

The Death of Christopher Marlowe (A SCRIPT FOR BALLET)

BY MENNO MEYJES

CAMBRIDGE 1583 Christopher Marlowe, the brilliant nineteen-year-old son of a cobbler, who won one of the first scholarships made available, is a student at Cambridge. Steeped in the classics and burning with ambition, he wonders how to make his mark on a world in which everything great has already been written, when the Devil, dressed in the black gown of a Cambridge don, appears in his study. After a furious *pas de deux* the Devil makes him the following proposition: if Marlowe promises never to fall in love with a woman, everlasting fame and glory will be his. Marlowe agrees and the Devil gives him a pen with which Marlowe invents blank verse that very night.

LONDON 1593 Marlowe is London's most popular playwright. People follow him in the streets and quote his verse. He leads a brawling, dissolute life (it's a matter of record that he killed two men in a swordfight outside the theatre). At the Globe Theatre he oversees the revival of his most popular work, *Dr. Faustus* (a play full of highly theatrical devices such as mechanical clouds and gunpowder explosions), with the aid of his sober cold-eyed apprentice, one William Shakespeare. Marlowe, who never forgets his vow, is content to flirt with the boys who dress as girls in his productions (women

were forbidden to perform on stage), but a stage-struck Lady Ann Walsingham, who is madly in love with Marlowe, designs a ruse to win his favor. She disguises herself as a boy dressed as a girl, and auditions for Marlowe. He falls in love with her. Unable to deceive him any longer, Lady Ann reveals herself. Knowing he has broken his vow, Marlowe despairs but the Devil, who has always been charmed by the dashing playwright, comes to his aid. They dance once again and this time the Devil hands Marlowe a dagger. All Marlowe has to do is kill Lady Ann and thereby free himself of her love.

Marlowe tries to gather his courage in a tavern where Lady Ann finds him. Half drunk, Marlowe begs her to leave but she won't, for she honestly loves him, and Marlowe falls deeper and deeper in love with her. He tries to throw away his dagger but it clings to his hands like a silver asp. Marlowe is torn between love and ambition. The dagger takes on a life of its own and is about to pierce Lady Ann's heart when at the last moment love overwhelms his desire for fame and glory and he plunges the dagger into his own eye instead. As Marlowe lies dying in Lady Ann's arms the Devil appears one last time and throws off the black gown, revealing herself to be a woman.

THE END