

# LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 12, No.3 - Fall 1966

Editor of this issue: Thomas Remeikis

ISSN 0024-5089

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## THE GRAVEDIGGERS An Excerpt

KOSTAS OSTRASKAS

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DEDICATED TO ALGIMANTAS MACKUS

Kostas Ostraskas is an outstanding Lithuanian playwright of the younger generation in whose plays man's confrontation with death is a frequent theme.

A cemetery.

Early evening.

Two GRAVEDIGGERS digging graves side by side. They are in the pits up to their waists.

GRAVEDIGGER I — frazzled shirt cuffs, shabby old tailcoat. A Stetson hat on an umbrella stuck into the ground.

GRAVEDIGGER II — open shirt, has a waistcoat on.

GRAVEDIGGER I (*takes out a handkerchief, wipes his face like a gentleman*). To bury a man, as it turns out, is not an easy task.

GRAVEDIGGER II. How many times you've said that already?

GRAVEDIGGER I. I keep repeating this in the hope that you may at last grasp the deeper meaning — *sub specie aeternitatis*.

GRAVEDIGGER II (*laughs*). Sure, and I haven't caught it yet.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Nay, but hear you, goodman delver."\* Must these graves be so deep? Would not, say, a yard be satisfactory? The dead will not break out of their graves. Why not, then, scratch the ground a little and sing the *Requiem* ?

GRAVEDIGGER II. The dogs'll get the bones.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Pshaw! Think, fellow, use your head! We could dig more graves. *Ipsa facto*: more people could die.

GRAVEDIGGER II. There's no way to hurry this up. Time comes for somebody—plop, he's dead. And if it don't, you won't finish him off with a cudgel.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Profound philosophy, this. Metaphysics.

GRAVEDIGGER II. What?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Never mind! (*Pathetically.*) *Passons, passons, passons!* In short, you don't agree with me?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Just see to your job, and that will do.

GRAVEDIGGER I. I beg your pardon! I have not sunk so low as yet.

GRAVEDIGGER II. You don't like your trade no more?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Trade? *Pardon!* This is a stage. It is only a part I play.

GRAVEDIGGER II. You bet! With a shovel, in a pit.

GRAVEDIGGER I. And you?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Out there I used to plow. Here I dig.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Bravo! I assure you, my dear fellow, "there is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers."

GRAVEDIGGER II. You're talking stupid.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "They hold up Adam's profession."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Oh.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Not "oh," but "ah"! "The Scripture says, 'Adam digged'."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Sure, he dug Eve.

GRAVEDIGGER I. No need to mock, my friend. "What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. It's written right on your nose.

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Touche. (Digs and sings):*

"In youth, when I did love, did love,  
Methought it was very sweet,  
To contract, O, the time, for, ah, my behave,  
O, methought, there was nothing meet."

GRAVEDIGGER II. The time's long gone, eh?

GRAVEDIGGER I.

"But age, with his stealing steps.  
Hath claw'd me in his clutch,  
And hath shipped me intil the land,  
As if I had never been such."

GRAVEDIGGER II. What are you beefing about — it isn't your grave you're digging.

GRAVEDIGGER I. It is but a poetic device.

GRAVEDIGGER II (*takes a skull out of the grave*).

GRAVEDIGGER I. Aha! "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Yelled its head off. (*Throws the skull away.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. "How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder! It might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'er-reaches; one that would circumvent God, might it not?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. Maybe it was a politician, but does that make me a knave, and an ass to boot?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Pardon me, my good man—these are only my lines. Shakespeare. *Hamlet!*

GRAVEDIGGER II. To hell with them, whoever they are. Can't you speak your own words?

GRAVEDIGGER I. What need do I have for them if there is a nobler tongue?  
(*GRAVEDIGGER I climbs out of the grave and picks up the skull.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Or of a courtier; which could say, 'Good-morrow, sweet lord! How dost thou, good lord?' This might be my lord such-a-one..."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Or else, a clodhopper.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "I like thy wit well."

GRAVEDIGGER II. Looks like we'll get together, after all. (*Throws out another skull.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. "There's another. (*Takes a skull.*) Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quilllets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? Hum!"

GRAVEDIGGER II. He lost his case, and his noodle don't hurt him no more, that's for sure. Except maybe from your palaver.

(*GRAVEDIGGER II climbs out from the grave, sits down on the pile of dirt and starts eating, washing it down with whiskey.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. I perceive you are gorging yourself again?

GRAVEDIGGER II. A man works in the fields, he's got to keep his strength up. And you won't have any grub this time, either?

(*GRAVEDIGGER I takes out a cigarette butt and lights up.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. I have use for none but spiritual nourishment.

GRAVEDIGGER II (*gives him the bottle*). Here, then, have a suck of this.

GRAVEDIGGER I. This is not indispensable, but I shall not refuse. (*Takes a swallow and spits it out.*) Poison! (*Returning the bottle.*) And thus you will go to your grave without ever having tasted the difference between noble spirits and dishwater.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Why talk about going places if you're here already.

GRAVEDIGGER I. We only prepare the bedding for others, "goodman delver." This here grave, for instance, is for the fairest Ophelia. (*Talks with himself*):

"What man dost thou dig it for?

"For no man, sir.

"What woman, then?

"For none, neither.

"Who is to be buried in it?

"One that was a woman, sir; but rest her soul, she's dead."

(*To GRAVEDIGGER II.*) But for whom are you scratching out this pit — I have no notion.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Maybe, it's for your "prince."

GRAVEDIGGER I. Nonsense. It is too early.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Why?

GRAVEDIGGER I. A ridiculous question. No one is buried alive.

GRAVEDIGGER II. So there you've got it: the hole is for somebody who is no longer alive.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Your logic astounds me. But it is of little help. Aren't you curious?

GRAVEDIGGER II. I don't care. Whomever they stick in there, I'll bury him.

GRAVEDIGGER I. It would seem to me you don't respect your profession sufficiently.

GRAVEDIGGER II. I'd go nuts otherwise.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Did not the undertaker tell you?

GRAVEDIGGER II. And you?

GRAVEDIGGER I. I must confess, I remember nothing. It seemed as if someone had taken me firmly by the arm, brought me here and told me to dig.

GRAVEDIGGER II. That's just how it was with me.

*(A pause)*

GRAVEDIGGER I. I think I have stepped out of character a little. Someone has mixed up the text.

GRAVEDIGGER II. While they're straightening it out, you better get into your grave. We won't be finished in time.  
*(GRAVEDIGGER II climbs in and digs.)*

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Mass, I cannot tell" who shall stretch out his limbs here comfortably for eternal repose. It could be a maiden as yet unspoiled, or else a whore having sold her last breath. Or perhaps a mother who could no longer bear the ruckus of her dozen brats, or again, perhaps a dignified matron who passed on out of sheer *ennui* and is still holding on to her lorgnette, even in the darkness of the grave.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Why just womenfolk?

*(Silence)*

GRAVEDIGGER I. "How long will a man lie in the earth ere he rot?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. You'll find out when you are in there.

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Pardon?* *(Suddenly.)* I cannot bear not knowing! "Whose grave's this, sirrah?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. That's right, yell some more and I'll tell you.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Do not play a bigger fool than you already are.

"What is he whose grief  
"Bears such an emphasis? Whose phrase of sorrow  
"Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand  
"Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,  
"Hamlet the Dane."

*(Raises his hands and leaps into the grave on top of GRAVEDIGGER II.)*

GRAVEDIGGER II. Have you gone crazy?!..

GRAVEDIGGER I.

"Thou pray'st not well.  
"I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat;  
"For, though I am not splenitive and rash,  
"Yet have I something in me dangerous,  
"Which let thy wiseness fear: hold off thy hand."

*(While the GRAVEDIGGERS are struggling, a YOUNG WOMAN walks in nonchalantly, wearing slacks and a tight sweater. She is blonde, well-built.)*

*(The GRAVEDIGGERS are dumbfounded.)*

GRAVEDIGGER I. What devil is this?

GRAVEDIGGER II. No devil—a woman in pants.

YOUNG WOMAN *(looking around)*. How do you do?

GRAVEDIGGER II. I do, I do, what else?

YOUNG WOMAN. That's fine. And you?

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Pardon?*

YOUNG WOMAN. *Comment allez-vous, Monsieur?*

(GRAVEDIGGER I jumps out of the grave, leans on his umbrella and takes the hand of the YOUNG WOMAN.)

GRAVEDIGGER I. Madame, I am, as they say, in the Spring of my years, in the very flower of youth. (Kisses her hand.) How cold is your hand.

YOUNG WOMAN. Really?

(A pause)

YOUNG WOMAN. You seem to be having a difference of opinion.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Forever. (Puts on his hat.) A struggle between the elements of darkness and light.

YOUNG WOMAN. As tragic as that?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Allow me to present myself (takes off his hat): an actor *par excellence* — Oedipus, Hamlet, King Lear, Faust; if need be—Romeo, et cetera, et cetera. Ergo — a mirror of man's suffering and of his soul.

GRAVEDIGGER II. And now — a gravedigger.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Your smattering of *quid pro quo* shall not distract from my glory. Today, as then, I am ecstatic with my part: "There is no ancient gentlemen but grave-makers ..."

GRAVEDIGGER II. What, Adam and Eve again?

GRAVEDIGGER I. If it were not for the fair sex... (Takes up a fencing stance with the umbrella.) "Give us the foils!"

(GRAVEDIGGER II laughs)

YOUNG WOMAN. "Good my lord, be quiet."

GRAVEDIGGER I. Horatio! Are you an actress, too?

YOUNG WOMAN. Hardly. Unless we all are actors. In that case, I am cast, they say, in a tragic role.

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Enchante*. (Sticks the umbrella into the ground and hangs his hat on it.) "Lady,-shall I lie in your lap?"

YOUNG WOMAN. What lap?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Let's not be particular.

YOUNG WOMAN. All right. Then I answer: "No, my lord."

GRAVEDIGGER I. "I mean: my head upon your lap."

YOUNG WOMAN. "Ay, my lord."

GRAVEDIGGER I. "Do you think I mean country matters?"

YOUNG WOMAN. "I think nothing, my lord."

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Charmant!* (To GRAVEDIGGER II.) "How like you this play?"

GRAVEDIGGER II. Isn't one fool enough?

GRAVEDIGGER I (to YOUNG WOMAN). "By the Lord, Horatio, these three years I have taken note of it; the age has grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe."

YOUNG WOMAN. Oh?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Wait another three years, the toe will reach higher yet.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Pig. Pay him no attention. "Welcome to Elsinore."

YOUNG WOMAN (laughs). My pleasure.

GRAVEDIGGER II. What's all this fancy stuff? Once you got here, lass, make yourself at home on the muddy grave-pit,

and that's all there is to it.

YOUNG WOMAN. Is that all? You speak straight from the shoulder.

GRAVEDIGGER II. I'm not much at big speeches. In the field, spreading manure, or cracking the whip, I had no use for fancy talk. I don't need it now either.

GRAVEDIGGER I. May I present: a mole of the earth.

GRAVEDIGGER II. What counts is that I still belong to the soil.

YOUNG WOMAN. Excellent. The formalities are over. (*To GRAVEDIGGER I.*) Well, then—back to your grave. Hop!

GRAVEDIGGER I. I beg your pardon. We don't know each other yet.

YOUNG WOMAN. Everyone knows me, but no one is anxious for the meeting.

GRAVEDIGGER I. In your youth and beauty? You can't be serious.

YOUNG WOMAN. Believe me.

GRAVEDIGGER I. I cannot. This is why I must get to know you. You speak the lines very well, but you say you are not an actress.

YOUNG WOMAN. Oh, no. No, no.

GRAVEDIGGER I. Then who are you?

YOUNG WOMAN. Don't you remember?

GRAVEDIGGER I. I swear upon St. Patrick — no.

YOUNG WOMAN. And you?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Haven't laid my eyes on you as long as I live,

YOUNG WOMAN. You have short memories. It was I who told you to dig the graves.

(*The GRAVEDIGGERS exchange glances.*)

GRAVEDIGGER I. Are you the undertaker?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Damn it! Now it's the womenfolk sticking you under the ground.

YOUNG WOMAN (*smiles*). Is this really news?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Even if it were news, on this occasion it is a pleasure. My respects. (*Kisses YOUNG WOMAN'S hand again.*) Your hand...

YOUNG WOMAN. Is cold. You told me already.

GRAVEDIGGER I. *Pardon*. And yet, I must confess, I have no memory of you. Do you perhaps ?

GRAVEDIGGER II. Hell, I don't know and I don't care. If she says she told us to dig, let's dig.

YOUNG WOMAN. You are practical.

GRAVEDIGGER I. "A worthy pioner!"

YOUNG WOMAN, (*pointing to the grave*) Then follow his example.

(*GRAVEDIGGER I does not move.*)

YOUNG WOMAN. Do you feel uneasy today?

GRAVEDIGGER I. Your insight pierces like an arrow.

GRAVEDIGGER II. Does it always hit the bullseye?

YOUNG WOMAN. If I were to say "yes", you would not believe me anyway. So the question remains a question. That will suffice.

*(YOUNG WOMAN takes GRAVEDIGGER I by the arm and leads him to the grave.)*

GRAVEDIGGER II. Look at that—just like to the altar.

YOUNG WOMAN *(points to the grave)*. "Go, make you ready."

GRAVEDIGGER I. *(to GRAVEDIGGER II, as if aside)*. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

*(GRAVEDIGGER I climbs into the grave and begins to dig. YOUNG WOMAN comes forward.)*

YOUNG WOMAN *(to the audience)*. "Will the king hear this piece of work?"

*(It is getting darker. A light rain starts falling. In the chapel rings a bell.)*

**Note**

\* This and all other matter in quotation marks is taken from Shakespeare's Hamlet.