

The Servants of Madness

A One-Act Play

By Keith Eckert

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CAST LIST

Deacon Menehan – 30-plus-year-old Papal cleric

Deacon Tomei – 40-plus-year-old Papal cleric

Cardinal Di Mori – 50-plus-year-old man, gaunt and severe, a former soldier and statesman

Gabriella Porto – A woman anywhere between 25 and 45 years old, sensual, flirty, illiterate but intelligent, mistress and agent of the Duke of Spoleto

Pope Stephen VI – 60-plus-year-old man, vain and pompous

TIME/PLACE

Rome, the Basilica of St. John Lateran
(Precursor to the Vatican, residence of the Pope)

897 A.D.

SCENES

A room inside the Basilica of St. John Lateran

NOTES

This play is based on a real event (called the Cadaver Synod), but the characters, situations and motives discussed are completely fictional and grossly unhistorical.

SYNOPSIS

The Servants of Madness, based on an actual event that took place in 897 AD, tells the story of Pope Stephen VI who, ignoring the vehement protests of the papal staff, has brought his enemy, Formosus, to the papal residence for a synod.

EXCERPT

(Scene: Rome, 897 A.D. The Pope's inner rooms at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, precursor to the Vatican. A desk or workplace stands to the one side with papers, quills and scrolls. Cardinal Di Mori is on stage when Gabriella Porto enters.)

PORTE

Ah, Your Eminence.

(Porto perfunctorily curtsies and kisses the Cardinal's ring.)

Is His Holiness, Pope Stephen, in?

CARDINAL

Madam Gabriella Porto – ah!
You know you can't just stroll in and see the Pope
Whenever fancy strikes your that precious mind of yours.
This is the Holy See. Pious men
From all the world 'round seek an audience
With His Holiness. There is a structure –

PORTE

But I'm a special friend. Now, aren't I, Cardinal?
After all, I'm an agent of the Duke of Spoleto, and as such
I'm more of an unofficial advisor than a supplicant.
Besides, who is going to stop me – Your Eminence?

CARDINAL

Hmm. *(begins shuffling papers)*
He's in a meeting anyway. You can't see him.

PORTE

In a meeting? Ah.

CARDINAL

With your friend.

PORTE

My friend?

CARDINAL

Formosus.

(Porto laughs heartily.)

You laugh. It's outrageous.

PORTE

Oh, the Pope just wants
To see Formosus and pay his respects. That's all.
Why do you make it all so dire and grimstone?
Dire and grimstone!

(Porto laughs at her own joke.)

CARDINAL

Pay his respects? He wouldn't pay a penny
For a dime of respect. It's more than that and you know it.
You're the one pressing the spur to the sides of this
Profanity – this synod.

PORTE

Profanity?

CARDINAL

That's what I said.

PORTE

Are you saying a poor, peasant girl like me, born
Of a sun-burnt farmer, sprung of the second sex,
Uneducated in the algebras of the world, possesses any power
Over you, you learned giants in your scarlet robes?

CARDINAL

No, but you have his ear, and probably a few
Other body parts better for mentioning in a brothel
Than the Holy See.

PORTE

(she laughs)

Well, Your Eminence, I assure you
I am not pushing for this or any synod.

*(Porto picks up a piece of paper and looks at it
bored.)*

But then, I am not trying to stop it either.

*(The Cardinal snatches the paper from her and
puts it back where it was.)*

CARDINAL

It's an abomination. I tell you I'll quit
Before I give my assent to this monstrosity!

PORTE

(bored)

Promises, promises, Cardinal.

(Porto picks up another paper.)

You know Formosus
Did the same – reversed the previous Pope's actions.

CARDINAL

There's no comparison to this.

PORTE

Pope Stephen is in his rights.

*(The Cardinal snatches the paper from her and
puts it back.)*

CARDINAL

Give me that! If you could read, I'd be alarmed
At your presumption to scan the Pope's private papers,
But all you're doing here is getting them out of order.
And for god's sake, don't speak to me of the Pope's rights –

PORTE

It doesn't matter anyway. He's not going to do it.
Like all men, he's only good at threats and growls.
Honeyed words and stingless acts. No more.

CARDINAL

Yes. That's what I used to think. Until he brought Formosus
To the See.

PORTO

Yes, he must be looking sumptuous about now.
Ah, Formosus – he was quite the devilishly handsome man.

CARDINAL

(pointing)

If you want to see him, there, just follow your nose.

PORTO

Look, darling, the Pope has to make the threat look real.

CARDINAL

First, don't call me darling. I'm not your plaything.
And second, at this point, I'm not sure I know
Where the threat is coming from. Or what's real.

*(Porto grimly looks up and down the Cardinal,
as if measuring him in her mind.)*

PORTO

You're too noodle-spined for treason, Your Eminence,
A little heat and water and you go soft.
But you might want to put that mouth on a leash.
He is, after all, the Pope. And Pope for life.

CARDINAL

You dare to lecture me on treason? Me?
And if the Pope commits treason against decency,
Law and religion?

PORTO

Don't get your skirts in a knot.
Decency? Law? Religion? Ha! I thought
You used to be a soldier, and would have discarded
Mythic sentiments like decency long ago
There among the battle's corpses.

CARDINAL

You wouldn't know one thing about being a soldier.

PORTO

Ah, but I've heard about your idea of soldiering.
And cashing in.

CARDINAL

What are you trying to saying?

PORTO

I'm saying, Your Eminence, the Duke of Spoleto
Has a message for you:
The crown of the Holy Roman Empire is at stake.
He'll bear no more pseudo measures, suffer no more
Half wins, tolerate no more token gestures;
He'll heed no more speechifiers, nor professionals,
Nor bureaucrats, nor philosophers, nor doctrinaires.
He'll be fooled no more by perfumes, scents or oils.
It's time, Your Eminence, to get on board with us.
Lose this coquettish blushing, those squeamish morals,
That stiff-necked righteousness which pride's suffused you.
The Duke is tired of losing. And when he's tired,
He's very, very nasty. Oh, you wouldn't like him.
This time the enemy is not be defeated. Oh no.
He must be destroyed.

(The Cardinal pauses for a moment in reflection, laughs bitterly, then answers.)

CARDINAL

Tell your master that the message is received
And understood. And assure him that his goals and mine
Are perfectly aligned. And toward these ends,
He can expect the most rigid obedience of his wishes.
I regret that there was any other perception.

(The Cardinal bows his head to Porto, then smiles grimly.)

But for you, Madam Porto, I'll add a footnote:
This twilight world – twixt hell's and heaven's poles –
Is streaked in grays that will not stand still
For your daubing them all white, but will shake off your colors
Like so much brittle ash from their sleeve.
And remember: When you start clubbing snakes,
The thudding Earth will wake the multitudes.
It's sometimes best to simply let them sleep.