Meaner Creatures by Holly Cate

(Note: The centerpiece of all three plays in this trilogy is an ensemble of citizen CLOWNS. *Meaner Creatures* was written for an ensemble of nine CLOWNS. Companies producing this work are encouraged to establish their own line attribution for the CLOWNS. The example below is one way of many to determine which CLOWN says what text.)

HASTINGS I'll have this crown of mine cut from my shoulders

Before I'll see the crown so foul misplaced. But canst thou guess that he doth aim at it?

BUCK. Ay, on my life; he reminds you of the news

That just yesterday your enemies,

The kindred of the Queen, were 'headed at Pomfret.

(BUCKINGHAM points to the bobbing heads.)

HASTINGS Indeed, I am no mourner for that news,

But that I'll give my voice on Richard's side To bar my master's heirs in true descent, God knows I will not do it, to the death.

(RICHARD steps forward into the space.)

RICHARD Pardon, my friends, that I have stayed so long,

I have been picking strawberries, but I trust My absence doth neglect no great design

Which by my presence might have been concluded.

BUCK. Had not you come upon your cue, my lord,

William Lord Hastings had pronounced your part –

I mean your voice for crowning of the King.

RICHARD Fie, what a slug you are, Hastings. (*To BUCK*.) "To the death",

I think he said. (*To HASTINGS*) To the death, my lord?

(HASTINGS sees the trap now. RICHARD nods to the CLOWNS, who begin to close in on

HASTINGS.)

The Lord Chamberlain knows me well, and loves me well.

HASTINGS I thank your Grace—

RICHARD He also has a good memory.

(RICHARD backhands HASTINGS, who crumples to the ground in pain.)

RICHARD Don't you, my lord? (*To the CLOWNS*) Get him up.

(The CLOWNS hold HASTINGS up so he can face RICHARD.)

HASTINGS I thank his Grace, I know he loves me well;

But for his purpose in the coronation—

(RICHARD takes out his dagger. HASTINGS is desperate now.)

For his purpose in the coronation, I know not, my lord, I know—

(RICHARD drives his dagger deep into HASTINGS' thigh and leaves it there for a few seconds. HASTINGS screams in pain.)

That sounds familiar. CLOWN 1

Shhh – this is serious. CLOWN 2

(The CLOWN gives her a "Whatever" look in response.)

RICHARD (To HASTINGS) You know what? (he takes the dagger out;

HASTINGS screams) What say you, my lord?

Cousin of Buckingham, you heard him,

What says the sweating lord?

(HASTINGS is trying to speak and to stand up, but RICHARD keeps him at bay with one arm.)

BUCK. My lord, the testy gentleman promises

That he will lose his head ere give consent

His master's child-

RICHARD "His master's child"?

BUCK. (*Continuing*) Shall lose the royalty of England's throne.

RICHARD Who is your "master's child"?

HASTINGS I only meant—

RICHARD (Grabbing HASTINGS) I am your master, you piece of shit. I helped

you. And this is how you repay me?

Thou art a traitor. Off with his head!

(BUCKINGHAM nods at the CLOWN with the indictment who hands it to him. RICHARD and BUCKINGHAM start to exit. HASTINGS moans and writhes in pain on the ground, mumbling to himself. The CLOWNS speak over HASTINGS.)

CLOWN 8 (To the other CLOWNS) See, didn't I tell you?

This is the world we live in.

CLOWN 3

Yeah, yeah – you're a genius.

HASTINGS

Woe, woe for England; not a whit for me . . .

(RICHARD turns to see that the CLOWNS haven't obeyed his order.)

RICHARD

OFF WITH HIS HEAD! Oh for Christ's sake . . .

(He marches over and grabs one of the CLOWNS, flinging him toward HASTINGS.)

RICHARD You do it.

(RICHARD has chosen the CLOWN who hates cutting off people's heads. The other CLOWNS immediately begin to snicker and enjoy the fact that their friend has to do his least favorite chore. RICHARD and BUCKINGHAM exit. The CLOWNS basically forget about HASTINGS and begin circling around the chosen "executioner". They are very playful. The event has more the feel of a hot-dog eating contest than an execution. They laugh and taunt the executioner CLOWN, often talking over one another.)

CLOWN 8 Ahhhh HA! Serves you right.

CLOWN 3 You better remember this the next time you talk about France.

Maybe we'll send you there—

Let's choose the dullest sword we can find— CLOWN 2

CLOWN 6 Axe.

What? CLOWN 2

Axe. You behead someone with an axe. CLOWN 6

CLOWN 2 Okay, fine – let's choose the dullest axe we can find,

So you have to chop and chop and chop.

CLOWN 8 Until his head goes plop—

CLOWN 6 In the basket.

(One of the CLOWNS grabs a bucket as a prop and begins dancing around with it, miming the moment the head comes off. Unnoticed by the CLOWNS, HASTINGS is trying to stand.)

CLOWN 9 Plop, plop, plop . . .

CLOWN 5 You're going to have to saw and saw and saw . . .

CLOWN 8 (Overlapping) Hope you had a good breakfast! (The CLOWNS begin a sort of locker-room ritual in which they all mime being the executioner and having their head chopped off, often with multiple executions happening at once, and accompanied by a rhythmic chant. They are having terrific fun, even the executioner CLOWN. *The actors should feel free to improvise.)*

CLOWNS Saw saw saw – PLOP

Saw saw plop

PLOP PLOP PLOP saw

Saaawww saawww plop, etc.

(In their glee, they take the chair and turn it on its side so that it functions as the chopping block. At the climax of the ritual, all of the CLOWNS are circled behind the 'victim' CLOWN when one of them notices that HASTINGS is standing now and watching them.)

CLOWN 9 Hey – look at him—

(He points at HASTINGS, and the other CLOWNS stop the game.)

CLOWN 2 Better get the job done.

(The executioner CLOWN looks crestfallen but goes over to HASTINGS and grabs him roughly by the arm. HASTINGS immediately launches into a grand speech.)

HASTINGS O bloody Richard! Miserable England!

I prophesy the fearfull'st time to thee—

Come, come dispatch; 'tis bootless to exclaim. CLOWN 1

The Duke would be at dinner—

CLOWN 5 The Duke? *I* would be at dinner.

CLOWN 1 (*Continuing*) - he longs to see your head.

(Slight pause)

CLOWN 9 Plop.

(The CLOWNS collapse in laughter. HASTINGS seizes the moment to make his case. The CLOWNS largely speak over him; only the first few words of his speech are clearly heard.)

HASTINGS O momentary grace of mortal men,

> (Which we more hunt for than the grace of God. Who builds his hope in air of your good looks

Lives like a drunken sailor on a mast, Ready with every nod to tumble down *Into the fatal bowels of the deep.)*

CLOWN 2 (Over HASTINGS) Take him out. CLOWN 1 I'm trying.

(Some CLOWNS come over to help the executioner CLOWN with HASTINGS who is doing his best to resist, despite his injuries.)

CLOWN 8 Ugh. Don't you ever get tired of listening to them talk, talk?

CLOWN 3 Just kill him here. What does it matter.

Please – shut him up. CLOWN 2

(One of the CLOWNS stabs HASTINGS in the heart, killing him.)

CLOWN 2 Ah. Thank you.

(*About the head*) Do I still . . . ? CLOWN 1

CLOWN 2 Yeah. The Duke wants it.

CLOWN 9 That's okay, buddy – we'll help you.

(They all gather around HASTINGS' body and help to carry it off. They speak as they exit.)

CLOWN 2 I've got the sharpest axe in Christendom.

CLOWN 5 'Sharp' is not the word I'd use for it.

CLOWN 6 You've got the shortest axe in Christendom.

CLOWN 2 It's longer than your sword.

CLOWNS Ooh aahh.

(They exit, still joking, carrying HASTINGS' body. After a beat with the stage empty, ELIZABETH creeps into the space, trailed by her two CLOWNS. MARGARET appears out of nowhere, scaring the hell out of everyone. She holds out a bucket to ELIZABETH.)

MARGARET Plop.

(ELIZABETH lunges at MARGARET. The two women have a brief but quite vicious physical scuffle, which the CLOWNS try to break up. ELIZABETH speaks as she attacks.)

ELIZ. God bless the Prince from all the pack of you! A knot you are of damned bloodsuckers.

(The CLOWNS finally pull ELIZABETH off MARGARET. MARGARET laughs quietly and touches her face. ELIZABETH has drawn blood.)

MARGARET Good. Toughen up.