

RUDOLF II

ACT I, SCENE I

(Prague 1600. RUDOLF II's chambers. It is dominated by his bed, which is huge and cover with rich fabric. Above his bed is Arcimboldo's famous painting of him. Also in the room are other painting [probably one by Roelent Savery, probably one on a more erotic theme], strange mystical and scientific objects of various sorts, at least one ornate clock, a bejeweled Spanish sword, and a variety of other oddities representative of his large collections. At the top of the play, RUDOLF hangs from a rope for a moment. A chair is kicked over. It is obvious that he has attempted to hang himself. Then, quickly, the rope falls, and RUDOLF with it. RUDOLF lies on the ground and groans, softly. LIBUŠE, dressed in clothing of the ninth century, enters.)

LIBUŠE

Once, long ago, there was a ploughman, a good man, not too bright but with a kind heart, who would have lived an uneventful but satisfying ploughman's life. He was a stubborn man, and he didn't believe that women's opinions were worth very much. These were flaws of course, but flaws like that are not too serious in a ploughman.

RUDOLF

Am I dead?

LIBUŠE

His country was full of men like him. Those men had a queen who ruled them, but they were ashamed of her, because she was a woman. So she was forced to find a man to rule. She chose the ploughman.

RUDOLF

My necks hurts. I don't feel dead.

LIBUŠE

She chose him, knowing he had flaws. But every man has flaws. Some are just not lucky enough to be ploughmen. If you had been a ploughman, what would your life have been like?

RUDOLF

I don't understand your question.

LIBUŠE

What don't you understand?

RUDOLF

I just tried to hang myself. Is this what death is, stories about ploughmen?

LIBUŠE

You are not dead.

RUDOLF

Why not?

LIBUŠE

Perhaps you would have been an alchemist instead, one of the crowd of charlatans that gathers around this castle every day in the hope of royal favor. Though if you were an alchemist, who would be Emperor? Surely someone with less interest in exploring the occult.

RUDOLF

The rope must not have held. I was never good with knots.

LIBUŠE

You would be one of the more sincere, but less financially successful alchemists, I think. One who truly hopes to unlock the secrets of the universe. You alchemists call it your Great Work, I believe.

RUDOLF

I am not an alchemist.

LIBUŠE

I have my own Great Work. It involves Emperors, not alchemy. I too am trying to turn those of lesser mettle into gold.

RUDOLF

Who are you?

LIBUŠE

I'm surprised it took you so long to ask.

RUDOLF

If you hadn't appeared just in the midst of my suicide attempt, I would be quizzing you thoroughly, I assure you. The only thing more interesting than meeting a visitor from the afterlife would have been to venture into that territory myself. But since I failed at that, I must take what I can get. You are a ghost of some, sort, aren't you?

LIBUŠE

I am Libuše.

RUDOLF

The prophetess who founded Prague?

LIBUŠE

Yes.

RUDOLF

Then the ploughman must be your husband, Přemysl. I've heard that story.

LIBUŠE

Yours is more tragic.

RUDOLF

To me it is, yes. I've lost my closest brother.

LIBUŠE

Yes, that is tragic. But I am talking about the tragedy that is to come.

RUDOLF

You mean my brother Matthias. You're a prophetess, tell me, will he overthrow me in the end?

LIBUŠE

It seems like you are eager for it.

RUDOLF

It's my greatest fear.

LIBUŠE

Than why do you try to speed him to the throne, with your death?

RUDOLF

Yes, I must be mad. Matthias thinks I am, I know. Am I?

LIBUŠE

What does that mean, mad?

RUDOLF

I suspect that my brother, whom I hate, wants to overthrow me, so I try to kill myself. That's a sort of madness, isn't it?

LIBUŠE

It's a paradox. Impulsive. A poor idea. And weak, in an emperor.

RUDOLF

And mad.

LIBUŠE

Do you wish to be mad so dearly?

RUDOLF

Sometimes, yes. Sometimes, I do. I know it is coming. I've seen it in too many others. I see it even in my son. I just want it to arrive, for me.

LIBUŠE

You can't be mad yet, Rudolf. I won't allow it. I still need you to rule.

RUDOLF

If you need me to rule, tell me, how do I stop Matthias?

(LIBUŠE exits.)

Libuše! Wait!

(PHILIP enters, with a costume.)

PHILIP

My liege!

RUDOLF

Who are you?

PHILIP

Your valet, my liege, your new valet.

RUDOLF

Philip Lang?

PHILIP

Yes, my liege.

RUDOLF

Rumpf was telling me of you. And Jiří, too. Yes, I remember.

PHILIP

My liege, are you...are you well, my liege?

RUDOLF

What makes you ask?

PHILIP

I do not mean to pry, my liege.

RUDOLF

I was trying out a new perversion.

PHILIP

I see.

RUDOLF

Actually, it's a very old one. Almost all perversions are old. But we each must find them for ourselves anew. Have you ever tried it?

PHILIP

A noose, my liege?

RUDOLF

Yes.

PHILIP

No, my liege.

RUDOLF

You should. I stumbled across it just today, but I didn't think I would have a chance to put it to use. It seems as though I may, after all. I have a great enthusiasm for perversions.

PHILIP

Of course, my liege.

RUDOLF

Of course? So you have heard?

PHILIP

I did not mean to imply—

RUDOLF

What is that you're carrying?

PHILIP

It's a costume, my liege. Arcimboldo designed it. Rumpf asked me to bring it to you, for your opinion.

RUDOLF

I am surrounded by ghosts.

PHILIP

Ghosts, my liege?

RUDOLF

Do you believe in them?

PHILIP

I think I do.

RUDOLF

I was visited by one, just now.

PHILIP

Who?

RUDOLF

Arcimboldo, of course. He designed this before he died, but it is only now that I finally get to see it in the flesh...so to speak. Hold it up, then.

(PHILIP does.)

What do you think?

PHILIP

Me?

RUDOLF

Yes.

PHILIP

I'm no artist.

RUDOLF

Nor am I, unfortunately. I have always failed at the great tasks. Painting, alchemy, and suicide.

PHILIP

I have not tried...any of them, my liege.

RUDOLF

Yes, quite beautiful. A soft sort of beauty, inspiring really. It moves me, a little. It gives me an odd sort of hope, even in despair. Beauty does that for me.

PHILIP

I think the costume is beautiful, too. If you value my uninformed opinion. I was told he called it *The Astronomer*, because of your love of science and the stars.

RUDOLF

I was not speaking of the costume. But yes, it is beautiful too.

PHILIP

Shall I...leave it here with you, my liege?

RUDOLF

Stay.

(Pause.)

Jiří told me something about you that lingered in my mind.

PHILIP

What is that, my liege?

RUDOLF

He told me you had a most unusual penis. Is that true?

PHILIP

I...yes. Perhaps.

RUDOLF

It was described to me as some sort of deformity. But I think I know differently. It is a circumcision, is it not?

PHILIP

It...yes, my liege, it is.

RUDOLF

So you are a Jew.

PHILIP

I was. At one point. But I have converted. I am not a Jew any longer, I assure you.

RUDOLF

I see.

(Pause.)

Show me.

PHILIP

My liege?

RUDOLF

Don't worry. I am not angry. Just curious. Would you mind showing me this circumcision of yours?

PHILIP

As you wish my, liege.

(PHILIP begins to undress.)

RUDOLF

Wait. Let's talk a while more. Then later, if we so decide, the penis.