

Dies

by Terry Dugan

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Cast of characters

FLORA, an aging local theatre star

VI'LET, also a local theatre star although aging slightly less

SAPPHIRE, a transvestite

THELMA, a very old woman

CLAPPY KAY, an unorthodox method director

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SCENE: A room where a callback for the part of Juliet in the new Clappy Kay production of Romeo and Juliet is about to take place.

AT RISE: Youthish stage veteran VI'LET prepares for the final audition.

VI'LET

My only love sprung from my only hate. Too early seen unknown, and known too late! Prodigious birth of love it is to me, that I must love a loathed enemy.

(FLORA enters.)

Like a forgotten spirit, she appears, as desired as a bag of garbage -- about as useful as one, I might add. You poor, lost, disoriented woman. Let me escort you back to your nurses who must be losing sleep from your absence.

FLORA

You insufferable hack. So witty. So blind to the limits of her talent. I will call it talent, that much I will. My mind can envision your audition: with talent you spread your legs wide apart. Not wide enough it seems: You're here, I'm here.

VI'LET

A woman your age must have brain damage to even think she could play Juliet. A mother, a nurse, a ticket-taker: all these things I see in your sagging face. You imply I'm a whore, but you are here, this call-back, to play someone half your age. Women like you don't make it to round two, not without pity, not without pretense.

FLORA

Foolish Vi'let, women like me are you. In time. Women like me are you. You'll see.

VI'LET

When I lose all touch with reality, I'll be the first to tell you you were right.

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FLORA

So strange that I'm a threat to you, sweet child. Being full of youth must feel so empty.

(SAPPHIRE enters; he screams.)

SAPPHIRE

Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my goodness! Vi'let Wilsted! Flora Dindle! Right here! An autograph. I need your autographs. I, of course, don't have a pen or paper. If you both just stand there for a second I can make an autograph with my mind. There, there, hold on, almost there, I've got it. Vi'let, I adore your work to no end. There will only be one Desdemona. The Upper Umbria Dinner Theatre has been a shell of itself since you left.

VI'LET

Thank you. That was some time ago, of course.

SAPPHIRE

Flora Dindle, the one who changed my life. The time I watched you play Hamlet's Gertrude was the first day of the rest of my life. The Hicksburg Community Playhouse died, it just died, the day you left for ... Broadway?

(pause.)

VI'LET

I must admit I did not catch your name.

SAPPHIRE

Sapphire Jones. The grand jewel of denial.

VI'LET

Though your words are kind, you must forgive us. We must ask you to leave us to our thoughts as we slip into the zone of ourselves. This room you stumbled upon, dear Sapphire, is holding a callback for Juliet. Even us great actresses must prepare.

SAPPHIRE

I was called-back for Juliet as well.

(SAPPHIRE cackles again.)

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FLORA

A man can't play the part of Juliet.

SAPPHIRE

I think you're above name-calling, Flora.

FLORA

You have a penis! I can see the bump!

SAPPHIRE

Juliet was once played only by men.

FLORA

People used to die of tooth infections.

VI'LET

Flora dear, Flora dear: It's Clappy's game. This is the sort of thing Clappy Kay does to break his actors down to their bare selves. He locates your rawest nerve and twists it.

FLORA

That's why everyone wants to work for him. We're masochists who speak in safe words. Clappy Kay can make us actors feel real.

SAPPHIRE

I'm not some ruse; I deserve to be here. I star in a fringe group: "The Thesbians."

FLORA

That's what Clappy Kay would want him to say.

SAPPHIRE

The purest, only true form of acting is for a man to play as a woman, and for woman to play the role of man.

VI'LET

I think that he-she just insulted us.

SAPPHIRE

Every role generates self-delusion as you dig up some old

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SAPPHIRE (cont.)

experience and repackage it as something brand new, pretending to transform to the other. So for every role, you draw on something -- memories once known or ones never had. No matter what you've become, you're still you, rewinding yourself to play a new role. A man playing the role of a woman; a woman becoming man: that's acting.

FLORA

Bad actresses like ourselves must give up as there is no hope for the myopic, us women who stereotype ourselves, who choose to play roles of our own gender.

SAPPHIRE

I'm saying you don't become someone else until you're someone you're completely not.

VI'LET

When Flora pretends to be an actress, but the whole world can see that she can't act.

FLORA

(To VI'LET)

That was completely unnecessary.

(To SAPPHIRE)

You can clomp in here with hard-to-find shoes, touting phony-baloney womanness, but don't think for a second you can take leading lady parts from leading ladies.

SAPPHIRE

Clappy's vision is one we cannot see.

VI'LET

I take back accepting your compliment.

SAPPHIRE

The words I spoke were not complimentary.

(VI'LET gasps. Directly afterward, the door swings open and CLAPPY KAY appears. He looks at the trio, then closes his eyes)

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*and stands in silence, for a while.
He then opens his eyes and looks at them.
Eventually, he begins his monologue.)*

CLAPPY

There are so many ways to meet your end: cancer, drowning, earthquake, fi're, beaver. We don't get to choose what takes us away; it just happens one day, out of the blue. One minute you're thinking about nothing, the next, that nothing you've lived for is gone. Death lives among us, waiting, just waiting for you to stop living your mundane lives. Death is the biggest moment of our lives. We are completely unprepared for it. Death is not the end of your role, your words. Death is the end! Shakespeare understood that. That's why he wrote that the character dies -- no emotion, no cue: Death is the end. In the 17th century, death was real. Death surrounded you; today we hide death. Our avoidance makes death an afterthought. We're too busy learning our lines of life, rushing to sit in a plane's assigned seat. Rambling through small moments is easier. It's understood. It's harmless to weak minds. My Juliet knows what it means to die. My Juliet wants to die for Shakespeare. I chose you four because of your talent, but the one that wins the role: She must die.

VI'LET

Forgive me, sir, but you said four of us.

CLAPPY

Call me Clappy, and I know what I said. Before the night is through, there will be four. People don't just die in threes in this world. Wait. Stop! Hear this: KAW! The raven says KAW! Quoth the raven, "Nevermore." KAW! KAW! KAW! Flora Dindle: Death is at your doorstep. You can't be blind to the death of your youth. Tell me how I'm wrong. Tell me of rebirth.

FLORA

I cannot see through the eyes of others. One man's sunset is mistaken for dawn. Perhaps you look into a mirrored west.

CLAPPY

Perhaps I do. Perhaps I do, Flora. Or maybe it's Vi'let who's caught my gaze.

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VI'LET

My youth is as alive as life itself.

CLAPPY

Sweet Sapphire wishes part of her would die, but fear is not knowing what you'll become.

SAPPHIRE

A caterpillar is most beautiful the very moment before its death arrives.

CLAPPY

While I sat in *Père Lachaise* one cold day, looking at the monuments of the dead, these high-rises of excess for evermore, crumbling, crumbling because that's what things do, a butterfly landed on my clenched hands. It perched itself for about five minutes, which is a very large part of its life. My hands stayed still. We looked at each other. This beautiful moment among the dead and those looking for Jim Morrison. KAW! The silence, the stillness is broken! KAW! This is the end, beautiful friend. The end.

FLORA

(to VI'LET)

Seems like Sapphire's been on the casting couch.

VI'LET

We are friends here and we are enemies.

CLAPPY

The time for quoting lines is at an end. You want to be Juliet. Show me death. Let's see who is ready to die for art. Vi'let, die like you were hit by a car.

VI'LET

Act like I was hit by a car right here.

CLAPPY

Show me your creative process at work.

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VI'LET (aside)

Such a strange request doth he make of me. There were no cars in the time of Shakespeare. Juliet would not walk in front of one. It's safe to assume she would look both ways. Perhaps she would try suicide by car. What light from approaching car with no brakes!

(VI'LET dies.)

CLAPPY

Flora, die like you were stabbed in the back.

FLORA (aside)

This one should be easy with Vi'let here. Hers has been in my spine for several years. The wound that severs all forgiveness nerves. Whether from friend or foe the cut runs deep.

(FLORA dies.)

VI'LET

You call that death or is it pantomime? Death has never been so invisible.

CLAPPY

Frightening is the death that goes unseen. I didn't see the woman hit the train. The event happened right in front of me. The metro screeching to a halt. KAW! KAW! Confusion, commotion and then nothing. Someone arrived while the rest of us left, hurrying to catch the 22 tram. One life quietly, violently over; the rest of us left to contemplate.

(CLAPPY closes his eyes and stands there.)

Standing on stage is sadly a lost art. The stillness of life gave way to movement. Cross left. Cross right. Move to show importance. Move so that others can see you're alive. They must see your life for they know not death. Death is challenging to an audience. They don't know it. They barely think about it. They're all curious as to how they'll die, but they dare not broach the situation lest they be inundated with Prozac. "Don't worry. Everything will be just fine." *(To SAPPHIRE)* Part of you has been dead for a long time. You've died a societal death, you have, now living your life in purgatory.

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SAPPHIRE

I know not purgatory. I am me.

CLAPPY

So you say, but the truth is you are dead. You live as an outcast, unaccepted. That is not a state of living, nor death. Instead you hover. Your life is the fog. You cloud our view of what we want to see. As such, you must die like a hemorrhoid.

SAPPHIRE (aside)

Methinks Clappy's last marble he doth lost, or is this some statement on what I am. How to die like something that does not live? A part's a part; I must do as I will.

(SAPPHIRE dies.)

CLAPPY

Before you can start, you must know the end. The only road to life passes through death. Instantaneously, death becomes us. Now, don't think; die like you were being born.

(The three actors die.)

Die like you're being eaten by a bear.

(The three actors die.)

Show me how to die like you're in Cleveland!

(The three actors die. A knock is heard at the door.)

The door. What's on the other side awaits.

(CLAPPY goes into one of his still-trances. After another knock is heard, CLAPPY takes large steps toward the door.)

Behold! The last Juliet has arrived.

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(He swings open the door to reveal THELMA. As CLAPPY stands in his silent state, THELMA slowly uses her walker to move to the end of the line. CLAPPY snaps out of his trance.)

Breathe in the beautiful smell that is death. Smell that emanates from a life lived full, mothballed, waiting for its final chapter to be written by the hand of her God. Some like to skip ahead to the last page. When they do, they read life out of context. Meet Thelma, fill your nostrils with death's stench!

(The three actors walk over to THELMA and start smelling her.)

Direct it through your nose and in your brain. Breathe it! Make your mind come alive through death. This is how my Juliet smells so sweet.

(VI'LET begins coughing and wheezing.)

That's it! Now you get it. Soak in every scent. Expunge all the oxygen from your blood. Embalm your senses with beautiful death.

VI'LET

Methinks I inhal'd too much old too fast. To huff the elderly makes me dizzy.

SAPPHIRE

This is what taking peyote is like; well, peyote is less nauseating.

FLORA

Shame on both of you for your disrespect. She is of flesh just as we are of flesh. Do not treat her as less of a person because she has lived the fullest of life.

VI'LET

(to SAPPHIRE)

She can't smell it because she is too old.

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CLAPPY

I feel the coldness of your dotted flesh. I can see the cataracts in your eyes. The world is dark, dear Thelma, it is dark. You move slow, but you have nowhere to go. What do you think about, my dear Thelma? You cannot help but feel survivor's guilt. Who chose for you to roam the Earth alone, taking everyone away from your life until the only one left is you? Kaw! Oh Thelma! You are too intense for me! Congratulations, you are Juliet! You are my lovely, lovely Juliet! The rest of you, thank you for stopping by. Please come back to audition for the Nurse.

VI'LET

I don't even know what just happened here.

SAPPHIRE

Clappy's vision is one we cannot see.

FLORA

I think he wanted us to feel a death.

CLAPPY

(To THELMA)

Let us warm up with the balcony scene: "Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?"

(As she begins to speak, THELMA dies.)

I suppose we can start with the death scene.

FLORA

She has collapsed! One of you go for help!

CLAPPY

She's dying! Let her die! Let her find peace. This is her time; let the woman have it.

VI'LET

We can't just stand here and watch Thelma die.

CLAPPY

Standing on stage is sadly a lost art.

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(CLAPPY goes into his trance as he stands above THELMA.)

I often wonder where birds go to die. Birds are not eternal; they must too die. How rare it is that you see a dead bird that isn't clenched in the jaws of a cat? The only birds we know, we hear; they sing. They sing their songs early in the morning. They build their nests, raise their young, and they sing. One day these songbirds too must die their deaths. We seldom see a dead bird on the ground. It's not that these birds passed on are not there. We're too busy living our lives to see. For once let's stop and look at this songbird, understand what it means to be alive.

[END]