

The Duchess of Malfi

As Adapted by  
Lisel M Kraft

### Set Design:

Written to be performed on a thrust stage, the set is minimalist. It consists of the bars of a cage, which encircle the center of the acting area, leaving only enough space outside of it to walk. The majority of the action of the play takes place within these constraints. The bars are composed of thick black cloth that is cut to resemble a cage, suspended from the ceiling, and secured to the floor so that it is taut. The cloth should be cut in such a way that it rolls in on itself slightly, to give the illusion of bars. The characters cannot see the cage. At the back of the stage is a large pendulum blade. It hangs from the ceiling, motionless. Etched into the front of the blade is *χάος* (chaos).

### Other set pieces:

Two wax figures are needed to represent Antonio and the eldest son. They must melt.

### Necessary props:

A length of rope, a dagger, a sword, blood.

### Costuming:

Costumes should reflect fashions of the early 1600s, but broken--pieces of the clothing should be missing at random (but not obscenely so) as though they were only half completed.

Characters:

Bosola

The Duchess

Antonio

The Cardinal

Ferdinand

Asylum Ladies (3): Ofelia, Tipota, Kanenas

Eldest Son

Children (young son, young daughter)

Scenes:

Prologue: A beginning.

Scene 1: The Duchess and Antonio

Scene 2: The Cardinal, Ferdinand, and Bosola

Scene 3: The Duchess, Antonio and the Children

Scene 4: Antonio hears The Duchess

Scene 5: Bosola, Death

Scene 6: Bosola confronts Ferdinand and The Cardinal

Scene 7: A beginning.

Prologue: *As the lights come up on the stage, Bosola stands alone, enclosed by the cage. He is partially shadowed and looks troubled. Shortly, the three Asylum Ladies enter and circle the outside of the cage, looking in at Bosola. Throughout the scene, Bosola twists and turns as though tormented by something unseen.*

Ofelia: 'Tis great pity he should be thus neglected.

Tipota: I have heard he's very valiant.

Kanenas: This foul melancholy will poison all his goodness.

Ofelia: Want of action breeds all black malcontents.

Tipota: Look how his broken mind searches for solace.

Kanenas: Something wicked will find its home in him.

Ofelia: Some fellows, they say, are possessed with the devil.

Tipota: But this great fellow invites a darker shadow.

Kanenas: Watch the light leave his eyes!

Ofelia: The blackness there chills the soul with its glance.

*[Bosola suddenly looks up at these words, his torment ended. He stands.]*

Tipota: Oh! What has Fortune brought upon this man?

Kanenas: Blame not Fortune; darkness does not turn her wheel.

Ofelia/Tipota/Kanenas: It begins.

*[Bosola slowly walks from the center of the stage to the bars and, without pause, bursts through to the outside as though he has bent the laws of physics to his will.]*

Bosola: So: what follows? Never rained such showers as these without thunderbolts in the tail of them. Take your devils, which hell calls angels! Sometimes the devil doth preach.

*All Exit.*

Scene 1: *The Duchess and Antonio stand within the bars of the cage, conversing.*

Duchess: What do you think of marriage?

Antonio: It locally contains heaven or hell; there's no third place in it.

Duchess: Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh. Sir, be confident! I do here put off all vain ceremony and only do appear to you a young widow that claims you for her husband.

Antonio: Oh my unworthiness! Were there nor heaven nor hell, I should be honest: I have long served virtue and never taken wages of her. Truth speak for me, I will remain the constant sanctuary of your good name.

Duchess: I thank you, gentle love. My heart is in your bosom: I hope it will multiply love there. You do tremble.

Antonio: But for your brothers who have forbidden it?

Duchess: Do not think of them. All discord is without circumference; it is only to be pitied and not feared. I would lead you by the hand unto your marriage bed. We'll lie together. Oh, let me shroud my blushes in your bosom, since it is the treasury of all my secrets!

*All Exit.*

*Scene 2: Bosola stands alone on the stage outside the bars, contemplating.*

Bosola: This family twists in on itself: The Duchess foolishly thinking herself free, while her brothers are like plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools.

*Enter Ferdinand and The Cardinal.*

Ferdinand: I was lured to you. My brother here could never abide you.

Bosola: Never since he was in my debt.

Ferdinand: For that you must give great men leave to take their times. Distrust doth cause us seldom be deceived.

Bosola: Yet, take heed; for to suspect a friend unworthily instructs him the next way to suspect you and prompts him to deceive you.

The Cardinal: There's gold. We give it that you may live in the court here and observe the duchess, to note all the particulars of her behavior.

Ferdinand: What suitors do solicit her for marriage, and whom she best affects. She's a young widow: I would not have her marry again.

Bosola: It seems you would create me a quaint invisible devil in flesh. These cursed gifts would make you a corrupter.

The Cardinal: Let good men for good deeds covet good fame.

Ferdinand: Be yourself; keep your old garb of melancholy; it will express you envy those that stand above your reach.

*The Cardinal and Ferdinand exit.*

Bosola: I have them cursed now, for the deed they have bid me do will take form of all the ill man can invent! They know not what they have sown.

*Exit.*

Scene 3: *The Duchess stands alone in the center of the stage; the Asylum Ladies circle the cage, watching her.*

Ofelia/Tipota/Kanenas: *[Chanting discordantly, repeatedly.]* They know; your brothers know.

Ofelia: They will take him from you.

Tipota: You are undone.

Kanenas: You will see what power lightens in great men's breath.

*Asylum Ladies exit.*

*Enter Antonio and their three children. Antonio and the eldest son are dressed for travel. They speak in hushed, hurried voices.*

Duchess: I suspect some ambush; therefore, by all my love, I do conjure you to take your eldest son and fly towards Milan. Let us not venture all this poor remainder in one unlucky bottom.

Antonio: You counsel safely, best of my life. Farewell.

Duchess: I know not which is best, to see you dead or part with you. Farewell, boy; thou art happy that thou hast not understanding to know thy misery.

Antonio: Do not weep: heaven fashioned us out of nothing, and we will strive to bring ourselves to nothing.

Duchess: Let me look upon you once more, for that speech came from a dying father.

Antonio: My heart is turned to a heavy lump of lead, with which I sound my danger. Fare you well.

*Antonio and Eldest Son exit.*

Duchess: My laurel is all withered. When Fortune's wheel is sliced in half, the weight moves it swiftly down: I would have my ruin be sudden!

*All exit.*





*Scene 4: Antonio, distraught, stands in the center of the cage, pacing. The Asylum Ladies enter and circle the cage, speaking to him. He hears their voices as though he is speaking with The Duchess.*

Ofelia: News like death, we have.

Tipota: In deadly accent.

Kanenas: A thing of sorrow.

Antonio: Why speakest thou to me as though from the air? Do not torment me so with my wife's voice.

Ofelia: Aye, wife's voice.

Tipota: That suits it best.

Kanenas: A thing of sorrow.

Antonio: The wind through the bricks plays games with my ears.

Ofelia: Thou art a dead thing.

Tipota: Never see her more.

Kanenas: Fly to your fate!

Antonio: If it be so, I will not henceforth save myself by halves: It is a mockery and abuse of life. Lose all, or nothing!

*All exit.*

Scene 5: *Outside the cage, two wax figures fashioned in the likeness of Antonio and the Eldest Son are positioned as though their throats have been slit and they lie dead. Enter Bosola outside the cage.*

Bosola: My trade is to flatter the dead; I am a tombmaker.

*Bosola pauses at the wax figures and kneels.*

Bosola: *[Grasping desperately at his head]* In faith, end here! Go no further in your cruelty!

*Bosola jerks upward suddenly and falls through the bars of the cage, leaving him trapped inside it.*

Bosola: Oh, fie! Oh, fearful! What wretchedness hath possessed my soul with such darkness?

*Bosola shudders and then pauses and stands.*

Bosola: Those fools a whore of the duchess make, her punishment they will to me. Now death will haunt the slaves of Fortune to all their misery!

*Enter the duchess.*

Bosola: *[Walking toward the wax figures, Bosola exits the cage as he speaks.]* Duchess, I am here to present you this sad spectacle that, now you know directly they are dead.

Duchess: There is not between heaven and earth one wish I stay for after this.

Bosola: I think you know not your own mind in this. *Exits.*

*Enter Asylum Ladies. They circle the cage, watching the scene.*

Asylum Ladies: *[Singing]*

Oh, let us howl some heavy note,  
Some deadly dogged howl,  
Sounding as from the threatening throat  
Of beasts and fatal fowl!  
As ravens, screech owls, bulls, and bears,  
We'll bell and bawl our parts,  
Till irksome noise have cloyed your ears

And corrosived your hearts.  
At last, whenas our choir wants breath,  
Our bodies being blest,  
We'll sing, like swans, to welcome death,  
And die in love and rest.

*Enter Bosola with the two children.*

Bosola: I am come to make thy tomb, but first I make the tomb of thy children.

Duchess: Thou art mad!

Bosola: Here is a present from your princely brothers *[takes out a dagger]* and may it arrive welcome, for it brings last benefit, last sorrow!

*Bosola quickly slits the throats of each child in succession and lets their bodies fall to the floor, pooling in their blood. He steps over them toward the duchess, who has frozen in shock.*

Bosola: What will you do? Call for help?

Duchess: To whom?

Bosola: Doth not death frighten you?

Duchess: Who would be afraid of it, knowing to meet such excellent company in the other world?

Bosola: There will be no other world for you! *[Dropping the dagger, Bosola strangles the duchess with his hands. She struggles little and dies quickly. Bosola stands and walks back toward the wax figures, contemplating them.]*

Bosola: To be so easily fooled by the likeness. They are but wax.

*[Bosola reaches out and touches the figures. They have begun to melt and he gets the wax on his fingers. Startled, he steps backward and slips in the blood pooled on the floor around the children. He is now covered in blood.]*

Bosola: *[Anguished]* Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out! The element of water moistens the earth, but blood flies upwards and bedews the heavens!

*Blackout*

Scene 6: *The stage is dark and shadowed as in early morning--the stage gets progressively more well-lit as the scene progresses. The Asylum Ladies watch from outside the cage. Bosola enters. Unseen by Bosola, Antonio and the Eldest Son enter and remain toward the back of the stage.*

Bosola: *[To himself]* Oh poor Antonio, though nothing be so needful to thy estate as pity, yet I find nothing so dangerous. I'll seek thee out and all my care shall be to put thee into safety from the reach of these most cruel biters that have got some of thy blood already. I'll join with thee in a most just revenge! *[Antonio, moving toward Bosola unknowingly, makes a small scraping sound as he walks.]* What's that? A sound! I am discovered! Fall right, my sword! Fie on thee, foul makers of dark deeds! *[Bosola stabs wildly at the darkness with his dagger, catching Antonio in a fatal blow. In the growing light, Bosola sees what he has done.]*

Antonio: Oh, I am gone!

Bosola: The man I would have saved above my own life! We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and bandied which way please them. Break, heart!

*Antonio dies. Roused by the commotion, The Cardinal enters the scene at a run. Seeing him, Bosola raises his dagger and strikes.*

Bosola: Now it seems thy greatness was only outward, for thou falls faster of thyself than calamity can drive thee. I'll not waste longer time: there! *[Stabs him again.]*

The Cardinal: Help! Help! I am slain!

*Enter Ferdinand. He sees The Cardinal fall to the ground, dead, his head next to the feet of Antonio's corpse.*

Ferdinand: I shake my sword over you; will you yield!?

Bosola: Now my revenge is perfect. Sink, thou main cause of my undoing! The last part of my life hath done me best service! *[Bosola reaches out to strike Ferdinand and, in doing so, is struck by Ferdinand's sword.]*

Bosola: *[Reaching up, he feels his mortal wound and takes it away to see the blood that drips from his hand.]* I hold my weary soul in my teeth. *[He stabs Ferdinand again. Ferdinand falls with his head at The Cardinal's feet.]*

Bosola: Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, like diamonds, we are cut by our own dust.  
*[Bosola falls with his head at Ferdinand's feet and his feet at Antonio's head, completing the circle of corpses.]*

*Scene 7: From the back of the stage, the Eldest Son, who has watched the whole scene unfold, slowly walks toward the ring of bodies. He steps over them and stands in the center, briefly leaning down to pick up the dagger. He holds it up to see it glint in the growing light as the blood drips down the blade. Suddenly, he tosses the dagger in the air and catches it by the hilt, grinning. He walks forward over the corpses and through the bars of the cage as the final lines of the play are said.]*

Ofelia/Tipota/Kanenas: *[In unison]* The lord of the first house being combust in the ascendant, signifies short life; and Mars being in a human sign, joined to the tail of the Dragon, in the eighth house, doth threaten a violent death. It begins.

*Blackout.*