

Act One

SCENE 1

Cleopatra's unfinished mausoleum.

As the lights come up, Charmian and Iras enter carrying a brazier apiece, which they place either side of the throne. They kindle the braziers till smoke rises. Then a light behind a muslin gauze reveals Cleopatra, in full regalia as Isis. She stands before her throne, arms upstretched, eyes upward.

Charmian and Iras pick up instruments from the throne and flank Cleopatra either side: one carries a gong, the other a percussion instrument that makes a sound like a breath. They use these to intersperse Cleopatra's prayer.

Four gongs are sounded as the muslin curtain rises.

(Note: to avoid confusion pronounce Isis as Eye-sis and Iras as Ear-ass.)

CLEOP'RA: Oh Isis, (*breath - gong*)
You existed when nothing else was;
Oh Isis, (*breath - gong*)
Through the terror of Chaos you walked;
Oh Isis, (*breath - gong*)
You are Goddess of Heaven and Earth;
Oh Isis, (*breath - gong*)
You are wisdom and justice and truth.

(She lowers her hands to shoulder level, heels in, fingers out.)

It is I (*breath - gong*) - Cleopatra,
Who have given my life to your cause;
It is I (*breath - gong*) - Cleopatra,
Who have tried to fight Rome for your sake;
It is I (*breath - gong*) - Cleopatra,
Who used Antony all for your sake;

It is I (*breath - gong*) - Cleopatra,
Who loved him, though lesser than me.

*(She breaks out of the anapaest rhythm into free form expression. Her arms
plead forward, and she begins to move more. Charmian
and Iras chant Umamma softly – making
an indistinguishable murmur.)*

But Isis, my Mother - (Umamma)
Why have you brought me to such a hollow outcome as this? - (Umamma)
But Isis, great Mother - (Umamma)
Octavius has chased us to this mausoleum, and Mark Antony my husband is
dead, and I am asking you why? (Umamma)
But Isis, great compassionate sky - (Umamma)
The Empire of love has been strangled and now there must begin the rule of
iron - (Umamma)
But Isis, whose understanding is the sea - (Umamma)
O Isis, the empire of love - it never even started.

(Her arms go up again. Charmian and Iras use gong and percussion again.)

(Umamma) - Mother of hopes - (*breath - gong*)
Why did you make me as I am, dedicated to your works?
(Umamma) - Mother of truth - (*breath - gong*)
Why did you give me your vision if I was never to succeed?
(Umamma) - Mother of mercy - (*breath - gong*)
Why did you torture me with impossible hopes?
(Umamma) - Mother most high - (*breath - gong*)
Kill me! - Or empower me! - Now!

*(She slumps to her knees, eyes closed. Charmian and Iras wait motionless on
either side. Smoke lessens. Eventually she opens her eyes.)*

CLEOP'RA: I am still alive.

IRAS: Yes, Lady.

CLEOP'RA: Isis has not killed me.

IRAS: No, Lady.

CLEOP'RA: Do you think she has empowered me?

IRAS: Trust her, Lady.

CLEOP'RA: She has deserted me, Iras. I am alone.

IRAS: Never, Lady.

CLEOP'RA: So why do I feel no answer?

IRAS: Because you gave everything to your prayer and have nothing left.

CLEOP'RA: Why should Isis put me in this situation where I have nothing left, not even Antony?

IRAS: She has her ways Lady.

CLEOP'RA: *(This speech is quieter, despairing, as though winding down)*

Do you think it was to test me out?
Or to enjoy my discomfort?
Or to win a wager with another god?
Or because she has always preferred this
Octavius - and wanted to prove it
By sacrificing me? How do gods think?
How do they justify this casual
Taxation of theirs? We earthly rulers
Take only cash or part of a grain crop,
But from us they extract our agonies.
What can a god do with an agony?
Why wring such taxation from such poor
Hearts as ours? Do they say to each other
"I've collected more agonies than you" -
While others reply, "Ah but my agonies
Bit deeper"? I see now what the gods are -
They are old soldiers playing barrack room
Games to while away the boredom of
Eternity. They throw their dice and gamble
Our hearts on the outcomes. Well, I wonder
Which God is throwing for Octavius.

CHARMIAN: Do not worry Madam.

CLEOP'RA: Worry?

CHARMIAN: Madam, you should not mock the Gods.

CLEOP'RA: Mock?

CHARMIAN: Madam, we love you.

(Pause)

IRAS: Both of us love you.

(Long pause)

CLEOP'RA: Then perhaps I am richer than the Gods.

(Pause. She rises and goes to sit on the throne.)

CLEOP'RA: *(as though rallying herself)* Well, what must be done about Antony?

CHARMIAN: I have tried to embalm his body.

CLEOP'RA: This should have been my mausoleum, Charmian. Perhaps it will serve as Antony's.

CHARMIAN: Madam, he will need proper burial soon.

CLEOP'RA: So I must beg Octavius to help us?

CHARMIAN: We lack the herbs for preservation.

CLEOP'RA: What would Antony say?

CHARMIAN: I don't know Madam.

CLEOP'RA: Iras? You think much about the next world. Peer up there and see what Antony says.

IRAS: Lady, I think he would wish to carry on the fight.

CLEOP'RA: So do I. No begging to Caesar. Let us kill ourselves first and rot where we are.

CHARMIAN: I'd rather not rot.

CLEOP'RA: Let Iras instruct you. We won't rot will we? Only our bodies.

IRAS: Yes Lady, those are the...

CHARMIAN: Madam, a moment ago you had doubts about everything.

CLEOP'RA: So does Isis. She is the Moon. She can never be sure if she is quarter, new or at the full.

CHARMIAN: But you told me once before that Isis is the sun.

CLEOP'RA: Isis is anything she wants to be. She has as much desire to win arguments as I

have and will enlist any portion of sky to help her.

CHARMIAN: Does our queen blaspheme?

IRAS: The Goddess loves her entirely and therefore loves her blasphemies.

CLEOP'RA: I wish she would show a bit more sign of her love.

CHARMIAN: *(listening)* What's that?

(Gallus enters at back of theatre. Smoke stops.)

CLEOP'RA: Where?

CHARMIAN: By the grating.

IRAS: Is it a Roman?

CLEOP'RA: Go, see, Charmian.

CHARMIAN: *(going to stage front)* Who's there?

GALLUS: *(calling from back of theatre)* I have come from Octavius Caesar.

CLEOP'RA: Ask who it is.

CHARMIAN: Who are you?

GALLUS: I am General Cornelius Gallus, commander of Caesar's forces in Africa.

CLEOP'RA: *(calling)* Why are you here?

GALLUS: Caesar has sent me.

(Cleopatra rises to approach the voice. Charmian steps back to rejoin Iras.

Despite herself, Cleopatra enjoys this verbal duel.)

CLEOP'RA: Where is Proculeius?

GALLUS: He could not be here. Caesar has sent him on another mission.

CLEOP'RA: Antony told me I should trust only Proculeius.

GALLUS: You can trust Caesar.

CLEOP'RA: That's a new idea.

GALLUS: You need not fear him. There are no more wars to fight.

CLEOP'RA: *(quietly to girls)* He will have a war against his own soldiers if he can't pay them with my treasure. *(calls to Gallus)* Oh, I see.

GALLUS: He intends no harm to you. He will treat you with respect.

CLEOP'RA: *(calls)* Respect? *(quietly)* Do you know this is flattery? *(calls)* What about my

sons?

GALLUS: You need not fear him. There are no more wars to fight.

CLEOP'RA: (*quietly*) Except against my sons when they are old enough to raise armies.
(*calls*) Will they be safe?

GALLUS: He desires your co-operation, so of course they will be safe.

CLEOP'RA: (*quietly*) Co-operation! I tell you this is flattery. (*calls*) What does he want of me?

GALLUS: Octavius Caesar wants nothing. His role from now on is only to give.

CLEOP'RA: (*quietly*) His role is to take my treasure. (*calls*) Will he parade me through the streets of Rome?

GALLUS: He wishes to show you respect, not humiliate you.

CLEOP'RA: (*quietly*) Everything he says is threadbare. (*calls*) Really? (*quietly*) Therefore I can see through it. (*calls*) I'd like to believe that. (*quietly*) And so I think myself superior. This man is the cleverest of flatterers.

GALLUS: Give Caesar opportunity to prove himself.

CLEOP'RA: (*quietly*) So what is he planning? (*calls*) I wish that I could. (*quietly*) I'm meant to feel so pleased with myself I don't notice what's going on.

CHARMIAN: The treasure!

CLEOP'RA: The treasure! Fetch my knife!

(Charmian brings a knife from the throne area.)

GALLUS: I'll be honest with you. There is something I want.

CLEOP'RA: (*quietly*) This man is too clever. He knows I've tracked his mind so far. (*calls*) What do you want?

GALLUS: Cleopatra, Octavius has sent me to plead that you might come to an arrangement.

CLEOP'RA: Plead? Come, General Cornelius Gallus, that is too obvious. Make your flattery more subtle.

GALLUS: Let me be blunt then. He wants your treasure.

CLEOP'RA: Of course he wants it. What is blunt about telling me what I know?

GALLUS: He needs it to pay his troops.

CLEOP'RA: Yes. Come on, what is your news?

GALLUS: If he doesn't pay them he could have rebellion on his hands.

CLEOP'RA: Yes. And he sent you to ask for my help.

GALLUS: He did.

CLEOP'RA: Help? (*quietly*) Excellent flattery. He is suggesting I can help or defeat Octavius Caesar. (*calls*) Does he offer me the crown of Egypt?

GALLUS: No.

CLEOP'RA: What does he offer?

GALLUS: What do you demand?

CLEOP'RA: He knows what I want. I want the crown for one of my children.

GALLUS: I have been sent to negotiate.

CLEOP'RA: Never mind negotiate. That treasure is surrounded by flammable materials, and if I don't get a good answer it will be melted down.

GALLUS: That is why I am here.

CLEOP'RA: Tell me your answer then.

GALLUS: I am the commander of Caesar's troops in Africa. You could not have a more powerful emissary.

CLEOP'RA: (*rising anxiety - quietly*) Why is this man stalling? (*calls*) Tell me the answer. (*quietly*) What is going on?

GALLUS: Well, you have three children by Mark Antony.

CHARMIAN: The back window!

CLEOP'RA: How do they know about - ?

(Enter Proculeius from behind - perhaps he climbs over the throne to mimic climbing through a window.)

CLEOP'RA: (*three sharp fierce shriek words*) Pig! Filth! Roman!

(She reaches the dagger from Charmian and makes to kill herself. Proculeius rushes to dispossess her. Fierce tussle. He wrestles the dagger away, snatches the sheathe from Charmian, and puts the dagger safely in his belt.)

PROCUL'S: Please, Queen, do not harm yourself.

CLEOP'RA: (*Quietly from floor*) They've taken the treasure girls. We have nothing left to

bargain with.

PROCUL'S: My master wishes you safe.

CLEOP'RA: He wishes me robbed.

PROCUL'S: Please accept the situation.

CLEOP'RA: Accept?

PROCUL'S: Caesar is a magnanimous victor.

CLEOP'RA: (*quietly*) Oh, I understand his magnanimity. The man is Cheapjack Caesar, isn't he, emperor of housebreakers. At one time, I thought him brave enough to wage war against me, but all the while it was against my treasury. He's nothing but a bag snatcher. Octavius, gladiator of the world, armed with magnificent armies, and what does he pit himself against? A woman's purse.

PROCUL'S: You must accept what has happened.

CLEOP'RA: Accept? Octavius Payclerk looked up from his ledgers and decided to send his sneak housebreaking. Accountant Caesar, Octavius Bursar - king of all quartermasters.

PROCUL'S: Great Queen - my master's troops fought in your war, so who must pay them?

CLEOP'RA: (*coldly*) What is the name of your master's little dog?

PROCUL'S: Madam?

CLEOP'RA: Your master's pet, his voice, his paw, his bark carried at a distance and disgorged in a mausoleum. Who are you little one?

PROCUL'S: I am Proculeius.

CLEOP'RA: Proculeius? (*quietly*) Antony told me to trust a man called Proculeius.

PROCUL'S: You can trust me, Queen.

CLEOP'RA: Believe me, you are no dog.

PROCUL'S: I am not.

CLEOP'RA: Because dogs are faithful, which you are not to Antony.

PROCUL'S: Great Queen - Caesar will set up an empire of peace.

CLEOP'RA: An empire of peace? Well!

PROCUL'S: You will be part of it and benefit from its prosperity.

CLEOP'RA: Oh I am robbed for my own good am I?

(*Enter Gallus*)

CLEOP'RA: Here comes another Roman. Come, second this tax gatherer. Tell me how my monies will buy me services in this new empire of peace - such as fire dousters, or maybe education for those children the Bursar spares, and of course a nice pension in my old age.

PROCUL'S: Gallus, try to explain the moderation of Caesar.

CLEOP'RA: This is Gallus? Deception-tongue? Well, I am meeting them all.

GALLUS: Cleopatra -

CLEOP'RA: Come, General Cornelius Gallus, commander of all the troops in Africa, cannot you command a few words to explain the morality of this housebreaking.

GALLUS: Cleopatra, we could not let your treasures be destroyed. *(To Proculeius)* She had more tinder than we imagined.

CLEOP'RA: Look this way, Gallus, there is a queen talking to you.

GALLUS: Cleopatra, I am sorry we had to break in, but I am a soldier and war is war. *(To Proculeius)* The soldiers are making all safe.

CLEOP'RA: *(rising anger)* I said look this way - you who undertakes the danger of speaking in streets while your friend squeezes through any rat hole he can find.

GALLUS: Cleopatra, believe me, we intend you no ill will. *(To Proculeius)* We should transfer the treasure straight away.

CLEOP'RA: *(quietly)* I said pay attention, you accomplice of a rat, you underling of a rat, you udder of a rat, you diseased udder on a diseased rat in a diseased world inhabited by rats and diseases such as yourself.

GALLUS: Cleopatra, please contain yourself. *(To Proculeius)* Do you need any more men up here?

(She attacks Gallus. Proculeius intercepts and holds her by the hands.)

PROCUL'S: Please don't attack Caesar's Generals. He wants you undamaged.

CLEOP'RA: Oh, should I play the lustful gipsy instead? That's what Rome believes I am. Should I try to seduce him? That would be a challenge. At the last reckoning he was a disease. Well, I could inhale him through my nose - which would be a sort of seduction.

But then the fever would make me vomit him out. What sort of lustful gipsy is

it that reduces her lover to an unnamed stickiness on the floor?

A generous one perhaps, because that would be a rise in stature for him. Have faith, Gallus - one day with perseverance, luck, and well directed urges you could progress as far as something congealing in the corner of a bathroom.

PROCUL'S: Madam, will you listen to what Caesar intends for you?

CLEOP'RA: Caesar, that dullness? No, I am enjoying myself.

GALLUS: *(to Proculeius)* Shall we start unloading the treasure, or do you want an escort for her?

CLEOP'RA: *(looking at him with wonder)* Now, where were you last? I do believe you were quietly developing a crust somewhere.

PROCUL'S: Madam.

CLEOP'RA: *(suddenly snapping out of the invective)* So much for that. Now what does Caesar want? Why wasn't I allowed to kill myself?

PROCUL'S: He wants you safely installed in your palace.

CLEOP'RA: *(Long pause and wander)* He wants that?

PROCUL'S: He does Madam.

CLEOP'RA: *(To Gallus)* He wants that?

GALLUS: Yes, Cleopatra.

CLEOP'RA: I almost begin to enjoy him. What plan is he hatching now?

PROCUL'S: Madam, he wishes to visit you as one ruler to another.

CLEOP'RA: *(Long pause and wander)* He wants that too?

PROCUL'S: He does Madam.

CLEOP'RA: *(to Gallus)* He wants that too?

GALLUS: He does Madam.

CLEOP'RA: *(mouths silently to girls)*

CHARMIAN: He does Madam.

IRAS: He does Madam.

CLEOP'RA: *(as if convinced by their testimony)* He must. *(pause)* But what is my sneaky adversary getting up to? Why should he visit me? What does he want?

PROCUL'S: He wishes to show you his magnanimity.

CLEOP'RA: He wishes to drag me through Rome, like my sister Arsinoe.

PROCUL'S: No Madam.

GALLUS: No Madam.

CLEOP'RA: (*she looks silently at girls*)

CHARMIAN: No Madam.

IRAS: No Madam.

CLEOP'RA: (*as if convinced*) Well then, maybe he doesn't.

PROCUL'S: Believe me, he wishes to be magnanimous.

CLEOP'RA: (*she glances*)

CHARMIAN: Magnanimous.

IRAS: Magnanimous.

CLEOP'RA: I have a price for his magnanimity - the crown of Egypt for one of my sons.

PROCUL'S: He understands that.

CLEOP'RA: And hear this - every child of mine must live. No tidying things up with the odd death here and there.

PROCUL'S: He wishes to see you.

CLEOP'RA: To discuss these matters?

PROCUL'S: To discuss all matters.

CLEOP'RA: He is an infinity of consideration. (*pause*) Suppose I try suicide again?

PROCUL'S: You want the crown of Egypt for one of your sons.

CLEOP'RA: (*calculating*) Oh I see, my children die if I fail to co-operate?

PROCUL'S: Caesar is not so crude.

CLEOP'RA: Yes, I see it - the Bursar is threatening to put them in the debit column.

PROCUL'S: He wishes to be generous.

CLEOP'RA: To keep them in credit.

PROCUL'S: There has been a war.

CLEOP'RA: Our loss, his profit.

PROCUL'S: Perhaps your profit too eventually.

CLEOP'RA: If I can just remember not to commit suicide.

PROCUL'S: Please.

CLEOP'RA: He doesn't want this asset to depreciate.

GALLUS: Time to go.

PROCUL'S: Great Queen, can you ready yourself for leaving?

CLEOP'RA: Do I hear an order?

GALLUS: Cleopatra, I am a soldier, so I say it plainly - prepare to leave. Caesar orders it.

CLEOP'RA: For the first time I begin to admire you. That came close to honesty.

PROCUL'S: Please accept -

CLEOP'RA: Oh, I accept well enough. You have been doing your job. And I? - I have been consoling myself with anger. I mean little of it - I don't even bear you any ill will. What can a loser do but rant? So I ranted.

PROCUL'S: Indeed.

CLEOP'RA: Did you like my rant?

PROCUL'S: Great Queen, I understood.

CLEOP'RA: Understood?

PROCUL'S: All soldiers are losers. They lose many things - comrades, hopes, battles.

CLEOP'RA: Why then, we are all soldiers.

GALLUS: There is an escort outside.

PROCUL'S: We will wait for you.

(Exeunt U S R Proculeius and Gallus)

CLEOP'RA: Well girls, we'd better pack away.

*(The girls carry the braziers offstage, then work at the throne,
partially out of sight.)*

CLEOP'RA: *(change of tone - honesty after the combat)*

And so farewell to expectation:
Caesar has annexed it. What now?
We were makers, Antony and I, sent from
Above to make a new kind of poetry,
Not from words but from people.
That poem, though, will never now be made.
Goodbye Antony, even dying together is
Denied us, which would have made if not
An epic, at least a lyric of regret.
But I must leave, passed on like baggage,
Made ridiculous by children and their
Overbearing necessity to live.
How many parents shrivel so their offspring
Might thrive? Well, it has happened again.
As for our poem - which would have brought
Down heaven to this earth to demonstrate,
Unmistakable, the higher way -

That poem we never even started.
Oh Antony, we made children in flesh
But our higher child you did not even
Know to be conceived. It would have been
My greatest gift to you - life, disciplined
As the forms and metres of poetry,
As fulfilling to heart and intellect,
And fed with the gift of continual
Inspiration - the sacred breath of Isis.
Farewell Antony, companion:
I'm sorry you never saw the truth of me.

(pause)

Well, girls - will the Bursar let us live?

IRAS: He says he will, Lady.

CLEOP'RA: For now.

CHARMIAN: He might take a look and change his mind.

CLEOP'RA: Yes, I'd be too much trouble. Well, here we go, death without dignity. He may let a child or two live, and to earn such mercy we must act his puppets - till he cuts the strings.

CHARMIAN: Not him. He'll get us to cut the strings for him.

CLEOP'RA: Charmian, you're cleverer than me, or more like Octavius and therefore worse.
Yes he'll look at us and give permission to die.

CHARMIAN: Probably.

CLEOP'RA: Is everything finished?

IRAS: Yes, Lady.

CLEOP'RA: Then take it over there.

(The girls push the throne downstage left and turn it round till it shows the wall and seat for the next scene. Exeunt, with equipment U S R.)

FADE TO BLACKOUT