

DANIEL AND THE BEASTLY BABYLONIANS

A Play

by

MARGARET FOREY

SchoolPlay Productions Ltd

15 Inglis Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3HU

DANIEL AND THE BEASTLY BABYLONIANS

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CAST - In order of appearance

Narrator

Soldier 1

Soldier 2

Daniel }

Shadrach }

Meshach } - *Israelites*

Abednego }

High Priest of Bel

Clerk in Job Centre - (*later Keeper of the Lionhouse*)

Sorcerer 1

Sorcerer 2

Sorcerer 3

Sorcerer 4

Sorcerer 5

Royal Messenger

Sorcerer 6

Sorcerer 7

Sorcerer 8

Sorcerer 9

Doorkeeper

First Servant

Second Servant

King Nebuchadnezzar

Arioch

Deputy High Priest

First Priest

Second Priest

Herald

Angel

King Belshazzar

Third Servant

King Darius

PRODUCTION NOTES

CASTING:-

Daniel and the Beastly Babylonians was written to be played by 32 boys, but is equally suitable for a mixed cast. The only parts which have to be performed as male are those of the two Soldiers, the four Israelites, and the three Kings. With alteration of Priest and Sorcerer to Priestess and Sorceress, all other parts can be presented as female. The few verbal alterations required are largely self-evident.

With doubling, the cast can be reduced to 22 as follows:-

- 1) The *NARRATOR* can also play the *ANGEL*. A costume change can be effected by giving the *NARRATOR* a cloak to wear over the *ANGEL* costume; alternatively the *NARRATOR* can appear as an angel throughout.
- 2) *SOLDIERS 1 and 2* can play *BELSHAZZAR* and *DARIUS*. They have ample time to change costumes and make-up.
- 3) The *HERALD*'s part can be played by *ARIOCH*.
- 4) The *ROYAL MESSENGER* can also take the parts of the *DOORKEEPER* and *SERVANT 3*.
- 5) *SERVANTS 1 and 2* can play *PRIESTS 1 and 2*; if extra time is needed for changing, their parts in Scene 3 can also be assigned to the *ROYAL MESSENGER*.
- 6) The parts of *SORCERERS 8 and 9* can be given to *6 and 7* in Scene 2, and shared as desired among the other *SORCERERS* in Scene 10.

The cast can be increased by:-

- 1) separating the parts of the *CLERK* and the *KEEPER of the LIONHOUSE* and omitting the references to the Job Centre in Scene 8.
- 2) assigning the parts of *SERVANTS 1 and 2* to different people each time they appear, thus turning 2 *SERVANTS* into 8;
- 3) adding an unlimited number of extra *PRIESTS* in Scenes 6 and 10 (these would have chorus parts only);
- 4) using up to 6 visible though non-speaking *GUARDS* at the start of Scene 7.

Size of parts:-

The largest part is that of the *HIGH PRIEST*; *NEBUCHADNEZZAR*, *DANIEL* and the *CLERK* also need to be able to memorise a considerable amount. Moderately large parts are those of *DARIUS*, *BELSHAZZAR*, *ARIOCH*, the *DEPUTY HIGH PRIEST* and *SORCERER 5*. Very small speaking parts are: *SORCERERS 2, 6, 7, 8, 9*; *Priests 1* and *2*; the *3 SERVANTS*; the *HERALD*; *ROYAL MESSENGER* and *DOORKEEPER*, and *SOLDIER 1*; but all the *SORCERERS* (and other *PRIESTS* as well if desired) have also 2 poems to memorise.

PERFORMANCE TIME:- Probably 1¼ - 1½ hours.

STAGING:-

The play can be performed with a simple set and without change of scenery. An unchanging backdrop could be used to give the desired atmosphere (we used one called 'Interior of an Egyptian Tomb' hired from Border Studio, Berwick). A throne and some seating are required; if desired these can be made of stacked rostra, Q-Build or boxes. It should be possible for Sorcerers 1 and 2 to lie full length on the seats, which should be loosely covered with material - coloured blankets, old curtains, etc. - under which they can hide. There should be some sort of wall over which Nebuchadnezzar can look in Scene 7, when he peers down into the Burning Fiery Furnace. The furnace itself can be suggested by red lighting; if this is not possible a large cut-out of flames could appear at the back of the stage. The arrival of the Angel allows for some pyrotechnics, if desired.

The 'lion-pit' can be constructed in front of the stage, so that Daniel and Servant 3 can actually descend into it; alternatively a normal exit can lead to an unseen den. Wherever the lion pit is to be, it should contain an empty receptacle into which the water from Servant 3's bucket can be poured when he is swilling out the pit. The human remains handed out of the pit will obviously vary according to what is convenient: we happened to possess part of a dressmaker's dummy and a set of false teeth, but obvious alternatives are a stuffed stocking, a stuffed sock, and a stuffed glove. Light brown would probably be more convincing than pink or white. The hand that writes on the

wall can be effectively created from a stuffed glove suspended by the finger tips from fine nylon fishing line. The wall on which it writes needs to be made of thin plain absorbent material - an old sheet or curtain lining are ideal - stretched tightly over some sort of frame. Two people will be required backstage to achieve this effect: one to move the hand from behind the wall as it 'writes', the other to paint the mysterious words on the back of the sheet with dark-coloured but runny paint, so that the writing soaks through and appears on the front. It is easier to fasten the nylon line to something firm (even a real fishing rod) unless the top of the wall is very smooth, or it will catch when moved along. The painter has to write the words mirror fashion, so it is as well to have them on a bit of paper pinned up behind the wall, to be copied exactly. This needs a trial run, to gauge how wet the paint should be, how large the writing, etc. The 'wall' will of course have to be renewed for each performance, which is easier if it has been safety-pinned round the frame rather than nailed. When designing the set it should be borne in mind that both Belshazzar and the audience should be able to see the writing appearing on the wall.

The idol of Bel which is brought on stage by Priests 1 and 2 in Scene 5 can remain there in the background till its overthrow at the end of the play. Daniel needs to be able to lift it by himself.

The 'secret entrance' to the temple used in Scene 10 can take any form, as long as a crowd of people can pass through it with reasonable speed, carrying the offerings. Our Priests crawled through a flap under a seat, which proved rather awkward for people wearing long robes.

PROPS:-

- Scene 1:* Swords for Soldiers; 2 sacks filled with something that clanks metallically; scroll for High Priest.
- Scene 2:* 2 or more rugs for couches; job-cards; scroll for Messenger.
- Scene 4:* Papers for High Priest and Deputy, including plan of Temple.
- Scene 5:* Golden statue of Bel and cloth to cover it (possibly also kitchen steps for Priest placing cloth over statue). Scroll for High Priest.
- Scene 6:* 4 Silver Goblets on a tray.
- Scene 8:* Scroll for King; golden bowls containing nuts, etc. for guests to eat with fingers; any other golden objects that might have come from Temple in Jerusalem (possibly 7-branched candlestick?). Hand to write on wall.
- Scene 9:* Broom and bucket for Servant; arm, leg and dentures (or similar) for lions' den; sack for Clerk.
- Scene 10:* Baskets or boxes of flour and wine, also large jar; statue of Bel; small bowl or bag (of ashes, in theory, but can be empty) for Daniel; scroll and lantern for Priest; dishes of meat and bottles for meal.

PRONUNCIATION:-

Stressed syllables are indicated by capitals:

Abednego:	Ab-BED-nee-go
Alzopongee:	ALL-so-PONG-ee
Amariah:	AM-a-RY-ah
Babylon:	BABB-ill-on
Babylonian:	Babb-ill-LONE-ian
Belshazzar:	Bell-SHAZZ-ah
Darius:	Darr-I-us
Jehoikim:	Je-HO-ick-im
Mene mene tekel upharsin:	MEE-nee MEE-nee TECK-ell up-HAR-sin
Median:	MEED-ee-an
Meshach:	MEE-shack
Nebuchadnezzar:	NEB-you-cad-NEZZ-ah
Psaltery:	SALT-err-ee
Nineveh:	NINN-evv-vay
Pongeepongee:	PONG-ee-PONG-ee
Shadrach:	SHAD-rack

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SCENE 1

(The sounds of battle are heard off: clashing of weapons, yells, screams of anguish, etc. As the sound fades, NARRATOR enters).

Narrator: In the third year of Jehoikim, King of Judah - that's 598 BC, to you - Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, besieged Jerusalem and captured it.

(Noise of battle resumes and dies away as - preferably through auditorium - DANIEL, SHADRACH, MESHACH, ABEDNEGO enter escorted by SOLDIERS 1 and 2, who are carrying sacks that clank).

Soldier 1: *(Driving the PRISONERS on with his sword).* Come on, you lot, get a move on.

Shadrach: Where are you taking us?

Meshach: Why can't we stay with the rest of our people?

Soldier 2: You'll find out soon enough - though what the king wants a bunch of blasted Israelites for, Bel only knows.

Daniel: Then take us to Bel, whoever he is, and we'll ask him.

Soldier 2: Take you to Bel - that's rich, that is! Don't you Judeans know anything at all? Bel is our god: Bel of the Babylonians -

Soldiers: *(Dumping their sacks and salaaming; by this time the whole party has mounted the stage).* Glory be to Bel!

Soldier 2: *(Looking for something to sit down on and finding it).* And he's a great deal more use than that tin-pot little deity you have down in Jerusalem. Look how easily we captured the place; no trouble at all. Here, you can take a rest till somebody comes for you.

(Israelites sit).

Soldier 2: Your Jehovah couldn't even look after his own temple - all these golden bowls, candlesticks, hanging lamps - *(To SOLDIER 1)* cleared the lot, didn't we?

Soldier 1: Easy-peasy.

Abednego: *(Jumping up).* You've stolen the sacred vessels from the Temple?

How dare you! That's sacrilege!

Soldier 2: Ah, come on! (*Pushes him down again*). Even in a dreary little backwater like Judah you must know better than that! What do you expect a conquering army to do: go to the Tourist Office and ask for a guided tour of the city before taking the next camel home? And me with my GCSE in pillaging and plundering? General's Certificate of Soldiering Experience, Grade 1, that's me!

Soldier 1: Best looter in the class, he was.

Soldier 2: That's why I got the job of collecting you: part of the loot, you lot are. Got to hand you over to the king with all this ironmongery from the Temple (*Kicking sack*) - though personally I'd rather have a golden candlestick than one of you, any day. (*Yawning and stretching*). Bel, I'm tired! It's been a long journey. Hope somebody comes and fetches you soon.

(*SOLDIERS slump down and doze*).

Daniel: That's bad news: I don't like the idea of being loot. Loot doesn't usually get handed back again.

Abednego: You think they're going to KEEP us here? For good?

Daniel: Sounds rather like it to me.

Meshach: How horrible! I don't want to live among strangers for the rest of my life.

Shadrach: Daniel, what are we to do?

Daniel: I don't know, John. There's only one thing I can think of.

Shadrach: What's that?

Daniel: We may have left the rest of our families behind, but the God of Israel doesn't live in Jerusalem - oh, I know that's where the Temple is, but God is with us here, just as much as He was at home. HE won't leave us: we must make certain we don't leave Him. (*Thoughtfully*). Perhaps it will help if we can look on this as a sort of opportunity: a trial of our faith. We have to prove we can be strong.

Abednego: I don't feel strong. I feel very Very VERY weak. And I think I've got a blister on my heel. It's been coming on for the last half-mile.

Meshach: We can't be strong on our own. But Daniel's right: we aren't on our own.

Soldier 1: We certainly aren't, the High Priest's coming.

Soldier 2: (*Hurriedly to the ISRAELITES as he scrambles up*). On your feet - and watch your manners, now. I'll give you a word of warning: the High Priest's a very important man around here. Been Nebuchadnezzar's right-hand man for years. So you'd better not offend him, if you know what's good for you.

(Enter HIGH PRIEST carrying a scroll).

High Priest: Ah, Amariah, they told me you were back. Have you got the - ?

Soldier 2: These are the prisoners, Your Holiness.

High Priest: *(Appalled).* THESE?

Soldier 1: Anything wrong, Your Holiness?

High Priest: *(Consulting scroll, and looking disparagingly at the PRISONERS after each epithet).* "Tall, handsome, high-born, outstandingly intelligent" - was this the best you could do?

Soldiers: Afraid so, Your Holiness.

High Priest: Oh well, I suppose we'll have to make do with what we can get. *(To DANIEL).* You there, what's your name?

Daniel: Daniel.

High Priest: *(To SHADRACH).* You?

Shadrach: John. *(HIGH PRIEST points to each of the others in turn).*

Meshach: Thomas.

Abednego: Peter.

High Priest: What extraordinary names! 'Daniel' I can just about cope with, but *(Stuttering over them)* J-John, T-Thomas, P-Peter - I could never remember tongue-twisters like that. From now on you will be known as Shadrach. Meshach and Abednego. Much easier for everyone. *(To SOLDIER 1).* Make a note of that.

Soldier 1: Yes, Your Holiness.

High Priest: Right, you lot. Now let us get one thing straight from the start. I am Pongeepongee, High Priest of Babylon, famous throughout the land, and certain to go down in the history books. YOU are four barbarians from the backwoods whom nobody has ever heard of and nobody will ever hear of. I AM IMPORTANT, YOU ARE NOT. Is that clear?

Daniel: Quite clear, thank you.

High Priest: However, for reasons he has not thought fit to share with me, His Imperial Majesty King Nebuchadnezzar has decided to take the cream of your race and train them up to help him administer his empire. *(Sniffs).* You lot look more like sour milk to me. All the same, if you show yourselves worthy of it, you will in due course be given important posts in the Civil Service. You may some day achieve power and authority. BUT YOU WILL NEVER BE AS IMPORTANT AS I AM. Is that clear too?

Daniel: As crystal, thank you.

High Priest: I am glad that is understood. *(To SOLDIERS).* Bring them along.

(He sweeps out).

Soldiers: (*Picking up sacks and driving PRISONERS before them*). Right, you heard. Get moving. Step on it, *etc.*

(*Exeunt*)..

SCENE 2

The Job-Centre in Babylon. Rugs on couches on the opposite side to the door.

(*Enter CLERK with a handful of cards which he lays down as SORCERERS 1 and 2 enter. CLERK bustles up to them*).

Clerk: Can I help you two gentlemen?

Sorcerer 1: Rather a delicate matter. Is there somewhere we can speak privately?

Clerk: Certainly - if you'd like to come over here? (*Leading them to couches*). Do take a couch.

(*SORCERERS sit; CLERK sits facing them*).

Clerk: Now what may I do for you?

Sorcerer 1: My friend and I are just - er - making enquiries.

Sorcerer 2: That's it, enquiries.

Sorcerer 1: I wouldn't want you to think that we've lost our jobs or anything.

Sorcerer 2: Oh no, we haven't lost our jobs.

Sorcerer 1: I have a very good position at the moment, very good indeed.

Sorcerer 2: The best possible.

Sorcerer 1: (*Rising and striking a pose*). In fact I would call myself one of the highest in the land.

Clerk: (*Impressed*). You would?

Sorcerer 1: (*Sits*). Metaphorically speaking. I have the King's ear.

Clerk: (*Looking round frantically*). Have you? Where?

Sorcerer 1: Metaphorically speaking. His Highness does nothing without my advice.

Sorcerer 2: Nothing at all.

Sorcerer 1: But all the same, one likes to look around from time to time. Keep the old ear to the ground, don't you know?

Clerk: (*Bewildered*). The King's ear?

Sorcerer 1: No, MINE, you fool. Metaphorically speaking. One wouldn't wish to miss any opportunities. For promotion, I mean.

Sorcerer 2: ANY opportunities.

Sorcerer 1: So what have you on offer?

Clerk: Well, we haven't a great deal at the moment. The recession, you know. There have been rather a lot of redundancies

Sorcerer 1: } Don't mention that word!

Sorcerer 2: } *(Together)*. Oh!

Clerk: *(Rising and moving to where he left the cards)*. But if you would like to look at the cards over here oh, excuse me a moment. *(He sees someone outside and moves to the door)*.

Sorcerer 1: } *(Together, agitated)*. Someone's coming.

Sorcerer 2: } We must hide.

(SORCERERS 1 and 2 dive under rugs on couches, out of sight. Enter, furtively, SORCERERS 3, 4 and 5).

Sorcerer 3: *(In loud whisper to CLERK)*. You can't see me.

Clerk: *(Bewildered)*. I beg your pardon?

Sorcerer 3: You can't see me. I'm invisible. I am just a disembodied voice in your ear.

Clerk: *(Crossly)*. Oh, not MORE ears; I've had enough of those. Besides, I can see you perfectly well.

Sorcerer 4: Told you so, old man.

Sorcerer 5: Those spells of yours are out of date. You need to lay in some new stock. No wonder you've been made re

Sorcerer 3: } Don't say it! don't say it!

Sorcerer 4: } *(Together)*. Hush!

Clerk: If you don't mind, gentlemen, perhaps we could get to the point. I have some other customers *(Looks round)* I DID have some other customers. But THEY seem to be invisible now. Or else they've gone.

Sorcerer 3: *(Alarmed)*. Other customers?

Sorcerer 4: *(Soothingly)*. No, no, old chap, the place is quite empty, nobody is going to see you.

Sorcerer 5: Besides, we have to get used to this. There's nothing disgraceful about having to look for a

(SORCERERS 3 and 4 clap their hands over his mouth).

Sorcerer 4: *(Severely)*. There's no need to say it out loud; I'm sure this fellow

understands what we've come for. *(To CLERK)*. You have information about, er, positions? Occupations? Professions fit for gentlemen? Preferably with a large

Sorcerer 3: VERY large.

Sorcerer 4: financial reward?

Clerk: *(Picking up the cards and handing them to SORCERER 3)*. Everything I have is on these cards, gentlemen. Perhaps you'd like to take a seat and glance through them?

(But all three SORCERERS are too absorbed in the cards to move. With SORCERERS 4 and 5 on either side of him, SORCERER 3 reads them out, while the CLERK waits deferentially in the background, or busies himself with paper-work).

Sorcerer 3: "Wanted, steady reliable camel-driver for long-distance journeys. Pay half a shekel a month." *(They look at each other in dismay)*.

Sorcerer 4: Half a shekel? My wife would never agree to that. Her last head-dress alone cost over five shekels.

Sorcerer 3: What about this one? "Labourers wanted in vineyard. Pay, standard rates."

Sorcerer 4: What's the going rate for labourers?

Sorcerer 5: A penny a day, I understand.

Sorcerer 4: Impossible! Read the next one.

Sorcerer 3: "Door-keeper wanted for small temple. Must be prepared to work during public holidays. No overtime pay. Board and lodging provided."

Sorcerer 4: Intolerable! Next?

Sorcerer 3: "Beggar has vacancy for apprentice. Must provide own begging bowl and loin-cloth. No pay, but good prospects for right candidate, particularly if lacking arms or legs." *(They look at each other in horror)*.

Sorcerer 4: Is that the lot?

(He totters to couch and sinks on to it, whereupon the rugs begin to heave up and down).

Sorcerer 3: Seems like it. Pretty grim, isn't it? What in Bel's name are we to do?

Sorcerer 4: I don't know. I feel as if the whole world is heaving up and down.

Sorcerer 1: *(Emerging crossly)*. It isn't the world, you fool, it's me. Get off and let me get up.

Sorcerer 5: Good heavens, it's the Astrologer Royal! *(Whips off another cover)*. And the Lord High Sorcerer!

(SORCERERS 1 and 2 stand up).

Sorcerer 4: What on earth are you doing there?

Sorcerer 5: I should have thought that was obvious. They're here for the same reason that we are - and like us, they've been trying to conceal it. We're fools, all of us. We'd do far better to swallow our pride, tell the truth and then put our heads together to see what we can do about it. Now gather round and listen to me.

(He sits centrally on couch; other SORCERERS group themselves around him).

Sorcerer 5: Astrologers, sorcerers, seers, magicians, soothsayers - we've all of us been important people up to now, haven't we? In any catastrophe - and until recently life was delightfully full of catastrophes - people in difficulties turned to us. But since the arrival of those Israelites

Sorcerer 1: *(Gloomily).* Shadrach and Meshach.

Sorcerer 2: And Abednego.

Sorcerer 5: Precisely. They have been organising the country so efficiently that catastrophes have almost come to a halt. Even the camel-trains are running on time. Consequently we are no longer deluged with work. On the contrary, it has dwindled to an alarmingly thin trickle.

Sorcerer 3: Precisely.

Sorcerer 4: All because of those dreary prigs Shadrach and Meshach.

Sorcerer 2: And Abednego.

Sorcerer 5: But it has come to me with one of those flashes of genius for which I am so famous that we have been going about this the wrong way. We supposed the only thing we could do was look for new jobs. What we should be doing is working out a way to get rid of Shadrach and Meshach.

Sorcerer 2: And Abednego.

Sorcerer 1: But how?

Sorcerer 4: They're far and away the best administrators we've ever had. We could never persuade the King to dismiss them.

Sorcerer 5: Not for their work, no. We have to attack where they're vulnerable. *(The other SORCERERS look baffled).* Their religion, of course. They're ridiculously faithful to it. Didn't you ever hear of that rumpus about eating pork?

Sorcerer 3: Yes, I do remember something about it. They refused, didn't they?

Sorcerer 4: And demanded a vegetarian diet instead.

Sorcerer 5: The Keeper of the King's Captives got quite worried about it - he thought he'd get into trouble when they all grew pale and thin.

Sorcerer 4: Only they didn't. So they were allowed to get away with it.

Sorcerer 3: And now they plaster the palace with Animal Rights posters - and no one takes a blind bit of notice.

Sorcerer 5: That's because the King doesn't mind all this plant-eating - in fact he sometimes does it himself. We have to find something he DOES mind.

Sorcerer 1: But the King doesn't listen to us any more.

Sorcerer 5: So it has to come from someone he DOES listen to - like the High Priest. He doesn't like the Israelites either: I've noticed that.

Sorcerer 3: Now we may be getting somewhere. What have you got in mind?

Sorcerer 5: (*Thoughtfully*). Supposing the High Priest could persuade the King to erect a statue, a statue of Bel. Then he could suggest

(*Enter ROYAL MESSENGER*).

Messenger: (*To CLERK*). Here, you, a message from the Palace. Urgent. The King needs astrologers, sorcerers, seers, magicians, and soothsayers - at once. (*Gives him a scroll*).

Sorcerers: (*Together*). At last! Us? A job! But that's marvellous. The King? *etc.*

(*Enter, fast, SORCERERS 6, 7, 8 and 9*).

Sorcerer 6: There's a rumour about a job

Sorcerer 7: That sounds just the sort of thing I'm looking for.

Sorcerer 8: Somebody said a sorcerer was wanted?

(*All SORCERERS crowd round CLERK, pushing and jostling*).

Sorcerer 1: Now wait a minute. We were here first!

Sorcerer 3: You'll have to wait your turn. Stop pushing and shoving.

Sorcerer 9: YOU'RE the one who's pushing!

Clerk: Gentlemen, gentlemen, PLEASE. There are opportunities for everyone, if you'll just listen. (*Reads*). 'The high and mighty King, Nebuchadnezzar, Lord of Lords, Ruler of the Universe, etc, etc, requires a diviner

Sorcerer 1: (*Gloomily*). I've never learned water-divining.

Clerk: (*Giving him a withering look*). A diviner of dreams to interpret what he dreamt last night.

Sorcerer 6: Now that's more like it!

Clerk: "Successful interpreter will receive presents, rewards and high honour. Applications to the palace, straight away." (*To SORCERERS*). If you'd just like to fill in a form?

(But the SORCERERS are already on their way out. Exasperated, the CLERK watches their departure; when all have gone he turns to the MESSENGER).

Clerk: They should have waited to hear the rest of it.

Messenger: Why, what did the King dream about?

Clerk: That's just it: he can't remember.

(They look at each other and shrug, before going off in different directions).

SCENE 3

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S palace. A throne. DOORKEEPER stands by entrance.

Doorkeeper: *(Calling out).* Pass along, please, quickly. All enchanters and sorcerers this way. Get a move on, will you?

(Enter SORCERERS and line up in a row. Enter SERVANTS 1 and 2, who stand one each side of the entrance).

Servants: *(Together).* Nebuchadnezzar, King of Kings. Bow down before him, O lowly ones.

(Enter NEBUCHADNEZZAR. While the SORCERERS kneel and salaam, he seats himself on the throne).

Nebuchadnezzar: You may arise. I have sent for you urgently on a matter of the greatest importance. I have a recurrent dream which is disturbing me greatly. I feel it signifies something, and I want to understand it. Interpret my dream for me.

Sorcerer 1: O King, live for ever. Tell your servants the dream, and we will reveal its meaning for you.

Nebuchadnezzar: Are you a qualified magician, enchanter or sorcerer?

Sorcerer 1: Indeed yes, O King: I studied at the Royal Academy of Magic Art, and graduated with high honours.

Nebuchadnezzar: In that case I do not need to tell you my dream: YOU should be able to tell ME what I dreamt. A little test of your ability. Tell me what I

dreamt, and I will know I can trust you to interpret the dream correctly, and will reward you richly. But if you cannot tell me my dream and its meaning, I will have you torn limb from limb, and your houses razed to the ground.

(Outcry among SORCERERS).

Sorcerer 5: O King, live for ever. The conditions of employment laid down by the National Union of Magicians and Allied Trades state quite clearly that any dreams to be interpreted must first be described in detail.

Nebuchadnezzar: *(Furiously).* Am I the King or am I not? Do I take orders from the National Union of Magicians and Allied Trades? I have FORGOTTEN what I dreamt - I wake each morning to find my heart heavy with fear, but the dream flees from my mind even as I try to grasp it. I require you to recall it for me. *(Pause).* Well? Which of you would like to begin?

Sorcerer 3: O King, live for

Nebuchadnezzar: Of course I shall live for ever, you don't need to keep on about it. Can you tell me my dream? *(Seizing him by the throat).*

Sorcerer 3: *(Falling to his knees).* Sire, no one but the gods could do what the King requires.

Nebuchadnezzar: *(Hurling SORCERER 3 to floor).* Pah! Fakes and frauds, the lot of you! I will have you SHREDDED! Every wizard and wise man in the land. *(Calls).* Arioch!

(Enter ARIOCH).

Nebuchadnezzar: Slaughter the sorcerers! Sweep away the seers! Turn the sages into sage and onion stuffing! Wise men are to be exterminated! I want them killed, the lot of them.

Arioch: The LOT of them, my Lord? Even the Israelites?

Nebuchadnezzar: Yes, the lot of them. And have it done HORRIBLY. *(Begins to sweep out. Then as an afterthought, over his shoulder).* And bring me the details afterwards. *(Exit).*

Arioch: *(To SERVANTS).* You heard what the King said. Take these men to the prison. *(To SORCERERS).* And stop that snivelling, you!

(SERVANTS escort the sobbing SORCERERS out. ARIOCH sits, depressed).

Arioch: What a dreadful prospect! I don't mind having that bunch of star-gazers executed; I've never thought much of them anyway. But my friend Daniel! How am I to break it to him? How can I face putting him to death? O Bel

(Raising his arms to Heaven, then dropping them again, downcast) - no, Bel won't do anything for Daniel and his mates, they never pay any attention to him. (Kneels). O God of the Israelites, whoever you are. Help me out of this fix.

(DANIEL enters behind him).

Arioch: I don't want to put Daniel to death! I don't want to put Daniel to death!

Daniel: *(Clapping a hand on his shoulder).* Then don't put Daniel to death, you idiot! What are you in such a state about?

Arioch: Oh Daniel, the most terrible news - I don't know how to break this to you

....

Daniel: If you mean the business of the King's dream, you needn't: I've just heard.

Arioch: Well, I must say you look remarkably cheerful for a man in your situation.

Daniel: The servants of my God always have a reason to look cheerful. Cheer up, Arioch, things aren't as bad as you suppose.

Arioch: You don't mean

Daniel: The King's dream has been revealed to me in a vision; he dreamt about a marvellous statue of gold, silver and bronze, but with feet of clay. A stone shatters it, and then grows to a mighty mountain, filling the whole earth. *(Confidently).* It is a dream of the future, of the rise and fall of empires, and God's kingdom which is greater than all. I am on my way to see the King now and tell him so. So hold up the executions a while. I'll get him to change his mind about those. *(Exit DANIEL).*

Arioch: What a relief! What amazing powers he has! It must be wonderful to be able to discern dreams and foresee the future. *(Starts to go, then is struck by a sudden thought).* Why didn't I think to ask him if he knows who'll win the 2.30?

(As ARIOCH departs the sound of the SORCERERS cheering is heard offstage).

SCENE 4

The Temple of BEL.

(Enter HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY HIGH PRIEST, who carries a sheaf of papers. The plans for the new temple can be brought in by the HIGH PRIEST or may be already in place on stage).

Deputy: the sacrifice rota for next month. And a number of applications to join the priesthood: I have the application forms here, if you'd like to look through them.

High Priest: (*Rifling through forms*). Sorcerer soothsayer wizard enchanter what's going on here?

Deputy: It's after that affair of the King's dream last month. Nobody wants to be a magician any more: I think they feel it's too risky. And actually I hear on the grapevine that a lot of them were out of work anyway. So our recruitment figures are up. Can we afford to expand our workforce at the present time?

High Priest: (*Thoughtfully*). Yes. If we continue to meet our target for 430 sacrifices a week. I'm thinking of opening a new temple in the centre of the city shortly: it will be good for our image. We need to keep a high profile at the moment, if we are to retain any influence in the land at all. Those Israelites

Deputy: My feelings exactly, Your Holiness. It was bad enough before, but since that business of the dream the King consults nobody except Daniel and his companions. By the way, have you heard the latest? Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have been made rulers of provinces.

High Priest: No! This is intolerable! I've been hinting for years that I would like a province to rule, and I've never had even a teeny-weeny one! How do they do it?

Deputy: Well, you know what they say: it's that God of theirs.

High Priest: Tell me another! You and I know a thing or two about gods, don't we? Which reminds me: I've got the plans for the new temple here - like to have a look? (*Fetches or produces plans: both sit*). This is the Outer Court - the worshippers bring the animals for the sacrifices in at this gate. They get slaughtered here here are the fires for roasting the carcasses then the outer gates close, the congregation goes home, and we come in by this secret passage here and collect our supper. Then the next morning when the gates are opened

Deputy: Everybody is amazed to find

High Priest: All the roast meat has disappeared

Deputy: And all the priests a little fatter?

High Priest: They won't notice that. Why do you suppose our priestly robes are made so loose? Besides, when we tell the people that Bel has accepted their sacrifice

Deputy: They will suppose the statue of the god has eaten the meat!

High Priest: Exactly. We shall need a new statue too, of course. I'm hoping to get the King to donate it.

Deputy: Now this is a most fortunate coincidence. One of our new applicants -

used to be a sorcerer, most intelligent man he seems - presented me this morning with a set of proposals. (*Feels his pockets, or where his pockets would be if he had any*) I don't seem to have the tablet on me at the moment, but I think you would be greatly interested. A scheme for getting rid of Daniel and his friends, using a statue. Perhaps you'd like to come and have a word with him?

High Priest: A good scheme? Would it work?

Deputy: I think it would. It will need careful planning, of course. Any spontaneous outburst of complaint from a large number of people requires to be very well rehearsed. And we mustn't try to rush things, either. With Daniel so high in the King's favour we might be pushing our luck if we tried to get rid of all four at once. I fancy it would be better to start with Shadrach, Meshach

High Priest: And Abednego. What are we waiting for? Let's go!

(*Exeunt*)

SCENE 5

The new temple of Bel. The golden statue of Bel may be already on stage, or can be brought in by PRIESTS 1 and 2, who enter carrying a cloth large enough to veil the statue, and possibly a pair of kitchen steps.

Priest 1: Hurry up, the King will be here any moment. I hate to think what would happen if he arrived to unveil a statue and found it unveiled already.

Priest 2: (*Placing steps*). Boiling oil for the lot of us, I should think. (*They get sheet in place over statue while talking*). Don't worry, we'll get it done in time. The High Priest's talking to him about the wording of the proclamation.

Priest 1: Proclamation? What proclamation?

Priest 2: Wait and see. But I'll tell you this: it's going to make life hot for certain people in the future.

(*PRIESTS 1 and 2 remove steps and wait in background. Enter NEBUCHADNEZZAR, HIGH PRIEST, carrying a scroll, DEPUTY, HERALD, SORCERERS [now PRIESTS] and any other PRIESTS or ROYAL SERVANTS desired*).

High Priest: I'm so glad Your Majesty has enjoyed this tour of our little temple. And now if you would like to stand just here to make your speech?

Nebuchadnezzar: (*Importantly*). Before I unveil this statue, I have a short announcement to make. Since I have generously provided your new temple with this golden image, I intend to make sure my munificence is never forgotten, and that my name is honoured for ever - and Bel's too, of course. Herald, read the proclamation.

(*HIGH PRIEST hands scroll to HERALD*).

Herald: (*Reading from scroll*). "Be it known to all the King's subjects, that at whatever time you hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image which the King has caused to be set up. And whosoever does not worship as commanded, or who worships other gods at other times, shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. For so the King has commanded."

Nebuchadnezzar: And now it gives me great pleasure to unveil - (*Does so*) the great god Bel. Musicians, strike up!

(*A few bars of loud music, offstage, produced by a variety of instruments. All except NEBUCHADNEZZAR fall prostrate, chanting "Great is Bel" .*)

Nebuchadnezzar: Yes, very effective. All right, you can get up now. (*They rise*). I'm so glad you suggested this, High Priest. I shall have a lot of fun with this. Musicians, strike up again!

(*Music resumes. All fall prostrate, chanting as before*).

Nebuchadnezzar: You've no idea how funny you look. Is it painful falling flat on your face like that?

Deputy: (*Through gritted teeth*). Somewhat painful, Your Highness.

Nebuchadnezzar: Yes, I thought it must be. Well, you needn't stay down for as long as that. The sooner you get up, the sooner I can make you fall down again. (*They rise cautiously*). I think I'll tell the musicians to play three times an hour, for the present. That should give you a LOT of exercise.

(*Exit, followed by HERALD and any other members of his court*).

Deputy: (*Aside to HIGH PRIEST, while other PRIESTS dust themselves down*). I hope this works: I'm going to be black and blue by the morning.

High Priest: Don't worry: it'll work. The proclamation is being made all over the city. And I've arranged to have Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego followed. (*To PRIESTS*). Off you go - you all know what you have to do.

(*Exeunt PRIESTS. As they are leaving, HIGH PRIEST continues talking to DEPUTY*).

High Priest: I'm putting spies in their households. Those three (*Points to some PRIESTS*) are going to disguise themselves as dancing-girls. We'll have them nailed by sundown, or I'm not the High Priest of Bel. (*He gives the DEPUTY a thumbs-up sign*).

(*Exeunt*).

SCENE 6

The Palace. Several couches.

(*Enter NEBUCHADNEZZAR. He claps his hands and SERVANT 1 enters*).

Nebuchadnezzar: I am expecting some Provincial Governors to dinner. Have they arrived yet?

Servant 1: Yes, Your Highness; they are waiting in the courtyard.

Nebuchadnezzar: Have them admitted. We will take some wine before we eat.

Servant 1: Yes, Your Highness.

(*SERVANT 1 leaves. NEBUCHADNEZZAR reclines on couch. Enter SHADRACH, MESHACH and ABEDNEGO, followed by SERVANT 2 with wine in four silver goblets on a tray, which is set down beside the KING while SHADRACH, MESHACH and ABEDNEGO are bowing low. Exit SERVANT 2*).

Nebuchadnezzar: Come in, my dear fellows, come in. Take a goblet. Take a couch. Meshach, come and sit by me. I want to ask you about that new irrigation system of yours.

(*SHADRACH, MESHACH and ABEDNEGO take goblets and recline on couches,*

MESHACH beside the KING; almost immediately a hubbub starts outside, with shouts of "Treason" "Let me see the King" "Down with the villains", etc. SERVANT 2 enters hurriedly).

Nebuchadnezzar: *(Angrily).* What on earth's going on out there? Who are all those people shouting in the courtyard?

Servant 2: The High Priest, your Highness, craves audience on an urgent matter. He has brought a number of his friends with him. They seem rather excited about something.

Nebuchadnezzar: Oh, what a bore! Why does he always arrive at meal-times? Well, I suppose I'd better see him. Let him in.

(Exit SERVANT 2. NEBUCHADNEZZAR, SHADRACH, MESHACH and ABEDNEGO set their goblets down and sit up in formal poses. Enter quickly HIGH PRIEST, DEPUTY and PRIESTS, including the former SORCERERS. They bow low).

Nebuchadnezzar: Good evening, Your Holiness. I hope this isn't going to take long.

High Priest: O King, live for ever. I am sorry to interrupt Your Highness at dinner-time, but I am so appalled by what I have just learned I could not contain myself longer. Your Highness - I know this is almost incredible - there are three men in your dominions who are disobeying your commands. They do not worship the golden statue when music sounds, and worse still, they have continued to worship their own God morning and evening. The INSULT to your Highness - I was quite overcome when I heard of it! *(Passes his hand faintly across his brow. DEPUTY fans him vigorously).*

Nebuchadnezzar: *(Leaping up).* Disobeying my commands? Ignoring my statue? Worshipping their own God? Who are these villains?

All Priests: *(Pointing to each one in turn).* SHADRACH! MESHACH! and ABEDNEGO!

Nebuchadnezzar: *(Recoils).* What!

Priests: *(Chanting together with impeccable timing, except for the lines assigned to PRIESTS A, B, etc. which can be allotted as desired to individuals. The HIGH PRIEST acts as a conductor, bringing them in and beating time).*

All: *SHAdrach, MESHach AND aBEDnego
SAY their PRAYERS beFORE to BED they go.*

Priest A: *THAT'S not NORmal.*

Priest B: *THAT'S not NICE.*

Priest C: *THAT'S a MOST disGUSTing VICE!*

Priest D: *We're DREADfully SORRY we HAVE to SAY it -*

All: *But YOU made the LAW and we MUST oBEY it.*

(NEBUCHADNEZZAR sinks down into his seat and covers his face with his hands).

All: *SHAdrach, MESHach AND aBEDnego*

Priest E: *(Gleefully to his neighbour) Very soon they will be DEAD, you know.*

(The rest of the PRIESTS turn and frown at him, fingers on their lips, before resuming).

All: *WORship GOD with PRAYERS and PRAISE.*

Priest F: *HOW we HATE their NASTy WAYS!*

Priest G: *We DON'T like to SNEAK -*

Priest H: *Or to GIVE them aWAY -*

All: *Buy YOU made the LAW and we MUST oBEY.*

(NEBUCHADNEZZAR's distress has turned to anger; he clenches his fists and beats one upon the other, grinding his teeth and breathing deeply).

All: *SHADrach, MESHack AND aBEDnego*
IN your FURNace will FRIZZle up from HEAD to toe.

Priest I: *SERVE them RIGHT, the BEASTly STINKers,*
WHEN they TURN to ASH and CLINKers.

Priest J: *We FEAR that the PROSpect may SLIGHTly disMAY you -*

All: *But YOU made the LAW and we MUST oBEY you!*

Nebuchadnezzar: *(Rising)* Shadrach! Meshach! Abednego! Is this true? How dare you disobey me!

Abednego: O King, in all earthly matters we obey you, and it is right that we should do so. But there is one greater than the King, and that is our God. How can we bow down to metal or stone, the work of men's hands? The God of Israel commanded our forefather Moses, saying "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve". Let not the King be angry with his servants in this matter, for God is greater than all the kings of the earth.

Nebuchadnezzar: Angry? When you speak to me as no man has ever spoken before? I am the KING, do you hear? The KING! What is this God of yours that you dare to put him before ME? I warned you - I warned everybody - anyone who disobeys ME goes straight into a burning fiery furnace. Where is the God who can deliver you then? Answer me that!

Shadrach: If God wishes to deliver us, He will deliver us; whether we live or die, we are in His hands.

Nebuchadnezzar: You are in MY hands, you fools! I will give you ONE LAST CHANCE! *(Calls)*. Musicians, play on the cornet, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and all kinds of music!

(Music played as before: all but the KING and ISRAELITES fall prostrate, chanting "Great is Bel").

Meshach: Put us in your furnace if you must, but we will not worship your golden statue, O King, nor serve your false gods.

Nebuchadnezzar: Enough! I will hear no more of this! To the furnace with them: take them away!

(The crowd of PRIESTS seizes the ISRAELITES and bears them away, NEBUCHADNEZZAR following; SERVANTS 1 and 2 scurry in to remove the goblets and tray. The HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY are left on stage alone. They look at each other in silent triumph and shake hands before following the others off).

SCENE 7

Red lighting if possible.

(SHADRACH, MESHACH and ABEDNEGO, hands tied, are pushed on stage into the furnace by GUARDS who may or may not be visible; the furnace doors may also be offstage if desired. MESHACH loses his balance and falls. Sound of heavy bolts being shut).

Abednego: This is going to be distinctly unpleasant. How long do furnaces take to warm up?

Shadrach: Much too long. I'd rather get it over quickly. I've never been at my best in hot weather.

Meshach: *(Sitting up)*. If only they hadn't fastened us up we could have tried to escape. I hate the idea of just sitting here and cooking. Roast Meshach. What a prospect!

Shadrach: *(Loosening his robes and showing other signs of discomfort, as far as his pinioned hands allow)*. Don't kid yourself. You'd need a pneumatic drill to get out of this place. There's no way in or out except that door - and didn't you hear those bolts being slammed shut behind us?

Meshach: *(Glumly)*. Don't say "kid". It gives me the wrong ideas.

(Pause).

Abednego: *(Puffing somewhat)*. Getting a bit warm, isn't it?

Meshach: What do you EXPECT? "Burning fiery furnace", he said. "Seven times hotter than usual", he said. Of COURSE it's getting warm!

Abednego: Oh, well. All in a good cause, I suppose. I didn't mean to beef about it

Meshach: *(With gritted teeth)*. Don't say "beef"!

Abednego: Sorry.

(Pause. He starts again, brightly).

Abednego: Would you be a lamb and

Meshach: *(Shouting)*. DON'T SAY

(Swinging round, he sees the ANGEL, who has arrived unnoticed at the back of the stage)

Meshach: Good God!

Angel: Not at all; you overestimate me. Merely sent by Him; He is impressed by your loyalty. Hold up your wrists and I'll do something about those uncomfortable fetters. (*ANGEL undoes the ties*). That's better. Now I would suggest you walk about a bit, to get the circulation going. You'll find it's not too warm in here now

Shadrach: (*Wonderingly*). You're right; it's not. It's getting distinctly chilly, in fact.

(*The PRISONERS start to move about slowly, rubbing their wrists*).

Angel: Come on, step it up: LEFT right, LEFT right. That's better. Keep away from the walls; they're still hot. I have supplied you with temporary internal refrigeration; cooling the furnace down will take rather longer. LEFT right.

(*All four march briskly about the stage during the following dialogue*).

Nebuchadnezzar: (*Off*). Am I too late? Put that fire out at once! You, with the ladder. Set it up here and hold the bottom while I climb. And you.

(*He is heard climbing the ladder, then his head appears over the wall. The red light gradually fades out*).

Nebuchadnezzar: Shadrach! Meshach! Abednego! You're all right! Thank heavens! But (*Counting on his fingers*) one, two, three FOUR? Who's this, and how did he get in? And why aren't you dead? This is a miracle. Are you really all right?

Meshach: Come down and see, O King. Our God has delivered us in the midst of the furnace.

Nebuchadnezzar: Amazing! Is it quite safe to come in? I didn't really mean it, of course. You know what I'm like when I lose my temper. (*His voice is still heard as he climbs down*). Open the doors! Fling wide the furnace gates!

(*If the gates are visible on stage, they open. NEBUCHADNEZZAR enters, followed by a crowd of PRIESTS, SERVANTS, etc., including the HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY. The ANGEL is swallowed up in the crowd and disappears, unnoticed*).

Sorcerer 2: Remarkable! Hair not even singed!

Sorcerer 5: Clothes not scorched.

Sorcerer 3: (*Sniffs*). No smell of roast meat.

Nebuchadnezzar: Won't you introduce me to your friend? I'm so sorry he found himself in the furnace too: a most unfortunate accident. I must speak to the coal merchant: it's deplorable what gets into the coal supplies these days.

(The CROWD - who by now are finding it hot in the furnace - start looking in vain for ANGEL).

Abednego: Don't blame the coal merchant: God sent an angel to help us.

Shadrach: He delivered us from the heat of the furnace, but now he has gone. You will not see him again.

Nebuchadnezzar: Amazing! Extraordinary! I'm most impressed. I shall make another decree at once. *(Announces)*. Let anyone speak disrespectfully of the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and I will have him torn limb from limb, and his house shall be razed to the ground. No other God can save his people in this way. Even I, the King, could not survive in a furnace like this *(pats a column or wall and finds it hot)* - owch! Your God is greater than kings; I have to admit it. *(Wiping his brow)*. But let's move to somewhere cooler.

(Exeunt all except HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY).

High Priest: That was a pretty stupid idea of yours. I told you it wouldn't work.

Deputy: MY idea! It wasn't my idea!

High Priest: Well it certainly wasn't mine. I knew all along

(They go out quarrelling).

SCENE 8

The Palace.

(Enter NARRATOR).

Narrator: So Nebuchadnezzar learnt wisdom at last; but in the fullness of time he was gathered to his fathers, and his son Belshazzar reigned in his stead.

(BELSHAZZAR enters, studying a scroll, and sits on the throne).

Narrator: Now Belshazzar was a proud man.

(Enter ARIOCH. NARRATOR leaves).

Arioch: O King, live for ever.

Belshazzar: Of course I shall live for ever. Am I not the King? It puzzles me that Dad slipped up so badly about that - though it's just as well for me that he did. But about this banquet I am giving tonight. As this is the first big event of my reign, I want to make it a special occasion. I have planned the menu with the greatest care - I drool at the mouth every time I read it. Just take a look at that, will you? *(Hands scroll to ARIOCH)*. In fact you can read it out aloud.

Arioch: *(Reading)*. "Soup: consommé of camel, with croutons. Fish course: whale steaks à la Jonah in Nineveh sauce. Entrée: roast lamb with bitter herbs, served with stuffed vine leaves and unleavened bread. Sweet: dates stuffed with wild honey. Savoury: fried locusts on toast. Goat's milk cheese. Choice of fine wines".

Belshazzar: What a delicious prospect: I can hardly wait till this evening!

Arioch: Indeed a gourmet's delight, Your Highness.

Belshazzar: But I still feel the occasion will be lacking something. I feel the need of a certain "je ne sais quoi" to make it really memorable.

Arioch: I fear we have no "je ne sais quoi" in the larder at present, Your Highness. But I will send someone out to the superbazaar at once. Er if Your Highness could explain a little more fully what it is and how it should be cooked? Fried in oil, perhaps?

Belshazzar: Dolt! Did you never learn Gaulish at school? No, I suppose you wouldn't have done; I was forgetting such refinements are reserved for members of the upper classes. It means a little I-don't-know-what: something to give the occasion a touch of style. Have you any suggestions?

Arioch: Dancing girls?

Belshazzar: Too ordinary.

Arioch: A couple of slaves thrown to the lions?

Belshazzar: That will hardly do: my new Keeper of the Lions is among the guests tonight. He won't want to spend the evening talking shop. I didn't really want a cabaret, anyway: just something to impress.

Arioch: I have it! What about having the table spread with dishes and platters of gold?

Belshazzar: Haven't any.

Arioch: But you have, Your Highness! In your father's young days, when he besieged Jerusalem, there were golden dishes and ornaments in the Temple -

he took the lot! They were put away in a storeroom: I came across them just the other day. I can fish them out in no time.

Belshazzar: Excellent! The very thing. Get them at once, will you? My guests may be arriving before long.

Arioch: Who is coming beside the Keeper of the Lions?

Belshazzar: The High Priest and all his "entourage" - there's another bit of Gaulish for you! Do I hear them coming now?

Arioch: I will go and see, Highness.

(But as he starts for the door the DOORKEEPER enters with the KEEPER of the LIONS - who turns out to be the former CLERK. Once the CLERK has entered ARIOCH quietly bows himself out).

Doorkeeper: *(Announces)*. The Keeper of the Lions, Your Highness.

Belshazzar: My dear chap, splendid to see you. Settling in all right?

Clerk: Yes, thank you, Your Highness.

Belshazzar: Roaring doesn't keep you awake at nights?

Clerk: No, no, it doesn't bother me at all.

Belshazzar: Bit more exciting than working in the Job Centre, eh?

Clerk: Much more exciting, Highness.

Doorkeeper: *(Announces)*. Pongeepongee, High Priest of Bel; Alzoepongee, Deputy High Priest; the Priests of the temple of Babylon.

(Enter HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY followed by the former SORCERERS and other PRIESTS. DOORKEEPER bows himself out once the guests have entered).

High Priest: So good of you to invite us, Your Highness.

Belshazzar: Not at all: it's been far too long. I don't see you about very much these days.

High Priest: I don't get out a lot; I'm not as young as I used to be.

Belshazzar: *(Introducing them)*. Do you know the Keeper of the Lions?

High Priest: No, I don't think we've met.

Clerk: I've only just started here. I used to work in the Job Centre: not something Your Holiness has ever needed to patronise, I'm sure.

Belshazzar: Do recline, everybody. *(To SORCERER)*. Offered any good sacrifices lately?

(A murmur of conversation as guests recline on floor or couches "Have you been here before?", "I'm told we can expect excellent food", "I miss the old king, in a way", "Splendid rug, this, isn't it?" etc. CLERK and DEPUTY are

near the KING. Meanwhile the former ROYAL MESSENGER enters with golden bowls etc., which he places before GUESTS and KING; all help themselves (nuts, crisps) with fingers. By now most conversations are being mimed: we only hear the following):

Clerk: *(To DEPUTY).* Sad about old Meshach, wasn't it?

Deputy: Oh, very sad.

Belshazzar: Meshach? Don't think I know him.

Clerk: A bit before your time, Highness. One of the four Judeans your father had running the country for him. But that was a while ago now. Two of them have been dead for some years: Shadrach and Abednego. And now old Meshach. Ah well, we all have to come to it in the end.

Deputy: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. How that takes me back!

Belshazzar: Did I ever tell you *(Suddenly points in terror to opposite wall).*
Aaaah!!

(At the other side of the room, a hand has appeared writing on the wall. All the GUESTS scramble to their feet and back away from it. During the following scene the hand slowly writes "Mene mene tekel upharsin", then disappears).

Belshazzar: What is it? What does it mean? What has it written?

High Priest: Don't worry, Your Highness; my men can deal with it. They've all been soothsayers and sorcerers in their time. *(To SORCERERS).* Come on, one of you. Interpret the writing for his Highness!

(Meanwhile in the background the CLERK has made a surreptitious exit).

Sorcerers: Well, er Not quite my scene I don't think I not absolutely sure
.... *etc.*

Belshazzar: You useless bunch of cringing cretins! You despicable gathering of snivelling sorcerers! Call yourselves soothsayers? How about SAYING a bit of sooth, for a change?

Deputy: I think perhaps it's a graphologist Your Highness needs.

Belshazzar: Graphologist? An expert in HANDWRITING? How stupid can you get?

Deputy: O, much stupider than that, Your Highness!

Belshazzar: I shall have you put through a mincer! I shall have you thrown to the lions! Keeper where's the Keeper of the Lions gone to?

Clerk: *(Returning).* Let not the King be troubled. I have just sent for Daniel.

Belshazzar: Daniel? Who's that?

Clerk: In your fathers's time, O King, there was nobody like him for this sort of work. Interpreting of dreams, shewing of hard sentences, dissolving of doubts; he really was first-class. Of course he's getting on now. He's been living quietly in retirement the last few years. He has a flat somewhere in the east wing of the palace. But I'm sure he's your man.

(Enter DANIEL).

Daniel: Thy servant is here, O King.

Belshazzar: You're Daniel, are you? I've been hearing about you. Hope you can help us. A bit of a problem with graffiti. Tell me what that *(Pointing)* means and I will clothe you with scarlet, hang a golden chain about your neck, and make you Number Two in the kingdom.

Daniel: O King, I need neither your gifts nor your rewards; but I will read the writing, and the interpretation shall be made known to you. *(Studies the writing, and then turns to BELSHAZZAR and speaks in prophetic mode).* Forasmuch as you have not humbled your heart before God, but pride has hardened it; and forasmuch as you have taken His holy vessels for your own use, eating and drinking from them; and forasmuch as you have worshipped gods of brass, stone and wood, rather than the true God in whose hands you are, this hand has been sent and this writing written:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN,
which being interpreted, means: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting; and your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. This is the word of the Lord.

(The court is silent, aghast. BELSHAZZAR totters to his throne and slumps down on it. The PRIESTS, SORCERERS and CLERK look uneasily at each other and gradually slip away, tiptoeing out quietly. Only DANIEL is left. He crosses to the throne and bows silently, then leaves. BELSHAZZAR puts his head in his hands. Blackout. In the darkness the voice of the NARRATOR is heard).

Narrator: *(Off).* In that night was Belshazzar, King of Babylon, slain.

(Noise of fight, during which BELSHAZZAR slips quietly off-stage. Once he has gone the lights come up gradually on the empty throne, while the NARRATOR continues).

Narrator: (*Off*). And Darius the Median took the kingdom. Then desired Darius to set Daniel over the whole land, for the excellent spirit that was in him. But the great men of the land were jealous, and conspired against Daniel.

SCENE 9

Outside the lion-house.

(Enter HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY from different sides of the stage).

High Priest: My dear chap, welcome back. Did you have a good journey? What was the weather like?

Deputy: Dreadful. Never rained once. But otherwise a most satisfactory trip. That woodcarver in Ur who makes idols is prepared to give us special terms for a bulk order - but this will all keep. What's been going on at home while I've been away?

High Priest: Well, there's one thing you'll never believe: we're getting rid of Daniel at last.

Deputy: No! How?

High Priest: Same old trick, but this time it's going to work. Some of the princes and I have talked the King into making a decree - and you know what the Medes and Persians are like about their laws! "The laws of the Medes and Persians can never be changed" - isn't that what they say?

Deputy: What sort of decree?

High Priest: For thirty days nobody is allowed to make a petition from anybody except the King, on pain of being thrown into

Deputy: a burning fiery furnace!

High Priest: No, that didn't work too well last time, did it? Must have been something wrong with the flue. THIS time it's a den of lions: much more reliable.

Deputy: So Daniel?

High Priest: Prayed to his God, of course. Made no secret of it - the fool. Beside his open bedroom window, loud enough for any passer-by to hear. The King was terribly upset, of course. Kept trying to wriggle out of it. But the laws of the Medes and Persians

Both: CAN NEVER BE CHANGED!

High Priest: Today's the great day. You're back just in time to see the fun. No

more Daniel.

Deputy: (*Rubbing his hands*). Splendid!

(*Enter the CLERK, now KEEPER of the LION HOUSE, with sack, followed by SERVANT 3 with broom and bucket of water*).

Clerk: (*To SERVANT 3*). Just sweep the small stuff over to the drain and swill it down. If any large bits are left you'd better hand them up to me.

[N.B. *If Lion-house is not a pit he should say "out to me"*].

Servant 3: Righto, boss. (*Enters or jumps down into den and disappears from view*).

Clerk: (*To PRIESTS*). Good afternoon, gentlemen. A sad day, isn't it?

High Priest: Oh, terribly sad. Terribly TERRIBLY sad. Poor Daniel.

Deputy: What shall we do without him?

Servant 3: (*Off*). Boss!

Clerk: Yes?

Servant 3: (*Still invisible, but handing objects out of the den to the CLERK*). Here you are. One leg. One hand. One set of dentures.

(*CLERK puts the items in his sack. Sound of water being swilled. SERVANT 3 reappears, passing his bucket and broom up first if he has climbed down into the den*).

Servant 3: That's the lot.

(*Exit SERVANT 3, with bucket and broom. Enter from another direction SERVANTS 1 and 2 escorting DANIEL, followed by an agitated DARIUS*).

Darius: I really can't tell you how sorry I am, Daniel.

Daniel: Can't be helped: these things happen. I know you didn't mean it.

Darius: It's just that the laws of the Medes and Persians

Daniel: Can never be changed. You don't have to tell me.

Darius: I shall never forget you, you know.

Daniel: Nor I you - I'm not likely to have the chance.

(*CLERK gives nod to SERVANTS 1 and 2, who push DANIEL into pit*).

Servant 1: (*Brutally*). In you go.

Servant 2: (*Relishing the situation*). That's it, right in.

(HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY exchange satisfied looks).

Darius: *(Calls to DANIEL, wringing his hands).* Your God whom you serve continually, He will deliver you. *(Reels away with his hand over his eyes as roaring of lions is heard).* Oh, I can't watch!

Clerk: *(Consolingly).* It won't take long, Your Highness: the lions have not been fed for two days. Why don't you go home, have a hot bath and an early night?

Darius: I think perhaps I will. You're a good chap: remind me to reward you sometime. I shall give you a garment as red as blood - oh, whatever made me say that?

(DARIUS rushes out, distraught, followed by SERVANTS. HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY take up the rear).

Clerk: *(Bedding down outside the LIONHOUSE).* I hope I don't have nightmares. Poor Daniel!

(The lights dim, then come gradually up again, revealing CLERK sound asleep. Before full lighting is restored a thunderous knocking is heard. He stirs and wakes).

Clerk: *(Sleepily rising).* All right, coming. Good heavens, what a time to wake a man up. It's hardly dawn yet. *(He staggers out, rubbing his eyes, and his startled voice is heard offstage).*

Clerk: *(Off).* Your Highness!

Darius: *(Hurrying in followed by CLERK).* I couldn't wait any longer. I haven't slept a wink all night. Perhaps his God will have saved him, do you think?

Clerk: *(Reluctantly).* I shouldn't be too hopeful, sire.

Darius: I won't look. I think I'll just call from here. *(Calls).* Oh Daniel, servant of the living God, has He are you could He deliver you from the lions?

Daniel: *(From den).* Did somebody call?

(CLERK and DARIUS look at each other in amazement, then both rush to fling themselves on the ground and look over edge of lion pit, or alternatively to throw open the doors).

Darius: Daniel! You're alive! Are you hurt? *(Lions roar).*

Daniel: *(To lions)* Be quiet, you! *(To DARIUS).* No, I'm not hurt. God, who protects the innocent, kept the lions mouths shut all night. But even if they

don't want any breakfast I could do with some. Can I come out now?

Darius: Yes of course you can. Oh day of marvels! Let me give you a hand. *(Does so)*. Won't the High Priest be cross! *(DANIEL emerges from pit)*. Are you really all right? *(Inspects him all round)*. Not a toothmark! Remarkable! Extraordinary! I shall have all your enemies thrown to the lions instead. *(Regretfully)*. Except the Priests, I suppose. Bel might get rather annoyed if I made a dog's dinner of them - or a lion's dinner, either.

Daniel: Bel! Bel isn't real, Your Highness. He's just a statue, you know. Statues can't DO anything.

Darius: Well this one can. He devours twelve bushels of the finest flour, six measures of wine, and forty sheep every day. It's costing me a packet, I can tell you. FORTY SHEEP A DAY! Just think of it. I wouldn't like to offend someone who can eat forty sheep a day. I know your God looks after you pretty well, but I really think you would be well advised to make the odd sacrifice to Bel every now and then, just as a sort of insurance.

Daniel: *(Laughing)*. My king, don't be taken in. Bel is clay inside and metal outside, and has never eaten anything, not even one sheep. I can prove it to you, if you like.

Darius: You can? How?

Daniel: If you don't mind, I'd rather tell you AFTER breakfast.

(DARIUS and DANIEL depart. The CLERK takes a puzzled glance into the den, shakes his head in bewilderment, and follows the others out).

SCENE 10

The Temple of Bel. Statue visible as before.

(Enter SORCERERS 1 and 2, carrying baskets of loaves).

Sorcerer 1: Bread and wine in here, sheep in the porch as usual. *(He places his basket in front of the statue)*.

Sorcerer 2: *(Following suit)*. Why is Daniel coming with the King today?

Sorcerer 1: *(Shrugs)*. Ask me another.

Sorcerer 2: All right, I will. How did Daniel get out of the lion's den alive?

Sorcerer 1: You'd better ask the Keeper of the Lions: he usually makes his sacrifice at the same time as the King.

(Enter SORCERERS 3, 4 and 5, also carrying baskets. They place them beside the others).

Sorcerer 3: Here we are, six bottles of wine.

Sorcerer 4: Don't you think it's time we increased the wine order? Six bottles doesn't go very far among all of us, does it?

Sorcerer 5: Be careful what you say. Somebody's coming.

(Enter SORCERERS 6, 7 and 8, also carrying baskets).

Sorcerer 6: *(Dumping his basket just inside the door).* Whew, that's heavy!

Sorcerer 7: Don't leave it over there. Put it nearer the secret entrance.

Sorcerer 5: I do wish you'd keep your mouths shut. You know the King always arrives as soon as his donations have been delivered.

Sorcerer 8: And a good thing too - I'm rather peckish.

Sorcerer 7: Well, you'll have to wait a while tonight. The King wants to seal the temple doors when he leaves, for some reason.

Sorcerer 6: I can tell you why that is. Daniel, the interfering busybody, has told him that Bel isn't a real god. *(Gasps from PRIESTS).* The King is sealing the doors so that he can prove that it's Bel, and nobody else, who eats the sacrificial food. *(Laughter).*

Sorcerer 3: So after all the attempts to get rid of Daniel, he's obliging us by doing it himself. Once we've come in by our secret passage and collected our supper, Daniel will be totally discredited.

Sorcerer 8: He's a clever man - but not quite clever enough.

(Enter SORCERER 9, carrying a jar).

Sorcerer 9: Look what the Keeper of Lions has sent for his sacrifice. A jar of mint sauce to go with the lamb. Wasn't that thoughtful of him? Where shall I put it?

Sorcerer 1: Just here, beside the wine.

(Enter ROYAL MESSENGER).

Royal Messenger: The King approaches. He wishes the temple emptied before he arrives.

(PRIESTS depart, muttering "Come on, let's go", "Hurry up, chaps" "Get a move on, you lot" etc. Enter DARIUS, DANIEL, who carries a small bag or box,

and CLERK. DANIEL stands back while the others make the offering).

Darius: } *(Together addressing the statue).*

Clerk: } O Bel, thou art mighty. Look favourably upon thy servants, O Bel, who leave thee this sacrifice. Great is Bel. *(They bow).*

Darius: *(Briskly).* Right, that's done. *(To CLERK).* Just look round and make sure nobody is hiding anywhere, will you? *(To DANIEL).* Now what was it you were planning to do? What have you got there?

Daniel: Ashes, my King. I am going to spread them on the floor all round the food. Then I think we shall see a thing or two. *(He does so, while the CLERK completes his inspection of the premises).* Now I suggest we leave.

Darius: *(To CLERK).* See that the doors are sealed with the Royal Seal. I want to make quite certain that nobody can get in during the night. Then we shall know who's right, Daniel or me.

(The royal party leaves. The lights dim, but not entirely; the PRIESTS, including the HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY, can be seen entering through the secret entrance. Some carry dishes containing what could be joints of roast meat; one bears a lantern).

High Priest: For what we are about to receive, we have really only ourselves to thank. However, I like to keep up our customary rituals - Disgrace before eating, you might say. *(PRIESTS titter politely).* Who has written the Ceremonial Ode to Food for today?

Priest with Lantern: I have, Your Holiness.

High Priest: *(To the rest of the company).* Be seated everyone. *(They sit).* Supper may commence. *(To PRIEST WITH LANTERN).* Let's hear you, then. Nice and clear, not too fast.

(HIGH PRIEST joins the others on the floor, where they sit round the food and wine and help themselves with relish, eating with their fingers and drinking from the bottles. When we next see the dishes and baskets they are empty - unless a few bones are lying about - and since the bottles are lying uncorked on the ground, plainly they are empty too. The only exception is that one portion of everything has been reserved for the speaker of the Ode, since he has been reciting throughout the meal.

The PRIEST WITH LANTERN puts it down - or hangs it up - and recites the Ode, possibly reading from a scroll. At any rate he should adopt a formal posture, and be illuminated by a spotlight, though during the last verse the stage begins to grow lighter).

Priest: I'm supposed to be a priest of Bel,
But I'm better at worshipping my belly.
I offer it sausages and mash,
Junket and jam and jelly.
Slippery spaghetti that's SO hard to pick up:
I eat such a lot that I'm inclined to -
(The rest of the Company look up sharply, but after a brief pause he continues blandly).

Have a lie-down afterwards
To sleep
It
Off.

I'm supposed to stand before the altar
But I'd rather sit down at table.
When it's laid for a five-course meal
I gobble as much as I'm able:
Cheese that I chomp or soup that I slurp -
I eat such a lot that I'm inclined to -

(Again the others look up).

Have a lie-down afterwards
To sleep
It
Off.

I'm supposed to sacrifice some sheep
But I'd rather carve them up for my dinner;
With forty every day to eat
I'm not going to get any thinner.
Baked beans, baked potatoes, Bakewell tart:
I eat such a lot that I'm inclined to -

(This time there is a sharp intake of breath from the others, but as before he carries on smoothly).

Have a lie-down afterwards
To sleep
It
Off.

Deputy: *(Scrambling up and patting his stomach).* Not bad, not bad. I've heard worse. And I've eaten worse. Time's getting on, Your Holiness: shouldn't

we make a move?

High Priest: *(Rising)*. Yes indeed; the King could be here any minute. *(To PRIEST WITH LANTERN)*. We've left you a good helping of everything. Someone will carry it out for you. Come along, gentlemen: we'd better be making tracks.

(They all start to leave, one or two of them carrying the portions of food left for the RECITER. A trumpet sounds offstage, and their departure rapidly speeds up. By this time full lighting is restored. For a moment the stage is empty; then DARIUS enters with DANIEL).

Darius: *(Triumphantly)*. There, what did I tell you? All gone. What an appetite!

Daniel: And what did I tell YOU? Look there, on the floor.

Darius: Good heavens! Footsteps! But who has been here? How did they get in?

Daniel: Somewhere there must be a secret entrance. The tracks lead in this direction.

(He follows them and gropes at the wall, which gives way. The PRIEST who recited the Ode is revealed on the other side, fast asleep, bottle in hand).

Daniel: Look at this. Caught in the act. Too much of your good wine, I suspect.

Darius: The priests themselves! The villains! *(Goes to the entrance and shouts)*. Servants! Bring all the priests here! At once! *(To DANIEL)*. So they thought they could make a fool of Darius, did they? But I'm not as easily fooled as all that. I saw through their little game. And now they're going to pay for it.

(SERVANTS 1 and 2 usher in the rest of the SORCERERS and PRIESTS, including the HIGH PRIEST and DEPUTY. Most are yawning or rubbing their eyes).

Servant 1: Here they are, Your Highness.

Servant 2: All except one whom we can't find.

Darius: I have him here already. *(Pushes him with his foot)*. Wake up, you.

(Sleeping SORCERER wakes up and stumbles to his feet, bleary-eyed and bewildered).

Darius: To the lions with the lot of them! You have deceived me. Bel is not a god; he has no powers, he is just brass and clay. Take them away! *(To DANIEL)*. Throw down that idol!

(SERVANTS 1 and 2 drive the sobbing PRIESTS and SORCERERS out, while DANIEL dismantles the statue and lays it on the ground before returning to DARIUS, to whom he bows).

Daniel: It is done, my King.

Darius: I want all the temples of Bel razed to the ground. See to it, will you, Daniel? I won't have false gods worshipped in this land.

Daniel: An excellent idea, if I may say so.

Darius: My ideas are ALWAYS excellent. *(He sweeps out).*

Daniel: *(Wandering over to the statue).* So much for you, you fallen idol. Did you hear that? False gods will not be worshipped any more. *(He kicks it, then returns to the centre of the stage, facing the AUDIENCE).* Idolatry has been destroyed: the land is cleansed. *(Lifting his arms in triumphant praise).* Thanks be to God!

(He follows the King out, with head high and a look of exultation on his face; as he does so the NARRATOR appears at the other side of the stage and watches him thoughtfully. When DANIEL is out of sight the NARRATOR speaks).

Narrator: But he was wrong, of course. Idolatry is never done for. We have a new set of false gods, that's all: mobile phones, designer clothes, personal computers - you know the sort of thing. Dreadful, isn't it? *(He starts to walk off; then a thought strikes him).* I hope you like THIS gear, by the way? *(He pirouettes slowly, showing off his [not necessarily modern] clothes. By Armani, [or any other preferred designer] of course.*

(Extremely pleased with himself he struts off).

THE END

