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THE GRAVEDIGGERS

Kostas Ostrauskas



KOSTAS OSTRASKAS was born in 1926 in Veiveriai, Lithuania. After completion of his secondary education in Liibeck, Germany, Ostrauskas studied Lithuanian language and literature at Baltic University in Hamburg and later Lithuanian and Russian literatures at the University of Pennsylvania, where he received his doctorate. At present Ostrauskas is the Head of the Music Library at the University of Pennsylvania.

After making his literary debut with poetry and stories, he began to work primarily in drama. His dramatic works include *The Pipe* (Pypkė, 1954), *In the Green Meadow* (Žaliojoj lankelėj, 1961), *Once Upon a Time Lived an Old Man and Old Woman* (Gyveno senelis ir senelė, 1963) and *The Gravediggers* (Duobkasiai, 1966).

Because of his numerous articles and studies on Lithuanian literature and culture, Ostrauskas has earned the reputation of being a critic and literary historian.

La mort, quoi, cette Providence des dramaturges!
Michel de Ghelderode
Les Entretiens d'Ostende

THE GRAVEDIGGERS

by

Kostas Ostrauskas

Dedicated to Algimantas Mackus

Translated by Rimvydas Šilbajoris

CHARACTERS:

GRAVEDIGGER I
GRAVEDIGGER II
YOUNG WOMAN

A cemetery.

Early evening.

Two GRAVEDIGGERS digging graves side by side. They are in the pits up to their waists.

GRAVEDIGGER I — frazzled shirt cuffs, shabby old tail coat. A Stetson hat on an umbrella stuck into the ground.

GRAVEDIGGER II — open shirt, has a waistcoat on.

GRAVEDIGGER I (*takes out a handkerchief, wipes his face like a gentleman*). To bury a man, as it turns out, is not an easy task.

GRAVEDIGGER II. How many times have you said that already ?

GRAVEDIGGER I. I keep repeating this in the hope that you may at last grasp the deeper meaning — sub specie aeternitatis.

GRAVEDIGGER II (laughs). Sure, and I haven't caught it yet.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Nay, but hear you, goodman delver."* Must these graves be so deep? Would not, say, a yard suffice? The dead will not break out of their graves. Then why not just scratch the ground a little and sing the *Requiem*?

[* This and other passages in quotation marks are taken, with few exceptions, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.]

GRAVEDIGGER II. The dogs'll get the bones.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Pshaw! Think, fellow, use your head! We would be able to dig more graves. *Ipsa facto*: more people could die.

GRAVEDIGGER II. There's no way to hurry this up. Time comes for somebody — plop, he's dead. And if it don't, you wouldn't finish him off with a cudgel.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Profound philosophy, this. Metaphysics.

GRAVEDIGGER II. What?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Never mind. (*Pathetically.*) *Passons. passons, passons!* In short, you don't agree with me?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Just stick to your job, that's all.

GRAVEDIGGER I. I beg your pardon! I am not about to stoop to that.

GRAVEDIGGER II. You don't like your trade no more?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Trade? Pardon! This is a stage. It is only a part I play.

GRAVEDIGGER II. You bet! With a shovel, in a pit.

GRAVEDIGGER I. And you?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Out there I used to plow. Here I dig.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Bravo! I assure you, my dear fellow, "there is no ancient gentlemen hut gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers".

GRAVEDIGGER II. You're talking stupid.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "They hold up Adam's profession."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Oh.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Not "oh", but "ah" ! "The Scripture says, 'Adam digged'."

GRAVEDIGGER II. He sure plowed Eve.

GRAVEDIGGER I. No need to mock, my friend. "What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. It's written right on your nose.

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Touché! (Digs and sings):*

"In youth, when I did love, did love,
Methought it was very sweet,
To contract, O. the time, for ah, my behove,
O, methough', there was nothing meet."

GRAVEDIGGER II. The time's long gone, eh?

GRAVEDIGGER I.

"But age, with his stealing steps,
Hath claw'd me in his clutch,
And hath shipped me intil the land,
As if I had never been such."

GRAVEDIGGER II. What are you beefing about — you're not digging your own grave.

GRAVEDIGGER I. It is but a poetic device.

(GRAVEDIGGER II takes a skull out of the grave.)

GRAVEDIGGER I. Aha! "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Yelled its head off. *(Throws the skull away.)*

GRAVEDIGGER I. "How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder! It might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'er-reaches; one that would circumvent God, might it not?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. Maybe it was a politician, but does that make me a knave, and an ass to boot?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Pardon me, my good man — these are only my lines. Shakespeare. Hamlet!

GRAVEDIGGER II. To hell with them, whoever they are. Can't you speak your own words?

GRAVEDIGGER I. What need do I have for them if there is a nobler tongue? *(Climbs out of the grave and picks up the skull.)* "Or of a courtier; which could say, 'Good-morrow, sweet lord! How dost thou, good lord?' This might be my lord such-a-one..."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Or else, a clodhopper.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "I like thy wit well."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Perhaps we understand each other after all. *(Throws out another skull.)*

GRAVEDIGGER I. "There's another. *(Takes the skull.)* Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillies, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? Hum!"

GRAVEDIGGER II. He lost his case, and his noodle don't hurt him no more, that's for sure. Except maybe from your palaver.

(GRAVEDIGGER II climbs out from the grave, sits down on the pile of dirt and starts eating, washing the food down with whiskey.)

GRAVEDIGGER I. I perceive you are gorging yourself again.

GRAVEDIGGER II. A man works in the fields, he's got to keep his strength up. And you won't have any grub this time, either?

GRAVEDIGGER I *(takes out a cigarette butt and lights up)*.
I have use for none but spiritual nourishment.

GRAVEDIGGER II (*gives him the bottle*). Here, then, have a suck of this.

GRAVEDIGGER I. This is not indispensable, but I shall not refuse. (*Takes a swallow and spits it out.*) Poison! (*Returning the bottle.*) And thus you will go to your grave without ever having tasted the difference between noble spirits and dishwater.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Why talk about going places if you're there already.

GRAVEDIGGER I. We only prepare the bedding for others, "goodman delver". This grave here, for instance, is for the fairest Ophelia. (*Talks with himself*):

"What man dost thou dig it for?

"For no man, sir.

"What woman, then?

"For none, neither.

"Who is to be buried in it?

"One that was a woman, sir; but rest her soul, she's dead."

(*To GRAVEDIGGER II.*) But for whom are you scratching out this pit — I have no notion.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Maybe it's for your "prince".

GRAVEDIGGER I. Nonsense. It is too early.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Why?

GRAVEDIGGER I. A ridiculous question. No one is buried alive.

'GRAVEDIGGER II. So there you've got it: the hole is for somebody who isn't alive.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Your logic astounds me. But it is of little help. Aren't you curious?

GRAVEDIGGER II. I don't care. Whoever they stick in there, I'll bury him.

GRAVEDIGGER I. It would seem to me you don't respect your profession sufficiently.

GRAVEDIGGER II. I'd go nuts otherwise.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Did not the undertaker tell you?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Did he tell you?

GRAVEDIGGER I. I must confess, I remember nothing. It seemed as if someone had taken me firmly by the arm, brought me here and told me to dig.

GRAVEDIGGER II. That's just how it was with me. (*Pause*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. I think I have stepped out of character a little. Someone has mixed up the text.

GRAVEDIGGER II. While they're straightening it out, you better get into your grave. We won't be finished in time. (*Climbs in and digs.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Mass, I cannot tell" who shall stretch out his limbs here comfortably for eternal repose. It could be a maiden as yet unspoiled, or else a whore having sold her last breath. Or perhaps a mother who could no longer bear the ruckus of her dozen brats, or again, perhaps a dignified matron who passed on out of sheer ennui and is still holding on to her lorgnette, even in the darkness of the grave?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Why just womenfolk? (*Silence*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. "How long will a man lie in the earth ere he rot?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. You'll find out when you are in there.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Pardon? (*Suddenly.*) I cannot bear not knowing! "Whose grave's this, sirrah?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. That's right, yell some more and I'll tell you.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Do not play a bigger fool than you are. "What is he whose grief Bears such an emphasis? Whose phrase of sorrow-Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I, Hamlet the Dane." (*Raises his hands and leaps into the grave on top of GRAVEDIGGER II.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II. Have you gone crazy? !...

GRAVEDIGGER I.

"Thou pray'st not well.
I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat;
For, though I am not splenitive and rash,
Yet have I something in me dangerous,
Which let thy wiseness fear: hold off thy hand."

(*While the GRAVEDIGGERS are struggling, a YOUNG WOMAN walks in nonchalantly, wearing slacks and a a tight sweater. She is blonde, well-built. The GRAVE-DIGGERS are dumbfounded.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. What devil is this?

GRAVEDIGGER II. No devil — a woman in pants.

YOUNG WOMAN. How do you do?

GRAVEDIGGER II. I do, I do, what else is there to do?

YOUNG WOMAN. That's fine. And you?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Pardon?

YOUNG WOMAN. *Comment allez-vous, Monsieur?*

(*GRAVEDIGGER I jumps out of the grave, leans on his umbrella and takes the hand of the YOUNG WOMAN.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. Madame, I am, as they say, in the spring of my years, in the very flower of youth. (*Kisses her hand.*)
How cold is your hand.

YOUNG WOMAN. Really? (*Pause*)

YOUNG WOMAN. You seem to be having a difference of opinion.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Eternally. (*Puts on his hat.*) A struggle between the elements of darkness and light.

YOUNG WOMAN. As tragic as that?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Allow me to present myself (*takes off his hat*): an actor *par excellence* — Oedipus, Hamlet, King Lear, Faust; if need be — Romeo, *et cetera, et cetera*. *Ergo* — a mirror of man's suffering and of his soul.

GRAVEDIGGER II. A gravedigger.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Your smattering of *quid pro quo* shall not distract from my glory. Today, as ever, I am ecstatic with my part: "There is no ancient gentlemen but grave-makers. .."

GRAVEDIGGER II. What? Adam and Eve again?

GRAVEDIGGER I. If it were not for the fair sex... "Give us the foils!" (*Takes up a fencing stance with the umbrella.*)

YOUNG WOMAN. "Good my lord, be quiet."

GRAVEDIGGER I. Horatio! Are you an actress, too?

YOUNG WOMAN. Hardly. Unless we are all actors. In .that case, I am cast, they say, in a tragic role.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Enchanté! (*Sticks the umbrella into the ground and hangs his hat on it.*) "Lady, shall I lie in your lap?"

YOUNG WOMAN. But we've just met.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Let's not be so particular.

YOUNG WOMAN. All right. Then I answer: "No, my lord."

GRAVEDIGGER I. "I mean: my head upon your lap."

YOUNG WOMAN. "Ay, my lord."

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Do you think I mean country matters?"

YOUNG WOMAN. "I think nothing, my lord."

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Charmant!* (To GRAVEDIGGER II.) "How like you this play?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. Isn't-one fool enough?

GRAVEDIGGER I (to YOUNG WOMAN). "By the Lord, Horatio, these three years I have taken note of it; the age has grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe."

YOUNG WOMAN. Oh?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Wait another three years, the toe will reach higher yet.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Fig. (To YOUNG WOMAN.) Pay him no attention. "Welcome to Elsinore."

YOUNG WOMAN {*laughs*}. My pleasure.

GRAVEDIGGER II. What kind of circus is this? Just make yourself at home, woman, on this muddy grave pit, and leave at that.

YOUNG WOMAN. That's all? You get straight to the point, don't you?

GRAVEDIGGER II. I'm not much at big speeches. In the field, spreading manure, I had no use for fancy talk. I don't need it now either.

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Voilà*: a mole of the earth.

GRAVEDIGGER II. What counts is that I still belong to the soil.

YOUNG WOMAN. Excellent. The formalities are over. (To GRAVEDIGGER I.) Well, then — back to your grave. Hop!

GRAVEDIGGER I. I beg your pardon. We don't know each other yet.

YOUNG WOMAN. Everyone knows me, but no one is anxious for the meeting.

GRAVEDIGGER I. With your youth and beauty? You can't be serious.

YOUNG WOMAN. Believe me.

GRAVEDIGGER I. I cannot. This is why I must get to know you. You speak the lines very well, but you say you are not an actress.

YOUNG WOMAN. Oh, no. Not at all.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Then who are you?

YOUNG WOMAN. Don't you remember?

GRAVEDIGGER I. I swear by St. Ginesius — no.

YOUNG WOMAN. And you?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Never laid my eyes on you.

YOUNG WOMAN. Both of you have short memories. It was I who told you to dig the graves. (*The GRAVEDIGGERS exchange glances.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. Are you the undertaker?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Damn it! Now it's the womenfolk sticking you under the ground.

YOUNG WOMAN (smiles). Is this really news?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Even if it were news, on this occasion it is a pleasure. My respects. (*Kisses YOUNG WOMAN'S hand again.*) Your hand.. .

YOUNG WOMAN. ... is cold. You told me already.

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Pardon.* And yet, I must confess, I don't remember you. Do you perhaps?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Hell, I don't know and I don't care. If she says she told us to dig, let's dig.

YOUNG WOMAN. You are practical.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "A worthy pioner!"

YOUNG WOMAN (*pointing to the grave*). Then follow his example. (*GRAVEDIGGER I does not move.*) Do you feel uneasy today?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Your insight pierces like an arrow.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Does it always hit the bullseye?

YOUNG WOMAN. If I were to say "yes", you would not believe me anyway. So the question remains a question. (*YOUNG WOMAN takes GRAVEDIGGER I by the arm and leads him to the grave.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II. Look at that — just like going to the altar.

YOUNG WOMAN (*points to the grave*). "Go, make you ready."

GRAVEDIGGER I (*on the brink of the grave, pathetically*). "O day and night, but this is wondrous strange! "
(*GRAVEDIGGER I climbs into the grave and begins to dig. YOUNG WOMAN comes forward.*)

YOUNG WOMAN (*to the audience*). "Will the king hear this piece of work?"

(*It is getting darker. A light rain starts falling.*)
(*A bell rings in the chapel.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I (*after the sound has died down, standing under his umbrella*). . . .Never send to know for whom the bell tolls. . .

YOUNG WOMAN. ... — it tolls for thee.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Ah! A lady of culture!

YOUNG WOMAN (*takes the FIRST GRAVEDIGGER's umbrella and stabs it into the ground*). My dear sir, I have never lacked culture. It's only my manners that are sometimes found wanting. This, it would seem, is evident even now. But would you call that a shortcoming?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Heaven forbid — no. So let us continue our dialogue.

YOUNG WOMAN (*without enthusiasm*). As you wish.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Madam, it so fell out, that certain players
We o'er-raught on the way."

(*GRAVEDIGGER II, leaning on his spade, follows the conversation with a smile.*)

YOUNG WOMAN. No. Let us return to where the dialogue broke off: it tolls for thee.

GRAVEDIGGER I. For me?

YOUNG WOMAN. For thee. (*Pause*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. Your wit, Madame, is keen.

YOUNG WOMAN. Some think, alas, mistakenly, that I never laugh.

"The actors are come hither, my lord. Buz, buz!"

(*GRAVEDIGGER I and YOUNG WOMAN burst out laughing together.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II. Should I be laughing, too?

YOUNG WOMAN. I would suggest that you restrain yourself.

GRAVEDIGGER I (*to GRAVEDIGGER II*). ... — it tolls for thee. (As in " 'Tis the season to be jolly".) Fa-la-lala-la-la-lala! (*Mockingly*):

" 'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world."

GRAVEDIGGER II Don't curse hell. It might come in handy.

YOUNG WOMAN. Very practical advice, considering the time and place. (*Kicks the skull next to the pit of GRAVEDIGGER I.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. "This same skull", my dear lady, "was Yorick's skull, the king's jester."

YOUNG WOMAN. I don't recall exactly. It could, indeed, be so.

GRAVEDIGGER II. You mean there were two of them?

GRAVEDIGGER I (*takes the skull*). "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy."

YOUNG WOMAN. Too bad, too bad.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Yeah, ain't that sad?

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing."

YOUNG WOMAN. "What's that, my lord?"

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' the earth?"

YOUNG WOMAN. "E'en so."

GRAVEDIGGER I. "And smelt so? Pah!" (*Puts the skull down.*)

YOUNG WOMAN. "E'en so, my lord."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Too bad, too bad.

YOUNG WOMAN. Yeah, ain't that sad?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Madame, far be it from me to criticise your behavior, but I would nevertheless appreciate a little more respect. If not for me, then for the text.

YOUNG WOMAN. Of course, the text.

GRAVEDIGGER I. And if not for the text, then at least for the author.

YOUNG WOMAN. Ah, the author. That is most important.

GRAVEDIGGER I. For, in the end, one does not mock at death.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Why not?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Death commands respect.

GRAVEDIGGER II (*blows his nose vigorously*). Like hell it does.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Don't blaspheme.

YOUNG WOMAN. Death thanks you kindly, I am sure.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Now just a minute — who cares about that? Some don't give a damn what death thinks.

YOUNG WOMAN. Oh? Some do not?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Some.

YOUNG WOMAN. Very few, I assure you.

GRAVEDIGGER II. How come you know so much about this?

YOUNG WOMAN. Experience, dear friend, experience. (*Pause.*) But you two fellows better get busy, for time is getting short. If you don't dig a proper pit, the heels will stick out.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Whose?

YOUNG WOMAN. Why, obviously, the heels of those for whom these graves are waiting. By the way, those two are still alive...

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Pardon?*

YOUNG WOMAN. ... — but also dead.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Madame, your words seem empty of meaning.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Supposin' she fills them up?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Oh, there is no doubt but she will. Abundantly. — Damnation! There is a question, but I have no answer! Madame, I beg you.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Why don't you shut up and dig.

GRAVEDIGGER I. You in the pit are just like a pig in the muck. But I — I think, I search for an answer. I must know for whom I'm digging this hole.

GRAVEDIGGER II. So you can be sure it ain't for you.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "O, answer me!
Let me not burst in ignorance."

YOUNG WOMAN (*smiles*). Always this yen for knowledge. This confounded desire to put one's finger on everything. Knowledge enslaves, the finger will get burned. If a snail, i.e. *helix pomatia*, should wish, out of boredom, to find out why it has been imprisoned in its own shell — this I could understand and justify. But man? He is free!

GRAVEDIGGER I. Madame! Now you have spoken! "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How-infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god!"

GRAVEDIGGER II. What a blabbermouth!

GRAVEDIGGER I. "The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!"

GRAVEDIGGER II. And the dregs, I'd say.

GRAVEDIGGER I. What wonder, then, if he does search for an answer.

GRAVEDIGGER II. In the grave pit, especially.

YOUNG WOMAN. Believe me: ignorance is bliss. At least sometimes. Now, in particular.

GRAVEDIGGER I. I beg your pardon: *cogito, ergo sum*.

YOUNG WOMAN. Hm. (*Pause*.) "And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

(*YOUNG WOMAN takes the two skulls and brings them up to the GRAVEDIGGERS' faces.*)

YOUNG WOMAN. This skull here, let's say, could have been that of a plowman — tempered by the sun, the rains and wind.

GRAVEDIGGER II. If so, it doesn't look one bit like me.

YOUNG WOMAN. Small wonder. And this — of an actor — tragedian: Oedipus, Hamlet, King Lear, Faust; if need be, Romeo, *et cetera, et cetera*. Corroded by makeup.

GRAVEDIGGER I (*avoids looking at the skull*). Madame, the text is different: "That skull had a tongue in it. . ."

YOUNG WOMAN. And don't you have a tongue?

GRAVEDIGGER II. That's all he's got.

YOUNG WOMAN (*laughs and throws the skulls away*). Dust. Does it, then, matter whose?

GRAVEDIGGER I. I beg to differ.

GRAVEDIGGER II. That's it. Hang on. Don't give up the ship!

YOUNG WOMAN. Would it not be more interesting to see how dust returns to dust?

GRAVEDIGGER I. On stage only. In life it is macabre. (*Opens his umbrella.*)

YOUNG WOMAN. All right, let's take the stage. I remember one play.

GRAVEDIGGER I (*under the umbrella*). Which one?

YOUNG WOMAN. You did not see the play performed and had no part in it. Not your cup of tea. Although no one invited me — I'm seldom paid this honor — I did feel right at home. Perhaps that's why I remember it so well. I'll quote you some lines: Our destination was the same. Some were nailed in coffins, others wrapped in shrouds, others again fell and buried themselves — without coffin or shroud.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Fell and buried themselves?

YOUNG WOMAN. Without coffin or shroud.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Nonsense.

YOUNG WOMAN. I wonder.

GRAVEDIGGER II. It ain't so easy to stick oneself under.

YOUNG WOMAN. Not as hard as you think.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Ever try it?

YOUNG WOMAN. Do you have to try everything to be convinced ?

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Words, words, words."

YOUNG WOMAN. Be careful: Polonius ended with a dagger in his belly. . . (*There is a squeak.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II (*strikes with his shovel*). A rat!

GRAVEDIGGER I (*suddenly closes his umbrella and holds it like a rapier*). "Dead, for a ducat, dead!" (*Tries to jump out of his grave, but the YOUNG WOMAN pushes him back in with her foot. The darkness thickens. Long pause.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II. What kind of woman are you, not afraid of rats?

YOUNG WOMAN. Rats only threaten us in skirts.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Do britches give you that much courage?

YOUNG WOMAN. What, are you itching with curiosity, too?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Sure, sure. Want to scratch me?

YOUNG WOMAN. Yes indeed, to scratch you out. (*Pause.*) Questions, questions, questions.

GRAVEDIGGER II. I ain't asking — just wondering.

GRAVEDIGGER I. This should suffice.
"To be, or not to be: that is the question."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Stupid! That ain't no question! Hold on to the earth, with your teeth if need be, as long as you can.

YOUNG WOMAN. And when you no longer can?

GRAVEDIGGER I. "To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream."

GRAVEDIGGER II. That's no sleep, brother; them ain't no dreams.

YOUNG WOMAN. Then what?

(*GRAVEDIGGER II looks at YOUNG WOMAN, scoops up a shovelful of dirt and slaps it down in front of her. YOUNG WOMAN smiles.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. "To die: to sleep; No more.-"

GRAVEDIGGER II. No more? (*Silence*)

YOUNG WOMAN. You keep staring far ahead and don't see what lies under your very noses. But the present is a reality, just like this night — dark, wet and murky. (*With an oratorical gesture.*) Gentlemen. The sun won't rise this morning.

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Pardon?*

GRAVEDIGGER II. Oh no? Are you telling me the cock won't crow?

YOUNG WOMAN. It will fold its wings and sing no more.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. Yeah. Just try to shut up a cock!

YOUNG WOMAN. All trumpets will be silent, the spades and halberds will be quietly laid aside. GRAVEDIGGER II. What in the world are you jabbering about ?

GRAVEDIGGER I. *C'est l'absurde*, Madame.

YOUNG WOMAN. I try to satisfy your curiosity and you refuse me.

GRAVEDIGGER I. But you do speak in riddles.

YOUNG WOMAN. I said: the night is dark; I add: replete with mysteries of fate.
(*Pause. YOUNG WOMAN takes out a coin.*)

YOUNG WOMAN. Here's a coin. Flip it, noble man. (*GRAVEDIGGER I cringes.*) Flip it — take a chance.

GRAVEDIGGER I. I don't believe in chance.

YOUNG WOMAN. And you an actor? Where is your winged imagination, your excellent fancy? (*Pause.*) Pity. How about you?

GRAVEDIGGER II (*takes the coin*). What are the stakes?

YOUNG WOMAN. They have been fixed already.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Then why this game of chance?

YOUNG WOMAN. I like to play.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Okay by me. Might as well play the fool and have some fun.

YOUNG WOMAN. Excellent. Look at the coin.

GRAVEDIGGER II. A skull. (*Turns the coin over.*) Another skull!

GRAVEDIGGER I. Well, well — aren't you in luck.

YOUNG WOMAN (*firmly*). Flip it!

(*GRAVEDIGGER II throws the coin in the air, catches it, cries out in pain and drops it to the ground.*) GRAVEDIGGER II. Damn it! My palm is burning!

GRAVEDIGGER I. It stinks of human flesh!

YOUNG WOMAN (*with a loud laugh*). You have a good nose, indeed.

GRAVEDIGGER II. If you want to play like that, pick up your marbles and go.

YOUNG WOMAN; Alas, almost everybody tells me that.

(*Silence*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

YOUNG WOMAN. Most likely. — Well, the die is cast. Enough digging.

GRAVEDIGGER I. At last.

(*The GRAVEDIGGERS are up to their armpits in the holes. It rains harder.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II. Just a bit deeper, maybe?

YOUNG WOMAN. That will do.

GRAVEDIGGER II. You're the boss.

YOUNG WOMAN (*smiles*). You can climb out now.

GRAVEDIGGER I. I thank you, Madame.

(*The GRAVEDIGGERS try to climb out but cannot. They get as high as their waists and fall back in again.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. Damnation!

GRAVEDIGGER II. Hey, what gives? This must be some joke!

YOUNG WOMAN. There, you see. And you thought you'd dig even deeper.

GRAVEDIGGER II. My legs seem full of lead.

GRAVEDIGGER I. I feel as if some force were pulling me into the bowels of the earth. 'Tis trickery! A trap!

YOUNG WOMAN. It couldn't be. You must be tired. Rest a while.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Inside the grave? No, thank you.

YOUNG WOMAN. Where will you find a softer bedding for your rest?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Never mind this baloney about being tired. I've dug more and deeper graves than this.. .

YOUNG WOMAN. . . .but for the first time can't climb out ? Embarrassing, isn't it? Here — let me give you a hand.

GRAVEDIGGER II. I'll make it by myself, even if it kills me.

YOUNG WOMAN. Good luck.

GRAVEDIGGER I (*stretches out his hand*). I beg you.

YOUNG WOMAN. With pleasure.

(*The YOUNG WOMAN takes GRAVEDIGGER I by the hand and suddenly, with a quick, panther-like movement, jumps on his neck.*)

YOUNG WOMAN (*sitting on his shoulders*). Apocalypse!

GRAVEDIGGER I. Madaaaame!

(*YOUNG WOMAN jumps off, and GRAVEDIGGER I collapses in the pit.*)

YOUNG WOMAN. My apologies.

GRAVEDIGGER I (*stands up and raises his hands*):
"O all you host of heaven! O earth!"

GRAVEDIGGER II. For God's sakes, quit your yapping. GRAVEDIGGER I. "What else? And shall I couple hell ?"

YOUNG WOMAN. Too late. (*To the audience, with a smile.*)
Oh, how romantic. ..

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. . ."

YOUNG WOMAN. Tonight. Right now.

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Pardon?*

(*Suddenly it gets completely dark.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II. What the hell is this?

(*A long, tense silence. Two heavy strokes of the chapel bell, and a faint bluish light envelops the cemetery. The YOUNG WOMAN emerges standing like a statue: instead of a face, she has a burning phosphorescent skull.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II (*crosses himself*). God Almighty!

GRAVEDIGGER I. A-a-a-a-gh!

GRAVEDIGGER II. Death!

GRAVEDIGGER I. The Providence of playwrights!

YOUNG WOMAN (*with a deep bow*). At your service.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!"

(*The GRAVEDIGGERS start again clambering furiously out of their graves, but fall once more to the bottom.*)

YOUNG WOMAN. No use. I assure you: your struggles are in vain.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Away, away, you evil demon!

YOUNG WOMAN. I'm neither demon, nor evil. My attire is a bit unusual, perhaps. But don't be astonished. Some see me riding a horse, others — with a scythe over my shoulder, and yet others behold me as I am now. I trust you will forgive a woman's frailty — to keep changing costumes. This is but form. The content remains the same.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "O.woe is me, To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"

YOUNG WOMAN. Again unhappy? You wanted an answer. How shall I satisfy you, dear?

GRAVEDIGGER I. "O most pernicious woman!"

GRAVEDIGGER II. Damn your eyes, how I wish I had time enough to curse you as you deserve.

YOUNG WOMAN. Do not lament — you'll get the chance to relieve your bile. I never miss such an opportunity — it comes so seldom.

GRAVEDIGGER I (*choking*). Madame, I am most rudely surprised. To tell the truth — I'm shattered.

YOUNG WOMAN. You are?

GRAVEDIGGER I. I must say, your visit was quite unexpected.

YOUNG WOMAN. Many reproach me for this shortcoming. Put is it really a bad thing? Ignorance is a blessing.

GRAVEDIGGER II. I bless you like I would a slimy snake.

YOUNG WOMAN. Thanks. And you?

GRAVEDIGGER I. I? I. . . protest.

YOUNG WOMAN. How?

GRAVEDIGGER I. By the strictest means possible.

YOUNG WOMAN. Oho! What means are those?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Why — the strictest of all possible means. (*Silence*)

YOUNG WOMAN. You have disappointed me.

GRAVEDIGGER II. When it's finally time to give it to her straight, he swallows his tongue.

GRAVEDIGGER I.

"O heat, dry up my brains! Tears seven times salt, Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye!"

GRAVEDIGGER II. Your brain'll dry up, heat or no heat, and you won't need the salt of tears to eat your eyes out.

(*YOUNG WOMAN giggles in her fist.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II. Shut up, you devil's cuckoo bird! Wouldn't you like to see me burst out crying and beating my breast? To roll my eyes like I was thunderstruck? To fall at your feet, arms spread out like I was nailed on the Holy Cross ? You got somethin' else coming! I ain't gonna crawl before you on my belly, you creepy toad!

GRAVEDIGGER I. "O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious jieriwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags. . ." Do forgive him, Madame.

YOUNG WOMAN. Forgive? On the contrary, I'm glad.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Don't get happy, you stinking whore! Quit your drooling! If I could only squash you like a louse! Oh. how I'd like to tear out your guts and heart! . .
— My blackest curse on you!

YOUNG WOMAN (*turns to the audience, ironically*). And where is the respect that was my due?

(*GRAVEDIGGER II lifts his shovel and belts the YOUNG WOMAN on the behind.*)

GRAVEDIGGER II. There, take it!

(*YOUNG WOMAN falls sprawling in the dirt.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. "How does your honor for this many a day?"

YOUNG WOMAN. "I humbly thank you; well, well, well." (*YOUNG WOMAN gets up, all caked with mud, stretches sensuously and sighs.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. Madame, don't judge him too severely: my friend was provoked.

YOUNG WOMAN. He had his reasons. Forgive me: I did not wish to offend your tender sentiments.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Go scratch your ass!

(*YOUNG WOMAN laughs and spreads her legs between the grave pits.*) (*The chapel bell rings thrice.*)

YOUNG WOMAN (*clapping her hands.*) Well, gentlemen! Let's get down to business!

(The GRAVEDIGGERS compulsively begin to bury each other.)

YOUNG WOMAN. Faster!

GRAVEDIGGER I (*dazed, as if in a dream*): "A pick-axe, and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding sheet. . ."

GRAVEDIGGER II. The sun won't rise this morning. . .

GRAVEDIGGER I. "O, a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet."

GRAVEDIGGER II. . . .and the cock won't crow.

YOUNG WOMAN. Faster! Move!

GRAVEDIGGER II. Where is your heat, oh sun?

GRAVEDIGGER I. "He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone. . ."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Oh cock, where is your cry?

GRAVEDIGGER I. "At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone."

YOUNG WOMAN. Stooooone!

(*Only the heads of the GRAVEDIGGERS are left sticking out.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. Madame, why so cruel?

YOUNG WOMAN (*shrugs indifferently*). I have no manners.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable.
Seem to me all the uses of this world!"

GRAVEDIGGER II. Idiot! Now, at least, come to your senses !

YOUNG WOMAN (*to the audience, motioning to the GRAVEDIGGERS*). "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable!" (*Pause.*) It is a pity to wave good-by.

(*YOUNG WOMAN comes to GRAVEDIGGER I. bends down and touches him with her lips. A pastoral kiss.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I.

"Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love."

YOUNG WOMAN. Another performance.

(She kneels down, feverishly embraces the head of GRAVEDIGGER II and kisses him, clinging to his lips like a leech.)

YOUNG WOMAN. Now, this is passion!

GRAVEDIGGER II. Bah! What's the matter? Ain't you had any recently?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Madame, forgive this peasant, he knows not what he says.

YOUNG WOMAN. Quite the contrary. — "How fares our cousin Hamlet?"

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Excellent i' faith."

YOUNG WOMAN. A lie. "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?"

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Not so, my lord; I am too much i' the sun."

YOUNG WOMAN. Still reciting? *(Silence)*

YOUNG WOMAN. "Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you."

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd."

YOUNG WOMAN. Sorry, not my job.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Good night, mother."

YOUNG WOMAN. If you were not acting, your last words would be a compliment. *(Takes a shovel.)* The part has been exhausted. No more lines. *(Buries GRAVEDIGGER I completely and sticks the shovel into the ground with gusto.)* Basta! *(Pause)*

YOUNG WOMAN. Well, and how is our "goodman delver" doing ?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Go to hell, you whore to all the world!

YOUNG WOMAN. Oh, if only I could.

GRAVEDIGGER II. I came from the earth — I return to the earth. But not without bitterness. *(Clears his throat and spits in the YOUNG WOMAN's face.)*

YOUNG WOMAN *(laughing sharply)*. You can tell the lion by his claws. "Fare you well, my dove!" *(Covers the head of GRAVEDIGGER II with earth and blows a kiss into the air.)* Adieu, my darling.. .

(A downpour from the sky. The YOUNG WOMAN, wading about in the mud, gradually develops her movements into an erotic, almost obscene, dance. Before the end of the dance, she collapses in the mud.)

YOUNG WOMAN *(moaning)*. I am... swallowed up... by my victory. *(Tears off her mask.)* I'm tired. *(Pouring water on herself.)* Aahh. . . how my bones ache... and my limbs. . . O God! where is my own old age ? Where is my death? *(Pause.)* Death? My death? *(Bursts out laughing bitterly.)*
Silence.

Suddenly the YOUNG WOMAN stretches out again in her full grace, puts on the mask, turns around nimbly and, stepping over the graves of the GRAVEDIGGERS, departs from the cemetery.)

1964-65

Scenes from the 1967 production of The Gravediggers by the Chicago Lithuanian theater.

