

THE BAPTIZER

By Jerold London

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TIME AND PLACE

32 CE (give or take a year or two). Machaerus, the palace-fortress of Herod Antipas located now in Jordon, 16 miles southeast of the mouth of the Jordon River on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, approximately 35 miles east (as the crow flies) of Jerusalem.

CHARACTERS

JOHN THE BAPTIZER. Hairy black hair. Black beard. Half clad in plain white (waist to the knees). Barefoot.

PRINCESS SALOME. Age 18. Daughter of Herodias and niece/step-daughter of Herod. Wrapped in gray and white, primitive, with feathers.

HEROD ANTIPAS. Tetrarch (referred to as King). Wearing a silver robe. A sometimes heavy drinker.

HERODIAS. Herod's wife, the Queen. (Earlier his brother's wife). Wearing a black evening gown sewn with pearls. Her hair powdered in blue dust.

MEN (being baptized). Non-speaking parts.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

... // in the dialogue indicates interrupting (but **not** overlapping) text.

You create your life
You shape your life refining it a little more each day until it sings
Until it murmurs with contentment like a little stream
When suddenly from nowhere

– Howard Barker, "Let Me," 2006 (Edward Petherbridge in the lead role).



SCENE 1 – FIRST BAPTISM

A spacious dungeon room (lit in red) with a pool of water between two tall, Doric pillars. At the rise JOHN is bathing a MAN, kneeling beside JOHN in the pool. Throughout the scene MEN continue to enter and leave, each being bathed, on his knees. A cot is off to the side.

SALOME enters and looks around.

Sound from above like a violent rushing wind.

SALOME

You bathed that man yesterday, John.

JOHN

Yes, I know.

SALOME

Why bother bathing him again today?

Why bathe any of them, for that matter? They just keep coming back.

JOHN

Because it's what I do.

I bathe them The moment I arrived, I saw all the people here were filthy.

And the ones who were not, were still filthy.

SALOME

Then bathe me. Why not me?

JOHN

Your mother's the whore of Gomorrah.

SALOME

Your father's a Sodomite cockroach.

Pause.

SALOME

You disgust me.

JOHN

You're so obvious about it.

SALOME

Be what you want to be, John. What else?
By all means be the thing you want to be, and bathe away.
Float like a butterfly, get swallowed by a whale.

JOHN

Jonas bathed in a whale.
Three days running, like a washerwoman.
Three nights tumbling, like a dryerwoman.

SALOME

And look where it got him.

JOHN

You're so obvious about it.

SALOME

Into an oven.

JOHN

Into an oven?...
Whose oven?

SALOME

My oven, for all you'd care.

JOHN

What do you want from me?

SALOME

You.

JOHN

Find someone else.

SALOME

You.... To bathe me.

JOHN

Oh.

SALOME

Why are you ... //

JOHN

What? Uncouth?...

It's a lie. They're all lies.

That's why.

Like everything else in your father's kingdom: All lies and smiles.

O! That one may smile, and smile, and be a Herod.

SALOME

He's not my father.

JOHN

You could have fooled me.

You live in his palace, and he sleeps with Herodias, your mother.

SALOME

I know why.

I know why you think everybody lies.

JOHN

Why?

SALOME

Because you imagine they make up stories about your member, ship.

You're famous for it.

JOHN

You make me want to revisit breakfast.

SALOME

Which was? what? Grasshoppers and wild honey?

JOHN

More lies.

SALOME

If I were an artist, I'd color you all differently.

Oh, I'd for certain keep your beautiful blackness. The rest of you, in pastels.

JOHN

If I were an artist, I'd paint you on a Grecian urn.

Silent. Away. In the corner of some scullery kitchen.

SALOME

Why not in a bedroom? That's where we belong. Silent. Making it ours.

JOHN

You bleed me, at the neck.
But I would pray for you.

SALOME

And I would reproduce, *for you*.

JOHN

If I were an artist, a *good artist*, I'd softly sculpt your features in fine shading.
I'd delicately highlight your splendid hair and eyes in silver and blue.
Echo your curves against the flow of the Jordan I'd paint behind you.
I love that river.
It reflects the link between nature and virginity.
It flavors the air with the scent of the eternal feminine....
But I'm not. So forget it. There's no canvas coming from me.

SALOME

Are you a virgin?

JOHN

Are you?

SALOME

See. We have *that* in common.

JOHN

I'd call my painting "Bosker."

SALOME

Me? Bosker?

JOHN

Bosker Wild.
It suits you.

SALOME

You're mocking me.

JOHN

Why? Do you think so?

SALOME

Without having me, your art would reveal only thirst and misery.
How you pine and thirst for me with every brush stroke you take.

JOHN

Go away. Baptized men turn their backs on temptations like you.

SALOME

Turn their asses, you mean....
Who, pray tell, baptizes you?

JOHN

I do it myself.

SALOME

Often?

JOHN

As necessary.

SALOME

And what else?
What else do you do to yourself in the wilderness?

JOHN

I smile a lot.

SALOME

With an expression like that? I doubt it.
You'd mock the great Julius Caesar himself.

JOHN

I'm not happy in the wilderness. Not much comfort.
Which is why I smile so much.

SALOME

You're the image of human discontent out there. Book of John, first edition.
How do you possibly expect to inspire a messianic following like that?

JOHN

Yours is just your opinion.

SALOME

My opinion,
actually, more my mother's opinion right now,
is the source of authority in this land.
And our opinion is, if you don't shape up you're in deep shit....
You'll probably die.

JOHN

To rise again?

SALOME

How pregnant sometimes your replies are.
A condition often accompanying madness.

JOHN

You fancy me insane?

SALOME

Are you mad? Well, maybe....
A sort of madness, I guess.
To prefer to die than to take me to bed.

JOHN

You and I? Having sex?
Grisly's the word for the union.

SALOME

You're a horse's ass, you know.
And you have an ass that's more stubborn than a mule's.
Refusing to move an inch toward me.

JOHN

You, young lady, are too young, selfish, and arrogant.
Too vain and spoiled.
And if your father didn't own this cellar, I wouldn't have to listen to you.

SALOME

I fancy you, too.
And don't move.
I want to snap a picture of you like this permanently in my memory.

JOHN

Half naked? Bending over? You're out to rob a man of all his dignity.

SALOME

You'd rather my mother unzip your head instead?
And topple forever whatever thin dignity you may have?

JOHN

You despise me.

SALOME

Not at all. And certainly not all of you.
Not that especially fine paintbrush you have.
And your hair. Your magnificently jet black hair.
Let me feel of it.
Like the long black nights the moon will hide its face and play Peeping Tom,
watching us naked in the darkness.

JOHN

Who are you trying to fool?
I'm no painter, and you're no poet.

SALOME

No. I'm more a lusty butcher, I am. I am.
Butcheress.

JOHN

Unremorseful.
Ruthless, would be my guess, like your mother.

SALOME

Don't use your flattery on me.
I want your body. Not your honeyed words.
And maybe a little of that liquor you use.

JOHN

What liquor?
What are you talking about?

SALOME

Your baptism water. I chop up watery rituals for fun. Watch me.
I butcher them. I betray them. I betray everything in witness of sex.

JOHN

Did you just say: the *wetness* of sex? Is that what you said?
What world are you in?

SALOME

I wish I *had* said that. It's good. But no. I'm not quite *that* clever.
O, what the Hell.
Surrender yourself to *me*, wet or dry, and be done with it.
Or deliver your head to my mother.
Those are you options.

JOHN

You think you're such a big scare?
I've played to bigger ones.

SALOME

Like who?
May I ask?

JOHN

I've fought nose-to-nose.
With the Devil himself. In the wilderness.

SALOME

So what? *I'm* a better match. And sex is the prize.

JOHN

With you, sex may be the object, but death is always the subject.

SALOME

Death is not the subject when love is the verb.

JOHN

When love is the verb, death is a preposition of deception.

SALOME

You know? You're more vain a baptizer than I am a butcher.
Or a dancer.
Or a candlestick maker.

JOHN

Nothing's vain in the service of God, my Dear.

SALOME

You'd intrigue me, if your platitudes didn't try one's patience the way they do.

JOHN

I'd heard you have no more patience than your mother.

SALOME

And I've heard you like desert bitches.

JOHN

Women are no shelter for a holy man's flesh.

SALOME

What about tonight?

JOHN

I do not care to baptize you tonight.

SALOME

Because?

JOHN

Because, it is of the greatest importance that Satan be defeated.
Before the world ends.
And all good men need to be baptized as fast as possible....
Posthaste.

SALOME

And I'm what?
Chicken liver?

JOHN

It seems so.

SALOME

It seems so? Are all women chicken liver to you?

JOHN

My mother was no chicken liver.
And always in the night when I'm threatened with death, I think of her.
Her sainted soul.

SALOME

Her sainted soul?

JOHN

It seems so.

SALOME

There's a shallowness in your history, isn't there?

JOHN

Perhaps.
Perhaps at times I think we're all mere pieces, in a game of chess.
On opposite sides of the board, you and I.
Your mother and mine.

SALOME

Yes. [*thoughtfully*] Yes, we are.

And your bogus theory of the world coming to an end in a month or two doesn't help. Because it ain't going to happen that way. Trust me.

JOHN

[*pause*] Take off your clothes.

SALOME

Take my clothes off?

JOHN

Now.

SALOME

And you'll baptize me?

JOHN

I suddenly long to baptize a truly cruel woman. Or the daughter of one. I've never baptized a butcher before.

SALOME obliges, disrobing to be baptized. Underclothes on.

JOHN baptizes her.

SALOME dries herself and puts her clothes back on.

SALOME

Checkmate!

I knew you couldn't go on forever not baptizing a body like mine. What I didn't expect, though, was that you'd be seduced more by my intelligence.

JOHN

But if I lie, bleeding to death at your feet, I'll expect nothing more from you than for you to ignore me completely.

SALOME

Say no more, Teacher. I'll run into the garden searching for other sweet lips to kiss.

And laugh the night away with them.

JOHN

Precisely.

SALOME

Because I'm that kind of woman.

JOHN

Because I'm that kind of man that can never be loved.

SALOME

Because you baptize with water,
and don't know a thing about baptizing with blood.

JOHN

What are you talking about?

SALOME

Do you see any of yourself in me?

JOHN

[beat] No!

SALOME

What we are? Where we are?

JOHN

Where's that?

SALOME

In the land of David and Solomon.
And where's their heart? Where's their *blood*?
Where's the blood they poured into making us the future of Israel?
We've become a nation of pettiness, filth, and subservience to the Romans.
And you don't care.
You're so religiously "enlightened" that you're politically blind.
There's no God in God, no blood in baptism, when Rome calls the shots.
What are you? A Neanderthal?

JOHN

I'm a baptizer.

SALOME

Baptizing for what?

JOHN

For God's coming. With the brave new world He'll bring us.

SALOME

For what? What have we done to deserve a brave new world?
When we don't care enough to fight for this one.

JOHN

We don't *deserve* it. It's God's grace. For us.

SALOME

I was wrong about you.
You *are* pitiful.
And I love you for that.
Because a man a woman can't pity, a woman can't love.
Because pity *is* love. And pity is passion.
And tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow ... //

JOHN

creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
to the last syllable of recorded time.... I've heard.

SALOME

Your loneliness, too.
I pity your loneliness.
And I pity your having to bathe all these dirty derelicts in here all the time.

JOHN

[*beat*] Face it: I'm never going to be loved.
Because I'm never going to be understood. Am I?

SALOME

You know what you are?
You're a bath left running.
Of useless questions.
Speaking of which:
When was the last proper bath *you've* taken.
With genuine soap and lather?

JOHN

I've been waiting. For the world to end. The night before.
Even though Armageddon will almost certainly obliterate any distinction between
the washed and the unwashed.

SALOME

Because Heaven stinks?

JOHN

One aspect of its magnificence.

SALOME

I do love you, John.
And I do pity you, too.

JOHN

Put your clothes back on.

SALOME

I have.
They're on.
You're just remembering.
Or wishing.
Do you want me to get naked for you again?

JOHN

I am wishing, aren't I? What have I become?

SALOME

A man. With raised hopes. More truly a man than you've ever been, I'd wager.
If I could only swap a picture of the true you for what they'll write about you.
People are fated to know you by water, bad clothes, and smell alone.
I want them to see you for being the Messiah you are.

JOHN

A Messiah? *Me??*

SALOME

You're the one who has the most skin in the game.

JOHN

Why do you say that?

SALOME

Who else stands to lose his head?
Without a picture, how will people know *what* to believe?

JOHN

They can read. And why do you care, anyway?

SALOME

Lies. Lies. And more lies. I *hate* lies people write. More than anything.

JOHN

What's your name? I've forgotten it.
Wait! Give me a second....
Salome? Right?

SALOME

Stop that! Right now!
You Goddamn well know who I am.

JOHN

How does it fit so well?
That sharp tongue of yours, in such a slender mouth?

SALOME

Talk about mouths!
Look at that mouth of yours. Like a scarlet ribbon.
Like a pomegranate from the gardens of Tyre, cut with the pearl knife of heaven.
Let me wash it. Please. And kiss it.
Your mouth.
It's beautiful.
I suspect that's why you're in here, isn't it? Your mouth
For me to kiss it. Let me kiss it. Let me bite your lips. It's my destiny.

JOHN

My mouth is here for one reason only:
To cry in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

SALOME

For what?

JOHN

For love and purity.

SALOME

Let me tell you something, John, about love and purity.
There's only one good speech.
That's a good speech.
Only one good act.
And that's a good act.
Only one good God.

And that's a good God.
And only one good love.
And that's love smothered in sex. Pure sex.

JOHN

Purity? Smothered in sex?

SALOME

Water is pure, but it has only the spirit of water.
I will bathe you with the spirit of love.
And don't sneer.
It will leave you changed. Your eyes will open.
It's better not to sneer until you see the light.
With your head still on.

JOHN

I live for purity. Washed, rinsed, and dried.
And when a man is pure, his soul opens to the voice of Heaven.

SALOME

Listen to me. *I* am the voice of Heaven.
And I tell you, making love is what purifies a man.
You think I want to fornicate just for my jollies.
I want to take you into me to make you a man.
What profit is there if a man professes that he has all the faith in the world,
if he has no works beyond waterworks? No experience with women?
If a woman is poor and naked, and all he does is wash her?
All he does is send her away, to find clothes on her own?
What the Hell? What kind of man is that?
You are made man with the sacred duty to fulfill manhood.
And I am made woman to make you.
If you're warm, and filled, and give nothing of it, what have you accomplished?
I tell you: Faith without love is as dead as a body without a head.
Something that water bath of yours can't match.
The love of a woman.
Can't come close to matching.

JOHN

It's sweaty in here, isn't it?
Right?

SALOME

It's
You know, I really love that mouth of yours.
It's just, when you open it, it offends me with its ignorance.

JOHN

How do I get out of here? I've got to get out of here.

**JOHN walks away from the MAN he is
baptizing, only to return.**

SALOME

Write me a poem.

JOHN

A what?

SALOME

Say a poem for me.

JOHN

What?

SALOME

Sing a psalm.

JOHN

What?

SALOME

Buck, cluck, pluck a few words together if you can.

They can rhyme, or not.

In any meter. It doesn't matter.

Sketch something. A verse or two.

JOHN

I don't know how.

SALOME

And you don't have any good stories, either.
No parables or proverbs.
No metaphors of the Kingdom of Heaven. No beatitudes.

How can you hope to become a Messiah?

JOHN

What's a beatitude?

SALOME

Well, it's not, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," I can tell you.

It's like ...

Blessed are the poets and playwrights,
for theirs is the kingdom of the world's a stage.

JOHN

What?

SALOME

You know what I mean.

JOHN

No I don't.

SALOME

Like, letting another plunder your thunder.
See? There's poetry. And truth. And I wasn't half trying.

JOHN

I couldn't hope to be a poet.

SALOME

Hope springs eternal.

JOHN

If I could only hope that were true.
But there's no time.
Before Judgment Day.

SALOME

Tomorrow, maybe.

JOHN

Oh? Tomorrow you'll be different?
Uncruel, maybe? A retired butcher?

SALOME

All right. Let's fornicate, and forget it.
I'm destined always to be a butcher.

JOHN

I'm busy.

SALOME screams.

SALOME

No one.
Let me repeat, and clarify.
No one refuses me that way.
Do I make myself clear?

Pause.

SALOME

I am the most beautiful girl in the world.
You're a hermit.
What do you have to live for, if you refuse me?

JOHN

I have friends. Just not here, right now.

SALOME

They've forgotten you. Take my word for it.
They've all forgotten you.
He's stolen them all from you.

JOHN

If that's true, I am indeed in danger.
The end of me. Right? My extinction. Correct?
And you think that scares me?
I'm so absolutely aware of my danger, Salome, I amaze myself.
I'm losing my head over it.
So fearless of death I feel right now, whew!!
I feel I might possibly feel like God Himself feels.

SALOME

Oh? You've found the secret?

JOHN

What secret?

SALOME

A resurrection.... Have you seen one?

JOHN

No.

SALOME

Any photographs?

JOHN

No.

SALOME

What, then?

JOHN

Words, let's say.

SALOME

Words?

Like "bitch"?

JOHN

Murderous bitch.

SALOME

If that's all you have, don't say it.

Witness it.

JOHN

You couldn't.

SALOME

Not me. But my mother could.

And don't think for an instant she doesn't have the balls to.

JOHN

You use words like a maze.

To trap a goose in.

SALOME

I don't lie. Period.

JOHN

I know you lie.
But I don't mind.
I can lie, too.
I'm perfectly able to.
In fact, I am almost certainly lying right now.

SALOME

Excellent.
Forget the media.
Forget the mindless talking heads.
That was yesterday's news in Judea.
Let's talk about tonight.
Or tomorrow night.

JOHN

Anything's possible.
Tomorrow. Maybe.

SALOME

Are you lying to me? To love each other?

JOHN

To know we're simply part of a story long since forgotten.

SALOME

Or misbegotten.
Kiss me. I love you.
You have such a marvelous mouth.

JOHN

I won't.

SALOME

Tomorrow, then, maybe?

JOHN

How can you want to kiss someone your mother's thinking of beheading?

SALOME

Please. I have my passions. And she's not one of them.

JOHN

You're a hypocrite.

SALOME

You're breaking my heart.
And, now, when I've already filed my emancipation papers.

JOHN

You don't have to be so smug about it.

SALOME

Smug?!

JOHN

There's no truth on a woman's lips when she's bragging.

SALOME

I brag like a woman, and shag like a woman.
Are you at peace with that?
Are you at peace with life with women in it who have balls?

JOHN

At peace with life?

SALOME

No, of course not.
How foolish of me!
How could anybody, crying in the wilderness, be said to be at peace with life?
Right?

JOHN

I'll tell you the truth: I'd kiss you if you weren't so beautiful.
It's. I just don't trust beauty like yours.

SALOME

You're afraid of me.

JOHN

Afraid of you?

SALOME

Well, afraid of my mother then. *She's* a beautiful woman.

JOHN

I wouldn't necessarily say that.

SALOME

You don't know what you're talking about.
Of course she's beautiful. Two kings worth.
On the outside, she's one of the world's most beautiful woman.
And your denial is as corrupt as the corruption you accuse her of.

JOHN

What corruption?

SALOME

My mother.
Her husband.
My royal family.

JOHN

He sweats too much, when he's around you.
Quite unlike a father.

SALOME

I told you: He's *not* my father.

JOHN

Your uncle, if you want it that way.
Around you he sweats like a man.
Not like a father. *Or* an uncle.

SALOME

What are you trying to say?

JOHN

He appreciates you.

SALOME

Of course he does.

JOHN

When you dance.

SALOME

Does that bother you?

JOHN

It gives me a peculiar feeling.
Around the neck.

SALOME

I thought you didn't like me.

JOHN

I respect you. Like I respect dancing cobras.

SALOME

And you can hear me? Now?

JOHN

You've gotten through
Despite the noise.

SALOME

The truth is simple.
Be my lover and stay in one piece. And be at peace with life.

JOHN

Your terms are heavy.

SALOME

Somewhat heavier, I'll admit, than a headless baptizer.

JOHN

She would do that? And get away with it?

SALOME

Imagine it. Just imagine it.
Imagination is faster than the eye.

JOHN

Imagine my eyes, smiling up into your face.
From a dinner plate.

SALOME

You won't listen to reason, will you?
Who's ever going to make you a better offer?

JOHN

I will be remembered, down through the ages.

SALOME

For losing your foolish head?
Foolishly?

Who would believe it?
I'll tell you how they'll remember you.
For being an itinerant messenger, derelict in his duty.
Not fit to tie the shoelaces of the real newsmaker.
Lowest in the kingdom of heaven. That's what he'll say of you.

JOHN

You're kidding me.

SALOME

It's all in the telling, my Dear John.
All in how the history books are printed.
Already there are those who think you don't preach the good stuff.

JOHN

Like what?

SALOME

Like, nothing about life after death.

JOHN

I tell it like it is.

SALOME

That's what I'm saying.
You don't paint pretty enough pictures for people.

JOHN

That's because *I'm* not pretty enough.

SALOME

To me you are.
Paint a picture for me.
With me in it; and spend the night.
Nobody will know.

JOHN

God will know.

SALOME

Don't be silly. Of course God will know.
God brought you to me, Silly Goose.

JOHN

I'd want to swallow my tongue, if I believed that.

SALOME

Why?

You can be the Messiah.

And I can be your Magdalene.

What's to swallow a tongue about that?

The Gospel writers will all be on our side, if we give them a chance.

JOHN

Jezebel.

SALOME

Think of it: The truth, and all the lives it will save.

JOHN

It's marvelous, how self-centered you are.

SALOME

Speak for yourself, Teacher.

What's marvelous is how stubborn *you are*.

JOHN

You don't know a thing you're talking about.

SALOME

Oh yes I do.

And you know it, too. You're just too proud to admit it.

JOHN

What?

SALOME

I'm talking about offering a viable path to heaven without hatred and bigotry.

JOHN

You're not normal, Salome. You're not clean.

SALOME

But you just washed me. Remember?

JOHN

Apparently it didn't work.

SALOME

Then wash me again.

JOHN

What? Wash a woman twice?
In the same day?

SALOME

Why not? I'm game.

JOHN

You're so damned opinionated.

SALOME

And you're so damned arrogant.

JOHN

I'm arrogant?...
Well, of course I am.
If I weren't, would I be in this position?
Anyone who challenges authority is automatically considered arrogant.
The very act of calling attention to dereliction of duty is arrogance.
So, don't tell me I'm arrogant.

SALOME

You'll pay the price. You have enemies in high places.
And *that's* the truth.

JOHN

Tell me about it.

SALOME

And I can be a valuable friend. If you make it that way.
And more than that.

JOHN

What is it you want? Other than what you want?

SALOME

That's all.

JOHN

You have no morality.
Which only stands to reason, since your whole family has no morality.

SALOME

You have no sense of achievement.
Which only stands to reason,
since your whole family has no sense of achievement.
Which is why, I suspect, you're so much at home here, in this water hole.

JOHN

If you say so.

SALOME

You admit it!
No! You embrace it!

JOHN

Noise pesters my thinking.

SALOME

No noise better than the passing sound of axe over neck-bone. Right?

JOHN

If my beheading keeps one beggar on the street from starving, nothing is in vain.

SALOME

How about it? One shag. No one will know the difference.

JOHN

Where?
Where will no one know the difference?

SALOME

In the corner over there.
It's dark enough.
Here. I'll show you.

**Walks into the darkness, and throws her clothes out into
the (red) light.**

Can you see me now?
I'm as naked as the moon, with nary a cloud in sight.

JOHN

No.

SALOME

Then come on in. The water's fine.

JOHN throws her clothes back into the darkness, keeping her underpants, which he puts on under his half robe.

SALOME redresses and steps back out of the darkness.

SALOME

You're a mountain man. A hermit. A hippie
By the way, they look good on you.
The way you walk.
I'm surprised you can fit yourself into them.

JOHN

What's your point?

SALOME

Up to a point I've found it sexy.
Trying to seduce you in this place. In this scene.
But now

JOHN

You're a teenager with a teenager's patience.
What else is new?

SALOME

I have a party to get ready for.
Let's quit the charades.

JOHN

No.

SALOME

Communicating with a closed mind is next to impossible to do.
This is your last chance.

JOHN

God loves me, more than you do.
God will protect me.

SALOME

No one loves you more than I do. Or protects you more earnestly.

You think I'm trying to fornicate with you for the excitement of it.
Wrong! It's the love of it my soul desires. For now, and for life.
What more can I bring you?
A cup of tea? Some coffee? A Coke? More of my underthings?
This is your last chance.

JOHN

I think I'm going to check out of here.

SALOME

You can check out any time you like.
But you can never leave.
Not without me.

JOHN

God loves me. More than you do. This I know.
And God doesn't speak to me through a vagina.

SALOME

I thought if you could see all of me, the depth of me, without my clothes on,
you would also see inside of me, my heart and soul.
You would love me for what I am, and not my mother.

JOHN

Inside of you I'm sure I'd find the deepest sadness of my life.

SALOME

Inside me. Try it.
A world so unknown and unknowable.

JOHN

Inside you?
No. I would only be hiding in your flesh.

SALOME

Inside me. Yes.

JOHN

Inside you?
No.

SALOME

Inside me. Yes.

JOHN

Inside you?

No.

SALOME

So? How do you feel? Right now?

JOHN

About you?

SALOME

About life in general.

JOHN

Virtuous.... Scared, a little.

Wondering what it feels like.

SALOME

Don't say I didn't warn you.

SALOME exits.

JOHN continues his endless baptizing in the red.

SCENE 2 – HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE-MAN-DAD

A dining hall, with hundreds gathered to celebrate Herod's 52nd birthday. Ample wine, bread, and fruit. (The main course being awaited.) Party noises fill the air. Sitting at the head table are HEROD. To his right, his wife HERODIAS. To his left, her daughter, SALOME.

Sound from above like a violent rushing wind.

HEROD, slightly inebriated, stands and signals for attention, clinking a knife against a water glass.

HEROD

A warm and hearty welcome to everyone. One and all, to these wet festivities. Herodias, and Salome, and I welcome you. We love you. God bless you all.

Raises his glass.

Drink with me a toast to love. In the spring wine of my joy.
It makes a king, yet a man, feel loved.
From his beating heart, all the way back to his now departed ancestors.
We feel loved tonight.
This special night.

VOICE (offstage) from the party

Tell us, King Herod, about your ancestors.
Tell us about their love.

HEROD

Lots, if you want to know.
A forefather of mine who loved his daughters more than the world.
Like I do my daughter.
Whose wife, sadly, went to salt.
A forefather whom angels visited from heaven. And his wife, too.
Oh yes, I have ancestors visited by God's angels themselves.
In Sodom and Gomorrah. And found the people there all filthy.
What else is new?
But not our beloved forefather. He was righteous.
And his wife, maybe, before she fell into his salt pit.

HERODIAS

Pulling at Herod's sleeve.

Darling, you ought not be telling this story tonight. On your birthday.

HEROD

Not tonight. Not about cousin Lot tonight.
Not about the salt pit in Lot's back garden.
No.
Not about that tonight.
His wife fell in, and pickled her skin, and made herself a statue.
But his daughters escaped.
Safely to the mountains. With Lot.
To the crevices of the mountains.
Concealed themselves in wine and watched.
But no! Not about that tonight.
Mustn't speak of that tonight.
Perfectly aware how a man moves, returning from illicit intimacy.

HERODIAS

Pulling somewhat more intensely at Herod's sleeve.

Shh, my Love.

HEROD

Bad word! Bad word!
Mustn't say "intimacy."
Say "affinity."
Say "union."
Say "confederacy."
But don't say "intimacy."
Don't say F'ing "intimacy."

HERODIAS

Pulling even more intensely at Herod's sleeve.

Hush!

HEROD

How could he be expected to stand it?
Alone in the mountains, by himself, and two beautiful, young girls.
The world he knew, burnt to Hell.
With everybody else in it.
And all the rules. And all the watchdogs.
And his wife. A pillar of salt, so his story went.
Alone. With two voluptuous daughters.

HERODIAS

Shh. Shh. Shh.

HEROD

O, dear God!
Not “voluptuous.”
Not *that* word.
Any word but the “V” word. Heaven forbid!
Worse than Lot’s wife reporting him to local authorities in Sodom and Gomorrah,
of all places, for child molestation. Two counts.

**HERODIAS pulls HEROD back down
into his seat.**

VOICE (offstage) from the party

Happy Birthday, King Herod.
Long live our King.

HERODIAS

[*to HEROD*] He’s a baptizer.
A baptizer who looks like an escapee from a zoo. A zoo!
And he claims moral superiority over us. Over me! Christ!

HEROD

Insubordinate, surely.
But the people like him.

SALOME

He interests me, Mother.
Let him be.

HERODIAS

[*to SALOME*] Read the tea leaves, Dear.
He’s as good as dead already.

SALOME

If you’d only see him through my eyes, Mother.
He wouldn’t look zooish at all.
He’s naïve, that’s all.
A bit long-suffering.
His mouth has been shaped by lifelong disappointment, grasshoppers and honey.

HERODIAS

Don’t let it disturb you, my Dear.
I’ve had to learn not to let things like that disturb me.

SALOME

Everything disturbs you, Mother.
Let him be.

HERODIAS

Quiet.

HEROD gets up and leaves the table, to
glad-hand friends in the banquet hall.

SALOME

Why do you look at me like that?
Like frigid snow?

HERODIAS

Why do you persist dressing in those rags? Like some anachronistic hippie?
Just shut up about the Baptizer, and think of your father.

SALOME

Father? Or Uncle-Man-Dad you're married to now?

HERODIAS

If you don't behave, you're out of here.
Party or no party.

SALOME

Don't take it personally, will you?
You're wonderful. Everybody knows that.
But ... just ... John thinks it's a little incestuous.
You jumping into bed with your husband's brother, like you did.

HERODIAS

You better shut the fuck up.
I'm warning you.

SALOME

It's not all that different from how I'm feeling right now.
You know what I mean? After I'm emancipated from you.
Or is it you fear my feelings for John will interfere with my dance for Uncle?

HERODIAS

Feelings?? What do you possibly know about feelings? At your age?
Or your reason for being. You're too young and naïve to know anything about it.

SALOME

But not too young to do a thing about it for what you want. Right?
Savage love, Mommy Dearest.
Did somebody break your heart?
Or simply play around with you, while Father watched?
And you think I never knew.
You're the naïve one. How you raised your leg,
showing Uncle-Man-Dad up your thighs, and thought I never saw.

HERODIAS

You have the foulest mouth.

SALOME

It's the look.
Your key was always in the look.
Like Uncle-Man-Dad gives me now.
That lingering look.
Up and down.

HERODIAS

I'll get you to shut up.

SALOME

You.
You. Slipped away, into your hiding place.
You two.
And figured I never knew.
The door left just enough ajar,
so my father could see what you let his brother do to you.
On the table.
Taking off your gloves.
Your hat.
Your blouse.
Drawing up your skirt.
Showing yourself off to Uncle's lusting eyes.
And to Father's eyes as well.
As you humiliated him.
Your bare ass leaning across the edge of the table.
My Uncle behind you.

HERODIAS

It was God's will.

SALOME

Your will. You adulteress.

HERODIAS

My will is God's will.
And I'm queen because of it.
And you are my daughter.
And John the Baptizer is dead meat.

SALOME

You betrayed my father sixteen times, didn't you?

HERODIAS

I never counted.

SALOME

You should be the one turned into a pillar of salt.

HERODIAS

You think your father cared?
You think he was a husband who fawned upon his wife?
Hardly, I can assure you.

SALOME

What?

HERODIAS

There were bottoms other than mine he much preferred.

SALOME

Sixteen times.
His queen, my mother, betrayed him.

HERODIAS

Hush.

SALOME

Sixteen times you betrayed him.

HERODIAS

I don't think so.
You can only betray a man who cares.
He could have cared less.

SALOME

And *you* could care less. For Uncle-Man-Dad to screw me.

HERODIAS

If I get what I want, I get what I want.

SALOME

What is it you want?

HERODIAS

Nothing spoils sin like its permission.
Your father ... if I asked him ... //

SALOME

My Uncle, you mean?

HERODIAS

Yes, if you insist. Your *Uncle* would never cheat on me,
unless he delivered something to me I cared more for.

SALOME

Which is?

HERODIAS

The head of your friend.
The head of John the Baptizer, on a platter.

SALOME

You wouldn't.

HERODIAS

He's an idiot. With a capital I.
Bathing filthy men incessantly.

SALOME

He finds the lowest of the low in the shape and skin of God.
And I kinda get it.
But no way you'd ever understand.
The hungry, he gives them meat.
The thirsty, he gives them drink.
The dirty, a place to get clean.

HERODIAS

Yes. In *our* cellar.

SALOME

Naked, he clothes them. Sick, he nurses them.
In prison, and he has them come unto him.

HERODIAS

You're getting as nutty as he is.

SALOME

Why? When he washes them, he feels God's body in his hands.

HERODIAS

I'm going to have the head of that man ... on a platter.

SALOME

You won't.

HERODIAS

Try me.

SALOME

You're lying.

HERODIAS

Don't count on it.

SALOME

I'd do anything to save him.

HERODIAS

I'd do anything to get rid of him.

SALOME

If you free him I'll do what my Uncle wants me to do with him.
You can have anything else in his kingdom you want.
And I won't write about you in my memoirs.

HEROD reenters. HERODIAS rises and goes to him (away from the table), to speak privately. He nods. Then they return to their respective seats at the front table. There is applause.

SALOME

[to HEROD] Are you lying to me?

HEROD

Dance for me.

SALOME

Only if you promise you haven't lied to me.

HEROD

Your mother and I have spoken.
You can count on her.

SALOME

She's changed her mind?

HEROD

Why do you care so much about him?

SALOME

He fascinates me.
His God.
His faith.
His mouth.
His truth.

HEROD

Too much water, I'd say. Does something to the skin and lips.

SALOME

Just leave him to me. Why not? He's only a visitor.

HEROD

He thinks he can check out of here whenever he likes.
But I tell you, he can never leave.

SALOME

Why?

HEROD

What do *you* care?
What does it mean to you?

SALOME

I like what he eats.
If I were with him, I'd eat better.

HEROD

Grasshoppers and honey?

SALOME

Life could be worse.

HERODIAS

[to SALOME] And what about his duty?

SALOME

What duty?

HERODIAS

His duty to apologize.

And keep his mouth shut.

If only to remind the rest of the populace of their proper place in society.

Which is keeping their mouths shut.

SALOME

That's not very politically correct, Mother. You're an inconsiderate bitch.

HERODIAS

You, Salome, are a spoiled brat.

And I trust I shall never have to exchange vile syllables like these with you again.

SALOME

Why am I even here?

HEROD

As a witness.

To history.

To the finest birthday party of King Herod's life.

It will go down in history.

It may even alter the course of history.

And I trust I don't have to tell you what that means.

SALOME

You want the truth?

HEROD

Why not?

SALOME

The truth is that truth is outlawed in this land.

HEROD

You've become jaded, my Sweet.

HERODIAS

She's become unmanageable.

Unmanageable, fretful, and, to tell the truth, a bit ugly.

SALOME

Oh? Am I now?

HEROD

Not to *my* eyes.

Trust me.

SALOME

I am quite prepared to be ugly.

HEROD

Prepared for what?

SALOME

For life away from here.

Wandering like a gypsy.

With John.

HEROD

Now you don't want that.

SALOME

Trust me.

HEROD

And what am I to be? A Hershey bar for your wandering tastes?

SALOME

This is not about chocolate sweets.

Actually, it's more about me.

And my body.

And your flirtations with what you're dying for.

HERODIAS

O! You think yourself some kind of poet now?

Is that it? At eighteen?

SALOME

A poet's truth is hidden, like a loincloth hides the truth of a symbol.
Behind cloaks of respect, dignity, and public decorum.
Behind lust, deception, possession, and privilege.
Trust me.
My body can see what my eyes miss.

HERODIAS

What in Hell was it that attracted you so much to a zoo animal like him?

SALOME

His holiness.
I wanted to be obsessed like him with God.
And for him to be as obsessed with me
I wanted to be in control of his female fetish.
Blind him with the sight of my body.
I wanted him to crave me more than God.
His asceticism. His insanity. His being forbidden.
His not having me.
I wanted to break the back of his not having me.
His rejection of me.
And I wanted to learn from him inside me, all the secrets of divinity he knows.
To change history for him. And for the world.
And trust me. I can do it...
Who creates the frustration of passion more than this?

SALOME bites her lip.

HEROD

What do you think *I'm filled with*? Dog food?

SALOME

You're an ocean, Man-Dad, washing shores with your waves.

HERODIAS

What are you implying by that?

SALOME

It's complicated.
Trust me.

HEROD

I do wish you'd desist talking about him. It might affect my prowess.

SALOME

Thoughts, like prayers, just come over me. Sorry.
I'm being tormented by memories of him.
Being with him. In the shadows.
Red shadows. Baptizing.

HEROD

And no desire for a king?

SALOME

I desire what I desire. And my body obeys me. Trust me.

HERODIAS

You're a slut, My Dear Daughter. Need I say more?

HEROD

And what am I in this scenario, Dearest Wife? A Hershey bar?

HERODIAS

If that's what you want to be. A child's chocolate bar.

HEROD

Trust me, more than that.

HERODIAS

Then control your eagerness while we sort this out.

HEROD

You're being loyal to me?

HERODIAS

It's your birthday, isn't it? Your special birthday?

A bell rings.

SALOME

What's that sound?

HERODIAS

Sound?

SALOME

Yes. Sound.
What's that sound?

HEROD

Nothing.

SALOME

The entire character of this adventure
If you can call it an adventure

HEROD

It will be.

SALOME

The entire character of this adventure is its eccentricity
If not its foreboding.
Let's get it over with.

The bell rings a second time.

SALOME

That sound. See?
That bell. Sound.

HEROD

What of it?

SALOME

You are all obsessed.
Everyone's obsessed with sex and nakedness.
Erotic distractions.
My being made into one of them.
Used as a victim of some conspiracy I've chosen three times to extricate myself
from.

HERODIAS

Three times?

SALOME

I'm not part of this.
I'm no co-conspirator.
It's a lie.
I want more than anything, God willing, for John to go on baptizing.
Have a child with him.
And get out of here.

HERODIAS

You're delirious.

SALOME

Enraptured.
I love his lips.
I've dreamed of them next to mine. All mine.
And I'm not part of this.
Proselytes rewrite truth to their own tune.
Just don't let them say:
I'm damned for all time.

For the third time
What is that sound?

HEROD

There's no sound.

SALOME

Yes there is.
I hear it.
Sort of a ring.
A clock, is it?
Find it. Look for it

HERODIAS

There are two hundred rooms in our palace.

SALOME

Go into every one.
Find it.
Just don't say:
I'm damned for all time.

HEROD

Go into two hundred rooms?

SALOME

And their closets, too, if you have to. And cupboards.
Just don't say, I'm damned for all time.

HEROD

It would take all night.

SALOME

It could take all night.
Just don't say:
I'm damned for all time.

HERODIAS

[*aside*] After tonight, she's being committed.
For all time.

HEROD

My party's drifting away from me.
Calm down, you two.
Everything's okay.

SALOME

For whom?
For me?
For John?
I thought when the crisis came
John said when it came there would be fires burning all over the place.
I thought I'd have to rip my clothes into shreds, for children's bandages.

HERODIAS

You're talking like a savage.

HEROD

My party's drifting toward a crisis.

SALOME

There it goes again....
Not a bell, it's water.
Did someone leave the water running?

Or?

**SALOME puts her hand to her mouth
and begins gnawing her knuckle.**

SALOME

It is a crisis.

HERODIAS

Not if you do what you're told.

SALOME

Is that true?
Are you telling me the truth?

HERODIAS

The world's not coming to an end.
And you will be free to roam the countryside as you please.
Kiss anybody's lips you want to.

SALOME

You promise?

HERODIAS

I do.

Pause.

HERODIAS

[to SALOME] Why are you staring at me like that?

[pause] Why?
Stop it.

SALOME

You're a liar.

HERODIAS

[privately to SALOME] An adulteress, maybe. In a past life. But never a liar.

SALOME continues staring at her mother.

HERODIAS

Stop staring at me.

SALOME

I can't help it.
You're such an artisan at it.
My spine tingles like riding a crucifixion watching the gall of liars like you.
Poor John can't lie his way out of a doggie bag.
Which is why he is where he is today.

HERODIAS

Where?

SALOME

Rotting in our cellar.
With little on to keep him honest but my panties and half a robe.
Because others have used him to get to you.
Do you think for an instant he knew about the stuff he said about you?
No.
He was merely a pawn in their game.
It was fed to him by rebel Zealots intent on undermining our Roman-friendly
fake regime.
By ones who really do want to crown a new King of the Jews.
By ones who didn't want him to find me or love me.

HERODIAS

Shit! You're stupider than I thought!

SALOME

It's the truth; and I can't help it.

HERODIAS

Who's feeding you this crap? And who's going to believe it?

SALOME

I'll leave a diary, with everything in it.

HERODIAS

It will be trashed.
Along with everything else that's contrary to the true facts.

SALOME

True ... facts?

HERODIAS

True facts are what are carried in the true hands of true power.
Power is truth in this world.

SALOME

Oh, let's get this over with, so I can get out of here.

HERODIAS

You're not hungry?

SALOME

I've lost my appetite.

HERODIAS

You're starting to think like him.

SALOME

In a certain way, I suspect I am.
Is that a sign of love?
Or a sign of enlightenment?

HERODIAS

Why you?
Why my daughter?
Why *my* daughter? This makes no sense.

SALOME

There's no one else.
It *has to be me*.
If his life is to be saved, it has to be me.
Only me.
Those who used to call him the greatest man ever born,
they've abandoned him.
They've betrayed him.
Maybe three times over.

HERODIAS

Why does truth even matter?
No believer is going to believe it anyway.

SALOME

Truth is part the formula for finding God in the world.
If that means anything to anybody.
Skin to skin. Next to God.
Skin of the poor, and the homeless, and the falsely accused.
Skin on everybody, framed and colored by God's immortal eye.

HERODIAS

And this spectacular enlightenment of yours? It's Heaven sent?

SALOME

Maybe the world *is* coming to an end. Or maybe just ours.

HERODIAS

Infantile.

SALOME

Romans flatten everything in their wake.
They poison the Earth with their legions.
And you just sit on your ass and watch like a donkey.
Trees are being cut down everywhere.
Just look at the rainforests.
Rivers are being polluted.
Animals are being hunted and chased out of existence.
Climates are being stirred like witches' brew.
While you just sit here.
And patiently wait for Man-Dad to screw me.
So you can have dinner.

HEROD

Food now? Or our poetry session first, Darling One?

SALOME

Poetry.

HEROD

The sublime poetry of your dance.

SALOME

I'm your daughter, you know, in a way.

HEROD

You're my niece.
Nieces are nice.

SALOME

I've lost my appetite.

HEROD

For the Baptizer?

SALOME

For myself. For my sexuality. For my mission.

HEROD

Forgive me. But

HEROD moves his mouth, for several sentences, but nothing is heard. Then ...

HEROD

Forgive me, but words of delicacy seem to have left me
You're not saying, are you?
You're not saying *No* to me, are you?

SALOME

No

HEROD

Good. For I am not a man without feelings.

SALOME

We all are.

HEROD

What?

SALOME

Not without feelings.

HEROD

Good.

SALOME

Not without feelings.

HEROD

Good.
And good you don't flinch when you say so.
Nothing's as distasteful as a romp without feelings.

SALOME

Feelings are history.
And we sure as shit are not without history tonight.

HEROD

A magnificent verse!

SALOME

Happy Birthday.

HEROD

Well, I thank you....
And an evening from which only happy memories will emerge.

SALOME

Memories of much.
Behind me.

HEROD

I can do it from the front, if you prefer.

HERODIAS

I'm getting hungry.
Our guests are, too.
Make it quick.

[*aside*] Like a guttering candle.

HEROD

[*to* HERODIAS] You do love me, don't you, Dearest?

HERODIAS

I often have to forgive myself, my King, my immense love for you.
But nothing
No matter what act you may perpetrate
Will ever free me of my love for you.

HEROD

Good.
One must live with the consequences of his actions.
And the ones he fails to perform,
they stay longer in him, undigested in his gut.

SALOME

[*aside*] While a good man wallows in the cellar.
A cellar he walked near for forty years, and never knew existed.

HEROD

The truth?

HERODIAS

The truth?
You can trust me. You know that.

HEROD

The truth cannot bruise me.
If anything, it will strengthen me. I am King, I am.

SALOME

Thus spake Zarathustra.

HEROD

[to HERODIAS] Of course, Dear, I'll be thinking only of you.

HERODIAS

And afterwards. At dinner. The slow grin of eating shit.

SALOME

[to HEROD] You're not lying to me, are you?

HEROD

I know what you want.
Your mother told me. You may have it.

SALOME

Okay, then.
Let's do this thing.

HEROD

Okay?

SALOME stands and covers her eyes with one hand, extending the other out in front of her. HEROD stands, takes Salome's extended hand, and leads her out of the banquet hall and offstage.

Dance music plays, while the background noise of the party continues.

HERODIAS

It won't take that long. Trust me.
He's quick at it. Ferret-like.
Like the self-centered bastard he is.
And then we can all eat. In peace.

She didn't look all that happy. Good.
She never is anymore, unless she's making me unhappy.
It will all work out.
No one is happy all the time.
That's why we smile as much as we do.

HERODIAS

We need some remodeling done in here, don't we?
A man-size obelisk, to my husband.
Seduced by his own inflated ego.
Oh, I can hear him now:
Why? Why does anyone care about generations to come?
When it's such a distraction to my prominence?

He came, when I was innocently the bride of his brother, and lured me in:
"Sister, I'm the only man wrong enough to be right for you. Take me.
I'll wax the moon of all your desires.
No man is better formed to fill your lust than I am."
Enticements to that effect. And so it went.
I spit on him when first he practiced his seduction.
But he wiped it off, and won out in the end.

Am I not rare?
Safely in the arms of a gentle man to run headlong to a grizzly bear?
Knowing his greatness.
For knowledge of one's greatness is endemic to greatness.

He pined for my body.
O! Wonders of wonders, what carnal desires kings and devils have.
Always feeling the chill and hearing the wings of the air over them.
Even when there lacks all breath of wind and motion.
Behaving, at times, no better than the son of a thieving camel-driver.
Salome claims we all are toads in the winter.
Am *I*? I doubt it! I'm a queen. But him ...?

I'm told a queen is forever given what she requires.
The trick is locating requirements that are refined enough.

Romans to me are coarse and common creatures.
Giving themselves airs of nobility.
Whose philosophers usually kill themselves.

My God!
It's morbid to picture a foreign cunt in your husband's face, isn't it?
Even if it's your daughter's
Especially if it's your daughter's.
O! This is perfect!
What's taking so long?

Pause.

HERODIAS

What *is* a holy man?

A person who can see into the future?

Predicting the fall of the sun, the moon, and the stars?

Predicting the fall of a nation?

The fall of an empire?

What *does* he know for certain?

Predicting random floods, storms, fires, and pandemics?

Predicting worldwide sadness?

Predicting the coming of a Messiah?

Who must die to resurrect magically?

Let me think on that. Ha!

Pause.

What, Goddammit, is taking so long?

I have to get away from here.

Maybe a trip to Vienna. Or Rome. Or the pyramids.

Face it:

I'm Queen of a pretty stinking nation with little or no redeeming social value.

Why would anyone ever expect a movement of spiritual significance to come out of *this place*?

More time passes, before HEROD and SALOME enter, and return to their places at the head table. Silence.

Sound from above like a violent rushing wind, followed by a resumption of the sounds of the general party – HEROD, HERODIAS and SALOME noticeably not talking.

A silver platter is brought in and placed in front of SALOME. On it rests the severed head of JOHN.

SALOME lets out a blood-curdling scream.

Pause.

SALOME rises, spits on her hands, and commences to choke HEROD. HERODIAS jumps up and pulls her daughter off. Slaps her, and sits back down.

HEROD

What the Hell!!
[*rubbing his neck*] You could have strangled me.

SALOME

Remains standing, rubbing her face.

God! I wish I had.
Might have, at that.
No one knows what a girl's capable of until her tits are tested.

HERODIAS

Discipline, Daughter. Discipline.

SALOME

I wish my fingers were knives. Or broken bottles.

HEROD

There must be some mistake. I thought
Your mother told me

SALOME

[*to HEROD*] You lied to me.
[*to HERODIAS*] *You* lied to me.

HEROD

From now on, you come to me on your knees.

HERODIAS

This is what truth is, in this land.
Before your very eyes. Embrace it.

SALOME

You always do use a man, don't you, to get what you want?
And sometimes a child.
You're evil, Mother.
Not common. Evil.

SALOME picks up the silver charger and walks toward exiting with the head of JOHN resting on it.

SALOME

The truth is: Men fuck things up.
Women sew them back together.

SALOME exits.

HEROD

What? What did I do?
Did I have the head of the Messiah severed? Hardly.
And too bad if I did. Who's to say?
It's too late now.
I did it because you told me to.
To get Salome to bed with me.
You told me it was what she wanted.
Some revenge thing that was upsetting her. Against the Baptizer.
Didn't you?

HERODIAS

I needed him dead. He was threatening us.
It was the only way. We did it for you, Sweetheart.
You weren't listening, otherwise.

HEROD

My mistake. Should have scavenged a bit deeper for your treachery.
We talk no more meaningfully to each other than waves on sand....
It probably would have been better to have him drowned.
In his baptismal water.
Hard to say. Except, I guess it *was* a shock for Salome.

How trivial, to have to kill to have my needs satisfied.
How oddly stale.
It makes me want it again.
To kill, and dance again with her.
It begs for repetition.
Hardly had we returned to the table when I was stirred to want it again.
The full monty.
Pity.
Out of luck, on that front. No more baptizers in the basement.

HERODIAS

You're a piece of work, my King.
And ever my King.
Whenever I walk into a room, I search you out.
You're the reason a woman walks as she does, around you.
To meet life, face to face. It's a queen's way. *This* queen's way.
Because your brow is the brow of a leader.
A true leader, like no other.
Dark. Mysterious. A face for history.
And the body.
The steel and muscle that gets things done in life.

HEROD

I do, don't I?
While so many talk, and write, I *do*.
And nobody reads them till they're dead.

HERODIAS

Tit for tat. A severed head here, an infidelity there.

Lighting dims to red. SALOME enters. JOHN walks beside her, head intact. But only HEROD and HERODIAS appear to notice them.

Silence. A sound from above like a violent rushing wind.

SALOME

I have no words to tell you how despicable you two are.

HEROD

What? for Christ's sake!
What is *that*? Who is *he*? What kind of game is this you're playing at?

SALOME

I'm no poet.
And I'm no prophet or Messiah, either, who could tell you.
But I'll tell you one thing, Man-Dad:
You're a heartless pedophile like your ancestor Lot.

HEROD

Is it? Is he ... resurrected?

SALOME

I'm eighteen.
With no more than eighteen hours real-time sense in me.
You want control?
You want possession?
You want power?
You want gratification?
Good luck!!
Every bit of it possesses *you*.
And controls *you*.

HEROD

What's going to happen to me now?
Am I going to lose my crown?
Am I going to die because of this?
Because of what *I* did?
Because of *her*?

Points at HERODIAS

She's the one.

SALOME

Not today. But your time is coming.

I'm too young to understand things like this.
Why my man has had to pay all the dues he has,
only to grease the rails of history for the real resurrection.
But I'm telling you:
When truth and justice fade away, youth fades away alongside them.

Goodbye.

**SALOME and JOHN exit. Light returns
to normal.**

HEROD

[*to* HERODIAS] Is he? ... resurrected? How can that be?
How can you arise from the dead without a head?

[*beat*] We are persons of interest here.
The crime. The miracle. Aren't we?

HERODIAS

It's a lie. A lie. A trick of some sort.

HEROD

Do you think the Baptizer *is* alive?

HERODIAS

It makes no difference.

We won't be seeing them soon again.

Because next time we'll do it right.

Only ashes will be left.

HEROD

If I fall, the world falls with me.

That's all I know that matters.

Most everything else can just be erased from memory.

Or written over.

Because no one will ever believe it if we keep our mouths shut.

And anyway, he's an imbecile now. A zombie.

I thought I saw his head fall off, just as they left the room.

Blue mist slowly covers all.

END