

SAVING NINEVEH

Act I

Scene 4

Setting: The shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

At Rise: It is a sunny, mild morning. We hear the crash and sigh of breakers, the cry of gulls, the piping of shore birds. JONAH is lying on his back, his limbs splayed about in a posture uncomfortable enough to suggest death. HE is soaking wet, draped in seaweed, and looks hugely the worse for wear.

ITHAMAR

(ITHAMAR BEN-AARON enters on the run. HE is a callow, earnest young man.)

Sir! Sir!

(HE looks out to sea.)

It's still there! And it's immense! Why, the fin alone must be taller than I am!

(ITHAMAR kneels.)

Sir! Are you all right? Sir?

(ITHAMAR opens JONAH'S shirt and presses his ear to his chest. JONAH comes to, face to face with ITHAMAR, and screams. ITHAMAR leaps back. JONAH raises himself up to a sitting position.)

JONAH

You—you're not a fish!

ITHAMAR

No, no, I'm not.

JONAH

You're not even remotely fishlike!

ITHAMAR

Thank you?

JONAH

The reason I say that is that I've been . . . I was just . . . I think I see a new problem.

ITHAMAR

You were swallowed up at sea by a great fish and then, at the command of the Lord, the monster vomited you forth again upon dry land!

JONAH

How do you know that!

ITHAMAR

I saw it! I, Ithamar Ben-Aaron, was witness to the miracle! Look! Look there! Off shore a hundred yards! Behold your fish!

JONAH

(Gets to his feet.)

It looked bigger from the inside.

ITHAMAR

It's a creature out of legend! The hand of God is in that fin!

JONAH

(Peeling seaweed off his robe)

Yes. Well. It's a fine big fish. So, where am I?

ITHAMAR

Near Arvad. Just up the shore that way a couple of miles.

JONAH

Arvad. Of course, Arvad. I understand the road to Nineveh runs out of Arvad?

ITHAMAR

Nineveh!

JONAH

That wicked city.

ITHAMAR

Why would you . . . I mean, that place It's, it's nasty and evil and dangerous.

(Gazes at JONAH with sudden wonder and then flings himself at
JONAH'S knees.)

My master!

JONAH

Master?

(Struggles to get free.)

ITHAMAR

All my life I've sought for such a man as you!

JONAH

Such as . . . !

(Looks out to sea. Whistles.)

Fish! Could you drop me off a little further up the beach?

ITHAMAR

I'll never let you go! A man of God! A prophet!

JONAH

Prophet!

ITHAMAR

Sent to denounce the wicked city of Nineveh!

(ITHAMAR leaps up and grasps JONAH'S shoulders.)

I am right, aren't I? You are a prophet? The Lord is sending you to denounce Nineveh?

What else would explain such a fish and such a man going to such a city?

JONAH

That seems logical.

ITHAMAR

You must tell me! I won't let you go until you promise!

JONAH

All right. I promise.

ITHAMAR

(Releases JONAH.)

Well?

JONAH

You win. I am Jonah Ben-Amittai and I have, in fact, been sent by God to denounce Nineveh-that-wicked-city.

ITHAMAR

I knew it! Oh, thank You, Lord, that Thou hast heard and answered my petitions!

JONAH

Your petitions!

ITHAMAR

An Elijah! An Elijah sent from of old to denounce the wicked Ahabs and Jezebels of these times! My whole life, the one thing I have sought, sought with every fiber of my being, was some sign from God. And now, behold! He has sent me—you!

JONAH

And this doesn't shake your faith?

ITHAMAR

Why should it?

JONAH

A pudgy, bedraggled, slime-covered sack of guts on a beach! I'm your sign from God?

ITHAMAR

Even you, my master! I know, as surely as I know anything, that I, Ithamar, have been appointed your disciple, help, and stay in this, your treacherous mission!

JONAH

No way!

ITHAMAR

Yes! Why do you think I am here? Why, of all the sons of Israel, I and I alone was privileged to behold the Great Fish of God?

JONAH

You were out for a walk?

ITHAMAR

Because you need me, even as I need you!

(RAPHAEL enters quietly, not yet manifest.)

JONAH

Don't even think about it! I don't need a disciple! I need a good meal, a hot bath, a new pair of sandals, and about three weeks in a hammock! That's what I need!

ITHAMAR

But your mission to Nineveh!

JONAH

Mission-shmission!

RAPHAEL

(Thunderously)

Jonah Ben-Amittai!

JONAH

(Jumps, then turns and sees RAPHAEL.)

You again!

ITHAMAR

(Cannot see RAPHAEL.)

Master, to whom are you speaking?

JONAH

Oh, an angel.

ITHAMAR

My master is speaking with a Son of Heaven!

(Falls on his knees, not quite facing RAPHAEL.)

O Hail, bright servant of God!

JONAH

You missed him. Here, turn this way a little. There you go. Now he's in your sights.

ITHAMAR

Hail, O Hail, wondrous creature!

JONAH

(To RAPHAEL)

I thought we were finished.

RAPHAEL

He chose you. You're His prophet.

JONAH

Well, but you know. I panicked, I fled, I ducked out. Face it, I'm a dud. He should find someone more worthy.

RAPHAEL

We have seen better work.

JONAH

Like you said, I'm a screw-up. No use even pretending.

RAPHAEL

And that's why we've decided to get you some help.

JONAH

Some help?

RAPHAEL

Yes, you know, some help. A helper.

JONAH

(Gestures towards ITHAMAR.)

Not . . . ?

RAPHAEL

Jonah Ben-Amittai, fear not to take as thy companion the young man, Ithamar Ben-Aaron. He has been appointed by the Most High to be thy disciple and scribe.

JONAH

The kid?

RAPHAEL

Lo, even the kid.

ITHAMAR

What did the Angel say?

JONAH

You're in, kid. Lo, even you. Raphael says so.

ITHAMAR

Raphael! The Raphael! O Glorious Prince! Splendid Eagle of Heaven! I lay my grateful heart at your feet for this great gift. But, oh to see thee, Bright Angel! May I but ask this favor?

RAPHAEL

(To JONAH)

It's not a good idea.

JONAH

Oh, a little manifestation for, lo, the kid here!

RAPHAEL

I don't think so.

JONAH

Oh, come on!

RAPHAEL

I'd really rather not.

JONAH

Sorry, kid. I tried.

ITHAMAR

But just to be in the presence of you both—an Angel and a Prophet! This moment will I remember with joy and thanksgiving all the days of my life!

JONAH

(To RAPHAEL)

You see that? That was me once. Him God has filled with joy overflowing. Me He has filled with fear and bitterness and sorrow. Get Him to explain that for me some day, will you? All right, the kid can follow me to the gates of Nineveh, but no further. Do you understand?

ITHAMAR

Jonah! Master! You must take me with you!

JONAH

No!

(Staring straight up into God's face)

Kill him Yourself if he finds favor in Your sight, but I will not have his blood on my hands. Do You understand?

RAPHAEL

(Answering at God's behest)

Ithamar Ben-Aaron will accompany you to the gates of Nineveh, but no further.

JONAH

Then we're agreed.

ITHAMAR

I am to be cast off?

JONAH

You're getting off light.

RAPHAEL

Oh, I do have one other message to give you as well.

JONAH

More help?

RAPHAEL

There has been a change in the message you are to carry to Nineveh.

JONAH

They're still a stench in God's nostrils, aren't they?

RAPHAEL

Call them what you will, but add this: Thus saith the Lord: In forty days Nineveh will be cast down!

JONAH

Cast down? Like Sodom and Gomorra? He's going to flatten them? And after the way they have brutalized our people. . . . Death to the Assyrians!

RAPHAEL

I'm so pleased we were finally able to make you happy. But farewell. And try not to screw up this time.

JONAH

What, you got a giant camel out there waiting to swallow me?

RAPHAEL

Precious time has been lost. Any more delays could be disastrous. Farewell, Jonah—prophet.

JONAH

Yeah. Farewell.

ITHAMAR

Is . . . is he leaving us? But I haven't seen him!

JONAH

(To RAPHAEL)

Hey, the kid's right. Just a little manifestation? He's doing a lot for you.

RAPHAEL

I'm afraid not.

JONAH

(To RAPHAEL)

Oh, forget it.

(To ITHAMAR)

Angels are like that.

RAPHAEL

(RAPHAEL starts to leave. Just before exiting HE turns, sees ITHAMAR'S disappointment, and relents. A brilliant light flashes on RAPHAEL. His voice booms)

And farewell to you, Ithamar Ben-Aaron, companion of the Prophet! I, Raphael, leave you my blessing!

(RAPHAEL vanishes. ITHAMAR lets out a shriek and ducks.)

JONAH

(To RAPHAEL)

Oh boogie boogie boogie!

(ITHAMAR raises his head. JONAH turns to him.)

Boogie!

(ITHAMAR screams and buries his head a second time.)

Sorry. I shouldn't have.

(To himself)

They'll boil me in oil if I go there! They'll stake me out and peel me alive! Could I have offended Him somehow? Is He trying to kill me? But then in forty days . . .

(To God)

What are You doing with me?

ITHAMAR

The Angel! I saw him! Raphael!

JONAH

That was him all right. Troublesome peacock.

ITHAMAR

Come, we must fly to Nineveh! It needs us!

JONAH

Needs us? Needs us! Relax, will you? It's hundreds of miles from here. And when we get there, they're going to kill us seventeen different ways.

(Starts to leave.)

I can't do this.

ITHAMAR

(Grabs JONAH'S elbow and starts to drag him away.)

When an Angel commands, who can but run to obey!

JONAH

Are you asking?

ITHAMAR

He manifested himself to me! He greeted me! By name! There was this huge flash of light! And this voice, like the voice of God, coming down from the sky! We must fly!

JONAH

(Hanging back with every step)

Is death such a thing to be chased after?

End of Act I