

Desdemona in the Afterlife

By Nelly E. Cuellar-Garcia

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DEDICATION

To the wonderful theatre company of ZHS, thank you for making this world come alive for the audience, and to Christina and Julian for always encouraging me whenever I get in my own way.

STORY OF THE PLAY

Set in the realm of Purgatory, the all-female cast of Desdemona, Emilia, Juliet, Lady Macbeth, and Ophelia explore the roles women choose in their pursuit of love and self-identity. Taking its inspiration from Dante's Inferno, this visceral play allows powerful actors to reach heightened levels of awareness as they grapple with the ideas of an individual's purpose in their mortal life and the ramifications it carries over into the immortal world. About 40-50 minutes.

AWARDS

University Interscholastic League, UIL One-Act Play Contest, TX, 2016: District Advancing Play, Bi-district OAP Champion, and Area Alternate Play to Regionals.

PREMIERE PERFORMANCE

Zapata High School, TX, Feb. 5, 2016 with the following cast and crew: A. Nunez, M. Gutierrez, R. Pineda, S. Ochoa, K. Alaniz, T. Gonzalez, A. Lerma, A. Garza, A. Gutierrez and K. Cooper.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(6 female speaking roles, unlimited female ensemble)

DESDEMONA: Recently died, has just arrived in Purgatory.

LADY GRUOCH MACBETH: Present in Purgatory.

EMILIA: Awaits in Purgatory.

JULIET: Awaits in Purgatory.

OPHELIA: Awaits in Purgatory.

MESSENGER: Angel of death that serves the will of Heaven.
May be played by one of more. May be double cast with the Angel.

ANGEL: Non-speaking guardian who delivers Desdemona into Purgatory. May be double cast with the Messenger.

WOMEN: Optional ensemble in Purgatory.

SETTING

A temple on the shores of Ante-Purgatorio: The region rising from the shore at the mountain's base leading to the gates of Purgatory proper. Columns give the illusion of a deteriorating temple. A giant willow tree with the trunk in the shape of a fossilized woman is center stage. This trunk becomes a major reveal in the final scenes of the show, so great wisps of willow sprouting from the branches can obliterate the trunk from view till the end. A cyclorama can create the illusion of beautiful passages of time by simply positioning ellipsoids on both sides of the wings and projecting textured colored gobos on them. For the final confrontation between the Messenger and Lady Macbeth, rotating gobos can create the illusion of anarchy that is about to engulf Purgatory.

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SONG

The women sing *The Willow Song*, which is originally found in Shakespeare's *Othello*. It is a sorrowful folk ballad which is sung acapella.

COSTUMES

It is suggested the actors appear in what they would have been wearing at the time of their deaths, and gowns are used as part of the effects in Scene 6.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The age-old question of what happens to us when we die an unnatural death has always plagued my students when they finish reading any Shakespearean text. Coming from all walks of life, they have varied religious beliefs, and varied expectations of the afterlife, so when I decided to pursue this topic, I turned for my inspiration to one of the greatest classics written by man, *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri.

My role as a playwright has always been to challenge my actors to explore different perspectives and challenge the expected outcome. How does a pagan Lady Macbeth end up in a decidedly Christian world? How does Juliet's suicide allow her to remain in Purgatory rather than the seventh circle of Hell? These and other questions are explored as these women interact with each other and their environment.

As in all the plays that I write, I highly encourage the director and designers to create a world as elaborate or simple as they wish. I am also a big advocate of color-blind casting and encourage it in all my works.

Your imagination is the only guide you will need in creating and directing this piece. Enjoy the show!

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(AT RISE: Curtains open to reveal DESDEMONA lying in front of a large willow tree with an ANGEL at her side, who is in essence, delivering her soul to Purgatory. This angel is invisible to all the actors on stage.)

Prologue

(The WOMEN on stage are all in their own reveries, reliving some of the last moments of their lives. We hear their ragged breathing before the actors start. EMILIA starts her first line and pauses. JULIET begins her first line at the end of Emilia's first line and pauses when she's done, OPHELIA begins her first line after Juliet finishes her first line. They then all speak the rest of their lines simultaneously. All should finish about the same time. The last line we will hear spoken alone is Juliet's last line. They all breathe raggedly and can be heard by the audience. LADY MACBETH delivers her lines at that time.)

EMILIA: *(Caught in the last moments of her life. Speaking to an invisible Othello.)* Then she was even more an angel, and you're an even blacker devil! You've lost your mind to accuse her of cheating. She was utterly faithful to you. A villain has made a mockery of your love. You stupid fool! I found that handkerchief by accident and gave it to my husband. *(Turning to an invisible Iago.)* He begged me to steal it many times. I found it and gave it to my husband! *(SHE re-enacts her stabbing and slowly falls to her knees, dealing with her pain; all we hear is her ragged breathing.)*

JULIET: *(Waking up in an invisible crypt.)* Where is my husband? I remember very well where I should be, and here I am... Where is my Romeo? *(Tripping over an invisible dead Romeo. SHE examines his body.)* Ah, Poison I see hath been his untimely end... Oh churl, drunk all, and left no friendly drop to help me after? None...

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JULIET: *(Cont'd.)* Then I'll be quick... Oh, good knife, my body will be your sheath... Rust inside my body and let me die...

OPHELIA: *(Speaking to an invisible Claudius and Gertrude.)* I'm quite well, and may God give you what you deserve. They say the baker's daughter was turned into an owl for refusing Jesus' bread. My lord, we know what we are now, but not what we may become. May God be at your table... *(SHE takes several steps and then leaps into an invisible lake. We see and hear her drowning.)*

LADY MACBETH: *(Remembering lines spoken by her husband.)* Life is but a walking shadow... I shall not be afraid of death.

(EMILIA is the first to overcome her reverie, and she begins to sing to comfort herself. The OTHERS hear her and join her in response to their need.)

WOMEN: *(Sing.)*
The poor soul sat sighing, by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow.
Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow...

(As the WOMEN sing, we see the ANGEL'S ministrations starting to have an effect. DESDEMONA'S chest starts to expand with breath and she awakens gasping, clutching at her throat, scared and lost.)

DESDEMONA: Where am I? *(To WOMEN.)* Where is this place? Answer me... Breathe... Breathe...

WOMEN: *(Sing.)*
The fresh streams ran by her, and murmured her moans,
Sing willow, willow, willow...
Her salt tears fell from her, and softened the stones,
Sing willow, willow, willow...

DESDEMONA: *(To herself.)* Remember... Remember...

End of Freeview

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