

TANTALUS

By Victoria Maria Moyer

CHARACTERS

TANTALUS Affectionate mother, a devoted worshipper of her personal gods and goddesses, impulsive, intelligent

PELOPS Her child. Curious, smart, stubborn, emotional, quirky, a little selfish; 11 or 12 years old

GODS AND GODDESSES (NOT PLAYED ON STAGE BY ACTORS; HOWEVER, PRE-RECORDED VOICE-OVERS WILL BE NEEDED)

ZEUS

HERA

APOLLO

DIONYSUS

HADES

ARTEMIS

DEMETER

NOTES:

1. The appearance of the mannequins should be somewhat unsettling, but the more simplistic and less decorative the better. Simple white styrofoam heads with makeup on them can be stuck onto wooden poles for an appropriate effect.

2. The "secrets" recited by the gods are often direct quotes from poets and philosophers, namely Friedrich Nietzsche, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Walt Whitman, and Rumi.

3. The gods' voices are unique and if possible should be recorded with 7 different voices. The voices could be those of children for interesting effect. In our production, we used digitized somewhat robotic sounding voices, but each voice was tonally different.

SCENE [1]: DANCING WITH THE GODS

(A dim room prepared for a ritual, replete with candles, perhaps incense, ambient music, etc. There are 7 mannequin-like bodies set up around the room. A young woman, TANTALUS, offers a gift of intimacy to each of the mannequins as she addresses each one by name.)

TANTALUS:

My beloved Zeus! My one true father, ruler of all kingdoms, I want to be nearer to you and your steadfastness.

And my beloved Hera! Equally glorious, the one true mother, you birthed me and allow me to give birth.

Apollo! You alone awaken the poetry and music in my soul, you are my imagination.

Dionysus! You created my body for pleasure. Dionysus. Your name upon my lips is the sweetest kiss.

Hades! Balancer of all things, you are justice, you are temperance, you are death and also deathless.

Artemis! Queen of the moon, your wild whispers climb between my ribs and caress my heart.

Demeter! The earth pulsates and the seasons change at your command. You are my sustenance.

In all of your presence, I am unworthy and yet you allow me to stay with you. I love you.

ZEUS:

My child. We welcome you. You are blessed among the mortals.

HADES:

But do not forget that you are mortal.

HERA:

And Hades, do not forget that you are ruled by me.

ZEUS:

Tantalus, beautiful child, you have grown in favor with the gods. Ask and you shall receive.

HERA:

Ask and you shall receive.

TANTALUS

I want to know. The secret. The secret meanings of everything. I want to know the secrets of the universe.

HERA:

So you shall receive a secret from each one of us.

ZEUS:

But you must promise never to repeat these words to another mortal.

TANTALUS:

Oh, father! I promise!

(Lights may shift as the gods recite their secrets. Tantalus may perform some sort of ritual dance or trance as she receives the secrets.)

ZEUS:

Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again.

HERA:

You have to keep breaking your heart until it opens.

APOLLO:

Truth is a pathless land. The content of your consciousness is your entire existence.

DIONYSUS:

You are the universe in ecstatic motion.

ARTEMIS:

Every hour of the light and dark is a miracle, every inch of space is a miracle.

DEMETER:

If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

HADES:

What hurts you, blesses you.

(These voice-over secrets may be played again, looped in an overlapping fashion, until Tantalus finishes her dance. The last secret by Hades should always be heard clearly.)

PELOPS (offstage):

Mom! Mommmyyyyyy!

TANTALUS:

Coming!

(Tantalus blows out the candles and quickly exits.)

SCENE [2]: TANTALUS AND PELOPS

(Dining room with small table and chairs. Pelops is seated at the table, staring at a small jar they are clutching. Tantalus enters.)

TANTALUS:

Pelops! I thought you were going to have dinner with Josiah's family tonight. Something the matter?

(Pelops is silent and unmoving.)

TANTALUS:

Sweetie?

(She goes to her and kisses her on the forehead.)

TANTALUS:

What's wrong?

(Pelops shows Tantalus the contents of the jar.)

TANTALUS:

What is th--oh. I'm sorry.

(Pause.)

How did it happen?

(Pelops gazes at the jar. Long silence before they can speak.)

PELOPS:

I let Josiah play with him and when he gave him back he was like this.

(Holding back tears)

I hate Josiah.

TANTALUS:

I'm sure it was an accident, sweetie.

PELOPS: (getting angrier)

How could it be an accident! Look at him! Look at him!

TANTALUS: (looking at the jar and taking it from Pelops)

I know it can be hard to understand. But, you know...

(Voice of Zeus simultaneously speaks as
Tantalus speaks:)

Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally
rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything
blossoms again.

PELOPS:

What?

(Tantalus continues to gaze at the
jar.)

I'm going to kill Josiah.

TANTALUS:

You're not going to kill Josiah.

PELOPS:

I am. I'm going to kill Josiah. I'm going to strangle
him so that his face turns purple like Buddy's. I'm
going to make him cry first and then I'm going to kill
him.

TANTALUS:

Pelops! Stop it.

(Pelops gets up and moves towards the
door. Tantalus blocks their way.)

Where are you going?

PELOPS:

I told you! Look what he did to Buddy! It's not fair!

TANTALUS:

I know it's hard, I know, but you can't kill your
friend!

PELOPS:

I have to!

(Tantalus improvises methods to stop
Pelops from leaving and places them
back in the chair. Tantalus offers a
gesture of comfort.)

TANTALUS: (Softly, with
voice of Hades speaking
simultaneously)

What hurts you blesses you.

PELOPS:

What?

(Pause)

Mommy, can we have smiley face fries for dinner?

TANTALUS:

We don't have those.

PELOPS:

You didn't buy me smiley face fries?!

TANTALUS:

Don't say that.

PELOPS:

I hate you.

TANTALUS:

You don't mean it.

PELOPS:

Today at school Madison peed her pants! Can we have chicken nuggets for dinner? Do we have chicken nuggets? Do we have macaroni? I want a snack. Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy...

(Voices of the gods chanting Tantalus' name overlap with Pelops chanting "mommy." Pelops continues ad-lib recounting events as Tantalus is drawn towards the voice of the gods and drifts away from Pelops.)

SCENE [3]: EXILE FROM THE GODS

(In the ritual room again with the mannequins. Harsher atmosphere. Voices of the gods menacingly repeat Tantalus' name, building in volume.)

ALL GODS: (alternating,
rhythmically)

Tantalus. Tantalussss. TANTALUS! TANTALUS
TANTALUSSSSSS!

TANTALUS:

WHAT?

ZEUS AND HERA:

You betrayed us.

HADES:

These abominable sacks of mortal flesh are never to be trusted.

TANTALUS:

What have I done?

APOLLO:

You told our secrets, Tantalussss.

TANTALUS:

I--

DEMETER:

Oh, Tantalus, I believed in you.

ARTEMIS:

You have broken our hearts.

TANTALUS:

I didn't mean to. My child--they needed comfort.

DIONYSUS:

We are not here for COMFORT!

(Voices of gods chant in agreement of Dionysus' statement. Angry chatter escalates until Zeus' voice:)

ZEUS:

Silence! Tantalus, for your crime against the gods you shall be exiled from our company forever. No longer are you welcome here. No longer shall we commune together, eat and dance together. You are mortal and you shall dwell in your own human filth until the end of your days.

TANTALUS:

Father, please forgive me.

ZEUS AND HERA:

Silence!

HERA:

Leave us.

ALL GODS:

LEAVE US!

(Tantalus does a dance of fury and abandonment; she is now alone or in a liminal space between the gods and her child.)

TANTALUS:

Human filth!
 Who says I must bow to them?
 They will not accept my apology, so I will show them
 their own folly. Perhaps I have sinned...
 and so shall they.
 They will see that they, too, transgress
 They will eat their words
 They will eat this human filth

SCENE [4]: THE FUNERAL

(Pelops is in an empty room except for a small altar upon which is the jar with Buddy. Perhaps cheesy funeral music plays. They kneel before the altar and recite the eulogy. Tantalus watches quietly. As the eulogy progresses, Tantalus slowly walks towards Pelops and sits down and hugs them from behind. Pelops might gently acknowledge their mother's presence.)

PELOPS:

Dear Buddy,

Thank you for being my friend. You were so pretty and so little. I remember the time you pooped and accidentally stepped in it and I had to clean you. I remember the first time you made a chirp sound and I chirped back at you. You made me happy, even when you wouldn't sleep when it was time to sleep. I'm sorry about Josiah. I hope he didn't hurt you too much and that death felt OK and you weren't too scared. I miss you a lot already. I will never forget your black balloon eyes or your silly wings that never worked. I wish you at least had the chance to fly before you died. Maybe you are flying now wherever you are. I wish you could talk and tell me where you went when you died. Thank you for making me smile. I had fun taking care of you. Do you want to be buried next to a tree? The one near my house? The one with really big leaves that we sat under that time it rained and mommy wasn't home yet?

(Tantalus begins to hug Pelops harder and harder and wraps her arms around their face and mouth. Pelops writhes and tries to push their mom off but Tantalus is strong and determined. As Tantalus squeezes harder, she speaks her phrase as if it were a mantra:)

TANTALUS:

Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally
rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything
blossoms again.

(Pelops is dead, limp in the arms of
Tantalus.)

What hurts you blesses you.

(Lights out for a moment. When they
come back on, Tantalus is pouring what
looks like bloody flesh from a jar onto
a plate.)

SCENE [5]: TRICKING THE GODS

(Room with the seven mannequins. Even more menacing atmosphere than before. Tantalus, smeared with blood, is holding a serving platter with fresh meat upon it. She offers the meat to the mannequins as if trying to get a young child to eat from a spoon.)

TANTALUS: (sweetly)

I've come to ask again for forgiveness. I brought a gift.

(Silence)

TANTALUS:

You must try it. I spent all day preparing it just for you.

(Silence. Tantalus approaches each god individually to offer the food.)

TANTALUS:

Mmmm. Doesn't it smell delicious? It really is food fit for the gods...don't you want to try? Just a bite. You will see how much love I put into it. I poured all the love I have into it. I offer you my precious gift. Please, please...

(Tantalus arrives at the final god Demeter and holds the spoon very close to her face. She brings it closer and closer to the mannequin face and begins to "feed" her.)

Just try it! YES! YOU WANT TO TASTE IT! Ha, ha, ha, yes, you are eating it! You are eating the flesh of a mortal! You have sinned, stupid stupid god, you are eating the baby!

(Becoming angrier, louder, as if seized by a powerful force outside of herself. She becomes so inflamed that she smashes the spoon into Demeter's face, violently penetrating the styrofoam.)

VOICES OF THE GODS: (booming,
yet sad and weary)

What have you done?

(Tantalus falls to the ground,
desperately trying to remove the spoon
from the mannequin's face. She is
hysterical.)

TANTALUS: (wailing)

No, no, no, no... My baby.

(Once she removes the spoon, Tantalus
cradles the bloody mannequin head in
her arms, as if it were the body of a
baby.)

VOICES OF THE GODS:

Punishment.

SCENE [6]: PUNISHMENT

(Tantalus hums a lullaby and continues cradling the flesh-covered mannequin head while the gods describe the punishment. In our production, we had the voice of Pelops read these lines instead. Perhaps Tantalus removes an article of clothing and creates the image of a swaddled baby that she can rock back and forth.)

ZEUS:

You spend the rest of eternity waist-deep in a lake.
Above, you see luscious red and purple fruits
dangling from the branches of a tree
a big tree with big leaves.

HERA:

You stretch your arms towards the fruits, hungry,
starving, desperate.
But the tree moves farther from your arms. You can
never get closer.
You are thirsty, yearning deeply for a sip of cool
water, you bend down towards the water
but it moves away from your mouth.
You open your mouth to receive a droplet of rain,
but the big leaves on the big tree shield you from
water.
Your lips and tongue will never again be wet.

HADES:

You want to die but you cannot die. You want to move
but you cannot move. You are here forever.

DEMETER:

You cannot speak. You hear voices but can never
answer.
What have you done? Who are you? Why are you here?
What have you done? Who are you? Why are you here?

HADES:

Hungry. Thirsty. What have you done? You are here
forever.

(Blackout.)