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: one 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, the

Narrators become Witnesses, and the 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]

**ACT 3, scene two: THE MOUNTAINS OF THE SCORPION PEOPLE**

CHORUS

Gilgamesh wandered the rim of the world,

Until he reached the fluted crags of Mâshu, the two-headed mountain.

Its two peaks breached the underbelly of Heaven;

The rock below it rested on the sagging gut of the Underworld.

Two inhuman sentinels stood guard: the Scorpion People.

Very few living beings have seen this place;

And what human has ever journeyed beyond it?

A WITNESS   
So who could ever return from there, to tell its stories?

TUNNEL OF THE SUN WITNESS

Gilgamesh did. He passed through. He returned. He told.

CHORUS

You bear testimony?

TUNNEL OF THE SUN WITNESS  
I do. I tell of the Scorpion People, and the Tunnel of the Sun.

Ceremonially:

Listen: I had this from my great-grandfather, whose grandfather’s grandfather had it from his great-grandfather, who had it in a direct line from his thrice-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, who had it first-hand from the boatman Urshanabi, who had it from great king Gilgamesh himself!

The Witnesses briefly become more human, less vegetal and mineral. They are suitably

impressed.

TUNNEL OF THE SUN WITNESS

A terrible, wind-raked place was this jut of mountains. It held no sign anywhere of anything of *us,* or *ours*—nothing human—only cliff face; and crag-jaw; and the thin, chill pallor of the sky.

The ranks of the Witnesses thin as if wind-

blown; any who remain take on the shapes

and character of the mountain landscape.

TUNNEL OF THE SUN WITNESS

But what the Scorpion People stood sentinel to was not the mountains, but a tunnel—the

Tunnel of the Sun.

CHORUS

The sun goes down into the mountains.

Where it slots into a great tunnel, and rolls like a boulder in a groove—

From below the western horizon to below the eastern horizon.

Until coming up out of its plummet, it rises high into an arc of sky—

And blazes back across the face of the world toward the mountains—

Where, plunged into its tunnel, it rollicks through the dark of the world—

And out again.

Forever and again and forever, for such is the cycle of the sun.

TUNNEL OF THE SUN WITNESS

And in their crag-hardness, in their sun-radiance, in the scuttle of their swiftness, these

Scorpion People were terrible to behold. Just to *look* at them could kill an ordinary man.

SCORPION MAN

Who’s that coming toward us, wife?

SCORPION WOMAN

Not an ordinary man, husband. Partly human; two-thirds a god, by my reckoning.

SCORPION MAN

Ho! Traveler! State your business, if you please!

SCORPION WOMAN

Ho! Traveler! What *he* said! My Scorpion Man!

VOICE OF GILGAMESH

I seek Utnapishtim, my ancestor, the immortal. I wish to question him about the nature of life and death.

SCORPION WOMAN

A long journey you’ve set out on, then!

SCORPION MAN

Not that *that* matters much.

SCORPION WOMAN

Since nobody has ever completed the first leg of it!

SCORPION MAN

Ho! What *she* said! My Scorpion Woman!

They laugh an eerie, craggy, scuttling laugh.

GILGAMESH *(entering)*

Then I will be the first.

SCORPION MAN

Mmh. So, traveler—what’s your name, by the by?

GILGAMESH

I am Gilgamesh—

SCORPION MAN

Well, then, Gilgamesh—

GILGAMESH *(continuing)*

King of Uruk, slayer of Humbaba and of the Bull of Heaven.

SCORPION WOMAN

Oh, *that* Gilgamesh!

They laugh the craggy, scuttling laugh.

GILGAMESH

My need, sentinels, is great. It is in cold and in hunger that I travel, and in heartbreak, yet I cannot be turned from my path. Do you mean to assist me, or to assault me?

SCORPION MAN

Oh, as far as that goes, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk—and two-thirds divine by our reckoning,

which may make things interesting—you’re welcome to our complete indifference.

SCORPION WOMAN

Follow the sun into that cave. Run from one side to the other of the world. Outracing it.

SCORPION MAN

Dense the darkness is in there, and not a scrap of light there’ll be—

SCORPION WOMAN

Till it gets back!

SCORPION MAN

Outracing *you*, as the sun does tend to do!

SCORPION WOMAN

And then there'll be a *lot* of light. Too much for you, perhaps.

BOTH *(laughing the laugh)*

What *she/he* said! My Scorpion Man/Woman!

SCORPION WOMAN

Go right ahead, though, dear—Mâsha is open to you. *Maybe* you’ll make it.

CHORUS

Banded in color and glare, the sun began to set. It was as if the peaks jostled to catch it. The very landscape seemed to shift, as the sun roared into the rift between the two heads of the mountain. With a roar all his own, Gilgamesh plunged in after it, riding the fiery embers of its wake.

TUNNEL OF THE SUN WITNESS

King Gilgamesh himself it was who told the boatman Urshanabi, who told my ancestors’

ancestors’ ancestor what happened in that tunnel. The tunnel of the sun.

CHORUS

And told it true?

TUNNEL OF THE SUN WITNESS

Sure. How else could Gilgamesh have lived to meet the boatman?

VOICE OF GILGAMESH, *from sudden darkness*

Two hours, I hurtled through its darkness, behind and before the hurtling sun.

Not once did I stop, or waver.

For four hours, I raced into that darkness, with only the echoes of my breath

and the pounding of my stride to steer me, to sound my path between the walls.

Six hours in that tunnel, then eight hours, then twelve hours, sixteen,

yet never did I pause, or waver, as I chased the sun's last hint of twilight,

as I outpaced the sun's first hint of dawn light.

Twenty hours, and twenty-four, seeing only darkness,

following only a far whiff of air, towards a faint hope of sky.

Twenty-six hours I hurtled, the sun hurtling hard behind me now, and twenty-eight.

Until at the twenty-ninth hour—the sun’s great howl and hiss of fire

breaking almost upon my back— I broke through

into a world of light.

A dazzle of light; we see Gilgamesh on the

ground, collapsed and breathless.

TUNNEL OF THE SUN WITNESS

The light of sunrise, it was, at the far end of the world.

And a great blaze of precious gems, also—because now Gilgamesh was at a place

where no one the likes of *us* has ever been; where things work differently;

so that the flowers, the fruit-trees and the shrubs,

all the plant life he could see,

grew in a latticed garden of living diamonds and rubies, of emeralds and pearls,

carnelians and amethysts; of lapis lazuli; of sapphires and of gold!

So my ancestors have told to me as true, and so I affirm to you, in their name.

Chorus plays a transitional music. The scene

shifts. The Witnesses reshape themselves, to

evoke the next new landscape.

**ACT 3, scene three: THE BAR AT THE END OF THE WORLD**

CHORUS

But what are the marvels of such a garden to Gilgamesh?

What is this half-death of exhaustion to him?

He rises; he walks beyond the brilliance of light into the emptiness;

White sand, and in the distance the sea;

And at its margin, a single building.

BAR WITNESS

Shamash spoke to him as he walked there.

CHORUS

Excuse me?

BAR WITNESS

The god, Shamash? He spoke to him.

General mild skeptical confusion. No one

has heard this detail before.

BAR WITNESS

Listen, I had this from my great-grandmother, whose grandmother’s great-great-grandmother had it from her great-grandmother, who had it in a direct line from her thrice-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother who had it first-hand from the boatman Urshanabi. Who she said had it from the great king Gilgamesh himself.

CHORUS

Sweet. So bear your witness.

The Witnesses are still impressed, but a bit less so this second time around.

BAR WITNESS

Just a voice in his ear the god Shamash was, you understand. “Gilgamesh, where are you running to? *Why* are you running?” And with a whisper of his thin, hoarse breath—Gilgamesh replied:

GILGAMESH

Shall I rest my brow on the earth and sleep my life away?

Or if not—if I am to be awake; if I must live—

What else can I *do* with my life, my lord, but this?

BAR WITNESS

And so he barely noticed that he had arrived at a building; or that it was a bar; or that the

barmaid was speaking to him.

SIDURI *(the same actress, but a different character)*

No need to talk to yourself, now, sugar. Bartenders exist for you to tell your troubles to—

especially if you manage the trek all the way out to the bar at the end of the world.

GILGAMESH *(looking around)*

There’s nobody else here.

SIDURI *(serving him)*

Well, duh, the bar at the end of the world. I'm Siduri. The barmaid.

GILGAMESH

Of the bar at the end of the world.

He laughs: incredulity, exhaustion,

depletion. He pours a little beer into his

palm, to splash his face. He laps up the

last of it, gestures for more.

SIDURI

And you’re a little scary.

GILGAMESH *(wearily)*

Gilgamesh. King of Uruk. Legendary hero. Slayer of the great Humbaba, who was steward

of the Cedar Forest. Vanquisher of the Bull of Heaven.

SIDURI

Wow, that was stirring. So what happened, legendary hero? Why the dark circles, the sunken cheeks, the limp little wilted strut?

GILGAMESH

Siduri, your name is? Gilgamesh.

SIDURI

King, hero, tough guy. You said.

GILGAMESH

Well, Siduri, tell me. If you were me, would you be doing any better?

SIDURI

Because?

GILGAMESH

Because Enkidu is dead. My friend. My brother. My… My other self. For a week, I wouldn’t even let them bury him, Siduri, and then, and then—afterwards, I didn’t know what to do with myself! How can someone like Enkidu—so…alive—be dead?

SIDURI

And, this Enkidu—was he also a legendary hero, maybe?

Gilgamesh takes in what she’s implying.

GILGAMESH

Oh. Well, that too, a little. Oh, I do want him back. But yes, you’re right, I’ve thought about it. If he can die, then so can I. Turn back to clay. To dirt.

SIDURI

So why are you here? On some kind of quest for a sliver of eternal life? Oh, you poor baby! Let me give you the speech, dear: we were born to die. Only the gods get to live forever, and lusting after some dream prize you can’t have trashes the one you won. The *real* prize. More scampi?

GILGAMESH

And another pitcher, please.

SIDURI

They may not have meant to, Gilgamesh, but the gods gave you something. A piece of fire and feeling that they don't get. Because if they can't die, how can they know what it is to *live*? This food, this drink—so good! You may never taste its like again. The feel of this cloth; the thrill of just that phrase of music. Dancing, sex, kids. Do life right, sugar, and it is *yours*. Your *ride*, your sweet right *now*. You work it with your hands. You make a place, a home, a life. Nothing can take that from you, Gilgamesh. You forge yourself in it—in its fire; in its feeling. You claim it!

GILGAMESH *(stirring back into himself)*

Nothing *did* take it! I claimed it, the nothing *took* it, and now it’s gone! I *know* the *speech*!

SIDURI

Maybe. You're not hearing it yet, though, sweetheart.

GILGAMESH *(at long last decisive again)*

What I need from you are *directions*; how do I find Utnapishtim? Here—there—how?

SIDURI

That's the spirit! Utnapishtim it is! Get up and go at it, hero!

BAR WITNESS *(transforming back)*

But what Siduri told him wasn’t encouraging. To find Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh would need to cross an ocean; and across this ocean—because of its breadth; because of the Waters of Death at the vast heart of it—there was only one way.

COMPANY

Urshanabi!

BAR WITNESS

The boatman of the Far Ocean. My great-grandmom’s grandmom’s great-great-grandmom’s great-grandmom’s thrice-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmom knew the guy personally, you know?

SIDURI *(back into character)*

He has the only boat that can get across it. Go talk to him—he’s somewhere in those trees, gathering wood. He’ll have his Stone Men with him, you can’t miss him.

Gilgamesh nods his thanks and rises.

SIDURI

But Gilgamesh… He may be difficult to persuade.

GILGAMESH

Oh, I can be persuasive.

And Gilgamesh is gone.

SIDURI

Riiight. Like a sledgehammer. Poor baby.

BAR WITNESS

Well, mmh. That’s all I have. My people have always been more into bars than boats. So… I solemnly attest that I have borne true witness.

She retreats. The Witnesses reset the scene,

as the bar vanishes. We are now at a nearby

part of the seashore, fringed by tall woods.

**ACT 3, scene four: POLE, POLE, POLE YOUR BOAT**

CHORUS

And so it came to pass that—

FAR OCEAN WITNESS

I’ll tell this.

CHORUS

Let us guess.

You had this from your great-grandsomebody,

Whose grandsomeone’s great-great-granddoodad, or doomom,

Had it from his or her great-grandsomething,

Who had it in a direct line from his, or her

Thrice-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandthingummy,

Who had it first-hand from the boatman Urshanabi—

FAR OCEAN WITNESS

Who *was* the boatman Urshanabi. The boatman of the Far Ocean.

CHORUS

Sorry? *Was* the?

FAR OCEAN WITNESS

*Was* the. Who had it from king Gilgamesh. But you threw in some extra greats.

CHORUS

Sorry.

FAR OCEAN WITNESS

Don’t mention it.

CHORUS

We won’t then.

FAR OCEAN WITNESS

Good.

GILGAMESH

Aaaaaarrrrgggh!

Gilgamesh charges at the Ocean Witness—

who also plays URSHANABI.

FAR OCEAN WITNESS / URSHANABI

Are you a madman?

GILGAMESH

Quite possibly. Are you Urshanabi, the boatman of the Far Ocean?

URSHANABI

Quite possibly. The answer may depend on the nature of your madness.

GILGAMESH

I need you to take me to Utnapishtim. I’m told you may need some persuading.

URSHANABI

Decapitating me with an axe may not be effective.

GILGAMESH

Not persuaded, then? Let me show you what this axe can do.

He charges off into the forest. Throughout

the next exchange we hear screams.