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Umlaut, Prince of Düsseldorf

The Coarse Acting *Hamlet*

Michael Green

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



**SAMUEL
FRENCH**

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CHARACTERS

Klaus, King of Düsseldorf

Wilhelmina, his wife and Queen

Umlaut, her son by her previous marriage to the late king

Ghost, of the former king

Gezundheit, Chancellor

Hildegard, his daughter

Heineken, Umlaut's friend and an officer

Budweiser } soldiers

Kronenbourg }

Rosenstern } spies

Guldencranz }

Anthrax, a courtier

Clown, a gravedigger

First Player

Courtiers, Attendants, Strolling Players etc.

Time — at director's discretion

INTRODUCTION

Taking liberties with Shakespeare has a long and distinguished history. In the 18th Century some plays were rewritten to have a happy ending and the custom of revising them has continued to the present day. The most dreaded words in the theatre are when the director announces, "I see this play as ..." He or she then describes how they have changed the period, altered the text, mutilated a famous speech, moved the locale, invented two new scenes and added a pop group.

I feel therefore I need not apologize for any liberties taken in this little spoof. As long ago as the sixties I remember Macbeth being shot by a firing squad at the Theatre Royal, East London. More recently elsewhere I recall the ghost in *Hamlet* appearing in a modern business suit to his son, who was smoking a cigarette. Then there was the production where Fortinbras arrived on a motorcycle, complete with crash helmet. This raised a huge laugh, in striking contrast to the gravediggers, who had spoken their jokes in complete silence. I have also seen a version of *Titus Andronicus* in modern dress where the famous banquet scene in which Tamora eats a pie made from the flesh of her two murdered sons, was played as a cocktail party, with Tamora politely nibbling at a canapé, presumably smeared with her children. Some of the cast suggested new dialogue: Guest: I don't like children. Titus: Well, leave them and just eat the chips.

I write as one who has carried a machine pistol in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and worn a swastika in *Measure for Measure*.

So if anyone requires motivation for a performance of *Umlaut, Prince of Düsseldorf*, I suggest they think of it as put on by a group from Bogthorpe University directed and freely adapted by a lecturer in media studies who claimed the original was based on an old German manuscript. The stage manager vanished just before the dress rehearsal and the play had to be cut savagely because at the Edinburgh Fringe they could only secure a half hour slot in a basement room in Bruntsfield.

Or not. Personally I always find the best motivation is a few hundred quid.

Michael Green

NOTES FOR DIRECTORS

There is no mystery about Coarse Acting. It is basically an impersonation of a performance of a play by an incompetent or disaster-prone company. The title comes from my book *The Art Of Coarse Acting* wherein there are various definitions of a Coarse Actor, such as one who know the lines but not the order in which they come, or who plays every part with a limp (sometimes on both legs simultaneously). Or he may be disaster-prone, like the man I know who was stuck on stage by a jammed door and escaped by going through the fireplace.

One of the laws of Coarse Acting is that the more serious the drama, the funnier it is when pretension is exploded by some unexpected disaster. People find it funny when actors are in trouble. Like farce, Coarse Acting is tragedy played at high speed, so the cast must plough on with deadly seriousness as the show collapses around them.

I haven't specified any particular period for this play in common with current practice of setting Shakespeare in any century. Traditional or timeless would be fine, and don't worry about the anomalies of the ghost in armour or the playing of the German national anthem. Shakespeare is full of them. However, I always feel there is a strong affinity between the court at Elsinore and the dark days of Germany with Hitler or the Kaiser and Bismark. Setting it in Nazi Germany might be a possibility, with the King sporting a toothbrush moustache and the ghost in a gas-mask. Even better might be the late 19th Century, with actors in spiked helmets and waxed moustaches. The main thing is a strong German atmosphere, or rather the atmosphere of Germany as portrayed in Hollywood films, all heel clicking and saluting.

As regards the acting, desperate sincerity is the keynote. Perhaps too desperate in some cases. Pace is important, too. Nothing is less funny than a Coarse Acting play that drags. Half the fun of this spoof is that the world's greatest play is condensed from four hours to twenty-odd minutes. In particular, the salutes when the King drinks, consisting of cannon, drums and *Deutschland Über Alles* must be short — not more than seven or eight seconds. The salute might get even quicker as the play progresses, ending in a screech.

A lot of business is closely detailed in the stage directions. Read these carefully, and don't cut business without good reason. You may need the laughs. Of course, directors can add their own. I recall with great pleasure a production of another Coarse play in which one character stood up every time he spoke and then sat down.

Remember that any accidental hitches aren't funny. Real disasters, as distinct from those planned, kill the joke, and audiences sense it. One of the unfunniest evenings I've ever spent at the theatre came when the set really did fall down in a Coarse Acting play. Hence the need for careful rehearsal.

Perhaps not surprisingly, genuine Coarse actors are rarely funny in the deliberate version. The best actors are the best actors.

Good luck.

Michael Green

Other titles by Michael Green
published by Samuel French Ltd:

The Art of Coarse Acting

Four Plays for Coarse Actors
(Comprising *All's Well That Ends As You Like It*,
A Collier's Tuesday Tea, *Il Fornicazione* and *Streuth*)

The Coarse Acting Show 2
(Comprising *The Cherry Sisters*, *Henry the Tenth Part*
Seven, *Last Call for Breakfast* and *Moby Dick*)

The Third Great Coarse Acting Show
(Comprising *A Fish In Her Kettle*, *Julius and Cleopatra*,
Present Slaughter, *Stalag 69* and *The Vagabond Prince*)

Coarse Acting Strikes Back
(Comprising *Cinderella*, *Oedocles King of Thebes*,
Pride at Southanger Park and *Trapped!*)

UMLAUT, PRINCE OF DÜSSELDORF

SCENE 1

The battlements of the royal castle in Düsseldorf

The stage is in darkness. The Lights slowly come up. Then the howling of wind is heard and the stage is filled with dense smoke. Budweiser is alone on stage, armed with a lance and in a state of readiness

Budweiser (*calling off*) Is Heineken there?

Heineken and Kronenbourg enter with lances, groping through the fog with difficulty

Heineken A piece of him.

Budweiser Welcome, good Heineken. Welcome, stout Kronenbourg.

Kronenbourg What, has this thing appeared again, noble Budweiser?

Budweiser I have seen nothing.

Kronenbourg Heineken says 'tis but imagination.

Heineken Tush t'will not appear.

Budweiser Donner und blitzen! I tell you I saw it last night. Just as the bell struck one.

Heineken Peace. Look where it comes again. (*He points excitedly to one side*)

All turn to face offstage, lances ready

Enter Ghost. He is in armour with helmet and visor open. He drags a long length of chain behind him to show he is a ghost. He is accompanied by an extra puff of smoke and a green spot

Unfortunately Ghost comes on behind the group, who don't notice him ("I thought we changed it at the dress rehearsal old chap"). Ghost gives a moan to attract their attention. They turn

Budweiser In the same figure as the king that's dead.

Kronenbourg It is most like the former king.

Budweiser They say the spirits of the dead converse in Latin. Heineken, thou art a scholar. Speak to it in Latin tongue.

Heineken Hic, haec, hoc.

Ghost turns away as a cock crows

Budweiser It is offended.

Kronenbourg See it stalks away.

Heineken Stay. Speak, speak. I charge thee, speak. Stop it, Budweiser!

Budweiser Shall I strike it with my spear?

Heineken Do if it will not stand.

Budweiser 'Tis here.

Kronenbourg 'Tis here.

Heineken Nay, 'tis there.

Confusion as they rush around in the fog. Ghost is stabbed in the bottom by mistake

Ghost exits, dragging its chain, moaning and holding its buttocks

Heineken Umlaut, the old king's son, must know of this. Until then, stout Kronenbourg and honest Budweiser, not a word to anyone.

Exeunt coughing

SCENE 2

The court

There are two thrones on stage

A flourish. Enter Klaus, King of Düsseldorf, wearing a huge gown, Queen Wilhelmina, Prince Umlaut, Gezundheit and his son Grolsch and Courtiers including Cup Bearer holding a huge goblet of wine

King Though yet of our dear brother's death the memory
 Be green, yet let us mourn no longer.
 Be jocund, merry as he would have wished.
 Behold I drink to his memory.

Cup Bearer brings him wine. He tosses the drink down and throws away the goblet which hits Cup Bearer in the face. Just as well it's made from some harmless substance such as papier mâché (the cup, not the face)

Gezundheit My lord, I crave a suit.

King Worthy Chancellor Gezundheit, 'tis already granted. We know thy worth.

Gezundheit 'Tis for my son, young Grolsch. He wishes leave to go to France.

Grolsch I returned for your coronation, my liege, but now my duty's done.

King Then go with the King's blessing.

Gezundheit and Grolsch withdraw only to be met by an unexpected jet of smoke as they leave the stage. This forces them to grope for another exit

The King's gaze lights on Umlaut who is standing apart brooding

King Now good Umlaut, do the clouds still hang on you?

The Queen gets up and goes to Umlaut

Queen Good Umlaut, dearest son, do not leave us now to go to Wittenberg. Stay here with your mother and her new husband.

Umlaut I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

King Why, 'tis a loving and a fair reply.

In grace whereof

No jocund health that we do drink today

But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell.

Come away.

Cannon and drums sound, followed by two bars of "Deutschland über Alles", played at high speed. The music ends in a screech. All stand to attention and salute. Once more the King throws his goblet in the face of his long-suffering Cup Bearer. He then rises but gets his feet entangled in his gown and falls, being saved by crashing into the Cup Bearer who receives further injuries in the fall

Exeunt all except Umlaut

Umlaut Within two months my father dead, my mother to my uncle married. (*He pronounces it "marry-ed"*) Would I were buried. (*He pronounces it "bury-ed"*). *He puts his face in his hands*

Enter Heineken, Kronenbourg and Budweiser

Heineken My lord, last night I think I saw your father.

Umlaut The King? My father? Where?

Heineken Upon the battlements. I spoke in Latin but answer made he none. Then the morning cock crew and he vanished.

Umlaut Perchance it was a ghost. Hold you the watch tonight?

All We do, my lord.

Umlaut I will watch tonight with you upon the platform 'twixt eleven and twelve. Farewell.

Exeunt all but Umlaut

The thrones are struck

Umlaut Something is rotten in the State of Düsseldorf.

Umlaut exits but at the last moment realizes he should have gone off the other side and hastily corrects

SCENE 3

Enter Gesundheit, Grolsch and Hildegard

Geundheit (*embracing Grolsch*) There — my blessing. And now aboard for France.

Grolsch Farewell, Father. (*He kisses his sister*) Farewell, sister. (*He kisses his father*) Remember what I told you, sister.

Hildegard Farewell, brother. (*She embraces her father*)

All three madly exchange kisses and embraces in an effort to end the confusion

Exit Grolsch

Geundheit What is it, daughter, that he hath told you?

Hildegard Something touching the Lord Umlaut.

Geundheit Marry, well bethought. The Lord Umlaut has been too familiar with you. Trust not his tenders of affection. Guard well your chaste treasure from him. (*He cackles lasciviously and glances at the chaste treasure before patting her bottom*)

Hildegard I shall obey my lord.

Hildegard exits

Geundheit Yet I do fear thy nature is too full of the milk of human kindness.

Geundheit exits

SCENE 4

The battlements

Enter Umlaut, Heineken and Budweiser. Wind howls

Umlaut What hour now?

Heineken It lacks of twelve.

Budweiser No, it is struck.

Sudden sound of trumpets, cannon and two or three bars of “Deutschland über Alles”, plus cheering. All stand to attention and salute

Heineken What means this?

Umlaut The King doth make carouse. At every drink

The cannon and the trumpet sound his health.

Heineken Is it a custom?

Umlaut More honoured in the breach than the observance.

Trumpets, cannon and orchestra playing “Deutschland über Alles” as before. All salute

Heineken The King is thirsty.

Budweiser Look, see where it comes my lord!

Enter Ghost accompanied by the customary jet of smoke and dragging his chain. He limps and holds his injured buttock

Umlaut My father to the life!

Ghost beckons Umlaut to come apart from the others

Heineken It would speak with thee. Do not go.

Umlaut I say away! Go on, I'll follow thee.

Ghost beckons him away while the others retire

Ghost Umlaut, I am thy father's ghost. Yes, I am thy vater-spook.
(Fortunately pronounced "farter" in the German)

Umlaut Vater!

Ghost Spook.

Umlaut Speak, spook.

Ghost Revenge my foul and most unnatural murder.

Umlaut Murder?

Ghost Murder most foul.

Umlaut Alas poor spook that you should suffer thus.

Tell me, that I with speedy wings may haste
 To my revenge.

Ghost 'Tis given out that sleeping in my orchard

A serpent stung me.

But know thou noble youth

The serpent that did sting thy father's life

Now wears his crown.

Umlaut My uncle!

Ghost As I did sleep thy uncle stole to me.

And in the crevice of my ear did pour

A poisonous distilment, whose effect —

He breaks off as his visor suddenly falls down shut. He is blinded and gropes with difficulty round the stage, sometimes speaking with his back to Umlaut

Oh horrible! Oh horrible! Most horrible!

If thou hast nature in thee bear it not.

Let not the royal bed of Düsseldorf

Be couch for luxury and damned incest.

But fare thee well

Adieu, adieu. Remember me.

Blinded he cannot find the way out. Eventually Umlaut takes him by the arm and leads him off. Offstage we hear a voice cry "sod"

Umlaut So Uncle, there you are. Now to my word.

I have sworn it.

Enter Heineken and Budweiser

Budweiser My lord! My lord!

Heineken Lord Umlaut!

Budweiser What news my lord?

Umlaut I'll tell thee more within, stout Budweiser.

The time is out of joint. Oh cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right.

Exeunt

SCENE 5

Enter Hildegard distressed. Enter Gezundheit meeting her

Gezundheit How now, Hildegard, what's the matter?

Hildegard Oh my lord, I have been so affrighted!

Gezundheit With what in the name of God?

Hildegard My lord, as I was sewing in my closet
The Lord Umlaut, with doublet all unloosed,
His stockings fouled and round his ankles fall'n,
Comes before me, with wild and piteous look.

Gezundheit Mad for thy love?

Hildegard I fear it.

Gezundheit Come, go with me. I will go seek the King.

Exeunt

SCENE 6

Umlaut solitary, brooding. Enter Gezundheit

Gezundheit My lord, I have news for you. The actors are come hither.

Music

Enter Players

Umlaut You are welcome masters, welcome all. (*Aside to First Player*)
Can you play the murder of Gonzalo?

First Player Aye, my lord.

Umlaut We'll have it tomorrow night. (*He takes him aside*) Could you
insert a short scene which I would write for you?

First Player Aye, my lord.

Umlaut Excellent. Follow that lord and mock him not.

Exeunt all except Umlaut

If it were done when 'tis done then 'twere well
It were done quickly. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

Exit

SCENE 7

Enter King, Queen, Gezundheit and Hildegard

King We have sent for Umlaut to come hither
So he, as though by accident, may here
Affront Hildegard while we ourselves do watch.
We will bestow ourselves.

Gezundheit I hear him coming. Let's withdraw, my lord.

Exeunt all but Hildegard who stands to one side

Enter Umlaut. This is Umlaut's big moment and he is well aware he is about to say the most famous soliloquy in the English language. He dramatically takes up position and pauses

Umlaut To be or not to be, that is the question. (*Once again he pauses dramatically*)

Whether 'tis nobler —

He pauses because a jet of smoke is shooting across from L

In the mind —

He stops because he is aware of Ghost marching on R. Ghost takes a few steps and then realizes he should have come on L with the smoke (“why didn’t somebody tell me they had altered it?”). He retires hastily

Umlaut struggles on

— to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
 And by opposing end them.

Once more he pauses dramatically

This time Ghost appears L where the smoke came from

Unfortunately a jet of smoke then shoots forth from R. Ghost pauses in horror. Umlaut tries surreptitiously to shoo him away

Eventually Ghost takes the hint and withdraws L

To die, to sleep;
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
 The flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wished. (*He pauses dramatically again*)

Suddenly two jets of smoke appear, one L, one R

Ghost enters C

Ghost O, revenge me, Umlaut.

Ghost exits

Umlaut is showing signs of strain but battles on

Umlaut To die, to sleep

No more — perchance to dream; aye there's the rub
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come —

The cannon, drums and "Deutschland über Alles" of the King's drinking salute sound, drowning out Umlaut. He shouts desperately through the din

— when we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.

Once more he makes the fatal mistake of a long pause and totters round the stage indicating distress by biting the back of his hand

He pauses so long that Hildegard thinks he has died and makes her entrance prematurely, carrying a large Valentine card

Hildegard My lord —

Umlaut *(with savage emphasis, glaring at her)*

For who would bear the whips and
Scorns of time

Hildegard hastily exits

The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin.

Once more he pauses to roam the stage

A nervous Hildegard thinks he has finished, entering

Hildegard My Lord, I have remembrances of yours that I have —

Furious at being interrupted yet again in the greatest speech of his career, Umlaut loses control

Umlaut (*desperately*) Oh, get thee to a nunnery.

He storms out and we hear him shout “I resign” in the wings

Hildegard is left stranded alone. After one or two sheepish grins and titters she cuts to the end

Hildegard Woe is me,

To have seen what I have seen, see what I see.

Hildegard slinks off

SCENE 8

Two thrones are set

Trumpets, drums etc.

Enter King, Queen, Gesundheit, Umlaut and Hildegard with Courtiers including Cup Bearer who now wears an eye patch or similar sign of injury

King Let the players come forth. Let the play commence. But first a toast. The King drinks to Umlaut.

Cup Bearer produces a goblet. Trumpets, drums, cannon and “Deutschland über Alles”. All salute and stand to attention. Screech.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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