*ACT III SCENE 2*

***HAMLET*** *and the* ***PLAYERS*** *enter.*

**HAMLET**

Perform the speech just as I taught you, musically and smoothly. If you exaggerate the words the way some actors do, I might as well have some newscaster read the lines. Don’t use too many hand gestures; just do a few, gently, like this. When you get into a whirlwind of passion on stage, remember to keep the emotion moderate and smooth. I hate it when I hear a blustery actor in a wig tear a passion to shreds, bursting everyone’s eardrums so as to impress the audience on the lower levels of the playhouse, who for the most part can only appreciate loud noises and pantomime shows. I would whip a guy for making a tyrant sound too tyrannical. That’s as bad as those old plays in which King Herod ranted. Please avoid doing that.

**FIRST PLAYER**

I will, sir.

**HAMLET**

But don’t be too tame, either—let your good sense guide you. Fit the action to the word and the word to the action. Act natural at all costs. Exaggeration has no place in the theater, where the purpose is to represent reality, holding a mirror up to virtue, to vice, and to the spirit of the times. If you handle this badly, it just makes ignorant people laugh while regular theater-goers are miserable—and they’re the ones you should be keeping happy. I’ve seen actors who are highly praised, but who—not to be too rude here—can’t even talk or walk like human beings. They bellow and strut about like weird animals that were made to look like men, but very badly.

**FIRST PLAYER**

I hope we’ve corrected that fault pretty well in our company, sir.

**HAMLET**

Oh, correct it completely. Make sure that the clowns do not ad-lib, since some of them will make certain dumb audience members laugh mindlessly at them, while an important issue in the play needs to be addressed. It’s bad behavior for an actor, anyway, and displays a pitiful ambition to hog the limelight on stage.

*The PLAYERS**exit.*

*POLONIUS, GUILDENSTERN, and ROSENCRANTZ**enter.*

So, my lord, will the king be attending the performance?

**POLONIUS**

Yes, he will, and the queen as well.

**HAMLET**

Tell the actors to hurry.

*POLONIUS**exits.*

Will you two help them get ready?

**ROSENCRANTZ**

Yes, my lord.

*ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN**exit.*

**HAMLET**

Well, hello there, Horatio!

*HORATIO**enters.*

**HORATIO**

Here I am at your service, my dear lord.

**HAMLET**

Horatio, you’re the best man I’ve ever known.

**HORATIO**

Oh, sir—

**HAMLET**

Don’t think I’m flattering you. What could I hope to get from you, who’ve got nothing but your charm to support you in life? Why would anyone flatter a poor person? No, keep flattery for kissing the hands of those who can pay well. You understand? Ever since I’ve been a free agent in my choice of friends, I’ve chosen you because you take everything life hands you with calm acceptance, grateful for both good and bad. Blessed are those who mix emotion with reason in just the right proportion, making them strong enough to resist the whims of Lady Luck. Show me the person who’s master of his emotions, and I’ll put him close to my heart—in my heart of hearts—as I do you. But I’m talking too much. The point is, there’s a play being performed for the king tonight. One of the scenes comes very close to depicting the circumstances of my father’s death, as I described them to you. Watch my uncle carefully when that scene begins. If his guilty secret does not reveal itself, then that ghost was just a devil, and my hunch wasn’t, in fact, worth anything. Watch him closely. I’ll stare at him too, and afterward we’ll compare notes on him.

**HORATIO**

My lord, I’ll watch him as closely as I would a thief. I won’t miss a trick.

*Trumpets play. CLAUDIUS enters with GERTRUDE, POLONIUS, OPHELIA, ROSENCRANTZ, GUILDENSTERN, and other lords attendant with CLAUDIUS ’s guard carrying torches.*

**HAMLET**

They’re coming. I can’t talk now. Take your seat.

**CLAUDIUS**

So how’s my nephew Hamlet doing?

**HAMLET**

Wonderful! I eat the air, like chameleons do. I’m positively stuffed with air, I eat so much of it.

**CLAUDIUS**

I have no idea what you’re talking about, Hamlet. You’re not answering my question.

**HAMLET**

Mine, neither. *(to* POLONIUS*)* My lord, you performed in amateur dramatic productions in college, right?

**POLONIUS**

Indeed I did, my lord. I was considered to be quite a good actor.

**HAMLET**

What role did you play?

**POLONIUS**

I played Julius Caesar. I was killed in the Capitol. Brutus killed me.

**HAMLET**

That was brutish of them, to kill so capital a guy.—Are the actors ready?

**ROSENCRANTZ**

Yes, my lord. They’re ready whenever you are.

**GERTRUDE**

Come here, my dear Hamlet. Sit by me.

**HAMLET**

No thanks, my good mother. There’s a nicer piece of work right here. (*he sits down near* OPHELIA )

**POLONIUS**

(*to* CLAUDIUS) Hey, did you notice that?

**HAMLET**

My lady, should I lie in your lap?

**OPHELIA**

No, my lord.

**HAMLET**

I mean, with my head in your lap?

**OPHELIA**

Yes, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Did you think I was talking about sex?

**OPHELIA**

I think nothing , my lord.

**HAMLET**

That’s a nice thought to lie between a girl’s legs.

**OPHELIA**

What is, my lord?

**HAMLET**

Nothing.

**OPHELIA**

You’re in a good mood tonight, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Who, me?

**OPHELIA**

Yes, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Oh God—who is, by the way, the best comic of them all. What can you do but be happy? Look how cheerful my mother is, only two hours after my father died.

**OPHELIA**

No, my lord, it’s been four months.

**HAMLET**

As long as that? Well, in that case these mourning clothes can go to hell. I’ll get myself a fur trimmed suit. Good heavens, he died two months ago and hasn’t been forgotten yet? In that case, there’s reason to hope a man’s memory may outlive him by six months. But he’s got to build churches for that to happen, my lady, or else he’ll have to put up with being forgotten, like the hobby-horse in the popular song that goes, “Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, the hobby-horse is forgotten.”

*Trumpets play. The pantomime show begins. A king and queen enter and embrace lovingly. She kneels before him and resists his passion. He lifts her up and lays his head on her neck. He lies down on a bank of flowers. When she sees him sleeping, she leaves. Another man comes in, takes the crown from the king, pours poison in the sleeping man’s ear, and leaves. The queen returns and finds the king dead. She becomes hysterical. The killer comes back with three others and calms the queen. The body is carried away. The killer woos the queen with gifts. She is cold toward him for a while but then relents and accepts his advances.*

*The PLAYERS**exit.*

**OPHELIA**

What does this mean, my lord?

**HAMLET**

This means we’re having some mischievous fun**.**

**OPHELIA**

This pantomime was probably a summary of the play.

*The PROLOGUE—the actor who will introduce the play—enters.*

**HAMLET**

This guy will tell us everything. Actors can’t keep a secret. They’ll tell all.

**OPHELIA**

Will he tell us what that pantomime meant?

**HAMLET**

Sure, or anything else you show him. As long as you aren’t ashamed to show it, he won’t be ashamed to tell you what it means.

**OPHELIA**

You’re naughty. I’m watching the play.

**PROLOGUE**

We beg you most courteously; To be patient with us; And watch our humble tragedy.   
*The PROLOGUE exits.*

**HAMLET**

Was that the prologue or the inscription on some wedding ring?

**OPHELIA**

It was a bit short, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Yes, as short as a woman’s love.

*Actors playing the roles of KING and QUEEN**enter.*

**PLAYER KING**

It’s been thirty years since we were married.

**PLAYER QUEEN**

I hope we stay in love for thirty more years! But I’m sad. You’ve been so gloomy lately, so unlike your usual cheerful self, that I worry something is wrong. But don’t let this upset you, since women are too afraid in love—for them, love and fear go hand in hand. You know very well how much I love you, and my fear is just as deep. When someone’s love is great, the little worries become very big. So when you see someone who worries a lot about little things, you know they’re really in love.

**PLAYER KING**

My love, I will have to leave you soon. My body is growing weak, and I will leave you behind in this beautiful world, honored and much loved. Perhaps you’ll find another husband—

**PLAYER QUEEN**

Oh, damn everyone else! Remarrying would be treason to my heart. Curse me if I take a second husband. When a woman takes a second husband, it’s because she’s killed off the first.

**HAMLET**

(*to himself*) Harsh!

**PLAYER QUEEN**

Someone might marry a second time for money, but never for love. Any time I kissed my second husband in bed, I’d kill the first one all over again.

**PLAYER KING**

I know that’s what you think now, but people change their minds. Often our intentions are strong at first, but as time goes on they weaken, just like an apple sticks to the tree when it is unripe but

falls to the ground once it ripens. The promises we make to ourselves in emotional moments lose their power once the emotion passes. Great grief and joy may rouse us to action, but when the grief or joy have passed, we’re no longer motivated to act. Joy turns to grief in the blink of an eye, and grief becomes joy just as quickly. This world is not made for either one to last long in, and it’s no surprise that even our loves change along with our luck. It’s still a mystery to be solved whether luck controls love, or love controls luck. When a great man has a run of bad luck, watch how followers desert him, and when a poor man advances to an important position, he makes friends with the people he used to hate. Love is unreliable. A person with lots of money will always have friends, while one fallen on hard times makes an enemy of any friend he turns to for money. But back to my original point—what we want and what we get are always at odds. We can have our little dreams, but the fates decide our futures. You think now you’ll never remarry, but that thought will die with me, your first husband.

**PLAYER QUEEN**

May the earth refuse me food and the heavens go dark, may I have no rest day and night, may my trust and hope turn to despair—may the gloom of a prison overtake me, and may my every joy be turned to sorrow. May I know no peace either in this life or the next one, if I become a wife again after I am a widow.

**HAMLET**

Nice vow, but what if she breaks it?

**PLAYER KING**

You have made this vow with deep sincerity. My dear, leave me alone now awhile. My mind is getting foggy, and I would like to sleep and escape this endless day.

*The PLAYER KING**sleeps.*

**PLAYER QUEEN**

Sleep tight, and may nothing come between us.

*The PLAYER QUEEN**exits.*

**HAMLET**

Madam, how are you liking this play?

**GERTRUDE**

The lady’s overdoing it, I think.

**HAMLET**

Oh, but she’ll keep her word.

**CLAUDIUS**

Do you know the plot? Is there anything offensive in it?

**HAMLET**

No, no, it’s just a joke, a little jibe but all in good fun. Not offensive at all.

**CLAUDIUS**

What’s the play called?

**HAMLET**

The Mousetrap. Why on earth is it called that, you ask? It’s a metaphor. This play is about a murder committed in Vienna. Gonzago is the duke’s name, and his wife is Baptista. You’ll see soon enough. It’s a piece of garbage, but who cares? You and I have free souls, so it doesn’t concern us. Let the guilty wince. We can watch without being bothered.

*LUCIANUS**enters.*

This is Lucianus, the king’s nephew in the play.

**OPHELIA**

You’re an expert commentator, aren’t you?

**HAMLET**

Yes. I could even supply the dialogue between you and your lover if you did your little puppet show of love for me.

**OPHELIA**

Ooh, you’re sharp.

**HAMLET**

Yes, pointy, but you could take the edge off me— though it might make you moan a little.

**OPHELIA**

You get better in your jokes and worse in your manners.

**HAMLET**

That’s what you women get when you trick us into marriage.—Let’s get started, murderer on stage, please! Damn it, stop fussing with the makeup, and get going. We’re all waiting for the revenge!

**LUCIANUS**

Evil thoughts, ready hands, the right poison, and the time is right too. The dark night is on my side, for no one can see me. You deadly mixture of weeds and plants, which Hecate, goddess of witchcraft, has put a spell on, use your magic to steal this healthy person’s life away. (*pours the poison into the* PLAYER KING ’s *ears*)

**HAMLET**

You see, he poisons the king in his own garden to get the kingdom for himself. The king’s name is Gonzago. The original story was written in the finest Italian. You’ll see shortly how the murderer wins the love of Gonzago’s wife**.**

*CLAUDIUS**stands up.*

**OPHELIA**

The king is getting up.

**HAMLET**

What—is he scared of a gun that only fired a blank?

**GERTRUDE**

My lord, how are you feeling?

**POLONIUS**

Stop the play.

**CLAUDIUS**

Turn on the lights. Get me out of here!

**POLONIUS**

Lights, lights, get us some lights!

*Everyone except HAMLET and HORATIO**exits.*

**HAMLET**

Let the deer that’s been shot go off and weep, While the unharmed deer happily plays. For some must watch while other must sleep, That’s how the world goes. Couldn’t I get work as an actor (if I hit a run of bad luck) in some acting company, and wear flowers on my shoes?

**HORATIO**

They might even give you half a share of the company.

**HAMLET**

No, a whole share for me. For you know, my dearest Damon, That Jove, king of the gods, was Thrown out of power here, and Who’s in charge? A big—peacock.

**HORATIO**

You could have at least rhymed.

**HAMLET**

Oh, Horatio, I’ll bet you a thousand bucks the ghost was right. Did you notice?

**HORATIO**

Yes, I did, my lord.

**HAMLET**

When the actors were talking about poison?

**HORATIO**

I watched him very closely.

**HAMLET**

Ah ha! Hey, let’s have some music here! Play your flutes! For if the king doesn’t like the play, Then he doesn’t like it, we may say. Come on, music!

*ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN**enter.*

**GUILDENSTERN**

My lord, could I have a word with you?

**HAMLET**

You can have a whole story, not just a word.

**GUILDENSTERN**

Sir, the king—

**HAMLET**

Yes, what about him?

**GUILDENSTERN**

He’s in his chambers now, and he’s extremely upset.

**HAMLET**

What, an upset stomach from too much booze?

**GUILDENSTERN**

No, sir, he’s angry.

**HAMLET**

You should be smart enough to tell this to a doctor, not me, since if I treated him, he’d just get angrier.

**GUILDENSTERN**

My lord, please try to stick to the subject at hand.

**HAMLET**

I’ll be good, sir. Go ahead.

**GUILDENSTERN**

The queen your mother is upset, and sent me to see you.

**HAMLET**

It’s lovely to see you.

**GUILDENSTERN**

No, my lord, your polite words are not to the point. If you could please stop fooling around, I’ll tell you what your mother wants. If not, I’ll leave you alone and that’ll be the end of my business.

**HAMLET**

Sir, I can’t.

**GUILDENSTERN**

Can’t what, my lord?

**HAMLET**

Stop fooling around. My mind is confused. But I’ll do my best to give you a straight answer, as you wish—or rather, as my mother wishes. Okay, to the point. My mother, you say …?

**ROSENCRANTZ**

She says that your behavior has astonished her.

**HAMLET**

Oh, what a wonderful son, I can impress my mother! But what’s the upshot of her admiration? Do tell.

**ROSENCRANTZ**

She wants to have a word with you in her bedroom before you go to bed.

**HAMLET**

I’d obey even if she were my mother ten times over. Is there anything else I can do for you?

**ROSENCRANTZ**

My lord, you used to like me.

**HAMLET**

And still do, I swear by my hands.

**ROSENCRANTZ**

My lord, what’s wrong with you? You’re not doing yourself any good by refusing to tell your friends what’s bothering you.

**HAMLET**

Sir, I have no future ahead of me.

**ROSENCRANTZ**

But how can you say that, when the king himself says you’re the heir to the Danish throne?

*The PLAYERS**enter with recorders.*

**HAMLET**

Yes, eventually, but as the proverb goes, “While the grass grows …” But that’s a tired old proverb. Oh, the recorders! Let me see one.*(he takes a recorder and turns to* GUILDENSTERN*)* Why are you hovering so close, as if you want to ambush me?

**GUILDENSTERN**

Oh, my lord, I’m sorry if I’m forgetting my manners. It’s just that I’m worried about you.   
  
**HAMLET**

I don’t really understand what you mean. Will you play this recorder?

**GUILDENSTERN**

I can’t, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Please.

**GUILDENSTERN**

I’m serious, I can’t.

**HAMLET**

I’m begging you.

**GUILDENSTERN**

I have no idea how.

**HAMLET**

Oh, it’s as easy as lying. Just put your fingers and thumb over the holes and blow into it, and it’ll produce the most moving music. Here, the holes are here.

**GUILDENSTERN**

But I can’t play a melody. I don’t know how.

**HAMLET**

Well, look how you play me—as if you knew exactly where to put your fingers, to blow the mystery out of me, playing all the octaves of my range—and yet you can’t even produce music from this little instrument? My God, do you think I’m easier to manipulate than a pipe? You can push my buttons, but you can’t play me for a fool.

*POLONIUS enters.*

Hello and God bless you, sir.

**POLONIUS**

My lord, the queen wants to speak with you right away.

**HAMLET**

Do you see that cloud up there that looks like a camel?

**POLONIUS**

By God, it does look like a camel.

**HAMLET**

To me it looks like a weasel.

**POLONIUS**

It does have a back like a weasel’s.

**HAMLET**

Or like a whale.

**POLONIUS**

Yes, very much like a whale.

**HAMLET**

I’ll go see my mother soon. (*to himself*) They’re trying as hard as they can to mess with me.—I will go soon.

**POLONIUS**

I’ll tell her.

**HAMLET**

It’s easy enough to say “soon.”

*POLONIUS**exits.*

Now please leave me alone, my friends.

*Everyone except HAMLET**exits.*

This is the time of night when witches come out, when graveyards yawn open and the stench of hell seeps out. I could drink hot blood and do such terrible deeds that people would tremble even in the daylight. But I’ve got to go see my mother.—Oh, heart, don’t grow weak, like Nero. Let me be cruel, but not inhuman. I’ll speak as sharp as a dagger to her, but I won’t use one on her. And so, my words and thoughts will be at odds.

*HAMLET**exits.*