

The Williamson Turn

One-act play by Janine Tearle Maske

With, for and inspired by David Denys Swingler

A study in futility, hope and destiny

Title

The Williamson Turn

Draft

Final

Genre

Dark drama

Setting

The action takes place on the deck of an ocean liner during an overcast, windy evening, circa 2025. The weather is inclement and, as such, creates a sense of foreboding. Dim deck lights provide illumination, and several cabin lights are on.

Characters

- FIRST OFFICER FRANCIS SWANSON: An upper middle-class Englishman and seasoned officer on his last voyage. Introspective. Almost overly duty-conscious, creating the impression that there are underlying problems.
- DR DAVID LAMBED (pronounced /'lambəd/): A South African psychiatrist on the maiden voyage of a newly commissioned ocean liner. Appears not to take life too seriously, although the audience senses he is deeply troubled.
- LADY MAVIS ROTTINGER: Upper-class Englishwoman in her eighties. Slightly infirm, but full of the joys of life.
- HILARY WEST: Lady Mavis's companion. Middle-class Englishwoman in her early seventies. Irreverent.
- ELIZABETH BLACKWELL: The captain's personal assistant.
- YOUNG LADY (drunk)
- CREW MEMBER OF UNIDENTIFIED RANK
- NAMELESS MAN
- All bit parts played by two actors

ACT 1

SCENE 1 -

First Officer Swanson, a man dressed in uniform and of the clear rank of first officer on board an ocean liner, is standing on the deck under a spotlight.

FO SWANSON

(downstage, centre full front)

Cold, unsure evenings. That's when I think of them, and the time I lost O'Leary. Dear friend, Jack O'Leary.

Jack was a comrade *and* a friend. A rookie from a humble home, but rich in faith and joy.

"Did I ever tell you the one about the laughing dick?"

"Go on, Jack," we would say, and Jack would tell us. We would laugh and laugh, and cry a bit after a pint.

"Did I ever tell you about the prostitute nun?"

"Oh, Jack, please don't - there are women in our midst."

And so it carried on - as even they would laugh, those uniformed girls.

He was going to marry Mary. Uncle John would play the organ and the prayer of Francis, just for me: another channel of His peace. And down the aisle she'd go, crowned in baby's breath. There would be roast beef and trifle for dessert, and a toast: to Mrs Jack O'Leary!

Jack was so happy then - whatever happened to his Mary?

(The first officer loses his proud bearing for a moment and seems to crumble.)

FADE TO BLACK

ACT 1

SCENE 2 -

The weather on deck remains inclement. A man, portly and interesting-looking - one Dr Lambed - is reclining on a deckchair. He is distractedly twirling an empty wine glass in his right hand. A near-empty bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape is set on a table at his side. It serves precariously as a paperweight on a flyer.

FO SWANSON

(enters stage left, taking a little surprised leap at Dr Lambled's presence)

Ah, the psychiatrist! What brings you on deck in this inclement weather?

DR LAMBLED

(calmly, almost detached)

Suicide.

(The first officer does a visible double-take, yanks a nearby table to a position next to where Dr Lambled is sitting, and sits down in an upright position in cheating (right) profile to the audience. The doctor remains in his reclined position in quarter turn to the audience.)

WOMAN'S VOICE

(intermittently audible, but carried in snippets by the wind)

You ... cleavage ...

MAN'S VOICE

... kin ... pid ... drunk slut.

FO SWANSON

(cautious)

It is the weather for dark thoughts.

Hope you don't mind my sitting here. I see you have the flyer for tomorrow's talk. Kevin Hines: "Cracked not Broken".

DR LAMBLED

(gestures a welcome)

No better company than the first officer. I may attend. The speaker inspired the psychiatrist's mantra: Ask the question.

Taking a breather?

FO SWANSON

Yes - daunting task, keeping passengers safe and entertained. And you? Strange place for a sabbatical.

DR LAMBLED

(laughs)

Just hoping to bump into a well-heeled widow, while waiting for Godot.

FO SWANSON

(wryly)

There is more to you than the oath and academia, Dr Lambled. Looking for a highly intelligent under-sixty? Well-preserved natural beauty? Sense of humour? Hen's teeth, I am afraid. They're onto pre-booked billionaires before the ship is commissioned. Ancient, of course.
(snorts)

DR LAMBLED

Damn! But we were talking *suicide*, not women. God forbid we should merge those two topics: suicide by erection.

FO SWANSON

While waiting for Godot?

DR LAMBLED

(in a mock state of seriousness)

We could hang on *that* Beckett line. But I was thinking earlier: No overboard suicides? Bridges and ships almost attract them. What if - in today's maritime context?

FO SWANSON

It's a big *if* these days. Heightened railings, enclosed deck areas, anti-climb measures, surveillance.

DR LAMBLED

Small *if*? Worst-case scenario: Someone jumps?

FO SWANSON

Ever heard of the Williamson turn?

DR LAMBLED

A rescue manoeuvre, I suppose.

FO SWANSON

Yes. Sail from the place of incident and turn back.

DR LAMBLED

Surviving jumpers instinctively fight drowning and can go on to lead extraordinary lives. "The irreversible shift" we call it.

FO SWANSON

A Williamson! A good metaphor for that conversion. But in my world, it's safety first and avoidance of further turbulence.

DR LAMBED

A fraught rescue would cause additional challenges for psychiatrists, too.

FO SWANSON

It could be more than fraught. The propeller could finish the job.

DR LAMBED

For the jumper, as he is carved up by the propeller, and for the psychiatrist, who would have nothing to counsel.

FO SWANSON

Futility. Too much. Too little. Heartbreak. No prospects. No hope. Bad pathology. What is death's deal? Whom does it attract?

DR LAMBED

Impossible to profile. Just in our time: Naomi Judd, Anthony Bourdain, Kate Spade.

FO SWANSON

Robert Enke, Lorna Breene.

DR LAMBED

Musicians, foodies, designers, sportsmen. In literature, anyone from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf - Woolf wading into the river with stones in her pockets.

FO SWANSON

Weighing herself down like that, when all most writers and artists want to do is fly?

DR LAMBED

The anatomy of despair, dissonance fuelled by explosive chemistry, is typical in the artistic genius. But just as often, it's the ordinary people like you and me.

FO SWANSON

I wonder at that, Doctor. Your ordinariness, I mean.

DR LAMBED

You challenge my clinical distance in your familiarity.

FO SWANSON

Have I overstepped your boundaries?

DR LAMBED

No, just that mutual empathy fudges them. Your essence is subservient to three stripes, mine to wine and Hippocrates.

FO SWANSON

Anatomy of despair quite subtle, then?

(Light on the two men fades: Lights isolate upstage left a lone figure in a hoodie of whom the psychiatrist and first officer are unaware. He appears to be standing on the wrong side of the ship's rail in three-quarter turn to the audience. A sound bite of Ray Charles singing "Hit the road, Jack" can be heard.)

MAN WITH HOODIE

(holding tightly onto rail)

God, please save me. I don't want to die.

(Isolation lights fade, and man exits upstage left.)

DR LAMBED

Tears go unnoticed when there's no physical injury. Do you know that tomorrow's speaker cried all the way to Golden Gate Bridge on San Francisco Bay? Thought death was the only way out. He did not want to die.

FO SWANSON

You know him?

DR LAMBED

I know the *story*.

FO SWANSON

Bottom line?

DR LAMBED

Bipolar with psychotic incidents. Between a survivable entry and the efforts of a seal, he was saved.

FO SWANSON

Survivable entry?

DR LAMBED

After letting go of the rail, he twisted his body for damage control. Landed feet-first and could avoid being swept out to sea and drowning. Seriously injured, though. Imagine hitting a body of water like that from 73 metres at 129 kilometres an hour.

FO SWANSON

And a seal?

DR LAMBED

It's inherent in animals, you know, helping a fellow survive. He kept nudging the jumper up to the surface until the coast guard arrived. Not like us.

FO SWANSON

Us?

DR LAMBED

Humans. The bus driver who drove Hines to the bridge must have seen him crying. "C'mon, kid, get off the bus. I gotta go," is all he said. A woman gave her camera to the kid as he got off the bus, asking for a photo. He wiped his eyes, took her picture and returned the camera. She moved on.

FO SWANSON

Bitch.

DR LAMBED

(as he struggles out of the deckchair)

No. Even family and friends of suicides seem blind to the signs. No one ever asks the question. It's always, "Could have, should have, wish I had."

(boxes the air in frustration)

FO SWANSON

Ships have preventative measures, as I've just told you. And bridges?

DR LAMBED

At Golden Gate, they have suicide watch. Unfortunately, politics, budgets and aesthetics come before *material* safety measures. No matter that *(elevates speech register)* bedlamites may be speeding to their parapets, tilting there momentarily, shrill shirts ballooning.

FO SWANSON

"The bridge". Crane Hart. Maritime history. In an alcoholic stupor, he jumped off the SS *Orizaba* into the Gulf of Mexico. "Goodbye, everybody." Last words.

DR LAMBED

Very poetic - but hard to be homosexual in those times.

FO SWANSON

Oh, God. Let's move to the rails. Just to stretch our legs.

(laughs)

DR LAMBED

(as they walk upstage with both in three-quarter turn from the audience)

You know your literature.

FO SWANSON

Thanks to Mother. English professor.

(The rest is inaudible, as the spotlight follows the two men moving to the rails. Dr Lambled takes the flyer with him, only to drop it on the way. It is shown to the audience in pin spot.)

FADE TO BLACK

ACT 1

SCENE 3 -

FO Swanson and Dr Lambled are at the rails, upstage and facing each other but in "cheat out" and isolated in faded light.

Enter from downstage right two women, Lady Rottinger and Hilary West, the older one using a walker. They are angled towards one another in three-quarter and quarter turn respectively, so that their faces are visible to the audience.

LADY ROTTINGER

Ooooh, the sea breeze! Along with the attentions of the first officer, life at its best. I have told him to call me Isabella, not Lady Rottinger.

HILARY WEST

But your first name is Mavis.

LADY ROTTINGER

That's my point, Hilary. Men in uniform *(sighs)*. My eyes match my stole, apparently - the emerald one. What's that piece of paper?

HILARY WEST

(picks up the flyer and reads it)

Looks like the jumper from Golden Gate Bridge will be giving a talk on his survival.

LADY ROTTINGER

What! There are Americans on board?

HILARY WEST

Now, now, Lady Rottinger, don't be cruel.

LADY ROTTINGER

Whatever cruel is.

HILARY WEST

Well, it's not love.

BOTH LADIES TOGETHER

(laughing)

Whatever love is.

LADY ROTTINGER

Oh, Hilary, my dearest companion, I *do* love you.

HILARY WEST

Aha, platonic. I'm into Eros. *(then cautiously)* Speaking about love, I've met a psychiatrist. Worth a bottle of *du-Pape* or two. Quite the *bon vivant*. Very jolly. David Denys Lamed. Analyse me, Dionysus!

LADY ROTTINGER

First class?

HILARY WEST

Oh, yes. South African.

LADY ROTTINGER

You won't leave me?

HILARY WEST

No. No. Jolly as in jolly complex. A mere interlude.
(hums "Strangers in the night")

LADY ROTTINGER

Well, a maritime toast: Bottoms up to that. Bottoms up to the gods!

HILARY WEST

(giggling)

That's as far as we can go - we, the irreligious: "God loves us," they say. But no agape for you and me. *Cin cin*, cheers, *santé, gesundheit*.

(Somewhere from the inner ship, a lone singer's version of "Strangers in the night" can be heard. Ladies exit left past the deckchair and table where the two men were sitting earlier.)

FADE TO BLACK

ACT 1

SCENE 4 -

FO Swanson and Dr Lambed are standing with their backs against the rail, arms stretched out with hands holding onto the rail.

FO SWANSON

These voyages - all pleasure, or just the opposite.

DR LAMBED

Ships at a distance have every man's dream on board, I have heard it said.

FO SWANSON

Zora Neale Hurston. "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some, they come in with the tide. For others, they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing ... That is the life of men."

DR LAMBED

Note the use of "men".

FO SWANSON

Strange, considering her complex views on gender. But that was 1937. Even the generic use would be a bit tricky these days. All "person" for gender anonymity.

DR LAMBED

Total anonymity and freedom are the U-turn from the reality we all seek. Could be fatal, though. For men and for women.

(A scantily dressed young woman wearing a crown of vine leaves enters upstage right and makes her way to the rails some distance from the two men. Discovering there is no way to lean over the rail, she vomits on deck. She staggers drunkenly across stage to exit downstage right.)

FO SWANSON

(making a hand gesture towards the lady as his eyes follow her offstage)

Freedom of the cultish type: anything from the tooth fairy to craning his neck to watch the departure of Dionysus - and many a female convert.

DR LAMBED

(as the two men return to the rails to their seating arrangement)

Following a tiff, I wouldn't wonder. A happy quasi-death.

FO SWANSON

(preparing to sit on the table)

They should pay me for being a table arrangement.

DR LAMBED

Yes, uniforms do wonders for aesthetics. But, no, let me sit there; I make for a fuller, more florid look.

(The two men take their positions, Swanson on the deckchair and Lambled on the table.)

DR LAMBED

But back to our topic: What do you think are the main causes of death in the northern hemisphere and North America? External causes of people under forty-four?

FO SWANSON

Suicide right up there, I suppose.

DR LAMBED

Yes. Road accidents, suicide - especially from mid-teens to late twenties - drug overdose and homicide.

FO SWANSON

And where you come from?

DR LAMBED

Exact figures are elusive in South Africa. Diversity and socioeconomics. Suicide *per se* is culturally blind; *ukuzibulala* in Zulu and Xhosa, *selfdood* in Afrikaans - affects

all communities. Reportage differs and records all a jumble. Life in *Mzansi*!

FO SWANSON

Religion must have an impact. Nonsecular societies?

DR LAMBED

Easier to read. In some Muslim countries, a no-no on legal *and* religious grounds, so figures should be lower.

FO SWANSON

What about - suicide bombing, against the *infidel*?

DR LAMBED

That's *Jihadist* stuff. Framed as martyrdom! Suicide is *haram* for the others.

FO SWANSON

Forbidden?

DR LAMBED

Yes, and more. Families won't admit it when that is the cause of death. Suicide means mental struggles associated with *jinn*.

FO SWANSON

(in a lilting tone, as though he is taking a drinks order)

And you're not talking Tanqueray, Gordon's, Bombay, Sapphire?

DR LAMBED

An evil spirit of a different kind. These days, *imams* take a more holistic view.

FO SWANSON

For the Catholics, suicide is out. Gin, not necessarily.

DR LAMBED

You're not one? A Catholic, I mean.

FO SWANSON

Mmm-hm

DR LAMBED

Lapsed?

FO SWANSON

Rescued from the frenzied administrations of a holy disciplinarian - into the arms of the British Royal Navy.

DR LAMBED

An over-zealous priest, probably.

FO SWANSON

(nods and makes a whipping motion)

Then Falklands. At one point, I had hoped for a vainglorious end, but providence prevailed. God knows what I'm destined for - what it is for which I am destined.

DR LAMBED

(in professional mode now)

There's more, isn't there?

FO SWANSON

Let's exchange seats, Doctor.

DR LAMBED

Feeling uncomfortable?

FO SWANSON

(sitting up, shaking his head and lying back again)

Your comfort is my concern, Doctor.

DR LAMBED

Ah, yes. *First Officer* Swanson. Have you ever captained a ship?

FO SWANSON

No, and never will. I was once young enough, but on the wrong side of the shadow line.

DR LAMBED

Sounds like Conrad. So, this is your swan song, then?

FO SWANSON

Yes. I feel like Gloria Swanson's Norma. *Sunset Boulevard*.

DR LAMBED

But in *Gloria's* case, the sun was not setting. The play was her comeback, her legacy.

FO SWANSON

Gloria in excelsis Deo. There's a lot in a name.

DR LAMBED

Like Lam-bed. Indeed, silencing the lamb - de lam(b)ed.
In a word, disarranging it. Bedlam. Deranged.

FO SWANSON

T'was brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in
the wabe. Sounds as though *I* am deranged. But no. Those
were my untroubled days. Wonderland. Introduced at
mother's knee.

DR LAMBED

Aah. You're leading me somewhere.

FO SWANSON

To nonsense or insanity?

DR LAMBED

Beyond that. Into the looking glass, where I see our
reflections.

FO SWANSON

What on earth are you talking about?

DR LAMBED

I don't have an inkling. It's a rabbit hole. I'm on
sabbatical and, like you, about to retire.

*(Lighting changes, and the audience is suddenly aware of a
well-built, apparently older woman lingering in the shadows,
in isolate with her back to the audience. She stays a while,
looking out to sea. Her black raincoat is cinched at the
waist. The lining suggests Burberry. The hair is a glossy
grey, shoulder-length and slightly windswept. She acknowledges
the doctor with an up-and-under glance before leaving the
scene, stage right.)*

FO SWANSON

That was Elizabeth Blackwell. PA to the captain. He gave
her a job - after her divorce. All above bo - I mean,
nothing untoward.

DR LAMBED

Maritime clothed in the clichés that drive us to *ennui*.
Slow death. At sea. Ships that don't come in. Ships
passing in the night.

FO SWANSON

Between the devil and the deep blue sea.

DR LAMBED

Without the clichés, no place to hide. Life can get tricky without the euphemisms.

FO SWANSON

Three sheets to the wind?

DR LAMBED

(laughing as he pours the last of the wine into his glass)

No. Pissed as a coot, and I could do with another.

FO SWANSON

(making to leave the scene to fetch more wine)

Bottle, Doctor?

DR LAMBED

(raising his glass to show the remaining wine, and shifting to Shakespearean actor register)

Stay a while. We are not finished yet.

FO SWANSON

(picking up on the doctor's cue and acting along with him, engaging an overemphasised Shakespearean register)

We cannot be finished and be here.

DR LAMBED

Nor do we lie here or say it is ours.

FO SWANSON

(sitting up)

But lying I have been for too long, I think.

DR LAMBED

Quick lies breed slow denials?

FO SWANSON

Dr Shakespeare.

DR LAMBED

Gravedigging.

FO SWANSON

You could find skeletons.

DR LAMBED

I suspect I shall.

FO SWANSON

(swinging his legs around on the deckchair, so that the two are facing one another)

What deaths attract Christian burials?

DR LAMBED

Natural, legally assisted, illegally assisted, by murder, by homicide, by misadventure, self-inflicted-long-term-naïve and more.

FO SWANSON

And Ophelia?

DR LAMBED

Aah! Lady of repentance and sorrow.

FO SWANSON

Rosemary for remembrance, pansies for thoughts, fennel for flattery and rue for regret.

DR LAMBED

Regret is an important mitigating circumstance in *felo-de-se*.

FO SWANSON

Bit late to regret floating down the brook in passive surrender, when you could have saved yourself. What would you have yours be?

DR LAMBED

(making a gesture with finger to his temple)

Boom! No, no, no *(pointing to the empty bottle)* - rather the slow death - self-inflicted, long-term, deliberate and enjoying every lonely sip of it.

FO SWANSON

You won't succumb on my watch, then, Doctor. But I meant burial.

DR LAMBED

Ahh, we're talking burial.

FO SWANSON

A Christian one?

DR LAMBED

I am not a Christian.

(Cabin lights go on and pandemonium ensues, with conflicting music - from hip-hop to heavy metal and strains of "Jerusalema". All goes dark for a while, and then light returns gradually onto the two men.)

LADY ROTTINGER

(calling from the wings, stage right)

First Officer! First Officer? Are you there?

FO SWANSON

(standing up)

Oh, damn, I almost forgot, I promised Lady Rottinger I'd partner her in a game of whist. Not that she can hold hers. I'll return a little later, Doctor.

DR LAMBED

I'm David.

FO SWANSON

(speaking over his shoulder as he exits stage right)

Francis.

FADE TO BLACK

ACT 1

SCENE 5 -

Dr Lambed has moved downstage and is standing full front to the audience. The lighting has changed somewhat, indicating a pending storm and nightfall. Cabin lights in sharper focus.

DR LAMBED

(talking to the audience as though they are passengers on the lower deck)

We have much in common, the first officer and me. Time of life, literature - even "The bridge". He knew the source of my reckoning. I am more than half impressed:

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Let me deliver the diagnosis in poetic mode: He sits there in the stiff folds of custom, but the snort as he quips tells me there is no laughter there. He's drowning.

Our first officer is a man with no apparent vices - except Catholicism? Even in the lapsing, a vice indeed.

They are the difficult ones in the psychiatrist's chair, the Catholics. They know kneeling at the skirt of a

nameless silhouette and looking for redemption in novenas.

Forgive me. At your expense, I share that I am the one in trouble here, and with no refund at the door. His drowning mirrors my spiralling down, and I am losing my hand on the rail. Can anyone save *me*? I don't want to die.

Who am I, as I stand looking down on the lower deck? I don't mean to patronise. On boarding, I was a pleasure seeker, looking for respite from the noise. And with a hopeful heart: a fellow connoisseur, a new companion? (Hilary West gulps wine down like soft drink and is seventy. Get *her* to a nunnery.) They say that Hamlet did not mean a cloister, but a brothel. Hilary? In a cloister? I think not. In a brothel? Definitely not.

And now? Who am *I* now? I am dissected by the professional in me and just me. I knew it, even as he yanked that table over, and I, with my intuition screaming "No!", let him stay. He doesn't even drink - on or off duty. Or so I'm told.

Let me tell you about what I was drinking at the time.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape. I drink it sometimes as a nod to a staunch Catholic friend who died too young and went to heaven. Atheists drink it, too, as the surest way to paradise.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape is a wine region in France. Lean back; I'll take you to a happy place.

Made in the place of *joie de vivre*, a magical place. Can you see it? It should appear now in your mind's eye, set on its hill rising out of grapevines.

See at its summit the vestige - a wall, a tower and the halls of the château built by cardinals. The pope's New Castle. Their summer residence. Ahh, to be Catholic. Are you there yet? In the 14th century. Yes?

Now, wander around the ruins and admire the views over the Dentelles de Montmirail, the Mont Ventoux, the Rhône and even Avignon.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape as a wine-growing area marked the advent of the *appellation d'origine contrôlée*: We can so be sure that wines are worthy of their names.

(grabs the bottle from the table)

You see, I have a bottle of *du-Pape* right here *(points to the back label and pretends to be reading it)*. It attests - attested, as I have drunk it all - to pebbly soil covered in small stones, and abundant sunshine. Yes, that is typical of the reds: ruby in their prime, complexity, a broad aromatic palate with ripe fruits, blackcurrant, blackberries, spices, roasting, liquorice, prunes, leather. Good wines, like good people, triumph in difficult conditions.

Are you with me still?

I was talking about First Officer Swanson. I think he is concerned that I seek *my* redemption too deeply in the bottle. *Hy kyk te diep in die bottel*, South Africans say. Too much *awayini*.

Any South Africans here? You are asking me why I do not sell *our* wine industry. I will do - tomorrow, if I am here, following the talk. "Cracked not broken". Join me. Second deck.

For now, I am here with *my* problem, which concerns my acquaintance with the first officer. And you'll notice that even in the telling, I breach the ethics of my profession.

Principle 1. Respect for human dignity. Point 1. Ensure the patient knows his rights and the doctor his place. In other words, know the patient from the doctor.

You must forgive me, then. I have put *you* in the holding environment, so that I can have the emotional space to share my truth. Not the other way around. But I, the doctor, am the vulnerable one, asking you to help me.

Principle 2. Avoidance of exploitation Point 3. Maintain observer status and strict boundaries in relationships.

But I moved from observer to participant in trying to keep my distance. We are all but friends already, and

yet, and yet - let's just call it "an over-caring distance".

We met not as agent-patient, but as two men on a ship, and neither in a professional moment. He, like me, was on sabbatical. In uniform, granted, and his hiatus but a very short one.

Principle 3. Avoidance of subjectivity. Point 4. Apply strict clinical protocols.

In observing him, I saw me.

I ask myself: Should being on leave give me leave to compromise professional guidelines? Intuitively speaking, I am sure our first officer is about to give up. And you? You know, even from your holding space, that I have made the cardinal error of projection.

I feel somehow that between the two of us, there are four involved, and offer my unbelieving prayer that providence will intervene.

Or one of us will die tonight.

(Dr Lambed returns to the deckchair and is about to lie on it, when Hilary West enters downstage right.)

HILARY WEST

Dr Lambed, I am so pleased I caught you here. I thought we could have a little drink together.

DR LAMBED

(speaking over his shoulder to the audience)

Or two big ones, more likely.

(Dr Lambed and Hilary West exit stage left.)

FADE TO BLUE

ACT 1

SCENE 6 -

The stage is empty but for the place where FO Swanson and Dr Lambed were sitting. The atmosphere is eerie. The first officer re-enters stage right and looks around quizzically as if to wonder where Dr Lambed has disappeared to.

FO SWANSON

(turning to the audience full front and then engaging)

What a treat. Lady Rottinger. We won at whist, although she chatted all the while: Rotter this and Rotter that. From the naming, the poor dead fellow was not what she would have him be. But that he was a rotter tests my suspension of disbelief. Even so, "The Ship's Manifest of Duty to Passengers":

Code 5. Accessibility and inclusion. Point 1. Empower every passenger to feel not just welcomed, but seen.

Besides, I am indebted to her. She interrupted us and saved me from scrutiny and an ill-advised response. For a moment there, I thought I might confess it all, failing in my duty to the doctor - indeed, the ship's duty to *all* its passengers.

Code 3. Hospitality and dignity. Point 1. Guarantee discretion in all interactions.

But I swear I felt him circling, circling - me: seeking that alliance. I was there before in therapy. It was after the collapse - but then again, before the quiet, tentative shift.

(makes a performance of pulling himself together, back into first officer mode)

Code 6. Enrichment and atmosphere. Point 1. Curate artistic, intellectual and leisure experiences that stir the imagination.

(now in announcement mode)

For entertainment and enlightenment. Ladies and gentlemen: Do not miss our cabaret, Thursday night at seven. Second deck.

"Willkommen! And Bienvenue! Welcome! Fremder, étranger, stranger. Glücklich zu sehen; je suis enchanté; happy to see you. Bleibe, reste, stay."

Wamkelekile. Welkom.

Tomorrow, it's the talk "Cracked not broken" at six, and then the wine tasting by connoisseur Dr David Lamberd: "Pinotage: Halfway to heartbreak".

(beginning a three-quarter turn away, and speaking to himself out loud)

Nearly forgot: Code 1. Safety and stewardship. Point 1.
Provide timely updates during adverse conditions - no
silence during the storm.

(in an about turn in the direction of the audience/passengers)

And a safety check: No need to panic, but be aware
there's a storm coming.

(entering a stream of consciousness, but now in side view -
"cheat out")

He knows me - and's still digging. The bit about the
skeleton? I won't go there with him. Not his
responsibility to listen.

Is he well? Suicide? What topic is that - as an escape
from anything?

Too many lines crossed and boundaries overstepped. Each
as well as the other. Unclear lines in murky waters.

He asks what he might dread to hear. But still, there is
rapport even in the literature that binds us to that
other suicide. Three lives intertwined. That hapless
Hart, blind to his *talent extraordinaire*, hit both the bottle and
the seas:

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty -

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
- Till elevators drop us from our day

Unity. All from "The bridge", the poem that indiscreetly
draws us closer.

Does my important passenger - new friend, the doctor -
even have a clue what I meant when I invoked the Conrad?

"I was still young enough, still too much on this side of
the shadow line, not to be surprised and indignant at
such things."

I was saying that that young man still had a chance. He was young and already captain, and young enough to transition into someone even greater.

And me? All washed up, I sometimes think.

The doctor knows the work, for sure. His shadow line? It can only be between the illusion that he is in control and the role of fate. But agnostic as he is, he has no belief. He thinks inevitability. Not fate. That is where *his* tension lies - I mean, between resistance and the crossing into darker self.

Me again? Yes. And no, I *will* not, *cannot* go there with him. This is my liberation. This ship. A happy discipline that keeps me safe and sure on course. It is not over yet. I have the privilege of my duties. There can be no unravelling.

Code 6. Enrichment and atmosphere. Point 1. Encourage wonder at sea: the passage, the solitude, the vastness.

(turned to the audience/passengers)

Do you hear the quiet before the storm? Do you not wonder at it? At your safety in the hands of others within the vastness of this inky, choppy sea? That ambitious moon?

(returned to stream of consciousness)

"The sea was white with foam, and the wind howled like a living thing. I stood there, holding on, not knowing whether I was master of the ship or a man about to be cast adrift by fate." Ahh, fate, Joseph Conrad and me.

Oh, yes, that's it! This is not about the doctor. This is about me and the game I play with despair - like a romantic thing. How does a man rise, rise, rise without challenges to overcome? A troubled sea and no turbulence within me?

Of course there is. Not knowing whether I might be master of the ship or cast adrift -

How can I live? An officer all his life at sea that never would a captain be. Unmet expectations. On the bridge, with my bloodless mind gripping to command and looking for direction. That *should* be me. But for -

I *will* not, *cannot* go there - beyond my mother's knee,
where the Jabberwock was just a part of youthful, joyful
fantasy.

(*repeats*) On the bridge, with my bloodless mind gripping
to command and looking for direction. That *would* be me.
But for Falklands.

I was so much younger then. HMS *Sheffield*. Images flashed
back at me.

Fire, stay back, stay back! I see the Jabberwock,
dear Doc.

He's coming for me through the flames,
His jaws ajar, his hands spread wide,
This is the fearful Jabberwock roasting in the
flames,
I retreat and run.

One, two! One, two! And through - he's tripped me
from behind.

They took me then and lay me down.
Should I have saved the Jabberwock?
Well done, my son, comrade at arms.
You should be proud you've done no harm.

'Twas charr-ed and the bright blue eyes
still lit up for his Mary;
and joy was in the laughter lines
Now he's gone, O'Leary.

Well done, my son, they said to me. All I felt was shame
and loss. Then - a kind of disassociation. That was the
nature of survival.

(*for the third time*) On the bridge, with my bloodless
mind gripping to command ...

That's *not* me.

My friend, the doctor - an educated man; a kindly,
empathetic man. He knows me well enough. He knows about
the buried skeleton and how it re-emerges. Post-traumatic
stress disorder. He sensed it and put his mind on leave.
Psychiatrists, too, have codes, and yet I sense unease.

Does he despair where there should be wonder or order or
trust?

"Never will a man be called upon to answer for a deed as he is for a trust."

Again, Conrad's insights test my wonder: Can I trust David? What then to be done, if not?

But no, it is *I* who hold the trust and have responsibilities.

Code 6. Enrichment and atmosphere. Point 2. Encourage visual and emotional memories.

I shall remind him of the greatness of the sea. So that he can look at the stars even in retreat, and the moon as it gives in against the cloud. I shall make him feel the beauty of the peril in the hands of man's fragility.

But there is a greater duty.

Code I. Safety and stewardship. Point 2. Maintain vigilance as to the safety of all individuals on board. Navigation, clear emergency protocols, trained personnel and the absence of weapons.

My God. Boom! That finger to his head!

If I trust him, then who shall answer, should someone die tonight?

(does an about turn and moves quickly upstage)

(Lighting reveals that Dr Lambled has returned to the deckchair.)

DR LAMBLED

Ah, there you are, Francis!

FO SWANSON

I'm back, as promised, David.

DR LAMBLED

You look worried. What on earth has Lady Rottinger done to you?

FO SWANSON

No, it's you, and I hope I can get my words right: As first officer, I have a duty to facilitate your pleasure. For that reason, I have shown restraint in my greater duty.

DR LAMBED

So, no more first mate then, Francis - I mean, First Officer Swanson?

FO OFFICER

Dr Lambed, it is my duty to ask: Are you, erm, loaded?

DR LAMBED

Financially, no; alcoholically, yes, sir.

FO SWANSON

I mean, are you carrying a firearm?

DR LAMBED

Neither a rifle nor a gun, although I was glad to see Ms West earlier.

FO SWANSON

Oh, God, David. FFS.

DR LAMBED

I, too, have erred in my responsibility. First Officer Swanson, I must ask: Are you -

(There's a commotion on deck. A crew member enters.)

CREW MEMBER

Sir, sir - to the bridge, sir. It's the captain, sir!

(Dr Lambed and First Officer Swanson spring into heightened awareness. Exit the first officer stage right at great speed.)

DR LAMBED

(calling after the first officer)

Steer your ship, my man.

(Elizabeth Blackwell enters. She has her Burberry coat open over a black lace negligee. A long, well-toned leg is exposed. There is a smear of blood across her face, and she is clearly upset.)

ELIZABETH BLACKWELL

(taking the doctor by the elbow)

Dr Lambed? Elizabeth Blackwell, the captain's personal assistant. Betty. The crew is traumatised.

DR LAMBED

And you, Betty, are you okay?

ELIZABETH BLACKWELL

Yes. I just wish I had asked the captain the same question earlier.

DR LAMBED

He's dead?

ELIZABETH BLACKWELL

Yes, bullet to the head.

DR LAMBED

No turning back.

ELIZABETH BLACKWELL

No, no Williamson.

(All the lights dim, but for a strobe light leading the doctor and Elizabeth Blackwell into a future of possibility. Then gradual darkness before the stage lights up again to reveal Lady Rottinger and Hilary seated in the original places of the doctor and first officer. Lady Rottinger is wearing her emerald stole, and Hilary appears to be in her cups, hugging half a bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.)

HILARY WEST

(hiccupping)

Mistah Kurtz - he dead.

(Curtain call for two leads, and then Lady Rottinger and Hilary West rise to take their bows for the various bit parts.)

Music as the theatre clears: "Jerusalem" followed by "Jerusalema".