

[Reading for "The Player" page 1/2]

as reality, the name we give to the common experience . . .
'Look, look!' recites the crowd. 'A horse with an arrow in
its forehead! It must have been mistaken for a deer.'

Ros (*eagerly*) I knew all along it was a band.

Guil (*tiredly*) He knew all along it was a band.

Ros Here they come!

Guil (*at the last moment before they enter – wistfully*) I'm
sorry it wasn't a unicorn. It would have been nice to have
unicorns.

*The Tragedians are six in number, including a small boy
(Alfred). Two pull and push a cart piled with props and
belongings. There is also a Drummer, a Horn-Player
and a Flautist. The Spokesman ('the Player') has no
instrument. He brings up the rear and is the first to
notice them.*

Player Halt!

The Group turns and halts.

(*joyously*) An audience!

Ros and Guil half rise.

Don't move!

They sink back. He regards them fondly.

Perfect! A lucky thing we came along.

Ros For us?

Player Let us hope so. But to meet two gentlemen on the
road – we would not hope to meet them off it.

Ros No?

Player Well met, in fact, and just in time.

Ros Why's that?

Player Why, we grow rusty and you catch us at the very
point of decadence – by this time tomorrow we might have
forgotten everything we ever knew. That's a thought, isn't
it? (*He laughs generously.*) We'd be back where we started
– improvising.

Ros Tumblers, are you?

Player We can give you a tumble if that's your taste, and
times being what they are . . . Otherwise, for a jingle of
coin we can do you a selection of gory romances, full of
fine cadence and corpses, pirated from the Italian; and it
doesn't take much to make a jingle – even a single coin has
music in it.

They all flourish and bow, raggedly.

Tragedians, at your command.

Ros and Guil have got to their feet.

Ros My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz.
(*Guil confers briefly with him.*)

(*without embarrassment*) I'm sorry – his name's
Guildenstern, and I'm Rosencrantz.

Player A pleasure. We've played to bigger, of course, but
quality counts for something. I recognized you at once –

Ros And who are we?

Player – as fellow artists.

Ros I thought we were gentlemen.

Player For some of us it is performance, for others,
patronage. They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us
say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two
coins. (*Bows again.*) Don't clap too loudly – it's a very old
world.

Ros What is your line?

Player Tragedy, sir. Deaths and disclosures, universal and particular, dénouements both unexpected and inexorable, transvestite melodrama on all levels including the suggestive. We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion . . . clowns, if you like, murderers – we can do you ghosts and battles, on the skirmish level, heroes, villains, tormented lovers – set pieces in the poetic vein; we can do you rapiers or rape or both, by all means, faithless wives and ravished virgins – flagrante delicto at a price, but that comes under realism for which there are special terms. Getting warm, am I?

Ros (*doubtfully*) Well, I don't know . . .

Player It costs little to watch, and little more if you happen to get caught up in the action, if that's your taste and times being what they are.

Ros What are they?

Player Indifferent.

Ros Bad?

Player Wicked. Now what precisely is your pleasure? (*He turns to the Tragedians.*) Gentlemen, disport yourselves. (*The Tragedians shuffle into some kind of line.*) There! See anything you like?

Ros (*doubtful, innocent*) What do they do?

Player Let your imagination run riot. They are beyond surprise.

Ros And how much?

Player To take part?

Ros To watch.

Player Watch what?

Ros A private performance.

Player How private?

Ros Well, there are only two of us. Is that enough?

Player For an audience, disappointing. For voyeurs, about average.

Ros What's the difference?

Player Ten guilders.

Ros (*horrified*) Ten guilders!

Player I mean eight.

Ros Together?

Player Each. I don't think you understand –

Ros What are you *saying*?

Player What am I saying – seven.

Ros Where have you *been*?

Player Roundabout. A nest of children carries the custom of the town. Juvenile companies, they are the fashion. But they cannot match our repertoire . . . we'll stoop to anything if that's your bent . . .

He regards Ros meaningfully but Ros returns the stare blankly.

Ros They'll grow up.

Player (*giving up*) There's one born every minute. (*to Tragedians*) On-ward!

The Tragedians start to resume their burdens and their journey. Guil stirs himself at last.

Simultaneously – a lighting change sufficient to alter the exterior mood into interior, but nothing violent. And Ophelia runs on in some alarm, holding up her skirts – followed by Hamlet.

Ophelia has been sewing and she holds the garment. They are both mute. Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced, no hat upon his head, his stockings fouled, ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle, pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other . . . and with a look so piteous, he takes her by the wrist and holds her hard, then he goes to the length of his arm, and with his other hand over his brow, falls to such perusal of her face as he would draw it . . . At last, with a little shaking of his arm, and thrice his head waving up and down, he raises a sigh so piteous and profound that it does seem to shatter all his bulk and end his being. That done he lets her go, and with his head over his shoulder turned, he goes out backwards without taking his eyes off her . . . she runs off in the opposite direction.

Ros and Guil have frozen. Guil unfreezes first. He jumps at Ros.

Guil Come on!

But a flourish – enter Claudius and Gertrude, attended.

Claudius Welcome, dear Rosencrantz . . . *(He raises a hand at Guil while Ros bows – Guil bows late and hurriedly) . . . and Guildenstern.*

He raises a hand at Ros while Guil bows to him – Ros is still straightening up from his previous bow and half way up he bows down again. With his head down, he twists to look at Guil, who is on the way up.

Moreover that we did much long to see you,
the need we have to use you did provoke
our hasty sending.

Ros and Guil still adjusting their clothing for Claudius's presence.

Something have you heard
Of Hamlet's transformation, so call it,
Sith nor th'exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was. What it should be,
More than his father's death, that thus hath put him,
So much from th'understanding of himself,
I cannot dream of. I entreat you both
That, being of so young days brought up with him
And sith so neighboured to his youth and haviour
That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court
Some little time, so by your companies
To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather
So much as from occasion you may glean,
Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus,
That opened lies within our remedy.

Gertrude Good *(fractional suspense)* gentlemen . . . *(They both bow.)*

He hath much talked of you,
And sure I am, two men there is not living
To whom he more adheres. If it will please you
To show us so much gentry and goodwill
As to expand your time with us awhile
For the supply and profit of our hope,
Your visitation shall receive such thanks
As fits a king's remembrance.

Ros Both your majesties
Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,
Put your dread pleasures more into command
Than to entreaty.

Guil We both obey,
And here give up ourselves in the full bent

To lay our service freely at your feet,
To be commanded.

Claudius Thanks, Rosencrantz (*Turning to Ros who is caught unprepared, while Guil bows.*) and gentle Guildenstern (*Turning to Guil who is bent double*).

Gertrude (*correcting*) Thanks, Guildenstern (*Turning to Ros, who bows as Guil checks upward movements to bow too – both bent double, squinting at each other.*) . . . and gentle Rosencrantz. (*Turning to Guil, both straightening up – Guil checks again and bows again.*)

And I beseech you instantly to visit
My too much changed son. Go, some of you,
And bring these gentlemen where Hamlet is.

Two Attendants exit backwards, indicating that Ros and Guil should follow.

Guil Heaven make our presence and our practices
Pleasant and helpful to him.

Gertrude Ay, amen!

Ros and Guil move towards a downstage wing. Before they get there, Polonius enters. They stop and bow to him. He nods and hurries upstage to Claudius. They turn to look at him.

Polonius The ambassadors from Norway, my good lord,
are joyfully returned.

Claudius Thou still hast been the father of good news.

Polonius Have I, my lord? Assure you, my good liege,
I hold to my duty as I hold my soul,
Both to my God and to my gracious King;
And I do think, or else this brain of mine
Hunts not the trail of policy so sure

As it hath used to do, that I have found
The very cause of Hamlet's lunacy . . .

Exeunt – leaving Ros and Guil.

Ros I want to go home.

Guil Don't let them confuse you.

Ros I'm out of my step here –

Guil We'll soon be home and high – dry and home – I'll –

Ros It's all over my *depth* –

Guil I'll hie you home and –

Ros – out of my head –

Guil – dry you high and –

Ros (*cracking, high*) – over my step over my head body! –
I tell you it's all stopping to a death, it's boding to a depth,
stepping to a head, it's all heading to a dead stop –

Guil (*the nursemaid*) There! . . . and we'll soon be home
and dry . . . and *high* and dry . . . (*rapidly*) Has it ever
happened to you that all of a sudden and for no reason at
all you haven't the faintest idea how to spell the word –
'wife' – or 'house' – because when you write it down you
just can't remember ever having seen those letters in that
order before . . . ?

Ros I remember –

Guil Yes?

Ros I remember when there were no questions.

Guil There were always questions. To exchange one set
for another is no great matter.

Ros Answers, yes. There were answers to everything.

Guil You've forgotten.

Ros (*flaring*) I haven't forgotten – how I used to remember my own name – and yours, oh *yes!* There were answers everywhere you *looked*. There was no question about it – people knew who I was and if they didn't they asked and I told them.

Guil You did, the trouble is, each of them is . . . plausible, without being instinctive. All your life you live so close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye, and when something nudges it into outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque. A man standing in his saddle in the half-lit half-alive dawn banged on the shutters and called two names. He was just a hat and a cloak levitating in the grey plume of his own breath, but when he called we came. That much is certain – we came.

Ros Well I can tell you I'm sick to death of it. I don't care one way or another, so why don't you make up your mind.

Guil We can't afford anything quite so arbitrary. Nor did we come all this way for a christening. All *that* – preceded us. But we are comparatively fortunate; we might have been left to sift the whole field of human nomenclature, like two blind men looting a bazaar for their own portraits . . . At least we are presented with alternatives.

Ros Well as from now –

Guil – But not choice.

Ros You made me look ridiculous in there.

Guil I looked just as ridiculous as you did.

Ros (*an anguished cry*) Consistency is all I ask!

Guil (*low, wry rhetoric*) Give us this day our daily mask.

Ros (*a dying fall*) I want to go home. (*Moves.*) Which way did we come in? I've lost my sense of direction.

Guil The only beginning is birth and the only end is death – if you can't count on that, what can you count on?

They connect again.

Ros We don't owe anything to anyone.

Guil We've been caught up. Your smallest action sets off another somewhere else, and is set off by it. Keep an eye open, an ear cocked. Tread warily, follow instructions. We'll be all right.

Ros For how long?

Guil Till events have played themselves out. There's a logic at work – it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again, even without the innocence, a child – It's like being given a prize, an extra slice of childhood when you least expect it, as a prize for being good, or compensation for never having had one . . . Do I contradict myself?

Ros I can't remember . . . What have we got to go on?

Guil We have been briefed. Hamlet's transformation. What do you recollect?

Ros Well, he's changed, hasn't he? The exterior and inward man fails to resemble –

Guil Draw him on to pleasures – glean what afflicts him.

Ros Something more than his father's death –

Guil He's always talking about us – there aren't two people living whom he dotes on more than us.

Ros We cheer him up – find out what's the matter –

Guil You've forgotten.

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Guil Draw him on to pleasures – glean what afflicts him.

Ros Something more than his father's death –

Guil He's always talking about us – there aren't two people living whom he dotes on more than us.

Ros We cheer him up – find out what's the matter –

Guil Exactly, it's a matter of asking the right questions and giving away as little as we can. It's a game.

Ros And then we can go?

Guil And receive such thanks as fits a king's remembrance.

Ros I like the sound of that. What do you think he means by remembrance?

Guil He doesn't forget his friends.

Ros Would you care to estimate?

Guil Difficult to say, really – some kings tend to be amnesiac, others I suppose – the opposite, whatever that is . . .

Ros Yes – but –

Guil Elephantine . . . ?

Ros Not how long – how much?

Guil *Retentive* – he's a very retentive king, a royal retainer . . .

Ros What are you playing at?

Guil Words, words. They're all we have to go on.

Pause.

Ros Shouldn't we be doing something – constructive?

Guil What did you have in mind? . . . A short, blunt human pyramid . . . ?

Ros We could go.

Guil Where?

Ros After him.

Guil Why? They've got us placed now – if we start moving around, we'll all be chasing each other all night.

Hiatus.

Ros (*at footlights*) How very intriguing! (*Turns.*) I feel like a spectator – an appalling prospect. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute . . .

Guil See anyone?

Ros No. You?

Guil No. (*At footlights*) What a fine persecution – to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened . . . (*Pause.*) We've had no practice.

Ros We could play at questions.

Guil What good would that do?

Ros Practice!

Guil Statement! One-love.

Ros Cheating!

Guil How?

Ros I hadn't started yet.

Guil Statement. Two-love.

Ros Are you counting that?

Guil What?

Ros Are you counting that?

Guil Foul! No repetitions. Three-love. First game to . . .

Ros I'm not going to play if you're going to be like that.

Guil Whose serve?

Ros Hah?

Guil Foul! No grunts. Love-one.

Ros Whose go?

Guil Why?

Ros Why not?

Guil What for?

Ros Foul! No synonyms! One-all.

Guil What in God's name is going on?

Ros Foul! No rhetoric. Two-one.

Guil What does it all add up to?

Ros Can't you guess?

Guil Were you addressing me?

Ros Is there anyone else?

Guil Who?

Ros How would I know?

Guil Why do you ask?

Ros Are you serious?

Guil Was that rhetoric?

Ros No.

Guil Statement! Two-all. Game point.

Ros What's the matter with you today?

Guil When?

Ros What?

Guil Are you deaf?

Ros Am I dead?

Guil Yes or no?

Ros Is there a choice?

Guil Is there a God?

Ros Foul! No *non sequiturs*, three-two, one game all.

Guil (*seriously*) What's your name?

Ros What's yours?

Guil I asked first.

Ros Statement. One-love.

Guil What's your name when you're at home?

Ros What's yours?

Guil When I'm at home?

Ros Is it different at home?

Guil What home?

Ros Haven't you got one?

Guil Why do you ask?

Ros What are you driving at?

Guil (*with emphasis*) What's your name?!

Ros Repetition. Two-love. Match point to me.

Guil (*seizing him violently*) WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Ros Rhetoric! Game and match! (*Pause.*) Where's it going to end?

Guil That's the question.

Ros It's *all* questions.

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[Reading for "Horatio" page 1/2]

didn't he take you in completely – (*Claps his hands.*)
Encore! Encore!

Player (*activated, arms spread, the professional*) Deaths for all ages and occasions! Deaths by suspension, convulsion, consumption, incision, execution, asphyxiation and malnutrition –! Climactic carnage, by poison and by steel –! Double deaths by duel –! Show!

Alfred, still in his queen's costume, dies by poison: the Player, with rapier, kills the 'King' and duels with a fourth Tragedian, inflicting and receiving a wound: the two remaining Tragedians, the two 'Spies' dressed in the same coats as Ros and Guil, are stabbed, as before.

And the light is fading over the deaths which take place right upstage.

Dying amid the dying – tragically; romantically.

So there's an end to that – it's commonplace: light goes with life, and in the winter of your years the dark comes early . . .

Guil (*tired, drained, but still an edge of impatience; over the mime*) No . . . no . . . not for us, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over . . . Death is not anything . . . death is not . . . It's the absence of presence, nothing more . . . the endless time of never coming back . . . a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound . . .

The light has gone upstage. Only Guil and Ros are visible as Ros's clapping falters to silence.

Small pause.

Ros That's it, then, is it? (*No answer, he looks out front.*) The sun's going down. Or the earth's coming up, as the fashionable theory has it. (*Small pause.*) Not that it makes any difference. (*Pause.*) What was it all about? When did it begin? (*Pause, no answer.*) Couldn't we just stay put?

mean no one is going to come on and drag us off . . . They'll just have to wait. We're still young . . . fit . . . we've got years . . . (*Pause. No answer.*) (*A cry*) We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?

Guil I can't remember.

Ros pulls himself together.

Ros All right, then. I don't care. I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved.

And he disappears from view.

Guil does not notice.

Guil Our names shouted in a certain dawn . . . a message . . . a summons . . . there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said – no. But somehow we missed it. (*He looks round and sees he is alone.*) Rosen –? Guil –? (*He gathers himself.*) Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you –

And disappears.

Immediately the whole stage is lit up, revealing, upstage, arranged in the approximate positions last held by the dead Tragedians, the tableau of court and corpses which is the last scene of Hamlet.

That is: The King, Queen, Laertes and Hamlet all dead. Horatio holds Hamlet. Fortinbras is there.

So are two Ambassadors from England.

Ambassador The sight is dismal;
And our affairs from England come too late.
The ears are senseless that should give us hearing
To tell him his commandment is fulfilled,
That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.
Where should we have our thanks?

Horatio Not from his mouth,
Had it the ability of life to thank you:

[Reading for "Horatio" page 2/2]

He never gave commandment for their death.
But since, so jump upon this bloody question,
You from the Polack wars, and you from England,
Are here arrived, give order that these bodies
High on a stage be placed to the view;
And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about: so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fallen on the inventors' heads: all this can I
Truly deliver.

*But during the above speech the play fades, overtaken
by dark and music.*

Act Two

Hamlet, Ros and Guil talking, the continuation of the previous scene. Their conversation, on the move, is indecipherable at first. The first intelligible line is Hamlet's, coming at the end of a short speech – see Shakespeare Act II, scene ii.

Hamlet S'blood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out.

A flourish from the Tragedians' band.

Guil There are the players.

Hamlet Gentlemen, you are welcome to Elsinore. Your hands, come then. *(He takes their hands.)* The appurtenance of welcome is fashion and ceremony. Let me comply with you in this garb, lest my extent to the players (which I tell you must show fairly outwards) should more appear like entertainment than yours. You are welcome. *(about to leave)* But my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived.

Guil In what, my dear lord?

Hamlet I am but mad north north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.

Polonius enters as Guil turns away.

Polonius Well be with you gentlemen.

Hamlet *(to Ros)* Mark you, Guildenstern *(uncertainly to Guil)* and you too; at each ear a hearer. That great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling clouts . . .

He takes Ros upstage with him, talking together.

Polonius My Lord! I have news to tell you.

Hamlet *(releasing Ros and mimicking)* My lord, I have news to tell you . . . When Roscius was an actor in Rome . . .

Ros comes downstage to re-join Guil.

Polonius *(as he follows Hamlet out)* The actors are come hither my lord.

Hamlet Buzz, buzz.

Exeunt Hamlet and Polonius.

Ros and Guil ponder. Each reluctant to speak first.

Guil Hm?

Ros Yes?

Guil What?

Ros I thought you . . .

Guil No.

Ros Ah.

Pause.

Guil I think we can say we made some headway.

Ros You think so?

Guil I think we can say that.

Ros I think we can say he made us look ridiculous.

Guil We played it close to the chest of course.

Ros *(derisively)* 'Question and answer. Old ways are the best ways!' He was scoring off us all down the line.

Guil He caught us on the wrong foot once or twice, perhaps, but I thought we gained some ground.