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Royalty and rogues

Premiered at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in 1999. July 26.

Cast In Order of Appearance:

Marun, first Croatian King	John Seitz
Yelena, his wife	Deborah Offner
Katarina, his daughter	Mara Lieberman
Trpimir, his son	Tim Devlin
Grgur, court counselor	Bryan Clark
Dora, Grgur's daughter,	
Trpimir's fiance Elizabeth	Anne Keiser
Fool, court jester	Albert Macklin
Poisoner #1	Sharon Freedman
Poisoner #2	Lacey Bartlett
Guard #1	Casey Murphy
Guard #2	Seth Barron
Setting : Croatian Court	
Time: 10th century	
Director	Nina Kleflin
Dramaturg	Richard Kalinoski
Production Stage Manager	Tom Aberger
Production Assistant	Andrew Heaver

ACT ONE

-1-

(Yelena, Marun, Fool, Katarina - later Trpimir and Dora)

MARUN: Last night I dreamed of a white dove, the army and my tomb. The dove held a dagger in its beak.

YELENA: What does this mean?

MARUN: The dove holding the dagger means suicide, the army means war, and the tomb means a tomb.

YELENA: Nonsense.

MARUN: No, it is not nonsense. It's the future. It seems reasonable to conclude that I can expect a war in the immediate future, and after the war - suicide. The only thing that might save me is if, in my next dream, the dove lets go of the dagger, or if a rooster without its left wing perches on a soldier's armor.

(Silence.)

YELENA: How ridiculous it is to be a queen yet have no money to commission the tailoring of a gown. Ours is the poorest court in Europe. We haven't even the wherewithal to support court musicians.

MARUN: Should we be singing and playing music while an entire people is starving? Should you be wearing lavish gowns while my subjects sleep on straw with no blanket to cover them and walk barefoot in the snow? *(To the audience)*: I am a good king and I love my people.

YELENA: The court should be wealthy. Wealth is a measure of the king's real power. We don't need the glory of the Court for ourselves, but for others. *(To the audience)*: I am a bad and evil queen.

MARUN: The treasury is empty. Harvests for the last two years have been meager at best. The drought is at fault.

YELENA: If you were just a little more capable we wouldn't be where we are today.

MARUN: Sermons and sermonizing. Leave me alone. I need rest.

YELENA: If you'd listened to me none of this would have happened.

MARUN: You think you know better than I.

YELENA: If you were decisive, and a lot less merciful everything would have been different. It is high time you do something. Everyone is wondering what tomorrow will bring.

MARUN: Tomorrow will see to itself.

YELENA: Do something.

MARUN: Do what? When a man sinks into quick sand every movement makes his predicament worse and speeds him faster to the depths. I'd rather stay still and wait.

YELENA: You're weary and incompetent.

MARUN: Yes, I am weary. Look, I have a slipped disc, migraines and high blood pressure.

FOOL: While our miserable kingdom sinks

The king does nothing but think,

❖So do something!❖ they shout

While they stand there and pout.

YELENA: Everything is going to hell. You stand by calmly and watch.

KATARINA: *(since the opening of the scene she has been holding a book in her hand and leafing through it, showing little interest in the conversation.)*

MARUN: Daughter dear, what is that you're reading?

KATARINA: Just poems, father.

MARUN: What about?

KATARINA: ... they speak of love.

MARUN: Sad poems, then?

KATARINA: Yes, they are, father.

MARUN: Why not read something more cheerful? Leave the glum books for your dotage.

KATARINA: I like them - they say nothing of the drought or politics.

YELENA: There is nothing more perverse than poetry.

MARUN: Reading is the source of her sorrow.

KATARINA: I beg you: send someone to fetch me new books from the town of Knin.

MARUN: *(laughs)*: At once.

(Trpimir and Dora rush into the room. They are alarmed.)

TRPIMIR: Lord above, save us from the rabble!

MARUN: What's wrong, my son?

TRPIMIR: I still can't catch my breath!

YELENA: What has happened?

TRPIMIR: Are you kidding? A man can't ride with his fiancée through the fields anymore in this insane country.

DORA: I nearly fainted.

YELENA: Tell us!

TRPIMIR: We rode all the way to the white cliffs. We passed that village on the way home where the big old oak tree stands, we noticed a ragged mob of villagers running up to us. At first we thought they were eager to catch sight of people from court, but when they got within twenty paces of us I saw they were carrying clubs, pitchforks, axes.

DORA: They wanted to kill us!

TRPIMIR: Luckily our horses sensed the danger and took off at a gallop. (to the audience:) Those filthy imbecilic peasants could have stolen my Rolex!

DORA: We escaped by a hair, their speed was incredible, and they heaved stones at us.

YELENA: An attack upon the state!

FOOL: Horsemeat was the prize

In the peasants' foggy eyes

And not the prince's rump

Did they want to dump.

No need to suggest

The trappings of treason

When hunger was the reason.

YELENA: I told you not to leave the palace.

TRPIMIR: We can't just sit here inside these endless walls. Though it's true that the two of us have a fine time when we're cloistered in these walls.

YELENA: What do you say to this, Marun?

MARUN: Forget it.

YELENA: Sure. Your forgetfulness will cost us our lives.

2.

(Marun, Grgur - later the Fool)

GRGUR: We must do something, at once.

MARUN: Easy to say: ~~◆~~We must do something~~◆~~. It's the fault of the drought.

GRGUR: The peasant overlords are bullies. We are helpless against them. Each builds his own fief and steals from everyone else. It's not only the drought, Marun.

MARUN: If the harvest is decent next summer everything will be fine.

GRGUR: A big if... The people are up in arms. Your son and my daughter were nearly slain out riding.

MARUN: An isolated incident.

GRGUR: Nothing should be forgotten. I dispatched a detachment to punish those savages.

MARUN: Whatever for?

GRGUR: To teach them a lesson.

MARUN: And you didn't consult me?

GRGUR: You said you would leave military matters to me. The guilty have been punished and the village has been leveled.

MARUN: But why, Grgur? You help by killing peasants?

GRGUR: In the course of the punitive raid a total of 36 hands were severed 18 stomachs slashed, 160 ribs smashed, 18 eyes plucked, 8 girls, 5 women and 4 old women raped, 96 teeth broken, 9 kidneys ruptured and 50 throats slit - and I am the man behind all this, implying, of course, that I am the bad guy in this play. I am delighted that I was so utterly successful in my devastation of the village.

Life is brutal. We have no room for mercy. From time to time we must enforce order and create a little slaughter here and there. The populace grumbles, and if we give in even the smallest amount they will take all we have left.

(Silence.)

MARUN: The army has emptied our treasury.

GRGUR: You are criticizing me because I have urged you over the last few years to increase the military budget?

MARUN: I criticize myself. We made the decisions together.

GRGUR: The fact that we have a strong and well~~◆~~armed military force is all the security we have.

MARUN: You're my counselor. How am I to feed my people?

GRGUR: With hatred for the Hungarians.

MARUN: Bitter fare.

GRGUR: Tell them how the grain harvest in Hungary has been bountiful this year, how children play by making real cakes with flour instead of mudpies, they feed their pigs with bread. Then our people will be victorious, for the hungry have always won.

MARUN: I do not wish to embark on a war. It horrifies me. Better times will come.

GRGUR: Not by themselves.

(Enter Fool.)

FOOL: Oh, the two men talk wise

From deep shit they want to rise

The ruling one is still not sure

The other one knows the cure

But if he was the king alone

He'd measure words as each a stone!

GRGUR: (To the audience) Before this play ends I will see that this fool is burned alive. With me watching.

3.

(Dora and Trpimir)

DORA: The ship gradually sinks and none of us know how to swim. The water is already up to our noses but we still do nothing. You - the future king, and I - the future queen, stand by and watch as our future kingdom collapses. If only you were more decisive and a little smarter too, I'd urge you to kill your father and take the crown, but I know that you are soft and inept - which can be charming- but not useful.

TRPIMIR: What good is the crown? I'd have to spend all day managing stupid and tiresome matters of state. The only thing I want is you, and horses - and I want enough time to ride you, and them, every day

DORA: We can't go on like this.

TRPIMIR: Who cares? The world will probably take care of itself.

DORA: Nothing takes care of itself. My father has recently been taking things into his own hands. He's got his eyes on the crown. The ship is going under, I mean that. We're about to drown.

TRPIMIR: So, we abandon ship.

DORA: Never.

TRPIMIR: Grab the gold from the treasury, hightail it out of this rotten place and skeddadle to some other country where we can ride horses and each other every day in peace and quiet. (To the audience) I am dying for a new wardrobe from some decent foreign store.

DORA: You have no idea where you live, my dear - the treasury is empty, the very last gold coins have been distributed to the army, we don't know a single foreign language, and I fear we would soon be burgled and become beggars once we were abroad.

TRPIMIR: No, no, each member of a fallen royal family from the East receives financial aid in the West.

DORA: No, we've got nowhere to go. I want to be the first lady, at least for one day.

TRPIMIR: Your chances are slim and none.

DORA: If you won't help me, I'll do it myself.

TRPIMIR: (to the audience)This ambitious woman is going to cost me my life. Our problem is even bigger because this play takes place in the tenth century after Christ and America h

hasn't been discovered yet. If America had been discovered already, we would run away there. At first we would wash dishes in restaurants, but, later, we would get our act together and go into exciting big-time business selling purple dinosaurs. But you can see that in some other play.

4.

(Katarina, Dora, Fool)

KATARINA: *(reads a book.)*

DORA: *(nervously paces the room.)*

FOOL: *(plays with pebbles).*

DORA: Why are you always reading those stupid books?

KATARINA: But... this is so fascinating, it is all about a noble prince who fights for his beloved, she is a virgin and longs to marry him, if you'd like I'll read you a bit.

DORA: Thanks, you needn't, I have no time for empty words. I've always wondered about people who spend half their lives staring at those sheets of paper while real life is going on inches from them...

FOOL: And they - indeed - quite wonder,

At the darkness where you blunder,

The gloom otherwise known to be

Ignorance and illiteracy.

DORA: What good would reading do for me. Remember I am a woman. I know how to live without reading.

(Dora and Katarina exchange glances - Katarina drops her eyes.)

KATARINA: If you wish I could teach you how to read and write.

DORA: If you wish I could teach you how to live.

KATARINA: Why are you so quickly insulted?

FOOL: Never help a person

Who does not request aid,

For in your loving kindness

Their evil is displayed.

DORA: You probably think I'm not as good as you because I wasn't born in a golden cradle.

KATARINA: I have never said that, I love you as my one true friend.

DORA: Don't make me laugh.

KATARINA: (weeps, than addresses the audience) When you are naive, plain simple and stupid, life is a struggle.

5.

(Grgur, Yelena - later the Fool)

YELENA: *(Alone. She paces the terrace in agitation.)*

GRGUR: *(hurries over.)*

YELENA: At last.

(They embrace passionately, kiss, then quickly part for fear that someone might happen upon them together.)

YELENA: How much longer will we have to hide like this? When will you be mine, and mine alone for eternity? I've had my fill of my old marriage. I can hardly wait to marry you.

GRGUR: That day is not far off. Soon I will no longer have to share you with that wreck of a man.

(They kiss again and embrace, and then step each two paces back and stand in silence for a few moments.)

GRGUR: He will not hear of declaring war.

YELENA: Make him.

GRGUR: That's what I'm doing. I have ordered a detachment of my soldiers to attack Hungarian villages and set them on fire. Further I have instructed the cavalry to capture a hundred men, obtain their heads and catapult them into the burning villages as missiles. Marun refuses to attack the Hungarians, but when the outraged Hungarians attack us he will have to fight.

YELENA: Wouldn't it be far better for us to murder him? I have no more patience. I want you and I want peace in this land. Kill him, darling, if you love me kill him. If you love me, kill him now, kill him well. If you need me kill him. Do it twice if needed.

GRGUR: So you're saying you want me to kill him?

YELENA: I think that point is made.

GRGUR: No - I don't want this country as things stand now. After a war with the Hungarians, if we win, we can poison him, if we lose it will be even easier to depose him. In the end, no matter what happens I will emerge as victor, for you give me strength. Fighting for the kingdom I fight for you.

YELENA: My biological clock is ticking. We must hurry before my time comes and it is too late.

GRGUR: Hold your horses. I would love to become king while my father is still alive... so he can see how his son made it to the top. That would cheer up his old age, I bet! Ah, Daddy, Daddy. (to the audience) It is well known from the literature of psychology that a man feels truly recognized only in the praise of his parents. O.K. Dr. Freud would dig up a lot of stuff here, but the author of this play firmly decided not to permit any cheap psychobabble here. Emotions - yes. Loony bin - no. That's why we have to return to our story. Where were we, dear?

YELENA: You were saying: "Oh, how I would like to become a king!"

GRGUR: Oh, yes. You bet I would like to become a king while my father is still alive. Oh, Daddy, Daddy!

YELENA: Kiss me once more.

GRGUR: Gladly.

(Just before their lips meet, Fool enters the room.)

FOOL: Oohh, ahhh, ,bim, bam, boom

What a time to walk in the room!

GRGUR: Sniffing around the court again, are you? You'd better watch it or you'll lose that nose of yours.

FOOL: My nose I do not fear to lose

For always I've revered the Lord

And kept it far from baddest news,

Plunged deep in wine and bread and board.

GRGUR: Go to bed.

FOOL: At your heartfelt Good Night

I've no choice but swift flight.

6.

(Marun)

MARUN: They urge me: take things into your own hands, but they have no idea how my hands ache. They tell me: You used to be such a splendid monarch, once you single-handedly created this kingdom. Why do you stand by and let it fall apart - yet I hold my tongue. People demand of me what I can't do. There are more and more who hate me. I have become insensitive to both hatred and love. Something has happened with my feelings. Sometimes I cannot see a single thing in this world that could move me, it seems there is nothing left to wish for, and then I wonder what keeps me going - sometimes I think people with no desires die yet I live on, I live on, but... I feel dead. Things happen despite my will, and I seem to exist - less and less. I find it hard to believe even in these words, even these words seem incredible - nothing has its former shape, its fragrance, its glory. Perhaps we are gradually taking leave of this world and I am losing all my desires one by one. For there are fewer and fewer things for us to lend ourselves to.

(to the audience)What is the message behind this monologue? In short: Politics are not for Croatians, and Croatians are not for politics. And allow me to be completely frank. I want a good pension plan and health insurance with no deductibles. I want to fish and read newspapers. But here I am stuck in this thankless job that would make a young man wilt.

7.

(Grgur, Katarina)

(Grgur is alone; Katarina enters with book in hand.)

GRGUR: Ah, it's you. I was off to make the rounds of the sentries.

(He walks toward the exit.)

KATARINA: Grgur.

GRGUR: (*hesitates.*)

(Silence.)

GRGUR: What's going on?

KATARINA: I have something to say.

GRGUR: Do.

(Silence)

GRGUR: Do.

KATARINA: I... I'm not sure how...

GRGUR: What?

(Silence.)

KATARINA: I've something to say... but... Never mind. Nothing.

GRGUR: I'm off to do the rounds of the sentries.

(He strides off toward the exit.)

KATARINA: Why do you run from me?

GRGUR (*halting*): I do not run from anyone.

KATARINA: You do so - whenever I find you alone you are in a hurry to go somewhere. Why is that?

GRGUR: And why is it that you so often find me alone?

KATARINA: Is that so hard to guess?

GRGUR: No.

KATARINA: Then why flee?

(They stare long at each other in silence.)

GRGUR: Forget me - imagine that I don't even exist.

KATARINA: Now, when the entire country is floundering in this chaos I feel your strength and your power and I would like, for a single day... to be yours. I've never loved anyone but you. I never will. Do not reject my love. I fear that by tomorrow it will be too late, I fear I may die before your hands ever touch me. Ah, ah! Ah, ah! (to the audience) Oh, how my heart is pounding! My skin is one huge rash.

GRGUR: I'll instantly forget everything you've said.

KATARINA: Don't be so cruel, don't reject me.

GRGUR: You're young, you'll easily find someone else.

KATARINA: I want no one but you.

GRGUR: I'm off to make the rounds of the sentries, sorry, but I haven't time to talk.

(Grgur moves toward the exit.)

KATARINA: I know whom you have chosen instead of me.

GRGUR (*stops*): What do you wish to suggest?

KATARINA: I know who it is.

GRGUR: Hogwash!

KATARINA: Oh, I know. I don't blame her. It's you I'm surprised at. How can you... with that... snake, that vile woman who has never felt love for her children or her husband?

GRGUR: Don't insult her.

KATARINA: She's a snake! A snake! A Snake!

GRGUR: I will not allow this!

KATARINA: She wallows in evil.

GRGUR: She is a real woman. You, you're lifeless like your wimpy indecisive father. Your mother and I are made of different stuff, we change the world. We are all flesh and hot blood, poised for action, our place is at court. You should be in the peasants' huts with the pigs.

KATARINA: I despise you!

GRGUR: No - you love me, let me tell you, you really love me and it will take you ages to get over me. It's about time you suffered the taste of unrequited love. I've been there. The taste is bitter.

KATARINA (*starts to cry*): Why are you so cruel - when I love you?

GRGUR: I think this is your problem.

KATARINA (*bursts into wracking sobs and runs off. After a moment, she returns and addresses the audience*)

Now that this teenage love scene is over, I can confess something: I hate to play virgins. Virgins are so one-dimensional and they do not give an actor enough material to build a complex character. I never wanted to play Ophelia - she couldn't even swim. But, unfortunately, I always have to play such roles - it must be because of my virginal features that fool every director. I think I might find myself a decent plastic surgeon to screw up my face a little. I strongly believe my career will then improve significantly.

8.

(Marun, Yelena)

MARUN: I dreamed of that dove again with the dagger in its beak. It was flying above the army and I spied it from a tall oak tree and prayed to the Lord that the dagger would drop from its beak. But the dagger wouldn't fall. And then the dove flew down to the highest branch of the oak, and I swung my right hand in which I was holding a huge diamond. I wanted to knock the dagger out of its beak. I missed. The diamond was gone and the dove flew off slowly and I could hear peals of human laughter coming from its throat.

(Long silence.)

MARUN: You've been rather moody these last few days.

YELENA: The country is coming apart at its seams?

MARUN: Why do you harp so on politics?

YELENA: Politics is our life together. You know that.

MARUN: Long ago, we did talk of other things.

YELENA: We no longer are the same people we were, long ago.

(Silence.)

YELENA: I remember when you proclaimed yourself king ten years ago, I remember while you were still a count, and while you built up the country I remember how the victories followed fast one upon the next, and you built a sturdy fortress of your land, I remember how everyone quaked when you passed, I remember how you were a very different man. I remember better times and a different King Marun; and I wonder: whatever happened to you? Why aren't you like what you used to be?

(Silence.)

MARUN: A few years ago when I began to lose my enthusiasm for all of this I tried to talk to you about it. I tried to tell you how I felt, but you couldn't hear or understand. My words fell on deaf ears. You were always, always exulting in being a queen, and you never felt my despair.

YELENA: I enjoy being a queen. I can't imagine what you mean by despair - court life is still better than any other kind of life.

MARUN: You haven't understood.

YELENA: How can I understand a man who has let his destiny dribble through his fingers?

MARUN: And I can't grasp someone who has never longed to relinquish it.

YELENA: You think too much, you talk too much.

MARUN: I know. - I think I'll go out onto a road, stop the first passerby and give him my crown. He won't have time to think it over. He'll have to act. *(To the audience)*: These words suggest I am an extremely wise and sensitive man.

YELENA: These are times for the strong.

MARUN: These are times for the stupid.

YELENA: Your state is rotten.

MARUN: My state is precisely the sum of its inhabitants.

YELENA: You judge others by yourself. Everyone is not as bone-weary as you are. Lead your people, king.

MARUN: Lead them? Where?

YELENA: Don't ask where, but rather against whom. The Hungarians.

MARUN: No.

YELENA: You have to. It's our only way out.

MARUN: There you go trying to talk me into it again.

YELENA: War is the only way.

MARN: *(to the audience)* It would be a great consolation to know that your wives are as bitchy as mine. *(to Yelena)* I do not wish to go to war. It's not that I'm afraid, and even less that I doubt our chances for victory. Don't forget that I am unvanquished as a military leader and all our neighbors fear me.

YELENA: Then, why...?

MARUN: No, no - everything seems more and more ridiculous as time passes. I cannot picture myself with those generals, all of them so somber, as we forge a plan of war, with me placing great importance on every move. It seems so imbecilic, so fatuous. Never again will I be able to stand before the troops and give them a stirring speech before they march into battle bristling with words like: homeland, victory, the enemy. I'd die laughing if I tried to pull off a speech like that.

YELENA: I don't understand you.

MARUN: Neither do I.

(Silence.)

YELENA: You are awash with indifference.

MARUN: Perhaps... but maybe not, because I suffer and pine for all sorts of things.

YELENA: What are the things you pine for?

MARUN: Maybe for you.

YELENA: I don't know how you can pine for me - I'm still alive and I'm still your wife.

MARUN: Less and less alive and less and less mine.

YELENA: You are beginning to talk like that jester of yours.

MARUN: We are no longer the husband and wife of yesteryear, you're no longer mine.

YELENA: What do you mean?

MARUN: I know Grgur is your lover.

YELENA: But I...

MARUN: I know! And I don't hold any of it against you. I'd rather that you loved another than that you don't love anyone at all.

YELENA: Whatever are you talking about?

MARUN: But I can't tell whether you really love him sincerely or are fooling yourself.

YELENA: When have you seen us together?

MARUN: Never. You must be quite skilled at hiding around this gloomy castle. But I've heard his words on your lips time and time again, and yours on his.

YELENA: I have always been faithful to you.

MARUN: Oh, sure, sure.

YELENA: A king must trust his queen even when he has no proof that she is faithful.

9.

(Grgur, Dora)

GRGUR: At last our time has come.

DORA: You must hurry this along, Father.

GRGUR: Yesterday my soldiers burnt down three and a half more Hungarian villages. I cannot imagine what's keeping them. When will they finally declare war!

DORA: And after the war?

GRGUR: We'll take the country into our own hands. We'll be the boss. It was only fifteen years ago that we lived in a mud hut, and now, with a bit of luck we'll have a whole country for ourselves. But I've got to exterminate the entire royal family in time.

DORA: Someone will suspect something.

GRGUR: They are far too preoccupied with themselves to think of us. Daughter dear, soon enough we will be masters of our own fate. Twenty years ago, when I first drove wheat to the castle, and when I saw the people who lived so far from the pigs and the stench. I set for myself such a far-flung goal that my head began to spin at the very thought. Now it's reality.

DORA: Will you slay them all?

GRGUR: Every last one.

DORA: Trpimir is harmless. (to the audience) But he's good in bed.

GRGUR: No one is harmless.

DORA: What about your mistress? You'll spare her life so you can keep playing around.

GRGUR: ... She goes too. If I leave her alive, rumors will spread that the change in power came about because of an ordinary love affair, which is far too dangerous for us. The reasons for one king taking over from another must be for the general good of the populace. It is always done for the welfare of the country.

DORA: Aren't you afraid of the war?

GRGUR: No. When I was still a young lad, I went to Northern Europe and served as a paid soldier in two brutal wars. Oh, what great years those were. I know today that those were the best years of my life! War is the perfect game. It is the state of absolute freedom, where sin and God do not exist. You know I feel a certain nostalgia when I think about these old women and about these young girls that we raped. Yes, each generation has its own charms. And how we played with the prisoners of war! We chopped off their ears and shot arrows at their balls. First the left one - then the right one. First the left one - then the right one. First the left one - then the right one. Ha, ha, ha. I was on the top of the world. People are afraid of war because they fear absolute freedom. Absolute war. Absolute freedom.

DORA: When I hear you talk about the war like that, I really feel sorry that I am not a man, so that I could go to battle and experience that joy. We women really have to do something about that. We must fight for equal

rights. If it goes our way, the day will come when we will sit around in taverns, fight battles, be in charge. Then WE will rape whoever we please.

DORA: I can hardly wait for the day to come.

GRGUR: I can hardly wait for the deed to be done.

10.

(Dora, 1st Poisoner)

DORA (*enters.*)

1st POISONER: Good evening, noble lady.

DORA: Good evening, fine sir.

1st POISONER: What good tidings bring you to my humble dwelling?

DORA: Perhaps the tidings are not so good.

1st POISONER: Then pray what evil brings you here?

DORA: Perhaps it is not evil, either

1st POISONER: This is beginning to rouse my curiosity.

DORA: Guess why I've come.

1st POISONER: My mind is of such limited scope that I doubt it could plumb your motives. You are a noble lady of the court and I am only a lowly court cook.

DORA: But you surely can guess why I'm here.

1st POISONER: Regrettably, I cannot.

DORA: I am here to make the necessary arrangements.

1st POISONER: Arrangements? What sort of arrangements?

DORA: Important arrangements.

1st POISONER: How can a lowly court cook help you?

DORA: Rumor has it that you're deft at handling special plants.

1st POISONER: Deft, but not daft. Don't believe everything you hear.

DORA: Those rumors brought me here.

1st POISONER: Pity. You're wasting your precious time.

DORA: The greater the pity for you. - You'll lose two hundred gold ducats.

1st POISONER: Two hundred gold ducats! A miserable creature such as myself could live happily to the end of his days on a sum like that.

DORA: Unfortunately you won't because you refuse to discuss the necessary arrangements.

1st POISONER: Well, there may have been a slight misunderstanding.

DORA: No, there doesn't seem to be. - You informed me I was wasting my precious time. I find it wiser to seek out someone else, a cannier cook, a bolder botanist.

1st POISONER: My humble mind doubts that you will find anyone cannier than myself. Do not waste your two hundred gold ducats on an amateur, when before you stands one of the greatest masters of his trade in this corner of the European continent.

DORA: Ah ha! So you are prepared to offer your services?

1st POISONER: To you, alone, of course.

DORA: Do you have, among them, a particular plant, which would never be detected should it be mixed in food?

1st POISONER: My remedies are more powerful than the sun. I have one can cure a person of nearly anything... including life itself. And whoever cures people from life itself is a benefactor, for life is suffering and death is deliverance.

DORA: Is this a brand new substance?

1st POISONER: A superb one.

DORA: Reliable?

1st POISONER: Utterly.

DORA: Tell me all about it, every last detail.

1st POISONER: It does not produce any attacks of sweating or vomiting in the patient. The patient feels pain only two days after ingesting the leaves into his unhappy body, and the pain is such a small pain, a minuscule pain - and then - he dies. No great thrashing about. None of the dearly beloved family members ever dreams it could be anything but God's will.

DORA: You've tested it?

1st POISONER: On many.

DORA: Sounds lovely to me.

(Silence.)

1st POISONER: And now, I must learn the name of the individual to be blessed with this medicament. I can assume that the patient is a member of the court, and undoubtedly of great importance. Tell me which of our dearly beloved is to be saved from a life fraught with pain and temptation?

DORA: Queen Yelena.

1st POISONER: The Queen? I cannot cure the Queen.

DORA: One doesn't stumble on two hundred gold ducats every day.

1st POISONER: I love life, women and the fragrance of springtime. This is dangerous. And besides I honor my queen far too greatly to lift her heavenward for a mere two hundred gold ducats.

DORA: Three hundred gold ducats is no trifling sum.

1st POISONER: I honor my four...queen and wouldn't lose her for anything in the world... but hundred gold ducats is a very attractive sum.

DORA: Four hundred!?! You toad! That is highway robbery!

1st POISONER: O.K., forget it.

DORA: You must know that you ask too high a price. You are a thief.

1st POISONER: I am merely trying to force you to turn me down; the stakes are too high. I love gold as much as I love my own eyes, but life I love more. I'm delighted that we could not strike a bargain.

DORA: Oh yes we have. Let it be four hundred.

1st POISONER: Ah... well if it is the will of God, so be it.

DORA: You will receive your instructions later. (Alone) I must do this as soon as possible. I am sure my father would never kill this bitch, she would become more important to him than me. (She makes a few steps then addresses the audience) This role is especially difficult.

11.

(1st Guard, 2nd Guard)

1st GUARD: Another dismal night ahead of us.

2nd GUARD: Better ahead than behind. How many soldiers have no more nights ahead?

1st GUARD: One of these days two different guards will be standing here and saying these same words.

2nd GUARD: Not too soon, I hope.

1st GUARD: Never too soon, as far as I'm concerned.

2nd GUARD: You're in a death rush, eh?

1st GUARD: I've caught myself lately envying the dead on their peace and quiet. Court makes me sick. Look at the bigwigs hating each other while the country goes to the dogs. In the old days I used to imagine that people at court were somehow above all the pettiness of everyday life, above bad digestion. What do you know? It all turns out to be misery and despair in fancy clothes. Everyone wants to be royalty - but they're nothing but rogues.

2nd GUARD: You've never been satisfied. That must be your nature. I'd kill myself if I felt as you do. Have you forgotten the days when we were in a boot camp together, in the rain, the sun, eating that revolting food, with sick horses and the unbearably stupid soldiers? Then we used to envy the court guards.

1st GUARD: We were happy in those days.

2nd GUARD: Happy!?

1st GUARD: We were happy, in boot camp, while we dreamed of how wonderful it would be to have guard duty at court. And now once we've seen how fabulous court life really is, we no longer dream.

2nd GUARD: The king is the only one among them who acts like a human being.

1st GUARD: He is an honest soldier of the old school. I get the impression that he's lost his will for everything. He used to be so strong, so mighty, so firm.

2nd GUARD: Rumor says Grgur poisoned his predecessor before he became court counselor.

1st GUARD: Watch it!

2nd GUARD: Why should I? Everyone says so.

1st GUARD: Some talk like that to draw you out so you blurt something. And then off goes your head.

2nd GUARD: Strange how the king's elder son passed away. Stomach pains. He was so valiant, not at all like that younger brother of his.

1st GUARD: What can you do. There are people at court with poor digestion and they eat bad food. Imagine, we used to envy their diet before, too.

2nd GUARD: I don't give a fig for them. And I don't care who did in whom and why. We are not out on the front lines and we are at court. It's best living among the greats on the sidelines.

1st GUARD: What goes around comes around.

2nd GUARD: Hey, why should it? What do we matter?

(Silence.)

1st GUARD: I don't like what I've been seeing recently. I don't like what I've heard as it passes by me. You know I really wish my sight were worse and I was a bit on the deaf side.

2nd GUARD: We are not all so fortunate as to have weak eyes and poor hearing.

1st GUARD: We know too much. Far too much. I'm scared that they'll read in our eyes everything that our eyes have seen.

2nd GUARD: It's guys like you who will someday multiply and become the intellectuals.

1st GUARD: You're lucky that we live in the 11th century and don't know what the word ♦intellectual♦ means yet, because if we did, I'd be furious.

12.

(Grgur, 2nd Poisoner)

GRGUR: I have a new job for you.

2nd POISONER: I hope it's not too dangereus.

GRGUR: I never judged you to be the type to shrink from underhanded undertakings.

2nd POISONER: I never was a coward, but I'm also no fool. You should know that. I've worked three times for you, boldly, slyly, with no traces.

GRGUR: You're expensive.

2nd POISONER: Yes, I am the most costly and finest poisoner in the land. And you are a clever man and know that such things don't come cheap.

GRGUR: You're full of talk. All I care about is seeing whether you are or are not ready for a new assignment.

2nd POISONER: I am. Tell me the name.

GERGUR: Trpimir.

2nd POISONER: The king's son?

GRGUR: Yes. He.

2nd POISONER: Big name - big risk.

GRGUR: It must be done.

2nd POISONER: When?

GRGUR: In a week. No traces.

2nd POISONER: I have a great potion - the devil could do no better.

GRGUR: Be careful.

2nd POISONER: As always.

13

(1st Poisoner, 2nd Poisoner)

2nd POISONER: Who?

1st POISONER: Yelena.

2nd POISONER: When?

1st POISONER: Next week. And you? Who and when?

2nd POISONER: Trpimir, also next week.

(Silence.)

2nd POISONER: They have all gone mad. They'll kill each other off till no one's left. At the end that rogue will make himself into royalty.

1st POISONER: Why should we care. The more they hate each other, the more we earn. Now we do individual work, but later we can open an assembly line.

2nd POISONER: I fear that we, too, may lose our heads in this little dance

2nd POISONER: The country is collapsing. Time to clear out.

1st POISONER: Where to?

2nd POISONER: Anywhere. To some place where every reptile does not consider himself fit to be king.

1st POISONER: Should we give up such lucrative assignments?

2nd POISONER: We must. If we both do as our clients expect, two heads will fall at the same moment in the royal family, and this will require an investigation. Things are getting too hot. Let's collect what loot we've got so far and get out of here, tonight.

1st POISONER: Fine I'll do as you say though I'll never get over the loss of those four hundred gold ducats.

14.

(Marun, Fool, Katarina, Dora, Trpimir, Yelena - and later Grgur)

TRPIMIR: Why did the cooks flee the court last night?

DORA: Why do you suggest they fled? They were free to go. They left.

TRPIMIR: But before they left they didn't say goodbye to anyone.

YELENA: Rats are first to abandon sinking ships.

(Silence.)

MARUN: Daughter dear, what has come over you?

KATARINA: ...I don't know what you mean, father.

MARUN: You haven't been eating for days. You lock yourself in your room and never leave it, and you are sharp with your servants. You've changed over night. Tell me what's wrong.

KATARINA: Nothing's wrong.

MARUN: Come now. Won't you tell your father the truth?

KATARINA: Please speak of other things, of politics, the Byzantines, the Bulgarians, the Babylonians and leave me in peace.

MARUN: Has someone hurt you?

KATARINA: I beg you to stop talking about me.

(Silence.)

TRPIMIR: A merchant told me that there are horses in the East, which are twice as fast as ours, much more sturdy and obedient. One might say that a man is to be judged by his horse.

FOOL: Young man you fancy so a horse

This gives me pity and remorse

No regard for brain and heart, alas

That's why they say you're such horses ass.

TRPIMIR: There is nothing on earth more wonderful than a horse. Horses have strength, speed and nobility.

YELENA: If your father looked after his country as you look after horses we wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. If only your father were a true king...

MARUN: Don't start with that again. Leave me alone. I have a stomachache. I won't be able to think about matters of state until the pangs subside.

YELENA: You always have some excuse.

KATARINA: And you always find a way to criticize father while accepting no criticisms from others.

YELENA: Why should anyone criticize me? I am queen, not king.

KATARINA: First you are a woman. Then queen.

YELENA: No, queen first. Queen first.

FOOL: You were a child long ago,

Now a bitter queen, yet lo!

These mutations have yet to slow:

Your face again new changes show.

YELENA: What changes?

FOOL: A snitch - a witch - a bitch.

YELENA: You are such an idiot.

DORA: This man should be thrown out of court. He does nothing but insult us.

MARUN: I will throw him out when he begins to speak of pleasantries.

FOOL:

My foolish corpse would be long gone

If not for the faithful dogs I own

For each plate of my food they try

Instead of me they foam and die,

DORA: He is speaking nonsense! His dogs are dying from dog diseases and not from poisoning.

FOOL:

I hope you're right my pretty miss

All men wait for death's dark kiss

Who live in fear of lovers' arms

So too our king stands near to harm.

YELENA: What liberties he permits himself! He is comparing himself to the king! You should have dealt with him long ago.

MARUN: I have a stomachache. (to the audience) It is very hard to play on the same note all the time. If the author does not give me a startling moment in the plot soon, I will die of boredom.

YELENA: You've told me everything but you've done nothing.

(Hurried footsteps are heard, and Grgur bursts in, agitated)

GRGUR: War! To arms! War awaits!

MARUN: Oh, the new moment already!

YELENA: What has happened?

GRGUR: The Hungarians have declared war - the Hungarian army is attacking us.

MARUN: Impossible!

GRGUR: Oh, it is possible, very possible. A herald has arrived with the declaration of war.

MARUN: But why? What drove them to declare hostilities?

GRGUR: Why don't you ask them on the battlefield? I've given orders in your name that the population must take up their arms.

MARUN: Such a costly affair, war, but I accept. - I will defend my kingdom. I do not want the lands of others, but will not relinquish my own. Trpimir, this will be your first battle. You will command a detachment of the cavalry.

TRPIMIR: Really? Ah, come on, really? Do I have to?

MARUN: Of course! You are not a woman, are you? Grgur, order our horses to be saddled, we will be off at once to the borderlands. The battle must be fought in Hungary, not on our territory. Bring me my victorious sword! We will attack at night when they don't expect us. The infantry first, the cavalry will follow. Darkness and surprise will be our allies and their enemy. From now on only the laws of war apply. Call all able-bodied men to arms. They will feel our strength and our rage. Justice for our children. Death to Hungarians!

ALL: Death to Hungarians!

(Military bugles and drums play brightly. This lasts for quite a long time. Stage lights gradually dim.)

END OF THE FIRST ACT

SECOND ACT

-2-

15.

(Yelena, Katarina)

(They stroll together. They sit and embroider.)

YELENA: It is so awful to have to be a woman and wait.

(Silence.)

KATARINA: Do you believe victory is possible?

YELENA: What choice do I have?

KATARINA: What if we lose?

YELENA: I can't bear to contemplate that. (to the audience) Now you have an idea how boring the life of woman was before the age of CNN.

(Silence.)

KATARINA: Perhaps the battle has passed. We know nothing.

YELENA: We know how to wait.

(Silence.)

KATARINA: We must win. Otherwise...

YELENA: We shall win!

KATARINA: But what if they...

YELENA: Silence. Say nothing. Be still. Every word you say drives me closer to lunacy.

(Silence.)

KATARINA: You seem so nervous, mother. As if you fear for someone's life. I wonder whose?

YELENA: That's a stupid question - our nearest and dearest are all there.

KATARINA: ◆nearest and dearest?◆ Which nearest and dearest? You're not quaking for all of them.

YELENA: And what do you mean by that?

KATARINA: ...I know whom you think of.

YELENA: And I know whom you're thinking of. But the one you have in mind does not have you in mind.

(Silence.)

KATARINA: You look well today. Your wrinkles don't seem to be as prominent as they sometimes are.

YELENA (*looks at her sharply.*)

KATARINA: But I must say I can't bear the thought of living to your age. All that searching for restorative herbs, the facial masks day in and day out, the grueling diets you have to sustain - I could never live with it.

YELENA: I'm sure you're right. Even at such a young age you can hardly manage a thing, let alone how feeble you'll be at my age.

KATARINA: Odd that there isn't a queen alive who realized that the crown, for other men, is the most appealing part of her body.

YELENA: You are much too quick for such a simpering child.

KATARINA: And you are hardly quick enough for a mature woman.

YELENA: I wouldn't say so - I've never been off course, I've let nothing slip through my fingers. I've lived my life to the hilt.

KATARINA: A wise woman waits to the last to speak.

YELENA: When war is being raging, every day is the last.

KATARINA: I think we should have played this much stronger. The audience must feel how much we hate each other and that the love for the same man makes us real enemies.

YELENA: . and SO on....If you really think so, we should return to the place where you say:"You look so good today"

KATARINA:Oh, yes, you look well today

(They repeat the whole scene. After it is over they continue embroidering in silence.)

16.

(Yelena, Dora - later Grgur and Trpimir)

DORA: How did you sleep last night?

YELENA: Fitfully.

DORA: Me too.

DORA: Do you hear those horses' hooves? Sounds like a herald on his way.

YELENA: No. Those are the guards. Ever since the men have all gone off to war, they go to the nearest village every night to get drunk. None of them will take orders any more.

DORA: The battle is surely over by now... I hope we won, and all of our nearest and dearest are... alive...

YELENA: The battle must be done but we've had no word yet. The new court cook complains that in a day or two he'll have nothing left to cook. There'd be food in the larder if he hadn't carted it all of to his house. They should be...

(Steps from outside interrupt her half-way through her sentence. Grgur and Trpimir stride into the room in armor.)

YELENA: Oh my God!

GRGUR: Is there no one to greet the warriors come home?

YELENA: What has happened?

TRPIMIR: We won! We won!

DORA: Won?!

GRGUR: The army is an hour's ride behind us. We could no longer abide the dust so we took two pairs of horses and rode them until we got here. The Hungarians are groveling.

YELENA: What about Marun?

(Brief silence.)

GRGUR: Alive and well. He stopped in at the first church he came across. He ordered us to go on; he will come tomorrow. He wished to cleanse himself from sin.

TRPIMIR: You should have seen my father on the battlefield: he fought like a savage bear. The soldiers rushed after him, exalted. You should have seen him wield his sword - no longer the weary man from court. He was a wild beast. People scattered before him wherever he went. He smashed even the tightest ranks of the enemy as if it were a child's game. You'll hear what the others say when they come. Songs to King Marun are on everyone's lips. In a few days six new songs have been sung of my father, and every single soldier knows them by heart. People respect him, they love him, they fear him. He has grown to be a cult once more. I am telling you: there will be a big budget movie based on his life. And daddy will be played by a masculine actor with an Austrian accent from the **A** list.

GRGUR: The booty is vast - the Hungarian treasuries were overflowing. There is more gold than anyone ever dreamed of. Our country has been saved. We are rich.

YELENA: Oh, Lord above, I am so glad. How lovely it is to be rich. It always pays to work hard.

TRPIMIR: But when the battle was over, when everything was done, father's old lassitude came back, that mood that used to govern him, and to

everyone's amazement he let all the prisoners go free and ordered us to go home. None of the generals dared defy him - they all feared and respected him as they used to ten years ago when he was first crowned. And then when he came upon the first of our churches he sought out a priest: he gave himself to prayer and commanded us to go on and not wait for him. He could no longer sleep at night. As soon as he starts to doze a dove appears before his eyes with a dagger in its beak, and it wakes him up.

YELENA: The dove with the dagger in its beak means suicide - why that's nonsense - no one kills themselves after a glorious victory. I fear that the king may start taking sedatives again.

And how are you my son? Do you have wounds on your body?

TRPIMIR: What do you think, that I am crazy? I acted more from the background as moral support. After all I am the heir to the throne it would be the shame if I got myself killed. I cataloged and collected the war booty. I was also in charge of international exchange: dead bodies, recognizable remains and loose body parts.

DORA: All that matters is that we won. Progress is such a fickle thing.

GRGUR: I always said that war was the best solution. All it takes is a carefully designed action and you can't go wrong. But only the chosen one know the recipe: little war - big profit, big war - small profit.

TRPIMIR: It is remarkable how smart he is, and all of it without government scholarships and grants or even guaranteed loans.

17.

(Dora, Grgur)

DORA: Your face openly shows your dissatisfaction.

GRGUR: The king worries me. He has become a hero again.

DORA: A hero who can still pray for forgiveness. I have never understood that man. Do you?

GRGUR: Always.

DORA: Really?

GRGUR: Yes, really.

DORA: You admire him?

GRGUR: Only at certain moments... I despise him for he has the spirit of a child, yet the strength of a lion. How did he become king? I can't understand it. But when I saw him out there in battle I kept thinking that only he could be king.

DORA: But what about now? What do you think now?

GRGUR: I must take away his crown. The crown belongs rightfully to me. In peacetime? A very bad king.

DORA: Everyone adores him again.

GRGUR: We'll turn that love to hatred.

DORA: How?

GRGUR: It will be tricky.

DORA: Do you have a plan?

GRGUR: Yes, I do.

DORA: Tell me.

GRGUR: I can't, not yet.

DORA: You can tell me.

GRGUR: No.

DORA: Please.

GRGUR: You are better off not knowing all my plans.

DORA: You insult me with your secrecy. Tell me, tell me, tell me.

GRGUR: I merely wish to leave you with a remnant of your peace of mind.

DORA: Are your designs as evil as that?

(Silence.)

DORA: You haven't answered my question.

GRGUR: Our victory was far too glamorous, too exalted. I wanted something a little different, more difficult, a victory after which a soldier despises war and his military leader. We have the victory. But now we have a hero.

DORA: It's all your fault..

GRGUR: You think you're clever now? You knew about my plans from the start - you could have disagreed earlier.

18.

(Grgur, Yelena, Dora, Trpimir, Fool, Katarina)

(The courtiers sit around a large table, a banquet is in progress, the goblets are full to overflowing, Fool and Trpimir are performing a lively song. They are loud. Grgur rises to his feet, holds his goblet high, the music stops, all fall silent.)

GRGUR: Friends! Allow me on this joyous occasion to say a few words from the heart... Three days have passed since we returned from the war, and our victorious fervor has been glowing in our hearts ever since, undiminished. It is true, of course, that our king is still praying for forgiveness for his sins which, to my mind, do not even exist for to slay an enemy is not a sin but a noble act. But, if he chooses to make himself absent we will celebrate without him! Friends! We routed the enemy, freed the Hungarian people of their ruling tyrants and in some cases from their lives, brought them our freedom and our war songs, strengthened our own country, fed our people, returned to the kingdom its former glory, in a word we are happy. We showed a high degree of humanity. All our prisoners had, regular trials, free legal advice, and smart lawyers with sharp suits before they were executed. We have forbidden killing of children under age six and women over ninety - five. I am certain of the flourishing of children's toy sword production and the growth of war industry stock portfolios. A marvelous future awaits us. In the name of the days which have passed, in the name of days to come, let us drink down our goblets of wine in honor of our homeland and the majesty of this great victory.

They all raise their goblets.)

GRGUR: Long live!

COURTIERS: Long live!

(They drink down their wine and take their seats. Trpimir and Fool play on. Dora and Katarina rise from the table and dance to the strains of the music near the musicians, Grgur and Yelena begin to dance, and soon they move apart from the other dancers, the music plays softer and the dance goes on.)

YELENA: What is he waiting for? When will he come?

GRGUR: How should I know? He must have had a piety attack.

YELENA: It is time to be done with this. Everything has gone smoothly so far. I can hardly wait to get rid of Marun so I can become yours. I'm so excited. I'm flushed. See me flush.

GRGUR: Unfortunately it won't be as soon as we'd planned.

YELENA: Why not?

GRGUR: In the country everyone is praising and admiring him. It would be risky to change kings right now until the high spirits begin to wane.

YELENA: What do we do?

GRGUR: We wait.

YELENA: I can wait no longer.

GRGUR: You must. I, too, find it difficult.

YELENA: We've been waiting for years. I am a woman on the verge of a nervous break down. I will have a break down of the nerves.

GRGUR: A break down of the nerves?

YELENA: Yes.

GRGUR: We mustn't rush things. Not another word.

(Grgur and Yelena join the other dancers. The music swells. After a few more minutes the dance is over and the dancers return to their seats.)

FOOL: This party is first rate

but where is that wise pate

whom we celebrate?

GRGUR: Keep your mouth shut, Fool. Music! Music!

(Fool begins playing music, and is joined by Trpimir. Dora, Katarina and Yelena begin to dance, Grgur sets the rhythm with his clapping. The dancing spins faster and faster... Marun comes into the hall, no one notices him. The Fool spots him first and stops playing. Trpimir sees him and stops playing, Grgur claps two or three more times without music, and then all stop.)

YELENA: Marun!

(Yelena rushes over to the king to embrace him, but he won't allow it.)

MARUN: Don't touch me.

(All freeze.)

MARUN: What is this?

(Silence.)

MARUN: I asked you: what is this?

GRGUR: We're celebrating.

MARUN: Celebrating! We have not yet buried all the dead soldiers yet, but you celebrate your life instead of mourning their death!

(Silence.)

MARUN (*addressing Yelena*): Come with me.

YELENA: But I...

MARUN: Come with me!

(Marun exits, Yelena follows.)

FOOL:

First the king will have a bath

That, you know, is the path

Then they will go to bed

Where lies and smiles will be said

And the queen will almost moan

◆Welcome to your loving home◆

Men of court, why stare you so?

Don't you have a place to go?

(to the audience): When Odysseus returned home the situation was a lot more difficult. But that is not what I wanted to say. I wish to remind all soldiers, sailors, truck drivers and astronauts that each time they return home from work they will find a changed wife at home. Therefore I strongly advise people in these professions to lead a solitary existence.

19.

(Marun, Grgur, later the guards)

(Marun sits, deep in thought, Grgur enters.)

GRGUR: You summoned me?

MARUN: Yes, I summoned you.

GRGUR: Why?

MARUN: You'll find out.

(Silence.)

MARUN: Grgur, tell me why did you provoke the Hungarians?

GRGUR: Whatever do you mean by that?

MARUN: Why did you force the Hungarians into war?

GRGUR: I don't know what you're talking about.

MARUN: Yes you do.

(Silence.)

MARUN: From the Hungarian prisoners I interrogated I learned that you sent troops to burn villages along the border, and that you did this for months without my knowledge or permission. Why, Grgur?

GRGUR: We needed the war. The war came for us like manna from heaven. The country was on the verge of collapse. Now we are richer than ever before.

MARUN: And I fought like a wild man because I thought that the Hungarians had attacked us without reason. I found the strength to win because I believed that God's justice was on our side. I was sure I was defending, not attacking.

GRGUR: You were defending your land and your crown.

MARUN: You shouldn't have done that. Because of you I hate my soldiers, those cruel brigands, thieves, rogues. They found it so easy to kill Hungarian women and Hungarian children, they pilfered grain from the silos with my name on their lips. I saw one soldier plunge his head into a sack of flour. He gulped and gulped the raw powder until it choked him. That flour and this joy that has intoxicated the entire country, all of it is damned. I am damned. My people are damned. When I realized that we were nothing but marauders, I began to sob at my own fate, I wept for the beast that had been born, and those were the most bitter - but the last - tears King Marun ever shed.

GRGUR: Why see it all so dark. Revel in the victory!

MARUN: The victory?! What victory? Are you so stupid that you can't see how we lost? Because of our bellies we trampled what little humanity we had left within us. - And you talk about victory.

GRGUR: You succeeded in strengthening your country, you've made yourself a true king, but even that is not enough.

MARUN: King or count, count or king - what difference does it make?

GRGUR: You are the first king.

MARUN: First. Everyone wants to be first. Why? What does the second lack that the first has? What makes the first better than the third? People are so stupid. And I am no better than the rest - I'm nothing but an ordinary thief.

GRGUR: If I hadn't provoked the Hungarians into war, you would have been left, Marun my friend, bereft of crown and life.

MARUN: Instead I'm bereft of a clean conscience and good name.

GRGUR: What did you want? To rule the country and be innocent too, without sin? That's impossible, Marun. It can't be done. Everyone must bear their part of the filth on their soul, that is the way to rule, and no other. You used to look down at us who handled the dirty business from on high. You showed us your disgust. And yet you knew that someone had to do those things, the dirty work, and that without it no country anywhere in the world would survive. You, at last, have tainted yourself with our dirt. You've embarked on the road leading to hell. You see, it's not so bad. It can be fun. I'm interested in your next crime.

MARUN: You are my next crime.

GRGUR: What do you mean by that?

MARUN: I've issued orders for your arrest after our little chat. You will be dead tomorrow at dawn.

GRGUR: How could you!?

MARUN: I can.

GRGUR: I helped you to stay in power.

MARUN: No.

GRGUR: I am your closest ally. You can't do this to me.

MARUN: Yes, I can.

GRGUR: (He drops humbly to his knees.) I beg you, king, spare me. Give me my life if you are a man.

MARUN: No, I am a man no longer. And it's your fault.

GRGUR: Please.

MARUN: Don't beg. I have no mercy left, even for myself.

GRGUR: King, I love you, I respect you, I'll be your mongrel, save my life, mercy, mercy!

MARUN: That's enough talk! Guards!

(The guards enter and grab Grgur, drag him across the floor while he moans and pleads.)

GRGUR: Nooooo, mercy, mercy. Spare my life. (He breaks loose from the guards) Let me say my parting monologue.

(Guards halt.)

GRGUR: I was the bad guy, this is my end. To all those who exult in my demise I'll add: I'll bribe St. Peter and if it takes endless intrigue I'll make it to heaven. For now farewell dear audience, till then!

(he returns) And one other thing: I admit I wanted your part. I am sick and tired of playing the bad guy. After the show no one wants to buy me a drink, no one asks me for my autograph, no one says *◆wonderful show◆*

MARUN: (to the audience) Now this is really too much. Even Shakespeare wouldn't grant you two parting monologues. (To soldiers) Take him away.

20.

(Marun, 1st Guard - later 2nd Guard)

1st GUARD: The execution will take place in one hour.

MARUN: Have all the generals been informed?

1st GUARD: Yes.

MARUN: What did they say?

1st GUARD: They held their tongues. They accept your decision. All know that the court guard has been ordered by you to kill anyone without hesitation who tries to defend Grgur.

MARUN: What is the mood among my guards?

1st GUARD: Good. They consider you to be a just ruler and believe that your decision to execute Grgur is entirely justified.

MARUN: If anyone expresses any doubt at all, whether soldier or general, you must execute them along with Grgur.

(2nd Guard enters.)

2nd GUARD: Something terrible has happened, Your Highness!

MARUN: Someone has spoken in Grgur's defense?

2nd GUARD: Worse. Tried to free him.

MARUN: Was this person apprehended?

2nd GUARD: Yes.

MARUN: Have them killed at once, and Grgur as well. Do not wait for dawn.

2nd GUARD: But Your Highness...

MARUN: Without hesitation - anyone who tries to free a traitor is a traitor too, and must die at once.

2nd GUARD: But the person is a girl, not a man. I mean she is of the feminine sex, I mean she has several female body parts.

MARUN: The law is equal for all. Kill her, too.

2nd GUARD: But she is...

MARUN: I don't care who she is. Do as I say! Let die our greatest traitor and the girl who tried to free him. Tell everyone that the king condemned her without asking for her name and origins but only for her deed. Go now - and let God's will be done. When there's killing to be done, do it.

(2nd Guard bows obediently and leaves the room. The king paces the room for a very long time staring at the floor.)

MARUN: Do you think me cruel?

1st GUARD: No, king.

MARUN: Do you think me just?

1st GUARD: Always, Your Highness.

MARUN: If you were in my place, would you do the same?

1st GUARD: I am but a lowly man.

MARUN: All of us are lowly men. What would you do?

1st GUARD: I would have ordered Grgur's execution.

MARUN: And hers?

1st GUARD: I don't believe I would.

MARUN: Don't you think Grgur's daughter is just as evil as her father?

1st GUARD: That I do.

MARUN: Then why do you suggest that I shouldn't have had her killed?

1st GUARD: But you didn't have her killed.

MARUN: What?

1st GUARD: She is under guard in her room. She could never have come to Grgur's cell. All those who support him are under the supervision of your personal guard.

MARUN: Then who was the girl who tried to set him free?

1st GUARD: I cannot say...

MARUN: Speak!

1st GUARD: Your daughter!

MARUN: What!? ??

1st GUARD: It seems you sent your daughter to her death, Sir.

(The king stands frozen for an instant, and then like a shot he rushes from the hall. 1st Guard follows. The hall is empty, muffled music can be heard suggesting anxiety and foreboding. A change in lighting. 1st Guard and 2nd Guard come into the hall carrying the king's daughter. The king follows them in. The guards place the body on the floor. The king is shattered, hunched. He kneels by his dead daughter and kisses her hair. The music descends more and more painfully on the scene.)

MARUN: Heavens look down and see what happens when a good man becomes evil. Oh, my only daughter! How will I live without you? Without our talks and our walks in the park? I have lost you through my own stupidity. This is a one hundred percent tragedy. This is a bonified tragedy of the highest order. I've no more daughter, I'm choking in slaughter, hell's in my skin, the devil's my kin. Catharsis, Catharsis, come to me run, before my life is over and done.

21.

(Marun, Fool, Trpimir, Yelena, Dora)

(The courtiers are in black, all stare mutely before them, only the king is sitting. The silence is long.)

MARUN (*softly*): Have you nothing to say?

(No one answers. Long silence.)

MARUN (*bellowing*): Why are you silent?

(No one speaks again. Marun rises from the throne and goes over to Yelena.)

MARUN: Why are you silent?

(Yelena says nothing. He goes to Trpimir.)

MARUN: Say something, son.

(Trpimir does not respond.)

MARUN: Why do you despise me? Don't look at me like that.

(Silence.)

MARUN: Out! Everybody out!

(Courtiers walk to the exit, Marun grabs the Fool by the shoulder.)

MARUN: You stay.

(All the others exit except Fool. King and Fool stand silently.)

MARUN: Tell me what you think of me.

FOLL: You know my thoughts, Marun.

MARUN: All the more reason. Tell me.

(Brief silence.)

FOOL: You shouldn't have executed Grgur.

MARUN: Why?

FOOL: Because he was a better counselor than you are a king. He was always consistent and you aren't. You change, like a child. People in power must never do that.

MARUN: Everything disgusted me.

FOOL: I know. The crown charms only those who don't wear it. I understand you, but I can't approve of what you did.

MARUN: I wanted...

FOOL: You should never have gotten mixed up in politics. You look upon the work of animals with human eyes. You and you alone are guilty for the chaos that reigned in the country and the war with the Hungarians, just as all the merit for this disgraceful victory now is chalked up to your account.

(Silence.)

FOOL: While you were ruling and managing your job as you should, Grgur was a faithful subject, then he earned the highest honors and made it to court counselor. Only later, when you grew weary, of your duties, only then did Grgur turn against you. He felt instinctively that the country was heading for disaster - and instinctively he took things into his own hands, and rightfully so - and you had the man executed. Now they all hate you - your wife, your son, Dora. Even I hate you, because you began to kill.

(Silence.)

MARUN: You've forgotten one person who hates me more than all of you combined.

FOOL: Who is that?

MARUN: That young man who came, many years ago, to the court with his heart brimming with faith that he could be king and be a man, at the same time.

FOOL: There's not room in one body for two people.

MARUN: He knows that now, too.

(Silence.)

MARUN: I'm stained with blood, I horrify myself. I killed my own child, my life disgusts me, people disgust me, the air is revolting, all my words seem useless, I am ashamed of the eyes pinned on me, I am not the same, I'm stained with blood, I'm stained with blood. Tell me: what should I do with these bloodstained hands?

FOOL: Wash them.

MARUN: Do you think I can?

FOOL: You can.

MARUN: How?

FOOL: It's hard.

MARUN: How?

FOOL: I can't tell you, because despite everything I still care more for you than all the rest together.

(Long silence.)

MARUN: Do you remember the ancient custom at the courts of the counts of old?

FOOL: Do I have to?.

MARUN: In days gone, when the count sensed he was aging, too sick, that he could go on no longer... he would call in a trusty servant and order him... to kill his master.

FOOL: A foolish custom. Truly a vapid custom.

MARUN: Thanks to this custom all Croatian rulers died on their feet.

FOOL: That was only done by counts who were terribly sick. Let's talk about something else.

MARUN: I am sick.

FOOL: You're talking nonsense.

MARUN: My insides are gnawed, everything aches, every word and every thought, the world hurts.

FOOL: You mustn't take this so badly.

MARUN: None of our counts died at the hands of enemies; the only ones to see them go were their trustiest of servants, the only witnesses.

FOOL: Why tell me all this?

MARUN: Because you are my trustiest servant.

(Short silence.)

FOOL: That was a long time ago, in the wild old days.

MARUN: The days are always wild.

(Marun pulls a dagger from its sheath and holding it by the blade, offers the handle to Fool.)

MARUN: Take this knife.

FOOL: Don't ask this of me.

MARUN: I am sullied by blood, help me wash it off.

FOOL: Don't! Please don't!

MARUN: Don't speak - help your king to leave this world like a man.

FOOL: I respect you, Marun, I love you.

MARUN: All the more reason. Take the knife.

(Short silence.)

MARUN: My trustiest man, let's waste no more time.

(The king takes one more step toward Fool with the dagger in his hand, Fool takes the dagger, they look at each other, the king smiles and nods. Fool thrusts and stabs the king with the knife in the chest. The king groans and falls to his knees.)

FOOL: My king, my dearest king! What have I done?

MARUN: Don't weep, Fool, don't weep long after me.

(After saying these words he expires.)

(Silence. Fool looks sadly at the dead body of the king. A long beat.)

FOOL: My man. Nice job with the death scene. Riveting. Straight out of Stanislavsky.

(Marun raises himself up slightly.)

MARUN: Really? I can do it again, if you want.

FOOL: No, no. Everything was perfect. Just lie still and be dead a moment longer. Time for my parting monologue.

(Marun again lies dead.)

FOOL: The king's demise

Ends the play,

And we allies

Will be sent away.

So:

Fare you well my fine gents,

And remember: have fun with your lady friends.

THE END