

XERXES AND THE VOICES FROM THE DARKNESS

Radio Drama by Magda Woitzuck

Characters

Archaeologist

Midwife

Atossa

Dareios

Young Xerxes

Amestris

Ester

Xerxes

Runner

Greek 1, Greek 2, Greek 3

Tourguide Troy

Advisor

Soldier, Sparta

Leonidas, Sparta

Goethe

Schiller

Artemisia

Officer 1, Officer 2

Murderer

Roman

Pontius Pilate

Waldseemüller

Another

Greta, the maid

Cardinal 1, Cardinal 2, Cardinal 3

Surgeon for soprano castratos

Assistant to the surgeon

Castrato's father

Dorothea Handel

Handel's father

Young George Frideric Handel

George Frideric Handel

Caffarelli

Newsman

Friedrich Nietzsche

Reginald Fessenden

Helen Fessenden

Sailor

Cast

Alina Fritsch

Regina Fritsch

Eva Mayer

Michael Smulik

Till Firit

Wolfram Berger

Director

Peter Kaizar

Dramaturgy and editing

Leonhard Koppelman

SCENE 1

Atossa, Midwife, Actors, Director, (Archäologin)

wind / music / woman singing / war reporting / gunfire / explosions

Queen Atossa is in labour, she moans and wails, keeps crying out.

Atossa: I can't take this any more!

Archaeologist: This is Atossa. Before we launch into the story: I am an archaeologist. I excavate, and an excavation is nothing else than controlled destruction.

Atossa: *(howls with pain)* I want it to stop!

Midwife: One more push! yes!

Final contractions are setting in. Atossa starts to howl.

Archaeologist: *(excited)* Now! We are witnessing a historic moment!

Midwife: A boy, my queen! You have a son!

Infant sounds, music

Announcer: Xerxes and the voices from the darkness

Radio drama by Magda Woitzuck

Archaeologist: Like I said, controlled destruction. It is our job to dig deep down into thousand year old dirt from a distant past and to take apart what used to be put together. That is all you need to know about us.

Director: Fine. We will now decide who plays which part.

Archaeologist: Ready?

Actors: Ok! Si! Yes! Yeah, sure. Let's do it ...

Archaeologist: So: Xerxes, Greek, a Man, Doubter, Cardinal, Handel's father, Castrato's father, Caffarelli, Nietzsche.

Wolfram Berger: Sure thing! All me! All me!

Michael Smulik: Xerxes? Should be someone young, vital.

Till Firit: Hush! If he wants to do it, let him.

Archaeologist: Atossa, Amestris, Handel's mother.

Regina Fritsch: I see. Well... fine. Ok.

Archaeologist: Midwife, a Woman, Greta the maid, another Maid, Artemisia, Ester, Helen Fessenden.

Eva Mayer: Oh yes! Happy to.

Archaeologist: So, what else we've got: Dareios, Riding instructor, a Friend, a Greek, Advisor, Leonidas, Goethe, Officer, Pontius Pilate, Columbus, Waldseemüller, Cardinal, Surgeon, G.F.Handel, Nietzsche, Reginald Fessenden.

Till Firit: Haha, what a list. But that's fine, I'll manage.

Archaeologist: Arto, Runner, Greek, Man, Tourguide, Soldier, Schiller, Spartan, Officer, Murderer, Roman, Vespucci, Another, Cardinal, Man, Crier, Sailor.

Michael Smulik: You could be Italian, as fast as you talk. By the way: Vespucci – sono io.

Fellow actors laughing. Studio doors being closed. Music.

Archaeologist: Right...Xerxes' mother Atossa belongs to the dynasty that ruled Persia, when Persia encompassed half the world. In this dynasty, intermarriage within the family was the rule, which is why Atossa's first husband was also her half-brother. While on campaign against the Egyptians, he learned of a plot against him. Naturally, he wanted to return home as fast as he could to take action against the plotters. He was in such a hurry that when he leapt on his horse, his sword cut into his leg, and presto, blood poisoning killed him somewhere in Syria. Well, probably not a bad thing that she did not have a child with her brother. The plot is a long story in itself, so I'll skip most of it. Suffice it to say, following her brother-husband's death, Atossa married one of the plotters, a certain Mr Gaumata, high priest of Zoroastrians. Zoroastrians, there's another long story. I should probably get a move on. Anyway, Atossa lost her brother-husband, married the high priest, who was backstabbed by Dareios, and then, well,

Dareios must have thought, hey, she's really cute, I think, I'll marry her next, and so he married her. Haha. No, of course not. This is how it really was:

SCENE 2

Atossa, Dareios, Midwife, (Archaeologist)

Atossa: So, Dareios, you little upstart. You just murdered my second husband, who also happened to be the head of our religion. You think you have what it takes to rule over the entire Persian empire? Really? The only ones able to rule this realm are people belonging to my dynasty. Why do you think I married my brother, you sandworm? So there. And there's exactly one person left in my family, and that person is I. If a parvenu like you wants to have any hope of ruling Persia peacefully, you have no choice but to marry me. From now on I will be your new principal wife.

Dareios: But, I'm married already!

Atossa: And our firstborn son shall be the next ruler of Persia.

Dareios: But, I already have three sons!

Atossa: Perhaps you should have thought about that before. Usurper!

Midwife: A boy. My queen, you have a son!

Archaeologist: (*whispering*) You recall? Xerxes!

SCENE 3

Atossa, Xerxes, (Archaeologist)

Atossa humming affectionately / baby crying.

Archaeologist: He is now 113 days old. He lies in his cradle and, in keeping with his age, is not only entirely clueless but also quite dependent on people putting breasts in his mouth and changing his diapers.

A fly starts circling the infant. Atossa swats the fly.

Archaeologist: Or on people who make sure he isn't stung by insects. Insects can be very dangerous, in particular to children back then.

(Music)

So, I have to bore you with a number: In 519 BC, Xerxes is born.

A jug shattering.

Archaeologist: Xerxes is four at this point.

Atossa: I SAID, DON'T TOUCH THAT!

Archaeologist: Here he is at the age of eight, taking riding instruction:

Clattering hooves.

Xerxes: Look!

Atossa: Hold on to the mane!

Xerxes: Mummy!

Atossa: That's it, hold on tight, I said – no, don't, don't! – It will bolt!
Xerxes! You can't hold it!

Horse bolts.

Xerxes: MUUUUUMMYYYYYYYYYY!

Dull thud as young Xerxes hits the ground.

Archaeologist: Xerxes is eleven at this point:

Xerxes: *(sad)* When will dad be home again?

Atossa: Your father has to work. He is really, really busy.

Music

Archaeologist: Dareios hasn't been home in ages. During the first years of his reign he is always on the move, subduing the revolts that spring up in almost every province in the wake of his usurpation of the throne. Egypt offers stubborn resistance, and so does the city of Babylon at the heart of his empire. The Babylonians with their tower and their god Marduk conduct themselves like one big, grumbling, raisin-picking crowd, a bit like Great Britain vis-à-vis the EU.

SCENE 4

Atossa, Xerxes, (Archaeologist)

Atossa: Would you like me to tell you what will one day be yours, my dear?

Xerxes: Oh yes, please.

Archaeologist: Starting in the capital of Susa and going round clockwise this would include present-day: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Cyprus, Egypt, Northern Sudan, the Libyan coast, parts of Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, parts of Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and of course the heartland, Iran.

Xerxes: And all that will one day be mine?

Atossa: Yours alone.

Archaeologist: To this day, it remains one of the largest empires of all time.

Atossa: And that's why your father is always on the road.

Xerxes: Is that why he's building so many roads and bridges? And the palaces? (*construction noise*) I love palaces. I love bridges.

SCENE 5

Atossa, Xerxes

Atossa: Your father makes sure there's a proper infrastructure. And you, my son will make his realm even larger.

Xerxes: (*concerned*) But what if I fail?

Atossa: I'll make sure you are well prepared.

Xerxes: But what if I disappoint father?

Atossa: Hush. You can't think that way.
It will be your name that will echo through the millennia. Xerxes!

Music / war reporting / explosions / gunfire / fighter jet

SCENE 6

Runner, Greek 1, 2, 3, (Archaeologist)

Archaeologist: Everything started when the Persians decided they should invade Greece, because – (*interrupts herself, thinks*) really long and complicated story, that. It ends in a public square in Athens, more or less like this:

Athens, somebody approaching at a run, completely spent

Greek 1: Oh, the messenger with news from the front.

Runner: Gentle ... men ... gentle ... men ... we ...
have ... defeated...the Persians!

The runner collapses, concerned muttering.

Greek 2: What' wrong with him? Is he ill?

Greek 1: No, apparently he ran!

Greek 3: From Marathon?! The whole way?!

Greek 1: Is he crazy?

Greek 2: Why didn't he ride a horse?

Greek 1: Maybe he's allergic to horses.

Greek 3: Or they were out of horses, after the battle.

Greek 1: He doesn't know how to ride.
Greek 2: Doesn't like horses.
Greek 3: Running from Marathon to Athens, that's going to go down in history. They'll still be laughing about that in a hundred years.
Please, get the fool a drink!
Greek 2: Too late! He's dead!

Music

Archaeologist: The Persians lose the battle of Marathon but aren't prepared to take this lying down, starting what will later be referred to as the Greco-Persian Wars. Let me put it this way: rather heavy going.

Music

SCENE 7

Dareios, Atossa, Xerxes, (Archaeologist)

Archaeologist: Xerxes, meanwhile, has turned 33.

Dareios breathing heavily.

Dareios: The end is near, Atossa.
Atossa: (*tenderly*) I'll have them bring tea.
Dareios: Tea? What good is tea against death!
Atossa: Solace, my darling.
Dareios: I am sorely afraid.
Atossa: You have nothing to fear, Dareios. Do you hear the thunder? It is the gods making room for you at their banqueting table.

Music and tears

Archaeologist: Dareios dies.

Well, that's all very sad. But the world doesn't stop turning, just because a ruler dies –

Music

Atossa: I am proud of you my son. Xerxes, Lord of heroes
Xerxes: I will do everything in my power not to bring disgrace on my father.
Atossa: Your father is dead, my son.
Xerxes: (*plaintive*) Yes, mother.
Atossa: What I am trying to say: You have to rule for the future. If you keep looking back, you run the risk of stepping off a precipice.
Xerxes: (*irritably*) Yes, mother.
Archaeologist: Xerxes had passed the years before his ascension in various ways.

SCENE 8

Xerxes, Amestris, Midwife, (Archaeologist)

Construction noises.

Xerxes: Higher! All of this has to be much higher!
Faster! Everything should move much faster!

Excited moaning.

Amestris: (*almost shouting with lust*) Harder! Harder!
Archaeologist: This is Amestris.
She is his wife. And his cousin.

Giggling and gasping they roll apart .

Archaeologist: Xerxes remains true to the tradition of interfamily marriage. It isn't long before Amestris –

Amestris is in labour and crying out.

Archaeologist: Yes, yes, yes. Things start to repeat themselves but that's the way of life. What is born must die and what dies has to be born first, hardly my fault.

Midwife: You have given birth to a son, your majesty!

SCENE 9

Xerxes, Tourguide, (Archaeologist)

Archaeologist: But Xerxes isn't just busy enlarging his family but also enlarging the empire by conquering recalcitrant Greece. Just the way his father would have wanted.

Music

Xerxes: Men, I know, the road is long!

Archaeologist: 3682 kilometres, to be precise. That takes a while on foot, and even on a horse you won't be much faster.

Xerxes: *(swatting a fly)* And it's hot!

Archaeologist: Well, desert, you know.

Xerxes: But I will finish what my father started and conquer Greece!

Men cheering half-heartedly.

Archaeologist: Along the way he does a bit of sight-seeing –

Tourguide: So, take a look, bro. This is where they butchered Achilles a thousand years ago, and this is where his blood drenched the sand.

Xerxes: *(stomping around in the sand)* Right here?

Tourguide: I'm telling you. Right there. You think over there, or what, bro?

Xerxes: A thousand years. Wow. That's a long time. And where is Troy now?

Tourguide: What do you mean, where is Troy now? Burned down, bro, burned down! The Greeks came – and Troy was gone.

Xerxes: That's right. How foolish of me.

Archaeologist: Xerxes tours Troy, or what is left of it. On the one hand Troy is literally on the route from Persia via what is Turkey today to Greece. On the other hand, Troy was facing the same opponents he does.

Xerxes: These Greeks are a cunning people.

Tourguide: I have to admit. A cunning people, but devious too. And the idea with the wooden horse, what a great move. Really great idea, even though a Greek came up with it. Though a Turk would have thought of it as well. A Turk would have thought of it as well.

Xerxes: I will destroy them.

Tourguide: You will destroy them. Yes, bro! Bro, please, destroy them. It is high time!

(//continues to shout in rage in the background: blood, blood must drench the ground! Burn down everything. Show them, show them who's boss, bro!)

Xerxes: I had an instructor from Sparta. Sword combat, spear technique, combat in general. All kinds of fighting. (buzzing fly - swatting fly)

Archaeologist: In all his campaigns, Xerxes will never lift a sword.

Tourguide: That's what you are famous for, battle and war.

(// again he shouts enraged in the background: And now you are preparing for war with the Greeks. You'll kill them! Please, let there be butchery. Finish them off! Tear them down! Obliterate them! See them burn! Finish them! I'm totally on your side! 5000 bulls, 20 000 bulls for the Greeks' death! Make sure the gods can see. I'll pray for you. I'll pray for you and the soldiers. Destroy the Greeks! Please, at last. They came and ruined Troy, now you ruin them! It's only right. It's karma even, karma! You show them, bro! Please show them, bro! Finish them off.)

Xerxes: (*agitated*) I will leave no more of Greece than what the Greeks left of Troy.

Archaeologist: To conquer Greece, Xerxes has gathered a huge host, which he now has to get across the Dardanelles. So he decides to build a pontoon bridge of connected rafts. However, as soon as the bridge is finished, a storm springs up.

SCENE 10

Xerxes, Advisor, (Archaeologist)

The raging sea, men and women crying out in despair.

Archaeologist: Anyway, the Greek god of the sea, Poseidon, sends a storm to delay Xerxes.

Xerxes: (*screeching*) 300 lashes! Where it hurts!

Advisor: (*trembling*) But Lord ...

Xerxes: THIS INSTANT!

Advisor: My Lord, who should we whip?

Xerxes: THE SEA, YOU IDIOT!

Advisor: The sea.

Xerxes: 300 LASHES FOR THE SEA!

Advisor: Immediately, my lord, immediately.

Sound of water being whipped.

Archaeologist: Poseidon doesn't interfere when Xerxes erects a second bridge. His huge host floods into Greece, heading south towards Athens.

Xerxes: (*whispering*) Just for you, Dareios. Just for you, father.

Archaeologist: He comes to a stop at the Thermopylae, a narrow passage bordered by mountains on one side and the sea on the other. Unlike today, back then the passage was only about 15 metres

wide – which isn't much for a battlefield. Xerxes' army on the one side faces the Spartans on the other.

SCENE 11

Soldier, Leonidas

Drums, battlecries.

- Soldier:** This is suicide, Leonidas. He has at least 20 000 men!
- Leonidas:** Yes, 20 000 Persians. All the world knows that they don't know how to fight. We on the other hand, are Spartans.
- Soldier:** I don't care who we are! There's only 300 of us! What are you thinking?
- Leonidas:** Look. If we line up at the narrowest point, the Persians have to match us there. Then their 20 000 will make no difference. Only ten of them will be able to fight us at any time and all we need to do is stand there and kill them one by one as they come!

Original recording of war reporting by Karim El-Gawhary:

We are now in one of the completely deserted villages. Some of the houses have been gutted by fire. Peshmerga tell us that it was the jihadists of the Islamic State who set fire to some houses before retreating from these villages. / A gunshot / Angry Arabic voices / Wow, somebody shot at us! Now our driver is heading towards the Peshmerga positions with raised hands...

SCENE 12

Schiller, Goethe, (Archaeologist)

- Archaeologist:** Let's briefly skip ahead two thousand years. Like this:
A darkened room, Friedrich Schiller and his friend Johann.
Schiller feels nervous and ill. I have no idea why he's ill but he is nervous because his friend Johann's surname is Goethe and

Friedrich is currently reading to him from his most recent work -

Schiller: ... rest in peace, beloved ones! Doused in your blood! ...

Goethe: (*interrupts*) Wait, wait, read the last sentence again: Go tell the Spartans –!

Schiller: „Go tell the Spartans, wanderer passing by,
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.”

Goethe: By god, Friedrich, that's really beautiful!

Schiller: (*pleased, eager*) Really? Well, I'm glad! I did a new translation all by myself.

SCENE 13

Spartan, Xerxes, Advisor, Persians, Actors, (Archaeologist)

Archaeologist: This may all seem pretty interesting from a historical perspective, but those who took part, ended up dead. 299 Spartans die. Only one of them didn't.

Gallop ing horse

Archaeologist: – this time on horseback –

Gallop ing horse coming to a stop

Spartan: We were defeated at the Thermopylae! (*Music*) He is coming!
Xerxes is coming! Run for your lives! Athens will burn!

Archaeologist: But not before Xerxes, well, some souvenirs –

Xerxes: Wrap this up for me, thanks, and oh – who are these handsome gentlemen? (*knocking on hollow metal*)

Advisor: These two handsome gentlemen are the tyrannicides Harmodios and Aristogeiton.

Xerxes: Tyrannicides, my mother is going to like those! She can put them up in her bedroom. Crate them up and bring them along! Oh,

what a splendid column, this one will look great in Persepolis. But before I forget, I urgently need a souvenir for my wife.

Advisor: This gold vase, perhaps?

Archaeologist: Once he's done plundering Athens –

Xerxes: HAS EVERYBODY FOUND SOMETHING THEY LIKE?!

Coins and treasures jingling and clinking

Persians: Yes...sure...not too bad // aaawesome!!!! phat! // no complaints! // it was more last time. // no complaints here! super! // awesome sack! // thanks, boss! thanks, Xerxes! thanks!

Xerxes: THEN LET'S RAZE THIS CITY TO THE GROUND!

Match being lit followed by major explosion

Archaeologist: Well, Xerxes may like architecture, but he prefers his own.

Michael Smulik: And once again he's playing Xerxes.

Till Firit: Don't get worked up about it!

Michael Smulik: I'm just saying.

Till Firit: Besides, he has been doing this the longest.

Michael Smulik: Which makes him much too old.

Till Firit: Nonsense!

Music

SCENE 14

Xerxes, Artemisia, Officer 1, 2, Advisor, (Archaeologist)

Archaeologist: What was left of Athens at the end of that day has since become known as "Persian rubble" and can be found at most major museums. Athens' inhabitants were able to escape to Salamis in time, an island within eyeshot of the city. Salamis is still there. Great place for a vacation. Nowadays, that is, not back then; back then it was crowded with desperate refugees.

(original recording, news report "Zeit im Bild": 20.000 refugees or more are arriving every week on the small island of Lesbos, so many each month that for the past couple of days the boats have been even fuller than before...instead of 35, it is now up to 50...)

- Archaeologist:** Refugees as well as Greek and other islands, by the way, really long story, basically endless, anyway -
- Xerxes:** After them! Only a dead Athenian is a good Athenian!
- Archaeologist:** Everything points to a naval battle in the straits between the island and the mainland.
- Artemisia:** Hang on a second, Xerxes, my good man
- Xerxes:** My dear Artemisia. What can I do for you?
- Artemisia:** This strikes me as a bad idea.
- Xerxes:** Did you not bring your ships to assist me in such affairs?
- Artemisia:** I just fought a naval battle against the Greeks in your name. They are really good at two things: the sea and sailing ships.
- Xerxes:** Nonsense. Besides I outnumber them.
- Artemisia:** Sure, their fleet may be smaller but it's much better than yours.
- Xerxes:** You are an able admiral, Artemisia, but –
- Artemisia:** I am an able admiral, precisely. Why don't you listen to me and avoid this naval battle? You are just jeopardising your victory.
- Xerxes:** You think so?
- Artemisia:** Yo.
- Xerxes:** *(turning to the other advisors and generals)* Well, what are my generals' thoughts on the subject?
- Officer:** Not what Artemisia is suggesting, that much is certain!
(in the background: most def!)
All of Athens is caught on Salamis like a mouse in a trap!
- Artemisia:** Exactly! A month from now, they'll be out of food on that joke of an island. There is no need to fight, Xerxes, all you have to do is wait.
- Officers 2:** *(derisively)* We didn't come 4000 km on foot just to sit and wait.
- Officer:** Your father would not have waited, Lord Xerxes, that much is certain

(in the background: that's right. indeed!)

Xerxes: You really think that?

Artemisia: *(irritably)* What does his father have to do with anything?!

Xerxes: *(regretfully)* I'm sorry, Artemisia, I'm in no mood to wait. *(turning back to his men)* After them! Only a dead Athenian is a good Athenian!

Archaeologist: And his fleet sets out squeezing into the narrow straits.

Sounds of the sea / Xerxes enjoying some olives, spitting out the pits / laughing

Archaeologist: Xerxes sits on his throne atop the hill, eating olives, drinking wine, and looks down on the countless ships that have come from all over his empire to fight for his cause.

Xerxes: There, look – purple sails, those must be my Egyptians.

Advisor: Exactly, that's them.

Xerxes: Oh, and there that blue one – *(snaps his fingers impatiently, unable to recall)* who are the blue ones again?

Advisor: Ah, the blue ones are...

Xerxes: Ah, ah, there's the green sails of Artemisia!

Advisor: Yes, look how fast they are.

Archaeologist: The naval battle at Salamis is considered the largest such battle in antiquity: thousands of ships, tens of thousands of women and men facing each other on that hot day in late September two and a half thousand years ago. This might have been the first major clash between East and West, if East and West had been around back then.

Battle noises

Xerxes: This is for you, father.

Archaeologist: Xerxes has such a huge numerical advantage, that –

Xerxes: *(shocked)* No.

Archaeologist: – he is really surprised –

Xerxes: *(flabbergasted)* NOO!!!

Archaeologist: – when he loses the battle of Salamis.
Xerxes: (*beside himself*) NOOO!!!!
(*sulking, sad*) I've had enough of this! War is stupid! I want to go home!
Advisor: But my Lord – You just lost a single battle, we still outnumber them dramatically. Just stick with it a little while longer!
Xerxes: Another one who tells me to wait! I don't have to do anything! This is no longer any fun! I'm going home!

Door slams. Music

Archaeologist: So he left, leaving others in charge of his army.

SCENE 15

Xerxes, Atossa, (Archaeologist)

Archaeologist: Watches from a distance how his father's dream ends.
Atossa: Open battle was never your thing, my son. It's past time to acknowledge who you are. You're destined for higher things, my Lord of Heroes. Let the heroes do the job they were born for.
Archaeologist: So he sends others to put down the inevitable revolts. And he takes another wife, whose name is Ester. She's Jewish and her story is told in the Book of books.
Xerxes' realm does not settle down. Like in his father's day, little Babylon rises up against him. Babylon is old, and owing to its age cultivates a false sense of security, of always being in the right and lasting till the end of time.
Xerxes: Every few years the Babylonians are causing trouble again!
Atossa: It isn't far away, my son. It isn't a major opponent. Something neither your father managed to accomplish, nor your grandfather, nor your great grandfather, nor any other man before him –
Archaeologist: (*whispering*) Bring an end to this.
So Xerxes goes to Babylon and has Babylon obliterated. He burns down the tower, which the Babylonians once built so that

the gods could descend and lie with their priestesses. He burns down the temple where the stone statue of Marduk has been waiting for a thousand years, and he destroys Marduk himself, the god whose hand you had to grasp before you could become king. In a day, Xerxes wipes out Babylon along with a whole religion, something that nobody succeeded in doing before or after. He destroys Babylon, where Man first settled down, where writing and beer were invented, the oldest realm the world had seen until then.

War reporting

Atossa: But never forget this, Xerxes: It is much easier to destroy than to create.

Construction noise

Archaeologist: Hence, having brought apocalypse to Babylon, Xerxes creates. Growing columned halls, baths, boulevards, manors, and palaces from the plains, like a farmer growing corn. He summons architects from every corner of his realm (*in the background a man whistling a tune*) as well as stone, gold, and artists, and he would have kept on building, if not one night, well -

SCENE 16

Xerxes, Murderer

Xerxes' sleeps and snores. A man whistling a tune.

Xerxes: (*starting up from his sleep*) Who's there?

Murderer: Your end, Xerxes, Lord of Heroes.

Some heavy sword blows, rattling breath, Xerxes dies.

SCENE 17

Roman, Pontius Pilate, (Archaeologist)

Music

Archaeologist: Man only knows a single thing with certainty, and that is death. We are forced to live our life towards its end. Xerxes' realm also reached its end and the name of the man who brought it about was Alexander the Great. And when the end had also caught up with Alexander, one day in spring a new age dawned in a city called Jerusalem.

Nails being noisily hammered into wood.

Roman: What about him, Prefect Pilate, what should we do with him?

P. Pilate: (*impatient*) Whatever we did with the others. I'm sick of these long-haired rebels! Getting themselves lost in the desert for forty days, coming back crazed by hunger and thirst, driving everybody up the wall with their talk of god-is-my-only-master! Rome is their only master! When will they finally learn?!

Roman: (*hesitant*) Ehm, I'm not so sure Prefect ... this one is rather popular, kind of...

P. Pilate: Nonsense, So were the others. Fools calling themselves prophets! What's his name?

Roman: Jesus of eh... Jesus of Nazareth.

P. Pilate: (*short pause, dismissively*) What's the worst that can happen? Up the cross he goes!

SCENE 18

(Archaeologist)

Archaeologist: Well. (*clearing throat*) Not the best idea, in hindsight. Five hundred years later, the Roman empire has ceased to exist, and Christianity is no longer a cult but a well-established, rather hyped, religion. Which is why the following 1000 years end up being rather turbulent, and why we don't know all that much about a period we nowadays call the "Dark Ages".
(*death bells ringing*)

SCENE 19

A man, (Archaeologist)

Music

Archäologin: Meanwhile, a man from Genoa proposes a daring idea – long story, but ten years later Columbus has found the necessary ships and men, and sets sail -

A man: LAND, HO!

Archaeologist: A new continent implies that the entire world has to be reconceived. Who does it belong to? What treasures does it hide? And why is it inhabited by large numbers of people who have never heard of god?

A man: Jesus! Free slaves! How convenient!

Archaeologist: A new continent also means that new maps of the world are needed. It is the year 1507: In a small house near Saint-Dié in the Vosges mountains, a small group of young scientists collaborate in a kind of think-tank of cartography.

SCENE 20

Waldseemüller, Another, Greta, the maid, (Archaeologist)

Waldseemüller: Listen people, people! I know what we'll call the new continent. We'll call it Amerigo.

Another: After Amerigo Vespucci.

Waldseemüller: Exactly.

Another: Europe, Asia, Africa – continents are named after women we've conquered, I think we should stick with that.

Waldseemüller: Good gracious! All my map needs is a name for the New World.

Greta, the maid: How about Ameriga? Europe. Africa. Asia. Ameriga. That works!

Waldseemüller: Greta, hey, that's great!

Greta, the maid: Or America. That sounds even better, don't you think?

Waldseemüller: America! Gosh, Greta!

Archaeologist: Ever since, the unknown maid Greta has become renowned for having come up with America's name. Indeed. Haha.

A man: My dearest Mr Waldseemüller! Congratulations on naming the new continent! A-meri-ca! What a stroke of genius!

Waldseemüller: Thank you, thank you. The name came to me as if a voice out of nowhere had spoken to me.

SCENE 21

Actors, director, a man, (Archaeologist)

A boy singing Ave Maria.

Archaeologist: Ah! Such an angelic voice!

Michael Smulik: I can't feel my feet anymore, after listening to this.

Till Firit: Hush now!

Wolfram Berger: (*lacht*)

Eva Mayer: Long live the knife! Long live the knife!

Director: Sure. But let's talk about the castratos later, please.

Archaeologist: Right. (*leafing through the script*) Before we talk about the removal of testicles, we first have to address the removal of women. Ready?

Actors: Sure! Go on then! Right on, sister. Right! Let's go!

Archaeologist: Fine: There are many ways to acquire power but only one way to stay in power: a ruler can never allow himself to be questioned,

never and by nobody. Since such an endeavour tends to be met with significant resistance, it is useful to base one's legitimacy on some widely recognised authority (*in the background a man shouting: host...*) It turns out, it is of considerable advantage if the ruler is himself a god, of godlike stature, or at least invested by a god. The technical term is the "doctrine of divine right".

Man in the background: Amen

Archaeologist: In order to prevent the ruler's authority from being called into question, it helps to introduce, and regularly reinforce, some sort of fear. It doesn't really matter if it's fear of showering, measles vaccinations, refugees, or left shoes. There are no limits to the imagination, the one thing that matters is that only the ruler has the power to protect his followers. It is of particular importance to ensure that one can identify with the ruler, ideally the identification is based on one of the ruler's attributes that can't be lost, such as a penis. This attribute then has to be elevated to a norm and, if at all possible, grounded in the word of god.

A man: Gen. 3,16: To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you."

Michael Smulik: Wow, such bad acting.

Till Firit: You think? Well...

Archaeologist: Once „penis“ has been established as a norm, the norm can be extended at will to include things like "white" skin or "Christian" religion, a fact that has proven especially useful to white penises in the context of colonialism and imperialism. I think the concept is becoming clear. Something that deviates from the norm is, by definition, abnormal and has neither the right to dissent nor to rule. Those who do, will be killed, enslaved, or exiled, but most definitely should not be allowed to speak.

A man: Amen! So be it.

Archaeologist: Around the same time the doctrine of divine right became established a council was convened on the subject.

SCENE 22

Cardinal 1, 2, 3

Cardinal 1: Gentlemen, we have gathered to solve a particular problem, namely, that the Holy Bible contains a great number of women who have something to say (*loud prayer in the background*) We have to find some common approach to the issue. The single female apostle presents a particular problem. We can't have Mary Magdalene be the one who Jesus loved the most, we'd never hear the end of it from women. That needs to be fixed urgently! So: Mary Magdalene has money, she isn't married, and she washes his feet. Suggestions?

Cardinal 2: (*clearing throat*) We all know women of her kind, Cardinal.

Filthy laughter and giggling.

Cardinal 1: A whore! We'll turn her into a whore! Brilliant!

Cardinal 3: Consider this, gentlemen! It's Eve's fault that we were expelled from paradise. Mary Magdalene has just been shown to have been a whore Zeifix silentio! Silentio in the back! (*loud prayer in the background stops*) Don't you think, we should also have a truly good, a virtuous woman? As a role model, perhaps? Somebody to give us solace? (*music: choir of bishops*) Who loves us unconditionally, and all that?

Cardinal 2: (*metaphysically*) We all know a woman like that, too.

Cardinal 1: Mommy!

Cardinal 3: Yes, a merciful mother!

Cardinal 2: Who always has a sympathetic ear for her son!

Cardinal 1: Whom she moreover has conceived immaculately!
(*clapping hands in joy*)

Cardinal 3: That's great. That's great.

General laughter. Music.

SCENE 23

Man, (Archaeologist)

Man: (*1st Letter to*) Timothy 2, 12-14: I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

Archaeologist: If only penises are permitted to earn money or own a house, women will soon learn to find shelter with some penis, because while they are able to bear children, they also need to eat and tend to freeze to death easily. If the woman refuses to be good and stay home, you just make sure that it is considered indecent and wicked if she is out in the streets by herself. In order to cement one's power for centuries, one thing's of particular importance: a compelling story.

Pop song medley.

Archeologist: Like the one about women loving a life of hearth and home, caring for children and shopping, when they are not busy with their second most favourite activity: indulging men with blowjobs. (*laughs*) Nobody knew that better or sooner than the church. And, of course, Capitalism.

Music

SCENE 24

Man, Man 2, (Archaeologist)

Archaeologist: Europe 500 years ago was dominated clergymen who were busy legitimising secular rule. Kings and clergy in turn provided money

to the arts. Or did you seriously believe Leonardo, Botticelli, or Michelangelo painted all the bible crap voluntarily? Why exactly the clergy decided to push women into obscurity is another long story. Consider this, though: celibacy had just been introduced (*background: man flagellating himself*) and the white clergy penises were just starting to abstain from women. (*lashes / flagellation / church bells*)

Man: They bleed once a month but never bleed out!

Man 2: Satan's spawn! Original sin! Greedy shrew! Devil's work!

Archaeologist: However, just because something's suddenly prohibited, doesn't mean you stop wanting it. Women had to disappear: from every place where clergy penises gathered around a supreme clergy penis. Now, how to deal with the absence of women?

Boy sings Ave Maria

Archaeologist: Banishing women from church choirs caused another difficulty: without them you are left with only 3 out of 6 vocal registers: tenor, baritone, bass. At first young boys are used for the higher registers but this soon proves unprofitable. Soon after they have been properly taught how to sing, their clear voices fall victim to puberty. But what if there's another way to reclaim the voices of the exiled?

SCENE 25

Surgeon, Assistant, Father, (Archaeologist)

Surgeon: Your son sings like a nightingale, dear sir.

Assistant: Yes, beautifully.

Surgeon: I have treated many boys but your son has what it takes...

Assistant: ... for the papal chapel in the Vatican.

Surgeon: ... for the papal chapel in the Vatican. I agree.

Father: (*flattered*) You really think so? Well, thank you for saying so. He wants nothing more than use his voice in the service of god.

Assistant: Indeed, in the service.

Surgeon: How old is he now?

Father: Eight summers.

Surgeon: Then we'll have to act soon.

Assistant: You need a very sharp knife with a curved blade.

Surgeon: I'll make two small incisions in his groins. Then I sever the ducts connecting his testicles to the rest of his body and finally, I pull out the tiny jewels.

Assistant: Or you simply sever the seminal ducts and then let the tiny testicles wither inside the scrotum.

Surgeon: Your son makes a great sacrifice to god, our almighty lord.

Father / Surgeon / Assistant: (*mumbling*) Amen.

Father: Is it dangerous?

Surgeon: Well, I am convinced the almighty god will protect him from infection and keep him alive.

Assistant: But pray, make sure you pray.

Father / Surgeon / Assistant: (*mumbling*) Amen.

Surgeon: Well, then let us begin. Have your son sit in the ice water. Now make sure you hold him tightly.

Assistant: Hold tight and pray.

Surgeon: Pray.

Ave Maria by Alessandro Moreschi

Archaeologist: Don't believe this was a brief fashion. The practice lasted over 400 years! During the 18th century, 500 000 boys were castrated in Italy alone.

This is Alessandro Moreschi, one of the last castrato sopranos and a singer in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. He died in Rome in 1922. After the exilation of women, thousands of churches and choirs all over Europe need to be supplied with castratos. After all, it's like in soccer: the eighth division needs

players too, not just the Champions League.

More often than not only the testicles are removed, sometimes the penis has to go as well. There are a few capable surgeons who do castration tours across the continent and for whose services parents are willing to mortgage their house. There is a much greater number of bad surgeons.

Father: He has a fever and hasn't passed water in days.

Surgeon: Opium against the pain.

Assistant: But you have to pray.

Surgeon: You have to believe.

Assistant: Belief is able to move mountains.

Archaeologist: Indeed. Mountains of the dead and the road to god is paved with children's testicles! Initially, castratos are reserved for services to god, i.e. church choirs and oratories etc. However, clergymen, too, like to spend time in the theatre or at a recital, and one can't have women at such events either.

The holy city of Rome is full of men and so soprano castratos are expected to far la donna: act the woman, to ensure the clergy isn't tempted by the presence of a real woman. The whole thing backfires a little by offering every kind of incentive to amorous adventures between men.

Those among the boys who do survive castration, those who are talented and lucky enough, don't find it hard to transition from a church choir to a secular stage. And while we're on that subject: Around the same time soprano castratos are becoming popular, a group of scholars and musicians in Florence has an idea -

SCENE 26

Man 1, 2, 3, (Archaeologist)

Man 1: Look, I really enjoy the theatre but the constant talking is a nuisance. It lacks a certain – how should I put it – pizzazz.

Man 2: We could have the actors talk faster.

Man 3: How about having them sing their parts rather than speak them?

Archaeologist: That's it! Who would have thought it'd take humanity till 1580 to realise? Anyhow, the introduction of soprano castratos to recently invented opera had about the same effect cat videos had on the internet. (*frenetic applause*) Soprano castratos become celebrated supernovas, arch angels ascended from the heavens.

Audience: (*euphorically*) Bravo! Bravissimo! Long live the knife! Long live the knife!

Archaeologist: No composer can afford to do without them. No longer just a replacement for women in church music, they now have parts written for them in this new form of musical piece, the opera.

SCENE 27

Dorothea Handel, Young G.F. Handel, Handel's father, (Archaeologist)

George Frideric Handel, aged eight, at the cembalo.

Archaeologist: Oh, do you hear that? (*a few bars of music*) It is 1693, let's say March. It is raining outside. Perhaps it has been raining for days and the river Saale has burst its banks and flooded the streets of Halle.

Dorothea Handel: Patience my darling. This is a wonderful melody.

Young Handel: (*startled*) Oh no, it's father!

Handel's father: (*shouting*) Have the boy learn a proper trade! What will become of him if he wastes his time tinkling the hours away?!

Dorothea Handel: He will be a musician.

Handel's father: Over my dead body. He'll become a lawyer!

Exits and slams the door.

Dorothea Handel: (*assertively*) He will be a musician and composer.

SCENE 28

G.F. Handel, the Maid, Amestris, (Archaeologist)

Music

Archaeologist: And not just any composer. George Frideric Handel's talent finds Europe insatiable in its desire for operas and this fortunate coincidence of "being in the right place at the right time" launches him from provincial Germany. He is barely 20 when his first opera premieres in Hamburg. At the age of 24, he achieves international recognition while in Venice. And from Italy, young Handel makes his way to London...

G.F. Handel: *(annoyed)* Well ?!

The Maid: Maestro, lunch is served.

G.F. Handel: I don't have the time! For crying out loud! Bring me the bible!

The Maid: You could do with a break, master.

G.F. Handel: I can take a break when I'm dead.

The Maid: And you soon will be, if you don't eat.

G.F. Handel: Am I paying you for good advice, or your service?

The Maid: For my service, master.

G.F. Handel: So! Bring the bible!

The Maid: Right away, master.

Archaeologist: George Frideric Handel is working on an oratory.

G.F. Handel: *(searching)* The book of Ester, the book of Ester – goddammit – here! Here it is. *(quoting from the bible)* Est. 2,15: When the turn came for Ester to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Ester won the favour of everyone who saw her. The little cutie. Well. *(quoting from the bible)* Now the king was attracted to Ester more than to any of the other women. Dirty dog.

Archaeologist: Twenty years later he is still there.

Handel humming a melody.

Archaeologist: Ah, now he's got it. The genius at work, can you hear it?
G.F. Handel: Di da di da. That's it. That's what I want.
Archaeologist: (*whispering*) He has composed a new work.
Amestris: And this time I shall play the main part, not Ester.
Archaeologist: Actually, Xerxes plays the most important part.

SCENE 29

Caffarelli, G.F.Handel, Newsman, (Archaeologist)

Caffarelli: (*disparagingly/disappointedly*) Ah, Maestro.
Archaeologist: This is Caffarelli. An absolute superstar among soprano castratos. George Frideric Handel had made a great effort to recruit him to his London opera house.
G.F.Handel: (*unable to bear the tension*) And? How do you like it?
(*disappointedly*) You think it's no good? You don't like it?
Caffarelli: This libretto is criminal.
G.F. Handel: (*taken aback*) The libretto has nothing to do with me.
(*maliciously*) I am in charge of the music, Caffarelli.
So how do you like the aria?
Caffarelli: It's pretty, sure.
G.F. Handel: (*in disbelief*) Pretty? In the meaning of nice, or what?
Caffarelli: Yes, pretty. No stroke of genius, but nice.
G.F. Handel: This aria is tailor-made for your soprano voice!
Caffarelli: As may be – but I am Xerxes. Why in the world am I serenading a tree?
G.F. Handel: It is a plantain.
Caffarelli: Xerxes' brother, I noticed, is also a soprano
G.F. Handel: Yes, but the part of your brother is sung by a woman. A woman!
Caffarelli: And then there is my fiancée –
G.F. Handel: Of course, Amestris.
Caffarelli: She is a woman, but disguises herself as a man? Do I understand that correctly? And she's yet another soprano!

G.F. Handel: *(with suppressed rage)* Alto, not soprano.

Caffarelli: Good god, this is all rather confusing. Am I not Xerxes? Lord of heroes?

G.F. Handel: Yes.

Caffarelli: So why is your opera only about boring love stories?

G.F. Handel: Because, I... is there anything...that you like about it?

Caffarelli: And what about Ester. Where did she end up?

G.F. Handel: A third woman would have been too much. Besides, I dedicated an entire oratory to her already!

Caffarelli: *(exasperated sigh)* I simply don't understand.

G.F. Handel: Nor do you have to, Caffarelli! You don't have to understand it. You have to sing it! That is what you were made for! To sing!

Aria: Ombra mai fu

Newsman: World premiere! Tomorrow night!
Xerxes, the new opera by Frideric Handel!
At the Haymarket Theatre! Tomorrow night! Xerxes! Featuring the great Caffarelli!

Archaeologist: After 2000 years, Xerxes once again bestrides the world stage – as a castrated man serenading a tree
(quietly translating the words of the largo)
Never was a shade of any plant dearer and more lovely, or more sweet / emerald, tender and beautiful fronds / never shall some uncouth lout with rude axe / cut off a leafy bough / though if it should be cut / it would remain, transformed into an arrow / shot from Diana's bow, oh the blind god ... the blind god...

SCENE 30

Nietzsche, (Archaeologist)

Archaeologist: ... the blind god. And so time rushes by like an ocean. French Revolution. The Enlightenment sees the blind god fall silent. The

industrial revolution makes him frail. He approaches his 1900th year on earth when a madman – was he mad though? – turns prophet.

Nietzsche 1: „Thus Spoke Zarathustra“: I search for god!

Nietzsche 2: I search for god!

Nietzsche 1: Where is god?!

Nietzsche 1&2: Are we not stumbling constantly? Lost in infinite nothingness? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? It's growing colder, is it not? Night followed by deeper night? Can we not hear the noise the gravediggers make as they dig god's grave?

Original recording: Wollt Ihr den totalen Krieg? (Do you want total war?)

Archaeologist: Soon, very soon we will hear the noise.

Nietzsche 2: Isn't this act too great for us?

Nietzsche 1: Can't we smell the reek of god's decay?

Archaeologist: Soon.

Nietzsche 1: Even gods decay!

Archaeologist: Soon we'll be able to smell the perfume the world has applied for the 20th century.

SCENE 31

Nietzsche, all actors taking turns reciting passages from

Paul Celan's Death Fugue:

(translation by John Felstiner)

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink
we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair
Marguerite

he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all sparkling
he whistles his hounds to come close
he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the
ground
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland
your golden hair Marguerite
your ashen hair Shulamith

Nietzsche 1: God is dead. God stays dead.
And we are the ones who killed him.

Nietzsche quotes and Celan's Fugue, cut/overlaid.

Nietzsche 1&2: What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? I come too soon. I am before my time. This monstrous event is still on its way. It has not yet reached the ears of mankind.

SCENE 32

Reginald Fessenden, Helen Fessenden, Sailor, (Archaeologist)

Crackle, static, morse signal

Archaeologist: This is not yet the crackling of a global conflagration but the birth pangs of an invention that will play an important part in the upcoming annihilation.

Reginald: *(excitedly)* What's the time?

Helen: Almost midnight.

Archaeologist: This is Helen Fessenden.

Reginald: Let's go through it one more time.

Archaeologist: And this is her husband, Reginald. They are about to start their broadcast. The first radio broadcast in history.

Reginald: *(in a high trembling voice)* I'm so nervous, Helen!

Helen: There is no reason to be nervous, dear. Hardly anybody will be able to hear us.

Archaeologist: At this point in time, nobody has the kind of apparatus needed to receive what the Fessendens are about to broadcast into the aether. Nobody except ships at sea which are able to use the new invention and Morse code to communicate with one another across vast distances.

Reginald: *(groans)* I think, I'll throw up. I'm sick.

Helen: You aren't sick.

Reginald: We have to postpone!

Helen: We aren't postponing.

Reginald: Stop shouting at me!

Helen: I'm not shouting!

Reginald: *(hysterically)* I can't take your hysteria anymore!

Helen: Do you want me to do the talking, Reginald? I am used to talking into nothingness.

Reginald: NO! THIS IS MY INVENTION! I WILL BE HEARD! *(emotional)* I wish, my mother could see me now.

Helen: Good god! Your mother is dead, Regy. Concentrate on what lies ahead. Ok?

Reginald: Ok, fine.

Helen: Your invention is the future.

Reginald: Ok.

Helen: This is it.

Reginald: Ok.

Helen: Ok? Ready?

Reginald: Ready. *(squeaking)* Hand me the bible.

Helen: Here you are.

Helen (off) & Reginald Fessenden.

Reginald: Dear listeners. This is the first radio broadcast. In history. My name is Reginald Fessenden and I am transmitting from Brant Rock, Massachusetts.

Helen: It is the night of 24. December 1906. It's Christmas. And she gave birth to a son, her firstborn.

Reginald: And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

Archaeologist: (*whispering*) The only ones more afraid were the sailors on their ships far out at sea. For Helen also picked a piece of Music for the first radio broadcast in history: Xerxes.

Sailor: (*shouting*) What the fuck is that?!

SCENE 33

Xerxes, Ester, Amestris

Xerxes: Ester.

Ester: (*groaning*)

Xerxes: Are you awake?

Ester: No.

Xerxes: Amestris.

Amestris: Let us sleep, Xerxes.

Xerxes: I can't find any peace. Let me climb in between you. I am afraid.

Ester: (*yawning*) Of what, exactly?

Xerxes: Of war. Of death.

Ester: Only the dead know the end of war.

Xerxes: I am afraid of what awaits me. (*Quiet Death Fugue passages in the background.*)

Ester: Awaiting you is the dust that is all that remains of your Persepolis.

Xerxes: (*confused*) What? ... My realm will last forever!

Amestris: (*laughs*) Of course. Until another lord of heroes builds yet another Persepolis.

Xerxes: Nobody else will erect another Persepolis.

Amestris: No.

Xerxes: My name will be known. (*Music*)

Amestris: Your name will be known.

Xerxes: And your name will be known.
Ester: Ester.
Amestris: And my name will be known.
Xerxes and Ester: Amestris.
Xerxes: And my mother's name.
Ester and Amestris: Atossa.
Xerxes: And perhaps the names of my architects.
And the names of my horses. My dogs –
Ester: Xerxes, please!
Amestris: Tomorrow is a new day.
Xerxes: I love you. And you.
Ester: And everyone loves you.
Amestris: Till kingdom come.

Music

CLOSING ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcer: Xerxes and the voices from the darkness
radio drama by Magda Woitzuck
with Alina Fritsch. Wolfram Berger. Eva Mayer. Till Firit. Michael
Smulik
Sound and technical support: Anna Kuncio and Manuel Radinger
Music: Peter Kaizar, Antonio Vivaldi and George Frideric Handel
Assistant director: Teresa Schwind and Julia Herzog
Director: Peter Kaizar
produced by Hessischer Rundfunk and ORF Radio, 2021
Dramaturgy and editing: Leonhard Koppelman

Duration: 58:58