

THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH

from the story by Edgar Allen Poe

by

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15 Inglis Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3HU

THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH
(from the tale by Edgar Allan Poe)

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Prince Prospero

His Four Military Henchmen

His Two Horses

His Master of Ceremonies

His Castle Dwarf

His Eight Castle Guests

The Eight Peasants of the Village, *including:*

1. The begging Child
2. Its Mother, Mary
3. Its Father
4. Matthew
5. Michael, the Messenger
6. The Watch
7. The Corpse at the Funeral
8. Marietta, *who dances*

The Village Priest

The Red Death

The Monk-Guide

Five other Monks

The On-stage Tourist

Seven other Tourists of the first party

Seven different Tourists of the second party

Five Masquing Entertainers

Five Beggars by the door.

With a cast of 30, the parts should be doubled.

INTRODUCTION and PRODUCTION NOTES:

The Story:

Edgar Allen Poe's tale runs to only five sides or so and a great deal of it is taken up with moody, atmospheric description of a splendidly decadent medieval castle. All that he really establishes is a country over-run with a horrific red plague while its ruler Prince Prospero retreats with his cronies into the confines of his castle, which is furnished with all imaginable devices of pleasure and entertainment. At the end of the tale there is a masked ball at which there appears a mysterious, death-like figure who symbolises the Red Death and who destroys all those who have placed themselves in the seeming safety of the castle.

In turning this powerfully evocative but slight piece into a play, I have seized on it as a sort of moral fable, highlighting and making explicit a conclusion which Poe does not but which is there if you think about it.

It seems to **me** to suggest that if, when the world at large labours in suffering, those with the power and resources to help it turn their backs on it and simply look after number one, they create for themselves a short-lived fools' paradise, because the world which they choose to ignore will develop in one way or another and will eventually intrude on them, and probably in a mood of revenge for the help that was not given when it was needed. It seems to me a piece about compassion and charity rather than party politics, a fable about the wrongfulness and eventually the foolishness of supposing that those with health and wealth can isolate themselves from the sufferings of those who have not.

On top of that, it remains - I hope - a jolly good Gothic horror story with all the atmospheric trappings of a Grand Guignol film.

Actors and Audience:

The relationship of the audience to the action keeps changing. At the beginning, they are in effect tourists visiting the castle (now an abbey) where the Masque of the Red Death once took place. They are then drawn in as the audience at a play-within-a-play and from time to time they are addressed as guests at Prospero's banquets and balls. At the end of the play they are addressed direct as citizens of the modern world who might profitably reflect on the meaning of what they have witnessed and experienced.

There is no attempt at any kind of embarrassing "audience participation" of a practical kind (*other than one occasion on which they may, if they wish and if stage directions are followed, put on a simple card eye-mask which can be inserted in the programme*) but it is hoped that there will be **psychological** participation, and to this end it is suggested that as soon as they enter the foyer area of the place where the play is to be performed, they find themselves in the atmosphere of the abbey. This can be achieved in simple and unpretentious ways: the distant sound of plainchant, the passage through the foyer of an occasional monk, the entry through the foyer of some of the actors who represent the first party of tourists, and so forth.

What Is Not In The Script:

There are, I think, four places in the play where a director is going to have to look at the resources and skills of his cast and work out sequences for a particular and given production. It would be absurd for me to try to convey a detailed sense of what we did in the original production and then to insist that the same things be attempted anywhere else the play is done, but there are a few things to do with the mood and function of these sequences which it may be helpful to state: In Act One, Scene Two, Prospero is "auditioning" a troupe of performers to see whether they might be suitable as castle entertainers. The point here is to reflect his cruel and fleshly tastes: by showing the kind of entertainment he would like, much is conveyed about his character. What we did in Oundle was to take an old Egyptian folk-tale about jealousy and murder and present it as a stylised, mimed and masked music-drama which had a sense of the exotic and bizarre conveyed by its Egyptian trappings.

At the beginning of Act I Scene 4, we are at a party in Prospero's castle. Though we did not in fact do it in the original production, I think the best possible thing here would be a dance performed by the castle-guests. They are going to have to learn at least some simple dance for the later Red-Death-Masque in any case and since the castle-guests are in effect non-speaking roles, to include a dance at the beginning of Act I Scene 4 will increase their contribution to the performance. The dance should convey an atmosphere of luxury and pleasure-seeking.

In Act I Scene 4, a sequence of entertainments is presented to Prospero and his guests. His remark on them is as follows:-

"These acts are skilful, I grant you - but they are entertainments for a children's party! My friends and I have tastes for things more 'curious'."

This should give the guidance that is necessary to warrant the remark and to form here a sufficient dramatic contrast with the other castle-entertainment near the end of Act II. In Oundle, we used juggling, tumbling, acrobatics, mime and so forth, capitalising on a wide variety of skills which could be found or cultivated among our young performers. The fourth and last place where this kind of invention is required is in Act II, Scene 3, the actual scene of the Masque of the Red Death itself. In terms of dramatic build-up, there should ideally be two entertainments which precede the Masque and of a kind which Prospero will more wholly approve of - perhaps more along the lines of the Egyptian music-drama we began to see in Act I Scene 2.

In the Masque itself, Marietta must clearly be a good dancer since it is she who performs the "whirling dervish" routine which leads to the mass-slaughter. It will be ideal if the character of The Red Death can join her in this and certainly the animal-masked castle-guests must manage a few steps to lead them to their grisly ends.

Design:

The principal staging-requirement is an open space (with some sort of platform for the Monk-prompt and Tourist to sit on) which light and a few telling properties can turn into a number of different atmospheric environments. In circumstances where set design and construction is a fostered skill, something a little bit more ambitious might be attempted. In Oundle, we had an upstage colonnade of arches dressed with "stone" to suggest the abbey and through which characters could make interesting entrances and exits, together with - above the Monk's platform - a flat-wall containing a "stained glass window" through which lighting effects, such as a blood-red sunset during the Masque, could be projected.

Since the device is that we are watching a play about the Red Death performed in an abbey, the permanent presence of an "abbey" setting is not intrusive. Neither is it absolutely necessary. What **is** important is that light and properties (and costumes, of which more in a moment) create sharp contrasts in the play - a rather dull and depressing atmosphere for the majority of the Peasant-scenes and a splendid, rich atmosphere for the Castle-scenes. The colour red must be exclusively reserved for the figure of the Red Death himself and for Marietta in the Masque, though there are one or two places where red light may be very effective.

Costuming the play offers a nice variety of challenges: there will be modern costumes for the two parties of tourists and the beggars at the end, monks' habits, timeless "hessian-and-sackcloth" for the peasantry, splendid medieval gear for the aristocracy, special and perhaps extravagant wear for the castle entertainers and, of course, a particularly striking creation for the figure of the Red Death himself and for Marietta in the Masque. There may also be a number of interesting face-masks to hire or make. To spread the load we enlisted a lot of help from the actors' families.

Music and Sound:

Music and sound will play an important part in the atmosphere of the piece, bells and plain chant evoking the abbey, some sad little tunes evoking pathos and pity in the peasant scenes, a deliberately anachronistic song or tune pointing up the burning-alive, and so forth. There will also be music for the dances and probably for a number of the castle entertainments as well as the occasional scene-change-cover. In circumstances where there is a keen composer, it may be attractive to create a completely original score, but it is entirely possible to do the whole thing with "off-the-shelf" recorded music and sound, as we did in the original production. The only bits of "mixing" we had to do were in creating a sinister cacophony of charnel-house sounds to announce the entry of the Red Death and in editing to create a sufficiently weird electronic sequence for Marietta's dance.

One Last Point:

The notes I have given here recognise, I hope, that the fun of a school production like this is in getting together a large number of creative people - pupils and teachers alike - who can bring different skills and enthusiasms to the work. I hope that I have not appeared to place undue restrictions on those qualities - and if any future producer wants particular advice, I shall be happy to give it.

Paul Ward.

The play was first performed on Saturday 6th June 1987 in the Stahl Theatre, Oundle, with a cast of pupils from Oundle School.

The production was directed by the Author, with Melvyn Roffe and Jeremy Firth.

THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH

by Paul Ward

ACT I

SCENE 1

[Presuming some sort of atmosphere to have been set in the foyer (see prefacing note on 'Actors and Audience'), this will be continued as the audience enters the auditorium]:

One or two MONKS at a prie-dieu kneeling in silent prayer [on stage] while actors representing the first party of TOURISTS are scattered about the auditorium, looking at guide-books, examining [real or imaginary] exhibits, paintings, missals etc. When everyone is ready to begin, word will be passed to the MONK-GUIDE, who will call the "TOURISTS" to the stage as the house-lights fade.

Monk-Guide: Well, ladies and gentlemen, I do hope that you have enjoyed your tour of this fine old abbey. Now, before you pass on

(One of the tourists takes a flash photograph).

Monk-Guide: Excuse me, Sir / Madam, but I have asked you NOT to take flash photographs in the principal chambers: the fabrics and paintings are so delicate. Thank you. Now, where was I? Oh, yes: Before you pass on to the souvenir shop, through that door there, where you may buy books, postcards, figurines and so forth, just stand a moment and absorb the atmosphere of the Great Hall here. On a sunny afternoon in 20-- *[current year]* it may seem innocent enough, but it was in this chamber, this very chamber, that some four hundred years ago there took place the awful and celebrated Masque of the Red Death, which I described to you at the beginning of our tour.

(A frisson of pleasant horror through the CROWD, which disperses round the space talking, pointing to things, taking forbidden photographs, etc. The MONK answers questions until he thinks enough time has elapsed).

Monk-Guide: Now, ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure that you've all had the opportunity to get a feeling of the atmosphere in the Hall, so please pass

along to the souvenir shop: It's due to close in fifteen minutes. Thank you.

(He politely shoos them along, not noticing that one YOUNG MAN / WOMAN is lingering behind. As the last back is disappearing, he makes a sour face. There is a distant rumble of Thunder. He looks up).

Monk-Guide: Oh dear: I'm sorry, Lord, but these tourists drive me to distraction. I came here for a quiet, contemplative life, I

(The Thunder rumbles again).

Monk-Guide: Yes, Lord, I do promise that I won't let it happen again.

Young Tourist: What really happened here, Father?

Monk-Guide: Oh, I didn't realise, I - er - the tour's over now. Would you mind passing along to the souvenir-shop with the others, please?

Young Tourist: The Red Death, I mean, Father. What?

Monk-Guide: I did explain at the beginning, Sir / Madam.

Young Tourist: You told us a bit, yes - just enough to satisfy a simple tourist's taste for the bizarre - but I want to know the real story, the whole story.

Monk-Guide: I'm afraid it's quite a long story, Sir / Madam, and we HAVE closed to the general public now. Perhaps another time, hm?

Young Tourist: But I shan't BE here another time; and I've come especially to find out.

Monk-Guide: It really is impossible now. Allow me to explain the difficulty: The Abbey needs to raise a very great deal of money - to maintain the building and further the work of our community, and so forth - and as a new venture in fund-raising, some of the brothers have prepared a sort of dramatic version of the Red Death story. We are to give our first performance tomorrow and we are to have our dress rehearsal NOW. I have to prompt.

(The YOUNG TOURIST draws out a cheque-book while the MONK looks nervously at his watch as a distant bell indicates the start of the proceedings).

Young Tourist: How much is the Abbey trying to raise, Father?

Monk-Guide: Oh, we need half a million pounds altogether and we've raised only a quarter of it so far.

Young Tourist: *(showing cheque)* Would this help, Father?

Monk-Guide: But I don't know what to say, Sir / Madam, I Thank you, thank you

Young Tourist: *(withholding cheque)* Only on condition that you let me stay and

watch the rehearsal.

Monk-Guide: Well, I - er, um Oh very well, come and sit with me.

(They sit together on the platform where they will remain throughout until the last part of the play. The MONK-GUIDE will have a script and is, as he says, the prompt, should the need arise. Enter the MONK-PROLOGUE).

Monk-Prologue: Four hundred years ago, the peasants of the village below the Abbey were in a terrible state. There had been a harsh and bitter winter and food was scarce. The people were cold and desperately hungry.

(The MONK-PROLOGUE's narrative is superseded by enactment on stage. To suitable music, ragged PEASANTS come on, some with sticks, begging bowls etc. and having arguments over scraps of food. After a moment or two, there is a fanfare and four of Prince Prospero's MILITARY HEAVIES come on).

Soldier 1: Out of the way, scum!

Soldier 2: Your Prince Prospero is to pass through the village on his way to the castle.

Soldier 3: Show some respect!

Soldier 4: Clear out of the way!

Peasant 1: Our "Prince", as you call him, is a wicked devil.

Peasant 2: He feeds on delicacies while we starve!

Peasant 3: He takes what little grain we can grow as tithes and leaves us with nothing!

Peasant 4: We haven't got the strength to work and our children haven't got the strength to live!

Soldier 1: You'd best not let HIM hear you talking like that.

Soldier 2: Because if he did, he might put you to the torture.

Soldier 3: Or kill you outright!

Peasant 5: He does torture us! He does kill us!

Peasant 6: Do you think any man-made torture can be worse than the racking pains of hunger?

Peasant 7: Do you think death can be worse than the living misery he allows us to suffer in?

Peasant 8: What he and his friends eat at one feast would keep the whole village alive a fortnight.

(Hubbub of agreement. Another fanfare).

Soldier 4: Clear the way - get back!

(PROSPERO comes in and the CROWD is subdued into silence. They hate him but they are afraid of him. His entry forms a splendidly magnificent contrast to the PEASANTS' squalor).

Prospero: Well, what's the matter with you? Are you struck dumb? Are you oblivious of the fact that it is your prince who stands before you? You should be on your knees shouting hosannas of praise.

(At this point, a hungry little CHILD, too small to understand the words, goes to PROSPERO with extended hands, blindly hoping for a gift of food from the bright image he sees before him).

Prospero: Get away from me, you filthy brat! How dare you approach me?

(He strikes the boy with his stick and the CHILD falls. There is a murmur of shock in the CROWD).

Boy's Father: Forgive him, my lord. He's hungry: he doesn't understand.

Prospero: Do you think I care for your miserable hunger and your ignorant lack of understanding? The sufferings of the peasantry are self-inflicted; the results of stupidity and careless extravagance. If you farmed your plots efficiently and saved instead of squandering, there would be enough.

Boy's Mother: The child is dead!

(A murmur of hatred begins to surge through the CROWD, which starts to move towards PROSPERO).

Prospero: On! On, I say!

(As the procession begins to move off, the boy's FATHER runs in front of it and is trampled down. The CROWD surges forward, shouting for revenge, GUARDS fending off the peasants. The MOTHER / WIFE kneels between her dead child and her injured husband and prays).

Mother: Dear God in heaven, look down upon us and have mercy. Is there to be no end to our sufferings?

(Sinister Music / Sound to cover the entry of THE RED DEATH a tall, powerful,

red-cloaked figure who also wears a mask).

Red Death: No end. No end to your sufferings until the cause of your unjust pain be removed.

Mother: Who are you? Why don't you show your face?

Red Death: Those who look on my face look on nothing else again, and sadly you must see it. Were I a thing of liberty, I should begin my work elsewhere, bringing corruption of the flesh where corruption already festers in the heart; but I am like the waters, made to travel first in those low places where the course is easy. Only when the waters of the lowlands swell and foam with blood shall they ascend to the safe-seeming hilltops and wreak their destruction there.

Mother: I don't understand. What are you, a prophet? What relief do you bring us?

Red Death: I bring the only relief I can - a moment of pain, for sure, but afterwards, an eternity of peace in the blessed release of death. Look - look upon my face.

(He reveals his face to her without showing it to the audience. She screams. He begins to "fade" off while she struggles in agony. Before she has expired, TWO PEASANTS return from the chase).

Peasant 1: Mary, what is it?

Peasant 2: What has happened to you?

(She raises her face to them).

Peasant 1: Oh. God!

Peasant 2: Stand back, Matthew - it's the Plague!

Peasant 1: Quick - we must tell everyone!

(They run off in different directions shouting "Plague!", "Board up your houses!" and so forth).

SCENE 2. PROSPERO's castle

(The castle should give an impression of luxury, however simply and economically achieved. While the scene is changed, attention focuses on the MONK and YOUNG TOURIST).

Tourist: Did she REALLY see a prophetic figure cloaked in red?

Monk: So the legend goes - and I'm inclined to believe it myself, if only because of the other appearances, as you'll see later. But at least it is sure that the Red Death came to the village and that the mother of that unfortunate child was its first victim.

Tourist: And what of Prospero?

Monk: By the time the body of the first victim was discovered, the Prince had reached the safety of his castle. Watch and you'll see

(Attention now shifts to PROSPERO, sitting musing over a pleasurable book, perhaps with food and drink. There is a knock at the door).

Prospero: Yes?

(Enter the MASTER of CEREMONIES accompanied by the castle DWARF, a mute).

Master of Ceremonies: My Lord, I have brought those masquers of which we spoke yesterday.

Prospero: Well, where are they?

Master of Ceremonies: They wait outside, my Lord.

Prospero: Well, bring them in. I can't judge them from the corridor, can I?

(MC goes to the door and signals. The mute DWARF comes to PROSPERO).

Prospero: You want to watch, do you?

(DWARF nods).

Prospero: Well so you shall my little friend.

(Enter MASQUERS in exotic costume / masks. They kneel before PROSPERO).

Prospero: Welcome, my friends. Your fame travels before you. You may have heard that I give many feasts in this castle-abbey. On those sumptuous

occasions my guests and I must be entertained, and some of them, I must tell you, have something of a taste for the exotic and bizarre. If your entertainment pleases, you will be well rewarded. Regard this private viewing as a kind of audition, if you will. I await the delights you have to offer.

(The MASQUERS begin to perform a grotesque, stylised piece containing some element of the bizarre. After some time a GUARD bursts in and whispers urgently in PROSPERO's ear).

Prospero: Stop!

Masque Leader: Does our entertainment not please you, my Lord?

Prospero: Guards! Guards!

(Enter GUARDS).

Prospero: A peasant from the village has entered this castle - and do you know what news he has brought? That the Plague is in the village!

(The PEASANT bursts in, having escaped the custody of other GUARDS, who stumble in after him).

Prospero: Hold him!

Peasant Messenger: Prince Prospero, you must help us! We did our best to bear starvation alone, but now the plague has struck us and we must throw ourselves on your mercy.

Prospero: Help you? Are you mad? *(To GUARDS)* You fools! Is it not enough that you allow a filthy peasant to enter my castle-keep, but a filthy peasant from a village alive with the Red Death, you Take him back from whence he came and burn him in the market-place, as an example!

Guard 1: But Prince Prospero, the plague is in the village: we

Prospero: And you must pay for your folly and incompetence. If you dare disobey me I will devise for you a death ten times more horrible than that inflicted by the Plague. Take him away!

(They begin to move).

Prospero: Wait! *(To MASQUERS)* Which way did you travel to the castle?

Masque-Leader: My Lord, we er, we

Prospero: Out with it, man! Did you travel through the village?

Masque-Leader: We did, my Lord.

Prospero: Take them and burn them, too. Away with them!

(PEASANT and MASQUERS are hustled out by some of the guards. PROSPERO speaks to others).

Prospero: You, come here. Ride like the wind to all my noble friends. Bear news of this catastrophe and bid them all come HERE. The nobility scattered across the land is like a knight with a hundred chinks in his armour. If we make siege together here, there is but one vulnerable place, and we shall make this place INVulnerable. Go at once. No-one is to travel through the village! *(To another guard)* There is work for you, too. The castle will be full for many months to come. The chambers must be prepared and there must be provision - food and drink in great abundance. Go!

(Exit guard).

Prospero: *(To MC)* And since we are, it seems, to have a long house-party, get some entertainers!

(MC exits)

Prospero: *(As MC goes)* And order the purification of this chamber. Once filled with the noblest blood in the land, I will fortify my castle so that there shall be no crack, no fissure to admit even the wind. No breath of the vile contagion engendered by those stinking peasants shall assail us here.

(Enter The RED DEATH, unseen).

Prospero: Darkness and Death may reign in the land, but here there shall be only light and life. *(As he exits)* Guards! Guards!!

(The RED DEATH advances into the stage, laughing ironically).

SCENE 3. *The Village Market-square.*

(While the set is changed back, attention focuses on the MONK and TOURIST).

Tourist: Surely Prince Prospero can't really have been as cruel as that?

Monk: Yes, if records are to be believed. He certainly ordered the death of all those who had had contact with the village and he certainly tried to save all his aristocratic friends by gathering them together in his castle.

Tourist: Then why did the plan fail?

Monk: All in due course. First you must witness the events which took place in the beleaguered village.

(Attention switches to the village square. PEASANTS who have escaped the plague are scattered about desultorily. One keeps watch. Enter the dead boy's FATHER, with a crutch after his injury).

Watch: There's no sign of him yet.

Father: Are you surprised?

Watch: But he's been gone since morning.

Father: And what do you expect him to do - come riding back in a grand coach full of food and medicine? Prospero doesn't care a fig whether we live in misery or die in agony so long as none of our troubles touch HIM.

Watch: But surely even he can't just stand by and see the whole village wiped out as if it had never existed?

Father: We shall have to wait and see. But I at least do not wait in hope.

(Enter GUARDS with the MESSENGER and the MASQUERS, bound).

Watch: Michael, what's this?

Messenger: This is your answer from Prince Prospero.

Watch: I don't understand.

Guard: You will soon enough - bind them together!

(The PEASANTS and MASQUERS are bound in a "bundle". A GUARD kneels as if lighting a pyre. Lighting shows the flames which consume them. [Being a non-naturalistic moment, it is perhaps good to use an alienation effect here: a delicate Christmas carol, for instance]. When the burning is done, a funeral bell tolls and enter the village PRIEST with PEASANTS carrying a stretcher on which there is a body covered in a red blanket. The procession halts and the PRIEST sings a little bit of a Latin Mass for the Dead).

Priest: And now, dear brethren, let us lift up our sad hearts to Almighty God, beseeching Him that He will have mercy on the souls of the dear departed, on those who have suffered the agony of the Red Plague and on those who have suffered in the flames. May He have pity, too, on those who have suffered bereavement and on all of us who sadly remain, waiting to be snatched into the jaws of Death. If we have offended Thee, Lord, that Thou punishest us so, forgive us those things wherein our hearts have transgressed, purify us that when we are called to behold Thy face, we may look upon Thee with eyes that will merit Thy mercy and compassion.

All: O Lord, hear our prayer.

(As if in answer to prayer, enter the RED DEATH).

Red Death: Fine words - noble words, humble words. Yet they are weighted with lead. God pities your plight, but your words cannot rise to Heaven while your hearts burn with desire for revenge. Who among you can deny, for all his pitiable suffering, that his heart burns with hatred of Prospero - that if your dreams were fulfilled, every beat of your poor hearts would be a funeral knell for your despised prince?

(Silence)

Red Death: Not one of you. You pray to God, bewildered, and beg to know why I, the Red Man of Death, should come among you. In your terror and your pain, you search your heavy hearts for some offence which might so displease God that he sends me among you as a punishment. And can you find such an offence within you? Can you?

(Silence).

Red Death: No, because you know in your hearts that I do not come among you as a scourge of God. I exist here because you are so burdened and enfeebled by your slavery to Prospero that you have not the strength to resist me. You cannot banish me from your house by prayer. You will be rid of me only when your stomachs are full, when you have wood for your fires, when the sheep that you shear clothe your own backs against winter's chill. You will be rid of me when Prospero and his tyranny is dead. I do not hate you. I pity the ills I must inflict. And I come at your prayer not to torture but to give hope. How many more must die by the touch of my hand I cannot say, but if there is one among you, one still possessed of youth and beauty, who will give his

life freely, will die by choice in my arms, he may, like your own saviour Christ, by his sacrifice save many others. Does such a one exist?

(A pretty young GIRL, mesmerised by the speech, begins to step forward).

Marietta's Father: No, Marietta, no!

Priest: We cannot trust this man.

Marietta: Leave me. *(She steps forward)* I will serve you.

Red Death: Then may you be the Saviour of your people. But pause a moment: You understand what it is that I ask of you - that you will lay down your life in the service of your fellows?

Marietta: I do not care for my own life. Family and friends are dying and I have neither food in my belly nor hope in my heart. Why should I value my life? If by losing it other lives can be saved, then I shall lose it with a glad heart.

Red Death: You are noble and courageous. Come with me and I will teach you what you must do.

SCENE 4. PROSPERO'S castle.

(Lively, festive music while the stage is transformed. Perhaps the castle GUESTS perform a dance here. In what follows, the THEATRE AUDIENCE is included among the GUESTS in the castle).

Prospero: Friends, the reason for your presence here in my castle can be a source of no pleasure. Yet while you ARE here, voluntary prisoners in this safe retreat, you shall HAVE pleasure. The doors may be sealed with bolts, but my castle is stored to bursting with provision. Though you cannot leave these rooms to hunt and sport, every day will be a day of feasting. Your stomachs will be full of delicacies, your hearts warmed and your senses inflamed with wine - and, more than that, you shall have entertainment, too.

(Appreciative response from guests).

Prospero: Now, where is my Master of Ceremonies?

Master of Ceremonies: Here, my Lord.

Prospero: Our friends have feasted their stomachs. Now it is time to feast their

eyes and ears. Bring us our entertainment!

[See note in introduction about what follows, but basically it is a pre-interval medieval cabaret-showpiece based on available skills such as juggling, tumbling, acrobatics, dancing, mime etc.].

(When it has come to an end and the final applause is dying, PROSPERO speaks to the MC).

Prospero: You have done well *(suddenly nasty)* - but not well enough!

Master of Ceremonies: My Lord?

Prospero: These acts are skilful. I grant you - but they are entertainments for a children's party! My friends and I have tastes for things more "curious".
(Suddenly catches sight of the theatre audience) You incompetent blunderer!

Master of Ceremonies: My Lord?

Prospero: Do you not see that half of our guests have no food and drink? Go. Alert the servants of the ante-chamber.

(MC dashes off through auditorium door where he really will tell the house staff that the interval is just about to begin).

Prospero: *(To theatre audience)* Can you forgive this negligence? My Lords and Ladies, if you will pass to the ante-chamber, you will find refreshments prepared for you. Return when your thirsts are slaked, and I will devise for you an entertainment still more cunning. Just one word of advice: If you value your lives, you will not leave this building

END OF ACT I

ACT II

SCENE 1. PROSPERO's castle.

(During the latter moments of the interval, Prospero's CASTLE-GUESTS, plainly tired / suffering from indulgence, return and take up sleepy positions. Possible music cover. As house lights go, enter PROSPERO, who speaks first to the theatre audience).

Prospero: Was your entertainment adequate? Were you warm enough? Did you have enough to eat and drink? If any man's answer is "No", I will hear of it later, for it is a matter of pride in Prospero's castle that no stomach should be empty, no mouth parched with thirst, no back shiver against the cold. *(Suddenly focusing on an empty place in the auditorium)* Was that place vacant before the interval in our entertainment? I thought I recalled but never mind: Just so long as no one of you has dared to leave the confines of this castle, for I cannot be answerable for the dangers and evils which lurk in the streets beyond. Now, my friends, I hope that you have not so far succumbed to excess that your minds are numbed - that you are in plain terms more awake than those closest to me, for I have news of an intriguing device. *(He rouses the stage COURTIERS)* Come on, awake, rouse yourselves from your swinish stupor - I have a task for your imaginations!

(The COURTIERS rouse themselves with difficulty).

Prospero: You crave sleep, and sleep you shall have, through all the velvet darkness of the night. The fires are lit in your chambers and your beds are dressed with sheets of the finest silk. Now, as you go to your rest, I give you something to tease your thoughts: Tomorrow night's feast shall be a masquerade. All shall be disguised, for when no man's name is known, who shall reproach us for what we do? The castle wardrobes will be at your disposal and I look to your ingenuity, your taste for the bizarre, to provide us with a masquerade worthy of the feasts of the Roman emperors. Only one thing I forbid: the kindness of the gods has preserved us from the ravages of the plague which rages without and, as a mark of our gratitude, no-one - I repeat, no-one - shall deck himself in the colour red. *(To theatre audience)* You too, my friends: at tomorrow's masquerade let me see no touch of red about you. The world we can master with force, but we shall not tempt the fates with insolence. *(Once again to STAGE-COURTIERS)*. Now to your beds, my friends. May your night be as full of pleasurable dreams as your

day has been full of acts of pleasure. Goodnight, my friends.

(As others exeunt PROSPERO detains M C and DWARF).

Prospero: Master of Ceremonies!

Master of Ceremonies: My Lord?

Prospero: Your entertainment this evening was, as I have remarked, adequate, amusing even but it was entertainment for the young and innocent. We who are sophisticates of the world, patrons of the senses, desire something more curiously exotic. *(Suddenly blunt)* In short, unless your "ceremonies" at tomorrow's feast are more pleasing, you will no longer be Master of them. If you should dare to displease us greatly in this matter, I shall have the doors of my castle opened and you flung out into the plague-ridden world beyond. Do I make myself quite clear?

Master of Ceremonies: My Lord.

(Exit PROSPERO. DWARF goes to MC to comfort him).

Master of Ceremonies: What am I to do? I cannot leave the castle to find new masquers and those who are here are in the main just circus fellows. If I stage only their juggling and tumbling again tomorrow, the Prince will not forgive me and I shall be cast out to face the Oh, it's too horrible to think about! But what can I DO?

(A knocking at the "external" door. The following conversation is conducted through it)

Master of Ceremonies: Who is it knocks?

Marietta: A friend to Prospero.

Master of Ceremonies: Prospero's friends are all within this keep. Who are you?

Marietta: I come to offer my services to you.

Master of Ceremonies: Your services? What is it that you do?

Marietta: I entertain.

(MC almost opens the door and then restrains himself).

Master of Ceremonies: No - this is some trick from the village.

Marietta: I am not from your village. I have travelled across the mountains from lands where I have played before the greatest monarchs. What would you have me do here - sport myself in some stinking peasant tavern? No: I who

have pleased kings will play before no-one less than your prince.

(MC still looks doubtful but DWARF nods to encourage him).

Master of Ceremonies: Very well - but if I admit you, you must give me your word of honour that you will tell no-one the secret of your admission.

Marietta: I give you my word.

(MC opens the door. Enter MARIETTA now dressed more finely but with no touch of red about her, accompanied by the RED DEATH who wears a garment identical to his original one so that we recognise him, but it is a different colour - a dull brown, perhaps. He carries a bag and, visibly, a basket of red paper flowers).

Master of Ceremonies: Who is this? I heard only one voice - I

Marietta: This man is both my accomplice and my guard. Surely you must see that it is not safe for a woman to travel the mountain roads alone?

Master of Ceremonies: Yes. Well, er On condition of the absolute secrecy I demand, we will put your skills to the test. Tomorrow night there is to be a great feast with the Prince and all his courtiers. You must bring them unimaginable delights.

Marietta: I give you my word.

(She whispers in his ear. He is plainly pleased by what he hears).

Master of Ceremonies: Come with me to your lodgings, but on no account are you to leave your chambers before you are sent for tomorrow.

Marietta: You have our promise. We should in any case not wish to spoil the effect of surprise.

(The DWARF carries the bag. As the MC is ushering them out, the RED DEATH, still holding the basket of flowers, looks about the chamber and nods, knowing what he will achieve here. Exeunt).

SCENE 2. The Village Market-place again.

(MARIETTA's FATHER, the WATCH, MATTHEW and the PRIEST sitting in a group which deliberately ostracises the two of PROSPERO's SOLDIERS sent to and condemned to remain in the village).

Matthew: Take comfort - She may still return unharmed.

Marietta's Father: She was my only child. All my hope for the future, such as it was, lay in her. I just can't understand why she did it.

Watch: There's no denying it was a strange business, that; it seemed as if she was suddenly possessed by something, almost like a martyr offering herself to God.

Priest: Or a frightened girl offering herself to a man who might give her a chance of safety.

Marietta's Father: What do you mean, Father?

Priest: I don't know. I just mean that I can't trust the Red Man. Oh, he's appeared at important moments, even spoken words of comfort, but wherever he has been, the plague has been, too. When he has come, we have suffered. We don't even know that he's not one of Prospero's henchmen.

Watch: But he spoke against Prospero - called him a tyrant.

Soldier 1: He's nothing to do with Prospero.

Matthew: Why should we trust your word? How long is it since you were calling us scum and kicking us out of the way in the market-place?

Soldier 2: We were only doing a job.

Matthew: With a little too much relish for my liking.

Soldier 1: What did you expect us to do? Come up and say "Excuse me, would you mind standing aside, please?" We should have been the laughing stock of the castle. And if Prospero had caught us talking to you like that, we should have been punished as well.

Watch: You burned Michael alive.

Soldier 2: Under threat of our own deaths, yes. What would you have done?

Priest: Please - nothing can undo the evils and horrors of days gone by. But we must TRY to forget our bitterness: remember that even the crucified Christ begged forgiveness for the soldiers who drove in the nails. "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do."

Marietta's Father: None of this brings me comfort for the loss of my daughter.

Priest: No.

Watch: Tell me, Father, for I don't understand: if the Red Man WAS in league with Prospero why should he promise to destroy him and take Marietta as a sacrifice?

Priest: God in heaven knows. But with the weak faith of an ordinary man, I just know that I shouldn't like to be a pretty peasant girl alone in the castle with Prospero and all his friends.

Marietta's Father: You don't think - ?

Priest: I don't know what to think, old friend. If the Red Man is on our side, or if he's a messenger from God, it may be a noble sacrifice.

Marietta's Father: Speak no more, Father. Oh, my poor child.

Matthew: Take comfort. I say that we've no reason to distrust the Red Man. Not yet, anyway. As things are, we have no hope BUT him. Who else has spoken of an end to our suffering? No-one. Prospero will not help us and God - yes, even God, Father, though I don't mean to blaspheme - if He sees our misery, has sent no saviour to redeem us from it. Only the Red Man has given us any word of hope.

Priest: I pray God that you are right, Matthew. We can only wait and see.

(Enter the RED DEATH).

Red Death: Your faith wavers, and it cannot be wondered at under the heavy burden of so much suffering. But I beg you to hold fast and not lose faith.

Priest: Who are you? Why should we place our trust in you?

Red Death: I am the corruption which springs from the hearts of wicked men - selfish men who have the power to soothe the suffering of the world, but who use that power only to gratify their own greedy desires. When the plenty of the world is shared by ALL the world, I lie in a grave beneath the earth and will trouble no-one. But when my sleep is pierced by the wails of the hungry and sick, when my nostrils are assailed by the stench of neglect, when the restless feet of the homeless drum on the roof of my cave, I am roused and must answer the call.

Priest: Yet you answer the call not with comfort but with the horror of disease and death.

Red Death: Be patient just a while longer: when the rain falls, it first floods the valleys, but when the waters rise, even the highest hills are submerged. If your tormentors knew themselves men like you, they would behold your plight with compassion and with terror, not with complacency. That is the lesson they must learn and it is for that that Marietta's sacrifice is made.

Marietta's Father: Where is she? Please tell me.

Red Death: Safe.

Marietta's Father: Will she live?

Red Death: A sacrifice cannot live and yet propitiate. Even your Saviour Christ had to die in suffering on the cross before His people could be saved.

Marietta's Father: Then she is dead?

Red Death: Not yet. But she WILL die and in dying will kill the very root of the tree of your suffering. It is hard for you to understand. I can only bid you have faith and believe.

Matthew: Forgive our mistrust. We Let me take your hand.

Red Death: No, you must not touch me, for all who touch me will die and you shall live to tell this story. You can do no better than kneel, pray to your God, and beg that your deliverance may come as soon as I believe that it may. The sun will set tonight in the deep redness of blood, but that may herald a fine day tomorrow if Marietta's mission is blessed. Pray for her, pray for yourselves and pray for me, too. Farewell. You will not see me again.

SCENE 3. PROSPERO's castle.

(Loud festive music covers the change to the night of the masquerade. Enter CASTLE-GUESTS in their masks, many of which might be animal-masks to stress the unspiritual indulgence of the court's behaviour. In mime, they experiment with the personalities suggested by the masks).

[In the original production, a soldier signalled for the theatre audience to put on the eye-masks which had been inserted in their programmes].

Prospero: My lords and ladies, you are welcome to our masquerade - and doubly so because you have exercised the ingenuity of your imaginations and brought me such a wealth of intriguing and edifying spectacle. Now, you have feasted your stomachs and slaked your thirsts and it is my turn to feast your eyes with a display of entertainments. Where is my master of ceremonies?

Master of Ceremonies: Here, my Lord.

Prospero: Then tell us what delights you have procured for our delectation.

Master of Ceremonies: First, my Lord, we have

(He announces the first act of this second cabaret, in which the entertainers have gone some way towards answering his criticism of the previous evening's performance. Applause when it is finished).

Prospero: You have done well. And what next for our delight?

Master of Ceremonies: We must always keep the very best things until last, and as a finale this evening, I have something so breathtakingly special that you will remember it till your dying day, but first, just to whet your appetites further

(He announces the second act. It is performed. Applause).

Prospero: Even better. But our minds are tortured to know the nature of the final delight you promise. Come, keep us waiting no longer - waste no more words.

(There is a hush of anticipation. MC goes to the door and claps. Complete and stunned silence as enter MARIETTA and the RED DEATH, both dressed in shocking bright red. The RED DEATH carries the basket of red paper flowers).

Prospero: What is this? I forbade anyone to appear at this masquerade dressed in red. How dare you flout me?

Red Death: Peace, Prospero. You need have no fear. It is the final jest of courage that you can laugh at death - for that is what you do, locked here in your castle with your friends. You laugh at death every day. Do not be superstitious: the entertainment you are about to see will banish all fear for the last time.

Prospero: And what is this "entertainment" called?

Red Death: It is called "Death and the Maiden". Attend.

(There follows a wild and whirling dance to music which mounts in intensity all the time. MARIETTA might begin it alone and, if the actor is capable, she might involve the RED DEATH, too. In any case, as the dance develops, she involves the masked courtiers. Her touch and, of course, that of the RED DEATH, is fatal, so that the courtiers stagger, fall and die.

(Blackout).

(The "corpses" get off and the RED DEATH and MARIETTA scatter the red flowers to symbolise them. A monastery bell tolls).

SCENE 4. The Monastery, though the red flowers remain.

Monk: And that was the end of Prince Prospero and all his associates - all claimed by the plague in a single day.

Tourist: What happened to the girl?

Monk: She died, of course. It was part of her contract with Death. But in time the plague passed and the village began to recover. Prospero had no children, of course, and a more kindly ruler came from beyond the mountains to take his place. In the days of the new Prince, the villagers were very much better off, and as they grew healthier and stronger, the plague found it harder to come among them.

Tourist: It's a fascinating story. And thank you for allowing me to see the rehearsal - it's an experience I'll always remember. Now, I haven't forgotten what I promised. *(He gives the cheque).*

Monk: We are deeply, deeply indebted to you.

(A bell rings).

Monk: Oh my goodness, look at the time! We're opening to the public again now. You really will have to excuse me. Thank you once again.

(Enter a second party of TOURISTS).

Tourist: Thank YOU. Goodbye.

(Exit TOURIST).

Monk: Please excuse the debris here, ladies and gentlemen. We have just been rehearsing a dramatic version of the famous legend associated with this abbey and I'm afraid we haven't had time to clear away yet. Some of the brothers will attend to it while I take you on your tour of the building. Come this way, please.

(One of the visitors takes a flash photograph).

Monk: And may I PLEASE ask you not to take flash photographs in the principal chambers, if you don't mind. Thank you.

(As the MONK escorts the tourists off, the figure of the RED DEATH enters and approaches the audience).

Red Death: No, don't recoil. I do not mean to harm you, but I must speak with you. There. *(He throws back hood, removes mask, and for the first time the audience has a full view of the face of an ordinary human being in this figure of terror)*. What is it that you suppose you have been watching here today? An old Gothic tale by a master of horrors? An improbable entertainment based on some distorted historical fact? Perhaps both of these things, but certainly something more, too: The Red Plague, any plague, is a symptom - no, more than that, an EMBLEM of the many sufferings under which our world labours. And when the world does labour in suffering, in hunger and in pain, what do we do? Prospero, of course, locked himself in his castle in the vain belief that the sufferings of the world would never touch him. You have seen his fate for yourselves. But I see you are puzzled. Why tell us this, you ask? We are not Prosperos, you say; we do not lock ourselves in castles and waste our lives in foolish indulgence. True, no doubt. You are for the most part, I expect, decent hard-working people with some measure of compassion for your fellows. Yet not one of you will end today aching with hunger, cold or miserable. All of you will have a warm bed to sleep in, perhaps even the love and care of your families and friends. I do not begrudge you those things - but this wretched world is FULL of men, women and children who have none of them! You do not have castles. But still, I beg you, do not lock yourselves in the closed and comfortable prisons of your minds; do not close your eyes, ears and hearts to the pitiful crying of the poor and needy. If you do, you will allow the coming of an evil world from which, finally, you yourselves will have no refuge. *(An afterthought as he leaves)* I can see to that, my friends.

(Exit)

(Lights Fade).

*** FINIS**

***NOTE:-**

[The audience should go away with a sense of this final message, not with a comfortable sense of a play over and done, so no curtain-call. To reinforce the "real world" dimension, in the original production we put actors playing modern beggars by the foyer exit doors and I think the message had got through, because we collected an amazing amount of money in their bowls!]

Paul Ward