

Three Impressions of "Carcosa, or the Queen and the Stranger", Act One, Scene 3

The queen greets the white masked stranger who appears indifferent to her status. She seems to know who he is and to have expected him, but is surprised he has come so soon. When she puts this to him he replies that no, she is really surprised that he wasn't here before. They talk for a period more but you realize that it's all clever word play designed to obfuscate a hidden truth and you lose interest in the dialogue as you consider what is not being said. A couple a few rows in front of you start whispering urgently. They gather their things, then get up to leave. You are very annoyed at this and can choose to make a comment if you wish. But actually you can sense a repressed tension in yourself, too, at odds with what you would call this play's understated portrayal of ill-defined events. The stage regains your attention, as the stranger makes to embrace the queen.

The white-masked stranger enters; Cassilda is oblivious to his presence. She begins a soliloquy in which she speaks of each of her children who wander in distractedly as they are discussed (they are named here for the first time): her eldest son, Thale, restless, contented and cruel; Uoht, her second son, flawed, ambitious, sensitive; Camilla, her daughter, quiet but influential. She bemoans how the family was only ever held together by the Yellow Sign. The theater is absolutely still. You sense a tension in yourself, something tells you a truly awful event is about to occur. As all the other actors save Cassilda leave, the silent stranger, almost forgotten in the shadows, steps past her to the very front of the stage. He faces the audience.

The queen, Cassilda, is alone on the stage. She is quiet for almost a minute -- very odd for a play -- and then she reacts as though someone has joined her although no one has. She speaks of the approach of madness, and she talks ever more excitedly about the power of the king, the King in Yellow, and there are pauses in her conversation as though she is listening to another side. Then a second figure enters wearing long silk robes and a bone-white mask. She ignores him. Someone at the back of the theater shouts out and people in front of you turn to look as the disturbance continues. On stage the queen sees the newcomer. She visibly struggles to remain calm.