

ACHILLES

A One-Act Tragedy

by Jon Lott

Dramatis Personae:

ACHILLES, legendary Greek warrior

PATROCLUS, companion of Achilles, Greek warrior

BRISEIS, the captive bride of Achilles

AGAMEMNON, leader of the Greek army

MENELAUS, Agamemnon's brother, from whom Helen was taken

ODYSSEUS, the cleverest Greek warrior

NESTOR, a wise old Greek warrior

PRIAM, King of Troy

HECTOR, Prince of Troy, Priam's eldest son

AJAX, a strong Greek warrior

HOMER, famous poet

GREEK SOLDIERS

TROJAN SOLDIERS

Scene:

The Greek camps near Troy

Time:

12th century BCE

Scene 1

On both ends of the stage there is a wooden torch burning. A large brown cloth, the inside of Achilles' tent, is stretched across the back, with a cloth flap as a doorway on both sides of the stage. There is a small bed with some pillows, and BRISEIS lies atop it, staring up. A javelin and a couple amphorae are nearby. A bronze cuirass is fixed upon a metal stand, along with a red-plumed helmet. Greaves hang below the breastplate, and on the back of the armor, a sword is hidden.

An old, bearded man is standing in the center-right of stage. HOMER is holding a gnarled wooden walking stick, and a cloth wrapped tightly around his eyes. As the fire crackles in the dark silence, a single overhead spotlight begins to shine upon HOMER.

HOMER

(strikes the stage thrice with his staff)

For nine years now the Greeks have laid siege here,
upon the coast of Troy, beneath its wall
and still foretold is one more bloody year,
when thousands more of men are still to fall.
Among these Greeks and Trojans, there's one man,
who, prophesied by priests, will end this war,
and with him, win the war for Greeks he can,
and send their valiant soldiers home from shore.
But Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks,
a King for some, and rich beyond compare,
has lost the girl he's had, so now he seeks
a prize replacement, delicate and fair.
And from Achilles, strongest of the rest,
he wants Briseis, young and pale and sweet,
among the brides abducted she was best,
and, brazen, widely proves his own conceit.
The consequence of Agamemnon's pride

HOMER (Cont.)

will cause Achilles to sit out the fight,
the Myrmidons will, from the battle, hide
and sit among the camp in royal slight.
Without these soldiers, Agamemnon knows,
he will not break the walls, too high and long
avenge fair Helen's theft, and slay his foes.
Begin the play as I now end my song...

(The spotlight fades and HOMER exits stage right.)

Scene 2

The inside of Achilles' tent is
illuminated.

ACHILLES enters stage left, wearing
sandals, a fancy Greek tunic, and
in a fit of rage. PATROCLUS enters
and BRISEIS sits up attentively.

ACHILLES

(pacing quickly)

I will not ever fight for that false king!
He can't insult me with this posturing!

PATROCLUS

(standing between ACHILLES and his armor)

Calm down, Achilles, think, relax, and breathe.

ACHILLES

You will not stand between me and my sheathe.

BRISEIS

What is it that has made you so upset?

ACHILLES

(turning violently to BRISEIS and then up to the sky)
This dog-face Agamemnon has a debt
With me and death and hundreds more besides!

PATROCLUS

The king wants you among his group of brides.

BRISEIS

But great Achilles, I will be your wife,
To you I dedicated my own life.

ACHILLES

What dedications matter to this king?
He always puts his hands on everything!

PATROCLUS

(placing his hand on Achilles' shoulder)
Could you for just one moment stop and think?
This girl could our nine-year effort sink.

ACHILLES

(wrenching Patroclus' hand away)
If I can't take you to be my own wife,
(draws sword from the sheathe)
Briseis, with my hand I'll take your life.

BRISEIS

As you command, Achilles, have it done,
(she kneels, offering her neck)
I won't be whore to that ignoble one!

PATROCLUS

Please stay your hand, companion, stay your blade
And spare us all of bloodshed, reckless made.
Nine years we fought for glory side by side,
And all to end 'cause one man wants your bride?

ACHILLES

(leveling his sword near Briseis)
Do you forget how this whole war began?
Some coward stole the woman of a man!

PATROCLUS

When Troy's walls fall and crumble to the sand,
and Helen's coward husband's made his stand,
and nobles die and treasures are made yours
and Priam's made to grovel on all fours,
when Trojan hero's spirits sink to shade,
and then that dumb, unrighteous debt is paid.
But I can feel the war is near its end,
and risking all for any bride or friend
it will not bring us closer to quiesce,
but it will bring us further from a peace.

ACHILLES

(breathing deeply, Achilles turns his blade away from Briseis)
Dear Patroclus, my rage you're softly coaching.

PATROCLUS

Hush hush, I hear the soldiers now approaching.

(Two GREEK SOLDIERS enter stage left, equipped fully in armor, each one wielding a sword and shield. They, thinking ACHILLES' already drawn sword means battle, shift into battle stance. PATROCLUS and BRISEIS shift to stage right.)

ACHILLES

(laughs derisively)

Do you think my sword means that I will fight?
I don't intend to shed your blood tonight.
But I could kill a hundred men like you,
with just my sword for you to be cut through,
and in your fancy armor, you'd be slain
A hundred Agamemnon soldiers' pain.
My argument lies with your wretch commander,
That filthy dog-face overproud philander.

GREEK SOLDIER #1

The king demands the woman to be brought.

(BRISEIS moves behind ACHILLES.)

ACHILLES

(sheathes sword, then shrugs)

Then I to Troy will not lead my onslaught.

GREEK SOLDIER #2

What are you saying? What is it you mean?

ACHILLES

I will not fight to capture Helen, queen.
And Agamemnon, Menelaus, both
will suffer, for I cancel now my oath.

GREEK SOLDIER #2

And you would coward home and leave this place?

ACHILLES

(shouting in GREEK SOLDIER #2's face)

What kind of king won't say this to my face?!
Go bring this so-called king my bride and speech,
I won't fight one more Trojan on this beach.

(ACHILLES turns his back to the soldiers, and strides to the edge of the stage, his face lit by the orange torchflame)

GREEK SOLDIER #1

As you say, great Achilles, we will go.
We'll end the war within a year, you know,
and when we storm the burning gates of Troy,
you won't be there, nor will your choirboy.

(gestures obscenely to PATROCLUS)

(GREEK SOLDIERS #1 and #2 lead BRISEIS off stage left. Fade to black.)

Scene 3

Scattered rocks and trees fill the stage. A strong backlight obscures the individual features of the characters on stage.

TROJAN SOLDIERS are cautiously moving from center stage to stage left. AGAMEMNON and MENELAUS enter, stage right.

AGAMEMNON

Push on and drive them to the river now,
We'll kill 'em like a sacrificial cow!

(GREEK SOLDIERS rush from behind AGAMEMNON and MENELAUS and begin fighting the TROJAN SOLDIERS. MENELAUS cuts down one.)

MENELAUS

That's twelve I've slain today, if I recall!

AGAMEMNON

By sunset we will soon have killed them all!

(A TROJAN SOLDIER cuts AGAMEMNON's arm, causing him to drop his sword. AGAMEMNON falls, but a GREEK SOLDIER intervenes and is killed defending his king. MENELAUS kills the TROJAN SOLDIER.)

MENELAUS

My injured brother, that one makes thirteen!
If this keeps up, I'll soon reclaim my queen!

AGAMEMNON

Can you not see I'm injured, cut my arm?
Defend your king and stay to ward off harm.

(The TROJAN SOLDIERS have driven off or killed all the GREEK SOLDIERS except one, #1, whose leg is injured. He is swinging his sword madly at two TROJAN SOLDIERS trying to close the distance to him.)

GREEK SOLDIER #1

My king, they've rallied backup forces here!
The tide has turned upon us Greeks I fear.

AGAMEMNON

We do not have the strength to match them now,
but let them rout us I will not allow.

GREEK SOLDIER #1

Fall back to camp. I will remain and stall,
And on the field alone, in glory, fall.

(AGAMEMNON scurries off stage right.)

MENELAUS

I will recount your bravery this day,
when I return to camp and here you stay.

(MENELAUS exits stage right.)

TROJAN SOLDIER #1

Yield, you Achaean. There is no way out.

GREEK SOLDIER #1

Yield now? This death is what my life's about!

(GREEK SOLDIER #1 lunges at TROJAN SOLDIER #1, but his blade is parried. TROJAN SOLDIER #2 kicks him down. GREEK SOLDIER #1 loses his blade and crawls to a dead soldier nearby. He grabs the fallen man's sword, and springs up to attack. TROJAN SOLDIER #2 dodges and cuts his side. GREEK SOLDIER #1 dies.)

TROJAN SOLDIER #1

He should've fled or begged for his own life.

TROJAN SOLDIER #2

He'd rather die out here by Trojan knife.

TROJAN SOLDIER #1

Let's strip the dead and bury them with speed,

TROJAN SOLDIER #2

With coin to sate the undead boatman's greed.

(TROJAN SOLDIERS #1 and #2 drag GREEK SOLDIER #1's body off stage. Fade to black.)

Scene 4

Inside the war tent.

A table is set up in the center,
around which MENELAUS, AGAMEMNON
ODYSSEUS, and NESTOR stand.

ODYSSEUS

The war has not of late been going well.
Three weeks have passed, three hundred Greeks now fell
in battle. And what have we in exchange?
Lost ground among the battlefield and range.
I know it stings to hear, my king, but still,
we cannot win without Achilles' skill.

AGAMEMNON

I do not wish to hear that. There's a way,
to shift the tides without him in the fray.

MENELAUS

I can't devise a plan to get this done.

AGAMEMNON

Old Nestor's mind has scheming just begun.

ODYSSEUS

Tell us, wise Nestor, what do you believe?

NESTOR

I have a thought, if someone can deceive.

AGAMEMNON

Get out with it, and tell us what you mean.
Have you concocted a new war machine?

ODYSSEUS

Oh that reminds me, king, a thought with force.
We could devise and build a wooden-

AGAMEMNON

Odysseus, I'll speak to you in kind.
But first I'll hear what Nestor has in mind.

NESTOR

Achilles will not fight for you, my king.
But I've devised a certain other thing.
His friend Patroclus wants to fight again
and rejoin soldiers, battle with real men.
He knows Achilles and his movements well,

NESTOR (Cont.)

can duplicate his style, who can tell
that boy apart from his companion, they
are of a height, hairlength, and size, I say.
And when the Myrmidons see Patroclus
adorned in famous armor, there's no fuss,
and happily they'll all rejoin the fight
thinking Achilles has outgrown his slight.
Inspired, all the Greeks will seize the day,
and chase the Trojan cowards all away.
And if Achilles, later, hears of that,
and acts again the sour, spoiled brat,
we'll send him home alone in his own ship
and empty-handed he'll go on that trip.

MENECLAUS

It is a clever plan, I will admit,
Can you convince Patroclus to do it?

NESTOR

Odysseus and I can sway his heart,
Your army on the morrow we can start.

AGAMEMNON

See that it's all arranged by end of day,
I want to march on Troy without delay.

Scene 5

On the beach, far away from camp.

ODYSSEUS and NESTOR spot PATROCLUS
practicing archery. They approach,
and PATROCLUS lowers his bow.

ODYSSEUS

Is that Patroclus shooting on the sand?

PATROCLUS

It is, Odysseus. I hunt on land.

NESTOR

Aiming for Trojans hidden in the bush?
Or other forces, poised in your ambush?

PATROCLUS

Just practice, Nestor. For when I return
to battle I'd prefer not to relearn
just how to aim an arrow and release
and bring great glory to us all and Greece.

ODYSSEUS

There is no glory but in battle, son.
And glory only comes after we've won.

(There is a great pause, as ODYSSEUS and NESTOR try to wait him
out. PATROCLUS eyes them somewhat suspiciously, and then slings
his bow across his shoulder.)

PATROCLUS

What is it that you've come to me to say?

NESTOR

And tell a former soldier anyway?

PATROCLUS

I will not fight until Achilles will.

ODYSSEUS

He surely his friend's stubbornness still.

NESTOR

And don't you yearn to fight the Trojans yet?

ODYSSEUS

It's been so long now I think he'll forget.

PATROCLUS

I want to fight, but not without my friend.
I did not start his anger, I can't end.

ODYSSEUS

Patroclus and Achilles suffer big,
bear witness to dead friends from our king pig,
that Agamemnon, he's a fat old fool,
and ugly as an ox, stiff as a mule.
But surely you can sympathize with me,
And all your fellow soldiers that you see,
each one is homesick, tired of this war,
each one here from a noble vow they swore.
I know Achilles will not fight again,
And our king won't cede his prize. What then?
A neverending stalemate on this plain?
What do we all from this endeavor gain?

PATROCLUS

What would you have me do, betray my friend?

ODYSSEUS

I'd have you not betray. Instead, pretend.

PATROCLUS

I do not understand your words. Explain.

ODYSSEUS

We would have you your ally's arms obtain,
and dress yourself in his golden breastplate,
his helmet, greaves, and sandals, his sword great,
and lead his troops to battle in his name,
and bring us, him, and yourself endless fame.
They will not follow anyone to fight.
If they think you're Achilles, they just might.

PATROCLUS

I am intrigued by this, I will confess,
to fight and be Achilles, to success.
But I cannot unless Achilles knows,
and on this plan, his blessing he bestows.

NESTOR

Then get his blessing, tell him of this plan.
And then impersonate that hero, man.

Scene 6

Inside Achilles' tent. The suit of armor is positioned under the light. The lights are low.

ACHILLES is sulking on his bed, polishing his sword with a cloth.
PATROCLUS enters with his bow and arrows, setting them down near the stage left entrance.

ACHILLES

Oh Patroclus, I have resolved to leave
the shores of Troy, new deeds yet to achieve.
The Myrmidons and you and I will go
to new adventures we do not yet know.
This false king is not worthy of my sword.
This false kind is not worthy of my word.

PATROCLUS

And sentence all the Greek allies to die?

ACHILLES

If they are sentenced to, let arrows fly.
And if they triumph, let them touch the sky.
But I won't Agamemnon deify,
and I will not serve under a false king,
no matter what he has of his to bring,
when so unfairly he treats his own best,
and that's excluding how he treats the rest!
Two fates press on, until my day of death.
If I remain and lay siege here to Troy,
upon this field will be my final breath.
But if I voyage home, and see my boy,
and have no pride or glory in old age,
no deeds accomplished, suffered through my rage.

PATROCLUS

I can't abandon soldiers for nine years,
I've fought behind, and shared all hopes and fears,
and even though there's no one I love more,
I cannot leave the rest upon this shore.
Permit me, dear companion, to request
a plan to execute 'fore going west.
I fight as you and lead the men to clash
and fight the Trojans, stab and duck and slash,
and in your armor, shimmering and known,
and bring the men to victory as shown:
when, rallied to your legendary plate
and plume, the forces fight the city-state
as one, united, in its heart and cause
can seize the vict'ry from defeat's own jaws.

ACHILLES

Then wear my armor bravely, but obey:
there are two precepts to which you must stay.
The first is not to fight on the offense.
Stay where your cover is at its most dense.
And second, stay within sight of the coast,
where our own forces have advantage most.

PATROCLUS

I will obey conditions you have said,
or else risk greater odds of going dead.

ACHILLES

I will not go and sail from Troy until
you have returned from battle near the hill.

PATROCLUS

(leaping in joy)

Oh great Achilles! I will make you proud
and stand out past the soldiers in the crowd!

(ACHILLES and PATROCLUS excitedly press their foreheads together.
Fade to black.)

Scene 7

The battlefield.

PATROCLUS (dressed as ACHILLES) and
GREEK SOLDIER #2 and AJAX jump
proudly on stage right.

PATROCLUS

(pointing his spear across the stage)
The Trojans flee beyond the ships and more!

AJAX

Then let's give chase, commander! This is war!

GREEK SOLDIER #2

Achilles, after you we cannot fail!

AJAX

They're running! We can slaughter them wholesale!

PATROCLUS

Let's go and chase and not give any wait!
We'll chase them all to Tartarus' gate!

(a horn blows, and then a ripple of thunder)

AJAX

My gods! It sounds as Zeus is close nearby!

GREEK SOLDIER #2

He's watching overhead up in the sky!

(TROJAN SOLDIERS #1 and #2 enter stage left, followed by HECTOR.)

HECTOR

And so Achilles, legendary Greek,
You are the one I've come out here to seek.

PATROCLUS

Your fleeing forces don't inspire fear,
I think you're seeking noble combat here.
But when the dust has settled, winds are gone,
It will be you alone who's dead at dawn.

HECTOR

Soldiers, both Greek and Trojan all, step back.

PATROCLUS

And witness, not disturb, our great attack.

(PATROCLUS stabs at HECTOR with his spear, but HECTOR dodges.
PATROCLUS pushes the attack, but HECTOR avoids him.)

PATROCLUS (Cont.)

Will you duck every time that I come near?!

HECTOR

Then draw your sword and drop your coward spear!

PATROCLUS

So be it, Hector, fated Prince of Troy!
(PATROCLUS tosses the spear aside.)
Defeating you will be my all-time joy!

(PATROCLUS and HECTOR duel with their swords for a while.
PATROCLUS is knocked down, but manages to regain his footing and
upsets HECTOR's balance. HECTOR falls down, swinging desperately
at PATROCLUS.)

(HECTOR rises and charges PATROCLUS. The two of them fall hard
on the ground, each one holding the other's sword hand, trying to
wrestle it away. All the SOLDIERS watch in silent awe.)

(They both lose their swords, and begin pummeling and twisting
each other on the ground. PATROCLUS is still wearing the helmet
of ACHILLES. Reaching to the ground with a momentarily free
hand, HECTOR grabs PATROCLUS' discarded spear and brings it down
on PATROCLUS, who grabs HECTOR's wrist. HECTOR struggles to
bring the spear point down.)

PATROCLUS

Achilles will not die upon this field,
nor will I ever in this contest yield!

HECTOR

You have no strength or weapon or a shield.
You'll die from your old weapon I now wield!

(HECTOR, with a final burst of strength, pushes the spear into PATROCLUS' neck. PATROCLUS goes limp and all the SOLDIERS are briefly motionless.)

HECTOR (Cont.)

Goodbye, Achilles, fearsome, greatest Greek,
You were a noble fighter, but too weak
to stand against my skill and yet survive,
and where I go, Greek death will soon arrive.

(HECTOR slowly, almost tenderly, unclips PATROCLUS' armor and removes PATROCLUS' helmet, which really belong to ACHILLES, and gazes upon the face of his enemy.)

HECTOR

Who is this man to whom I've just laid claim?
He wore his weapons, armor, not his name.

AJAX

That is Patroclus! Patroclus is dead!

GREEK SOLDIER #2

(shouting off stage)

It's not Achilles! Patroclus is dead!

HECTOR

Where is Achilles? I will have him dead!

AJAX

He'll sooner have your rotten, Trojan head!
Hurry, you soldiers, save our friend's remains!
We will not lose his body on these plains!

(GREEK SOLDIER #2 rushes to the corpse of PATROCLUS, and he and AJAX fight HECTOR back from the corpse. HECTOR has ACHILLES' old armor, helmet, and weapon, though.)

HECTOR

Fall back, you Trojans. We will have the day,
And let those Greeks with shame escape away.
And tell Achilles I will end him, boy,
if he will duel me at the gates of Troy.

(HECTOR and TROJAN SOLDIERS #1 and #2 exit stage left.)

AJAX

Achilles will not sleep except in blood
of Trojan princes, women, crimson flood
will be unleashed upon deliverance
and on this world a rage unleashed, intense.

(AJAX heaves the body of PATROCLUS over his shoulder and exits
stage right with GREEK SOLDIER #2. Fade to black.)

Scene 8

Achilles' tent. The torches burn
low and dimly as ACHILLES reclines
impatiently on his bed.

AJAX stands at the edge of stage
left.

ACHILLES

I hear you outside. Step into the light,
Patroclus, brave and honored in the fight.

(AJAX enters, quietly and sadly)

ACHILLES (Cont.)

Oh Ajax! Where is Patroclus, my friend?

AJAX

My lord, Achilles, he has reached the end.

ACHILLES

He's dead, you're saying? Ajax, is he dead?!

AJAX

My lord, Achilles, that is what I've said.

(AJAX briefly exits stage left and returns with the body of
PATROCLUS.)

ACHILLES

(unintelligible grief screams)

Ohhh! Aaagh! Ahhh!
Who did this Ajax? Who must I now slay?
His killer's going to meet his death today!

AJAX

Achilles, it was Hector, Prince of Troy.

ACHILLES

Then Hector, Trojan Prince, I will destroy!
(more screaming)

(after some time passes in wailing)

AJAX

My lord, the Trojan prince he waits for thee,
Alone before the gates of Troy boldly.

ACHILLES

I will destroy him in a single duel
and drag around his body, lifeless fool,
And so dishonor Hector, Trojan prince,
And every other Trojan I see since.

(ACHILLES kneels beside PATROCLUS, placing a hand on his heart
Fade to black.)

Scene 9

Before the gates of Troy.

HECTOR is standing center stage,
wearing the armor and helmet of
ACHILLES, holding his sword and a
shield. ACHILLES enters stage
right, with new arms and armor.

ACHILLES

You killed Patroclus, Hector, prince of Troy?

HECTOR

I didn't think you'd have a trick decoy.

ACHILLES

No tricks remain, Prince Hector. This is it.

HECTOR

And either one of us, this death befit.
Will you consent to one agreement yet?
The winner lets his corpse's friends it get
To bury it with honors as is right?

ACHILLES

I make no pledges, Trojan. Let us fight.

(ACHILLES swipes his sword at HECTOR in a furious onslaught. At the end of this attack, ACHILLES slams HECTOR down with his shield. HECTOR slashes at ACHILLES' feet.)

HECTOR

And is it true your weakness is your heel?
You'll have to tell me soon how death does feel.

(HECTOR spins his shield back and knocks ACHILLES back a few feet. HECTOR climbs back up, his sword clashing with ACHILLES' blade.)

(ACHILLES and HECTOR continue fighting, neither one seeming to gain an edge. They circle each other, parrying blows, their swords dancing in mortal combat.)

ACHILLES

I will take back my arms and armor, too,
Unjustly stolen, greedily, by you.

HECTOR

You're drunk with anger, merciless with wrath,
Unquenched by killing, crazy for bloodbath.
You'd kill the world, if all the Fates allow

ACHILLES

No gods will save you from fate, Hector, now.

(ACHILLES bashes HECTOR again and again with his shield, eventually disrupting his balance again. But this time, when HECTOR falls, ACHILLES steps on his sword hand, kicking the sword loose. HECTOR slams ACHILLES with his shield, knocking him down.)

(Both men get up, HECTOR wielding just a shield. ACHILLES discards his shield, holding just the sword. He rushes HECTOR, but the prince deflects each stroke with his shield. HECTOR jabs at ACHILLES with his shield, but ACHILLES ducks and grabs the shield, wrenching it from HECTOR's grip.)

(ACHILLES smacks HECTOR with the other half of the shield, knocking him on his back. ACHILLES tosses the shield away.)

ACHILLES

Rise, Hector, I'll not slay you on your back.
I will not kill a dog with no attack.

(HECTOR, as he slides back, discovers a bronze spear point on the ground. Gripping it, he stands to fight ACHILLES.)

ACHILLES (Cont.)

Ah, now the weakling mongrel Trojan rises,
and he has got a number of surprises.

(HECTOR ducks and dodges ACHILLES' swipes as they move around. Eventually, HECTOR and ACHILLES grab each other's wrists, just as HECTOR and PATROCLUS did in their duel. HECTOR and ACHILLES are at a standstill, until ACHILLES suddenly drops his sword, using his free hand to quickly grab the spear point and jam it into HECTOR's chest. HECTOR falls with a heavy thud, clutching his chest.)

HECTOR

Return my body to King Priam please,
so my own father his dead son he sees
My spirit fades to shadows now and fog,

(ACHILLES picks up his sword and stands over HECTOR.)

ACHILLES

I will make no such promise to a dog.

(ACHILLES finishes off HECTOR, then removes his own armor and helmet from HECTOR. Wailing is heard from inside the walls of Troy, and ACHILLES looks up to the ramparts, raising his sword.)

ACHILLES (Cont.)

I am Achilles!

(Fade to black.)

Scene 10

Inside Achilles' tent.

HECTOR's body, barely clothed,
covered in red gashes, is laid out
on a low table in the tent.

ACHILLES is standing over the body,
next to his suit of armor.

(PRIAM enters stage left)

PRIAM

I've come alone, Achilles, you must trust.
Is there no end to your brutal bloodlust?

ACHILLES

No end to pain except what Hector met,
The living will remember; dead forget.

PRIAM

For weeks you've held the body of my boy,
my dear son, Hector, noble prince of Troy.
The ransom asked for waits not far away.
I hope it helps your fury to allay.

ACHILLES

Twelve days of mourning, I decide is fair
When we won't offer battle, that I swear
on gods and men and our loved one's pyres
and Hector's too, two funereal fires

PRIAM

That from our warring camps may light the night
and live in truce for time without a fight.

ACHILLES

But on the coming of the growing moon,
The morning after, war will restart soon
and on these fields the newer blood of men
will drench the roots of thirsty grass again.

PRIAM

Thank you, Achilles. I must now depart.
We each bear grief inside our troubled heart.

(PRIAM embraces ACHILLES for a long time next to the body of
HECTOR. Fade to black.)

THE END

HEMLOCK

A One-Act Tragedy

by Jon Lott

Dramatis Personae:

SOCRATES, famous philosopher

PLATO, Socrates' preeminent pupil

EUTHYPHRO, a student

CRITO, a student

PHAEDO, a student

SIMMIAS, a student

ATHENIAN JUDGE #1 and #2

Scene:

A jail cell in Athens

Time:

399 B.C.E.

Scene 1

Inside an Athenian jail.

There is a simple bedframe with a small blanket folded neatly on top of it. SOCRATES sits solemnly on the bed. A nightstand with a bronze goblet sits nearby. Near the entrance of the jail cell, on stage left, there is a bench, on which PLATO is seated, quickly scribbling down notes on a long, blank scroll. There is a chair, empty, near the entrance, near a single torch burning quietly in the darkness.

ATHENIAN JUDGE #1

(from off-stage)

Socrates, you are found guilty of the following charges: first, of corrupting the youth of the city of Athens. Second, of impiety and blasphemy, in your denial of the gods and goddesses of this city. What is the punishment decided by the jury?

ATHENIAN JUDGE #2

(from off-stage)

Socrates, you are hereby sentenced to death. By hemlock. To be consumed before next dawn.

(The jail cell is lit up, and SOCRATES turns to PLATO.)

PLATO

I didn't think it would end like this.

SOCRATES

(looking up at PLATO incredulously)

Hmmmmmm. This is how I always suspected it would end.

PLATO

That's not what I meant, Socrates. Crito and Phaedo and Euthyphro and the other students at the academy pooled our money together. We tried to bribe the jury for an acquittal of charges.

SOCRATES

Are you serious, Plato? How much did you offer them? There were five hundred men in that jury.

PLATO

We didn't just offer them money, professor. We paid bribes to over half of them in the last week, and promised coin to others after you were free. Over 3,000 drachma altogether.

SOCRATES

It was a foolish move, Plato. Not only that, I don't approve.

PLATO

If we had flipped thirty more votes, you would be free. Would you approve of that?

SOCRATES

It would be unjust.

PLATO

But you would be happy if you were free, yes? Don't you always claim that a just life is a happy one?

(PLATO begins to write on his scroll.)

SOCRATES

A just life is happy, yes, but not all happy lives are just. To presume that I would be happy upon being acquitted does not make it right. You needn't write that down, my boy, you know it all by heart by now.

PLATO

So is it right that you are sitting here, wrongly sentenced to death for...*impiety* and *corruption*? When we all know the archon Laches is a charlatan and a fraud?

SOCRATES

Why are you asking what you already know?

PLATO

I want to have your answers written down, Socrates. There must be a written record of your wisdom, for future generations.

SOCRATES

I never did like writing much.

PLATO

Why is that?

SOCRATES

My handwriting was imperfect, and I was a slow writer. Now my hands aren't as strong as they were when I was young and in the war, and the...strain on my joints is too painful. I'm not sure I ever expected to achieve this level of reputation considering how often I denied being wise at all.

SOCRATES (Cont.)

But regarding your earlier question, the justice system here is imperfect, but it is a contract I entered into. I knew the men of Athens would judge me; I only expected them to make the other decision. As far as I see it, this is more evidence against democracies. They're led by witless men, followed by sycophants with, at best, superficial understanding of governance. Don't write that last part down.

PLATO

Yes, professor.

SOCRATES

I mean it, Plato. I don't mean for my last words to be wasted on the ruling class.

PLATO

I didn't write that part, professor. The part about democracies being led by witless men, followed by sycophants with, at best, a superficial understanding of government.

SOCRATES

(laughs)

Governance. Not government.

PLATO

Apologies. I didn't write it down either way, I swear.

SOCRATES

Another reason not to write things down. Your pupils, years from now, might squabble over the minute differences between *governance* and *government*.

PLATO

But without a written record, how would they know what you meant at all? Surely I can't remember everything just as you said it.

SOCRATES

Let them think for themselves and reach their own conclusions. Just because I am seventy years old doesn't mean I have all the answers.

PLATO

Not all of them, anyway. But a great deal.

SOCRATES

I know you'd rather spend my final hours in overly sentimental, tearful moments. But I'd sooner spend them arguing with my students. Aren't they visiting me in my time of death?

PLATO

I believe they're waiting outside with the guard. Shall I go fetch them, professor?

SOCRATES

Yes, please.

(PLATO exits stage left. SOCRATES leans forward and lifts the cup of hemlock. He breathes in deeply and sets it back down.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

I could drink this now and die alone in peace. What is so precious about life that I must cling to every fleeting second of it? What virtue exists for me in my final hours? Would that I had died twenty-five years ago at Amphipolis with my brothers in battle. I could've taken some Spartans with me.

(SOCRATES walks over to PLATO's scroll and examines it.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

Hmmmm, he didn't write that bit after all.

Scene 2

Inside the jail cell.

PLATO
(off-stage)

Professor, I found Euthyphro.

SOCRATES

Bring him in, Plato.

(PLATO enters with EUTHYPHRO, who walks to SOCRATES and embraces him strongly.)

EUTHYPHRO
Professor, I have a problem that needs your counsel.

SOCRATES
Could it be more grave than an imminent death sentence?

EUTHYPHRO
It is, and more impious, too. I am bringing a case to court against my own father.

SOCRATES

What does he stand accused of?

EUTHYPHRO

Murder, professor.

SOCRATES

Whom has he killed? Explain the case.

EUTHYPHRO

On our farm, you know we hire a number of workers, in addition to the slaves we bought a few years back. One of the workers, a free man, killed a slave worker in a drunken fight. No one but the killer witnessed it, and my father, when he found out, he-

SOCRATES

How did he discover this?

EUTHYPHRO

The man confessed when confronted about it. My father tied up the man and threw him in a ditch overnight since we have no holding room at the farm. He didn't care if the man was uncomfortable down there, since he had killed his own slave. But the man died there overnight, and my father has the man's death on his hands now.

SOCRATES

The man violated your father's property and your father violated his life. Do you wonder whether it's right that you are the one to prosecute him, or whether what your father did was wrong?

EUTHYPHRO

I wonder whether it is impious to bring a case upon my own father.

SOCRATES

Do you remember how we defined piety and impiety, Euthyphro?

EUTHYPHRO

That which is pious—actions I mean—are in accord with the gods. Actions not in line with the gods are impious.

SOCRATES

Plato, do you agree?

PLATO

I do, professor.

SOCRATES

I've taught you both well. Well, Euthyphro, is it not true that gods have different opinions, just as humans do?

EUTHYPHRO

This is true.

SOCRATES

And then, is it not true that what is in line with one god may be looked down upon by another?

EUTHYPHRO

I suppose so, professor.

PLATO

Indeed, even during the Trojan War, the gods took opposing sides. Aphrodite sided with the Trojans while her own husband Hephaestus backed the Greeks, even forging the armor of Achilles.

SOCRATES

It's no wonder why Ares sided with the Trojans, I think, if that's where Aphrodite stood.

EUTHYPHRO

So what is pious to one is impious to another?

SOCRATES

Just so. And what is impious to one may be pious to another.

EUTHYPHRO

But surely all gods would agree to punish the murder of another?

SOCRATES

Would any god argue that a guilty man should go free?

PLATO

Are we still talking about Euthyphro's father?

SOCRATES

Of course.

EUTHYPHRO

If the act of throwing a chained man in a ditch to die is wrong, shouldn't the murderer be punished?

SOCRATES

Think of Zeus, who overthrew his own father, Cronus. What was just to Zeus was unjust to his father. And if a son of Zeus overthrew him, Zeus would regard that act as unjust, just as the son would believe his own action to be just.

EUTHYPHRO

I don't want moral relativism, professor. I want answers.

SOCRATES

Then you've come to the wrong jail cell, Euthyphro. I don't have the answers, I can only give you a map and let you find them on your own. In truth, I'm not sure I believe in any of the gods. Zeus, Hera, Ares, I certainly don't worship the silly local gods of Athens.

PLATO

Shhhh!

SOCRATES

What are they going to do? Make me drink two cups of hemlock? Facing certain death allows one to be more honest about life. An impious man would not worry about whether his action was permissible. He would not reflect on it, nor make the proper choice in the end.

EUTHYPHRO

Master, I still don't know if I should prosecute my own father.

SOCRATES

I can only give you the map, my pupil. You must determine your own way. I've found mine here.

(SOCRATES gestures to the goblet)

EUTHYPHRO

Goodbye, Socrates. And thank you.

SOCRATES

Farewell, Euthyphro.

(The two hug once more, for a long time. EUTHYPHRO exits)

PLATO

The dawn is nearly here, professor.

SOCRATES

Is Crito near? I know he would want to see me before I go.

PLATO

I heard he was bringing another student or two. I think I hear them now.

Scene 3

Inside the jail cell.

(CRITO, PHAEDO, and SIMMIAS enter, and each one embraces SOCRATES in turn, nodding respectfully at PLATO, writing quickly in his scroll.)

SOCRATES

I'm glad you've come to see me before dawn strikes.

CRITO

We've come to rescue you!

SOCRATES

I don't need rescuing! And I don't want rescuing, either!

CRITO

You don't want to be rescued?

SIMMIAS

We bribed the guards and secured a boat ten miles from here. We'll sail to Corinth!

CRITO

Or Crete!

PHAEDO

Or Egypt!

SIMMIAS

Or anywhere!

SOCRATES

Boys, I'm seventy years old. These bones can't survive another voyage across the sea. I'm too old to become a fugitive. What's more, I'm not afraid of death. And shame on you all for thinking I would go for this half planned scheme. Egypt, Phaedo?

PHAEDO

You want to stay and die here, Socrates?

SOCRATES

I made my peace with fate. If I leave now, my work and philosophy will be one of cowardice and inconsistency. I'll take the hemlock to prove my virtue to all those doubters. Send the boatman away, and any other helpers you've paid off. I'm not going anywhere but the afterlife, if there is one.

PHAEDO

Professor, I cannot stand here and watch you die.

SOCRATES

Then go, Phaedo.

PHAEDO

I will, and I'll take this hemlock with me!

(PHAEDO grabs the goblet of hemlock from the table and starts to stride out. PLATO rises to block the exit.)

PLATO

I will not let you leave with that cup.

SIMMIAS

Reconsider this, Phaedo.

PHAEDO

I'll pour it out. I will!

SOCRATES

Then I'll lick the cup or drink it from the floor. You think, dear Phaedo, that you are doing me some great kindness by this rashly thought out act. Instead, you will deny me the only choice that remains to me in this cell.

I have lived seventy long years on earth, and outlived all my siblings. I survived the great plague of Athens and fought in the great war against Sparta when you weren't yet born, and I survived it all. At Delium, at Amphipolis, at Potidaea, I never retreated from battle then, just as I will never retreat from philosophy now. I have survived the Thirty Tyrants and a marriage, too, something many of you haven't yet found the experience to fully appreciate.

When my mind is set to something, Phaedo, I accomplish it with courage and resolve. I have accepted my fate here, and I will drink the poison gladly. Now set down that cup.

PHAEDO

I'm sorry, professor. I thought that bluff might sway you.

(PHAEDO places the goblet back on the little table.)

SOCRATES

What is death anyway but a separation of soul from body? Why should we philosophers mourn at this exit? Is it not true that what we all do is discuss the virtue of the soul alone?

SIMMIAS

It is, Socrates.

SOCRATES

Then isn't death what we've been chasing all this time? Our glorious and unique chance to exit pain and pleasure? We have been resisting those physical states for too long to fling ourselves to them upon the brink of death. Truth is revealed to us when our mind is at peace, when quiet overtakes us and there are no sensations but our thoughts. Have you ever felt such a state while in pain?

CRITO & SIMMIAS & PHAEDO

No, professor.

SOCRATES

Have you ever felt such an understanding in pleasure? After you've laid with another man or woman?

CRITO & SIMMIAS & PHAEDO

No, professor.

SOCRATES

And have you, any of you, ever felt a transcendent virtue through some bodily sense? Ever seen truth, Simmias?

SIMMIAS

No.

SOCRATES

Ever tasted understanding, Phaedo?

PHAEDO

No.

SOCRATES

Ever smelt knowledge, Crito?

CRITO

Not yet.

SOCRATES

Ever heard truth, Plato?

PLATO

Only from your lips, Socrates.

SOCRATES

You flatter, but I don't have full knowledge of anything. Of all the sophists, I am the least wise, because I am aware of all that I have yet to learn.

CRITO

If you fled with us, professor, you could have time to learn even more.

SOCRATES

I would likely only learn of more things that I didn't know I didn't know, my brave Crito. To leave would mean I love my body more than I love my wisdom. I'm too old to love my body anymore, and I'm just lucky I lasted as long as I have.

SIMMIAS

What will we do when you are gone?

SOCRATES

Plato, what should they do when I am gone?

PLATO

Do you want my own thought or what I think you'd say?

SOCRATES

What do you think?

PLATO

Open your own schools, of wisdom or rhetoric, Simmias. Or seek a new teacher. Greece is a large place. Go to Corinth. Or Crete. Or Egypt, Phaedo, you've paid for the boat already.

(CRITO and SIMMIAS laugh.)

SOCRATES

I cannot lead you after I am dead. You must become your own masters. And if there is an afterlife, I hope to see you all there someday, so you can share with me all that you've learned after I am gone.

CRITO

Socrates, is there anything you would have us do for you? Something to tell your wife and sons, or business you need completed?

SOCRATES

I cannot think of anything specific. My wife knows how my property will be split up, the greatest share to Lamprocles, my eldest son. There is not much to give away, as you all know. My wife will remarry, perhaps to one of you or one of my other unlucky pupils. Echecrates or Apollodorus or some other man who's not present here at this moment.

SOCRATES (Cont.)

I would have you all live conscientiousness lives of honest introspection, and shun excessive wealth and the trappings of material life.

(SOCRATES takes a long, deep breath, letting it out slowly.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

Now, don't you youths feel thoroughly corrupted?

CRITO

How do you want us to bury you?

SOCRATES

To be honest, Crito, I haven't given any thought to my remains. You can bury me any way you like. I won't need my body anymore.

PHAEDO

All of Greece will come to mourn you.

(PHAEDO starts sobbing softly.)

SOCRATES

Stop crying, Phaedo. Can't you see I've chosen this? Be happy for me; this is what I want to do.

PHAEDO

Yes, professor.

SOCRATES

I think it's time you've left me to my duty.

(CRITO, PHAEDO, SIMMIAS, and PLATO start to exit.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

Not you, Plato. Stay for a moment.

(CRITO and SIMMIAS exit. PHAEDO looks back once, and exits.)

PLATO

What is it, Socrates?

SOCRATES

I want you to bear witness to my death.

PLATO

As you wish.

SOCRATES

No more writing, though. My final moments and last words you can tell Phaedo to make up, as long as it's in keeping with my reputation. He's always been a good storyteller.

PLATO

Yes, professor.

SOCRATES

You can fabricate the whole story if you want, Plato. You're the one with the scroll, after all. You can even edit yourself out so nobody will suspect you made it all up.

PLATO

Wouldn't that be an impious act?

SOCRATES

(laughs)

Maybe. Maybe not. Zeus made up stories all the time.

(SOCRATES breathes in, and sighs.)

The sun is rising, Plato.

PLATO

To me it feels as though the sun is setting.

(PLATO embraces SOCRATES.)

PLATO (Cont.)

You've been like a father to me.

SOCRATES

And you, a son.

PLATO

You are the wisest and best man I have ever known.

SOCRATES

And you are the greatest pupil I have ever taught.

(The long embrace ends. SOCRATES lifts the cup.)

SOCRATES (Cont.)

Shall I make a toast, Plato?

PLATO

Yes, professor.

SOCRATES

To virtue and to truth and to you. Farewell.

(SOCRATES drinks deep from the goblet, and a moment passes in silence. The lights dim, and SOCRATES drops the goblet and falls down upon the bed. PLATO watches in silence next to the door, clutching his rolled-up scroll. Fade to black.)

THE END

THE GREAT

A One-Act Tragedy

by Jon Lott

Dramatis Personae:

ALEXANDER, commander and king of the Macedonian army

CALLISTHENES, Alexander's biographer and historian

PTOLEMY, a Macedonian general

NEARCHUS, a Macedonian general

PARMENION, a Macedonian lieutenant

PHILOTAS, Parmenion's son, a Macedonian officer

ROXANNE, Alexander's pregnant wife

BAGOAS, a eunich lover of Alexander

AESIO, an army doctor

MACEDONIAN SOLDIERS

Scene:

The unconquered lands east of Persia

Time:

late 4th century B.C.E.

Scene 1

The Macedonian army camp in India.
326 B.C.E.

Inside a tent, loosely furnished, with a table in the center of the stage. Around it stand motionless ALEXANDER, NEARCHUS, PTOLEMY, and PARMENION. There is a chair near the stage right exit, and a suit of armor on a stand near a simple bed. Thunder and rain is heard in the background throughout the scene. The entire stage is dark, except for a light on CALLISTHENES, holding a scroll, facing the audience.

CALLISTHENES

Ten years ago great Alexander died,
and I was there among his soldiers, too,
where it seemed all of Babylon had cried,
a teary river drowned us as it grew,
when wailing reached the heavens far above,
and earthquakes trembled, and great Atlas shook
the earth with all the long and hard-worked love
for Alexander. So I wrote this book
as during conquest I had tagged along,
as his biographer, historian,
and legend builder, writer of the song
that I'd record on scroll with my own pen.
Now it has been some time since he has passed,
and clearly still remember I the day,
and with this document, his fame will last,
and never from this kingdom go away.
I think it only right to share with you,
as I was by his side through his campaign,
some memorable moments he'd lived through,
when kingdoms and the earth fell to his reign.
Nine years into this war we had survived,
when we had conquered Asia Minor all,
and on the way at Gordium arrived,
and cut the knot behind its inner wall.
And then beyond and south, to Issus, too,
then Memphis on the Nile river, long,
where Alexander's mighty army drew
up battle ranks and slew opponents strong

CALLISTHENES (Cont.)

More time had passed and we reached Babylon,
where its blue bricks had seemed a welcome breath,
but as we conquered Persia, we moved on,
from where, returning later, he met death.
And as we sought the distant eastern shore,
through mountains, deserts, and the Parthian plain
We met allies, who joined us in the war,
and enemies who, fighting us, were slain.
And Alexander even found a wife,
Roxanne, among a noble northern tribe,
who would beget his son, enrich his life.
All this I saw and learned. I was his scribe.
And I admit he had a tender mood,
between the empire he sought to found,
between the fleeing, foreign kings pursued,
and after he was ritually crowned.
All this and even more elapsed before
I start this tale and share the treachery
he suffered close before the Indian shore,
after the almost happened mutiny.

(CALLISTHENES walks out of the spotlight to the empty chair,
where he sits and quietly begins to write. The stage is slowly
illuminated.)

NEARCHUS

The men say they will not march any more.
For years they've ached to return home from war.

PTOLEMY

The weather here has not inspired hope.

ALEXANDER

They can't appreciate my kingdom's scope!

PTOLEMY

They understand it, but they miss their home.

PARMENION

Nobody wishes to unceasing roam.
They've seen their fathers, friends, and sons all fall
And now, for weeks, are stuck in endless squall.
The men are dying, not from sword but snakes
within this jungle, illness, poison, aches.

ALEXANDER

I've said repeatedly, we will advance
when to our favor lies all circumstance.

NEARCHUS

The soldiers feel as our luck's expired.
This jungle's not the glory they desired.

ALEXANDER

When storms here weaken, and give way to light,
to that King Porus, we will bring the fight.
But I will not nine years risk in one move
if battle circumstances disapprove.

PARMENION

And what are we to tell the men outside?

NEARCHUS

They think you want alone time with your bride.

ALEXANDER

My wife Roxanne is not for them to touch.

PARMENION

He meant you are with Bagoas much.
A Persian eunuch they will never trust,
who motivates their king by baser lust.

ALEXANDER

Regale the men with stories of our past,
this weather won't and can't forever last.
And when the earth is Macedonian,
and all the earth for Greece we'll conquer, win,
and men around the world will chant our names,
and everlasting all will be our fames,
and when we've spilt from enemies their blood,
who here would think of this unhappy mud?

PTOLEMY

Shall we depart and keep our men at bay?
We'll keep them happy with some extra pay.

ALEXANDER

Yes, extra money will suffice for now.
Remind them, too, of their own sacred vow
that they all swore before we left from Greece.

PTOLEMY & NEARCHUS

To fight forever in the quest for peace.

ALEXANDER

And that's enough for generals tonight,
We'll reconvene tomorrow at first light.

(PTOLEMY & NEARCHUS & PARMENION bow their heads stiffly, and exit stage left.)

CALLISTHENES

Is there anything else you'd have me do?

ALEXANDER

Oh Callisthenes, I'd forgotten you.
Before you go to sleep, your words unroll,
and read what today's written in your scroll?

(ALEXANDER lies down upon his bed, looking up at the ceiling.
CALLISTHENES unfurls his scroll.)

CALLISTHENES

Great Alexander marshaled all his men,
and spoke of their past glories all again,
from Darius' flight across the sand,
to where the king had made his final stand,
when Persian ranks broke form and turned to flee,
and Macedonians pursued with glee...

(From stage left, PHILOTAS, sneaking in with a dagger drawn,
slowly creeps up behind CALLISTHENES, who is facing ALEXANDER
lying on his bed.)

CALLISTHENES (Cont.)

Before that still, their long Tyrian siege,
when Azemilcus called our king *his* liege,
and in his mercy, Alexander said,
that all the Tyrians had enough bled,
but slavery for some would fate assign-

ALEXANDER

Callisthenes, do you see any wine?

(ALEXANDER sits up, noticing PHILOTAS a couple meters away.)

ALEXANDER (Cont.)

Get down, Callisthenes! Assassin here!

PHILOTAS

I mean to kill you, king. I have no fear.

(PHILOTAS pushes CALLISTHENES down as ALEXANDER unsuccessfully
tries to maneuver to his suit of armor. PHILOTAS moves in the
way and advances on ALEXANDER, who gives some ground.)

ALEXANDER

You would kill Alexander with that thing?

PHILOTAS

With just this dagger, I'll unmake a king.

(PHILOTAS swipes the dagger at ALEXANDER, who leaps back.

PHILOTAS strikes a few more times, but ALEXANDER dodges. Finally, ALEXANDER manages to grab PHILOTAS' wrist and wrench the dagger free.)

(PHILOTAS hits ALEXANDER and runs to the suit of armor, where he pulls out ALEXANDER's sword.)

CALLISTHENES

(shouting to the audience)

Great Alexander, he is under threat!

PHILOTAS

Great Alexander?! What an epithet!

(PHILOTAS and ALEXANDER duel for a moment, but two MACEDONIAN GUARDS quickly appear from both sides of the stage.)

MACEDONIAN GUARD #1

Philotas? You would stand against your king?

MACEDONIAN GUARD #2

And on a lesser-armed one, danger bring.

ALEXANDER

The plan is foiled, Philotas, you see!

PHILOTAS

It ends when I have justly murdered thee!

(PHILOTAS lunges again at ALEXANDER, but MACEDONIAN GUARD #1 spears PHILOTAS. PHILOTAS falls to the ground, dropping the sword, which CALLISTHENES picks up, holding it carefully.)

ALEXANDER

But why, Philotas? Why this treachery? You must, before you die, explain to me.

(PHILOTAS tries to speak, but only gurgles out a few incoherent words.)

MACEDONIAN GUARD #1

He's dying, Alexander, he will die, before he can explain his motive why.

ALEXANDER

Why did you kill him? He still had to talk,
and give up co-conspirators and squawk!
Get out of here, and send a doctor here,
We might yet save him if the doctor's near!

(MACEDONIAN GUARD #1 exits stage right.)

ALEXANDER (Cont.)

And Callisthenes, bring to me my sword.

CALLISTHENES

Of course, at once, great Alexander, lord.

(CALLISTHENES brings the sword to ALEXANDER.)

ALEXANDER

Now go and bring Nearchus to my tent,
and Ptolemy as well, in secret sent.

(CALLISTHENES exits stage left.)

ALEXANDER (Cont.)

Oh poor Philotas, tell me why you tried
to kill me, and instead now you have died.

PHILOTAS

The men...have no more...will to fight for you.
You've no...concern for your own...soldier crew.

ALEXANDER

You are not dead yet, Philotas, not yet!
I still can from my old friend answers get!
It's all because the soldiers want to leave?
And, one day go home they cannot believe?
Speak, speak, Philotas. Leave him Hades, please,
I pray you, beg you, I am on my knees.

(AESIO enters, alongside CALLISTHENES, PTOLEMY, NEARCHUS, and
MACEDONIAN GUARD #1. AESIO rushes to the body of PHILOTAS.)

AESIO

My great king, Alexander, he is dead.
He from the wound inflicted too much bled.

ALEXANDER

Aaahhhhhh Zeus and Hades curse me from above
when all I show the sacred gods is love!

(PTOLEMY and NEARCHUS exchange a doubtful glance.)

PTOLEMY

Philotas? Alexander, he's the spawn
of our own general, Parmenion.

ALEXANDER

I know it, Ptolemy. And now I'll see
Parmenion explain this treachery.
And hide his son, he cannot know his fate.
A crime by son will father implicate.
I'd just suspected something of him now,
when with you he did not recite the vow.

(MACEDONIAN GUARDS #1 and #2 drag PHILOTAS off stage right.)

NEARCHUS

That's not enough judge him of this crime.

ALEXANDER

It is when we are living in wartime!
The father is as guilty of the son,
for what he has attempted to have done,
against his king and country, in this room.
So guilt for Parmenion, we assume.

NEARCHUS

He served you nobly for nine years, my king.

ALEXANDER

Which makes betrayal a more wicked thing.
He came, Nearchus, behind my back,
to stab me with a dagger in attack.
Great men I've known who, looking at my face,
Attacked me with great character and grace.
But Philotas and Parmenion, too,
attempted to, in secret, cut me through.
Assassination I will not abide,
Parmenion must die. This I decide.

(MACEDONIAN GUARDS #1 and #2 leave, and the scene is dimmed,
and everyone but CALLISTHENES freezes in place. CALLISTHENES
approaches the audience, holding his scroll, and steps into the
spotlight.)

CALLISTHENES

I did not stay for Parmenion's pleas
and, though denying knowledge of the plot,
and though he'd fallen, begging, on his knees,
he took the justice Alexander brought.

(While CALLISTHENES is speaking, MACEDONIAN GUARDS #1 and #2 drag PARMENION in from stage left and throw him in front of ALEXANDER, begging—all silently—at ALEXANDER's feet. ALEXANDER stabs PARMENION once in the chest, and MACEDONIAN GUARDS #1 and #2 drag PARMENION off stage left.)

CALLISTHENES (Cont.)

In truth, I am not sure what I believe,
that several of them, more would make a scheme
that after all his soldiers did achieve,
they'd want to end our mighty Greek regime,
and kill the man we'd all grown to admire
and love as if he were our family,
who always could our deepest hearts inspire,
and, always first in battle, never flee.
But after that attempt upon his head
he pushed away all of his allies near,
he felt as if the world had sought him dead,
which fed his growing paranoia fear.

(PTOLEMY and NEARCHUS exit stage right, leaving ALEXANDER by himself next to the table.)

Scene 2

Babylon. 323 B.C.E.

CALLISTHENES, PTOLEMY, NEARCHUS
AESIO, and ROXANNE are standing
around ALEXANDER's bed. ALEXANDER
is lying on his bed. BAGOAS is
fanning ALEXANDER gently with a
large palm leaf, and AESIO is
holding a cup of medicinal wine.

CALLISTHENES

Four years had passed since India and he
had grown more maddened, desperate it seemed,
after his forces meant to mutiny.
And joyously the forces all, they beamed,
when Alexander said they would return
to Macedon, though he was still upset
because for eastern shores, he'd always burn
and never to the outer edges get.

CALLISTHENES (Cont.)

I wondered how the army would receive
their welcome home twelve years after they'd gone
to conquer foreign kingdoms, young, naïve,
and harden boys with battles dusk to dawn.
But Alexander didn't make it back,
and in one winter, spent in Babylon,
he felt a sudden feverish attack,
that from his body, all his strength was drawn.
A couple weeks he spent in illness there,
and, not recovering, summoned his men,
to state his will and designate his heir.
And I was in that room with scroll and pen.

(The scene is slowly illuminated.)

ALEXANDER

My wife, commander, bears my son inside
her womb, who may be born after I've died.
I'd have you bring Roxanne to Macedon,
and leave the sturdy walls of Babylon.
And there, my son will my own mother meet,
and grow a warrior who won't retreat
from battle or philosophy, and he
will seize the land I couldn't, past the sea.

NEARCHUS

And if Roxanne gives you a female heir?

ALEXANDER

A son she'll have, upon the gods, I swear.

ROXANNE

My king, I feel another king in me,
who may not his own living father see.

PTOLEMY

The empire may not survive your death.

ALEXANDER

Then build it back and give it back its breath.
You know the army well, Nearchus, too,
And you can stop any attempted coup.

PTOLEMY

It simply cannot stay after you're dead,
A beast will not survive without its head.

(ALEXANDER sighs heavily.)

NEARCHUS

And it will be some time before your son
has grown enough to lead the realm as one.

ALEXANDER

Wise Aristotle and my mother can
mold little Alexander to a man.

ROXANNE

(angrily)

And what of me, the mother of our boy?
Am I to be discarded like a toy?

NEARCHUS

You have no skill at ruling, Queen Roxanne.
You'd better leave the leading to a man.

ALEXANDER

Roxanne, my sweet, you will remain in Greece
to hold the royal family in peace.

ROXANNE

I am your queen, and by your son I'll stay,
not let Olympias push me away.
We know your mother plots and plans and dreams,
to keep her power close, enacting schemes,
and I don't trust her close to power still,
she has no tact for politics, nor skill.

ALEXANDER

(furiously)

You have no place to speak about her so,
and what we've been through, you will never know.
Nearchus, take my wife out of this room.

ROXANNE

I pray this place does not become your tomb.
(ROXANNE storms out stage left.)

ALEXANDER

My friends, do you recall Parmenion?
The man whose son attacked me, dagger drawn?

CALLISTHENES

In India, my king. Yes, I recall.

PTOLEMY

I can't forget it. I remember all.

ALEXANDER

I've thought about that night a lot of late,
and how on that night I was so irate,
I butchered him where his son had just died,
In his son's pool of blood, his body lied.
And what would happen if I had been killed,
and conquest that we'd leave yet unfulfilled.

PTOLEMY

What are trying to express, my king?

ALEXANDER

I know not if I did the proper thing,
by killing men who wanted to go home,
not sending them away from us to roam
the western lands and desert, find their way
to Macedon, so distant, far away.

PTOLEMY

You mean to say ambition grew too strong?

ALEXANDER

I wonder if my justice dealt was wrong.

NEARCHUS

You cannot change the past, and even so,
that was two men dead many years ago.

ALEXANDER

I know I cannot ever change the past,
but my decisions' impacts ever last.
My father sought upon my very birth
to change the culture of this very earth.
And though he could be cruel as I have been,
the likes of him and me won't come again.
My generals, I would please you adjure
for a brief moment with my paramour?

(PTOLEMY and NEARCHUS exit stage left.)

CALLISTHENES

Shall Aesio and I, too now step out
and leave you to matters you'll speak about?

ALEXANDER

No, you may stay, you and the doctor, too.
I may still have a need for both of you.

(ALEXANDER turns toward BAGOAS, standing nearby with a large palm
leaf, fanning ALEXANDER.)

ALEXANDER (Cont.)

Bagoas, dear, I fear that I may die
this very moment, looking in your eye.

BAGOAS

Oh Alexander, do not perish yet.

ALEXANDER

Do you remember when you and I met?

BAGOAS

In this same palace, eight great years ago,
when I was dancing in the court below,
and then I caught your eye upon the stair,

ALEXANDER

and seemed it all to pause the very air,
and I was smitten on the very spot,
when you, your figure, me, my eye it caught.

(ALEXANDER sighs deeply.)

BAGOAS

I could not ask for any greater thing,
to live and serve you, Alexander King.
And if you, here, you breathe your final breath,
I'll kill myself and join you soon in death.

(BAGOAS holds ALEXANDER's hand and kneels beside his bed.)

ALEXANDER

Oh you Bagoas, always you are here
beside me, times of courage, times of fear.
Upon me now, I feel a dizzy spell.

AESIO

Great Alexander, do you feel unwell?

ALEXANDER

Not more than I have in these last two weeks,
but go and summon my two favorite Greeks.

(AESIO hurries off stage left.)

ALEXANDER (Cont.)

Callisthenes, do you write all you've heard?

CALLISTHENES

I'm writing every single kingly word.

ACHILLES, HEMLOCK, and THE GREAT by Jon Lott
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ALEXANDER

Good man, Callisthenes, you are the best
biographer upon our noble quest.

(PTOLEMY and NEARCHUS enter stage left. AESIO follows.)

PTOLEMY

Great Alexander, many think you dead,
the soldiers don't believe you live instead.

NEARCHUS

The rumor's spread like water during rain,
And washing through the troops without a drain.

ALEXANDER

I am not dead yet, Ptolemy, you know.
Do you think I can stand and make a show?

AESIO

I do not think it wise, but it could be
a show of strength for all the men to see,
and know their Alexander is still king.

PTOLEMY

It could be an inspirational thing.

ALEXANDER

Aesio, doctor, hand me please your cane.
I do not think I'll stand without some pain.

(AESIO hands ALEXANDER a cane. With great effort, after BAGOAS
removes the top sheet, ALEXANDER rolls out of bed and stands,
walking out towards the audience.)

NEARCHUS

The men are standing, watching, down in court.
And when they see you, word will spread, report.

ALEXANDER

I may recover from this illness yet,
And rumors of my death they'll all forget.

(ALEXANDER hobbles slowly, leaning on his cane, to the front of
the stage. He waves with one arm at the audience.)

PTOLEMY

My lord, they see you living, and rejoice,
And listen to them, chanting in one voice.

MACEDONIAN GUARD #1 and #2

(off-stage)

Great Alexander King! Great Alexander King!

Great Alexander King! Great Alexander King!

(PTOLEMY and NEARCHUS, standing behind ALEXANDER, motion for the audience to join in the chant. Hopefully they do.)

Great Alexander King! Great Alexander King!

(ALEXANDER waves more and bows deeply to the audience. Fade to black.)

THE END