

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.

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!

Great Alexander King! Great Alexander King!

Great Alexander King! Great Alexander King!

Great Alexander King! Great Alexander King!

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

THE END