

Premiere After-Party

Dark comedy in two acts

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SYNOPSIS

The curtains have just closed on the long-awaited premiere of Shakespeare's Othello and the actors stay after the play to celebrate the opening night. Unfortunately, the party is marred by a mysterious death, and there is a suspicion that a party participant may be involved. Gloomy, yet humorous, with "whodunnit" intrigue plot twists to an unexpected finale; Premiere After-Party is riveting until the very end.

The world premiere was staged in 2010 by Russia's most famous theater director - Roman Viktyuk - to critical acclaim and has been hailed as an enormous success.

4 men and 3 women. Interior

From reviews:

"Valentin Krasnogorov's *Premiere After-Party* is, in my opinion, the best modern play. He was able to pick up on the spirit of the time so perfectly, with all the chaos and the triumph of vulgarity, that, of course, I immediately decided: I must direct the play! And the actors got instantly inspired. Similar to how a drop of water reflects the sea, the ocean, and the sky, a drop in the life of every theater reflects the life of the country. This play analyzes the current state of our society with both humor and sadness. It is universal for Russia and any other country in the world. I have always directed plays by those not immediately appreciated by the country. I am proud of it.

This play is about our social system and its structure. It's the best on the subject, because the theater is a reflection of the present day, the interactions of all ideological and human relationships in the society, its dissociation and dullness, all that surrounds us in this life. We must learn (and the theater is the best mentor) to face the truth of life."

Roman Viktyuk

"Do you love theatre as I love it?"

V.G. Belinsky

CHARACTERS

Othello

Iago

Cassio

Lodovico

Desdemona

Emilia

Bianca

ACT ONE

Desdemona's bedroom in Othello's castle in Cyprus. A canopy bed at the back of the stage, and, closer to the forefront, a table and several chairs. The actors in the Renaissance costumes are playing the famous finale scene of Shakespeare's masterpiece. It may seem a bit long for our play, but the need for this will become apparent later.

Desdemona, in a beautiful nightgown, is sitting in front of the mirror tidying up her luxurious golden hair. Emilia helps her.

DESDEMONA.

Emilia, I'm afraid I cannot sleep,
A sense of foreboding worries me.

EMILIA.

Here is some herbal drink,
It'll help you sleep.

DESDEMONA.

Thanks, darling. *(Drinks.)*

EMILIA.

Farewell, madam. Good night.

Emilia leaves. OTHELLO enters.

OTHELLO.

Have you prayed tonight, Desdemona?

DESDEMONA.

Yes, my lord.

OTHELLO.

If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight.
I would not kill thy unprepared spirit.
No, heavens forbend, I would not kill thy soul!

DESDEMONA.

Talk you of killing me? I'm scared.

OTHELLO.

Think of your sins.

DESDEMONA.

My only sin is love to you.

OTHELLO.

That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee
You gave to Cassio.

DESDEMONA.

No, by my life and soul!

OTHELLO.

By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in his hand.
O perjured woman! You turn my heart to stone.

DESDEMONA.

He found it then;
I never gave the handkerchief to him

OTHELLO.

Honest Iago has told me all.

DESDEMONA.

Kill me tomorrow: let me live tonight!

OTHELLO.

Nay, if you strive -

DESDEMONA.

But half an hour!

OTHELLO.

Being done, there is no pause.

DESDEMONA.

But while I say one prayer!

OTHELLO.

It is too late.

(Strangles her.)

EMILIA. *(Behind the door.)*

My lord, my lord! what, ho! my lord, my lord!

OTHELLO.

What noise is this? Not dead? not yet quite dead?

I that am cruel am yet merciful;

I would not have thee linger in thy pain: So, so.

(Stabs Desdemona with a dagger and throws her behind the bed canopy.)

DESDEMONA.

Oh, falsely, falsely murdered!

EMILIA. *(Bursts into the room.)*

Alas, what cry is that?

OTHELLO.
That? What?

EMILIA.
Out, and alas! that was my lady's voice.
Help! help, ho! help!
(Rushes to Desdemona behind the bed canopy.)

DESDEMONA. *(In a faint voice, behind the bed canopy.)*
A guiltless death I die.

OTHELLO.
It was I that killed her
Cassio did top her; ask your husband else.
O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell,
But that I did proceed upon just grounds
To this extremity. Your husband knew it all.

EMILIA.
O mistress, villainy has made mocks with love,
My husband say that she was false!

Enter Iago, Cassio, Bianca and Lodovico – a representative of the doge of Venice.

LODOVICO.
What is the matter? How now, general?

EMILIA.
O, are you here, Iago? You have done well,
Disprove this villain, if you are a man:
He says you told him that his wife was false:
Speak, for my heart is full.

IAGO.
I told him what I thought, and told no more
Go, charm your tongue.

EMILIA.
I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak:
My mistress here lies murdered in her bed.

Everybody is stricken.

OTHELLO.
Don't stare, masters: it is true, indeed.

EMILIA.
O you dull Moor! that handkerchief you spoke of
I found by fortune and did give my husband;
For often, with a solemn earnestness,
More than indeed belonged to such a trifle,
He begged of me to steal it.

IAGO.
Filth, you liar!

EMILIA.
By heaven, I am not!

OTHELLO.
Are there no stones in heaven
But what serve for the thunder?--Precious villain!

Othello tries to stab Iago, but Cassio disarms the Moor. Iago kills Emilia and tries to escape. Cassio and Lodovico catch Iago and tie him.

EMILIA.
Ay, ay: Oh, lay me by my mistress' side. *(Dies)*

CASSIO.
You, Lodovico, are an ambassador of Venice
Give us the order, what we have to do.
All of us obey you.

LODOVICO.
O thou Othello, thou wert once so good,
Fall'n in the practise of a damned slave,
What shall be said to thee?
Did you and he consent in Cassio's death?

OTHELLO.
Ay.

CASSIO.
I never gave you cause.

OTHELLO.
Oh the pernicious caitiff!
How came you, Cassio, by that handkerchief
That was my wife's?

CASSIO.
I found it in my chamber:
And Iago confessed but even now
That there he dropped it for a special purpose
Which wrought to his desire.
I gave the handkerchief to Bianca later.

BIANCA.
Ay, that is true.

CASSIO. *(Pointing to Bianca.)*
So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true.
For if I knew to whom the handkerchief belonged,

How could I dare give it to a strumpet?
Nor would she carry it like that without hiding!

OTHELLO.
O fool! fool! fool!

LODOVICO.
Othello,
You must forsake this room, and go with us:
Your power and your command is taken off,
Come, bring him away.

OTHELLO.
Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know 't.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus.

Stabs himself. Everybody is stunned.

LODOVICO.
O bloody period!

CASSIO.
All that is spoke is marred.

OTHELLO.
I kissed you ere I killed you: no way but this;
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

Othello dies. The show ends. Applause. The entire troupe makes the well-orchestrated curtain calls. The applause, the flowers. Then the actors call the director to the stage (he also plays the role of Lodovico). Finally, the applause dies down. It is assumed that the audience leaves the hall, and the curtain falls. Artists hug, kiss and congratulate each other. In short, the usual finale of a premiere performance. Everyone except Othello and Iago, leaves the stage. Othello is a big, good-natured, and a little clumsy "bear". The actor playing Iago is clever, cool, and acrimonious.

OTHELLO.
Have you been told the director asked the leading actors to stay after the performance?

IAGO.
Yes, I know. There will be a discussion and a party.

OTHELLO.
I'd prefer just a party without any discussions.

IAGO.
Naturally. But has our Lodovico ever missed a chance to lecture us?

OTHELLO.

Let him blab. We'll be listening and eating. Frankly, I don't mind to relax a bit. It's a premiere, after all! We have to celebrate!

IAGO. (*Sullenly.*)

As to me, I wouldn't mind to get wasted too.

OTHELLO.

Anything wrong?

IAGO.

No, why?

OTHELLO.

You've got a strange expression.

IAGO.

Nothing's wrong with my expression.

OTHELLO.

Is it because of her? (*Pointing in the direction of the back of the stage.*)

IAGO. (*With a cold surprise.*)

Who?

OTHELLO.

Just asking...

IAGO.

Just answering.

Enters Lodovico, the middle-aged director of the performance.

His speech and manners give away a man used to be in charge, which he softens with his friendly tone of voice.

LODOVICO.

Dear friends, once again: congratulations on the premiere! (*Shakes hands with the actors.*)

EMILIA. (*Entering.*)

Stagehands are asking if they should remove the bed and other props.

LODOVICO.

No, tomorrow we are playing Othello again. Let it all stay as it is.

EMILIA.

Then I'll let them to go home. (*Exits*)

LODOVICO.

Let's all talk a little about the tonight's performance.

During the subsequent dialogue enter Emilia and Bianca, carrying bags with snacks, bottles, plates, etc. They spread out the tablecloth and begin to set the table.

IAGO.

How about postponing the talk till tomorrow, and just having some drinks now?

LODOVICO.

Tomorrow we will discuss everything in detail, but now I am going to say just a couple words, while the trail is still warm, so to speak. Besides, our ladies haven't set the table yet.

IAGO.

Look at Victor, he's so exhausted he can hardly stand.

LODOVICO.

I've told you guys many times: as long as you rehearse, forget that Othello's name is Victor, Desdemona is Veronica and Cassio is Mark. Even off stage they are Othello, Desdemona and Cassio for you. You should

always call each other only by your stage names to fully get used to your roles and the play. That's my method.

IAGO.

That's what I'm saying: look at Othello, he's so exhausted he can hardly stand.

OTHELLO.

I'm OK.

LODOVICO.

See? He is all right! By the way, Othello, you were at your best tonight!

OTHELLO.

Thank you.

LODOVICO.

However, as usually, you let your temper get the best of you. You are losing self-control.

OTHELLO.

I know. I always get carried away.

IAGO.

But, on the other hand, isn't Othello supposed to have a temper?

LODOVICO.

I know you're friends, and you always stand up for him, but he doesn't need it today.

IAGO.

I am sorry, how could I forget: what you call a discussion is actually your monologue.

LODOVICO.

By the way, Iago, your acting so far has, unfortunately, been far from perfect. Take the last scene. You should have shown us the fear of discovery, the anger at the failure of your elaborate plot, the shame for what you have done.. And what did we see instead? Leaps and listless cries. Your mind was obviously some place else. You should stop fussing so much, and start playing internally, not externally.

IAGO.

I just didn't want to steal Othello's thunder in that scene. After all, the entire audience attention should be on him.

LODOVICO.

You're not quite right. To me, the protagonist of the entire play is precisely Iago, and not Othello. Iago is the cornerstone of the play. Let's recall how the play starts.

Iago envies the Moor who received the post of a commander, and starts to hatch a plot against him. But Othello also has a deputy, Cassio, so Iago is intriguing against Cassio, too. He devises a cunning plan to kill two birds with one stone: he makes Othello jealous of Cassio, to divide and destroy them both. A brave, intelligent, and loyal soldier, he cannot accept being passed up on a promotion while the commander's post was given to a Negro, and a deputy post - to Cassio, some flippant and nice-looking swaggerer who ought to be a Doge's or a Senator's relative. And Iago embarks on a path that will ultimately ruin his wife, and Roderigo, and Othello, and Desdemona, and himself. To me, it is not a tragedy of jealousy or of the deceived trust, but of envy.

OTHELLO. (*Both he and Iago were not really listening.*)

By the way, where is Cassio?

IAGO.

Surely, our Mr. Handsome is signing autographs for his lady fans at the service entrance. He'll be back soon.

LODOVICO.

So, like I said: envy rules the world. We don't envy some Rockefeller with his billions, because we don't know him personally and because he is far away, but we do envy those near us – even in small things. Why is my co-worker paid two pennies more than me even though I work as hard and as well as him? Why is my neighbor's home better than mine? Why does my friend have a better car?

This is what bothers us and pushes us to commit the evil deeds - the desire to be the first one among others.

IAGO.

What's so surprising about that? As Caesar said, "It is better to be first in the village than second in the city".

OTHELLO.

As for me, I do not envy anyone. But other people's success always depresses me.

LODOVICO.

That's exactly what I'm talking about. We live in the age of competition.

Homo homini lupus est. We all instinctively fear others; we do not trust anyone, even our friends. The aggression is hiding deep inside each of us and it keeps spilling out here and there.

That's what my play is all about.

IAGO.

Our play.

LODOVICO.

Of course - our play.

Cassio enters. He is nice-looking, personable, and easy-going.

CASSIO.

Am I late?

IAGO.

No, we haven't started yet.

LODOVICO.

What do you mean "we haven't started"? We've been discussing the performance for a while.

IAGO. *(With irony.)*

I meant the party, not the discussion.

LODOVICO.

Oh, yes, that's right. We've gathered here to celebrate the premiere. Ladies, are you ready over there?

BIANCA.

Yes, please take your seats.

Everybody sits down at the table. Lodovico is holding a glass and saying a toast.

LODOVICO.

So, my friends, let's drink to the success of our play and let's wish it a long life!

OTHELLO.

To success! It's the main thing in actor's life!

BIANCA.

And it's even more important for a woman.

Everybody clinks glasses, cheers, drinks, and eats.

OTHELLO. *(To Cassio.)*

Mark, give me a cigarette.

LODOVICO.

What is this "Mark, give me a cigarette"? Haven't I told you: get used to seeing each other not as actors but as your characters in the flesh. And not just during the performance. It would be better to say,

My dear Cassio, may I please taste

Your cigarettes, so sweet and fragrant?

Or something like that.

CASSIO. *(Rising with a glass in his hand.)*

I apologize I wasn't around during the discussion. Perhaps not everything was perfect tonight, and each of us could and should use some critique. But what's important, we won, and to the victor belong the spoils. So I propose a toast – to our victory!

Everybody joins in with enthusiasm. The atmosphere is getting noticeably warmer and more informal.

LODOVICO.

Would anyone else like to say something?

BIANCA.

Let's have a contest for the best toast!

IAGO.

The shortest toast is always the best. We've spoken enough up onstage; let's just drink.

OTHELLO. (*Stands up.*)

Please allow me. Theatre is a temple of art, it united us into one big family. I would like to drink to our noble profession, to the brotherhood of actors.

The actors are supporting the toast in unison.

LODOVICO.

Cassio said, to the victor belong the spoils. Yes, the premiere was successful, and yet there was a black fly in our Chardonnay. As a director, I'd like to summarise our discussion of the play. We have already spoken about Othello's and Iago's roles.

You, Cassio, were not bad, but you admired yourself too much. You have to remember: you are playing a warrior, a deputy chief, and not a ladies' man...

CASSIO.

Why can't a warrior be a ladies' man?

LODOVICO.

Now Lodovico... Wait, Lodovico was played by me.

IAGO.

And certainly played impeccably. It was the best and dare I say - the central - role of the play. It's strange the play is titled "Othello" and not "Lodovico".

LODOVICO.

Your sarcasm is ill-placed. You are aware I'm not an actor, but a director. I just happen to play this bit role of a doge's representative by chance, because an actor got sick.

IAGO.

Don't be so humble. True, you only pronounced two or three phrases, but it's clear you're a natural actor, not a director at all.

LODOVICO. (*Not bothering to respond to Iago's incisive remark, turns to women.*)

With you, Emilia, I have no problems. You, Bianca, were simply charming. But who I'm really unhappy with is Desdemona. I've reprimanded her during the intermission. By the way, where is she? Why isn't she here?

The actors look around. Desdemona is, in fact, absent, and everyone has just noticed it now.

EMILIA.

She must be changing.

LODOVICO. (*To Emilia.*)

Would you mind going and having a look?

Emilia exits. Lodovico continues.

Let's, for example, take her last words, "A guiltless death I die". I've already told her a hundred times: these are the most spectacular of her words. When everyone assumes she's already drawn her last breath, she suddenly comes out from behind the canopy, pale, with her hair down, moans quietly, "A guiltless death I die" and falls. Instead she just mumbles something from behind the canopy in this unrecognizable voice so the audience can hardly hear her! What was that all about? The ending of the play was completely screwed up. This is unacceptable.

IAGO.

Better tell this to her when she comes here.

LODOVICO.

I will, don't you worry.

IAGO.

And you won't chicken out?

LODOVICO.

Why are you teasing me all the time? Let me celebrate this evening in peace, and tomorrow I'll deal with you. I know your favorite phrase, "I would have directed it differently". So let me tell you this: everyone knows the wrong ways to direct, but nobody knows the right one.

EMILIA. (*Coming back.*)

Her dressing room is empty.

BIANCA.

And she didn't go to the curtain calls.

CASSIO.

Our diva is displeased with something again...

OTHELLO. (*To Lodovico.*) .

Obviously, she felt offended about your reprimand during the intermission.

CASSIO. (*With malice.*)

And tomorrow she is going to complain to the manager.

LODOVICO. (*Worrying.*)

I wouldn't call it a reprimand... Just a comment made in the most tactful manner.

IAGO.

That's exactly what you can tell the manager when he calls you to his office.

CASSIO.

Or when she calls you.

LODOVICO.

Bianca, would you please look for Veronica? It's impolite to continue celebrating without her. She'll be offended.

IAGO.

Not Veronica, but Desdemona. (*With sarcasm and admonition.*) We should always call each other by our stage names only to fully get used to our roles and the play. That's your method.

Lodovico chooses not to answer. Bianca exits. Pause.

CASSIO.

Don't you worry. When she calls you, you'll apologize to her and to the manager in the most tactful manner, and she'll forgive you.

LODOVICO. (*Annoyed.*)

I don't give a damn about the manager and this moody mistress of his. I'm not going to endlessly indulge her every whim.

IAGO.

If I were you, I wouldn't say it in front of the witnesses.

Bianca comes back.

BIANCA.

I didn't see her anywhere.

LODOVICO.

Have you asked the doorman?

BIANCA.

The doorman is asleep.

LODOVICO.

Wake him up and ask if he's seen her.

Bianca exits. Pause. Lodovico is very nervous.

CASSIO.

While Bianca is looking for our incomparable Desdemona, may I suggest a puzzle for your entertainment?

Three guys found two bottles of wine. How did they split them?

OTHELLO.

I am not up to a puzzle at the moment. How about you just tell us the answer?

CASSIO.

What about you, Iago?

Iago shrugs. Cassio triumphantly declares.

Easy! They poured the wine into three glasses and drank equal amounts of wine!

And so, as there are three guys here, I suggest we drink to us.

Othello, Iago, and Cassio drink.

LODOVICO.

So you don't consider me a guy?

IAGO.

Your position is so high up there - we don't dare to include you in our company.

Bianca comes back.

LODOVICO.

So? Where have you been for so long?

BIANCA.

I was trying to wake up the doorman. He said Desdemona had left with everybody else.

LODOVICO.

Ask him to come here.

BIANCA.

He went home and asked me to give you the keys.

LODOVICO. *(Taking the keys.)*

Well, the great actress has the right to do whatever she wants. Talent redeems everything. Let's drink to our celebrity.

EMILIA.

With pleasure. She is a great actress and a remarkable person.

OTHELLO.

Yet I wonder why she's left.

CASSIO.

We gathered here to celebrate – not to discuss Desdemona. She's gone – fine. I have a suggestion: let's drop this topic.

LODOVICO.

Right!

OTHELLO.

Deal.

IAGO. *(To Cassio.)*

You shouldn't have suggested it.

CASSIO.

Why not? Do you want us to keep talking about Desdemona?

IAGO.

Not at all. But we shouldn't have made a deal about it. Do you know a parable about a man who was ordered not to think about a monkey for an hour? Even though he hadn't had a single thought about a monkey before, after the order all he could think about was the damn monkey...

CASSIO.

You are right. Let's try to forget about our monkey without any deal. Let's just drink and have fun with our beautiful ladies.

BIANCA.

Stop talking about the monkey. It's not nice.

CASSIO.

Ok, I won't. I regret more than anybody that Desdemona is not with us: there are not enough women at our little party. There are only two of you, and there are three of us, men. *(Glancing at Lodovico.)* I meant, four.

EMILIA.

It's alright, each one of us ladies here is worth two.

CASSIO.

Do you mean each of you is ready to take up two men?

BIANCA.

Even more, if necessary.

IAGO.

Wow! That's a bold statement!

OTHELLO.

And so I propose a toast to our beautiful ladies.

LODOVICO.

And, besides, wonderful actresses.

CASSIO.

To your beauty, charm and talent!

Traditional ritual: the men stand up and drink to women; the women remain sitting.

EMILIA.

Now we have no choice but to propose a toast to men.

CASSIO.

Now that the ladies would like to drink to us, for this special occasion I have a surprise for them: real French cognac.

OTHELLO.

Where is it?

CASSIO.

It's hidden in a secret place. I'll get it.

Cassio walks to the back of the stage, passes by the bed, automatically draws the canopy, glances at the bed, stops on his tracks, looks closely and a few moments later returns to the party.

OTHELLO.
Why are you back?

Cassio doesn't answer.

IAGO.
What's wrong? You don't look like yourself.

CASSIO.
There... in bed... Desdemona...

LODOVICO.
Desdemona what?

CASSIO.
Nothing. She is lying in bed.

BIANCA.
You mean asleep?

CASSIO.
I don't know.

LODOVICO.
Bianca, go look.

BIANCA.
I'm afraid.

LODOVICO.
Afraid of what?

BIANCA.
I don't know. Just afraid.

LODOVICO.
Emilia, you go.

EMILIA.
I won't.

LODOVICO.
Are you afraid too?

EMILIA.
You better go yourself. Why are you sending us? You guys are men!

Lodovico hesitates.

IAGO.
I don't get it – are you afraid, too?

LODOVICO.
No, but... To look at a woman in bed...

IAGO.
Don't be ridiculous. It's a stage, not a woman's bedroom.

Iago decisively walks to the bed and disappears behind the canopy. He stays there for quite a long time before reappearing again. Everybody waits anxiously what he has to say.

EMILIA.
So?

IAGO.
She is dead.

Everybody is shocked.

LODOVICO.

Are you sure? Is she really dead?

IAGO.

Couldn't be more dead...

OTHELLO.

Impossible! She was alive just moments ago! I was just strangling her!

IAGO.

I'm afraid you succeeded.

OTHELLO.

Stop kidding around!

IAGO.

I'm not kidding.

Lodovico walks to the bed and comes back crushed.

LODOVICO.

Yes, she is dead.

OTHELLO.

But why?

LODOVICO.

I'm afraid, my friend, you have let your insatiable temper out again. I warned you. During our morning rehearsal you have almost strangled her.

OTHELLO.

No, I barely touched her...

LODOVICO.

"Touched"... Look at your huge paws and recall how fragile a woman's body is.

OTHELLO.

What if she had a heart attack? She kept complaining about her heart.

LODOVICO.

Don't lie to yourself, Othello. She's got blue handprints from your hands on her throat.

BIANCA.

God, what should we do?

IAGO.

Personally, I feel an urge to have a drink.

LODOVICO.

Me, too.

EMILIA.

I wouldn't mind it, either.

OTHELLO.

Neither would I.

IAGO.

Cassio, bring your cognac.

Cassio, carefully bypassing the bed at a maximum distance, heads toward the back of the stage.

OTHELLO.

Still, I have nothing to do with it.

EMILIA.

The investigation will figure it out.

Cassio brings cognac and pours it into glasses.

LODOVICO.

So – to her soul - let it rest in peace - right?

Othello is about to clink habitually, but Emilia stops him.

EMILIA. *(Sternly and reproachfully.)*

Don't clink when drinking to the dead.

Othello obediently moves his hand holding the glass away. Everyone drinks. Silence.

OTHELLO.

So what is going to happen now?

CASSIO.

Don't worry. This is a manslaughter, so you won't get much.

OTHELLO.

How much, you think?

CASSIO. *(Shrugging.)*

I don't know... Perhaps, five years.

OTHELLO. *(In despair.)*

And you call it "not much"?

CASSIO.

Well, it's better than ten. You'll still have to prove it wasn't premeditated, though.

IAGO.

If they trump up a premeditated murder on you – you may get as much as ten.

OTHELLO.

Ten?! Ten years for literally nothing?

CASSIO.

What did you think? Iago, pour me some more.

EMILIA.

Good cognac.

CASSIO.

I told you guys it's French.

BIANCA.

Must be a present from a lady fan?

CASSIO.

Maybe.

BIANCA.

From who?

CASSIO.

I am a tactful person and never give away other people's secrets.

OTHELLO.

How can you guys talk about some cognac now? Shame on you! By the way, pour me some, will you?

LODOVICO.

Here is my advice: if you get a chance, hide your money and valuables in a safe place before the arrest.

Otherwise, while you are doing time, your wife will get married, and when you come back, you will have nothing.

OTHELLO.

Are you out of your mind?

CASSIO.

Lodovico's right – it's quite common. Listen to the smart guy.

OTHELLO.

My wife is not like that!

CASSIO.

There is a joke about this. A prisoner asks his cell mate, "Aren't you worried that during the ten years you'll spend in prison, your wife may leave you?" The inmate replies, "Absolutely not. First, she is a decent woman; second, she loves me very much; and third, she is doing time, too".

Everybody laughs, including Othello.

EMILIA.

Let me tell you another joke that proves that some women are truly loyal and can wait for their husbands to return from a prison. The wife comes to visit her husband serving time in a prison and tells him, "By the day you get out of prison, I will mend your favorite plaid suit."

Everybody laughs.

BIANCA.

A judge asks, "Defendant, why did you murder your wife in such an old-fashioned way as strangulation? Why didn't you use a gun? Defendant replies, "I didn't want to wake up the children".

Cheerful laughter.

OTHELLO. *(He laughs too, but eventually realizes that the matter concerns him, and stops laughing abruptly.)*

Stop cracking jokes. They are not funny. And I'm not guilty.

CASSIO. *(Cannot stop.)*

"Defendant, do you plead guilty?" - the judge asks. The defendant responds, "I need some time to think it over." Judge: "Well, I hope ten years will be sufficient."

Everybody rolls on the floor.

OTHELLO.

It's all funny to you guys, but tomorrow they might take me into custody!

CASSIO.

Don't worry. Time is passing by fast in prison. Ten years will fly by as one day.

IAGO.

And our Desdemona must be in heaven by now.

EMILIA.

Playing a role of a sinless woman.

BIANCA.

And looking for a new lover.

CASSIO.

Frankly, Othello, you did a big favor to all of us. Of course, we all were fond of Desdemona, but just think for a moment: is it fair that for every performance she was earning more than all of us together?

BIANCA.

All this because our manager thinks that people come to our theatre to see her, and her only.

EMILIA. I wish he told us how much money he spent to make a star out of her. She is being promoted, she is the only one to be interviewed – as if there are no other actors in the theatre. She gets half of the profit and all the glory, and we are a nameless flock.

IAGO.

I've noticed, Emilia, that you feel most unhappy not because of your failures but because of other people's success.

EMILIA.

As if you were happy about Lodovico's success!

IAGO.

Do you consider this performance a success?

EMILIA.

Didn't you want to direct Othello – you even started working on it, but Desdemona revoked your assignment with the excuse that you're an actor, and not a director.

LODOVICO.

And she was right.

IAGO.

She just knew I would never give her Desdemona's part.

EMILIA.

You shouldn't have quarrelled with her. First it was a passionate love, and then it turned into a passionate hatred.

BIANCA.

That's how it usually goes.

IAGO.

How about we do not gossip for once?

LODOVICO.

I admit, not everything in the play worked out the way I wanted. But is it my fault that the show was run by Desdemona?

IAGO.

You shouldn't have danced to her tune.

LODOVICO.

Easy for you to say. But now, thank God, she kicked the bucket, and I'll change everything to my liking. Oh, I didn't mean to say thank God, but... How do I put it? ...At any rate, too bad she's gone.

OTHELLO.

It all seems like a terrible nightmare. Just half an hour ago when we were playing the finale, she was still as alive as we are, hissing at me that I should not distract the attention of the audience away from her with my acting. I can't believe it's so easy: here she was, but not any more.

EMILIA.

Our fate is in God's hands.

OTHELLO.

I can't help but thinking she is about to come out from behind the canopy, and everything will be as it used to be.

CASSIO.

No point in grieving... It won't bring her back.

OTHELLO.

I'm not grieving for her, but for myself. Just moments ago everything was alright, I've played the premiere well, I was counting on the movie and TV roles... And now what? A jail? A prison camp?

EMILIA.

Do you even remember killing her?

OTHELLO.

The thing is I absolutely don't. It's all blurry. It's such a shame to go to jail for nothing. If only I had known how it was going to end, I would have strangled her intentionally and enjoyed it. At least I could have fun. Oh well... Call the police.

EMILIA.

You'll be better off if you go there and confess. You'll get a shorter sentence.

OTHELLO.

You think so?

EMILIA.

Of course! Confession and remorse... You know...

OTHELLO.

Well... (*Gets up.*) Then I'll go right away. A horrible end is better than an endless horror. (*Solemnly.*) The Moor has done his work, the Moor can go. Remember me kindly...

(Takes center stage.)

Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell the plumèd troops and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue! Oh, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
And O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
The immortal Jove's dead clamors counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone.

(*In despair.*) What a great actor is falling!

CASSIO. (*Putting his hand on Othello's shoulder.*)

Listen, I've got an idea how you can avoid prison.

OTHELLO. (*With hope.*)

Really?

CASSIO.

I just thought it might be better if you stab yourself to death.

OTHELLO.

Are you serious?

EMILIA.

Well, it's better than rotting in prison till the end of your days. And it'd be so Shakespearean! Spectacular ending. All newspapers will write about you. "The death worthy of a great actor."

OTHELLO. (*After a short pause.*)

You are right. That's what I'll do. Does anyone have a dagger?

CASSIO.

Use the one you stabbed yourself with onstage.

OTHELLO.

That one won't work. I need a real dagger, not a fake one.

BIANCA.

There's a knife here, on the table, – I sliced salami with it. Nice and sharp! Here. (*Gives him the knife.*)

OTHELLO. (*Checking out the knife.*)

Thanks.

BIANCA.

Just give it back to me when you're done, will you? I haven't finished slicing yet.

OTHELLO.

Ok. How did it go?... (*Recalling the suicide scene.*)

I took by the throat the circumcised dog...

LODOVICO. (*Interrupting.*)

You were standing not here, but a little to the right. And don't forget to grab yourself by your throat.

OTHELLO.

That's right. (*Moves to another part of the stage.*)

I took by the throat the circumcised dog,

And smote him, thus...

Othello's hand, ready to cut his throat, stops. His face lightens up.

Yes! I remember now!

LODOVICO.

What do you remember?

OTHELLO.

I didn't strangle her! I didn't strangle her – I stabbed her!

LODOVICO.

So what?

OTHELLO.

Don't you remember? After I had strangled her, at first she said, "O, falsely, falsely murdered!" and then, after I stabbed her in addition to it, she said, "A guiltless death I die". That means she was alive!

LODOVICO.

Yet now she is dead.

OTHELLO.

But I have nothing to do with it. Now I remember everything! When I finished strangling her, she asked me in whisper not to crumple her nightie because she would soon have to make the curtain call...

LODOVICO.

What about those marks on her neck?

OTHELLO.

Those are from the morning rehearsal. I really lost control then...

CASSIO.

Strangled or stabbed - what difference does it make?

OTHELLO.

Excuse me, it's impossible to kill with a fake dagger. It's made of cardboard, don't you know?

CASSIO.

How do we know the dagger you used was fake?

OTHELLO.

What else could it be? Here, take a look. (*Unsheathes his dagger and gives it to Cassio.*)

CASSIO. (*Checking out the blade.*)

But the dagger is real!

Cassio takes a swing and throws the dagger to the floor. The end of the blade gets stuck in the wood. Everybody looks at Othello quizzically, but he is stunned more than anybody.

OTHELLO.

Impossible. I didn't stab her.

Pause.

LODOVICO.

Let's check it out. Who'd like to examine the body?

IAGO.

Not me.

BIANCA.

I'm really afraid of the dead.

CASSIO.

If we are talking about examining the body, I can.

EMILIA.

As if you haven't seen it alive!

CASSIO.

But I haven't - imagine that.

EMILIA.

I thought this pleasure was granted to all men in the theatre.

IAGO.

Emilia, stop gossiping!

LODOVICO.

Emilia and Cassio, come with me.

Lodovico heads behind the bed canopy. Emilia and Cassio reluctantly follow him. Some time later they come back.

OTHELLO.

Well?

LODOVICO. Imagine, there is both a stab wound and blood. And the blood is real, not a cranberry juice.

OTHELLO. Don't hang this case on me, you guys. I did not strangle her, that's what matters. As far as stabbing is concerned - any of you guys could have done it.

LODOVICO.

What do you mean - any of you guys?

OTHELLO.

That's what I mean.

Pause.

LODOVICO.

Ok then, let's look into it. Let's recall who was where and who was doing what during the final scene.

IAGO.

I'm afraid, signor Lodovico, this night of recollections is going to be pointless. The final scene was staged by you so badly that it would be impossible to understand it at all.

LODOVICO. (*With hostility*)

Surely you would have staged it better.

IAGO.

No doubt. You had actors thrashing about, fussing, shouting, and wringing their hands senselessly, and that's what you call directing.

LODOVICO.

I made this part so dynamic to relate characters' exhilaration and not for the purpose of conducting an investigative experiment.

CASSIO.

By the way, may I tell another joke? The last one, I promise. The court is trying a rape case. The prosecutor announces, "The victim requests the investigative experiment to be repeated!"

LODOVICO.

Cassio, settle down. Let's try to calmly figure out who did what on the stage after Othello strangled Desdemona.

OTHELLO.

Again? I am telling you – I didn't strangle her!

LODOVICO.

Calm down, I mean it in the theatrical sense.

OTHELLO.

I don't want to hear it in any sense.

LODOVICO.

Stop swaggering. Your charge has not been dropped yet.

OTHELLO.

No one charged me with any crime. You are not a prosecutor, are you? I haven't strangled anyone. End of the story.

BIANCA.

Actually, I think you have. She was able to wheeze out two or three phrases after that and then finally kicked the bucket.

LODOVICO.

Bianca, nobody is asking for your opinion. You better tell us what you were doing at that moment on the stage.

BIANCA. Me? Nothing. I was standing by Cassio's side, showcasing my legs to the audience – just like you told me during the rehearsal.

LODOVICO. I didn't tell you anything of the kind. I just reminded you to act like a courtesan.

BIANCA.

And that's exactly what I did.

LODOVICO.

What were you doing, Emilia?

EMILIA.

I was denouncing Iago until he finished me off.

IAGO.

But before that you were snuggling with Desdemona behind the bed canopy and couldn't tear yourself away from her. Maybe that was when you strangled her?

EMILIA.

And had thrust a knife into her as well? Actually, the knife was in your possession – the very knife you were chasing me with.

IAGO.

That knife was made of elastic rubber, and you know it. I still have it. *(Takes the fake knife from his belt and shows it to everyone.)*

EMILIA.

Well, you killed me with a fake knife, and her – with the real one. You came to really hate her after she had cheated on you!

IAGO.

As if you all adored her.

LODOVICO.

Stop bickering! Cassio, your turn!

CASSIO.

You all saw how I came on the stage and was there with you guys. Then we unsheathed our swords, caught Iago, and that was it.

LODOVICO.

But while we were chasing him you could have quietly poked Desdemona with your sword as well. She dumped you, Mr. Handsome, didn't she? Because of her, you didn't get Othello's role, even though you really wanted it.

CASSIO.

You guys also could have slaughtered her and you dreamed about it. She humiliated you guys publicly at every rehearsal!

OTHELLO. *(To Cassio.)* You wanted my role? That's a surprise! That's why you started courting the bitch!

CASSIO.

How come this role is yours? Based on how you are playing it, you have no idea who Othello is and what he is like. Even Bianca could have played it better.

A short pause.

IAGO.

We are moving in the wrong direction. I suggest we have a drink and calm down.

CASSIO.

Good idea.

OTHELLO.

Is there any cognac left?

CASSIO.

No, just vodka.

BIANCA.

Even better. Go ahead, pour some.

Cassio pours vodka into glasses. Everyone drinks in silence. Pause.

OTHELLO. (*Thoughtfully.*)

I wonder, guys, how come you can quench your thirst with water, but not with vodka? The more I drink vodka – the thirstier I get.

CASSIO.

This is a question that has been pondered by all the enlightened humanity.

EMILIA.

Listen, you guys. Before the play Desdemona's so called "sponsor" visited her in her dressing room.

BIANCA.

You mean the manager?

EMILIA.

No, the other one, the main one. One of those tough ones.

BIANCA.

I don't get it. Isn't she with the manager?

EMILIA.

Sweetie, you are still inexperienced and you don't know that if a decent actress wants to be successful, she needs at least two sponsors: one would be a director or a manager, and the other - a rich guy from the audience. One gives you roles, another gives you money. You can't accomplish much without both of them.

CASSIO.

Emilia, your young friend knows it as well as you do. Please continue. What did you want to say?

EMILIA.

Making a long story short – they had a big fight.

LODOVICO.

Are you sure?

EMILIA.

You bet! Our tender Desdemona was swearing like a sailor. I found it very educational and enlightening.

Cassio. (*Joking and bantering, as usual.*)

Once a gang of bad guys from Daytona

Chased and caught a young girl, Desdemona

With intent to abuse and harass.

Tender, sensitive girl

Told them, "Eff off, y'all -

Or I'll shove your effin' balls up your ass."

IAGO.

Ok, so they quarrelled, so they fought, so what? How is it our business? Why did you tell it to us?

EMILIA.

Because - what if he got even with her? And it has nothing to do with us!

LODOVICO.

How? How could he have gotten even with her?

EMILIA.

Easy. While we, in the final scene, were making faces and faking passions, he came from the back of the stage, got under the canopy - and that was the end of it. He did it himself or hired a professional.

CASSIO.

When would he be able to?

EMILIA.

It's easy if you know what you are doing. Besides, he had plenty of time to think it through and prepare – the entire two and a half hours.

IAGO.

No, this sounds like such a cheap criminalistics. What would he kill her for? It would be too risky. He could've just stopped giving her money - and that would be the end of it.

EMILIA.

That would be way too cruel!

BIANCA.

You know what I'm afraid of? If the tough guy decides that it was us who killed his sweetheart, he will get even – with us.

CASSIO.

You mean, he'll kill us?

BIANCA.

How would I know? He might. If he really is that tough.

Everyone exchanges glances.

IAGO.

Don't be silly. Why would he kill us? It can be done so much easier: he can bribe the prosecutor, and all of us will be sent to jail.

OTHELLO.

They say, there are theatres in prisons these days...

IAGO.

And that's the kind of a theatre we'll be playing for ten years.

EMILIA.

I don't get it – are you kidding or serious?

IAGO.

We are kidding very seriously.

CASSIO.

I would say, we are saying serious things while kidding.

LODOVICO.

Ok, ladies and gentlemen. It's time to wrap up the talking. There is a murdered woman laying behind the canopy right next to us and we keep blabbering. One of you guys murdered her and wouldn't confess, but I'm determined to get to the end of this case right now, in hot pursuit.

BIANCA.

Why "one of you", and not "one of us"? Maybe you are the one who killed her. You hated her the most.

IAGO.

And what makes you think you have the right to investigate?

LODOVICO.

Because I'm the most senior here both age-wise and position-wise.

IAGO.

So what? We obey you as a director. But this is not a stage or a theatre.

LODOVICO.

Actually, this is a stage and a theatre. And you are my actors, and this is my performance.

IAGO.

But it's a different kind of theatre and a different kind of performance. You are no longer in charge.

LODOVICO.

If you want to lead the investigation – go right ahead.

IAGO.

I don't want anything. Actually, I want a drink.

OTHELLO.

We all do.

BIANCA.

And I want to go home...

LODOVICO.

No, no one will leave this room until we sort this through. I've got the keys to the theatre door.

IAGO.

Here's what I suggest: let's all go to our dressing rooms for about twenty minutes and each of us will calmly think the situation over. Then we'll gather again and decide what to do.

(Everyone exchanges glances.)

LODOVICO.

Makes sense.

EMILIA.

I agree.

BIANCA.

And I'm afraid.

CASSIO.

If you are scared to stay in your dressing room alone, we can go to mine together.

BIANCA.

I'm afraid.

CASSIO.

What are you afraid of? That twenty minutes won't be enough?

BIANCA.

Stop wisecracking. I don't want to go to your room, and that's it.

CASSIO.

Why not?

BIANCA.

What if you are the murderer?

EMILIA.

Bianca, stop it. We are all uncomfortable enough.

OTHELLO.

So, shall we go?

LODOVICO.

Let's go.

The actors slowly leave the stage one after another.

The end of the Act One

ACT TWO

The same place, about fifteen minutes later. Bianca enters and sits down cautiously, looking around fearfully. She shudders at every sound or rustle. Somebody's steps can be heard. Bianca jumps up and contemplates hiding behind the bed canopy, but scared of the fatal place even more, ends up hiding behind the table. Cassio enters.

CASSIO.

Bianca, what are you doing there?

BIANCA.

Me?

CASSIO.

You.

BIANCA.

Nothing.

CASSIO.

If you are so scared, you should've stayed in your dressing room.

BIANCA.

Being there alone is even scarier. That's why I left.

CASSIO.

You are not alone now, you are with me. Don't be afraid – if I strangle you, it will be with hugs.

BIANCA.

I'm not scared. I've got my salami knife.

CASSIO.

Very sensible. Although you better keep it away. So, have you calmed down now?

BIANCA. *(Sits down at a significant distance from Cassio)*

Yes.

CASSIO.

Bianca, I can't help but think: why is it that you are my lover only onstage? Why don't we try it in real life?

BIANCA.

Tell me: is there an actress in our theatre who hasn't received the same proposal from you?

CASSIO.

What does it have to do with other actresses? We are partners now. Lodovico wants us to get used to our characters. So - let's follow our director's instructions. Up onstage you look like a first-rate courtesan. What about in real life?

BIANCA.

In real life I am also great. No complaints so far.

CASSIO.

So why don't we try? Would you like that?

BIANCA.

Actually, I would. Very much so. But not with you.

CASSIO.

What is such a disfavor for?

BIANCA. *(Flirting.)*

You haven't deserved my favors yet.

CASSIO.

If you mean presents and that kind of stuff, that won't be a problem.

BIANCA. *(Much warmer.)*

I wonder, where does your money come from? After all, you are just an actor.

CASSIO.

I realised a long time ago that our government loves culture in word, but business in deed. So I became a businessman.

BIANCA.

Really? I'd never guess. And what kind of business are you running?

CASSIO.

I own a strip club. Would you like to work for me? You've got a great body and nice legs... You could earn more for one night there than for a month in the theatre. Just learn a couple of things – and go right ahead.

BIANCA.

I know another occupation where one could earn even more. And there is no need to learn.

CASSIO.

Is that what you do?

BIANCA.

It's not your business.

CASSIO.

Well, one wouldn't interfere with another, would it? *(Sits down next to Bianca.)*

BIANCA.

Who, do you think, finished off Desdemona? Was it really Othello? He is such a good-natured bear...

CASSIO.

That's right, a bear. Just think: the play is titled Othello, but media write and talk about Desdemona only. So he has gone wild!

BIANCA. I think you hate him. But why?

CASSIO.

I don't hate him. I envy him. If he fails tomorrow, I'll love him like my brother again, I'll cheer him up, I'll encourage him. But if he is successful again – he better beware of me!

BIANCA.

Is this because you wanted to play Othello?

CASSIO.

And I will, you'll see. So - would you like to work for me in my club?

BIANCA.

I don't know. I'll think about it.

CASSIO.

As you wish. I'm not going to force you.

BIANCA.

It's impossible to force me: I always give in first.

CASSIO.

Then why don't you give in to me? I mean – to my business?

BIANCA.

First I want to see who gets Desdemona's part.

CASSIO. *(Surprised.)*

You want to play Desdemona?

BIANCA.

Why not? The role is vacant!

CASSIO.

Wow, you're quite an ambitious girl!

BIANCA.

That's the only way to succeed. Will you support me? If I become Desdemona, I'll insist you play Othello.

CASSIO.

And may I count on your personal benevolence?

BIANCA. *(Very warmly.)*

Ah, don't worry about small things – we can always work it out.

Cassio hugs Bianca, but at this very moment Othello and Iago enter.

IAGO.

So, what's the news?

CASSIO. *(Letting Bianca go.)*

There's no news. What can be new anyway?

Emilia and Lodovico enter.

LODOVICO. So, everybody's here? *(And because everyone is silent, continues.)* Any statements? Perhaps someone wants to say something?

(Everyone is silent.)

Then I'll rephrase my question: any suggestions?

IAGO.

I think: why should we bother with this case at all? There are competent authorities and professionals – let them do their job.

LODOVICO.

You mean we should call the police?

IAGO.

Well, yes. I think we should've done it a long time ago.

OTHELLO.

And while we are at it - the ambulance, too.

IAGO.

Too late for the ambulance, don't you think?

LODOVICO.

Any other suggestions?

Silence. Lodovico takes out his cell phone.

Who's going to call?

Pause.

IAGO.

You go ahead. You are the most senior. *(And adds.)* And you are in charge.

Lodovico puts the phone down.

LODOVICO.

Why me? What does it have to do with me? Why not, say, Othello?

IAGO.

Go ahead and call – the police will figure it out.

Lodovico wants to start dialing again.

CASSIO. Wait. I have a suggestion. What good will come out of it if the police arrive here right now? Investigators, photographers, and reporters will all descend here, with their questions, interrogations, and reports. What were you doing, where were you standing, did you have the intimate relationships with the deceased... There will be a scandal! Do we need it?

LODOVICO.

So - I shouldn't call then?

IAGO.

Why, you should. But not now. All this can wait until tomorrow.

EMILIA.

That's right – there's no urgency. True, Desdemona has passed away, but this is not good enough a reason for us not to celebrate the premier. We worked so hard rehearsing for so many months, we deserved such a success, and now what - we can't even celebrate? No way!

OTHELLO.

Right! Let's eat and drink first, and then we can call. Let them come later.

BIANCA.

We do have the right to have some fun after working so hard!

CASSIO. I'm sure Desdemona would approve of our decision. After all, we are celebrating her success as well.

EMILIA.

Let's imagine that in the mind's eye she is still with us.

OTHELLO. *(Standing up with a glass.)*

Great! Let's drink to Desdemona's success!

Everyone raises their glasses in unison.

LODOVICO.

Wait! How will we explain to police why we didn't call them right away?

IAGO.

We won't have to explain anything. We were just sitting here drinking peacefully all night. And only when we were about to go home, we noticed she was lying in bed motionless. We called right away. That's it.

LODOVICO.

Well, if you say so... To Desdemona's health!

Everyone becomes noticeably more cheerful.

EMILIA.

Let's drink to our director, who united us into an harmonious team of soul mates and led us to a well-deserved success.

BIANCA.

Bravo!

The women kiss Lodovico, the men shake his hand.

OTHELLO. *(Getting up.)*

To the brotherhood of actors!

IAGO.

We've already drunk to it.

OTHELLO.

Have we? That's alright. We'll drink again. You know, it's my favorite toast. I don't know why, but I feel better now. Mark, give me a cigarette. I mean,

My dearest Cassio, may I... so to speak...

Anyway... oh well... give me a cigarette!

CASSIO.

I see you are pretty wasted.

OTHELLO.

Why not? It was such a good day: premiere, star role, success... Tomorrow I'll play even better!

IAGO.

"Tomorrow"... Who knows what's going to happen tomorrow. You – as well as the rest of us – might be arrested as early as tomorrow morning. At any rate, the performance will be cancelled.

LODOVICO. (*Worried.*)

Cancelled? After such a success?

IAGO. A prosecutor won't care about success. They'll keep us in custody until they figure out this case.

LODOVICO. Oh no! I invited critics, television, and even a journalist from the capital for tomorrow show...

People would start talking about me... Perhaps I would even get my own theatre finally!

IAGO.

People will start talking about you now, don't worry.

LODOVICO.

No, we cannot allow the performance cancellation.

EMILIA.

No way! I have also invited very important people to the tomorrow show!

BIANCA.

I want to be onstage again. I've got such a luxurious dress - it shouldn't be wasted.

OTHELLO.

I don't know if I'm going to be arrested, but I would love to play in at least one more show.

CASSIO.

I've got a new idea! Want to hear?

Everybody becomes silent.

EMILIA.

Well?

CASSIO.

What if we don't notify anybody? It's not our responsibility to check her bed, after all. The doorman said Desdemona had left the building – that's it. We don't know anything. We just celebrated the premiere and went home.

Pause. Everyone is processing the idea.

LODOVICO.

What's the point?

CASSIO.

The props are installed; nobody will approach the stage. Desdemona's body won't be discovered until tomorrow night. It will take time for them to digest the news, to inform the manager, to call the police, and so on, - so they won't have time to cancel the performance. And so we'll play this performance at least once more.

EMILIA.

Not a bad idea.

CASSIO.

Besides, in this case we all get a chance to take care of our personal business. Who knows what will happen to us when everything is discovered? It never hurts to play it safe.

IAGO.

It's a good idea, but surely one of us will blow the gaff. Bianca will be the first one to babble the secret out to her four of five closest friends. Otherwise, she'll just explode from the information overload.

BIANCA.

I am not an idiot.

CASSIO.

Let's take an oath of secrecy.

LODOVICO.

The consequences of letting it out should be obvious to everyone even without an oath. If it comes out that we knew and didn't report it – we all will go to jail for harboring, aiding and abetting.

CASSIO.

So, what do we do?

OTHELLO.

We won't notify the police.

CASSIO.

Who is against it?

Everyone is silent.

Passed unanimously.

OTHELLO.

Very well. So we are sitting here, drinking, and one by one great ideas come to our minds. (*Drinks a fair dose.*)

EMILIA.

By the way, I've got an idea too; great or not – you decide.

CASSIO.

Ok, let's hear it.

EMILIA.

I'm not even sure if I should say it...

OTHELLO.

Get to the point. Fire away!

EMILIA.

It should be arranged that Desdemona's body disappears from the theatre.

Everybody is stunned.

OTHELLO.

I don't get it. Is it even possible?

EMILIA.

Why not? Move it out of here - that's all.

CASSIO.

Where to?

EMILIA.

I don't know. The important part is not where to, but where from. The point is, she shouldn't be here.

LODOVICO.

Explain what you mean.

EMILIA.

If she is discovered here tomorrow, we will end up being involved one way or another. Interrogations under oath, questioning by the investigators, court subpoenas, media frenzy... but if she is not here - we have nothing to do with it. No Desdemona – no problem.

LODOVICO.

It truly is a brilliant idea. We need to think the details through.

OTHELLO.

Where should we hide the body? Bury it?

IAGO.

We are in the city. Do you have a shovel and a hack to chisel the asphalt?

CASSIO.

And the tar to cover up the grave afterwards?

BIANCA.

How about we just throw her in the river?

IAGO.

Listen for my suggestion. Our diva came to the theatre in a luxurious dress and in an expensive coat.

EMILIA.

Given to her by her lover.

IAGO.

Why do you need to rub it in?

EMILIA.

I'm just saying you couldn't afford presents like that.

LODOVICO.

Emilia, stop interrupting! *(To Iago.)* Go on.

IAGO.

Othello has a car. We undress Desdemona, drive her away from here and leave her in the street by her house. Then everybody will assume she was robbed and killed on her way home.

OTHELLO.

Ingenious! I've always known Iago is the smartest of us all!

CASSIO.

And who, in your opinion, is the stupidest?

OTHELLO.

What are you hinting at?

CASSIO.

I am not hinting, I am just asking.

LODOVICO.

Cassio, stop it. It's not a good time for jokes.

IAGO.

So, has my plan passed?

EMILIA.

Unanimously.

IAGO.

Then let's get to the meat of it! Ladies, would you quickly clear up a part of the table? Guys, bring her here.

Emilia and Bianca quickly move the piled up plates, glasses, and bottles to the edge of the table. Lodovico, Cassio, and Othello walk behind the bed canopy and get out Desdemona's body from there. Her nightgown has blood stains on it.

OTHELLO.

Where to?

IAGO.

Put her on the table.

The men put the body on the table.

CASSIO.

Now what?

IAGO.

Now we have to wash the make-up off and take her nightie off. Bianca, bring water, a sponge and a towel. Quickly!

Emilia takes off Desdemona's wig - beautiful golden locks.

EMILIA.

Should I throw the wig away?

IAGO.

No. Another Desdemona will need it tomorrow.

Emilia puts a wig on and looks in the mirror with pleasure. The men take off the nightgown of Desdemona. Bianca is waiting with a sponge and a pitcher of water.

BIANCA.

Should I wash the blood off?

IAGO.

No, just the make-up.

BIANCA.

Should I throw away her nightie?

IAGO.

Absolutely not! It should be washed, ironed and left in Desdemona's dressing room along with her wig – as if she prepared them for tomorrow performance before she left.

BIANCA.

Then we should take off her diamond ring that she brags about so much.

EMILIA.

And earrings, too.

BIANCA.

And her lingerie. Is it a theatre requisite?

EMILIA.

No, it's hers. She always bragged that she only wore expensive sexy lingerie.

LODOVICO.

Girls, don't get carried away. We are not touching her lingerie.

BIANCA.

But we do have to take her ring and earrings off – otherwise nobody would believe it was a robbery!

IAGO.

Damn you – ok, take it off.

The women begin to take off the jewelry. The ring doesn't come off.

LODOVICO. *(Looks at women's efforts.)*

What a show!

IAGO.

How about you direct this scene? You are a director, the ball's in your court.

LODOVICO.

No, thanks, you seem to do it better. Keep going.

CASSIO. *(To the women.)*

Why are you lingering there? We don't have much time! It will soon be dawning!

EMILIA.

Can't take the ring off.

CASSIO.

Leave it.

BIANCA.

Are you out of your mind? It's diamonds!

OTHELLO. Just cut her finger off! What's the problem?

CASSIO.

You are a barbarian!

OTHELLO.

Why? She won't need that finger anyway!

EMILIA.

Got it! (*Puts the ring on her finger.*) Pretty, isn't it?

BIANCA.

And I'm taking the earrings.

IAGO.

Dames, are you crazy? If anyone sees these on you, we are done!

EMILIA.

Don't worry, we'll hide them well.

IAGO.

Othello, take those trinkets from them immediately, or we all will end up in jail.

Othello, clenching his fists menacingly, advances towards the women. They reluctantly give him the jewelry. He passes them to Iago, who pockets them.

EMILIA.

What are you going to do with them?

IAGO.

Don't worry, I won't keep them. I'll hide them for now - and then we'll see. Ready? Othello, go get your car to the entrance. Lodovico, give him the door keys.

LODOVICO.

Is he going to drive? He's drunk!

OTHELLO.

I may lose my driver's licence. How will I get to my summer house then?

CASSIO.

Is this your only problem?

IAGO.

It's only about 500 metres to her house. A minute drive. And there are no police in the area at night. We'll be fine.

OTHELLO.

I'm scared. I've never driven corpses before.

LODOVICO.

Stop whining. We are doing it for you.

OTHELLO.

Ok. Let's have one for the road. To keep my spirits up.

EMILIA.

I think you had enough! You are wasted already!

OTHELLO.

Don't worry, I'm as sober as a judge.

All of them sit down at the table and fill up their glasses.

BIANCA.

Move the body a little, please, there is not enough room for the plate.

The body is moved to the edge of the table.

EMILIA.

Othello , would you like some snack?

OTHELLO.

I wouldn't say no to a good slice of salami.

CASSIO. (*Raising his glass.*)

To our success!

They all drink and eat.

IAGO.

Let's roll, Othello! Get the car ready!

Othello walks out.

Bianca, quickly wash and iron her nightie.

BIANCA.

Where do I get an iron?

IAGO.

In the wardrobe room.

Bianca exits.

Emilia, go to Desdemona's dressing room and get her dress, handbag, coat, shoes - everything to create the impression she went home.

Emilia exits.

Cassio, help me drag the body to the car.

CASSIO.

Am I coming along?

IAGO. No, you better look after the women here and make sure they don't do anything stupid. I will keep our bear under control, otherwise - you understand... Ok, let's lift it!

Iago and Cassio lift the body dropping plates and bottles.

LODOVICO.

Careful! Don't spill vodka!

CASSIO. (*Laying the body down.*)

Hang on a sec. (*Takes a cigarette and lights up.*)

Bianca comes back with wet Desdemona's nightgown and an iron, clears up part of the table and starts ironing. Iago and Cassio lift Desdemona again, touching various objects with her body and, making clumsy movements and accompanying them with mutual accusations ("Don't go there!", "From the right," "Watch your feet!", etc.), carry it away to the car. Bianca and Lodovico stay on the stage.

BIANCA.

Do you mind if I iron here? I'm afraid to be over there by myself.

LODOVICO.

I don't mind.

BIANCA. (*Continuing to iron.*)

May I ask, who is going to play Desdemona now?

LODOVICO.

I keep thinking about it.

BIANCA.

And who are you going to choose?

LODOVICO.

Actually, I promised the role to Emilia.

BIANCA. *(Surprised.)*

When?

LODOVICO.

A long time ago. I mean, recently... I mean, just now.

BIANCA.

Why don't you give it to me?

LODOVICO.

You?

BIANCA.

Of course! How am I worse than Emilia?

She sets the iron down and sits down cross the table from Lodovico and demonstrates her beautiful legs.

LODOVICO.

You are certainly not worse, but...

BIANCA. *(Takes an even more seductive pose.)*

What's the problem then?

LODOVICO.

But the performance is tomorrow. Do you know the lines?

BIANCA.

I do - by heart! *(Cuddles with Lodovico.)* I will be a different Desdemona. Not pale and miserable, but seductive, erotic, sexy... *(Presses herself against Lodovico even tighter.)* You won't regret it - I promise!

LODOVICO.

Well, if you don't mind rehearsing it with me at my place every once in a while ...

BIANCA.

But of course! How else? I understand...

LODOVICO.

You never agreed before.

BIANCA.

I was young and inexperienced. And I didn't realize then how much I liked you. *(Hugs Lodovico.)*

LODOVICO.

Wait... Who is going to play Bianca?

BIANCA.

I will.

LODOVICO.

You? Both roles?

BIANCA.

Why not? They never show up on the stage together. Well, what do you say? Just don't say "no"! I'm so excited... *(Presses his hand to her breast.)* Feel my heart... do you hear it pounding?

Lodovico feels the heartbeat of the girl so well that his own heart starts beating in unison with hers. Unfortunately, at this moment enters Emilia, carrying Desdemona's dress, coat, handbag, shoes, and other belongings. Lodovico and Bianca quickly move away from each other.

EMILIA.

I don't know what to do with her stuff.

BIANCA.

Really, what a swanky dress! Let me try it. Lodovico, could you turn around, please?

And before Lodovico turns away and Emilia comes to her senses, Bianca quickly takes her theatrical costume off, grabs Desdemona's dress, and puts it on.

BIANCA. *(Turning around in front of the mirror.)*

How do I look?

EMILIA.

It's too loose for you. It's just the right size for me.

BIANCA.

I can alter it a little. It won't fit you anyway, you are too chunky.

EMILIA.

Me - chunky? Ok, so I am not as scrawny as some people, but I'm not fat at all. Let me try it on and you'll see. *(Tries to take the dress off Bianca.)*

BIANCA. I am telling you, you won't fit in it. *(Continues to turn around in front of the mirror.)*

Emilia leaves Bianca alone, puts Desdemona's coat and shoes on and addresses Lodovico.

EMILIA.

What do you think - does it look good on me?

LODOVICO.

Very much so!

BIANCA. *(Looking at Emilia with envy.)*

It's too long for you.

EMILIA.

Not long at all. Just right. *(Turns around before the mirror.)*

BIANCA. *(Reaching out to the coat.)*

Take the dress, try it on - would you like to?

EMILIA.

Why would I try on this trash? I'd rather take the coat.

BIANCA.

Where is her handbag? There ought to be some expensive make-up in it. It would be silly to throw it away.

Both women rummage through Desdemona's handbag. Cassio enters.

LODOVICO.

So? Where have you been for so long?

CASSIO.

We had hard time squeezing the object into the car. All because of that drunk, Othello.

LODOVICO.

What else did he do?

CASSIO.

When we were pushing her through into the car, he either broke or sprained her arm, then he hit her in the eye with his elbow and finally pinched her foot with the car's door.

EMILIA.

That's ok. It's even better this way. The signs of violence and resistance will make the robbery look more convincing!

LODOVICO.

Where are they now?

CASSIO.

On the way. I think they'll be back in five or ten minutes.

LODOVICO.

Who is driving? I hope not Othello?

CASSIO.

No, Iago is. Othello is sitting next to him and singing songs. We couldn't shut him up. What about you guys?

LODOVICO.

Well, the ladies are trying things on.

BIANCA. *(To Cassio.)*

How do you like my dress?

CASSIO.

Are you crazy? Take it off immediately! All these are evidence! Desdemona was killed for this crap! The dress and the coat were taken by robbers! Did you forget?

BIANCA.

Oh, right! *(Hastily takes off the dress and stays just in her lingerie again.)*

CASSIO.

Hide it really well – or better yet, burn it all.

EMILIA.

No, let me wear the dress for a while, at least until the morning. *(Puts Desdemona's dress on to Bianca's displeasure.)*

CASSIO.

Bianca, have you ironed the nightie?

BIANCA.

No, I didn't have time.

CASSIO.

Hurry up.

BIANCA.

It's inconvenient to iron here, let's go to the dressing room. And please, stay there with me, I'm scared. *(In a low voice.)* We won't get bored there.

CASSIO. *(In a low voice.)*

I hope so.

BIANCA. *(In a low voice.)*

But let's go to your dressing room, not mine. I share it with Emilia – she might walk in any minute.

CASSIO. *(Taking the iron.)*

Ok, I'm waiting for you.

Cassio exits, Bianca follows him. On her way she bumps into Lodovico with her hip and whispers intimately.

BIANCA.

I'm ready to start rehearsing any moment. Even tonight. *(Exits.)*

Emilia and Lodovico stay on the stage.

EMILIA. Now that we are alone, may I ask what you were doing here with Bianca?

LODOVICO. *(Embarrassed.)*

Bianca and I? Nothing. What could we possibly be doing?

EMILIA.

You don't know? The same activity that Cassio and Bianca are busy with now.

LODOVICO. *(Looks with displeasure in the direction of the back of the stage where Cassio and Bianca disappeared earlier.)* He is helping her to press the clothes.

EMILIA. I don't know what exactly he is pressing at the moment, but you stop pretending to be such an idiot.

LODOVICO.

I would ask you to change your tone. We were just rehearsing.

EMILIA.

It wasn't Desdemona's role, was it?

LODOVICO.

What if it was?

EMILIA.

But you promised Desdemona to me!

LODOVICO.

How could I promise you the role that was already taken?

EMILIA.

You said that if Desdemona gets out of the picture, this role would definitely be mine. She is out of the picture, alright. Now what?

LODOVICO.

We'll see. We'll think about it.

EMILIA.

There's no time to see or think about it! The performance is tomorrow! And don't you dare give the role to Bianca - you'll regret it.

LODOVICO.

Why are you unhappy? If I hadn't made an actress out of you, you'd be still selling condoms in that shitty pharmacy.

EMILIA.

I wasn't selling condoms.

LODOVICO.

Really? Have you forgotten you sold me two packs? That was the excuse for our acquaintanceship, and you agreed to go out for dinner with me.

EMILIA.

I just did not realize at the time that those two packs would last you three months.

LODOVICO.

One way or another, you have become a somebody thanks to me.

EMILIA.

Why do you think being a pharmacist in the first-class pharmacy is worse than playing supporting roles in this second-rate theatre? At least I earned more there.

LODOVICO.

Why "supporting roles"? Last year you played a queen. But you played indifferently and boring. You must've been thinking not about your role, but who'd get louder applause!

EMILIA.

That's a blatant lie! I was thinking about my miserable wages. I'm playing a queen, and cannot afford a decent coat. I have nothing to wear. That's how the artists are appreciated here.

LODOVICO.

Do you think as a Venetian senator and doge's representative, I earn more?

EMILIA.

I don't care how much you earn. Just tell me: who is going to play Desdemona?

Bianca and Cassio come back, very pleased. Cassio's military uniform is unbuttoned, Bianca's hair is messy and she is fixing her dress as she is walking. Emilia stops the fight and walks to the side. Lodovico greets Bianca with an obvious displeasure. They lead their following dialogue in an undertone.

LODOVICO.

Have you ironed the nightie?

BIANCA. (*Embarrassed.*)

No, I didn't get a chance yet, the iron is still cold.

LODOVICO.

But, as I see, you have warmed up quickly.

BIANCA.

No need to get angry.

LODOVICO.

I'm not angry. But now come to think of it, you won't be able to play Desdemona. Stay in the role of the courtesan. It suits you better.

Bianca bites her lip resentfully. Enters Iago. All eyes are fixed upon him.

EMILIA.

So?

IAGO.

Everything is good. We dumped her by her house.

LODOVICO.

Has anyone seen you?

IAGO.

I don't think so. But I'm not sure.

CASSIO.

Where is Othello?

IAGO.

I left him on the couch in the doorman's room. Let him sleep it off a bit. It was a mistake to bring him along – he was only getting in my way. When we were unloading Desdemona from the car, he managed to hit her head against the hood. Luckily, the hood wasn't damaged.

BIANCA.

So we are out of the woods?

IAGO.

Looks like it.

BIANCA.

Yippee! (*Claps her hands.*)

CASSIO.

And now we can continue our party in peace.

EMILIA. (*Pouring tea for Iago*)

Iago, have some tea. You must be exhausted dragging the corps back and forth.

BIANCA.

I'll give you a nice piece of cake.

IAGO.

Give a piece to Cassio, too – he also was working hard.

LODOVICO.

Yeah, we sure know how hard he was working.

CASSIO. Please stop you insinuations. (*Raising his glass.*) As Shakespeare, our father, said, the end crowns the deed! Let's drink to the happy end!

LODOVICO.

The "deed" is far from being done. We still have a main problem to solve.

CASSIO.

What problem? Haven't we solved all of them?

LODOVICO.

I've been persistently thinking throughout the night: who is going to play Desdemona?

EMILIA.

What is there to think about? Clearly I'm going to play Desdemona. This issue has been solved long ago.

BIANCA.

Interesting... who is that "we" and when was it solved? It couldn't possibly have been before Desdemona's death, could it? This is becoming very suspicious...

EMILIA.

The director and I have just made this decision. *(To Lodovico.)* Right?

Lodovico prefers not to answer, but Bianca does.

BIANCA.

I don't get it – first it "has been solved long ago", then you "have just made this decision". It doesn't add up.

EMILIA.

How is it any business of yours? You've been in the theatre for a very short while. Your job is to keep quiet and listen.

BIANCA.

My job is to play Desdemona.

EMILIA.

Are you in your right mind? You are an absolute, complete, 100 percent, total and hopeless scrub!

LODOVICO.

Emilia, calm down.

EMILIA. *(To Iago and Cassio.)*

Why are you two not saying anything? I can't believe you really want Desdemona to be played by this floozy? This would mean a full failure!

CASSIO. *(To Emilia.)*

You see... How do I put it... Desdemona should be young and beautiful. You, of course, are not old... and sort of good-looking... for your age...

EMILIA. *(Interrupting.)*

What about our deceased diva? Was she young and beautiful? She was older than me! And a lot more fat. And in her scene with Othello she wore a corset to create an illusion of a waistline.

CASSIO.

That's why we came up with the idea to replace her. And now, when things worked out so favorably...

EMILIA.

And now, when things worked out so favorably, you want me to watch other people's happiness?

CASSIO.

Bianca is certainly very talented.

EMILIA.

I wonder when and in what part of her body have you discovered her talent? Wasn't it just now, when you two locked up in the dressing room?

LODOVICO.

But I think you'd agree that the age...

EMILIA. *(Interrupting.)*

Is it that important? For your information, an actress has three ages.

BIANCA.

Is that so? Fascinating. Tell us. I like listening to the old people.

EMILIA.

First of all, it's the documented age, which is irrelevant. Second of all, the age a woman looks like. It's usually at least ten-fifteen years younger. And thirdly, it's her stage age. For example, I'm forty-two, I look like thirty-two, but onstage, with the help of wigs, corsets, powder and make-up, people tell me I look like twenty-two.

BIANCA.

First of all, you are not forty-two, you are fifty. Second of all, you look like a fifty-year-old who tries to look like a thirty-year-old. And thirdly, onstage you look like sixty.

EMILIA.

Bianca, shut up. You are young, you will have plenty of opportunities to play. As for me, this is my last chance. And I'm not going to miss it. Get it?

Pause.

IAGO.

Here is what I propose. Let's have an audition. Let Emilia and Bianca show us how they'd play Desdemona, and we will decide who is better.

EMILIA. (*Contemptuously.*)

Me – compete with some Bianca?

IAGO.

And let's make a deal: the one who refuses to audition, refuses the role.

EMILIA. (*After some hesitation.*)

Ok, deal.

BIANCA.

Deal.

LODOVICO.

Ok, who will be first?

BIANCA.

Me.

EMILIA.

Why you?

BIANCA.

Because.

CASSIO.

Let Bianca start. What's the difference, anyway?

LODOVICO.

Show us the last scene – the death of Desdemona.

The improvised "Art Council" of the three men sit down to watch Bianca's performance. She is approaching the bed.

CASSIO.

To play the scene, she needs Othello.

IAGO.

Should I go, wake him up?

BIANCA.

No! I'm afraid of him! He'll strangle me!

LODOVICO.

Don't be silly.

BIANCA.

No! I'm not going to audition with him! And not just audition - I am not playing with him. Let Cassio play his part.

LODOVICO.

Don't act up.

BIANCA. (*Stubbornly.*)

I want Cassio!

EMILIA.

You've just locked up with him in a dressing room and you already want him again?

LODOVICO.

Bianca, put on the nightie and start.

BIANCA. (*Embarrassed.*)

But the nightie is still damp!

IAGO.

Haven't you ironed it yet?

BIANCA.

No.

LODOVICO.

Then what were you doing with Cassio in the dressing room?

EMILIA.

Haven't you guessed? Bianca was showing him the way she plays the Nude Maja.

LODOVICO. (*Angrily, to Bianca.*)

Put on the nightie and start. Otherwise Desdemona will be played by Emilia.

Bianca takes the nightgown and exits.

EMILIA. (*To Lodovico, in a half-tone.*)

I'm warning you nicely: if you don't give me the role, you'll regret it.

LODOVICO.

Don't threaten me and don't go too far. Or you will be the one who'll regret it.

Bianca comes back in Desdemona's nightgown and starts turning around in front of the mirror.

IAGO.

Go ahead and start already!

BIANCA. (*In the role of Desdemona.*)

Emilia, I'm afraid I cannot sleep,

A sense of foreboding worries me.

EMILIA.

Here is some herbal drink,

It'll help you sleep.

BIANCA. (*In the role of Desdemona.*)

Thanks, darling. (*Doesn't drink.*)

EMILIA.

Farewell, madam. Good night.

Emilia goes to the side.

BIANCA.

So who is going to play Othello? I want Cassio!

LODOVICO.

I will not give you Cassio. Or Iago, for that matter. They are part of our little Council. Let Emilia play Othello.

BIANCA.

Why Emilia all of a sudden?

EMILIA.

Really, are you kidding me or what?

IAGO.

What difference does it make who will be giving Othello's lines? We are looking at Bianca-Desdemona.
Stop arguing, we don't have time.

EMILIA. (*Gloomily.*)

Alright. (*Puts on Othello's coat and approaches Bianca.*)

EMILIA. (*In the role of Othello.*)

Have you prayed tonight, Desdemona?

BIANCA. (*In the role of Desdemona.*)

Yes, my lord.

EMILIA. (*In the role of Othello, threatening.*)

If you bethink yourself of any crime

Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,

Solicit for it straight.

Advances towards Bianca, stretching her hands to Bianca's throat.

BIANCA. (*In the role of Desdemona. Retreating from "Othello".*)

Talk you of killing me? I'm scared. (*In her own role.*) I don't want to play with her! I'm really scared!

LODOVICO.

Stop acting up! You just don't know the *mise-en-scène*. Why didn't you have a drink that Emilia gave you?

BIANCA.

I'm scared! She'll poison me just like she poisoned Desdemona.

LODOVICO.

Come to your senses, Bianca, what are you talking about?

BIANCA.

I know what I'm talking about. I saw how she poured some poison in Desdemona's drink. (*Having understood that she blurted out too much, bites her lip.*)

CASSIO.

What? What did you see?

BIANCA.

Nothing.

CASSIO.

No, please finish what you've started. Tell us!

BIANCA.

Emilia was pouring some drops from a little bottle into the glass. I asked her why and she told me she wanted to take it for her headache. But then she gave that glass to Desdemona.

EMILIA.

You are lying! There was no glass and no bottle.

BIANCA.

Oh yeah? Then what is this? (*She takes a little bottle out from her corsage and shows it to everybody.*)

EMILIA.

Where did you get it from? Give it to me! (*She wants to take the bottle from Bianca, but Cassio grabs it.*)

CASSIO.

Emilia, what is it?

EMILIA.

Just a regular insomnia medicine.

CASSIO.

Why did you give it to Desdemona?

Emilia keeps silence.

Answer me!

EMILIA.

I wanted her to fail the scene being half-awake and thus lose the role.

IAGO.

And fall asleep she did - forever.

EMILIA.

I have nothing to do with it. This medicine, while strong, is harmless in very small doses. Show it to any doctor, and they will confirm it.

IAGO. (*Looking at the bottle.*)

But the bottle is empty. There is nothing to show.

EMILIA.

What do you mean - empty? (*To Bianca.*) Where did you pour the rest?

BIANCA. (*Tentatively.*)

I, too, had a headache and I decided to take a few drops.

EMILIA.

A few drops? There was half a bottle left! Stop bullshitting us about your head - there cannot be a headache in an empty head. Where did you pour the drops?

IAGO.

Into the same glass – where else?

BIANCA. (*Embarrassed, yet with challenge.*)

Yes, into the same glass. So what?

CASSIO.

What could happen if one takes a big dose of this medicine?

EMILIA.

Numbness and coldness of the body, loss of pulse, and ...well, in sufficient quantities... (*Becomes silent.*)

Pause.

LODOVICO.

I'm afraid, Emilia, you and Bianca will have to take the responsibility for that.

EMILIA.

Me? And who asked me to disable Desdemona? Wasn't that you, my gracious signor Lodovico?

LODOVICO. (*Embarrassed.*) Well... it's true, I wanted to take the role away from Desdemona, and I needed an excuse for that...

EMILIA. To take the role away and give it to Bianca? And for that I listened to you and shouldered all the dirt?

LODOVICO.

But you were talking about a light sleep medicine, not a poison. I'm very sorry.

EMILIA.

Oh no, darling, feeling sorry is not good enough. If we have to take the responsibility - we'll do it together.

IAGO. (*To Lodovico.*)

Turns out, you are a better director that I thought!

Lodovico doesn't answer.

BIANCA.

But eventually Desdemona was killed by Othello. He stabbed her with his dagger. We all have seen the wound.

CASSIO.

But his dagger was fake!

IAGO.

No, Cassio, the dagger was real, and you know it.

CASSIO. (*Now he is embarrassed.*)

What makes you think that?

IAGO.

Because I saw how artfully you swapped his dagger before the last scene. Poor Othello didn't notice a thing.

CASSIO.

Yes, I did, I am not denying it. I wanted to play a prank on him.

IAGO.

A fine prank, I must say!

CASSIO.

But what about you? You saw it, you knew it, but you didn't say a word?

IAGO is not responding. Pause.

LODOVICO.

There is something I don't get. How come Desdemona, after being poisoned, strangled and stabbed, was able to moan, "A guiltless death I die"?

EMILIA.

I said it for her from behind the canopy.

Heavy silence.

BIANCA.

Why are we all so worried? What's done is done. All of us wanted the same thing - to rid Desdemona of her role - and it ended well. Her body is not here, we didn't see anything, we don't know anything. And actually, nothing happened!

LODOVICO.

That's true. Why would we blame each other, why investigate, why fight? What will we gain?

IAGO.

Nothing.

EMILIA.

What should we do then?

CASSIO.

What should we do? Let's sit around the table and continue our party.

BIANCA.

Great idea!

Everybody sits down around the table.

CASSIO. (*Raising a glass.*)

Let's drink and forget everything!

Everybody drinks with an inspiration.

LODOVICO.

Now - about tomorrow. I would like to underscore the essential idea of my performance.

IAGO.

Our performance.

LODOVICO.

Ok, let it be our performance. The modern society is reigned by jealousy, aggression, and hostility that are often disguised as a hypocritical friendliness. That's what our act is all about.

IAGO. (*Politely-indifferently.*)

Yeah, sure, we'll do our best.

LODOVICO.

You may not find this idea exciting, but it's important to me. We must resist the evil, we must bring goodness, love and understanding to the world.

CASSIO. (*Chewing salami.*)

We'll sure bring them!

EMILIA.

I can't care less about the idea. That is to say, I care a lot about any idea. It's much more important to me to know who's going to play Desdemona tomorrow.

BIANCA.

Honey, this problem has been solved. I'll be playing Desdemona. And you will play Emilia, as you did before. Occasionally you do it not bad. Just don't give me your drink.

EMILIA.

Lodovico, who distributes the roles here - you or this centipede?

BIANCA.

If you don't mind, I only have two legs, not a hundred.

EMILIA.

But you spread them wide a hundred times a day.

BIANCA.

Unlike you, I am in high demand. I feel sorry for you. I think once upon a time, a very long time ago, when you were young and pretty, men didn't shun you, either.

EMILIA.

Laugh all you can, you idiot. Let's see how you will laugh when I play Desdemona tomorrow.

BIANCA.

You are mistaken, my dear. I will be Desdemona!

Limping heavily, enters a woman in a torn gray robe without buttons or ties. She has a large band-aid on her forehead, a bruise under her eye, hanging cast on her arm, and a bandaged leg.

WOMAN.

You both are mistaken. I will be Desdemona!

Everybody is stunned.

EMILIA.

Desdemona?

BIANCA.

Desdemona!

ALL (*Together.*)

Desdemona!!!

DESDEMONA. (*Triumphantly.*)

Yes, Desdemona!

LODOVICO. (*Babbles.*)

I'm so happy to see you!

DESDEMONA.

Lodovico, everybody knows you are such a failure as a director, but you are hopeless as an actor as well.

You can't even decently fake the joy of seeing me.

BIANCA.

So you are alive?

DESDEMONA.

Take off my nightie this very moment, you whore!

BIANCA. (*Frightened.*)

What will I be in then? I'm not even wearing underwear!

DESDEMONA.

You are not going to pretend you are shy, are you?

BIANCA.

Of course not... (*Pitifully.*) But I am cold!

DESDEMONA. (*Takes off her hospital robe, exposing a bloody scar, and throws it to Bianca.*)

Shut up and do what you're told. Now!

Bianca hastily takes off the nightie, puts the robe on and gives the nightie back to Desdemona, who puts it on.

CASSIO. (*Carelessly.*)

And here we are, sitting here, celebrating the premiere and wondering: where is our precious Desdemona?

DESDEMONA.

After everything that happened I am not surprised at anything any more. I've always known what all of you were worth, but now you've shown your true colors.

IAGO.

What, actually, happened to you?

DESDEMONA.

Don't you know?

IAGO.

How would we know?

DESDEMONA.

Really, how would you? Well, I'll tell you. In the final scene, I suddenly felt very sleepy and was only thinking how to hang in there until the end of the play. The last thing I remember was a dagger stab. Luckily I was wearing a corset, and a dagger slipped to the side. Then I fainted. When I came about, I found myself undressed on the pavement, freezing to death and bleeding. Fortunately, a passer-by saw me and called an ambulance. That saved me.

EMILIA.

What a joy!

DESDEMONA. (*In a sugary voice.*)

By the way, Emilia, you are wearing an awesome dress. Would you like to give it to me as a present? (*Sternly.*) Right now!

EMILIA. (*Embarrassed.*)

Of course! (*Nervously takes off Desdemona's dress.*)

DESDEMONA.

How about taking off my wig, too?

EMILIA.

Am I still wearing it? Sorry, I forgot! (*Takes off the wig.*)

DESDEMONA.

And where are my diamonds?

Iago takes the ring and earrings out of his pocket and gives them to Desdemona.

Thanks. Bring the rest of my stuff back to my dressing room.

EMILIA.

We just took them so that no one would steal them.

DESDEMONA.

I see. While you were sorting things out, I was standing and listening from the backstage. So now I know how much you love me. First you poisoned me, then strangled, then stabbed, then hit my head against the

hood, and then dumped me in the street to die. Shakespeare would envy such a plot. But you all will regret it.

CASSIO.

Are you going to rat on us?

DESDEMONA.

No, my revenge will be much worse!

BIANCA. (*Terrified.*)

Are you going to make us pay all your medical bills?

DESDEMONA.

This goes without saying. But that's not all.

EMILIA.

So you are going to report us, aren't you?

DESDEMONA.!

If I do, all of you will go to jail, and the play will be discontinued. But I want to perform. I didn't work for many long months on getting used to my heroine's image and on searching for new shades in her personality to lose this starring role just like that. Nor did I just now escape from the hospital for nothing. I will be playing tomorrow. Today, rather, as it's morning already. I will be Desdemona. Desdemona shall be me. Desdemona I shall be!

LODOVICO.

But it's impossible! How are you going to play Desdemona in your condition? With a black eye, bandages all over, with a broken arm, and a limp...

DESDEMONA.

Just like that!

LODOVICO.

And what would the audience think?

DESDEMONA.

The audience would think Othello beats up his wife every night, and now he's made up his mind to strangle her. Just an ordinary family.

LODOVICO.

But it's very different from my interpretation!

DESDEMONA. I don't give a damn about your interpretation. Mine is better.

IAGO.

Is that your revenge?

DESDEMONA.

Isn't it good? I will be playing every night, in all plays, and always starring. You are going to linger out your pathetic lives dying slowly from anger and envy – and I'll enjoy watching it. I will be firing and appointing directors, and in general, I will be doing what I want. And if you just think of letting out a squeak against me – I'll reduce you to dust. (*Changing the tone.*) Give me a drink, for goodness sake! I can barely stand on my feet.

Everyone moves readily freeing up the place for Desdemona. Lodovico gives her a chair, Cassio pours a glass of wine, Bianca sets a plate and fork for her, and Emily fills her plate with snacks.

IAGO.

What are we drinking to?

EMILIA.

Clearly, to Desdemona's health!

CASSIO.

To our beautiful Desdemona's health!

Othello enters. He is a little puzzled, but joyful and cheerful.

OTHELLO.

Do you know what happened? I have just woken up on the couch in the doorman's room. How did I get there? And why are you all here? *(To Desdemona, very friendly and calmly.)* Desdemona, hi! How are you?

IAGO.

You don't remember a thing, do you? We've been having a premiere after-party.

OTHELLO. *(Puzzled.)*

Really? All I remember is, we drank a lot and really had a lot of fun. It was a good party, wasn't it?

DESDEMONA.

A very good one. And now it's a time to go home. I have to rest before the play.

Everyone makes a motion to leave.

OTHELLO.

Already? Wait! Let's have a drink!

LODOVICO.

The last one, I hope?

OTHELLO.

We'll see. *(Standing with a glass in his hand.)* We all are like a family and, indeed, all people are brothers and sisters. So let's drink to our brotherhood, to the goodness, well, to all the best that unites us! In short - to love!

BIANCA.

To love!

Everyone is clinking their glasses and drinking.

DESDEMONA.

And yet Desdemona shall be me!!

The end. The entire troupe makes the familiar well-orchestrated curtain calls, but this time with Desdemona.

Curtain.

Author's concluding remarks

The scene from the "Othello" in the beginning of the play may possibly seem long, but there are reasons for that.

First of all, the audience needs to be reminded of the "Othello's" plot and introduced to the tragedy cast. While part of the audience may vaguely remember that Desdemona dies because Othello strangled her (which is not exactly true), they hardly have a slightest recollection of the rest of the characters (Emilia, Bianca, Lodovico, etc.)

Secondly, the scene is altered compared to Shakespeare's text in accordance with our plot (it's shortened, there is no crowd scene, Shakespeare's Emilia does not give Desdemona a drink, Bianca is introduced to the scene to familiarize the audience with her, etc.)

Thirdly, it's necessary to show the contrast between the actors' actions onstage and in life, between the high intensity of Shakespeare's characters' passions and insignificant and pathetic little rages of the actors playing their roles.

Fourthly, and most profound: this scene not only shows the Shakespearean plot, but also brings into motion the actors' plans to get rid of the competitors, triggering therefore the development of the plot of our play. This theme, not picked up or noticeable by the audience needs to be carried out in production.

These days, it becomes customary to stage classic plays in the modern costumes and environments. In our case, an opposite method is used: the modern reality is played in the Renaissance costumes. Therefore, Shakespearean scene should not be "modernized" by any means.

Another note: this comedy should not be considered as a realistic "play about theater" or a "play about actors". This is a play about our life, "dark" comedy about our weaknesses and flaws shown with typical for this genre hyperbolicity and pointedness. The theater stage was selected as the venue only because it allows to amplify both the acting and comical elements and to introduce "play inside the play", enriching it with a vivid visual appeal (spectacularity). Plays are not written about miners, pilots, or actors. The subject is a human being.