

MUCH ADO THAT ENDS WELL

a comedy in one act

by DAVID MAYEROVITCH

V 3.0

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**This play is dedicated
to the memory of
JANET DUNBRACK**

CHARACTERS

Six actors, one doubling

THE DUCHESS

A flinty tyrant, around 60

LADY CLAIRE

Her free-spirited daughter, mid-20's

BARON HUGO von STRAUSS

A boorish titled bumpkin, around 50

RUDOLF, Prince of Rofrania

A dashing man in his 30's

COUNTESS OCTAVIA

A worldly and alluring woman, 40's

BARMAID

In her 20's or 30's

ARCHBISHOP

Very old. *This part is doubled, in a white beard, by the actor playing the **BARMAID**.*

TEXT NOTES

In the first line of the Prologue, “tonight” becomes “today” for a matinee performance.

Hagelstein	HAH-gel-shtein (g as in good)
Hugo von Strauss	HOO-go fon Shtrauss
Rofrania	Roh-FRAH-nia
Octavia	Oc-TAH-via
Scharwenka	Shar-VENK-a

RIGHT means stage right.

DESIGN

As in Shakespeare’s day, a few minimal pieces of furniture and décor elements define locations. A banner creates a castle, a cross the church, etc.

PROLOGUE

OCTAVIA

Tumbling trippingly from our tongues tonight
Shall be the syllables that tell our tale,
And lest our limpid tones be rudely marred
By grating interruption, we now bid you
Delve within your pocket or your purse,
And with firm fingers find that jangling toy,
That devilish dictator of your day,
And smother it in silence.

Now must you endure
That plague upon our stage, the trigger warning:

Some words and acts presented in our play
May cause in those who are susceptible
Gross uncontrolled convulsions of the belly
That in the vulgar tongue are known as laughs.
If you be subject to such symptoms, we'll
Exchange your ticket, and you'll see instead
Some deadly boring tragedy at Stratford.

And now our story starts: A distant place,
Another century, and yet desire
Remains the same no matter where or when.
And in the realm of once upon a time,
Two hopeful hearts discover that they rhyme.

The LIGHTS come up on:

SCENE 1

A RECEPTION ROOM in a tiny palace in Hagelstein, somewhere in central Europe in the late 18th century. At CENTRE, a couch, with a chair to its RIGHT and a small side table to its LEFT, with a small portrait of the late Duke on it in a black mourning frame. The furniture has seen better days, as has the palace. Visitors will enter from RIGHT. Interior rooms are off LEFT.

The DUCHESS, about 60, dressed in widow's black, is sitting on the couch, a bejeweled cane beside her. Entering the room from LEFT is her daughter LADY CLAIRE, mid-20's. She is dressed simply for a country outing. She carries a small picnic basket, from which she will nibble during the scene.

CLAIRE

You summoned me, Mamma?

DUCHESS

You are a
Wicked, vain and disobedient girl.
I must remind you of the principles
Laid down by God and King to guide our state,
Ensuring Hagelstein stays Hagelstein-ish.
And these are Duty, Honour, Reverence,
Self-Discipline, Self-Sacrifice, and Faith.

CLAIRE remains untroubled by this harangue.

CLAIRE

Grumpy God and cranky King missed out
On freedom, sisterhood and brotherhood,
And celebration, music, dance and love,
Adventure, sensuality and joy.

DUCHESS

I do not understand one word of French.

I now demand of you a sacrifice,
Redeeming you from your recent years of sin.

CLAIRE

Christians call it sin. I call it fun.

She pops a grape into her mouth.

DUCHESS

You'll know your duty when you've learned the truth
About your father's most peculiar death.

CLAIRE

But was it not a riding accident?

DUCHESS

A wealthy country Baron owned a horse
So proud and fierce that it could not be tamed.
Your father bet that he could ride that beast,
And if he could, the animal was his.
He mounted and was thrown off instantly,
Landing head first upon the stony ground,
Thus losing all at once both life and bet.

That weakling, having thrown away our fortune
At gambling casinos and the track,
Had just one asset left to pledge as forfeit
In case the Baron's fiery horse prevailed.
That asset was, dear Claire, your hand in marriage.

CLAIRE

My father bet his child against a horse?

DUCHESS

He liked the odds. The horse had two more legs.
Once you're the Baroness, your husband's gold
Will fill the coffers emptied by your father
And once again we'll live in pride and comfort.

CLAIRE

You'll pimp your only daughter out for cash?

DUCHESS

Among the nobly born, that's the tradition.
 Your father's gone, and now my word is law.
 To the convent will you go, to fast
 And weep until you choose to do your duty.

CLAIRE

I will not do it —

BARON

Bellowing from offstage RIGHT

Where is she? Where's my promised bride?

CLAIRE and DUCHESS freeze.

The BARON strides in from RIGHT. He is pretentiously and opulently dressed, sword slung at his side and wearing a large ornate hat.

Baron Hugo von Strauss, at your service.

Takes off his hat with an elaborate flourish, bows to DUCHESS. She extends her hand. He kisses it grossly. She grimaces.

Sorry about your husband. Never try to ride a horse named Volcano.

He hands his hat to DUCHESS as if she were a footman. Repelled, she holds it at arm's length, deposits it on the chair.

BARON crosses to CLAIRE.

So this is the little filly.

DUCHESS

The Lady Claire.

BARON places his palm on top of CLAIRE's head.

BARON

Sixteen hands high. Just right for riding. If you know what I mean.

He strokes her cheek. She recoils.

CLAIRE

Get your hands off me, or my knee will make sure you never get back in the saddle again. If you know what I mean.

DUCHESS

Forgive my daughter, my dear Baron, for the Reticence so natural to a maiden
When first she meets her promised cavalier.

BARON continues to stalk CLAIRE, attempting to caress her as she backs away.

CLAIRE

He's no more a cavalier than I'm a maiden.

BARON chases CLAIRE around the furniture, almost knocking over the DUCHESS. He tries to kiss CLAIRE. She slaps his face and dodges away. DUCHESS is horrified.

BARON

Resistance only ripens my desire.

He continues his pursuit. CLAIRE grabs the DUCHESS's cane and strikes the fencing pose against the BARON. She advances, flourishing the cane, and it's clear that she's an expert fencer. BARON retreats, but CLAIRE, feinting and thrusting, lands a good hit on his chest and continues her attack.

The BARON draws his sword.

DUCHESS

Screams.

Parrying, the BARON uses his sword to knock the cane out of CLAIRE's hand. He lowers the sword.

BARON

Laughs.

I do not draw my sword upon a woman!
At least not *this* sword, if you know what I mean.
Soon you shall join the ever-swelling list
Of ladies who've surrendered to my love
In boudoirs and haystacks and in carriages,
Queens, Contessas, trollops, tarts and tramps!

Advances on CLAIRE, sword still in hand.

I make Don Juan look like the Virgin Mary.

DUCHESS gasps, makes the sign of the cross.

CLAIRE

Holding him off

How sad for you that she's not on the list.

DUCHESS covers her face.

BARON rushes at CLAIRE. He grabs her and presses in to kiss her.

CLAIRE

Pulls away but can't break his grip on her wrist.

Go back to your queens, your trollops, tarts and tramps
But let me be — I'm suffering menstrual cramps!

The BARON recoils in shock, letting her go and dropping his sword. Facing front, he makes the sign of the cross.

Picking up sword with his right hand, he extends his open left hand up towards CLAIRE as if he's holding a demon at bay, and awkwardly waddles backward. He turns tail and runs off RIGHT.

CLAIRE, grinning in triumph at the audience, stalks off LEFT.

DUCHESS swoons and collapses on the couch.

BLACKOUT

SCENE 2

A DARK CORRIDOR in the palace. CLAIRE looks around nervously.

CLAIRE

To flee, or not to flee ... That's a no-brainer.
Marry the Baron? Or rot away in the nunnery?
At midnight shall I steal into the stables
And saddle up Minerva, my best friend.
We'll gallop to our border in the south
And enter that exotic land: Rofrania.

Rofrania! Whose long-oppressed people
Overthrew our puritanic rule,
Creating for themselves a bright new realm
Where freedom and imagination dance.
I've heard that in their capital there reigns
A noble Prince beloved of all his people,
And to his court I'll strive to make my way
A refugee in quest of life renewed.

I share the gambling spirit of my father,
I inherit too my mother's fierce resolve,
Combined, they'll fuel my fury to be free
And the monarch of my future shall be me!

She runs off.

BLACKOUT

SCENE 3

BEDROOM in PRINCE RUDOLF'S lodge in the Rofranian countryside. COUNTESS OCTAVIA'S shoes and clothing, along with RUDOLF's princely jacket and his boots, are strewn on the floor. OCTAVIA, in her negligee, lies yawning with satisfaction in the bed. RUDOLF, standing in trousers and shirt, takes his ceremonial jacket from the floor and starts to put it on.

OCTAVIA

Oh, Rudolf, not already?

RUDOLF

I must perform

The christening of the flagship of our Navy
In honour of myself: *Prince of Rofrania*.
I hope she floats. Our other ship does not.

OCTAVIA

My husband will be there?

RUDOLF

I suppose it would be

Gauche of me to give him your regards.

OCTAVIA

You'd first have to remind him who I am.
On those happily rare occasions when he
Wants to exercise his marital privilege,
He treats it more like exercise than privilege.

I hold so tenderly these times we have,
And it's my fondest wish for you, dear Rudi,
That some day you will find someone who's free
To give you all the love that you deserve
And whom you'll love with all your generous heart.

RUDOLF

Octavia ... that hope is fantasy.
 I am a Prince. No woman whom I meet
 Is not bedazzled by my rank and fame.
 How can I know that I am loved as Rudi,
 And not as Prince, an object of ambition?
 I ask myself, would I be in your arms
 If I were nobody ... a stable boy?

OCTAVIA

I do not know ... Why don't we try and see?

Removing his jacket seductively.

"The Countess and the Stable Boy",
 A tawdry novel, peddled furtively
 To serve as aid to solitary pleasure.

She drapes his jacket over her own shoulders.

Randy stable boy: Go!

RUDOLF

Hey there, girlie. I exercised the horses. Sweaty work. Filled six barrels muckin' out the stables. Now I got ten minutes. How 'bout you and me play mare and stallion? (*Belches, or blows nose on sleeve.*)

OCTAVIA

Insolent varlet! Know you not whom you
 Offend with gross obscenities that shame
 Even the beasts you tend? I am a Countess,
 Cousin to twelve crownèd heads of Europe,
 Diamond-dripping paradigm of fashion,
 Patroness of impov'rishèd *philosophes*,
 Wife of a Lord High Admiral, and mistress
 To a dashing, bold and celebrated Prince.
 What say you to that, man of manure?

RUDOLF

I just want yer steamin' hot body.

OCTAVIA

(Shrinking away, outraged) Oh! ... Oh! ... Oh!

(Temptation creeps in) Oh ... Oh ..

(Seductively) Ooooooooooh ...

Leans in, but grimacing at his smell, pulls back.

No way.

RUDOLF

I'll take a bath.

OCTAVIA

Deal.

She reaches for him, but he stops her.

RUDOLF

But you get in it with me.

OCTAVIA

Oh Prince of stable boys! Forget the bath! I am your mare! Come, stallion!

They tumble into bed, rolling about passionately. The lights BLACK OUT except for a pool of light that RUDOLF steps into.

RUDOLF

Through some strange alchemy I lost myself
 And I felt freed from what I've been, a Prince,
 Suddenly I was an ordinary man.
 And this seduction, although just in sport,
 Opens a novel path to self-discov'ry.

I'll walk out in the wider world, disguised
 As some low fellow from the common folk.
 And without the great advantage of my birth,
 I'll learn from women what I'm really worth!

BLACKOUT

SCENE 4

The DUCHESS's bedroom, dimly lit. She lies in bed in her robe, eyes closed, a cool compress on her forehead. By the bed a small table with medicine bottles.

The BARON enters, hat in hand, looking haggard.

BARON

Any news?

DUCHESS

Nothing. Her horse was gone. The rain washed away the hoofprints. Impossible to say which way she went.

BARON

I want her back. She's mine.

DUCHESS

Gets out of bed slowly.

I long to have you in our family. Your contributions will be ... most substantial. Forgive my daughter for her fiery temper.

BARON

I'm a military man. I could tell that she was born to offer leadership. And discipline.

DUCHESS

You admire those qualities?

BARON

Very much.

DUCHESS

These many ladies you have ... known. Have they provided leadership and discipline?

BARON

Oh yes. They tell me what to do.

DUCHESS

And you enjoy that?

BARON

I live for it.

DUCHESS

Dear Baron, every minute you become more interesting. Would you pass me my medicine? In the blue bottle.

BARON

Of course.

He brings her the bottle. She slaps it out of his hand and it clatters to the floor.

DUCHESS

You dropped my medicine.

BARON

I was so careless. So neglectful.

DUCHESS

Pick it up.

BARON

Yes yes yes.

He bends over to pick up the bottle.

DUCHESS

On your knees.

He goes to his knees and picks up the bottle, hands it to the DUCHESS in a submissive manner.

You didn't apologize.

BARON

I do apologize, dear Duchess. I dropped your medicine.

DUCHESS

Now apologize for not apologizing.

BARON

I humbly apologize for not apologizing for dropping your medicine.

DUCHESS

Have you considered, my sheepish little Baron, that the Lady Claire's rejection was merely the first salvo of the discipline that she will wreak upon you all your life?

BARON

I hadn't thought of that. She is a genius.

DUCHESS

Come here every day, my Baron, and I'll rehearse you in the full submission she'll expect.

BARON

I am most grateful.

DUCHESS

I shall bind you to our family with hoops of steel. I will accustom you to cruelty.

BARON

You are too kind.

DUCHESS

She's very good at it. *(Darkly)* She gets it all from me.

BARON

(Timidly) May I come here twice a day?

DUCHESS smiles.

BLACKOUT

SCENE 5

RUDOLF ALONE. He stands facing the AUDIENCE, looking into an imaginary mirror. He inspects himself, turning back and forth. He is wearing the shabby clothes of a peddler. He has added to his face a moustache and a small beard. At his feet lies a packsack filled with peddler's ware.

RUDOLF

Farewell, Prince Rudolf. Welcome, Tom the peddler. Any woman who can love me like this ... may be a woman I can truly love. I feel like Sir Lancelot charging into battle in his underwear.

He takes a small book out of his pocket.

Fortunately there's help. "Guide for the Would-be Casanova". By Giacomo Casanova. Chapter One. "Elegant dress is essential." I'll start with Chapter Two.

Slings the pack on his back, tucks the book into his pocket and goes out.

LIGHTS come up on ...

SCENE 6

A HUMBLE COUNTRY TAVERN in Rofrania. UPSTAGE RIGHT, a bar with a couple of stools. DOWN LEFT, a table with a couple of chairs. Behind the bar, the BARMAID cleans beer steins, opens bottles, wipes counter.

RUDOLF enters the tavern at RIGHT. Spies BARMAID, straightens his shabby shirt, tries a bit of swagger. BARMAID glances at him indifferently, goes back to her work. RUDOLF takes out the book, reads from it.

RUDOLF

(To AUDIENCE) “The would-be Casanova begins with an innocent request, spiced with a hint of warmer interest.”

He sits on a bar stool.

Could I see the menu ... *(seductively)* sweetie-pie?

BARMAID

I’m not on it. *(Continues with her work.)*

RUDOLF

To AUDIENCE

Better try Chapter Three.

BARMAID

(Bored) Our specialty is chicken.

RUDOLF

Reading from book. To AUDIENCE:

“Do not neglect the humoristic approach.”

Returns to BARMAID.

I hope your chicken is more fair than fowl.

BARMAID

It’s our specialty.

RUDOLF

(To AUDIENCE) That laid an egg ... “As a last resort, try honesty.”

(To BARMAID) I’m just a humble peddler, so I thought maybe —

BARMAID

I don't want what you're peddling.

RUDOLF

(Defeated) I'll have the chicken.

BARMAID

We're sold out.

BLACKOUT

SCENE 7

OUTSIDE THE TAVERN. CLAIRE strides in DOWNSTAGE. She is dressed as a young nobleman on his Grand Tour, in riding clothes with a short riding sword. She wears a moustache and a short beard, not unlike Rudolfs.

CLAIRE

How easy 'tis to travel as a man!
Free of leers and catcalls and much worse
From every random scoundrel passing by.
'Tis shameful that I need this masquerade.
But here I am — the air feels different now!
I rode across the border and my heart leapt
To see those blessèd words upon the sign:
 WELCOME TO ROFRANIA!
 HOW CAN WE MAKE YOU HAPPY?
I then looked back to see my homeland's counterpart:
 WELCOME TO HAGELSTEIN!
 YOU ARE UNDER ARREST.

And now I'll taste my very first meal in freedom
In this new land I hope to make my home.

LIGHTS come up on ...

SCENE 8

THE TAVERN. RUDOLF eating at the table, with a dish of stew and a stein of beer before him while he reads his book.

CLAIRE enters from RIGHT. The BARMAID is in awe of this fine gentleman. She attempts an awkward curtsy.

BARMAID

Welcome, noble sir, to our humble establishment.

CLAIRE

Thank you.

BARMAID

(Indicating the table) Please be seated, sir. I'll be with you soon.
She crosses to the bar, primping up for the gentleman.

CLAIRE approaches the table. RUDOLF looks up from his book and sees her. The book falls from his hand. He rises from his seat as if hypnotized. CLAIRE stares at him, herself hypnotized.

CLAIRE

Good evening.

RUDOLF

Good evening, sir.

CLAIRE

I am the Viscount Scharwenka.

RUDOLF

I am the peddler Tom.

CLAIRE

My name is Michael. Please call me Mike.

RUDOLF

Mike.

CLAIRE

Tom.

CLAIRE extends her hand. They shake hands.

MUSIC: Sudden, swelling LOVE THEME.

LIGHTS go down, leaving them in their own pool of light.

They stare motionless at each other, spellbound, then release their hands as if they were scorched. They back away from each other, then face audience.

CLAIRE

My life I now must reckon in two parts:
The first, before this moment; the second — forever.

RUDOLF

In this moment I feel I've had a twin
Who had been torn away from me at birth,
But now by some miraculous intervention
Restored to me at last, to be my brother,
My companion and my dearest friend.

CLAIRE

A stranger! Of whom all I know is — nothing
But this: that one brief touch of his warm hand
Against my hand called to my heart and said
At last I've come to you. Your search is ended.

Lights come up again. BARMAID comes to table to take CLAIRE's order.

CLAIRE

I am no longer hungry.

BARMAID becomes aware that something strange has happened. She retreats to the bar.

RUDOLF

(To AUDIENCE) Wherever he is going, I will go, to be in his company.

(To CLAIRE) Sir, where are you bound?

CLAIRE

The capital city.

RUDOLF

I go there too.

CLAIRE

(To AUDIENCE) Our paths are joined. Who knows what lies ahead?
But I know I'll know no joy till we be wed.

BLACKOUT

SCENE 9

A ROADSIDE CLEARING IN THE WOODS. The moon is rising. At CENTRE a rough-hewn picnic table. RUDOLF and CLAIRE enter from RIGHT. He carries his peddler's pack, she a saddlebag.

CLAIRE

Oh, Tom! What a perfect place to rest amid the woods! You know the country very well.

RUDOLF

In my position, one has to.

CLAIRE

Your ... position?

RUDOLF winces at his slip.

I never thought of peddler as a "position".

RUDOLF

Oh, well, uh ... it's kind of a ... rebranding ... by the Peddler's Association ... we're trying to upgrade the image of the profession ... I'll go find some firewood.

He goes out LEFT.

CLAIRE

Oh, Tom. Tom, Tom, Tom.

What shall I do? The moon is rising full.

I long to tell him that I am a woman

And that I love him as I've never loved.

But the consequence could be disaster.

He might assume —

RUDOLF

SCREAMS in pain from OFF LEFT.

CLAIRE

Tom! Tom! Has some beast attacked you?

RUDOLF

GROANS

CLAIRE runs off LEFT.

A moment later she returns, supporting a hobbling RUDOLF, who tries to clutch his lower leg.

RUDOLF

It's nothing, just a cramp. It will pass. Aaaaagh!

CLAIRE

I have some skill in practical healing.

She helps him sit at the picnic table, facing outwards towards the audience. She sits beside him and stretches his afflicted leg to lie across her legs. She grasps his lower leg.

RUDOLF

SCREAMS.

CLAIRE

Sorry. The muscle is completely rigid.

She starts to massage his lower leg. He winces and groans, gasping in pain.

It's opening up a little. Does that feel better?

RUDOLF

A little.

She continues to massage. RUDOLF starts to relax, breathes deeply, eyes closed. His gasps of pain slowly become gasps of pleasure. He is getting turned on. CLAIRE, unaware of this, focuses on her work.

RUDOLF

(Weakly) Stop.

CLAIRE

It's coming along. I can feel it relaxing.

RUDOLF

Alarmed at what he feels.

Stop it. Please take your hands off me.

CLAIRE

What's wrong?

RUDOLF

Don't touch me!

CLAIRE

Releasing him.

What have I done?

RUDOLF

You've done too much! Just go away!

CLAIRE, shocked and distraught, runs off RIGHT.

RUDOLF painfully pulls himself off the bench and limps DOWNSTAGE.

As he stroked my leg I felt one thing — desire! I've known desire for women, but nothing ever like this. And now the feeling that I feel for him is sweet hot love!

I know men who love other men. Good men. Just different. They had the courage to accept their lot. I am no coward. So be it. I am one of them. And so is he, I know it! Those little smiles. Those probing personal questions. Those accidental touches that were not. If I do not make him mine, I betray my very self!

Mike! Mike! Come back! I did not mean it! I was wrong!

CLAIRE enters cautiously from RIGHT. RUDOLF limps to her.

Mike! You've shown me who I am! I'm just like you! I love you!

CLAIRE

What?

RUDOLF

I am a man who — a man who loves men!

CLAIRE moves DOWNSTAGE, stunned.

CLAIRE

To AUDIENCE

I found my only love and he's the other way!

She runs out LEFT, sobbing, with RUDOLF limping in hot pursuit. They immediately return, with RUDOLF hauling her by the arm.

RUDOLF

Mike! Mike! Just one kiss will show you — man on man!

He tries to kiss her. She holds him off.

CLAIRE

It cannot be! I am a woman!

RUDOLF

You are not.

CLAIRE

Then look at this!

She peels off her beard and her moustache, holding them high, then throwing them on the ground.

What am I now?

RUDOLF

A gorgeous man without a moustache or a beard.

CLAIRE

I am a woman!

She grabs his hand and touches it to her breast.

RUDOLF

Stunned

You are a woman!

He lifts his other hand to touch her other breast.

On both sides.

CLAIRE

And by the way, I love you.

RUDOLF

You love me?

CLAIRE

And will always.

RUDOLF

And I love you, first as a man and now ... as a woman. That is my doubled love for you!
And yet ... I must confess to some confusion.

CLAIRE

I fled a forced betrothal, and I travelled as a man for self-protection.

RUDOLF

You fooled my eyes. You didn't fool my heart.

CLAIRE

And I'd like you to know, my name's not Mike. It's Claire.

RUDOLF

And I'm not Tom, and never was. I'm Rudi.

CLAIRE

Why Tom should now be Rudi I care not
So long as it be true.

RUDOLF

It is.

CLAIRE

I'm pleased to meet you, Rudi.
Extends her hand.

RUDOLF

Claire.

They shake hands, cautiously.

MUSIC: The sudden LOVE THEME, even bigger.

LIGHTS: The lights go wild, spraying the stage with swirling kaleidoscopic colours, like a 60's disco merged with Times Square on New Year's Eve.

CLAIRE and RUDOLF stare at each other, spellbound. Now they look around, amazed, at the transformation of the world. And then they hold each other close.

LIGHTS and MUSIC subside.

CLAIRE

After that, I guess we must get married.

RUDOLF

You'd wed me though I'm just a humble peddler?

CLAIRE

Together we can peddle twice as much,

Then we'll buy ourselves a little shop

And settle down to raise our family.

Our children we'll apprentice to the trade —

RUDOLF

You cannot know the gift that you just gave me.

Alas, I must betray your gentle trust,

Because I'm not who I have seemed to be.

He peels off his moustache and beard, lifts them high and throws them on the ground.

CLAIRE

You are a woman!

RUDOLF

I am a Prince.

CLAIRE

A Princess!

RUDOLF

He presses her hand to his chest.

A Prince.

CLAIRE

You are a Prince ... who peddles?

RUDOLF

I am a Prince ... who princes. Rudolf, Prince of Rofrania, at your service.

CLAIRE

My dreams are lost. The peddler's life ... the little shop ... the wee apprentices ...

RUDOLF

And yet with love all things are possible.
With courage, darling, could you not endure
The grinding hardships of a prince's palace?

CLAIRE

To my eternal shame, I fear I could.
I am, alas, the daughter of a Duchess.

RUDOLF

Our titles shall dissolve when we embrace.

CLAIRE

And then we'll just be you and me. And so ...

She holds out her hand.

RUDOLF

You offer me your hand to kiss?

CLAIRE

You'll kiss my hand. And, if you so desire,
You may pretend that it's my mouth.

RUDOLF

I'll kiss your mouth and pretend that it's your hand.

CLAIRE

Were you to kiss my mouth, I'd want your full attention there.

RUDOLF

Moving in to kiss her

There shall it be —

CLAIRE

Gently holding him off

I said, "Were you to kiss." It was a mere ... hypothesis.

RUDOLF

Your lips caress the word "hypothesis"
As if it should be censored. From such lips
I know that I will learn so very much.

CLAIRE

You promise, then, that if you kiss my lips
Your purpose shall be purely educational?

RUDOLF

That university I'll enter in the fervent hope
I'll never have to graduate.

CLAIRE

Pointing LEFT

Over there I spy a welcoming grove of trees ...

They both look out at AUDIENCE

Where we shall not be seen.

Hand in hand, they glide off stealthily towards the LEFT. Before they exit, she stops him.

But I must give you notice, little freshman,
That there will be ... examinations.

She grabs his hand and hauls him out at LEFT.

BLACKOUT

SCENE 10

RECEPTION ROOM in the DUCHESS's palace, same as SCENE 1. The BARON is cowering on the couch, with the DUCHESS standing over him.

DUCHESS

I have devised a fresh humiliation that will make all your previous sufferings feel like a day at the spa.

BARON

I wallow in your savagery. I am ready.

DUCHESS

Not today! You must first prove your unworthiness.

She pushes him down on the couch, tucks his arms behind his back.

Wait here like this for my return. Do not move a muscle.

BARON

My nose is itchy.

DUCHESS

Excellent.

She goes out LEFT.

The BARON twitches his face. His nose itches. He tries to make it stop by grimacing. It gets worse and he grimaces harder. He sticks out his tongue trying to reach his nose. His body twitches. His arms and hands start to jerk out from behind his back. He suppresses them. Finally he can stand it no longer and he reaches out to scratch his nose —

But at that moment the DUCHESS reappears at LEFT. He pulls his hand back behind his back, fearful that she's seen him. She stands there sternly.

She is wearing a lady's black top hat for riding. In her hand, a riding crop.

BARON

We're playing horsie!

DUCHESS

Assume the position.

BARON gets down on his hands and knees.

You are a miserable excuse for a race horse. You will run last. By 30 lengths. You will require a shameful name, pitiful and contemptible. What is your name?

BARON thinks desperately, gets nothing.

DUCHESS whacks him with riding crop.

Your name!

BARON

Underdog.

DUCHESS

That's prideful.

BARON

Underbelly.

DUCHESS

Pretentious.

Whacks him

BARON

Underwhelming.

DUCHESS

Pathetic.

Whack

BARON

Underprivileged.

DUCHESS

Pompous.

She fakes a whack. He flinches.

BARON

Underling.

Whack

Undercooked.

Whack

Underfoot.

Whack

DUCHESS

Holding the riding crop ready

One last chance!

BARON

Underpants!

DUCHESS

What took you so long?

Whack

BLACKOUT

SCENE 11

In the DARKNESS we hear:

SOUND: Distant church bells all around the town.

MUSIC: Festive pre-wedding organ music.

LIGHTS come up on:

CATHEDRAL SQUARE in the Rofranian capital.

The ARCHBISHOP enters at LEFT from the cathedral. He is very old and stooped, and is played by the BARMAID actor in a white beard.

RUDOLF and CLAIRE enter from RIGHT, arm in arm. He wears a creamy-white uniform with sash and medals. She wears not the traditional bridal gown but something creamy-white that reflects her own less formal style. She carries a bouquet.

SOUND AND MUSIC FADE OUT.

RUDOLF

My Lord Archbishop! It's time to earn your keep.

ARCHBISHOP

'Tis young Prince Rudolf, and his blushing bride!

CLAIRE

And only he, Your Grace, can make me blush.
Repeatedly.

ARCHBISHOP

To RUDOLF

It seems just yesterday I baptized you.
You've grown taller.
But look, here comes a noble lady
Whom we do very seldom see in church.

OCTAVIA enters from RIGHT, dressed to kill.

RUDOLF

Uncomfortably surprised

Octavia?

OCTAVIA

Curtseying deeply

Your Highness, Lady Claire, I give you joy
Upon your wedding day.

CLAIRE

And I take joy

To see you here, my wonderful new friend!

Hands RUDOLF her bouquet and runs to OCTAVIA for the two-cheek kiss.

RUDOLF

You've met?

CLAIRE

Octavia invited me for tea.

We joked and laughed and teased and talked for hours.

RUDOLF

You talked for hours ... Of what was your discourse?

CLAIRE

Philosophy.

OCTAVIA

Diplomacy.

CLAIRE

And Rudolf.

RUDOLF

Oh, him? So, not too much to say, I guess.

CLAIRE

Octavia's brought the latest fad from Paris —

We were topping up our teacups with champagne!

So all our talk of you was ...

OCTAVIA & CLAIRE*Together*

Uninhibited.

RUDOLF*Uneasy*

So, Countess ... I hope you're doing well?

OCTAVIA

A young musician's visiting our town,
 Do catch his concerts! He's called Wolfgang Mozart.
 He's composed the most extr'ordinary scores,
 And he comes to me in private for encores.

CLAIRE*To RUDOLF*

My darling, should I ever tire of you
 I shall consult the Countess for suggestions.
 Perhaps she will propose ... the stable boy?

RUDOLF*To AUDIENCE*When women make alliance, 'tis men who must blush.

*CLAIRE and OCTAVIA do the two-cheek kiss. RUDOLF returns bouquet to CLAIRE.
 OCTAVIA and RUDOLF do the two-cheek kiss.*

*OCTAVIA steps away, does a little curtsy to them, then walks LEFT towards the
 cathedral, escorted by the ARCHBISHOP. He ushers her in, but she lingers in the
 doorway. ARCHBISHOP crosses back to CLAIRE and RUDOLF.*

*OCTAVIA glances back at RUDOLF, who inclines his head with a little smile. She turns
 and enters the cathedral.*

ARCHBISHOP

I've never heard that lady make confession.

CLAIRE

I suspect your life is much the poorer for it.

RUDOLF

To ARCHBISHOP

My good old friend, I owe so much to you.
By tonight you'll have done my baptism and my wedding.

ARCHBISHOP

And if I did your funeral, I'd have the hat trick.
Shall we?

CLAIRE and RUDOLF, hand in hand, follow the ARCHBISHOP towards the cathedral, LEFT.

MUSIC: Triumphant organ chords

The DUCHESS storms in from RIGHT, thumps with her cane.

DUCHESS

Not so fast!

MUSIC: Trails off

CLAIRE

Mamma! How come you here?

DUCHESS

An intercepted letter to your friend
Apprised me of your heartless treachery.

CLAIRE

Slaps her forehead in dismay.

Only a fool sends mail out unencrypted.

To RUDOLF

I know she comes here only to abuse me
In this, the happiest hour of my life.

DUCHESS

Not so! My purpose is instructive, just to show you
That I've found somebody better to abuse:
None other than your former love the Baron.
And I've brought him here to grovel at my feet.

CLAIRE

The Baron is here?

DUCHESS

He's in the alley cowering on his knees
Until I give him orders to crawl forth
And join with me today in holy wedlock
So his wealth, estates and horses shall be mine.

CLAIRE

This cannot be. Today is mine and Rudolf's.

RUDOLF

If I may ...
For years, our bordering countries have been frozen
In unproductive loathing and suspicion.
Let a double wedding symbolize a thaw,
Plus it always pays to please your mother-in-law.

CLAIRE

His diplomatic skills will bless our family
By calming down disputes, resentment, quarrels,
And acrimonious domestic scenes,
At least, until our children reach their teens.

RUDOLF

My Lord Archbishop, do you have the strength
To unite today two pairs instead of one?

ARCHBISHOP

In Christian charity I'll forego the extra fee.

DUCHESS

Come, bridegroom!

The BARON shuffles in from RIGHT. He is wearing an extravagant bridal gown with train and carries a grotesquely decaying bouquet. He is rouged and lipsticked.

ARCHBISHOP

Looking at BARON

I must revise the sermon that I wrote,
And search the gospels for a relevant quote.

DUCHESS

Lay special stress on love, honour and obey.

On "obey" she elbows the BARON in the ribs. BARON nods enthusiastically.

RUDOLF

Although our nation's budget may be small
I proclaim there shall be wedding cake for all!

MUSIC: Grand festive organ march.

ARCHBISHOP leads the two couples in stately procession into the cathedral, LEFT.

The MUSIC swells to a climax. The stage is empty.

LIGHTS dim. OCTAVIA enters to deliver the Epilogue.

EPILOGUE**OCTAVIA**

We've loved, and fought, and laughed, and sighed, and wept,
We've given up the old to risk the new,
We've held each other tight, and run away,
We've plotted and we've schemed, and we have dreamed.

We've struggled hard to learn just who we are,
So as we leave you now, we'll only say
Our time on earth is short, so let's take care
To find the truth behind the masks we wear.

BLACKOUT

Next page: CURTAIN CALL

CURTAIN CALL

ARCHBISHOP, OCTAVIA, BARON and DUCHESS take their bows and line up DOWNSTAGE.

RUDOLF and CLAIRE enter from opposite sides. CLAIRE is carrying an infant.

She stops, suddenly aware by smell and feel that the baby has done what babies do. She grimaces, then crosses to hand the baby to RUDOLF, who takes it, smiling gamely.

They take their bows.

END OF THE PLAY