

A Round of Slaughter

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086
201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • m.bett@verizon.net

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

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A Round of Slaughter

DESCRIPTION

The conflict between artists of different purposes.

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

- SIGNET
- OLEAGE
- SILL
- BALKIS
- CICISBEO
- CINCHONA
- DISMAS
- SECULOR
- CISTA
- GRIG
- ANZAC
- SPUR
- GROAT

NOTE: Spur and Groat can be played by the same actor.

SETTING

The stage is divided into four playing areas: SIGNET's writing studio, with a long workbench and some stools; the bedroom, with bed, small table, and a clothes-pole; OLEAGE's office, with desk and chairs; an open space used for various other scenes.

A Round of Slaughter

Scene 1

SIGNET, in a separate light reading a letter, wears a long overcoat or duster with pockets, camouflage-style pants, pull-over shirt, heavy shoes.

OLEAGE, dressed officially, in a separate light, recites what the letter says.

OLEAGE
(as if in mid-sentence)
-- having rendered the most extraordinary service
that any one person can give to one's country --

SIGNET
(agitated)
Wait! Wait!

SIGNET reads silently. After a moment, OLEAGE repeats.

OLEAGE
-- having rendered --

SIGNET
Wait!

OLEAGE pauses briefly, then begins.

OLEAGE
-- having rendered the most extraordinary service
that any one person can give to one's country --

SIGNET
He is such a bucket-shitter.

SIGNET reads silently. After a moment, OLEAGE starts.

OLEAGE
-- the service you have rendered as a playwright,
as an artist of the stage, often in defiance --

SIGNET
(reading with OLEAGE)
-- the service you have rendered as a playwright,
as an artist of the stage, often in defiance --

(to herself)
A shite-spreader.

SIGNET reads silently. After a moment, OLEAGE starts.

OLEAGE

-- but service always rendered with authority and
as our public conscience.

SIGNET walks into OLEAGE's light, and OLEAGE turns to her.

OLEAGE

Of course, our recent history has been unkind to
artists like you --

SIGNET

Such buttery crap, Citizen Oleage.

OLEAGE

Unkind to artists unappreciated for their power
and purpose.

SIGNET

Spread it around.

OLEAGE

(smiling)

But given our state's remarkable and recent
translation to democratic rule --

SIGNET

The barbarians spreading it around --

OLEAGE

-- we can now think -- what had once been
unthinkable.

SIGNET

Had been made unthinkable.

OLEAGE

Thus our invitation to you -- nay, our
solicitation, our suit --

SIGNET

You want me back.

OLEAGE smiles, breaking from the "officialese."

OLEAGE

We want you back, Citizen Signet.

SIGNET

You want me to whitewash the blood --

OLEAGE

We want you to bloody the whitewash.

SIGNET

I'll start with a quart of blood from you.

OLEAGE

Taken by teeth or needle?

SIGNET

As if those were my only bloodletters.

OLEAGE

Let me get back to --

SIGNET

By all means.

OLEAGE

(back to the "officialese")

Our solicitation -- our suit --

SIGNET

By all means necessary.

OLEAGE

Our solicitation -- our suit -- for you to return to the land of your home so that you can, through your craft, grace the ears and eyes and hearts of your compatriots --

SIGNET

I am free to rollick on home.

OLEAGE

Yes.

SIGNET

Yes.

OLEAGE

Grace us with your incomparable works of the stage as well as the fullness of your heart.

SIGNET begins to circle OLEAGE as he speaks. Within a few steps he turns and offers her his hand, and, palm to palm, they continue to circle as if dancing.

OLEAGE

Therefore -- in great anticipation -- your reply.

SIGNET

I have already winged it.

OLEAGE

Now we can arrange our common lives --

SIGNET

I begin today.

OLEAGE

-- so that the affairs of state and the affairs
of art speak in a parallel language.

SIGNET

Is that likely?

OLEAGE

Join your words to us as we shape the future.

SIGNET

We shall see.

OLEAGE and SIGNET look at each other for several beats.

SIGNET

Close your eyes.

SIGNET licks her thumb and makes the sign of the cross on each of
OLEAGE's eyes.

SIGNET

I will make you all see so much better.

OLEAGE

And now you.

SIGNET closes her eyes. OLEAGE does the same thing to SIGNET but
makes an "X."

OLEAGE

For us, "X" marks the spot where we put the
funeral coins.

SIGNET shoves OLEAGE away, who smiles and exits.

Hard music for transition.

SILL enters naked and gets into bed -- his clothes hang on the pole.

SIGNET takes off her clothes and throws them into the bedroom area,
runs and jumps into SILL's arms, and they fall onto the bed wildly.
Music stops, and so do they.

* * * * *

Scene 2

Bathrobes for SIGNET and SILL hang on the clothes-pole. They are the same size, so that they can be worn by either person.

SIGNET

Let me get the letter.

SILL

Don't get up -- don't break the moment --

SIGNET gets the letter from the coat.

SILL

Then while you're up, throw me that.

SIGNET throws him the robe while looking over the letter. She takes her own robe and puts it on.

SILL

(referring to the robe)

I can't believe you kept this.

SIGNET

(half-hearing him)

Why not?

SILL

It would require sympathy on your part.

SIGNET

(not hearing him)

They will re-publish everything.

SILL

Is that what it says? That's very good.

SIGNET

Everything.

SILL

You deserve it.

SIGNET

Even material not yet published. Yet conceived.

SILL

Not enough?

SIGNET

It's fine -- it's fine fine fine --

(holds up the letter)

In the midst of this so-called "winning" -- my winnings -- perusing this offer of "enough" while rotting in my city of exile -- what is my first thought -- my first pulse -- when I think about touching our blessed soil?

SILL

A rhetorical or actual [question] --

SIGNET

Is it a fast hand held out to my scarred fellow writers, those who stayed and resisted?

SILL

Subject for a tedious breakfast -- come back to bed --

SIGNET

To re-visit geographies of anguish and bliss?

SILL

There's no need --

SIGNET

No. None of those my first pulse.

SILL

Then what, your first pulse?

SIGNET

It is to bed you --

SILL

Well, why not?

SIGNET

In swift and pounding savagery --

SILL

Signet's signature -- the flying buttress. Come back. I am a fellow playwright -- so that's one checked off -- and a scene of bliss, yes? That's another. This pounding feels so old-hat and welcome.

SIGNET

I'm not finished.

SILL

No, of course not.

SIGNET

My first thought -- my first free thought -- is, in swift and pounding savagery, to bed the one whom everyone here and not-here has named "coward."

SIGNET waits for SILL's reaction.

SIGNET

Even as they're pouring gifts into my lap -- you. Whom everyone has named.

SILL

Named --

SIGNET

My lap did not feel the weight of the gifts -- just the wetness of your name.

SILL

Not cowardly to stay in the way [I stayed] --

SIGNET

Give -- your robe -- give it to me.

SIGNET takes hers off, takes SILL's. SILL puts hers on.

SIGNET

Better. Holed up in that dreary rain-soaked city called "asylum" we all read your -- work --

SILL

The gossipers in exile --

SIGNET

We could get your -- work -- yes -- we monitored. How many repeats of the same official formula, we wondered --

SILL

Wondering from safe nurseries --

SIGNET

How many of those polished bootlicking plays, we mused, would Sill the laureate write before his fingers rebelled? We worried, we did, about the health of our country's laureate.

SILL

No idea, Signet -- you have no idea -- what it was like here to be here.

SIGNET

Not the Sill we knew -- had known.

SILL

No idea.

SIGNET

But even closer to me -- because it is always me, Sill -- closer to the question actually --

SIGNET grabs SILL's crotch.

SIGNET

-- at hand --

SILL

Stop it --

SIGNET

-- that's not how you wrote when I was climbing you -- when we all gathered --

SILL

Hiding like animals --

SIGNET

-- ideas and spit flying like swallows feeding -- what we would use, remember, you and me -- spit -
-

SIGNET takes SILL's hand and spits in it, rubs their palms together.

SIGNET

Writing and fucking all abusing the same fluids. Remember? Many nights, fingers buried between my legs and then my smell littering the pages as I wrote after coming, licking my fingers to get the taste of the loose words spilling on the page the way you spilled onto me. Do. You. Remember?

SILL

I remember. I remembered.

SIGNET grabs his crotch again.

SIGNET

I can feel your member remembering -- good.

SILL
Stop it. So I stayed here -- and that plagued everyone?

SIGNET
(shrugging)
That hardly matters now --

SILL
Did it plague you?

SIGNET
(ignoring his question)
The exiles-coming-home are sharpening their tongues --

SILL
Did it?

SIGNET
-- for slitting Sill's ribs. Righteousness intoxicates them -- they're all now as smug as Lazarus risen.

SILL
But you? You were with them. What is in your mouth?

SIGNET
(laughing)
What is in my mouth?

SIGNET sits on the bed.

SIGNET
Sill, I know better what is better. Memories of Sill's composition, of that Sill before this Sill. This is why I oozed -- because I remembered. In this mouth, you ask? Then here it is: I am going to bring Sill back to Sill -- I am going to save him. It is what you need.

SILL
Returned to save me?

SIGNET
With the gut of this letter, Sill -- not publications, not recognition, but a commission -- a commission from --
(she laughs)
-- the people!

SILL

Commission?

SIGNET

A play for a command performance -- any subject I want. On the occasion of their one-year self-congratulation for joining humanity, yes. Stage, actors, dramaturds --

SILL grabs the letter, reads.

SIGNET

By all means, read.

SILL

I cannot believe --

SIGNET

My dearest chuck --

SILL

I cannot believe this --

SIGNET

Is that venom on your lips?

SILL

(throwing the letter down)

Nothing.

SIGNET

That's nothing with fangs.

SILL

That -- that -- meant to be mine. Promised to me!

SIGNET

You could not do this, Sill. You couldn't. Not now. Not without some deep scourging. They know that.

SILL

I am better than you are --

SIGNET

I am home --

SILL

Better craftsman --

SIGNET

-- and you are thinking "better"?

SILL

-- better thinker --

SIGNET

"Better" hardly matters --

SILL

Because I had -- have -- the discipline of the art! Not like you -- you -- giving in to impulse and this lavender exquisiteness -- sensual beyond any thought of how to control -- and then ambitious, yes, and immodest in your ambition --

SIGNET

Because I want to be heard -- that is the point, after all --

SILL

Oh, the people hear you, all right!

SIGNET

And that means nothing to you? Eh?

SIGNET does something to get his attention.

SIGNET

They hear me because I give in to the impulse to sniff their soles of their shoes and smell the fear on their breaths and hate the cowed yipping of their voices and their gray clouded eyes and word all of it so that even a deaf-mute -- even a politician -- even a laureate! -- would be smacked down and enraged --

SILL

And they all love you.

SIGNET

Except those with the guns and the hearts of leather -- the ones who loved you up.

SILL

And now the guns give you commissions --

SIGNET

And don't love you anymore.

SIGNET moves closer to him.

SIGNET

My thought --

SILL

That was mine --

SIGNET

My hope was that we could work this together. My way to save you.

SILL

Save me so I can feel their thrust, the same way they're thrusting it to you?

SIGNET moves away.

SIGNET

Guess what, Sill?

SILL

I'm sorry.

SIGNET

Guess what, laureate? I am no longer wet and in my saving mood. Leave.

SILL

I'm sorry.

SIGNET

No you aren't, even if you are. Get out.

SILL

I don't want to argue --

SIGNET

We will not argue. You have suddenly run out of room.

SIGNET violently, pushes SILL out of the bed. As she speaks she takes SILL's clothing and smacks him with each piece as she hands it to him.

SIGNET

Take your spite and stuff it into your classical forms -- churn out more pristine crap. The commission is now mine. Why did I even think to think of you? A stupidity that love of an old love pukes up. Well, friend, I am cured. Get. Out. Now.

Enter BALKIS, who stamps on the floor to simulate knocking on the door. He wears clothing similar to SIGNET's, including the overcoat.

BALKIS

I am here, Citizen Signet.

SIGNET

You drain my spirit, you starve my heart, I will not ever stop loving you, but I will love you no more. So much for welcome, and so much for home. Go!

SILL leaves, brushing past BALKIS, who politely does not notice SILL's state of undress.

SIGNET

Tectonic plates grind --

BALKIS

Citizen Signet?

SIGNET

Grind and grind -- what point is the effort? what point is a heart?

BALKIS

Citizen Signet?

SIGNET

Do I look older to you?

BALKIS

We all look older because we are older. Every day.

SIGNET

Yes, but from when I used to be here.

BALKIS

I never knew you were here when you were here, so --

SIGNET

Who are you?

BALKIS

Citizen Balkis.

SIGNET

Citizen Balkis -- what grinds your heart to ambitious dust?

BALKIS

Nothing.

SIGNET

Why?

BALKIS

Because I have purpose in life.

SIGNET

And what's your purpose today?

BALKIS

To speak to you.

SIGNET

I don't even know who you are.

BALKIS

You summoned me. "Come at ten," you said.

SIGNET

Yes. Yes. The --

BALKIS

Interview, you said.

SIGNET

Yes.

BALKIS

Something about a play --

SIGNET gets the journal from the overcoat and pulls out a chair.

SIGNET

Yes.

BALKIS

Though I don't go in for them much.

SIGNET

Interviews?

BALKIS

Plays.

SIGNET

Neither do I. Sit.

BALKIS sits.

BALKIS

Now, it's only been recently that my talk has been allowed about what we are going to talk

about, so naturally I am a bit nervous about speaking as to the likes of you.

SIGNET

You don't like my likes.

BALKIS

Also, there is a cost for the presentation.

SIGNET

You charge.

BALKIS

Freedom to make contracts as one desires -- in the new Constitution. And since naturally I have no talents beyond this particular display --

SIGNET fishes coins out of the overcoat and drops them in his hand.

SIGNET

Will this do?

BALKIS

This is worth at least a double take. Thank you.

SIGNET

Well?

BALKIS

I must warn you --

SIGNET

Warn me.

BALKIS

It is not for the faint.

SIGNET

I have never been one of "the faint."

BALKIS

I can give you your money back now -- but not after.

SIGNET

Not to be rude, citizen, but shut up and show me your contract freely entered into. And talk to me while you enter said contract -- ignore me while I take notes.

BALKIS takes off his coat; under his shirt, on his back, are two noticeable lumps. He takes off his shirt and two white angel wings

pop into view -- small, clearly unable to lift him, but otherwise perfect. SIGNET quickly jots notes, sketches.

SIGNET
Talk to me, Citizen Balkis.

BALKIS
Medical experiment, they said --

SIGNET
To do --

BALKIS
They never said why or what. To me, at least.

SIGNET
What did they do?

BALKIS
For the new state, the doctor said -- made no sense to me. But the money was good --

SIGNET
Food?

BALKIS
Enough for a year -- full family.

SIGNET
They bought you.

BALKIS
I was ready to be bought by those who had brought me low.

SIGNET
"The new state" you said -- turn a bit --

BALKIS
As they laid me down on the table -- new state, new state of man, bring down the angels, lift up the slime of human nature -- to be honest, Citizen Signet --

SIGNET
By all means, be honest --

BALKIS
I could scarcely hear them through the medicine -
- all I remember is "angles" -- "angles" -- bring down the "angles" --

SIGNET
And when you woke up? A bit more -- excellent.

BALKIS
When I woke up --

SIGNET
Lift your arms -- When you woke up --

BALKIS
I really did feel different.

SIGNET
I'm sure. Put them down.

BALKIS
No, not in that way.

SIGNET
Then how?

BALKIS
I felt. Chosen.

SIGNET
Except that the wings couldn't lift you up.

BALKIS
Of course not -- too small.

SIGNET
May I?

BALKIS
Included in the price.

SIGNET fondles and pulls on the wings, occasionally taking notes.

BALKIS
You're not sickened?

SIGNET
By other things, not by these. So beautiful and so useless.

BALKIS
True -- no lift.

SIGNET
And can't be moved?

BALKIS
They didn't promise much.

SIGNET
Useless.

BALKIS
And beautiful, like you said.

SIGNET
I will tell you why they did it.

BALKIS
That would be nice.

SIGNET
I will tell you why you are going to be central
in my play.

BALKIS
Central.
(indicating his shirt)
Are you finished?

SIGNET
No -- a double take, remember?

BALKIS
All right -- but it is cold.

SIGNET
The new man -- you, Citizen Balkis. Twisted into
a horrible useless beauty.

BALKIS
Not that horrible. I'm chilled.

SIGNET
Not the shirt.

BALKIS
You are being cruel.

SIGNET
I paid for it. Citizen Balkis, as accepting as a
sheep's throat to the knife.

BALKIS
I had family --

SIGNET
Go ahead -- try to move them.

BALKIS

You know I can't. Could you close your robe?

SIGNET

Family -- the eternal excuse, isn't it?

BALKIS

Your robe.

SIGNET

"I had family." And you? No dignity?

BALKIS

I actually believed --

SIGNET

Ah -- they got you because you "actually" believed. They made you a freak because you "actually" believed.

BALKIS

I am cold.

SIGNET

That's why you will be the icon of my play, Citizen Balkis. The belief that twisted men into "angles" perverse.

BALKIS

I'm honored -- it's cold -- my shirt --

SIGNET

No.

BALKIS

You're hard.

SIGNET

Go ahead -- move them.

BALKIS

I can't.

SIGNET moves close to BALKIS.

SIGNET

Aren't you disgusted with yourself? No anger at those who made you a monster?

BALKIS

I make a good living --

SIGNET

(hissing)

I'm sure your family loves the support of a freak. You're no different than the Sons of the Republic! -- The Angelic Heroes! -- who died in the meat-grinding wars.

(checking the wings)

No movement yet.

BALKIS

They can't!

SIGNET

Every sideshow needs a freak, and you are going to be mine.

(checking)

Not yet. The "new man" of the new society -- ecce homo! -- our ideal cripple, our crippled ideal --

BALKIS

I have tried to do my best --

SIGNET

My play is going to bury you --

BALKIS

My shirt --

SIGNET says nothing. BALKIS fumbles to put on the shirt but struggles with it -- arm wrong-side out, etc.

SIGNET

And you aren't the only one, Citizen Balkis --

BALKIS

(muttering)

I've got to put on my shirt --

SIGNET

You're just one of an army of freaks -- whole battalions of trussed-up, crook-backed, club-footed, contorted-six-ways-from-Sunday "new men" --

BALKIS

Goddamn this shirt!

SIGNET

All are going to be in my play! Citizen Balkis -
- what do you have to say to those who did this
to you?

(looking at the wings)

Not yet.

BALKIS does not reply, gets the shirt on.

SIGNET

You can say it in my play. You can tell them
what you think about what they did to you --

BALKIS

Stop this!

SIGNET

The freaks shall inherit my earth!

BALKIS

I've got a nice life!

SIGNET

The rachitic angel -- the failed experiment --
what a destiny!

BALKIS

Don't -- don't --

BALKIS looks at SIGNET in deep distress, and SIGNET faces BALKIS,
searching. Then BALKIS' face changes to a mixture of surprise and
fear: the wings have moved a little.

SIGNET

What?

BALKIS turns his back to her; there is a slight quivering under the
cloth of the shirt.

BALKIS

Look.

SIGNET

I can see.

BALKIS

Look.

SIGNET

You are coming to terms, Citizen Balkis. Like
all of us.

BALKIS

What am I supposed to do?

SIGNET

What do you think Gabriel did when he first flexed his wings?

BALKIS

I don't know. Your heart does not bleed.

SIGNET

Oh, it bleeds all right, Citizen Balkis, but not without training -- you will have front-row seats on opening night.

BALKIS puts on his overcoat.

BALKIS

They won't stop twitching.

SIGNET

Mine never do, either.

BALKIS

I do not feel as peaceful.

SIGNET

That's why you want to go home to your family and get out of my company.

SIGNET digs more coins out of her overcoat.

SIGNET

For your extra service.

BALKIS

You are cruel to make me feel so unpeaceful.

SIGNET

Hold off on that opinion -- I hope to change the adjective for you.

SIGNET touches his face.

SIGNET

Go home, broken angle. Your extra service has shown me a way.

BALKIS leaves.

Music: rock and roll.

SIGNET dresses as OLEAGE moves into his office. OLEAGE holds a sheaf of manuscript pages: the first draft.

* * * * *

Scene 3

SIGNET walks into OLEAGE's office. Music stops.

OLEAGE

It has all your marks.

SIGNET

But I see no marks upon it.

OLEAGE

I wouldn't want to limit your draft that way.

SIGNET

I don't draft, Citizen Olege -- I just write.
You can criticize whatever and whenever you want.

OLEAGE

Whatever your name for what you do, Citizen
Signet, this is -- well --

In OLEAGE's moment of hesitation, SIGNET grabs the script out of OLEAGE's hands and goes to rip it in half. OLEAGE takes it back from SIGNET before she can do it.

OLEAGE

Ah, ah, ah. Citizen Signet, move over there -- I
prefer a little distance from someone so fully
loaded. Good. What did you think I was going to
say?

SIGNET

I was going to destroy it before you did.

OLEAGE

Then you'd be destroying a very unusual -- and
delectable -- document. Eh? Not complete -- it
is a draft --

SIGNET

It is a work.

OLEAGE

Whatever the name, it is remarkable.

SIGNET

Who can trust a bureaucrat's "remarkable"?

OLEAGE

I'll say it again -- remarkable --

SIGNET

Repetition is not proof.

OLEAGE

-- remarkable so far -- one thing I do want to point out -- but in a moment. This reminds me of that one you wrote --

SIGNET

No recitation of my past works, please --

OLEAGE

Many all ready for proofing -- as promised.

SIGNET

I'm not fond of the "proofing."

OLEAGE

No typos, misprints, must --

SIGNET

I don't need to autopsy myself.

OLEAGE

If you want them, I can get you assistants.

SIGNET

I want them --

OLEAGE

Consider them approved. Good -- now I feel our temperature dropping. Polarities reversing.

SIGNET

What is it you want to say to me?

OLEAGE

Some positive feedback? On your work. I've heard that writers like that sort of thing?

SIGNET

So feed me back.

OLEAGE

Let's begin at the beginning. Right from the top, you make me focus with the descent of the angel -- I can see right away you're trying to match what you've gone through --

SIGNET

Been put through --

OLEAGE

What you've come through.

SIGNET

We weren't there by choice! It wasn't a pilgrimage!

OLEAGE

Citizen Signet -- the polarities rising again. Unnecessarily. You. Can. Let. Go.

SIGNET

So can you.

OLEAGE

So can we all.

SIGNET

It's just hard to hear that all of the torturing you -- the junta of the corpses!-- now chooses to be as soft as the wool between a lamb's eyes -- that you want art.

OLEAGE

A difficulty easy to understand.

SIGNET

And my blood roils at that easy understanding of yours. Don't pretend to know.

OLEAGE

Fair enough.

SIGNET

Just because lies come out softly now doesn't stop them from being lies.

OLEAGE

That's why we expect our artists to keep the times honest. What?

SIGNET

Do you ever fear that your tongue will fall off from sheer embarrassment at the things that come out of your mouth?

OLEAGE

Embarrassment comes from being powerless, Citizen Signet. Therefore, I am never embarrassed.

SIGNET

Ah.

OLEAGE

(indicating the manuscript)

Let's just make your work our common ground -- for the moment. As I was saying, this opening -- the descent of the broken angel. The "crooked angle," as you name him. Name "it." As our guide. I can see the shafts of light on the descending body, the hush of the audience palpable. Who else would prepare us like that? Not Sill. Not Sill, eh?

SIGNET does not take the bait.

OLEAGE

No.

OLEAGE flips more pages.

OLEAGE

And here -- I think the re-creation of the Last Great Battle by the amputees in the veterans' hospital -- prosthetic arms and legs lobbed like incoming artillery -- "a shin at twelve o'clock high!" -- I laughed and choked at the same time!

SIGNET

I spit all over those words -- to give the scene its proper smell.

OLEAGE

And it smelled to the high heaven you wanted it to smell. All of it so superb in execution -- even for a draft. Excellent work.

SIGNET

Have I passed? What?

OLEAGE

Just curious.

SIGNET

About.

OLEAGE

Why you didn't respond --

SIGNET

To?

OLEAGE

To my mention of Sill.

SIGNET

Is this for extra credit?

OLEAGE

You know we almost gave this to him.

SIGNET

I had heard almost.

OLEAGE

I like Sill. He is respected --

SIGNET

Yes.

OLEAGE

In his way.

SIGNET

You have used up his "way" until he has only talent left to offer you.

OLEAGE

Plenty of talent -- skill, aptitude -- marksmanship. But he is very much the artisan -- do you know what I mean? I think you know what I mean. Now, he would begin in realism -- the unities --

SIGNET

Any artist can begin any way he wants.

OLEAGE

Subject, of course, to the need of the people for art to offer them something useful in their lives.

SIGNET

Your tongue is still attached -- amazing. What would be useful for "the need of the people," Citizen Oleage, would be for the junta of corpses to stop telling the people what they need that would be useful in their lives.

OLEAGE

All right -- we have reached that moment, Citizen Signet, where the phase of positive feedback has ended -- where your circle now becomes just a bit tighter. I like you, Citizen Signet, have always

respected -- a pull, of sorts, between -- and you should know, if you already don't, that I was the Archimedes that levered you back here to retrofit the new regime. And you certainly know I crave theatre -- thank God you will straighten its spine! But don't mistake any of this or that for affection. At this moment you do not have the brevet to banter with me.

SIGNET

The spread of the butter on the bread?

OLEAGE

The beds that one has made -- and unmade. So, just to finish the discussion: I was asking you if you knew why we hadn't given this to Sill.

SIGNET

(indicating the manuscript)

I'd prefer to continue the autopsy.

OLEAGE

He wanted it too much.

SIGNET

I prefer --

OLEAGE

And wanting it too much, he would have done everything just right -- and it would have smelled -- talking about smells -- like the forty-seventh version of his first play. Sill has served his purpose -- at least for us. This is now what is ascending as the angel descends. This. Your play. Our play. New voices. It is important to keep that in the forefront --

(tapping his forehead)

-- up here. Now, we just need to add one more thing.

During the next lines SIGNET becomes more and more agitated by OLEAGE's words -- she prowls.

OLEAGE

Our finest writer has one more thing that needs her -- attention. The President -- our leader, the President -- there has to be made room. The audience more than just overhearing his name. His exploits.

SIGNET

He is there.

OLEAGE holds up a single page.

OLEAGE

The dedication. Very economical. But not --
drawn in -- throughout.

SIGNET

You said a play that would honor the struggle --

OLEAGE

Yes --

SIGNET

That would acknowledge, finally, our fall into
sanity.

OLEAGE

Yes --

SIGNET

And that is what I am doing.

OLEAGE

Good.

SIGNET

When that angel drops into sight, I want the
audiences' lungs to collapse.

OLEAGE

And they will.

SIGNET

When the old patriotisms about "singing of arms
and the man" are bodied in the wooden arms of war
cripples crashing to the hospital floor, I want
their stomachs to wrench at the sight of these
living fag-ends of "dulce et decorum est" dancing
like the puppets they were -- they are --

OLEAGE

Spit and polish -- always has been your method.

SIGNET

To keep the free mind safe and alive --

OLEAGE

The mirror, as it were, up to nature.

SIGNET

Up to your nature -- up to all of theirs -- up
your nature -- up yours! -- and then crack!

OLEAGE puts a hand on SIGNET to stop her moving.

OLEAGE

All of that is very true. Very nice. But.
Something more of him before I bring something to
him for a read. More of him towards the
beginning.

OLEAGE hands the manuscript toward SIGNET, who refuses to take it.
OLEAGE smoothly moves behind her and, with his right arm over her
shoulder, grabs her by the left breast and pulls her against him.

OLEAGE

There has been suffering. And mistakes. In the
name of "for reasons of state." But now, you --
you -- are a "reason of state" -- an "affair of
state" -- you, yes -- and that, I firmly believe,
bodes well. We need truth, Citizen Signet, yes -
- as medicine. We also need what makes us proud.
I am sure you can make a double star of both.

SIGNET grabs OLEAGE's wrist.

SIGNET

Funny -- no sign of a heartbeat.

OLEAGE

None?

SIGNET

I would have sworn you had a heart.

OLEAGE

Funny how the heartless find one another out.

OLEAGE releases SIGNET, not roughly, not softly.

SIGNET

I will find a way to kill you next time.

OLEAGE hands her the script.

OLEAGE

Show me your next -- version -- show it to me
soon. And what is it that actors say? "Use the
energy"? Use your bile well -- I expect no less
from our defender of broken angels.

* * * * *

Scene 4

Musical transition as SIGNET crosses to her writing studio and OLEAGE exits.

Papers attached everywhere: floor, walls, even from clips attached to the ceiling. Also hanging, perhaps even like wind-chimes, are dozens of flensing and filleting knives. Prominent is a large long chart that SIGNET uses to track the narratives. She has filled it with signs, lots of handwritten notes, etc., and at times she needs to get up on a small stool or ladder to read. Also prominent is a small tower of thick manuscripts: the galley-proofs. The studio should look like the writer's version of a crowded and working painter's atelier.

SIGNET

(going down the chart)

If this tracks to here, and the angel's story to here -- the Lazarus parade shows up here at the veterans' hospital -- then this has to follow --

CISCISBEO and CINCHONA enter and stamp on the floor as if knocking on the door. At that same moment, SIGNET has a full-bodied sneezing fit, only managing sentence fragments between sneezes.

SIGNET

Come in --

CISCISBEO and CINCHONA enter, watching, waiting, respectful.

SIGNET

Goddamn this. Goddamn. Who are -- Shit. Who are you? Enough already -- enough!

SIGNET sneezes for a few seconds more, then stops -- paused, as if waiting for the attack to come back.

CICISBEO

It's cold in here.

CINCHONA

More like chilled.

CICISBEO

I would agree with "chilled."

SIGNET

It's an old slaughterhouse converted -- what else would you expect?

SIGNET waits for other sneezes. None come.

SIGNET

Good.

CICISBEO

I wouldn't expect much from a slaughterhouse.

CINCHONA

Except slaughter. It's good for that.

CICISBEO

Well-designed.

CINCHONA

Is that why they've put you here --

CICISBEO

To chill you?

SIGNET

I chose this place -- my choice. Isolated so I wouldn't be bothered -- so who are you bothering me?

Pointing at each other as they speak.

CICISBEO

Cinchona.

CINCHONA

Cicisbeo.

SIGNET

Again. This cold stiffens my eardrums.

CICISBEO

Cinchona.

CINCHONA

Cicisbeo. Your assistants.

CICISBEO

Government funded.

SIGNET

Citizen Oleage selected you?

CINCHONA

Asked us.

SIGNET

Are you his spies?

CINCHONA

Of course not!

CICISBEO
Of course not!

CINCHONA
We're here to work.

CICISBEO
We're here to serve.

SIGNET
At government expense.

CICISBEO
More money for you.

CINCHONA
It is cold in here.

CICISBEO
We agree on that.

SIGNET
I like it cold -- hardened nipples keep my mind
sharp.

(pointing to her nipples)
Gun turrets.

CICISBEO
(pointing to hers)
Spear-points.

CINCHONA
(pointing to hers)
Thumb-tips.

SIGNET
My mind must be very sharp at the moment.

CINCHONA
(to CICISBEO)
Now, that is a measure we haven't considered.

They touch each other's nipples as if to test the theory and nod,
agreeing with something between the two of them.

SIGNET
Watching you do that suddenly made me feel
warmer.

CINCHONA
You have a mountain of papers.

CICISBEO

A mess of a mountain.

SIGNET

It's how I work -- it's how my thoughts think themselves!

(pointing to her head)

Thought comes in -- then, like Athena, leap out -
- slam! -- to here. Up it goes.

CICISBEO

How do you find anything?

SIGNET

They find me -- they hunt me down like Diana,
running me to ground. How well can you read?

CINCHONA

Test me.

SIGNET hands her the top fat volume of galley-proofs. CINCHONA opens it and begins to scan lines with her index finger. Suddenly, her body gives a small but definite chill.

CINCHONA

Misplaced modifier.

She shows it to SIGNET.

SIGNET

Not mine.

CINCHONA

Wouldn't think so -- you're so above them. What would you like?

SIGNET

Unmisplace it.

CINCHONA

Good.

(looking around, gesturing)

Where, where, where --

SIGNET hands her a pencil and CINCHONA corrects the error. While CINCHONA makes the correction, SIGNET turns to CICISBEO.

SIGNET

Do you do -- that?

CICISBEO

No, I do this.

CICISBEO makes a distinctive gesture. SIGNET hands her a galley-proof. CICISBEO reads, then makes the gesture and shows SIGNET the book.

CICISBEO

Comma splice.

SIGNET hands CICISBEO a pencil.

CINCHONA

Then unsplice it.

CICISBEO

Done.

CINCHONA

Do we pass?

SIGNET

(repeating their gestures)

How did you come to this and that?

CICISBEO

Our fathers -- both grammarians.

CINCHONA

Both teachers -- relentless drilling.

CICISBEO

His drills would have made an oil company --

CINCHONA

Or a dentist --

CICISBEO

Or a Marine --

TOGETHER

Envious.

CINCHONA

Old joke.

CICISBEO

Our fathers had us read your plays. Even when we weren't supposed to.

SIGNET

Brave -- or foolish -- men.

CINCHONA

Neither -- they didn't like them.

SIGNET

Well --

CINCHONA

But they knew greatness --

CICISBEO

Their word.

CINCHONA

-- when they saw it. They were brave --

CICISBEO

Not foolish --

CINCHONA

-- about that. Greatness had to be honored.

CICISBEO

Has to be honored -- present tense.

CINCHONA

Yes.

CICISBEO

So here we are.

SIGNET

In a slaughterhouse.

CICISBEO

I want to ask you more about that --

SIGNET

Take a deep breath. Do either of you smell the old blood? Do you?

SIGNET hits several of the knives to make them chime, sniffs.

SIGNET

I do all the time. Turns my nipples to iron.
(pointing to the chart)

See this.

CINCHONA

Clearly.

SIGNET

This is the score of the song that I am going to sing. And see this, where it begins? Right there at the beginning? See that figure there. Cinchona, what is it?

CINCHONA

It is a bloody knife.

SIGNET

Sporting -- Cicisbeo?

CICISBEO

Sporting a bloody head.

SIGNET

Severed head. Head on a spit. That's the
presiding icon of the days to come. You look --
what's going on behind those [faces] --

CINCHONA and CICISBEO look at each other.

CINCHONA

I think my nipples have hardened.

CICISBEO nods in agreement.

SIGNET

Does that mean you want to stay?

They both nod yes.

SIGNET

Each of you -- galleys. Get the crap out of the
way so we can get on with the gut-work. Go find
a place to work -- I think you're both quite
capable of making yourselves comfortable.

SIGNET talks to herself as she peruses her chart. CICISBEO and
CINCHONA each begin to read, gesturing as they come across mistakes
and then correcting them.

SIGNET

This stinking archeology -- this is what you have
asked for, unpulsing Oleage -- and when the
curtain rises -- whose head piked on the knife
there? Whose head will it be? I always work out
of a slaughterhouse -- it is always my point of
origin. Healing, celebration, what you've said
you want -- we'll see, we'll see -- the angel
travels there, then to the village of one-eyed
widows grieving -- go, my Hermes, go, go swiftly
--

The three women continue working as the lights cross-fade to the
bedroom. CINCHONA and CICISBEO exit.

* * * * *

Scene 5

SILL enters the bedroom, stands. SIGNET hits the knives so that they ring like chimes, then crosses to SILL.

SIGNET

Look at me, Sill.

SILL

Why did you ask me here?

SIGNET

Look at me.

SILL

Why would you want me h[ere] --

SIGNET

Look at this flesh -- does it still riddle you?
It riddles me.

SILL

I am always riddled by you.

SIGNET

It is a poor, poor instrument, isn't it? Look at
it.

SILL

Why have me come here when your broken angel can
bless you hourly?

SIGNET

I am tired of the arc of the angel. I want you.

SILL

Whom you don't respect.

SIGNET

Great respect. Greater understanding.

SILL

Why do you want me here?

SIGNET

Because -- as I said -- this too, too sullied
flesh is tired of her angel.

SIGNET steps across the bed and begins to undress SILL, who neither resists nor helps.

SIGNET

The angel has drained the flesh, Sill -- you, mirror, as it were, up to nature -- solid -- is what I need. I feel extracted -- I need infusion.

SILL

Your play infuses you.

SIGNET

Confuses me. I am gripped in ways I cannot even give tongue to.

SILL

Why hold me?

SIGNET licks him.

SIGNET

Thirsty for your salt. In ways you cannot imagine. Everything comes to me now as grist.

(SIGNET grabs his crotch)

Your mirror, as it were, is what I need.

SIGNET goes to unbuckle his pants, but SILL stops her and moves away.

SILL

You only call me back to move yourself forward --

SIGNET

Forward me, please!

SILL

Just because you're -- extracted -- and --

SIGNET

And?

SILL

Lonely.

SIGNET

And you?

SILL

And I? I come because I cannot stay away if unsheathed Signet says come.

SIGNET

And come is what I want you to do!

SIGNET starts to push him playfully.

SILL

There is nothing but this play for you, Signet.

SIGNET

Enough! Tonight, forget!

SILL

No room for anyone else --

SIGNET

I am making room for you -- come, conqueror!
Rut! Rout!

SILL

And yet I still come to you -- like a puppy --

SIGNET

Give me your dog!

SILL

So that I can watch you leave me behind.

SIGNET

I like your behind!

SILL

When it is time to return to yourself.

SIGNET

You are too serious!

SIGNET wrestles SILL to the bed and climbs on top of him. As she does, DISMAS enters OLEAGE's office, takes a chair, comes downstage, and sits.

SIGNET

Much too long-faced -- both of us -- too
restrained -- I need a bruise -- will you bruise
me?

DISMAS

Ahem.

SIGNET looks up, tries to ignore.

DISMAS

Ahem.

SIGNET

Go away.

What? SILL

Not you. SIGNET

Then -- SILL

Nothing. SIGNET

Who's onstage now? SILL

I was hoping that you here would have -- expelled him by now. SIGNET

Lover as septic system -- SILL

Stop it. SIGNET

It's a role. Who? SILL

Dismas. SIGNET

I have come. DISMAS

You spoke with The Butcher? SILL

Today. SIGNET

That explains everything. SILL

Oleage thought I should. I shouldn't have. SIGNET

You shouldn't have at all -- better to have two scorpions dance on your eyes. SILL

But he knew I had to. SIGNET

SIGNET puts on her coat, takes out her journal and a pencil, and walks into OLEAGE's office. SILL, both rejected and fascinated, watches as SIGNET interviews DISMAS.

SIGNET

I knew I had to. The Butcher sitting there like a squat toad. Venomous. Citizen Dismas.

No response.

SIGNET

Is it the place? The time? A woman?

DISMAS

The "honorific."

SIGNET

"Citizen" -- I think it's a wonderful -- lubrication.

DISMAS

Hmm.

SILL

You always prick.

SIGNET

(a sliding gesture with her hands)
A social grease that mashes up the classes --

DISMAS

Grease is something you would like -- from what I have heard.

SIGNET

Yes, I would --

(to SILL)

-- grease made me think of you --

(to DISMAS)

-- yes, I would, from what I know.

DISMAS

Oleage -- "Citizen" Oleage -- said you wanted to interview me. That is not my way.

SIGNET

We are all in chartless waters here.

DISMAS

But he thought my consent would lend -- weight.

SIGNET

It is ponderous work we do.

DISMAS

So I gave consent.

SIGNET

Which brought you here.

DISMAS

Also know that I moved to kill your commission.

SIGNET

I appreciate your disdain -- and also for not carrying the day, which now allows me to eat!

SILL

Signet --

DISMAS

You need nothing from me. We are done.

SIGNET

Could not let him off so easily.

(to DISMAS)

But how can I not interview the President's brother? You loom -- large in our recent history. You shall loom equally large in my play -- centrally large --

DISMAS

You make it sound -- grander than it was. I did my duty.

SIGNET

A duty of such large proportions.

DISMAS

Duty is duty, large or small.

SIGNET

But if pressed -- I'm pressing you --

DISMAS

I see myself as part of a historical necessity.

SIGNET

You mean bones scalded in quicklime --

The air is filled with the feeling that if DISMAS thought he could get away with it, he would gut her on the spot for that remark.

DISMAS

You think of that image because it fits one fit
to live in a slaughterhouse.

SIGNET

I work in a slaughterhouse.

DISMAS

A typical empty artistic gesture.

SIGNET

Any artist with a grain of soul knows he works on
the killing floor.

DISMAS

All gesture -- all bloviate. A slaughterhouse!
Maudlin and cowardly and liberal. You were not
here when the real work needed to be done.

SIGNET

Real work executed by you --

SILL

(disbelieving)

Executed -- Signet --

DISMAS

You think you know -- but all known from your
fashionable exile. Resistance! Rebellion!
Death! That was work? They don't call it a
"play" for nothing -- a sport for children in
playpens. What?

SIGNET

(pointing to her temple)

I am watching that large vein there.

(to SILL)

Burst!!!

DISMAS

You are vulgar.

SIGNET

It is imperially inflamed.

(to SILL)

Spew!!!

DISMAS

Vulgar -- and suicidal.

SILL

Listen to him, Signet.

SIGNET

A writer, Citizen Dismas! Of "necessity" vulgar, mob-like -- isn't that how we act now -- the mob our master, the crowd our conscience?

DISMAS

Enough! Are there specific questions?

SIGNET

Will there be specific answers?

DISMAS

Do you have any specific purpose at all?

SIGNET begins to prowl around DISMAS.

SIGNET

When arms blown off from soldiers in the Last Great Battle go arching through the air because they obeyed Citizen Dismas to slam their bones against a wall that his generals warned had no strategic worth -- when pride and arrogance detach arms and send them arching -- then I am purposed to write the words "arching" and "arm" and "blood" and "bastard" and "executed" because those are the words the vulgar slaughterhouse writer requires.

Prowl stops.

SIGNET

I have more.

DISMAS

Why did they ever select you?

SIGNET

Misplaced paperwork is my guess. Too late now -- I've got the thing half done. In my play -- you will understand this -- in my play I have a man who owns a slaughterhouse. He sings songs of utopia -- perfection -- to his butchers as the carcasses swing down the line. They hack while he tries to blind their hearts to the meat at the ends of their knives -- they all hate him. They may meat-hook him by the end of the play -- I am not sure what transcendence he will reach. Any resemblance to the living or the living-dead is completely coincidental.

SIGNET moves back to the bed, taking off her coat.

SILL

He will have you quartered and re-drawn.

SIGNET

He will make pieces out of me -- the same thing I want to make out of him.

SILL

I marvel at the stupidity of your courage.

SIGNET

I marvel at the courage of my stupidity.

SILL

Come here. Come here.

SILL takes her chin in his hand and moves her head as if looking for something.

SILL

Soft.

She slaps his hand away.

SIGNET

What?

SILL

I want to see if there is any Dismas left.

SIGNET hesitates, then offers her face again. He gently moves it from side to side.

SILL

Tilt this way -- then that --

SILL brushes her cheek softly.

SILL

He seems to have left behind only a little ash.

SIGNET

My face, Sill.

SILL

Yes.

SIGNET

It is not a beautiful face.

SILL
(brushing it gently again)
Not at peace, no.

SIGNET
Watching that toad today --

SILL
That would take its toll --

SILL goes to touch her face again, but SIGNET pulls away, shaking her head no.

SIGNET
Not what you think. Not taking a toll. Not only that.

SILL
Then what?

SIGNET
Excited --

SILL
Excited?

SIGNET
Yes.

SILL
By that?

SIGNET
No, by this: that he, this envenomed toad, had to sit there and let me hover over him like a fly he couldn't eat -- this compressed power couldn't move until I moved --

SILL
If he had wanted to move --

SIGNET
I know --

SILL
-- he would have moved, Signet -- with a crush.

SIGNET
I know that! But for a moment -- a moment -- he couldn't -- constrained -- by me -- and in that moment --

SILL

What? What?

SIGNET

I felt what Dismas must feel often --

SILL

Brutal? Nothing?

SIGNET

Power. Having. The power. To make the word or
the gesture stick!

SILL

Between someone's ribs.

SIGNET

In their eye if you have to!

SILL

Please!

SIGNET

What writer wouldn't want it?

SILL

That is an ugly thought.

SIGNET

Not you?

SILL

Never.

SIGNET

Never?

SILL

Have you forgotten I saw your toad total up the
corpses into the quicklime?

SIGNET

Not forgotten that you prospered by staying.

SILL

Which at least let me give people some comfort.

SIGNET

Some healing. Some beauty.

SILL

And that's not for you?

SIGNET spreads her arms wide, takes a wide-legged stance, as if to say, "With this face and body? With my life?"

SIGNET

I have never believed in beauty, Sill. Once you aim for beauty, then a deadness blooms in the brain -- "sweetness and light" take over, and then -- pfft! Happiness! Followed by betrayal!

SILL

And you think what -- you felt -- in that room -- with --

SIGNET

Go on, spit it out!

SILL

That you felt life?

SIGNET

What else is it?

SILL

I couldn't --

SIGNET

Speak truth to power, Sill -- you think that takes beauty -- comfort?

SILL

It doesn't take --

SIGNET

With beauty, you get to be -- laureate -- but that's as far as --

SILL

At least not a beast --

SIGNET

What does it take, Sill? Do you have any idea?

SILL

(pointing to her face)

Too much hate. It's twisting you.

SIGNET dances while she speaks, in a greater and greater frenzy.

SIGNET

It's not hate, you beautician -- it is rage! Fury! Don't you ever feel it? Don't your guts eat themselves alive every minute in this country? Don't they? You -- you think I want to

be Dismas -- don't be dense! I don't want him --
I want his freedom! I want his capacity so that
my words will purge the earth of his filth -- my
gestures grind their bones to dust -- my spit
like thunder, my shit like artillery, annihilate
the whole damn corruption! Apocalypse fucking
everything! Everything, Sill! Everything!
Everything! That's not hate, Sill -- that's a
blessing for us all!

SIGNET stops dancing, exhausted. SILL waits.

SIGNET
(softly)

A blessing.

SILL

Look at you.

SIGNET

"Look at you." "Look at you": his comforting
response! All you can offer the exhausted one?
Look -- he stares at the beast; that look does
not comfort me. And now he looks away -- so
accommodating. Sill, Sill, why aren't you with
me on this, Sill? Why aren't you writing this
with me?

SILL

I can't --

SIGNET

You should, Sill -- you can, still -- Why are
you backing away?

SILL

I need -- to breathe --

SIGNET

Don't! Don't!

SILL

Stay -- away --

SIGNET

I don't -- I don't mean you -- no, no -- Sill --
I am exhausted -- I am exhausted -- by -- doing --
- being -- alone -- this is not why I wanted you
to come here --

SILL

Get Sill to give you a good reaming -- that's why!

SIGNET

That's not why --

SILL

Stay -- back! Pneumatic Sill -- the laureate's piston -- gives you a good cleaning out so you can plow on to your next execution.

SIGNET

Sill, forgive me -- my only refuge -- not you included in --

SILL

Harder -- you're much harder -- like a rock against me -- destroy everything to save it -- crush -- me --

SIGNET moves to him.

SIGNET

Sill --

SILL

I can't -- I can't -- There was a time --

SIGNET

There is always "there was a time" -- but what now?

BALKIS, as a vision, enters.

BALKIS

He's already said he can't, Signet. He won't. Don't waste your time. He has to leave.

SIGNET moves in closer to SILL, as if to ignore BALKIS.

BALKIS

There is no time to bring him back. There is only time for me.

SILL looks up and sees BALKIS. Their eyes meet.

SILL

Signet --

SIGNET

Don't talk.

BALKIS
(to SILL)

You know she has to.

SILL
(to BALKIS)

Let her rest.

SIGNET looks up with surprise on her face, seeing that SILL has spoken to BALKIS.

BALKIS
There's rest enough in the grave.

SIGNET
You see him.

SILL
(to SIGNET)
I'll stay.

BALKIS
You can't. He can't. It will be a betrayal!

Slowly, painfully, SIGNET extricates herself from SILL and goes to BALKIS, clearly unwilling, just as clearly determined to leave.

BALKIS
(to SILL)
Thank you -- you helped her get empty enough to get back to me. How pneumatic of you.

In the studio, in a ghost light, CICISBEO and CINCHONA enter and move the knives so that they chime. SILL responds to the noise.

SILL
Signet. Answer me this before you leave: Will the butchers meat-hook the owner or not?

SIGNET
What?

SILL
Of what kind of utopia does he sing to them? Why would they be angry to have in their ears a world without pain when the meat weighs so heavily on their bones? Unless they are in love with pain - - but why would any sane heart be like that? And yet -- there are such hearts with such a love. I know exactly their feel and pitch, their weight and fall. Because I know Signet.

SILL leaves but does not completely exit; he turns and looks at SIGNET, as if through a closed door. SIGNET crawls into the bed and pulls up the sheet. SILL hesitates a moment more, then completely exits. BALKIS comes to the bed.

BALKIS
Broken angels always come first.

BALKIS kisses SIGNET on the temple, and exits. The knives continue to chime.

* * * * *

Scene 6

The writing studio, with SECULOR, the leader of the church, and CISTA, the leader of the university, as well as GRIG, ANZAC, and SPUR, the three actors. SIGNET will enter later.

SECULOR
Where is she?

GRIG
She is not here.

SECULOR
And who are you?

GRIG
Actors.

SECULOR
Why are you here and she is not?

GRIG
To act, of course.

ANZAC
Is this like the catechism, Father? "Who is God?"

SECULOR
Act what?

ANZAC
"Why did God make me?"

SECULOR
Quiet!

ANZAC
I'd like to know.

Act what?!

Bishop --

The final draft --

Version --

Version, yes -- of the play.

Final version?

She always uses "version," Bishop, not draft.

I was speaking to him.

But now you've heard it from me.

I don't want to hear it from.

That doesn't matter to me.

Actors and intellectuals --

Theatre began in the church, Bishop Secular.

Not in my church.

It is not really your church.

He is a hard --

-- row --

SPUR

-- to hoe.

SECULOR

My church, my rule. Look around you -- a slaughterhouse!

CISTA

I understand her point --

SECULOR

Her point is to lie.
(pointing at the "score")
A laboratory for lies.

CISTA

And your church has never lied.

SECULOR

(pointing)

And they --

SPUR

Look at that finger!

SECULOR

-- are nothing but liars.

ANZAC

No Christ-like humility in that finger.

CISTA

The certainties of your Church must be so comforting.

SECULOR

Certainty provides no comfort -- because infidels
--

GRIG holds up his index finger like a sword and does a pretend sword-fight with SECULOR's finger -- but does not actually touch SECULOR's finger.

GRIG

That un-Christly finger again!

SECULOR

-- never rest in their attack --

GRIG

En garde!

SECULOR

-- on faith.

GRIG

Back! Back!!

SECULOR grabs GRIG's sword-finger and would, if he chose, break it. GRIG freezes. Everyone freezes.

SECULOR

(to GRIG)

Shut. Up. You. Idiot.

CISTA comes over and disengages them without actually touching SECULOR, eases GRIG back.

CISTA

And the faithful must always feel persecuted to remain faithful -- is that the subtle point you wanted to make to the younger generation?

CISTA and SECULOR face each other, SECULOR wanting to say, but won't, "Don't you ever do that again," CISTA wanting to say, but won't, "Don't be such a buffoon."

SECULOR

Because we are now more than ever in the time of infidels.

CISTA

(indicating actors)

Him? Them? Hardly. I doubt they can spell "infidel" much less act like one. I would be more cautious around the ones wearing the political ties and policy suits than these children.

SPUR

I-N-F-I-

ANZAC whacks SPUR to shut him up.

CICISBEO and CINCHONA enter SIGNET's bedroom. They help SIGNET get up and move her towards the studio.

GRIG

I thought we could now speak freely without being crisped --

SPUR

And bone-broken --

ANZAC

As heretics.

SECULOR

One of the more toxic illusions in the days of infidels --

GRIG

What do you want of her?

SECULOR

I would tell you?

SPUR

Telling us is as good as telling her.

CISTA

Citizen Oleage told us that he thought we should talk to her -- about our views.

(to SECULOR)

It's not a state secret.

SECULOR

Everyone already knows our views.

CISTA

Knows your views --

SECULOR

And not yours?

CISTA

It is easier to understand the things that never change.

SECULOR

Like your being a gunsel.

CISTA

Much better than a bully.

ANZAC

Bishop, your views haven't changed since God whizzed in Paradise --

SECULOR

I'm leaving -- we're obviously not important enough for her to be prompt.

SPUR

We'll tell her you were here.

GRIG

Her areolas will be very hardened at having missed you.

As SECULOR and CISTA make to leave, SIGNET arrives, with CINCHONA and CICISBEO.

SECULOR

Well.

CISTA

Citizen Signet.

SIGNET

(ignoring them, to the assistants)
Have you prepared everything?

CICISBEO

We have brought you the actors.

CINCHONA

We have made the copies of the scripts.

CICISBEO

The space is set.

CINCHONA

The time to run is ready.

SIGNET

Then let's get started.

SECULOR

Citizen Signet --

SIGNET

You're not needed.

SECULOR

Citizen Oleage --

SIGNET

I already know what I need to know about you both. It's not that hard.

ANZAC

Said so.

SECULOR

We've heard certain rumors --

SIGNET strikes the knives; they chime.

SECULOR

Citizen Signet!

CISTA

We are in a slaughterhouse, Bishop --

SIGNET

If you are so eager to contribute, then riddle me this, both of you, our institutional leaders of soul and mind: why did you -- why do you both still -- in the name of the patria, fuck over the beliefs you say you hold dear to those beating chunks you call hearts?

CICISBEO

Hit most --

CINCHONA

Palpable.

SIGNET

Time's up! Do not even bother to answer because I have already signed off on the answer -- you will hear it when the wind blows it through your bung-holes on opening night. Go.

SECULOR goes to strike SIGNET but is restrained by CISTA -- this time, CISTA touches SECULOR.

SIGNET

A putrid certainty spews out --

THE THREE ACTORS

Spews.

SIGNET

-- at the speed of wrath --

CINCHONA & CICISBEO

(with an emphasis on the "r" sound)

Wrrrrrath.

SIGNET

-- when uncertainty lances the boil.

CICISBEO

Certainty recoils from --

CINCHONA

The prick of truth.

SIGNET
Spur, you played a priest once --

SPUR
(to SECULOR)
I did play a priest once. In a play.

(indicating CISTA)
At the university. I did.

SIGNET
How many penances?

CISTA
(to SECULOR)
Let us go.

SPUR
A mess of 'em to atone for the mess. Goodbye.

CISTA
Now.

ANZAC
God bless!

GRIG
Good speed.

SIGNET
Let us move on to the opening night.

SECULOR and CISTA move to OLEAGE's office and sit -- lights do not yet come up on them.

ANZAC
Was that smart?

SIGNET
Anzac, if I had ever thought about "smart," I would have stayed in exile.

ANZAC
And deprived us of our mother's milk?

CINCHONA
It's always about breasts.

CICISBEO
And those that want them.

GRIG

What's wrong with breasts?

SPUR

And mother's milk?

SIGNET

There will be plenty of mammaries later if this works out. Are you all ready to suffer the slings and arrows?

DISMAS joins SECULOR and CISTA in OLEAGE's office.

GRIG

That "One for all" stuff?

SIGNET

It's not a joke -- we hang together or we hang separately. Cinchona, the scripts.

CINCHONA and CICISBEO go to a pile of thick manuscripts and hand them out, two of them to SIGNET, for a total of seven.

SIGNET

This has a short fuse. Its shrapnel is merciless and loving -- though they'll miss the part about "loving."

(meaning SECULOR and CISTA)

Those two still carry weight, even if it is dead-weight. Now, actors --

SPUR

Saltimbancos --

ANZAC

Gammoners --

GRIG

Mountebanks --

CINCHONA

Charlatans --

CICISBEO

Artists --

SIGNET

Kindling for the bonfire -- let us begin

* * * * *

Scene 7

Lights crossfade out on the writing studio -- all exit, leaving the scripts there except for SIGNET, who takes one with her -- and up on OLEAGE's office. OLEAGE and SILL join the others, SILL standing just to the outside of the group.

SECULOR

Can you do nothing? Will the President do nothing to stop this?

OLEAGE

What, precisely, are you referring to?

SECULOR

Oleage -- functionary --

OLEAGE

"Minister," Bishop, never func[tionary] --

SECULOR

-- let me ask again.

DISMAS

It is all a disaster.

SECULOR

We heard it's finished!

OLEAGE

Almost finished.

SECULOR

You don't know?

OLEAGE

It has been the policy not to interfere --

CISTA

And the President -- he's been reading?

OLEAGE

What I pass on to him.

SECULOR

What you pass on to him? Not everything?

OLEAGE

He does not have time for everything --

CISTA

He's approved --

OLEAGE

What I have passed on to him.

CISTA

Word is, Citizen Oleage -- you know how these things get around -- that she has written something very disturbing --

OLEAGE

It has its -- theatrical -- elements.

CISTA

Not entirely respectful.

OLEAGE

Entirely theatrical.

SECULOR

Cista, shut up --

CISTA

It sounds very interesting --

SECULOR

You mince around like an arthritic mouse.

CISTA

Says the gout-ridden cat.

SECULOR

This play will serve up falsehoods and rumors in the service to what this tramp thinks is truth, and it will not celebrate us.

CISTA

We called her back in order to celebrate her --

SECULOR

So that she would celebrate us -- we've hired the whore, and she should --

CISTA

Your charity is astounding.

SECULOR

(to DISMAS)

What is your brother going to do? Even he is not immune.

DISMAS sniffs several times.

SECULOR

What?

DISMAS

Did I just smell treason?

CISTA

He meant not immune to the poison of her pen --
his gout sometimes slurs his thinking --

SECULOR

Yes, of course -- civil unrest, the people
encouraged to reach beyond themselves -- it will
all flow from this play.

DISMAS

If it is seen.

SECULOR

(to OLEAGE)

Is there an effort to do -- that?

DISMAS

It is more a matter of what he has already done.

SECULOR

Oleage?

OLEAGE does not answer.

SECULOR

"Minister."

OLEAGE

The President was not entirely -- flattered by --

DISMAS

By what the state's money had bought for itself.

(to OLEAGE)

You speak far too slowly.

OLEAGE

He, of course, wants to honor the society's
artists -- he recognizes their importance to the
on-going commitment to our democracy --

SECULOR

Enough of the speaking!

OLEAGE

No -- if I can be, for a moment, forward about the President's thoughts because they are his thoughts and thus important to us all.

DISMAS

My brother really does believe the tripe Oleage is going to say.

CISTA

Here, here!

SECULOR

But what does it matter?

DISMAS

Are you -- again -- implying that my brother does not matter?

SECULOR

No, no -- but what does it matter if a decision has now been made?

OLEAGE

The President honors artists of all kinds.

DISMAS

He does.

OLEAGE

He sees them as valuable citizens.

DISMAS

Believe it or not.

OLEAGE

But they should also realize that they are citizens as well as artists --

SECULOR

Ah -- now I see the groundwork --

OLEAGE

Yes.

CISTA

This is not -- appropriate.

SECULOR

Cista thinks he has to uphold academic freedom -- as if you ever had anything worthwhile at that nursery you run over there --

CISTA

This is not how it had been discussed.

DISMAS

Times change -- rapidly.

OLEAGE

In the affairs of state.

CISTA

So what is going to be done? Is the whole thing to be cancelled, after all the announcements?

DISMAS

Oleage.

OLEAGE steps out of the office and signals to SILL, who enters.

SECULOR

Ah! Well!

DISMAS

My brother, in his infinite wisdom, has proposed a different path.

(to SILL)

You know why you are here?

SILL

Citizen Oleage --

DISMAS

You can drop that.

SILL

Yes. It was explained to me.

DISMAS

How quickly can you write? You know our timeline -- our deadline --

OLEAGE

The President is willing to shift the commission -- as you have already guessed.

SILL

There is not that much time --

DISMAS

How quickly, Citizen Sill?

SILL

Quickly enough for the purpose.

SECULOR

Will you start today?

SILL

Yes, of course.

SECULOR

Tell me --

SILL

Tell you what?

SECULOR

Why is she the way she is?

SILL

I wouldn't know.

SECULOR

Come, come -- you sleep with her. Slept with her, for years. Or are you saying that it is better not to know someone like Signet too well in order to sleep with her? I imagine she may exhaust a man rather quickly if he gets too close.

SILL

My feelings have nothing to do --

DISMAS

This is irrelevant -- if you want details, Seculor, go stick your eye to the keyhole. We have a disaster here we need to correct -- the people require that we do right by them, by all the sacrifices that they have made to bring to bear the freedoms we enjoy. Those are my brother's words, by the way. Not mine. Me? Throw her in jail, rape her a time or nine --

(to SECULOR)

-- you can watch, if you want -- all right with you, Sill? -- and then shut off the light.

OLEAGE

We should also add that the President still wants to honor an artist --

DISMAS

Punctilious --

OLEAGE

That the people so clearly honor themselves --

DISMAS

He doesn't want riots, in other words.

OLEAGE

So her plays will be printed, the festival will bear her name --

SECULOR

But not her play.

OLEAGE

Not in its present form. It will be the laureate's play.

DISMAS

Act one in a week from the laureate.

SILL

In a week.

SECULOR

This is only appropriate -- she has forfeited her chance because she decided to follow her own path rather than the one offered her. An artist should be free, of course, but not too free -- otherwise, the memories all get twisted and the people become confused.

OLEAGE

I think we can probably leave it there.

DISMAS

In a week, Sill. And it better be good.

SILL leaves and walks downstage center, in darkness.

SECULOR

Think he's safe?

CISTA

He will produce the product. But it won't be very good.

DISMAS

No wonder he wants to empty himself into her -- hope to suck up a little of her fire by swimming in her muck. She does have fire, that much is clear. Right, Oleage? I've heard you champion her to my brother. "Brilliant," I think I heard you say. "Challenging." I wonder at your motives.

SECULOR

The thing about jail --

CISTA

I thought we were through with doing that.

SECULOR

She does seem to be asking for the -- honor.

CISTA

What pretext could we have now?

DISMAS

We have plenty of left-over pretexts, Cista. "Misuse of public funds," for one. "Reasons of state" always works. Look, she wants to demean us one way or another. Prove her superiority. It is ever thus with people like her -- she feels empty unless martyred. So let's oblige -- at least for a week or two. We'll chalk it up to the problems with transitioning into a democracy -- a hold-over from a former state of being troglodytes. We'll apologize profusely.

SECULOR

We can't overlook her offense.

CISTA

She's done nothing but speak her mind.

SECULOR

As if that were nothing. How soon --

OLEAGE

The President's signature has already dried.

DISMAS

A week or two -- for the show of it. If we are going to be called the sons of whores -- and we are sons of whores -- we might as well act out our natures. It makes everything easier all the way around for everybody. Wouldn't you agree?

Lights crossfade from OLEAGE's office to downstage center on SILL. All exit except for OLEAGE, who goes to the writing studio, collects the left-behind scripts, and remains there. SIGNET joins SILL.

* * * * *

Scene 8

SIGNET
(slamming the script into his body)
Here.

SILL
It's finished.

SIGNET
And so am I. Read.

SILL
(opening the script)
"The stage: bare. In black. Descending, in a
single light, is the angel, the 'broken angle.'"

SIGNET
Continue.

SILL reads silently. As he does, SIGNET moves as SILL reads. After several moments of this, SIGNET stops and looks at SILL, who looks at her with a mix of pain and amazement in his face.

SIGNET
Yes?

SILL nods.

SILL
Yes.

SILL begins the same dance, and for a few moments they dance the play together. There is a pause as they look clearly and cleanly at each other, then SILL exits reading. Lights crossfade to the writing studio as SIGNET enters.

* * * * *

Scene 9

OLEAGE
Are these all of them?

SIGNET
Yes.

OLEAGE
Is that true?

SIGNET
You question my honesty?

OLEAGE

If you were I, you would question me exactly the same.

SIGNET

Probably. Yes, those are all the copies extant.

OLEAGE

Everything here will be burned -- notes, notes on notes --

SIGNET

What is it with heretics and fire?

GROAT, the jailer, enters the writer's studio.

OLEAGE

Go.

GROAT tucks SIGNET's arms behind her and roughly escorts her downstage, OLEAGE carrying the scripts. GROAT tries to force SIGNET to kneel, but she resists until GROAT, with more force than he wants to use, gets her to buckle, and she falls on all fours.

OLEAGE

Don't force his hand -- it irritates him.

SIGNET slowly lifts up one leg, like a dog going to piss.

OLEAGE

Groat.

GROAT takes a script from OLEAGE and whacks SIGNET on the back of the head so that she is pitched forward.

GROAT

Disrespect like that irritates me.

SIGNET

Groat, is it?

GROAT

I don't have a last name, and only certain ones get to use my solo name, and you ain't one of them listed.

SECULOR, DISMAS, and CISTA enter the cell. OLEAGE hands GROAT the scripts.

OLEAGE

You have made life so difficult.

SIGNET

I intended to.

DISMAS

What did you think you were doing?

SIGNET

Ah, The Butcher. Simple -- truth.

SECULOR

What you say is the truth?

SIGNET

I say what I feel, I say what I see -- what other truth is there?

DISMAS

Objective truth. Proper truth. Useful truth.
You were commissioned --

SIGNET

To write the truth.

DISMAS

And not your sickness. Executions? Broken
angels? A ballet with skeletons?

SIGNET

I wrote what I saw.

SECULOR

And all you saw was death? What does that say
about you?

SIGNET

When everything has been built on the stumps of
mass graves --

SECULOR

And who anointed you the desert's baptist?

SIGNET

Perhaps I was stupid to believe --

SECULOR

We wanted you to honor the progress we have made
--

SIGNET

Truth is not an honor? A progress?

DISMAS

She will never understand -- egotistical beyond all warrant.

SECULOR

Clearly thinks a breed apart.

CISTA

She's simply saying --

SECULOR

Shut up.

CISTA

She's simply saying that she's acting the way we say we want to be about -- openness -- light --

SECULOR

Who ever said that what we say is what we want? That's for them, to keep their bellies quiet. And even she doesn't believe what she's saying. With ambition as spread-eagled as hers, you think she'll settle for being "the voice of the people"? Humbly vocalizing for the "little ones"? She likes the grind and bump of power as much as any of us -- why do you think she came back?

CISTA

Seculor, stop this.

SECULOR

You were going to teach us about truth and reconciliation -- well, we are all reconciled about the truth of you, and it's this: the new whore has to start at the back of the line.

CISTA

Seculor!

SIGNET

Apoplexy gives you some color.

GROAT raps her on the back of the head.

GROAT

Was that all right?

SIGNET

So -- inquisition over. What happens now? I suppose you won't just let it go forward as it is and let the people make up their minds --

DISMAS

That is not going to happen.

SIGNET

Everyone is expecting something --

DISMAS

And it will be "something" they will get -- we've already taken care of that.

OLEAGE

Citizen Dismas, perhaps not --

DISMAS

(over-riding him)

Perhaps yes. Sill will write what you should have written.

SIGNET

Sill?

OLEAGE

He's been commissioned with your commission.

SECULOR

Note the dismay of betrayal!

DISMAS

The people have no taste anyways --

SECULOR

Crestfallen!

DISMAS

-- they'll eat whatever's on the plate for that day. If it weren't Sill, they'd get hard for bear-baiting.

SECULOR

Do you notice how, deflated, she does not even try to argue with us, use her superior reasoning to bring us kneeling next to her?

SIGNET

Why bang my hips against a dry root?

SECULOR

I suppose that could describe Sill, now, eh? Citizen Signet, one last inquiry: I'd really be interested in knowing why you think artistic irresponsibility should be exempt from civic responsibility.

SIGNET

I refuse to be the mouse.

SECULOR

Dismas?

DISMAS

(to GROAT)

Break what you have to.

SECULOR

Crack, crack. Preferably in halves, quarters,
and minces.

(to SIGNET)

Snap your pelvis like a wishbone.

SIGNET

As it was in the beginning.

SECULOR looks around and begins to laugh. DISMAS looks disgusted,
CISTA dejected.

SECULOR

Now she's angling for sainthood. Careful, she
might sprout wings at any moment!

(to SIGNET)

I can take the stink of rats -- but such stupid
self-pity? I'd have thought a truth-teller would
be more honest with herself.

SECULOR exits, followed by CISTA.

DISMAS

I told you. There is power, and then there is
power. You have the right, if you want to call
it that, to speak truth to it. Just don't be
surprised when it bites your head off in return.

SIGNET

I thought this was the new democracy.

DISMAS

Just a different set of teeth.

DISMAS exits.

OLEAGE

You see what I am up against. I fought for you
as much as I could.

SIGNET

And then you stopped.

OLEAGE

There was only so far to go.

SIGNET

That is the difference between us.

OLEAGE

Are you scared?

SIGNET

Only when your half-masted love of art stands so close to me. Then it's more sick than scared.

OLEAGE kneels on one knee next to her.

OLEAGE

You flatter yourself that I would even be half-risen for you. When you were our "official outlaw" dancing in my office, then you had some rough beauty about you -- slack-bodied as you were, I could imagine a squirt or two across your face. What would you think of that, Groat?

GROAT

Two-day old bread.

OLEAGE

Yes -- she is a stale. No smart remark? That is very smart of you.

OLEAGE rises and crosses slowly behind SIGNET to her other side, then kneels again. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small round gold container, perhaps with a jewel on its lid.

OLEAGE

(holding up the container)

Secular gave this to me -- supposedly ancient, but he needed a favor, and so easily parted with --

(opens it)

It contains chrism --

SIGNET

Oil and balsam --

OLEAGE

For the anointing of sacraments, yes --
(to GROAT)

Hold her arms.

GROAT holds SIGNET's arms back, but she struggles so strongly that GROAT ends up putting his arm across her throat in a chokehold.

OLEAGE

Hold her head still.

As GROAT immobilizes SIGNET, OLEAGE opens the container and puts a small quantity of the chrism on his thumb.

OLEAGE

Did you forget?

OLEAGE, using the chrism, draws a large "X" across SIGNET's face, and then on her eyes, an echo of the "X's" he put on her eyes in Scene 1. A small amount of coloring could be in the chrism to make the mark visible on SIGNET's face.

OLEAGE

Was it sainthood you wanted? Well, then --
anointed be. Groat, something funny as well --
this is also how we mark condemned and decrepit
buildings. How strange the world of symbols.
Let her go.

OLEAGE and GROAT stand.

OLEAGE

As good as a squirt or two across the face, hey?
She's yours if you want her.

GROAT

I prefer fresh bread.

OLEAGE

Well, then.

OLEAGE does a slight, mocking rendition of SIGNET's dance, then exits.

GROAT

When I leave, you will have no light.

SIGNET

Over-rated.

GROAT

The rats will gnaw at your fingertips, the floors
are damp and never dry, you will hear screams the
likes of which you will not want to remember --
that's the truth.

SIGNET

Do they pay you enough to do this work?

GROAT

To see the come-uppance of many has sometimes
been salary enough. I hate pretenders.

SIGNET

Did you fight in the wars?

GROAT

I went where I was told. I was born to do as I
was told. And I've been told to leave you be.
So leaving you be commences now.

GROAT exits with the scripts.

SIGNET

Don't leave! I can still write in my head -- I
can sketch it all out and remember it point for
point if I concentrate, if I don't think --
This is the proper payment for telling the truth
-- remember it all! Don't lose a detail, a
stitch, a scintilla of meaning! I have done what
I could do, more than kept faith with faith --
It is so dark -- it weighs -- Sill -- betrayed -
- I will not bend!

(SIGNET breathes heavily)

I will not bend!

(the light fades)

I will not be bent.

(dimmer)

I will not -- I will not --

Light fades to black as SIGNET looks around her in great fear: it is
the first time in the play we see her actually afraid.

* * * * *

Scene 10

SILL, CINCHONA, CICISBEO, GRIG, ANZAC, SPUR, and BALKIS, wings
uncovered, gather center stage. In a ghost light, SILL arranges the
actors to do the prologue of SIGNET's script. BALKIS stands on the
stool, arms outstretched, and when the action begins, GRIG and ANZAC
will lift him firmly under his arms and hold his outstretched hands so
that he looks as if he is both suspended and crucified. SPUR,
CINCHONA, and CICISBEO take up their positions. Suddenly CISTA joins
the group -- there is a moment of hesitation, then SILL replaces ANZAC
with CISTA. SILL begins gesturing as if encouraging people to gather
around, and then indicates to the actors to begin. BALKIS is lifted
and carried in a circle, then lowered to the floor. The remaining
actors gesture and mouth lines. When done, SILL gets up on the stool
and tells the crowd what has happened to SIGNET; he overlaps the words

with the people in the studio -- this can be timed so as not to interfere with each other.

All during this, DISMAS, SECULOR, and OLEAGE meet in the writing studio. The dumbshow takes place while they speak and ends when they end.

DISMAS

What do you mean that there was an "unaccounted for" script?

OLEAGE

Sill has it.

SECULOR

Sill is working for us.

OLEAGE

Sill is working for love.

SECULOR

Where is Cista?

DISMAS
(to OLEAGE)

What do you mean?

SECULOR

Cista?

OLEAGE

Sill has taken actors and is going to the street corners doing the prologue -- part of it anyway. Then tells the story of Signet's signal punishment for the telling of the truth.

DISMAS

Stupidity of love. Love of shame.

SECULOR

I told Cista to be here.

OLEAGE

He is with Sill. There will be others. There already are. The crowds get bigger as the word of mouth lengthens.

SECULOR

What does your brother say?

DISMAS

What does my brother say?

OLEAGE

Your brother is an eminently practical man.

SILL

You all know her you all have come to respect her
and --

OLEAGE

He knows the power of a rising popular opinion.

SILL

Know how she's fought on your behalf -- and now
she's --

OLEAGE

Her name is known.

DISMAS

Fools to do any of this.

SILL

-- locked away by the state for the --

OLEAGE

He is pledged to the people.

SILL

-- crime of telling the truth, for trying to--

SECULOR

Can we jail Sill?

SILL

-- tell your story openly --

OLEAGE

Afraid the old days and ways are gone.

SILL

Demand freedom, demand --

OLEAGE

The President thinks the truth just might work.

SILL

-- to see the play!

SILL and all the others exit, off to another street corner.

OLEAGE

The script is out. Apparently Sill will not be
fulfilling his commission. It has already, shall

we say, gone into rehearsals. The writer may not be redeemable, but the situation is. I am going to tell the President that there is a unanimous opinion to go forward with the play as planned. That we have seen the error of the old ways. That the will of the people should always and forever be the touchstone of --

DISMAS

Enough.

OLEAGE

As a round of slaughter goes, this one is fairly benign. Shall I have her released?

DISMAS gestures assent. Lights go to full black. In the darkness a tight spot opens on BALKIS center stage, just wide enough to include his head and wings. SILL and the actors enter downstage in darkness. SIGNET walks into her own light.

BALKIS

Oh, yes, I'm the one she based that opening scene on, the "broken angle," she called me -- she called me that from the first day when I talked with her. I found her a bit forward, but I never doubted that she was going to do this play, and do it just the way she wanted it done. Actually, no, they were never supposed to move, but now they can, thanks to Citizen Signet. Oh, I've had many offers -- which is good, given the way things have been going. My life is changed.

SIGNET

Did they like the play, Balkis?

BALKIS

In the beginning, standing in the courtyard waiting to get in, buzz-buzz, you know -- elites over there chattering away, the "salt of the earth" somewhat stunned by it all, most of them used to no more than jolly songs and rip-farting farces. Hard to say what was readily changeable.

SIGNET

But during it --

Lights come up on SILL and the actors.

SILL

They gasped.

SIGNET

Did they?

SILL

As if their lungs had collapsed.

SPUR

I heard sobbing from where I was on the stage.

SIGNET

Sobbing --

ANZAC

I smelled fear and release swirling off the
loges.

SIGNET

They were raked.

BALKIS

Even the elites couldn't ignore anymore.

SIGNET

And after?

GRIG

Much can happen to a soul in three hours, Signet.

CINCHONA

Their hands burned in applause.

CICISBEO

Their eyes steamed.

SILL

Signet, their hearts changed.

SIGNET

How?

SILL

Who knows? Who cares? Every new direction is a
new direction.

OLEAGE enters. Lights are now up to full. BALKIS joins SILL and the
actors. SIGNET stands alone.

OLEAGE

Congratulations, on behalf of the President.

SIGNET

I am sure he had a more comfortable seat than I did.

OLEAGE

For which he apologizes.

SIGNET

I have been dealt quite enough of his admiration.

OLEAGE

He wanted me to convey his gratitude at your having created exactly the art the people needed.

SIGNET

When all else fails, I suppose, let us tell the truth.

OLEAGE

Or at least a truth -- one that convinces people that they have heard the truth. It's a fairly exchangeable commodity, wouldn't you say?

SIGNET

Not to me.

OLEAGE

That statement in itself is not entirely true -- but in the afterglow we can let that pass. Of course, in thirty years, people may remember how this play felt to them -- they may talk about what it was like to be at its premiere -- even those who were never there but who want to borrow glory! -- but in thirty years no one will be moved by it. Now is the time to enjoy the moment when a society admits that it has grown up enough -- grown humble enough -- to accept its blemishes as the trumpets of its redemption. You -- the people's voice -- take your rewards now! Which brings me to a pleasant duty. The President is having a dinner in your honor, and I am here to invite you to his table. He is full of praise for what you have done. Will you join him?

SIGNET exchanges a look with SILL, and then the others.

SIGNET

Yes. I will join him.

OLEAGE exits, followed by SIGNET, who does not look back. SILL and the others look at each other. CINCHONA and CICISBEO take pencils out of their pockets and break them in half. Lights to black.