

SISY

by Paul Calandrino

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Characters

Sisyphus	Half-naked, muscular, sweaty, exhausted
Enarete	Newly dead mother of Sisyphus
Boulder	A boulder

Place

Tartarus,
the lowest point of the underworld

A note on the boulder:

The Boulder is formed by a number of actors, dancers, or acrobats, male and female, young and old. There should be enough actors, tightly entwined, to form a credibly thick and weighty mass. The composition of the Boulder is not static, but fluid, with actors changing positions, vertically and horizontally. (Don't get too cute with this unless you have a choreographer and acrobats or dancers. Be safe.) Throughout the play, the Boulder emits vocalizations, but no words. It plays against Sisyphus.

Sisyphus pushes a Boulder of softly weeping, moaning humans up a hill (a flat stage will do). He is almost to the summit, but before he reaches it, a woman approaches from behind. She is Enarete, his recently deceased mother.

ENARETE

Sisy?

He pauses. The Boulder sighs and whimpers. There are whispers. Sisyphus turns to her, pressing his back against the Boulder.

SISYPHUS

Enarete.

ENARETE

I hate it when you call me by name.

SISYPHUS

I hate it when you call me Sisy.

ENARETE

But I've always called you that. It's your nickname.

SISYPHUS

It's your pet name for me. I'm not a gerbil. (Beat) You died?

ENARETE

Yes.

SISYPHUS

How?

ENARETE

Pneumonia.

SISYPHUS

Sorry.

ENARETE

It happens. I was old.

Pause. He turns to push the Boulder.

SISYPHUS

Have a nice death.

ENARETE

I descended through three layers of night to see you, Sisy.

SISYPHUS

(Turns) Would you quit calling me that? What are you doing here in Tartarus? Go back up to Elysium where you belong.

ENARETE

I missed you. I worry about you.

SISYPHUS

Do I hear a lecture coming on? Look, I died a grown man. I died a king. Corinth was all my doing. Did you have any other kids that founded city-states?

ENARETE

Well, Cretheus, he did. And Deioneus.

SISYPHUS

I'm way past being lectured by my mother!

ENARETE

(Sarcastic) A man of great accomplishments. Merope, your own wife, left your body in the street instead of giving you a proper burial.

SISYPHUS

(Sore subject) I told her to!

ENARETE

But you didn't want her to.

SISYPHUS

She obeyed me!

ENARETE

She dishonored you!

The Boulder slips and screams. He struggles to steady it.

And here you are pushing this ... this thing up a hill!

SISYPHUS

It's a boulder.

ENARETE

Not like any boulder I've ever seen.

SISYPHUS

It's my boulder.

ENARETE

Yeah, well, that makes sense.

SISYPHUS

Here we go.

ENARETE

Yes, here we go.

SISYPHUS

Isn't it enough that I'm condemned to push a boulder up a hill for eternity? I have to listen to you too?

He pushes, not too effectively.

ENARETE

Yes, you have to listen to me. (Beat) Talk to Zeus.

SISYPHUS

Zeus is a dickhead. I'm not kowtowing to that prick.

He stops, out of breath, and presses his forehead against the Boulder.

ENARETE

You were such a clever boy. Now look at you. Most people look at you and say, "What a pity. That poor man has to push a boulder up the hill, over and over again." They don't even think about what you might have done to deserve it.

He drops to one knee. Then sits, places his feet against the Boulder, and lies on his back.

SISYPHUS

I never asked for pity. If they pity me, that's their problem.

She sits down. Strokes his hair.

ENARETE

You had such potential. (He laughs) You did! The ships you built, the commerce, the expeditions.

SISYPHUS

Good stuff.

ENARETE

Exactly! Was the rest of it really necessary?

SISYPHUS

The rest?

ENARETE

The murders, the plundering. You raped your niece.

SISYPHUS

I did not rape my niece. I seduced her.

ENARETE

She was a girl!

SISYPHUS

I loved her. I took her into my home. Merope was fine with it.

ENARETE

Yeah, right. (Pause) Sisy. Appeal.

SISYPHUS

There is no appeal.

ENARETE

Of course there is. The gods are fickle. Zeus is nothing if not capricious.

SISYPHUS

I don't want to appeal.

ENARETE

Why? That's silly.

He rises to his knees.

SISYPHUS

You make your choices, you do what you have to do, and you live -- or die -- with the consequences. Asopus came to me with a water deal, I told him where Zeus had taken his daughter, and here I am. So be it.

ENARETE

Stubborn.

Realistic.

SISYPHUS

A martyr.

ENARETE

Myself!

SISYPHUS

Apologize.

ENARETE

I can't undo what's done.

SISYPHUS

The Boulder threatens to crush him. He stands, strains, regains stasis.

ENARETE

Would you like some help?

SISYPHUS

No.

ENARETE

Just a moment of relief?

She stands beside him and places her hands on the Boulder.

You let go.

SISYPHUS

I'd like to get this on canvas. Where's a painter when you need one? You'll be crushed.

ENARETE

I'm already dead, Sisy.

SISYPHUS

You still have bones. We're in Hades, not some airy dreamworld like "Heaven."

ENARETE

Go on. Let go.

SISYPHUS

Your funeral.

He slowly eases up. The Boulder trembles and gasps.

ENARETE

I've got it.

He takes one hand off. The Boulder cries out sharply.

SISYPHUS

You're sure?

ENARETE

I'm sure.

He leaps away downstage, ducks and rolls. The Boulder screams and quakes. A moment passes. Enarete holds the Boulder firmly in place. The Boulder murmurs.

SISYPHUS

What the ...?

Enarete pulls one hand off the Boulder to brush the hair from her eyes. The Boulder is astonished. She turns to him, holding the Boulder in place with one finger. She pokes it. It rolls up the hill and gently back. The Boulder giggles, gives a polite golf clap. It seems to relax.

ENARETE

No problem.

SISYPHUS

That's depressing.

ENARETE

Well, it's your boulder, not mine.

SISYPHUS

Clear conscience?

ENARETE

Sisy, I have kept all my oaths -- times three! The water of the sea has cleansed my soul. When you are ruled by the steadfast councils of Rhadamanthas, your burdens are light. As gossamer.

She steps away from the Boulder. As it rolls toward her, she blows gently. It rolls back up the hill. She does this again - each time the Boulder emits a soft hoot, as if from a far away rollercoaster. She stops it with one hand again. He rises and goes to her.

SISYPHUS

I disagree. (Places his hands on the Boulder) Thanks, I'll take it from here.

ENARETE

Ask Zeus to forgive you.

SISYPHUS

Not gonna happen.

ENARETE

I'm your mother.

SISYPHUS

Out of the way, please. Go on!

Pause. She walks away. The Boulder nearly flattens him. It weeps again. He struggles, pushes, makes progress.

ENARETE

You're making progress.

SISYPHUS

It's an illusion.

ENARETE

You're moving the boulder from there to there. You're almost to the top.

SISYPHUS

And then it'll roll down to the bottom and I'll start again.

ENARETE

You would rather spend eternity pushing a boulder uphill than admit you're wrong.

SISYPHUS

I would rather kill Zeus. I would rather kill you if it would get me off this hill. I would rather use my strength, my will, my wit than grovel before the illusions.

ENARETE

Which are?

SISYPHUS

Meaning.

ENARETE

Yes, meaning?

SISYPHUS

No, "meaning" is one of the illusions. Mind. Thought. Whole empires built on the hoax of cause-and-effect. Love. Honor. Goodness. Altruism. Brotherhood. Rationality. Culture. Importance. They're all artifacts of the deranged spongiform organ called the brain.

ENARETE

Is that what you think?

SISYPHUS

My thoughts are no better than yours or anybody else's.

ENARETE

Doesn't it scare you to think that way?

SISYPHUS

No.

ENARETE

I think it must.

SISYPHUS

I can't think any other way.

ENARETE

Nothing matters?

SISYPHUS

Not in the way you mean it. I tried my best! I made decisions based on the best reasons I could find. But it's all a rationalization. Don't you see? Your faith is make-believe. When everyone dies, meaning ends.

ENARETE

Nobody thinks that way.

SISYPHUS

Everybody does. That's why they pray.

He reaches the top. The Boulder continues to weep.

ENARETE

You've reached the top. You can let go.

He lets go and steps aside. The Boulder rolls downhill and offstage shrieking. Sisyphus watches it roll until there is silence. He looks out, almost serenely, over the underworld, then begins to take his first step down.

Wait. (He looks at her) What just happened?

SISYPHUS

A boulder rolled down a hill.

ENARETE

No, after that.

SISYPHUS

Nothing.

ENARETE

Something happened. You changed. For an instant, you were different. What did you see?

SISYPHUS

See?

ENARETE

When the burden fell away. You turned, you looked out. What did you see? Feel? Hear?

SISYPHUS

(Thinks) I saw Hades. Wide, bleak, buried Hades. I heard the wind. I smelled sulfur ... and wet leaves.

ENARETE

What did you feel?

SISYPHUS

Joy.

ENARETE

An illusion?

SISYPHUS

No.

ENARETE

Ask.

SISYPHUS

No.

He exits toward the Boulder.
Fade.
End of play.