DAVENANT’S SHOW

By

Peter Hankins
**SCENE 1**

DAME MARY: No, William, it must *not* go on!

DAVENANT: But my love, why not?

DAME MARY: Because, if it goes on, this *show* will get your head cut off! The performance of plays is *illegal* now - and you are the last person who can afford to flout that law. You are not a Puritan who wants a licence to sing psalms; you are not some obscure mountebank whose feeble jests might escape attention; you are Sir William Davenant: a confidant of the Queen; a commander of the King’s forces during the late war; the royal poet laureate; a leading man at court. You would have been the King’s Lieutenant-Governor of Maryland, if we hadn’t been stopped by those wretched Parliamentary ships. You, of all people, cannot risk a public act of defiance: and what could be more public than a play? You might as well announce your own execution.

DAVENANT: There are those who would pay to see that entertainment. But we’ll be careful. For one thing, it isn’t exactly a play. Nor a masque. It will be an ‘opera’ like the ones in Italy.
There’s no law against operas: as a matter of fact this will be the first ever performed in England – think of that – *never seen before on the English stage!* Eh?

DAME MARY: And never seen again. ‘Opera’, indeed – to the Puritans it will sound like a secret Catholic society. Don’t you remember how the soldiers arrived at Blackfriars, stopped the performance half-way through and closed the theatre? Then it was the Cockpit; and they didn’t just throw the people out; they took down the stages and stripped the buildings, so that they could never be used as theatres again. At Blackfriars, they’ve built houses where the theatre used to be.

DAVENANT: Yes, I know. Awful. But it could have been worse. Nobody was hurt. They didn’t imprison the actors, or the manager – or even the playwright. They just closed the show. Critics do that much. At least the Roundheads didn’t complain about our lack of originality and artistic vision while they were about it.

DAME MARY: Oh, William! It’s not a joke! If only we were still with the Queen in France! I don’t
understand why you must spend your time
with hucksters, rogues, and actors.

DAVENANT: Oh, I met far more hucksters and rogues in
the Queen’s entourage than I ever find in the theatre: I dare say there were a few capable actors amongst the King’s favourites, too.

There are bad people everywhere, you know my love, even in France: but if it’s at all possible I should sooner any man was my friend than my enemy. When all’s said, every one of us is the child of Adam and Eve.

DAME MARY: That didn’t make Cain as good a man as Abel.

You are a gentleman, William: you should live a gentleman’s life. Now in France, I saw your true nature blossom. You truly were the honourable chevalier Guillaume De Avenant, always ready with a witty but discreet remark, a well-calculated gesture. You never had to shout and bang the table to get the waiter’s attention; you never had to explain to the flunkeys who you were.

DAVENANT: Ah yes; Paris was wonderful. Though a little more money would have made our stay even more agreeable, and the waiters positively fawning.
DAME MARY: Here, it seems to be waiters you spend your time with, instead of gentlemen. Everyone here claps you on the back; they shout your name from the back of dirty Southwark taverns, and you... you talk to them all as if they were your friends and equals. Can’t we go back to Paris, and seek the Queen’s patronage again? Isn’t it your duty, in a way, to go back and do what you can?

DAVENANT: No. The time has come to take up my own life again. My proper business is poetry and plays. I suppose there will be no more royal masques, but I cannot let those astonishing, wonderful performances come to an end altogether, and I can no more stop producing plays than a hen can stop laying eggs. Parliamentary ordinances hold no more sway over a poet’s brain than over a chicken’s guts.

DAME MARY: Ah, the Laureate speaks! If you must put on plays, couldn’t you do it in Paris? Where they are not illegal, and you need not risk your life?

DAVENANT: No, my love, I’m afraid London is the only place. Paris is a beautiful city, and I love the
French theatre. Corneille is a wonderful fellow, but it is all too civilised for me. It all has to follow Aristotle over there, you know: a classical temple, with all the unities observed. Some may prefer a marble statue but I, my love, must have a living, breathing woman, however much she complains. It’s London for me.

DAME MARY: A town whose theatres have been demolished!

DAVENANT: All the more need for us to restore them. You know how I had planned to set up my own theatre here before the war, that long intermission, came along, and I shall carry that plan through eventually, Parliament or no Parliament.

HEAVY FOOTSTEPS

BAILIFF: Sir William Davenant?

DAVENANT: Oh! It’s the bailiff. God’s hooks, Wandle, you startled me – I thought you were a troop of roundheads! What is it now? It’s Urswick the tailor and his bills again, I’ll wager. Will I never be free of this constant pursuit? In thirty-four years he has never yet ceased to send bailiffs after me!

BAILIFF: In thirty-four years, you’ve never yet paid
him Sir William. No offence intended. It’s steady work for me, and you’ve always been a gentleman to deal with, never losing your temper, always ready to offer an honest bailiff a drink.

DAVENANT: There’s beer over there. I can’t afford wine, as you know.

BAILIFF: Ah.

POURING SOUNDS

BAILIFF: No wine? You must really be short of money this time, Sir William.

DRINKING: MUG BANGS ON TABLE

Proper ale, though. Now then. Our business today is a little bit more serious than usual, Sir William. It isn’t Mr Urswick this time. Let me show you these papers… there are substantial sums here, owed to the kind of people who can’t be put off.

DAVENANT: I’ve explained all this before. I have the means to pay… but not in London. In order to realise the necessary cash, I have to go to Oxford. But I have only been released from the Tower on parole, and one of the conditions of the parole is that I do not leave London. I am caught between the horns of a legal dilemma. If I stay here, I shall be
imprisoned for debt: if I go to Oxford, I shall be imprisoned for having violated my parole. The whole thing is impossible: I’m sure it must be contrary to the articles of war. I must have more time to obtain a proper pardon, don’t you see? It will do my creditors no good to have me in jail.

**DAME MARY:** You see what madness it is to contemplate putting on any kind of show! The shadow of the Tower still hangs over you! It was only by luck you escaped having your head cut off.

**BAILIFF:** Oh yes, that debate in Parliament! There was drama for you! Better than any play, meaning no offence, Sir William. What a scene! Ten malignants, old diehard cavaliers, all lined up before the House. It’s life or death for them...

**DAME MARY:** I’ve heard the story, Mr Wandle.

**BAILIFF:** It’s a classic, isn’t it, Ma’am? Anyway, the Speaker looks grim. The first five come up, and the vote is taken.

Number one – *death*!

Number two – *death*!

Number three ... well, so it went.

**DAVENANT:** Have you ever thought of going on the stage,
my boy? You’re doing this awfully well.

BAILIFF: Then up comes Sir William here. Now a few of the members had seen Sir William’s shows, it seems, at one time or another; some had even read his poetry; most of them knew, anyway, that he was a decent, good-hearted fellow. But on the other hand, he was a catholic convert, active in the Royalist cause; the Queen’s right-hand man. A real double-dyed black malignant.

DAME MARY: Mr Wandle!

BAILIFF: In their eyes, I meant, Ma’am – no offence intended. Now this is a good bit. Just as they’re about to take the vote, in come two Roundhead burgesses from York. Parliamentary men, both of them, in good standing with the government. They’ve travelled all the way to put in a word for Sir William, and they haven’t so much as stopped to take their cloaks off. Turns out, during the war, they’d been taken prisoner. Unlike the rest, they were too mean to pay their ransoms.

DAVENANT: Those folk would sooner have their throats slit than their purses.
Anyway, they end up being handed over to Sir William to look after. Now he treats them like honoured guests. Entertains them to dinner every night. Spent a fortune. Anyone else would have had the beggars shot.

We became quite good friends in the end, in spite of our differences. But I couldn’t go on entertaining them forever, so I took them aside and said I hoped they wouldn’t be offended, I’d enjoyed having them as prisoners, but now would they please consider taking an early opportunity to escape?

Of course, I tipped the wink to my guards, in case they should happen across the prisoners on their way out. So the two Yorkshiremen slipped through the lines one morning and were away. But when they got a few miles off, it struck them that they’d been a bit ungrateful, leaving without saying goodbye. So they came all the way back again, slipped back through the lines again, and found me. “Sir William,” they said, “Sorry if we’ve put you to any trouble, but we’ve just come back
to say thank you very much and we’re going to escape now.”

“Very well, sirs,” I said, “But once you’ve gone, please try not to slip through the lines any more.”

BAILIFF: That story got a big laugh in the House, and they were impressed by the fact that two Yorkshiremen, solid Parliamentarians, would go to so much trouble on Sir William’s account. So anyway, they settle down and take the vote.

In favour of death, 27.

Against - 27. A tie!

Now it’s all up to the Speaker’s casting vote.

There was absolute silence for a few minutes.

DAVENANT: Now Harry Martyn was there. He was a Parliament man, of course, but a good fellow. He couldn’t bear the silence, and he stood up to do what he could for me. But what could he say?

BAILIFF: Mr Speaker, he says, the honourable members here have been asking that we
should make of these malignants a sacrifice
unto God. Well, I always thought that when
you sacrificed to God, you gave Him the best
you had, pure and without blemish. Are they
seriously suggesting we present the
Almighty with this rotten old rascal?

DAVENANT: Gadzookers, that was good! I wrote to him
afterwards and told him the obligation he
laid me under should be forever
acknowledged – that remark had saved my
life. The Speaker cast his vote in my favour,
and I was saved. Of course, even now, as I
say, if I stir out of London I shall be arrested
again. You see my difficulty, Wandle? You
don’t have to confiscate anything, do you?
Not just now, surely?

DAME MARY: Oh! How can you laugh about your life being
in mortal danger! And how can you think of
putting on a play in such circumstances?

DAVENANT: An opera, my love. I need something to raise
my spirits. And I might make some money to
pay this fellow with.

BAILIFF: I don’t want to know anything about any
play. Look, Sir William, I don’t have to take
your furniture now, but if I don’t get at least
half of the money within the next fortnight, you’ll be arrested, whatever I say. Haven’t you got some friends who could bail you out, just till the pardon comes through? Some of your old patrons in London must have a bit of cash put away somewhere safe, eh? And surely you made friends when you were in France? You have a think. I’ll see you again soon, Sir William, and good fortune to you in the meantime.

HEAVY FOOTSTEPS RECEDING

DAME MARY: William? Promise me you won’t risk your life over this play.

DAVENANT: My love. Trust me. I must do this. A show is everything to me. When I sit there waiting for a show to begin, even if it’s one I’ve rehearsed over and over again, I feel the way a child feels on Christmas Eve. It may seem strange, but to me the war and all my adventures were truly little more than a long intermission in the real business of life. God writes the best plots, it’s true, but Lord! He needs an editor sometimes.

But don’t worry, my love: I don’t intend to die just yet. I know what I am doing. Don’t
you think you have to pretty cunning to run Royalist guns across the Channel under the noses of the Parliamentary fleet again and again, as I did?

DAME MARY: William, there is no secret scheme, is there? No half-baked plot?
And you never told me before that you were smuggling guns! You said it was billets-doux for the Queen!

SCENE 2

LOUD FOOTSTEPS

BAILIFF: Mr Sapience Godsmerry Scropes, Justice of the Peace?

SCROPES: You know perfectly well who I am, man! Do you have to shout out my name like the town crier every time you enter the room?

BAILIFF: I love my work, sir.

SCROPES: Don’t stand on the carpet in those boots!

BAILIFF: Back, back! That’s better. Now stay!

SCROPES: Carpet must be worth a bit, eh Mr Scropes?

BAILIFF: Have you anything for me today, sir? Any good news?

SCROPES: Don’t harass me, Wandle! I’ve told you I’ll pay. But if you start pestering me...

BAILIFF: No, Mr Scropes, not a bit of it. I know my place, and I know better than to harass a magistrate. No, I just thought if we put our
heads together, we might think of a plan. I often have a chat with my customers about how they could raise some money. I’ve just been talking to Daphne about that very thing.

SCROPES: Daphne?

BAILIFF: Sir William Davenant. ‘Daphne’ is what the other gentlemen call him, you know, behind his back. Though judging by the number of hungry sons and daughters in that house of his, he could teach most of them a thing or two about virile prowess.

SCROPES: Davenant? That mephitic old whoremonger? They should have executed him.

BAILIFF: Well, sir, he owes a few sums of money, like yourself. We had a bit of a chat. His wife, Dame Mary was trying to persuade him not to put on a play of some kind.

SCROPES: What? A play? Most strictly forbidden!

BAILIFF: That’s what I told them. Of course, Sir William always pays in the end. Those old Royalists, they spent a lot of time at the Palace. Bound to be a silver spoon in the pocket of an old coat somewhere. And no doubt he made a few business contacts abroad who could make use of his services now he’s back in London...
SCROPES: In plain language, you would take money he’s earned by spying for the King of France?

BAILIFF: We have a saying in my line of business, Mr Scropes: *pecunia non olet*. It means, the business may stink, but the money don’t. It’s what the old Roman Emperor Vespasian said when they asked him how he could think of putting a tax on pissing in the street.

SCROPES: A fine example - a pagan Emperor, persecutor of the Christian martyrs?

BAILIFF: Burning in Hell, sir, burning in Hell this minute. But, incidentally, why did he need new taxes anyway? Why, to pay for the Colosseum. Entertainment was always an expensive business. Now the thing that puzzles me is, how can Sir William raise money by putting on a play if he hasn’t got any money to start with? Plays cost a fair sum.

SCROPES: Didn’t you ask him about his circumstances?
BAILIFF: He told me a neat little story about how he
couldn’t leave London because of his parole,
and couldn’t pay his debts because he
couldn’t get to Oxford. Only an idiot would
believe that. For one thing, the dilemma is
too contrived. That’s the thing about artists
like Daphne, you see: they can’t resist the
urge to make a good story out of their
excuses. But in any case, Oxford isn’t the
moon, is it? If he had money there,
something could have been arranged. No. I
know perfectly well he must have got hold of
a little fund somehow.

Anyway, it crossed my mind, as I was
walking over here, that if he couldn’t put on
the play – if he were prevented, somehow –
he’d have nothing else to do with that little
fund, wherever he got it from. He’d have to
use it to settle his debts. He might even have
a bit over to spare for anyone who had
helped keep him out of jail.

SCROPES: Have a care, Mr Bailiff. If you’re suggesting I
should use my office to extort money from
the old devil, you might find yourself in
trouble. But if the business about the play is
true, something must certainly be done about it.

BAILIFF: I don’t mean anything improper, Mr Scropes. Of course, you want to suppress Sir William on principle, rather than for advantage, but either way’s good for me. I dare say Dame Mary will talk him out of it anyway. I couldn’t say I knew anything definite about it; not, you know, under oath...

SCROPES: I shall have this investigated: if you know anything else, you had better tell me now.

BAILIFF: No sir. But I’ll keep an eye on him.

SCROPES: Be aware, Master Bailiff, that you have begun to swim in deep water.

BAILIFF: I find it necessary, Mr Scropes, in order that I may more effectually cast my bread thereupon. I’ll see you again soon, sir, and good fortune to you in the meantime.

HEAVY FOOTSTEPS RECEDING

SCENE 3

COOKE: Good day, Sir William. Dame Mary. I see you have a stage fitted up. So what are we doing? Is it a play of some kind?

DAVENANT: Ah, Cooke. It’s to be the Siege of Rhodes. My latest work. We’re going to do it as an opera, stilo recitativo. It’ll be the first time
recitative has been used in this country –

never seen before on the English stage! And

look there...

COOKE: What are they? Painted boards? Is it some

kind of decoration?

DAVENANT: It’s called ‘scenery’. These panels at the

sides represent the lush foliage and teeming

fauna of the fertile island of Rhodes. At the

back, a fair prospect of the city itself. To the

audience, it will be as if they are seeing a

lonely hill above the town, where our action

takes place. But the great thing is, we can

change it for each scene. These panels are

changed for ones painted to resemble

crumbling fortress walls, or an elegant

throne room, just as we need.

DAME MARY: I’ve never seen anything like it. I’m sorry,

William, but to me it looks like one of those

stalls at Bartholomew Fair, with a brawny,

red-faced man standing in front of it and

shouting. Oh – Henry, I didn’t mean...

COOKE: No, no, of course, of course. I’m sorry

Davenant, but I don’t like it, either.

Shakespeare never had scenery. It’s the art

of the actor – with the help of the
playwright, of course - to conjure up
whatever impressions he needs from the
imaginations of the beholders. Your scenery
forces the audience to see things a certain
way, instead of each having his own
particular imaginary vision. And how much
more wonderful than any painting are the
scenes of the imagination - don’t you agree?

DAVENANT: Oh, imagination! If imagining things is so
wonderful, let’s bring them all into a dark
room and let them imagine the show! Your
imagination never surprised you with things
beyond your dreams. Your imagination never
hit you in the eye with the sheer wonder of
the spectacle before you! If I had a magic
glass, I should call up fantastic visions on
this stage, Cooke, enchanted phantasms:
visions of monsters, volcanoes, armies:
valour, strife, and tender love. I would show
the audience the wonders of heaven and the
terrors of hell, before their living eyes! But
lacking that power, this painted scenery is
the best I can do. This will be the first time
scenery has been used on the English stage:
think of that – the noble drama as you have
never seen it before!

DAME MARY: Henry, I wish you could persuade him not to be so rash. If you have to put on a show, why not another private entertainment – like the Declamation.

COOKE: Declamation? I don’t think I heard about that one.

DAVENANT: No, hardly anyone did, I’m afraid. We called it The First Day’s Entertainment, and it was very nearly the last day’s entertainment, too. I learned a lesson there, Cooke: you can’t be a popular success in secret.

COOKE: What kind of a show was it, then?

DAVENANT: Well, I suppose it was my attempt to produce the kind of show that a Puritan would find acceptable. I’m used to working under constraints, after all – I coped with the Queen insisting that everyone must write about Platonic love instead of carnal desire. How on earth you were supposed to get a plot going when no-one wanted to get into anyone else’s bedroom... half the plays in those days, there was nothing going on except people sitting around and sighing miserably at each other. And that was just the audience.
DAME MARY: I thought the Declamation idea was rather interesting. Two people in robes, sitting in chairs, are wheeled on stage, and begin to talk, partly to each other, partly just to themselves.

COOKE: And what happens? Do the other characters come on later?


DAME MARY: The interest was intellectual. It was a kind of dialogue – like a Platonic dialogue.

DAVENDANT: Plato again. The man’s a jinx.

COOKE: But if there was no story and nothing happened, what was it all about?

DAME MARY: You see this was a drama about the nature of the drama itself, and about its role in society. It was a theatrical event examining the nature of theatrical events: it challenged old ideas of what a stage performance entails. William put the argument that the theatre could be a medium of education and enlightenment: a means of putting new ideas before the common people, who were as capable of appreciating them as the courtiers who attended the royal masques in happier days.
DAVENANT: I truly believe that, of course. But oh Lord! The truth is, Cooke, we called it a private entertainment, and it was more damned private than entertaining. That debate about the drama – it would have been all right in a book, perhaps, but on stage it died: it died like a dog, only in total silence.

DAME MARY: You can’t expect every experiment to succeed the first time. I thought there was great merit in the Declamation: I thought a refined discussion was more consonant with your dignity as Poet Laureate and a leading man of letters, than some farcical story full of low jokes.

DAVENANT: We got an audience of barely 150: we had seats for 400. We barely broke even. But what really annoyed me most was the frustration of suffering such a failure while doing something I didn’t especially want to do anyway. Your taste is more refined than mine, my love: I enjoy those farcical stories. After that Declamation, I decided I was sick of trying to pander to other people’s preferences, whether Puritans, or saving her grace, the Queen. Next time, I said to myself,
I’m going to put on a show the way I like it; and that’s what I’m going to do now. This time, by God’s hooks, I’m working for nobody but Sir William Davenant! It’s going to be a real eye-popping, breath-taking, edge-of-the seat show. I want to laugh and cry and shout in exultation; and Gad, I want everyone in London to laugh and cry and shout with me.

DAME MARY: You see, Henry. Excuse me – I have matters to attend to at home.

COOKE: Good day, Dame Mary. She has got a point, Davenant, hasn’t she? I mean, all that laughing and crying and shouting – is it going to be all right? You must have been on thin ice with that Declamation, weren’t you? I know you’ve got a lot of friends, but 150 ticket-buying spectators doesn’t sound much like a private entertainment. A public play, well – is it really safe?

DAVENANT: Trust me, Cooke. I have assessed the situation carefully. There is some risk that we may be closed down, I grant you, but better to have opened and closed than never to have opened at all. That is truly the worst
that is likely to happen. Don’t forget, this is not a play – it’s an opera. *Stilo recitativo*, Cooke, *stilo recitativo*.

**COOKE:** I’m sorry, Davenant – what is *‘stilo rat-a-tat-tivo’*?

**DAVENANT:** *Recitativo*. Italian, my boy. It means the whole thing is done to music, which serves to heighten the drama and enhance the pleasure of the spectacle. It’s the new thing.

**COOKE:** I’m sorry, but I’m not sure I like that idea, either. Won’t it interfere with the proper performance? Shakespeare never did *‘stilo resuscitativo’*.

**DAVENANT:** Let me worry about Shakespeare, Henry. I believe everything I’ve written here is done in Shakespeare’s very spirit. And I knew him, you know, when I was young.

**COOKE:** You know, Davenant, there is a story... Well, people sometimes say... Well, they say your mother knew him well, too. When they call you Shakespeare’s bastard son, it isn’t just a metaphor. Though it does rather sum you up.

**DAVENANT:** Shakespeare was my godfather. Of course he was a good friend of my parents. In any case, I revere old Will. Wonderful plays!

**COOKE:** Well, yes, Davenant, but you never play them
straight, do you? If you think they’re so
good, why do you keep re-writing them?

DAVENANT: Small adjustments, little touches. The sort of
thing Will would be doing himself if he were
still alive. Look at Hamlet. A wonderful play:
a shaft of light on our dark and dusty lives.
But whoever sat through the full, uncut
version? For the angels, it’s perfect: for
human beings that sit on corporeal
backsides, it’s just too long.

Or Romeo and Juliet? The audience doesn’t
want to see them dead, Cooke: it wants
consummation! What people want for the
Montagues and Capulets is weddings all
round.

COOKE: Heavens! Surely the Poet Laureate must have
more respect than that for such a noble
tragedy?

DAVENANT: I’ll tell you what. When I get my proper
theatre, we’ll put on a season of Romeo and
Juliet. One night, we’ll play it as tragedy, the
next as tragi-comedy, and so on. We’ll see
which version takes more money. *Let the
public decide* – some of them will probably
come twice, to see both versions!

COOKE: Your godfather must be turning in his grave.

DAVENANT: No, I don’t think so. Will Shakespeare was a practical man; he understood the requirements of popular theatre. He was never reverent about his own work.

Eventually, you know, he gave it all up: stopped writing altogether and went off to play the country gentleman. That I never could understand, though it seems Dame Mary wishes I would do the same.

COOKE: I suppose we’ll never know now what his reasons were.

DAVENANT: Well, as a matter of fact I did ask him about it once. He said... now then... I forget, exactly. It was very eloquent. Wonderful words. You always ask yourself afterwards why you didn’t write these things down. I think it went like this...

The word unspoken never chafes,
It frights us not, the silent horn;
Those words like souls whom God retained Fortune’s darlings, never born.
I think that was the phrase. I used to have a lot of his papers, but I don’t know where they are now.

COOKE: Hm. So he actually spoke in verse? You know, Davenant, those words sound more like yours than his.

DAVENANT: Perhaps you think I take after him, Henry!

COOKE: Sorry. Anyway, about the play – sorry, the opera. I suppose, indeed, we may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. I suppose scenery and stilo recita...

DAVENANT: Recitativo.

COOKE: ...yes, aren’t actually going to make all that much difference. So long as you’re not going to introduce anything scandalous. A toast to a King, or anything like that.

DAVENANT: No, no. Heavens, Cooke, you know me better than that. Well, there is one other little novelty I have in mind.

COOKE: What?

DAVENANT: Well, there’s a part here – Ianthe – a female part with some wonderful songs. I’ve asked Mrs Coleman, Ned’s wife, if she would take it on.

COOKE: Take it on?

DAVENANT: Yes. Play the role. Sing the songs.

COOKE: A woman? Acting? In the play?
DAVENANT: The Opera. It will be the first time a woman has ever appeared on the English stage. Isn’t that amazing? This show is going to be a real turning point, Cooke – the English theatre will never be the same again.

COOKE: You’ll never get away with it! This would never have been allowed, even when King Charles was alive! The King’s own Master of the Revels would have had you arrested, never mind Oliver Cromwell!

DAVENANT: Well, you may be right about that. You see Cooke, we have to find the silver lining in every disaster. The King’s death was a tragedy for the whole realm, but it does mean there is, at the moment, no Master of the Revels. I’ve made a strange discovery lately, Henry. When everything is illegal, everything is equally possible. You said it – if we’re to be hanged for a lamb, we might as well make it a sheep: no, a magnificent, heroic, golden-fleeced ram with curling adamantine horns and shining hooves of chrysoprase. Yes, by God’s mighty hooks! All those things I always wanted – opera, movable scenery, women on stage – I’m
going to have them this time and be damned.

This is going to be Davenant’s show!

COOKE:  This is rank folly!
DAVENANT:  Nonsense, Cooke. It’s time we moved on. All I’m proposing is a respectable woman singing an agreeable air. If it were a boy in a skirt kissing a man, you’d think that was chaste and respectable, would you?

COOKE:  It doesn’t matter what I think Davenant!

What will his Highness the Lord Protector think about it? How’s Old Warty going to like it?

DAVENANT:  Cromwell? I don’t see why it should bother him if Mrs Coleman plays Ianthe. He wouldn’t have been right for the part, anyway.

SCENE 4

DISTANT HAMMERING ON A DOOR

DAVENANT:  Alright, everyone. We’ll take a break there while I find out what that dreadful banging noise next door is. Mrs Coleman, would you stay for a moment and we’ll just run through your last song once again.

COLEMAN:  Sir William, I... I don’t know...

DAVENANT:  Is something wrong?

COLEMAN:  I’m worried about the show, Sir William. I think people are talking about it.
DAVENANT: That’s a good thing, surely?

COLEMAN: Well, yes... But three times today people I hardly know have mentioned today’s rehearsal to me. They know I’m going to be in the play. And who is that man in the big hat, sitting watching? He has a Puritan look about him. I think... I think he’s a spy. I don’t think... I’m sorry Sir William, but I don’t think I can do it after all.

DAVENANT: Nerves, my dear, just nerves: you couldn’t perform so well if you weren’t nervous. As for our friend there, I know all about him, and I’m glad he’s here. Now, excuse me, I must just go and find out what’s going on...

(Off) Who’s banging, there?

SCROPES: (Off) Open up there! Open up I say! Open in the name of the law!

COLEMAN: Oh! Oh! I knew it! What can I do? The scenery! They’ll see it! Perhaps if I untie the draperies I can pull them across...

FOOTSTEPS

SCROPES: Who are you? Where is Sir William Davenant? And what is that?

COLEMAN: I... Sir William will be back in a moment, if you’d just like to wait, and he can explain everything.
SCROPES: This looks bad; very bad. From the street, this seems an honest house: yet inside I find a den of vipers! What devil’s work is afoot here? I shall not leave until I have an answer!

DAVENANT: Not bad, not bad: plenty of passion, but you’re a little static.

SCROPES: What? Who are you? What do you mean, ‘static’?

DAVENANT: You’re a little stiff in your manner, my boy. Remember the importance of gesture. That hat, now; you could do something with that.

SCROPES: What? Hey! That’s my hat, damn you…

DAVENANT: No, no: don’t worry. Now look, see how I do it…

What devil’s work is afoot here? I shall not leave until I have an answer!

And then you dash the hat furiously on the ground like this…

See? Now you try.

SCROPES: What! How… You…

COLEMAN: Sir William – I think this man is a constable.

SCROPES: I’m a magistrate, damn your insolence!

DAVENANT: A magistrate! Oh, dear! I’m very sorry. I thought you’d come for an audition. I don’t suppose you want to try out… no, of course.

Well, we don’t usually allow visitors in to our
rehearsals, but today we have one already – perhaps you know him? Would you like to sit down with him over there?

SCROPES: No, I would not like to sit down! Give me my hat. You are Sir William Davenant?

DAVENANT: At your service.

SCROPES: Then why didn’t you tell me your name when you let me in?

DAVENANT: I think it’s customary for the *visitor* to give his name first? You passed by me with such speed and resolution that there was little opportunity for the customary formalities.

Will you tell me your own name, please?


DAVENANT: Not Mr Sapience Godsmercy Scropes?

SCROPES: How do you know my name?

DAVENANT: Oh, I believe we have the same bailiff – Mr Wandle? An indiscreet fellow, but a winning way to him. Your debts are a little larger than mine, I think. Well, this is indeed an unexpected pleasure! You should have let us know you were coming. If I’d known I could have bought wine. Except I can’t afford it, of course.

COLEMAN: Sir William, please be careful – I think you’re annoying Mr Scropes.

DAVENANT: Am I, Mr Scropes? It’s just my careless,
rattling manner, you know.

SCROPES: Keep away from me, you diseased old traitor!

What is that?

DAVENANT: It’s... What’s happened? Oh, you’ve pulled
the draperies across... Now that’s an
interesting idea. If we drew two curtains
across, we could reveal the scenery all at
once...

SCROPES: What are those painted panels?

DAVENANT: It’s called scenery, Sapience – may I call you
Sapience? Call me Bill if you like.

SCROPES: No, you may not call me... by my forename. I
see what’s afoot. This is a kind of stage, isn’t
it – for the performance of a play!

DAVENANT: An opera, Mr Scropes – an opera. Stilo
recitativo, you know. You’ll enjoy it.

SCROPES: I will not enjoy it!

DAVENANT: Oh, you say that now, but I warrant by the
end of the evening you’ll be humming along
and tapping those big feet of yours like
anything! Won’t he, Mrs Coleman?

SCROPES: Have a care, Davenant! I am struggling to
understand this open defiance of the law.

Have you a licence of some kind to perform
plays?

DAVENANT: Operas, Mr Scropes. No, I have no licence at
the moment.
SCROPES: Then this is the illegal performance of a play.
DAVENANT: No, it is the rehearsal of an opera.
SCROPES: Opera, opera! Changing the name won’t make it any different. I say again, this is an illegal performance.
DAVENANT: My point, you see, is that it isn’t an illegal performance because it isn’t a performance at all: it is a rehearsal. The law forbids unlicensed performance: it does not forbid rehearsal. I suppose that means it is legal for us to rehearse, but not strictly right for you to come and watch. Still, I’m willing to turn a blind eye if you really want to stay.
SCROPES: Now you listen to me. If this be not an illicit act in itself, it is conspiracy to perform one. I’ve seen enough here: the evidence is unmistakable. Make a full confession now, and it may go easier with you; one more insolent word, and I’ll see you hang.
DAVENANT: Hang? Well no offence intended, Mr Sapience Godsm mercy, but I’ve been tried and acquitted by better men than you. If I’m put on trial, I shall appeal to the judgement of his Highness the Lord Protector.
SCROPES: You – you diseased old cavalier? What makes you think Old Warty’s going to find in
DAVENANT: Please, Mr Scroopes. I admire your inner sincerity, but contain yourself a little.

Cromwell was my enemy in the war, but an honourable one. The war is over now and I’m not ashamed to say that I believe he is a just and open-minded man. He has used his supreme power to defend the interests of England in a way which even his enemies must respect, don’t you agree? And I for one should be happy to submit my cause to his personal judgement.

COLEMAN: Oh dear! Sir William! You’re not well.

SCROPES: So, the old malignant hopes to save his skin by turning his coat, does he? Well singing the praises of Cromwell won’t help you, my friend. Parliament runs this country now: legitimate authority, not some jumped-up captain of horse from the fens. And I represent the authority of that Parliamentary government. Do you doubt me? If you do, I have a dozen soldiers waiting round the corner.

CROMWELL: No you haven’t.

SCROPES: What?

CROMWELL: No you haven’t. You haven’t got a dozen
soldiers waiting round the corner. I came
upon them as I was on my way here this
evening. I don’t like soldiers standing around
where they’re not needed, so I dismissed
them and sent them home.

SCROPES: Sent them home? Who are you?

CROMWELL: I’m known to some as ‘Old Warty’, it
appears.

SCROPES: I… Your Highness… I meant… I didn’t…

CROMWELL: Yes, Mr Scropes, I know exactly what you
didn’t. Well, I came here tonight to see a
show. You’ll watch it with me Mr Scropes.

Sit down. Carry on, Sir William.

DAVENANT: Thank you, your Highness. Mrs Coleman?

COLEMAN: Ah… my throat is a little dry, Sir William…

SCROPES: Just a moment. Is this woman… Am I to
understand that this woman is to perform in
your damnable show?

DAVENANT: Certainly. Mrs Coleman takes the role of
Ianthe.

SCROPES: You’re mad as well as debauched! Do you
seriously think you can get away with
presenting not just a play, but lewd dancing
women! I swear this isn’t a stage; it’s the
gaping mouth of Hell itself!

CROMWELL: What? A woman singing reminds you of Hell?

What does it take to make you think of
Heaven, Mr Scropes? Thumbscrews?

**SCROPES:** Do you realise that this fellow is proposing to allow women to take part in his damnable play?

**CROMWELL:** I don’t just realise it, I’ve seen her doing it, Mr Scropes, before your arrival interrupted the proceedings. Isn’t it normal for women to participate in these, er, displays?

**SCROPES:** Of course not! Surely you know that?

**CROMWELL:** No, I’m afraid I had no idea. How would I know? I’ve never been to a play before. From what fellows like you had told me, Mr Scropes, I thought they consisted of nothing but more or less continuous debauchery. But now it seems women are not normally allowed at all, even if they are fully-clothed and merely sing. So what normally happens when a female character is required?

**SCROPES:** Female parts are played by boys whose voices have not yet broken.

**CROMWELL:** Really? Well, I’m sorry Scropes. I know nothing about these matters, but your idea seems much stranger than Sir William’s way to me. I see nothing hellish about it. If anything there’s a kind of innocent, childish excitement about the whole thing. It rather
reminds me of Christmas up at Hinchingbrooke when I was a boy.

DAVENANT: Friend, you understand me!

SCROPES: The celebration of Christmas is not innocent. Besides, the woman’s a whore!

COLEMAN: What! How dare you slander an honest gentlewoman! You evil slug!

CROMWELL: All she’s going to do is sing, Scropes... Ah, that is all she’s going to do, isn’t it Sir William? Yes. I see nothing here to provoke such an outburst. If a modestly-dressed woman singing a song amounts to whoredom, then Whitehall as I passed through it this evening rivalled Sodom and Gomorrah.

COLEMAN: Sirs, I shall not endure such foul insults as this fellow has thrown at me. And you claim to be a magistrate!

CROMWELL: The lady’s cause is just, Scropes. I think you should withdraw your remark.

SCROPES: Of course I do not suggest that this entertainment includes actual acts of carnality – God forgive me for even alluding to such a possibility. However, the distinction between acting and prostitution is morally negligible. It’s all the same, when you get
down to it. She offers her body for the
entertainment of others – for money. She
professes emotions she does not feel. She
excites feelings directed towards... improper
objects...

DAVENANT: The gestures are really coming on, my boy.
You’re so much looser now - don’t you feel it
in your shoulders there?

SCROPES: Take your hands off me, you fornicator!

CROMWELL: Enough! Enough! Sir William, do not excite
Mr Scropes any further. I think we have
already managed to put aside the polite
constraint between strangers which
sometimes stands in the way of plain
speaking. We need no further diminution of
our courtesy. As for you, Mr Scropes,
remember that I came here tonight to see a
comedy, not to be part of one. I desire you
both to calm yourselves and conduct any
discussion in a temperate, peaceful manner:
on pain of my displeasure. And let me tell
you both, once and for all that my
displeasure is associated with pain of the
most severe kind!

DAVENANT: Your Highness.

SCROPES: With all... with all due respect, your Highness
I am here as a legitimate authority. Am I to be threatened with force?

CROMWELL: What were you proposing to use on Sir William? Charm?

SCROPES: But...

CROMWELL: Silence, both of you. I want to hear no more from either of you for a while. You, madam: explain the opera to me.

COLEMAN: Well, I, er... Your highness realises this is the first opera I have undertaken myself?

CROMWELL: Yes, yes: I’m not asking for an aesthetic disquisition – we can leave that to Sir William. I’ve seen and heard enough tonight to have an idea of the thing, but you might as well have been speaking Italian: I still can’t make out what you are actually singing about. Just tell me the story, if you will.

COLEMAN: It is a story of the famous siege of Rhodes. Solyman’s great Turkish horde advances upon the peaceful city of Rhodes...

CROMWELL: There? That castle painted on the board?

COLEMAN: Yes. Well, naturally we only have a few players, but it will be wonderfully evocative, I assure you.

CROMWELL: Evocative?

COLEMAN: Yes. The opera calls forth a lively sense of the immense drama and personal gallantry of
the epic struggle. The virtue of the Christian
defenders, and the claims of love and duty,
are put to the test against the backdrop of
the Turk’s cruel belligerence.

DAVENANT: Well put!
CROMWELL: Sir William? Hearken to the lady, please.
COLEMAN: Of course, the music helps. But the story is
brought into tragic focus by the fate of two
young lovers. I play the role of Ianthe, the
lovelorn young maiden awaiting her beloved
Alphonso. She is safe, but he is caught up in
the siege. It’s wonderfully evocative. She
suffers such torments, you see: will love
conquer all? Will he escape and enfold her
once more in his loving arms? Or will he yield
to the call of imperious duty and lay down his
life in the fatal defence of the innocent city?
Which shall triumph, love or valour? Can he
really steel himself against the tender
pleadings of my tear-filled eyes?

CROMWELL: And can he?
COLEMAN: Well, yes, if Sir William has his way. I think
he should let the lovers be reunited at the
end.

DAVENANT: Perhaps if this one is a success, we might
have a sequel...
CROMWELL: Well, now. I can conceive that such spectacles might even be useful to raise the martial spirits of the population, in certain cases. The Turk is a proper foe, certainly, though it might be better still, I think, if the opera showed the wickedness of the Spanish.

SCROPES: Your Highness... may I speak?
CROMWELL: Very well. I see that the two of you must plead, so let’s hear it.
COLEMAN: Please, Sir William, be careful. Don’t be defiant, will you?
SCROPES: Your Highness, I don’t think you quite... see the nature of this entertainment. This is no ordinary play, and whether it be an opera or no does not signify. It’s true nature is evident from the gilded innovations with which Davenant has filled it. Scenery, females, gorgeous draperies, music: this is no play, but a royal masque.

CROMWELL: How’s that, a masque?
SCROPES: Certainly. Davenant here was the Queen’s chief maker of masques: gaudy entertainments in which foppish young cavaliers strutted and preened, and into which the King’s revenues were incontinently poured. Will you allow this waste and
corruption to be revived now? You must
remember how the late King would spend the
funds he had illicitly raised as ship-money on
extravagant entertainments setting out his
own supposed virtues and entitlements: on a
Sunday, instead of reading the Bible, the
Court’s time would be given to such wicked
pursuits, got up by Ben Jonson or by this
very same old knave here. Can you suffer
such practices to be resumed, and even
displayed to the common people?

CROMWELL: I understand you, Scrope. They were an
unlovely crew, those young cavaliers, though
they thought themselves so handsome. Give
me a decent carpenter or blacksmith any
day, with a straight back and a prayer book
in his hand.

SCROPES: Yes, yes! But Davenant is trying to bring that
gilded lecherous luxury back: and not at
Court, but spread in the streets of London!

CROMWELL: What say you to that, Davenant? I’ve no love
for courtly entertainment. Will your opera
become a meeting place for disaffected
cavaliers? Will you spread the doctrine of the
Divine Right of kings through these shows of
yours?

DAVENANT: No, your highness. I’m not spending anyone’s taxes, and you judged yourself that the moral of the story was wholesome and suitable for a general audience. Why shouldn’t the people enjoy uplifting drama, too? It helps distract them from brooding thoughts that may give rise to sedition.

There’s nothing Royalist about that. I was a loyal servant of the king, but I have never considered those whose consciences led them another way, to be my personal enemies. You may have heard how Harry Martyn, for example, spoke up for me in Parliament.

SCROPES: By calling you an old, rotten rascal?

COLEMAN: Shame on you, you viper!

DAVENANT: His words may have taken the form of an insult, but he saved my life.

CROMWELL: No he didn’t.

DAVENANT: I... He didn’t?

CROMWELL: No. He may have swung the vote in Parliament, but Parliament doesn’t make the decisions in this country. Never has, and never will. No, we should have cut your head off whatever Parliament said about it. The
man who really saved your life was John Milton.

DAVENANT: Milton?
CROMWELL: Certainly. He advised me that executing the Poet Laureate would damage the reputation of our regime in Europe. Now I trust John. There’s no straighter man in the land, nor one more loyal to our cause: and he’s the one the foreigners respect. To them, I’m just a ruffian, but they take John for a great man, rightly enough, I dare say.

DAVENANT: So it was a political decision?
CROMWELL: Well, partly. I don’t think it was really just our good repute among the learned men of Christendom that was in John’s mind. Of course, he writes poetry himself, sometimes, so it might have been comradely support for a fellow poet. Something like that.

DAVENANT: As a rule, there’s nothing a poet composes more enthusiastically than a funeral ode for one of his fellows.
CROMWELL: Just so. I think the truth must be that John simply likes what you write. Strange, but there we are – I trust John implicitly.

DAVENANT: I must find some way of thanking him.
CROMWELL: In any case, although you were mistaken
about the name of your saviour, his
existence does support your argument. If
Milton thinks your plays are worth reading,
they can’t be very deeply Royalist. If it
hadn’t been for John’s advice, I should never
have accepted your invitation to come here
tonight.

**COLEMAN:** Oh, Sir William! What will Dame Mary say!

**SCROPES:** You *invited* him?

**CROMWELL:** Oh yes, Scropes, Sir William has been
pursuing me for some time now with his art.

Look, I have papers here. This is a song to
the Victor (myself) which he composed.

**SCROPES:** Good God! Have you no shame, you
worthless hypocrite?

**CROMWELL:** You think it shameful to write songs about
me? You think he should have stuck to his
royalism? Well, Scropes, I can’t say I
enjoyed the song very much myself. You and
I are plain men: poetry is nothing to us. We
prefer the truth. Anyway, that’s only part of
it. Here is a direct appeal to me for a pardon,
supported by a letter from Colonel Bingham -
your jailer in the Isle of Wight. Bingham says
that if you leave London you’re liable to be
arrested under the terms of your parole: but
if you are unable to go and attend to your affairs in Oxford, you’ll be imprisoned for debt anyway. He feels this is an unfair addition to your sufferings, and contrary to the articles of war.

DAVENANT: Ah, Colonel Bingham! An honest, good-hearted man. Surely his words must carry some weight, even if you don’t like mine?

CROMWELL: No doubt. Several other poems, odes, and panegyrics here, addressed to members of my Council or their families... and here an epithalamium to my own daughter on the occasion of her marriage.

SCROPES: Monstrous!

CROMWELL: My daughter’s wedding was not monstrous, Scropes, and in fact I must tell you that this was perhaps Sir William’s most effective stroke. My daughter was pleased. To you or I this verse means nothing, but it seems that a flowery, complimentary poem from the Poet Laureate is not at all unacceptable to a young bride. I think you have no daughters, Scropes, or you would appreciate the force of that. You may be Lord Protector of England, but on her wedding day your daughter is
Queen. Anyone who makes her smile, or puts a light in her eyes on that day, is your friend, Scropes, believe me, whether you like them or not. All the same, when I received Sir William’s invitation to come here and see whether I wouldn’t give him a licence for his opera, I admit I was astonished. I couldn’t quite decide whether it was criminal insolence or simple dementia. But I’m a man who likes to see with his own eyes and make up his own mind. So here I am – an uncovenanted mark of favour, I dare say, but it can’t be helped.

DAVENANT: Your highness, may I so far presume on your kindness to show you this rough draft of a further opera which I should like to present if this present one should prove successful? It is entitled ”The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru”.

CROMWELL: Ah? Let me see it... I see... So you have already written about the atrocities of the Spanish? There look to be proper sentiments in this...

SCROPES: Your Highness... I speak with all due moderation... I have no wish to offend your
Highness...

CROMWELL: But?

SCROPES: But I am not alone in my view of this... entertainment. Recollect that Parliament has passed an ordinance forbidding this kind of performance. If you licence this man’s play, you will... provoke resistance.

CROMWELL: A night of transformations. Sir William Davenant is my admirer, and Scropes has become a diplomat. What a shame I cannot be transformed into Solomon. Your advice is sound, of course, Scropes. I am not the King, and many of our party are less temperate than I about pretty things such as this. Very well, then: gentlemen, wise or foolish, here’s my judgement – there will be no appeal and I expect it to be observed, is that well understood?

I will not licence Sir William’s opera, nor any other spectacle he may design. I will not give retrospective authorisation for the work which has been going on to have the Cockpit theatre restored to working condition – yes, of course I know about it, Davenant – do you
think your workmen are invisible?

However, I will give him a full and formal pardon for his part in the late war. His parole is terminated, and he may freely go about his lawful business. *Moreover,* I expect him to be left alone, and his illegal operas to remain undisturbed, just so long as they continue to address the wickedness of the Spanish and other wholesome matters.

**DAVENANT:** Your Highness, I thank you. I...

**CROMWELL:** Wait. There are two conditions. First, I never came here tonight. None of you will speak of it on pain of my displeasure. Second, Sir William - don’t send me any more poetry.

No, Mr Scropes, don’t speak, but you will accompany me, please – we have some further small matters to deal with which are not suitable to discussion here. Sir William, Madam – goodbye.

**RECEDING FOOTSTEPS**

**COLEMAN:** Sir William, I perceive that you have been laying plots which none of us knew of. You were lucky tonight, I think.

**DAVENANT:** That’s true. I thought Scropes would appear
tonight, at his first opportunity, but it could not be guaranteed. It would have been much more difficult without him. Our Lord Protector is a man who loves to say no, and if I had been here alone I fear the temptation to say it to me would have disturbed the well-balanced judgement he displayed.

COLEMAN: But I was surprised to hear of the flattering attentions you have been paying... his Highness. Are you not a little ashamed to turn against your own opinions in such a manner?

DAVENANT: I have not contradicted myself, Mrs Coleman. We all have to do what we can, and sometimes a change of emphasis is helpful. I have not cast off my old friends. In fact, that was the biggest risk of the night. When Cromwell marched right up to the stage like that, I thought he knew what was under it.

COLEMAN: Under it?

DAVENANT: Guns, Mrs Coleman. There are enough munitions under that stage to equip a regiment.

COLEMAN: Oh!

DAVENANT: You see, I never disposed of all the armaments I brought into the country for the
King’s army. Recently, I have managed to make an arrangement to pass them on to Prince Rupert’s agents in return for some of the treasure he has accumulated in the West Indies. That’s how I managed to afford all the expenses of this production, and the costs of the work on the Cockpit theatre. So you see, I have not altogether lost touch with my old friends after all.

COLEMAN: Oh heaven! What will Dame Mary say?
DAVENANT: She must never hear of this, Mrs Coleman, if you please. Where is the rest of our cast, by the way?

COLEMAN: I believe they are hiding in the upper rooms.
DAVENANT: Do you feel able to continue?
COLEMAN: Nothing shall stop me now, Sir William!
DAVENANT: Excellent. Would you call the others down?

And do you know, Mrs Coleman? I think we can afford to spend a few pence now. We all deserve a glass or two of wine.

SCENE 5

DAVENANT: Ladies and Gentlemen, a short epilogue. The Siege of Rhodes, that epoch-making production, was a popular success under Cromwell’s benign neglect, and in due course we transferred it to the re-fitted Cockpit
Theatre. I continued to produce operas: after Cromwell’s death some questions about my activities were again raised, but with the glorious return of his Majesty Charles II all further danger ceased. I got my new theatre and became a leading – the leading theatre manager of the Restoration. I produced many further works of my own (including the Siege of Rhodes II and III) and work from many other distinguished pens.

Oh, and one more thing. When King Charles returned to his kingdom, they arrested John Milton, and prepared to cut off his head. I was able to speak to the King and persuade him that the death of such a distinguished poet would reflect badly on his regime...

END