

# SAVING NINEVEH

## Act II

### Scene 1

Setting: The middle of the Assyrian desert.

At Rise: The stage is drenched in hard yellow light. At center is a bench. Up stage RAPHAEL perches on his ladder, wearing a short-sleeved robe and shorts, a wide hat, and dark glasses. HE sips lemonade while fanning himself with a palm frond. JONAH and ITHAMAR enter: hot, tired, and foot-sore. THEY trudge across the stage, almost stumbling over the bench before THEY register what it is. JONAH stops and stares at it. HE touches the bench lightly, then firmly, to be sure it is real. HE and ITHAMAR gaze off in every direction.

JONAH

Sand dunes as far as the eye can see, except for one solitary bench. This is suspicious.

ITHAMAR

I guess somebody must have lost it.

(Sits on bench.)

JONAH

Naah, it's him again.

ITHAMAR

Him who?

JONAH

Him Raphael. This'll be his work.

(Calls)

Raphael! Raphael! I know you're around here somewhere.

(RAPHAEL makes noise with his straw in the bottom of his glass  
but doesn't answer.)

ITHAMAR

You mean, the Archangel of the Lord? That splendid being who manifested himself to me in all his celestial radiance?

JONAH

Lightning bug about so tall.

ITHAMAR

Then that makes this bench a miracle of the Most High God!

(Leaps up off the bench.)

JONAH

It makes it a bench.

(Sits on it.)

So what are you staring at?

ITHAMAR

You're sitting on the . . . on the . . .

JONAH

Bench. Say it, Ithamar—bench.

ITHAMAR

But you're touching it . . .with your . . .your . . .

JONAH

My tokhes, Ithamar? Yes. I am placing my profane tokhes on this miraculous bench. That's why the celestial being put the miraculous bench here in the first place.

ITHAMAR

But but I, I couldn't. I mean, if it were a regular bench. But God . . .

JONAH

Ithamar, God made everything you ever sat, stood, or lay on. Look at the sand under your feet. Who made that? Some sandgrinder?

(ITHAMAR gasps at the realization and starts lifting one foot then the other off the ground, as if the sand were hot.)

JONAH

The air you breathe. The food and water you've been putting away for the last twenty years. Who made all that?

ITHAMAR

Aaaaagh!

(Covers his mouth with his hands, looks at the sand, the air, all around him. HE is paralyzed, looking at JONAH with frightened, bulging eyes, standing on one foot, not breathing.)

JONAH

So now what, Ithamar? You going to stand there for all eternity like a constipated stork? Or are you going to rest your God-given tokhes on this God-given bench? What's it going to be?

ITHAMAR

With wisdom such as yours, my master, it is enough for me to sit humbly at your feet.

(HE sits in the sand before the bench.)

JONAH

Whatever.

(Enter JASMINE and her three HENCHMEN. JASMINE is a vamp, swirling with silks, jingling with gold, her eyes painted like a cat's. Her HENCHMEN, waving scimitars, scuttle about her, sniggering and snorting. JASMINE sights her prey. SHE gestures to her HENCHMEN to freeze and draws their attention to the rubes on the bench. SHE straightens herself up, hikes back her shoulders, bats her eyelashes. THEY understand that SHE is about to go into action. SHE shoos them out of sight, turns towards JONAH and ITHAMAR, and jingles a bracelet.)

ITHAMAR

(Leaps up.)

Master, someone's coming. It's a woman!

JONAH

Out here in the desert?

JASMINE

Good afternoon, gentlemen.

JONAH

(Rises)

Good afternoon.

JASMINE

I hope I'm not interrupting anything.

JONAH

No. We were just discussing . . . nothing.

JASMINE

Men are so—fascinating. Might a lady have a seat?

ITHAMAR

But that bench. . .

JONAH

(To ITHAMAR)

Shush!

(To JASMINE)

Be our guest.

JASMINE

Thank you.

(Lounges full-length.)

Oh, I didn't mean to take this whole, wide, empty expanse of bench for myself.

(Sits up, makes room for another.)

ITHAMAR

Jonah, I'm not sure . . .

JONAH

(To ITHAMAR)

Relax!

(To JASMINE)

Thank you.

(Sits beside her.)

JASMINE

(To ITHAMAR)

What about you, sweet boy? There's room on this side.

ITHAMAR

It is enough for me to sit here at the feet of my Master.

(ITHAMAR sits again in front of JONAH. JONAH tries to signal ITHAMAR to can the "master" talk.)

JASMINE

Master?

(To JONAH)

Then this handsome young man is not your son?

JONAH

Not exactly.

ITHAMAR

I'm his disciple.

JONAH

Ithamar!

JASMINE

Disciple?

ITHAMAR

My master is a great prophet.

JASMINE

Oh, a prophet and his disciple. Yes, I see.

(Leans back on JONAH.)

It sounds nice. Can three play?

JONAH

Excuse me.

(Stands up and moves away from her.)

JASMINE

Oh, Papa.

(To ITHAMAR)

What about you, choir boy? More room than ever now.

ITHAMAR

No, I'm fine, thanks. Gosh, you're dressed pretty. You look like an empress of the Fertile Crescent.

JASMINE

Honey, I am the Fertile Crescent. You may call me Jasmine.

JONAH

No good can come of this.

ITHAMAR

Well, heh, Jasmine. Um, can you tell us how far it is to Nineveh?

JASMINE

Four days, maybe three. Depends on your legs.

(Pulls her dress up over her knee.)

These will do it in two.

JONAH

(Eyes closed, hands tightly clasped)

Be Thou my strength and my deliverer.

ITHAMAR

You know the city then?

JASMINE

Oh, darling, do I know Nineveh?

(Slides along the bench toward ITHAMAR.)

Oh, honey, the night life! Where do I begin?

(Lays a hand on his arm.)

Nineveh's home for me, you know.

(Walking her fingers up his shoulder to his cheek.)

It's where I learned all the little arts of pleasing.

ITHAMAR

(Hops up and retreats, trying to cover his alarm.)

Yeah? Like what's there to do there?

JASMINE

(Off the bench and after him)

Women, my boy! Women like you've never seen.

(Catches him, wrapping her arms around him.)

Fast, loose, easy, quick—and for a specimen like you, appreciative.

ITHAMAR

Oh. Oh dear.

(Slips away toward JONAH, clinging to him for protection.)

No, I'm sorry. I . . .

JASMINE

Not into women? But we have guys, too.

(JONAH and ITHAMAR spring apart, flexing their muscles and establishing their Manhood.)

Not into either? We've got opium dens, gambling parlors, a booming slave trade. Does none of this appeal to you?

JONAH

(Cold, steely, daring her)

Tell me more.

JASMINE

(Comes after JONAH. HE stands his ground as SHE garlands him about with her arms.)

A strong, virile man like you could join one of our military outfits and rape, loot and pillage to your heart's content. Doing all kinds of business these days down there in Israel, I understand.

JONAH

Oh, really?

JASMINE

What brings you boys to the big bad city, anyway?

ITHAMAR

Funny you should put it just that way!

JONAH

Ithamar, sit down!

ITHAMAR

No, master! Don't you see! The time has come!

JASMINE

What time, child?

JONAH

Ithamar!

ITHAMAR

Go to Nineveh, that wicked city, go and denounce her! Those were Yahweh's very words.

JASMINE

Who is this Yahweh? Some guru?

ITHAMAR

Yahweh is the great and mighty God! He made this bench!

JASMINE

Well, there's a display of power.

ITHAMAR

Master, tell her! Make her understand! In forty days, the wicked city of Nineveh will be rubble, will be cast down brick by iniquitous brick, flattened, ruined, destroyed, in punishment for its evil ways!

(To JASMINE)

And I don't want that you should get hurt.

JASMINE

(To JONAH)

What's he talking about? Nineveh destroyed?

JONAH

Well, the kid's right. Let's see—forty days plus four to get there—six weeks from this Thursday, the Creator of Heaven and Earth plans to destroy the wicked city of Nineveh. Probably, I don't know, mid-afternoon some time. Two, three o'clock.

ITHAMAR

Hear the words of the Prophet!

JONAH

(To ITHAMAR)

That will do!

JASMINE

You mean, like Sodom and Gomorra way back when?

JONAH

And I have no doubt you deserve it.

JASMINE

Destroy Nineveh! No! No, this can't be!

(Grabs JONAH.)

Wherever shall I go? Whatever shall I do?

JONAH

(Unsuccessfully trying to peel her off him)

What's done is done! It's the wages of sin!

JASMINE

(Wrapping herself even more frantically around him)

Oh, woe is me! Woe for my sins.

(SHE wrestles JONAH back onto the bench, sitting in his lap, as SHE repents.)

I knew it would come to this! Oh, how wicked, how sinful I have been! Oh, I repent!

JONAH

You do?

JASMINE

(Buries her head against his chest.)

O I do, I do! I'm sorry, sorry, sorry!

(Bursts into sobs, still wrapping JONAH up.)

ITHAMAR

What do we do now, my master?

JONAH

I don't know. He didn't say.

(Wrapping an arm around JASMINE)

Are we in some kind of a big hurry?

ITHAMAR

But Nineveh! Our mission!

JONAH

It'll keep. Jasmine?

(SHE sobs and curls more tightly around him.)

I sort of feel . . . younger.

ITHAMAR

Master?

JONAH

We're low on water, as I recall. Why don't you go search for an oasis?

ITHAMAR

But, Master, what about your wife?

JONAH

Rachel! God's anger I can handle—but Rachel!

(To JASMINE)

I'm sorry, ma'am. We've got the Lord's work to attend to. If I were you, I'd steer clear of the whole Tigris Valley. Up you go!

JASMINE

(SHE rises, straightens her clothes, and stares at JONAH, perfectly dry-eyed, cool, contemptuous.)

You are a pitiful pair of rubes! Brother, what next? Repent and be saved! Why is it Nineveh attracts all the wackos?

(Calls)

Abdul!

(The three HENCHMEN run in, brandishing their scimitars.)

JASMINE

If you're such a prophet, how come you didn't see this coming?

(To ITHAMAR)

What about you, disciple? Surprised you too, did I?

(Gives him a cool, appraising look.)

I wonder what you're worth.

ITHAMAR

We haven't two shekels between us.

JASMINE

Oh, I know that. I got papa's money bag some time ago. But that's not quite what I had in mind. Abdul, get the rope!

THE ABDULIM

(All three HENCHMEN lift up coils of rope and answer)

Yez, bozz!

ITHAMAR

Which one is Abdul?

JASMINE

They're all Abdul! It saves a world of trouble.

(The ABDULIM circle JONAH and ITHAMAR, brandishing their weapons and ropes, and sniggering.)

JASMINE

(To ITHAMAR)

You want to see Nineveh? Then you will. King Sargon will pay me nicely for a boy like you. He can always use more stone haulers.

ITHAMAR

Master!

JONAH

Behind me, Ithamar!

(ITHAMAR scurries behind JONAH.)

You plan to sell me, too, I suppose?

JASMINE

Fossil like you? I'd be lucky if I could sell you for parts.

JONAH

If he goes, I go!

JASMINE

I'm sorry, papa. He is going, but you're staying right here—for the rest of time. Abdul!

THE ABDULIM

Yez, bozz?

JASMINE

(Points to one of them.)

You. Feed the birds.

(The chosen ABDUL sidles up toward JONAH swinging his sword while the other two egg him on. E draws his sword back and lunges at JONAH'S breast. JONAH leaps aside with a shout and the sword runs ITHAMAR through. JONAH flees, not stopping to look back. ITHAMAR screams, totters onto the bench, and dies, flopping back full length on it.)

(The ABDULIM freeze. The killer, hereinafter the BAD ABDUL, hangs his head. JASMINE stomps over to ITHAMAR, lifts his hand, and lets it drop back limp onto the bench. The BAD ABDUL hangs his head even lower. The other two ABDULIM point at the BAD ABDUL and giggle. RAPHAEL has been watching all of this but makes no move to intervene.)

JASMINE

(To the BAD ABDUL)

You idiot! That was the marketable one!

BAD ABDUL

Sorry.

(JASMINE rolls her eyes and marches off. The two GOOD ABDULIM, still twittering and pointing, and the crestfallen BAD ABDUL, dragging his sword in the dirt behind him, follow her off. After a moment JONAH looks to see if the coast is clear and then sneaks back on stage.)

JONAH

Ithamar?

(Sees him lying motionless on the bench.)

Ithamar!

(Runs to him and kneels beside him.)

Ithamar! O God, no!

(Tears open ITHAMAR'S robe.)

Ithamar! Ithamar, my God!

(Listens for a heart beat, checks for signs of breath. Nothing.)

Ithamar! You can't do this! Oh, what have I done? What have I done?

(Cradles ITHAMAR, smooths ITHAMAR'S hair, puts his ear by ITHAMAR'S nose for any sound of breathing, etc.)

This is all my fault. Ithamar, what have I done to you! O, my good Ithamar!

(RAPHAEL watches with concern but still does nothing. JONAH lays ITHAMAR down and climbs to his feet, addressing heaven)

He-e-e-elp! If You're still listening—help! Send help! He's young! He's good! He's not the screw-up you're after! I am! Help him! Please God, save him!

RAPHAEL

(Looking skyward)

Really? Here? Now?

(RAPHAEL skips down from his ladder and runs off stage, while JONAH wanders about, lamenting.)

JONAH

God in Heaven! Hear me! You can't take Ithamar from me like this! This is all my fault! Mine, not his! I'm a coward and a sneak and a rat! Wreak your vengeance on me if You wish! But spare my Ithamar! Oh, what have I done! If I had just gone to Nineveh in the first place, without all this screwing around, Ithamar would still be alive! But no! I run here, I run there. And now! Lord, I am sorry! I am! Show some mercy! Spare me my Ithamar!

(JONAH falls on his knees, crumbling in grief. RAPHAEL, meanwhile, has reappeared wearing a stethoscope and carrying a plain brown suitcase. HE walks quickly but calmly to ITHAMAR, sets down his suitcase, and opens it. HE opens ITHAMAR'S robe and listens for a heartbeat with the stethoscope. The suitcase holds a portable fibrillator. RAPHAEL pulls out the electrodes, squirts conductant paste on them, rubs them together, and holds them on ITHAMAR'S chest.)

RAPHAEL

Clear!

(There is a flash of lightning, a crash of thunder, and ITHAMAR'S back arches spasmodically.)

JONAH

Hello?

RAPHAEL

Clear!

(Another flash and crash. ITHAMAR arches again.)

JONAH

Lord?

RAPHAEL

Once more! Clear!

(Again, lightning, thunder. ITHAMAR arches, falls back, draws a deep breath and moans.)

JONAH

(Rises)

Can it be? Would You really—?

RAPHAEL

(Puts the stethoscope back into his ears and listens to ITHAMAR'S heartbeat.)

That got it!

(Disassembles and packs his gear.)

JONAH

O, Lord, if you have. If only You really have!

(JONAH goes to ITHAMAR as RAPHAEL slips away with his suitcase. JONAH kneels beside ITHAMAR, who moans again and starts to move.)

Ithamar. Ithamar, can you hear me?

(ITHAMAR stirs feebly and blinks open his eyes.)

Ithamar, are you okay? Can you hear me, Ithamar?

ITHAMAR

(Slowly raises himself up.)

You're not a fish.

JONAH

Oh, my Ithamar! What a scare you gave me!

ITHAMAR

Who was mixing those things?

JONAH

You must rest. You've been badly hurt.

ITHAMAR

(Checks his chest but finds nothing, no wound at all.)

I was . . . run through, wasn't I? Jonah?

JONAH

Yes, you were.

ITHAMAR

(To heaven)

I owe You one.

(Starts to force himself to his feet.)

We have to get moving.

JONAH

Keep still! You need to rest.

ITHAMAR

No. I'm okay. Really.

(Straightens up completely.)

You've got a city to denounce.

JONAH

Boy, have I ever!

(To HEAVEN)

Thank You.

End of Act II, Scene 1