

THE DANCE OF DEATH

BY
AUGUST STRINDBERG
IN A NEW VERSION BY
CONOR McPHERSON



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

THE DANCE OF DEATH
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THE DANCE OF DEATH was presented by the Donmar Warehouse at the Donmar Trafalgar in London, England, opening on December 17, 2012. It was directed by Titas Halder; the set design was by Richard Kent; the lighting design was by Richard Howell; the sound design was by Alex Baranowski; and the movement director was Laila Diallo. The cast was as follows:

CAPTAIN Kevin R. McNally
ALICE Indira Varma
KURT Daniel Lapaine

THE DANCE OF DEATH was subsequently produced at Writers Theatre in Chicago, Illinois, opening on April 3, 2014. It was directed by Henry Wishcamper; the set design was by Kevin Depinet; the costume design was by Rachel Laritz; the lighting design was by Keith Parham; and the sound design was by Josh Schmidt. The cast was as follows:

CAPTAIN Larry Yando
ALICE Shannon Cochran
KURT Philip Earl Johnson

CHARACTERS

EDGAR, a captain at a coastal artillery fortress, late fifties/sixties.

ALICE, his wife, forties.

KURT, newly appointed Master of Quarantine, forties.

PLACE

An island near a port in Sweden.

TIME

1900.

THE DANCE OF DEATH

ACT ONE

The interior of a round fortress tower built of granite.

Upstage are a large pair of doors with glass window panes, through which can be seen the sky at dusk and a distant shoreline with some lights. To the side of each door is a window.

There is a dresser with some framed pictures and books, a piano, a table with some chairs, an armchair, a mounted mercurial barometer, and a desk with a telegraph machine. There is also a kind of “bar” — a high table against one wall — with glasses, bottles of liquor, and a mirror above it. There are a few rugs, but the walls are bare granite and nothing can take away a feeling of foreboding — this building used to be a jailhouse. On one wall hangs a portrait of Alice in costume onstage in a production twenty-five years ago.

There is a lamp suspended from the ceiling. A heavy door stage right leads to steps going down to the kitchen. Beside this is a large free-standing hat stand, on which hang coats and pieces of military equipment: gloves, helmets, and swords.

It is a mild autumn evening. The doors are open. The sea is dark and still.

Alice, an attractive woman in her forties, sits at the table listlessly staring into space.

The Captain, a well-built but tired-looking man in his sixties, is sitting in the armchair, fingering an unlit cigar. He is

dressed in a worn dress uniform with riding boots and spurs. A discarded newspaper lies on his lap. They can hear snatches of a military band in the distance, drifting in on the wind.

CAPTAIN. Play something?

ALICE. Play what?

CAPTAIN. Whatever you like.

ALICE. You never like what I play.

CAPTAIN. Well you never like what I play.

ALICE. Edgar, you can't play. Do you want the doors left open?

CAPTAIN. I don't mind.

ALICE. Well, are you going to smoke that cigar?

CAPTAIN. You know, I'm not sure strong tobacco agrees with me anymore.

ALICE. You should take up a pipe.

CAPTAIN. *A pipe?!*

ALICE. Why not? Why deny yourself your "only pleasure" as you call it.

CAPTAIN. Pleasure? Hmph, I've forgotten what that is!

ALICE. Well don't ask me to describe it for you! Have a glass of whiskey.

CAPTAIN. *(Shudders at the idea.)* Better not. What's for dinner?

ALICE. How would I know? Go down and ask Christine.

CAPTAIN. Isn't this the time of year for mackerel? Autumn?

ALICE. I suppose so.

CAPTAIN. Yes, it's autumn — outside and in. You see, what you do is, you take a mackerel, grill it, drizzle a little lemon on it, serve it up with a huge glass of White Zinfandel — and one doesn't feel quite like blowing one's brains out anymore, does one?

ALICE. You're asking the wrong person.

CAPTAIN. *(Smacking his lips.)* Have we any of that Zinfandel left, chilling away down there in the wine cellar?

ALICE. We don't have a wine cellar.

CAPTAIN. What happened to our wine cellar?

ALICE. You mean the laundry room?

CAPTAIN. I mean the wine cellar, where we keep the wine.

ALICE. There is no wine.

CAPTAIN. Well, this is not good enough. We have to stock up for our silver wedding celebrations.

ALICE. You really want to celebrate that?

CAPTAIN. Well of course I do. Don't you?

ALICE. I thought we might show more decorum by keeping our long miserable mistake to ourselves.

CAPTAIN. Oh come, Alice! We've had fun. *(Beat.)* Now and then. And soon it will be all over. We'll be dead, and all that's left is your rotten carcass. And all it's good for is to fertilize the cabbages.

ALICE. So we go through all of this just for the sake of the cabbages?

CAPTAIN. *(Picking his paper up.)* Listen, I don't make the rules.

ALICE. Well it seems like a stupid waste if you ask me. Was there any post?

CAPTAIN. *(Affirmatively, while he reads.)* Mm-hm.

ALICE. The butcher's bill?

CAPTAIN. Mm-hm.

ALICE. And?

CAPTAIN. *(Still reading, he takes the bill from his pocket and holds it out to her.)* I can't read his writing.

ALICE. *(Coming to take it.)* That's old age you know.

CAPTAIN. What?

ALICE. Your eyes.

CAPTAIN. Rubbish!

ALICE. Well I can read it.

CAPTAIN. Your scrawl is worse than his.

ALICE. *(Reading.)* Oh my God! Can we pay this?

CAPTAIN. Of course we can. Just not at the moment.

ALICE. Then when? In a year's time when your miniscule pension kicks in? Which won't even be enough for the doctor's bills when you're sick.

CAPTAIN. Sick? How dare you? I've never been sick. Not one day in forty-four years of military service!

ALICE. That's not what the doctor says.

CAPTAIN. *(Dismissively.)* "The doctor" ... What does he know?

ALICE. Well who else would know?

CAPTAIN. Now, you listen to me. There's nothing wrong with me and there never has been. Real soldiers don't get sick. They just drop dead where they stand, in their boots. Bang! Just like that. And I have twenty good years left in me, you know ...

ALICE. *(Simultaneously with him.)* "Twenty good years left in me" ... Yes, well you're half deaf already. You probably can't hear

that music is coming from the doctor's house. You do know he's throwing a party for the entire command this evening.

CAPTAIN. Yes, I do know actually, and do you want to know why I wasn't invited? Shall I tell you? Because I refuse to mix with that scum — and because they all know I'm not afraid to speak my mind, that's why.

ALICE. You think everyone is scum.

CAPTAIN. They *are* scum!

ALICE. Except you.

CAPTAIN. Hey, I have always behaved in a decent civilised manner, no matter what life has ever thrown in my path. You know I am not scum! (*Beat.*) Alice. (*Pause.*)

ALICE. Do you want a game of cards?

CAPTAIN. Not if you're going to cheat, I don't.

ALICE. I won't! (*She gets the cards and starts dealing.*) Yes, well apparently it's the first time the regimental band has ever been given permission to perform at a private party.

CAPTAIN. Well if I spent the bulk of *my* working life creeping round the garrison, sucking up to the colonel all day, I could have the regimental band in here while I ate my bloody breakfast if I wanted! But I don't. (*Takes up his cards.*) That doctor was always a little dirtbag.

ALICE. There was a time I used to be quite friendly with Gerda. Until I found out she was backbiting me.

CAPTAIN. They're all backbiters! What's trumps?

ALICE. Where are your glasses?

CAPTAIN. They don't work. They've never worked, just tell me.

ALICE. Spades.

CAPTAIN. Spades! Typical ...

ALICE. (*Playing.*) None of the new officers' wives ever speak to me.

CAPTAIN. Who cares? We're better off. I don't even like parties.

ALICE. Well that's alright for you — and even for me, but what about the children? They have no friends. (*She reaches to take a trick.*)

CAPTAIN. I'll take that, thank you. (*He takes the trick.*)

ALICE. What are you doing?

CAPTAIN. Six and eight — fifteen.

ALICE. Six and eight are only fourteen.

CAPTAIN. (*Bluffing.*) Yes, six and eight, fourteen, and two, sixteen, it's your trick. That's what I said. Take it.

ALICE. What are you talking about? You should go to bed.

CAPTAIN. No, no. Deal. *(He gets up and wanders to the window, listening to music in the distance, a rousing military march with drums pounding.)* Listen. That's the full band! You can hear it all the way over here! Can you imagine how loud it must be in his little house? What an idiot.

ALICE. *(Dealing cards.)* Do you think Kurt has been invited?

CAPTAIN. *(As though sick of talking about Kurt.)* Kurt! Kurt, Kurt, Kurt, Kurt, Kurt! *(Short pause.)* My spies tell me he arrived on the seven o'clock train this morning so he'll have had plenty of time to get his glad rags on. Although I notice he hasn't managed to drag himself up here to say hello!

ALICE. It's quite an honour when you think about it. My cousin being appointed the Quarantine Master.

CAPTAIN. Sharing your family name is no honour, darling.

ALICE. *(With sudden anger.)* Now you listen to me, if you want to start dragging families into it I'm happy to do that all night!

CAPTAIN. Alright, alright ...

ALICE. We've agreed to stop doing that!

CAPTAIN. Alright, calm down, let's not start all that nonsense all over again. It was just a joke. *(Pause.)* All the same. Quarantine Master. He'll have a lot of clout.

ALICE. Really?

CAPTAIN. Oh, yes. They'll all bow and scrape before him. You know what they're like.

ALICE. Will he be a kind of doctor?

CAPTAIN. *(Disparagingly.)* Of course not! Can you imagine a lunatic like him knuckling down to medical studies? No. He'll just be another overpaid pen pusher, that's all.

ALICE. Well I'm glad things have come right for him. He's never had it easy.

CAPTAIN. He cost me a bloody fortune, Alice! Leaving his wife and children in the gutter, chasing round after some whore! He's a disgrace!

ALICE. How can we know what goes on in any marriage Edgar? Let's give him the benefit.

CAPTAIN. Oh please. Gallivanting about in America ever since! And it's a shame, because even though he was such a loose cannon, he always managed to be such an absorbing philosopher, debating with me, far into the night!

ALICE. You only say that because he always gave in to you.

CAPTAIN. Gave in? He was invariably crushed by the weight of

THE DANCE OF DEATH

by August Strindberg

in a new version by Conor McPherson

2M, 1W

On an isolated island, military captain Edgar and his wife, Alice, live a bitter life, their marriage soured by hatred. When the possibility of redemption and escape arrives for Alice in the shape of their former comrade Kurt, it seems that Edgar is prepared to use his very last breath to make their lives a living hell.

“Conor McPherson’s version of THE DANCE OF DEATH is snappy and smart ... jokes seem to whizz around like venomous arrows.”
—**TheArtsDesk.com**

“THE DANCE OF DEATH doesn’t sound like a barrel of laughs but this Strindberg play is, in its own twisted way, almost jolly. The show depicts a toxic marriage and, as the couple claw at each other, it’s impossible to look away. Conor McPherson, a master of bruising banter, has penned this new version and the play feels lighter in his hands.”

—**Time Out (London)**

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