



The Chestnut Crown

Janek, a young Gypsy law student, unexpectedly abandons his studies and returns to his native village to cut down an ancient chestnut tree, revered by the surrounding villagers as sacred. He pins together enough chestnut leaves to make a wreath, a “chestnut crown”, which, in combination with other Gypsy rituals, should kill the “worms” in his head and release him from the paralyzing bonds of the past. The crown is then found on the head of Aloys Weiner, a local eccentric, who has been stabbed to death with a breadknife. Suspicion falls on Janek, and the play proceeds to its resolution through a series of flashbacks during the interrogations by a local inspector (examining magistrate), who is determined to establish the “one and only” truth, for “the world without truth would be immeasurably sad.”

As the background of the supposed murder gradually unfolds, we learn that Janek is having sexual problems with his girlfriend Selena, and that these problems stem from the incestuous relationship with his mother, of which he is unable to free himself. This primeval bond, in the author’s treatment poetic rather than perverse, is the main cause of Janek’s failure to find a place for himself in the wider society. As a prisoner of a double dilemma – the son seeing his mother as a woman, the lover seeing his partner as a mother – he is forced into a relentless cycle of escapes and returns, in the end finding refuge in ancestral ritualistic magic. But memory, represented by the Gypsy demon Melalo, is a hermaphrodite, producing demons by the dozen. The only solution would be a removal of the womb to which he is tied by an unsevered umbilical cord.

In a symbolic sense this happens when Janek learns that Weiner, too, was having a relationship with his mother, and that she is carrying his child. Unable to face this, he convinces Weiner that Aranka had a hysterectomy shortly after his birth, and that her story about a child is a lie. Weiner, whose attempts to reproduce have been his life-long obsession, feels robbed of the last chance and, on the spur of the moment, commits suicide. Learning that his mother is indeed carrying Weiner’s child, Janek realizes that he is finally free of his bond, and that in his newly found freedom he has nowhere to go – except into another bondage, which Janek achieves by “admitting” that it was he who killed Weiner.

And so “truth” wins the day, Inspector leaves satisfied, while the society from which Janek had been running back to his atavistic roots is revealed as a contractual framework of “truths” beneficial to those with the power to shape reality.



What the critics said

“The diction of Evald Flisar’s first play is wholly authentic, suffused with hidden and revealed passions, with almost naturalistic yet hardly everyday speech patterns, with language brought into the world by life itself, with ideas that successfully rise above ideologies, since they constitute part of the sensual and emotional fabric of life from which they emerge...”

Vasja Predan, *Delo*, 1971

“The new staging of *The Chestnut Crown* confirms the undiminished vitality of this early play by Evald Flisar... of the play which is marked by primeval traumas of individuals in the grip of tradition and culture of their ancestors, who, at the same time, as people living in the modern world without God, look for temporary solutions in eroticism, fatherhood, regression... It is in this context that Flisar’s interesting characters offer exceptional opportunities to the actors...”

Tone Persak, *Delo*, 1989

“This play, thematically exceptional in the history of Slovenian drama, has lost none of its force in the 17 years since it was written and first produced at the Slovene National Theater Maribor... and then, in spite of many polemics against the decision, officially removed from the repertoire... The reasons for this “liquidation” can be found in two ideologies, one of the Party, the other of the traditional, moralistic Church, neither of which could accept a play about incest that does not conform to the only model allowed on stage, that of *Oedipus Rex*... *The Chestnut Crown* dramatizes the basic conflict between primeval eroticism without any boundaries and the norms of Judeo-Christian morality...”

Peter Bozic, *Delo*, 1989



“On this level *The Chestnut Crown* is a play of preparations and unfulfilled expectations. It is a search for lost roles: the role of mother for Aranka, of woman for Selena, of man for Weiner, of son for Janek. The four prime movers of the play are caught in two erotic triangles. At the top are Selena and Aranka; below them are Janek and Weiner as two contenders. In Janek’s hallucinations the colors of both triangles blend: the green color of panic, flight, and guilt, and the red color of eroticism, fire, obsession, rebellion...”

Igor Lampret, *The Chestnut Crown*, introductory essay, 1971





The Chestnut Crown, Slovene National Theater Maribor, Slovenia, 1971
Volodja Peer as Janek, Milena Muhic as Selena
Directed by Branko Gombac



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

Characters

**Inspector
Janek
Aranka
Weiner
Selena
Priest**



The Chestnut Crown was first produced at the Slovene National Theater Maribor, Slovenia, on January 12, 1971. It was directed by Branko Gombac with the following cast:

**Inspector
Janek
Aranka
Weiner
Selena
Priest**

Joze Zupan
Volodja Peer
Angela Jankova
Marjan Backo
Milena Muhic
Boris Bruncko



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Act One

(The central area of the stage is surrounded by a ring of darkness from which characters emerge into light and withdraw back into darkness as if crossing a spatial and temporal border between two worlds. Weiner is lying on an iron bed with his left foot on the floor. On his head he has a wreath of chestnut leaves. He is dead. A blood-stained breadknife lies on his chest. Janek sits on the floor near the bed. The central area represents different locations: interior of Weiner's house, lawn in front of a vicarage, edge of forest, courtyard in front of Aranka's house. In addition to the iron bed, it contains a wooden bench, a camping chair, a wooden chair and a chicken coop with gleaming white eggs. The rest is left to the imagination of the designer.)

1.

(As the curtain rises, Inspector emerges slowly from the ring of darkness. He stops and looks around. He puts his hat and briefcase on the bench. Approaches the bed and spends thirty seconds observing the corpse. He walks back to Janek and stops.)

INSPECTOR: So you are the law student who decided to pass the exam in criminology with pactical work? And passed it by committing a range of offences plus murder in the first degree? Won't you say anything? *(Janek doesn't respond.)* Never mind, sooner or later your tongue will perform a tap dance for me. In the meantime I'll do the talking. To start with, we might narrow our differences regarding truth. Are there two: one yours, one mine? No. There is only one truth. Everything else is a lie, or ignorance of facts. If we look at facts carefully



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enough, lie has no chance to carry the day. Which is precisely our task: to enable truth to occupy its rightful place. Because the world without truth would be immeasurably sad, don't you think? We're going to undertake our task with care and without haste – as if looking for a needle in a haystack. The needle is tiny, but when we find it, it'll be large enough for me to sew up the case. That's why I'm here. I want to know your opinion. I'm sure you have one. A third-year student of law, brilliant, I hear, with a declared wish to become a judge, finds himself – to everyone's shock and amazement – in the role of the main suspect for a murder most foul, if I may use the expression, being, as I am, a little old-fashioned. By what twist of fate has this come about?

JANEK (*looks up*): I, too, as a little boy, was told where to go in this world. I got more of a cane than advice, so I knew well who was the only Lord. I carried, inside my heart, the shadow of Cross, and bitter taste of the blessing I got in the church of St. Anthony. I, too, as a young man, learned that it was wrong, the way for which I was caned. I found a way of my own and no longer remembered the only Lord, out in the world I found brighter heavens than those in the church of St. Anthony. I, too, as a young man, returned to where I was born, and they held a feast at the church of St. Anthony, and many sombre people were listening to the words of the priest, who knew, and was willing to say, what is God. I turned away.

(He lowers his head. Brief silence, then the sound of church organ which, at first violent, wheezes out asthmatically. A beam of light on Priest, who is about to preach. He is mildly intoxicated.)

PRIEST: So you've come here today to hear the word of God. Unfortunately, your faces tell me a rather different story. You've come for reasons not of divinity but of reprehensible superstitious nonsense! God, whose unenviable task it is to forgive you, will not be happy, I assure you. In spite of what the unenlightened say, God *will* empty the Earth, he will split it open and turn it upside down, and he will scatter its inhabitants. Then it will be the same for priest and people, for master and slave, seller and buyer, borrower and lender, debtor and creditor. But until that wrathful day I will continue to occupy my privileged position of being closer to God than any of you will ever be. (*Calmly.*) Now then. What are we going to say about



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this chestnut tree? You, no doubt, want me to say that the cutting down of this tree was the work of an angel who had come to manifest and proclaim the triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was not, I'm sorry to say. It was not. Women will be alarmed, and no wonder: so faithful and earnest they are in their desire to get to heaven that they would sell their souls to Satan if he gave them the right of entry. God, and let me be quite emphatic about this, will not manifest the resurrection of Jesus Christ through destruction of a chestnut tree which a community of peasants in a God-forsaken village believe to be sacred. I have been your spiritual shepherd for the past thirty years. I love every one of you. So you're going to say that I myself went out there to bless your sacred tree, and that we prayed for it in this church. All that is true. But I only did that because I was reluctant to hurt you in your simplicity. I alone will answer for any part in this ungodly affair. *(Pause.)* Well, the tree is no longer there. That is the reason you've come here in such extraordinary numbers today. Now, you think, the seven angels that hold seven trumpets are prepared to blow them. Now hail and fire mingled with blood will be hurled upon Earth. Well, let me tell you something, and let me be quite emphatic about this. The only thing hurled upon you will be the scorn of those among us who still have some reason left ! Whoever it was that cut down the tree must've had very hard work; the tree was gigantic. But do any of you know the culprit? I'm certainly not going to point a finger. That wouldn't be Christian. On the other hand it could be said that you all are to blame. But that, no matter how true, would be neither Christian nor wise. This affair, therefore, is bound to remain one of those mysterious things that only the Lord himself knows the answer to. Consequently it is up to him to do something about it. All we can do is pray. Repeat after me. *(Clasping his hands.)* Our Father who art in heaven ... blessed be your name ...

(Organ music returns and grows in volume as the lights fade. In darkness, it is cut short.)



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2.

(Lights on the central area. Inspector is circling around Janek.)

INSPECTOR: What do we find? ... At the heart of our society, which is based on Reason, there exists an ugly smudge of Unreason ... A dark, cancerous growth which threatens us with vile metastases. If we relax our guard, even for a moment, it will spread and suffocate us. What, then, is our duty? To remove every manifestation of Unreason as soon as it appears. To cut out, dissolve or isolate every single, no matter how small, malignant trace of the tumor as soon as we discover it. Am I wrong in thinking that you are one of such metastases? No, I'm not. If I have to take on the role of surgeon I will not turn away. I'm grateful for the tasks imposed on me by my job. *(Walks to the corpse, pulls the wreath of chestnut leaves off its head and looks at it.)* Something tells me that we're going to find your fingerprints on these leaves. Am I wrong?

(Janek jumps to his feet and pulls the wreath from Inspector's hands.)

JANEK: Not any more. *(He slips into the ring of darkness, his voice comes from there.)* What do I see? I see three devils with golden trumpets. Everyone hide! Here comes the army of Gypsy demons! *(The sound of a trumpet is heard. Janek, grotesquely waving his arms, comes marching back into the light.)* One-two-three-let-every-one-flee! Every-one-but-me! *(Comes to a stand and raises the wreath of chestnut leaves into the air.)* The chestnut crown. Woven on the fifth day after the fall of the tree which required five hours of axing. *(He puts the crown on the floor, straightens up.)* In my pockets: five toads of medium size. To be thrown over my head into the stream behind me. *(Pretends to pull something out of his pockets and throw over his head.)* One! Two! Three! Four! Five! *(Turns towards darkness, yells.)* Hey-hoy! Melalo! All toads are now in the stream. Two to the left, two to the right, one in the middle. Now the crown. The crown, Melalo! *(Picks up the crown and places it on his head.)* I'll now dance three Devil's dances. Melalo! I want you to come here. I know you. You're a worm with a hundred heads. If you're a magpie, I know you, if you're a bark-beetle, I know you.



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I know you in every one of your thousand forms. (*Makes two paces towards the ring of darkness.*) Me-la-lo! Come. Come to me, demon of demons, the demon of madness, come, I'm your son, your son without reason. I'm ready for you. (*Turns to face the audience.*) Music! (*As if descending from the sky, a wild sound of many violins. Janek performs a succession of grotesque dancing movements, spinning first on one leg, then on the other, throwing his limbs in all directions, twisting his head etc. When the music abruptly stops, he collapses on the ground, breathing heavily. Climbs back to his feet.*) Once more! (*Same music, same dance.*) Now for the last time! (*Same music, same dance. At the end he falls to the ground, hardly able to breathe.*)

INSPECTOR (*picks up the chestnut crown*): Five hours of hard work to get a few leaves? Why?

JANEK (*still gasping for breath*): That's how Gypsies used to cure insanity.

INSPECTOR: How do you know?

JANEK: I've read about it.

INSPECTOR: But how does it work, this – chestnut crown?

JANEK: It kills the worms that crawl around in your skull. It draws the poison out of your brain. Put it on, you'll see.

INSPECTOR (*turns back to the corpse*): Evidently the chestnut crown does more than draws poison out of one's brain. (*Places the crown on Weiner's crotch.*) It perforates stomachs. (*Looks at Janek and yells.*) Doesn't it?

JANEK: For a long time you refuse to say dirty words. So you never see things as they are. All you see is the color stuck to them from the past. Then one day you slip on this smooth surface of many ancestors, and you fall, and some of the color peels off. Underneath, there is something different, something completely different. You get fed up with all this beauty, with all the gleaming appearances, with the red clouds of the sunset, you lose your temper and begin to scratch, and you peel the color off trees, countryside, heavens, and faces, and finally, there, between your fingers, you have it: the bare world.

INSPECTOR (*after pause*): Why did you kill him?

JANEK: The moon is shining, cats are whining, boo-boo-boo-boo-boom!

(*Priest emerges from the ring of darkness.*)



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PRIEST: I'm not saying that you should be grateful for what I've done for you. But don't forget that you practically grew up in my house. You spent as much time with me as with your mother. I bought you clothes. You read my books. We were friends. Yet now, all of a sudden, I no longer know you! After three years at college you return, and what do you do? (*Approaches the corpse.*) He was sending you money, paying your fees. He was helping your mother, so she wouldn't starve. The harder I try, the less I understand you. The most brilliant boy I've come across in these parts, with opportunities for a career that others can only dream of –

JANEK: Oh, Gypsy violin, play a song for me, your crazy son, who knows not where he's been.

PRIEST: It must be that woman. That hussy who followed you here and then just as suddenly vanished. She was the one who poisoned your mind.

JANEK (*rises and yells*): Melalol! You're a worm with a hundred heads. If you're a magpie, I know you, if you're a bark-beetle, I know you. I know you in every one of your thousand forms. (*He makes two paces towards the ring of darkness.*) Me-la-lo! Come, I'm your son, your son without reason! Music!

(Silence. Janek comes back, sits on the floor, withdraws into himself. Priest fades back into the ring of darkness.)

INSPECTOR: Isn't it funny how everything in the life of a man revolves around a woman? Oh, it's the same with me, I'm no exception. The only difference is that I wouldn't kill for a woman. But then, who knows, maybe I could. Maybe one day I will. We don't know ourselves well enough to know what we're capable of. Except when it's too late.

JANEK: One day the sun turns into a black star, so you pick up a stone and fling it across the ocean to see how far you can reach. The stone flies to the nearby cliffs and sinks. So you turn. And you run. Back along the river that flows to its source. Like a bolt of lightning, you go. But only lightning grows out of the night, and then returns. You remain where you are. Like when you step into a pool, and water travels in all directions: nowhere.



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INSPECTOR: I, too, used to write poetry when I was young. And it was better than yours. There were rhymes, it was easy to understand. Simple, like myself. In your case, it's easier to understand your letters than your poetry. *(Pulls a sheaf of letters from his pocket, unfolds one, reads.)* "I have been here for two years, and all this time I have longed to return home; perhaps longing is not the right word, it's an instinct, wild, bloody..."

JANEK *(springs to his feet)*: Where did you get his? *(Tries to pull the letter from Inspector's hand.)*

INSPECTOR: There're two armed policemen in front of the door.

JANEK. These are my letters. Personal letters.

INSPECTOR: I know.

JANEK: Did she give them to you? Or did you steal them? I should've wrung her neck.

INSPECTOR: Just as well you didn't, otherwise we'd now be investigating two murders.

JANEK: You're not investigating, you've already hanged me. *(Sits down and withdraws into his thoughts.)*

INSPECTOR: I haven't. But some eager prosecutor could cite these words in front of a jury and strengthen his case beyond all reasonable doubt. *(Reads from the same letter.)* "From the very beginning there was something that was pulling me back, and although this was causing me pain, it grew stronger until it succeeded in tying my hands. As if somewhere at home I had left unsettled accounts." *(He folds the letter and puts the papers back in his pocket. Looks at Janek.)* Perhaps trusting a woman isn't such a good idea.

(Blackout.)

3.

(Lights on the central area. Janek and Selena are sitting on the floor. Selena is smoking. She blows smoke towards Janek's face.)

JANEK: You're so kind.

SELENA: The priest keeps staring at me.

JANEK: How could he not? He hasn't seen such a big pair of boobs in his entire life.



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SELENA: Come on.

JANEK: Yesterday I saw him admiring them. Then he let his eyes wander down to your legs. That made him so angry that he went in the house and cursed behind the closed door for an hour.

(Selena blushes, looks away.)

JANEK: The moon is shining, cats are whining, boo-boo-boo-boom!

SELENA: Have you seen your mother yet?

JANEK: From afar.

SELENA: I don't believe you.

(In the ring of darkness there is a flicker of lightning.)

JANEK: Look. Can you see that big black mouth behind the woods?

SELENA: A storm's coming.

JANEK: No. That's a big black mouth. Yesterday I sneaked up to my mother's house. I saw her come out and walk down towards the stream. Then a flame came from the sky. It could've been lightning, it could've been something else. It missed my mother by an inch. She turned. She ran back to the house. Then it came. First the wind. Then the darkness of the sky split up and turned into a big black mouth. Which began to slide towards me. I was falling into it, head first. The trees, grass, birds, everything was pouring into me like hot black mud. And then... fear. I was beating about, a trapped animal. In the end there were only tentacles, firmly embracing my body. The big mouth gaped at me.

SELENA *(after pause)*: I like rain.

JANEK: It's still there.

SELENA: When you left I felt so lonely. I never thought I would.

JANEK *(sinks to his knees)*: I know I should flee. But I just... can't make up my mind.

SELENA: On Friday I went up to the castle. That's where you first put your arms around me.

JANEK: Has it ever happened to you that you turned into a stone?

SELENA: I wanted to remember the pressure of your embrace.

JANEK: One day I found myself standing in the middle of the city square. Alone. No one there, not even pigeons. My thoughts were clear, with sharp edges, like crystals. I could feel cold flowing through me. Then I turned into a blade of grass.



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SELENA: There were nights when I dreamt that you took me away, far away.

JANEK: Then I was gradually hardening, turning into a stone. I wanted to flee. I raised my right arm, like this (*demonstrates*), but then I got afraid I might grow stiff in this ludicrous pose, like an unfinished statue. So I let my arm fall. (*He does so.*)

SELENA: Pity there's no sun. I've brought my bikini.

JANEK: The world sunk into me. Nothing there, except my pulsating blood. Hardness of bones. Muscles. Flesh. (*Gets up, nervously paces about.*)

SELENA: I brought you a present. Would you like to see it?

JANEK: Then I felt the light. Only a flash above the buildings, nothing more. But it came back, flapping about me like a giant moth. What is this, I asked aloud, is it the sun? But I was afraid of the answer. I was afraid the light might jump on me and beat me.

SELENA: Why did you ask me to come?

JANEK (*sinks to his knees*): There I was, lying cold on the stony ground. Suddenly I saw them coming. They emerged from the main street, from the side streets. People. Men, women, children. First they just watched me. Then they approached, still carefully. But it wasn't long before they were running, running towards me!

SELENA: Answer me!

JANEK: Then it wasn't people coming towards me, but dust. They turned into dust, millions of tiny particles, swarming like tiny gray animals –

SELENA: I'm talking to you!

JANEK: Dust, coming towards me in waves, like a heaving gray sea –

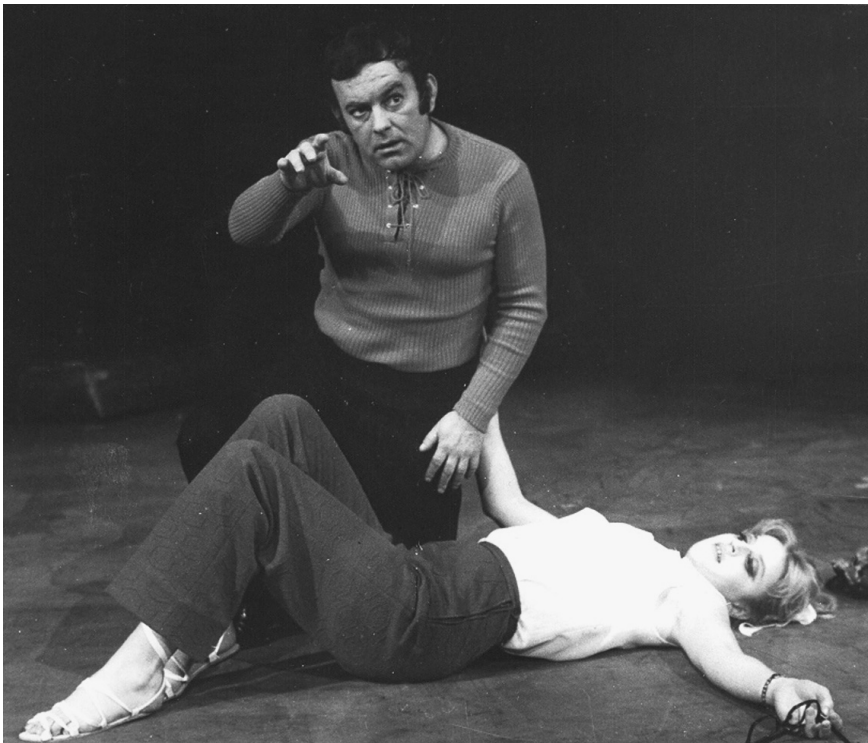
SELENA: I don't care!

JANEK (*louder*): Dust, covering the streets, breaking in through the windows, rising up to the roofs, and then –

SELENA: I don't want to know! (*Starts to cry.*)

JANEK: – then it moves right towards me. I want to flee. But I'm a stone, I can't move. Dust reaches my lips. It tastes like tiny worms, neither warm nor cold, just like worms, more and more of them. Then once again a flash of light up there, and then... the big black mouth. And darkness.

(He lowers his head, withdraws into thoughts. Selena is crying. In the ring of darkness, a flash of lightning. Janek rises and stares into darkness. He turns around.)



The Chestnut Crown, Slovene National Theater Maribor, Slovenia, 1971
Volodja Peer as Janek, Milena Muhic as Selena
Directed by Branko Gombac



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JANEK: Are you suffering from a fixed idea that people don't understand you?

SELENA (*through tears*): What?

JANEK: Come on, wipe that sadness off your face. You're beautiful.

SELENA: You know I'm not.

JANEK: Says the little girl to the little boy: what shall we do? Says the little boy to the little girl: I shall kiss you. (*Moves closer; tries to kiss her.*)

SELENA: Keep away from me.

JANEK: Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jump over the candlestick! (*Tries again.*)

SELENA: Don't touch me!

JANEK: Blast and devils! You're stupid.

SELENA: You don't care about my feelings –

JANEK: Who cares about anybody's feelings? Come on, I'll take you to the vicarage. I don't want you to get lost in the woods.

SELENA: No.

JANEK: Ici, mici, bici; ira, dira, bira; oker, poker, dominoker; home goes you.

SELENA (*touching his hand*): Janek ...

JANEK: There was an ugly girl, she had a little curl, in the middle of her forehead.

SELENA (*gets to her feet*): You'll be sorry for this.

JANEK (*reaching after her*): Don't go ...

SELENA (*disappearing into darkness*): Very sorry ...

(*Blackout.*)

4.

(*Lights on the central area. Inspector emerges from the ring of darkness.*)

INSPECTOR: Do you think that you're responsible for your actions? Or do you think that you're not? Maybe you feel that there is no connection between you and your actions. Many a criminal has believed that. Perhaps you're subject to visions, hallucinations that are outside the reach of your conscious mind. Perhaps a hidden voice whispers to you: stab, throttle, get rid of, take revenge. Could that be so? (*Janek doesn't respond.*) I've made enquiries among



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your fellow students. And what did I learn? Some interesting facts. How you slapped your professor. At a college ball she came to ask you for a dance. You assaulted her. Then a funny thing happened at the theater. Where you went to see... let me check... (*Shuffles through his papers.*) ... oh yes, *Oedipus Rex*. In the middle of the performance you started to scream. You were dragged to the police station. You were beaten.

JANEK: I wasn't beaten.

INSPECTOR: No, right. It was you who did the beating. You grabbed a policeman's truncheon and beat him unconscious before disbelieving eyes of his colleagues. How did you feel after that? Relieved? Proud of yourself? Important? Did you have a sense of achievement? Or were you sorry? Perhaps even aghast at what you had done? Tell me. (*Janek is silent.*) I want to be your friend. I can have you handcuffed right now, I can have you locked up without breaking a single rule. But I want to know. For me it's not enough to establish that a crime's been committed, I want to know why.

(*Janek is silent. Inspector fades back into darkness. Blackout.*)

(*Lights on the central area. Aranka is washing clothes in a wooden tub on the bench. Janek emerges from darkness and tiptoes up to her, placing his hands over her eyes from behind. She grows stiff, then shrieks.*)

ARANKA: Aloys! Why're you scaring me like that?

JANEK (*removing his hands*): What Aloys, which Aloys?

ARANKA (*turning*): Oh my God! My son!

JANEK: How do you mean? That your son is God, or that God is your son?

(*Aranka sits on the bench, covers her eyes and starts to cry. Janek puts the tub on the floor and sits next to her.*)

JANEK: You're so happy to see me that you'll die of misery.

ARANKA: You're staying with the priest. Is it better up there?

JANEK: Don't be childish, Mother.

ARANKA: You've been back for a week!

JANEK: Two days.

ARANKA: I'm your mother, you must see me first.



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JANEK: I was here, but you were down at the stream.

ARANKA: Why didn't you wait for me?

JANEK: Good question.

ARANKA: You don't like me any more.

JANEK: Oh, come on.

ARANKA (*in tears again*): The priest said you brought a woman!

JANEK (*rising to go*): Good-bye, Mother.

ARANKA (*clutching at his arm*): No, Janek, no, please, don't go.

JANEK: If you stop crying.

ARANKA (*wiping her eyes with the back of her hand*): I won't any more, I promise. I'll laugh. Only don't go. Are you hungry? What would you like to eat? I'll make it for you. Come, sit down. (*She pulls him next to her on the bench.*) Or would you rather go inside?

JANEK: I'll stay here, Mother.

ARANKA (*looking at him*): Oh, Janek...

JANEK: What?

ARANKA (*touching his cheek*): My fat little shortpants.

JANEK: Not any more. No longer fat, no longer shortpants.

ARANKA: The priest said that when you come you'll bring a beautiful thing for me.

JANEK: Really.

ARANKA: Yes, he said that you'd bring me a present from there, that you'd save up, and bring me a beautiful thing.

JANEK: Sorry, Mother.

ARANKA: I know you have no money. I only mentioned it because the priest said so. (*Points to his left wrist.*) What's that?

JANEK: A bracelet, Mother. A green bracelet.

ARANKA: Where did you find it?

JANEK: Find? I bought it.

ARANKA: It suits you.

JANEK: This stone is life. It's called jade.

ARANKA: Ugly name. But the stone is beautiful!

JANEK: It has magical qualities. It protects me. If anything happens to me, the stone will break, but I will remain unhurt.

ARANKA: I'm so glad.

JANEK: But it also reflects death.

ARANKA: No.

JANEK: Can you see how it glitters? But as soon as the color becomes dull and oily, someone will die.



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ARANKA: Don't frighten me.

JANEK (*lifting the wrist to her eyes*): Can you see two oily spots under the surface? I noticed them yesterday. (*Gets up, paces about, looks at the sky.*)

ARANKA: Janek, you will now stay with me, won't you?

JANEK: I don't know.

ARANKA: Until it's time to go back?

JANEK: I won't be going back.

ARANKA: The priest said that two more years –

JANEK: No.

ARANKA: Is it finished, then? All finished?

JANEK: All finished, Mother.

ARANKA (*clapping her hands*): Oh Janek, I'm so happy, soooo happy! That means you're already Your Lordship.

JANEK: What?

ARANKA: The priest said that when you finish your studies you'll come back and you'll be a judge. And a judge is addressed Your Lordship.

JANEK (*sits on the bench, looks at his feet*): No, Mother. I'm not Your Lordship. I'm not a judge. I'll never be one.

ARANKA: But the priest said –

JANEK: Never mind what the priest said! I'm thirsty.

(Aranka rises and fades into the ring of darkness. Janek rises and paces about. He laughs and dances, jumping up and down.)

JANEK: Please-Your-Lordship-please-Your-Lordship... (*He stops and looks at the sky.*) I see the moon, the moon sees me. God bless the moon, God bless me.

(Aranka returns with a jar of water.)

ARANKA: It isn't very cold.

JANEK (*taking the jar*): I am cold. So cold that the water will freeze inside me. (*Drinks, offers the jar to Aranka.*)

ARANKA: I'm nor thirsty. (*Puts the jar on the floor.*)

JANEK: When I was little I wanted to be a sleepwalker. So I could climb roofs, trees, church spires. Look down on everything. Once I climbed a pine tree over there. (*Points into the ring of darkness.*) I looked down and saw myself.



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

(He sits on the bench. Aranka sits next to him.)

ARANKA: Oh, Janek. How nice it was before you went to the city.

JANEK: It used to be very windy.

ARANKA: We did so many things together.

JANEK: Wandered through the woods, didn't we?

ARANKA: Over the hills, across the plain.

JANEK: We would sit on fallen trees, watching the sun rays jump playfully from fern to fern.

ARANKA: We would stand beside the stream, admiring our retractions.

JANEK: Reflections, Mother. We would drink cold water from hidden wells.

ARANKA: Then we would lie on the leaves...

JANEK: The woods were sultry. The trees smelt of pitch.

ARANKA: And you would swim in the stream, Janek. I still remember, and, ooooh, you smelled of frogs, Janek, of frogs!

JANEK: I would dig my nails into the bark of trees, put my arms around them.

ARANKA: Around me.

JANEK: The trees formed a roof above us.

ARANKA: All I could see was your hair.

JANEK: Then Mishy brought six little puppies. He said they had to be killed.

ARANKA: Sometimes the sun was so hot. And we were wet. Wet from sweat.

JANEK: The puppies were soft little balls of fur. They couldn't see.

ARANKA: Then you'd pull at my hair. Very hard. It hurt, but I liked it.

JANEK: Mishy picked one up by its hind legs and struck its head against a tree. *(Rises and demonstrates.)* Like this.

ARANKA: You nibbled at me, at my shoulders, with your sharp little teeth.

JANEK: I shuddered.

ARANKA: Then you'd nibble at my... *(Touches her breasts.)* Remember, Janek?

JANEK: Then something got hold of me: despair, I don't know. I grabbed the puppy, one of the soft little balls, and bashed its head against a tree till it was crushed.

ARANKA: And then ... you nibbled at my tummy...

JANEK: I remember pushing my fingers, these fingers, in the remains of the puppy's head.



The Chestnut Crown, Slovene National Theater Maribor, Slovenia, 1971
Angela Jankova as Aranka and Volodja Peer as Janek
Directed by Branko Gombac





THE CHESTNUT CROWN

ARANKA: Janek! Come to your mother...

JANEK (*burying his face in his hands*): Oh Mother!

ARANKA: Are you still mine?

JANEK: When I came to the city I was shunned. By everybody. I smelled differently. I was marked. Sure, a few women did want my body. I wanted them, too. But I couldn't reach them. As I reached out I felt a wall. It was you. You were there all the time. Guarding the routes of escape...

ARANKA: Oh, Janek...

JANEK: You kept pulling me back. To this... hole, to this... filth...

ARANKA: Janek, don't be cruel to your mother!

JANEK: You want me to crawl back into your womb? Is that what you want?

ARANKA: Janek! Ooooooh... (*Starts to cry.*)

JANEK: Never again! You're full of poison. It's dripping out of your mouth, out of your eyes. Sweet, deadly poison. I can feel it inside me. I can't see, everything's blurred. What else do you want? (*Stretches out his arms.*) Look! Have you ever seen an eagle without wings?

(He sinks to his knees. For a brief moment they remain motionless. She is crying. Then Janek buries his face in her lap.)

JANEK: Mother!

ARANKA: You're mine!

JANEK: Punish me! Tell me you never want to see me again.

ARANKA (*stroking his hair*): Janek, my Janek...

JANEK (*after pause*): Mother...

ARANKA: You used to tell me I was beautiful.

JANEK: You *are* beautiful.

ARANKA (*seductively*): Still beautiful?

JANEK: Yes, Mother, still.

ARANKA: Even more beautiful?

JANEK: Even more.

ARANKA: You're only saying that...

JANEK: No, you're beautiful. And chubby! Here... (*Tickles her tummy, Aranka laughs.*) ... and here ... (*Touches her breasts; Aranka's laughter becomes hysterical.*) Your legs are so... soft, and your hair is so... long...



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ARANKA: Janek...?

JANEK: Yes?

ARANKA: Are you still my little shortpants? Are you, Janek? My little shortpants?

JANEK: I don't know.

ARANKA: Remember how happy we were? Years ago? When we were alone? We would go down to the stream. Mishy would be playing the violin up in his hut. And the grass was young, and so tall! I would be hiding in it. Remember, Janek? You'd look for me... and when you found me I had nothing on, not a stitch! There I was, lying in the grass, all soft and chubby. And I said: bring me some water, Janek, water from the stream. And you did, nice cool water, and you splashed it all over my tummy, ooooh, it was... it was... soooo beautiful, Janek, so beautiful. And then... remember what happened then?

JANEK: No.

ARANKA: Was it nice, what happened then?

JANEK: I don't know.

ARANKA: Oh, Janek! (*She puts her hand under his shirt.*) Am I still yours, all yours, Janek? Only yours, so beautifully yours?

JANEK (*moans*): Mother...

ARANKA: Janek!

JANEK: Why do I have to call you mother!

ARANKA: You don't have to.

JANEK: Can I call you something else?

ARANKA: Call me darling. Call me lover.

JANEK: I'll call you Aranka.

ARANKA: Oh Janek...

JANEK: You're Aranka! You aren't my mother! You're Aranka! I don't know you. We've just met. You're my first. My only one.

ARANKA (*embracing him tightly*): Oh my little shortpants!

JANEK (*wildly*): You're beautiful, Aranka! (*She laughs hysterically, half in tears.*) Your hair is... like a warm forest. (*Aranka shrieks with happiness.*) I can't... without you. I hate you, but I can't without you... (*Lights begin to fade.*) Your breasts... milk!... apples!... grapes!... so smooth!... smooth...

(*Darkness.*)



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

(Lights on the central area. Janek circles round the chestnut crown which is lying on the ground.)

JANEK: Na janav ko dad mro has! Niko malen mange has! Miro gule daj merdijas! Pirani man pregelijas!

(Sits down, cross-legged, and waits. Aranka's voice comes floating through the air, tender, inviting: Janek, my little Janek, please come to me, to your mother, your mother... Janek abruptly rises.)

JANEK: Don't follow me!

(The voice returns, comes closer, becomes louder, hovering above him: Janek, I'm so beautiful, beautiful... tiful... tiful... Janek waves his arms defensively.)

JANEK: Go away, demons! Go away!

(Covers his face with his hands, sinks to his knees, groans. The sound of a screech owl can be heard inside the ring of darkness. This is followed by the sound of approaching wind, which is cut short by Janek's scream. Brief silence.)

JANEK: Get away from me! Earth, swallow me! *(Creeps about, looking for refuge, tries to dig a hole in the ground.)* Let me in! Let there be darkness! Please...

(He collapses, exhausted. Lies for a while. Gets up, disappears into the ring of darkness, returns with four withered twigs. He places them on the ground, forming a rectangle. Steps inside it, kneels, places the chestnut crown on his head.)

JANEK: Memory, you're a demon! I know you, oh yes, I know you! Don't think you can fool me, your name is Poreskoro! You have four cat's heads and you have four dog's heads and your tail is a poisonous snake. You're a hermaphrodite, impregnating yourself, giving birth to ten demons a day. *(Yells.)* But I'm going to kill you!

(He gets to his feet, steps out of the rectangle, walks around it in circles.)



The Chestnut Crown, Slovene National Theater Maribor, Slovenia, 1971
Volodja Peer as Janek
Directed by Branko Gombac





THE CHESTNUT CROWN

JANEK: I-have-never-seen-you-golden-toad-I-would-like-to-see-you-golden-toad-I-want-to-see-you-golden-toad! I know what you are! You're a female sexual organ! Jumping about at night, having fun! Every night you turn into an animal! I know you! (*Fast.*) I haven't seen you I haven't seen you I want to see you! Kill my memory! Please... I'm not afraid. Come – and kill – my memory!

(He disappears into the ring of darkness.)

JANEK: Na janav ko dad mro has! Niko malen mange has! Miro gule daj merdijas! Pirani man pregelijas! (*Comes running back, jumps inside the rectangle, waits.*) She didn't come. She didn't come. (*He goes back into the ring of darkness. His voice is hoarse and desperate.*) Na janav ko dad mro has! Niko malen mange has! Miro gule daj merdijas! Pirani man pregelijas!

(He comes running back, jumps inside the rectangle, waits. Brief silence. Then, in the distance, hollow sounds of slow, rhythmic drumming, coming closer, getting louder. Janek grabs the chestnut crown and puts it on his head.)

JANEK: The golden toad! She's coming!

(He waits, shivering. The drumming is getting closer. Emerging from the ring of darkness with cautious, cat-like steps comes Aranka. She looks at Janek with a salacious grin.)

ARANKA (*almost whispering*): You're mine.

(Blackout.)

5.

(Lights on the central area. Inspector approaches from the ring of darkness, looks at Janek.)

INSPECTOR: Since you refuse to talk to me I have to form my own opinions of you. Including opinions about what sort of opinion you



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may have of yourself. I think you regard yourself as something higher and better. Correct me if I'm wrong. I'll be glad to accept your corrections. I think you see society as a mill that grinds individuals into sticky subservient flies. Isn't that so? Object, please. Prove me wrong. Give me proof that we're not talking about a dangerous arrogance of a solitary sociopath who has excommunicated himself because the society didn't give him everything that he wanted on a platter. The characteristic of this criminal is that he doesn't hope for, let alone work for things he wants, but demands them, now. And when he doesn't get them he not only feels snubbed but elevates his displeasure into a quasi philosophy. (*Rum-mages among his papers, pulls out a letter, reads.*) "All these young people who, alongside me, strive for results and make plans for the future want to achieve one thing alone: success, and with it a name for themselves. A name in a nameless crowd. They don't seem to realize that in the middle of a depersonalized mass of inferiors there is no name, no individuality, no freedom. To stay outside the crowd means to avoid the danger of being depersonalized, of becoming the grist for this mill..." (*Folds the letter and pushes the papers back in his pocket. Approaches the corpse.*) Depersonalized mass of inferiors. You have invented a completely new term, congratulations. The opposite of inferior is of course superior. But there is a price to pay for the superior's right to remain an individual, isn't there? And this price must be paid by others. With their lives, if necessary. Right? (*Janek remains silent.*) And how would you call a female superior? Superiorina?

(*Inspector disappears into the ring of darkness. Blackout.*)

(*Lights on the central area. Weiner has "come to life" and is sitting on the bench with his shirt open; every so often he tries to kill a mosquito, slapping in turn his chest, his arms, his face. In the background, an occasional flicker of lightning. Selena emerges bare-foot out of darkness, wearing a flimsy bathrobe.*)

SELENA: Mister Wiener.

WEINER (*buttoning up his shirt*): Weiner, Miss, Weiner. (*Appears embarrassed, produces a fake smile.*)



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

SELENA: You make a good target for a thunderbolt, sitting here.

WEINER: It always misses me. Always by an inch.

SELENA (*sits and leans back in the camping chair*): How nice to be able to stretch out.

(*Weiner runs a hungry eye over her body, catches her look, blushes, looks at the sky.*)

WEINER: These storms. They all come as far as the woods over there, give us a bit of thunder and lightning, and a short piss of water, then they are off again, blinking from afar, as if afraid. But they always come back. Looks like we're getting a vile one today. Rakes and shovels will be falling out of the sky.

SELENA: Where is the priest?

WEINER: Afternoon nap. Dreaming of angels. (*Looks at her sharply.*) And Janek, where have you lost him?

SELENA: It would be difficult to lose someone who's already lost. (*Lights a cigarette, offers one to Weiner.*) Smoke?

WEINER: Oh no. But there is no harm in trying, is there? (*Takes a cigarette with a shaking hand, Selena lights it for him.*) I don't suppose it's going to kill me, eh? (*Draws, begins to choke, coughs violently.*)

SELENA: You don't seem to be much of a man, Mr. Weiner.

WEINER: There're other things that make a man. Very much more important, if you ask me.

SELENA (*crossing her legs and uncovering her thighs*): And where do you keep those things?

WEINER (*blushing*): Those things? Well hidden, as they should be.

SELENA: Are you married?

WEINER: I used to be.

SELENA: I don't suppose you get many women out here.

WEINER: It does happen. Not very often, but often enough, I'd say.

SELENA: I like your moustache. Long and thick.

WEINER: Well, I... I... but...

SELENA (*stretches out her left leg and wiggles her toes*): The priest doesn't like my legs.

WEINER: Nor should he. He'll go straight to hell. He shouldn't like any part of you.

SELENA: Well, he does like my boobs.



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WEINER: That I can believe. *(After pause.)* It's all different in the city, isn't it? Men and women, and all that. You're more... free. Is that the right word? I've read about it. About this, how do you say?... About this... sex. We out here have a more common word for it.

SELENA: Let's hear it, then.

WEINER: Oh no. Might be a bit too strong for your city ears.

SELENA: Then I'll close one of them. Tell me now.

WEINER: Well, out here we say, we say... It won't cross my lips.

SELENA: Spell it, then.

WEINER: The first letter is F. You know, F for Friday?

SELENA: You mean F for fuck.

WEINER: I... I never thought you'd... know such a word.

SELENA: Oh come on, Mr. Wiener...

WEINER: Weiner.

SELENA: Shall we switch to first names? Might be easier.

WEINER: Aloys. Aloys Weiner. Here is my hand.

SELENA *(shakes his hand)*: Big fingers. Long and thick.

WEINER *(embarrassed)*: Not city fingers, that's for sure.

(Selena rises, removes her gown, throws it across the back of the chair. She is wearing a bikini. Stretches out in the camping chair.)

SELENA: Not much sun. Perhaps lightning will give me some tan.

WEINER *(trying hard not to stare)*: Not much sun, that's quite true. Last month was better, only two splashes of rain. But now it just keeps on pissing and hissing.

SELENA: Are you embarrassed?

WEINER: Who, me?

SELENA: That's what it looks like.

WEINER: I have seen such things before. It's the priest...

SELENA: He hasn't seen such things before?

WEINER: It's not that. He may think that there is...

SELENA: What? Something going on?

WEINER: Why don't we walk up to my house? No one will disturb us there.

SELENA: Your house? Why?

WEINER: Well I thought... I thought... I'm sorry, but I thought...

SELENA: You thought of what?

WEINER: Nothing.

SELENA: F for Friday?



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

WEINER: I was under the impression that... (*Indicates her body.*) ... that...

SELENA: That I was throwing myself at you?

WEINER: That's the impression I got.

SELENA: Don't you think you should spend some effort on courting before you ask me up to your house?

WEINER: Courting?

SELENA: Don't you know what that means?

WEINER: Of course I know.

SELENA: Well?

WEINER (*scratching his head*): What exactly would you like me to do?

SELENA: The ball is in your court.

WEINER: The ball is in my court? I don't understand.

SELENA: Not very bright, are you, Mr. Wiener?

WEINER: Not as bright as you, that's for sure.

SELENA: Quite dim, in fact.

WEINER: Let's go up to my house.

SELENA: Do you have a clean bed? Fresh sheets? No cobwebs, no dust?

And how often do you take a shower?

WEINER: Shower?

SELENA: Open your mouth and show me your teeth.

WEINER (*in deep distress*): I don't... I just don't...

SELENA: Well?

WEINER (*rising*): I'm... yes, I'm... I'm going to deal with you in my own way. I'm going to... I'm going to grab your leg. (*Takes hold of her foot.*) That's what I'm going to do. You think I don't dare? I don't care about the priest. I don't care if the Almighty himself watches me. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to move my hand up along your leg, all the way up to where you want it to end up, right? You think I don't dare? (*Slowly slides his hand up her leg.*) Here, I've reached the knee. I'm over the knee. I'm getting closer now, closer ...

(*Selena slaps his face.*)

WEINER (*nursing his cheek*): You... you... you...

SELENA: Blockhead!

WEINER: No woman has ever done this to me.

SELENA: Do you think I find you attractive?



The Chestnut Crown, Slovene National Theater Maribor, Slovenia, 1971
Milena Muhic as Selena and Marjan Backo as Weiner
Directed by Branko Gombac





THE CHESTNUT CROWN

WEINER: What's wrong with me? I'm a man!

SELENA: A man with rotten teeth.

(Weiner grabs Selena by the elbow and raises his hand to strike her. The hand remains in the air. He moves away, sinks to the floor in front of the bench, pulls a handkerchief from his pocket, wipes his nose with a trumpeting sound, then dabs at his eyes.)

WEINER: Why... why have you... why have you done this to me? *(He gets to his feet and raises his hand once more.)* I'm a man! Man! Man! *(He stumbles away into darkness.)*

SELENA *(after him)*: Blockhead!

(Priest emerges from the ring of darkness.)

PRIEST: Has he made a pass at you? *(Selena rises, puts on her gown, sits back in the camping chair.)* I should've known. *(Sits on the bench.)* A difficult man. His wife ran away. There were no children. He was blaming her, she was blaming him. Until she had enough, and left. Now he's like this. A passing skirt is enough to send him into a spin. He doesn't believe in God. God? – he says. But twice I caught him in the church, raising his fist at the altar, shouting: Give us a baby, just one little baby! Then he began to breed frogs. This year, heaven be praised, he switched to chickens. *(Rises.)* Rain's on the way. *(Looks at her.)* Aren't you cold, in this?

(Priest walks into the ring of darkness. Blackout.)

6.

(Lights on the central area. Weiner is a "corpse" again, arraigned as before. Janek sits on the floor. Inspector approaches from the ring of darkness.)

INSPECTOR: In most cases the victim and the murderer know each other. Often they are closely connected. No doubt you and Weiner were closely connected as well. Mutual creditors, mutual debtors. With secrets, which, however, you kept to yourselves. Everyone



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owes us something, and we all owe something to others. But sooner or later an enraged creditor decides to collect the debt. And here things can go horribly wrong. The whole thing can end up far worse than intended. Right?

JANEK: Na janav ko dad mro has! Niko malen mange has! Miro gule daj merdijas! Pirani man pregelijas!

INSPECTOR: Gypsy, I presume. At any rate something that isn't taught at language schools. Forgive me therefore if I don't know what you're trying to tell me. Or perhaps I do. Perhaps in a roundabout way you're trying to tell me that we should look for reasons for the irksome presence of this corpse in the fact that you grew up in a different world. Will you help me? Of course you won't. I'll have to help myself. Just as well I did half of my work before coming here. (*Rummages among his papers, pulls out a letter.*) I'm not going to use the word Roma. I'll use the word Gypsy, like everyone else in these parts. Here I have notes of the priest's opinion of the dominant traits of your race. (*Reads.*) "The Gypsy does not control his nature, he continuously sabotages his aims as well as his principles. He does that spontaneously, without bad intentions. When he promises to come and do a job of work in the morning he means it. But the following morning he may not come. Much has happened in the meantime. The sun went down, the moon crossed the sky, the sun rose again, the wind scattered the clouds. And the Gypsy thinks with the weather, he moves with nature. His actions depend on chance, on flashes of intuitive insight. There isn't a thing in the world that a Gypsy could embrace permanently or bring to a conclusion. (*Folds the letter and puts it away.*) With one exception. Murder.

(*Blackout.*)

(*Lights on the central area. Weiner, who has "come alive" again, is crouching by the chicken coop.*)

WEINER: What beautiful eggs you are! What beautiful chickens are growing inside you! Shall I bring you some brandy, little chicks? How many more pricks before you're out? What will you say? I know. You'll say –

JANEK (*who has sneaked up behind him*): Cockadoodledoo!



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

WEINER (*recovering from shock, rising*): It's you, Janek Banek.

JANEK: I thought it was time for a short visit.

WEINER: Short? I haven't seen you for months.

JANEK (*looks at the chicken coop*): What are you breeding? Bantam-cocks? Dragons?

WEINER: Many different things. How are you?

JANEK: I don't really know. And you?

WEINER: I've discovered something very important.

JANEK: That chicken came before the egg?

WEINER: That I was born through no fault of my own!

JANEK: Good. I hope the culprit is safely behind bars.

WEINER: I'm not trying to be funny, and let the Devil strike me right now. Look – (*Pulls a large clock from under the bed.*) – this one... and this one – (*Pulls a watch from his pocket.*) – these two have opened my eyes. The wall-clock was always in perfect working order, the best clock in the world, if you ask me. But this one, my pocket watch, never knew what time it was; it ticked away, but it couldn't make up its mind, an old Russian iron piece of shit. One day, before going to town, I pull it out to adjust it. It was dead, of course. So I look at the wall-clock to see the time, and – strike me dead – the wall-clock is showing half past eleven. But my watch, too, is showing half past eleven! But the watch didn't go, it was dead.

JANEK: It stopped at half past eleven the night before, and you wanted to wind it up twelve hours later.

WEINER: You've got a very clever head on you, boy. But look: only a week later the very same thing happens to me. Only this time it's a quarter to twelve. And a few days ago the same thing happens for the third time, this time exactly at twelve! In less than two weeks, my boy, it happened *three* times that I reached for my watch *exactly* twelve hours after it had stopped!

JANEK (*pacing about*): How very interesting.

WEINER: Let me tell you what happened yesterday. I was winding up this Russian iron piece of shit, when there was a twang inside it, and it was gone. Broken spring. A second later there came a twang from this wall-clock, and it, too, was suddenly broken, gone forever.

JANEK: A case of collusion, it seems.

WEINER: And now look at this. The French emperor Charles the Great died in 814 A. D.

JANEK: No. Really?



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WEINER: But that is also the number of the lock on my bicycle!

JANEK: A historical conspiracy!

WEINER: *And the number of the postal district in which I used to live!*

JANEK: A geographical conspiracy!

WEINER: And last but not least: 814 is the date of my birth! Fourteenth eighth. Now what do you say about that?

JANEK: Nothing at all.

WEINER: You think I'm joking, eh? Let me show you something else.

(He pulls a piece of cardboard from under the bed. Holds it up. It is a simple drawing of an ovum surrounded by spermatozoa.) This here, in the middle, is an egg. A female egg. And all these are little tadpoles that shoot out of you when you... when you... Millions of tadpoles. But out of these millions only one succeeds in fertilizing the egg. Only one! So what I'm asking myself is this: how is it possible that out of these millions of little wiggles it was precisely the one that carried me which succeeded? Why am I not my brother? Why am I not someone else? *(Looks at Janek as though he had made a momentous discovery.)*

JANEK *(after pause)*: What about death?

WEINER *(after pause)*: I'm talking about life. Is something wrong? Are you sick?

JANEK: Sick is everything that I see, that I smell, that I touch. Sick is everything that's behind the horizon, invisible, and everything that's inside me, so close it's too close.

WEINER *(after pause)*: I don't know what to say.

JANEK: Selena tells me you propositioned her.

WEINER: Your woman? Couldn't care less about her. And I'm not saying that to offend you.

JANEK: She isn't my woman.

WEINER: Strange creature.

JANEK: She finds you interesting.

WEINER: I could see that.

JANEK: Well?

WEINER: I make a point of avoiding women like that. No offence. Besides, she's your woman. And I respect that.

JANEK: She-isn't-my-woman!

WEINER: Why did you invite her, then?

JANEK: She invited herself.

WEINER: She's staying with you at the vicarage.



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

JANEK: We're in separate rooms.

WEINER: But is there... I mean... nothing between you?

JANEK: A healthy mixture of contempt, mistrust and impatience.

WEINER (*confused*): Strange woman. Strange thing. (*Looks at Janek.*)

One of those who lead you on and then slap your face?

JANEK: Dozens of cats are whining inside her belly, hungry for milk.

WEINER: No. She's yours.

JANEK: Don't be a fool. You need a woman. Go and tell her that the bomb is going to fall anyway, so why not get down to it while there is still time?

WEINER (*swallows*): Janek... let's leave it. I've got a very good plum brandy. Home-made. Sit down, I'll be back. (*Hurries off into darkness.*)

JANEK (*pacing about*): Small windows. Dirty panes. Sorry, sun, you're not wanted here. Iron bed. Does it creak? (*Tries the bed. It creaks.*) Pots. Pans. Breadcrumbs. Shoes, socks, nails, wood shavings. Chicken shit. Frogs and lizards. Rats and mice. Pachydermatous non-ruminant ungulates of aquatic habits. Aquarium. Zoo. Two hundred miles of cobwebs. Spiders, spiders, spiders...

WEINER (*returns with a bottle*): There isn't much.

JANEK: Weiner! Why did your wife run away?

WEINER: Janek, certain things had better be left alone.

JANEK: Rumor has it that you regularly beat her with a piece of firewood.

WEINER (*drinks from the bottle, offers it to Janek, who declines*): What you hear in the village isn't worth a monkey's ass.

JANEK: An old woman, Miss whats-her-name, says that you can't get it up.

WEINER: Oh yes? Has she shown you her cloven hoof?

JANEK: Old Pelz was saying in the pub the other day that your thingamadinghy had been cut off while you were still a boy.

WEINER: Him! He should've kicked the bucket years ago!

JANEK: The village doesn't seem to have much respect for you.

WEINER: Wait till you hear how much respect I've got for the village.

JANEK: You give yourself airs, they say, calling peasants a heap of dung.

WEINER: The more you dig in it, the more it stinks.

JANEK: Your house, they say, is about to collapse.

WEINER: It hasn't collapsed yet.

JANEK: They say you never take a bath.

WEINER: And they bathe every day. In bilge water!

JANEK: It seems they'd like to see the back of you.



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WEINER. Janek, let me tell you: if there is one normal man in this village, then it's me. There're many things I could tell you about these peasants, but I don't want to. As for the priest, God bless his soul, he is, you won't believe it, he's drinking. (*Takes a swig from the bottle.*) So am I, but I'm not a priest. As for you, things are being said about you, too, you know. That you and your mother – the priest thank heavens doesn't know – that you and your mother –

JANEK (*grabs a chair, lifts it above his head*): Weiner!

WEINER: Kill me. Come on. Kill me. What's the matter? Are you afraid?

JANEK: Never again, Weiner, must you mention anything as ridiculous as that!

WEINER: All I'm saying –

(*Aranka emerges from the ring of darkness.*)

ARANKA: Oh St. Mary, Janek! (*Bursts into tears, sinks to her knees.*) Don't! Please.

JANEK (*puts the chair down*): Are you following me?

ARANKA: I didn't know you were here.

JANEK: Why did you come, then?

ARANKA: I do the house for him. He has no one.

JANEK: No one except you?

ARANKA (*half whispering*): He's paying for your schooling.

JANEK: Money stopped coming a year ago. Then I got a scholarship.

ARANKA: Yes, but he was paying before –

JANEK: And you still haven't paid it off?

ARANKA: He is so alone –

JANEK: Oh dear! So you're taking care of him? Doing what? Feeding his frogs? Lizards? Washing his underpants? Sweeping out the chicken shit?

ARANKA: Oh Janek...

JANEK: "Oh Janek, oh Janek!" (*Goes to Weiner, grins at him.*) "Oh Janek, oh Janek!"

(*Abruptly turns and walks into the ring of darkness.*)

ARANKA: Aloys, you promised you wouldn't quarrel with him.

WEINER (*after pause*): Shut up.

ARANKA: You must've told him something to make him so angry!



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

WEINER: Yes! I called him a motherfucker!

ARANKA: Alooooooooooys!

WEINER: I'm nobody's Alooooooooooys!

ARANKA: You didn't tell him about us, did you?

WEINER (*after pause*): Tell him what? That we both screwed you? That you lied to him, and lied to me? You Gypsy slut! You'd suck my blood out if I let you. Money for him, food for you – I'm surprised I still have my skin on. And only because you swore, remember, swore on your knees *and* before a cross that you'd bear me a son. I swear I'll give you a son, Aloys, you said before God, I swear, Aloys – don't ever call me that again – never again! And what have you given me after five years? Not a piece of chicken shit!

ARANKA: Aloys...

WEINER: Weiner, for you. From now on it's Weiner. *Mister Weiner!* Do you hear? (*He sinks to his knees, buries his face in his hands.*)

ARANKA (*quietly*): Would you like me to sweep the floor? Or shall I do the washing first? (*Looks around.*) I'll sweep the floor.

(Weiner doesn't answer. Aranka puts down the basket she has been clutching, goes into the ring of darkness and comes back with a broom. She starts to sweep, looking at Weiner from time to time. Weiner looks up and watches her. Gets to his feet.)

WEINER: I'm sorry, Aranka.

ARANKA: I'm not angry.

WEINER: I'm not usually so rough. You know that.

ARANKA: Did you tell him about us?

WEINER: No.

ARANKA (*relieved*): I was so afraid.

WEINER: But something is true, and let the Devil strike me right now.

Five years have passed, and you have nothing to show for it.

ARANKA: Suppose it isn't me...

WEINER: Don't be stupid! Your son has been pumping seed into you longer than I. And what has grown? Not a weed.

ARANKA: You had so many women, and it was always like this –

WEINER: Because-all-women-are-barren!

ARANKA: It may still happen. Perhaps very soon –

WEINER: Soon? You want to go on milking me? Oh no! Weiner may be naive, but he is not stupid.



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ARANKA: Aloys...

WEINER: I know what I'll do. I'll find myself a woman. A real one. Not a dry piece of dung. A woman that's got juice oozing out of every pore of her body.

ARANKA: Aloys...

WEINER: Strike me dead!

(He wrestles the broom from her hands, throws it on the floor, grabs her basket, picks up the broom and pushes both into her hands, then propels her towards the ring of darkness.)

ARANKA: Alooooooooooys!

(He pushes her out of the area of light. She keeps calling his name and crying.)

WEINER: I'm going to jump on your belly!

(Aranka's crying fades. Weiner paces up and down. He bends down and pulls a battered suitcase from under the bed. He opens it and carefully takes out a white shirt. He takes off the crumpled shirt he is wearing and starts to put on the white one.)

WEINER: F for Friday, she said. Well, she's going to get it. And if she keeps saying no, I'll twist her neck and squash her city ass – *(Pulls a pair of boots from under the bed.)* – with one of these boots! *(Sits on the bed and starts to put on the boots.)*

(He rises and twists his walrus moustache. Stares vacantly ahead. Staggeres to the bed, collapses on it, buries his face in his hands. Far away, the church clock delivers four strikes. Weiner bends down and starts to take off his boots. Stares ahead.)

ARANKA *(in darkness, calling)*: Aloys... Aloys...

WEINER: Yeah, what?

(Aranka slowly emerges from the ring of darkness, goes down on her knees and takes Weiner's hand.)



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

ARANKA: I must tell you something.

WEINER: Everything's been said.

ARANKA: Something beautiful!

WEINER: Stop it.

ARANKA: Something glad! *(Takes his hand and puts it on her tummy.)*

Don't you feel it?

WEINER: What, your tummy?

ARANKA: I've got him, Aloys! I've got him!

WEINER *(uneasy)*: Got what?

ARANKA: A little one! A little son for you!

WEINER *(grabs her and pulls her up)*: Why do you tell me now?

ARANKA: I didn't know before! It wasn't there before!

WEINER: How can it be there now?

ARANKA: It moved! I can feel it moving.

WEINER: If you're lying I'll drive my breadknife through your heart.

ARANKA *(bursting into tears)*: I've got him, Aloys! I've got him!

WEINER: Moving, is he? *(He is seized by a wild laughter.)* He is moving!

(Pulls Aranka to her feet and starts to dance with her.) He's moving!

Thank you, God! You just got yourself a fresh believer. At least for a day. *(Stops dancing, propels Aranka to the bed, makes her sit down, kneels before her.)* Don't move. I want to watch you.

(Aranka produces a self-complacent laugh. She takes off her shawl and frees her luxuriant raven hair.)

WEINER: Strike me dead, woman! You are beautiful.

(Blackout.)



The Chestnut Crown, Slovene National Theater Maribor, Slovenia, 1971
Angela Jankova as Aranka
Directed by Branko Gombac



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

Act Two

7.

(Weiner is lying on the iron bed with his left foot on the floor. Janek is sitting cross-legged nearby, in the same posture as at the start of the play. Inspector approaches from the ring of darkness and stops.)

INSPECTOR: Guess what: I've been to see your professor. And he told me more about you than I expected. "This university, professor, stinks, I don't want to be documented." That's what you told him when you came for an exam and informed him that you weren't going to answer his questions. He didn't throw you out, as I would've done, he was kind to you. Remember his words? *(Janek doesn't respond.)* Of course not. How could you, since your head was crammed with other thoughts. *(Pulls a letter from among his papers, reads.)* "You're an independent young man, a rebellious one, which I like. But I do wish you had a more realistic view of the world. You'll have to eat, some day you'll have a family ... do you want to chuck it all in? What are you going to do? Sell newspapers on the street corner? Why not step over this little hurdle? With a degree in your pocket you can indulge in such thoughts to your heart's delight. Don't let emotions force you to make wrong decisions." *(Folds the letter, stuffs papers back in his pocket.)* That's what your professor told you. But you didn't listen. The call of blood was stronger than your desire to escape this archaic world, to grow up, step out of darkness into light. Why? Everybody was kind to you, they all wanted to help you, in three more years you could be doing my job, going around asking questions I'm now asking you. You



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were on your way to becoming one of us – what was it that pulled you back? What sort of a world would this be, if we all lived in the darkness in which you found refuge?

(Stares at Janek for five seconds. Straightens up and disappears into the ring of darkness. Blackout.)

(Lights on the central area. Janek is sitting on the bench and with a pocket knife carving figures into a long piece of wood. Selena, wearing her gown, emerges from the ring of darkness, sits on the bench, lights a cigarette.)

SELENA: May I ask you something?

JANEK: If you first ask me if you may ask me something, you're already asking me something, so I'll have to answer two questions.

SELENA: Why're you so horrible?

JANEK: Is that the question? The answer is: because it makes me happy.

SELENA: How did the visit to your mother end the other day? *(Pause.)*
On top of her?

JANEK: Has your head ever felt the sobering touch of a piece of wood?
(Calms down.) Wherever I end up, it won't be on top of you.

(Returns to whittling. Selena rises to go.)

JANEK: Wait.

SELENA: Why?

JANEK *(rising)*: Because I'd like to recite you a dirty little poem. *(He bows.)* Let's go to the city, says the first devil. What shall we do there, says the second devil. Look for my mother, says the first devil. What shall we do with her, says the second devil. Screw her to death, says the first devil.

(Approaches Selena and tries to kiss her on the forehead. She grabs him and draws him into her arms, trying to kiss him on the lips. He pushes her away, and down on the floor. He returns to the bench, sits, resumes whittling.)

SELENA: You're so...



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JANEK: What?

SELENA: Rough.

JANEK: I'll cut my throat.

SELENA: I like it when you're rough.

JANEK: Shall I rough you up properly, then?

SELENA: I'm ready.

JANEK: What would you say if I told you that you don't come from a respectable middle-class family? You come from the bottom, like me. Your father is a farm hand, and your mother a little woman selling spinach at the local market. (*Selena, embarrassed, looks away.*) Some background!

SELENA: Why did you ask me to come, if you hate me so?

JANEK: I don't hate you. I just feel sorry for you. Isn't it hard, going through life as a fraud?

SELENA: You don't understand a thing. Not a thing.

JANEK: You're right. I don't. Do you ever dream?

SELENA: You couldn't care less if I dream or not.

JANEK: I dream very often. Last night I woke up in a strange country, and there, in front of me, stood a giant obelisk, made of black stone. It glittered like... it glittered like... And as I looked up to its pyramid, I saw in the sky above it the most terrifying sight: two planets, two earths, next to each other. The sky behind them was the color of blood. Then, suddenly, it all vanished. And what I saw instead was a giant ape, licking a bone. Sitting beside the ape was my mother.

SELENA (*reaching out*): Come here.

JANEK: Pull that gown over your knees.

SELENA: Does the sight of my knees bother you?

JANEK: Yes, it bothers me! All right?

SELENA: I remember days when the sight of my entire body didn't bother you.

JANEK: You're free to remember whatever you want.

ELENA: You're sick.

JANEK: Yes, I'm sick! Not because I saw something terrible behind the woodshed when I was little, but because my pecker was gobbled up by my mother, and now I can't get it back so that other women could have a go at it. You, for example.

SELENA (*matter-of-factly*): Shall I make you some coffee?

JANEK: Oh, she's so cool! But inside she's like a boiling volcano! When she erupts, her wrath will drown all the men in the world.



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SELENA: All except you.

JANEK: Go and see Weiner, he'll see to your needs. You're fertile, bear him a child, save his life.

SELENA: Come here and promise me something.

JANEK: What?

SELENA: That you'll touch me.

JANEK: With two fingers or one?

SELENA: Touch! All over!

JANEK (*after pause, quietly*): I can't.

SELENA (*comes closer, gently takes his hand*): Try.

JANEK (*jerks his hand away*): Who gives you the right to be gentle with me? Who? She alone has the right to touch me like that!

(Selena turns and quickly walks into the ring of darkness.)

JANEK: Don't... Come back... (*Sinks to the ground, strikes at it with his fist.*) Woman!... Woman!... Woman!...

(Blackout.)

8.

(Lights on the central area. Inspector emerges from the ring of darkness with a sheaf of papers in his hand.)

INSPECTOR: Your well-endowed lover friend, in these letters signed as "eternally yours," has reduced the notion of eternity to a more manageable time period. During a friendly chat I had with her she indicated that she now regrets having wasted so much energy on your relationship. Which was very intense, no doubt about that. At least on her side. Maybe less so on yours. In other words, we're back where we should've remained all along. Cherchez la femme. (*Unfolds a letter, reads.*) "Your face is unusual, even startling, it hits one like a sharp blow. As a child you must have been very ugly. Traces of that ugliness can still be seen behind your expression. But suffering has put a mask on your face, and this mask is beautiful, people say, strikingly beautiful. This mask has the features of hatred – intense, criminal hatred. I think your face is frightening rather than beautiful –"



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

JANEK (*rises*): This letter was addressed to me.

INSPECTOR: Oh, you're not mute! Bravo!

JANEK: You can only confiscate personal correspondence with a warrant. Do you have it?

INSPECTOR: I can issue one to myself.

JANEK: No you can't, and you know that. Besides, I've burned all my letters – where did you get something that no longer exists?

INSPECTOR: A great mystery. Even greater than the circumstances of the murder we're investigating. But now, together, we're bound to make headway, don't you think? Together we will get to the bottom of this in no time at all.

JANEK: There're things that have no bottom.

INSPECTOR: You mean things in the past? (*Rummages among his papers, unfolds a letter, reads.*) "If I knew more details about your past I could explain why you may not be responsible for some of your actions. You're a man of the senses, stuck in the past to which your reason has no access at all. You were created by events. Nothing is more important for our mind-set than events in childhood." (*Folds the letter, puts it away.*) What does she study, this friend of yours? Psychology?

JANEK: You know nothing...

INSPECTOR: Which I freely admit. So why don't you help me? I don't want you to be falsely accused.

JANEK: I found her beautiful. Looking at her I felt... as if I had won a contest. As if I had been chosen to receive a special blessing.

INSPECTOR: I understand.

JANEK: She spoke to me simply, openly. As though we had known each other for years. She seemed sincere, trustworthy. I was lonely, the city was so impersonal.

INSPECTOR: So it is, for all of us.

JANEK: She would visit me. She'd spend whole afternoons in my room. As soon as she came she would take off her clothes and walk around naked. She'd lounge about in various poses, read or talk to me. And all the time I was forced to stare at her naked body. I was hugely excited...

INSPECTOR: Who wouldn't be?

JANEK: But after a week... it passed. I grew used to seeing her naked. Then she said it was time for me to get used to my own nakedness. And to her seeing me.



The Chestnut Crown, Gledalisce cez cesto, Kranj, Slovenia, 1989
Igor Pavlovic as Janek and Kondi Pizorn as Weiner
Directed by Sreco Spik



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

INSPECTOR: So?

JANEK: Again we would spend whole afternoons in my room. Naked. Watching each other. Then she said the time had come to... to... And... we did it. It was over before it began.

INSPECTOR: Oh dear.

JANEK: I wanted to, I really did, but something... I don't know what... I crawled into a corner and started to shiver. I liked her, I liked her very, very much, but... she wasn't the right one.

INSPECTOR: Not the right one?

JANEK: No.

INSPECTOR: Not the first one. The first and only one. The one you can't escape. The one who brought you back and pressed an ax in your hands to cut down the chestnut tree. And then the breadknife, to stab the man who was in your way. Why was he in your way?

JANEK: She wouldn't let go. She followed me. Followed me here. With an excuse she wanted to help me.

INSPECTOR (*unfolds a letter, reads*): "There is only one way. Your strange behavior, the hatred you carry inside you, is caused by the fear of sex. All I can suggest is: let's try again. Make an effort, clench your teeth and hold out till the end. Perhaps, with me, you'll find that the fear you first felt with your mother has no basis." (*Folds the letter and puts it away.*) She really wanted you, didn't she?

(Janek stares at the floor. He sinks to his knees.)

INSPECTOR: Are we getting closer?

JANEK (*staring into the ring of darkness*): Once again, on the eve of another night, wind smells of faraway places. But I haven't even reached the boughs of the chestnut trees. To this lonely, secret house I come to pray, although the altar is empty, although there are no saints, no angels, no virgins, only a confessional, where, on my knees, I wait for a shadow at least to approach from the woods to hear my confession, to hear that I sinned because I did not believe the roots of the chestnut trees to be eternal, and that grass lives the way we do, loving, withering, dying; and because, above all, I did not believe that the sun can explode and split in two smaller suns which, deep in space, can and will keep on shining. There is no shadow to hear me. I'm confessing to myself under the



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boughs of green chestnut trees. Once again, on the eve of another night, the wind, which alone has grass and woods in its eyes, whispers of faraway places...

(Blackout.)

9.

(Lights on the central area. Weiner has "come alive" again and is polishing his boots. He puts them on his bare feet, walks around, testing the step. Janek approaches from the ring of darkness. Weiner sees him and jumps.)

WEINER: I never heard any knocking.

JANEK: Neither did I.

WEINER: I was just cleaning my boots. Have to go to town. *(Sits on the bed and bends down to take them off.)*

JANEK: It's July.

WEINER: I like my step to be firm.

JANEK: On the way here I met a black cat.

WEINER: Cats are horrible things.

JANEK: She followed me to the house.

WEINER: As I said...

JANEK: She's sitting in front of the door. Shall I let her in? *(Turns towards the ring of darkness.)* She's bigger than a sheep dog.

WEINER: Wait! *(Walks into the ring of darkness, returns.)* There is no cat.

JANEK: It must've climbed under the roof. Suddenly, before you know it, she'll be sitting on you neck, scratching away like mad.

WEINER: Don't let her kill my chickens!

(He pushes the boots under the bed and walks into the ring of darkness. Returns with a loaf of bread and a big breadknife. Puts both on the bed.)

WEINER: Cut yourself a slice. It's home-made.

JANEK *(picks up the knife)*: Would you like me to kill the cat?

WEINER: Come on. Try some of my bread.

JANEK: When I was little my Dad and I used to sleep in the woods quite often. One morning, when I woke up, I found my Dad lying beside me. With a big knife sticking out of his throat.



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

WEINER: Shall we go out for a while? Get some fresh air?

JANEK. Tell me, Weiner. How was it when you went with a woman?

I mean for the first time.

WEINER: You know the feeling.

JANEK: Was it good?

WEINER. Can't say it wasn't.

JANEK: Not in my case.

WEINER: Oh?

JANEK: I remember the night it happened. There was a full moon, silky, silvery light among trees. Dampness was seeping up from the valley floor, and I could hear a fox barking in the woods. I could feel the night breeze, causing mysterious rustling in the bushes, I could feel the bristling of the fox's coat. I could feel the soft moss under its paws, I could smell the bark of trees, the pine-needles, the ferns, the warm feathers of night birds. And my skin, my sweat. Then a strange cold swept over me. I shivered. I felt a sudden desire to flee to the safety of a den, to draw, like an animal, close to a warm fire. The desire took me home, to my mother's hut. The moon had painted bright stripes on the floor. And there, in the corner, criss-crossed with shadows and stripes, lay a naked body, breathing. I could feel that the cold had followed me, it was with me in the house. Then, suddenly, cold turned to fear. The desire to crawl into a den became unbearable. I could feel the smoothness of the skin. And warmth! There it was, the entrance to my den was right there, before me, and I plunged in like a fugitive on the run. With a cry of relief that must have been heard miles away. Later, when the cramp was over, I felt alone. Cold returned. I could see the moon-shine drawing away from my naked body. I smelled. I smelled so strangely. I felt colder than ever before.

WEINER (*not quite knowing how to react to this*): Terrible. Terrible.

JANEK: Later that night a violent storm passed overhead. Wind. Thunder. I could feel that something inside me had rotted, like autumn leaves. I felt betrayed. The next morning I found her sitting beside me, silent, afraid. She reached out to comfort me. I staggered from the hut and ran through the woods. It was raining. Early morning, and it was raining. I looked up, hoping the rain would wash me, cleanse me. (*Goes to the edge of darkness, stares into it.*)

WEINER: Much better to forget it...



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JANEK: Look at the horizon. Thy sky's so bright!

WEINER: Memories are like open wounds...

JANEK: I have no wounds. I've burned out. Whatever I did in the past three years was no more than smoke. Black smoke, rising from the scene of my self-immolation. (*Turns around, strikes at his chest.*) What's the point in having a fire in one's heart? What does it produce? Smoke. Which then rises and disappears in the darkness of the universe. Up there. Down there. Everywhere. Nowhere.

WEINER: Janek...

JANEK (*goes back to the edge of darkness*): Look how bright the sky is! (*Turns around.*) Do you believe in signs, Weiner?

WEINER: No, I don't.

JANEK. Neither do I. But look at that sky. All lit up, but full of rotting leaves. (*Sits down and stares ahead.*) There's always been autumn in my heart. Somewhere here, above my stomach. A desire to burn, and burn out fast.

WEINER (*rising*): I was about to go and see the priest when you came –

JANEK: Sit down, Weiner.

WEINER: Don't be difficult, Janek.

JANEK (*gets up and approaches him*): Hit me, Weiner. Go on, hit me.

WEINER: My dear boy –

JANEK: Hit me, or I'm going to hit you.

WEINER: No you won't –

(Janek hits Weiner heavily on the jaw. Weiner instinctively reacts, hits Janek in the face and sends him reeling.)

WEINER: Janek, I didn't want to – (*Reaches out to touch him.*)

JANEK: Away from me! Now, Weiner, all bonds between us have been cut. We're friends no longer. Never again.

WEINER: What's come over you?

JANEK (*grabs the breadknife and makes a threatening gesture*): Sit down, Weiner. Sit down. Sit!

(Weiner staggers back and sits on the wooden chair.)

JANEK: I've discovered that you're a swine. So from now on I'm calling you Swiner.



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

WEINER: I don't mind.

JANEK: What's the matter? Are you hot? If you're hot, take your shirt off. I won't stare at your sunken ribs. Is there anything you want? Glass of water, maybe? Or a slice of your home-made bread?

WEINER: Listen...

JANEK: Shut up! (*Points the breadknife at him.*) Who asked you to pay for my schooling?

WEINER: Your mother.

JANEK: Do you always part with your money at the drop of a hat?

WEINER: Well, she...

JANEK: Or was it the skirt that she dropped?

WEINER: She washed my clothes, strike me dead. Swept the house. Took care of the garden.

JANEK: Go on.

WEINER: This is leading nowhere –

JANEK: What else did she do for you?

WEINER: Janek –

JANEK: Don't janek me, Swiner. Did she or did she not drop her skirt for you?

WEINER: I wouldn't advise you to –

JANEK: Do you deny it?

WEINER: That's a lie! And I know where you got it from.

JANEK (*turning away, quietly*): She told me herself.

WEINER (*leaning forward*): She told you herself? Stupid woman.

JANEK: Do you still deny it?

WEINER: If she told you herself, strike me dead, I see no reason to keep her out of the shit.

JANEK: It's you who's in the shit.

WEINER: I'm clean.

JANEK: As clean as my foot.

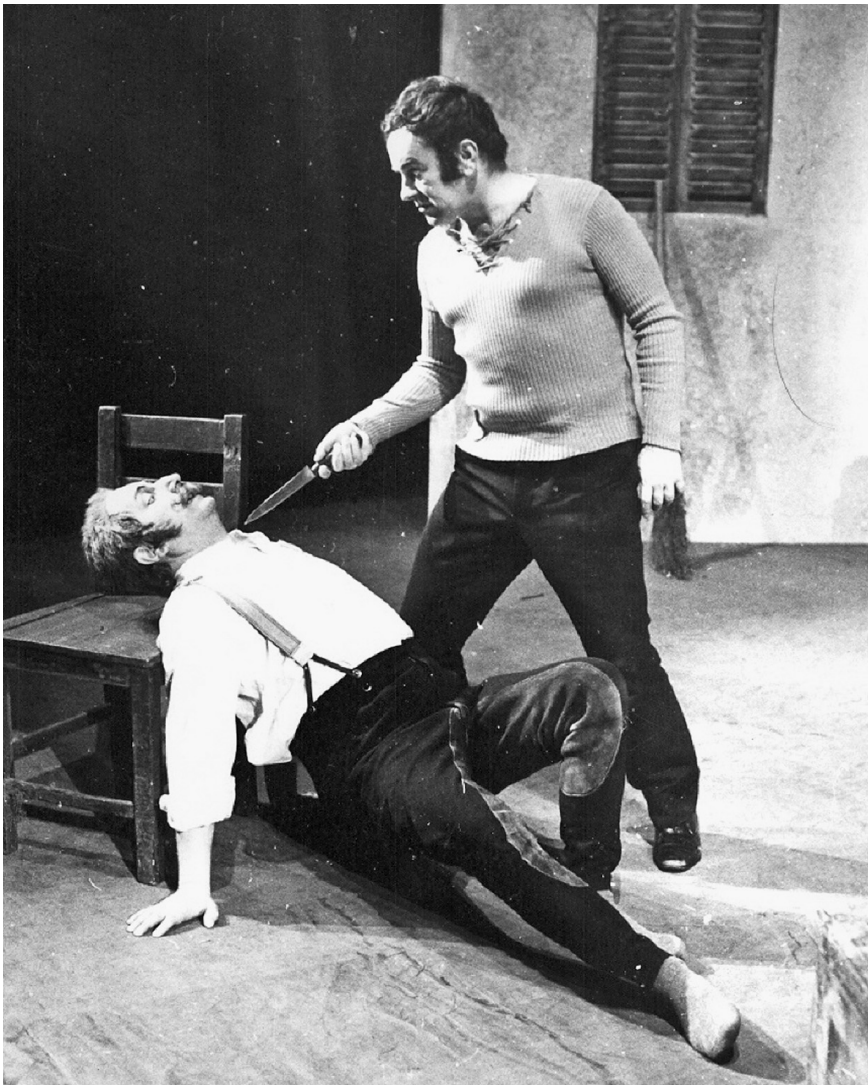
WEINER: How dare you reproach me? Do you know how much money I paid for you?

JANEK: You're worse than the peasants you hate so much. They're superstitious, but you're chicken-mad and frog-crazy!

WEINER: And you're a Gypsy! There!

JANEK: Lizards, chickens, frogs! The only thing you ever brought to life.

WEINER: And you? Why have you come back? Because they kicked you out. You weren't good enough.



The Chestnut Crown, Slovene National Theater Maribor, Slovenia, 1971
Marjan Backo as Weiner and Volodja Peer as Janek
Directed by Branko Gombac





THE CHESTNUT CROWN

JANEK: Even a bitch like Selena wouldn't have you. She would fuck with a nest of hornets, but she wouldn't have you.

WEINER: Strike me dead, the money I had to part with so you'd turn into a human being! And what do I see? A scraggy-haired good-for-nothing.

JANEK: The money wasn't wasted – you paid a whore with it.

WEINER (*raising his hand*): Don't you say that about her!

JANEK: Are you defending her? (*Makes a threatening gesture with the breadknife.*) You are defending her? You have no right to do that, Weiner Swiner. I alone have the right to defend her. Because she's mine. She's never been yours. You were stealing her. Because your sperm is no good, you wanted everything. Chickens, for God's sake! (*Kicks at the coop, which splinters.*) Where was it, where did you have her, on this bed, on this filthy bed? (*Kicks at the bed, slashes at the bedspread.*) But what you wanted so much you haven't got. No one will bear your name when you die.

WEINER: I'm going to have a son.

JANEK: Oh yeah? With one of your chickens?

WEINER: With your mother. *My* son.

JANEK (*after a long pause*): With my mother.

WEINER: She told me yesterday.

JANEK (*absentmindedly*): She told you yesterday.

WEINER: I didn't want to hurt you, but you've left me no choice.

JANEK: I don't want to hurt you either, but there is no baby.

WEINER: There is, because she told me.

JANEK: She lied.

WEINER: Not about a thing like that.

JANEK: Where do babies grow? In gall-bladders? In the liver? In the gut? They grow in wombs, Weiner. That means there is no baby. My mother's womb was surgically removed shortly after my birth. Didn't she tell you?

(*Weiner staggers to the bed, collapses on it, sinks into himself.*)

JANEK: There is no baby. (*Quietly, as if trying to convince himself.*) There can't be. There is no womb, so there can't be a baby.

(*Weiner groans. Janek looks at him. Throws the breadknife on the bed and walks into the ring of darkness.*)



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(Weiner stares vacantly for a few seconds. Suddenly he looks very old, deadly tired. He reaches under the bed and pulls out his boots. He starts putting them on. His gestures, at first hesitant and careful, but increasingly certain, turn into a special ritual. With his boots on, he rises and walks around the bed as if testing the firmness of his step. He picks up the knife and the bread, cuts himself a slice, chews absentmindedly. He pushes the loaf under the bed and puts the breadknife on the bedspread. Walks to the edge of darkness and stares emptily into nothingness. He walks along the edge of darkness, stops, stares again. Returns to the bed and sits down. Picks up the knife to move it away a little. As if on second thought, he picks up the knife again and with both hands drives it into his stomach. As he groans, Janek emerges from the ring of darkness with the chestnut crown on his head. He stops, stares at Weiner.)

JANEK: Weiner!

(Janek pulls the knife from Weiner's stomach. Weiner's body slowly topples back on the bed and assumes the position of the "corpse" at the start of the play.)

JANEK *(with a mixture of pleading and reproach)*: Weiner...

(He looks at the knife in his hand. Blackout.)

10.

(Lights on the central area. The breadknife is lying on Weiner's chest, as at the start of the play. Janek is sitting on the floor not far away. Priest emerges from the ring of darkness, stops, looks at Janek.)

PRIEST: Would you like to eat something? *(There is no reply.)* Janek.

JANEK: I'm not hungry.

PRIEST *(after pause)*: Why don't you lie down? You've been sitting up all night. *(There is no reaction.)* If there's anything I can do for you...

JANEK: Leave me alone.



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

PRIEST: I've always been your friend. Please don't forget that.

JANEK: You asked me if there was anything you could do for me.

PRIEST: From the bottom of my heart.

JANEK: Leave me alone.

PRIEST: Janek...

JANEK (*at the top of his voice*): Leave-me-alone!

(Priest turns and walks with injured dignity into the ring of darkness. Janek remains sitting. Then he rises, approaches the bed, carefully takes the chestnut crown off Weiner's head and puts it on his own head. He spreads his arms, assumes a position for dancing.)

JANEK: Me-la-lo! Here I am, your son without reason! Music!

(He waits and listens. Silence. He removes the chestnut crown and puts it back on Weiner's head. Stares at Weiner for three seconds. Sits down and sinks into himself. Inspector emerges from the ring of darkness. A moment later he is followed, from different directions, by Priest, Selena and Aranka.)

INSPECTOR: I came at nine in the morning. It's five in the afternoon. The body will have been taken to a mortuary. We don't smell very nice on our way to another world. That's why we're going to wrap this thing up. Right?

JANEK: Have you ever looked at your face in the mirror?

INSPECTOR (*confused*): What?

JANEK (*more to himself than to anyone else*): I never did. Not until last night. All of a sudden I felt I ought to see my face. But as I looked in the mirror, I saw not my face but... a big black obelisk. It glittered like... it glittered like... (*Unable to find the right word, he groans with frustration.*) ... aaaaahrr!... it glittered like... it glit... glit... (*Choking, then breathing heavily.*) ... up there, in the sky, I saw two planets. Very close to each other. Two earths. And I think that... I may have been born on the wrong one.

INSPECTOR: Have you ever considered the possibility that you may be mad?

JANEK (*facing Priest, Selena, Aranka*): I'll teach you how to love death, you meadows with sun hats and shadowy stripes, pastures with herds of white-red cows, blue rivers with tentacles stretched out



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along your shingled beds. There is no way to where you so much want to go. Believe me, I have been there, and I found nothing, nothing, nothing –

INSPECTOR: Enough of this nonsense. (*Turns to Aranka.*) For how long have you been having sex with your son?

ARANKA (*lowers her head*): I don't remember.

INSPECTOR: Ten years! You told me, I've got it in black and white!

ARANKA: Yes, ten years.

INSPECTOR: And with the deceased?

ARANKA (*in tears*): Five. With Aloys five years.

INSPECTOR: Did you hide your relationship with Weiner?

ARANKA: Yes.

INSPECTOR: Why?

ARANKA: I was afraid! Afraid he would hurt him!

INSPECTOR: You were afraid your son would hurt Weiner.

ARANKA: Yes.

INSPECTOR: Two days ago you came to Weiner's house. Your son was here. You caught them in the middle of a quarrel. Your son was attacking Weiner with a chair.

ARANKA: I don't know.

INSPECTOR: That's what you told me.

ARANKA: Then it must be true.

INSPECTOR: And what did you do yesterday?

ARANKA: Yesterday?

INSPECTOR: Didn't you tell him about you and Weiner?

ARANKA (*lowers her head*): I did.

INSPECTOR: Why?

ARANKA: Because I have a little one! (*She places a hand on her tummy and points with the other one to Weiner's corpse on the bed.*) With him! A little one!

JANEK (*jumping up*): That's a lie!

(*He raises his hand to strike Aranka. He restrains himself. Sinks to his knees, and then into himself.*)

INSPECTOR: Well? Do we know now why you stabbed him?

JANEK (*ejecting himself into an upright position*): With this... this... chicken man? Tell them it isn't true!

ARANKA. It is, Janek, it is! I'm so sorry.



THE CHESTNUT CROWN

(Janek again raises his hand to strike Aranka, and again restrains himself. He removes the chestnut crown from Weiner's head and places it on his own. He swirls around his axis. Raises his hands.)

JANEK: Melalo! I'm ready! Let's have the music! *(He waits. Silence.)*
Melalo! Let the golden toad come now. Let her come. Let her squirt her gray saliva into my face! Let her close my eyes forever!

(He waits. Silence. Suddenly he grabs the chestnut crown and, tossing it to the floor, begins to stamp on it, frothing, emitting guttural sounds. He stops, exhausted, and watches the people who stand at the edge of the ring of darkness, watching him. Aranka moves towards him, reaching out with her arms.)

ARANKA: My son, oh my son!

JANEK: I'm not your son. Your son's in your womb.

(Aranka curls up on the floor, weeping. Janek goes to the bed and watches Weiner's face. Then he turns and watches his mother. He turns away, sits on the floor, lowers his head.)

INSPECTOR *(approaches, quietly)*: Why don't you tell us?

JANEK *(after a pause)*: I killed him.

INSPECTOR: *(after a pause)* You killed him. Now get up and tell everyone what you did.

(Janek mechanically obeys. Inspector turns him round to face the others.)

INSPECTOR: Tell us.

JANEK: I killed him.

INSPECTOR *(turns him towards the audience)*: Once again. What did you do?

JANEK *(screaming)*: I killed him!

(Inspector gathers his papers and stuffs them in his briefcase. He puts on his hat. Looks at everybody in turn.)



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INSPECTOR: Yes. The world without truth would be immeasurably sad. Wouldn't it?

(He walks towards the ring of darkness. Janek speaks. Inspector pauses.)

JANEK: I don't know about you, but I was told to travel this road till I reached the house where all doors open into the night. I found the house and opened all doors to the left, to the right, and I stepped out of this world into space. And I sent the wind back from the universe, and the birds, and I put poplars back along the country roads, to enjoy their stormy shapes if I ever returned. I traveled past a million stars, left behind the sun *and* the galaxy, and reached the place where they never heard of our space. I turned around and asked the nothingness: where? This time I was told to follow the stars till I reached the house where all doors open into the day. I found the house, and I opened all doors, to the left, to the right, and through all doors at once I fell – where? – I fell – where? ...

(Curtain.)