COMPLEAT FEMALE STAGE BEAUTY

BY JEFFREY HATCHER
AUTHOR’S NOTE

The first two productions of COMPLEAT FEMALE STAGE BEAUTY were commissioned by the Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, and City Theater in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In those productions certain major roles were doubled, especially those of Thomas Betterton and Charles II. Both T. Ryder Smith and Doug Rees were splendid doubling as actor manager/merrie monarch. By the time the script was revised for productions at Philadelphia Theatre Company and The Old Globe, however, those roles were played by separate actors. The current script doesn’t allow for doubling Betterton with Charles. Other doubling schemes, including instances of men playing women and women playing men, are possible.

COMPLEAT FEMALE STAGE BEAUTY was commissioned by Contemporary American Theater Festival (CATF), West Virginia, and City Theatre Company, Pittsburgh.

It was produced by the Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, opening on July 9, 1999. It was directed by Ed Herendeen; the set design was by Michael J. Dempsey; the costume design was by Moe Schell; the lighting design was by Michael Angelo Tortora; the sound design was by Kevin Lloyd; the hair and makeup design were by Fred Hawck; the stage manager was Kathryn Loftin; the assistant stage manager was Alison Wloocko; the fight captain was Paul Sparks; the casting was by Beverly D. Marable; and the vocal consultant was Sarah Felder. The cast was as follows:

EDWARD KYNASTON ........................................... Dallas Roberts
THOMAS BETTERTON / CHARLES II .................. T. Ryder Smith
SAMUEL PEYS / HYDE /
WATCHMAN / OLLY ...................................... Michael Goodwin
VILLIARS / RUFFIAN ..................................... Lee Sellars
MARIA ............................................................. Brandy Burre
LADY MEREVALE ........................................... Melinda Wade
MISS FRAYNE ................................................ Cherene Snow
SIR CHARLES SEDLEY / MISTRESS REVELS ..... Paul Sparks
MARGARET HUGHES .................................... Susan Knight
NELL GWYNN ............................................. Michelle Federer
OMNES .... Members of the 1999 Intern and Apprentice Program
COMPLEAT FEMALE STAGE BEAUTY was produced by The Philadelphia Theatre Company at Plays and Players Theatre in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, opening on October 25, 2000. It was directed by Walter Bobbie; the set design was by John Lee Beatty; the costume design was by Catherine Zuber; the lighting design was by Peter Kaczorowski; the sound design was by Elaine Tague; and the hair design was by David Brian Brown. The cast was as follows:

EDWARD KYNASTON ........................................ Brandon Demery
THOMAS BETTERTON ..................................... Steven Skybell
SAMUEL PEPYS / CHARLES II ......................... Douglas Rees
VILLIARS / RUFIAN / DRUNK ......................... Michael Tisdale
SIR CHARLES SEDLEY / MISTRESS REVELS / RUFIAN ........................................ Doug Mertz
MARGARET HUGHES ...................................... Laurie Klarscher
NELL GYNN ............................................... Michelle Federer
LADY MEROVALE / EMELIA TWO / MISS FRAYNE ............................................... Brea Bea
SIR CHARLES SEDLEY .................................... Tom Nelis
MARGARET HUGHES ...................................... Jenny Bacon
CHARLES II ................................................ Robert Stanton
NELL GYNN ............................................... Marcy Harriell
MALE EMELIA ............................................. John Zak
RUFIAN / THUG ........................................... Leo Hiederritter
RUFIAN / BOUNCER / OLLY ......................... Mark Buettler
COMPLEAT FEMALE STAGE BEAUTY was produced by the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, California, opening on March 31, 2002. It was directed by Mark Lamos; the set design was by Michael Yeargan; the costume design was by Jess Goldstein; the lighting design was by York Kennedy; the sound design was by Paul Peterson; original music was by Michael Roth; the dramaturg was Scott Horstein; the fight director was Steve Rankin; the voice and dialect coach was Jan Gist; and the stage managers were D. Adams and Joel Rosen. The cast was as follows:

EDWARD KYNASTON .................................. Robert Petkoff
THOMAS BETTERTON ................................ Jonathan Fried
SAMUEL PEPYS ........................................ David Cromwell
VILLIARS ............................................ Quentin Mare
MARIA .................................................. Laura Heisler
LADY MERESVALE .................................... Ryan Dunn
MISS FRAYNE ....................................... Christine Marie Brown
SIR CHARLES SEDLEY ................................ Steve Hendrickson
MARGARET HUGHES ................................. Krista Hoepner
CHARLES II ........................................... Tom Hewitt
NELL GWYNN ........................................ Kswana Martinez
HYDE ................................................... David McCann
MALE EMILIA ........................................ Antoine Knoppers
RUFFIAN .............................................. Brian Ibsen
RUFFIAN / THUG / COURTIER /
SIR THOMAS KILLIGREW ......................... Lucas Caleb Rooney
SIR PETER LELLY ................................. David McCann
MRS. ELIZABETH BARRY / COURTIER .......... Deb Heining
MISTRESS REVELS ................................. Ryan Dunn
COURTIER ........................................... D’Vorah Bailey

CHARACTERS

EDWARD KYNASTON, 25–30. The last male actor to play female roles in the Restoration.
THOMAS BETTERTON, 30. A major actor of the Restoration.
SAMUEL PEPYS, 40. The famed diarist.
VILLIARS, DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM, 35.
A prominent aristocrat.
MARIA, 23. A seamstress.
LADY MERESVALE, 25. A rich fan.
MISS FRAYNE, 25. A rich fan.
SIR CHARLES SEDLEY, 39. A rich writer.
MARGARET HUGHES, 25. The first actress.
CHARLES II, 32. The King.
NELL GWYNN, 15. His mistress.
HYDE, 50. The Prime Minister.
MALE EMILIA, 25. An actor.

RUFFIAN ONE
RUFFIAN TWO
RUFFIAN THREE
SIR PETER LELLY
THOMAS KILLIGREW
MRS. ELIZABETH BARRY
BOUNCER
MISTRESS REVELS
DRUNK
THUG
PLACE
London.

TIME
1660s.

COMPLEAT FEMALE STAGE BEAUTY

ACT ONE

Prologue


PEPYS. "December 8, 1661. To the theater this afternoon to see a play. It is The Moor of Venice, from Shakespeare and quite a show of splendour and glitter it is after eighteen years of Puritan gruel. Six months into his restoration and King Charles has made good his promise to bring light back to London, and this "Moor," though black as jealous bile, is brilliantine. Betterton is all one could hope for as the brooding general, but better than even Betterton is his Desdemona. Such eyes, such hair, such lips, and voice to stir, be one Venecian or anthropophagi. The player is Kynaston. And surely he is the most beautiful woman in the house!" (A loud explosion of stage thunder. Lights out on Pepys. He exits as the drop rises to reveal.)

End of Prologue
Scene 1


KYNASTON. "Who's there? Othello?"
BETTERTON. "Ay, Desdemona."
KYNASTON. "Will you come to bed, my lord?"
BETTERTON. "Have you pray'd tonight, Desdemona?"
KYNASTON. "Ay, my lord."
BETTERTON.
"If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight."
KYNASTON. "Alas, my lord, what may you mean by that?"
BETTERTON.
"Well, do it, and be brief; I will walk by:
I would not kill thy unprepared spirit;
No; heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul."
(Thunder! Kynaston rises and backs away from Betterton.)
KYNASTON. "Talk you of killing?"
BETTERTON. "Ay, I do."
KYNASTON. "Then heaven have mercy on me."
BETTERTON. "Think on thy sins."
KYNASTON. "They are loves I bear to you."
BETTERTON. "Ay, and for that thou diest!"
KYNASTON. "That death's unnatural that kills for loving!"
BETTERTON. "Peace and be still!"
KYNASTON. "I will so. What's the matter?"
BETTERTON.
"That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee
Thou gavest to Cassio."

KYNASTON.
"No, by my life and soul!
Send for the man and ask him."
BETTERTON.
"His mouth is stopped.
Honest Iago hath ta'en order for 't."
(Rumble of thunder as lights ebb up to reveal side stage boxes filled with fashionable theagogoers.)
KYNASTON. "O, my fear interprets! What he is dead?"
BETTERTON.
"Had all his hairs been lives, my great revenge
Had stomach for them all."
KYNASTON. "Alas, he is betray'd, and I undone!"
BETTERTON. "Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?"
KYNASTON. "O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!"
BETTERTON. "Down, strumpet!"
KYNASTON. "Kill me to-morrow; let me live tonight!"
BETTERTON. "Nay, if you strive, —"
KYNASTON. "But half an hour!"
BETTERTON. "Being done, there is no pause."
KYNASTON. "But while I say one prayer!"
BETTERTON. "It is too late." (Wild thunder during what follows next: Betterton thrusts Kynaston on the bed and "smothers" him with the red pillow. Knock, off.)
EMILIA. (Off.) "My lord, my lord! What ho! My lord, my lord!"
BETTERTON. (Still smothering.)
"What noise is this? Not dead? Not quite yet dead?
I that am cruel am yet merciful;
I would not have thee linger in thy pain:
So, so."
(A male actor, dressed as Emilia, enters.)
EMILIA ACTOR. My lord, what noise — !
AUDIENCE MALE. Boo!
EMILIA ACTOR. — what, what noise, my —
AUDIENCE MALE. Boo! Boo-boo! Bring back the girl!
BETTERTON. "What, how should she be murdered — "
AUDIENCE FEMALE. Yes, bring back the girl, bring back
Desdemona!
AUDIENCE MALE. Bring back Kynaston!
BETTERTON. ... er ... ay, Emilia ... Thou, thou —
AUDIENCE. (Ad-libs.) Yes! Hell with the Moot! Give us Kynaston!
Scene 2

The green room. Backstage at the Duke’s Theater. Kynaston and Betterton enter from the scene we’ve just witnessed.

KYNASTON. Damn!
BETTERTON. What?
KYNASTON. It’s not working!
BETTERTON. (Disbelief) What do you mean, “not working”? I’m trying to get through to the end and they’re shouting “Kynaston! Kynaston!” Haven’t even FINISHED the show in three fucking weeks!
KYNASTON. I’m talking about my death scene. It’s not quite right. (Betterton plops into a chair and starts to remove his dark make-up, Pepys enters with his diary. Villiars, Duke of Buckingham, enters behind him.)
PEPYS. Good show, Mr. K!
VILLIARS. Brava, Kynaston!
BETTERTON. (Grumpy) You see? THEY like it!
PEPYS. (Ever eager) See what?
BETTERTON. Mr. Kynaston is complaining about his death scene.
KYNASTON. Something is eluding me. Perhaps it’s a gesture, a tone … Tommy, do the lines.
BETTERTON. (Groans, exasperated) Oh, come on, can’t I just take off my bootblack and go to a whorehouse?
KYNASTON. Come on, this is important. (Desdemona voice) “Alas, he is betrayed and I undone!”

BETTERTON. (Bored, by rote) “Out, strumpet! Weep’s thou for him to my face?”
KYNASTON. “O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!”
BETTERTON. “Down, strumpet!”
KYNASTON. “Kill me to-morrow; let me live tonight!”
BETTERTON. “Nay, if you strive —”
KYNASTON. “But half an hour!”
BETTERTON. “Being done, there is no pause.”
KYNASTON. “But while I say one prayer!”
BETTERTON. “It is too late!” Smother, smother, smother.
KYNASTON. Hmm.
PEPYS. Maybe if you had a speech.
KYNASTON. WHILE I’m being smothered?
BETTERTON. (Mocking: like a bad actor) “Oh, I am being smothered! Othello is smothering me! Oh, please, Othello stop your smothering!”
KYNASTON. See, that’s the thing. There’s no time. The dialogue is so “bang-bang-bang!” You know what I think? I think the first fellow who did this role had a speech there and Richard Burbage complained he was being upstaged, so Shakespeare cut it. That’s it, Tommy. I’m dying too soon.
BETTERTON. There’s an actor for you. “My death scene doesn’t go on long enough!” Well, you’ll have plenty of chances to get it right.
PEPYS. Yes, grasp the fact, Mr. K., the performance is a grand triumph! (Kynaston sits at his make-up table, removing make-up. The pillow is set on the table.)
BETTERTON. This is what I don’t grasp. King comes to the play last week —
PEPYS. (Jotting) This is Othello?
BETTERTON. This is Othello — and he says, King says, “Bravo, Betterton, good show, thrills and chills, see it again Saturday next. Question, though: Could it be a bit … cheerier?” “Cheerier” say I. “Yes” says Charlie, “something more jolly.” And I say, all bowed and unctuous, “Would His Majesty prefer a comedy?” And he says, “Oh, no, Othello again, by all means, but make it jolly.” And I say, “Well, Your Majesty, Mr. Shakespeare does end his play with Desdemona strangled, Emilia stabbed, Iago arrested, and Othello disemboweling himself. Do you suggest we do away with that?” And he says, “Heavens no, kill ‘em all, just make it jollier.” What is one to do with such criticism?
PEPYS. Does Desdemona have to die? You could re-write it so that
after Othello smothers Desdemona and Iago confesses, Desdemona comes back to life.

KYNASTON. (Mock groan.) I start to groan. “Oh — Oh — Oh-thello ...”

BETTERTON. (Othello voice.) “What? Desdemona not dead?”

KYNASTON. “Not quite.” (Betterton cradles Kynaston in his arms.)

BETTERTON. “I did not mean to smother you. Forgive me?”

KYNASTON. “Oh, all right, give us a kiss!” (Betterton and Kynaston break from their embrace. Kynaston removes his wig.)

BETTERTON. Have to figure something before the King comes back; we play Othello again day after tomorrow. (Sighs.) Maybe we'll get lucky.

KYNASTON. Maybe there'll be an interregnum.

PEPSY. (Picks up pen.) Ooh!

KYNASTON. Don't write that down, Pepys.

VILLIARS. What none of you glean is that in his preferences, the King is expressing a particularly salient stage view.

BETTERTON. And what is that, your grace?

VILLIARS. He wants surprises. He's been away — and the theaters have been closed — for eighteen years. Now he's back and the theaters are open, what does he find? The same old things. Poetry, he approves; ideas, he approves; love, death, tragedy, comedy, yes! But SURPRISE him!

KYNASTON. What about sex?

VILLIARS. Mr. Kynaston?

KYNASTON. Vis-à-vis the stage. You claim the King approves love, the idea, but what about sex, the expression?

PEPSY. Poetry can express sex.

KYNASTON. And so can sex. “Fit the action to the word, the word to the action.”

VILLIARS. Mr. Kynaston, if you insist on something more graphic, show a tit, the King won't complain.

KYNASTON. (Looks down his bust.) And how would you suggest I do that?

VILLIARS. (Deadpan.) Surprise me. (Maria, a backstage seamstress, enters with a letter.)

MARI. Mr. Kynaston? A letter for you. (Smells letter.) Nice perfume. Shall I open it?

KYNASTON. (Takes it.) In front of these ruffians? It may be an invitation to an assignation.

BETTERTON. Lady TitBum perhaps. Or the Countess ChewMeUp.

MARI. You're unspeakably vulgar, Mr. Betterton. How that slop bucket can speak such poetry I do not know. (Taps letter.) The letter probably came from one of the ladies. (Kynaston opens the letter and reads. Villiars tries to peek over Kynaston's shoulder at the letter; Kynaston senses his presence and slaps him away with the envelope. Villiars smiles and backs off again.)

BETTERTON. What ladies?

MARI. Upper class ones. Two of 'em. They want to come backstage and be received by Mr. Kynaston. (Kynaston has now read the letter and put it back in the envelope.)

KYNASTON. (Indicates letter.) Then the letter's from them. The writing style's too coherent to have come from ladies of the upper class. Two minutes, then bring 'em back.

PEPSY. Why two minutes?

KYNASTON. (Putting wig back on.) Got to put my visage back on. They want the illusion, not some Green Room hermaphrodite.

THIS. Tommy, is why I deserve a share.

BETTERTON. (Buries head in hands.) Oh, no.

PEPSY. What are you two talking about?

BETTERTON. Mr. Kynaston's contract is up and he's putting the screws to me.

KYNASTON. All I want is what is fair.

BETTERTON. You have the best deal in London. Five pounds a week, thirty-two weeks a year, choice of roles, and I provide the handkerchiefs. You won't get that over at Mr. Killigrew's theater.

KYNASTON. I want a share. You make me a shareholder, I won't argue salary, I won't argue clothes, I won't even insist you wash the pillow you shove in my nose; Tommy, I'm as much a draw as you! More so!

BETTERTON. Prove it.

KYNASTON. (Holds up letter.) Where's your love note? Where're your ladies?

BETTERTON. A share in the company is out of the question. Tell you what. As a gesture of good faith, as proof that I am seeking to find a way, from this day forth you have approval over the casting of any co-star that takes place upon my stage.

KYNASTON. (To others.) You are my witnesses. (Maria exits.)

PEPSY. (Snaps diary shut, stands.) Noted! And I'm off to another show!

BETTERTON. What, to Killigrew's Theater? The competition?

KYNASTON. (Mock anger.) Traitor.
PEPYS. Killigrew says he's got some new twist.
VILLIARS. I'll give you a lift. I have to dine at Chesterfield's.
KYNASTON. (Doesn't look up.) This evening?
VILLIARS. For an hour or so. (Turns to Betterton.) Good show,
Mr. Betterton. (Bows to Kynaston.) Lovely as always, Mr. K.
KYNASTON. Thank you, Your Grace.
PEPYS. Bravo, Betterton. Mr. K.
KYNASTON/BETTERTON. Pepys. (Villiars and Pepys exit as
Maria enters.)
MAREA. Lady Meresvale and Miss Frayne.
KYNASTON. (Rises.) Entre. (Two decorously gowned giggling girls
enter. Maria exits.)
MISS FRAYNE. SHH! No! You start!
LADY MERENCEVALE. I can't — You do it!
MISS FRAYNE. You do it! I'll die!
LADY MERENCEVALE. SHH! Oh — ! (Turns, curtsies.) Mr. Kynaston?
KYNASTON. (Bows.) Ladies, do you know Mr. Betterton?
MISS FRAYNE. Are you an actor, too?
BETTERTON. (Sways.) I played the Moor.
MISS FRAYNE. You look different.
BETTERTON. (Deadpan.) Yes, I'm not really black.
LADY MERENCEVALE. Mr. Kynaston, my friend and I saw the per-
formance this afternoon, we're such fans, I can't tell you.
MISS FRAYNE. She's seen you six times.
LADY MERENCEVALE. Stop it!
MISS FRAYNE. She has.
LADY MERENCEVALE. I am a great fan, and I was wondering, well —
would you be willing to take a stroll with us through St. James'.
It would be such an honor to have you.
LADY MERENCEVALE/MISS FRAYNE. Please, please, please!
KYNASTON. Well, if you give me half an hour to remove my face
and clothes —
MISS FRAYNE/LADY MERENCEVALE. Oh, no! Don't! PLEASE!
LADY MERENCEVALE. Mr. Kynaston, we'd like you to leave your
appearance "as is."
KYNASTON. (After a beat.) Well, then: To the carriage!
LADY MERENCEVALE. He said yes!
MISS FRAYNE. This is so good! (The giggling ladies sweep Kynaston
off.)
BETTERTON. (Sighs.) Should've left the boot black on. (Betterton
exits.)

Scene 3

The park. Kynaston and the ladies stroll through the lush
green. The ladies fan themselves and giggle incessantly.

LADY MERENCEVALE. Have I told you how many times I've seen
you?
KYNASTON. Tell me again.
MISS FRAYNE. Six.
LADY MERENCEVALE. Seven today.
KYNASTON. And all of them Desdemona?
LADY MERENCEVALE. No, not all. Juliet and Ophelia and the one
without hands and Lady Mac —
KYNASTON. Don't say it.
LADY MERENCEVALE. What?
KYNASTON. That name.
LADY MERENCEVALE. What, Mac —
KYNASTON. Don't say it. Just call them "The Scots."
LADY MERENCEVALE. Why?
KYNASTON. Because they're Scottish.
LADY MERENCEVALE/MISS FRAYNE. Ahhhh. (Miss Frayne elbows
Lady Meresvale.)
LADY MERENCEVALE. (Whisper.) What?
MISS FRAYNE. (Whisper.) Go on.
LADY MERENCEVALE. (Whisper.) No!
MISS FRAYNE. (Whisper.) Ask her!
LADY MERENCEVALE. (Whisper.) Quiet!
KYNASTON. What are you two hissing about?
LADY MERENCEVALE. (Turns to Kynaston.) Well —
MISS FRAYNE. You see — Lady Meresvale was wondering —
LADY MERENCEVALE. We BOTH were.
MISS FRAYNE. Yes, both of us were rather wondering if you were
really, well, a gentleman.
KYNASTON. (Very dignified.) Ladies, you have no need to fear
for your honor.
MISS FRAYNE. (Overlaps below.) No, that's not —
LADY MERENCEVALE (Overlaps above.) We didn't mean —
KYNASTON. (Grins.) I know what you meant.
LADY MERESVALE. (After a beat.) ... Well? ... Are you?
MISS FRAYNE. (Pert and annoying.) My father's a wig-maker, and
he says you're a fake! He says you must be a woman.

KYNASTON. Lady Meresvale, what does YOUR father say?
LADY MERESVALE. My father's in the colonies. But my mother's
good friend, the Earl of Lauderdale, says if you're a man you don't
have a gentleman's thing. He says you're like those Italian singers, the
whatzits —

MISS FRAYNE. Castrati.
LADY MERESVALE. The Earl says they cut off your castrati, then
you become a woman.

KYNASTON. I take it the Earl of Lauderdale is not a surgeon.
LADY MERESVALE. (Stupid but proud.) No, he's an Earl.

KYNASTON. Well, assure both your father the wigger and your
mother's special friend that I am indeed a man.
LADY MERESVALE. They said you'd say that.
MISS FRAYNE. They said we'd have to get proof.

KYNASTON. Proof for what?
MISS FRAYNE. For our wager.
LADY MERESVALE. We made a bet.

KYNASTON. I'm not lifting my skirts.
MISS FRAYNE. Oh, come on!
LADY MERESVALE. Please!

KYNASTON. They've only your word to go on. Say I let you see
it and there it was, a big, bulging orb and scepter of a thingy.

MISS FRAYNE. That won't do! We need to touch it!
LADY MERESVALE. NOW!

KYNASTON. Why?
LADY MERESVALE. Because they're watching us. From Courtoold
Palace. (They all look up and out.)

KYNASTON. Your father and your mother's lover want to see you
stick your heads under my costume and feel me up?

MISS FRAYNE. Give you a shilling. (A whistle off. They turn. A
dandy enters. A dandy of the first order. He wears a pink and blue
doublet, cream cape and cream hat with purple plumage, yellow gloves and
brandishes a huge gold stick with a red tassel on the head. He seems
drunken.)

DANDY. Women, beware! (Advancing.) I see three fish eager and
awaiting. Come skewer on me pole!

LADIES. OHHH!
Scene 4

The stage of the Duke's Theater again. The bed, now without its curtains, is still center. It's late. Dark. No one to be seen. Outside noises of the London street. Maria enters the stage, whistling "The Willow Song" from Othello. She carries a lantern. Maria looks at the bed. She picks up the red pillow. She inhales its scent. She looks around to see if the coast is clear. Then she performs the "murder scene" doing both roles, alas, neither very well.

MARIA.
“Talk you of killing?”
(Deep voice.)
“Ay, I do.”
(Her voice.)
“Alas, he is betray'd, and I undone!”
(Deep voice.)
“Down, strumpet!”
(Her voice.)
“Kill me to-morrow; let me live tonight!”
(Deep voice.)
“Nay, if you strive, — “
(Her voice.)
“But half an hour”
(Deep voice.)
“Being done, there is no pause.”
(Her voice.)
“But while I say one prayer!”
(Deep voice.)
“It is too late!”
(Maria falls back on the bed as if she's being smothered by the pillow. A noise off as Kynaston comes clattering on stage, out of breath. Maria leaps up. Brandishes lantern.) Who's th — ? (Stops.) Mr. Kynaston?
KYNASTON. Ohh ... God. No breath. Can't breathe. (Holds side.)
MARIA. Wound?
KYNASTON. (Loosens sash around waist.) Corset.
MARIA. What you doing out and about dressed like that?

KYNASTON. (Huffing and puffing.) Those two gentle ladies who were here earlier wanted to feel me up for the sake of a wager. Help me with this, would you? (Maria helps him undress.)
MARIA. Yes, sir. Sir, the ladies ... did they succeed?
KYNASTON. In what?
MARIA. In ... "feeling" you.
KYNASTON. (Smiles.) What kind of girl do you take me for? (Maria blushes, smiles.) You're blushing.
MARIA. I am not!
KYNASTON. Then what makes your face so red in humour? (Kynaston and Maria are looking at each other. Then Maria looks away.)
MARIA. The lamp light. (Gets back to work.) Shall I wash your pillow case?
KYNASTON. No. Let me die under it one more performance. You'd best head home. Get some sleep.
MARIA. ... I'd sleep here if I could. (Sits on bed.) I'd sleep here tonight. (Maria looks up at Kynaston. He gazes back at her, but gently declines her invitation.)
KYNASTON. Maria. I shall not be charged with taking unfair advantage of womanly virtue. (Pulls her up.) I'll lock up when I'm done. Leave the lamp and go. Go, go, go!
MARIA. (Sets lantern down.) Watch the wick, sir. Don't burn yourself. (Maria exits with the red pillow. Kynaston lets air escape his lungs. He sits on the bed starts to remove his shoes. And Villiars pops up from beneath the bed sheets.)
VILLIARS. Milady.
KYNASTON. (Leaps up.) Damn!
VILLIARS. Scare you?
KYNASTON. Don't ever do that again.
VILLIARS. You were late. Thought I'd get in a quick nap. My note said seven, where were you?
KYNASTON. I was stranded in St. James' Park.
VILLIARS. What were you doing in St. James'?
KYNASTON. Two gentle ladies offered me a shilling to touch my cock in front of their fathers.
VILLIARS. (After a beat.) This is why I prefer Hyde Park. So much less that sort of thing. So what happened?
KYNASTON. (Takes wig off.) We were interrupted by some frilly fop who thought we were whores on the make.
VILLIARS. St. James' is famous for its whores. Half the time, you can't see the forest for the bush. And this fop thought you were a
woman?

KYNASTON. Once he felt the truth, off he went.

VILLIARS. Wasn't the case with me. *(Kynaston is in his shift now.)*

KYNASTON. *(Randy Desdemona voice.)* “Then, c'mon and give us a kiss.”

VILLIARS. Not yet. Show you something. *(Digs in his cloak.)* Truth be told, I was late myself tonight.

KYNASTON. Dinner went long at Chesterfield's?

VILLIARS. I skipped Chesterfields. Pepys got to talking in the coach, tells me he's going to Killigrew's Theater tonight, something “surprising” that he didn't want to mention it in front of you and Betterton. So I tagged along. *(Takes out a flyer.)* Here's the fly-bill that was posted advertising the show.

KYNASTON. What is it?

VILLIARS. Read.

KYNASTON. *(Takes paper, reads.)*

“I come unknown to any of the rest
To tell you news: I saw the lady drest.
The woman plays today, mistake me not,
No man in gown or page in petticoat.”

*(Reads again.)*

“The woman plays today.”

*(Puts down paper.)* The woman.

VILLIARS. An act — tress.

KYNASTON. It's a joke. It's a fake. Jimmy Noakes, maybe or —

VILLIARS. I know Jimmy Noakes, and it was not Noakes, it was not any man. It was a girl.

KYNASTON. It's illegal.

VILLIARS. *(Shrugs.)* One did think as much.

KYNASTON. A woman playing a woman. What's the trick in that? What was the play?

VILLIARS. Othello.

KYNASTON. *(After a beat.)* ... I take it the woman did not play the Moor.

VILLIARS. No.

KYNASTON. How was she?

VILLIARS. You mean the acting? Oh, I never notice the acting. But it reminded me of the first time I saw my estates. House falling down, gardens to seed, but all I could see were the possibilities.

KYNASTON. How'd she die?

VILLIARS. Sorry.

KYNASTON. When Desdemona died, how'd she, you know, get the pillow up her face?

VILLIARS. Rather quickly I thought. One, two, Desdemona's dead.

KYNASTON. You go backstage after?

VILLIARS. No. Green room was too crowded. Pepys went. If two mice were fucking in a nutshell he'd find room to squeeze in and write it down.

KYNASTON. What's her name? The “ac-tress.”

VILLIARS. Er ... Hughes. Pepys said she's mistress to some rich would-be- Going to be at the palace tonight. King's got a midnight supper and some singing thing.

KYNASTON. You invited?

VILLIARS. Yes.

KYNASTON. Are you going?

VILLIARS. If we finish up early, I might drop by.

KYNASTON. *(Strides away from Villiars.)* Oh, by all means, let's finish quick; I think that's rather your style. *(Beat.)*

VILLIARS. *(Dawns on him.)* ... You're jealous.

KYNASTON. *(Turns, scoffs.)* Of what?

VILLIARS. Well, I'm not sure.

KYNASTON. *(Faces, Trying to convince himself.)* This ac-tress ... it's a joke! A one-time thing! It's just ...

VILLIARS. What?

KYNASTON. *(Stops.)* Why did it have to be Othello? *(Turns to him.)* Do you love me?

VILLIARS. *(Smiles, comes to him.)* Where am I now? Who am I with now?

KYNASTON. Then take me ...

VILLIARS. *(Smiles, offers a hand.)* Come.

KYNASTON. ... to the palace.

VILLIARS. *(After a beat.)* What?

KYNASTON. I want to meet this “surprise.”

VILLIARS. *(Chewing it over.)* You want to go to the palace?

KYNASTON. Yes.

VILLIARS. With me?

KYNASTON. Yes.

VILLIARS. As ...?

KYNASTON. *(A hopeful smile.)* As your life's great love? *(Beat.)*

VILLIARS. You'll go as an “acquaintance” who behaves himself. And if you try to grow your part you'll find the role's been cut.

KYNASTON. To the palace then?
VILLIARS. No. First fuck, then see the freak. And Ned? Put this on? (Holds up wig.)

KYNASTON. (After a beat.) Would you ask your lady whores to wear a wig to bed?

VILLIARS. If it made them more a woman. Come on. I want to see a golden flow as I die in you. (Kynaston picks up the wig and hands it to Villiars.)

KYNASTON. “Will you to bed, my lord?”

VILLIARS. Ah, Desdemona. (Kynaston sits on the bed. Villiars comes around the side of the bed and kneels on it above Kynaston. Villiars places the wig on Kynaston’s head as if he is being crowned. Kynaston looks up at Villiars. They kiss. Then Kynaston lies down on the bed, his face facing out front.) Die for me, Desdemona. (The lantern remains on the stage floor. The two men begin to make love. After a moment, a shadow moves at the rear of the stage. A figure comes forward. It’s Maria. She stays far upstage and holds on to the pillow. She buries her face in the pillow as she watches the love-making. The lantern lights go out.

Scene 5

The court of King Charles II. A drum roll as Desdemona’s bed goes off. An arm rises, revealing the opulent private mini-theatre of Charles II. A blast of period music. From the flies descends a beautiful woman in a gold helmet, purple plumeage, gold shield and gold sword. As she descends, she sings. The singer is Nell Gwynn.

NELL. “Who can resist such mighty, mighty charms? Who can resist such mighty, mighty charms? Victorious! Victorious! Victorious love! Who can resist such mighty, mighty charms! And even the thunderer,

The thunderer, love!

Who can resist such mighty, mighty charms?

Who can resist such mighty, mighty charms?”

(Applause. King Charles II enters, resplendent. He claps for his mistress. Others hover and applaud. Charles II joins Nell on the tiny stage. We now glean that behind the gold shield she is completely naked but for high-heeled gold boots. [At least we see her bare bottom,]

CHARLES II. Brava, my dear! Well done! I think I can say with all certitude that was the finest, the most exquisite, the most perfectly sung and staged performance of “The Raging Dido” yet seen in the palace this week! (Charles II grins and turns to his court. They clap again. Nell curtsies. Hyde, Charles’ grim minister, enters. He is followed by Villiars and Kynaston. Both men are now in smart court dress.)

HYDE. His Grace, the Duke of Buckingham, and Mr. Edward Kynaston.

CHARLES II. (Grins.) George!

VILLIARS. Majesty.

CHARLES II. (Hugs him.) George, where’ve you been? Thought you’d skipped us. (To Kynaston.) And ... Kynaston. Know you. You’re —

NELL. (Delighted.) The actor!

CHARLES II. Ah! Would I have seen you in anything?

KYNASTON. I was in Othello this Thursday last at Mr. Betterton’s.

CHARLES II. Who were you, Cassio? Roderigo? Not Iago, I hope, didn’t like him.

KYNASTON. I played Desdemona.

CHARLES II. (Aweled.) THAT Kynaston! Late the wife of the murderous Moor! Went to see the show last week, curtain was late, I said, “What’s the matter,” they said, “Your majesty, the Desdemona is still shaving!”

KYNASTON. You paint a blush upon me, Majesty.

CHARLES II. Long as you’re not the lago fellow, didn’t like him in the least.

KYNASTON. His Highness may want to know our Iago is in fact a quite charming gentleman.

CHARLES II. I make no distinction between the part and its player, and neither I think does anyone else. Have you met Miss Gwynn, my Pretty Witty Nell?

NELL. Mr. Kynaston, I am a great admirer.

CHARLES II. Nell is the most ardent theatregoer in London.

NELL. I used to be an orange girl. I worked the stalls before, dur-
ing and after every performance. *(Shouts.)* “Oranges! Oranges! Two pence a pip!”

CHARLES II. *(Wincs.)* Yes. *(Turns back to Kynaston.)* Kynaston, I was speaking to Betterton about *Othello* last week. Needs some changes. Mind you, it’s first rate, but... I don’t know... Could be...

KYNASTON. Jollier?

NELL. That’s what I said!

CHARLES II. The very word. I mean, what we want are —

KYNASTON. Surprises.

CHARLES II. Exactly.

NELL. But we don’t want to know they’re coming. *(Everyone turns to look at Nell.)*

KYNASTON. Er, we shall try our best when next you see the show. Day after tomorrow, yes? *(Hyde reenters.)*

HYDE. Mrs. Margaret Hughes.

CHARLES II. Heigh ho! Chock full of theatre folk. Swing her in. *(Margaret Hughes enters. Beautiful in a demure gown. Booming.)* Ahoy! Is this the face that launched a thousand claps? *(Margaret blushes.)*

HYDE. His Majesty refers to applause.

MARGARET. Majesty, I know not launches nor applause, but my little boat did make it ‘cross rough seas and thankfully the claps were not of thunder.

CHARLES II. Now there’s an entrance line! Mrs. Hughes, Miss Nell Gwynn.

NELL. I’d take your hand, but me tit would fall out.

CHARLES II. The Duke of Buckingham.

VILLIARS. Madame.

CHARLES II. And Mr. Kynaston, of the stage, like yourself.

MARGARET. Mr. Kynaston.

KYNASTON. *(Stiff now.)* Mrs. Hughes.

NELL. *(Excited whisper.)* Well? How was it?

MARGARET. The performance?

NELL. I wanted to see it, but we were doing this Dido thing. All that for a one off. Work, work, work, and it’s over in a pop. Like Charlie. *(Laughs.)*

HYDE. Miss Gwynn, I remind you you are speaking of the father of his people.

NELL. Well, at least, a lot of ’em.

CHARLES II. Mrs. Hughes, was yours too a “one off?”

MARGARET. It certainly was novel. Whether Mr. Killigrew will repeat it, I cannot say.

VILLIARS. Well, I suppose it’s a question of what the market will bear.

HYDE. And what the Crown will allow.

CHARLES II. My minister, Mr. Hyde is reminding me of my responsibilities as your sovereign.

HYDE. His Majesty has just this past week signed into law certain acts of restoration, although I doubt he is fully aware of all he has allowed and disallowed.

CHARLES II. It does no good to skimp in matters of reform. Out with the old, in with the new! I think it might be fun to see women on the stage. They’ve had them in France a long time now.

HYDE. *(Baleful.)* Yes, whenever we’re about to do something truly horrible we always preface it by saying, “The French have been doing it for years.”

KYNASTON. I hear there was a quite a crowd in your changing rooms tonight, Mrs. Hughes. His Grace the Duke said it was quite a mob scene.

HYDE. You see, Majesty? Mobs. Women on the stage beget disquiet.

NELL. Anybody important come?

MARGARET. I met a Mr. Pepys.

NELL. *(Rolls eyes.)* Oh.

MARGARET. You know him?

NELL. Got the pen marks on my arse to prove it.

MARGARET. *(To Villiars.)* If I may be so bold, your grace, seeing as you saw the performance... did you like it? *(All look at Villiars.)*

VILLIARS. *(The diplomat.)* I never tire of *Othello*.

KYNASTON. Truth be told, he never tires of Desdemona. Always sticking his head in. Last time we did it, he came round the back way.

VILLIARS. Actually, Mrs. Hughes I thought you showed a very pleasing Desdemona.

KYNASTON. But perhaps without quite the DEPTH he’s accustomed to. *(Villiars glares at Kynaston.)*

MARGARET. Well, it was our first try. I hope we shall have more chances.

KYNASTON. Ah, well, that’s the tricky thing about novelty. Do it more than once, it’s not novel anymore.

MARGARET. That may be true, but in the theater I am told there are no old shows, Mr. Kynaston, just new audiences.

NELL. Charlie, let’s see her!

CHARLES II. When can we go? Hyde?

HYDE. His Majesty is booked three weeks hence.
MARGARET. I —
KYNASTON. And surely the Scottish Play has bloodshed.
MARGARET. Oh, I'm far too young to play Lady — ! (Steps herself. reverses gear.) There was never a question, Mr. Kynaston. Desdemona is "the part." Oh, I do so wish you could see us play on Saturday. I'd love to know what you think of how I die!
KYNASTON. (Smiles, purrs.) Mrs. Hughes, I am always interest-
ed in how my rivals die (Villiars returns.)
VILLIARS. Ah, still talking shop. Mrs. Hughes, forgive me, did
you know we had a friend in common?
MARGARET. And who is that, your grace. Surely you can't mean
Mr. Kynaston?
VILLIARS. Your protector. We went to school together. (Villiars
gestures off. Sir Charles Sedley enters. He is the "dandy" Kynaston met
in the park.)
SEDLEY. Heigh-ho!
VILLIARS. Sir Charles Sedley, my good friend, may I present Mr.
Edward Kynaston ... an acquaintance.
SEDLEY. Kynaston. Odd. I have a feeling I've had the honor already.
KYNASTON. Or you've already had the honor of feeling it.
SEDLEY. (Glassy-eyed.) ... I'm obviously behind in my drinking.
Did you see my Pegs tonight, Kynaston?
KYNASTON. Otherwise engaged I fear.
MARGARET. Mr. Kynaston was himself being smothered by a
man ... if I gleaned your meaning.
SEDLEY. Oh, yes, you're Betterton's Desdemona. You and Peg
play the same part.
KYNASTON. But without the same parts.
SEDLEY. Well, you MUST see her Desdemona.
KYNASTON. Must I?
SEDLEY. Certainly. She's seen yours.
KYNASTON. (Turns a wicked smile on her.) Have you, Mrs.
Hughes? You didn't tell me that. (Margarre turns red.)
SEDLEY. Copies you like a monk in cloister. Got so bad I told her
she had to start acting more ... manly. Fact is she saw you do the
role so often, she said to me, "THAT is the role in which I must
debut!" (Margett looks miserable. Kynaston smites at her.)
KYNASTON. My question is answered. Well, would that I could
see her play me, but as we're opposites, I Shan't have the chance.
SEDLEY. (Eyes narrow.) You won't go? Not even for the fun of it?
KYNASTON. Theater people don't go to plays for fun. We go to

CHARLES II. Sorry, Nell.
VILLIARS. Well, (Beat.) If I may suggest, Your Majesty ... seeing
as you've viewed Mr. Kynaston's Desdemona already ... why not
see Mrs. Hughes' instead? I'm sure Mr. Kynaston would agree it's
the collegial thing to do. (Kynaston glares at Villiars.)
CHARLES II. George, I'd make you a duke were you not a duke
already. Make noxes, Hyde.
HYDE. (Jots.) Saturday: Othello. The OTHER one.
CHARLES II. And now, forgive me, I have to pray our Midas from
her prison de oro. Good to meet you, Mrs. Hughes.
NELL. (To Margaret.) Split an orange after. (Neil and Charles exit.
Hyde exits.)
VILLIARS. Well, madam, will you excuse me, I think I see an
acquaintance. I'll leave you to Mr. Kynaston to find ... more
"depth." (Villiars exits. Margaret and Kynaston are left alone. An
uncomfortable pause. Then.)
MARGARET. I have heard so much about you, Mr. Kynaston. I
wish I could see YOUR Desdemona.
KYNASTON. Do you?
MARGARET. (Quickly, nervous.) Not that I consider Desdemona
MINE, having made such brief and recent claim to her. But then a
part doesn't belong to an actor, an actor belongs to a part, don't you
agree? The portrait may be different, but the subject's the same. Still
the same words. "I love you, I'm innocent, don't kill me, I'm dead."
KYNASTON. Tell me, Mrs. Hughes, how came you to play the
role? Was it offered you by Mr. Killigrew?
MARGARET. I have a close acquaintance in a gentleman, Sir
Charles Sedley, who has taken an interest in the theater. Mr.
Killigrew's establishment needed certain financial situations set
right, Sir Charles offered to patronize it. Consequently came the
offer to perform.
KYNASTON. That's all it took?
MARGARET. That and an Act of Parliament.
KYNASTON. And how was the play itself chosen?
MARGARET. (Nervous.) The play?
KYNASTON. Yes. Why Othello?
MARGARET. Well ... the play does do well when it's performed,
as you could arrest. The plot, the bloodshed, the poetry.
KYNASTON. Hamlet has a plot.
MARGARET. Pardon me?
KYNASTON. Plenty of poetry in Cymbeline.
find out what went wrong. Besides, bad luck to watch a “colleague” play the same character whilst one is running. Who knows what good things one might wish to borrow, what others one might NOT. VILLIARS. (Tries to defuse.) I’m heading home, Mr. Kynaston. Shall I DROP you?

KYNASTON. Yes, to bed, to bed. Tomorrow we audition new roles, then two shows of The Silent Lady. In it, I play a girl in a man’s clothes. Might be your sort of thing, Mrs. Hughes. I’ll look over the footlights, see if you’re out there jotting notes. (To Sedley.) Sir Charles. (Kynaston offers his hand to Sedley. Sedley shakes it coolly.)

SEDLEY. Mr. Kynaston.

KYNASTON. (Holds up glove, à la Sedley.) I shall never wear this glove again! (Sedley realizes who Kynaston is. Kynaston blows Sedley a kiss and exits grandly. Villiars, embarrassed, bows to Margaret and Sedley. Villiars exits.)

SEDLEY. (Glowering.) This “Silent Lady” speaks too much. Mr. Kynaston is a fella in need of a come-down. And on his own turf. Did you tell him you’re auditioning for Betterton tomorrow?

MARGARET. No.

SEDLEY. (Smiles.) Good. Surprise him.

MARGARET. Sir Charles, do you know Mr. Kynaston from before?

SEDLEY. Not really. Thought he was a whore tonight and grabbed his cock. (They exit, arm in arm.)

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**Scene 6**

*Backstage at the Duke’s Theater. Three or four chairs are set.*

*Maria ushers Nell into the scene. Nell is now well dressed.*

*Maria is somewhat perplexed by Nell.*

MARIA. Miss Gwynn. This is the stage.

NELL. (Awed.) Wo.

MARIA. You say you want to see Mr. Betterton?

NELL. Right. 'Ar's him.

MARIA. (Bemused.) I’ll tell him you’re here. (Maria goes off. Nell looks around, awed. She grins and starts to spin in place like a little girl. Margaret enters, in a yellow cloak. Nell sees her and screams.)

NELL. AHHHHH! You scared me! I didn’t know anybody was watchin’! Doncha recognize me, Mrs. Hughes! It’s me! Nell!

MARGARET. (Surprised.) Miss Gwynn?

NELL. Surprised?

MARGARET. I am, yes.

NELL. Surprised meself! Didn’t think I’d get up the nerve.

MARGARET. To…?

NELL. To audition! Don’t tell Charlie. He knew I was here he’d bust a boil! Secret, eh?

MARGARET. What are you auditioning with?

NELL. What do you mean?

MARGARET. I mean what piece? For example, I have prepared a speech from a play.

NELL. (Nods, incomprehending.) Clever idea. This speech, is it yours?

MARGARET. Well, it’s Shakespeare’s actually.

NELL. And he don’t mind you using it?

MARGARET. I pray not.

NELL. I haven’t done any speeches as yet, just songs. You got the speech written down?

MARGARET. No, I’ve memorized it from a prompt book.

NELL. Wo. That’s hard. I don’t read. You think that’s a hindrance?

MARGARET. If you don’t read, how do you memorize the words to the songs you sing?

NELL. Charlie makes the Prime Minister say the lyrics to me til I’m ready to kill him. After that, it just kind of sets in.

MARGARET. So what do you plan to do for your audition?

NELL. Well. First I thought I’d just sort of stand here for a while and let them have a good look — that’s done surprisingly well for me to date. Next, I figured I’d sing a hymn about the temptation of Eve. Last, I take off my all of my clothes and pretend I’m wrestling a gigantic bulbous snake. It’s worked before.

MARGARET. (After a beat.) How old are you, Miss Gwynn?

NELL. Fifteen.

MARGARET. No parents?

NELL. Me mum was a whore, me father the navy.

MARGARET. I see.

NELL. Yeah, that’s why I don’t never do sailors. Do you think they’ll want a speech today?

MARGARET. I fear so.

NELL. I knew I forgot something. I mean, I want to be an actress more ‘n anything, but if I got to READ … Here, now I’ve got flies
in my gullet. I gotta do a run. Save me place?
MARGARET. Of course.
NELL. (Stands, hesitates.) Friends for life?
MARGARET. Run of the show. (Nell smiles, then dashes off.
Betterton enters, dressed in the armor of some great military figure —
very much the fat, male version of what Nell wore in her performance
in "The Raging Dido.")
BETTERTON. (Calls off.) Maria! MIA! Damnit, girl, where
are you!? Fucking codpiece is half way up my fundament! (Ses
MARGARET.) Ho! Who are you?
MARGARET. (Stands.) Mr. Betterton, I am Margaret Hughes. I
am here to audition.
BETTERTON. (Perplexed.) As what?
MARGARET. As an actress.
BETTERTON. Dear girl, we do not employ actresses. Now it's
almost curtain! Scurry off, we have a show to — (Betterton starts off;
stops, turns.) Hang on. "Margaret Hughes?" The Hughes who
played last night at Killigrew's?
MARGARET. Yes, that was I.
BETTERTON. (Comes to her.) Heavens. Everyone's talking about
last night's performance and your appearance in it.
MARGARET. Good words, I hope.
BETTERTON. Well, they're talking, that's the main thing.
Killigrew going to perform it again?
MARGARET. Tomorrow night.
BETTERTON. Then, has he you to a contract?
MARGARET. I have signed no contract as there is no assurance of
future opportunities. Mr. Killigrew has been most kind, but ... I
have always been desirous of working at your theater. I've seen you
and Mr. Kynaston dozens of times. You're my favorite theater couple!
(Kynaston enters, dressed as a fop with long red hair.)
KYNASTON. Tommy — (Sees her.) Mrs. Hughes.
MARGARET. Mr. Kynaston.
BETTERTON. You've met?
MARGARET. We've exchanged words.
KYNASTON. Are we giving tours, Tommy?
BETTERTON. Mrs. Hughes is desirous of an audition as today
has been our day to see players. Pray, do you have a scene for us,
Mrs. Hughes?
MARGARET. I do, actually.
KYNASTON. Tommy, it's but a few minutes to curtain —
MARGARET. It won't take but a minute. (Kynaston fumes. Betterton
decides.)
BETTERTON. Mrs. Hughes. Take the stage. (The men sit. Margaret
starts to move the auditioner's chair. Betterton hops up and moves it for
her.) Allow me. (Holds chair for her, as she sits.)
MARGARET. (Sits.) My thanks.
BETTERTON. (Bows, smiles.) My pleasure. (Betterton sits next to
Kynaston.)
BETTERTON. What, Mrs. Hughes, will you be doing for us today?
MARGARET. A soliloquy.
BETTERTON. From?
MARGARET. (Hesitates.) ... Othello.
BETTERTON. ... And the role?
MARGARET. (Nervous.) ... Desdemona.
BETTERTON. (Glances at Kynaston.) Well, then, this should be fun.
MARGARET.
"What shall I do to win my lord again?
Good friend, go to him; for by this light of heaven,
I know not how ..."
(She stops. She winces and makes a pleading face.) May I start over?
BETTERTON. (Uncertain.) Please.
MARGARET. Thank you.
"What shall I do to win my lord again?
Good friend, go to him; for by this light of heaven,
I know not how ..."
"I know not how ..."
KYNASTON. "I know not how I lost him."
MARGARET. (Tight.) My thanks.
KYNASTON. My pleasure. I say it every night.
MARGARET. May I begin again?
BETTERTON. Heavens, I was going to suggest it myself!
KYNASTON. "I know not how —" "
MARGARET (Loud; red faced anger.) " — I know not—how— I lost—
him! (What follows is a ghastly rendering of the speech. Every mistake
an actress can make, Margaret makes. Lots of gestures, histrionics, too
fast, too slow. It's a classic.)
MARGARET.
"What shall I do to win my lord again?
Good friend, go to him; for by this light of heaven,
I know not how I lost him.
Here I kneel.
If e’er my will did trespass ‘gainst his love,
   Either in discourse of thought
Or actual deed
Or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense (Sniffs.)
Delighted them in any other form;
Or that I do not yet, and ever did,
And ever will — though he do shake me off
To beggarly divorcement — love him dearly,
Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much,
And his unkindness may defeat my life,
But never taint my love.” (Steps.)
That was it.

BETTERTON. (Stunned.) ... Yes, of course it was! Sorry, I was so
... caught up in the ... gestures and such. Well. I have never heard
the role performed quite that way before.

MARGARET. Do you think there might be something for me?
BETTERTON. Don’t know. Depends.

MARGARET. Oh?

KYNASTON. (Deadpan.) On hundreds if not thousands of actors
ahead of you dying of the plague.

BETTERTON. Ned’s being funny —

KYNASTON. (Stands.) It depends on the audiences of London
losing their eyes, their ears, and truth be told, their sense of (Sniffs
à la Margaret.) ... smell. I must confess, Mrs. Hughes, when I heard
about your performance at Killigrew’s last night, I was worried! I
thought: Women on the stage, what will become of me? And then
you auditioned for us! You have taken a great load off my mind.

MARGARET. (Hurt and stiff.) I take it the answer is no.

BETTERTON. (Solicitous.) We’ll keep in touch. Best of luck
tomorrow night. Wish I could slip in and see.

MARGARET. (Eyes welling, starts off.) I would arrange tickets, but
we’re sold out.

BETTERTON. (Light bulb!) Sold out?
MARGARET. (Starts to cry.) Yes!
BETTERTON. Sold out every seat?

MARGARET. (Crying.) Since last night Mr. Killigrew’s been getting
requests apace!

BETTERTON. Requests apace. You mean: SALES IN
ADVANCE? Mrs. Hughes, you say Mr. Killigrew has not signed a
contract with you.

MARGARET. (Turns, sniffs.) Not as yet, although he made men-
tion last night —

BETTERTON. Whatever he offered, I’ll double it! Ned! What say
we brought in Mrs. Hughes to play one of the roles? “Emilia” per-
haps? Or “Bianca”? Not “you-know-who,” of course, that’s you,
but — splash things up a bit. What do you think?

KYNASTON. I refuse.

BETTERTON. What do you mean “refuse”?

KYNASTON. I shall not act with her.

BETTERTON. By what right?

KYNASTON. My rights. Mr. Betterton, you gave me approval
over casting. And I hereby exercise said rights.

BETTERTON. But she’s sold out Killigrew’s!

MARGARET. (Trying to convince Ned.) Indeed! The theater was
packed and the crowd clapped and clapped!

KYNASTON. I recall a puppet show once where a recently
departed dog was stuffed and made to dance with Punch and Judy,
and that crowd was packed and clapping too.

MARGARET. Do you mean to be quite so insulting, sir, or is it
just your nature?

KYNASTON. A feminine prerogative.

MARGARET. At least I am what I appear to be, instead of some
mingling catamite!

KYNASTON. Madam I have worked half my life to do what I do!
Fourteen boys in a cellar, crammed in with a former boy player
who pawed at us day and night. A fat old fellow who’d take in
urchins like me and teach us the tricks and turns. It was all com-
pletely illegal, of course, Cromwell being the theater fan he was,
but that Old Boy, he’d whisper in my ear, “Mark me, the stage’ll
come back, and when it does, my lad, you’ll be its star.” What
teacher did you learn from? What cellar was YOUR home?

MARGARET. (Cald.) I had no teacher nor such a classroom, but
then I had less need of training. (We hear a chant begin.)

OFFSTAGE VOICES. Start the play! Start the play! Start the play!

BETTERTON. Ned, this lady ...

KYNASTON. (To Betterton.) Mr. Betterton, if you insist on argu-
ing the case for Mrs. Hughes further — indeed if you attempt to
audition her or any other women ever again — I will consider it a
breech of contract, and leave the stage forthwith. Now, do we play
or do you refund the house? (We hear feet stamping in their seats.)

OFFSTAGE VOICES. Start the play! Start the play! Start the play!

(Betterton glares.)
BETTERTON. (A chilled voice.) I am a man of my contract and my word. You exercise your rights today, I mine tomorrow.

KYNASTON. (Bows.) Thank you, Mr Betterton. I shall await my cue. (Kynaston sweeps off. Betterton fumes. Nell rushes onstage.)

NELL. God, I must've dropped ten stone! Is this Mr. Betterton?

MARGARET. (Low and sad.) Mr. Betterton cannot audit today.

NELL. What? (The offstage chants are louder now.)

BETTERTON. It's too late. The curtain must rise.

NELL. (Red-eyed.) But — I hurried as I could! What about after the play?

BETTERTON. No.

NELL. Then tomorrow — ?

MARGARET. (Defeated.) He cannot audit you at all, Miss Gwynn.

BETTERTON. I fear I gave Mr. Kynaston approval over my players, and Mr. Kynaston refuses to see players who are of the feminine form. (Chants offstage louder. Nell's tears freeze to anger.)

NELL. (Snarls.) BITCH! (To Betterton.) Does he know who I am?

BETTERTON. Madame, whoever you are, it is enough for Mr. Kynaston that you are a woman!

NELL. (Fury.) Well, mark me, sir! Women shall lay blame for this! (Nell grinds Margaret and storms off. The chants are raging.)

OFFSTAGE VOICES: Start the play! Start the play! Start the play!

BETTERTON. Place! Curtain up!

(Betterton exits. Three knocks of the cane. Curtain rises. Footlights come up. Kynaston strolls on, dressed in his 'britches' garb.)

AUDIENCE. Aahhhhh! (Applause.)

KYNASTON.

"Come I to London
   At seventeen,
   But wait, don't speak
   Til you have seen
   The locks that fall from neath my hat
   I am a girl
   And that is that!
   Dressed as a man to find my fortune,
   A babe on a doorstep,
   A bastard orphan
   Here to seek my wealth and fame,
   And needs be I must change my na — "

(Audience voice calls out.)
Scene 7

The green room. Betterton — still in costume, but without his helmet — strides in. He paces, wringing his hands. Kynaston enters slowly with Maria. His wig and hat are gone. His clothes are splattered with brown smears. Maria hovers behind him, holding a cloth with which she has obviously been trying to clean him. Maria tries to wipe some of the shit from Kynaston’s face, but he jerks his face away from her. Maria rushes offstage. Kynaston makes his way to his make-up table. Betterton wrinkles his nose and backs away from him, both to avoid being smeared himself and to give Kynaston’s anger its room to breathe. The cheers have by now faded to silence.

BETTERTON. I, uh, think it would be best if we did not perform the second show. I don’t want a repetition of THIS! I’ll tell the box office to refund the tickets.

KYNASTON. Nonsense. We’re going to play to a full house tonight.

BETTERTON. What makes you think that?

KYNASTON. Because the “wits” of the town are even now sitting in their coffee houses telling what happened to Ned Kynaston when he played The Silent Lady today. And what will happen to him when he plays her next.

BETTERTON. I can’t allow it. The things they threw on the stage could have been bricks or glass or —

KYNASTON. It was shit. (Maria enters.)

MARIA. A letter, Mr. Kynaston. (Hands it to him.) No perfume.

(Kynaston opens it, reads silently.)

BETTERTON. What is it?

KYNASTON. It’s a poem.

“ONSTAGE WOMEN ARE SO SIZED
YOU’D THINK THEY WERE THE GUARD DISGUISED;
WITH BONE SO LARGE AND INCOMPLIANT
CALL DESDEMONA, ENTER GIANT.”

From Sir Charles Sedley.

BETTERTON. Why’s he sending you doggerel?

KYNASTON. He’s serving notice. It was he paid the ruffians to smear me with verse and shit.

BETTERTON. (Points at letter.) Does he say as much?

KYNASTON. No.

BETTERTON. Then how do you know he authored their barbs?

KYNASTON. The rhyme scheme is the same. This is his repayment for my refusal to act with his whore, the Hughes. (Soft, like a small child, a chant.) Why are they doing this to me? Why are they doing this to me? Why —?

BETTERTON. Ned…? (Pause.)

KYNASTON. (Determined.) We shall play tonight.

BETTERTON. Ned —

KYNASTON. To a full house. And we’ll beat Sir Charles and his whores who came to you today. I insist.

BETTERTON. (Seethes.) You’ll insist yourself to hell, Mr. Kynaston. (Betterton goes off. Kynaston stomps out at his image in the mirror, Maria behind him.)

KYNASTON. Yes, I probably will. (Maria starts off.) Maria, don’t go. Plots must I lay, deceptions treacherous. (Gets an idea.) I must prove a villain to foil a villain.

MARIA. (Doesn’t get it.) Sir…?

KYNASTON. (Stands.) I think these clothes have seen better days!

In The Silent Lady, I play a woman playing a man, yes?

MARIA. A “dandy” of the town.

KYNASTON. Well, then, here’s what I need: (Kynaston grabs Maria by the hand, pulls her up and sweeps her off with him. Lights dim slightly on the green room as lights come up on another part of the stage. A beat later, King Charles II descends from the flies in Nell’s chariot. He’s in a long dressing gown, reading papers. Nell is sniffing dramatically, hoping to gain Charles’ attention. Charles does indeed look up from his papers and sees Nell before him.)

CHARLES II. Nelly? Is that you?

NELL. (Black mood.) Yes!

CHARLES II. What is it, sweets? You been crying? (Nell looks up at Charles and breaks into fresh tears.)

NELL. Charlie? You’d help me to do what I want, wouldn’t you?

CHARLES II. I’ve always said.

NELL. And you’d never deny me?

CHARLES. (After a beat — suspicious.) What do you want? (Nell stands and goes to Charles. He bends to her as she whispers. Charles suddenly pulls back from whatever Nell has whispered. He looks
shocked.) Nell! I can't.

NELL. (Pleading.) Charlie —

CHARLES. (Shakes head.) It's out of the question.

NELL. I'll never ask another favor —

CHARLES II. No!

NELL. (A dirty leer.) Charlie ... (Nell starts to slide down his front.)

CHARLES II. Here now, Nell, I've work to do — (Nell starts to undo Charles' belt.)

NELL. Charlie-Boy, where's his toy...?

CHARLES II. Nelly, this is important stuff — taxes and knight-hoods, we're at war with the Dutch.

NELL. Your Majesty, let me see the Crown! (Nell dives beneath his robes. She disappears inside the folds of the dressing gown. His eyes roll back.)

CHARLES II. OH! OHHHHH! OHHHH, NELLY! (Charles comes. Nell looks up and whistles. The chariot ascends with the happy Charles carried aloft. Nell dabs her lips, smiles, and exits demurely. Simultaneous to their exit, sound up: an audience before the curtain goes up. Lights rise on an area representing the upper boxes of the theater. Sedley appears in the "box." Margaret appears with him.)

SEDLEY. (Sneers.) Mrs. Hughes. How went the audition?

MARGARET. (Still steaming, but she lies.) ... I did not come here. I had a headache.

SEDLEY. Pity, I've been here most of the day to see Mr. Kynaston play.

MARGARET. (Bitter.) Did he play WELL?

SEDLEY. He did not play LONG.

MARGARET. (Suspects something.) What happened?

SEDLEY. (Sneers.) It was critics' day. (Pepys enters, out of breath. He looks around. Sedley sees Pepys and waves at him. Villiars enters.)

SEDLEY. Pepys! Your Grace!

PEPYS. (Looks up.) Sir Charles!

SEDLEY. You got my message, then?

PEPYS. I came as soon as I received your cryptic invitation. (Looks around.)

VILLIARS. You have assembled quite a theater party, Sir Charles.

SEDLEY. I have invited the cream of London society to join us this evening.

PEPYS. Well, I am grateful to be included, although I must confess, I have seen The Silent Lady a good few times before.

SEDLEY. Not as you shall tonight. That's why I most particularly wanted you here.

PEPYS. To what end?

SEDLEY. Why, Mr. Pepys, to write it down. For posterity. (Three knocks of the cane. Pepys sits. Sedley and Margaret look at the stage. Lights dim as the lights brighten on the stage. The curtain rises and we see Kynaston center, dressed exactly as Sedley: cane, hat, gloves, colors, everything. He faces out front.)

KYNASTON.

"Come I to London
At seventeen,
But wait, don't speak
Til you have seen
The locks that fall from neath my hat
I am a fop
And that is that!
Dressed as a man, I seek a verse
To sing the praise
Of one who's worse
Than any dandy, fool
Or fraud
Dressed as a clown
And shoddily shod.
No barbs hurled here
Can ere compare
To this knight's barbarous
Verse, I dare;
So here proclaim a scathing medley
Of this poor dot, so dull and deadly
A man whose lip pronounced him "Thedley."
That oatish pricks,
Our own Charles Sedley."

(Audience whoops with laughter and applause as Kynaston bows. Margaret looks embarrassed. Sedley looks aghast. Pepys stands and claps. Cheers go on and on.)
Scene 8

Backstage. The green room. The action is continuous. Sedley has stormed off, with Margaret exiting soon thereafter. Kynaston, triumphant, enters. He removes his hat. Pepys and Villiers are waiting for him. Pepys looks ecstatic. Villiers betrays no expression. Betterton and Maria enter.

PEPYS. Bravo, Mr. K! Bravo! There was the house, full to the brim with the all the best society above and there below three or four ruffian sorts with somewhat smelly bags between them. And then the curtain rised and you appeared. I have never heard such an intake of breath; the candle fire was almost sucked into our breasts! And as you spoke, the laughter came, and I stole a glance at Sedley's face, but there was no mirth in it. Even his ruffian boys with their sacks laughed and mocked him. It was the finest night I've ever had in the theater!

BETTERTON. How'd you like the play?

PEPYS. Oh, fuck the play.

KYNASTON. (Takes Maria's hand.) It's Maria's doing. Maria has the eye and the hand.

MARIA. You inspired me, sir.

KYNASTON. (Kisses Maria's hand.) And you me. What say I take you to dinner, eh?

MARIA. Dinner?

KYNASTON. Yes. (To Villiers.) What do you say, Your Grace? Shall we both escort our genius girl to dine?

VILLIERS. (Cool.) I fear I cannot, Mr. Kynaston. (Lady Meresvalve and Miss Frayne enter.)

KYNASTON. Ah. Well, then. (To Maria.) It's you and me then.

LADY MERESVALE. Mr. Kynaston.

KYNASTON. Ah. Lady Meresvale. Miss Frayne. Come to see if I'm really Sir Charles Sedley? You can take a look in my head, you'll find no brain.

LADY MERESVALE. Mr. Kynaston, we wish to apologize for our rudeness yesterday afternoon. We wish to make things up with you. May we take you to a supper at Chesterfield's?

KYNASTON. (After a pause.) Well. Why not? Dressed as I am, I may commit any crime, and lay the fault at the door of the dullard dandy. (Kynaston and the ladies sweep off.)

PEPYS. (Calling after them.) Good night, Mr. K! Bravo again! (To Betterton.) All's well that ends well! Eh?

BETTERTON. Let's hope so. Whorehouse?

PEPYS. Whorehouse. (Betterton and Pepys exit. Villiers looks at Maria. She is staring after Kynaston, her eyes red.)

VILLIERS. You crying?

MARIA. (Looks away.) No, sir. It's the lamp-light. Will ... will you be back again to see the show tomorrow?

VILLIERS. (After a beat.) No. I have had my fill of Desdemona. (Villiers exits.)

MARIA. (Simply.)

"What shall I do to win my lord again?
For by this light of heaven,
I know not how I lost him."

(Maria begins to cry. Lights fade.)

Scene 9

The park. The ladies and Kynaston enter again.

LADY MERESVALE. Oh, let's stop ... here, why don't we.

KYNASTON. Don't tell me the Earl of Lauderdale and the Wigmaster are in the upper window again. (Miss Frayne and Lady Meresvale exchange a look.)

MISS FRAYNE. No.

LADY MERESVALE. Tarry a while, Mr. Kynaston. Flatter me, who does not deserve your good graces.

KYNASTON. Very well. (Lady Meresvale slaps Kynaston.)

LADY MERESVALE. You mocked us, sir. You, an actor, mocked your betters!

MISS FRAYNE. Hit him again!

LADY MERESVALE. You shall know the other end of it now, shitboy! (Three ruffians appear out of the darkness. One from upstage center, one from stage left. One from stage right. Each carries a cudgel or stick.)

RUFIAN 1. Look 'ere.
RUFIAN 2. A dandy.
RUFIAN 3. A frothy boy spun in sugar!
RUFIAN 1. Ere wait, I know this one.
RUFIAN 2. Me too.
RUFIAN 3. It's Sir Charles Sedley.
KYNASTON. You mistake me, gentlemen.
RUFIAN 2. No mistake.
RUFIAN 1. Tis he. The Sedley.
RUFIAN 3. Dressed as we had been foretold.
RUFIAN 1. You did ignite certain respected lords and ladies, sir.
RUFIAN 2. We have been procured to pronounce the penalty.
(Ruffian 1 swings his stick and slams it into Kynaston’s belly. Lights change. Kynaston is beaten by the ruffians in slow motion as the ladies watch, fanning themselves with their fans. As the beating goes on, Charles II enters with a few pieces of paper. He speaks out front as if to an audience of politicians.)
CHARLES II. Ministers of the Privy Council! I present to Parliament an Edict which I wish to have passed, put down in law and posted throughout the effected areas post-haste. (Kynaston continues to be beaten. Pepys enters with his diary.)
PEPS. “December 10, 1661. To the theater this afternoon to see again The Moor of Venice, and found the theater closed, the play postponed. Apparently, Mr. Kynaston met with an accident in the park last night and is not recovered to play. So off to Covent Garden where I did see posted an edict newly issued from the King. A licensing law which states in binding language as does follow: “Whereas the women’s parts in plays have hitherto been acted by men in the habits of women, at which some have taken offense, we do permit and give leave for the time to come, that all women’s parts be acted by women. No He shall ere again upon an English stage play She.” (Lights narrow to Kynaston on the ground; then to a spot on Kynaston’s hand. It is bloody and clutches a handkerchief. It twitches in the light. Black out.)

End of Act One

ACT TWO

Scene 1

Pepys in front of the curtain.

PEPS. “To the theater to see a play ...” (Sound: Music underscores the following.) “... The King’s edict passed, Mr. Betterton has been forced to find his ladies elsewhere.” (Curtain rises. We see Betterton onstage with Maria. He holds a pillow. They are rehearsing.)
MORIA. “Talk you of killing?”
BETTERTON. “Ay, I do.”
MORIA. “O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!”
BETTERTON. “Down, strumpet!”
MORIA. “Kill me to-morrow; let me live tonight!”
BETTERTON. “Nay, if you strive —”
MORIA. “But while I say one prayer!”
BETTERTON. “It is too late!” (Betterton puts the pillow over Maria’s face.) Thunder, thunder, thunder. (Maria peers out from behind the pillow.)
MORIA. (Meek.) Better?
BETTERTON. (Wincs.) Let’s do it again. (They start off.)
MORIA. “Talk you of killing?”
BETTERTON. (Meaning it.) “Ay, I do.” (They have exited.)
PEPS. “Upon inquiry, am told Mr. Kynaston has not played these six weeks passed, his injuries still not having healed. And so to the Law Courts where the trial of the three ruffians who did batter Mr. K. takes place.” (Ruffians enter.) “But the ruffians’ reply to the court is ...”
RUFIANS. We thought he was Sir Charles Sedley.
PEPS. “… whose image Mr. K. had most undoubtedly imitated.” (Sedley enters in his dandy clothes.) “And as Mr. K. does not appear in court ... the ruffians go free.” (Ruffians exit, Sedley gives them each a coin.) “And so with the triumphant Sedley to the Royal Gallery, where his mistress, Mrs. Hughes, sits for the portraitist,
Lelly." (Margaret enters and poses. Lelly enters.) “Sir Charles has commissioned the painting in the hopes of making quite a stir. But the sitting is not going well.”

LELLY. Mrs. Hughes, if I am to paint the first actress on the English stage, I must paint her with tits exposed. How else prove to the public she is really a woman?

MARGARET. I want to be taken as a serious actress!

SEDLEY. Madam, before you can be taken seriously, you must put bums in seats! (Margaret fumes, then pulls down part of her dress to reveal one of her breasts.)

MARGARET. Paint quickly. It’s cold as — it’s cold. (Lelly backs away, in awe. He smacks his lips.)

PEPSY. “And thus is art made flesh.” (Margaret exits, as Lelly and Sedley follow.) “After which to Covent Garden to inquire if the Duke of Buckingham will join me at the theater …” (Villiers enters with Lady Meresvale and Miss Frayne. Villiers whispers into Lady Meresvale’s ear. She blushes.)

LADY MERESVALE. Ohhhh!

PEPSY. “ … but the Duke has of late abandoned painted backdrops for less dimensional pursuits.” (Villiers and Lady Meresvale exit in one direction.)

MISS FRAYNE. (Pouts.) Ohhh! (Miss Frayne exits in the other.)

PEPSY. “Afterwhich, to the Palace.” (Charles II enters.)

“ … where the King hosts a birthday celebration for himself.”

CHARLES II. Happy birthday to me. (The chariot of Dido descends. It’s garish and over-the-top. It carries Nell, in full regalia.)

PEPSY. “The hostess is Nell, whose talents have grown by such leaps and bounds she has decided to author her own birthday verse to the King.”

NELL. (Spoken.)

“To our Great Mars
From his Sweet Venus:
Here’s to the Crown
And here’s to His Penis.”

(Chariot, Nell, and Charles exit. The music is over.)

PEPSY. “And so at long last at the end of a full and busy day … to the coffee house to sitt and sort the wit and wisdom of the sun and moon just past.” (A coffee bar slides in. Pepys sits with his diary and sips coffee. A man enters. He wears a plain dark suit. He wears sunglasses and needs the cane with which he supports himself. It’s Kynaston.) Mr. K.? Tis I. Pepys. (Kynaston removes his sunglasses. His eyes are bruised and red.)

KYNASTON. Pepys. Hardly recognized you without your book.

PEPSY. And I you without your — well, you don’t look yourself.

Sit, sit.

KYNASTON. I mustn’t.

PEPSY. No, please.

KYNASTON. No, really.

PEPSY. I insist.

KYNASTON. (Firm.) Better I stand.

PEPSY. Of course. Bad for the back, eh? Should have realized.

You’re on the mend though?

KYNASTON. Every day.

PEPSY. Back on stage soon?

KYNASTON. Soon as they’ll let me.

PEPSY. Physicians, eh? What role will mark your return?

KYNASTON. What else but Desdemona?

PEPSY. (A beat.) … Ah. (Changes gears.) You know, Mr. K., the performance of yours I always liked best? Well, as much as I adored your Desdemona and your Juliet, I always loved best the “britches” parts. Rosalind, ‘tis instance. And not just because of the woman stuff, but also because of the man sections. Your performance of the man stuff seemed so right, so true, that I suppose I felt it was the most real in the play.

KYNASTON. You know why the man stuff seems real? Because I’m pretending. You see a man through the mirror of a woman through the mirror of a man; take one of those reflecting glasses away and it doesn’t work; the man only works because you see him in contrast to the woman he is; if you saw him without the her he lives inside, he wouldn’t seem a man at all.

PEPSY. (Blinks at that.) You have obviously thought longer on this question than I. Well. (Stands.) Must home to my wife. Pleasure to see you, Mr. K.

KYNASTON. Have you finished your coffee?

PEPSY. … er … yes. Would you … like to drink it?

KYNASTON. I’d like to clear it. (Pepys stares as Kynaston takes a white apron from his pocket and places it around his waist. He then leans over and takes the coffee cup.)

PEPSY. Ah. Thank you. (Beat — takes out a coin.) May I —?

KYNASTON. (Takes coin.) Thank you, sir. A pleasant evening, sir. Come again. (Kynaston limps off behind the bar with the coffee. Pepys stares another moment. Then he exits.)
Scene 2

A bare stage. Upstage center, Betterton enters, carrying the figure of a woman in his arms. He staggers downstage to the footlights. Betterton carries a life-size female doll, the kind made of horsehair and cotton. No features on the doll’s face. It wears a white shift. Betterton mounds a speech as he hoists the doll and kisses its face. Kynaston has remained onstage. He watches Betterton.

KYNASTON. Lear.
BETTERTON. (Starts, then turns to see him.) How’d you guess?
KYNASTON. (Indicates the doll.) Cordelia. You’re practicing your carry. (Comes over to the doll — lifts it.) Light.
BETTERTON. Lighter than you. Although the distribution of weight somehow makes it clumsier. (Betterton sets the doll down in a corner.)
KYNASTON. (Points at doll.) That work in performance?
BETTERTON. It’s for rehearsal. In performance I carry a real woman.
KYNASTON. And that is?
BETTERTON. Maria.
KYNASTON. (Taken aback.) … Any good?
BETTERTON. Surprisingly effective in her lack of affectation. Only trouble is the last scene. I’m hovering over her body, moaning. “Never, never, never,” and she’s trying to stitch up my hem. Once a seamstress … Why’d you want to see me?
KYNASTON. (Smiles.) Pick me up, see how light I am. (A bit of doggerel.)
“Carry me to the chamber,
Fling me on the bed,
Lament my tragic death,
Put a pillow’ pon my head.”
BETTERTON. Can’t. Crow’ll close me if I do. ’Sides, the company’s full-up. You weren’t the only actor cut loose by the Law. Town’s full of your sort now, begging for crumbs. Doing Hamlet next week, forty-seven men auditioned for Osric, the Courtier. Jimmy Noakes got the part. I said, “Jimmy, you played concubines

and queens, why go out for Osric? He says, “Darling, he’s the closest thing.” How the mighty are fallen. I’m being unkind … on purpose. You cost me the palace’s support. You stopped my theater seeing actresses the day the King’s mistress came to audition. That edict was Nell Gwynn’s revenge upon us all. I struggle now. I grovel to the King and Miss Gwynn at every chance. Slowly, ice melt by ice melt, they soften. Take you back would freeze me out again. (Beat.) Did you try Killigrew?
KYNASTON. Killigrew employs Peg Hughes, whom, if I saw, I would be duty bound to strangle. Tommy? Is she any good as an actress?
BETTERTON. ( Shrugs.) She’s a star. She did what she did first. And you did what you did last. (Betterton scoops up the doll and exits.)

Scene 3

The Turkish baths. Steam. Sound of hissing. A marble bench comes downstage center. A coat tree with hooks for towels and a lavish robe is set next to it. Villiers, a towel around his waist, is seated on the bench … He’s sweating. He throws his head back. He closes his eyes. Kynaston has remained onstage. He turns upstage to see Villiers. Villiers senses him and looks up.

VILLIARS. Good God. You’ll poach in that.
KYNASTON. (Chilly.) Would your grace like me to disrobe?
VILLIARS. (Looks around.) Quiet! This isn’t the place.
KYNASTON. I thought you hated heat and steam.
VILLIARS. I am purifying myself. I want to purge all evils from my pores.
KYNASTON. That include me? (A man enters. He’s the bath club bouncer.)
BOUNCER. Sir, are you a member of the club?
VILLIARS. (A glance at Kynaston.) … He’s my guest of the moment.
BOUNCER. Yes, Your Grace. (Bouncer eyes Kynaston and leaves.)
VILLIARS. (A muffled whisper.) Any more of that I’ll have you taken bodily!
KYNASTON. Not the first time. (Moves closer.) Why didn’t you
come to my rooms when you heard I'd been attacked?
VILLIARS. (Swallows.) I knew you wouldn't WANT me to see
what they'd done to you.
KYNASTON. (After a beat.) Why didn't you write?
VILLIARS. (Looks away.) Ned, I've never been a word-type. Letters
are dangerous. They live on long after their passions have died.
KYNASTON. They're dangerous only if they're secrets.
VILLIARS. I'd call us a secret, wouldn't you? There were begin-
ing to be whispers, gossip. The jokes you made in front of the
King, that matinee of The Silent Lady when Sedley's boys attacked
you. "His Duke's Rank Arse!"
KYNASTON. And for that you blame me? Not Sedley?
VILLIARS. I expect Sedley to be vile and stupid. But Sedley's not
going anywhere. He's more a fixture now than ever. (Smiles.) He's
decided to write plays.
KYNASTON. (On old footing.) You're joking.
VILLIARS. (Lips like Sedley.) For his woman. (Pause. They're closer.)
KYNASTON. "What shall I do to win my lord again?" (Kynaston
reaches out to touch him.)
VILLIARS. I'm getting married. (This stops Kynaston. He stares at
Villiars.) It's this Saturday. King's coming. Dryden's composed a
sonnet for Peg Hughes to speak. My fiancee is quite a charming
thing, really: pretty, rich, surprisingly literate —
KYNASTON. And a woman. What's she like in bed? What's she
like to kiss? Does she wear a golden flow as you die in her? Or don't
you know?
VILLIARS. (Explodes.) I DON'T WANT YOU! (Calms.) Not as
you are now.
KYNASTON. What do you mean?
VILLIARS. When I did "spend time" with you ... I saw you as a
woman. When we were in bed, it was always yours being on stage; I
always thought, here I am in a play, inside Desdemona, Cleopatra,
poor Ophelia. You're none of them now. And I can't divorce the
thought of THEM from what I felt for YOU. I don't know who
you are now. I doubt you do.
KYNASTON. I know I'm not twisting my life to fit the way
things have become!
VILLIARS. Neither am I! My — (The bouncer strolls through, eyeing
them. Public voice.)... My current position on this subject is the logos-
cal conclusion of the events as they have occurred. (The bouncer
exits.) Change your life, Neddy, change what you DO. What we do
is what we are. Take that away and what are we?
KYNASTON.
"Though he do shade me off,
Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much,
And his unkindness may defeat my life,
But never taint my love."
(As he speaks, Kynaston kisses his fingers and lightly lays them on
Villiars' cheek. Villiars and the bench and hook go off.)

Scene 4

The stage at the palace. Music plays off. Kynaston has remained
onstage. Out of the shadows comes the figure of a large woman.
We don't see her face. Kynaston approaches.

KYNASTON. Madam, beg pardon, I'm looking for Miss Nell
Gwynn — (The large woman turns. It's Charles II, dressed as a queen.
Heavy make-up.)
CHARLES. (Casually.) You won't find her here.
KYNASTON. (Shocked, bows.) ... Majesty?
CHARLES II. King or Queen? Guess quickly!
KYNASTON. Sire —
CHARLES II. Right first time! Do forgive, but we're about to per-
form one of our palace musicals. (Hyde enters.)
HYDE. Majesty? The guests?
CHARLES II. Hyde, we'll need another seat for Mr. — I'm sorry,
what is your name? You look familiar.
KYNASTON. Your Majesty, I am Edward Kynaston.
CHARLES II. Kynaston! Mr. Hyde, see our guests are waiting.
HYDE. Yes, Your Majesty. (Hyde exits.)
CHARLES II. How in hell did you get in here?
KYNASTON. A former fellow actor is Your Majesty's undercook
and has long been dear a friend to me.
CHARLES II. Ah. Well, then, we'll have to execute him. Joke, joke.
Calm down. It's the Restoration. No more chop-chop. What you
want with Nell? She doesn't like seeing anyone before she goes on.
Don't know why you think she'd see you. Nell doesn't like you much.
KYNASTON. Majesty, when she came to audition, my bile was aimed at another. I did not even see Miss Gwynn —
CHARLES II. Kynaston. I'm sure you could straighten all this out, but... it's just not important to me.
KYNASTON. (Explodes.) IT IS TO ME! (A high peal of female laughter off. Charles turns to Kynaston. Kynaston and Charles lock eyes as the guests enter. Sedley, Margaret, Lady Merevals and Miss Frayne enter, chattering away.)
ALL. (Ad-lib.) Here, what's the hold-up! — We've been waiting out there for —! (They all stop when they notice Kynaston and the King in their stare-off. Nell pokes her head in from the wings, dressed as Charles II in male garb. She has a mustache.)
NELL. Charlie, we're at places! What's holding up the —? (Stops herself.)
CHARLES II (Cold, hard.) Say what you want.
KYNASTON. I want to act.
CHARLES II. Then act.
KYNASTON. I want to act as I did before.
CHARLES II. You mean the girl parts.
KYNASTON. If you will.
CHARLES II. I won't. You're talking about the Law. My Law. Twenty years ago, it was illegal for a woman to act onstage ... in public. But in the palace ... women galore! Private musicals, masques, no one gave a damn! Except the clerics. One minister, Mr. Pryne, wrote a pamphlet against all actresses as lewd women and whores. My mother acted in some of those court masques. She felt Mr. Pryne's diatribe was directed at her. So Mr. Pryne was tried, convicted, and sentenced to the stocks where his feet were burned, his ears lopped off, and his tongue cut out. Still, Mr. Pryne never recanted. Some say his stoicism in the face of such “excess” is what fanned the flames of the Puritan revolt. And so off with my father's head, and I to Holland for twenty years. Exile is a dreadful thing for one who knows where is his rightful place. (Beat.) I changed the law because it was time for a change: balance the scales, give the girls a chance. If the public rebels, they'll clamor for your return. I shall listen for that clamor, and when that clamor comes, the bells will ring your repeal. But I haven't heard a tinkle yet. Besides, it's a sop to the Church. The priests always preached against boys playing women, said it lead to effeminacy and sodomy. Well, they're priests, they'd know. So we say, "There! See? New Law. No more boys in dresses! Just girls flashing tits! Happy now?"

KYNASTON. Sire. You're wearing a dress.
CHARLES II. (Pretending to notice.) Oop. The Emperor has new clothes. Act a man, Kynaston. How hard could it be?
KYNASTON. It's not a question of acting a man; I can act a man; there's no artistry in that. But there are things I can be as a woman I cannot be as a man!
CHARLES II. Such as?
MARGARET. A star. (All look at Margaret. Nell smiles.)
NELL. Oh, I think Mr. Kynaston would be a star in any guise. You say there is no artistry in acting a man. Well, then, show us. Let's give Mr. Kynaston the chance to shine as he once gave us.
KYNASTON. (Not sure what she means.) ... Miss Gwynn?
NELL. Play a man for us. Show us how well you can act a man ... and perhaps we'll change our minds as to whether you can play a woman. Let's see you as ... Othello. (Kynaston looks at the assembled guests.) Take the stage. Please. (Kynaston positions himself. The others move across the stage from him. He inhales. He performs with elaborate, low voiced bravado.)
KYNASTON. "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. It is the cause —" (He freezes.) May I start again?
NELL. (All condescendingly.) Yes, of course.
KYNASTON. Thank you. (He starts again, with even more bravado.)
"It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow
And smooth as monumental alabaster:
Yet she must die —
Yet she must —"
(He looks lost.) I'm sorry. Might I — once more?
NELL. (Smiles.) Please.
KYNASTON. I'll ... skip ahead a bit. (He starts to lighten his voice. It becomes airy and tremulous.)
"Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
O, balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! Once more, once more ..."
(Kynaston is shaking now. He begins to weep.) I'm sorry, if I could give it one more go — (Nell stands, she averts her eyes.)
NELL. I think we've seen enough.
SEDLEY. (Sneers.) Very “delicate” performance.
CHARLES II. (Clears throat, stands.) Well now! Show to do. (Goes up to Kynaston.) Kynaston! My astronomers tell me that a star's
light shines on long after it has died, even though it doesn't know it. I believe you know your way out. Go as you came. (Turns to Nell.) Places, sir?
NELL. (A pained smile.) Places, madam. (Charles II and Nell go off backstage. Miss Frayne and Lady Meresvale giggle as Kynaston slowly exits. Margaret watches Kynaston's exit. It looks as if she might cry.)
SEDLEY. Peggers?
MARGARET. I'm not staying for the performance.
SEDLEY. It is a Royal Command!
MARGARET. Then stay without me.
SEDLEY. But they desire the feminine!
MARGARET. Sir Charles, you bring with you enough femininity to choke a drain! (Sedley marches off, furious and embarrassed. Margaret looks off where Kynaston exited ... but he is gone.) Oh, Mr. Kynaston ... where in the world will you go?

Scene 5

PEPYS. June 17, 1662. To the theater to see ... well ... one has so many choices. There's Mrs. Conley in Romeo and Juliet ... Mrs. Bracegirdle in Twelfth Night ... Mrs. Barry in Hamlet ... and of course, Mrs. Hughes ... Mrs. Hughes as Cordelia in Lear. (Margaret enters, in a ragged costume, with a rope around her neck. She has just come offstage to desultory applause. She is angry.)
MARGARET. Half full house today at best!
PEPYS. Well ... summer, you know.
MARGARET. Will you be here for the second performance?
PEPYS. I fear not, Mrs. Hughes.
MARGARET. Going off to see one of my rivals?
PEPYS. Mrs. Hughes, you have no rivals.
MARGARET. Who is it, Mrs. Barry?
PEPYS. ... Mrs. Barry, indeed, yes.
MARGARET. I hear she's quite a good Juliet.
PEPYS. And a good Ophelia too! Not that your Ophelia isn't a splendid effort, of course ... regardless what the papers said and the
Scene 6

The stage of the Cockpit Tavern. Offstage applause. A tatty stage, with orange curtains rolled up. Tiny footlights flicker up. A woman enters onto tiny stage in front of the curtain. She is a hellish M.C. with wild white hair and a eye-patch. She carries a large stick with a suggestive crown at its top. We shall call her Mistress Revels. She bangs the stick for attention.

MISTRESS REVELS. (Crude cockney.) AUDIENCE! AUDIENCE! Give me silence now for we needs ears to hear and eyes to see, throats to laugh and hands to clap, for the Cockpit Tavern now presents for the fourth time this night that very special Dark Lady of the Sonnets, that Cock-Sure Madam, that Ballsy Bawd, that compleat female stage beauty ... Miss Kissy Anytongue! (Mistress Revels bangs her stick. Applause and whoops from her drunken audience. The curtain parts and Kynaston enters. Kynaston is dressed in a garish gown, huge red wig, white make-up, smeared rouge and lipstick, huge beauty mark. He stands unsteadily. Mistress Revels takes his hand and steadies him. She gives him a “watch yourself, boy-o” look, steps down off the stage and watches from the shadows. Music up. Kynaston clears his throat and begins to sing “No Balls At All.”)

KYNASTON.

“Oh, mother! Oh, mother! Oh, what shall I do?
I’ve married a man who’s unable to screw.
My troubles are many, my pleasures are small,
For I’ve married a man who has no balls at all!”

KYNASTON AND DRUNKS.

No balls at all; no balls at all;
She married a man who had no balls at all!
(When the song is over, there is applause and cat calls. Mistress revels re-mounts the stage. Kynaston stares out, weavering a bit.)

MISTRESS REVELS. Ere now, that was top-hole! And speaking of HOLES — it is my understanding, havin’ circled the room, as twere, that there are some of you gents — and maybe even some ladies out there — what think our little pretty one ere may not actually be what we call a real, live fish. (Laughter from crowd.) Missy dear ... Raise the curtain, will you, please? (Drum roll. Kynaston takes his hands and slowly begins to inch up his dress. Crowd makes a “wuuuur” sound as the dress goes up and up. Finally, it’s high enough to reveal a dark triangle of hair. We realize Kynaston is wearing a Merkin over his crotch. There are cheers from the house. A woman’s voice is heard off.)

WOMAN. (Off.) Stop it! STOP IT! (Mistress Revels turns to look out front. Kynaston squints to see who it is. Crowds silences. Out of the shadows comes a woman in a dark cloak and cowl. She comes onto the stage. She pulls back the cowl. It’s Maria.)

MISTRESS REVELS (Sneers.) What you want, Trout? MARIA. I want the lady. (The drunk stagers to his feet.)

MISTRESS REVELS. After we’ve finished.
MARIA. I’ll pay for him. (Holds up pounch.) Five pounds. (Crowd sound: “Oooou.” Mistress Revels puts out her hand for the pounch. Maria drops the pounch on the stage. It lands with a clink. Mistress Revels fumes, but she leans over to pick up the pounch. She straightens up and quickly looks inside. Maria goes to Kynaston and takes the stick. She hands it to Mistress Revels. Mistress Revels takes the stick and holds it tight.)

MISTRESS REVELS. Right then, get the fuck off my stage! (Maria takes Kynaston’s hand and leads him down off the stage. As they make their exit, more “boo’s” and hisses and whistles. Mistress Revels calls:) One more time! (Leads audience.)

No balls at all; no balls at all;
She married a man who had no balls at all!
(Mistress Revels storms off through the curtains.)
Scene 7

A bedchamber at an inn. A simple cot-like bed comes in. A bed table next to it with a wash bowl and cloth. Maria enters with Kynaston. His red wig is gone. He wears a long cape. His make-up is still on. She sets him down on the edge of the bed. He stares out, dull-eyed. Maria lights a candle and puts it on the bedside table. She removes her cloak. She is wearing the Desdemona dress we saw at the top of Act Two. From the table she takes the bowl and cloths.

MARIA. You can stay here for a week. I paid the innkeeper that far. I couldn’t take you home. My father wouldn’t allow it. Have you eaten?

KYNASTON. (Dazed rasp.) ... No.

MARIA. We’ll get food and drink. No spirits. Have you slept?

KYNASTON. (Coughs.) ... Don’t know.

MARIA. Get this off you. (She begins to remove Kynaston’s make-up.) Took a lot to find you. Landlady said you’d gone weeks ago. No address. Didn’t know where to look. Wasn’t til I saw a fly-bill for that ... character you were performing.

KYNASTON. Perfectly legal. You saw the evidence betwixt me legs.

MARIA. That went in the sewer ditch first thing.

KYNASTON. (A wisp of smile.) You’re so ... fastidious. (Maria stops washing his face. She looks at him a beat. Then she slaps him hard. He recovers. She goes back to washing his face.)

MARIA. If I was fastidious, I wouldn’t be here with you. I wouldn’t act on the stage. I’d be stitching chastity belts for convent girls. You stink of gin.

KYNASTON. I cook with it. I clean with it. I wash my teeth with it. (Looks at her.) Why are you doing this?

MARIA. What, removing the grime and filth from you? ’Cause I won’t let you dirty the sheets. (Maria removes the cape. Kynaston is naked but for an undergarment. There are lots of scars and bruises from his attack. Touches his chest.) Hurt when I touch this?

KYNASTON. I don’t feel ANYTHING when you touch whatever you’re touching. (Maria goes back to washing him. Kynaston comes back to life a bit, still woozy, but articulate.) So you live with your father, eh? Must be a strict sort. I mean, if he won’t let you bring home gin-soaked bum boys who wear false twats, he mustn’t be very open minded.

MARIA. My father was an actor, before Cromwell. He’s retired from the stage. Binds books now. He would welcome you, gin and all, but he’d give you the stable, and I think you need a dry room for a good few nights.

KYNASTON. Your father sounds like heaven. Maybe I should marry him. I said I’d never wed an actor, but a book-binder I could manage. What’s his name?

MARIA. George.

KYNASTON. Oh, I’ve had a George. No fun. They marry duchesses at the earliest convenience. Betterton told me you were a good actress. Said you had an “effective lack of affectation.” The great sin of all actors: alliteration. We treat every sentence as a test of our diction. Clicking away, teeth and lips and tongues. Good practice for all sorts of things, theater-related and not. (Wincs.) That’s starting to hurt a bit.

MARIA. (Wipes more gently.) Sorry. (Moves from the bed, her back to him.) I shall stay here with you tonight. (Kynaston looks at Maria. She wrings out the cloth into the bowl.)

KYNASTON. You want to make sure I don’t run off? (Maria stands with the bowl and cloth. She turns to him.)

MARIA. ... No. (They look at each other.)

KYNASTON. I have never slept with a woman. Except myself. (Maria sets down the bowl and cloth. She takes off her Desdemona gown. She wears a shift, like the doll Betterton used. She sits next to Kynaston on the bed.)

MARIA. Tell me what men do.

KYNASTON. With women?

MARIA. With men.

KYNASTON. They ... we ... Well, it depends. With men and women, there’s a “man,” and there’s a “woman.” Well ... sometimes, on occasion, it’s the same with men and men.

MARIA. Were you the man or the woman? (Kynaston gives her a look.) That means?

KYNASTON. Would you like me to show you? (Maria nods. Kynaston rises. He indicates that Maria stand. She does. Kynaston lies down on the bed, face down. He looks up at her. He indicates that she “mount” him from behind.) Right, in the saddle. (Tentatively, Maria
does so. She "rides" his haunches.)

MARIA. I see. And am I the man now or the woman?

KYNASTON. You're the man.

MARIA. And you're the woman.

KYNASTON. Yes.

MARIA. Isn't much to do.

KYNASTON. Not with what we're given.

MARIA. What's it like the other way? (Kynaston indicates that Maria hops off. She does. Kynaston indicates that she lies down, face forward. Maria does so. Then Kynaston comes behind her and lies gently on top of her.) So ... who am I now?

KYNASTON. You're the woman.

MARIA. And you're — ?

KYNASTON. I'm the man. Or so I assume. I've never been up here before. Quite a view.

MARIA. But I'm the man-woman.

KYNASTON. Yes, you're the man-woman. Or the woman-man. It works both ways. (Maria turns over so that she is now on her back looking up at Kynaston above her.)

MARIA. And what am I now?

KYNASTON. The woman.

MARIA. Still?

KYNASTON. Yes. (Maria puts one leg around his back and slowly, slowly revolvs him until he's lying with his back on the bed and she is above him.)

MARIA. And now what am I?

KYNASTON. The woman. (Maria puts her arms around him.)

MARIA. And now?

KYNASTON. The woman.

MARIA. And you are —

KYNASTON. The man. (Maria rises and pulls Kynaston up so that he's kneeling on the bed, facing her.)

MARIA. And now? Who are you now?

KYNASTON. I don't know. (Silence. Maria comes forward to kiss Kynaston on his cheek, where the bruises and scars are.)

MARIA. (Kissing.) Can you feel that?

KYNASTON. No.

MARIA. (Kissing.) That?

KYNASTON. (Closes eyes.) No.

MARIA. (Kissing.) That?

KYNASTON. (Eyes closed.) ... Yes. It hurts ... (Maria stops kissing him. She puts her arms around his torso. She looks up at him. He looks at her. He may kiss her. Finally.) Wait. Before we do ... Tell me something.

MARIA. (Eyes closed.) Anything.

KYNASTON. How do you die?

MARIA. Die?

KYNASTON. As Desdemona. How do you die? (Maria opens her eyes and stares at him. Then she pulls her shift back up. She sits on the side of the bed, away from him. She starts to cry.) I'm sorry, I should not have asked, I — I'm — I really shouldn't —

MARIA. (Bitter, through tears.) I fight him!

KYNASTON. Excuse me?

MARIA. I fight him off, I fight for my life! I won't let him kill me! But he still kills me! I always hated you as Desdemona! You never fought! You just died "beautifully"! No woman would die like that, no matter how much she loved him! A woman would fight! She'd fight and leave her love, if that were it! Only a man would act it any other way! (Maria gathers her things, her cloak, etc. And rushes to the door. She stops, her hand on the knob. She does not turn to Kynaston.) You can stay here the week. I've paid. (She exits. Door slam. The candle near the bed goes out. Lights go out.)

Scene 8

The same room. Gray daylight. Kynaston asleep in the bedclothes. A loud knocking off. Male voice:

VOICE. Edward Kynaston! Edward Kynaston within! (Kynaston stirs. The door swings open violently. Kynaston sits up. A thug enters, all in black. He looks very threatening.)

THUG. Kynaston. Get up. Put clothes on.

KYNASTON. (Dazed, scared.) ... I ... don't have my clothes. (Thug takes off his own black cape and tosses it at Kynaston.)

THUG. Put this round. (Kynaston wraps the cape around himself. The thug turns and calls out through the door.) He's clad. Decent as will. (Nell Guynn enters. She is dressed in expensive but subdued travel clothes. She gives the thug a baleful glance.)

NELL. Shit, wouldn't want to see him without the drapery. Scorch
my fuckin' eyes.
KYNASTON. (Squints.) Miss Gwynn?
NELL. Innkeeper says you've been up here best of a week. Where'd you get money for that, I wonder, especially as you look such a rat tail. Wait outside. *(Thug exits.)*
KYNASTON. What do you want?
NELL. *(Looks down.)* ... To apologize. For what I did to you at the palace. I was warranted in my anger but had no right to vent it in that way. You blocked my way, Ned. You stopped me from seeing Mr. Betterton.
KYNASTON. My refusal was not aimed at you but at the Hughes. NELL. That supposed to make me feel better? "Oh, I wasn't out to ruin YOUR life, it was some OTHER woman." Peg's my friend.
KYNASTON. No professional jealousy?
NELL. We play different kinds of parts. She's the tragic type. Me, I do comedies.
KYNASTON. And she's no rival for the King's affections?
NELL. *(Looks away.)* ... Not she. Charlie's got a new tart. French, Catholic, too. Clerics've been protesting outside the palace all week. Other day, they stopped my carriage, thought I was her, I yelled: "You got the wrong coach! I'm the PROTESTANT whore!" Charlie's been decent though. Set me up a house, monies, lands, jewels. I'm still faithful to him.
KYNASTON. You mean, in your "way."
NELL. *(Hard.)* No. I'm faithful in the way the word faithful means. *(Beat.)* I'm gonna work for Mr. Betterton. Had offers from the others, but he's had rum luck and could use a boost.
KYNASTON. Why rum luck?
NELL. He lost his Desdemona, Maria whatzit. Up and quit the other day.
KYNASTON. What happened?
NELL. She said she'd ne'er assay the role again after some discussion she had with you about her "death scene." Problem is Betterton had scheduled *Othello* for tonight. Charlie's coming, everybody's in tow. The Crown wants to decide if it should patronize Mr. Betterton's theater again, so there's a lot riding. Then this Maria Nobody pops off, and Mr. B's without his Mrs. O.
KYNASTON. What about you?
NELL. Please. Who wants to see a FUNNY Desdemona? He got Peg, "The Hughes."
KYNASTON. I thought she worked for Killigrew.
NELL. He fired her.
KYNASTON. Why?
NELL. She's no good. I say this as a friend.
KYNASTON. But she was a star ...
NELL. Look. I was an orange girl. I sold fruit. Some fruit people paid dear for! Why? 'Cause they was rare. When Peg hit the stage she was rare. Now: We've got fruit all over town! Mrs. Orange, Mrs. Peach, bloody Mrs. Pomegranate! Peg's like the first soldier over the barricades: a big cheer and then ... bang! She's a mess now. When she heard the King and all were coming tonight, she refused to go on. But Sedley has put money in Betterton's theater now. He insists it is Peg or none. So there's no option.
KYNASTON. *(Suspicious.)* What do you want?
NELL. Help her.
KYNASTON. "Help...?"
NELL. If you took her in hand ... and taught her some tricks, some turns ... I think she could get the courage to go on!
KYNASTON. *(Disbelief, it's laughable.)* No!
NELL. There's money in my purse.
KYNASTON. NO!!! Teach the woman who drove me from the stage to help the man who fired me from his theater to entertain the King who outlawed me from life!!!
NELL. You ever see her onstage?
KYNASTON. No.
NELL. You should have.
KYNASTON. Why, what's she like?
NELL. You. She does you. Every inflection, every bat of the eye. Bits of business, vocal tricks. Like an engraving.
KYNASTON. Then she shouldn't be half bad.
NELL. It don't work. I do mimicry, Ned. I can mimic anyone. Woman, man. I did Charlie so well once, I almost got the Spanish ambassador to think England wanted to give Scotland to Portugal. I can mimic the Queen herself ... but it don't "fit."
KYNASTON. We are not always what we do.
NELL. Say that. I could be made Countess of Cleveland, I'm still a bejeweled fish. *(Pause.)* Most of the play she'd be fine. It's the end what's bad. When she dies.
KYNASTON. The murder.
NELL. She's only played it once. That first time. Never since.
KYNASTON. What about the night you and the King were going to go —
SEDLEY. Well, then, what shall we do? Cancel the performance?
BETTERTON. Cancel the play because one of the actors is no
good? Start doing that, there won't be a show left on the planet!
(Nell enters. Betterton and Sedley turn to see her.)
NELL. Gentlemen, I have procured Peg a tutor. (Kynaston enters.
A beat as they all stop and stare at each other.)
BETTERTON. (A weak smile.) Ned.
KYNASTON. (Wary.) Tommy, Sedley.
SEDLEY. (Harrumphing.) Some rules of engagement, Kynaston —
KYNASTON. (Cuts him off.) First rule: You're out. Off the stage.
SEDLEY. (Protesting.) Betterton — !
BETTERTON. Best work in private, Sir Charles. We've less than
half an hour.
SEDLEY. (Fumes.) We shall execute, Kynaston, but mark our his-
tory and my property. You are assisting MY Desdemona, as all the
city know. Don't try anything funny — give her a funny voice
or a funny walk, a squint. I'll notice. And I won't like it! (Sedley huffs
and exits.)
BETTERTON. Neddy, I can't thank you e —
KYNASTON. Then don't.
BETTERTON. ... I've tried everything with her, every trick. The
girl's a wash-out. If you can just make her passable. What do you
need? Wine? Some cheese?
KYNASTON. A share.
BETTERTON. ... I would say, "What?" but you will say —
KYNASTON. "A share."
BETTERTON. How big?
KYNASTON. Five. Partner?
BETTERTON. Thief! Shall I bring her in?
KYNASTON. (Nods.) Would you be a dear?
BETTERTON. At once, Mr. Kynaston ... (Sotto voce.) ... you
arrogant bung-house shit. (Betterton exits.)
NELL. I'd best go, too. See you after! (Nell exits. Kynaston puts
on the cloak. He looks at the bed. He adjusts the sheets.
He pulls up the white pillow. Maria enters. He turns to see her.)
KYNASTON. (Surprised.) I thought you'd quit.
MARIA. (Cool.) I quit the role of Desdemona. I play Emilia now.
My father advised the long view: "Desdemones shine 'twixt
the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, but Emilias go on forever." Still
doing the seamstress work.
KYNASTON. That's not my pillow.

Scene 9

The stage at Duke's Theater. The bed is set. Betterton and
Sedley pace before it. Betterton wears his Othello cloak.
Sedley's outfit is outrageous as always. Sedley stops and snaps
his fingers. He's got an idea.

SEDLEY. Perhaps —
BETTERTON. (Turns.) What.
SEDLEY. What if she played it as a no-dialogue part? No voice?
BETTERTON. Meaning?
SEDLEY. (Making it up as he goes.)
"More poignant for her silenced flute,
This evening's Desdemona's mute!"
BETTERTON. (Stares at this idiot.) Oh, lord ... and I'm produc-
ing your first play.
MARIA. Different one. It's for Mrs. Hughes.

KYNASTON. (Takes it.) Yes, mine was red. And you sewed pearls in it, as I recall ... although from the seats you couldn't see them.

MARIA. (Sofiens.) The pearls were for you.

KYNASTON. I am sorry about the night in the inn. I had been trying to act a man, but hadn't found the role.

MARIA. We are never suited for the roles we most desire. (Gives him a hard look.) Why'd you come back to do this?

KYNASTON. (Jaunty and theatrical.) "The stage beckoned and I picked up my cud." (Terse.) Work to be done. I'm told men live for their work. And I have lived for this chance.

MARIA. To do what?

KYNASTON. (Mysterious.) ... You shall see. (Margaret enters. She wears a sparkling Desdemona gown. Kynaston turns to see her. He tosses down the pillow.)

MARGARET. (Cool.) Mr. Kynaston.

KYNASTON. (Cool.) Mrs. Hughes. Welcome to my bedchamber.

(Margaret looks at Maria. Maria exits.)

MARGARET. I am given to understand you intend — (Kynaston starts to move, all business.)

KYNASTON. Let's get to work, shall we? (Re: gown.) You wearing that tonight?

MARGARET. ... Yes.

KYNASTON. Lose it.

MARGARET. Sir Charles designed this costume especially.

KYNASTON. It looks it. Strip down to your shift.

MARGARET. Strip — ! Here now, if you think you can teach me how to be a woman — !

KYNASTON. I'm not teaching you how to be a WOMAN! I'm teaching you how to be DESDEMONA!

MARGARET. I DON'T WANT TO BE DESDEMONA!!! I DON'T WANT TO ACT EVER AGAIN!!! (Starts off, weeping.) I am done with the stage — !

KYNASTON. (Grabbing her.) NO! YOU CLAIMED THE ROLE. NOW HOLD ONTO IT TIL THEY PRY YOUR FINGERS FROM ITS NECK! MORE THAN THE ROLE, YOU HOLD THIS THEATER IN YOUR HAND! SO STAND STILL, DRY YOUR EYES, AND STRIP! (Margaret shimmies out of her gown.)

KYNASTON. Muss the hair before the scene. Not like that. That's puffing to make it look attractive when it's merely arranged. Roll on a sheet, make it real. Flat on one side would be good. And no

 blush on your cheeks. No lip paint. White checks, pale lips. Blood drains down at sleep, not up to the face.

MARGARET. I know you consider this "your" part —

KYNASTON. No. It's your part. And frankly, it's not that "good" a part. Most of Shakespeare's women aren't very good parts, except the crazy ones. Couple of scenes, then off they go. Even their death scenes aren't very good. No great speeches for the girls. What's Desdemona's last line. "Farewell." What's that?

MARGARET. YOU played that line with a whisper and a cough.

KYNASTON. Shit with sugar on it. The way Betterton does the last scene, there are 32 lines, cutting 17. You start on the bed. Go. (Margaret drapes herself on the bed.) Not like that. That's like me.

MARGARET. (Sits up.) Well, then, how should I do it?

KYNASTON. How do you get into BED? C'mon, woman, how'd you get this PART? (Margaret fumes. She flops down on the bed and pulls the duvet over her.) It's Cyprus in summer. (Margaret flings off the duvet. She flips over on her back.) Is that how you sleep?

MARGARET. (Sits up again.) How am I supposed to know how I sleep? I'm SLEEPING while I sleep!

KYNASTON. What do your lovers tell you? (Beat. Margaret turns over on her stomach and curls up in a fetal position.) Good, curled up in ball, spread over both sides of the bed. Sounds right to me. Right! First line!

MARGARET. (Sits up.) "Who's there? Othello?"

KYNASTON. Why's she say that? "Who's there? Othello?" She think it's not really him? No. She knows it's him, she's just not AWAKE yet.

MARGARET. Yes, I see.

KYNASTON. So lie back down. Stay down for four lines. She won't really be awake until she says: "Alas, my lord, what may you mean by that?" Onward.

MARGARET. (Lies down; sleep sound.) "Will you come to bed, my lord?"

KYNASTON. "Have you pray'd tonight, Desdemona?"

MARGARET. (Yawns.) "Ay, my lord."

KYNASTON.

"If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight."

MARGARET. (Sits up; alert.) "Alas, my lord, what may you mean
by that?"
Send for the man and ask him."

Kynaston: "Yes. I'll send for him."... "Send for the man!"... "Send for the man!"

Margaret: "I'm lost."

Kynaston: "You think I plucked Cassio out of nowhere? If you think I was going to poison the Moor's mind with a fitful lover, I've had more sense than that."

Kynaston: "But she doesn't say his name!"

Margaret: "Ah, has he?"

Kynaston: "Yes."

Margaret: "But I haven't seen him."

Kynaston: "No."

Margaret: "Why?"

Kynaston: "Because everyone always does them slow. Very deliberate. Very stately. "O, look at him. He's advancing on her!"

Kynaston: "They don't act with what isn't there! The man's been fevered for three days. I heard him. Then he told me you were coming!"

Margaret: "And now he's come to your bedroom. Woke you up and told you to pray before you die!"

Kynaston: "So what's the line?"

Margaret: "Kynaston does not know."

Kynaston: "And I mean that!"

Margaret: "Yes."

Kynaston: "Well, no."

Kynaston: "Aye."

Margaret: "Good."

Kynaston: "Keep going."

Margaret: "Othello, wise."

Kynaston: "Yes."

Margaret: "Yes."

Kynaston: "That death is unprofitable."

Margaret: "Aye, and then it is advancing on me."

Kynaston: "Peace and be still!"

Kynaston: "Are you seeing me moving?"

Kynaston: "Yes."

Kynaston: "And I mean that!"

Kynaston: "That death is unprofitable."

Margaret: "(Bellow.) PEACE AND BE STILL! (Margaret almost falls.)"

Kynaston: "I will so. What's the matter?"

Kynaston: "That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee!"

Margaret: "No, by my life and soul."

Kynaston: "Had all his heart been lives, my great revenge."

Margaret: "I would not kill thy unprepared spirit."

Kynaston: "I would not kill thy unprepared spirit."

Margaret: "But I'll be thundered there."

Kynaston: "No."

Margaret: "Another! How can you say things like "While I say one prayer?"

Kynaston: "You're not in charge of this part of the scene."

Margaret: "Because everyone always does them slow. Very deliberate. Very stately. "O, look at him. He's advancing on her!"

Kynaston: "They don't act with what isn't there! The man's been fevered for three days. I heard him. Then he told me you were coming!"

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Margaret: "Yes."

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Margaret: "Aye, and then it is advancing on me."

Kynaston: "Peace and be still!"

Kynaston: "Are you seeing me moving?"

Kynaston: "Yes."

Kynaston: "And I mean that!"

Kynaston: "That death is unprofitable."

Margaret: "(Bellow.) PEACE AND BE STILL! (Margaret almost falls.)"

Kynaston: "I will so. What's the matter?"

Kynaston: "That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee!"

Margaret: "No, by my life and soul."

Kynaston: "Had all his heart been lives, my great revenge.
MARGARET. (Faster) "Alas, he is betray'd, and I undone!"
KYNASTON. (Faster still) "Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?"
MARGARET. (Tripping over lines.) "O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!"
KYNASTON. (Overlaps.) "Down, strumpet!"
MARGARET. (Falls back on bed.) "Kill me to-morrow; let me live tonight!"
KYNASTON. "Nay, if you strive —"
MARGARET. (Overlaps "If you strive.") "But half an hour!"
KYNASTON. "Being done, there is no pause."
MARGARET. (On her knees.) "But while I say one prayer!
KYNASTON. (Grabs up pillow.) "It is too late."
MARGARET. (Screams.) AHHHH! (They freeze in a pose, he above her, her hands in front of her to protect her.)
KYNASTON. And there'll be thunder there as well. (Kynaston tosses down the pillow. Sound: noise of audience entering off.) See what comes out of a rehearsal?
MARGARET. I had planned to scream anyway.
KYNASTON. Good for you.
MARGARET. Now do it.
KYNASTON. What.
MARGARET. Throw me on the bed. Kill me.
KYNASTON. No.
MARGARET. We start the play in fifteen minutes. We've got to finish this off.
KYNASTON. Save something for the moment. Always do something different than you planned. Good to throw yourself off a bit. Recall what we've done to this point in the scene. Then when you die ... surprise me. Tommy!
MARGARET. But how do I know Mr. Betterton will do as you have done?
KYNASTON. You don't. Because he won't. (Betterton and Sedley enter.)
BETTERTON. All ready to go?
KYNASTON. Yes. I'm playing the Moor.
BETTERTON. Pardon?
KYNASTON. Mrs. Hughes insists. (Pause. Betterton and Sedley turn to her.)
BETTERTON. Mrs. Hughes —
MARGARET. I do.
SEDLEY. Does he even know the part?
BETTERTON. (Glovers at Kynaston.) Oh, yes. He knows it.
SEDLEY. This is an outrage!
KYNASTON. Wait'll you see us do Macbeth!
BETTERTON. (Staggering back.) AHHH! (Betterton rushes off.)
KYNASTON. Now, quickly, someone get me boot black.
MARGARET. Boot black?
KYNASTON. Othello's still a moor, yes?
SEDLEY. I have boot black!
KYNASTON. With you?
SEDLEY. A scuff, sir, is a dreadful thing. (Hands it over.)
KYNASTON. Sedley, you are useful after all. Now, clear off!
SEDLEY. Yes, yes, the stage, sir, is yours! (Sedley exits.)
MARGARET. Mr. Kynaston. My thanks.
KYNASTON. It's not a good role, Desdemona. Go for Lavinia. Or Cleopatra.
MARGARET. Why they?
KYNASTON. Because when Lavinia loses her rongue and hands ... she still must assert herself.
MARGARET. And Cleopatra?
KYNASTON. She kills herself with the sting of an asp. A snake to her breast, that men had kissed and a child would suckle. "Those who do die, Do never recover." (Kynaston holds the pillow and fixes her with a dead stare.) I blame you for my death.
MARGARET. What's that from?
KYNASTON. Nothing. (Beat.) See you onstage. (Margaret exits. Kynaston begins to dress and make up as Othello.)

"It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar the whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light.
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore."
(Loud thunder. Lights change.)
Scene 10

Lights come back up almost immediately. Onstage at the Duke's Theater. A large bed with flowing curtains. No other furniture. Figure lies on the bed. Kynaston enters. Another rumble of thunder. The scene is played as they rehearsed it.

MARGARET. "Who's there? Othello?"
KYNASTON. "Ay, Desdemona."
MARGARET. "Will you come to bed, my lord?"
KYNASTON. "Have you pray'd tonight, Desdemona?"
MARGARET. "Ay, my lord."
KYNASTON.
"If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight."
MARGARET. "Alas, my lord, what may you mean by that?"
KYNASTON.
"Well, do it, and be brief; I will walk by:
I would not kill thy unprepared spirit;
No; heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul."
(Thunder. Margaret rises.)
MARGARET. "Talk you of killing?"
KYNASTON. "Ay, I do."
MARGARET. "Then heaven have mercy on me."
KYNASTON. "Think on thy sins."
MARGARET. "They are loves I bear to you."
KYNASTON. "Ay, and for that thou diest."
MARGARET. "That death's unnatural that kills for loving!"
KYNASTON. "Peace and be still!
MARGARET. "I will so. What's the matter?"
KYNASTON.
"That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee
Thou gavest to Cassio."
MARGARET.
"No, by my life and soul!
Send for C ... the man and ask him."

KYNASTON.
"His mouth is stopped.
Honest Iago hath ta'en order for 't."
(Rumble of thunder.)
MARGARET. "O, my fear interprets! What he is dead?"
KYNASTON.
"Had all his hairs been lives, my great revenge
Had stomach for them all."
MARGARET. "Alas, he is betray'd, and I undone!"
KYNASTON. "Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?"
MARGARET. "O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!"
KYNASTON. "Down, strumpet!"
MARGARET. "Kill me to-morrow; let me live tonight!"
KYNASTON. "Nay, if you strive, — "
MARGARET. "But half an hour!"
KYNASTON. "Being done, there is no pause."
MARGARET. "But while I say one prayer!"
KYNASTON. "It is too late."
MARGARET. AHHHHH! (Wild thunder during what follows next: Kynaston grabs up the pillow and stabs down at Margaret a beat. Then Kynaston thrusts Margaret on the bed and smother her. She struggles. He is pressing hard. She starts to rail arms and legs. He won't let up. She screams from underneath the pillow. Knocking at door. Kynaston and Margaret struggle. She claws at his face. She slaps his arms. She slides from under him and collapses on the floor, choking. To the audience.) HELP! HELP ME! HE'S KILL —! (Kynaston lunges at her and smother her on the floor, not the bed. "OHHH!" from the crowd. Beat. Knocks off.)
MARI. (Off.) "My lord, my lord! What ho! My lord, my lord!"
KYNASTON. (Still smothering.)
"What noise is this? Not dead? Not quite yet dead?
I that am cruel am yet merciful;
I would not have thee linger in thy pain:
So, so."
(Maria dressed as Emilia, enters.)
MARI. "My lord — " (Kynaston stares off. A glassy stare. Maria leans down to the floor. She listens at Margaret's heart. Kynaston stands above, looking lost. Maria looks back up at Kynaston, her eyes wide. Maria stands and looks offstage and opens her mouth to speak. Then Margaret's hand moves.)
MARGARET. (Weak voiced.) "O, falsely, falsely murdered."
MARI. (Surprised.)
Scene 11

Backstage after the show. Kynaston, Margaret, and Maria have not moved. Suddenly the stage is filled with people. Pepys, Sedley, Betterton, and Nell are the first in from stage right. Margaret sits up as they rush in, their words practically falling over each other.

PEPYS. Huzzahs, Mrs. Hughes! Amazing!
SEDLEY. My dear, I knew you could do it!
BETTERTON. Fantastic, madam, top to bottom!
NELL. When Ned came at you like that, I almost got up there meself and kicked ’im in the nuts! (Margaret is all smiles and about to speak when suddenly king Charles II, Villiars, Lady Meresdale, and Miss Frayne enter from stage left.)
CHARLES II. Mrs. Hughes.
MARGARET. Majesty…?
CHARLES II. Brava, madam, good show, thrills and chills, all the way around.
MARGARET. Thank you, Your Majesty!
CHARLES II. Very different, Betterton. That new ending was very real. Almost too much so. But restorative somehow. Well, that’s tragedy for you: Awe and terror and yet we still go to dinner. (To the women.) Ladies? (Charles II, Lady Meresdale, and Miss Frayne turn and exit off left. Nell turns away, hurt by Charles II. Villiars remains a beat and looks at Kynaston.)
VILLIARS. Bravo. (Villiars exits. Sedley becomes the expansive host.)
SEDLEY. Well, then! Dinner indeed! Chesterfield’s? My treat!
PEPYS. I’ll take you up on that!
SEDLEY. (To Nell) Miss Gwynn, lost in thought?
NELL. Just thinking what I’d give to see Ned play Rosalind again. But not now. Now Rosalind’s MY PART! (Nell exits with Pepys and Sedley.)
BETTERTON. You know … doing As You Like It next week … could use a good Jacques.
KYNASTON. Possibly.
BETTERTON. You’ll know best what suits. Well! Rehearsal in the morning! Chance to get it right again, eh? (Betterton exits. Margaret
VILLIARS.
    And errant dukes.
KYNASTON.
    What does it matter,
    What he lost?
    That world was gone,
    And Tempest toss'd.
    He found himself upon a shore
    Where he could act
    And asked no more.

PEPYS. "To the theater to see the actor Kynaston. He had good
fortune to appear in many guises, and by the end was surely
the handsomest man in the house." (Kynaston still holds
the pillow from the murder scene. He brings it up to his face. He breathes in its scent.
He closes his eyes and smiles. He exhales. Lights fade.)

End of Play
PROPERTY LIST

Diary, pen (PEPYS)
Red pillow (BETTERTON, MARIA, MARGARET, KYNASTON)
Wig (KYNASTON, VILLIARS)
Makeup removing kit (BETTERTON, KYNASTON)
Letter (MARIA, KYNASTON)
Gold stick with red silk tassel, yellow gloves (SEDLEY)
Lantern (MARIA)
Flyer (VILLIARS)
Gold helmet, gold sword and shield (NELL)
Glove (KYNASTON)
Burlap bags of excrement (AUDIENCE)
Cloth (MARIA)
Handkerchief (KYNASTON)
Letter (MARIA, KYNASTON)
State papers (CHARLES II)
Cudgels, sticks (RUFFIANS)
Fans (LADIES)
Coffee (PEPYS, KYNASTON)
Cane, sunglasses, white apron (KYNASTON)
Life-size doll (BETTERTON)
Rope (MARGARET)
Suggestive stick (MISTRESS REVELS)
Merkin (KYNASTON)
Pouch with coins (MARIA)
Candle, match, bowl, cloths, water (MARIA)
White pillow (MARGARET, KYNASTON)

SOUND EFFECTS

3 knocks of a cane
Stage thunder
Applause
Laughter
Cheers
Whistle
Seven bells
Drum roll
Knock on door
Music
Steam hissing
Sound of audience entering
Cheers and feet stomping
COMPLEAT FEMALE STAGE BEAUTY
by Jeffrey Hatcher

9M, 5W (doubling)

In 1661 the most famous portrayer of female roles on the London stage was a performer named “Kynaston.” Like every other player permitted to enact such roles, Kynaston was a man. A celebrity artist shining bright at the crest of the Restoration, Ned or Mr. K, as he’s called, is applauded onstage and off for his interpretations of Shakespeare’s tragic ladies: Ophelia, Cleopatra, especially his Desdemona and his famous “death scene.” He’s the toast of the town and the very secret “mistress” of the powerful Duke of Buckingham. But when an unknown named Margaret Hughes plays Desdemona one night at an illegal theater, instead of stopping the show, the ever-game King Charles II changes the law to allow women to act. By the stroke of a pen, Kynaston’s world is turned upside-down. He loses his cachet, his livelihood, his lover and his sense of self. And as such women as the king’s own courtesan, Nell Gwynn, and Kynaston’s former dresser, Maria, become stars, his own light disappears until fate and his desire for revenge give him a chance to take the stage again.

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