ISRAEL ELIRAZ

MASADA 967
OPERA

LIBRETTO IN 15 SCENES
MUSIC: JOSEF TAL

ENGLISH VERSION: ALAN MARBE

ISRAEL MUSIC INSTITUTE (I.M.I.),
P.O.B. 11253, TEL AVIV, ISRAEL.
"MASADA 967" was commissioned by the National Council for Culture and Art for the Israel Festival and the 25th Anniversary Celebrations commemorating the establishment of the State of Israel.

The opera was premiered on 17th July 1973 at the Jerusalem Theatre.

Conductor — Gary Bertini, director — Leonard Shach, design and lighting — Arnon Adar. The electronic recordings were executed by Josef Tal at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.
Israel Eliraz was born in Jerusalem in 1936. He graduated from the Hebrew University and obtained his Master’s degree from Tel-Aviv University, completing his studies in theatre at the Sorbonne, Paris.

He has published two novels ("Tin Seesaws" and "Golden Summer"), as well as a collection of short stories ("Last Birds"). He has also written a number of radio plays, essays and articles on literary and theatrical subjects. Two of his plays were awarded first prizes by the National Council for Culture and Art. Some of his works have been translated into English, French and German, and most of his plays have been published and produced both locally and abroad.

"Masada 967" is the second opera written by Eliraz with Josef Tal. The first—"Ashmedai"—was produced by the Hamburg State Opera in November 1971, and he is currently engaged
in writing a third opera with the same composer.

His plays include:

“Far from the Sea—Far from the Summer”. (Tzavta Theatre)

“The Bear, or Rebel and King”. (The Haifa Municipal Theatre)

“The Banana”. (Café-Theatre “Aux Deux Ponts”, Paris)

“Round Trip”. (Habimah Theatre)

“Three Women in Yellow”, (The English Group at the Jerusalem Khan)

“The Persian Protocols”. (The Jerusalem Khan)
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ROMANS:

SILVA—Commander of the Tenth Legion
HISTORIAN
POET
THREE MERCHANTS
THREE OFFICERS
FOUR SOLDIERS
MERCHANTS
SOLDIERS

MASADA SURVIVORS:

YOUNG WOMAN
OLD WOMAN
THREE BOYS
TWO GIRLS

MASADA DEAD:

ELEAZAR—The Commander
YOUNG REBEL
DEAD HUSBAND
DEAD FATHER
THREE WASHERWOMEN
CHOIR OF THE DEAD JEWS
TIME:
The fifteenth of Nissan. The fifteenth day of the month of Xanthicos, 73 A.D.

PLACE:
Prologue — Silva’s Camp at the foot of Masada.  
The 15 scenes of the opera — various places on the mountain.

SCENERY:
The stage consists of steps, arranged in the shape of a semi-circular arena resembling a Roman stadium. The steps provide numerous action-platforms permitting the simultaneous, multi-dimensional performance of the various scenes. Downstage, in front of the steps, there is a wide proscenium area.

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Note:
The faces of the Dead are covered with masks.

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The opera is performed without an intermission.
PROLOGUE

(Silva's camp. Midnight. A bonfire. The Choirs of the Jews are standing in wordless prayer atop the mountain — on the upper steps.

A spotlight picks out two Soldiers, who are slowly dressing Silva for battle.

The Historian, standing to one side, holds a jar of wine.

The Poet bundled up in his cloak by the fire)

HISTORIAN: (Herald-like to the audience) On the fifteenth day of the month of Xanthicos—the month of Nissan—and following upon a twelve-month siege, after the fall of Jerusalem to Titus, Herodion and Machaerus unto the Legate Bassos...

SILVA: Wine, Historian—wine!

(Historian serves him)

You hear them?

( Drinks)

The last of their strongholds—a death-trap...

And still they go on with the fight...
(Drinks. With an anguished scream)
It's against all reason and sense!
(Historian pours him more wine)

HISTORIAN: (To the audience) He was right—it was against all Roman reason—and sense.

SILVA: What can they still be expecting, the crazy fools—
To win?

HISTORIAN: I do not know.
(To the audience) No, I didn’t know.

(Enter an Officer on one of the upper steps. He runs down)

1st OFFICER: The defence-wall is breached!
(A second Officer runs in from a different direction)

2nd OFFICER: The wooden wall is up in flames!
(Another Officer runs in from yet another part of the stage)

3rd OFFICER: All is prepared for the final attack, sir!

SILVA: (To Historian) We’ve finished, Historian. Nothing more will happen.
(He kicks the Poet)

Up! Write to the Emperor we’ve conquered!

POET: (Rises, shakes himself)
“I offer you this mountain-top,
Caesar,
Like a goblet of blood—
Judea's three-year vintage and crop—
To your health and good cheer!"

(Silva is now fully clad in his military attire. The Historian hangs the commander's chain of office on his breast)

**SOLDIERS' VOICES:** Silva . . . Silva . . . Silva . . .

**HISTORIAN:** (Herald-like, to the audience)

The address of Silva

On the might of Rome, and

On the right of a great nation to own a smaller one.

(Silva kicks the sand slowly over the bonfire to extinguish it. As his voice grows in strength, the rhythm of the kicks grows faster)

**SILVA:** Legionnaires

The world's divided evenly: the heavens to the gods,

And unto Rome the earth;

For the greatness of Rome never in the past reached out so far

From primitive England to the vast deserted wastelands of Asia.

Beyond our Empire there is no more world.

Rome has unfolded her all-embracing purple cloak

And has called to the nations:
“Ye shall flock within it
Or
Disappear!”

(Pause)

Legionnaires

It is months since we began the siege of this last
sullen and stubborn peak.

Many of us have perished in the desert, in the
sun.

This is hardly a mountain,
But a thorn in the flesh of the Empire,
Which you are to pluck out today—
To prove that smaller nations belong to greater
ones.

(Soldiers cheer)

Today
You are to crush this filthy, liberty-maddened
mob
And I pledge you their barbarian blood like
wine!

(Soldiers cheer)

Their women are yours!
Their children shall be your slaves!
Their gold shall be your spoil!
You shall set their mountain aflame,
Their God shall be burned!
I want a burning torch to blaze,
A pall of smoke
To proclaim
Here the Romans have trod!
(Soldiers cheer.
The fire goes out. Silva is no longer seen. In the dim light of dawn, the Soldiers' Choirs storm the ascending stepped areas. As they cover the steps in their red cloaks, the mountain seems to be ablaze with flames, whereupon they vanish into the spaces between the steps, as if swallowed up by a shattered ghost-town.
All at once, there is absolute silence.
A beam of light picks out the Historian, bundled up in his robe)

HISTORIAN: On the fifteenth day of the month of Xanthicos—the month of Nissan—following upon a twelve-month siege, after the fall of Jerusalem to Titus, Herodion and Machaerus unto the legate Lucilius Bassos, the ten-thousand men of Flavius Silva's Tenth Legion burst through the double walls of Masada.
(The lights go out abruptly. Darkness and silence as long as possible)
SCENE ONE

(A spotlight picks out the "sun"—a huge copper sunflower carried up the steps by two soldiers. As it reaches the top most step, where the Historian is revealed, the "sun" glows with a golden light: it is bright daylight. The Historian strikes the "sun" as if it were a giant gong, and vanishes behind it. After a pause, two Boys and a Girl appear from among the sunflower petals, the latter carrying a many-coloured ball in her hand. They look around, scared and apprehensive, their voices growing stronger as the daylight increases in strength. 

1st Boy is the eldest in the group)

1st GIRL: Silence ... what a silence! ...
1st BOY: Silence at last ...
1st GIRL: The sun ...
1st BOY: What a sun! ...
1st GIRL: Light—what a light ... Light ... light ...
1st BOY: In such a light did God create the world ...
1st GIRL: In such a light does God destroy the world ...

(The Children go up and down the steps. They search)

CHILDREN: The palace in flames
          The wall in flames
          Honey-jars all flames
The figs, the wine flames
The water cisterns flames
The mountains in flames
The sea in flames
The salt-pans flames
The heavens flames
The sun—flames . . . The sun all flames . . .
Flames—it's all flames—only flames . . .

1st BOY: Shsh! . . .
(The Children fall silent, bend down and hide beneath the step. Enter a Boy and 2nd Girl holding a sunflower.
1st Boy leaves his hiding-place and crosses their path)

1st GIRL: Flowers!?

2nd GIRL: The mountain's covered in sunflowers . . .

1st BOY: The sun's fallen down on the walls . . .
(1st Boy wrenches the flower from 2nd Girl's hands. The Girl bursts into tears)

1st GIRL: Be quiet, fool!

2nd GIRL: (stops wailing at once) It's still forbidden to cry?
(1st Boy picks up the flower, then picks off its petals—while, at the same time, the petals of the "sun" flower are plucked off by two Roman soldiers, until only a bright metallic disc remains)
1st BOY: I shall live—I’ll die—I shall live—I’ll die...

(etc)

(The Children go up and down the steps)

CHILDREN: The palace in blood
The wall in blood
Honey-jars all blood
The figs, the wine blood
The water cisterns blood
The mountains in blood
The sea in blood
The salt-pans blood
The heavens blood
The sun in blood... The sun all blood...

Blood—it’s all blood—only blood...

(The Children stumble over a corpse, and crouch down beside it)

1st GIRL: Sarah, crazy Sarah!

2nd GIRL: Look—the baker’s wife!

1st BOY: Cobbler Yossi’s here!

1st GIRL: The other day, I brought him a little left shoe:
His fingers caressed the hide
And tapped in the air,
His mouth spat out many nails...
Laughter...
Such tricks!

(The Children “dig” him a grave, then carry
his body to it, deposit it there and vanish the next moment)

SCENE TWO

(Three Soldiers run down the steps. Then, two more Soldiers enter, from another part of the stage. They search)

SOLDIER: Have you found?...

SOLDIER: Not a soul!

SOLDIERS: Zeus, what has happened?

SOLDIER: The Jews—where are they gone?

(They scatter and search, but find nothing. They return in a group)

SOLDIER: All ghosts!

SOLDIER: To hell with their ghosts!

SOLDIER: To the Palace!

(First group of three Soldiers exit, to the right)

SOLDIER: To the Palace!

(Second group of Soldiers exit, to the left)
SCENE THREE

(The Historian is discovered at the top of the steps)

HISTORIAN: (To the audience) There was plenty of water in the water-pits, and in the stores—mountains of grain, oil, dates, wine... and carcases...

(He calls out his words, herald-like, as he descends the steps. To accompany each statement, two or three corpses are made to emerge from between the steps, rolling down to the steps beneath him)

Carcases in the Northern Palace!
Carcases in the Southern Palace!
Carcases in the houses within the walls!
Carcases in the bath-house!
Carcases in the food-stores!
Carcases in the courtyards!
Carcases in the house of prayer!
Carcases in the water-cisterns...
In the cellars!

(He reaches the last steps with an effort and in a state of agitation)

A mountain of slaughtered carcases!
Nine hundred and sixty
Not a body more!...
A contemptible handful of rebels!
(It is only now that the two Soldiers flanking the "sun" turn it sideways—and reveal it to be a gigantic, dazzling Roman eagle. From behind it enters Silva. He paces about among the corpses in a daze. He turns over one of the corpses, then another—ad lib—with his foot.

_Enter 1st Officer, running)_

**SILVA:** Not a single Jew alive?

**1st OFFICER:** Not even one, sir.

**SILVA:** Did they die of _thirst_?

**1st OFFICER:** All the water-cisterns are filled to overflowing. In the bath houses, going up in flames, there is hot water, and lukewarm water, and cold water.

_(Enter 2nd Officer from a different direction)_

**SILVA:** Not even a single Jew alive?

**2nd OFFICER:** Not even one, sir.

**SILVA:** Did they _starve_ to death?

**2nd OFFICER:** Those of the food-stores not yet up in flames are filled with food. On the kitchen-hearths, the pots are boiling. There's a smell of bread in all the ovens.

_(Enter 3rd Officer)_

**SILVA:** Not even a single Jew alive?

**3rd OFFICER:** Not even one, sir.

**SILVA:** Did they die of _plague_?
3rd OFFICER: Their throats were slit by the knife. Their bellies were ripped by the knife. And the children who started to cry...

(Stunned silence. Silva is dazed)

SILVA: We laid them roads, we built them hippodromes and amphitheatres—and palaces—and cities... But they preferred a demented and feeble God...

I offered them life and they refused To accept it...

No,
I don’t understand them, Historian!

HISTORIAN: You’re an army commander, Silva, not a philosopher.

They have perished—we are alive!
You’ve added to the military map
A tenable desert causeway.
Legate, the rebellion of the Jews is finished,
And history is ready for your campaign to proceed.

When will you issue the order for the advance?
(He steps aside, Silva lifts up a corpse and looks at it)

SILVA: Is it possible to defeat those who are not afraid to die?
(He flings the body away)

HISTORIAN: (To the audience) Silva did not grasp this,
for a Roman could never understand this.

(Enter the Poet, with an armful of scrolls)

SILVA: Did you find a Jew alive, Poet?

POET: Only scrolls...

SILVA: (Screams): Then have them burned!

POET: The scrolls?

SILVA: All evidence must be destroyed!

Let not a Hebrew letter remain, Poet.

Burn them! The scrolls shall burn!

And the dead shall burn!

Prevent any possible plague—

Burn!

OFFICERS: Vivat Flavius Silva!

Vivat Flavius Silva!

(The Officers leave together with the Poet, bearing the scrolls)

SCENE FOUR

(Now the Merchants rush in from all directions, like black carrion-birds. Their ululation accompanies the whole of the scene, as they strip the corpses)

1st MERCHANT: Golden teeth!

2nd MERCHANT: So pull them out!
MERCHANTS: Pull out! Pull out!

1st MERCHANT: And hack them all to bits!
MERCHANTS: Hack up! Hack up!

2nd MERCHANT: Rip their entrails out!
MERCHANTS: Rip out! Rip out!

3rd MERCHANT: They have swallowed all their gold!
1st MERCHANT: So tear their arses apart!
MERCHANTS: Tear up! Tear up!

1st MERCHANT: Their entrails! Their gold! Their wealth!
2nd MERCHANT: Smash in their skulls!
MERCHANTS: Smash in! Smash in!

1st MERCHANT: They're only Jews, and all's allowed.
MERCHANTS: All's allowed, for they are Jews—yes, all’s allowed...

(They strip the corpses of clothes, shawls, colourful headgear—and go wild. The shawls form gaudy streams—red, yellow, black. After a short while, all the corpses are naked, white—only their faces covered by masks. The merchants leave. There is awful silence. Pause)
SCENE FIVE

(Silva, who has observed the whole of the previous scene, is about to leave, when the 3rd Boy enters, running. The Boy, seeing Silva and the Historian, stops short. Recovering from his shock, he runs off)

HISTORIAN: Nine hundred and sixty one!
(Enter the Poet, chasing 1st Boy, who runs in from a different direction. The Boy manages to elude him. The Poet runs off, still trying to catch him)

HISTORIAN: Nine hundred and sixty two!
(Enter Children, running in from various directions and at different heights on the steps—chased by Soldiers, Officers and the Poet. They run about, dodging their would-be catchers, and occasionally stumbling until finally they stop below Silva and the Historian. The five Children huddle together)

HISTORIAN: Nine hundred and sixty five!
(Silence. Silva pokes at 1st Boy with his staff. The Boy grinds his teeth and makes for him. Two Soldiers seize him and Silva laughs. As he does so, the Soldiers release the Boy. Silva gropes at him, as at a beast. Then suddenly, he falls upon him and pinions him in his arms—
the Boy attempting to resist the while, and hitting out at his tormentor with ineffective fists. Silva does not let go of the Boy. There is a wordless, thrilling silence, as all look at the Commander, then Silva releases the Boy. The rest of the Children again huddle about him. Silva draws himself up, stiffens, seizes a whip from one of the Soldiers, cracks it once, then throws it to the Historian.

Enter 1st Officer)

1st OFFICER: A couple of women sir!

SILVA: Women?

1st OFFICER: They came from the water-cisterns.

HISTORIAN: They were looking for the children.

(EXIT Silva, followed by his men. The Roman eagle is also removed. Only the Historian and the Children are left on stage)

SCENE SIX

HISTORIAN: From whom shall I start, my little desert mice?

(Cracks whip)

From you!

(1st Boy steps out. The Historian acts like an animal trainer. The children are in constant motion)
HISTORIAN: You fled into the water-cisterns.
1st BOY: Yes, my lord.
HISTORIAN: From there you saw everything.
1st BOY: Yes, my lord.
HISTORIAN: What then, boy?
1st BOY: I cannot remember...
HISTORIAN: Your name was called out. You did not answer.
1st BOY: I wanted to—but I couldn’t.
HISTORIAN: To live—you wanted to live!
1st BOY: To live?...
HISTORIAN: (Cracking whip) Remember!
1st BOY: I cannot remember—I cannot remember...
And then the sun burst out
All at once...
Just like a jumping toy-clown, when the lid is opened...
I jumped outside... nothing but silence...
It was like God giving out
The Law...
(A crack of the whip. Silence. The boy huddles back into himself)

HISTORIAN: (To 2nd Boy) And you too, you ran off to the water-cisterns, from where you saw it all.
They searched after you.
You came out!

2nd BOY: (Shocked) No!
HISTORIAN: Yes, you did. And you met your father, didn’t you?

(He cracks the whip)

2nd BOY: No—no—no!

(Tense silence. The Children watch the Historian. The 2nd Boy moves back, huddling within himself, as if absorbing the “information”. He bends down over one of the corpses, which rises to life in order to play the part of the Father)

FATHER: You heard it?

2nd BOY: I heard it, Father.

FATHER: You saw it?

2nd BOY: Blood. Nothing was there to be seen. Blood.

I saw everything.

Father.

FATHER: Are you frightened, son?

2nd BOY: I’ve learned about Isaac... about Abraham...

We shall find a kid,shan’t we Father?...

FATHER: No, son. No kid. No ram.

(Embraces him) No angel.

2nd BOY: The sky is very low today.

It seems as if you could jump inside.

You’re frightened, Father.

(The embrace tightens)

You’re trembling all over, Father...

Your eyes are crimson, Father.
FATHER: Your eyes are crimson, son.

2nd BOY: I see myself standing within your eyes, Father.

FATHER: I see myself standing within your eyes, son.

(The Historian cracks his whip. The corpse collapses between the boy's arms, and the latter falls over it. The Children close around them like petals at sunset)

SCENE SEVEN

(The spotlight picks out a corner of the stage where Three Washerwomen are crouching. They launder and hum. Young Washerwoman spreads out a shirt)

YOUNG WASHERWOMAN: I embroidered across the chest of my son some golden letters

And a small silver gazelle

Skipping upon a blue hill...

I could have added a tiny crimson cloud

By that slash there for his neck...

(Rocking the shirt as one might rock a baby, she sings a lullaby)

A king and a queen

A kid and honey
Brimstone. Salt.

*(She buries her head in the shirt)*

**VERY YOUNG WASHER-WOMAN:** The smell of your body is warm still in the shirt,

Like our love in our bed.

See this rip...

*(Overjoyed)*

Remember how you chased after me, you rascal?

It's like the wound in your belly,

From which your soul came out towards my soul.

*(She wraps herself in the shirt, erotically)*

**OLD WASHER-WOMAN:** When Passover was out—we were to have Celebrated her wedding, poor soul.

She got herself a chest of spotless linen

And a chest of coloured cloth

And a chest for the clothes of her future babies.

In the first, they'll lay her bridegroom, dead,

She herself in the second

And the third shall be for the unborn babies.

*(Spotlight over Washerwomen fades out)*

**CHILDREN:** Yesterday no one slept on the mountain

The iron ram was pounding!
Thus will wake the folk who shall not sleep again

The iron ram was pounding!
There were some who built a second wall of wood

The iron ram was pounding!
There were some who shot, some who threw up, who prayed or cursed

There were some who sang...
The iron ram was pounding!
The iron ram was pounding—The iron ram was pounding!

(The Children crouch.
The Historian cracks his whip and moves away from them)

HISTORIAN: (To the audience) All this the Children told me, and a great deal more.

SCENE EIGHT

(The lights go up to show the Jewish Choirs at various levels on the steps. The Choirs are moving in prayer, which grows in intensity to become ecstatic. From time to time, their movement mimes the last hours of the mountain.)
Eleazar emerges from among the Choir. His words, herald-like, are addressed to the audience as well as to the men of Masada

ELEAZAR: Look at the camp at the soldiers
They are dicing over the bodies of our wives and our mothers

Look at the merchants they have scattered
Our children through the markets of Europe
Prime Asiatic meat for the slave marts
The wall that for seven years protected us
Is choking our breath out tonight
Tomorrow and yes Passover falls tomorrow
Once again we leave as free men for a new land

JEWS’ CHOIR: A Paschal lamb unto the Lord
A Paschal lamb unto the Lord
A Paschal lamb . . .

(A Young Rebel emerges from among the Choir.
He approaches Eleazar)

YOUNG REBEL: No! Eleazar—No! No!
I would live . . .
I want to live!
Not to die . . . not to take my life . . .

ELEAZAR: Laugh death in the face son
For death has ceased to be

YOUNG REBEL: We swore to take vengeance on Rome—
ELEAZAR: Not to take our own lives...
To take up arms—rebel—to go and fight!

ELEAZAR: Forget all human words you learnt
At this hour here on this mountain a new
language is born
The language of languages
Man shall never rule over man
A kingdom shall never reign over another
For equal are all of us in the sight
Of the Lord
Who is One

YOUNG REBEL: Masada shall be destroyed—
The last of the Jews shall be killed—
That is the will of the Lord...
Do you hope for a miracle, then?

ELEAZAR: To believe and even at this final hour that we
are in the right
That we shall not surrender
Our God and country
That's a miracle son
That is salvation

(Embracing him, Eleazar stabs the Young Rebel
to death)
For death my son protects our dignity as men
Like the womb protects the babe

YOUNG REBEL: Oh, God!
Throw open your gate to us
As the gates close here on us
On the Mountain...
(The Choirs of the Dead repeat the Young Rebel's words. The Young Rebel falls.
Eleazar stoops over his body with fatherly love)

ELEAZAR: Sleep my son my hero sleep
There's no sea only heaven
No more mountains only heaven
No more heaven only heaven
Sleep
Something has come to an end now
An eagle has folded its wings in the sky
(The Choirs of the Dead continue echoing the Young Rebel's words in growing ecstasy)
We gave you everything that we owned
Galilee Samaria Jerusalem and the Temple
And like an oven that swallows loaves of bread
You took from us everything we gave you
Both body and soul
Blessed be your name

JEWS’ CHOIR: Both body and soul—both body and soul...
(etc.)

ELEAZAR: Who has been dispossessed of all as you have
Whom shall you rule if you desert your people
Lacking flesh that is given to sorrow and pain
And what's as good for that as the flesh of a Jew
What can you do with your flail
Unless you show yourself now
As was promised in the Vision and the Scrolls
And now the final hour of Doomsday has struck
When shall you come then
To whom shall you come

JEWS' CHOIR:  Both body and soul—both body and soul . . .

(etc.)

ELEAZAR:  And see a pillar of fire a pillar of smoke
Are going before us
And there's nowhere to go to
And there's nowhere to arrive at

(He rejoins the Choir)

JEWS' CHOIR:  Both body and soul—both body and soul . . .
And your name shall be praised!

(Darkness. The Children are picked out by a spotlight. The Choir vanishes. The Children sway in ecstatic motion. Then, suddenly, stop. Silence)

1st BOY
and 1st GIRL:  At last there were ten that remained for the kill.

And no wind blew, and no new birds arrived.
There were nine, then eight, and then seven.
The sea did not dry, the desert did not crack.
There were six, then five, and then four.
The mountains of Moab did not cross the Jordan,
And from the skies there were no ladders sent down.

There were three, then two, and then one...
And not a Voice was heard
And neither was a Hand stretched out...

1st BOY: You’ll write that down... Historian?
(Crack of whip. The Children fly away in every direction. They vanish. The lights go out)

SCENE NINE

(Another part of the stage. The Historian is shown holding a jug of wine. Not far from him, Silva is seen with the Young Woman at his feet)

HISTORIAN: (To the audience) What does a Roman commander do with a lovely young Jewish woman left alive after the storming of an ill-starred fortress?
(Pause)
He will be thirsty...
(He pours two cups and serves them, then moves aside)

SILVA: Drink! It’s Corinthian. (Pause)
You set your faith in the steepness of the Mountain, in the food stores,
In the water-cisterns, in “Judgment Day”...
You looked for the Kingdom of Heaven to come down

But it was Rome that came up instead.
Confess, therefore, Woman—
It was us that God chose,
And his Messiah is Vespasian.
(Pause)
You’re a wise woman—you have chosen life.

YOUNG WOMAN: No, I only refused to choose death.
(One of the corpses approaches the Young Woman)

DEAD HUSBAND: You’re here?
I looked for you all night long.
Where were you—where?

YOUNG WOMAN: In the water. With your two children,
Up to the neck.
I’ve nothing left in the world but them.

DEAD HUSBAND: I’ve nothing left in the world but the three of you...

YOUNG WOMAN: We have given our children life
How can I take their life away from them now?
Let them make what they may wish of their lives
Not what you wish... not what I wish...

DEAD HUSBAND: What is the worth of not dying?
He who remains alive is Roman chattel,
And is as good as dead.
(Silence)
You despise me!

YOUNG WOMAN: You were handsomest and strongest among men,
And there was no-one that I loved as I did you.
Embrace me with all of your thousand arms.
(She embraces him)
Kiss me until my lips become wilted...
Look upon your little lambs.
It’s blind you are!
(He gropes about her face)

DEAD HUSBAND: You’re lovely still.

YOUNG WOMAN: And that’s a curse today.

DEAD HUSBAND: You hear it?

YOUNG WOMAN: What?

DEAD HUSBAND: How the blood already makes the wild field grass grow...

(Corpse vanishes)
SILVA: Drink! It's Corinthian!
(Pause)
You do not hear me?

YOUNG WOMAN: Only now do I hear
What I have seen with my eyes
Which no longer can see.

SILVA: Ashamed to be alive, woman?

YOUNG WOMAN: And you now?
(Silva splashes the wine into her face, which reddens as if blood had poured out all over it)

SILVA: Officer! Officer!
(Enter Officer)
Get me five of my men—
The filthiest and hungriest of all!
(Exit Officer, at a run. Silva drinks from the second cup. Pause. Enter five Soldiers. They stand to attention)
Sniff at her, scum that you are!
(Tears one of her sleeves)
Lick at her, my wild beasts of prey—lick at her!
(Tears her second sleeve. Silence. They fail to believe their ears. They laugh)
No longer virgin, but a woman!
She is yours!
You ravenous jackals—she is yours!

(Silva splashes wine all over them—then leaves, nauseated. The Historian claps. Enter two Soldiers, who put up a screen between the group onstage and the audience)

HISTORIAN: A la guerre comme à la guerre!

(Exit Historian. The lights dim over this part of the stage. The Soldiers vanish. The Young Woman lies onstage, motionless. Enter the Children, all in black, raven-like. They converge on her body, which is picked out by a spotlight. As the Old Woman enters, they fly aside, closing in upon themselves, to witness the following scene)

SCENE TEN

(The Old Woman kneels beside the Young Woman and wipes her tortured face. The light focuses on the Old Woman)

OLD WOMAN: Everything that's done, Lord, has been done by your will.

O, teach me to make out your design.

To make clean the land that you promised
With the night-soil of Rome?
Why did you choose just this scourge?
A she-ass spoke—so why are the heavens silent?
(Silence)
Who is mute as you are, Lord?
If we've sinned in your sight,
Open up the mountain beneath us,
And harrow the land of this valley.
Send fire—darken the world...
Deliver the Sons of Light to those of Darkness
In this awful desert of salt?
Why should you smite us with such doubts,
All that is left me, if you will it or if not, is that
I believe in you.
What can you do with a stubborn believer such
as I am?
I will not give you back my soul—
It is the last of your bonds to remain in my
hands.
Redeem it, then!
I'll gaze at the sun down till my eyes
Are filled with thorns of blackness
And continue to live...
(She stoops over the Young Woman and tends her)
SCENE ELEVEN

(The Historian descends the steps towards the two Women, but stops at some distance from them)

HISTORIAN: (Angry, crying out) To write? To write of what?
(He pulls out a blank scroll, tears it up and throws it away)
How to present what has taken place thus, that people may find it believable?
Who'll believe?
(To the audience)
Who of you'd believe me if I wrote . . .
(Stops. Pause. Exerting his full power of conviction, he addresses the Women)
In our days, it is not enough to die for all to think you're right.
We live in the year seventy-three, and not in the Age of Darkness. Who, in our days, is impressed by tales of berserk derangement?
(To the Women, pointing to the audience)
How explain to them that there were people capable of drawing lots for who should slaughter whom?
(Kicks an earthenware jar to pieces—Red wine flows out on the steps)
OLD WOMAN: You've heard about Kyprus the river?
HISTORIAN: (Screams at the audience) The tale of Kyprus the river!

OLD WOMAN: They were killed by the legions surrounding them,
And blood was mingled with blood
And the blood burst forth, until it had gotten
To Kyprus the river . . .
You've heard about Kyprus the river?

HISTORIAN: (Screaming at the audience) The tale of Kyprus the river!
(The Historian kicks open further wine jars)

OLD WOMAN: And thus did the Romans despatch all the men,
women and babes,
Until their blood poured forth from every door,
And from every window, and from every gutter.
And the horses sank in blood to their nostrils
And the blood was rolling, was rolling the stones
Till it poured into the sea four miles down . . .

HISTORIAN: I could still have been telling you more
and more:
About Vespasian at Trikhē, in the districts of Timna and Antipatros,
Or Palakides at the Tower of Nunia
Or Cestius Gallus at Lod and at Jaffa... About the town of Gamla, where the infants were smashed on the rocks, and where hundreds of Jews leapt from the peak. Yes, if blood could blaze with roaring flames The torch of this land would be burning for two thousand years!

(He moves away from the Women. The light over them dims, He moves towards Silva’s group)

SCENE TWELVE

(The lights go up on Silva. He is screaming. Around him stand his military company. At his feet, a sand-model of Masada has been placed by two Soldiers. The voice of the Old Woman breaks in from time to time)

SILVA: What a filthy adventure! What a filthy adventure!

Burn it down! Root it out! Grind all to dust!
Smash up! Leave not a stone standing upright here!

(He kicks at the sand-model, defacing it)

Let this mountain of salt be forgotten!
Wipe out this blot here—
There was no Masada!

(Kicks at sand-model, as above)
No Jews ever fought here at all!
Only the sun—desert—brimstone—and death!
Let not this steep crag here—
The hump of our empire—be an altar
On which barbarians have killed themselves!

(Kneels and scrabbles among the ashes)
Load up the ashes on mules, that they may not be scattered
To these skies—all over this land—
About this sea.
To Rome with it!
All to Rome!
This obstinate Jewish mountain which
Has never been in existence—
To Rome!

(He almost chokes on his breath. The Soldiers and Officers stare at him in amazement)
I am Flavius Silva—a Legate, and not a grave-digger!

I am Flavius Silva—a Legate, and not a grave-digger!

(His screams echo and re-echo)
What on earth can you be waiting for, you lazy idiots, you?
Uproot this whole mountain out of the desert
Like a boil full of pus!

(He remains kneeling, helpless. Exit all the company—except for the Poet, who remains standing near him)

SILVA: You're silent, Poet?

POET: Do not offer them, Silva, further martyrs:
This land has already sprouted
More prophets than all of the camel humps in
Arabia's wastes.

If you don't remove the mountain,
They will forget it!

SILVA: So long as Masada exists, wherever it is,
Romans can never find rest... Poet!
Find me Eleazar Ben-Yair!

(Exit Silva.
The Poet starts walking among the corpses.
To the left, a wooden cart is pushed by
some Soldiers gathering up the bodies. At
various levels on the steps, more Soldiers enter,
carrying bodies, and then move off. It is a
macabre harvest)
SCENE THIRTEEN

HISTORIAN: *(To the audience)*
Will it all be forgotten? What will be left?... Earth that’s been scorched... Some coins—some rag-shreds of matting—a skeleton or two that the salt and the untainted air will preserve...
*(Tearing a scroll up and scattering the pieces)*
Some pieces of scroll—a phial of perfume—a comb—a mirror—a make-up palette—some lamps—a flute—a sandal—maybe a woman’s mesh of hair...
*(He steps aside, but watches the proceedings. Three Soldiers have found Eleazar’s corpse. They fall upon it savagely and strip it of clothing, belt and sandals. They quarrel, even put on the clothing in grotesque playfulness. Finally, the corpse remains stretched out on the ground, naked. The Poet voices no protest at what the Soldiers have been doing. As they leave, he kneels beside the body. Meanwhile all the other corpses have been carted off)*

POET: What did you try to prove here, youngster?
Cut your throat, burn your bones—
On whom will it work?
Vanity of vanities—all is Rome...
Open wide your dreadful eyes and see—
A golden slogan hung over Asia’s firmament:
You cannot be weak and also right in your cause,
But, my boy, in order to know this,
One must grow to be old.

(Enter Silva, stripped to the waist like a gladiator. He carries a brace of tridents and nudges the Poet with his foot. The Poet rises)

A young man. And sad.
His forehead’s broad and smooth.
Death has failed to age him.
Nor does he stink as if he were defeated.

(Silva exchanges glances with him, gestures with his head and the Poet leaves. The Historian leaves, too. The wind sighs)

SCENE FOURTEEN

(Silva tugs at the corpse and descends with it into the proscenium-arena)

SILVA:
Just me now and you. No one is with us.
It’s all quite off the record.
It’s all in flames! What fire won’t devour
Shall be burnt by the sun, shall be consumed in the salt.
And the desert shall close for ever round the mountain and its corpses...

(Pause)
You knew there was no more hope:
Eight camps and a siege-dam and a siege wall.
So why did you not yield, then?
A commander is bound to surrender when defeat would be senseless and futile.
Nor is it shameful to surrender when one has fought as you have.

(He draws his sword and throws it at the corpse, which rises to grasp it. The whole scene that follows resembles a nightmarish gladiatorial contest. Eleazar's face is covered by a mask. The distant Choir of Romans calls out its support)

ROMANS: Sil-va! Sil-va!

ELEAZAR: As an army man you're right

SILVA: (Screams) You, too, are an army man, Eleazar!

ELEAZAR: How can you be a judge of my life
When you have come here to take away
My life
My freedom
My God

SILVA: You are slaves to your freedom!
Nations fight in order to live—while you people fight in order to die!
It is your God and the desert that have driven Judea to madness!

(He succeeds in making his opponent fall, and sets his trident on Eleazar's neck—then moves aside)

ELEAZAR: Whoever has reached Masada
Has lived all his life
From here none descend but only rise
To arms stretched out to receive us

SILVA: Your God's?
You trust in a God who never knew how to save you from me!

(The fight continues—it grows in fury and is carried on all over the steps. The supporting Roman Voices are now joined by the Voices of the Dead Jews:
“Oh Lord, open your gates to us…”)

ELEAZAR: With all your engines of war and your thousands of men
You can conquer a mountain
But you can never conquer a people that's ready
For the sake of that same mountain to die

SILVA: Nine hundred and sixty people for one desert mountain
All dry—far off?

ELEAZAR: There are nations that live for ever by virtue of One mountain
Whose size does not exceed the head of a pin
On your military map
SILVA: Just words!
To be destroyed—is to be destroyed!
Nothing more!
ELEAZAR: As a gladiator you're right
(The trident-duel rages bitterly)
We are bound to our God
And to this tiny and desert-like land
As a man to his shadow
(Eleazar all of a sudden stops fighting, casts away his sword and turns into a shadow that collapses in the darkness. All the Voices are cut off. Silva gazes at him in total shock, throws down his trident and hurries out)
"sun"—seen at the beginning of the opera—but it is now purple in hue. The Children climb up and slowly pluck the petals off the sun-flower. Then they swarm down the steps and kneel by Eleazar’s body.

The "sun" now slowly turns into a silver-grey "moon."

Night falls. The wind sighs. The Historian casts away his whip and wraps himself in his cloak. The spotlight focuses upon him)

**HISTORIAN:** (To the audience) On the fifteenth day of the month of Xanthicos—the month of Nissan—and following upon a twelve-month siege, after the fall of Jerusalem to Titus, Herodion and Machaerus unto the legate Lucilius Bassos, the ten-thousand men of Flavius Silva’s Tenth Legion burst through the double walls of Masada...

(As he speaks, two Soldiers enter, pick up the "moon" and carry it down the steps. As they descend, the lights fade out until, finally, the "moon" goes out as well and the whole of the stadium is left in darkness.

The wind still sighs in the distance.

Then utter silence descends)