

HELGA

By Steven Stack

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HELGA

A rather dark comedic two-act adaptation of Hamlet

By Steven Stack

SYNOPSIS: Helga is mourning. And pondering. And mourning some more. And pondering some more. Her mother is dead from natural causes – or so she thinks, until her dead mother returns as a ghost and tells her the truth: It was not of natural causes. It was murder. Now her mother needs Helga to avenge her death. But avenging her would force Helga to take action instead of pondering . . . all the time. Perhaps she should just go mad. An uproariously dark comedy that follows Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* while taking some unforeseen and bizarre twists. Good news . . . everyone still dies. It is a comedic tragedy, after all. Along the journey, there are betrayals, sword fights, scenes of madness and laughter, ghosts galore, a love story of sorts, a demise non-demise, lots and lots of pondering questions without answers, and a destroyed pillow. Oh, and all the genders have been reversed.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(9 females, 2 males, 7 either; 2-15 extras, doubling possible)

HELGA (f).....Princess of Denmark. *(346 lines)*
 HELENA (f).....Helga’s only truly loyal friend.
(212 lines)
 QUEEN HELGA (f).....A ghost, Helga’s mother. *(90 lines)*
 GERHARDT (m).....Helga’s father, rather pointless. *(67 lines)*
 CLAUDIA (f).....Helga’s aunt, the new Queen of Denmark. *(107 lines)*
 POLONIA (f).....Servant of the court, mother of Orlando and Linnea. *(69 lines)*
 ORLANDO (m)Son of Polonia, Helga’s boyfriend. *(119 lines)*
 LINNEA (f).....Daughter of Polonia, seeks to avenge her father’s death. *(115 lines)*

ROSALINE (f).....	Friend of Gilda and Helga, loyal to the throne. <i>(65 lines)</i>
GILDA (f).....	Friend of Rosaline and Helga, loyal to the throne. <i>(57 lines)</i>
THE PLAYER	An actor, leading the troupe. <i>(20 lines)</i>
ALEXIA (f).....	Another actor from the troupe. <i>(8 lines)</i>
ELEANOR (f).....	Another actor from the troupe. <i>(12 lines)</i>
REGAN (f).....	Yet another actor from the troupe. <i>(6 lines)</i>
BALDER (m).....	A night watchman. <i>(51 lines)</i>
CORIN	A grave digger. <i>(26 lines)</i>
FENTON (m).....	Another grave digger. <i>(25 lines)</i>
FORSETI (f)	A young princess of Norway, whose mother was killed by Queen Helga. <i>(9 lines)</i>
EXTRAS (f/m).....	Optional non-speaking extras during the performance of the “play” and as Forseti’s soldiers.

(ALL LINE COUNTS ARE APPROXIMATE)

DURATION: 90 minutes

SET DESIGN

The set can be as elaborate or as simple as desired. There are very few basic pieces required. Below is what is needed and suggested for each scene.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1: Outside the castle - Bench

SCENE 2: A small room inside the castle - Pillows

SCENE 3: Outside a tavern

SCENE 4: Outside the castle

SCENE 5: Outside the castle

SCENE 6: Courtyard (Chairs)

Gertrude's chambers

Parlor (2 chairs, curtains)

SCENE 7: Inside the castle

ACT TWO

SCENE 1: Outside the castle

SCENE 2: Parlor of Queen (2 chairs, curtain)

SCENE 3: Graveyard

SCENE 4: Outside the castle (Chairs, 2 tables)

PROPS

ACT ONE

- Mask (Helga, Scene 1)
- A torn pillow (Orlando, Scene 2)
- A poorly made pillow (Orlando, Scene 2)
- A rather nice pillow (Orlando, Scene 2)
- A mug (Helena, Scene 3)
- Swords (Rosaline and Gilda, Scene 4)
- A poorly made pillow (Polonia, Scene 4)
- Book (Helga, Scene 4)
- Skull (Helga, Scene 5)
- Drinks (Claudia, Gerhart, Scene 6)
- A letter (Claudia, Scene 6)
- Sword (Helga, Scene 6)

ACT TWO

- Note (Helena, Scene 1)
- Sword (Linnea, Scene 2)
- Cups (Claudia, Scene 2)
- Several bottles (Claudia, Scene 2)
- Shovels (Fenton and Corin, Scene 3)
- Swords (Helga and Linnea, Scene3)
- Cups, one marked “poison” (Claudia, Scene 4)
- Swords (One sword sharper than the others, Scene 4)
- Sword (Forseti, Scene 4)

SOUND

No sound cues are needed unless you want to add outdoor ambiance in the outdoor scenes, perhaps the sound of trumpets at various moments, such as when Helga looks off (Act One, Scene 1) and the play beginning (Act One, Scene 6) and final duel (Act Two, Scene 4).

COSTUME NOTES

Below are specific costumes that are needed:

- HELGA – All black during Act One and pirate garb in Act Two
- QUEEN HELGA – A bloody nightgown and bathrobe
- ORLANDO – Burial cloth (Act Two, Scene 3)

With the rest of them, be creative and have fun. Think about what makes the characters unique and have their costumes represent them and the period.

AUTHOR’S NOTE ON COSTUMING

Before we started rehearsals on this show, the students organized a “Bring clothes that make you think of Hamlet, Shakespearean plays, and the time of the Renaissance” day. The actors, clearly having all stashed a collection of costumes that fit that description, brought so much that we had to get very little.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Helga was first produced by WCATY at the Overture Center in Madison, Wisconsin on July 9, 2015.

THE ORIGINAL CAST

Helga	Sydney Walker
Helena.....	Gwen Lambouths
Queen Helga.....	Justine Mattson
Gerhardt.....	Max Luke
Claudia	Aurorah Arndt
Polonia.....	Kinsey Louthier
Orlando.....	Fred Beaster
Linnea.....	Kaela Schudda
Rosaline.....	Madison Hummel
Gilda.....	Danny Wendt
The Player	Abby Stitgen
Alexia	Catie Rutledge
Eleanor	Kaela Schudda
Balder	Abby Stitgen
Corin.....	Max Luke
Fenton.....	Kinsey Louthier
Forseti.....	Catie Rutledge

DEDICATION

To my wife, best friend, and favorite editor:

Maggie Stack

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

SETTING: *Dusk. Outside on the grounds of the Queen's castle.*

AT RISE: *BALDER, a watchman, seems rather bored and is clearly waiting for someone. A noise is heard. Balder turns.*

BALDER: Stop, who goes there?

HELENA enters without looking at him.

HELENA: It is I, Helena. *(She crosses away, stops, and looks back.)*

Oh, I'm sorry. Was I supposed to stop?

BALDER: I did say that, did I not?

HELENA: Suppose you did. Now I'm going to sit on this bench.

(HELENA sits on bench.)

BALDER: I did not expect you to show.

HELENA: Yet I did. *(Mockingly)* To see "her."

BALDER: Why did you say it that way? In that mocking tone?

HELENA: Because I find "mocking tones" work better when mocking someone. *(Silence.)* I harbor no illusion that she will show tonight.

Or ever, for that matter. For she is dead. So, come sit beside me so that we can see nothing together.

BALDER starts to speak but decides against it. HELENA pats the bench beside her. BALDER slowly walks over to her and sits. She stares at him.

BALDER: What are you doing?

HELENA: Staring at you in order to make you uncomfortable.

BALDER: You're being very successful. *(Silence.)*

HELENA: Explain to me again why you're now a night watchman along with everything else you do?

BALDER: The new Queen got rid of everyone else. Wanted to cut the palace payroll.

HELENA: I see.

BALDER: So you really don't believe me? About the ghost?

HELENA: I do not. Perhaps it's my education, or my disbelief in things that aren't real, which causes this nonbelief. There is no ghost. It's merely . . .

QUEEN HELGA enters. BALDER'S eyes grow wide and he points to QUEEN HELGA. HELENA turns and sees QUEEN HELGA. HELENA turns to BALDER.

The timing for that entrance was impeccable.

BALDER: Do you believe it now?

HELENA: Suppose I must.

BALDER: And she looks very much like the Queen, does she not?

HELENA: Yes, it's rather disconcerting. I'm thinking of leaving.

BALDER: Don't. I think it wishes to speak to us. Ask it something, Helena.

HELENA: Like what?

BALDER: I don't know. Something.

HELENA: Very well. (*HELENA slowly crosses to QUEEN HELGA, who stares at her. There is silence.*) You wish to speak to us?

QUEEN HELGA continues staring.

Yes? No? You have to give me something. (*Silence.*) I'm finding this quite tedious.

QUEEN HELGA continues staring.

Why come back from the dead if you're not going to speak? (*Silence.*) What are you, that haunts this late night looking like the nearly departed Queen of Denmark dressed for . . . bed? (*Silence.*) By heaven, I charge thee to speak!

QUEEN HELGA turns away sadly.

Now I've offended you?

BALDER moves close behind HELENA.

BALDER: I think you have. You were very cross with her.

HELENA: I wouldn't have been if she had merely answered my questions. But no, nothing. So really, this is all her fault.

QUEEN HELGA begins to exit.

BALDER: She's leaving! Quickly, say something.

HELENA: (*Nonchalant.*) Stop, don't go.

BALDER: That's all you have?

HELENA: Yes, I'm done with this. I found this ghost to be more maddening than fearful.

BALDER: She reminded me of a sad little puppy.

HELENA: And now she's walking away with her tail between her legs.

QUEEN HELGA turns and opens her jacket, where a wound appears.

BALDER sticks her face in HELENA'S back. HELENA, too taken aback by what she's seeing, doesn't notice this.

Well, that's gross.

QUEEN HELGA exits in a huff.

BALDER: Don't say that about the Queen. I mean, she has aged, and being dead has obviously not helped her appearance, but—

HELENA: I'm not talking about that.

BALDER: What, then?

HELENA: A wound.

BALDER: Are you sure?

HELENA: Did you not see it?

BALDER: No, I placed my face in your back so as not to see what she revealed when she opened her robe. It wouldn't be proper to—

HELENA: The Queen was stabbed. I'm not sure, but being stabbed doesn't seem to qualify as "natural causes." (*Crosses away. Looking off.*) This must mean ill times for the kingdom.

BALDER: Should we go after her?

HELENA turns to BALDER and sees that QUEEN HELGA has returned.

HELENA: No need, she has returned. Which makes her last exit seem rather pointless. I shall speak to her again. But honorably this time.

HELENA crosses to QUEEN HELGA, followed closely by BALDER.

Dear Queen, speak if thou can. Explain to us why you haunt this land. Is there something you need? Some secret knowledge that you possess that you wish to share?

BALDER places her head on HELENA'S shoulder.

BALDER: You're doing a much better job this time.

HELENA: *(Without turning.)* Go sit on the bench. My Queen, why do you haunt this place?

QUEEN HELGA: *(Whispering.)* Helga.

HELENA: Helga? No, I'm Helena. Though I can understand your confusion, for we—

QUEEN HELGA: Helga.

HELENA: No, I've already told you—

BALDER: Perhaps she wishes to talk to her daughter.

HELENA: *(Realizes.)* Oh. *(To BALDER.)* Go get her.

BALDER: But I'm on duty.

HELENA: Yes, and your duty now is to go fetch Helga.

BALDER: Aye.

BALDER exits. HELENA turns back to QUEEN HELGA. There is silence. An uncomfortable silence.

HELENA: So I suppose it's just the two of us now.

QUEEN HELGA stares at her.

Sorry about your . . . death. And apparent stabbing. *(Awkward silence.)* So, you're a ghost? Do you do anything? *(No response.)*

HELENA sighs and starts pacing.) This is boring. (Silence. Then HELENA notices a rock. She reaches down and picks it up.) If I threw this at you, would it go through—

QUEEN HELGA starts to exit.

HELENA: *(Continued.)* What? You're leaving? But—

QUEEN HELGA is gone. HELGA enters with BALDER. HELGA is wearing a mask that has a poorly painted face on it with an X through the face.

HELGA: How now, Helena? Balder told me—

HELENA turns and sees HELGA.

HELENA: Nice mask. Note the sarcasm, of course.

HELGA: Sarcasm noted. It is my mother's face. With an "X" through it. Because she's dead.

HELENA: I see. It's a terrible likeness of her.

HELGA: It's a grief mask. Family custom.

HELENA: Well, it's awful. And your customs are odd. Speaking of your dead mother, I have news of her.

HELGA: She's alive?

HELENA: No, she's dead. How would she—

BALDER: We saw her ghost!

HELGA turns to BALDER.

HELGA: What?

HELENA: *(To BALDER.)* I was supposed to tell her!

BALDER: I thought—

HELENA: You thought incorrectly. Now leave us.

BALDER: But—

HELGA: Leave us, Balder.

BALDER: Yes, my lady.

BALDER exits. HELGA turns to HELENA.

HELGA: What's this now? Of my mother?

HELENA: I've seen her, Helga. Her spirit was standing here mere moments ago.

HELGA: Why did she depart?

HELENA: I think I scared her.

HELGA: How?

HELENA: I was going to throw a rock through her.

HELGA: You were going to throw a rock through my dead mother?

HELENA: Well, the ghost of your dead mother, and . . . yes.

HELGA crosses away, pondering for the first of many times. She turns back to HELENA.

HELGA: Do you think it would have gone through her?

HELENA: I guess we'll never know. She fled like a coward.

HELGA: I don't feel calling her a "coward" is appropriate. She thought you were going to assault her with a rock.

HELENA: It probably would've—

HELGA: Why is she here?

HELENA: I don't know. She will speak only to you.

HELGA: I shall find her restless spirit then. Perhaps alone, though—

HELENA: Because of the rock?

HELGA: Yes. But wait for me. I might need your company afterwards.

HELENA: How long will you be?

HELGA: I don't know. How long does talking to the ghost of one's dead mother normally take?

HELENA: Don't have a basis for an estimate.

HELGA: Nor I.

HELENA: I will wait regardless. But don't take too long.

HELGA: Of course.

HELENA starts to exit and then turns back.

HELENA: (*Holding out the rock.*) Do you want this?

HELGA considers it.

HELGA: I don't think I should. (*Reconsiders.*) But you know what, on second thought, I'll take it, you know, just in case it comes up.

HELENA: Of course.

Hands rock to HELGA and then exits. HELGA turns and is face to face with her mother. She screams and collapses. QUEEN HELGA looks at her as HELGA stays collapsed. Moments pass.

QUEEN HELGA: Can we get on with this? I don't have all night. But I do have eternity. Eternity. (*Laughs.*) What a ridiculously long and boring concept. (*Looks at HELGA.*) Get up!

HELGA looks up.

HELGA: I don't like it when you yell at me, Mother.

QUEEN HELGA: If you had gotten up, I wouldn't have had to. Why did you pass out?

HELGA: (*Slowly getting up.*) I always pass out when someone I didn't know was there appears in my personal space from behind.

QUEEN HELGA: Oh, yes. I remember now. Always had fun doing that to you.

HELGA: Yes, you and Father did. Delightful childhood I had. Why are you here and not . . . not here? (*Crosses away.*) Unless you're not real?

QUEEN HELGA: I am real, Helga. I assure you. (*Crosses to HELGA.*) I cannot rest. Because of my death.

HELGA: Actually, it would seem to be the perfect time. Death is known as an "eternal rest," after all.

QUEEN HELGA: Yes, but rest does not come for those whose deaths were not of nature.

HELGA: What are you saying? Your heart gave out.

QUEEN HELGA: It did. Because there was a dagger through it.

She opens her robe and HELGA turns away.

HELGA: Mother! I don't want to see you that way.

QUEEN HELGA: Look so you know.

HELGA still doesn't.

I have clothes on.

HELGA slowly peeks at the bathrobe.

HELGA: Is that my bathrobe? And you got all it all bloody from those
(*Finally notices the wounds.*) . . . wounds. Who did this to you,
Mother?

QUEEN HELGA: It was . . .

Voices are heard. The ghost looks over HELGA'S shoulder. HELGA turns and when she turns back, QUEEN HELGA is gone. GERHARDT, HELGA'S father, enters.

GERHARDT: There you are, Helga. I've been looking all over for
you. (*Sees that HELGA is distraught.*) What is the matter?

HELGA: I . . . I . . .

GERHARDT: Is it about your mother? Being dead?

HELGA: She was your wife as well.

GERHARDT: Yes, it is very tragic.

HELGA: Why are you dressed that way? As if for a wedding?

GERHARDT: You always did know your fashion. The reason I'm
dressed this way is because I got remarried. Moments ago, in fact.

HELGA: What now?

GERHARDT: I'm now a married man again.

HELGA: But Mother just died. Surely - -

GERHARDT: Just died is still dead, Helga. Must a man mourn
forever?

HELGA turns away.

What?

HELGA: You treat Mother's passing as if it meant nothing.

GERHARDT: Everything dies, Helga. One day I will, you will, why everyone that we know will die. Perhaps sooner rather than later. And I have to tell you, your moodiness is growing wearisome.

HELGA: Who did you marry?

CLAUDIA enters and crosses to HELGA.

CLAUDIA: It is I.

HELGA: Aunt Claudia?

CLAUDIA crosses to HELGA and touches her shoulder.

CLAUDIA: Call me mother. Or Queen. Or I suppose Mother Queen would be best. (*Silence.*) I am sorry that you missed our wedding.

HELGA: (*Uncomfortably.*) Yes, I as well.

CLAUDIA: To be fair, you would have had to change from this all black attire. People would have thought you were attending a wake.

HELGA: It's a reflection of what is going on inside me, and this will no doubt make it worse.

CLAUDIA: So moody. Your mother was such a warrior. If she could see you now—

HELGA: She would no doubt see that this pain is brought on by my love for her. What would she say about you?

CLAUDIA crosses to GERHART.

CLAUDIA: She would be joyous to find that her husband and her kingdom are safe. With all that is going on, your mother's completely natural death, the continued threat of that young Norwegian princess Forseti attacking Denmark, and various other ills of this kingdom, your mother would no doubt be relieved that the kingdom is in such strong, capable, yet soft hands. (*Silence.*) We are about to have a celebration dinner. Perhaps you would like to join us?

HELGA: No, I need to be alone.

GERHART crosses to HELGA and takes her hands in his.

GERHARDT: Dear Helga, don't be selfish on mine and Claudia's day of joy. Please come and celebrate with us. My time as a widower—

HELGA pulls away.

HELGA: You were a widower for less than two weeks.

GERHARDT: A very long two weeks.

Silence. CLAUDIA begins to exit and motions to GERHART "to hurry this up." GERHART quickly "hurries this up."

Come when you're ready, then. *(To CLAUDIA.)* Is Linnea on her way to France?

CLAUDIA: She is. Let us not talk of those things, though, my love, for now it is time to dine.

CLAUDIA exits. GERHARDT begins to follow her but turns back to HELGA.

GERHARDT: We shall be in the dining hall when you - -

HELGA: I won't.

GERHARDT: That sounded very petulant, Helga. I'm not very pleased with you right now.

GERHARDT exits. HELGA watches him go. She turns away.

HELGA: Something is foul in Denmark and those two are covered in the stench of it. How could Father so quickly marry if he loved my mother as he claims? And Mother . . . her ghost walking. Saying she was murdered. Is this real or all in my head? And if it's real, who would do such a deed?

HELGA looks off as she hears trumpets playing.

Could it be? Take my mother's bed and her throne? No, it cannot.

HELENA enters.

HELENA: What cannot?

HELGA turns to HELENA.

HELGA: Betrayal of one you love.

HELENA: Is this about that time with me and Orlando? To be fair, you were on a break.

HELGA: What? No. Did you?

HELENA nods.

Never knew. But this is about my mother. I think she was murdered.

HELENA: Oh, good.

HELGA looks at her, confused.

Not that your mother was murdered, but that you weren't . . . so, the conversation with your mother went well, I take it?

HELGA: I . . . how long were you and Orlando together?

HELENA: Not very long.

HELGA: I think he's angry with me. Before arriving here, I destroyed his favorite pillow.

HELENA: Why?

HELGA: I don't know.

HELENA: Very well. Back to your mother. You think she was—

HELGA: Yes. No. I . . .

Silence as HELENA stares at HELGA, who notices this.

What?

HELENA: Is there more to that sentence?

HELGA: No.

HELENA: But you started a new—

HELGA turns away.

—never mind. I feel like drinking. A lot. And you should as well.
Wash your troubles away.

HELGA: They will no doubt come crashing back. Helena, I feel that dark clouds are surrounding me and that they'll only grow darker.
(*Silence. Starts to exit.*) I need to be alone.

HELENA: Do you?

HELGA turns.

HELGA: It really doesn't matter. Whether we're alone by ourselves or alone with others, we're always alone.

HELENA: Is that a yes or a no? (*No answer.*) You know, if you're going to be alone either way, we might as well be alone together. And drunk.

HELGA considers this.

HELGA: Very well. I will be alone together with you. And everyone else at the bar. (*They exit.*)

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

SETTING: *Dusk. A small room inside the castle.*

AT RISE: *Orlando is throwing things around his room in anger. Polonia enters.*

POLONIA: What is all this noise, Orlando? You're going to anger the Queen.

ORLANDO looks up.

ORLANDO: I don't care. (*Shows her the destroyed pillow.*) My pillow has been destroyed.

POLONIA: By whom?

ORLANDO: Helga. She also grabbed my wrist really hard. And stared at me and sighed. And sighed some more. A deep-in-thought conversation in which I had no part. This went on for a while. Holding my wrist really hard the entire time.

POLONIA: Why?

ORLANDO stands up.

ORLANDO: Because of you and your demands that I break up with her. Or possibly because of her dead mother. But that's been weeks now. Before I could break up with her . . . everything went to hell. She began mocking me, even my appearance. Has she seen her reflection lately? Then she said the most horrid thing that she ever could say. (*Dramatic silence.*) She said . . . my sewing was an abomination and then . . . destroyed my favorite pillow. (*Starts to weep.*) My favorite pillow. I'll never be able to make another.

ORLANDO continues weeping loudly. POLONIA grows more annoyed.

POLONIA: Stop it!

ORLANDO instantly stops crying and looks up fearfully at POLONIA.

What happened after she destroyed your pillow?

ORLANDO: I started crying—

POLONIA: Of course.

ORLANDO gets a little huffy after hearing that comment but continues anyway.

ORLANDO: A crowd started gathering, so I tried to leave, but she wouldn't let go of my wrist. She's terribly strong. Then the sighing began.

POLONIA: Did you at least break up with her?

ORLANDO: Maybe. Or not. I don't think so. She in fact questioned whether she actually knew me or not. And if she didn't know me, then perhaps we never dated. Or perhaps she broke up with me. I have no idea. She was rather off, which she has been ever since her mother's death. To be honest, though, when she finally let go and departed spewing of god knows what, I realized that I've never been more attracted to her. Even though her looks were those of a dirty beggar, I knew that I could—

POLONIA: Enough. (*POLONIA crosses away and seems to be pondering something.*) Helga, it would seem, is touched in the head.

ORLANDO: She has gone through a lot.

POLONIA: Yes, but those are inconsequential things. Death happens every day, and your aunt marrying your father and becoming Queen only days after your mother's death has happened . . . I don't know . . . but I'm sure it has. That's of no matter. The reason Helga has been acting out is because of her undying love for you.

ORLANDO: Come again?

POLONIA: Helga has been acting this way because she loves you—

ORLANDO: But she destroyed my pillow.

POLONIA: Because she thought you were breaking up with her.

ORLANDO: I don't even think I mentioned that. Once I said I had to give back—

POLONIA: Her love?

ORLANDO: The pillow she made me.

POLONIA: The pillow she made you . . . of love?

ORLANDO: No, of cloth and stuffing. Certainly not talent. I mean, it was the most terrible . . . oh, I now understand what you meant and I suppose that's what it could be. She did deny that she ever gave me the pillow. Thus she must be crazy. Crazy in love . . . with me.

POLONIA: That's right. Answer me this. Did you, at any time, partake in the . . . you know . . . with Helga?

ORLANDO: You know what?

POLONIA: You . . . know.

ORLANDO: Dancing?

POLONIA: You . . . know?

ORLANDO: Reciting poetry while she brushed my long flowing locks?

POLONIA: No. You . . . know?

ORLANDO: Stop saying you know when I clearly don't . . . (*Finally understands.*) Oh, that you know. No. Despite my best efforts . . . no.

POLONIA: Excellent.

ORLANDO: I don't see how that's excellent—

POLONIA: No time. Give me the pillow.

ORLANDO hands POLONIA the pillow that he made.

Not the one you made. The one she did.

ORLANDO reaches in a bag and pulls out a most terrible-looking pillow. POLONIA is appalled.

It is terrible. Now, I must go tell Claudia that I know why Helga is acting the way she is. And you, stay prepared – I may need you to talk to Helga again.

ORLANDO: I would rather not. I haven't gotten over how she treated me.

POLONIA: Well, get over it then.

ORLANDO: But her actions scare me and I don't understand them.

POLONIA: My son, excluding me, the actions of a woman rarely make sense due to the very emotions that they embrace.

ORLANDO: I embrace my emotions.

POLONIA: Yes, you do. Now wait here until you—

LINNEA enters. POLONIA turns.

Linnea, there you are.

POLONIA rushes to LINNEA and tries to give her a hug. LINNEA puts a hand up to stop her.

LINNEA: You know how I feel about hugs, Mother.

POLONIA nods and stops trying to hug her. ORLANDO stomps towards them.

ORLANDO: Do you know that you've never greeted me that way? Or even tried to give me a hug?

POLONIA: Don't be childish now. Your sister's leaving for France.

ORLANDO: I wanted to go to France! Why does she get to go—

LINNEA: Because appeasement seems to be the way of the new Queen. Keeping me happy is a good thing.

POLONIA: Don't speak of the Queen that way, Linnea.

LINNEA: Why not? It's true.

POLONIA: Of course it is. Truth doesn't have to be spoken.

LINNEA: You mean, like how disappointed you are in having Orlando be your only son?

ORLANDO: Did I exit the room without myself knowing?

POLONIA: Exactly.

ORLANDO: I'm not very fond of you two either!

POLONIA: But, my daughter, one must do whatever one must do to get what one desires. And I desire the Queen's favor.

LINNEA: That's where we're different, Mother. I will not sell my soul to anyone.

POLONIA: Because you don't have to. Now spend some time with your brother before you leave. (*Hugs her.*) Be safe and represent us well.

LINNEA: Of course.

POLONIA starts to exit. ORLANDO calls to her.

ORLANDO: Mother?

POLONIA turns to ORLANDO.

Do you love me?

POLONIA: Love. Such a strong word.

POLONIA exits. LINNEA walks over to ORLANDO and pats him roughly on the shoulder.

LINNEA: There, there . . . you.

ORLANDO looks up.

ORLANDO: You're not very good at cheering one up.

LINNEA: Bringing cheer is not my forte.

ORLANDO crosses to LINNEA.

ORLANDO: I made you this. (*Hands her a pillow.*)

LINNEA: A pillow. Thank you. I'll add it to the collection of pillows that I have.

ORLANDO: I do need to learn to make something else.

LINNEA: Yes, but that's not why I'm here.

ORLANDO: Of course. You came to say goodbye.

LINNEA: Yes, but that's not the main reason.

ORLANDO: Shouldn't it be though? Saying goodbye to your younger brother. Who knows when we might see each other again? We might not. I might lose my wits, fall off a cliff and die.

LINNEA: All right. That is the main reason. Goodbye.

ORLANDO: That goodbye was lacking. Are you dead inside? I don't even—

LINNEA: Never mind. I came to ask you about you and Helga.

ORLANDO: What about me and Helga? Because Mother has already—

LINNEA: Are you still a couple?

ORLANDO: A gentleman never talks, but maybe. Although, I must admit, this whole dead mother thing is making her . . . more tiresome than normal.

LINNEA: Good.

ORLANDO: Why is that—

LINNEA: Because you need to end your relationship with her now.

ORLANDO: I think I did. Or I didn't. I don't know. Mother wants me to talk to her again. Thinks her love for me is the reason she's—

LINNEA: Crazy?

ORLANDO: Yes.

LINNEA: Doubtful. One would think it comes from her mother's death and her need to ponder things. She's very irritating.

ORLANDO: Yes. But this mad thing . . . also makes her quite . . . you know . . . to me.

LINNEA: You're nothing more than a fling to her. Not to mention that her station is far above yours, so even if she wished to marry you, she couldn't.

ORLANDO: And your point is?

LINNEA: I think I made it fairly clear. You need to walk away.

ORLANDO: Maybe I will. Maybe I won't. Maybe I have already. Maybe I haven't. Maybe I will someday—

LINNEA: Listen, Orlando. We both know that you are the one who dreams of love. You think that you've found it in Helga, but she is incapable of that. Especially now. So do whatever Mother wants and then say goodbye and find someone more like you.

ORLANDO: I will listen no more to this. Go to Paris. Bring me something back, of course.

LINNEA: Of course. Thanks for the pillow. Though it isn't one of your more impressive efforts. *(She smiles and exits.)*

ORLANDO: She's right. It's not. *(Grabs the remains of the pillow that was destroyed.)* This pillow is. *(Silence.)* And now it's gone. What to do now? Yes, that is a good idea. I shall sit here and sob.

Lights fade on ORLANDO sobbing.

ACT ONE, SCENE 3

SETTING: *Late at night. Outside a tavern.*

AT RISE: *Helena enters with her arms around Rosaline and Gilda. She has a bottle in her hand.*

HELENA: Have I ever told you how much I love you two?

GILDA: Never.

ROSALINE: Always. But only when you're—

HELENA: Right. *(Crosses away from them.)* Why are you back?

GILDA: Because the Queen called us.

ROSALINE: *(To GILDA.)* No. *(To HELENA)* We are here because Helga needed us.

HELENA: I'm sure that's it. And not what Gilda said.

ROSALINE: Queen Claudia did in fact send for us, but we would've come anyway. She felt we could cheer Helga up.

HELENA: That's what I'm for.

GILDA: Queen Claudia does not like you. And thinks you lead Helga astray.

HELENA: That I do. And proudly. But I am her friend. To the very end.

HELGA enters.

HELGA: To the end of what?

HELENA turns and looks confused.

HELENA: I have no idea. I thought that was the end of the sentence.

ROSALINE: But there are a lot of ends you could be talking about.

HELGA: So which one in particular?

HELENA: All of them.

HELGA: You are a good friend then. *(To ROSALINE and GILDA.)* So my mother aunt called you both here?

GILDA: Yes.

ROSALINE: But we would've come anyway.

GILDA: Probably.

ROSALINE turns to GILDA and makes a face and they both turn to HELGA.

GILDA and ROSALINE: We're very sorry.

HELGA smiles and walks off, looking sad.

HELENA: *(To HELGA.)* Your sullen face makes it seem that the night has dried you out. *(Hands her the bottle.)* Drink some more.

HELGA pushes the bottle away.

HELGA: The illusions of the bottle can only hide the realities of this life.

GILDA: That's why the realities of life don't exist to me. Enjoy the good time and ignore the bad times completely, is what I say.

ROSALINE: That's impossible.

GILDA: No.

ROSALINE: For even in times of joy, there comes an inevitable time of sadness because you know on some level that that joyful time does in fact end. And endings, by their very nature, are sad.

GILDA: What about "happily ever after"?

HELGA: I assure you, there is no happily ever after in life, for we are forced to read until the true end of the story.

HELENA: Perhaps then it's better for us to put no meaning into anything.

ROSALINE: What now?

HELENA: Think about it. These things that happen, everything, including the death of your mother, Helga, are actually nothing but a happening. The sadness, the anger, the longing only come once you apply meaning.

HELGA: Meaning cannot be avoided.

HELENA: If you feel that it cannot be avoided, then I suppose it cannot. (*Silence.*)

GILDA: Speaking of breaking this dreadful silence, I encountered someone rather delightful yesterday.

ROSALINE: Oh, do tell.

GILDA: Last night, Rosaline, when you had grown tired of me and I was forced to find entertainment elsewhere, I came across a man who was quite mad. Singing and dancing, fighting others for no apparent reason, cursing all that he saw, even children and rodents. His actions showed a complete lack of thought and care.

ROSALINE: Were you frightened?

HELENA: Or entertained?

HELGA: Or both?

GILDA: Both. But I was more intrigued than anything else. I noticed that this man's madness allows him something that is not allowed of the sane: complete and utter freedom.

ROSALINE: Madness is not freedom!

GILDA: To the sane, no. But to the mad, absolutely. For you see, meaning is lost in madness along with the expectation of logical actions. Thus . . . freedom.

ROSALINE: That is ridiculous.

HELGA: Perhaps not. Not being held accountable for your actions because of something beyond your control would make everything easier. Though so would death.

HELENA: Such a happy thought. (*Looks at bottle.*) Oh, look, I'm going back in for another. Anyone care to join me?

GILDA and ROSALINE: We would.

ROSALINE and GILDA exit into the bar. HELENA starts to follow but looks back at HELGA.

HELENA: Helga?

HELGA: No, I think it's time for me to wander aimlessly and ponder questions for which there are no answers.

HELENA: All right. Until tomorrow, then.

HELGA nods and HELENA exits. QUEEN HELGA enters, unseen. HELGA sighs and turns, sees her mother and falls. Her mother laughs.

HELGA: It's not funny. I think I may have peed myself a little. (*HELGA stands up.*) How are you?

QUEEN HELGA: Dead, but I'm adjusting. Walking around in this robe with a giant stab wound is not very flattering, but it's all I have.

HELGA: So tell me, Mother, why are you still here?

QUEEN HELGA: It's actually a funny story. It seems that if you're murdered you can't just move on. You're stuck here until you are avenged.

HELGA: I don't see the humor in—

QUEEN HELGA: No. But alas, it's true. And you, Helga, must be the one. You must avenge me. Then and only then can I move on.

HELGA: What can I do, Mother?

QUEEN HELGA: Kill the one who killed me!

HELGA: But who—

QUEEN HELGA: Your aunt.

HELGA: Claudia?

QUEEN HELGA: You don't have another. I only had one sister, and your father was an only child, so—

HELGA: How?

QUEEN HELGA: How was your father an only child? Well, because—

HELGA: No, Mother. How did Claudia kill you?

QUEEN HELGA: With poison. In my ear.

HELGA: What?

QUEEN HELGA: Poison.

HELGA: In your ear?

QUEEN HELGA: Yes, why are you acting—

HELGA: It seems rather stupid. Dying because someone poisoned you through the ear is—

QUEEN HELGA: I didn't die because of the poison in my ear. I died because of the dagger in my chest. And being pushed off the balcony. Suppose the whole ear-poisoning thing could've been skipped. But what would she know? She's not the Queen.

HELGA: Well, she wasn't.

QUEEN HELGA: What's that?

HELGA: Oh, you didn't know?

QUEEN HELGA: Didn't know what?

HELGA: That father married Claudia, and now she rules the kingdom.

QUEEN HELGA: Are you kidding me?

HELGA shakes her head no.

She poisons my ear, stabs me, pushes me over the balcony and then takes my husband and my throne. (*Considers.*) Quite a diabolical plan. (*Silence.*) You have to kill her, Helga. No matter the cost.

HELGA: Yes, Mother. But how will I—

QUEEN HELGA: By killing her. Soon. And don't do that pondering thing where you speak such nonsense about life—

HELGA: Don't think now's the time to—

QUEEN HELGA: Sorry. When I was alive it got on my nerves. And if you do that pondering thing now, not only will you condemn me, but your pondering will probably lead to the death of many others, including yourself.

HELGA: I can't promise anything, but . . . did Claudia really kill you?

QUEEN HELGA: I've already told you. Why would you ask that?

HELGA: It's just that perhaps—

QUEEN HELGA: None of this is real? You're going mad? Stop thinking and start killing. Your aunt. No one else.

HELGA: What about Father? Surely he—

QUEEN HELGA: No, it's your father. What's wrong with you? Listen, your father is a simple man. But he was my simple man. And your father. He is meant to be pitied, not killed. Promise me, though, that'll you'll avenge me.

HELGA: I will, Mother.

QUEEN HELGA starts to leave and then turns back.

QUEEN HELGA: Avenge me. *(Starts to back away.)* Avenge me. Avenge me. Avenge—

HELGA: I got it.

Blackout.

ACT ONE, SCENE 4

SETTING: *Several weeks later. Outside the castle.*

AT RISE: *ROSALINE and GILDA, both with fencing swords, are staring at each other rather angrily.*

GILDA: You seem quite sluggish this morning.

ROSALINE: I am. As a matter of fact, I want to go back to sleep.

GILDA: I don't see that happening, you beef-witted bladder.

GILDA lashes at her. ROSALINE blocks the blow.

ROSALINE: Very well, you artless crook-pated codpiece. Take this.

ROSALINE lashes out at GILDA, who quickly knocks the blow away.

GILDA: Nice try, but I won't be so easily defeated by some dankish dismal dreaming dewberry!

ROSALINE starts laughing.

ROSALINE: Wonderful alliteration, Gilda.

GILDA: If you liked that, you'll love this.

They begin fighting and laughing. At some point they begin to collapse. ROSALINE turns to GILDA.

ROSALINE: You know, this is quite delightful, but I would rather not fight you.

GILDA: I'm hurt. Who would you rather fight?

ROSALINE: Don't be hurt. What I meant was that I think we should role play.

GILDA: I like it. But what roles shall we play?

ROSALINE: Clearly you would be Helga, distraught over her mother's death, her father's remarriage, and just the general way that she is.

GILDA: But would she fight or just talk about fighting?

ROSALINE: The latter, but that would be boring. So let's, for our purposes, assume that she would be driven to fight because . . . because . . . she has been driven mad.

GILDA: But who would she fight? Queen Claudia?

ROSALINE: Someone unexpected.

GILDA: What about one of us?

ROSALINE: No. If Helga did go mad, she would more than likely indirectly have us killed rather than killing us directly. (*Walks off a little.*) Now, bear with me. I'm going to tell you a story.

GILDA: I hope it's not long.

ROSALINE: It's not, and it will serve its purpose. Do you remember how in the bar, Helena said that Helga has talked of seeing her mother's ghost?

GILDA: No. I assume I wasn't listening at that point because I too busy planning what I was going to say.

ROSALINE: Anyway, let's say that the ghost told Helga that she must be avenged because she was murdered.

GILDA: By whom?

ROSALINE: By . . . wait for it . . . Queen Claudia. (*GILDA gasps.*) Who then marries the King, takes the throne, and tries to become Helga's new mother, not knowing that Helga has been visited by her now dead mother who told her of the murder. This breaks what little connection she has to reality and sanity, forcing her to cause such chaos in the kingdom that eventually everyone dies, including her beloved Orlando, all brought about in some way by Helga herself. Linnea, Orlando's sister, stricken by grief, comes for revenge on Helga and they fight. Thus I will be playing the role of Linnea and you, Helga.

GILDA: (*Gasps.*) How did you come up with that?

ROSALINE: Can I be honest with you and you promise not to tell anyone?

GILDA: No to both, but go ahead and tell me anyway.

ROSALINE: I write stories based on events that happen in real life or that I've read that I'm a fan of. Fictional versions, of course, because I take what has already happened and put my own spin on it. Like this.

GILDA: Do you think any of these things might actually have happened?

ROSALINE: No, it's completely over-the-top and absurd. Alas, it is really fun to write . . . this fan fiction. Fan fiction. I like it. (*Draws sword.*) Now, Helga, we shall fight to the death. Your death. For your sins against my brother!

They start to fight.

GILDA: Wait.

ROSALINE hits GILDA.

Ow. I said wait.

ROSALINE: Sorry, didn't hear you.

GILDA: Clearly. What if Helga also killed Polonia? Accidentally, of course.

ROSALINE: That's just plain silly. Leave the writing to the writer. Let's begin again. (*In Linnea's voice.*) Helga, before I kill you, explain yourself. Are your actions caused by your aunt—

QUEEN CLAUDIA and GERHARDT enter.

—that loud-mouthed wench that claims what is not hers or your dimwitted father Gerhardt?

GERHARDT: I am not her father.

ROSALINE and GILDA turn and their eyes grow wide.

Nor am I dimwitted.

ROSALINE: Of course not.

CLAUDIA crosses over to ROSALINE and GILDA.

We were role playing two people who in no way exist nor are in any way related to Denmark.

CLAUDIA: Good. (*Looks at GILDA.*) Now, Rosaline—

GILDA: I'm Gilda.

CLAUDIA: I thought you Rosaline.

GILDA: You've always thought me Rosaline.

ROSALINE: And I Gilda. Though neither is the case. (*CLAUDIA looks at them.*) Unless you want it to be.

GERHARDT: It is of no matter. Have you seen Helga?

ROSALINE: Indeed we have. We spent last night with her at the tavern. Helena was there as well.

CLAUDIA: How did she seem?

GILDA: Helena?

CLAUDIA: No. Helga.

GILDA: Not like herself. She was moody and contemplative. Wait, I suppose that is exactly like herself. Only more so.

CLAUDIA: I need you both to keep a close eye on her. We need to make sure that all is well.

GILDA and ROSALINE: Yes, my lady.

CLAUDIA: And let her know that there is to be a performance, a play, in her honor. We do know how she loves the theatre. That will no doubt make her happy. Now leave us.

ROSALINE and GILDA nod and exit. CLAUDIA turns to GERHARDT, who looks troubled. CLAUDIA crosses to him.

What is wrong, my king?

GERHARDT: Do you really think something is wrong with Helga?

CLAUDIA crosses away.

CLAUDIA: I do not, my king. The actions of the young often make no logical sense. I am sure she shall return to her normal self in good time. There is nothing wrong with our daughter.

POLONIA enters.

POLONIA: Something is wrong with your daughter.

CLAUDIA: Or there is. (*Turns to POLONIA.*) What is it?

POLONIA: She's gone mad, but I think I know why.

CLAUDIA: Do you now? It's not because Helga is upset about a possible murder, or an aunt taking her mother's throne and her marriage bed?

POLONIA looks at her.

POLONIA: No. I don't know why she could be upset by such a thing that did not happen. Except the last part, and—

GERHARDT: What is it?

POLONIA: I think her madness is caused by her love for my dear son, Orlando.

GERHARDT: Really? Him?

POLONIA: Yes. As hard as it is to believe.

CLAUDIA: Why on Earth would you think Helga's actions are caused by Orlando?

POLONIA: Because of – this! (*Pulls out the pillow HELGA made.*)

CLAUDIA: (*Disgusted.*) What is that?

POLONIA: A pillow. Made by Helga for Orlando.

CLAUDIA: Does she hate him? Or pillows? Or both?

GERHARDT: Neither. As eloquent as she is with words, she is equally abysmal at . . . crafts. The fact that she made it for him shows feeling though.

POLONIA: That it does. When you look past its unpleasant appearance, you can see the princess's undying love for Orlando and how he brings happiness into her world that is full of darkness.

CLAUDIA: You got all that from . . . (*Pointing at pillow.*) that?

POLONIA: Yes. When you see with your heart and not with your eyes.

CLAUDIA: Does Orlando feel the same way?

POLONIA: Yes.

CLAUDIA: Then why would this cause Helga to react—

POLONIA: Because I told Orlando that Helga is far superior to him and demanded that he cease seeing her. And when he did or didn't do what I demanded, well, she said harsh things to him, grabbed his wrist really hard, and destroyed his favorite pillow. You see, Orlando is the reason she has turned to madness.

CLAUDIA turns to GERHARDT.

CLAUDIA: Do you think it could be true?

GERHARDT: (*Turns to CLAUDIA.*) You've met Orlando, right? So . . . no.

POLONIA: Has there ever been a time when I said something was true and it was found that it was not?

GERHARDT and CLAUDIA: Many.

POLONIA: Well, this is not one of those times. Stab me behind a curtain if I am wrong.

CLAUDIA: Why would we . . . how do you suppose we find out if this is true?

POLONIA: You know, recently she has taken to pacing around the lobby like a madwoman, ranting and raving.

CLAUDIA: Yes, we are aware.

POLONIA: When she's there the next time, I'll send my son to see her. You and I will hide to see what transpires. If it turns out that Helga is not in love with my son and love is not the cause of her madness, then you can fire me on the spot.

CLAUDIA: Or stab you through a curtain like you suggested earlier.

POLONIA: I wish to take back that suggestion.

HELGA is seen entering, reading a book upside down.

Here comes Helga now. Quickly, depart. I will speak to her.

CLAUDIA and GERHARDT exit. POLONIA, after hiding the pillow, turns to HELGA.

POLONIA: How are you, my lady?

HELGA looks at her.

HELGA: I am neither yours nor a lady. I am reading.

POLONIA: Your book is upside down.

HELGA: Is it now? (*Looks at it.*) It is. Much like the world.

POLONIA: You act as if you don't know me.

HELGA: Of course I know you. You are the fat woman who sells fish.

POLONIA: I do not sell fish. Nor am I—

HELGA: You should. Sell fish. Then there would be something good about you.

POLONIA: Good?

HELGA: There are very few in this world who are good. One who sells fish among them. Do you have a son?

POLONIA: Why yes, Orlando.

HELGA: I am not Orlando.

POLONIA: No, you are Helga. My son is Orlando, as you know.

HELGA: As I know what?

POLONIA: Orlando.

HELGA: I do not know you, so why would I know your son?

POLONIA turns towards the audience.

POLONIA: She acts as if she does not know me nor Orlando. Called me fat when I've clearly lost a few pounds as of late. Yes, indeed she's mad. But who among us hasn't been mad with love? I—

HELGA: I can hear everything you're saying.

POLONIA: No, you can't.

HELGA: I can. You called me mad and defended your obesity.

POLONIA: I am not obese and you cannot hear me. I was delivering an aside, which cannot be heard by others, in this case you.

HELGA begins to laugh and reads some more. Then she grows angry.

HELGA: Nothing in this book but words and lies. A waste. (*Throws book angrily.*) All of it.

POLONIA: Fresh air would do you well. Perhaps you would care to step outside.

HELGA: Into my grave.

POLONIA: Or perhaps just to outside.

HELGA: Nothing more than a temporary fix for a permanent need.

POLONIA: Well, then I shall take my leave of you.

HELGA: You cannot take what is freely given. I've enjoyed our talk, fat woman.

POLONIA: (*Offended.*) I'm not—

POLONIA exits in a huff as HELGA laughs. ROSALINE and GILDA enter and see HELGA laughing. They cross to her.

ROSALINE: It's good to see you laughing, friend.

HELGA turns to them.

HELGA: Yes. Why are you here?

ROSALINE: Queen Claudia sent us to tell you news.

HELGA: Why on Earth would you talk to that beast of a woman?

ROSALINE: She is your Queen.

GILDA: And your mother.

HELGA: She neither my Queen nor my mother. She is but a figment of your imagination.

ROSALINE: A very real figment, no doubt.

HELGA: Indeed. How are you two?

ROSALINE: As well as anyone.

GILDA: Not too happy and quite happy to not be too happy. How are you?

HELGA: The colors in my mind become darker and darker and harder to understand moment by passing moment.

ROSALINE: I do not know what that means.

HELGA: It means as much as a broken promise. Nothing.

GILDA and ROSALINE look to one another.

ROSALINE: Can we ask you a question?

HELGA: What type of question?

GILDA: The type that might anger you?

HELGA: Then of course. Those are my favorite types. Ask away.

GILDA: Have you gone mad?

ROSALINE turns to GILDA.

ROSALINE: That was not the question we were going to ask!

GILDA: But I thought it was.

ROSALINE: That's a horrible question to ask.

GILDA: It does get straight to the point though, doesn't it?

HELGA: That it does. Am I mad? (*Considers it.*) As in angry?

GILDA: No, as in gone mad.

HELGA: Right. The word "gone" does connote a journey. Into madness, but not the angry form of madness. Polonia wondered the same thing. Perhaps I am. Perhaps I'm not. Perhaps I've only begun the journey. Alone. Or perhaps we've begun the journey. Into madness, that is. This life no doubt picks apart what sanity we do have, bit by bit, until we're seeing ghosts. So to answer your question . . . no. I'm no more mad than you are. You who are neither happy nor sad when the color of life should no doubt cloud your view of the sun.

ROSALINE: I have to say, you're not very fun to be around anymore.

HELGA: My mother is dead, I see her ghost, and have to watch my aunt mother rule a kingdom that she has no business ruling while my inept father sits around acting powerless. Perhaps I am overreacting. What is this “news” you have for me?

ROSALINE: Queen Claudia wanted us to tell you something wonderful. There is to be a theatrical performance. In your honor.

HELGA: In that the case, the world is ending. (*Paces away and then turns back sharply.*) So, who are the actors that are to perform?

THE PLAYER enters, along with her troupe, in very gaudy clothes.

THE PLAYER: It is I and a troupe of performers.

HELGA, ROSALINE and GILDA turn to her.

HELGA: And your entrance seems timed to cross the line between reality and theatre. (*Looks at her.*) Why, you look like nothing more than a clown.

THE PLAYER: As actors we are often no more than clowns. In fact, now we are sad clowns, having traveled many, many miles in search of those who wish to see our works, but alas have found but one.

HELGA: What are these works?

THE PLAYER: We can give you whatever it is that you desire. We can perform the classics, dating all the way back to when words were not spoken nor written down, nor ever recorded in any shape or form.

ROSALINE: Then how would you know what to perform?

THE PLAYER: Who would tell us that we were wrong? And we perform all types of shows.

Claps hands. THE TROUPE moves into place.

The tragedies.

THE TROUPE begins acting out a tragedy. Near the end, when they all die, THE TROUPE looks up.

TROUPE: We're all dead.

THE PLAYER: The comedies.

THE TROUPE begins wordlessly acting out the same play as before, but this time everyone lives.

TROUPE: We all live!

THE PLAYER: We can also—

HELGA: Are you poor?

THE PLAYER turns to HELGA.

THE PLAYER: What's that now?

HELGA: Are you poor?

THE PLAYER: That seems to not be a well-placed question. But alas, I shall answer it. We are indeed poor in money, yet rich in talent.

HELGA: You don't say. What did the Queen wish you to perform?

The PLAYER: A thrilling tale of a princess accepting and loving her aunt, who is now her Queen and stepmother after her mother died tragically.

HELGA: Seriously?

THE PLAYER KING nods and HELGA begins laughing. She then places her arms around ROSALINE and GILDA.

My friends, go and tell your Queen that you have done your duty and that I will in fact partake in the viewing of this play.

GILDA and ROSALINE: Aye, my lady.

ROSALINE and GILDA exit. HELGA turns to PLAYER KING.

HELGA: As for you and your troupe, I believe that a change of script is in order.

THE PLAYER: A change?

HELGA: Aye. One that shall light the truth where now it sits in darkness. Come. We shall discuss.

They exit as lights fade.

ACT ONE, SCENE 5

SETTING: *Outside the castle.*

AT RISE: *ORLANDO is onstage walking to find HELGA. HELENA enters, sees ORLANDO and crosses to him.*

HELENA: Well, look at what we have here.

ORLANDO turns and sees HELENA.

ORLANDO: It's me. Orlando.

HELENA: Yes, you are Orlando. Where are you going?

ORLANDO: To talk to Helga.

HELENA: For what purpose?

ORLANDO: Jealous?

HELENA: No.

ORLANDO: Then I'm going to talk about . . . I don't really know yet.

Hoping to figure that out on the way there.

HELENA: Do you know where she is?

ORLANDO: No. Figured I would bump into her.

HELENA: It's a big kingdom.

ORLANDO starts to laugh.

What?

ORLANDO: I know what this is. These questions you're asking.

You're hoping to reignite an old flame.

ORLANDO crosses to HELENA.

With me. And you. Making an us.

HELENA: I have no interest in making an us with you.

ORLANDO tries to put his finger to her lips, but she grabs and twists it. He falls to the ground.

I don't like people touching my face.

ORLANDO starts crying gently.

Are you weeping?

ORLANDO: No! I'm crying gently. Linnea is more of a weeper. Don't tell her that I told you. She'll . . .

ORLANDO breaks down even more. HELENA backs away uncomfortably.

HELENA: This is making me uncomfortable.

ORLANDO looks up.

ORLANDO: I love her, Helena. And though Mother believes she loves me, her words and actions say differently. And lately she's looked rather dirty.

HELENA: She's going through a lot.

ORLANDO: That's no reason not to clean one's self.

HELENA: I suppose. *(Silence.)* I'm leaving now.

ORLANDO: If you see her, will you send her my way?

HELENA: Will you still be crying?

ORLANDO: I don't know. Perhaps.

HELENA: Very well. You should stop crying. You're not a very attractive crier.

ORLANDO starts crying even more. HELENA exits and lights fade. When the lights return, we see HELGA staring out. QUEEN HELGA is standing beside her silently.

QUEEN HELGA: This is odd.

HELGA jumps and backs away.

HELGA: Stop doing that!

QUEEN HELGA: I've been standing beside you for seconds now. I wasn't exactly hiding.

HELGA: I was lost in my thoughts.

QUEEN HELGA: You're always lost in your thoughts. (*Silence.*) So?

HELGA: So what?

QUEEN HELGA: Aren't you going to ask me how purgatory's treating me?

HELGA: I . . . wasn't . . . but I can.

QUEEN HELGA: Good.

Silence. HELGA looks at QUEEN HELGA, confused, then gets it.

HELGA: How's purgatory treating you?

QUEEN HELGA: Fine, I suppose. I have learned some tricks that I'm finding quite amusing. Other than that, it's all right. Except for this one couple. You will not believe how they died.

HELGA: How?

QUEEN HELGA: Well, their families were feuding yet they were in love, so the girl had some elaborate plan where she would poison herself to make it look as if she was dead. But she wasn't. Well, the boy thought she was dead, poisoned himself in anguish, and died. The girl woke up—

HELGA: Of course.

QUEEN HELGA: Yes, of course. She woke up and saw her love dead, attempted to poison herself by the leftover poison on his lips, failed, so she stabbed herself. Then died.

HELGA: Oh. That's sad.

QUEEN HELGA: No, what's sad is that they won't stop telling everyone what a great love story it is. Well, it's not.

HELGA: Why can't they move on?

QUEEN HELGA: I don't know. I think they're choosing not to. I'm ready to move on though. But I can't. Because of you.

HELGA: Whoa now. Don't—

QUEEN HELGA: It's true, Helga. Why haven't you acted? Why haven't you avenged me?

HELGA: I . . . I . . . you know I've never been good at avenging. I—

QUEEN HELGA: When have you ever had to avenge anything?

HELGA: Never, but this . . . I have set something in motion for tomorrow and there I shall gain my proof. I—

QUEEN HELGA: (*Angrily.*) Proof? What do I have to do? I came back as a ghost and told you point blank what happened. If I had just died in a normal way, like getting trampled by horses, do you think I would still be around?

HELGA: I only need—

QUEEN HELGA: (*Shaking her head.*) Well, know that while you're getting your "proof," I have to continue listening to the blathering of dead fools. Please, Helga. I mean, that is, if you ever loved me.

This line hits HELGA. QUEEN HELGA smiles a little.

Thought that line would land.

QUEEN HELGA reaches out her hand. HELGA looks at her.

HELGA: I don't know why you're reaching out your hand.

QUEEN HELGA: I don't either. I thought it very ghost-like and moving, but . . . never mind.

She exits. HELGA watches her go and then turns away.

HELGA: I can't take this anymore. Perhaps it would be better if I were . . . (*Silence. Pulls out a skull and looks at it.*) To be or not to be . . . that is the question. To be or not to be.

HELENA enters.

HELENA: To be or not to be . . . what?

HELGA turns and sees HELENA.

HELGA: What?

HELENA: To be or not to be what?

HELGA: (*Nonchalantly.*) Oh, I was just pondering whether or not to end myself.

HELENA: Humph. Is that a skull?

HELGA: (*Looks at skull.*) Yes. I carry it around with me so when thoughts of death arise I—

HELENA: Have a prop?

HELGA shrugs.

It's not your mother's skull, is it?

HELGA stares at her but says nothing.

I'm just going to pretend you said no. (*Silence.*) So, what have you decided about this ending yourself thing?

HELGA: Don't know. Still in the pondering stages. I mean, is it nobler to suffer through all of life's struggles or simply take arms and defeat life by ending it? And thus have a victory over life.

HELENA: By ending it?

HELGA: Yes.

HELENA: Seems a rather hollow victory because, you know, you'll be dead.

HELGA: But in death do you not avoid life's slings and arrows?

HELENA: I suppose. But one would then also avoid life's . . . non-slings and non-arrows.

HELGA: Even in life's non-slings and non-arrows, I find nothing but a pit of despair.

Silence and then HELENA starts laughing. HELGA looks at her and then smiles.

That was a bit much. My apologies.

HELENA: It's fine. Somewhat used to it by now.

HELGA: Do you think I'm mad like the others?

HELENA: As in angry?

HELGA: No, the other.

HELENA: No, but I do believe that if you continue all this pondering without any action, you will no doubt be pulled into the darkness without a choice.

HELGA: What do you suppose I should do?

HELENA: I don't know. Something.

HELGA: Are you saying that I should kill Claudia?

HELENA: What? No, I wasn't. I was actually thinking something smaller.

HELGA: Like what then?

HELENA: I don't know. Perhaps bathing, for a start.

HELGA: Or embracing my madness. If others already believe it so—

HELENA: No, your ideas are awful. Look, the next chance you get to do something . . . do. Whatever it is. All right?

ORLANDO enters and sees HELGA.

ORLANDO: (*False bravado.*) There you are, Helga.

HELGA and HELENA look to ORLANDO.

HELENA: Look like you have the perfect opportunity. Now, I have to go. It's almost bar time. Come by when you get the chance.

HELENA exits and HELGA turns to ORLANDO, who is now crossing to her. A slightly skewed smile comes over HELGA.

ORLANDO: That's a disconcerting smile.

HELGA laughs slightly.

And that laugh—

HELGA: How are you on this beautiful day, Orlando?

ORLANDO: I am well. Or as well as can be.

HELGA: I imagine most would say that. Why are you here?

ORLANDO: To speak to you.

HELGA: About?

ORLANDO: Your love for me.

HELGA: I don't love you.

ORLANDO: Or do you?

HELGA: I don't.

ORLANDO: But you clearly did. Look. You made me that awful pillow . . . that I loved, of course, which clearly showed your love for me.

HELGA: Pillows are ridiculous. I would never lay my head on one and by god would never make one.

ORLANDO: Don't speak ill of pillows, and you did make me one.

HELGA: I made you nothing!

ORLANDO: You're being rude.

HELGA: Your words are full of lies!

ORLANDO: No, your words are! You loved me once. You said.

HELGA: Words, my dear Orlando, flow freely at no cost. Possess no meaning.

ORLANDO: Then I suppose our relationship was a fraud.

HELGA: You're a fraud, Orlando.

ORLANDO: (*Unsure.*) No, I don't think so.

HELGA: You parade around, clearly pretending to be something that you're not, all in the name of seeking approval from anyone. Everyone. And what's so sad, you will never get that approval. You will never be enough. (*Silence.*) I will never be enough.

ORLANDO: Well, then I'm breaking up with you.

HELGA starts laughing.

HELGA: Break up with me? (*She gets into his face.*) Break up with me?

ORLANDO: Y . . . yes.

HELGA continues laughing and turns away angrily.

HELGA: Everything is already broken up. Everything and everyone. We lie to ourselves that we are together, but we are nothing but fragments being tossed, turned, and thrown about by a world that cares nothing for us.

ORLANDO: So . . . we're broken up. And I suppose I'll—

Starts to exit and HELGA grabs him.

Not the wrist again! Oh my, you smell appalling.

HELGA: I'm going to give you a piece of advice. Leave this place. Find somewhere to go and hide from this world. Before it destroys you. Because it will. Trust me. Get out. And don't even think of ever bringing children into this horrible world.

ORLANDO: Oh, I would never have kids. They're disgusting and needy and—

HELGA: You're missing the point.

ORLANDO: Sorry.

HELGA: Go. Remove yourself. Defeat this . . . all of this. You're nothing but a puppet in a horrible play that ends with your strings being cut.

Shoves him down. HELGA walks away a little. ORLANDO backs away and stands up.

ORLANDO: A puppet? I'm not a—

HELGA: Snip, snip.

ORLANDO: I'm not very pleased with you. *(HELGA exits, laughing.)*
And we are definitely broken up!

ACT ONE, SCENE 6

SETTING: *Four months since Queen Helga's death. The courtyard.*

AT RISE: *THE TROUPE acts out a scene, waiting for HELGA.*

ELEANOR: *(As the King.)* Wife of mine, such great love I have for you.

REGAN: *(As the Queen.)* I know, and my love for you is as eternal as the oceans. Oh, love of my life—

ELEANOR: Stop!

REGAN: Yes, I agree the line of dialogue—

ELEANOR: It's not the line of dialogue. It's the way you're playing the Queen. I need you to stop it.

REGAN: What's wrong with the way I'm playing the Queen?

ELEANOR: You're playing her all wrong. All girly.

REGAN: She is a girl.

ELEANOR: She may be, but not all women act like that. It's a quite dreadful stereotype, really.

REGAN: Don't speak poorly of my choices.

REGAN and ELEANOR begin arguing.

ALEXIA: Oh, the two of them are arguing yet again and you (*To THE PLAYER*) do nothing to stop it.

THE PLAYER: It's wonderful. Such passion. This -

Pointing to ELEANOR and REGAN as they actually begin fighting.

- is theatre.

ALEXIA: No, this is life.

THE PLAYER: And life is theatre and theatre is life.

Sees that ELEANOR is on top of REGAN about to punch her. Claps hand.

Stop, you two. As much as I would love to continue enjoying your delightful dueling, I must insist we get back to rehearsal. Regan, play the Queen less like you're doing and more like the way it should be played. Everyone else, continue doing what you are doing, only with passion. Bring these lives to . . . life! Places, everyone!

REGAN: Before we start—

THE PLAYER: There is no "before we start." Our show begins in mere moments.

HELGA and HELENA enter.

HELGA: Or now. Are you ready?

THE PLAYER: We shall make magic.

HELGA begins laughing.

HELGA: Out of this poorly written scribble?

THE PLAYER smiles and nods.

Wonderful.

THE PLAYER: I do have a question, though. Do you think we should be performing it for the Queen and King?

HELGA: Why on Earth would we not?

THE PLAYER: When you consider everything that has happened in Denmark, with your mother's death and—

HELGA: (*Shock.*) My mother is dead?

THE PLAYER is confused but nods agreement.

Humph. Pay it no mind, the dead will stay dead whether or not you traipse upon the stage.

THE PLAYER: Some would say that you're accusing the Queen of committing murder.

HELGA: Would they?

THE PLAYER: Perhaps.

HELGA: Let them. (*Trumpets begin playing.*) Oh, it seems time for the performance. Make it good. It may be your last.

THE PLAYER starts to speak but HELGA puts her hand to her mouth.

Shhhh! Rest your voice for the stage.

THE PLAYER nods at her slowly and then nods for her troupe to follow her. HELENA, who had been watching from a distance, crosses to HELGA.

HELENA: That was the worst pep talk I ever heard.

HELGA turns and sees HELENA.

HELGA: (*Laughing.*) Dear Helena, so nice to see you. I need a favor.

HELENA: What?

HELGA: During today's performance, I need you to watch the Queen closely.

HELENA: For what purpose?

HELGA: Guilt, of course.

HELENA: Guilt?

HELGA nods.

Very well.

HELGA smiles and then starts to exit.

HELGA: I should go. My Aunt Mother and Uncle Father will no doubt be expecting me.

HELGA exits as HELENA watches her go.

HELENA: This cannot be good. (*QUEEN HELGA appears.*)

QUEEN HELGA: Oh, it's not.

HELENA turns and notices QUEEN HELGA.

And it's pointless because I told her everything she needs to know. But it will be entertaining. (*QUEEN HELGA stares at her.*) You don't seem to be fond of me.

HELENA: It's not you, it's your . . . ghost-ness that annoys me.

QUEEN HELGA: You should be more accepting.

HELENA: I'll get right on that.

QUEEN HELGA: I'm sure you will. Now let's go get our seats. Can't miss the opening act. Don't imagine there'll be a second one.

They exit and the lights transition to the stage. We see QUEEN CLAUDIA sitting by GERHARDT and POLONIA. ROSALINE and GILDA are standing behind CLAUDIA and GERHARDT.

GERHARDT: Do you think Helga will come?

CLAUDIA: It is of no matter. Soon she'll be England's problem.

GERHARDT: (*Somewhat distraught.*) I would rather her not go to England.

CLAUDIA: Would you rather kill her?

GERHARDT: Why is that the second option? Clearly there has to be—

CLAUDIA: We can't have her running around being so . . . her.

POLONIA, who has been listening in, moves her face between CLAUDIA and GERHART.

POLONIA: If I may, let me try something first. After the show, leave Helga alone with her father to talk. King Gerhardt, you can see if you fix her. If yes, all is well. If not, off to England she goes.

HELGA arrives.

HELGA: Off to England who goes?

CLAUDIA, GERHARDT, POLONIA turn and see HELGA. POLONIA turns to CLAUDIA.

POLONIA: I'll handle it. (*To HELGA.*) No one.

HELGA smiles.

HELGA: Consider it well handled.

GERHARDT: I'm surprised to see you here, Helga.

HELGA: Surprised?

GERHARDT nods.

My surprise is that my attendance surprises. I love good theatre, it's in my honor, and it promises to be quite the experience.

CLAUDIA crosses to HELGA.

CLAUDIA: How are you doing, dear daughter?

HELGA: I eat the air, like chameleons do.

CLAUDIA: I have no idea of what you speak. You did not answer my question.

HELGA: Mine, neither.

ORLANDO enters and begins crossing to POLONIA.

GERHARDT: Come, sit by me.

HELGA: Good father, I would, but . . .

Sees ORLANDO and crosses to him.

How are you, sir?

ORLANDO: All right.

HELGA: (*Whispers.*) I think we both know that you've never been "all right."

ORLANDO: By god, don't start—

HELGA starts laughing.

HELGA: God. That fellow. The greatest comic known. (*Crosses behind GERHARDT and places her hands on his shoulders.*) Look at father, so joyful and his wife has been dead but 2 hours.

GERHARDT: It's been four months.

HELGA: Has it?

CLAUDIA: Indeed it has. Now please sit, Helga. The show is about to begin.

HELGA: The show is indeed about to begin.

HELGA crosses away to the stage. CLAUDIA looks on.

CLAUDIA: What on Earth is she—

HELENA comes and stands behind CLAUDIA and looks at her. CLAUDIA starts to speak but is cut off by HELGA.

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