

THE TEA SERVANT

A one-act drama by
Ed Shockley

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ZANSHIN, quiet tea servant and retainer to the princess.

PRINCESS, sheltered young love-struck girl.

RONIN, a farmer masquerading as a samurai.

NARRATOR, storyteller, could also be played by multiple members of the Chorus.

SENSEI, learned man of peace.

STUDENT #1, arrogant senior student.

STUDENT #2, playful senior student.

CHORUS, flexible in size, to play the spirits during the duel and students in the class.

The lines of Students 1 and 2 could be divided between a larger group of students, depending on the needs of your production.

(The center space is bare. Three boxes are defined by jo-sticks and bokkens [wooden swords] placed stage left, right and up center. Actors enter in ceremonial fashion, bless the performance space with incense then kneel with their backs to the audience in the boxes. Zanshin enters then begins performing the tea ceremony. The Princess flits around sighing with love then both freeze. The Narrator turns and enters the performance space.)

NARRATOR: Then and now,
next and last,
deed and dream,
mix in time.
This great tale,
as old as salt,
may well have grown
fed by the years
but none the less,
her perfect core
will stand the test
past one telling more.

(Narrator claps and the bodies build a house covering the tea ceremony using jo-sticks.)

Perfection is rare in things large and small. Our tale begins with a simple tea being served without flaw by a faithful retainer and confidant.

PRINCESS: Read it again, Zanshin... Did you hear? I want his sweet words dancing upon the autumn air once more.

ZANSHIN: To do one thing well we must do one thing only.

PRINCESS: You sound like my father but I am too happy to care. Here, give me the letter and I will read it myself.

(Zanshin slowly pauses the tea service then produces the letter, unfolding it with deliberation. The impatient Princess takes it from her and Zanshin returns to the ceremony.)

My Dearest Darling:

Without you here the days are decades. My soul cries out like a featherless bird beneath a burning summer sun. If I could hold you for one hour I would trade every twilight from now until dawn shall cease to follow night. Write to me immediately and come sooner.

Your tortured love,
Natsume

Has such elegance ever before been employed in the service of love...? Zanshin?

ZANSHIN: The tea is too hot, Princess, we are wise to wait.

PRINCESS: What? Never you mind. Order my wardrobe crated. We are going to Meiji.

ZANSHIN: We cannot.

PRINCESS: Why not?

ZANSHIN: We have no escort and bandits plague the road.

(The Bandit [RONIN] comes alive and performs a martial dance.)

PRINCESS: Love will give us wings to fly past them to her sacred goal.

ZANSHIN: Ducks have wings and yet fall prey to gamesmen.

NARRATOR: Every argument is countered without recourse to logic, for love is a disease that affects the mind, and so preparations are made and in less than an evening the belligerent princess and her apprehensive retainer meet to embark on a perilous journey.

(Zanshin enters dressed as a samurai. Princess bursts into laughter.)

ZANSHIN: It is a desperate tactic to fulfill your wish.

PRINCESS: I have no desire to see you parade around in a samurai hakima.

ZANSHIN: If I can effect the swagger of a sword master then the deception may preserve us past the perils of this journey.

PRINCESS: You can no more pass for a samurai than I could masquerade as a tea servant.

ZANSHIN: For the sake of our virtue and your verbose suitor, we will pray for dim-sighted vagabonds.

NARRATOR: And this time it is Zanshin who will not be swayed from her course, and so after hours of practice perfecting the gait, the ladies set out to bluff their way across the kingdom.

(Comic dance captures Zanshin learning to walk like a man and the journey until they arrive at a deserted knoll.)

RONIN: Have you permission to travel my highway?

PRINCESS: The emperor is lord of every road and walkway and so unless you are in his employ we owe you nothing.

ZANSHIN: Except courtesy and the wish of a pleasant journey.

RONIN: It is I who say what is owed and who will pay.

PRINCESS: Stand down, oaf, or I will report you to my father.

ZANSHIN: Please...

RONIN: And who might your father be when he is at home?

ZANSHIN: It is of no consequence, for we are simply...

PRINCESS: My father is Michiyo Kazuma and he will have your entrails spread out before you for daring to bar my way.

ZANSHIN: We needn't allow affairs to progress so far...

RONIN: A rich and powerful man this Kazuma, eh?

ZANSHIN: A man of appearances, living beyond his means.

PRINCESS: How can you say that? He owns and controls every cubit of land from Yoshikuni to Saruwatari Riku.

RONIN: Therefore you will pay for passage and you shall beg for your life.

ZANSHIN: House your blade.

RONIN: In your heart.

PRINCESS: What is your price? I would rather pay than lose a friend.

ZANSHIN: The turn in the road is passed now.

PRINCESS: Nonsense. You wanted alms and here you have it; now let us pass.

(Princess throws a purse to the Ronin.)

ZANSHIN: It is become a matter of honor.

PRINCESS: He is a thief accosting women on highways. Where is this precious honor?

ZANSHIN: He has drawn his sword and now it may not be sheathed until it has crossed with another. This is the samurai code, is it not?

RONIN: Uh, quite true.

PRINCESS: You will not fight him.

ZANSHIN: It must be.

PRINCESS: He will kill you.

RONIN: As I have many.

ZANSHIN: Such is fate.

RONIN: Then let us bury you in a shallow grave so that I may be on to my lunch.

ZANSHIN: I request one concession: allow me to deliver the princess to her destination and then I will return and conclude our duel.

RONIN: How do I know you will return?

ZANSHIN: You have my word.

PRINCESS: And you have my purse as ransom.

RONIN: Go. Deliver your princess, and if you seek me again, I will be found.

ZANSHIN: Thank you, noble samurai. I suspect that my travels will require a night and day again, there and back.

(The Ronin grunts and the women continue their journey.)

PRINCESS: Well done, Zanshin. You outwitted the simpleton though it grieved me to surrender my purse to that clod. When we reach Meiji I will report this to my precious Natsume and he will find this buffoon and cut off his ears.

NARRATOR: Zanshin says little and travels without incident on to Meiji, where she delivers the petulant princess to a well-attended inn. Immediately the retainer prepares a meticulous tea service without spilling a drop or breaking the rhythm from start to end.

PRINCESS: Magnificent, Zanshin. You have performed perfectly.

ZANSHIN: Then I am fulfilled.

PRINCESS: This gives you great pleasure, does it not?

ZANSHIN: To perform a task with a single mind is the single purpose of a solitary life.

NARRATOR: The princess does not yet understand and continues flitting about preparing for the visit of her lover. Zanshin meantime sets out to find a sensei.

(Zanshin once again dances travel and then happens upon a group of STUDENTS training with weapons. Slowly the strikes threaten around her. Instead of cringing, Zanshin begins tidying a disheveled tea tray.)

STUDENT #1: What are you doing?

(Zanshin continues cleaning.)

Are you ignoring me?

(Zashin continues.)

STUDENT #2: What have we here?

STUDENT #1: A rude little man in need of instruction.

SENSEI: If this one were truly rude, it would have been more easily revealed by answering your foolish question since it is obvious to anyone with eyes, ears or imagination that this is a tea servant preparing libation undisturbed by the brutes who threaten all around.

(Zanshin offers tea. The SENSEI sits and sips in silence displaying equal reverence for each detail. The ritual is a dance. When it is complete, the Sensei rises, smiles and speaks:)

Yes.

ZANSHIN: Excuse me, please?

SENSEI: I suppose it is now your turn to be foolish.

(Pause.)

ZANSHIN: I have been challenged to a duel.

SENSEI: There is no one who will dare pursue you here.

ZANSHIN: I am to meet my adversary at the crossroads near Tsumago shortly after night yields to morning.

STUDENT #1: If you do not meet him, you cannot lose.

ZANSHIN: I have pledged my word.

STUDENT #2: And your word is worth a life?

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