

MIRROR

A ONE-ACT PLAY FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

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SYNOPSIS

A spoiled princess must choose a husband. No one knows why and where all her bridegrooms disappear after they fail to solve her crossword puzzle. Only after she falls in love with a young man who doesn't care about her crossword puzzle, does she begin to realize the full extent of her cruelty. She learns the lesson of a mysterious mirror, and no one ever disappears from the kingdom again.

CHARACTERS:

Princess

Bridegroom

King

First Minister, Second Minister

Merchant

Peter

Guard

Maid

Citizens

Other bridegrooms

SETTING: A castle.

TIME: Fairytale time.

SCENE ONE

A room in a palace. The Princess is lying on a couch. A young man--a would-be bridegroom-- is sitting at a small table in the other end of the room, bent over a sheet of paper. He is holding a pencil in his right hand, while his left hand is supporting his head. He seems ready to write something down, but then sighs, shakes his head, sighs again and again.

BRIDEROOM

This is an impossible puzzle, Your Highness.

(The Princess doesn't answer)

PRINCESS

PRINCESS: No talking in the test room! (*Pause*)

Give me your answers.

(The Bridegroom walks over to the Princess's couch, hands her the paper)

PRINCESS *(slaps him)*

Why, you haven't solved it at all! You've failed my test totally and absolutely! How dare you ask for my hand in marriage! *(Opens the door, calls the Guard)* Take him into the dungeon! To the starvation cell ! Now!

SCENE TWO

The Princess is playing ball in the palace courtyard. A large armchair can be seen in the back. The King enters.

KING

My royal child!

PRINCESS *(catching the ball)*

Yes, father?

KING

I wish to speak to you, my child. Yet this ball-bouncing activity is not the most conducive background for a talk.

PRINCESS *(still playing ball)*

I'm listening, Father. If you have anything to say--

KING

Indeed I do, child. *(Sighs, waits for the Princess to stop playing ball)*

PRINCESS

Then do.

KING *(with a sigh)*

You know very well how much I love you, don't you, my child?

PRINCESS

Hmm? Yes, Father.

KING

And I realize, sweetheart, that a girl of your charm and intelligence must take every possible precaution in her choice of a husband.

PRINCESS

That's just what I'm doing, father.

KING

But, sweetheart, don't you think that, instead of that strange crossword puzzle, you could have thought of some other test for all those fine young men?

PRINCESS

These fine young men, father--

KING

...they are in love with you, sweetheart.

PRINCESS

Precisely.

KING

Falling in love, sweetheart, has never before been punishable by death. Not in my kingdom, at any rate.

PRINCESS

What do you suggest, father? That I let them get away with it?

KING

No, no, sweetheart, I'm sure that getting away with loving you is not humanly possible. Even I, sweetheart--

PRINCESS

I know you love me, father. But it's not the same.

KING

Of course, it is not the same. I'm your father. I want to see you happy.

PRINCESS

And they are my bridegrooms. Their goal is to see themselves happy.

KING

I don't know where you got these ideas, sweetheart. Among these hundreds of bridegrooms there might be one who prizes your happiness above his own life. In fact, don't all of them? Since their love for you is so great that they're willing to sacrifice their lives for you?

PRINCESS

I've heard all this before, father.

KING

All I want to suggest, sweetheart, is why not replace that strange crossword puzzle you give them to solve with some *other* test, for example, a jumping contest, or a footrace?

PRINCESS

But, father...

KING

And the main thing I'd like to ask you is to change the punishment. Instead of having all these fine young men die of hunger in the solitary confinement of the deepest dungeon, why not have them pay a stiff fine? I'm sure their families would be more than willing to part with any amount of money to get their sons back.

PRINCESS (*puts down the ball, curtsies*)

I'm your dutiful daughter, father.

KING

Of course you're my dutiful daughter. Don't I know that? Would I even be talking to you if you weren't my daughter and therefore dutiful? Hah! If you weren't my daughter, and if I'd heard of the havoc you'd managed to wreck in my kingdom, I'd--I'd-- I don't know what I'd do!

PRINCESS

You'd have me flogged on the main square in front of the palace, wouldn't you, father?

KING

I'm not sure. That's the punishment for thieves and drunkards. No, I don't know yet what I'd do. I'd have to meditate on it.

PRINCESS

How about this, father: (*lifts her head high, makes a commanding gesture*):
Take her to the dungeon! Off with her head!

KING

No, sweetheart, such unnecessary cruelty is no longer practiced in our kingdom. Only one

person still resorts to it: you.

PRINCESS

It isn't cruelty, father. It's tradition.

KING

Where have you heard of this tradition? I don't recall any family legends in which an ancestor king was chosen merely for his brain-power! For his ability to solve a puzzle! Ha-ha! *(The King pretends to roar with laughter)*

PRINCESS

I'm glad you find it funny, father.

KING

And anyway, you're not traditional in any other way, sweetheart, you don't even dress properly-- look at you, what you're wearing on your head *(King points at the Princess's bandana)*, so why do you care about tradition now, when it comes to the choice of a bridegroom?

PRINCESS

I have my reasons, father. And I'm afraid you're not going to learn of them all.

KING

I think you're right--I'd have you flogged you on the main square, were you not my daughter. But it is because you *are* and enjoy all the privileges of royalty that you've been indulging your whims with complete impunity while one hundred and thirty of the bravest young men of my kingdom are gone from this world forever!

PRINCESS

Remember what the doctor said, father--anger may be harmful to your health.

KING

You're quite right, it is harmful to my health! *(Calming down)* Of course, of course, sweetheart. *(King walks backwards towards a large armchair, sits down in it, half-sprawling)* I won't get angry, how nice of you to care so for your old father...*(he closes his eyes)*

PRINCESS

Rest, father.

KING (*eyes still closed*)

Yes, rest... rest... (*sitting up suddenly, as if jolted awake*) But no, how can I rest when a worry the size of an elephant is eating at my brain! And would you like to know what that worry is-- answer me, sweetheart!

PRINCESS

I have a right to preserve my silence, dear father.

KING (*jumping up from the armchair, pacing*)

My worry is the fear that haunts every king! Now guess what it is, sweetheart--you, who love puzzles so much!

PRINCESS

Let's see now... What does every king worry about? A daughter? But not every king has a daughter; some have only sons.

KING (*muttering*)

Ah, lucky devils!

PRINCESS

Then is it the well-being of their subjects? Not every king is as good-hearted as my father. I know! *Here* is the worry of every king on earth! (*she points at the armchair*) The fear their people will band together and steal this precious chair from under him.

KING

Yes! My throne.

PRINCESS

If you ask me, it's just an old stuffed chair.

KING *(kneeling in front of his throne, hugging it)*

Without this old chair, I'm nothing. With this chair, I'm king.

PRINCESS

I hope to find a husband who will act like a king even without a stuffed chair.

KING

That's what I worry about. If a daughter starves to death the finest young men in the country, what will the fine families of these young men think of me, her father? What do you think they'll say? *(No response from the Princess)* Speak, sweetheart.

PRINCESS *(throwing the ball against a wall)*

I'm playing, father.

KING

Take him to the dungeon! Off with his head! is what they'll say, sweetheart. And what will happen to you, my daughter, if the soldiers hired by the finest families in the kingdom come to drag me away? Will you still be a princess, if you and your mother are thrown out of this palace? Out of the kingdom? Out of the world?

PRINCESS

A princess is a princess is a princess, father. In other words, once a princess, always a princess. In or out of these walls.

KING

Alright, sweetheart. I'll try another approach. You have no fear for yourself, I see. But try to see it through the eyes of my many subjects who mourn their beloved sons. What sort of royal explanation can I give them, when they blame you for the loss of their sons? Try to see it through their eyes.

(A Guard at King's side opens the curtain behind them. Citizens of the Kingdom pass in front of the King and the Princess, throwing accusations in her face).

1st CITIZEN *(holding up a picture of her son)*

My son, my gentle and kind son! Where's my boy, the best math student in the entire kingdom!
Why did he have to fall in love with you, cruel Princess?

(1st Citizen throws her son's portrait at the Princess, goes out at the other end of the stage.)

2nd CITIZEN

My son, my only son! The most talented singer of all twelfth graders! Oh why did he ever catch
a glimpse of you, Princess! The cruelest Princess in the Western world!

(2nd Citizen throws her son's portrait at the Princess.)

3rd CITIZEN *(holding up two portraits)*

My sons, my sons! Both my sons fell in love with you, terrible Princess! Now they're gone
forever, and who will answer for that? Philip, the oldest, was to take over my millinery shop,
while the youngest, Tom, was planning to be a doctor. They're gone, they're gone, and every
night my wife's pillow is soaked with tears! And whose fault is it, terrible Princess?

*(3rd Citizen throws his sons' portraits at the Princess as he walks past. It's possible to add more
citizens, male or female, single or couples, who pass in the similar manner, leaving the Princess
all but buried under the portraits of their sons.)*

PRINCESS *(screams)*

Get these off of me!

KING

Not until you promise, sweetheart, that there'll be no more funerals of fine young men in my
kingdom!

PRINCESS *(screams)*

I promise! I promise! Now get these off me!

*(The King gestures to a Guard to go and help the Princess from under the pile of portraits. With
a disgusted look on her face, the Princess restores herself to a dignified royal appearance, as
her Maid bustles about her, shaking dust off her dress, straightening her sleeves, etc.)*

KING

And if you're truly such a traditional princess, sweetheart, and so eager to return to the ways of our ancestors, why don't you try frightening off your grooms with some of those spirits that fill our legends, or put them to use by sending them off to fight dragons or monsters?--or whatever it was they used to fight in the old days. But no more blood in this palace, sweetheart, you hear me?

SCENE THREE

The Princess's room. Servants bring a large object draped with black cloth.

Princess comes in, stretches herself on a royal couch.

PRINCESS *(with contempt)*

Tell the merchant to come in.

MERCHANT *(enters, carrying a large object covered with black drape; bows to the Princess)*

Mary...

PRINCESS

It's *Your Highness* to you.

MERCHANT

No, Mary, I don't play these games.

PRINCESS

Games? How dare you--

MERCHANT

I'm sure you're a real princess, Your Highness, but, you see, titles just don't mean very much to me.

PRINCESS

Titles?

MERCHANT

A princess. That's a title, Mary. But is that what you really are?

PRINCESS

What?

MERCHANT *(looking her straight in the eyes)*

What are you?*(No response from the Princess):* Are you a tiger?

PRINCESS *(in a trance, hardly audible)*

No.

MERCHANT

Are you a vulture?

PRINCESS *(in a trance)*

No.

MERCHANT

Are you a human being?

PRINCESS *(in a trance)*

Not sure...

MERCHANT

Are you a princess?

PRINCESS

I don't know.

MERCHANT

Do you have a heart?

PRINCESS

I don't know.

MERCHANT (*claps three times*)

Here you are, Mary. (*The Merchant puts his hand on a large object covered with black drape*)

PRINCESS (*comes out of the trance, opens her eyes*)

Mary? Nobody calls me by my first name!

MERCHANT

Mary, I brought you the object of your dreams.

(*The Princess looks at him with even more surprise*)

Yes, Mary, you've been dreaming of this very thing since the night when your father the King had that little talk with you.

PRINCESS

The talk?

MERCHANT

Don't pretend to be surprised, Mary, don't arch your pretty brows--I don't need to look at your face to read your secrets. I can read in your soul, and all your thoughts were known to me even before I crossed the threshold of your palace.

PRINCESS

Stop calling me Mary or I'm going to call my guards to throw you out of here!

MERCHANT

I brought you the most precious gift--and now you're angry at me?

PRINCESS (*calms down; whispers languidly*)

Did you bring me a dagger that kills without spilling any blood, or an invisible funeral carriage for my bridegrooms?

MERCHANT

Your Highness, it's something much better, much more unique--a mirror!

PRINCESS

But what do I need another mirror for? Don't all mirrors in the palace repeat to me the same thing all day, every day--that I'm stunning! I know very well how brightly my eyes shine and how perfect all my features are.

MERCHANT

Are you sure, Mary?

PRINCESS

Take away your stupid gift and be grateful if I don't have you flogged in the main square--after all, you've deceived the daughter of the King!

(Princess tries to call a guard to throw the Merchant out of the room but she can't make a sound. She tries to get off the couch but can't move. She looks at her visitor with horror)

MERCHANT

Don't be afraid, Mary. I only wanted to prove to you that I'm not a swindler making fun of the most beautiful girl in the Western world. You can call your guard now, if you like. *(The Princess shakes her head no)* No? That means you're willing to listen to me and take me seriously. I'm not giving you this mirror so you can admire yourself, Mary. *(He takes a stuffed dove out of his shoulder bag, puts in front of the mirror, the dove disappears)* Know this, Mary: whoever is reflected in this mirror, will dissolve in the air, like steam coming out of a tea kettle. Vanish without a trace!

(The Merchant laughs thunderously, goes to the mirror, lifts the black drape covering it, and disappears without a trace. Only his booming voice is heard, for a few more seconds)

Therefore, you must always keep my gift carefully closed--except of course when you want to use it!

(Stunned, the Princess looks for him everywhere but finds neither him nor his shadow)

SCENE FOUR

Evening of the same day. The King is talking with his two ministers.

FIRST MINISTER

Your Majesty, tonight the Princess had us give pencil and paper to yet another love-struck young man.

SECOND MINISTER

And, Your Majesty, he's the son of the most prominent family in the Kingdom!..

FIRST MINISTER

This is serious business, Your Majesty!

SECOND MINISTER

We might have a civil war on our hands, Your Majesty, if this worthy young man fails to solve the puzzle and kills himself with that terrible dagger the Princess hands her unfortunate suitors!

KING

Haven't I made you announce this morning to my people that my incomparable daughter has given me her word? I had her promise there'd be no more blood in the Kingdom, and no more funerals of worthy young men. (*sternly*) Or do you distrust her royal promise?

SECOND MINISTER

Oh, Your Majesty, we wouldn't dare to. But the young man's family is so prominent, and so...well, so worried about his fate... They sent us to get further reassurance. You know how parents are, you're a father yourself...

KING

Indeed I am. No easy task. Easier to rule a kingdom than one's own daughter, take my royal word for it. (*absent-mindedly*) ...Now what is it you've been telling me?

SECOND MINISTER (*bowing slightly*)

The parents, Your Majesty.

