

HAMLET.RU

A play by

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In Honor of the Great Tragedy's 400th Anniversary (1601-
2001)

CHARACTERS

HAMLET
ALEXÁNDER ÁNIKST, Ph.D.
POLONIUS
GHOST
FIRST GRAVEDIGGER
SECOND GRAVEDIGGER
OPHELIA
ROSENCRANTZ
GUILDENSTERN
FORTINBRAS
LAERTES
and others

Anikst's Prologue

Ladies and gentlemen!

Our tragedy is that your tragedy is our tragedy. When we reach the end of the show you will understand what I mean. But by then it will be too late. Therefore, before it is too late, I wish explain to you what, later, there will be no point in explaining.

In our tragedy, I play the part of the late Shakespeare scholar Alexander Anikst. My job is to explain the unexplainable. It is a profoundly tragic role and only a genuinely great actor can play it. If you doubt that, I suggest you leave the auditorium at once and not watch this show at all. A ticket to leave the theater costs exactly what you paid to enter. What's that? No, it costs twice as much to leave during the intermission.

During the exodus I would request those remaining to observe a deathly silence. Our tragedy begins with people leaving the theater! It is the author's opinion that all tragedies so begin.

Ladies and gentlemen!

The sun glasses I am wearing indicate I am dead. The author maintains that he has consulted with a dream image of the Ghost of Shakespeare and the Ghost told him that, personally, he, the Ghost, has nothing against employing the color of black to indicate aliens from the world of the dead. However, he emphasized he is not actually Shakespeare but merely his Ghost. And also that he doesn't have the right to speak for Shakespeare.

As you understand, this is an irresolvable situation: Shakespeare cannot appear to the author from the other world in any other form than that of Shakespeare's Ghost, while Shakespeare's Ghost is not Shakespeare for the simple reason that he is a Ghost.

Ladies and gentlemen! The curtain will now rise and our tragedy will become your tragedy. There is nothing tragic about that; only you ought to be prepared for any eventuality. Including everything inevitable. Because in our tragedy, everything is a tragedy.

Curtain!

Trumpets. The curtain rises.

ACT I

Hamlet, dressed entirely in black, stands with a flute in one hand and a skull in the other as if he were a

*Russian tsar holding a
scepter and orb.*

ANIKST

I don't believe it!

HAMLET

Why not? As you can see yourself, I exist. Will you permit me to play my flute?

ANIKST

My lord!

HAMLET

(Corrects him.) My good lord. Won't you please hold my skull? Only don't drop it. I don't have another. *(He plays then suddenly breaks off the melody.)* Perhaps you would like to play? I'll hold your skull.

ANIKST

(Lovingly.) I don't make music, my good lord.

HAMLET

Why not?

ANIKST

I don't know how, my lord!

HAMLET

Shall I teach you?

ANIKST

(Lovingly.) Act three. The famous "mousetrap," the play-within-the-play. The brilliant episode with the flute.

HAMLET

Very good. These are the stops.

ANIKST

My good lord, I don't intend to play upon you.

HAMLET

Do you truly believe you can explain my tragedy to me?

ANIKST

To a degree, my lord.

HAMLET

To what degree? Pardon me, but what is your degree?

ANIKST

I am a Doctor of Philosophy.

HAMLET

A dead Doctor of Philosophy.

ANIKST

My good lord, I have one request. Please don't call me dead. I find it unpleasant. I wish to remain myself.

HAMLET

Give me your skull. That's my skull – I asked for yours. Why do you stare at me so? To resemble yourself is the first sign of death. The living never resemble themselves. In order to become yourself, you first must die. But practically no one can bring himself to do that. Even dead, you wish to conceal your death. Why is that doctor? Perhaps you're not a scholar, but a gravedigger?

Anikst drops the skull.

ANIKST

Forgive me, my good lord.

HAMLET

(Picks up the skull.) There once were eyes here. Living eyes. Now you can stick your fingers in these sockets. Stick your fingers in there. Fear not. Probe the dwelling of what used to be a mind. Perhaps even an immortal soul. Let the dead bury their dead, said Christ. And then was resurrected.

ANIKST

My good lord!

HAMLET

This is I in the form of a skull. Or you. Or he who is not yet born. But has already died. *(To the audience.)* Ladies and gentlemen! The good doctor Anikst will now pronounce a monologue on life and death.

ANIKST

I?!

HAMLET

(Holds the skull out to him.) Only don't drop it again.

ANIKST

My good lord, I can't. The monologue is not my genre.

HAMLET

No tragedy in that. I'll feed you your lines.

ANIKST

No, my good lord.

HAMLET

Then my skull will not save you.

ANIKST

What must I be saved from?

HAMLET

From death after death. Do you see that rug?

ANIKST

You mean that curtain?

HAMLET

A curtain is a curtain. A rug is a rug.

ANIKST

There is no rug here, my good lord.

HAMLET

There is, but it is invisible. Take off your glasses. You look blind in them.

*Anikst removes his glasses.
His eyes are closed.*

Now open your eyes. Don't be afraid, open them.

ANIKST

I can't, my good lord.

HAMLET

You can. You can, but you are afraid.

ANIKST

I cannot do it.

HAMLET

You must. Or you will never see what the invisible rug is concealing... *(He disappears behind the curtain.)*

ANIKST

My good lord!

Polonius emerges from behind the curtain in a Roman toga and dark glasses.

POLONIUS

Where is he?

Anikst is silent.

Don't play deaf, dumb and blind. Whose ghost are you?

Anikst drops the skull again.

Whose skull is that? (*Picks it up, looks it over.*) I'm taking the skull. (*Disappears behind the curtain.*)

ANIKST

My good lord!

Enter the Ghost from behind the curtain. He is covered by a sheet with holes cut in it for the eyes. Anikst bumps into him. They both feel each other as if they are blind.

GHOST

O horror! Horror! O great horror!
 Haven't you seen Hamlet, man? I thought
 I heard the prince's voice. Hark:
 I am the doleful spirit of his father.
 I am that Specter that wanders Europe.
 Lord! Do You hearken? You're a corpse
 yourself.
 O horror! Horror! O great horror!

Disappears behind the curtain.

ANIKST

My good lord!

Enter the gravediggers from behind the curtain.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Hey there, dead man!

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Dead man, hey!

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

We are gravediggers.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Your gravediggers.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

I am the first gravedigger.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

I am the second.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

We are your gravediggers.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

We are here to bury you.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

And we will bury you. *(Pulls out a measuring tape and measures the length of Anikst's body.)*

ANIKST

(Shouts.) My good lord!

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Don't shout, dead man. We have work to do.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Don't sweat it. You're a Ph.D. and we are doctors, too.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

You're a dead man and we are dead men.

ANIKST

(Shouts.) My good lord!

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Do you want to remain unburied?

Anikst is silent.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

To want or not to want.

Anikst is silent.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

You see? You don't want.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

To see or not to see?

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

You see? You don't see.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

But he shouts.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

You know who you look like when you shout with your eyes closed?

Anikst is silent.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Okay, now we're going to dress you.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

You will look just like yourself.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

The black shoes must go.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Off they go! (*Takes off Anikst's black shoes.*)

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

And on with the white slippers.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

On they go!

ANIKST

(*Shouts.*) My good lord!

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

My good lord, is right. Foot a little higher.

ANIKST

(*Shouts.*) My good lord!

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

That's right, my lord. Now the other.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Shroud. (*Hands it to his partner.*)

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Shroud. (*Demonstrates a straight jacket.*)

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

(*Sings.*) "White his shroud as the mountain snow..."

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

(*Catching up the tune.*) "A pit of clay for to be dug..."

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

There's nothing I love more than burying doctors!

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

You doctors look good in white.

BOTH GRAVEDIGGERS

White his shroud as the mountain snow,
A pit of clay for to be dug.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Sing along, dead man.

BOTH GRAVEDIGGERS

White his shroud as the mountain snow,
A pit of clay for to be dug.

*They put the straight jacket
on Anikst. Enter Ophelia
from behind the curtain.*

OPHELIA

That's my song. (*Sings.*) "White his shroud as the mountain snow, A pit of clay for to be dug." (*To Anikst.*) Sing along. Don't look at me as my father did or these flowers will wilt. Rosemary is for remembrance; thoughts are brought by pansies. And rue we call the herb of grace o' Sundays. I will weave you a garland. Or are you indifferent to flowers as was my father? You frighten me with that look. Please, won't you sing? (*Sings.*) "White his shroud as the mountain snow..."

ANIKST

(Unsure of himself.) "White his shroud as the mountain snow..."

ALL

(Together.) "A pit of clay for to be dug..."

Enter Hamlet.

HAMLET

Singing already?*(To Anikst.)* And you call it a tragedy. Behold this nymph, doctor. Why do you blush now, my soul's idol?

OPHELIA

Don't call me an idol, my lord.

HAMLET

But aren't you my soul's idol? Who are you, then?

OPHELIA

I believe my father is looking for you.

HAMLET

Here? In this grave?

OPHELIA

Your jokes could drive me to suicide. *(Leaves.)*

HAMLET

Hey there, burial engineers, why so glum? *(Gaily.)* "White his shroud as the mountain snow/A pit of clay for to be dug."

BOTH GRAVEDIGGERS

And you, good man, now will be

As quiet as a dove.

HAMLET

A fine little ditty, burial engineers. Drink to my madness. *(Tosses them a coin.)*

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

God grant you die a total idiot.

The Gravediggers leave.

HAMLET

Where is my skull, doctor? Without my skull, I am not I, not Hamlet, nor your good lord. Who would believe my madness? (*Unties Anikst's hands.*) Do you have bad dreams? Nightmares? How about rats, for instance?

ANIKST

Rats, no. But I often dreamed about you.

HAMLET

As a rat? (*Pulls a rat out of his pocket.*)

ANIKST

That is a rat, my good lord.

HAMLET

This is not a rat. (*Whispers.*) A secret: This is I in the form of a rat.

Enter Polonius.

POLONIUS

I beg your pardon, lord. For four hundred years you have been mumbling God knows what to God knows whom and, meanwhile, history is happening!

HAMLET

Well, while it is happening, allow me to introduce you to each other. The late Shakespearean scholar Doctor Anikst. POLONIUS. The late Shakespearean scholar Polonius. (*Extends his hand.*)

Anikst shakes it warily.

Prince, history is being made! The king, your father, has died. Your mother, the queen, has married his brother, your uncle.

HAMLET

Would you like to present them my skull as a wedding gift?

POLONIUS

Prince, are you in your right mind? What does this skull have to do with anything?

HAMLET

Not just this skull; my skull. Or do you think I can occupy the royal seat without my skull?

POLONIUS

The royal seat has been occupied by your uncle, king Claudius, lord.

HAMLET

My uncle?

POLONIUS

Your uncle, lord.

HAMLET

No uncle can occupy the royal seat. You said my uncle is the King of Denmark. And the royal seat after the death of the father goes to the eldest son. Ergo, my uncle is my father's eldest son. That is, my older brother. Well, brother may he be – I've seen worse in my days – but what is this about him marrying his own mother?! (*Embraces Polonius.*) Brother, don't do it!

POLONIUS

Prince, do you consider me your brother, too?

HAMLET

The doctor maintains that we are twin cousins. But I suspect that for such close relations you lack inborn idiocy.

POLONIUS

I understand your filial feelings, lord. I am a father myself.

HAMLET

Then explain my tragedy to me. And the ghost of my uncle can explain his filial feelings to the ghost of my father.

POLONIUS

Do you wish to displease their majesties, lord?

HAMLET

But you may please their majesties. Tell them I have gone crazy about your daughter.

POLONIUS

Leave my daughter out of this.

HAMLET

Do you want her to lose her faculties of reason? Doctor, explain to this corpse what love is. (*Leaves.*)

POLONIUS

You must sway him before it is too late. Before he loses his mind and drives you out of yours. Do you remember the law of maintaining reason? Or the law of maintaining memory? $E=mc^2$. Remember that? (*Plucks a skull from behind the curtain.*) Do you see these black holes?

ANIKST

That's his skull! My good lord!

POLONIUS

Don't shout. He's not here.

ANIKST

He's not?

POLONIUS

No. And he never was.

ANIKST

In what sense?

POLONIUS

Literally. Scientifically. However you want. You aren't here either, by the way.

ANIKST

I?

POLONIUS

Nor I either. There is no such thing as a dead Shakespeare scholar.

ANIKST

I don't understand.

POLONIUS

Why would you want to understand? Get it through your head; you don't exist. Can you grasp that? You cannot! No one is! No one can and no one tries. But he does – he tries. That's a tragedy. A real tragedy! You can't imagine what we have gone through for four hundred years! I, in particular. He'll drive you to a tragic end, too. Believe me, he will. Did he already tell you that this is he in the form of a skull? He did. I can tell by your eyes, he did! And did he show you himself in the form of a rat? He did! And that's only the beginning of what he'll show you! Just thank your lucky stars that nobody has cut off your head, like they did to poor Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

ANIKST

I don't believe you.

POLONIUS

They didn't either. (*Calls.*) Rosencrantz! Guildenstern!

*Enter Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern.*

ROSENCRANTZ

Here we are, my lord.

GUILDENSTERN

Our regards, my lord.

POLONIUS

Tell this unfortunate man what awaits him if he cannot sway the prince.

ROSENCRANTZ

Misfortune awaits this unfortunate man.

GUILDENSTERN

You unfortunate man, misfortune awaits you.

ROSENCRANTZ

Your head will be cut off.

GUILDENSTERN

Your unfortunate head.

ROSENCRANTZ

My lord. Shall I show the unfortunate man the ax?

GUILDENSTERN

Shall I show the unfortunate man a head that has been severed?

POLONIUS

My dear doctor. Shall we show you? Yes. Precisely. To be, or not to be: that is the question! No, no. No need to answer. No point in forcing yourself. (*Tucks the skull under his arm.*) Your Hamlet is inside of you, dear doctor. I said, inside of you, not in your stomach.

Enter Hamlet.

HAMLET

You are quite right, good sir: I am inside of you and not in the good doctor's stomach. Thank God, you have no need to worry of pregnancy. Conception is a blessing; but as your daughter may conceive, – friend, look to 't.

Polonius is motionless.

I thought we had agreed you would not be so obsequious when holding my skull under your arm. A tragic end awaits you, good sir.

Polonius inadvertently drops the skull.

HAMLET

My good sir, that is a skull, not a football.

POLONIUS

I have a son who will avenge me.

HAMLET

And a daughter who will go out of her mind.

POLONIUS

Your tragedy is that you are not a father. (*Leaves.*)

HAMLET

Dear friends, you are off to study in England.

Enter, one after the other, the Gravediggers, the Ghost and Ophelia.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Oh, I love future corpses to death!

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Future corpses are my hobbyhorses!

GHOST

We are terribly happy to see you, fellow ghosts.

OPHELIA

I will weave you a garland. Rosemary is for remembrance; thoughts are brought by pansies. And rue we call the herb of grace o' Sundays.

ROSENCRANTZ

Most dear lord, you're getting ahead of yourself.

HAMLET

Really? Is there any self that can be gotten ahead of? Perhaps my self can get ahead of itself? Or maybe there are no selves? Nor any tragedies. Perhaps there is nothing at all. Nothing and no one. *(He pulls out his flute and begins to play. Suddenly he interrupts the music.)* "People, lions, eagles and partridges, horned deer, geese, spiders, silent fish, starfish and protozoa – in short, everything living, everything living, everything, once completing the sorrowful circle, did fade out." *(To Ophelia.)* Can you portray the Moon?

OPHELIA

What says the Moon, my lord?

HAMLET

It says nothing. I will write the words for you later. "For thousands of years the earth has borne no living creature. And this poor Moon lights its lamp in vain." *(To Ophelia.)* Light a candle. "Cranes no longer shriek upon awakening in the meadow; and May bugs are not heard in the linden grove." *(To the audience.)* Wow, this guy had foresight! *(Overacts shamelessly.)* "Cold, cold, cold. Empty, empty, empty. Frightful, frightful, frightful." *(Blows out the candle.)* Tell me, most dear lady, are you frightened?

OPHELIA

I am, my lord.

HAMLET

Fear not. It gets worse later.

ANIKST

Don't frighten her, my good lord. *(To Ophelia.)* That's from *The Seagull*. It's by Anton Chekhov.

HAMLET

"The bodies of living creatures turned to dust and eternal matter transformed them into stone and water and clouds. And their souls united into one. It is I, I who am the world's universal soul. In my soul live the souls of Alexander the Great and Caesar and Shakespeare and Napoleon and the lowest of the leaches." Doctor, can you feel within you the soul of a leach? You know what? I do! And I can't do a thing about it! "Like a prisoner thrown into a deep, empty well, I don't know where I am or what awaits me. Once

in a hundred years I part my lips to speak. My voice resonates sadly in the void, lacking thought, lacking will, lacking the agitation of life." Most dear lady, do you love me?

OPHELIA

I do, my lord.

GHOST

"In all the universe only the spirit remains constant and unchanging."

HAMLET

"Matter and spirit shall unite in glorious harmony and then the kingdom of universal will shall be at hand."

OPHELIA

My lord, did he say "unite"?

GHOST

"But that will come only after thousands and thousands of years when the Moon and bright Sirius and the Earth have turned to dust. Until that time: horror, horror, horror!"

HAMLET

Horror, horror, horror. Do you love me?

OPHELIA

I do, my lord.

HAMLET

Let us talk of love in the light of the Moon.

ANIKST

My good lord, you forgot one spot — the one about the devil, the father of eternal matter.

HAMLET

My love, have you a sword?

OPHELIA

A sword, my lord?

HAMLET

A needle? A pin? A hair clip?

OPHELIA

I have a bobby pin, my lord.

HAMLET

I now will show you the father of eternal matter. (*Takes Ophelia's bobby pin and plunges it into the curtain.*)

Enter Polonius from behind the curtain.

POLONIUS

Prince! You have murdered me! (*Falls.*)

OPHELIA

Father!

HAMLET

My incomparable lady, do not lose your mind before it is time. My good sir, this is no sea rock and you are no walrus.

POLONIUS

Where am I?

HAMLET

In a theater. We are actors and we are rehearsing an Italian commedia dell'arte. Your daughter is portraying the Moon and these drunken sots (*he indicates the Gravediggers*) are playing hired assassins. These two mugs (*indicates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*) are the embodiment of two-faced hypocrisy. I am the romantic leading man, the son of this ghost. (*Extends his hand to Polonius.*)

POLONIUS

A strange cast of characters.

HAMLET

Everything the Italians do is strange. They're just crazy about macaroni poetry and phallic symbols. Every Italian is a macaronic poet and every poet is a phallic symbol.

POLONIUS

In what sense?

HAMLET

In a symbolic sense. The play is symbolically titled *The Seagull*. On the shore of a swan lake there lives a beautiful maiden, the daughter of a courtier. She is in love with a prince. But the prince is not in his right mind. He believes the maiden is a seagull and that he is a swan which an evil sorcerer has turned into a phallic symbol.

POLONIUS

Ophelia! Go home. I forbid you to act in this play.

HAMLET

First you take away my skull and then you leave me without a Moon. My good sir, without a Moon I am as a man without hands. You cannot make a play with hired assassins alone.

POLONIUS

You still have your ghost.

HAMLET

Well, the ghost is untouchable. But you don't believe it exists.

POLONIUS

I don't believe it.

HAMLET

What a pity you can leave nothing untouched.

POLONIUS

(Groping the Ghost.) This is no ghost.

HAMLET

Then who is it? The father of eternal matter?

GHOST

Am I or am I not?

POLONIUS

(Groping the Ghost.) I don't believe so.

HAMLET

Please tell their majesties that the show is canceled. And in its place, show them your phallic symbol.

POLONIUS

Ophelia! Home! On the double!

*The stage goes dark.
Polonius and Ophelia leave.*

HAMLET

Doctor, do you recall that a rat is a mouse of abnormal proportions?

ANIKST

Why abnormal, my good lord?

HAMLET

Because a rat of normal proportions is merely a mouse. Do you know how mousetraps are constructed? (*Pulls a mousetrap out of his pocket.*) You see, here is a nail on which bait is attached. Here is a spring and here is a steel bar – it breaks the mouse's back. Life is a mousetrap, my dear doctor! (*Sets the mousetrap.*) A man strives for immortality in order to become a ghost. But once a ghost, he ceases to be a man.

Enter Polonius behind Hamlet's back.

(*Not turning around.*) And here we have a rat of abnormal proportions. You know what Alexander the Great said? He said, "Infectious laughter transforms into universal grief."

POLONIUS

Alexander the Great did not say that.

HAMLET

Maybe not to you. But he did to me. Doctor, cure me of my ghostliness.

POLONIUS

Words, words, words. (*Steps over the mousetrap and disappears behind the curtain.*)

HAMLET

(*Whispers.*) He is terrified that you will explain my tragedy to me.

ANIKST

Polonius?

HAMLET

Shh! (*Whispers.*) That's not Polonius. I killed Polonius four hundred years ago. This is his ghost. He's the one who gave me the mousetrap. He wants me to snuff you out. So that everything will be just as it was in Shakespeare only with you in his place. He can't get it through his head that you and he both are dead Shakespeare scholars.

Fanfare. Enter Fortinbras with soldiers.

FORTINBRAS

Lord Hamlet. Allow me to pass through your lands.

HAMLET

Be my guest, Fortinbras. Only you should know that, alas, none of these lands are mine.

FORTINBRAS

So, seize them, then! I'm on to Poland.

HAMLET

Good luck seizing Poland and Polish girls.

FORTINBRAS

Thank you. (*Steps on the mousetrap.*) God damn it! (*To his soldiers.*) Forward, march!

Fanfare. Fortinbras leaves with his soldiers.

HAMLET

I ought to camouflage that. You got a hanky? (*Takes Anikst's handkerchief and covers the mousetrap with it.*) Now, get thee behind that curtain! We're going to catch him red-handed.

Anikst disappears behind the curtain. Enter Polonius.

POLONIUS

Lord!

HAMLET

Shh! (*Whispers.*) Our dear, dead Shakespeare scholar wants me to kill you. He's the one who gave me the mousetrap. He wants everything to be just like in Shakespeare. He doesn't understand where he is.

POLONIUS

He doesn't?

HAMLET

No. Do you?

POLONIUS

What are you trying to say?

HAMLET

This is what I'm trying to say: Poison. A relative pours poison into someone's ear while that person is sleeping. Do you have relatives? Mother, father, brother, daughter... Why do you stare at me so? I assure you, I am not your daughter.

POLONIUS

I don't have a brother.

HAMLET

But you do have ears? Beware, friend.

POLONIUS

I'll remember your words.

HAMLET

And please relay them to the king. I believe he also has ears. (*Leaves.*)

Polonius takes a couple of steps and steps on the mousetrap.

POLONIUS

A-a-a-a! (*Tosses away the mousetrap.*)

Enter Ophelia.

OPHELIA

Father!

POLONIUS

What, Ophelia?

OPHELIA

I dreamed I saw you in a mousetrap.

POLONIUS

Do you think your father is a rat? (*Hides the mousetrap in his pocket.*) Ophelia! Fate and Shakespeare have determined that I am both your father and your mother. As your father, I grieve publicly but weep and wail on the inside! As your mother, I can take it no more! Don't throw yourself at that man! A man is an animal in pants! And Hamlet is a prince, not a monk! The more you love, the more terrible it is! You can't let loose the reins on a man! Never! Or he'll run amuck. As your mother, I only want what is good for you. I want... I want... I have no words for it – I am choked by tears! As your father, I publicly maintain my silence but I

have splinters in my heart! Like nails! I sleep as if on a bed of nails! And as your mother, I cannot sleep at all! My heart aches! And so does my lower back. I can't breathe. And my bones – right here – ooh, they ache! Daughter! I am not well! I might die tomorrow! He is a prince, Ophelia, and he is free to sow wild oats where he will! He is a ghost, daughter!

OPHELIA

Prince Hamlet is a ghost?

POLONIUS

Prince Hamlet has lost his mind! Believe your mother. Your own mother...

OPHELIA

Yes...

POLONIUS

Ophelia, swear you will not meet with him. Do you swear?

OPHELIA

I do.

POLONIUS

My child! Never forget your father is near.

Enter Hamlet.

HAMLET

An ass is a goat with ears. A goat is an ass with a beard. A beard is the quintessence of a goat. Ears are the quintessence of an ass.

POLONIUS. Ophelia, go.

Exit Ophelia.

HAMLET

The quintessence of a man is dust and ash. Have you a quintessence, my good sir?

POLONIUS. Do you mean me, lord?

HAMLET. When a man dies, what remains is his quintessence.

POLONIUS. Would you kill me over some pitiful quintessence?

HAMLET. The Massacre of the Innocents is not our tragedy. That is King Herod's territory. (*Leaves.*)

POLONIUS. We shall see yet who is a babe and who is not. Son!

Enter Laertes.

Laertes! My son! Remember my commandments. Do not play with fire. Do not muddy the water. Do not play the fool. Do not take to the bottle. Do not wag your tongue. Do not lend money. Do not trust women. Do not make mountains out of molehills. Do not cast your sister to the whims of fate.

LAERTES. I shall inscribe them in my heart.

POLONIUS. My son! Prince Hamlet wishes to kill me.

LAERTES. I'll kill him!

POLONIUS. Remember one more commandment, Laertes: Make no promise in vain.

LAERTES. Do you really think he will run you through again as if you were a rat? And that poor Ophelia will go mad again and drown herself? Father, is there really nothing we can change?

POLONIUS. Only Shakespeare can change Shakespeare. We've already killed so many times that one time more or less is no big tragedy to me.

LAERTES

Then what is a tragedy, father?

Enter Hamlet and Anikst.

ANIKST

Tragedy, literally, is "the song of asses," that is, "the ass's song." Tragos in Greek means ass. Oide means song.

HAMLET

Now there's a real tragedy if you are an ass and you have a song.

LAERTES

I'll kill you, lord!

Enter Ophelia. She throws herself between them.

OPHELIA

Father! Brother! My Love! Can you not wait to see me in my grave?

HAMLET

Most dear lady! These are your brother and father?

OPHELIA

Yes, my lord.

HAMLET

Are you certain they are really your brother and father and not their ghosts?

OPHELIA

Oh, heal him, heavenly powers!

HAMLET

Your brother will heal me, do not doubt it. And don't you forget to dip the blade in medicine, Laertes.

POLONIUS

Go now, Laertes. And remember my commandments. Ophelia, see your brother out.

Ophelia and Laertes leave.

As for me, lord, I don't understand you. Why do you continue to play at this comedy?

HAMLET

This great baby amazes me. Absolutely amazes me. Tell me child, do you know how to scream bloody murder?

POLONIUS

I do not, lord.

HAMLET

Then I will teach you, sir. All you must do is open your mouth a little. Then you bend back your tongue, like that. And then force the air out of your chest, like this: A-a-a-a! Only you must have a boneless tongue and you must have air in you that you can force out. Aside from that, nature takes care of everything else.

POLONIUS

Do you wish to make a fool of me?

HAMLET

Lord help us!

POLONIUS

I have always wished you well, lord.

HAMLET

However, you already know how to scream bloody murder.

POLONIUS

I do not, lord. I swear by my daughter.

HAMLET

Nothing but woe with these infants! All right. I will now scream bloody murder and you will swear by your daughter that you wish me well.

POLONIUS

I swear by my daughter, lord.

HAMLET

Wait a minute, I haven't begun to scream yet. (*Screams.*) A-a-a-a! Doctor, if you are not a ghost... Won't you join in?

*Anikst joins Hamlet in screaming "A-a-a-a!"
Offstage, Laertes, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern begin shouting, A-a-a-a!
Enter Laertes at a run, holding his bared sword. Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are right behind him.*

OPHELIA

Father!

LAERTES

What is going on here?

POLONIUS

Prince Hamlet is losing his mind.

HAMLET

Won't you join us, noble Laertes? (*Screams.*) A-a-a-a!

OPHELIA

O heavenly powers, restore him!

HAMLET

Good sir, please note that I have screamed in your place for the last time.

POLONIUS

Yes, sir!

Polonius leaves with Ophelia and Laertes.

HAMLET

Students, in England you will be taught to play the flute. I will give you a letter of recommendation. Doctor, have you a quill?

Anikst extends to him a ballpoint pen.

Is this a quill? *(To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.)* Have you a quill and parchment?

Enter the Ghost.

GHOST

I do. *(Hands Hamlet some parchment and a goose quill.)*

HAMLET

How is it that those who do not exist have everything? *(Writes and then reads aloud.)* "To the Humanist-King, Henry VIII. Elsinore, June 12, 2000. *(Use the actual date of the performance.)* Your Majesty! I recommend to you the bearers of this note, our dear friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. I am sure that, in your inherent humanism, you shall reward their merit as justly as you did that of Thomas More.

Anikst does not move.

GHOST

My dear dead man, you do not fear your own posthumous signature, do you? It's me or them.

Anikst resolves to sign and does. Hamlet follows suit.

HAMLET

(To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.) Students! England awaits you!

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and the Ghost disappear behind the curtain.

Don't worry, doctor. We are beyond good and evil. We are in eternity where nothing happens. We are in a state of non-being where there are no events. We are present but we do not exist. In fact, nothing exists at all. Nothing and no one. *(Looks at Anikst.)* I fear I cannot save you.

ANIKST

From death after death?

HAMLET

From universal emptiness.

Hamlet jerks back the curtain. There is nothing behind it. The lights go out. Hamlet walks onto the proscenium. An unseen flute plays quietly.

Diogenes, where is your Tub?
 Hippocrates, where is your Oath?
 Columbus, where is your Egg?
 Plato, where is your State?
 Archimedes, where is your Fulcrum?
 Caesar, where is your Rubicon?
 Newton, where is your Apple?
 Mohammed, where is your Mountain?
 Planck, where is your Constant?
 Pilate, where is your Truth?
 Cain, where is your Abel?
 Woe, where is your Wit?
 Heart, where is your Pain?

The stage goes black. A deathly silence. A flute sounds in the darkness. Up comes an infernal light. Hamlet is not to be seen. Enter Polonius. Under his arms, he carries the heads of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as if they were watermelons.

ANIKST

Is that they?!

POLONIUS

In the flesh. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

ANIKST

Already?!

POLONIUS

What's to wait for? It only takes a second! Hold this, will you? (*Holds out one of the heads.*) My shoelace came undone.

*Anikst takes the head.
Polonius bends over. His
shoelace snaps.*

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark! How am I going to connect these two scraps now? What a tragedy, my good doctor! (*He extends the second head to Anikst who takes it.*) Hold it by the hair or you'll drop it. (*Stares at Anikst as he ties his shoelaces.*) Careful, they're still dripping, doctor. You're all bloody there.

*Anikst drops the heads. They
hit the floor with a dull
thud as if on a scaffold.
Total darkness.*

ANIKST

(*Shouts.*) My good lord!

Enter Ophelia.

OPHELIA

What is the matter with you, doctor? You are wailing like a newborn baby. Oh, I know. There is a full moon tonight and you dreamed you are my father and that you are in a mousetrap. Let me rock you to sleep. (*Sings a lullaby as if to a newborn baby.*) Why are you looking at me like that? No. No, don't look at me like that. I don't want to have that dream. No, no! I don't want to! That is the expression I saw when I drowned.

 There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
 That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy
stream...

Who is that? (*Screams.*) A-a-a! (*She runs out.*)

ROSENCRANTZ

Doctor! Won't you hold my unfortunate head?!

GUILDENSTERN

Doctor! Won't you hold my severed head!?

ANIKST

(*Screams.*) A-a-a-a!

Enter Hamlet.

HAMLET

Is that you wailing like a newborn babe?

ANIKST

My good lord! (*Points at the heads.*)

HAMLET

You wished to kill me, my excellent good friends.

ROSENCRANTZ

To save you, most dear lord. But you killed us.

GUILDENSTERN

And you, my good doctor, you absolved this murder.

HAMLET

Have you nothing to say? Explain my tragedy to them!
(*Leaves.*)

ANIKST

You see... the tragedy... of the prince...

ROSENCRANTZ

Gaudeamus igitur!

GUILDENSTERN

(*To the audience.*) This is an old student song.

ROSENCRANTZ

Juvenes dum sumus!

GUILDENSTERN

Let's make merry while we are young!

ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN

(*Together.*)

Gaudeamus igitur!
Juvenes dum sumus!
Post jucundam juventutem,
Post molestam senectutem
Nos habitet humus.

ALL

(*Together.*) Vivat Academia,
Vivant professores!

Enter Hamlet.

HAMLET

Singing already? That didn't take long. Sing. Sing! Life is short, art is eternal. Eternity is full of sadness, but this sadness is a great joy! (*To the audience.*) Gaudeamus igitur!

*The stage goes black.
Claudius and Gertrude sit on
a bed in their regal
raiment. Enter Hamlet.*

CLAUDIUS

Now, my cousin! — No, my son! From now on, Hamlet, you are my son. And I would ask you, as I would my son, to cast off that nighted color, that which makes mourning of the day. Do not seek eternally thy noble father in the dust with your veiled lids.

HAMLET

O king and father, you shall replace my father. O queen and mother, you shall replace my mother.

GERTRUDE

Why *replace* her, son? I am your mother.

HAMLET

Impossible! Then who takes the place of my mother?

GERTRUDE

But son, why do you need a replacement while I am alive?

HAMLET

But why do you need an uncle in place of my father while I am alive?

GERTRUDE

Son, do you understand what you are saying? Do you wish to upset your uncle who shall replace your father?

HAMLET

Uncle who shall replace my father, forgive him who would stand in stead of your son if he has upset you instead of bringing you joy.

GERTRUDE

Hamlet! Son! You speak not with your uncle, but with His Majesty, the King of Denmark!

CLAUDIUS

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet, to give these mourning duties to your father: But, you must know, your father lost a father and he lost his. One cannot fill the lives of the living with nothing but sadness.

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
With one auspicious and one dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage
Have we taken to wife.
Come, join the wedding feast.

HAMLET

Shall I not grow cross-eyed with a hopeful and a dropping eye?

GERTRUDE

Son, don't dare you speak with His Majesty so!

CLAUDIUS

Unprevailing woe shall bear no fruit, Hamlet.

HAMLET

Yes, Majesty, if it is unprevailing. However, the fruits of my woe are not so fruitless. On the contrary. I fear they are so fruitful that in enjoying mirth in death, my mother may grow ripe with child that shall make an uncle of her son. May I lay here in this bed?

*Hamlet leaps onto the bed
between Claudius and
Gertrude and embraces them
both.*

I find a double casket is too tight for one.

GERTRUDE

You've gone mad!

HAMLET

(Leaps up from the bed. To Claudius.) Farewell, mother.
(Leaves.)

CLAUDIUS

He fosters murderous intentions. He will not spare even you, his own mother. And, as for me, Gertrude...!

GERTRUDE

Darling!

CLAUDIUS

Don't cling to me! Polonius!

*Polonius crawls out from
beneath the bed.*

POLONIUS

At your service, sire.

CLAUDIUS

Keep an eye on him. Let me know immediately if you see anything. *(He tugs on the curtain.)*

Enter Anikst with a skull.

POLONIUS

Where is the prince, doctor?

ANIKST

Here, hold this skull please.

*Polonius takes the skull.
Anikst pulls out a flute and
begins to play.*

POLONIUS

I asked you where the prince is.

ANIKST

Are you sure this is not the prince? *(Plays the flute.)*

POLONIUS

We are both Shakespeare scholars. We are both Ph.D.s. We are both dead. Let's not play games.

ANIKST

Do you know how to play the flute?

POLONIUS

I do not intend to play the flute. I intend to play on you, my good doctor. That's right, don't give me that otherworldly stare. You should know better than anyone that I am no villain.

ANIKST

How do you know I know that?

POLONIUS

It's written all over your face.

ANIKST

My face? *(He pulls out a small mirror and looks into it.)* I don't see anything.

POLONIUS

Because it's a crooked mirror.

ANIKST

This mirror is crooked? *(Looks it over.)*

POLONIUS

Would you like to see the crooked nature of the universe with the bare eye?

Anikst puts on dark glasses.

What do you see now?

ANIKST

Nothing.

POLONIUS

If you see nothing, how can you see I am a villain?

ANIKST

What else am I supposed to see?

POLONIUS

An important government official who perished tragically as a result of court intrigues. The unfortunate father of two children. A deceased Shakespeare scholar, like you. Where is the prince, doctor?

ANIKST

Inside of you. Study your innards. And if you don't find him there, hunt for him here in the theater.

POLONIUS

All Shakespeare scholars want to play Hamlet. And it always ends the same. He kills them when he goes after me in the scene where he argues with his mother.

ANIKST

Here is your Danish prince! *(Pulls a rat out of his pocket. To the rat.)* My good lord! *(To Polonius.)* The prince is undergoing a moment of self-recognition.

POLONIUS

I would warn you.

Anikst pulls out his flute and plays. He leaves. Enter Ophelia in the guise of the Moon. She rehearses.

OPHELIA

"Signori, I'm the Moon, the satellite of Dreams!"

No, that's not it.

"Signori, I'm the Moon!"

POLONIUS

Ophelia, I forbade you to perform in that play!

Enter Hamlet.

HAMLET

Do you know me, good sir?

POLONIUS

Of course, lord. You are a fishmonger.

HAMLET

Your eyes need checking. You see everything in a tragic light.

POLONIUS

Don't go playing Hamlet with me. (*Leaves.*)

Enter Anikst.

ANIKST

To be, or not to be: that is the question!

HAMLET

Want to buy some fish?

Enter Horatio.

HORATIO

My good lord! Everyone is looking for you; no one can find you.

HAMLET

And who are you, my good friend – everyone or no one?

HORATIO

I am your friend Horatio. I have been looking for you everywhere.

HAMLET

I was wondering what happened to my friend Horatio. I figured he must be looking for me everywhere. Friend, want to buy some fish?

HORATIO

What is the matter with you, my good lord?

HAMLET

The world is a prison containing Denmark. Denmark is a prison containing my skull. My skull is a prison containing my mind. My mind is a prison containing my thoughts. My thoughts are a prison containing my essence. My essence is a prison containing the whole world. My friend! Freedom is insanity. (*Leaves.*)

HORATIO

What is wrong with him?

ANIKST

With whom?

HORATIO

Prince Hamlet.

ANIKST

And who are you?

HORATIO

I am his friend Horatio.

ANIKST

Pleased to meet you.

HORATIO

Pleased to meet you.

ANIKST

Are you sure you're a friend?

Enter Hamlet in the costume of a jester. He is holding a rubber phallus.

HAMLET

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than
are dreamt of in our philosophy.

HORATIO

What philosophy, good lord?

HAMLET

Doctor, please explain to him what a Doctor of Philosophy
is.

HORATIO

This ghost is no ghost.

HAMLET

This ghost is a Doctor of Philosophy.

HORATIO

I'm not talking about that ghost.

HAMLET

This ghost is not my father.

HORATIO

Are you the son of a ghost, good lord?

HAMLET

That I am, my friend.

HORATIO

If your mother slept with a ghost, then she is a witch.
HAMLET. I am the son of a witch and a ghost. (*Leaves.*)
HORATIO. Doctor! Look at what a state you have reduced him
to.

ANIKST

Who?

HORATIO

Hamlet. Prince Hamlet.

ANIKST

Are you sure he is a prince?

HORATIO

If not, then who is?

ANIKST
Who are you?

HORATIO
I am his friend Horatio.

ANIKST
Pleased to meet you.

HORATIO
Pleased to meet you.

ANIKST
Pardon me, but who's friend are you?

HORATIO
What is the matter with you?

ANIKST
You're interrupting my music. (*Plays.*) He has gone out of his mind. (*Plays.*)

Enter Hamlet in a ballet tutu.

HAMLET
My friend. I have gone mad.

HORATIO
Why, good lord?

HAMLET
Why does anyone?

HORATIO
No one does, good lord.

HAMLET
Am I really so alone in the universe? My friend, we have been friends for four hundred years. Let's go mad together!

HORATIO
Prince! It is my duty to explain to you your tragedy.

HAMLET
And who might you be?

HORATIO
I am your friend Horatio.

HAMLET

Pleased to meet you.

HORATIO

What is the matter with you, good lord?

HAMLET

Didn't I tell you?

HORATIO

What?

HAMLET

I've lost my mind. (*Pulls out a rat.*) Buy my fish!

HORATIO

That is a rat, good lord.

HAMLET

Tell your philosophers that if a rat is called a fish then that is what it is. (*Leaves.*)

HORATIO

Doctor! Do you understand any of this?

ANIKST

And who might you be?

HORATIO

I'm his friend Horatio.

ANIKST

Pleased to meet you. Shhh! A secret — To be, or not to be: that is the question.

HORATIO

You've all gone mad!

ANIKST

Shhh! Not everyone. Dead Shakespeare scholars don't go mad.

HORATIO

Who told you that?

Enter the Ghost.

GHOST

I did.

HORATIO

And who are you?

GHOST

This is a secret, but I am Shakespeare.

HORATIO

Pleased to meet you.

GHOST

And who are you?

HORATIO

I am friend Horatio.

GHOST

Pleased to meet you. We ghosts are terribly happy to see you. Tell your philosophers that I am the gravedigger of the human race! (*Leaves.*)

HORATIO

Doctor! What is going on here?

Enter Hamlet in a jester's costume, weeping streams of tears.

HAMLET

What a tragedy, my friend! What a tragedy! Nobody will buy my fish. But since I don't lose hope that I may still sell some, everybody thinks I am crazy. Friend mine! No one thinks that about themselves. I exist where you are not. (*Leaves.*)

HORATIO

Doctor! I think I'm losing my mind.

ANIKST

Shhh! (*Glances around.*) Buy some of his fish.

Enter the Gravediggers.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Hey-ho, fish!

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Fish, hey-ho!

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

We are gravediggers.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

We bury fish.

HORATIO

I'm not a fish!

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Then who are you?

HORATIO

I am friend Horatio!

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Who?!

HORATIO

A humanitarian!

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Shall we dismember him?

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

There's an idea! (*Pulls out a net and throws it over Horatio.*)

HORATIO

(*Shouts.*) Good lord!

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Don't shout, fish. I can't work when it's noisy.

HORATIO

(*Shouts.*) Good lord!

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

For a fish, he squeals like a humanitarian!

HORATIO

(*Shouts.*) Good lord!

Enter Hamlet in a white shroud.

HAMLET

What have you forgotten here in this grave, my friend? (*To the Gravediggers.*) Are you burying my friends?

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

A fish, good lord.

HAMLET

(Throws a coin to them.) I bury my own fish.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

May you bury the humanitarian who lives within you!

The Gravediggers leave.

HAMLET

What a terrible age we live in! *(Removes the net from Horatio.)*

HORATIO

What age is that, good lord?

HAMLET

Ours, my friend, ours. *(Embraces Horatio and both leave.)*

Anikst begins to play the flute then leaves. Enter the Ghost with a telephone receiver in his hand.

GHOST

Hello! Shakespeare speaking. Tell your philosophers that my theater is an explosive device of untold power.

The stage goes dark. Enter Ophelia.

OPHELIA

(Sings.) In the north, in his own lands
There lived a prince, said local
lore.

HAMLET.

He let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.

Shall I let you in, most dear lady? It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge.

OPHELIA

You are keen, my lord.

HAMLET

Only thanks to you. For here is my stinger. (*Pulls out a hairpin.*) I return it before dying.

OPHELIA

I never gave you aught.

HAMLET

My honor'd lord, you know right well you did;
And with them words of so sweet breath
composed
As made the things more rich - their
perfume's lost.

OPHELIA

Decent girls don't do things like that.

HAMLET

Then I am not a girl. Call me my soul's idol.

OPHELIA

I don't wish to call you an idol.

HAMLET

But I do, my soul's idol.

OPHELIA

You are tempting the Moon, my lord. Are you honest?

HAMLET

Between us girls, I am honesty incarnate.

OPHELIA

Are you so innocent?

HAMLET

I am honesty incarnate and innocence in the flesh.

OPHELIA

I hear you see ghosts.

HAMLET

Would you have it that Hamlet become a ghost? So be it! I am Hamlet, a ghost of himself. I am a ghost and I scorn nothing ghostly.

OPHELIA

Do you wish to frighten me?

HAMLET

I wish to bite you.

OPHELIA

And I – you.

HAMLET

Please do. And make it deadly. Is anyone watching? (*Looks around.*) I have had insomnia ever since my father was poisoned in his sleep. Waking, I sleep and every dream I have is a premonition. (*Takes Ophelia's hand.*) Do you like my death mask?

OPHELIA

I don't understand you, my lord.

HAMLET

Most people's life masks are much more terrible than their death masks. (*Brings her hand up to his face.*) Do you love me?

OPHELIA

Yes, my lord.

HAMLET

There are innumerable ways to commit suicide. The most trusty of them is love. If you wish to bite me, now is the time to do it.

OPHELIA

My father forbade me to see you.

HAMLET

But did he forbid you to bite me? Doesn't he seem rather ghostly to you?

OPHELIA

Lord?

HAMLET

(*Intimately.*) My lord.

OPHELIA

(*Intimately.*) My lord.

HAMLET

(*More intimately.*) Yours.

OPHELIA

(More intimately.) Lord.

HAMLET

My.

OPHELIA

My... My Lord! I'm going mad.

HAMLET

Dally with it, I beg of you. Are you crying?

OPHELIA

A girl's tears are but raindrops, my lord.

HAMLET

O nymph, gore my inner voice. *(Extends the hairpin to her as if it were a knife.)* Is anyone spying on us?

OPHELIA

I don't know, my lord.

HAMLET

You do. But you know I do not care. *(Kisses her.)*

Enter Polonius.

POLONIUS

Ophelia! You gave me your word.

Ophelia leaves.

HAMLET

Your son wants to bite me!

POLONIUS

Your mousetrap is dated, lord. It was four hundred years ago. *(Pulls a mousetrap out of his pocket and hands it to Hamlet.)*

HAMLET

Mors occasionalis. Incidental death.

POLONIUS

There is nothing incidental in death on the stage.

HAMLET

Did Shakespeare tell you that?

POLONIUS

I once played in a university theater and was accounted a good actor. I did enact Julius Caesar.

HAMLET

Beware the ides of March, divine Julius. (*He takes the mousetrap and leaves.*)

Enter Claudius and Gertrude from behind the curtain.

CLAUDIUS

He is fostering murderous intentions. Shut up, Gertrude. (*To Polonius.*) Do you think he wants to...

Enter Hamlet suddenly from behind the curtain. He is dressed in a jester's costume.

HAMLET

I do not. However, black becomes more white the more it blackens from within. And worms, mother, are those who crawl within from without. They crawl in through the openings of ears; when it is all black before your eyes. I'll bet you like Shakespeare.

CLAUDIUS

I adore him. He's a great tragedian! A true poet! I always see Hamlet in the light of the sixty-sixth sonnet: "Tired with all these, for restful death I cry."

HAMLET

Give me back my skull.

CLAUDIUS

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Gertrude: a fellow of infinite jest. a' poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once.

HAMLET

I want the Moon.

CLAUDIUS

And he died.

GERTRUDE

Who?

CLAUDIUS

Gertrude, do not drink.

HAMLET

Tell me Judas, which of Christ's ears did you kiss?

POLONIUS

His cheek, lord, not his ear.

HAMLET

Is that so? And he died?

POLONIUS

Who?

HAMLET

I knew your brother once. You don't believe in ghosts, do you?

CLAUDIUS

On the contrary, I believe in them well. In their ghostliness.

POLONIUS

Are you a ghost, lord?

HAMLET

I am obsessed with the Moon.

CLAUDIUS

Shut up, Gertrude.

HAMLET

If the prince is sick, he is only sick and knows not what he does.

CLAUDIUS

But what if he is not sick?

HAMLET

So if he is not sick, then he's okay,
But the good doctors hold him wholly in their
sway.

O moon, arise! Eclipse my feeble mind!
Or else I'll die from the dark thoughts that
blind me!

Don't let the theater become a haven and rest,
A couch for luxury and damned incest!

(He leaves.)

CLAUDIUS

He must be brought under control. Shut up, Gertrude.

GERTRUDE

Still, as his mother...

CLAUDIUS

Shut up, Gertrude.

Gertrude leaves.

And I don't care how it's done.

POLONIUS

But the queen...

CLAUDIUS

No buts! (*Leaves.*)

The stage goes dark.

Enter Hamlet. He parts the curtain. The heads of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stand on pedestals.

HAMLET

How are you, friends?

ROSENCRANTZ

Without us the earth acquired conscience, most dear lord.

GUILDENSTERN

The instant we departed, the earth was made honest, honored lord.

HAMLET

Then that means the world has ended. Strange I did not notice. (*Leaves.*)

Enter Anikst playing the flute.

ROSENCRANTZ

Doctor! Won't you hold my unfortunate head?!

GUILDENSTERN

Doctor! Won't you hold my severed head!?

ANIKST

(Screams.) A-a-a-a! (Drops his flute.)

Enter Polonius.

POLONIUS

What is the matter, doctor? *(Jerks back the curtain.)* Don't you recognize me?

ANIKST

You are the father of eternal matter.

POLONIUS

I am a father, doctor. But not of eternal matter. My daughter's name is Ophelia. *(Picks up the flute.)*

ANIKST

I know.

POLONIUS

Do you know what awaits her?

Anikst is silent.

You do! And yet you play along with that madman! Aren't these heads enough for you?

ANIKST

Stop tormenting me!

POLONIUS

You're tormenting yourself. And I want to help you. I want to give you a gift.

ANIKST

Poison?

POLONIUS

Why poison? Not poison at all. I want to give you a magic flute. *(Pulls out a dueling pistol.)*

ANIKST

That's a flute?

POLONIUS

A magic flute. It makes inhuman music.

ANIKST

Inhuman?

POLONIUS

Music! You raise this orifice to your lips – like this. Then your finger goes – not there, but here. And a distorted grimace appears on your face.

ANIKST

A distorted grimace?
POLONIUS

Your own mother wouldn't recognize you.

ANIKST

And no one will recognize me?

POLONIUS

No one. Ever.

ANIKST

And my torments will be at an end?

POLONIUS

Instantaneously! (*Puts the pistol in Anikst's pocket.*) It is up to you to decide who will be and who will not be. (*Leaves.*)

Anikst watches him go, and then approaches the curtain and looks into the backstage area. Enter Hamlet.

HAMLET

Are you looking for me?

ANIKST

I am looking for myself.

HAMLET

That's what you should have done in life. However, it's never too late. The world is small – no matter where you go you meet yourself. Everywhere where you are not. Especially when you don't exist at all! But, you know, you can find yourself only by coincidence. And even then only if you are seeking the truth.

ANIKST

I am seeking the truth.

HAMLET

Doctor, don't make me laugh before death. You're staring into emptiness again.

ANIKST

I am empty inside. And you are, too.

HAMLET

Not all emptiness is empty. (*Leaves.*)

ANIKST

(*To the audience.*) Are all of you ghosts? Is there even one living man among us?

Enter Polonius from behind the curtain.

POLONIUS

There is. I am, doctor.

ANIKST

What about the prince?

POLONIUS

Your dear lord is a figment of imagination! Doctor! Do you really not understand yet that Hamlet is the embodiment of the idea of Man? He is an idea realized in flesh. And, like any other idea, this idea is less than itself. And, like any embodiment, it is richer than all ideas taken together. That is the mystery of it. And that is the tragedy of it.

ANIKST. You mean, my tragedy?

POLONIUS

Our tragedy.

ANIKST

Your tragedy?

POLONIUS

The human tragedy! Omniscient blindness, deafness that hears all, the eternal motion of rest, the immortality of death and the lifelessness of life. When nothing means anything and all is meaningless!

The sounds of marching are heard. Special forces soldiers in black masks pour on stage from offstage, from behind the curtain and

through all the entrances to the auditorium. One soldier has a dog on a leash.

CAPTAIN

Clear the stage!

The soldiers pull everyone out from behind the curtain and shove them off stage.

(To the audience.) This show has been canceled! We have information that a bomb has been planted in the theater. Don't panic now! We are certain it is a false alarm, but we must take precautions. Selivanov!

SELIVANOV

(To his dog.) Hamlet! Search!

The dog begins sniffing the stage.

CAPTAIN

Clear the hall!

SELIVANOV

(To his dog.) Hamlet! Search! *(He comes down off the stage into the auditorium with his dog.)*

ACT II

ANIKST

My dear ghosts! Your tragedy is that you do not perceive your tragedy as a tragedy. Have you understood that we exist beyond good and evil? Would someone like to hold my skull? Play the flute? Play the father of eternal matter? Play spin the bottle? Kick the bucket? He loses who does not play, my dear ghosts! Shhh! A secret! I am Hamlet! Shhh! Elsinore ought to be destroyed. Shhh. *(Leaves.)*

Fanfare. The curtain rises. Hamlet stands on his head. Enter Polonius; he looks at Hamlet.

HAMLET

Salve, Caesar! Have you already crossed the Rubicon?

POLONIUS

Forgive an old man, but your youth makes you too blunt.

HAMLET

You think so? And where do you think I'm headed?

POLONIUS

For the grave, lord.

HAMLET

Are we not traveling companions?

POLONIUS

In Shakespeare's tragedy, yes. But in this one... You must be killed, lord.

HAMLET

Thank you for being frank. By the way, am I obliged to you for nothing? I'm at your service. Make it this ear, if you wish. Or this one. I can lie down. (*Lies down.*) And pretend that I am sleeping. Ah! And here's the flute! O nymph of the night!

Enter Gertrude.

GERTRUDE

Hamlet! What is the matter?

HAMLET

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.
Are you a nymph of the night? May I offer my hand...

GERTRUDE

Son!

HAMLET

And heart?

GERTRUDE

Hamlet!

Enter Claudius followed by Anikst playing the flute. He steps over Hamlet and, continuing to play, disappears behind the

curtain.

CLAUDIUS

Gertrude! Go at once!

GERTRUDE

Your Majesty, I am his mother.

HAMLET

Don't argue, mother. Go. The rat will happily replace me in my grave.

CLAUDIUS

Polonius! Do something about him. The queen and I will await you in the throne room.

Claudius leaves with Gertrude.

POLONIUS

(Calls.) Laertes!

Enter Laertes.

LAERTES

Yes, father.

POLONIUS

Laertes! Hamlet loves your sister. She loves him. It is my belief that no one should obstruct their feelings, neither father nor brother. Do you remember my commandments?

LAERTES

I do.

POLONIUS

Then go.

Laertes leaves.

HAMLET

I get the feeling you want to marry me off.

POLONIUS

Why not? I thought... *(Glances around and falls silent.)*

HAMLET

...that King Hamlet and Queen Ophelia are more to your liking than King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. Isn't that

so? Alas, divine Julius! I cannot kill the king if first I don't kill you and Laertes.

POLONIUS

Why, lord?

HAMLET

It's the law of tragedy. The law of destiny. The law of eternity. I am a tragic hero, not a fishmonger. Polonius may not understand that, but Caesar is obliged to!

POLONIUS

Go ahead, finish what you have to say.

HAMLET

Every man will be dead, but not every dead man will become a ghost. *Caesarem licet stantem mori.* Caesar must die standing.

POLONIUS

That's a nice phrase. But I know one just as good. Fish rots from the head down. *(Leaves.)*

A fanfare. Enter Fortinbras and his soldiers.

FORTINBRAS

Are you alive, prince? I had heard that...

HAMLET

That what? Don't believe rumors just because you have conquered Poland. How were the Polish girls? They say every one is a beauty.

FORTINBRAS

Are you kidding? I lost the war. *(Steps on the mousetrap.)* God damn it! *(Tosses the mousetrap aside.)* Too bad they didn't kill you.

HAMLET

Don't worry, they've got a shotgun wedding planned for me.

FORTINBRAS

That's worse yet! Congratulations! Farewell, prince.

HAMLET

Farewell, Fortinbras.

Fanfare. Fortinbras leaves

*with his soldiers. Enter
Anikst playing the flute.*

HAMLET

Ah, a flute!

ANIKST

Don't come near me!

HAMLET

Why not, doctor?

ANIKST

I'm no doctor, I'm a patient! My illness is called mors occasionalis. I must kill you. (*Pulls out a dueling pistol.*)

HAMLET

At your service.

Anikst is motionless.

(Hamlet takes the pistol and raises it to his mouth. His face is contorted in a grimace. The pistol clicks – it misfired.) I'll let you in on a secret: You have killed me. *(He hands back the pistol and leaves.)*

Anikst pulls out a small mirror and puts the gun to his mouth. He tries to imitate a grimace on his face. Enter Polonius.

POLONIUS

Having fun, doctor?

Anikst aims the pistol at Polonius.

Aren't you afraid you might kill me?

Anikst's face is distorted in a grimace.

Or yourself?

Anikst raises the pistol to his mouth.

Frightful, isn't it?

Anikst winces with eyes closed and fires.

A fine shot, doctor. Only too bad you missed. (*Leaves.*)

Enter Ophelia at a run.

OPHELIA

Father? Is that you?

Anikst is silent.

Where did you get that pistol?

Anikst is silent.

Did you fire... at yourself?

Anikst is silent. He throws down the pistol and leaves. Enter Laertes.

LAERTES

Ophelia?! Who was that shooting?

OPHELIA

Not I.

LAERTES

Then who?

OPHELIA

I don't know. (*Leaves.*)

LAERTES

(*To the audience.*) What idiot was shooting in here?

Enter Polonius.

POLONIUS

I was. (*Picks up the pistol.*) Go, Laertes. Don't take words lightly. Remember my commandments.

Laertes leaves. Enter Hamlet.

HAMLET

Fish rots from the head down. O divine Julius, do you know how to say that in Latin?

POLONIUS

Ask them. (*He parts the curtain and leaves.*)

*The heads of Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern stand on
pedestals.*

HAMLET

Wipe away your invisible tears, friends. I am with you!

*The stage goes dark.
Enter Ophelia as the Moon.*

OPHELIA

Signori, I'm the Moon, the satellite of Dreams!
With my reflected light, I illumine
The ferment of ideas, reason's dream,
That holy terror, to which poets are prone,

—
Chaste virgins' crazy quivering
And the chaste quivering of crazy virgins,
The incest of our Danish queens,
The timid footfall of young villains.

My rays are filling nature's waste-
Land, and they blind the blind man's eyes,
Our forefathers upon their fathers gaze
And on extinguished cities and dead tribes,
As the living God on gods extinguished,
As children on their fathers, departed and
sad,
But in reflected light that distinguishes
Each age, I only wash the mad!

The mind of the enlightened I corrupt
And turn away from daylight.
The fruitless fruits of weighty thoughts
I fill up with the Poet's wasteland.

And in my wasteland, I erect my own
Palace of gold! And everything is in my
palace:
Squirming vermin, man, and the divine —
Whatever you could want — the golden palace
itself!

My light, Signori, is the highest light,
 And, Signori, the highest light is termless
 light,
 The light of veritas, nonexistent in our
 world,
 The tears of a — perhaps — corrupted
 virgin!

*Hamlet appears from behind
 the curtain.*

HAMLET

Does your father consider you a capable actress?

OPHELIA

What about you, lord?

HAMLET

I certainly do.

OPHELIA

Do you not fear I will drown myself?

HAMLET

What from, most dear lady?

OPHELIA

From love, my lord.

HAMLET

Not after the way the Moon played its part.

Enter Polonius.

POLONIUS

Ophelia!

OPHELIA

Farewell, my lord. *(Leaves.)*

HAMLET

Let's keep this secret, but keep an eye on her. God forbid
 she really should go and drown herself. Shakespeare saw the
 future as clearly as his reflection in a pond.

POLONIUS

Ophelia! *(Goes out after her.)*

Enter Anikst, playing the

flute.

HAMLET

I see you are quite at home here. Perhaps now you will explain my tragedy to me.

ANIKST

My pleasure. Your tragedy is called *Hamlet*. Everything in it is terribly tragic. Hamlet is a tragic hero who experiences a terrible tragedy. His own uncle killed his father. And his own father turned out to be a ghost. Then his own mother married his own uncle. But Hamlet didn't let that get him down. He loved life, the theater and Ophelia. His friend Horatio was a true humanist. He embodied the tragedy of humanism. Ophelia is the image of poetry itself and you cannot look upon her without tears. She goes out of her mind in a nightshirt. Throughout the whole tragedy Hamlet exposes evil. He pronounces the "to-be-or-not-to-be" monologue. This is a terribly tragic part. Everybody is totally ecstatic about it and then, in horror, they all kill each other.

HAMLET

But what's the point of the tragedy?

ANIKST

The point is this: It seems that to be, you must not be. That is what's so horrible and, in horror over that, everybody kills each other.

HAMLET

And that's it?

ANIKST

There are so many meanings in this tragedy, only a madman could count them all. But the basic ones are the quintessence of humanism. All the world's a prison. All people are rats. All brothers are fratricides. All women are perfidious. All fathers are ghosts. All friends are traitors. All kings are villains. All art is reduced to the art of lying. All wine is poison. All words are poisonous. Man is the quintessence of dust. Love is death. Freedom is madness.

HAMLET

Are you not mad?

ANIKST

That is immaterial. (*He approaches the curtain.*)

HAMLET

Wait. Explain your tragedy to me.

ANIKST

Let him explain it. (*He jerks back the curtain, revealing Polonius holding a skull. Anikst leaves.*)

POLONIUS

I determined the square root of your skull, lord. And now I return it to you safe and sound.

HAMLET

Don't you believe I love your daughter?

POLONIUS

Kill me, if you will, but I do not.

HAMLET

Why is that, if it's no secret?

POLONIUS

Because you don't believe it yourself. Ask yourself – of what consists your love?

HAMLET

Myself? (*Addresses himself aloud.*) Of what should love consist, my good lord?

POLONIUS

Now answer.

HAMLET

Myself?

POLONIUS

I don't care about your answer.

HAMLET

Nor I your skull.

POLONIUS

See how easy it is?

HAMLET

And of what consists your love of your daughter?

POLONIUS

Ask my daughter.

Enter Ophelia.

OPHELIA

Lord, what do you wish to ask of the Moon?

HAMLET

Of love.

OPHELIA

Love, my lord?

HAMLET

I would ask you this: Do you love the theater?

OPHELIA

I do, my lord.

HAMLET

And of what consists your love of the theater?

OPHELIA

Of the fact that you are my soul's idol.

HAMLET

Aren't you tired of loving an idol? Do you remember that all those playing your part go out of their minds?

OPHELIA

I do, my lord.

HAMLET

Tell your father that he may play the fool no where but in 's own house.

OPHELIA

I will, my lord. But he cannot do otherwise.

HAMLET

Why is that, most dear lady?

OPHELIA

Because he is an actor and he will die on the stage.

HAMLET

What about you, my soul's idol?

OPHELIA

If I did not love him, I could not love you.

HAMLET

But are you prepared to die on stage?

OPHELIA

Of love, yes.

HAMLET

I will weave you a garland. Rosemary is for remembrance; thoughts are brought by pansies. And rue we call the herb of grace o' Sundays.

OPHELIA

The Moon is a heavenly body, my lord. (*Leaves.*)

Hamlet approaches the curtain. Enter Claudius and Gertrude.

CLAUDIUS

Gertrude, do not drink. (*Jerks back the curtain.*) Polonius, what are you hiding here for?

HAMLET

He is dead.

CLAUDIUS

Dead? Polonius?!

HAMLET

Julius Caesar. At the hands of Brutus. It's a tragedy by Shakespeare, your Majesty.

CLAUDIUS

I love Shakespeare.

HAMLET

However, we are not staging a tragedy here.

GERTRUDE

What is it, then?

HAMLET

A mousetrap, mother. And here are our spectators. (*He points to the heads of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.*)

GERTRUDE

Oh my God!

CLAUDIUS

Shut up, Gertrude.

GERTRUDE

That's not Shakespeare! And the dead aren't spectators.

HAMLET

The dead, indeed, are not spectators. And the mousetrap is a metaphor. However, your Majesty, please note that if the mousetrap is imagined, the rat it catches is quite real.

GERTRUDE

They must be buried.

HAMLET

My friends, we do not want our spectators to see in you only the quintessence of dust. Therefore, come give us a taste of your quality! "But who had seen the mobled queen?"

GUILDENSTERN

But who, O who had seen the mobled queen!

Inexorable Fate has bent

Her bowed diadem-crowned brow.

Blind tears well up in eyes.

Like a snake her torn robe winds around

About her lank and all o'er-teemed loins.

The winds lose voice. The earth below
Is hush as death.

ROSENCRANTZ.

"Hecuba, whom do you seek?"

POLONIUS.

"Cassandra, my daughter. An evil dream have I seen. Perhaps she can tell me what it means."

HAMLET

Mother, look whether he has not turned his color and has tears in 's eyes. (*To Polonius.*) Where is your daughter? Have her play Cassandra.

POLONIUS

The Moon is in eclipse, lord.

HAMLET

Already? Somehow I had not noticed. However, as her father,

you know best. But they say Cassandra, too, suffered eclipses, so that should not harm our tragedy.

POLONIUS

She shall not play Cassandra.

HAMLET

Do you wish to ruin my show?

POLONIUS

This is not a play but a trap for a mouse!

GERTRUDE

What mousetrap is that, Hamlet?

HAMLET

He means the theater. Spectators come to the theater for spiritual sustenance. But they are caught as in a trap for in the theater they are the bait. However, since we are all actors, we are in no danger.

CLAUDIUS

Is there no offense in this play?

HAMLET

Absolutely none, for there is no play at all.

CLAUDIUS

How's that?

HAMLET

Just so. Why make a spectacle of some play when life itself is an incomparable spectacle?

GERTRUDE

But there must be a story. Something must happen on stage.

HAMLET

Oh, it will! And what a story it will be! It is called "The Rehearsal of the Murder of Julius Caesar." Julius Caesar prepares to go to the senate, but suddenly there is an eclipse and... Friend Horatio, where are you?

*Enter Horatio and the
Gravediggers.*

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
A little ere the mightiest Julius

fell...

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

The graves stood tenantless, and the
sheeted dead
Did squeak and jibber in the Roman
streets.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood...

HORATIO

"Stars with trains of fire" are comets.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood...
HAMLET. Please don't shout. Poetry is a cry, not a shriek,
of the soul. (*Shows him how to recite.*) As stars with
trains of fire and dews of blood...

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Disasters in the sun; and the moist star...

HORATIO

"The moist star" is the Moon. Where is the Moon, my lord?

HAMLET

There is no Moon. The Moon is in eclipse. Continue.

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

And the moist star...

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands...

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse...

HAMLET

"Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse," what poetry!

HORATIO

And even the like precurse of fierce
events,
Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
Unto our climatures and countrymen!

*Anikst appears holding his
flute.*

HAMLET

And here is the demonstration! (*To Claudius.*) He is rehearsing the part of Hamlet and is pretending he is not in his right mind.

ANIKST

I am not rehearsing anything!

HAMLET

Thatta boy! Why rehearse? You can play Cassandra cold.

ANIKST

What Cassandra?

HAMLET

Has the doctor forgotten Cassandra? She is the ancient seer who predicted the fall of Troy. Her tragedy was that no one ever believed her although all her predictions came true. Same as with me.

ANIKST

Then you go play your Cassandra!

HAMLET

That's right! Why should you play Cassandra if all you have on your mind is Alexander the Great?

ANIKST

I don't have any Alexander on my mind!

HAMLET

Thatta boy! Nor do you have a mind – and who needs one? A mind only disturbs the sleep of the dead. Or thus spake Aristotle. And, though he was wrong, as always, that is the absolute truth! Stand behind that rug, please – you will soon be counting corpses.

ANIKST

I will not be counting corpses!

HAMLET

That's right! Why should you? But counting corpses is as easy as pie. Alexander the Great taught me how to do it and I'll teach you. You count the bodies on fingers you imagine in your head. Three fingers for five bodies. Five fingers for seven bodies. It's very simple, your Majesty, there are always two more bodies than fingers.

CLAUDIUS

Why two?

HAMLET

That's a question better addressed to God. Lord! Why are there always two more bodies than fingers! (*Listens for an answer.*) Hear that? (*To the audience.*) Did you all hear that? God clearly said, "Because!" There's no way around it, doctor – five fingers: seven bodies. But Alexander the Great taught me to count only live corpses.

ANIKST

What live corpses?

HAMLET

In tragedies, all corpses are live. That intensifies the tragedy. Each spectator, hiding it from all the other spectators, starts to sense his or her own future corpse and mentally prepares to part with life. That's when you can get 'em warm and ready! You'll confirm that, won't you, doctor?

ANIKST

I'm not saying anything more!

HAMLET

The rest is silence. That's what Hamlet says just before dying. Are those your last words, doctor?

Anikst is silent.

The Danish prince inside the doctor has died.

Anikst falls.

And it seems 'a made a good end. Friend Horatio! Put the newborn babe in a carriage.

Horatio rolls out a wheelchair, seats Anikst in it and moves off towards the curtain. Anikst is silent.

There is no actor who can hold a pause better than his own mummy. Maybe that's why contemporary theater is degrading into well-dressed mummification. Which is just what Cassandra predicted.

GERTRUDE

That Cassandra of yours is a she-wolf!

HAMLET

And what a she-wolf, mother! Nothing like you! She comes to Caesar in the morning and screams bloody murder at him: "Don't go to the senate! They'll kill you!" Meanwhile, divine Julius lies in the arms of an Egyptian she-wol..., I mean, prosti..., I mean empress! That would be Cleopatra. And he is so exhausted by her caresses that in his mind he is already in the senate. He thinks, "Well, Plato's my friend..."

CLAUDIUS

You mean, Brutus.

HAMLET

Plato, Brutus, Shakespeare, what's the difference? In our tragedy it's all one and the same.

CLAUDIUS

Three in one?

HAMLET

Why three? Make it as many as you want. Horatio might be a friend, but so might that she-wolf Cassandra or that rat over there. (*Pulls a rat out of his pocket.*)

CLAUDIUS

A friend to Caesar?!

HAMLET

Why Caesar's? I mean mine. As it is, Caesar lost count of all his friends which, basically, is what brought him down. Think about it, your Majesty, if he had been a friend of mine maybe he would have suggested running you through instead of this rat over here. (*He prods the rat with his sword.*)

Polonius falls.

GERTRUDE

Oh my God! What's the matter?

HAMLET

Nothing fatal, mother. He just got a bit wet crossing the Rubicon. Divine Julius! Doctor, help this dead man. Take him to the operation room and attend to his birth.

GERTRUDE

What birth?!

HAMLET

His birth into another world. Shh! That is a state secret.

CLAUDIUS

From me?

HAMLET

From you and no one else. A state secret, indeed, is something everybody knows except the king. (*Takes Claudius aside.*) Shh! A conspiracy is growing. And I am leading it!

CLAUDIUS

A conspiracy in the form of theater! What a plot twist! What a play within a play! Simple and brilliant. I'm jealous.

HAMLET

I'm jealous of myself. And I swear by his daughter that I have every right to be. The leader of the conspiracy – that is, I – must kill you, your Majesty!

CLAUDIUS

What?! And that is no secret?!

HAMLET

No secrets here! I will kill you during the rehearsal.

CLAUDIUS

Very impressive! But it would be better to do it during the performance itself! Imagine that. (*Strikes the pose of Claudius.*) Let the cannons roar and trumpets speak after each of Hamlet's hits! And the king shall drink to Hamlet's health as thunder roars up in the heavens! (*He raises his goblet to his lips. A cannon fires. He puts the goblet back down.*)

HAMLET

Very impressive. But when do I kill you?

CLAUDIUS

At the end of the show. So when does rehearsal begin? Or has it already begun?

HAMLET

Nothing can begin without your permission, Majesty. Caesar cannot be murdered without Caesar's permission.

CLAUDIUS

Is that so? I believe history testifies to the contrary.

HAMLET

History bears false witness. There is no king who does not know he will be killed. Caesar transforms his assassination into a spectacle. He arrives in a festive toga; his death mask is the mask of Eternity. He is a tragic character who does not leave the stage. Any lowly scoundrel who scratches his way to power will go out of his mind from terror. He will see ghosts everywhere. He will pee in his pants and end his days in a prison he built himself. Even his name will not survive. He will disappear into the void behind the mask of Oblivion. Shall I show you these masks, your Majesty? It makes an engaging spectacle. Here is the mask of Power. Here is the mask of Faith. Here is the mask of Love. Here is the mask of Death. Here is the mask of Friendship. Here is the mask of Glory. Here is the mask of the Homeland. This one is of State Terror. Here is the mask of Mystery. Here is the mask of God. And here is my favorite – the mask of Madness.

CLAUDIUS

What mask is this?

HAMLET

The mask of Emptiness, your Majesty. He wears it who can wear no other mask.

CLAUDIUS

And I must choose one of them?

HAMLET

You are not obliged – it is your right. Or you may play without a mask if your own face is so secure as to be a mask.

CLAUDIUS

I have no reason to hide my face.

HAMLET

That does you honor. Here is the mask of Honor.

CLAUDIUS

(*To Gertrude.*) I did not know your son was such an enthusiast of the theater, dear. How do you like these masks?

GERTRUDE

I don't like that I have no idea what is going to happen. And nobody pays me any mind. There must be love in the theater. Where is it, then?

HAMLET

Right here, mother. (*Hands her the mask of Love.*)

GERTRUDE

This is love? My boy is sick! Love does not hide behind masks. When a woman loves, she dies of love!

CLAUDIUS

What is the matter, dear?

GERTRUDE

I think no one loves me. No one!

CLAUDIUS

Please, dear, don't get so carried away by the wine. Alcohol is poison!

HAMLET

The king is right, mother. By the way, see if there isn't real poison in this pearl. (*Bows deeply.*) I await your permission, Majesty.

CLAUDIUS

To begin the rehearsal?

HAMLET

After the actors are cast in their roles, which is what I suggest doing now.

CLAUDIUS

Very impressive. I must admit, I had underestimated our kinship. As well as the kinship of our souls.

HAMLET

Majesty! I want to offer you the part of Caesar.

CLAUDIUS

It will cost me my life.

HAMLET

Yes, but it will be worth it. Brutus doesn't suit you at all. The other conspirators are all just gray mice. They all cut each other up in the end and die.

CLAUDIUS

What about Marcus Antonius?

HAMLET

Mother, your new husband is dreaming of Cleopatra's sweet embrace!

GERTRUDE

What?! *(She gives Claudius such a whack that his crown flies off.)*

HAMLET

See how easy it is to lose the crown? That's all she wrote!

GERTRUDE

(To Hamlet.) Listen, you moron! Quit playing the fool! Who is this idiot protégé of yours with the flute? "To be or not to be! To be or not to be! To be or not to be!" You could go nuts like that! *(To Anikst.)* Give me that whistle! *(Grabs the flute and knocks Hamlet over the head with it.)* Your father is dead! *(Hits Claudius with the flute.)* And he was your brother! Two total imbeciles! Where is that she-wol..., I mean, that prosti.... Where is she, I ask you?!

HAMLET

I thought of offering you the role of Cleopatra, mother.

GERTRUDE

Me?! *(She drops the flute.)*

CLAUDIUS

Gertrude, do not drink. *(Picks up his crown.)*

GERTRUDE

I will drink! And I will play Cleopatra! *(Knocks the crown from Claudius's head again and leaves.)*

CLAUDIUS

(Picks up his crown.) Did Caesar have a wife?

HAMLET

He did, your Majesty. But she was above suspicion, which played into the hands of the conspirators! *(To the Gravediggers and Anikst.)* You stand there and you stand over there. And you, doctor... No, better you there, you there and you come in from behind.

CLAUDIUS

As far as I can tell, the rehearsal has begun.

HAMLET

Don't rush things, Majesty. We haven't cast all the actors. Would you like to play a slave?

CLAUDIUS

A slave?

HAMLET

In order to make certain that I kill you... When I say "you," I mean Caesar... In order to make certain that I kill you, I must work out my plan of action. Not in theory, but in a practical sense. Best to do it on a dummy – or, better yet, a warm body. I need a warm body, say, a slave.

CLAUDIUS

Don't you have any other parts?

HAMLET

I have a beggar. But he isn't attached to the plot. It's just that while everybody else is cutting each other up, this Roman Diogenes comes out on stage. He's a blind old man with a lantern and he says: "I'm looking for a human!" Every once in awhile he bumps into someone and asks, "Are you a human?" He gets killed last.

CLAUDIUS

What's he get killed for?!

HAMLET

To make him quit bugging people. It's a tragedy, Majesty. The stage must be littered with bodies. Otherwise it's not funny.

CLAUDIUS

So who kills the beggar?

HAMLET

Well, if you play the beggar, I'll kill you happily.

CLAUDIUS

What if I refuse?

HAMLET

That's what I'm counting on!

CLAUDIUS

I don't understand.

HAMLET

That's also part of my plan.

CLAUDIUS

Amazing! Everything is thought out down to the last little detail! Where does it all begin?

HAMLET

That's a surprise!

CLAUDIUS

Hamlet! I am the stand-in for your father, you know.

HAMLET

Good point. All right! *(In a conspiratorial whisper.)*
Here's a secret: with the dummy.

CLAUDIUS

With what dummy?!

HAMLET

Enter a dummy of Cassandra... I mean: Enter Cassandra with a dummy.

Enter Gertrude in the sheer dress of Cleopatra.

CLAUDIUS

Gertrude!

HAMLET

Bravo, mother!

GERTRUDE

What mother? I am Cleopatra! Salve, Caesar!

CLAUDIUS

Salve, sweetheart. But I'm not playing anything yet.

HAMLET

That is a commonly held misconception, your Majesty. Everyone is always playing somebody. You want to play a spectator?

CLAUDIUS

What kind of a show is it where they kill spectators?

HAMLET

Modern theater isn't queasy about that kind of thing. Most

shows are deadly for spectators. Whole theaters-full of them. I just thought I'd symbolically limit myself to one.

CLAUDIUS

Meaning me?

HAMLET

What do you have to lose? Anyway, you're playing yourself, that is, one doomed to die soon. As I am, too, for that matter. And as are all mortals. Life, your Majesty, is a tragedy.

CLAUDIUS

True tragedy is not shouting all the time at everybody from a stage: "You'll die! You'll die! You'll die!" That's not interesting. That's banal. Pardon me, but that's vulgar! True tragedy is a voice whispering in your ear: "Live! Live! Live! Because you, too, soon will die."

HAMLET

In the ear, your Majesty? Do I detect poison in those words?

CLAUDIUS

You do. But that is why we have great tragic poets to measure out the poison in medicinal doses. So that the poison becomes a healing potion.

HAMLET

What does it heal us of? Death or life?

CLAUDIUS

It no longer matters once poison becomes a healing potion. What was that?

*Enter Ophelia dressed as
Cassandra. She holds a
stuffed seagull.*

GERTRUDE

What is that dummy?

HAMLET

That is not a dummy. It is a symbol.

GERTRUDE

What does this mean, my child?

OPHELIA

I am told the seagull is a most regal bird. (*To Hamlet.*) I beg of you, do not tell the king for he may think the bird is I and that my species is the loony. I will weave you a garland. Rosemary is for remembrance; thoughts are brought by pansies. And rue we call the herb of grace o' Sundays. (*Places a garland on Hamlet's head.*)

GERTRUDE

What is wrong with her?

HAMLET

An eclipse, mother. (*To Ophelia.*) You are ruining my reputation. (*Takes the stuffed seagull away from her.*)

Ophelia leaves.

CLAUDIUS

What part does this dummy play in the show?

HAMLET

Doctor, what role does the seagull play in Chekhov's *The Seagull*?

ANIKST

The title role.

CLAUDIUS

What?!

HAMLET

Pay him no mind, your Majesty. He's in character as Hamlet right now.

ANIKST

(*Shouts.*) I am not in character! I am not in character! I am a character myself! I am a bright, shining image!... that never!... never!... can be erased!... from our tragedy! (*Leaves.*)

GERTRUDE

To get so worked up over a dummy...

HAMLET. Bravo, Cleopatra! (*To Claudius.*) Hold this, please.

Claudius takes the stuffed seagull. He looks it over.

The dummy's chief purpose is to distract, your Majesty.

*Claudius drops the seagull.
Hamlet picks it up.*

It will come in handy, believe me. Cleopatra, I would ask you please to symbolically hold this symbol. But here is Marcus Antonius!

Enter Polonius. He wears a Roman toga and dark glasses.

CLAUDIUS

Polonius?! What is the matter with you?

HAMLET

Pay him no mind, your Majesty. He is in character.

POLONIUS

(Shouts.) I am not in character! I am not in character! I am father and mother in one body!

HAMLET

My dear dead man, do not drive yourself to madness. You are in transition. Your birth into a new form is progressing wonderfully. As soon as your umbilical chord is cut you will immediately feel relief! Push!

POLONIUS

(Shouts.) A-a-a-h! You want to make me part with the figments of my imagination! You want me to be among those two fingers more! You want to turn me into a mummy!

HAMLET

Cleopatra! Marcus Antonius is confusing Ancient Rome with Ancient Egypt. Pacify him with some gentle caresses, but keep it clean.

GERTRUDE

Sleep! Sleep! Sleep!

POLONIUS

A-a-a-h! No, not all of me shall die! I sleep as if on nails. I sense in me the soul of a leach! I want to scream bloody murder! A-a-a-h!

GERTRUDE

Sleep, I said! *(She hits Polonius on the head with the stuffed seagull.)*

Polonius falls.

HAMLET

Now, cut his umbilical cord. (*Holds out a knife.*)

GERTRUDE

What?

HAMLET

Mother, are you afraid to kill a rat? I think you have a skewed idea of who Cleopatra is. (*To the audience.*) Tell your philosophers that gravediggers play kings better than anyone! Mother, give me this cape for a minute. (*To the Gravediggers.*) Friends! (*He tosses the cape over the shoulders of the First Gravedigger and puts Ophelia's garland on the head of the Second Gravedigger.*) Stand over there, behind the curtain. (*To Polonius.*) Divine Julius! At least before you die wouldn't you like to learn how to play Caesar? What have you there? (*Takes a dueling pistol from Polonius.*) There is nothing dangerous in what we now shall witness. (*Aims the pistol at Claudius.*) Nothing but love, mother. Nothing but power, king. Nothing but the power of love and the love of power. (*To the audience.*) "Caesar and Cleopatra"! The action takes place in ancient Egypt. The rehearsal has begun! (*Signals by firing the pistol.*)

The curtain opens. The Second Gravedigger (Caesar) stands in the pose of Rodin's "The Thinker." Enter the First Gravedigger (Cleopatra).

CLEOPATRA

What is Caesar up to?

CAESAR

Cleo! Come on in.

CLEOPATRA

Aren't you busy?

CAESAR

For you? Are you kidding? Come on over here.

CLEOPATRA

What's on your mind?

CAESAR

You know... someday somebody will kill me.

CLEOPATRA

Heck, I'll kill myself. (*Pulls out a small snake.*) This little snake will sink its fangs into me right here.

CAESAR

You carry your own death around with you?

CLEOPATRA

A queen should always have everything at her beck and call. And I give it all to you.

CAESAR

Cleopatra! (*Embraces her.*)

Cleopatra slips out of his grasp.

You little snake, you! I crave love!

CLEOPATRA

Now's not the time, Caesar.

CAESAR

Snake! I crave love! (*Pulls her to him again.*)

CLEOPATRA

Not now. (*Slips away again.*)

CAESAR

Why not? I suddenly saw myself... in a pool of blood... on a marble floor. And all my friends were standing above me. My friends were the assassins! Imagine that, Cleo – to become Caesar and then fall at the hands of your friends!

CLEOPATRA

I hate it when people shorten my name.

CAESAR

I see you are out of sorts. Too bad.

CLEOPATRA

What do they call you in Rome?

CAESAR

Me? I am Caesar everywhere. I am Caesar, remember?

CLEOPATRA

Does your wife call you Caesar in bed?

CAESAR

Cleo, come over here.

CLEOPATRA

Why? To call you Caesar in your bed?

CAESAR

Listen, what are you after?

CLEOPATRA

Power.

CAESAR

Over me?

CLEOPATRA

Yes, if you really are Caesar.

CAESAR

The truth is what is called the truth. Rome is constructed in such a way that the truth is Caesar and Caesar is the truth.

CLEOPATRA

This isn't Rome. Rome isn't here.

CAESAR

That's not true. Rome is where Caesar is. I'm busy, Cleopatra.

CLEOPATRA

Doing what?

CAESAR

Wielding that which you desire: Power.

CLEOPATRA

Caesar...

CAESAR

Power! Go, I'm busy.

CLEOPATRA

I crave love! *(Throws herself at Caesar, wraps herself around him like a snake and stings him with kisses.)*

HAMLET

Stop! Thank you, friends! (*Tosses a coin.*) Drink to my tragedy.

FIRST GRAVEDIGGER

God grant you play it to the end!

SECOND GRAVEDIGGER

To the bitter, tragic end!

The Gravediggers leave.

HAMLET

Mother, will you play Cleopatra?

Gertrude looks at Claudius.

CLAUDIUS

Play whomever you want, dear.

GERTRUDE

I will.

HAMLET

Then cut his umbilical cord. (*Holds out a knife.*)

GERTRUDE

Do you realize what you are saying, son?

HAMLET

I am not the son of Cleopatra. I am the son of a witch and a ghost. And this here is a rat.

Enter Laertes.

LAERTES

Did you call my father a rat? He thinks we are all rats! (*To the audience.*) And all of you, too. In his eyes, he alone exists. Everyone else is either a rat or a ghost.

HAMLET

Mark your own words, noble Laertes.

Enter Ophelia.

OPHELIA

(*Sings.*) White his shroud as the mountain snow,
A pit of clay for to be dug.
And you, good man, now will be

As quiet as a dove.

Give me my dove. (*Takes the stuffed seagull and approaches Polonius.*) Why is he sleeping?

HAMLET

Ask him yourself, my soul's idol.

Enter Anikst. He looks at Ophelia and wipes his eyes with a handkerchief.

OPHELIA

No, no, do not erect idols within yourself. If he awakens, he will take away my dove! My brother discovered the Sea of Rains on the Moon and I am soaked to the bone...

A willow o'er the water bends
Us to the only verb: to love, to love, to
love...

Friends, do not stare at me in the past tense!

LAERTES

Do you want her to lose her mind again?! To drown herself again?! Doctor, explain love to him.

ANIKST

You can't explain anything to him. He is not a person, he is a symbol! Worse, he is the dummy of a symbol.

HAMLET

Is that my tragedy, doctor?

ANIKST

You have no tragedy!

HAMLET

Then why did you study me your whole life?

ANIKST

That was my tragedy.

HAMLET

Oh, you dummy of my soul. So that was your tragedy?

ANIKST

I am not your dummy! (*Tragically.*) I am looking for a human!

HAMLET

It's a conspiracy! Against me, the tragic hero of all times and nations! Against our father Shakespeare! Against my great tragedy! Against our tragedy! (*To the audience.*) Against your tragedy!

Ophelia approaches Claudius.

OPHELIA

Emperor, the ides of March are come.

POLONIUS

Ophelia, go home!

OPHELIA

Let me play Cassandra.

POLONIUS

Fool! What did I tell you? Home!

OPHELIA

I'll drown myself!

POLONIUS

Laertes!

Enter Laertes.

LAERTES

Sister, let's go home.

HAMLET

Cassandra!

LAERTES

Don't move, my lord!

HAMLET

Pardon me, Majesty. I believe it's his rapier that is dipped in healing poison!

LAERTES

Halt, I said! (*Draws his sword.*)

OPHELIA

Brother, I'm coming.

HAMLET

Ophelia!

OPHELIA

Wait... the seagull! (*Pulls out the stuffed seagull.*) Who killed it? Why did they kill it? I have forgotten... Do you remember? Give me my hairpin, brother. Can't you bear to part with it? (*Tries to wrest the sword from Laertes's hands and wounds herself.*) Ah!

LAERTES

Sister!

HAMLET

Cassandra!

OPHELIA

It doesn't hurt a bit. What's this? Blood?

LAERTES

Sister!

HAMLET

Ophelia!

OPHELIA

Emperor, the ides of March are come.

CLAUDIUS

My child!

OPHELIA

(*Suddenly staggering.*) Oh, it hurts! But there is no pain!

LAERTES

Quick! A doctor!

OPHELIA

I will... weave you a garland.

LAERTES

A doctor! Quick!

OPHELIA

How pale is my poor brother! I do not need a doctor. The Moon shines, it seems, but it does not warm. And if that is so, then what is life to it? (*Holds the stuffed seagull out to Hamlet.*) My gift. Take it, lord. My lord. Or do you scorn my gift? Who killed it? I do not remember. But it was

a good man. He did not let it suffer long. I do not remember – perhaps I dreamed it or it was in a play – my part was given to another actress and she drowned herself from ecstasy as if she were the Moon. (*To Claudius.*) You will be assassinated in the senate. (*To Laertes.*) I remember you. (*To Polonius.*) And you I remember eternally. (*To Gertrude.*) You... (*To Anikst.*) And you... (*To Hamlet.*) And you I remember eternally... your roles. You always have a sorrowful gaze. Here is the dummy of my love, my lord. (*To Laertes.*) Brother! For love of me, do not kill him whom I have loved!

LAERTES

Sister!

OPHELIA

Here is the dummy of my soul! I remember you all, eternally, eternally, eternally... (*Falls.*)

LAERTES

No! I'll kill... I'll kill myself! (*Stabs himself.*)

POLONIUS

Oh, God! Ophelia! Laertes! Oh, my God! The devil in the flesh! Die! Die! Die! (*Throws himself upon Hamlet.*)

HAMLET

Now that, your Majesty, is what it means to be Caesar! Veni, vidi, vici! I came, I saw, I conquered! (*Holds Polonius off.*)

POLONIUS

Die! (*Suddenly freezes.*)

Hamlet lifts Polonius as if he were a baby.

HAMLET

What is the matter, Caesar?

POLONIUS

I... am... dying.

CLAUDIUS

Is he dead?

HAMLET

I am not a doctor. But it looks like it. What a tragedy, your Majesty! People are dying like flies! (*Sets Polonius*

down.)

GERTRUDE

Hamlet!

CLAUDIUS

Gertrude, do not drink!

GERTRUDE

I am Cleopatra!

CLAUDIUS

What is the matter, Gertrude?

GERTRUDE

Imbecile! As if you didn't know! The drink! The drink! I am poisoned. (*Falls.*)

HAMLET

Villainy?! Who is the assassin? Who is the victim? Who dared sabotage this show?! Was it you, your Majesty?!

CLAUDIUS

I love Shakespeare! "I summon death! I cannot wait to see it!" *Finita la commedia!* What are you waiting for? Now you are supposed to shout bloody murder: "Drink your potion: Is thy pearl here? Now follow my mother!" But, you're as quiet as a mouse. Not talking. I'll bet he's going over his monologue in his head. "To be or not to be!" But death in life is much more prosaic. Hamlet! Do it! You kill not your father, only him who takes his place!

HAMLET

In you — I kill myself! In myself — I kill you! (*Seizes Laertes's rapier and plunges it into Claudius.*)

Claudius falls.

(*To the audience.*) And you, mute audience to this act... How am I to limp the hell out of here? Into emptiness? A theater? Eternity? The Moon? The grave? Fortinbras!

FORTINBRAS

(*Offstage.*) Here I am. I'm offstage, waiting for you to die, my lord.

HAMLET

Then who will finish me off? Friend Horatio!

HORATIO

No, my lord. Please, no. I am a humanitarian.

HAMLET

Doctor, please!

ANIKST

I don't exist. I am dead, my lord.

HAMLET

What about me?

ANIKST

You are an immortal symbol. You are an idea. The Idea of mankind in the flesh.

HAMLET

I am not an idea!

ANIKST

Take him for all in all!

HAMLET

I am a man! A tragic hero! Are you weeping?

ANIKST

(To the audience.) You, trembling and pale, Silently witnessing the game...

HAMLET

No! No! No! I don't want to hear that. Can't you see I am dying?

Anikst dons dark glasses. He stretches his hands out before him and moves as if he were blind.

ANIKST

I am looking for a human!

Enter the Ghost in armor from behind the curtain. Anikst bumps into him.

Are you a human?

The Ghost is silent. He approaches the front of the

stage. Looks at the audience and then disappears behind the curtain. Anikst bumps into Hamlet.

Are you a human?

HAMLET

The rest is silence. (*Disappears behind the curtain.*)

ANIKST

I am looking for a human! (*Disappears behind the curtain.*)

From behind the curtain we hear the sounds of a flute. The curtain rises. The Ghost, in the mask of Death, holds a globe in one hand and a flute in the other.

GHOST

I am Shakespeare. And this is my theater, the Globe. (*He sets down the globe on the edge of the stage.*) My theater is an explosive device of untold power. But there will be no explosion. And there will be no flood. Other than what will be, nothing will be. And cannot be! Our tragedy has ended, ladies and gentlemen! Yours continues! There is nothing tragic in that, only you must be prepared for everything. By which I mean to say, everything that is inevitable. Four captains will now bear Hamlet to the stage and the soldiers will fire the salute. Fortinbras will take the reins of power and everything will reassume its natural course. A flute... A goblet with poison... A poisoned dagger... Poor Yorick's skull...

A dog appears from behind the curtain. He walks to the front of the stage and looks at the audience.

DOG

To be or not to be, you curs!

END OF PLAY