THE SOCRATIC METHOD

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A Play in One Act

by

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Cast of Characters

Socrates: A man in his 70s
Pericles: A man in his 40s
Aristophanes: A man in his early 20s
Autolycus: A man in his early 20s
Plato: A man in his late teens
Aspasia: A woman in her late teens

Scene
Athens, a ruined city.

Time
Sort of present, sort of not.
ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING: Socrates, an old man in grungy clothing, slopes onstage. He looks out into the void, waiting. A male voice – deep, authoritative – cuts through the silence.

VOICE
Do you wish to reconsider your decision?

SOCRATES
No.

VOICE
You’re certain?

SOCRATES
Second-guessing is a jury’s task, Your Honor. Not mine.

VOICE
Very well. Let the record reflect that the defendant, Socrates, has consciously refused to accept a state lawyer as offered by the Council of Athens. You are prepared, then, to defend yourself?

SOCRATES
Is that judgment I detect in your voice?

VOICE
Answer the question.

SOCRATES
I will speak.

VOICE
Shall the charges be repeated?

SOCRATES
Are you afraid I’ve already forgotten them? If I recall, Your Honor, your job is to prosecute, not to patronize.
VOICE
Then let the courtroom be silent. The defendant may now plead his case.

SOCRATES
One of my most distinct recurring memories of growing up comes from my darling mother, a woman who dreamed of strapping, warrior sons and wound up with an underweight asthmatic bookworm instead. She used to club me with her wooden stirring spoon whenever my sentences grew longer than her sunflower stocks and she’d always hiss out the same eight words: “Socrates, you will talk yourself into the grave.” Even as a child, I knew that language was a potent herb, pleasing only to some and in the sparsest of quantities. My mother certainly believed words would be my undoing. You will talk yourself into the grave. But it seems she was mistaken. For it is not into the grave, but out of it that I must now talk myself. So with that standard looming over my head, let the nightmare begin.

[He is suddenly standing in a pool of harsh light.]

SOCRATES
How you have felt, O men of Athens, at hearing the words of my accusers, I cannot tell. They spoke persuasively, did they not? Solid rhetoric, backed up with the blazing fury of self-righteousness. A perfect recipe for defamation. By the time Meletus finished speaking, even I was at least three-fourths convinced that I am exactly what he claimed: namely, a villain and a menace. What craft. For Meletus, as he very well knows, hasn’t strung together two true words in his entire life. Truth is the bastard son he never visits. But of all the inanities that spewed from his little slug’s mouth, my favorite phrase has to be his warning to all of you jurors not to “fall prey” to the power of my “eloquence.” My eloquence. A gift I have never possessed, nor ever wanted to. Why would a man be eloquent when he could be truthful? Yes, Meletus, I am talking to you. Because that was your real warning, wasn’t it? You begged this Council to question my words because you feared the veracity in them.

VOICE
Stop attacking Meletus.

SOCRATES
But it’s so easy.
VOICE
This is a defense, Socrates. Not an indictment.

SOCRATES
Why can’t it be both?

VOICE
I won’t warn you again.

SOCRATES
Want to bet?

VOICE
Socrates-

SOCRATES (dismissive)
Fine, I yield. I can see all you Council clowns shifting in your seats, anyway. No doubt you fear that my words will be unpalatable to you. And of course they will. Humans are allergic to complexity and the truth is never simple. Only fiction goes down easily. But that is your problem to overcome.

[He clears his throat.]

SOCRATES
I will begin at the beginning, now.

VOICE
About bloody time.

SOCRATES
Patience is a virtue, Your Honor. Allegedly.

VOICE
Gods help us.

SOCRATES
But what is the true beginning? From whence do the charges against me originate? Surely, they have their roots in the public fear that has always clung to my person like cigarette smoke on a hot day. Meletus claims-

VOICE
Ahem.
SOCRATES
My apologies. It has been claimed by a thimble-brained twat who shall remain nameless that I have, for many years, been an “evil-doer.” A what?, you might ask. I doubt even my accuser could give a satisfactory definition. But evil-doing is a fault and he is one of many men who have made it the mission of their shriveled little lives to find fault with me at every possible occasion. They claim that I make light out of darkness and proclaim terrible things “good.” This is most obviously nonsense. Never once in my seventy-year life have I argued against the facts of reality. I am not a liar. I am a question-asker. And these questions are often unsettling, as they can produce no satisfactory answer. But let me submit to you that no man should die because another man fears the mysteries of life. That carries logic the way two hands carry water.

[A pause. A choice.]

SOCRATES
But for the sake of thoroughness, I will trace the charge of my alleged evil-doing to what I assume you consider its birthplace: the moment when my questions began uprooting the marble assumptions of this godforsaken city. It was many months ago. And it was purely accidental...

[Socrates evaporates. Lights out.]
ACT I

Scene 2

SETTING: A street in Athens. Dirty, rubbled, sour. If there is music wafting through the air, it is angry. A car honks. An alarm blares. Two young men enter together: Aristophanes and Autolycus. Aristophanes, dressed in black, exudes a kind of feline charisma; his friend, Autolycus, is all seriousness in a pair of camouflage pants.

ARISTOPHANES
What would you say if I promised you a front-row seat?

AUTOLYCUS
I’d say no. Again.

ARISTOPHANES
A front-row seat and a hooker.

AUTOLYCUS
You couldn’t afford a hooker.

ARISTOPHANES
I never said she’d be pretty.

AUTOLYCUS
I’m not going.

ARISTOPHANES
But you have to see it!

AUTOLYCUS
And what if someone sees me, huh? How would I possibly explain that to my captain?

ARISTOPHANES
I’m sure he’d understand.

AUTOLYCUS
You call him a “dick-licker”!
ARISTOPHANES
If the condom fits...

AUTOLYCUS
Captain Hippias is married.

ARISTOPHANES
And he likes licking dicks. And you’re a dick if you don’t come to my show.

[Beat.]

AUTOLYCUS
I despise you, Aristophanes.

ARISTOPHANES
And I’ll see you at seven-thirty, Autolycus. Front row.

[Autolycus groans. The sound of a jet plane roars past. Both boys look up. Autolycus is shaken.]

ARISTOPHANES
So. How long before they export you?

AUTOLYCUS
How would I know?

ARISTOPHANES
You could ask.

AUTOLYCUS
And break ranks?

ARISTOPHANES
Why not?

AUTOLYCUS
I’ll go when they tell me to go.

ARISTOPHANES
Or you could ask.

AUTOLYCUS
It hasn’t even been confirmed.
ARISTOPHANES
Firebombing in Thebes. Sieges all over Attica. Pimply boys running around with moustaches, trying to convince everyone they’re seventeen. If that’s not a confirmation of war, I don’t know what is.

AUTOLYCUS
You’re still angry.

ARISTOPHANES
That my best friend enlisted in the corrupt Athenian army instead of choosing an occupation that would keep him safely within the city walls? Nah, why would I be angry about that?

[Socrates enters the street, using a cane. Plato, a well-dressed teenage boy, scrambles along beside him. They pay no attention to Autolycus and Aristophanes.]

PLATO
But wouldn’t that pave the road to tyranny?

SOCRATES
You don’t believe tyranny already engulfs us?

[Aristophanes and Autolycus stop talking.]

ARISTOPHANES
(under his breath)
No way.

PLATO
Of course not. Our Council was chosen by the people of Athens.

SOCRATES
What people?

PLATO
All of them.

SOCRATES
Except those too poor to pay the voting fine.

PLATO
Vagrants.
SOCRATES
And do vagrants not have legitimate reason for wanting a say in who writes the laws of their city? They are the ones left begging in the rain, after all.

ARISTOPHANES
(to Autolycus)
Since when does he visit this neighborhood?

AUTOLYCUS
Maybe he’s come for revenge.

ARISTOPHANES
Ha ha.

PLATO
But Athens has always been a democracy.

SOCRATES
Not a particularly democratic one.

PLATO
Surely, voting is preferable to anarchy.

SOCRATES
Nothing is sure until it’s tested.

PLATO
Dangerous test.

SOCRATES
These are dangerous times.

[There’s a pause. Socrates sees Aristophanes and Autolycus. Plato looks around.]

PLATO
What are we doing in this sector, anyway?

SOCRATES
Paying a visit.

PLATO
The air smells like vomit.

SOCRATES
You’re welcome to go home.
Plato finally follows Socrates’ gaze to the two young men standing nearby.

PLATO
Isn’t that–?

SOCRATES
Shut up.

[Nearby…]

ARISTOPHANES
He’s looking at me.

AUTOLYCUS
Want my gun?

ARISTOPHANES
Shut up.

SOCRATES
You, there.

ARISTOPHANES
Me, here?

SOCRATES
Aristophanes.

ARISTOPHANES
Socrates.

SOCRATES
Glad that’s sorted, then. What’s your opinion on small talk?

ARISTOPHANES
That you and I shouldn’t waste our time on it.

[Beat.]

SOCRATES
I saw your play.

ARISTOPHANES
I figured.
I liked it.

Well, thank you.

It’s hard for me to pick a favorite moment, although I particularly enjoyed the way you describe me as a pretentious egghead with no grip on reality.

[Plato glances, mortified, at Autolycus. Aristophanes takes a deep breath.]

Look, if you’re waiting for me to apologize—

I expect no apology.

So...what? You came here to fight?

Why would I fight a man five decades younger than myself?

For honor. Isn’t that what you geezers usually chalk it up to?

(Autolycus glares, warningly)

Ari.

And who’re you?

I’m no one.

Ah. The humble sidekick. A soldier, no doubt.

At your service.
SOCRATES
Shouldn’t you be at Athens’ service?

AUTOLYCUS
Shouldn’t we all?

[Beat.]

PLATO
And I’m Plato.

AUTOLYCUS
Autolycus.

PLATO
A pleasure to meet you. Both.

ARISTOPHANES
(to Socrates)
Is it really?

SOCRATES
Courtesy dictates I say yes.

ARISTOPHANES
From what I hear, you and Courtesy rarely keep company.

SOCRATES
This coming from the playwright who can’t tell a story without dragging a dozen reputations through the mud.

ARISTOPHANES
It’s not my fault all the men in Athens are touchier than a spinster at her sister’s wedding.

PLATO
(to Autolycus)
Is your friend always like this?

AUTOLYCUS
Is your teacher?

[A girl enters. Aspasia. Sharp-eyed, provocatively-dressed, and carrying a suitcase. She glances around at the street, with the classic wariness of a person in a new place for the first time. Aristophanes sees her first. Autolycus, Plato, and Socrates
quickly follow his sight line to her. She sees them all at once. It brings her to a stop.]

ARISTOPHANES (quietly)
Just when you think your day can’t get any more interesting.

[Then, he raises his voice.]

ARISTOPHANES
All right, sweetheart?

[Beat.]

ASPASIA
So now that the asshole has identified himself, who should I talk to instead?

SOCRATES
Me, probably.

ASPASIA
Because you’re old and wise?

SOCRATES
Because I’m old and disinterested.

[This is enough for Aspasia.]

ASPASIA
Can you point me in the direction of Miss Juniper’s Flower House?

[The words “Flower House” cause a quiet stir amongst the men.]

SOCRATES
First day in Athens, is it?

ASPASIA
How’d you know?

ARISTOPHANES
Because no one calls that place the Flower House. Not even old Juniper.
ASPASIA
I thought I made it clear I wasn’t speaking to you.

ARISTOPHANES
She doesn’t hire from off the streets, either. This is Athens. Any prostitute worth her salt around here has to earn her way to the top.

ASPASIA
(snapping)
Unlike a man, who can roll to the top any time it suits him.

ARISTOPHANES
Is that an offer?

ASPASIA
Just an observation.

[The sound of footsteps. Pericles enters. He is in his 40s, dressed in military finery. As he walks across the street, the four men beside Aspasia bow low. She remains standing. Pericles notices this. He comes to a halt before the group.]

PERICLES
At ease.

[Socrates, Plato, Aristophanes, and Autolycus stand. Pericles has trouble taking his eyes from Aspasia, but the sight of the old philosopher surprises him.]

PERICLES
Socrates.

[Beat.]

PERICLES
I didn’t expect to see you in this sector.

SOCRATES
Is there a question in that?

PERICLES
Not yet. As you were.

[Socrates nods. Pericles turns back to Aspasia.]
PERICLES
And now to you, miss. What on earth was that?

ASPASIA
What was what?

PERICLES
Did you not see your friends bowing?

ASPASIA
They are not my friends.

PERICLES
Glad to hear it.

[Pericles gestures with one hand. Aspasia takes a few steps towards him, leaving the group.]

PERICLES
Are you new to this city?

ASPASIA
Why does that matter?

PERICLES
Because I need to determine whether your flagrant disrespect for the authority of Athens stems from a revolutionary zeal or from genuine ignorance. If the first, I shall have no choice but to order your arrest. If the latter, I shall have no choice but to learn your name.

ASPASIA
Aspasia.

PERICLES
Aspasia. Welcome to Athens.

ASPASIA
Thank you, sir.

PERICLES
My name is Pericles. I am the prince of this realm and the head of its Council.

ASPASIA
Color me shocked.
PERICLES
Color me charmed. Is your husband here, or…?

ASPASIA
Actually, I was on my way to an interview. With Miss Juniper.

[Beat.]

PERICLES
Well, if that’s the case, then perhaps we might see each other again.

ASPASIA
Perhaps we might.

PERICLES
Shall I accompany you to the brothel—? (coughs) I mean, the Flower House?

ASPASIA
Nothing would delight me more.

PERICLES
This way.

[He leads her offstage, taking her suitcase in his hands. Socrates, Plato, Aristophanes, and Autolycus all watch them leave.]

AUTOLYCUS
Talk about getting off on the right foot.

ARISTOPHANES
Or just getting off.

PLATO
Isn’t the prince married?

SOCRATES
If it was only unmarried men who paid for sex, the entire industry would collapse. Old patriarchs have money.

ARISTOPHANES
And terrible libido. Offense intended.
SOCRATES
Is that bitterness I detect in your voice?

ARISTOPHANES
What do I have to be bitter about?

SOCRATES
She didn’t give you the time of day, did she?

ARISTOPHANES
Her loss.

SOCRATES
Your opinion.

AUTOLYCUS
(to Plato)
Our entertainment.

[Plato smiles.]

ARISTOPHANES
That’s it. We’re leaving.

AUTOLYCUS
Fair enough.

SOCRATES
Oh dear. Was it something I said?

ARISTOPHANES
Don’t flatter yourself.

SOCRATES
If I don’t, who will?

[Beat.]

ARISTOPHANES
Autolycus?

AUTOLYCUS
(to Plato)
Good to meet you.
SOCRATES

What about me?

AUTOLYCUS

Jury’s still out.

SOCRATES

Eh, I’ll take it.

[Aristophanes and Autolycus leave.]

PLATO

Bye.

[Plato and Socrates are finally alone.]

SOCRATES

Self-important bastard.

PLATO

Yes, you are.

SOCRATES

I meant the playwright. Smugger than a boy leaving his first brothel. And caustic to boot.

[Beat.]

PLATO

You liked him. You liked them both.

SOCRATES

Oh, please.

PLATO

Am I wrong?

SOCRATES

You’re…irritating.

PLATO

That’s what I thought.

[Socrates grumbles. The pair of them fade...]
ACT I

Scene 3

SETTING: Socrates stands in his pool of harsh, judicial light.

SOCRATES
Of all the charges leveled against me – some of which have been idiotic, while others have been downright hilarious – only three float to the top of the garbage heap as legitimate accusations. Of these three, I am guilty of none. Yet, I have walked in their shadows and flirted with their consequences, so for this reason, I will name and address them. The first is religious impiety. The second is treason. And the third is corruption.

[He coughs.]

SOCRATES
Not political corruption, although I’m sure my opinions on the defectiveness of Athens’ democracy, were they known, would be enough to draw that charge–

VOICE
Are you seriously calling this city’s government defective? On the record?

SOCRATES
Really, Your Honor. Did you or did you not have me swear an oath of truthfulness in front of this entire court?

VOICE
Is there no grain of self-preservation in you?

SOCRATES
I’m already on trial, Your Honor. What’s left for me to preserve?

[Beat.]

VOICE
Carry on.
SOCRATES
The men who have dragged me here today accuse me of corrupting the youth of this city. The youth. Not the parents who raise them or the politicians who run their lives. The youth. So, I ask you men: why am I in such trouble? Why bother prosecuting a man whose corruption only extends to a group of grunged-up, blackheaded teenagers who aren’t even old enough to go inside the voting booths?

[A jet plane roars in the distance.]

SOCRATES
Perhaps because I began accumulating this body of students during the period of damp, pressing dread that always suffocates people just before the start of a war. A nation at war requires a home front at peace, and mankind has always, for better or worse, defined peace as the lack of conflict. Questions lead to doubt, which is two steps from dissent. And I am always asking questions. No wonder you feared me.

VOICE
We don’t fear you.

SOCRATES
Whatever helps you sleep at night.

[He grows solemn.]

SOCRATES
But I would ask you men a very specific question now, which I hope you will ponder long after this trial has ended: what would exist of the Athens we call home if our ancestors had not asked questions? If they had taken for truth only what had come before? Would we be here today; you judging, me defending? Or would our city be a lost opportunity, a cosmic casualty, stuck inside the void of nonbeing for the rest of human history? I put this to you, to all of you. Explain why asking questions is a punishable crime and I will explain how I have poisoned the minds of your children. It is as simple and as stupid as that.

[Socrates evaporates again. The lights fade...]
ACT I

Scene 4

SETTING: A street in Athens. Plato appears, holding a notebook and pen. He tries to write. And tries. And tries. And throws the pen against the ground.

PLATO
What do you write when you know there is someone who could write it better? How do you write, when that someone is a stone’s throw away? Ideas mean nothing until they are dressed in words and my wardrobe is nothing compared to his.

[He tosses his notebook aside.]

PLATO
Nothing.

[Beat.]

PLATO
When I was seven, a boy named Cyrus punched me in the stomach. Hard. He crumpled up his hand like a piece of paper and pushed it straight into my gut. Made me throw up. I hate throwing up. Cyrus was angry because I kissed him...at least, I think that’s why he was angry. His lips were the strangest purple color. I’d never seen purple lips before. I thought they might taste like grapes. But they were too sweet for grapes, and too soft. Like jelly, I thought, grape jelly. So I told him: “Your lips taste like grape jelly.” But he didn’t care about that. Because that’s when he punched me. Hard. In the stomach. I don’t remember crying, but I remember throwing up, because it came out all orange and sticky. When I asked my sister about it, she told me that boys don’t want to know things like the fact that their lips taste sweeter than the best grape jelly in the whole world. And I remember she was touching this giant green bruise on my stomach while she said it. “Boys don’t want to know.” Those five words, over and over. Boys don’t want to know. It made me want to throw up all over again. Because I knew, even back then, that I wasn’t like those angry, punching boys. I was someone who always wanted to
know. And I still want to know. I want to know everything, more than anyone else, more than anyone ever knew a person could know.

[Plato picks up his notebook, and then his pen. He doesn’t notice Autolycus enter.]

PLATO
Socrates knows everything. He pretends not to. But he does. He knows everything and he won’t say anything. He just asks questions. Question after question after question after question and he never answers any of them! But I know he knows the answers. I know he does. Men never ask a question unless they’re sure they know the answer. It’s how they keep their chins so high in the air. If I didn’t know Socrates, I think I could fool myself into believing I’m a genius. I know a lot of things. But he knows more and my chin will never reach as far north as his. The most I can ever hope for is a smile, a wink, a nod of approval. Some sign from him that I might not be as idiotic as he always makes me feel.

AUTOLYCUS
Where’s your teacher?

[Plato whips around, sees the soldier. He flushes.]

PLATO
Eating lunch.

AUTOLYCUS
So he is human. Why aren’t you with him?

PLATO
I’m not hungry. Not for food.

[Beat.]

AUTOLYCUS
What are you writing?

PLATO
Just ideas.

AUTOLYCUS
About what?
PLATO

Does it matter?

AUTOLYCUS

You tell me.

[Beat.]

PLATO

You sound like him. When you talk like that.

AUTOLYCUS

I’m a soldier: fluent in discretion.

PLATO

Self-preservation.

AUTOLYCUS

Six of one, Plato. Tell me what you’re writing.

PLATO

Lots of things. Anything. Everything that pops into my head.

AUTOLYCUS

How exhausting.

PLATO

It’s scribbles, mostly.

AUTOLYCUS

I’m sure you’re being modest.

PLATO

(bitterly)

If only I could be.

[Socrates enters, eating. He sees his pupil with Autolycus.]

SOCRATES

If it isn’t Soldier-boy.

AUTOLYCUS

I have a name.

SOCRATES

Good for you.
PLATO
(to Socrates)
Autolycus, remember?

SOCRATES
Mm. This way, pupil mine.

[He moves to leave. Plato slowly follows.]

AUTOLYCUS
Why come back?

[Socrates turns.]

AUTOLYCUS
You don’t belong in this sector, O wise one.
(to Plato)
Neither do you.

PLATO
Why not?

AUTOLYCUS
How many people owned your shirt before you?

PLATO
Um, zero.

AUTOLYCUS
But you came back to the slums?

SOCRATES
My pupil thought there might be value in exploring how the other half lives.

AUTOLYCUS
We’re not the other half. We’re the bottom ninety-eight percent.

SOCRATES
And how does that make you feel?

AUTOLYCUS
Okay, are you a philosopher or a therapist?

SOCRATES
Why can’t I be both?
AUTOLYCUS
Because no man can be brilliant and care about how other people feel.

SOCRATES
You flatter me.

PLATO
(confused)
He insulted you.

AUTOLYCUS
Yes, I did.

SOCRATES
He called me unfeeling. I’d rather be that than unthinking.

[Autolycus scoffs.]

SOCRATES
In the whole world of war, Soldier-boy, there are only two armies that really matter: the brain and the heart. No man can master them both. I made my choice a long time ago.

PLATO
So a man must be an idiot in order to fall in love?

AUTOLYCUS
I’d say it’s love that turns a man into an idiot.

SOCRATES
The chicken or the egg…

[Arístophanes enters.]

ARISTOPHANES
Which are you, then?

SOCRATES
Oh, good: the Actor.

ARISTOPHANES
(cheerfully)
Playwright.

SOCRATES
Even worse.
ARISTOPHANES
(to Socrates)
What’re you doing in our sector, old man? Trying to haunt me?

PLATO
No-

AUTOLYCUS
Apparently, they want to observe us.

ARISTOPHANES
(grinning)
By all means. Observe away. I can take off my shirt, if you’d like.

SOCRATES
Don’t you dare.

ARISTOPHANES
I always dare.

AUTOLYCUS
Let’s go, Ari.

PLATO
So soon?

ARISTOPHANES
What about them?

SOCRATES
AUTOLYCUS
We’ll be fine. 
They’ll be fine.

[Beat.]

PLATO
Apparently, we’ll be fine.

[Pericles enters, talking on a cell phone. When he sees Socrates and the three boys, he stops. He lowers the phone and listens.]

ARISTOPHANES
(to Plato)
Is this what you do instead of school? You just run around, following Lord Cranium all over Athens while he spouts nonsense and tracks down artists who hurt his feelings?
SOCRATES
You didn’t hurt my feelings.

AUTOLYCUS
Right, because you don’t have any.

PLATO
Did you go to school, Aristophanes?

AUTOLYCUS
He tried.

SOCRATES
They kick you out?

ARISTOPHANES
I joined the theater.

SOCRATES
So, yes.

ARISTOPHANES
I still got an education. It just happened on a stage.

PLATO
Well, my education happens here, in the streets. With Socrates.

ARISTOPHANES
And what does he teach you? Besides self-righteousness.

AUTOLYCUS
And cynicism.

SOCRATES
I’m not a teacher.

AUTOLYCUS
You called Plato your “pupil.”

SOCRATES
And so he is.

ARISTOPHANES
(to Plato)
Then who’s your teacher?
There’s a pause. Then Aristophanes and Autolycus erupt in laughter. Socrates notices Pericles lurking in the background. Plato huffs.

PLATO
Mock me if you want. Pass judgment if you must. I know how easy it is for you playwrights to jeer at philosophy. But this world begs examination. Every inch, every moment of it. Even though it’s large and messy and cruel and offers no mercy to those who need it most. It is still our world. Our reality. And we choose to breathe inside of it. For what reason?

AUTOLYCUS
Because the alternative is death.

PLATO
And how do you know that death is worse than life?

ARISTOPHANES
Anything is better than oblivion.

PLATO
Exactly! And I want to learn as much as I can before I fall into the void.

[Beat.]

ARISTOPHANES
(to Socrates)
You inspired this?

SOCRATES
(to Pericles)
No. I only encouraged it.

[Pericles raises his eyebrow, then exits. Socrates watches him leave. Aristophanes, Autolycus, and Plato haven’t noticed a thing. They’re still looking at each other with varying levels of respect and uncertainty. Lights fade...]
ACT I

Scene 5

SETTING: Socrates, on trial.

SOCRATES
I would like to address the second of my charges now, the one that troubles me the most. The charge of treason. Treason. A tennis ball of a word, always bouncing back and forth between grunting, sweaty foes. Treason. The crime to end all crimes. There’s nothing worse than infected loyalty. Because how do you prepare for it? How does anyone prepare for betrayal?

[His eyes locate a specific spot in the courtroom. His jaw tightens.]

SOCRATES
I do not believe in treason. I never have. At least, not in the way the men in this courtroom would define it. You call it a political act; the wrong political act. An act of aggression against the state and its silver-bearded patrons. But I would argue that what you men call treason, most of us would call autonomy. It is how we continue to protest when you refuse to listen to our voices.

[He pauses for breath. For control.]

SOCRATES
How I have committed treason in your eyes, I can’t explain. I suppose you feel threatened by my mockery of your precious Athenian army.

VOICE
That is indeed a reason.

SOCRATES
Or maybe you hate the way I have said, and continue to say, that by taking our city to war with Sparta, you condemn it to death.

VOICE
Now, just a moment-
SOCRATES
Seems I’ve hit that nerve once again.

VOICE
This Council has already heard your opinions on the conflict with Sparta-

SOCRATES
Conflict? You’re bombing the fucking bedrock out from under each other-

VOICE
Leave it alone-

SOCRATES
I will not. You have pitted our city against a nation that breeds warriors. Against a city that yanks infants from their mothers’ breasts and forces them into armor before they even know what violence means. Of course we will lose this war!

VOICE
TREASON!

SOCRATES
LOGIC!

[A pause. He is shaking.]

SOCRATES
I have done nothing — nothing — but inserted clarity into a chasm you men would fill with patriotism, which is propaganda, which is paranoia! Resent me for that, if you wish. But you have no cause to punish me. Treason — real, actual treason — has nothing to do with politics. It is far more plebian and a thousand times more deadly. It is what happens when a person chooses what he, or she, knows to be wrong. When self-interest eclipses self-worth. Your new queen knows this better than anyone. Isn’t that right, Aspasia?

[Aspasia comes into view. She is dressed in a long robe. A crown gleams in her hair. She and Socrates stare at each other for a long moment. Then they both fade...]

[528x745]31
ACT I

Scene 6

SETTING: A street in Athens. Pericles enters, flushed and grinning. He breathes in deeply.

PERICLES
Ah... Sun. How lovely to be standing in the sun. A man forgets to appreciate the sun. He forgets to enjoy the warm glow upon his pale skin. That sensation of buzzing contentment that spreads through his limbs when they bask in the golden light. A man becomes so busy, so wrapped up in his affairs, that he forgets to notice the mere existence of the sun. He neglects its beauty. He loses track of its majesty. That is the cost of running the world.

[Aspasia enters, dressed in rumpled clothes. No crown. She is still just a prostitute. Pericles sees her enter and smiles, surprised.]

PERICLES
Well, good morning, my dear.

ASPASIA
Please don’t call me that. You know how it embarrasses me.

PERICLES
Because it’s affectionate?

ASPASIA
It’s domestic.

PERICLES
We share a bed every night. What could be more domestic than that?

ASPASIA
Only your wedding bed.

PERICLES
Come, let’s not talk of cold things on such a warm day.

[He kisses her. She returns it, seemingly enraptured.]
PERICLES
Why did you follow me into the street?

ASPASIA
I hate watching you leave from that dingy little window. And I wanted to warn you.

PERICLES
Warn me. That sounds rather ominous.

ASPASIA
You must promise not to get upset.

PERICLES
You’re adorable, did you know that?

Promise me.

ASPASIA
Very well.

PERICLES
Alright, here it is: I have a client arranged to come in this afternoon-

ASPASIA
What? Who?

PERICLES
His name’s Meletus and he’s-

ASPASIA
The Speaker of my Council?

PERICLES
That’s the one.

[Unbeknownst to either of them, Aristophanes enters the street. When he catches sight of the pair, he hides. He listens.]

PERICLES
Cancel the appointment. Call him now.

ASPASIA
What reason would I give?
PERICLES
The man is a menace.

ASPASIA
You say that about all my clients.

PERICLES
And it’s true! They’re awful men, the worst.

ASPASIA
(gently)
I need the money, Pericles.

PERICLES
I’ll pay you. I’ll give you all the money you need. Tell me how much.

ASPASIA
Are you sure?

PERICLES
Of course I’m sure.

[He gives her money.]

ASPASIA
I mean, are you sure you’ve thought this through? What would your wife say if she knew this is how you’re spending your money?

PERICLES
It’s none of her business how I spend my money.

ASPASIA
But for the prince of Athens to keep a prostitute in residency-

PERICLES
I love you, Aspasia.

[Beat.]

PERICLES
I don’t want you sleeping with strange, possibly criminal outsiders. You shouldn’t have to endure that. I won’t let you endure that. I love you.
You love me?

More than any man has ever loved any woman, I’m sure of it.

What about your family?

It’s my heart. My choice.

[He takes her hand.]

Do you love me, Aspasia?

Ask me something else, Pericles. Anything else. Don’t make me lie to you.

We are alone.

It could cost me my life.

I’ll protect you. I will always protect you.

And that is why I love you.

I knew it.

[They kiss. Aristophanes watches.]

You’ll cancel the appointment?

Meletus will have to find some other way to orgasm. From now on, I’ll touch no man but you.
PERICLES
Then perhaps I ought to find you a place to live that isn’t connected to a brothel. A home of your own.

ASPASIA
A home for us both.

PERICLES
Just so.

[Beat. Aristophanes tries not to throw up.]

ASPASIA
Run along. Or you’ll be late for your Council meeting. Aren’t they voting today?

PERICLES
Not for another week.

ASPASIA
Shouldn’t they have decided by now?

PERICLES
It’s war. It’s complicated.

ASPASIA
And every day that they stall, another twenty men die in the borderlands and it gets even more complicated-

PERICLES
There’s no use getting upset, darling.

ASPASIA
What if I talked to them?

PERICLES
To whom?

ASPASIA
Your Council! Let me come with you to their session today.

PERICLES
For what purpose?

ASPASIA
To give my own testimony. Don’t forget, Pericles, that, unlike the men who sit on your legislative bench, I have
actually lived outside the Athenian walls. Give me twenty minutes in front of the Council and I can explain everything from the crippling lack of accountability in Athens’ military hierarchy to the fractured lines of communication with Sparta.

PERICLES
Goodness, it’s amazing your head doesn’t pop clean off.

ASPASIA
I can help you.

PERICLES
You already help me. Every night, every kiss, every inch of you helps me. Just the sight of you standing there makes me feel like my heart is exploding into particles of light. I couldn’t ask for anything more.

[Beat.]

ASPASIA
If you’re sure.

PERICLES
Always. I’ll pick you up at seven tonight. Cocktails begin at seven-thirty.

ASPASIA
I’ll be ready.

PERICLES
Then goodbye for now, my dear.

ASPASIA
How lovely to hear you call me that.

[With a final kiss and a smile, Pericles exits. The moment the prince is out of sight, Aristophanes leaves his hiding place. He approaches Aspasia, applauding.]

ARISTOPHANES
And I thought I was a good actor.

ASPASIA
The hell are you doing here?
ARISTOPHANES
Just enjoying the performance of a lifetime.

ASPASIA
Or eavesdropping like the pervert you are.

ARISTOPHANES
I don’t hear you denying it.

ASPASIA
Denying what?

ARISTOPHANES
That you hate the prince with every fiber of your being.

ASPASIA
I don’t hate Pericles.

ARISTOPHANES
Now, see, that wasn’t convincing at all. You’ve got to speak with conviction, Aspasia. Tap into your talent!

ASPASIA
Leave me alone.

[She starts to exit.]

ARISTOPHANES
What happens when his wife finds out?

[She turns.]

ARISTOPHANES
Do you honestly think the princess of Athens is just going to let you waltz off with her husband? To live in some little pink-and-yellow apartment somewhere? Their coronation is weeks away!

ASPASIA
I know.

ARISTOPHANES
And?

ASPASIA
And she won’t be attending the coronation.
ARISTOPHANES  
(facetious)  
Are you planning to murder her? Because if so, I’ll walk away now. Plausible deniability and all-

ASPASIA  
I’m not going to kill her.

ARISTOPHANES  
What a relief-

ASPASIA  
I’m going to replace her.

[A long pause. Aristophanes and Aspasia stare at each other. But before he can get over his shock enough to put words together, Autolycus enters. He heads straight for Aristophanes, grinning in surprise.]

AUTOLYCUS  
What gives, Ari? You’re never up this early.

[Autolycus registers Aspasia.]

AUTOLYCUS  
Ahh.

ARISTOPHANES  
No.

ASPASIA  
No.

AUTOLYCUS  
No?

ARISTOPHANES  
No.

ASPASIA  
Not in a million years.

ARISTOPHANES  
(to Aspasia)  
You exaggerate.

ASPASIA  
You wish.

[Beat.]
AUTOLYCUS
Should I go?

ASPASIA
I was just leaving.

[She turns to exit, while Autolycus raises his eyebrow at Aristophanes. At the same time, Plato and Socrates enter together. Plato sees Autolycus and smiles.]

PLATO
You’re early.

AUTOLYCUS
So are you.

SOCRATES
What’s new in this shithole?

ARISTOPHANES
Ask her.

SOCRATES
Aspasia.

[She stops, turns.]

SOCRATES
Rising star at the brothel, or so I hear. Do you enjoy working for Miss Juniper?

ASPASIA
As much as I expected to. She hates you, did you know that?

SOCRATES
I did.

ARISTOPHANES
Does anyone not hate you?

PLATO
I-

ARISTOPHANES
Besides Plato.
AUTOLYCUS
(to Socrates, with interest)
Why does the Madam hate you?

ASPASIA
Because he talked six different girls into waiving their fee.

SOCRATES
Nothing impressive about that. The hard part was talking those six girls into sleeping with me in the first place.

[Everyone enjoys that, even Aspasia.]

SOCRATES
(to Aspasia)
I don’t suppose you’d consider-

ASPASIA
No.

SOCRATES
See?

[Laughter.]

ASPASIA
Why do you spend so much time in this sector? I’ve never understood.

SOCRATES
Makes two of us.

PLATO
The four of us like to debate here, every now and then.

ARISTOPHANES
“Like” is a strong word.

PLATO
Yet here you are.

ASPASIA
You debate?

AUTOLYCUS
It’s a fancy word for “argue until we’re blue in the face”-
ASPASIA
I know what the word means.

AUTOLYCUS
We sometimes forget.

[She has to smile.]

ASPASIA
What do you argue about?

SOCRATES
Depends on the day.

PLATO
And our mood.

ARISTOPHANES
And how much alcohol we drank the night before.

ASPASIA
Who normally wins these debates?

AUTOLYCUS
No one.

ASPASIA
Are you all that bad?

AUTOLYCUS
Nah, just stubborn.

PLATO
Winning isn’t the point.

ASPASIA
Never thought I’d hear a man say that.

SOCRATES
Politicians speak to win. We speak to learn.

ASPASIA
Learn what?

SOCRATES
Debate with us sometime. See for yourself.
ARISTOPHANES
Sure you won’t be too busy, sucking on the prince’s–?

ASPASIA
Finish that sentence and I swear I’ll rip out your tongue.

ARISTOPHANES
But then you wouldn’t get to experience the pleasure of feeling it.

ASPASIA
Do you overestimate the power of all your organs this much?

ARISTOPHANES
Wouldn’t you like to know?

ASPASIA
“Like” is a strong word.

[Beat.]

ARISTOPHANES
Vicious girl.

ASPASIA
Does that mean I win?

AUTOLYCUS
(laughing)

By a landslide.

ASPASIA
Socrates? Count me in.

SOCRATES
Excellent.

PLATO
(to Autolycus)

We’re doomed.

AUTOLYCUS
I know. Isn’t it great?

[The five debaters regard each other. Then they fade...]
ACT I

Scene 7

SETTING: Socrates, in his ring of courtroom light.

SOCRATES
In the spirit of honesty, I feel I should tell you Council members that I have not the slightest intention of defending myself against the final accusation of religious impiety.

VOICE
Really?

SOCRATES
Instead, I would like to ask you men – every last one of you – to explain why you have put me on trial for a crime that can only be defined as a failure to appear sufficiently afraid of the supernatural.

VOICE
For crying out loud-

SOCRATES
I am not an actor, Your Honor. It is not my job to present an identity that is not my own.

[He raises his eyebrow, the very picture of an exasperated professor.]

SOCRATES
Look at you all. Calling yourselves men of justice, when you’re as flighty and capricious as the gods you spend all day worshipping. And isn’t that why you concocted them in the first place, so that every legal action can bend to your whim?

VOICE
All right-

SOCRATES
A brilliant strategy, I admit, to praise a host of deities who suffer from anger management problems. When a man’s god is unstable, his instability becomes godlike. What better
excuse for a collection of imbeciles to keep their grip on authority?

VOICE

That’s enough—

SOCRATES

And to those of you who would argue for the validity of your precious, violent deities, permit me to observe that our neighbors in Sparta believe in the exact same gods you do. And yet our cities stand on the cusp of war. How can the gods be on our side, when, presumptively, they are also on Sparta’s? Riddle me that.

VOICE

You have exactly sixty seconds to come to a stopping place or I’m ending your defense prematurely.

SOCRATES

Very well, here goes: religion is nothing but a shiny toy and only one sibling gets to keep it in the end. History tells us it’s usually the sibling with the sharper steel and the bigger tanks—

VOICE

Thirty seconds.

SOCRATES

So maybe you men have bigger problems to worry about than one old man’s cynicism. That’s all I’m saying.

VOICE

Yes. That’s all.

[Socrates fades from view...]


ACT I

Scene 8

SETTING: A street in Athens. Morning. Socrates stands with his pupils: Aristophanes, Autolycus, Plato, and Aspasia. They are talking together. Aspasia wears a gold bracelet.

Why are we here?

[Beat.]

SOCRATES

PLATO

What?

You heard me.

SOCRATES

ASPASIA

(dubious)

“Why are we here”?

ARISTOPHANES

Are you serious?

SOCRATES

When am I not?

AUTOLYCUS

Haven’t we crossed that bridge already?

SOCRATES

Have we?

AUTOLYCUS

We wouldn’t keep coming to these meetings if we didn’t want to.

SOCRATES

Don’t downplay the question, Autolycus; answer it. Why are we here?
PLATO
To learn.

AUTOLYCUS
Argue.

ASPASIA
Irritate each other.

SOCRATES
Stop using verbs. Make statements. Think beyond our enclave.

ARISTOPHANES
Ooh, an “enclave.” Is that what we are now?

SOCRATES
Tell me why we are here.

PLATO
In this sector? In Athens? In the world?

SOCRATES
Yes.

ASPASIA
We didn’t choose to be alive, that’s what you’re asking. I didn’t.

SOCRATES
Then it follows by deduction that someone else chose for us.

PLATO
By that logic, there’s no such thing as coincidence.

SOCRATES
You think all of humanity derives from coincidence?

PLATO
I didn’t say that. But accidents happen.

ARISTOPHANES
I certainly hope I wasn’t an accident.

ASPASIA
More like a practical joke.
SOCRATES

Then who created us?

AUTOLYCUS

How do we know it was a “who”?

SOCRATES

Fair question.

ASPASIA

I suppose the gods invented us, didn’t they?

SOCRATES

Did they?

ARISTOPHANES

But which gods?

PLATO

The smart ones.

AUTOLYCUS

The twelve Olympians.

SOCRATES

Would you be able to work harmoniously with eleven other people on a single project?

PLATO

Depends on the people.

AUTOLYCUS

If the project was important enough.

ARISTOPHANES

No.

SOCRATES

So if the gods didn’t collaborate, then who formed us?

ASPASIA

Our parents.

SOCRATES

They gave us physical bodies. What of our souls?
ARISTOPHANES
I’m not entirely sure Aspasia has one.

ASPASIA
Very funny.

PLATO
(to Socrates)
You’re leading us to something, aren’t you?

SOCRATES
Who created our souls? Think, you earthbound idiots. Who gave us consciousness?

PLATO
Someone curious.

ASPASIA
Someone angry.

ARISTOPHANES
Someone bored.

SOCRATES
Or?

AUTOLYCUS
Or no one at all.

[Dead silence.]

PLATO
Impossible.

ARISTOPHANES
That’s sacrilege.

SOCRATES
And who’s to say what is sacrilegious isn’t also true? Do not confuse religious piety with logic, Aristophanes! They are not the same. Regardless of what the priests tell you, they are never the same.

PLATO
But what is a man without the gods?
SOCRATES
A man.

AUTOLYCUS
Do you realize what you’re saying is blasphemy?

SOCRATES
Do I look like I care? “Blasphemy” is a word created by men to describe truths they do not wish to hear.

PLATO
How do you know that what you’re positing is true?

SOCRATES
Because I have seen no evidence to the contrary.

ARISTOPHANES
Socrates the scientist.

SOCRATES
Hardly the worst thing you’ve ever called me.

[Aristophanes smiles.]

SOCRATES
Until someone can bring me irrefutable proof of the existence of any deity beyond the limits of human consciousness—

AUTOLYCUS
Which will never happen—

SOCRATES
...then I shall continue to believe in my hypothesis that we are alone in the universe.

ASPASIA
But if we’re alone, then we’re unprotected.

PLATO
Not if we protect each other.

ARISTOPHANES
You give mankind too much credit.

SOCRATES
Or perhaps you don’t give it enough.
SOCRATES
That’s enough for today. Go home. Lie to your family and neighbors and royal roommates about where you’ve been. Get some rest. Tomorrow will swallow us before we know it.

PLATO
See you tomorrow.

[Socrates leaves. Plato sits and pulls out his notebook. Autolycus goes to him.]

AUTOLYCUS
Shouldn’t you go with him?

PLATO
You want me to go?

AUTOLYCUS
I didn’t say that.

PLATO
He likes walking alone. Says it gives him time to think.

AUTOLYCUS
Does he ever stop thinking?

PLATO
Not even when he’s asleep.

AUTOLYCUS
Do you think he’s crazy?

PLATO
Everyone’s crazy, Autolycus. He’s just not embarrassed by it.

AUTOLYCUS
Why is that?

PLATO
I wish I knew.

[They look at each other. Meanwhile, across the stage, Aspasia does her lipstick in front of a compact mirror. Aristophanes watches her.]
ARISTOPHANES
Off to meet the prince?

[She doesn’t answer, which is answer enough.]

ARISTOPHANES
And where does His Highness think you’ve been all day?

ASPASIA
At the brothel, studying. It’s half-true.

ARISTOPHANES
He’s a fool.

ASPASIA
Lower your voice!

ARISTOPHANES
Trusting a prostitute to be faithful-

ASPASIA
I’m not a prostitute anymore.

ARISTOPHANES
Maybe not in his eyes.

ASPASIA
Not in anyone’s! This bracelet is pure gold.

ARISTOPHANES
I get it: you’re a lily, he’s gilding you-

ASPASIA
He’s preparing me.

ARISTOPHANES
For what? A lifetime of posing for photographs?

ASPASIA
I wouldn’t expect a vagabond playwright to have any idea what it takes to be a ruler.

ARISTOPHANES
Pericles doesn’t want a ruler. He wants a pretty girl in a gold bracelet.
ASPASIA
I can be both.

ARISTOPHANES
I know you can.

[Beat.]

ASPASIA
Flirt all you like. It won’t change anything.

ARISTOPHANES
No, of course not.

ASPASIA
The prince is expecting me.

[Aristophanes nods. Finally, she leaves. He watches her go. Then he leaves as well. Plato and Autolycus, who have watched this entire encounter, glance at each other.]

PLATO
What does she see in him?

AUTOLYCUS
He’s going to be the next king of Athens.

PLATO
I wasn’t talking about Pericles.

AUTOLYCUS
He’s challenging. Everyone likes a challenge.

PLATO
Is that why you’re his friend?

AUTOLYCUS
Partly. My life’s been tied up with Aristophanes for so many years, I can barely remember who I was before him. He’s a nightmare, of course, but so are a lot of brilliant people. And god knows I couldn’t ask for a better ally.

PLATO
Do you love him?

[Beat.]
PLATO
Never mind, don’t answer that.

AUTOLYCUS
He’s my best friend.

PLATO
Okay.

AUTOLYCUS
Don’t you have a best friend?

PLATO
I have a favorite book. And a sister.

AUTOLYCUS
And Socrates.

PLATO
Exactly.

[They share the moment. Then Autolycus clears his throat.]

AUTOLYCUS
So, what’s next for you, Plato? Where do you see yourself in five years?

PLATO
Probably in Athens. Probably writing.

AUTOLYCUS
Writing what?

PLATO
A book.

AUTOLYCUS
About?

PLATO
My philosophy.

AUTOLYCUS
Which is…?

PLATO
I wish I knew.
AUTOLYCUS
Well, you’ve got five years.

PLATO
I hope you’ll read it. My book. When it comes out.

AUTOLYCUS
That depends entirely on whether or not I’m still alive.

PLATO
(horrified)
Why wouldn’t you be?

AUTOLYCUS
Because war is a high-maintenance woman, who demands everything we men have to offer.

PLATO
War?

AUTOLYCUS
Against Sparta. I’m sure you’ve heard.

PLATO
But it hasn’t been declared!

AUTOLYCUS
Only a matter of time.

PLATO
How much time?

AUTOLYCUS
Maybe a week.

PLATO
And you’ll go?

AUTOLYCUS
I’ll have to.

PLATO
Not if you drop out.

AUTOLYCUS
Why would I do that?
Plato kisses Autolycus. Quickly, wildly. They look at each other.

PLATO
I’m sorry. That was... Sorry.

[Plato scrambles to his feet, grabbing his notebook and pen. He leaves. Autolycus watches him go. There’s a pause.]

AUTOLYCUS
Should I have expected that? Was I supposed to know? How could I know? He never looks me in the eye! Or is it the other way around?

[He runs his hand through his hair.]

AUTOLYCUS
The captain asked me once. He wasn’t supposed to, it’s against the rules. But he wanted to know because I guess he was repressed. Is repressed. And it was my first week so I was too scared to walk away. And he asked me and I said no. No, not boys. Never boys. I thought it was the truth. Because I know girls. I like girls. I’ve been with girls. I’ve been with them in public and...not in public. They’re soft, you know? At least on the outside. And I always liked that. It’s nice to put your arms around something soft, especially when the world outside your window is all anger and concrete. It’s comforting. I found it comforting. I thought comfort was the whole point. It seemed like enough. It’s not enough. I can feel my blood boiling a thousand red and gold degrees and it’s not enough. My fingers are trembling like the leaves in October and it’s not enough. I’m drowning in the open air, choking on the breeze, and god, it’s not enough. Nothing can ever be enough now. Not without...

[Beat.]

AUTOLYCUS
Maybe a week, I said. It’s probably less. The Council could vote any day now. So a number of days is all the time the bloody stupid universe will give us and then it’s back to my station. That’s how they’ll phrase it, anyway. “To your station!” I’ve heard those three words more in the past six months than I’ve heard my own name. To your station, Autolycus. I used to like that order. It gave me a purpose. It was how I knew the world needed me. Now... Now, I would
give almost anything in the world to be completely and utterly useless.

[He leaves. Lights fade...]
ACT I

Scene 9

SETTING: Socrates, in his pool of courtroom light.

SOCRATES
I used to hate the theater.

VOICE
What on earth are you talking about?

SOCRATES
I’m sorry, was that sentence not clear?

VOICE
Why are you talking about the theater?

SOCRATES
I was going to make an argument.

VOICE
What possible relevance does the theater have to this governmental trial?

SOCRATES
Finally! I was wondering when you were going to start asking good questions.

VOICE
Socrates-

SOCRATES
I’ll explain it, Your Honor.

VOICE
Explain quickly. You’ve only got a dozen minutes left on your defense clock.

SOCRATES
Then please stop interrupting me, so I can make them count.

[The Voice audibly sighs.]
SOCRATES
Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Once upon a time, when that I was and a little tiny boy, I saw a monstrous play about parental incest that scared me so much, I vowed never to return to the theater again. For years I abstained, convinced that all plays must be as morbidly gratuitous as the tragedy I had burned into my eight-year-old eyes. Then, only a few months ago, I heard that there was a new play in Athens featuring a character in my image and honor. You can imagine the excitement I felt at the idea, so I made the fatal decision to attend. The play was called The Clouds. Which is a stupid title, but that is neither here nor there. It was written by a young ragamuffin I’d never heard of named Aristophanes.

VOICE
Ahh.

SOCRATES
Yes. Good to see you’re paying attention. In this play, a man named Socrates proves himself a most decided moron for spending his every waking moment thinking about humans and idealizing human thought. I was so offended by the end of Act One, that I actually stood up in my seat. It was even worse than the play I endured in my youth. It was personal.

[He nods, more to himself than anyone else.]

SOCRATES
I felt each jibe like an ice-cold needle in the tender underbelly of my pride. Questions poured out of me: How dare he? Why did he do this? Was any of it true? I was manic, furious, wounded, distraught. I cursed the theater. I called it the worst day of my life.

[Socrates pauses. Aristophanes comes into view. He and Socrates stare at each other.]

SOCRATES
Perhaps you can see where I am taking this. With only a dozen well-penned lines, a vagabond playwright managed to obliterate my reputation without ever touching a hair on my head. A few words, a single actor, and Aristophanes managed to make the smartest man in Athens doubt his own mind. If any of you Council members have been wondering why I’m so unperturbed by this defense stand, it’s because I know that
nothing you men can do to me will ever come close to the
damage a playwright could do to me onstage.

VOICE
We’ll see.

[Socrates raises an eyebrow.]

SOCRATES
“Under every dark rock lurks a politician.”

VOICE
That’s blasphemy.

SOCRATES
No, Your Honor. That’s Aristophanes.

[Beat.]

SOCRATES
If you think killing me will silence the criticism against
you, you are wrong. The real critics are those who create.
Writers, actors, painters, poets...they are the ones to be
feared. They were placed on this earth to mutilate our
reality. To defy the undefeatable. To blatantly and
relentlessly scream, “No,” when the whole world is
murmuring, “Yes.” As long as a single artist lives,
revolution will never die. I just thought I should mention
that, before I’m done.

[The light fades...]
ACT I

Scene 10

SETTING: A street in Athens. Socrates waits for his students. Pericles enters, holding a sheaf of papers. He notices Socrates and slows to a stop. Socrates bows.

PERICLES

Not again.

[Socrates stands and regards the prince, leaning on his cane. Pericles sighs.]

PERICLES

This is getting out of hand.

SOCRATES

Funny, I don’t remember the Council passing a law against standing in the street...

PERICLES

Why this street? Every morning at ten, the same exact street. You don’t even live in this sector!

SOCRATES

Neither do you.

PERICLES

I’m the prince.

SOCRATES

Non sequitur alert.

PERICLES

They say you spend all day talking to teenagers.

SOCRATES

Who’s “they”?

PERICLES

My guards.
Your spies.

They hear things.

How thrilling for them.

Did you really admit to being an atheist?

No, I didn’t admit that.

Good.

I declared it.

Socrates-

What do you care?

The city of Athens shares one faith.

Most of the city.

You could go to prison.

Not if you intervened.

I can’t go up against the law.

But you’re the prince.

Are you mocking me?
SOCRATES

Are you surprised?

[Beat.]

PERICLES

I don’t have time for this, Socrates. I know you’re a smart man and I’ve always admired your independence, but if you continue to insist on rattling off this pagan philosophy in public-

SOCRATES

Are you afraid of what I say, Pericles? Or of who might be listening?

PERICLES

The young men of this city deserve messages of solidarity and hope. Not dissent.

SOCRATES

Because they’re all about to die.

PERICLES

If Athens goes to war-

SOCRATES

When-

PERICLES

Then it will require a united home front-

SOCRATES

When did they decide?

PERICLES

You know I can’t divulge the Council’s private-

SOCRATES

When did they decide?

[Beat.]

PERICLES

Two hours ago.

SOCRATES

You bloody idiot.
PERICLES
You’d better watch your mouth.

SOCRATES
You’d better watch your gates. The Spartans could arrive at any minute.

[Aspasia enters. She sees the two men standing, face to face.]

ASPASIA
Hope I’m not interrupting.

PERICLES
Not at all, not at all. Socrates and I were just catching up.

SOCRATES
Sure, let’s call it that.

PERICLES
What brings you here, my dear?

ASPASIA
Oh, I…

[She glances at Socrates.]

ASPASIA
…I wanted a cup of coffee.

SOCRATES
Is that so?

PERICLES
Well, you won’t find anything worth drinking in this sector. Might I suggest we find a café a little closer to home? La Mèr Verde, perhaps?

ASPASIA
That sounds delightful.

PERICLES
Save me a seat. I’ll join you after my appointment.

ASPASIA
With whom?
PERICLES
(dotingly)
Always so curious! It’s no one worth mentioning.

SOCRATES
Captain Hippias, perhaps?

[Pericles gives him a look, but continues talking to Aspasia.]

PERICLES
It doesn’t matter. I’ll see you soon.

[He kisses her cheek and walks away. Socrates turns to Aspasia.]

SOCRATES
A cup of coffee?

ASPASIA
Why’s he meeting with a military captain?

SOCRATES
A cup of coffee?

ASPASIA
Did he seem anxious about it?

SOCRATES
Of all the unimaginative-

ASPASIA
Socrates! Has war been declared?

SOCRATES
It has.

ASPASIA
Fuck.

[Aristophanes enters. He has a pen stuck behind one ear. He freezes when he sees the pair standing together. Socrates notices him; Aspasia does not.]

SOCRATES
I hope you’re squeezing every last penny out of that man. Pericles may be powerful, but he’s about as charming as a lobotomy.
ASPASIA

Non sequitur alert.

SOCRATES

That’s my line.

ASPASIA

Have you told Autolycus?

SOCRATES

It’s not my place to tell. Or yours.

ASPASIA

Since when have you cared about staying in your place?

SOCRATES

Since your precious Pericles threatened to lock me up if I keep debating out here.

ASPASIA

Did you-

SOCRATES

He has no idea you’re involved.

ASPASIA

Thank you.

[Then Aspasia sees Aristophanes. They lock eyes. Then she looks pointedly away. Aristophanes exits. Socrates watches Aspasia closely.]

SOCRATES

No lie can live forever, Aspasia.

[Beat.]

ASPASIA

Tell Autolycus about the war. You owe him that.

[She leaves as Autolycus and Plato enter together. Both boys are laughing. When they see Socrates, they raise their hands in cheerful salute.]

AUTOLYCUS

Fancy seeing you here, old man.
PLATO
Where’s Aspasia going?

SOCRATES
La Mèr Verde.

AUTOLYCUS
Gesundheit.

SOCRATES
She’s having brunch with the prince.

AUTOLYCUS
Naturally.

PLATO
(to Socrates)
Is something wrong?

SOCRATES
What?

PLATO
You look upset.

SOCRATES
I’m a misanthrope. I’m supposed to look upset.

PLATO
Socrates-

SOCRATES
War.

[Beat.]

PLATO
What?

SOCRATES
It’s happening.

PLATO
I don’t understand.

SOCRATES
The Council voted this morning.
PLATO
That’s impossible.

AUTOLYCUS
No, it’s not.

PLATO
Autolycus-

AUTOLYCUS
(to Socrates)
Who else knows about this?

SOCRATES
Your captain’s finding out as we speak.

PLATO
But it can’t be! Everyone said that if we went to war, we’d lose! This decision doesn’t make any sense! It’s barbaric! How could the Council be so stupid?

SOCRATES
Too late for that question now.

PLATO
It’s never too late!

AUTOLYCUS
But it is.

PLATO
NO! You’re wrong! And you’re wrong!

AUTOLYCUS
Plato-

PLATO
Don’t touch me! I hate both of you!

[Plato runs off. There’s a pause.]

SOCRATES
Did I make the wrong choice?

AUTOLYCUS
It would’ve come out eventually.
(Beat.)

AUTOLYCUS
I need you to do something for me.

SOCRATES
Name it, son.

AUTOLYCUS
Take care of him.

(The soldier and the old man look at each other. Lights fade...)
ACT I

Scene 11

SETTING: Socrates, in the courtroom. He looks tired.

SOCRATES
In my remaining few minutes of time, I would like to make a brief non sequitur, which you may or may not hold against me. Is that all right?

VOICE
Well-

SOCRATES
If it’s not, then too bad. You crackpots need to hear this.

[He clears his throat.]

SOCRATES
Whether you choose to think about it or not, the fact remains that our city is at war.

VOICE
Not this again-

SOCRATES
The radio broadcasters you haven’t managed to bribe into silence predict that the first wave of Spartans has already reached the northern tip of the borderlands. How many children do you think pick flowers in that valley?

[The Voice is unable to speak. Socrates notices someone specific in the crowd.]

SOCRATES
The people who live in the borderlands choose not to be Spartan and they reject Athenian law. They are innocent of our politics. And they will die.

VOICE
Socrates-
SOCRATES
You have sent our city’s children, dressed in armor and stuffed with lies, to murder the people who might’ve been their neighbors. You have done this. You have inflicted this. Do you not feel guilty? Do none of you pasty, ugly, gutless men feel even the slightest bit guilty?

[The sound of crying. Plato comes into view. Tears stream down his face. He and Socrates stare at each other.]

SOCRATES
No answers. There are no answers in war. It’s just one giant question after another. I guess that makes me a battlefield. And all you Council members get to be the halfwit students who couldn’t finish the fucking test.

[Plato sobs. The lights fade...]
ACT I

Scene 12

SETTING: A street in Athens in the middle of the night. Aristophanes stands smoking. Aspasia walks on, sees him, and decides to join him. The world is quiet.

ARISTOPHANES
Lady Pericles, as I live and breathe.

ASPASIA
Don’t call me that.

ARISTOPHANES
Isn’t it past your bedtime?

ASPASIA
I had to... Pericles took me to the opera.

ARISTOPHANES
You have my condolences.

ASPASIA
I’d rather have a cigarette.

[He hands her one and lights it for her.]

[Meanwhile, far away, in a small bedroom in Athens, Plato and Autolycus lie entwined, half-dressed. The world is quiet.]

PLATO
Are you awake?

AUTOLYCUS
Mm.

PLATO
It’s so quiet.

AUTOLYCUS
It’s the middle of the night.
PLATO
No gunshots.

AUTOLYCUS
Only a matter of time.

PLATO
Please don’t. I want to pretend it can stay like this. That the world can be this quiet forever. I want our voices to be the only sound in the whole, wide, empty universe.

AUTOLYCUS
I’d like that.

ARISTOPHANES
Autolycus doesn’t like my smoking habit. Says it’s bad for my health.

ASPASIA
(quietly)
Did you see him today?

ARISTOPHANES
Briefly.

ASPASIA
And?

ARISTOPHANES
I knew it was coming. Knew it the day he signed up. Of course I tried to talk him out of it, but you can’t talk a hero out of being heroic. It just doesn’t work.

ASPASIA
More’s the pity.

PLATO
I hate this.

AUTOLYCUS
I know.
PLATO

It’s not fair.

AUTOLYCUS

I know.

PLATO

Four days.

AUTOLYCUS

We’ll make them count. We already are.

PLATO

But how am I supposed to tell you I love you when I only have four days to work up the courage?

[Beat.]

AUTOLYCUS

I love you, too.

ARISTOPHANES

He was my first audience.

[Aspasia looks at him.]

ARISTOPHANES

Back when we were kids. I used to make up stories with these puppets that were really just old lunch sacks and I’d act them out and he’d watch. I guess I didn’t give him much choice in the matter, but he never complained.

PLATO

What am I supposed to do now?

AUTOLYCUS

There are other boys.

PLATO

Not for me. Not until I know you’re...until I know you won’t be coming back.
AUTOLYCUS
Plato, I’m not coming back.

ARISTOPHANES
And he always laughed at the right moments. You can tell you’ve got a quality audience member when he laughs at exactly the right moments.

AUTOLYCUS
Either I’ll survive this war or I won’t. And if I do, I won’t deserve you anymore. I’ll be a murderer. And a cynic.

ARISTOPHANES
And when my first play opened, he gave me this giant bunch of wildflowers that he’d picked for me in the borderlands. Fifteen years old and he spent all day picking flowers, just to congratulate me. They were so ugly.

AUTOLYCUS
You deserve the boy you fell in love with, Plato. And I’m telling you he’s going to die, no matter what happens on the battlefield. That’s how it works.

ASPASIA
If there’s anything I can do...

ARISTOPHANES
There isn’t.

PLATO
Are you scared?

AUTOLYCUS
Are you?
I’m sorry.

ASPASIA

I’m angry.

PLATO

Me too.

ARISTOPHANES

Me too.

AUTOLYCUS

[Lights fade...]
ACT I

Scene 13

SETTING: Socrates, on the defense stand. The presiding voice booms out.

VOICE
The prisoner’s time is up.

SOCRATES
Whew. I’m going to need a throat lozenge.

VOICE
Let the record reflect that the defendant, Socrates, has made a formal statement in his own defense and will now await the verdict of this Council.

SOCRATES
How long will that take?

VOICE
The prisoner will be silent.

SOCRATES
No he won’t, Your Honor. That’s why he got arrested in the first place. And I’d like it on the record that if pontificating is a crime, then every member of this Council ought to be incarcerated, and straight away.

VOICE
Do not presume to lecture this seat of justice.

SOCRATES
With respect, Your Honor, I was not lecturing the seat, but rather the man who sits in it.

VOICE
You forget yourself, Socrates.

SOCRATES
You shame yourself, Pericles.

[Beat.]
VOICE
The Council will begin its deliberation. The prisoner will return to his cell.

SOCRATES
Happily. Get me the fuck out of here.

VOICE
Socrates-

SOCRATES
Contempt of the court, I know, I know. There are more important things to be afraid of.

[He exits. Lights down.]
ACT I

Scene 14

SETTING: A street in Athens. Socrates is with Aristophanes, Autolycus, Plato, and Aspasia. The sun is shining.

SOCRATES

None of you seem the type.

ASPASIA

Is that an insult?

SOCRATES

Do you feel insulted?

ASPASIA

Not particularly.

SOCRATES

There you are.

PLATO

What’s the “type”?

ARISTOPHANES

Heterosexual.

AUTOLYCUS

At least, according to the law.

PLATO

Fuck the law.

ARISTOPHANES

That’s the spirit.

PLATO

Who needs marriage, anyway?

SOCRATES

Lots of people think they need it.
PLATO
But why?

AUTOLYCUS
Tax breaks.

PLATO
How romantic.

ARISTOPHANES
I never saw the point in any of it.

ASPASIA
That’s because you have nothing to offer.

ARISTOPHANES
I resent that!

AUTOLYCUS
Ari, you live in a cardboard box.

ARISTOPHANES
But I’m charming.

ASPASIA
“Charming” doesn’t pay the water bill.

ARISTOPHANES
Right, and women only ever marry for money.

SOCRATES
(looking at Aspasia)
Or power.

ASPASIA
(to Aristophanes)
Which you also don’t possess.

PLATO
Shouldn’t people marry for love?

ARISTOPHANES
Stop, you’re making me nauseous.

AUTOLYCUS
I think a successful marriage requires more than attraction.
PLATO
I didn’t say “attraction.” I said, “love.”

SOCRATES
It’s still a gamble.

PLATO
Bullshit.

SOCRATES
Nothing’s less certain than the shelf-life of human affection. It can die in a week or live to be a hundred.

ASPASIA
(impatiently)
But what does this have to do with marriage?

ARISTOPHANES
Nothing.

PLATO
Everything!

AUTOLYCUS
And then there’s the question of children...

SOCRATES
A good question.

ARISTOPHANES
What question is that?

SOCRATES
Do you want children?

ARISTOPHANES
In the world? Sure.

PLATO
It’s the greatest achievement in a man’s life: giving birth to a child.

ASPASIA
Men don’t give birth.

PLATO
Figuratively speaking.
ASPASIA
It’s not real until it’s literal. Until there’s blood and guts and afterbirth spilling all over the place and your hair is damp and your throat is raw and the whole world is shaking like static in a broken T.V.

ARISTOPHANES
(to Aspasia)
So much to look forward to!

ASPASIA
I’ll survive.

SOCRATES
Hopefully.

AUTOLYCUS
We don’t have to talk about this-

ASPASIA
It’s all right. You might as well know.

ARISTOPHANES
Know what?

[Beat.]

PLATO
Oh.

AUTOLYCUS
How far...that is, how long...?

ASPASIA
Two months.

SOCRATES
The prince?

ASPASIA
Couldn’t be happier.

[Beat.]

PLATO
Well...congratulations.
AUTOLYCUS
Yeah.

SOCRATES
Best of luck to you both.

[Beat. Aspasia looks at Aristophanes.]

ASPASIA
Well?

ARISTOPHANES
Two months, huh? That’s not too late to abort the mission.

[Aspasia slaps him. Then she leaves. Silence.]

AUTOLYCUS
Ari...

PLATO
What the hell is wrong with you?

SOCRATES
Leave him alone.

PLATO
But how could you-

SOCRATES
Back off. Now.

[Furious, Plato walks out. Socrates glances at Autolycus, who nods. Then Socrates leaves as well. Autolycus approaches his best friend.]

AUTOLYCUS
You’re better than that.

ARISTOPHANES
I’m really not.

AUTOLYCUS
Yes, you fucking are. Apologize to her. Make things right.

ARISTOPHANES
What if I can’t?
AUTOLYCUS
You have to try.

ARISTOPHANES
I’m going to miss you.

AUTOLYCUS
It’s not until tomorrow.

ARISTOPHANES
Plato said it was the day after.

[Beat.]

AUTOLYCUS
Call me a coward.

ARISTOPHANES
We’re both cowards.

AUTOLYCUS
Apologize to Aspasia. Be the better man.

ARISTOPHANES
I really am going to miss you.

[Autolycus smiles. He leaves. Aristophanes takes a deep breath, drinking in the silence.]

ARISTOPHANES
“The better man.” Honestly. The better man. There’s no such thing.

[He kicks a nearby wall.]

ARISTOPHANES
None of this would’ve happened if I was writing the story. If I was writing it, then we’d all be together now. All of us happier. Better fed. More attractive. Except Aspasia, who’s already so stupidly attractive that adjectives of beauty have lost all their meaning. It would be summer, not autumn. Mid-June. A comedy. Humor and good will and just enough conflict to keep the audience from falling asleep in the pews. Two budding romances, shaken to the core by the bitter winds of circumstance. The innocent pair that falls head over heels at first sight: that’s Plato and Autolycus. Give them the best poetry. Make them irresistible. Maybe
they sing a duet. Something lyrical, but just a little naughty. And then focus on the other romantic pairing, the one that seems impossible. The one the audience has been rooting for from the moment they first hurled insults at each other across the marble hall of some rich man’s foyer. That’s me and Aspasia. They’d have different names of course. Both plagued with pride, inflamed by passion. Too scared to admit their feelings and too stubborn to ask for help. And they’d have to be clever. Wordsmiths to the core. Give them endless banter, wicked insults. Make them magnetic. Put up no obstacles but the ones they create themselves. Challenge them to find each other in five short little acts. And there’d be dancing, of course. The me in this story would be a very good dancer. Maybe add a subplot involving Socrates and Miss Juniper and a birth certificate falling into the wrong hands. A band of musicians who only speak Swedish. A litter of Golden Retriever puppies. Enough champagne to drown an ocean liner. Midsummer frivolity that borders on the orgiastic. An ending so perfect, it brings the audience to their feet before the epilogue is even over.

[He almost laughs.]

ARISTOPHANES
I could write a play like that. Practically just did. People’ve been writing plays like that since the beginning of time. I always thought they were useless. Insipid. But I could write one. It would be easy. Fun and easy. It just wouldn’t be real.

[Beat.]

ARISTOPHANES
A writer can tell any story, pursue any goal, have any ending. He can write any life – every life – except his own. And if that sounds devastating, just imagine how it feels. To be unable to edit myself, polish my words, abbreviate my flaws. To exist in a state of perpetual revision. And never being sure of anything except that I’ll probably die before I find out if it’s a comedy or a tragedy that I’ve been trapped in all along.

[He looks in the direction that Aspasia left. He walks towards it. Lights fade...]

ACT I

Scene 15

SETTING: In the courtroom, Socrates sits at the defense table. Plato enters. He stands in a spotlight, holding his notebook. He reads from it.

PLATO
Someone will say: “And are you not ashamed, Socrates, of a course of life which is likely to bring you to an untimely end?” To him I may fairly answer, “There you are mistaken: a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong…acting the part of a good man or of a bad.” When the goddess, Thetis, said to her son, Achilles, that if he avenged his companion Patroclus and slew Hector he would die himself, he chose to despise death rather than fear it. "Let me die next," Achilles replied, "and be avenged of my enemy, rather than abide here by the beaked ships, a scorn and a burden of the earth." Had the great warrior, Achilles, any thought of death and danger? No, he did not. For wherever a man's place is, be it the place he has chosen or the place he has been given by a commander, there he ought to remain in the hour of danger. He should not think of death or of danger or of anything but the disgrace of failing his mission. And this, O men of Athens, is what truth sounds like.

[The world wakes up. Plato sits down and continues scribbling in his journal. Aristophanes enters and goes to sit beside him.]

ARISTOPHANES
What are you writing?

PLATO
What’s it to you?

ARISTOPHANES
Fine, don’t tell me.

[Beat.]
PLATO
It’s Socrates’ defense. Everything he said.

ARISTOPHANES
He said a lot.

PLATO
I have a good memory.

ARISTOPHANES
Why not just get a copy of the transcript?

PLATO
You really think Pericles is going to leave that document lying around in public records?

[Beat.]

ARISTOPHANES
Let me know if you need any help.

[Plato nods. Then Pericles’ voice booms through the silence.]

VOICE
The prisoner will stand.

[Across the courtroom, Socrates rises to his feet. He glances back at Plato and Aristophanes. Plato is trembling.]

PLATO
They can’t do it. They won’t. Deliberation never takes ten hours unless...

ARISTOPHANES
Unless they’re divided.

PLATO
Yeah.

ARISTOPHANES
Yeah.

[Pericles’ voice cuts through the air.]

VOICE
Socrates, you have been found guilty of the charge of treason.
PLATO
No...

VOICE
By the powers vested in me as Chief Magistrate of the Athenian Council, I hereby sentence you to death by hemlock, to be self-administered tomorrow at dawn. And may the gods have mercy on your soul.

ARISTOPHANES
NO!

[Socrates looks back at the boys before exiting.]

PLATO
This is wrong...this has to be a mistake-

ARISTOPHANES
This wasn’t a mistake.

[Aristophanes looks out, finds someone in the crowd.]

ARISTOPHANES
Was it, Pericles? Not a mistake; not even close. You and your precious wife knew exactly what you were doing when you dragged him here-

PLATO
Aristophanes-

ARISTOPHANES
I sure hope you’re watching, Princess! I hope you’re feeling really good about yourself now-

PLATO
Come on, we need to go-

ARISTOPHANES
Let them arrest me. It’s probably what they’re planning anyway. Isn’t that right, Your Majesties? Well, go ahead! Lock me up! See if I fucking care-

PLATO
Please, Ari!

[Beat.]
PLATO
Socrates needs us. Both of us.

[Plato begins to lead Aristophanes away.]

ARISTOPHANES
(quietly)
I hope she’s watching.

PLATO
Forget Aspasia. Come with me...

[Lights fade...]
ACT I

Scene 16

Aspasia enters. She is dressed in negligee and holding a half-empty bottle of red wine. The alcohol has stained her mouth. Her hair is a mess. She is barefoot.

ASPASIA
Never wear black on your first encounter. Apply just enough perfume to reach a five-foot radius. Don’t bother with fake eyelashes. Smile. Stand with confidence, but curtsy with your chin down. Wear the lacy thong, but forget the stilettos. Choose the longer necklace. Shave every inch of skin below the neck. Smile. Coordinate the nail polish on your fingers and toes. Curl your hair with the thinner iron. Use the thicker hairspray; the one that makes your head itch. No solid food within two hours of your next appointment. Brush your teeth with baking soda. Smile.

[She takes a long gulp of wine.]

ASPASIA
Blush when he touches your face for the first time. Swoon when he kisses you. Laugh when he says something stupid. Keep smiling, keep smiling. Are you still smiling? Roll around like you have epilepsy. Moan like you’re dying in a desert. Scream like you’re on fire. Smile. He’s looking at you. Smile. He wants to make sure you’re enjoying yourself. Smile. He’s not like those other men who have no idea what they’re doing inside a woman. He’s different, he’s knowledgeable, he’s the customer you’ve been waiting for. Smile at him, smile for him. You’re a professional, after all. Pretend to be embarrassed when he hands you the money. Look deeply into his eyes when you thank him. Be earnest, be glowing. He deserves to see you glow.

[Another swig.]

APSASIA
Be breasts and hips. Be lithe limbs and a soft mouth. Be his resting place and nothing more. You are not a voice, you are a vessel. Let him fill you. Let him drown you. Let
this half-empty half-life in the bruise-colored shadows be enough for you.

[Aristophanes enters and comes to a halt when he sees Aspasia. She doesn’t notice him.]

ASPASIA
Not enough. Never enough. "Be content," they told me. Be content. Two words, those same two words over and over and over and just who do they think I am? "Be content, Aspasia." No. Other girls are content. They’re happy to settle for the money and the beauty, happy to leave the rest of their potential at the door. But I want to last longer than a dash of lipstick. And I want to burn brighter than a few weak sparks at the end of a cigarette. Be content? I’d rather be dead.

[She sees Aristophanes. A long pause.]

ASPASIA
The hell are you doing here?

ARISTOPHANES
I came to apologize.

ASPASIA
Boring.

[She takes a long slug of wine. Aristophanes swallows hard.]

ARISTOPHANES
I shouldn’t have said what I did. About your baby. I’m sorry.

ASPASIA
It’s not my baby, it’s the prince’s baby.

ARISTOPHANES
Are you alright?

ASPASIA
He asked me to marry him.

[She giggles.]

ASPASIA
The prince. Not the baby. I said yes.
ARISTOPHANES

Congratulations.

ASPASIA

I’m going to be the queen of Athens.

ARISTOPHANES

Long live the queen.

ASPASIA

My name’s going to be in books. I’m going to make decisions and seal fates and shake this city like a snow globe. I’m going to topple empires with a flick of my wrist. I’m going to matter.

ARISTOPHANES

You already matter.

[Beat.]

ASPASIA

Aristophanes-

ARISTOPHANES

No. Not now.

ASPASIA

I want-

ARISTOPHANES

Pericles. Go to him.

ASPASIA

I hate him.

ARISTOPHANES

Let me call you a cab.

ASPASIA

I’m not leaving!

ARISTOPHANES

Aspasia-

ASPASIA

I’m not!
One of us has to.

Why?

[Beat.]

Fine, I’ll go.

Kiss me.

That’s a terrible idea.

Would you just do it?

[He kisses her. It’s unbearable and not nearly enough for either of them.]

Tell me how you feel.

Like I could rip the world in half.

I can’t stop shaking.

I’ve never been this close to it.

To what?

That word. That one, stupid word. Starts with “L.”

Say it.

If I said it, I’d mean it.
ASPAasia
Kiss me, then.

[They kiss, fiercely. Aspasia is crying.]

ASPAasia
Socrates is going to be arrested.

[Beat.]

ARISTOPHANES
What?

ASPAasia
Soon. Maybe tomorrow. The prince’s already set a court date.

ARISTOPHANES
The prince, your fiancé.

ASPAasia
They’ll let him off with a fine. At least, I think they will. ‘Long as he doesn’t put up a fight. I told Pericles he wouldn’t resist.

ARISTOPHANES
You sold him out?

ASPAasia
They were ready to conscript him! I said, “No, give him a fair trial.” I did that.

ARISTOPHANES
How fucking noble of you.

ASPAasia
Socrates knew he was breaking the law—

ARISTOPHANES
Stop it, just STOP!

ASPAasia
Tell him…tell him not to resist. He should be alright.

[They stare at each other.]
ARISTOPHANES
I wish I could ask who did this to you. I wish there was
some enemy I could fight. But there’s not, is there? You
did this to yourself.

ASPASIA
You are talking to your queen.

ARISTOPHANES
No. I’m talking to Aspasia. And I’m telling her goodbye.

[Aristophanes leaves. Lights fade...]
ACT I

Scene 17

SETTING: In a jail. Socrates sits. Plato is with him, writing in his notebook.

SOCRATES
Are you writing my eulogy?

PLATO
That’s not remotely funny.

SOCRATES
Someday, Plato, you’re going to sit down and write something that has absolutely nothing to do with me. And when that happens, crack a bottle of champagne because that’s the moment you will know that you have finally achieved-

ARISTOPHANES
(offstage)
SUCCESS!

PLATO
Really?

[Aristophanes enters the cell, excitedly waving a piece of paper in one hand.]

ARISTOPHANES
Really. Her name’s Helena and she’s docked at the southeastern port.

SOCRATES
What on earth are you talking about?

ARISTOPHANES
A trading ship. Leaves in two hours.

SOCRATES
En route to...

ARISTOPHANES
Crete. And there’s an open cabin.
SOCRATES
Well, enjoy your time in Crete.

PLATO
No, Socrates. The cabin’s for you.

[Beat. Meanwhile, outside the cell, Aspasia appears at the door. She is wearing her crown. She raises her hand to knock, then hesitates. She listens.]

ARISTOPHANES
It’s all arranged. The captain won’t ask any questions. I paid him all the money in Plato’s education fund and added in the sales from my last play and he’s willing to take you without any documentation at all.

PLATO
(to Socrates)
You’ll be free.

SOCRATES
 Wouldn’t my boarding a ship necessitate me being, I don’t know, not in prison?

ARISTOPHANES
I bribed a guard to let you out. He’ll be here soon.

SOCRATES
With whose money?

PLATO

My dad’s.

SOCRATES
Won’t he mind?

PLATO

He would if he knew.

[Beat.]

ARISTOPHANES
No need to thank us.

SOCRATES
I wasn’t planning on it.
PLATO
How can you say that?

SOCRATES
Of course I appreciate the gesture. Although it does seem like a foolish waste of money-

ARISTOPHANES
A waste? We’re saving your life!

SOCRATES
I never asked you to do that.

PLATO
Did you really think we were just going to sit back and watch you die?

SOCRATES
Yes.

ARISTOPHANES
This is ridiculous. Take the ticket. Take it! The guard’ll be arriving any minute-

SOCRATES
And I’ll apologize to him for the wasted journey.

PLATO
What’s wrong with you? Why won’t you escape?

SOCRATES
Because history has no patience for cowards. Because seventy years is enough time. Because an idea can never die. Because I can disrupt the world so much more effectively from the inside of a casket than from the top of a sand dune in Crete.

PLATO
I don’t understand. You want to die?

ARISTOPHANES
He wants to be a martyr.

SOCRATES
I wouldn’t go that far.
ARISTOPHANES
You already did.

PLATO
But if you continued debating in another city-

SOCRATES
And who’s to say that city wouldn’t arrest me as well?

PLATO
You have to try.

SOCRATES
I don’t have to do anything. That’s the whole point.

[Aristophanes stands abruptly. Socrates looks up at him steadily.]

SOCRATES
Autolycus would’ve understood.

ARISTOPHANES
Autolycus is dead.

SOCRATES
And tomorrow, I will be too.

[Beat.]

SOCRATES
Good luck with your next play.

[Aristophanes leaves the cell. As he steps out, he comes face to face with Aspasia. For a near-eternal moment, they stare at each other. Finally, he bows.]

ARISTOPHANES
Your Majesty.

ASPASIA
I tried to stop it.

[He doesn’t reply.]

ASPASIA
The Council…those men refuse to listen to me.
[And still, Aristophanes is silent. She raises her voice.]

ASPASIA
You know I never wanted this.

ARISTOPHANES
(snapping)
Do I, though? Do I know that?

ASPASIA
Aristophanes-

ARISTOPHANES
Because, from where I’m standing, it looks to me like you got exactly what you wanted.

ASPASIA
That isn’t fair.

ARISTOPHANES
Says the girl with a crown on her head.

ASPASIA
You have no right-

ARISTOPHANES
To what? Love you?

PERICLES
(offstage)
Aspasia?

ARISTOPHANES
(quietly)
That’s not a right; it’s a curse.

PERICLES
(offstage, louder)
Aspasia?

[As Aristophanes rips himself away. Aspasia watches him leave, takes one step in his direction. Then Pericles enters. He’s also wearing a crown.]

PERICLES
Ah, there you are, my dear. Have you made your farewells?
[She nods, slowly.]

PERICLES
Then let’s get out of this dungeon, shall we?

[Pericles takes Aspasia’s arm and leads her from the hallway. Inside the cell, Plato and Socrates sit together. Socrates looks at his longtime student.]

SOCRATES
I take it you won’t be storming out?

PLATO
Autolycus would want me here.

SOCRATES
Hemlock’s not a pretty death.

PLATO
Good thing you’re already ugly.

[Beat.]

SOCRATES
You’ll keep writing?

PLATO
What do you care?

SOCRATES
Athens is going to need you. And Aristophanes. There are still questions to be asked.

PLATO
I want answers.

SOCRATES
Yes, answers are reassuring. But it’s questions, Plato – only questions – that can save us in the end.

PLATO
So you say.

SOCRATES
So I believe.
PLATO
At least you believe in something.

[He puts his hand over one of Socrates’. Lights fade...]}
ACT I

Scene 18

SETTING: A street in Athens. Morning.
Aristophanes hasn’t slept after his conversation with Aspasia. He waits for Socrates, agitated. Suddenly, Plato runs on in a panic.

PLATO
He’s gone!

ARISTOPHANES
(Screwed)
Socrates?

PLATO
(Disoriented)
What? No! Autolycus! Autolycus is gone! I mean, I can’t find him anywhere. When I fell asleep, he was right there next to me and when I woke up...

[Beat.]

PLATO
Do you know where he is?

ARISTOPHANES
Yeah, and so do you.

PLATO
But…no. It’s tomorrow. He told me it wasn’t until tomorrow.

ARISTOPHANES
He lied.

PLATO
Autolycus wouldn’t lie to me.

ARISTOPHANES
Well, he did.

PLATO
But he told you the truth.
ARISTOPHANES
He knew I could handle it.

PLATO
Spoken like a true bastard.

[Beat.]

ARISTOPHANES
Love makes people do really stupid things, Plato.

PLATO
Like run off to war without saying goodbye?

ARISTOPHANES
Goodbyes are overrated. Trust me.

[Beat. Plato wipes his eyes.]

PLATO
Why were you looking for Socrates?

ARISTOPHANES
Oh. That. You really want to know?

PLATO
Never ask me that question again.

[Aristophanes nods. Lights fade...]
ACT I

Scene 19

SETTING: A street in Athens. Socrates appears, holding a spray can of red paint. He begins to spray words onto the walls of the streets. Sound engulfs the old man: jet planes roar overhead, men scream in agony, machinery grinds. Socrates glances up, but doesn’t cease his graffiti. The first sentence he writes is: “No one desires evil.”

SOCRATES (reading)

“No one desires evil.”

[He nods.]

SOCRATES

That’s true. At least, I think it’s true. Another person who thinks it’s true is Plato. That boy would rather bite off his own toes than believe that humans enjoy being cruel. He plates his ideals in platinum and wears them around his wrists, not remotely aware of the danger those bracelets invite. I usually wind up acting far more cynical than I am because I feel duty-bound to toughen his skin before he gets catapulted into the middle of Athenian politics. Not that Plato is destined to become a politician; he most certainly is not. Too few people like him; too many people would laugh at him. Nevertheless, he will lead a political life. He will argue loudly and widely for a utopia - for equality, meritocracy - and this will scare every living man with a single drop of undeserved power. He will be sincere, verbose, and just manic enough to convince the public that he really could change the world if given the right opportunity. And he will have students. A smattering, no doubt: the good, the bad, and the stupid. But they will follow him, listen to him, declare war on stability in his name. Plato, the philosopher. He will think great thoughts and be remembered for them. He will love men and be rejected by them. He will
reach for enlightenment and find only fluorescents. He will never be happy.

[Socrates spray-paints another sentence: “No one errs willingly.”]

SOCRATES
(reading)
“No one errs willingly.” Another truth, no less true than the first. Autolycus, this one’s for you. Humans don’t fuck up because we enjoy failure. We fuck up because we’re violent, paranoid creatures of habit who’d rather go to war for the millionth time than plunge our hands into the cold, cold water of reinvention. Our mistakes are born of fear, not because we like ruining the world. But of course, that doesn’t stop us from ruining it, over and over and over... Autolycus knows this. Has always known this. He chose the life of a soldier because he wanted to believe that he could defend something good, which is a pretty decent excuse for becoming a professional murderer. Knowing Autolycus, it shouldn’t take him more than a couple days to regret every decision that led him to the battlefield. He’ll hate war. He’ll despise having a part in it. He’ll miss his best friend and freedom and sleep without nightmares. He’ll scrub his hands until the skin peels, but he’ll soon realize it’s futile. Blood is the one memory you can’t wash off. That’s why he’ll never touch Plato again. That’s why he’ll make sure to get shot before there is any chance of coming back to the city that shipped him off to kill the world. Autolycus the soldier. He will not be remembered, although the war he fights will never be forgotten. He will never be happy.

[Socrates spray-paints another sentence: “All virtue is knowledge.”]

SOCRATES
(reading)
“All virtue is knowledge.” Yes, Aristophanes, I actually agree with you on something. Morality means nothing until a person understands what morality is. Every good quality can trace its lineage back to intelligence. Compassionate people know why compassion matters. Gentle people know how to enact gentleness. Peaceful people know what peace should entail. And people without morality...well, if they’re smart, they’ll keep that fact to themselves. As long as we can pretend we’re good, most people will believe that we
actually are. And who’s better at pretending than an actor? Men like Aristophanes were born to spend their lives in the theater. It’s the one venue left in the world that allows deceivers to be honest about their deceit. Actors are allowed to lie—encouraged, even. So Aristophanes will lie: today, tomorrow, and on until the end of his life. What else can he do? He’s in love with a woman he hates. That’s so much to feel. Too much. When a man feels too much, the safest thing to do is pretend he doesn’t feel anything at all. Aristophanes, the playwright. Masked in apathy, cloaked in sarcasm. It will be lies and self-loathing until the last, gasping moment. He will lie to the world and they’ll applaud him for it. He will lie to himself and be destroyed by it. He will never be happy.

[Socrates spray-paints another sentence: “Knowledge is sufficient for happiness.”]

**SOCRATES**

*(reading)*

“Knowledge is sufficient for happiness.” Which is to say that what differentiates intelligent people from the masses is the fact that intelligent people recognize that life will always leave them unsatisfied. Sound familiar, Aspasia? Before it was oil and water, it was duty and love. She is well aware of this. Clawing her way into the prince’s good graces demanded that she sacrifice all self-worth, all affection, all hope. But at least she still gets to be cunning. Intelligent women are a tragedy unto themselves, aren’t they? Disregarded by men of study, feared by men of ignorance, belittled by both. But at least an educated woman has sharper weapons with which to battle the onslaught. Knowledge is a spear. Wisdom is a shield. Aspasia holds tightly to both. This is how she has survived her time on this earth. She is a fighter. And she will be fighting herself until the day she breathes her last. Aspasia, the queen. The girl who replaced her heart with a crown. She will wake up in a feather-swollen bed every morning, but she will never enjoy the sex that happens on it. She will dine on the best cuisine and sip the finest of wines, but she will feel sick every minute of every day. She will command hundreds of servants, but she will not have a single friend. The perfection of her life will infect her. She will look down from the highest throne in the world and wish she could shatter against the earth. She will never be happy.
[Socrates sighs.]

SOCRATES
The truth. Four truths. Four realities. Hideous. As hideous as me. Another person who will never be happy. But that is alright. I will not have to endure this polluted river of time for much longer. It will be over soon. My stanza. And that’s alright. Others will sing it when I’m gone. It won’t be long now. They are coming for me. I fall asleep to the sound of footsteps…

[Socrates lies down on the ground. He closes his eyes.]
ACT I

Scene 20

SETTING: Four people enter. Aristophanes is smoking. Autolycus has a gun. Plato holds his notebook. Aspasia wears her crown. They watch Socrates, who lies motionless on the ground. They bow their heads. Lights down.

THE END