

ACT ONE

Scene One The Stage

(A ghost light burns. After a moment, a figure in the darkness speaks.)

MAGGIE. O.

“O, for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention!
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!”
O, indeed. You’re right, Andrew. Our theater – it soaks
up the words like a grateful sponge.

(A voice in the darkness, at the back of the house:)

CELESTE. Maggie? Is that you?

MAGGIE. *(To herself.)* Here we go.

Celeste, yes! Here, let me get the lights.

(A clang as general lights up, revealing the space to be an empty stage. Or perhaps one littered with set pieces from past productions. The year is 1942. MAGGIE – a passionate, determined, simply-dressed woman in her forties – greets CELESTE – a diva, more glamorously dressed, in her fifties – who enters from the rear of the theater.)

(Of the lights.) There. That’s more like it.

CELESTE. Ah! Hello. Hello, dear old friend.

MAGGIE. *(Surprised by the affection.)* Why, hello, Celeste.

CELESTE. (*Ignoring MAGGIE, to the theater, caressing the stage.*) Hello, hello, hello.

MAGGIE. (*To herself.*) Ah, of course.

CELESTE. (*To the theater.*) It's been a lifetime. Your doors bolted against me, a lifetime!

MAGGIE. Four months.

CELESTE. Exactly. Oh, to tread these boards again, breathe the air!

MAGGIE. That's actually why I telephoned. It's heartbreaking, isn't it? To see the Oberon empty like this?

CELESTE. Empty? Oh, my dear, no, it's anything but. I can hardly walk for the ghosts. Ghosts round every corner.

MAGGIE. (*Thrilled.*) I see them, too! Our men are Over There but still here, as well. Thomas, Phillip, Andrew –

CELESTE. Oh, them, yes, them as well, them as well brave souls, but it's my own shades I speak of. I can't take a step but I bump into my Desdemona, my Lady M., my Isabella. (*Seeing her creation.*) And my Juliet! My sentimental favorite. Oh, star-crossed youth. Put the dagger down, dear child, put it down!

MAGGIE. (*No idea what to do.*) Ah...

CELESTE. But she doesn't, does she? Not a once. And only I have the power to resurrect her.

MAGGIE. Yes, resurrect, Celeste, that's exactly why I –

CELESTE. And me? I suppose I am a ghost of my former self as well. The longer the Oberon's doors are shut against me, the more I wither away. You wouldn't understand, having worked only on the other side of the footlights, but – the laughter, the tears, the applause? I'm an unwatered flower.

MAGGIE. Well, what say we turn the sprinkler on?

CELESTE. Sprinkler?

MAGGIE. This place – there's no reason it needs to stay dark.

CELESTE. But we have lost our men to the war, the last of them. Unless you propose a *Lysistrata* to bring them home?

MAGGIE. No, I –

CELESTE. I am relieved to hear it. That play always sounds like a good idea, and then, five minutes in...besides, our men fight a just cause, the Axis must be vanquished, it is not the time for sexual deprivation.

MAGGIE. I couldn't agree –

CELESTE. Then what? Why summon me? (*Joy.*) Oh, God! A solo performance! Yes, yes, give me a month! A week! "A Shakespearean Evening with Celeste Fielding." I shall inhabit them all: Rosalind, Olivia, Viola, the lot! You're right Maggie, the men in our company have smothered me all these years, myself is enough, it has always been enough!

MAGGIE. That sounds lovely, Celeste, but we weren't thinking of –

CELESTE. We?

MAGGIE. – Andrew and I – we've been corresponding almost daily and we think it best to continue with the season as planned.

CELESTE. But the season opener was –

MAGGIE. I know.

CELESTE. The *Henriad*.

MAGGIE. I know.

CELESTE. *Henry the Fourth* and *Fifth* combined.

MAGGIE. I know.

CELESTE. Maggie, I realize it was Andrew's dream to present the Henrys, but may I remind you that they contain a grand total of three female roles.

MAGGIE. Yes.

CELESTE. The rest are men.

MAGGIE. Yes.

CELESTE. We have no men.

MAGGIE. Ah, but that's where you're wrong.

(*She walks to CELESTE, lays her hand on her.*)

Here. Here is a man.

CELESTE. Whatever could you possibly...?

MAGGIE. I've watched you, Celeste. Eighteen seasons, I've watched you play every role in the canon to perfection. You've made me swoon, explode into laughter, weep. But there is more to you than this.

CELESTE. More than Shakespeare?

MAGGIE. More than the Shakespeare you've been *given*. You – you contain multitudes, my dear, multitudes. And it's about time the world saw them.

CELESTE. I? I play a...

(**MAGGIE** *nods*.)

I'll...I'll be laughed off the stage.

MAGGIE. You?

CELESTE. No, I suppose not. Not that, never that. But the challenge of it –! To temper the femininity that you see before you? Replace it with its opposite? That would be an heroic undertaking.

MAGGIE. And one we know you are capable of.

CELESTE. Andrew? He believes as well?

MAGGIE. Do you have to ask? You are his muse, after all.

CELESTE. (*Blushing.*) Oh, yes, yes, but even so, it's lunacy, is it not, it's... (*Smiling, getting used to the idea.*) ...but if I succeeded?

(She picks up a prop sword, turns it over in her hands, feels its weight.)

Henry? Prince Henry. The debaucherous pup who grows into glorious manhood. The conqueror of empires. Tempting, sorely tempting. But who would accompany me on this Saint Crispian's Day? Perhaps I can metamorphosize into a man if challenged, but who else could possibly –?

MAGGIE. I'm holding auditions Friday.

CELESTE. *You?*

MAGGIE. Me. I'll be directing.

CELESTE. Andrew's Parrot? Oh, I think not.

END