

## CASTING CALL for IVONA, PRINCESS OF BURGUNDY by Witold Gombrowicz

*Ivona, Princess of Burgundy* is a 1936 play by Witold Gombrowicz, one of Poland's most iconoclastic and revered writers. Living an itinerant life across continents, his exile from Poland, both physical and literary, informs and generates his work, which spans from novellas to diaries to plays.

*Ivona* is a tale of form, otherness, and violence: it is the story of a prince who one day, on the prowl for pretty women with his pals, comes across a repugnant young girl, Ivona. His repulsion is so strong that he decides to marry her. Introduced to the court, Ivona becomes a "decomposing agent," in the words of the playwright: she exposes to all the members of the court their own deepest vices and self-hatred. They cannot stand to be confronted with the truth about themselves, and finally kill her.

### CAST BREAKDOWN

Ivona (**already cast**)

King Ignatius

Queen Margaret

Prince Philip – Heir to the throne

Lord Chamberlain

Isabel – lady in waiting to the Queen

Cyril – friend of the Prince

Cyprian – friend of the Prince

Ivona's two aunts

Innocent – a courtier

Valentine – a butler

State dignitaries, courtiers, beggar, ladies of the court

### Side for KING IGNATIUS

*In this scene, the King is ordering the Queen to serve carp at a royal dinner celebrating Ivona and the Prince's engagement. It is part of a plot to kill Ivona by making her choke on a fish bone.*

KING

Margaret, if I tell you to serve carp, you'll serve carp. Don't fight with me, or I'll give you such a punch... and I can punch you if I want, I can punch you because I have sinned – I can do anything, woman, I say tremble before me, for I have sinned! I am the king of sins, understand, the king of rot and sin, of rape and groans!

QUEEN (*terrified*)

Ignatius!

KING (*more calmly*)

Well now, well now... serve carp. And invite the most eminent dignitaries, you know, those seasoned, old intimidators, those old boys who can paralyze with fear like a hundred thousand devils. (*In a lower voice*) Margaret, enough of all this shyness, fear, shame – do you understand? Enough of this poetry, pliability, peas, trees... you're no longer a fresh young flower, you're a lady, a queen, now, now. It's not you that should bend, but others that should bend before you – now, now. Go and wash up, you tramp, you look like an ungodly creature. Put on your damask dress – show what you can do, old girl! Go on! Pull together your elegance, grace, distinction, tact, manners, that's what I keep you around for, and order your harlots to dress up too, in whatever they can. Now, now, go on – you understand? And make sure it's splendid! The party is to be splendid, with ladies, not tramps. Get the guests and the food and don't worry about the rest, I'll take care of the rest! From above, from up high – with majesty! Go on, go on – you serf! (*Exit QUEEN, covering her face*) Lord Chamberlain... (*nudges him*)

CHAMBERLAIN

Sire?

KING (*quietly, gloomily*)

Bow... I need you to bow to me...

CHAMBERLAIN (*listening*)

Someone is coming.

KING (*with a sigh*)

We'd better hide.

**Side for QUEEN MARGARET**

*In this scene, the Queen confronts her desire to murder Ivona after seeing the reflection of her own poetry in the hapless girl.*

*(QUEEN walks a few steps towards IVONA's room, stops, takes out from her bosom a little notebook, quietly groans and covers her face with her hand)*

KING *(aside)*

What is this book of woes?

CHAMBERLAIN *(aside)*

Tsss...

QUEEN *(reading)*

I am alone. *(repeats)* Yes – I am alone, I am alone, lonely... *(reads)* Nobody knows the secrets of my womb. *(speaks)* Nobody knows my womb. Nobody knows it, oh, ohhh! *(reads)*

*To you, my notebook-confidante,  
I entrust my dreams, all mine,  
And my clear moonshine,  
And all my thoughts no doubt,  
May no one find them out!*

*(speaks)* May no one find them out, may no one find them out. Ohhh! *(hides face)* Horrible – horrible... Kill, kill... *(lifts bottle)* Poison, poison...

KING *(aside)*

Poison?

QUEEN *(with a painful grimace)*

May no one find them out. *(waves hand)* Let's read on. Let's read! Let this reading rile up our strength to do the terrible deed. *(reads)*

*For you, O people, I sit in my crown  
In my gown,  
The fire in my womb is not known.  
You think I am proud,  
Wonderful and endowed,  
But I only want to be pliable.*

*(speaks)* Pliable, ohhh! Ohhh! Supple. And it is I who wrote that! That is mine! Mine! Kill, kill! *(reads)*

*I want to be pliable as debris  
And supple as a planted pea  
And flexible as a hazel tree,  
Bending like a humming grove,  
Bowing like a springtime clove,  
I want pliability! I don't want royalty!  
I only crave pliability!*

Pliability, ohhh! Suppleness, ahhh! Ah! Incinerate, destroy! Debris, pea, tree... it's awful! I wrote that! It is mine, mine, and no matter what, it must be mine! Oh, only now can I see,

what a monstrosity it is! So Ignatius... has read this! Ohhh! There is a resemblance – there is a resemblance... the way she stumbles about, slobbers in herself... Oh, she is a horrible allusion to my poetry! Informant! She is betraying me! It's me! It's me! It's mine! Between us there is a resemblance... Oh, the way she dragged everything out of me and exposed it! Anyone who looks at her can discover the resemblance she shares with Margaret. Anyone who looks at her can know how I really am, exactly as though they had read my poems. Enough! She must die! Oh Margaret, you must kill her! Forward, murderous bottle! She cannot exist on earth, time is up – for everyone is ready to uncover that poisonous resemblance between us. I cannot become a victim of mockery, harassment, ridicule, human aggression because of this informant. Murder! Let's go, let's go – let's quietly enter her room with this bottle, we'll pour a couple drops into her medicine... No one will be able to tell! No one will know. She is sickly, they'll think, she just died like that, just because... Who'd guess it was me. I am the queen! (*walks forward*) No, no, wait. I can't go like this. I look the same as usual – and I'm meant to poison while looking the same? I must change myself. Dishevel at least... my hair... Good, not too much, not too ostentatiously, just enough to change my look. Oh, now... Yes, yes!...

**Side for PRINCE PHILIP**

*In this scene, the prince and his friend Cyril have brought Ivona back to the palace after the couple's engagement announcement. They're now questioning her, trying to get her to speak.*

PRINCE

Madam, why are you like this?

IVONA (*silent*)

PRINCE

Silence. Why are you like this?

CYRIL

No response. She's offended.

PRINCE

Offended.

CYRIL

Perhaps not offended. Just scared.

PRINCE

A little shy?

IVONA (*quietly, uneasily*)

I'm not offended. Please leave me alone.

PRINCE

Ah! So you're not offended? Then why don't you answer?

IVONA (*silent*)

PRINCE

Well?

IVONA (*silent*)

PRINCE

Can't you? Why?

CYRIL

Ha, ha, ha! She can't! She's offended!

PRINCE

Madam, please be kind enough to explain your mechanism. It seems you're not all that stupid. Why do people treat you as though you couldn't count to three? Are they just teasing you?

CYRIL

She's not stupid, she's in a stupid situation.

PRINCE

Very true! I'm sorry, but one thing is astonishing, Cyril. Look, she has quite a proportional nose. And she's not brainless. In fact, she doesn't seem any worse than most of the ladies we know. Why doesn't anyone harass the others? Why is this, madam? Why are you such a goat, or rather a scapegoat? Has it become a habit?

IVONA (*quietly*)

It is a wheel. It goes round and round in circles.

CYRIL

What wheel?

PRINCE

What – a wheel? Don't interrupt. What wheel?

IVONA

It goes round and round always, everyone everything always... always.

PRINCE

Round and round? Why round? There's something mystical about it. Ah, I'm beginning to see. It's true, there is some circle here. For instance: why is she lethargic? Because she is unwell. And why is she unwell? Because she is lethargic. Don't you see what a circle this is? It's Hell, not a circle!

**Side for LORD CHAMBERLAIN**

In this scene, the opening of Act IV, the Lord Chamberlain suggests a method of killing Ivona to the king.

CHAMBERLAIN

On the other hand, I've had an idea, *(laughs)* something just occurred to me. *(laughs)*

KING

Why are you laughing like an idiot?

CHAMBERLAIN

Because of this idea. *(laughs)* After all, today Your Royal Majesties are giving a banquet to celebrate this deplored betrothal. And what if we served fish, a fish full of bones, like carp, for example, now is the season for carp, serve carp in cream sauce.

*(enter VALENTINE)*

Leave!

KING *(gloomily)*

Out! – carp?

CHAMBERLAIN

Carp. *(laughs)*

KING

What do you mean – carp?

CHAMBERLAIN

Your Royal Highness, carp at an official, ceremonial banquet – I don't know, if Your Royal Highness has noticed, but the more people are around, the more lost she is – and yesterday I glanced at her, a bit like this... from above, from up high... and she almost choked on a potato, a regular potato. Your Royal Highness, what if we served carp – vigorously, from up above. *(laughs)* It's a difficult fish... bony... one can choke on it quite easily at a ceremonial banquet in front of many strangers.

KING

My Lord Chamberlain... *(looks at him)* It's a bit... stupid... carp?

CHAMBERLAIN *(a little hurt)*

I know it's stupid. If it weren't stupid, I wouldn't have mentioned it.

**Side for CYRIL and CYPRIAN**

This is a fragment from the first act, and it's the moment that the prince and his two companions, Cyril and Cyprian, first see Ivona.

CYPRIAN

What a monster!

ISABEL (*offended*)

"Monster" is going too far.

CYRIL

A drowned rat! She is – dissatisfied!

CYPRIAN

Wretch! Crybaby! Let's go and show her our contempt! We'll snub her!

CYRIL

Yes, yes! Let's deflate this puffed-up sufferer. It's our duty. Go on, I'll be right behind you.  
(*With sarcastic looks, they walk right by IVONA, then burst into laughter.*)

CYPRIAN

Ha, ha, ha! Right under her nose! Right under her nose!

ISABEL

Leave her alone – this is nonsense!

AUNT I (*to IVONA*)

See what you expose us to.

AUNT II

To being a public laughingstock! You heaven-sent affliction! I thought that at least in my old age, after having finished my job of womanhood, I would avoid ridicule. Now I'm old, but I still must suffer being sneered at because of you.

CYPRIAN

Can you hear that? The aunts are at it too. Ha, ha, ha, she deserves it! Go on, give it to her!

AUNT II

They're laughing at us again. We can't leave, because then they'll laugh behind our backs... but if we stay – they laugh in our faces!

AUNT I (*to IVONA*)

Last night, at the dance, why didn't you move your leg, dear child?

AUNT II

Why isn't anyone interested in you? Do you think this is enjoyable for us? We placed all our female sexual ambition in you, and you... nothing... why don't you ski?



AUNT I

Why don't you pole vault? Other ladies do.

CYPRIAN

Oh, how clumsy she is! She annoys me! She annoys me terribly! She's really grinding my gears! I'll go flip the bench over – what do you think?

CYRIL

No, no. Why trouble yourself? It's enough to shake your finger or wave your hand or whatever. Whatever you do to such a creature will be mocking. *(sniffs)*

AUNT II *(to IVONA)*

You see? Now they're sniffing at us!

ISABEL

Leave her alone.

CYPRIAN

No, no, let's play a real joke on her. You know what, I'll pretend to have a limp, and she'll think that means that not even a lame dog would want her. *(tries to go up to the bench)*

PRINCE

Stop! I have a better idea!

CYPRIAN

Oh ho! I leave the field to you!

CYRIL

What do you want to do? You look as though you have something good!

### Side for IVONA'S AUNTS

In this fragment from Act I, the prince approaches Ivona, who is flanked by her two mean aunts.

PRINCE

You ladies seem to be having trouble with this young lady. Why is she so apathetic?

AUNT I

Our misfortune! She suffers from some organic deficiency. Her blood is sluggish.

AUNT II

It causes swelling in the winter and stink in the summer. In the autumn she has a runny nose, while in the spring it's headaches.

PRINCE

I'm sorry, I don't know what season to pick. And there is no cure?

AUNT I

The doctors have said that if she became a bit livelier, if she was a bit more cheerful, the blood would start flowing more energetically and her afflictions would disappear.

PRINCE

So why doesn't she get livelier?

AUNT I

Because the blood in her is too sluggish.

PRINCE

If she got livelier, the blood would flow with more energy, and if the blood flowed with more energy, she would get livelier. Most peculiar. A real vicious cycle. Hm... quite... you know...

AUNT II

Your Highness is, of course, laughing at us. You are welcome to, naturally.

PRINCE

Laughing at you? No, I am not laughing at you. The hour is too serious for that. Do you not feel a certain expansion of the spirit – a certain multiplication – a certain intoxication?

AUNT I

We don't feel anything, I think it's too chilly.

PRINCE

Strange! (*to IVONA*) And you – do you also not feel it?

AUNT II

Eh, what could she possibly feel?

**Side for INNOCENT**

Innocent, a courtier who is in love with Ivona, tries to protest the engagement.

INNOCENT

Excuse me.

PRINCE

What's this? You've stayed behind?

INNOCENT

Yes. Sorry. I only wanted to say that this is vile.

PRINCE

What?

INNOCENT

This is vile and mean. I'm sorry – I must sit down. (*sits down, takes a deep breath*) Emotion always upsets my breathing.

PRINCE

You're saying, sir, that something is vile?

INNOCENT

I'm sorry. I got carried away. Please forgive me, Your Highness. Please forget about it. I'm sorry. (*wants to leave*)

PRINCE

One moment, one moment, you said that something is vile. Please wait a moment, sir.

INNOCENT (*his speech alternates between deadly quiet and great irritation*)

But I see now that I won't be able to cope.

CHAMBERLAIN

Cope? Cope? What a stupid expression – cope with what?

INNOCENT

Cope with what I have started. (*tries to leave*) I apologize.

PRINCE

Wait a moment, don't be so mysterious, mister...

INNOCENT

The thing is that I love her... and because of that I got carried away and started protesting. Now, however, I take back my protest and please forget the whole incident.