

Death Without A Knife

“Inhale with expectation,” Eggret says, the tips of his shoulders up around his ears and his palms flat out like some queen mime all dressed in black on tipped toes, “exhale with boredom.” He throws his head to the side, closes his eyes, and drops his chest and shoulders. Such dramatics—and with that transparent lisp too (“eck-thpect-tay-shun”). Eggret doesn’t like subtlety, but it’s what I learned at USC. “It’s not conducive to Shakespeare,” he says shaking his head and fluttering his eyelids. “This is not Shakespeare,” I say, “It’s modern.” “Oh go and *be* dead then,” he says. This is a joke on the title of the play and he’s proud of it.

Guildenstern has it tough too. He’s straight. Everyone whispers about him, that this is his first stageplay—that his background is in circus!—that he hasn’t an ounce of body fat. All of us watch his hips when he walks, then look quickly away when he notices. Even Eggret honestly wants several dress rehearsals just to see Guildenstern in tights. This Guildenstern rarely says anything, keeps to himself mostly. He’s supposed to be the more “cerebral” Eggret says. How is one to *look* more cerebral, really? “Actually, it’s easy for me to look *stupid*,” he whispered to me at audition, “I’ve done two disaster movies. You know, like *Love Boat* with tragedy. But *smart*, I don’t know.” I was busy just *seeing* him, and I think he took this wrongly. This could have been the start of his feeling so alienated.

This room is huge and black. It looks like one thinks of the inside of a camera, with metal this and that everywhere, ropes and cables hanging about. Indistinguishable pipes run along an endless, starless ceiling, and catwalks crisscross up among pulleys and spotlights. “Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying inside a box with a lid on it?” I have to say and look up there into

the charcoal metals—it's deadening having to pretend there's a real sky with stars like the play calls for. "No, no, no," says Eggret, "It's supposed to be funny! For Heaven's sake, Rosencrantz, find some feeling." Spotlights follow one around and the colorless hardwood creeks pathetically like a false earth. There are, I admit, a couple of tiny windowlets that let in arrows of light way up there, like in Beckett's *Endgame*, "rays of hope" I suppose. Next time Eggret yells coffee (he does this always with his hands cupped about his mouth; it's hideous!). I have a mind to climb up the catwalk and look outside like Clov from *Endgame* does and scream "Nothing," just to piss him off. I have, of course, told this plan to no one. I deem this appropriate in a play where when asked by a reviewer "is it a tragedy or a comedy?", the director, Eggret, said, "You know, I honestly don't know. Is it a comedy *about* a tragedy?"

* * *

"Now for a handful of guilders I happen to have a private and uncut performance of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*," says Winston. He has straight, white hair cropped up the back very short but hanging in a flap across his forehead like Peter O'Toole. Eggret likes his work. "--or rather, woman, or rather Alfred--" he glances over his shoulder with his lips pursed like a fashion model. "Get your skirt on, Alfred--" he says.

Alfred is a good looking young man I happen to have gone to school with. He's landed the role not so much on my recommendation, but because of his small stature and clear skin--he is to play the part of a small boy. Eggret has had Alfred's hair cut short as a boy with *The Death*, and the poor man looks as silly as he's supposed to as he struggles into women's clothes.

"And for eight you can participate," says Winston. He's a good actor, acts with his voice instead of his eyes, completely fixed at each turn. "Taking either part." He's stalking Guil slowly across the stage with these lines, each like the batting of a cat's claw. And

the beautiful Guildenstern with his shoulders up around his jaw-bones backs like leery prey. It's something to watch. "Or both for ten," says Winston. Guildenstern turns abruptly but Winston has him by the sleeve. "With encores—" he shouts, as Alfred, the boy, the object of this pornography, stands sheepish watching on. It's marvelous.

With that there's Guildenstern's backhand to Winston's face. Guil goes instantaneously through anger, repulsion, and resignation. "Get your skirt off, Alfred," Winston says.

"You're supposed to be a heroic Guildenstern here," says Eggret, "don't be so... satisfied."

Guildenstern is shaking with rage and fright at the same time (he's really a fine actor, circus background or not). "It could have been--it didn't have to be obscene... It could have been--a bird out of season, dropping bright-feathered on my shoulder... It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way... I was *prepared*. But it's this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this--a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes."

Winston bows with respect for this performance, his Peter O'Toole flap flopping across his nose. He's sad now. "You should have caught us in better times. We were purists then." He straightens up. "Onward," he says to his company, a group we hired sub-scale from a community college.

Now my big line. "Excuse me!" I point a finger in the air.

"Higher, higher, higher! Your voice needs to be higher, Rosencrantz!"

Guildenstern, perhaps appeased by this latest Eggret jab, rolls his eyes at me. Eggret yells at us all, not just Guildenstern.

"Ha-alt!" Winston signals and the community college cast stops.

"A-al-l-fred!" he screams.

"No, no, no. Too much melodrama. This is supposed to be funny, Winston. It's supposed to be like the cartoon, not like Shakespeare," Eggret says. He puts his hands on his hips and says softly, "Alvin?" then louder, "Alvin?", then in a crescendo of voice

“Al-vin!... See? That’s how it’s done. This is a *parody* of Shakespeare, for Heaven’s sake, I’ve told you.”

“Shit,” says Winston out of character, “I can’t tell the difference anymore.”

“Coffee then,” says Eggret without megaphone hands, with resignation of his own.

* * *

“Positions!” he yells. Very Shakespearean. Eggret is a spoof of himself. “Where the hell is the theatre knife? Has anyone seen the theatre knife? Rosencrantz. What have you done with the theatre knife?”

“Mr. Eggret, please,” I say, “my name is Tom.” I’m fuming but saying this in jest and the cast giggles. Acting.

“Now, now,” Eggret says and waves his finger at all of us. “Let’s not get short. It’s been a long day for all of us.” Then he gets down on a knee and spreads his arms like Hamlet himself in soliloquy. “Will you bless us, dear Rosencrantz. Tell us the location of the fucking theatre knife!”

“I think Guildenstern had it,” I say numbly.

“Well, we can’t have death without a knife.” He’s standing, brushing himself off, quite composed, but acting too. He can’t tell the difference any more either. “Now then, where *is* the handsome Guildenstern?”

The theatrics over, all of us look about and at each other. The chatty community college group are perplexed and silent at the disappearance of Guildenstern. Laertes and Hamlet, the prone and dead Ophelia, the onlookers next to the gravesite (A concoction of plywood ramp and second-hand bathtub. You should see when the Prince and the brother jump into the tub for the sword fight), all have stopped rehearsal. Even in the hardwood beneath our feet, silence, but for the tiny din of the spotlight turrets roaming and searching the darkness of the stage. It is opening night with spotlights criss-crossing in the sky.

“Guid-den-thtern!” Eggret’s hands drop suddenly from his

mouth (suddenly, but controlled), and we all hear Guil's voice from above.

"I'm here," This is not in the script. Guildenstern is wearing his stage tights on the catwalk above, his thick thighs highlighted for us all in the shine of the little Beckett windowlet there.

Then, tragedy.

Guildenstern leaps spread-eagle, beautiful, into the darkness. "Noth-thing," he screams in a terrible, forced exclamation ("*Throw your voices,*" Eggret would say).

Eggret drops to his knees. "No!" This he says for *real*; we all notice. But then in an instant choreography the cast switches into laughter as the elastic cord tied to Guil's leg reaches its greatest stretch.

Guildenstern stands, releases the velcro strap. There is a short, calculated moment of silence, then applause. "Oh, come, come, gentlemen--no flattery--it was merely competent," he says brushing himself free of imaginary dust, standing firmly rooted, and holding the retractable blade stage dagger.