

Miro Gavran

(www.mirogavran.com)

Death of an actor

THE DEATH OF AN ACTOR was first performed on October 22, 1995 in the Epilog Theatre, Zagreb, with the following cast:

TOM Pero Kvrđić

EVA Vjera Zagar-Nardelli

Director: Miro Gavran

Costume Design: Durda Janes

Music: Mladen Dervenkar

What the critics had to say about Death of an Actor:

The author skilfully dissects, evaluates and wittily comments on the game we call the theatre, with great feeling for all its participants. Anyone who has anything whatsoever to do with the theatre will find himself or herself in this play, woven by the actors into a fine lace of reality and fiction. It will be difficult for anyone in the audience to recognise when reality ends, and dream begins, for the simple reason that that border does not exist.

Miroslava Jandrić, Oct 24, 1995, *VJESNIK*

Convincing, warm and touching. I really enjoyed this play.

Ivan Kusan, Oct 18, 1995, *VEČERNJI LIST*

This was an authentic celebration of acting that we will long remember with nostalgia.

Igor Mrduljas, Oct 27, 1995, *HRVATSKO SLOVO*

Scenes in the play about the theatre and actors speak out with sentiment and warmth, succeeding in transmitting their emotional force to the audience, which did not feel any shame at a tear or two.

Ivana Suberic, October 25, 1995, *GLAS SLAVONIJE*

An excellent play. For true theatre cognescenti.

N. Blazekovic, January 25, 1996, *MOSLOVACKI LIST*

ACT ONE

(The stage is covered with old props and parts of stage sets from various periods of time. This play is going to unfold on the stage of some amateur theatre that is used for many purposes, not just theatrical productions.)

SCENE 1.

(We see TOM trying to repair a wobbly chair with a hammer and pliers. As he works, concentrating on what he is doing, his voice is heard reading out a letter over the loudspeaker.)

TOM (OFF): Dear Madam: For years now, as a spectator, I have had the honour and pleasure of enjoying your marvellous acting creations, bringing to life many a magical heroine. I admire you as a comedienne and tragedienne, but also your roles in contemporary drama and playing modern women. When you are on the stage, the audience holds its breath; when you are on the stage the theatre comes into its own in its full sense and beauty. As your greatest fan, I have summoned up the courage to write you this letter asking you to help the amateur theatre company at our Retirement Home with your reputation and expertise. With your assistance, I am convinced we will be able to create a show that will have much more than just beginners' luck; and, what's more, we will have an opportunity to talk with you about your wonderful roles, which have made our lives more bearable over recent years. We would be most grateful if you could come to an introductory meeting about our amateur company's new production. The meeting will be held on Wednesday at...

(The voice from the loudspeaker hushes and is lost before the letter is read to the end. With the last sentence spoken, TOM bangs a nail into the chair. He is wearing blue overalls, of the type worn by carpenters and tradesmen who work in dusty environments. EVA comes on stage. She is very elegantly dressed, quite unsuitably for the surroundings in which she finds herself.)

EVA: Excuse me.

TOM: Can I help you?

EVA: I've probably made a mistake.

TOM: Perhaps not.

EVA: I'm looking for a company, an amateur theatre company. Led by somebody called Tomislav. I've been told he's here somewhere.

(TOM puts down the hammer, wipes his hands, approaches EVA and offers his hand.)

TOM: Tom. Call me Tom. I' m glad you have come.

(EVA shakes hands with him.)

EVA: So am I.

(Silence ensues. They look at each other. TOM sizes her up as though he is seeing her for the first time in his life.)

TOM: You' re different like this, in real life, than you are on the stage, acting, in all that glare with the footlights on.

EVA: Well, this is a kind of stage too.

TOM: Yes, but an amateur one. And I'm not in the audience. The whole impression is totally different.

EVA: Where are the others?

TOM: What others?

EVA: The members of your amateur company.

TOM: Ah, yes. You see... perhaps it' s better now at our first meeting... that we are alone. And then, depending on what we decide to do... I'll arrange that the others come. That' s if they are needed, of course.

EVA: What do you mean: if they are needed?

TOM: Look, there are plays with many characters and there are others with only a couple. It all depends on the play how many actors are needed, doesn't it?

EVA: Yes, but...

TOM: This is where I' m hoping for your help... your advice. I have my own ideas, of course, but you might not think much of them. But we should not be discussing business at our first meeting. Won' t you take a seat.

EVA: Thank you.

TOM: We have a bottle of fruit brandy here. Would you like some?

(TOM takes a bottle from an antique wardrobe.)

EVA: Thank you. I'd rather not.

TOM: As you like, of course.

(Silence)

TOM: I am so pleased that you have come. A great Croatian actress and all that... and yet you have found time for our acting company, for us amateurs. Otherwise, professionals despise amateurs, don't they?

EVA: Well, it's...

TOM: ... it's quite normal and understandable.

EVA: Yes, it does make sense.

TOM: But the reverse holds too. Amateurs despise professionals.

EVA: I'm not so sure about that...

TOM: But I am. And that makes sense too. Doesn't it?

EVA: Well now, I don't see why it should.

TOM: I despise both.

EVA: Both?

TOM: If they are not the real thing, if they are not sincere. Do you get my point? You either have a God-given talent, or you don't. That's the way I look at it. Do you agree?

EVA: Yes, yes I do.

(Silence)

TOM: An amateur can be an actor too. If he has any talent, of course. And experience. You see, for the last forty years I have been acting just for my own satisfaction. It's not the same as with you pros, but still - I have sixty roles behind me, if you know what I'm saying. In our business, experience is very important. Experience and training.

EVA: And talent.

TOM: Of course - I'm not even interested in those without talent.

(Silence.)

TOM: What about having that drink now?

EVA: I stay away from alcohol.

TOM: Really?! And I thought that all great artists were masochists and liked to destroy themselves bit by bit.

EVA: What made you think that?

TOM: It' s simple - a person who is creative, who brings other characters to life, who is constructive every day, has to be destructive, too, from time to time... just for the sake of balance. We hold within ourselves all life' s conditions, all the qualities and all the contrasts. Those who do the most good works often do the most evil. Those who love the most - hate the most. Just for the sake of balance. Creative people are the most destructive. Do you agree?

EVA: Yes, partly. It' s true - after some really hard work, after you are drained emotionally, you are very often capable of... all right then, you can pour me some.

(TOM pours a glass for EVA and then for himself.)

TOM: Here' s to your good health, and to our work together.

EVA: Cheers.

(TOM drains his glass while EVA sips her drink.)

EVA: Strong stuff.

TOM: Slavonian plum brandy... put through the still twice.

(They look into each other' s eyes. The silence lasts.)

EVA: Tell me. What did you have in mind? What are you expecting from me? Just advice, or perhaps that I direct for you or...

TOM: You would like a concrete discussion right off, but I was thinking that we should get acquainted first. Actors like to know their partner before they decide to work with them. Isn't that right?

EVA: Yes, but I...

TOM: You see... I know you well. Extremely well. I have seen you on stage, I know how you act. I know your potential and your limitations.

EVA: My limitations?

TOM: We all have certain limitations. Even John Gielgud. Bounded by our own restrictions, just like a painting by its frame. But limitation becomes quality when we make it conscious. That' s what I meant to say.

EVA: Oh, I see.

TOM: And now - it' s not hard for me to decide whether to work with you or not.

EVA: Well, it was you who sent me that charming letter.

TOM: True enough, that letter told you how much I admired your acting skills, and your talent and stage sense and interaction with your partner on stage. I really do know you very well, and we don't have to waste any more words on that score. In any case, the whole country knows you; everyone knows you are the greatest Croatian actress of your generation - although the majority know you from your roles in films and on TV. But when I talk about acting and art, I'm always talking about the theatre. I think you understand me.

EVA: On the whole.

TOM: Television is crap, motion pictures are pseudo-art, theatre is what counts. Only theatre.

EVA: You can't generalise like that.

TOM: Oh yes I can. They make one good movie that means something among hundreds of totally idiotic ones.

EVA: There you are. That one "good movie" you mention means that even you think films can be worthwhile.

TOM: They are shit mostly. Movie making attracts people with the lowest IQs - looking for cheap fame and glory. The theatre is more modest, simpler - but much stronger because it lives off the body and soul of a living human being, the actor. The real theatre. I'll be completely frank with you: I know and respect you as an actress in the theatre, and that's what interests me. And your forays into film and television - let's just ignore them, forget all about them. I invited you to come because of the theatre, so let's stick to that.

EVA: You started saying something about yourself and how I don't know you.

TOM: Exactly. You don't know me. But for you to want to work with me, for you to have faith in me as I have in you, you have to get to know what's good and what's bad about me. So I'm ready to stand before you now and deliver a soliloquy I've prepared. Then you'll be able to judge if I am a real actor or just a hopeful ham.

EVA: You would be willing to do that? Do a soliloquy in front of me just as if you were doing it at the Academy entrance exam?

TOM: Exactly. Just for you, I'll go through it all again.

EVA: But all I wanted to know was what you expected from me in this amateur company of yours. What help you need from me.

TOM: Easy now. We'll come to that. But only after you see me acting. You can only talk serious business after you know with whom you are dealing. Isn't that so?

EVA: Well yes, it is. But I don't insist that you try out for me here.

TOM: No, but I do. I want you to know what sort of actor you are dealing with, I want you to see that the sixty-two roles I played in the theatre were not for nothing.

EVA: What play is the soliloquy from?

TOM: It' s a great play. It' s called " The Actors Depart" .

EVA: Who wrote it?

TOM: You' ll find out. And now - you could sit here.

(EVA sits down. The lights change and the entire stage is in darkness except for one spotlight on TOM).

TOM: When an actor is dying, it' s not just one person dying; it's the death of the shades of the many false bodies through which we give ourselves so unselfishly. Without even knowing it, our audience dies with us. Even memories of us die, because reminiscences about the dead are never sincere, never sincere and critical enough. Reminiscences about the dead are tearful and false, full of our own weaknesses and fear of our own deaths. When an actor is dying, every future role he could have played dies with him, and even those spotlights that were never lit fail to light at opening nights that never take place. When an actor is dying, hundreds of characters die with him and life is shown to be a poor play in which the denouement and the ending are badly written. When we cry about an actor' s death, we don' t cry merely for him, but for all the days and all the performances that we lived through with him in the theatre. When the actor dies, the members of his audience die too, because his death is confirmation of the transitory nature of their own lives. But, worst of all is when the actor dies before he has had the chance to play the part of his life - the part in which he could give his all, with an ideal cast, a superb text and unobtrusive direction. A role in which he feels he has shown all his knowledge, qualities and skills - finding the right measure for every word and every gesture. A role in which he accepts his body as it is, not trying to cheat his age. A role he did not act but simply lived. It's sad to die without having played such a part. But there, both you and I have lived our lives for the theatre and in the theatre. We were married for twenty years. We have played hundreds of parts. We have been showered with the praise and the glory we dreamt of as children. But neither of us has ever created that role of a lifetime. And that's simply because we never acted together. The two of us - such a distinguished acting couple - have never appeared on the stage together. And that' s the only reason we have never reached the very top. We both know it. And the sands of time are running out for us. We are nearing the autumn of our lives - and that' s why I am asking you: let' s do it while we still can, while our bodies still have the strength to reflect our souls. I' m not speaking to you as my ex-wife, but as the ideal stage partner. Without you on the stage, all I know about the craft is worthless. A great actor needs a great co-star. A boxing match is no good if one boxer is strong and wily and the other weak and inept. Don't turn me down. You need me as much as I need you. You can't just act on your own. You'll never reach the pinnacle without me either. Forget our divorce. Forget your husband and my wife and focus on the fact that the final curtain is not far off, and we still haven' t shown what we can do.

(The lights change.)

TOM: There you are - the entrance exam is over. Did I pass?

EVA: You were great. Really great. So convincing. And it's a wonderful text. Who wrote the play?

TOM: I did.

EVA: You did?! You write too?

TOM: Just this once. For the past year I have been looking for the right vehicle, something that expresses some of my feelings. I didn't find it so I sat down and wrote it myself.

EVA: What did you say it's called?

TOM: "The Actors Depart". The two main characters are husband and wife, both actors. People of our age. They were divorced fifteen years before the play commences, have been married to other people in the meantime, and then... but it's better that you read it yourself.

EVA: That's fine with me. But wait... you said that there were only two characters.

TOM: That's right.

EVA: And who would play them.

TOM: We would.

EVA: We would?

TOM: Yes - unless you would feel uncomfortable acting with an "amateur".

EVA: Not at all. You act very well, surprisingly convincingly, just as it should be. But who's the director?

TOM: I am.

EVA: You?

TOM: Yes, me.

EVA: I don't like it when an actor acts and directs. It's a bit like masturbation.

TOM: I don't know much about masturbation, but I do know that this will be a great show. Unless...

EVA: ... unless I am uncomfortable playing with an amateur.

TOM: You see, we are on the same wavelength. You even read my mind. But you do not have to decide today, take the script and read it. If you like it, I am sure you won't turn down the part. In any case, what have you got to lose?

EVA: What do you mean by that?

TOM: You're not in anything at the moment. The *Gavella* Theatre is being renovated, and none of the others seem to have anything for you.

EVA: I see you are very well informed.

TOM: A good director has to know everything about the actors he wants to engage.

EVA: All right. I'll read your play, even though I am not too keen on actors being the main characters. That's not very original. I have read hundreds of plays with that theme.

TOM: This one is different.

EVA: In what way?

TOM: In the way it is written. It's well written because an actor wrote it.

EVA: I don't like it when writers are actors.

TOM: But you loved playing Shakespeare, didn't you?

EVA: Yes I did. Every moment of it.

TOM: He was an actor. As so was Moliere.

EVA: Chekhov wasn't.

TOM: But his wife was an actress.

EVA: It's not an experience that's transmitted in bed.

TOM: Ah, but it is. It is.

SCENE 2.

EVA: Too much has happened between us. Too much that was ugly.

TOM: But lots that was nice.

EVA: That's true - but much less. I'm sorry, but I can't... I don't want to work with you...

TOM: You don't want to?

EVA: I can't.

TOM: You could, if you wanted to. I know you want this role even more than I do. For the last few years you haven't had many offers. I have been more fortunate.

EVA: I have always been envious of you, you male actors. Five times more roles are written for men than for women. I have always despised playwrights because they don't write roles for women, or when they do they don't know how.

TOM: That's why you must not turn down this play. Both roles are wonderful, rich and deep.

EVA: Even so, don't you realise how perverse it would be for the two of us to act together after all we've gone through. What would your wife say, and what about my husband?

TOM: They'll be angry, they'll object.

EVA: You see - I am right.

TOM: No, you are not. You won't let me explain. This is our last chance to show what we can do. Don't forget that we are both sixty.

EVA: And don't you forget that we were married for twenty years, and that I don't want to bring to life those memories that have been laid to rest for all time.

TOM: I am not asking you to do that. I'm asking for your co-operation professionally, and nothing more. When we were married, you used to say that you didn't want us to act together because we were married, and that everybody would think we were acting out our private life. And then when we divorced, you didn't want to act with me because we were not married any more.

EVA: I didn't want to because of my new husband, I didn't want to hurt his feelings, and I still don't.

TOM. All right, hold it there. Listen to that line: " I didn't want to because of my new husband." The key word is " husband" . Emphasise it. For her, the husband is the rationale. He's the third player in the game, always present but never actually there. You must not mention him just by the way. He's the greatest obstacle. It's the greatest obstacle. It's because of him that she finds it hard so say yes to the actor

EVA: OK.

TOM: Just one more thing: your silences are not meaningful enough.

EVA: We have only been rehearsing for three weeks and you...

TOM: Yes, but we have worked on this scene at least fifty times.

EVA: And I find it stupid that we keep on at that one scene instead of bringing the whole play to life.

TOM: This is the key scene in which we have to establish their relationship. If we do this scene well, everything else will go right, as night follows day. If we manage to explain to ourselves in this scene who our characters are, after that we only have to lend them our bodies and our voices. Nothing more. If you know what your actress is thinking and feeling, the audience will know too. If you understand the character you are embodying, the audience will understand your role in the right way.

EVA: That' s all very well, but I still don' t know what' s wrong with my silences.

TOM: Do you know what real acting is to me? It' s when you' re standing on the stage, motionless, no lines to speak, and the audience cannot take its eyes off you. But silence has to be prepared carefully, the tension has to be achieved through your concentration on your partner, that mental focus on what your character would be going through in such a situation. The silence has to be in its actual context, the tension has to permeate both partners. Even some mediocre actors know how to chatter, how to skilfully utter sentences that don' t mean much. Hamlet' s soliloquy can be played by any beginner, but Hamlet' s silence can be interpreted only by the top professionals. I often quote that great saying: " You show me your stage silence and I' ll tell you what sort of actor you are."

(Silence.)

EVA: Who said that?

TOM: I did. I first said it in 1967. As time goes by, I' m more and more convinced I was right. And now - let' s try that scene again.

EVA: Where from?

TOM: From the beginning.

(The light change.)

EVA: Too much has happened between us. Too much that was ugly.

TOM: But lots that was nice.

EVA: That' s true, but much less. I' m sorry but I can' t... I don' t want to work with you...

TOM: You don' t want to?

EVA: I can' t.

SCENE 3.

(TOM is alone on the stage. He is walking up and down in agitation. He stops for a moment at the antique wardrobe, pulls out the bottle of fruit brandy, pours himself some and downs it. EVA comes in.)

EVA: I' m sorry, but the trams were packed and I...

TOM: You are late!

EVA: I was just unlucky, there was some sort of traffic jam at Kvatrich...

TOM: You are late!

EVA: I' m so sorry, but...

TOM: You are an hour late.

EVA: Really?

TOM: Yes, exactly an hour.

EVA: I' m sorry, it wasn' t intentional.

TOM: It wasn' t by chance either.

EVA: What' s that supposed to mean?

TOM: You have been late eight times this last month. That is unprofessional, impolite, and immoral. You are destroying my concentration. How do you think I can act after waiting for you for a whole hour? Let me tell you that I have never been late, never. I can' t stand actors who are late for rehearsal, I despise them. In any case, remember what Stanislavski said about actors who are late for rehearsal.

EVA: What' s the meaning of this? I am doing you a favour by even consenting to work with you, and you have the temerity to insult me...

TOM: My apologies, but I am doing you a bigger favour than you are doing me.

EVA: You' re doing me a favour. Nonsense!

TOM: Ah, no. It' s not nonsense at all. Don' t think I don' t know that it' s been four years since you played in the theatre. Since then - nothing. You think I don' t know that every time the phone rings you say to yourself " that might be the theatre" , and when you hear the neighbour' s voice you are disappointed and sadder that you were before it rang. I' m doing you the favour, because I' m making it possible for you to do the work you love. And what do you do in return? After " resting" for four years, you start working, and are late from the very beginning. All you professionals are the same. Croatian actors think that the theatre should serve them, and not the other way round.

EVA: You are presumptuous and insolent.

TOM: No-one is more insolent than an actor who is always late.

EVA: If you don' t stop behaving like this, I will pull out of the play. You forget that I am a lady, and you are just a man.

TOM: I apologise to the lady, but I despise the actress for reminding me that she is one. If you were a real professional you would not be stooping to such low female tactics.

EVA: You permit yourself too much.

TOM: No more than you.

EVA: I will not allow some frustrated actor to lecture me. No doubt you tried to pass the entrance exam at the Academy ten times at least, and failed each time. Now you are taking it out on me.

(Silence.)

TOM: Yes. I did take the entrance exam. Not ten times, but only once. And I did not fail - but was accepted. It was the same year you enrolled.

EVA: But... that' s impossible.

TOM: No, it' s not. Try to remember. In nineteen fifty-one when you were accepted as a student, the Academy enrolled Izet, Zido, Slip, Kohnitza, Sanda, Drach, Rogula... That was the Academy' s third class of students. You had two long plaits and a blue dress with a small brooch. While you were waiting to be called, you sat at the end of the corridor shaking like a withered autumn leaf waiting to fall. You wanted very much to be accepted, very much.

EVA: But how do you know that? I really did have a blue dress and I wore my mother' s brooch. Who told you all this?

TOM: I am trying to tell you. I passed the entrance exam that year too, but I wasn' t able to attend classes.

EVA: Oh, I remember now. When we came for our first lecture, the professors mentioned that one student had quit. Jakov Bratanich, our art history lecturer, was always telling us that he was the lucky one. That he had made a wiser decision than the rest of us.

TOM: That was me.

EVA: But why did you quit if you passed the entrance exam.

TOM: It' s a long story. Sad too. It' s not important. Forget it... We were talking about you being late so often.

EVA: Exactly - we were talking about my being late. You have to come to terms with that as quickly as possible.

TOM: But...

EVA: I have been late for rehearsals all my life and I will be late until my dying day. You just have to get used to it. All the directors in Croatia have.

TOM: But as far as I am concerned, an actor who is always late...

EVA: Tom - " What a queen can do, her subjects can' t" . I have always been forgiven for things that could not be overlooked in ordinary actors. Don' t forget that the theatre is founded on unwritten rules, and the word equality does not exist there.

Scene 4.

EVA: The theatre is a collection of deceptive memories, unproved gossip, minor intrigues and an insatiable desire for fame and glory. The theatre is the most disgusting institution ever created by god and there is no doubt that he peopled it with creatures who have no personality, no place under the sun. Theatre people want to cheat their own destiny and the laws of nature, they are often very limited and completely uninteresting, and this is the same theatre you idealise as a temple of the arts.

TOM: No, I don' t idealise that sort of theatre. I worship the theatre that your colleagues have never attained because they sold their souls for petty objectives.

EVA: And what are they?

TOM: Running after the money and popularity that comes from film and TV roles. Actors today want the eminence of university professors, they want to be as rich as merchants and as influential as politicians, and even more popular than champion sportsmen. And these are all motives of the wrong kind.

EVA: And what is the right kind of motive?

TOM: The stage, and only the stage. And the audience, of course. If an actor thinks that there is a greater pleasure in life than acting before a full house of people who watch his every move almost - then he should try his hand at something else, and not acting.

EVA: An actor is only human. He has his own needs and desires, too.

TOM: All the same - you could have done without those stupid partisan films that you played in during the Sixties. And those two television series. Just a waste of time. Utter rubbish.

EVA: All of us did the same thing. We wanted to try our skills in other media.

TOM: You wanted the money and the popularity. Those are not media for actors. It is only in the theatre that the actor can play god, feel like a king who rules himself and others by the way he feels.

EVA: I accepted that television role because I was going through a minor crisis. I wanted a change.

TOM: You should have sought the solution on the stage, and not on film sets.

EVA: I had my daughter to think of. I wanted to provide her with a good life. I had a husband who kept on about how he earned more money than I did. I wanted to prove the opposite, to be financially independent. It's easy for you to idealise acting when you never had to live off it. In my first year at the Academy I, too, dreamed of pure art, ideal conditions, ideal partners. By my third year I had realised that this was a bloody and cold-hearted profession where you had to compromise and make mistakes.

TOM: But not so often perhaps.

EVA: It's easy to be wise now.

TOM: That's true. So it's better for you to turn your back on the past and focus on what we are doing here now.

EVA: I agree.

(Silence.)

TOM: I would like to make a suggestion.

EVA: Go ahead.

TOM: I know you wanted to celebrate your fortieth anniversary of work on the stage last year, I know you mentioned it to the management and that they promised to find the right role for you - and forgot all about it in the end.

EVA: Well informed again.

TOM: There it is. All of Zagreb's theatre world left you in the lurch - not even one director came forward from any of the other theatres where you could have performed. No one made it possible for you to celebrate with an anniversary performance and I was thinking... I was thinking that this could be declared a performance celebrating your forty years in the theatre.

EVA: This performance?

TOM: Yes, this one. I know the hall is not very big, but it's no worse than the majority of theatres in Zagreb. In any case, if you can act in the foyer of the *Gavella* Theatre, why not at a Retirement Home.

EVA: Oh, Tom. It's a wonderful idea! It will be a slap in the face to the Zagreb culture crowd. I can already imagine tomorrow's headlines: "Great Actress Denied Anniversary Appearance", "First Amateur Performance - After Forty Years as a Professional". That will goad them. I can hardly wait. Leave the critics and the press to me.

TOM: You always liked a sensation.

EVA: It never does any harm in this profession.

TOM: Eva...

EVA: Yes...

TOM: Do you have faith in our play?

EVA: Of course I do. Did you doubt it?

TOM: No - but you professionals are often prejudiced about the amateur theatre.

EVA: Tom...

TOM: Yes...

EVA: Why didn' t you study acting?

(Silence.)

TOM: It' s a long story.

EVA: All the same... I' m interested.

TOM: My father was a postman. He used to play a tenor tambouritza in the evenings with his musician friends in Slavonski Brod. I was the oldest child. When I was four, my mother had twins. They were wonderful kids. Three years later, a sister came into our lives. A pretty normal family - until January, 1946. Then the communists sentenced my father to be hanged.

EVA: But why?

TOM: Only because he had played his tambouritza for the wrong people during the war. I was fourteen at the time, and on that day I realised that childhood was over, and that whether my brothers and my sister survived depended on me. On the whole - my mother and I did the dirtiest jobs around, just to keep the family fed.

EVA: And acting?

TOM: In 1948, when I was sixteen, one of the Zagreb theatre companies gave a guest performance in Slavonski Brod. It was the first time in my life that I had ever seen a theatre performance. I fell in love with the theatre there and then, and wanted to be an actor myself. A year later I played a role in a skit with a Brod amateur group, and not long after, I had a role in a Maxim Gorki play. At that time, Russian socialist writers were still in. But, luckily, it wasn' t a bad play.

EVA: " At the Bottom" ?

TOM: No, " Children of the Sun" . So I decided to become a real actor. In the spring of fifty-two, I managed to persuade my mother to move the entire family to Zagreb. Mama had a job waiting for her in my uncle' s pub, and I managed to get a job as a labourer at the railway station. Because of my father' s c.v., I could not find decent employment. My documents were marked with the information that my father had been hanged as a traitor.

EVA: But that must have been the same year you passed the entrance exam.

TOM: That' s right. I passed the entrance exam for the acting courses, and two days later my mother died, suddenly, out of the blue. I had to make up my mind quickly. We had no money, and my sister and my brothers had only me to depend on. I knew I would have to put off my studies until better times, and that I would have to keep the whole family. During the day, I worked at the railway station, and at night I did the job my mother had done at the pub for the last few months before she died. It all went on like that for about five years. After finally, in fifty-seven, I went back to the Academy to try again, but they told me first-year students had to be under twenty-four years old, and I was twenty-five. And so: there was nothing for it but to dabble in amateur acting, as I had already been doing, and to go to the theatre to watch the professionals. I was terribly unhappy. I remember that in the fall of fifty-seven you had a leading role in Shaw' s " Mrs Warren' s Profession" , and you were great, fabulous. After that, you made your name with Begovich' s " Without a Third" .

EVA: And Chekhov' s " Sea gull" , too.

TOM: Yes. That was your best season ever. You opened the following season with your wedding, instead of first night.

EVA: That' s right. I married in the September of 1958.

TOM: To a doctor who didn' t like the theatre.

EVA: How do you know he didn' t like the theatre?

TOM: I presumed he didn' t.

(Silence.)

EVA: What about you? What happened to you?

TOM: A month after your wedding, I got a job at the City Library. I found it simple and easy, but it was far from what I had hoped for. But I could read hundreds of books every year, and speak with people who knew and appreciated good literature. Instead of talking with those railroad workers and the boozy costumers at my uncle' s pub, I now had a chance to talk to students of literature, to university professors and writers. On the face of it, I should have been satisfied and happy. But I was neither. I cursed my bad luck in living in a country in which you can' t get a part simply by auditioning for it and being the best, where only actors who have been to the Academy have any chance. But I didn' t grow to hate the theatre. In fact, I became an informed spectator and a hardworking amateur. If I told you I had seen all your performances, you probably wouldn' t believe me.

EVA: No, I wouldn' t.

TOM: To date, you have had exactly eighty-four first nights.

EVA: But how do you know the exact number?

TOM: I told you, I have seen all your performances. And I kept a diary, a Spectator' s Diary, just for me. When you had your little girl in sixty-three, I was afraid you would not return to the theatre for some time. And sure enough: you didn' t act for two years. Luckily, your return to the stage was marvellous, absolutely brilliant. And once more you had the help of a great playwright, George Bernard Shaw.

EVA: " Pygmalion" was my favourite play. My favourite part.

TOM: I got married the day after the premiere, and my son Stephen was born a year later.

(Silence.)

EVA: Shall we continue with the rehearsal?

TOM: Yes.

EVA: Good.

TOM: Try to be natural, no pathos, you have to tell your ex-husband everything to his face, but you are aware that it is too late, that this argument will not have a victor and a vanquished, that both of you will be losers when the past is hashed over. I will defend the actor with the arguments of a person of reason; he' s a man, after all. As a woman - which is only natural - you will be calling on emotions, on the logic of the soul and not of the mind.

EVA: All right.

(The lights change.)

EVA: It was then, that summer, that you stopped loving me.

TOM: That' s not true.

EVA: It' s true. You stopped loving me because I stopped laughing at all your jokes, your play of words. You no longer dominated me as you did in the beginning, and that' s why you looked for another woman, one who would adore you, who would be impressed by your wit, your career and your impeccable manners. In fact, what you needed was some young goose who knew nothing about life. And you found her.

TOM: You always inclined to cheap psychoanalysis, but you have forgotten how you were behaving at that time, and who set the rules in our marriage anyway. Everything I did then, I did for you - and not for me. Anyway, remember all I had to go through just to...

Scene 5.

EVA: I' m sorry, Tom, but we can' t go on like this, we really can' t.

TOM: Why? What' s wrong?

EVA: We have been rehearsing for more than a month and I still don' t know what kind of costume I' ll be wearing.

TOM: Wait for a few more days, and we' ll find the solution to that problem.

EVA: You told me the same thing a week ago.

TOM: I' m sorry, Eva, but you must realise that I am doing my best. I' m both actor and director. So if I have not shaped up as an organiser, surely you can overlook that.

EVA: Who is this costume designer anyway? I' ve never heard of him.

TOM: He designed excellent costumes for " The Plank" amateur group from Sisak.

EVA: So why hasn' t he turned up here to show us his sketches and his suggestions?

TOM: Take it easy. The man has family problems. As soon as he settles them, he' ll be at rehearsal. Anyway, a costume is not the most important part of a performance. What is important is that you feel the role in your mind and your body. And I know this is going to be a great play and that we will be turning in great performances.

EVA: Once, in 1967 to be precise, a whole performance of mine was ruined because of the costumes, despite how good I was.

TOM: You didn' t flop because of the costumes.

EVA: No?

TOM: You were thirty-four and you were playing the role of a nineteen-year-old girl.

EVA: Now you are being offensive.

TOM: No, I am not. I am just giving you the facts and figures. There comes a time when every actress has to recognise that she can no longer play ingenues and young girls, but has to take the parts of mature women. You wasted your energy on playing youth and innocence - which is impossible anyway - instead of concentrating on the character.

EVA: I was going through a minor crisis at that time. I don' t remember why I accepted that part.

TOM: You accepted it because it flattered your vanity to play the part of a girl, when you were no longer young. You wanted to prove that you were still young - and it simply couldn' t be done.

EVA: Do you know what it is about you that gets on my nerves?

TOM: Tell me. What?

EVA: The fact that you think you know everything.

TOM: But I do. If you had had me as a friend, you would not have made so many wrong moves in your career.

EVA: Aha - now you are going to tell me that there were other mistakes in my life.

TOM: There certainly were. Remember 1976, when Igor offered you the part of Gertrude in " Hamlet" . That production was pure shit, and you should never have had anything to do with it.

EVA: Modern productions were in at the time - and that was the way Igor directed.

TOM: Igor directs like an idiot because he is one. My heart bled for you in the laboured modernism of that show. That was the dawn of Balkan theatrical postmodernism in Zagreb. Poor Hamlet spent all his time in the crown of that walnut tree, declaiming his verses from above. And the rest of you circled around him and talked to your partners on branches of the tree.

EVA: I remember now. My head and my neck ached after every rehearsal. Igor' s concept was to try to emphasise Hamlet' s alienation from the other characters so that our words did not reach him.

TOM: I never had any faith in him as a director. He doesn' t have a clue about acting, he doesn' t know that the theatre is about acting, and not cheap symbolism. He humiliated his actors in that production. As far as he is concerned, Hamlet is an ape that has not yet come down from the trees. I am sick of people who want to be modern at any price, and don' t understand that they are creative zeroes.

EVA: You can' t say that. Plays he directed have won awards at the *BITEF* and *EUROKAZ* festivals, and some festivals abroad, too.

TOM: All those *BITEFs* and *EUROKAZs* are just shit. I have had my fill of them. They are all concocted for the glory of the directors, and to the detriment of the actors. Most of those types of plays don' t even need real actors. You could arrange those festivals with a bunch of total strangers to acting, prepared to believe in inane concepts. You pseudoprofessionals who have stopped loving the theatre in an innocent and child-like way, you are the ones who have sold your souls to five directors and five drama critics who haven' t got a clue about authentic theatre. You gave up good texts and gave in to senseless assemblages, you gave up acting and gave in to idiotic " interpretations" , which drove the audience out of the theatre. You allowed others to explain to you what was good, and what was bad.

EVA: It looks as though you don' t care much for the modern theatre.

TOM: No, quite the contrary. I am for the modern theatre, because all modern performances, all modern texts, become classics after only a few years. I' m against the fashionable theatre because, sooner or later, fashionable things in the theatre prove to be senseless. I have nothing against bad or mediocre shows - the law of averages makes them inevitable. But I am against inane shows, which you know in advance are going to be senseless. People here can' t differentiate between what is modern and what is mere fashion, because criteria are set by frustrated charlatans, and not by professional theatre people.

EVA: Yes, but you find that sort of theatre all over the world.

TOM: In every country you find three of four arty snobs who are allergic to normal acting. But they have influence. They would walk around on their eyebrows just to prove their originality. They go to all the round-table conferences and write erudite essays on the visual theatre. They have a weak spot for the visual arts. For them, set designs and costumes are more important than actors, and they like mime, too, as though any theatre that is non-physical and inorganic could exist. They like the story to be told through body posturing and screams. Only the English have managed to resist such stupidity. All those jerk-off experiments play second fiddle with them. In the theatre of authentic drama, it is the actors that are the masters. In normal countries, the experimental theatre is just that, a backwater, and not the mainstream the way it is becoming here in Croatia, or the even more crazy form that it has taken in some German theatres where the directors have become almighty Messiahs, and the actors and the audience have accepted amnesia and a position of subjugation as their well-deserved fate.

EVA: You are partly right.

TOM: I am completely right.

EVA: Still - you are too exclusive.

TOM: No, I am not. I am acting as a spokesperson for the spectators in our theatres, as a loyal theatregoer who has not missed any Zagreb or foreign guest performance in forty years. I am speaking as a man in love who, without wanting to, spent all his money and ruined his private life on the theatre. I am speaking to you as a man in love who has the indisputable right to show you what love is, for he knows the feeling and has suffered for it. A man who has travelled over half of Europe, searching for the perfect performance, for the authentic theatrical experience. I have watched so many times as unfulfilled idiots with their false identity performances chase the audience away. I' m no theoretician - I am a practitioner. What' s more: theatre is my life. Never in my entire life have I visited those theatre cafes, because I am not interested in theatre gossip but in the sacred rite celebrated when a good text and good actors are brought together. That harmony of mental and physical energy which is transmitted from the stage, through a stage partner who knows how to listen, to the audience, reaching the normal spectator who has his own views on life and art, and who doesn' t need an interpreter.

EVA: You' re talking like an innocent girl who idealises marriage, just because she has never spent three days and three nights in a row with a man.

To her, the life of two people together appears to be an ideal exchange of smiles and gentle kisses. The theatre, too, lives from banal and prosaic things - the theatre is comprised of clans in which the actor is seemingly protected, but the clans soon fall apart, and there are also those clans which are set against the actor. The theatre is inhabited by theatre people of flesh and blood, with all their faults and virtues. With vanities that choke them and their environment. That theatre poetry you dream of always came into being on a bed of manure and misfortune - if it came into being at all. And the actor is a creature of flesh and blood whose life, often against his will, spills over into his roles.

TOM: I always held that against you.

EVA: What?

TOM: The fact that you could see on stage if something ugly was happening in your personal life. A pro should never allow that to happen. As a member of the audience, I must not be able to see that your father died yesterday, or that your head aches, or you are in a good mood or a bad mood. I must not see that your husband has run off with another woman and that you are in pain.

(Silence.)

EVA: That was visible with me?

TOM: It was. You played that entire season without any concentration, nothing like the way you had been before.

(Silence.)

EVA: On my forty-fifth birthday, I found out he was having an affair with a nurse. It was like a thunderbolt. His... his... she was three months pregnant. Nothing could be changed, or stopped. He was moving off into a new life, a new beginning, and I found myself rejected and alone. My daughter soon left to go to college in America. Overnight, I lost my family. Everything caved in.

TOM: Not everything. You still had the theatre.

EVA: You can't reduce life to only one dimension. All I wanted to do was to get away from everything, from the city, from my friends. I just wanted to be alone. Instead, I had to go out onto the stage every night and demonstrate control of emotions. Me, who had been trampled by them.

TOM: Does your daughter write to you?

EVA: Now and then. If she had not married an American I would at least have someone I could get together with once a week, and speak frankly and openly with about everything. I haven't seen her for eighteen months.

(Silence.)

EVA: You know, it occurred to me yesterday that it would be better for me if I lived like you - in a Retirement Home - instead of being alone in my apartment.

TOM: Don' t talk rubbish - a great Croatian actress like you ending up in a home.

EVA: Well, you have chosen to live in one.

TOM: It' s different with me. Even when I was living in a pack, I was always a loner. Besides, when my wife died I couldn' t go on living in that apartment, full of memories. And when my son got married, I realised that I did not want to bother him with an old man' s problems. I left him the apartment and moved here. If I had stayed there, I would have been in their way. As it is, we are on good terms.

EVA: Do you see each other?

TOM: I go to have Sunday lunch with them, once a month. They suggested once a week, but I decided once a month would be enough for them to put up with. I play with my grandson and... and then back to my lair, before they get bored with my stories about the theatre and old times.

(Silence.)

TOM: I remember, once, before - you were as slim as a birch - and then in seventy-nine, you suddenly putr on weight. Only your eyes stayed the same - the eyes of a girl from 1952, at the entrance exam.

EVA: When an actor puts on weight, he becomes more convincing, more vital. Thanks to those extra pounds, I played some wonderful character roles at the beginning of the Eighties, which would have passed me by if I had not put on weight. Anyway, I despise actresses who are too skinny.

TO: Yes, but you were skinny too, at the beginning.

EVA: There' s a time for everything. After they get divorced, all women put on weight. Or start drinking. I did both. For a while. After I went in for double abstinence, the alcohol evaporated but the pounds stayed on.

(Silence.)

EVA: So when' s the costume going to be ready?

TOM: Oh Jesus, you do get on my nerves!

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Scene 6.

TOM: Perhaps I really have been unjust to you, perhaps I was a lousy husband and a bad colleague. But you can't erase twenty years just like that, just as you can't deny that we respected each other as actors. Always. And we always wanted to act together. Let's say that you were a better wife that I was a husband, let's say I deserve all the nasty things you've said tonight, let's say we're only human and make mistakes, or that I made the mistakes and that my "I'm sorry" doesn't mean much to you any more and that it is sixteen years too late. But still, please don't let us add another mistake to all this. Possibly the biggest of all. If we don't do this play together, you will regret it as much as I do... But, what the hell. I know it's all hopeless and I can't persuade you to act with a man you despise. Come on, out with it, give me a straight "no", and enjoy rejecting me, just as you think I rejected you sixteen years ago. Come on, let me hear that "NO"

.

(Silence.)

EVA: Never before in your life have you ever fought for my "YES", for my good will. Never before have you ever shown that you cared for me. If you had approached me with such authentic desire even once, we would never have got divorced. Instead, you persistently showed your superiority, your lack of interest in me and what I felt.

TOM: I thought I would make you jealous, revive your interest in me, and instead you responded with coldness and scorn.

EVA: That's what you deserved. You betrayed my love for you.

TOM: But I never stopped loving you, never.

EVA: I don't believe you.

TOM: I swear it.

EVA: Why didn't you say so then before our lives went off in separate directions?

TOM: Believe me, I was looking for the right words. But you didn't want to listen to me then.

EVA: You really loved me?

TOM: I never stopped loving you. Never. I know it's not important now. I know that our lives are nearing their end and that we don't have time to make a new beginning, even if we wanted to. But I want you to know that I never stopped loving you. Never. Just as I know that you still love me, and that your love is stronger than all the links of hatred you have chained about our love. Your present husband, and my wife - even they know that we are the ideal cast, even they know that they are just bit players who make aging easier for us, just as we make aging easier for them.

(Silence.)

EVA: All right. I agree to play opposite you in this piece. I agree that we celebrate our anniversary on the stage together - on condition that you allow me to go on hating you, as much as I once loved you.

TOM: Permission granted - with pleasure. I know very well that your every expression of hatred towards me has its roots in your desire for me, in your unsuccessful suppression of love. The more you hate me, the happier I' ll be. It will be a sign of your injured love for me.

EVA: Do I have to say it, do I have to spell it out, do I have to confess how much you still mean to me for you to understand what can' t be said, you damned...

(She raises her hands to strike him, but ends up in his arms, sobbing...)

TOM: Forgive me, please forgive me.

EVA: I would be so happy if I didn' t love you, if I could hate you, if I could live without thinking about you.

TOM: It would be easier if you could admit to yourself that we were made for each other.

EVA: I know that. I have known it for a long time. You are irresistible, a conceited seducer.

(The lights change.)

TOM: That' s good. Quite good.

EVA: What does that " quite good" mean?

TOM: It means I think you can dig deeper into your emotions. But less obviously.

EVA: What do you mean?

TOM: Emotions are strongest when they are suppressed. You will be expressing the emotion more strongly if the audience sees and feels that you are suppressing tears, rather than actually shedding them.

EVA: All right. I' ll try it that way. Although it is better if the measure of emotion is determined by my feeling at that moment.

TOM: Would you like a small brandy?

EVA: Yes, I would.

(TOM takes the bottle and pours brandy into two glasses.)

TOM: It was good, really good. A good rehearsal.

EVA: This play of yours is demanding but satisfying. My part is full of emotions, memories, and strength. And at the same time - she is so vulnerable, welling with hidden frustration. I like parts like this. Although, I have to admit, it' s as tiring as doing a monodrama. You probably saw that monodrama of mine.

TOM: Yes, I did. In 1974 at the &TC [Et cetera] Theatre, in the round. Monodramas were very popular at that time.

EVA: What did you think of it?

TOM: I don' t like monodramas. Monodrama is not theatre. It' s like a boxing match with only one fighter - flapping his arms about, jumping round the ring and showing his muscles. That' s the way it was with your monodrama.

EVA: There were charming moments, too.

TOM: And many superfluous ones.

EVA: Perhaps you caught a poor performance. There were plenty of good ones.

TOM: I watched every single performance at the &TD Theatre. Thirty-eight to be exact, but I missed out, thank God, on your appearances in the provinces. In any case, you were only after quick-and-easy money. As I remember, you bought yourself a car after one hundred and twelve performances.

EVA: Sometimes I wonder if you are an undercover agent.

TOM: No, unfortunately, I' m not.

EVA: Just the same, the reviews were good.

TOM: Not quite all of them.

EVA: Yes they were. Every single one.

TOM: And that one in " Eye" magazine?

EVA: Oh, yes. I remember now. We won' t count that one. Should that man ever be taken seriously?

TOM: When he was bursting with praise for you, you took him seriously enough.

EVA: No, I didn' t.

TOM: Yes, you did. That detailed biography which appeared in the programme for that particular play quoted his comments on your role in Osborne' s " Look Back in Anger" .

EVA: I still think you must be an undercover agent.

TOM: Maybe. Maybe not. Perhaps they work for me.

(TOM pours another glass for EVA and one for himself.)

EVA: You know what? You are my ideal audience. My one authentic critic. It's not even hard for me to listen to you finding fault with me. I know it's all sincere, because you know all about me and my career.

TOM: I put everything you do in the context of the high criteria you set yourself. That's why I'm harsher with you than with other actresses. If I were a critic, I would praise the bad actors - to improve their self-confidence and finally get them really acting one day; but I would point out the faults of the good actors - so that they could recognise and eliminate them, and get even closer to perfection.

EVA: Sometimes all an actor needs is a good word, a little bit of praise which doesn't have to be deserved, to help him to bury his doubts and give his best. I remember when I went to Dubrovnik in 1976 to do something at the Dubrovnik Summer Festival. Everything went wrong. I had left Zagreb alone, after a fight with my husband. To get his own back on me, he refused to go to Dubrovnik with me.

TOM: He wanted to have you to himself for the summer, but you couldn't resist playing in Dubrovnik.

EVA: That's right. Besides - it was the first time I had travelled without my daughter, who was three then. She stayed with her granny in Zagreb. I was very upset and nervous. The papers were full of me playing Racine's *Phedre*. It was going to be a great event - but, unfortunately, that Dalmatian maniac was directing, and he yelled his head off at me all the time. Everyone in the troupe could see that something was going on with me - except him. Instead of pointing out where I was going wrong, he just yelled more and more. One night at about one in the morning, in the middle of a rehearsal, we had such a fight that I told him to go to hell and walked out. Then, while I was wandering through the streets of the old town, all alone and in tears, making up my mind to pack and leave Dubrovnik in the morning, a man stepped out of the shadows and approached me. "Madam", he said, "I have just watched the *Phedre* rehearsal. You are marvellous, I can't wait for the opening night." That's all he said, and then he disappeared, without even telling me his name. But that sentence was so sincere that it was all the support I needed. I returned to rehearsals and played that part with all the concentration I could muster. I was really going through a bad time.

TOM: You know, you seem to have these periods of crisis too often.

EVA: You think so?

TOM: Yes. I made a graph of your career - on average, you went through a crisis every four years. And people in the audience should not have been able to see that you were having a fight with your husband, or that your period had started that evening. All I want to see is the actor who is fully submerged in his part. Have I made myself clear?

EVA: Extremely clear. Even disgustingly so.

TOM: When a man expresses himself in plain, straight sentences, there is always a chance that people will regard him as vulgar.

(Silence.)

EVA: By the way, that mysterious night stroller from Dubrovnik gave me something for luck, before he left...

TOM: ... a small shell in a ring box.

EVA: But how do you know that? I have never mentioned to anyone.

TOM: That man who stepped out from the dark... that was me.

EVA: Good Lord! How is that possible?

TOM: When I read that you were going to perform in Dubrovnik, I managed to rent a room - at considerable cost - overlooking the square where the *Phedre* rehearsals were being held. I watched all the rehearsals and saw that fight with the director. So I followed you. I knew you only needed a word of encouragement, and that everything would be fine. I was happy that I could help to restore your self-confidence. You really did play *Phaedra* very well.

EVA: Tom, you were really there when I needed you. You can't imagine what that mean to me.

TOM: You mean it?

EVA: Yes, I do. I have taken that little shell as a good-luck charm to all my premieres. Since 1967. To every opening night. Thanks to you, the Dubrovnik Summer Festival is a very happy memory.

TOM: Not to me it isn't.

EVA: Why not?

TOM: I don't like open-air festivals. Planes flying overhead, drunken tourists yelling all over the place, cats strolling across the stage, wind and rain at the wrong moment - the worst of enemies when the show must go on. Sun-tanned actors reciting their lines with deep pathos, as though everything is as it should be. Theatre should take place in a theatre. There should be no surprises that the director doesn't know about. It shouldn't be too hot or too cold. The audience should not have water poured over it, or be a character in the play. And as for the actors - their skills should conjure up wind and rain, the cold and the sun, love and hate. And after you have shown all you know, and when you are sure that you have elevated the souls of your audience, when you have woken the emotions of the coldest of spectators and made the evening unforgettable, then you come to the end of the play, without strain, and bow to those people who have given you what is priceless - their time and their trust. And never forget that a good audience is as valuable as a good actor, and, without both, there is no theatre.

EVA: You are generalising. I have seen some outstanding performances at the Dubrovnik Summer Festival. All right - there have been some disasters too. But there is a strange charm and challenge in open-air performances.

TOM: I am afraid you are not convincing me.

Scene 7.

(TOM is sitting on a chair, reading a newspaper. EVA enters.)

EVA: Good day.

TOM: Good day.

(TOM shows EVA the newspaper i.e. the page he has been reading.)

TOM: Have you read this?

EVA: Yes, I have.

TOM: And what do you say?

EVA: What should I say - an interview like any other. Actors have to give interviews - it's part of the job.

TOM: But - this is really below all standards. This is supposed to be a serious actor, he's fifty years old, babbling on about his hobbies, politics, and his doggie, who is his inspiration - only fit for the tabloids. In general, actors here are poorly educated, and they don't even seem to read.

EVA: Jean Gabin was a bricklayer, but he was a great actor.

TOM: Jean Gabin was a movie star, and even horses are good actors in movies. Anyway, think of Fellini's films, where non-pros did such a good job. And all of them would be a disaster on the stage. An actor of Laurence Olivier's range would never have become what he did if he hadn't been born into the family of an Evangelical minister, in a house full of books and educated people. He was only ten when he got the part of Brutus in his school production of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar". He studied at St Edward's College at Oxford and then at the Fogarty Acting School in London.

EVA: But he acted in motion pictures, too.

TOM: I have never forgiven him for that. Fortunately, he didn't abandon the theatre, he worked on film between theatre engagements - unlike all the other actors who did the reverse.

EVA: Whatever. But without movies, you would never have seen Olivier acting.

TOM: You're wrong. I saw him in 1957 when he gave a guest performance in Zagreb in "Titus Andronicus". Then I saw him at the National Theatre in

London in 1968 in " Three Sisters" . They later used it as the basis for a bad film. I watched him playing Sophocles and Ibsen. I did heavy physical labour in London just to be able to watch English actors. I hitchhiked, slept in doss-houses, to be able to watch aware, educated English actors, to be able to see the English theatre, where they have not forgotten that the audience comes to the theatre to see the actors. And it goes without saying that their dramatic texts are of the highest order. When you have Shakespeare in your blood, as they have, their writers simply cannot be inferior.

EVA: You often mention Shakespeare and education - but you seem to forget that Shakespeare was barely educated, even for his time. He was not a well-read man, he never learned Latin properly, even though he lived at a time when most important books were written in the language. But nonetheless, that man created great plays of elevated manners and incontestable persuasiveness. And do you know why he was able to accomplish all that? Because he had broad experience of life, because, like Moliere, he spent years wandering about the provinces, getting to know life and people - before he became the court playwright. Being well-read and having a good education does not mean much for an artist unless he has the talent for transforming experience into a work of art. I have met so many well-educated actors, writers, directors, who are creatively impotent, who quote others because they don' t know how to express their own thoughts, and are so far removed from the secret of the creation of real art. It was a happy circumstance for me that I was born into the family of a civil servant who cherished good books, and that my mother was a great admirer of the visual arts. She drew in pencil and charcoal in her spare time. And it' s no less important that I went to Zagreb' s renowned Liberal Arts High School where I had the very best teachers, before I enrolled at the Academy. But all that does not mean a thing. None of it is worth as much as one exhausting tour across the country with a troupe. All those books written about the experiences of others are not worth as much as my own adventures, as my own experiences of love and hate.

(Silence.)

EVA: What did your wife think about you traipsing all over Europe?

TOM: Not a lot. She hated the theatre as much as I loved it. After a while, she grew to hate me too. She thought I was an irresponsible eccentric who spent his time and his money on frivolities. She used to say: " Other women' s husbands have normal hobbies - like bowling, fishing, whores - while you: you have the bloody theatre."

EVA: She would probably get along with my former husband.

TOM: No doubt.

(Silence.)

TOM: If I am not mistaken, there is a line in the play, " Ivan Galeb' s Springs" which goes: " It' s awkward that every time we start to speak about art, we end up speaking about ourselves." I have just realised how true it is. Speaking about art, we are really speaking about ourselves.

EVA: We say even more about ourselves when we engage in art. Much more. Without being aware of it.

(Silence.)

TOM: You have spoken well about your profession, but still - even you have sometimes given senseless and unnecessary interviews, talking about everything but the real stuff, your acting.

EVA: You have to play along if you are asked ridiculous questions. In any case - an actor is not expected to say anything bright or wise. People want to hear something spicy about his life or some scandal, things like that.

TOM: I don' t agree with you.

EVA: The less you agree with me, the more pleasant our conversation becomes.

TOM: Perhaps you are right.

Scene 8.

EVA: And don' t you forget that we spent twenty years together, and that I don' t want to bring to life those memories that have been laid to rest for all time.

TOM: I am not asking you to do that. I' m asking for your co-operation professionally, and nothing more. When we were married, you used to say that you didn' t want us to act together because we were married, and that everybody would think we were acting out our private life. And then when we divorced, you didn' t want to act with me because we were not married any more.

EVA: I didn' t want to because of my new husband, I didn' t want to hurt his feelings, and I still don' t.

(The lights change.)

TOM: Nice. Better and better every time. Just a bit more work and we will have an excellent performance on our hands.

EVA: Tom.

TOM: I think we can now set the exact date for the opening night so that you can contact all the journalists you want to invite, and I can tell my friends when to come. This is going to be outstanding, something Zagreb hasn' t seen for years. You' ll be back in your old form, in the best possible way. And I will get my chance to play with my perfect stage partner.

EVA: Tom...

TOM: I can hardly wait for the opening night. I can hardly wait for the audience to settle in their seats and for us to show them what we can do with the emotions we have nurtured for them, and shaped into the characters.

EVA: Tom...

TOM: What it is?

EVA: I have to... It's so hard to tell you, but...

TOM: What? What's happened?

EVA: I can't rehearse with you after today.

TOM: Whaaatt?

EVA: I have to break off rehearsals for a month... and then we can continue.

TOM: But why?

EVA: A job has come up.

TOM: What job?

EVA: A performance.

TOM: What kind of performance?

EVA: At the Croatian National Theatre. It's Shaw's "Mrs Warren's Profession". This time they have offered me the part of the mother, I play Mrs Warren.

TOM: And who's directing?

EVA: Igor.

TOM: Igor! That fraud! And you want to put off our performance to celebrate your fortieth anniversary as an artist to work with him?

EVA: You see, Tom, Igor invited me to do the part on condition that I celebrate my anniversary with this role. The *Gavella* Theatre is being renovated, and that's why they are offering me the National Theatre. Rehearsals start tomorrow - it has all happened so suddenly.

TOM: But that man has no feeling for Shaw. All his working life has been spent in converting the classical theatre into post-modern crap, and he will ruin this play too.

EVA: No, he won't. He approach is interesting.

TOM: Whenever a director has an approach - there's bullshit on the horizon. I can't believe that you are prepared to abandon our play for Igor's sake.

EVA: I have to.

TOM: No, you don't have to.

EVA: Just for a month, a month and a half and I' ll be back.

TOM: In the end, it turns out that you have no morals at all, just a dilettante. You never did know the difference between the true and the fake theatre. And that' s why you have played dozens of totally forgettable roles.

EVA: Sometimes people have to do things they don' t like very much. It' s the same with actors.

TOM: Actors don' t have to, and they never should. Worthless roles destroy actors more than they could ever imagine. You really are a dilettante.

EVA: You, my friend, are always right, but only in theory, because your whole life has been spent outside the theatre. If you were a pro you would never survive in today' s theatre. Your idealism would be the end of you. You would probably end up in a mental home like some of my colleagues who could not accept the hard reality of life in the theatre. And just one thing: I' m no dilettante, but I could say you were. Because your idealistic concept of the theatre shows that you never lived with it, you just wanted to. It' s like unrequited love. You dream about a woman and idealise her more and more, just because you haven' t met her. If you lived with her through ten days and nights, you would see that your idealised muse has a blotch or two, that she has bad breath in the morning before attending to her toilette, and that she is not the least ideal - but as trite as everybody else. She would either disappoint you terribly, or you might finally become mature and accept life' s reality as it is. It' s the same with the theatre - you have to learn to love it with all its faults. If you can do that, you will find it easier to understand why I decided to do Mrs Warren. The theatre survives on compromise. Actors are creatures of compromise, and can' t always chose what they would like. If you were a professional, and not a dilettante, you would understand why I have to accept the National Theatre part after four years off the stage. Despite what I think about the National Theatre and the people I will be working with.

TOM: I can' t accept your reasoning. No matter what you think, I am deeply disappointed in you.

EVA: Why are you so angry? I' m prepared to come back to our play in a month and a half.

TOM: But I' m not prepared to have you back. I call what you are doing - treachery. You' ve betrayed not only me, but yourself. I can' t and I won' t work with such a person - you have proved that you are not a real artist. You are still calculating, even at sixty. You have no sense of shame. It has to be the sure thing with you. I would rather turn my play into a monodrama than act with you.

EVA: But you hate monodramas.

TOM: What choice do I have, when there is not a real actress in the whole of Zagreb who loves the theatre more than herself. In any case, I wrote this play for you and for me - nobody else can play your role, because I don' t want to see anyone in your part. I am willing to take chances, I don' t add and subtract all the time. I have only acted in plays I admired with people I respected. But, you can' t hear what I' m saying - because you are a fake

like all the members of your profession. I thought you understood what real art was, real theatre art - but you simply dabble in it.

EVA: I won' t allow you to insult me. I was prepared to do you a favour, and now you are behaving like a mule driver.

TOM: Aha - now you are going to get angry at me. You should be ashamed of yourself.

EVA: You are rude and insolent.

TOM: You have understood - finally.

EVA: Goodbye.

TOM: Goodbye for ever! And I hope to God that your Igor makes you play your role in the top of a tree!

Scene 9.

(TOM is alone on the stage. He comes closer to the proscenium.)

TOM: We lived through twenty long years together. You can' t erase it just like that, you can' t just forget it. Don' t you understand how you have become part of me, and I have become part of you. Don' t you realise how much we have in common! How your thoughts have become mine, and how my views are now yours! How many memories belong only to you and me - with us taking the leading roles. Rejecting me, you reject yourself. Rejecting me, you reject a part of yourself, and you don' t realise how it will impoverish you. So I am begging you: forget the bad things, forget how we parted and think only of how we came together, and how we lived together, and the value we have together. Together we are worth ten times more - because we are born partners.

(The lights change. TOM takes the bottle of brandy and slowly drinks some. Shortly after, we hear EVA' s voice reading over the loud-speaker.)

EVA (OFF): Dear Tom: I know you are so angry at me that you would like to tear this letter into little pieces. But I hope you will read it anyway and accept my apology. I' m truly sorry for the injustice I did you. You probably heard that I pulled out of Igor' s play at the National Theatre. After working with you, working with him was real torture. I could not believe in him because there is nothing in him to believe. I' m coming to see you, tomorrow, Tuesday, at noon in the rehearsal room. Just to see you once more and to talk things over. I am going on a business trip which could last for some time, and this may be our last chance to meet. Please, forgive me for what I did to you.

(TOM gets up from the chair and goes to the proscenium. The lights change.)

TOM: When an actor dying, it' s not just one person dying; it' s the death of the shades of the many false bodies through which we give ourselves so unselfishly. Without even knowing it, our audience dies with us.

(EVA enters.)

TOM: When an actor is dying, every future role he could have played dies with him, and even those spotlights that were never lit fail to light at opening nights that never take place. When an actor is dying, hundreds of characters die with him and life is shown to be a poor play in which the denouement and the ending are badly written... But, worst of all is when the actor dies before having had the chance to play the part of his life - the part in which he could give his all, with an ideal cast, a superb text and unobtrusive direction.

(The lights change.)

EVA: Good day.

(TOM does not answer.)

EVA: You must forgive me... I... know how much I hurt you - it's only now that I realise how good your play is, the pain and truth in this monologue about the death of an actor. It's only now that I know how our play could have been the best I have ever done. And it's only now that I know the worth of it, how much it means to me. It's now that I know we should have played it.

(TOM remains silent.)

EVA: Everything went downhill at the Croatian National. Unfortunately, Igor is still Igor. He doesn't care at all about the actors, he cares only for his concept. I stuck it out for two weeks at those idiotic rehearsals - and then I left. We argued bitterly. The next day I woke up with strong pains and unbearable beating of my heart. I have been in hospital for ten days. I have to go back tomorrow for an operation. The doctor says everything will be all right, that I mustn't worry.

TOM: I know. I talked to him.

EVA: Oh, Tom, you are still thinking of me, you still watch over my life like a guardian angel.

TOM: Did you think I would desert you, that I would ever leave you?

(EVA throws herself into his arms and starts crying.)

TOM: There, there, Eva. Cry if it makes you feel better. Just let the tears fall.

(EVA sobs uncontrollably.)

TOM: Everything will be OK. Don't worry. But don't forget the one thing that can help more than anything else.

EVA: What's that?

TOM: The small box with the shell. It helped you so many times, you have to keep it with you during the operation.

EVA: Oh Tom, you are so good, so sweet. If I had known about you from the beginning, if we had met at the beginning, my life would have been different. Much happier.

TOM: And mine too, Eva. And mine.

EVA: Why didn' t you do something about it, why didn' t you tell me about your feeling for me - my secret admirer.

TOM: I didn' t have the courage. And I didn' t want to upset you - I wanted to enjoy you without disturbing your life, your peace. I wanted to be the ideal audience which takes pleasure in your acting, recognising your real value - but without causing you any trouble, sitting quietly in the darkened theatre.

EVA: It was wonderful working with you, talking with you.

TOM: Does your doctor know you' re here?

EVA: No, he doesn' t. If I had asked him, he would have said no. They don' t let anybody out the day before an operation. They treat my body as though they own it. I bribed one of the nurses to bring me my clothes. I left a message on the bed that I would return in an hour.

TOM: They' ll be angry at you.

EVA: It doesn' t matter. I had to come to see you, Tom. I had to come to tell you.

TOM: Tell me, Eva.

EVA: To tell you that you are the best stage partner I have ever had, and that I am... and that I am so sorry that we did not manage to put on our play, that I did not play that part, to create my life' s role.

TOM: Why are you talking as though we will never act together again. As soon as you are better, we can go on with the rehearsals and then do the play.

EVA: I am afraid that I am running out of time, Tom. I know that it' s hopeless, I know I am having this operation only so that my doctor can feel that he did what he could.

TOM: Don' t talk like that, Eva. You have to believe in yourself.

EVA: I know, Tom, I know. But I simply do not have the strength. I am so afraid. I am so afraid of this part that I have to play without even one rehearsal, I am afraid that I won' t have the courage, that I will be an ordinary weepy woman, below my standards.

TOM: I' ll be with you. I will give you strength, I will give you courage. I won' t give you up. I won' t.

EVA: If this had happened to me three months ago - it would all have been different, it would all be easier. But since you have come into my life, everything has sense, everything has meaning. It' s hard for me to give up on life now. I never talked with my ex-husband the way I do with you, Tom. I never met anyone in the theatre who loves it and understands it as you do. I am deeply sorry that I won' t be able to play that part, my life' s achievement.

TOM: Eva, do you have the strength and the will for us to put on our play now - from start to finish?

EVA: How, without an audience? There is no performance without an audience.

TOM: I' ll have an audience here in three minutes. The people in the home are just finishing lunch, I' ll invite them to come. When I tell them that you are acting, the hall will be full in a jiffy.

EVA: All right. I' ll do it.

TOM: There, you see. We will act together. Do you know your lines? We haven' t rehearsed for some time.

EVA: I had your play with me all the time in hospital. I even know your lines.

Scene 10.

(The lights come on slowly, the stage is empty, and shortly after - we see TOM go to the proscenium.)

TOM: Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends and colleagues, dear residents of the Home. It is my great pleasure to have the opportunity to show you a performance in which you will see the greatest Croatian actress. Please accept my apologies that we are acting without sets and appropriate costumes. Let us consider this as a general rehearsal, and when Eva comes out of hospital, we will arrange a proper opening night, right here on this stage. I am truly grateful for your attention and I hope you will enjoy our performance, just as we enjoyed rehearsing for it.

(The audience applauds. TOM goes off. The lights change. We then see EVA sitting in a chair upstage. A knocking sound is heard.)

EVA: Come in.

(TOM enters.)

EVA: Where did you spring from?

TOM: They said you were here in wardrobe. I wanted to talk with you.

EVA: About what?

TOM: I have a proposition for you, a business proposition. I you have the time.

EVA: You know I' m busy. And even if I were free, I would not be talking business with you. You had twenty years to tell me all you wanted to, more than I wanted to hear, so please leave this room and don' t come again unless you are invited...

(EVA clutches at her chest. She gasps for air.)

TOM: Eva!

(EVA falls to the floor. TOM runs over to her.)

TOM: Eva, what is it? Eva!

EVA: It' s over, Tom, it' s over. I' m sorry I won' t be able to play it to the end... I' m so sorry... You were a wonderful partner, Tom... wonderful.

TOM: I' ll call a doctor.

EVA: Don' t, please, don' t. Hold me, Tom, hold me. You have the right.

EVA: Eva, you must not leave... Eva, I have loved you, I have loved you all my life and admired you. You must not leave Eva. I have loved you all these years.

EVA: I know, Tom, I know. And I love you. I know that this play of yours... about two actors... I know that you dreamed of the two of us being an acting couple... I know it is about us, as we could have been... I will live in that play, Tom, as long as your play lasts, I will live... we actors don' t last long... writers have better luck... what they do lasts longer... I am cold... so cold.

(EVA' s hand falls. She is dead.)

TOM: No, Eva, no! My dearest actress, how will I live without you... I can' t go on without you... My love... my only love...

THE END