

THOU ART SLAIN

A play by

John Montgomery

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

RUAN HUTHNANCE – An actor. He is of indeterminate middle age; as with many actors who have been at their work a long time, it is hard to tell how old he really is. He might be as old as he appears (although it's not clear what age *that* is), or he might be older and striving to appear younger. He is an Englishman (if you accept that the Cornish are English too). He plays Claudius in a production of *Hamlet* being rehearsed.

MARGOT HUTHNANCE – An actress, and RUAN's wife. She appears somewhat younger than he does, and may even actually be so. Attractive now, she was clearly a great beauty in her youth. She is also English, and actually from England, as she demonstrates by speaking with a rather posh Home Counties accent. She plays Gertrude.

JUSTIN BEAM – An actor. He is young, and handsome in the way one associates with television actors whose principal talent is their looks. He is an American. He plays Hamlet.

FRANCIS WEEKS – An actor. He is a bit older than RUAN, or at least appears so. He is English. Everything about him screams 'character actor' as opposed to 'leading man'. He plays Polonius.

BARRY RENFREW – An actor. Young, about the same age as JUSTIN or a bit younger, but English. He plays Laertes.

CHRISTINE RENFREW – An actress. She is BARRY's real-life sister, and plays Ophelia.

DAN SINGLETARY – A Columbia University student, on the fencing team there.

SETTING

The time is the late 1970s or early 1980s, and the place is New York City. The entire play takes place on a single set. It is the stage area of an old, run-down theatre on the Lower East Side. There are two levels. The lower level is like that of any proscenium-arch theatre. The back of the stage area is actually the rear of the building, and at the extreme rear we see two metal double doors, the sort that are opened by a press-bar. These open out into an alleyway behind the theatre building, where the brick wall of the building opposite can be seen. The doors are normally behind the backdrop of the scenery for whatever show is being put on, but at the moment, they are exposed. The upper level is divided into two areas. Each contains a dressing room used by some of the characters; RUAN and MARGOT will use the one at stage right, and everyone else uses the other. These dressing rooms, which are mobile, are pushed forward, to the edge of the upper level, when action occurs in them; at other times, they are pushed out of sight, and the upper level appears vacant. When it is vacant, the actors from the lower level can go up to it and down again, and at such times it is understood to be actually above the main level. At stage left, there is a stair between the two levels, which can be used by the actors to go from one to the other within sight of the audience. When the dressing rooms are in action, the characters speak of going 'down' to their dressing rooms, which are supposed to be in the basement area of the theatre. They do this by leaving the stage and, the audience presumes, using another stair that is out of sight.

The action in both acts of the play is continuous; there are no divisions, such as curtain drops or pauses to change scenery, between scenes. When the action shifts from one place to another, as from the main stage to one of the dressing rooms, the unused part of the set is blacked out and the other lights up. There is always at least one character in sight, doing or saying something.

ACT ONE

As the curtain rises, we see that we are looking at – the stage of a theatre. It should be immediately apparent to the audience that the stage they see is not the stage of the theatre in which they are sitting, but is meant to be the stage area of some other. This other is old, run-down, and surely not the first choice of any self-respecting theatre company. Exposed brickwork at the back, obviously normally concealed by scenery but not entirely so covered at the moment, appears not far from imminent danger of collapse. There is also an upper stage, and above that some old ropes that might once have been used for lifting scenery and props. On the main level, two metal double-doors are exposed, clearly so that they can be used easily. The set is partly dressed. At the back, part of the wall is covered by a sort of hanging drapery – an arras. A rack holds a selection of old-fashioned swords. These are not modern fencing swords; they look like the real thing. The swords have little buttons attached to their tips, presumably for safety. Another rack has some costumes hanging from it. This rack is about the shape of a soccer football goal, but smaller; two uprights support a crossbar from which the costumes hang. This rack is on wheels, and the costumes are of the sort one sees in a very old-fashioned production of a Shakespeare tragedy. Yet another rack holds a selection of props, such as drinking chalices. The most notable one is a human skull. A production of Hamlet is obviously in preparation.

At stage right, there is a small piece of wooden furniture. A man is standing behind it. This is RUAN, in character as Claudius. He is in full costume.

RUAN: O, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven,
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not.
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens,
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offense?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardoned being down? Then I'll look up.
My fault is past – but O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder?'
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder –
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th' offense?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above.

There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
Try what repentance can. What can it not?
Yet what can it when one cannot repent?
O wretched state, O bosom black as death,
O limed soul that, struggling to be free,
Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay.
Bow, stubborn knees; and heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe.
All may be well.

RUAN kneels at the small piece of furniture, which we now realize is for this purpose, and assumes the posture of prayer. JUSTIN enters from the wings, stage right. He is in costume as Hamlet, wearing a dagger.

JUSTIN: Now might I do it pat, now he is praying,
And now I'll do it! *(he draws his dagger)* And so he goes to heaven,
And so I am revenged. That would be scanned.
A villain kills my father, and for that
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
O, this is hire and salary, not revenge!
He took my father grossly, full of bread –

RUAN abruptly breaks character and gets up.

RUAN: No, no, no. That's all wrong.

JUSTIN: What?

RUAN: You were doing well enough up until you drew your dagger. But you mustn't carry on saying the rest of the line as if you are still about to kill me. You must pause, hesitate, let the audience know you have suddenly been caught by the thought that you are about to send Claudius to heaven, in a state of grace, because he's been praying. And 'That would be scanned' – scanned means something like analysed or reviewed, you need to show that you know you have something to think about. So, 'That would be scanned –'; hit hard on 'that'. Really, it would be best if you could suggest some doubt about whether you really care if I go to heaven, or whether you're just looking for an excuse not to kill me, looking for a way to avoid having to do it. But that's probably too much to hope for at this point.

JUSTIN: Believe me, I didn't feel like I was looking for an excuse not to kill you.

RUAN: Hamlet is, or at least the audience should think he might be. And – well, there's more, but let's just try to get these first few lines right, shall we?

JUSTIN: Ruan, we don't have time for this. It's enough work for me just learning all these lines. I can't memorize exactly how you want me to say every word. We're supposed to open in ten days.

RUAN: You need at least to understand what the words actually mean, and why Hamlet is saying them.

JUSTIN: No, Ruan, I don't think I do. This stuff is four hundred years old. The audience isn't going to understand most of it any better than I do. I should just get through the boring parts –

RUAN: Boring parts?

JUSTIN: – the difficult parts as fast as I can, and slow down for the good stuff. You know, the lines everyone is waiting for because they've heard them before and remember them. *(He poses with his dagger)* 'How now, a rat! Dead for a ducat, dead!' *(He thrusts)* That's what we should be practicing, a good way for me to kill Polonius. Where is Francis, anyhow?

(The double doors at the back open, and FRANCIS enters. He is in street clothes, but he heads to the costume rack, where he begins to put on parts of a costume.)

RUAN: Ah, Francis. We were just looking for you. Are you ready to get some work done?

FRANCIS: Of course, of course. I just had to step out for a bit. What shall we work on this afternoon?

RUAN: I thought you might work with Barry. The 'advice' scene. As Justin was so helpfully pointing out to me, the audience expects certain famous scenes to be done well.

(FRANCIS realizes JUSTIN is being mocked here, and plays along by reciting lines in an exaggeratedly hammy fashion)

FRANCIS: 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend –'

JUSTIN: Now that's the way to do it!

FRANCIS: Shall I go get Barry?

RUAN: He's in the dressing room. Actually, you needn't bring him out here just yet. You can run lines with him there just as easily. I need room on the stage for – something I have to work on with Justin.

FRANCIS: All right. I'll just take this off. *(He makes to remove the costume he has just put on)*

RUAN: No, keep it on. I was just about to explain to Justin that it's important for all of us to wear the costumes as much as possible. *(To JUSTIN)* You have to look the part to play the part, even in rehearsal.

(FRANCIS exits stage right. We hear his footsteps as he descends the unseen stairs to the dressing room.)

JUSTIN: 'Step out for a bit'. Are you really going to let him spend half his time drinking in bars? I know you Brits think it's great to be drunk all the time, but this isn't London.

RUAN: Quite right, it isn't. In London we have proper pubs to drink in. All you've got here in New York are crappy Irish bars called things like the Blarney Stone. Still, when in Rome. And I've seen Francis give marvelous performances when he was much worse for drink than he is now. Some actors simply can't perform otherwise. You won't know this, since you were hardly born then, but in '64 Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole both played Hamlet. Burton did it here in New York, O'Toole in London. And both of them were drunk as lords the entire time.

JUSTIN: Actually, I've heard about Burton's performance. It was in modern dress. We shouldn't even be wearing these stupid costumes. They're an embarrassment. Costumes like these are ancient history now.

RUAN: Which is why I was able to get them for a song. Those old swords, too (*he gestures toward the rack*). In this production, we're going to be doing many things in a way that you would undoubtedly call old-fashioned.

(The double doors at the back open again, and MARGOT enters. She is in street clothes, with carrier bags in hand. The lettering on one of them indicates that she has bought takeaway at a Chinese restaurant; the other evidently contains bottled drinks.)

RUAN: Hello, dear. Something good?

MARGOT: I hope so. (*Indicating bag*) Chinatown. Hi, Justin.

RUAN: Lovely. Why don't you set the food out for us in our dressing room, I'll be along.

(She smiles, and they kiss as she passes by and exits stage right; footsteps, etc.)

JUSTIN: It's almost time for sword practice.

RUAN: Yes.

JUSTIN: But you've got Barry working with Francis in the dressing room. I need Barry out here to practice the fencing match scene with me.

RUAN: Dan should be here in a bit to give you and Barry your fencing lesson. You can practice with me for the moment.

JUSTIN: With you? I know you think I don't know the play very well, but I do know that Claudius doesn't have a sword fight with anyone.

RUAN: Do you think this is the first time I've ever acted in *Hamlet*? I've done a bit of swordplay on a stage before now. When I was at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, I played Laertes.

JUSTIN: Oh? Why didn't you play Hamlet?

RUAN: A certain Irishman did. Who has subsequently become rather well-known.

JUSTIN: O'Toole? (*RUAN says nothing, but smiles tightly*) Peter O'Toole was there at the same time as you? Oh my God, I can't imagine you on the same stage with him.

RUAN: Well, I was. And I gave a good account of myself too, and not only in my acting. He found it hard to keep up with me when we fought.

JUSTIN: If that's true, it must have been the only time you were ever better than him at anything. That's why he's a movie star now, and you're –

RUAN: I'm not an actor in a cheap daytime soap opera watched by bored housewives, as you are.

JUSTIN: Okay, so it's a soap. But a lot of great actors have gotten their start in soaps, like Richard Chamberlain and Ryan O'Neal. Mark Hamill! And *The Brash and the Brazen* is one of the best dramatic shows on TV. We really get to explore the emotions of relationships, in a way that the prime-time shows just can't. It's deep, y'know? I've really developed my acting skills in the past two years.

RUAN: Let's see how your fencing skills are developing. I haven't forgotten mine. *(He goes to the rack and selects a weapon)*

JUSTIN: You asked for it. *(He also gets one)*

(They face each other. JUSTIN attacks wildly, slashing and thrusting with great energy. RUAN retreats.)

JUSTIN: Well, Ruan? How's your fencing doing these days? Any better than your acting career? *(JUSTIN continues his attack, but with less apparent success. RUAN seems hardly to move, turning all efforts aside with seeming ease. He was not lying when he said he was good at this. He knows where JUSTIN's blade is going each time, and blocks and parries perfectly with minimum energy spent. Now RUAN goes on the attack, and JUSTIN, exhausted from his flailing, is barely able to defend himself.)*

RUAN: I don't need to be better than Peter O'Toole, not now. I only need to be better than you. You little shit.

(He resumes his counterattack, pushing Justin against the back wall. RUAN is in total control now and can do what he likes. Somehow, the safety button has come off the end of his blade. With a feinted thrust he causes JUSTIN to extend his arm. RUAN hits JUSTIN's arm with the flat of his own blade, and JUSTIN drops his sword in pain.)

JUSTIN: Okay, Ruan, I get it. You've made your point. You can stop now.

RUAN: I can, yes. But I don't think I will.

(He advances, and in a moment the point of his blade is poised six inches from JUSTIN's throat. JUSTIN stares at it, unable to move. The double-doors burst open, and CHRISTINE and DAN come in. RUAN steps back at the noise, and JUSTIN scrambles to recover his sword. DAN is wearing a blue and white sweatsuit with 'Columbia' on the front, and is carrying an equipment bag. CHRISTINE is dressed in a manner suggesting she has been shopping at the secondhand clothing stores of the Lower East Side of the type frequented by young punk rockers or hipsters.)

DAN: Decided to start without me? *(He sees that JUSTIN is breathing heavily)* Wow, you look like you've really been going at it.

RUAN: I didn't know when you were going to get here, so I decided to give Mr. Beam a preliminary lesson. I've just been showing him a few tricks about stage-fighting that I learned when I was his age.

DAN: That's what I'm here for, Ruan. You said you didn't want any of that fake stuff. You wanted it to look real.

RUAN: That's just what I've been doing, showing Justin how to make it seem real.

DAN: Well, he needs to be practicing for the fifth-act fight with Barry. Barry's the one playing Laertes, not you.

CHRISTINE: Is Barry here?

RUAN: Your brother is with Francis in the second dressing room. Would you be so kind as to go down and send him up here?

CHRISTINE: All right.

(She exits stage right, etc.)

JUSTIN *(to RUAN)*: I definitely need to work on my technique. Maybe Dan will show me some moves I can demonstrate to you later.

RUAN: I do hope so. That's why I wanted to direct this production, as well as act in it. I intend to see to it that you learn all sorts of lessons, from both Dan and myself. About acting, as well as fencing.

DAN: That's great! Columbia wouldn't have won the Ivy League championship if we didn't have great coaching. You have to learn from the best!

(BARRY enters from stage right)

DAN: Hi. You ready?

BARRY: Yeah. Just let me get this costume off and we can start. *(To Ruan)* I can't believe you make us wear this old tat.

(BARRY goes to the costume rack and begins doffing his Laertes costume, exposing a T-shirt beneath in which he apparently intends to practice.)

RUAN: I'm late for lunch. See you lads later.

(RUAN exits stage right, etc. BARRY selects a sword from the rack and stands facing JUSTIN.)

DAN: OK, let's go through what I showed you last time. Then I have some new moves for both of you to practice.

(BARRY and JUSTIN begin going through what appears to be the first bout of the fifth-act match between Laertes and Hamlet. The lights darken on the main stage until we can no longer see anyone there. At the same time, the lights go up on the upper stage, revealing the stage-right dressing room. Inside it are RUAN and MARGOT, eating Chinese food. They appear to have almost finished, and both soon put their chopsticks down.)

RUAN: I have had quite enough of that little bastard gobbing off at me. He is simply too stupid to understand what an opportunity this is for him, to learn something about real acting by working with us. And by being directed by me. When I was his age, just being in the same building with Olivier or Gielgud, just sitting in the cheapest seats, which were all I could afford, and watching them act, even as old as they were by then, seeing how they did it, was the greatest experience of my life up to that point. Of course I hadn't met you yet, dear. And when I got to see Scofield in *A Man for All Seasons* – O moment, stay, you are so fair! Faustus couldn't have sold his soul to the devil any faster than I would have done, if only it could have bought me a chance to actually be in a play with any one of them. And now he gets to work with real Shakespeareans, to learn from the best, and he doesn't even realize what a great favor is being done him. He thinks acting is just learning the lines and saying them any old way, it doesn't matter how, as long as you feel the proper emotions while doing it. That's how his generation have been taught. Method acting, so called. Get in touch with what they imagine the character feels and the job is done. No attention need be paid to, to line readings, enunciation, projection, any of it. Just emote, that's all. It makes me sick.

MARGOT: It was your decision to have him in the play. When he expressed interest, you couldn't say yes fast enough. And by the way, from his point of view he's the one doing us a favor by being in it. He is considered a star over here, you know.

RUAN: Yes, I did cast him. You know why.

MARGOT: Your master plan. Darling, please tell me it's going to work.

RUAN: It will work. It's worked for too many others before now to fail us. Not that it's been done in the exact way we're doing it now, but the details are unimportant, so long as we're seen. These Yanks are suckers for a touch of class, and we've more than enough of that. Too much actually, but we won't tell them so. New York isn't just the theatre, it's also television and films. Important people will come to see this production, just because idiot-boy Justin is in it, and they will see us too. Next to him, we will seem as gods. It's actually for the best he's so incompetent. You know, their film studios have loved Brits, as they call us, since the Thirties. David Niven, Leslie Howard, on up to Burton, the list goes on. We're next, love. When I put the word about that we are available, that we don't necessarily have to go back to London after this, the offers will roll in.

MARGOT: We've got to get through this first. You know, Justin thinks this production is going to make his name as a serious actor. We have to encourage him in his little fantasy. Tell him how well he's doing, how brilliant his performance will be. We need him to give interviews and promote the show so the uptown people come see it. They'd never go near this part of town normally.

RUAN: I don't know if I can manage it. The thought of him playing the greatest of all roles, and probably being cheered for it too by an audience that doesn't know any better. Do you know I almost killed him today? No, really. I'm not joking. His opinion of his fencing skills is just as over-inflated as his opinion of his acting ability. I was showing him a thing or two and had him defenceless. I actually could have killed him. Those swords are real, you know.

MARGOT: Why didn't you? Imagine the publicity. Front page of *The New York Post*. You could pass it off as an unfortunate accident. 'I couldn't avoid it, he made a wrong move and stepped right into my blade'. And then – 'The show must go on!' Some other New York actor, probably one even better-known than Justin, would take over the part to save the show. You'd carry on manfully even though you'd been crushed. Everyone would feel so sorry for you, they'd hire you in a minute. In a Noo Yawk minute. (*RUAN is staring intently at her now*) Oh, come on, dear, I didn't mean it really. Just one of my mad thoughts. Noo. Yawk. They really do say it that way. I thought it couldn't be true but it is. Which reminds me. You do know that in order to work here, you're going to have to be able to do a Yank accent if asked.

RUAN: No trouble at all. I can do accents. American is easy.

MARGOT: Show me.

(*RUAN picks up a copy of the New York Post and begins to read from it. His accent is unconvincing.*)

RUAN: 'The body of a woman was found in Central Park early this morning by a man walking his dog. She was identified as Yolanda Ruiz, 23. Police said she appears to have been murdered'. (*He switches back to his normal accent*) Someone's murdered every day in this city.

MARGOT: You didn't sound much like an American to me.

RUAN: That was a regional accent.

MARGOT: Oh? In what part of America do people speak as you just did?

RUAN: Alaska. They sound different up there, you know. It's the Canadian influence. Now, if you'd like me to do mah South'n gennilmun –

MARGOT: That's quite all right, dear. There's another thing we have to get through. When are you going to hire the rest of the cast? There are only six of us so far. And we've already put most of the money we've got left into renting the theatre. We can't spend much more. Thank God Dan is so stage-struck that he's doing the fencing coaching for nothing.

RUAN: There are only six important roles in *Hamlet*. Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, and of course the title character. We've got all those. The others can be played by anyone. I've put an advert in the trades, it'll run in a day or two. Open casting, a cattle call. New York is full of starving actors who will work for next to nothing. They'll show up in their multitudes and we'll pick the ones we want. Don't worry, darling, we'll find our Osric and our Fortinbras. And they'll be Americans too, which means no good, which means we'll shine all the more. Bloody Yanks. The only thing worse than a Yank is an Irishman.

MARGOT: How you do go on, you sound like my father talking about what he called Johnny Foreigner. And the Irish aren't at all like the Yanks. I agree the Yanks have a horrid accent and can't speak verse, but the Irish sound very well, some of them. Gift of gab, natural poets, all that. You shouldn't hate them all just because of your past history with Peter O'Toole.

RUAN: My opinions of the Irish at large have nothing to do with Peter O'Toole.

MARGOT: Darling, everyone knows you left the Royal Academy because of him, because you knew you would never get the best roles while he was there.

RUAN: I don't blame O'Toole for that. Well, maybe a little, but it was mostly the bastards who ran the place then who wouldn't cast me as Romeo or Hamlet or Prince Hal. Even though I was better than he was. As for the Irish, I don't like the way they make a point of being so Irish all the time.

MARGOT: What else could they be?

RUAN: For a start, the ones born and raised in London or Liverpool could simply be cockneys or scousers or just plain English. As we Cornishmen have been for a thousand years now. I don't think the Huthnance family was so called when we spoke Curnowic, but we adopted an English-sounding name when we became English. With the Irish, there's always that wearin'-o'-the-green business. They're always acting a part, and acting it badly. Like Justin Beam.

MARGOT: Does it really matter whether his acting is any good or not?

RUAN: To me it does. And I'm going to see to it that he improves. After all, it would reflect badly on me if he didn't learn something from being on the same stage as me. As us, dear. He'll learn. I'm just the man to teach him a lesson or two.

(The lights fade on the stage-right dressing room, and come up on the other dressing room.)

FRANCIS and CHRISTINE are in it.)

FRANCIS *(as Polonius)*: What is between you? Give me up the truth.

CHRISTINE *(as Ophelia)*: He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders
Of his affection to me.

FRANCIS: Affection, pooh! You speak like a green girl

Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.
Do you believe his tenders as you call them?

CHRISTINE: I do not know, my lord, what I should think. (*She breaks character*)
How was that?

FRANCIS: Good. But at this point, Ophelia's insanity should only be incipient, not obvious. The audience should notice a change when she goes completely crackers later on. But good.

CHRISTINE: Perhaps you should be directing us instead of Ruan.

FRANCIS: Don't say that. Or rather, don't say it where Ruan can hear it. He doesn't need to know that I'm helping you. It'll be our little secret.

CHRISTINE: As if you've ever kept any secrets from Ruan.

FRANCIS: I won't tell Ruan you were running lines without putting your costume on first, if that's what you're worried about.

CHRISTINE: No. I'm not worried about anything.

FRANCIS: You shouldn't be. As long as we all play our parts correctly, this production is bound to be a success. And by our parts, I mean both in the play and in real life. Especially the latter. We can't have any reversion to – undesirable behavior that would get in the way.

CHRISTINE: Mine's no worse than yours.

FRANCIS: I think it is. I don't drink any more than I always have, and I break no laws by doing so. You, on the other hand –

CHRISTINE: I don't like it when you poke your nose into my personal business. And I'll like it even less if you go running off to Ruan every time you think you see something.

FRANCIS: Ruan is like everyone else in that what he doesn't know won't hurt him, and he doesn't have to know everything. But I can only go so far in turning a blind eye.

CHRISTINE: I'm fine. I'm well in control of myself. Nothing is going to happen.

FRANCIS: All right, then. I'm going out for a bit.

(*He exits the dressing room as the lights go down on it, and up on the main stage. There, BARRY and JUSTIN are just finishing a swordplay sequence as DAN watches.*)

DAN: That's excellent! You're both really improving. It looks more like a real fight every time. But Justin, you don't have to be so aggressive. Even with the points covered, you can still hurt someone with these things.

JUSTIN: Ruan told us to make it seem real.

BARRY: He wants us to pretend to fight in such a way that it looks real. You're behaving as though you actually need to know how to kill a man with a sword. Ruan would call that method acting. You know he hates that.

(*FRANCIS enters from stage right, but JUSTIN doesn't see him*)

JUSTIN: Ruan Huthnance can kiss my ass.

FRANCIS: Temper, temper! Justin, I've known Ruan a great deal longer than you have. He's always been a difficult man, and I expect he always will be. I only wish you could understand why he does things the way he does. It may be hard to believe, but it's all down to his dedication to his craft. Ruan worships Shakespeare. He carries a copy of the complete plays with him everywhere he goes, and reads from it at odd moments, the way religious people study the Bible. To him, every word Shakespeare ever wrote is sacred, and deserves to be performed perfectly. That means studying the performances of the past masters and learning from them. He wants you to learn from him, as he learned by watching Gielgud and Olivier.

JUSTIN: It's all bullshit. Ruan is living in the past, he wants to turn the clock back fifty years. Fancy costumes, fancy accents, everything artificial. We don't do that in New York, not anymore. How can he not know that all that old crap went out the window when Brando played in *Streetcar* on Broadway? You don't get into a costume, you get into a character, by thinking and feeling like that character, as much as you can. That's what dedication means. *(While he is saying these lines, JUSTIN takes his sword to the back of the stage and stands it next to one of the pieces of stage furniture, apparently not wanting to put it back in the rack. It will remain there until he picks it up again in the second act.)*

FRANCIS: Hmm. Do me just one small favor, will you? Please don't mention Brando to Ruan, ever. All right, boys. I'm going for a breath of fresh air. Be good! *(He exits through the double doors)*

JUSTIN: The kind of fresh air that comes out of a bottle of Scotch. 'These tedious old fools!' I'll give Shakespeare credit, he knew what he was talking about when he gave Hamlet that line.

BARRY: Francis isn't the fool you think he is, not by a long chalk. Nor is Ruan. They both know their business when it comes to performing Shakespeare. Of course, that's going to be difficult for you to understand. Being a Yank, I mean. *(BARRY replaces his sword in the rack while saying these lines.)*

JUSTIN: Oh God, not you too. You Brits, always so superior. Thinking everything is done better over there than over here.

BARRY: Many things are.

JUSTIN: Let me tell you something. Anything that we Americans aren't already better at than you, it's only because we haven't bothered. Like those stupid games you play. You know, like cricket.

BARRY: Or football, I suppose you would say. I mean proper football, what you would call soccer.

JUSTIN: Yeah, that too. It's not hard, it's only kicking a ball.

BARRY: What about taking a penalty shot? That part of the game really is only kicking the ball. You think it's easy?

JUSTIN: Gotta be. Too bad I can't prove it to you.

BARRY: Would you like to try? We'll have a little contest right now. Dan, you can be the referee. All you have to do is say whether the ball went in the goal.

JUSTIN: What ball, what goal?

(BARRY goes to the costume rack and roughly pulls all the costumes off it, exposing the crossbar. He positions the 'goal' a few feet from the wall where it was. Then he gets Yorick's skull off the shelf and places it on the floor in front. Lastly, he positions himself as the keeper.)

JUSTIN: That's a lot smaller than a real goal. But okay.

(JUSTIN sets up and kicks the skull, not badly either; he has some athletic talent. It flies to BARRY's left, but BARRY has anticipated and knocks it away, across the stage.)

DAN: No goal! *(He retrieves the skull and places it on the 'spot'.)*

BARRY: My turn. *(He and JUSTIN change places. BARRY sets up while JUSTIN awaits the shot. BARRY goes to JUSTIN's right side with the shot, but JUSTIN is fast enough to knock it away.)*

DAN: No goal! This is great! *(He again retrieves the skull and resets it as the others change places)*

JUSTIN: I'm getting the hang of this now. Watch out! *(JUSTIN goes to BARRY's right this time, skidding the skull across the floor. BARRY is almost fooled and can do no more than sprawl across the floor while sweeping with his arm. He just manages to flick it away, but he clearly has let it get past the upright first.)*

DAN: Goal! America wins!

BARRY: No goal. That's a save. It didn't get past me.

JUSTIN: It went in! You were too late!

BARRY: Oh? Do you know how that is determined, by the rules? The ball must cross the line. Do you see a line here?

JUSTIN: Come on, that is so bogus. Obviously there's an imaginary line, under the crossbar. The ball was over it.

DAN: He's right!

BARRY: We don't play with imaginary lines. It would have to be unmistakable for it to count. It's not a goal unless you bounce it off the wall.

JUSTIN: What kind of rule is that? You just made that up! I won, we all know it.

BARRY: If it pleases you to think so. I've had enough exercise for the moment. I'm going to see what my sister is up to. *(He exits stage right, etc.)*

DAN: Do you want to practice some more? You need to, if you're going to keep up with Barry. He's ahead of you when it comes to fencing.

JUSTIN: Let's do it.

(They restore the rack and skull to their former places. JUSTIN takes a sword from the rack, apparently forgetting about the one he was using before. DAN takes his own from his equipment bag. DAN stands next to JUSTIN and begins to show him a bit of technique as the lights go down on the lower stage, and come up on the second dressing room. BARRY enters and sits down next to CHRISTINE.)

CHRISTINE: What is everyone doing?

BARRY: They're all busy. We have a few minutes to ourselves. God knows I need it. *(She stares at him)* I mean I need to speak to someone sane, not like those Yank loonies Ruan's collected. *(She does not seem persuaded)* And I also need . . . the other thing. Like before.

CHRISTINE: Barry, no. We can't, we have to stop. You're my brother, it's not right. I never should have let this go on. I never should have started. We agreed. A fresh start in New York, a new town, new habits, like a New Year's resolution.

BARRY: Half-brother and half-sister.

CHRISTINE: Makes no difference.

BARRY: Have you ever wondered why we don't look alike?

CHRISTINE: Different mothers.

BARRY: I have to tell you something. Something which I've known about for a long time, but you haven't. It will make all the difference.

CHRISTINE: Oh God, don't start telling me you're in love with me, not now. I couldn't bear it.

BARRY: Just listen. How were a half-brother and half-sister born so close in age? Less than a year. You were told, we were both told, that my mother died in childbirth and Father remarried immediately. That part is true. And that your mother wanted a child of her own, and they wasted no time making it happen. Also true, in a manner of speaking. Ever wonder why there were no more children after us? Because your mother couldn't have any. She never could. They both knew it when they married. Christine, you were adopted. From a foundlings' hospital, I think. We aren't related by blood. *(She is too shocked to speak, or at least appears to be so)* That's why we've always been so attracted to one another. It's perfectly natural for us. *(He takes her in his arms; she does not resist)* If you hadn't been adopted, if we'd met each other some other way, the law would say we could do anything we liked. We could have been married by now. Are we going to be stopped from doing what we both want – what we both know is right – by an accident that says we're both named Renfrew now? Even though your real mother, whatever her name was, wasn't called that?

CHRISTINE: What's in a name? Is someone coming?

(BARRY leaps up and opens the door to the dressing room and looks out, then shuts it and returns to CHRISTINE, now holding her closer than before)

BARRY: No one. And I locked the door, just in case.

CHRISTINE: We'll have to be quiet.

BARRY: I'll be quiet. And I do love you. *(They kiss passionately as the lights go down on the second dressing room, and come up on the main stage. DAN and JUSTIN are fencing as RUAN enters)*

RUAN: *(To DAN)* Everyone's going hard at it, I see.

DAN: Just finishing. *(RUAN stares at him without speaking)* Well. I guess you have to rehearse a scene or do some real actor stuff like that.

RUAN: Something like that, yes.

DAN: I can go out for a while. I'll check back in later and see if anyone wants to practice some more.

RUAN: What a fine idea. See you later.

(DAN hurriedly collects his things and leaves through the double doors)

JUSTIN: You must have something in mind, the way you got rid of him.

RUAN: I do have, yes. I need to set you straight before you go any farther down the wrong road. This is not a game. I am not putting on *Hamlet* just so that you can boast to your friends that you once played the role. I'm going to give of my best and I require the same of you. In television, you can learn your lines at a glance and as long as you say the words in the right order, it's good enough. Shakespeare requires proper acting.

JUSTIN: Acting is acting, Ruan. And the best acting is real. As long as you feel what your character feels, the words come out sounding just fine. It's all about getting into your character's head, thinking like him, being him. All the time, until you're finished with the part, not just when you're on stage or when the camera is rolling. I'm getting there. I feel more like Hamlet every day.

RUAN: Though this be Method, yet there is madness in't.

JUSTIN: What?

RUAN: Acting is pretence. Hamlet is not a real person, he is a fictional character. There is no 'him' for you to become, even if such a thing were possible. When you pretend to be an imaginary person, you use your imagination. You imagine how such a person would stand, would walk, would speak, if he did exist. And then you imitate that nonexistent person. You wear costumes, you change your vocal inflections, you behave utterly unlike yourself in every way. It all begins with the words. No real person would ever speak as Hamlet does, nor did they four hundred years ago. The actor must learn the meaning of every line, every word. A playscript is nothing but words. Understanding the words is the only way to understand how to pretend to be the person who says them. But a pretence is all it is or can be; proper acting is simply being clever about it.

JUSTIN: That is so wrong. We've gone beyond that old-fashioned, faked-up, artificial stuff. We've learned better, since the war. Everything is different now. The plays are different. We don't just have drawing rooms full of rich people anymore, we have plays about real people, like *Death of a Salesman*. And we have actors who behave like real people on the stage. Brando showed us how to do that.

RUAN: Brando.

JUSTIN: Of course! *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he revolutionised Broadway. And then the movies. *On the Waterfront*. And the others who came after him. James Dean, Montgomery Clift. He showed a whole new generation how to act. Why are you looking at me like that? Oh, no. It can't be. You can't not think Brando is great.

RUAN: Marlon Brando was not a great actor, or even a good one. Yes, let's speak of him in the past tense, his career may as well be over at this point. He was the opposite of everything an actor should be. Let's begin with his voice. When he raised it, he had an unlovely whining tone. When he lowered it, he mumbled and slurred his words to the point of incomprehensibility. He had only one method of portraying any character, whether a nobleman like Marc Antony or a lout like Stanley Kowalski, which was to – did I use the word 'method' again? I suppose I did. Marlon

Brando, the Method actor. Well, his method, such as it was, was to have his character seem so dull-witted as to border on the retarded, and simultaneously to be so unbalanced as to appear constantly on the verge of some maniacal outburst. That is not acting, it is the avoidance of acting. If the only thing you can think of to do with any character is to demonstrate his inner torment and hope the audience sympathises, you reveal your own lack of skill and range. Dean and Clift were equally bad, never anything from them except the tortured-soul routine. But Brando was worse because he started it. Then, later in his career, he found he could get away with doing nothing at all, so he did that instead. In *The Godfather*, he played every scene as though he were about to fall asleep, and persuaded everyone that that, too, counted as acting. No, not quite everyone. A few of us were never fooled.

JUSTIN: Are you done?

RUAN: No. Brando was an example of an entire school of thought that has made acting worse, the idea that you ought to portray 'real' people. Real people are not interesting, most of them. We go to plays and watch films because they contain characters who are strange and wondrous and altogether more interesting than real people. Shakespeare knew that. I need you to pretend to be all the things that make Hamlet interesting. Forget that you, yourself, are nothing more than a high-school dropout ne'er-do-well who waited tables in cheap restaurants until he struck lucky at an audition for a television show. Be more than that, be better than that, even if only when you are in character.

JUSTIN: I'm not going to stop being me. Any more than you're going to stop being crazy.

(BARRY and CHRISTINE enter from stage right. They both look a bit disheveled, her especially. RUAN turns and glares at them.)

BARRY: We were just working on some things downstairs.

RUAN: What things? Do tell me.

BARRY: A couple. Of things.

CHRISTINE: Yes, I was practising going mad.

JUSTIN: That's interesting. Ruan was just doing the same thing.

CHRISTINE: I'm getting good at it. At least Barry thinks so.

RUAN: That's fine, love, but it is I who am directing you and it is I who must be satisfied with your performance. Ophelia has fewer scenes than any of the other major characters, and I expect you to be first to finish learning your part. We'll start running your scenes here on the stage soon. And now, unfortunately, I must go looking for Francis. I think I know where he is. I'll fetch him back and then we can do some serious work with all of us here. *(He exits through the double doors)*

JUSTIN: We have to do something about Ruan. He's going crazy. Seriously.

BARRY: That's a bit of an exaggeration, surely.

JUSTIN: No, it isn't. He almost killed me earlier today. We were fencing, and somehow he got the drop on me. I mean, normally he couldn't have, but he pulled some kind of trick and I made a mistake just for a second, and just like that he took the button off the end of his sword and he was waving it around under my chin. Then Christine and Dan came in. I think he really wanted to kill me, I'm not joking.

CHRISTINE: Well, if you're that afraid of him –

JUSTIN: I'm not afraid of Ruan! I'm just, you know, worried.

CHRISTINE: You could always quit the show. You don't have to do this.

JUSTIN: I'm not quitting. How can I quit? I'm the star. I wouldn't let you down. I know how important it is to both of you to be in this show with me. And I'm not going to let Ruan run me off. But we need to do something. I think his plan was to make it look like an accident.

CHRISTINE: Maybe Ruan could have an accident.

BARRY: Lots of ways to have an accident in an old theatre like this one. Lots of junk lying about. A man could trip, slip, fall down. Or something could fall on him.

JUSTIN: Now you're talking. Now you're talking. (*He looks up*) How far of a drop do you think it is from the upper stage to here?

BARRY: Not far enough. You might break a leg, but it wouldn't kill you. (*JUSTIN is pulled up short by this. He hasn't thought of killing RUAN. But now . . .*)

JUSTIN: We need a plan. We can't let Ruan be the only one who has one. He thinks he's so much smarter than everyone else, but he isn't. We can outsmart him. I'm going to need help.

BARRY: I'm sure we can think of something. Two heads are better than one. Or three heads.

CHRISTINE: Two, for the moment. I'm going to visit Margot and spy out the land. If we're going to do something about Ruan, she'll have to be dealt with too, somehow. Leave that to me for now. You two can go on making plans. (*She exits stage right*)

BARRY: Whatever we do, it can't be traced back to us. It has to look like an accident.

JUSTIN: Or suicide.

BARRY: Ruan would never kill himself. He only ever blames others for anything that goes wrong. But the New York police won't know that, will they? If it looks right it won't be questioned. How would an aging ham actor do it? In the most dramatic way possible. His final performance. Hanging, of course. (*He looks up*) Not far enough to die through an ordinary fall, but more than enough for the hangman's drop. And there are those old ropes up there. (*They excitedly run up the stair at stage left to the upper stage, which is now clear*) If we can just get him up here with us, the two of us can handle him. (*He takes one of the ropes, pulls it to make sure it is attached above, and fashions a noose at the end*) If you can distract him, I'll get him from behind. Once it's around his neck, we just push him over the edge. It'll happen too fast for him to do anything about it. You'll only need to get him arguing with you about something, and God knows you're good at that. He'll forget I'm even there.

JUSTIN: It just might work.

BARRY: Screw your courage to the sticking point, and we'll not fail.

JUSTIN: Huh?

BARRY: Never mind. We only need the right opportunity. If we can wait until everyone else has gone for the night, and find a way to get Ruan to stay behind and lure him up here, there will be no witnesses and no evidence. Just a dead man for someone to find in the morning. (*He replaces the rope at the side of the upper stage, within easy reach, and they go back down the stair. The lights*

go down on the upper stage, and the second dressing room is moved back into position, unseen by the audience.)

JUSTIN: When do you want to try it?

BARRY: Tonight, if we can. There's no point in waiting.

JUSTIN: Okay. But I just thought of something. Why do you want Ruan dead? He hasn't tried to kill you, and he doesn't crap all over you every second the way he does with me. And your sister wants to help, too. I don't get it.

BARRY: We have our reasons. We've known Ruan a lot longer than you have.

JUSTIN: Yeah, I can see how that would do it.

BARRY: *(he extends his hand)* All for one and one for all.

JUSTIN: Ha! Now I know you're having fun with me. I'm pretty sure Shakespeare never wrote that line. But what the hell, it's a deal. *(They shake on it)*

(The lights go down on the lower stage, and the second dressing room is illuminated on the upper stage. MARGOT and CHRISTINE are in character, running a scene.)

MARGOT *(as Gertrude)*: To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

CHRISTINE *(as Ophelia)*: Where is the beautiful majesty of Denmark?

MARGOT: How now, Ophelia?

CHRISTINE *(singing)*: How should I your true love know,
From another one?
By his cockle hat and staff,
and his sandal shoon.

(MARGOT breaks character)

MARGOT: Which one of them was it?

CHRISTINE: What do you mean?

MARGOT: I know that look on your face. God knows it happened to me often enough when I was your age. You're showing all the signs. You aren't just acting that. One of the men is after you.

CHRISTINE: It's not like that.

MARGOT: Oh, I think it is. Justin, I suppose. He's exactly the sort who would think that his status as a 'big star' entitles him to certain privileges. Now don't try to protect him by saying something ridiculous, like that it's my husband. I know Ruan better than that. *(This last attracts considerable interest from CHRISTINE.)*

CHRISTINE: I'm sure you don't need to worry about Ruan. After all, he's married to you, so he doesn't need to look elsewhere.

MARGOT: Very kind of you to say, although I don't suppose you really mean a word of it. When I was your age I assumed every man I met wanted me, and they generally did. I'm sure it's the

same with you now. But the reason Ruan wouldn't stray has nothing to do with beauty or sex appeal. Or with me, even.

CHRISTINE: What is it, then?

MARGOT: You won't know this, he tries so hard to pretend it never happened. But in his younger days, Ruan was a holy terror. He wasn't at the same professional level as Burton and O'Toole and Richard Harris and Oliver Reed, but he wanted to be. He imitated them. Drinking his head off, chasing every woman in sight. When I met him, he was in a bad way. He wouldn't have lasted another five years in the business, and wouldn't have lived another ten.

CHRISTINE: He isn't like that now. He must have changed.

MARGOT: He did. He decided the way forward was into the past. Instead of trying to be an alcoholic madman like his contemporaries, he would imitate Gielgud and Olivier, people who were already getting on in years even when we first saw them. He would live for his art and only for art, he said. He would perfect his technique and that would make him famous, he said. And where did it get us? This place. No one wants actors who perform in the old-fashioned grand style. Even when he was still young he seemed old. And then he married me.

CHRISTINE: Why did you marry him?

MARGOT: When he gave up the booze, he also gave up womanising. Of course what he told me was that I was so perfect and beautiful that he couldn't even look at anyone else ever again. I believed it then. I actually thought I had reformed him by the power of love. Have you ever heard anything so silly? No, it was all about him, it always is. What really happened was that Ruan decided that he must gain control of his sexual appetites along with everything else. Give Ruan credit for that much, he wants to control everyone and everything, and he doesn't spare himself. He did it by finding a woman who would always be there after the show, available for him to screw, rain or shine. For that he needed an actress, someone who could travel with him and be in the same productions. He needed me.

CHRISTINE: Does he still need you?

MARGOT: Oh, yes. Even after all these years, Ruan never misses a performance.

CHRISTINE: Perhaps I should have asked whether you still need him.

MARGOT: We're getting a bit off the subject here. I did ask you a question.

CHRISTINE: I know. And it isn't Ruan.

MARGOT: So it's Justin.

CHRISTINE: No.

MARGOT: Surely you can't mean Dan?

CHRISTINE: No. I think he does have a crush on me, but no. So far Dan hasn't done anything more than invite me out for coffee. It's Francis.

MARGOT: I don't believe it. Francis cares for nothing except the bottle. His wife divorced him over his drinking years ago, and he hasn't looked back.

CHRISTINE: I don't think you know everything about Francis, or Ruan for that matter.

MARGOT: What do you mean?

CHRISTINE: Remember when we did *Midsummer Night's Dream* in Gloucester last year? The girl who played one of the fairies, Peasblossom I think it was? *(It should be apparent to the audience, but not to MARGOT, that she is lying)*

MARGOT: Gillian something. I remember her.

CHRISTINE: Ruan cast that show too. He told Gillian that if she wanted to be in it, she had to sleep with Francis. And now he wants me to do the same. He says it's my turn because he hasn't got anyone else lined up in this country. I see it now, don't you? Ruan lets Francis do all the things, makes him do the things, that Ruan can't do himself. Drunkard, womaniser. Ruan's a voyeur. He's producing his own little soap opera in real life because it amuses him.

MARGOT: Ruan always told me that he was carrying Francis because no one else would give him work. An act of Christian charity, he called it. He said Francis wasn't strong enough to give up drink the way Ruan did, and that we all had to tolerate it. Ruan thinks loyalty is the greatest of virtues.

CHRISTINE: Charity, loyalty. Ruan might as well be holding the bottle and pouring the whiskey down Francis's throat. And no woman would ever go near Francis if Ruan didn't procure for him. Well, not me. I won't do it. We can't let them do this.

MARGOT: What should we do?

CHRISTINE: Bring an end to this madness. You don't have to stay with Ruan always. Francis has no choice, but you have. You could be with someone else.

MARGOT: Sometimes I simply hate men, don't you? *(The lights fade on the upper stage. They go up on the lower stage, where we see BARRY and JUSTIN standing about, seemingly not doing very much. The double doors open and RUAN and FRANCIS enter.)*

RUAN: What have the two of you been up to?

JUSTIN: Nothing much, just a bit of sword work. You know. Practising being violent.

BARRY: We've been waiting for you.

RUAN: How typical. Nothing gets done, nothing that's of any use, unless I'm here to see to it myself. Now if we could just get Margot and Christine – *(they enter from stage right as he is saying this)* – ah, how convenient. Now everyone's here, we are going to work on a scene, and learn to do it properly. The scene is just before the visiting players enact the play within the play, the Mouse-Trap. Hamlet is already on stage, and Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia enter. Barry, Laertes isn't in this scene, so you can stand in as Rosencrantz. You know his lines? He only has one or two in this scene, anyhow.

BARRY: One line.

RUAN: Everyone else have their lines? *(All answer yes)* You had damned well better. I told you earlier to make ready for this scene as it's so important. This is where we see Hamlet's plan in action. Costumes, everyone. *(Those not already in costume take pieces of costume from the rack and put them on)* Okay, let's begin. Justin, you're here; the rest of us go off and on again. *(All but JUSTIN head off stage right, and before we lose sight of them, turn and go back)*

RUAN (*as Claudius*): How fares our cousin Hamlet?

JUSTIN (*as Hamlet*): Excellent, i' faith, of the chameleon's dish. I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so. (*RUAN obviously does not care for Justin's line readings but does not say anything yet*)

RUAN: I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet. These words are not mine.

JUSTIN: No, nor mine now. (*To FRANCIS (as Polonius)*) My lord, you played once i' th' university, you say.

FRANCIS: That I did, my lord, and was accounted a good actor.

JUSTIN: And what did you enact?

FRANCIS: I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i' th' Capitol. Brutus killed me.

JUSTIN: It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there. (*To BARRY (as Rosencrantz)*): Be the players ready?

BARRY: Ay, my lord, they stay upon your patience.

MARGOT (*as Gertrude*): Come hither, my good Hamlet. Sit by me.

JUSTIN: No, my good mother, here's mettle more attractive. (*He sits by Christine (as Ophelia)*)

FRANCIS (*aside*): O ho, did you mark that?

JUSTIN: (*to Christine*) Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

CHRISTINE: No, my lord.

JUSTIN: I mean my head upon your lap?

CHRISTINE: Ay, my lord.

JUSTIN: Did you think I meant country matters?

(RUAN has been growing increasingly dissatisfied with JUSTIN's performance, not bothering to hide it as he does not need to stay in character during rehearsal and feels free to wear his director's hat when he is not speaking lines. He has been moving about, prompting the actors and gesturing to them to indicate what he wants. Now he breaks character completely.)

RUAN: That's enough. Justin, I can't let you do any more of that.

JUSTIN: What?

RUAN: You don't understand this scene at all. Hamlet is not being polite, he is being quite rude, and doing his best to provoke trouble. He does this to heighten the tension, because he knows that in a few moments, he is going to use the Players to accuse Claudius of murder. He wants Claudius on edge, and doesn't care if he offends everyone else too. When he speaks to Ophelia of 'country matters', as you pronounced it, he is not talking about farms and cows. Well, in a way he is, since he is treating Ophelia as a sort of silly cow whose only asset is the fertile land between her legs. He actually asks her about 'cunt-ry matters'. Yes, just like that.

JUSTIN: That's impossible. You have a dirty mind.

RUAN: No more so than Shakespeare himself. His plays are full of dirty jokes and sexual references. As you would know if you had ever studied them.

CHRISTINE: He's right, you know. Someone wrote a whole book called *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, it's full of examples.

JUSTIN: Shut up. Stay out of this.

RUAN: Oh, very good! That's the spirit! If only you would put some of that spite and hostility, that desire to manipulate, into your characterization of the Prince.

JUSTIN: Why would I? Hamlet is the hero, he's the good guy. The play is all about his noble character, how he's better than everyone else.

RUAN: Justin. Barry was playing Rosencrantz just now.

JUSTIN: So?

RUAN: So, what happens to Rosencrantz, and his friend Guildenstern? They die. Hamlet, rather gleefully, forges a letter to have them executed when they reach England.

JUSTIN: That's different, he only does that because he knows they're in on the plot against him.

RUAN: True. But Ophelia isn't; at least, no more than Polonius forces her to be. She loves Hamlet. He tells her that he doesn't love her back and calls her a whore – yes, I know he doesn't use that word, but it's what he means – and drives her to suicide. Hamlet doesn't kill Claudius when he has the chance, and he hotheadedly kills Polonius by mistake because he thinks it's Claudius, not Polonius, behind the arras (*gesturing to the one hanging on the set*). Hamlet is not a hero. He may be more clever than everyone else, but in practice his actions always lead to disaster, and he is morally no better than the other characters. Not even Claudius.

JUSTIN: You're crazy. You're insane. No one could think that Claudius is anything but a villain. He killed his own brother.

RUAN: Oh? And you think that automatically makes him a villain? To Shakespeare's audience it wouldn't have. They knew that half the kings of England got the throne by murdering someone.

JUSTIN: Yeah, like Richard the Third, killing the princes in the Tower. Shakespeare didn't make him a hero.

RUAN: Do you really want to debate English history with me? Very well, let's. (*RUAN is clearly just getting warmed up into full rant mode. FRANCIS, who has seen this before, wanders to the back of the stage. He removes a bottle of whisky from a hiding place in one of the pieces of set furniture and drinks from it, making no effort now to conceal what he is doing.*) Take the man who succeeded Richard, Henry Tudor. He parlayed an utterly bogus claim to the throne, based on illegitimate descent from John of Gaunt, into victory at Bosworth. Do you know who was rightful king of England after the princes in the Tower disappeared and Richard was killed? Edward Plantagenet, the Earl of Warwick. He was the son of George, the Duke of Clarence, Richard the Third's older brother. Edward was the last living Plantagenet in the legitimate male line. He was ten years old when Henry stole the crown. Henry locked him away in the Tower of London and waited for him to achieve his majority so that he could be decently executed, then chopped his head off. Henry only waited that long so he couldn't be accused of being a child-killer like Richard. Of course, Shakespeare couldn't write about all this because he had to live under the Tudors. What a bloody crew. Henry the Eighth, chopping off heads left and right. 'There is no head so fine but I

will make it fly!’ He actually said that. And his children. Edward the Sixth, the Protestant fanatic who died when he was only fifteen, and almost caused a civil war by trying to hand off the crown to his ridiculous cousin, Lady Jane Grey. Mary, the Catholic fanatic who killed hundreds. Elizabeth, who undid Mary’s work by sending the ghastly Topcliffe into the land to hunt down the Catholics, and who killed the other Mary because the Queen of Scots had a better claim to the throne than she had. And there were others Shakespeare did write about. Henry the Sixth and Richard the Second were both murdered by their successors. Shakespeare’s friend Marlowe made a play about the murder of Edward the Second. Oh yes, Shakespeare’s audience knew about all this. To them, Claudius’s way of getting the throne was just business as usual.

JUSTIN: Well, Ruan. All I can say to your little history lesson is – Thank God for George Washington!

RUAN: Do you think you Yanks are any better? George bloody Washington, who fought a revolution to preserve his status as a rich landowner with a plantation full of slaves. And Abraham Lincoln, a bloodstained civil warrior and a worse dictator than even Cromwell was in England --
(FRANCIS has by now seen enough of this. He has put down the whisky bottle, for the moment, and now approaches RUAN and JUSTIN.)

FRANCIS: Gentlemen, gentlemen. This is all very interesting. But now we’re all here, can’t we get back to work on the play? *(Others indicate agreement)*

RUAN: No. We can’t. Not until this one here agrees to do things the right way.

JUSTIN: Ruan, there is no right way. Even if there is, I can’t do things your way, not in the time we have. What I can do is learn all the lines and find a way to say them that fits with my acting style and my own ideas about Hamlet’s character. I know you don’t like that, but trust me, it’ll work. It really will. Why do you think I’m one of the most popular actors on daytime TV? Audiences love what I do. I don’t know why they love it, they just do. And the audience here will love me too.

MARGOT: He’s right about that. We can sell out every show. You know what that means. Lots of attention, lots of reviews. For all of us here.

RUAN: *(To MARGOT)* You take his side now, against me? Do you? *(To JUSTIN)* And you, I see now what you’ve had in mind all along. I thought you wanted to better yourself, to learn, to take a step up in class. All you ever really intended was to turn *Hamlet*, the play, into another soap opera, and turn Hamlet, the character, into a version of your television character. You disgust me, both of you.

MARGOT: I just want what’s best for us –

(JUSTIN steps in front of MARGOT, acting the gallant)

JUSTIN: Ruan, we all want what’s best, and success is the best thing of all. Let’s just do the play and make a splash. You know we can. An audience will come here to see Shakespeare – to see you – who never would have come if I weren’t here. And so what if my performance isn’t the way you would have done it? It’s still Shakespeare’s words, it doesn’t matter that much how I say them.

RUAN: It does matter. It matters more than anything in the world. You think I exaggerate, but I don’t. This is why we’re here, not just the six of us but the entire human race. It’s why God, or Mother Nature, or evolution, put us here. Are we beasts, to eat and sleep and screw and die? No.

We have minds, we can create. Shakespeare had the greatest mind in human history, his plays are our species' greatest accomplishment. Greater than any painting, greater than any symphony, although I will grant Beethoven second place. Would any orchestra dare to be at less than their best when they play a Beethoven symphony? Would any conductor tolerate it? No, they know better. So should we. If we act Shakespeare poorly, we do not celebrate him, we desecrate him. And I will not allow that.

JUSTIN: You're just going to have to take what you can get.

RUAN: No, I don't have to. Better this production should die in rehearsal than be put on the way you would have me do it. Have you noticed that all six of us here on the stage play characters who die during the play? Better all of us should die in real life than live with the shame of having butchered Shakespeare's greatest play. But especially you.

JUSTIN: You really are crazy, aren't you. You already wanted to kill me once before.

RUAN: Oh?

JUSTIN: When we were practicing with swords. I didn't take it seriously but you did. When I dropped mine and you were pointing yours at me –

RUAN: You may take my word for it that if I had wanted to kill you, then or at any other time, you would be dead already.

JUSTIN: You were acting crazy then too. You were working yourself up to it and then Dan came in –

RUAN: You little whoreson. I don't need a sword to deal with the likes of you. My bare hands would be more than enough.

JUSTIN: Try it, old man –

(They move toward each other and FRANCIS and BARRY step in to pull them apart if necessary. The double doors open and DAN bursts in.)

DAN: Hi, guys! I told you I'd come back!

(All stop what they are doing and turn to stare at him, wordlessly)

DAN: Am I interrupting something? Maybe I should just come back again tomorrow. *(He turns to leave)*

CHRISTINE: No, wait, Dan. That's the best idea I've heard from anyone here in quite some time. I'll go with you and we can get something to eat.

MARGOT: I'll join you.

RUAN: And I'll join my wife. Yes, I do think this is a good idea. Our little dinner party should make for a more congenial evening than what I've been subjected to in the past few minutes. By morning I'll have thought of a way for us to get past our problems. All of us. Justin, let's plan on a fresh start tomorrow. I suggest you also find a way to relax for the next few hours.

JUSTIN: Ruan, what the hell is this? A minute ago you were ready to fight me.

RUAN: I learned a long time ago that these rehearsal contretemps mean nothing, in fact less than nothing. I've been through worse, many times. As long as all concerned cool down and keep a clear head, there is a solution. Among professionals, which all of us are, there always is. Do you

know, I now think most of this has been my fault. Yes, I see it now. I simply haven't done a good enough job of showing you the right way. I need to lead by example. I even have an idea how I shall do it. (*BARRY has been showing increasing distress as he realizes that RUAN is about to escape. He moves between RUAN and the door.*) Everyone, let's all get a good night's sleep and –

BARRY: No, Ruan. We need to settle this now.

RUAN: We?

BARRY: I mean you. You and Justin. If we sleep on it now we'll be right back where we started in the morning with nothing settled. Francis, if you would take Ruan's place – Margot, are you going to that bistro down the street where we all had lunch before? (*MARGOT nods yes, although her expression makes clear that she is far from certain she likes any of this*) Of course you are, it's the only one in this filthy neighborhood that's any good at all. Make sure you order a bottle of that wine you liked. (*He glances at FRANCIS*) Two bottles. Right then, it's settled. Francis –

FRANCIS: I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here, for whatever comes next. As you so obviously intend to do. If you're going to stay and lend support to Justin in whatever you or he or both of you have in mind, I shall do the same for Ruan.

RUAN: Very kind of you, Francis, but there's no need. (*He turns to go. BARRY again tries to block him.*) Barry. I hardly think you're going to stop me having dinner with my lovely wife and her friends, if that's what I wish to do. Are you? No? Good. Francis, are you coming? You won't be taking my place, but you're welcome all the same.

FRANCIS: No, thank you. I have other business for this evening.

(*RUAN thinks for a moment, then glances back at the whisky bottle, and clearly decides that FRANCIS means he would rather spend his time drinking. RUAN gestures acquiescence.*)

RUAN: Right then, I'll leave you to it. Nine sharp tomorrow morning, everyone.

(*All except BARRY, JUSTIN, and FRANCIS go out the double doors. FRANCIS waits until the rest are out of earshot, then advances on BARRY.*)

FRANCIS: All right, out with it.

BARRY: Francis –

FRANCIS: Ruan may be too self-absorbed to notice, but I'm not. And I'm not half so drunk as you think I am, either. I know you two are up to something.

JUSTIN: Francis, we aren't. We really aren't.

FRANCIS: (*To JUSTIN*) In your case I suppose that's just barely possible. (*To BARRY*) You are far too clever not to be behind whatever is going on. And whatever it is, it must stop before it goes any farther. Remember our agreement.

JUSTIN: Agreement?

BARRY: (*To JUSTIN*) Something that happened a long time ago, it doesn't matter now. It was all left behind when we crossed the Atlantic.

FRANCIS: I think several things were brought over from England that ought to have been left there. Mostly having to do with you and your sister.

JUSTIN: Like what?

BARRY: (*To JUSTIN*) Don't listen to him. He's trying to turn us against each other, can't you see that?

FRANCIS: (*To JUSTIN*) Some old, bad habits were brought here. And I don't mean my drinking, which by the way is not at all a bad thing in an actor if it doesn't affect his performance.

BARRY: (*To FRANCIS*) All right, all right. You needn't go into it any further. Justin and I had a plan, it's true. We can't do it now since Ruan has left for the night. I was trying to get him to stay but I ended up with you. We were going to talk to him, out of the others' hearing. We were going to persuade him to let Justin have his own way with his performance.

FRANCIS: Were you? Ruan isn't easily persuaded about such things. You of all people know that already.

BARRY: Yes, but we had a particular card to play. I was going to tell him that if he didn't give way, I would tell Christine the truth about – (*he glances at JUSTIN*) certain things. And Justin would hear it too.

FRANCIS: You idiot. All the years I've spent protecting all of you and you would throw it away.

BARRY: I wouldn't have, really. I would only have threatened to do it. The threat would have been enough.

JUSTIN: I can't believe you two. The more you talk, the less I know. Someone better tell me what's going on. What agreement? The truth about what?

FRANCIS: I'm not going to tell you. But I can tell you something else. Something that will be of more use to you.

JUSTIN: Yeah, what?

FRANCIS: How to get Ruan off your back. And with no threats needed. (*FRANCIS begins striding and posturing now; he can be almost as pedantic as RUAN*) It's true you will never be able to perform to Ruan's satisfaction. Don't feel that that's a failure on your part, at least not much of one. None of us can. No one is good enough for him, except someone like Olivier. But there are ways to keep him happy. Why do you think he dislikes your performance so much?

JUSTIN: He seems to hate everything about my performance.

FRANCIS: You won't be able to change everything, but change just one thing. It will make all the difference.

JUSTIN: What thing?

FRANCIS: Your accent. Simply start talking like – how to put this in terms you will understand – have you seen some of those Hollywood films of the thirties with English actors playing dukes and earls and such? Horribly posh? Speaking as if they had plums in their mouths and had to talk round them?

JUSTIN: Yeah. But come on, no one ever talked like that except bad movie actors.

FRANCIS: You're wrong. Accents are terribly important in England. Even today, there are people who talk exactly that way. It's how they demonstrate social superiority. You don't have to go that far, just part of the way. Change the flat 'a' to an 'ah'. Pronounce the words the way some stuffy old member of the peerage on his way to take tea with the Queen would do, at least a little. An interesting thing will happen. The rest of yourself will follow along. You will start standing and

moving and behaving like a nobleman born and bred, someone who thinks he's better than everyone else.

JUSTIN: All right. Let me try some lines. (*In the following, JUSTIN speaks in a sort of mid-Atlantic accent, something like the singer Madonna's after she began living in England*)

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

FRANCIS: Very good, much better already.

JUSTIN: That was totally fake. I can't be like what's-her-name in *My Fair Lady*, no one is going to believe I'm upper-class because of how I talk. Ruan won't.

FRANCIS: Who do you think Ruan is, anyhow? What do you think he is? A provincial lad from some God-forsaken fishing village in Cornwall who moved to London and imitated his betters. He changed his accent and his manners. Everything about him is contrived. He's been doing it for so long he's even convinced himself he was always like that, and now he can make others believe it too. When he sees you trying to do the same thing, he'll love it.

JUSTIN: Thanks for the advice. I'll keep it in mind. And by the way, nice try. But I did notice that you were trying to change the subject. So. What happened back in England, what got brought over here, what agreement?

BARRY: Francis, don't –

FRANCIS: (*To JUSTIN*) Barry doesn't want you to be told certain things about, ah, his sister. Although I would be surprised if you haven't guessed some of it. We're in the Lower East Side. Alphabet City. You live in New York. What is this neighbourhood known for?

JUSTIN: Drugs.

FRANCIS: That's right. I know you make fun of me for going out to drink. Have you noticed that Christine is off her face every time she comes through those doors?

JUSTIN: I thought she was just getting into character to play Ophelia.

BARRY: It's not that bad. She's kicked the stuff before, she will again.

JUSTIN: So that's the big secret? Drugs? Half the actors in New York are on something.

FRANCIS: No, the big secret is the one Christine doesn't know.

BARRY: Francis –

FRANCIS: Christine isn't really Barry's sister. Not by blood. She was adopted. The rest of us know, never mind how, but she doesn't.

JUSTIN: So? It's nothing to be ashamed of. You know, your big secrets aren't turning out to be –

FRANCIS: There's more. Christine hasn't been told because she would want to know who her real parents are. And then –

BARRY: Shut it! Leave it out, you drunken old fool! (*He chases FRANCIS to the back of the stage, with obvious intent. FRANCIS grabs the whisky bottle and smashes BARRY in the head with*

it, showering glass fragments everywhere and momentarily stunning him. FRANCIS picks up a sword from the rack, one that looks ready for serious business, and climbs the stair to the upper level as BARRY regains his feet.)

FRANCIS: I'll stay here until you leave. Don't try to come up.

(BARRY also gets a sword, and takes a coat from the costume rack which he drapes over his left arm. He ascends the stair in a rage. FRANCIS threatens him with his sword, stabbing downward, but he is not very handy with it. BARRY fouls FRANCIS's sword with the coat and gains the top level. JUSTIN follows immediately after; now all three of them are up top. FRANCIS manages to remove the coat from his sword and stands ready to fight as best he can.)

FRANCIS: No more, Barry. Let's neither of us do anything we can't take back.

BARRY: I can't trust you. You were ready to tell him *(indicating JUSTIN)* everything.

FRANCIS: No. I wasn't. No more than I'd already told. He had to be told some of it. Barry, I can't allow this production to fail. That would be the worst disaster for us all. We've wagered everything on making a go of it in America, all of us have. We need him. *(He gestures out toward the seats, and they both face front.)* Because the people who are going to be sitting out there will pay to see him.

BARRY: Maybe you're right. *(While these last lines are being said, JUSTIN goes to the side of the stage and seizes the prepared rope. He rushes forward. FRANCIS and BARRY both hear him and start to turn. The actor playing FRANCIS will be wearing a sort of parachutist's harness under his outer clothing; the rope is prepared with a load-bearing steel cable that cannot be seen by the audience. The actor playing JUSTIN loops the noose around FRANCIS's neck, and connects the steel cable to the harness. To the audience, it appears that only the rope has been put in place.)*

BARRY: Justin, no – not him –

(JUSTIN pushes FRANCIS off the front of the upper stage, sword still in hand. The rope jerks as FRANCIS is pulled up short, a few feet above the lower stage. He drops his sword and dies.)

BARRY: What have you done?

JUSTIN: What have we done, you mean. And now I think you're going to tell me the rest of the secrets.

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

As the curtain rises, the lower stage is lighted just enough for the audience to see what has changed since the end of the first act. FRANCIS's body is nowhere to be seen. The hanging rope is also out of sight, and the fragments of the shattered bottle are gone. On the upper stage, the large dressing room is fully illuminated. JUSTIN and BARRY are already there. The door opens, and CHRISTINE enters. She already looks a bit worse for wear.

JUSTIN: We don't have long. Ruan will be here soon.

BARRY: We have time. One thing about Ruan, he's never early and he's never late. He said nine and he'll be here at nine exactly.

CHRISTINE: Is Francis coming?

JUSTIN: You didn't tell her?

BARRY: *(To CHRISTINE)* Francis won't be coming. He had a small accident. He's dead.

CHRISTINE: Really. Well, it was meant to be Ruan, but Francis is next best. Where is he now?

BARRY: In the basement of the building across the alleyway. Lucky for us this neighbourhood is such a slum that there are derelict properties everywhere. The police won't find him for days. When they do, they'll think he was robbed and murdered while he was staggering about drunk.

CHRISTINE: You're so clever. Both of you are. That's what I call a good start. But now Ruan really must be next. *(To JUSTIN)* I suppose you're still wondering why I'm so keen to see him dead.

JUSTIN: No. I'm not. You see, I know everything now. Barry has told me everything.

CHRISTINE: Everything? *(She is genuinely fearful at this idea)*

JUSTIN: Yes, everything. We had a little heart-to-heart last night. I told him I wouldn't help with the rest of what you need to do unless he spilled all the beans. And I have to say, I was shocked. *(JUSTIN steps closer to CHRISTINE, leaving BARRY behind him and out of his sight)* I mean, I know a lot of actors, and some of them are . . . but that disgusting old man.

CHRISTINE: That disgusting old man. *(She doesn't know whether he means RUAN or FRANCIS)*

JUSTIN: Barry told me all about him. About how both of you started working with him when you were still underage. About how Ruan's a – child molester. *(CHRISTINE catches BARRY's eye; BARRY shrugs, unseen by JUSTIN)* About how he won't let young people have parts unless they give him what he wants. About how he didn't even care which one of you it was. And how you let Ruan – I can't even say it – with you so that he would leave your brother alone. *(CHRISTINE is growing visibly relieved as she realizes BARRY has told JUSTIN a pack of lies)* Yeah. And Barry told me about you, too. Something you don't know. I can't believe none of them ever told you. You were adopted.

CHRISTINE: *(pretending she has never heard this before)* Oh my God. Oh Jesus Christ.

JUSTIN: It's nothing to be ashamed of. I mean, so what if a certain famous actress became pregnant by a certain famous movie actor who was an old friend of Ruan's, and she didn't believe in abortion, which was illegal then anyhow, and Ruan arranged for two other friends of his to adopt

the baby? (*CHRISTINE and BARRY exchange looks again as before*) Hey, at least we know where you got your talent from, right?

CHRISTINE: Right!

JUSTIN: And Mister Famous Movie Actor agreed to support you financially, and Francis and Ruan have been keeping it secret all these years. Yeah, I guess you could say I know everything. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone.

CHRISTINE: I'm glad you found out about all this. Now you see why something had to be done. About Francis and Ruan and the, the horrible things they've been doing for so many years.

JUSTIN: Well, something's already been done about Francis. Now we have to take care of Ruan.

CHRISTINE: We must figure out a way to do it that will look like, like, an accident or something. Not like . . .

BARRY: Murder. If you are willing to perform the act, you ought to be willing to call it by its right name. I sounded a bit like Ruan just then, didn't I? He's always been one to get straight to the point, even if it means uttering some home truths. Well, now that we are plotting Ruan's murder – which is exactly what we are doing – let's do it the way he would do it himself. Let's figure out how to perform our little play, *The Death Of Ruan Huthnance*, in such a way that it is maximally persuasive to the audience. Which, in our case, will be the police. We must all learn our parts and play them perfectly. The police must be made to believe that what we will pretend happened actually did happen. Fortunately, I have already thought about this and I know how to do it. Let's go up to the stage. I need to show both of you. Justin, you go ahead, I need a minute with my sister.

(Justin shrugs and leaves)

CHRISTINE: What are we –

BARRY: Trust me. I've got it all planned. But this first. *(He kisses her passionately and she responds in kind; while they are embracing, JUSTIN enters the main stage. BARRY and CHRISTINE leave the dressing room, and as the lights go out on the upper stage, they join JUSTIN on the main stage.)*

JUSTIN: *(to BARRY)* You know, you really are starting to sound like him.

BARRY: I shall take that as a compliment. However much we all hate him, for different reasons, he does know a great deal about how to put on a play.

CHRISTINE: How do we put on ours?

BARRY: We can't reenact the Francis scenario. One person killed by drug-addicted thieves, okay. Two would seem suspicious. It must be something very different. I think the best way is what Justin already said Ruan wanted to do to him, to run him through with a sword while practising. That's how we will tell the police it happened. Just a tragic accident, nothing more. Ruan was demonstrating to Justin how he wanted the fight between Hamlet and Laertes to go. Dan wasn't here so Ruan took over the fight-coaching role. He was showing Justin how to make it look real, how to come as close as possible with his sword without actually touching his opponent. Justin didn't like it, in fact he said it seemed too dangerous, but Ruan insisted. Stretch your sword right out, Ruan said. I'll show you how close I can come, he said. And you'll use a sword with no button, he said. But Ruan isn't as young as he used to be and he made a terrible mistake *(he mimes*

being run through and collapsing). I'll say I was watching the whole thing and it happened exactly that way.

JUSTIN: I like it. It'll work. I'm really going to enjoy killing him.

BARRY: Oh, you won't kill him. I'm going to do that.

JUSTIN: What?

BARRY: You will only kill Ruan, by accident, in the little story we are going to tell to the police. I shall do it in real life. Justin, it must be that way. Dan has already told you that you aren't very good at swordplay. I'm afraid that's true. And Ruan is already very suspicious of you as well, much less so of me. Bear in mind we can only afford to do this once, and he has to die, not only be injured. If we make a pincushion of him even the stupid New York police will know something is wrong. It must be a single blow and it must be through the heart. *(While saying this BARRY has gone to the sword rack and selected a weapon)* Here's how. We do this sometime when Dan isn't here. That's easy, he's away most of the time anyhow. Only Margot needs to be dealt with. Christine, you will find some excuse to get her off the stage and into the dressing room. Ruan, Justin, and I will be here. Justin will occupy Ruan with some talk about swords, asking some question or other about how to use them. It will then seem natural for me to take an interest in the subject. I'll get a sword, perhaps this one, it seems good enough. The point is very sharp, and so is the blade near it, that's to help the tip go in. Hum, a real fighting weapon, how did it end up here? I'll interrupt Ruan, showing him the sword like so, holding it almost straight up, indicating the point with my left hand *(he demonstrates)*. I'll ask my own question about it, it doesn't matter what. Ruan will come closer to look at it, perhaps bending over a bit. Like you're doing now, Justin, do you see, your natural curiosity almost forces you to look at it closely. Now, this sword, it hasn't an edge this far down, so I can hold the blade with my left hand without cutting myself, but the point is more than sharp enough. I already have the handle in my right hand – so – and I grasp the blade with my left – so. One quick two-handed thrust, and Ruan is run through – so. *(He demonstrates; JUSTIN jumps back at the movement, which comes uncomfortably close to him)* See? You jumped, but nowhere near quickly enough to avoid being skewered. Ruan won't be able to avoid it either. I'll aim for the heart, and I think I'll be able to hit it nine times out of ten. Even if I miss by a bit, he won't live long. I've read about the sword fights they used to have. Christopher Marlowe killed a man with a sword, did you know that? When you're run through, you might live for a minute or two but no more than that. Not with heavy blades like these. Then, a quick wipe to remove my fingerprints if any, and Justin, you take the handle to put yours on it. Job done. *(He returns the sword to the rack)*

CHRISTINE: *(She is staring adoringly at BARRY)* Brilliant. It will work, I know it will. Everything is in place. We won't even have to worry about Dan. When we were at dinner last night, he said he wouldn't come back here until we called and told him he was needed. We will have Ruan all to ourselves.

JUSTIN: What about Margot? She'll be here the whole time. *(to BARRY)* I know you said we could wait until Christine gets her out of the way in the dressing room. But she's bound to figure out what really happened even if she doesn't see it. We can't have her talking to the police. *(He pauses a moment)* Are we going to have to get rid of her too?

CHRISTINE: Oh, no. That won't be necessary. I've almost got her to the point where she would be willing to kill him herself. Let me work on her a bit more and she'll be on side completely. Justin, we need her. She's one more witness to the story we are going to tell.

JUSTIN: What if she doesn't come around?

CHRISTINE: Then we'll – do what you said. But it won't come to that, I promise.

(JUSTIN looks at her, obviously uncertain whether to trust her. RUAN and MARGOT come in through the double doors. RUAN looks about but says nothing.)

BARRY: Morning! Now we're all here, I'm looking forward to getting some work done! *(RUAN looks sharply at him and BARRY realizes he has made a mistake)*

RUAN: Not all of us. Unless Francis is here somewhere. Is he?

BARRY: No. I thought he was with you. Isn't he just behind you?

RUAN: Why would you think he was?

BARRY: He's staying at the same hotel as you two, isn't he? I just assumed you would all come over together.

RUAN: Francis didn't come back to the hotel last night. I waited up for him in the bar and he never showed. He wasn't in his room this morning, either. What time did he leave here last night?

JUSTIN: About a half hour after you did.

BARRY: We discussed a few things and then we all left.

RUAN: Together?

BARRY: We went out the door together. Francis headed up toward the Bowery. He invited us to join him for a drink but we said no. The sort of bars they have there, can you imagine it?

JUSTIN: Yeah, he's probably passed out on the floor of some gin mill. Or else sleeping it off in an alley.

RUAN: You think so.

JUSTIN: I do. He's probably flat on his back. Dead to the world. You really ought to do something about that.

RUAN: About what?

JUSTIN: His drinking, Ruan. It'll be the death of him. I won't be surprised if he doesn't make it all the way through the run of this production. What if he can't go on one night? What do we do then? I know your budget doesn't run to hiring understudies.

RUAN: Kindly allow me to be the one to decide what does and does not need doing, when it comes to one of my oldest friends. Francis does not permit his drinking to interfere with his work. He is always ready when the curtain goes up. I've never seen him miss a cue or forget a line. Nor have I ever known him to fail to make it back to our hotel in the evening.

JUSTIN: Maybe he got lucky. Maybe he's shacked up with some barfly he picked up.

RUAN: Perhaps. *(It is obvious he doesn't believe any of this)* We'll see if he comes along in a bit. Meanwhile, we can start working. Oh, before we do. What did the three of you talk about last night after the rest of us left?

JUSTIN: Nothing much. Nothing important.

BARRY: (to RUAN) Francis gave Justin a bit of a talking to about how he should play Hamlet. Mostly taking your side. As you knew he would, didn't you? That's why you were willing to go out to dinner and leave Francis behind. You knew he would say all the same things you would have.

RUAN: It's not a surprise when two people with great experience in performing Shakespeare take the same view. And what did he say?

BARRY: That Justin should concentrate on his accent, on sounding posh. He said if Justin did that, other things would fall into place.

RUAN: Excellent advice. I should have thought to tell Justin that myself. It sounds as though your little session went well.

BARRY: It did.

JUSTIN: Very well. (RUAN looks sharply at him) I mean, now that Barry's reminded me, yeah, Francis told me some things that made sense. I'm still thinking over some of the things he said.

RUAN: Perhaps you'd like to demonstrate what you've learned.

JUSTIN: Hey, wait a minute. Last night you said you had thought of a way to show me what you meant. You said you had an idea of how to do it. (He gestures toward the front of the stage) You first.

RUAN: All right. I was going to do this later, but now is as good a time as any. I have a little routine, sort of a party piece, that I've done before. It consists of being given a list of several famous speeches from Shakespeare and then performing them on the spot. No preparation, one after the other. This is to show you that proper acting doesn't require ages to get into character. Who will give me my assignments? Not you of course, you don't know Shakespeare well enough. Margot, dear, will you do the honours?

JUSTIN: Hey, that's not fair. Your own wife? Of course she's only going to tell you to recite speeches that she knows you like giving. She's going to point you to all your favourites.

RUAN: What's wrong with that? The purpose of the exercise is to demonstrate good acting. Shouldn't I be performing speeches I know, from parts I'm familiar with, so that I can show you my best?

JUSTIN: Okay, okay. But won't you need scripts? Or at least to sneak a peek at your copy of the complete plays? You can't possibly have memorized all of Shakespeare. Not even you could do that.

RUAN: How unfamiliar you are with the theatre and those of us have spent our lives in it. No, I don't know all of Shakespeare. But I have acted in all of the famous plays, and learned the leading parts, even if I didn't always play them. I learned all of the famous speeches by heart, and many less famous ones. I did this for fun, or out of pride, whichever it pleases you to call it. But I did it. And I'm not the only one. If Larry or John walked in here right now, either of them could rattle off most of *Othello* or *Macbeth*, no matter how long it's been since they acted in those plays.

JUSTIN: Larry? John?

RUAN: Olivier, Gielgud.

JUSTIN: Oh, so you're on a first-name basis with both of them, are you?

RUAN: Another thing you wouldn't know. We refer to them by their Christian names as a show of respect. A way of recognising that there is only one Larry, and one John, in the theatre. *(to MARGOT)* Are you ready, dear? I'll start in a moment. Use your judgment, but you had better stick to the more famous speeches. That will improve the chance that Justin has heard them before. *(He goes to the costume rack and pulls it forward. He stands next to it and indicates he is ready. The others stand off to give him space.)*

MARGOT: In order: Edmund. Richard the Second. And one more. Hmm. Henry the Fifth.

JUSTIN: Aren't you going to tell him which speeches you mean?

MARGOT: I don't need to. He already knows which ones.

(RUAN gets a costume for his first turn. He selects a smart-looking short jacket but does not put it on yet. He goes to center stage.)

RUAN: *(to JUSTIN)* This is Edmund, from *King Lear*. His speech is about how unfair it is that his brother Edgar will inherit everything and he will get nothing. *(RUAN puts on the jacket and stands up straight. He suddenly appears many years younger than his actual age.)*

Thou, Nature, art my goddess. To thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why 'bastard'? Wherefore base,
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With 'base', with 'baseness, bastardy – base, base' –
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed
Go to th' creating a whole tribe of fops
Got 'tween sleep and wake? Well then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to th' legitimate. Fine word, 'legitimate'.
(RUAN finds a piece of paper in his jacket pocket, removes it, and waves it about)
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall to th' legitimate. I grow, I prosper.
Now, Gods, stand up for bastards!

(At this point it is becoming clear to JUSTIN that RUAN has been telling the truth about his acting ability. He really is good. RUAN goes to the costume rack while handing to BARRY the jacket he has been wearing. BARRY hangs it up as RUAN takes a shabby-looking but obviously expensive long robe. Again he does not put it on yet, but this time, he also goes to the props rack and finds a crown, presumably one that he himself would wear at some point while playing Claudius. He returns to his spot.)

RUAN: *(to JUSTIN)* Next is Richard the Second. He knows that he is going to lose the crown to Bolingbroke, who will become Henry the Fourth, and that he will die. *(He puts on the robe, and then the crown, instantly assuming regal bearing.)*

Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs.
Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.
Let's choose executors and talk of wills –
And yet not so, for what can we bequeath
Save our deposed bodies to the ground?
Our lands, our lives, and all are Bolingbroke's;
And nothing can we call our own but death,
And that small model of the barren earth
Which serves as paste and cover to our bones.

(He sits down)

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground,
And tell sad stories of the death of kings –
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed,
All murdered. *(He takes the crown off and puts it aside, feeling his head with his hands where the crown had touched it.)*

For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court; and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh that walls about our life
Were brass impregnable; and humoured thus
Comes at the last, and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall; and farewell, king!
(He mimes death for a moment, then gets up again)
Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence. Throw away respect,
Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty,
For you have but mistook me all this while.
I live with bread, like you; feel want,
Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus,
How can you say to me I am a king?

(RUAN goes to the costume rack as before. BARRY picks up the crown and returns it to the other props. This time RUAN selects a long overcoat with a military appearance. It looks as though it ought to be in a film about the Napoleonic wars, but no matter. RUAN returns to his spot.)

RUAN: *(to JUSTIN)* All right, one more. I have to admit those first two were a bit depressing in their subject matter, but this one's more, more positive. You Americans love that, don't you? The power of positive thinking? *(For a moment RUAN imitates a smarmy American showbiz emcee. He is openly mocking JUSTIN's ignorance as he sees it.)* And now – last but certainly not least – Henry the Fifth! How did he inspire his troops before the deadly battle of Agincourt? Let's find out! *(RUAN drops the emcee act and drapes the coat over his shoulders. He realizes that it is too big for him, so does not put his arms through the sleeves. He assumes a military bearing and seems infused with sudden energy. As he speaks, RUAN strides and paces, almost leaps; he waves his arms freely outside the coat, which seems glued to his shoulders.)*

If we are marked to die, we are enough
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
God's will, I pray thee wish not one man more.
By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,
Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;
It ernes me not if men my garments wear;
Such outward things dwell not in my desires.
But if it be a sin to covet honour
I am the most offending soul alive.
No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England.
God's peace, I would not lose so great an honour
As one man more methinks would share from me
For the best hope I have. O do not wish one more.
Rather proclaim it presently through my host
That he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart. His passport shall be made
And crowns for convoy put into his purse.
We would not die in that man's company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.
This day is called the Feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day and comes safe home
Will stand a-tiptoe when this day is named
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall see this day and live t'old age
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours
And say, 'Tomorrow is Saint Crispian.'
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars
And say, 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words –
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester –

Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered.
This story shall the good man teach his son,
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by
From this day to the ending of the world
But we in it shall be remembered,
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother, be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day.

(Having finished his speeches, RUAN shrugs off the coat and lets it fall to the floor to be picked up by BARRY. He turns to JUSTIN.)

RUAN: And that, dear boy, is acting. *(He goes to the costume rack and finds a towel draped over it, which he uses to dry his perspiring face. The others applaud his performance, most of them sincerely but more like a sarcastic golf clap from JUSTIN. CHRISTINE helps BARRY push the costume rack back into its original position.)*

JUSTIN: Okay, Ruan, I'm impressed. I really am.

RUAN: You ought to be. I meant you to be. Oh, not with the quality of my acting, although I was rather good, wasn't I? No, I wanted you to see how it was done. How a few simple changes in costume, in posture, in voice, in facial expression, make you a different man in a moment. It's all technique, nothing more. You don't need to feel any of it. *Dokesis* – seemingness – was the Greeks' word for it. I didn't for a single second believe that I actually was a nobleman's bastard or a king of England, I merely pretended I was those people.

CHRISTINE: Ruan, you're telling Justin a few little pork pies now, aren't you? You're more than a bit – transported – when you play these characters.

RUAN: I'm sure I don't know what you mean.

CHRISTINE: You enjoy it so much. I sometimes think you wish Shakespeare's plays were the real world so you could be in them all the time. When you're not acting in them you're reading them and studying them.

RUAN: You're almost right. It's not Shakespeare's plays that I wish I lived in, but the real England of his time. A better time than this one. If time machines weren't just science fiction, I'd set mine to four hundred years ago. Me, back in the West Country, a young man again. I'd have been there with Raleigh. And Francis Drake. I might have sailed with Drake against the Armada! And then on to London. I'd have joined Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Acting in his plays in the Globe and at court. For fifteen years he wrote two new plays a year.

Imagine that. Waiting for him to deliver each new play, rehearsing it, learning my part, being on the stage with Shakespeare and Richard Burbage and Will Kempe, performing before Queen Elizabeth and the great men and women of the day. That was the time to be alive. That was the time to be an Englishman.

JUSTIN: I'll do it. (*RUAN turns to look at him*) I said I'll do it. I mean, I'll try. It goes against everything I've ever been taught, all my acting classes. But I'll do it your way. From now on, I'll just imagine what Hamlet ought to seem like and try to do that. And if you want to coach me and correct me, I'll listen and learn. No promises that it'll work, or that I'll be any good at it. But I'll try it.

(*BARRY is watching this with a seeming look of approval on his face. CHRISTINE and MARGOT exchange glances; they both realize that a peace treaty among the men is about to be signed.*)

RUAN: That's all I've ever wanted you to do. You're going to learn that it's not that difficult, indeed it works better than you ever thought possible. Don't fear that what you're doing will seem ridiculous or fake because it's not the real you. The audience (*he indicates the auditorium*) will consist of people who want something that is not like any real person, including you. Shakespeare is full of plots and characters that bear no resemblance to real life. So is any play worth seeing. All you have to do is pretend that it seems real to you, and the audience will meet you halfway. I'm sure you know the scene in *Peter Pan* where the audience is told they must believe in Tinkerbell, otherwise she'll die. And they do, every time. Because they want to believe. They will believe in you, too. All you have to do is ask them. (*JUSTIN and RUAN draw close together and converse in tones inaudible to the audience and to the other characters. CHRISTINE sees this and rushes over to BARRY.*)

CHRISTINE: Isn't it wonderful?

BARRY: Mmm?

CHRISTINE: I mean, it looks as though we're well on our way to solving all our problems. And without having to do anything more. No matter how urgent it may have seemed at one time.

BARRY: (*He takes her meaning*) I think it's for the best. I don't think we really want any more – arguing.

(*CHRISTINE abandons him and rushes over to RUAN and JUSTIN, interrupting their conversation*)

CHRISTINE: Ruan. Now that you and Justin are making such progress, and Barry too, I think it would be a good idea if you, ah, planned out the rest of the day. For all of us. Just the three of you, I mean. Margot and I need to get out of your way while you do that. (*RUAN seems a bit puzzled by this*)

MARGOT: Yes, we'll retreat to the dressing room and let you work for a bit. You don't want to be distracted by us when you're doing so well. We'll come back after a while and then we can all

work on a scene or two, whichever ones you like. (*MARGOT and CHRISTINE get off the stage as quickly as they can, not waiting to hear more.*)

JUSTIN: (*To both BARRY and RUAN, not caring who answers*) That was weird. Do you think those two are up to something?

RUAN: In my experience, any time two or more women go off together, they are up to something. Especially when there are men nearby who can be talked about behind their backs. In any event, we've work to do. Now, Justin, it's important for you to establish your manner of playing Hamlet right from the start. Everything you choose to do to pretend to be him must be made apparent in your first scene. When you make your entrance at court with Claudius and the others . . .

(*The lights fade on the main stage, and so do the voices of the men, although they can be seen talking for a few moments. The lights go up on the large dressing room as CHRISTINE and MARGOT open the door and enter it.*)

CHRISTINE: Everyone else seems to be changing their minds about things. Have you?

MARGOT: No. My mind is made up. I've been thinking about what you told me yesterday. It all fits in with things I've known for a long time. I suppose I wasn't willing to admit them to myself.

CHRISTINE: I'm so glad. You don't have to go on like this. All this time, Ruan has just been using you. To him, you're just a, a servant who can also be used as a sex toy. You know how he's obsessed with the past. He wishes he lived in the times when gentlemen could have their way with the female servants whenever they liked.

MARGOT: I know what you mean.

CHRISTINE: And there are other things he's done. Him, and Francis. I didn't want to tell you before, I thought it would be too much. (*Again the audience should see that she is lying.*) You may have noticed that I have – a little problem. (*MARGOT raises an eyebrow but does not say anything*) When I started, I wasn't careful. They caught me at it. I was so ashamed. Barry knew and he wanted me to stop. I told them I wanted to stop. But Francis was very cool about it. No worse than drinking, he said. Lots of actors need a little something to get them through a performance.

MARGOT: What did Ruan say?

CHRISTINE: That what I did was my business. He soon started giving me extra money on the side. He knew what I was spending it on but he didn't care. What he cared about was that Barry and I were the two best juveniles he'd ever acted with. Whichever city we traveled to, he made sure the right sort of people showed up in our dressing room. You know, dealers. As long as we acted in his company he was happy. He was afraid I would quit, quit acting I mean, and he made sure I depended on his money. He knew Barry wouldn't leave without me. That's how he's kept us working with him. And now – I already told you. What he wanted me to do for Francis.

MARGOT: We need to do something. We can start with Francis, when he shows up. Francis is the weak link.

CHRISTINE: Francis isn't coming back. We've already started it. It's not just Barry and me, Justin is in as well. That's why I had to tell you all this. So that we can finish it with Ruan.

MARGOT: You can't ask me to be the one –

CHRISTINE: I'm not. I'm not. It won't be you. We have something arranged. You won't need to do anything except let it happen.

MARGOT: Did you see the three of them up there? The best of friends.

CHRISTINE: I know. It was supposed to have happened already, while we're down here. We just need to get Barry and Justin back on track. They can still do it.

MARGOT: What do we need to do?

CHRISTINE: It'll be me mostly. What I've just done with you here, I can do with Barry and Justin up there. (*MARGOT looks faintly suspicious about CHRISTINE's choice of words*) Tell them the truth about Ruan, I mean. Make them realize that it has to happen. We can't stop now, and they will see that. In order to get away with what we've already done we have to see it through. (*MARGOT begins sobbing*) It'll be all right, it really will.

MARGOT: I know. It's just that this is the first time in years, really ever, that I feel I've had a chance. You can't know what it's been like. I mean, of course you know some of it. Just being around him, you see how he is. But you're not married to him.

CHRISTINE: You can tell me. You can trust me, just as I trust you. We're in it together now.

MARGOT: Now that I see there's a way out, I realize what I've been through. What he's really like. I can't believe it took me so long. Ruan – Ruan is like every man you've ever met, only a hundred times more so. Thinks he's cleverer than everyone else, especially every woman. Can't utter a sentence on any subject without giving you an Oxford don's lecture about it, letting you know what material to revise for the exams, which will follow shortly, see if they don't. Deciding everything I must do as if I were a character in a play, Author: Ruan Huthnance, being written as we go along. Every day. Wear these clothes, not those ones, those don't become you, I'll buy you new ones so you don't look a fright. Here's where we're going for lunch, and then he orders for both of us because he ate there once ten years ago and he knows what dish they do best. If challenged he would say he pays for everything and so he gets to choose how his money's spent. As if he spends it out of generosity. He does it to control me, as he controls everyone. It's no wonder he became an actor, everything he does is an act, all planned, all scripted, all to make him the star of his own show and let him be the hero always. A show on an open-ended run that will never close. Do you know, he can't even imagine that there's anyone who could deny him the respect and admiration he deserves. If he doesn't get something he wants it's only because lesser men cheated him of it, because they envied him and resented his superiority, but that still means that they know he's better

than they are. Oh, he's never hit me or anything like that, or denied me material things. He has better ways than those to ill-use me. The worst of them is the incessant, insufferable, inescapable condescension. It's in every word he speaks. If he says good morning it really means 'I've decided that this morning is a good one, and it is not for you to disagree'. Well, I've had enough. It's time for it to end.

CHRISTINE: It will end. It will. It's time to end his run.

MARGOT: Let's go post his closing notice.

(They leave the dressing room as the lights go down there, up on the main stage. The three men are there, working on a scene. JUSTIN is in character as Hamlet, dressed in a costume just as RUAN likes him to be, and giving a speech. After a few lines CHRISTINE and MARGOT enter and watch.)

JUSTIN *(as Hamlet)*: I have of late – but wherefore I know not – lost all my mirth, foregone all my customs of exercise; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire – why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.

(His line readings, if not truly skillful, are at least better than before. Most of all, he is trying to give them the way RUAN has told him to.)

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god – the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – no, nor woman either, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

(RUAN and BARRY are indeed smiling, as they approve of JUSTIN's progress in improving his performance.)

CHRISTINE: Very good, very good. Ruan must have shown you how to do that while we were downstairs.

JUSTIN: What do you mean?

CHRISTINE: Didn't Ruan just recite that speech for you so that you could imitate him?

JUSTIN: No. He's been coaching me, sure. That's his right as director. But he doesn't give me line readings.

RUAN: Indeed I don't. I have been assisting Justin in mastering the art of Shakespearean acting. It's something that is new to him, but he must learn it for himself. Acting is not learning to mimic sounds like a parrot.

CHRISTINE: I didn't think he could have learned so quickly without being shown how. Earlier you gave us some selected speeches. I thought you must have done some of Hamlet's after that.

RUAN: There is a difference between learning by example and rote memorization. I have never imposed the latter on any actor. I learned from Olivier and Gielgud and others, but never imitated them, never. Still less would I try to duplicate their performances. And I am not going to act Hamlet myself so that Justin can impersonate me.

CHRISTINE: I'm pleased to hear it. Although if you really are going to let Justin have his own way to any slight extent, it's the first time you've ever done such a thing.

JUSTIN: I never know what any of you are talking about.

RUAN: You may count yourself lucky. *(To CHRISTINE)* Obsession with the past is unhealthy.

CHRISTINE: So you say, although you've never stopped talking about Peter bloody O'Toole and how he got the parts you deserved, and how many years ago was that? If Justin doesn't stand up for himself he'll get the same treatment Barry and I did. *(JUSTIN is looking at her with interest now; she turns and speaks to him)* Even when we were small, Uncle Ruan was always popping by, bringing us presents, asking after us. We were led to believe he was just an old family friend. He was actually getting us to look up to him so that he could control us, get us to do what he wanted later on. *(JUSTIN obviously takes this as reference to RUAN's 'molestation', while RUAN thinks otherwise)*

JUSTIN: *(to RUAN)* Is that true? You'd better tell me. I'm not going on with this production unless someone tells me what the hell is going on here.

RUAN: Yes, of course it's true. I took an interest in both of them. I had plans for them both if things worked out. Christine makes it sound like something sordid, which it was not.

JUSTIN: Wasn't it?

RUAN: Of course not. And anyhow, they both wanted it.

JUSTIN: Did they?

RUAN: Of course. They knew grownups did it and they wanted to do it themselves. And most of all, they wanted to do it with me.

JUSTIN: I can't believe you admit it, just like that.

RUAN: What is there to admit? Of course they wanted to act. They knew I was an actor, as were many of the adults they knew growing up. They begged me to let them on the stage when they were old enough. I started them as the doomed princes in *Richard the Third*; Christine was still young enough to pass for a boy then. *(JUSTIN looks to CHRISTINE, then to BARRY, and back to*

CHRISTINE again. *He is starting to realize that he has, perhaps, not been told the truth about everything.*) After that, they never wanted anything but the stage. I knew they weren't going to succeed at anything else. It's not as though either of them could have gone to Oxford, they hated school. Their parents were in no position to pay for any respectable private school anyhow.

JUSTIN: Who were their parents? I mean exactly. No one seems to want to say. I only know the name, Renfrew.

BARRY: *(To RUAN)* It is time for Justin to be told that some things are none of his business.

RUAN: Why should he be told that, rather than the truth? Is it shameful? *(To JUSTIN)* Christine was adopted. And I had something to do with how that was arranged. As did Francis. *(To CHRISTINE)* You do know this already, don't you? You're too clever not to have worked it out by now. *(CHRISTINE refuses to meet his eyes and turns away)*

JUSTIN: I know that much. But no one will tell me who her real parents are. I haven't heard a single name.

RUAN: The names don't matter. No one you ever would have heard of.

JUSTIN: I thought they were famous actors.

RUAN: Who would have told you such a thing? Actors, yes, but not famous ones. It was the old story. A young actress of the company Francis and I were in at the time fell pregnant. She wouldn't take the obvious course of action – still rather dangerous then, I must admit – so something needed to be done. Francis and I knew a couple, the Renfrews, who wanted to adopt. He'd remarried after Barry was born and his first wife died. They wanted another child, but the second Mrs. Renfrew couldn't conceive. We made some arrangements, and further arranged that the Renfrews, who were not poor exactly but very far from rich, would receive financial support from us. So that's how Christine came into the world.

JUSTIN: Who was her father?

RUAN: Unknown. Some other actor, I presume.

JUSTIN: All right. I've also been told about some sort of agreement you all have.

BARRY: Ruan, for Christ's sake –

RUAN: *(to BARRY)* I'm going to tell him. It's obvious that someone, you I presume, has been telling Justin all sorts of fanciful stories. I mean to set him straight. I'm vain enough not to be willing to tolerate others believing falsehoods about me. *(to JUSTIN)* I told you that Francis and I were helping the Renfrews financially, so Barry and Christine could have a bringing-up that was a bit closer to what we all wanted. With both of them, it was obvious from an early age that they were natural performers. I knew they would turn out to be what they are, talented actors. Have you any idea how difficult it is to get real juveniles with talent to join a theatre company? The parts are

there, just not the right young actors to play them. Usually you have to make do with people trying to play ten years younger than they are. I knew they would be the best Romeo and Juliet anyone had seen in a long time, and they were. But that's getting ahead of ourselves. Now this may seem odd, but I'm not the least bit ashamed of it, because it was the best thing for all concerned. Francis and I arranged with the Renfrews that they would, so to speak, pay us back by doing something for us. They encouraged Barry and Christine to turn professional and tour with us. You can call it apprenticeship if you like. The agreement was that they could leave when everyone had enough money, enough success, enough other prospects, to stop touring the provinces and work in films or television. That's what this production is for. To make our names in America, where there is so much more work. And so much more money, to be blunt. So please don't quit. We all stand to gain a great deal by having this production come off well. (*JUSTIN seems impressed; RUAN can be quite charming and persuasive when he wants to be.*)

BARRY: Apprenticeship? Indentured servitude, more like. Which has been illegal for a century and a half.

RUAN: Don't start again. If it's like anything, it's like being a bonded trainee, which is still legal in New Zealand, I believe. Who taught you your trade? I did, and Francis. Margot, too. Without us you'd both be in the gutter.

BARRY: Instead of which we've spent our youth acting in plays that were already old hat before we were born.

RUAN: (*to JUSTIN*) The best training they could have received! They're ready for anything now. It wasn't just Shakespeare. The Restoration comedies, Oscar Wilde, Noel Coward, all the greats. Nothing much later than Coward, there's hardly been anything new worth doing since the war anyhow. Why are you here, Justin? Because you know that an actor of substance must take on the great roles in the great plays.

CHRISTINE: Oh, marvelous. As though anything you've ever done was for anyone's benefit but your own. Your whole life has been a gigantic act, with you in the starring role and the rest of us only here to support you. You led Francis to the bottle, me to drugs, Barry to –

RUAN: You ungrateful little slag. I never once encouraged any one of you to do anything you didn't want to do. You know that.

JUSTIN: All right, Ruan. I've heard enough. No more. No more.

RUAN: Then let's get back to work.

(RUAN goes to the rack to get costume. While his back is turned, CHRISTINE looks imploringly at JUSTIN. JUSTIN turns to BARRY who returns his gaze steadily. JUSTIN nods briefly at him. JUSTIN and BARRY assume positions at opposite sides of the stage, JUSTIN to stage right. CHRISTINE goes to MARGOT and stands by her. RUAN comes back and stands in the middle of them all, apparently ready to direct the next scene to be rehearsed, but JUSTIN speaks first.)

JUSTIN: Before we start, Ruan, I was wondering about something.

RUAN: Something about this production, I hope. Not that other business.

JUSTIN: About sword-fighting. Without Dan here, who's going to coach us?

RUAN: I will, of course. Oh, I don't know as much as he does about the real thing. But I know what a good stage fight looks like. I can show you things to do that will look good enough.

JUSTIN: It's for the bout with Barry, with Laertes, at the end. I know there's been a controversy about something called the exchange of blades. I know some people say Hamlet and Laertes trade swords on purpose somehow at some point, and some people say they don't. I wanted to know what the right way is to do it. I thought you might know.

RUAN: Indeed I do. What you do is – it would be easier simply to show you, if I had a sword here. You need to hold it like so, and then Barry will grab it with his other hand . . .

BARRY: I'll get one. *(He goes to the rack and selects his favorite one. He approaches RUAN, who is still turned away from him, talking to JUSTIN.)*

BARRY: Here, Ruan. Can you show me too? Oh, and about this sword. Do you think it's the right one for me to use in that scene?

(BARRY holds the sword, point up, as if for RUAN to see but actually poised to thrust. BARRY indicates the upper part of the blade with his left hand, as if directing RUAN's attention, but actually moments away from taking hold of it for the two-handed thrust. All of this is done the way BARRY described earlier. RUAN looks at the sword, bending forward slightly, as BARRY predicted he would do. RUAN then lifts his head up sharply, staring directly into BARRY's face. BARRY, just for a moment, takes on a look of panicked horror as he realizes that RUAN knows, or has guessed. He doesn't have long. With great speed, RUAN seizes the lower part of the blade with his right hand, just above the hilt, and the middle of the blade with his left hand, just below the sharpened area. With two hands on to BARRY's one, RUAN has much greater leverage on the blade, and he does not need to move it very far. BARRY is too shocked to resist anyhow. RUAN directs the sharp part of the blade to the right side of BARRY's neck, the side away from the audience, and performs a quick, violent cut. BARRY's carotid artery and jugular vein are severed. Blood is spurting. He releases the sword and claps both hands up to the cut area, turning and staggering, showing the audience that huge amounts of blood are flowing between his fingers. He looks about wildly but cannot speak. He takes his left hand off for a moment to see the amount of blood on it, then puts it back. He collapses and dies. RUAN watches and takes a more normal grip on the sword. RUAN turns toward stage right, where by now all the others are gathered. RUAN speaks; it is not clear whether to JUSTIN only, or to others as well.)

RUAN: Did you really think I'd let him do it? Don't you know by now that I know everything? Yes, everything. Nothing goes on in my productions, among my acting company, in any theatre I work in, without my knowing it. What I'm not told I figure out on my own. That poor dead fool over there thought he could outwit me. Well, where's it got him now?

MARGOT: Oh my God he's gone mad –

CHRISTINE: You bastard you bastard –

JUSTIN: Jesus Christ –

MARGOT: He's gone mad he's gone mad –

RUAN: No, my dear, not mad at all. Never more sane. The unfortunate truth is that it's the rest of you, some of you at any rate, who have been losing your minds. I tried to stop it, I offered you a way out again and again, but you pressed on. Perhaps this (*indicating BARRY*) will bring you to your senses.

JUSTIN: Ruan, you killed him. There's no way to make things right, not now.

RUAN: Now that someone's dead, you mean?

JUSTIN: Of course that's what I mean.

RUAN: The time for acting is past. I tried to help you improve yours, but evidently I failed. You're no better at playing the innocent than you were at playing Hamlet. Francis isn't coming back, is he? (*JUSTIN refuses to speak*) No, I thought not. I've known for some time that he wasn't. I don't know how you did it but that doesn't really matter, does it?

JUSTIN: It wasn't me. It wasn't us (*indicating CHRISTINE*). I mean, we knew about it, yeah, but we couldn't stop it. Barry did it. It was his idea.

CHRISTINE: (*to JUSTIN*): How dare you put all this on my beautiful brother. You caused it all. If we'd stayed out of your filthy country and never allowed any of you Yanks to come near us –

RUAN: (*to MARGOT*): Isn't it wonderful? They're having a falling out. It's just like *The Sweeney*. One hard question from Jack Regan and they're grassing each other. (*now speaking to all present*) Which does raise another point. We have to come up with, ah, some explanation that will satisfy New York's ridiculously named Finest. I'm sure you had one ready to explain Barry's murdering me, so we can come up with one for things as they've turned out. Of course I could tell them that what I did was self-defense, which has the merit of being true.

CHRISTINE: He wasn't going to murder you. He was only going to give you what you deserved. (*She advances on him but RUAN points the blade at her and she retreats.*)

JUSTIN: See that, Ruan? They're the ones who hated you. Although I have to admit, I don't really see why. I mean, you're a complete prick, and if I had to put up with you for years – well, I wouldn't have. I'd have run away, like I got away from my parents and my crappy home town and went to New York. But they stayed with you. (*to CHRISTINE*) It couldn't have been that bad.

CHRISTINE: He's nothing more than a ponce. A pimp, as you'd say here. To get me to perform on the stage, he put me in the way of men who would give me drugs. And take whatever payment I could give them. He knew all along but he didn't care. And that's not even the worst of it.

RUAN: What a monstrous ingrate you are. As your brother was too. I supported you financially, taught you your profession, helped you in every way I could. All the trouble you've had, you've got yourself into. You were always looking for it. I've never seen a girl so determined to grow up, or act grown up, from such a young age.

JUSTIN: What are you saying, Ruan? That she wanted it?

RUAN: She damned well did. Everything that's happened to her, she sought for herself. And now she blames me. 'How sharper –' (*He stops abruptly*)

CHRISTINE: Go ahead, Ruan. Give him the rest of the line, he may not know it.

RUAN: '– than a serpent's tooth it is –'

CHRISTINE: To what? Finish it.

RUAN: '– to have a thankless child'.

JUSTIN: What? She's your child, your daughter?

RUAN: Perhaps. It's even odds. Francis and I were both, ah, seeing her mother at the time. Before I met Margot. It could have been either of us, we never tried to find out. Why are you so shocked? You're an actor, you know how we behave. Well, Francis and I did the right thing. The honourable thing. We arranged for Christine's support, which is a hell of a lot more than almost anyone else would have done.

JUSTIN: (*to CHRISTINE*) And you knew about this?

CHRISTINE: Yes. I wasn't meant to, but I did. The Renfrews told me. When I was old enough I asked Francis if it was true. He denied it at first, but he finally admitted it. (*to RUAN*) I knew you wouldn't tell me the truth, ever. But Francis wasn't as strong as you were.

JUSTIN: So that's the worst.

CHRISTINE: No. What's worse is what he did with me and Barry.

RUAN: I did nothing.

CHRISTINE: He told you we played Romeo and Juliet. Ruan said we wouldn't be able to do the love scenes properly unless we rehearsed them in private. Rehearsed them all the way. (*to RUAN*) That's one bit of Method acting you didn't object to.

JUSTIN: *(to RUAN)* This is so disgusting. You really are a monster.

RUAN: I never told them to do anything they weren't doing already, or if they weren't they soon would have been. Christine was after her brother from a very young age. He resisted because he thought she was his sister by blood. I could have told him the truth, but I didn't because I thought it was best he didn't know. For years he never knew she was adopted. But then he found out somehow. At that point he thought she was the one who didn't know. That she was pursuing him was something he found tremendously exciting. He thought it was a great compliment to him that she would want him in spite of the taboo. After that there could be no stopping them. Yes, that's really what they were like. I could no more have stopped Francis from drinking than I could have stopped them from – *(to CHRISTINE)* and you accuse me? I'm the only one here with any self-control. *(to MARGOT)* Except you, dear. I've always been able to rely on you. *(She attempts to conceal her discomfort at this)*

JUSTIN: I don't believe you. Well, in a way I do. I believe what you said about your self-control. You never do anything by accident. And all of this stuff, it was no accident. All of it happened because you wanted it to. That means it's all your fault.

RUAN: Well, my young friend, I'm truly sorry to hear that. I gave you your chance to stay away from the losing side. You can't blame that on me. Which means what is about to happen is your fault, not mine.

JUSTIN: What are you talking about? It's over. Everything's over.

RUAN: There's one thing left for me to do. *(to MARGOT, who is standing close to CHRISTINE)* We may be able to do something with her. But not this one *(he turns back to JUSTIN, who realizes what RUAN means and looks about, turning toward the audience)*. Don't bother. You can't get out that way. All the doors here are padlocked but these *(indicating the double doors)*, thanks to your famous New York criminals. And I'm between you and them. Just as I'm between you and them *(indicating the rack of swords)*.

(RUAN begins to advance slowly, confident that nothing can stop him. JUSTIN realizes that he has left one sword apart from the others, and manages to pick it up before RUAN sees what he is doing. Now JUSTIN is armed.)

RUAN: You're better off now than you were a moment ago, but it won't be enough. Remember what happened last time we did this?

JUSTIN: That wasn't a real fight. I wasn't really trying.

RUAN: Weren't you? And do you think it will matter even if you do try harder now? We'll know soon enough.

(RUAN advances on him, and JUSTIN shows real fear, almost panic, as he retreats as best he can. RUAN attacks and JUSTIN is barely able to fend him off, escaping around RUAN to the opposite

end of the stage as RUAN keeps the doors blocked. JUSTIN sees the stair and thinks of running up it, but RUAN blocks that too.)

RUAN: This is not acting, Justin. This is real. Life and death. Can you do better at it than you do at acting, at pretense? No more rehearsals, just performance.

(JUSTIN decides to attack but RUAN stops him easily. JUSTIN falls back.)

JUSTIN: Come on, Ruan. You can't really kill me, not in front of witnesses. This is crazy. They won't let you get away with it.

RUAN: Won't they? Do you see them doing anything about it? They're doing what women always do, waiting to see who wins when the men fight it out. Women always back the winner.

(JUSTIN looks about wildly, looking for any chance. He makes for the doors but RUAN blocks him. JUSTIN then runs straight at MARGOT and CHRISTINE, who are side by side but split apart as he comes at them. JUSTIN ignores MARGOT and manages to get behind CHRISTINE, gripping her with one arm and menacing her with his sword in the other. RUAN is there a split second later but pulls up short.)

JUSTIN: Now what? Your own daughter, Ruan. I know you said it was fifty-fifty but I think she's yours, and I think you know it too. Just let me get to the door. I'll let her go on my way out.

(RUAN stares intently at them and lowers his sword, his posture slumping as if in defeat. MARGOT comes up behind JUSTIN and wildly cuffs him in the head, sending him staggering as CHRISTINE escapes his grasp. JUSTIN's sword goes flying and he scrambles to recover it, getting his hand on it as RUAN steps on the blade, pinning it to the floor. JUSTIN tries to get up but RUAN kicks him with his off foot, sending him sprawling. RUAN advances for the kill. While he is doing this, MARGOT has made her way to the sword rack and picks up the dagger JUSTIN used in the opening scene, concealing it in her clothing. RUAN does not see this as he dispatches JUSTIN with the sword.)

RUAN: So much for him. *(He turns to address CHRISTINE and MARGOT, who has now moved back next to CHRISTINE)* Thank God that's finally over. The unpleasantness, I mean. There's no need for any more of it. *(to CHRISTINE)* You've seen what happened to them *(he gestures toward the fallen)*. It doesn't have to happen to you too. Whatever you promised them, whatever you intended, that's behind us now. I only need one word from you. Only tell me that you have no intention of, of, going on with it. With what they planned.

CHRISTINE: I haven't – Father. I wouldn't, I won't. I'm not going to raise a hand against you. Not now, not ever. You've nothing to fear from me.

RUAN: I believe you. *(to MARGOT)* And you, my dear. Magnificent! Just as you've always been, ever since we first met. The only one I've always been able to trust.

(RUAN goes to MARGOT, his arms outstretched, sword extended away, to embrace her. MARGOT meets him. At this point, RUAN is facing the audience and MARGOT is seen from the back. As he cradles her in his arms, she embraces him with one arm, takes out the dagger with the other, and stabs him in the back. RUAN staggers away from her.)

RUAN: Unkindest cut – gross flesh – silence – inhuman dog – *(RUAN looks at MARGOT)* Not you. Anyone but you. *(He dies)*

CHRISTINE: We have to go to the police now. Just one thing first. *(CHRISTINE takes the bloody dagger from MARGOT and wipes the handle with the towel from the costume rack, holding it so as not to put her own fingerprints on it. She looks about for what to do with it, and with a shrug, places it next to her brother's body.)* That'll do. Remember, we don't know what happened here. The filth will have great fun pondering who killed whom and in what order. They won't think of us. We were in the dressing room, we heard them shouting and fighting, we didn't dare come out until it stopped, we found them like this. And don't forget to cry a lot. Ready? *(MARGOT nods yes. They go to the doors. CHRISTINE looks back before they go out.)* Well, it seems the ladies have won in the end.

MARGOT: We usually do, dear. We usually do. *(They exit through the doors.)*

THE END