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Loveplay

by
Moira Buffini



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Loveplay was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the Pit Theatre, London on 28th February 2001. The cast was as follows:

Herek/Trevelyn/Mr Quilley/Buttermere/Dieter
Simon Coates

Marcus/Deric/Man/De Vere/Gwyn/Peter
Ian Dunn

Woman/Matilda/Roxanne/Lynne/Brigitta
Niamh Linehn

Eric/Llewellyn/Boy/Quinn
Neil Warhurst

Dorcas/Hilda/Marianne/Miss Tilly/Joy/Anita
Alison Newman

Gilda/Helen/Nillie/Flynn/Rita
Jody Watson

Director **Anthony Clark**
Designer **Rachel Blues**
Lighting Designer **Richard Beaton**
Music **Conor Linehan**
Fights **Malcolm Ranson**
Sound **Steff Langley**

Moira Buffini's plays include *Blavatsky's Tower* (Machine Room), *Gabriel* (Soho Theatre), *Silence* (Birmingham Rep), *Loveplay* (Royal Shakespeare Company), *Dinner* (National Theatre and West End), *Dying for It*, adapted from *The Suicide* by Nikolai Erdman (Almeida), *A Vampire Story* (NT Connections), *Marianne Dreams* (Almeida), *Welcome to Thebes* (National Theatre), *Handbagged* (Tricycle Theatre) and *wonder.land*, created with Damon Albarn and Rufus Norris (National Theatre).

Other plays by Moira Buffini published by Samuel French Ltd

A Vampire Story
Welcome to Thebes

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The action takes place on the same small square of land, which moves through time from the past to the present.

The title of each scene should be shown.

The play can be performed with as few as six actors.

CHARACTERS

MARCUS – a Roman

DORCAS – a businesswoman

HEREK
ERIC
DERIC
WOMAN
} Saxons

GILDA – a novice

HILDA – a rebel

MATILDA – a nun

TREVELYN – an actor

LLEWELLYN – a playwright

HELEN – a malcontent

ROXANNE – a scientist

MARIANNE – a servant

MAN – an artisan

ESTELLA – streetwalker

BELLA – a trainee

MELLOR – an officer

DE VERE – a gentleman

BUTTERMERE – a vicar

JOY – a prostitute

BOY – a virgin

QUINN – a revolutionary

FLYNN – a convert

GWYN
LYNNE
} *adventurers*

BRIGITTA – a single woman

ANITA – a matchmaker

RITA – a secretary

DIETER – an alcoholic

PETER – a doctor

MR QUILLEY

MISS TILLEY / MISS TILLY

MILLIE

Scene One
The Classical Age

79AD. Open land. A half-built structure of wood and stone. **DORCAS** *runs on. She lifts her skirts at someone following her, laughs and runs off.* **MARCUS**, *a Roman soldier enters in pursuit. He exits. We hear* **DORCAS** *shrieking and giggling.* **MARCUS** *enters, pulling her by the arm.*

MARCUS *(pulling* **DORCAS** *down)* Here. Quick. Now. This.

DORCAS Hang on; I got something in my back. *(she pushes something out from underneath her)* What're you building here then? What's that?

MARCUS Going to be latrines for the garrison.

DORCAS What's a latrine?

MARCUS It's a structure of wood and stone, designed for us to shit in.

DORCAS You're building a building to shit in?

MARCUS It's what we do. We have latrines.

DORCAS You can't shit in a building.

MARCUS Why not?

DORCAS It's not natural. Why don't you shit in the woods like human beings?

MARCUS Because we're civilized. Can we talk after?

DORCAS Don't have to talk at all if you like.

MARCUS Great.

DORCAS Hang on. Isn't there something you're forgetting?

MARCUS Oh yes, sorry.

He gives her a coin.

Here.

DORCAS *(looking at it blankly)* What's this?

MARCUS A coin.

DORCAS What's a coin?

MARCUS It's money. You can buy yourself something with it.

DORCAS *(uncomprehending)* What?

MARCUS You can exchange this money for goods. Take it to market and buy something.

DORCAS I have to go all the way to market to get my payment?

MARCUS No, that's your payment. You go to market to *spend* it.

DORCAS So all you're giving me is this?

MARCUS *(trying to begin)* It's plenty; it's loads.

DORCAS *(stopping him)* It's usually a chicken.

MARCUS Pardon?

DORCAS I usually get at least a chicken.

MARCUS But that coin is worth more than a chicken.

DORCAS No it ain't.

MARCUS In exchange for that coin you'd probably get a chicken, a bag of grain and some fruit. You might even get a piglet. Come on.

DORCAS I want a chicken.

MARCUS I haven't got a chicken. I've got that. It's *money*.

DORCAS I don't wannit.

DORCAS *drops the coin. She turns her face from* **MARCUS**. *Pause.*

MARCUS Can I owe you a chicken?

DORCAS Do I look stupid?

MARCUS Look, the coin means chicken. Take it to a vendor of chickens and he'll say: "That is *currency*. I accept it. Here is a large chicken."

DORCAS No one in their right mind would swap a chicken for that.

MARCUS Not swap! It's *legal tender,* an entire system, the basis for the whole structure of civilised –. Look, please… I've been on the road for weeks. I'm aching for this.

DORCAS Aching?

MARCUS Yes…

DORCAS *(sympathetically)* Ahhh… *(she feels his cloak)* Tell you what; this is nice. Isn't it soft?

MARCUS My cloak?

DORCAS You can gimme that, if you like.

MARCUS You can't have my cloak.

DORCAS Why not?

MARCUS It's regulation issue. You only get one and if you lose it you freeze. It's bloody cold here.

DORCAS It's a lovely colour.

MARCUS Thanks.

DORCAS What d'you call that fabric then?

MARCUS Wool.

DORCAS Wool? Really?

MARCUS I think so.

DORCAS It's a fabulous weave. How did they get it like that?

MARCUS I don't know. Look –

DORCAS Do you have different sheep down there in Rome or something?

MARCUS You can't have it.

DORCAS Go on.

MARCUS No! … Frankly, it's worth more than we agreed on.

DORCAS More than a chicken?

MARCUS Yes.

DORCAS You're saying it's worth more than me.

MARCUS I'm saying it would be foolish of me to give up my cloak for one shag.

DORCAS Two shags. One now and one later.

MARCUS No!

DORCAS Right. *(shoving him off)* Off you get.

MARCUS Look. You're lucky I'm offering to pay you at all. I could just take you.

DORCAS Oh, could you?

MARCUS *(becoming violent)* Right now!

DORCAS Take me and I BITE! If you enter me without my will, the pain of it will make you think you dipped it in poison. You'll piss acid and desire will eat away at you with no release. Force me and I will make you shrink. You're shrivelling now; I can feel it… like a slug on salt.

MARCUS *(getting up)* Right. Forget it.

DORCAS Oh, have I upset you? I'm so sorry. Come on, Roman, show us the might of your empire. You're very welcome if you just give me a chicken or your cloak.

MARCUS *spits on her. She laughs.*

Scared you, have I?

MARCUS We will crush you. You will fall under the foundations of our city like dust. When we've finished here, creatures like you won't exist!

MARCUS *exits.*

DORCAS Course we will. Creatures like me will always exist.

DORCAS *picks up the coin. She examines it.*

Money.

She throws the coin into the air and catches it.

Money for nothing.

Scene Two
The Dark Age

544. Open land. The Roman latrines are in ruins. The grunts of a **MAN** *having sex can be heard from within. Two grimy Saxons,* **ERIC** *and* **HEREK**, *are sitting in front, at a fire.*

ERIC What d'you reckon it was, that place?

HEREK *(looking behind him)* Some sort o' temple, I s'pose. Can't see why they'd build anything else out of stone. It's got a shelf of wood. About that high. Big, round holes in it. An altar, I reckon. I threw her down on it but it was rotted. She went right through. *(pause)* Did it on the floor in the end.

ERIC I don't like the idea of doing it in a temple.

HEREK Why not? It's not a temple any more, is it? It's nothing now.

ERIC What about their gods?

HEREK Their gods are dead, aren't they? Dead, along with all o' them. That city we walked through back there; ruins tall as trees and not a sod in sight. A dead nation. Hundreds of years worth of dead.

ERIC What makes you think their gods are dead?

HEREK Well, they must be. They're no longer worshipped.

ERIC A god is immortal. The presence of a god endures, 'specially in a sacred place, even when his name is long forgot.

HEREK Well...

ERIC I'm not doing it in there.

HEREK Why not?

ERIC I might invoke a curse.

HEREK Look, I done it in there and I'm fine.

ERIC How do you know?

HEREK Cause my dick hasn't fallen off.

ERIC Yet.

HEREK Look, if you don't wanna do it in the hut, do it in the woods.

ERIC I'll do it here. By the light.

HEREK Not in front of me you won't. Take her in the woods like a human being.

ERIC I'll do it here.

HEREK Why?

ERIC I don't like the woods. A wood has spirits.

HEREK Fuck's sake.

ERIC Didn't you feel them as we brought her through? The same eyes that were watching us in that city were watching us in the wood.

The grunts are reaching a crescendo.

HEREK It's always something with you, isn't it? Eyes, spirits, omens – always some fucking thing looking at you.

ERIC The eyes of the dead.

HEREK Oh please.

ERIC They don't like us.

HEREK Eric...

ERIC I've been on my guard against them all day long. I can feel them, here, in this place. They want to suck our lives out.

They pause uncomfortably while the **MAN** *in the ruin comes to a climax.*

HEREK Eric, can I tell you something, for the sake of your own, you know, sanity?

ERIC What?

HEREK The dead are dead; finish. And this place is just a place.

ERIC A place is never just a place. Everywhere you go, you have a crux – like a joining – of time, flesh, spirit, of *stuff*; past events,

future portents all crowding in, visible only to the mind. It causes pressure.

HEREK Well, if you don't like it here, maybe we should go. Let's just go.

ERIC What about my release?

HEREK What about it?

ERIC I want it and I'm having it here, by the light. How can I have peace until I've had my release?

HEREK You find peace in it, do you? In a rape, you find peace?

ERIC Rape or not rape; makes no difference. Power, then peace… Why, what do you find?

HEREK I don't look for anything. I just do it.

DERIC *(entering from the hut)* All yours, mate.

ERIC Bring her out here.

DERIC What for?

ERIC I want her out here.

DERIC She's in there.

HEREK He doesn't like the hut.

DERIC What's wrong with it?

ERIC Bring her out!

DERIC Fuck's sake… *(he exits)*

HEREK You should calm down, Eric. All this shit about spirits and dead gods; it fucks you up. As if there's some great meaning to everything we're doing, as if some higher power cares. It's pathetic really, cause there is no higher power, there is nothing apart from this – what we do and what we see. That is the meaning. To exist here, now and follow every desire we have. Like if I want to eat, I eat. If I want a shit, I have one. If I want to shag, I find something to shag and I shag it. That's it. As soon as something's happened, it's gone, dead, over – and as to things that haven't happened yet, as to the future, as to omens and portents and curses; well it's such a lot of shit I can't even bring myself to speak on the subject.

ERIC You'll discover you're wrong when it's too late.

DERIC *enters with a* **WOMAN** *over his shoulder.*

DERIC Shall I dump her in the woods, then?

ERIC Here.

DERIC What, right here?

ERIC By the light.

DERIC You're not expecting us to watch, are you?

ERIC You can do what you like.

DERIC I'm not watching.

ERIC Then go elsewhere.

HEREK Oh, let him get on with it. It'll only take five seconds anyway.

DERIC I don't believe it…

DERIC *dumps the* **WOMAN** *by* **ERIC** *and stands as far apart as he can.* **HEREK** *joins him.* **ERIC** *prepares himself by praying.*

You see, there's something about doing it which is fine, and something about watching some other bloke do it, which is not fine – know what I mean?

HEREK I know exactly what you mean.

DERIC *(intimately)* Because it's not about watching or looking at all, is it? The whole thing. It's about… I mean, even having your eyes open is not a good idea. There was one point, when I had my eyes open right, and this, between you and me – I mean strictly – is why it took me a while to finish. 'Cause I could see that she was looking at me. I could see her eyes in the dark like… like marsh lights shining out of her skull, you know? And her face in some kind of…contortion. And I thought shall I hit her and blot it out? But I'd already hit her pretty hard, so I just thought no, I'll close my eyes. So I shut 'em and I thought of nothing, and then, at last, I found myself in that place which is the favourite place of all men since the world began.

HEREK *sniggers.*

Not that place! – I was already there! I'm talking about the, the *place* inside you that opens up – the…the mind. More than the mind…the, the spirit, the –

HEREK Self.

DERIC The being, yeh. Am I making sense?

HEREK Yep.

DERIC When I'm doing it, I am most myself –

HEREK Right.

DERIC I am most fully me –

HEREK Yeh.

DERIC In that place of closed eyes and darkness –

HEREK Right.

DERIC Of boundless freedom and – and limitless…

HEREK Present.

DERIC Yeh, the mysterious – I don't know –

HEREK Moment of self.

DERIC Timeless… Time disappears, don't it. And for that moment, you are everything, everywhere. You are Beyond.

ERIC *(examining the* **WOMAN***)* Deric, would you come here for a moment, please?

DERIC What?

ERIC Could you tell me what I'm supposed to do with this?

DERIC *and* **HEREK** *approach* **ERIC**.

Should I bury it, or burn it?

DERIC What d'you mean?

He lifts the **WOMAN** *and lets her drop.*

ERIC It's dead.

DERIC No, she just fainted, mate.

ERIC Look at it.

DERIC She ain't dead.

ERIC It's nothing but a thing. Dead!

DERIC She can't be dead.

ERIC *(furious)* You careless fucking bastard! What about my release?

DERIC Look, I only hit her. There's no way she's dead; she was looking at me!

ERIC *(backing away)* There's no release in that, no power to be gained from it, nothing. I'm not touching it. It's gone.

DERIC You mean, while I was – She was –

ERIC The gods have taken her, not you! *(he turns towards the hut)* I haven't set foot in it! I haven't defiled it! What ever god you are, LEAVE ME BE!

ERIC *runs off.*

DERIC What's he talking about? What god?

HEREK He gives me the fucking jitters, that bloke. *(he gathers his things)* Get your stuff. We're going.

DERIC What god?

HEREK He thinks that some great supernatural force actually cares about what we've done here. It's dogshit.

He follows **ERIC**. **DERIC** *stares at the* **WOMAN**. *The darkness grows.*

DERIC You shouldn't of looked at me.

He goes. At last the **WOMAN** *stirs. She slowly gets to her knees. She retches. She stands. She wails. A kind of keening. The sound of anguish – and rage. It is replaced by…*

Scene Three
The New Millennium

1099. **GILDA**, *a novice, singing. Eerie, otherworldly, ecstatic. The space has become a house of prayer.* **HILDA**, *a nun, is kneeling over a covered corpse.*

HILDA Goodbye my love, my love, my love, my love, goodbye.

HILDA *kisses the dead nun's hand.* **GILDA** *ends her song. She and* **MATILDA**, *the Mother Superior, join* **HILDA** *at the corpse.*

MATILDA When did it happen?

HILDA Half an hour ago.

MATILDA God rest her soul.

GILDA Amen. I know I'm only new here but I've heard you say she was the best among us.

MATILDA There was none more loving in her duty to the Lord.

HILDA I have a request, Mother.

MATILDA Then speak.

HILDA May I lay her out alone?

MATILDA It's not our way. This girl must learn how these things should be done. And special friendships, Sister; you know I can't approve.

HILDA *reluctantly acquiesces.* **MATILDA** *moves away. She kneels and prays in a low voice.* **HILDA** *and* **GILDA** *begin to wash and lay out the corpse.*

HILDA You start down there. Wash her as if she were Christ.

GILDA *begins to wash the corpse's feet. They work.* **MATILDA** *continues to pray.*

GILDA *(whispering to* **HILDA***)* When she died…were there any signs?

HILDA Signs?

GILDA I mean what happened? Our sister was so saintly. She spent such a lot of time in prayer. Well, both of you, so often cloistered here in close communion with God. The famous letters that she wrote.

HILDA We wrote them all together.

GILDA And the visionary tracts. Her bold ideas – your bold ideas – about the loving Christ… I don't understand them but they've put this abbey on the map. And when the bishops came she'd never see them – that was brilliant. They were always so insulted but they couldn't say a thing! She'd never see a man, no matter who he was, when most of us would climb the orchard walls and graze our hands and knees to get a peek at a retreating friar's back. She held herself above such things. And she showed us all great kindness and compassion. Her feet are big.

HILDA Keep your eyes off her flesh.

GILDA I was wondering how God received her. She was so special and so good. Was there a shimmering of incandescence? When St Bridget died, twenty five eye witnesses saw her room shine with the light of divine splendour.

HILDA I didn't notice any light.

GILDA Not even a momentary sunbeam? Perhaps her eyes were fixed on a vision of paradise reserved for her alone. Perhaps, as her soul took flight –

HILDA She rattled with death.

GILDA Oh dear.

HILDA Can we work in silence please?

They work on. **GILDA** *is washing the corpse's thighs. Silence but for* **MATILDA***'s prayer.* **HILDA** *suddenly notices what* **GILDA** *is doing.*

Don't touch her there.

GILDA Why not?

GILDA *touches her, then shrieks and reels from the corpse.*

HILDA I said don't touch her!

MATILDA What is it?

GILDA Sorry Mother. There's a thing, a growth.

MATILDA A what?

GILDA I felt a lump; a fleshy growth. *(she points)* There. On her secret place.

MATILDA *approaches the corpse. She lifts the sheet. She is utterly stunned.*

MATILDA Novice, leave the room.

GILDA Is it a canker? Is that what killed her?

MATILDA Say nothing of this.

GILDA Our dog had a canker / a big, hairy lump –

MATILDA Do not ever speak of this to anyone!

GILDA Why not?

MATILDA Get out I said, you stupid girl!

GILDA *leaves.* **MATILDA** *looks again. She is so shocked she cannot speak.*

A man. You knew.

The shock sinks in.

You shared a cell. And all carnality.

HILDA *continues to work.*

I trusted you! I believed in her! How you must have laughed at us.

HILDA Never.

MATILDA How you must have scorned our efforts to be celibate. How you must have pitied us. How you lied!

HILDA We prayed for things to change.

MATILDA We have lived side by side for fifteen years! For fifteen years I have fought against the physical, the animal, the flesh. How dare you both deceive me with abominable love?

HILDA Sister, I came here against my will –

MATILDA As did I!

HILDA He followed me. We had no choice –

MATILDA He had choice! He, it, that deadness there, that empty, rotting flesh; He had choice… Why would a man, a man who could do anything, a man who is free, why would a man choose such a life as this?

HILDA *has taken the corpse's hand.*

For love? It isn't possible.

HILDA It is.

MATILDA Leave me with him.

HILDA *doesn't move.*

If you want your secret kept, get out.

HILDA *goes.* **MATILDA** *approaches the corpse. She takes the hand, examines it, compares the size with her own.*

You could have trusted me. Why did you not?

MATILDA *lifts the corpse's hand and holds it to her face.*

I would have loved you too.

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