

The Art Of Love

SCRIPTUS BOOKS

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The Art Of Love

by Andrew Rissik

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All rights whatsoever in this play are strictly reserved and applications for permission to perform it, etc., must be made in advance before rehearsal begin to Berlin Associates, 7 Tyers Gate, London SE1 3HX.

Characters

Ovid

Julia

Sertorius

Falco

Fabia

Palamades *Julia's secretary*

Paullus Fabius Maximus

Verrius *Caesar's secretary*

Augustus Caesar

The Art Of Love was first broadcast by BBC Radio 3
on April 11th 2004 with the following cast:

Ovid Stephane Dillane

Julia Juliet Aubrey

Sertorius Peter Eyre

Falco Ian McNeice

Fabia Penny Downie

Palamedes Ioan Meredith

Paullus Fabius Maximus James Laurenson

Verrius Damian Lynch

Augustus Caesar Robert Hardy

The play was directed by Jeremy Mortimer
with music by Mia Soteriou.

VI

Later.

Ovid and Julia are sitting together, very close.

They are alone.

Ovid

Did you like it?

Julia

Yes.

Ovid

And?

Julia

No, it's just ...

do you not think the king
sounds too self-consciously modern?

Ovid

What's wrong with that?

Julia

Nothing:
but clearly it's my grandfather talking.

Ovid smiles.

Ovid

Possibly.

Julia

Why don't you write more traditionally?

She's baiting him.

Ovid

I started on an epic, once.
I wrote heroically for days.

Julia

O? did something go wrong?

Ovid

Yes: a woman:
she threw me out.

I came home early one evening,
suspecting nothing
to find my clothes
piled up in the street.

She'd even changed the fucking locks.

Julia laughs.

How dare you laugh.

Julia

Bet you deserved it.

Ovid

I thought of what I'd been scribbling
only that morning:

all the pompous high-flown words
I'd been using:

and I said to myself,
“what is more fatuous

than to waste a life
writing rubbish like this?”

But you're right:
it's the epic I need:

the one big incontestably great
but utterly unreadable masterpiece,
with its forked tongue up Caesar's arse.

Julia laughs: a moment.

Virgil sets out to write
the history of our race,
the story of Aeneas,
in grand heroic verse;

he devises this ridiculous piece
of imitation Homer
blatantly, nakedly, to win Caesar's favour,
whose men
had seized the family farm,
and not restored it to him.

So:

this shy, stammering, high-pitched man,
with his ailments and illnesses,
his nickname 'the virgin'

creates for us nevertheless
a sternly virile hero,
a titan of battle and war,
and is given, in reward,
for services to poetry and the state,

every type of material honour:
his farm rebuilt as a luxury villa,
a special kind of toga ...

Julia interrupts, amused.

Julia

It is beautifully written.
It is better than you say it is.

Ovid

Possibly.

A moment as she studies him.

Julia

I'm not like you.
As a child I wasn't moved by life.

It dazzled me
but it also seemed to threaten me.

I was moved
by the things that were read to me,

or otherwise by things
which were like the things in stories or poems.

I live in a mad world
and mad things keep happening in it:

brutal things,
deliberately cruel things,

pointless punishments visited upon
the good or the innocent
or the merely unlucky.

To me
the things you laugh at:
the epic shouting,
the violence:

weren't fiction: they were life.

A moment.

Once upon a time I had three elder brothers;

our house was filled with
their laughter,
their craziness,
their cruel and teasing boyish noise.

All are gone:
Gaius and Lucius are dead:
probably by poison,
probably by my grandmother's hand,

and Posthumus,
Posthumus the survivor,

the only remaining male child
who has a direct claim to the throne

exiled to an island prison
caged like an animal

still alive but barely alive:
he lives no life,
as you or I would understand life;

why?
because some woman he barely touched
was bribed to lie about him:

by my grandmother, I do not doubt,
who knew such a tale would be believed ...

A moment or two.

Even to speak this is treason.

Even to suggest
that Livia my grandmother
accused my brother, falsely, of rape

because she thought
he stood in the way of her own son:

Tiberius,
now the nominated successor to the throne:

the throne
which we must not call the throne,
because Rome is republican:
it can acknowledge no king.

Silence.

Ovid

I don't understand
why I can't stop thinking about you.

I don't understand
why it's the only thing
which matters to me.

I long to comfort you but you won't let me.

Julia

I cannot: you know that.

She holds his gaze.

A moment or two.

Ovid

Why did you want to see me?

Julia

I wanted your advice.

Ovid

About what?

Julia

About a man.

A moment.

Ovid

Ah.

Julia

Tell me how I can make him notice me.

Ovid

Tell me who he is.

Julia

That's not for you to know.

A moment.

He is of high rank:
a good and honourable man:
serious about what he says,
what he believes:
and therefore ... a little intimidating.

Ovid

What is your interest?

Julia

My interest is sexual.

Ovid

Tell me his name.

Julia

No.

Ovid

Then I will not help.

Julia

You must,
if you wish to see me again.

A moment.

Besides, I need a poet,
a poet of love.
Who else is there?

Ovid

Who else is there,
you mean,
who is any good,
who writes as people actually are,
who really knows it,
lives it,
does it?

A moment.

Julia

Do not laugh at me.

Ovid

Why not?

Julia

There is an implication of contempt.

Ovid

Indeed.

It is an implication you deserve.

You have enjoyed hurting me
by asking this advice.

Julia

You will not let me go:

your heart,
or your imagination,
will not relinquish me,
until you see I am no longer free;
until you are angered
by the thought of my infidelity
to you,
to your obsession.

A touch of anger, now.

I know you.

I know how confident you are.

You play games with me,
pretending to be my lover,
talking to me
as a lover would,

thinking
that, in the end, it will be like a poem,
that, in the end, I will submit.

I cannot submit.

He grips her suddenly, squeezing tight.

Ovid

Can you feel that?

Julia

What do you think?

Ovid

I think you have gone unpunished
for far too long.

A moment.

You say I play with you.
You have played shamelessly with me.

You talk of friendship.
It is a word you love to use.

It is your excuse for what you deny me.

No man can be truly open
with a woman
until he has been naked in her arms.
It is not possible.

Julia

To the woman it is possible.

Ovid

No, that's a lie,
a little lie that women often tell.

She is silent.

A moment or two.

This man ...
be alone with him:
it doesn't matter why, or what you talk about.

Let him see you smile.

He will know the smile is nothing,
mere politeness,
but it will set his imagination working.

While you're with him, move around, do things.
Let him be aware of your body beneath your clothes.

Let him think
you are unaware of his interest
and might not be flattered if he disclosed it.

Be pleasant in manner,
effusive, even,
which no sophisticated woman would be
if she had any overt sexual interest,
as he will know,
unless he is exceptionally naive.

This will serve to awaken his senses

while reinforcing in him
the outwardly discouraging
and therefore inwardly challenging idea
that, beneath your flawless good manners,
you are emotionally beyond his reach.

He will take his leave
with a single dominating objective: to see you again
as soon as he can.

Julia

It will not work.

Ovid

It will.

She shakes her head.

Julia

What you have suggested ...
is nothing more than a description
of our own first meeting.

Ovid

You are wrong.

At our first meeting
I sensed your interest immediately.

You said you admired my poetry
and had always wanted to meet me.

I answered I could only be
a disappointment, in the flesh:
I was middle aged and losing my looks.

You shook your head
then, more significantly,
you blushed.

Julia

The problem is my reputation.

This man thinks
I am not chaste, not serious.
I am famous for my frivolity.

I am like my mother:
many think that I will end like my mother.

Ovid

Do you believe that?
Do you?
You should not.
Believing such things may make them come true.

Julia

It is what people say.
It is what I am.

Ovid

So,
tell me,
what would you be instead?

She holds his gaze.

Julia

I would be a virgin.
I would be a virgin again.
I would begin my life again, in his arms.

Ovid laughs.

Ovid

As a virgin?
You think *I* am able to make you a virgin?

Julia

A poet can do anything.

Ovid

What do you mean
'a poet can do anything'?

He studies her, cool, suspicious.

Julia

A poet can change the world.