

OTTO-DA-FÉ

Characters

OTTO, a prosperous businessman, with patrician bearing and refined good looks

HANNAH, his sociable wife of the same age

ELLE, his reserved young assistant

Costumes

Hannah and Otto wear sporty designer clothing. Elle wears skirted business attire.

Time

The present, give or take.

Setting

A private garden with a bench.

Notes

OTTO-DA-FÉ depicts a complete shift in power from one character to another over the course of a brief encounter. After Otto's infidelity is exposed at the play's midpoint (at the palindromic "Noon"), his character "backs out of the scene." Hannah and Elle are left to deliver each other's original lines in reverse order with significantly different meanings that lead to an uneasy conclusion.

The play's reversing structure is inspired by J.S. Bach's "Musical Offering, Canon A 2 Quaerendo Invenietis", as described in *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* by Douglas Hofstadter. For further information about this short fugue, see "<https://bit.ly/3gplq62>". Listen to an animated version at "<https://bit.ly/3f3eahu>".

OTTO-DA-FÉ

In darkness, a single piano plays Bach's canon forward and then backward while a left-to-right-to-left graphic display depicts the notes on a screen, a performance that will take about one minute.

With the final notes of the canon, the lights come up on the garden where ELLE sits on a bench, deep in thought. After a moment, HANNAH enters.

ELLE

(Startled from her preoccupation.)

Oh, Hannah. It's you.

HANNAH

(Cheerfully.)

I didn't expect to find you here today, Elle.

ELLE

I had to see the garden.

HANNAH

Of course.

ELLE

The perfect setting.

HANNAH

(Playfully rhapsodic.)

I couldn't agree more. Watching life pass by isn't this garden's only reward, Elle. These flowers are special to me. Months ago, Otto gave me the seeds I planted here, when their triumph was a mere possibility. My efforts have now freed all their promised glory. I hope you grasp how much more I enjoy these blossoms that are the result of Otto's act of faith.

ELLE

The sun, the flowers. So restful.

HANNAH

An oasis. Even when you're not alone it offers the peace of solitude.

ELLE

Otto's favorite spot.

HANNAH

I remember the first time that he brought me here.

ELLE

He would've made a show of that. He's the master of planned spontaneity.

HANNAH

(Laughs.)

Otto's Otto.

ELLE

(Politely.)

I don't know him like you do.

HANNAH

I've been thinking about Otto a lot lately.

ELLE

Please, sit. Spend some time with me. We won't disturb the calm.

*HANNAH sits on the bench
opposite. A pause...*

HANNAH

Elle... I must know. Otto's planning something, isn't he? He's preparing to make some big decision.

ELLE

What are you implying?

HANNAH

I'm not sure that I can say.

ELLE

But you sound as though you believe there's cause to worry.

HANNAH

You have to admit that it's not like him to... muddle about so.

ELLE

So you think he's acting strangely?

HANNAH

Otto's usually able to focus, no matter how much he has on his plate.

ELLE

Acquisitions. Mergers. The business details blur together after a while.

HANNAH

But Otto has the uncanny ability to predict profit and loss.

ELLE

No matter the circumstances, he always finds a way to come out ahead.

HANNAH

(Beat.)

May I be honest with you, Elle? About how Otto's affairs affect us.

ELLE

Certainly.

HANNAH

I've always felt a special bond with you. Perhaps it's only because of Otto, but I perceive that our lives were meant to cross.

ELLE

I know what you mean. I feel it too.

HANNAH

I sense that our fates are overlapping.

ELLE

I count on it.

HANNAH

I know that I can trust you.

ELLE

You're suspicious. As if you suspect your husband has some secret life.

HANNAH

And I'm caught between wanting to know and wanting to remain mercifully ignorant.

ELLE

Maybe that's reason enough to avoid looking more closely.

HANNAH

You said that his distraction was uncharacteristic.

ELLE

(Noncommittally.)

Yes, I wonder what it's all about.

OTTO enters suddenly, purposefully, but his energy dissipates quickly when he sees the two women.

OTTO

Oh, my. Heh, heh.

After a brief, subtle moment of recalibration, OTTO recovers with the bravado of a practiced liar.

OTTO (CONT'D)

(Heartily.)

Look who's having a nice chat in my country garden. What a lovely surprise.

OTTO crosses to HANNAH, who receives him while seated. He kisses her on the cheek with routine marital affection.

OTTO (CONT'D)

All this beauty, with my dear wife as the centerpiece. I hope you both enjoy it. I know I do.

OTTO indicates the expanse with open arms.

OTTO (CONT'D)

I just got up from my desk to stretch my legs, and now I see what I've been missing, right under my nose. I could be out here, enjoying this marvelous day. Instead, I'm wasting my time indoors with charts and tables.

ELLE rises as if to ask a question, but OTTO waves her off.

OTTO (CONT'D)

No, no, Elle, I can finish on my own. Thanks to your usual administrative efficiency, I have everything I need.

OTTO turns to HANNAH.

OTTO

Tell you what, Hannah, my dear, I'll join you for drinks and conversation. Just give me another hour to finish my report to the board.

OTTO consults his cell to learn the time.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Splendid. Yes. That's it...

(Beat.)

Noon.

(Beat, his mind racing.)

(MORE)

OTTO (CONT'D)

That's it, yes, splendid.

*(Beat, then urgently, as his
bravado begins to fail him.)*

My dear Hannah, I'll be finished with my board report in an hour. Then I'll join you for drinks and conversation.

OTTO looks about nervously.

OTTO (CONT'D)

So, Elle, I have everything I need. Thanks to your usual administrative efficiency, I can finish on my own.

*OTTO exhibits a growing
desperation to escape.*

OTTO (CONT'D)

Too bad I'm wasting my time indoors with those charts and tables. Now that I've gotten up from my desk to stretch my legs, I see what I've been missing. This marvelous day, out here, right under my nose.

With a theatrical flourish.

OTTO (CONT'D)

All this beauty, with my dear wife as the centerpiece. I hope you both enjoy it. I know I do.

*OTTO backs away, his hands
upraised protectively.*

OTTO (CONT'D)

Such a lovely surprise... I'll let you finish your nice chat in my country garden.

*OTTO scuttles sideways, like a
fleeing crab, his voice composed
but his eyes darting.*

OTTO (CONT'D)

(With exaggerated heartiness.)

Heh, heh... Oh, my.

OTTO exits. ELLE sits.

HANNAH

I wonder what that was all about?

ELLE

This distraction is so uncharacteristic.

HANNAH

Maybe that's reason enough to avoid looking more closely.

ELLE

Leaving you caught between wanting to remain mercifully ignorant and wanting to know.

HANNAH

I'm suspicious. I suspect that my husband has some... secret life.

ELLE

(Not a question.)

Well, you know you can trust me.

ELLE breaks eye contact.

HANNAH

I count on it.

ELLE

I sense our fates are overlapping.

HANNAH

I know what you mean. I feel it too.

ELLE

I've always felt a special bond with you. Perhaps it's only because of Otto, but I perceive our lives were meant to cross.

HANNAH

Certainly.

ELLE

May I be honest with you, Hannah? About how Otto's affairs affect us.

HANNAH

No matter the circumstances, he always finds a way to come out ahead.

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Otto has the uncanny ability to predict profit and loss.

HANNAH

Acquisitions. Mergers. The business details blur together after a while.

ELLE

But Otto's usually able to focus, no matter how much he has on his plate.

HANNAH

So you, too, think that he's acting strangely.

ELLE

I admit it's not like him to muddle about so.

*HANNAH's growing alarm brings
her to her feet.*

HANNAH

You sound as though you believe there's cause to worry.

ELLE

I'm not sure what I should say.

HANNAH

What are you implying?

ELLE

*(A deep breath before
plunging.)*

You must know, Hannah. Otto's planning something. He's preparing to make a big decision.

HANNAH

Sit. Take your time. We mustn't disturb the calm.

ELLE

I've been thinking about Otto a lot lately.

HANNAH

I don't know him like you do.

ELLE

(Portentously.)

Otto's Otto.

HANNAH

He's the master of planned spontaneity. He makes a show of it.

ELLE

I remember the first time he brought me here.

HANNAH

Otto's favorite spot.

ELLE

An oasis. Even when you're not alone it offers the peace of solitude.

HANNAH

The sun, the flowers. So restful.

ELLE rises and begins pacing. As she makes her intentions clear, she becomes more and more imperious.

ELLE

I couldn't agree more, Hannah. What's flowered here is special to me too. But I'm no mere passerby. Otto's seed, planted months ago as an act of faith, has rewarded my efforts with every result I could possibly have hoped for. The promised glory is now in my grasp, and I'm free to enjoy life's triumphant blossoming, while you can only watch.

ELLE caresses her belly as she gives HANNAH a smug look.

HANNAH

The perfect setting...

ELLE

Of course.

HANNAH

(Beat, then with growing apprehension.)

The garden. I had to... see.

ELLE takes a challenging step toward HANNAH.

ELLE

(Coldly deliberate.)

We didn't expect to find you here today, Hannah.

Slowly HANNAH collapses on her bench, leaving ELLE to loom over her.

HANNAH

Oh, Elle...

(A long beat as comprehension dawns.)

It's you.

Fade to black as the piano begins to play Bach's canon again.

END OF PLAY