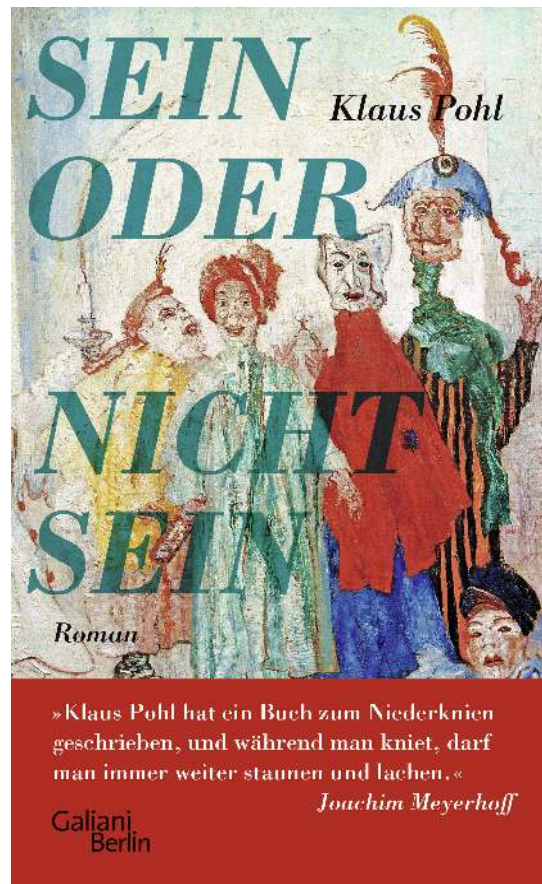


# TO BE OR NOT TO BE by Klaus Pohl

Translated by Damion Searls



[Chapters 1-2, 6-7, 12]

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One sunny morning in February, 1999, the entire troupe of actors for Peter Zadek's production of *Hamlet* gathered in the Strasbourg apartment of the director and his wife, the writer Elisabeth Plessen, to start rehearsing. The ensemble contained the best actors a German director could get hold of at the time.

Twenty-two years after his famous *Hamlet* production in Bochum, the crowning finale of his furious struggles with Shakespeare, renowned lion of the stage Peter Zadek, now 73 years old, was launching into another *Hamlet* adventure. Ulrich Wildgruber had been Zadek's celebrated Hamlet in Bochum; this time he was supposed to play the court toady, Polonius, alongside a woman playing Hamlet—the actress Angela Winkler. This constellation was to be the springboard for a drama among the actors as comic as it was tragic.

Many months had passed since Zadek first asked me if I would take on the role of Hamlet's best friend, Horatio. New obstacles came up constantly, the start of rehearsals had to be postponed again and again, but at last the production was ready to go. To Hamlet or not to Hamlet? My family and I were living in New York at the time, and it wasn't an easy decision for me to make. Then I remembered how I'd gotten my start at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg.

Uli Wildgruber was playing the evil earth spirit Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and I was Ariel. Ariel! This spirit of the air, flying faster than any bird, was my first major role. I was happy beyond belief!

And that was how I played the role: as happy beyond belief. Ariel's lot was my lot. In very few years, with very much chutzpah, I had made it from greengrocer's apprentice to playing on Germany's greatest stage.

I was a total beginner and practically a baby at the time, on stage with Uli Wildgruber, and that was how he thought of me. But then, at a sold-out performance, something happened that turned us into friends for life.

In the scene where Ariel fights all the men who've taken a vow against the lord of the island, driving them crazy with the help of genuine wolfhounds who raged and raced around the stage on long ropes, one of the dogs tore free and pounced on Ulrich Wildgruber.

The lord of the island had immediately taken refuge on a mountain of crates at the edge of the stage while his two comedians clutched each other tight at center stage, hiding their heads like children who think that if they can't see anything, no one can see them.

I, transformed into a harpy with giant breasts and terrifying wings, raced around on stilts among the dogs, whom the director, to heighten the effect, had covered in wolf's pelts. My skull was shaved bare, a blood-red scar ran down it onto my naked body, and perched on my skull was a dragon mask. I tore it off and sprang, yelping like a dog myself, at the berserk beast with its teeth bared, snapping again and again into Wildgruber's mud-smeared costume.

I kept at the dog until it was so exasperated that it left Wildgruber alone and came after me. Everyone in the audience held their breath. The diversionary tactic worked. Soon the dog was chasing only me and the scraps of my costume—he chomped at the stilts on which I had entered like a prehistoric bird; he snapped, baring his teeth, at the dragon mask I was

shoving in front of his jaws. Finally, to the sound of terrifying howls and insane barking, I dragged the beast offstage.

When I came back onstage, the Hamburg audience greeted me with a thundering ovation. And after this unforgettable performance, Ulrich Wildgruber took me out for a couple of glasses of Glenfiddich in the Reichshof Bar nextdoor. I was now the man who had saved his life. We drank to lifelong blood-brotherhood until we were plastered, then rapturously stumbled out of the bar.

Filled with such memories, I said yes to Peter Zadek. I wanted to work with this genius director again, drink Glenfiddich with Uli Wildgruber again, and act with this famous troupe of actors again, standing onstage with Hamlet as his best friend, Horatio.

I packed my things. Off to Strasbourg. Off on the great adventure. I said goodbye to my wife and two daughters and Broadway. Goodbye, Sanda. Goodbye, Marie and Lucie! Farewell, New York. Till Christmas!

If it had taken extraordinary strength of will and action for Peter Zadek to bring the production into existence, the months of rehearsal in Strasbourg would turn out to be far more dramatic still, bringing his undertaking to the brink of catastrophe over and over again. I will now tell the story of this expedition of a lifetime and its unusual cast, on the basis of my diaries from the time, availing myself of well-tempered artistic license.

Uli Wildgruber didn't actually want to take part in this second Peter Zadek production of *Hamlet*, didn't want to get back on board the old boat, and especially not as the court toady, Polonius. After all, in Bochum he had been the celebrated, lionized, crack-brained Prince, unreachable in his solitude. In his eyes it would be tantamount to betrayal to accept another Hamlet above him. And a Hamlet-woman too—even if the woman was Angela Winkler. He looked in the mirror and flames flickered in his eyes. Hamlet, he thought, could never be a woman. “Sarah Bernhardt—yes of course! But Angela Winkler is no Sarah Bernhardt, not even if she gets her right leg amputated.”

Then he darted looks all around—there was something inside him that trembled the moment he spoke up against his master's ideas. He had the feeling he would never be free of this master as long as he lived. He often thought that Peter Zadek had taken up lodgings in his head, along with Shakespeare, whom Zadek called *his* Shakespeare.

“I'm telling you,” Zadek said once, “I went to school in London.”

As if that explained anything.

The two men in his head.

Wildgruber thought back to Rainer Werner Fassbinder in Bochum. Fassbinder had been just as devoted to Zadek as he was himself, but then Fassbinder had rebelled. He'd adopted a dog and named him Zadek, and kept running through the Bochum Theater chasing after his dog, shouting: “Zadek, heel!” “Zadek, here!” “Zadek, sit!” “Zadek, drop!”

With the help of a dog, Fassbinder had escaped from Zadek. “Down, Zadek!”—and he raced out to make his first movies. But Uli? He’d never had so much as a rabbit who answered to “Peter.”

Of course, in his own good time he’d gotten the better of that devil Zadek in his roles. Maybe he’d be able to win Zadek’s love back one more time?

[...]

After a short train ride across the Rhine, Uli Wildgruber walked from Gare de Strasbourg across the station square, scrubbed clean like it was every morning, towards Parc du Contades.

After getting lost yet again in the maze of alleys, he tried to hail a taxi.

That was when we ran into each other.

I was coming from my neighborhood, Petite France, wearing a hat, carrying a briefcase and a fresh rose. “Good morning, Uli!” I cried.

His head whipped around.

We shook hands, somewhat embarrassed. It’d been eight years since we’d seen each other.

“I thought I was lost,” Wildgruber said. “And I was already happy. Lost in Strasbourg! How I wish I could have gotten completely lost. Who would have thought it’d be so hard to grow old respectably in this profession. The best thing would be to disappear into a long coma! It’s my heart valves’ fault, I need three artificial heart valves at all costs but no doctor dares to operate. Mine get used up too fast, they’re falling apart. My weakened heart is much too active. But how am I supposed to turn it down? What’s dramatic is the period in the middle of the sentence, the director Fritz Kortner once said. Who will put the period in the middle of my sentence? I’m wiped out, and that devil Peter Zadek is waiting for me, reminding me, ‘Uli, we’re starting over from the beginning.’ Good God. It’s

awful how he's getting his revenge on me. All because I still say Mozart is better than him."

He squeezed his eyes shut and opened his mouth wide in crazy silent laughter.

"Didn't plan ahead for the winter. I've turned into Polonius. 'Impotent' is what Shakespeare calls me. To that I only have one thing to add: that my teeth are falling out." He flung his bag of books over his shoulder, wheezed, and sweated. "I need money! I need to go to Hollywood, my Sicilian geisha kept calling me all night—I should quit the production, better today than tomorrow. Quit? Me? I've worked with Peter Zadek my whole life, it'll come to its end with him too. Don't you know any jokes, like my teacher, Otto Schenk?"

Otto Schenk, the popular actor, director, and author, had been Wildgruber's acting teacher for three years, 1960 to 1963, at the Reinhardt Seminar in Vienna. Before washing up in Vienna, Ulrich had worked in a pudding factory and as an assistant mailman. In Hamburg he took private acting classes. After being kicked out of those, for bad behavior, he decided he wanted the world-famous Berliner Ensemble to take him on as a beginner. Despite being incredibly young, Wildgruber tried to get an audition with Helene Weigel; when nothing came of that, he went to every performance at the Ensemble theater on Schiffbauerdamm for 180 straight nights, to penetrate the mystery of Brecht, as he later put it. Finally the Reinhardt Seminar in Vienna let him in.

"Two snails meet in the forest..." I began.



Wildgruber interrupted me. “Escargot is good, very good—when I’ve got Alsace escargot coiling round my tongue I can put up even with Peter Zadek.”

“Two snails meet in the forest. One of them has a black eye. ‘How’d you get that black eye?’ the other one asks. ‘I was out jogging.’ ‘And what happened?’ ‘I was jogging through the forest... and suddenly a mushroom sprang up in front of me.’”

Uli wiped the sweat off his face and paused for a moment. A moped went clattering by, throwing a cloud of dust into the air behind it.

“No one’s here except us? What’s wrong? Where is Hermann Lause? My Bochum king? Where’s Eva Mattes? My beloved, very sneaky mother, eternal lust and eternal fear? Where is everybody? All the others? Where’s this famous parade of well-paid traveling entertainers hiding?”

“They’re all upstairs at the master’s apartment already. Benjamin, our prop master, has set up a sumptuous breakfast buffet. It’s all supposed to be a very relaxed atmosphere for the first few days. The master, out of consideration for Angela, wants to avoid anything that might signal stress or tension. The whole troupe has been in the city for two days, and the French flair of Petite France is putting everyone in a holiday mood.”

“For now!” Uli laughed.

As we climbed the steps to the director’s apartment, he said: “You’ve got to be crazy. What are you doing here with us?”

“It’s our Hamlet.”

“My God! You’re saying you’re here for Angela? Is that rose for her?”

I held the rose tight in the hand my briefcase was hanging from. I'd picked it out and bought it at a small flower shop by a little bridge over the Ill.

Uli clutched at his chest. "Believe me, this job will be terrible torture. I'm going to do everything I can to have Zadek transfer me. Preferably to India. Rice, that's the ideal food. Just no more theater. No more theater! Maybe more children? In the South Pacific. Children but only in the South Pacific. Now I'm Peter's overwrought fear. Me as Polonius the counsellor – overwrought – It's his revenge!"

"His revenge?"

"For having to serve me all those years. The combat situation is reversed now! Ha! But unfortunately I won't be any good in the part. Hooray, hooray! Not being good is its own weapon. I don't have a direct tone anymore, I've turned so pastoral, I've gotten so dreadfully old and fat, I look like my uncle Theodor! But that Peter Zadek won't give an inch. He outdevils the devil himself."

Second floor.

"How much more?"

"Another floor," I answered.

"Dreadful. Appalling."

He could barely breathe. "You have the best line in the whole play."

"Which one?" I asked.

"I am more an antique Roman than a Dane! I'll pay you a hundred marks if you sell me that line."

In the apartment, everyone was crowding around the buffet.

From the beginning, Peter Zadek was worried about Angela Winkler in her double function as leading actress and mother. Angela had been hesitant from the beginning. She was scared of Hamlet. The more time she spent with him, the stranger he seemed to her, and she lived in mortal terror of all the words—Hamlet has the most lines of any famous role in world drama. Plus the translation just wouldn't get finished. When she finally got a copy into her hands, she was petrified. She would never get this mountain of words into her head before the start of rehearsals.

That was why Peter Zadek wanted to signal total peace and relaxation to his leading actress on the first day of the adventure. The message was: There is not the slightest reason to lose your nerve, no reason to hang your head at what's being asked of you. "You've got me, too, not just the script. Just count on me!"

We were standing by the buffet. “For the love of God!” Wildgruber cried. “I can see it now. I will be pampered in this prison like in none before. It’s insidious, it’s pure treachery. Zadek the raptor wants me to be a grateful snack. Otto Sander is playing the king? I didn’t expect Otto.”

And without skipping a beat he started shouting “Mee-mee-mee-mee-mee.”

Coming from the back corner of the apartment, where Sarah, the blonde, rail-thin student auditor from Pinneberg was keeping an eye on her things, was the sound of an argument between her and Benjamin, the prop master, who wished he could operate every rummage sale in the world.

Sarah said calmly: “Hamlet’s crazy.”

The prop master with dreams of controlling the global junk trade answered back, very firmly: “Hamlet is not crazy. Read the play, it’s all right there.”

“Hamlet’s crazy, and he’s crazy on every stage in the world.”

“He’s not crazy, he’s *acting* crazy. He’s walking a fine line but one that he hopes will lead him to the truth.”

Then came another voice—the prompter’s. She said: “He does every last thing wrong with women.”

“Who does?” the prop master cried.

“Who? You!” came the resounding echo back.

Sarah insisted: “Hamlet is insane.”

“He is not insane.”

“He is insane.”

“He’s *pretending* to be insane! Whoever among you is playing the fool, don’t make them say more than what’s in their role.”

“What, in my role? There’s nothing!” Sarah cried. “Nothing there!” She was standing right in the prop master’s face and she said to his meek grin: “I don’t have any role! Remember that!”

“Just wait,” Benjamin said. “You’ll get your part, everyone gets a part here. Our director can find the ticklish spot on anyone and everyone.”

Hermann Lause was sitting at a little glass table where he’d spread out the pages of his *Hamlet* script he’d taken out of his three-ring binder. He was now bent over a heap of pages swirled together into a shuffled mess.

He asked me in passing: “Do you pay regularly into the Munich retirement fund too?”

Then he said in Uli’s direction: “You know, Uli, memorizing lines is such a bitch. It hurts me, it physically hurts me—all that lost time.”

And with that he turned back to the loose pages of his script, constantly slipping off the tiny glass table onto the floor. Lause sat in their midst like a gracious kindergarten teacher surrounded by her bouncy gaggle of cute little wards. He smiled at the wayward pages as they drifted off. He took a page of hole-punch reinforcement rings out of a little booklet of them, peeled the rings off the adhesive, and stuck them one by one on all of the holes on all of the pages of his script.

“Hey, tell me,” Uwe Bohm, the actor playing Laertes, said to me, “our director says you’re in love with Angela? You brought her a rose this morning?”

“The right color, too,” Ophelia said.

I replied: “Love is the cook who serves up the most dishes in the world. Angela is Hamlet, and my heart belongs to Hamlet. It’s he who lives in the depths of my soul.”

“So it sounds like you’ve got a really bad case of it,” Uwe said seriously. “I wonder if you’ll ever be that into me.”

“Let’s wait and see, Uwe. Anyway you look perfect to be our Laertes.”

“What do you mean?”

“Naïve, charming. Chipper. Sweet face, still with baby fat, freckles all over. Nosy, cunning, foolhardy. If you work hard we’ll get a convincing Laertes out of you.”

“Excuse me? This pipsqueak role? My part is a joke! I have precisely three and a half minutes of lines if I say them straight through in a row! I come on stage and immediately disappear off to Paris, and don’t come back until the end of the play. There’s thirty seconds more lines. Then the big fight, the big die-off. Breathlessness and ketchup—that’s Laertes. No role! No meat on the bones! It doesn’t matter that the buffoon is by Shakespeare!”

“Well he’s giving a speech now,” said Knut Koch, the actor playing the queen in the play-within-a-play. One little problem to start things off: Koch didn’t like the pink bra the costume designer had found for his part and presented with a giggle at the read-through. It was supposed to be emphatically cheerful and relaxed at the read-through, and what’s funnier than a pink bra among the green olives, French cheese, and Italian salami?

“Please, who wears pink bras nowadays?” Knut asked.

“The market women at the Viktualienmarkt in Munich,” Hermann Lause said bitterly.

Everyone now was quiet as a mouse, mobbing the buffet. Peter Zadek cleared his throat. Then he said: “When I come to rehearsal in the morning and rehearsal goes well, I’m happy. Please, make me happy as often as you can, today and in the days to come.”

Applause and a careful stomping of feet.

On that day and the next, with concentration and devotion, we read Shakespeare’s play: *Hamlet – Prince of Denmark*. Translated into German by Elisabeth Plessen.

I didn’t observe anything gloomy during the read-through. Everyone was concentrating on their role; we went about our business with the thrill of discovery. Peter Zadek laughed several times, he listened contemplatively and often downright charmed to Shakespeare’s lines.

The way Angela Winkler read her dialogue and soliloquies on that Alsatian morning, they sounded like no one had ever spoken the words before.

Uli’s overblown rhetoric, his imprecations against Peter Zadek’s Hamlet-woman—so they were nothing but stubborn bluster, artistic blarney from the Wildgruber ragbag? It seemed to me he was utterly carried away by Angela Winkler’s cautious approach to the great part he continued to see as his own—as though every new line out her mouth was going to make him give up his inner resistance to this Hamlet.

We had stepped out onto the balcony and everyone was standing around, chatting and joking in an excited mood. Tomorrow we were going to move to the rehearsal stage on rue Jacques Kablé.

Angela leapt up and whooped with joy when, with my face beaming, I handed her my rose, painted by Goya.

“Horror,” she cried—that was her nickname for me—“What amazing surprises you always have!”

Zadek put one arm around Wildgruber’s shoulders and the other around mine. “Well, you two? You know, what makes my productions so excellent is the casting alone. I see someone, then I try to look at them from the inside and discover what I can draw out of them.”

“You can pull a lot out of Pohl,” Wildgruber cried.

Everybody laughed. Angela Winkler gave a real scream, as if she’d stuck her hand in a fire: “Horror!”

“When Uli’s standing around next to me on the balcony, cracking little jokes like just now, even though he’s in constant fear of a heart attack or a headache or his teeth falling out—when he feels constantly overwhelmed by the situation, exactly how Polonius at the court of Denmark feels overwhelmed and cracks dumb jokes because of it, then it’s genuine. And it has to be more than genuine. It has to be genuine and very well acted on top of it. Genuine isn’t enough.”

Otto Sander came out onto the balcony and stood in the sun, laboriously took a big blue handkerchief out of his pants pocket, and gave a loud sneeze. “I am the King.”

That night I couldn’t sleep from excitement. In my half-awake dreams, I wandered with Angela through a war-torn land, I guarded her and watched over her sleep, lit a torch for her, held her hand. The next morning, we moved into the military academy on rue Jacques Kablé, where a gigantic



rehearsal stage was standing ready for us—the place that, for the next three months, would be our *Hamlet* workplace.

[...]

... THE END OF CHAPTER 12

*[Rehearsals have started. Uli Wildgruber has skipped out of town for the day.]*

“I’ll have to quit,” Peter Zadek said. “This is just not possible. I can’t work like this. How am I supposed to work under these miserable conditions?”

A silence—enormous, staggering silence—followed the director’s lament.

“Why do you never stop scratching yourself?” he then asked Uwe Bohm in exasperation.

“The flea is back,” Uwe replied.

Peter Zadek totally lost control for a moment. “What flea?!”

“I had a flea. It was gone. Now it’s back.”

“This is the end!” the director screamed. “The flea is back! That too! We have a flea, and no Polonius! I am directing *Hamlet* here. Under these conditions. Unbelievable. Klara!” Now he was definitely shrieking. “Klara! My director’s table is still wobbly! I had asked for someone to make my director’s table stop wobbling. Why does nothing I ask for ever happen? Why is the director’s table wobbly? Klara?”

Gorgeous Klara’s face turned chalk white. “The techs will make the table stop wobbling. I already made it stop wobbling a little.”

“Aha! I see, I see,” Zadek said. He stared off into the distance. “A little. Everything’s done a little.”

Klara's main task was to drive the director in a limousine from the apartment on Parc du Contades to the rehearsal on rue Jacques Kablé every morning, and bring him back home after he was done. Klara was an incredibly fast driver. She had worked her way from being a seventeen-year-old race queen to a place behind the wheel, but then her soul had been awakened to the unique images and mysteries of literature, and she gave up motorsports for a life in the theater.

Uwe Bohm was madly in love with Klara. He invited her out to dinner every night after rehearsal, and every night she rebuffed him, though she tried to console him: "I can't, Uwe, I have so much to read, and I have to wash my t-shirts." But Uwe was determined to win her. Klara, meanwhile—the smitten Uwe didn't know this—was in love with the assistant director: shy, reserved Jan, who worshipped Zadek. But since no one knows what lies within two hearts, a lot of room was opened up for mad love and fantasies of conquest.

Angela Winkler sat there quietly, hair a sepulchral black, crown on her head. She was chewing gum and concentrating hard, deeply absorbed in the octavo notebook where she had written out the play by hand. She needed five notebooks for the whole play, one for each act. She had put tiny drawings and notes next to some of the lines and dialogue. Dried daisies, and crow's feathers she'd picked up, were stuck between the scenes she was studying. Then Zadek said: "I cannot and will not cancel any rehearsals for this or any other absence of Uli's. It's torture for me not to rehearse. We can't afford it. As you all know, we have a very, very long road ahead of us. Get into costume, we're going to rehearse the first act. The second too of course."

Jan prodded the technical team to set up the rehearsal stage for the start of the play: Act I, Scene I; midnight, a platform atop the battlements of the Castle of Elsinore. Meanwhile the dramaturge had to procure at once a copy of a photograph that had caught the master's attention while he was watching TV over breakfast.

"We will try to get at least to the second act, Angela, to Hamlet's monologue... Somebody help me!" he screamed at his staff when the lines didn't come to him. "To... children, please, help me! To, where?"

"To: 'Now I am alone,' " Florian, the second student auditor, felt confident enough to say.

"Thank you. That is where we will try to get. Please, now, all of you concentrate hard on your work."

And with that he turned his attention back to the photograph that had struck him during his breakfast TV. "The picture showed a Serbian general with a skull, and under the photograph it said: To Be or Not To Be. Please, Bärbel; please, Florian! Get me a copy of that photo straightaway!"

Angela couldn't believe it, she thought she must have heard wrong. "Peter? You seriously want to rehearse to the end of Act II without Uli?"

"I can't postpone my production for Uli's sake. The performances here and in Vienna are already all sold out."

Grumbling and in a bad mood we put on our costumes. We'd been counting on another day off, never expecting a substitute Polonius.

"Does Uli have an understudy? Who?" Hermann Lause asked.

"Probably you. The Ghost never meets Polonius!" Otto Sander said.

"For God's sake!" Lause yelled. "No way! I'm not the absence of Uli."

We rummaged around and gathered up our props, mumbling our lines to ourselves. In the face of adversity we wanted to be good, and we could hear Zadek's impatient voice. He was cursing and coughing, coughing like a coalmine.

Eva Mattes shouted for joy in her partitioned-off changing area. "Please! Someone call an ambulance for Peter! Maybe we'll get the day off today after all."

Angela Winkler was going over her lines with the prompter.

Zadek's coughing subsided. We spent the next three hours rehearsing Act I. And the director unceremoniously replaced the missing Uli Windgruber with the blonde student auditor, Sarah.

"Me?" Sarah said. "I'd die of shame with these professionals, I'm not an actress."

Zadek, master of persuasion, unparalleled connoisseur of human nature, had the right instinct: There are very few people who don't enjoy being on stage, dressing up, and playing a role. "It's precisely because you're not an actress, Sarah, that you'll get Polonius right away. Just think about your father, who's worried about you. That's the part. The king you're working for, as his counsellor, Polonius, is playing a dangerous game. The skies might come crashing down on Polonius at any moment, and then that'd be it for your children, too. You were relieved to send your son away, so that you could worry twice as much about your daughter. The girl is in love, you see, Ophelia is going around with a terrorist, Hamlet. It's not hard to understand this father, Sarah. Think with your heart."

At this remark, Sarah stared at Zadek with her eyes open wide. Had she really understood him?

“Sarah,” the director said, “don’t act, just think about the situation, think about how your own father worries about you. Do you understand?”

She nodded, concentrating hard. She was already right in the thick of it.

“How did your father react when you told him you wanted to go into the theater? And, even worse, work with that frightful *enfant terrible* Peter Zadek? How did your father react?”

“It was horrible,” Sarah said, and she turned away, blushed, took off her scrunchy, and combed a punctilious paternal part into her flax-blond hair. Everybody laughed. Zadek ordered us to stay serious.

Sarah toiled bravely on. Zadek sat at his director’s table, marvelling, amused at the shy awkwardness of his second assistant until at some point Sarah’s stage fright leaked into the role and miraculously turned into Polonius’s fear.

The rest of us acted as well as we could under the ridiculous circumstances, but we did notice how much this rehearsal inspired our director. We had a lot of fun with Sarah. Surprisingly, we managed to get to the end of Act II, enjoying ourselves immensely.

Sarah’s Polonius was no sweaty overweight sixty-three-year-old man with a bad heart, hip problems, and his teeth falling out. He was now a skinny German from the conservative Young Union, blond to the tips of his toes, never quite sure of himself but always behaving very correctly. Sarah’s embarrassment gave rise to a thrilling character; the way her dramatic clumsiness fit the role of Polonius was riveting.

The old man was happiest of all.

Peter Zadek, to give an example to his directing staff, said something that Sarah misunderstood at first: “Here you have a perfect example of what I’m always saying: Good is bad and bad is good.”

Sarah turned red. “So you’re saying I’m bad?”

Zadek howled with laughter. “No. Darling! But you need to play the role with exactly the attitude you had when you just asked me: *Am I bad??* That’s the whole part right there. Always on the lookout: Am I doing something wrong? Am I doing the right thing? It’s wonderful! Totally wonderful, Sarah.”

He stopped the rehearsal and came up onto the stage.

“His caution is born from this constant fear that he’s not doing enough. Polonius isn’t subservient and cringing, he’s careful. He’s always afraid of failure. Incredible. This is a real discovery, Sarah. I think you’d make a very effective Polonius. Unfortunately I’ve already cast Uli Wildgruber in the part. Rehearsal’s over,” he cried, in a glorious mood.

We thanked Sarah for making the rehearsal a success. She didn’t want to hear a word of it—our praise just embarrassed her. She was trying to grasp what had just happened and how Zadek had interpreted it. Suddenly everything was a big conflict. She never wanted to be an actress, she saw herself as much too fragile and demure for this slick theater world.

Benjamin kept after her. “I prophesied it that day at the read-through, Sarah: Everyone gets a part here. Will you let me be your impresario?”

“Leave me alone!” Sarah cried. She bent down to pick up a pebble.

Today I no longer remember whether she actually threw it at him.