

SAVING NINEVEH

Act II

Scene 3

Setting: Nineveh-that-Wicked-City

At Rise: People pushing and shoving, selling illicit wares, committing vile crimes, indulging in unseemly practices, and otherwise enjoying themselves. JONAH stands to one side viewing the scene with loathing and outrage.

JONAH

This place is even worse than I had imagined!

(JONAH fights his way against a current of pedestrians, all of them aggressive and rude.)

Excuse me. Pardon me. My fault. Pardon me. Sorry. Hey, watch it, will ya!

(The NINEVITES are a motley crew. Each cast will have to create their own assorted crimes and depravities. Some that have been used successfully include the following:

A woman inviting young men into a house of prostitution, showing off young women and drawing attention to their charms;

A man dragging his daughter, kicking and screaming, to this madam and selling her to her;

The madam showing off a young dancing male to the company;

Assorted drunks staggering about the stage, one of them collapsing in a stupor;

A hapless psychotic, carrying an empty bird cage, looking into the sky and whistling;

A pickpocket slinking from person to person, stealing their belongings, and stooping to rifle the pockets of the fallen drunk;

A beggar woman pleading for alms and being ignored, or, when less lucky, kicked, buffeted, and insulted;

A young exposer, who skulks about in a trench coat, then flashes the old beggar woman and sends her into hysterics;

A Roman guard beating three slaves with a whip.)

JONAH

(Directly addressing the audience)

Have you ever seen such a dump! And the people! Look at them! Hurried, wolfish, hungry-looking.

(A NINEVITE crashes into him.)

Ooof! Excuse me! Hey! Same to you!

(Directly to audience)

These are them! These are the Assyrians, the people who are drinking the blood of Israel! Raping and terrorizing our lovely land—to feed this, this dragon's lair! This serpent's pit of a city! It's, it's inhuman! They stalk each other like wild animals! They beat and rob and kill! And does anyone help? No! A crowd gathers and they place bets and applaud! I've seen this!

(The PICKPOCKET slinks up behind JONAH, pats his coat and pants, finds nothing, and leaves. JONAH never notices any of this.)

And the shops here sell any kind of ludeness, rottenness, vulgarity! Anything to gratify your slimiest desires! Why, they pimp their own sons and daughters on the street, and drink up the profits! And their poor—my heavens!—their poor people have to sleep out here on the road, and does anyone stop to help them? The passers-by kick them aside like trash! Their sons grow into slick dealers, supple villains. And their daughters! Walking along with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet.

(Wheels suddenly to shout at the NINEVITES)

You are the offspring of evil! Your hands are full of blood! Behold, the fury of the Lord comes from afar, burning with anger, in thick rising smoke! His lips are full of wrath, His tongue like a devouring flame!

(This pulls some of the NINEVITES up short, though most pass on by. RAPHAEL enters to listen at a distance, invisible.)

Because you sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes; because you trample the head of the poor into the dust and turn aside the way of the afflicted; because a man and his father go into the same woman; for these transgressions the Lord has prepared your destruction.

(More NINEVITES stop to watch. THEY are becoming fascinated and angered.)

Woe to you who loll on your beds devising evil and only rise to perform it, who covet fields and take them, who leave the poor man without bread or raiment. Vengeance is the Lord's and He shall repay! Though you dig down into Sheol, He will find you! Though you climb to Heaven, He will drag you down! Though you hide in the depths of the sea, He will send the sea monster to deal with you! Trust me on this one.

NINEVITES

What's the meaning of this? — Some kind of crank! — Get along with you! — Somebody do his business! — No! Listen to him! — Give him a chance! — Let him speak, then get him! — Loony! — Scroll thumper! — Torah beater!

JONAH

What do you mean, you well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for your neighbor's wife?
What do you mean, you women dressed in scarlet, sniffing the wind like camels in heat?
And you—violators of children! Shall God not punish you for these things? Shall the Lord not smash you like a piece of pottery?

NINEVITES

You're talking in riddles! — What are you trying to say! — What's all this about?

JONAH

In forty days Nineveh shall be cast down!

NINEVITES

Cast down! — How? — Are you nuts? — By whom? — What's this?

(By now all the NINEVITES have stopped.)

JONAH

The Lord who makes the mountains shudder, who makes the storm whip the sea to fury,
He will cast down the wicked city of Nineveh! All your images will be battered to pieces
and all your streets laid waste!

NINEVITE 1

Go! Send for King Sargon!

NINEVITE 2

Right!

(Runs off)

JONAH

Tear your cheeks, pluck out your hair and beard! Rend your garments and wail!

NINEVITE 3

O woe is me! This is my evil! I have destroyed myself!

JONAH

Roll yourselves in the dust! Smear your faces with mud and ashes!

NINEVITE 4

I am scum! Filth! This man has seen right through me!

JONAH

Make lamentation like the jackal, howl and mourn! For in forty days, Nineveh shall be a ruin!

NINEVITE 5 (A WOMAN)

Evil! Evil! Evil! All my life has been evil! And now my days are done! O woe!

JONAH

Wait wait wait a minute! What is all this now?

NINEVITE 5

This man is a prophet!

JONAH

A prophet! Well, yes, but . . .

NINEVITE 5 (A WOMAN)

(On the verge of despair)

Tell me! Tell me, sir! Am I so very bad?

JONAH

You're a low-grade tramp. You cheat on your husband five times a week—with a sailor!

NINEVITE 5

Five times? Five! Oh, if only it were just five! But you knew! You knew I was a tramp!

JONAH

Come on, lady! Anybody could have told you, if you'd just asked them.

NINEVITE 5

Behold, the prophet of God!

NINEVITE 6 (A MAN)

All my life I've waited for a man like you!

JONAH

What! Again!

NINEVITE 6

I will study at your feet, meditate on your words!

JONAH

The post is taken! Now get your hands off me! Repent! Repent, I say! For the wrath of the Lord is already upon you, melting down your gates, scorching your rooftops!

NINEVITE 7

Oh, I repent! I repent! I repent!

JONAH

You what!

NINEVITE 7

I repent!

JONAH

Forget it! I'm not being taken in again!

NINEVITE 7

But my heart is wrung with remorse!

JONAH

It is not!

NINEVITE 7

Then why am I so wretched?

JONAH

You're drunk, you're hungover, you've ruined your health doing God-knows-what. And He does, too! Hah!

NINEVITE 1

We are all lost, doomed for our iniquity!

JONAH

Yeah, well, don't come crying to me about it!

(SARGON, KING OF ASSYRIA, marches in. HE is preceded by the HERALD and followed by NINEVITE 2, who went to fetch him. NINEVITE 2 carries a chest. HE sets down the chest and fades to the side. The KING strikes a commanding pose. The HERALD stays by his elbow to be ready when needed.)

NINEVITES

It's the King! — Sargon! — The King! — Holy Smokes, it's the Man!

(THEY back away from him, bowing their heads.)

SARGON

What is this I hear of some threat to my city?

JONAH

You have heard aright, Sargon, King of Assyria! I, Jonah, peasant of Galilee, am sent to pronounce the doom of Nineveh as recompense for her sins! Nor will the Lord spare you, O King, you who abhor justice and pervert all fairness! Who give judgment for a bribe, injustice for hire!

(The NINEVITES are shocked by this, all except the HERALD,
who can't imagine why one wouldn't take a bribe.)

Because of you, Nineveh shall be plowed up as a field, the capital of Assyria a heap of rubble!

SARGON

And what are we threatened with exactly?

JONAH

In forty days Nineveh will be cast down!

SARGON

Cast down!

JONAH

At the very name of Nineveh men will groan aloud and their hearts grow sick at the remembrance of what the Lord did to her in her evil! And that's my message for you, Sargon, King of Ruins!

(The NINEVITES are transfixed. Some are moaning. Others are on their knees, tearing their hair. Yet others are rocking in terror and covering their faces. SARGON rises to his full height. His eyes are blazing. JONAH turns away and falls on his knees.)

JONAH

I have done my job and am content! Execute your wrath on this city! I rejoice to die here pronouncing her doom!

(SARGON strides to JONAH, who shrinks back. SARGON pulls JONAH to his feet, stares him full in a face a moment, then throws his arms around him and bursts into a wailing sob. JONAH is too astonished even to cry out. SARGON releases him, then turns toward the NINEVITES.)

SARGON

Evil!

(A groan from the NINEVITES)

Evil!

(A louder groan from the NINEVITES)

Woe unto us and unto our city! We have been found evil in the eyes of God, and evil we have been! Who can deny it!

(Mounting hysterical sobbing from the NINEVITES)

JONAH

(As nonplused as it is possible for mortal man to be)

But but but but

SARGON

O my people! Wail and mourn and weep for your sins!

(The NINEVITES rend their garments, wail, bang their heads, lift handfuls of dirt and dump them on themselves. All, that is, except the HERALD, whose worldliness is so deeply entrenched that he remains unmoved, and largely puzzled, by all of this.)

SARGON

It's all true what you say, good and holy man! We have been a violent, lying, murderous, lecherous people! We are lascivious, wicked and false! I do take bribes! I do pervert justice!

(The HERALD shrugs, as if to say, “Of course. So?”)

Wail, my people! Think of your sins, your lechery, your malice, and cry and cry and cry!

JONAH

But but but but! My martyrdom!

SARGON

Herald! Where are you?

HERALD

Here, O Master of the Cosmos.

SARGON

Sackcloth, Herald! I want sackcloth!

JONAH

Sackcloth!

HERALD

I think we have sackcloth in the trunk, O Stellar Glory of the East.

SARGON

Fetch it! Fetch it! O Woe! Woe for the sins of Nineveh! (Etc.)

HERALD

(Opens the chest. After a moment of rummaging around, HE pulls out sackcloth and brings it to SARGON.)

Sackcloth, O Morning Star of Assyria.

SARGON

(Removes his robes and hands them to the HERALD.)

Here. Take these away. Rags! Filth! Vanity!

(Spits on his robes, then takes the sackcloth from the HERALD and puts it on, a little clumsily at first.)

Ashes, Herald?

HERALD

I will see, Great Whizbang of Nineveh.

(SARGON stands, beating his breast and wailing, while the HERALD rummages around in the trunk.)

JONAH

Now wait a minute!

SARGON

Yes?

JONAH

When I said repent, I didn't mean . . .

SARGON

Sackcloth and ashes is right, isn't it?

JONAH

Well, sure, I suppose. But . . . oh, forget it.

SARGON

O woe for the sins of my wretched, evil, corrupt, hateful city!

HERALD

Ashes, ashes.

(Pulls out a small urn.)

Ah!

(Carries the urn to SARGON.)

Ashes, Most Glorious of Penitents.

SARGON

Cover me with them, Herald, and spare not! My pride is laid low. My vanity is but dust.

HERALD

Would it please Your Strickenness to kneel?

SARGON

Of course.

(SARGON Kneels. The HERALD pours the ashes over SARGON, rubbing them in with barely concealed zest. Meanwhile, SARGON continues to moan:)

O woe! Woe for the sins of Nineveh! O weep and mourn, my people! Our sin turns back to destroy us!

(The NINEVITES weep and wail and beat themselves, rend their garments, stuff their mouths full of dirt, pass around a rock and take turns hitting themselves and each other on the head with it.)

SARGON

We have been so very bad! I am so penitent, Herald!

HERALD

O Sir! You are the very Apogee of Abasement.

JONAH

What kind of a crazy, screwball repentance is this! It's too late, I tell you! The jig is up! Forty days! You got it? Forty! Like don't buy no annuities, you know what I mean?

SARGON

Herald, I wish to make a proclamation.

HERALD

Of course, Great Husband of Camels.

(Helps SARGON to his feet. Claps loudly.)

The Poobah speaks!

(The NINEVITES are hushed, awaiting SARGON'S word.)

SARGON

People of Nineveh . . .

(A chorus of moans cuts him off. SARGON clears his throat and tries again)

People of Nineveh . . .

(An even louder chorus of moans cuts him off. HE raises his voice)

People of Nineveh . . .

(A really tumultuous chorus of moans cuts him off a third time. HE shouts:)

People of Nineveh—shut up!

(The moan falls off, like a vacuum cleaner unplugged.)

People of Nineveh, hear me! We have lived, as this good man has shown us, a life of wickedness, greed, lechery, and thought to escape unharmed. But we are caught, tangled in our own nets. Yet, for all that, we shall not despair. Perhaps our amendment will bring God's mercy. Therefore listen and take note. This is a decree of the king and his nobles. No man or beast, herd or flock, is to taste food, to graze or to drink water. They are to clothe themselves in sackcloth and call on God with all their might. Let every man abandon his wicked ways and his habitual violence. It may be that God will repent and turn away His anger, and so we shall not perish.

NINEVITES

We will do it! — We repent! — We will change our ways! — Down with violence! — Down with whoring! — Repent and be saved! — Hooray for Jonah! — Hooray for king Sargon! — Hooray for Jonah, our prophet! (Etc.)

JONAH

Wait wait wait! You don't get it! It's too late! It's over! You're not saved! You're not! You're doomed! Got it? Forty days and then, poof! You hear me! I'm not your savior! I'm not your savior!

(The NINEVITES circle JONAH, cheering and waving. THEY hoist JONAH onto their shoulders and carry him about. Suddenly there is a loud crash of thunder, the sky goes dark, and a brilliant light falls on RAPHAEL.)

RAPHAEL

People of Nineveh! Hear the Word of the Lord!

(The NINEVITES shout with amazement and fall on their faces, quivering. JONAH tumbles off their shoulders.)

JONAH

Here it comes! Here it comes!

RAPHAEL

People of Nineveh: The Lord, Judge of Heaven and Earth, has seen your misery, your shame, and your softening of heart!

JONAH

Their what!

RAPHAEL

And for this repentance, He revokes the punishment!

(The NINEVITES raise their heads, their faces flooded with joy, astonishment, and relief.)

JONAH

No!

RAPHAEL

Nineveh shall live, grow, and prosper!

JONAH

No! No, this can't be! There must be some mistake.

RAPHAEL

Farewell, O Nineveh, and you too, Sargon, King! Reign long and be a shepherd to your people! And tempt not again the wrath of the Lord!

(The light goes off. RAPHAEL has becomes invisible to the NINEVITES, though JONAH can still see him.)

NINEVITES

Did you see that? — It was an angel! — It was a god! — It was like the sun! — It spoke and there was thunder! — It was blinding! — He said we're saved! — We're going to live! — Jonah has saved us! — Jonah has saved us! (Etc.)

JONAH

(To RAPHAEL)

I'm going to kill you for this!

(HE rushes at RAPHAEL but can't reach him.)

Come down here, you feathered light show, and fight like a man!

RAPHAEL

The Hosts of Heaven rejoice at your triumph, Jonah Ben-Amittai!

JONAH

Triumph? Triumph!

RAPHAEL

Never has any prophet of Israel turned so many hearts to God as have you.

JONAH

So now what? No fire? No storm? Not even a little pestilence?

RAPHAEL

Nothing but warm sun and cool rain, rich crops and healthy children!

JONAH

(To the NINEVITES)

Forget what I said! Go back to sinning! Crush that widow! Grind that orphan! Pimp that daughter! God won't be happy till you're all destroyed!

(The NINEVITES hear none of this. They swarm around JONAH, hailing him as prophet, savior, friend. THEY lift him again onto their shoulders and carry him about.)

It's too late! It's too late! The angel was just fooling!

(The NINEVITES carry JONAH past RAPHAEL.)

RAPHAEL

Blessings be upon you, Jonah of Galilee! The Lord rejoices at the saving of Nineveh!

JONAH

(To RAPHAEL)

We're through! Through, do you hear?

(To Heaven)

Do You hear me? I never want to hear Your Word again! Never! You hear me! Never!

End of Act II, Scene 3