**THE PLAY OF GILGAMESH:**

a storytellers theater adaptation of the 4,000 year old epic poem

Derek Kannemeyer

Cast of Characters

GILGAMESH

ENKIDU

NARRATOR 1: character roles [f] include SHAMHAT the hierodule; ELDER # 2; EA

NARRATOR 2: character roles [f] include NINSUN; ISHTAR; ARURU

NARRATOR 3: character roles [m] include HUNTER; SHEPHERD; HUMBABA; ENLIL

NARRATOR 4: character roles [m] include ANU; HUNTER # 2; STRANGER;

ELDER # 1; the voice of the BULL of HEAVEN

CHORUS: a musician-vocalist, augmented at need by Witnesses

WITNESSES: four to seven dancers, singers, musicians, onstage crew members. They

are both the permanent onstage “audience” and participants in the telling.

They play the animals, the servants, the crowd, the scenery. They supply

interpretive movement, and augment the Chorus. After intermission, as the

Narrators join their ranks, the original Witnesses become featured players.

The following characters are therefore performed by the Witnesses:

THE TUNNEL OF THE SUN WITNESS [m]; SCORPION MAN [m];

SCORPION WOMAN [f]; THE BAR WITNESS / SIDURI THE

BARMAID [f]; THE FAR OCEAN WITNESS / URSHANABI THE

BOATMAN [m]; UTNAPISHTIM [m]; MRS. UTNAPISHTIM [f]

Notes

This is *tribal* storytellers theatre. My aim is to respect not only the narrative lines of the source material but its origins as oral epic poetry. The tellers are griots; the cast are the people of the tribe, whose task is participatory; the musical and dance elements are loose and expressive, to invite in the whole tribe. The audience should be made to feel part of this tribe.

The designations *m* and *f* apply to the characters played by the storytellers, but not necessarily t.o the storytellers themselves, who may be of any size, shape, race, age, sex. This applies even to the principal narrative roles, the tribe members who play the male heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

**PART ONE**

**PROLOGUE**

CHORUS sets up, tunes, begins informally to play.

The NARRATORS settle into their dressing areas,

conversing with the audience and with each other as

they check their costumes and props; the transition

into scripted dialogue is without fuss or flourish.

They are four individuals, distinct in personality,

tone, and oratorical style, ranging from didactic to

casual, dry to fervent, theatrical to geeky to chatty.

NARRATOR 1

This is an old story, an ancient story, about a man whose dearest friend died; and of how he

was inconsolable. The man was Gilgamesh.

NARR. 2

And he *was* a man, although his ancestors were gods. He was an extraordinary man: a mighty king; a superhero. But for Gilgamesh, it wasn't enough. There was a dream he had…

NARR. 3

An entirely human, entirely impossible quest: he wanted to be…*greater* than human.

NARR. 4

We four are the narrators.

NARR. 3

The leaders of the story. We’ll tell it, and we’ll act the parts—

NARR. 2 *(as the first couple of Witnesses enter)*

We'll have help!

NARR. 1 *(gradually more formal, finishing her set-up)*

The tale of Gilgamesh isn't just old. It's the *oldest* story of our human tribe. 4,000 years old! And it tells of a king and a people who lived even earlier, a thousand years before.

NARR. 4 *(also finishing, and settling into his role)*

But it's still *our* story. With all that same familiar human noise about what it is to live and to die.

CHORUS *(flexing his voice, chanting to his own music)*

Long, long ago, and as if it were yesterday—

Gilgamesh, and Enkidu— who was his friend…

WITNESSES respond to the music as they do their costume and tech checks, and/or limber up to dance.

NARR. 3 *(finishing his set-up)*

So, we four. Our Chorus musician. And these Witnesses. To crew, and to act, and to dance, and to be your representatives. You, the audience, the people of the tribe; whose story it will be also.

NARR. 1

And in a short while, our two lead actors will be here, to play Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

NARR. 2

Enkidu, E-N-K-I-D-U. Who was Gilgamesh's friend. Still, there will be parts of this tale where we can’t enter, because they go beyond what we know. Or what any ordinary human knows—

NARR. 4

They come later. After the intermission.

NARR. 3

Gilgameshis *not* an ordinary human; he’llfind a way—

CHORUS *(both chiming in and sound-checking)*

Come what may—he'll find a way—  
To defy the odds, and the gods, and the grave; and never die.

NARR. 1

Or he'll *lose* his way.

NARR. 2 *(having now finished her set-up)*

So. To Mesopotamia, 5000 years ago; time immemorial.

NARR. 4, CHORUS

To Uruk, city of cities, that no city known to man could equal.

Music. Chorus may sing, chant, or orate to it; the

Narrators play off the music but speak naturally.

Chorus sticks to a designated area; the Narrators are

mobile. Witnesses do all of the above and more. As a cast and crew, they act and react, work and

support. As an audience and citizenry, they are rapt

and knowing. They have a long familiarity with the

turns of the piece, yet it constantly, wondrously

surprises them. They cheer, they gasp, they party.

CHORUS, NARRATORS, WITNESSES *(solos in italics)*

There was once a man whose friend died; so he fought a war with death.

His name was Gilgamesh, and he was two thirds divine. But that other third?

*Tyrant! Asshole! Poor baby! Hottie! King of the world! Inconsolable! Whiner! He-man!*

Human.

Brief choreography, to announce the play proper.