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Requiem for the Dead

by CHARLES L. MEE

The text for this play is composed entirely of the fragments
of the lost plays of Sophocles.

Darkness.

The high, thin music of a Vietnamese violin,
the piercing music played on only one or two strings.

Out of the darkness we see
a young man walking slowly downstage.

Gradually, we make out the ruined shell of an ancient building.

A torn and burnt-out metal Coke sign on a pole.

An immense shard of rusted steel
embedded in the dirt as though it had fallen from the sky

On the back wall,
a line of 6 bird cages horizontally across the wall
with live crows in them

Dirt.

An old man, extremely frail, lying in the dirt,
or lying on an iron bedstead, painted white,
his head resting on a balled up piece of clothing,
his eyes wide open.

The young man, Lars, approaches the bed, speaking:

LARS

It was he
who devised weights, numbers and measures;
he
who taught the Argives
how to know the heavenly signs.
He discovered how to measure terms and periods of the stars,
trustworthy signs for those who watched while others slept,
and for the shepherds of ships at sea
he
found out the turnings of the Bear
and the chilly setting of the Dogstar
he who revealed things that earlier were hidden.

[he stands next to the bed]

Let any man procure as much pleasure as he can
as he lives his daily life;
the morrow comes ever blind.

[he puts a damp cloth to the old man's forehead]

No one loves life so much as he who is growing old.

There is no pain like long life.

[A boy stands nearby holding a glass of ice chips.]

The best thing is a life free from sickness,
the power each day
to take hold of what one desires.

[Lars's wife, Mathilde, appears now near the bed,
or steps into the pool of light near the bed.]

MATHILDE

A man is nothing but breath and shadow.

[The boy gives the old man some ice chips
as Lars continues to speak.]

LARS

The time of life is short,
and once a mortal is hidden beneath the earth
he lies there for all time.

MATHILDE

A cup without a bottom is not put on the table.

No man was ever born
but he must suffer.
He buries his children and gets others in their place;
then dies himself.
And yet men bear it hard,
that only give dust to dust!
Life is a harvest that man must reap like ears of corn;
one grows, another falls.
Why should we moan at this,
the path of Nature that we must tread?

Time makes all things dark
and brings them to oblivion.

[the old man puts his head back,
closes his eyes,
and sleeps]

First you will see a crop in flower,
all white;
then a round mulberry
that has turned red;

lastly
old age
of Egyptian blackness
takes over.

[The sweet violin music of Biber.

Suddenly, blue, blue skies are projected on the entire back wall
and on the side walls of the stage.

A young girl, age 10, runs out at full speed
and throws herself into the arms of Mathilde,
who holds her off the ground
and dances with her in her arms

while a floating angel descends from the flies
to come to rest on the white wall.

So we have blue blue and white.

This is not a moment;
it is a dance number
that goes on for a long while.

After the dance,
Mathilde lets the girl down to the floor.

The girl stands a moment,
then turns and runs out at full speed.

The music is still going on for another minute.

[Note on music:
we can use "familiar" music,
by Mozart and Verdi and Biber—
but much of the music should be from very distant countries
or places we think are long gone or dead, such as medieval church music,
Gregorian chant
that we hear and think instantly: vanished.]

[Note on events:

Things should always be just vanishing throughout the piece.

And also: some things should happen with astonishing suddenness.

Other things should linger a long, long time.

We should hear huge things shattering in a million pieces,
thunderous, earth-shaking collapsing things,
and see sudden intrusions of projections or objects.

Moreover:

all the stage directions are meant to be suggestive,
not to prescribe that these are the actions that must occur
but rather
to suggest that this is the genre of physical events
that might be used to set the text.]

A boy runs in, stops, looks around,
and then spreads a picnic sheet on the ground
in front of the old man, Morris,
so Morris is now automatically reclining at a picnic in his earlier life

The boy is followed at once by
women and men who bring in baskets of food,
another picnic blanket,
bottles of wine
other things

As the music comes to an end
we hear birdsong
and the sounds of daily life in the summer
voices, and the sounds of boat building and carpentry

Now there are:
the old man, Morris
the young woman, Mathilde
the young woman's husband, Lars
the boy, Peter
and

another man, Robert
two women, Susanne and Martha
and, after a while, the girl, Lucia, will return.

The women begin to speak brightly, energetically, flirtatiously,
teasing the men,
and the men banter back.]

MATHILDE

In childhood, in our father's house,
we live the happiest life, I think, of all mankind.
But when we have understanding
and have come to youthful vigor,
we are pushed out and sold,
away from our parents,
some to foreign husbands,
some to barbarians,
some to joyless homes,
and some to homes that are malevolent.
And this,
once a single night has yoked us,
we must approve
and consider to be happiness.

SUSANNE In dealing with your husband,
you must know how to change the color of your true thoughts,
like a polyp on a rock.

ANOTHER MAN, JIRI

O woman
whose shamelessness has stopped at nothing,
no other evil is or ever will be worse
than a woman who was born to give pain!

LARS

A man could acquire no plague worse
than a bad wife

nor any treasure better than a right-minded one;
and each man tells the tale
according to his own experience.

ANOTHER WOMAN, MARTHA

A woman swears that she will avoid the bitter pangs of childbirth;
but once she has respite from the pain,
she is caught again in the same nets,
overcome by the desire of the moment.

JIRI

The oaths of a woman I write in water.

SUSANNE

To a mother, children are the anchors of her life.

MATHILDE

Vain is man's evil speaking and blame of women—
the twang of an idle bowstring.
For they are better than men.
They manage the home,
and guard within the house the sea-borne wares.
No house is clean or prosperous if the wife is absent....
In the oracles of Phoebus,
women expound Apollo's will;
and at the holy seat of Dodona,
beside the sacred oak,
woman conveys the will of Zeus
to all Greeks who may desire it.

MARTHA

O mortal and miserable race of men,
walking about as a superfluous burden upon the earth.

SUSANNE

A man can get a reputation from very small things.

MARTHA

If you investigate, you will find that most of what men do is low.

MATHILDE

It is money that finds friends for men.
For wealth has a strange power to get to places sacred and profane,
and to places from which a poor man
could not get what he desires.
Wealth makes an ugly person beautiful
and an incoherent speech eloquent;
and wealth alone can enjoy pleasure.

MORRIS, THE OLD MAN

When ice first appears in the winter,
and the young boys take it into their hands,
they feel such intense, new pleasures.
And, after a while,
when it hurts them to keep holding the ice in their hands,
their pride will not allow them to let it go.
In just this way,
lovers are caught between the desire to hold on and to let go.

Biber's Musketeer's March (1:09)
or Concti simus concanentes by Anonymous from
The Speech of Angels, Cloisters and Cathedrals, vol II (9:32)
and Robert does a bragging sort of dance
like a russian squat dance
and he is eventually joined by Lars— competitively

Again, this is not a moment;
it is a full dance number.

And then Mathilde or another woman take up the dance with the men;
in time Lars and the other woman drop out,
leaving Mathilde and Robert
who dance together to a longer Biber piece,
Mathilde picking up her skirt
flirting.
Wild, passionate music here
and eventually the two of them do
a wild, abandoned, Dionysian sexual dance together.

Then the bright white light of summer is projected
and blots out everyone on stage
—Richard Foreman lights in audience eyes—
and the scene evaporates on stage
as we hear the sound of an airplane overhead

and the bright light gives way, eventually, to a projection
that fills the back and side walls
of children
or of a field of flowers
of poppies

The girl runs in at full speed,
pursued by Peter
who catches her
and hurls her to the ground
(over and over?, or just once playfully?)
as they play this word game.

LUCIA
tortoise

PETER
hare

LUCIA
owl

PETER
winter

LUCIA
spring

PETER
green

LUCIA
grape

PETER
tendrils

LUCIA
sweet

PETER
mild

LUCIA
pleasure

PETER
heaven

LUCIA
stars

PETER
Night

LUCIA
dawn

PETER
sea

LUCIA
waves

PETER
life

LUCIA
tears

PETER
pain

LUCIA
delight

PETER
desire

LUCIA
dance

PETER
sing

LUCIA
flower

PETER
garden

LUCIA
fountain

PETER
furrow

LUCIA
plow

PETER
earth

LUCIA
eager

PETER
hard

LUCIA
alive

PETER
moment

LUCIA
eyes

PETER
lightning

LUCIA
love

[Suddenly, the entire back and side walls
are filled with an immense projection in black and white
a film of the mountaintops of Greece
as though taken from an airplane hurtling too fast towards the mountains
and buffeted by winds and updrafts
so that the moving images are in a panic
and there is a deafening sound of rushing and pounding
deep-throated rumbling of machinery and earthquakes and avalanches
as we are hurled forward into the horrible space.

Lucia falls immediately to the ground
and crawls or rolls out, very very slowly, like an insect
first a hand reaches out in the direction she wants to go,
then the body follows,
leaving a leg stretched out languorously behind like an insect's leg,
then the leg comes over and reaches further out,
arms and legs either too far ahead, like tentacles,
or too far behind the body as it rolls

or should she be thrown repeatedly to the ground by an older man—
which sets up family vengeance cycle: husband kills him, wife kills husband

and it is after being thrown to the ground
that she insect crawls out to dark music?

and then the man is left there to join the men working?

while, from the other side,
men drag in a big boat
[as we hear crashing thunder, ear-splitting lightning?]
and thus to fishing nets, thus work
old man working on nets, too
talk of work and money

MORRIS

Truly I count mariners among unhappy mortals—they to whom neither god nor mortal men can ever give their due reward in wealth. Ever risking their distant enterprises on slender chances, amid many ruinous wanderings they either keep or lose their profits. But I revere and praise those mortals who constantly find the courage to earn a scarce and painful living with their much-enduring hands.

JIRI

You will never attain to the heights without labor.

MORRIS

nothing good results from casual leisure

ROBERT

if the house is neglected, it collapses.

Every proper trade is part of our equipment—fighting with the spear, contests of wrestling, riding, running, boxing, biting, twisting people's balls; we have songs of music, we have oracles quite unknown and not forged, and tests for ways of healing; we can measure the skies, we can dance, we can fart.

Fortune does not fight on the side of those who take no action.

MORRIS

It is money that finds friends for men, and also honors, and finally the throne sublime of royalty, nearest to the gods. And no one is an enemy to money, or if they are, men deny their hatred of it. For wealth has a strange power to get to places sacred and profane, and to places from which a poor man, even if he effects an entry, could not get what he desires. For wealth makes an ugly person beautiful to look on and an incoherent speech eloquent; and wealth alone can enjoy pleasure even in sickness and can conceal its miseries.

PETER

the whole race of barbarians loves money.

LARS [TO MORRIS]

And do not be surprised, my lord, if I hold on to my profit as I do! For even mortals who have great wealth grasp at profit, and for human beings all other things rank after money. There are those who exalt the man who is free from sickness, but I think that no poor man is free from sickness; the poor man is always sick.

JIRI

It is better not to exist than to live in misery

LARS

Profit is sweet, even if it comes from lies.

ROBERT

If you investigate, you will find that most of what men do is low.

JIRI

The most painful thing of all happens when one could have arranged things neatly, but brings the damage to oneself.

MORRIS

When a man prospers one should never call his fortune good before his life has been completed and he has run his course. For with little effort and in a moment of time the gift of an adverse fortune ruins the happiness brought by vast wealth, when the gods decree that things must change.

Suddenly the sounds of birds in a zoo
or of railroad trains thundering on a track
or the sounds of construction and men's voices.

Lars grabs Jiri or Robert
and throws him to the ground.
The other man strips off his shirt
and returns to the wrestling match.

Lars strips off all his clothes to wrestle.
The other man matches him, getting naked to wrestle.

Eventually, defeated, the other man leaves.

LARS

What can be taught, I learn;
what can be found, I look for;
what can be prayed for I beg of the gods.

Whoever approaches danger boldly
talks straight and his purpose is not shaken.

No,
for fate does not do violence to a man before his time.

Most alarming things that have drawn breath during the night,
when day comes
grow mild.

If one is frightened
everything makes a noise

Life is a possession more delightful than any other,
because the same people cannot die twice.

No one is without troubles,
and he who has the least is the most fortunate.

[As he speaks,
the girl is brought in by the women,
stripped bare,
and dressed in a bridal gown.
This continues as the old man speaks.]

[is she finally married not to the boy but to the grown man?]

MORRIS

There is no pain like long life.

All evils are part of great age; mind gone, actions feeble, futile worries.

What kind of trouble did not afflict me then? Lion, dragon, fire, water....

The eye grows dim with age.

Wherever did I find the flower that cures pain like this?

Old age and the wearying effect of time teach all things.

No falsehood lasts into old age

Most alarming things that have drawn breath during the night,
when day comes
grow mild.

Fate does not do violence to a man before his time.

The same people cannot die twice.

I am an old man,
but age is often accompanied by good sense
and the ability to make the plans one needs to make.

No one loves life so much as he who is growing old.

As a man grows old, he becomes a child once more

Mankind is one tribe;
one day in the life of father and mother brought to birth all of us;
none was born superior to any other.
But some are nurtured by a fate of misfortune,
others of us by prosperity,
and others are held down by the yoke of compulsion that enslaves us.

The most honorable thing is to be just;
the best thing is a life free from sickness;
but the most delightful thing
is the power each day
to take hold of what one desires.

The calm sea
the mast amidships
the gilded bow
the long sweep of the oars
the blade of pine
the dirge of sadness
this is the song that my spirit is eager to chant

No man was ever born
but he must suffer.
He buries his children and gets others in their place;
then dies himself.
And yet men bear it hard,
that only give dust to dust!
Life is a harvest that man must reap like ears of corn;
one grows, another falls.
Why should we moan at this,
the path of Nature that we must tread?

A cup without a bottom is not put on the table.

[Peter picks up a piece of ice,
holds it in his hand, looking at it.

Lucia, now completely dressed,
turns round and round as one of the women who dressed her speaks:]

MARTHA

There is a seagirt land, called Euboea,
where a bacchic vine grows only for a day.
First while dawn shines brightly
the green vine-shoot puts forth its tendrils;
then the middle of the day

makes the unripe grape grow large,
and the fruit gains sweetness and takes on dark color;
and in the evening
the crop comes to a fine growth and is harvested,
and the drink is mixed.

[Gradually,
the Arabian sea at night
is projected on the back walls and side walls:
the dark sea, the stars,
and the lights of fishing boats on the water.

We hear the opening Andante passage of Alessandro Marcello's
Concerto X for flutes and strings.

And this is gradually drowned out
by the sounds of earthquake and avalanche
that grow in volume
until they are deafening.

Lars throws another man to the ground over and over again,
the second man trying to get away,
Lars not letting him.
The man gets up,
Lars catches hold of him and throws him to the ground again.
This is repeated again and again
until finally the other man lies exhausted on the ground.
Then Lars speaks.

Is there an operatic aria in the background,
eg. the aria Lontananza crudel from Alessandro Marcello?]

LARS

If you go through them all, you will not find a single mortal who is fortunate in all
things.

everything is loaded with cobwebs.

under every stone a scorpion is on guard.

What people believe prevails over the truth.

the life of men is transformed by the cunning wiles of ruinous error that bring calamities at all seasons.

If you investigate, you will find that most of what men do is low.

how shall I who am mortal fight against events ordained by the gods? Where there is formidable power, hope is of no use.

O mortal and miserable race of men, we are nothing but creatures like shadows, walking about as a superfluous burden upon the earth.

Let any man procure as much pleasure as he can as he lives his daily life; but the morrow comes ever blind.

When a man prospers one should never call his fortune good before his life has been completed and he has run his course. For with little effort and in a moment of time the gift of an adverse fortune ruins the happiness brought by vast wealth, when the gods decree that things must change.

The clever dice-player must put up with the throw of the dice and make the best of it, but not lament his fortune.

For me it is best to drink bull's blood, and not to endure any longer these people's slanders.

the time of life is short, and once a mortal is hidden beneath the earth he lies there for all time.

A cup without a bottom is not put on the table.

Suddenly Mathilde slashes Lars's throat with a knife.

MATHILDE

tyrants

slaves

insolence

excess

cunning wiles

under every stone a scorpion

tortoises, owls, martens

cobwebs

I pray to Night that conceals all things.

a storm that brings back darkness

[The sound of a railroad train in the night,
as the young woman drags the other man out.]

MORRIS

the armies....

Standing opposite one other

struck at the orbs of one another's brazen shields....

the spear...the lance...

Alas. What shall we say, what words shall we utter?

...they who had endured the ordeal together

lay dead near to one another,

lacerated

PETER

If you have acted dreadfully, you must suffer dreadfully.

MORRIS

it is better not to exist than to live in misery

PETER

it is here that all the concerns of men go wrong,
when they wish to cure evil with evil.

For war likes to hunt down men who are young.

[Morris falls back in bed.]

PETER

It was he
who devised the wall
for the army of the Argives;
his
was the invention of the weights, numbers and measures;
he
taught them to marshal armies thus
and how to know the heavenly signs.
He was the first, too,
who showed the army how to use beacons,
and revealed things that earlier were hidden.
He discovered how to measure terms and periods of the stars,
trustworthy signs for those who watched while others slept,
and for the shepherds of ships at sea
he
found out the turnings of the Bear
and the chilly setting of the Dogstar.

There is no pain like long life.

Time makes all things dark
and brings them to oblivion.

First you will see a crop in flower,
all white;
then a round mulberry

that has turned red;
lastly
old age of Egyptian blackness takes over.

[Morris gradually vanishes behind the scrim
as Lucia in the bridal gown joins Peter.
A light is left on the ruined bicycle.

And we hear the music of Alanis Morissette or *Run Lola Run*.

Peter and Lucia dance.]

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NOTE:

The texts of Sophocles are taken from *Sophocles: Fragments*, translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, published in the Loeb Classical Library by Harvard University Press.

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