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THE 5th HUMOR

by

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B.A., Media Arts, University of New Mexico, 2015

M.F.A., Dramatic Writing, University of New Mexico, 2022

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

I will be using a self-interview as a method of investigating both the origins of myself, the artist, and the work produced I have produced in and out of the MFA Dramatic Writing program with a special focus on my dissertation play, *The Blood Vessel*.

The intention is to investigate how my plays have come into existence and how they inform each other. This is done through a series of questions I ask myself under the pseudonym Penelope Hawkins. Penelope guides me through the investigation as a character, thus becoming part of the work of the self-interview and still a part of me, the artist. This dissertation can then be viewed as art as an investigation of artist and the work that came before it.

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The 5th Humor

Part One: The Origin of the Theses

On February 19, Penelope Hawkins and I sat down together in the Cerulean Lounge of the Carte Blanc estate. Penelope was born quite recently, out of my desire for anonymity. She was the pseudonym I used for The Blood Vessel premiere at the annual Linnell Festival of New Plays in 2022. She had many questions about the nature of writing, role-playing, masks, and humor. I only had some of the answers.

Penelope: Where do your ideas come from?

Stella: Here we go.

Penelope: Oh come on. People always ask that question.

Stella: Fine. Let's see... well to start, writers don't write in a vacuum. All ideas come from somewhere. To track any one idea is difficult because there are so many ways to approach it. If I were to consider myself a fictional character – how would I approach myself? I could start from the beginning and follow a linear path. My parents meet, I am conceived, born, grow to adulthood, etc. Isn't it also interesting, the *how* of my parent's meeting? I mean my father was raised in a small town in Ohio, though born ...somewhere else, I can't remember (Norfolk, Virginia?). My mother grew up on a small farm near a very small village outside of a city near an Army Base in Bamberg, Germany.

(Stella gets up and puts on some music)

Penelope: LCD Soundsystem?

Stella: Ja.

Penelope: Don't you find that distracting?

Stella: Not at all. I like to have a playlist for all my creative work. Where were we?

Right! So...my father floundered after high school. He spent his time getting drunk and hitting baseballs. If the mythology serves, someone told him to get his shit together.

That's why he joined the Army.

Penelope: Huh.

Stella: It doesn't seem so random if you look at the people he grew up with. He had uncles he admired who returned from Vietnam (Green Berets, Navy, Air Force, etc.).

And, being a history nerd, I am sure the idea of touring Europe was a huge sell. I've seen his childhood drawings. Lots of tanks and soldiers. He became one of his own drawings.

He became a soldier and drove a tank. The Army stationed him in Germany and he always told us kids that he was a "speed bump for the Russians." This *really* bothered him. It became a rant.

Penelope: Why do you think it bothered him so much?

Stella: I suppose he wanted his involvement in the military to mean something. His history was a military history on the male side. The women he knew were either homemakers or teachers. The men fought and the women taught. He wanted to get me some kind of "Daughters of the Revolution" college funding. The Perrys fought in the War of 1812, including Oliver Hazard Perry, who was Navy Commander during the Battle of Lake Erie. Perrys fought on both sides of the Civil War.

Penelope: No funding?

Stella: There's no funding for "Daughter of the War of 1812" I guess. Oliver died from yellow fever anyway. From my own research, he was one of those people determined to die in glory. So, that's funny. Ugh. Why did I start with my father?

Penelope: You tell me.

Stella: Dominant personality in the household. The first diva in my life. I've been reading *Fences* by August Wilson with a class I'm teaching. The central figure, Troy Maxon, is very similar to my father. Troy is a man full of stories, seemingly larger than life, and everyone around him is in awe. They look up to him. They must – he is a tall tale – casting a long shadow. He has built this mythology around him. The song about his dog "Blue," wrestling with the Devil, playing baseball. All these stories are reinforced by the re-telling. The saddest part of the play for me is when he becomes self-aware. His friend Bono had told him how he looked up to him and modeled himself around Troy. But when Troy cheats on his wife, Rose, Bono speaks up. He tells Troy to come clean to Rose. And he walks off. Their friendship is never the same after that. The myth of Troy breaks, and we see that he is human, flawed like the rest of us. That's the tragedy.

Penelope: Do you write tragedies?

Stella: I have tried but it just doesn't come out right. Thinking about it now, I realize that my parents do not have a sense of humor. Sure, there was a laugh track – a kind of "let's laugh so he doesn't get pissed." I think at the beginning of my life, my mother was very

funny but that wore away. They both had a sense of tragedy though. I chose a different path.

Penelope: With comedy?

Stella: And art, music. At some point, the pattern must break. Not one of my siblings had any desire to join the military. We all became active in the arts. We didn't give a damn about Oliver Hazard Perry. Except that he looks nearly identical to my brother (let's call him Billy). That was a lark! Billy wanted a painted portrait of himself that was like a portrait of Oliver. We sat him in the armchair, and he mimicked the pose. Except he was in his sporty shorts and sandals. Ha! Billy and I always tried to make each other laugh.

Penelope: How do you make a comedy?

Stella: The common perception is that inspiration strikes an artist and then they whip up a fully-formed piece of art. Prose fiction writer George Saunders, in his article "What Writers Really Do When They Write," makes the case that art is a result of a process (Saunders n.d.). Guided by intuition and experience, an artist works on the clay of inspiration, adding to it and shaping it until it feels right. Then they do it again and again. They refine their work again and again until it's more nuanced and specific. This increases the "ambient intelligence" and depth of the piece.

Saunders argues that this process has an empathetic motivation. The better you can make your writing, the more respect it shows for the viewer/reader/listener. You're hand-crafting a gift for them. For me, it really comes from having a strong grasp of who my characters are. And they are almost always unaware of their behavior. I work at refining

their mode of speech, how they move, and in what ways are they absurd? The truth of the character. My first written works are all short stories and character-driven. Silly characters in even sillier situations.

Penelope: Tell me about your earliest piece of writing.

Stella: Yeah, you weren't around for that. (*internal wink*). Ahhh. Here comes the re-telling. I have used this story for many college applications. Every time I write it, it makes me grow even more self-conscious. But it is a true story. I was a hard-core advocate for animal protection and environmentalism at that age. I had this pamphlet with all the animals on the endangered list, listed in order of risk.

Anyway, at age seven, I wrote a short story called "Icy & the Polar Bear." It was about a penguin and a polar bear. They fight over a fish. The fish gets away and sticks its tongue out at them. They laugh and a friendship is born.

I don't know why, but there was something funny about a polar bear and a penguin becoming friends. It seemed very unlikely. And it was. I can't remember who but someone I knew scoffed and said how that would never happen. These animals live on opposite ends of the earth.

Penelope: Tough break.

Stella: I wrote a lot of academic essays and book reports after that. It took me a very long time to accept that a story can do anything. It didn't have to be factual but there had to be a truth in it.

Penelope: When did you realize that?

Stella: Late teens. When I read my first “absurdist” plays. When I first read *The Architect and Emperor of Assyria* and *The Maids*. I found them at a community college library – in a collection with Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (*makes an explosion sound from the top of her head*). Atomic.

Penelope: What was it about these plays that excited you?

Stella: Everything. I wondered where they had been my whole life. I had read and been in plays in high school. You know, Shakespeare. Miller. Ibsen. Chekhov. That real serious shit. The big guns; the standards – the “greatest hits.” The Elizabethan and Modern Tragedies of our time. Don’t get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with writing tragedy. Many do and they do it REALLY well. But I loved the “absurdist” plays. They were subversive and transgressive in their form, language, and content. It was fun and it gave me confidence that I could write my own plays. There are wrongs ways to solve math problems, to mix cakes, and to create atomic bombs. There is no wrong way to write a play.

Penelope: Did you start writing plays at that time?

Stella: No. I did not write my first play until 2009.

Penelope: Oh.

Stella: It was a very short one-act called *How One Twin Absorbed the Other*. It is about two entities who awaken in a dark limbo. They play with language, power dynamics, and possible life roles. Then they come to realize only one can move on into The World.

I submitted it to the Border Theatre's first annual "Exhibitions in Dis/Connection" in 2010. They accepted it and, along with two other pieces, three production teams staged it. They developed the productions in isolation, resulting in three distinct interpretations. That was an eye-opening experience.

I completely revised and expanded *Twin* in the Dramatic Writing program. The result was *Womb Eye*, a 45-minute one-act that premiered (as a virtual staged reading) at the 2020 Linnell Festival of New Plays.

Penelope: Why all the gaps?

Stella: Drama. Life.

Penelope: Such as?

Stella: Skip! Haha. Although I did keep theatre around me. I spent a lot of that time acting in a community theatre. I mostly auditioned for comedies, no surprise there. Basic, run-of-the-mill stuff for the blue hairs. That's what the theatre called its main demographic. It was all very polite comedy. Every now and then, there was a bawdy one thrown in. You know, for variety.

Penelope: Did you have a favorite part?

Stella: Two. The butler/Felicity in *The Farndale Avenue Housing Estate Townswomen's Guild Dramatic Society Murder Mystery* and the martian/Felicity in *They Came from Mars and Landed Outside the Farndale Avenue Church*. It was the same character in the two plays. So, one part.

Penelope: What did you like about it?

Stella: The physicality of the role. The character of Felicity is a member of this “dramatic society” and is cast in both plays as the antagonist. She plays the butler who committed the murder and the Martian who attacked the church. The nature of these plays is that the town’s dramatic society attempts to put on a play, and it always falls apart. Everything. The set starts to break down. The actors forget their lines and break the fourth wall. And in the middle of all that, the president of the townswoman’s guild interrupts the narrative to present a talent show, a murder mystery quiz, or a flower arrangement competition. Felicity is nearly killed every time. Whether it’s a stage flat that falls around her (ala Buster Keaton) or a handrail that breaks. I enjoyed the physical comedy of that role. If a director needed an actor to do a fall, that was me. I nearly perfected the stage fall in a production of *Rumors* (Neil Simon).

Penelope: You mentioned Buster Keaton. Was he an inspiration for you?

Stella: Definitely. I loved Keaton’s mind – the way he understood how the joke would play out and his sense of where the camera needed to be. And also also the Marx Brothers. It was so satisfying to watch a Marx Brothers film and get a little of every humor. You’ve got the silent clown Harpo and the verbose Groucho. There’s Chico who plays at stereotypes and is kind of an everyman and Zeppo, the straight man.

But their films would be nothing without Margaret Dumont. She was the perfect foil for Groucho. Even after appearing in seven of their films, she apparently did not quite get their jokes. It’s what made her so funny!

Both Keaton and the Marx Brothers came from the vaudeville stages. It's what gives the Marx Brother's film *Animal Crackers* (1930) that raw energy. From verbal banter to suddenly – a harp solo! Then some more plot development and then – piano shenanigans! Most of my plays have song, dance, and physical antics built into them because of these influences.

(Silence. Madame Carte Blanc has just walked into the room.)

(Ding! Ding! A small bell.)

Penelope (*internal monologue*): And then, there's HER. I squint through sweaty eyes at the horror coming my way. From this distance, she looks like an upright larva wobbling along the walkway. Behind her, Bernard, the aging butler with a desperate comb-over ambles over with an ice bucket. A green glass bottle of liquor juts out from the bucket. It is eight thirty a.m. A martini glass in her hand. In earnest locomotion, the larva inches closer. Each segment of her silk-swathed body lengthens and shortens: The Silkworm. In its pupa phase. Under a crinoline brim hat with white silk flowers, a bleached smile cracks across her hardened clay face. It is a lopsided smile, an involuntary result of morning gin and prescription pills. The Silkworm plants her high-class heels in the ground...

Her left ankle buckles with the uneven weight distribution. I despise silkworms. Christian monks smuggled them out of China and sold them to the Byzantine Empire. They're only economically beneficial for those that produce the silk. The silk is then only beneficial to the vain and status-conscientious. Silkworms cannot survive without humans. They enjoy the leaves of mulberry trees. Mulberry trees! Mulberry trees that give us fruit for tea and

pie and jam! It's not the silkworm's fault at all. If they had a choice, they'd become Silk moths. No glamor in being a moth.

Madame: Leave the drink cart and go back to your cellar.

(Bernard shuffles off, his pant legs too long and dragging under his shoe heels.)

Madame: Well, well, well. What do we have here?

Penelope: We are in the middle of an interview.

Madame: Mhm. What about?

Stella: About my origins. Where my ideas come from, stuff like that.

Madame: Yes, well. Here I am.

Penelope: Where were we?

Stella: Um...

Madame: Let us talk about my origins, shall we? It seems my story arc was written out of order.

Penelope: How's that?

Madame: It all began with *Maids of Honor* – a play I wasn't even in!

Stella: You were in it.

Madame: Yes, yes. I leave a few voice messages. The entire play is my two servants talking about me behind my back!

Stella: That was the point.

(Beat.)

Madame: They also do very poor impressions of me.

Penelope: Role-playing is a feature in many of your plays.

Stella: Yes. *Maids of Honor* could be seen as a conversation with French writer Jean Genet's 1947 play *Les Bonnes* (*The Maids*). In both, the protagonists are housemaids who role-play as their mistress and take turns dominating each other. Madame eventually comes home. In my work, the lady of the house is never seen, only discussed. The maids discover a bit of suspicious scalp in the bathtub and debate whether to turn Madame in. This role-play between the two maids also echoes that of *How One Twin Absorbed the Other*. In both, the characters are two halves of a whole, neither good nor bad, always struggling for control.

Madame: Playing? Hardly. It is very hard WORK being me.

Stella: Madame likes to forget where she came from.

Madame: I can't forget what was never there to begin with.

Stella: She had very humble beginnings and an overbearing mother.

Madame: I made myself. I had no mother!

Penelope: In another play, *Carte Blanc*, you tackle Madame's origins. She arrives at the House of Carte Blanc as a young and impressionable mail-order bride carrying a single suitcase. She is greeted by Libby, a brusque middle-aged Russian woman with a missing left-thumb. Soon Amador, the hyperactive master of the house bursts in "a flurry of animal fur and gun-metal." Amador examines the young woman and finds her to be satisfactory. She only requires a bath and the addition of a mole. Libby draws one in the proper place and Amador skips off happily.

Stella: This opening scene establishes the tone for what is to come. Libby prepares the new Madame for a savage wedding night ceremony and describes the conditions of her life at the estate. Most importantly, she is not to gain weight. That was the downfall of the previous Madame, who gorged on Gorgonzola cheese until she died. But soon the dynamics of power begin to shift, and the young Madame decides to change her role. All it takes is a little murder.

Madame: Yes. Libby, the one-thumbed widow.

Penelope: Not Amador?

Madame: He was a man-child, controlled by the Libby.

Penelope: In *Carte Blanc* you suggest other Madame before this one.

Stella: *Carte Blanc* was loosely inspired by the (Alfred) Hitchcock film *Rebecca*. This idea of entering another person's habitat and assuming their role to make it your own. I don't know. It's kind of what we do in this modern era. We move into an apartment, once occupied by countless others, forward mail that isn't yours. We find a job, assume that

role. We establish a radius of day-to-day activities around that apartment. Then we pack it all up and do it again. Somewhere else. Some other apartment where someone else has moved on. How many different lives have I had?

Madame: Five?

Stella: More than that.

Madame: Six?

Stella: I don't know. A lot.

Penelope: Aren't you the same person?

Stella: I think I am. I have the same name that I was born with. If that's the same, I must be the same. This what I play with when I have all these different women playing Madame... and Libby.

Madame: There must always be a Libby.

Stella: But they are not the same people. There was the original Libby (from *Carte Blanc*). She was from Russia and once had a family. The Libby from *Maids of Honor* is not the same Libby from another play called *Raoul & the Art of Eating Pansies*.

Madame: I preferred Libby number two.

Stella: In fact, the Madame that is here now is a former Libby.

Penelope: You are referring to *The Blood Vessel* Libby?

Stella: When I wrote *The Blood Vessel*, I decided to finally have Madame and Libby role-playing. I have never done this with the other plays. This is also the first “Madame” play that is a full-length, features a host of characters, and isn’t set on the estate (the “House of Carte Blanc”).

Penelope: What inspired these choices?

Stella: I just wanted to break out of that intimate mold of Madame, Libby, and a third, other character. The earlier plays were set in a single room of the estate, you know, the Fuchsia bathroom (also called the Vagina Dentata Bathroom), the Kitchen, the Garden... No, I decided. Let’s move away from the estate. Let’s put Madame’s household on a boat. Get the uninvited Duke onboard somehow to upstage her. Throw in a premeditated murder, an execution, the tango, some drinking and drugs –then! Bam! A storm. The whole ship sinks. Now, we are on an island. It’s the castaway story with the Duke and Madame and their servants. What happens now?

Madame: Terrible.

Penelope: Why the castaway story?

Stella: I’ve been doing a lot of research on island tropes in literature and theatre. And, as I mentioned, Arrabal’s *The Architect and Emperor of Assyria* was a major inspiration. But that play begins and ends *on* the island and the two characters (the Emperor and the Architect) have formed a kinship. The kinship is a result of the role-playing and game-playing they do during their time on the island. “As the Emperor is transformed into the Architect and the Architect into the Emperor – as one plays wife, the other husband (...)

one the master, the other the slave – we are conscious of their condemnation to each other, but we are also aware of the joy they experience in having each other” (75).

Penelope: You don’t think there is a kinship between Madame and Libby?

Stella: No.

Madame: Yes.

Penelope: How about Madame and the Duke?

Madame: Absolutely not.

Stella: Yes.

Madame: He is a party pirate!

Stella: That is all part of the game that the two of you play.

Madame: Nonsense.

Penelope: There is a lot of game-play in this play. Can you speak to that?

Stella: When I started work on *The Blood Vessel*, it became clear that the role and game play in *The Architect and Emperor of Assyria* had found its way into my work. In fact, so much of his dramatic work has characters playing games like running, wrestling, fighting, word games to “fill the idle hours of the adult children” (Donahue, 63).

Fantasy and illusion are considered solitary activities, but when the illusion is “actualized and given rules and structure” it becomes a game (Donahue, 62). The game then becomes

a “communal illusion” (there is a close association of the Latin verb ‘to play’ with the word ‘illusion’). A dramatic text has its own rules and structure as set forth by the writer. Consciously or not, writers develop an internal logic for their dramatic world.

The rules of my game are simple. I invite the audience on a journey. You can see this in the blurb Juli and I wrote to promote the piece:

Madam Carte Blanc welcomes you aboard *the Blood Vessel*. The ship will embark on its virginal voyage through the dark & mysterious waters of vodka, sweat, servitude, and cuttlefish stew.

Come settle yourself on the main deck with a beverage in hand and watch the comedy unfold.

Masks have never been this fun.

Juli added the “masks have never been this fun” part because well, we have masks in the play. More on those later. Back to the game: We begin with a party. We are introduced to Madame, the host of the party. She lays out the order of the party. These are the meal courses and this is the entertainment, etc.

I give the audience clues that this party is actually a charade orchestrated by Madame with the intention of killing one of the guests. That’s the second layer. The communal illusion here is that everyone at the party is a wealthy member of the elite class.

Madame’s household staff, Daisy and Bernadette, are playing the millionaires Mr. and Mrs. Vandervelt. Another female servant is playing the boat’s male captain. I let the audience in on the joke by letting the servants, Daisy and Bernadette, break character to

be their actual selves.

This, of course, is still all an illusion. The rules of the stage are that actors are *playing* the characters and the stage is not *actually* a boat but a representation of the boat. The audience, for the most part, knows this rule and thus, they are also a part of the overarching illusion. This is a play. The characters are being played by actors. Some characters are also playing a fantasy character.

There is one solitary illusion at play that isn't part of Madame's orchestration but becomes a private game separate from the party game. This is when Libby decides to dress up and pretend to be Madame. By doing this, she demonstrates agency in her own illusion. Madame witnesses Libby pretending to be her and decides to pretend to be Libby. I wanted this to be their little secret, a way to illustrate the special relationship of mistress and servant. They amuse each other by playing at the other.

Of all his plays, this is most obvious in *The Architect and Emperor of Assyria*. That "entire play is in fact a creation of a second reality by the two characters, whose sole past-time is the game of mimicry" (Donahue, 66). I carry this second reality between Madame and Libby through the party, the storm, until it becomes a complete reality for Libby. That's when she strangles Madame on the island and assumes the role of Madame herself.

Penelope: But you disrupt the party game with the Duke and his personal attendants?

Stella: Yes. He is the wild card. Monetarily, he is Madame's equal. But he is also there to upstage her. I wanted to suggest that they are competitors in all games; social and private. They know each other's dirty secrets. The Duke is fun because he adds more games to the party game. He is unaware of the communal illusion of servants playing fantasy characters. He is too focused on upstaging Madam at her own party.

Penelope: Upstaging?

Stella: Yes. Oh, yawn...Madame's entertainment is so boring, let's tango! His servant witnesses the Baroness' murder, and he takes that knowledge and makes it into a detective game, as a way of tormenting Madame. The meal courses are bland, let's spice things up! Oh, the boat is sinking? Let me put on my diving gear and go for a swim. Oh, I'm stranded on an island? Let me put a seaweed crown on my head and play charades with my servants. Now let's play 'Death Circle'!

Penelope: Death Circle?

Stella: Everything is a game to the Duke. Death Circle is a game of life and death that he invents on the island. He seems jaunty and full of ideas. So it is through his servants' behavior and reactions to him that we get a sense of his darkness. Because it is there. For the Duke, servants are interchangeable: "This one [meaning the servant] only knows the word Satchmo and St. James. And some colors? Or was that the other one? Anyway, that's as far as we got. Tedious, teaching the lower classes to speak."

He also considers the servant as having no gender. To him, they are all one: "Libby is not a woman, she is a servant."

Physically, I originally envisioned a Duke of ‘Orson Wellsian Proportions’. I even wrote this in an earlier character list. But when I saw Curtis Madden audition for the Linnell Festival, I knew that he had to play the Duke. No doubt. Juli saw it too. This casting choice made me re-think how I wanted characters to be cast, specifically with the Duke. In the final draft of this play, I changed “of Orson Wellsian” to “strong physical presence.” That leaves it open to director’s interpretation.

Penelope: Were there other choices the director made that changed your mind about how the work could be interpreted?

Stella: Yes. Juli and I went to the auditions and callbacks together. We had a huge turnout, which was great. However, I had it in my head that I wanted whomever played Madame and Libby to be the same height and weight. You know, similar enough that they could ‘pass’ for each other. Maybe the same timber in their voices? I was vibe-ing off of Ingmar Bergman’s film *Persona* (1966) and David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001). This idea of interchangeability.

Juli was interested in how the students moved. How did they carry themselves? She had movement exercises for them to explore at the auditions. Students who did not do so well with the monologue portion of the audition came alive during these exercises.

A lot of the students had put down how they wanted a “dramatic role” or an “emotional role” on their audition forms. But when they were working with Juli, these students turned out to be very funny.

Madame was a tough decision for me. There was a student I wanted who completed this vision of Madame and Libby looking the same. Deep down, I knew Andy Gustke was the best choice and I let Juli convince me of that. They were amazing as Madame. I don't think it mattered that Andy and Rose Meizlesh (who played Libby) were very different in appearance. The audience is smart. They figured it out.

The two roles we were not able to cast at that time were the Duke's Servants. I had re-written those roles to be played by anyone. Juli had two women in mind and when it was discovered that they could work aerial silks too...Bam. She had her clowns.

Penelope: And a (nearly) all female cast! How did that happen?

Stella: Aubrey Sandoval, who played Bernadette, had some concerns when she was first cast because the role was male-identifying and originally called Bernard. I had by then decided that Madame would have a mostly female household staff on her boat to play her little dress-up game. So, I changed Bernard to Bernadette.

There was a point when Curtis got sick with COVID and we didn't have a Duke. Juli brought a lady friend in to help out and step into that role. For some reason, I didn't want the Duke to be a female in drag. That was my limit, I think. It seemed okay, narratively, for Madame's staff to be in drag --- because that was the plan. But if the Duke was actually a woman in drag, too – dunno, that would have been confusing for me.

So, there is a script where the Duke is the Duchess. And I am still thinking about making this a permanent revision. What if it was the Duchess and her servants who crash the party? How does this change the story? Would it change the story? I picture a Bette

Davis/Joan Crawford dynamic here. Two women fighting for the spot light. It is very intriguing to me.

If that were to happen, then the Baron would be the only male. And because he was never invited to the party in the first place, it works!

(Madame has fallen asleep; snoring loudly. We tiptoe out of the room and to the garden.)

Part Two: The Humors

“It’s better not to know so much about what things mean or how they might be interpreted, or you’ll be too afraid to let things keep happening.”

- David Lynch

(Penelope and I have decided to continue our conversation in the garden.)

Penelope: Why do writers sometimes use a quote at the start of a book or every chapter?

Stella: Are you wondering why I used a quote?

Penelope: I just don’t understand what it gives the reader.

Stella: David Lynch has heavily influenced my artistic life over the years. A lot of what he says about creativity and storytelling speaks to me.

Penelope: What does this quote mean to you?

Stella: Before I decided to use *The Blood Vessel* as my dissertation piece, there was another play, tentatively titled *Verbrannt!* This was a play that began as a story about witch burning in Bamberg, Germany and then became a Cold War anti-romance disaster. But I kept trying to make it work because I felt it was a synthesis of two really interesting ideas I encountered during the Dramatic Writing program.

Pause.

Penelope: Go on.

Stella: So, the first idea came to me when I was reading Heiner Müller’s *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten* (*Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts*). It is highly anachronistic short play in three parts that is loosely based on *Medea* by Euripides (scholars would also say it is a re-making of the *Medea* myth). No scene directions, three characters, and vivid language:

Shredded menstrual napkins The blood

Of the women of Colchis

But you must be careful Yes

YES YES YES YES

Mudcunt I say to her That’s my Man

Screw me Come Sweetie

Until the Argo crashes his skull the useless ship

The plays’ three parts has a strong female voice – not unlike the Euripides play, which I find to be sympathetic to *Medea* and the misogynist attitudes of that time – but the imagistic language used by Müller closes that time gap and brings me right into an apocalyptic vision of violence, contradictions, and a confrontation with history and contemporary culture. Menstrual napkins to Argo. It’s neither here nor there but in between. Just enough of a critical distance to engage without being too didactic.

Penelope: What’s wrong with being didactic?

Stella: I'm just not inclined to instruct others with my work, morally or otherwise.

(Awkward moment)

Penelope: Why not?

Stella: The meaning we derive from theatrical works originate as thoughts in the writer's mind. These thoughts move from the writer, via the play, to the minds of the audience. In his chapter on "Thought," Sam Smiley maps this "trajectory of thought" (Smiley 2005, 151). First, the playwright puts their ideas into their work via the composition of the play and in the communication of conceptual ideas via the plot and characters (152). The playwright's ideas can be embodied (mimetic) or directly stated (didactic) in the play. Whether or not it's directly stated, the play reveals the playwright's view of human behavior through the speech and actions of the characters. The ideas of a play end their trajectory in the mind of the audience. The play may or may not convey the intended ideas since every audience member's interpretation is unique and personal. I am choosing the embodied, or mimetic.

For example, in *Top Girls* (1982), Caryl Churchill illustrates the effects of patriarchy on women by giving voice to a variety of women of different ages (and of different ages). Churchill's thoughts are embedded in these character's speech and actions. Churchill has created a model of reality, an intensified onstage world where her ideas can be tested. In this way, fiction allows us a clearer understanding of reality.

When didactic dramatists use characters as mere mouthpieces, they “diminish the effectiveness of the play and even render inconsequential the ideas so delivered” (Smiley 2005, 167). The audience can easily become disconnected from the theatrical illusion.

Verbrannt! is a tangled mess. I wanted to mimic the vivid, poetic language of Heiner Müller’s piece. And, at the same time, I was incorporating a short play I had written in a Topics class with Dr. Laster. For my final project in this class, I wrote *The Fat Cat Sat on the Mat*. It was inspired by my mother’s earnest desire to assimilate and “become an American.” Language was sacrificed first. My mom and I would sit down with my first-grade reading workbook and learn English together.

While it may have been a play that would have been cathartic for me, I think it would have been a disservice to my audience. Back to the George Saunders article, as a way of communicating a “sense of respect for your reader,” a writer revises to increase the “ambient intelligence of a piece of writing” – I couldn’t just throw *Verbrannt!* out there to the audience; telling them how it was, why it was, and making it all about me.

Penelope: Why not?

Stella: This goes back to the Lynch quote. During the writing process, I was not letting things happen in this play because I was getting hung up on what it meant and how it should be interpreted. I was narrowing the interpretative field for my audience and underestimating their own intelligence. This weird collage thing happened where I was forcing and re-enforcing this idea of ‘becoming American’ and the persecution of ‘difference’ – Benjamin Franklin’s head would pop up in a suitcase and shout racist epitaphs, witches were being burned for dancing, the American soldier was abusing his

wife because he was a “speed bump for the Russians” (my dad’s rant) -- it was all so direct. And it felt forced. The characters weren’t characters at all but mouthpieces. I was trying too hard.

The Blood Vessel just poured out because the characters were clear to me. Through their voice and behavior and the settings, I had the critical distance I wanted. The constant role-playing, the games, the masks, all add to the chaos and help to reinforce the illusion. Like in the Saunders article, I told myself that the audience is “humane, bright, witty, experienced and well-intentioned.” I was having a lot of fun writing it. That’s always a good sign. Because with *The Blood Vessel*, I made another crucial decision.

Penelope: What was that?

Stella: Make funny. Activate the 5th humor! “The objectivity that permits laughter also allows for criticism” (Donahue 1980, 45).

Penelope: There are only four humors.

Stella: Nope. There’s a fifth.

Penelope: Explain.

Stella: Okay. Four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. The Greek physician, Hippocrates, proposed that our temperament was influenced by the imbalance of these humors. Blood was associated with a Sanguine person whose temperament is sociable, charismatic, disorganized, and impulsive. Phlegm was associated with a phlegmatic person whose temperament was quiet, relaxed, meek, and submissive. Before

I continue, I want to add that this is probably not scientifically sound in any way but serves as prelude to my 5th humor.

Penelope: Oh.

Stella: We'll get there. I promise. So, yellow bile for the choleric person who is energetic and ambitious but also dominant with a quick temper. Finally, an overabundance of black bile in a person leads to melancholy, denoted by moody, sensitive, and perfectionist personality traits. Now, I had to look up whether black bile really exists. I know bile is a digestive juice, but black bile sounds plain scary. Apparently, if you are vomiting black bile then there is blood from the stomach or intestinal lining mixing with enzymes that changes it to a dark color.

Penelope: Gross.

Stella: And yet, somehow, all this talk of juices and bile and blood evolved the word "humor" to mean "the quality that makes something laughable or amusing; funniness" (Merriam-Webster).

Penelope: Ancient Greek physiology is pretty laughable.

Stella: It carried through to the Medieval ages. Which reminds me of a joke. My favorite joke. What do you call a leper in a bathtub?

Penelope: Uh...

Stella: Stew. (*laughs with a snort*)

Penelope: I don't like how this is going.

Stella: My son HATES that joke. I think it is hilarious. Someone told it to me in elementary, or middle, school and here it is. It's comforting to know that someone out there thinks this joke is funny, too.

Penelope: It's disgusting. I like this one: what do you call a huge pile of cats?

Stella: What?

Penelope: A MEOWtain! Har. Har.

(Crickets)

Stella: See? What people laugh it is a matter of personal taste. Take the 'fart joke' as another example. Recently, I watched a *Jackass* clip with Johnny Knoxville. [*Jackass* is a prank show] He was in a yoga studio, having ingested an incredible amount of "Gas-X," and was letting the farts rip through the studio. People smirked, some grimaced, and others laughed out loud. Not for everyone. But there is something about the 'fart', a bodily function we cannot control, which can induce laughter. Vomiting can also make people laugh. We laugh at things out of our control, we laugh at the incongruity of say, a fart in a yoga studio. Humors are everywhere.

Penelope: So, what is the 5th humor?

Stella: Cuttlefish stew.

Penelope: What?

Stella: Cuttlefish Stew. A big pot with squid-y things, spices, tomato juice, wine... I mean, it all sounds really gross. I like to think that *The Blood Vessel* has a humor for

every sense of humor. The ridiculous verbal banter between Madame and the Duke. The Baron vomiting overboard. The Duke's servant tasting spoonfuls of stew and spitting into a cup. Snorting spices. Hallucinating from the ink from a cephalopod. Words written with blood on seashells. Death circle. It goes on.

Penelope: Stew?

Stella: And Stewie was his name-o! Sitting in the audience with my fourteen-year-old son, and in my ears, people laughing. My son laughed. I laughed. A lot! It wasn't that canned laughter from 90s sitcoms either. Juli really nailed all those funny moments. The student actors moved in ways that were funny. They articulated the jokes through the body and the head.

Penelope: Were you worried that people wouldn't laugh?

Stella: Yes. Absolutely. I re-discovered comedy while I was writing this play. I remembered the comedians I liked and why I liked them. All of that and my own weirdness went into it. It is a risk to try out a joke on strangers. But when it works, the reward is so great.

Penelope: Explain how it worked.

Stella: For my part, it was all done through language. I wanted every character to have their own voice, their own little internal show – and offered a mix of affective and scientific language.

There was also variety in the pacing of speech. Some scenes would move in rapid fire (ala *Animal Crackers*) or slow waaaayyy down when Madame is giving a speech or reciting a poem.

And repetition. As an audience member, I love repetition with variation. I think that is an element of comedy, that, when done well, will always illicit laughter. The whole “there was no plus one on the invite” was repeated several times throughout *The Blood Vessel*. If you didn’t hear it the first time, you get it the second time. If you heard it the first time, the second time is an inside joke. And hopefully, by the third time and with variation, everyone gets it. Job done.

Body language and gesture was implied in the stage directions which also helped set the tone. The actors didn’t have to worry about being ‘natural’ – the more absurd, the better. Like when Daisy takes some drugs and says:

It feels like a squid wiggly inside me...mmm... I just want to move.

She dances by herself. It looks like squirming.

In the production, Daisy (played by Jayla Franklin) does this weird little dance across the stage and looks directly at the audience. They laugh because this is a moment where they are let in. Juli made that choice to interact because she was working in a Bouffon style that allows for this direct interaction with the audience.

Penelope: Bouffon? What’s this?

Stella: She explained that Bouffon was like the “dark clown.” It is a specific style of performance work that focuses in on mockery. “Truth in exaggeration,” she said, which is very complementary to this piece.

When Juli was in rehearsal, she told me that there was this one line in the play that she felt needed a ‘dum da dum’ sound effect at the end. It’s after Libby, wearing Madame’s mask, pushes the Baroness overboard. One of the Duke’s servants see this and tells the Duke. Meanwhile, the Baron is looking for the Baroness. The Duke then suggests that Madame had planned more entertainment, a murder mystery. Libby, as Madame, goes along with this and says “Uh. Of course. A Murder Mystery sure to entertain! I, of course, will be playing lead detective.” To which the Duke replies that she cannot play lead detective “because you are, I’m afraid, the prime suspect.”

Dum da dum!

I love this aspect of production, the embodiment of character. I don’t remember there being an actual ‘dum da dum’ sound cue but they way the characters react, the sudden intake of air, a hand gesture – that effect was implied.

Would another director approach the play in a different way? Perhaps focusing in on the darker aspects of the work?

Penelope: Such as?

Stella: When the Duke slaps his servant. I wanted it to feel like it came of out of nowhere. The Duke has just arrived aboard the Blood Vessel and is introducing himself to the couple he believes to be the billionaires, Mr., and Mrs. Vandervelt. He tries to

regale them with a story of his swim to the boat, claiming that a harbor seal was swimming in his wake:

DUKE

Finally, I just slapped the creature –

He slaps Servant #1.

DUKE

And said: alright you freeloader, I've let you ride my stream now what will you give me in return –

He snaps at Servant #2, who nods and exits to the FRONT.

Servant #2 hoists up a dead baby seal with some netting and carries it back to the Duke.

DUKE

No easy feat. Like wrestling an oiled up half-man with no arms or legs, but in the end, I did manage to defeat the creature with my bare hands.

The seal is dumped on the floor in front of the group.

Gasps. Chuckling. Servant #1 rubs the welt on his cheek.

DUKE

In return, it gave me its life.

Penelope: It's not so bad.

Stella: I think it is. He slaps the servant without provocation. He doesn't apologize. The other guests on the boat only react to the baby seal being dumped before them. They gasp for the baby seal but not for the slap dealt to the servant. In Jean-Paul Sartre's introduction to *The Maids and Deathwatch: Two Plays by Jean Genet*, he comments on the slap administered between two characters in *Maids* as a "poetic act" that "melts into gesture; the very pain that it causes is lived imaginarily" (Genet 1954, 28). At the same time, "it is slurred over, for this true slap which is felt imaginarily is a fake slap that an actor pretends to give another actor."

There are a few slaps in this first half. Madame slaps her servant, Libby. Libby slaps the Captain of the boat, who is a fellow servant in Madame Carte Blanc's household. The Captain is astonished that Libby would slap her, but Libby diffuses this by suggesting that the Captain likes it so much. The servant, Daisy, slaps the Madame, believing her to be Libby disguised as Madame. Madame slaps Daisy back.

Penelope: Why so much slapping?

Stella: According to Sartre, part of Genet's fascination with the theatre are the elements of "fake, of sham, of artificiality" (Genet 1954, 8). I feel that way, too. A slap is theatrical; it reinforces the illusion. It's not really real.

And who gets to slap whom? If we follow the slap's trajectory, we get a sense of the hierarchy on the boat. So, it's interesting to see how the slapping carries through. The Duke initiates it but Madam gets the final slap when she slaps Daisy. Libby gets to slap

the Captain because she is becoming Madame. Daisy only slaps Madame because she thinks Madame is Libby.

Another moment that was intentionally dark was the scene between Libby and the Baroness. Libby is about to push the Baroness overboard (at Madame's request) and the Baroness is a bit mixed up from drugs and her own emotions. Subtle changes were made to the dialogue and actions of the Baroness character. For me, this completed a vision of her as lonely, out of her element, and oscillating between reverie and lucidity:

Libby, with Madame's Mask in hand, leads the Baroness through a passage below deck and they come up to the FRONT of the ship. Libby points to show the Baroness something out on the water. The Baroness joins Libby. Libby slips on the mask.

LIBBY (*as MADAME*) See there? That is my tower.
You're not far from the shore at all.

BARONESS

Yummy water. I just want to drink it all up!

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

Oh. Yummy indeed.

BARONESS

Oh! You've changed faces? Where did Libby go?

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

Libby has gone off to do what Libbys do, I suppose.

Fetching drinks, zipping gowns, (quietly) other things.

Awkward beat. The Baroness stumbles on some netting and slumps to the floor.

Stella: Awkward beat. How does one portray the awkward beat? Libby is only there for one purpose. The two aren't friends; this isn't a chat about the stars. The Baroness is stumbling around and Libby watches her. To me, this is very awkward. Actually, you know what? No. Not an awkward beat. *A sinister beat.*

Sinister beat. The Baroness stumbles on some netting and slumps to the floor.

BARONESS

I knew a man named Erich once.

LIBBY

Oh?

BARONESS

Yes, we met in Monte Carlo.

LIBBY

As most people do. Come, stand up. You'll get your gown dirty.

Stella: It may seem that she is helping the Baroness up out of kindness. I mean, it could be played that way or ...?

Libby helps the Baroness to stand. She wobbles and occupies herself with smoothing her gown:

BARONESS

He told me his story of woe and I immediately fell in love with him. The soft-spoken pirate on a stolen vagina---

oh, hee --- did I say vagina? I meant boat...(wobbles)

he had been locked away you see, until some kind servant released him and let him go free

LIBBY

Ah.

BARONESS

And then I watched your play and remembered what he said about the woman with the shark smile. Sharrkkkss.

Oh my (swoons) there aren't sharks down there in the water, are there?

She peers precariously over the railing.

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

No.

BARONESS

Oh, okay. Good. Ever since he told me of that shark smile,
I have been haunted by that image.

A cold wind. The Baroness shivers.

Stella: I added the cold wind to incorporate the coming storm. Murdering the Baroness is a big moment for Libby. The storm is connected to Libby and what she is feeling:

BARONESS

It's s-s-s-s-so cold. Do you think it is cold down there on the bottom? Poor, poor Erich. It's so tragic what happened to him. (*beat*) The Baron. He lacks the melancholy that I so crave. Do you know melancholy Madame? Well of course you do. (*licks her lips, dry from the drugs*) And you are s-s-s-so forgiving, aren't you? You must be to keep Libby around after she (*trails off*)

LIBBY (*as herself*)

She what?

The Baroness is alert again, slightly.

Stella: This is that moment that happens when one suddenly ‘reads the room’. The Baroness senses that something is off. This is due to Libby’s voice changing from Madame to her own voice.

BARONESS

...Erich.... he always said that he would never forget
Libby. His key to freedom.

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

Aw. That’s lovely.

Libby pushes her overboard and watches her drown.

Stella: Or did she stand the Baroness up to make pushing her over easier?

Penelope: Is she watching because she is thorough? Or is she watching with regret, or some other emotion?

Stella: She is wearing a mask. So, is it Madame pushing the Baroness over or the person behind the mask? I think Libby would like to believe that Madame did it. That’s the power of a mask.

(A mound of dirt stirs. A man, Raoul, the trowel-handed gardener, pulls himself out from deep underground. Collapsing, he rolls over to face the sun, his arms stretched out – the DaVinci “Vitruvian Man” on his back, naked to the sun.)

Penelope: What the...?

Part Three: Masks

“He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it”

-George Orwell

(Still in the garden...Raoul is on all fours, whispering to the flowers)

Stella: I found that quote in some research I was doing on playwright Jean Genet and just loved it. And when I found this quote, I knew how to finally end *The Blood Vessel*.

Penelope: The ending that was in the production?

Stella: Yes. I struggled most with the ending. Here’s why:

I originally ended the play with a scene in which Libby is getting a facelift operation to ‘become’ Madame. The language is very scientific and technical between the nurse and doctor who are the only other characters in the scene. It was also in a third setting; not the boat and not the island. At its core, the scene was very important to me. I wanted to show the audience the transformation of Libby to Libby as Madame that was unlike the play-acting and dress up, they had already experienced throughout the play. An ACTUAL transformation:

NURSE

Anesthesia has been administered. The female is prepped for surgery.

SURGEON

I will make the first incision over the edge of the tarsus.

Swab.

NURSE

Swabbing.

SURGEON

I will now pull back the skin flap to expose the underlying tissue. Swab.

NURSE

Swabbing.

SURGEON

Repositioning the muscle. Tissue glue.

Stella: Then the lights come up and Libby is standing there, her face wrapped in gauze, talking to the Duke (offstage or in her imagination?):

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

Well, of course I am back, Duke. I mustn't keep my future party guests waiting. (clears throat) Oh, these. After that terrible ordeal on the island, I really wanted to lift my face again. Recover those lost days and remove the creases from intense worry that vexed me when my Libby ran off.

Yes, Yes, we must do tea.

Stella: This goes back to my “Icy & the Polar Bear” problem – how do I root Libby’s transformation in fact? I wanted the ending to seem plausible when it didn’t have to be. The audience doesn’t need a factual ending. They have been in on this crazy boat ride and now I skip to an ending that says, “See? She becomes Madame. She literally becomes her.” Eh? Eh?

Meh.

The second ending I played with had Libby killing Madame on the island (that stayed the same). BUT then I wanted Libby to go a little mad and regard the Mask:

Holding the mask to face her:

LIBBY (*screams at the mask, turns to laughter*) You’re Dead! Blue but empty Blue but empty (*she pokes her fingers into the empty eye holes*)

Blue empty blurs and blemishes A bruise no one can see, Deep inside-

(She is about to put the face on – hesitation, an invisible magnetic pull, her spirit resisting perhaps?)

How now do I assume the role?

The cruel mistress &

the institutional grit

With it

Grinding in my teeth

No matter how much I swallow

(holds hand out to pretend guests)

Kiss the nail

Smell the glove

Eyes down low

Hands up my skirt

Gimme, gimme, gimme

Stella: This poetic language is similar to Madame's but fragmented, not full formed. I was thinking of an interview with playwright Mac Wellman in which he elaborated on his "language as gesture idea." Wellman talks about the physical aspect of language, "particularly in theatre, words should be objects flying around the room" (Wellman Jan 1992, 49) . Libby uses words like smell, down, gimme, grit, swallow. I find these to be evocative, physicalizing Libby's interiority, which at this point in the play is breaking apart and re-forming.

I decided to add to this temporary re-building of identity by giving The Mask a voice. I was playing with the notion of the object itself becoming a character. You know, how when you stare long enough at a statue's face, it seems to move? It is alive:

A cloud covers the sun. The natural world pauses.

The mask appears to talk:

MADAME'S MASK

(Madame's voice but low, guttural)

You reject my cruelty

Yet there is nothing in its place

The dryad in the traveler's tree

It watches

It waits

For the world to sigh its last breath &

all the world drains back into the volcanic

hole

backwash lava and algae bile

the primordial soup

on a low simmer

We can gargle the salt

And clean our nails

But underneath

The rug

Where the dirty is kept

Is this face

Stella: The “where the dirty is kept” is a reiteration of something Madame said when she was crawling along the island’s sand, after the shipwreck:

She stops to lie face down.

The face dropped to the floor, the face dropped and the maid, she swept, the face under the rug – it lay there, the lump under the rug, trampled underfoot, and cursed to silence, the face – how long had it remained on her shoulders before it fell? How long?

She licks her finger and sticks it in the sand. She contemplates the sandy finger.

Erosion, volcanic glass, over time. Minerals and lava heavily petted by the tide’s ebb and flow –

She licks her sandy finger.

Iron. Basalt, fresh by a millennium. A realm without wanting but treaded on like the face. How am I deserving of a fresh martini right now? Libby?

Stella: Because the Mask speaks in Madame’s voice, I thought it was important to remind the audience of the Face, the Mask, and how they become one. But this is not a voluntary becoming in this ending. I chose to have the Mask force itself onto Libby’s

face. Libby resists and there is a verbal back and forth until they finally sing “Paper Moon” together:

TOGETHER

It’s only a paper moon

Sailing over a cardboard sea

But it wouldn't be make-believe

If you believed in me

Beat.

LIBBY

He’ll be mine now.

MADAME’S MASK

All is yours now

Stella: This second ending became all about the Mask and its mysterious power. It still carried the essence of Madame and wanting to exist once more, affixes itself to Libby’s face. Libby no longer has agency and becomes a victim of the mask. It felt wrong to me. I wanted Libby to choose to become Madame. Not with face surgery, not with the supernatural, but as a result of something familiar.

I kept throwing out more ideas to Juli because she was already in rehearsal. What about a combination of both scenes? What if we alternate endings for each night?

Juli thought it needed a “button” and I mulled over that. A button? What kind of button? Brass button? Silver button? Gold button?

Finally, I could bring the Duke back for for the ending. Which is what I always wanted! I mean, I just kind of left him at the campfire to eat his own servant.

Madame and the Duke are symbiotic beings. There can’t be one without the other. That was the logic of my play world. Thinking about “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet” I remembered that “characters mean only as they inhabit, enact, fulfill, engage a succession of sites, actions, and objects under a specific set of conditions (...) constituents of a complex artistic pattern” (Fuchs 2004, 6). I thought about the first and last image of *The Blood Vessel* and how we travel between. We start with a party on a boat and end with Madame & the Duke on an island. How did we go from there to here? What changed? Much of this play is about Libby becoming Madame. But it is also about Madame and the Duke’s little game. I thought of it like a new tooth coming in (Libby) and the old one falling out (Madame). The new tooth grows to fit inside the jaw with all the other teeth. The Duke is a tooth and to function as a maw, they must accept each other.

So -the final ending (*below*) retains a bit of the poetical language of the second ending. Also, as in the first ending, I bring the Duke back onstage rather than allude to his real or imagined presence:

The Duke enters. He is picking his teeth with his pinky nail.

DUKE

You missed supper Madame. A bit gamey but quite tender.

Stella: Suggested cannibalism & word-play (gamey). For the darkly humorous folk.

Libby, her back to him, jumps a little at the sudden arrival. She drops the mask.

DUKE

Some seamen must have seen my fire,

And have come ashore to take us home dear.

LIBBY

Ah. Ok.

Let me just gather my things.

She goes to pick up the mask.

DUKE

Leave that grotesque thing behind. Come, come. I want to discuss the upcoming boat war. I think your gardener would make a great champion.

Libby stands on the sand, stiffly

After a moment, her body shifts – an arm on the waist

The other holding an invisible glass

A shark smile crawls across her face.

She throws her head back, laughs and (maybe a wink to the audience)

Stella: A physical shifting into the role. Rose Meizlesh did this so well!

LIBBY

Ah, Raoul.

The man with the bag of lady bugs

The smell of fresh soil on his breath

I squeeze him between my legs

And make him sing

The Duke steps in line next to her.

Stella: Next to her because in no way is she going to upstage him:

DUKE

Of course you do.

LIBBY

Yes.

DUKE

Yes.

LIBBY

Why must you always get the final word?

DUKE

I am the Duke.

He holds out his arm and she takes it.

LIBBY

I am the Madame.

The Duke starts to open his mouth –

LIBBY

Don't. You. Dare.

Lights out.

Stella: Libby *is* Madame. She gets the last word. But it is also a reset. There is discussion of another party game, the 'Boat War'. The Duke told the Vandervelts of this at the start of the play. "Good blood sport" he said to them.

Things are mostly back to normal; except I think this Madame is assertive and strong. She carries all the attributes of her former self into this new identity. The Duke has accepted her as Madame, and she can go forth into her new reality with confidence.

Penelope: Because the Duke accepts her?

Stella: No, because she accepts it.

At the end of Arrabal's play, the Architect and the Emperor, having played the games and alternated roles and identities, develop a strong kinship. The two become one. This presents the audience with one complete view of human behavior, what he calls "genuine structure." The master is the servant and vice versa.

At the end of my play, Libby murders Madame. One supplants one. Then, she goes off with the Duke. We are back to the beginning, with one Madame and one Duke. In my world, there can only be one Madame.

I strand them on an island in the second half and we (or at least I) hope the Duke and Madame will change their behavior. But it is more of the same, only slowed down. Time on the island is different than on the boat. There is no alcohol. There is no nosh. The characters are in 'hangover mode' – sluggish, wandering, somewhat reflective. All this could be the conditions for reversal, a social change, right?

But it is the Duke who brings everyone back into 'game mode' by suggesting they play charades. Charades then becomes Death Circle. Libby kills for Madame once again. She realizes that no matter where they are, nothing will ever change because her role is that of a servant. So, she becomes Madame.

The servant class does not rise up with Libby at the helm. Becoming Madame is a selfish act. Which is more honest than everyone skipping off together as friends.

Penelope: Why not have Libby kill the Duke so that she and Madame can be together?

Stella: I don't think Libby wants to be *with* Madame. She wants to *be* Madame. What they have is a very unhealthy, co-dependent relationship. We see that when we realize Madame cannot pleasure herself without Libby there to do it. She is very attracted to Libby when Libby is pretending to be her. She has her fetch drinks, murder the Baroness, fight for her 'honor' – she gives nothing in return.

Libby seizes an opportunity on the island to end this cycle of abuse. But I wonder, when Madame-Libby returns to the estate, will it be more of the same? Will she hire a Libby and do what Madame did to her?

I mean, we've seen her acting the part already. For Libby, it's like taking a holiday from her real life. Why not make it a permanent vacation?

Penelope: Would you?

Stella: Would I what? Murder someone and take over their life?

Penelope: Yeah. If you knew you'd get away with it.

Stella: Ah, no. But I have no problem putting that in my work. Like I said, this play poured out of me. One part of it could have been my frustration with COVID, poverty, and isolation. I wanted to laugh again. There were a lot of times in the writing of it that I laughed to myself. Every time I thought of the Duke in his wetsuit, flopping around on the floor, giddy with drugs – I chuckled. It is just so ridiculous!

However, the frustration with COVID also helped me think about theatre in a different way. *Transmission*, another work I developed in the program, was designed specifically

for the Zoom format. It was presented at the Fall 2021 Linnell Festival and, in my opinion, received well by the audience.

In *Transmission*, a couple, separated by deep space, struggles with solitude and madness. The one left behind witnesses the collapse of their settlement (apocalyptic time) while the other bears witness to the rise of a new settlement (future time). Ideologies clash as the two deliver status reports and heartfelt sorrow to each other via recorded video messages.

I played with disruptions to the conversation by adding technical glitches. As the Zoom host, I could have all that at the ready. One character's transmission would cut out and the space mission logo would appear. All the actors had to do was set the Space Logo (designed by a friend) as their profile picture and then 'leave the meeting'. I built these instructions as the stage directions of the script.

A transmission from a long dead cosmonaut played in the middle of their conversation. Again, as the host, I kept my screen blank and 'shared screen'. Then, pushed play on the recorded audio of this transmission.

We also had short videos of a shadow-play scarab walking across the screen with static in the background. Again, 'share screen'.

This virtual stage format also gave me the opportunity to collaborate again with Lisbeth Dyer. Lisbeth lives in New York City (and actually played Madame in a few productions). She loved that she could be involved in something I was doing many miles away.

The recorded audio transmission was courtesy of Leah Donahue, my friend from Ireland. I found a real recording of a Russian Cosmonaut delivering her last broadcast. Leah translated that into Gaelic.

It was an experiment that I'd like to do again.

BUT - When we were told our dissertation play would be live and in the X theatre, I wanted to go all out. I had ditched *Verbrannt!* and decided 'all out' meant *The Blood Vessel*. It may have been too much too soon. A few actors got sick. We didn't have understudies. Everything had to be done in a few weeks' time.

I thought it was important that the theatre department had the live (organized) chaos on stage once again. And let's poke some fun at the rich while we're at it. I mean, not many had the luxury to rent a private island for their friends during a global pandemic? Or could complain about how boring it was to be in their mansion during the mandated lockdowns? I mean, I was living in a travel trailer on a campground so...what the hell?

But there were times when I questioned whether I should have gone with something super minimal like *Transmission*. Then I went to the rehearsals and that question was tossed aside. The students were having so much fun with my piece. Why not give them some wild disaster-piece that is both a verbal and physical workout? These thespians hadn't been on an actual stage for a long time, if at all.

Juli and I were in tune with each other. We had the cast we wanted. She knew how to get them to move. The script felt complete. And - I had finally met someone who loved masks as much as I did!

Penelope: But masks on top of characters playing fantasy roles. Did you think that was too much, this layer of masks?

Stella: I don't think there were enough masks! In fact, if we could do it again, I'd want only masks for everyone that looked like the person they were pretending to be! You know, how Michael Myers is wearing a mask modeled after William Shatner's face in the *Halloween* movies. I love masks. I think I have had a mask in just about everything I have written. From papier mâché lion and horse heads to Luchador and ski masks to gauze wrapped around the character's face. My casts often get the pleasure of creating their own masks. We made lovely masquerade masks in a play I did called *Lupercalia Uber Alles*.

I went to the Yōkai art exhibit at the International Folk Museum in Santa Fe twice, maybe three times in 2021. It was an amazing walkthrough of Yōkai (supernatural creatures in Japanese folklore). I was most impressed with their representation on the stage. There is magic with masks. You put one on and no one can see the real you. But the mask becomes another version of you. Personally, it is absolute freedom to wear a mask on stage. You become so much more aware of your body and what you are communicating with that. You become aware of your voice and how little or big you can express the language.

The idea of a death mask is just sublime. I remember seeing a picture of John Keats' death mask and getting goosebumps. I think the first known death mask was the one made of King Tut. They buried his mask with him as it was believed it would help the

face find the body in the afterlife. Other cultures believed the mask would imbue a new wearer with the power of the deceased.

In my play, Madame has a death mask made for a former lover, Erich. She has a mask made for herself but unlike the death mask, her mask has holes where the eyes should be. “My eyes are always open,” she says. She uses both masks for her little entertainment piece on the boat. It is a theatrical scene between Madame and Erich. Libby plays Madame in the ‘Madame’ mask because “Libby looks nothing like me.” Francesca the scullery maid played the Dunk... while disguised as the male ‘boat captain’.

Madame wrote this theatrical piece with the sole purpose of un-nerving the Baroness. The Baroness, you see, stole Erich away from Madame.

Penelope: Why would Madame trigger the Baroness in this way?

Stella: Madame is playing with the Baroness like a cat with a mouse. It’s a prelude to the kill. The whole party of millionaires was a ploy to get the Baroness to come. It is a game designed to isolate the Baroness (even from the land, by going out to sea) and eventually throw her overboard to drown.

Penelope: Pretty elaborate.

Stella: The Baroness took her man-toy, Penelope!

Originally, I wrote the play with so much sub-text that a lot of this was unclear. I assumed that if I knew it then everyone would know it too. Telepathy.

I got a lot of solid feedback from my cohorts. So, in a later revision, I let a bit more of the revenge plot show through. When the Duke crashes the party, it makes the servants, Daisy and Bernadette, uneasy. They re-think the game. They discuss with each other (in asides) about whether the Baroness should be murdered. Equally riled is the Captain, who asks Libby if they shouldn't postpone the murder. If the audience catches on, great. If not, due to the pacing of the first half, it's okay. All of it comes out again towards the end, when Madame, Libby, the Duke, and his servants are stranded on the island and have their final confrontation.

Penelope: So, it's okay if the audience misses something?

Stella: Yes. I want the pacing of the boat party to feel loose, fast, and a bit confusing. The audience has been invited to this party too and they aren't implicit in the murder plot. They are like the Baron. He is the one character closest to the audience. He's not sure what's going on but he's having a good time. He snorts a little spice and does some naughty things.

Penelope: Such as?

Stella: Oh, you know. He gets a blowjob from one of the Vandervelts. To him, that's cool.

Penelope: Why put that in?

Stella: That kind of thing happens at parties. I've catered some very elaborate, crazy rich people parties way back and you'd be surprised at how much a high-paying doctor will snort. or what people not married to each other will do in a back room somewhere. I've

cleaned extravagant, lagoon-like pools with archways and slides for police officers and wondered, “Wow. How are they affording all this on a police officer’s salary?”

Penelope: Do you think these experiences inform the work?

Stella: Oh, sure. I was exposed for most of my twenties to the idleness and excess of the wealthier class. I cleaned their saltwater fish tanks, their pools. I poured fifty dollars shots of tequila at country clubs, catered penthouse parties. I lived in their houses and took care of their neglected dogs, cats, birds, fish, twelve-foot pythons. Most of the time I was invisible to them. But there were moments when I thought they liked that I was a voyeur, a trespasser in their private lives, and that maybe they did wild shit for the pleasure of their employees. I sometimes think I should put more of the darker things I’ve seen into this play. Blowjobs, drugs, food orgasms don’t seem like enough now.

Penelope: Food orgasm?

Stella: Yeah. The Duke has his servant feed him fish head ice cream. This is an orgasmic experience for him.

Penelope: Do you actually want an actor to feign an orgasm on stage?

Stella: I’m on the fence about that. There is a certain campiness written into this thing. You know, that ‘dum da dum’ aspect. I also have Servants who do not speak so that gives it a clown-like element too. Like Harpo plus one. But I do call it a ‘Dark Comedy in Ten Vignettes’ and I think I want the dark parts to be, you know, DARK. However, for the Linnell production, it was mostly student actors and I’m not sure it was necessary to literally do some of things written in the play.

Juli focused more on the camp/clown aspects, because that was what she was interested in exploring. I suspect a different director may want to stage the blowjob in a way that makes the audience really uncomfortable. I am thinking of the scene in the film *Brown Bunny*. It has actor Chloe Sevigny giving actor/director Vincent Gallo a blowjob and I kept looking away. It just felt a bit *too* real. (I mean, was it?)

But if that is what a director wants to emphasize in their version of this play, great! That's why it's there. How it is performed is up to a director and the actor. A blowjob can be done with shadows like in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Or there can be a massive fake dildo (I'm thinking of Christopher Durang's 1974 play, *Titanic*). OR you can imply it in the way Juli did – with the Baron zipping up his pants. The fun comes from the 'fellatio – head' word play that happens anyway so the audience will know what went on without actually seeing it. I learned from experience that if it's something you really want in there as the writer, then you must make a character say it. Specific scene design, lighting, costumes...all that is extraneous and a director can veto it. Or the rest of the production team.

I *thought* I wanted the cross section of a real boat on stage. I was so specific in my original script that it had to be a "Gulet Style yacht." Then, I saw Inseung Park's stage design and thought, "Wow. This works. All it needs are some levels." He added in some levels and I realized I didn't need an ACTUAL boat but the expression of a boat. And how does one express a boat? Some sails, a mast, a deck...it was all there. It was beautiful. Plus, in the beginning of the play, Libby explains all the remodeling done on the boat and describes it in such a way that the audience can imagine how it looks. If they

can't imagine it, they'll at least understand that A LOT of works has been put into the renovation.

In my stage design vision, the boat is wrecked and physically forms the island. I was imagining, "if Buster Keaton wrecked my boat, how would he do it?" In a way, that transformation happened. Black fabric draped over the deck – the white sails dropped. An island.

Penelope: In terms of setting, what do the boat and island mean to you? Could the setting have been, say, a garden?

(Penelope gestures to Raoul who is eating the heads of the flowers)

Stella: Uh. The implication of being at sea is interesting. You are vulnerable to the elements. A storm can create hysteria. I've been through it. The boat dips down and you grip tight – you get sick, you pray to the sea gods, "please, please, don't let me drown today." That can be fun to stage.

For me, the boat is Madame Prime. An old yacht, renovated to look new. This is symbolic of Madame's insecurity about aging. A façade; fresh new wood to hide the rot beneath.

I think of the storm as the manifestation of Libby's frustration with the facade. The cold of the murder task. She wants to tear it all down. The storm does this. It sinks the boat. But it doesn't take away Madame and the Duke. Libby can't have it that easy. There must be a reckoning.

If the boat is Madame; the island is all Libby. This is her domain. Black sand, white blazing sun (like a maid's uniform)– a Traveler's Tree which is symbolic of her desire for the gardener.

Everything becomes something else on the 'island'. A diamond dress in the distance appears like a glittering oasis. Oar-weed becomes a crown for the Duke. Seashells are game pieces for the Duke's games. All that remains from the boat is Libby's 'Madame' mask. Which she leaves behind on the island when she and the Duke are rescued.

(Raoul, the gardener looks up, his mouth agape and full of soil. I look behind me.

Madame has entered the garden.)

Madame: You're still here?

Penelope: Is that a problem?

Madame (to Raoul): Why are you eating my pansies???

Raoul: They ruin it.

Madame: They are vibrant little muses for my-

Raoul: They have no function.

Madame: I like them.

Raoul: Do you? Do you really? Because every year you order them and I plant them along the walk way- see, this here- the WALK WAY. And you step on them. Crush them underfoot and I can hear their little screams. So, piss on your muses! I'm going to eat them all.

Madame: Sing to me.

Raoul: No.

Madame: Sing to me!

Raoul (*running off*): No!

(*Madame totters after him.*)

Penelope: Jeez.\

Stella: They have a complicated relationship. *Raoul & the Art of Eating Pansies* was the third of my Madame one-acts. In this play, we get to see how Madame imposes her will on an employee. She forces Raoul to sing, to make love to her, to wear the boat and compete in the blood sports, and, in the end, Raoul has had enough. He digs a hole deep, deep into the earth. Madame tries to maim him (again) with her machete but he strangles her with a pearl necklace and drags her down into the hole – never to be seen again.

Penelope: Is *that* the end of Madame?

Stella: Oh no. A small Ginkgo Biloba plant has the Libby of this play transfixed. She/it manipulates her into ‘becoming’ Madame.

Penelope: There’s a pattern here.

Stella: Madame is eternal. In my mind, someone will always play the role. I like to think I’ll keep working with this character until I can understand her.

(*Penelope and I stare at each other for a long time while the sun sets on the*

conversation.)

[Ha ha. So, I don't know how to end my interview! But nothing really ends, does it? For even more fun, enjoy the latest draft of *The Blood Vessel* (Appendix A)]

APPENDICES

Appendix A. The Blood Vessel

THE BLOOD VESSEL

(a dark comedy in ten vignettes)

by

Stella Perry

Settings

For scenes: “Pleasantries” – “Storm”:

Aboard “The Blood Vessel,” a Gulet-style Yacht on a balmy summer night

The ship has two masts, vaguely dividing the stage into thirds.

Characters can move between the FRONT, MIDDLE, and BACK thirds of the ship.

At the MIDDLE is a small cabin with large windows, where the Captain is piloting the yacht.

There is also a passage BELOW deck.

For scenes: “Black Sand” – “Sandtrap”: an uninhabited island

[Note: There can be an intermission following “Storm”]

Cast of Characters

<u>MADAME CARTE BLANC:</u>	The very wealthy owner of ‘The Blood Vessel’
<u>THE DUKE:</u>	Madame’s neighbor and rival. A strong masculine presence and a close talker.
<u>MR. VANDERVELT:</u>	Madame’s carpenter, BERNADETTE, disguised as a wealthy philanthropist.
<u>MRS. VANDERVELT:</u>	Madame’s kitchen maid, DAISY, disguised as a wealthy socialite.
<u>MRS. BARONESS:</u>	Supremely wealthy, the guest of honor
<u>MR. BARON (TO BE):</u>	The Baroness’ possible fiancé
<u>THE DUKE’S SERVANTS:</u>	Two very handsome, almost unearthly, people.
<u>LIBBY:</u>	Madame’s head house maid and personal attendant
<u>CAPTAIN:</u>	Madame’s boat captain & chambermaid named FRANCESCA
<u>THE UNSEEN CHEF:</u>	Slavishly creating delicious cuisine below deck

Scene One: Pleasantries

Lights up slow to reveal the BARONESS, BARON (to be), Mr. & MRS. VANDERVELT in a tableau vivant, ala an Irving Penn photograph, poised with various drinks in hand.

LIBBY enters from the BACK of the ship in her Victorian Maid's uniform. The BARONESS, seeing her, snaps her fingers. The others turn their heads to look at LIBBY.

BARONESS

Ahoy. You there. May I have a refill?

LIBBY

Certainly.

BARONESS

After all, I am the guest of honor! Tee-hee. *(she has had a bit too much already)*

LIBBY takes her empty glass and goes to refill it.

MR. VANDERVELT

This is true. Why, when Margery and I were told that the Baroness would be at this gala, I turned to her and I said *(turns to Mrs. Vandervelt)* We wouldn't miss it for the world.

MRS. VANDERVELT

Oh yes. Why, I wouldn't have come if the Baroness wasn't going to be here. *(winks at Mr. Vandervelt)*

BARONESS

I blush. I blush.

BARON

Aw, honey. It's so cute when you blush.

BARONESS

Honestly, I haven't a clue who this Madame Carte Blanc is, but when I heard that the illustrious Vandervelts were to be on board – I said, “hoist the main sails!”

MR. V

Yes.

MRS. V

(snicker)

Beat.

BARONESS

And I just love being the center of attention.

BARON

That she does.

Libby returns with the drink.

LIBBY

Here you are & welcome.

The sound of a nautical whistle from below.

LIBBY

Madame Carte Blanc is delighted to have you aboard 'The Blood Vessel' for its virginal voyage along the coast. She would like you to notice the newly restored and Epoxy laminated salt water resistant mahogany with an astonishing 100 years of sea life. The ship is piloted by Madame's Captain – he has his Inland Waters Certificate of Competency, his Day Skipper Badge, the Local Waters & Coastal Waters license as well as a mastery of underwater welding.

MR. V

What does welding have to do with piloting a ship?

LIBBY

Um...

MRS. V

What about his Yacht master Offshore license?

BARON

Surely, we are staying close to the coast?

LIBBY

Who are you?

BARONESS

This is my plus one. Let's call him The Baron.

LIBBY

There was no plus one on the invite.

A pounding from DEEPER below deck.

LIBBY

Ah, ok. Finally, our meals will be provided by Chef. He is a restaurateur, winemaker, chef, and author of three cookbooks: *Table for One*, *Table for Two*, and *Table for Three*. World renowned, yet reclusive, Chef prefers to work unseen. "Let the plate be my face and the taste be my voice."

BARONESS

What does he look like?

LIBBY

I just said-

BARONESS (*interrupting*)

-How do you communicate?

LIBBY

Eh, a pulley system.

BARON

How very mysterious! Why, dearest, you have brought me to the most peculiar boat party.

LIBBY

Your name?

BARON

Richard Cornelius Hanson, but most people call me Rick, or Ricky, but only my brothers call me Dick, or Dicky...sometimes D or D.J. as in Dick Junior...oh yes, I am a junior.

The Baron does an awkward bow.

MRS V

About twenty years her junior

MR V

Now now

BARONESS

He is my Baron to Be!

BARON

Or not to be, that is the question.

The Baroness giggles. The others just stare at her.

LIBBY

(to the Baron) Do you have any food allergies?

BARON

I am deathly allergic to shellfish.

LIBBY

Noted. Can you swim?

BARON

Absolutely not.

The Vandervelts exchange a look. The sound of a nautical whistle.

LIBBY

And now, may I present to you, the ubiquitous Madame Carte Blanc.

LIBBY unlatches a door in the floor. She then pulls on a pulley, straining as MADAME rises from below in a glittering diamond dress & Cosmopolitan drink in hand. Her smile more of a grimace and an exaggerated mole on her face. The platform wobbles and stalls for a moment; MADAME only halfway up.

MADAME

Libby.

LIBBY

(out of breath)

Libby continues with the pulley system and Madame is finally able to step off her platform, empty glass in hand.

MADAME

Welcome. By now Libby has introduced you to tonight's Captain and Chef. She was quite eager to introduce me to you, but I think it is more appropriate if I tell you a little bit about myself. *(clears throat)* a little speech I prepared. Oh. Where did I put it, Libby?

LIBBY

Left glove.

Madame attempts to retrieve it still holding the glass. Libby comes to get the glass from her.

MADAME

A refill, dear. And with a bit more zing and less zang. Capiche?

Libby nods and exits.

MADAME

(pulls a scroll out of her gloved hand & unrolls it) Welcome aboard my gullet or as they say in Italy, "goletta." Once a fishing vessel and now my Blood Vessel, the last gift of a dear lover *(dramatic sigh)* Erich.

Why he left me, alone & heartbroken? Well, only the sea knows.

All I know is that he lost *this* boat at a poker game in Monte Carlo. There he was, out on the pier, as the man who won his boat drifted away into the night. Erich was nursing a tumbler of whiskey and I was nursing the waif "loneliness" -having just lost my husband, Amador.

And so, we met: strangers in the night. I had just docked my own boat, The Vagina Dentata, when I came upon him. We sailed back to my estate and I locked him away in the Nautilus Room – my heart's treasure. Mine. I gave him this whistle should he ever need my warm embrace. *(Sad blow on whistle)*

At the FRONT of the boat; a grappling hook! The DUKE and his TWO SERVANTS bob up from the sea in diving gear.

MADAME

Erich & I were inseparable. For a while. Until one day, someone unlocked my heart's treasure. He stole away in the night to take my boat and crashed it against some rocks. To the murky depths, he was lost.

(Wipes away a tear)

For seven days, he was in the Irish Sea, twisting and whipping about. That broken marionette strangled with seaweed- glittering with dinoflagellates, reeking of cuttlefish. My sad little scallop.

Those seven days I wept for I knew a terrible thing had happened to him. In my dreams, he was a merman, singing to me in garbled speech. *(singing an old sea shanty)* Cause her hair was green as seaweed, her skin was blue and pale, I loved that girl with all my heart, I only liked the upper part, I did not like the tail.

The DUKE and his TWO SERVANTS have now climbed aboard the FRONT. One SERVANT climbs up the mast to release a colorful green, purple, and white parachute.

MADAME

I was there when they fished him out of the sea. *(she blinks hard & wobbles)* Anyway, I found his vessel for sale when I was looking to replace my stolen one. Funny, isn't it? Finding his ship for sale after losing my own? How a ship finds its *true* master? Reminds me of a poem by Lord Alfred Tennyson:

“Sunset and evening star,

And one clear call for me!

And may there be no moaning of the bar,

When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,

Too full for sound and foam,

When that which drew from out the boundless deep

Turns again home.”

The parachute lands on the ship's deck near Madame's feet. There is a small gold package attached to the parachute. She ignores it. The guests look up: where did it come from?

MADAME

(continues with the poem, quite annoyed that no one is listening)

“Twilight and evening bell,

And after that the dark!

And may there be no sadness of farewell,”

Libby enters with a fresh, pink Cosmopolitan.

LIBBY

Madame, a gift for you! How lovely!

MADAME

“When I embark” –

Oh fine! I’ll open it. To whomever put such glorious effort into delivering this to me, I applaud your intentions and will cherish whatever is inside.

Libby hands her the gold package and Madame opens it to reveal an action figure that resembles the Duke. Libby looks over –

LIBBY

It has a button!

She presses it and the little figure announces:

"THE DUKE HAS ARRIVED!"

The guests gasp, look around. The Baroness claps.

BARONESS

Oh goody! The Duke!

The DUKE, in his wet suit and flippers, enters. He is escorted by his two gorgeous SERVANTS in gold boxer-style shorts.

DUKE

It is I!

He bows. More clapping from the Baroness. Madame throws the action figure overboard and beckons to Libby.

MADAME

Help me to change.

The Duke stops her.

DUKE

Madame, like starlight you are! May I kiss your delicate hand?

Madame holds out her hand and the Duke gets down on one knee to kiss it.

DUKE

My dear, you wouldn't happen to have a suit on board? This adventurous undertaking has so racked my mind with sharks, grappling hooks, accordion, and other party favors - plus the sheer (strategic!) timing of the parachute to my arrival that I have forgotten to bring a change of clothes. Alas, I am only in a wetsuit & flippers, hardly the proper attire for your vaginal voyage.

MADAME

Virginal.

DUKE

Yes.

A shark smile with red lipstick:

MADAME

Dearest Duke. This is a boat not a boutique. Libby...help me, I can barely move in this cursed dress.

Madame exits to the BACK of the boat with Libby. Changing clothes:

MADAME

The nerve! Usurping my party in such fashion. Why, I could just-

She punches something.

LIBBY

Deep breath

MADAME

But he will ruin everything Libby!

LIBBY

Nah. He is the Duke. And what does the Duke always do at parties?

MADAME

Yes, yes

LIBBY

He passes out somewhere most embarrassing

MADAME

Do you remember the time he passed out in the Judge's lap?!

LIBBY

Well.... okay. I'm not so sure-

MADAME

-And the time we stuffed him in the coffin we bought for Amador! What a lark!

LIBBY

Actually, he didn't really mind that

MADAME

Oh Libby, I could just strangle him- with my, my, hmm...what do I have that I could use?

LIBBY

We are on course and nothing will stop us

MADAME

Come, zip me darling.

Libby joins Madame behind the dressing screen. Back to the MIDDLE:

MRS. V (approaching the Dukes Servants)

Hello.

SERVANT #1

Ahoy.

MR. V

Gold shorts, really? Is the Duke going through another mid- life crisis?

Servant #2 nods.

MRS V

Didn't he have you two wearing lion heads and fur pelts at Madame's last party?

SERVANT #1

Started to smell

Servant 2 nods.

MR V

Yes. It was most rank.

Curious looks. The Duke walks over.

DUKE

Neither cool nor warm but balmy, eh?

He pulls at his wetsuit near the crotch to un-stick it. Mrs. V giggles.

MRS. V

You wear that suit well, Duke.

DUKE

Mrs. Vandervelt, is it? And Mr. Vandervelt. Charmed to meet you at long last.

The Duke kisses MR. Vandervelt's hand.

MR. VANDERVELT

We would be fools to miss a party hosted by the fabulous Madame Carte Blanc.

MRS. VANDERVELT

Fab-u-lous.

DUKE

This? This is but a shindig. I believe many of my invitations to you have been lost in the post for I, the Duke, throw the most lavish parties this side of the continent.

MR. VANDERVELT

We are very busy people.

MRS V

Yes, I am a wealthy socialite

MR V

And I am a wealthy philanthropist. Ho hum.

DUKE

Yes. Yes. I am happy to meet you finally. (*snaps at servant #1*) Give them the envelope.

Servant #1 produces an envelope from the golden shorts.

MR. V

Ah...

DUKE

This here is an invite to my 10th Annual Boat War.

MRS. V

Thank you.

DUKE

It's good blood sport. You would enjoy it. Oh. I almost forgot. During our swim over, an old Harbor seal followed in my wake. I think he thought I was his cousin.

Polite laughter. All join the Duke as he does a seal bark impression.

DUKE

Finally, I just slapped the creature –

He slaps Servant #1.

DUKE

And said: alright you freeloader, I've let you ride my stream now what will you give me in return –

He snaps at Servant #2, who nods and exits to the FRONT. Servant #2 hoists up a dead baby seal with some netting and carries it back to the Duke.

DUKE

No easy feat. Like wrestling an oiled up half-man with no arms or legs, but in the end, I did manage to defeat the creature with my bare hands.

The seal is dumped on the floor in front of the group. Gasps. Chuckling. Servant #1 rubs the welt on his cheek.

DUKE

In return, it gave me its life.

Madame steps out from behind the changing screen in an asymmetrical 'mostly black with a triangle of white' cocktail dress. Libby hands her a fresh drink. She starts to walk towards her guests when the CAPTAIN pops her head out the cabin window.

CAPTAIN

Madame, I'm afraid we will have to stay close to shore. There is a fierce storm on the way.

Madame throws the contents of her glass into the Captain's face.

MADAME

Full steam ahead!

LIBBY

Not a steam ship.

MADAME

You know what I mean Libby! Fetch me another cocktail. And wheel out the Scallop and Olive Eyeball canapes. All this dressing has made me hungry.

CAPTAIN

My eyes are burning!!! Ahhhhhh

MADAME

Libby.

Libby produces a napkin from her apron pocket and dabs at the Captain's eyes. Madame walks away to join in on the laughter (the Duke has gone 'full seal')

CAPTAIN

Thanks Libby.

LIBBY

Don't worry about the storm.

CAPTAIN

I can't help it. This is my first voyage & I don't want to crash.

LIBBY

Just stick to the plan.

CAPTAIN

Oh Libby, I can't wait to be free.

The Captain hugs Libby & tries awkwardly to kiss Libby who gently removes herself from the situation.

CAPTAIN

We are all counting on you.

LIBBY

Alright, get back to the controls.

Fade.

Scene Two: Entertainment

Lights up on the MIDDLE of the boat. Libby is wheeling away an empty food cart.

Madame blows on her nautical whistle.

MADAME

While those gorgeous little canapes are broken down by bile and transformed into chyme, before making its way into the three parts of the small intestine, my favorite part is of course the duodenum, I would like to offer a selection of my life in dramatic theatrical fashion. It is a scene wrought with desire & longing:

Erich, as played by the Captain and Madame, played by the servant Libby, have been in love for some time. Not knowing that this is the last time she will see her il innamorato, she squabbles with him. I invite you to watch this deeply affecting & terribly tragic event. Please note: Captain and Libby are not classically trained actors. I have worked with them for days and we are lucky that they can project and annunciate. Let us remember that it is the words that give rise to speech & emotion and those words were penned by my most manicured hand. The right hand. And now, without further ado, I present to you:

“The Squabble that Pushed my Lover out to Sea (to die).”

Polite clapping. The Duke fakes a yawn. This is not missed by Madame, and she stands next to him.

Awkward silence.

Madame blows her whistle. The Captain stumbles in with an Erich Mask on (let's say it looks like a handsome man's death mask)

CAPTAIN

Libby needs help with her costume.

MADAME

So why don't you help her?

CAPTAIN

I can't see.

MADAME

TRY.

The Captain stumbles off to the BACK.

DUKE

Madame, how very exciting & Avant Garde! Very different than your usual cliched theatrical endeavors.

BARONESS

Why were the eyes closed on that mask?

BARON

It appeared to be a death mask.

MADAME

Indeed, it is a replica of Erich's face. Who are you?

BARONESS

Oh, my goodness!

BARON

Rick, or Ricky. Her plus one.

DUKE

A death mask. Most ingenious! Had I done that with all my dead lovers! (*chuckle*)

The Servants exchange a look.

MADAME

I had a surgeon in the art studio to advise the mask maker – on account of Erich's bloated face. What you will see here is as he looked before his death. BEFORE someone stole him from me!

The Baroness gulps.

DUKE

And did you have a mask made for yourself?

MADAME

Well, of course. Except, my eyes are always OPEN.

Libby & the Captain enter, in their respective masks. Libby is wearing a long white gown studded with conches and other various seashells. The Captain is in a ruffled, white satin poet blouse.

MADAME

Quiet now. It begins.

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

Erich, darling, where were you last night? I went up to the tower and found only a cold cot where your warm body should have been.

CAPTAIN (*as ERICH*)

I went out, my dearest, to the beach. The moon spoke to me in soft whispers “come out, come out, wherever you are”

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

But I needed you, under that full moon! It was the most harrowing of days and your comfort was required. How did you even get out? The door was locked.

CAPTAIN (*as ERICH*)

Ah, my love. One of your servants took pity on my condition and allowed me passage to the sea –

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

Which servant?

CAPTAIN (*as herself*)

(hesitates) Um...

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

Never mind, I’ll get rid of them all.

CAPTAIN (*as ERICH*)

No, please. I won’t ever go out on my own again.

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

My sweet, you can always visit the sea with me –

CAPTAIN (*as ERICH*)

You must understand, fair maiden, --

The Captain snorts.

LIBBY (*as herself*)

Stop it. You're going to make me laugh.

CAPTAIN (*as herself*)

It's just --

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

Hush now. I know what you are going to say. You are going to say that a man must venture out alone from time to time. But! you are not going out alone. There is someone else, isn't there?

CAPTAIN (*as ERICH*)

There is no one.

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

She is here now. I can smell it.

The Baroness chokes on her drink.

CAPTAIN (*as ERICH*)

I smell nothing but your mammalian musk, my lover.

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

As do I! Now, let us adjourn into your tower for some plum pudding. But alas, where is the key?

CAPTAIN (*as ERICH*)

The only key you need is right here (*points to his heart*) -

DUKE

Well done. Well done. Who would like to watch my servants, Tango?

MADAME

The scene is not yet over.

DUKE

Tell us how it ends, love. You are so good at summary.

MRS. VANDERVELT

What type of Tango?

DUKE

Hm. Uruguayan, I believe. Is that right?

The Duke's Servants nod.

DUKE

Oil each other up while I fetch my accordian.

The DUKE exits to the FRONT of the boat. MADAME follows. The CAPTAIN and LIBBY dash off to the BACK of the boat.

The guests chatter and watch the Duke's Servants oil up. They do this by jumping up and down and working up a sweat and then smearing the sweat all over their bodies.

MADAME

You know very well that my play was not yet over!

DUKE

Oh, my dear. It is too much when you bare your soul in such fashion. It makes me question the legitimacy of your status. And Libby was very unconvincing, even with your face on.

MADAME

I've got a good mind to push you overboard.

DUKE

Please try. It would amuse me.

She tries. He laughs. She slaps him. He laughs.

She walks back to the party. The Baroness and Baron approach her.

BARONESS

Many apologies, but I think Rick and I had better get going.

MADAME

Rick?

BARON

I'm Rick. Her plus one.

MADAME

There was no plus one on the invite.

BARONESS

I wonder if you might ask your Captain to pilot us back to shore.

MADAME

Nonsense dear. There is still the main course. You must stay for that. The Chef has put his heart & soul into the cuttlefish stew.

BARON

Soul?

MADAME

Yes. Soul (*she really drags out the word 'soul'*)

The Baroness sips her drink. Awkward silence.

Finally, Madame takes the Baron to Be by the arm.

MADAME

Would you like a private tour of 'The Blood Vessel'?

BARON

Why, yes, I –

The Duke enters with his accordion. A musical prelude.

DUKE

Let's Tango!

He plays a song on the accordion and his servants Tango.

MR. VANDERVELT

Would you care to dance, Mrs. Vandervelt?

MRS. VANDERVELT (*as herself*)

I only know the Argentine tango.

MR. VANDERVELT (*as herself*)

Who would notice the difference?

The Baroness walks by. The Vandervelts compose themselves & get back in character.

MRS. VANDERVELT

The Duke would, *Fritz*. He is very cultured.

MR. VANDERVELT

Really *Margery*. You would know all about his cultures, wouldn't you?

MRS. VANDERVELT

Why don't you ask the Baroness to dance? She is looking a bit pale and could use a healthy flush to the cheeks.

MR. VANDERVELT (*as herself*)

I'm not sure –

MRS. VANDERVELT

Come, we will walk over together.

MR V (*as herself*)

No. I don't think we should go near her.

MRS V (*as herself*)

Why?

MR V (*as herself*)

This whole plan, it's too risky now with the Duke here.

MRS V (*as herself*)

He is ob-li-vi-ous. Look at him. He suspects nothing.

They look at the Duke playing the accordion. He looks back at them and starts to swoop over. But Mr. & Mrs. Vandervelt cross over to join the Baroness & Madame.

MR. V

May I have this dance fair maiden?

Mrs. V snorts.

BARONESS

I cannot tango.

MR. V

Come, come. I will show you.

Mr. Vandervelt and the Baroness enter the dance floor.

MRS. V

Ricky Baron Dick Junior, would you like to dance?

MADAME

I am giving him a tour of my vessel.

BARON

I'm sure a short spin on the dance floor can be arranged, Madame? Especially with someone as prestigious as Margery Vandervelt.

Madame scowls and does not let the Baron's arm go easily. Mrs. V tugs until the Baron is released.

The Duke meanders around the dancing couples with the occasional flourish on the accordion – the song shows no sign of ending.

Mrs. V whispers in the Baron's ear. The Baron casually tweaks Mrs. Vandervelt's nipple. She giggles. The Duke is the only one who sees this.

Libby shares chocolates with Madame from her apron pocket.

MADAME

I am so hungry.

LIBBY

Yes.

MADAME

Will this song ever end?

LIBBY

I can end it for you.

MADAME

No, dear. We must preserve your energy for the grand finale.

LIBBY

You should have thought of that when you designed your grand entrance.

MADAME

It was a pulley system, Libby, and you barely broke a sweat.

LIBBY

Yeah, just.

MADAME

Oh pish.

The Servants dance past Madame & Libby. Libby unfolds a chocolate wrapper.

LIBBY

The servants will be a problem.

MADAME

Nonsense. Just be rid of them.

Libby is about to pop the chocolate in her mouth when Madame stops her.

MADAME

Is that the last Choco-bon?

LIBBY

Yes.

Madame opens her mouth. Libby reluctantly puts the chocolate in it.

MADAME

MMMM

Libby

LIBBY

Yes?

MADAME

Fetch me another drink.

Madame walks over to the Duke.

MADAME

End the song, you maniac.

DUKE

My dear, you are sweating. Have you been eating chocolate?

MADAME

That is none of your concern.

DUKE

It looks like you were snogging with a Man-Sized Truffle!

MADAME

End the song now or I swear to the gods on high that I will –

DUKE

-What?

MADAME

It will be so humiliating

DUKE

Yes? Go on.

MADAME

I know about what you did to your scullery maid.

DUKE

You forget. I am in league with the Judge.

The Duke finishes the song. A stare down. Libby brings Madame her drink.

A knock from below!

MADAME

Libby, dear, Chef is ready with the main course.

She blows on her nautical whistle. Libby exits to the BACK.

Scene Three: Spices

BARON

All that dancing made me quite hungry.

MR. V

I agree.

BARONESS

What is the main course, Madame?

MADAME

Why, Chef continues to amaze us with a delightful array of sea-style cuisine. Tonight, we will have Italian Style Cuttlefish Stew with Green Peas, Whole Baby Cuttlefish Soup Taiwanese Style, Wakame Seaweed Salad, Caprese Salad with Sad Scallops, Grilled Eel with Prawn Fritters, and a Greco di Tufo wine pairing, Fish head ice cream and my personal favorite, plum pudding (*Libby enters with a food cart*). Please, eat and be merry.

The Duke and his Servants are the first to approach Libby.

DUKE

You, go fetch my spice box. And you, taste the stew first.

Servant 1 leaves to the FRONT, Servant 2 puts a spoonful of cuttlefish stew in its mouth.

DUKE

Here. Spit in this.

Servant 2 spits the spoonful into an empty glass.

DUKE

What does it need?

SERVANT 2

Red.

DUKE

Do this one next.

The Servant takes a bite of something else and spits.

SERVANT 2

Yellow.

Another bite.

SERVANT 2

Purple.

Servant 1 enters the MIDDLE with a beautiful, wooden spice box.

DUKE

Madame, while your Chef truly deserves an A for effort, may I interest everyone with my exotic array of spices? Come, come, you must sample these fine powders as any of them will ultimately enhance the dishes. May I recommend this finely powdered paprika for the cuttle fish stew? *(to the servant holding the spice box)* Go around to the tables and let them see the rainbow of the world, the crushed bounty of all the continents and the sea. Fritz, you must have a sniff of the eggshell white on the right.

The Spicebox Servant finds their way to MR. VANDERVELT who is at a table nearest the Duke. He snorts the powder from a small wooden spoon. Zing!

MR. VANDERVELT

Margery, you must try some of this.

MRS. VANDERVELT

I rather like the looks of the pink one.

She takes a snort of the pink powder.

MRS. VANDERVELT

Oh! You must bring this to the Baroness. *(to the Baroness)* Try a bit of the pink. It is divine.

MADAME

Ah, signora. We must try the cerulean blue! I insist.

She takes a hefty scoop of blue powder and holds it up to the Baroness' nose.

BARONESS

If you insist, Madame.

The Baroness snorts. A bit of gagging, blue leakage from the nostrils. Madame takes a big spoonful for herself and waves the servant away.

Madame (fake) sneezes the powder into the Baroness' face.

Libby stifles a laugh.

BARONESS

Oh!

MADAME

Oh Libby! She is blue in the face! Be a dear and take care of the Baroness.

BARON

Should I help too?

MADAME

No. No. The Vandervelt's will entertain you.

Madame hand gestures to Mrs. Vandervelt.

MADAME

Mrs. Vandervelt, will you keep the Baron to Be company? Libby and the Baroness are heading off to change. *(wink)*

MRS. VANDERVELT

Bring me some more pink!

Madame storms off with Libby & the Baroness following in her powdered wake.

The Spicebox Servant goes to Mrs. V. She licks her finger and dips it into the pink powder to rub along her gums.

MRS. VANDERVELT

I wanna dance!

MR. VANDERVELT

I'd like to eat now, Margie.

MRS. VANDERVELT

It feels like a squid wiggly inside me...mmm... I just want to move.

She dances by herself. It looks like squirming.

The Duke snaps his fingers, and the box appears before him. He snorts some eggshell white with green.

DUKE

Good. Good. Ignites a real fire in my loins, that green.

In the sky, multi-colored fireworks. Illusion or real?

A green mist moves through the boat.

Mrs. Vandervelt wiggles her way to the Baron at the food cart & starts groping him.

At some point, the Duke snaps his fingers and his servants start boxing. Mr. Vandervelt watches for a while. "Let's make this interesting" the Duke says. He tosses some gold coins on the ground. Mr. Vandervelt adds to the pile.

Mrs. Vandervelt performs fellatio on the Baron.

The Captain joins the boxing ring. Servant 1 knocks Servant 2 to the floor.

Servant 2 goes to the FRONT of the boat, wounded.

The Duke he has Servant #1 on their knees spoon-feeding fish head ice cream into his mouth. This is an orgasmic experience for the Duke.

Libby, with Madame's Mask in hand, leads the Baroness through a passage below deck and they come up to the FRONT of the ship. Libby points to show the Baroness something out on the water. The Baroness joins Libby. Libby slips on the mask.

LIBBY (as MADAME)

See there? That is my tower. You're not far from the shore at all.

BARONESS

Yummy water. I just want to drink it all up!

LIBBY (as MADAME)

Oh. Yummy indeed.

BARONESS

Oh! You've changed faces? Where did Libby go?

LIBBY (as MADAME)

Libby has gone off to do what Libbys do, I suppose. Fetching drinks, zipping gowns, (*quietly*) other things.

Awkward beat. The Baroness stumbles on some netting and slumps to the floor.

BARONESS

I knew a man named Erich once.

LIBBY

Oh?

BARONESS

Yes, we met in Monte Carlo.

LIBBY

As most people do. Come, stand up. You'll get your gown dirty.

Libby helps the Baroness to stand. She wobbles and occupies herself with smoothing her gown:

BARONESS

He told me his story of woe and I immediately fell in love with him. The soft-spoken pirate on a stolen vagina--- oh hee --- did I say vagina? I meant boat...(*wobbles*) he had been locked away you see, until some kind servant released him and let him go free

LIBBY

Ah.

BARONESS

And then I watched your play and remembered what he said about the woman with the shark smile. Sharrkkkss. Oh my (*swoons*) there aren't sharks down there in the water, are there?

She peers precariously over the railing.

LIBBY (as MADAME)

No.

BARONESS

Oh, okay. Good. Ever since he told me of that shark smile, I have been haunted by that image.

A cold wind. The Baroness shivers.

BARONESS

It's s-s-s-so cold. Do you think it is cold down there on the bottom? Poor, poor Erich. It's so tragic what happened to him. *(beat)* The Baron. He lacks the melancholy that I so crave. Do you know melancholy Madame? Well of course you do. *(licks her lips, dry from the drugs)* And you are s-s-s-so forgiving, aren't you? You must be to keep Libby around after she *(trails off)*

LIBBY *(as herself)*

She what?

The Baroness is alert again, slightly.

BARONESS

...Erich.... he always said that he would never forget Libby. His key to freedom.

LIBBY *(as MADAME)*

Aw. That's lovely.

Libby pushes her overboard and watches her drown. Servant #2 is also watching. Libby then retreats below deck and along the passage to arrive at the BACK of the boat. Madame is waiting behind the screen.

MADAME

Zip me.

Libby zips up her blue satin evening gown. Madame turns around & smiles.

MADAME

You wear it well.

Libby starts to take off the mask. Madame goes to her and caresses the mask.

MADAME

A clever game, Libby. Of course, we must change our clothes so the others can't tell us apart.

LIBBY

Our faces are not the same.

MADAME

Silly dear. No one ever looks at a servant.

The two women change 'roles. Madame wipes her own mole off her face & draws a mole on Libby.

MADAME

Ingenious. Now get back to your party!

Servant 2 is whispering something into the Duke's ear.

DUKE

Delicious!

LIBBY (as MADAME) goes to the MIDDLE of the ship:

LIBBY

Duke, what is the meaning of this?! Powder everywhere -- all the fish head ice cream, gone!

MRS. VANDERVELT (returning to the group with the Baron)

Fritz?

MR. V

Why Margery. How fares thee?

They chuckle. The Baron zips up his trousers.

BARON

Madame. You throw one heck of a party!

LIBBY

Thank you, Carlos.

BARON

The name is Rick.

MADAME (as Libby) enters from the BACK.

BARON (*to Madame*)

Is my lady friend all cleaned up?

MADAME

Pardon?

BARON

The Baroness. She left with you.

MADAME

Oh. Ah. (*as Libby*) I cleaned her face and she left to find you.

MR. V

The Baron was playing Hide the Salami with Margery.

MRS. V

How dare you!

LIBBY

What happens on the boat stays on the boat. We are all adulterers here.

The Captain ENTERS.

CAPTAIN

Libby, can I talk to you?

Libby scowls at her.

LIBBY

Whatever it is, it can *wait*.

DUKE

It seems that Madame did have a plan for tonight's entertainment.

LIBBY

Pardon?

DUKE

I have experienced this before. Ladies and Gentleman, welcome to the 'Murder at Sea' mystery voyage. Why dear, I did not think you would organize populous entertainment. You surprise me.

LIBBY

Uh. Of course. A Murder Mystery sure to entertain! I, of course, will be playing lead detective.

DUKE

Why no, that cannot be.

LIBBY

And why not?

The Duke rises.

DUKE

Because you are, I'm afraid, the prime suspect.

Servant #2 nods. Libby glares at the Duke as the lights go down.

Scene Four: Suspects

The Duke paces back and forth across the MIDDLE of the ship. His Servants pace with him. The guests watch.

DUKE

Hmm. Is there any reason why the Baroness would be missing?

BARON

She may be slumped in a corner somewhere. She gets vertigo sometimes.

DUKE

Ah. So, she has a medical history.

MRS. V

I would say that we all have a medical history, Duke.

DUKE

That so? What is your medical history, Mrs. V?

MR. V

I beg your pardon, that's private.

DUKE

I have always been curious about your HMO – skin as rashy as yours. Eczema, I'm afraid. But with all your wealth, surely you could not find a cure?

The V's exchange a look.

MR. V

Erm. My wife's HMO is none of your business.

DUKE

Hmm. H-M-O.

Libby helps Madame with the finishing touches of her 'detective' costume at the BACK of the ship.

MADAME

I cannot allow the Duke to upstage me on my own vessel.

LIBBY

Yes

MADAME

I would say you did well, but our so-called Captain called you Libby. Miraculous that the Duke was not paying her any attention.

LIBBY

It seems he had something else on his mind.

MADAME

Where's the riding crop?

Libby helps Madame look.

LIBBY

Why do you have a riding crop on the boat?

MADAME

I like to bring the gardener on board sometimes.

LIBBY

Oh.

Madame emerges wearing a deerstalker cap, horse riding pants with jacket and blouse. A riding crop in her hand. She goes to the MIDDLE of the ship. Libby lingers behind, slowly putting on her Victorian Maid's uniform.

MADAME

Don't tell me you've started without me!

MRS. V

The Duke was interrogating us about our HMO's!

MADAME

Well, how very rude. *(blowing on her nautical whistle)* Libby! Bring me a brandy!

DUKE

My dear, is it time for Brandy already?

MADAME

Yes.

DUKE

Have you a glass for me?

MADAME

No. You are on duty, detective.

DUKE

Ah good. For a moment there, and as deduced by your deliberate choice of attire, that you thought you would play the role of Lead Detective.

Libby brings Madame a glass of brandy. Madame sips.

MADAME

I will leave cliched endeavors to you, dearest Duke. Please get on with it.

DUKE

I suppose it is best to start at the beginning.

MADAME

Of the day? Why, Libby was giving me my daily sponge bath – weren't you dear?

LIBBY

Yes. She had her bath.

DUKE

You were there the whole time?

LIBBY

Always.

DUKE

Hmmm.

MRS. V

I refuse to say where I was yesterday morning.

MR. V

I do not see how it is relevant.

DUKE

Motive! I am trying to establish motive.

MRS. V

My motivation was to prepare for this party, of course.

MR. V

You were in a bit of a mood, darling.

MRS. V

Oh. I, ah, yes – I was in a mood.

MADAME

What manner of mood?

MRS. V

Well, you see, I had worked all day on something that I thought was brilliant only to have someone walk in and dump it on the floor.

MADAME

Well, I hardly thought it was brilliant.

MRS. V

Pardon?

MADAME

Why would someone dump something so brilliant on the floor, dear?

MRS. V

Because that someone was in a mood!

MADAME

It was not to theme dear. And maybe that someone's nerves were on the fritz on account of preparing a virginal voyage!

LIBBY

Madame, would you like a refill?

DUKE

That was quite confusing. What on earth were the two of you gabbing on about? You act as if you spent the day together.

MADAME

Yes, please. A refill.

Libby goes to refill the drink. The Captain joins her.

CAPTAIN

I think we need to turn around.

LIBBY

Quiet.

BARON

Having spent a great deal of my childhood reading 'Detective Comics', I can say with confidence that the *best place to start* is at the scene of the crime.

DUKE

Now, that is something. To the prow!

The Duke saunters to the FRONT of the Ship and the rest follow. He mimes looking for evidence, inspecting the railing, etc. Everyone watches with feigned interest.

The Captain and Libby linger behind.

LIBBY

We improvise, that's all.

CAPTAIN

No. I can't. The Duke is onto us.

LIBBY

Hardly. He thinks this is all a game.

CAPTAIN

No. He knows.

LIBBY

Pish.

CAPTAIN

Please, let's turn around.

Libby slaps the Captain. The Captain stares at her.

LIBBY

Yeah, well, since you like it so much.

MADAME (*yelling*)

Libby!!!! Where is my refill?

Libby goes to the FRONT of the boat to bring Madame her drink.

DUKE (*looking at the boat's figurehead*)

What is the meaning of this?

MR. V

What's wrong with it?

DUKE

Well, nothing is wrong with the technique. The man who crafted this was quite capable.

Mr. V smiles.

DUKE

You smile?

MR. V

Oh. I vetted this *man* myself and passed along his card to Madame. I feel like it has been carved by my very own hands.

MADAME

Indeed.

BARON

I thought these things-

MR V

Figurehead

BARON

Pardon me, figurehead, were supposed to be women –

MADAME

How very archaic. No, this is Erich's head on my vessel – parting the waters with his beautiful mouth and swallowing the -

DUKE

-Your obsession with this dead lover must cease. At once!

MADAME

(sips)

LIBBY

There is a lot of netting and – what's all this? Grappling hooks?

DUKE

How else was I to get on board?

MADAME

You weren't!

LIBBY

From the looks of this carelessly strewn pile of hooks n' ropes, I'd say the Baroness probably tripped on the Duke's accessories and fell overboard.

MADAME

Ah, yes. I see it now.

BARON

You're saying she drowned?

LIBBY

Hook, line, and sinker.

MADAME

Oh Libby. Pish. (*sips*)

MRS. V

Case closed. That was fun.

MR. V

May I suggest we move onto a pre-dawn nosh?

MRS V

Oh yes!

MADAME

No more nosh for you two.

DUKE

I do not agree.

MADAME

No?

BARON

Are you suggesting we nosh?

DUKE

Hmm.

BARON

I'll pass. My stomach has been churning for some time.

DUKE

I am suggesting foul play.

MADAME

Accidental.

MRS. V

Let's put it to a vote?

MR. V

Here

MRS. V

All in favor of accidental drowning say 'aye'?

MR. V

Aye

BARON

I-

MADAME

Aye

BARON

I don't know-

LIBBY

Aye!

MRS. V

Aye! Captain?

The Captain looks at Libby.

CAPTAIN

I guess...

LIBBY

Shouldn't you be manning the ship?

MADAME

Yes, please. Off you go to keep us afloat.

CAPTAIN

But I want to-

MADAME

LEAVE.

The Captain goes to the cabin.

DUKE

Nay. There is always a murderer. That's the point of the game.

MADAME

Well, if we must have a murderer. I vote the fiancé.

BARON

The hell!

MR. V

I second the motion. Perhaps the missus saw him in the act of receiving fellatio from Mrs. V –

MADAME

-and fearing libel repercussions

LIBBY

Pushed her over.

MRS. V

Well, I was giving him head –

MR. V

(clears throat) Fellatio

DUKE

Did you say 'head'?

MR V

No. No. Fellatio.

BARON

I didn't push my Daniella off the boat.

MADAME

Of course you did.

DUKE

I hardly think it was the man. And really, 'head'?

MADAME

Let's move past that, shall we?

DUKE

It seems so petty to push a petite oil baroness overboard – and really, if he wanted to get rid of his business partner, I can think of a dozen ways to eliminate such tiny weight.

His Servants exchange a look.

MADAME

I am sure you can.

DUKE

This is the act of a desperate *woman*. And since Mrs. V was occupied with the Baron to Be's engorged member, there is only one woman left who could do it.

He looks at Madame.

MADAME

Libby.

DUKE

Libby is not a woman, she is a servant.

MADAME

My most LOYAL servant.

Pause. Libby looks at Madame. The Duke smiles.

DUKE

No. It was the captain. She is not who he seems.

BARON

I knew there was something funny about that fella. (*groans, clutching stomach*)

DUKE

Your captain is one of your chambermaids, I gather?

MADAME

Well done.

DUKE

My eyes never deceive me.

MADAME

I suppose not.

The V's smirk.

MADAME

Well, let's have her walk the plank, then, shall we? Libby, bring the Captain.

LIBBY

Really?

Madame slaps Libby.

MADAME

I won't ask again.

Libby EXITS.

DUKE

A ha! Now, this calls for libations!

BARON

You can bring my lady friend out now.

DUKE

Yes.

MADAME

Momentarily.

Libby enters with the Captain.

MADAME

Strip her down.

Libby takes off the Captain's hat, coat, and pants. Only a chambermaid beneath.

CAPTAIN

Libby says I am walking the plank?

MADAME

For fun, darling.

CAPTAIN

But I cannot swim.

MADAME

Of course you can. You have your Level One Swimmer's License, don't you?

CAPTAIN

You told me not to get it. Remember? You said that a Captain always goes down with his ship.

BARON

That is true.

DUKE

Captain, we hereby charge you with the murder of the Baroness. Have you anything to say?

CAPTAIN

I didn't do it. But I know who-

DUKE

-Anything else?

CAPTAIN

Libby, she

LIBBY (*covering the Captain's mouth*)

Off you go!

DUKE (*to his servants*)

Help her hoist the chambermaid.

Servant #2 refuses. Servant #1 and Libby grab the Captain and hoist her up onto the boat's prow.

CAPTAIN (*biting Libby's hand*)

Libby!!! She! Key!

The Captain is tossed over. Screams, drowning.

MRS. V

Whoa.

MR. V

Uh. She was the only one certified to pilot this ship.

MADAME

(*clapping*) Well done, Detective. Let us freshen up & meet again under the stars.

DUKE (*to Servant 2*)

You disobeyed my order.

Servant 2 looks down.

DUKE

You know what that means.

Lights down.

Scene Five: Storm

Lights up. Libby, dressed in Madame's gown & wearing her mask, reclines on a deck chair with the Duke. The servants curled up asleep near his feet. The Baron stares off into the darkness.

BARON

I can't believe it.

DUKE

In a day or two, you will.

BARON

Why would a servant I have never met simply push my Daniella overboard?

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

Haven't you got something he can snort? These utterances grate on my nerves.

DUKE

Mustn't un-nerve Madame, hmm?

LIBBY (*as MADAME*)

You there (*kicks Servant 1*) bring the spice box!

DUKE

Goodness. You are on edge, my dear.

Servant 1 looks for a command from their Master.

DUKE

Yes, yes, get the box.

BARON

What am I going to do now?

LIBBY

Go home.

BARON

What home?

LIBBY

Your home.

BARON

That there is tricky.

DUKE

Explain.

BARON

Well, we weren't married or nothing, you know, and she -

DUKE

She had all the money. I did not mean to interrupt, but my deduction skills have been sharpened as of late.

LIBBY

Hmph.

DUKE

Madame, aren't you currently seeking your next male conquest?

LIBBY

Not this one.

DUKE

Oh, come, he has a large member. That's nice, isn't it?

LIBBY

(sighs) What social clubs do you belong to?

BARON

Um, well, there's the country club -

LIBBY

Mhm. Her membership, no doubt.

BARON

I could -

A strong gust of wind. More wind. Servant 1 returns with the Spicebox -

DUKE

No. There is too much wind for spice. Go fetch me the vials.

The Servant nods and exits to the Front.

BARON

Well, I suppose I'll retire to my cabin. I feel feverish.

LIBBY

Rest well.

DUKE

Rest assured, good sir, that your lady friend's murderer has been justly dispatched into the murky underbelly of this cold, dark world and look forward to a penniless future that is yours and yours alone.

BARON

'Night.

The Baron exits. The Servant returns with a velvet pouch.

LIBBY

Hmph. You've brought everything but your nightdress.

DUKE

Ah. You forget I sleep in the nude. *(to Servant)* the Obsidian.

LIBBY

Always the Obsidian.

DUKE

A dirty habit, I know, to suckle from the ink sacs of the cephalopod – but it incapacitates me in a way that no earthen man can.

The Servant retrieves a small, corked bottle of black liquid and presents it to the Duke.

DUKE

Ladies first.

Libby takes a sip from the bottle. Feigns momentary blindness.

LIBBY

Damn.

DUKE

(sips) Damnation.

LIBBY

What? Where?

DUKE

Give it a moment.

Libby slides off the chair like a slug and rubs her face on the wood.

LIBBY

Cubie bella boo boo

The Duke rolls off onto the floor. The two roll back and forth on the floor.

More wind. Rain.

LIBBY

Mmm.

DUKE

Gibba monta fisk

LIBBY

Bibby semper

The Servant sits in the empty chair.

DUKE

Vum vum

LIBBY

Yes, vum vum

DUKE

Mincey meaties

LIBBY

Yes, you like those

DUKE

Mmmm. Meatie meatie

LIBBY

Labo dimmy dum dum

(NOTE: this gibberish and rolling on the floor can go on for as long as actors desire)

The boat tips and the Duke rolls towards the Front of the Ship. The Servants bolt awake. Madame enters in Libby's Victorian Maid's uniform.

MADAME

Libby, get off the floor you minx! You'll ruin my gown!

Libby stands and brushes off her gown. The Duke rolls along the deck.

LIBBY

If we're lucky, he may just roll right into the sea.

The boat tips toward the Back and the Duke rolls out to the Middle again. Servant 1 puts a foot on the Duke to keep him steady.

Thunder clap!

MADAME

Libby, do you have the key?

Beat.

LIBBY

What key?

MADAME

To the ship. The chamber maid said you had the key.

LIBBY

Oh. Yes.

MADAME

What are you waiting for? The vessel needs you!

Libby is about to exit but Madame grabs her by the waist.

MADAME

You look absolutely ravishing, my dear.

Madame gently kisses the mask. Libby exits.

MADAME

Do what you will to him, I do not care.

The Servants exchange a look & then attempt to hoist the Duke overboard -

The Baron enters, appearing very sickly.

BARON

(burps) Where are the life vests?

The Servants put the Duke in the deck chair; wipe the ink from his drooling mouth.

MADAME

The what?

The Vandervelts enter in their nightclothes.

MRS. V

Libby, what do we do?

MADAME

Do you know what life vests are?

The Baron searches the railing for rescue rings (life savers). Anything!

MR. V

You mean we don't have any?!

MRS. V

Of course we don't! Leave it Madame to sail us to our deaths, ooh, that, that hard-nosed cunt!

Thunder clap!

MADAME

I beg your pardon!

MR. V

Take off the mask Libby – it's grotesque!

MADAME

I am your Madame!

The boat lurches. Lightning. Thunder.

MRS. V

Enough games!

The Baron joins them.

BARON

Nothing! No vests, no life boats!

He throws up a little in his mouth.

MR. V

Surely you remembered to bring life vests Libby?!

BARON

I can't swim y'all!

MRS. V

Neither can I!

MR V

I am a LAND. MAMMAL!

MADAME

Libby will steer us right to shore. She is very capable.

The Vandervelts look at each other. The boat smashes hard against something! All grabs hold of the mast. The Duke falls onto the floor.

MRS. V

Madame?

MADAME

Do not speak to me. I must go check on Libby.

BARON

What the hell is going on?

Madame exits.

MR. V

You're in for it now Daisy.

BARON

Daisy?

MRS. V

Come on, I only called her a cunt. What's the worst that can happen?

The boat lurches. Harder rain. The Baron vomits overboard.

MR. V

Plenty. We could end up in the hills.

MRS V

Aren't you more worried about ending up at the bottom of the sea?!

The Duke wakes up and slowly stands.

DUKE

My, my, quite a tempest! It's a good thing I'm in my wetsuit! Har. Har. (*looks around*)

Why are you in your bedclothes?

MRS. V

Some of us needed to sleep.

MR. V

Shh.

DUKE

Your nightdress looks awfully familiar.

MR. V

Beg your pardon?

The Duke moves closer to Mr. V.

DUKE

Bernadette?

MRS. V

His name is Fritz.

The Duke turns to Mrs. V and gets really close to her face. He then scans her bosom. The Baron sinks to the ground, moaning and clutching his gut.

BARON

Shellfish...the rocking...and rain...I can't...

DUKE

Why, I remember this bosom? Madame's 'Mardi Gras Madness' -

Mrs. V crosses her arms over her chest.

DUKE

And these tender, tasty arms! You are Madame's Cauldron Stirrer. A lowly kitchen maid.

MR. V

Not anymore, I'm afraid.

MRS. V

(to MR V) Shut it.

DUKE

My dear, have you been discarded by the Illustrious One?

MR. V

Called her a cunt, she did!

The Duke laughs. Madame enters, in her diamond gown.

MADAME

And here I thought we were rid of him.

Mrs. V goes up to Madame and slaps her.

MRS. V

That's for your damn tricks Libby!

Madame slaps her back.

MADAME

No one likes your pie, Daisy.

MR. V

Uh. Madame, you changed back into your gown?

MADAME

Of course, you prat. If I must go down, it will be in diamonds.

BARON

So, we are going down?!!

DUKE

It appears so.

MADAME

Libby says we smashed into some rocks. The cabins are flooding. I imagine Chef has drowned. Haven't heard a knock from him in some time.

DUKE

Table for none, I suppose.

MADAME

In mere moments, I will join my merman in the fluid embrace of the swarthy sea.

MRS. V

Oh, stuff it! Nothing but talk of Erich since we set sail.

MR. V

We all just watched when they threw Francesca overboard!

MRS. V

We were pretending!

DUKE

She was a Murderess.

MR V (*quietly*)

No, she wasn't.

The boat tips back and begins to sink. The Duke's diving gear slides along the floor. The Duke grabs his gear before it is lost in the churning waters.

MADAME

Hold me, Libby.

MRS. V

She's not here.

MADAME

Someone, hold me.

Mrs. V backs away from Madame. The Duke, in all his gear, gives Madame a gentle pat on the shoulder.

DUKE

There, there, my fetishistic fiend, a fitting end. The Madame goes down with her ship & all her servants. And a plus one. A funny little game and nearly well played. Until we meet again at those pearly gates of hell.

MADAME

Don't you mean heaven?

DUKE

Why bother with heaven when you can have a heavenly hell?

Madame balls her fist and goes to strike, but the Duke jumps into the sea and swims away. His Servants exchange a look and jump in after him.

The Vandervelts clutch each other tight.

The Baron screams.

Madame stands firm, her gloved hands balled into fists – staring up at the sky, daring it to sink her.

The boat sinks, lights fade.

{INTERMISSION}

Scene Six: Black Sand

Lights up slow. Madame grapples nude on the black sand beach of an uninhabited island. She pulls herself along, muttering. She is alone.

MADAME

The dirges have pulled their finger out of the dyke, the water flowed on with reckless abandon to consume her, but she persevered, and the dirges suck their finger, hot now from the sun, sticky salt rimmed glass with no vodka to kill it, I on black sand, amoeba – cruelly discarded by my gown – the Libby, lost, carousing with the dead below and my Blood Vessel, broken, a stroke in the water, but nothing, no more

She stops to lie face down.

MADAME

The face dropped to the floor, the face dropped and the maid, she swept, the face under the rug – it lay there, the lump under the rug, trampled underfoot, and cursed to silence, the face – how long had it remained on her shoulders before it fell? How long?

She licks her finger and sticks it in the sand. She contemplates the sandy finger.

MADAME

Erosion, volcanic glass, over time. Minerals and lava heavily petted by the tide's ebb and flow –

She licks her sandy finger.

MADAME

Iron. Basalt, fresh by a millennia. A realm without wanting but treaded on like the face. How I am deserving of a fresh martini right now? Libby?

Urgent.

MADAME

Libby!!!! Oh, my fair Libby. My sweet surly maid, more than made my bed & gave me maiden comfort. The soothing feel of her breast. (*moans*) Libby. (*touches herself*) Ye goddess, I am in the buff. (*strokes her inner thigh*) Mmmm.

More playing. Slight frustration.

MADAME

It doesn't work well when I do it. I must find the Libby.

Stands. Squints, scanning the land.

MADAME

Heavenly hell, indeed. What is hell without a dry martini? *(laughs to herself)* Good one, Madame. Hell would be but a dry county with no olives. No, no. There would be olives but only the black ones that come in a *(with disdain)* can – and there must be martinis in hell. Or there is no such thing. Yes. This is no hell but something else. This is a land who has taken me in, like the oceanic, moon-spelled orphan that I am.

A cloud shifts. Sunlight; hard. Something in the distance.

MADAME

Something glitters in the distance. Aha. A fresh pool of water! How I am need of a good soak!

She walks off. Lights down.

Scene Seven: Clever Duke

Lights up on the Duke, casually reclining in the sand on his elbows. The top half of the wetsuit unzipped to reveal his chest. He wears a mop of oar weed on his head. His servants fan him with some palm fronds.

DUKE

What a swim! What a swim! Why, I say we have finally beat the Poet's record and tsk tsk to the Poet – for me and my attendants can certainly do the breaststroke and the back stroke in good measure. Well done. Well done.

His servants smile.

DUKE

There will come a time today when one must go fetch supper. Decide amongst yourselves. The other will have to set up the domicile for who knows when we will be homeward bound! We may have to endure forever on this blackened rock, sipping on froth and eating halibut raw. An easier feat, I say, than the entertainment you will be forced to provide me because, as you both know, I *cannot* suffer boredom. I have given it thought and deem that blood sport shall be the last resort. Does that make you feel better? For now, charades!

The Servants exchange a look.

DUKE

Certainly, you know charades? (*they shake their heads*) Well, the technical rules for charades are usually informal and vary widely, but most agree on the basic rules of play. First, we divide into teams. Since you are new at this, I will allow you to play as one. I, the opponent. Then, we will need paper – hmm. I don't suppose there is paper here. Have you any paper?

They shake their heads.

DUKE

Of course not. You are illiterate. Let us see what my resourcefulness shall produce, shall we? Perhaps a half dozen conch shells would suffice. Scatter! Seek out shells, a palm-length in size, and return post haste!

He gestures them off with a little hand wave. The Servants walk off together.

DUKE

Not together! Scatter, you fools!

They communicate silently before splitting apart.

DUKE

This is fun.

Libby enters.

LIBBY

Is it?

DUKE

Ah, Libby. How fares the Madame?

LIBBY

No clue.

DUKE

My, my.

LIBBY

Are you here alone?

DUKE

My servants are on a scavenger hunt.

LIBBY

For food?

DUKE

No.

LIBBY

Water?

DUKE

No. What is the meaning of this interrogation?

LIBBY

I've been walking for a while – there is nothing here. Palm fronds as you have already discovered and –

DUKE

- lovely vegetation indeed. Do you like my crown?

LIBBY

I, uh...

DUKE

Oh Libby, you really should try harder to please me. It seems I am your only hope for future employ. If you like, you may go off and sear a few halibut bodies. You may use my grappling hook.

LIBBY

What?

DUKE

Providence, isn't it? That my grappling hook should wash ashore. It is why I rest here. To see what other treasures the sea will offer up to me. This crown, my hook, and the two servants. Oh. I am blessed by her tides. (*he strokes his stomach*) Go on, girl, fetch us some supper. It has been hours since our last nosh.

LIBBY

Mhm. Has anything else from *The Blood Vessel* surfaced?

DUKE

The Baron has most certainly drowned.

LIBBY

And the Vandervelts?

DUKE

Oh, Libby. You can stop with the games. I know about the Vandervelt charade. (*chuckles*) I knew the entire evening that the Vandervelts were nothing more than Madame's Lowly Kitchen Maid and the Carpenter.

LIBBY

Clever Duke.

DUKE

It is why I came aboard. To watch the fun!

LIBBY

You are *so* clever.

DUKE

Mind you, I have never met the actual Vandervelts so I was a bit curious to meet them. I sent invites but it seems that the real Vandervelts are so very busy with their philandering-

LIBBY

Philanthropy

DUKE

Yes. But I knew at once that those two were imposters. If the real Vandervelt's haven't the time for my extravagant feasts and feats of strength, they most certainly do not have the time for Madame's madness.

LIBBY

A ha.

DUKE

I know a servant when I see one. What is that in your hand?

Libby grips her 'Madame' mask tightly.

LIBBY

Oh. It's not important.

DUKE

You clutch it as if your life depended on it. Come, come, show us.

LIBBY

I'm going to fish now before it gets dark...or something.

DUKE

The hook is there. Happy hunting!

He points to a small pile of snorkeling gear and the grappling hook. Libby takes up the hook line and walks away, dragging it in the sand. Lights down.

Scene Eight: Hard Water

Madame stumbles along in the black sand. Muttering:

MADAME

No...

No...

No!

I had nothing to do with her death, your Honor.

Well, no. They all drowned.

The Duke? Well, I presume that he is dead as well. Or perhaps hijacking another party he was not invited to!

That, you Honor, is the crime in question here. The Duke, a possible relation to the infamous Blackbeard, stole aboard my ship like the thieving party pirate he is.

Most heinous, indeed. And he murdered a baby seal! A precedent, you see? Why, it was only after he produced his walnut spice box and the Baroness took a snort that she did fall overboard. I mean, I wouldn't really know for sure as I was changing gowns.

You see, I opened the evening in a stunning diamond gown. No! One hundred percent real diamonds, you Honor. It was a heavy gown.

I would have drowned had I not wiggled my way out of it...

She looks around

Where am I? Oh yes, there. My soaking pool waits for me. My, how it glitters. No doubt teeming with minerals to rejuvenate my parched epidermis. Look at these hands, ye gods!

She pulls at the skin on her hands

Crepe paper hands. Libby, look at this. A cracked nail. I cannot bear it. Please, darling, even it out for. *(in Libby's voice)* Of course, Madame. We mustn't keep that cracked nail waiting. What would you like me to do? Buff it out? *(Madame's voice)* No, that will not do. Nibble at it, my dear. *(She nibbles at her nail)* We will even it out with our teeth. There's a girl. Your lips are so warm. Come, look into my eyes while you do it. Yes, that's it. *(chewing)*

Yes

Yes

Yes!!

Servant #1 enters, crawling –

MADAME

Who's there? You there! Where are you going? *(to herself)* They mean to take the soaking pool! *(to the servant)* No. That is my pool.

SERVANT 1

Help

MADAME

How absurd

She stumbles along to the “soaking pool” and falls to her knees. She takes her hands and places them in “the water.” Shrieks.

MADAME

Hard water!

The Servant reaches the “soaking pool” and puts their face in. Screams. Lifts head; cuts on their face.

MADAME

The pool is cursed!

The Servant stands and drags the “water” up with him. It is Madame's diamond gown.

MADAME

Thief! Stop Thief! That is my gown!

She grabs at it. Tug of war with the gown. The Servants pulls and Madame falls to the sand. They try to drag her but she throws sand in their eyes.

Stunned for but a moment. Madame rises and coils her end of the gown around his neck, pulling tight. The Servant twists and turns, trying to throw Madame off them.

Diamonds cut and rip at their neck.

She pulls them down to the ground.

MADAME

You look surprised. You're thinking, "Why Madame would never knowingly commit murder? She is a refined, well-spoken woman with all manner of luxury at her feet."

The Servant gasps for air. Madame covers their mouth and nose.

MADAME

I bet you're wondering

Why can't I breathe?

Why has man not evolved to suck the air around him with something more than a

Gaping maw

&

Nostril

Nostril

Nos...tril

Aren't you needing of something more?

Some other mode of respiration?

In this quiet act of desperation

Tis true that we have but two paths

And you, sad little scallop,

Have crossed mine

Your master was not invited

And for that you must die

The Servant is dead. A moment. She unravels the gown from the servant's neck.

MADAME

Pity, all this blood on my diamonds. I had better rinse it off in the sea.

LIBBY

Allow me.

Libby appears. How long had she been watching?

MADAME

Oh, Libby!! Are you another illusion or has my only dream come true and you are here to service me once again?

LIBBY

Yes, I am here. Let's get you freshened up for dinner with the Duke.

MADAME

Oh, he has survived?

LIBBY

Yes.

MADAME

He will not like that one of his attendants has mysteriously perished in all this black sand.

LIBBY

Suckle on this plant leaf for a moment.

Libby hands her something that look like a banana leaf.

MADAME

A palm?

LIBBY

From the 'Traveler's Tree' – has moisture in it.

MADAME

Oh, Libby, you really must stay away from our gardener. He is no good for you.

Beat.

LIBBY

Don't talk. Just suckle.

MADAME

Can you believe there was a little island nearby all this time?

LIBBY

Unbelievable.

MADAME

Why, this would be a great place for you and I to picnic.

LIBBY

Sure.

MADAME

We could ask the Carpenter to fashion us a little boat and come here whenever we desire.

LIBBY

She drowned.

MADAME (*ignoring her*)

I am thrilled that you have survived, my dearest.

Libby goes to the sea to rinse the dress. Madame suckles and stares at the dead body.

She turns her back on it. Libby returns with the gown.

LIBBY

It's much heavier now that I've rinsed it.

MADAME

I cannot bear to wear it in this heat. Libby, allow me your garments?

LIBBY

Then what shall I wear?

MADAME

Why, you can wear the gown!

LIBBY

I'd rather not.

MADAME

Oh pish. You loved playing the part on the boat.

LIBBY

I-

MADAME

Go on, dear, make Madame happy.

Libby strips out of her servant's uniform and into the gown. Madame enjoys this. Libby helps Madame into her uniform.

MADAME

Well done. Let us have a bit of fun with the Duke.

Lights down.

Scene Nine: All Hail the Duke

Dusk. Libby lounges in the sand near the Duke, still in Madame's dress & pretending to be her.

Madame, in maid's costume, picks at her burnt halibut on a stick. The Duke's last servant sits stoically behind the fire, staring hard into the flames.

After a moment, the Duke clears his throat.

DUKE

Well, I was hoping that my other attendant would arrive to join us, but it appears he either lost or...

The Servant looks at the Duke.

DUKE

Sleeping somewhere. *(to servant)* Come, come, don't look so glum. Madame, you and your Libby must play a round of charades with us.

LIBBY

I'd rather not.

DUKE

But my lad has spent all day collecting these wonderful shells. Surely, you would not deny this melancholy manservant an opportunity to play a game? He has never played before and does need some distraction from his worries. I mean, look at him.

Libby and the servant exchange a curious look.

LIBBY

No, thank you.

The Duke sighs heavily and stands. He takes a stick and draws a large circle in the sand.

DUKE

Well, then, how about your servant and my servant fight in this circle. Whomever steps outside or is forced out will die.

Madame squeaks. Libby smiles.

LIBBY

You do know my Libby is a fierce warrior.

MADAME

Charades sounds like a lot of fun, Madame.

The servant nods.

LIBBY

Does it now?

MADAME

Oh yes. I would do anything to play.

LIBBY

Swear on your life.

MADAME

Sweet, beautiful Li-Madame, I swear on my life to do anything but play death circle.

LIBBY

Duke, we shall play your little round of charades.

DUKE

Ah! Good sports all. I will begin.

He grabs a shell from the pile and studies it. He pretends to sing.

SERVANT

Song.

Duke nods. He holds up two fingers.

SERVANT

Two.

The Duke puffs out his cheeks and pretends to play a trumpet.

SERVANT

Satchmo!

Duke nods. He puts his palms together and looks down at someone. He mimes taking a cloth and covering a "body"

SERVANT

St. James

DUKE

Well done!

LIBBY

That was not the name of the song.

MADAME

Everyone knows that is your favorite song, hardly a challenge.

DUKE

I beg your pardon. *(to Libby)* Madame, please remind your servant of their place.

LIBBY

She is right. And the song is St. James Infirmary. Three words.

MADAME

Your turn, Madame.

Libby picks up a shell. Frown.

LIBBY

Did you write this with blood?

DUKE

His blood.

The Servant waves.

LIBBY

I would like to get a different shell.

DUKE

And why would that be, hm?

LIBBY

For one, I have never read this book so I would have no way to create clues.

DUKE

My dear, you have most certainly taken pages from this book.

LIBBY

I refuse.

MADAME

Oh, let's try it. If it is a book Madame has read, I am sure to guess right.

LIBBY

You won't like this.

MADAME

Please let me try.

Libby tosses the shell. She mimes opening a book.

MADAME

I know it's a book, dear.

Libby holds up six fingers.

MADAME

Six words.

Two fingers.

MADAME

Two words?

DUKE

She means the second word.

MADAME

What is wrong with the first word?

DUKE

Madame, please proceed.

Libby mimes a large bellied man with a detective magnifying glass.

MADAME

Detective.

Libby indicates more.

MADAME

Murder. Mystery.

Libby nods yes.

MADAME

Mystery.

Libby holds up four fingers.

MADAME

Fourth word?

Libby nods and points to her eye.

MADAME

Eye. Eyeball.

Libby shakes her head.

MADAME

Iris, cornea...

DUKE

Time is up.

MADAME

There is no timer.

DUKE

I have been counting seconds in my head. Plus, I hardly expect you to know this one.

LIBBY

The Mystery of the Blue Train.

DUKE

All Hail the Duke!

MADAME

What exactly are you insinuating with that book title?

DUKE

Hm?

MADAME

Are you implying that the Madame murdered someone?

DUKE

There is no need to imply anything. I know for a fact that Madame murdered the Baroness.

LIBBY

How dare you!

DUKE

I remember now where I have seen the Baroness before. She came to Monte Carlo with Erich. We three had the most pleasant time together.

MADAME

Stop.

DUKE

He was in such high spirits – having escaped captivity.

LIBBY

How dare you speak of Erich!

DUKE

I can speak of my nephew whenever and wherever and to whomever I chose, Madame.

MADAME

Madame, I wish to leave.

DUKE

Trapped in that Nautilus Room, never allowed to roam as an imperialist should. You made him soft!

MADAME

All the men in your line are SOFT

The Duke rises.

DUKE

Say that again!

MADAME

All are soft, in my jaw

DUKE (*to Libby*)

I will not have your servant speak to me in this way

LIBBY

That woman fell overboard. Period.

SERVANT 2

No.

He points to Madame.

DUKE

Ah. So rather than dirty your hands, you had Libby push her over.

LIBBY

I did not!

MADAME

I did not!

DUKE

You should really get your story straight.

MADAME

As should you, you pompous cad! I've seen you murder for much less.

DUKE

Pardon?

MADAME

At your Bicentennial Birthday party. You strangled your scullery maid.

DUKE

Not this again. You have no proof of that.

LIBBY

I saw it.

DUKE

Impossible. You cannot bear to enter my kitchens. It smells of bay leaf and pig fat, you always say.

A moment; a standoff. Madame stares hard at the Duke, the Duke at Libby, and the Servant at Madame. In the distance, the cawing of birds – a monkey screeches.

DUKE

There is only one way to settle this. My servant shall be my champion and Libby, yours. They are to fight to the death.

MADAME

No.

LIBBY

I must decline.

DUKE

You jest! You love death circle.

MADAME

We do. Ha. It is I, the Madame, dressed as Libby and she is wearing my diamond gown. A bit of fun, really. But now that my honor is at stake, Libby – you must fight for it.

LIBBY

You forget yourself Libby

DUKE

This is not right. Which of you is the real Madame?

LIBBY

I am.

MADAME

Good Duke, you must recognize my mole.

LIBBY

I have a mole, too.

MADAME

Take off the mask Libby. Show the Duke your true self.

LIBBY

No.

MADAME

Take it off Libby! This little charade is over.

Libby slowly removes her Madame mask. The Servant gasps.

DUKE

My brain is wracked with questions. Why on this good black sand would you pretend to be the servant?

The Servant points at Libby emphatically.

DUKE

What is it?

The Servant holds up three fingers.

DUKE

Three words?

The Servant nods. Holds up one finger.

DUKE

First word?

MADAME

I have had enough of this game.

The Servant gets on their knees and kisses the Duke's flipper.

DUKE

Servant

Servant nods. Holds up two fingers.

DUKE

Second word

The Servants pretends to stab.

MADAME

Stab

Servant shakes his head no.

DUKE

It is not your turn Madame. Let's see... not stab, filet, carve, wound, gored, harpooned, impaled, jabbed, punctured, skewered, speared, spiked, spitted...

The Servant is confused with all the words, shaking and nodding and making the repeated stabbing motions.

LIBBY

Why don't they just speak?

DUKE

He only knows the word Satchmo and St. James. And some colors? Or was that the other one? Anyway, that's as far as we got. Tedious, teaching the lower classes to speak.

MADAME

Killed

The Servant stops and nods. Holds up three fingers.

DUKE

Third word

The Servant walks about on their knees, glass in hand, making fish kisses.

MADAME

The Baroness.

DUKE

Servant killed the Baroness. *(to Libby)* So you did it. And rather than confess, you thought you'd let your mistress take the fall?

MADAME

Tsk tsk Libby

LIBBY

I was asked by my mistress to kill the baroness

MADAME

She also murdered your other servant

LIBBY

Liar

DUKE

Come, come, this can all be solved in a game I like to call Death Circle

The Servant stands and stares at Libby.

LIBBY

What? I didn't kill your other.

The Servant glares at her and spits.

DUKE

Do you swear on your life?

LIBBY

Yes

DUKE

Then, Death Circle.

In the distance, drumming. Like a heartbeat. The Duke gestures to the sand drawn circle from earlier. Servant 2 jumps inside! Libby looks to Madame:

MADAME

For my honor, dearest. When you win, the Duke will have to admit to my innocence. And that finger-pointing slave of his will be no more.

LIBBY

You have such confidence in me.

Madame kisses her softly on the cheek.

MADAME

We win. We go home & we have some plum pudding. T will be as if it never happened.

LIBBY steps into the ring. Bang a gong.

DUKE

Begin.

The Death Circle begins. (can be played in any way as long as Libby wins)

LIBBY breathes hard, the dead servant at her feet.

A moment.

The DUKE shuffles over to touch the dead servant.

DUKE

Ah, supper. Who shall dine with me? Madame? You love the soft parts.

LIBBY walks away.

MADAME

Momentarily. Let us freshen up.

Madame trails after her. The Duke drags the servant to the fire; unearths his ACTION FIGURE. Pushes the button:

“The Duke has Arrived”

Ha laughs & stands the figure up on the sand.

DUKE

You’ll eat with me, won’t you little Duke?

He pushes the button again:

“The Duke has Arrived!”

Black out.

Scene Ten: Sandtrap

Madame and Libby sit under a Traveler's Tree. Its large fronds swaying in the gentle sea breeze. Madame's Face Mask is nestled in a branch. Madame is in one half of the maid's costume, Libby in the other half. The diamond dress discarded on the sand, twinkling in moonlight.

Madame kisses Libby. Libby returns the act. Madame pushes Libby down on the ground and kisses her all over. Libby closes her eyes.

MADAME

Libby?

LIBBY

Mm?

MADAME

Why were you pointing to your eyeball in the game?

Libby sighs & opens her eyes.

LIBBY

Look at them.

MADAME

Yes, eyes. You have them.

LIBBY

They are blue.

MADAME

Ah, so they are.

LIBBY

You never noticed? After all these years?

MADAME

Well...no. I have blue eyes, so I suppose it didn't seem like something new to me.

LIBBY

Ah.

MADAME

Does that bother you?

LIBBY

No, it's fine.

MADAME

Erich had blue eyes too. Darker than yours; like troubled waters.

LIBBY

Yes.

MADAME

The gardener has brown eyes; soft as a velvet pincushion...

Silence.

MADAME

Kiss me, Libby. I've been yearning for you since I washed ashore, lost and lonely for my lovely Libby.

Another long kiss.

MADAME

Libby?

LIBBY

Hm?

MADAME

I

Beat.

LIBBY

Yes, what is it?

MADAME

Something our little Francesca said before she was tossed overboard...something about you having the key

LIBBY

Gibberish.

MADAME

I see. But-

Libby rolls Madame on to her back and kisses her forehead.

LIBBY

What do you see now?

MADAME (*looking up at the mask*)

I see myself.

Beat.

LIBBY

What?

MADAME

I see myself, behind you

Madame wraps her legs around Libby and grips her body hard.

LIBBY

I don't understand

Madame pulls Libby in for more.

MADAME

Yes...oh my yes...gimme gimme

Madame moans. Libby grabs her throat.

MADAME

Libby....

LIBBY

I don't want that.

Madame struggles.

Her eyes pop wide open and they stare at each other until her last breath.

The mask falls out of the tree and lands next to them.

A very long moment. Libby looks around. No one.

She takes the diamond dress and covers Madame with it.

She sees the mask on the sand.

Holding the mask to face her:

LIBBY

You're Dead!

Blue but empty

Blue but empty

(she pokes her fingers into the empty eye holes)

Blue empty blurs and blemishes

A bruise no one can see,

Deep inside

(she is about to put the face on – hesitation, an invisible magnetic pull, her spirit resisting perhaps?)

LIBBY

The dryad in the traveler's tree

It watches

It waits

For the world to sigh its last breath &

all the world drains back into the volcanic

hole

backwash lava and algae bile

the primordial soup

on a low simmer

The Duke enters. He is picking his teeth with his pinky nail.

DUKE

You missed supper Madame. A bit gamey but quite tender.

Libby, her back to him, jumps a little at the sudden arrival. She drops the mask.

DUKE

Some seamen must have seen my fire,

And have come ashore to take us home dear.

LIBBY

Ah. Ok.

Let me just gather my things.

She goes to pick up the mask.

DUKE

Leave that grotesque thing behind. Come, come. I want to discuss the upcoming boat war. I think your gardener would make a great champion.

Libby stands on the sand, stiffly

After a moment, her body shifts – an arm on the waist

The other holding an invisible glass

A shark smile crawls across her face.

She throws her head back, laughs & (maybe a wink to the audience):

LIBBY

Ah, Raoul.

The man with the bag of lady bugs

The smell of fresh soil on his breath

I squeeze him between my legs

And make him sing

The Duke steps in line next to her.

DUKE

Of course you do.

LIBBY

Yes.

DUKE

Yes.

LIBBY

Why must you always get the final word?

DUKE

I am the Duke.

He holds out his arm & she takes it.

LIBBY

I am the Madame.

The Duke starts to open his mouth –

LIBBY

Don't. You. Dare.

Lights out.

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