

# The Mercurian



*A Theatrical Translation Review*  
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Editor: Adam Versényi  
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*The Mercurian* is named for Mercury who, if he had known it, was/is the patron god of theatrical translators, those intrepid souls possessed of eloquence, feats of skill, messengers not between the gods but between cultures, traders in images, nimble and dexterous linguistic thieves. Like the metal mercury, theatrical translators are capable of absorbing other metals, forming amalgams. As in ancient chemistry, the mercurian is one of the five elementary “principles” of which all material substances are compounded, otherwise known as “spirit”. The theatrical translator is sprightly, lively, potentially volatile, sometimes inconstant, witty, an ideal guide or conductor on the road.

*The Mercurian* publishes translations of plays and performance pieces from any language into English. *The Mercurian* also welcomes theoretical pieces about theatrical translation, rants, manifestos, and position papers pertaining to translation for the theatre, as well as production histories of theatrical translations. Submissions should be sent to: Adam Versenyi at [anversen@email.unc.edu](mailto:anversen@email.unc.edu) or by snail mail: Adam Versenyi, Department of Dramatic Art, CB# 3230, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3230. For translations of plays or performance pieces, unless the material is in the public domain, please send proof of permission to translate from the playwright or original creator of the piece. Since one of the primary objects of *The Mercurian* is to move translated pieces into production, no translations of plays or performance pieces will be published unless the translator can certify that he/she has had an opportunity to hear the translation performed in either a reading or another production-oriented venue. All material published in *The Mercurian* is protected by international copyright law. Inquiries related to production or reproduction should be directed to the translator of the piece in question.

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*Volume 2, Number 4*

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### **Editor's Note:**

The daylilies are in bloom, the hydrangea are on the wood, it is humid in North Carolina and, therefore, time for a new issue of *The Mercurian*. This issue contains three short plays by the unjustly neglected Cuban playwright Virgilio Piñera translated by Kate Eaton: *You Always Forget Something*, *False Alarm*, and *Thin Man Fat Man*. Piñera is probably best known for his play *Cold Air*, translated by María Irene Fornes among others. These three comic plays demonstrate one aspect of Piñera's range. Following the Piñera plays comes Carolina Miranda's article *Invisible on Stage: the case of Roberto Arlt's Saverio el Cruel*. Miranda's article meditates on the reasons for another case of neglect, that of Roberto Arlt's theatre. While Arlt is frequently acknowledged as a forerunner of the Latin American "boom" in fiction, his importance in the development of contemporary Argentine theatre is largely unexplored. Miranda's article seeks to rectify this omission while discussing some of the particular challenges Arlt's work poses for theatrical translation. Her translation of *Saverio, the cruel* follows. The issue concludes with Kanchuka Dharmasiri's fascinating article on the role translation has played in the creation of contemporary theatre in Sri Lanka., *Translation and the Emergence of Modern Sinhala Theater in a Postcolonial Context*. Dharmasiri discusses the way that translation has been fundamental to creative practice in Sinhala Theater and to its establishment as a distinct form from Tamil and English theatre in Sri Lanka. With this issue *The Mercurian* concludes our second volume. In celebration back issues of the journal can now be found under "Related Links" on the website of the Department of Dramatic Art at the University of North Carolina, <http://drama.unc.edu/> where we will maintain a permanent web presence.

As the theatre is nothing without its audience, *The Mercurian* welcomes your comments, questions, complaints, and critiques. Deadline for submissions for consideration for Volume 3, No. 1 will be October 30, 2010.

--Adam Versényi

## Pieces of Piñera

Virgilio Piñera's playwriting career spanned four decades; these three one-act plays are stepping stones through three of those decades. Together they reveal the many aspects of Piñera's stagecraft and provide a glimpse into the comic complexity of the inverted worlds inhabited by his hapless protagonists.

*Falsa Alarma* [*False Alarm*] was written in 1948 and the original version of the play was published in the Cuban poetry magazine *Orígenes* in 1949. Piñera added dialogue for the play's premiere in Havana in 1957 and this has subsequently become the definitive version. *El flaco y el gordo* [*Thin Man Fat Man*] was written in 1959 and was premiered later that same year whilst *Siempre se olvida algo* [*You Always Forget Something*] was written in 1963, published in *La Gaceta de Cuba* in 1964 but not finally premiered until 1987 some eight years after Piñera's death.

Like all translations these are works in progress. They have been produced with an eye (and an ear) to performance and have been rigorously tested (and improved) by contact with actors during the multiple stages of their development.

### YOU ALWAYS FORGET SOMETHING

#### A Comedy in One Act

#### CHARACTERS

(In order of appearance)

CHACHA

LINA

SEÑORA CAMACHO

TOTA

STRANGER

### SCENE ONE

*Living room: two armchairs, a sofa, coffee table, vase on top of the table, paintings, standard lamp (lit), telephone. Front door, side door; next to the front door a large suitcase and a sunshade can be seen; on the floor, next to one of the armchairs, an open suitcase; on top of the chair, clothes and toiletries. It is night-time. Present day (1964).*

CHACHA: *(Lying on the sofa reading a newspaper; as she reads she guffaws loudly, she bends double with laughter and clutches her stomach.)* Oh my God, I'm going to die, I'm dying! Oh, it's too much, it's killing me! *(Pause)* Oh, no, stop it, stop it!

LINA: *(She enters dressed as if ready to go out; tailored suit, hat, etc; shouting at Chacha.)* Why are you lying there on the sofa? Finish packing your suitcase at once. The plane won't wait.

CHACHA: *(Still laughing)* Pardon me, Madam... But it's just so funny.

LINA: *(Opening her handbag and rummaging in it.)* What's so funny? *(Pause)* You know I can't stand jokes. *(Pause)* I am a dramatic woman. *(She looks up at the ceiling.)*

CHACHA: Pardon me, Madam, but this one's really good. *(Pause)* Go on, listen. *(She sits)* It's a good one I promise you.

LINA: *(Closing her handbag, she sits in the armchair.)* What's it about?

CHACHA: *(Renewed fits of laughter as she casts her eye over the newspaper again)* Oh, Madam, I can't...! *(She doubles up with laughter once more.)* Oh, oh, oh, oh. I'm going to die!

LINA: (*Gets up and heads over to the side door.*) That's enough! You're insufferable. I'm going. I'm not interested in your joke. Tell it to someone else.

CHACHA: I'm begging you Madam, don't leave! Listen to this, listen...

LINA: (*With her back to Chacha*) Just get it over with then.

CHACHA: (*Reading.*) Yesterday, after a cruel illness, the venerable matron Doña Asunción Marticorena widow of Valladares died peacefully at the respectable age of one hundred. May God receive her soul (*Laughs uproariously.*)

LINA: (*Turning slowly as she rubs her eyes.*) That's dreadful, Chacha, absolutely dreadful! (*She starts to cry.*) I shall never forgive myself for not having been at her deathbed.

CHACHA: (*Astonished*) But Madam, you didn't even know her, did you?

LINA: (*Dropping down into the armchair.*) That's why I shall never forgive myself. Of course I didn't know her. If I'd known her I'd have laughed my head off... (*Pause, shouting*) I shall never forgive myself.

CHACHA (*She stands up with a great effort and goes over to the armchair with the clothes on it as she says*) Madam, you change everything; you feel everything differently. I've prayed to all the saints in turn to make you go to the doctor.

LINA: (*Making disdainful noises with her lips and teeth.*) The doctor is for your throat or your liver... (*Pause, she opens her handbag again, looks inside, closes it again.*) I am perfectly healthy in body and spirit.

CHACHA: (*As she puts things into the suitcase*) But you're not going to deny that if it's green you say red, if you hear a joke then you cry, and if you get some bad news then you burst out laughing?

LINA: Things affect me less that way.

CHACHA: Affect you less Madam? Would you say that the news of the Widow Marticorena has affected you less? You're still crying.

LINA: I don't deny it. If I get good news I'll pretend it's bad to stop me feeling pleased, and if I get bad news I'll pretend it's good to make me feel better. It's a strategy that never fails.

CHACHA: Well, if Madam is happy that way...

LINA: Never happier; nothing can take me by surprise. I hate surprises.

CHACHA: Still Madam, surprises can be very agreeable. *(Pause)* Once I found a peso in the middle of the street...

LINA: *(Interrupting her)* I too have found a peso in the middle of the street.

CHACHA: And wasn't it a surprise for you Madam?

LINA: No it was a peso, a peso like any other peso.

CHACHA: Forgive me Madam, but you're very strange. I've worked for many ladies, but never for a strange one.

LINA: *(She gets up, goes over to the telephone, she dials a number.)* Hallo, hallo!

Is that 32-1532? Am I speaking to Señora Camacho? It's Lina. How are you? I'm very well thank-you. *(Pause)* Listen, Señora Camacho, today is Monday the 20<sup>th</sup>, the time is 9.00pm. Call me back next Monday at exactly the same time, will you? *(Pause)* Yes, I'm going away, yes to England. I'll be there for three months. *(Pause)* How can you call me back at this number if I'm in England? No of course not, I can't be here and in England at the same time, just call me. *(Pause)* Will there be someone here to take the call for me? No, the house will be empty, just call me. Goodbye, Señora Camacho. *(She hangs up.)*

CHACHA: *(Open-mouthed.)* Forgive me, Madam, but I don't understand a thing. If the house is empty then the phone will ring and ring...

LINA: *(Mysteriously.)* You always forget something.

CHACHA: What did you say Madam?

LINA: I said you always forget something.

CHACHA: *(Nervous and confused she tries to put a dress into the suitcase but it falls to the floor.)* You make me nervous Madam. *(Picks up the dress)* What you just said about *always forgetting something...* *(Pause)* If we make a note of everything we're taking on the trip, I don't see why we should forget anything.

LINA: *(Serenely.)* You always forget something. *(She opens her handbag again and looks inside it.)*

CHACHA: In your handbag, Madam?

LINA: (*Closing the handbag.*) In my handbag? What do you mean?

CHACHA. What I meant, Madam, was that it seemed like you were looking in your handbag to make sure you hadn't forgotten the money.

LINA. (*Serenely*) You always forget something.

CHACHA. (*She goes over to Lina*) And what I say Madam, is that if you make a list of everything that you're taking on the trip and you check it item by item then you won't forget anything important. (*Pause*) I never forget anything. (*She points to her suitcase.*) I'll bet you anything you like that I have everything I need in that suitcase. I haven't forgotten a thing.

LINA. (*She goes over to Chacha's suitcase, rummages about and finally pulls out a hairbrush.*) If I take this brush out of your suitcase, this brush will no longer be in your suitcase, ergo you always forget something.

CHACHA. (*Furious*) What on earth do you take me for Madam..., No-one takes a brush out of their suitcase after they've just put it in..., their suitcase; unless they're crazy. (*She stares at Lina as if suddenly thinking that she might have gone mad.*)

LINA. A crazy person can forget something. (*Pause*) That's enough. I can see you're getting carried away. It's bad for the health. (*Pause*) The fact is; you always forget something.

CHACHA. (*Pointing to herself*) Madam, I may not know much but I do know that you are very... (*She stops short of finishing her sentence as if afraid of saying something rude.*)

LINA. Very what...? Come on, spit it out!

CHACHA. (*Fearfully*) You are very complicated. (*Pause*) I don't mean to meddle in your affairs Madam, but if you will permit me...

LINA. I permit you. Out with it!

CHACHA. (*Cheering up*) Well the thing is I don't understand that telephone conversation.

LINA. (*Laughing*) There's nothing to understand – I called Señora Camacho to ask her to call me back next Monday at the same time.

CHACHA. But Madam, next Monday we will be in London, the house will be empty, the telephone will ring and ring and nobody will answer it.



LINA. (*Shaking her head she starts to walk around the armchair.*) So nobody will answer it! (*Pause*) Well, I say to you that you always forget something.

CHACHA. There you go again! (*Pause*) So you forget something! I don't suppose you're going to come all the way back from London just because you've forgotten your shoehorn or her lipstick...

LINA. (*Abruptly stops walking.*) And if I did do it, what would you say?

CHACHA. (*Confused, stammering.*) I would say that you... are... very... complicated.

LINA. Good. (*Pause*) And what would you say if I wittingly left...

CHACHA. (*Interrupting her*) What was that Madam?

LINA. Wittingly, that is to say: on purpose. (*Pause*) What would you say if I left something behind on purpose?

CHACHA. (*Distressed*) I don't know, Madam, I don't know. I don't understand a thing!

LINA. (*She sits. To Chacha*) Sit down. (*Pause*) I have decided that every time that I prepare to go away, I shall wittingly forget to take with me an item of personal use.

CHACHA. (*Quick-fire*) I really don't see the point Madam. It makes no sense at all.

LINA. It may not seem that way to you, but actually it makes perfect sense. (*Pause*) Aren't people always saying: "You always forget something!"? (*Pause*) Come on, answer me!

CHACHA. Well, if someone forgets something they might say it

LINA. (*Sharply*) No, not might say it: they do say it.

CHACHA. (*Sighing*) Okay, Madam, they say it.

LINA. Yes they say it and they double say it... (*Pause*) Let me see. Supposing that you forget... let me see... let me see...

CHACHA. (*Unable to contain herself*) The aspirins Madam! I always forget them.

LINA. So you always forget the aspirins Magnificent! (*Pause*) And what do you say when you've forgotten them?

CHACHA. Well, I say... (*Pause*) Shit, I've forgotten the aspirins! Sorry, Madam. (*She covers her face with*

*her hands.)*

LINA. (*Applauding*) That's the spirit! (*Pause*) Now, tell me: doesn't it make you angry that you've forgotten the aspirin?

CHACHA. (*Taking her hands away from her face.*) Very angry, Madam! With the headaches I get... (*Pause.*) Do you know something? I always discover that I've forgotten the aspirins in a place where they don't sell aspirins.

LINA. (*She heads towards Chacha's suitcase and starts to go through it; at the same time she pretends to have a splitting headache.*) It's got to be here! I know I brought the bottle of aspirin. It was the first thing that I packed. I even remember saying: "you first so that I don't forget you." (*Pause*) After that I packed the little bottle of Mercurochrome. (*She takes out a small bottle.*) Here it is! (*She leaves it on the armchair.*) After that the bicarbonate (*She takes out another bottle.*) And here it is too! (*She starts to rummage with greater tenacity and various pieces of clothing fall to the floor.*) After the bicarbonate I packed the magnesia (*She takes out a large bottle.*) And here it is! (*More clothes fall on the floor*) And the castor oil (*She takes out another bottle.*) And here it is! (*She pulls out more clothing*) And the menthol (*She takes out a small round tin.*) And here it is! (*Her voice gets louder.*) And the paregoric elixir; and here it is! (*Shouting*) And the creosol; and here it is! And the belladonna; and here it is! (*Yelling*) But the aspirins are not here. Help! Help! Help! (*She falls to the floor pretending to faint.*)

CHACHA. (*Running over to Lina she takes her in her arms.*) Madam, Madam! What's the matter? What's the matter?

LINA. (*Getting quickly to her feet*) Isn't that what happens every time that you forget the aspirins?

CHACHA. (*Stupefied, she slowly stands up.*) Madam, you are an artist! What brilliance! You got it in one, Madam! (*Pause*) That's it Madam, that's what happens to me when I forget the aspirins.

LINA. (*Straightening her dress and arranging her hat.*) And then your head starts pounding until you scream like a condemned woman.

CHACHA. And without a single aspirin, Madam, without a single aspirin (*Pause. Suddenly*) what is it that you forget Madam?

LINA. (*Looking at her watch*) The iodine! (*Pause*) I have a terrible fear of infections. They say that if you die from an infection your corpse swells up far more quickly than normal.

CHACHA. (*Surprised*) You don't say Madam! (*Shuddering all over*) How horrible!

LINA. (*Shuddering herself*) Horrible! (*Pause*) Every time that I travel I forget the iodine. (*Pause*) And where I feel it most is in the aeroplane.

CHACHA. I don't follow, Madam.

LINA. Suppose the aeroplane were to crash. With what iodine would I anoint my wounds?

CHACHA. (*Ingenuously.*) You'd need a gallon of iodine in that case, Madam.

LINA. What does it matter if it's a gallon, a tank or a bottle if I always forget the iodine! (*Reflective pause*) Listen, it makes no difference what I do, I always forget to put the iodine in the suitcase. Nothing works, not the knot in the handkerchief, not the dictionary left open at the word iodine, not even spilling a little iodine on the floor before I start to pack...

CHACHA. (*Shaking her head*) And iodine's got an awful whiff to it too Madam...! You can smell it a mile away! (*Pause*) You know what Madam... I believe you. (*Pause*) Guess what happened to my aunt with the aspirins? (*Pause*) Well I sent her a telegram saying: "Remind me by return not to forget the aspirins."

LINA. (*Brightly*) I know! She forgot to send you the telegram.

CHACHA. (*In a desolate tone*) If only it had been that, Madam! (*Pause, she bursts into tears.*) No, Madam, it was much worse. My aunt died.

LINA. See, Chacha! Those damned aspirin have even killed a member of your family. (*Pause*) In spite of the lists, in spite of checking each and every item, even in spite of the knots in the handkerchief... You always forget something!

CHACHA. (*Shaking her head*) That's right, Madam: you always forget something! And the worst of it is there's no cure.

LINA. Yes there is a cure! (*Pause*) Haven't I just told you that from today we will – wittingly – forget to take something? (*Pause*) I will forget the iodine; you will forget the aspirin.

CHACHA. But, Madam, how are we going to forget to take something that we always forget to take?

LINA. For that very reason; if we know beforehand that we have forgotten to take the iodine and the aspirin, we will know that we won't forget to take the iodine and the aspirin.

CHACHA. Ooh, Madam! That's all so complicated!

LINA. Complicated? Simple and..., safe! *(Pause)* When we are mid-flight I will say to you: "Chacha, I have – wittingly – forgotten to bring the iodine"; you will say to me: "Madam Lina, I have forgotten – wittingly – to bring the aspirins". Then I will say to you: "Chacha, we never forget anything"; you will say to me: "Madam Lina, we never forget anything". *(Pause)* Then..., *(Pause)*

CHACHA. *(Longingly)* What, Madam! Then, what...?

LINA. Then we will return to this house and look for the iodine and the aspirins.

CHACHA. And once we have the iodine and the aspirins, will we catch the plane again Madam?

LINA. But of course! *(Pause)* Only without the iodine and the aspirins; once more we shall wittingly forget to take them.

CHACHA. How lovely, Madam! We will always be travelling! It's going to be very enjoyable.

LINA. Now go to the bathroom and bring the iodine and the aspirins.

CHACHA. *(Astonished)* What, Madam! Are they going with us?

LINA. No, they're staying here. Here we will leave behind my iodine and your aspirins. *(Pause)* Let's see, where would be the best place to put the bottles. *(Pause)* Go on, bring them.

*Whilst Chacha goes for the bottles, Lina starts to perform a mime; she looks all around the living room, she puts a finger to her temple in a pensive attitude, she nods her head as though in agreement, then she shakes it as if in disagreement; she squats down and looks under the armchairs, she gets up, points to the armchairs and then nods her head, then shakes her head; she goes over to the coffee table, she nods her head in agreement and gestures with her hands as though putting something on the table, etcetera. Finally she remains by the table, very upright, awaiting Chacha's return.*

CHACHA. *(Entering)* Here they are, Madam. Where shall I put them?

LINA. *(Putting out her hands)* Give them to me. You finish packing. *(She places the bottle of iodine on the coffee table.)* The iodine, here... *(She pauses as if looking for a place to put the aspirin)* and the aspirins, there... *(She goes over to the armchair and places the bottle on the seat)* That's it! *(Pause)* Now I shall explain my plan to you: next Monday the twenty-seventh, that's to say a week today, as we are taking our morning dip on a beach in Brighton, I shall suddenly say to you: "Chacha, I forgot to put the iodine in

the suitcase!" *(Pause)* And you will say to me...

CHACHA. *(Interrupting her)* And I forgot the aspirins, Madam!

LINA. Perfect! Then – dishevelled and hysterical – we will catch the plane and enter through that door *(She points to it)* at the precise moment that Señora Camacho is calling this number.

CHACHA. Forgive me, Madam, but to be perfectly honest, I don't see the point of that call.

LINA. You don't? Then wait until you hear Señora Camacho's screams of rage.

CHACHA. Screams of rage, Madam? Why? I don't know Señora Camacho but I can't imagine she's going to scream just because you've told her to call you on Monday the 27<sup>th</sup>.

LINA. She's going to scream when she hears me. Señora Camacho is anti-forgetfulness personified. As she never forgets anything, she can't stand forgetfulness in others. *(Pause)* When I tell her, over this telephone *(She points to it)* that, in light of my perennial forgetfulness, I have wittingly forgotten to take the iodine and the aspirins, she will scream with rage. *(She roars with laughter.)*

CHACHA. I understand now, Madam, but...

LINA. But what...?

CHACHA. What I mean is..., that's to say... *(Pause)* What if Señora Camacho forgets to call you next Monday 27<sup>th</sup> at 9.00pm?

LINA. Are you off your head? Señora Camacho is anti-forgetfulness personified. *(Pause)* And now, to our travels! *(She goes over to the door and picks up her suitcase.)* Let's go! We shall return on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> just in time to receive Señora Camacho's telephone call.

*At that precise moment the telephone rings.*

LINA. *(Dropping her suitcase)* Who can that be? *(She walks over to the phone.)*

CHACHA. *(Looking at the phone)* Maybe it's Señora Camacho?

LINA. *(Picking up the receiver)* Yes! *(Pause)* Uh-huh, uh-huh, of course, hmmm, uh-huh, hmmm, of

course, uh-huh. Goodbye. *(She hangs up.)*

CHACHA. Who was it, Madam?

LINA. *(Walking over to the door.)* Señora Camacho. She was calling to ask me if I had everything, if hadn't forgotten something. *(She picks up her suitcase.)* Poor woman! She has no idea what's in store for her! Let's go! *(They both leave slamming the door behind them; blackout; music.)*

## SCENE TWO

*One Week later; Lina and Chacha enter. The living room which has remained in darkness is illuminated by Lina switching on the lights. Once the room is lit, Chacha enters.*

LINA. *(Leaving her suitcase by the door)* Objective achieved, operation completed...

CHACHA. *(Who has just come in also leaving her suitcase by the door.)* It's like a dream, Madam... Only a few hours ago we were bathing in Breeeton...

LINA. *(Correcting her pronunciation.)* Brighton, Chacha, Brighton...

CHACHA. I'll never be able to say it, Madam. *(Pause)* Well a few hours ago we were in Bree-ighton and now we are in Havana. *(Pause)* Have we arrived in time, Madam?

LINA. *(Looking at her watch)* One minute to nine. *(Looking towards the telephone)* Señora Camacho will be on the point of calling. That won't fail. *(Pause)* But we have failed. *(Pause)* That's why we have returned. What did you forget, Chacha?

CHACHA. The aspirins, Madam.

LINA. And me?

CHACHA. The iodine, Madam.

LINA. *(Walking over to the bottle of iodine, she picks it up.)* You rascal! So you hid yourself did you, eh? But I've come back for you. *(She kisses it several times and murmurs mmm mmm to it.)*

CHACHA. (*Imitating Lina, she picks up the bottle of aspirin.*) You rascals! So you hid yourselves did you, eh? But I've come back for you. (*She takes out an aspirin, kisses it and swallows it.*)

LINA. (*She takes the lid of the bottle and starts to dab herself on the face, the neck and the arms.*) Wounded, I am wounded, lacerated! (*She dabs herself again.*) Knifed, pierced, stabbed!

CHACHA. (*Imitating Lina she starts to stuff aspirin in her mouth.*) My head is splitting; I have a migraine, neuralgia, ants and scorpions!

*Lina starts to dab at Chacha who in her turn puts aspirin into Lina's mouth; at the same time they both express the pleasure they are feeling by making sounds with their mouths, showing the whites of their eyes, contorting, etcetera. Suddenly the telephone rings.*

LINA. (*Putting the lid on the bottle and leaving it on the coffee table. She runs to the phone.*) Yes! (*Pause*) How could I not know who's calling me, Señora Camacho? This call could only be from you. Yes, we've just got back from England. (*Pause*) Yes, I already know that you never forget anything. (*Pause*) Of course, but I tell you that you always forget something. (*Pause.*) Yes, Señora Camacho, I will continue to state it: you always forget something. (*Pause*) So you don't believe me? What are we going to do with you! (*Pause*) That would be useless, it's already happened. (*Pause*) What's already happened? Well I have wittingly forgotten the iodine, and Chacha, my maid, the aspirins, that's what's already happened (*Pause.*) Yes, Señora Camacho, we always forget the iodine and the aspirin, despite the list. (*Pause*) Of course! And as we always forget them, now we leave them behind wittingly. (*Pause*) Just so that you know... and we will continue to forget the iodine and the aspirin. (*Pause*) Yes, in an hour we will catch the aeroplane again. (*Pause*) Yes, to England. I am sorry that the news is giving you a headache. Take an aspirin. (*Pause*) Señora Camacho, hallo, hallo, Señora Camacho... (*She replaces the receiver, creased with laughter*) She hung up! (*Walking towards the centre of the room and addressing Chacha.*) She's having a fit. She says that the world is like it is because of people like me. What nerve! If she only knew that the world is like it is because of people like her! (*She sits in one of the armchairs.*) Look at us, not only do we eat, sleep, walk and talk but we also forget the iodine and the aspirins; whereas she, eats, sleeps, walks and talks and never forgets a thing. What a colourless life! (*Pause*) Chacha...

CHACHA. (*Goes over to Lina*) Yes, Madam.

LINA. At what time does our plane leave for England?

CHACHA. At ten, Madam, it's already a quarter past nine.

LINA. Where will we be on Monday the fourth of August at ten o'clock in the morning?

CHACHA. Madam, we will be in Breeeton...

LINA. (*Affecting a British accent*) Brighton, Chacha, Brighton...

CHACHA. Forgive me, Madam, we will be in Breeeighton, having our morning dip.

LINA. (*Slowly getting up*) And what will I suddenly say to you?

CHACHA. (*Imitating Lina*) Chacha, I forgot to put the iodine in the suitcase!

LINA. (*Imitating Chacha*) And I forgot the aspirins, Madam!

CHACHA. (*Clapping her hands*) And we will hurry back to Havana.

LINA. (*Also clapping her hands*) And then we will return straightaway to Brighton! (*Pause*) I've thought of something even better..

CHACHA. (*Doubtfully*) Something even better Madam? Is that possible?

LINA. Something even better; that's to say, the same thing, but improved upon. (*Pause.*) Look: we will leave something behind at the hotel in Brighton... Let me see..., let me see... (*Thinking*) Ah, got it! At the hotel in Brighton, I will leave behind my garters...

CHACHA. (*Waving her hands about*) And I, Madam, will leave my rosary.

LINA. Splendid, Chacha, that way you can be an atheist one day and the next day not; *theist* in Brighton, atheist in Havana.

CHACHA. (*Giving a shriek of terror she slumps down into the armchair.*) Madam!

LINA. (*She goes over to Chacha. She takes her hands; she gives her little slaps on the face.*) Chacha, what's the matter? Wake up. (*She looks all around her.*) What have you seen, Chacha; tell me, what have you seen?

CHACHA. (*Giving an even more piercing shriek*) Aaaargh!



LINA. (*Embracing her*) Speak to me, Chacha, speak to me!

CHACHA. (*Pathetic and ridiculous*) Madam, haven't you thought that one day we might forget to travel?

LINA. (*Retreating towards the other armchair with horror written all over her face*) What, Chacha, what...! What are you saying?

CHACHA. (*In the same tone*) That one day we might forget to travel!

LINA. (*She falls into the other armchair*) Aaaargh! (*She faints.*)

CHACHA. Aaaargh! (*She faints*)

*Long pause: suddenly, the front doorbell rings, loudly; first prolonged ring, pause, second ring even longer; pause; another ring, longer still.*

CHACHA. (*Coming round*) Where am I? (*Another prolonged ring of the doorbell*) (*She looks towards the door then towards Lina, who is still in a faint.*) Who can it be? (*She gets up, goes over to Lina, she shakes her.*) Madam, Madam! Someone's ringing the doorbell!

LINA. (*Coming round, looking distractedly at Chacha*) What? What are you saying? (*Another prolonged ring*)

CHACHA. There's someone at the door, Madam. Didn't you hear the bell?

LINA. (*She leaps up.*) Who could it be? I don't receive visitors, you know that.

CHACHA. (*Making as though to walk over to the door*) Shall I open, Madam? (*Another prolonged ring*)

LINA. (*Shaking her head.*) We haven't got time. (*She looks at her watch.*) Only just enough time to catch the plane. (*Now the bell rings uninterruptedly.*) (*To Chacha.*) Open that door and tell whoever's ringing that Madam isn't here.

CHACHA. (*She goes over to the door, she opens it.*) Madam isn't here. (*She makes to close the door but an arm from which hangs an enormous lady's handbag prevents her from doing so.*)

CHACHA. I've just told you that Madam isn't here.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Entering followed by Tota her maid who is carrying two suitcases. Señora Camacho*

*is an extremely stout woman of about fifty whose sense of fashion is at least ten years behind the times; over her dress she wears the kind of antiquated overcoat known as a duster; hat with veil, ankle boots. Tota, the maid, between twenty-five and thirty years old, also demodée: long yellow dress; wears a black beret.*) But I am here! *(She walks to the centre of the living room and repeats)* Yes I am here!

LINA. *(Getting up)* Señora Camacho!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. The very same. *(She lifts up the little veil.)* Here I am!

LINA. *(Going over to Señora Camacho)* Señora Camacho, I wasn't expecting you. We spoke only a few minutes ago and you didn't announce your visit.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. It's true, I didn't announce my visit; but in view of the gravity of the situation...

LINA. The gravity of the situation? I don't understand, Señora Camacho. Would you like to explain yourself? *(Pause)* Actually, I don't have time; the plane is waiting for us...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. The plane is waiting for me and for Tota *(She points at Tota.)* too...

LINA. *(Looking at Tota She sees the suitcases.)* What, Señora Camacho? Are you both travelling tonight as well?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(With great composure)* We are travelling as well, Lina. *(Pause)* I can tell you that this trip wasn't in my plans, but in view of the gravity of the situation...

LINA. *(Brightly.)* Some family incident?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. If only it were that! *(Pause)* No, Lina, the family is in perfect health. *(Pause)* No, no, nothing to do with families. I have come to dot all the i's and to cross all the t's *(Pause)* but first I will sit. May I?

CHACHA. Certainly! Make yourself at home.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Thank you. *(Looking at Tota again; to Chacha)* May I tell Tota to sit too?

CHACHA. Of course! Make yourself at home.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(To Tota)* Tota, first say thank you to Señora Lina, then put the suitcases down on the floor and after that you may sit.

TOTA. *(To Lina.)* Thank you very much, Madam. *(She puts the suitcases on the floor, next to the door, but*

*apart from Lina and Chacha's suitcases. Finally she sits on the sofa.)*

LINA. *(To Chacha.)* Chacha, sit next to Cota...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(Correcting Lina)* Not Cota, Tota.

LINA. That's it: Tota. Sit next to Tota and make conversation.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(To Tota.)* Careful what you say, Tota. Don't let the cat out of the bag.

TOTA. *(To Señora Camacho)* Don't you worry yourself Madam; my lips are sealed.

CHACHA. *(Sitting next to Tota)* We'll see about that!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(To Lina.)* You would do well to warn Chata...

LINA. *(Correcting Señora Camacho.)* Not Chata, Chacha...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. That's it: Chacha. You would do well to warn Chacha not to try any funny business with Tota. I wouldn't like to answer for the consequences...

LINA. *(To Chacha)* On guard, Chacha.

CHACHA. On guard, Madam.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(To Tota)* Remember, Tota..., cat in the bag..., and don't let her out.

TOTA. *(To Señora Camacho.)* She won't get out Madam, I swear it.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(To Lina)* Well, now we can begin. *(Pause)* Sit down. This will take a while.

LINA. *(Sits)* At what time does your plane leave, Señora Camacho?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. At ten *(Looks at her watch)* we still have fifteen minutes.

LINA. *(Interrupting her she makes as if to get up)* Fifteen minutes! We must leave at once. We can talk on the way to the airport.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(Making a movement with her arm as if to stop Lina)* It is not usual for delicate matters to be dealt with hastily; much less in an automobile. Haste plus speed spells catastrophe, my dear. *(Pause)* No, no, no, no... This lovely sitting room is the ideal setting for our conversation tonight. *(Pause)* And by the way: where exactly in England is it that you are headed?

LINA. (*With self-possession*) Once we have landed in London, we shall go directly to Brighton.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Might one know what that is?

LINA. The seaside; Brighton is a coastal resort.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. So the seaside... (*To Tota*) Tota... (*To Lina*) I would have preferred somewhere else...

TOTA. (*Leaning half off the sofa*) Yes, Madam.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Hand me the bathing suits. (*To Lina*) Somewhere less worldly; but, what can we do!

*Tota, meanwhile, has opened the suitcase and is rummaging through it.*

LINA. (*Impatient*) Señora Camacho, don't take this the wrong way, but your behaviour isn't, shall we say, exactly commendable...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Calmly*) Uh-huh! How so?

LINA. You arrive unexpectedly; you do it knowing that we are about to take the plane to England; not content with that, hardly have you burst – yes that's the word – burst into my house, than you say that the reason for your ... unexpected visit is to clear things up. (*Pause*) What things – I'd like to know – what things? (*Pause*) And as if that wasn't enough you ask me for our exact destination in England. As soon as I inform you that we go to Brighton from London, you hurriedly notify me that you are headed for Brighton too. Then as if to rub my face in it, you tell your maid to take the bathing suits out of the suitcase.

TOTA. (*Who has been approaching Señora Camacho*) Excuse me Madam: here are the bathing suits, yours and mine.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Smiling*) Thank you, Tota. (*She takes the swimming costumes. To Lina*) before dealing with all your criticisms point by point I shall first explain these bathing suits. (*Pause*) although I hadn't thought to have a summer holiday this year – neither in that resort of Bree...

LINA. Brighton.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Thank you..., neither in that resort of Breeighton nor in any other seaside town,  
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nevertheless, foreseeing that a fortuitous circumstance might find me beside the sea – such a circumstance as has now arisen – I ordered Tota to put our bathing suits into the suitcase. *(Pause)* In much the same way we carry woollen stockings and longjohns with us in case of a sudden frost, or in case we should find ourselves scaling an Alpine peak, or who knows, even in the Himalayas – because I assure you that anything is possible. *(Pause)*

LINA. *(Sarcastically)* That's exactly what I say, Señora Camacho. Anything is possible – even forgetting something.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Juana Camacho Widow of Pérez never forgets anything that matters... I simply keep it in my bag. *(Pause)* Do you know what the two sworn enemies of forgetfulness are? Well I'll tell you: phosphates and lists.

CHACHA. *(To Tota with an air of complicity)* You always forget something! I forget the aspirins, how about you?

TOTA. *(Sharply)* I drink two bottles of phosphates a month and I make my lists. I don't forget a thing.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Good, Tota! In the bag!

LINA. *(Roundly.)* That's what you think. Wait till Chacha puts her in her place. *(To Chacha.)* On guard!

CHACHA. *(To Tota.)* Phosphates? That'll put hairs on your chest then!

LINA. *(To Chacha.)* Touché, Chacha! Touché!

Tota. *(To Señora Camacho, making the characteristic sign to denote dementia)* Stark, staring, Madam, stark, staring!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(To Lina)* If you don't want your domestic to end up on the funny farm at Mazorra I advise you to give her phosphates morning, noon and night.

LINA. *(Seriously)* What are you thinking of Señora Camacho? Do you want Chacha to be completely covered in hair?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(Furious.)* You are both regrettably confusing restorative hair tonics with memory-enhancing phosphatic substances. But it doesn't surprise me. It's all a product of forgetfulness. If you continue like this, one day...

CHACHA. (*Interrupts her in fits of laughter*) We'll start thinking with our hair and combing our brains. What fun!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*To Lina.*) An idiot, that's what your maid is: an idiot!

LINA. (*Evenly.*) I don't doubt it, Señora Camacho. I'll start giving her phosphates immediately. Then she'll not only be an idiot, she'll also be hairy.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Splendid! Give her phosphates before she ends up putting you into the suitcase.

LINA. Fantastic! That way we'll only have to pay for one flight.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Slapping her thighs*) Well, do whatever you like. I haven't come here to waste my precious time on your maid. Sort it out as best you can! (*Pause.*) The object of my visit is, as I was telling you just a moment ago, to discuss a matter of the utmost gravity with you.

LINA. (*Leaning forward in the armchair*) I am at your disposal. Although I have to warn you that anything you say to me will go in this ear (*she points to her right ear.*) and come out the other. (*She points to her left ear.*)

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Sorrowfully*) That is your business. I for one am not in danger of making a similar mistake, nor, like you, of spouting nonsense. If I wanted to be mad like you, I would tell you, right now, to put a plug in your left ear, so that what goes into your right ear can't escape. (*Pause*) No, I am a normal woman, with a head on her shoulders and a husband in the cemetery, that is to say, a respectable widow; a woman who is careful to note down on a piece of paper everything that she should take with her on a trip to another country – near or far – and who simply cannot allow certain other people to travel to countries – near and far – and forget to take with them items of personal use, and what is worse, forget to take them with them wittingly.

LINA. Have you finished? Have you said everything, Señora Camacho?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Smugly and affectedly*) That was merely the exordium. Now we will get to the crux of the matter. (*Pause.*) I am prepared to offer you a practical demonstration.

LINA. A practical demonstration of the exordium?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Indeed. (*Pause.*) But first, do me the favour of expanding upon what you were saying to me over the telephone concerning those forgotten aspirins...

LINA. (*Lively*) And the iodine! Certainly! When it comes to forgotten items I'm in my element. (*Pause*) As you will see, Señora Camacho; every time that I travel I forget the iodine, and my servant Chacha forgets the aspirins. We can't avoid it.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Uh-huh! Anything else?

LINA. No nothing else! In order not to continue forgetting the iodine and the aspirin we have decided to forget them wittingly.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Making a gesture with her hand*) That will do! (*She gets up.*) Now I will offer you the practical demonstration. (*Pause; to Tota.*) Tota, get up!

TOTA. (*Springing up*) Yes, Madam! At your command, Madam!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Bring me a suitcase.

TOTA. One of our suitcases, Madam?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Yes, one of our suitcases. I never use anything belonging to anyone else. Bring mine.

TOTA. (*Picking up one of the suitcases*) That's right, Madam; you never know what you might find in someone else's suitcase.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*To Tota*) Come here, Tota, you're a darling. Let me kiss you. (*Tota approaches pulling faces and Señora Camacho kisses her.*)

TOTA. (*Going back to the suitcases*) Madam is very good. (*Finally she picks the suitcase up. To Señora Camacho*) where shall I put it, Madam?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Pointing to the empty armchair*) There. Open it. (*Tota opens the suitcase whilst Señora Camacho says to Lina :*) This practical demonstration is called: You never forget anything!

LINA. (*Sarcastically*) The facts demonstrate the opposite. (*Pause, solemnly.*) Señora Camacho, you are in the house of a person for whom forgetfulness is strategic. Therefore: you always forget something!

CHACHA. (*Jumping up like a spring.*) And... wittingly, Madam.

LINA. (*To Chacha.*) Come here, Chacha, you're a darling. Let me kiss you. (*Chacha approaches pulling faces and Lina kisses her.*)

CHACHA. (*Returning to the sofa*) Madam is very good. (*She sits down again.*)

LINA. Well I was telling you that you always forget something...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. That is precisely why I am here. I cannot permit such irregularity to continue. Where will we all end up? *(She turns to the audience.)* Ladies and gentlemen, you have just seen this crazy woman *(She points to Lina.)* congratulating her no less crazy servant. I ask myself: should this be allowed to continue? Either this lady mends her ways and travels normally, taking with her the iodine and the aspirins, or I throw her into the funny farm at Mazorra.

LINA. *(Sarcastically)* And since when did you become director of the Psychiatric Hospital, Señora Camacho?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. That's quite enough of your silly little jokes; don't change the subject. This is a very serious matter *(Pause)* and now, to the practical demonstration. Listen attentively your life depends on it. *(Pause, transition; in a normal voice to Lina.)* Would you have the kindness to fetch me the iodine and the aspirins?

LINA. *(Picking up the bottles of aspirin and iodine from the coffee table)* Here you are. *(She hands them over, sits down again.)*

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(To Tota)* Tota let us prepare our luggage. *(Pause)* Please read out the items that we will take with us. *(To Lina.)* Come, you may check for yourself that every item on the list is actually in the suitcase.

TOTA. *(She stands up; she takes a piece of paper from one of the pockets in her dress and reads slowly.)* Detailed inventory of the items that Señora Juana Camacho Widow of Pérez will take with her on her trip. *(Pause)* Garments: two morning dresses, two afternoon dresses, two evening dresses; three petticoats, three pairs of knickers, three brassieres, three pairs of longjohns, five pairs of stockings. *(Pause)* Toiletries: a bottle of eau de cologne, one of lavender water, one of mouthwash, a pot of face cream, a tin of talcum powder, one of face powder, and a... a... *(She clears her throat, coughs and looks confused)* and a... a sw... sw... sw...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(Surprised)* What's the matter, Tota? Can't you read your own writing?

TOTA. *(Stammering)* Madam, it's just that..., here..., I don't understand... *(She bursts into tears.)*

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Come on! Pull yourself together. Keep reading.

TOTA. *(Fearful.)* Madam, it says here a..., sweet potato...!



SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Astonished*) A sweet potato? But that's not a toiletry; anyway, I never take a sweet potato with me on my travels. (*Pause*) Let's see, let's see! (*She rummages feverishly in the suitcase. Finally she pulls out a sweet potato.*) Here it is! And what a sweet potato! It looks like a sputnik... (*To Tota*) Since when have we taken sweet potatoes on our travels? What were you thinking of, putting it in?

TOTA. (*Wringing her hands*) I'm sorry, Madam, it won't happen again.

LINA. (*Laughing heartily*) Perhaps she was reading the shopping list as well and the sweet potato slipped in amongst the toiletries.

CHACHA. (*To Señora Camacho*) Beg pardon, Madam, don't take this the wrong way, but that Tota's a total liability; she'll slip a whole barrowful of vegetables into your suitcase when you least expect it.

LINA. (*Still laughing*) I agree: better the maid who's too frugal than the maid who's too extravagant. Chacha is right, Señora Camacho. That Tota's a total liability. She'll slip a man into your suitcase, when you least expect it, out of sheer extravagance.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Very serious*) It won't be because of that! I have a man in my suitcase.

LINA. Don't change the subject, Señora Camacho. There's a sweet potato in your suitcase, a fact you should be ashamed of.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. And I tell you again that there's a man.

LINA. Yes a man who's turned into a sweet potato.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Would you like to see him? (*Pause. To Tota.*) Tota read the details of the souvenirs that always travel with me.

TOTA. (*Reading*) The first communion dress, the little porcelain potty, the jet necklace and the mummified body of your dead husband.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Takes Lina by the arm and leads her to the suitcase.*) Tell me, is there or is there not a man in that suitcase.

LINA. (*Sticking her head inside the suitcase*) Aaaargh, a dead man, a dead man! (*She faints.*)

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Slaps her on the face, picks her up, Lina comes round.*) That happened because of your cynicism, my dear, because of your cynicism. (*She takes Lina and sits her in the armchair.*) Anyway, I don't see what's strange about having a mummy in my suitcase, even less so if in life he was my

husband.

LINA. (*Contrite.*) But all of a sudden like that, Señora Camacho... And so ugly!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. My husband was certainly not ugly, and since the church united us for all eternity, then it is my duty to take him with me wherever I go. (*Pause*) But let us continue with the practical demonstration. (*Pause; to Tota*) Tota, carry on with the reading, I hope it won't lead to any more incidents.

TOTA. (*Reading.*) First-aid kit: a packet of cotton wool, a bottle of antiseptic, one of gentian violet, one of Mercurochrome, one of iodine...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*To Lina*) Did you hear? A bottle of iodine; come and see for yourself.

LINA. (*Raising her arms in a gesture of refusal*) No, no, I'll take your word for it, Señora Camacho!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. If you're worried about seeing my husband, I can assure you that he's not visible now; I've moved him to the bottom of the suitcase.

LINA. (*Brightly*) Thank you, Señora Camacho, I'm very grateful; I prefer to remain seated.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*To Tota*) Tota, continue.

TOTA. (*Reading.*) A tube of haemorrhoid cream, a bottle of sleeping tablets, a box of plasters, an elastic bandage, a bottle of aspirins...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*To Lina*) There you are; the aspirins! Don't you want to have a look? Oh well, as you like, but they're there. (*To Tota.*) That'll do, Tota. (*To Lina*) So what do you say to me now then? Are we or are we not agreed that you never forget anything?

LINA. (*Springing up*) And the sweet potato?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. What about the sweet potato?

LINA. And you still have the temerity to ask me? (*To Chacha*) Are you listening Chacha? She's talking about never forgetting anything and she forgot to leave the sweet potato at home.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Again taking the sweet potato out of the suitcase*) This sweet potato isn't an omission; on the contrary, it is a mistake.

LINA. Tell me, Señora Camacho: was this sweet potato included amongst the items to be taken on your

trip?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. No, but...

LINA. (*Interrupting her*) With all due respect... (*Pause*) If this sweet potato wasn't included amongst the items to be taken on your trip, where should it be now?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. In my house, with the other vegetables.

LINA. Good. Where is it now?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Here. (*Bad-tempered.*) Can't you see it? (*She waves it in Lina's face.*)

LINA. (*Unperturbed.*) Don't get worked up, Señora Camacho. (*Pause.*) So, if it's here, in your hand, it isn't in your house. Isn't that right? Good. (*Pause*) Answer me now: did you or did you not forget to leave it at home?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Well, I forgot and I didn't forget.

LINA. So are you trying to tell me, Señora Camacho that the sweet potato is here and in your house as well? I didn't know that sweet potatoes could be in two places at once.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Confused*) Well, it is and it isn't...

LINA. (*Energetically*) Señora Camacho, this is the last straw... you can't have your cake and eat it.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. You just want me to eat my words...

LINA. You've already eaten them...with a helping of sweet potato... (*Pause*) How do you feel? (*She goes to Señora Camacho and takes her head between her hands, mockingly.*) Who could have said to this teensy weensy head that a sweet potato would be the cause of its downfall! (*She takes her hands which are still holding the sweet potato.*) And who could have said to these teensy weensy hands that they themselves would put a sweet potato on the list! (*She touches her mouth.*) And who could have said to this teensy weensy mouth that it would find itself obliged to shout! (*Shouting at the top of her voice*) You always forget something! (*Pause*) Say it, Señora Camacho, say it!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Shouting*) You never forget anything!

LINA. (*Shouting*) You always forget something! (*Putting her hands on her hips*) So that's how things are, is it! Perfect, perfect! (*Pause.*) Tell me, are your parents dead?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Showing signs of stupefaction*) What are you asking me that for?

LINA. Answer me, Señora Camacho: are your parents dead?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Sighing*) Yes they're dead.

LINA. Well you forgot to put them on the list; and your grandparents and your great-grandparents too. (*Pointing to the telephone*) Call the cemetery and ask them to dig them up. (*Feigning cordiality*) Señora Camacho, you must be more careful with your dead relations. After all, these are blood relatives; your dead husband was only related to you by marriage.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. I don't have to take my relatives. It would cost me a fortune.

LINA. Even if it cost you two fortunes, Señora Camacho, even if it cost you two... family is family, Forgetting your dead relatives is unforgiveable. (*Pause*) But it's not just the relatives. Loads of things were missing from the list that Tota just read: the Benzedrine, the Bible, the bicarbonate, the bicycle, the corkscrew, the coffee maker...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Interrupting her*) The coffee maker is on the list. (*To Tota.*) Tota read the rest of the list.

TOTA. (*Reading*) A coffee maker, a hammer, a plough, a horse, a stove and a mattress. That's all, Madam.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*To Lina*) See? We didn't forget the coffee maker...

LINA. But you forgot loads of things: the window frame, the telephone book, the crossword puzzle and the monkey puzzle, the pick and the shovel, the sugar and the sedatives, the water jug, the baby's bottle, the tumble dryer, the dictionary, the hot water bottle, the peace pipe, the insecticide, the castanets, the oxygen mask, the foil, the billiard balls...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. No more! No more!

LINA. (*Relentless, continues enumerating.*) The cups, the plates, the spoons, the knives, the forks, the saltcellar, the sugar bowl, the decaying teeth, the colds, the spots, the typhoid fever, the poliomyelitis, the parallelepipedon...

SEÑORA CAMACHO AND TOTA. (*Together*) No more! No more!

LINA. Do you or do you not always forget something?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. Yes, you always forget something: the blanket, the syringe, the terracotta, the terra firma, the terrapin, the telescope, the peppermint, the almanac, the bath-tub, the wash-tub, the hip-flask, the demijohn, the jeroboam, the marjoram...

TOTA. (*In a frenzy, on her feet.*) The colander, the alcohol, the cholesterol, the creosol, the parasol, the... the...

CHACHA. (*Gets up; frenetically*) The carousel and the rosary, the shrubbery, the ossuary, the treasury, the notary, the aviary, the... the...

TOTA. The breviary. And the suppository, the lavatory, the cemetery, the refectory, the constabulary, the... the...

CHACHA. The judiciary. And the butter dish, the butterfish, the buttermilk, the butterfly, the butterscotch, the butter beans, the... the...

*During all these enumerations those actresses that are not speaking are counting on their fingers.*

TOTA. The... the... the... the... (*To Señora Camacho*) There's nothing else left, Madam.

CHACHA. The... the... the... the... (*To Lina.*) It's true, Madam, there's nothing else left.

LINA (*To Señora Camacho, snidely.*) Is there anything else left, Señora Camacho?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Throwing herself at Lina*) Madwoman! Bitch! So you always forget something, eh! Well here's one thing you won't forget in your goddamned life: I'm going to pull out all your hair.

LINA. (*She stops her with one hand.*) I wouldn't advise it, Señora Camacho. You'd have to spend your whole life pulling my hair out.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Confused*) I don't understand...

LINA. (*She goes over and presses herself right up against her.*) The phosphates, the phosphates! I will sprout manes of hair, forests of hair. You will go mad pulling it all out, Señora Camacho.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Recoiling*) Witch! That's what you are, a witch. (*Pause; to Tota.*) Tota, let's go. (*At the same time she goes over to the suitcase and starts to close it.*)

Tota. (*Going over to the suitcase by the front door*) Quickly Madam: Before she casts a spell on us.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*As she finishes closing the suitcase, to Lina, disdainfully.*) Forget it! (*She picks up the suitcase and starts to walk towards the door.*)

LINA. (*To Señora Camacho as she picks up the sweet potato from the coffee table.*) Señora Camacho, you've forgotten the sweet potato.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Without looking at her*) Fry it! (*She gets to the door. To Tota.*) Tota, phone for a taxi.

LINA. (*As Señora Camacho talks to Tota, Lina starts to walk over to the side door; meanwhile Tota goes over to the telephone; as Lina passes the coffee table she picks up the sweet potato.*) I'll put it in the kitchen; I don't want the same thing happening to me as happened to you Señora Camacho... (*She pushes the door open, exits, then rapidly returns to the living room slamming the door behind her, screaming:*) A man, Señora Camacho, there's a man in there!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Sarcastically*) A man? Something else you've forgotten, maybe?

LINA. (*Breathless.*) No, Señora Camacho, I swear to you that I've never seen him before.

STRANGER. (*Entering; He is barefoot, in vest and pyjama trousers*) Forgive me, ladies...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Screaming*) Tota, call the police... A burglar.

STRANGER. (*To Señora Camacho*) I am not a burglar, Madam.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Beside herself*) What are you, then?

STRANGER. A fleeing lover...

LINA. (*Forcefully.*) But not mine; certainly not mine. Tell this lady that you are not my lover.

STRANGER. (*To Señora Camacho*) Its true, I don't know this lady, circumstances, you see, have forced me to...

LINA. Yes, break into my house. That is not right.

STRANGER. (*To Lina.*) I know, Madam, a thousand pardons, but when one's life is at risk... a deceived husband can be very dangerous.

LINA. Well, now that you're here, you might as well stay, although I have to warn you that there is no

men's clothing in this house. *(Pause)* Tell me, had you been hiding in the bedroom for long?

STRANGER. I was just jumping through the window...

LINA. Ah! The window was open?

STRANGER. Open, that was my salvation.

LINA. *(To Señora Camacho)* See, Señora Camacho? You always forget something! *(Pause. To the Stranger)* Proceed.

STRANGER. I was just jumping through the window when you arrived home.

LINA. So you have heard our entire conversation.

STRANGER. *(As if embarrassed)* I had no choice. You were speaking so loudly.

LINA. Fantastic! You have been heaven-sent. *(Pause)* Tell me, Señor...

STRANGER. *(Steps forward, holding out his hand to Lina.)* I'd prefer to remain incognito. Call me Pancho.

LINA. *(Gives him her hand.)* Pancho Carrancho killed his wife with five knitting needles and a carving knife... *(Pause)* Pleased to meet you. *(Pause.)* Tell me, Pancho, do you agree with me that you always forget something?

STRANGER. *(Looking towards Señora Camacho)* Well, Madam...

SEÑORA CAMACHO. *(She approaches the Stranger, she holds out her hand to him.)* Juana Camacho, widow, as you already know, of Pérez. *(Pause)* This lady is completely mad. I'd advise you to maintain a prudent silence.

LINA. *(To the Stranger.)* Answer, voluntarily or by force, but answer my question. *(Pause.)* Chacha, if Pancho refuses to answer, go and find a police officer.

STRANGER. *(Alarmed.)* There's no need for that, madam, I will answer voluntarily. *(Pause)* Well, in view of the dramatic circumstances I find myself in; taking into account that I took refuge here with a jealous husband hot on my heels; considering that I am a fugitive, I will say the following: I for one forgot to take the necessary precautions.

LINA. *(Triumphant, to Señora Camacho)* Hear that, Señora Camacho? Did you hear what Pancho said? If Pancho had taken all the necessary precautions then he wouldn't be in this predicament. But as you

always forget something (*emphatically*), *you always forget something*, we have the pleasure of his company, and what is more, of his confirming my point of view.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Imploringly, to the Stranger*) I for one, never forget anything, Señor Pancho!

STRANGER. (*Sarcastically*) Well, madam, although I have nothing against you and I hate to contradict you. I would say that you forget almost nothing.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Shouting*) Not almost nothing, no; nothing, absolutely nothing.

STRANGER. And the sweet potato?

LINA. (*Imitating the Stranger*) And the sweet potato, Señora Camacho?

CHACHA. (*The same*) And the sweet potato, Señora Camacho?

TOTA. (*The same*) And the sweet potato, Madam?

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Reproachfully.*) Et tu, Tota?

TOTA. (*Shrugs her shoulders.*) Sorry, Madam. But there it is large as life. Nobody wants to bury it!

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Looking around her*) Then there's only one thing left for me to do...

STRANGER. (*Taking a step towards Señora Camacho*) Now, now Señora Camacho, there's no need to go *that* far... Don't they say: life is worth more than a... sweet potato? Eat it before doing away with yourself.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Sharply*) But I wasn't thinking of killing myself. Not for that, nor for all the sweet potatoes in the world. (*Pause*) I just wanted to say: 'and the sweet potato, Señora Camacho?'

STRANGER. (*Warmly*) That's the spirit, Señora Camacho! (*Pause*) Anyway, today it's a sweet potato, tomorrow it might be a hen.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. (*Astounded*) A hen?

STRANGER. Yes, a hen. Don't forget that you always forget something.

SEÑORA CAMACHO. And the day after tomorrow it might be... (*She is pensive.*)

TOTA. A scallion, a stallion, a battallion, a galleon, a..., a...



CHACHA. A Castilian. And a hickory, a chicory, a history, a memory... a... a...

STRANGER. A glory. And a pail, a rail, a sail, a snail, a... a...

LINA. A quail. And an Airedale, an airbed, an airhead, an airlock, an airport, an aeroplane... *(Pause; with a start)* An aeroplane! *(To Chacha)* Chacha, we must run, the plane, the plane! *(Pause; disheartedly.)* We have missed the plane! *(Pause, shouting.)* You always forget something!

EVERYONE. *(Surrounding Lina and shouting at the tops of their voices.)* You always forget something!

CURTAIN

## FALSE ALARM

### CHARACTERS

MURDERER

JUDGE

WIDOW

*The scene shows an office. A desk, swivel chair, opposite the desk a chair, a bench against the wall stage right; statue of Justice centre stage. As the curtain rises the Judge appears dressed in his robes with his biretta in his hand. The Murderer, who has his back to the door, is leaning against the statue.*

JUDGE: (*Stopping in the doorway.*) Good morning!

MURDERER: (*Turning abruptly.*) Who are you...?

JUDGE: (*Stepping one pace forward; severely.*) I am the judge. (*He steps forward another two paces and touches the statue with his fingertips.*) And as for this, this is Justice...

MURDERER: Justice...?

JUDGE: (*Sitting in the swivel chair and moving his body from right to left.*) Yes, Justice... I always have her brought here when I am about to conduct a criminal hearing.

MURDERER: (*Standing before the desk.*) I killed in self-defence.

JUDGE: (*Rapping his knuckles together.*) That's what they all say. (*Pause*) So you shot him at point-blank range...

MURDERER: ...at point-blank range.

JUDGE: (*Pointing to the bench.*) Sit down. You'll be calmer.

MURDERER: (*Continuing to stand.*) I want to know what's going to happen to me.

JUDGE: (*Pointing to the bench again.*) Sit down. You're rushing.

MURDERER: (*Sitting.*) Can I smoke?

JUDGE: Yes. (*Pause*) Did he fall forwards or backwards?

MURDERER: (*Lighting a cigarette.*) Forwards: over a chair. (*Pause*) I'm tired.

JUDGE: What did you do first? Steal or kill?

MURDERER: First I stole; then the guy arrived. He jumped on me. I shot him.

JUDGE: Do you know what they're saying?

MURDERER: What?

JUDGE: That it was all an act of revenge; that the dead man was an old enemy of yours; that you had sworn to kill him the first chance you got.

MURDERER: (*Violently, getting up.*) That's a lie! I'd never seen him before.

JUDGE: (*Pointing to the chair.*) Sit down in that chair.

MURDERER: (*Sits.*) Who's saying that?

JUDGE: It's none of your business. (*He turns on the lamp that is on the desk and shines it into the Murderer's face.*) Yes, you had seen him before.

MURDERER: Why have you turned that light on?

JUDGE: Just answer. You mustn't ask me anything. (*Warning pause*) Admit that it was all an act of revenge.

MURDERER: (*Blinking strongly.*) No, I swear it. This is the first time I've visited this town.

JUDGE: You were hunting him from town to town. Here you found him.

MURDERER: (*Visibly nervous.*) Why are they saying that? Why do they say it? (*Pause*) Yes, I killed him, but he wasn't my enemy. I didn't know him.

JUDGE: (*Thunderously.*) It is essential that you speak the truth and nothing but the truth so that justice knows how to apply itself.

MURDERER: (*Turning his face away from the light.*) I went into the bedroom...

JUDGE: (*Interrupting abruptly.*) Face... Turn your face to the light!

MURDERER: (*Looking at the light again.*) I went into the bedroom; I stole five hundred pesos that were in a briefcase. I was just leaving when the guy came in. When he saw me he jumped on me. Then I fired.

JUDGE: At point-blank range?

MURDERER: At point-blank range.

JUDGE: At last you had your revenge

MURDERER: It wasn't revenge.

JUDGE: (*Implacable.*) That's what they're saying.

MURDERER: Tell them to come and say it to me.

JUDGE: Anyway, that's what they're saying.

MURDERER: But can't you see that it's slander? (*Pause*) Listen: I want to go and live in New York. I came to this city from my village and I took up lodgings at the Hotel America. The people in the room next door to mine were a married couple. On my second day in the hotel I could hear the wife telling the husband that he shouldn't leave the door unlocked; that thieves were everywhere; even amongst the hotel staff; that in short, anyone might pass by and seeing the door unlocked, slip into the room and steal the money.

JUDGE: Or carry out an act of revenge that had been nurtured over a long period of time... Isn't that so?

MURDERER: I didn't take any chances: I waited until the guy had gone out. Do you know that he forgot to lock the door? Then I slipped into the room.

JUDGE: A nice version, but, my dear sir, I fear that the facts are very different... It would be better if you confessed.

MURDERER: I have told the truth. (*He makes the sign of the cross with his fingers and kisses them.*) On this!

JUDGE: A perjurer as well?

MURDERER: (*Covering his face*) For God's sake! What are you trying to make me out to be?

JUDGE: Confess, confess!

MURDERER: I can't confess to what I haven't done.

JUDGE: Do you deny that you have killed?

MURDERER: I have killed a man, but I didn't do it out of revenge.

JUDGE: Alright, let's leave the revenge. (*Pause*) So, you killed him because you were in love with his wife then, did you?

MURDERER: You're trying to confuse me. (*He bows his head.*)

JUDGE: (*Shouting.*) Head! Lift your head up I said! Stare at the light! (*Pause*) They say that the motive for the crime might have been jealousy.

MURDERER: Jealousy... Whose jealousy?

JUDGE: Yours, your jealousy, the jealousy you felt because he was the happy husband.

MURDERER: But I'd never even seen his wife!

JUDGE: Do you expect me to take what you say seriously?

MURDERER: I swear to you that I'd never met her! What's more: I don't even know what she looks like.

WIDOW: (*She enters impetuously, sobbing, prisoner to her immense grief: She is the classic widow who has just lost her husband, her hysteria heightened by the violent death of her consort, and intensified by the loss of the five hundred pesos. Her entire being of outraged widow demands swift satisfaction. In her right hand she tightly squeezes a small handkerchief. She is dressed in full widow's weeds; from the black suit down to the veil covering her toque; between sobs.*) Justice, Your Honour, Justice! (*Facing the statue of Justice*) Justice, Madam Justice, Justice! (*More sobs.*)

MURDERER: (*To the Judge.*) Who's that?

JUDGE: (*Getting to his feet.*) Calm yourself madam, calm yourself... (*To the Murderer*) Quick! It's the widow. Go to the bench. (*To the widow, taking her by the hands*) My dear lady: sit yourself down in this chair.

WIDOW: Who is that man?

JUDGE: Your husband's killer.

WIDOW: (*Letting out a scream.*) Him! (*She sinks into the chair; more sobs, pause, she throws herself at the Murderer like a wild animal.*) Murderer, thief, murderer! (*She pummels him on the*

*chest with her fists.*) Why did you kill him? Tell me, why?

JUDGE: You must be brave, madam, very brave!

WIDOW: *(Still sobbing.)* Brave you say... What do you suppose...? I was brave enough to see him dead, stretched out in a pool of blood; I told him about the door, but he was too good, he didn't believe that the world could be full of thieves and murderers. *(Looking at the Murderer)* Yes, murderers like you, you evil man. What had we done to you, tell me, what? Did we owe you something? Had we ever even seen you before?

MURDERER: *(To the Judge.)* Hear that? I didn't know her.

WIDOW: Of course I didn't know him. How could I know a murderer? Suddenly they're everywhere your Honour. People like that, people who don't know where they've been or where they're going, ought to be watched very closely. *(Pause)* My God! Why didn't you rent another room? How, exactly, did you come to occupy the room next to ours?

MURDERER: I asked for a room and they gave me number thirty-five.

WIDOW: *(Ingenuously.)*... And ours was number thirty-six. *(Pause)* Hear that? People like you don't stay in hotels, they sleep in parks, do you hear? In parks. *(Pause)* Oh Alfonso! Where are you, Alfonso? Are you listening to me? Twenty years together, and now dead, dead, dead!

JUDGE: Come now, madam, resignation. The law will punish the culprit.

WIDOW: *(Pointing to the Murderer.)* That... That is the murderer of my unhappy husband! *(Pause)* Did you hear, you monster? You will be executed very soon. I will come to your execution. I won't lose a single detail; my eyes will pierce you like two daggers until all life has flowed from that miserable body bequeathed to you by an unnatural mother.

JUDGE: Madam, please...!

WIDOW: Please, please...! It's relevant! The unhappy widow is supposed to be sensible now, but as for you lot... Why weren't you lot sensible enough to put a police officer on the door of every room?

JUDGE: I think that you should calm down and tell me whether you happened to see this man prowling around outside your room?

WIDOW: No, no I didn't see him. If I had seen him, as sure as my name is Rita, I wouldn't have left Alfonso alone for one minute. Oh, no, I wouldn't have left you alone, Alfonso! *(She turns pleadingly to the Judge.)* Listen to me, your Honour: Swear to me that you will condemn him to death. Swear it! *(She points to the statue.)*

JUDGE: I can't swear anything, but the evidence for the crime is so overwhelming that the court

will inflict the highest penalty.

WIDOW: (*Emphasizing the phrase.*)... The-high-est pe-nal-ty.

JUDGE: The vote will be unanimous.

WIDOW: ...Be u-na-ni-mous.

JUDGE: The deliberation will be very brief.

WIDOW: ...Ve-ry bri-ef.

JUDGE: A question of pure formality.

WIDOW: ...Of pu-re for-mal-ity.

JUDGE: (*To the Murderer.*) Each member of the jury will have the profound sensation that you are a public enemy.

WIDOW: ...A pub-lic en-em-y.

JUDGE: The whole courtroom will feel relieved when the jury pronounces its verdict.

WIDOW: ...Its ver-dict.

JUDGE: Mothers will hug their children, children their mothers, brothers their sisters, husbands their wives, in short, the great human family will say in gratitude: "The long arm of justice has fallen on the head of the culprit." (*He touches the arm of the statue.*)

WIDOW: ...On the he-ad of the cul-prit. (*She touches the arm of the statue.*)

JUDGE: So be it. (*Taking the Widow by the waist*) Come, poor, unhappy, inconsolable widow; let us leave this sinner alone with his remorse. (*They head for the door.*)

MURDERER: (*Catching up with the Judge*) Your Honour, please...! What will you do with me?

JUDGE: (*Opening the door, letting the Widow through first.*) What the penal code demands in such cases: Execute you! (*He goes out and closes the door.*)

*The Murderer remains leaning against the statue; sustained pause. The door opens again and one of the stage-hands enters. He goes over to the Murderer and gently prises him away from the statue which he removes. As he exits another stage-hand enters carrying a portable gramophone, which he places on the pillar where the statue was. He puts on some music and goes out closing the door. Long pause. The door opens again and the Judge appears dressed in a lounge suit; he goes over to the gramophone and takes the record off.*

JUDGE: Intolerable. How many more times will I have to listen to the *Blue Danube*? (*To the Murderer*) Don't you agree with me?

WIDOW: (*Elegantly attired, in a brightly coloured cocktail dress. She goes over to the gramophone as she says to the Judge.*) Why did you take the record off? I adore the *Blue Danube*. (*She puts the record on again; to the Murderer*) Isn't this waltz adorable? (*She takes the Murderer by the arms and starts to dance with him; he moves like an automaton, she stops.*)

Well, dear me... What's the matter with you, have you forgotten how to waltz or didn't you ever learn? (*To the Judge*) Shall we dance then?

JUDGE: Delighted! I don't like to listen to the *Blue Danube*, but I love to dance to it. (*He takes the Widow in his arms and they give a few turns.*)

WIDOW: (*Stopping dancing; to the Murderer.*) There, see how it's done? It's not very important however. You don't know how to waltz, but perhaps you know how to dance the tango?

JUDGE: (*Taking the record off again.*) I hate the tango; too languorous. I much prefer a waltz.

WIDOW: Then you wouldn't mind a little *boogie woogie*...

JUDGE: Of course I wouldn't mind it! It's just that these days, my muscles...

WIDOW: (*To the Judge, imploringly.*) Please, a little more *Danube*...

JUDGE: Oh no...! If we're not going to waltz, what's the point...? (*Pause*) So what about *tap* then?

WIDOW: *Tap, tap!* What a happy coincidence that you've brought up the subject of *tap*. It's my favourite style of dancing, my absolute favourite.

JUDGE: Have you taken part in any *tap dancing* competitions?

WIDOW: No; I only dance it *chez moi* or, that is, in front of close friends, extremely close friends...

JUDGE: My little niece already knows how to dance it. She's only five, but you should see her, clacking away in her shoes with the reinforced metal soles, backwards and forwards, prancing around, etcetera, etcetera. She's a prodigy.

WIDOW: Sometimes there are nasty tumbles...

JUDGE: Yes, but nobody complains. Anyway, the person who takes the tumble doesn't get upset, because nobody thinks about sympathizing with him or telling him off.

WIDOW: That's just what I say! If you hurt your knee, you hurt your knee, end of story...!

JUDGE: End of story!

WIDOW: (*She sits in the chair.*) You don't know anyone who'd like to buy my little beach house off me do you? I can offer a good commission.

JUDGE: What! You're selling your lovely beach house?

WIDOW: I'm selling it and very cheaply too; seven thousand pesos. (*To the Murderer*) Sit down will you; you look like a gatepost... (*The Murderer sits in the Judge's chair.*) I hadn't sold it because Alfonso used to spend the weekends at the beach, but now that he's dead, I haven't any excuse not to put it on the market.

JUDGE: You had it rented out, did you not?

WIDOW: Yes, that's why we were living at the America. It wasn't a matter of having two houses at the same time.

JUDGE: Ah! Did you let the beach house furnished?

WIDOW: Furnished.

JUDGE: But, my dear lady, how could your husband spend the weekends there if other people were occupying it?

WIDOW: (*Lighting a cigarette.*) *C'est la vie...* The couple who lived there would take up residence in our hotel room on Saturdays and Sundays, whilst we would go off to the beach house. (*To the Murderer*) Oh sorry! I forgot to offer you a cigarette. (*She gives him one, the Murderer takes it automatically; she stretches her arm across the table and gives him a light; she offers another to the Judge.*)

JUDGE: No thank you, I don't smoke. (*Pause*) Who taught you to smoke? Your husband...?

WIDOW: Well, no, not him exactly..., I already smoked when we got married but Alfonso really got me hooked. (*Pause*) For instance: if before marrying I smoked three cigarettes a day, now I smoke twenty.

JUDGE: Don't you get dizzy? Doesn't it make you lose your appetite?

WIDOW: If you only knew... (*Pensive*) Yes it makes me lose my appetite, yes I get dizzy... but it's so, so... (*She lets out a huge puff of smoke*) So... so... (*She finishes by singing 'so' softly to herself.*)

JUDGE: That's it! So... If you were to say any other word, you couldn't express everything that 'so' says about cigarettes.

WIDOW: But also, one is oneself so... so... (*Pause*) Of course! Everything is so and nothing more than so...

JUDGE: So, so, so...

WIDOW: But of course, so, so, so.

JUDGE: Changing the subject: do you think you'll marry again?

WIDOW: (*With a sidelong glance at the Murderer.*) Perhaps, who knows...? If I find a man to



suit me...

JUDGE: Well, a man who..., a man... If you understand me: a man who has lived as much as you, or more.

WIDOW: (*Laughing.*) Ah, now I get you! I tell you what; that also falls into the sphere of 'so'. But look here: Politeness isn't a sign of weakness... And one thing has nothing to do with another...

JUDGE: That's what I say: one can live, one can not live; my sister has nothing to do with blenders; whilst my brother-in-law does not sit in a wheelchair.

WIDOW: That is a profound thought. You are a wise man. I like your musicality.

JUDGE: I met a man who was missing the index finger of his right hand; when anyone in his presence used the phrase "all ten fingers", he would hasten to say: "all nine fingers". Do you see?

WIDOW: (*Roaring with laughter.*) What precision, what exquisite precision! He had forgotten about his amputated finger so completely that he was totally unaware of the existence of the tenth finger. He lived with only nine fingers!

JUDGE: And he always added that if one day for some reason his hands and feet were amputated then he would forget that those parts of the body existed too.

WIDOW: Very amusing: "Mr X, I've dislocated my arm..." and Mr X replies: "What is an arm?"

JUDGE: Let's not get into too much detail...Leave it there... (*He gets up and paces around the office.*) How much commission would you give me for the sale of the beach house?

WIDOW: (*Pensive.*) *Chère Madame* Widow: Are you tormented by the memory of your dear dead Alfonso? And *Chère Madame* Widow replies: What is an Alfonso? Where do you buy one? What do you eat it with? (*Laughs*) Well dear me, I don't know what you would eat it with...

JUDGE: Are you thinking of travelling with the proceeds from the sale of the beach house?

WIDOW: If I get the full seven thousand pesos, I will spend a year in Paris and a year in New York. (*Pause*) Wouldn't you like to come with me?

JUDGE: Why do you make me that proposal?

WIDOW: I know that you spend the day sitting on your hands...

JUDGE: Ah! You know...?

WIDOW: I know it; one knows everything. But I suppose you have done the same as your friend with the nine fingers...

JUDGE: To a certain extent yes: when the judges disappeared from the face of the Earth, then I continued to exist without the judge that I had been for twenty years.

WIDOW: And why do you say to a certain extent...?

JUDGE: Because there are always people who will insist on taking me for what I was, that is, for a judge, and so I devote myself to demonstrating to them that judges don't exist anymore.

MURDERER: (*Stupefied.*) But... You... Aren't you the judge that sentenced me just half an hour ago?

WIDOW: What's he saying?

JUDGE: (*Laughing sonorously.*) He's talking about a judge. (*To the Murderer*) Which judge are you referring to?

MURDERER: To you. (*Turning to the Widow*) And aren't you the widow of the man that I shot?

WIDOW: (*To the Judge.*) I have to renew my passport. It's an eternity since I last travelled.

JUDGE: Do you believe in the so called attraction of travel?

WIDOW: (*Turning to the Murderer again.*) You... Have you travelled?

JUDGE: Much is spoken of the pleasure that travelling brings, but, is it really like that?

WIDOW: Well... There is travelling and travelling... (*Laughing*) And why do we travel.

JUDGE: I think that we travel in order not to be without travelling.

WIDOW: (*Crossing her legs.*) Then, when we don't travel we do it in order to be without travelling.

JUDGE: Let's leave the travelling for when we travel.

WIDOW: Other attractions remain in the world. For example if I put the travelling project to one side, I could, one supposes, knit...

JUDGE: Or listen to the *Blue Danube*...

WIDOW: But listen to it day after day?

JUDGE: You may not believe... It has its attractions.

WIDOW: And if someone breaks the record?

JUDGE: Then I buy another.

WIDOW: Supposing that it's the only record of the *Blue Danube* in existence?

JUDGE: Then I'd buy another record. Let's say..., *The Lights of Buenos Aires*; I'd buy a coat or I wouldn't buy anything.

WIDOW: (*Sarcastic peals of laughter.*)

JUDGE: And the one guilty of breaking the record?

WIDOW: (*Sarcastic peals of laughter.*)

JUDGE: (*Laughing.*) Ah! Now I get it; so you were trying to catch me out, eh...?

WIDOW: (*Laughter imitating the Judge.*) I would buy another record, let's say *J'attendrai*, or I would buy a cafetière, or I wouldn't buy anything.

JUDGE: A cafetière! What a magnificent idea: I adore coffee!

WIDOW: Doesn't it keep you awake?

JUDGE: Not at all; in fact, it helps me sleep.

WIDOW: I hate coffee.

JUDGE: (*Astonished.*) You hate coffee... or anything else? Is that possible?

WIDOW: (*Caught out.*) Well, it's a figure of speech... (*Pause*) Like when one says: I saw it with my own eyes...

JUDGE: Or when one says: I went into the inside, I went up to the upstairs, I went down to the downstairs.

WIDOW: If one doesn't hate coffee, then, what does one do?

JUDGE: Exist. Everything else is..., ornamental.

WIDOW: (*Getting to her feet.*) Do you like my dress? (*She gives a turn.*)

JUDGE: (*Sitting in the seat that the Widow has just vacated.*) Do you like my suit?

WIDOW: (*Raising her hand.*) Get up. (*She goes towards the gramophone.*)

JUDGE: (*He has stood up, he stops her.*) What are you going to do?

WIDOW: Put on *Blue Danube*.

JUDGE: Do you mean to dance again?

WIDOW: (*Pleading.*) Please, just a few bars, a few turns!

JUDGE: So be it! Just a few turns... (*He puts on the record and starts to waltz; they have scarcely performed a couple of turns, when the Murderer, on impulse, gets up and takes the record off.*)

MURDERER: (*Beside himself.*) Despicable people! How much longer are you going to keep on torturing me? What new torture is this?

WIDOW: Is he mad? Did you invite him?

JUDGE: Certainly not. (*To the Murderer*) Who is torturing you, my friend?

MURDERER: (*Sobbing.*) You and her...

JUDGE: Who is 'you' and who is 'her'? Let's agree on that.

MURDERER: (*Slumping down onto the bench.*) I can't take it anymore. Sentence me once and

for all, but don't keep on torturing me.

WIDOW: There's always a third party who ruins a few turns of the *Blue Danube*. (*Tearful*) Yes, just a few turns of *Blue Danube*.

JUDGE: (*Going over to the Widow.*) Oh, no, my dear friend, calm yourself! (*Taking between his fingers a pendant that the Widow is wearing*) What a beautiful *pendentif*! Beautiful! Imported I presume?

WIDOW: Imported.

JUDGE: Dozens of things are imported.

WIDOW: But also dozens of things are exported.

JUDGE: Do you think that our government imports more than it exports or exports more than it imports?

WIDOW: (*Lighting another cigarette.*) I think that it exports more than it imports. At least that's what Alfonso always used to tell me. (*She offers another cigarette to the Murderer.*) No? Oh well suit yourself.

JUDGE: That's what I say: to know whether there are more exports than imports or more imports than exports also falls into the realm of the ornamental. There are exports, there are imports; that's all, it has no meaning...

WIDOW: That's right, it has no meaning.

JUDGE: (*Pause.*) And what happened to that little hat with the veil and the flowers? It was *so* sweet.

WIDOW: I gave it to my sister. I've got another one now, Italian straw, in green, trimmed with white.

JUDGE: You don't look bad in green.

WIDOW: Not only do I not look bad, but it suits me so well it's a joy.

JUDGE: Have you seen those women who co-ordinate handbag, shoes and dress? What do you think of them?

WIDOW: That they are co-ordinated; I don't think anything else.

JUDGE: But they make you laugh...

WIDOW: (*Emphatically.*) You have fallen, my dear sir, into your own trap. The laughter that those co-ordinated ladies provoke in you... is but ornamental. What is authentic is their existence as co-ordinators.

JUDGE: Don't you even let out a...

WIDOW: I have learnt from your own little book.

JUDGE: (*He starts to measure the office by pacing it.*) How many metres do you think this place is?

WIDOW: Lengthways or widthways?

JUDGE: Both: width and length.

WIDOW: (*With her hand on her chin, reflective.*) Let's see, let's see... Well... four metres long by three metres wide!

MURDERER: (*Punching himself in the head.*) I can't take it anymore, I can't take it anymore, I can't take it anymore!

JUDGE: Rectangular or squared?

WIDOW: Rectangular I'd say.

JUDGE: (*Looking at the ceiling.*) Haven't you noticed that the ceiling is a little cracked?

WIDOW: That will be due to the humidity. It could collapse...

MURDERER: How much longer! Please, your Honour, please: I'll say anything you want, sign anything you put in front of me, I'll confess that I hated the dead man, that I was in love with his wife; but, please, I can't stand all this nonsense!

WIDOW: What cheek! He says we're talking nonsense! (*To the Judge*) Who invited this man anyway? Was it you? Or did he come in by mistake? (*Pause*) How can he say that he was in love with me if I've never seen him before in my life?

MURDERER: Did you hear that, Your Honour? She herself says that she doesn't know me. But what does it matter; I'll confess that I loved her crazily - anything rather than this torture.

JUDGE: (*To the Murderer.*) I think that you are totally mistaken. You address me as 'your Honour' and yet I'm not a judge.

WIDOW: Does he want to entertain himself at our expense?

JUDGE: Who knows...? I would find a joke like that absurd, but not him. He seems to find it amusing. Let's allow him to enjoy himself.

WIDOW: (*Complainingly*) He interrupts our conversation. It's unbearable.

JUDGE: Only momentarily... (*Pointing to the Murderer*) Look: it seems he's going to be quiet for a good while.

*The Murderer has his head between his hands.*

WIDOW: I was saying that a collapse...

JUDGE: Ah, yes...! These monolithic ceilings are subject to filtration.

WIDOW: Making an approximate calculation, how much do you think it would cost to repair a cracked ceiling?

JUDGE: Well, it depends on the size of the ceiling and the severity of the fissures...

WIDOW: There are experts, are there not?

JUDGE: There are. (*Pause*) Tell me, do you have a siesta?

WIDOW: That's a subject that fascinates me: yes I do have a siesta; from one until three. If by chance I go out between one and three then I don't sleep between one and three.

JUDGE: When do you sleep then?

WIDOW: I don't. Quite simply, I do without my siesta.

JUDGE: I adore the siesta, but it gives me disorders...

WIDOW: What disorders?

MURDERER: (*Getting to his knees.*) Great God in heaven! For pity's sake! I can't take it anymore!

JUDGE: Disorders like all disorders...

WIDOW: At one time I was getting headaches. My doctor attributed them to the siesta.

JUDGE: It's a very strange thing: I can't lie down if I've just had lunch, but I can lie down if I've just had supper.

WIDOW: With me it's exactly the opposite. I can lie down if I've just had lunch, but on the other hand, I can't lie down if I've just had supper.

MURDERER: Fair words butter no parsnips!

JUDGE: Did you hear that? Butter parsnips! No doubt about it, it's a mad, mad world.

WIDOW: (*To the Murderer.*) What a lack of logic my dear sir! Don't you know that parsnips should be baked after first being lightly blanched?

JUDGE: In a very little boiling salted water...

WIDOW: (*To the Murderer.*) Look: you peel and quarter the parsnips, you place them in a saucepan, then you blanch them in a very little boiling salted water for three minutes...

MURDERER: Fair words butter no parsnips!

JUDGE: You and your buttered parsnips! But my dear sir, where would it end if we all went around buttering parsnips: it'd be enough to drive one crazy.

MURDERER: Fair words butter no parsnips.

WIDOW: (*Convulsed, to the Judge.*) I cannot suffer such a culinary error.

JUDGE: Don't take any notice of him. And if he insists on buttering parsnips... then let him.

WIDOW: (*Hysterical.*) I can't, I can't tolerate it; I have to set him straight. (*To the Murderer*) My friend, in a very little boiling salted water the parsnips...

MURDERER: Alright, you don't butter them; pardon my ignorance in the matter, but intercede with the judge. Ask him what he means to do with me.

WIDOW: (*To the Judge.*) He's talking about judges again.

JUDGE: Let him, my dear. He has to talk about something. I don't see why he shouldn't make a speech about judges. It's a topic like any other.

WIDOW: Like any other... I adore topics. Would you like me to give you a topic of conversation?

JUDGE: I would love it.

WIDOW: Let's sit down then. Topics of conversation demand that you should be seated.

JUDGE: Upon what topic would you like to expound?

WIDOW: Any, just so long as it's a topic.

JUDGE: But there are topics and topics...

WIDOW: A topic is always a topic.

JUDGE: Very true. A topic can never cease to be a topic.

*In the meantime the Murderer has dragged the bench over to them and has sat down to listen.*

WIDOW: That's the beauty of a topic: you can think of the worst thing, but it will always continue to be a topic.

JUDGE: Do you believe, my dear friend, that a horse and a topic might be the same thing?

WIDOW: What are you talking about! You are completely mistaken: a horse is a horse, and a topic is a topic.

JUDGE: Agreed. It's all very deep. Well then, let's start the topic.

WIDOW: (*Disconcerted.*) I don't have a topic.

MURDERER: I...

WIDOW: (*Interrupting him.*) You are not a topic, you are a murderer. You said so yourself.

MURDERER: Of course I'm a murderer; I demand that you try me.

JUDGE: I demand, I demand...! What an expression! Said like that, suddenly, I demand... But...

MURDERER: Yes, I demand.

WIDOW: Now I've got a topic. (*Tapping her index finger against her thumb*) However...

JUDGE: Do you have a topic or don't you?

WIDOW: I have one, but it upsets me to use it up.

JUDGE: The same thing's happening to you with your topic as happens to me with soap.

WIDOW: You're not going to tell me that you don't bathe.

JUDGE: That's the pity of it; I bathe, but the soap gets used up.

WIDOW: (*Contrite.*) Irreparable.

MURDERER: Will you allow me a word?

JUDGE: Two if you like.

WIDOW: Is it a topic?

MURDERER: No, it's a word.

WIDOW: A word, I'll have you know, can be a topic. For example, the word 'elephant' can be a topic.

JUDGE: And what a topic! What a formidable topic you have brought up, my dear lady! (*Pause*) On my last trip to the Congo...

MURDERER: (*Imploringly.*) Your Honour, I beg of you, let me explain...

JUDGE: Some hope! For your information, my man, very few people in the world know more than I do when it comes to the matter of elephants. You won't be able to teach me a thing about them.

WIDOW: It's amazing what you know about the subject, my friend: you haven't even told the story yet, but the way you began: on my last trip to the Congo... I see herds and herds of elephants... tell us, tell us.

JUDGE: (*Furious.*) I refuse; I will not speak of elephants.

WIDOW: Dear sir, don't be a fly in the ointment.

JUDGE: Speaking of which: I shall talk about the tsetse fly.

WIDOW: Bravo! That's a fascinating topic; nothing less than an oneiric topic.

MURDERER: One word, I want to ask something, it's about my life.

WIDOW: You have made a mistake, good sir: tsetse fly consists of two words. Tsetse one; fly two; Tsetse fly.

JUDGE: Tsetse fly.

WIDOW: In the dictionaries it appears under: fly, tsetse.



JUDGE: On my last trip to Tanganyika...

WIDOW: It would be lovely to have Tsetse as a surname. For instance: Rita Tsetse.

JUDGE: Rita Tsetse de Fly would be even lovelier.

WIDOW: I would prefer Rita Fly de Tsetse. It's more fly. (*Looking at the Murderer*) It appears our friend is ready to fly off the handle.

JUDGE: I don't see why he should fly off the handle. He's got no reason to fly off the handle.

WIDOW: All the same, one can fly off the handle.

JUDGE: Agreed, but you've got to have a reason.

WIDOW: Not necessarily. The human heart is very complicated. It can fly off the handle without warning.

JUDGE: I didn't know that the heart could fly off the handle.

WIDOW: It can fly. (*Pause*) Our friend's heart has flown off the handle.

JUDGE: Well, if he's flown off the handle then he should un-fly off the handle.

WIDOW: And if he can't un-fly off the handle?

JUDGE: Then he should stay flown off the handle. What a devil! You can live flown off the handle.

WIDOW: It must be a painful sensation.

MURDERER: I haven't flown off the handle.

WIDOW: (*To the Judge.*) He says he hasn't flown off the handle. What a nerve! (*To the Murderer*) If you haven't flown off the handle, what's the matter with you then?

MURDERER: I want you to try me.

WIDOW: See a judge.

MURDERER: (*Pointing to the Judge.*) That's a judge...

JUDGE: (*Furious.*) And stop all this "your Honour" and "your Honour"...

MURDERER: But you yourself subjected me to an interrogation not half an hour ago. How can you have forgotten? (*Vehemently*) You came in dressed as a judge, you bombarded me with questions, you shone that lamp at me and wouldn't let me turn my face away, then that lady turned up, dressed from head to toe in black, she threw herself on me and punched me. Are you going to deny that you told me that I would be condemned to death? (*To the Widow*) It's true isn't it?

JUDGE: (*To the Widow.*) Shall we start yet, or has he still not had enough?

WIDOW: (*Looking at the Murderer.*) I think we could start: the differences are very marked...

MURDERER: (*Stupefied.*) The differences?

JUDGE: Yes, first we unfolded before you all the imposing machinery of Justice and the profound grief of a widow faced with the death of her beloved consort. (*He clears his throat.*) I didn't play it at all badly, did I?

MURDERER: What?

JUDGE: My role as the judge; of course I was helped a lot by having all the symbols of Justice...

WIDOW: (*To the Judge.*) And what about my get-up, my veil, my widow's weeds... I beg you not to forget them.

JUDGE: Irreproachable, dear lady, irreproachable! You gave a brilliant performance.

MURDERER: (*Exceedingly agitated.*) You are both completely insane. I am a murderer but you are utter maniacs. I want to finish being tried. I want a judge, a real judge. Do you hear? (*Pause*) If, you two..., playing the judge, playing the widow, fakes! (*To the Widow*) Cheap comedy widow!

WIDOW: Cheap comedy widow; moi? You are totally mistaken, my friend. (*She picks up her bag which is on the table and takes out an identity card.*) See! Look at this identity card! Rita Diaz de Paz. (*She puts it in the Murderer's hands.*) And do you know who Paz is? (*She opens her bag again and takes out a photo.*) Well it's Alfonso Paz, the man that you... (*She reads the inscription*) "To my unforgettable Rita, from her Alfonso with all his love". What do you say to me now?

MURDERER: (*Confused.*) Then you didn't love your husband.

WIDOW: What a simpleton you are... I loved him, but now he's dead. One thing has nothing to do with the other.

JUDGE: (*Showing the Murderer nine fingers.*) Remember? The man who lived with only nine fingers...

WIDOW: Nine fingers! Not one more.

JUDGE: (*To the Murderer.*) I understand your astonishment, your surprise. You killed just like anyone else, and now you hope, also like anyone else, to be tried in accordance with the law.

WIDOW: (*Emphatic.*) Pure routine!

JUDGE: (*To the Widow.*) Thank you for your timely remark. (*Pause*) Well, let us continue: you hoped that the law, that convenient shoulder to cry on, would take care of explaining your actions.

MURDERER: I didn't choose to appear before the judge. I was dragged out of that room by force; they used tear gas on me, as you already know. *(Pause)* I would have escaped a thousand and one times if I'd had the chance!

JUDGE: You dwell on details that in no way contradict my exposition. We allow that you wanted to flee, but we also allow that you - as in fact happened - couldn't escape. Now that we have you in the grip of justice you may make the following observation: "So, I couldn't escape, but once I have been tried, whether the result is good or bad, this matter will be closed."

WIDOW: Closed... Ha! Ha! Ha!

MURDERER: If I am acquitted, I will be at peace with society. If I am sentenced, I will have paid my debt.

JUDGE: Oh, words, mere words! "How much longer are you going to abuse our patience...?" *(Pause)* Look, pal: You committed a crime. Well then, there isn't a single person in the world who can judge it.

MURDERER: And the judges?

JUDGE: I have said not a single person. And the judges...

WIDOW: *(Opening her arms.)* ...Are people.

MURDERER: Then, God...

JUDGE: *(Deliberating.)* God... God... I don't know anybody by that name. But let's continue. First phase: You manage to flee, your crime goes unpunished, you end up forgetting all about it yourself and you don't even suffer any pangs of conscience. Everything appears to be fixed, perfect. Nevertheless..., there's a sticking point: your actions cannot be judged, not by you or by anybody else.

MURDERER: But if I've forgotten all about the crime, why should I care about the rest?

WIDOW: Whoa! Steady boy... steady.

JUDGE: Let us proceed to the second phase: the murderer flees, but one fine day, wracked by guilt, he turns himself in to the law. He hopes to find peace, but he is under a complete misapprehension. The law cannot judge him; the law can only offer him purely formal solutions.

MURDERER: But they can try me, and then...

JUDGE: The problem still stands.

WIDOW: It's the same for me: I will die, we will all die and words will fail us...

JUDGE: Lastly, let's examine the problem from the point of view of the judges. The problem still stands, because in spite of the verdict, you have not been judged.

WIDOW: (*To the Murderer.*) The same for me: the judges will say to me: Madam, the wrong has been righted, justice has been seen to be done; the murderer will feel the full weight of the law. And I will say to them: what difference does your rhetoric make to me? I am a woman whose husband was killed by a man... (*Pause*) Everything was decided: You had to kill my husband, my husband had to let himself be killed; I had to become a widow. That is all.

JUDGE: Work it out for yourself...; and since the lady has expressed herself in such terms, it only remains for me to say that I am but another man who could only aspire to convert his judgeship into a piece of theatre.

MURDERER: But you are a judge...

JUDGE: I was a judge... I also believed that I was really judging my defendants, acquitting them or sentencing them; I believed that my judgements meant something. I believed this and much more. It was the period of my spirit of self-satisfaction. Tee-hee!

WIDOW: Tee-hee!

MURDERER: (*To the Judge.*) Then, you won't sentence me? (*To the Widow*) And you don't accuse me?

WIDOW: Tee-hee!

JUDGE: Tee-hee!

MURDERER: But I was arrested, cornered, they dragged me out of the hotel room using tear gas, they threw me into a cell; I was interrogated; you yourself shone that lamp in my face.

JUDGE: (*Touching the Murderer on the shoulder.*) A false alarm, my friend, a false alarm...!

WIDOW: (*Touching the Murderer on the shoulder.*) A false alarm, my friend, a false alarm...!  
(*Long pause; to the Judge*) Well I was telling you that if I lie down just after lunch it doesn't affect me, and if I lie down just after supper, it affects me badly.

JUDGE: You have to take all sorts of precautions with the siesta... different factors affect different people: a siesta for an elderly person isn't the same as a siesta for a child; nor one for a pallid person the same as one for a person of florid complexion...

WIDOW: (*Showing the Judge her right leg.*) I bet you can't guess how much these stockings cost me!

JUDGE: Well, of course they're not silk; I'd say they're made of nylon...

WIDOW: ...of nylon.

JUDGE: (*Reflecting.*) Five pesos?

WIDOW: What are you talking about! Ten pesos.

MURDERER: Apart from you, are there other judges?

JUDGE: (*To the Widow.*) I had no idea nylon could be so costly. Isn't it a synthetic product?

WIDOW: And these aren't even the most expensive... There are some that cost twenty pesos.

MURDERER: Listen, it can't be like you say...

JUDGE: (*To the Murderer.*) Nylon stockings can't be so expensive?

MURDERER: Oh no... no I wasn't talking about nylon stockings! I was saying that Judges are here for a reason; they're here to judge us.

WIDOW: (*To the Judge.*) Do you dye your hair?

JUDGE: How did you guess? (*Pause*) And look I use a guaranteed hair dye.

WIDOW: One can always tell... (*Sniffing the Judge's head*) Yes, it's very good... How much does it work out a bottle?

JUDGE: Well: five pesos for a large bottle; three for a medium size and one peso for a small one.

MURDERER: Listen: if you don't judge me and I don't judge myself, who will judge me then?  
(*To the Widow*) You?

WIDOW: (*To the Murderer.*) Me? No, not me either. (*To the Judge*) I've got a little piece of gossip, you know? (*To the Murderer*) Excuse us just one moment.

*The Widow takes the Judge by the arm and leads him towards the door. The whole of the scene that follows is the pursuit of the Judge and the Widow by the Murderer as he tries to get them to clear up the terrible doubts that they have awoken in him. The Widow whispers something unintelligible to the Judge.*

MURDERER: (*Imploringly*) Please! Who's going to judge me?

*The Judge murmurs something unintelligible to the Widow. They are together by the bench.*

MURDERER: One moment... What should I do?

*The Widow and the Judge run towards the table.*

MURDERER: But it's urgent... You can't leave me like this...

JUDGE: (*Now they are by the pillar.*) ...It's like carrying water in a sieve.

MURDERER: (*Seizing the Judge by the lapels.*) Why did you say it's like carrying water in a sieve? (*Pause*) For pity's sake: explain yourselves!

WIDOW: (*They are at the chair.*) Explanations are what we're after! So, like water in a sieve. It's incredible.

MURDERER: Well, if you're not a judge, and you're not a widow, then I'm not a murderer either.

JUDGE: (*Raising his arms.*) So Señor Perez gave a pearl necklace to the wife of his close friend!

WIDOW: A necklace costing ten thousand pesos... Understand?

JUDGE: That's quite a few pesos...

WIDOW: The pearls are from the orient, exquisite, utterly pure... (*She looks at her watch.*) Oh, how late it is, how late...! My God, six o'clock! (*To the Judge*) Shall we go?

JUDGE: Come off it! We've got all the time in the world. Wouldn't you like another little turn of the *Danube*...?

WIDOW: I adore the *Blue Danube*, I'm Hungarian by nature.

JUDGE: (*He puts on the record and they waltz very slowly.*) So Señor Perez...! I never would have thought it... Seeing is believing!

WIDOW: What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over.

JUDGE: But my dear friend, Señor Perez hasn't gone blind and as for his heart, it's still beating soundly.

WIDOW: Well, then: what the eye sees, the heart grieves over.

JUDGE: Señor Pérez, does he dye his hair?

WIDOW: Not on your nelly! I sniff his head every day. It's his natural hair colour.

JUDGE: You have to be very careful with dyes. I know of cases where the scalp has been poisoned.

WIDOW: Tell me that story.

JUDGE: Not much story to tell.

WIDOW: But it's a story like any other story. What's more, it's the story of a scalp.

MURDERER: I've just said: I'm not a murderer.

JUDGE: Did anyone ask you? (*To the Widow*) Not half an hour ago he was shouting his head off saying he was a murderer; now he announces that he's not one. I don't understand this man.

WIDOW: It's a topic of conversation like any other. (*To the Murderer*) Listen, my man: we already have a topic of conversation. (*To the Judge*) What are nine times nine?

MURDERER: (*To the Judge.*) Once and for all: am I or am I not a murderer?

JUDGE: Have you ever seen such impertinence! What do I know about legal matters! Go and talk to a judge... (*To the Widow*) Eighty-one, my dear.

WIDOW: And seven times eight?

JUDGE: Fifty-six.

WIDOW: Thank you very much. I never could learn the multiplication table off by heart.

JUDGE: With me it's the opposite: I never could learn the division table.

WIDOW: Now I'm going to laugh till I cry. What is sixty-three divided by nine.

JUDGE: Sixty-three divided by nine... *(Pause)* It's useless, I don't know.

WIDOW: Seven. See how well I know my division table.

JUDGE: What are seven times nine?

WIDOW: Dead, buried, descended into hell, resurrected... I don't know.

MURDERER: *(To the Widow.)* Am I or am I not a murderer.

WIDOW: *(To the Judge.)* This man is preventing us from revising the multiplication table.

MURDERER: I know both tables...

WIDOW: Remarkable! Astonishing! *(To the Judge)* He knows both tables. He's a phenomenon.

MURDERER: I will recite all four tables if you clear up my doubts first.

JUDGE: I don't understand. A man who says he knows all four tables has no reason to doubt the tables.

MURDERER: I know the tables but I don't know if I'm a murderer.

WIDOW: One can't know everything in this life. I know that I'm not a murderess, but I don't know the four tables off by heart.

JUDGE: All things considered, you're enviable.

WIDOW: And how enviable; a man who knows the four tables off by heart!

MURDERER: Don't complicate things. I have killed a man. His wife is my victim.

WIDOW: You mind your dead people and I'll mind my tables.

MURDERER: I want to be judged.

WIDOW: And we want to learn the tables off by heart; him, division; me, multiplication...

JUDGE: But you're contradicting yourself, my friend. Just a moment ago you doubted whether you were a murderer, and now you're saying that you are one. *(Pause; to the Widow)* It's useless my dear. Only sensible people like us never contradict themselves.

WIDOW: That's what I say: if we know or we don't know the tables, we know or we don't know that we know them or that we don't know them...

MURDERER: You're both confusing me; you've said...

JUDGE: Eh, pal...! I've said what I've said, and one thing has nothing to do with another.

WIDOW: It's the same as going up to the upstairs and going down to the downstairs...

MURDERER: You're both going down to the upstairs...

JUDGE: *(Interrupting him.)* You're wrong: if we go down it's to the downstairs and if we

multiply we don't divide.

MURDERER: (*Shouting.*) Enough of all this idle chatter! (*Pause*) I can't go on like this, tell me something...

JUDGE: (*To the Widow.*) What time is it?

WIDOW: (*Looking at her watch.*) It's six o'clock; six and a good few minutes past. I have an appointment with my dressmaker. Shall we go?

JUDGE: (*Offering the Widow his arm.*) Yes, my dear lady, let's go. I also have an appointment... (*They start to walk very slowly*) ...with my barber. (*To the Murderer*) I tell you what... The best thing you can do is to dance the *Blue Danube*. (*They quicken their step and exit roaring with laughter.*)

*The Murderer looks at the gramophone. Pause. He goes over to it. Pause. He seems undecided: at last he puts the record on and starts to dance very slowly. Slow curtain.*

### ***The Thin Man and the Fat Man***

A play in one act by Virgilio Piñera

#### **CHARACTERS**

**Thin Man**

**Fat Man**

**Second Thin Man**

**Orderly**

**Doctor**



## SCENE ONE

*A room in a hospital; two beds, two chairs and a table; as the curtain rises, the Thin Man, in pyjamas and with his right leg in plaster, is sitting on the edge of the bed. He is looking at his leg.*

THIN MAN: When I get this stinking plaster off! *(Pause)* These people think it's all so easy... *(Pause)* Oh yeah, it's great having my leg in plaster! It looks like a pillar. *(He sticks his leg out stiffly)* Time is ticking by and I'm just living on thin air. *(Pause)* To think I've still got to endure it for another day. *(Pause)* I broke my leg stealing a hen. I thought I'd kill off all my old hunger in this hospital, but fat chance of that with my luck *(Pause)* The truth is I'm cursed: it was going so well with those hens. Then, I broke my leg, I nearly got caught red-handed – at least that bird had the sense to hide itself – and now to add insult to injury I'm being starved to death. If I get much thinner they'll cart my skeleton out of here. *(He looks at his leg again)* The only thing that doesn't get any thinner is you...! You bastard! *(Pause; he gets up and goes to the other bed; he lifts up the sheet and touches the mattress.)* Of course, that fatso, since he's got the readies, gets a mattress! *(Pause)* I don't know what the hell he wants a mattress for, since he's already so well padded... *(Pause)* He makes me sick to the stomach... what with all his la-di-da ways and everything. *(He imitates the Fat Man)* How did you sleep? Could you do me a favour? Is your leg getting better? My arm doesn't hurt me anymore but I'm still having massage as you can never be too careful. *(He sits in one of the chairs)* That fat guy is murder! And how he eats! *(Pause)* He orders steak whenever he feels like it. Well if you've got it, flaunt it... *(Pause)* And me swallowing the muck they serve up here... Without a single sodding cent to my name; *(Pause)* Oh well, God helps those... *(Pause)* That fatty was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

*Enter the Fat Man; two hundred pounds with a big belly; about thirty years old. His left arm is in plaster and he is wearing flowered silk pyjamas. He laughs uproariously.*

THIN MAN: Are you going to share the joke? *(Renewed and ever more stentorian peals of laughter from the Fat Man, who finally collapses into the other chair)* You'll burst an artery. That's what happened to an uncle of mine. He keeled over and never laughed again.

FAT MAN: *(Stopping laughing)* It's that little doctor chappie, he thinks he knows everything... *(Pause)* Do you know what he told me, me, the expert in all things culinary?

THIN MAN: *(With a grimace of displeasure.)* Here we go again!

FAT MAN: *(In a mocking tone.)* Having too much of a good thing...?

THIN MAN: It's just that you spend the whole damn day with food in your mouth.

FAT MAN: Well I've got the money to buy it. It's not my fault if my father left me a small fortune. *(Pause)* Anyway that little doctor chappie swears blind that beef and potato stew should be served with... bacon. Bacon! Heavens above! Bacon of all things!

THIN MAN: I can't remember when I last ate beef and potato stew...

FAT MAN: Nobody asked you. I didn't tell you to spend years and years not eating beef and potato stew, which actually, shows extremely poor taste. What I told you was...

THIN MAN: *(Interrupting him)* Anyway, I don't see what's wrong with bacon... You can take it off the plate.

FAT MAN: *(Exploding)* Such ignorance! What about the taste, the flavour... Anyone can see that you know absolutely nothing about the art of cookery.

THIN MAN: The only thing I know is that I've been hungry for a long, long time.

FAT MAN: Anyone one would think that the authorities at this hospitable institution gave you nothing to eat. *(Pause)* If my eyes don't deceive me, the orderly brings you your lunch at twelve and your supper at six. Now if these generous rations that the hospital offers you absolutely-free-of-charge aren't enough for you, then do as I do; ask for the a la carte menu.

THIN MAN: Ask, ask, ask...! All you have to do is ask... *(Pause)* Chance would be a fine thing.

FAT MAN: *(Impassive)* Well I'm going to order beef and potato stew for lunch. What time is it?

THIN MAN: Tomorrow the same as today... Today, the same as yesterday...

FAT MAN: I didn't ask you about today or tomorrow. *(Pause)* What time is it?

THIN MAN: Watery soup, cornmeal mush and sweet potato.

FAT MAN: What time is it?

THIN MAN: Not much longer now...

FAT MAN: That's right... Not much longer now. *(Pause)* Let's see what my stomach wants today. *(He taps his stomach)* What would you like for lunch?

THIN MAN: I mean not much longer till I leave the hospital.

FAT MAN: Exactly; how many more days?

THIN MAN: One. *(Pause)* In one more day they'll let me out of here.

FAT MAN: Do you hope to eat well once you're out?

THIN MAN: If I find a job.

FAT MAN: If I find a job... If I find a job... *(Pause)* It's wrong to nurse too many illusions. It brings about catastrophe, what a bizarre word! You shouldn't count your chickens...

THIN MAN: *(Pensive)* Or my hens.

FAT MAN: What does it matter! Chickens or hens, you'd still be in the... soup. *(He laughs)*.

THIN MAN: But you can't complain: money, food, massages... Women as well I suppose...

FAT MAN: Wine, women and food! You'll find it strange that I don't say wine, women and song... But music isn't edible. *(Pause)* I bet, I bet you broke your leg trying to catch one of those little chickens...

THIN MAN: It wasn't a chicken, it was a hen.

FAT MAN: Aha! So you like the older ladies... Well, each to his own I say. *(Pause)* I'll tell you what though: my friend Pedro just got married to an old woman of sixty. A sixty year old with a twenty-five year old. *(Pause)* The other day he took her to the dentist. There were fisticuffs and everything.

THIN MAN: I don't follow you.

FAT MAN: The dentist told my friend to take good care of his mother. Imagine saying that to a newlywed!

THIN MAN: Everybody does what they can to get by. It's really tough for me. Nobody gives me a thing.

FAT MAN: And what caused that little outburst? I'm telling you the tale of the dentist and you start rattling on something completely different.

THIN MAN: I know what I'm saying... *(Pause)* What is there for me when I leave this hospital?

FAT MAN: Well if that's all you're worrying about, don't: *que sera sera...* *(Pause)* Anyway, this conversation's very pleasant but lunch-time is drawing nigh. I have to ponder the menu. *(Pause)* Could you do me a favour?

THIN MAN: You've been saying the same thing for the last ten days. I do you a favour, I rack my brains putting different dishes together for you, and in the end it's always your list that wins.

FAT MAN: There's an explanation for everything. You draw up various menus for me, so that by the time I sit down to eat, I'm absolutely ravenous.

THIN MAN: *(Interrupting him)* But...

FAT MAN: Please, may I finish? Yes? Thank you. *(Pause)* Anyway, I'm saving your lists for another day. Don't imagine that you have completely bad taste; although I shan't forgive you your lapse over bacon with beef and potato stew.

THIN MAN: *(He goes over to the Fat Man and puts his mouth right up to his ear)* Are you very hungry today?

FAT MAN: Ravenous.

THIN MAN: *(Looking discouraged)* It's always the same. Never a day goes by when you don't have an appetite. *(Pause)* Are you going to ask for double portions?

FAT MAN: What are you talking about? I am extremely well brought-up. I never have second helpings; if the Master could hear such a thing...

THIN MAN: Who's the Master?

FAT MAN: A gourmand like no other; but a gourmand of refined tastes. Not me, I'll eat anything. It's a question of filling yourself up. Of course, there are limits: I never have seconds, I don't eat tripe or trotters and I never refuse anything good if it's offered to me. However, to compare myself to the Master...

THIN MAN: I've thought of a menu.

FAT MAN: *(Clearing his throat)* Let's hear it.

THIN MAN: *(Reflecting before speaking)* Fish soup...

FAT MAN: Hmmm.

THIN MAN: Don't you like fish soup?

FAT MAN: I haven't said a word.

THIN MAN: Well, fish soup, shredded beef, fried plantains, avocado salad, white rice, guava jelly and cream cheese.

FAT MAN: (*With a grimace of disgust.*) That is a menu so revolting that if the Master heard it he would die of shock. (*Pause*) Fish soup followed by shredded beef indeed... (*Pause*) Hunger will turn anyone mad.

THIN MAN: Well I would eat it all without complaint.

FAT MAN: If I've told you once I've told you a hundred times that when you draw up a menu you mustn't be inspired by your own base instincts. You must be like a machine that reads my thoughts. (*Pause*) Come on, try again.

THIN MAN: (*Reflecting again*) I'd rather not go on. It's not my lucky day to day. Anyway, it's a waste of time. You'll never accept one of my menus.

FAT MAN: Come on, man! Don't be discouraged. I promise that I'll accept one of your menus. Onwards and upwards!

THIN MAN: Beef and potato stew...

FAT MAN: It's an obsession. (*Pause*) Still I won't question it. Carry on! Beef and potato stew... What else?

THIN MAN: (*Hysterical*) Beef and potato stew, beef and potato stew, stew, stew! (*He bursts into tears*).

FAT MAN: (*Shrugging his shoulders*) I'm completely at a loss. (*Pause*) Fancy a dish as inoffensive as beef and potato stew making you burst into tears. Quite frankly I don't understand it at all. (*Pause; he pats him on the back*) Come on, cheer up! Continue... Onwards and upwards.

*The Thin Man has fallen into a chair and covered his face with his hands. Just as the Fat Man is approaching the Thin Man making disapproving noises a hospital orderly enters with a pencil lodged behind his ear and a piece of paper in his hand.*

ORDERLY: (*Addressing himself to the Fat Man*) Good morning, sir. What would we like to eat today?

FAT MAN: (*Opening his arms*) Beef and potato stew of course. What else could I eat? (*Pause, he looks at the Thin Man, he makes noises of disapproval again*) Hold the beef and potato stew... No point converting a pleasant lunch into a lachrymose affair. It would be the first time that stew has been served with tears.

ORDERLY: (*Confused*) What's going on?

FAT MAN: In reality nothing is going on, but people always contrive to act as though loads of things are going on.

ORDERLY: So beef and potato stew...

FAT MAN: (*Categorical*) No way. (*He looks at the Thin Man*) He's not feeling that well.

ORDERLY: I could bring him some bicarbonate of soda.

FAT MAN: (*In a pompous tone*) Bicarbonate of soda? What for? His stomach is made of iron. You should see him eat...

THIN MAN: (*Lifts his head from his arms and looks sadly at the Fat Man*)

FAT MAN: The look of a little lamb to the slaughter... (*Pause*) Talking of which, I'd like a leg of lamb for lunch. (*The Orderly gets ready to write it down, but the Fat Man interrupts him*) On second thoughts I'll leave it till supper. (*He ponders*) Let's see, let's see... What shall I ask for? (*Long pause*) Got it – chicken and rice, brain fritters, cucumber salad and crème caramel. (*To the Thin Man*) Any objections?

THIN MAN: (*He shakes his head; pause; to the Orderly*) It's all the same to me.

ORDERLY: (*Bursting out laughing*) Today we have boiled cabbage...

FAT MAN: I can't stand the sight of it! (*To the Orderly*) Please, hold the cabbage. Bring him sweet potatoes.

THIN MAN: But...

FAT MAN: But me no buts... You question everything. What's the difference if it's cabbage or sweet potato?

THIN MAN: For precisely that reason...

FAT MAN: For precisely that reason and many others the world is like it is. (*To the Orderly*) You heard: sweet potatoes! (*The Orderly bows his head, sniggers scornfully and leaves*).

FAT MAN: (*He takes the table and puts it centre-stage; he then takes a chair and places it so that the person sitting on it would be facing the audience; he places the other chair to the left of the first chair. To the Thin Man*) I suppose you will do me the honour of sitting at my table?

THIN MAN: (*Thinking that the Fat Man is actually asking him to share his lunch.*) Are you really inviting me to eat with you? (*Pause*) I love brain fritters.

FAT MAN: Not exactly. If I invite you to sit at my table it's with an eye to enjoying some conversation during lunch. You will eat your food and I will eat mine.

THIN MAN: I prefer to eat mine sitting on the bed.

FAT MAN: If you decline my friendly invitation you will lose the chance to try the brain fritters.

THIN MAN: You can stuff your fritters. (*Pause*) I'm not in the mood for this today. And don't talk to me, because I won't answer. (*He goes and sits on the edge of the bed*).

*The Orderly enters again; he goes over to the table and puts a tablecloth on it, followed by a napkin, cutlery, a saltcellar, a cruet stand with oil and vinegar, a beer, a glass and toothpicks. To the Fat Man:*

ORDERLY: There are no cucumbers. Would you like an avocado salad?

FAT MAN: Anything. So long as it's not cabbage.

THIN MAN: Nice, ripe avocados...

FAT MAN: Yes, thank you, thank you... enough of your tedious little jokes. (*Pause*) There's still time you know. I can't believe that any civilized man would prefer to eat on his own in a corner. Eating is just the pretext, my friend. The true pleasure lies in conversation, in the exchange of ideas.

THIN MAN: How many fritters will you give me if I sit at the table?

FAT MAN: That's called blackmail. It is one thing for me to extend to you the friendly offer of a little fritter of my own free will, and quite another for you to try to extort it from me.

THIN MAN: Just one little fritter, nothing more than that?

FAT MAN: Tasting something doesn't mean gorging yourself on it. One fritter is more than enough to make you aware that you are swallowing a foodstuff called brains.

THIN MAN: Of course, one rule for you and another one for me: I taste one little fritter and you stuff your face with dozens of them.

FAT MAN: You should never try to square the circle. It's important not to lose sight of reality. I pay for the little fritters, I stuff... my face, good God! What a bizarre expression!, with the little fritters. I eat, you

taste. *(Pause)* The monarchs of old always used to employ someone to taste their food. There was the food-taster, the wine-taster, the *sommelier*...

THIN MAN: Well, if you don't want to give me the fritters, then give me half the chicken.

FAT MAN: You must be joking! You on your side and me on mine; and, don't humiliate yourself later: "Give me a fritter, even just a quarter of a fritter". At least have the courage of your convictions.

*The Orderly enters carrying a tray upon which there is a casserole of chicken and rice, a dish of fritters, the avocado salad and the crème caramel as well as a small basket of bread. He starts to put everything on the table. As though obeying an irresistible impulse the Thin Man draws closer to the table.*

FAT MAN: What did I tell you! I know my people. *(To the Thin Man)* A very agreeable ensemble wouldn't you say? *(To the Orderly)* Bring this gentleman's order straightaway.

ORDERLY: *(Smiling.)* Well, there's no soup.

FAT MAN: Magnificent! There's no soup. *(To the Thin Man)* Did you get that?

ORDERLY: And there's no sweet potato.

FAT MAN: Fantastic! There's no sweet potato. *(To the Thin Man)* Did you get that?

THIN MAN: Then bring the cabbage.

FAT MAN: Cabbage...? Did you say cabbage?

THIN MAN: Cabbage.

ORDERLY: *(Looking at the Fat Man; Pause.)* What shall I do?

FAT MAN: Serve it to him. He's within his rights. *(Pause)* Who would credit it!

*The Orderly leaves. The Thin Man goes back to sit on the bed; the Fat Man sits at the table but he doesn't start eating. He rattles the cutlery. Long pause.*

FAT MAN: *(He stops rattling the cutlery; he sniffs the chicken and rice.)* That really hits the spot... *(To the Thin Man)* Is the delicious aroma wafting over as far as your bed?

*The Thin Man lies down on the bed with his face to the wall and covers his head with the pillow.*

FAT MAN: All roads lead to a Roma..., and all smells creep inside your nostrils even if you put a pillow



over your head. *(Pause)* Come on, my little poppet, light of my life! When lovers truly care for each other, summer storms such as these only serve to strengthen their everlasting devotion.

*The Orderly enters with the Thin Man's food. When he sees the Thin Man on the bed he looks disconcerted. He looks at the Fat Man; the Fat Man shakes his head. With his free hand the Orderly gestures to the Fat Man asking him where he should put the Thin Man's food. The Fat Man indicates that he should put it at the foot of the bed; the Orderly does this and starts to retreat on tiptoe.*

FAT MAN: No need for that. He's more awake than we are. He's only playing dead to see how many people come to his funeral... *(Pause)* You can go.

*The Orderly leaves*

FAT MAN: So, we shall lunch alone then. *(Pause)* Beforehand, and so that my gentlemanly conscience remains clear, we shall address one final appeal to the Knight of the Mournful Countenance... *(He gets up and goes over to the Thin Man's bed)* For one last time I ask you to accompany me in the sacramental act of lunch. *(Pause; the Thin Man doesn't move)* Oh well, you're the loser; you're behaving like a spoilt child. Your conduct is inexcusable. *(He goes back to the table, sits down and takes hold of the napkin which he ties around his neck; he picks up the cutlery and serves himself with chicken and rice from the casserole; he pours himself a beer and rubs his hands but he doesn't start to eat. Long pause. He places the dish of fritters slightly to the left; he changes the position of the basket of bread and separates the vinegar bottle from the bottle of oil, in short, he makes a series of movements that express his unease.)* Ready to board! *(Pause; he looks over to the bed)* Something seems to be missing, however.

THIN MAN: *(He takes the pillow away and lies face up)* I'm what's missing, but don't count on me. I'm going to eat this muck and then I'm going to have a siesta.

FAT MAN: *(Breathing heavily.)* That's certainly an excellent idea. There's nothing like a siesta after a heavy lunch. *(Pause)* I shall do the same. *(Pause)* Would you be so kind as to let me taste your cornmeal? It looks absolutely heavenly.

THIN MAN: *(Suspicious)* But you hate cornmeal!

FAT MAN: It's true, I hate it, but from time to time it takes my fancy. *(Pause)* Oh, what the hell! You only live once... Give what ever name you want to this craving of mine; call it a craving of pregnancy if you like.

THIN MAN: Well, if you've taken a fancy to my cornmeal you can have it, but I also have a craving for

brain fritters.

FAT MAN: That's fair enough, and you shall certainly have a taste. (*He cuts off a tiny piece of fritter, spears it with his fork and carries it over to the bed*) There you are. Now you can't say that I don't keep my word.

THIN MAN: (*He lifts the fritter to his mouth, but he doesn't eat it.*) That's not a fritter...

FAT MAN: What is it then? A whale?

THIN MAN: It's just a tiny piece.

FAT MAN: And what did you expect? Tasting isn't the same as eating. It would never occur to me to eat your cornmeal. (*Pause*) Come on, man, stop making such a song and dance about it and tell me whether you like it.

THIN MAN: (*Resignedly eating the piece of fritter.*) It's so small that I can't get the flavour.

FAT MAN: (*Walking back to the table, he says*) I'd advise you to see a doctor... (*He sits down at the table again, spears a fritter and swallows it parsimoniously; he speaks as he's eating*) I, on the other hand, do get the flavour: it tastes of brains, and I could swear there's a little pinch of pepper there; even though the recipe doesn't prescribe it.

THIN MAN: (*Sitting on the bed.*) Why do you advise me to see a doctor?

FAT MAN: (*Spearing another fritter and holding it aloft on his fork; as he speaks, he points to the fritter with his left hand.*) Because, you simply have no sense of taste, my friend; your tongue doesn't pick up the flavours...

THIN MAN: (*Interrupting him.*) Well if you gave me another little piece...

FAT MAN: (*Interrupting him.*) What for? It would be useless. When the taste buds haven't atrophied, even the tiniest morsel of food that you slip into your mouth has a flavour that is instantly captured and tasted. (*Pause*) No need to make an issue out of it however; it would be far worse if you'd gone blind. (*Pause*) Nobody ever understands anyone else's condition, of course. The blind person would rather have atrophied taste buds and the deaf person would rather be mute.

THIN MAN: My sense of taste is perfect.

FAT MAN: But, my dear sir, your sense of taste is only perfect after the ingestion of copious amounts of  
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food. *(Pause)* You must know that a meal should be deciphered, like a hieroglyphic or a piece of musical notation. By the smell, the presentation, the colour, the...

THIN MAN: *(Getting to the table.)* Give me a fritter.

FAT MAN: With the greatest of pleasure. *(He indicates the chair)* But take a seat. Whilst it's true that the act of eating a fritter doesn't constitute a meal in itself, it is, for all that, an invitation to the feast. *(Pause)* Good, I shall give you your fritter, but on one condition.

THIN MAN: Oh here we go with the conditions.

FAT MAN: In this life everything is conditional. *(Pause)* If you can recite correctly the recipe for the making of brain fritters, I shall give you..., a brain fritter!

THIN MAN: *(He sits, clears his throat; wriggles around on the chair.)* Well... *(Pause)* Well...

FAT MAN: *(Spearing another fritter and chewing it.)* I have to warn you that the word well doesn't appear anywhere in the recipe. *(Pause)* Carry on.

THIN MAN: *(Wriggling around more and more on the chair.)* Brain fritters..., have...

FAT MAN: That's right, start with the ingredients. Afterwards you can explain the method.

THIN MAN: *(Still wriggling around on the chair.)* Well...

FAT MAN: *(Exploding.)* Do not say that word again, please! "Well" is not an ingredient. *(Pause)* Proceed.

THIN MAN: *(Closes his mouth tight shut; laboured breathing; strangled sounds from his throat.)*

FAT MAN: You're not going to explain anything grunting like that. *(He takes another fritter and starts to eat it)* The recipe in question is made up of this and of that. Spit it out then.

THIN MAN: *(Perplexed.)* It has brains...

FAT MAN: *(Raising his eyes in exasperation.)* The things you have to put up with in this life! *(Pause)* Brains... What else?

THIN MAN: Salt... *(Long pause)* Salt... *(Long pause)* chilli and onion...

FAT MAN: Oh, so chilli and onion... Why not chocolate and fondant fancies as well?

THIN MAN: I honestly thought...

FAT MAN: The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I can see your fritter moving away from Earth at supersonic speed like a ballistic missile.

THIN MAN: Give me another chance.

FAT MAN: Granted. Forget the chilli and onion. *(Pause)* Proceed.

THIN MAN: Lard...

FAT MAN: How much?

THIN MAN: A ladleful.

FAT MAN: A ladleful doesn't explain anything. Say if it's half a pound, or a pound.

THIN MAN: A pound.

FAT MAN: *(Roaring with laughter.)* A pound! We'd be eating lard fritters then. *(He makes a gesture of disgust)* Please! Let's not go on. You're putting me off my lunch.

THIN MAN: *(Begging.)* Don't be like that, mate... I've just got a bad memory that's all. *(Pause)* I swear to you that I know the recipe; I was the cook at a big house in Vedado once, the mistress cried when I left.

FAT MAN: *(Taking up the lie, as at the same time he spears another fritter.)* Losing a good cook is like losing a loved one. I understand the despair, the pain, and I would even say the anguish of that good lady. It's not as though good cooks are to be found hanging around on every street corner... *(Pause)* And I can only imagine the delicious brain fritters that you used to make in that house. *(Pause)* Bah...! I say brain fritters because they're here before us on the tablecloth, but I'm sure you used to cook finer more elaborate dishes than that. *Suprême de Poulet a la Villeroi or Crêpes Suzette*, for example... *(Pause)* Talking of which; could you let me have the recipe for that Chicken Supreme in Villeroy Sauce?

THIN MAN: *(Extremely nervous; he knocks over the saltcellar.)* What did you say?

FAT MAN: *(Crossing himself.)* What are you doing? Spilling salt on the table brings bad luck. It can even cause stomach cramps. *(He takes a pinch of salt and throws it over his left shoulder)* I said Chicken Supreme in Villeroy Sauce.

THIN MAN: *(As if he hasn't heard him.)* Brain fritters also have...

FAT MAN: *(Spearing the last fritter as at the same time he assumes an expression of utter boredom.)*

Enough! Forget the fritter recipe. It's all far too boring. *(Pause)* Anyway, I've just eaten the last fritter. There's no point talking on and on about brains as happily, they're already in my tummy. *(He pats his stomach)* Here they are; all the brainy brains in my tummy. *(Pause)* And why aren't you eating your cornmeal?

*The Thin Man, without stopping to answer the Fat Man, automatically starts to eat his cornmeal. He does it with a profound lack of enthusiasm.*

FAT MAN: Anyone would think, from the way you're lifting the spoon to your mouth that your food had gone off. *(Pause)* Nevertheless, cornmeal has a noble heritage. When Cortés arrived in Mexico...

THIN MAN: *(Furiously interrupting him.)* Don't talk such rubbish. *(Pause)* If it's so nice, why don't you give me your chicken and rice then? Eat it, you greedy cheat, eat the cornmeal!

FAT MAN: *(Wiping his mouth with great affectation.)* Well, I was afraid of that. I was afraid we would descend to the level of personal insult. *(Pause)* This has happened because I'm too good-natured; I'm a fool to myself. *(Pause)* Give someone an inch... And just as I'd decided to offer you the gizzard too! *(Pause)* Calling me by that name! Me, who has never taken anything from anyone, and who hands out charitable donations left, right and centre. *(Pause)* I feel so upset, I'm not quite sure I shall be able to 'assault' the chicken. Good God, what a bizarre word I've just let slip. Still these days...

THIN MAN: Having too much of a good thing. Well I'm not biting. *(Pause; he touches the casserole)* It's getting cold. Eat your chicken and rice, but don't you forget to give me the gizzard. And if you like you can throw in the parson's nose and the giblets as well...

FAT MAN: *(Taking the casserole in both hands and making as though to offer it to the Thin Man.)* That's right: the parson's nose, the giblets, the thighs, the breast and the wings; not to mention, the rice, the *petit pois* and the peppers.

THIN MAN: I'm not asking for all that.

FAT MAN: *(Snapping his fingers.)* I have an idea!

THIN MAN: Here we go... When you have an idea I always end up tightening my belt another notch.

FAT MAN: Maybe not; maybe you'll eat the chicken. *(Pause)* Carry on with your cornmeal whilst I perfect my plan.

*The Fat Man pretends to meditate and the Thin Man pretends to eat his cornmeal. The Fat Man takes a*  
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*sip of beer. The Thin Man, thinking that the Fat Man won't see, tries to slip his hand into the casserole, but the Fat Man sees him and slaps his hand away.*

FAT MAN: *(He puts his hand into the upper pocket of his pyjama jacket and takes out his wallet from which he extracts a piece of paper; he glances at the paper then puts his wallet back in his pyjama pocket; he takes another sip of beer and then wipes his mouth with the napkin. All these movements are executed in a very parsimonious manner.)* You might be aware that at the great banquets it is customary for a small orchestra to play incidental music in a muted tone, for the entertainment of the diners.

THIN MAN: I'm not a musician. I can't even play the claves.

FAT MAN: If you would let me finish... *(Pause)* This bad habit people have of interrupting when someone else is talking... *(Pause)* May I go on? Good. I was saying... Anyhow, I suppose you understood. Correct? Well, my idea is this: given that the only music my ears can tolerate is the music of food, it has occurred to me that whilst I eat my chicken and rice, you can delight my ears by reading out the recipe for the making of that same dish. Here, take it. *(He hands the piece of paper to the Thin Man.)*

THIN MAN: *(Casting his eyes over the piece of paper.)* It's longer than a novel. It's a lot to read for just one gizzard. Give me a bit of rice.

FAT MAN: We'll see. Everything depends on the execution. I have to warn you now that when it comes to the music of food my ear is exceptionally finely tuned. *(Pause)* Would you like to start, please?

THIN MAN: First put the gizzard on a separate plate.

FAT MAN: Granted. *(He puts the gizzard on the plate that the fritters were on).*

THIN MAN: And the rice?

FAT MAN: The rice is conditional. Brilliant execution: rice. Moderate execution: gizzard. Atrocious execution: nothing. Carry on.

THIN MAN: *(Taking a deep breath.)* Chicken with rice: serves six people.

FAT MAN: *(With his mouth full.)* Beautiful title; it's like a poem. Proceed.

THIN MAN: *(Reading.)* A. The Chicken. If you are buying a live chicken it should weigh about two and a quarter pounds but prefe... *(To the Fat Man)* I can't read what it says here.

FAT MAN: *(Taking the piece of paper.)* Preferably *(He returns it.)*

THIN MAN: But preferably you should buy chicken that has already been cleaned and jointed. In this case you should purchase six pieces of such a size that their total weight is a pound and a half.

FAT MAN: (*Attacking a chicken thigh.*) Everyone has their own preference, but I usually buy a chicken that has already been killed and cut into pieces. It's so disagreeable to wring the bird's neck. Proceed.

THIN MAN: B. Marinade: Two peppercorns, a teaspoon of dried oregano, a medium-sized clove of garlic, three teaspoons...

FAT MAN: (*Interrupting him.*) I have to say that you are reading the epigraph "Marinade", which is sublime, with a very flat intonation. Think of the epigraph as being like the colour of the orchestra. It needs greater animation. Start again please with the marinade.

THIN MAN: (*Sighing; starts reading again.*) Two peppercorns...

FAT MAN: Louder, louder almost singing!

THIN MAN: (*Singing it all.*) Two peppercorns...

FAT MAN: It's better to read it. You'll give me indigestion if you keep on singing.

THIN MAN: Two peppercorns, a teaspoon of dried oregano, a medium-sized clove of garlic, three teaspoons of salt, two teaspoons of olive oil, one teaspoon of vinegar.

FAT MAN: You haven't had much luck with the marinade, old chap. Let's see how you get on with the broth. I'm all ears. (*He starts to devour the chicken breast.*)

THIN MAN: C. Broth: Three tablespoons of lard, an ounce of bacon, two ounces of cooked ham, a medium-sized onion...

FAT MAN: I think they've left the cooked ham out of this chicken and rice. What are we going to do! You can lead a horse to water...! I shall continue listening to your interesting account.

THIN MAN: (*Reading.*) One green pepper, one ripe tomato, one sweet pepper, one leaf of long coriander, two sprigs of wild coriander....

FAT MAN: (*Putting his hands to his head.*) Long coriander and wild coriander! Where's it all going to end...? Every time that I copy that recipe I forget to wipe long coriander and wild coriander off the map.

THIN MAN: (*Timidly.*) Is long coriander the same thing as ordinary coriander?

FAT MAN: Of course it's the same thing! It's just that women, children and old people say coriander, and men say, long coriander.

THIN MAN: Why?

FAT MAN: If you want to be happy, don't ask... *(Pause)* Alright then; continue.

THIN MAN: *(Reading.)* Six olives, one teaspoon of capers, three tablespoons of tomato paste.

FAT MAN: *(As he finishes swallowing a mouthful.)* Atrociously executed. I can see your gizzard in the vulture's beak... *(Pause)* Let's hear the third movement of this symphony in Chicken Major.

THIN MAN: If I'm doing it so badly, why go on? I'm almost fainting.

FAT MAN: We'll have an interval. You can eat a little cornmeal to gather your strength. The Mexican Indians...

THIN MAN: *(Interrupting him.)* I prefer to finish it all in one go. I can't wait much longer to get stuck into the gizzard and the rice.

FAT MAN: *(Still eating.)* As you wish. Remember that the rice is conditional; so don't get your hopes up. *(Pause)* Would you like me to tell you the fable of the milkmaid? A milkmaid went to market with her milk can...

THIN MAN: *(Putting his hand over the Fat Man's mouth.)* No, don't tell it to me; I prefer to keep on reading.

FAT MAN: As you wish, but I must tell you that it's a marvellous fable, it has a moral and everything. *(Pause)* What are we going to do with you...! Proceed with the third movement.

THIN MAN: *(Reading.)* D. Method. One can of *petit pois*.

FAT MAN: Read your pentagram well. That is not method; that is ingredients.

THIN MAN: I jumped a line. Anyone who's as weak with hunger as I am...

FAT MAN: *(Shaking his head.)* You never fail to amaze me. So you feel weak with hunger... *(Pause)* But everybody has to eat, old chap. That's why there are such things as mealtimes. It's lunchtime now, for example. I have my lunch at twelve because it's obvious that if I've breakfasted at eight o'clock in the morning, by noon I will be weak with hunger. But not you, you just let yourself get weaker. Why? I can't



explain it. Maybe you're just trying to be different. Well, that's your problem. *(Pause)* Would you be so kind as to continue with the reading?

THIN MAN: *(Reading.)* Put a large pan onto a low heat. Add the three tablespoons of lard. Once the lard has melted add the bacon and ham included in C. Brown them over a high heat for about four minutes. Add the chicken pieces and brown them on both sides.

FAT MAN: Hmmm! How delicious it all smells! Go on, go on! This chicken and rice is going to be scrumptious.

THIN MAN: *(Reading.)* Turn the heat down to moderate and add the following: the onion washed and finely chopped. The green pepper, washed, de-seeded and cut into quarters. The sweet pepper, washed, de-seeded and cut in half. The tomato washed and cut into quarters. The leaf of long coriander and the sprigs of wild coriander washed and roughly chopped. The six olives. The teaspoon of capers...

FAT MAN: *(Jumping up and down in his chair.)* Bravo, bravo! It's as exciting as a pornographic film. *(He takes up a little bit of rice on the fork; to the Thin Man)* Open your mouth...

*The Thin Man opens his mouth.*

FAT MAN: *(Putting the forkful of rice into the Thin Man's mouth.)* You've earned it. That's what's called a well-interpreted passage. Continue, if you will.

*The Thin Man keeps his mouth open.*

FAT MAN: *(Closing the Thin Man's mouth for him.)* Read well and then we'll see if you get any more.

THIN MAN: *(Reading.)* Agitate the pan gently for ten minutes until the onion softens. Meanwhile, open the tin of *petit pois*, drain the liquid into a measuring jug, and then top it up with water until it measures four cups and heat. *(The Thin Man opens his mouth.)*

FAT MAN: Don't play the fool. Apart from the fact that you read that passage abominably, I'm not here to feed you... My patience has its limits. You can only go so far with some people. *(Pause)* Close your mouth and continue with the reading.

THIN MAN: *(Sighs deeply, continues reading.)* Put the two and a quarter cups of rice into a big sieve and wash rapidly; drain well and put into the pan. Turn the heat up high and leave the pan uncovered, don't stir and allow the rice to dry out which should take about fifteen minutes.

FAT MAN: My Aunty Mariana used to cover the pan, and my granny would heat it over two or three pieces of charcoal.

THIN MAN: It doesn't say that here.

FAT MAN: You are infuriating, simply infuriating. How the hell can you expect my Aunt Mariana and my Granny to appear in a recipe? My Granny died a good thirty years ago, and Aunty Mariana left this vale of tears almost ten years ago.

THIN MAN: (*Confused.*) I thought...

FAT MAN: I thought, I thought! You and your false suppositions. That's why the world is like it is. You can't play first fiddle all the time... (*Pause*) When did your granny die?

THIN MAN: My granny's still alive.

FAT MAN: (*Raising his arms above his head.*) That really is the last straw! So your granny's still alive. That's all I needed, for your granny to still be alive...

THIN MAN: (*Astonished.*) But, why?

FAT MAN: Why, why? Who said that grannies should be alive? The brief interlude that we were going to have talking about our respective grannies – dead, of course – has come to nothing because your grandmother got it into her head to remain in the land of the living. (*Pause*) After that lightning bolt I don't dare to ask about your aunt, I'd be sure of a most unpleasant surprise. (*Pause*) We'd better continue with the reading. (*He passes his hand across his brow and places it on his heart*) Upsets like these really affect me; I'm having palpitations! (*Pause*) Let's finish it once and for all.

THIN MAN: If you're feeling unwell...

FAT MAN: (*Checking him.*) It's not that bad. Anyway, I have a strong sense of duty. If you start something then you must finish it. (*Pause*) Let's end this once and for all.

THIN MAN: (*Looking at him closely.*) You're so fat. They say that when there's a lot of fat, the heart...

FAT MAN: (*Interrupting him.*) You take care of your heart and I'll take care of mine. Anyway, if you continue with your little game of skipping meals, your tiny ticker will play a nasty trick on you. (*Pause*) Read.

THIN MAN: (*Reading.*) As soon as the rice has dried out, turn the heat down low and turn the rice so that

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what was at the bottom is at the top and vice versa. Do this by inserting a spoon at the side of the pan and flipping the rice over. *(He looks into the casserole dish)* There's hardly any rice left.

FAT MAN: *(Serving himself the two or three spoonfuls left in the casserole.)* Nobody asked you. You look at your recipe and I'll look at my rice. *(Pause)* Will your chicken take much longer?

THIN MAN: Nearly done.

FAT MAN: Dear me! Everything comes to an end in this life. *(Pause)* Your recipe, my rice, these beautiful days in the hospital...

THIN MAN: Beautiful days my eye! They're killing me with hunger in here.

FAT MAN: Because you insist on it. *(Pause)* Anyway that's your business. Apart from your particular case – and one swallow doesn't make a summer – I shall always treasure my memories of the days spent in this hospital. Eating, sleeping, conversing... It's like a trip on a luxury cruise-liner. *(Pause)* And now let's finish this reading once and for all.

THIN MAN: *(Reading.)* Cover the pan and simmer for twenty to twenty-five minutes. Uncover the pan, add the drained *petit pois* and mix them in with the rice.

FAT MAN: ... And mix them in with the rice. That's the stupid thing about recipes. It goes without saying that the *petit pois* should be mixed in with the rice. *(Pause)* Finish please.

THIN MAN: *(Reading)* Serve the rice up immediately on a dish with the chicken pieces arranged around the outside and garnish with sweet red peppers that have been cooked and well drained.

*As the Thin Man is reading the final paragraph, the Fat Man shovels the last spoonful of rice into his mouth and then immediately spears the gizzard and eats that too.*

THIN MAN: What are you doing...? What about my gizzard?

FAT MAN: *(Hardly able to articulate for the amount of food he has in his mouth.)* The... giz... The... giz... *(Laughter)* The gizza... *(Renewed laughter)* Ha... Ha... *(Spurting grains of rice from his mouth)* The gizzard... Ha, ha, ha, ha!

THIN MAN: *(Completely losing his cool, he gets up and shouts angrily at the Fat Man.)* Son of a bitch! I'm going to rip that gizzard out of your belly. I hope it rots your guts.

FAT MAN: *(Very serious.)* And so we descend once more to the level of personal insult. *(Pause)* Listen, my

little friend: it's not my fault if you can't read a recipe as it should be read. If you want to know the truth, it sounded like gobbledegook. I didn't understand a word. And now you have the gall to start complaining and banging on about your rights, ooh give me my gizzard, ooh I hope your guts rot; and to cap it all, personal insult. *(Pause)* We're finished. It's my fault for being kind to strangers. *(Pause)* You will never sit at my table again. *(He starts to walk over to the bed)* Now I shall sleep the sleep of the just. Don't let them wake me until six. *(He lies down on the bed face up and closes his eyes).*

THIN MAN: I take far too much shit; that's why this has happened. *(He walks over to the Fat Man's bed and stares at him, then he goes to his own bed and lies down with his hands behind his head, he sighs.)* He looks like a fattened pig...

#### CURTAIN

*As soon as the curtain goes down, the following refrain is sung three times:*

*As sure as the world is round*

*And Jack is not called Jim*

*It is certain that the fat man*

*Will be eaten by the thin*

*(The curtain rises immediately)*

#### SCENE TWO

*The Thin Man (now turned into the Fat Man) is sitting at the table sucking contentedly on a human tibia. Scattered around the floor in front of the table are the bones of a skeleton. The Thin Man is resting his right foot on the skull of that skeleton. On the table are the pieces of plaster and the bandages from the Fat Man's arm.*

THIN MAN: *(Affectedly, throwing the tibia on the floor.)* What a blow out! *(He pats his stomach)* Oh, pardon the expression, but these days...! *(Pause)* I shall express myself in a more cultured fashion: a

banquet fit for King Henry the Eighth himself... *(Pause)* Would you like to know how I did it? Well, Fat Man was sleeping like a log, imagine: chicken and rice, fritters, the gizzard... I made a little hole in him with the knife and he just bled to death. Then I cut him into pieces and ate him bit by bit. *(Pause)* He tasted like pheasant. *(Pause; he puts his hand into the pyjama pocket, pulls out the wallet and starts to count the money)* Four twenties, five tens, four fives and one peso; one hundred and fifty-one pesos in total *(Pause)* Well; they'll let me out of here this afternoon. *(As if speaking to the Fat Man)* If you could only see me Fat Man... Where are you now I wonder? *(Pause)* Well, where could you be except in my tummy? Here. *(He pats his stomach again)* All safe and sound... in my tummy you can't break your little arm... *(He breaks into loud guffaws of laughter).*

*The Orderly enters with a napkin over his arm, a notepad and a pencil tucked behind his ear.*

ORDERLY: *(Bowing.)* Just past twelve, sir. What would we like for lunch today? *(Pause; he stares at him amazed.)* Sorry..., are you the Fat Man? No, you're not the Fat Man. *(Pause)* Those are his pyjamas though. I could swear you were the Fat Man, although... *(Pause)* Are you the Fat Man sir?

THIN MAN: *(Looking at his pyjamas.)* Well, I'm the Fat Man now.

ORDERLY: But the same Fat Man?

THIN MAN: What does it matter...? *(Pause)* If you're worried about your tip, I'll set your mind at rest. *(He gets out the wallet, takes a peso and gives it to the Orderly)* There you are. *(Pause)* I think I'll give lunch a miss, I haven't got much appetite. *(Pause)* Anyway, I'm out of here this afternoon.

ORDERLY: *(Thoughtful.)* Thank you sir. *(Pause)* I can see now that you aren't the Fat Man. But if you aren't the Fat Man, then where's the Fat Man gone?

THIN MAN: Always these eternal misunderstandings! How should I know? Do I look like the hospital detective? I'm just a patient with a fracture of the right leg. *(He lifts up the leg of his pyjama trousers and shows the Orderly his plaster).*

ORDERLY: *(Astonished)* But, then... You're the Thin Man. So how did you get so fat overnight?

THIN MAN: You may well ask! One day you're thin, the next day you're fat. Mysteries, my friend, mysteries. Some get fat on raw cane sugar, for others the air that they breathe is enough...

ORDERLY: But, so quickly... *(Pause)* Anyway, those are the Fat Man's pyjamas. Heavens! They certainly fit you well.

THIN MAN: That's right; these are the Fat Man's pyjamas. And what of it? When I awoke this morning I saw that his bed was empty, and on top of the bed were his pyjamas. I had a strong urge to put them on; and so I did.

ORDERLEY: And the wallet. Did he leave that on the bed as well?

THIN MAN: Yes, the wallet as well. If he returns then I'll give the wallet and the pyjamas back to him. Although you never know with these fat guys; they like to vanish into thin air.

ORDERLY: You'll do the same, eh?

THIN MAN: I shall say "goodbye!" though. I detest English-style farewells. This afternoon at five I shall be all smiles and hugs.

*At that moment the Doctor enters.*

DOCTOR: *(Going to the Thin Man.)* Let's see that arm.

THIN MAN: *(Showing his arm.)* Here you are.

DOCTOR: Not that one, the broken one.

THIN MAN: *(Showing his other arm.)* Here you are.

DOCTOR: But didn't you have a broken arm?

THIN MAN: No, leg.

DOCTOR: Of course! Your leg. Forgive me; I've got such a bad memory. *(Pause, he examines the leg, he gives the plaster a number of little taps)* Fifteen days more.

THIN MAN: But...

DOCTOR: *(Strictly.)* No arguments. Fifteen more days I said. *(Pause)* Goodbye. *(He exits).*

THIN MAN: *(Raising his hands to his head)* That Doctor is a vet. He treats me like a horse. *(Pause)* He imagines my life is here in the stable, eating and sleeping. *(Pause)* I am a business man! The stock market, shares, dividends! *(He hides his face in his hands).*

ORDERLY: Come on sir, don't get so worked up. You'll have a nice time here in the hospital. Anyway, you've got the Fat Man's money. And if as you say the Fat Man has vanished, then what are fifteen more

days here, well fed and well cared for? After all, I shall be at your disposal sir.

THIN MAN: Go to hell! (*Talking to himself with his head to one side*) They'll find the whole thing out, and then I'll really be in the soup...

ORDERLY: Don't upset yourself, sir. The stock market is subject to expansion and contraction, just like fat men and thin men.

THIN MAN: Would you shut up? (*Pause*) I've got to find a way out... The soup, the soup...

ORDERLY: (*Solicitous.*) What kind would you like, sir? Oxtail, chicken?

THIN MAN: (*Thumping the table with his fist.*) Ruined, ruined!

ORDERLY: Calm down, sir. Don't get so upset about it, life is too short... (*Pause*) Cheer up, I'll bring you some consommé right away...

*The Orderly runs over to the door and as he is leaving he bumps into an excessively thin man dressed in hospital pyjamas. He is limping and has his right leg in plaster.*

NEW THIN MAN: (*Timidly.*) They said it was here.

ORDERLY: Were you sent to this room?

NEW THIN MAN: I was sent to this room.

ORDERLY: Then make yourself at home. (*Pause*) That's the Fat Man. Try to engage him in conversation. (*He exits*).

NEW THIN MAN: (*Approaching the Thin Man who has his head in his hands.*) Excuse me, sir...

THIN MAN: (*Lifting his head and looking at the New Thin Man.*) Who are you?

NEW THIN MAN: They sent me here. Look, I've got my leg in plaster. (*He shows his leg*).

THIN MAN: (*Jumping up.*) But that's not possible! It's a misunderstanding; you've got the wrong room. (*He points to the Fat Man's bed*) That bed is occupied by a patient, a fat man. He's just popped out for a minute, but he'll be back, I assure you, he'll be back. (*He goes over to the door, retraces his steps, stares at the New Thin Man, goes back to the door, shouting*) Tell him that it isn't here! Tell him that he's made a mistake! I don't want him with me, I don't want him, I don't want him! Help, help! (*He falls to his knees*) Help, help! (*He bursts into tears*).

## CURTAIN

### Virgilio Piñera : A Brief Biography

Born in Cuba in 1912, Virgilio Piñera was a prolific playwright, poet, novelist, essayist and short story writer. Famed for a sharp wit and an acid tongue, he was a polemicist who sniped from the sidelines and offered up an idiosyncratic and dark view of human nature.

Piñera spent much of the 1940's and 50's in Argentina in self-imposed semi-exile from the successive corrupt dictatorships and the moribund literary scene in Cuba. Amongst his friends in Buenos Aires he counted the Polish exile Witoldo Gombrowicz and headed the committee of writers who helped to translate *Ferdydurke* into Spanish.

Piñera returned to Havana in November 1958 shortly before the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the new regime and the possibilities it offered him as a writer; however his status as an overt homosexual and non-conformist led to his eventual marginalisation during a well-documented period of recent Cuban history when homophobia, misplaced revolutionary fervour and petty bureaucracy stifled many forms of creative expression.

Virgilio Piñera spent the last ten years of his life in Cuba as a literary ghost. His works ceased to be published, his plays were no longer performed, and his name was excised from the reference books. He was not allowed to travel and the possibilities of seeing his work translated into other languages were lost to him. His output did not diminish however. When he died in 1979 eighteen boxes of unpublished material were recovered from his apartment. After his death, slowly but surely, the process of rehabilitation began and with it his posthumous transformation in Cuba from literary ghost to literary giant. This process has been slower to translate to the outside world.

### Kate Eaton – Translator

Kate Eaton originally trained as an actor and has worked extensively in theatre, television and radio in the UK. In 2003 she translated Virgilio Piñera's *La boda* [*The Wedding*] for UK based company Scarlet Theatre and has subsequently been working closely with director Gráinne Byrne and actors from Scarlet on developing further translations of Piñera's work.

In March 2010 final year students from The Central School of Speech and Drama performed these translations of *El flaco y el gordo* [*Thin Man Fat Man*] and *Siempre se olvida algo* [*You Always Forget*]



*Something*] in a double bill at London's Arcola Theatre in a production directed by Gráinne Byrne. In April 2010 *Siempre se olvida algo* was performed in both the original Spanish and this translation by bi-lingual students from Hostos Community College, CUNY. The production was directed by Angel Morales.

The plays of Virgilio Piñera and the collaborative process of translation for performance are the twin strands of her practice-led PhD research at the Drama Department of Queen Mary, University of London for which she receives funding from the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council).

### **Invisible on Stage: the Case of Roberto Arlt's *Saverio el cruel***

"Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción." (Jorge Luis Borges)<sup>1</sup>

"Translation has to do with authority and legitimacy and, ultimately, with power, which is precisely why it has been and continues to be the subject of so many acrimonious debates." (André Lefevere)<sup>2</sup>

Roberto Arlt (1900-1942) is generally considered by critics the forerunner of the Latin American 'boom'. Arlt's innovative style reflects a fascination with the popular and a trenchant social realism fused with fantasy; his oeuvre is considered to have paved the way for later Latin American magic realism. Though distinguished names such as Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar praised his work, still, Arlt has also been considered by lesser figures a marginal voice, a tragicomic commentator on life, an autodidact and journalist, a writer who could not even spell. Arlt's place in the Argentine canon has, however, been granted as Arltian scholars and critics regard his work as an incisive portrait of its epoch, a much deserved milestone that secured the author a literary place that his contemporaries tried to deny him.

This article, organised in three sections and a short conclusion, will focus on Arlt's theatre career. The first section provides a brief sketch of Arlt's theatre production and his relation to the Teatro

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<sup>1</sup> 'Las versiones homéricas', *Discusión* (1932) in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), pp. 239-243.

<sup>2</sup> *Translation/History/Culture. A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge 1992), p.2.

del Pueblo together with a short description of *Saverio el cruel* (1936 [Saverio, the Cruel]),<sup>3</sup> the particular play under study. The second section addresses some broad problems in relation to theatre translation using a Translation Studies viewpoint<sup>4</sup> in order to try and situate Arlt within a broader Argentine tradition of translation, in general, and that of the theatre in particular. Finally, the third section discusses some of the specific problems encountered when translating, or rather rewriting, *Saverio el cruel*.

### **I. Roberto Arlt, the Teatro del Pueblo and *Saverio el cruel*.**

The place occupied by Roberto Arlt within Argentine letters is today incontestable. All the same, it is Arlt the auto-didact novelist and journalist that attracts the greatest attention;<sup>5</sup> Arlt the playwright is a much lesser known figure, one that is frequently overlooked even. As Florian Nelle points out, Arlt made a name in the theatre by means of adapting his own novels for the stage.<sup>6</sup> In fact, his first play, the one that actually pushed him towards the theatre, *El humillado* ([The Humiliated] staged in 1931), represents a 'translation' of a fragment of *Los siete locos* (1929, [The Seven Madmen]) for Leónidas Barletta's Teatro del Pueblo. According to Bernardo Carey, this is a common phenomenon amongst theatre writers of the period who, in general, prefer to adapt their prose for performance.<sup>7</sup> This could explain why critical works discussing Arlt's prose fiction vastly outnumber those which set out to analyse his dramatic contribution. In fact, the only critical work on Arlt's theatre prior to 2000 was a study by Castagnino published in 1964.

The 1930s, the decade in which Arlt initiated his theatre career, would prove a pivotal one for Argentine theatre history, for it is at that moment that Leónidas Barletta (1902-1975), one of the

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<sup>3</sup> All translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

<sup>4</sup> Lefevere 'Translation Studies: The Goal of the Discipline' in *Literature and Translation*, (ed.) James S. Holmes, José Lambert and Raymond van den Broeck (Louvain: ACCO, 1978), pp. 234-5.

<sup>5</sup> Arlt published four novels: *El juguete rabioso* (Buenos Aires: Latina, 1926; *Mad Toy* (Durham& London: Duke University Press, 2002), trans. Michele McKay Aynesworth; *Los siete locos* (Buenos Aires: Latina, 1929; *The Seven Madmen* (Boston: D. R. Godme, 1984), trans. Naomi Lindstrom, (Boston: Godine, 1984), trans. Nick Caistor; *Los lanzallamas* (Buenos Aires: Claridad, 1931), *El amor brujo* (Buenos Aires: Victoria, Talleres Gráficos Rañó, 1932) more than 70 short stories (mainly published in magazines, except the 1933 *El jorobadito*) compiled in *Roberto Arlt, Cuentos completos*, edited by Ricardo Piglia and Omar Borré (Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe, 1996) and various editions of his Aguafuertes, the series of columns published in *El Mundo* newspaper. For a complete bibliography see Rita Gnutzmann's *Roberto Arlt, Innovación y compromiso. La obra narrativa y periodística* (Murcia: Campbell 2004).

<sup>6</sup> See 'Roberto Arlt y el gesto del teatro' in *Roberto Arlt: Una modernidad argentina* (ed.) Morales Saravia and Schuchard (Madrid: Iberoamericana, Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2001), pp 125-139.

<sup>7</sup> See Bernardo Carey, 'Mossian revela el teatro de Roberto Arlt' in *Teatro* (XXI, VI, 10, (otoño) 2000), pp. 90-92.

key names of the Boedo group,<sup>8</sup> set up the Teatro del Pueblo. As Versényi points out, the Teatro del Pueblo was perhaps the first non-commercial theatre in Latin America.<sup>9</sup> Barletta's Teatro del Pueblo staged works of a number of European playwrights, Shakespeare, Gogol, Tolstoi, Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Molière, to name a few. At the same time, it also catered to 'the people' who wanted to see what the *generación del 900* had to offer. Thus, local, contemporary names such as Raúl González Tuñón, Nicolás Olivari, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Eduardo González Lanuza and of course Roberto Arlt were also part of the Teatro's cultural agenda. This avant-garde, experimental theatre paid particular tribute to national authors and artists, including first and second generation of artists who were too rooted in popular culture to enter the canonical mainstream. The Teatro del Pueblo stood out because it experimented with new techniques, focusing on the role of the director and challenging the commercial theatre. According to Barletta, it would bring the art to the masses, thus promoting the spiritual elevation of *all our people* (my italics).<sup>10</sup> Arlt is amongst the key figures contributing to this 'teatro independiente' movement; according to Ordaz Arlt even 'fué [sic] por antonomasia, el autor del movimiento independiente.'<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, critics such as Rela consider that Arlt's dramaturgy 'define una sólida actitud renovadora en el teatro argentino moderno'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> During the 1920s and 1930s, the Buenos Aires literary arena was dominated by two vanguard movements, Florida and Boedo, which differed not only geographically but also aesthetically and politically. Members of the Florida group, named after the opulent shopping street representative of the central, European-like, luxurious life style, tended to focus on mainly aesthetic goals. Jorge Luis Borges, Ricardo Güiraldes, Conrado Nalé Roxlo and Oliverio Girondo may be counted amongst this "patrician" tradition. The Boedo group, on the other hand, represented a suburban wave greatly influenced by the nineteenth-century Russian realists. These would focus on political and social issues, mainly in prose narrative, while the Florida group would also cultivate poetry. Roberto Mariani, Elías Castelnuovo, Leónidas Barletta exemplify the Boedo literati. Both groups maintained their own journals and publishing houses. In spite of the overt differences in style, taste, and social and political background, there were numerous friendships between members of these ostensibly opposed groups. Because of the considerable overlap of interests, there were many writers who oscillated between them, Arlt being one of those in particular who transcended narrow partisanship.

<sup>9</sup> Versényi, 1993, p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> In 1912, the Council of the City of Buenos Aires passed a decree by means of which a new "popular theatre aiming to offer instructive and moralizing shows" would be created. Although the Teatro del Pueblo started its activities in 1931, it is not until 1936 that Leónidas Barletta would be given a theatre building in concession. Barletta continued to be director of the Teatro del Pueblo until he died in 1975. The most prolific period of the theatre is perhaps between 1937 and 1943 when the theatre was forced to move premises as the Military government closed it down. The theatre continues working today under the administration of the Fundación SOMI ([www.teatrodelpueblo.org.ar](http://www.teatrodelpueblo.org.ar), accessed November 2009).

<sup>11</sup> "[Arlt] was, par excellence, the author of the independent movement." Ordaz, *El teatro en el Río de la Plata. Desde sus orígenes hasta nuestros días* (Buenos Aires: Liatán, 1957), p. 228.

<sup>12</sup> '[D]efines a solid, revitalising attitude in modern Argentine theatre'. "Argumentos renovadores de Roberto Arlt en el teatro argentino moderno", *Latin American Theatre Review* (Volume 13, Nr 2, pp 65-71), p. 66.

The fact that Arlt abandoned novel writing (*El amor brujo* [Bewitching Love] of 1932 is his last novel)<sup>13</sup> in favour of a completely different medium may well be responsible for the largely negative evaluation that his theatrical oeuvre has received.<sup>14</sup> Figures such as Julio Cortázar, who praised Arlt's prose writings, considered his drama 'dispensable'. Similarly, critics such as Adolfo Prieto have attacked Arlt's theatre, deeming it a sign of the artistic decadence of a writer who had given in to 'presiones socio-culturales'.<sup>15</sup> Despite adverse critical opinion, *Saverio el cruel*, possibly the most enduring of Arlt's stage plays, proved a triumphant success, making an important contribution to the development of national Argentine theatrical tradition.

If Roberto Arlt earned the cliché label of 'bad writer' in relation to his novelistic production (allegedly, he could not spell), he was certainly a self-made man when we refer to his theatre. In *Teatro completo de Roberto Arlt* [The Complete Theatre Works by Roberto Arlt], Mirta Arlt reminds us that following his "criterio de inventor, de explorador intuitivo acuñó formas por el procedimiento de prueba y error."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, this 'intuitive' creativity, as opposed to a scholarly training, does not imply that he was unaware of the theoretical and formal problems associated with writing. In actual fact, Arlt himself was conscious of his limitations.

By 1931, the year when *El humillado*, a fragment of Arlt's second novel *Los siete locos*, was adapted for the stage, Arlt was already a well-known novelist and journalist who, encouraged by Barletta, would combine his journalistic and narrative career with the writing and staging of his own plays. With the exception of *El fabricante de fantasmas* [The Phantom Maker], which was performed by the company run by Milagros de la Vega and Carlos Pirelli (October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1936), all of the plays Roberto Arlt penned and saw staged were premiered at the Teatro del Pueblo: *El humillado* (1931 [The Humiliated]); *Prueba de amor* (1932 [Proof of Love]); *Trescientos millones* (1932 [Three Hundred Millions]); *Saverio el cruel* (August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1936 [Saverio, the Cruel]). *La isla desierta* (December 30<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Though Arlt abandoned novel writing, he continued to write his *Aguafuertes* and also produced a number of short stories after 1932. As Saïtta points out, after 1932, in fact, "la cantidad de relatos publicados aumenta considerablemente." (2000), p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> See Nelle, p. 126.

<sup>15</sup> "[S]ocio-cultural pressures", Prieto 1978, p. xxx.

<sup>16</sup> "[Arlt], following his inventive, intuitive, explorative criteria, coined forms by a process of trial and error." Arlt, *Teatro completo de Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Schapire, 1968; vols 1 and 2), Vol 1, p.7. All cites are taken from this edition.

1937 [The Desert Island]], *África*, (March 17<sup>th</sup> 1938 [Africa]), *La fiesta del Hierro* (March 18th 1940 [The Party of the Iron]). Arlt finished *El desierto entra en la ciudad* (Teatro El Duende, November 5th, 1953 [The Desert enters the City]) in 1942 but died on June 26<sup>th</sup> the same year.

*Saverio el cruel*, was originally published as *Escenas de un grotesco* in 1934 [Scenes of a Grotesque].<sup>17</sup> All in all, the play received very good reviews.<sup>18</sup> In this play, Saverio is a stereotypical Italian immigrant who sells butter on commission for a living and seems quite happy with his humble life. Susana, a wealthy young lady, sends for him on the pretext of a business proposal. Hopeful and expectant Saverio arrives at the *estancia* only to meet Susana's close relatives who inform him she has gone mad. At Susana's however, they also have a proposition to make: they want naïve Saverio to take part in the experimental farce the conspirators are organising in the hope of shocking Susana back to sanity. This implies Saverio's 'playing the part' of a Colonel, as Susana believes she is a princess whose kingdom has been taken over by this tyrant. In the therapeutic farce, the Colonel's head would be severed; one of them would get a real human head to give the charade a realistic touch, and, thus causing Susana the shock she would need to be cured. Unaware of all this, Saverio reluctantly accepts, and they could not be more amused anticipating Saverio's public humiliation —the farce was to take place in front of more friends at a fancy-dress party. To their surprise, Saverio is tipped off and disgraces them all when he confronts Susana with the truth. The change of fate comes when Susana, who in actual life has really gone mad, shoots Saverio when he rejects her, both as a phoney Colonel and as a real man.

Although systematically criticised by *La Prensa*, Arlt's role in the Argentine theatre of the 1930s and 1940s is nothing if not dynamic. Indeed, Arlt played an active role in the Argentine theatre of his time translating current political and social issues onto the stage; his contribution to the Teatro del Pueblo movement and to the national stage as a whole was culturally rich and varied as well as historically relevant.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Escenas de un grotesco* (*Gaceta de Buenos Aires*, n°2, August 1934; reprinted by Jorge Dubatti, *El cronista comercial*, 3rd and 10<sup>th</sup> of January, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> 'Saverio el cruel en el T. del Pueblo. La obra de Roberto Arlt continua la línea de nuevos moldes' in *La Nación*, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 1936. Even *La Prensa*, traditionally more critical of Arlt's oeuvre in general, reticently highlights Arlt's "evidente propósito renovador dentro de nuestro ambiente" ["obvious intent to revive our theatrical scene"]; see 'Saverio el cruel fue estrenada anoche en el Teatro del Pueblo' in *La Prensa*, 27 August, 1936.

<sup>19</sup> See C. Miranda, 'Saverio el cruel: National History and the Subversion of Melodrama' in *Fragmentos*, n 32 (ed.

## II. Translation and the Theatre

Translation plays a crucial role in many literary traditions. In the manner commentators such as Venuti and Hale propose, the study of translation can open new approaches to recurrent issues in the history of literatures. Within such literary traditions, of course, we find the theatre (notwithstanding the concerted attempt within British and North American universities to promote drama as a discipline in its own right and entirely separate from literature). As Hale and Upton note in the introduction to *Moving Target, Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation*,<sup>20</sup> the intimate relationship the stage has long enjoyed with translation is, naturally, no secret. In Britain, approximately one in eight professional productions reviewed in the national press at the time of writing (2000) was a translation. Nevertheless, translation does not enjoy the same privileged status in other media: statistics suggest that theatre seems one of the most receptive forms, television and cinema suffering from the proverbial “aversion of English-speaking audiences to dubbing and even subtitling.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Hale and Upton point out that “[d]espite theatre’s age-old tendency to adopt material from other cultures, British sensibility has been inclined to underplay the foreignness of its inspirations. Translations and adaptations, having been thoroughly domesticated, have entered the repertoire almost surreptitiously under the guise of British versions.”<sup>22</sup> This was especially so in the nineteenth century when almost half the plays staged in the London theatre were of French origin, though few advertised themselves as such. Even perennial classics of the Victorian stage such as *Still Waters Run Deep* (1855) and *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1862) were based on French originals.<sup>23</sup> According to Booth, the influx of French sources was so great, however undercover, that “some critics felt that native English drama was doomed to extinction.”<sup>24</sup>

**Literary translation fared much less well, even in the nineteenth century. Today, the British**

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Paul Jordan, Brazil: University of Santa Catarina, 2007, pp. 51-63)

<sup>20</sup> Carole-Anne Upton ((ed.), Manchester: St Jerome, 2000, pp. 1-13).

<sup>21</sup> Hale, 2000, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Upton, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Hale, ‘Popular Theatre’ in *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, (ed.) Peter France, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 382-93.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Booth, *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century – Volume III – Dramas 1850-1900*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 15.

and North American publishing industry has a clear aversion to translation. Venuti, for example, has pointed out that despite American and British publishing output having quadrupled since the 1950s, the percentage of translations has remained at some 2% to 4% of the total number of new titles published.<sup>25</sup> This is one of the lowest in-translation rates in the world. The publishing industry is by no means the only example of the negative effects of the cultural hegemony of the English language.

Writing about 'Issues in the Translation of Latin American Theatre', Kirstin Nigro notes the notorious absence of Latin American theatre in the USA despite the fact that Latinos constitute the second largest minority in the country.<sup>26</sup> Despite the *boom* and *post boom* phenomena, only a handful of Latin American writers have secured their place on bookshop shelves in the US and Britain, though these include Pablo Neruda (Chile, 1904-1973), Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina, 1889-1986), Octavio Paz (Mexico, 1914-1998), Carlos Fuentes (Mexico, 1928), Guillermo Cabrera Infante (Cuba, 1929-2005), Mario Vargas Llosas (Peru, 1936), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia, 1928), and Isabel Allende (Chile, 1942). And the list is even shorter when we look at playwrights. Nigro also highlights that "most readers are unaware of or uninterested in Latin American writing, assuming – incorrectly – that it is too exotic or inferior in quality (meaning usually 'too political')." <sup>27</sup> Apart from the ethnocentricity of the American (and we might add British) attitude in relation to translation in general, needless to say, the situation of Latin American playwrights is further complicated by the performance dimension with all the issues of production, casting and monetary pressures. Nigro attributes this, at least partially, to the lack of circulation printed theatre itself enjoys in Latin American countries. Obviously, there are always exceptions to such generalization; after all, a handful of Latin American playwrights have found their way on to the international stage. Perhaps the most significant theatrical works to emerge from Latin America in recent decades are *Death and the Maiden* by Ariel Dorfman<sup>28</sup> and *El beso de la mujer araña* [*The Kiss of the Spider*

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<sup>25</sup> See Venuti, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> See Kirstin Nigro, 'Issues in the Translation of Latin American Theatre' in *Moving Target, Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation*, (ed.) Carol-Anne Upton (Manchester: St Jerome, 2000) p. 118. Although Nigro particularly focuses on Latino theatre for a U.S. audience, her arguments are useful with regard to the present discussion.

<sup>27</sup> Nigro, p.118.

<sup>28</sup> *Death and the Maiden* was originally written in English (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1992); translated into Spanish as *La muerte y la doncella*. (Mexico, D.F.: Seix Barral, c1995). In 1995, this piece was made into a film; *Death and the Maiden* (Mount/Kramer Production of a Roman Polanski Film. [S.I.]: Turner Home Entertainment: New Line Home Video, c1995).

Woman] by the Argentine, Manuel Puig,<sup>29</sup> two plays which also made the transition from stage to screen. Equally, Hollywood provided Chilean Skármeta (bn. 1928) with considerable publicity when his novel *Ardiente paciencia* [Burning Patience], later retitled *El cartero de Neruda* (Ediciones del Norte, 1985; Plaza & Janés, 1995 [Neruda's Postman]), was adapted for the cinema as *Il Postino* (1994, dir. Michael Radford [*The Postman*]). Likewise, Argentine Griselda Gambaro (bn. 1928) and Cuban-French José Triana (bn. 1931) are some Latino names that may sound familiar in English-speaking cultures.

Despite these examples, stage translation *per se* remains a secondary activity. With the exception of Gambaro and Triana, the other examples cited above are essentially novelists or poets who have turned their hand only occasionally, albeit successfully, to the theatre in the course of very active careers.<sup>30</sup> It is also noteworthy that translation, when it has occurred, is invariably limited to the US stage; the British stage has virtually no history of involvement with Latin American theatre. This is not intended, of course, to diminish the work for the theatre of these authors but to highlight how the genre seems to have been systematically marginalised.

An area which is even more neglected than narrative prose is the translation of theatre. According to Hale and Upton, "[t]he theatre translator has rarely been acknowledged as a creative figure integral to the process of production. Translation studies has paid relatively little attention to this particular role; theatre studies even less."<sup>31</sup> As Susan Bassnett points out, one possible explanation could be the higher literary status poetry holds, "but it most probably is due to the widespread erroneous notion that a novel is somehow a simpler structure than a poem and is consequently easier to translate."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the assumption here is that stage translation is an activity analogous to the production of translations of narrative fiction, and that both activities share a similar methodology. As theatre practitioners recognise, this is clearly not the case. To begin with, dramatic texts have an entirely different purpose since it is only in performance that they realise their full potential.

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<sup>29</sup> *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) was later translated for the theatre (1983) and in 1985 also made it to the big screen. Directed by [Hector Babenco](#) and starring William Hurt, Raul Julia and Sonia Braga, the film was nominated for several Oscars and earned Hurt the Oscar for Best Actor (1985). In the 1990s it was also adapted for a musical which opened (with its own cast) in London in 1993, the following year in Broadway and later in Buenos Aires.

<sup>30</sup> Skármeta could be the exception as he has forged his career both as a novelist and script writer for television and cinema.

<sup>31</sup> Hale (2000), p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> See Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (London: Routledge 1998), p. 109.



Indeed, as Bassnett notes, the stage translator is thus presented with the central problem of whether to tackle the playtext as a purely literary genre or to “try to translate it in its *function*, as one element in another, more complex system.”<sup>33</sup> As Bassnett further points out, work on theatre semiotics has shown that the linguistic system is not an optional component in a set of interrelated systems comprising in a spectacle.

### **A. Rewriting *Saverio el cruel***

Following the discussion above, working between an Argentine-Spanish and an English system is unlikely to be easy. Trying to create a version of *Saverio* that makes sense to an Anglo-Saxon audience would probably demand an intrusive translation practice more akin to rewriting than translation in the narrow sense. After all, translation, at least in Britain, usually depends on finding a convenient topical issue of concern to the host community which may somehow be illuminated by the source text (ST): a ‘peg’ on which ‘to hang the translation.’ Arguably, such a rewriting would constitute not so much a scholarly exercise as a creative one; and for this reason the translation to which these comments refer will not attempt to constitute a fluent, essentially ‘domesticated’ translation ready for stage performance.<sup>34</sup> However, it is useful to provide a close, reasonably literal (but not excessively so) version, not least because any future rewriting depends, as a first step, on the production of such a core version. Indeed, the British theatre routinely commissions so-called ‘literals’ which are then passed over to experienced playwrights (who may not, and generally do not, read the language of the ST). How ‘literal’ a ‘literal’ should be is open to interpretation, however, and the term has never been defined in a satisfactory manner. In practice, a ‘literal’ can constitute any one of a host of different discursive practices. Not only this, but there is evidence to suggest that the literal is a peculiarly British practice, largely created by the decline of language skills amongst theatre professionals. In any event, there is little evidence of the existence of the concept prior to 1914; and some theatre professionals tend to associate the term with the increase of interest in world theatre ushered in by the early repertoire of the National Theatre in the mid-1960s.

Even the production of a close reading poses a number of questions. To begin with, the very act of

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<sup>33</sup> See Bassnett, p.120.

<sup>34</sup> This translation is part of my PhD thesis *Roberto Arlt: Translation and the Construction of Genre* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Hull, 2007).

translation serves to move the play from a peripheral, non-hegemonic location to a central, hegemonic system. Likewise, the psychological situation of the translator (in this case, the present writer) is ambiguous: stranded between a scholarly academic tradition (which discourages authorial intervention in the texts of canonical authors) and a theatre practice (which seems to demand such interventions), but also stranded between a native 'non-prestige' (Argentinean) culture and the hegemonistic demands of the English language. A third, and far more practical, problem lies in the fact that class antagonism is at the very heart of the play. One hundred years of socialism in Britain – during which time the leisured land-owning classes have virtually been abolished<sup>35</sup> – has largely erased the ferocious class hatred which underlies the play. More generally, a contemporary British audience has no experience of a culture constituted by a small wealthy elite and a massive semi-destitute immigrant population. A final issue with regard to stage translation in recent years has been the tendency of the British stage to largely disassociate itself from literary experimentalism in favour of performance practice in a non-text based context.

But Translation Theory also fails to offer any easy solutions. Arlt's technique as a creative writer has some parallels with the concept of *tradaption* adopted by the English-speaking world. This term, a contraction of 'translation' and 'adaptation', was used by the French Canadian theatre director Robert Lepage to "convey the sense of annexing old texts to new cultural contexts."<sup>36</sup> Paradoxically, Arlt was using this system of massive and systematic adaptation at the time when the Prague School was looking for a methodology which could provide a supposedly perfect translation.<sup>37</sup> By this, the scholars of the Prague school, curiously enough contemporaries of Arlt, meant a translation that would work on stage exactly in the same manner as the original source text had done on the target culture.

Examining the function of the linguistic system in theatre in relation to the experience as a whole Bogatyrev suggests that:

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<sup>35</sup> Canadine's work has been highly influential in this respect. See in particular Canadine's *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> See Verma, Jatinder, 'British: a *jungli* approach to multi-cultural theatre' (in *Studies in Theatre Production* 13, pp 92-98), p. 93.

<sup>37</sup> Dramatic texts encompass certain features that are distinctive – dialogue being the central one. Veltruský, to name but one, mentions that, "the relationship between the dialogue and the extralinguistic situation is intense and reciprocal. The situation often provides the dialogue with its subject matter. Moreover, whatever the subject matter may be, the situation variously interferes in the dialogue, affects the way it unfolds, brings about shifts or reversals, and sometimes interrupts it altogether. See Veltruský, Jiří, *Drama as Literature* (Lisse: Peter de Rider Press, 1977) p. 9.

Linguistic expression in theatre is a structure of signs constituted not only as discourse signs, but also as other signs. For example, theatre discourse, that must be the sign of a character's social situation is accompanied by the actor's gestures, finished off by his costumes, the scenery, etc. which are all equally signs of social situation.<sup>38</sup>

This proves a very difficult and very impractical notion to exercise as conventions of theatre practice are not even the same within one given culture. Assigning a particular weight or interpretation, for example, to the stage-lighting of a particular scene, is by no means easy. In many respects, such matters are more or less defined by conventional practice as much as the requirements of a director; but whether one can even begin to place more than a subjective evaluation on the impact of the lighting on, say, the emotional register, let alone its ideological import, of a scene is highly debatable. Unfortunately, the conceptual naivety of such a schema – perhaps because of its promise of absolute scientific accuracy – has maintained a fascination for researchers to the present day even though it fails to ask the sort of questions that a theatre practitioner would be interested in. More to the point, since live theatre is about performance, and not about recapturing some past performance elsewhere (however influential or important), the “ideal” translation envisaged by those associated with the Prague School might well prove not so much an ideal as a millstone even if it was a viable concept. After all, what is interesting about translation, whether literary or performance-based, is that the target text does *not* have the same colouring and weight as the original.

This system of achieving a perfect translation proposed by the Prague School likewise fails to take into consideration more practical issues. Meech sees the figure of the director (and certainly not the translator, however perfect) at the centre of a production. Indeed, he argues that the theatre poses perhaps a unique opportunity for “researching how a theatre speaks to its audience; how it responds to and expresses the aspirations and concerns of that audience”.<sup>39</sup> Meech points out that “under the cover of a ‘concept’ production, it had long been a practice in Eastern Europe to stage plays from the classical canon, injected with a contemporary political relevance”. In this way, a play such as “*Hamlet* or *Julius Caesar* needed little in the way of adaptation to present all-too-familiar images of tyranny for a politically aware East German audience. No wonder Stalin banned

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<sup>38</sup> See Peter Bogatyrev, ‘Les signes du théâtre’, *Poétique*, VIII, 1971, pp 517-30, as cited by Bassnett, p. 122.

<sup>39</sup> Meech, ‘The Irrepressible in Pursuit of the Impossible. Translating the Theatre of the GDR’ in *Moving Target, Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation*, (ed) C-A. Upton, (Manchester: St Jerome, 2000, pp 128-137) p. 129.

productions of Shakespeare's plays in pre-War Russia."<sup>40</sup> Thus, it is ultimately the director, and not the translator, who will bear the signature of the production, who will interpret and stamp a play with meaning for his or her particular community. If the same play will be different when performed by the same actors, say at different venues, or even from one day to the next, we can only expect that it will be interpreted in different ways by different directors working in different cultures. As a result, the notion of semiotic equivalence here is not only theoretically untenable but also practically unachievable.

## **B. Interpretative communities**

When looking at Arlt's oeuvre in general and his theatrical work in particular, especially if we also bear in mind the fact that Arlt was mainly engaged within the Boedo group at Barletta's Teatro del Pueblo, we cannot but place the notion of interpretative communities at the centre of this analysis. As Hale, and more recently Krebs with regard to Edwardian theatre translation,<sup>41</sup> argue: translation can be used, and frequently is used, to create new readings of texts which are at odds with not only the author's intended reading but also the readings of a work's original (source language, SL) audience. Looking closely at a particular interpretive community, or rather a 'translational community', Krebs draws attention to the collaborative interaction of a small group of theatre practitioners working for the West End stage in the early twentieth century and the manner in which that group defined translational practices and constructed a small canon of contemporary German plays within an English setting. A similar situation could be observed in Argentina in the 1940s and 1950s. Interestingly, Patricia Wilson addresses issues regarding translation practices of a

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<sup>40</sup> Meech, p. 128.

<sup>41</sup> Krebs' Doctoral Thesis 'Dissemination of Culture Through a Translational Community: German Drama in English Translation on the London West End Stage from 1900 to 1914' (University of Hull, 2002) published as *Cultural Dissemination and Translational Communities. German Drama in English Translation, 1900-1914* (Manchester: St Jerome, 2007).

particular Argentinean intellectual group in her *La constelación del Sur* [The *Sur* Constellation].<sup>42</sup> Although she does not refer to this phenomenon in the light of Krebs' concept of 'translational community', Wilson thoroughly describes how during these decades publishing houses such as *Sur* (notably led by the pen of celebrated figurers such as Borges, Silvina Ocampo and José Bianco) shaped the European and North American influx of literature creating a canon not only for the Argentine but also for the rest of the South American readership.

Although Krebs' argument relates to German drama in the West End, by analogy, various insights may be applicable to the Argentine situation. In scrutinising the Teatro del Pueblo, Lury's concept of lifestyle could prove useful as lifestyle is part of a group's attempt to differentiate themselves from other groups in "a struggle over social positioning." In this sense, lifestyle is the common denominator of this movement. As Krebs points out, "[a]s a group of theatre practitioners their work in and around the theatre is an attempt to differentiate themselves from the status quo of the theatre landscape and change the role and function of theatre."<sup>43</sup> Crucially, another point the Teatro del Pueblo has in common with Krebs' interpretative community of German translators is the fact that the primary aim of the translations conducted by these communities was not publication but performance.

In this respect, it is difficult not to evaluate how analogous the role of translator and playwright is, how similar their status, how marginal and ultimately invisible they both have been. In Argentina, as in Britain, the theatrical experience is largely controlled, as we have seen, by a director rather than a playwright or, indeed, a translator. In fact, the status of the latter is often so questionable that the role can almost entirely be unacknowledged. As in the British system, there is not even any form of power sharing arrangement. The play bears the authorial signature of the director as much as that of the playwright. In any event, the presence of either the playwright or the translator is not demanded at the rehearsal stage (though in other cultures, where the role of the dramaturg is more clearly established, the author/translator is represented by proxy). The expendability of the

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<sup>42</sup> Literally 'Sur' means 'South'; here Wilson is referring to the literati associated with the avant-garde magazine *Sur*. Wilson looks at how the works of William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Jean Genet, and Graham Greene, amongst others, were 'filtered' by this group of elitist writers and translators who foreignized the works and created authoritative versions, both aesthetically and ideologically, for the South American reader. (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores Argentina, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Krebs 2002, p. 66.

translator is manifest in other ways, too. You can make do without a formally accredited translator (though the practice may be extremely questionable, numerous productions are cobbled together from a hotchpotch of existing translations without any form of accreditation – though those guilty of such practices are reluctant to draw attention to the fact), but never without actors, the director, lighting and sound technicians, and so on. On this basis, the claims of some schools of thought, notably the Prague School, simply fail to recognise the reality of the power dynamics that exists within the British (and other) theatre.

Such a situation also occurs within a South American context, not least because of the linguistic proficiency of South American theatre practitioners, including actors and actresses, typified by names such as China Zorrilla.<sup>44</sup> Although born in Uruguay, Zorrilla is a household name in Argentina. When asked about how she herself interacted with the other actors, the director, and the translator of the foreign plays in which she has played a role (let us note in passing that Romance languages emphasize the role of the actor by talking of his or her ‘interpretation’), she remarked, in her usual humorous and matter of fact manner, that in her experience, she could not remember ever having come into contact with such a person as a translator.<sup>45</sup> What the company tended to do, she continued – and here she refers in particular to the production staged by herself and her Uruguayan compatriot Carlos Perciavalle, in the mid 1980s, of Mark Twain’s 1903 *The Diary of Adam*, which they translated themselves and adapted into the musical *El diario privado de Adán y Eva* [The Private Diary of Adam and Eve]<sup>46</sup> – was enter into rehearsals on the basis of a ‘literal’ that was usually produced by the director and/or the various actors and actresses involved in the production on a collective basis. This literal would then be worked up later by the director, who would alter and adapt it to suit his own cultural, aesthetic and ideological agenda. In a case such as that of Zorrilla, the desire of a member of the cast to be involved at an early stage in the framing of the overall production, including the ‘translation’, perhaps

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<sup>44</sup> Born in Montevideo, March 1922, Zorrilla lived in Paris due to her father’s work. Zorrilla lived and worked in London, Cannes (covering the Festival for the Uruguayan *El País* newspaper) and New York where she taught French in a French school and worked in a drama school (notably with actors such as Dustin Hoffman). In 1971, after appearing in *Un guapo del 900* (Argentina 1971, dir. Lautaro Murúa), Zorrilla moved to Buenos Aires where she still lives.

<sup>45</sup> Personal communication with the present writer. Buenos Aires, December 2000.

<sup>46</sup> During October 2009, Zorrilla’s and Perciavalle’s *El diario privado de Adán y Eva* toured Argentina. In this version, the 87 year old Zorrilla (who was to undergo hip surgery) was confined to a chair from where she sang and acted her parts.

suggests a desire to mould a particular part to the actor's strengths. Also important is the fact that Zorrilla's notorious career and experience in the theatre has secured her authoritative credentials to, if not to take hand-on part, at least have a say in some production decisions.

Arguably, in the Argentine theatre, the translation is no more than a common property, often undertaken collectively, and subject to any number of permutations. The 'literal' (indeed a first draft of the translation) is intended as no more than a 'neutral text', that is a text lacking in ideological colour, either that of the source or the target culture, which provides no more than a blank canvas on which the director can superimpose his new interpretation. In such a context, the translational concept of 'domestication' hardly has any meaning either, since the recontextualisation performed by the director might equally apply, as in the case of Arlt, to a locally produced ST, as to a translated ST.

Indeed, as part of that 'community of interest' (where the members of a community have certain characteristics in common as well as similarities and agreements, be they cultural, ideological or aesthetic) and, in fact, as a dramaturg, Arlt played an equally "marginal" role in the staging of his own plays as that usually played by a translator. Mirta Arlt comments on the fact that, sometimes, as a part of the Teatro del Pueblo movement, Arlt was forced to compromise both his aesthetic and ideological agenda to fit in with that of the Teatro, that is, his interpretative community. At times, those compromises were merely driven by the meagre budget with which the Teatro operated: "[e]n principio su objetivo fue manifestar sus problemas, inquietudes y opiniones apelando a recursos espectaculares y deslumbrantes que... hipnotizaran al espectador. Era difícil alcanzarlo en un teatro de verdad pobre como era el Teatro del Pueblo."<sup>47</sup> At other times, however, Arlt's artistic and, perhaps particularly, ideological imprint was subjugated by the overriding power of the Director. "En esa noche fría de octubre del 36" [In that 1936 Cold, October Night] Mirta Arlt goes on to comment that

Arlt supo, dolorido, que a *Saverio el cruel* le aguardaba el retorno a las exigencias del Teatro del Pueblo, que en efecto impuso la situación del primer acto, con personajes de la burguesía frívola, inescrupulosa e irresponsable, en lugar de la celebración de un

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<sup>47</sup> "[H]is main objective was to express his troubles, concerns, and views resorting to spectacular and dazzling effects which ... would mesmerize the spectator. This was difficult to achieve in a truly poor theatre such as the Teatro del Pueblo." Mirta Arlt, 'La locura de la realidad en la ficción de Arlt' in *El Teatro y los días. Estudio sobre el teatro argentino e iberoamericano*, (ed) Pellettieri (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1998, pp. 13-24), p. 20.

aniversario del manicomio donde los internados eran actores y autores del evento.<sup>48</sup>

Mirta Arlt further suggests that had the author been alive when his last play, *El desierto entra en la ciudad*, was staged (1952),<sup>49</sup> it would also have undergone the usual amount of rewriting after being read and rehearsed by the director and the cast. This perhaps exemplifies how, at least in Argentine theatre, a play, as much as a 'literal', is but the common property of all, writer, translator, director and cast. It also shows how both playwright and translator may be erased from the whole process and, indeed, result invisible.

***SAVERIO, THE CRUEL***  
A three-act dramatic comedy.

***Characters***

Susana, Juan, Pedro, Julia, Luisa, Maid, Saverio, Simona, Caddie, Ernestina, Landlady, 1st Man, 2nd Man, Juana, Ernesto, Dionisia, Demetrio, Roberto, Maria, Herald.

Guests, Voices.

**FIRST ACT**

*Hall to the study. To one side, the stairs; to the front, interior door; in the foreground, windows.*

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<sup>48</sup> "Arlt came to the painful realisation that *Saverio el cruel* would have to succumb to the demands of the Teatro del Pueblo, demands that required the change in the first act, with its frivolous, unscrupulous, irresponsible bourgeois characters instead of the celebration of the anniversary of an asylum where inmates were actors and authors of the show". Mirta Arlt, p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> As we mentioned previously in chapter 4, Arlt finished this play in 1942 but did not see it staged as he died soon after.



## SCENE I

PEDRO, JULIA, SUSANA and JUAN. *They are all between 20 and 30 years of age. JULIA is embroidering.*

SUSANA. *(Abruptly breaking apart from the group and pausing by the door)* So stop here and at that point I'll say to him: But what makes you so sure that I'm Susana?

JUAN. All right. So what happens next?

SUSANA. *(Going back to her embroidery)* He should have been here by now.

PEDRO. *(Glancing at his watch)* Five o'clock.

JUAN. *(Looking at his watch)*. You're 7 minutes fast. *(To SUSANA)* This is a great hoax you've come up with.

SUSANA. *(Standing up, ironically)* Well at least none of our friends will be able to complain that they were bored this year. In fact, it'll be more like a private theatrical show than a house party.

JULIA. The whole idea is disgusting.

SUSANA. *(Indifferently)* Really? *(JULIA does not answer. To JUAN)*. No mistakes now.

JUAN. Nooo *(SUSANA, silent)*

PEDRO. Isn't he a good actor?

JULIA. *(Still looking at her embroidery)* Thank goodness the mater isn't around. She doesn't find this sort of thing very amusing

PEDRO. But the mater would see the joke in the end. She always does.

JULIA. But don't you care how the poor lad will feel when he realises you've been fooling him?

PEDRO. If he's a bright lad, he'll treat it all as a joke and say so to Susana's face.

JUAN. (*Ironically*) Well done you!

JULIA. If he's a bright lad, he probably won't be amused. Intelligent people never like to have their faces rubbed in it.

JUAN. In a way, I'm glad my aunt isn't here. She'll blame the whole damn thing on me.

JULIA. Quite right, too. You and Susana have concocted the scheme between yourselves.

PEDRO. Come on, Julia. Don't blow things out of proportion.

JUAN. You always take things too seriously, Julia. Nobody means any harm by it. Even if the milkman ends up with egg on his face, we don't exactly cover ourselves with glory either.

JULIA. I don't see why you have to be so mean to have a good time.

PEDRO. (*To JUAN*) She's quite right, it's all your fault for encouraging Susana.

JUAN. (*Pretending to be angry*) You have to credit Susana for her artistic temperament, don't you?

JULIA. Susana's artistic temperament is not the point. What I find so disgusting is this whole business of spinning a web of deceit in which to catch a perfect stranger.

JUAN. Calm down, children! That's exactly the point, Julia. There wouldn't be any fun in it if the victim knew what we had planned for him. You don't get any laughs from picking up a banana skin before somebody steps on it.

## SCENE II

LUISA *enters suddenly, dressed to go out.*

LUISA. Hello, hello, everybody. How are you, Juan? Has he arrived yet? (*She stops by PEDRO's chair*)

JULIA. We were just talking about him. (*Silence*).

LUISA. What's going on between you? It feels like a funeral parlour in here. Where's Susana?

JULIA. Don't you think this whole business is going too far?

LUISA. There you go again! Why do you always have to be the spoil-sport? It's only a bit of fun.

JULIA. I'm glad to hear you say so!

LUISA. Do you agree, Juan?

JUAN. Of course.

JULIA. If you don't watch it, that milkman will kick up a right stink.

LUISA. I just wish I had a part to play in it.

JULIA. Don't worry, you will. I'm washing my hands of the whole business. It's just downright mean.

JUAN. Come on!

JULIA. No, I'm serious! If the mater were here, I'd get her to put a stop to it right this instant. *Getting up*. I'm going. *(Silence)*

### SCENE III

LUISA, PEDRO *and* JUAN.

JUAN. What a stroke of luck, her walking out on us like that!

PEDRO. What if she's right? What if the milkman does kick up a stink?

LUISA. *(Ruffling Pedro's hair)* Don't be silly; he's only a bloody milkman. We're going to split our sides over it. Shall I play Julia's part?

PEDRO. What about your mother?

LUISA. She'll be fine.

JUAN. Fine with me. *(The phone rings. PEDRO hurries to get it)*

PEDRO (*On the phone*) Oh, is that you? No, he's not here yet. Susana is just getting dressed. Tonight. OK, see you later. (*Going back to the table*) That was Esther. She wanted to know whether the milkman had arrived.

JUAN. You see! Everybody's heard about it. (*Lowering her voice*) Just between ourselves: we're beginning to get a reputation.

LUISA We certainly are!

#### SCENE IV

*The same. Enter the MAID.*

MAID. Sr Pedro, the milkman is here.

JUAN. Have you informed Susana?

MAID. No, Sr.

JUAN (*To LUISA*) Let's see how you look in your role of concerned sister. (*To PEDRO*) And you as the doctor. (*Standing up*) Remember all of you to stay calm whatever happens. (*He leaves*)

LUISA. Eat your heart out, Greta Garbo.

PEDRO. (*To the MAID*) You can show him in now. (*Exit MAID.*)

LUISA. (*Unexpectedly*) A kiss for luck, Pedro? (*PEDRO stands up and kisses her swiftly. Then he sits down at the table pretending to look serious. LUISA tidies her hair. Enter SAVERIO. Physically, he is small and shy. His tie is not straight. He's wearing a reddish shirt and has a hang-dog look about him. Exit MAID. SAVERIO pauses at the door not knowing what to do with his hat*)

#### SCENE V

SAVERIO, LUISA and PEDRO; then SUSANA.

LUISA. (*Approaching him*) How do you do, Saverio? Allow me. (*She takes his hat and hangs it up*) Allow me to introduce myself: I am Susana's sister.

SAVERIO. (*Shyly moving his head*). Delighted, I'm sure. Where's Miss Susana?

LUISA. Do come in. I'm afraid you won't be able to see Susana. (*Indicating PEDRO*). This is Doctor Pedro.

PEDRO. (*Shaking SAVERIO's hand*) How do you do?

SAVERIO. Nice to meet you. Miss Susana asked me to call in to talk about the privatisation scheme.

PEDRO. Yes, so I was informed. You would like to become the main supplier for the local schools.

SAVERIO. Do you think I stand any chance?

LUISA. I'm sorry, Saverio. This is probably not a good time for business.

SAVERIO. (*Missing the point*) But my milk is top quality, ma'm. I can supply as much as you like. Straight from the cow: no additives nor nothing.

LUISA. The thing is...

SAVERIO. (*Interrupting*) Additives are an important issue in the dairy business. Children have very sensitive stomachs. Only last year there was a big scandal about fresh milk being mixed with returns that was past its sell-by-date.

LUISA. I'm sorry that this is such an inconvenient moment to talk about such matters. There's no easy way to say this, Saverio, but we're in the midst of a family crisis here.

SAVERIO. I'm so sorry. May I ask... I don't mean to pry....

LUISA. Of course. It's my little sister Susana...

SAVERIO. Susana? What's wrong with her?

PEDRO. Completely lost her senses. Gone totally doolally.

SAVERIO. (*Taking a breath*) Mad? But, that's impossible. I was here only yesterday and she

seemed as sane as you or I.

LUISA. Well, you know how it is. These things can happen to anyone.

SAVERIO. But it's so unexpected.

PEDRO. Well, see for yourself. There she is, staring into the garden.

*Through the door Susana can be seen, her back to the audience, looking out into the garden.*

PEDRO. Let's watch her. We can all hide here.

PEDRO, SUSANA *and* SAVERIO *hide*. SUSANA *turns round. She is down stage, her hair loose on her shoulders, dressed in men's clothes. She walks fearfully, moving her hands as if she was pushing aside lianas and branches.*

SUSANA. (*With melancholy*) These bearded trees clad in silence. (*Stooping to the floor and examining it*) Their shadows seem a canopy most fatal. No trace of mortal man. (*Raising her arms and in a ringing tone*) Oh ye Gods! Why have you abandoned me? Fiends of hell, why dost thou haunt me? I wander defenceless in this green Inferno. Fate! Wouldst thou pity me? I sleep defenceless in this hostile place.

*Drums are heard.*

... The drums, the drums! Always the sinister beat of the soldiers' drums. Where is my body-guard? Gone, gone, since I left the palace. (*Holding her head*) It's so heavy... this poor head of mine. Little song-bird (*looking around sadly*)! Why dost thou look at me like that? Dost thou pity me? The falling dew is cold and chill, And no bird sings in Arcady. How can my misfortune harm you? (*In desperation.*) Peace, peace! Have pity on me! If you can command these elements to silence! Every animal in God's kingdom has a sanctuary where

it can rest its tired head! Everybody but me, the fugitive of injustice, the victim of a tyrannical Colonel.

*The drums are heard again, though more distant.*

(SUSANA surveys the landscape.) They are trying to trick me. A tree! But could I climb high enough? I would tear my hands. (*She pretends to be touching a trunk*) How rough is the bark. (*She drops to the ground, her back leaning against one of the legs of a garden table.*) Nameless, unspeakable fears crowding in on me! Who will show pity to an unknown outlaw, chaste and pure as I am. Even the wild beasts seem to understand that. They respect my virtue. (*She stands up*) Get a grip on yourself, girl! There's no cave the Colonel's soldiers have not searched. (*She pretends to lift a shrub*) Three nights I have slept in the jungle (*she holds her aching foot*), if we could call such a state sleep: exhaustion, rather, disturbed time and again by the roaring of the beasts of the jungle, the whistling of snakes that drive even the moon mad? (*Taking her hands to her aching head*) Oh, when will this torture end!

## SCENE VI

JUAN and SUSANA

JUAN (*enters, dressed casually, and put his hand on SUSANA's shoulder*) Shhhh! Everything's all right, Susana.

SUSANA. (*With a violent start*) Susana? Who's Susana? And who are you?

JUAN. Let's sit down. (*He points out a chair*) The logs will do for a seat...

SUSANA. For God's sake, answer me! Who are you? What do you want?

JUAN (*Hesitating, as if he'd forgotten his part*) Sorry... I've just realised that you are a woman – a woman dressed as a man.

SUSANA. But why did you call me Susana?

JUAN. Did I call you Susana? You must be mistaken. Why should I have called you Susana?

SUSANA (*Sarcastically*) So... you work for the Colonel too?

JUAN. (*Pretending surprise*) The Colonel? What Colonel?

SUSANA. (*Placing her hand on her bosom*) That's a relief!. I can see you don't know the cause of my fear. (*Smiling*) What a fool I am! I should have realised from your leather chaps! You must be the local shepherd.

JUAN. Yes, yes... I am the shepherd.

SUSANA. You don't look much like a shepherd, not the sort you see in the engravings. Where is your crook and your flute?

JUAN. Now is not the time for playing the flute.

SUSANA. (*Standing and looking him up and down*). You're not bad looking, you know. You remind me of Tarzan (*To herself*) Well built. (*Shakes her head sadly*) You'd better go back to the woods where you came from.

JUAN. I don't see any need to.

SUSANA. (*Tragically*) I've just had the most dreadful vision. (*Prophetically*) I see you lying on the marble steps of my palace, with seven swords thrust through your heart.

JUAN. (*Hitting his biceps boastfully*) Seven swords, did you say, miss? Just let them try! Anybody who comes after me, I'll knock them down.

SUSANA. That's the spirit! You super-heroes have such a way with words. (*Serious*) Poor young man. Could you hide me in your cabin in the woods for a few days?

JUAN. My cabin in the woods? But you'd hate it there. It's much too simple for a fine lady like yourself.

SUSANA. Don't you worry. I won't disturb you. I need to do some serious thinking. (*Sitting down*) I'm so tired... My life is such a mess these days. (*To herself*) Everything around me seems like a dream. Tell me, are you married?

JUAN. No, ma'm.



SUSANA. Any lady friends?

JUAN. Ma'm, I am a gentleman!

SUSANA. I am glad to hear it (*She paces to and fro*). That simplifies the question. Women upset everything. Let me look into your eyes. (*She leans to him*) You're smiling. Yet, I see a trace of fear at the back of your eyes. (*Sarcastically*) You're not sure which side you're on, are you?

JUAN. Please, Susana!

SUSANA There you are... You did it again...Who is this Susana? A girlfriend?

JUAN. (*Hesitating*) I'm sorry. My mistake. It's just you remind me of a shepherdess who used to live round here. Her name was Susana.

SUSANA. Shhhhh! One of the Colonel's spies might be listening?

JUAN. We would have heard the dogs.

SUSANA. Can you keep a secret?

JUAN. Of course, ma'm.

SUSANA. (*Shaking her head in desperation*) Better not... helping me would be to sign your own death warrant. I am a monster dressed up as a mermaid. Listen to me my dear shepherd, and whoever is out there spying on me, run away from here. Get away while there's still time.

JUAN. (*Beating his biceps.*) Let them come! I'll ram their teeth down their throats!

SUSANA. I doubt it. You have a noble soul. Childish. (*She paces undecided stopping before him*) Your eyes don't lie. The smoothness of your brow testifies to your innocence. You're not one to go out looking for trouble, are you, or getting innocent people caught up in your mess?

JUAN. (*Stammering*) Of course not, ma'am. I am an honest man.

SUSANA. And no girlfriend. Perfect. Do you know who I am?

JUAN. Not yet, ma'am.

SUSANA. Hold on tight, this will surprise you.

JUAN. I'm all ears. Nothing you say could surprise me.

SUSANA. It will. I am Queen Bragatiana.

JUAN. The queen? Dressed as a man? Alone in the woods?

SUSANA. Quite a surprise, isn't it.

JUAN. It certainly is.

SUSANA. So I imagine, my dear shepherd. It's not every day that a shepherd runs into a dethroned queen.

JUAN. I'm honoured.

SUSANA. Can you now understand the extent of the disgrace?

JUAN. Your Majesty! I see but I cannot believe.

SUSANA. You call me majesty. Am I dreaming? What a pleasure! It's been so long since last I heard the word!

JUAN. (*Kneeling down*) Your Majesty, allow me to kiss your hand.

SUSANA *gives it to him making an exaggerated gesture of pleasure.*

SUSANA. (*Emphatically*) Shepherd, I demand to reward you for the pleasure you have given me. I hereby confer on you the rank and title of count.

JUAN. (*Reverently*) Your Majesty, your obedient servant.

SUSANA. I will call you the Count of the Flowering Tree, because your soul is like a fragrant tree. All those who shelter under your shade become impregnated with your perfume.

JUAN. I am touched by your praises, Your Majesty. I am speechless at your misfortune.

SUSANA. (*Melancholic*) My dilemma perplexes you, doesn't it? When I see myself reflected in the silvery mirror of a bubbling stream in the clumsy garb of a tramp I cannot help but

wonder: how can it be possible that a queen born and bred should be compelled to beg for mercy in the woods, a fugitive from a revolution plotted by a rebel Colonel and a party of agitated shop-keepers?

JUAN. Then it is all the fault of the Colonel?

SUSANA (*Angrily*) And the shop-keepers, Count, don't forget the shop-keepers. This revolution is not the people's revolution, but a conspiracy of grocers and market-traders who proclaim that men are descended from the apes mixed in with a couple of Spaniards with large overdrafts. You don't understand politics, but let me tell even my loyalist friends had to kowtow to their claptrap. Even as we speak they are awaiting my return. In order to save my life, I was forced to flee, dressed in a maid's uniform and dragged down an underground passage like a hunted vixen.

JUAN. Enough to terrify the wife of a coal-heaver let alone an innocent young girl.

SUSANA. How can I describe my escape, Count? A thousand times my virtue was imperilled. What lies and sophistries I was obliged to spin.

JUAN. But Majesty, you did escape unscathed?

SUSANA. Fortunately, I was protected by the Virgin Mary. I had a small print of her about my person. (*She takes it from her bosom and kisses it. Changing her tone of voice.*) How would you like to...?

JUAN. How would you like to... what? Majesty?

SUSANA. How would you like to cut off the Colonel's head?

JUAN. (*Taken by surprise*) Cut off the Colonel's head? But what's he done to me?

SUSANA. (*Letting her head fall, discouraged*) I knew I couldn't trust you. I thought: the Count will go straight to the Dragon's cave and with his sword will sever the head of the wicked Colonel from his body. We shall celebrate a "Colonelicide" in the Palace. I can picture it now. You are striding forward along a path of roses... bearing a shiny tray of gold on which the Colonel's dishevelled head oozes blood and gore. Can you imagine the sheer beauty of such a scene, shepherd? The most delightful of my ladies-in-waiting will run to greet you. Hark! The violins are striking up. A hundred heralds proclaim your arrival on silver trumpets: the Count of the Flowering Tree. The sheer beauty of it!

JUAN. Oh, if it's all a matter of trust and aesthetics, there's no earthly reason why I shouldn't chop off the Colonel's head.

SUSANA. That's more like it!

JUAN. (*Naively*) The Colonel won't be very pleased though, will he?

SUSANA. Don't be silly, Count! Nobody likes having their head severed from their body.

JUAN. Couldn't we just try to reason with him? It's good to talk.

SUSANA. Such youthful naiveté! It's quite obvious to me that you've spent the best years of your life tending the sheep-dip. Even a mule would be more amenable to reason.

JUAN. Is he so difficult?

SUSANA. Impossible! People say he's got the heart of a lion, the brains of a donkey! (*The drums are heard again*) Listen! What's that?

JUAN. The drums again.

SUSANA. The soldiers are searching for me. We must be away, Count.

JUAN. My cabin is this way, Majesty. They'll never find us there. (*Both exit.*)

## SCENE VII

SAVERIO, LUISA, and PEDRO enter slowly, then JUAN.

LUISA. It breaks your heart just to hear her! What a loss! She really does think she's in the jungle.

*They sit round the table.*

PEDRO. It's actually more common than you think, miss.

SAVERIO. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it. (*Staring at them*)

I swear I wouldn't believe it. (*Naively to PEDRO*) Tell me doctor, the man who was playing

the part of the shepherd – the Count – is he mad as well?

PEDRO. No; he is one of Susana's cousins. He only agreed to take part because we're still trying to decide the best way to treat her.

SAVERIO. Oh! That's clever.

LUISA. You can tell a lot from what someone with a disturbed mind is saying.

SAVERIO. There's something frightening about madness even if you're perfectly sane. (*Pensive*) She's really determined to chop off the General's head.

LUISA. Can I go and see Susana now.

PEDRO. It's not advisable, miss. She's with Juan at the moment and his presence has a calming effect on her.

SAVERIO. Do you think that kind of insanity can be cured, doctor?

PEDRO. It's too early to say. But I do have a plan I'd like to try. It's been known to work in the past. It involves recreating the patient's imaginary world. In this case, the kingdom she thinks she's lost.

SAVERIO. Is that possible?

LUISA. Oh, yes. We're going to stage the entire royal court. Most of Susana's friends have already promised to take part.

*JUAN comes in wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.*

JUAN. How did I do?

LUISA. (*together*) Very good.

JUAN. (*Looking to Saverio*) Mr...

LUISA. Let me introduce you to Mr. Saverio, our dairy provider...

SAVERIO. Pleased to meet you.

JUAN. My pleasure. (*Sitting down, to LUISA*) I was all right, wasn't I?

PEDRO. There were a few difficult moments. Now Juan, what we need to do is find someone who could play the part of the Colonel.

SAVERIO. What exactly is the point of acting out this farce, doctor?

PEDRO. In a nutshell: Susana's obsession revolves round cutting off a head. It constitutes the leitmotiv of her wandering thoughts. Our intention is to make Susana think that she has actually witnessed the scene of Juan cutting off the Colonel's head. The shock the patient will get by seeing such a violent act should frighten her out of her delirium.

SAVERIO. But nobody is going to agree to having their head cut off even to cure Susana.

PEDRO. We'll get a head from a hospital morgue.

SAVERIO. God Almighty! How macabre!

JUAN. No, no. We can't do that. It too unhygienic. You never know what diseases these heads are harbouring.

SAVERIO. Just think what would happen if the family got to hear about it and came to claim it back before we'd finished with it. It could be really awkward.

PEDRO. What if we used a wax head and some dye?

LUISA. That's it, doctor. A waxwork will do just as well.

PEDRO. As a doctor, I would be inclined to use a real human head. It would be much more realistic. In the circumstances... We can make do with a wax one.

SAVERIO. Do you know what brought on her insanity?

PEDRO. Not really. Too much reading, perhaps. An anaemic trauma of the brain?

SAVERIO. Have her periods been regular?

PEDRO. (*Serious*) To the best of my knowledge. (*LUISA covers her mouth with a handkerchief*)

SAVERIO. Begging your pardon doctor, but speaking as a layman it seems to me that there's nothing better for someone suffering from a weak constitution than a balanced diet – one

based on dairy products, that is. In my experience...

PEDRO. There is nothing wrong with Miss Susana's general health – her problems are purely mental.

SAVERIO. Butter, for instance, is very good for the brain, doctor. However, eating adulterated butter can give rise to all manner of...

JUAN. Saverio, this really hasn't anything to do with butter...

SAVERIO. (*Emphatic*) Butter strengthens the nervous system, tones the muscles, and aids digestion...

PEDRO. I'm sure butter is very good for you, but...

SAVERIO. (*Imperturbable*) The civilisation of a country is measured by their annual consumption of butter.

LUISA. The thing is...

JUAN. For goodness sake, can we stop talking about butter! What we want to know is if we can count on you to play the part of the Colonel in our farce. We'd pay you of course.

SAVERIO. (*Surprised*) Me... play a Colonel? But I don't like the military.

PEDRO. You'd only have to be a pretend Colonel like in a comedy at the theatre. That's all.

SAVERIO. A comedy? What for? Wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity to try a butter-based treatment? I can provide you with gallons of the stuff. Completely pure, no additives of any kind. Not even much whey in it.

PEDRO. Come on, Saverio. Can we drop the subject of butter. Believe me: you can't treat madness with solidified dairy fat.

SAVERIO. With the greatest respect, doctor, there's nothing make-believe about butter. The world might be an illusion, but...

LUISA. Frankly, Susana never much cared for butter.

JUAN. Actually, butter used to make her sick.

PEDRO. She detested butter.

SAVERIO. (*Triumphant, rubbing his hands*) Ha! Ha! Now we're getting down to the nitty-gritty. Everything's clear now! Miss Susana's body is deficient in vitamins A and D, both typically provided in a healthy diet by good butter.

LUISA. Are you obsessed with butter, Saverio!

SAVERIO. (*Imperturbable*) Statistics don't lie, miss. Listen to me for a moment. While the average inhabitant of Argentina consumes less than two kilos of butter per annum, the typical New Zealander packs away sixteen kilos. As for the Americans, irrespective of age, race and gender, they consume thirteen kilos per year...

LUISA. Mr. Saverio, please, drop it! Even the thought of those butter mountains makes me want to throw up.

SAVERIO. As you like. (*Sitting down*) I was only trying to be useful.

PEDRO. If you really want to help us, why not accept our little proposition?

LUISA. (*Suggestively*) It's not much to ask, Mr Saverio, is it?

SAVERIO. The thing is, miss, I'm not an actor. Besides, I've never liked Colonels.

JUAN. Don't you think Susana's health is worth the sacrifice?

LUISA. I'd do it myself, Saverio.

PEDRO. It's almost a humanitarian act.

JUAN. Don't forget that my cousin's family is, in a sense, your benefactor.

LUISA. We have been buying dairy from you for a long time now. We might not be in the same league as the New Zealanders...

SAVERIO. What about my round? If I spend all my time playing at being a Colonel, I'll lose all my clients. I've put so much effort into persuading them as to the benefits of a balanced diet based on eating ...

PEDRO. Butter!

SAVERIO. How did you guess?.

JUAN. You don't need to give up your day job, Saverio. A few rehearsals in the evening



would be more than enough.

SAVERIO. And how long will the comedy last?

PEDRO. It won't last long. We've got to catch the patient at her most delirious. Your part will be just one scene... Just the scene of the, er, beheading.

SAVERIO. I'm not running any risk, am I?

LUISA. No risk whatsoever, Saverio.

SAVERIO. (*Half-convinced*) I don't know.... You're putting me in a difficult...

LUISA. Not at all, Saverio, not at all. You are accepting out of the goodness of your heart.

PEDRO. We were counting on you.

SAVERIO. Well...

JUAN. You're a real good sport.

PEDRO. We can get the Colonel's uniform from a costumiers.

LUISA What about the sword? Oh, I can already picture it in my head.

SAVERIO. Me, too. (*Rubbing his hands*). Do you think I've got the makings of a good actor?

PEDRO. How can you ask? You have the body of a natural.

JUAN. This side, his profile reminds me of Moisi.

LUISA. Would you like to stay for tea, Saverio?

SAVERIO. (*Glancing at his watch*) Thank you, but I'm already late. I should be at the wholesaler's by now.

JUAN. Could I bring the uniform round to your home?

SAVERIO. This is my address (*He writes on a card, to PEDRO*). Don't forget to put a good word in for me with the catering manager at the hospital.

PEDRO. Of couse.

SAVERIO. Miss Luisa, it's been a pleasure.

LUISA. (*Walking him to the door*) Thank you very much, Saverio. I will get a friend to come with me to the rehearsals. It's as if you were one of the family.

SAVERIO. (*With his back to JUAN and PEDRO, while they shake their heads*) I don't know what to say, miss. See you soon. (*He goes out; LUISA lifts her arms.*)

### SCENE VIII

*The same, except SAVERIO, then SUSANA.*

LUISA. What an angel! An angel in the shape of a tradesman.

JUAN. (*Shouting*) Susana, Susana, he's gone. You can come in.

SUSANA. (*Entering triumphantly*) How did I do? Did he fall for it?

PEDRO. Great! What an actress you are!

LUISA. I had to sit on my hands to stop myself from clapping.

SUSANA. So he's fallen for it, hook, line and sinker, has he?

JUAN. Not exactly. What I really enjoyed about your performance was the sense of improvisation. You shift from humour to tragedy, just like that.

LUISA. (*Gladly pensively*) Susana! You were wonderful! There was one moment when I had my heart right in my mouth.

PEDRO. This is going to be a right laugh!

JUAN. We'll have everybody round.

LUISA. No doubt about it.

SUSANA. (*Absently*) Oh, this is going to be such a joke.

*The three of them stare at her for a minute in admiration, while she, lost in thought, looks away with her hands resting on the edge of the table.*

**CURTAIN**

## SECOND ACT

### SCENE I

*A bare room. SAVERIO, dressed in the fantastical uniform of a colonel of a Centro American pseudo-republic, faces the unmade bed. On the table, a chair. Both, table and chair are covered by a scarlet bedspread. The colonel's sword is stuck into the table. SAVERIO looks into the mirror.*

SAVERIO. *(Climbing on to the throne on the table, he suddenly points with his finger while clutching the sword)* Out of my sight, you dogs! *(Looking to one side)* Shoot them down, General. That'll teach them some respect. *(Smiling unctuously)* My dear Minister, I'm sure this minor altercation might easily be subsumed under the responsibilities of the League of the Nations *(Charmingly, standing up)* I am most obliged by the honour of your favours, my charming marquesa. *(Resuming his normal voice, sitting down)* Good God! What a line! *(Grave and confidential)* Your Highness, these are distressing times for prudent rulers such as ourselves. Could not the Holy Father oblige the clergy to attend to the indoctrination of the lower orders? *(With passion, standing again)* My dear madam, I assure you that the ruler is but a colonel, the colonel is but a man, and that the man is in love with you. *(In a more vulgar tone, sitting down)* Well they wanted an actor, and I'll be damned if they are getting one!

### SCENE II

SAVERIO and SIMONA.

SIMONA. *(From outside)* Can I come in?

SAVERIO. *(Shouting)* Come in!

SIMONA. *(From outside)* Excuse me...

SAVERIO. *(shouting)* Come on in!

*Simona enters, with a tray of coffee in hand, and stops in her tracks, pressing the tray against her chest.*

SIMONA. My goodness! Look at the state of those sheets and the bedspread!

SAVERIO. (*commandingly*) Simona, I've been given the red carpet treatment here.

SIMONA. (*standing in the middle of the room*) And people call me bad-tempered, a harridan, and a shrew! Just look at the state of those sheets. What on earth do you think you're doing!

SAVERIO Simona, kindly show some respect to a son of Mars.

SIMONA. Mars, Venus, whatever! You don't have to wear yourself out washing them. (*Amazed*) And what's that sword doing stuck in the table like that? Just you wait till the landlady sees it! Have you gone mad?

SAVERIO (*lighting a cigarette*) Simona, you are an affront to my dignity as a Colonel.

SIMONA. (*putting the tray on the table and adding some sugar. Sadly*) At this rate I'll end my days taking oranges to one of the tenants who was put away in an asylum after he went barking!

SAVERIO Do you know who you're talking to, Simona!

SIMONA. (*passing him the coffee*) Fancy giving up a regular job for all this nonsense!

SAVERIO (*getting exited*) Do stop preaching! Do you know what the Americans say? (*pronouncing carefully*) "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth." Do you know what that means? (*SIMONA says nothing*) Not a clue! Well listen here you illiterate peasant, it means you've got to make the most of your opportunities. Do you remember that fox-trot which had the line: "I never stood a chance." (*He moderates his tone*) And do you remember who it was moaning that he'd never stood a chance? A young man who'd been born in the United States of America with every possible advantage. (*He becomes grave*) Well, I have been given that chance, Simona, and I intend to make the most of it.

SIMONA. You may be an expert on foreign affairs, but that clownish colonel role of yours

will do you more harm than good.

SAVERIO. Don't be so naive, Simona.

SIMONA. Just don't come running to me when it all goes wrong.

SAVERIO. (*Impatiently*) You're completely in the dark about politics, aren't you? You win power for a fortnight but it takes them twenty years to get rid of you.

SIMONA. (*Rubbing her eyes with her apron*) You must be barking! You're completely out of your mind.

SAVERIO. (*with authority*) Simona...

SIMONA. (*wiping off her eyes*) What, sir?

SAVERIO. (*lowering the tone*) Simona, have I ever called you stupid?

SIMONA. (*moved*) No, sir.

SAVERIO. You're an intelligent woman.

SIMONA. Thank you, sir.

SAVERIO. But there's always a but... (*Grandiosely*) History is made up of accidental events which assume a universal significance. Unfortunately, you, a chamber maid, lack the basic elements necessary to turn yourself into such a universal significance .

SIMONA. (*to herself*) What is he going on about?

SAVERIO. Let's face it, Simona, politics is not exactly your strongest suit, is it? You lack that sense of opportunism which, in the blink of an eye, can transform a total unknown into a leading statesman.

SIMONA. Mr Saverio, you sound just like one of those men selling snake grease in the marketplace, but...

SAVERIO. I am talking like a populist leader, Simona.

SIMONA. You're too ambitious, Mr Saverio. Remember the old days (*To herself*) I remember them! You used to walk so much, that when you took off your shoes we had to hold our breath. Your room smelled like a cesspit.

SAVERIO. (*angrily*) You poor innocent! If Mussolini had followed your advice he'd still be laying paving stones in Switzerland and Hitler would still be scribbling poetry in a Munich beer-keller.

SIMONA. Not everyone is invited to sit at high-table, Sr.

*A voice calling for SIMONA can be heard off-stage. Exit SIMONA.. SAVERIO comes down from the throne and sits on the edge of the bed.*

SAVERIO. To hell with women! (*lights dimmed*)

### SCENE III

*For a minute, Saverio seems to be daydreaming. Suddenly, an arms-dealer approaches him. The latter demonstrates that he is a figure of fantasy by wearing a skull mask. He is dressed in golfing clothes, baggy trousers and a checked cap. Behind him, the caddie, a bag of clubs on his back.*

SAVERIO. (*sitting up*) Who are you? What do you want?

IRVING. Your Excellency, I was just about to play a few holes with the Reverend Johnson, who is a member of the Evangelic Congress, when I suddenly said to myself: Let's mix business with pleasure. Irving Essel is the name (*handing him one of his cards*), I represent Armstrong Nobel Dynamite.

SAVERIO. Oh, so you are an arms-dealer?

IRVING. (*Extracting a cigar and offering it to SAVERIO*) Our civilising mission reaches to every corner of the planet. Armstrong Power Plants, Excellency, offer assistance to fifty-two nations. Our illustrated catalogue (I'm sorry, I haven't got one with me right now) includes every single weapon of war, known and unknown, from the automatic pistol to the

Superdreadnought.

SAVERIO. You couldn't have called at a better time. I happened to require some weapons... Tell me (*he smoothes down his moustache*) what credit facilities do you offer?

IRVING. Now that, in the words of Lloyd George, we have hanged the pacifists very high and with a very short rope, we are able to provide a limited range of credit facilities.

SAVERIO. What brings you here now?

IRVING. It is a principle of ours, Excellency, to visit every Head of State at the outset of their career. It goes without saying that we enjoy especially cordial relations with generals and admirals. We could provide you with references, if you like.

SAVERIO. Between gentlemen, there's no need.

IRVING. (*rubbing his hands together*) Indeed, as you say, between gentlemen there is no need for that (*Clears his throat*) Alas, gentlemen also need to earn a living. On that basis I would like to inform you that if your country had the misfortune or the good luck to become involved in a conflict with a neighbouring state, we would be delighted to offer you a ten per cent discount on any weapons purchased, five per cent to the ministers and generals and one per cent to the quality papers.

SAVERIO. A mere bagatelle.

IRVING. Exactly, Excellency; I can see we understand one another. As my great friend the Reverend Johnson says, human nature is so fragile that the only way of luring it to the path of virtue and duty is by keeping it sweet.

SAVERIO. Ha, ha! Mr. Irving. I see that you are a philosopher.

IRVING. The pleasure is all mine, Excellency. (*He turns as he leaves*) May I recommend one of our new chemical product to you: the Violet Cross Gas. The man who invented it has just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Good-bye for now, Excellency.

SAVERIO. Without a shadow of doubt, the English are the most cynical on the face of the earth. (*A knock on the door, the lights go up*)

#### SCENE IV



ENTER PEDRO, LUISA *and* ERNESTINA, *a lady in her twenties.* .

PEDRO. Good afternoon, my friend.

SAVERIO. Good afternoon, doctor.

LUISA. You look wonderful, Saverio. This is my friend Ernestina.

SAVERIO. (*shaking her hand*) Pleased to meet you.

PEDRO. How dignified you look in uniform! Let me see you, turn round. (*Saverio turns round slowly*)

ERNESTINA. The very latest fashion.

PEDRO. It gives him such a military air...

LUISA. You look so elegant.... The minute you step outside you'll have all the girls at your feet on Florida.

SAVERIO. Don't....

LUISA. (*rascally*) Don't be so modest, Saverio. (*To ERNESTINA*) Doesn't he look just like Chevalier in the "Parade of Love"?

ERNESTINA. That's true; Saverio, you look just like Lionel Barrymore when he was young.

SAVERIO. How amazing.

LUISA. Hasn't your girlfriend seen you dressed in uniform?

SAVERIO. (*clumsily*) I don't have a girlfriend, miss...

ERNESTINA. You must be a married man then with children...

PEDRO. (*looking at the catafalque SAVERIO has set up*) What's that?

SAVERIO. That's my throne for the rehearsal.

PEDRO. (*concerned*) Remarkable...

LUISA. What a genius, splendid! Didn't I tell you, Ernestina? This man is just what we need.

*(Exaggerating)* Saverio, we would have been lost without you?

PEDRO. You've got everything under control, haven't you?

SAVERIO. *(seeing that LUISA and ERNESTINA are looking around)* Let me get some chairs, excuse me. *(He leaves)*

ERNESTINA. He's raving, isn't he?

PEDRO. Poor bloke, but don't rag him so unmercifully, he'll put two and two together.  
*(SAVERIO comes back with three chairs)*

LUISA. You didn't have to.

SAVERIO. That's OK.

ERNESTINA. Thank you very much. Mr Saverio, may I ask you ... Do you find it very difficult to get into your role as the Colonel?

LUISA. *(To PEDRO)* I wouldn't have missed this performance for anything.

SAVERIO. *(To ERNESTINA)* It's just a question of getting into the character, miss. Nowadays we have seen so many men start from nothing and become great that it comes as no surprise that I'm now beginning to enjoy getting into the skin of a colonel.

PEDRO. You see how right I was when I asked you for help, Saverio?

LUISA. And you were saying you were anti-militarist...

PEDRO. As with everything... It's just a question of effort...

LUISA. And what were you doing when we arrived...?

SAVERIO. Rehearsing.

LUISA. *(shaking her hands as a spoilt child)* Why don't you rehearse now, Saverio?

ERNESTINA. Oh, yes Mr Saverio, rehearse.

SAVERIO. Well, the thing is...

PEDRO. If it's convenient, Saverio. Six eyes are better than two. Speaking as a doctor...

LUISA. That's true. Please, please, Saverio.

ERNESTINA. You will rehearse, Saverio, won't you?

PEDRO. We could correct your mistakes.

LUISA. Improvised scenes are never good.

SAVERIO. (*To PEDRO*) Do you think so?

PEDRO. I do...

SAVERIO. (*climbing to the throne*) How is Miss Susana coming along?

LUISA. The attacks are less intense than before but very frequent...

PEDRO. It's the other way round, Saverio... The attacks come less frequently, but are very intense...

SAVERIO. And do you really think she'll ever be cured?

PEDRO. I have every hope that this farce will restore her to her senses.

SAVERIO. And if she does not get better, you've nothing to worry about. She may as well share the throne with a Colonel.

PEDRO. Saverio, don't say that...

SAVERIO. Why not? You know political contingencies can make marriages that at first sight seem impossible.

LUISA. Saverio... don't say that... Remember! It's my sister you're talking about...

ERNESTINA. Here is the sword, Saverio.

SAVERIO. Do I need it?

PEDRO. 'Course you do, it's part of your character. (SAVERIO *leans the sword on the table and stands still gravely*)

SAVERIO. Am I OK like this?

LUISA. (*biting her handkerchief*) Brilliant! Just like one of our great leaders!

PEDRO. The sword, push it away from your body. You'll look more valiant like that.

SAVERIO. How's this?

ERNESTINA. Perfect.

PEDRO. Breathe in, Saverio. Colonels always look martial.

SAVERIO. *(standing straight, but without over doing it)* I shall imagine I am here in the throne-room turning away my politic enemies: *(louder)* "Go away, you bastards".

ERNESTINA. *(splitting her sides laughing)* We can't hear you. Louder, Saverio, louder.

PEDRO. Yes, put some more passion into it.

SAVERIO. *(wielding the sword energetically)* piss off, you bastards...

## SCENE V

*Suddenly, a door opens and, with all the authority of a policeman, the landlady stops in the middle of the room*

LANDLADY. What do you think you're doing in my house? Look at the state of that bedspread.

SAVERIO. Kindly do not disturb us, madam, I'm rehearsing.

PEDRO. I'll pay for anything that gets damaged.

LANDLADY. *(without looking at PEDRO)* And who are you supposed to be? *(To SAVERIO)* You can find yourself a room somewhere else for this nonsense. Are you listening to me? *(She leaves slamming the door)*

LUISA. What an impolite old lady.

ERNESTINA. What a temper!

SAVERIO. You should see her when she's roused! *(Contemptuously)* No better than a  
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fishwife.

PEDRO. Let's continue.

SAVERIO.*(To PEDRO)* Would you lock the door, doctor? *(PEDRO does as he's told and rejoins the group.)*

ERNESTINA. Where were we?

SAVERIO. At the palace ball. My dialogue with the shy lady I meet there: "Marchioness, your president is but a colonel, the colonel is but a man. It is the man who loves you"

LUISA. Beautiful, Saverio! How moving!

ERNESTINA. Excellent, Saverio. It reminds me of a line by Ruben Dario spoken by the Marchioness Eulalia.

PEDRO. You sound just like a real gentleman.

ERNESTINA. Listening to you, nobody would guess you're nothing more than the boy who delivers the milk.

LUISA. What if Susana falls in love with you when she's cured?

SAVERIO. In this next scene I'm receiving a visit from a papal legate. I think I should use a different tone, something less frivolous. Gentle but serious.

LUISA. Certainly.

SAVERIO. What do you think to this: "Eminence, these are pitiless times we're living in. Even the most prudent ruler cannot but help feel distressed by them. Could we not suggest to the Holy Father that the teachings of the Church concerning the duties owed by errant workers to his employers will help combat Communism.

PEDRO. *(Gleefully)* I like your political sentiments, Saverio. You have a marvellous ethical sensibility.

LUISA. Your support for law and order does you justice, Saverio.

ERNESTINA. Oh! If all rulers were like you!

SAVERIO.*(lowering his voice)* Did it feel right?

PEDRO. Very much so.

LUISA. Excellent. This is all much better than we expected.

SAVERIO. I'm glad.

PEDRO. It couldn't be better.

SAVERIO. (*taking off his military cap*) By the way! Just before you came in I was thinking about a little detail that has escaped us all.

PEDRO. Go on.

SAVERIO. You don't have any friends in the War Arsenal, do you?

LUISA. No (*To PEDRO and ERNESTINA*) What about you?

PEDRO *and* ERNESTINA (*together*) No, we don't either. Why?

SAVERIO. We are going to need some explosives and anti-craft cannons.

PEDRO. (*astonished*) Anti-craft cannons!

SAVERIO. Apart from some other single-shot rifles, machine guns, a launcher for gas grenades, and a flame-thrower.

LUISA. What on earth do we need all that for?

SAVERIO. Miss Luisa, who is in control here?

PEDRO. (*conciliatory*) You are Saverio, but it's only a farce.

SAVERIO. Let's be clear about this ...it is a farce for the others...but it's real for us.

LUISA. I don't get you, Saverio.

PEDRO. Let's keep calm, everything will be OK. Tell me something, Saverio: You are a colonel in the artillery, OK? Infantry or cavalry?

SAVERIO. (*surprised*) Oh, I hadn't thought about that.

ERNESTINA. Come on, Pedro. An artillery colonel is not very poetic!

LUISA. That's hardly what Susana would want, is it?

PEDRO. As a doctor, Saverio, I have to tell you that Susana's colonel is a cruel but a charming man.

LUIS. For the record, in films you have to be a colonel in the cavalry to be a romantic lead.

SAVERIO. I'm sorry to disappoint you, miss, but in modern warfare the cavalry hardly counts for anything these days.

ERNESTINA. I'm not sure, Saverio. An officer in the cavalry is still every woman's ideal lover.

LUISA. The sound of galloping hooves, the mane swaying in the breeze...

SAVERIO. Well, that solves the artillery problem. Personally, I'd still rather be in the army!  
*(There is a knock on the door)*

## SCENE VI

SAVERIO, PEDRO, LUISA *and* ERNESTINA. SIMONA *enter*.

SAVERIO. Come in.

SIMONA. There are two men at the door, they've got something for you.

PEDRO. Shall we leave you?

SAVERIO. Just the opposite, it's good that you're here. *(To SIMONA who's looking around)*  
Show those men in *(She leaves. SAVERIO places the table against the back wall.)*

## SCENE VII

*horizontal wooden supports, and an object covered with plastic bags. The others look at each other in surprise. The men leave the load in the space left vacant by the table was, symmetrically placed so that the red throne on the back serves as frame.*

MAN 2. Could you sign here? *(He hands SAVERIO a receipt which he signs. SAVERIO tips them, the men say goodbye and leave. SIMONA remains still, arms folded)*

SAVERIO. You can go now, Simona. *(SIMONA leaves reluctantly)*

SAVERIO *(closes the door, then approaches the object)* Ladies, my good doctor, you will, I hope, congratulate me for my foresight. Just look at this beauty! *(He uncovers the object, the others gathering closer. When they realise the hidden object is a guillotine they collectively step back a pace.)*

LUISA. My goodness! What is it?

SAVERIO. *(with emphasis)* A guillotine, of course.

PEDRO. *(dismayed)* A guillotine? Whatever for, Saverio?

SAVERIO. *(surprised)* What do you mean whatever for? What do you think you use a guillotine for?

ERNESTINA. *(scared)* Good Lord! The man's a homicidal maniac!

SAVERIO. How can you expect to rule without chopping off some heads!

ERNESTINA. Well, really!

PEDRO. Do we really need to go to such extremes?

SAVERIO. *(laughing)* Doctor, don't tell me you are one of those innocents who still believe in the myth of parliamentary democracies!

ERNESTINA. *(pulling PEDRO's arm)* Let's go, Pedro. It's getting late.

PEDRO. Saverio... I don't know what to say. We'll talk about it later.



SAVERIO. Please stay. I'll show you how it works. First, you pull this rope...

PEDRO. Another time, Saverio. *(The guests start edging towards the door)*

SAVERIO. We could fix the guillotine in the back of a truck and offer a door to door service.

ERNESTINA. *(opening the door)* Good night, Saverio. *(They leave)*

SAVERIO. *(running after them)* Don't forget the gloves and the hat *(Silence)*

## SCENE VIII

SAVERIO, *thoughtful, comes back into the room. He paces up and down silently before the guillotine. He looks at it, pats it as if it was an animal.*

SAVERIO. Miserable idiots. They're backing out. That's the worst of the middle class. There're always like that. They lack that natural bloodthirstiness of the aristocracy. *(Rubbing his hands in a familiar but pompous manner)* That's all right, ladies and gentlemen. We'll organise the terror without them. That we will. *(He paces to and fro in silence, suddenly stopping as if he had heard voices. He cups his ear)*

## SCENE IX

*Suddenly several difference voices coming from various loudspeakers can be heard in turn.*

SAVERIO *listens carefully and nods.*

LOUDSPEAKER 1. Extra, extra: Saverio, the cruel, is playing an underhand game with the

League of Nations.

SAVERIO. Good publicity. The proletariat admires cruelty in a dictator.

LOUDSPEAKER 2. International news from The Radio Herald: Saverio rejects summit with great powers. Foreign ministers refuse to comment on despot's conduct.

LOUDSPEAKER 3. *(long siren call, beams from spotlights cross the stage. SAVERIO's shadow)* News from the Radio Voice. Breaking news. Dictator Saverio's conduct has caused a break down in international cooperation. General confusion among the Ministries of Foreign Affairs. Will Saverio declare war? *(Voices stop, spotlights go off. SAVERIO paces silently)*

SAVERIO. This is a time for political caution. *(Gravely)* Heads will roll for this one after another. *(He pats the guillotine. Starts changing his uniform quickly. There is a knock on the door as he fastens his trousers. He spreads a sheet over the guillotine immediately)* Come in.

## SCENE X

SAVERIO and SIMONA enter.

SIMONA. I have to make the bed *(Takes the sheets from the table as SAVERIO is getting ready in front of the mirror)* Just look at these foot marks! *(Showing him a sheet.)* You should be ashamed! *(Shaking the sheet)*

SAVERIO. *(irritated)* What? *(Turns round brusquely)* Simona, in spite of your peasant patina, deep down you're an intelligent woman.

SIMONA. *(resentfully)* What...?

SAVERIO. I've had an idea, Simona.

SIMONA. Look at this bedspread. It was brand new.

SAVERIO I was thinking of giving up my milk round, but I've decided to hang on to it now.

SIMONA. That's the first sensible thing you've said..

SAVERIO I'll ask for a few days off.

SIMONA. (*without turning her head, still making the bed*) Good for you.

SAVERIO. (*patting her on the back and picking up his hat*) Yes, sweetie, for it is written in the Bible: "Thou be cunning like the snake and candid like the dove". Adios, beautiful lady. (*He leaves, while SIMONA shakes her head. She makes the bed.*)

**CURTAIN.**

**THIRD ACT**

*Dark red room. Lateral doors. In the foreground, on the carpeted platform, a throne. A few lights. The windows are open. In the background, the moon hovers over the trees. Guests move about, chatting, dressed in XVIII century costumes.*

**SCENE I**

PEDRO, JUANA, ERNESTO, DIONISIA, ERNESTINA, LUISA *and* DEMETRIO.

PEDRO. (*to JUANA*) This is what I call a party!

JUANA. Do I look all right?

PEDRO. Beautiful.

ERNESTO. How do you like my helmet?

JUANA. You look like a warthog.

DIONISIA. (*to JUANA*) My goodness this Saverio's really making us work hard, isn't he!

## SCENE II

Same, JUAN, ROBERTO and MARIA.

JUAN. *(enters dressed as a shepherd from a print, half-naked, with a goat skin wrapped around his waist)* Gather round, you fellows! *(They stand around him)*

JUANA. *(to JUAN)* Do you really have to chop off the colonel's head?

JUAN. Yes.

PEDRO. We've got the head. *(pointing to a lateral door)*

ERNESTINA. This pot is in the way. *(pushes it to one side)*

LUISA. It feels like a proper carnival. We only need some steamers.

DEMETRIO. *(to LUISA)* Is it true that the guy has a guillotine at home?

LUISA. Ask Ernestina.

ROBERTO. *(dressed in an armour)* Damn! This is really uncomfortable! *(He tears off his moustache and puts it in his pocket)*

LUISA. *(To JUAN)* Where's Susana?

JUAN. She's getting ready.

PEDRO. I'll go and check if Saverio is on his way.

ERNESTINA. What if he doesn't show up?

LUISA. Don't even think about it.

## SCENE III

SUSANA *comes in through the door that leads to the throne. She is dressed like the protagonist of a classical tragedy, with a tunic made of fur and sandals. Her hair is loose. She's looks sinister: gaunt face, pale skin.*

SUSANA. How do I look, friends?

*The music stops*

EVERYBODY. *(Together)* Wonderful.

JUAN. *(Jumping on to the platform)* Ladies and gentlemen. May I have your attention, I won't take long. I am delighted to introduce you to the author of the tragedy which has become the greatest hoax ever concocted in Buenos Aires. Good people, we in BA are pastmasters of pulling each other's legs. If my memory serves me right, the late José Ingenieros and his friends used to throw parties like this. But they never pulled off a hoax which was a patch on this one. Let me introduce to you the brain behind all this: the young lady standing beside me, as delicate a creature as you could hope to meet.

VOICES. Three cheers for Susana.

VOICES. Speech, speech! *(JUAN climbs down from the platform)*

SUSANA. *(Goes to the front of the platform. Silence)* It is not wise for an author to speak in anticipation of the events which are about to take place. I can only say that the denouement will greatly appeal to you. *(Steps down. Applause. The group breaks up into smaller units, chatting)*

LUIS. Pull your hair back a bit more.

SUSANA. How do I look?

ERNESTO. Like the heroine of a tragedy.

DIONISIA. If you do it right, you'll turn everybody's blood cold.

DEMETRIO. You look as if you're possessed by the devil.

ERNESTINA. Juan looks really perfect in that goat skin, doesn't he?

JUAN. (*Joining the group. To SUSANA*) What if Saverio doesn't turn up?

SUSANA. He will, don't worry.

DEMETRIO. Where's Julia? I haven't seen her.

SUSANA. (*Ironically*) Julia is too serious to take part in slapstick.

DEMETRIO. What if you and the milkman end up getting married?.

SUSANA. (*Irritated*) Don't be so stupid!

DEMETRIO. (*Turning round and winking*) Susana, you look as white as a ghost.

SUSANA. (*Coldly*) I've put on too much make up.

JUAN. You're not afraid of the Colonel, are you?

MARIA. What if he tries to cut her head off? (*To the others*) At least we'll be here to protect you, won't we?

DEMETRIO. I hope Saverio carts his guillotine over here tonight. I think I'll split my sides.

JUAN. (*To SUSANA*) Don't worry, we've replaced his sword with one made of paste.

SUSANA. That's reassuring!

PEDRO. (*Ironic*) You're enjoying yourself now, aren't you?

DIONISIA. What about you? I think you're the one who's enjoying it the most.

ERNESTINA. We should fetch Julia.

SUSANA. (*Lively*) No, please, not that. Leave her alone.

JUAN. (*Looking around*) Can I say something? There's one thing I forgot in my little speech. Do you know what this scene reminds me of? That chapter in *Don Quixote* when Sancho appoints himself Governor of the Barataria Island.

DEMETRIO. That's true. And we are the crazy dukes.

JUAN. (*winking at everybody*) OK. So which of us is insane now?

EVERYBODY. (*forming a circle around SUSANA, pointing at her with their fingers*) Susana.

SUSANA. (*kindly*) I don't mind being mad because this way I can manipulate people like puppets.

JUAN. (*Putting up his arm*) We're all mad here, but the most incurable case hasn't arrived yet. He's making us wait. He's making Susana wait. (*Turning to the others*) Because Susana is in love with the milkman. She loves him tenderly, deeply, passionately!

SUSANA. (*Faking a laugh*) How utterly charming!

JUAN. (*exited*) But I also love Susana. So far, she has turned a deaf ear to my good works. She is following her own dark and solitary path.

EVERYBODY. (*All together*) Good, good.

JUAN. That's it. I can't remember what I wanted to say.

LUISA.. So, is Saverio coming or not?

DEMETRIO. It looks as if he's not coming.

ERNESTINA. (*To Pedro*) Why don't you go and wait for him at the station?

#### SCENE IV

*The same and the MAID, who then leaves with SUSANA.*

MAID. If you please, miss, Saverio has arrived.

SUSANA. I must go. Don't mess things up! (*SUSANA and the MAID leave silently*)

JUAN. This is wonderful. And do you know why it's wonderful? Because I can smell blood in the air. (*Laughing*) Somebody will pay for this with their life.

ERNESTINA. I hate it when you talk like that! I sometimes think you're a savage!

JUAN. Can't you smell blood?

VOICES. Shut up...

JUAN. Don't say I didn't tell you. But I can feel it in my bones.

LUISA. Do you want us to write it down?

## SCENE V

*Same and the MAID, then SAVERIO and PEDRO*

MAID. Mr Saverio is here (*She goes out*).

JUAN. Just don't muck it up.

SAVERIO *enters into the room followed by PEDRO. The guests move aside instinctively. SAVERIO walks with a military gait. He does not greet anyone. He imposes respect.*

JUAN. (*Goes to the centre of the room*) Mr Saverio, the head is in the next room. (*Points to the door*)

SAVERIO You're playing the shepherd, aren't you?

JUAN. Yes, sir.

SAVERIO You can go now. (JUAN *leaves puzzled*. SAVERIO *climbs to the throne and has a look at the guests, who are also looking at him*) Ladies and Gentlemen, when you are ready, the farce can begin. (*To PEDRO*) Tell the orchestra to strike up. (PEDRO *leaves*)



## SCENE VI

SAVERIO *sits on the throne; a waltz begins. SAVERIO, pensive, looks at the couples dancing before him as they turn their heads to look back at him.*

HERALD *(entering at the back of the room, wearing knee-length trousers, playing a silver trumpet. The audience splits into two groups.)* Her Majesty, Queen Bragatiana, wishes an audience.

SAVERIO. *(without getting up)* Show her in.

SUSANA. *(majestically walks between the two groups)* I hope the dukes are enjoying themselves. *(SAVERIO still pensive and cold)* While your fugitive queen suffers in unknown lands, just look at them...dancing! Very well! *(Slowly)* What do we have here? No fury beasts but elegant hearts of steel. The Colonel is plunged in thought. *(SAVERIO does not turn his head to look at her)* You see that? He doesn't even look at me. He's not listening. *(Suddenly and angry)* You are a wicked man, Colonel! Look me in the face!

SAVERIO *(To the guests)* I regret honourable dukes, that the manners of your queen are not very queenlike.

SUSANA. *(Ironic)* You miserable cur! Despite your impeccable manners, convince me that you haven't stolen my throne! *(Pathetically)* You have destroyed the paradise of an innocent maiden. Where roses used to bloom yesterday, I hear only the murderous grating of iron today.

SAVERIO. Your Majesty has a talent for literature.

SUSANA. The Colonel calls abused innocence literature! Look at me, honourable dukes. Pity me. Are these rags fit for a queen? Where are the hand-maidens who used to garland my hair with flowers? I seek them in vain. And what about my friends? Where are my sweet

friends now. (*Turns her head*) I can't see them either. (*Naive*) Would they be at home, by the side of their husbands, safe in the company of their children? (*With terror*) No. They're rotting in jail. The Colonel's agents are plotting their downfall. (*Sardonic*) Why else won't the Colonel look at me? Because it is hard to be confronted with one's own crime! (*She places her hand on her forehead. She remains silent for a moment. She runs both hands over her cheeks*) Living in exile is not easy to endure! To lose one's home land is hard! Quaking like a leaf at the lightest breeze is hard. I see the peasants working in the vineyards and hear young women singing by the fountains, but I cannot stop tears rolling down my cheeks. I'm the most wretched woman on this earth! And who is to blame for all this? (*Pointing at him*) There he sits! Cold. As suspicious as the Trojan Horse. While he lies in a comfortable bed, I, just like a hungry wolf, prowl about the roadsides. I have no husband to protect me, no children to shelter in my bosom and nourish.

SAVERIO (*Still cold*) Without a doubt, madam, children are a great comfort.

SUSANA. Do you hear? (*begging*) Can nobody else see through him? Children are a great consolation! Tell us, you evil little man: were you a comfort to the woman who gave birth to you? What kind of poisonous being furnish your evil instincts? Speak! What wet nurse fed you with sour milk?

SAVERIO (*Always cold and indifferent*) These are matters of state.

SUSANA. (*Violently*) I couldn't care less about the State! A manufacturer of misfortunes, that's what your state is! Have I asked for your advice? I was dancing with my friends in the fields to the sound of the violins... How long ago it seems! Did my advisers summon you? Did I ask you to mend my laws, make my decrees? You say nothing. Your silence is your shield, Colonel. You've got the nerve of a leader, the stupidity of a raw recruit. But that does not signify. (*Gently*) I have lost everything. Now the only thing I want from you is an answer, Colonel. That's all I ask. Why don't you talk to me? Why do you sit there convicted by your own silence?

SAVERIO (*Standing up*) I will tell you why I haven't spoken. The other day your sister Julia called on me. She informed me of the hoax you have plotted with your friends. I'm sure you can understand why I cannot take all this nonsense seriously. (*Everybody steps back as if they've been slapped in the face. Deadly silence. SAVERIO sits down, impassively*)

SUSANA. (*addressing the guests*) I beg you all to leave me alone. I must apologise to this

man. (*Looking down, the guests file out in silence*)

## SCENE VII

SAVERIO and SUSANA

SUSANA. What a dirty trick you've played on me, Saverio, but it's only fair. (*She sits down by the throne, pensive*) All these lights and tapestries. And here I am, sitting at your feet looking like a poor tramp. (*Looking up to SAVERIO*) Are you comfortable on your throne, Colonel? Must be nice having the world revolving at your feet?

SAVERIO (*Standing up*) I am leaving.

SUSANA. (*Getting up suddenly, she clutches him by the arm*) Oh, no, don't go, please. Come here... Let us look at the moon. (*She walks with him to the window, holding him by the arm*) Isn't this spectacle moving, Colonel?

SAVERIO (*Dryly*) Why do you insist on carrying on with the farce?

SUSANA. (*Honestly*) I like being alone with you, just the two of us. (*Laughing*) Is it true that you commissioned a guillotine? That is really wonderful. You are as mad as I am. (SAVERIO *lets go of her hand, sits down on the throne and remains pensive. SUSANA stays standing*)

SUSANA. Why are you not listening to me? Do you want me to go down on my knees? (*She gets on her knees*) The crazy princess gets on her knees before the pale, unhappy man. (SAVERIO *does not look at her. She stands up*) Are you listening to me, Colonel?

SAVERIO. I have been warned by Julia, your sister.

SUSANA. Julia, Julia! What does she know about dreams? But you, you really are a dreamer. Fancy having a guillotine made? Is the blade sharp?

SAVERIO. It is.

SUSANA. And aren't you happy to remain a dreamer?

SAVERIO. Happy? I used to be happy.

SUSANA. What! Selling milk and butter?

SAVERIO. (*Angry*) Yes, being a milkman. (*Getting exited*) In those days I believed I was powerful enough to carry out all my wishes. And that strength came from the milk and butter.

SUSANA. Did you drink that much milk?

SAVERIO. I had to work so bloody hard to earn my living that I ended up overtaxing myself.

SUSANA. And now you are mad at me?

SAVERIO. You're not the problem. You're a shadow filled with words. You turn on the light and the shadow disappears.

SUSANA. Touch me... you'll realise I'm not a shadow.

SAVERIO. There was a time when I used to think that dramas could banish reality. But now I have learned that a hundred ghosts do not make up a living man. Listen to me, Susana: before I met you and your friends I was a happy man. I went back to my little room at night totally worn out. My customers can be hard work, they're not sympathetic. Some find the milk too thick, some too thin. In spite of that, I was content. My brains and legs were all part of my livelihood. When you invited me to take part in this farce, as my dreams have hitherto always been modest, it transformed my sensibility into a seething cauldron. It changed my life. (*Silence*)

SUSANA. Go on, Saverio.

SAVERIO. It is so sad to analyse a broken dream! I no longer wanted to be a butterfly but a vulture. Nothing but being a dictator would suffice me. (*Leaves the throne and paces nervously*) Do you understand?

SUSANA. It was only a joke...

SAVERIO. (*Laughing*) Don't be naive. My drama consists in having understood, having

understood...that I am not built to be a Colonel, not even to play the role of a Colonel. Isn't that tragic? The set cannot fool me any longer. I dreamed to be like Hitler, like Mussolini. Now I understand that I'm nothing but an idiot.

SUSANA. That is the tragedy of your life.

SAVERIO. (*Sarcastic*) That is it. Simona was so right.

SUSANA. Who is Simona?

SAVERIO. She is the maid of my landlady. She was absolutely right when she warned me: "Mr Saverio, don't leave the milk business. Mr Saverio, people in this country are drinking it more and more". It sounds funny to you. It might be ridiculous to compare selling milk with a dictatorship. Anyway...what's done is done... I didn't know what my own strengths were and I tried to live a dream.

SUSANA. What about me, Saverio? Could I ever mean anything to you?

SAVERIO. You? You're just a monster.

SUSANA. (*Taking a step back*) Don't say that.

SAVERIO. You are. A woman capable of coldly plotting such a farce, that woman is a wild beast. You cannot be hurt by anybody or anything.

SUSANA. My farce was only a way of getting to know you.

SAVERIO. That's nonsense (*Pacing*)

SUSANA. That was the only way of measuring how much you liked me. I was looking for a man who could live a great dream.

SAVERIO. You are mistaken. You were not dreaming. You were mocking. They're totally different things.

SUSANA. Saverio, don't be cruel!

SAVERIO. If somebody had told me a fortnight ago that there was a woman capable of plotting a joke like this, I would have been happy to meet her. Today, your capacity for pretence has turned against you. Who would trust you? There's something repulsive about you.

SUSANA. Saverio, be careful, don't say such unpleasant things.

SAVERIO. You and your friends are but the dregs of life. Could there be something worse than the indifference with which you laughed at a nobody?

SUSANA. That's horrible.

SAVERIO. Are you blaming me? I was the one who has been made a fool of.

SUSANA. I really regret it, Saverio. You do believe me, don't you?

SAVERIO. (*Coldly*) May be, may be not. You'll soon be hatching the next one. Your lack of scruple is beyond belief. You only seek to satisfy your whims. Me, on the other hand, you've destroyed me.

SUSANA. What are you going to do?

SAVERIO. What do you think I'll do? I'll go back to my old job.

SUSANA. Don't reject me, Saverio. Don't be unfair. Try to face it. How else can an innocent young girl get to know the heart of the man she wants to marry?

SAVERIO. Here we go again.

SUSANA. Do you think it was so ridiculous? It's the ends that matter, not the means. Saverio, you haven't played your part gracefully, but I haven't either. Go and ask the others what they think of a woman who can plot a farce like this? You'll see what they say. (SAVERIO *sits on the throne, tired*) You look tired! (SAVERIO *rests his head on his hands with his elbows on his knees*) I like you so much when you do that! Don't speak, darling. (*She runs her hand through his hair*) You're torn inside, I know. But if you leave me now, even if you lived a thousand years, you'd still regret this moment, you'll never forget you're little dove.

SAVERIO. (*Without looking up*) What a brave dove you are!

SUSANA. (*stroking his head*) You're offended, aren't you, darling. Oh, no, it's that you've just been born; and when you've just been everything hurts. Solitude has turned you into a beast. No woman has ever spoken to you like this before. The milk boy needed a shock to liberate the man. You'll never make another mistake.

SAVERIO. (*Rubbing his face*) It's really stuffy in here!

SUSANA. (*Standing by him*) I am the great girlfriend you're heart was beating for. Look at me, my love. I'd like to wrap my coils around you, like a tropical snake.

SAVERIO. (*Instinctively stepping back to the sofa*) What's the whole snake thing about? (*Surprised*) Look at your eyes! There're like saucers!

SUSANA. My eyes are beautiful for you. Like twin suns. Because I love you, my dear Colonel. All my life I've looking for you. (*She launches herself on to the sofa next to him. She places her hand round his neck*)

SAVERIO. Careful! Somebody may come in.

SUSANA. Don't you like it when I get close to you?

SAVERIO. Are you still pulling my leg.

SUSANA. (*Sweetly*) Pulling your leg, my dearest? How can you say that Saverio?

SAVERIO. (*Angrily*) What is all this joke about? (*Lets go of her arm violently*)

SUSANA. Why do you treat me like this, my dear?

SAVERIO. There's something terrible in your eyes.

SUSANA. Let me lean on you. (*She hugs him again*)

SAVERIO. There's an evil look in your eyes. (*Tries to push her awayt*)

SUSANA. Don't be afraid, my dear. You're in shock.

SAVERIO (*Puzzled*) What's wrong with you? You're as white as a sheet.

SUSANA. (*Sweetly*) Are you afraid, my dear?

SAVERIO (*Jumping off the throne*) What are you hiding in your hand?

SUSANA. (*Suddenly still, standing on the platform*) You miserable cur!

SAVERIO. Susana! (*He suddenly understands and begins to shout*) This woman really is mad! Julia! Help!. (*SUSANA raised the gun she is holding*) Don't! Don't! Susana!

#### SCENE VIII

*The sound of shots are heard. The guests hurry on stage. Saverio is lying on the stage.*

JUAN, PEDRO, JULIA, etc.

## CURTAIN

### **Roberto Arlt (1900-1942)**

Argentine novelist, dramaturg and journalist. Arlt is generally considered by critics the forerunner of the Latin American “boom”. Arlt’s innovative style reflects a fascination with the popular and a trenchant social realism fused with fantasy; his oeuvre is considered to have paved the way for later Latin American magic realism. Between 1928 and 1942 he run a column *Aguafuertes* (i.e. Sketches) in *El Mundo* newspaper. Amongst his most important works there are four novels, *El juguete rabioso* (Buenos Aires: Latina, 1926; *Mad Toy* (Durham& London: Duke University Press, 2002), trans. Michele McKay Aynesworth; *Los siete locos* (Buenos Aires: Latina, 1929; *The Seven Madmen* (Boston: D. R. Godme, 1984), trans. Naomi Lindstrom, (Boston: Godine, 1984), trans. Nick Caistor; *Los lanzallamas* (Buenos Aires: Claridad, 1931), *El amor brujo* (Buenos Aires: Victoria, Talleres Gráficos Rañó, 1932 [Bewitching Love]), nine plays written between 1934 and 1942 (most of which he saw staged at the Teatro del Pueblo) and a series of short stories published throughout his life in newspapers and magazines such as *El Mundo*, *El Hogar* and *Mundo Argentino* (probably the three most popular publications of the epoch).

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I joined Victoria University almost three years ago after finishing my PhD in Hull, UK. I am also a member of the New Zealand Centre for Literary Translation / Te Tumu Whakawhiti Tuhinga o Aotearoa.

My main areas of research are Translation Studies and Latin American contemporary narrative. I have contributed several articles on contemporary Hispanic writers and poets to the *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature* (Routledge Reference, Routledge, 2006). My chapter “Un argentino entre gángsters: Europa y las Américas en la obra detectivesca de Roberto Arlt” (in *Cruce de vías: una mirada oceánica a la cultura hispánica*) explores detective fiction, my other research interest (forthcoming 2010, ed. Rogelio Guedea. Mexico: Aldus). I am currently revising my PhD thesis, “Translation and the construction of Genre: The Case of Roberto Arlt”, which is under contract with Edwin Mellen Press.



# **Translation and the Emergence of Modern Sinhala Theater in a Postcolonial Context.**

By Kanchuka Dharmasiri

Theater is a space where various sociopolitical and ideological issues are enacted, contested, and subverted. Sri Lankan theater has often functioned as a critique of contemporary political and social issues and has been a popular medium frequented by many. Sri Lankan theater consists of Sinhala, Tamil and English theater. In this article, I will focus mostly on Sinhala theater. Modern Sinhala theater as one knows it today does not have a very long history and became a distinctive art form in the middle of the twentieth century in a postcolonial context. A significant factor that comes to mind when talking about theater in Sri Lanka is the role that translation has played in the process of establishing it as a distinct art form. What I would like to do in this article is to sketch a brief history of the formation of the modern Sinhala theater and to examine the various roles that translation has played in fashioning it as a specific creative practice. At the same time, I will also explore some of the complications a translator faces when translating a play and look at theater as a space where multiple levels of translations occur.

Itamar Even-Zohar in *Polysystem Studies* (1990) examines the place that translation occupies in the literary system and perceives translation “as a system fully participating in the history of the polysystem, as an integral part of it, related with all the other co-systems” (1990:22). In the same text he argues that more research should be done to investigate “the major role translation has played in the crystallization of national cultures” (1990:21). Using Even-Zohar’s notions of literary systems, Annie Brisset illustrates the way in which translation played a major part in the formation of the Quebecois national theater and also helped valorize the Quebecois language. In *Translation in a Postcolonial Context* (1999) Maria Tymoczko comprehensively illustrates the major role that translation played in the Irish cultural renaissance further illuminating the significant role that translation plays in the formation and revival of national cultures in postcolonial contexts. My study of translation and Sinhala theater uses Even-Zohar’s ideas about translation, systems theory and his ideas about the significance of translations in forming national cultures. Moreover, I will engage with André Lefevere’s concepts about rewriting,

refractions, and recreation of texts and refer to Ortrun Zuber's and Sirkku Aaltonen's ideas about the challenges in translating theater and the translational aspects embedded in the theater space. In order to understand the colonial and postcolonial situation in Sri Lanka in terms of culture, I will also look at Frantz Fanon's position on national culture, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's writings on Kenyan national theater, and Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity.

Sri Lanka was granted independence in 1948. It was a colony for four centuries, from 1517 to 1948, colonized respectively by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. The central part of Sri Lanka did not come under British rule until 1815, and thus Sri Lanka became fully colonized only in 1815. The colonizers influenced many political, economic, and sociocultural aspects of Sri Lanka, then Ceylon (the name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972). What happens to a nation that has been colonized for more than four centuries? What happens to the people and the culture of the colonized land? How do the people reaffirm their identity? Four centuries of colonization had a lasting effect on the language and culture of certain classes of Sri Lankans, especially those of the middle and higher classes. Ngugi contends that the mindset of the formerly colonized is influenced by the language and culture of the colonials and that colonialism's "most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world" (1981:16). The colonized are in fact left with a value system that enforces the imperial world view. Thus, he perceives the need to surpass this mindset in order to decolonize the mind. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) Frantz Fanon asserts that this process can take various forms ranging from literary and cultural revival to violence.

In postcolonial Sri Lanka, the native intelligentsia, mostly bilingual, takes it upon itself to fashion an identity for the nation. This is in keeping with Frantz Fanon's chapter "On National Culture", where he argues that it is the native intellectuals belonging to the middle classes who start seeking a national culture and for them "the demand for a national culture and the affirmation of the existence of such a culture represent a special battle-field" (Fanon 1967:167). Accordingly, the postcolonial period sees a resurgence of nationalistic ideas and a renaissance of language and traditional art forms. In Sri Lanka too such a revival was visible in literature – novel, short story, and poetry – and art. Amidst this cultural resurgence, a need was felt for a theatrical tradition that captured the national identity of the country. The formation of the modern Sinhala Theater can be situated in such a context. It arises as a part of a larger

cultural renaissance and as a need to affirm an identity of a nation.

In his introduction to Annie Brisett's *A Sociocritique of Translation* (1996) Richard Bauman writes that "For Germany in 1800, for the Ireland of Yeats and Synge, the creation of a theatrical repertoire was essential; the very existence of the (future) nation depended on the creation of a 'national' theater. The authors discussed by Annie Brisset give this same central role to the theatrical repertoire" (1996: xv). In this segment Bauman discusses the crucial role theater plays in forming the ideas of a national culture; it almost suggests that the concept of the nation should be performed as a collective at a certain level. The desire for a national theater points out the desire for a communal art form capable of constructing the idea of what is perceived as essential to a certain community. In her work, Brisset also illustrates the extremely significant role theater occupied in Quebec. In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1981) Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o shows how a national theater in African languages became a necessity after independence from the British and how such a movement came about as a result of people's desire to have a form that they could call national theater, as opposed to the English theater done by British expatriates living in Kenya.

There were parallel trajectories in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The situation in the country was complex because there were different performance traditions, but the problem was that none of them was considered to be the "national" theater.<sup>i</sup> It is in such a context that Ediriweera Sarachchandra,<sup>ii</sup> a playwright, scholar and novelist, took center stage in founding a national theater for Sri Lanka. As a professor in the Department of Sinhala, he was involved in translating European plays and working with English department professors such as Ludowyke. His first translations (in the 1940s) include Molière's *The Doctor In Spite of Himself* and the *Bourgeois Gentleman*, Gogol's *Marriage*, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, and Chekhov's *The Proposal* and *The Bear*. Many of these adaptations became successful and their popularity may partly be attributed to the satire and comedy that were pervasive in the traditional ritualistic and folk performances in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, Sarachchandra realized that translations of comedies and the use of the European form did not exactly meet the need for a national theater. He then started looking at traditional performance methods and connecting them to traditions of theater in Japan and India.

I will take this moment to give a brief impression of the performance traditions that existed in Sri

Lanka prior to the creation of a modern theater.<sup>iii</sup> Although theater did not exist in the formal "Western" Aristotelian sense in Sri Lanka, there were many performances connected with rituals and other religious traditions. Some were a component of healing and blessing ceremonies. Speaking about *tovil*, a healing ceremony, Schechner asserts that "The tovil trance-fire dance is theater nested in performance" and "structurally, the thovil presents a complicated picture. Entertainment, ritual, athletics,... and spirit possession are all mixed" (1988: 90). Rituals and healing ceremonies were vested with performance aspects.

*Sokari* and *Kōlam* were two other performance practices that belonged to the up country area and the coastal areas of Sri Lanka respectively. They were ceremonies that utilized masks and stylized performance methods. Some of these performances still exist today, but not as abundantly as before. The masks and the movements in these performances can have a symbolic function and these dramatic traditions are "more presentational than representational" (Bauman).

*Nādagama* [plural: *nādagam*] was another folk drama and there too stylistic dances and music were used. The *nādagama* was influenced by the Catholic Church and Tamil performance practices. Some of the plays were in fact translated from Tamil:

The earliest *nādagamas*, we may infer from the evidence of the texts themselves, as well as from the existence of the prototypes in the Tamil language, were translated into Sinhalese from Tamil originals. The Tamil prototype of the Sthakki nadgama is the Roman Catholic play known as Stakkiar, which is said to have been acted before Christian audiences in Jaffna some years ago. (Sarachchandra 1953:89)

The *nādagama* seems to have gone through several transformations and is a form that encompassed many traditions including Tamil performances and Stakkiar, a Roman Catholic play. The language of the *nādagama* also deserves a certain amount of notice. In *Sinhalese Folk Play* Sarachchandra introduces Pillippu Sinno, one of the first translators of the *nādagama*, and asserts that his "language is a peculiar mixture of Sinhalese and Tamil words, with a large portion of pseudo-Sanskrit in it. Some of it is hardly intelligible" (1953:90). What is interesting to note here is the incentive of the translator to integrate three different languages, even though "some of it is hardly intelligible!" This particular instance shows "the

heterogeneous dynamic character of language use” and how it plays a “central part...in social construction of reality” (Bauman 1977: 60). For Phillippu Sinno there was nothing amiss in constructing a folk play that was an amalgamation of many traditions and languages.

Sokari, k lam and n dagam were mainly practiced in rural areas. Nurti was popular in the city. Nurti consisted mostly of musicals and often were direct replicas of Indian Parsee pieces. The Indian raghadari music and melodies captivated Sri Lankan audiences. Sometimes, the Indian pieces were mimicked without any coherence and songs forcefully infused into the play. In the end, it was the songs that drew the audience to the Nurti, “an ungainly hybrid with little to recommend it artistically” (Gunawardena 1). Yet it did have “a long-lasting impact on Sinhala culture” (1) and producers such as John de Silva were successful in their creations.

John de Silva in fact played a significant role in using nurti and some aspects of n dagam to create plays with nationalist themes. Neloufer de Mel, who does an analysis of gender and national theater in Sri Lanka, illustrates how John de Silva was creating a drama that specifically addressed emerging nationalist sentiments. She shows how he selected themes about national heroes and patriots and was outwardly critical of the colonials. What is also interesting about John De Silva’s work is that while he rewrote historical Sinhala tales and wrote plays on historical and religious themes, he also made translation a major part of his work. In the early 1900s, John de Silva was involved in a prolific translation of Shakespeare’s plays, including *Othello* (1909), *Hamlet* (1909) and *King Lear* (1913).<sup>iv</sup> He also translated Kalidasa’s *Shakunthala*. De Mel asserts that “in de Silva’s “preface to *Othello* (1909) he stated that [Shakespeare’s plays] would enrich the native language, and that Shakespeare belonged not only to Englishmen but to all communities and races” (2001:63). Thus, when it came to the performances in Sri Lanka, one can see how borrowing from other cultures and traditions occupied a significant place. The process of translating and transporting other cultural forms has been central to the evolution of this art form.

Sarachchandra did not find the form of the Nurti to be a suitable vehicle for a national theater. Also, by this time, he had realized that the translation of comedies did not exactly meet the need for a national theater and felt the need to move away from light farce and a theatrical tradition that was based on European models. He turned to the n dagam and traditional folk plays in his desire to come up with a

theater form that he thought would fulfill the need for a national theater. In the end, he combined the n dagam and the knowledge he gained by exploring the theatrical forms in China, Japan, India, and Europe to form the modern Sinhala Theater. Thus, already what is known as the national play of Sri Lanka was a hybridized form. Several traditions were integrated to create *Maname*, his play produced in 1956: the *nādagam* tradition, folk songs and musical rhythms, stylized dances and gestures, a storyline from the Buddhist Jataka Tales influenced by Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, and techniques from Noh and Kabuki. The original Jataka story tells the story of Princess Maname, married to Prince Maname, and how she falls in love with a *vedda*, an indigenous Sri Lankan, while traveling to the Prince's kingdom; She aids the vedda in killing the Prince. The story ends offering a cautionary note on the fickleness of women when the *vedda* leaves her in the thick forest to die. Sarachchandra tries to nuance and complicate the Princess's situation, showing that she was denied agency from the beginning, and leaving some of the fundamental questions about the storyline open, in a way that is reminiscent of *Rashomon*. In Kurosawa's *Rashomon* we are given four accounts of the murder of a samurai and each of the characters provide their own perspective of what took place in the grove. The viewer is presented with a complex situation without definite answers. In Sarachchandra's *Maname* too the position and intention of the princess are left open and ambiguous.

The colonized mindset was such that when *Maname*, "the transcreated n dagama" (Haththotuwegama 130), was first staged in the Lionel Wendt Theater where only English plays were staged, the English speaking elite dismissed it with disdain. It was only when Reggie Siriwardena, an influential critic who wrote for the English newspapers, gave a very positive critique of the play that the elite class started going in crowds to see the play. Sarachchandra's desire to stage the first national play in a theater that was frequented by a predominately English-speaking upper class emphasizes his own ambiguous position and "we see that the cultural problem as it sometimes exists in colonized countries runs the risk of giving rise to serious ambiguities" (Fanon 1967:174). Haththotuwegama asserts that already "the Sarachchandra oeuvre had become the site of contradictions and paradoxes that have never come to be resolved" (1998:131).

As I stated earlier, in his quest for the national theater Sarachchandra drew extensively on material from villages, a project somewhat similar to the one described by Ngugi. Many of the rhythms in

Sarachchandra's plays were popular in *n dagam* rhythms and his collaborations with Charles de Silva helped him to utilize these songs effectively in his productions. Nevertheless, the difference between the post independence Kenyan theater and post independence Sri Lankan theater is that, while they are both steered by the bilingual intellectuals, the theater movement in Kenya became a part of the people's desire to create a theater whereas the theater scene in Sri Lanka takes on a fairly bourgeois tone and form. The spaces in which the plays are performed, except for the open air theater in Peradeniya, are spaces frequented by the middle classes. Thus, Haththotuwegama accuses Sarachchandra of taking the *n dagam* from the villages, but never taking it back. The spaces in which his works are performed are essentially bourgeois spaces except when they are performed in the Open Air Theater at Peradeniya where a huge crowd of a variety of backgrounds from distant places comes to see the plays.

Sarachchandra's next play, *Sinhabahu* which retells the story of the origin of the Sinhala race, considered to be his best play, employs similar devices as *Maname*. Both plays consist of narrators introducing the characters and at times commenting on the feelings and thoughts of the characters. Stage properties and lighting and other technical effects are minimal in both plays. Some characters' faces are painted in such a way that they almost give the effect of a mask. The gestures and movements are influenced by Kabuki and Noh traditions. The music and the melodies are taken from the *n dagam*. What should be noticed here is the way that different cultural forms are integrated to construct the national Sinhala Theater. Thus, theater by the time of Sarachchandra had become a much hybridized form. This hybrid nature remains a strong asset of this theatrical tradition.

Two groups of theater artists emerged as a result of the renaissance of the Sinhala play: those who followed Sarachchandra and those who deviated from his highly stylized form. The latter perceived problems in the use of classical, written language and the mythical and historical themes in Sarachchandra's plays. The deviant group, named Apey Kattiya (our folks) and led by Sugathapala De Silva, opted for a more naturalistic theater that dealt with contemporary socio-political issues. Their main objections were directed at the high flown language and what they perceived as themes that were far removed from people's day-to-day political realities. An analysis of Sarachchandra's plays does show that he was concerned with contemporary issues despite his use of a stylized form. Nevertheless, Apey Kattiya felt constrained by the new form and sought different outlets to express their ideas. In contrast to Sarachchandra's work, de Silva's productions focus on urban characters in naturalistic settings. Jayawardena and Diasena state that "Plays of the Ape Kattiya were on the other hand full of characters

one meets in urban streets, boarding houses, and mercantile offices” (1996: 26). It should be noted here that while the group that followed Sarachchandra was affiliated with the university, Sugathapala De Silva’s followers in Apey Kattiya were mostly government workers employed in offices. In addition to writing their own plays, the latter group also turned to “Western” theater artists and conventions to widen their field. Translation played a major part in their project. It is interesting to note how these theater artists rely on western forms to move away from the highly stylized modes that Sarachchandra initiated and that others were striving to imitate (Jayawardena and Diyasena 1996:27).

Apey Kattiya also deserves special attention because they were the first to successfully use spoken diction in “serious” plays. Translation played a major role in this endeavor. Annie Brisset speaks of a similar situation in Quebec, where the translations of Shakespeare into Quebecois French served to valorize a language that is seen as not belonging to the mainstream. Thus, what the translations do is to give validation to the language and help it become a part of the wider society. Although the translation scene in Sri Lanka is not the same as that in Quebec, one of the similarities between the two contexts is the way in which language acquires more validity as a result of translations.

Here, a brief discussion of the Sinhala language will be of use. The Sinhala language has a spoken form and a written form and the two are very different. In the beginning, in theater, the spoken form was only used for farcical purposes or was infused into the mouth of the servants or the “lower classes.” It was used to induce laughter. The first time that Sarachchandra used spoken diction for a “serious play”, Checkov’s *Ivan Ivanov*, “the audience, the playwright remembers, resolved its embarrassment by finding matter for mirth in it” (D.M. de Silva xvi). D.M. Silva claims that “it appeared – rightly – to Sarachchandra that the audience could not bring itself to reconcile a grave emotion or interest with the use of everyday prose” (xvi). This partly explains his use of poetic language in *Maname* and *Sinhabahu*. It was difficult to use the spoken diction for “serious plays” and it was only after *Maname* and the modern Sinhala play was established that it became a successful venture. For the first time, after the cultural upheaval, spoken diction was used in “serious” plays successfully and translations played a major role in this endeavor.

In his discussion about translation as rewriting Andre Lefevere sees rewriting – and rewriters – as important because “they are at present, responsible for the general reception and survival of works of literature among non-professional readers, who constitute the great majority of readers in our global



culture...” (1992:1). He states that the term non-professional reader “does not imply any value judgment whatsoever” and that “it merely refers to the majority of readers in contemporary societies” (6). He emphasizes “the importance of rewriting as the motor force behind literary evolution” (2). Consequently, the dynamic resurgence of theater initiated by Sarachchandra continued in the 1960s and continues to the present with translations of plays by Bertolt Brecht, Luigi Pirandello, Dario Fo, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Peter Weiss, Eugene Ionesco, Tennessee Williams, Shakespeare, and others.<sup>vi</sup> In that sense translations done into Sinhala become one of the forces behind the evolution of Sinhala theater. The dramatists used these various European texts in order to point out problems within their own society and to discuss issues relevant to the social fabric of Sri Lanka.

One of the other factors that should be noticed in relation to the theater scene in Sri Lanka is the constant debates that took place among playwrights, critics and spectators about “original” plays, translations, and adaptations. Whether a certain play should be labeled as a translation or an adaptation was one of the main arguments that recurred. Critics and spectators tried to evaluate to what extent a certain translator did justice to the source text. There was also an attempt to make value-based judgments about “original” plays and translations: Could one assess the task of a writer and a translator on the same basic principles? However, the fact that “original” plays and translations existed side by side is exemplified by the fact that the national drama festival awarded two prizes for scripts: the best original script and the best translated script. There was only one award for the performance of the best play. Thus, the importance of translation was recognized at a national level and “original” plays and translations continue to exist side by side.

The debate has led to serious discussions about issues in theater and translation. As A. J. Gunawardena, a leading critic in Sri Lanka asserts, “the debate was a necessary exercise – an evolutionary need, as it were – in a medium that was trying to define itself” (1). The debates were taking place at a time when the idea of a national theater was developing and these dialogues were a significant asset to it. Moreover, this issue became a vital point of discussion in a time when Sri Lanka was trying to define its identity as a nation. What does an original work signify in such a context? What does a translation signify? What then is an adaptation? The impossibility of giving fixed definitions to these queries in some ways reflects the ambiguity that is a part of the question of national identity itself. G.K. Haththotuwegma comments on the debate as follows: “The translations and adaptations that were claiming the favor of a new, advancing fashion bore the marks and pressures of this critical creative dialogue. The discriminating

if not finicky distinctions made between translations and adaptation reflected the complications inherent in the discourse” (142). It was indeed a “critical creative” dialogue that further enriched the field. What should be realized is that it is difficult to have “facile categorizations” (Gunawardena) when it comes to a dynamic, live medium such as theater. Furthermore, the hybridity and the ambiguity inherent in attempts to define and categorize the theater itself serve as an indicator of the more problematic aspects of the larger question of national identity.

Henry Jayasena contributed to this debate with his translation of Bertolt Brecht, adamantly claiming that his translation/adaptation of Brecht’s *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) is a translation, but not an adaptation. At the same time, a factor to bear in mind here is that Jayasena used Bentley’s translation of Brecht’s *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* to translate it into Sinhala. Since Jayasena leaves out entire sections, especially in the fifth episode in his translation/adaptation of the play, his statement that the play is a translation and not an adaptation becomes a significant issue. For example, in the trial scene he omits the trial of the two corrupt doctors. In the same episode, he leaves out a significant section of the text where Azdak, the ironshirts and Sauwa discuss a certain period in Persia when “a peasant ruled when the Vizier was hanged” (Bentley 90) and where a soldier commanded the army (90). Jayasena leaves out these scenes where Brecht’s Marxist ideas come to the fore. Why does Jayasena edit ideologically saturated scenes out of the play? Does this reinforce his idea “that Marx was not relevant to a discussion on Brecht? (Haththotuwegama 1998:142). Thus, is Jayasena infusing his own ideological stance into Brecht’s play? Is it inevitable that the translator’s ideology and way of thinking interferes with the translation/adaptation? This is quite surprising because Jayasena’s original plays grapple with union issues and the complications of such activities. He depoliticizes Brecht’s highly political play. Haththotuwegama asserts that Jayasena needs to bring Marx back to the discussion of Brecht.

However, Jayasena’s *Hunuwataye Katawa* is Brecht for the majority of theater goers in Sri Lanka. They know Brecht and talk about him because of Jayasena’s production. As André Lefevere affirms, “[t]he refraction ... is the original to the great majority of people who are only tangentially exposed to literature “(1992: 16). In fact, Lefevere’s ideas about translation and refraction are quite useful when one deals with this issue:

First of all, let us accept that refractions – the adaptation of a work of literature to a different

audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which the audience reads the work – have always been with us in literature. ... These refractions have been extremely influential in establishing the reputation of a writer and his or her work. (1992:4-5)

Jayasena's rendition of Brecht's play does influence the spectators' notions about who Brecht is and what his work signifies. It is Jayasena's play that has "[established] the reputation the writer." Therefore, refractions have an effect on the reception of a certain work in the target audience. What does this say about translations and adaptation? If the audience is first exposed to Brecht through Jayasena's production and if that is their reference point when it comes to Brecht, what does that say about translation?

Here, I have to mention that Henry Jayasena's translation of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is one of the longest running plays in Sri Lankan history. It has been running for 30 years, has had more than 3000 shows, and in 2004 was reproduced with a new cast and crew. The play is so popular in Sri Lanka that Grusha and Azdak have become part of Sri Lankan culture. Manel Jayasena, who played Grusha, and Henry Jayasena, who played Azdak, are sometimes identified as Grusha and Azdak rather than by their own names. A few years ago when Manel Jayasena passed away, the media recalled her exceptional portrayal of Grusha and commented on how she made Grusha a part of the Sri Lankan cultural imaginary.

Moreover, although Jayasena translates Brecht's prologue, he omits it in the performance and instead opts for a very short version of it. So, what does translation and adaptation signify for a dramatist? What happens when a theatrical piece is translated with performance in mind? How does a live dynamic art translate from one culture to another? Since theater is a live medium, there is not much space to pause and think about the meaning of each and every utterance or gesture. They have to be made familiar and easily comprehensible. I feel that this is where a translation for the stage differs from a textual translation. As Sugathapala de Silva, the translator of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, asserts "When a text is translated into another language, possessing knowledge of the source language alone will not do justice to the source text. It is extremely important to have a visual image of the theatrical aspect ... when one is translating a play" (1992: i).

There are two aspects that one should take into account when translating a play: the linguistic and the cultural. I also think that the process differs when one translates a play into another language with the intention of performing it (as Jayasena did). Depending on the specific objective – whether the translation

is done for reading or with the intention of performing – the translation may vary. Ortrun Zuber addresses some issues that come up when translating a play, in his article “The Translation of Non-Verbal Signs in Drama” (1980). He perceives a difference between a translator of a play and a director who would eventually translate the written text into a performance. He offers a few suggestions:

Another possibility for the translator will be to produce a reading edition in the target language with comprehensive notes explaining the meaning and ambiguity of a verbal or non-verbal sign in the original and leave the difficult task of transposing all allusive signs to the producer, actors and readers of the play. This would mean that the translator only points out the problems and the producer is left to solve them, in other words the role of the producer has become more challenging and demanding. (1990:73)

Zuber’s suggestions are based on the assumption that the translator and the producer/ director are two different people. However, what happens when the translator is the potential director? Would not her/his project become more complicated if that were the case? Many of the translators of plays in Sri Lanka are the directors themselves. Thus, their visualization of the text differs from a translator who would only view it as a written text.

Furthermore, Zuber distinguishes between the translator, director, actor, and reader. I would also add the spectator to this list. One of the factors that must decide the direction that a translation should take is the audience. Will the translation of a play be read by a reader or will it be viewed by an audience? Since a live audience would not have the advantage of glossaries or footnotes, the translator must present the ideas and concepts in a way that will facilitate the audience to grasp them quickly.

In fact, some of the changes that Jayasena makes are done with the intention of making the play more accessible to a Sri Lankan audience. He changes several culturally specific details in the play. For example, Brecht talks about the revolt of the carpet weavers in several instances in the play. Since carpets are not a common commodity in Sri Lanka and there are no carpet weavers as such as a profession, the word would not signify anything substantial for a Sri Lankan audience. Thus, Jayasena employs the word "vatu kamkaruwo" meaning plantation workers. This term evokes ideas about the working class and enables the viewers to establish a more immediate relation with the context. Food too is a very distinct

cultural marker and Jayasena changes food items that are not familiar to a Sri Lankan audience. Thus, “corn cake”, which in fact is the English translator Eric Bentley’s term, would not have any impact on a Sri Lankan audience and is transformed into a “kavum petta”, a familiar food item made out of rice flour and treacle. Furthermore, “the elm tree” in Grusha’s farewell song to Simon is translated as an “ehela tree” a common tree that bears red flowers, especially during the Traditional Sinhala and Tamil New Year season. Thus, not only does the tree conjure up familiar images, it also denotes a new beginning. As I stated earlier, Jayasena is using Eric Bentley’s translation of Brecht’s *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis*. Thus, in that sense he is already using someone else’s interpretation or rewriting of Brecht’s text.

Furthermore, it should be noticed that he changed songs, humor, and profanities in the play. Lefevere comments on how “both Hays and Bentley eschew Brecht’s profanities in their translations” (15). Jayasena seems to be no different from the two:

CORPORAL: A good soldier has his heart and soul in it. When he receives an order, he gets a hard-on, and when he drives his lance into the enemy’s guts, he comes. (Bentley 50)

The Sinhala lines, translated into English, would be as follows:

CORPORAL: A good soldier is someone without a mind and a heart. When he receives an order, he gets goosebumps. When he strikes the enemy with his spear, his blood boils. (37)

Jayasena completely erases the sexual implications of the lines. Throughout the play, he alters and leaves out much of the sexual innuendos. Does this arise as a result of some ethical, moral code that he is embedded in? Jorge Luis Borges in “Homeric Versions” illustrates how different translations of Homer’s *Iliad* tell more about the translators than about Homer or the *Iliad*. For example, Pope’s version is “oratorical and visual”, “speeches and spectacles.” “That is Pope”, affirms Borges (74). Borges also demonstrates how Butler turns “Homer’s text into a series of sedate news items” (74). Thus, the translation will be influenced by the translator, her/his ideological stance, and the sociopolitical context in which the translation is done. Hence, do Hays’s and Bentley’s and Jayasena’s translations of Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* tell more about Hays, Bentley, and Jayasena and their respective contexts than about Brecht? And if, Jayasena’s text is based on Bentley’s version of the play, how many levels of

rewritings and recreations occur prior to what Sri Lankan audiences ultimately view on stage?

Eventually, what the Sri Lankan audience gets is a hybridized play, a version that encompasses Brecht's concepts, Bentley's thoughts, and Jayasena's ideas. The play becomes easily accessible to a Sri Lankan audience because the use of masks, stylized gestures, and employment of a narrator are not alien concepts for them. The *n dagam* too had a narrator and introduced the characters before they came onto stage. *Maname* and *Sinhabahu*, the classical pieces of the modern Sinhala Theater in fact employ many of these strategies. Like Brecht – and quite independently of him – Sarachchandra had made use of techniques borrowed from Chinese opera. Therefore, the stylized performance methods and the use of masks are not unfamiliar elements for an audience used to a stylized presentational space. Thus, we see here how a foreign play is incorporated to the cultural fabric of Sri Lanka. The translation of Brecht happens in a space between European culture and Sri Lankan culture. In Homi Bhabha's words,

If the effect of the colonial power is seen to be the *production* of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonial authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (35)

The postcolonial Sinhala Theater is the third space where there is resistance, subversion and negotiation. It is a powerful force because it encompasses multiple traditions. The dramatists take the “foreign” form and render it their own or rewrite it as their own. Haththotuwegama speaks of a similar possibility when he asks the question “couldn't translation be an *empowering* process, helping *re-discover* the possibilities of languages pushed into subservience?” (2006)

If rewriting is a way of getting material across to the nonprofessional reader –also in terms of theater to the “non professional spectator – the street theater of Gamini Haththotuwegama is a perfect example of it. In his innovative and radical theater, he enacts contemporary issues related to economic liberalization, capitalism, neocolonialism, power, and ethnicity in the street. And, of course, to say the least, translation is a significant part of Haththotuwegama's *The Wayside and Open Theater*. If Jayasena took Brecht to the proscenium theatres in Sri Lanka, Haththotuwegama took Brecht to the streets with his recreation of Brecht's parable “Mr.K” and his play based on Brecht's poem “The Importance of Governance.” His “transcreation” of Anton Chekov's short story, “Misery” is another example of his creative translation process. In this particular play, he takes Chekhov's story “Misery” and recreates it to

fit a Sri Lankan context: thus, for example, instead of a horse drawn carriage, there is a carriage drawn by bullocks.

Haththotuwegama is also a theorist of translations and adaptations. He uses the term transcreation to indicate how a text from a specific context goes through a linguistic and cultural transformation and takes on a new form and meaning in a different socio-political and cultural setting. He believes that a theatrical form is a translation in itself and that translation is inevitable. In his productions he uses Sinhala, English, and at times Tamil and the integration of the languages is done in a very powerful way. According to him, art forms from different cultures and traditions overflow into each other and one should think about ways of empowering local art forms by borrowing from other languages and cultures. His work is a case in point as he extensively uses borrowings from other cultures and constantly shifts between languages, especially Sinhala and English.

There is another small detail I would like to mention before I end the article. In the performances of *The Wayside and Open Theater Group*, it has become a convention to sing Bob Dylan's song, "Blowin' in the Wind", at some point in the performance. The English version is accompanied by Sinhala and Tamil translations. This may be a minor aspect of the rewriting, but I see this as an instance where translation practice is taken outside of the academy, outside of the stereotypical image of an indoor theater, and performed instead in an open, outside, and a more public space. Before the group sings this song, they provide an introduction to the freedom and civil rights struggles of the 60s and 70s and point out how artists took to the streets to protest against the violence, wars, and inequalities created among human beings. Thus, the trilingual song, while connecting the protest movements in other parts of the world and Sri Lanka also acquires various significations in the Sri Lankan context in terms of the violent conflicts within the island. The Wayside and Open Theater's translation of 'Blowin' in the Wind' enables three linguistic communities to engage with the ideas of freedom presented in the song and it is significant that this moment of engagement occurs in open and public spaces.

Not only has translation expanded the theater system in Sri Lanka, it continues to enrich what remains a hybridized space. Here, it should be emphasized that I am not ignoring the power politics that is embedded in a system where translation only functions one way. While each year many theater translations are done into Sinhala, there are hardly any translations done from Sinhala to English. Is theater a particularly difficult form to transfer from one culture to another? Does translation from a dominant culture differ because many of the ideas of the dominant culture are already embedded in the

less-dominant one? Does this serve as an indicator of the cultural hegemony that disseminates knowledge only from the dominant space to the Other? Or can one take another perspective and try to understand how the exposure to multiple cultures empower and enrich these “less dominant marginal spaces”?

The fact that translation functions only one way exemplifies that it is a form of cultural hegemony at one level.

I will reaffirm that translations have expanded the theater system in Sri Lanka and continue to do so. It is not a recent phenomenon, but one that was a part of traditional folk performances as well. Borrowing from other cultures and traditions remained a significant asset to performances in Sri Lanka. It is an inevitable outcome in a nation that is multiethnic and multilingual. Hence, it is the hybridized nature of the postcolonial Sinhala theater which remains a powerful asset. It is this ability to understand and experience two or more cultures simultaneously that positions the spectator in a complex space where many cultures and worldviews cross each other.

Consequently, what becomes apparent in a study of modern Sinhala theater is the way in which translation has been a central process in the art form. Translation has not been a peripheral activity, but one that has been a major component in the formation of the modern Sinhala theater. Another aspect that becomes clear is the way in which translations and rewritings were a central part in performance traditions in Sri Lanka prior to the modern period. For example, the *n dagam* were influenced by a variety of sources. The concept of hybridity thus exceeds the aftermath of the colonial period because a close look at performances in Sri Lanka shows that the performance traditions were already influenced by other art forms and were already hybrid. Thus, this examination sheds light on various aspects of nationalism and national culture through theater. The search for a national theater ends up in a creation of a play that is extremely hybrid in nature. *Maname* is seen as “original” by many and plays belonging to the “translation” category help in establishing the difference between the two genres. If the first national play is a hybrid, what does this say about national identity and national culture? If the first national play was a transcreation and an amalgamation of a variety of traditions and forms of performance, what does it say about national identity? The extensive use of translations and borrowings to form the national theater in Sri Lanka make us question the nature of “original” texts and translations and also extends the critique to questioning national culture and identity.

Notes



I will describe different performance traditions in Sri Lanka in detail later in the article.

The following description of Sarachchandra by Haththotuwegama captures the variety of styles, forms, and influences that constitute Sarachchandra's work and his literary and cultural outlook:

"In his transcreated nādagama (*Maname* and *Sinhabahu*) he strained and culled some of the mixed treasures of our mixed artistic heritage adapting them to the complex cultural commerce of the times, to which he was party and proxy (plot sources: Buddhist Jataka local folk lore/ historical legend; formalistic mode: modernized folk nādagama- presumably originating in Tamil and Catholic sources-using narrator chorus-musical verse-stylized movement; stage: proscenium arch- picture frame with modern lighting and playing time scaled for modern urban usage, and audience: urban bourgeoisie; aesthetic ideology: western oriented criteria-via Cambridge- inspired English Dept. University intellectuals like Ludowyke- and Sanskrit Rasa theory. Academic training: English medium graduate studies in oriental classics/ post-graduate studies in Western and Buddhist philosophy/ Research input: Sinhala Folk play: critical training: Shanthi Niketan, overall political cultural inspiration: pan-Indian, anti-British anticolonial movement..." (1998:131)

Sokari and Kōlam are still performed, but the nādagam and nurti are extinct forms. It is for this reason that Haththotuwegama affirms that "Sarachchandra took the nādagama out of the village, but never took it back." More research is needed in this area.

*Rashomon* is a film based on Rynosuke Akutagawa's short stories "In a Grove" and "Rashomon." While "Rashomon" provides the setting for the film, "In a Grove" provides characters and the plot. In the short story, however, we are given seven accounts of what happened in the grove further illustrating the subjective nature of truth.

The dramatists and directors of earlier generation, because of their bilingual background had drawn inspiration, ideas and theater techniques from every available source- whether it was the Noh and Kabuki plays of Japan, Chinese Opera, the Western realist theater of Ibsen and Shaw, the Absurd theater of Beckett and Ionesco, Brecht's theater of alienation, Street Theater or the Broadway Musical. These they fused with their own ritual and native drama traditions and by doing so produced a rich and vital theater tradition that was enthusiastically supported by the population at large. (Obeyesekera 82)

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