

# ET TU, SHOWBIZ?



||| A NEW MUSICAL |||

"ET TU, SHOWBIZ?"

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Book, Music and Lyrics by  
Matthew Canning-Wall

Contact:  
Matthew Canning-Wall  
+44 (0)7976 739 967  
mswall@aol.com

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

JO - Male, 20s. Impresario. Scrappy, passionate, theatrical and intensely in love with the stage.

YOUNG JO - Male child / young teen. Jo as a boy; already ingenious, theatrical and ambitious, turning scraps into spectacle.

ATTALUS - Male, 30s. Former gladiator. Stoic, physically commanding, quietly searching for purpose beyond spectacle.

VIBIA - Female, 30s. Waitress and singer. Charismatic, warm, sharp and compelling; the moral centre of the story.

NERO - Male, 20s. Emperor of Rome. Grandiose, vain, comic and increasingly menacing.

GEMELLUS - Male, 20s. Young actor. Handsome, well-meaning and emotionally open; a comic foil with real vulnerability.

FABIANUS - Male, 70s. Veteran actor. Larger-than-life, eccentric, sentimental and comic.

SILVIA - Female, 80s. Retired actress. Elegant, slightly vague, funny and poignant, with ethereal stage presence.

METROBIUS - Male, 80s. Legendary retired actor. Gravitas, eccentricity and mythic stage aura.

THRASEA - Male, 30s. Calm senator and Nero's foil; dry, politically astute and quietly conflicted.

DROLIO - Male, 70s. Failed comedian. Battered, relentless and needy; terrible jokes covering a surprisingly true heart.

PARACLES - Male, 70s. Attalus' flamboyant agent. Energetic, comic and charmingly ridiculous.

GAIUS DONATUS - Male, 60s. Gemellus' wealthy, intimidating father. Practical, business-minded and controlling, but not without affection.

MAKEDA - Female, 50s. Gladiator and Attalus' peer. Grounded, unsentimental and physically formidable.

GALLA - Female, 40s. Metrobius' major-domo. Dry, witty and efficient.

RICCIUS - Male, 60s. Gruff tavern keeper. Fearful, prejudiced and self-protective.

DOMITIA - Female, 50s / 60s. Formidable owner of the provincial theatre; a civic matron with sharp instincts and no patience for unpaid genius.

ESTHER - Female, 50s+. A practical woman from Jo's childhood village who knew his parents and recognises his gift.

GALLEY ATTENDANT - Female, 30s+. Brisk, terrifyingly efficient official of the Roman galley. Customer service with a whip.

CASTOR - Male, 20s / 30s. One half of a songwriting duo; music-led, hungry, energetic and quick.

POLLUX - Male, 20s / 30s. The other half of the duo; articulate, dry, sharp and verbally nimble.

FEATURED ENSEMBLE ROLES - Including Emcee, Vestal Maxima, Herald, Guard Captain, Judges, Jonah, Roman Boy, Children, Waitress, Bouncer, Thug, Baker, Young Mother, Patrician Lady, Hecklers and Audience Members. These may be doubled flexibly.

ENSEMBLE - Citizens, performers, farmhands, children, stagehands, servants, gladiators, guards, judges, hecklers, musicians, "Rome's Got Talent" acts and audience.

## SETTINGS

### Act I

- Scene 1 - Dusty Farm in Judaea. A.D. 65.
- Scene 2 - Crumbling Provincial Theatre. Caesarea Maritima.
- Scene 3 - Shabby Taberna. Caesarea Maritima.
- Scene 4 - Campus Martius Arena. Rome.
- Scene 5 - Shabby Taberna. Caesarea Maritima.
- Scene 6 - Port of Caesarea / Roman Galley / Ostia Dock.
- Scene 7 - Elegant Office. Palatine Hill. Rome.
- Scene 8 - The Palatine Grill. Rome.
- Scene 9 - Comedy & Tragedy Taberna. Subura. Rome.
- Scene 10 - Public Gardens. Rome.
- Scene 11 - Imperial Palace. Palatine Hill. Rome.
- Scene 12 - Fields by the Campus Martius. Rome.
- Scene 13 - Training Grounds. Campus Martius. Rome.
- Scene 14 - Comedy & Tragedy Taberna. Subura. Rome.

### Act II

- Scene 1 - On the Road to Volaterrae.
- Scene 2 - Villa of Metrobius. Volaterrae.
- Scene 3 - Central Square. Rome.
- Scene 4 - Suburan Theatre. Rome.
- Scene 5 - Imperial Palace. Rome.
- Scene 6 - Comedy & Tragedy Taberna. Subura. Rome.
- Scene 7 - Theatre of Dionysus. Rome.
- Scene 8 - Same. The Following Day.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

"Et Tu, Showbiz?" is a fast-moving, theatrical musical comedy set in ancient Rome. It should not be played as strict historical realism, but as a heightened, imaginative world where emotional truth and comic anachronism happily coexist.

The production should favour fluid stagecraft over literal realism. The central revolving set, mobile platforms, and ensemble transformations should create the many locations swiftly and playfully. Scene changes should feel like part of the show's theatrical language, not interruptions to it.

Visually, the piece should balance the rough ingenuity of travelling players with the excess of imperial Rome. Handmade effects, bold silhouettes, props, drapery, banners, masks, and light should do as much storytelling as scenery.

Doubling is encouraged. The ensemble should function as actors, citizens, stagehands, servants, gladiators, and audience, helping to create a world that is constantly shifting before our eyes.

Above all, the show should feel like a love letter to the theatre: scrappy, funny, moving, and gloriously alive

## MUSICAL NUMBERS

### Act I

1. Nowhere, Judea – Young Jo
2. It's Warm in Here – Vibia
3. All Roads Lead to Me – Nero
4. A Different Kind of Glory – Attalus
5. That Girl Was Me – Young Silvia
6. At Dawn – Jo / Vibia, Attalus / Makeda

### Act II

1. Take Your Show on the Road – Jo, Vibia, Attalus, Makeda, Company
2. Carry the Flame – Jo and Vibia
3. He's Everything to Me – Gemellus
4. Rome's Got Talent – Emcee/Ensemble
5. The Stage Is Mine – Nero
6. Let It Be Me – Vibia
7. It'll Be Alright on the Night – Jo and Company

ACT I

SCENE 1

DUSTY FARM IN JUDAEA. A.D. 65.

Lights up on a rustic barn. Dust floats in the air. Central revolving theatre box sits centre stage with hay bales, ropes, and simple props. CHILDREN, FARMERS, and a few puppet SHEEP make up the audience. YOUNG JO is cueing the action. A wooden "whale" prop is makeshift, but charming.

CHORUS CHILDREN

Jonah ran from God's great plan –  
Took a boat and fled the land.  
But stormy winds and angry tide –  
Said, "Get out, Jonah – time to ride!"

Stagehands bang makeshift drums. Crowd reacts with OOH! Jo pumps the bellows. Whale spout sprays the front row. Jonah leaps, pantomimes terror, runs. Whale wobbles, pushed by TWO SHEEPDOGS, steered by a FARM BOY. Whale "gulps" Jonah; he dives through fabric flap. Lettuce flies from whale's mouth. Jo signals cue.

CHORUS CHILDREN (CONT'D)

Three long days in belly wet –  
Has Jonah learned his lesson yet?

CROWD

No!

CHORUS CHILDREN

He prayed, he cried, he swore to change –  
Then splash! The sea got rearranged.

Jo slams hidden lever. Whale tilts. Jonah tumbles onto canvas "beach," flailing.

JONAH

I obey thy will, O Lord.

CROWD

He's alive! The whale spat him out!

Jo signals; crowd claps, stomps. Children chant. ANGEL drops from barn roof on pulley. Jonah kneels in thanks. Whale head pokes out; operator waves.

The whole tableau is a riot of joy. The audience loves it.

YOUNG JO  
Now that's theatre!

The makeshift cast burst into applause and delighted chaos. Someone hugs Jonah.

A village woman - ESTHER - slings her arm around Young Jo.

ESTHER  
Josephus! bubbeleh! Our little orphan genius! That whale was, well... I couldn't believe it when the water came out of its... How'd you do that?

YOUNG JO  
Empty wineskin. Borrowed bellows. Trade secret.

ESTHER  
If I were a gambling woman, I'd say one day you'll play Caesar's palace.

YOUNG JO  
I'd settle for proper actors - or at least ones that don't smell like goat.

The children and farmhands laugh. The mood is high and messy and happy. They begin dragging off the whale, ropes, drums and canvas. A CHILD runs past wearing an angel wing.

Jo is left behind among the remains of his little miracle: damp canvas, scraps of painted wood, the whale's jaw hanging open.

Esther lingers, watching him gather up small wooden figures.

ESTHER  
Your mother used to do that. Such a talent she had.

YOUNG JO  
Do what, Esther?

ESTHER  
Make a whole world outta nothing. A cloth, a candle, those wooden tchotchkes. She'd sit you on her knee and make gods and monsters dance across the wall.

YOUNG JO

I don't really remember.

ESTHER

Oy, she remembered enough for the both of ya, did your mamma. And your father - may his memory also be a blessing - carved those. Said a boy should have something to hold onto when the world got mean.

YOUNG JO

The world is mean a lot, Esther.

ESTHER

Then make it better, bubbeleh. That's what they did. You should do different?

YOUNG JO

Esther... did they ever talk about Rome?

ESTHER

Ah, now your mother always said Rome was the place to be. She said people went to Rome when they wanted the whole world to know their name.

YOUNG JO

And papa?

ESTHER

Well, he said names meant nothing, but that was your father. What mattered most, he said, was how bright we shone while we were here. The flame we carried.

Esther gently places one of the wooden figures back in Jo's hand.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Keep the faith, Jo. Always. This little barn's not the end of you, bubbeleh. From my mouth to God's ears.

She kisses him on the head and exits.

Jo stands alone with the carved figure.

YOUNG JO

No, Esther. This barn's where I start.

Music begins.

YOUNG JO (CONT'D)

"NOWHERE, JUDAEA"

HERE IN THE DUST,  
WITH FLIES IN THE AIR,  
DREAMS FEEL SO FAR,

LIKE THEY'RE NOT EVEN THERE.  
GIVE ME A STAGE,  
JUST A PLANK AND A PLAY —  
I'LL MAKE IT BIG...  
I'LL DO IT IN A BROAD WAY.  
THEY CALL ME A NOBODY,  
MUD ON MY SHOES,  
BUT ORPHANS LIKE ME  
JUST DON'T GET TO CHOOSE.  
FROM TATTERS AND TRICKERY,  
SPECTACLES GROW —  
ROME DOESN'T KNOW ME YET...  
BUT IT WILL KNOW.  
NOWHERE, JUDEA —  
THAT'S WHERE I START.  
A WINE-SKIN WHALE AND A LION-HEART.  
THE ROAD IS ROUGH  
AND THE NIGHT IS LONG —  
BUT TOMORROW ROME WILL HEAR MY SONG!  
TOMORROW ROME WILL CHEER ME ON!  
LET EMPERORS STRUT,  
LET SENATORS PREEN,  
I'LL SHOW THEM A MAGIC  
THAT THEY'VE NEVER SEEN.  
A LAUGH IN THE DARK,  
A GASP IN THE AIR,  
THE STAGE WILL BE MINE —  
AND I'LL TAKE THEM THERE.  
SO MOCK ME, FORGET ME,  
CALL ME A FOOL,  
A FARM BOY WHO FIDDLED  
WITH BELLOWS AT SCHOOL.  
THAT WON'T LET ME GO —  
ROME DOESN'T KNOW ME YET...  
BUT IT WILL KNOW.  
NOWHERE, JUDEA —  
IT'S SMALL, BUT IT'S MINE.  
I'LL FIGHT FOR THE FOOTLIGHTS,  
I'LL CARVE OUT MY LINE.  
I'LL GIVE THEM THE WONDER  
THEY'VE NEVER KNOWN —  
AND TOMORROW ALL THE SEVEN HILLS WILL KNOW!  
TOMORROW ROME WILL CALL ME JO!  
PROPS THAT TUMBLE, SETS THAT FALL,  
GOATS THAT BLEAT INSTEAD OF CALL,  
CROWDS THAT LAUGH AND BEG FOR MORE:  
THAT'S THE DREAM I'M FIGHTING FOR!  
NOWHERE, JUDEA —  
BUT NOT FOR TOO LONG.  
THE SPOTLIGHT IS WAITING,  
MY FAITH IS STRONG.  
ONE BOY, ONE DREAM,  
ONE STAGE, ONE HOME —  
NOWHERE, JUDEA...  
TOMORROW — ROME!

CRUMBLING PROVINCIAL THEATRE. CAESAREA MARITIMA.

PROJECTION: "XV YEARS LATER. NOT ROME."

Lights up. The central revolving theatre box has rotated to reveal a shabby provincial theatre. Benches are crooked, props patched and battered. Young Jo is frozen centre stage.

A spotlight sweeps across him, then crossfade lighting effect reveals Jo stepping forward. Young Jo exits.

ON STAGE: A shabby troupe performs.

GEMELLUS

(loud, dreadful)

Oh noble Phallus, thou hast returned from war!

FABIANUS

(as bad, maybe worse)

Indeed, I have just come... back. I have just come back.

A goat bleats loudly.

FABIANUS (CONT'D)

My gentle lady! How sweet she sings!

SILVIA makes her entrance.

FABIANUS hands her a bag.

FABIANUS (CONT'D)

Sweet Myrrhina, temptress divine. Grasp my sack, for it is thine.

JO

(consulting script)

"Grasp my sack"? Eww.

Back-and-forth pantomime ensues: he gives bag, she returns it; actors freeze, waiting for her line.

A tumbleweed rolls across the stage. Crickets chirp.

Sound effect of a single cough from the back of the theatre. A cheap prop falls with a crash.

HECKLER (OFFSTAGE)

That was the best part! You guys suck!

The sound of chairs scraping.  
Audience members complaining.  
Doors slamming.

Cube rotates slightly. Jo leans  
against the wing. His gaze drifts  
to a poster pinned high on the  
wall: a gladiator in full glory:  
"ATTALUS THE GREAT – BLOOD! GORE!  
BRING THE KIDS!"

JO

Someone the audience actually wants to see. But  
why? He just waltzes in, cutting off heads like  
it's a stroll in the Forum. Must be nice to  
have it so easy. Attalus the Great? Over-rated.

The set revolves to reveal a  
shabby taberna. Jo's cast sits  
drinking wine.

SCENE 3

SHABBY TABERNA. CAESAREA MARITIMA.

Jo sits at a table centre-stage.  
Fabianus drops into the seat  
beside him.

FABIANUS

You know what you need, Jo?

JO

Better actors?

FABIANUS

Oh, come now – today's show wasn't especially  
bad.

JO

No. Just bad in all the usual ways. Twelve  
people and a goat. And I'm pretty sure the goat  
walked out.

FABIANUS

Yes. Tragic. That goat really got my  
performance, you know. Still – I've been in  
worse plays.

JO

I know. I saw them.

Silvia slides in.

SILVIA

Chin up, darling. Not every producer's a  
legend. Just like not every performer's a star.  
Take gladiators: you've got your butcher's meat  
– and then you've got...

GEMELLUS

Attalus.

JO

Oy. Him again.

FABIANUS

He's got star quality, Jo. Buckets of it. If we're sinking, why not get him?

JO

Why not...? Fabianus: he's the highest-paid performer in the Empire! Why would he swap baths and courtesans for seeing you do to Greek tragedy what Romulus did to Remus?

FABIANUS

Remind me, darling?

JO

He murdered him. I can relate.

SILVIA

It doesn't have to be Attalus, darling. Just someone exactly like him in every way.

FABIANUS

Silvia's right. Strong. Mysterious. Dangerous.

GEMELLUS

Cheap.

SILVIA

Naturally.

(to Jo)

You're not exactly living the life of Rileus, are you, my dear? No money, career in the latrine...

JO

Tha...

SILVIA

Clothes like a muleteer's shroud. Stench like a galley slave's sandal.

JO

Thank you, Silvia. I am your boss, you know.

SILVIA

And you're doing a splendid job, my dear.

The scene fades in the provinces  
and comes to life far away: in  
Rome.

SCENE 4

CAMPUS MARTIUS ARENA. ROME.

Lights up. The central revolving theatre box: front face = Imperial Box (elevated, shaded, gold accents), downstage apron = implied arena. Holding tunnel suggested by chains and shadow.

ATTALUS alone, spotlighted.

HERALD (O.S.)

Ladies and citizens of Rome – your champion returns! The lion of Latium! The slayer of Pontus! The undefeated, unchallenged, unrelenting – Attalus the Great!

Gate sound cue. Light floods. Attalus dons helmet, picks up sword, strides toward downstage apron. Distant cheering.

In the Imperial Box, EMPEROR NERO lounges. Senator THRASEA stands beside him, taking notes.

NERO

That's the look I want, Thrasea.

THRASEA

The chest or the adoration, sire?

NERO

Both. Though I imagine one greatly assists the other.

A roar from the crowd.

NERO (CONT'D)

Listen to them! They cheer as if he belongs to them.

THRASEA

It does have that flavour, great one.

NERO

I hate that flavour, Thrasea. They're mine. Their awe, their devotion, their uplifted little faces – mine.

THRASEA

Of course, divine Caesar.

NERO

A gladiator waves a sword about and suddenly Rome sinks to its knees? Oh, please.

THRASEA

The mob does seem to like him, sire.

A distant clash from the arena.  
More cheers.

NERO

Schedule a concert appearance for me, Thrasea.  
It's been far too long since I've shared my  
gifts with the rabble. My public demands it.

THRASEA

They speak of little else, majesty.

NERO

Something heroic. Something immortal. And  
something close. 'Cause, you know - travel:  
boring.

THRASEA

The provinces will be heartbroken, sire.

NERO

And I want the same contest judges as last  
time.

THRASEA

Presumably with their heads reattached to their  
necks, great one?

NERO

Surprise me.

Nero rises, arms open to the  
crowd.

NERO (CONT'D)

Rome! Your true son returns! Your voice, your  
soul, your god-kissed muse! The hour has come  
for...

HECKLER (OFFSTAGE)

Hey, Nero! You suck, man! Worst. Emperor. Ever.

Nero lowers his arms.

NERO

Rome is wasted on the Romans, Thrasea. Thank  
the gods it has me.

Nero exits.

THRASEA

Lucky Rome.

The cube rotates: locker room. A  
few shirtless gladiators. Benches.  
Attalus sits, armour off.

PARACLES - his agent - bursts in.

PARACLES

Bubbeleh! My big, brave gladiator! You moved like Mars in a designer loincloth. I wept.

ATTALUS

Paracles, it lasted ten seconds!

PARACLES

But what a ten seconds! Listen, baby, Antioch wants you. Alexandria doubled their offer. Thessalonica offered a sacrifice: virgins or cattle. In Thessalonica, who could tell the difference?

ATTALUS

I'm done, Paracles.

PARACLES

Done being adored?

ATTALUS

Done with the arena.

PARACLES

Don't say it.

ATTALUS

Theatre.

PARACLES

He said it! By the gods, he said it!

ATTALUS

I want to perform. Not grunt. Not kill. I want to make something real. Art.

PARACLES

You are Art, baby. A big, beautiful monument to a high-protein diet.

ATTALUS

Then at least I want to be Art that means something.

PARACLES

What are you now - Metrobius?

ATTALUS

Who?

PARACLES

Met... Only the greatest actor who ever lived, that's who. Sixteen laurels at Olympia! They named a soup after him in Thrace! Possibly dead, possibly retired, definitely off the market.

(MORE)

PARACLES (CONT'D)

And by the way: I'm your agent – what am I supposed to do now? Ten percent of what exactly?

Attalus shrugs.

PARACLES (CONT'D)

Oh, sure. Paracles panicked, Attalus shrugged.

ATTALUS

Just... be objective.

A beat.

PARACLES

So, you gonna do dialogue?

ATTALUS

Yes.

PARACLES

From your mouth?

ATTALUS

Paracles!

PARACLES

Take me now!

SCENE 5

SHABBY TABERNA. CAESAREA MARITIMA.

Lights up on the central revolving cube, tavern forward.

Jo, Fabianus, Silvia and Gemellus sit around a table. Standing over them is DOMITIA, formidable owner of the provincial theatre.

JO

– and if you'll just give us a little more time, Domitia, I promise we can turn this around. Last night the audience...

DOMITIA

Wasn't there, is what they were, Josephus. Last night's house was twelve people and a goat!

GEMELLUS

So, thirteen if you think about it?

Domitia's look kills that dead.

JO

Domitia...

DOMITIA

Save your breath, Jo. I've had enough. Enough excuses, enough unpaid rent, enough "immersive poetry workshops". You owe me for theatre rental, the lamps, the broken bench, the missing curtain, and whatever happened in row three.

SILVIA

I said Fabianus hadn't been well.

DOMITIA

Silvia...

SILVIA

Forget I'm here.

DOMITIA

And don't even think about skipping town. Any of you. Trust me: I know every innkeeper, muleteer, harbourmaster, and idiot with a boat.

GEMELLUS

Are you a travel agent too, Domitia? That's so cool.

DOMITIA

By sunset tomorrow, either I have my money, or I send for the magistrate.

JO

The magistrate?

DOMITIA

The last fool who owed me rent spent three days in the town square wearing a placard that said: "One Singular Sensationally Bad Investment".

GEMELLUS

D'ya hear that, Jo? A placard! (beat) Wait, what's a placard?

DOMITIA

It gives the public something to aim at when they're throwing rotten fruit.

GEMELLUS

Free fruit? I love this town!

DOMITIA

Tomorrow. Sunset. Either I get my money – or Caesarea gets a one-man show even I'd pay to see.

She exits.

JO

This is serious, people. We need a big idea for a big new show, and we need it fast. C'mon, gang. Shoot.

FABIANUS

Tragedy. Something brooding. Tears rolling down a marble cheek?

SILVIA

Or a mad oracle? I do a fine mad oracle.

Gemellus's hand shoots up.

JO

Not now, Gemellus – the adults are talking.

The hand sinks.

SILVIA

Jo-Jo...

JO

Fine. Go ahead, Gemellus. This is a safe space. No stupid ideas, blah blah. Go nuts.

GEMELLUS

Okay – what about people in a villa, and someone gets murdered? There's all these suspects and clues, and then... ooh, a clever magistrate gets everyone in a room and...

JO

That's the stupidest idea I ever heard.

FABIANUS

Pull yourself together, boy.

GEMELLUS

Yeah. Dumb. Um... we could ask my dad for the money?

JO

Your dad?

GEMELLUS

He's a merchant. Sorta.

JO

A rich merchant?

GEMELLUS

Kinda. Grain. Ports.

JO

Ports? Plural? For Mercury's sake, Gemellus! You didn't mention this because...?

GEMELLUS

Pops hates theatre. Says it's a cesspool of degeneracy and perversion.

JO

His point being?

FABIANUS

How rich?

GEMELLUS

Save your breath, Fabianus. He won't invest, I've asked already. He told me to stop playing make-believe.

JO

What if I pitch it to him as a business? Coin. Profit. Investment. Those are things in business, right?

SILVIA

Absolutely no idea, darling.

JO

My friends, this is our shot. I'm gonna talk to Gemellus' dad. Man to man.

GEMELLUS

He won't like it, Jo.

JO

I'll see him or die trying. As God – my God this time, gentiles – as God is my witness: I'm not giving up!

GEMELLUS

He's in Rome.

JO

I'm giving up!

Fabianus leans forward, inspired.  
Jo stops pacing.

JO (CONT'D)

What is it, Fab?

FABIANUS

How do you feel about adventure travel?

JO

Why do I not like the sound of this?

Jo stops at downstage dock face of cube, surveying the "port."  
Background sound: harbour ambience, distant seagulls, waves, and faint chatter from offstage workers.

JO (CONT'D)  
Rome, here I come!

SCENE 6

PORT OF CAESAREA / ROMAN GALLEY / OSTIA DOCK

A stylised port. Crates. Rope. A  
GALLEY ATTENDANT appears.

GALLEY ATTENDANT  
Travelling to Rome today are we, sir?  
Wonderful. We offer three classes of travel for  
your journey with us: Imperial, Senatorial, and  
Economy.

JO  
Economy.

GALLEY ATTENDANT  
Excellent choice, sir. Popular with students,  
debtors, and those with very low standards.

JO  
How long will it take?

GALLEY ATTENDANT  
Weather permitting? A day and a night, sir.  
Includes one flogging and light refreshments.

JO  
Sounds perfect. (beat) Wait... a flogging?

Two DECKHANDS seize Jo, spin him  
round, and slam him onto a bench.  
An oar is thrust into his hands.

A drumbeat.

JO (CONT'D)  
What the...?

GALLEY ATTENDANT  
Welcome to our economy cabin, sir.

CRACK of a whip. A sailor throws a  
bucket of water over Jo.

Lights snap, sound pounds, a few  
brutal rowing strokes –

Then blackout.

Lights up on the dock. Jo stumbles  
forward, soaked and shattered.

The steward reappears.

GALLEY ATTENDANT (CONT'D)

Welcome to Rome. Thank you for rowing with us today. Your suffering funds the Empire. Thank you, sir. By-bye now. By-bye.

She whisks away.

Jo stands there, dripping.

JO

Rome! I hate it already.

As he does, the dock clears around him. Crates are whisked away. Ropes fly. The cube begins to turn.

SCENE 7

ELEGANT OFFICE. PALATINE HILL. ROME.

Jo, still wrecked from the galley, trying hard to look like a man worth investing in.

Two THUGS flank the doorway.

Gemellus' father, GAIUS DONATUS, sits behind a vast desk.

The ubiquitous "Attalus the Great" poster hangs on the wall.

JO

Picture it, Don Gaius – Spartacus meets The Bacchae, with the sweat of the arena thrown in. Drama, action, spectacle, true love... goats!

GAIUS DONATUS

Sounds expensive, kid.

JO

Not expensive, sir. Epic!

GAIUS DONATUS

That usually means expensive.

JO

Gladiators, sword fights, passion, betrayal. Everything the mob wants.

GAIUS DONATUS

The who?

JO

The mo... Uh, the people.

GAIUS DONATUS

Good. Because where I come from, when someone says "the mob," I start checking for my purse.

JO

Right. The people.

GAIUS DONATUS

And what do "the people" want?

JO

Excitement. Spectacle. Romance. A hero. A villain. A goat, which goes without saying. Something that grabs them by the throat and doesn't let go. The show, that is, not the goat.

GAIUS DONATUS

And your show does that?

JO

It will.

GAIUS DONATUS

So at the moment, it doesn't.

JO

All I need is five hundred denarii, Don Gaius. In return: receipts, returns, prestige! Your name attached to a major theatrical sensation.

GAIUS DONATUS

I sell grain, kid. You understand? People need grain. Nobody ever starved without a play.

JO

Think of it as diversification?

GAIUS DONATUS

Oh, I do. Diversifying away from you.

JO

But this isn't just theatre, Don Gaius. It's scale. It's vision. It's legacy. Think "The God Father".

GAIUS DONATUS

The what?

JO

A piece I wrote about Jupiter. Family, power, betrayal...

GAIUS DONATUS

How'd it do?

JO

The horse's head killed.

GAIUS DONATUS

The gag, or the show?

JO

Mixed response.

GAIUS DONATUS

Listen kid, nobody buys "vision". Nobody buys "heart". Nobody buys because some putz with a dream swears this one's special. What they buy, kid, is a name.

JO

We have actors.

GAIUS DONATUS

You have warm bodies. A name is different.

JO

We have a terrific script.

GAIUS DONATUS

You have scrolls. A script is what people cheer when someone famous does it.

JO

What are you saying, sir?

GAIUS DONATUS

I'm saying: bring me a star. Someone the public already loves. Then we talk.

JO

And until then?

GAIUS DONATUS

Until then, all you've got is a stage and my dumb kid playing dress-up.

JO

Gemellus is not dumb. (beat) Wow, there's something I never thought I'd say out loud.

GAIUS DONATUS

Not dumb? So, why's he in theatre?

JO

Okay, fair point, but c'mon, Don Gaius: make me an offer I can't refuse.

GAIUS DONATUS

I'm the one refusing, kid.

JO

When I find my star...

GAIUS DONATUS

If.

JO

When I find my star, you'll wish you'd got in on the action sooner.

GAIUS DONATUS

Fine. Then here's your offer. Bring me a name. A real name. Someone people will actually pay to see.

JO

And if I do?

GAIUS DONATUS

Then - maybe - I invest.

JO

Maybe?

GAIUS DONATUS

With me, kid, "maybe" is a kiss on the mouth.

JO

And if I don't?

GAIUS DONATUS

Gemellus comes home.

JO

Gemellus?

GAIUS DONATUS

What, I got another son wasting his life in a bedsheet?

JO

He's not wasting it, sir. He... he belongs with us.

GAIUS DONATUS

He belongs in the family business. Grain. Ports. Things that exist whether people clap or not.

JO

Don Gaius...

GAIUS DONATUS

You wanna play producer, right? So produce, already. Bring me a star. Otherwise, I haul Gemellus back to Rome and stick him in the warehouse, where he starts learning the difference between wheat and barley. For the rest of his life.

JO

He might need more time than that.

GAIUS DONATUS

Don't I know it? (beat) Listen, kid, I got a ship leaving for Caesarea. Soon. You get my son outta the sticks and into a show – a good show – before my ship comes back to Rome... then – maybe – we got ourselves a deal.

JO

And if not?

GAIUS DONATUS

Then Gemellus comes home to papa.

JO

When I come back, Don Gaius, you'll have your star.

GAIUS DONATUS

And you'll have your answer. (beat) And Gemellus will have his. Wheat or barley, remember?

Jo exits.

GAIUS DONATUS (CONT'D)

He's got nerve, that one.

THUG

Want me to break it, Don Gaius?

GAIUS DONATUS

Nah. I kinda like that kid.

SCENE 8

THE PALATINE GRILL. ROME.

Cube rotates to show upmarket taberna.

Attalus and Paracles at "best table," A waitress – VIBIA – moving with a tray.

Jo enters. Crosses to the menu scroll above bar.

JO

That's not a menu: it's a ransom note.

Steps back, bumps into Vibia.

VIBIA

Careful, pal – some of us are hauling a tray of other people's debt.

JO

Sorry, miss – I wasn't – I mean – I didn't...

VIBIA

Eyes front, buddy. First time in the Palatine?

JO

How'd you guess? The rags? Or that even the lentils here are out of my league?

VIBIA

Both. Plus a faint whiff of... galley sweat? Let me guess. Actor? Swineherd?

JO

Either. Depending on who you ask. I was hoping for a cheap meal...

VIBIA

In here? Honey, even the olives come with a payment plan.

JO

I'll just crawl back to the slums and rethink my life choices.

VIBIA

Listen, if you want a drink you can afford, try the Subura – there's a taberna with masks over the door. Comedy and Tragedy. Just look for Tragedy, though. Comedy burned off in the last fire.

Jo starts to thank her; she bustles away. A BOUNCER approaches. Jo scarpers for the exit.

Back to the best table.

ATTALUS

Another day, another ovation, choking on sand and praise. I used to feel alive out there, Paracles. Now? I feel like one of the extras.

PARACLES

The corpses?

ATTALUS

Whatever. It's blood, sweat, and no meaning. What's the point?

PARACLES

The point's on the end of your sword, baby. The people adore you! You are the arena. They chant your name, they swoon over your...

ATTALUS

Biceps. I noticed. But I want more, Paracles. I want to make them think, feel, yearn. Not just scream when I chop off another head.

PARACLES

Baby, in the arena you rule seventy thousand screaming lunatics.

ATTALUS

It's not enough, Paracles. I want to act. I want to be remembered for more than my sword.

PARACLES

Acting? Pah. What are you gonna do, huh, join some ragtag troupe of half-starved hacks? Oh, please.

Vibia approaches with tray. Trips slightly on Paracles' toga; drinks splash over Attalus' tunic.

VIBIA

I am so sorry! I didn't mean - let me - please forgive me, sir.

ATTALUS

That's one way to get my attention.

PARACLES

Can't you be careful? This is the mighty Attalus! Of all the gladiators in all the world, you had to spill onto mine?

VIBIA

I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to - please, let me fix it. I -

Her dress shifts slightly, and a cross around her neck is revealed.

PARACLES

Hey, what is that? It's a... Aw, nuts: it's a cross!

VIBIA

It's... it's a sign of my faith.

PARACLES

You're a Christian in a taberna full of Romans! Sweetheart: are you trying to get us all killed?

ATTALUS

What's a "Christian"?

PARACLES

Read a scroll sometime, would ya?

VIBIA

It's not... I'm not causing trouble. Please, don't...

RICCIUS, the taberna keeper,  
approaches. Spots tattoo; grabs  
her wrist.

RICCIUS

You know the rules, toots. From day one I knew  
you was trouble. Want to bring Nero down on my  
neck, huh? Get Ric's place shut down? Why you  
little...

Riccius moves to strike Vibia.  
Attalus' massive forearm  
intercepts Riccius mid-swing.

PARACLES

Easy, Ric – she's just a kid!

RICCIUS

She's history. Beat it, Vibia. Now.

Vibia nods, then runs out the  
back.

ATTALUS

Is that serious?

PARACLES

Being a Christian? Oh, they're flavour of the  
month – ask the lions.

ATTALUS

But she's just a waitress. Who cares about a  
dumb tattoo?

PARACLES

Because this is Nero's Rome, kid. You want that  
head to stay on those broad shoulders? Keep  
your distance from troublemakers.

Paracles exits. Attalus leans  
back, eyes still on the door.

### SCENE 9

COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA. SUBURA. ROME.

Cube rotates to Subura dive. Half-  
drunk, half-hostile crowd. Sound:  
murmur, laughter, clinking cups.

Jo enters and takes a seat.

ON STAGE: DROLIO, toga in tatters.  
He holds a battered leather  
megaphone.

DROLIO

So I said to the eunuch, I said – is that a dagger under your toga or are you just pleased to see me?

Silence. A cup sails past him. He speaks once through the megaphone:

DROLIO (CONT'D)

Is this thing on?

HECKLER

Unfortunately... yes!

DROLIO

My wife says: "Let's vacation where the women all look like me." I say: "The catacombs don't open till the Ides." The Ides!

A table gets up to leave.

DROLIO (CONT'D)

Tough crowd. What are you – deaf?

HECKLER (OFFSTAGE)

I wish!

DROLIO

Okay, golden oldie: The Republic.

Rimshot. Groans. A WAITRESS approaches Jo.

WAITRESS

Drinking to remember or forget?

JO

Hoping to eat.

WAITRESS

Anything on the menu.

JO

Where's the menu?

WAITRESS

We don't have one.

JO

Then how do I...

WAITRESS

This is the Subura, pal, not the Palatine Grill. Wine?

JO

Red or...?

WAITRESS

Or nothing.

JO

Red. Finest you've got.

WAITRESS

Everyone's a big shot.

Back on stage:

DROLIO

Centurion says try mime. I say: I'm a Jew – I don't suffer in silence.

Jug smashes. Chairs scrape.

JO

Is this the comedy or the tragedy?

Just as violence is about to ensue.

Music soft, arresting. The room hushes.

From shadows: Vibia. She rises slowly, moving among patrons, calming, soothing.

She sings:

VIBIA

"IT'S WARM IN HERE"

IT'S WARM IN HERE –  
THE WORLD'S OUTSIDE,  
WITH ITS BATTLES AND ITS PRIDE.  
BUT IN THIS ROOM,  
WE LET THAT GO,  
AND FIND THE FRIENDS WE DIDN'T KNOW.  
SO TAKE YOUR SEAT,  
AND DROP YOUR SWORD –  
LISTEN WHILE I STRUM A CHORD.  
TONIGHT, IT'S JUST A TALE OR TWO,  
A CUP OF WINE THAT SEES US THROUGH.  
IT'S WARM IN HERE –  
COME SHARE THE FLAME,  
NO ONE'S ASKING FOR YOUR NAME.  
THE WALLS DON'T JUDGE,  
THE CHAIRS DON'T CARE,  
AND STRANGERS FIND A WELCOME THERE.  
YOU SING OFF-KEY?  
THEN YOU'RE IN LUCK –  
WE'RE ALL JUST FOOLS WHO LIKE A MUG.  
AND MAYBE, WHEN YOU  
RAISE YOUR GLASS –  
YOU'LL DRINK TO THINGS  
THAT COME TO PASS.

IT'S WARM IN HERE —  
NO NEED TO SHOUT,  
THE FIRE'S FED,  
THE RAIN STAYS OUT.  
A JEST, A TUNE,  
A SHOULDER NEAR,  
CAN CHANGE THE SHAPE  
OF ANY YEAR.  
SO STAY A WHILE,  
DON'T RUSH THE NIGHT,  
LET LAUGHTER, LOVE  
AND JOY TAKE FLIGHT.  
IF JOY IS RARE  
AND SORROW CLEAR —  
THEN RAISE IT HIGH —  
IT'S WARM IN HERE.  
THAT'S ALL WE GET —  
A FEW GOOD NIGHTS,  
A FEW GOOD HEARTS,  
A FEW SHARED LIGHTS.  
AND IF THIS IS ONE  
THEN STAY, MY DEAR —  
IT'S WARM IN HERE.

Music fades.

JO  
Now that's theatre.

Jo approaches Vibia.

JO (CONT'D)  
I think you just saved the old guy's life.

VIBIA  
Wouldn't be the first time. Drollo's like an  
old amphora: mostly cracks, none of them wise,  
somehow still holds wine.

JO  
Wait... I know you! Fancy place. Terrifying  
prices.

VIBIA  
You're the schmuck who cried at the wine list.  
Didn't stay?

JO  
Nah. Figured I'd rather buy a villa in Thebes  
than a Greek salad in that dump.

VIBIA  
Smart move.

JO  
So what's a talent like you doing in a dive  
like this?

VIBIA

Rome's expensive. I sling wine uptown, sing for tips down here. Two jobs, same sandals.

JO

Both involve flying dishes?

VIBIA

Only when Drollo's on stage.

JO

Say – any chance there's a room to rent upstairs? And by "rent," I mean –

Her glare cuts him off.

JO (CONT'D)

– or a stable out back? Between addresses.

VIBIA

We're between dishwashers?

JO

Perfect. Two days in Rome and already failing up!

Vibia hands him a mop.

VIBIA

Welcome to the Comedy & Tragedy. Start with the latrines.

JO

Comedy or Tragedy?

VIBIA

Tragedy's on the left.

JO

Comedy's worse?

VIBIA

You got it.

Jo shoulders the mop like a pilum, salutes.

JO

What about Drollo?

VIBIA

He won't mind. We're kind of a team.

JO

My condolences.

VIBIA

Thank you. I'll tell him you're big on the stand-up oratory circuit or something. Now, less yap, more mop.

Jo sets to work. Lights go down.

SCENE 10

PUBLIC GARDENS. ROME.

Lights up on a quiet corner of the Public Gardens. Late afternoon. A bench.

Jo enters, notebook in hand.

JO

Rome. Capital of the known world. Cradle of civilisation. Graveyard of taste. Ya know, this city has everything. Power. Money. Insane amounts of marble. And not one performer who can hold a note or land a joke without congratulating himself.

He opens the notebook. Reads.

JO (CONT'D)

"Charisma: none." "Timing: criminal." "Voice: public health matter." I come all the way to Rome to discover its greatest resource: overconfidence. Maybe talent's got nothing to do with it. Maybe all you need is hair oil, a profile, and the moral emptiness to call yourself an artist.

Then - music.

Lights reveal another pocket of the gardens.

Two musicians sit cross-legged in the grass.

CASTOR

WE SING OF FAIR NERO,  
A GOD NOT A CHURL -  
THE HAIR OF APOLLO,  
THE LIPS OF A GIRL.

POLLUX

HE STANDS IN THE FORUM  
EACH DAY AS WE PASS.  
JUST SAY YOU ADORE HIM -  
HE'LL SHOW YOU HIS...

JO

Hey, I've spent all day looking for talent in Rome. Up till now, the jury was out. You two are good.

CASTOR

Of course. We're twins.

POLLUX

Harmonising since the womb.

JO

But you're...?

CASTOR

Tall, ginger, devastatingly handsome.

POLLUX

Short, dark, built like a stonemason's lunchbox.

JO

Fraternal then?

POLLUX

No. Identical.

CASTOR

Mother said so.

JO

Okay.

CASTOR

I'm Castor – music.

POLLUX

And I'm Pollux – words.

JO

Wait... Castor and Poll–

POLLUX

We've heard all the jokes, thanks.

JO

Josephus.

POLLUX

Josephus the Jew?

JO

"The Jew" is usually silent.

CASTOR

Huh. Not in my experience.

JO

True. Anyway – I'm putting on a show. I need writers, songs, spark. I think I just found it.

CASTOR / POLLUX

We're in.

JO

That was quick.

POLLUX

We were starving artists.

CASTOR

Now we're just artists. Still starving, though.

JO

Come on. I know a taberna.

The three of them stroll off into the dusk.

SCENE 11

IMPERIAL PALACE. PALATINE HILL. ROME.

The central set reveals the IMPERIAL PALACE: opulent, vain, excessive.

Nero lounges on an ornate throne. Thrasea stands beside him.

NERO

I've decided, Thrasea, to celebrate... Me!

THRASEA

A bold departure, sire.

NERO

Not another boring concert this time. Something more upbeat. Rome grows ambitious. Everywhere I turn, some juggler, singer, poet, dancer, or hairdresser with an attitude is trying to become beloved.

THRASEA

A regrettable outbreak of aspiration, sire. O tempora, o mores.

NERO

Um... yes. Exactly. The people's admiration has become untidy. It needs managing.

THRASEA

"Managing", Caesar?

NERO

If Rome insists on having talent, then Rome shall have it by permission only.

THRASEA

How reassuring for the talent.

NERO

I shall host the greatest spectacle the world has ever seen. A competition. Every talentless half-wit in the Empire will dream of being chosen. Every tavern singer, every provincial troupe, every fool who thinks applause makes him immortal.

THRASEA

And the name, sire?

NERO

"Nero's Got Talent".

THRASEA

Catchy. Though perhaps something broader? More inclusive. Less about you, more about the Empire?

NERO

Less about me? My dear Thrasea, I am the Empire.

THRASEA

Of course, Caesar. Still – the mob likes to feel included. Perhaps "Rome's Got Talent"? A gift from you to them.

NERO

Hmm. "Rome's Got Talent". Broad. Generous. Almost as if I thought of it myself.

THRASEA

Inspired, majesty.

NERO

Naturally. The winner shall have riches, fame, glory, and the privilege of serving me. In short: become a legend.

THRASEA

And the losers?

NERO

Will have the privilege of being remembered.

THRASEA

Fondly?

NERO

Briefly.

THRASEA

Ah.

NERO

Let them come, Thrasea. Let them sing, sweat, dance, tremble. Let them offer me their pathetic dreams and call it ambition. And I want names. Anyone drawing crowds. Anyone filling taverns. Anyone being cheered a little too loudly.

THRASEA

I understand completely.

NERO

Admiration is a dangerous thing, Thrasea. Left unattended, it wanders.

THRASEA

And we can't have that, can we, sire?

NERO

Indeed not. I shall gather every stray spark in Rome and teach it how to burn.

THRASEA

This would, of course, be a religious festival too, sire?

NERO

Would it?

THRASEA

Auspicious to have the gods on our side.

NERO

Oh, them again.

THRASEA

With all the proper protocols observed?

NERO

Yes, yes. Priests, incense, virgins, chickens looking anxious - whatever keeps the gods from sulking.

THRASEA

Then we should include the customary rite of final address, sire. Vox Populi. It means...

NERO

I do speak Latin, you know.

THRASEA

Then you will know, sire, that any accused person brought before a sacred public festival may speak once before judgement. A final address to the people.

NERO

How dreary.

THRASEA

Mostly, sire. But, occasionally... surprising.

NERO

Very well. Let them have their little speech.  
Let them implore the rabble. Then off to the  
arena for dinner, as it were.

THRASEA

Very droll, sire. Shall I draw up the festival-  
slash-religious decree?

NERO

Yes, yes. Scroll it, stamp it, sacrifice a  
pigeon over it, if you must. Now - where was I?

THRASEA

Celebrating yourself, sire.

NERO

My favourite subject.

Music begins.

NERO (CONT'D)

"ALL ROADS LEAD TO ME"

THEY CHEER FOR BLOOD,  
THEY CHEER FOR STEEL,  
THEY CHEER WHATEVER FLASHES BRIGHT.  
A SHARPENED SWORD,  
A PRACTICED POSE,  
A LITTLE DEATH TO CROWN THE NIGHT.  
THEY CALL THAT GREATNESS.  
CALL IT GLORY.  
CALL IT ART FOR ALL TO SEE.  
BUT NOISE IS NOTHING.  
FAME IS NOTHING.  
ALL ROADS LEAD TO ME.  
THEIR HOPES, THEIR DREAMS,  
THEIR LITTLE SCHEMES,  
THEIR SCRAPS OF IMMORTALITY,  
THEIR STRUTTING PRIDE,  
THEIR BORROWED LIGHT,  
THEIR BRIGHT PRETENCE OF DESTINY -  
THEY FLARE, THEY FADE,  
THEY PASS LIKE WEATHER,  
THEY ARE SPARKS THE CROWD MAY FREE.  
BUT SPARKS ARE NOTHING.  
ASH IS NOTHING.  
ALL ROADS LEAD TO ME.  
WHAT IS ROME, IF NOT MY IMAGE?  
WHAT IS POWER, IF NOT MY FACE?  
WHAT IS ART, IF NOT THE MIRROR  
HELD TO MAJESTY AND GRACE?  
A THOUSAND VOICES

RISE AND CLATTER.  
ONLY ONE DECIDES WHAT'S TRUE.  
LET DREAMERS DREAM.

He picks up a mirror.

NERO (CONT'D)

I NAME THE DREAM.  
AND ALL ROADS LEAD ME TO YOU.  
NO —  
ALL ROADS LEAD TO ME.  
LET THEM COME, THEN.  
LET THEM TREMBLE.  
LET THEM BRING THEIR SONGS TO HEEL.  
LET THEM DANCE,  
COMPETE, UNRAVEL,  
OFFER UP THEIR HOPE AS ZEAL.  
THEY THINK THEY COME  
TO WIN THEIR LAUREL,  
TO STAND, TO SHINE, TO CLAIM, TO BE —  
BUT EVERY STAGE,  
AND EVERY SPOTLIGHT,  
WAS BUILT FOR ME.  
THEIR GIFTS, THEIR WIT,  
THEIR TRICKS, THEIR TEARS,  
THEIR HUNGER DRESSED AS POETRY,  
THEIR FIERCEST FIRE,  
THEIR DEEPEST GRIEF,  
THEIR LITTLE REACH FOR LEGACY —  
I TAKE IT IN. I MAKE IT MATTER.  
I SHAPE IT TO NECESSITY.  
FOR NOTHING LIVES  
UNLESS I CROWN IT.  
ALL ROADS LEAD TO ME.  
THEIR HOPES, THEIR DREAMS,  
THEIR LIVES, THEIR LOVES,  
THEIR PETTY GRASP AT HISTORY,  
ARE SMALL BENEATH  
THE TURNING WORLD  
AND SMALLER STILL BENEATH ME.  
FOR WHEN THE FUTURE  
CALLS ITS CHOSEN,  
WHEN TIME DECLARES WHAT MEN SHALL SEE,  
IT DOES NOT WHISPER.  
IT SPEAKS ONE NAME.  
ALL ROADS LEAD TO ME.  
ALL ROADS LEAD TO ME.  
ALL ROADS LEAD TO ME.

THRASEA

This battle of artistic titans will be remembered for generations, mighty Caesar. But who will claim the golden laurel? Oh, the suspense.

NERO

Thrilling, isn't it? Now, Thrasea — summon everybody. Everybody! Designers, architects, cooks, jugglers... mimes!

THRASEA

(sotto voce)

I hate mime.

NERO

Have heralds despatched across the Empire.  
Tabernas, brothels, theatres, bathhouses,  
markets, arenas, slums. Anywhere performers  
gather.

THRASEA

Bathhouses and slums should cover it, Caesar.

NERO

Excellent. What would I do without you?

He bustles toward the exit.

NERO (CONT'D)

Oh, Thrasea, it's going to be a triumph! For  
me. But what am I going to wear? Primula?  
Primula! My swatches!

Nero stops, turns back.

NERO (CONT'D)

I nearly forgot.

THRASEA

Sire?

NERO

I need a theatre. Cheap, but spectacular.  
Outside the Temple of Minerva.

THRASEA

Where the orphanage is?

NERO

Where the orphanage was.

THRASEA

And the children who live there?

NERO

Hadn't you heard? Children are notoriously  
portable.

THRASEA

Consider it done, majesty.

NERO

Splendid. Now, chop-chop! Bricks, tiles,  
columns, cushions – something tasteful but  
imperial. Oh, and Thrasea?

THRASEA

Yes, Caesar?

NERO

No one shines in Rome unless I strike the light.

Nero sweeps away.

THRASEA

Gods, I hate this job.

SCENE 12

FIELDS BY THE CAMPUS MARTIUS. ROME.

A dusty, half-abandoned parade ground.

Pollux is tapping idly on a makeshift drum.

CASTOR

You can't just hit the beat – you have to feel it.

POLLUX

You're about to feel it upside your head.

JO

All right, gather up, people. We are one step from greatness.

SILVIA (OFFSTAGE)

Just the one, dear?

Silvia enters carrying her meagre belongings.

JO

Silvia! What are you doing here?

SILVIA

I was looking for my friend Jo-Jo. Oh, it's you!

JO

Where's Fabianus?

SILVIA

He got an offer from... somewhere in Athens. Playing statues.

JO

Well, he has the range.

Gemellus enters.

JO (CONT'D)

Gemellus! Thanks the gods!

He grabs Gemellus in a hug – then pulls back, suddenly alarmed.

JO (CONT'D)

Wait. Your father didn't get to you, did he?

GEMELLUS

Huh?

JO

The warehouse! The grain! Oh God – look at me!

He points toward a passing cart piled with sacks.

JO (CONT'D)

Quick! Which one's wheat and which one's barley?

Gemellus squints at the sacks. Thinks hard.

GEMELLUS

Is that a puppy?

Gemellus bounces with glee.

Jo exhales with profound relief and hugs him again.

JO

You're still you.

SILVIA

Was there ever any doubt?

JO

You didn't hear the barley speech.

Jo gathers the troupe.

JO (CONT'D)

Right, people. Here it is. The big idea. An orphan farm boy born for greatness. A princess with unusual hair. A tyrant emperor. An old mystic with a strange force about him. A rebel alliance. A talking monkey. A weapon that rains fire from the heavens.

POLLUX

So: basically Disneus' touring show? You know: Stars. Wars.

JO

Disneus will never notice. And if he did, who cares? Old Disneus is as timid as a mouse.

After a nervous look to the audience, Jo climbs onto a crate.

JO (CONT'D)

Listen up, people! Rome has no idea what's coming. They think greatness belongs to names, marble, money, and men with private bathhouses. But... we few, we crappy few – we too are an empire, my friends. A rainbow empire of affordable talent. Jew, Christian, pagan, moron – with nothing but heart, nerve, and overdue rental costumes to our name.

JO (CONT'D)

The theatrical establishment won't like us. They'll come at us with everything they've got. But if they strike at our little empire...

Castor raises a hand.

JO (CONT'D)

Shut up, Castor! (beat) The empire strikes back!

GEMELLUS

That's the title!

VIBIA

That is absolutely not the title.

The troupe breaks.

Vibia crosses to Jo.

VIBIA (CONT'D)

All right, Caesar. Back to the taberna.

DROLIO

Wine?

VIBIA

Obviously.

The others drift off. Jo lingers. Vibia clocks him.

VIBIA (CONT'D)

You always do that.

JO

Do what?

VIBIA

Climb onto something, start talking like Cicero, and pretend the rest of us are lucky to be nearby.

JO

I was being inspiring.

VIBIA

No, you were unveiling a statue of yourself.

JO

Vibia, I am trying to hold this together.

VIBIA

I know.

JO

On my own.

VIBIA

Oh boy.

JO

Excuse me?

VIBIA

You're a piece of work, Jo, you know that? You've got Silvia walking eight days on bad knees to get here, Gemellus glowing because you said the word "company", and those two idiots writing songs about Nero's backside. That's not "on your own". That's a troupe. Hecuba, Jo, that's a family. A deeply alarming family – but still a family.

JO

That doesn't mean I can pull it off.

VIBIA

No. But it means if you fail, you don't fail alone.

She starts to go, then turns back.

VIBIA (CONT'D)

Which – in Rome – is basically a miracle.

She exits.

JO

A "miracle"? Vibia! What the hell's a miracle?

Jo chases after her.

### SCENE 13

TRAINING GROUNDS. CAMPUS MARTIUS. ROME.

Lights up on a bare, torchlit playing space.

From far off: the muffled roar of the arena.

Attalus sits on a bench.

PARACLES (O.S.)

You should be in there, bubbeleh – they're chanting your name louder than Nero's.

ATTALUS

They don't even know what they're cheering for.

PARACLES

They're cheering for a winner, baby. You want meaning? Buy a scroll. You want love? Buy a dog. You want glory? Keep hitting people till they stop moving.

ATTALUS

Glory? You said Metrobius could silence a whole theatre with a whisper.

PARACLES

Here we go!

ATTALUS

That's what I want, Paracles. Something human. Something that doesn't end with a guy's intestines making a run for the exit.

PARACLES

Art's for poets and sissies. You're a gladiator, baby. Big muscles, bad temper – the whole package.

ATTALUS

Maybe I don't belong in the arena anymore.

PARACLES

Where you gonna go, huh? You think the theatre's waiting for you with a fruit basket? You're not an actor – you're a weapon with legs. A very impressive set of legs, sure, but still.

ATTALUS

Then I'll find someone who can help me to put down the blade.

PARACLES

(fondly)

And what am I supposed to do without my favourite meal-ticket, huh?

Paracles claps him on the shoulder and walks away.

Attalus stays where he is, listening as the distant roar fades.

ATTALUS

"A DIFFERENT KIND OF GLORY"

THEY CHEER WHEN I ENTER,  
THEY CALL OUT MY NAME,  
FOR BLOOD IN THE DUST,  
FOR THE THRILL OF THE GAME.  
THEY LOVE HOW I CONQUER,  
THEY LOVE WHAT I AM —  
BUT I HEAR SOMETHING DEEPER  
THAN BLOOD AND THAN SAND.  
I WANT A DIFFERENT KIND OF GLORY,  
A LIGHT THAT DOESN'T FADE,  
A VOICE THAT FINDS THE SILENCE,  
A TRUTH THAT WON'T BETRAY.  
I WANT TO TELL MY STORY,  
I WANT TO TAKE MY STAND,  
I WANT TO LEAVE BEHIND ME  
MORE THAN BLOOD AND SAND.  
I'VE SEEN HOW A WHISPER  
CAN QUIET A ROOM,  
HOW ONE HONEST FEELING  
CAN BREAK THROUGH THE GLOOM.  
NO CRASH OF THE BATTLE,  
NO SHOUT FROM THE CROWD,  
JUST ONE HUMAN MOMENT,  
ALIVE AND UNBOWED.  
I WANT TO STAND IN THAT STILLNESS,  
I WANT TO SPEAK AND STAY,  
I WANT TO MOVE A HEART  
BY WHAT I CHOOSE TO SAY.  
I WANT TO TELL MY STORY,  
I WANT TO TAKE MY STAND,  
I WANT TO BE REMEMBERED  
FOR MORE THAN BLOOD AND SAND.  
WHAT IF THESE HANDS,  
MADE ONLY FOR WAR,  
COULD CARRY A DREAM,  
COULD OPEN A DOOR?  
WHAT IF THIS VOICE,  
BURIED UNDER THE CRY,  
COULD RISE THROUGH THE DARKNESS  
AND FINALLY FLY?  
WHAT IF THE MAN  
THEY SUMMON WITH CHEERS  
IS ONLY THE SHADOW  
I'VE WORN ALL THESE YEARS?  
WHAT IF THE LIFE  
I HAVE NEVER YET KNOWN  
IS WAITING BEFORE ME —  
AND STILL CAN BE MY OWN?  
I WANT A DIFFERENT KIND OF GLORY,  
NOT WON BY FEAR OR SHAME,  
BUT SOMETHING TRUE AND LIVING  
THAT NO ONE ELSE CAN NAME.  
I WANT TO STAND IN THE LIGHT  
AND BE MORE THAN I HAVE BEEN,  
TO FIND THE PART WITHIN ME  
THAT HAS WAITED TO BEGIN.  
I WANT TO MATTER TRULY.  
I WANT TO FINALLY LIVE.  
I WANT TO BE MORE THAN STRENGTH ALONE,

MORE THAN THE BLOWS I GIVE.  
SO LET THE OLD WORLD KEEP  
ITS TRIUMPH AND ITS NOISE —  
I WILL CHOOSE THE TRUER ROAD.  
I WILL LIFT MY VOICE.  
I WANT TO TELL MY STORY.  
I WANT TO TAKE MY STAND.  
I WANT A DIFFERENT KIND OF GLORY.  
I WANT MORE THAN BLOOD AND SAND.

As the last line hangs, a figure  
steps from the shadows.

MAKEDA

You seek Metrobius, I hear.

ATTALUS

You know where he is, Makeda?

MAKEDA

I guarded his villa for a time. He paid in gold  
and praise — never enough of either.

ATTALUS

I thought he was dead.

MAKEDA

Shut away. Big place North of Volaterrae.  
Smells of olives and money.

ATTALUS

You think he'd see me?

MAKEDA

Maybe. He likes broken things with potential.  
All great actors do. But ask yourself, my  
friend: what do you really want from him?

ATTALUS

I've had enough applause bought in blood,  
Makeda. I want to earn it a better way.

The distant roar of the arena  
still rolls faintly across the  
yard.

Attalus stands in silence.

Then, from offstage:

HERALD (OFFSTAGE)

Attalus the Great to the arena, please!

Attalus does not move.

MAKEDA

They're calling you.

ATTALUS

I know.

MAKEDA

Every man in that crowd out there would kill to be you, my friend. And every woman would...

ATTALUS

That's the problem.

He sets the sword belt on the bench.

MAKEDA

You leave here, my friend, you don't come back the same.

ATTALUS

Good.

HERALD (OFFSTAGE)

Has anyone seen Attalus?

ATTALUS

They can keep "Attalus the Great", Makeda. I'm done dying for strangers.

MAKEDA

All right then, actor. We leave at dawn.

They exit.

SCENE 14

COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA. SUBURA. ROME.

Jo sits at the table, head in hands.

Castor and Pollux bicker.

Silvia naps on a couch.

Drolio is present too – in a corner, half in shadow.

JO

Well, here we are. Nowhere. A cast with one foot in the underworld. A singing waitress. The Empire's worst stand-up. Even the twins are starting to realise they're not related.

CASTOR

Lies.

POLLUX

Don't listen to him... brother.

They hug.

JO

We need something. Fast. How's the script coming along, boys?

CASTOR

It's a nightmare! Drollo thinks every line needs punch, and Silvia doesn't even know what day it is.

POLLUX

Last week she thought she was the Muses. All of them.

GEMELLUS

Hey – cut it out, you guys! Don't talk about Silvia like that. She's given everything to the theatre. Her life. Her soul. Probably several shawls. I mean, I don't know all the details, but I know she matters. And once, she was Helen of Troy, and with, I dunno, one little...

The company's discussion continues, but their voices fade.

A figure appears from the half-light: YOUNG SILVIA – radiant, poised, lit like a memory. Silvia wakes and sees her. No one else does.

YOUNG SILVIA

"THAT GIRL WAS ME"

THAT GIRL KNEW HOW TO ENTER,  
HOW TO HOLD A CROWDED ROOM,  
HOW TO MAKE THE SILENCE LISTEN,  
HOW TO MAKE THE LILACS BLOOM.  
THAT GIRL WALKED INTO TORCHLIGHT  
LIKE THE WORLD HAD SET HER FREE –  
ALL THAT FIRE, ALL THAT SPLENDOUR  
THAT GIRL WAS ME.  
THAT GIRL NEVER DOUBTED,  
NEVER TREMBLED, NEVER BENT,  
EVERY GLANCE A LITTLE PROMISE,  
EVERY HEARTBEAT HEAVEN-SENT.  
MEN WROTE VERSES, WOMEN WATCHED HER,  
BOYS KNELT DOWN AS IF TO PRAY –  
GODS, SHE WORE A SCRAP OF MUSLIN  
LIKE A QUEEN IN BRIGHT ARRAY.  
I CAN STILL FEEL HOW SHE TURNED HER HEAD,  
STILL HEAR HOW THE HOUSE WENT STILL,  
STILL KNOW WHERE THE LAUGH SHOULD LAND,  
STILL REMEMBER THE FORCE OF WILL.  
THOUGH THE MIRROR'S GROWN A STRANGER  
AND THE NAMES SLIP OUT TO SEA.  
SOMEWHERE UNDERNEATH THIS DRIFTING,  
THAT GIRL WAS ME.  
THAT GIRL WEPT AS QUEENS AND VIRGINS,  
DIED A DOZEN DEATHS A NIGHT,

BROKE HER HEART IN PAINTED GARDENS,  
ROSE BY DAWN IN BORROWED LIGHT.  
SHE BELIEVED THE STAGE WAS ENDLESS,  
BELIEVED BEAUTY COULD NOT DIM —  
NEVER THOUGHT THE HAND WOULD FALTER,  
NEVER THOUGHT THE EDGE WOULD SWIM.  
NOW THE DAYS COME TORN AND TANGLED,  
NOW THE HOURS BLUR AND FRAY,  
NOW I LOSE THE THREAD MID-SENTENCE,  
LOSE THE WORD AND LOSE THE WAY.  
BUT WHEN MUSIC FINDS THE OLD PATH,  
WHEN A LINE COMES BACK TO ME,  
FOR A MOMENT — JUST A MOMENT —  
THAT GIRL IS ME.  
SO IF I SEEM FAR AWAY NOW,  
IF I VANISH NOW AND THEN,  
IF THE ROOM GOES STRANGE AROUND ME  
AND I CANNOT NAME IT WHEN —  
DO NOT THINK THE LIGHT IS ENDED,  
DO NOT CLOSE THE BOOK AND GRIEVE.  
SHE IS THERE BEHIND MY EYES STILL.  
SHE IS WHAT I STILL BELIEVE.  
THAT GIRL KNEW HOW TO ENTER,  
HOW TO BOW AND HOW TO BURN,  
HOW TO TURN A SCRAP OF MAKE-BELIEVE  
TO SOMETHING PEOPLE YEARNED  
TO HOLD ONTO IN THE DARK AWHILE,  
TO CARRY HOME AND KEEP —  
AND SOMETIMES, WHEN THE NIGHT IS KIND  
SHE WALKS AGAIN THROUGH SLEEP.  
THAT GIRL.  
THAT FIRE.  
THAT CERTAINTY.  
THAT GIRL WAS ME.

Silvia and Young Silvia embrace.  
Then Silvia turns to the company.  
Young Silvia watches for a moment,  
then exits.

SILVIA

You need someone special, Jo-Jo.

JO

Silvia, I need a star.

SILVIA

Then you need Metrobius. My first director.  
Phaedra. Syracuse. I was awful. He was  
magnificent. He left Rome after his Cassius.  
The city wept. A senator made a joke of it in  
court the next morning. Metrobius never spoke  
another line.

JO

You think he'd help us?

SILVIA

He'll say no.

JO

Encouraging. Where is he?

SILVIA

Volaterrae. Hiding from fools.

JO

Then we go to him. At dawn. And if we fail –  
let's fail in front of the best.

SILVIA

A toast, then. To our little company. And to  
our leader. Not just our leader: our soul.

COMPANY

To Josephus. Our soul!

Glasses raised.

DROLIO

Room for me in the cart, Jo?

JO

Uh... sure.

The others settle. One by one,  
they drift into sleep or stillness  
where they are.

Joe rises quietly. The back-room  
light dims behind him.

At the same time, on the far side  
of the stage, a second world  
begins to appear: the deserted  
arena. Not fully lit yet. Just the  
shape of it. A bench. Sand. Stone.  
Attalus.

Jo climbs to the roof of the  
Comedy & Tragedy.

Jo reaches the roof and stands  
still, looking out over Rome.

Across the stage, Attalus sets  
aside the last piece of his  
armour.

Makeda's last line returns as an  
echo:

MAKEDA (OFFSTAGE)

We leave at dawn.

On the roof, Jo breathes the same  
thought.

JO

At dawn.

Music begins.

STAGE LEFT, raised above the rest of the set: the roof of the Comedy & Tragedy.

STAGE RIGHT, broad and low: the deserted Campus Martius arena.

JO (CONT'D)

"AT DAWN"

AT THE SUNRISE,  
IN THAT MOMENT,  
AS THE DAY WAKES  
TO BEGIN,  
WHEN THE DARK GIVES UP  
ITS HOLD AROUND YOU,  
AND THE LIGHT COMES  
SLOWLY IN —  
WHEN THE LAST DOUBT  
STILL SURROUNDS YOU,  
WHEN YOUR STRENGTH IS  
PAPER-THIN,  
WHEN YOU ONLY KNOW  
YOU CANNOT STAY THERE,  
AND YOU FEEL IT  
DEEP WITHIN —  
AT DAWN,  
THERE'S A WORLD WE'VE YET TO FIND.  
AT DAWN,  
WE STEP OUT OF WHAT'S BEHIND.  
AT DAWN,  
ALL THE HOPE WE'VE HELD IN SECRET  
MEETS THE FEAR WE CANNOT HIDE.  
AND WE RISE,  
OR WE FALL,  
BUT WE FACE IT  
AT DAWN.

As Jo finishes, the light widens.  
Attalus now comes into focus in  
the arena. Jo remains visible,  
still under moonlight.

ATTALUS

AT THE SUNRISE,  
IN THAT STILLNESS,  
WHEN THE OLD LIFE  
LOSES CLAIM,  
THERE'S A SILENCE  
FULL OF ASKING  
WHO YOU ARE  
BEYOND YOUR NAME.  
I HAVE LIVED  
INSIDE AN ECHO,

IN A LIFE NOT WHOLLY MINE.  
IF I FOLLOW, I MAY LOSE ALL  
THAT THE WORLD HAS SAID I AM —  
BUT I CANNOT SPEND MY WHOLE LIFE  
AS THE SHADOW OF THAT MAN.  
SO AT DAWN,  
WHEN THE SKY BEGINS TO OPEN,  
AT DAWN,  
WHEN THE EDGES ALL GROW CLEAR,  
AT DAWN,  
SOMETHING CALLS US FROM THE SILENCE,  
AND WE KNOW THAT IT IS HERE.

JO

AT DAWN,  
WITH OUR RAGS AND WITH OUR SCARS,

ATTALUS

AT DAWN,  
WITH OUR FEAR AND WITH OUR HEARTS,

JO

AT DAWN,  
WITH THE DREAM WE HARDLY DARE TO TRUST  
STILL BURNING THROUGH THE DARK —  
NOT WITH ANSWERS —

ATTALUS

NOT WITH ARMOUR —

JO

NOT WITH ANYTHING BUT NERVE —

ATTALUS

ONLY WITH THE WILL TO WALK ON —

JO

ONLY WITH THE HEART TO SERVE.

JO / ATTALUS

AT DAWN!  
WE ARE MORE THAN WHAT HAS BEEN!  
AT DAWN!  
SOMETHING NEW CAN STILL BEGIN!  
AT DAWN!

JO

ALL THE FEAR AND ALL THE COST

ATTALUS

MEET THE HOPE THAT BROUGHT US ON!

JO / ATTALUS

AND WE RISE,  
AND WE CHOOSE,  
AND WE LEAVE BEHIND THE NIGHT  
AT DAWN!  
AT DAWN!

ATTALUS  
WHEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE WAIT  
LIKE TWO SHADOWS SIDE BY SIDE!

JO  
AT DAWN!  
STILL WE GO AND STILL WE DARE  
WITH OUR HEARTS FLUNG OPEN WIDE!

JO / ATTALUS  
AT DAWN!  
WE MAY LOSE WHAT WE HAVE KNOWN!  
AT DAWN!  
WE MAY STAND AND STAND ALONE!  
BUT TO STAY HERE IN THE DARKNESS  
WOULD BE LOSS BEFORE WE'VE GONE!

JO  
SO WE RISE,

ATTALUS  
AND WE CHOOSE,

JO / ATTALUS  
AND WE LEAVE BEHIND THE NIGHT -  
AT DAWN!  
AT DAWN!  
AT DAWN.

Blackout.

**END OF ACT ONE**

ACT II

SCENE 1

ON THE ROAD TO VOLATERRAE.

Lights up on a split stage.

STAGE LEFT: Jo's company. A crowded, listing ox-cart. A stylised puppet - the FRIENDLY OX - smiling and dopey, is harnessed to the front.

STAGE RIGHT: Attalus and Makeda. Two elegant stylised puppet HORSES. Their movement is smooth, disciplined.

JO

"TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD"

WHEN THE DOOR WON'T OPEN,  
WHEN THEY TURN AWAY,  
WHEN THE WORLD SAYS,  
"WE DON'T WANT YOU,"  
AND THERE'S NOTHING LEFT TO SAY,  
WHEN THE DREAM WON'T LEAVE YOU,  
THOUGH THE MONEY'S LONG SINCE GONE,  
YOU DON'T WAIT FOR SOME TOMORROW -  
YOU PICK IT UP AND CARRY ON.  
WHEN THE STAGE IS TAKEN,  
WHEN THE LIGHTS BURN LOW,  
WHEN THERE'S NOWHERE LEFT TO TURN TO,  
YOU TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD.

JO / VIBIA

TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD!  
CARRY THE SPARK, CARRY THE LOAD!  
IF NOBODY WANTS YOU,  
IF NOBODY KNOWS,  
YOU CARRY THE DREAM  
WHERE THE BRIGHT WIND BLOWS!  
TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD!

VIBIA

WHEN THE CITY SHUTS ITS GATES ON YOU,  
WHEN THE NIGHT TURNS COLD -

JO

WHEN THE PURSE STAYS EMPTY,  
AND THE STORY WON'T BE SOLD -

JO / VIBIA

YOU DON'T SIT AND WAIT FOR PITY,  
YOU DON'T STOP BECAUSE YOU'RE SCARRED,  
IF THE WORLD WON'T MAKE A PLACE FOR YOU,  
YOU TAKE YOUR HOPE AND TRAVEL HARD.

TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD!  
CARRY THE FLAME, CARRY THE LOAD!  
IF ALL YOU'VE GOT IS A SONG AND A HOPE,  
THEN A SONG AND A HOPE ARE WEALTH UNTOLD!  
TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD!

Across the stage, Attalus and  
Makeda move in measured sync.

ATTALUS

WHEN THE CHEERS HAVE LOST THEIR MEANING,  
WHEN THE ROAR IS ONLY NOISE,  
WHEN THE LIFE THEY BUILT AROUND YOU  
ISN'T SOMETHING YOU WOULD CHOOSE,  
WHEN THE SELF YOU WORE LIKE ARMOUR  
HAS GROWN HEAVY ON YOUR BONES,  
YOU DON'T STAY WHERE YOU WERE FASHIONED,  
YOU GO OUT AND FIND YOUR OWN.

ATTALUS / MAKEDA

TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD!  
CARRY THE WOUND, CARRY THE GOLD!  
IF NOBODY CROWNS YOU, IF NOBODY CHOSE,  
YOU FOLLOW THE PATH THAT THE DEEP HEART KNOWS! TAKE YOUR SHOW  
ON THE ROAD!

JO

NOT BECAUSE IT'S EASY —

ATTALUS

NOT BECAUSE IT'S CLEAR —

MAKEDA

NOT BECAUSE THERE'S SAFETY —

VIBIA

NO ONE PROMISED THAT, MY DEAR —

COMPANY

BUT BECAUSE THERE COMES A MOMENT  
WHEN THE STANDING STILL FEELS WRONG —  
AND THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS  
IS TO TAKE THE DREAM ALONG!  
TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD!  
OUT WHERE THE SKY IS WIDE AND BOLD!  
IF ALL YOU HAVE IS A RAGGED BAND  
AND A STORY BURNING BRIGHT IN YOUR SOUL,  
THEN YOU CARRY IT HIGH,  
AND YOU CARRY IT PROUD,  
AND YOU SING IT SOFT,  
OR YOU SING IT LOUD,  
TILL THE WORLD THAT IGNORED YOU  
HAS HEARD IT TOLD —  
WHEN THERE'S NOWHERE ELSE TO GO,  
YOU TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD!

Both parties now approach the same  
villa from opposite sides.

Jo's cart gives a final alarming creak.

JO  
We're close!

DROLIO  
My bladder disagrees.

The friendly ox moos.

MAKEDA  
There it is.

ATTALUS  
Metrobius.

JO  
Great. Perfect. Legendary actor, ritzy villa,  
no appointment. What could possibly...

The villa gates open.

SCENE 2

VILLA OF METROBIUS, VOLATERRAE

GALLA (OFFSTAGE)  
Who goes there?

GALLA appears.

GALLA (CONT'D)  
If you don't have an invitation, an  
appointment, or an absurdly overpriced gift,  
you're trespassing.

ATTALUS  
We've travelled a long way, madam.

GALLA  
The Via Appia's a long way, oaf. It's also  
filthy, and I can tell from here you've brought  
half of it on your boots.

Makeda steps forward.

GALLA (CONT'D)  
Save it, sister. I've seen gladiators before.  
All power in the posters, nothing in the ring.

From the opposite side, Jo's  
troupe arrives.

VIBIA  
Holy Minerva!

JO  
Would you get a load of this?

DROLIO

I've acted on sets less expensive than this gatepost.

(sees Attalus)

And look at that – shoulders with their own weather.

VIBIA

Not looking.

Galla plants herself before the great doors.

GALLA

Master Metrobius does not receive unsolicited visitors. He is an artist. He has been meditating. Also, napping.

JO

Then tell him it's about a show. One that might actually be worthy of him.

GALLA

I have chills.

JO

And we need to speak to him before...  
(points to Attalus)

ATTALUS

My name is, ah... Glorian.

MAKEDA

Apparently.

GALLA

Wonderful. A roving theatre company for the clinically bewildered, and a himbo in search of a second act.

She sweeps through the doors.

VIBIA

If he says no, we're sleeping in the ditch.

DROLIO

I've slept in worse. I've been married. Twice.

JO

He'll see us. I can feel it.

The doors open. Enter METROBIUS.

METROBIUS

Galla said there were intruders.

GALLA

I said there were pilgrims, Master.

METROBIUS

Same thing. Depends whether they brought figs. Well then – what collection of sunburnt ambition is this? Have you come for wisdom, blessing, or simply to gaze at the mortal remains of greatness? If so...

He gives them a splendid tableau.

JO

We came because we're putting on a show, sir. Something new. Something Roman.

METROBIUS

The last "new" thing in the theatre was mime, young man. And we all know how that turned out.

GEMELLUS

I hate mime.

JO

We're building a company the old-fashioned way, sir. Heart, nerve, absolutely no cash.

METROBIUS

The best way. And you want something from me?

JO

We do. But... not here.

METROBIUS

Not here?

JO

Your atrium's magnificent, sir, but the acoustics are too round and the floor is too wide. You lose intimacy.

METROBIUS

You know the stage?

He turns to Galla.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

How tiresome.

Back to Jo.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

Very well. Let us go to the only place on this estate more precious to me than my glittering reputation.

The villa reveals METROBIUS' PRIVATE AMPHITHEATER.

Jo stands on the dirt stage.

JO

Master Metrobius. Rome thinks it has seen everything. Blood, conquest, blood, pageantry, blood, applause – whole lotta blood, basically. But what if the thing Rome hasn't seen is itself? A story can do that. The stage can do that. We call it "The Fall of Fire". A myth. A spectacle. A play to stir every Roman heart – slave or senator. It begins with Prometheus. Not as thief. As gift-giver.

METROBIUS

Say on.

JO

"CARRY THE FLAME"

WHAT IF THE FIRE CAME DOWN  
NOT AS A CURSE, BUT GRACE?  
WHAT IF THE GODS GAVE LIGHT  
TO LIFT THE HUMAN RACE?  
WHAT IF ONE SOUL STOOD UP,  
ALONE AGAINST THE NIGHT,  
AND CHOSE TO PLACE IN MORTAL HANDS  
THE FIERCE, FORBIDDEN LIGHT?  
NOT FOR TRIUMPH,  
NOT FOR FAME,  
NOT FOR CROWNS THAT FADE AWAY,  
BUT BECAUSE TO GIVE THE LIGHT AWAY  
IS HOW WE FIND OUR WAY.  
TO WARM THE WEAK,  
TO GUIDE THE LOST,  
TO LET THE FEARFUL SEE,  
TO PLACE INTO THE HANDS OF MAN  
A SPARK OF WHAT COULD BE.

JO / VIBIA

CARRY THE FLAME.  
CARRY THE FLAME.  
A LIGHT PASSED ON,  
A LIVING NAME.  
FROM SOUL TO SOUL,  
FROM HAND TO HAND,  
WE BEAR THE FIRE.  
WE MAKE THE STAND.

JO

PROMETHEUS DOES NOT STEAL THE FLAME  
FOR VANITY OR PRAISE.  
HE BRINGS IT DOWN  
SO HUMANKIND MAY SEE THROUGH DARKENED DAYS.  
AND IF THE GODS DEMAND A PRICE,  
HE PAYS IT WILLINGLY,  
BECAUSE THE FIRE WAS NEVER THEIRS ALONE –  
IT WAS MEANT FOR YOU AND ME.  
THAT IS THE STORY.  
THAT IS THE ROLE.  
THAT IS THE PART TO CLAIM:  
A MAN WHO STANDS

APART, ALONE,  
AND STILL WILL CARRY THE FLAME.

VIBIA

THAT IS WHAT THEATRE IS.  
NOT ORNAMENT. NOT NOISE.  
BUT LIGHT PASSED THROUGH THE HUMAN HEART  
BY COURAGE AND BY CHOICE.  
WE TAKE THE DARK,  
WE TAKE THE PAIN,  
THE GRIEF MEN CANNOT NAME,  
AND HAND IT BACK TRANSFORMED AT LAST –  
ALIVE WITH BORROWED FLAME.

JO / VIBIA

CARRY THE FLAME.  
CARRY THE FLAME.  
WHEN NIGHT IS LONG,  
WHEN NONE REMAIN,  
WHEN FEAR TAKES HOLD,  
WHEN HOPE GROWS DIM,  
SOMEONE MUST BEAR  
THE FIRE WITHIN.

METROBIUS

The flame. Not as power, but gift. You do know  
the theatre, my boy. By the gods, you do. I'm  
in. When do we begin?

JO

Um... twelve days.

METROBIUS

Impossible. Also, perfect. Galla – my notes on  
acoustics. And the Etruscan red. Not the one we  
serve guests. We start now.

DROLIO

Now? What happened to dawn?

METROBIUS

Dawn is for amateurs.

The courtyard bursts into life.

Baskets are thrown open. Scrolls,  
masks, bits of costume, broken  
props, and lengths of cloth spill  
everywhere. The courtyard becomes  
a rehearsal room.

Vibia shifts a chaise to clear the  
playing space. It is heavy,  
awkward, and clearly more valuable  
than anything else currently being  
mistreated.

Attalus sees her struggling and  
crosses to take the other end.

VIBIA

Careful, big guy. This is an antique.

ATTALUS

Should fit in perfectly around here.

Nearby, Gemellus is attempting stage combat with a wooden gladius. He overcommits wildly, nearly spinning himself into a shrub.

Attalus catches the weapon neatly.

VIBIA

Easy, Gemellus. What did that shrub ever do to you?

ATTALUS

No – like this.

He steps behind Gemellus, close enough that the correction is almost an embrace. One hand adjusts Gemellus' grip on the sword; the other settles his shoulder, guiding him into place.

ATTALUS (CONT'D)

Don't fight the sword. Let it sit in your hand. If you grip too hard, the whole body stiffens.

GEMELLUS

Right. Of course. Loose. Natural. Masculine.

Attalus moves a little closer, correcting the angle of Gemellus' stance.

ATTALUS

Not everything is force. You don't swing at the whole man. You find the place that matters.

He guides Gemellus' arm forward – slowly, precisely.

ATTALUS (CONT'D)

Strike for the heart.

GEMELLUS

The heart?

ATTALUS

Always.

For a moment, they are still: Attalus focused on form, Gemellus barely breathing.

Vibia sees it.

ATTALUS (CONT'D)

Again.

Gemellus tries the move. This time it lands – not brilliantly, but better.

ATTALUS (CONT'D)

Good.

GEMELLUS

Was that... good-good? Or just not-disastrous good?

ATTALUS

Somewhere in between.

GEMELLUS

I'll take it.

Gemellus tries again. Better.

ATTALUS

There. You're learning, lad.

GEMELLUS

From you.

Attalus does not quite catch it.

Vibia does.

She turns away, busying herself with another crate.

ATTALUS

Need a hand?

VIBIA

Always. But I rarely admit it.

They lift the crate together and carry it a little way off.

For a moment, Vibia and Attalus are alone.

ATTALUS

You always do that?

VIBIA

Lift from the wrong end?

ATTALUS

Turn everything into a joke.

VIBIA

Jokes are cheaper than armour.

ATTALUS

You talk about love that way too.

VIBIA

Love is armour with better songs.

ATTALUS

Someone hurt you, didn't they?

VIBIA

Oh, he liked me in private. In public, I was just the girl from the tavern. Useful when he wanted a song, invisible when he wanted a wife.

ATTALUS

Because of your faith?

VIBIA

Because of my faith. Because of my... sandals. Who knows? Probably because some men only have feelings when no one important is watching.

ATTALUS

That's why injustice makes you so angry.

VIBIA

Look, my mother lost her stall because she said no to the wrong guy. By sunset, he had an apology, she had a fine, and we had nothing.

ATTALUS

What happened to the guy?

VIBIA

Oh, he inherited a vineyard. So, yes. I have strong feelings about unfair fights.

ATTALUS

And love?

VIBIA

Also an unfair fight, mostly.

ATTALUS

Mostly?

VIBIA

Listen, big guy. Love, justice – it's all the same fire.

ATTALUS

Fire?

Vibia touches her heart.

VIBIA

The thing we carry in here. Jo calls it "the flame." I call it faith. You might call it honour, or hope, or some pagan word with too many syllables.

ATTALUS

I don't know what I'd call it. Being human?

VIBIA

Not bad, big guy. And it's our job, right? As people? Carrying the flame. Keeping it alive when the world tries to stamp it out.

ATTALUS

What if we can't? Carry the flame, I mean.

VIBIA

If we're lucky, someone comes along to carry it with us.

Across the courtyard, Gemellus watches them from a distance, the wooden sword still in his hand.

Vibia and Attalus exit.

Gemellus tries the move again.

GEMELLUS

Always.

Lights shift. Gemellus sees Metrobius sitting on a bench in the gardens.

He crosses to him.

GEMELLUS (CONT'D)

Sir?

METROBIUS

Good evening, dear boy.

GEMELLUS

I was just walking. Thought I might get some air.

METROBIUS

Yes. That's usually what I tell people. Come. Sit.

GEMELLUS

Sir... I... Did you ever love someone who didn't love you back?

METROBIUS

Much worse. I loved a man who did.

GEMELLUS

What did you do?

METROBIUS

What all fools do. We made a life together.  
Until...

GEMELLUS

I'm sorry, sir. Did it stop hurting?

METROBIUS

No. But the pain changed its complexion. It became something I could carry. Something I'd never sacrifice. He was reckless, brilliant, bold. Rome's greatest general. The kind of man who never knew how brightly he burned. I told him: one day, you'll break every heart in Rome or get yourself killed. He did both. But I wouldn't give up a second of it. Not the joy. Not the pain. Not for all the gold in Egypt. You don't just get the easy parts, Gemellus.

GEMELLUS

But... what if I'm not brave enough?

METROBIUS

Then act as if you are. That's what we do, isn't it? We actors. Listen, child. The gods rarely give us the ending we ask for. But they have an uncanny knack of giving us the ending we need.

He reaches over and smooths  
Gemellus's hair back from his  
forehead.

METROBIUS (CONT'D)

You're young. You're beautiful. You have more feelings than you know what to do with. Good.

GEMELLUS

Good?

METROBIUS

That's exactly when one should risk everything.

GEMELLUS

Thank you, sir.

METROBIUS

Don't thank me, my boy. Go and follow your heart. Be wonderful.

Gemellus rises. He kisses  
Metrobius lightly on the forehead,  
then exits.

Lights dim on Metrobius.

The light shifts. Later.

Scrolls, masks, bits of costume  
and half-built props are  
everywhere.

Jo, Castor and Pollux huddle over  
pages.

Across the space, a shirtless  
Attalus rehearses, bathed in  
dramatic light.

POLLUX

Tell me the crowd wouldn't eat him up.

CASTOR

Tell me he doesn't look like he stole fire  
without breaking a sweat.

JO

A god!

CASTOR

Exactly.

JO

No, I mean - "a god". It's what we need.  
Fellas, we've been writing this all wrong.

POLLUX

Now he tells us.

JO

Prometheus shouldn't be old and wise. He should  
be dangerous. Jacked. Brave enough to defy  
Olympus because someone down here is cold.

CASTOR

That's Glorian.

POLLUX

That is painfully Glorian.

JO

Metrobius as Prometheus was the sensible  
choice, wasn't it? The predictable one.

CASTOR

The boring one.

JO

Whereas, Glorian...

Attalus sees them watching and  
pops them a cheeky flex.

POLLUX

So what do we do with Metrobius?

Lights up on Metrobius.

JO

Jupiter!

METROBIUS

I beg your theatrical pardon?

JO

Master, an idea. Prometheus steals the flame, okay? Jupiter goes nuts. Bam! Youth against age. Honour against power. Fire against thunder. Just like "The God Father".

METROBIUS

The what?

JO

Seriously?!

POLLUX

Also, no offence, Master, but you do thunder beautifully.

METROBIUS

I have been told.

CASTOR

And Glorian does...

They all look at Attalus: lit, magnificent.

POLLUX

That.

METROBIUS

So Prometheus makes the noise...

JO

Jupiter makes it matter.

A long beat.

METROBIUS

You're improvising, of course.

JO

Wildly.

METROBIUS

Good. It suits you. Very well. Let the prince of pectorals suffer. I... shall reign!

JO

Company! Gather up! Big guy – haul that muscle mountain over here before you get mistaken for scenery.

The courtyard bursts into life.

The friendly ox is puppeted on.

ATTALUS

Did I forget to boil the sandals again?

Attalus crosses to Jo.

JO

I always forget how much of you there is.  
Glorian: how do you feel about fire?

ATTALUS

Are you set on it?

POLLUX

Well, you might be.

CASTOR

It's a metaphor.

POLLUX

Sure it is.

JO

Glorian, we want you to play Prometheus.

ATTALUS

The lead?

JO

You've got presence. Gravitas. Enough chest for two people. Plus you're the only one who won't break a hip if you fall off the stage. No offence, guys.

ATTALUS

But I was meant to be a corpse. I mean - an extra. A spear-carrier.

VIBIA

Maybe it's time you stopped hiding behind weapons, big guy.

ATTALUS

You're serious?

JO

We believe in you, Glorian. All in favour?

Hands go up.

ATTALUS

Prometheus? Me! What could go wrong?

VIBIA

Well, you've nailed one dramatic cliché, Glorian. Famous last words.

JO

We leave at once! Scrolls, masks, costumes, torches – oh, and if anyone's seen that random piece of string I had three days ago that I never mentioned, it has now become absolutely essential to the success or failure of our show. So, ya know, no pressure.

The scene tips into organised chaos. Crates are gathered. Cloaks, hats and all the travel essentials.

CASTOR

You packed Act Two with the comic revisions?

POLLUX

Because Act One has all the deaths.

CASTOR

It's a tragedy!

POLLUX

You ain't kidding.

JO

Props in the cart, costumes under canvas, swords nowhere near Silvia!

Attalus lifts a crate onto the creaking ox-cart. Drolio rushes over.

DROLIO

Careful! That's sacred!

Attalus cracks the lid open a fraction.

ATTALUS

It's wine.

DROLIO

Wine is sacred.

Gemellus unfurls a sexy gladiator poster.

GEMELLUS

Why do we need these posters?

SILVIA

Someone asked for inspiration.

GEMELLUS

Was it me?

MAKEDA

Almost certainly.

The ox sneezes in Gemellus' face.  
Then licks him.

GEMELLUS  
Aw, it hates me.

MAKEDA  
Nah. He's in love.

They gather by the cart.

JO  
Nowhere, Tuscia - tomorrow: Rome!

The cart moves off.

Attalus and Gemellus linger a  
moment.

ATTALUS  
Something on your mind, lad?

GEMELLUS  
So... when I was a kid, my father took me to  
the arena. Said it would make a man of me.  
Oops. Anyway, there was this one fighter. I  
never even saw his face. But I remember his  
name: Attalus the Great. He didn't show off.  
Didn't grandstand. He made strength look  
almost... kind. That mattered to little me. I  
thought I'd never find someone like that. Till  
I met you.

ATTALUS  
Gemellus...

GEMELLUS  
I know, Glorian. You don't have to say  
anything. It's just... some people spend their  
whole lives waiting to be loved. And maybe it's  
braver just to love someone. No promise. No  
prize. Just... because.

ATTALUS  
You know Achilles and Patroclus?

GEMELLUS  
I'm not as dumb as everyone thinks.

ATTALUS  
Gemellus, you are not dumb, you're... amazing.  
Listen, people always say Achilles was the  
brave one. But I think Patroclus was braver. He  
went into battle knowing love might not save  
him. He went anyway. For love.

GEMELLUS  
I like that.

ATTALUS  
You know what? Me too.

Attalus puts an arm around  
Gemellus as they exit.

SCENE 3

CENTRAL SQUARE. SUBURA. ROME.

At once, from stage right, the  
creaking cart rolls on.

As the cart crosses, the cube  
revolves to reveal ROME: the city  
returned in all its bustle.

Street noise rises. Trumpets.  
Hawkers. A gathering crowd.

JO  
We're home.

VIBIA  
Well, we're back.

A sudden flourish of brass. The  
Herald mounts a crate. A small  
crowd gathers fast.

HERALD  
People of Rome! By decree of Nero Claudius  
Caesar Augustus Germanicus...

HECKLER (OFFSTAGE)  
Who?

HERALD  
Nero, you hayseed. The Emperor. Divine patron  
of the arts and scourge of mediocrity.

A trumpet blast.

HERALD (CONT'D)  
The great contest begins! "Rome's Got Talent"!

HECKLER (OFFSTAGE)  
Coulda fooled me, bud!

HERALD  
It's the name of the contest.

HECKLER (OFFSTAGE)  
Oh yeah? (beat) Actually, it's a good name.  
Carry on!

CASTOR  
A talent contest?

POLLUX  
No.

JO  
Yes!

HERALD  
Singers! Jugglers! Poets! Actors! Actors? Ugh.

JO  
Ignore him. Guy can't even project.

HERALD  
Comics! Orators! Good-looking morons with no discernible talent!

GEMELLUS  
Finally!

HERALD  
All are summoned to compete!

SILVIA  
We're back, my dears!

VIBIA  
We are so back!

JO  
Thank the gods! Theirs and mine.

HERALD  
The winner will receive glory, gold, and the honour of performing alongside Caesar himself.

DROLIO  
I could win that.

COMPANY  
No!

HERALD  
Applications close at sunset. Entry fee: one thousand sesterces.

A beat.

JO  
Wha-? A thousand sesterces?

SILVIA  
Well, that sucks.

HECKLER (OFFSTAGE)  
Hey, get your own lines, lady!

METROBIUS  
That's not an entry fee. That is extortion in sandals!

HERALD

No exceptions, no sob stories, no regional accents.

He gestures grandly to a makeshift registration table / theatre entrance now being set up at one side of the square.

HERALD (CONT'D)

Applicants form an orderly queue, if Rome still remembers what order is.

Performers, jugglers, singers, animal acts, dancers, mimes and general lunatics surge toward the registration point.

The troupe is nearly swallowed by the crowd.

POLLUX

Yeesh. A thousand sesterces? Maybe if I sell my sandals, I could raise some coin?

CASTOR

If you sell those particular sandals, brother, maybe we can all breathe again.

Drolio comes barrelling through the crowd.

DROLIO

Why are you just standing here?!

JO

Because our lives are over, Drolio. Keep up.

DROLIO

But the auditions are happening now!

JO

Now now?

DROLIO

Now now. They're calling people in.

VIBIA

What about the entry fee?

DROLIO

Buy now, beg later. What could be more Roman than that?

JO

Gemellus, your time has come. Put that gorgeous punim to good use and stall them while we put together a routine. And a back-story. Judges love back-stories. Anyone got a dead grandma?

METROBIUS

It's 65 A.D., Jo. Everyone's grandmother is dead.

Gemellus is at the theatre entrance.

GUARD 1

Name?

GEMELLUS

Gemellus Donatus Corleonis. Actor. Very nervous. May also need the toilet.

Gemellus is shoved through.

GUARD 2

I thought they said no actors?

GUARD 1

Face like that? Who cares?

Jo and the company try to follow.

GUARD 2

Not you, pal.

JO

But we're with the good-looking moron.

GUARD 2

That sounds like more of a you problem than a me problem, buster. Now beat it.

The guards cross spears.

VIBIA

Gemellus. He's in there all alone.

DROLIO

Those poor judges.

JO

Nobody panic.

A beat. The others look at him.

JO (CONT'D)

I meant me.

#### SCENE 4

SUBURAN THEATRE. ROME.

The cube has turned to reveal a makeshift audition hall. A large banner reads: ROME'S GOT TALENT – AUDITIONS TODAY! STRICTLY NO MIMES!

On a small stage, three JUDGES lounge in a row.

Gemellus stands alone in the centre of the stage.

JUDGE 1

Well, you're pretty - but have you got talent?

JUDGE 2

You do have an act, I presume?

JUDGE 3

By the way... how's your grandma?

GEMELLUS

My...? Listen, I... I don't really have an act, but...

JUDGE 1

(sighing)

Oh gods. Just do the whole "say what's in your heart" schtick. That's always lots of fun.

GEMELLUS

Really? Well, in that case...

Music begins.

GEMELLUS (CONT'D)

"HE'S EVERYTHING TO ME"

HE WALKS LIKE HE'S ALONE,  
LIKE NO ONE UNDERSTANDS.  
BUT I WOULD WALK BESIDE HIM  
IF HE'D ONLY TAKE MY HAND.  
HE HIDES BEHIND THE ARMOUR,  
BEHIND THE MASK, THE GAME,  
BUT I SEE SOMETHING SHINING  
THAT HE WON'T DARE TO NAME.  
HE SPEAKS LIKE NO ONE'S LISTENING,  
HE LAUGHS LIKE IT'S A SHIELD.  
BUT STILL I SEE THE QUIET SOUL  
HE'S WORKING TO CONCEAL.  
HE DOESN'T KNOW HE'S NOBLE,  
HE DOESN'T KNOW HE'S KIND...  
BUT I HAVE SEEN THAT GLORY  
WHEN HE LEAVES THE PAST BEHIND.  
HE'S EVERYTHING TO ME -  
THE REASON I STAND TALL.  
HE'S EVERY DREAM I CARRY  
WHEN THE WORLD FEELS SMALL.  
HE'S EVERYTHING TO ME,  
EVEN IF HE'LL NEVER SEE.  
HE MAY NOT LOVE ME -  
BUT HE'S THE REASON  
I BELIEVE IN ME.  
I DON'T NEED A PROMISE.  
I DON'T NEED A VOW.

JUST TO KNOW I SAW THE BEST OF HIM  
IS ENOUGH FOR NOW.

The troupe enters.

GEMELLUS (CONT'D)

SOME LOVES ARE MEANT TO LIFT US -  
TO SHOW US HOW TO BE,  
AND EVEN FROM THE SHADOWS,  
HE'S LIT THE LIGHT IN ME.  
HE'S EVERYTHING TO ME -  
AND I WON'T WALK AWAY.  
HE'S THE FIRE THAT KEEPS ME MOVING  
THROUGH THE HARDEST DAY.  
HE'S EVERYTHING TO ME,  
THOUGH HE MAY NEVER KNOW -  
SOME LOVES AREN'T MEANT  
TO HOLD YOU BACK,  
THEY'RE MEANT TO LET YOU GROW.  
SO IF HE WALKS HIS PATH ALONE,  
AND NEVER TURNS TO SEE,  
I'LL STILL BE STRONGER,  
BRAVER, WHOLE -  
BECAUSE HE'S EVERYTHING  
TO ME.  
SO IF HE WALKS HIS PATH ALONE,  
AND NEVER TURNS TO SEE,  
I'LL STILL BE STRONGER,  
BRAVER, WHOLE -  
BECAUSE HE'S EVERYTHING  
TO ME.

Three thumbs up from the Judges.

JO

Where did that come from?

Gemellus turns, sees the troupe.

Attalus is the first to reach him,  
dumbstruck.

Gemellus turns and sees Attalus.  
Hope flickers across his face.

ATTALUS

My Patroclus. Braver than I'll ever be.

GEMELLUS

I...

A Judge approaches.

JUDGE 1

What have we here?

GEMELLUS

My friends. My troupe. I said they'd be here.

JUDGE 1

You auditioned as a singer, young man. We can't have "actors" cluttering up the stage: this is a respectable contest-cum-dubious religious festival. And unless they happen to have a thousand sesterces between them...

From the wings: Thrasea.

THRASEA

I'll vouch for them.

JUDGE 1

Senator Thrasea. Your magnificence.

THRASEA

I think the Emperor might enjoy some fellow thespians on stage. To keep him company. And, if there is some confusion over the entry fee, I will cover the thousand sesterces.

JO

You will?

THRASEA

(gesturing at Gemellus)  
Call it... nurturing young talent.

DROLIO

Oh, thank you.

Thrasea looks directly at Gemellus.

THRASEA

I very much enjoyed your song.

Gemellus opens his mouth to speak and then shuts it again, blushing.

DROLIO

I don't know who you are, pal, but this is the best thing anyone's done for theatre since Dionysus invented happy hour.

JUDGE 1

This way, Senator.

Thrasea and the Judge exit.

JO

Gemellus, you were incredible! Music and acting at the same time! I mean, I don't even know what you'd call that?

GEMELLUS

"Musical theatre"?

A beat.

JO

That's the stupidest thing I ever heard.

GEMELLUS

Yeah, I know.

JO

"Musical theatre"? What even?

VIBIA

Unbelievable.

They exit.

SCENE 5

IMPERIAL PALACE. ROME.

Nero is being dressed while  
Thrasea stands by.

NERO

How many hopefuls, Thrasea?

THRASEA

Far too many, sire. Rome appears to contain an  
endless supply of lyre-pluckers, spear-twirlers  
and nit-wits.

NERO

Modern culture in a nutshell. People will  
insist on admiring the wrong things.

THRASEA

A persistent flaw among the rabble, Caesar.

NERO

One stage, Thrasea. One star. One true ideal of  
greatness.

THRASEA

Yours, presumably?

NERO

Naturally. But what if some rough little wonder  
appears amongst the tumblers and frauds?

THRASEA

Rome discovers a new star?

NERO

If he knows his place.

THRASEA

Or she?

NERO

Don't be absurd, Thrasea. Can you imagine?  
Come. Let us patronise the arts.

Nero exits.

THRASEA

As ever: with all the delicacy of a house fire.

SCENE 6

COMEDY & TRAGEDY TABERNA. SUBURA. ROME.

The cube reveals the back room of  
the Comedy & Tragedy.

Jo stands over a scroll.

JO

We're short, folks. Way short. Our elegant  
friend has covered the entry fee. But this is  
everything else: sets, costumes, props,  
musicians, bribes, and the sacrificial goat.

DROLIO

Do we really need the goat?

JO

We're not savages, Drolio. This isn't Persia.

VIBIA

So we've begged, borrowed, bartered, and still  
can't afford a second-hand toga.

POLLUX

The scenery alone will cost a fortune.

CASTOR

That's because "someone" wants it to catch  
fire, levitate, and symbolise the fall of  
civilisation.

JO

It's called vision, Castor.

CASTOR

It's called expensive is what it is, mate.

In the corner, Silvia stirs from  
her doze. She rises slowly,  
clutching something to her chest.

SILVIA

Even for actors, you lot talk too much.

She crosses to Jo and opens her  
hand: an old necklace, gold-  
flecked and elegant.

SILVIA (CONT'D)

This was given to me by someone I think I cared for. He said it was real. I don't remember his face, but I do remember how I felt when he put it around my neck.

She presses it into Jo's hand.

JO

Silvia, we can't -

SILVIA

Pfft. What use is it to me, just dangling there? I'd rather wear rags in something glorious than pearls in nothing at all.

JO

Glorious it is, then. For Silvia.

DROLIO

We really doing this, kid?

JO

Oh yes we are, my friend. We... we fake grandeur. We imply scale. We lie beautifully.

The necklace glints in his hand.

JO (CONT'D)

This is gonna be great!

Blackout.

Lights upon a catastrophically bad rehearsal.

A painted backdrop buckles and sags. A drunk EXTRA stumbles through a cardboard temple. An URCHIN GLADIATOR drops his wooden sword and tears after a chicken. Feathers explode. Drolio dangles from a too-short rope. Pollux hurtles across the stage, cloak on fire. Castor charges after him with a bucket. Half the set collapses.

JO (CONT'D)

This is a disaster!

GEMELLUS

That was incredible, right?

JO

Well, I can't believe it, if that's what you meant.

GEMELLUS

Good – because I may have invited someone.

From the gallery: Gaius Donatus  
steps forward.

POLLUX

Aw, Hecuba.

CASTOR

Gods preserve us.

SILVIA

Shit.

DROLIO

I said don't let Gemellus handle the PR.

GAIUS DONATUS

What... was... that?

GEMELLUS

Did you like it, Pops?

GAIUS DONATUS

Like it? I barely survived it. That wasn't  
theatre – it was a hostage situation with  
props.

JO

Sir, with respect...

GAIUS DONATUS

Respect would've been not inviting me to  
this... whatever this is. Gemellus, you called  
them visionaries. I saw a circus! Only without  
the lions, without the dancing girls, and with  
all the crap I hate! The only thing that could  
possibly have made it worse would've been a  
mime!

JO

I hate mime.

Attalus enters, shirtless,  
dragging a pillar.

GAIUS DONATUS

By the gods! I'd know that chest anywhere.  
Attalus the Great! I'm your biggest fan! I got  
a mosaic of you in my pool! You've been hiding  
the world's greatest gladiator, kid? That's  
your star. You want gold? You got it. My  
office. Tomorrow. Bring the big man.

He turns to Gemellus.

GAIUS DONATUS (CONT'D)

And you - maybe you ain't as dumb as this acting thing makes you look.

GEMELLUS

Thanks, Pops.

GAIUS DONATUS

Don't get cocky.

Gaius Donatus exits.

JO

You could've told us who you were, you know, "Glorian". That's a stupid name, by the way.

ATTALUS

You wanted an actor, not a sword-swinger. I'm sorry, Jo. I'm sorry, everyone.

Attalus walks over to Gemellus to check that he's okay. Gemellus hugs him.

VIBIA

This is all very touching, but we're not out of the woods yet, are we?

JO

Even with the Don's money and the "mighty" Attalus, we can't build my version in two days.

From the shadows, calm as fate:  
Metrobius.

METROBIUS

Then stop building your version.

JO

But we had gods, fire, a chariot... goats!

DROLIO

One lousy goat. Played by me.

METROBIUS

Decoration. Frills. Nonsense. The story was always underneath all that. A Titan who gives humanity its greatest gift, and pays the ultimate price.

VIBIA

Prometheus.

METROBIUS

Exactly. The flame. The sacrifice. Hope. Life. You don't need flying scenery for that, my boy - merely courage. And trusty players.

SILVIA

And an audience who believes.

METROBIUS

Silvia understands. Let's remind the people why they fell in love with theatre in the first place. Why we all did.

JO

But we're not ready, Master.

METROBIUS

My dear boy. None of us ever are.

He claps Jo on the shoulder and strides away.

JO

Still knows how to make an exit.

He turns to the twins.

JO (CONT'D)

Fellas - I hope you've got plenty of papyrus.

CASTOR

How much is plenty?

POLLUX

Because spiritually, we're out.

JO

Enough to rebuild the show by dawn. And possibly redefine Western notions of dramatic form for the next thousand years?

CASTOR

Maxima's All-Night Papyrus Emporium?

POLLUX

On it.

Jo, Castor and Pollux exit, followed by the rest of the company.

Drolio remains on stage.

The cube revolves.

The rehearsal room slips into the quiet of the taberna.

Drolio stands alone, half in costume, half in panic.

Metrobius appears.

METROBIUS

You're quiet, Drolio. Did someone die?

DROLIO

Just my dignity. And that went years ago.  
Listen, Master: when I was a boy, I saw you in  
Corinth. You died for love on a marble  
staircase. Very loudly.

METROBIUS

I did everything loudly in Corinth.

DROLIO

Afterwards, you shook my hand and you said,  
"Keep your heart open, boy. That's where the  
stories live."

METROBIUS

I said that?

DROLIO

I never forgot it. I thought: that's what I  
want. Then... Life happened. Turns out the  
stage doesn't always love you back.

METROBIUS

No. But she notices when you keep turning up.

DROLIO

What if I do something stupid in the show?

METROBIUS

You will. We all will. But if your heart is  
open, they'll feel it out there in the dark.  
They always do. Break a leg, old friend.

DROLIO

I'll try not to break anything else.

Metrobius exits slowly.

DROLIO (CONT'D)

An open heart.

SCENE 7

THEATRE OF DIONYSUS. ROME.

The troupe walks on. All the acts  
are viewing the performance space.

SILVIA

Gods, I've missed this.

Thrasea enters and addresses the  
contest entrants.

THRASEA

Welcome to the Theatre of Dionysus. Welcome all. I hope you're ready for tomorrow's extravaganza. And I hope you've brought your best.

JO

We brought everything, sir. Statistically, our best might be in there somewhere.

THRASEA

Ah, the theatre! The Forum lets men talk, but the stage lets them feel. Rome respects the first and fears the second.

VIBIA

You're Senator Thrasea, aren't you? I thought you'd be older. Or carved out of marble.

THRASEA

Ah, my reputation precedes me.

He notices the cross around  
Vibia's neck.

THRASEA (CONT'D)

Second chances, yes?

VIBIA

You know what it means?

THRASEA

I know what hope looks like. And faith.

VIBIA

And you, sir? What do you believe in?

THRASEA

That truth sometimes has to disguise itself just to get through the door. And that - once in a while - someone is brave enough to speak for the silent.

Thrasea exits to rejoin the  
officials.

The others drift away.

Jo stands in the wings, looking  
out at the vast house.

JO

It's so big.

SILVIA

Theatres always are, darling. Until the first laugh. Then... they're yours.

JO

You know, Silvia: I used to think my story would be me and someone. A proper love story. But maybe this is my love story. This place. These people.

SILVIA

Of course it is, my darling boy. You make something out of nothing and give it away like a feast. That's love, Jo-Jo. That's the best kind of love. It's not just for one person: it's for everyone. Ooh, speaking of giving things away: here.

She hands him a small parcel wrapped in cloth.

JO

Aw, you didn't have to...

He opens it. It is a carved wooden figure.

JO (CONT'D)

But..

SILVIA

Don't ask me where I got it, my dear. I can barely remember my own name most days.

JO

Thank you. Oh, thank you.

They embrace.

JO (CONT'D)

Silvia... do you think we're ready?

SILVIA

Of course we're not ready. That's the theatre, Jo-Jo. And isn't it wonderful?

The lights fade out.

SCENE 8

THEATRE OF DIONYSUS. ROME. THE FOLLOWING DAY.

A trumpet fanfare.

High above the stage, the Imperial Box blazes. Nero rises. Thrasea stands just behind him. Nearby, severe and immaculate, stands the VESTAL MAXIMA.

NERO

Citizens of Rome! Today we gather not for bloodshed, battle, or sweaty athletes, but for something far more noble: Art. (beat) You're welcome.

He gestures to the Vestal Maxima.

NERO (CONT'D)

Since this is, for reasons I still don't understand, a sacred festival - we will observe all proper rites and rituals in accordance with... the somethings. Because, you know: gods and... stuff. Anyway, our esteemed Vestal Maxima will sanctify the proceedings. Senator Thrasea will ensure the law is satisfied. I, of course, will ensure that Beauty triumphs over all.

THRASEA

Rome is in your debt, Caesar.

NERO

I know.

Nero turns grandly back to the crowd.

NERO (CONT'D)

People of Rome! Here, in the golden light of Apollo, let "Nero's Got..."

Thrasea coughs loudly.

NERO (CONT'D)

... "Rome's Got Talent" begin!

Music crashes in.

EMCEE

"ROME'S GOT TALENT!"

ROME'S THE HOME AND ROME'S THE GLORY,  
HEARTS ARE RACING, LIGHTS ARE BRIGHT,  
HERE'S OUR CAST AND HERE'S THEIR STORY -  
WATCH 'EM TEAR IT UP TONIGHT.  
SO GET READY, YOU'LL ADORE 'EM,  
WATCH THEM TAKE IT UP THE FORUM...  
ON ROME'S... GOT... TALENT!

Backstage seethes with last-minute panic.

Props fly. Costumes are fastened. Lines are muttered.

A sudden commotion tears through the space.

Praetorian Guards burst in. At their centre: Riccius.

RICCIUS

That's her! The Christian from my high-class dining establishment on the Palatine Hill! Try the veal!

JO

And?

GUARD CAPTAIN

Christians are enemies of the state by imperial decree, pal. She'll answer in the arena.

DROLIO

But... she's an artist, not a threat.

GUARD CAPTAIN

In Rome, old man: same thing.

The guards close in.

RICCIUS

Look at her - poisoning the purity of Rome. This city was built on orgies and corruption, toots, not turning the other cheek.

MAKEDA

This is Roman justice? She did not plot. She did not riot. Pah! You fill this place with gods and myths and men pretending to be better than they are. But one woman tells the truth - and you cower like dormice?

The guards shackle Vibia. Attalus lunges forward, but Metrobius and Silvia stop him.

ATTALUS

Vibia!

METROBIUS

If you move now, you lose her. We'll think of something. I promise.

VIBIA

Go out there, my friends. Be wonderful. For them. For us. For everyone out there in the dark. I love you.

She is led away.

POLLUX

What do we do now, Jo? She was the Chorus.

MAKEDA

You're worried about the show?

Makeda draws her sword.

METROBIUS

Steady on, dear lady. It might be our only way to save her.

JO

The Master's right. The show must...

HECKLER

Go on! This is taking forever!

CASTOR

But Jo: no Chorus, no show.

Metrobius turns to Drolio.

METROBIUS

You've been shadowing her.

DROLIO

Of course. She has the key to the wine cellar.

METROBIUS

You know the part, Drolio.

DROLIO

Sure I do... but I'm the goat.

JO

Okay, okay - I give! We lose the goat.

A voice from somewhere beyond the stage:

HECKLER (OFFSTAGE)

No goat!? What is this, Persia!?

JO

Drolio, my friend, we need you. Vibia needs you.

DROLIO

I... I can't do it.

ATTALUS

You can.

DROLIO

No, big guy, I really can't. I'm a comic. A lousy comic. I was prepared for goat.

ATTALUS

Then be the goat who saves the play.

DROLIO

That's not helping.

ATTALUS

No, but it's true. Drolio - if you fall, we catch you. That's what being a company means. You've taught me that. All of you.

METROBIUS

The actor speaks at last. Bless you, my boy.

DROLIO

I... I can't, Master.

METROBIUS

This is the moment you thought you'd lost, Drolio. You know laughter. You know pain. Two sides of the same battered coin. That is Everyman. Every woman, too, for that matter. That is the Chorus. Don't be perfect, old friend. Be true. Go. Find your light.

The troupe gathers around him.  
Hands on shoulders. Murmured encouragement.

JO

Places.

They break.

The cube transitions back to the Imperial Box and the stage becomes the contest performance space.

High above it all, Nero lounges.  
Thrasea stands nearby.

Below, the JUDGES prowl the stage with wax tablets. They are as much part of the spectacle as the acts themselves.

EMCEE

Citizens of Rome - fasten your sandals!  
Tonight, talent enters the arena!

A roar.

A blitz of spectacle:

The FIRE-EATING VESTAL VIRGINS devour flame in perfect sacred formation.

JUDGE 1

Is it me, or did it just get hotter than Vesuvius in here?

The GLADIATOR PERCUSSIONISTS pound swords on shields until the whole theatre shakes.

JUDGE 2

I came for bloodsport, but you hit the beat of my heart.

THE AQUA-DUCTS spin in, absurdly seductive engineers.

THE AQUA-DUCTS  
PRESSURE MAKES THE FLOW...

JUDGE 3

I learned nothing about hydraulics, but I felt the pressure.

Jo and Gemellus peer out from the dark.

GEMELLUS

They're so cool.

JO

Oh, God - everyone's so...

GEMELLUS

Ripped.

JO

Visual! This is gonna be a disaster.

GEMELLUS

We're going to need a miracle.

JO

A what?

GEMELLUS

A miracle. I'll explain later.

JO

Aha, so you know what it means?

GEMELLUS

No.

They duck back as the Emcee booms again.

EMCEE

And now, fellow Romans, we come to something very special indeed.

The judges drift back into a loose semicircle.

EMCEE (CONT'D)

A humble shepherd boy seeks your indulgence to share his simple song.

CROWD

Awww.

EMCEE

Ahem. Yes. Please welcome him to our stage.

Applause.

Nero enters, as the most  
extravagantly overdressed shepherd  
boy in history.

The applause drops. Fast.

Jo and Gemellus reappear.

GEMELLUS

That's Nero?

JO

Huh. I thought he'd be taller.

Nero takes centre stage.

NERO

"THE STAGE IS MINE"

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE — THEY SAY.  
MOST NEVER LEARN THEIR PART.  
THEY DRIFT ACROSS,  
THEY MISS THEIR MARK,  
THEY CALL THAT LIVING ART.  
BUT I KNOW EVERY ENTRANCE,  
I KNOW EACH GLANCE AND LINE.  
I KNOW EXACTLY WHEN TO TURN.  
SO FITTING.  
SO DIVINE.  
FROM THERE YOU LOOK AT ME —  
THE SUN, THE MOON, THE SPARK.  
I AM YOUR BRIGHTEST FANTASY,  
YOU PEOPLE IN THE DARK.  
YOU BEG ME FOR A SPECTACLE,  
THEN BLAME ME FOR THE SMOKE.  
YOU'LL CROWN ME AS A MONSTER  
EVEN WHILE YOU CHEER THE JOKE.  
I AM THE VILLAIN, CLOWN,  
AND LEADING MAN  
IN ONE DESIGN.  
FOR ALL THE WORLD MAY BE A STAGE —  
BUT THE STAGE IS MINE.  
THE CROWD CANNOT LOOK AWAY.  
THERE'S NOWHERE THEY CAN TURN.  
TODAY AND EVERY DAY  
THE WORLD IS MINE TO BURN.  
I TAKE THEIR SCREAMS,  
THEIR STARVED-OUT DREAMS,  
THEIR HUNGER TO BE SHOWN,  
AND SHAPE THEM INTO SOMETHING GRAND.  
A BEAUTY OF MY OWN.

I DO NOT SPILL BLOOD — I STAGE IT.  
I DO NOT MAKE WAR — I WAGE IT.  
I AM NOT CRUEL — I'M CRUCIAL.  
I AM NOT HARSH — I'M TRUTHFUL.  
I AM ART.  
I WROTE THIS ALL MYSELF —  
EACH GLORY, GASP, AND GROAN.  
I CAST THE WORLD,  
I LIT THE STARS,  
I CLAIMED THE SCENE ALONE.  
SO IF A POET BREAKS,  
OR THUNDER SPLITS THE FLOOR,  
THAT IS NOT FAILURE — THAT IS FANFARE.  
AND ROME DEMANDS ENCORE.  
IF I SHOULD SCORCH THE CITY,  
THEY'LL RISE AND BEG FOR MORE.  
FORGIVE ME — I'M A GIVER.  
I ONLY OPEN DOORS.  
FOR ROME I'LL WRITE A NEWER AGE,  
A BRIGHTER GRAND DESIGN.  
FOR ALL THE WORLD MAY BE A STAGE —  
BUT THE STAGE  
THE LIGHT  
THE FLAMES  
THE AGE —  
ARE MINE.

He strikes his final pose.

The Emcee enters.

EMCEE

And now, plebs and patricians, senators and slaves... we come to our final act. Last — and most definitely least: our evening's one — and thankfully only — moment of... theatre.

The crowd lets out a sigh of disappointment.

EMCEE (CONT'D)

Yes. Could've been worse, folks — could've been mime.

HECKLER (OFFSTAGE)

I love mime!

EMCEE

And so, I give you... "The Fall of Fire."

Dim light.

Silence.

Then Drollo enters in ragged robes.

No stumble. No gag. No apology.

For the first time, he stands still.

DROLIO AS CHORUS

Before kings. Before laws. Before Rome had a name, there was darkness. The gods kept fire in heaven and called it order. Men shivered below and called it Life.

Silvia enters as the Sibyl, veiled in ash-grey gauze.

SILVIA AS SIBYL

What is kept from the world becomes power. What is given to the world becomes hope.

Attalus enters as Prometheus, helmeted, chained, carrying nothing.

DROLIO AS CHORUS

One Titan looked down and saw mankind crawling in the cold. Not wicked. Not weak. Waiting.

Gemellus rises from the darkness below as Mankind.

GEMELLUS AS MANKIND

If there is light, why are we denied it? If there is warmth, why must we beg?

ATTALUS AS PROMETHEUS

You will not beg.

He tears off the helmet.

The crowd recognises him.

NERO

No. No, no, no - that's Attalus. My gladiator. He's meant to kill, not... kill it. And he's good. (beat) Almost as good as me.

Metrobius appears as Jupiter high above, framed by shadow and light.

METROBIUS AS JUPITER

I gave them sky. They answered with questions.

ATTALUS AS PROMETHEUS

Questions frighten tyrants more than swords.

METROBIUS AS JUPITER

You would give them fire?

ATTALUS AS PROMETHEUS

I would give them choice.

METROBIUS AS JUPITER  
They will burn what they build.

ATTALUS AS PROMETHEUS  
And build again.

METROBIUS AS JUPITER  
They will suffer.

ATTALUS AS PROMETHEUS  
And learn mercy.

METROBIUS AS JUPITER  
They will love. They will become who they are.

SILVIA AS SIBYL  
All gifts come with chains. All chains can be  
broken. The choice is not the gods' to make.

METROBIUS AS JUPITER  
So be it, Titan... fall!

The stage goes black.

A terrible crack of thunder.

In the darkness, Prometheus cries  
out.

Then - one tiny red-gold flame  
appears.

Not in Prometheus' hand.

In Gemellus' hand.

Gemellus looks at it, amazed.

GEMELLUS AS MANKIND  
What is this light? What is this fire?

DROLIO AS CHORUS  
That was his crime.

Another flame appears in Silvia's  
hand.

Then another in Drolio's.

Then another among the company.

One by one, the stage fills with  
small, handmade red-gold flames -  
silk, hidden lamps, scraps of gold  
cloth catching the light.

Cheap. Simple. Miraculous.

DROLIO AS CHORUS (CONT'D)

Not to steal fire. To share it.

The stage is now alive with flame.

The auditorium remains dark.

Nero sees it: not imperial gold,  
not spectacle, not machinery -  
people passing light from hand to  
hand.

GEMELLUS AS MANKIND

I do not want Olympus. I do not want a throne.  
I want to love and lose and hope and fail and  
rise again. And if that is sin - then let me  
sin alive.

METROBIUS AS JUPITER

You think yourselves ready for freedom? You,  
who break what you build? What will you do with  
fire when it burns your home?

ATTALUS AS PROMETHEUS

Build another.

METROBIUS AS JUPITER

With thought, when it questions your gods?

ATTALUS AS PROMETHEUS

Teach ourselves.

METROBIUS AS JUPITER

With power, when it lures your children?

ATTALUS AS PROMETHEUS

Teach them to carry it better than we did.  
Better a ruined city of stumbling souls than a  
palace of silenced children.

Silvia lifts her flame.

SILVIA AS SIBYL

A flame cannot be unlit. A question cannot be  
unasked. The age of gods ends when men begin to  
think for themselves.

Drolio looks out at the audience -  
the stage lit by human fire, the  
house still dark.

DROLIO AS CHORUS

And so the world began. No trumpet. No decree.  
No blessing from above. Only a spark in the  
dark. One heart that would not kneel. One hand  
passing light to another. And another. And  
another.

The stage glows brighter:  
Prometheus, Mankind, Sibyl,  
Chorus, company - all carrying the  
flame.

DROLIO AS CHORUS (CONT'D)

So men became more than dust. And gods became  
only stories. And mankind learned... Each of us  
can carry the flame.

Blackout.

In the Imperial Box:

NERO

That wasn't a play! That was treason in verse.

He sweeps out of the box and down  
to the stage.

Lights rise on Jo and the company,  
still standing in the aftermath of  
the performance.

The crowd is stunned. Moved.  
Dangerous.

NERO (CONT'D)

A worthy performance. If one enjoys sedition,  
heresy, and treacly sentiment. Silence now for  
the judges' verdict.

The VESTAL MAXIMA steps forward,  
severe and ceremonial.

VESTAL MAXIMA

Under the auspices of divine Minerva, we have  
deliberated without fear or favour. And by  
sacred judgement, the winner of "Rome's Got  
Talent" is... The Emperor Nero. For his...  
breath-taking... contribution to the arts.

The crowd reacts: boos, hisses,  
disbelief.

NERO

Thank you. Thank you. I accept on behalf of me.  
As for these wretches...

The Guards drag Vibia back in.

NERO (CONT'D)

Ah, the little Christian firebrand.

ATTALUS

Vibia!

NERO

Take her. And let nothing theatrical happen  
between here and the lions.

The Guard Captain moves.

THRASEA

A moment, Caesar. If I may?

NERO

You may.

THRASEA

The contest is being held as a sacred festival.

NERO

Yes. Apparently the gods insisted.

THRASEA

With all the proper protocols observed.  
Including the rite of final address: Vox  
Populi.

NERO

What?

THRASEA

It means...

NERO

I know what it means!

THRASEA

Your decree, sire.

He produces the scroll.

THRASEA (CONT'D)

Any accused person at a sacred festival may  
speak once before judgement is passed. What  
greater display of Roman justice than allowing  
Rome itself to hear her?

NERO

Fine. One final address. Then it's feeding time  
in the arena.

Nero sweeps off.

Vibia steps forward.

VIBIA

"LET IT BE ME"

I WAS QUIET IN THE CORNER,  
ALONE AND LOST AND SMALL.  
LET THE LOUDER ONES BE LEADERS —  
I THOUGHT I HAD NOTHING AT ALL.  
BUT A WHISPER'S A BEGINNING,

AND A SPARK CAN SPLIT THE NIGHT.  
I'M DONE WITH BEING SILENT,  
AND I'M READY TO ASK WHY.  
WHY DO WE HIDE WHAT WE'RE MADE OF?  
WHY DO WE WAIT TO BE SEEN?  
WHAT IF THE WORLD NEEDS YOUR COLOURS  
TO FINISH THE SCENE?  
LET IT BE ME WHO STEPS FROM THE SHADOW.  
LET IT BE ME WHO BELIEVES I BELONG.  
WE WERE BORN WITH A LIGHT MEANT TO TRAVEL -  
NOT TO BURN OUT ALONE,  
BUT TO CARRY IT ON.  
IF THERE'S A HEART THAT NEEDS LIFTING,  
A SOUL LOST AT SEA -  
I WON'T WAIT FOR OTHERS -  
LET IT BE ME.  
I REMEMBER THE SILENCE,  
AND THE KINDNESS THAT BROKE THROUGH.  
JUST ONE VOICE FROM ONE WHO CARED  
TAUGHT ME WHAT ONE VOICE CAN DO.  
WE'RE THREADS OF LIVING COLORS,  
WOVEN BRIGHTER THE MORE WE GIVE.  
YOU DON'T FIND YOUR TRUE PURPOSE  
'TIL YOU HELP SOMEONE LIVE.  
WHAT IF YOUR VOICE IS THE ECHO  
THAT SOMEONE'S BEEN ACHING TO HEAR?  
WHAT IF YOUR COURAGE  
IS LOUDER THAN FEAR?  
LET IT BE ME WHO SAYS, "YOU ARE WORTH IT."  
LET IT BE ME WHO WON'T WALK AWAY.  
LET ME BE PART OF THE RISING  
THAT TURNS A DARK NIGHT INTO DAY.  
IF THERE'S A TRUTH THAT NEEDS SPEAKING,  
OR A DREAM YET TO BE -  
WON'T WAIT FOR PERMISSION -  
LET IT BE ME.  
ONE STAR ALONE MAY BE QUIET,  
BUT TOGETHER WE BURN LIKE THE SUN.  
YOU ONLY BECOME WHO YOU'RE MEANT TO  
THE MOMENT YOU SHINE FOR SOMEONE.  
LET IT BE ME WHO STANDS WITH THE SILENT.  
LET IT BE ME WHO OPENS THE DOOR.  
I WILL RISE FOR THE ONES WHO WERE BROKEN  
AND BE SOMETHING MORE THAN BEFORE.  
IF LOVE NEEDS A FIGHTER,  
IF HOPE NEEDS A KEY -  
I'LL BE THE ANSWER -  
LET IT BE ME.

The final note hangs in the air.

Silence.

Vibia stands alone in the light.

Nero storms back in.

NERO

More treachery! More insolent lies! This Christian thinks her appeal to Rome's better nature will save her. Fat chance. Tell me: which of you will prove it? Which of you will face the executioner in her stead? Come now, Romans - who among you loves virtue more than life? Hah. Just as I thought. Loyal Romans... until loyalty costs.

Then - from somewhere in the auditorium:

ROMAN BOY

I will, Emperor.

NERO

What?

A small red-gold flame appears in the darkness of the auditorium.

The Roman Boy is holding it.

ROMAN BOY

She said, "Let it be me." Be kind. Help people. So, Emperor... let it be me.

NERO

Put out that flame.

The boy does not.

From elsewhere in the house:

YOUNG MOTHER

No. Take me.

Another flame.

BAKER

Me!

Another.

PATRICIAN LADY

And me.

Then more voices - from every direction.

VOICES

Take me! And me! Take us! All of us!

One by one, small red-gold flames rise throughout the auditorium.

The image from Jo's play has escaped the stage.

The crowd has understood.

Vibia sees it.

Jo sees it.

For once, even he has no words.

NERO

Sit down! Sit down, I command it!

No one sits.

The theatre fills with light.

The Judges hurry onto the stage  
with the laurel and the purse.  
They thrust both toward Jo and  
Vibia.

The crowd erupts.

NERO (CONT'D)

Rabble! Scum! (beat) Oh, granny! Why did you  
have to live so long? This is so unfair!

The Praetorian Guards escort Nero  
away before the mob turns on him.

Backstage and stage blur together:  
costumes half-off, props  
abandoned, wine appearing from  
nowhere.

The company is giddy, exhausted,  
alive.

Gemellus and Thrasea stand  
slightly apart.

THRASEA

You were very brave tonight, Gemellus.

GEMELLUS

Was I any good?

THRASEA

You were... You are... remarkable.

Thrasea takes Gemellus' hands in  
his.

Attalus smiles, then crosses to  
sit beside Jo.

ATTALUS

Why so quiet?

JO  
Just thinking.

ATTALUS  
Is that wise?

JO  
In showbiz? Almost never. But... what now?

ATTALUS  
Well, for me: some kind of life with Vibia.

JO  
Duh. What else?

ATTALUS  
I haven't told anyone this, but what I really want to do...

JO  
Don't say it.

ATTALUS  
... is direct.

A collective intake of breath.

VIBIA  
Absolutely not.

JO  
We'll talk.

VIBIA  
We will not.

From above: Nero in half-light.

A torch burns in a brazier.

NERO  
"If I should scorch the city..? No. Not yet. Let them think they've won... for now. I'll bide my time. After all... I really think I could win this thing next year.

He turns away, vanishing into the dark. Behind him, the torch flares.

Castor and Pollux approach Jo.

POLLUX  
So, boss. I guess this is it, huh?

CASTOR  
Thanks, Jo. I mean it. You're... Aw, come here.

Group hug.

JO

Say, fellas. How do you feel about an encore?

A banner flies in: ONE NIGHT ONLY:  
MUSICAL THEATRE

Scrawled beneath: HONESTLY NOT  
THAT BAD!

The stage explodes into joyous  
absurdity.

Attalus appears in mock-heroic  
armour, centre stage.

Castor and Pollux sweep on from  
either side, leading a chorus of  
performers.

Vibia enters in comic goddess  
mode, half-mocking the whole  
thing, half-loving every second.

Paracles appears in the wings,  
practically vibrating with joy.

Gemellus enters, over-committed  
and heroic.

His tunic gives way, exposing his  
torso.

Then hears a voice:

GAIUS DONATUS

That's my boy!

GEMELLUS

Don't make it weird, Pops!

GAIUS DONATUS

Keep dancing, kid! They love ya!

Gemellus, blushing furiously,  
begins shamelessly playing to the  
crowd.

Makeda steps forward with a pair  
of massive hand-drums.

She gives the company a look that  
says: try to keep up.

Then she launches into a rip-  
roaring drum solo – thunderous,  
funny, ferocious. The whole stage  
catches fire around her rhythm.

Metrobius glides through:  
impossibly magnificent.

Silvia follows, watching him with  
the faint smile of someone who  
remembers exactly why he was  
famous.

Drolio bursts through the number,  
tap-dancing in sandals with  
terrifying commitment.

DROLIO

A fella could get used to this!

Jo takes centre stage.

JO

"IT'LL BE ALRIGHT ON THE NIGHT"

WHEN THE WORLD FEELS HEAVY,  
AND THE ROAD FEELS LONG,  
WHEN YOU'RE NOT QUITE CERTAIN  
WHERE YOU STILL BELONG,  
WHEN THE NOISE GROWS LOUDER  
AND THE LIGHT GROWS SLIGHT,  
COME STAND HERE TOGETHER -  
IT'LL BE ALRIGHT.  
WHEN YOUR HEART IS RESTLESS,  
WHEN YOUR COURAGE SHAKES,  
WHEN YOU FEAR THAT NOTHING  
CAN BE MENDED NOW IT BREAKS,  
THERE IS SOMETHING STRONGER  
THAN THE DARK IN SIGHT:  
ALL OF US TOGETHER -  
IT'LL BE ALRIGHT.  
SO SHOW UP, SHOW UP,  
EVEN SCARED, EVEN TIRED,  
EVEN WHEN THE SPARK IN YOU  
FEELS DIMMED INSTEAD OF FIRED.  
COME WITH ALL YOUR QUESTIONS,  
COME WITH ALL YOUR FRIGHT,  
COME AND STAND BESIDE US -  
IT'LL BE ALRIGHT ON THE NIGHT.  
WE ARE NOT MADE ONLY  
FOR THE DAYS THAT SHINE,  
NOT FOR PERFECT ENDINGS  
DRAWN IN GOLD DESIGN,  
WE ARE MADE FOR HOLDING  
FAST WHEN HOPE IS SLIGHT,  
FOR LIFTING ONE ANOTHER  
TILL THE WORLD FEELS LIGHT.  
THERE IS NO GREAT POWER  
IN STANDING ALL ALONE,  
EVERY HAND REACHES OUTWARD,  
EVERY HEART NEEDS HOME,  
AND THE SMALLEST KINDNESS  
CAN OUTLAST THE NIGHT -  
IF WE KEEP TOGETHER,

IT'LL BE ALRIGHT.  
SO SHOW UP, SHOW UP,  
WITH YOUR JOY AND YOUR DOUBT,  
WITH THE PARTS OF YOU YOU CARRY  
AND THE PARTS YOU'VE HIDDEN OUT.  
BRING YOUR HOPE IN TATTERS,  
BRING YOUR WILL TO FIGHT,  
BRING YOUR HUMAN HEART HERE —  
IT'LL BE ALRIGHT ON THE NIGHT.  
WHEN THE DAY HAS FAILED US,  
WHEN THE DREAM LOOKS THIN,  
WHEN THE DOORS ARE CLOSING  
AND THE COLD GETS IN,  
STILL A VOICE CAN ANSWER,  
STILL A FLAME BURN BRIGHT,  
STILL WE MAKE A SHELTER  
FOR EACH OTHER IN THE NIGHT.  
NOT BECAUSE WE'RE CERTAIN,  
NOT BECAUSE WE KNOW,  
NOT BECAUSE TOMORROW  
WILL BE EASY AS WE GO,  
BUT BECAUSE WE'RE STRONGER  
WHEN WE STAND IN SHARED LIGHT,  
AND BECAUSE WE NEED EACH OTHER  
TO MAKE THE DARKNESS BRIGHT.

Gaius Donatus finds himself  
clapping along. Paracles  
approaches.

PARACLES

I could sell this. I could sell all of this!  
Don Gaius, we should talk. Percentages, merch,  
touring.

GAIUS DONATUS

Who the Hecuba are you?

PARACLES

Don Gaius, I'm the future!

Jo returns to the centre.

JO

SO GATHER, GATHER,  
COME OUT OF THE SHADE,  
NO ONE WALKS THIS WHOLE ROAD  
UN-HELD AND UNAFRAID.  
BRING YOUR BROKEN PIECES,  
BRING YOUR TRUTH IN PLAIN SIGHT,  
WE WILL MAKE A CHORUS —  
IT'LL BE ALRIGHT ON THE NIGHT.  
AND IF THE SKY SHOULD TREMBLE,  
AND IF THE FEARS RETURN,  
STILL WE'LL FACE THE SILENCE,  
STILL WE'LL HELP THE FIRE BURN.  
SIDE BY SIDE, WE'LL ANSWER,  
SIDE BY SIDE, WE'LL WRITE  
A BETTER KIND OF STORY:

IT'LL BE ALRIGHT.  
SO SHOW UP, SHOW UP,  
THAT IS HOW WE START,  
NOT WITH GRAND ILLUSIONS,  
BUT WITH ONE ANOTHER'S HEART.  
HAND IN HAND, WE'LL FACE IT,  
TURNING TOWARD THE LIGHT -  
IF WE SHOW UP FOR EACH OTHER,  
IT'LL BE ALRIGHT ON THE NIGHT.  
IT'LL BE ALRIGHT,  
YES, IT'LL BE ALRIGHT,  
IF WE SHOW UP FOR EACH OTHER,  
IT'LL BE ALRIGHT ON THE NIGHT.

Confetti falls.

The whole company comes forward.

Gaius Donatus puts an awkward arm  
around Gemellus.

GAIUS DONATUS  
You did good, kid.

GEMELLUS  
Thanks, Pops.

GAIUS DONATUS  
Don't get cocky. But yeah. Come here, you.

They embrace.

Thrasea and Gemellus hold hands.

Metrobius and Silvia share the  
smallest bow to one another.

Jo stands at the centre of  
everything, overwhelmed.

Vibia and Attalus approach,  
holding hands.

JO  
Vibia, I get it now. I know what a miracle is.

He looks at the company.

Then, Jo sees someone.

JO (CONT'D)  
Wha-?

Young Jo - barefoot, scrappy, all  
elbows and hope - stands in the  
wings, staring in wonder.

Jo smiles through tears.

Young Jo smiles back.

JO (CONT'D)

Now that's theatre.

Blackout.

**THE END.**