More laughter.

Gary Racz. “Were you the cream-pie slinger?” I’m trying to think of what the fixed phrase would be, or the phrase we’re trying to fix...

As he ponders, the lunch gong rings.

Adam Versenyi. As we’re talking about pudding! Thank you all.

Neil Blackadder. Thank you!

END

WIT'S END

A Play based on Lope de Vega's La dama boba

Edward Friedman and Jeffrey Ullom

Introduction

Wit's End is based on *La dama boba* (The Lady Simpleton) by the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega (1562–1635). With his successor Pedro Calderón de la Barca and members of their respective “schools,” Lope created new forms of drama that represent a veritable Golden Age in the literary history of Spain—a moment as decisive and influential as the Elizabethan period in England. Owing to a saturnalian spirit permissible in comic drama, Spanish comedies of the first half of the seventeenth century tend to feature assertive women who take control of their fate by defying the authoritarian rule of their male protectors and who, as a rule, determine their own marriage partners. The motif of the world as stage finds an analogue in young women who become metaphorical dramatists, rewriters of the established social scenario. Like *La dama boba*, *Wit's End* is about love, the norms of society, and relationships. A common denominator of these elements is communication, both in the ways which people use, abuse, and manufacture language, and in the ways which people define themselves through their discourse. The play's protagonists are two sisters, one an illiterate and the other a baroque poet. Initially, one is too dimwitted and the other too precocious to succeed. Their attempts to dominate language serve to mirror—and, to a great extent, to determine—their growth and the course of their interaction with two key admirers. The male protagonists include one suitor who is willing to marry for money and another who cannot refrain from being a poet long enough to demonstrate his emotions in the real world. The women's father symbolizes the patriarchal system and the Spanish obsession with the code of honor. The two sisters and their suitors have servants who emulate and comment on the behavior of their masters.

The story of Aurora, the lady simpleton, relates the neoplatonic principle of love as a

teacher. Although she seems incapable of learning even the most rudimentary lessons, Aurora undergoes a change following the first meeting with her fiancé, Enrique. In Act I, she borders on the moronic, as she tests the patience and the pedagogical skills of her tutor. In Act II, she discovers that a transformation is taking place—that the clouds through which she has viewed life around her are disappearing. By Act III, she is fully in control of the situation. Marisa, her older sister, is the antithesis of a moron. Devoted to books, she presides over a poetry circle whose members see her as a muse. She despairs because she has no muse of her own and because she would rather be the equal than the inspiration of her male colleagues. Her transformation is a reversal of her sister's, for she must come down to earth (and she must bring her suitor with her). The sisters are subject to the fickleness of fortune, good and bad, and on permutations wrought by a fortune hunter (Enrique) and a poet lost in contemplation (Gonzalo), each of whom also experiences a metamorphosis of sorts.

By focusing on—and updating, as it were—the ironies implicit in Lope's model, *Wit's End* addresses the timeless issue of women's place, an issue that underscores the role of rhetoric as an intrinsic component of personality and of self-identity. At the same time, the play explores the theme of self-interest, or love as negotiation. In this particular domain, desire and economics are intimately linked. Aurora's uncle has left her a fortune, so she is more viable in the matrimonial market than her sister, although the latter has intellect on her side. Enrique is of noble lineage but poor, whereas Gonzalo is aristocratic and wealthy; thus, the negotiating space is different in each case. Don Cristóbal, father of the two women, is primarily concerned with divesting himself of a serious liability (or two). In the plot structure, shifts in attraction ultimately depend on shifts in interest, and the happy ending is the product of newly-discovered communicative skills and of fortuitous mergers. The goal of *Wit's End* is humor at the service of

thought and, fittingly, at the service of language.

Wit's End:
A Reading of *La dama boba*

Edward Friedman

Wit's End is a collaborative effort. Jeffrey Ullom modified the original manuscript for performance, and the present version reflects those changes. Here, I look at the path that led me to the adaption, or, it might be said, to my collaboration with Lope de Vega. As a student and teacher of Spanish Golden Age drama, I have always been struck by the amalgamation of humor and social issues in Lope de Vega's *La dama boba*. The play is indisputably funny, but it also contains messages about the education and status of women. The contrast between the two sisters, at opposite extremes of the intelligence spectrum, is complemented by a clash between love and financial security. The neoplatonic motif of love as teacher—the justification of the transformation of the lady simpleton into a veritable sage—gives Lope the freedom to move the action of the play forward without exposing potential flaws in the social fabric of the period. Society intervenes, nonetheless, through what could be termed the counterplot, based not on love but on the negotiation of marriage alliances. Finea is able to marry the man responsible for her metamorphosis—able to have it all. So is Laurencio. Although the groom is willing to sacrifice mental stimulation for money, the wealthy bride acquires wisdom to accompany her dowry. In order to accommodate Finea's new-found strengths, and their idealistic foundation, the play must accommodate Laurencio's materialism. Laurencio makes a dubious moral choice, but, ironically, as Finea's love object (!) he can capitalize on her good fortune, which becomes his good fortune.

The most problematic figure in the play is clearly Nise, condemned for her intellectual curiosity and assertiveness. Because she does not respect her place in the scheme of things, she must be put in her place. She is outsmarted by her “foolish” sister, and she loses—to her sister—the man whom she loves and who has professed his undying love for her. The strategically placed speeches of Otavio, wizened by age and experience, present a point of view that would seem to represent the operative norms of society: it is a danger for women to be overly concerned with books and learning; the ideal wife puts her husband and children before herself; one must recognize that men will seek what they do not have, and no man considers himself lacking in judgment. Otavio’s speeches are borne by the dramatic events. Nise the intellectual comes in second to her sister. Both women enter traditional marriages. Laurencio and Liseo marry the women whom they have pursued most vigorously. But Nise’s concession speech, as it were, indicates a resignation to the established order—in effect, an inability to resist the forces that overwhelm her. These factors include a non-competitive dowry, conditions unfavorable to her thirst for knowledge, and inconstancy on the part of the man she loves. Even in the topsy-turvy realm of comedy, aggressive women must be tamed, or domesticated, as preparation for matrimonial tranquility. Nise’s haughtiness, rather than her intellect, determines her destiny. She cannot succeed if to do so would mean an ideological intrusion into male territory, into the sacrosanct patriarchal space.

With respect to causality and to focus, *La dama boba* is very much Finea’s story. The direction of that story does not alter the fate of Laurencio, so that the happy ending is as much a function of his social transactions as of hers. The contest between neoplatonism and materialism remains a draw. Nise aims at two related but distinct goals, both associated with Laurencio. She wants to develop as an intellectual and to marry the man whom she has come to know in the

literary academy. Like Finea prior to her transformation, Nise is a literalist. Laurencio employs the figurative discourse of poetry, but Nise takes his statements—however stilted, however embellished with rhetoric—as valid and transparent. Mental obscurity blurs Finea’s vision. Another kind of obscurity, baroque poetry, fills Nise’s head with abstract notions that allow her, nonetheless, to hear what she wants to hear and seek a heaven on earth. Neoplatonism links Finea to the themes and emotional registers of the past. Nise, on the other hand, exudes a pre-feminism that signals the future and that becomes more attractive over time. It is Lope’s—and her era’s—treatment of Nise that serves as the primary inspiration for *Wit’s End*. *Wit’s End* is not a translation but an adaptation that seeks to convey the basic messages of *La dama boba* in a new light with significant variations on the themes of authority, gender roles, and language, and with an altered and updated sense of irony.

In *Wit’s End*, I have endeavored to maintain the comedy’s focus on the female characters and to project exemplary portraits of both sisters. Because I feel that Lope’s play shortchanges Nise, I have sought means of rewarding the independent, intelligent woman along with her simple yet complex sibling. Correspondingly, I have attempted to make the pairings at the end comply with the principles of poetic justice. I want each woman clearly to be in control of the selection of her husband-to-be, and I want the choices to be reasonable; in short, the men should be well matched with and in every way worthy of the women who fall in love with them. I also want to break the tie, as it were, between love and interest, in favor of love. What this means, essentially, is that I have rewritten the ending (and various events that precede the ending) to place the “lady simpleton” with her fiancé and the precocious sister with her fellow academician. The betrothed gentleman does not break his pledge—even though he vacillates on numerous occasions—and the two lovers of conceits find happiness in tandem. Although victorious on all

fronts, the Liseo figure (here called Enrique) discovers that he is more manipulated than manipulative. I have converted the Laurencio figure, renamed Gonzalo, into a dreamer and a practitioner, as well as an admirer, of baroque poetry. The male intellectual descends from the private domain of high-flown abstraction to find love in the real world. The female intellectual, in turn, need not lay aside her ambitions or her opinions in order to negotiate the marriage market. The obvious control of the women may be advanced in the strict social context, but it reflects the fantasy world—which can include the projection of a desired future—of comedy.

I have modified the characterization of the father (Don Cristóbal) by deflecting the authority of his words. His most noteworthy speeches, rearticulated in *Wit's End*, strive to convey the sensibility of early seventeenth-century urban Spain, but the refurbished commentaries have an ironic counterpoint. Don Cristóbal proceeds as if he were in full control of the situation, whereas the on-stage action and, notably, the discourse itself indicate the opposite, namely, the illusion of control. The father is amiable, protective of his daughters, and zealous of their well-being, but he seems a bit behind the times with an exaggerated sense of his perception of the world and oblivious to what is happening in his own home. In addition, he falls victim to the linguistic excesses that he deplores in his overly discreet and overly cultured daughter and her principal suitor.

My dual aim in *Wit's End* is to engage dialectically with *La dama boba* and to offer a freestanding text. I wish to underscore the incipient feminism, or pre-feminism, of Lope's play by legitimizing the bookish leanings of Nise through her counterpart in the adaptation. I want to provide two equally happy endings in which all parties—especially the two sisters—are content with the final pairings. Furthermore, I want the final pairings to suggest true commitment, a meeting of minds and souls; that is, I want the ending to suggest that the couples “lived happily

ever after.” The satirical thrusts of *Wit's End* are directed against social inequity, antifeminist views of education and of domesticity, and crass materialism—not at women whose pride and erudition are regarded as arrogance and over-reaching.

The juxtaposition of dramatic poetry with the baroque aesthetic gives Spanish Golden Age drama an elaborate linguistic foundation. In general, the plays lend themselves to analysis as texts about language, about successful and unsuccessful communication, and about the rhetoric and the structures of power implicit in signifying systems. *La dama boba* is evocative and appealing in this regard because initially one sister is illiterate and the other is consumed by readings of high baroque art. In order to attain viability according to the criteria of mainstream society, each must move toward a middle position, Finea from grotesque literalism and Nise from literary elitism. Love teaches Finea how to communicate through soulful lessons from Laurencio. He accomplishes what the tutor seeks in vain; she learns how to think, how to discern, and how to take advantage of words. The victory of Finea and Laurencio hinges on two verbal ploys: the marriage pledge before witnesses and the naming of the attic (“Toledo”). The central action in *La dama boba* is Finea’s transformation, which can be interpreted as a transition from illiteracy to a winning command of language. Nise, in contrast, must recognize that too strong a subjection to concepts and conceits will cast her to the margins of society. Thus, one sister learns how to do things with words, while the other learns to rely less on words. In a sense, Otavio is a master of the word; he is at once a critic of simplicity and eccentricity, a follower of the conventional wisdom, and a cultural and linguistic pragmatist. Even when he loses control of his daughters’ destinies at the end of the play, he gains two sons-in-law and the relief that comes with transferred responsibilities with respect to honor, which is never truly in jeopardy within the comic mode. The denouement attests to the validity of Otavio’s assertions in the speeches of Act

I, Scene 3.

Wit's End accentuates the linguistic skills and defects of the sisters. One can neither read nor grasp figurative concepts. The other delves into the intricacies of baroque poetry. In each case, a man is the vehicle of redemption, but the women control the negotiations, both socially and verbally. The simpleton Aurora cannot grasp the fundamentals of reading, and the most basic principle of semiotics—the juncture of sign and object—eludes her. The subtle Marisa, her antipode, has her head in poetic clouds. She wants to participate actively in artistic creation, but she realizes that female poets have no muses. And that is not her only problem. As it turns out, Gonzalo, the object of her affection, is so consumed by conceits that he has lost his grip on the here and now. While Aurora can perceive only the tangible—pure substance, in its immediate context—Gonzalo exists for the intangible, for the ethereal. In his obsession for signifiers, for poetic and rhetorical complexity, he tends to overlook signifieds, such as Marisa. Marisa must bring him down to earth, must supply the missing signified (herself), while staking out a reasonable place for herself in society and in the domain of art. The precarious balancing act is intensified by the lure of the other side, the side of economic prosperity whose emblem is Aurora's considerable dowry. Marisa wants a flesh-and-blood suitor, but not one who will succumb to materialism. From the beginning, Aurora and Marisa have their hearts set, respectively, on Enrique and Gonzalo. All four go through various rites of passage, but it is the women who most effectively alter the social scenario for their own purposes.

I have tried to sustain the interplay of popular and artificial language, as well as the interplay of broad and more subdued humor. Much of the humor derives, logically, from language, which ranges from Aurora's linguistic incompetence to Marisa's and Gonzalo's exaggerated competence. In order to allow prose to compensate for the poetry of the original, I

have attempted to mix the humor of the uninitiated, uneducated simpleton with the pompous and ultimately empty language of the baroque enthusiasts. The barrage of rhetorical figures and of phrases in Latin and French is not intended to be deciphered but, instead, to display the vacuousness of eloquence and circumlocution for their own sake. Language can be—and should be—functional as well as exquisite. The supremely polished diction of the tutor Don Félix represents a discursive analogue of his pedagogical dilemma: he cannot connect with Aurora in any way. Although Don Cristóbal leads the charge against verbal excess, he quite regularly falls into the very traps that he criticizes in others. This verbal irony is designed to reflect, and to intensify, the patriarch's displacement from the center of family politics, within, of course, the parameters of comedy.

I want the movement of both sisters toward the center—toward what I would call a radiant synthesis of life and art, of reality and words—to be positive and progressive. Aurora is rewarded by and through her love for Enrique, and the process makes him a better, less self-interested, person. Rather than being punished for her obsession with poetry, Marisa discovers, after a series of disappointments, that she can be an artist, a woman, and a wife. Her victory is made possible by her assertiveness, but also by Gonzalo's willingness to grant her freedom of expression and room for growth. A liberated wife ideally will have a liberated husband. Marisa rouses Gonzalo from his poetically induced slumber, and he proves to be her ideological equal. In *Wit's End*, economic determinism looms dangerously in the background, but art and practical morality win out. The two sisters get their first choice in mates, and so do the two suitors. Enrique's contract with Don Cristóbal is not broken, and Gonzalo's words of love do not vanish into the air. Aurora eventually completes her transformation. Marisa eventually settles on an arrangement in which she does not have to compromise her scruples or her spirit.

A note on names: With one exception, I have changed the names of the characters, in part to mark the difference between the original play and the adaptation. The “light” symbolism of the names is intended as a modest clue to an understanding of *Wit's End*. Finea becomes Aurora (dawn), a woman who will undergo a major awakening. Her maid, as in *La dama boba*, is Clara, also a woman on the verge of a breakthrough to clarity. Nise is renamed Marisa, whose first surname is Badilla, making her Marisa Badilla, which sounds much like *marisabidilla*, bluestocking. Her maid is Juana, a name shared with the brilliant Mexican nun and baroque poet, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The names of the male protagonists and their servants may perhaps bring to mind two baroque geniuses, Francisco de Quevedo (EnriQUE / Francisco) and Luis de Góngora (GONzalo / Luis), notorious literary enemies who wrote scathing verses against each other. The father, Don Cristóbal, advocate of traditional values, bears the first name of Cristóbal de Castillejo, who is associated with traditional Castilian poetry, as opposed to Italianate forms that served as models during the Renaissance and baroque periods in Spain. The choice of names reflects a correspondence between social mores and literary norms. Marisa, proponent of the “new poetry,” represents a new way of looking at the world, specifically at women. Her father dismisses overblown verse, just as he rejects the idea of extensive education for women who run the risk of becoming female Quixotes. Aurora’s tutor, Don Félix, has a name in common with Lope Félix de Vega Carpio. Don Félix is by no means a stand-in for the author—either author—but the name serves to hint at a distancing of the authority of the father, no longer the controlling figure, no longer the *raisonneur*. Lope’s second name goes to the frustrated schoolmaster (and substitute for Otavio’s confidant Miseno), who, when applying his personal methodology, does not achieve even a modicum of success with his charge.

Wit's End premiered at Neely Auditorium on the campus of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, on November 9, 2006, and was given six performances as part of Vanderbilt Theatre's 2006-2007 season. The play was directed by Jeffrey Ullom. The set designer was Phillip Franck. The costume and makeup design was by Alexandra Sargent, and the technical design by Nate Otto. The music was written and performed by Rachel Eve Ginter. The cast was as follows:

AURORA
CLARA
MARISA
JUANA
ENRIQUE
FRANCISCO
GONZALO
LUIS
DON FÉLIX
DON CRISTÓBAL

Angie Fontaine
Claire Epstein
Sarina Sahetya
Leslie Kelly
Brett Bolton
Eli Branson
Matt Clevy
Brian Collura
Alex Kane
Joey LaRoche

Wit's End was first published in the Ibérica Series of Peter Lang (2000). The editor of the series was A. Robert Lauer.

Jeffrey Ullom directed the premiere of *Wit's End* in November of 2006 at Vanderbilt, and Byron Halling directed the play at Escondido Charter High School in Escondido, California, in 2008, in multiple performances and with double casting. Friedman and Ullom have revised the play, based on Ullom's performance text and later collaboration.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Aurora, the simpleton
Clara, her maid
Marisa, the intellectual
Juana, her maid
Enrique, betrothed to Aurora
Francisco, his servant
Gonzalo, suitor of Marisa
Luis, his servant
Don Félix, Aurora's tutor
Don Cristóbal Badilla y Fuenmayor,
father of Aurora and Marisa

With the exception of Don Félix and Don Cristóbal, the characters' ages should range from about 20 to 25 years. The tutor is over 40, and the father should be suitably paternal.

The play takes place in Madrid, around 1625. The principal setting in each of the three acts is a garden in the home of Don Cristóbal, father of the two women. The garden set may be quite simple (a table, chairs, flowers, plants), as can the inn set. The three scenes that take place elsewhere can be played in front of the curtain. The overall look of the garden should be highly stylized, artificial, overdone.

Act I

Scene 1: a room in a small-town inn where Enrique and Francisco have spent the night en route to Madrid

Scene 2: a garden in the home of Don Cristóbal

Act II, the following day

Scene 1: a street near Don Cristóbal's home

Scene 2: the garden

Scene 3: a street near Don Cristóbal's home

Act III, the following day

Scene 1: an open field, site of the "duel" between Enrique and Gonzalo

Scene 2: the garden

ACT I

Scene 1

A room in the small-town inn where Enrique and Francisco have spent the night en route to Madrid. A curtained window downstage center. At stage right, a bed with nightstand, on which is propped a water basin. A chamber pot is visible under the bed. To the left of center is a rough cot, perhaps with a bit of hay on the floor around it. Near (invisible) door at stage right, two travel bags, one larger and far more elegant than the other.

During the scene, Enrique and Francisco prepare to take their leave. They do their final dressing and packing.

FRANCISCO. *(Putting on a jacket or vest)* Ohhhh! I ache all over. My back is killing me from this poor excuse for a mattress. Every bedbug in the bloody inn must have left its mark on me. Not to mention the saddle sores, the chigger bites, and the dust in my throat and eyes! And need I mention the food that we have sampled on this little excursion? I don't know which was the worst—the meat that seemed never to have had a master, the salad that substituted dirt for croutons, or the eggs that had rather too much of a crunch. Sir, ... *(He struggles to get Enrique's attention.)* Sir! ... Sir! I am wasting away. Those who praise the glories of the road could never have travelled the paths I've been on.

ENRIQUE. Surely you exaggerate, my good man.

FRANCISCO. *(Aside)* So says the master to the servant, as if their courses were the same.

ENRIQUE. Besides, you know that our journey has a purpose. A divine purpose, I hope. I am about to meet my intended, and I am wishing for a goddess who will help me transcend the troubles of this world.

FRANCISCO. If by that you mean that you wish for a generous dowry, I thought that the matter was settled.

ENRIQUE. It does seem that fate is on my side. Don Cristóbal Badilla y Fuenmayor, whose lineage is as celebrated as it is long, offered a most tempting dowry for his second daughter, Aurora, a young woman praised for her beauty as well as for her bloodlines, and I accepted the offer with the highest expectations. Some friends of mine had seen my lady at mass, and they informed me that she is most ravishing, with an innocence that is truly rare. I made certain, then, to enter the competition for her hand, and I won the contest. I am a fortunate man. *(Slight pause)* I must admit, however, that I am perturbed by one thing: of late, I have been made aware of the rumor that my bride-to-be is a bit dull.

FRANCISCO. Dull? What do you mean by dull?

ENRIQUE. I am really not certain. Those who have dropped hints have been rather vague, apparently worrying more about tact than about accuracy. But such a family tree surely cannot

yield a dimwit, and, truth be told, I was not in the market for a sparkling wit. *(Slight pause)* You see, Francisco, man seeks what he does not have. He recognizes what life has given him and of what he has been deprived, and he strives to fill the lack, to compensate for the missing pieces, to be—as it were—master of his destiny. As you well know, I am from the best of families, but these days an illustrious past does not guarantee wealth. My father does not have the resources that his father enjoyed, nor do I, as the second son of a second son, have more than a modest income. I do, however, have a university education (“cum laude”), dashing good looks (modesty aside!), and (again, excuse my frankness!) considerable charm.

FRANCISCO. *(With less than great enthusiasm)* Your gifts are irrefutable, sir.

ENRIQUE. Thank you. *(Slight pause)* As I was saying, the world is redefining aristocracy, and one must stay on his toes if he intends to emerge victorious. Being practical as well as cultured, I took aim at a woman whose purse is as attractive as her face. She is my match in nobility, she is my match in comeliness, and she is my superior in finances. I am willing to give up scintillating after-dinner conversation with my wife, if need be, in exchange for a substantial operating capital. After all, there will doubtless be clever gentlemen around with whom to engage in banter, but money is far harder to come by. Should my beloved prefer silence to repartee, so be it. I will find eloquence in liberal revenues and fluency in liquid assets. And so, your complaints about the discomforts of travel notwithstanding, we seem to be headed in the right direction.

FRANCISCO. I have prayed for that to be the case.

ENRIQUE. Let’s get moving, then! We’re due in Madrid late this afternoon.

(They exit. Francisco carries the bags.)

Scene 2

Madrid. A garden in the home of Don Cristóbal. The meeting of the poetry circle has just broken up. On stage left a small table with a gavel and some loose manuscript pages. About eight light chairs to the side. The area should include a number of potted plants and several potted trees. The overall look of the garden should suggest artifice rather than nature. The garden can be approached from the house by (invisible) doors on either side of the stage.

GONZALO. *(Putting papers from the table into a folder)* Marisa, my majestic, magical, mirthful muse. The meeting of the poetry circle went extremely well, I believe. Thanks in great part to you. Dear one, you are an inspiration to us all.

MARISA. I do seem to inspire words, for which I am extraordinarily grateful. *(Aside)* I would like to inspire actions, as well.

GONZALO. The compositions that my colleagues and I presented today all centered on the brilliance of your spirit, on the glories of your soul and of that soul’s reflection in your visage.

You are—let me see if I can remember a passage from the first tercet of my sonnet—“a heavenly body removed to earth but ever mindful of its exalted origin, at once a proof and a paradigm of the hand of God.”

MARISA. (*Aside*) I'm flattered, but how do I bring this man down to earth? (*To Gonzalo*) You are too kind, sweet Gonzalo, ...

GONZALO. (*Interrupting her*) No, it is you who personifies all that is wonderful, all that is good, all . . . (*Slight pause*) Oh, my magnificent, munificent Marisa! My idol, my fancy, my candle in the night! (*Slight pause*) I can hardly wait to return home so that I can write more.

MARISA. You are a subtle and prodigious artist, Gonzalo, and I am pleased to be the object of your art. Your poetry proclaims to derive from passion, yet I am not certain of your real feelings for me, for the flesh-and-blood woman behind the signifying shell.

GONZALO. Do not contemplate, my dream, but that they are one and the same. (*Very performative*) You are abstract, you are concrete, you are fantasy, and you are finite. You are beside me, and you are unattainable. You are mine, and I am unworthy of possessing you. As a man, I adore you. As a humble scribe, I implore you. I have to be part of you, and you have to elude me. Please let me take my leave, so that I can begin missing you.

MARISA. Goodbye, Gonzalo.

GONZALO. Goodbye, my eyes, my obsession, my life. (*He exits. She sighs.*)

MARISA. (*As she delivers this soliloquy, Marisa may straighten things left untidy by the members of the poetry circle, may water the flowers, etc.*) What is happening to me? Why is my head throbbing so? A man has just told me that he worships me, and, if I may speak plainly, I admire him greatly. He is bright, he is handsome, and he professes a love that knows no bounds. Why, then, am I shaking? Why, then, do I dare to distrust the sincerity of his pledge? I want to be chosen from among all women and cherished forever. I want to be loved by a man whom I love and respect. (*Slight pause*) The rest should be simple. (*A pause*) But my life, like my art, has become baroque. (*Slight pause*) My art! My art! Perhaps that's where the problem lies. Is the female intellectual a deluded fool, a moron, . . . (*pleased with herself*) an oxymoron? (*Pause; then quite serious once more*) As a child, I always wanted to read and write. I wanted to learn, to learn to think, to play with concepts, to analyze, “ideologize,” anything but compromise. Never have I minded sewing, or knitting, or quilting, as long as I could talk while I worked and as long as that talk could center on matters of the head and not the hearth. (*Slight pause*) I merely want to be more than a wrapped package. Never have I longed to be a man, but neither did I wish to become a mannequin. I merely wanted to use my mind, to understand ideas, to have ideas, to express ideas. (*Slight pause*) Poetry seemed to be the answer to my prayers. Poetry has thought. Poetry has feeling. Poetry offers beauty, the heights of joy and the depths of suffering. Poets do marvelous things with words. They taunt us, they tease us, they fill us with wonderment. They move us to think, and they move us to tears. Oh, to capture the world through words! Oh, to liberate the world through words! To debate, infiltrate, exonerate, palpitate, exacerbate, excoriate! (*Slight pause*) To abnegate, berate, concentrate, decimate . . . (*Realizing that perhaps*

she has gone a bit too far) But where has poetry taken me? My guiding metaphors remain unrealized. Art is not life. *(Slight pause)* With Gonzalo and my comrades in art, I float, through planes of abstraction, to conceptual utopias and aesthetic paradises. I am granted entry into realms of thought which baffle me yet let me breathe. But when I leave the celestial sphere of poetry, I land defenseless. I am surrounded by guardians of my honor. I am blessed with devotees. But I have no control. And I have no muse. *(A pause)* My father has been mum on the question of marriage. I am ready to fight for Gonzalo's cause, but I am confused by that cause. How does my suitor view me? As an emblem—or worse, as an altar? I must search for the man behind the poet, for the mortal who has sought to immortalize me. I must persuade him that there is life beyond rhetoric. And I must deal with the ties that bind me to society. Can I rise to the occasion? Can Gonzalo? My future is a mystery. I am not oblivious to reality, but I fear that reality may be oblivious to me. *(A deep sigh. She exits stage left.)*

Aurora and Clara enter stage right.

CLARA. Those friends of your sister must have gone.

AURORA. They spend the whole day with their books.

CLARA. Well, I can't read, and I don't see what I'm missing.

AURORA. Father says that learning is important. When I asked him for what, he said to take my place in society, whatever that means. He told me he's hired a "tooter" to help me.

CLARA. A tooter? Some kind of horn player?

AURORA. Heaven help me, I just don't know.

Don Félix enters stage left.

D. FELIX. *(To Aurora)* Excuse me, young lady. Are you Señorita Aurora, the lovely mistress of the dawn?

AURORA. *(Gasps and slaps his face)* I'll have you know, sir, that I'm nobody's mistress!

D. FELIX. *(Patiently)* You misunderstand me, my dear. I was speaking figuratively.

AURORA. I don't know my numbers, sir, but I know an insult when I hear it.

D. FELIX. But I . . . *(Decides to let it go)* I am honored to present myself before you, Señorita Aurora. I am Don Félix, your tutor.

CLARA. *(Aside to Aurora. Suspiciously)* I don't see any horn!

AURORA. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Don Félix your tooter.

D. FELIX. My lady, it seems that congratulations are in order. I hear that you are affianced.

AURORA. I'm what?

D. FELIX. Affianced; i.e., your nuptials are approaching.

AURORA. (*Moving around the space*) Ay! Where are they? I can't see or hear them.

CLARA. Me neither.

D. FELIX. (*Aside*) I see that my work is cut out for me, but I am up to the challenge. (*To Aurora*) Aurora, my child . . . (*Aurora and Clara gasp. Aurora quietly inquires, "Daddy?" Don Félix recognizes the need to begin differently.*) Dear Aurora, your father has commissioned me to indoctrinate you in social protocol.

AURORA. (*Aside to Clara*) Now I am confused. Is he a doctor or a tooter?

CLARA. (*Aside to Aurora*) I think he may be a sailor, if he's headed for the port o' call.

D. FELIX. Let us begin with the alphabet. Do you know what a letter is?

AURORA. It's a piece of paper with markings that I don't understand.

D. FELIX. Why, yes, and those markings are . . . (*Trying to encourage her recall*) let . . . , let, . . . letters.

AURORA. (*Proudly*) Yes, that's what I just said.

D. FELIX. (*Patiently*) Indeed. But, to be more precise, a letter is composed of individual words, which, in turn, are comprised of letters. (*Aurora and Clara begin to gaze vacantly.*) In sum, the epistolary system is at the service of minimal units denominated as words, which themselves are subdivided into letters that derive from a pre-established and, needless to say, highly conventionalized alphabetological structure. Surely that cannot escape you.

AURORA. (*Looks at Clara, then at Don Félix*) No, sir, we're staying right here.

D. FELIX. Now, let us commence. Our point of origin will, of course, be "A."

AURORA. A what?

D. FELIX. "A," as in "A, B . . . "

AURORA. (*Quickly standing and shooing the air*) A bee? Where?

CLARA. Don't let it sting us!

D. FELIX. No, no. You're recontextualizing. Let me proceed: *(Aurora and Clara sit again.)* A, B, C . . .

AURORA. *(Jumping up, looking around them)* No sir, we don't see, but we're still scared of being stung.

D. FELIX. *(Aside)* It seems evident who's getting stung here. *(To ladies)* Let us resume the lesson. A . . . *(Aurora and Clara look at each other, with little expression.)* B . . . *(The women again look at each other, with their eyes bulging and their bodies stiff.)* C . . . *(The women shake their heads.)* D . . . *(Aurora and Clara stare blankly at each other.)* D, as in dyspepsia.

AURORA. Do you have a stomach ache, sir?

D. FELIX. No, the case is purely hypothetical.

CLARA. Can I bring you some nice chamomile tea or a hot-water bottle, sir?

AURORA. *(Excited by her suggestion)* Or maybe some oil of clove!

D. FELIX. *(Giving up)* Thank you. I'll be fine. *(Slight pause)* Now, as I was saying, the letter D is the initial consonant in a wide variety of words. *(He is preoccupied with thinking of words that begin with D. He faces the audience and does not realize that the two women are "acting out" the words that he recites.)* Dance. . . Dash. *(They run in place.)* . . . Despise. *(They give each other dirty looks.)* . . . Dig. . . Disappear. *(They exit. He looks back and realizes that they have taken him literally.)* Damn! *(Slight pause)* Ladies, please, come back!

Clara and Aurora reenter.

CLARA. *(Aside to Aurora)* I wish he'd make up his mind.

D. FELIX. Perhaps I should reconsider my pedagogical strategies. I may have been too ambitious in terms of establishing parameters vis-à-vis both expectation and experience. Let me try, if you will allow me, another tack.

CLARA. *(Aside to Aurora)* Attack! He wouldn't dare!

Aurora again slaps him in the face.

D. FELIX. *(He recovers, then starts anew.)* Señorita Aurora, your father informs me that your husband-to-be has sent you his portrait in a locket. May I see it?

AURORA. *(Removes a rather large locket from her neck and hands it to Don Félix.)* Here it is, sir.

D. FELIX. *(Struggling unsuccessfully)* I can't get it open. It seems to be sealed shut.

AURORA. Of course, it is. Father told me to lock it.

D. FELIX. So you haven't seen the image of your betrothed?

AURORA. I guess not, since I haven't seen anything.

D. FELIX. *(Finally pries the locket open)* Ah! Here we go. Now, my dear, gaze upon the countenance of your fiancé. *(She does not move.)* Look at it! Look at it!

AURORA. *(She studies the portrait.)* Oh, poor man! Clara, have you ever seen such a thing? *(Shows Clara the portrait)*

D. FELIX. What are you saying? Do you not find him attractive?

AURORA. His face is very pretty, but his body stops at the shoulders!

CLARA. What a pathetic creature! How does he get around?

D. FELIX. Ladies, ladies. The portrait is a pictorial representation of the man.

AURORA. But how does this unfortunate fellow move about?

D. FELIX. *(Becoming frustrated)* He has legs. You just cannot see them in the portrait.

AURORA. No, I can't. They must be tiny. Perhaps I could see them with a magnifying glass.

CLARA. How can he find shoes to fit him? *(Aurora gasps at this new thought. Slight pause)* It really is a shame, for he is quite comely from the neck up.

AURORA. Yes, he is. Still, I can't imagine why Father would want me to marry a man who's missing all those parts. *(They giggle.)*

D. FELIX. *(Aside)* I suspect that it would be wise to change the subject. *(To Aurora)* I would now like to instruct you in how to welcome your soon-to-be spouse. Are you familiar with the etiquette of the court?

AURORA. How is that again?

D. FELIX. Etiquette! Decorum. Ceremony. Customs. Mores. Civil observances. Regal deportment. Propriety. Ethos. Learned spontaneity. Elegance. Gentility. Charisma. Composure. Adaptability. Can you grasp this catalog of elements?

AURORA. *(Blankly)* Cattle log?

CLARA. *(Aside to Aurora)* I'll bet he's going to ask us to disappear again!

D. FELIX. Catalog, yes. The compendium of social amenities.

AURORA. (*Aurora crosses herself. Clara follows.*) Amen. Amen.

D. FELIX. (*Aside*) A prayer may be in order, at that. Heaven help us! (*To Aurora*) That's perfectly all right, dearest one. I was alluding to what has been deemed appropriate behavior for formal occasions. (*Slight pause*) Now, then, what will you do when you first meet your gentleman? How will you receive him?

CLARA. (*Rushing to answer*) She's going to drop to her knees to shake his little hand.

D. FELIX. (*Shouting at Aurora*) He is of normal proportions, I assure you! (*Slight pause, and calmly*) At the moment you are introduced to him, you will bend your head ever so slightly as you slowly and demurely proceed to curtsy, your right knee alarmingly—daringly, albeit coquettishly—close to the floor.

CLARA. (*To Aurora*) So that you can see him eye to eye.

AURORA. And what must I say to him?

D. FELIX. I would advise you to say the following: "Although I am truly undeserving of your attention, my liege, and under circumstances in which words can but fail me, I bow to welcome you to my humble home and to my equally humble heart." What do you think, my fancy? Can you remember what I have taught you?

AURORA. I will try, good sir. (*She attempts to curtsy but falls—most unceremoniously—to the ground. Clara helps her to her feet.*)

D. FELIX. Why do you not retire to the drawing room, where you can practice falling—that is to say, curtsying—on a carpet?

AURORA. Whatever you say, sir.

CLARA. (*To Don Félix, strangely serious*) I'm afraid that she can draw no better than she can write.

Aurora and Clara exit stage left.

D. FELIX. Merciful lord, you have put this instructor to the test. I have never been exposed to so dull—nay inept, nay doltish, nay ignorant—a pupil. Can one groom this lovely brute for matrimony? I am dubious, but I am on the payroll of her father. (*Slight pause*) Speak of the devil.

Don Cristóbal enters stage right. Don Félix approaches him and bows.

D. FELIX. Good afternoon, your grace.

D. CRISTOBAL. Good afternoon, Don Félix. I have come to check on the progress of my daughter Aurora. Have you been able to make a dent in the cerebral stone wall? Have you perchance enticed the rocks to speak . . . coherently?

D. FELIX. Sir, I have given the matter my strongest effort, have left no “stone” unturned, heh, heh. *(He collects himself as Don Cristóbal remains stoic.)* She is a feast for the eyes, but an academically unmovable feast. *(To Don Cristóbal)* Despite manifold barriers, I trust that I have prepared her to meet the promised groom.

D. CRISTOBAL. May it be God’s will. Much depends on this premier encounter.

D. FELIX. Tell me, sir, if you deign to satisfy my curiosity, why this gentleman has agreed to marry your second daughter when the first remains unwed, and when this first is second to none in appearance, charm, and—last, but hardly least—intellect.

D. CRISTOBAL. I would submit that the motive could not be more crystalline, unambiguous, or overt. The exceedingly gifted Marisa is financially comfortable. The uncomfortably vapid Aurora is exceedingly affluent.

D. FELIX. How can that be, if they are sisters and Marisa is the elder?

D. CRISTOBAL. From her earliest years, Aurora has exhibited a guileless yet incontrovertible backwardness. Her uncle—my late brother, Don Sebastián Badilla y Fuenmayor—a wealthy widower with no children of his own, became a second father to Aurora, captivated as he was by the freshness and candor that marked her presence, and moved as he was by the slowness and languor that never failed to accompany her.

D. FELIX. *(Aside)* This man speaks more like a scholar than like the progenitor of a nincompoop.

D. CRISTOBAL. Sebastián appreciated the delicacy of the situation, and, although he doted on his two nieces, he favored Aurora most inordinately in his will. He stipulated that the bulk of his not insubstantial fortune should go to the more needy of the sisters, to the one for whom it would be more problematic to arrange a marriage. My brother found solace in the belief that beauty and money would act as antidotes to incompetence. The inheritance that he left Aurora has enabled me to negotiate her betrothal to Don Enrique. Now she must prove that our faith in her is justified.

D. FELIX. Sir, I understand that the gentleman will be arriving imminently. I will continue to rehearse Señorita Aurora for her entry. With your permission, then, I will take my leave.

D. CRISTOBAL. Do your best to make the simple lass seem less so.

Don Felix exits stage left. There is a sudden shift in the lights as a spotlight appears on Don Cristóbal. A brief musical melody accompanies this shift, suggesting the creation of thoughts, as well as admitted theatricality.

D. CRISTOBAL. Alas, there is little peace in this paternal heart. *(Slight pause)* On balance, I have the ideal daughters. Each is notable in the extreme. Aurora worries me because she is unduly dependent, Marisa because she is unduly independent. Aurora worries me because I know that she will say nothing of value, Marisa because she puts an inflated value on everything that she says. Were they to blend together, the result would be perfection. Separately, they have turned my existence into a nightmare.

Lights revert back to normal. Don Cristóbal, exhausted, plops into a chair. A pause. Juana enters stage right.

JUANA. Sir, Don Enrique Entrambasmontañas del Valle has arrived. I have informed him that you will receive him presently here in the garden.

D. CRISTOBAL. Thank you, Juana. You may bring him out.

JUANA. Very well, sir.

Juana exits stage right. She returns with Enrique and Francisco. Don Cristóbal receives Enrique with great enthusiasm.

JUANA. *(To Enrique)* Right this way, sir.

D. CRISTOBAL. Don Enrique, welcome to my home.

ENRIQUE. It is a great honor to meet you, Don Cristóbal. I am delighted to enter your home and, as soon as the final details are ironed out, I know that I will be delighted to enter your family.

D. CRISTOBAL. It is we who are honored by your presence, Don Enrique. My daughter has modestly yet eagerly awaited the opportunity to meet her betrothed. She is a rare jewel, a woman of striking beauty. You are her Jason, come to recover the Golden Fleece.

FRANCISCO. *(Aside)* Lord, do not let us be struck—or fleeced!

ENRIQUE. I cannot tell you, sir, how anxious I am to see my lady. She is indeed pure gold to me ... *(He realizes that he has said too much and recovers.)* ... and I pledge to treat her with the reverence and respect that are her due. Fortune smiled upon me the day that our representatives bound your daughter to me in eternal wedlock. I look forward to complying with my pledge and to beginning our life together. And I feel as secure as I feel excited about the impending merger of souls. *(Aside)* I am lying. I feel far more apprehensive—and far less secure—that I am letting on.

Marisa enters stage left.

MARISA. *(Oblivious to what is transpiring)* Juana, did I leave the manuscript of my

commentary on Longinus out here? Oh, excuse me, Father, I didn't realize that you had company.

ENRIQUE. (*Aside*) How sublime she is! And how secure am I!

D. CRISTOBAL. That's perfectly all right, my dear. Don Enrique, permit me to introduce my daughter . . .

ENRIQUE. It is unnecessary to do so, good sir. I would know this angel anywhere. Her face has been preinscribed and now will be reinscribed on the tablet of my memory. What grace, what bearing, what regal demeanor!

D. CRISTOBAL. Don Enrique, I must tell you that . . .

ENRIQUE. Your excellency . . . No, I must call you father. (*Don Cristóbal reacts with unconcealed joy.*) Mere words cannot express my response to the splendor before me. My life is yours, my lady, my Aurora, the dawn of my being! . . .

D. CRISTOBAL. Don Enrique, please! This is not Aurora, but my elder daughter Marisa . . .

MARISA. . . . who is most appreciative of your gracious compliment, even when directed toward another.

ENRIQUE. Don Cristóbal—and Doña Marisa—I beg your pardon. It would be impossible for me to hyperbolize my sorrow over this error. It is decidedly profuse, and I have been—unwittingly—obtuse.

D. CRISTOBAL. There is no harm done, sir. It was an honest mistake.

ENRIQUE. I fear that my declaration will have offended Señorita Marisa.

MARISA. (*There should be no irony whatsoever in the delivery of the following speech.*) On the contrary, sir, given that you did nothing but lavish praise on me. I entered unannounced, and you made a reasonable deduction. As my father has noted, you meant no disservice. Accordingly, you will only have to transfer your tender and laudatory remarks to my sister. I wish you well, sir, in your suit. It seems that you are positioned to profit from love, for which I heartily congratulate you and welcome you to my father's home.

ENRIQUE. A thousand thanks. (*Aside to Francisco*) I am overwhelmed by the refinement and perspicacity of this woman! Would that her sister were her exact double!

D. CRISTOBAL. It is time, Don Enrique, for me to present your bride. (*Aside*) Lord, let me not be mortified! (*To Juana*) Juana, please summon Don Félix to escort Aurora.

Juana exits stage left. Don Félix enters with Aurora, who holds on to him in a most awkward fashion. Clara and Juana follow, a bit on the order of bridesmaids.

ENRIQUE. (*As soon as Aurora appears, aside to Francisco*) She is exquisite! I have never seen a more stunning woman.

FRANCISCO. (*After Aurora has taken a few steps, aside*) I have never seen a more awkward woman.

CLARA. (*On seeing Enrique, aside to Aurora*) Thank the Lord! Your beau has grown a hefty chunk since that portrait was done!

D. CRISTOBAL. Don Enrique—dear son—I would like to present your intended, my daughter Aurora. I rejoice that I am alive to witness this auspicious moment that will link blood to blood and soul to soul.

ENRIQUE. Doña Aurora, words fail me as I savor the halo of your celestial beauty. You are the bonnet that guards against the rays of the sun, the coat that robs the winter of its force, the cape that facilitates the matador's conquest, the slipper that allows the dancer to soar.

CLARA. (*Aside to Aurora*) I'll blush from embarrassment if he mentions underwear.

D. FELIX. (*Aside to Aurora*) Can you recall your opening line, dear? (*Under his breath, quickly*) "Although I am truly undeserving of your attention, my liege . . ."

AURORA. My leech . . . My leech . . .

D. FELIX. (*Aside to Aurora*) My little bonbon, get it out, get it out! Enunciate, enunciate!

AURORA. My little bonbon, get it out, get it out! (*Horried*) Nuns he ate! Nuns he ate! (*She attempts a curtsy but falls to the ground. Don Félix and Clara pick her up.*)

FRANCISCO. (*Aside*) Did she call my master a leech?

JUANA. (*Aside*) Nuns he ate?

D. FELIX. (*Aside*) Egad! This is worse than I expected. My tutelage has gone for naught.

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Aside*) Egad! Aurora could not appear more foolish. The engagement may have been compromised.

AURORA. (*Aside to Clara*) How did I recite my piece?

CLARA. (*Aside to Aurora*) I think it came out real pretty.

ENRIQUE. (*Aside*) Can this be happening to me?

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Aside to Don Félix*) Don Félix, let us gear our efforts toward damage control.

D. FELIX. (*Aside to Don Cristóbal*) At your service, sir.

D. CRISTOBAL. Don Enrique, I believe that the euphoria of this momentous and ceremonious event has overstimulated my dear Aurora. She is in a near-swoon.

D. FELIX. That is correct. And more's the pity, because she had planned to deliver a brilliant welcoming address.

D. CRISTOBAL. Please take her to her room, Don Félix. Clara will assist you.

Don Félix and Clara lead Aurora offstage left.

AURORA. (*As she departs*) Goodbye, Father. Goodbye, my leech.

ENRIQUE. (*Weakly*) Goodbye.

MARISA. I will take my leave as well, Father. (*Subtly ironic*) Don Enrique, I am glad to have made your acquaintance. May you receive all the benefits that you deserve.

ENRIQUE. Thank you very much, Doña Marisa. Until we meet again.

Marisa exits stage left, accompanied by Juana.

D. CRISTOBAL. My son, I apologize for any inconvenience that may have been caused by Aurora's temporary indisposition. (*Various crashing noises from offstage can be heard. Don Cristóbal looks offstage, wondering what destruction Aurora is causing. He begins to move upstage, and he speaks quickly in order to exit faster.*) You are an awe-inspiring couple, and we can convene forthwith to coordinate the details of the wedding. I will check on the status of our dear Aurora, if you will excuse me. Good afternoon, dear lad.

Don Cristóbal exits stage left.

ENRIQUE. I ... I ... I know not what to say, such is my astonishment. Aurora is gorgeous, but she is a beast, my burden for the duration. She seems of amiable temperament, but I had hoped for something more than an innocuous twit. (*Slight pause*) Something on the order of her sister Marisa. Now there is a complete woman! A beauty with brains, the epitome of grace and culture, in close proximity but out of reach. Woe is me! I am obligated to marry a dunderhead. Why has destiny backed me into the alley of ignorance?

FRANCISCO. Can you not escape from your vow?

ENRIQUE. (*Suddenly calculating*) That would be extremely complicated, but I must do something. In the meantime, please see if our driver is ready to depart. I will join you momentarily.

FRANCISCO. Yes, sir.

Francisco exits stage right. Enrique moves downstage and snaps his fingers. Music plays, and the lights quickly shift to the spotlight again.

ENRIQUE. In a society that is undergoing change on a daily basis, one must fight to ensure his place, to guard his place, and oft to forge his place anew. Nothing is stable. Nothing is sure. Fortune smiles, and fortune frowns. Fortunes are made to be broken. Words can alter reality, but so can money. I found a lady with hair and coffers of gold, but she is, to my despair, a likely kin of Midas's daughter, stunned into silence—or worse, into mumbling idiocy. How can I get out of this dilemma? How flexible are my choices? I must take stock of the situation. I must be master of my fate, or I will be saddled with the strangest bedfellow ever known to man. I will pray, I will scream. I will suffer, I will dream. I will explode, I will scheme. I will do anything to revise the scenario that I have written myself into. *(Slight pause)* The pawn will confront the dramaturge, though they be one. A pretty play! *(Pause)* Mighty fortune, your pawn approaches!

Blackout.

ACT II

The following day.

Scene 1

A street near the home of Don Cristóbal. Enrique and Francisco enter stage left, Enrique in the lead. They walk slowly toward stage right.

ENRIQUE. *(Very self-absorbed)* My mind is in turmoil. I am tormented by the treason that I have enacted upon myself. I do not want to be the prisoner of a woman of diminished capacity. *(Muses)* The retarded cerebral flower cannot flourish, no matter how formidable the physical plant. *(Slight pause)* But how do I retreat from this greenhouse of grief?

FRANCISCO. *(Aside)* You might slide past the shrubs of suffering and up the trees of tribulation.

Gonzalo and Luis enter stage right, Gonzalo in the lead. They walk slowly toward stage left.

GONZALO. *(Very self-absorbed)* I have written scads of new verses in honor of Marisa, which I will debut for her today. I hope that her critique will not be too harsh. She has a fine poetic sensibility—as she is a poet herself—but she is prone to attack what she perceives as form without substance. She seems to critique my courtship, as well, and I am afraid that she finds me wholly lacking in substance. My verses say that I am dying of love, and that is true, to an extent. I do not know what to do. My mind is in turmoil.

LUIS. *(Aside)* You are so sated by food for thought that you forget to eat—and to feed me.

Enrique and Gonzalo come face to face.

GONZALO. Enrique Entrambasmontañas!

ENRIQUE. Gonzalo Rivadeneyra!

GONZALO. My old university chum!

ENRIQUE. My classmate from Salamanca!

LUIS. *(To Francisco)* Luis Lacayo, at his *(points to Gonzalo)* service.

FRANCISCO. *(To Luis)* Francisco Fiel, loyal to a fault.

GONZALO. Enrique, what brings you to Madrid?

ENRIQUE. A marriage contract.

GONZALO. (*Overly celebratory*) Oh, then congratulations are in order.

ENRIQUE. (*Overly serious*) My good man, congratulations have rarely been less in order. My life is out of order.

GONZALO. How can that be?

ENRIQUE. Enticed by an exorbitant dowry, I arranged my marriage before meeting my intended. Having done so, I am appalled by what I have seen.

GONZALO. (*Aside*) This is intriguing! I shall take mental notes for a sonnet sequence on disillusionment. (*To Enrique*) What have you seen, my friend?

ENRIQUE. What have I seen, my friend? What have I seen? I have seen my doom. If this wedding takes place, I will be besieged by banality, bombarded by blather, and bedded with bedlam.

GONZALO. In other words, your fiancée is . . .

ENRIQUE. . . . slow. Beautiful but slow, even when she is off and running. Slow to the extreme. Oh, such is my luck that I have elected to walk down the aisle with a woman who has given new meaning to absentmindedness.

GONZALO. Poor chap! Perhaps I can assist you in this time of hardship.

ENRIQUE. I am in dire straits. My personal hell is intensified by a knowledge of heaven. I have met the most wondrous of women, yet she is tantalizingly beyond my reach.

GONZALO. I, too, have had the chance to preview heaven, also from a discreet distance. I am loath to attempt to describe my lady. My beloved is as lovely as any woman on earth.

ENRIQUE. My beloved is the loveliest woman on earth.

GONZALO. My beloved is like the angels in heaven.

ENRIQUE. My beloved is an angel.

FRANCISCO. (*Aside to Luis*) My metaphor can beat your simile!

GONZALO. My beloved surpasses the angels in loveliness.

LUIS. (*Aside to Francisco*) Rhetorical jousting! A bloodless sport!

ENRIQUE. My beloved is a goddess.

GONZALO. My beloved outshines the pagan deities.

ENRIQUE. My beloved outshines the sun.

GONZALO. My beloved eclipses the moon.

ENRIQUE. My beloved eclipses eclipses.

GONZALO. My beloved . . . Friend Enrique, I think we have gotten off track.

FRANCISCO. (*Aside to Luis*) You see, my master is a . . .

LUIS. (*Aside to Francisco*) There, there! Remember, they are smitten.

ENRIQUE. You are right, friend Gonzalo. Before I can go after the unattainable, I must remove the noose around my neck. How should I get rid of the babbling bride-to-be?

GONZALO. You must make yourself as unappealing to her as possible. Treat her crudely and unkindly. Make her beg her father to break the contract.

ENRIQUE. I can be crude and unkind, but will she notice?

GONZALO. It may be your last resort. Be a beast to your little beast. Demonstrate that her father has misjudged you. The more odious you can be, the more certain her repulsion. Try to produce in her the responses that she has produced in you. Mind you, cruelty is the key.

ENRIQUE. Later this afternoon I will put your antichivalric stratagem to the test, although it is against my natural inclination. I will succeed, or die trying. Desired victory, victorious desire!

GONZALO. I will pray for your triumph. Report the results of this “engagement” to me.

ENRIQUE. I hope to be shackle-free when next we meet. Adieu, Don Gonzalo.

GONZALO. Adieu, Don Enrique.

FRANCISCO. (*Aside to Luis*) Adieu to you, Don Luis.

LUIS. (*Aside to Francisco*) Adieu to you, Don Francisco.

Each group exits in the opposite direction from which it entered.

Scene 2

The garden in Don Cristóbal's home, at a slightly different angle as that shown in Act I. There is a small and rather inconspicuous storage shed at stage right; this will serve as “Toledo” in Act III. A table and several chairs. A bowl of grapes is on the table.

As the scene opens, Aurora and Clara are seated. Aurora nibbles at the grapes as she converses.

AURORA. I do not know what has happened, but I seem to see the world more clearly.

CLARA. That would be hard for me to understand—as is just about everything—were the same not true of me.

AURORA. Ever since I met the man who is to be my husband, the clouds that always lodged before my eyes have disappeared, and a new clarity, Clara, has set in.

CLARA. Don Enrique is nice to look at. *(She quickly becomes more passionate.)* And I find Francisco as pleasing as his master. *(Aurora looks at Clara, confused by the intensity of her remarks. Clara notices this and quickly recovers.)* Yet they are only men.

AURORA. But men have souls, and souls can act upon the souls of others. Little is sweeter than the compatibility of souls. *(Pause)* I can scarcely believe that those words came from my lips.

CLARA. Nor can I. And what is more, I can perceive—perceive *(Pats herself on the back)*—their meaning.

AURORA. Don Enrique has served as a catalyst—*(Sees the light)* oh, not a list of cattle—to my awareness of emotions that I have never felt before.

CLARA. I am also feeling emotions that were . . . *(Surprising herself)* dormant.

AURORA. I can't state precisely what love is. I have heard my sister talking about it with her poet friends, and they seem befuddled by its mysteries, too. I think that love is not only a feeling but a connection with someone else. Love changes us because we are forced to change through love. It is what they call a pair of . . . *(Slight pause)* no, a paradox.

CLARA. A synthesis of cause and effect. *(Stops. Reacts with surprise and glee to what she has just said.)*

AURORA. Well, there is a transformation going on inside of us. The sensations of the heart have ascended to the head. A fortuitous turn of events, wouldn't you say?

CLARA. Most assuredly. I am most favorably impressed by the new me.

Don Félix enters stage left, carrying books. He signs upon seeing Aurora and Clara, given that new trials are about to begin.

D. FELIX. Time for your lesson, Señorita Aurora. *(Aside)* Time for your mortification, Don Félix. *(To Aurora)* I would like to dedicate this portion of our continuing practicum to the topic of *(Slight pause)* prayer. *(Aside)* Although I do not expect to have a prayer for success in this project.

AURORA. Very well, Don Félix. What aspect of prayer do you wish to foreground?

D. FELIX. I planned to focus on . . . *(Reacts with surprise to what he has just heard by dropping his books. Aside)* Did she say . . . ? It cannot be!

AURORA. I thank God for the blessings that I have received.

D. FELIX. Good, my child.

AURORA. Those blessings include the promise of eternity in addition to the bounty that I have received here on earth.

D. FELIX. Señorita Aurora, you astound me. You appear to have awakened from ignorance.

CLARA. I am awake, too, Don Félix.

D. FELIX. Equally—if not more—remarkable.

AURORA. I would like for you to instruct me in the liberal arts and in the scientia nova, as well as in all areas pertaining to high society. I have the intuition that reading will cease to be an obstacle. For the first time, my head is filled with letters. For the first time, my head is filled.

CLARA. Mine, too.

D. FELIX. Of course, of course. Let me share the good news with your father, and I will meet you in the—*(Aside)* who would have believed it?—library.

Don Félix exits stage left.

AURORA. I feel *(Proudly)* semiliterate. I feel that the hemisphere has expanded for me.

CLARA. I feel half again as smart as I was yesterday. What will I be like tomorrow?

Aurora and Clara exit stage left. Pause. Marisa and Juana enter stage right and take the seats vacated by Aurora and Clara. Marisa has a book and papers in her hand; she sets them on the table.

MARISA. I will receive Don Gonzalo shortly. I want him to accept me as a fellow poet and as a living, breathing woman.

JUANA. And what if he cannot do so?

MARISA. Then I reluctantly shall have to look elsewhere. In fact, yesterday I could not help but look in the direction of Don Enrique, my sister's intended.

JUANA. Is their marriage not a fait accompli?

MARISA. Yes and no, I would say. All seems to have been certified and notarized, but you witnessed the spectacle of the introduction. Aurora, poor thing, could hardly maintain her balance, much less her composure. *(They laugh briefly at the thought of Aurora's futile attempts.)* Don Enrique cannot but be disappointed—not in her beauty, which is exceptional, but in her primitiveness, in her inability to sustain a dialogue or to utter an intelligible sentence.

JUANA. *(With great interest)* And did you detect a meeting of the minds between Don Enrique and yourself?

MARISA. That is a perplexing question, for when looks and money are involved, men will be men.

JUANA. Are you saying that Don Enrique would be a-“men”-able to marrying a woman who is not his “men”-tal equal?

MARISA. Who can know? It is all a matter of trust, and sometimes love and trust do not coincide. I love Gonzalo, but I do not fully trust him. I simply do not know where the poet ends and the man begins, or whether they have reached a point of consolidation. I want to be loved, but I do not want to be hurt. I know not where I stand because I know not where Gonzalo stands. *(Pause)* Does the good man see matrimony as redemption or as a tax exemption? *(Slight pause)* Can Aurora trust Enrique? *(Aside)* Can Aurora trust me? *(To Juana)* Of that I am not certain.

JUANA. I see that Don Gonzalo has arrived. I will leave you to be alone with him.

MARISA. Thank you, Juana.

Juana walks to stage right. She extends her arm in Marisa's direction.

JUANA. Right this way, sir.

Juana exits. Gonzalo enters stage right. He carries a number of manuscript pages.

GONZALO. Thank you. *(Erupting with emotion)* Oh, Marisa, my lighthouse, my tower of strength, the very foundation of my existence! My rose, my carnation, my rock, my salvation! I have verses to share with you.

MARISA. I think you have already begun sharing.

GONZALO. My darling, let me lay before you an offering, in *octava rima*, on the eight wonders of the world, of which you are the eighth and most prominent. *(Hands her a packet of paper tied with a ribbon)* And there is, as always, more: “When the crispness of the day moves to the softer tones of evening, and the stars commence their dance to celebrate the orb’s tranquility . . .”

MARISA. *(Overlapping)* How about this particular spatio-temporal plane? How about this garden? How about me?

GONZALO. (*Overlapping, oblivious to Marisa's questions*) "Phoebus, day's deity, retires to sleep and to ponder the day's events with humility."

MARISA. (*Shouting so that he will stop*) Gonzalo, speak to me!

GONZALO. Speak to you! Have I not been speaking to you, of you, to the heavens above you?

MARISA. You have been reciting poetry.

GONZALO. Marisa, my center, my incentive! Are you alleging that I am devoid of feeling?

MARISA. I am merely pointing out that you view me more as a token than as a woman.

GONZALO. (*Deeply offended*) How modestly you know me, Marisa. Yes, you are my poetic ideal, but you are more than that. I am but a marionette discarded in unfathomable darkness. You are my strings, my puppeteer, my beacon. I am but the residue of existence, the dust, the ash. You are my prime material, my unextinguished flame, my afterlife. Need I say more?

MARISA. (*Holds up the packet of papers he has given her, and then hits him repeatedly with them*) No, for I can continue to decipher your thoughts in the privacy of my room. The poet can be ever beside me. (*Hugs packet*) I do have a closing argument, Gonzalo, one that I hope you can comprehend. (*Pause*) I am grateful to be able to brush against the bard. You are a splendid shadow, and everlastingly will I hallow that shadow. Nevertheless, something is missing, something authentic, something real. I will leave you, Gonzalo, in the hope that reality will set in. (*A heavy sigh*)

Marisa makes a dramatic exit stage right.

GONZALO. (*Begins weeping*) Marisa has cast me aside! (*Now wailing*) This will intensify my suffering (*Slight pause, as he turns momentarily optimistic*) and my artistic productivity. (*Serious again, he resumes the moaning.*) Marisa's words are, like a treasonous ambush, a shocking breach of faith. Have I not eulogized—nay, deified—her? Where is her loyalty? How can she sacrifice me on the altar of piety that I have erected in her honor? I am left with nothing but my solitude. I am left with nothing but pen and paper. In her absence, I am condemned to be ... prolifically alone. (*Puts his head down on the table*)

Clara enters stage left, followed by Enrique. She has to repeat her first words a few times in order to be heard over Gonzalo's persistent cries.

CLARA. My mistress will be with you shortly, sir.

ENRIQUE. Thank you.

Clara exits stage left. Gonzalo looks up, sees Enrique. Each reacts in surprise.

GONZALO. (*Quickly gathering himself*) Enrique! You here?

ENRIQUE. Gonzalo! You here?

GONZALO. This is the home of my beloved Marisa Badilla.

ENRIQUE. This is the home of my abhorred Aurora Badilla.

GONZALO. Then Aurora is your betrothed. I had no idea. As you recall, we spoke in the abstract.

ENRIQUE. Yes, and I realize that the object of your desire is the same lady to whom I confessed an attraction. (*Aside*) The woman I am wild about belongs to another, and the woman who belongs to me is wild. Not an enviable position. (*To Gonzalo*) Gonzalo, you are privileged by fortune to be the squire of such a lady.

GONZALO. That selfsame lady has just forsaken me.

ENRIQUE. (*Not totally sincerely*) I am truly sorry. (*Slight pause*) Following your counsel, I am here to forsake Aurora. I am prepared to play the ogre in a drama of liberation.

GONZALO. May the fates be with you.

Aurora enters stage left.

AURORA. (*A bit tentatively*) Gentlemen.

ENRIQUE. Señorita Aurora, good afternoon.

GONZALO. Good afternoon, Señorita Aurora.

AURORA. (*Aside*) What a handsome twosome! My Enrique radiates a special warmth. (*To Enrique*) Don Enrique, I am at a loss for words . . .

ENRIQUE. (*Aside to Gonzalo*) That hardly comes as a surprise.

AURORA. . . . at this, our second meeting . . .

ENRIQUE. Aurora, in the name of honesty if not of self-aggrandizement, I feel that I must inform you of certain qualities that I possess. I am unduly recalcitrant, and my behavior borders on the reprehensible. I am parsimonious, nitpicking, and not easily placated. I snore, I scratch in inappropriate places, I go unwashed for days. I smoke, drink, and curse in excess, and I have been tempted to break the binding of a book. (*Everyone gasps at the horror of destroying a book.*) Don Gonzalo here, who knew me in Salamanca, can attest to my record of vice.

GONZALO. (*Somewhat reluctantly*) Yes, I can. (*Aside, still shocked*) A book?

AURORA. (*Aside*) I have never seen a more stirring display of modesty. (*To Enrique*) Go on, sir.

ENRIQUE. Having met you and having observed your delicate charm, I feel that you are too good for me. In fairness to you, I must relinquish my claim to matrimony.

AURORA. But, sir . . . But, Enrique . . . There is no need for you to do that.

GONZALO. (*Aside to Enrique*) Enrique, you have said a lot, but the diegetic must cede to the mimetic. Do not tell her you are uncouth. Show her.

ENRIQUE. Aurora, I must be blunt with you. You simply are not the woman of my dreams. You are small-boned and rather petite, and I prefer large and ungainly women. You have a refined look, and I prefer vulgarity of mien and comportment. I crave big hands, big feet, and big hips. I thrive on beauty supplied by cosmetics and other artificial embellishments—enhancement by enchantment, one might say—and you can only tender a beauty conceived by nature. I want a foul-mouthed, domineering woman, and you barely say a word. This match will never work. You must insist that your father dissolve the contract.

AURORA. But, Don Enrique, I would ask you to . . .

ENRIQUE. Good lady, there is nothing more to say on this subject. I will take my leave. I bid you both farewell.

Enrique exits stage left. Gonzalo gives him a “thumbs-up” sign as he passes.

AURORA. Don Gonzalo, I am devastated. I had wished to ask Don Enrique to reconsider his proposal.

GONZALO. (*Aside*) Devastated? Reconsider? Proposal? By no means words of the highest register, but unexpectedly sophisticated for a dimwit. (*To Aurora*) What would you have asked of him, Aurora?

AURORA. I would have suggested that he converse with me at greater length. I was, to my chagrin, exceedingly tongue-tied at our first meeting. Had we taken advantage of the opportunity to interact in meaningful dialogue, I believe that we could have examined the situation in a detailed and productive manner.

GONZALO. Aurora, I must tell you that I am floored to hear you speak thusly. As a constant visitor to your home, I have seen you mumble, stumble, and tumble through life. But now, . . . now you have flowered. You move with ease, and you articulate your thoughts cogently and plausibly. You have taken great strides, for which I applaud you.

AURORA. Thank you very much, Gonzalo. I had hoped to demonstrate this metamorphosis of sorts to Don Enrique, but circumstances were not propitious to a presentation of the evidence. I am heartened, however, by the fact that you, my respected friend, have detected a change for the

better.

GONZALO. I am heartened that you are heartened. (*Aside*) And is my pulsating heart intimating that there may be more to this developing story?

AURORA. I am, as I noted, disheartened by Don Enrique's rejection. I do not know what the future holds in store for me.

GONZALO. I, too, am the victim of rejection. Your sister wants no part of me. She avers that I am out of sync with reality.

AURORA. A fascinating datum, for I, of course, have just come *into* sync. We both find ourselves united, alas, in a melancholy mood.

GONZALO. Correct, but my melancholy is lightened because I see you in a new light.

AURORA. And I you—and the world at large.

Don Cristóbal enters stage right.

D. CRISTOBAL. Good afternoon, daughter, Don Gonzalo. I was told that Don Enrique was here.

AURORA. (*Sadly*) He was here, but now he is gone. He no longer wants to marry me.

D. CRISTOBAL. How can that be? What has happened?

AURORA. He requires another type of woman.

D. CRISTOBAL. But from what Don Félix has told me, you have converted yourself into another type of woman.

AURORA. All I know is that I am a woman despised. The changes wrought have brought me little satisfaction. I am inconsolable.

D. CRISTOBAL. I am so sorry, my dear. (*Aside*) Sorry for the state of depression, glad for the enriched vocabulary.

AURORA. Please excuse me, Father . . . and Don Gonzalo. (*Sincerely, but a bit dramatically*) I wish to be alone in my despair.

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Understandingly*) All right, daughter.

GONZALO. Be well, dear lady.

Aurora exits stage left.

D. CRISTOBAL. I am at a loss to explain what has occurred. Don Enrique has undergone a change of heart, Aurora (if you will permit a turn of phrase) a change of mind.

GONZALO. Discouraged by his first meeting with Aurora, Enrique has set his sights on Marisa. (*Aside*) I, on the other hand, discouraged by my last meeting with Marisa, am intrigued by Aurora's formerly latent insights.

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Aside*) I am confounded by the shifts in allegiance, and I am uncertain of the legal ramifications of the case.

GONZALO. (*Aside*) Definitely dismissed by one sister, I am drawn to the other.

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Aside*) Don Enrique's action threatens the honor of my daughter and of my family.

GONZALO. (*Resuming dialogue*) Don Cristóbal, if you will pardon the impertinence of the following suit, I would like to beseech you to consider my appeal for the hand of your daughter Aurora. I believe myself to be a good prospect, with impeccable credentials as a gentleman and a scholar. I swear that Aurora will have my unswerving loyalty and devotion.

D. CRISTOBAL. In light of the abrupt fluctuation of affections, *mutatis mutandis*, it would be wise for me to resolve Aurora's connubial conundrum. Ergo, Gonzalo, I extend two hands to you: one, my own, in paternal accord, and the other, that of Aurora, in marriage.

GONZALO. Don Cristóbal—Father—you have filled my heart to overflowing. (*Aside*) Also my pocketbook, but that is a complementary concern, not—I wish to stress—my principal interest.

D. CRISTOBAL. Don Gonzalo—son—you have allayed my anxiety, alleviated my distress, and assuaged my malaise. May God grant you a life of good fortune.

GONZALO. And may He grant you lasting good health and happiness. And may peace and prosperity prevail. (*They embrace.*) I will see you soon, *mi padre*.

D. CRISTOBAL. If God disposes, *mi hijo*.

Gonzalo exits stage right. Don Cristóbal sinks into a chair, with an air of obvious relief.

Scene 3

On the street outside Don Cristóbal's home, immediately following Gonzalo's departure. Enrique and Francisco are standing left of center stage.

ENRIQUE. I am dying to know what is transpiring in the garden. Gonzalo has spent an eternity there, and with a woman who only rarely utters a sound.

FRANCISCO. Some men would welcome that kind of dialogue.

ENRIQUE. I am curious as to Aurora's reaction to my delay tactics.

FRANCISCO. From your description, you seem to have been aiming for a full detour.

ENRIQUE. I cannot argue with you there. *(Looks to the right)* Here comes Gonzalo.

Gonzalo enters stage right. Luis follows a few steps behind.

GONZALO. *(Sees Enrique)* Enrique, I little expected to run into you.

ENRIQUE. I have been impatient to learn of the dénouement of my improvised show. I hope to have convinced Aurora of the insurmountable disparities between us. I adamantly refuse to marry her! Such a marriage would be catastrophic, cataclysmic, *(Slight pause)* catachrestic. Why, I would be espoused to death! Oh, Gonzalo, I will do anything within my command to avert a disaster of that magnitude. Please say that my ruse was effective.

GONZALO. Enrique, your ruse was effective. In effect, you now stand free of matrimonial obligations.

ENRIQUE. Gonzalo, you could not be the bearer of a more gratifying message. I am sated, elated, un-mated. I am returned anew to the world of the senses, to the world of good sense. My cleverness has paid off. But tell me, how did the drama play out?

GONZALO. Your cruel impersonation—or, more precisely, perhaps, your incarnation of cruelty—roused Aurora to tears. Shocked by your renunciation of the nuptial pledge, she withdrew to mourn her loss and to meditate upon the avenues open to her.

ENRIQUE. *(Aside)* Meditate? An unusual word to juxtapose with the name of Aurora. *(Slight pause)* I regret any sadness that I may have caused the hapless creature, but I am comforted by the knowledge that she lacks real feelings. *(To Gonzalo)* So I am truly rid of her? Thank you, my friend, for the glad tidings. Now for your counsel on a related front: need I fear retaliation from Don Cristóbal?

GONZALO. Again, I am pleased to dispatch good news. Initially, Don Cristóbal was irate to hear that Aurora had been jilted by her fiancé. As one would expect, he found your actions to be contemptible as well as inexplicable. *(Slight pause)* But a solution presented itself.

ENRIQUE. How serendipitous! To what do I owe my reprieve?

GONZALO. If I may be so bold, to my quick thinking.

ENRIQUE. A man has never had a better ally. *(Slight pause)* Fill the lacunae, if you will.

GONZALO. By all means. To resume: Aurora was distraught, Don Cristóbal wrathful, the outlook dim. Then it came to me that I could avenge the offense perpetrated against me by Marisa by wedding her sister, and, coincidentally, I could make myself the recipient of an ample dowry.

ENRIQUE. *(Not completely happy on receiving this information)* Yes, but . . .

GONZALO. *(Enthusiastic, not sensing Enrique's qualms about the new situation)* Trouble was brewing, but I—simultaneously selfless and self-serving—came to the rescue. Here was a father emboldened, but I calmed him into burying his anger. How? By inserting myself into the plot.

ENRIQUE. But . . .

GONZALO. I mulled over the recent events. Aurora had lost a suitor, and I had lost the object of my suit. The two naked souls, suitless as we were, seemed—I suspect you know what is to come—well suited. Naturally, I factored Don Cristóbal's fury, your fiat, and our friendship into the equation.

ENRIQUE. How big of you. But I must ask, how is it that you are willing to attach yourself to the mindless Aurora?

GONZALO. Harken, for this will leave you incredulous. Aurora—miraculously, almost overnight—has become less simple. She can maintain her balance, ponder issues, and voice her opinions.

ENRIQUE. A new and improved Aurora! *(Aside)* Did I toss her away too soon? *(To Gonzalo)* Is she now a normal woman?

GONZALO. No, indeed. She remains abnormal, but only because she stands far above the crowd.

ENRIQUE. *(Fumes silently for a few moments, deep in thought)* You have stolen my dawn! Aurora was mine, and you have plunged me into reckless abandonment. You have mocked me and transposed order into chaos. You have become my enemy.

GONZALO. Your enemy! I have sacrificed my personal welfare for yours. I will never forgive such ingratitude.

ENRIQUE. Personal welfare! You are egotism personified. It is I who will be unforgiving.

FRANCISCO. *(Aside to Luis)* How quickly friendship is forgotten.

LUIS. *(Aside to Francisco)* How quickly Marisa is forgotten.

GONZALO. I will not stand for this abuse.

ENRIQUE. It is I who will not suffer disparagement. *(Aside to Francisco)* Francisco, may I borrow one of your gloves, please.

FRANCISCO. Of course, sir. *(Hands him a glove)*

ENRIQUE. *(To Francisco)* Thank you. *(Slaps Gonzalo with glove)* Don Gonzalo Rivadeneyra, I challenge you to a duel tomorrow morning, time and place to be arranged.

GONZALO. Don Enrique Entrambasmontañas, I accept your challenge.

ENRIQUE. Agreed.

GONZALO. Agreed.

Enrique exits stage right. Gonzalo exits stage left. Francisco and Luis look at each other, shrug their shoulders, and follow their respective masters.

ACT III

The following day.

Scene 1

An open field.

At the same time, Enrique enters stage right (followed by Francisco, who carries a sheathed sword), and Gonzalo enters stage left (followed by Luis, who carries a sheathed sword). The two servants will stand at attention with the swords in view as their masters speak.

ENRIQUE. (*Very serious, formal*) Good day, Don Gonzalo.

GONZALO. (*Ibid.*) Good day, Don Enrique.

FRANCISCO. (*Aside to Luis, exaggeratedly serious*) Good day, Don Luis.

LUIS. (*Aside to Gonzalo, ibid.*) Good day, Don Francisco.

ENRIQUE. We are present in this open field to do combat. One of us is guilty of treason and must deal with the ramifications of his actions.

GONZALO. Let us review the case, honorable sir. Item, you sought my counsel as you sought means to detach yourself from Doña Aurora Badilla. Item, you expressed your strong admiration for the sister of said lady, Doña Marisa Badilla, over said lady. Item, you were desperate to cancel your covenant with Don Cristóbal, begetter of said ladies.

ENRIQUE. Let us interpolate additional elements into the argument, distinguished comrade. Item, you declared yourself to be the ultimate admirer of Doña Marisa. Item, you declared yourself to be my ultimate friend. Item, you observed a metamorphosed Doña Aurora but failed to alert me to said metamorphosis.

GONZALO. What would be the inducement for such an act of betrayal?

ENRIQUE. One, the beautiful (and refurbished) Aurora. Two, a commensurately beautiful revenue.

GONZALO. But that is not so! I have all the money a person could want. My father is one of the richest men in Madrid, and I am first-born son. Besides, I love Marisa, who has been my muse and the *raison d'être* of my musings.

ENRIQUE. Then why did you seek the hand of Aurora?

GONZALO. I was moved by the excitement of the moment, dejected by my misfortune with Marisa, shocked by Aurora's alteration, and affiliated in friendship to you.

ENRIQUE. I grant that the angle of vision is crucial here. I must concede that I pleaded with you to erase me from the matrimonial canvas. I must also confess that, although I was in attendance at the meeting with Aurora, I perceived no decline in dullness on her part—a grave oversight on my own part. I departed, in the hope that you would further my negative ambition. Thus, it is not fair to impugn your motives or to doubt your integrity.

GONZALO. (*Listens intently to Enrique's confession and begins his, in a weepy tone*) Nor I am without blame. I disregarded the fundamental role of perseverance in my pursuit of Marisa. She is worth fighting for, and even a decisive blow should not have dispirited me. Back stabbing, however, was not on my mind.

ENRIQUE. We seem to be on the route to reconciliation. (*Pause*) Let us recapitulate, with respect to our current preferences. After you, sir.

GONZALO. Priority one: to marry Marisa. Corollary one: to disengage myself from Aurora. Corollary two: to manage this without compromising my approval rating with Don Cristóbal. And you, sir?

ENRIQUE. Priority one: to marry Aurora. Corollary one: to regain my favored status with Aurora. Corollary two: to convince Don Cristóbal that, despite my monumental lapsus mentis, I deserve his trust.

GONZALO. Well, then, it looks as though we have our priorities in order. Our goals seem reasonable and nonconflictive. Would it not be to our mutual advantage to work in tandem as we labor to achieve these goals?

ENRIQUE. From a logical perspective, the thesis defies refutation, given that (A) I want Aurora. (B) You want Marisa. (C) Don Cristóbal wants his daughters wedded. (D) The interests are interdependent. (*Slight pause*) The desiderata are well defined and deftly circumscribed.

GONZALO. Our targets could not be clearer, yet there are obstructions in our range of vision: (A) My adored Marisa hates me. (B) Your adored Aurora may have been persuaded of your shortcomings. (C) Our wished-for father-in-law to-be likely will be a hard sell. (D) We have provided proof for opposing theories.

ENRIQUE. That rationale leaves little room for debate. The ordeal will be grueling, but two heads are better than one. Let us proceed, then, to join forces in the struggle to win our ladies.

GONZALO. In our dual effort we will clear the hurdles one by one. We will seek to flourish in our quest . . .

ENRIQUE. . . . and to crown our heads with laurel as we pay homage to our respective ladies. We will seek to be moderate . . .

GONZALO. . . . yet intrepid, cautious . . .

ENRIQUE. . . . yet fearless, judicious . . .

GONZALO. . . . yet indefatigable.

FRANCISCO. (*Aside to Luis*) Bellicose . . .

LUIS. (*Aside to Francisco*) . . . yet passive.

ENRIQUE. We will launch our plan posthaste.

GONZALO. We will not sleep until we have crushed every barricade.

ENRIQUE. Aligned in a common calling, we will assume our duties.

GONZALO. Dutiful to our assumptions, we will make a beeline to complete our calling. Destiny awaits!

ENRIQUE. We will not be late!

Gonzalo and Enrique exit stage right, arm in arm, and heads held high. Luis and Francisco hold the unused swords in front of them as they mock-heroically recite the following lines.

LUIS. Let us retreat from the battlefield bespattered with the blood of bold rivalries.

FRANCISCO. No knight errant e'er defended himself with greater ferocity than we have beheld in this hour of warfare.

LUIS. Agile combat.

FRANCISCO. Acute combatants.

LUIS. May we long remember it.

FRANCISCO. May our children and their children be told of it.

Luis and Francisco exit stage right, in a mock-serious marching gait.

Scene 2

The garden in Don Cristóbal's home. Same view as in Act II, Scene 2, but the shed is slightly more prominent.

Marisa is seated on a chair, left of center stage.

MARISA. Poetry, you have done me in! Poetry has shown me the heights of enchantment only to

bring me to the depths of dolefulness. Gonzalo was my poem, my poet, and I hungered to know his alter ego, the man, as well. The poetry remains, but the man has deserted me for my sister and her dowry. The enchantment has turned to excruciating disenchantment.

Juana enters stage right.

JUANA. Señorita Marisa, Don Gonzalo asks to speak with you.

MARISA. *(Aside)* I am afraid to see him or to refuse to see him. My misery is at the maximum level. What do I have to lose? *(To Juana)* Please show him in.

JUANA. *(Proceeds to stage right)* She has agreed to receive you, sir.

Juana exits stage right. Gonzalo enters.

GONZALO. Marisa, I have come to beg your forgiveness.

MARISA. Sir, there is no need to offer a supplicatory plaint. You have acted on your feelings, and your feelings toward me are evident. You are the owner of my sister's hand and thereby of her entire estate. Felicitations to you both.

GONZALO. Please, Marisa, let me explain. I have been your faithful servant for several years. You have been my north star, a beautiful light that has guided and inspired me. *(Pause as he becomes sincere, abandoning his rhetorical style)* Without you, I would have composed no poetry, but through my prodigiousness I unwittingly erected a barrier between us. I acted imprudently, I admit, but I have learned my lesson. After much soul-searching, the man has discovered himself and urges you to readmit him to your heart.

MARISA. I am grateful for your apology. Your words are pretty—*(Aside)* if a bit lackluster and unimaginative—but how can I judge the degree of their sincerity?

GONZALO. It was my error that taught me how to utilize my senses. I began to miss your company, not as a brilliant abstraction but as a woman of warmth as well as wisdom. I no longer dream of image patterns on parchment, nor even of your divine image, but of your person, tangible in my mind yet intangible in yours.

MARISA. *(A bit chilly)* If I may speak candidly, I remain unconvinced of your professed rehabilitation. There is also the not insignificant issue of your upcoming marriage to Aurora, an event that appears to have slipped your mind.

GONZALO. On the contrary, I can barely think of anything else, so weighty is my concern. But, in collusion with Enrique, who rues reneging on his promise, I am hoping to rectify a complement of errors that has deposited us into a maelstrom of familial politics.

MARISA. *(Continuing to chastise him)* Be that as it may, you have neither fully expiated your guilt nor extricated yourself from a binding contract. *(Short pause as she sees that he is heartbroken and sincere)* I believe that you have made a satisfactory first step toward contrition, but penitence is a crusade, not a brief encounter. I do not wish to be intransigent, but I hereby serve you notice that you will have to substantiate your claims more emphatically. *(Gently touching his face as a sign of encouragement)* This is not the end of our drama but the intermezzo, wherein the players take respite to ruminate and to scheme, to grow impatient, to fear disaster, to fantasize happy endings. I beg you take your leave, Don Gonzalo, so that I may analyze your discourse.

GONZALO. I will allow you your privacy, Doña Marisa. I hope that you have found me sufficiently forthright and remorseful, for I am both, and more.

MARISA. *(Unbending)* Good afternoon, Don Gonzalo.

GONZALO. *(Dejected)* Until our next meeting, Doña Marisa.

Gonzalo slowly exits stage right.

MARISA. He is a different man, but is he a changed man? And to what extent have I changed? If Gonzalo can release himself from the agreement, would I want him as a spouse? The determination boils down to this: he is a man. This raises a new question: comprehending the nature of man, why would any woman wish for marriage? *(Slight pause)* Take Enrique, for example. My phantom suitor! What brought him to Madrid? My sister? No, my sister's dowry. He is an aristocrat with a cash-flow problem, and he has found potential dividends by moving upstream. Thrown for the short term by Aurora's simplicity, he decided to bail out, only to return when the dullard showed signs of intelligence. *(Slight pause)* And what of Gonzalo? Lord knows, he has his flaws, but I suspect that he is the best that I can do. He is gentle, tactful, and—relatively speaking—sensitive. He is bookish, and, what is more, he sanctions my scholarly propensities. With him I can read, write, critique, debate, scrutinize, and quarrel. With him I can be whimsical and passionate. With him, in sum, I can be myself. *(Slight pause)* We shall see whether he can withstand the test of loyalty that I have imposed upon him. If not, our story will be over. If so, . . . Well, we shall see.

Juana enters stage right.

JUANA. Excuse me, ma'am, but Don Enrique requests a meeting with Señorita Aurora.

MARISA. Very well. Accompany him to the garden. I will send Aurora out. *(Aside)* The chessboard is set. The pieces begin to move.

Marisa exits stage left. Juana moves to stage right.

JUANA. This way, sir. Please take a seat. Señorita Aurora will be here presently.

Enrique enters stage right.

ENRIQUE. Thank you. *(He moves downstage and assumes a pose, expecting the change in lights and music for his monologue. When it does not arrive as planned, he gets frustrated, and coughs for attention. When that does not work, he looks at the control booth snaps his fingers and points. The change in lights and music finally comes. He quickly resumes his dramatic pose.)* I am bypassing my new “intended” to beg for mercy from the old. I also will take the opportunity to observe what lamentably I failed to observe during my last visit: the edification of Aurora. If, in fact, I find her—shall we say?—palatable, I will have her make an appeal to Don Cristóbal to nullify the contract with Gonzalo and to honor the preexisting contract with me.

The lights and music change. Aurora enters stage left. Seeing her, Enrique rises from his chair.

AURORA. Good afternoon, Don Enrique. I am surprised that you have asked to see me.

ENRIQUE. Good afternoon, Doña Aurora. Thank you for consenting to an appointment.

AURORA. *(Aside)* What a sweet and princely man! I can feel my juices working when he is around.

ENRIQUE. *(Aside)* She looks approvingly at me—a good omen—but right now she is subject to an approval rating. *(To Aurora, speaking slowly, as if to a dullard)* I have acted “precipitously,” and I wish to “ameliorate” any damage that I may have done.

AURORA. It is not beyond human frailty to behave rashly and in haste. It is commendable that you wish to provide reparation.

ENRIQUE. *(Aside)* Sterling synonymity! A testament to comprehension. Now for something a mite more difficult. *(To Aurora)* My darling Aurora, I am blinded by the light in your garden. It is as if three suns were shining on me.

AURORA. *(Aside)* Oh, as I suspected, an oral examination! I think I am prepared. *(To Enrique)* Why, Don Enrique, can you be alluding to my eyes offset by the sun? How gracious and gratifying a compliment!

ENRIQUE. *(Aside)* My, my, she has passed with honors. I stand in awe of her achievement. I am the trickster tricked.

AURORA. Kind sir, let us reverse roles for a moment so that I may drill you. Yesterday you argued before me that you were inferior to me and that I would be well rid of you. As if that were not enough fuel on the fire, you also made it clear that I was not your type of woman. Today you have returned, presumably to discuss new alternatives. What has happened in the intervening time to influence your decision?

ENRIQUE. *(Aside)* One can easily note who is getting burned here. *(To Aurora)* Please let me explain. As you know, I arranged our nuptials sight unseen. I had heard that you were a lady of great beauty and nobility and the possessor of untold wealth. When we met, I was flabbergasted by the contrast between your beauty and your modus operandi. You seemed—if I may be so bold

—utterly moronic. I could not imagine sharing a life with you, and I fled in panic. I, seeking harbor from foolhardy judgment, want to renew my pledge. I will humble myself before you and I will do penance, but never again will I desert you.

AURORA. As you might surmise, Don Enrique, I have mixed feelings regarding your conduct. While I can understand that our initial meeting will have been a shock to your system, I believe, at the same time, that you were bound—by general points of honor and by your solemn oath, your word as a gentleman—to respect your pledge.

ENRIQUE. *(Aside)* This reproach hurts all the more because it is irrefutable. *(To Aurora)* Doña Aurora, would that I could go back in time in order to rectify the errors that I have committed. Have pity on this sinner.

AURORA. *(Aside)* Words as sweet as honey, and they fill me with delicious sensations. *(To Enrique)* I am relying on your staunch resolve. We have much ground to cover.

ENRIQUE. Our most serious stumbling block, by far, is your marriage contract to Gonzalo. While that remains in place, we are doomed.

AURORA. Granted. How do you suggest that we proceed from here?

ENRIQUE. While I would be happy to meet with your father, I wonder if it would not be advisable for you to speak with him. After your intercession he cannot but acknowledge that you prefer me to Gonzalo.

AURORA. Your point is well taken. Return in an hour, and I will inform you of my progress. Please ask Clara to summon my father.

ENRIQUE. I will do so. Good luck, dear Aurora.

AURORA. Our luck is now intertwined, dear Enrique.

ENRIQUE. As are our souls.

Enrique kisses her hand, then exits stage right.

AURORA. I cannot deny that my foremost concern here is myself. I must marry the man who engineered my conversion, the mastermind of my cornucopia of erudition, in order to preserve my healthy state of mind. I want Enrique to love me because I love Enrique. I want Enrique to consent to be my husband because I want to be his wife.

Don Cristóbal enters stage right.

D. CRISTOBAL. You wished to see me, daughter. *(Seats himself)*

AURORA. Yes, Father. Thank you for joining me. (*Slight pause*) Father, I am worried about my matrimonial prospects.

D. CRISTOBAL. You have no need to be concerned, Aurora. You are betrothed to Don Gonzalo, poet-scholar-primogenitary offspring.

AURORA. Don Gonzalo is an illustrious man, but he is my sister's swain and consort.

D. CRISTOBAL. No, dear. He *was* your sister's colleague, but she banished him from her enclave. He asked for your hand, and I accepted.

AURORA. But could you not have consulted with me, as the interested party?

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Aside*) She is beginning to sound like her sister. (*To Aurora*) Fathers do not consult with daughters on issues such as these.

AURORA. Issues such as the selection of a spouse, with all the implications thereof?

D. CRISTOBAL. That is a father's prerogative. That is a father's duty. That is a father's domain.

AURORA. What about a daughter's rights?

D. CRISTOBAL. For all practical purposes, a daughter has no rights. She is subject to her father's authority until she marries, at which point she is subject to her husband's authority.

AURORA. (*Aside*) So much for social justice. But let us hope that poetic justice is another story. (*To Don Cristóbal*) Kind father, I did not realize that I was living in a totalitarian state.

D. CRISTOBAL. The primordial concern, Aurora, is not control but honor.

AURORA. I understand, but could you not maintain your honor just as efficaciously if I were to marry Don Enrique, who has again become my suitor?

D. CRISTOBAL. Don Enrique put my honor in peril by relinquishing his claim to you. Don Gonzalo came to the rescue by extending his hand. Because of his gallant overture, I was spared public humiliation. I am most grateful to him and resolute in my adherence to the status quo.

AURORA. But, Father, does the fact that Don Gonzalo has returned his affection to Marisa have an impact on your ruling?

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Compassionately*) I am sorry, my dear, but the discussion is closed. I am inflexible. I feel certain that you and Don Gonzalo will be a matchless pair.

AURORA. (*Aside*) May matchless be the operative term in this case.

D. CRISTOBAL. Good afternoon, daughter.

AURORA. Good afternoon, Father.

Don Cristóbal exits stage right. Clara enters stage right.

CLARA. How goes it?

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AURORA. By no means well. My father is not amenable to a change in the bridal registry. *(Pause. She is deep in thought.)* I will have to take the bull by the horns. *(Slight pause)* Clara, when Don Enrique returns, bring him to me without anyone—especially my father—seeing him. If Francisco is with his master, have him come out also.

CLARA. *(Excitedly)* Yes, ma'am.

Clara exits stage left.

AURORA. I have used legitimate means of appeal to my father. Nonetheless, my father would consign me to a loveless marriage and my sister to spinsterhood rather than conform to my equal-opportunity prospectus. I hope to rewrite the scripted plot and, at all costs, to avert a tragic ending.

Clara appears at stage left.

CLARA. *(A stage whisper)* Aurora!

Aurora goes to her.

AURORA. Has Enrique returned?

CLARA. Yes, and he brought Don Gonzalo with him. *(Suddenly giddy)* And Francisco.

AURORA. Bring them out, and be as quiet as possible.

CLARA. All right. *(Signals to men to come out.)*

Enrique, Gonzalo, and Francisco enter stage left.

AURORA. Hello, gentlemen.

ENRIQUE. Hello, my adored one.

GONZALO. Hello, sister of my adored one.

Francisco bows.

ENRIQUE. Have you a good report of your meeting with Don Cristóbal?

AURORA. Precisely the opposite. He insists that I marry Gonzalo.

GONZALO. (*Exaggeratedly emotional*) Oh, my heart! Oh, my Marisa! Take no offense, Aurora, but I am doomed. Two of the three orbs in my universe have set! Marisa is shut off from me and available to all other men. My future is bleak, my future is black. I am red with choler and green with envy.

ENRIQUE. (*Tired of the endless wailing*) Indeed, we are all desperate, Gonzalo, and the purple prose gets us nowhere.

AURORA. We must focus on our goal. Let me put my plan into action. Time is of the essence. Please do exactly as I order. If all goes well, each part will fall into place.

ENRIQUE. At your command.

GONZALO. I will comply with your every wish.

AURORA. Enrique, stand back. Gonzalo, come here. (*They do so.*) Don Gonzalo, we are engaged, is that not so?

GONZALO. (*Sadly*) It is so.

AURORA. Gonzalo, give me a big hug, and then let go of me.

GONZALO. What?

ENRIQUE. What?

AURORA. Just do as I say. (*Gonzalo hugs her and then lets go of her.*) Gonzalo, we were engaged. Now we are dis-engaged. We have broken our engagement.

GONZALO. (*Aside to audience*) Astonishing!

ENRIQUE. (*Aside to audience*) Smashing!

FRANCISCO. (*Aside to audience*) Daunting!

CLARA. (*Aside to audience*) Feminine ingenuity!

AURORA. Gonzalo, find a piece of paper and write on it, in bold letters, the word “Toledo.”

GONZALO. What has Toledo to do with this?

ENRIQUE. (*Forcefully*) Gonzalo, we must heed the commands without question.

GONZALO. Yes, sir. *(To Aurora)* And yes, ma'am. *(He finds pen and paper on the table and follows the command.)*

AURORA. Clara, give me that rag from your pocket. *(Clara takes out a rag from her apron pocket and gives it to Aurora.)* Francisco, I am going to entrust you with an extremely important job. I want you to administer the marriage vows to Don Enrique and me.

FRANCISCO. But, Doña Aurora, you know that I am not authorized to do that.

AURORA. Here, take this. *(Hands him the rag)* You are now a man of the cloth. Enrique, stand next to me. Francisco, stand in front of us. Gonzalo and Clara, you will be best man and maid of honor, as well as witnesses; assume your positions. *(The four do so, and the lights suddenly shift to a romantic tableau with soft music playing.)* Now, Francisco, ask us to repeat the following: I promise to love and honor *(fill in the name)*.

FRANCISCO. Don Enrique, repeat after me: I promise to love and honor Doña Aurora.

ENRIQUE. I promise to love and honor Doña Aurora.

FRANCISCO. Doña Aurora, repeat after me: I promise to love and honor Don Enrique.

AURORA. I promise to love and honor Don Enrique.

ENRIQUE. What about "obey"?

AURORA. Time is short.

CLARA. *(Aside)* I think the transformation is complete.

AURORA. Francisco: I now pronounce you man and wife.

FRANCISCO. I now pronounce you man and wife. *(Adlibbing)* You may now kiss the bride.

Music, possibly Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," plays as Enrique and Aurora kiss. The others congratulate them until Aurora cuts them off, abruptly causing the lights to revert and the music to end.

AURORA. Now to continue. Gonzalo, give Enrique the "Toledo" sign. *(He does so.)* Now, Enrique, go into the shed.

ENRIQUE. What?

GONZALO. *(Mocking Enrique's prior demanding tone)* Enrique, we must heed the commands without question.

ENRIQUE. Yes, sir. *(To Aurora)* Yes, ma'am.

AURORA. Francisco, please go into the shed with your master. Do not make a sound.

FRANCISCO. Yes, ma'am. *(Handing cloth to Clara)* Clara, my pet, I seem to have been defrocked.

Enrique and Francisco enter the shed. Enrique is holding the "Toledo" sign.

AURORA. Gonzalo, we still have a ways to go. We will have to compose our dialogue as the situation demands.

CLARA. *(Aside)* Commedia dell'arte.

GONZALO. My dear, you are dealing with an established poet.

CLARA. *(Aside)* . . . who keeps a supply of formulaic phrases.

AURORA. We need to sustain the dramatic momentum, to create poetry in motion.

GONZALO. Trust me, my lady. *(Aside)* That has become my signature line for each of the sisters.

AURORA. Let us be seated, Don Gonzalo. We deserve a brief respite from our toil.

Aurora and Gonzalo seat themselves. Clara stands behind and to the left of Aurora. A pause. Don Cristóbal enters stage right, sees them.

D. CRISTOBAL. Hello, Aurora and Don Gonzalo. Have I caught you making plans?

GONZALO. Yes . . .

AURORA. *(Aside)* Subversive, to say the least. *(To Don Cristóbal)* Honeymoon plans.

D. CRISTOBAL. How exciting! *(Aside)* I can see that my little tête-à-tête with Aurora did some good. A father can never be too firm. *(To Aurora)* What will be the destination of your wedding trip?

AURORA. Toledo.

D. CRISTOBAL. *(Wistful)* A beautiful city, patriotic if not exotic.

AURORA. In fact, my husband is already there.

D. CRISTOBAL. *(Aside)* Oh, no! Can the poor child be reverting to her former simplicity? *(To Aurora)* No, Aurora, your husband is seated right next to you.

AURORA. No, Father. (*“Slowly”*) My husband is in Toledo.

D. CRISTOBAL. But your husband is beside you! (*Aside*) And I am beside myself! (*To Aurora. Points to Gonzalo*) Is this not Don Gonzalo?

AURORA. Yes, Father, it is.

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Aside*) Relief is in sight. (*To Aurora*) So you can see, my sweet, that he is not in Toledo.

AURORA. I never said that he was in Toledo.

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Aside*) My sense of relief was premature. (*To Aurora*) But I distinctly recall your saying that Don Gonzalo was in Toledo.

AURORA. No, sir, I said that my husband was in Toledo.

D. CRISTOBAL. Who, then, is your husband, if not Don Gonzalo?

AURORA. Don Enrique is my husband. We were married this afternoon by a man of the cloth, before witnesses, and Enrique is awaiting me in Toledo.

D. CRISTOBAL. (*Slowly and menacingly moving toward Gonzalo*) Don Gonzalo, is this true? (*Don Cristóbal suddenly seizes Gonzalo to interrogate him.*)

GONZALO. (*Hesitantly*) Yes . . .

D. CRISTOBAL. (*At the top of his voice*) What infamy, what perfidy, what villainy has tainted the sanctity of my home, of my once-edenic garden? Aurora married on these very grounds! To Don Enrique, whom I exiled after his roguish self-exile! This cannot be! This cannot be!

Marisa, Juana, and Luis enter stage left. Don Félix enters stage right.

MARISA. Father, we heard your yelling from all corners of the house? Luis could hear you from the street. Pray, what is the matter?

D. FELIX. Don Cristóbal, are you having an attack?

D. CRISTOBAL. I am too agitated to speak. (*Continues to shout at full force*) What deceit! What guile! What duplicity! My daughter is married!

MARISA. Who is married?

AURORA. I am married.

MARISA. (*Aside*) Gonzalo, can you have disgraced me a second time? (*To Aurora*) To whom?

AURORA. To Don Enrique.

MARISA. *(Aside)* Stop, my beating heart. I can hardly breathe. I had feared the worst. *(To Aurora)* What has happened?

AURORA. *(Aside to Gonzalo)* Gonzalo, this would be a fitting occasion for you to display the verbal expertise to which you recently alluded.

GONZALO. Oh, yes. Don Cristóbal, please allow me to explain. *(Aside to Marisa)* Marisa, my dear, you are the destined receiver of these words. *(To Don Cristóbal)* The laws that consolidate our society, and the higher laws that inform them, were enacted to protect men and women and to champion the values, institutions, and hierarchies of society. Legislation is a positive force, an adjudicating principle, a cementing constituent.

MARISA. *(Aside)* This speech is for me?

GONZALO. Kind sir, room always must be left for compassion. In legal procedure, contracts are hermetically sealed, airtight, in short, binding. Yet leniency cannot but have its place in the great scheme of things. This is all that we are asking of you, Don Cristóbal: leniency, clemency, mercy, sympathy, empathy, amnesty.

D. CRISTOBAL. *(Aside)* He asks for much, and at this point in the speech I am moved but little.

GONZALO. Don Enrique made an error; he is human. He is earnestly and ardently in love with Doña Aurora, and he is the probable cause of her exceptional transformation. Do not chastise him for his folly or for his fervor. Be assured that he will be a good husband to your younger daughter.

AURORA. *(Aside)* He has come through for me.

GONZALO. As for me, Don Cristóbal, for years I worshipped Doña Marisa, from afar and by her side, and I am ashamed to admit that I strayed from my faith, but my love has profited from my moral lapse. I am cured, I am devout, I am revitalized. I belong to Marisa. Forever will I be Marisa's and she mine, if she will have me. Please, sir, allow us our foibles, and let us enjoy the bounty of your generosity.

D. CRISTOBAL. *(Appearing to be appeased)* Don Gonzalo, you have offered what could be called a seamless defense, for which I congratulate you. There is, for me, but one loose thread, and that thread is ... *(Erupting)* honor! I have spent my life as the custodian of my family's name, and I cannot acquiesce to those who would trample upon said honor.

MARISA. But, Father, Aurora is already wed.

D. CRISTOBAL. We will see what the officers of justice have to say about that! I will swear out a warrant for the arrest of Don Enrique.

D. FELIX. But, Don Cristóbal, will that not serve only to publicize your dishonor?

D. CRISTOBAL. What a dilemma, and due exclusively to the ingenuousness of Aurora!

AURORA. (*Aside*) Let me take that cue. ("*Simply*") But, Father, what about my husband?

D. CRISTOBAL. Your husband has taken leave of his senses. He is on the road to hell, and he will have hell to pay!

AURORA. No, sir, my husband took leave of me on his way to Toledo, and I fear that he has no money to pay for hell.

D. CRISTOBAL. You, young lady, are still under my jurisdiction.

AURORA. No, Father, I am not under anything. I am here in the open air.

D. CRISTOBAL. Aurora, gain your composure!

AURORA. Compose, compose . . . Father, do I know how to write?

D. FELIX. Horrors! *Dementia recurrens!*

GONZALO. Don Cristóbal, she is slipping into her former self. I believe that Don Enrique is the only viable antidote.

AURORA. I am not under anything. I am here in the open air. My husband is in Toledo.

GONZALO. Sir, you must act quickly.

D. FELIX. Her condition is deteriorating by the minute.

AURORA. He has no money. He cannot pay for hell.

D. CRISTOBAL. All right, all right! You have worn me down. Aurora, I will recognize your marriage to Don Enrique. Don Gonzalo, I will grant you the hand of Marisa. (*Aside*) So now both daughters are out of my hands. And we shall see who has hell to pay!

GONZALO. Thank you, Don Cristóbal. Father.

MARISA. Father, thank you.

AURORA. Father, I cannot describe my feelings of gratitude. Thank you for mollifying our fears and for finding a comprehensive remedy for our woes.

D. FELIX. *Recuperatio intelligentiae!*

D. CRISTOBAL. Aurora, we still have the problem of getting you to Toledo to join your husband.

AURORA. That, Father, is no problem, for he is nearby.

MARISA. What?

D. FELIX. What?

D. CRISTOBAL. But how can that be?

Aurora goes to the shed, opens the door, and Enrique and Francisco come out. Enrique holds the "Toledo" sign.

AURORA. I named the shed "Toledo," and this is where the wedding took place.

ENRIQUE. It was all quite legitimate, Don Cristóbal. Father.

GONZALO. Figuratively, . . .

ENRIQUE. Symbolically, . . .

GONZALO. Abstractly speaking. *(He shakes Don Cristóbal's hand. Don Cristóbal proceeds to squeeze it harder and harder. He lets go as he starts the following speech.)*

D. CRISTOBAL. I am done! I do not have the strength to enter into another foray. May you all live happily ever after. Come inside, Don Félix, and fix me a compress.

D. FELIX. Yes, sir. *(To couples)* I look forward to tutoring your children, *(Slight pause)* who certainly will have much to teach me.

Don Cristóbal and Don Félix exit stage right.

MARISA. Aurora, you are a prodigy.

AURORA. As the need arises. And a fool when the need arises.

GONZALO. You turned the tables on fate.

AURORA. And, one could suggest, I took the law into my own hands.

MARISA. Father will never be the same!

GONZALO. Our combined futures look rosy.

ENRIQUE. As the rosy-colored dawn that has brightened my day.

AURORA. Enrique, with your permission I would like to give the hand of Clara to Francisco.

MARISA. And Gonzalo, I would like to give that of Juana to Luis.

ENRIQUE. By all means.

GONZALO. Granted.

The two pairs of servants approach each other and hug.

CLARA. *(To Aurora)* Thank you, ma'am.

FRANCISCO. *(To Enrique)* Thank you, sir.

JUANA. *(To Marisa)* Thank you, ma'am.

LUIS. *(To Gonzalo)* Thank you, sir.

AURORA. *(To the four servants)* You may be excused to congratulate each other in private.

Juana and Luis head toward stage left, Clara and Francisco toward stage right.

JUANA. Education has its benefits.

CLARA. Education is ... bliss.

FRANCISCO. Don Luis, I salute you.

LUIS. And I you, Don Francisco.

The four exit.

GONZALO. Marisa, we are finally together. I promise to be your slave, your hero, your vassal, your paladin.

MARISA. I would prefer that you be my friend, my companion, my partner, and my equal. One must "conspire" to be adept at marriage.

GONZALO. I think I get the message, dear.

ENRIQUE. Aurora, we are together at last. Your ingenuity is immeasurable, and so is my love for you.

AURORA. Enrique, you have taught me the most valuable lesson: how to love and be loved. I do

not fully comprehend the mystery of my transformation, but love has surely opened a new world for me.

MARISA. Look who has become the idealist.

AURORA. And who the realist.

MARISA. In three days you have gone from cretin to genius.

AURORA. And, of course, from genius to cretin.

MARISA. And back to genius. I have had a workout, as well. I am at wit's end.

AURORA. A masterful exit line. May the illustrious senate be kind.

All four throw their heads back in laughter and hold the pose as the lights fade and the music swells. Blackout.

Bringing *Wit's End* to the Stage: A Dramaturg and Director's Journey

Jeffrey Ullom

I fell in love with Spanish theatre the first time I read it, and, unfortunately for most students in American theatre training programs, reading texts from the *Siglo de Oro* is the only way that they will ever get to enjoy Spanish theatre. Like most students, my undergraduate theatre history survey courses failed to incorporate Spanish plays into the syllabus, given the limited amount of time to chart the development of all Western theatre forms and given the fact that our theatre traditions derive from England (as opposed to Spain, England's long-time enemy). It was not until graduate school that I was introduced to the works of Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderón de la Barca, and I quickly became fascinated by the mixture of passion, humor, and violence in *Fuenteovejuna* as well as the imaginative power, romance, and beauty of *La vida es sueño*. My rapture with Spanish theatre was further cultivated in the summer of 2003 when I took eight students to London for a class on theatrical performance, and I announced that we would be seeing a rare performance of a Spanish drama (Tanya Ronder's compelling translation of *Peribáñez y el comendador de Ocaña* at the Young Vic). Most of my students took my excitement for this play as hyperbole, but that all changed following the performance when students declared *Peribáñez* their favorite of the thirteen productions that we witnessed.

It is not surprising then, that I jumped at the chance to direct Edward H. Friedman's adaptation of *La dama boba*. Familiar only with Lope de Vega's dramatic work and fascinated by both *Fuenteovejuna* and *Peribáñez*'s ability to resonate in terms of emotional angst and psychological devastation, I was pleasantly surprised by *Wit's End*'s reliance upon traditional *comedia* traditions and its charmingly antiquated notions of romance and honor. Given my inclination as a director to exploit (if not celebrate) theatrical conventions, *Wit's End* provided a

wonderful opportunity for my students explore antiquated performance styles by playing stock characters (the *pantalone*, the two types of *innamorati*, the *dottore*, etc.) while also working with wonderful dialogue and a more intricate plot than those often found in the works of Molière and Goldoni.

Having served as a dramaturg at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, I was familiar with the many battles and roadblocks encountered by new scripts as they endure a rehearsal process for the first time. Every text offers unique challenges when making the leap to the stage, and *Wit's End* was no different. The question for the dramaturg often boils down to one, simple standard: what is stage-worthy? Just because jokes, speeches, or relationships might be compelling or impactful on the page, it does not mean that it will provide a unique experience for both the performer and the audience. Reading the full text initially offered by Friedman, there were several adjustments that I thought needed to be made in order to ensure a successful presentation. One of the most captivating aspects of the script was the witty banter between the characters, but several of these puns and jokes succeeded because of reader's ability to view how words were spelled on the page and how the characters were confused because of their misunderstanding. For example, in the original draft, when Don Félix quizzes Aurora and Clara in his first lesson and asks, "Can you grasp this catalog of elements?" Aurora's responds with a question of her own: "Cattle log?" This joke is funny, no doubt, but it proved impossible to foresee how an audience would be able to understand the word play without having to overstress the distinction and/or having to stop the rhythm of the scene in order to give the audience time to comprehend the verbal distinctions and hope for a response; in other words, it is a joke that reads but will not play. While malapropisms occur frequently in the script for numerous characters, several proved easier to fix (after hearing Don Félix demand

Aurora to enunciate, Juana's original line of "Nuns he ate?" simply became "He ate nuns?"). Other edits made in conjunction with Friedman included a reduction of the foreign language references (I thought the intelligence of each character was sufficiently displayed through their wit, making some of the Latin and other foreign-language comments superfluous), a reduction in repetitions (the leading male characters often detailed their emotional distress through a variety of lists), and a consideration for the appropriate length of the performance (i.e., what amount of text would be feasible for a five-week rehearsal period).

When I first proposed *Wit's End* for inclusion in our season, I detailed my concept, which included paralleling the play's stock characters and heightened language to that of Spanish soap operas. I envisioned filming sequences that would serve as introductions to each act that would mimic the glamorous poses performed by the soap opera stars; however, the video for each act would be different in order to detail how the various characters have progressed from one act to the next (for example, Aurora would seem quite naïve in the first video and rather calculating in the last). Despite concerns that the concept required complicated projection equipment and a projector screen incorporated into the set design—not to mention extra time and expense to film such sequences—the play was approved by the faculty. When the design process began a few months later, I was informed that the inclusion of video projections for the production was not feasible, forcing a change in my concept. Although I was initially disappointed and frustrated by the abandoning of my concept, it resulted in a celebration of the theatrical as opposed to a hodge-podge of theatre and film. Instead, the idea of the introductions for each act was maintained, posing the cast in groups of two where they would pantomime a five-second scene revealing their current emotional state and then turn to gaze at the audience. Even though these scenes were conceived for film, re-envisioning them for the stage provided several benefits: it helped

establish the world of the play, it supported the convention direct address and audience acknowledgement, it emphasized the dramatic use of lights and music that would be employed frequently throughout the show, and it quickly detailed relationships for the audiences. If the dumb-show scenes, the lights, and the music were not enough for the audience to realize the presentational nature of the show, the usage of gobos to display the title of the play on the walls of the set made it quite clear that this production admitted its own theatricality.

Due to production limitations concerning budget and space (working in a black box prohibited major changes in scenery), another alteration in the text received Friedman's approval. The original draft called for a garden as the primary setting for the play, and different locations on this lawn would be used and differentiated by the appearance of a shed (in earlier scenes, it is further away while in the third act it is prominent). Our theatre did not allow for such adaptability, so a decision had to be made as to locating a hiding place for Enrique in the third act while also keeping to a single set. Set and lighting designer Phillip Franck and I found the answer in the traditions of farce and Roman comedy (which established many of the stock characters employed in the play) through the use of multiple doors. The location was reinterpreted as a garden/patio area with three doors: a gate leading to the street outside Don Cristóbal's house (downstage-right), a set of double door upstage center (the library, formerly the shed), and a door downstage-left that led to another part of the house. Franck researched Spanish architecture to make sure that the set would be one of the most identifiable Spanish aspects of the play, beginning with Romanesque arches then pinching them in with molding to suggest a Moorish influence. Furthermore, Franck researched Spanish villas from a variety of periods in order to create the layout for the garden and compile the color palate for the scenery.

The costumes, designed by Alexandra A. Sargent, aimed to merge elements of dress from

the Spanish Golden Age with modern clothing. This combination is most obvious in Enrique's wardrobe, featuring fabric and styles much more contemporary than his peers. The goal for the costuming was to allow the audience to readily identify the character types, especially the simplistic ingénue, her wealthy yet obstinate father, and the doddering academic. With a limited costume budget, a decision was made to have the characters remain in the same costume for the entire show except for the two daughters, Aurora and Marisa. As they became more "modern" women by seizing control of the situation and directing the action of the play, Sargent raised the hem of their skirts in the third act to reveal high, leather boots, allowing these characters to break the mold and no longer be confined to a submissive role as dictated by their *comedia* predecessors. The limited costume plot also affirmed for the audience that the men changed very little throughout the show, allowing the play to differentiate itself from established *comedia* conventions in that women get to be the heroes.

The abandonment of the video sequence also necessitated increased design demands of lights and music for the dumb-shows at the opening of each act. With light isolating each duo in heightened emotional states, this convention was continued and extended the play with the creation of what was termed the "monologue moments." At numerous times in the performance, when a character offered a monologue, it was decided to accentuate the theatricality of the piece and celebrate these moments of direct address by highlighting the convention. Whenever a character stepped downstage to address the audience, three things simultaneously occurred: lights dimmed all over the stage, a single spotlight illuminated the character, and a short flourish of notes becoming increasingly higher in pitch played on the piano (resulting in a dreamy, far-away mood). These moments not only furthered the whimsical theatricality of the piece, but it evolved into its own comic bit (especially in the third act when Enrique wants to express his

nervousness and steps downstage excepting for the change in lights and music, but none comes, forcing him to call for it). It should be noted that there were a few instances where the implementation of a “monologue moment” was rejected for the purpose of helping define character, namely Marisa’s lengthy monologue in the first act (as the most practical character, she would not be given to emotional extremes deserving of such extreme changes in her surroundings) and Aurora’s brief monologue after accepting Enrique’s apology (the description of her love and her intentions needed to be viewed as sincere in comparison to Enrique’s bold declarations). One quick note on the music: the use of music in the opening dumb-shows and in these “monologue moments” resulted in an increased role of music. Taking a cue for the *corrales* of Spanish theatre, I decided to utilize live music instead of recorded songs. The constant presence of a pianist (Rachel Eve Ginter) in the audience’s view not only helped reinforce the metatheatricality of the piece, but it also allowed for interplay between the actors and the musician (in an attempt to parallel the interrelations between actors onstage and the patrons standing in the patio of the *corrales*).

Shifting into production, casting proved challenging given the limitations of the talent pool. In spite of Vanderbilt University’s push to increase diversity in its student body, the theatre department often fails (by no fault of its own) to benefit from this university commitment in the form of a diverse casting pool. As a firm believer and supporter of color-blind casting, I was pleasantly surprised that I was not only able to cast wonderfully talented actors, but a diverse group as well. With Don Cristóbal played by an African-American actor and his daughters played by Indian and Caucasian actresses, the color-blind casting contributed to the ridiculousness of the comic situations of the play and the theatricality. Another priority in the casting process was to find actors who would further delineate the characters and the nature of

the relationships in the play, leading to a “casting by couple” procedure. Compared to Gonzalo and Marisa, Enrique and Aurora served as the “straight man” couple, satisfying audiences’ expectations (at least visually) of the lovers in a romantic comedy. A slight risk was taken in casting a dashing but young Brett Bolton (one week into his undergraduate career) to perform alongside a charming Angie Fontaine, but any fears were quickly allayed when the freshman took to the stage in the rehearsal process. These two actors served to exemplify the traditional depiction of young lovers, leaving Gonzalo and Marisa to fulfill the opposite purpose. The height difference between these lovers was more than a foot (Matt Cleve was six-feet eight-inches tall, while Sarina Sahetya tops out at five-feet one-inch), and the physical disparity between these two served the basis for their comical romance, encouraging a larger willing suspense of disbelief which led to more playful, broader comedy in their scenes.

Two other pairs of characters required special consideration when casting. In order to emphasize the stock character traditions of the *comedia*, the Dons of the play (Cristóbal and Félix) needed to fulfill certain physical traits, most notably the father’s ability to appear obstructionist (both physically and in action) and the tutor’s academic, book-worm personality (but also willing to perform stage combat due to the slapstick inserted into the play). Don Cristóbal is described by Friedman as “suitably paternal,” and when dealing with a collegiate casting pool, there are few actors who are able to believably play older characters. The maids also proved a bit problematic in that Clara is very similar to Aurora, suggesting a physical likeness as well, and given the small pool of actors who audition at Vanderbilt, I was extraordinarily lucky to find Claire Epstein, an actress with wonderful comic timing and inventiveness. Whereas Clara is a major character throughout the show, Juana is rarely seen and is fairly nondescript. Heading into auditions, I had no idea how to fashion/interpret the character,

choosing to rely upon the actor cast in the role. Given the mandates of educational theatre and the goal to offer opportunities to younger actors, Leslie Kelly, a wide-eyed freshman, was cast in role; given her prior experience with musical theatre, I hoped that her history with presentational work would help her bring creativity and specificity to the role.

The first read-through is always deceptive and fairly unproductive. While the cast may enjoy reading the play and hearing their peers dramatize a role with little (if any) preparation, such interpretations are usually incorrect and nothing like the final product. When Friedman attended the read-through, he left a bit stunned—not in a good way. Early on the actors exhibited little of the flair for the dramatic and scant ability to master the heightened language. Over the next four weeks, diligent work was accomplished toward helping the cast understand the style of the play, the theatrical nature of the performance, and the value of embracing and speaking heightened language. More importantly, during the rehearsal process, several discoveries were made as the characters evolved. While Enrique’s boldness was partially predetermined by the decision to include his “monologue moments,” his boldness and his quick shifts in intensity and determination certainly became more delineated and comic during the process. Because of the character’s absolute confidence, Enrique followed a strict blocking regime, crossing the stage only in straight lines (as opposed to Gonzalo who moved primarily in curved lines around the stage).

Perhaps no actor made more out of his character than Matt Clevy did with Gonzalo. While Gonzalo was certainly a romantic character as initially written, Clevy quickly transformed Gonzalo into a performance-based character rather than a text-based character. In other words, so much physical action and definition was added during the rehearsal process that Gonzalo became a character reliant upon the actor’s performance more than the text itself. Gonzalo’s dialogue

became a launching pad for bits of comic business, but these moments of hilarity always worked to embolden the humor of the text rather than overshadow it. Utilizing the costume pieces, Gonzalo's long scarf became an extension of his arms, constantly swishing the cloth around the space during his cries of passion and pain. Joey LaRoche as Don Cristóbal also used physical gags while exploring his character. In an attempt to educate contemporary audiences about the importance of *pundonor* during the Spanish Golden Age, Don Cristóbal stomped his foot on the ground and pointed his finger high in the air every time he uttered the word "Honor." As a sight gag, these moments played well, but they became hysterical once the actor explored and included the exaggerated behavior throughout the play in order for Don Cristóbal's *pundonor* moments to be consistent with his overall performance.

Being a college production in addition to a farce, it is certainly not surprising that many of the jokes inserted into the performance were of a sexual nature. With women being seen as the sexual aggressors since they are the one who solve the problems, the men assumed the traditional role of the ingénue, reacting emotionally to the various predicaments and often seen as foolish (if not helpless) characters. The choice to insert sexual humor into the performance primarily affected three female characters; for two of them, sex became an additional dimension to their characters while sexuality quickly developed into the defining characteristic for the third female. During Marisa's dismissal of Gonzalo in the second act, variety was needed in order to prevent her speech from becoming repetitive. Following her beating of Gonzalo with the papers (an action inserted into the play as well), she decides to use her sex to break through Gonzalo's rhetoric, beginning with the line "I do have a closing argument," allowing the actress to close the distance between them and then fill the words in the following sentences (like "brush against" and "splendid") with sexual overtones, enticing him to see her as more than a poet. For Clara,

sex and humor were fused in her random and unexplained passion for Francisco. On a whim, the actress playing Clara stressed Francisco's arrival with unparalleled excitement, causing Aurora to look shocked and confused over such intense feelings for a man who is dressed in shabby clothing and whose every line is a complaint or a smart-aleck comment. Clara's obsession with Francisco not only justified the happiness of the two servants at the end of the play (she squealed when their union is proposed), but her fascination with Francisco found purchase in several moments throughout the play. For example, in the second act, Clara remarks that "Don Enrique is nice to look at," but her concluding comment of "I find Francisco as pleasing as his master" was coupled with a far off stare of intense lust while the actress gripped the arms of the chair in anticipation of his touch.

The female character that benefitted most from the inclusion of sexual humor was Juana, an otherwise nondescript, functional character. Given the conclusion of the play where the servants are betrothed to each other, I needed to find a way to provide some form of a relationship between Juana and Luis, and Juana's sexual prowess became the answer. Throughout the play, Juana flirts with every male, including Don Cristóbal who occasionally leers at her (as would the traditional *pantalone*). In the second act when Juana leads Gonzalo into the garden, additional staging was inserted to allow Juana and Luis a moment to quickly plan an escape for a rendezvous. Initially, it was envisioned that upon hearing of her betrothal to Luis that the two servants would slowly move to the upstage wall and begin making out, but this action became distracting from the dialogue and was eventually eliminated. Nevertheless, I did like the perception with Juana and Clara of the difference between the upper and lower classes in this fictitious society (inspired by a line from Strindberg's *Miss Julie*) that the wealthy were afforded the luxury of talking about love and life while the servants seized the moment and

actually acted upon their passions.

Other discoveries in the rehearsal process involved dramaturgical decisions. When working on a classical play, my instinct as a dramaturg is to cut away excess lines and scenes that do not serve the director's vision. Working on *Wit's End* was a unique process in that I served as director and dramaturg for a classical text, yet the playwright was available to me and (appropriately) had final say on any material cut from the play. In reading the play and wrangling with the text in the rehearsal process, Friedman and I employed three different tactics for resolving various problems in the text. The first concerned lines that I initially considered cutting were instead rehearsed with actors to discover a method to make them work. Two examples come to mind: first are the aforementioned "Honor" declarations of Don Cristóbal. My initial response was to eliminate some of the repetitions, assuming that the audience would be able to remember his motive; however, we salvaged these moments by inserting the physical humor and choosing to punctuate and celebrate these "Honor" lines. Another example occurs in the first act when Aurora and Clara fail their examination with Don Félix and become confused over his teaching of the alphabet. This scene moves quickly, and the pattern of the scenes is that each answer from the two ladies will elicit a humorous response. An exception to this rule is Aurora's second line in the following sequence:

D. FELIX. D, as in dyspepsia.

AURORA. Do you have a stomach ache, sir?

D. FELIX. No, the case is purely hypothetical.

CLARA. Can I bring you some nice chamomile tea or a hot-water bottle, sir?

AURORA. Or maybe some oil of clove.

Clara's line serves as the comic response in this pattern, but Aurora's additional response does little to embellish the humor of Clara's comment. Although I was inclined to omit the line when I first suggested edits to Friedman, it remained in the script in hopes that a solution would be discovered during the rehearsal process. Similar to the "Honor" problem, the answer lay in over-emphasizing the line as opposed to eliminating it or quickly moving past it. Aurora offered the line as if it was a wonderful discovery, followed by Clara's wide-eyed amazement that she would be able to conceive of such a medical solution. This moment not only provided additional humor to the scene, but it helped illustrate the unintelligence of the characters while also staying true to the script and to de Vega and Friedman's intentions.

The second tactic for resolving text problems during the rehearsal process involved the rearranging of the text in order to improve the flow of dialogue or to help with staging difficulties. In cases involving the former, the text included several long speeches. But instead of letting each character speak at length, we rearranged the text to allow for rapid exchanges heightening the conflict of the scene, emphasizing the contrast between the characters, and increasing the tempo. An example of this alteration occurs in the second act when Gonzalo suggests that he marry Aurora. In the first version of the play, each character completes his train of thought before interacting:

GONZALO. Discouraged by his first meeting with Aurora, Enrique has set his sights on Marisa. I, on the other hand, discouraged by my last meeting with Marisa, am intrigued by Aurora's formerly latent insights. Definitively dismissed by one sister, I am drawn to the other.

D. CRISTOBAL. I am confounded by the shifts in allegiance, and I am uncertain of the legal ramifications of the case. Don Enrique's action threatens the honor of my daughter and of my family.

GONZALO. Don Cristóbal, if you will pardon the impertinence of the following suit...

These lines are clearly meant to reveal the character's internal thoughts, but since this conversation occurs at the end of the act when the tempo should be increasing and since these characters need each other to resolve their individual dilemmas, the text was altered and a new pattern introduced allowing each character to quickly state their case but do so in a more rapid manner. It should be noted that every word of the original text is maintained, but the new rhythm exaggerated the situation and, therefore, allowed for greater physical extremes as well:

GONZALO. Discouraged by his first meeting with Aurora, Enrique has set his sights on Marisa. *(Aside)* I, on the other hand, discouraged by my last meeting with Marisa, am intrigued by Aurora's formerly latent insights.

D. CRISTOBAL. *(Aside)* I am confounded by the shifts in allegiance, and I am uncertain of the legal ramifications of the case.

GONZALO. *(Aside)* Definitely dismissed by one sister, I am drawn to the other.

D. CRISTOBAL. *(Aside)* Don Enrique's action threatens the honor of my daughter and of my family.

GONZALO. *(Resuming conversation)* Don Cristóbal, if you will pardon the impertinence of the following suit...

Text was also rearranged in order to alleviate problems with staging. The final moments of the play finds almost every character gathered together and in conversation with each other.

Therefore, in order to clarify action and prevent the actors from standing in a massive semi-circle, a few lines were shifted. When the lead lovers join their servants to form new couples, the process is such that Luis, Francisco, Clara and Juana do not thank their respective masters until the entire process is completed. By moving Francisco and Clara's expression of thanks to immediately following Aurora's proposal, they move upstage of the group to be alone, allowing the lead characters greater freedom to move about the stage.

The third and final tactic employed to resolve problems in the text during the rehearsal process was the rewriting of lines and/or the outright elimination of them. The choice to rewrite lines has already been discussed, but it continued into the rehearsal process when lines thought to be clear proved difficult when performed. For example, when Aurora claims, "Don Enrique has served as a catalyst—(*Sees the light*) oh, not a cattle list—" it was assumed if the actress spoke the words "cattle" and "list" slowly, it might be enough to signify the difference (and hence the joke). However, in rehearsals we never found the right timing for the line, so it was changed to "a list of cattle" to make the distinction more evident. Taking the dramaturgical process further, lines that never found their rhythm or dramaturgical purpose were excised from the script. These lines were cut because they failed to contribute any new thought for the audience, joke for the scene, or insight to the character. Several examples can be found in the first act when Enrique is introduced to Aurora, a moment in which the audience anticipates the physical humor of the two lead characters clashing (Aurora's awkwardness against Enrique's brash confidence). At her first introduction, Enrique and Francisco offer their thoughts:

ENRIQUE. (*As soon as Aurora appears, aside to Francisco*) She is exquisite! I have never seen a more stunning woman.

FRANCISCO. (*After Aurora has taken a few steps, aside*) She seems to be fighting to stay on her feet. I have never seen a more awkward woman.

This first sentence of Francisco's line was cut because the actress would be able to perform this task, and such a visual cue did not need repeating by the servant. Furthermore, I did not want to establish Francisco as a constant commentator on the action as opposed to a one-time aside to the audience, allowing the focus of the scene to remain on Enrique and Aurora. By cutting the first portion of Francisco's line, a parallel was made between the two reactions: both begin with "I have never seen a more ..." only to be followed by completely opposite assessments. Another example follows a few lines later. After Enrique praises Aurora through various clothing metaphors, Clara expresses her wonderment:

CLARA. (*Aside to Aurora*) Does he think you are an article of clothing? What next? I'll blush from embarrassment if he mentions underwear.

The first two sentences were cut, again, because of the desire to keep the focus on the lovers. By allowing Clara too much dialogue, it disrupted from the flow of the developing relationship between Aurora and Enrique. Also, the first sentence explains the joke whereas the line that remained ("I'll blush from embarrassment if he mentions underwear.") stressed the next line of dialogue and also implied two aspects of Clara's character—virtue as well as stupidity—whereas the first sentence only illuminated her lack of intelligent thought.

After four weeks of rehearsal and a fairly smooth tech week (the only discovery being that not enough tile had been ordered to cover the roof, but this was quickly corrected by our technical director Nate Otto), the show opened on 9 November 2006 to an audience generous with applause and to a relieved Friedman, who watched the ensemble embrace the text and excel in comic delivery. The cast enjoyed a successful run, including several sold-out houses and a glowing review from the local press and singling out performances by Angie Fontaine, Matt Clevy, and Alex Kane as Don Félix and bestowing praise for the “hysterical” and “spectacular” production that offered “contemporary sidesplitting comic relief.” Audience favorites also included heretofore unmentioned actors Eli Branson and Brian Collura as Francisco and Luis, making the most of their small but comically-rich parts.

Any time a director opts to direct a comedy, he/she takes a risk in that he hopes that his sense of humor (the rhythm of jokes, the delivery of punch lines, the style and timing of physical comedy) is one that will translate to the audience. Bits of additional business are always inserted in comedies, and the director hopes and prays that the audience will find funny what he and the cast have thought to be funny for several weeks. The problem, however, lies in that both the director and the cast lose objectivity over the course of the four/five week process, making it harder to discern if their creativity remains worthy of inclusion in the performance or needs to be revised or omitted. Audiences thankfully approved of our comedic attempts, but, as with most productions, the audience also provided several moments of enlightenment. Much to my surprise, Juana became an audience favorite because of her sexual nature and constant flirting—an astonishing reaction given that initially I had no idea what to do with the character.

Regardless of the audience’s approval of our work, one does not become a director in educational theatre for glory or recognition, and the same proved true of *Wit’s End*. My memories

of the show do not include the audience reactions or the reviews (I had to search for them online, in fact). Instead, as a director who greatly favors process over product, my memories focus on the generosity of Edward Friedman in allowing me to tinker with and stage his delightful script. I also fondly recall and forever admire the willingness of the cast to venture with me on this project. Time after time, the cast exhibited bravery in exploring and discovering numerous moments of hilarity, and the production's success, in my eyes, will always be for them and because of them.

My goal in staging *Wit's End* was to not only bring two academic departments together in one space for evenings of entertainment, but it was also to introduce the student population at large to the wonders of the *Siglo de Oro*. Before I departed from Vanderbilt, I had planned to direct more Spanish plays (but given the department's mission to provide a wide selection of plays during a student's four years, I would only be able to direct one every five or six years). As a current faculty member at Case Western Reserve University, I look forward to pursuing the same goal, perhaps working with Friedman on his various adaptations, especially *Into the Mist*, a dramatic version of Miguel de Unamuno's 1914 novel *Niebla*. The works of the *Siglo de Oro* are too brilliant and too numerous to continue being ignored by theatre departments, and I can assure that any director who endeavors to stage *Wit's End* or any other Spanish text will find the experience challenging and rewarding, which is the ideal standard for educational theatre. For those directors who enjoy the process more than the product, *Wit's End* and other Spanish classics will offer as much gratification as any other text. The fact that the product will delight audiences is just an added bonus.

Edward H. Friedman is Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of Spanish and Professor of Comparative Literature at Vanderbilt University, where he also serves as director of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. He is editor of *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, a journal founded by Everett W. Hesse in 1948 and focusing on early modern Spanish drama. He is the author of critical studies and creative exercises, including adaptations of several Spanish works, among them Miguel de Unamuno's *Mist (Into the Mist)* [Juan de la Cuesta, 2011] and Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote (Crossing the Line)* [Juan de la Cuesta, 2012] and *El laberinto de amor* [Juan de la Cuesta, forthcoming]. *Wit's End* takes as its inspiration Lope de Vega's *La dama boba* [The Lady Simpleton], a comedy of the early seventeenth century, but *Wit's End* moves in its own direction, notably in the treatment of the female characters.

Jeffrey Ullom (Ph.D., University of Illinois) is assistant professor of theater and Director of Undergraduate Theater Studies at Case Western Reserve University. He is a theater historian, dramaturg, and director, and he has had wide and varied experience in the theater. In his position at Vanderbilt University, he directed eight plays, from Greek tragedy to Sondheim. He recently directed Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* at Case Western. Together with several essays, he is the author of *The Humana Festival: A History of New Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville* (Southern Illinois Press, 2008), and he is completing a book on the Cleveland Play House.

Bilingual Strategies and Homoeroticism in the Translation and Adaptation of Xavier Villaurrutia's *El ausente*

The staging of Xavier Villaurrutia's *The Absent One* was part of the 2012 StageLAB Festival organized by the Department of Drama at the University of Alberta to share and celebrate its faculty's ongoing research. The theme of the biannual event was "In-Between." It called for projects that situated themselves in between text and performance, languages, cultures, theatrical styles, and genres. Given my academic interest in intercultural theatre, I decided to submit a proposal for the translation and adaptation of *El ausente* written by Xavier Villaurrutia (1903-1950), a Mexican playwright and poet I had been researching for some time.

My interest in Xavier Villaurrutia started with his "Nocturnos: Los Ángeles," a long poem that struck me for its unapologetic homoeroticism, especially considering that it was composed in the 1930s. The author equates gay men with angels disguised as mortals and places them in a nocturnal scene as they come together to share a secret known only to them.

Las luces no son tan vivas que logren desvelar el secreto,
el secreto que los hombres que van y vienen conocen,
porque todos están en el secreto,
y nada se ganaría con partirlo en mil pedazos,
sí, por el contrario, es tan dulce guardarlo
y compartirlo sólo con la persona elegida (Gutiérrez, 289).

The men's search for togetherness is underlined by both a search for identity and for the "identical" represented by the Gemini constellation: "como los Gemelos que por vez primera en la vida / se miran de frente, a los ojos, y se abrazaran ya para siempre" (Gutiérrez, 289).

The poem resonates with a modern sensibility, one more suitable to the post-Stonewall era, and surprises for its directness and honesty. When I started my research into Villaurrutia's diverse theatrical works I was expecting to find the same powerful voice, but what I found

instead was a large body of work that addresses exclusively heterosexual themes and characters. Villaurrutia appears to relinquish his queer voice the moment that he writes for a live audience. One can argue that he shied away from the challenge, perhaps because theatre's liveness presented him with too many risks, both artistic and personal. While he was allowed to hold a governmental job, as a gay man he never fully escaped the homophobic attacks of the political establishment, which equated homosexuals with counterrevolutionaries. In fact, the members of *Los contemporáneos*, the literary group to which Villaurrutia belonged and which included other gay writers such as Carlos Pellicer and Salvador Novo, were often the target of vehement criticism (Paz 29). Villaurrutia's silence might have been motivated also by commercial and artistic reasons. José Quiroga argues that Villaurrutia "[...] aimed to be heard by different audiences, some of which could decode his language along the lines of homosexual expression" (Quiroga 52). Whatever the reasons for the author's reticence, I found this silence deafening in light of his candid portrayal of homoerotic desire in "Nocturnos: Los Ángeles."

When I finally discovered Villaurrutia's *El Ausente*, a one-act play he wrote in 1937 and published in the 1943 collection *Autos profanos*, I felt a deep connection to the characters: Fernanda, the wife who maintains her husband's goodness in spite of his betrayal, and especially Pedro, the silent man who cannot find the words to articulate his guilt for having betrayed Fernanda's trust and for having found happiness with another woman. Pedro's complete silence filled my mind with many different voices, but slowly it came to embody the silence of the playwright himself, the very silence I experienced in his theatrical works. Why can't Pedro utter a single word? What is the secret that he must keep? Why is his guilt so overwhelming that he cannot voice it? I wanted to explore Pedro's vacated identity, represented by his lack of a voice, and I came to understand his silence as a lack of vocabulary to express his feelings. His guilt and

desire are just too unfathomable and terrifying for him to relay them verbally. But why would a heterosexual man have such a difficult time confessing his betrayal to his wife? After all, Mexican plays from this time represent marital infidelity quite freely, almost with gusto. Pedro's silence became to me reminiscent of the *secreto* in "Nocturnos: Los Ángeles," and I decided that in my adaptation Pedro would have an affair with a man, a dramaturgical choice that raised the dramatic stakes for a contemporary audience and helped contextualize both Pedro's silence and Villaurrutia's own silence about his homosexuality. A character that does not say anything for the duration of the play and communicates solely through his physicality is surely a fascinating challenge to tackle in the staging of a play, but I felt it was also important to explicate Pedro's inner struggle and flesh out the nature of his silence. I placed Villaurrutia's poem "Nocturnos: Los Ángeles" at the end of the play so that Pedro could finally tell the audience his own version of the story, a story of secrets kept in the dark but also of consuming and unrepentant desires. Together with the gender switch of Pedro's love interest, the addition of this poem represents the most important adaptational strategy.

In *The Absent One* Pedro's male lover shows up at the couple's house claiming that he is moving in with them because Pedro has gambled away all of his possessions and left him with no place to live. María, Fernanda's neighbor, senses the inappropriateness of the situation, and calls the police, a fact that prompts the man to leave. Pedro follows him out, leaving Fernanda in a state of utter despair. In spite of the simplicity of the storyline, the play allows for ample emotional projection, especially in the scenes with Fernanda who is unable to fully comprehend what is happening to her marriage and must emote to convey her deep sorrow, and even more powerfully in the portrayal of Pedro's unspeakable guilt and shame. The adaptation incorporated the music of Chavela Vargas (1919-2012) to underscore emotional moments in the script and

convey the brokenness of the characters. Vargas, who came out of the closet as a lesbian when she was in her eighties, provided a magnificent subtext to the desperation and unutterable sorrow of both Fernanda and Pedro. Their longings are echoed in the affecting lyrics of *Paloma Negra* and *Piensa en mí*.

Bilingualism as Cultural Resistance

As I worked on the translation of both Villaurrutia's play and poem, I became intrigued by the possibility of working with both English and Spanish. I knew that Michelle Rios and Francisco Montaña were fully bilingual and that the other two cast members could do a good job at delivering a believable Spanish, so I decided that I would leave in the translated text selected sections of the original Spanish.

The presence of the source language in translated texts is usually quite sporadic, both in published translations and theatrical *mises en scène*. North American audiences are exposed to the original language of a play only during the occasional touring production of a Noh or Kabuki drama, or in the work of international directors such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, or Tadashi Suzuki. Spectators are usually content with foreign accents and appropriate design choices as means to experience the source culture of the play. The limited number of bilingual theatre companies existing in North America speaks volumes to how little theatre translators, directors, playwrights, and spectators care about this topic. Bilingualism in theatre exists as a limited practice only within large non-Anglophone communities, like in Quebec for the French, or New York City and the Southwest of the U.S. for the Spanish. Even in these cases, however, the choice of language is often univocal with the emphasis placed only on one language.

The theatrical medium always relies on a double translation: firstly, the written translation that might be published and thus must make sense within the monomediality of reading; secondly, the *mise en scène* which draws on the written text but inherently transcends it through the polimediality of the stage. In the interlinguistic translation, the source language is normally limited to what the reader can comprehend through context or what is communicated through cognates and other idiomatic strategies. During the staging the written text transforms, and is transformed by, the audiovisual means of live theatre: stage, lighting, sound, and costume design, as well as acting style and movement. Nevertheless, and quite surprisingly, the written text hardly ever changes in this second translation we called *mise en scène*. It rarely opens up to the possibilities offered by the theatrical medium to clarify and expand on the source language. This is all the more puzzling because the script used in the staging could easily reintegrate some of the source language to engage meaningfully with the original language and culture. I argue not only that it is feasible to conceive of a second linguistic translation, one showcasing specifically the shift from the monomediality of verbal text to the polymediality of theatre, but also that it is important to articulate the cultural and linguistic contexts implicit in all steps of theatre translation. The text delivered by the actors can incorporate more of the source language due to the physicality of the actors' bodies, and the tone and rhythm of their delivery. Moreover, the adoption of intermedial strategies such as videos and screens, and the use of music, lights, and costumes can help to illuminate the foreignness of the text. Following Amy Cook's notion of theatre as a mediatic and synergetic experience capable of blending diverse experiences, I argue that the use of the source language in the target *mise en scène* of a play functions as a "blended space" that encourages the audience to use their creativity and imagination and situates itself as a neutral, in-between space, where spectators engage in a direct experience privileging action over semantic meaning.

[...] language is less a system of *communicating* experience than actually *being* experience; we do not translate words into perception, we perceive in order to understand. It is time to begin to imagine the implications for theatre and performance studies of a shared neural substrate linking imagination and understanding, doing and feeling, fact and fiction, actor and character, me and you (Cook 589).

My translation of Villaurrutia's play aspired to probe how, and how much, one can communicate through languages the audience does not speak. I wanted to explore alternative ways to communicate, specifically how domestication and foreignization of the source text can coexist in the staging of bilingual plays. I purposely kept substantial passages in Spanish but I adopted a number of techniques to make these accessible. The use of cognates, such as "policías," "hipócritas," or "tranquilícese", was the most obvious of these techniques. These words were isolated for maximum dramatic effect. The spectators could not miss them because they were either couched in an English sentence, or they were preceded or followed by a pause. The fact that key words sound almost the same in both languages reassured the audience that they could comprehend the narration, but it also suggested that the source text had to be negotiated and did not offer itself up for easy consumption.

The convention of the "double utterance" was another technique I adopted. When a character said something in Spanish, the interlocutor would provide clues to what was said previously by either asking or answering a question, reiterating the meaning of the utterance in the target language, or providing contextual information. In the following exchange between María and Fernanda, for instance, the meaning of "good for him, bad for me" "Bueno para él, malo para mí" is clarified by the following line:

María: Are you saying that what happened to Pedro is good?
Fernanda: Bueno para él, malo para mí.
María: Bad for you because you love him, I see.

In this instance, the “bad for Fernanda” is clarified by Maria’s explanation: Fernanda’s love for Pedro makes his disappearance painful to bear. On the other hand, the meaning of “bueno para él” (good for him) is made obvious by the juxtaposition of the two propositions that Michelle Rios (as Fernanda) made obvious with clear gestural and vocal tones.

The same happens with the following line, where Fernanda’s question to María about whether she loves her husband is emphatically answered in the target language:

Fernanda: Y qué? No quieres tu al tuyo?
María: Yes, of course, I love my husband.

In the following exchange, Fernanda replies to María’s accusation that Fernanda did not try to find Pedro with “Y por qué crees tú que no lo he buscado?” The two sentences that follow clarify the meaning of the Spanish question by pointing in the direction of “looking” and “finding,” and by the emphatic usage of “did” in “I did try to find him.”

Fernanda: Y por qué crees tú que no lo he buscado? I looked for Pedro. I did try to find him. And if I didn’t look anymore it’s just because I know where he is and who he is with ... That’s why I didn’t do anything to make him come back.
María: Sabes dónde y con quién!
Fernanda: Sí, vecina, sí.
María: Who is it, then? Tell me.
Fernanda: No, I won’t.
María: Porqué no?
Fernanda: Because you already know. Míreme a la cara, María, and tell me you don’t know.

On the other hand, Maria’s shocked reaction “Sabes dónde y con quién!” almost does not need a translation because it echoes the surprise of the audience that did not suspect Fernanda’s awareness of Pedro’s whereabouts. Its meaning, however, is evidenced by the quick dialogue ending with Fernanda unmasking María’s knowledge of Pedro’s betrayal.

My use of the Spanish came from a desire to resist the linguistic and cultural domestication of the source language while exploring alternative ways of making meaning. More specifically, I contend that monolingual translations, mainly those where the target language is exclusive, are not necessarily more useful to deliver the source text's language and culture than those where the source language is incorporated to communicate the foreignness of the text. In theatre, spectators rely on multiple levels of communication, and language is only one of them. This was clear in the scene between Fernanda and Pedro's lover. It is the first time he appears on stage, and up until this moment the audience has had no reason to believe that Pedro's lover isn't a woman:

Man: Siento mucho molestarla, señora ... pero no puedo hacer otra cosa ... Me veo obligado a dar éste paso, porque su marido ...
Fernanda: I don't know who you are. Please leave.
Man: Señora...
Fernanda: I said go away.
Man: Déjeme decirle, señora, que si estoy aquí es porque su marido me ha obligado...
Fernanda: This isn't happening. It's not true. Please leave right now.
Man: Déjeme terminar, señora, y verá cómo si es posible y cómo si es verdad.

I wanted Man's entrance to create mystery and disrupt the audience's heteronormative expectation of Pedro's lover being a woman. At first Man speaks only in Spanish to Fernanda because I wanted him to function as the "other," a linguistic and sexual other that refuses to be codified and thus carries ambiguity and danger. In the context of this scene, his words matter less than the sense of alterity he embodies, both by speaking a foreign language and by being a gay man. The body language of both characters clarified the dramatically charged situation perfectly. His was dictated by anger and aggressiveness, hers by a sense of pride and fear. In the staging of this scene, as he moved forward, at times looking quite menacing, Fernanda leaned on the

sewing machine for balance and support. Fernanda only speaks English here because she wants to distance herself from the young man. They are different, and their polarization is evidenced by the languages they speak. However, in spite of the Spanish, I felt that the conflict between the two characters was clearly defined by their body language, delivery, and vocal tones.

Another moment in the play that highlighted the foreign quality of the text is the opening scene, which finds Fernanda alone on stage sitting at her sewing machine. She looks pensive and broods over her husband's twenty-day absence. She is stitching a red shirt that she places on a mannequin moments later. She takes a swig from a bottle of tequila, and then she begins to sing "Paloma Negra," a song she performs in Spanish. Instead of alienating the audience with the foreignness of the song, Fernanda engages it by embodying the desperation of the melody: she approaches the mannequin, dresses it with the red shirt, hugs it, touches it longingly, sings to it, and then pushes it away. The mannequin stands for Pedro, but also symbolizes his vacated masculinity, a fact that is reiterated via the male suits hanging from the ceiling. It is as if the presence of men was there as a memory, all pervasive, yet physically missing at the same time. Michelle Rios' performance as Fernanda and her vocal features were rich in nuance and translated the emotional turmoil of the character even in the absence of semantic meaning. Her erratic gestures and the lamenting and mournful quality of her singing provided an apt commentary to Chavela Vargas' tale of lost love and heartbrokenness.

The Absent One used both languages effectively because it provided the audience with meaningful linguistic scaffolding. It placed the audience in a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which Lev Vygotsky defines as a space of cognitive growth negotiated between a novice and a more accomplished individual. Vygotsky argued that every learner has three levels of

development: the “actual developmental level” which represents what the learner can already accomplish on his/her own without any assistance from external sources; the “potential developmental level” which represents what the learner is able to achieve in the future; and the “zone of proximal development,” which is an intermediate level representing what the learner can accomplish with the facilitation provided by outside help. Vygotsky defines this zone as “the distance between the actual developmental level as independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, 86). *The Absent One* offered the audience a mediated learning context to make sense of the Spanish, a language most people in the theatre did not speak. The theatrical context, which included the *mise en scène*, the body language of the performers, and linguistic clues in the spoken text, made the task accomplishable, even in cases where Spanish was prominently featured, such in the opening and closing songs, and in the first entrance of the Man. In his landmark book *Thinking and Speech*, Vygotsky explains his ‘functional method of dual stimulation’ as a procedural technique where carefully planned mediation enables and sustains cognitive learning: “One set of stimuli fulfills the function of the object on which the subject’s activity is directed. The second functions as signs that facilitate the organization of this activity” (Vygotsky, 1987, 127). I argue that in the staged production of *The Absent One*, the Spanish text represented the first set of stimuli that spectators recognized as a task to be conquered, while the totality of the *mise en scène* provided the second set of stimuli in the form of stage signs that made the task possible. The mediation functioned as a negotiating process where foreign content became familiar to the audience.

The production of *The Absent One* problematized meaning-making and showed how translation and adaptation for the theatre are the outcome of complex linguistic and cultural

negotiations that are all more successful when they manage to create slippages in signification. It showed approximation as a desirable cognitive operation and proved the linguistic and cultural significance of interweaving the false security of monoglossic drama into the true insecurity of polyglossic theatre.

Bilingualism is easier to accomplish in theatrical productions than in written translations, and it also has the potential to move the discussion of theatre translation into what Yasemin Yildiz defines as the “postmonolingual,” a term that “refers to a field of tension in which the monolingual paradigm continues to assert itself and multilingual practices persist or reemerge” (5). Bilingualism reminds the audience of the source text by situating unapologetically its language and culture at the core of the target *mise en scène*. In the meantime, it fosters new strategies to negotiate languages and cultures on stage. A reviewer who attended opening night of *The Absent One* noted that the production “certainly opened my eyes as to the possibilities of foreign-language plays on Edmonton’s stages” (Marynowski). One should hope this happens more frequently in both the translation and *mise en scène* of plays.

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The Absent One

(from Xavier Villaurrutia's *El ausente*)
translated and adapted by Stefano Muneroni

Original Cast

Michelle Rios:	Fernanda
Michelle Brown:	María
Doug Mertz:	Pedro
Francisco Montaña:	Man
Nicholas Díaz:	Guitarist
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Simon Bloom:	Director
John Raymond:	Stage Manager

A room that serves as both dining room and Fernanda's sewing room. The minimal furniture and décor give away the low middle-class background of the family. On the right side there's a sewing machine and a mannequin, on the left a sideboard with bottles of liquor that have been opened. Fernanda is alone on stage, sewing a man's red shirt. Men's suits are hanging from the ceiling, filling the room with a sense of vacated masculinity; the presence of men is there as a memory, all pervasive yet missing at the same time. After a few moments Fernanda gets up and places the shirt on the mannequin. The gesture turns into one of longing. She embraces the mannequin but she pushes it away after a few seconds. She looks around restlessly and then takes a swig from a bottle of tequila. The guitarist starts to play "Paloma negra" by Chavela Vargas. She joins in the singing, at first simply muttering a few words, then with more conviction, and finally with full abandon. There's great sadness in her voice but also depth and strength. María, the neighbor, enters in the middle of the song and unseen observes Fernanda with great interest. When Fernanda sees her, the magic of the song and the memories it had stirred are interrupted, leaving behind a palpable sense of displacement for Fernanda, and an awkward silence from both women.

Fernanda (*singing*): Ya me canso de llorar y no amanece
Ya no sé si maldecirte o por ti rezar
Tengo miedo de buscarte y de encontrarte
Donde me aseguran mis amigos que te vas
Hay momentos en que quisiera mejor rajarme
Y arrancarme ya los clavos de mi penar
Pero mis ojos se mueren sin mirar tus ojos
Y mi cariño con la aurora te vuelve a esperar

Y agarraste por tu cuenta la parranda
Paloma negra paloma negra dónde, dónde andarás?
Ya no juegues con mi honra parrandera
Si tus caricias han de ser mías, de nadie más

Y aunque te amo con locura ya no vuelves
Paloma negra eres la reja de un penar
Quiero ser libre vivir mi vida con quien yo quiera
Dios dame fuerza que me estoy muriendo por irlo a buscar

Y agarraste por tu cuenta las parrandas ...

María: Buenas tardes, Fernanda.

Fernanda: (*Startled*) Buenas tardes, María. What a surprise! Estaba escuchando la Vargas. La mitica, Chavela Vargas ... Her music always takes me somewhere else, sabes!

María: Of course ... me encanta también her music comes from the heart.

Fernanda: Yes, you're right ... Es música que llega al corazón.

Silence

(Fernanda and María start speaking at the same time. Something trivial. Perhaps a comment about the weather, or an invitation to sit down from Fernanda. They chuckle but the silence that follows is still one of uneasiness.)

María: I brought you some pastelitos. They're fresh. I just made them this morning.

Fernanda: Qué ricos! Gracias.

María: De nada. We are neighbors, good neighbors to each other for years. What is it now? Five?

Fernanda: Sí, cinco años.

(Pause)

María: Have you heard anything?

Fernanda: Nothing.

María: Veinte días hoy?

Fernanda: Sí, twenty days.

María: Twenty days is a long time. (Pause) Nothing at all, huh?

Fernanda: Nada.

María: People don't just disappear though. I wonder if your relatives know something. Your friends? Did you call them?

Fernanda: You have asked the same questions twenty times and I told you twenty times that I heard nada. Isn't that enough?

María: Claro, claro.

Fernanda: Unless you want me to give you a different answer, vecina! Qué quieres? Do you know something I don't?

María: No, no. It's just that I would like you to tell me something more than a simple 'nada.'

Fernanda: He left twenty days ago and hasn't come back yet. Eso es todo.

María: No, Fernanda, eso no es todo. Aren't you wondering what he has been doing all this time? What he is doing right now? Or if something bad happened to him?

Fernanda: He's fine. Nothing bad happened to Pedro. I would have heard if something bad happened to him. Bad news spreads like wildfire.

María: Are you saying that what happened to Pedro is good?

Fernanda: Bueno para él, malo para mí.

María: Bad for you because you love him, I see.

Fernanda: Y qué? No quieres tú al tuyo?

María: Yes, of course, I love my husband too.

Fernanda: You don't sound very enthusiastic.

María: Sí, pero ...

Fernanda: Pero qué?

María: I think I would love him more if he would ...

Fernanda: Vamos, finish saying what you mean.

María: If one day he left ... for a few days, only for a few days. And then he came back, after a few days, I wouldn't mind.

Fernanda: Estás loca! Don't you see me? I haven't slept in days, I can hardly eat. Do you want to feel like I do ... like this?

María: I said a few days, only a few. My case is different. You said you can't sleep now that your husband disappeared?

Fernanda: Sí.

María: Well, I can't sleep or eat when my Antonio is around. He has been with me since the day we married; and the closer he comes to me the less I sleep, and the less I eat. (*She grabs a pastelito from the plate she brought.*)

Fernanda: I understand. Pero no, no es mi caso.

María: But you know that Pedro will come back, right?

Fernanda: I know nothing.

María: We women know. Nosotras lo sabemos! You know it; you feel that Pedro will return. If I were you I know I would feel it.

Fernanda: Cómo? If Antonio never left, how can you be so sure you would know that he'd return to you? Cómo puedes presentirlo?

María: Antonio never left but I feel that one day he will ... only for a few days, but he will leave.

Fernanda: It's easier to miss them than to get them to come back.

María: But you haven't done anything to make him come back. You didn't even try to find out where he is.

Fernanda: Y por qué crees tú que no lo he buscado? I looked for Pedro. I did try to find him. And if I didn't look anymore it's just because I know where he is and who he is with ... That's why I didn't do anything to make him come back.

María: Sabes dónde y con quién!?

Fernanda: Sí, vecina, sí.

María: Who is it, then? Tell me.

Fernanda: No, I won't.

María: Por qué no?

Fernanda: Because you already know. Mírame a la cara, María, and tell me you don't know. You do, of course you do. Everybody knows. That pendejo who begs for money in the street knows and asks every morning "Qué ha sabido de Pedro?" The neighbors across the hall know, and so do those down the hall. My compadre knows and now stops by every night for no reason while before he never did. Lo saben ... the fact that you know is proof that everybody else already knows.

María: Yes, we all knew but I thought that asking would be...

Fernanda: Qué? Más piadoso? Pretending you didn't know and asking day after day the same question, la misma pregunta para obtener...

María: The same answer...

Fernanda: Exactly! The same lie to hide a secret everybody already knows. Hipócritas, we are all hipócritas. Compassionate hypocrite you, and spineless hypocrite myself. I should gather everybody to tell them the same thing, "Stop lying. You all know. So spare me your questions, your pats on the shoulder, your hopeful words, your suppositions, and conjectures..."

María: But don't you feel, in some way, inside of you, that Pedro will return to you. In spite of the evidence, don't you feel de cualquier modo que...

Fernanda: De cualquier modo? No, I don't feel it.

María: I do.

Fernanda: I'm glad for you.

María: They all come back eventually.

Fernanda: But yours doesn't even want to leave, no es eso?

María: (*Sighing.*) Eso es! (*Pause.*) If Pedro came back this very minute what would you tell him?

Fernanda: (*Running out of patience.*) Le diría que se fuera.

María: Cómo a su Pedro? You'd tell him to leave?

Fernanda: No, to you. Vete!

María: No need to be rude. I'm going.

Fernanda: Go gossip some more. Find someone who doesn't know yet.

María: What harm would it do you if I did, anyway?

Fernanda: Nothing, I suppose. (*Pause*) Do you want to know what I would tell Pedro if he came back right now?

María: Yes, yes.

Fernanda: Twenty days. In twenty days I haven't stopped thinking about the words I'd use; their tone, how I would make them sound and mean. Pues bien, le diría sencillamente. (*Looking straight into María's eyes.*) "Pedro, if you are not sure you want to stay here with me, go right now and this time stay away forever. Do

you understand me? Para siempre.”

María: Just that? You would just say that to Pedro?

Fernanda: No, wait. Le diría: *(Pause)* “Pedro, if you have come back to stay with me in this house, forever, don’t say anything. Not a word. I don’t want to know anything. Don’t explain, don’t ask for forgiveness. Just stay ... para siempre.

(At the beginning of Fernanda’s last lines Pedro comes on stage, unseen to the women. Pedro looks disheveled. In his eyes there’s a profound exhaustion and an indefinable sorrow that reveals itself in his silence. He walks without looking at them and without making any noise. The women see him only when he moves a chair to sit down, except he does not sit. He stands awkwardly, unsure he can, or should, reclaim his habitual position at the dinner table. The women are overwhelmed. The guitar plays briefly.)

María: Oh, well. I should ...

Fernanda: Yes, of course.

María: Go, right? I should go.

Fernanda: Sí, claro. You should go, María.

María: Sí, sí. Gladly.

(María leaves happily to inform the neighbors about the exciting news. Fernanda approaches Pedro, who does not look at her. The guitar plays until Fernanda speaks.)

Fernanda: You came back. I knew you would. I didn’t try to find you, or force you to come back because I knew it. Sabía que volverías. I lied to the neighbor before, when I told her I didn’t feel that you would ever return. Deep down, I hoped ... I felt it. I don’t know what would be worse. If you had left never to come back it would have been like you had died and I would have cried for you, Pedro. But you came back! You did! Has vuelto! It’s like you resurrected before I had time to cry for you. Because I did not cry for you. I didn’t cry because I knew it was just a matter of time before you returned. And now you are here, in front of me, silent. Has vuelto, al fin! *(Pedro opens his mouth as if to speak)* Don’t say anything, please. It’s better if you don’t. De qué me serviría oírte decir que estás arrepentido? I know you are sorry right now. But you can’t be sorry for what will happen tomorrow or in a few days when you might regret having returned to me and will leave again, and then you’ll feel sorry and return again, and again. Entonces es mejor que no digas nada. *(Pedro looks at her for the first time.)* You are not the same. I look at you, and you are different. Your eyes, the way you look and move. Do you know why I don’t want to hear you speak? Sabes por qué? I fear your voice will be that of a stranger; that it will tell me you are not you. *(Pedro looks out at the audience.)* Listen to me, por favor. In the past twenty days I had time to think and I was determined to tell you that this is the last time I will take you back, que ésta es la última vez que permito que vuelvas conmigo. I imagined every word I would say to you. I repeated those words to María a few minutes ago but now they’re stuck in my throat. I don’t know lo que me pasa, but I can’t say them. Seeing you like this ... makes me ... *(Pause. Fernanda gets a glass of milk and offers it to Pedro.)* Look at your hands. Go wash them, Pedro. A lavarte. We’ll talk later, or we won’t talk at all.

(Pedro goes to the bathroom while Fernanda sets a napkin next to the cookies. At this moment, she sees a young and attractive man standing and looking at her. Man is wearing fashionable

clothes and is fully aware of his erotic appeal. The two stare at each other for a few seconds, sizing up their competitors. It's like a dance of intents which might turn mortal at any moment. They both know Pedro is the battleground. The Man shows the confidence of someone who has nothing to lose, or someone who knows he has already won. His is an arrogance that comes from youth's sense of omnipotence. Fernanda, on the other hand, is shocked and angered. Her dignified behavior does not give away her feelings, but we catch glimpses of her growing desperation and humiliation in the conversation that follows. Music underscores this entire transition).

Man: Siento mucho molestarla, señora ... pero no puedo hacer otra cosa ... Me veo obligado a dar este paso, porque su marido ...

Fernanda: I don't know who you are. Please leave.

Man: Señora...

Fernanda: I said go away.

Man: Déjeme decirle, señora, que si estoy aquí es porque su marido me ha obligado...

Fernanda: This isn't happening. It's not true. Please leave right now.

Man: Déjeme terminar, señora, y verá cómo sí es posible y cómo sí es verdad. *(Pause)* During the time your lazy husband spent with me he went through all my savings, hocked all my things, one by one, and gambled away my furniture. The only thing he hasn't pawned or played yet is me.

Fernanda: Enough of you and your things. I don't need to know all this. No tengo por qué oírlo. Salga de aquí, por favor!

Man: Not a chance! Now that I've lost my house, you see, I have no place else to go. Pedro me ha obligado a venir aquí.

Fernanda: He didn't make you come here. Don't you say that, you hear me?

Man: En cierto modo, sí, señora, puesto que me ha dejado en la calle. Where do you think I should go, huh? Sleep under a bridge? Don't mistake me, señora, I'm not that kind of a man. You see, now, I have no choice but to play house with you and Pedro, querida señora Fernanda.

Fernanda: Pero qué dice usted!?

Man: You heard me.

Fernanda: Jamás!

Man: Your husband lied to you about me, no es eso?

Fernanda: Sí, eso es.

Man: He did the same to me. We're in the same boat. And even though we might not like it much, we are going to live together, under the same roof, with Pedro ... como dos hermanitos, está claro?

Fernanda: I beg of you, leave, leave right now.

(Man smiles as he looks around at the room with a sense of ownership.)

Man: I'm sure you'll be happier with Pedro here than with him gone. I may be a bad man but I am not a bad person.

Fernanda: Salga, salga de aquí.

Man: Are you going to call the neighbors? I don't think it's such a good idea.

Fernanda: *(subdued)* I am asking you to leave. Leave me alone, please.

Man: I see you're starting to be reasonable. No need to overreact. We can discuss the details of our new arrangements like civilized people, can't we?

Fernanda: *(screaming)* María, María.

Man: I'm sorry it has to be this way.

(At this moment, Pedro appears. He has washed himself up and combed his hair. He is clearly in

shock when he sees Man. After a moment he sits at the table.)

Man: You're here, Pedro! What a nice surprise!

Fernanda: Don't talk to him. No le hables, Pedro, por favor no le hables!

Man: Don't worry about that, señora Fernanda, ... o quizás pueda llamarte simplemente Fernanda. Pedro and I can go hours without saying a word. Truth is I have never missed his voice. There's many other ways to speak, me entiendes.

María: Can I come in?

Fernanda: Sí, pasa, pasa María.

Man: Are you going to tell your friend what's happening between us three? Why don't you just put an ad in the paper, it would be more effective, I'm sure.

María: Can I help you with anything?

(Fernanda goes to talk to María. Man observes them with a triumphant look at first but then his attitude change to one of concern. He interrupts them.)

Man: Tell her what we were discussing, or I'll do it. Tell her the wonderful news that you invited me into your house to spend some time with you and Pedro, and that tonight we are going to celebrate by dining all together for the first time. You see, Fernanda here was calling you because she would like you to be so kind as to go to the market and buy some beer, and whatever else looks good to you. *(Man retrieves a bill from his pocket and places it in María's hands.)* Para la cena contamos con usted, desde luego. We are all going to be good friends, eventually, so why not start today? Te llamas María, verdad? It's a pretty name.

(María looks confused and does not know what to do. She looks at Fernanda, who signals her to go. She leaves with the bill.)

María: I'll be back.

(Silence. Guitar music underscores this transition.)

Man: Keeping quiet is a quality you both have. I wonder who taught it to whom.

Fernanda: Salga usted de aquí! ... *(crying softly)* por favor.

Man: El favor que voy a hacerle es quedarme. Tranquilícese. *(Sits down)* I told you we are going to live together ... very happily, I hope. I'll do the shopping and cook, while you do your sewing, or whatever it is you do with that thing *(pointing to the sewing machine)*. Pedro likes to eat well and milk won't keep him around *(grabbing the glass of milk)*. I know what he likes. We'll give this to the kitty. You must have a cat! *(Pause. Man looks around the room with interest)*. Truth is, the house is not bad. I'll take a look at the rest. You don't mind, Fernanda, do you? *(Goes off stage. Fernanda waits until he is gone to speak)*.

Fernanda: Pedro! Pedro, mírame por favor. Pedro! I feel like I'm dreaming, mírame! Help me wake up from this dream, this nightmare. Este puto bewitched you. Y yo tengo miedo, Pedro. I am scared. Dile que se vaya, dile que se vaya en este momento, por favor *(Loud. Pedro is defeated; he looks at her and shakes his head. There's nothing he can, or wants to do)* Tell him to go, you hear me? Tell him to go, and if you won't tell him to leave right this minute you can go with him. Go, vete, vete, vete con él.

Man: Where would you like us to go, huh? We only have this place. Calm down and you'll realize that my situation, *(signaling to Pedro)* our situation, is just as difficult as yours. We're going to hate each other at first, but I know that in time we'll get used to each other. It's just a matter of time.

Fernanda: Lo oyes, Pedro? Lo oyes?

Man: Claro que me oye. Pedro might be mute but he hears well enough. He doesn't speak because he doesn't want to bother with chit chat. Pero, no te cuesta ningún trabajo oír, verdad? Tell her you hear everything, Pedro. (*Man puts a hand on Pedro's shoulder. He whispers the last line in Pedro's ear. It's like an electric current hits Pedro's body. Fernanda sees it and sits down on a chair, defeated. Triumphantly, Man goes to a cupboard and finds a bottle of tequila.*) ... Tenemos suerte, Pedro. I just found something that won't make you sick like milk does. (*He pours two glasses. He gives one to Pedro and takes a sip from his own glass. Then he passes the bottle to Pedro.*) Offer some to the lady, she looks upset. This is just a traguito para empezar la fiesta. María should be here soon with some more booze. (*Silence*) I like the house. I really do. I would add a few touches here and there, pero la casa me gusta bastante. It needs different curtains, more colorful, and some pictures on the walls. I left all my stuff with the doorman of my building (*testing the ground*) but we'll discuss this in the future, and clearly with everybody's approval. We'll let Pedro decide what he likes. (*Fernanda gets up as if to go.*) Where are you going, Fernanda. Why don't you relax? (*The sound of steps outside the door*) I think María is back.

(*María enters*)

María: Here is your money. It was so new I didn't want to spend it. I brought something else though, someone else really, and if Fernanda says it is fine I will invite them to come in.

(*Pedro gets up. Fernanda is visibly shaken.*)

Man: Except that la señora Fernanda doesn't want anybody to come in, verdad, señora?

Fernanda: A quién has traído, María?

María: A los policías (*pointing in the direction of the audience*). Shall I let them in?

Man: (*To Fernanda*) Are you going to let your neighbor meddle in our business? The arrangement I have proposed is good for me and for you ... Oyeme bien, Fernanda, porque si yo salgo...

Fernanda: I know, if you leave you won't leave alone. Is that what you were going to say?

Man: You guessed well.

Fernanda: Let them in, María.

Man: Un momento, espera un momento ... I don't need a scandal. I didn't come here to fight with you. On the contrary, I proposed a way of living together, in peace. I see you don't want that, so I will go (*he looks at Pedro*) if that's what you want ... así es lo que quiere, Fernanda? (*Pause*) Y, ahora, Pedro, adiós. (*Man leaves. After a few seconds Pedro gets up and follows him without saying a word. His are the motions of a sleepwalker. He turns once to look at Fernanda and then leaves. Fernanda follows him as if to stop him, then she returns. María catches her as she is about to fall down. The two stay locked in this position until the end of the scene. They both sit on the floor. María comforts Fernanda and strokes her hair. Oddly, María looks serene, almost happy. Fernanda is almost in a trance. The scene is somber; no crying, no overt drama, just sadness and resignation. For Fernanda, knowledge comes also with some kind of comfort.*)

María: He's gone.

Fernanda: You're right. We do know. We women feel it when our husbands are coming back.

María: You feel it?

Fernanda: No ... He is gone for good.

María: Yes.

Fernanda: He wasn't the same man. The one who came back no era el mismo. Le viste las manos? Le viste los ojos? No eran los suyos, María. I didn't want him to speak because I was afraid his voice would be different, like that of a man who has been resurrected from the dead, like in a miracle. You see, I am not sure Pedro was alive. *(Pause.)* Now I know he is dead. He won't come back and I'll never see him again. I didn't cry a tear in all the days he was gone but now I feel the immense void left by those who leave forever... el vacío que dejan en el pecho de los que nos quedamos. I feel this void filling with his spirit, his memories, and my own solitude ... I am not sure whether I can cry for him, but if you told me, if anyone told me that Pedro was a good man, I would agree. I'd say yes, "Pedro was a good man." No ahora que vino, sino antes, y siempre, Pedro era tan bueno! Tan bueno! He was good. A good man.
(Music starts and María starts humming "Piensa en mí" by Chavela Vargas. Fernanda joins in).

María & Fernanda: Si tienes un hondo penar
piensa en mí;
si tienes ganas de llorar
piensa en mí.
Ya ves que venero
tu imagen divina,
tu párvula boca
que siendo tan niña,
me enseñó a pecar.

Piensa en mí
cuando sufras,
cuando llores
también piensa en mí.

Cuando quieras
quitarme la vida,
no la quiero para nada,
para nada me sirve sin ti.

(At the end of the song, the music transitions to a more somber melody. Lights dim. Pedro appears. He is there but he can't be seen by the two women. As the music fades out, he starts to recite his poem. At the end of the piece, he looks at Fernanda one last time.)

Pedro: The streets flow smoothly through the night.
The lights are opaque enough to hide the secret.
The secret known only to the men who ceaselessly come and go.
They all know the secret and guard it jealously.
Nothing would come of sharing it.
The secret is sweet and enjoyed best with the chosen ones.
If they all uttered in unison the one word in their mind,
the six letters of the word "desire" would appear in the sky like a resplendent scar.
They would form a constellation more lasting than all the others;
A constellation that burns like sex in the hollowed body of the night,

Like the Gemini who see each other's faces and eyes for the first time, and spend the rest of their lives embracing.

Thirsty men move like a river in the street.
They walk, they stop, they stare at each other, dare to smile, and form unpredictable couples...
There are corners and benches in the shadows.
Blinding lights suddenly cut indefinable shapes on deep riverbanks, and doors open at the softest touch.

For a moment, the river of men slows down,
Stops for an instant, paralyzed, deaf, longing like a heart caught between two spasms;
Then its tide returns, eager to begin again.
A new thrusting pulse, a throbbing heartbeat
Bring to the street new parched bodies.
They cross once and again, take off and float close to the ground.
They swim standing up,
So miraculously that nobody would ever doubt they are really walking.

They are Angels who descended to earth with invisible ladders;
They come from the sea, that is the mirror of the sky, on boats made of shadows and smoke,
To fuse and disguise themselves among men,
To surrender their foreheads to the thighs of women,

(Fernanda looks at Pedro.)

To let other hands feverishly touch their bodies,
To let other bodies search for theirs until they are finally found,
Like lips find themselves when they close and know they are 'one.'

(María looks at Pedro.)

They come to tire their gaping mouths,
To exhaust their tongues of fire,
To spell out the songs, the vows, the sensual words
In which men have coalesced the mystery of flesh, blood, and desire.
Their names are wondrous and simple: Miguel, Paco, Francisco, or Luis.
They are distinguishable from mortals only by their beauty.

(Man appears and stands behind Pedro.)

They walk, they stop, they stare at each other, dare to smile, and form unpredictable couples...
They smile maliciously in hotel elevators where they can still practice slow vertical flight.
There are heavenly marks on their naked bodies: signs, stars, and blue letters.

They allow themselves to fall into beds and sink into pillows so they can feel again what it means to be still in the clouds.
But they shut their eyes to yield more utterly to the pleasures of their incarnation.
And when they sleep, they dream not of angels but of men.

The End

Xavier Villaurrutia (Author) (1903-1950) is one of the most important figures of modern Mexican literature. Together with the artists known as los contemporáneos, he contributed to the modernization of Mexico's literature and drama. He founded a number of literary magazines including *El hijo prodigo*, *Ulises*, and *Contemporáneos*, but he is mainly known for his collections of poetry *Reflejos*, *Nocturnos*, and *Nostalgia de la muerte*. His plays *Invitación a la muerte* and *Tragedia de las equivocaciones*, and the anthology *Autos profanos* are deeply influenced by North American playwrights whom Villaurrutia studied at Yale. Many of his plays reflect an artistic preoccupation with death, solitude and alienation, and articulate surrealist themes and topics. Villaurrutia's legacy is celebrated in Mexico through an annual prestigious literary prize named after him.

Stefano Muneroni (Translator) is Assistant Professor of Intercultural Theatre at the University of Alberta. He is a theatre historian, dramaturg and translator who has taught in Italy, England, the U.S., and Canada. Recent dramaturgical credits include *Yerma*, *Angels in America*, *The American Clock*, *Tales of the Lost Formicans*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Toxic Bus Incident*, and *Old Times*. Recent translations include Xavier Villaurrutia's *El ausente*, Osvaldo Dragún's *Tres historias para ser contadas*, and Brad Levinson's *A Ritual of Faith*. He received grants to conduct research in Honduras, Mexico and Argentina, was awarded the Andrew Mellon Predoctoral Fellowship for 2007-2008, and is the recipient of a 2012 KIAS Cluster Grant to research the post 9/11 Mexican-American border. He has published academic articles on Latin American theatre, religion and drama, and translation.

Neda Nezhdana

THE SUICIDE OF LONELINESS

**A Tragic Farce
with 12 Steps, One Pause and One Fall**

CAST

HUMANS:

HE: – a more or less young man

SHE: – of about the same age as HE

CATS:

TOMCAT: – a man in black

CAT: – a woman in white } (with feline-like features)

(DEAD) BODY – a lifeless something ([dummy] no actor required)

Remark: *When the CATS are in action, the HUMANS freeze; when the HUMANS are in action, the CATS disappear from the stage.*

ACT I

Step 1

*Flat roof of a high-rise building topped with dish antennas here and there.
The edge of the roof is bordered by a low metal railing. In the background a canopied penthouse
covering the stairway and elevator shaft. Night. Early May when it's warm by day,
but still chilly by night.
Dim light of stars, moon and windows. The CATS appear from the door of the penthouse.
They move lithely with a proud bearing and look around the roof.*

TOMCAT:

Seems we're alone here. How do you like it?

CAT:

So-so...

TOMCAT:

Super-pooper?

CAT:

Rather super than pooper; I'd say – more like half a pooper or even a quarter of a pooper.

TOMCAT:

Well, do we stay here or find something else?

CAT:

Oh no, this is the sixth roof we're on. Why look for anything else. By the time we find it the night will be over. Did we come here to celebrate or to slink up yet some other dirty stairways?

TOMCAT:

I'm not against the choice, am I, baby? Settle down.

CAT:

(Sits down closer to the edge of the roof). Look how the clouds are closing in on the moon. Once they shut it off, our feast will go to the dogs.

TOMCAT:

What dogs are you talking about?

CAT:

Never mind, it's just a trite phrase. A feast of the full moon without a moon isn't worth a snap.

TOMCAT:

Why be the cat killed by worry, baby? A moon hid by clouds will remain a moon. Makes no difference when we know that it's full and that it exists.

CAT:

For me it's not enough. I have to see it, feel it.

TOMCAT:

I knew that you were a sensitive sort, but not to such an extent.

CAT:

You'll know better now. Seems Ruddy's late.

TOMCAT:

Remember how that fop bragged that he'd filch a pack of cream?

CAT:

(Tenderly) He's not a fop at all. A daredevil that's what he is, unlike the others I know. Now what's a Moon Feast without cream?

TOMCAT:

I'd like to see him crawling up the high steps with a pack of cream in his teeth.

CAT:

I've been lugging my kittens up and down those steps for years. No big deal. Listen, how will he find us?

TOMCAT:

That's a good question, baby. Guess I'll have to "mark" our territory.

CAT:

Uh, what a stink! Do it somewhere else.

TOMCAT:

What a fraidy-cat you are.

TOMCAT goes to the other side of the roof and marks his "territory."

Presently a man – HE – comes out of the open door of the penthouse. Lanky, smart looking, dressed in ankle-low black, he wears a backpack. Once in the open, he pulls the BODY out onto the stage, heaves it on his back and carries it to the proscenium where he drops it to the stage floor. Catches his breath. Takes a look around the stage, produces a flashlight, goes to one side of the penthouse and attaches something (small video camera) to the wall. Pockets the flashlight, takes the BODY by its legs and drags it behind the penthouse.

All the time HE pays no attention to the CATS.

CAT:

Sh-sh, hush. Do you see what I see?

TOMCAT:

Yeah, the same man with the body we've seen on five roofs before.

The next moment a woman – SHE: – emerges from the penthouse. She wears a nice long evening dress. Her pretty face is marred by a sad look. At her sight HE: hides behind the penthouse, takes a mobile phone out of his pocket, dials a number, and whispers something into the phone.

TOMCAT:

Is this a date, or what?

CAT:

Unlikely, because he's hiding from her. I bet he's saying something about her over the phone. I wonder what he's saying.

TOMCAT:

Listen, what if we make ourselves scarce?

CAT:

What makes you so frightened?

TOMCAT:

I'm not frightened, just cautious.

CAT:

I want to see what happens next.

TOMCAT:

All right, let's go to the other side of the roof to keep out of harm's way.

The CATS slink off to one side. As HE watches keenly from behind the penthouse, SHE approaches the railing and stops.

STEP 2

SHE looks into the darkness beyond the roof as if bewitched, then produces a little object, drops it into the abyss and counts the seconds of the object's impact below. HE stealthily walks up to her from behind.

HE:

The moon looks like a deformed sun.

SHE:

(Turns around, frightened) What?

HE:

(Approaches) It's a full moon today. Looks like the sun, but very tortured, doesn't it?

SHE:

(Retreats one step) I don't know.

HE:

(Approaches one more step) Do you know that a full moon attracts sleepwalkers? Are you a sleepwalker by any chance?

SHE:

Not by any chance *(steps back from the railing)*.

HE:

Everything's clear then.

SHE:

What's so clear to you?

HE:

Excuse me for the intrusion, but you chose the wrong place.

SHE:

(Turns her head around to face him) What?

HE:

I said that you chose a wrong place for what you intend to do. Take a look what's down there – nothing but garbage cans...

SHE makes a sharp turn and goes to the other side of the roof. HE follows her.

HE:

Well, this place isn't the best either. A children's playground is down there. Imagine what the kids will see next morning? A child's psyche is so sensitive. Why injure it? *(SHE retreats still farther)*. Don't do it, don't!

SHE:

(Without turning round) How do you know what I intend to do?

HE:

I see it in your eyes.

SHE:

(Without turning round) That's not true. You don't see them. You see only my back.

HE:

(Comes closer) So what? I see them in my mind... Big eyes full of despair. You look down into the black abyss and it attracts you ... *(comes closer one step)*.

SHE:

(Retreats) Don't come closer.

HE:

Why shouldn't I? I can stand wherever I like. Here ... *(comes closer)* ... or here. What if I, too, want to go flying down the roof just like you...

SHE:

(Looks at him intently) No, you wouldn't.

HE:

Why not?

SHE:

You're not that type.

HE:

How do you know?

SHE:

Judging by your voice.

HE:

So how's my voice like?

SHE:

Ironic.

HE:

Do you really think you're what you pretend to be? Not at all. Had I met you on a street I would have never believed it. At one time, though, I thought that taking a dive was the best solution. You fly through the air like a bird, and the next moment you blink out. Besides, it's so simple – without any gun, noose or poison. Just like stepping out of a window.

SHE:

What made you change your mind?

HE:

You see I live on the ground floor – jumping out of a window would be more like improving my health than ruining it. You got the same problem? You live on a ground floor as well?

SHE:

No, on the first floor. But that's not the point.

HE:

I guess it's more convenient jumping from a roof, the more so in an evening dress.

SHE:

What's my dress got to do with it?

HE:

Right you are; it doesn't. What's important for you is the roof of a ten-story house. But there's one thing you overlooked.

SHE:

Exactly what?

HE:

Can you imagine how you'll look like after biting the dust?

SHE:

I don't care.

HE:

Oh yes you do. You've put on a nice evening dress, high-heeled shoes and undies to match the outfit.

SHE:

Stop being rude.

HE:

Judging from your reaction, everything's OK with the undies. Now imagine yourself lying down there. On what part of your body or at what angle you'll land is something only the God Almighty knows, if He'll care to know. Your dress might ride up or tear ... Imagine that? Would be a stunning sight. Hollywood could be green with envy. But lo! The badly selected undies might spoil all the esthetics of the scene.

SHE:

Making fun of me, aren't you?

HE:

You shouldn't take offense at me. I'm just concerned about your lot.

SHE:

(Loses her temper) Listen, I'll manage without your concern. Do me a little favor.

HE:

Hope it's not about money.

SHE:

No.

HE:

I'm at your service then.

SHE:

Can you get out of my sight as far as possible?

HE:

For pity's sake what's so disturbing about my presence?

SHE:

I can't do anything when somebody's breathing down my neck. Leave me in peace.

HE:

Eternal peace, you mean?

SHE:

Preferably a temporary peace.

HE:

Excuse me, but I've also got a little favor to ask of you.

SHE:

Will you leave me alone then?

HE:

I will.

SHE:

What's the favor you're asking?

HE:

I realize that it won't be too appropriate.

SHE:

For God's sake make it without any long preambles ...

HE:

You in a hurry?

SHE:

Yes, to get rid of you.

HE:

Why are you so nervous? Any problems?

SHE:

No, everything's all right with me.

HE:

So you must be a happy person.

SHE:

(Furiously) Sure, so happy it makes me skip and jump for supreme happiness.

HE:

You know, anger becomes you. Did anyone tell you that you're beautiful?

SHE:

Of course, and a lot of times. Do you think you're the first?

HE:

No, but certainly the last one.

SHE:

So what?

HE:

Can you show me the way out?

SHE:

(At a loss) You want to leave?

HE:

Do you wish anything else?

SHE:

(Pointing downward) The way out is right in front of you.

HE:

Many thanks, but only after you.

SHE:

Right now I'll gladly let you pass. I can even give you a helping hand and wave you goodbye.

HE:

Oh no, gentlemen always give way to the ladies.

SHE:

You, a gentleman? I've never seen such a lout as you before.

HE:

(Ironically polite, with a low bow and curtsy) My dear lady, since my destination is different from yours, could you be as kind as to show me the way leading, in this particular case, from the exterior to the interior, namely to the place common people are wont to call the entrance? Does such a way of saying it suit you?

SHE:

Is this mumbo-jumbo supposed to prove that you are a gentleman?

HE:

Me a gentleman? God forbid. I'm simply asking you to show me a stairway or at least a ladder, after which you can jump off the roof to your heart's content ... or, rather, discontent.

SHE:

Your way out is there *(points to the penthouse)*. Don't you see it?

HE:

Take me there, please. *(Offers his hand)* Maybe somewhere up there *(raises his eyes to the sky)* it'll be to your credit in the heavenly chancellery...

SHE:

All right ... (*offers him her hand*)

HE:

(*Loudly*) Be careful!

SHE starts, trips and falls. Her handbag drops and something spills out of it.

Step 3

HE rushes to her side and helps her to get up.

SHE:

Oh, it hurts.

HE:

What's the matter?

SHE:

My foot hurts.

HE:

It has to be rubbed down. Where does it hurt, here?

Begins rubbing her foot. SHE lets out a cry.

SHE:

Don't touch my foot!

HE:

Do you feel better?

SHE:

No, worse.

HE:

Good, I won't touch you. Why worry about it when you were already with one foot you know where.

SHE:

Where is my handbag?

HE:

Over there. I'll get it.

Picks up the bag and furtively hides something that had spilled out of it.

SHE:

(*Tries to get up on her feet but fails*) Now I won't get out of this place.

HE:

What makes you think so?

SHE:

Because of my injured foot, of course.

HE:

You'll hobble along somehow. Or else I'd be willing to carry you to your cherished destination.

SHE:

Don't you even dream about it!

HE:

And why not? (*HE lifts her off the roof, SHE resists*)

SHE:

What are you doing? Put me down immediately!

HE:

Of all the things to complain about! Here is a woman who's angry at a man who carries her in his arms. Better direct me where I have to go.

SHE:

But I told you before – over there (*points to the penthouse*).

HE:

(*Carries her with an effort*) Incidentally, how much do you weigh?

SHE:

Don't you think it's a tactless question?

HE:

My barbells back home weigh fifty kilos. I just wondered how much you weigh.

SHE:

Your comparison is absolutely out of place.

HE:

Does it mean that you weigh more?

SHE:

I'm not some barbells for you.

HE:

That's a pity. My barbells are easier to carry (*approaches the door of the penthouse, puts her down, leans her against the wall. SHE is unsteady on her feet*). Please, don't fall. (*Pushes the door*) It's closed.

SHE:

Let me try (*pushes the door, it stays closed*). It must have closed after I came out onto the roof.

HE:

Do you have a key?

SHE:

Yes, I do. I asked the janitor for it in case the door was closed (*rummages in her handbag*). Here's the key from my apartment, from the mailbox, but ... Did you pick up everything that fell out of my handbag?

HE:

What a question. Of course I did.

SHE:

I doubt very much that you're careful enough in everything you do.

HE:

I have the same doubts about you. We can just as well return to the place where you dropped the handbag. But mind you, I won't be carrying you anymore. Foot it yourself now.

SHE:

You bet I will, because your paws were constricting my blood circulation.

HE:

I'm wondering why I was going out of my way to see no appreciation on your part.

SHE:

There's not that much to appreciate.

HE:

All right, let's look for the key.

They return to the railing and start looking for the key. The CATS appear on the stage again. HE and SHE pay them no attention and do not hear them.

* * *

TOMCAT:

A weird twosome, I'd say. I have a strong suspicion that he's pulling the wool over her eyes.

CAT:

Of course he is. Do you realize that she wanted to jump off the roof?

TOMCAT:

And what's that to you?

CAT:

But she hasn't the slightest idea how it's done!

TOMCAT:

I fell off the fourth floor once and am still alive and kicking after having licked my wounds for a week or so.

CAT:

Fourth floor – big deal. Any fool can fall off the fourth floor. Ruddy fell off the sixth floor and hadn't a single scratch to complain about.

TOMCAT:

The main thing is not so much to fall as to land on the ground in one piece.

CAT:

Exactly. The humans know next to nothing about falling.

TOMCAT:

They're a savage tribe... What I would like to know just now is where is Ruddy with the promised cream.

CAT:

What if he lost his footing and fell down somewhere?

TOMCAT:

Come on, stop imagining. Ruddy knows every rut, gutter and stairway in this neighborhood.

CAT:

That's true. Still, I'm worried because today the pack of cream in his teeth will hinder his movements. And here this two-legged critter is traipsing around the roofs and getting on my nerves. I'm curious to know what he wants of her.

TOMCAT:

For me it's clear as daylight. What can a stud want from a nice looking dame?

CAT:

Oh, you've got only one thing on your mind. I'm sure that it's much more complex. Besides, she doesn't like him – he's only putting her out of sorts all the time.

TOMCAT:

I bet two fish tails to one that he'll screw her in the end.

CAT:

You'll lose.

The CATS slink off the stage again.

Step 4

*After failing to find the key at the railing, HE and SHE return to the penthouse.
SHE goes behind the penthouse, sees the BODY and utters a shriek.*

HE:

What's the matter?

SHE:

Come here, quick.

HE:

(Approaches) What made you shriek?

SHE:

(Frightened, under her breath) What's that over there?

HE:

Well, I see feet... hands... Looks like a human being, more likely a man than a woman – although it could be the other way around...

SHE:

Alive?

HE:

Why ask me? Feel the pulse and you'll know.

SHE:

But I'm afraid. What if you do it? After all, you are a man and, I think, a brave one.

HE:

How rapidly your opinion about me has changed.

SHE:

I'm sorry for the wrong impression.

HE:

All right, step aside if you're shaking in your shoes.

HE approaches the Body, examines it indifferently, and turns to her.

HE:

I'm afraid you'll be hearing something unpleasant now. But don't let that unsettle you. *(Says in a whisper)* I think it's a corpse.

SHE:

A what? Are you sure?

HE:

There aren't any signs of life as far as I can make out.

SHE:

How did it get here?

HE:

Why ask me? Ask the police.

SHE:

(Retreats silently) Was it you who killed him?

HE:

(Advances) I? Why I of all people?

SHE:

Who else?

HE:

How do I know?

SHE:

Don't come any closer...

HE:

For pity's sake, do I really resemble a murderer? *(Advances one more step).*

SHE:

Stay put where you are ...

HE:

All right, I will...

SHE:

Prove that you aren't a murderer.

HE:

Why should I be proving anything? What difference does it make to you? You'll be a corpse in five minutes anyway.

SHE:

You wanted to say that I ...?

HE:

(Advances) It's you who wanted to jump off the roof. So I supposed that it would happen in five minutes or so.

SHE:

Whatever else but I don't want to waste the last moments of my life in the company of a corpse and murderer.

HE:

I am telling you again that I am not a murderer.

SHE:

Why then are you here on this roof all by yourself, eh?

HE:

I? For a simple reason ... I am repairing antennas.

SHE:

At night?

HE:

So what? Just imagine anyone who wants to watch TV after a hard day's work when – bang! – the TV antenna goes kaput. For some people it's next to a dreadful disaster.

SHE:

Don't you rest after a day's work?

HE:

I work night shifts. It's the best time for repairing antennas. In the daytime you're annoyed by the scorching sun, flies, cawing and shrieking crows, and dirty pigeons.

SHE:

But at night the crows don't bother you?

HE:

Exactly. They don't disrupt the electromagnetic field and create any additional noise background.

SHE:

(Derisively) I see. So you do repairs in complete darkness?

HE:

A real professional does not necessarily have to see with his eyes. An antenna should be felt like a woman – by touch, by smell...

SHE:

And by taste ...

HE:

No, taste isn't necessary. Besides, I always carry a flashlight. I don't understand why you are interrogating me. If there's anyone resembling a murderer it's you!

SHE:

Why I?

HE:

If you're innocent, why were you bent on jumping from the roof then?

SHE:

It's something you won't understand.

HE:

Well, well, now I'm supposed to have the intellect of a cabbage. Might seem so on a roof in the moonlight, but in daytime you'd probably think differently. As an intelligent person, I am governed by the simple logic that since I appeared on the roof after you, it can only mean that something happened in the meantime. You had the opportunity; you had enough time, and

SHE:

Wait a minute. What about the motive?

HE:

How should I know? Maybe he was your lover who played false and loose with you – and you are an impulsive woman...

SHE:

Everything you said is not true.

HE:

So you had no purpose for appearing on this roof?

SHE:

I did have a purpose.

HE:

And you killed just by accident?

SHE:

How many times do I have to tell you that I didn't kill anyone!

HE:

But there's a corpse on this roof. Do you realize in what a fix I am? If anyone else shows up, I'll be the first to be suspected of murder, while you'll be resting in everlasting night at the foot of this house. What if your death will also be pinned on me? You were a witness and I put you away. Or the other way around – I pushed you off the roof, while he was a witness.

SHE:

I don't care what you think. (*On the verge of tears*). Leave me alone.

HE:

That's out of the question. It's you who slammed this door shut. How am I supposed to get out of here?

SHE:

I'm curious how you'll make me stay.

HE:

Very simply... (*takes a martial stance*). Know anything about karate?

SHE:

No.

HE:

But I do.

SHE:

Do you really think that I'm going to fight you?

HE:

I'd advise you against it. I don't fight with women, but ...

SHE:

It's certainly ungentlemanly to attack a weak defenseless woman. You're a maniac, that's what you are!

HE:

Me a maniac? (*moves forward, SHE backs away*)

SHE:

Just try and touch me. I'll yell for help.

HE:

You can yell as much as you want. I'll show you now what a maniac is really like.

*HE stops in front of her. After an awkward pause kisses her brazenly,
SHE backs away and slaps him in the face.*

Step 5

HE:

Wow! (*rubs his cheek*) That's what I get from someone who's weak, defenseless, and injured into the bargain.

SHE:

(*Guiltily*) I'm sorry ... but you asked for it.

HE:

Well, if you're so resolutely intent on joining your ancestors, I suggest spending this night in my company. Just one night ... take a look at the beauty of the moon's shimmering path, the star-studded sky and the hushed silence...

SHE:

Do you promise to leave me in peace then?

HE:

I promise. I could even show you the best place for your descent into eternity.

SHE:

I'm not set on freezing on this roof the whole night.

HE:

You won't have to. I'll surrender my raincoat against the cold. (*Takes off his raincoat*)

SHE:

I don't need it.

HE:

(*Puts his raincoat on her shoulders*) Oh yes you do. You're shivering from the cold like a hairless pup right now. I'd hate to see you turn into a stiff by morning. On the other hand, it might be not such a bad outcome for you.

SHE:

Until what morning? Do you really want to stay on this roof the whole night through? Go and find your way out. There might be a fire escape around here.

HE:

Suits me, if you keep me company. (*Invitingly*) Please...

They walk to the edge of the roof. HE produces a flashlight

HE:

Hold the flashlight, while I look for the fire escape.

SHE holds the flashlight, HE walks around the edge of the roof

HE:

Now look here – it's a bad place to jump... you'll land on a garage down there and could be lying on its roof God knows how long.

SHE:

You think that nobody would see me for a long time?

HE:

Quite so. Better not to risk. Now this place isn't any good either – you'll get entangled in the branches of a tree. The roof you chose is not good.

SHE:

I didn't choose it.

HE:

But you should have... (*touches his head and looks up into the sky*). Seems it's going to rain.

SHE:

I don't ... oh, what a big raindrop!

HE:

By the way, do you have an umbrella?

SHE:

What for? For a softer landing on the ground below?

HE:

I, too, haven't any. Judging by the raindrops, it's going to be raining cats and dogs.

SHE:

Go and find the fire escape as fast as you can.

HE:

No time for that. (*The rain crescendos*). Let's run over there.

They run to the penthouse and take cover under the canopy.

HE:

Oh yes.... by the way, what's your name?

SHE:

What's the difference?

HE:

Oh, I understand ... decent women are not supposed to communicate with tactless strangers. But since a momentous chance brought us together ...

SHE:

I don't care how you call me.

HE:

All right, I'll call you Vicky.

SHE:

No, anything else but Vicky.

HE:

Why not?

SHE:

Brings to mind a bad association of long ago.

HE:

What about Penny?

SHE:

Of all imaginable names – are you kidding?

HE:

It's no more than diminutive of Penelope, the name of Ulysses' faithful wife in Greek legend. If Greek names aren't to your liking, what about Lillian?

SHE:

No.

HE:

All right then. I'll call you Miss Incognito, while I'll be Mister Stranger for you. Good?

SHE:

I don't care.

Pause. HE looks intently into the sky. SHE sits down and embraces her knees.

HE:

What if you try and tell me what happened? Sometimes people have to set free their prisoned sobs on somebody's shoulder.

SHE:

(Ironically) As I understand it, you are magnanimously offering your shoulder for this purpose?

HE:

And why not? It might be good for you.

SHE:

I don't need your shoulder. After all, I've heard next to nothing about the reason of your presence on this roof.

HE:

I told you it's because of the antennas.

SHE:

It might as well be my reason too.

HE:

I don't understand ...

SHE:

What's so difficult to understand? I'm a TV addict who doesn't imagine life without the box. Tonight my TV antenna conked out.

HE:

And you believe that TV sets work much better in the afterworld?

SHE:

I don't know. I haven't been there yet.

HE:

What stuff and nonsense.

SHE:

Do you think the explanation of your presence on this roof is any better?

HE:

All right, it's a tie.

SHE:

I'm not in a mood of playing any games with you.

HE:

Well, if you don't want to tell me anything, let's keep silent for a while, although holding one's tongue is much more difficult than wagging it. Want to try?

SHE:

No, I want to see the rain stop.

They fall silent. The CATS appear on the stage.

* * *

CAT:

(Shivering) Come on, enjoy your clouds now.

TOMCAT:

They're as much mine as they are yours. It wasn't me who put them in the sky.

CAT:

But you said that it didn't matter whether there were any clouds. I hate rains.

TOMCAT:

You sound as if I and I alone are to blame for it.

CAT:

Can you imagine what I'll look like after wading through those puddles?

TOMCAT:

What if we join those two freaks at the penthouse?

CAT:

That's not in my line.

TOMCAT:

It's drier over there ...

CAT:

And taking the chance of having to run for it.

TOMCAT:

(Dreamily) They might treat us to a piece of sausage or ...

CAT:

Not by a long shot. They are on pins and needles. I sense at this distance how high-strung they are. Don't you recognize the smell of anxiety?

TOMCAT:

(Inhales the air) I sense their excitement.

CAT:

The more so to be on guard. Imagine you'd cornered a broad and some go-getter staked out a claim to her. What would you do?

TOMCAT:

I'd rip his snout to pieces. *(Pause)* The anxiety, though, is coming from you, baby...

CAT:

Could be ... I'm worried about Ruddy's absence. Where the hell is he?

TOMCAT:

Most probably getting it on with some pussy cat.

CAT:

Do you ever have something else on your mind?

TOMCAT:

Jealous, aren't you?

CAT:

No such thing. I'm afraid that something might have happened to him. Go and have a look.

TOMCAT:

Look where? Do you know the place where I'm supposed to be looking for him?

CAT:

No.

TOMCAT:

Just what I thought. Why be in a stew then?

CAT:

What a lazy bum you are. Let's walk around the roof and take a look.

TOMCAT:

And what about the rain?

TOMCAT:

I'm soaked as it is. Let's get out of here.

CAT walks into the depth of the stage, TOMCAT follows reluctantly.

Step 6

SHE:

Listen, if neither you nor I is the murderer, who is it then?

HE:

How should I know?

SHE:

What if he's hiding somewhere here?

HE:

Where exactly?

SHE:

I don't know. Somewhere here ... (*points in an indefinite direction*).

HE:

Why be interested in his whereabouts?

SHE:

He might want to get rid of witnesses – you and me.

HE:

Is that doubling for what you want to do?

SHE:

Whatever it might be, it makes me scared.

HE:

All right, if you stay here while I'll look around. Promise?

SHE:

I promise. (*HE gets up and walks away*). Wait a minute!

HE:

(*Stops in his tracks*) Now what?

SHE:

What if he shows up while you're away?

HE:

(*Returns to her*) I've got a whistle. Take it (*gives her the whistle*), blow it when you see him, and I'll come running.

SHE:

Good.

*HE leaves, while SHE keeps turning her head in all directions.
Suddenly SHE blows the whistle and HE appears at a run.*

HE:

What happened?

SHE:

(*Points at the BODY*) I think it moved.

HE:

(*Walks up to the BODY, examines it*) It must have been the wind.

SHE:

Did you see anything out there?

HE:

Nothing. You might as well relax.

SHE:

What about looking for a fire escape again?

HE:

I recalled a while ago that such buildings as this one don't have fire escapes.

SHE:

Putting it frankly, I don't understand why my presence is so important to you?

HE:

That's a weird question. Because you're my witness.

SHE:

Not at all. Somebody might take us for accomplices.

HE:

So what do you suggest?

SHE:

What if we fake a suicide and push him off the roof?

HE:

He'll be a mangled corpse down there, while we'll be alive and kicking up here – eagerly ready for the clink? (*Pause*).

SHE:

If we had a gun we'd press it into his hand and slam a bullet through his head – on seeing a hole in his noggin and finger prints on the grip, the police won't dive into any serious inquiries. But we have no gun.

HE:

That's just what we *do have* (*Produces a gun from his pocket*).

SHE:

Is it real?

HE:

(*Jokingly*) No, a toy.

SHE:

Why would you need a gun?

HE:

For self-defense.

SHE:

Is it loaded?

HE:

Sure. Why the question?

SHE:

May I have a closer look? Please ...

HE:

I have second thoughts about giving firearms to rash ladies.

SHE:

Did you really tell me the truth that it wasn't you who killed that man? Don't be afraid to speak up; I won't rat on you.

HE:

I had absolutely nothing to do with it.

SHE:

That's a pity ... (*pause*). For me it would've been better if you did.

HE:

Why better?

SHE:

It would mean that you have experience in such matters. But I'm not bold enough to snuff out a life, mine included.

HE:

That much I understand, but why kill me *in particular*?

SHE:

Your death could save my soul, if I have any.

HE:

If you are such a true believer, why do you want to do yourself in?

SHE:

A true believer? That's too far-fetched. I'm simply a miserable coward. At first I wanted to hire a killer. But where could I find one? They don't advertise their services in newspapers or on the Internet.

HE:

So you need a killer?

SHE:

Yes, a person who has a perfect command of firearms.

HE:

Do you realize that a killer's job costs quite a bundle?

SHE:

Oh yes, I know.

HE:

(Ironically) What will you pay him with – gold or diamonds?

SHE:

The only item of gold I have is this little chain ... *(points to her neck)*. But I can offer as pay a little, cozy apartment with rooms giving onto a little park ... a large kitchen...

HE:

(Sarcastically) ... and a corridor, I suppose.

SHE:

Truth is, the corridor is narrow, but there's a separate toilet and bathroom.

HE:

Now that's something. But all this requires a notarized will...

SHE:

What if I write it by hand with a signature and date? As far as I know, it would be valid enough as a last will...

HE:

Sounds like an attractive offer. But what you suggest shouldn't be done here and now. It requires some good thinking to dispel the merest suspicions. We'd have to find some deep ditch, sewer or well to dispose of the dead body...

SHE:

Do you accept my offer?

HE:

Well, I haven't said anything yet for you to think so... There's one more thing I must know. Do you have a weighty enough reason to join your ancestors? If you really abandoned all hope, I'd do you a supreme favor. But if it's otherwise...

SHE:

All right, I'll try to be straightforward ... but only if you tell me the truth why you are sticking around here.

HE:

Suits me. You take the first step.

SHE:

Agreed *(pause)*

Step 7

HE:

Dear me, but you're trembling.

SHE:

It's dreadfully cold...

HE:

I'll give you a hot drink. *(Produces a thermos flask from his backpack, pours its content into a plastic cup)*. It'll revive you.

SHE:

What is it?

HE:

Neither potassium cyanide nor arsenic. *(Jokingly)* Or is this bad news for you? Excuse me, lady, but I'm not a dispenser of poisons.

SHE:

(Sits down at his side and takes the cup). Still, what is it?

HE:

It'll keep you warm.

SHE:

(Takes a sip and gasps breathlessly right away) What's that? It's vodka!

HE:

Homebrew – to be more exact.

SHE:

Take that filth away from me...

HE:

It's not filth, but quite a decent drink. I bet it warmed you.

SHE:

A little bit. Why do you keep it in a thermos flask?

HE:

I hate drinking warm vodka – as simple as that.

SHE:

I see. I never drank vodka from a thermos flask.

HE:

See, you missed quite a few things in life at a time when you're set on departing from it to God knows where.

SHE:

I just don't want to live at all. I don't derive any joy from life.

HE:

Your explanation is too abstract. I need facts: your profession, job, marital status... What happened to you? All relatives passed away, house crumbled to pieces or you're gone crackers? Lost a job? Pinched with hunger? What?!

SHE:

All my relatives are alive, nothing's happened to the house I live in, I've got a job... would've been

better if I hadn't it.

HE:

Why, your manager is a sadist?

SHE:

Oh no... I'm simply doing what I'm not supposed to. I'm an historian by profession. In childhood I was an avid reader of historical novels ... wanted to discover new civilizations... but when I joined an archeological expedition all these fantasies faded into nothingness. I'm chilled with dreary horror whenever I recall how I had to dig, move and fuss around in the dirt among rotten bones. Add to all that the heat, dust and lack of any conveniences. It was routine, stupid work, the more so at digs where everything interesting had been unearthed before I showed up there. So I parted company with archeology forever.

HE:

You are shirking rough work, as far as I understand. History has a lot of potential for anyone willing to work hard.

SHE:

I was of the same mind when I went to work as an excursion guide at a history museum.

HE:

(Mockingly) Wonderful. A noble mission to enlighten the masses!

SHE:

Kidding, aren't you? Day in day out I was chattering away one and the same text nobody cared to remember. Soon it seemed to me that I was turning into a museum exhibit myself. The pay was meager, poverty dogged me at every step, I couldn't afford an extra pair of tights and had to keep mending over and over again the only ones I had. It was so humiliating ...

HE:

My, oh my, sounds very much like the existence of a church mouse. Now stop making a hippo out of a domestic fly. Your sufferings are simply funny...

SHE:

But you wanted facts!

HE:

Well, tights aren't exactly a fact underlying the only sense of living. In all probability you liked wearing miniskirts.

SHE:

No, I prefer long skirts.

HE:

My dear lady, your tights are invisible under long skirts, except perhaps for those who care to look at the reflections in puddles or for technicians who occasionally see the world at ground level from sewage manholes. Were you really so worried about what they thought about your mended tights?

SHE:

What a rude character you are.

HE:

I can't help it because you are unconvincing... What do you do for a living now?

SHE:

I resettle souls?

HE:

Very interesting. Smacks of Hinduism to me.

SHE:

No, it's simpler than that ... *(pause)* I resettle souls along with their bodies as a real estate agent. Very often my former friends phone me when they need to sell or buy something. I've noticed how a lot of

people don't like the places where they live and believe that once they change their environment, everything else will change as well. In real fact, you have to change something altogether different. You can't run away from yourself...

HE:

Do you like your job?

SHE:

I hate it.

HE:

Apart from jobs, did anything else occur in your life?

SHE:

Sure, but nothing special.

HE:

Still, try to recall it.

SHE:

I really fell in love once. Never been so happy before... just because of his presence, the sound of his voice, the way he smiled... a feeling I never experienced before. One touch of his hand made me heady. Everything – smells, sounds, objects became unusual, sweet, intoxicating.

HE:

And what about his responses?

SHE:

He kept repeating that he loved me, but something back in my mind was spinning a web of doubts ... *(pause)*...

HE:

Another woman entered the picture?

SHE:

How do you know? *(HE shrugs his shoulders)*. I realize the banality of it... I saw that woman once ... nothing of the unusual to qualify for a beauty ... a mediocre, indolent, and vulgar baggage. But first he put me through the wringer of lies, insults, deceiving promises, sessions of morose and unaccountable silence. It hurt me, it hurt me hideously; it was painful not being with him, and at the same time painful of being touched by him. I landed in hell, a monster-teeming hell from which I didn't see any way out. So I told him that I couldn't bear it any more, and he left. The other day I saw the two of them on the street. Their sight seemed to have covered me with filth.

HE:

Another love will come your way one of these days.

SHE:

I don't believe in love any more. For me it's dead. My life became empty and colorless. It's an unbearable pain to go on living. What makes you grin? You think it's funny, don't you?

HE:

Oh no... what you say makes me happy. I thought that such women as you simply didn't exist.

SHE:

Like what...? Naïve? Stupid? Have a good look at me then. Soon I might be the last of the species...

HE:

I had in mind foolhardy women. Nowadays most of the women are so cynical and wrapped-up in themselves. Take love, for instance. A man's attitude to love is simple – it's something that's just good in itself. But a woman subconsciously expects a reward – say, a present, flowers, and marriage in the end.

SHE:

Nothing of the sort. A woman expects attention from a man. As a token of his love, but not as a piece

of meat to stave off his momentary hunger.

HE: As I see it, if someone failed to make a woman feel that she is loved at a moment when she is really loved, no “tokens” whatsoever will be of any help then... I must say that you are an astounding discovery for me. I thought that women who are prepared to die because of unrequited love have become extinct like the dinosaurs.

SHE:

The dinosaurs died out because of the cold.

HE:

Yes, cold – exactly... a category of women who do not tolerate cold-hearted men. They do themselves in and leave no descendants – that’s how they become extinct.

SHE:

Which means that you see me as a sort of a dinosaur?

HE:

You’re a marvel. It’s a pity that somebody else loved such a woman.

SHE:

Not any more... (*pause, comes closer*). So will you take out your target?

HE:

What target?

SHE:

Me?

HE:

Oh, I forgot... No, I won’t ... you didn’t convince me.

SHE:

Why?

HE:

Because your death is supposed to hurt him. But you’ll fail.

SHE:

Why?

HE:

He doesn’t love you. For him it doesn’t make any difference whether you are alive or not. Now if that other woman were to be put away, it might really stagger him...

SHE:

I like the drift of your thought ...

HE:

Hey, what’s the idea? You’re suggesting that I ...

SHE:

Yes you ... as someone who has experience and knows how to handle a gun.

HE:

She’s your rival, not mine. So it’s your problem.

SHE:

If you’re worried about the reward, I’ve also got a dacha twenty kilometers out of town, and there’s a fine wood and lake nearby.

HE:

I don’t need your tumbledown dacha.

SHE:

It’s in good shape, I assure you.

HE:

I have a better idea.

SHE:

Killing him? I wouldn't be able to foot the bill because I don't have any more real estate to offer. Apart from that, the character in question isn't worth a dog's kennel.

HE:

I have another suggestion. Let's crash into silence for a while and discuss something altogether different. Please, sit down (*SHE sits down at his side. Pause*).

Step 8

HE:

Should I begin with some preliminaries or come straight to the point?

SHE:

Straight to the point.

HE:

All right. (*Pause*). What if we fall in love with each other?

SHE:

(*Heaves a sigh, pause*) Do I really look so bad?

HE:

Not at all. Just the other way around...

SHE:

Do I resemble a woman who can be made such a proposal by a man on the street without any fuss and bother?

HE:

On a roof. Mind you, we're on a roof.

SHE:

The more so...

HE:

You don't like it here? I think it's a grand place to fall in love.

SHE:

Sure, it's a grand place, but it's beyond the bounds of my reason. How I can fall in love with a person about whom I know next to nothing?

HE:

I tried to get acquainted with you, but you didn't want it. May I introduce myself?

SHE:

Spare me the introduction. Don't you really understand that all this is insulting?

HE:

What's so insulting about me liking you?

SHE:

Men are naïve in believing that all the problems of women revolve around men not loving them or loving them not enough.

HE:

I didn't say anything like that. But, on the other hand, your observation merits attention...

SHE:

If it were as simple as that.

HE:

But it is simple. Release yourself, make an attempt...

SHE:

For you it sounds as simple as offering somebody a smoke.

HE:

(*Settles at her side*). You see, I'm pressed for time. What if you jump off the roof in the morning?

SHE:

It could probably be earlier than that.

HE:

Exactly what I had in mind. You leave me no options. It's just about jumping from the first floor to the third and skipping the second. If everything were normal, I'd invite you to a coffee house, shower compliments on you, make a present of roses ...

SHE:

(Ironically) A truly ridiculous kit of gentlemanly baits: flowers, champagne, sweet music...

HE:

You don't like roses, do you?

SHE:

I don't.

HE:

Let me guess now what you like. Gladioli, asters, lilies – hardly. Hyacinths, perhaps?

SHE:

How did you guess?

HE:

I don't know. There's something of a flower about you; not a flower proper, but the fragrance of a flower ...

SHE:

I didn't suspect you to be so good at using such figures of speech.

HE:

Small wonder, because you know so little about me. Want to listen to some music?

SHE:

Here, on the roof?

HE:

Yes, on this roof. I've got a magic wand for this purpose. Just a moment ... *(rummages in his backpack, produces a little rod, and waves it a couple of times)*. Hocus- pocus *(sounds of music)*

SHE:

(Tries to see what's in the backpack). You're a cheat; it's a player you got in there.

HE:

Would the lady have the pleasure to dance with a cheat?

SHE:

Not with you ...

HE:

Apart from me, there's only this character on this roof *(points at the BODY)*. I see in your eyes that you'd rather dance with me than with him.

SHE:

It's too dark here for you to see my eyes.

HE:

Not exactly so. Your eyes sparkle like a cat's. Let's go and sail across the floor – oops! – the roof.

SHE:

You're forgetting that I've got an injured foot.

HE:

Don't worry about it. We'll be dancing very slowly and carefully. I'll support you wherever I can, and even limp along with you for company. Good?

SHE:

No. *(HE pulls her by the hand, they begin dancing slowly)*. It's so strange...

HE:

It's good, if it's strange... I like you very much, Miss Incognito, and I'm afraid of losing my heart to you.

SHE:

Why afraid?

HE:

In losing my heart I don't want to lose you.

Shortly after the music stops. HE is about to rush to the backpack.

SHE:

(Stops him). It's enough. *(Sits down again).*

HE:

As you like. Give me your hand, please.

SHE:

What for?

HE:

I want to read your palm.

SHE:

Can you, really?

HE:

I know a little about palmistry... *(examines her palm).* You've got a very long line of life ... almost pushing across all parts of the palm. This here is the line of love ... see how big it is. As to children, you'll have a horde of them these lines stand for kids...

SHE:

You're a liar *(sharply pulls her hand away).*

HE:

Well then – a liar or a cheat? Make up your mind at last.

SHE:

You're both – a liar and a cheat.

HE:

Yeah, and also a lout ... You seem in luck with every new acquaintance you make. *(Takes her hand and kisses it).* Don't pull it away, please. You can stop me whenever you like. Don't be afraid, everything will be all right...

HE fondles her, then picks her up on his arms and carries her backstage. The CATS appear.

* * *

TOMCAT:

See, he charmed the pants off her.

CAT:

Stop getting in my hair.

TOMCAT:

But you lost the bet. You owe me a fish.

CAT:

Now it's a fish? At first it was a tail of a fish. Besides, I didn't accept any bets.

TOMCAT:

Oh yes you did. You said that I'll lose.

CAT:

There's nothing certain what they are doing back there. She has another man on her mind.

TOMCAT:

If you have any doubts, let's have a look-see.

CAT:

Fie, that's a nasty thing to do. I won't go there.

TOMCAT:

Afraid I'll claim the bet?

CAT:

I don't care whether you lost or won. I won't go there. Spying on anyone is a nasty habit.

TOMCAT:

You're a phony.

CAT:

Whatever you might say is no proof. For her it might be simple despair, an illusion of loneliness.

TOMCAT:

Could be. But still...

CAT:

You know, I pity the people.

TOMCAT:

Why?

CAT:

When, unlike with us, making love is possible every day, it would drive me crazy from desire...

TOMCAT:

So love is something crazy for you?

CAT:

I don't know. Right now I'm losing my senses from waiting. If Ruddy won't show up shortly, it'll be me jumping from this dratted roof!

TOMCAT:

(Sighs plaintively) No one's ever waited for me like that.

CAT:

Never, what's true is true.

The CATS leave the stage. PAUSE (or interval, as the stage director decides)

ACT II

Step 9

Wrapped in a raincoat, SHE approaches the proscenium with a nervous tread. HE follows her at a short distance. SHE: stops closer to the edge of the roof, bends down and looks for something.

HE:

What are you doing?

SHE:

Looking for the key.

HE:

Want a flashlight?

SHE:

You're asking as if I want to find the key for myself alone.

HE:

And for me, too, really? (*Directs the flashlight at her*). I thought that you wanted to get rid of me?

SHE:

(*Turns her face away from the beam of the flashlight*) That's what you wanted, didn't you?

HE:

A while ago it was so, but now... I want the key to be needed by both of us.

SHE:

(*Ironically*) Are you serious? So go ahead and look for it.

For some time they walk around the roof. Then HE sits down at the edge.

HE:

Listen, you seem to have a weird habit. Do you always rush off looking for something after being kissed by a man?

SHE:

No, it's the first time something like that is happening with me. On the whole, I am shocked.

HE:

For what I did?

SHE:

No, for what I let you do. You're a total stranger to me ... and I don't know anything about you.

HE:

What exactly would you like to know?

SHE:

When was the last time you were with a woman?

HE:

Oh my, what a question to ask.

SHE:

A long time ago?

HE:

What makes you think so?

SHE:

You behave oddly I cannot explain why ... I just felt it

HE:

Is there something that's utterly not to your liking?

SHE:

No, it's not that.

HE:

In this case, what about not asking any questions at all?

SHE:

I have but one more. Are you married?

HE:

Not anymore.

SHE:

Divorced?

HE:

Yes.

SHE:

Why?

HE:

People tend to change with the years ... I was engrossed in my work, she didn't see me for days on end, we became strangers to each other ... Then I forgot about her birthday ... It offended her deeply.

SHE:

I can well imagine...

HE:

Once I came home late in the evening and there was a note on the table – she packed her things and left.

SHE:

And since then you ...

HE:

Listen, let's draw the line. Why revive the phantoms of the past?

SHE:

For me intimate relations imply openness. You seem to be too much wrapped in yourself ... and that's what I do not understand. What's the reason for you being here? Why did you stop me? Why?

HE:

But I told you why.

SHE:

I don't believe you.

HE:

Small wonder, because you've got a disordered imagination.

SHE:

I have one request. Please, give me the gun.

HE:

What for?

SHE:

Just to have a look at it ...

HE:

Without any suicidal intentions?

SHE:

With none at all. I promise.

HE:

All right, here you are, but be careful – the gun is loaded.

SHE examines it.

SHE:

It's so cold to the touch ... I'd like to remind you about our agreement.

HE:

What agreement?

SHE:

You promised to tell me what you are doing here. Let's be fair and square and exchange secret for secret, frankness for frankness.

SHE backs away and points the gun at HIM as if jokingly.

HE:

That's a foolish joke. Give me the gun back ... (*approaches her*).

SHE:

Stay where you are ... the gun is loaded.

HE:

And you won't shoot me?

SHE:

In this case just stay where you are, please.

HE:

All right. What next? Will we be staring at each other like that the whole night through ... especially against the backdrop of the dead body?

SHE:

Don't evade my question. Why are you here?

HE:

Oh, well ... (*pause*) ... I'm a sleepwalker.

SHE:

Why then instead of pajamas you are wearing a raincoat?

HE:

What's so unusual about that? I might have fallen asleep in a raincoat ... after a booze-up ...

SHE:

That's all baloney.

HE:

All right, I confess ... I was visiting a married woman when her husband showed up suddenly. For some reason she panicked and suggested that I make myself scarce. I couldn't possibly hide in a closet, so I rushed onto the balcony and from there climbed over to the balcony of her neighbors. They were stiff scared at my sight, but when I explained my predicament they let me out of their apartment from where I made it to this roof.

SHE:

Just a while ago you said that you hadn't been with a woman for a long time.

HE:

In this case my intentions weren't what you think. I became a victim of some misunderstanding.

SHE:

And she gave you a thermos flask on the way out?

HE:

What does a thermos flask have to do with it all?

SHE:

I wonder about that as well. It gives a weird ring to your story. The next thing you'll tell me is that she gave you the gun – to keep her husband at bay?

HE:

I always carry it ... just in case.

SHE:

If you had a gun, what made you so afraid as to run away, the more so since you weren't caught in any act?

HE:

I wasn't afraid of anything ... I just didn't want to discredit the lady ...

SHE:

Oh, what a gallant way of describing gallant adventures. So you suffered for the honor of a lady, didn't you?

HE:

What's wrong with that?

SHE:

You must have seen too many cheap melodramatic comedies.

HE:

Can comedies be melodramatic?

SHE:

That's just what I would want to know as well.

HE:

Why don't you believe me?

SHE:

Because the yarns you spin are phony.

HE:

In this case give free reign to your imagination and tell me what you think.

SHE:

Frankly speaking, I thought that you were a thief.

HE:

Thanks an awful lot. But I don't deserve such an imposing title.

SHE:

Did I offend you?

HE:

You bet.

SHE:

I'm sorry Why then are you telling me cock-and-bull stories?

HE:

All right, I'm clamming up. There's little pleasure in talking at the point of a gun ...

SHE:

You win. Take that gun (*gives him the gun*). Now don't mince words and be frank for a change ...

HE:

(*Takes the gun*) If I tell you the truth, I'm afraid you won't believe it.

SHE:

Go on, make a try.

HE:

All right, I'm here on the lookout for UFOs.

SHE:

Another cock-and-bull story?

HE:

Not at all. I saw one with my own eyes ... in broad daylight.

SHE:

A real flying saucer?

HE:

No, it didn't have the shape of a saucer.

SHE:

What was it – like a cup, a pan?

HE:

Your irony is out of place. What I saw resembled a cylinder with a metallic glint. Now and again it hovered in the sky and then rapidly moved on, disappearing and reappearing in different places.

SHE:

As far as I know, it's been proved that this is no more than an atmospheric phenomenon.

HE:

Who has proved it? There are hundreds of sightings, photographs, videos, readings of instruments. But all this is being ignored and has become taboo?

SHE:

But why?

HE:

Now that's a question of all questions.

SHE:

Haven't these flying saucers ever tried to get in contact with us?

HE:

Oh yes.

SHE:

With you?

HE:

No – if you have in mind a little green creature crawling out of some sort of aircraft and shaking hands with me. The contact was different – at a mental level. We humans enter into these so-called contacts every day. Do we really know about one another? We're no more than some delusive, distorted images. What is really on our minds? And what should be understood by contact at all? The first time I saw them my mind was crowded with roving thoughts... haphazard and something that had never struck me before ... thoughts about some parallel civilization. Those UFOs must have gained control over space and time. I realized that our biggest problem is the lack of understanding time. We plan something and delude ourselves into believing that what we plan is bound to come true. But everything turns out differently because of the intrusion of catastrophes, diseases, hostilities and simply by an unforeseeable concatenation of circumstances. We live like some blind kittens in a thick darkness of the future. The logic of events frequently seems to be unfathomable. It breaks us and drives us to despair. In this blindness we hurt one another and hurt ourselves ... And only then, after looking back at the past, we begin to understand destiny ...

SHE:

But there exist people who can figure out the future.

HE:

Yes, now and then. But it's like lightning and electricity in the cables. Do you understand the difference? We know the laws of physics, chemistry, mathematics, but we do not know the laws of our own destiny.

SHE:

And you want to say that you figured it out?

HE:

No, I simply realized that it's worth figuring out. Maybe I'm the chosen one to bring new knowledge to people and lead them out of the wilderness of blindness and helplessness. (*She applauds*). You don't believe me?

SHE:

I'm sorry, but I was wrong in believing that you were more down to earth, while in real fact you are wandering in a bewildering fantasy ... (*Pause*)

HE:

Seems I was wrong as well. I thought you could believe in such things.

SHE:

For me contact with anyone means frankness.

HE:

While for me it means trust.

SHE:

There hasn't been much trust on your part ... only lies.

HE:

Your problem is that you don't believe anyone.

SHE walks to the edge of the roof. HE remains standing at the penthouse. Off to one side on the horizon there appears a bright ball of light which SHE sees, but HE does not.

Step 10

SHE:

Look, what's that? (*Points in the direction of the light.*) Over there ...

HE:

How should I know.

SHE:

It looks like a cylinder. Isn't that the UFO you mentioned?

HE:

Leave me alone ...

SHE:

But I'm serious ... just take a look ...

HE:

(*Looks around, stunned*) That's it! Yes, that's it!

SHE:

Unbelievable!

HE:

(*The UFO shines ever brighter. Excited, HE walks in its direction.*) Do you believe me now?

SHE:

Look, it's moving.

HE:

Yes, I see.

SHE:

Hu-r-r-rah!

*SHE begins running around the stage and jumping for joy.
HE stays put, looking intently at the bright object.*

SHE:

(*Stops running around the stage*) Did it come after you? (*Pause*) Do you communicate with them mentally right now? (*Pause*) Tell them to take me along. Can they do it?

HE:

I don't know ...

SHE:

Why are you standing like that without doing anything? Give them a sign. They must have some system of communicating with this world! I, for one, do not know anything about it.

HE:

Neither do I.

SHE:

So try to do something.

*HE produces a flashlight from his backpack, switches it on
and begins moving its light in zigzags and circles.
The CATS appear on the stage.*

* * *

CAT:

Do you see what I see?

TOMCAT:

Sure ... a UFO ...

CAT:

You say it so simply as if it were a fish tail ...

TOMCAT:

The sight of a fish tail would make me much happier ...

CAT:

Of all the things to be happy about.

TOMCAT:

And what do you suggest I should be thinking about?

CAT:

What if that UFO snatched our Ruddy?

TOMCAT:

It's a pity ...

CAT:

And that's the only thing you can say?

TOMCAT:

Yes, it's a pity ... if the pack of cream disappeared along with Ruddy ...

CAT:

You are an unbearable creature!

TOMCAT:

Didn't you yourself say that there's no sense in a Moon Feast without cream?

CAT:

I'm sick and tired of your cream!

TOMCAT:

And I'm sick and tired of your Ruddy! There's still half a month to go before the mating parties – why be so keyed up?

CAT:

You won't understand the reason why.

TOMCAT:

I've had enough of your Moon Feast! I'm leaving ...

TOMCAT turns around and disappears from the stage

CAT:

Hey, don't go! I don't want to be here alone ...

CAT runs after TOMCAT. In the meantime SHE reaches into his backpack, pulls out the gun and fires into the air.

* * *

HE:

What are you doing? Stop it!

SHE:

I just want them to know that we are here.

HE:

(Takes the gun away) Do you want them to think that we are some aggressive maniacs?

SHE:

It was supposed to be no more than a sound signal ...

HE:

They won't hear it anyway.

SHE:

Or else not see us at all from such distance.

HE:

Who knows. They might have some powerful optical instruments.

SHE:

Oh, by the way ... *(goes to the backpack, takes a spyglass out of it, and puts it to her eye).*

HE:

(Shouts out suddenly). Put it back! Quick! *(Runs up to her and snatches the spyglass from her hand).*

Don't look into it!

SHE:

Hey, what's the matter?

HE:

You could have become blind. It's happened to people who looked at UFOs through any kind of telescope – an optical lens has the property of focusing and amplifying light!

The light in the sky disappears.

SHE:

Look, it disappeared.

HE:

It might reappear in a different place. It travels at a very high speed and that makes us think it vanishes from sight.

SHE:

Will it really reappear?

HE:

It might.

SHE:

Let's take a look from another side of the roof.

SHE walks around the roof. HE sits down and clasps his head with his hands.

SHE comes up to him.

SHE:

Is anything the matter?

HE:

It won't appear anymore.

SHE:

Why?

HE:

Now I understand everything Nobody so much as intended to carry off anybody. I was simply used as a guinea pig. They don't need me. I, though, fancied being the chosen one, short of a messiah. What an idiot ... what a blinking idiot I am!

SHE:

Maybe it was me who spoiled it all.

HE:

Don't blame yourself. It was my mistake. They just passed me by. *(Goes to the edge of the roof).*

SHE:

Hey, what are you up to?

HE:

Do you think suicidal moods are infectious? As far as I know, suicide isn't an airborne-droplet infection.

SHE:

I'm serious. What are you up to?

HE:

Have no fear; I won't be jumping into oblivion. What I've been living for over the past two years simply crumbled to pieces. What's left now is a void, almost like the one beyond the edge of this roof. You see, I was conceiving my theory of speed. Those UFOs are moving at a speed that accords with my theory.

SHE:

Are you a scientist?

HE:

You could say so. I was struggling along to call the scientific community's attention to this theory, churned out numerous papers, applied for grants, presented all the possible calculations, but at the research institute where I worked nobody took me seriously. The confirmation of my theory required a separate laboratory, special equipment, and thorough research. All the time it boiled down to one and the same problem – funds.

SHE:

So if you solve this mystery, you can communicate with them like an equal?

HE:

I won't be able to solve anything now.

SHE:

If you want, I'll help you. Of course, if ... if you need me.

HE:

I need you very much ...

SHE:

I know, I don't want to be jumping anywhere. I want to solve this mystery ... together with you.

HE:

And what if I disappoint you?

SHE:

You won't. I believe in you. Don't give up so easily.

HE:

You're a good girl, a very good one, especially if you don't want to jump from the roof. As for me, I feel bad, utterly bad ...

Pause. HE walks away from her. SHE aimlessly walks around the roof, approaches the DEAD BODY, bends down and takes a closer look at it.

Step 11

SHE:

You know, I think it's a dummy! Goodness gracious, what a bunch of idiots we were to take a dummy for a human being. Now we are free.

HE:

Free from what?

SHE:

Free from the dead body. Free from the danger of arrest. The question now is how to get ourselves down from the roof. (*Pause. SHE walks nervously around the roof*). I have an idea. Let's make a fire.

Somebody will call the firemen and they'll take us off the roof. What about setting fire to that dummy?

HE:

I'd hate to do that. After all, it's a fine piece of craftsmanship. (*HE walks around the roof, picking up scraps of paper and cardboard. SHE does the same, HE lights the waste paper and they gaze at the fire.*)

Presently, from the direction of the penthouse, comes a woman's amplified voice.

VOICE:

(*Vociferously*) Put out the fire in the shooting area. Immediately! It's against the rules. Why haven't any measures been taken yet?

SHE:

What's that? (*Goes up to the penthouse, pushes the door – it's closed.*) Where did the voice come from?

*Pause. Looks intently at him, HE averts his eyes.
The voice is heard again over the din of a TV studio.*

VOICE:

Dear TV audiences, you are viewing our reality show "The Rescuer of Suicides!"

SHE:

A reality show? All this has been recorded. (*Looks for a camera on the penthouse; finds it.*) I'll smash this camera to smithereens. I won't let them put anything on the air!

HE:

Please, stop! What are you doing?

VOICE:

The rescuer met the challenge and justly deserves the prize of 10,000. Hail the winner! (*Boisterous applause.*)

HE:

Idiots! Strait-laced idiots!

SHE:

So you knew it? You knew about the show, didn't you? Why didn't you tell me?

HE:

I couldn't ... the game has its rules.

SHE:

A game? For you it was no more than a game?

HE:

Not exactly. At first it ... and then everything became serious.

SHE:

What meanness! Do you realize what a low-down trick you played on me?

HE:

I didn't do anything bad. On the contrary ...

SHE:

You made a laughing-stock out of me. How much will you get for the extravaganza?

HE:

You heard it. Why ask?

SHE:

On no, for a latter-day Judas thirty pieces of silver are far from being enough. The stakes should be much higher nowadays. You'll be given the money for faking me out of jumping from the roof?

HE:

Yes, to make you change your mind. What's so wrong in your desire to go on living?

SHE:

You infused me with hope, but it proved to be a fake. That's a horrible thing to do.

HE:

Please, hear me out. I did it for the sake of a future laboratory. I need that money desperately to prove my theory.

SHE:

You'd have been better off as a professional killer – a much more honest choice.

HE:

When I agreed to take part in this show, I didn't know you. I couldn't have imagined that you are such an extraordinary person. It's a gift of destiny to have met you, really.

SHE:

Come on, leave that passionate lather for the TV cameras. You did it for the sake of money, and that makes you disgusting. And just standing at your side is disgusting. But nothing will come out of it for you. You just won't get that money. I'll go and jump off the roof.

HE:

You must be crazy! To jump just for me not receiving the money?

SHE:

Yes. I'll put on a real suicidal show. Tell your TV buddies to have their cameras zeroed on a non-sense suicide. (*Walks up to the edge of the roof.*)

HE:

Want me to refuse taking the money?

SHE:

You're a loser anyway.

HE:

If you only knew how much I need you!

SHE:

I don't believe a single word you say now.

HE:

What can I do to make you believe me?

SHE:

Nothing at all! Your time has run out.

HE takes up position between her and the edge of the roof.

HE:

Let's jump together then.

SHE:

What difference will it be to you when we smash ourselves up?

HE:

I think we'll land in one piece. We'll jump with a parachute.

SHE:

What? I've never done that before ...

HE:

Well, you have to do it once in a lifetime at least. (*Leads her away from the edge of the roof.*) Wait a minute I'll get the parachute. (*Goes to his backpack, takes a parachute out of it and puts it on.*)

SHE:

But you've got only one.

HE:

It'll hold us in the air just as well.

SHE:

What if it won't open?

HE:

It will – have no fear. Do you believe me?

SHE:

I don't know ...

HE:

I'm asking you the last time. Do you believe me?

SHE:

I want to ... but what if this will be a suicide after all?

HE:

It'll be the suicide ... of our loneliness. Understand?

SHE:

Yes.

HE:

(Stands behind her, puts his arms around her shoulders, and they move to the very edge of the roof).

Now don't be afraid; everything will be all right. We jump after I count three. Is that clear?

SHE:

Yes.

HE:

One, two, three ... down we go!

FALL

Fadeout. Voice of CATS

CAT:

But they don't know how to fall and to land on the ground. They should land on their paw pads...

TOMCAT:

People never now how to fall properly. They can fly, though, every so often.

CAT:

What if the "every so often" will happen now?

TOMCAT:

Maybe.

Empty stage with the DEAD BODY reclining against the penthouse.

Slow fadeout

CURTAIN

**Translated from the Ukrainian
by Anatole Bilenko**

Neda Nezhdana (Nadia Miroshnychenko) (Author) was born in 1971 in the city of Kramatorsk, Donetsk Region. A playwright, culturologist, art critic and translator, she graduated from the Art School of Kiev (1982-1986), the Institute of Foreign Languages of Kiev (French philology, 1988-1993), and the Mohyla Academy of Kiev (culturology, 1992-1995). She is the author of two collections of poetry *Trees and People (Dereva i liudy, 1993)* and *Roll-O'-Cherry (Kotvyvshnia, 1996)* and also compiled and contributed her plays to the dramatic art anthologies *In*

Anticipation of the Theater (V chekanni teatru, 1998), In Search of the Theater (V poshuku teatru, 2003), Our Drama (Nasha Drama, 2003), The Strike of Illusions (Straik iluziy, 2004), On the Other Side of the Pause (Potoibich pauzy, 2005), and the almanacs Modern Ukrainian Plays (Suchasna ukrainska dramaturhia, 2006-2007). In all, Neda Nezhdana wrote 16 plays, the main ones being *The Eleventh Commandment, or the Night of Buffoons (Odynadtsiata zapovid, abo Nich blazniv, 1995), But I'll Betray You After All (I vse-taky ia tebe zradzhu, 1996), He Who Opens the Door (Toi, shcho vidchyniaye dveri, 1998), Honore, and Where's Balzac? (Onore, a de Balzak?, 1999), The Whimsical Messalina (Khymerna Messalina, 2000), The Next to Last Judgment Day, or the Holiday of Dead Leaves (Peredostanniy sud, abo Sviato mertvoho lystia, 2001), A Million Little Parachutes (Milion parashutykiv, 2002), The Suicide of Loneliness (Samohubstvo samotnosti, 2003), When the Rain Returns (Koly povertayetsia doshch, 2004), and The Return to Never (Povernennia v nikoly, 2006).* Most of her plays were staged about 50 times in Ukraine, Russia (Moscow, Yekaterinburg), Poland (Cracow, Gniezno), and the US (New York, La Mama Theater). Her plays and critical articles have been translated into Russian, Polish, English, German and Spanish and published in Ukraine, Russia (*Kovcheg*, No.5, 2005), Poland (*Dialog*, July 2007), Germany (*Theater der Zeit*, No.5, 1999), and in the US (*The Expanding Circle* (Translations/Transmutations, vol. 45, No. 2, 2002)). Many times she has been prizewinner of festivals in Ukraine, Russia (International Festival of Modern Dramatic Art, Liubimovka, Moscow, 2004), Poland (New European Drama Festival, Poznan, 2005), Lithuania (Riva Festival, Klaipeda, 2001), and France (View from Ukraine Festival, Paris, 2006 and 2007). *He Who Opens the Door* and *A Million Little Parachutes* have been included in the catalogues of Europe's best plays in 2004 and 2006 (*The European Theatre Today: Plays*). Neda Nezhdana is President of the Confederation of Playwrights of Ukraine and member of the Council of La Maison d'Europe et d'Orient, Paris.

Anatole Bilenko (Translator) was born 1939 in Kiev. From 1943-1954 he resided in Germany and the US, where he gained most of his secondary education. In 1967 he graduated from the Department of Translation at the Taras Shevchenko University of Kiev, and he embarked on the career of a professional translator in 1968. He is a member of the Ukrainian Writers Union, has over 20 books of Ukrainian, Russian and Belorussian fiction translated into English to his credit, and holds the Ivan Franko Prize for Literary Translations. His latest literary translations are featured in the Ukrainian Literature Journal (a project of Prof. Maxim Tarnawsky of Toronto University), published by the Shevchenko Scientific Society in New York, N.Y., USA (www.UkrainianLiterature.org, vol.1, vol.2).