

August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*

Adapted by Rachel Connor in collaboration with Deja Vu

Ensemble

Scene 1.

A street in Manchester's Northern Quarter

As the audience approach, the Advocate is waving a wine bottle around, drunk, shouting obscenities at them. A car pulls up and Aggie is ejected. She is disorientated, falls onto the pavement and remains unmoving. The car drives off.

Advocate (*going to help her*): Where the fuck did you come from?

Aggie: I followed the lightning flash. I swear, one minute I'm in a field full of tents. And then I'm - it was like, like riding on a cloud. And the cloud started to fall and I fell with it. But where -

Advocate: You're in the Northern Quarter.

Aggie: God. I thought I'd left the second world and entered the third. It felt like I'd gone past the morning star. It's a long fucking way. And now I'm in this place and it's just - earth. I didn't think it'd be so gloomy.

Advocate: Earth. Ha. Did you know it's the densest and heaviest of the spheres that roam in space?

Aggie: Doesn't the sun ever come out? Wait. Over there. There's a gap in the clouds now.

Hey. Did you hear that, those noises?

Advocate: Can't hear fuck all.

Aggie (*pointing to the café*): Who lives there?

Advocate: Why don't you go and find out?

Aggie: It sounds like a – listen to that. Complaints. Can you hear what they're talking about? Suffering. Prison. Oh now there's...cries of joy, and shots and boomings. I can see – lightning flashes. And bells ringing. Fires lit and thousands of voices. They're singing praise. To heaven.

Advocate: Go on then, go. And when you come back, let me know if they've got anything to really complain about.

Aggie: The cloud's falling, the air's growing close. I feel like I'm - choking. It's all just – smoke and water. Dragging me down. I'm so heavy. But I can see it all now.

Distressed, Aggie runs to the café door, snatches it open and runs inside. The Advocate shrugs his shoulders and looks at the audience.

Advocate: Come on, then.

Scene 2.

A set of steps leading to a corridor

The Glazier is at the bottom of the steps, taping a line across the floor with a roll of duct tape. Through this scene, Aggie moves slowly down the steps to reach the Glazier.

Aggie: This place has changed since I was last here.

Glazier: It's been watered and manured.

Aggie: What're you talking about?

Glazier: If you look carefully, you'll see.

Aggie and the Glazier go down the stairs, moving towards the café foyer.

Scene 3.

A corridor

The Officer is sitting in a bath, his top half naked, his bottom half covered in books and sheets of paper. Classical music is playing in the background. The Officer seems confused, a little distressed. He has a pen in his hand and is trying to snap it.

Aggie: Please don't (*she takes the pen from him*).

Officer: Why won't you let me?

Aggie: You'll break it.

(*To the Glazier*) You can go now. I know what to do now. We'll meet later.

(*To the Officer*) You're a prisoner. I've come to set you free.

Officer: What took you so long?

Aggie: But you have to want it. Do you want it?

Officer: It's so hard, sitting here. But if I'm free then I suffer even more. At least it's safe here. If I could see you every day, I'd stay.

Aggie: What do you see?

Officer: I see you. You're a - child of God.

Aggie: So are you.

Officer: I can't get past this block.

Aggie: You're a writer. It's your duty to find the light. Let me help you. *(she hands him words on pieces of paper shaped like fish)*. Why don't you start with this one?

Officer: Can you read it to me?

Aggie: You have to read it for yourself. Here's another one. Go on, try. Why don't you write them down?

The Officer reads the words and transcribes them. He does this slowly and with patience, but he is still despairing.

Aggie: I get it. Life's a bastard. Is that how you feel?

Officer: Life hasn't been fair to me.

Aggie: Fair?

Music is heard from inside the main part of the café, on the other side of the door. Aggie goes to the door and opens it, standing on the threshold and looking inside. She looks back at the Officer, then at the audience.

Aggie *(to the audience)*: Let's go in.

Scene 4.

A living room

The Mother sits at the table, sewing shirts by the light of a candle. Aggie stands to one side, watching her. After a few moments, the Officer enters, dressed in a dressing gown.

Officer *(running to Mother)*: Mum?

Mother: Alfred?

They embrace.

Officer: Mum. I can't believe it.

Mother: Don't be daft. Go and get some trousers on.

Officer exits and returns a few minutes later, shirtless but wearing trousers. The Officer sits watching her sew.

Mother: Alfred. Who's that girl with you?

Officer: It's Aggie.

Mother: Aggie? You know what they say about her, don't you? She's a daughter of the gods. Apparently she's come to earth to see what it's like to be a human being. Load of rubbish if you ask me. She can't be a goddess. She looks stoned.

Alfred. There's something I need to say to you, before I die.

Officer (*growing agitated*): Mum?

Mother: Don't keep thinking life has been cruel to you.

Officer: It has, though, hasn't it?

Mother: What, because you were wrongly punished? For stealing that coin that slipped down the back of the sofa.

Officer: It's coloured my whole life.

Mother: Go to the cupboard.

Officer: Oh. You know about -

Mother: Treasure Island.

Officer: Please. Don't.

Mother: You let your brother take the punishment for it. You tore it up and hid it.

Officer: I don't understand how that cupboard is still there. We've moved house since then. And it's ten years since you died.

Mother: You're always asking questions. It ruins everything.

(to Aggie): Here. You look like a nice girl. You can have my sewing kit.

Aggie: I can't take that.

Mother: It's no use to me any more.

Mother urges Aggie to take the sewing kit. Aggie relents, steps forward and accepts it.

Officer: You can't give her that.

Mother: Alfred, don't be so mean spirited.

What is it with life? Whenever you try to be kind to someone, you end up hurting someone else. I'm sick of it.

Mother snatches up the candle and exits.

Aggie: I feel sorry for them. It's hard, sometimes, isn't it? Life. Still, there's always love though.

(to the audience) Come and see.

Scene 5.

A courtyard garden, outside the stage door

The Stage Door Keeper sits by the door, knitting. She is wearing a tattered wedding dress. The Bill Poster is also there, sitting on a stepladder, fishing. There is a small green tree near the door and a flower in bloom.

Aggie: You're not still working on that scarf?

Stage Door Keeper: Twenty-six years isn't that long.

Aggie: He never came back, did he? Your lover.

SDK: He had to leave. He couldn't help it.

Aggie (*to Bill Poster*): Didn't she used to be a dancer here once?

Bill Poster: She was the star. But when he left - it's like he took her dance with him.

Aggie: Everyone's always complaining.

Bill Poster: I don't complain. Not now I've got my fishing rod. When I was a boy I used to dream about it. Now that I'm fifty four -

Aggie: Fifty years. For that?

Bill Poster: It's a green fishing rod.

Aggie (*to the Stage Door Keeper*): Give me the scarf, then I can sit and watch people. But you'll need to stand here and tell me who they are.

Aggie takes the scarf and sits down beside the door.

Stage Door Keeper: The show closes today. They'll find out if they're being kept on or not.

Aggie: What happens to those who aren't?

Stage Door Keeper: You'll see.

The Singer exits through the door, crying. She stops for a moment and leans her head against the wall, bereft, then runs out.

Aggie: Poor thing.

Stage Door Keeper: This one's happy, though. Look.

The Officer enters through the door in a top hat, carrying a bouquet of roses.

Stage Door Keeper: He's going to marry Victoria.

Officer (*downstage, singing*): Victoria!

Stage Door Keeper: She'll be here in a minute.

Officer: Everything's ready. The taxi's outside, the champagne's been chilled. Ladies, can I kiss you?

He kisses first Aggie then the Stage Door Keeper on the cheek.

Victoria!

I'll wait.

Aggie approaches the Officer

Aggie: Don't you know me?

Officer: I only know one woman. Victoria. I've been walking around here for seven years. See the floor? You can see where my feet have left a mark on the path. She'll be mine soon.

Victoria! [*he gets no response*]. She'll be getting dressed.

(*to the Bill Poster*) I see you've got a fishing rod. Everyone here's mad about fishing. Or fish, I should say. How much did that cost?

Bill Poster: It was pricey.

Officer (*singing*): Victoria!

He points to the tree.

Look- it's coming into leaf again. That's the eighth time now.

Victoria! She'll be doing her hair now.

(*to Aggie*) Please, let me go up and see my bride.

Stage Door Keeper: No one's allowed on to the stage.

Officer: Seven years I've been here, waiting. Seven times three hundred and sixty five is...two thousand five hundred and fifty five! (*Points at the door*) I've stared at that door two thousand five hundred and fifty five times, without discovering where it leads to. I don't know if there's anyone inside.

Stage Door Keeper: I don't know. I've never seen it opened.

Officer: Victoria! Tell me. She can't have - there's no other way out is there?

Stage Door Keeper:

It's getting dark quickly today.

Aggie:

A year's like a minute to the gods.

Stage Door Keeper:

But to humans a minute can feel like a year.

The Officer re-enters. He looks older. The roses he was holding have withered.

Officer:

Hasn't she come yet?

SDK:

No.

Officer:

She'll come. She'll come. But maybe I should cancel the lunch. Yes. I'll do that.

The Officer exits again.

Stage Door Keeper:

Can I have my scarf back now?

Aggie:

No, it's alright. I'll do your job for a bit. I want to learn about people. Life. To find out if it's as hard as they say.

Stage Door Keeper:

You can't fall asleep on the job, though. Day or night.

Aggie:

Not at night?

Stage Door Keeper:

Well, you can doze a bit. There are security guards on the stage and they change over every three hours.

Aggie:

Not sleep? That's inhuman.

Stage Door Keeper:

You might think so. But I'm glad of it. Other people envy me my job.

Aggie:

Are you kidding me?

Stage Door Keeper:

The worse thing isn't the long hours and the drudgery and the cold and the draughts and the damp. The worse thing is being everyone's confidante. They talk to me. Why? That scarf. It hides thirty years of sorrows. Mine. And others'.

Aggie: It's bloody uncomfortable. There's like a burning feeling.
Nettles or something.

Stage Door Keeper: When it gets too much give me a shout and I'll take over.

Aggie: If you can put up with it, I can.

Stage Door Keeper: We'll see about that. Be kind to them, won't you?

The Stage Door Keeper exits.

The Officer enters again. He has aged visibly, hair grey now. The flowers he holds are completely dead.

Officer: Summer's gone, autumn's round the corner. But autumn's like spring to me and then it'll be time for the theatre to open again. And then she'll come. *(To Aggie)* Do you mind if I sit down for a while?

Aggie: Sure. Sit. I can stand.

Officer *(sits)*: Things would be so much better if only I could sleep. This door. It doesn't give me any peace. What's behind it? There must be something. *(Music comes from behind it)* Ah! They've started rehearsing. *(A light flashes on and off)* That light. Light and dark.

Aggie: Day and night. It's like someone wants to make time go faster. To shorten your wait.

The Bill Poster enters

Officer: How was the fishing?

Bill Poster: Well. The rod was good, but not like I'd imagined.

Officer: 'Not like I'd imagined'. Is anything ever like we imagine? The anticipation is always better than the reality.

Bill Poster: Isn't she here yet?

Officer: She'll be here soon. Do you know what's behind that door?

Bill Poster: No. I've never seen it open.

Officer: Maybe I should go and get a locksmith?

Officer exits.

Aggie: What was wrong with your fishing rod?

Bill Poster: There wasn't anything wrong with it. It just wasn't like I imagined.

Aggie: What did you imagine?

Bill Poster: It's hard to say. I didn't enjoy it like I thought I would.

Aggie: That's a shame. Tell me more.

Bill Poster: Are you sure? Everyone comes to you with their worries. But if you could just listen for a few minutes.

Aggie: Happy to. Come on.

They sit, talking quietly to each other. The Officer enters. This time he is carrying only the stem of the flowers from the bouquet.

Officer: Do you know if Victoria has gone yet?

Bill Poster: Not yet, no.

Officer: Then I'll wait. She'll come soon, won't she?

Bill Poster: I'm sure she will.

Officer: The locksmith's on his way. Soon we'll be able to see what's behind this door.

The Glazier arrives.

Officer: Are you the locksmith?

Glazier: No, the locksmith's busy I'm afraid. But I can do it just as well.

Officer: Right. Do you have a diamond?

Glazier: Course I have! Who ever heard of a glazier without a diamond?

Officer: Come on then!

The Officer beckons to the audience.

Officer: Come on everyone, come and see. This is – what a momentous occasion this is. (*The Officer is overcome with emotion*). I can't quite -

Enter Policeman, armed, shouting

Policeman: Stop! You can't open this door.

Officer: Oh God. Why is it, whenever you try to do something big, something meaningful –

Well. I'm not going to stop there. We'll get legal advice. I'll find a lawyer.

Scene 6.

The Advocate's office

There are legal documents pinned to the walls. Aggie and the Officer approach the Advocate.

Advocate: Let me take that scarf. It looks fit for burning.

Aggie: No. I haven't finished it yet. I know it's rancid but everyone's sorrows are caught up in it, all the things that make them sad and miserable. And I want to gather yours up too. All the stories you've been told about crime and imprisonment and –

Advocate: Your scarf won't be big enough. Look. You can see all the pain pinned to the walls, can't you? All these stories. No one

is ever happy when they come here. See how black my hands are? That's all their malice, their grief. They spit it all over me. My clothes stink of other people's crimes.

I've just taken on a murder case. But do you know what's worse? Divorce. When you think about how they started off, full of love and hope and then you get pages and pages of accusations and complaints. They fell out about a green salad. They fell out about a single word. It's so trivial. But the pain. No wonder women don't look twice at me. Look! I've got all the grief of the city papered onto these walls.

Aggie: I'm sorry.

Advocate: So am I. I don't understand what people live on. They borrow. Of course we all have to borrow. They live from day to day and muddle through until they die. They're always in debt. Who'll pay in the end? Tell me that. *(To the Officer)* What do you want?

Officer: I just want to know if Victoria has left.

Advocate: Definitely not. Why are you pointing at my cupboard?

Officer: That door. It's just like –

Advocate: Oh no! No, no, no.

Bells start ringing.

Officer: Is there a funeral?

Advocate: No, it's a degree ceremony. I must go. I'm to be made Doctor of Laws. Do you want to come and be awarded a degree? Doctor of Philosophy, maybe?

Officer: Why not?

The Officer and the Advocate exit, out of view. There is the sound of cheering and applause in the background. After a moment, the two of them come back into view. The Advocate looks dejected.

Aggie goes to him and leads him by the hand while the Officer watches on. They sit close together and close to the audience.

Aggie: Didn't you get your degree?

Advocate: I wasn't good enough.

Aggie: Why? Because you do legal aid? Because you get people off, even if they're guilty?

Advocate: Don't criticise them. I'll always defend them.

Aggie: I don't get why they hurt each other.

Advocate: They don't know any better.

Aggie: We could make them better. You and me. Together.

Advocate: They don't want to be made better.

Aggie: You know what I see? In this mirror. The world is the right way round. Normally it's so - distorted.

Advocate: What made it like that?

Aggie: When the copy was made.

Advocate: I always thought it was wrong, that copy. The original is so much better. It's depressing, isn't it, when you think about it? None of us can see.

Aggie: Listen. Do you hear that?

Music comes from offstage.

Advocate: What can you hear?

Aggie: What can *you* hear?

Advocate: The rain.

Aggie: No. I think they're tears. What else?

Advocate: A lot of sighing.

Aggie: Life's fucking miserable.

Advocate: Love. That's the cause. It's the best and the worst of things.

Aggie: I'd like to try it.

Advocate: With me?

Aggie: Yes, with you. You know about all the hazards – the rocks and reefs. We'd never get shipwrecked.

Advocate: But I don't have any money.

Aggie: It doesn't matter. Not if we love each other.

Advocate: But I hate things that you might love.

Aggie: Then we'll have to compromise.

Advocate: What if we get sick of each other?

Aggie: We'll have a baby.

Advocate: You're sure you want me? Poor? Ugly. A failure?

Aggie: I do.

Advocate: Let's do it then.

They exit.

Scene 7.

A small room

When the audience enters, Aggie is cowering in the corner of the room with her hands over her ears. Kristen and the Advocate are sticking Post-Its, scribbled with phrases borrowed from popular love songs, to the walls and furniture.

Aggie: I can't breathe.

Kristen: I've got to paste them to keep the draughts out. There's only one little crack left now.

Advocate: That's right, Kristen. Draughts waste money.

Aggie: What are you pasting with?

Kristen: Love letters.

Aggie: God. It's like you're pasting my mouth shut.

Advocate: Is the baby asleep?

Aggie: Yes, at last.

Advocate: All that crying scares the clients away.

Aggie: What can we do about it?

Advocate: Nothing.

Aggie: We need to find a bigger place.

Advocate: We don't have any money.

Aggie: I have to open the window. It's stifling in here.

Advocate: Then the heat will escape and we'll freeze.

Aggie: It's horrible in here. Let me at least scrub the floor.

Advocate: You haven't the strength and neither have I. Kristen needs to paste the whole house tight, every crack in the ceiling, the floors, the walls.

Aggie: I expected poverty. But not dirt.

Advocate: Poverty's always dirty.

Aggie: All this. It's worse than I dreamed it would be.

Advocate: It's not so bad. At least we have enough to eat.

Aggie: Cabbage.

Advocate: There's nothing wrong with cabbage. It's healthy and cheap.

Aggie: I hate it.

Advocate: Why didn't you say so before?

Aggie: Because I loved you. I wanted to – make a sacrifice for you.

Advocate: Then I should give up cabbage for you. It has to be mutual.

Aggie: Then what will we eat? Fish? You hate fish.

Advocate: And it's expensive.

Aggie: See. It's so much harder than I thought.

Advocate: And the baby. He was supposed to bring us together, but he just makes things worse.

Aggie: I'm stuck in here with no view. The baby cries all the time so I can't sleep. All I can hear is the neighbours arguing through the wall. I feel like I'm dying!

Advocate: My poor flower. No light, no air.

Aggie: And you say there are people worse off than us?

Advocate: Some people envy me.

Aggie: I could put up with it if I could just have a few beautiful things around me.

Advocate: You mean flowers. But they're so expensive. We could buy kilos of potatoes for that.

Aggie: I'd go without food if I could only have flowers.

Advocate: There *is* a kind of beauty that doesn't cost anything.

Aggie: What?

Advocate: If I tell you, you'll be angry.

Aggie: We agreed we wouldn't get angry.

Advocate: We did agree. Everything will be all right, Aggie, as long as we don't speak to each other angrily.

Aggie: We won't do that. Come on, tell me. About the beauty.

Advocate: If the home is kept in an orderly way – if the chairs are straight, say, and the curtains aren't missing any hooks – well, there's a sort of beauty in that, isn't there? It doesn't cost anything.

Aggie: There's no need for that tone of voice.

Advocate: I didn't.

Aggie: You did. God. I could really hate you after this.

Advocate: No. Let's not hate each other. I promise not to mention your untidiness again. Even though it makes me unhappy.

Aggie: And I'll carry on eating cabbage. Even though that makes me unhappy.

Advocate: It's funny. What makes one happy tortures the other.

Aggie: Marriage is so hard.

Advocate: See?

Aggie: I just feel so – sorry for people. Look, why don't we try to make it work? We know what our problems are.

Advocate: Yes. We're intelligent people. We can manage it.

Aggie: We can just smile, can't we, when things don't go right?

Advocate: I saw something in the paper yesterday. Where is the paper, by the way?

Aggie: I'm sorry. I put it in the compost with the vegetable peelings.

Advocate: For God's sake!

Aggie: Remember. We agreed we can smile about things. There was an article in it. It upset me.

Advocate: Which I happened to think was interesting. No, it's fine. I'll smile. I'll smile 'til you see my teeth. I'll hide it when I'm annoyed and say yes to everything and be a hypocrite. So you've thrown my newspaper away. I see. *(He straightens a chair, angrily.)* Now I'm tidying things again and you'll be angry. This is impossible!

Aggie: I know.

Advocate: But we have to stay together. Because of the baby.

Aggie: Yes, for the baby. Oh! We need to stay together.

Advocate: I've got to get to work. All my clients, all desperate to stay out of prison.

Aggie: Poor people. And this pasting.

The Advocate goes to the door and starts playing nervously with the latch.

Aggie: Don't make the bolt squeak. It's like you're squeezing my heart.

Advocate *(continues)* Squeezing.

Aggie: Don't!

Advocate: Squeezing.

Aggie: Stop!

The Officer enters and adjusts the bolt.

Officer: Here, let me.

Advocate: Of course. You're a Doctor now, after all.

Officer: Yes! The world's my oyster. I could have fame, celebrity.

Advocate: But what will you live on?

Officer: Live on?

Advocate: You need a home, clothes. Food.

Officer: It always works out. If you find someone to love you.

Advocate: Maybe so. Kristen! Keep pasting. Paste 'til they can't breathe any more.

Advocate exits. Kristen continues pasting.

Kristin: 'Til they can't breathe!

Officer: Will you come away with me?

Aggie: Alright. But where?

Officer: The sea! It's always sunny there. And there's singing and dancing, and parties!

Aggie: Yes. I want to go there.

Officer: Come on then.

The Advocate comes back in.

Advocate: Look, hairpins all over the floor.

Officer: *He's* seen the hairpins too.

Advocate: See this one? Two prongs on the same pin. Two, but one. If I straighten it, it's one continuous pin. If I bend it, it's two but still one. What happens if I snap it? Now there are two. Two!

He throws the pieces away.

Officer: But you have to pull the prongs apart to break it. If they get closer, it holds.

Advocate: And if they are parallel they never meet.

Officer: Perfect. And impossible.

Advocate: Like a bolt that fastens when it's open. And when I shut this door, Aggie, I open a way out for you.

Advocate exits. The Officer looks at Aggie

Officer: Shall we go?

Scene 8.

A music hall

A musician plays a horn while the members of the audience take their seats. On stage is the Quarantine Master, dressed up as a faded cabaret star. She ushers the audience in.

Quarantine Master:

Come in darlings, take a seat – don't go on the sofas or your arse will spread...
(Improvised banter)

(Once audience seated, listening to trumpet) Good isn't it? Well I couldn't fucking do it, could you? No, well enjoy it then. *(After a while)* OK, wrap it up. We've had enough. Now, it's time for peanuts. Peanuts anyone?! Come on, it's a fucking cabaret, relax! Let your hair down – eat those at your own risk darling, they're out of date. Like everything else here, including me. And talking of me, time for a song. Play the music!

The Quarantine Master performs the first two verses of 'The Windmills of Your Mind'. In between the musical interludes, she continues to address the audience.

And then of course we'd have the band. But not anymore because the band are all bloody dead now. I mean it makes this bit cheaper, but a lot less interesting don't you think? Still, I'll try to describe it for you. We'd have a few scantily clad ladies

with tits milling around with peanuts, they weren't out of date then, and some plate spinners, fire breathers and other shit, and then into the spotlight would come – Matthew. Matthew was good – you can hear it can't you madam? Yes, he had good fingers and a rakish smile, and we enjoyed him in our way – but I'm afraid Matthew's problem was that he wasn't as good as the next man... And the next man was ANTON. Ah god, he was sexy – (*pointing at audience member*) look she knows it, look at her smirk! Oh yes, he had the kind of fingers that could keep you awake at night – and every lady in here couldn't take her eyes off him, we'd be watching him and getting wet at the thought, but I tried for him twice and guess what?! He was gay! Fucking prick-tease. So I booted him off and got ready for my finale...

As the music builds for the finale of the song, the Quarantine Master speaks the following words urgently.

And the ladies would run in with a giant hoop and the fire-breathers would light it, and I would get ready, take a breath and so help me I would launch myself right through the ring of fire!

The Quarantine Master throws a beanbag onto audience table, then belly-flops onto it from the stage.

And then I would crowd-surf across the audience for the rest of the number. They clapped, you didn't. Don't worry about it.

Officer (*to Aggie*):

I think we're in the wrong place.

QM: I'm sorry, I beg your bloody pardon, but I'm in the middle of a show here and (*yelling*) you've fucking walked right through it and stolen the limelight. (*Switch to hushed tone*) No, no, go ahead, please. How can I help you?

Officer: This is Fairhaven, right?

QM: No. Fairhaven is on the other side. This is Foulstrand.

Officer: This isn't like heaven at all. This is like hell.

QM: Bloody charming.

Officer: Who lives here?

QM: Sick people darling. Sick, filthy, disgusting people. If you want the healthy ones, you'd have to go over that way. But over here, we're sick.

Officer: So only poor people live here?

QM: POOR PEOPLE?! You walk right in here and spit in these people's faces? Have you got any idea who you're talking to darling? These are rich people! *(QM jumps off stage and prowls around the cabaret tables)* look at this man... And what about this woman...

The Quarantine Master engages in improvised banter, taking items of clothing, hair or glasses from individual audience members and making them into signs of wealth.

Look at this complexion – do you think this comes for free?! No darling, it takes caffeine and calories. You see, we've all drunk too much red wine, haven't we? We've all eaten too much rich food but I'm afraid it's got the better of us. The salt has shrivelled our skin, the fat has clogged our arteries and now we're all fit for the knacker's yard. Grief reaches us all in one way or another.

Officer: Grief, yes.

QM: Hang on a minute. That tone, that hat... Jesus Christ, you're from the fucking theatre aren't you?!

The Quarantine Master rushes towards him.

Well, you shouldn't be down here. You should be on the fucking stage. Have they got the door open yet? No wait, don't tell me. No-one in the theatre speaks with a normal voice. Stand up here, centre-stage, take your jacket, take your hat and take your god-given charisma and SHOW US. Perform it for us now...

I'll sit here and direct, darling.

The Quarantine Master sits nearby and throughout the next speech, improvises direction and critiques the actor's performance, directly referencing gestures and posture that appear in his body language and delivery. She uses this to artificially build the speech into an overly climactic finish.

Officer: We're still appealing. The Bill Poster is out with his fishing rod, so that's slowed down the evidence. And the Glazier has put in more windows, which means the café has doubled in height. It a good growing season. Plenty of rain. And hot too.

QM: It was good darling, but I'll tell you now. It's not as hot as here.

Officer: How hot are the furnaces here?

QM: A hundred and thirty degrees. Any less than that and we won't kill off the cholera.

Officer: There's cholera here?

QM: You didn't know?

Officer: Of course I know. But I sometimes forget what I know.

QM: Lucky boy. I wish I could forget. Especially myself. Then I wouldn't have to tit about with all the amateur dramatics.

Officer: What have you been up to?

QM (*turning on him*):

What do you think I've been up to? I am the Quarantine Master, the master of ceremonies, and this is Quarantine, which means all we do is just sit here, day after day, wasting away and waiting for something entertaining to happen. But the only thing that ever happens is THAT. (*She points to the Poet, who is on the edges of the audience*)

Officer: Who is that?

QM: A poet in need of a mud bath.

Officer: But to write, doesn't she need light and air?

QM: No darling, she lives up there... in the ether. So she craves mud. It hardens the skin against the sting of rejection. Watch – 'Oi! Your poems are SHIT!'

(The Poet shrugs and looks nonplussed)

QM: See? She doesn't care. It's the mud. Anyway, what am I doing standing passing the time with you? You're new to Quarantine. And don't think I haven't seen you either (*rounds on Aggie*). Which means you two need your initiation. First thing we need to do is raise the Quarantine flag! (*flashes her yellow knickers at them. Aggie grimaces*) I know it's not pleasant, but everyone has to pass through here. Everyone who is infected.

Aggie: But we haven't done anything wrong.

QM: You don't have to have done anything wrong darling. Life itself is toxic. Don't worry, you just have to stay forty days and forty nights. Think of yourself like Jesus. You see there are two rules of Quarantine. We fight the fatigue because it's the first sign of plague. And we wave our flags on command.

So here are your Quarantine flags (*gives them both yellow pants*). Get them on. Ooh (*to audience*) if he gets them on this quick, just think how fast he gets them off (*winks*).

(To audience) And don't think we're not going to join you. Everybody in Quarantine has a yellow flag too. So, that's right, get them out and when we hear the siren, I want every one of you to take your flags carefully in your hands, and go absolutely totally bloody bananas, do you understand? I don't care how you move, just move as much as you can. So, let's have a practise flash from you two newbies up here onstage. One, two, three. OK darlings, I think we're ready. And about time too because the siren goes off at the same time every day and I believe it will be sounding in three, two, one. NOW!

Cancan music plays

(To Officer and Aggie) That's it darling's, big flashes.. *(To audience, leaping off the stage and dancing among them)* Get up! Get up! That's it, I want to see you on your feet or so help me I'll drag you. That's right darling, lovely moves, yes, yes – THIS IS THE WAY TO GO!

The Quarantine Master exits

Enter The Schoolmaster. Aggie and the Officer hastily sit down.

Schoolmaster *(to the Officer)*: You boy! Tell me what is two times two?

Officer sits in his seat, searching for the answer

School Master: Stand up when you're spoken to!

Officer: Two times two? I think that's – twenty two.

School Master: You haven't done your homework, have you?

Officer: I have. But – I don't know why. I just can't say it.

School Master: Don't give me excuses! You know it but you can't say it! Shall I help you?

The School Master pulls the Officer's hair.

Officer: Stop! Don't!

School Master: A big boy like you. You've no ambition.

Officer: Yes, I am a big boy. Much bigger than they are. I'm a – Doctor – aren't I? A Doctor of Philosophy. Why am I sitting here with them?

School Master: You are. But you must grow up. You know that don't you?

Officer: That's right. I need to grow up. Two times two is – two. And I can prove that by analogy, the highest form of proof. One times one is one, so two times two must be two. What applies to one must apply to the other.

School Master: Your proof is logical. But the answer is wrong.

Officer: If it obeys the law of logic it can't be wrong. One into one goes once, so two into two goes twice.

School Master: Quite correct, according to your analogy. But then, how much is one times three?

Officer: Three.

School Master: Then two times three must also be three.

Officer: That can't be right. It can't. Unless – No. I'm not sophisticated enough yet.

School Master: Not by a long way.

Officer: How long do I have to sit here, then?

School Master: How long? Do you think time and space exist? Suppose time does exist. Then you should be able to say what time it is. What is time?

Officer: Time. (*He thinks*) I don't know. But I know it IS. So I can know how much two times two is without being able to explain why. Can you tell me what time is?

School Master: Of course.

Officer: Go on then.

School Master: Time? Let me see. (*He ponders*) While we talk, time flies. So time is something that flies while I talk. You're talking now, and while you talk I fly. So I am time. That's logical.

Officer: Then logic must be crazy. You can't actually BE time.

School Master: That's also logical. And correct.

Officer: Then logic is madness.

School Master: If logic is madness, then the world is mad. And why should I sit here teaching you insanities?

Officer: You can't teach, you old fool.

School Master: Don't be insolent.

Officer: I'm an Officer. An Officer! And I don't understand why I'm sitting here being told off like a schoolboy.

The Quarantine Master rushes in.

Quarantine Master: The quarantine's starting.

Officer: Oh, it's you. This man is making me learn my times tables, even though I've got a PhD.

QM: Well why don't you leave?

Officer: Leave? I can't do that.

SM: I should think not. Just you try!

Officer: Can't you save me?

QM: Come! Come and dance. We have to dance before the plague breaks out.

Cancan music reprises

QM (to audience): Come on! Wave your flags!

The Quarantine Master, Aggie and Officer exit, performing the cancan and waving the yellow quarantine flags.

Scene 9.

A beach

Aggie: This is more like it. Fairhaven. Look. It's like a festival. Everyone's partying all the time.

The Blind Man enters, led in by a guide

Officer: Look at this man. Everyone envies him. He owns all this, all the beaches, the forests, the woods and everything in it – the fish, the game, the birds. He's the landlord of all these people.

Aggie: Does he complain too?

Officer: Of course. He's blind.

Aggie: *He's* the one they want to be?

Officer: He's come to see off the ship. His son is on it.

Blind Man: I can't see, but I can hear. I hear how the anchor digs into the sea bed in the same way as you might draw the hook from a fish. My son, my only child, is going abroad. I can only be with him in my thoughts. I can hear the cable screech and there's something fluttering like wet clothes on a line. Handkerchiefs, maybe. I can hear sobs, people crying. Once I asked a child

why the sea was salt. Her father was a sailor and she said: 'The sea is salt because sailors cry so much'. I asked why they cry and she answered 'because they're always having to go away. That's why they dry their handkerchiefs up on the mast.' I asked her why people cry when they're sad. And she said: 'because their eyes have to be washed so they can see more clearly.'

Aggie (to Officer):

What does that flag mean?

Officer:

It means yes. That's the Captain's 'yes' in red, like blood drawn on the cloth of heaven.

Aggie:

What does 'no' look like then?

Officer:

Blue. Like blood in the veins.

Blind Man:

Meeting and parting, parting and meeting. That's life. I met his mother and she went away. I kept our son. Now he's leaving.

Aggie:

He'll come back though, surely?

Blind Man:

Who's that? I've heard that voice before. In my dreams, when I was young and the summer holidays had just started. And again, just after my son was born. Whenever life smiled on me, I heard that voice.

The Advocate enters, goes over to the Blind Man and whispers something.

Blind Man:

Oh. I see.

Advocate:

I told you. That's what she's like.

Advocate goes to Aggie.

Advocate (to Aggie):

You might have seen nearly everything there is to see. But you haven't experienced the worst thing yet.

Aggie:

What's that?

Advocate: Repetition. Being stuck in endless cycles. You need to go back and learn your lesson again. Come on.

Aggie: Where to?

Advocate: Back to your responsibilities.

Aggie: What responsibilities?

Advocate: Everything you used to hate. Cooking cabbage and cleaning a dirty house.

Aggie: I have to go back to it?

Advocate: Life is all about repetition. We're trapped in it. Look at the school teacher. Come on. Let's go home.

Aggie: I'd rather kill myself.

Advocate: You can't do that. That would be a mortal sin.

Aggie: I'm staying here. Compared to life with you, this is paradise. But I need to know what's behind the door. I want to see it opened!

Advocate: Then you have to retrace your steps, and go back the way you came.

Aggie (*to the Poet*): You. You can come with me. Come on!

Scene 10.

A balcony

Poet: Where have you brought me?

Aggie: Far from the madding crowd. To the edge of the world. This is where the gods listen to the complaints of humans.

Poet: All I can hear is the wind.

Aggie: It's saying we were blown down to earth to live in dirty streets and city smoke. The gods - they must see the earth isn't clean. People aren't good. They get by, surviving not living. You know what they say: that we're born from dust and to dust we must return? We weren't given wings to fly, we were given feet that attract dust.

Poet: That sounds familiar somehow.

Aggie: Sssh! Listen to the voices of the winds. They're saying they carry the complaints of humans. Do you hear us in the chimneys on autumn evenings, in the gaps in the window when the rain hammers on the roof? On winter nights in snowy forests? And in the gales at sea, in the sails and the rigging? It was human voices that taught us these sad sounds. In war zones and hospitals and especially wherever babies are delivered. The pain of being born.

Poet: I've heard that before somewhere.

Aggie: Sssh! Here's the voice of the waves. They're saying they rock the winds to sleep. Like tongues of fire, quenching, burning, cleansing. Rocking the winds to sleep. Look what the sea's washed up, the ships' remains. Can you see their names: *Justice. The Golden Peace. Hope.* And there's a life jacket. Do you think the Captain saved himself and let the crew drown?

Poet: *Justice.* That's the ship that sailed from Fairhaven. It had the blind man's son on it.

Aggie: The Blind Man? Fairhaven? I must have dreamed it. And the quarantine, and the degree ceremony, and the solicitor's office, the theatre. Victoria. The castle. Oh, the Officer. I dreamed all of it.

Poet: I wrote it.

Aggie: You wrote it? Then you know what poetry is.

Poet: I know what dreaming is. What's poetry?

Aggie: Not real. But bigger than reality. Like a waking dream.

Poet: People think us writers are just prating around the whole time.

Aggie: Probably just as well. Otherwise everyone would lie around and no one would have invented things we need. Like tools.

Poet: Easy for you to say. You came from nowhere.

Aggie: You're right. I've been here too long. Now I'm stuck in the mud like you are, like everyone. I'm not free to fly any more. I can't hear their voices any more. Help me, gods! I'm stuck here.

Poet: Are you leaving us soon?

Aggie: Once I've burned off the dust. It won't wash off in the sea. Why?

Poet: I've got a favour to ask you.

Aggie: What kind of favour?

Poet: I've got a – a petition. Written from human beings to the Creator of the World. Written by a dreamer.

Aggie: You want me to - ? Can you say it out loud?

Poet: Of course.

Aggie: Go on then.

Poet: It'd be better if you did it.

Aggie: All right. But how will I -?

Poet: Telepathy.

Aggie (reading aloud as though remembering the words):

Why does it hurt to give birth? Why do babies cry? Why do we complain when the dawn comes? Why doesn't life make us smile? The gift of life is meant to be joy itself.

Why are we born like animals when we're the children of gods? Our spirit is always hungry for something else. But I shouldn't go on. I shouldn't question our maker. No one's been able to solve the riddle of life.

Life. It's like a pilgrimage over sharp stones. Where the track is easiest, we're forbidden to follow it. When you pick a flower, it's already someone else's. If the road is blocked by a field and have to carry on, you trample on other people's crops. Then, to get even, people stamp on yours. Every joy you have makes someone else miserable, so grief follows grief until you die.

Poet: I don't know how to find the words. Will you find a way to say it?

Aggie: Okay. I'll try.

Poet: What's that over there? Can you see it floating?

Aggie: It doesn't look like a ship.

Poet: No. Actually, it's not. It's a café. With trees around it. And a tower – like a telephone tower, with wires reaching up so we can communicate with the gods.

Aggie: We've got prayers. We don't need wires.

Poet: No. It isn't a café, or a telephone tower. It's a -

Aggie: What?

Poet: I can see a field covered in snow, a training ground. There's a church on a hill and the sun is shining and there's a shadow on the ground from the spire. And now – solidiers. They're marching on the church, climbing the spire and – oh they've

reached the cross. Here's a cloud passing over. It's blotting everything out. Now. Now everything's gone.

Scene 11.

A courtyard garden, outside the stage door to the theatre

Aggie: Are they here yet?

Stage Door Keeper: The dignitaries? No.

Aggie: We need them. We're going to open the door.

Stage Door Keeper: So?

Aggie: It's important. Some people think it's the answer to the mystery of existence and the Universe. Go on. Go and round them up - the Judge, and the academics. And don't forget the glazier, too, with his diamond - otherwise we'll never open it.

Officer: Victoria!

Stage Door Keeper: She'll be down in a minute.

Officer: That's good. The taxi's waiting, the table is booked, the champagne is chilled. Can I kiss you, please? (*he kisses the Stage Door Keeper*). Victoria!

Poet: Do you get the feeling you've seen this before?

Aggie: Yeah.

Poet: Maybe I dreamt it?

Aggie: Maybe you wrote it?

Poet: Yeah, maybe I did write it.

Aggie: Then you know what poetry is.

Poet: I know what a dream is.

Aggie: Is this déjà vu?

Poet: You'll soon work out what's real.

Aggie: Or a dream.

Poet: Or poetry.

Enter the Judge and the expert witnesses - Deans of Theology, Philosophy, Science and Law.

Judge: We're here to decide on this question of the door. (*To the Dean of Theology*) You're the Dean of Theology. What do you think?

Dean of Theology: The door hides dangerous truths. Quite simply, it shouldn't be opened.

Dean of Science: Come now. Truth is never dangerous. Science is the proof of that.

Dean of Philosophy: Truth? What's truth? Philosophy asks that very question. It's not a science. It's the science of sciences. The knowing of knowledge.

Dean of Law: I put it to you that truth is something that can be proven beyond reasonable doubt. (*To the Judge*) What's your opinion, milord?

Judge: Opinion? I'm not appointed to have an opinion. I did have some once but they were refuted. Opinions always are. But truth - truth is irrelevant here. Perhaps we should open the door now, even if does hide dangerous truths?

Theology: I am the way the truth and the light.

Philosophy: I think therefore I am.

Law: Prove it! Prove it!

All: The door is open!

Judge: What's behind it?

Glazier steps forward and opens door, peers round it.

Glazier: I can't see anything.

Judge: Professors. What's behind the door?

Theology: Nothing. Nothing! That's it! That's the answer to the question of existence. In the beginning God created heaven and earth. From nothing.

Philosophy: Nothing will come of nothing.

Science: Look behind it! That's proof that there's nothing there. That's the end of it.

Law: You (*to Aggie*). You've betrayed us. This is a conspiracy to deceive. I demand a trial.

Judge: Tell us what your motive was for opening the door.

Aggie: If I told you, you wouldn't believe me.

All: She won't testify.

Judge: Sentence her, then.

Aggie: I *have* testified.

Judge: Listen, she's testifying.

Advocate (*takes Aggie's arm*): Have you forgotten your duties?

Aggie: God, no.

Advocate: And your baby?

Aggie: What baby?

Advocate: Your baby's crying for you. Don't you get it? A human being is suffering for you.

Aggie: I feel so torn. It hurts.

Advocate: That's how life is.

Poet: You're telling me. I fucked up everything just to follow my vocation. I dropped out. My father never got over it, he died bitter and miserable. Even though it was my truth, it upset everyone. I still feel that pain. It nags at me that I've done the wrong thing.

Aggie (*to the Poet*): Come with me.

Advocate: You can't. Your child!

Aggie: Goodbye.

Scene 12.

A corridor

Aggie and the Poet are sitting in the bath. The Poet makes notes in a notebook.

Aggie: It's time for me to leave. I'm going to just disappear into the ether. Death. That thing everyone's afraid of.

Poet: Fear of the unknown.

Aggie: But *you* know. Have you always had doubts?

Poet: Sometimes I've felt sure but then the certainty faded, like a dream you wake up from.

Aggie: It isn't easy being alive, is it?

Poet: You get it now, then?

Aggie: I think I do.

Poet: You still aren't going to tell me where you came from?

Aggie: You wouldn't believe me if I told you.

Poet: Try me.

Aggie: I came because I wanted to find something.

Poet: What?

Aggie goes to the Poet and whispers in his ear

Poet (*agreeing*): That's my dream, right there.

Aggie: I've suffered while I was here. I've felt your pain. I've felt everyone's. Now it's time to go. It's all ready – the altar, candles.

Poet: Tell me what you suffered.

Aggie: Words wouldn't do it justice. I think that's the worst thing about suffering.

Poet: Before you go - I'd like to know. What was the worst thing?

Aggie: Just - being alive. Not seeing things well enough, or hearing properly. My thoughts got in the way all the time. But now - I should get rid of all this dust on my feet.

The Stage Door Keeper enters and hands Aggie her scarf

Stage Door Keeper: Will you take my scarf with you?

The Officer enters and hands her the dead flowers.

Officer: And my roses. They're just thorns now.

The Bill Poster, Glazier, Advocate, School Master and Blind Man enter.

Bill Poster: You're not taking my fishing rod.

Glazier: My diamond that opened the door. Take that too. Good luck.

Advocate: The big case I'm working on.

School Master: You can take my lesson plans.

Blind Man: My hands have been my eyes.

Poet: When you die, isn't your whole life meant to flash past your eyes?

Aggie: It's not like I'm dying.

Poet: What then? You can't go back to how you were. Not after this.

Kristen enters with strips of paper.

Kristen: I'm pasting, I'm pasting 'til there's nothing left to paste.

Poet: You'd paste up the cracks in heaven if you could.

Kristen: Aren't there any windows in here for me to paste?

Poet: No.

Kristen: I'll go then.

Aggie: Goodbye. This is the end. Goodbye, my poet. You dreamer. You know how to live well, soaring through the sky then plunging into the mud and shaking it from your feet.

When it's time to go you feel – loss. Sadness at leaving and regret for what you've done and more for what you didn't do. You feel torn – you want to stay and you want to go.

Goodbye. Tell people I won't forget them. Where I'm going – I'll tell the gods what it is to be alive. Because I – I'm sorry.

Goodbye.

Aggie leaves