

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 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 saw – PLOP
Saw saw plop
PLOP PLOP PLOP saw
Saaawww saawww 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—

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

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

CLOWN 2 Please – shut him up.

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

CLOWN 2 Ah. Thank you.

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

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.