

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



The Gambler

by Michael Kile

EXTRACT

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SYNOPSIS

The Gambler is an adaptation for the stage of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1866 novella, *The Gambler*. It is a satirical drama about addictive gambling, set in the fictional European casino city of Roulettenburg.

The play follows the fluctuating fortunes of Aleksei, a 25 year old Russian tutor, at roulette and with his romance with Polina, the step-daughter of the indebted General Zagoryansky.

The General's desperate scheme to recover his gambling losses via an inheritance – and repay his creditors - goes awry when his 75 year old aunt arrives unexpectedly from Moscow with plans of her own. Like most of the other characters, she too becomes a victim of Lady Luck's seductive attractions, with dramatic consequences for everyone.

While the play is set in nineteenth century Europe, its lessons are universal – and apply especially to contemporary Australia, where we are witnessing the growing social costs of our new casino culture.

THE CAST

FYODOR MIKHAILOVICH DOSTOYEVSKY: an impoverished 42 year old Russian writer

ALEXIS IVANOVICH (ALEKSEI), a 25 year old Russian tutor to the General's children, Misha and Nadya

Dostoyevsky and Aleksei are played by the same actor.

POLINA ALEXANDROVINA(PRASKOVYA), the General's young stepdaughter

GENERAL ZAGORYANSKY, a 55 year old indebted Russian nobleman

MARQUIS de GRIEUX, a young French gambler and financier

Mlle BLANCHE du COMINGES, a 25 year old Parisian courtesan, the General's fiancée , and friend of the Marquis de Grioux

MR ASTLEY, a wealthy Englishman, nephew of Lord Pibroch

ANTONIDA VASILYEVNA TARASEVICHEV (GRANDMAMMA), the General's 75 year old crippled aunt, a landowner and Moscow grand lady.

POTAPYCH, her servant

MARTHA, her maid

RASKOLNIKOV: a middle-aged prisoner

One croupier
Two gamblers
Casino manager

Between the Third and Fourth Acts there is an interval of one year and eight months.

ACT ONE

1

A luxurious hotel in the fictional town of Roulettenburg, Germany, in the heart of the mid-nineteenth century Rhineland gambling district. Aleksei has just returned from a trip to Paris to borrow gambling funds for the General and his entourage. He is seated on a sofa sipping an apertif. He stands up.

ALEKSEI (*To the audience*): I am back at last in Roulettenburg. I thought they would have been expecting me, but I was mistaken. The General uttered a few condescending words, and sent me to his sister. They must have borrowed more money from somewhere else while I was away. Nevertheless, Maria Philippovna eagerly took what I scrounged in Paris.

I have a little room on the third floor - but I am known to belong to *the General's suite*. (*A pause*) Somehow they have managed to make an impression. Everybody here believes he is very rich and very grand. The fools!

I saw Polina Alexandrovna too. She asked me why I had taken so long. We shall have to talk soon. A lot of things are happening – or about to happen.

The General enters the suite and sees Aleksei.

GENERAL: Alexis Ivanovich, when you take my children for a walk, please go to the park. I don't want them near the casino. I am not your mentor, but here's some advice. You are young and irresponsible - and eminently capable of gambling. Stay away, stay away from the tables, sir.

ALEKSEI: But I haven't any money, so how can I lose it?

The General rummages in his desk and consults a notebook. He discovers he owes Aleksei one hundred and twenty roubles.

GENERAL (*Embarrassed*): Alright. Here's the one hundred and twenty roubles I owe you. Please don't take offence. I am merely putting you on your guard. And I believe I have a right to do so...Enough. I must go and find my guests.

The General exits.

ALEKSEI (*To himself*): Well, *someone* has been gambling! Or did they borrow it all? (*A pause*) When I entered the hotel, I saw quite a cavalcade outside. Two splendid carriages, magnificent horses! Mademoiselle Blanche in one carriage with Maria Philippovna and Polina; the Frenchman, the Englishman, and our General all on horseback. It looked sensational. But it won't do the General any good. Mademoiselle Blanche is the kind of woman who always wants more and more - and more.

She's staying here with her mother, *Madame la comtesse*. The Frenchman is here too. They call him *Monsieur le comte*. Well, who knows, perhaps they really are a *comte* and *comtesse*?

The General returns with Polina Alexandrovna and de Grioux.

POLINA: Aleksei, it's lovely to have you back with us. How was Paris?

ALEKSEI: Thank you, Polina Alexandrovna. It's impossible for we Russians to dine there alone these days, I'm sorry to say. You'll simply expose yourself to abuse. In Paris, on the Rhine - even in Switzerland - it's all the same. There's so many wretched little Poles and their French sympathisers that it's impossible to utter a word - if you happen to be Russian.

De GRIEUX: So somebody somewhere has been teaching you a lesson.

ALEKSEI: A lesson? Yes, you could say that. I quarrelled first with a Pole, and then with a French officer who backed him up. But even the French came over to my side when I told them how I felt like spitting in Monsignore's coffee.

THE GENERAL: Spitting?

ALEKSEI: Exactly. Spitting. Spitting in his coffee. You know I had to go to Rome on our business. I went to His Holiness's Embassy in Paris to get a visa. There I met the secretariat - an abbé with a frosty face. He heard me out extremely coldly, and asked me to wait. I was in a hurry, but of course I sat down to wait. Meanwhile, I heard somebody going through the next room into Monsignore's office. I could see the abbé bowing to him. I repeated my former request, but nothing happened.

Then I saw an Austrian come in. He was taken upstairs immediately. "What's going on here?" I said to myself. I told the abbé that as Monsignore was seeing people, he could see me as well. The abbé recoiled in amazement. How could an insignificant Russian like me put himself on the same level as Monsignore's guests! Looking me up and down with the greatest insolence, he shouted, "*Do you really imagine Monsignore is going to leave his coffee for you?*" Then I shouted as well, but louder, "*In that case, let me tell you I don't give a damn for your Monsignore's coffee! If you don't finish with my passport this instant, I shall go to him myself!*"

"*What, when the cardinal is with him?*" he cried, barring the doors with his outstretched arms. He looked as though he would rather die than let me through. I then said that I was a heretic and a barbarian - and didn't give a damn about his Archbishops and Cardinals and Monsignores. (*Laughs*) With hatred in his eyes, he snatched my passport and took it upstairs. In one minute I had my visa. (*Displays the visa*). Here it is, would you like to see it?

GENERAL: But you....

De GRIEUX: What saved you was calling yourself a barbarian and a heretic.

ALEKSEI: Is that the way to look on us Russians? We sit here without daring to utter a squeak. We're even ready to deny we're Russians! (*A pause*) The French even suffered me to tell them that two years ago I saw a man who had been shot by a French soldier in 1812 simply because he wanted to unload his gun. The man was twelve years old at the time. His family was unable to get out of Moscow.

De GRIEUX: That's impossible! A French soldier wouldn't shoot a child!

ALEKSEI: Well, I was told by a respectable retired Captain. And I saw the scar on his neck myself. Perhaps, monsieur, you should read some extracts from the *Memoirs* of General Perovsky? He was a prisoner of the French in 1812.

THE GENERAL: That's enough, Alexis Ivanovitch! Why don't you take a stroll and cool off? We have another engagement. Goodnight.

They exit, but Polina remains behind.

ALEKSEI: Goodnight, General. I'll take your advice. (*To Polina*) Besides, the air in here is rather stuffy.

2

POLINA: So you only got 700 gulden for my diamonds? A fine bargainer you are! Any little pawn-broker would have paid at least 2,000 gulden. Well, I need more money, and I need it now. Otherwise, I shall be done for. Do you understand me?

ALEKSEI: Yes, of course. But let's talk about something else. What's been happening here?

POLINA: Nothing. Nothing at all. (*A pause*) There were two telegrams from St Petersburg. Grandmamma's very ill. They say she's dead. We're waiting for a letter confirming it.

ALEKSEI: So everybody's a little nervous?

POLINA: Of course. It's what they've been hoping for this past six months.

ALEKSEI: Are you hoping, too?

POLINA: I'm only the General's stepdaughter. (*A pause*) But I know she's remembered me in her will.

ALEKSEI: You'll get a great deal of money.

POLINA: She was fond of me. But why should *you* think so?

ALEKSEI: Does our friend, the marquis, know all the family secrets?

POLINA: Why do you ask?

ALEKSEI: Why not? If I'm not mistaken, the General has borrowed *quite a lot* of money from him.

POLINA: You're very good at guessing, aren't you?

ALEKSEI: Would he have lent him money if he knew nothing about Grandmamma? I don't think so. When he was saying something about her at dinner he called her Grandmamma, "*la grand'mamman*", three times? What familiarity!

POLINA: Yes, you're right. As soon as he knows I'll get something from her will, he'll begin making advances. Is that what you wanted to know?

ALEKSEI: *Begin?* I thought he'd been making them for a long time.

POLINA: He hasn't. (*A pause*). Where did you meet that Englishman?

ALEKSEI: Mr Astley? In Prussia, in a railway carriage. I ran into him again France, and then in Switzerland. He's shy. And he's in love with you too, isn't he?

POLINA: Yes, he's in love with me.

ALEKSEI: He's ten times as rich as the Frenchman. And has de Grièux really got anything at all?

POLINA: Yes. He owns a chateau. The General told me so.

ALEKSEI: In your place I would marry the Englishman.

POLINA: Why?

ALEKSEI: The Frenchman may be handsome, but he's a scoundrel. Mr Astley is honourable - and ten times richer.

POLINA: Yes, but the Frenchman is a marquis - and cleverer.

ALEKSEI: Are you sure?

POLINA: Absolutely! (*A pause*) You amuse me. You really do. I will not allow you to ask such questions.

ALEKSEI: But I have the right to ask you any kind of question. Why? Because I'm ready to pay for it any way you want. Besides, my life is really meaningless now.

POLINA: On the Schlangenberg yesterday, you said you'd throw yourself off the mountain at a word from me. I *will* say the word one day - solely to see you pay up. There are times when hate you – precisely because I have allowed you so much. (*A pause*) But I need you right now.

She gets up from her seat.

ALEKSEI: Before you go, allow me to ask you who is Mademoiselle Blanche?

POLINA: You know who she is! Mademoiselle Blanche will become the General's wife – if the rumour about Grandmamma's death is confirmed. (*A pause*) Mademoiselle Blanche, her mamma, and her third cousin, the Marquis, all know we are ruined.

ALEKSEI: So the General's utterly in love?

POLINA: That's not the point! Here's seven hundred florins. Go and play roulette – and win! Win me as much as ever you can! I must have money at all costs now.

She exits. Alex is alone on stage.

ALEKSEI: What a creature she is! “*Go and play roulette?*” Once more I ask myself if I am in love with her? No, I hate her! There are moments – at the end of every one of our conversations – when I would give half my life to strangle her! Yes, moments when I'd like to bury a sharp knife slowly into her breast - and with pleasure. And yet I swear by all that's holy that if she had said to me on the Schalengberg: “*Cast yourself down...*”, I would have done it.

During these two weeks a thousand and one new facts have emerged from the darkness. One way or another, the matter must be settled. As for me, I know I'll never realise my fantastic dreams. And that gives her great pleasure. Her attitude to me has been like that of an empress of antiquity. She undresses in front of her slave, not considering him a man...!

Enough! I have a commission from her – to win at roulette at all costs! There is no time to lose – *I must go to the roulette tables.*

He goes out.

3

Later in the evening. Aleksei returns from the roulette tables to the hotel. He is carrying a small pouch full of coins. He tips them onto a table in the hotel lobby, and inspects them. He reflects on his first visit to a casino.

In the background there is the sound of a roulette ball revolving in a roulette wheel, and the voices of excited gamblers.

ALEKSEI: Distasteful, distasteful! And to have to play for someone else as well.
Never again! (*A pause*)

I confess my heart was beating heavily. The moment I entered, I knew I'd leave Roulettenburg a different man. Yes, I knew that little wheel would change my life. Why do I expect to get so much out of roulette? I don't know. But the general opinion - that it's absurd to expect anything from gambling - seems even funnier. And why is gambling worse than other ways of acquiring money - like trade? Yes, I know only one person in a hundred wins. But what do I care about that? *That person could be me - was me!*

Everything was so squalid. There's nothing magnificent about those rooms. All of those greedy and anxious faces around the tables! (*Laughing*) But there's absolutely nothing dirty in the desire to win as much as possible as quickly as possible. Besides, aren't people everywhere always taking away something from each other? (*A pause*) I'm just like them - I want to win. What's the use of deceiving oneself?

And the ugliest sight of all in that gambling riff-raff? (*A pause*) Their respect for what they were doing. It's highly aristocratic, of course, not to notice the squalor of the rabble. And sometimes it's possible to convince yourself you're only a spectator, and in no way part of it. However, I honestly saw myself as a part of the riff-raff.

To begin with, it was all Greek to me. Somehow I discovered that money was staked on numbers, *pair* and *impair*, and colours. And decided to try my luck with a hundred gulden of Polina Alexandrovna's money. But it seemed to me by playing for her I was spoiling *my own luck*. Can one gamble without becoming superstitious?

(*He begins slowly, but becomes more and more excited.*) I began with five gold friedrichs, that is fifty gulden, and placed them on evens. The wheel spun, and the number thirteen came up - I lost. With a sick feeling, I put five more gold friedrichs on red. Red came up. I staked all ten gold friedrichs - red came up again. Again I staked the whole lot and red came up once more. Now I had forty gold friedrichs.

I staked twenty on the twelve middle numbers -and was paid three times my bet. Thus my ten gold friedrichs suddenly became eighty. My sensations were so intolerable that I wanted to leave. But I put the whole eighty gold friedrichs on pair. This time four came up. I was counted out another eighty. With great difficulty, I picked up a magnificent 160 gold pieces, and dragged myself away.

Polina enters in the hotel lobby. She sees Alexei, and approaches him.

ALEKSEI: Here are your winnings. (*She takes a pouch from him containing 160 gold friedrichs.*)

POLINA: So you won!