

SAVING NINEVEH

Act II

Scene 2

Setting: The Assyrian desert, not far from Nineveh.

At Rise: Bright, hot lighting. The stage is empty but for a single large rock.

JONAH and ITHAMAR enter, dusty, sun-burned, their clothes in tatters. For all that, JONAH steps along briskly, whistling, while ITHAMAR drags. THEY reach the rock. ITHAMAR lowers onto it stiffly. JONAH drops their bundle next to the rock and starts doing some light stretching exercises, still whistling. ITHAMAR stares at him.

JONAH

Five hundred miles on foot. This is certainly the most exercise I've had in a while.

(Reaches into the bundle, pulls out a wine skin, and offers it to ITHAMAR.)

Drink?

ITHAMAR

Thanks.

(It seems almost too heavy to lift, but HE does, and shoots a stream of wine into his throat.)

JONAH

Better?

ITHAMAR

(Takes another drink and hands the skin back to JONAH.)

Better.

JONAH

That's good. You're doing fine.

(Takes a drink.)

Bread?

ITHAMAR

What shape is it in?

JONAH

(Reaches into the bag and pulls out a chunk of bread.)

I could kill with this.

ITHAMAR

I couldn't get it down.

(JONAH tosses the bread over his shoulder. Thud.)

ITHAMAR

Leaving it for the birds?

JONAH

For the stonecutters.

(Takes another drink.)

ITHAMAR

It can't be much farther. How far do you think?

JONAH

To the gates of the city? Eight, nine miles maybe.

(Replaces the wine skin in the pack.)

ITHAMAR

God be praised. Think of the hundreds of miles we have come, my master!

JONAH

We have had a fine long walk.

ITHAMAR

You're in a chipper mood.

JONAH

Yeah, well.

ITHAMAR

No, really. What's happened to you?

JONAH

It's the Big Match. I'm up for it.

(Starts boxing with an invisible opponent.)

Take that and that and that!

ITHAMAR

Something has happened. I'm your disciple, Jonah, you should tell me these things.

JONAH

(Stops boxing.)

You're right. Something has changed. I've been thinking about it for three hundred miles or so, and it's hard to put it into words. But for you, I will try. I notice you're sitting on a rock. Have you really looked at this rock?

ITHAMAR

(Leaps off the rock.)

No. Why? Should I?

JONAH

Well, look at it. This rock—I mean, it's solid. It's real. We're not just imagining this rock. It's really here. Or at least, it is if you are.

ITHAMAR

How do you mean?

JONAH

When I was in the fish—maybe even before that—anyway, after I had fled from Gath-Hepher, all these rocks and trees started to lose something. Trees weren't trees anymore. They were like hollow, fake. And the sky wasn't a sky. It was like a sheet, hanging there, with nothing behind it. And people weren't even people. They were like puppets or ghosts. And this, I think, was the “pale, bleached quality” Raphael warned me about. And all this, I have come to understand, was because I had refused to be Jonah. God made me a prophet. I didn't ask to be one. But He made me one. And whatever God makes you, that's the thing you are. And you can either be that thing, that real thing, or you can refuse, and end up as a lie, a madman, even a ghost. Anyway, because I refused to be Jonah the Prophet, the real Jonah He made me, how could the rest of His creation be real to me? Now this—this is a fine rocky rock and this is good sandy sand. And that sky up there—it goes all the way up to Heaven. And it's all because I am no longer fighting Him. I am Jonah the Prophet and I will denounce the wicked city of Nineveh! No more fighting it, no more playing at it, just doing it.

ITHAMAR

So the Lord brought us both back to life.

JONAH

You could say that. Anyway, on to Nineveh! Where the people are at least real living sinners and not just ghosts.

(Returns to his shadow boxing.)

And a left and a right.

ITHAMAR

Perhaps He will bring them back to life as well.

JONAH

Not a chance! You heard Him. Forty days and Nineveh is history.—Take that and that!—
I mean, I've been a screw-up, but they've been really vicious.

ITHAMAR

It's a lot of people. It's even a lot of cattle. And dogs and cats and birds. They can't all
have it coming.

JONAH

Ithamar, He said what He said.

ITHAMAR

Maybe if they change their ways.

JONAH

Ithamar! These are Ninevites! They're not going to do that! All they're going to do is
shove their fingers deeper into their ears and keep sinning!

ITHAMAR

But if you keep telling them? They've got to hear you at some point.

JONAH

Ithamar, they are going to kill me! And they're not even going to be very long about it.

ITHAMAR

Then why even send you in there?

JONAH

He's just trying to play fair. He gives them a warning, they ignore it, and they get what's coming to them.

ITHAMAR

His will be done, I suppose. Still, I hate to think of it.

JONAH

You don't have to. You'll be miles away by then.

ITHAMAR

Master, I'll never leave you!

JONAH

Ithamar, stand up.

(ITHAMAR rises. JONAH removes his cloak, wraps it around ITHAMAR'S shoulders, embraces him, and steps back.)

ITHAMAR

Then it's final, isn't it?

JONAH

It has always been final. I have never, for thirty seconds, considered dragging you with me into . . .that.

ITHAMAR

But, Jonah . . .

JONAH

Peace! No. No.

ITHAMAR

My life was nothing and nowhere before you . . .

JONAH

Were belched into it by a fish?

ITHAMAR

Until you found me!

JONAH

Until God found you. Who knows? He may be dogging your footsteps even as we speak. Someday, when you least expect it—probably when you least want it—He may raise you up: Ithamar the Prophet, Man of God!

ITHAMAR

But now, Jonah. What do I do now?

JONAH

Your ordinary duties. Study the Torah. Marry, and love your wife. Raise your children with kindness. Care for the widow and orphan. Welcome the stranger in your gate. You're being offered the better job, Ithamar.

ITHAMAR

Is there anything I can do for you, Jonah? Just tell me and I will run like the lion to do it.

JONAH

Yes. There is something. But it's a very big favor.

ITHAMAR

Jonah, anything!

JONAH

Go to Gath-Hepher in Galilee. Find my Rachel. And tell her, I did as I was told.

ITHAMAR

I will.

JONAH

I will console myself with that when the first rock flies.

ITHAMAR

I will pray for you for the rest of my life, Jonah Ben-Amittai.

JONAH

Why don't you pray for me the rest of my life? You'll be done a lot sooner.

(JONAH hands ITHAMAR their pack.)

Here. I won't need it.

(ITHAMAR begins to leave.)

Ithamar!

(ITHAMAR stops.)

Shalom, Ithamar Ben-Aaron.

ITHAMAR

Shalom, my master.

(Exit)

JONAH

(To Heaven)

My life is over. The last person I love has left it. Make what You wish of the remnant.

(BLACK OUT. Suddenly we hear the nasal, sinuous, minor-key music of the Middle East and the noise of crowds: people shouting, calling, tramping up and down the streets, hawking all manner of goods.)

End of Act II, Scene 2