

#6

SAUNDERS/MAX

MAX. (trying to pull SAUNDERS off) SIR, CALM DOWN!!

(Finally, after several more seconds, SAUNDERS stops.)

SAUNDERS. Why me? He could have waited until tomorrow. He could have jumped out of the window after breakfast.

MAX. We sang a duet together. I mean I - I really liked him.

(SAUNDERS climbs off the bed.)

SAUNDERS. (bitter) Well, I guess that wraps it up. End of the road. Arriverderci. (Suddenly he attacks the body again.) AHHHH!!!

MAX. SIR!!

(SAUNDERS stops. Stands up. Then kicks the bed. MAX covers TITO, head and all, with the blanket. SAUNDERS walks into the sitting room, and MAX follows him.)

SAUNDERS. I'll have to make an announcement, of course. A few brief words, nothing elaborate. Ladies and gentlemen - Mr. Tito Merelli killed himself this afternoon, thereby depriving many of us of a great pleasure. It was universally acknowledged that he sang like an angel, but apparently he wanted to prove it. In short, our star for the evening has departed this world in a final gesture of selfishness and deceit unrivalled in the history of comic opera!

MAX. I think maybe I should make the announcement.

(SAUNDERS runs for the connecting door to get at TITO again, but MAX grabs him.)

SAUNDERS. Ahhhhhhhhhh!

MAX. We - we could still do the performance. I think we should.

SAUNDERS. Oh oh oh absolutely. We can prop him up and play a record. Add a few lines about how he stabbed himself at the end, then carry him around the stage on a stretcher!

MAX. I - I - I mean the understudy.

START

SAUNDERS. The understudy. Of course! My God, you've solved the whole problem! Skip the announcement, stick a note in the program, "The title role in Pagliacci will be sung by Albert Rupp." And then if there is anyone still in the audience when he takes his bow, they can stone him to death! The ultimate operatic experience! One thundering orgasm of insane violence! Make Salome look like The Merry Widow!

MAX. Sir, I think you ought to calm down.

SAUNDERS. Right! Good point! We don't want two dead bodies around here. Just think of the smell. Put everybody at the Gala Buffet right off their shrimp!

MAX. Sir! Let's just-just sit down for a minute. Okay? Sir?

(SAUNDERS is dazed. Numb. Slowly he sits. MAX sits next to him. Pause.)

These things happen, sir.

SAUNDERS. (A last lunge, MAX grabs him.) AHH!

MAX. It's not your fault. It was just-unlucky, that's all. I mean everybody'll understand.

SAUNDERS. Yes. Of course they will. And then they'll fire me. Ungrateful cruds.

(Pause. The rage is over. Black despair. After several seconds, however, SAUNDERS smiles. Then he chuckles. More chuckles. Then he breaks into laughter, genuine, if slightly hysterical.)

MAX. What's so funny?...Sir?...

SAUNDERS. Ohhh!...I was just thinking. They probably wouldn't know the difference. Albert Rupp. Clown costume. Big buttons, lots of padding. If we didn't tell the audience, they'd think he was Tito Merelli.

MAX. Think so? (He thinks about it. Then chuckles.) I think you're right.

(He starts to laugh, in spite of himself - which sets off SAUNDERS again.)

They probably wouldn't know -

SAUNDERS. They'd give him a standing ovation!

MAX. Bring down the house!

*(They both laugh uproariously, out of control. They can't stop. Finally.)*

Ohhh...

SAUNDERS. Ohhh...

MAX. It wouldn't work.

SAUNDERS. I know.

MAX. I mean the company would know it was him –

SAUNDERS. Of course.

MAX. And the story would leak out –

SAUNDERS. And then the audience would hang me. Yes, I realize that.

MAX. If he wasn't in the company, I bet it would work.

SAUNDERS. But he is.

MAX. Yeah. Too bad.

*(Long pause. Slowly, a light dawns in SAUNDERS' brain. He rolls it over in his mind, then turns his head and looks at MAX. MAX sees him and smiles amiably. He doesn't realize what SAUNDERS is thinking. Then he sees the stony, maniacal look in SAUNDERS' eyes and suddenly MAX looks nervous.)*

SAUNDERS. *(quietly)* Max.

MAX. Forget it. It wouldn't work. They'd spot me in ten seconds.

SAUNDERS. No they wouldn't.

MAX. Hey, stop it. The answer's no.

SAUNDERS. Max...

MAX. You're out of your mind. I don't even look like him.

SAUNDERS. Bright costume. Funny hat..

MAX. Hey. We were joking. This is life. It's called reality. Remember that?

SAUNDERS. You could do it, Max. I know you could.

MAX. *(starting to panic)* Hey. Look. Just-just one second, okay? I don't speak Italian. I – I – I – I – I – I hardly speak English.

SAUNDERS. You wouldn't have to speak Italian. Just sing it.

MAX. Look – look – just – just – okay? They'd know. They would know. It's me. Max.

SAUNDERS. No they wouldn't! He's in costume! He can be in costume for the entire show. And they've never seen him before. They're expecting *him*, not *you*.

MAX. Yeah, but-but-but-but...

SAUNDERS. They want to see him, Max. They want to say they've seen him.

MAX. But it's an opera! Two acts!

SAUNDERS. You know the part. You admitted it.

MAX. I can hum it! In the bathtub!

*(The phone rings.)*

SAUNDERS. You know every single note, I know you do –

MAX. Wrong! There's a few at the end, I – I get mixed up-

SAUNDERS. Aha! *(into the phone)* Yes?

MAX. *(pacing)* You're out of your mind!

SAUNDERS. *(into the phone)* Yes, Julia.

MAX. I mean, you're crazy! Okay? You're nuts!

SAUNDERS. *(Into the phone, he can't hear.)* What? *(to MAX)* Be quiet.

MAX. They could arrest me! It's called impersonation. Big crime –

SAUNDERS. *(into the phone)* No, Tito is much better. He's fine...

MAX. No, he isn't. He's dead. He's not fine. Fine is living!

SAUNDERS. *(into the phone)* No! Now, Julia, just listen. Don't come up...no. Just stay *downstairs*. Well, frankly, he's still a bit upset about his wife and I think it's better if

we meet you backstage.

MAX. That's better. That is better. Because he's dead!

SAUNDERS. *(into the phone)* Yes, just Max...right. Fine. See you there. *(He hangs up.)*

MAX. That was a mistake.

SAUNDERS. Max...

MAX. No.

SAUNDERS. I'm begging you, Max. I'm on my knees. *(he is)*

MAX. No!

SAUNDERS. Look at me! Max. You can do it, believe me!

MAX. I can't!

SAUNDERS. A thousand people! They're getting dressed now. They've got tickets at fifty dollars each, Max. That's fifty thousand dollars!

MAX. Sir –

SAUNDERS. My whole career! My life, Max. My children. It's all in your hands.

*(SAUNDERS grabs MAX around the knees and sobs. He looks up. No reaction. He sobs harder, sinking to MAX's ankles.)*

MAX. Ohhhh, *crap!*

SAUNDERS. I'll never forget this, Max.

MAX. I bet.

*(SAUNDERS jumps to his feet and races into the bedroom. MAX, now speechless with fear, follows him. During the following, SAUNDERS takes one of the suitcases from the closet and puts it on the bed next to TITO.)*

SAUNDERS. I have it all figured out. It's simple. You change here, make-up, the works. Then we drive to the theatre just in time and suddenly, bang, you're onstage.

MAX. Oh God.

SAUNDERS. Between the acts, you'll stay in your dressing room. Locked up. Then, after it's over, it's straight to the car, drive back and we're finished.

MAX. What about, uh...*(He nods at TITO.)*

SAUNDERS. No problem. Tomorrow morning, we break the news. He took the pills after the performance and passed away quietly during the night. This is it. *(The costume. SAUNDERS rummages through the suitcase.)* Costume...make-up...hat.

*(A knock at the sitting room/corridor door. They both freeze.)*

Who's that?

MAX. How should I know?!

SAUNDERS. I'll take care of it. You just change, and make it quick.

*(He hands MAX the suitcase and heads for the sitting room.)*

MAX. Sir?

SAUNDERS. *(stopping)* Yes, Max?

MAX. Wish me luck.

SAUNDERS. We don't need luck, Max.

MAX. Thanks.

*(MAX enters the bathroom. SAUNDERS leaves the bedroom and closes the door.)*

SAUNDERS. We need a miracle. *(he walks to the sitting room/corridor door)* Who is it?

JULIA. *(offstage)* It's me, Henry. Open the door.

SAUNDERS. Julia! I told you not to come up!

JULIA. *(offstage)* Open the door, Henry!

*(SAUNDERS opens the door. JULIA enters. She's about sixty and wears a silver dress covered in sequins. She strikes a pose.)*

How do I look? The truth.

SAUNDERS. Like the Chrysler Building.

JULIA. I knew you'd like it. *(She sweeps in and twirls around.)* It's straight from Paris. *Haute couture.* I feel like one of those fancy French tarts.