

DEATH IN VENICE IN FIRST PERSON

Based on the Novella
By Thomas Mann

Adapted for the Stage
By Rory Lance

DEATH IN VENICE IN FIRST PERSON

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DEATH IN VENICE IN FIRST PERSON

*For George & Faye, my parents, whose
support and love had no bounds*

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Death In Venice In First Person premiered at the United Solo Theatre Festival in New York City, with the author performing the role of GustavAschenbach.

CAST: 1 male/male presenting character

GUSTAV ASCHENBACH: A man of some accomplishment

TIME: 1912

PLACE: Various locations in Munich and Venice

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ACT ONE
SCENE 1

The setting is one that can suggest all places needed, decorated with the required stage props and scenic items, a table, a chair, and a plant atop a pedestal will represent all needed locations. Our sole character, GUSTAV ASCHENBACH, is a man of middle years, of exceptional accomplishment and sophisticated lifestyle. He addresses the audience.

ASCHENBACH. *(Seated in chair.)* It all started when I felt an insatiable desire to take a walk. I had just eaten an acceptably satisfying lunch, but before I resumed my day's work, I felt I needed to walk. If I had attempted to work at that moment, I would have either fallen asleep on the sofa near my writing desk or stared at the blank sheet of paper unable to fulfill my day's assignment, which was neither inspiring nor challenging me. I knew I had to take a walk.

(Getting up) The grey in my hair tells you that I have reached a point in my life that very often reveals either regret, which is bad, or complacency, which is much worse. I do have some reason to be free from regret. At the age of 54, I have, at least in the minds of many, achieved a definite level of success. Numerous writings, which include two major works, one of fiction and one of non-fiction, which have achieved a universal acknowledgement of... reverence. I am sought after as a desired lecturer on the subjects of my works and on the means and mechanics of the literary craft that has enabled me to present them to the reading public. I have been

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given various awards and honors that have allowed me the prestige of adding little letters after my name. I was famous and respected, and I... truly needed to take a walk.

When one is young, one is forever cluttered with the unknown. As one grows older, the unknown is piece by piece replaced with the known, the expected, the obligatory- will we ever be able to prove to the young that the unknown is ever so much more... delightful?

So I reached for my hat and stick (*Retrieves them from table*) and set off to wander through the main thoroughfare of my beloved city of Munich. (*Mime walk*) It was early May, and the chill of winter had yet to completely vacate the atmosphere; still in this late afternoon presage to summer, activity and celebration were quite evident in the cafes and gardens along the route. There is nothing so obvious as the solitary figure amongst celebrants. A certain mistrust on both parts. A certain suspicion will exist as to whether he is the spy who will destroy their good time, and they will always represent to our lone traveler the people who have shut him out.

Be that as it may, the increased chill in the air led me to believe that it was time to return home, and having walked much further than I had expected, I decided to take a streetcar back to my house. The station stop was right alongside the old cemetery and its ancient church, complete with decorative biblical imagery and markings. As I studied these symbols and ornaments, I noticed another lone traveler occupying the top of the entrance steps.

Younger than myself, he had the look of the tourist about him, a light colored linen suit with a large brimmed raffia hat, a knit shirt open at the neck with an overcoat under his right arm and leaning on a gilt-headed stick with his left. He had a mop of red hair and the smooth white skin that is the usual accompaniment to it. Where had he come from? I had not noticed him at all when I started my

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study of the designs around the church doorway, but more interestingly, where was he going? Just then, as I reflected upon his travels-he caught my eye and seemed to resent my intrusion on his temporary respite; I looked away quickly and walked along the headstones of the churchyard to widen the distance between myself and the object of my curiosity. Luckily, the streetcar was just then arriving and I hopped on. (*Throwing himself into the chair*). From the safe distance and velocity of the car, I looked back to have a final view of my companion, but alas, he was gone, nowhere to be seen, but his parting gift to me was already taking root. I will travel. I will delay my habitual sojourn to my summer mountain retreat, eating the same food and walking the same trails, and go off somewhere warm and exotic. Not too far but far enough away from the familiar. I will venture, for a time, into the unknown. I will be temporarily, like the young.

(*At the table, removing hat and cane*) After immersing myself in a laborious collection of maps and timetables, I decided that the place to renew and refresh my outlook and perspective would be where fantasy and reality blend seamlessly into one grand canal- I would travel to... Venice.

A delay and detour of the train schedule made me decide to do something I had never done before and travel to a destination that would enable me to approach Venice not by land, by way of the railway, but by sea. The vessel that was going to convey me to my destination was an old steamer that probably had had its best days a good sixty years before I boarded its deck. A very accommodating humpback of a sailor, who seemed even older than the ship itself, tried to revive the hospitality of the ship's former glory and directed me down a stairwell to the purchasing officer to buy my ticket. The ticketing agent had an elaborate grey beard and mustache, which told me he had lived long enough to make a formidable naval career eventually turn into a mundane position of clerk, but continued to conduct himself with the air and authority

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of someone who was still of major importance on a nautical bridge. *(Seated at the table)* “Ah! Venice- a most wonderful and appropriate destination for a man such as yourself-a most excellent choice to spend your holiday!” and he scribbled and stamped with the flair of the most noble, regal diplomat and gave me my ticket as if it were a rit of passage through wartime. “Enjoy your holiday, sir!” and he called “Next!” with great vibrato even though there was no one else waiting to be served.

(Using the table as the ship’s railing) As I resurfaced onto the deck, I saw a bit of celebration, as passengers would bid farewell to those below on the dock. The most noticeable bon voyage was from a group of young fellows in what seemed to be a last-minute holiday from their office jobs, waving and calling to those down below unlucky enough to have to continue to fulfill their obligations at work. The most boisterous of the group was a fellow in an ostentatiously cut yellow summer suit and lavishly banded straw fedora-calling to all whether he knew them or not, touching and jabbing his companions in a most provocative way. Then suddenly I realized he was a complete fraud, an impostor: he was ancient- for his beard was dyed and his red wavy hair, a wig. There were wrinkles aplenty around his eyes and mouth, and the redness of his cheeks was clearly applied. As he smiled and laughed, one easily recognized the yellow color that could only mean... dentures, and as they popped out on occasion, my suspicions were easily confirmed. Why would the other fellows who were truly young and strapping put up with this creature? He held them and gawked at them in the most repellent manner, continually licking his lips as he continued to call attention to himself, but they seemed to accept him and take him in stride.

(Crossing to chair) I found a deckchair far from the hustle and bustle of the other passengers, particularly the old fop, and wrapped myself in an overcoat with book in hand. *(Sounds of the*

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sea are heard) The immenseness of sea and sky, even as gray as it was, made me lean my head back in a sort of trance and think of the many personalities I had encountered thus far and heard them talk to me in some strange, indecipherable dream language, as I fell asleep.

At noon (*Turning chair to be the rail*), I took a place at the rail to hopefully see the coastline of my destination as soon as it appeared, and then the straightness of the distant horizon began to take a new and promising shape. And there it was, coming alive before my eyes, the Basilica San Marco, the Palazzo Ducale, and the towering Campanile- all welcoming me back. The colors and shapes, the domes and spires, all saying welcome to the city that gives holiday to all. And I quickly realized that approaching Venice any other way but by sea would be like entering Versailles through a back kitchen door.

No sooner did I land on the dock than I jumped into the nearest gondola. (*Sitting in the chair*) There is something extremely threatening about stepping into one of these ancient conveyances of transport. It's blacker than black wood can only be found in the woodwork of a coffin, and the plush upholstery combined with the bob of the water seems to induce a sort of trancelike sleep that must be a precursor to death itself. Surely Chiron himself must use a gondola as he ferries the never-ending line of souls to their ultimate destination. I allowed myself a momentary indulgence as I closed my eyes to leave the sound of the cities' talk and clamor farther and farther behind, wishing the trip would last a bit longer. That is when I suddenly realized we were heading out to open sea. "Excuse me, where are you taking me?" (*Standing on chair as the gondolier*) "The Lido." "I don't want to go to the Lido- I want to go to the vaporetto." "No, vaporetto don't allow luggage." That was true, it didn't allow luggage, and I did just wished for the journey to last. "I row you very well." I turned around to have a

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better look at who was commandeering me to a place I did not wish to go. He did row well, but he had a reddish curled moustache and seemed much smaller than the usual athleticism the job of gondolier required. His foreign look and ill-equipped stature got me unnerved. "How much will this cost?" "You will pay." "Well, I'm not going to pay anything to be taken to where I do not want to go, thank you very much." But it was a lost cause, the mutineer was bent on having his own way, and I was soon resigned to the fact that I was going to be rowed the entire way to the Lido.

Why is it that I can debate and negotiate and even demand with any man of professional standing, but I am at a total loss to get my way with a laborer of any sort, be it a waiter, cabbie, or clerk. As soon as the old man with the hook drew us to the dock, I ran into the hotel to get some change to pay my abductor. Upon my return, I found my bags sitting on the dock and the gondola gone.

(Pushing chair away) "Where'd he go?" "He took off- had no license, someone must have reported him. Look." And I saw two uniformed officers at the far end of the dock, definitely looking for someone. "Signor got himself a free ride." And the old man with the hook benefited from the extra change I now had at my disposal, and I followed my luggage up the main street to the hotel.

(Murmur of guests) We entered through the exquisitely ornate lobby, and I felt a rush of anticipation at the luxury and comfort I will be giving myself for the next fortnight. A very accommodating hotel manager met us. With his waxed moustache and frock coat, it seemed he would have been more at home in some French farce than an actual hotel. "You will come this way, signor," and he accompanied me into the elevator cage and up to my room. Wood panel and fresh flowers strongly scented the room, and a full-length French door presented me with a breathtaking view of the sea. After the manager left me alone, I opened the glass doors to get my fill of sea and air.

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The solitary traveler has a completely different experience from the social traveler. Each character and event he is confronted with takes on greater importance than it would ever have for those who are never at a loss for someone to react with or comment to. The ticket agent, the old fop and the underhanded gondolier all came back to my thoughts, and each brought with him an unnerving anxiety that was at once both profound and perverse. I looked at my watch and saw that it was time to dress for dinner, and so I did. (*Referring to a fourth wall mirror*) Taking my time as I always did when preparing myself in formal wear, I suddenly felt a twinge of concern- for whose benefit was all this pomp and circumstance? Social convention? Or was it something else? All of a sudden, the perverse seemed to outweigh the profound, and I quickened my pace and left the room feeling I had stumbled upon something unwholesome.

My anxiety had caused me to arrive at the lobby fairly early so the dining room had yet to open its doors. (*To the sound of atmospheric violin music*) I picked up a newspaper and concealed myself in a leather wingback using the newspaper only as a decoy so I could meticulously analyze my fellow guests. (*Sitting in chair by pedestal*) It was certainly a properly dressed and polished of assemblies. You could easily place the national origin of each guest: the American businessman with his nose securely buried in the financial section of some weekly, the British couple still fussing over their late afternoon cups of tea, and the German family ordering their French nanny about. It was a cacophony of tongues and dialects, probably only second to Babble itself.

Nearest to me was the distinct sound of Polish ruminating from a group of young people and their governess. There were three girls who ranged in age from fifteen to seventeen and a young boy of about fourteen (*Music suddenly stops*) who was absolutely, breathtakingly... beautiful. A perfectly chiseled face, that would

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have befitted the most perfect of classical statuary, surrounded by the natural highlights of the golden ringlets of a luxurious head of hair. Even seated, you could tell the tall, noble stature of an exquisite young athlete. It was clear that the only boy in this family was pampered and treated with an indulgent deference from his sisters, for all the girls were dressed completely alike in the most severe grey, almost cloistral, of uniforms. Their hair, pulled back tight on their heads to make any attractiveness unnoticed. The young man, on the other hand, wore a perfectly tailored British style naval suit of the most lustrous of silken fabric, whereas the girls were only woolly and dull. When he spoke, it was with an awareness of audience that showed he knew how to use his power of countenance to its best advantage.

Suddenly, all the children arose at once and greeted their mother, a patrician woman of approaching middle years who was obviously as beautiful in her youth as her son was at present. Her hair was perfectly coiffed, and her dress was exceptional in its line as opposed to its accessory. The only jewelry she wore was a single strand of stunning pearls that must have been priceless. When your pearls are of such quality, all you really need is a single strand. After the family's brief exchange that was replete with the most sincere show of love, respect, and devotion, the mother proceeded to the dining room, followed in order of age by her three daughters, then the governess, and finally the young boy at the rear. As the young man walked to the dining room, he turned quickly around to make some sort of final survey of the lobby and happened to catch my eye. I was left unprotected and immediately buried myself behind the sanctuary of my newspaper, and when I resurfaced, the family had vanished into the confines of the dining hall.

After a few moments to catch my breath, I too was ushered into the hall and brought to my table, so terribly disappointed that my table was so far removed from the view I had so enjoyed only a few moments before. After dinner, a stroll through the surrounding

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hotel gardens was all the activity I could muster as the strain of the day began to take its toll, and (*Removing coat*) I retired early to dream about the wonders I had seen.

(*Putting on coat*) The next morning, a feeling of foreboding began to set in that was directly due to the unfortunate change in the weather. I had experienced this heavy, strength-depreciating climate before, the thickness of air that made one feel as if a fever had consumed him, and I remember wanting to escape from the city as an immigrant escapes from tyranny. A change in travel plans would have been such an ordeal, but to play it safe, I decided not to unpack completely, so my options were kept open.

(*Sitting at table*) I decided to have breakfast in the morning room, which had the elegant quiet that only the finest of establishments were able to maintain- waiters practically tiptoeing to keep the calm of the reputation. Diagonally across the room, I was able to see the daughters of the Polish family severely dressed and pressed for their new day, minus their exceptional brother. Accompanied by their governess, they were discussing some such matter over jam and toast when suddenly our hero entered the scene.

Dressed in a blue and white woven naval suit, he looked every bit the astonishing young man I remembered from the night before. His movement and bearing had an exceptional grace and confidence to it, and when he took his place at the table, his command of his sisters' attention was immediate. I was able to view him in perfect profile and was amazed that the perfection I witnessed was done without the help of paint and canvas, but by nature at its finest magnitude. Cleft chin, aquiline nose, high cheeks, squared jaw, and piercing blue eyes- was there any aspect of male perfection that this young man did not possess?

After I had realized that I had long since finished my breakfast, I decided to take my place on the awaiting beach beyond the hotel

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terrace. (Sound of waves) I was led down a path of wooden planks by an old man in a childish sailor suit to the changing hut that came with the cost of my room. A row of these huts traced the perimeter of the private section of the beach, and before I settled down (*Moving chair to center*), I moved my folding beach chair closer to the sea and took in the immenseness that lay before me. The sound and smell of the sea were very effective in undoing some of the oppression of the present climate, and I was glad I had come and decided to stay.

The human activity around me was as fascinating as the endless movement of the ocean before me. A mixture of casual fashion and bare skin made an incongruous party atmosphere. Nearest to me was a Russian family totally enjoying the beach and even more, each other. As the children played, the adults watched and very often took part in the games to the delight of the younger family members. Loud and loving and demonstrative in their regard for each other, their playfulness needed an oceanfront, for it would never have been tolerated inside the fastidious hotel.

But just as I left my neighbors to stare once again at the ever-changing sea, a solitary figure crossed my view- it was our hero in a bathing suit that revealed every perfect curve of a perfect form. Each muscle developed to the point of having no challenge to execute its individual function, and taken in total, creating a unified vision of art, beauty, and desire. But as he passed he was distracted by the sound of our Russian family and I saw an immediate change in his face to one of utter disapproval that turn his beautiful features harsh and threatening to the extent that I was forced to turn away as one does when one notices something they were not supposed to see. It also changed my opinion of our young man- he went from being just a showpiece to an individual with a discerning set of standards. His reaction to a very removed segment of society from his own showed that already in his young life, he had a code of behavior that was as stern and steady as the

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muscles on his back. It enabled me to clearly see how much lay beneath the exquisite surface.

Then suddenly his attention was drawn to a group of children farther down the beach who were calling to him. I tried my best to decipher the name they shouted out, was it “Adgio”? Or possibly “Adgius” at first I was unable to tell, but then I realized from the limited amount of Polish I knew it was actually the familiar form of the name Tadeusz: Tadzio. Tadzio ran to the other children who were engaged in constructing an elaborate sand castle, and no sooner did he get there than he was taking complete supervision of the project. It was quite admirable how the other children quickly fell in line, accepting Tadzio as their leader, particularly a strapping young man with jet-black hair who openly seemed to adore Tadzio. His name was Yashu, and he walked with Tadzio arm in arm, kissing him on the neck as they passed by my hut. I had the initial desire to raise a finger and scold, but of course, I didn’t.

Soon after, Tadzio went swimming and had gone farther out to sea than the safety precautions of the hotel rules permitted. Cries of his name quickly filled the beachfront, “Tadzio!” “Tadzio!” “Too far!” “Too far!” and finally, he let a wave wash him ashore. As he emerged from the depths of the ocean with every perfectly incremented ripple of his torso revealed, I felt as if I was witnessing the birth of one of the most glorious of Olympians. As he lay down wrapped in a towel, I was amazed at the views I was witness to: the majesty of the sea competing with the beauty of human perfection.

(Getting up and pushing chair from center and placing hat and cane on table) After some time, I left the beach and went up to my room to prepare myself for lunch. Life at a holiday resort is a continual search for activity to punctuate the endless hunger one has for the over-indulged meals. Up in my room, I caught a

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glimpse of myself in the mirror: the haggard face, the puffiness of the eyes, and the ever-increasing grey streaks of hair had made such a wide divide between myself and the object of my study all morning on the beach. Yet this aging visage is a continual center of attention as I walk down the streets of my own city because of my ability to mix and match words in ways that make the reading public admire and respect me. I, too, have my qualities of exception, except they are of a kind that are no longer revealed in a mirror.

After lunch, I was pushed to the rear of the tiny caged elevator as a group of young people, who had also just finished their lunch, entered; Tadzio was among this group, and he ended up standing right next to me. I was able to study my subject with a proximity that I had up to now been denied. He was so much taller than I had even supposed and much broader of shoulder than I had realized from a distance. His blonde hair was made up of an infinite range of blonde and platinum shades, and his nearness had an effect that took me by complete surprise- a racing of the pulse and an increase of breath that seemed to culminate in a shaking of my right knee. I had a sudden fear that the few coins in my trousers were going to be my undoing. It was a great relief when the gate finally opened and the stream of confined humanity was set free. I did notice that Tadzio did not have the best of teeth. They were uneven and lacked the traditional luster of youth. Could he be sickly? I, oddly enough, felt a bit uplifted, and suddenly my memory of the image I saw in the mirror was of less concern to me.

(Retrieving hat and cane) After lunch, I decided to take the vaporetto to Venice. As I approached the city, the beauty and majesty of it were countered by the sickly stench of the lagoon. My stroll around the familiar sights I wished to reacquaint myself with was made particularly difficult by this persistent odor. The combination of the oppressive heat and the overwhelming smell of garbage, oil, smoke, and god knows what else made each step an

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endless impossibility. Oh, what to do? What to do? Twice now, I was given fair warning that the climate was much too overbearing for my present constitution, and the only sensible thing to do was to pack up and leave. I could not go home, for neither my townhouse nor my summer cottage were prepared yet for my arrival. But there must be other beaches far removed from the stagnation of the city that would suit my needs. (*Rising up placing hat and cane on table*) Back at the hotel, I made plans for my departure the next morning and preparations to move to a resort on the outskirts of Trieste.

The thought of packing up and relocating my holiday made a decent night's sleep impossible, so the next morning I arose fairly early and found myself having breakfast in an empty morning room. (*Sitting at table*) Soon after, the Polish sisters took their place and once again without the family's main attraction. I was interrupted by a hotel porter, "You come along now, the boat is about to leave for the train station." I looked at my watch and saw that it was a good hour before the train was to leave, and had no intention of rushing through my breakfast, no matter how impatient the hotel management was to prepare my room for the next guest. "You send my luggage with the boat and I will take the vaporetto to the station, and in the meantime I do not wish to be disturbed!" and I went on with my breakfast, even taking the time to look through a periodical I asked for.

As I left the morning room, who should cross my path but our young hero, Tadzio, who smiled and bowed his head slightly. As he passed, I said to myself, "Farewell, farewell, sweet Tadzio!" and went on my way. (*Retrieving hat and cane*) I retrieved my hand luggage from my room, boarded the vaporetto, and took my final view of my beloved Venice, knowing I would never return.

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The spirit and the flesh were at odds; no matter how the city made my spirit soar, the reality of it was a continual assault on my ever-weakening physical constitution. And I realized the spiritual and the physical were in battle, both around me and within me in more ways than I cared to contemplate. I started to have regrets. Did I make a hasty decision? I suddenly felt a desire to reverse my plans. But it made no sense; I was in a place that was making me sicker and sicker with every attempt to stay. Did I suddenly feel a coolness in the breeze? Was the weather changing to my advantage? Oh, what to do, what to do?

As I stepped onto the dock, I was informed that everything was going well and my bags were already dispatched to Como. "Como? I am going to Trieste, you must get them back!" With that, the porter took off at once to try and undo the mistaken directive. A few moments later, an apologetic manager said, "We will retrieve your luggage, sir, and no expense will be spared." And with that, a great weight was taken off my shoulders. I feigned annoyance and said I would return to the beach resort and expect my luggage to be brought there as soon as possible. They begged a thousand pardons, and I was off, retracing the course I had just taken a few moments before as I bid farewell to Venice forever.

At the resort, I was told that my room had unfortunately been given away to another guest but that a new room, every bit as nice, was waiting for me. (*Setting down hat and cane and sitting in chair center*) I laid out the items from my overnight bag and collapsed into an armchair by the window, unable to move from the stress and exhaustion of what I had just been through. And there in the distance of the ocean, I could see him, Tadzio in his bathing outfit, swimming, and I knew in the privacy of my thoughts that he alone was the reason I so wanted to return. Tadzio! Tadzio! And my arms reached up to the air as if something was there.

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(As Aschenbach reaches out, the lights slowly fade to black.)

END OF ACT ONE

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS--
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