

THE FOOL AND DEATH

Opera in one act by Andy Gaus

based on “Der Tor und der Tod” by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

CHARACTERS

Jason—Baritone

Superintendent/Death—Bass

Jason’s Mother—Mezzo-Soprano

Jason’s Girlfriend—Soprano

Jason’s Friend—Tenor

PLACE

Jason’s apartment, in an unnamed American city

TIME

Several decades ago

(Dusk. Jason is looking out the window at this tenth-floor apartment at the street below.)

JASON

Setting sun,
And people going home
To lay their labors down
And wash themselves in weariness...
Just like mice,
All scampering for their holes—
And yet I wish that I could live like one of them.

All their lives,
They run in simple grooves,
Their sorrows and their loves,
Their weddings and their funerals.
When they die,
Their sons will carry on.
Why can't I live upon the earth and be like them?

But me—with a screen of my own conception,
Shielding myself from the open sky,
Searching for words of apt description,
Slowly losing my ears and eyes.

Yes, me, still tracking my own emotions,
Trying to look my heart straight on,
Checking for deeper correlations,
Finding instead the feeling gone.

Even the bums
Are happier than I:
They stop the passers-by
And ask them for their pocketchange;
When they're drunk
They sleep like fallen trees
Till they can shuffle down their alleyways again.
Why can't I live upon the earth and be like them?

I'm getting tired...
I think I'll take a shower and lie down.

(He goes off in the direction of his bedroom, but stops.)

Good night, the hope of my religion,
The organ stops and the Apostles' Creed,
Commandments in my every time of pleasure,

But emptiness in every hour of need.

Good night, my family and relations,
With all the warmth your ample bosoms held.
You tried to mold me in your stupid image,
And hatch me without breaking up the shell.

Good night to all my friends and lovers,
And all the webs you used to hold me tight.
Your fear was only looking for a partner—
But now good night.

(Jason leaves and re-enters a few seconds later, fuming.)

No hot water! (The lights go out.) What's going on? (The lights come back on.) Where's the superintendent?

(There is a knocking on the door. Jason rips the door open. The Superintendent is there. Jason doesn't give him time to speak.)

You! I was just looking for you. What's going on? No hot water and the lights keep going out!

SUPERINTENDENT

I'll do what I can, sir, in just a few minutes...

JASON

Well, don't hurry for my sake. I'll just take a nice cold shower in the dark.

SUPERINTENDENT

Sir, I'm going to check the plumbing and the fuses and the circuits, but I have to warn the tenants and I came to warn you too.

JASON

What do you mean?

SUPERINTENDENT

There's somebody in this building and I don't know who it is and I just don't like the looks of it and I thought you ought to know.

JASON

There's a prowler in the building?

SUPERINTENDENT

I don't know if it's a prowler or what.

JASON

What does that mean?

SUPERINTENDENT

Well let me explain. I was on the second floor, right across from the elevator, and I seen this guy dressed up like in the movies. He didn't look like a friend of nobody in this building—cause I know all the people in this building and I know what kind of friends they have. He seen me coming so he ducks around the corner, but when I get round the corner he's gone. And there's nothing in that hallway but just two doors and both of them

are locked. So I come back where I was and I'm standing there by the elevator and I hear the elevator coming up and there's a light on in the car, and I just catch a glimpse of him, grinning like a loon, as he passes by my floor going up.

So my advice to you, sir, is don't go anywhere and keep your door locked with the bolt and don't let anyone in. Cause I don't know who this guy is and he could be up to anything. And to be very frank with you, sir, I don't know what religion you are, but the look in that guy's eyes made me feel like praying fast. (Exit.)

JASON

Not only don't the water and the lights work, but now the superintendent is out of his mind.

CHORUS (DEATH, MOTHER, GIRL, AND FRIEND)

(From offstage.) Shenandoah! (Jason looks round in amazement.) Across the wide Missouri!

(The chorus marches out, but Jason cannot see them.)

Shenandoah, I long to see you.

Away, you rolling river.

Shenandoah, I long to hear you.

Away, I'm bound away,

Across the wide Missouri.

(The chorus halts in place for a moment.)

Oh Shenandoah, I'm bound to leave you.

Away, you rolling river.

Shenandoah, I'll not deceive you.

(The chorus resumes its slow march.)

Away, I'm bound away,

Across the wide Missouri. (Exeunt.)

JASON (in a reverie)

One night I stood,

High on a hilltop,

In the summer of my sixteenth year,

While the stars poured down like raindrops

The light that even now

In all my dreams eludes me.

CHORUS

Shenandoah!

JASON

And in my head

That same song, over and over:

Shenandoah...

Away...

(Death appears silently in the room, looking fixedly at Jason.)

Who are you?

I can't breathe. What do you want from me?

You want my money? Take it,

And get out!

(Death is still staring.)

But look, buddy, if it's my body you want,

It's gonna have to be a dead body.

(He makes a break for the door. Death stops him with a gesture without actually touching him.)

DEATH

That's enough. You're being a child. You know who I am.

JASON

You sure don't act like any of my other friends.

DEATH

But you were just talking about me.

I heard what you just said

About a summer's night as distant as your boyhood,

And the stars, and the music in your head.

That was the last you saw me,

And every day since then

You've tried hard not to know me

But here I am again.

JASON

All right then. Say that I know you. What brings you here?

DEATH

I am the nightmare in the night.

I am the hammer on the gong.

You won't be waking up again

If you sleep so long.

Through sleepless nights and drowsy days

Your strength is dropping by degrees.

You must bolt upright and turn back

Or come along with me.

JASON

What should I do to keep alive

If not pursue my dreams round every bend?

And how should I not weary when the prize

Time and again turns ashes in my hand?

If there are some contented with their lot,

Either they never dared to aim so high,

Or in the face of their defeat

They glossed things over with a holy lie.

DEATH

You hunted life and hunted love

To make a trophy for your wall

And swore that if you could not have their heads

You did not want to meet with them at all.

And since they were too close for you to find
So close they melted through your clutching fist,
To spread your emptiness around
Of course you'd rather say they never did exist.

Now stand against the wall there and keep still.
Just once I mean for you to see
That there were others all around you
Who were what you could never be.

(Jason's Mother appears. She is pleasant-looking and not very old. Like the other two ghosts that will follow, she is oblivious of Jason's actual presence.)

MOTHER

How strange to breathe the air again!
(Catching sight of a storage chest as she looks about the room.)
That chest!
He gashed his head there:
All the blood
And all the stitches later.
And all the screaming
And all the crying...

He was quick and wild and cunning;
He would squirm from off my lap.
When his mind was fixed on running,
Not a soul could hold him back.
It was hopeless to predict him;
It was useless to correct him;
I was trying to protect him,
But what could he know of that?
(Jason looks at her, trying to get her to recognize him.)

DEATH

She cannot see you.

JASON

I'm right here, Mother!

DEATH

She cannot hear you.

MOTHER (noticing the clock)

Oh how many nights up waiting
Till he finally stumbled in.
How my mind came close to breaking—
But he never knew a thing.
I could scarcely dare approach him,
And my hands could never reach him,
And my words could never teach him

Of the roads where I had been:
He must walk them all again!

(Exit. Jason looks to see where she's going.)

DEATH

She's not coming back.

JASON

I want to tell her that I never meant to hurt her.
It's just I couldn't let her keep me back.
I meant to tell her that I always loved her;
My throat was dry, the words were stuck...

(Death is not impressed. Jason's Girlfriend appears. She is pretty and simply dressed.)

GIRL

It was so sweet...
Have you forgotten, Love,
Have you forgotten, Love, already?
It ended sadly, but
What do we do on earth
That doesn't end in pain?

But there were days of light as bright as I could bear:
The flowers in my windowbox were blazing.
The little table with the secret drawer—
I kept your letters there...

That was so long ago,
So dead and buried now,
In its own grave with its own gravestone.
To think that later on,
You threw me off again,
Just like a headstrong child
Who kicks his toys aside
And screams and wants a different game.

When that last letter came,
The one that stared at me,
That stung me like a swarm of angry bees,
I wanted to run and hide,
I wanted to stop the pain,
I wanted to leap and die,
Shouting "My death is your command!"
I was going to write you back;
Something stayed my hand.

Instead, I made a wish
That when you came to die

In that last hour I might be with you.
But not to plead with you
And not to call you names,
But like a taste of wine
From some forgotten time,
Erased, and out of sight, and somewhere.

(Exit. Jason buries his head in his hands. Jason's Friend appears, wearing bloodstained clothes.)

FRIEND

Are you still there, eternal sophomore?
Still quoting Oscar Wilde and Baudelaire?
Balancing parable and metaphor,
Handing out judgment from your easy chair?

With delicate phrases you drew close to me:
You told me once I was the nightly wind
Stirring up drowsy thoughts and memories,
Whistling past the caves they slumbered in...

When first we met, I only saw
The bright and binding charm
That shut my dim forebodings out
And muffled my alarm.
For years, just like a dog, I hung
On every word you said,
Though later, when I hated you,
I thought I always had.

You gathered friends around your smile
Like planets round the sun.
We leapt to do your every will
As words leapt to your tongue.
Your friendship seemed the richest thing
That life or strength could buy;
We only saw what fools we were
When you had drained us dry.

And then a lovely woman came our way.
How shall I tell you what came over me?
Like a great furnace licking at the sky,
Like the aurora over churning seas...

Sometimes the senses stay too long awake,
Gazing all night upon a distant goal,
Breathing the air of that dark mountainscape,
Tasting the springs that bubble deep and cold...

Yet, when I lost her to you, I could say
That it was well lost in a worthy game,
Although to you she was a rich display,
And though to me she was my blood and brain.

I wish I knew just what it was
You had to have from her.
You must have had some injury
You hoped that she would cure.
She gave her soul to build your strength,
And then you cast her off,
And left to me a skeleton
I could not even love.

Finally I hated every light that shone:
No street was dark enough to shroud my mind,
Till late one evening as I walked alone,
Someone came up and grabbed me from behind.

I had no money, so he took my life—
What good it was to him I never knew:
A hungry stranger with an open knife,
But still a better friend than you.

I had just one thought left of you
Before my brain had stalled:
I felt so much more blessed than you,
I almost felt regret for you,
You who were no one at all.

(Exit.)

JASON (to himself)

Nothing,
Nothing at all—
A lousy actor in a shabby play,
Speaking his lines by rote,
Making no sense
To the few who hear.

Nothing,
Nothing at all—
A mannequin in a department store
With open palms
And stiffened arms
To keep the sleeves in line.

And all the past
A choking fog
Around my head.
And what's to come
I do not want to see.

The only light that reaches in to me
Is my life that might have been.
Like another home it shines to me
Now that I can't go in.

The will to live is like a bird
That lies asleep all summer long
And only wakens in the chill
To find it must fly on.

I am awake now and I see
The life that was to be my own.
I feel it racing in my veins
Now that the chance is gone.

(To Death.)

Let me go free.
I am still young.
I have not lived.
I am not done.

I will learn love
And loyalty.
I will learn truth.
Now set me free.

I feel my strength
Return at last.
I see my way.
Now let me pass.

I've died enough.
Now let me be.
You've done your job.
Leave mine to me.

I am too full
Of life itself.
I am not yours.
This is not death.

Take some old man,
Withered and drawn.

I cannot die.

I am too strong.

(Death, with a gesture, draws the life out of him. It takes a few seconds. Jason crumples to the floor.)

DEATH

Write only on his grave

That what he wanted to believe,

He believed;

That in the silence of the void

He forced his ears to hear,

And in the final blackness read

What was not written there.

CHORUS (now including Jason)

Away, I'm bound away,

Across the wide Missouri.

END