

Isabella Says No

Scene One

(Still water pools in the broken fountain upstage left and another fountain trickles upstage right. African Lilly's, Bleeding Heart's, and Daisy's drip over the stage like stalactites. A floral swing hangs slightly off centre and a small trampoline sits in the left of the garden. MARIANA's wedding gown ripples around her as she kneels to the DUKE. She is crying. ISABELLA nearly trips on the bride's long veil as she watches the DUKE check his reflection in the still water. ISABELLA's crucifix pendant hangs over plain dress and her wimple is white. LUCIO shuffles behind the women, picking petals from a daisy. The PROVOST holds ANGELO's hands behind his back.)

MARIANA: My lord, I don't understand.

DUKE: It's simple. I ordered Angelo to marry you, now I order the Provost to kill him.

MARIANA: You're mocking me.

DUKE: I'm saving you from a life bound to a criminal. Let him die, take his inheritance, and buy yourself a better husband.

(MARIANA stands and walks to ANGELO. She puts her hand on his face and presses her forehead to his.)

MARIANA: I don't want anyone else.

(MARIANA kneels at the DUKE's feet.)

MARIANA: Please, I'm begging you, let him live.

DUKE: *(Dismissive)* Get up.

MARIANA: *(Desperate)* Please, give him a chance.

DUKE: *(Angry)* Get up!

MARIANA: *(Turning to ISABELLA)* I'm sorry you lost your brother; will you help me keep my husband?

(ANGELO watches MARIANA with a mixture of desperation and curiosity.)

DUKE: She didn't lose her brother, Angelo killed him. She won't-

(The DUKE falls silent as ISABELLA kneels.)

ISABELLA: Claudio was a criminal and he paid the price. Let it end there.

DUKE: Dear Isabella, what sort of Duke would I be if I didn't give my citizens justice?

ISABELLA: A merciful one.

(The DUKE laughs.)

DUKE: Bring me my sword.

(The PROVOST forces ANGELO to crouch over the fountain with his neck stretched across the marble. The DUKE looms over the prisoner.) MARIANA: *(Helplessly)* No!

(The PROVOST reaches up and pulls the sword from the flowers. He pauses.)

PROVOST: *(Playfully)* My lord.

(ANGELO pulls himself up as the DUKE looks away.) DUKE:

(Pausing) What?

PROVOST: You have a visitor.

DUKE: *(Smiling)* Send him in.

(The PROVOST pokes the sheathed sword into the flowers. The trampoline catches CLAUDIO's fall.)

ISABELLA: *(In disbelief)* Claudio!

(ISABELLA bursts into tears and hugs her brother. The DUKE ruffles ANGELO's hair playfully.)

DUKE: I suppose you're off the hook.

(ANGELO runs to MARIANA.)

DUKE: *(To LUCIO)* I wish I could say the same to you. How would you like to die?

LUCIO: Of old age, my lord.

DUKE: *(Laughing)* I'm afraid slandering a Duke deserves something more immediate.

LUCIO: Ok, lions, could you get lions? Or dip me into a volcano! Take a trip to Pompei, we could make a day of it. Or you could take an unripe grape and-

DUKE: *(Interrupting)* Enough, I'll punish you later.

(The DUKE turns to ISABELLA.) DUKE:

May I have a word?

(Confused, ISABELLA nods and CLAUDIO grips her arm. The others lean in to hear.)

DUKE: In private.

(Everyone but ISABELLA and the DUKE shuffle to the wings and poke their heads out to watch. The DUKE kneels on one knee. In the pit, a string quartet plays a Viennese waltz.)

DUKE: Give me your hand and say you will be mine.

(LUCIO and the PROVOST clap from the wings. ISABELLA stares at his hand in horror.)

DUKE: Isabella?

(ISABELLA bursts out laughing. ANGELO, MARIANA, and CLAUDIO join in.) DUKE:

Stop.

ISABELLA: *(Still laughing)* I know your tricks, my lord.

DUKE: This isn't a trick.

ISABELLA: *(Laughing harder)* If you were really proposing, you'd have a ring.

(Red roses lower from the white flowers. Rings wind around each stem. ISABELLA looks up, her horror renewed.)

DUKE: Is this sufficient?

(ISABELLA looks at the DUKE, then kneels next to him.)

ISABELLA: *(Gently)* I would love to be your wife, truly, *but-*

(The DUKE pulls her into an embrace as the PROVOST and LUCIO pop party poppers.

ISABELLA pushes the DUKE away and brushes herself off.)

ISABELLA: Don't touch me!

CLAUDIO: My sister is about to swear into sisterhood, she can't marry.

DUKE: You were about to be executed.

(Desperate, ISABELLA steps towards the DUKE.)

ISABELLA: I wish I could marry you, my lord. I owe you my brother's life. But I would make a terrible wife. My vow of obedience means I can't obey you; my vow of poverty means I can't live in your riches; my vow of chastity means I can't share your bed.

DUKE: It's not sinful to sleep with your husband.

ISABELLA: Don't teach me about sin.

DUKE: You can't break vows you are yet to make.

(ISABELLA shakes her head and cries.) ISABELLA:

I have a duty to God.

DUKE: You can do your duty by my side. I have a chapel in my palace, perhaps you could invite some of the sisters to pray with you there. You can set an example to all of Vienna.

What do you say?

(ISABELLA falls back into the swing and looks up.) ISABELLA:

Lord, God, help me.

(The swing lifts ISABELLA into the flowers above. The DUKE looks up at her, annoyed.)

DUKE: Isabella? I need an answer. Will you marry me?

YES ISABELLA: Yes!

NO ISABELLA: *(At the same time as YES ISABELLA)* No!

(Two swings lower two ISABELLA's back down. They are identical until YES ISABELLA plucks a ruby ring from a rose and slides it onto her finger.)

Scene Two

(A large crucifix hangs in front of the flowers above the stage and the fountains are replaced with a single alter stage right. Both swings still dangle from the flowers. FRANCESCA prays at the altar. She wears a black wimple and a crucifix pendant. NO ISABELLA runs to her, out of breath.)

NO ISABELLA: I am ready for my vows.

(FRANCESCA nods and the string quartet plays echoes of hymns. MARIANA slides the broken fountain upstage left, then steps behind it. YES ISABELLA tentatively follows the DUKE as he wheels lavish gowns and jewellery onto stage left. The string quartet splices phrases from a waltz into their music. On stage right, SISTERS including the PRIORESS enter and pull a lace wedding gown over NO ISABELLA's dress. MARIANA motions for the DUKE to turn around, then helps YES ISABELLA into a gold ballgown with a full skirt. NO ISABELLA kneels at the alter while the PRIORESS lifts four strands of her hair and cuts. The DUKE turns back to YES ISABELLA and smiles. Plain white linen drops from above and the SISTERS pull it over NO ISABELLA's wedding dress. YES ISABELLA selects a gold necklace and grimaces as the DUKE clasps it around her neck. The SISTERS tie a girdle around NO ISABELLA and lower a black wimple onto her head. The DUKE pulls YES ISABELLA into a waltz as NO ISABELLA and her SISTERS sing hymns about purity. YES ISABELLA trips over the DUKE's leg and he steadies her.) DUKE: Have you danced before?

YES ISABELLA: The convent doesn't host balls.

(The DUKE pulls her into a tighter hold.)

DUKE: How long did you live there?

(YES ISABELLA pushes him back.) YES

ISABELLA: Two years.

DUKE: And you're still unsworn?

YES ISABELLA: (*Annoyed*) Would I be here if I wasn't?

DUKE: Why are you upset?

YES ISABELLA: I was due to take my vows the day my brother sent for me.

DUKE: A sign from God.

YES ISABELLA: (*Coldly*) Don't preach to me, you're not a Friar.

(The DUKE pulls her closer again and doesn't let her push away.)

DUKE: Isabella, if you really wanted to be a nun, you wouldn't have waited so long to swear.

YES ISABELLA: The Prioress never lets anyone take their vows straight away.

DUKE: Why?

(He raises YES ISABELLA's hand, and she twirls beneath it. She glances to MARIANA, then returns to a loose hold.)

YES ISABELLA: Because some people realise the life isn't for them.

DUKE: And others fall in love with a Duke.

(YES ISABELLA uses the trampoline to leap into a lift.)

DUKE: You're getting the hang of this.

(YES ISABELLA holds the DUKE's hands and walks him centre stage.)

YES ISABELLA: Do you love me?

DUKE: I do.

YES ISABELLA: Please let me go back.

(She lets go of one hand and turns to stare at NO ISABELLA as the SISTERS congratulate her on taking her vows. The DUKE watches with a frown.)

DUKE: I can't let you swear; you wouldn't be happy there.

(YES ISABELLA turns back to the DUKE and wears a smile.)

YES ISABELLA: *(Tactfully)* My apologies, it's been a long day. Perhaps choosing my wedding gown would raise my spirits?

MARIANA: I have a selection.

(MARIANA pulls white dresses from the rack.)

YES ISABELLA: *(To the DUKE)* It's bad luck for you to see me in my dress.

(The DUKE brings her hand to his lips, then exits stage left. YES ISABELLA wipes her hand on her gown and rips the gaudy necklace from her neck.)

MARIANA: Oh Isabella, he's a good man.

YES ISABELLA: Can I trust you?

MARIANA: Of course.

(YES ISABELLA grips MARIANA's arm.)

YES ISABELLA: You asked me to help you keep a husband, now I'm asking you to help me lose one.

(MARIANA nods and the two silently scheme together. The SISTERS hand NO ISABELLA a small bible and leave her to her silent study.)

DUKE: *(Offstage)* Delivery for Miss Isabella.

(NO ISABELLA drops her book and runs to the swing. She tugs on the rope.) NO

ISABELLA: *(Rushed)* Lord, God, help me. Lord, God, help me.

(The swing doesn't rise, so NO ISABELLA lifts up the altar's cloth and hides beneath it. The

DUKE enters stage right clutching a parcel with a red ribbon. He walks around, searching.)

DUKE: Is hide and seek the new religious ritual?

(He kneels at the left side of the altar.) DUKE:

I prefer a game of catch.

(The DUKE rolls an emerald engagement ring under the altar.)

DUKE: I believe that was your favourite ring but do let me know if I'm mistaken.

(He sighs and puts the parcel in front of him.)

DUKE: Isabella, what you did earlier was very embarrassing. Not just for me, but for your family.

(NO ISABELLA quietly starts escaping from the right side of the altar.)

DUKE: Your brother, in particular, was very embarrassed to spend another night in a cell.

(NO ISABELLA freezes.)

DUKE: And I personally did not enjoy being undermined before my subjects.

(The DUKE runs around the altar to see NO ISABELLA crawling to the exit. He drops the parcel next to her.)

DUKE: But I am not one to hold grudges. Open it.

(NO ISABELLA shakes as she stands up and opens the parcel. A golden bible, larger than the paper one her SISTERS gave her, nestles inside the tissue. NO ISABELLA offers the DUKE a polite smile.)

DUKE: Can't you speak?

(The DUKE frowns, then reaches out and touches her black wimple. NO ISABELLA steps back.)

DUKE: You are sworn.

(NO ISABELLA nods.) DUKE:

No matter.

(He drops to one knee and offers his hand.)

DUKE: Give me your hand and say you will be mine.

(NO ISABELLA shakes her head.) DUKE:

No matter.

(He crouches to pick up the engagement ring.)

DUKE: You'll say yes next time.

(The DUKE pockets the ring and exits stage right. On stage left, MARIANA finishes scheming with YES ISABELLA.)

YES ISABELLA: Thank you, Mariana.

MARIANA: It's the least I can do.

(MARIANA exits stage left. Both ISABELLA's sit on their swings with grim expressions. YES ISABELLA pulls her crucifix pendent out of her bodice and kisses it. NO ISABELLA reads the golden bible.)