

The man was shifting a great pile of rope used to change backgrounds, he was spooling the pile up in an efficient manner that showed he'd done it a thousand times.

"Excuse me sir," the young woman was standing literally cap in hand. He didn't even look at her.

"Autographs are a half crown, I only sign playbills and only if my name appears above the title."

"Oh I wasn't...are you...are you famous?"

The man didn't show any reaction, he just kept wrapping the massive pile of rope around his arm. After a silent moment he said, "Apparently not!"

"Only I was looking for..."

"Can you fight?"

"Can I...excuse me?"

Without warning, the pile of thick rope now down to a dangling yard or so, he whipped the rope around at the young lady and would have struck her face, but she snatched it out of the air.

"You assault me, sir!" her hand went to her hip, where a sword would have been. Before whatever misfortune befell her.

He pulled on the rope and she pulled back, her face flush with anger.

"Good reflexes," he said. "You're not pretty enough for a romantic lead, but makeup does wonders. Too small. Eyebrows thin, no lips. The punters in the back need to see your expression. Need good eyebrows." Without realizing she was doing it; she raised and lowered her eyebrows experimentally. "But we always need pratfall artists, backgrounders for fight scenes."

"I...I could...I could serve in the background," she said gamely.

He heaved the bundle of rope at her. She caught it, but almost fell over.

"We'll see. Can you paint?"

"Can I..." she mumbled from behind a pile of rope.

"Always need painters for backgrounds. Can you sew?"

"You mean like...needle and thread, sir?"

"Ever rob anyone?"

"Sir!!"

"I thought not. Well you're young. Can you run?"

"Ah, like a shot, sir!"

"Could you chase a man down who's stolen from the collection tray? Tackle him, hold him at knifepoint? Doesn't have to be a real knife, we have props."

"Sir I don't think...wouldn't that be a matter for the police, sir?"

"Watch don't come to the theater," the man muttered. "Try the Clouds in Inkwell. They're mostly thieves and prostitutes but they seem to be working all the time, can't imagine why."

She put up a fight, in her own fashion. "Sir, I was educated at the Rectory of Saint Maerwyn in Corwell, sir. I know the histories of Donato and the comedies of Lady Mandini. And I'm a skilled with prose and poetry. And fast! I wrote an original Riojan tragedy in a fortnight for my final and got full marks. And would have produced it, too, if my fiancé hadn't..." She didn't finish. She didn't need to. He'd heard it all before.

"Writer, huh? Forget the Cloud, you'll be bagging pure for the night soil men by nightfall, if you're lucky. And theirs is a more respected profession. Give me something."

"Sir?"

"Something you wrote!" He clapped his hands, she startled. "We're actors, *recite something.*"

She cleared her throat.

"For so they yearned
And so they wandered
Across the seas of years
Their labor ceaseless
Eyes unblinking
Cheeks barren of tears..."

Her voice was good. Good singer, probably, he thought. Others in the company stopped to hear the pile of rope recite an original. He looked over the rope at his lead actress standing a few yards away, pausing in the rolling up of a background. She tilted her head and shrugged. High praise.

The pile of rope stopped reciting.

"Not bad," he admitted, mostly to himself. "Years and tears is a terrible cliché," he said louder to her. "Why 'barren' and not 'devoid?'"

"Ah...ah, I meant to evoke something of a desert sir, a barren desert? So the listener would more easily see the sailor's faces and imagine their cracked, ah...skin sir. Weatherbeaten, as it were. Sort of, a metaphor for their internal struggle and their lack of..."

"Yes yes yes, well you're a writer all right. But strictly amateur. That romantic dark sea-fable stuff? Might be popular in Vasloria, but it's ancient history here. Lovestruck Vampires are what's in. You got any moon-eyed bloodsuckers in you?"

"How did you know I was Vaslorian?"

He shook his head. "Take the rope to the master of props. Tell him to give you the pages from *A Marry Chase*, he'll know which ones. You've got an hour to do something with it. Don't ask me what's wrong with it, if you don't know you're no good. We'll be in the Bastard's...I mean, the King's Son."

"Sir?" She turned sideways so she could look at him from behind the pile of rope. "Thank you sir!"

"You want to thank me, write me a part with fangs. Punters are crazy for fangs, gods only know why."

Performers Guilds

Riojans love drama, art, and artists who create drama most of all. Playwrights, singers, actors. Money and influence belong to those who entertain the masses.

Function

A performers guild ensures the rights of its members, protecting salaries and preventing shakedowns by less reputable organizations and preserves the quality of professional performance art in Capital, ensuring its reputation as the highest in Orden. Their spectacular productions demonstrate how seriously they take these duties.

Guilds typically put on shows featuring their members only. A wealthy producer will hire two or three different performance guilds for a single production, but shows that pay artists well, like operas at the Mirror, never employ outside the guilds. Guild advertisements feature the Professional Performers Seal; three gold theater masks—one smiling, one screaming, and one faceless. The seal guarantees actors and singers and dancers the audience have heard of, which puts bums in seats.

The performers also play the Great Game. House Alvaro paid Aurum Secaenum to pen *Noble Wizard's Triumph*. Then the Fulcrum paid Higara¹ to produce a three-day concert event called "Guilded City." Each production an attack on a rival great house, but both times the performers profited!

The major guilds are run by high-level bards who spend most of their time hiding their magics, working to convince the punters the performances are 'real.' But each guild knows, should the Great Game tip over into a Great War, the power of the guilds is greater than mere propaganda. The guildmasters are also powerful *agents provocateur* with power to do more than just influence thought.

Who Joins?

Actors, singers, dancers, writers. Bards of every stripe. Even orators and jongleurs. Anyone featured in a production that sells tickets. Street performers aren't members, though the lesser guilds do recruit from their ranks.

Street performers can make a good living, but it's dangerous work. Almost anywhere there's street art, there's crime. Castorgate being a notable exception. Try to set up a stall or put out your hat in the Blues and you'll get a visit from the Lanterns before you finish your first ditty.

The guilds also need stunt workers, set designers, costumers, make-up artists. The better guilds employ dialect coaches and engineers. Producing theatrical thunder on demand, lightning, wind, and convincing waves requires enormous ingenuity and there is intense competition between the guilds to produce the best effects, and protect their techniques.

¹ The group, not the region.

The Performers Guilds mount epic productions and make quite a lot of money, and they also influence thought in the city almost as much as the Broadsheets. Like the broadsheets, they also need writers and many scribblers work for both to make ends meet. Times being what they are.

How to Join

Get cast in or hired to write a performance guild production. That's the way to join. Easier said than done, since to earn the gig you must knock out any number of artists already in a guild. Most folks start small with amateur or low-wage productions in *Artista Domica* or as street performers as a way to get their name out there and develop chops. The artists who grow a following or get lucky attract the attention of a producer who asks for an audition or interview. Sometimes a producer puts out an open call for a performance guild production that allows anyone who shows up a shot. If the producer wants to hire you, the guild comes calling, asking for a small annual dues fee to make dreams come true.

Aurum Scaenum

The largest and most prestigious of the performance guilds, the Aurum Scaenum or Golden Stage mount the Mirror's most ambitious productions. Enormous sums of money are spent and the performers and composers are all hailed as virtuosos. But the performances collapse under their own weight. The Stage spend more and more to make it harder for any other guild to compete, which means ticket prices go up and up and critics lambast the performances as bloated. Art should be vital, not pompous!

The Stage's productions recently began featuring extended musical solos from musicians, making celebrities out of players who would normally be out of sight in the orchestra. *The Nine Brides of Edmund the Seventh* is an entire solo production in nine parts written and performed by the becloaked pianoforte wizard Lord Northhold. His long, unfashionably blonde hair is as famous as his technical keyboard wizardry. The idea of a soloist mounting their own performance is seen by some as the height of indulgence and by others the sign of an art form, in this case opera, past its prime seeking new forms.

Influence

The Stage still influences art, but rarely political thought. Challenging audiences usually leads to challenging box office. But one performance by the Stage can have a massive impact on art in the city. Last year after Gaio Ormalto wrote the smash hit *Sanguine Funeral* for the Mirror, every other theater followed with their own vampire romance drama. Hugely popular, in spite of everyone complaining about how awful they all are.

Leadership

An elder man of the stage at the peak of his powers, Guildmaster Velencio Peritucci looks like a man of 30, exactly as he did twenty years ago when he starred in the title role for *Thief of the Manticore*. Magic, probably. What's the point of being one of the most experienced troubadours in the city if the people don't know it?

Velencio knows the Stage's reputation for mounting bloated, overproduced, pretentious nonsense but he's unsure at this point what else to do, the guild is so large, there are so many mouths to feed. Terrified of Tumultuari he looks at Higara jealously. Only four members!! And tunes people can hum!

Tumultuari

Inspired by a loud, terrible, amateur opera staged in front of 20 students at the Saint Galindo School of Art that culminated in their lead actor pulling down the school's set, the Tumultuari movement spread quickly and soon the guild named after it sprung into life almost self-assembled. Their productions focus on flash and enthusiasm and interacting with the crowd. The writers, actors, and singers are not only amateurs, they openly mock training and professionalism. "Theater should be REAL!" they shout, and against the productions of the Stage it's hard to disagree.

Critics say "yes but theater should also be comprehensible." Tumultuari's performances tend to be collections of short, loud, angry monologues and dramatic sketches which sometimes seem improvised. Still, there is unquestionably a lot of energy about them and their audiences tend to be young members of the new middle class who find themselves unable to relate to the expensive, expansive theatrical traditions of Rioja. Whatever it is, the kids seem to love it.

Influence

Tumultuari productions attract crowds of youth, the poor, and the marginalized. These shallower pockets mean lower ticket prices, but every Leather Bracer show is a chance to inform and frame a message to those typically ignored. If you desire a mob stirred up, nothing gets the job done like a Tumultuari gig.

Though they make a living the Leather Bracers, as they are known, are not successful. Couple this with their penchant for noisy, attention-gathering displays, and you get bards willing to indulge and appetite for destruction or distraction for a few extra crowns. Was it coincidence Fazvanzoz "Putrid" Kovizniz's uniquely dangerous performance of *Frozen Axes* happened outdoors in a park across the street from the scene of Maya Envío's assassination? The Broadsheets don't think so.

Leadership

Ready for this? Rip Snivus, a *ratman* bard and yes that's his real name, leads the Tumultuari. Well, "leads." Though metal piercings fill his face, an enormous otyugh tattoo adorns his shaved back, and Rip's songs and plays call for Halisaar's heart on a platter, in person his calm and empathetic demeanor convinces even Hiro "Rage" Akumira not to storm off a production. For the most part, he lets the Leather Bracers do as they please, calling for a meeting only when he believes a problem or production requires all their attention. Only Rip could get Hadeel 'Animal' Pursa to work with Tandy 'Stabbers' Bucklebrick.

A personal vendetta against the Broadsheets formed when Halisaar called Rip's first original production "another nonsensical anti-art non-statement, the actors should be arrested for assault."

Higara

An offshoot of the Aurum Scaenum, Higara—that's it, that's their entire name—is a four-piece guild made up of the heroes of last generation's greatest opera seasons. Once lauded for their technical mastery in indulgent, opulent productions, these four struck out on their own to make 'tunes.' Songs people could walk out of the theater singing. They successfully synthesized several generations of

complex Riojan opera into a few hours' worth of popular music that *everyone* in the city² loves. They are incredibly popular and play to sold-out houses in every district.

Their greatest accomplishment was getting the privy council to agree—this itself is a historic feat—to let them play the ruined coliseum in the middle of the city formerly used for gladiatorial combats and epic chariot races. Thousands came paying high prices for three sold-out shows and even though it was over a year ago, everyone in the city's been wondering when the next performance will be.

Despite their reputation as a four-piece, it takes an army to mount their productions and they are one of the city's largest employers of wizards and illusionists. Everyone assumed Higara could be heard even in the rafters because of the 'acoustics' of the coliseum and the amazing Caelian engineering. Acoustics! It's wizards! You wouldn't be able to hear them 10 yards from the stage otherwise!

Influence

Higara is insanely popular and the guild makes a tremendous amount of money, but while everyone can sing their songs, no one thinks about them much. Influence is something Higara very much sees as something the old guard pursue. Influencing thought is a kind of legitimacy, but the four composer-performers in Higara seem to think getting obscenely rich is legitimate enough.

Leadership

Higara is a large guild employing many stage technicians, but the public see them as four artists; Singer and cellist Rui de Orta; pianoforte wizard Branca dos Reis; lute, lyre, and queen of the 12 string citole Lianor Caldiera, and percussion grandmaster Heitor Gil.

The four of them write all the music and lead the guild, but they are supported by an orchestra an army of stagehands. Their manager, Stone du Graf is a powerhouse Vaslorian who is so thunderous and physical in his negotiations on the band's behalf that many people mistake him for their boss.

² Everyone who isn't a critic, the critics *hate* these guys.