**The Dance of Death**

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**Of its time yet timeless**

To coincide with All Souls’ Day, Stratford Town Trust are staging a performance of the poem, Dance of Death, in the medieval Guild Chapel in Stratford-upon-Avon where it was painted over 500 years ago

The ‘Dance of Death’ is a moralising tale, rooted in the medieval tradition of the macabre dating back to the 13th century. Its first known appearance as a *Danse Macabre* was in 1424, exactly 600 years ago. The poem is a dialogue between Death, a cadaverous/skeletal figure, and a series of characters, and the painting in the Chapel gives an insight into medieval beliefs and anxieties, and how they were reflected in art. The message is that life is fleeting and Death can take you at any time. It warns the viewer to be prepared for death by living a virtuous life because, come death, there will be a reckoning, and, in the end, wealth and status, and youth and beauty, mean nothing. The individuals being led away by Death come from all walks of life, and the poem’s humour comes from Death’s ability to recognise and poke fun at the foibles of humankind. While there will be some more macabre moments, the evening overall will be light-hearted, with the poem’s humour drawn out through the movements and voices of the characters in the Dance, and the costumes they wear.

**What we’re looking for**

We want local actors (semi-professional, amateur, from all backgrounds, aged 18+) to play the parts of Death and various other characters appearing in the version of the Dance of Death that is painted in the Guild Chapel:

* Translator/Narrator
* Death
* The King
* The Empress
* The Abbot
* The Virtuous Woman (Nun)
* The Astronomer
* The Gentlewoman
* The Physician
* The Merchant
* The Labourer
* The Sergeant-of-Office
* The Minstrel
* 3 beggars (non-speaking parts)

**What will the roles involve?**

The production consists of the Dance of Death itself and a number of songs, with medieval music played by local musicians. Most participants will take part in the Dance and form the chorus. The Dance itself will be based on a popular medieval dance from the period and is relatively simple, so you do not need dance experience, but you do need to be comfortable with movement. You will work closely with a choreographer to help with this. Details of the songs to be sung will be given in due course. Participants may have to take on understudy roles in addition to their principal parts.

**What we want you to do at the audition**

1. Perform your chosen part, having read and prepared for it in advance (see Appendix A).
2. The character of Death is the lynch-pin of the production and requires a strong performance. If you wish to audition for the part of Death, please prepare 2 verses of your own choosing.
3. Familiarise yourself with the rest of the script as you may be asked to perform an additional part, of our choosing, at the audition (you may read off a script for this).

**What can we offer you?**

This is a great opportunity for anyone looking to develop their performance skills and gain experience, or anyone who simply wants to be part of something completely different, something which first appeared on the scene 600 years ago in 1424, and which may only rarely have been performed since. You will be part of a friendly community production, performing in one of Stratford’s most beautiful and historic buildings.

**Dates**

Auditions: Thursday 23rd May, 2.00pm-6.30pm, in the Guild Chapel, Stratford-upon-Avon

Rehearsals: Tuesday evenings, 6.00pm-7.30pm, from July (exact dates tbc)

Performances: Friday 1st and Saturday 2nd November, 6.30pm–8.00pm

**Interested?**

If you are interested in taking part, please complete the application form below and return it by **16th May 2024** to Charlotte and Pamela at [volunteer@stratfordtowntrust.co.uk](mailto:volunteer@stratfordtowntrust.co.uk) .

Alternatively, return your application form to Charlotte Summerskill, Stratford Town Trust, 14 Rother Street, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, CV37 6LU. Tel. no. 01789 207117.

**Dance of Death Application Form**

**Relevant experience:**

**Part you wish to audition for:**

**Second choice if first choice not available:**

**Auditions are scheduled for Thursday 23rd May between 2.00pm and 6.30pm. Please state your preferred time(s).**

If you are unable to attend the auditions on 23rd May, please contact Charlotte and Pamela at [volunteer@stratfordtowntrust.co.uk](mailto:volunteer@stratfordtowntrust.co.uk)

**Privacy Policy** The privacy and security of your personal information is extremely important to us.

Our Privacy Policy explains how we protect and manage any personal data which you share

with us and that we hold about you, including how we collect, process, protect and

share that data. Read the full policy here <https://www.stratfordtowntrust.co.uk/privacy-policy>

**Signature:** **Date:**

**Age (please note you must be 18 years or over):**

**Email:**

**Tel no:**

**Address:**

**Name:**

**Appendix A** - **The script**

*(Translator/Narrator)*

Good eve to all, you sensible mortals who do come tonight to witness the Dance of Death.

I am John Lydgate, monk and poet of Bury St Edmunds, and I did find these words of the Dance on the walls of a cemetery in Paris, whilst I was on sojourn there in 1426. A French clerk of my acquaintance helped me translate it into the English tongue, with the purpose that proud people, bold and stout, might clearly see their ugly finish.

I do humbly pray you excuse any errors in my simple translation.

This text, now in the English, was copied onto the walls of Old St Paul’s in London, where Hugh Clopton, mighty Lord Mayor of London, born of Stratford, did likely observe it and, in his wisdom, did piously instruct for it to be painted here, in this ancient chapel, in 1496.

And so we have this ambitious scheme, a dance to the death of seemingly rational creatures, who nevertheless have but one desire - an eternal life. But I caution you, they are as hard-hearted as a stone, and about to receive an unwelcome message: Death spares no one.

Learn here the lessons of these foolish folk. See in this dance a mirror, and accept your fate. Who goes in front, and who goes behind, all depends on God’s arrangement, and you must take your chance.

Where is your wit or providence? Repent! Don’t revel in the temporal world as if it will last forever. Remember, whether you be rich or poor, young or old, cruel Death can creep upon you suddenly and deliver a fatal blow. Be wise, consider your place in Paradise, before it is too late.

This dance, portrayed here in all its elaboration, shows life is but a pilgrimage, given to us to correct our ways, before the journey’s end.

So sup your mead and enjoy the Dance, but be sure to heed my words today.

Adieu, my friends!

(NB. The Narrator will be holding a large open book as he is a learned academic; while we expect actors to learn the part, these words will likely be inserted into the book.)

*(Death addresses the King*)

Right noble King, most worthy of renown

Come forth anon; in spite of all your might,

Regardless of your wealth and regal gown

And realms that bow to you in royal sight,

You must give in to nature’s dance of old.

Let go your crown, leave sceptre at your feet,

Whoever here enjoys the greatest gold

Shall leave here clothed in but a single sheet.

*(The King responds*)

I never learned to dance like this before -

Such deadly steps and such ferocity!

And now I see the truth, so clear and sure,

How little pride is worth, how false nobility.

Death takes it all away, we cannot hide,

Both high and low this simple truth must learn.

It’s better to be meek, renouncing pride,

For we shall all to dusty ashes turn.

*(Death addresses the Empress)*

My lady Empress, give to me your hand.

You cannot turn away, for you must dance.

Your riches fail and nothing can withstand

The Dance of Death - not pleasure, nor romance.

Those fancy golden robes you think so high!

Clothes don’t protect you! Nothing that is bought

Can change the fact that all of us must die.

And now you see that all is come to nought.

*(The Empress responds*)

Oh what use now my gold, my wealth and booty?

Oh what use now my birth and noble proof?

Oh what use now my youth and glowing beauty

That haughtiness which held me so aloof?

Death says “checkmate” to me, I was too vain.

My worldly power and strength cannot avail.

No friends, no kin, no one can help my pain

Since Death is come my empire to assail!

*(Death addresses the Abbot*)

Come forth Sir Abbot, with your great broad hat,

Don’t hold back, I need to see you prance!

Great is your head, your belly round and fat,

In spite of size, you still must join the dance.

Leave your abbey to some other monk -

Your heir is old enough your state to occupy.

Who that is fattest, who’s eaten well and drunk,

Shall in his grave soonest putrefy.

*(The Abbot responds*)

I cannot match your menace, I must sigh

And understand that power was just to borrow,

A mere monk in his cloister I must die,

And Death brings me a multitude of sorrow.

I used to think that wealth was mine to win,

But nothing earthly comes to aid me now.

I ask for mercy and repent my sin,

In the face of Death, too late, I make my vow.

*(Death addresses the Virtuous Woman)*

Though you are dressed in nun’s attire so black,

In chastity you swore to spend your days,

All that won’t save you, there’s no turning back,

You’ll dance with me and follow all my ways.

In this world there’s no one gives you aid,

There’s no defence when drawing your last breath.

Whether you are widow, wife or maid

You’ll find that nature leads you on to Death.

*(The Virtuous woman responds)*

It doesn’t help to fight against our fate.

We know that Death will come, and we must die.

Therefore I say to all, it’s not too late -

You must prepare yourself and not ask why.

Protection comes from virtue, that’s your shield.

Remember to love God in charity

Then you can meet your death and gladly yield;

That’s all you need to do, in piety.

*(Death addresses the Astronomer)*

Come forth astronomer, looking up so far,

With all the instruments you use

To take the size and height of every star,

Astrology won’t change your mortal news

That Adam ate the apple, causing sin,

Although God said the fruit must not be eaten

So now death is the end of all mankind

Theology says Death cannot be beaten.

*(The Astronomer responds)*

For all my craft, my science and my learning

I can’t see how to change this mortal fate.

The stars won’t help, above me always turning,

Although I try to calculate their rate.

I now must come to this, my one defence

The knowledge that I have and so will tell

There is no more but for a man of sense

To live aright so that he can die well.

*(Death addresses the Gentilwoman)*

Come forth now mistress, of years young and green

You think you are the fairest ever seen

A famous beauty, like Polixene,

Helen, and Penelope the queen.

But in the dance these women did their duty

And so shall you, for all your coy disdain,

You flirted and relied upon your beauty

But you must join the dance and think again.

*(The Gentilwoman responds)*

Oh cruel death that leaves out no estate

To you both youth and age are much the same.

To kill my beauty you have said “Checkmate”

So hasty is your path to deadly blame.

When I was young, it was my only thought

To be a big success with all the men.

But now I know that flirting is for nought

You’re never safe in beauty, now or then.

*(Death addresses the Physician)*

Ah, you physicians, always on the make!

Scrutinising urine in that flask!

Remember your own soul, for you can’t take

Your money with you from that final task.

Death comes for doctors just as other men.

Heal ailments, but don’t forget to heal your own.

The Day of Judgement comes, we don’t know when,

Then we must reap in life what we have sown.

*(The Physician responds)*

Alas too long I’ve studied all the ills

Just wanting to make money from my work.

My life as doctor, medicines and pills

Were all I thought about, I did not shirk.

But sadly I neglected my own soul

My potions couldn’t help, not herb nor root,

I should have turned to God to keep me whole

Against my Death no remedy will suit

*(Death addresses the Merchant*)

You, rich merchant, must follow me behind.

You’ve travelled far, to many a distant land,

On horse, on foot, but always on your mind

Was profit, winning wealth, I understand.

But now to dance you must give me your hand;

All your merchant’s labours shrink and slough,

Adieu vainglory, for your riches will not stand,

The rich crave more than those who have enough.

*(The Merchant responds*)

By many a hill and many a distant vale

I’ve travelled far with mounds of merchandise,

Transported on the seas with many a bale

To sundry isles, more than I can devise.

Yet inwardly my heart has grown with greed,

But all for nought, now Death me doth constrain;

And now I see, and pay the scholars heed,

To be content with little gives more gain.

*(Death addresses the Labourer)*

Thou Labourer, who in sorrow and in pain

Hast led thy life in full great travaille,

You must dance too, and nothing must disdain,

For if you do, there will be nought avail.

And there’s a reason why I thee assail;

And it is this: to ask ourselves together

Why people cling to this false world to fail;

He is a fool who thinks to live forever.

*(The Labourer responds*)

My life is hard, I’ve often wished to die,

Although I want to flee from Death just now.

I’d rather live, although I toil thereby,

In wind and rain to walk behind the plough.

With spade and axe I laboured all my days.

Delved, ditched and led the cart both east and west.

And this I say quite flat, in all the ways

In this world, a worker has no rest.

*(Death addresses the Sergeant-of-Office)*

Come forth now Sergeant, with your stately mace,

Make no defence and don’t resist arrest,

It will not help to grumble in my face.

Shout all you like, the law will fail this test -

You can’t appeal, there’s nothing you can say

To fight against the coming dance for longer.

You may be tough and think that strength’s the way

But you should know that Death is always stronger.

*(The Sergeant responds*)

How dare you, Death, set on me an arrest!

I am the Sergeant chosen by the crown!

Yesterday, when walking east and west

I did my duty well with n’er a frown!

But now this day I am arrested here

And may not flee, my capture is so sure.

Each man is loath to die, both far and near,

Unless in life they learned to die before.

*(Death addresses the Minstrel)*

Gentle minstrel, show me now your skill.

Just play my notes and demonstrate my dance.

You’ve never known a harder tune than this, nor will,

For at our journey’s end we all must prance.

Think now what’s best, repenting all your wrongs.

Of my advice you must take care and heed,

Don’t play and sing those happy worldly songs!

It’s not too late to win the grace you need.

*(The Minstrel responds*)

Oh benedicite, this world is frail!

I have my pipe, my fiddle and my lute

But cheerful music now turns sad and stale,

In spite of zither, organ and my flute.

All worldly pleasure I now here refuse.

God grant me grace, allow me heaven to win,

And help me die, so my old ways excuse,

I can’t be merry if I die in sin.

*(The Dead King (eaten by Worms) comes forward*)

You folk who look upon this Dance of Death

And see we all must join, both high and low,

Know what we are, and how we waste our breath

Resisting Death, for all with Death must go.

Look in this mirror, see me, once a king,

But fortune’s wheel has many deadly turns.

Like all estates, from labourer to king,

Our bodies must putrefy as food for worms.

**The ‘Dance of Death’ is still very much alive, 600 years after its first known appearance in 1424!**

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