Flames

A 10-minute play

by

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# Characters:

**Security Police Officer**: Ruthless and devious, either male or female.

**Anton:** An insurgent trying to free his country from a brutal Eastern European regime in the 1970s.

**Elena:** Also an insurgent and Anton’s wife.

**Stefan:** Another insurgent. A wild and crazy fellow in the manner of Shakespeare’s Mercutio.

# Cast:

Elena: Jean Reid

Security Police Officer: Deena Baron

Anton/Guard 1/Subordinate Officer: Charles Anstett

Stefan/Guard 2/Narrator: Bill Baron

# Flames

# Scene 1

(Lights.)

(A security police interrogation room of a totalitarian state in the 1970s. A senior-level security police OFFICER, male or female, is standing Upstage Center, looking offstage Upstage Right. ELENA is brought into the room (Upstage Right) by GUARD 1, assisted by GUARD 2, and forcibly seated on a chair (Center Stage Right, facing Stage Right). The OFFICER now stands right next to ELENA. The GUARDS withdraw Upstage Right.)

OFFICER: Elena Petrova, we’ve been watching you and your husband. We know you help run the illegal printing press at 1612 Strada Govora in the Martarii Quarter. That ends tonight. The press—the whole building—will be gone by morning. Just smoldering ashes.

ELENA: What?!

OFFICER: You heard me correctly.

ELENA: You’re mad. There are dozens of people living in that building.

OFFICER: Many people in the Martarii Quarter support the NDC. So we are not worrying about them. The fire will be of “unexplained origin,” but perhaps these Martarii folk will re-think their commitment to the insurgency.

ELENA: Or maybe they will hate you all the more. Why am I here? Do you have Anton too?

OFFICER: There are some things we want you to tell us—and you will. Bojana and Daniel—they go to Poiana Christei School. We have snipers there right now ready to kill both children when they leave school. Perhaps they will shoot Anton’s mother as well. I didn’t give orders for that, but sometimes . . . Tell me what I want to know, and I will call them off.

ELENA: You are everything people say about you—but worse.

OFFICER: I suggest we move ahead. School is out in about an hour. First, who will be in the printing office tonight?

(ELENA stiffens her body in defiance.)

OFFICER: Do you understand what I just told you? *Who* . . . will be in the printing office tonight? Your husband, we think. But who else?

ELENA: So you don’t have Anton.

OFFICER: We’d have him if we wanted him. The building will burn at 9:15. The blaze will be fierce. Residents on the first floor and perhaps the second may get out. But no one on your floor will get out. And, we will be there just in case someone does.

ELENA: For God’s sake, spare our children! Yes, Anton and I are expected tonight. Also Stefan. But I don’t know who else. Other people might come by, but I have no way of knowing.

OFFICER: I will assume for now that you are telling the truth. Who is Stefan? This is a new name to us.

ELENA: Stefan Radin. He mostly runs the press. He is no one special. He can’t be important to you.

OFFICER: If he runs the press, he is important to us. Second question: We know you are printing leaflets promoting a walkout in the shipyards. You’ve been printing them for most of a week. How many have been printed? How many have been moved to other locations? What other presses do you people have? Who works these other presses? Where do you get the money to do all this? I know more than I am letting on. If you lie, I am likely to know it, and your children are dead.

ELENA: Monster! Satan!

OFFICER: This does you no good, Elena. Your children, Bojana and Daniel.

ELENA: If I tell you, you must promise to leave my children alone and let me bring Anton out of the building before it burns.

OFFICER: We can do that. If you tell me everything you know, and if you and Anton stay out of further trouble, you can all live your lives as good citizens. You and Anton can make up for your disloyalty by contributing to the security of the state. You see, I am a reasonable person.

ELENA: I will not say what I think you are.

OFFICER: Enough! I have my limits.

(The OFFICER picks up a pen and clipboard he or she will use for taking notes.)

ELENA: We have maybe 5000 copies of the leaflet. Most are still in the office. Maybe 1000 copies were printed at Strada Creata, near Jilava Square. The third printing office doesn’t exist anymore. It was at the University . . . .

(Blackout.)

# Scene 2

(Lights.)

(A shabby office that was once an apartment. ANTON and STEFAN, at Center Stage, are examining a fresh copy of the leaflet that was printed by an old mimeograph machine that is Upstage Left. Five knocks are heard in a coded pattern, and ANTON opens the door, Stage Right, for ELENA. He helps her off with her coat while they talk softly in pantomime. He puts the coat on a chair near the door. STEFAN keeps the leaflet.)

ELENA: (Struggling to stay composed.) Hello, Stefan. (She looks around.) How is it going, boys?

ANTON: It’s going well. The leaflets started coming out with a smudge, but Stefan fixed it. He’s good with these creaky old machines.

STEFAN: It’s a creaky old world, so we have creaky old machines. But we’ll soon have enough leaflets to tell everyone about the walkout.

ANTON: We’ve never had anyone as good doing the printing.

ELENA: Anton, you need to let Stefan print on his own tonight. Your mother. She’s ill. We need to go home.

ANTON: What? She’s been fine lately. If she’s sick, *you* go home and look after her. You could be home now, with her and the kids. I need to stay.

STEFAN: Go, go. I can keep it all going. If I fall behind on the folding, we can catch up with that.

ANTON: No.

ELENA: (With urgency.) Anton, I need to speak with you.

(She takes him aside into an imagined corner or alcove of the office that is Downstage Left. STEFAN goes back to run the mimeograph machine. A soft “chucka chucka” sound from the machine can be heard.)

ELENA: Anton, the security police brought me in today. They had men ready to kill the children, waiting by their school. Anton, I told them everything. What could I do? If I hadn’t, Bojana and Daniel would be dead now.

ANTON: Betrayal! People in this city die for our cause every week. Only the Resistance can put an end to this regime. That’s what we fight for every day. When they find us, and if we die bravely. . . if we don’t waver, we show the others how to resist. We will build the NDC until our cause is unstoppable.

ELENA: You’re not wrong, Anton. I know this. But Bojana. Daniel! I had to do it. The security police are outside the building now.

(ANTON quickly goes to an imagined window Far Upstage Left, pulls back a curtain, peeks out, focuses his eyes on what he sees outside, and then turns grimly back to ELENA.)

ELENA: At 9:15 the whole building will be set on fire. They agreed to let me come in and get you. Not Stefan. Not anyone else, just you. Come with me, Anton. Let Stefan stay. He’s a dead man no matter what. Anton, we can live. We can live and raise our children.

ANTON: What kind of deal do you think you’ve made? How do you know we will be safe after tonight? I’m staying here with Stefan. No reason for him to know until the last moments when the flames come. Let him die at his machine, fighting for freedom. That’s what he would choose. That’s what I want. Elena, just go. There’s no backtracking now. Raise the children. But raise them with a greater love of freedom than you showed today. That’s all I ask. I love you, Elena. I’m not judging you. Now go. Stefan must be wondering what all this is about.

ELENA: Anton, come with me. There’s seven more minutes.

ANTON: You have a choice to make, Elena. You can stay here and die with me and Stefan. With us dead, what will they care about two children? They will be safe. My mother will care for them, or else, others. In time, Bojana and Daniel will understand why we were not there to raise them.

ELENA: I can’t do this, Anton. I can’t leave them.

ANTON: Then go! I said, “Go.”

(He pushes her, and they stumble out together into the main part of the printing office, giving STEFAN the wrong idea about their private moment. He steps toward them. The “chucka chucka” sound is a bit louder in the main room.)

STEFAN: (Laughing.) Such sweethearts! Especially for married folk. So go. See to Anton’s mother and then have some fun tonight. I’ll handle everything here. But, you know the police hang around this building. So, when you leave, leave like this . . .

(STEFAN does a vulgar imitation of a couple kissing passionately and grabbing each other’s bodies. ELENA, horrified by his joviality at this terrible moment, bolts directly out the door. STEFAN looks at ANTON with an inquiring glance.)

STEFAN: She left her coat. Was I so bad? When you get home tonight, tell her I’m sorry.

ANTON: It’s OK, Stefan. We have printing to do.

(Blackout.)

# Scene 3

(ELENA and the OFFICER stand Center Stage looking Stage Right at the imagined blaze. A SUBORDINATE POLICE OFFICER stands behind them holding a police-uniform coat or similar garment with sewn-in insignia, ribbons, or other indications of rank. The NARRATOR is standing Upstage Right. A field radio is somewhere on stage.)

(Lights.)

NARRATOR: Elena stands with the security police officer outside the apartment building, which is fully consumed by flames.

(NARRATOR exits Upstage Right.)

ELENA: Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus!

OFFICER: Elena, there are fires like this every night in this city. This is just one more. Sad, but part of city life.

ELENA: I will never erase the flames and the screaming from my mind. This is your work? You do this kind of thing again and again? How is it possible?

OFFICER: I am not cruel. I don’t like this. But the NDC won’t accept the government and won’t compromise on their beliefs. They . . *.* You . . . put us in a difficult position.

(Cued by the OFFICER, the SUBORDINATE steps up behind ELENA and drapes a police coat over her shoulders. The officer markings on the coat should be visible to the audience. ELENA jerks her shoulders and begins to pull off the coat.)

OFFICER: You want to stay warm. Wear it!

(ELENA allows the coat to be draped over her shoulders and the SUBORDINATE exits Upstage Left.)

ELENA: My children will be safe?

OFFICER: I would never want to harm children. I have two children of my own. I hope your children grow up and do very well. But, Elena, so much depends on a child’s mother. Does it not?

ELENA: What are you saying?

OFFICER: I am saying that we have more work for you to do. You will need to inform on more people to keep your children safe.

(Entering Upstage Left, ANTON appears with STEFAN behind him. Both are in apparitional form. They listen closely.)

ELENA: I will not. Never. You didn’t say anything about this.

OFFICER: Elena, I am very good at making people tell me everything I need to find out. Then I find out more, and they tell me about that as well. You know, even worse things can happen to children than a quick death from a sniper’s bullet.

(ELENA cries helplessly. ANTON winces.)

OFFICER: Anton refused to leave, didn’t he? He’s a stubborn one. I wish he had been weaker. I would have liked to have both of you working for me.

ANTON: Oh, Elena. You should have stayed in the printing office and died with me. Everything would be over now. They’d have forgotten about Bojana and Daniel.

ELENA: Yes, Anton. You and Stefan have been burned to ashes. But I am truly in hell.

(The OFFICER steps a few paces Upstage to give instructions to unseen people Offstage Right. Then she begins talking on her field radio. STEFAN steps forward and focuses on the coat.)

STEFAN: (Nominally addressing ANTON, but mocking ELENA.) Well, well. Elena in a police uniform. The world is a funny place. Let me take a look, Luv. (Now addressing ELENA.) My goodness, you’ve already gotten a promotion. You’re moving up quickly. Anton and I—now we’ve been so well toasted, we’ll never need coats again!

(ELENA is stricken.)

ANTON: Shut up, Stefan. Your joking isn’t always in season. Elena was weak—and stupid. But her mistakes were mistakes that come from love, and those are not the worst of human mistakes, whatever the consequences. Elena, you are now on the most difficult of paths. But know that you still have my love. You had my love when I breathed the scorching smoke and when the floor beneath us caught fire.

ELENA: I always knew you were the best of men.

STEFAN: Bitch! Traitor! I am not so forgiving, Anton.

ANTON: You must be smart, Elena. And *strong.* Signal the NDC that you’ve been compromised.Perhaps you and the kids can go underground. Perhaps you can escape to the West. My mother will handle any retribution that comes her way. Nothing the police can do will frighten her. If it comes to the worst, shoot our children while they are sleeping and then yourself. I am so sorry, Elena, to have to say this.

ELENA: Yes. You are right. I will be resolute. From soft iron, I am now flame-forged steel. I will find the best way out of this terrible trap I’m in. . . Anton—and you, Stefan—you fight still . . . in the fiery whirlwind of the Resistance movement that gathers strength as it criss-crosses our nation from the cities to the muddy lanes of remote villages. . . Alas, my sad deeds of this day are best forgotten.

(Blackout.)

## The End

# Production Notes

The play can be staged very simply with neutral dress rather than costumes. An actual police officer’s coat or something similar should be used. Because Elena never puts on the coat, the size of the coat is not an issue. I have a satisfactory coat. It’s the top half of a vintage USSR military uniform.

A door frame would be useful for Scene 1 and 2. It would be placed Upstage Left in Scene 1 and Midstage Left for Scene 2.

Hi Bill, Hi Deena,

I liked the Bridge Theater *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The revision was extensive, but thoughtful. There is a problem in a traditional staging in that Theseus dominates Hippolyta and Oberon dominate Titania. Therefore, there are real benefits in reversing Oberon and Titania (so that Puck is working for Titania). The beds also work, because the play is very much a dream. I think they had a problem (that they didn't solve) when Oberon explains who his changeling child is (his son?). The whole speech "His mother was a votaress of my order" doesn't make a lot of sense. But I'd call this a successful (and very well acted and well staged) revision.  
  
Speaking of theater: Would you and Deena like to take roles in a 10-minute play? A group of our friends are doing three 10-minute plays on December 1 in the Shoreline Library (345 NE 175th St). I have the larger of the two community rooms reserved from 11:00 to 1:30. We'll assemble at 11:00 (latter day Mechanicals) to do a walk-through (entrances, exits, stage movements, but not speeches). Then, at about 12:00 will do the plays and socialize until 1:30. Then folks can come back to our house to socialize more.

I have you and Deena cast for "Flames," a rather grim play. The other two are lighter fare. Deena will play the Security police Officer (a bad guy). You play Stefan, an insurgent. Stefan is a relatively small role, but he's funny and sardonic. Please see attached script. My friend Jean Reid (Elena) was once a professional-level actor. I know less about her husband, Charles Anstett (Anton).

We perform script-in-hand so there is no memorization of parts. When plans are set, I will distribute a venue-specific script with all exits, entrances, and movements on the stage clearly marked. This makes the walk-through go much faster because people can rehearse at home with a good notion of the actual staging. I like casting partners together because it's easy for them to rehearse at home. Costumes are mostly what folks have on hand, although a few folks have found good costumes for themselves in thrift shops.

Hope you can do it. It's fun.

Dave