

CHAPTER 1

No one dared to do it before, not in front of the King. But you never knew with Marfisa. The performance was rolling along sweetly. That is, until the scene in which Arethusa bathes in a river. Acting the part, Marfisa appeared on stage in a loose petticoat, carrying her bow and with her quiver slung across her shoulder. She placed her bow and arrows to one side and sat on the floor, as if to descend into the river. She moved her arms pretending to wash herself. Then Alpheus appeared. She rose from the floor and faced the audience. ‘You have seen me bathing!’ she shouted. As Alpheus stopped to reply, she eased her petticoat off her shoulders and let it drop delicately to the floor.

To the amazement of everyone, Marfisa stood totally naked. A shocked gasp filled the theatre: nakedness on stage is a criminal offence. Then the audience became a cacophony of loud and rapid talking. Those who had, and the few who had not, seen the bare Arethusa made urgent exchanges. ‘Did you see that?’ ‘Did I see what?’ The local people at the back burst into cheering and shouting. Joyous celebration erupted. Many of the men had never seen a completely naked woman before, not even their wives. The members of the royal household controlled their reactions. After all, the King, King Charles II, was present and none of them knew how he would respond if they were to celebrate, too. Marfisa had stunned the royal party into silence. Our sadly disabled King, sitting only ten feet away from her, looked dazed, as if he had been struck about the head by an invisible weapon. He stared at Marfisa’s delicious form, transfixed by her pretty triangle of scant hair. The Archduke’s wife blushed with embarrassment. She glanced at the Archduke, as if to say, ‘If you think you can see me naked, you’d better think again’. The Archduke grinned with unconcealed delight. Then a nymph of Diana appeared and covered Marfisa’s nakedness with a white bed sheet. The incident was over.

This shattering diversion took place ten minutes before the curtain could be drawn. Antonio de Escamilla, the manager of the company, walked to the front of the stage, still dressed as Momo, the wise buffoon, and appealed to the audience, ‘Quiet, please. We want to carry on!’ He quickly regained silence and the play concluded.

The audience appreciated our performance – for more than one reason – and, at the end, people cheered and applauded enthusiastically as the cast

lined up on the stage. Antonio bent over towards the actors, an arm outstretched, to signal them to bow. The hand clapping ceased as the King and his entourage stood and left the theatre. Then the rest who attended dispersed, chatting and laughing among themselves.

We, the players and musicians, had previously agreed to meet afterwards in Bernalda de Molinas's tavern, which is in the Calle de Cantarranas, just around the corner from the Mentidero, a well known meeting point for actors, musicians and artists. We would meet at about seven o'clock in the evening, so I had time to go home first. I live in the Calle de la Madalena so it was not far for me to walk to the tavern. As I entered, the smell of the place hit me: an accidental blend of stale beer and urine. I could pick out about half a dozen or so of our group already sitting or standing at the back. Antonio and Manuela de Escamilla, his daughter, who had played the goddess Diana, had been the first to arrive and they and Simón Donoso, the guitarist, were arguing frantically.

'What the hell was she doing?' asked Manuela. 'That isn't in the script?'

'Well, yes, it is,' replied Antonio. 'At that point, Arethusa should be bathing naked in the river. It says that in the play.'

'She shocked me,' added Simón, 'especially when she stood facing the audience, showing all her charms.'

'So you dreamt up the idea, Antonio,' shouted Manuela.

'No, Manuela, dear. Not so.'

'Well, who did then?'

At that point, and as if to calm the discussion, Marfisa entered. She had heard Manuela's question and wanted to shift any blame away from Antonio. 'I thought it a good idea to appear naked, just as it says in the play. I know we hadn't rehearsed that but I did it on impulse. I hadn't intended to stand up naked until the last moment, when I thought – what a good idea.'

'You shameless tart,' said Manuela. 'Before we started, you told me you were afraid of the Archduke and then you decide to strip off in front of him.'

Marfisa burst into tears. 'I'm not a tart. I'm a professional actress and singer. I suddenly felt I had to do it so I did. If I've done anything wrong, I'm sorry,' she said softly and still weeping.

'Now, let's all calm down,' said Antonio. 'I'm more interested in what might happen than blaming Marfisa. You and I, Manuela, run a well known theatre company and it would be better to turn this around into something

positive than to be fighting Marfisa or each other.'

'I admire Marfisa for trying to keep to Juan Bautista's plot,' said Juan de Roxas Carrión, one of the violinists. 'But we may not have heard the last of this. The company could be prosecuted by the courts or even by the Inquisition. Let's face it, it would not be the first time an artistic work had been taken up by them.'

Marfisa sobbed at the mention of the Inquisition. 'Oh God, what have I done?' she whimpered.

Perhaps Juan shouldn't have touched on this subject as it unsettled Marfisa again. 'Marfisa,' I said, 'you may have been misguided in what you did, but you did it for the best intentions and we will defend you.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said Manuela. 'I don't see why the company should suffer just because Marfisa took it into her stupid head to strip naked for the audience.'

'That's not fair,' said Simón. 'It's better that we stick together than to openly blame Marfisa.'

'Well, what do we all think?' asked Antonio. 'What shall we do?'

'I agree with Simón,' said Luis de As, also a violinist. 'We all stick together and defend Marfisa, if we have to.'

'I agree,' I said.

'So do I,' said Juan.

'Thank you, Juan,' said Marfisa and, looking towards each of us in turn, said a separate 'Thank you' to us all.

'Who doesn't agree?' asked Antonio.

'Well, I suppose we all agree,' said Manuela, who then apologised to Marfisa for calling her a bad name.

'I love you, Manuela,' said Marfisa, smiling.

'Carried: we all stick together,' said Antonio, as if addressing a formal committee meeting, 'but what should we do to protect the company?'

'I suggest we do nothing for now,' I said. 'No one at the theatre wanted to pursue us or take us to court. There were several of the King's lawyers there and they said nothing. We just wait and see what happens.'

'That sounds right to me,' said Juan, 'but you, Juan Hidalgo, are a member of the Inquisition, so is there anything you can do to help us avoid any problem?'

'Maybe,' I said, 'but let's not cross any bridges until we reach them.'

Some of the other musicians and players arrived during our discussion and joined in. The unanimous conclusion remained that we all unite to defend Marfisa but do nothing for now. We agreed that I would think about an approach to the Inquisitor General but only if a case was made against the company. Antonio bought each of us a glass of wine or ale and we all

drank to our future success.

By the time I arrived home it was late in the evening. I went to my music room and took out a pen and some paper. I had been thinking about this book for a long time. My excitement grew as I dipped my pen in the ink. I wrote the date at the top of the page: 19 January 1678. Then I began to write this, the first chapter of the story of my life. I had something interesting to say: there could not be many men who had been a composer, a spy and a member of the Inquisition; and even fewer who had lived long enough to tell their tale.

