

BACK MATTER

The Stars: An Aristophanic Comedy

By Daniel Galef

The stage is slightly inclined to the left. The main curtain is blue with white stars, the second a light yellow. Others might include a light blue, for a sunny outdoor sky on Earth, possibly with clouds, and a crater-pocked moon set. Otherwise, the stage is bare.

*Prologue. The **Koryphaios of Stars**, Sirius, enters stage left to center and addresses the audience. He is dressed as all the other stars are dressed, in a pseudo-Greek robe or wrap, with a golden spiky halo. The Koryphaios's robe is white. His halo is slightly larger than all of the others. He wears theatrical boots, and, all in all, resembles Aristophanes in appearance.*

Koryphaios: Good evening. It is our delight tonight to present this rediscovered treasure of Aristophanic Old Comedy. As a special treat, to add to the production authenticity, tonight's performance will be delivered entirely in the original Greek.

He bows and walks off left, only to pause just behind the wall, barely visible, whispering frantically with someone just off, perhaps another star. He is angry or frustrated, but, wheeling around and returning to center, he beams through gritted teeth.

Koryphaios: Excuse me: It seems that none of the cast knows any Greek. I hope English will suffice.

He walks off left.

Curtain. A series of tubes and ropes dangles across the stage from the eaves down across and off right. A series of loud clomps emanates from off right, and, with each, the catenary is disturbed and moves in. As Didi walks on, it is wound in, so that it does not ever become looser or dangle low.

Xanthias *sprints out from off right, stops center right and catches his breath, hands on knees, panting. He recovers, turns and shouts off as the clomping continues.*

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.

Xanthias: I doubt you'll get too far in something quite so cumbersome, why, just the other night,

you slept in that contraption just to prove
you found that thing so loathsome to remove.

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.

Xanthias: I really think we might proceed with haste
a little better if you didn't waste
so long in trying to see where you were going
and took that damned thing off

Didi *clomps on. He is in full standard diving dress, waving his arms wildly out in front of him and stumbling as if blind. His initial speech is inaudible, but he doesn't realize this until Xanthys's frantic motions make it apparent.*

Didi: Mmm Hmm Hm Hmfmm Fmm-Hmm Hm Hm-Hm!

Xanthias: . . . Your arse is showing. [*Indeed it is, as his overlarge diving-trousers are invisible and inaccessible from the front, and he waves about a bit before giving up and removing his helmet. He looks like Dionysos.*]

Didi: Cut out the poetry nonsense. This isn't glee club. We'll never get up into space if I'm locked in this strongbox of a suit. Now help me out of this thing.

Xanthias obliges, and Didi is comically wrestled out of the contraption, falling down at least twice in the process, getting angry at Xanthias and hitting him at least twice, one of the times falling down because of hitting Xanthias, and possibly even once Didi hitting Xanthias, who, lifting arms in defense, drops beach-ball-sized iron diving helmet on Didi's toe, causing Didi to bulge eyes and hop on one foot while still with canvas or oilcloth trousers around his ankles, quickly catching foot and falling comically forward on face. Or not. Note: All above occurs in first half of undressing phase. After climax of falling on face, farce ends and he is further undressed with Xanthias' aid. It becomes slowly apparent as the diving outfit is removed that underneath it Didi is wearing his familiar getup from The Frogs — cumbersome theatrical boots and a fur piece over a light yellow robe. Xanthias expresses surprise.

Xanthias: [*removing something while convoluted so that his head is under D's arm*] O Zeus, an ozeus!

- Didi: Well I've hardly had time to *bathe* since this all began.
- Xanthias: *[as the full costume is finally revealed]* This all looks a bit familiar. What are you dressed like that for? I thought we were going up to space, to see the stars and meet the gods.
- Didi: We *are*. Don't you know anything? What's the most important thing about space for the tourist to know?
- Xanthias: Which way's up?
- Didi: No! There ain't no air way up in space. *[Knocks on the side of the resounding helmet twice]* It would all float away, you see?
- Xanthias: What? You mean there's no atmosphere? Like at Gert's? But then, what does the sun burn in?
- Didi: I don't know, probably ether or something. Don't you get it? Think, why don't you! It would all just dissipate in a second, *whoooooosh!* So, if ever there was air in space, it's gone now. And if there is any now, there won't be ere long! And the gravity ain't much either, hence the weighted boots. They came free with the rest of the deep-sea stuff.
- Xanthias: *[grudgingly accepting the explanation, but uncertain, unconvinced, and suspicious]* Alright, but then what's the rest of that getup for? What's with that fur piece?
- Didi: *[not believing his ears at the ignorance of his fellow]* Have you any idea of how *cold* it is in space?
- Xanthias: *[not defeated, but being convinced]* Okay, I guess. And the sheik's robe, in buttercup?
- Didi: *[in precisely the same tone and pacing]* Have you any idea of how hot it is near a star? You've got to take a tip from desert folk—they know how to deal with real heat, wear long light flowing robes to deal with the temperatures. You gotta pick a color that'll reflect what the thing put out, and what color is the sun?

Didi [*pedantically and condescendingly*] cum Xanthias [*grudgingly*]: *Yellow.*

Xanthias: So why don't I have any of that stuff?

Didi: Once we're up in space, there won't be any gravity to the situation, so I reckon I won't really be needing you to carry my stuff.

Xanthias: But how are we going to get to space, anyhow?

Didi: [*beaming: he's been waiting for this question to be asked*] Up! We go up, up, and further up! Where are the stars in the heavens? Where do the gods live? Up in the sky!

Xanthias: [*knowingly and contradictorily*] No, the gods live on Olympus. It's a mountain. I read about it once.

Didi: [*adjectivally and adverbially*] And what is a mountain but *up*? I tell you, I've been places you haven't, talked to *real* clever boffins and eggheads in the best academies and lyceums around.

Xanthias: [*with genuine curiosity*] And?

Didi: Oh, they're bonkers, every one. But I did meet a star-gazer, Roman chap, who pointed out Jupiter, and Venus, and Mars, and Mercury, and they were all stars in the sky. The way I figure, find a tall enough mountain and just walk up. None of that shooting yourself up in a flying bomb nonsense. After all, the higher you go, the closer you are to space, and that's all there really is to it, isn't it?

Xanthias: I guess . . . [*unsure, trying to find some fault*]

Didi: He told me, "*ad astra, per aspera.*" [*He mimics the astronomer in badly faked Cockney.*]

Xanthias: I thought you said there weren't any air.

Didi: Eh, he couldn't know everything. Highly specialized field, you know. Anyway, I asked, and he told me where to find the highest mountain around, and that's why we're here. See, there it is, right over that way.

Xanthias: Where? I don't see anything.

Didi: *[pointing] There.*

Xanthias: Oh, I see now. It was behind a bush.

They begin walking in place to the left "up" the incline, while stage lights of varying spot sizes and colors continually sweep right at roughly walking pace or a bit quicker. If the entire stage has been set up on jacks, gradually raise the left side to increase the incline and "get higher up the mountain." Of course, it probably isn't on jacks, so don't.

There is some silence for perhaps a minute, as the audience becomes accustomed with the characters' manners through their gait. Didi is stupid, headstrong, overconfident, pedantic, and oafish, while Xanthias is subservient, defiant, thick, surprisingly astute on occasion, low, base, logical, and vulgar. Neither is exactly intelligent, but Didi seems likely to know more, yet make assumptions on little knowledge, and Xanthias seems likely to be generally ignorant, yet think linearly, not jump to conclusions, and (extremely thickheadedly) follow a statement to a conclusion. There may also be some visual or physical humor during the walk up the mountain.

Presently, they tire, and the lights slow as they do.

Xanthias: So why are we going to space at all?

Didi: Terrible thing. Terrible, terrible thing. They don't want me here. I've been banished.

Xanthias: Banished? Really? What did you do?

Didi: Oh, who even remembers anymore! It was so long ago, and she had another sister . . .

Xanthias: So what happened?

Didi: It's all a bit fuzzy, now. Everyone wrote my name on a fur hat, and then I was kicked out. And that was that.

Xanthias: A fur hat?

- Didi: That's right. Everyone wrote my name on an astrakhan.
- Xanthias: You could go somewhere else. Sparta. Thebes. Montreal.
- Didi: No, you don't *understand!* *Everyone* voted me out. I'm exiled from everywhere! From Earth! I've been shrunk to the size of an ostrich!
- Xanthias: You've wh —
- Didi: I've been ostrich-sized! I can no longer stay here on Earth! And she was such a nice Gaia, too! Now my only hope is to go and plead with the gods in person. I'll go to the heavens, hop from star to star, planet to asteroid, until I can return home! I'll start by visiting the Sun.
- Xanthias: You can't visit the sun! Canary dressing gown or no, it's far too hot and bright to get anywhere near!
- Didi: Oh, so now you're an astrophysicist, are you? What, do you think I'm some sort of idiot? I'll go at night.

*Didi sulks and keeps walking. Suddenly, the two come upon a stone fortification or city wall, with guard-house atop. I.e., it comes upon them, as it is slid toward them at the rate they walk "up" the "mountain." It is probably Styrofoam, or some such rot. Perched on top of it is an **Owl** with a helmet and pike.*

- Didi: Hullo! What's this?
- Owl: Whooo?!
- Didi: I'm Dionysus, and this is Xanthias.
- Owl: Whooo?! Whooo?!
- Didi: I've been exiled from the Earth, and we're off to see the stars and meet the gods, or vice-versa. Sort of a weekend holiday.
- Owl: Whooo cooks for yooooo?! Whooo?! Whooo?! Whooo cooks for yooooo?!

- Didi: Funny sort of question, if you ask me. Well, I guess you did ask me. He does. [*pointing at Xanthias*] He's my valet.
- Owl: A valet in the mountains? Don't be ridiculous!
- Didi: Oho what a stroke come you not to the rescue! So, you can speak, after all! That whoo whoo whoo business was all Greek to me.
- Owl: What business have you at the gates of the City of the Birds?
- Didi: I say, we've left the earth behind and climbed right through the clouds! But City of Birds?
- Owl: [*who is joined as he speaks by a Loon on the battlements*] Yes, this is our City. And of you can't state your business or move along, I'll have the buzzards peck out your liver. And don't for a second think I won't! We've done it to Titans, so it would be child's play to do it to a man like you!
- Didi: I may not look like it, but in fact [*pulling himself up to a slightly fuller height and puffing out his chest, revealing a not-invisible gut*] I am the god of this entire Festival. I am Dionysos, god of wine.
- Owl: Do you care much for usque?
- Didi: Not particularly, no.
- Owl: No wonder. In Rome, Bacchus just adores the stuff. Of course, in Rome, everyone loves usque. Have you been to one of their orgies?
- Loon: [*looking out at audience*] I say, no wonder everyone's so drunk! This is *your* festival? I wouldn't watch this rubbish for a second if I weren't in it! They must be too plastered to notice that Dionysos and his festival have nothing at all to do with space or planets.
- Xanthias: I don't know about that. I was stumbling around last night after that Monty Python flick, and I fell into a crater.
- Owl: Enough! Depart, or your death will be slow and painful to you, painfully

boring to onlookers.

Xanthias: Say, here's a thought, couldn't the birds take us up further? You know, they've got those wings and all

Didi: Shut up, you turkey, you booby, you tit, you rat bustard! Do you want to get us killed? Do you want to — say, that *is* a good idea. Could you do it?

Owl: [*thinking*] Well . . . no, no, sorry. [*to Xanthias*] You, perhaps, but the heavy one [*Didi once again sucks in his gut*], it would have to be a job for the tube-nosed sea birds. And we just don't have the fuel for them.

Didi: You mean

Owl: That's right: We're all out of petrel. And you can't just fly up there on a lark.

Didi: Well there's no use crowing about it.

Xanthias: There's no use grouching about it, either.

Didi: [*annoyed he hadn't thought of that one*] Um, or, um, or . . . rantin' and raven about it?

Xanthias, Owl, and Loon pretend not to hear and embarrassedly look away so as not to be seen with bad poker faces; Didi himself immediately regrets the pun and looks at his feet, hunched. Owl, remembering himself, regains his lost verve.

Owl: Is that it, then, or should I call for the joy buzzards?

Didi: Oh no, please, carrion without us.

Everyone nods, satisfied. Didi has redeemed himself. He beams, once again enthusiastic and resolute.

Didi: Listen: We're no bother to you. We've come far too far to turn about, and killing us would only give your noble buzzards indigestion. Trust me. Give us safe passage through your city and above, and we'll put in a

good word for you with the Big Guy.

Owl: *[interested, but trying not to appear so]* You don't mean . . . Zeus? Here in the clouds, we're more than a little bit at his mercy. . .

A triple flash or strobe of white light and a deep rumble.

Didi: I meant Silenus, but Zeus is fine, too. To be fair, I'm much more familiar with Ol' Silly, and he is a *much* "bigger" guy that Thunderbolts-up-the-Wazoo in the fancy throne.

Owl: *[absently]* Is *that* where he keeps them . . .

Didi: So: How about it?

Owl: Why can't you just get to space in the normal way? You know: With a launch pad and technicians and boosters and a big ol' interplanetary rowboat.

Didi: Rowboat? You mean rocket?

Owl: Of course not! You'd fall in.

A pause.

Didi: Oh please, let us through! They'll kill me if I went back to Athens! Plus, why would I want to go back there, where the politicians spend all their time kissing hands and shaking babies, where the War has been going on for so long that the Spartan mothers have run clean out of shields for their sons to come home on, where the judges at the Dionysia are so corrupt or tasteless that Galephion hasn't won once—why would I want all that when I could live in the sky, and be among such heroes as Orion and that broad keeping the lion away from those scales he's trying to get at.

Everyone looks at him as if he suddenly sprouted a second of something most people probably should have only one of.

Didi: What? The astronomer chap told me. "Just follow the arc to Arcturus,

then speed on to Spica.” *[Didi employs the same over-the-top Cockney as before]*

Owl: The Auk? Well, why didn’t you *say* so!? He’s right over here. Here, come inside, why don’t you!

The gates are opened, and the two walk through. The scene changes to the City of the Birds. It looks like a city. Everyone is a bird. Simple stuff.

*The Owl and the Loon (to right) are introducing Didi and Xanthias (center) to the Head of the Castle Guard, a **Rook** (left). He is in similar guardly costume as they, with a helmet and pike, with the exception being that his helmet has a single feather plume. He is flanked by two more guards, a **Kiwi** and a **Cuckoo**.*

Rook: *What!?* Humans!? Are you a cuckoo!?

Cuckoo: Hey!

Rook: I apologize—are you a loon!?

Loon: Excuse me!

Rook: Sorry, sorry—don’t you remember what happened *last* time? Why did you let them in here?

Owl: They were pestering us. Being very annoying.

Rook: Why didn’t you let the buzzards on them?

Owl: I had, ah, a hunch. That they would just give them indigestion.

Rook: *[looking over the two]* Yes, perhaps you’re right. But that’s still no reason to let them into the city. Who are they?

Didi: *[stepping forward]* Dionysos and Xanthias. With, uh, the Hellenic Space Program. We merely request safe passage through your city, Your Flightiness.

Rook: *[sighing]* Listen, I’m just a rank and file guy, okay, but I’ll see if I can put

you through to the Mayor. You'll have to talk to him.

Didi: *[relieved that he's finally met with someone reasonable]* Thank you!

Rook: Meanwhile, of course, I'll have to keep you here in the jail. Can't have you wandering about the city. I'll put you in cell number five if it's free. You'll have some nice newspaper and a perch attached to the wall. At seven, the guard will come around with a cuttlebone. In fact, I'll have you escorted there now. *[over his shoulder]* Toucan, take the prisoners to number five!

*As the **Toucan** steps on from left, Didi becomes speechless with despair and betrayal and outrage. He opens and shuts his mouth a few times, then calls frantically and incoherently after the Rook as he leaves left. Meanwhile, as the Toucan crosses center to cuff them and take them away off right, and the Owl and the Loon file out left behind the other two guards, a respectful distance behind their supervisor, without so much as a look at the two humans. Only Xanthias retains his wits about him.*

Xanthias: *[nervously babbling and oblivious to the pun]* Don't be silly. We're no threat! Why, even *one* of you, with your saber beaks and meat-hook talons, is *more* than a match for we two measly humans.

Toucan: Very funny, but I'll have you know we tropicals don't take as kindly as the temperates to rude remarks. I'm a bird of paradise, you know.

Didi: *[recovering, and perking up at this]:* Really? Do you have them on you? I'll roll you for our freedom.

Toucan: Graaaaaaaaawwwwwxx!

They are led off right in chains. Fade out, and then in on a cell. A wall of bars is in front of the two humans. The Toucan's gone. Didi and Xanthias are sitting on the ground, not looking at each other, but not actually away either. Just listless. Finally, Didi speaks up.

Didi: Well, I don't know about you, but I'm not staying in this coop for one second longer than I have to!

Xanthias: *[looking at the bars]* You mean we don't have to stay?

Didi: Of course not! The birdcage hasn't been built that can hold Dionysos, Lord of Bibblers, and Xanthias, his plucky human sidekick.

Xanthias: I ain't your sidekick, I'm your valitt!

Didi: You're *invalitt*, is what you are. Come on, then! I think I see a sawbill approaching!

*The **Sawbill** comes on from left and crosses right. The stage is level, but the two call down to him, as if he is on the street and they above at a barred gaol window. He speaks up to them, and both project as if the other is maybe twenty feet off. The effect can be aided with a little initial squinting and pointing to see the passerby.*

Didi: Hey! Hey you! That's right, you!

Sawbill: Hmmmf?

Didi: I couldn't help but notice that wonderfully attractive beak you've got there.

Sawbill: Why, thank you!

Didi: And I was wondering if perhaps you could come a bit closer, so we could see it more clearly.

Sawbill: Well, I don't see why not — wait a minute! You're *jailbirds*! You could be murderers or vandals or thieves!

Didi: I assure you we won't be robin anything of yours; we're here for check kiting.

Sawbill: I knew a kite once, but he was a Slovak.

Didi: Besides, we've been so kind, and complimented that unfathomably ugly schnozz of yours!

Sawbill: Yes, well, I suppose one good tern deserves another.

He approaches the bars. As he does so, Didi leaps over Xanthias and to the edge, thrusting

his arms out the bars to the shoulder and grabbing hold of the sawbill's neck.

Didi: *[to Xanthias]* Duck!

He files through the bars in no time, and tosses the Sawbill aside to regain his composure, clutching his beak and moaning.

Sawbill: *[still clutching his beak, and speaking as if with his nose shut]* J u z d
loog ad da dabbage you've gauzed! Ad id'll all go od by bill!

Xanthias: *[clambering out after Didi]* Why, we're as free as a —

Didi: *[hastily]* Don't say it! Now, let's fly!

*They dash off left, i.e., the bars and the sawbill are slid off right as the two dash, and the stage lights sweep right at the same speed. They soon come upon a **Pigeon** with a tablet and stylus. He is raggedy-looking, and has a cup set out before him for change. He marks their approach, but is clearly blind. He has a big beard. The set is a city street, with doorways and a tall iron lamppost.*

Pigeon: You there! You look like tasteful folk! Wanna hear some Great Litcher?

Xanthias: We're over here.

Pigeon: Of course you are, of course you are! Anyway, how about it?

Didi: Actually, we're just coming here from the Dionysian mysteries, so —

Pigeon: Pah! Well, it's all the same with that rot, so I can tell you right now: The butler did it.

Didi looks at Xanthias accusingly.

Pigeon: Anywho! *[Didi and Xanthias look frantically around for the owl]* Allow me to introduce myself! I am Homer . . . a pigeon, you know. *[sticking out his wing to shake hands, but in the wrong place entirely]*

Xanthias: Still over here.

Pigeon: *[groping for Didi's face, and feeling it over roughly, then moving onto his arm]* Right, right! Right over . . . *here*, and just itching to hear the fodder of the Western Canon! Hm, funny sort of wing that is . . .

Didi: That's my neck. I'm an ostrich. Well, I'm size of one, anyway . . . And I don't care if you've got the mutter *and* fodder of the Western Canon, I'm not about to be shot out of it by some two-bit bard.

Pigeon: *[taken aback; gravely insulted, but spiteful]* I'll have you know, a poet *never* mutters! And if you're looking for someone barred, talk to an owl.

Didi: We've already *been* barred from the entire planet! And that Owl was no use at all!

Xanthias: *[interjecting in hopes of restoring some sense]* We're looking for the Auk. He's going to take us into space.

Didi: *[as if remembering for the first time]* Oh, is *that* what we're doing . . . I'd forgotten.

Pigeon: Certainly, certainly! Just follow me! *[He walks into a lamppost, stumbles back, and touches his forelock before moving on]* Pardon me, madame! My deepest apologies!

*Didi and Xanthias look at each other, shrug, and follow, each in turn ploughing into the lamppost and walking on, to the left. The post slides away, and soon one of the doors is stopped at. Suddenly, a **red thing** with feathers all about its feet comes crashing out one of the doorways with a bottle in hand, shouts back into the doorway: So's yer mother! and stumbles off right.*

Didi: *What was that!?*

Pigeon: That? Why, that's just a martlet. You get them a lot around these academic quarters. Little red things, like swallows. Spend most of their time drinking and sleeping through lectures. Anyway, here we are: the office of Professor C. P. Auk, BS, PhD, QED, Most Honorable Lecturer in Aeronautics and Ballooning and Chair Emeritus of the Department of Astronomy. The learn'd astronomer hisself.

He holds out his hand, as if for change. Didi grasps it and shakes vigorously, before striding through the doorway without a look back. Xanthias shrugs and follows close behind. Fade. Unfade. A study, with all sorts of brass instruments laying about. Telescopes, astrolabes, etc., atop unruly heaping piles of charts and calculations. Sitting on the largest pile of papers is the Auk. Didi and Xanthias have already sat down upon smaller stacks. A conversation is obviously already underway.

Auk: Impossible! Absolutely impossible!

Didi: [*desperately*]: But —

Auk: No! Simply can't be done, and that's all there is to it! Virgo is out of your league and she knows it! [*Didi looks crestfallen*] Of course, I can get you up into space as easy as pie.

Didi: Really?

Auk: Of course! I can get you as far as the moon in my balloon, and you can make your own way from there to the sun. Now, normally, this would be quite undoable, because the moon and the sun are about 150,000,000 kilometers away from each other.

Didi: [*to Xanthias*] Quick, how many stadia is that?

Auk: [*ignoring or not hearing the interruption*] However, today, there's an eclipse, which means they'll be right on top of each other! A stroke of luck, what! Naturally, we'll have to pile into the balloon immediately or risk missing the eclipse. The next total solar eclipse visible from Greece isn't for . . . let's see. Ever. This is the last one. Or maybe my chart just ends.

They all scramble to prepare to blast off: Xanthias begins frantically gathering his bindles and bundles from where they're scattered, Didi is welsh-combing his hair into the polished brass surface of the sun in a small clockwork orrery, and Auk is getting together armfuls of trajectories and figures and instruments. Presently, they all pile into the balloon basket that descends from the eaves at the hauling down of a robe by Auk. With the release of a catch, they're off, up and away from the stage by deus ex machina, and fade. Unfade on the basket dangling about center stage and about five feet off the stage. The lights are gently gliding continuously downward, indicating an ascent, and, as the scene goes on, the base

*lights gradually transition from a sky blue to a midnight, as they escape the atmosphere. If a fog machine is possible, it is recommended. A gauzy girl, **Koryphaios of Clouds**, floats down on harness, and greets our balloonists.*

Koryphaios: [airily] Can I help you?

Didi: No, you cannot, and I'll tell you what's more: You're in the wrong play!

Koryphaios: Well, I never . . . ! [*Floats off*]

Auk: Ah, look! The stars are coming out!

*And indeed they are. **The Chorus**, including the Koryphaios of Stars, emerges from either side on the platform above the stage, the lights dim overall (though they should be fairly starry-nightish by now, anyway), and the spots open onto them, and the three mortals look up at them as the Parabasis begins.*

The Chorus of Stars' dress varies, but maintains the same overall effect: theatrical boots, a floor-length, pseudo-Greek robe, and a golden spiky halo of light behind the head. The robes vary in colors as the colors of stars, e.g., blue, yellow, white, red, but not bright primary colors—rather light tints. The robes are either iridescent of their own right or are covered in little sequins that catch the spots.

Koryphaios: THE PARABASIS!

Chorus: [ponderously, with harmonizing] I went out to the theater at Epidermis;
I despised it: it really got under my skin,
and as soon as the goats wandered out for the Chorus,
I decided I'd leave before it could begin.

What's become of the theater since it was made,
that it stinks to Olympus with every new show?
What's with every new "hit" that, as soon as it's played,
just makes the whole audience get up and go?

They'll see tragedy (if it's got buckets of blood),
and some comedy's fine (just as long as there's sex),
but what is it with lit'ture, whose name is still mud,
that means no one will bother to stick out their necks?

What is drawing the Romans to their colosseum,
and what's dragging the Greeks to Olympics and sports?
If rich playwrights still live, I for one cannot see 'em.
I'll take *one* decent writer: in a storm, any port.

The Chorus files off to either side, the spots close, and the lights return to normal dark night. Didi dares to open one eye and take his hands off his ears.

Didi: O Zeus, is it over? I think it's finally over.

Xanthias: Those stars certainly seemed to have strong opinions about the theater.

Didi: Probably movie stars. Did you see those sequined gowns? Typical.

Auk: Here we are! The moon!

The basket alights, and Didi and Xanthias deballoon.

Didi: *That's one small step for man . . .* but I'm a god, so it really isn't a big deal.

Xanthias: I think I'll just stay in the landing module. What's this balloon called?

Auk: The *Eagle*.

Didi: Nonsense! If you don't come with me, who will carry all my stuff? You think I'm going to spend the rest of my life in the heavens without my things?

Xanthias: They say you can't take it with you.

Didi: I know that, which is why *I* won't; *you* will.

He hauls Xanthias out of the basket.

The basket rises again, and the heroes wave as Auk, also waving a handkerchief, floats up and away above the stage and is hauled into the eaves.

Didi: Thank you very much, Professor! I can sincerely say that I have never

seen such a quantity of hot air in my entire life!

Auk: Naturally, naturally!

He is gone.

Didi: Alright, it's nearly time. We'd better make our way over that ridge before the eclipse begins. We're on the dark side. And let's try not to run into Artemis, shall we?

They go left, up the ridge. Once over, the lights are up, white, and steadily get brighter and yellower as the sun approaches. Finally, the eclipse begins, which apparently means the sun and moon are next to each other. A yellow curtain is slowly pulled on from left, and now, only the right half of the stage is white, starry, and lunar, while the left half is yellow, solid, and solar. They cross over. Again, as they walk, the curtain resumes its motion and pulls until it is the background, and the moon is behind.

Didi: Well, I told you it'd be hot. *[He throws the fur piece out into the audience, dons a pair of large black sunglasses, and draws a stripe of opaque, white sun-block down his nose.]* Look! Over there! *[Off left]* I think I see someone!

The Sun *glides gracefully and elegantly on from left. Her robe is yellow, and she possesses a delicate and radiant beauty, as well as impeccable manners.*

The Sun: I am Sol, Lady of this System, and of the nine — sorry, eight planets. Wherefore disturbest thou my divine serenity?

A noise.

Sun: Excuse me! *[She blushes.]* Solar wind.

Didi: What about the gods? I thought they ruled everything. Are you saying those spheres *[gestures to the eaves]* are the gods?

Sun: Sort of. They're planets, and while, on Earth, Hermes, Aphrodite, and Ares are all children of Zeus, and Poseidon and Hades are his brothers, Kronos his father, Gaia and Ouranos *his* parents, and Apollo and Artemis, or sometimes Hyperion and Selene, various cousins, on the grand scale,

it's not quite so complicated. I'm not Apollo or Hyperion: I'm a star. And all of those others, Gaia included, are equal and under my governance.

Didi: I can see, all up there running little circles forever. Seem a bit boring. They don't look anything like their statues. Why, just look at Venus. Not particularly attractive at all, if you ask me.

Xanthias: I think that's Jupiter. He looks a little gassy.

Didi: So *he's* the same. What about all his lovers, going about him like that? Do they always do that?

Sun: Yup. And always will. The planets don't have quite so many . . . *antics* as the gods they're named after. Not that they aren't plenty interesting in their own right.

Didi: What about Earth? Where are we? When we're not here, I mean.

Sun: See over there, that little dot? That's it. Earth. The Big Blue Marble.

Xanthias: Not much of a marble, really. I used to have a bully-taw ten times better, and it didn't bulge out in the middle like that.

Didi: Yes, she's really letting the old equator get a bit loose, isn't she?

Sun: I have heard that you wish to meet the assembled stars.

Didi: Yes, I did, but then I heard them sing.

Sun: They probably won't do that again. But if you ever want to get back home, to be released from exile, they're the only ones that can make that happen.

Didi: But what about the gods? I could make a sacrifice . . .

Sun: And when was the last time you heard about a sacrifice being answered at all, let alone promptly and efficiently, before you froze to death or starved to death in the vastness of space?

Didi: How could I freeze to death here on the sun?

Sun: What about nighttime?

Didi: All right, I'll grant you that. And I also probably should have brought along some food. But what can you stars do to help me?

As they speak, the Chorus, looking just as before, file onto the raised shelf and begin chanting inaudibly until their dialogue.

Sol: You forget: Besides governing the gods themselves, the stars command mankind directly: When was the last time you heard someone say that some desired outcome was or wasn't "in the stars"? What does every person do, first thing in the morning as they pick up the newspaper?

Didi: Why, they read their horoscope!

Sun: Precisely! And when the moon is in the seventh house, and Jupiter's passed through Orion and come into conjunction with Mars, they think nothing at all of taking as law the instruction to avoid long journeys over water. After all, who would know better about that than we stars?

Didi: Brilliant!

Sun: So it would be child's play to arrange for the citizens of Athens to realize, due to the arrangement of the heavens, that exiled . . . what did you do?

Didi whispers to her. Her eyes slowly widen.

Sun: *Really?* Well, it might not be easy . . . but we'll try. That exiles . . . like yourself must be recalled immediately and forgiven, in order to avoid some vague astronomical peril or natural disaster. Hmm. How do meteors sound?

Didi: *Exquisitely threatening, yet unpredictable.*

Sun: [*satisfied*] Good. Ah, it looks like everyone's arrived. [*to the Chorus*] This is Dionysos and Xanthias. They are two humans who seek a favor of the Stars.

Koryphaios: *[stepping slightly forward; he is in the center of the ridge]* Greetings, mortals. I am Sirius.

Xanthias: Well I can see *that*. One could hardly believe you're kidding around with a mug like yours.

Didi: *[hitting Xanthias]* Don't mind him, Your Shininess! Feel free to maroon him on some remote asteroid. But please, help me, I beg of you!

Koryphaios: Watch your tongue, the both of you. Now: What have you to ask of the Council of Stars?

Didi: I wish a recall from ostrich-siz — from ostricissiz — a recall from exile, Your Twinkliness, and the forgiveness of my people.

Xanthias: Wait a minute! I thought you said you didn't like it back in Athens one bit!

Didi: Yes, well, that was before I found out it was possible to get back. Sour apples, you know. Now I just want that silly exile lifted.

Koryphaios: What is your offense?

Sol whispers to him. His eyes slowly widen.

Koryphaios: That may take . . . some doing. Some might say your actions are unforgivable.

Polaris: Oi! As if debauchery of that kind is anything new to you, you old Dog Star!

Koryphaios: Shut up, Polaris!

Polaris: Oh, like you don't remember that summer three billion years ago. Here: I'll give you a hint. You. Andromeda. *And* Qoppa Ceti B. At the beach.

Several titters, hastily covered with coughing, can be heard from various corners of the Chorus.

Koryphaios: Can't you see I'm doing the big fiery judge bit for the humans?

Xanthias: Oh, don't mind me! I think the whole thing's very impressive!

Koryphaios: *Thank you.*

Xanthias: Especially the bit about you and Andromeda!

Koryphaios: Wuaaaugh! If I grant your request, will you leave as quickly as possible?

Didi and Xanthias look at each other.

Didi *cum* Xanthias: Sure!

Agon. Alpha Centauri A and Alpha Centauri B are identical twins, yet male and female. (It's a play.)

Alpha Centauri A: What? You can't seriously be considering granting these humans' wishes! What happened to the clockwork heavens, to the inescapability of fate? Now can every two-bit hero with two bits for the auk come up here like it's bloody Hades and make demands? *You* saw what happened to the underworld as soon as people realized that it was just over the river and through the woods! Now Herakles goes there on his morning constitutional, and poor Charon has installed a separate ferry for living stiffs on some spirit journey or other nonsense to rescue a dead lover or complete a trial of bravery or just win a bet or do a triple-dog dare with some chums at Corinth Prep. It's chaos, Sirius, and that'll happen here, too, if you start listening to the townies.

Alpha Centauri B: Don't pay any attention to my idiot brother. I'm sure that bit about Hades is a gross exaggeration.

A: They've had to put in turnstiles!

B: Anyway, where would we be if we ignored those over whom we rule? If we don't listen to humans' pleas and respond, are we any better than the gods that take sacrifice after sacrifice, then send down lightning and floods and bad playwrights because they weren't frequent enough? Plus,

it's not like we have any other interesting life in this area. Earth's may not be too clever and stop being so amusing after a hundred years or so, but, compared to those little squiggly things on Europa, they're fairly worthwhile things. I say we send them back, with word about the mercy and compassion of the universe. Maybe it would be nice if we got some sacrifices of our own!

Proxima Centauri: You mean those little golden phonograph disc things? They tasted terrible!

A: Perhaps you're forgetting, but we *do* get involved with the proles. We tell them when not to trust strangers and when a relative is coming for an unexpected visit and when it would be a good idea to be nice to people.

B: But we never tell them the right thing.

A: How does that matter? The plebs have their own lives to lead. If we were always truthful, they would start to rely on us, and we wouldn't want that, now, would we?

B: Ugh! You're beginning to sound just like *them*! All it really boils down to is this: You can leave them back on Earth in the care of Sol, here, or you can have them gallivanting around the galaxy and pestering all of us. I think I know the solution. Just lift the exile and forget about them.

Koryphaios: [*clapping his hands together and turning to the rest of the Chorus; as he speaks, the lights are dimming again . . .*] Well! That's decided, then! And it seems like a fairly significant plot point, too, rather neatly bisecting the second act, don't you think. And you know what that means . . .

Didi: [suddenly realizing just what Sirius's at] Oh gods no —

Koryphaios: THE SECOND PARABASIS!

Didi: TO HELL WITH THE SECOND PARABASIS!

Koryphaios: [*shrugs*] Well all right then. Forget it.

The lights go back up.

- Didi: *Phew.* Please, I just want to go home. Athens isn't much, but I'd grown quite fond of some of the less extreme stench. Also, I have a considerable running bet on the outcome of the War.
- Koryphaios: How much?
- Didi: Everything. I deserted the second it broke out.
- Koryphaios: Then you'll be pleased to hear some good news: You've had the power to go home all along. Just knock together the heels of your buskins and say, "There's no place like Rome!"
- Didi: *[excited]* Really?
- Koryphaios: No. Give the Council of Stars a moment to convene, to deliberate whether your request is to be granted or not.
- Didi: I thought my request was already granted.
- Koryphaios: Sort of. Your exile is lifted. But you didn't leave. And we don't know how to make you go. Frankly, I was kind of hoping that if we went away and didn't come back, you would just forget the request and go away.
- Didi: I'm not really sure I *can* go back, now. The eclipse that let us walk over is finished now, and our balloon left without us.
- Koryphaios: *[disgusted]* You flew to the *moon* in a *balloon*? That's preposterous! And anyway, I'm sure I heard it in a popular song once. By any chance was it June, and did you spoon anyone?
- Didi: Not that I recall. Did I, Xanthias?
- Xanthias: *[fluttering his eyelashes]* Well . . .
- Didi: *[interrupting]* No, I'm sure I didn't. *[Despairing]* So how am I to get back?
- Betelgeuse: *[coughing politely and attempting to interject in a small voice]* Well, if

I'm not interrupting, sir, it may be—

Koryphaios: **[barking]** Speak up, will you, Betelgeuse!

Betelgeuse: I don't perhaps think that maybe we aren't in fact possibly using just at this exact mo . . . **[with import]** The *Argo*.

Collective gasps and whispers from the Chorus of Stars.

Regulus: He is right, Sirius. The *Argo Navis* has been obsolete for over a quarter of a millennium, and is unlikely to be used again. It would only fall into disrepair, its sails shred into tatters, its hull fall to shipworms, its masts topple like the cedars of Lebanon when they built the condominium complex The Cedars of Lebanon. It would be no great loss to turn the vessel over to these travelers for one last voyage.

Didi: So it's ridiculous to balloon into space, but perfectly rational to sail back out of it?

Koryphaios: Yes, Regulus has a point. This isn't exactly a starship but it is a *star* ship.

Didi: **[stubbornly]** No. No, I'm sorry, but I just don't believe it.

Koryphaios: Well, it is generally acknowledged that it is easier to submit to gravity than escape it. All reentry is is falling, ideally as slowly as possible. And the entire method is only a slight variation of the usual method of getting around space: the interplanetary rowboat.

Didi: You mean —

Koryphaios: **[cutting him off and not hearing the end]** No, of course not, it would tip over. Anyway, take good care of her. **[Tosses Didi a set of shiny metal jangly things]** Here're the keys.

Didi catches them.

Didi: Thanks. I'll be seeing you around, I suppose, at night, mostly.

Sol clears her throat.

Didi: Or during the daytime. That's fine, too. Thanks again. Oh, I just can't wait to see what they're playing tomorrow. What about you, Xanthias? Do you think they'll do another one of those

Dialogue fades as Didi and Xanthias walk off right, Sol off left, and the chorus empty off in either direction. Only a small half-chorus remains, immediately flanking Sirius, still in the center of the Chorus platform. The lights dim as before, and the spots open on them.

Chorus: Of any work, whether play or a book,
 one word always lurks, if you know where to look.
 It is written before the author can even begin,
 and, spoken or not, it always ends:

Koryphaios: FIN.

Lights. Curtain. Exeunt omnes.

Glimpses of Antiquity: A Photo Essay

By Gemma Israelson

The following photographs are from a series taken on my gap year in 2012/2013. They were shot on 35 mm film using a Pentax point and shoot camera. They are part of a larger body of shots tied into the classical world found in Brussels, Bruges, Antwerp, Paris, Verona , Venice, Florence, Rome, Edinburgh, London, Croatia, Barcelona and Tangier.

Romulus and Remus

This photo was taken in Rome in May 2013. The image of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a she-wolf is displayed throughout the Eternal City even today, and is emblematic of the city's mythical foundation. I found this emblem covered in modern graffiti, and thought the comparison of ancient myth and culture to modern forms of anti-establishment vocalization was striking. It is duly noted that in the 21st century, Romans still identify as Romans, then Italians, then Europeans, and the constant repetition of the she-wolf thorough out the city reiterates this. It also serves as a symbol of the Roman Empire's former persona, as life-giving but fierce and powerful at the same time. Overall, this image functions as a link between the ancient and modern world.



Pluto and Proserpina

This is a photograph of a bronze cast statue of *Pluto and Proserpina* from approximately 1565-1570. It was made in Italy and is accredited to the sculptor Vincenzo de Rossi and now resides in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London as part of their permanent collection. It depicts the rape of Proserpina at the moment of her abduction by Pluto. The grey-green light that was coming through the skylights on this typical London day seemed to emulate the greenish tinge that the statue has taken on as the bronze oxidized. The figures are perfectly anatomically rendered and their bodies reveal a high degree of emotion, which is contrasted with the two seated people in the lower right corner, who sedately admire the works in the courtyard. Overall, this image evokes both high emotion from the work balanced with a calm sense of serenity in the museum setting.

