

PRODUCTION HISTORY:

The Ugly Duchess was first produced at the Open Space New Theatre Series in Victoria in 1993, and in this version at the Uno Festival of Solo Performance (Victoria) and Exit Theatre in San Francisco in 1999. It toured the Canadian Fringe circuit, and was presented at the 2003 SummerWorks Festival in Toronto. This production toured to Prague and Ireland, and was presented within the University of Victoria's 2007 season at the Phoenix Theatre.

Margaret Maultasch.....PAUL TERRY
Director.....BRITT SMALL
Set Design.....JANET MUNSIL
Costume.....ROBERTA DOYLEND



The Ugly Duchess is based on the portrait of the same name by Flemish master Quentin Matsys, which hangs in the National Gallery in London. Margaret Maultasch was a historical figure, but few details are available about her life. Castle Tyrol still stands.

Running Time: 70 minutes.

CHARACTERS:

Margaret Maultasch of Tyrol. She is in her 30s-40s. She has a very wide and unattractive mouth. The play is written to be performed by a male actor.

SETTING:

Margaret's dressing room. A small table, with her brush, mirror, drinking glass, jewelry, and paintpots. A chair, with her clothing draped over it.

Shortly before dawn.

Margaret enters with a candle. She is wearing a plain white chemise. She puts the candle down on her dressing table and kneels to pray.

We Margaret, by the Grace of God
Duchess of Bavaria and Carinthia, Countess of Tyrol and Gortz
Margravine of Brandenburg and Princess of Bohemia,
Beseech thee, Oh Heavenly Virgin, worthy, pure and sacred,
To grasp our hand, by your holy mercy,
and pull us free from the putrid swamp of sin and lust.
Inspire us to the everlasting joys of chastity, sobriety,
Purity and honour.
Protect us this day from mortal sin, sorrows and sufferings,
from violent or sudden death, the company of terrible devils:
and let the fire of the divine spirit extinguish the lust of our flesh.
Help us accept adversity for the love of our Lord, thank him humbly for it,
and remind us that no one was ever loved by everyone.
In the year of our lord thirteen hundred and sixty three. Amen

Margaret rises and sits at her dressing table. She picks up her mirror. Pause. She sighs.

There once was a woman who dwelled near the church,
Whose daily ablutions were so protracted that she delayed the mass
and angered the Lord God,

Who was made to wait for her.
To teach her a lesson, God ensured
that at the same time and hour as she looked into her mirror,
Instead of looking upon her own reflection, the devil would turn to her his arse
Which was so foul and horrible that she died of fright!
Some might think the substitution of the devil's backside in place of their reflection
A delightful transformation, a miracle.
Until I see that delicious vision in my glass, I must paint
the lily and the rose into this self-portrait.
Women of position are ideals of beauty to be imitated.
Why, just yesterday I saw a monkey
In the town, long-armed, squat, very ugly and sad,
who'd don a horrid hat and show his long yellow teeth to great acclaim,
if you tossed a coin in the dish labeled "Maultach."

Margaret picks up a pot of face paint.

For skin problems resulting from use of paint: asparagus root and wild anise
in the milk of red goats, aged in warm yak manure. Rub on face with soft bread
for as long as it takes to say the credo thrice.
Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem,
factorem caeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium....

She begins to apply the paint to her face.

I love the church, the incense the candles, the Latin, the gold, the heavy cloth, so heavy,
Then the light yellow and blue straight from heaven,
the purest light over the mountains of Tyrol.
The fantastical carvings on the porticoes – columns sprouting flowers sprouting
human bodies with animal heads, gargoyles entwined in strange embraces,
dancing, laughing at our prayers.
I asked my abbess who were the men with the goat legs?

“Don’t ask such naughty questions, highness dear.
How can the stem of a flower support a roof?
Who has seen animals and men sprout roots and tendrils?
Now hush, and pray.”

I felt a sweet sympathy with distortions of nature,
two-headed calves, dwarves, misshapen vegetables.

She stands and puts on her foundation garments.

When I was a girl,
My father the king of Bohemia gave up drinking, gambling, and reckless spending –
His finest qualities, said goodbye to all of his bastards and most of his mistresses,
And locked himself in the church as penance.
He’d seen one too many pictures of the Last Judgment and the tortures of hell
In those carvings on the portal, and felt it time to make amends with God.
He’d been unequalled in his generosity – his lavish banquets, dances and tournaments
Are still topics of teary-eyed reminiscence.
He was much loved by everyone, even his many creditors,
Who once took him hostage in Innsbruck, but released him after a three-day marathon of
Dice and lewd storytelling, with vats of wine, barrels of pickled herring,
and rounds of cheese big as the wheels of the carts that delivered them.
This he gave away, as he road through the towns to his Castle Tyrol,
as he gave away those very towns to pay his debts.

She picks up her skirt.

The Queen, my mother, died in childbed with my sister Adelheid,
Who never recovered from the tragedy of her birth
and still she lies silent, pale, and lovely in her bed, eyes open but in a constant dream.
I liked to dress her when I was a child, in mothers golden gowns.
I propped her up against a wall to keep her from flopping on the ground.

She spreads the skirt out on the ground, ready to step into.

Sometimes I lay her flat on the rug and spread her yellow hair around her head
in golden rays like the sun.

She puts on the skirt.

I think Adelheid looks like my mother, a pale blue Madonna,
a cuff and hem of golden braid, and a tired loving sigh as she patted my ugly head
and sent me off to hide-and-seeK Körbl, the dwarf, our fool,
whose long slippers poked out from under the curtain.
Körbl told me stories of miraculous transformations,
frogs to princes, girls to trees, witches to stone.

Enchanted princesses.

She picks up her hairbrush, and does her hair.

My inheritance, this land, Tyrol, linking Germany to Italy and Burgundy to the Adriatic,
Married my Uncle John's Luxembourg on St. Bartholomew's Day,
when I, at twelve, wed my cousin Johann, aged seven.
A double wedding, my father the aging king took for his bride
the barren, anemic Beatrix of Savoy in vain hopes of concocting a legitimate heir
among his scores of bastards and we two sweet princesses,
Margaret the Monstrous and Adelheid the Undead.

Uncle John had arranged the marriages.

He was a cheat and a scoundrel and a smooth-talking pirate.

Wherever there was dissension and strife, he was there:

arranging and destroying marriages, treaties, alliances, starting wars, making enemies,
giving away land he didn't own, gambling without money.

He cared more for adventure than politics, and was handsome and dashing and fashionable
– a hero –And everyone forgot or forgave,
and called him the greatest knight in all Christendom.

Our weddings were held at Innsbruck – the first time I had been out in the world
Away from the castle Tyrol, high above the melancholy houses.

Father chose the most populous route to best sun himself in homage.

Heavy with pomp and uncomfortable wedding finery

(though I thought my feet looked very nice)

I rode in a litter with my governess, the The Abbess,

“Do not admire your feet so much, Princess – at least, not so obviously.

Ornaments cannot beautify as well as virtues, for they are the treasures of the soul.”

Abbess advised me to say sweet words and to delight in little Johann’s company,

“For it is a bride’s duty to encourage and nourish love when she first meets her husband.

She must be dutiful always, uphold his honor, and know that if he beats her,

it is only to correct her faults, for good and bad women equally require the stick!

I hardly heard her, peering through a crack in the curtain at the village streets

and the crowds of curious subjects who came to see the royal wedding procession.

Up ahead a cheer rose as father passed, then a hush, as heads were raised, necks craned.

How anxious they seemed to wish me well!

I swept back the curtain and nodded to them, lifting my veil to smile,

gently and humbly as I had practiced in my mirror.

Abbess was busily engaged in relating the fascinating lineage

of Count such-and-such to my sister, who accompanied us in her traveling box,

which had a lid in case she died suddenly.

But when Abbess saw my naked face she bolted, grabbed me by the hair,

pulled me back, and held tight closed the curtains with a gasp,

as the awe-inspired quiet in the street exploded

in a roar of laughter and screams, not to be mistaken for good wishes on my wedding day.

“Did you see that? We’d drown anything like that when it was born, like a kitten!

What a face! What an Ape! Heaven protect us! Maultasch Maultasch! Pocket Mouth!” the children cried, and for this inspired insult got a box on the ear from their shrieking mothers.

“Plain and shabby women sneering at their Princess, ordained by God to rule over them! How Dare they!” Abbess stroked my hand and smoothed my veil.

“In the next world, Highness, it is not man’s shape that matters. How quickly wrinkles line the smoothest face. Beauty on earth is transient, vain and deceitful.

God has given you a very special gift. Be thankful to him that you are not beautiful.”

She sits again and looks into her mirror.

Maultasch. Pocket Mouth. It’s not so bad, really. I know they don’t mean to be cruel.

They need time to get to know me. And I will work hard to win them.

God has some special purpose in mind for me.

He has marked and bound me so I can be closer to him.

I’ll wear my nickname with proud resignation. In time it will become an endearment.

The Maultasch. Our Maultasch. Our dear old Ugly Duchess.

She picks up her bodice, which laces up the front, and puts it on.

We arrived at Innsbruck on schedule, but Uncle John and my groom, his son Johann,

Were two days late. Their procession was glorious, bluegreen and gold

like fire across the evening sky.

Oh, how I loved Uncle John, so cunning and charming,

and without a trace of the hostile pity I met with as German and Italian ladies of the court curtsied to me with nauseated smiles.

I dared them with my stare to notice anything unusual about me.

Uncle John did not shrink from me, but even from his horse

swung me up in his arms and kissed me, saying how like a lady I was,

how proud he was that I would be his daughter,

while his puny, knock-kneed boy, my intended,

sick from the journey from Luxembourg and fidgeting in his little boy’s breastplate,

cried, and screamed, and kicked, and bit,
saying how like I was to an ape, and how cruel a tyrant was his own father
for arranging such a match.

During this display I studied the huge warm eye of Uncle John's horse,
on which a fly had landed.

I wondered why that horse didn't blink or make a fuss with that fly in his eye,
and I resolved to be as steady, accepting, silent and unblinking,
as small hands, mine and Johann's, were joined, and held together by adult hands,
and words were said, and we were married, and I looked down into my little groom's eyes,
and nodded, sadly, sweetly to show him that I understood.

At this Johann tore away howling and buried his snotty face in his father's chest.
"You will learn to love her," I heard Uncle John tell the boy "Or if not love her, grow
accustomed to her, when you are old enough to see the virtues of a clever wife."

At this my brat-groom cursed his father and spat in my face,
Sending the gasping, scandalized Abbess to my rescue.

Shortly after, he was given his first taste of wine by some malicious knight
and puked on the feast table during prayers.

She begins to lace the bodice.

I didn't want to marry. I imagined myself in the contemplative life of constant devotion to
God, for this is the only pure love.

Good Lord, I prayed, advise, inspire me.

I know I should not love or desire anything but you alone,
that only the virgin is truly virtuous.

Why did you make me ugly and rich?

Why not poor and pretty, so I could serve more perfectly for love of you?

I hear it is impossible for the rich to be saved,
yet have I the strength to relinquish the world completely?

Many queens are now saints in paradise, such as the Queen of King Clovis of France and the Queen of Hungary, and in my book of days they seem to be wearing quite nice clothes.

In my favourite story, Saint Kummernis, Bride of Christ,
was forced to marry a heathen prince and prayed to God to disfigure her lovely body.
Locked in her chamber on the eve of her wedding a miracle occurred -
a copious beard appeared on her chin.
Her enraged father, knowing the match would be broken, had her crucified,
like Him she adored.
I thought my chances for sainthood looked quite optimistic.

She continues to lace the bodice, eventually tying it in a bow at the top.

After a few sulky months of avoiding each other,
Johann and I hunted, hawked, and rode side by side, and learned to dance and read Latin –
well, one of us did. But life is too short to spend much of it in childhood.
Five years to the day of our weddings, Father's new wife Beatrix of Savoy
(who bore no sons and couldn't bear to look at Adelheid and me)
fell ill in the afternoon, told father to have his tailor flogged and banished,
then commended her soul to God and died.
Father spent that night barricaded in the church, whimpering,
haunted by the ghosts of those he'd good-naturedly tortured, murdered, and adulterated.
Horrible devils grinned at him from a lake of brimstone,
and when the doors were unlocked come morning, he was dead,
leaving two unhappy children to rule a bankrupt nation.

She walks to the window.

As I rode to his funeral through the mountains and vineyards,
the fertile land, the beauty of the crags, the haunted forests, the blue sky,
I tried very hard to look grave.
But my thoughts betrayed me. My heart sang "mine, all mine."

This land in the mountains is a prayer without words.

We had counselors, ministers, advisors, but Johann would have none of them as the new “King of Tyrol”. He was a child, had no idea how to run a country, had ignored his lessons, and couldn’t take advice, especially from me. He made stupid plans to make war with our allies, extract more tax from the poor. He called his subjects stupid filthy shitmongers, and didn’t understand that a true ruler holds his people in genuine affection. “No fortress is as well protected as one by the love and goodwill of loyal subjects.” “Shut up Hag,” he’d say and beat me for my arrogance.

“Do my subjects love me?” I’d asked Körbl, examining the toads the Abbess had nailed live on their backs to the balcony floor, poking their soft stomachs to see their legs twitch as they baked alive in the morning sun. “Powdered toad with mandrake root, three peony seeds and the eyes of dead cats, mixed to a paste with lavender water” was my sister’s midweek treatment, did her a world of good.

“I think they respect you, my Lady,”

“What does that mean, Körbl? I don’t think I know.”

“They loathe you honestly.”

Körbl examined the spider web plaster on his hand.

I’d shot him with an arrow accidentally during my first lesson a week before, taking aim at the bird-stick Körbl waved as a target.

The arrow went right through his palm.

I felt bad about that, but it was very exciting at the time – just like the pictures of the martyrs in my books.

“Everyone hates me because I’m ugly.”

“There are places in the world, my Lady, where you would be revered as a goddess.

The men would worship you for they would know that without you as a paragon, there would be no beauty.

Why, the God of love would shoot his arrows through the eyes of each man who saw you.”