

CASTING ABOUT

Cast of characters

Hamlet	A pale young man in his twenties
Millie	A brisk woman in her thirties / forties
Salome	A young woman in her late teens
Boudicca	An imposing woman of 'a certain age'
Arnold	An unimposing older man

Setting

A casting studio.

Four chairs (stage right, centre right, centre left, stage left) facing the audience
Between the chairs centre right and centre left, a round table on which are
magazines and newspapers

Properties

A copy of 'The Stage'

Plastic bag in which is Yorick's skull

Salome's mobile and headphones

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Hamlet enters stage right. He is carrying a plastic bag in which is a large, roundish object of some kind. After a moment's hesitation, he sits down on chair stage left.

Then, after another moment, he stands up and sits down on chair centre left.

Then, after a further moment, he stands and studies the chairs centre right and stage right, deciding which one he should sit on.

Millie enters stage left, adjusting her clothing.

Millie Hello. Are you here for the audition?

Hamlet Yes. I think so.

Millie You don't sound very sure.

Hamlet No. I don't think I am. It's a big decision, isn't it?

Millie Is it?

Hamlet To ...

Pause.

Millie *(helpful)* Audition?

Hamlet Or not to ...

Pause.

Millie *(brisk)* Well, you don't have to decide right away. I doubt if we'll be starting on time. He had a heavy session in the tavern last night and he's feeling like death. You know the sort of thing. O! that this too, too solid flesh would melt. So, a word of advice. I'd avoid anything too loud. No rousing call to arms before the Gates of Harfleur. No raucous jesting. I'd suggest a sonnet or maybe a soliloquy. Up to you of course. Take a seat for now while I go and minister to his needs.

Hamlet sits on chair stage right and places the plastic bag on the chair beside him centre right.

Salome enters stage right. She is wearing headphones and listening to her iPod. She doesn't seem to notice Hamlet. Taking the copy of 'The Stage' from the table, she sits down on chair stage left and starts flicking through it, jiggling her head in time with the music.

Millie re-enters stage left, straightening her dress, and watches Salome with a degree of disapproval.

Millie *(to Salome)* Hello.

Salome doesn't hear her.

Millie *(louder)* Excuse me.

Salome lifts one of her headphones.

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- Millie** Can I help you?
- Salome** I'm here for the whatsit.
- Millie** The audition?
- Salome** That's not singing, is it? I don't do no singing. Dancing, yes. Singing, no. My singing's shit.
- Millie** Oh, I see. You're a dancer. I'm afraid we're not auditioning dancers.
- Salome** (*menacing*) Listen, honey-bunch. I've come to see 'The Man'. Okay?
- Millie** 'The Man' is not a choreographer.
- Salome** A what?
- Millie** He's a playwright.
- Salome** I know that, don't I? That's why I'm here.
- Millie** But you said you were a dancer –
- Salome** I said I dance. I didn't say I was a dancer. But I am good. That's the point of the story, innit?
- Millie** Story? What story?
- Salome** I do this dance, don't I? Take my clothes off, one veil at a time –
- Millie** (*disapproving*) I really don't think –
- Salome** No need to look so shocked, girlfriend. It's legit. I'm in The Bible, ain't I? Salome. King Herod. Ring any bells? Ding-dong. (*Speaking to Hamlet*) Here, you! Pasty-face. You know the story, don't you? It's Herod's birthday, right, and I get to do my dance. Getting my kit off and stuff. And Herod's, like, well pleased. So he should be. Then he says: 'Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it to you.' To be honest, all I hear is: 'I will give it to you.' And I'm thinking: Oh, you will, will you, granddad? Anyways, Mum explains he's offering me, like, anything I want and she says: Ask for the head of John the Baptist. And I'm, like, John the What? But I can see Mum's getting narky so I says okay. Anyways, Oh My God! the next thing I know, there's a bloody head on a dish, staring up at me. And I do mean bloody. Now that's a story you don't hear every day, innit? So I thought, why not? I could use some exposure. So here I am.
- Millie** (*doubtful*) I suppose he did write 'Titus Andronicus' –
- Boudicca 'makes her entrance' stage right.*
- Boudicca** I trust he is ready for me? He is a 'he', isn't he? Playwrights usually are. Although I did hear a rumour he might be a 'she' –
- Millie** Oh, no. He's very much a 'he'. I can vouch for that.

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Boudicca A pity. Ah, well. That's today's world, isn't it? Dominated by men. That's why there are so few parts for women. Especially women of a certain age. It wasn't the case in my day. We gave the men a run for their money. And we will again. Yes, we will. A time will come when the rightful – the natural – order of things will be restored.

Millie The natural order?

Boudicca Women on top.

Millie Well, that's a position I favour.

Boudicca Then I can count on your support, sister?

Millie Sister?

Boudicca We are all sisters, my dear, although it has to be said that I am an icon. Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni.

Millie The Iceni? Oh. I see.

Boudicca I am a rallying-cry for women everywhere. My story demands to be told.

Millie Aren't the details of your life a little sketchy?

Boudicca Sketchy? My life is a full-length play. I sacked St Albans. I reduced Colchester to rubble. I left London in flames. What more do you want? Besides, facts aren't important. It's a positive advantage that so little is known about me. Plenty of scope for poetry and imagination. That's the playwright's job, isn't it? Behold the swelling scene and so on. Well, here I am. Ready to swell. The rest is up to him. We women must prepare to make a comeback. Think about it. A world ruled by women.

Millie (*dubious*) Well ...

Boudicca Nurture. Warmth. Compassion. A decent number of ladies' loos in every theatre. I will lead you to a new tomorrow. I will stand, bare-breasted in my winged chariot. I will sweep all before me. Cutting a swathe through my enemies. Sparing no one. Slaughtering all. Hear me, sisters. For she today that sheds her blood with me shall be my sister, be she ne'er so ... How does it go after that?

Millie Vile, I think. I'll go and see if he's ready for you.

Millie exits stage left.

Boudicca looks at Hamlet with disdain and then at Salome with approval.

Millie re-enters, buttoning her blouse.

Millie Would you like to follow me?

Boudicca Follow you? No, no. Never. I follow no one.

Boudicca exits magnificently stage left.

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Millie Goodness. (*to Hamlet*) Well? Have you decided? Are you going to or not?

Hamlet Umm ...

Millie Go on. Why not? What have you got to lose?

Arnold enters stage right.

Arnold Excuse me, my dear. Is 'The Bard' in?

Millie 'The Bard'? No, I've never heard him called that before. I suppose it might catch on.

Arnold Could you let him know I'm here.

Millie And you are ...?

Arnold You don't recognise me?

Millie I'm sorry. I ...

Arnold Don't worry, my dear. I'm used to it. I am King Arnold.

Millie King ...?

Arnold Arnold.

Millie Not King Arthur?

Arnold (*irritated*) No. Why does everyone confuse 'Arnold' and 'Arthur'?

Millie I'm terribly sorry. I don't know anything about you.

Arnold King Arnold. The first King of England. I know there are other claimants but my case is as good as anyone's. If I'd had a better publicist – And that's the point, isn't it? I need to have a play written about me. It's his patriotic duty to write one. It's not as if he hasn't written about kings before. Sometimes ad nauseam. Henry VI Part One. Henry VI Part Two. Henry VI Part Three. Henry VI Part Four –

Millie I think there are only three parts.

Arnold Well, they're all so dreary it seems like many more.

Millie And you're sure you're not King Arthur?

Arnold What's happened to English History? Every schoolchild ought to know the story of King Arnold and the Knights of the Round Ladle.

Millie (*absorbing this*) The Round Ladle.

Arnold We were all very fond of soup, you see. Beans, too. And stew. But especially soup.

Millie Is it a good story? Do you have strong characters? Plenty of episodes? An improbable plotline? Cliff-hangers?

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Arnold (to audience) You can see where this is going, can't you? No, my dear. King Arnold and the Knights of the Round Ladle is not a soup opera. (solemn) For many years my knights and I have been engaged on a noble quest. Searching for the celestial soup.

Millie The celestial soup?

Arnold The Holy Gruel.

Millie Oh, right. King Arnold, the Knights of the Round Ladle and the Quest for the Holy Gruel. Got it. Now I remember. You're the one who burnt the cakes, aren't you?

Arnold (patiently) No, my dear. That was King Alfred.

Boudicca re-enters stage left.

Boudicca (furious) The man's a fraud. A mountebank. A charlatan with the vision of an early morning mole. Can you believe it? He won't allow a chariot on the stage and he says appearing bare-breasted is a no-no. To cap it all, he wants me to be played by a boy! (shouting stage left) You ... You ... (struggling for the word) You, versifier!

Boudicca exits stage right.

Salome (standing) You know what? If there ain't going to be no bare breasts, I don't think I'll bother. I mean, showing off the goods, that's – like – what I do, innit. Doh.

Salome exits stage right.

Millie Two down, two to go. Take a seat, King Arnold. I'll let him know you're here.

Millie exits stage left.

Arnold moves stage right and stands over chair centre right (on which is Hamlet's plastic bag).

Arnold (about to pick up bag) May I ... ?

Hamlet hurriedly picks up bag and places it under his chair.

Hamlet and Arnold sit in silence until Millie re-enters stage left, tidying her hair.

Millie I'm terribly sorry King – umm – but he says the whole 'round table' thing's been done to death.

Arnold Done to death?

Millie Old hat.

Arnold Old ... ? Would it help if we changed the shape of the table? No? Oh, well.

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Arnold – the habitual victim – shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head and exits sadly stage right.

Millie Well. Here's your chance. Ready?

Hamlet I ...

Millie (*exasperated*) Don't tell me you still don't know.

Hamlet Oh, okay.

Millie You didn't tell me your name.

Hamlet Hamlet.

Millie That's unusual.

Hamlet Not in Denmark, it isn't. My dad was called Hamlet, too.

Millie Was?

Hamlet Dead.

Millie Oh, dear.

Hamlet Long story.

Millie Right. Come and tell him all about it. (*Seeing the plastic bag under Hamlet's chair*) Is that yours? (*Picks it up*) Gosh. What's in it?

Hamlet A skull.

Millie Whose skull?

Hamlet Yorick's. Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him.

Millie Well?

Hamlet I didn't say that.

Millie Oh, I thought you did.

Hamlet Most people think I did.

Millie Right. Follow me, Mr Hamlet.

Millie starts to exit.

Hamlet 'Prince' Hamlet actually.

Millie stops and looks back at Hamlet.

Millie Very well, Prince Hamlet. (*Bowing*) Let me usher you into the presence of England's greatest living dramatist. (*Exiting with aplomb*) Mister Christopher Marlowe.

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THE END