

THE COMPANY WE KEEP
(Russell PAF show 8/27-8/11)

ISTVAN, with Marco his puppet
LILY, a serving girl

(The lordship's very private room, a cobbled-together love shack. LILY enters quickly, looking over her shoulder, watching the door expectantly -

- as ISTVAN enters in a hurry behind her, tucking in his shirt)

ISTVAN: Where's my fucking trunk, girl? Where did you put my trunk?

LILY: Be easy, sir, I tucked it right over here -- *(Shows him)*

(ISTVAN sees, nods. Takes out a stashed bottle, takes a drink, then goes to the trunk to lift the lid and rummage around, make sure all's well.)

LILY: Did that ham-handed butler hurt you?

ISTVAN: Just a thump. No matter. *(Finally acknowledges the audience)* Why, greetings, *mesdames et messieurs*. I'd not expected this friendly audience - ? *(Looks to LILY, who nods eagerly)* Aren't you the helpful girl.

LILY: I told them all about you.

ISTVAN: Did you now.

It's a pleasure to see you all! I'd thought to be in there, playing for the assembled *(thumb at door)* - the lord of the manor engaged me for his dinner entertainment - paid in advance, too. But before the show could go on, Milord had a few things he wanted to show me. *(Adjusts clothing)* And then enter the butler. *And* the lady of the house, who's quite the busybody, I suppose because Milord's not so busy with her body, these days. Or any days. Or ever.

(Investigates the space, the objets d'art) Quite the gloryhole Not to my taste, but I've played in worse. And better. I've been up and down the road, Paris, Lyon, Brussels, towns whose names I never learned, to play for

kings - kings of industry, at least - *and* lords, and baker's boys and snotted children in the alley. Any place where a show is welcome.

And I used to have fine company, a – partner in my travels. (*Considers objects again, one in particular, takes it into his hand*) Does he dream of me, I wonder? Last night, I dreamt of him....

Oh, apologies, I haven't introduced myself! Nor my fond associate.

(Takes up the Marco puppet)

This fellow here, I have known a long, long time, and he me.

(Some caretaking business with Marco, a silent communication)

He doesn't talk much, but he's a rare talent, I assure you. Though he's got some saucy tastes.

(Takes a pull from the bottle, Marco reaches for it, and is denied).

And we've been in a few skirmishes together - nothing terribly serious, nobody has died.

(Marco looks at him)

Nobody has died lately.

We've gone everywhere, he and I and the others in that trunk. It's in the manner of an expedition - we investigate true love.

And from here we're on our way to a brothel. The madam of the place is an old friend of mine - in fact, she's my little sister. She used to help with costumes, sometimes, a length of velvet here, a twist of ribbon there, though she never liked the puppets much, did she. Some people don't, you know, they think our small friend here is ...

(Looks at Marco, Marco looks at him)

Unreliable. Ungovernable. Not living, but alive.... Do you know, once in jail I met a man, a shoemaker who argued - who *insisted* - that all puppets were not really puppets at all, not things made by hand, but the avatars -

LILY: What's that?

ISTVAN: - the familiars, say, of the darkness. That the scraps and sweepings ignored by the Lord when He put together Adam and his rib of a wife found their way instead into other hands, to be made into a different sort of life, one that lives forever, that gives nothing but only takes, and takes ... My sister may have thought so, too.

Did I mention that that shoemaker was in jail for stealing? From his mother?

(Shakes his head in tandem with Marco)

And now my sister's in charge of this backstreet brothel, Under the Poppy it's called, with whores who hop about onstage, and weevils and watered-up whiskey and who knows what else. Imagine seeking for true love in such a place!

Do you have love in your lives, *mesdames et messieurs*?

LILY: I don't. But I would love to!

ISTVAN: No lover at all? A pretty thing like you?

Come here. *(Makes her part of the tableau, himself and Marco)*

Now Milord, let's say, calls his love Madame, and the season box at the Opera, and the cushy seat on the banking board - or is it the mercantile board? Some sort of plank, anyroad. And hosting pretty parties, with pretty fellows to make merry - he makes fucking merry in here, I'll wager ... A harmless bastard really, I've known many like Milord. What brings the real harm is love.

True love!! You don't need flesh and bones to want it, eh? but it's not of the flesh itself. Yet it has a certain smell, one can't mistake it - *(sniffing at LILY, one on either side. Marco sniffs at the audience, nods at ISTVAN)* Ah! Some of you do! Who here knows of love? Is it you? You? You, yes, I know *you* do ... And you know that love's got a taste to it - not only the taste of kisses, though kisses can be very sweet *(making as if to kiss LILY, closer, closer, then does not)* - but of solitary tears. And lovers' sweat, and the scent of skin ...

Everything depends on the company one keeps.

My sister keeps her company with whores. I used to keep mine with the man she keeps there, now, or who keeps her; they run the business in

tandem, apparently. *(To Marco)* He's never had a taste for business, Rupert, but who am I to judge? I only grew up beside him, hand in hand, hand to mouth, mouth to mouth, heart to heart, until *he* did the judging, didn't he, until another fine milord in the bed was one milord too many ... As if it meant anything, as if it ever could! As if anything could, but him ... We kept company - you saw it *(to Marco, who nods, then acts in accompaniment to what is said)*. Up and down the roads, into and out of scrapes - you never saw a man could hit like him! Once he put a fellow through the windows with one punch! And tracked those thieves who stole our prop-box, and weren't they surprised to be found.... We ran the streets, we owned the roads. He was all the company I ever wanted.

Until –

Until *now*, until I get there, to that whorehouse where he lives some sort of – sort of half-life, with Ag. He'll not choose not to have my company again, he cannot, when he sees me, when we –

(Passionately, to himself) He cannot.

(Marco looks away)

Oh, but you don't want to hear my tale. You'd rather have your own, the universal one, from Adam and Eve to Romeo and Juliet to – what's your name again?

LILY: Lily.

ISTVAN: To Lily and her lad-to-be.

(LILY puts a hand on ISTVAN, who removes it)

It's the eternal tale of love found, and lost, and found again, if one's got the compass for it. Isn't that so, *mesdames et messieurs*? Here's to good company!

The company we keep
May keep us from our sleep
And keep us toss-and-turning till the morning
So on the road we go
To play our little show
To keep our hearts from sighing and forlorning –

(aside to Marco) "Forlorning"? Really?

(Marco nods. Shrugs)

And while we play our show
We make friends as we go

(Winks to LILY, to the audience)

In company as sweet as it is fleeting -

(Slides LILY from his lap)

For where the Poppy grows
Is where we'll play our shows
For journeys always end in lovers meeting.

Because all the world loves a lover, and –

LILY: Listen!

Listen, oh, that's Madame coming!

ISTVAN: And her fucking butler. *(Scrambles for Marco, hat, and the statue)*
Have the coachman take the trunk, I'll be back for it tonight –

(Bows to audience) And perhaps I'll see you Under the Poppy!

(Exits.

LILY follows. Audience departs.)