

TORN

by Jeffrey B. Snyder



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Torn

A play for Holy Week

by Jeffrey B. Snyder

CAST OF CHARACTERS

OLD RABBI JACOB – Narrator.

YOUNG RABBI JACOB – He's Old Rabbi Jacob in his younger years.

CROWD MEMBERS 1-3 – May be done with two if necessary by redistributing the lines.

JOHN – Jesus' disciple.

MARY – Jesus' mother.

SIMON – Jesus' brother.

RABBI ISAAC – High Priest who witnessed the tearing of the temple curtain.

PRODUCTION NOTES

For as long as we have been able to communicate with one another, storytelling has played an important role. Lively storytelling has been used to pass along valuable information in a way that is always memorable and easily understood. Little has been written about the tearing of the temple cloth in Jerusalem during the crucifixion of Jesus. Here, a distraught young temple priest and a grieving disciple provide vivid tales of loss and vulnerability from both sides of the Crucifixion event. There is no blame placed in this play for the events that are portrayed, but there is a challenge given for everyone who watches the story unfold.

I wrote this piece in the clear understanding that lives today are busier than ever. A few actors may perform this one-act drama with minimal practice in its simplest form. The Crowd characters may even be pulled from the congregation and given lines to read with minimal preparation the day the play is given. With the addition of costumes, set pieces, and longer rehearsals, *Torn* may become a more complex drama.

Simple costumes will help set the scene and draw the audience into the performance. Both the men and women may wear solid-colored or striped floor-length standard biblical robes and a *kaffiyeh*, or headpiece – a rectangular length of fabric. The men should tie a piece of cord around their heads to keep the cloth in place, while the women wear it loose and draped around their faces. The costumes for Mary and John would be fairly plain. More elaborate robes for the temple priests would be appropriate and, if you are feeling bold, the high priest's robes were blue, and he wore a twelve-stone breastplate as well, signifying the twelve tribes of Israel. At the least, ensure that their appearance is more luxurious than the other characters.

The play utilizes two sets, the temple in Jerusalem and the Crucifixion. The Jerusalem temple set is located Stage

Right, and the Crucifixion scene is located Upstage Left, giving it some separation from the Jerusalem location where most of the action will take place. I recommend that the temple curtain itself, the object of so much consternation and discussion, is located off set, with the characters looking and motioning in that direction as needed. The same is true of the cross holding Jesus' body. The temple may be portrayed with painted gold columns or something similar to establish its opulence. In contrast, the Crucifixion scene may simply hold some assorted plants to show that it takes place outdoors.

The telling of this tale requires roughly twenty-five minutes uninterrupted. There are natural breaks in the drama into which musical interludes could be placed. However you choose to use this resource, I hope it adds another positive note to your experience of the Lenten season.

(OLD RABBI JACOB stands at Downstage Center with the two sets darkened behind him, if possible. CROWD MEMBERS 1-3 freeze at the temple scene. JOHN, MARY, and SIMON freeze at the Crucifixion scene.)

OLD RABBI JACOB: (*Remembering an eventful day of his youth*)

The day they crucified that radical rabbi Jesus — what a fiasco! I'll never forget it. The priests in power believed they had crushed a threat to their authority, and before the day was done, they had lost far more than they gained. Really, it *was* a political fiasco. Crucifixion during the high holy holidays? What a mess! So public. Oh, I see from the look on your face that I need to speed it up, get to the point. Pardon me, an old man rambling. Anyway, I was a young priest then, looking forward to the day when I would be the high priest and lead services at the temple in Jerusalem. My fondest desire was to have the rope tied around my ankle and proceed past the curtain separating the public space from God's inner temple. To stand before the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat, to meet God directly, to see if I would be found worthy or struck dead and drug out by the ankle beyond the curtain in defeat. But that day I could only watch Rabbi Isaac from a distance as he entered, burning with the desire to replace him. Then I wandered away, as no one was watching me and I had no particular duty at that moment.

It was late in the day now, and all afternoon the crowd at the temple had been speaking of the most remarkable things. The day was overcast, to be sure, but some claimed the sky had rumbled and the ground shook in response. I felt nothing. Others claimed the dead were awake and walking the countryside. I saw nothing. Some claimed the voices among the reawakened belonged to the prophets of ages past. I heard nothing. I was smug in

1 my assurance that none of these things had happened. I
 2 dismissed it all, attributing it to the turmoil caused by
 3 that absurd crucifixion.

4 The entrance I now stood at was on the opposite side
 5 of the temple from the inner chamber, so I knew nothing
 6 of the uproar inside until one of the congregants came to
 7 get me. He told me Rabbi Isaac had run from the temple,
 8 screaming! Something about the temple curtain. I made
 9 my way through the anxious crowd, feeling an odd mix of
 10 fear and guilt: fear that on this day when so much was
 11 unsettled, someone had lost his head and done
 12 something awful, and guilt that I had been away from my
 13 post when the commotion started. Thus began the most
 14 remarkable day of my life. (*OLD RABBI JACOB freezes. The*
 15 *temple set at Stage Right is now lit as the action begins.*)

16 YOUNG RABBI JACOB: (*Bursts out into the temple proper.*) The
 17 temple has been desecrated! The inner curtain has been
 18 destroyed! God's sacred space is violated, and —

19 CROWD MEMBER 1: What does it mean?

20 CROWD MEMBER 2: God is angry with us!

21 CROWD MEMBER 1: What have we done?

22 CROWD MEMBER 3: What commandment have we violated?

23 CROWD MEMBER 2: No, not us! Them, the *priests* ...

24 CROWD MEMBER 3: No, that Jesus ... back from the dead like
 25 the prophets!

26 YOUNG RABBI JACOB: No! The radical rabbi Jesus is dead.

27 But his disciples! They could have done it. Yes, disciples.

28 CROWD MEMBER 1: Rabbi Jacob, one of *them* was hanging
 29 around the cross all afternoon. Maybe *he* did it.

30 YOUNG RABBI JACOB: Or knows who did! Find him; bring
 31 him to me! And find Rabbi Isaac. *He* should be able to
 32 recognize the criminal. Bring them both back here. Now!
 33 (*YOUNG RABBI JACOB and CROWD freeze and/or lights dim*
 34 *for temple set and rise on the Crucifixion scene at Upstage Left*
 35 *where JOHN, MARY, and SIMON are talking.*)

1 **JOHN:** (*Reaching forward to touch MARY's shoulder as MARY faces*
 2 *the cross, looking up, but never quite touching her.*) **Mary, it's**
 3 **over now. Let's go, let's leave ...**

4 **MARY:** (*Looking up at the cross, reaches out toward Jesus, still*
 5 *hanging on the cross, then slowly, hopelessly, pulls her arms*
 6 *back, hands to her face in a gesture of helplessness.*) **I can't,**
 7 **John. What will they do with my son? How do I know**
 8 **they'll ...**

9 **JOHN:** (*Gently touches MARY's shoulder and turns her away from*
 10 *the cross, toward himself.*) **Don't worry. Joseph is seeing to**
 11 **it. He has a tomb ready — his own tomb, Mary. He'll make**
 12 **sure they take Jesus there. We'll go there later and see.**
 13 **But for now, come with me. You need some rest.**

14 **SIMON:** We should've drug him home when we had the
 15 chance, Mother. He never knew when to quit. Now look
 16 what they did to him. Just look what they've done to my
 17 brother. I knew —

18 **JOHN:** Stop it! That's not helping. I'm not all that good with
 19 words. I'm far too blunt, and this has been an awful day
 20 for all of us. Now, before I say anything I'm going to
 21 regret, to you or to Mary, if you want to help, give me a
 22 hand with your mother. Let's get her off this hill, back to
 23 town. She's seen too much as it is.

24 **SIMON:** (*Pointing*) **John! Look — coming up from town. Here's**
 25 **trouble.** (*The lights fade on the Crucifixion scene and rise again*
 26 *on the temple set. Back at the temple, the disciple JOHN is*
 27 *brought in by the YOUNG RABBI JACOB. MARY and her son,*
 28 *SIMON, arm protectively around her, are among the people in*
 29 *the crowd at the temple watching what is happening.*)

30 **CROWD MEMBER 1:** Did you see? The priest took him right
 31 back to the curtain.

32 **CROWD MEMBER 2:** He was furious. I'll bet he plans to kill
 33 that disciple.

34 **CROWD MEMBER 1** How?

35 **CROWD MEMBER 2:** The Ark, of course. To look upon the Ark

- 1 of the Covenant is death to all but the chosen few.
- 2 CROWD MEMBER 1: Death?
- 3 CROWD MEMBER 2: Sure. God smites the unworthy if they
- 4 appear before him and his Ark.
- 5 CROWD MEMBER 1: So, think he'll kill the disciple?
- 6 CROWD MEMBER 2: The priest?
- 7 CROWD MEMBER 1: No, God.
- 8 CROWD MEMBER 2: We'll see. (*YOUNG RABBI JACOB brings*
- 9 *JOHN back into the room.*)
- 10 YOUNG RABBI JACOB: Well, did you do it? Did *you* desecrate
- 11 the temple? Or was it one of the other rabble, one of
- 12 Jesus' other followers?
- 13 JOHN: (*He is so startled by what he has just seen that he is not*
- 14 *listening ... yet.*) I saw it. I grew up hearing about it. The
- 15 Ark. The mercy seat. The very heart of the great temple.
- 16 I always wondered about it, and now ...
- 17 YOUNG RABBI JACOB: Answer me! Which one of you did it?
- 18 Who?
- 19 JOHN: Did it? You can't mean split that giant curtain, can
- 20 you? (*Demonstrates.*) Why, it's as thick as my palm! I have
- 21 great respect for the temple, always have.
- 22 YOUNG RABBI JACOB: Of course I mean it! Who split the
- 23 temple curtain, who violated God's holy space? You
- 24 wanted revenge. You did it. It's obvious.
- 25 JOHN: Are you insane? Haven't you done enough already?!
- 26 YOUNG RABBI JACOB: It had to be one of you. There have
- 27 always been firebrands in your group. Real troublemakers.
- 28 I've heard the stories, I've ... Wait — haven't I done
- 29 enough of *what* already?
- 30 JOHN: Taken enough from us.
- 31 YOUNG RABBI JACOB: Me? From you?
- 32 JOHN: Yes, and it wasn't enough, was it? I see what this is.
- 33 Now you want us all. So you set this up. Hoping for a
- 34 whole line of crosses out on Golgotha, are you? Hoping to
- 35 impress the Romans with a group execution just like

- 1 theirs? The first one didn't take long enough, is that it?
- 2 **YOUNG RABBI JACOB:** What?! How dare you! You can't talk
- 3 to me that way.
- 4 **JOHN:** Why not? You've already marked me for death, haven't
- 5 you? Deference won't save me now, will it? You just
- 6 couldn't be happy with one.
- 7 **YOUNG RABBI JACOB:** I had nothing to do with the decision
- 8 to kill your rabbi, your precious Jesus. I said it was a
- 9 mistake, a killing during the holy week. Horrible. But
- 10 they don't listen. No, they never listen. So sure of
- 11 themselves.
- 12 **JOHN:** So you'd have picked a more convenient time — a quiet
- 13 time with fewer witnesses?
- 14 **YOUNG RABBI JACOB:** I wouldn't have killed him at all! I'd
- 15 have just let him talk himself out, box himself into a
- 16 corner. These so-called messiahs always do. But (*Slowly,*
- 17 *with emphasis*) that is not the point. You sought revenge.
- 18 One of you or a group of you. You came here during the
- 19 storm in all the commotion, made your way through the
- 20 crowd, and violated the temple to get even. Destroyed
- 21 God's sanctuary in return for them taking your messiah.
- 22 I know you did. You might as well admit it.
- 23 **JOHN:** There's no point. You've already convicted me, haven't
- 24 you? And in front of witnesses, too. Very clever.
- 25 **CROWD MEMBER 3:** He didn't die. He saw the Ark and lived!
- 26 **CROWD MEMBER 1:** What does it mean?
- 27 **CROWD MEMBER 3:** I don't care what it means. If he saw it
- 28 and lived, so can I. I'm going. Come on. They'll never
- 29 notice. They're too busy blaming each other.
- 30 **CROWD MEMBER 2:** And in the temple. So unseemly.
- 31 **CROWD MEMBER 3:** Come on. I'm going to see what they've
- 32 always kept from me. I'm going to see where God sat.
- 33 (*CROWD MEMBERS 1-3 exit.*)
- 34 **YOUNG RABBI JACOB:** All my life I waited for the day I could
- 35 walk through that curtain and come face to face with



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