

# **THE BAPTIZER**

**By Jerold London**

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# THE BAPTIZER

## 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 52<sup>nd</sup> 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**