



Play with Death

drama by Christian Lanciai (2014)

The characters:

Charles, impresario
Elizabeth
Audiences
a doctor
Tom
Nancy
Kit
Judy
George
Julia
Tony

The action takes place mostly in Cornwall on the coast 1943-45.

Act I scene 1. Before the curtain.

Abundant applause.

When it gradually calms down, Charles appears before the curtain.

Charles After this memorable concert it is unfortunately our painful duty to announce, that this was Elizabeth Winslop's last concert.

Various voices No! No!

Another We can't accept that!

Others Da capo! Da capo! Encore! (*with more voices of protest*)

Charles (calms them down) There is a war going on, and it's nobody's fault. Elizabeth has decided to stand up for the war and play for the troops until it's over.

A voice Will she be back afterwards?

Charles She had better answer that question herself. (*let's Elizabeth through from behind the stage. To Elizabeth:*) You had better explain to them.

Elizabeth Beloved audience, thanks for your warm appreciation! But I can't stay at home and do nothing when there is a war going on for our survival! That's why I must join the general war effort where I can.

The voice As long as you come back to us afterwards.

Elizabeth We'll see about that when the war is over. At the moment no one knows how long it will take. (*sneaks back behind the scene*)

Charles That's all for now, ladies and gentlemen. Next concert will be in a week's time. Welcome back. (*sneaks away too.*)

(*The stage opens for a hospital clinic. Elizabeth is sitting there with a doctor.*)

Doctor I am sorry, Miss Winslop, but you can't enter the service. I believe you had the scarlet fever as a teenager?

Elizabeth Yes, but that can hardly have been any serious matter.

Doctor Unfortunately it has left a trace in your general condition that must bar you from any official service, especially from the war.

Elizabeth But I have given up my career to do what I can for my country!

Doctor You can still play the piano. You can even do that to the troops abroad. But you must take it easy. No regular service is possible for you.

Elizabeth But what is the matter? What is wrong?

Doctor You don't want to know that. If you still insist on finding out, you must contact our senior physician. I advise you to go for a long holiday and enjoy life, preferably close to nature, during a long vacation in which you must allow yourself everything. He will also give you that advice.

Elizabeth Is it that serious?

Doctor You are seriously overstrained and can't do any sort of war service. There is a slight possibility that your condition could improve if you take my advice. But every kind of exertion, emotional stress and risk to get upset must be eliminated.

Elizabeth I will talk with the senior physician. I have the right to know everything.

Doctor Yes, you do. I am sorry, Miss Winslop. But as I said, you can still play the piano.

Elizabeth (lower and more serious) Am I dying?

Doctor Yes, Miss, you are dying, and only a miracle could alter that condition.

Elizabeth Thanks for daring to be honest.

Doctor I advise you to go wherever you wished to go most of all – within the country.

Elizabeth Then it shall be Cornwall. I need to see and associate with the sea.

Scene 2. A pension on the coast, with a bar.

Tom I know who she is.

Nancy Is she some celebrity?

Tom That's what she is.

Nancy What is she known for?

Tom She plays the piano.

Nancy Don't you think I know? That's all she is doing here.

Tom But why would she come here to play the piano? Can you understand it?

Nancy That's just what I wondered. What the heck is she doing here when she must play better at home?

Tom That's what I am trying to find out.

Nancy Have you succeeded?

Tom No. But I know who she is.

Nancy Of what good is that when we don't know why she is here?

Tom Attention. Here she is.

Did you sleep well, Miss?

Elizabeth (enters) Thank you, the sea air works wonders with me. I have never slept so well.

Tom I hope you will stay here for long.

Elizabeth There is a risk that I will.

Tom All are curious about why a famous pianist would be coming here. My guess is that it is a health issue. Is it the lungs?

Elizabeth No, it's not the lungs.

Tom Pardon my curiosity.

Elizabeth My lungs are actually my healthiest part, since I never smoked in all my life, and I never did it because I have extremely sensitive lungs. When I catch a cold it takes months for me to recover and to stop coughing. That's why I never smoked, and that's why I have healthy lungs.

Tom As I said...

Nancy We have another loafer here like you, but I had better warn you against him. He is a charmer.

Elizabeth Then I shall not fall for him. What does he look like?

(Kit has shown up by the window and listened with keen interest to the conversation but discreetly.)

Nancy (sees him) You will recognize him when you see him, since his charm is out of the ordinary.

Elizabeth Then describe this lurking danger to me, so that I might be able to avoid it.

Nancy You will not be able to, if I know him right.

Elizabeth Then at least give me his name.

Kit (swings himself in) Kit, at your service.

Elizabeth Have you been listening?

Kit I couldn't resist the temptation.

Elizabeth Are you as dangerous as Nancy says?

Kit More dangerous. I bring everyone to his fall, but most of all myself.

Elizabeth You make it sound like a sport.

Kit No, it's my profession.

Elizabeth Even worse.

Nancy He is the worst con man here. Don't believe a word of what he says.

Elizabeth If that is his profession, I gather he has no profession.

Nancy Correct. He is just redundant.

Elizabeth (turning towards him) That could only mean one thing, for a handsome man like you with all your looks and senses intact. You must have been some jetsam of the war.

Kit We have a real Sherlock Holmes here, Nancy, but in skirts. Your observation is impressing for a woman.

Elizabeth Not observation. Intuition.

Kit And what about you? You are not here just for the healthy air, or are you?

Elizabeth (looks away) No, I am here on leave.

Kit But not from the war.

Elizabeth I wanted to serve in the war, and it's possible that I might still go there, but only as a pianist.

Kit I see! So you are the one who plays the piano here!

Elizabeth I touch it and practise a little now and then, yes.

Kit No, you are professional. I heard it myself at some distance.

Elizabeth You must not let your fingers down. I am content with just keeping up the basics.

Kit So the entire piano concerto repertoire.

Elizabeth Only the most beautiful ones.

Kit And some more. Nancy, could you refresh us with some drinks? (*Nancy leaves.*)

Elizabeth I really don't drink. Alcohol is enemy to the musical necessity of perfection.

Kit But you are on leave. A small sherry will always go down.

Elizabeth That will be all in that case. Have you nothing else to do than to drink?

Kit Yes, chasing girls.

Elizabeth What do you prefer?

Kit Both – in combination.

Elizabeth And you consume both with the same ease?

Kit Not at all. Only the drinks are shaken.

Elizabeth So the girls are easier?

Kit Joking apart – here come the drinks. (*Nancy re-enters with two glasses of sherry.*)

Elizabeth Cheers then, – Kit, but to what shall we drink? Your light girls?

Kit Rather the more difficult ones.

Elizabeth Are there any difficult ones?

Kit Yes, like those you can't immediately reach, like you, for example.

Elizabeth I am difficult to catch, because I am already caught up with music – for life, I am afraid.

Kit Is it a happy marriage?

Elizabeth Yes, but it demands a lot of hard work.

Kit No relaxations?

Elizabeth No, just hard practice.

Kit And you do it willingly?

Elizabeth You could really wonder why, – (*looks away*) now when it doesn't matter any more.

Kit Why doesn't it matter?

Elizabeth I should have joined the war as a nurse, but I was not allowed.

Kit Why were you not allowed?

Elizabeth They suggested I would be of better use as a pianist.

Kit Then we are both here, marooned by a war that does not need us.

Elizabeth It doesn't look any better, does it?

Kit Cheers! Bottoms up! (*They drink to the bottom.*) One more?

Elizabeth Why not. It's refreshing. (*He fills up.*) And what about you? Why are you of no use for the war?

Kit I was a pilot. I should have gone down but unfortunately didn't.

Elizabeth Why not?

Kit Because I survived.

Elizabeth Of course, but why wouldn't you have liked to survive?

Kit Because I may not fly any more.

Elizabeth I see.

Kit No, you don't, but it doesn't matter. Perhaps it's better that you don't see.

Elizabeth Then it's mutual.

Kit So you are also in a situation.

Elizabeth You could call it that.

Kit That's good. Don't say any more. I promise not to be curious or nosy.

Elizabeth It's mutual. (*Judy shows up.*)

Kit But here is now my situation.

Judy I see that you already have claimed the new virgin of the place.

Elizabeth Virgin? Why?

Judy You are fresh and know nothing about this place. That's what I call a virgin.

Kit Don't scare her off. – This is Judy, sorry, what was the name?

Elizabeth Elizabeth. Call me Lizza. All my friends do. (*shakes hands with Judy*)
 Thanks for the warning, Judy, but I usually don't fall for just anyone.

Kit So I am just anyone?

Judy You are incorrigible, Kit. For once you missed the mark.

Kit How is your play going? Have you found all the characters?

Judy Almost.

Kit Judy is staging an outdoor play for the summer. It's always Shakespeare.

Elizabeth Are you a director?

Judy Sometimes when needed.

Elizabeth I almost suspected Kit here of being some kind of an actor.

Judy Not at all. He can only act like a clown.

Elizabeth Why is he then not in the play?

Judy Because there are no clowns in it. He would only ruin it.

Elizabeth If you can act like a clown you can act like anything.

Kit Right, Lizza!

Judy I make better use of Kit as a consultant. Sometimes he has even been a prompter. He can never learn to remember lines, but he is a good reader.

Kit A drink, Judy?

Judy Yes, please. (*takes a cigarette and is going to light it*)

Kit (*stops her*) Not here, Judy.

Judy (*almost offended*) Why not?

Kit Lizza has sensitive lungs.

Judy (*drops the cigarette at once*) I see. Is that why you are here for recreation?

Elizabeth Not only.

Judy But?

Kit She is here on leave similar to mine.

Judy Problems?

Kit Hopefully passing, aren't they, Lizza?

Elizabeth I hope so.

Judy How exciting. (*a questioning eye at Kit. He shakes his head.*)
 (*to Elizabeth*) Kit and I are childhood friends. We practically grew up together.

Kit She has never grown up from keeping after me, like a big sister.

Elizabeth Is that necessary?

Judy It was always necessary. He has always had a notorious weakness for girls.

Kit Like Byron said, it's not my fault, for I don't need to chase them, since they are always chasing me.

Elizabeth Not I.

Kit I thank my good fortune that you already have another lover.

Judy Is he here?

Kit Always present. Lizza is married to music.

Judy Then she is saved.

Elizabeth I hope so – or lost.

Kit It's the same.

Judy Come, Kit. I need some advice for the performance.
Elizabeth What are you staging?
Judy The shortest play.
Elizabeth Macbeth?
Judy No, the Tempest.
Elizabeth Yes, that would be fitting here.
Kit Will you excuse us, Lizza?
Elizabeth Of course. I must go practising now anyway.
Judy What are you playing?
Elizabeth The piano. Sobriety exercises after the drink. Then we shall see.
Kit She is herself a composer, I heard.
Elizabeth Only improvising. (*leaves*)
Judy You act well.
Kit You have to keep it up as long as possible.
Judy One day it will not be possible any more.
Kit Then I would rather be dead.
Judy One day at a time, Kit. Come. It's about Caliban's outfit.
Kit Isn't he best naked?
Judy That's the question. He would like to be a gipsy.
Kit The only thing he can't be is a woman.
Judy Then he will be content if he may be whatever else. (*takes Kit under his arm and walks out with him.*)

Akt II scene 1. The open stage with the sea and cliffs in the background.

George How much monster am I supposed to be really?
Julia As much as possible, since I am to be the opposite.
George I can't just be too inhuman.
Julia But Caliban is not supposed to be human.
George Does he then not speak with a human voice?
Julia Remember, George, that you are the son of a witch and a fish. How could you then be human at all?
George Even witches are human, for only humans can be witches. And she is my mother. How could I be anything but human with a human mother?
Julia But you *must not* be human!
George Who can stop me? Only for you being as ideal as possible as a fluttering spirit, I don't have to crawl in the dust as some sort of venomous reptile.
Julia Here is Judy now. She is the one to settle this.
Judy (arriving with Kit) Are you two arguing again?
George She doesn't want to allow me to be human. I am to be some sort of abysmal freak just to let her appear the more noble and ethereal.
Julia But that's how Shakespeare wrote it!

Judy What is the problem?

Julia He doesn't want to cooperate.

George How are you cooperating then?

Judy Children, you have to do with each other, you have dialogues and discussions with each other, so you have to put up with each other, even if you can't. Just because you have differences you don't *have* to bring it into your acting. The parts are there to be acted as someone else than yourself!

Julia Try to make the cannibal understand that.

George (angry) Shakespeare doesn't say anywhere that Caliban is a cannibal!

Julia Why else would his name be Caliban?

Judy Don't argue now, but act!

George Only if I may be as human as I want.

Judy Of course you may. Who could forbid you?

George (points at Julia) That one.

Judy Julia, are you or I the director here?

Julia I never questioned your direction.

Judy Then don't quarrel with Caliban.

Julia He is the one who quarrels with me!

George Feminist! Just because I am a man I may not be human!

Judy Judy and George, let's agree on this once and for all. Caliban is a hybrid between animal and man who is striving to become a human being. That's what makes him interesting and by which he gains the sympathy of the audience. George, let Ariel fly off as an elf as much as she wants, and she might let you try to be as much human as Caliban wants.

George I can agree to that. Isn't that a fair compromise, Julia?

Julia Just as long as you don't fiddle with me.

George Why shouldn't I sometimes? After all, we are married.

Julia (almost cries) NOT ON STAGE!

Judy (after a short silence) Are you happy now? Are you agreed?

Julia (sombre) Until further.

George I promise not to pat your bum.

Julia At least something.

Kit (to Judy) Was it problems like this you wanted me to get mixed up with?

Judy No. I just needed you for some moral support. Actors are sometimes hopeless cases.

Kit But these are just amateurs.

Judy They are still playacting, getting worked up for being able to make a show of themselves, fail to notice how they acquire manners and grand airs, and then anything could happen by their sudden caprices and incalculable fickleness. What about this pianist now?

Kit She just arrived. I know nothing about her.

Judy You mean you didn't lay on to her? You seemed like a couple already.

Kit Judy, you don't own me.

Judy No, and no one else either.

Kit May I then not even compliment a nice lady without you having your day ruined by jealousy?

Judy I must consider her dangerous and at the same time protect her. She knows nothing about you.

Kit That's the intention. I don't want her to know anything either.

Judy She comes here perfectly green and might even be a virgin, and the first thing she does is to happen to you.

Kit I have absolutely no plans with her.

Judy Try to convince *her* of that. Haven't you seen her eyes, how they glitter when she watches you?

Kit I thought she seemed thoroughly on the defensive.

Judy The more they seem so, the more keen is their interest.

Kit She has nothing to fear from me.

Judy You say so now before she has fallen.

Kit *Judy*, you know how it is. Even if I can't reveal my situation to a stranger, I would never be able to deceive her either.

Judy I know you, *Kit*. You don't know yourself. The women know you, but you can never see through yourself, not even with your new second sight

Kit (*almost cross*) This leads nowhere. I go back up there.

Judy Back to her?

Kit If you have no more need of me as a moral support for your production, I ask you to let me go and listen to beautiful live music as a change from your storms.

Judy I don't want to hurt you.

Kit Why are you doing it then? (*leaves vexed*)

Judy (*after him, out of hearing*) Because I love you. (*returns to the players*)

Tony Are we rehearsing today or not?

Judy It's fine, *Prospero*. Let's take it from the beginning, your first scene with *Ariel*.
 (*The actors get ready, and Judy makes ready to direct.*)

Scene 2. The pension.

(*Tom at the bar.*)

At some distance, *Elizabeth* is heard playing *Cornish Rhapsody* on the piano.)

Nancy Will she never stop?

Tom For that we should be grateful. She will probably not be with us for very long.

Nancy But she keeps on every day.

Tom Yes, it keeps her alive, but don't you hear the undertones?

Nancy What undertones?

Tom I keep hearing a constant underlying mood of suffering in her manner of playing.

Nancy I only hear that it never ends. (*enter Kit*) Here you are, your customer for today.

Tom He keeps me concerned as well.

Kit I hear that she is at it again.

Tom I just told Nancy, that we should be grateful as long as she plays, because when she ends it will be quiet.

Kit Don't you like the music, Nancy?

Nancy It reminds me of my husband.

Kit Don't you like thinking of him?

Nancy It's not that. I don't like being reminded of that I miss him. And he is not the only one who is not coming back. Most of them won't come back. Only you came back, Kit, and there are many who wonder why.

Kit I was not allowed to fly any more, Nancy.

Nancy But you don't do anything else either. You could do unarmed duty or manage surveillance by radar or something like that, but you are doing nothing to help us win the war.

Tom Stop it now, Nancy.

Nancy (affected) I just can't forgive the war that it took my husband away from me. *(hides her head in her hands and rushes out.)*

Kit It's time, Tom.

Tom The usual ration?

Kit Yes. It's time for the daily effort to forget the war.

Tom Doesn't whisky just make it worse?

Kit Of course. That's why I drink. It *should* hurt. That's the meaning of self-torture. Or else you forget that you live although you should be dead.

Tom Now he is getting morbid again.

Kit Is it so strange? I am not allowed in the war. I am of no use. All I could was to fly and bomb shit out of the Germans, and I was good at that but good for nothing else, and the only thing I was good at in life I am not allowed to do any more. What else can I turn to then than self-destruction?

Tom The war has reached its height, and the Germans are actually already defeated, but the only ones who don't realize it are themselves, so they go on fighting by pure senseless vanity when the only sensible thing would be to abandon war for peace. It's only a question of time, Kit. Then you will be tormented no more by that you are not allowed to murder any more.

Kit In war it's not a question of murder, just of killing.

Tom What is the difference?

Kit You murder intentionally. In war you kill because you must. Or else you get killed yourself or you lose the war. That's why it is a war duty to your country to kill regardless of persons as many as possible.

Tom And you regret that you miss that opportunity?

Kit I regret that I have to feel useless and despised by my countrymen for not contributing. I am no more than a coward drone in the eyes of most people.

Tom They don't understand your situation.

Kit And I hope they will go on with that, because I never accepted it.

Tom She has stopped. Then she will probably come down.

Kit Is she also drinking?

Tom No, she is only playing. That's her escape from reality. How was Judy's rehearsal?

Kit The usual problem with the players, who allow their conceit to rise to their heads, so that their egoism blinds them.

Tom But that's theatre, isn't it?

Kit Don't ask me. I can't imagine myself in any other role than the one I will never get rid of.

Elizabeth (*coming down*) Kit! Are you here at the bar? Aren't you at the rehearsal?

Kit I was no longer needed there. They just quarrelled, and I can't stand quarrels.

Elizabeth So you escape the conflict.

Kit Was that an innuendo?

Elizabeth No, Kit, not intentionally. Pardon me if it was unintentional.

Kit I understand.

Tom Whatever Kit is, he is no coward.

Kit Don't mention that word!

Elizabeth (*to Tom*) Has he been drinking?

Tom Enough.

Elizabeth I don't want to annoy you, Kit, but what is the problem?

Kit What problem?

Elizabeth Why are you not in the war, a handsome young man like you in your best age?

Kit (*throws his glass into the wall, breaking it in thousands of pieces*) Because I am a coward and dare not fight and refuse to defend my mother country! (*vanishes all beside himself.*)

Elizabeth What's the matter with him? What is he suffering from?

Tom I must not reveal it. Obligation of silence. He refuses to talk about it himself.

Elizabeth But surely there must be a reason?

Tom Only he can explain it in that case.

Elizabeth Is he ill?

Tom Not at all.

Elizabeth Then he is at least in a better situation than I.

Tom We are all in the worst possible situation in the world as long as the war goes on.

Elizabeth So you think it will get better afterwards?

Tom Well, it could hardly get any worse, could it?

Elizabeth Yes, Tom, it can always get even worse. (*leaves to follow Kit*)

Tom You could almost believe this is a kind of sanatorium with all its despairing patients. (*minds the bar*)

Act III scene 1. Judy's home.

When Judy comes home, Kit sits by the table.

Judy Wasn't it any fun at the pianist's?

Kit It's not fun anywhere.

Judy Is that the only reason why you always come to me?

Kit You know me, Judy, since childhood. I know that I can always trust you, for I always could, and we work well together since we never were more than friends. I just hope it will continue that way.

Judy You can always rely on that, like you always could so far.

Kit I became a little uncertain when you gave vent to jealousy over Lizza.

Judy She is a stranger. She has no business here and no connections. She knows nothing of us and the life here. You must wonder why she came here in the first place.

Kit The sea. Nature. Freedom. No war. Peace and quiet. Idyll. Nice people. What more could you wish?

Judy But she is a concert pianist and should entertain the troops out in the world.

Kit Haven't you asked her why she doesn't?

Judy She evades the question. Does she know anything about you?

Kit Nothing.

Judy Then you are safe from her. Is she safe from you?

Kit Here you go again, Judy. Are you trying to directly force me into her arms by your jealousy?

Judy That's the last thing I want.

Kit Why are you doing it then?

Judy Because I love you.

Kit You should never have said that.

Judy (*down on her knees, full of remorse*) Only as a friend, Kit, only as a friend! Almost as a brother. We did grow up together.

Kit You are afraid of losing me.

Judy Of course!

Kit Still you know you have to lose me. Nothing could keep me.

Judy We intend to keep you stuck in life as long as we can, especially if you yourself are not willing.

Kit You can't force me to live against my will.

Judy No, we can't, but we can do all we can to keep your will to live burning, whatever happens.

Kit The inevitable will happen anyway.

Judy As long as you still can see at all there is hope.

Kit Don't you think that I notice how my sight is deteriorating day by day? Would I force myself to learn Braille if I wasn't aware of how my sight is fading away drop by drop, like in some Chinese torture?

Judy But you are still not blind.

Kit No, but my respite is irrevocably shortened day by day.

Judy You don't count the days until your death. You count the days you still are alive.

Kit Just count the happy moments, if I ever had any. Yes, as a pilot I was happy and free, but I may never fly again. That happiness is cut out forever.

Judy But you still have the light left and us. We will never give you up.

Kit Who are we? You are the only one who knows I am going blind. All others think I am a poltroon who got out of the war from cowardice, and that's better than if they start to feel sorry for me.

Judy Still you go on chasing girls. That's a good sign. Keep it going.

Kit That's what you imagine. I am not interested any more since I can't view them properly.

Judy Still you are interested in the pianist.

Kit She is different. She plays in a special way. She is not just technical but has a living suffering soul.

Judy Am I without one then?

Kit If you have one you can't express it by music.

Judy So she has seduced you by her music.

Kit There you go again. I had better leave.

Judy Pardon me.

Kit There is nothing to pardon, but jealousy is always possessive, and I can't stand it.

Judy You are as free a nature as she. She has her freedom in music, and you still have your freedom as a pilot by your pride, even if you can't fly any more.

Kit I made a difference as long as I lived. When I no longer can make a difference I don't want to live any more. (*Elizabeth plays at some distance. He listens.*)

Judy But her music seems anyway to turn on some life in you.

Kit When I hear that music I don't want to let go of life.

Judy So her music gives your life a meaning.

Kit No, but it makes me postpone death.

Judy You have to admit it to yourself, Kit. You have fallen in love with her.

Kit Possibly in her music. Everything else is forbidden.

Judy Why?

Kit And that question comes from you, the only one who knows I am going blind? I can't even court her for her sake and my invalidity, which she knows nothing of.

Judy But suppose she is also in love with you?

Kit There is no reason for such a supposition.

Judy How do you know for sure?

Kit In that case I would have even less right to risk any unhappy relationship.

Judy And suppose it would only be the happier, just because it would be so limited?

Kit You present alarming hypotheses. The way you go on, it could end up badly.

Judy Why would she stay on, if there wasn't something here to keep her, either some situation or perhaps something of interest or reciprocated feelings for you?

Kit It's getting worse and worse.
Judy I am just trying to understand the situation. I don't think you have tried to understand it, since you are involved and can't see it from the outside.
Kit What do you want me to do?
Judy Give her a chance, for the sake of the experiment. I have nothing to lose, since I know that you in your secret blindness always will come back to me.
Kit I never want to have you as anything more than my best friend.
Judy That's enough for me. (*The music is heard no more.*)
Kit She has stopped.
Judy Perhaps she heard our thoughts.
Kit Don't be absurd.
Judy I have a great respect for the sensitivity of musicians and their subtle reception of overtones.
Kit You make me mad by your insinuations. I had better leave.
Judy Go to her and ask why she stopped playing.
Kit Even musicians have to rest a while now and then.
Judy Or perhaps you will have an interesting answer.
Kit I wouldn't think so.
Judy Pardon me. I teased you enough. You are free from me. (*Kit leaves immediately.*)

Poor man. He has never been so much in love before. On top of that she is beautiful, much more beautiful than I, but I don't grudge her that, while he anyway will not be able to see much of her.

Scene 2. The bar.

Nancy Do you think there is something going on between them?
Tom No, I don't think so. They live in entirely different worlds. She is a concert pianist, you know, and too far out in her world to even be able to think of taking on a discarded pilot.
Nancy But he has charm, and she has a weakness for pilots, especially if they are grounded.
Tom How do you know?
Nancy She can't hear him being talked of without blushing.
Tom So there. Then you have your answer.
Nancy But is it mutual?
Tom If he has a chance, he is stupid if he doesn't take it, and so far he has never missed a chance.
Nancy Here he is now. He doesn't seem to be in very high spirits.
Tom How is it, Kit?
Kit (gloomily) A double.
Tom Is it that bad?

Kit Shut up.

Nancy Yes, obviously it is that bad.

Kit What the devil are you drivelling about?

Tom We are just concerned about you. It does you no good just drifting around like a loafer out of work.

Kit You know that I can't fly any more.

Nancy But why? You never told us. Were you grounded? Were you dismissed? You were a war hero as a pilot. What happened?

Kit You don't want to know.

Nancy We sure do.

Tom You could any time get a commission by the militia.

Kit Like what?

Tom Like for instance a surveyor.

Kit Go to hell! Give me another.

Nancy Something is wrong. Has she turned you down?

Kit Who?

Nancy The pianist.

Kit Here you go wandering again. She has no eyes for me, and I have no eyes for her. All she does is to play the piano all the time, you know.

Nancy You are a bad pretender. Judy is jealous of you and her.

Kit How do you know?

Nancy Everybody knows it in the theatre. (*Elizabeth has come down but keeps out of sight, has noted the topic and is discreetly listening.*)

Kit That's her own affair in that case.

Nancy A woman does not get jealous without reason.

Kit Leave me alone! Let me drink in peace!

Tom Obviously he had a bad day today.

Kit It was fair enough without you.

Nancy Have you been quarrelling with Judy again?

Kit Don't try it!

Nancy I am not trying. I am just checking your temperature. You have taken leave from the war, have been discarded by the air force, don't want to work and take it as an insult if someone offers you a job. Something is wrong.

Kit Yes, I have had too little to drink lately.

Tom Rather too much.

Nancy If you are struck by terror of the war and flying and therefore no longer found suitable, it's best for yourself the sooner you admit to yourself that you are a coward.

Kit (*gets a wild look and stares at her, like to an atrocious insult*)

Tom It's all right, Kit. She doesn't mean what she is saying.

Kit Don't try it.

George (*has come in and joins the company at the bar*) She is just provoking to tease you. Don't take her seriously.

Kit You know nothing.

Nancy Yes, we know nothing. Enlighten us. What scared you down to earth?

Tom (*explaining to George*) We have tried for weeks to get him on his feet, but he wants nothing to do with us and will not even play the clown for your theatre.

Kit That's what all the others do quite enough.

George Honestly speaking, Kit, many of us are concerned about your irregular drifting, and many have come to the conclusion that you must be a coward.

Nancy Tom just offered him the perfect civil service as a surveyor's assistant.

Tom It was not meant as an insult, Kit.

Nancy Even if it must feel humiliating for a pilot to watch fixed targets.

Tom (*observes Kit's growing harm and realizes the danger*) We had better leave him alone.

Elizabeth (*comes down*) What is the problem, Kit? Are you a coward?

Kit (*tries to discover her, but she stands against the light*) Who is speaking to me?

Nancy He has had too many grogs.

Tom Leave him in peace.

Kit Too late. I can never again have any peace.

Tom He wouldn't have stayed grounded if there wasn't a reason. He is after all well organized.

George With the best statistics of all pilots from here.

Nancy But he still chose to decline. All he has been doing since then was to chase girls. I just warn you, Elizabeth. All are ready to fall for him, but he never sticks to anyone.

Tom That's enough, Nancy.

Kit No, it's not enough. It's never enough. I never get enough, although I am all through.

Elizabeth I think he is ill.

Kit No, Lizza, I am not ill. I just can't see you.

Elizabeth But I am standing here in front of you.

Kit I hear your voice, but that is all. I hear your music, but you are as invisible now as when you play in your room. Just now you are in my yellow spot, which constantly is increasing, and that's why I can't see a thing of you. Get me another, Tom. (*tries to grab a bottle but almost misses it.*)

Tom (*understands at once*) You had better pour it yourself.

Kit (*pours, misses the glass, pours it all beside, tries again but can't see the glass*)

Nancy (*terror struck*) He is blind!

Kit (*throws the bottle on the floor, which breaks*) No, Nancy, I am not blind, yet! But I will be! (*rushes out*)

George So that was the rub.

Tom He concealed it well all the way until now.

Elizabeth (*sits down perturbed with her hand to her cheek*)

Nancy It was my fault. I am sorry. I didn't know it was that bad. (*vanishes out*)

George So that's what Judy meant when she mentioned he was innocent of his incompetence.

Tom (to Elizabeth) Your music has given him comfort. I suggest that you carry on.
(Elizabeth rises at once and goes out)

George I guess I need a drink.

Tom I think we all need it. *(pours a drink to each one of them)*

George I am sorry about the lost bottle.

Tom There are more. *(raises his glass, and they drink)*

(Soon Elizabeth is heard again at her piano concerto.)

George Has she composed it herself?

Tom I think so.

George No wonder Kit fell for it.

Tom There is something about her as well but I don't know what.

George There is nothing wrong with her music anyway.

Kit (cautiously and awkwardly coming back, as if music brought him in a better state of mind.

George and Tom become aware of him.) Sorry if I broke a bottle for you, Tom. I will pay for it.

Tom You don't have to. Accidents at work. It was Nancy's fault who provoked you to reveal your blindness.

Kit I am not blind yet, but I haven't much left. It could come quickly, but no one knows for sure.

George I am sorry, Kit.

Kit Don't be. If there is anything I tried to avoid, it was people's commiseration. I am not in the least pitiful, and no one must pity me.

George It will be difficult not to.

Tom I think you could have something in common with that pianist. She is also concealing something.

Kit At least it can't be blindness.

George And hardly deafness either.

Tom Let's not speculate in it. But I think you could need each other, Kit.

Kit She can comfort me. But how could I comfort her, when I don't even know if she needs any comfort?

Tom There might be something there for you to do. You should find it out.

Kit And if I don't find anything?

Tom There definitely is something. You can hear it from the music. *(Kit unconsciously empties George's glass and leaves them.)**(to George)* You'll get another. *(refills his glass)*

George How much about this do you think Judy knew?

Tom Everything. That's why she kept quiet about it. *(They mind their drinks.)*

Act IV scene 1. The piano room.

Elizabeth stops when Kit enters.

Kit No, please go on.

Elizabeth Not with you in the room. Then I get too emotional.

Kit I don't mind.

Elizabeth Is it true that you are going blind?

Kit Yes. That's why I was not allowed to fly any more. I couldn't focus enough on an enemy plane any more.

Elizabeth Can nothing be done about it? Eye operations are not too unusual, and they succeed better today than in Bach's and Handel's time.

Kit Don't you think I examined all possibilities? It's too risky. I could lose my sight entirely at once.

Elizabeth Have you anything to lose?

Kit Only you. At least as long as I still could see you, I wanted to keep you, and that will be at least for a short time yet.

Elizabeth How small or how great are the chances for an operation to succeed?

Kit Minimal.

Elizabeth But still they are there.

Kit At least one in a hundred.

Elizabeth And you don't dare?

Kit All experts advise against it. They say that I am not needed in the war anyway any longer since we are winning it.

Elizabeth But flying is the only thing you can and will.

Kit Yes.

Elizabeth But if you could save your sight, and it would mean you could fly again, wouldn't it be worth taking any risk? You dared take any risks anyway as a pilot, didn't you?

Kit Yes.

Elizabeth Who dissuaded you?

Kit Judy.

Elizabeth Do you love her?

Kit No.

Elizabeth But she loves you and sees perhaps your blindness as a means for her to always keep you.

Kit You are the one I love, Lizza. You came here like a rescuing angel with your music and revealed to us a better world than that of the war and the invalids, the fury and the ruins, the destruction and the madness. Your music opened a gateway to me of a better life at least for the mind and the heart.

Elizabeth I think you can make it, Kit. I will be your guardian angel during the operation.

Kit If you believe in it I will also believe in it.

Elizabeth I think it's worth an effort. I don't think we have anything to lose.

Kit I don't think so either. (*embracing her*) Thanks for saving me. If it turns out well you have saved me the whole way.

Elizabeth I would like to try.

Kit If the operation is successful we have a life. If it fails, it wasn't a life worth living anyway.

Elizabeth It will succeed.

Kit We just have to get Judy into the agreement as well.

Elizabeth Could she have anything against it?

Kit I don't think so. It's my life, and I am the only one to decide over it.

Elizabeth Good luck, Kit. Go to her and tell her and get her on. I will continue playing for you in the meantime.

Kit Do so, my love. Play me back to life. (*leaves. Elizabeth resumes her activity by the piano.*)

Scene 2. With Judy.

Judy It's downright suicide!

Kit We don't know.

Judy I know.

Kit How do you know?

Judy I can feel it.

Kit Judy, I have made innumerable flights and risked my life almost every time while I made others lose theirs at the same time. My life was a constant game with death, but I always managed and survived.

Judy And now you got the chance by your increasing blindness to at last get secured in life!

Kit A life as a blind man is no life, Judy. I believe I could once more find my life by going through death.

Judy And supposing the operation will be successful – what will then become of your life? You will go up in the air again and continue shooting down Germans and spreading death wherever you fly, while you yourself perhaps will be the next casualty. That hell was what I had hoped to at last have eliminated once and for all.

Kit That's my life, Judy. I can't do anything else.

Judy You have succeeded for a long time now to stick to the ground and being a nice fellow.

Kit During constantly increasing unease in bars and pubs and under constantly increasing disdain and detraction by my associates who believe I am a coward? I am not a coward, Judy, I never was, but if I desist from the possibilities of an operation I am really a coward.

Judy You have fallen for that pianist.

Kit Or she might have saved me.

Judy What is really the matter with her? Is she quite healthy herself, since she comes here to play when she ought to be entertaining the troops out in the war, which appears to have been her desire?

Kit I don't know.

Judy Find out about it then. Perhaps she has a secret agenda and therefore got stuck on you, which perhaps somehow has fitted into her plans.

Kit We can't speculate in her motivations.

Judy On the contrary – we *should*.

Tony (*looking in, knocking afterwards*) Are you here arguing, while we keep waiting for you?

Kit Your company is waiting for their director, Judy.

Judy Pardon me, Tony, but perhaps you could help me persuade this fool not to throw away his life on an operation which will only make him blind and incapacitated for the rest of his life?

Kit On the contrary! It's my chance to make myself useful again!

Judy If he comes through the operation he intends to start flying again and throwing away his life on murdering innocent Germans by bombing their beautiful cities to cinders. Is that better?

Tony But Judy, he is actually a pilot, and if he wants to fix his eyes to be able to fly again, who can stop him? And if the operation fails and he gets blind, you will be able to keep him, and that's what you really want, isn't it?

Judy You mean that whatever he does, it will be to his own detriment?

Kit You will lose me in any case, Judy.

Tony Are you really going to wage an operation, Kit?

Judy His new flame, that pianist, has fooled him to dare the challenge.

Tony I see! The green-eyed monster is out haunting you!

Kit I have no plans for Lizza, Judy and Tony, but she is actually right, and I try to be rational.

Tony Is the war rational? Is it really rational to wage on it, if you don't have to? You are privileged who got away from it, Kit, and I can understand that Judy consider it more rational if you neither get up in the air again nor risk your remaining sight.

Kit At the same time flying is my only real life.

Tony You can always fly as a co-pilot.

Kit That's not the same as flying yourself, to determine your course and manage your instruments and manoeuvres by yourself.

Tony But if you are operated on with success and will be able to fly again, you will irrevocably be used against the Germans in the war, and honestly speaking I must give Judy the right in her considerations. Who was ever right in a war? The Nazis are pointed out as the worst evil the world has seen, but how much is truth, and how much is propaganda? Isn't Stalin with his stifling autocracy a more threatening danger, which we have allied ourselves with without second thoughts? We might just as well have allied ourselves with Hitler against Stalin, and that would have been just as evil. If I have understood things correctly, Hitler's intentions have all the way been to restore Germany from the humiliation of the peace treaty of the last world war with its unjustly imposed burdens of guilt, which reduced Germany to an impoverished slave bereft of all rights and freedom of movement, while a

number of German-speaking countries were subjected to foreign government, like Saar and Danzig. Well, Hitler started the war, and he must pay for it, but I cannot see any justification for bombing all Germany to dust and cinders, and that's what you want to do.

Kit I am sorry, but I have made up my mind, and nothing you say could alter my determination. My only life is to be flying in the air.

Tony We must accept that, Judy. Come now, Prospero is waiting for his Miranda.

Elizabeth (appearing suddenly, and everybody understands that she already has been listening for a while) Judy, I have no claims on Kit. If he wants to dare the operation no one can stop him, and you don't have to fear my involvement, for I will shortly go abroad to play for the troops, which I should have done long ago.

Kit (hurrying forth and embracing her) Lizza, you must not fail me now!

Lizza (releasing herself) Marry Judy. She is the one who loves you.

Judy You don't have to sacrifice yourself for me, Lizza.

Elizabeth It is no sacrifice. It is an obligation, my musical duty, like you have duties to the theatre,

Tony She is right, Judy.

Judy We have long in vain tried to understand you, Lizza, your appearance here and what your plans really were, but now I understand, that we shall never be able to understand you.

Elizabeth That might be just as well.

Kit Is it really only the music?

Elizabeth Marry Judy, Kit. She loves you. (*rushes out*)

Tony (after a short pause) Well what of it? Will the director come?

Judy She will come. Kit, go after Elizabeth. I don't understand her, but you should try to, before it is too late. (*Kit immediately hurries out.*) Well, Tony, now I am at Prospero's disposal.

Tony (lays his arm around her and goes out with her) We were almost worried about a curtain drop before it had risen.

Judy As an actor you can fortunately always put on a mask for other parts. (*They go out.*)

Act V scene 1.

Doctor I must warn you, Miss Winslop. You are whirling around the edge of an abyss and challenging death by every new concert tour you abandon yourself to.

Elizabeth But it's my life. I can't do anything else.

Doctor Weren't you warned already long ago?

Elizabeth Yes, they said I was dying, but I never died, not even when I wanted it myself.

Doctor So you expose yourself to mortal danger all the time by your own will?

Elizabeth As long as the war goes on, I don't risk my life as much as too many others do.

Doctor Of course you make a great contribution by playing for the troops by all the most critical fronts, but you really shouldn't have exposed yourself to the terrible climatological conditions in Africa.

Elizabeth That was my best audience, and I survived.

Doctor Honestly speaking, you shouldn't have.

Elizabeth No, I should have died long ago, but still I didn't, and as long as I don't and the war goes on, I see no reason why I should put my life less at risk than so many others.

Doctor What drives you on?

Elizabeth Unhappy love. What else?

Doctor The most obvious of all answers. But why was your love unhappy? I always doubted that any love could be unhappy, not even the so called unhappiest possible.

Elizabeth I gave him up as there was another who loved him, but I was content with giving him a life.

Doctor Was it that pilot you asked me to keep you informed about?

Elizabeth Yes. Did I succeed in giving him the life he wanted?

Doctor His eye operation was successful, and he was actually allowed to start flying again. He now shares the bombings of Germany and is one of the boldest pilots taking the worst risks. He is like you, a kind of parallel case, and perhaps it's not so strange, that you seem to have had a passionate love affair together.

Elizabeth It didn't last very long. He thought he would go blind, and I thought I would die. That's why I went to Cornwall to, as I thought, make a happy end to my life. Instead I grew healthier and mortally in love.

Doctor And you persuaded him to dare the operation, which could have ruined his sight permanently?

Elizabeth He had a girl, a childhood friend, who protested, but she agreed to allow him to take the risk if I gave him up.

Doctor So he can never be yours again?

Elizabeth No. But I am satisfied and happy about having contributed to the restoration of his sight so that he could fly again.

Doctor Does he know that you are constantly exposing yourself to mortal danger by your concert tours?

Elizabeth I don't know. (*cautiously*) Do you know if they married? They were supposed to.

Doctor They are still just engaged. Since he is risking his life the way he does, he has asked to postpone the marriage till after the war.

Elizabeth How long do you think it will continue?

Doctor A year at most, maybe just half a year. The Germans have already lost but refuse to admit it, while there are increasing efforts in the country to urge the enforcement of some peace.

Elizabeth Is Hitler mad?

Doctor That you will have to ask him, if you meet him. Your pilot may visit him with a bomb. At least he is trying. He has bombed both Berlin and Hamburg.

Elizabeth Did he take part in the firestorm over Hamburg?

Doctor Yes, he did. That was one of the first missions he was part of.

Elizabeth It grieves me to hear. Hamburg was one of the most prominent musical cities of Germany.

Doctor Take my advice and cancel all further tours till after the war. Then you can play the more for example for the reconstruction of Hamburg.

Elizabeth I am sorry, but I can't stop now. A musician keeps working until he dies, or he dies prematurely, and the worst death for him is if his music dies before him.

Doctor (resigns) I can't stop you. It's your own affair. I can only warn you, and that's what I have done.

Elizabeth Thanks for your counsel, and for your news about Kit.

Doctor You gave his life back to him, even if it was only temporary, like yours as a wartime pianist could be as well.

Elizabeth Thanks, doctor. *(rises and leaves)*

Doctor These fanatics. What is driving them on? They are parallel cases, hopeless players of Russian roulette, and they can't stop at anything less than a crash. Who will die first of them? One should make a bet about it, but both have already survived themselves.

Scene 2. The bar.

Tom So you have landed for good?

Kit Never again, Tom. I've had enough.

Tom You should be glad that you came down alive.

Kit I don't know if I am.

Tom Being alive you can always drink. Being dead you can't even do that.

Kit Still I am looking forward to my only remaining flight, the escape from life.

Tom Have you forgotten Judy?

Kit I never loved her, Tom. I am sorry. Even if I would want to, you can never force love.

Tom Not even with a splendid spiritual and talented lady like Judy? No one would decline her except you.

Kit I don't decline her. I was always grateful for her friendship which I valued like nobody else's.

Tom She would have liked to have children with you.

Kit I know. Unfortunately it was not bilateral. No rational human being wants to have children with anyone in the world we have today, simply because it would be selfish and short-sighted to bestow children on this world.

Tom Still more children are born than ever.

Kit That only makes it worse and the world even more fraught with misery.

Tom So what will you do now when you are grounded again? Spend the rest of your life by the bar and the bottle?

Kit Do you have any better suggestion?

Tom You can't deny that the war will end, and when it just ends everything has to become better.

Kit Only temporarily. There will always be new wars.

Tom Judy would always have a place for you in her theatre.

Kit I know, Tom. I know that I should be grateful for getting my eyesight back in full, and if it hadn't been for a certain lady it would never have happened, but that lady was lost. I know, it wasn't Judy's fault, but I lost her only because she was too good for me.

Tom What happened to her?

Kit I tried to follow her career. She always chose the most exposed camps at the most hazardous places by the front to give her concerts, as if she tried to look up death itself, which she could find as little as I could. Perhaps she instead like me found something even worse.

Tom It wasn't your fault.

Kit Whose fault was it then if not theirs who carried through the holocaust?

Tom You just obeyed orders.

Kit That is no excuse. Even a soldier may refuse to comply with a mission if it transcends his competence.

Tom You didn't know what was going on.

Kit But the leaders of it knew all about it too well, what is done is done, and it was we who did it, and for that we are damned forever in our own eyes.

(Elizabeth has cautiously entered the door.)

Tom I think we have a visitor.

Kit *(turns around)* Who are you? A phantom?

Elizabeth I heard that you had come back.

Kit And why did *you* come back?

Elizabeth If for nothing else, then at least to congratulate you to the successful operation.

Kit Judy was right. I should have stuck to the ground and remain happy with only gradually getting blind.

Elizabeth What happened?

Kit Don't you know?

Elizabeth What is it that I don't know?

Kit I am not flying any more.

Elizabeth Why? Wasn't that your life's only meaning?

Kit Yes, until we were sent out to bomb Dresden.

Elizabeth Were you there?

Kit I was one of the many mass murderers.

Elizabeth And therefore you refuse to fly any more?

Kit Is that so strange? The command knew what mission we were sent out to perform. They had even meticulously planned the fire storm, which was thoroughly intended, but we were not to know, but we were compelled to behold the result of the operation when it was too late to turn back. More than thirty thousand, maybe sixty thousand, perhaps more than a hundred thousand civilians killed just because they happened to be in one of the most beautiful cities in the world at the wrong moment, all innocent. And we, the defenders of civilization, the knights crusading against evil, carried through this the worst massacre of innocents in history. It cut my wings for good, and I am looking forward after death to have them compensated with either angel's wings or justified black wings to fly down to hell with.

Elizabeth You have turned bitter.

Kit Is that so strange? How did you manage then? You appear to have looked up all the worst front places just to give concerts. Do you also have a reason for looking for death?

Elizabeth Aren't you married to Judy?

Kit No, I am not married to Judy.

Elizabeth Weren't you supposed to be?

Kit Yes, but we postponed the wedding till after the war. Now I will not be interested any more, even if the war ends. But what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be giving concerts at the front? The war isn't over yet, you know.

Elizabeth I heard that you were here.

Kit So you came for my sake?

Elizabeth I just couldn't keep away.

Kit Lizza! (*can't control himself, hugs her*) I was never able to love Judy. I loved you from the start, and not just for your music. Your music made me listen to a higher voice than myself, and I found you. You gave me back my life by insisting on my eye operation, so that I could fly again, but it's all over now. After Dresden I can never again obey any order or make an airplane start for the sky. But you remain and have come back. I can hardly believe it is true.

Elizabeth I never wanted to take you away from Judy.

Kit She has her theatre. She always took me for granted as her assistant, but I can never be anything more to her. Yes, she claims that she loves me and always did, but it's just a habit of hers, since I was always at hand, so that she got used to me and never really wanted any man but accepted me just because I was close at hand. You could perhaps call it love out of convenience. I found something higher.

Elizabeth My doctor says that we both have survived ourselves. Perhaps we have in order to find some meaning with it.

Kit What's wrong with you?

Elizabeth Before I came to Cornwall the first time they said that I suffered from a growing heart, which would be the end of me if I didn't immediately relax completely. That's why I came to Cornwall, but here I became better, because you suddenly became a part of my life.

Kit And your heart problem has remained stable in its improvement?

Elizabeth I threw myself into the war just to let my heart break, but it didn't feel like breaking any more. We both seem to have got away.

Kit And here you are to take care of a war ruin who only had the bottle left in life to enjoy after having had his wings cut by the war. Do you want to have a fallen angel without wings?

Elizabeth Do you want to have a handicapped pianist?

Kit Perhaps we could compensate each other.

Elizabeth We could last time I was here. It worked.

Kit Yes, it worked, so that I even got back my eyesight.

Judy (enters) I heard, Lizza, that you had returned. You came just in time to take care of a marooned war wreck which only caused me worries by striking.

Elizabeth Does that mean that you give us your blessing?

Judy Only you can save him. He couldn't have happened to anything better, since everything else would have been worse.

Elizabeth Thanks, Judy.

Judy Don't thank me. Thank providence. And thanks for coming back.

(Elizabeth and Kit look at each other, still in their embrace.)

Tom (prudently) May I invite you all three for a drink?

Judy Just what I need. We are staging 'A Midsummer-Night's Dream' for the summer, hoping the war will be over by then. Perhaps it would be convenient for your wedding?

Tom (raising his glass) Cheers, my friends.

(All four drink to each other.)

The End

(January 19th 2014,
translated in February 2020.)



Comment

The play is modelled on the film *Cornish Rhapsody* 1944 with Stewart Granger and Margaret Lockwood and is the third and last play inspired by the three immortal English piano concerto films from the war, *Dangerous Moonlight* 1941, *While I Live* (*Dream of Olwen* 1947) and this one. While the music is dominating in the two former, in this one Hubert Bath's *Cornish Rhapsody* is less dominating. Like in the two others, the author has introduced new ingredients that were not in the films.

February 23rd 2020