

Onorata

by Michael Olsen

Characters: BARNARDO 30's, an artist
 CONSTANZA late 20's, a lady
 ISADORA early 20's, sister of CONSTANZA

Lights come up on a makeshift artist's studio in a seaside town in C17th Sicily. There are a number of large boxes draped with linen. On the upstage wall there is a large portrait of a very beautiful woman. There is a feeling of general messiness about the place. There is a painting on an easel. BARNARDO is hard at work on the canvas. He is facing upstage. He walks away from the canvas and returns, holding a painter's tray of colours and brushes.

ISADORA: [*off*] Is't you, signoré?

BARNARDO: Who speaks?

ISADORA: [*off*] 'Tis only me, signoré.

BARNARDO: You are most early, Miss Isadora. I had not expected you for another hour at the least.

ISADORA: [*off*] I had to come to see for myself, and prepare.

BARNARDO: See what, may I ask?

ISADORA: [*off*] My portrait.

ISADORA enters, wearing only lingerie and dragging her dress behind her. She leans against a wall knowing exactly what she's doing. Barnardo still has not seen her.

BARNARDO: And why so eager to see a work that has yet to be finished?

ISADORA: Creation is a beautiful thing, signoré. I want to be there when it happens.

Barnardo finally looks up, sees Isadora, and is horrified. He rushes over and gathers up some of the sheet lying about to cover her. He guides her to sit on a linen-covered box.

BARNARDO: This is not a nude.

ISADORA: Signoré?

BARNARDO: This portrait will sit in your family's palazzo. It will be chaste. It will be beautiful.

ISADORA: Am I not beautiful, signoré?

Isadora again drops the sheet, and again Barnardo attempts to cover her up.

BARNARDO: Of course, but I try to capture the inner beauty as much as the outer.

ISADORA: How can you paint our souls without painting our bodies?

Isadora slides the cloth down exposing her shoulders, and leaning over to expose her cleavage.

BARNARDO: Because I am an artist, signorina, and I can see these things in my mind's eye.

Barnardo goes and pulls up the cloth.

ISADORA: Ah, your mind's eye. But surely it is what the eye sees that matters.

Isadora this time draws the cloth up to expose her leg.

BARNARDO: Please. It is a distraction.

ISADORA: But is not what is in your mind's eye a distraction also?

BARNARDO: No.

ISADORA: You have been so long with my portrait I thought something might be amiss, that you might need—

BARNARDO: Nothing is amiss.

ISADORA: So why have you asked me to sit for you yet again?

BARNARDO: I am a perfectionist, signorina. Your father has commissioned portraits of the whole family to hang in the great hall and he has paid me a great deal of money to do so. I am not about to let him down. Are you ready?

Barnardo has succeeded in positioning Isadora on the linen-covered box

ISADORA: It is as I suspected.

BARNARDO: And pray what is that?

ISADORA: Your actions betray you.

BARNARDO: My actions, signorina?

ISADORA: You simply need more inspiration.

Isadora reaches under the sheet and pulls off a rather large pair of knickers. She flicks them over to Barnardo, who, horrified, snatches them up and places them on the box next to her.

BARNARDO: Signorina as I have said, this is not a nude!

Barnardo again tries to cover Isadora.

ISADORA: You do not love me, signoré?

BARNARDO: No, I assure you I do not. My intentions towards yourself are purely honourable. All I require is your silence and your clothed self.

- ISADORA:** My silence, signoré?
- Isadora slides a leg out and runs her foot up the inside of Barnardo's leg. He pulls away out of reach.*
- BARNARDO:** I have heard even the great Michelangelo requires silence when he works.
- ISADORA:** Very well. (*Isadora gathers up the cloth and wraps it around herself.*) Constanza says that you talked all the time you were painting her.
- Barnardo shakes his head and returns to his canvas, frowning, wrestling with the paint that doesn't do what he wants it to do.*
- BARNARDO:** It was—it was—different with your sister.
- ISADORA:** Different, signoré?
- BARNARDO:** Yes, just —different. Now. If you please?
- Pause. Finally, a groan escapes Barnardo.*
- ISADORA:** Signoré?
- BARNARDO:** She has left me, child.
- ISADORA:** Who, signoré?
- BARNARDO:** My muse. This paint wishes not to form the beauty I can see.
- ISADORA:** Do I not please you, signoré?
- BARNARDO:** As a bee delights the flower, as—as the rain the dry earth, but that is not the inspiration I was seeking. No, there is something deeper here, something o'er which my spirit sits uncomfortably.
- ISADORA:** You have been a guest in our house these past three months. I have never seen you so troubled.
- BARNARDO:** Aye. I—I am diseased, child.
- ISADORA:** With what, signoré? 'Tis not the plague?
- BARNARDO:** Good lord, no. It is something much more deadly, but like the plague, there is no cure. Can I swear you to secrecy?
- ISADORA:** Of course, signoré. You know you can tell me anything.
- BARNARDO:** Do you swear on your mother's grave?
- Isadora looks up at the portrait of her mother. Barnardo looks up as well.*
- ISADORA:** I swear on the life of my mother Onorata Antoinetta Speranza.
- BARNARDO:** It is Constanza.
- ISADORA:** My sister, signoré?
- BARNARDO:** I try to paint you, but all I can see is her face. I am lost.

ISADORA: But what are you saying, signoré? Are you saying you are in love with Constanza? She is old and her best years are behind her. Why, she is nearly 30 years old!

BARNARDO: She is ageless. Her wit, her eyes, her smile. Nothing compares to her. Has she said anything to you about me?

ISADORA: No, signoré.

BARNARDO: Anything at all?

ISADORA: She has said you have talked—a lot.

BARNARDO: And that is all?

ISADORA: Know you not how she feels?

BARNARDO: How does she feel?

ISADORA: Do not trouble yourself with such ripe old fruit. There is green firm fruit for the taking.

Isadora takes Barnardo's hand and places it on her breast.

ISADORA: Can you not feel it, signoré? One squeeze and all knowledge is yours.

BARNARDO: No, no—I—

CONSTANZA enters, a sword strapped to her waist. Barnardo jumps up.

BARNARDO: [*bowing*] Signorina!

CONSTANZA: It seems I am just in time.

ISADORA: Constanza, he—

CONSTANZA: You are too young to understand the ways of men. Get you dressed. Now!

Isadora hurries off, holding her dress and wrapped in the cloth.

BARNARDO: Signorina, I can assure you—

CONSTANZA: I believe I can assure myself, signoré. Like all artists I believe you have come to grips with your subject.

BARNARDO: No, no, it—no, no.

CONSTANZA: We have some family honour here, signoré. Our mother's portrait hangs here to remind us of that. Prepare to defend yourself.

BARNARDO: But—

CONSTANZA: I will not warn you again.

BARNARDO: But, signorina, I—

Constanza approaches, withdrawing her sword, and just as she slashes at Barnardo he has snatched up his sword, and while it is still in its scabbard he has protected himself from Constanza's attack.

BARNARDO: You wrong me dreadfully, signorina.

CONSTANZA: Indeed? I think you were about to wrong us.

Constanza attacks Barnardo again, only this time he has his sword out and he manages to defend himself from a surprisingly vigorous attack. Pause.

CONSTANZA: They say woman is the fickle sex, as changing as the wind, but I say it is the man, driven by base lust, who is the wanderer.

BARNARDO: Nay, my affections in this instance have been an ever-fixed mark, signorina, and they have been fixed upon your good self.

CONSTANZA: Words come easy to men. How easily they do tumble from the tongue like sweetmeats into the mouths of baby birds. All you have done since arriving here is talk talk talk.

Constanza attacks again. This time Barnardo is forced back onto the box where Isadora was sitting. From sitting down he scrambles to his feet to keep the distance between them, but somehow in the scramble to his feet he has accidentally clutched Isadora's knickers.

BARNARDO: Signorina, your sister can attest to the honour of my actions.

Constanza picks the knickers out of Barnardo's hand using the tip of her sword.

CONSTANZA: I saw how honourable you were. All we women have left, signoré, is our honour. My mother, Onorata Antoinetta Speranza, taught me well: honour taken can never be repaid. You have taken mine, and now you seek to take my sister's, too.