

PLAYS FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

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2400 THIRD AVENUE SOUTH
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA 55404

612-872-5108

FAX 612-874-8119

www.playsforyoungaudiences.org

Arabian Nights

by
Toby Hulse

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Arabian Nights

The Hakawati – a storyteller

The Tale of King Dara al-Saeed and Princess Cyra

King Dara al-Saeed

Princess Cyra

Haroun

Kashifah

Shadha

The Tale of the Young Prince Dara al-Saeed

Dara's Mother

Dara's Father

The Young Prince Dara

Seer

The Tale of the Fisherman and the Bottle

Aaqil, the Rubbish Fisherman

Djinni of the Bottle

The Tale of the Ebony Horse

Kamar al-Akmar

Princess Yelda

The Heartless Tyrant

One Hundred and One Mounted Soldiers

The King of All Merrie England

The Tale of the Caliph's Son and the Large and Rather Ugly Tortoise

Caliph

The Caliph's Youngest Son

The Large and Rather Ugly Tortoise

Princess Wayuk

Princess Kabiha

The Tale of the Wonderful Bag

Samira

Abdul

The Tale of Ala al-Din

Ala al-din

Mother

African Magician

Djinni of the Ring

Djinni of the Lamp

Soldier

Princess Badr al-Budur

Princess Badr al-Budur's Handmaiden

SUGGESTED DOUBLING

Actor 1 KING DARA AL-SAEED, who plays incidentally Prince Dara al-Saeed

Actor 2 THE HAKAWATI, Djinni of the Bottle, The Heartless Tyrant, The Caliph's Youngest Son, Djinni of the Lamp

Actor 3 HAROUN, King Dara al-Saeed's Father, Aaqil, Kamar al-Akmar, Caliph, Abdul, African Magician, Soldier

Actor 4 PRINCESS CYRA, The Large and Rather Ugly Tortoise, Ala al-Din

Actor 5 KASHIFAH, King Dara al-Saeed's Mother, Princess Wayuk, Samira, Djinni of the Ring, Princess Badr al-Budur

Actor 6 SHADHA, Seer, Princess Kabiha, Princess Yelda, Ala al-Din's Mother, Princess Badr al-Budur's Handmaiden

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ACT ONE

The Palace of King Dara al-Saeed.

*The **HAKAWATI** greets us.*

HAKAWATI As-Salaamu `Alaykum. Greetings. It is a pleasure to meet you all. Welcome to the palace of King Dara al-Saeed, a palace of infinite riches, and wonders beyond compare. It is in this palace that our story is set.

Cheers and whoops of joy offstage.

Ah – here they come: King Dara al-Saeed, and his beautiful bride, Princess Cyra. Who, in the name of An-Nafi, the Source of all Goodness, would interfere with their happiness? Well, me, actually. That’s my job. I’m the Hakawati, a story maker. And spoiling things is a great way to make a story. So, the story’s started, and can’t be stopped until we’ve reached the end. Listen!

THE TALE OF KING DARA AL-SAEED AND PRINCESS CYRA

KING DARA AL-SAEED and **PRINCESS CYRA** enter from their wedding. **PRINCESS CYRA** is accompanied by her retinue of handmaidens and slaves, **HAROUN**, **KASHIFAH** and **SHADHA**. Much rejoicing.

KING DARA Music!

A dance of great celebration and beauty.

*The **HAKAWATI** suddenly interrupts the dance. The music becomes darker and more ominous as the **HAKAWATI** sings.*

The Song of King Dara al-Saeed and Princess Cyra

HAKAWATI *[Singing.]* In a time long past, many years ago,
In a distant land, far away,
King Dara al-Saeed and his new bride,
Feast their rapturous wedding day.
They smile, they laugh, they kiss, they sing,
But can this truly last?
Joy is but an hour glass –
And the sand is running fast.
For King Dara al-Saeed
Is despairing, is not whole:
There’s a dark and empty space,

Where he should have a soul.
And poor fated Princess Cyra,
Like the moon that shares her name,
Will find her life of bounteous joy
Is just about to wane...

PRINCESS CYRA What?

*The song ends abruptly, but the music continues under, dark, sinister. With a great clanking of chains and turning of keys, **PRINCESS CYRA** finds herself trapped in a dismal cell. It is small and dark.*

Wait! Stop! Dara, my king, my husband, my love, in the name of Al-Muhaymim, the Guardian, why have you locked me in here?

KING DARA This is how it must be.

PRINCESS CYRA Why?

No answer.

Please, my dearest, let me out.

KING DARA I cannot let you out.

PRINCESS CYRA If I have done anything to upset or anger you, please tell me.

No answer.

Dara, it is our wedding day. A day of joy and celebration. We should be together, as we will be for all the days of our lives.

KING DARA This is for your own good.

PRINCESS CYRA How?

KING DARA You would not understand.

PRINCESS CYRA Dara, my king, my husband, my love, what is it?

KING DARA If I let you out, it would be only to kill you.

PRINCESS CYRA No!

KING DARA To kill you, and your handmaidens, and your slaves.

RETINUE No!

PRINCESS CYRA But I have done nothing.

HAROUN And we've done even less.

KASHIFAH Look, we don't need to get involved.

HAROUN Even less than nothing. That really is not very much at all.

KASHIFAH We are just her slaves.

SHADHA We kind of have to follow her.

KING DARA Then you kind of have to die with her too.

RETINUE What!?

KING DARA It is what I have vowed to do.

PRINCESS CYRA Help me understand.
[Singing.] When first I saw my love,
His face was as the sun:
The golden lamp of day
That shines on everyone.
When first I saw my love,
His eyes were as the stars:
The silver lamps of night
That twinkle from afar.
But now I see my love,
His face is black as jet,
His eyes are cruel and narrow,
His lips are thin and set.
But now I see my love,
His mouth's a cruel grin,
Barren is his heart:
There is no love within.
King Dara al-Saeed, my love,
To you I gave my hand,
King Dara al-Saeed, my love,
Help me understand.

Music continues under.

KING DARA There is nothing I can do about it.

HAROUN Well, you could listen to her.

KASHIFAH I mean, that was beautiful singing, wasn't it?

SHADHA Listen to her, singing away in that cell. Surely, it would melt the coldest heart.

KING DARA Ha! The coldest heart in all of the world burns with the heat of the midday sun compared to mine.

HAROUN Don't you love her?

KING DARA I cannot love her.

KASHIFAH Oh, I get it. You love someone else.

KING DARA I love no one.

SHADHA You love no one?

KING DARA I can love no one.

PRINCESS CYRA I don't understand.

KING DARA Stay ignorant, stay locked in there and stay alive.

PRINCESS CYRA In the name of Al-Hasib, the Bringer of Judgment, I command that you tell me.

[Singing.] King Dara al-Saeed, my love,
To you I gave my hand,
King Dara al-Saeed, my love,
Help me understand.

HAKAWATI *[Singing.]* With a sigh that came
From where his heart should be,
King Dara pulled out
The rusty iron key,
Unlocked the dismal cell,
Let Princess Cyra go,
And, with trembling voice,
Began his tale of woe.

The music ends.

Listen!

THE TALE OF THE YOUNG PRINCE DARA AL-SAEED

HAKAWATI Imagine a man with a frozen heart. This is the story of such a man.

KING DARA When I was born –

HAKAWATI – King Dara al-Saeed began –

KING DARA – there was great rejoicing in the palace. My mother and father were overjoyed.

HAKAWATI [*To KASHIFAH and HAROUN.*] Help me, will you.

KASHIFAH If it saves our necks...

HAKAWATI It will.

HAROUN I like the sound of that.

HAKAWATI [*Appointing the parts.*] His mother. His father. He's your son.

DARA'S MOTHER A son! We have a son! Praise be to Al-Khaliq, the Creator.

DARA'S FATHER A son to inherit the throne when it is time. Our family will reign for one thousand and one glorious years!

KING DARA I was named Dara –

HAKAWATI – meaning 'ruler' –

KING DARA – al-Saeed –

HAKAWATI – meaning 'happiness'. The Happy Prince, who would grow to be the King of Joy.

KING DARA Never was a child so wrongly named. From the very first my parents knew that I was not as I should be. And as I got older, things did not get better. I pulled the wings off flies and small birds; I was vicious and mean to the palace slaves; I had no friends.

PRINCE DARA And I do not want any friends, with their big, fat, stupid, happy smiling faces. I am perfectly happy on my own.

DARA'S PARENTS *give him a birthday present.*

DARA'S MOTHER Happy birthday, my darling little boy.

DARA'S FATHER Three today! Happy birthday.

*The **YOUNG PRINCE DARA** unwraps the gift. It is a wooden horse on wheels for him to pull along.*

PRINCE DARA I hate it. I hate it. I hate it. With its big, fat, stupid horsey face.

He throws the toy horse across the stage. It breaks. They hand him a second gift.

DARA'S MOTHER We got you this too, O precious one.

It is a wooden soldier.

PRINCE DARA I hate that even more. With its big, fat, stupid soldier's face.

The soldier follows the horse across the stage.

DARA'S FATHER And this...

It is a toy castle.

PRINCE DARA I hate this most of all. With its big, fat, stupid castle face.

And across the stage it goes.

HAROUN Can castles have faces?

DARA'S MOTHER What have we done?

HAKAWATI Then, after eighteen long and lonely years of spite and malice, Prince Dara finally came of age.

DARA'S MOTHER Dara, my prince, my son, my love, today you are a man. A grown up.

PRINCE DARA A grown up? That is so unfair.

DARA'S FATHER I am old. Soon I will die, and you will be king.

PRINCE DARA I can't wait for that.

DARA'S MOTHER So, it is time for you to marry.

PRINCE DARA No! Gross!

DARA'S FATHER And your queen will give birth to a son to inherit the throne when it is time. Our family will reign for one thousand and one glorious years!

PRINCE DARA I do not want a wife, with her big, fat, stupid lovey dovey face. I am perfectly happy on my own. And there is nothing you can do about it.

HAKAWATI In despair the old King and Queen sought the advice of the seer, who looks beyond what we normal folk see, and reveals the truth that lies beneath. *[To SHADHA.]* Help me too.

SHADHA takes on the role of the SEER in stages, in response to the HAKAWATI's prompts.

She was ancient. And ugly. Ancient and ugly with a disgustingly hairy upper lip and a suppurating wart on the end of her nose.

SHADHA Watch it! Why am I doing this part anyway? Surely I'm the pretty one who gets to play all the princesses.

KASHIFAH Because I'm the mother. Again. Always the mother...

SHADHA And you're very good at playing mothers. Natural weight...

KASHIFAH Shut up!

DARA'S FATHER Tell us, O ancient and ugly seer with a disgustingly hairy upper lip and a suppurating wart on the end of your nose, what is wrong with our son?

SEER Hear, O king with royal armpits that stink like a souk in the sweatiest summer, and breath like a camel chewing its own dung, Prince Dara has a frozen heart. There is nothing but a dark and empty space where his soul should be. He can love no one. May Ar-Ra'Uf, the Kind, take pity on him.

DARA'S MOTHER Is there nothing to be done?

SEER Only one thing can help him. There exists a story, a story so touching, so human and so true, that upon hearing it the ice within him will melt, and his heart will beat, powerful, and strong, and brimming with love. But finding this one story will be hard, for this wondrous world of ours is full to overflowing with other stories. Praise be to Al-Karim, the Bountiful!

DARA'S FATHER We will find that one story –

DARA'S MOTHER – and save our son!

SEER May Al-Majid the Majestic go with you.

PRINCE DARA Shut your big, fat, stupid, fortune telling face.

HAKAWATI People came from all four corners of this wondrous world of ours, eager to meet the challenge of melting the young prince's frozen heart, and excited by the promise of a rich reward. They brought stories long and short, old and new, familiar and strange –

DARA'S MOTHER – but none of these stories is the one.

DARA'S FATHER Our son's heart is as ice-bound as ever.

PRINCE DARA In fact, I am so sick of hearing stories, with their once-upon-a times, and their so-it-came-to-passes, and their happily-ever afters, that, from now on, every time I hear a story that is not the one, I will execute the teller, and stick his big, fat, stupid story telling head on the palace battlements. Him, and his slaves and handmaidens.

KASHIFAH Here we go again. [*To the HAKAWATI.*] I thought you said this was going to save our necks.

HAKAWATI It will. And so it came to pass –

PRINCE DARA – I said I didn't like that! –

HAKAWATI – sorry – that the walls of the palace were crowned with one thousand and one heads, and the old King, knowing that his days were numbered, began to despair.

DARA'S FATHER [*To us.*] I must make sure that Dara takes a wife. [*A royal proclamation.*] Let it be known that, when I die, Prince Dara al-Saeed will be the next king, as is our law, but that he must marry within a year and a day, or be cast out of the kingdom a beggar.

HAKAWATI And so, the old king died, just as Al-Mumit, the Bringer of Death had decreed. Then Prince Dara al-Saeed sat upon the throne, and–

PRINCESS CYRA – decided to get married to the first princess he could find. Me.

KING DARA Exactly.

PRINCESS CYRA Just so you can keep your crown.

KING DARA Yes.

PRINCESS CYRA That isn't very romantic.

KING DARA No. It isn't.

THE TALE OF KING DARA AL-SAEED AND PRINCESS

PRINCESS CYRA But I still don't understand. Why have you locked me in a cell? Why did you not tell me before about your frozen heart, and the seer, and the stories, and the heads on the battlements? [*To the **RETINUE.***] And come to think of it, why didn't you? You clearly knew the story.

KASHIFAH Really? No...

PRINCESS CYRA You've just taken a number of key roles in it.

KASHIFAH Yes, I suppose we have.

HAROUN Oops, yes, sorry.

SHADHA To be honest, we had heard it before.

PRINCESS CYRA Really!

SHADHA But who ever listens to their slaves?

KING DARA Would you have agreed to marry me if you had known the truth?

SHADHA And I quite fancied being a queen's slave for a change.

KASHIFAH Me too.

PRINCESS CYRA Of course I would have married you. Dara, my king, my husband, my love. I love you with all of my heart. I could not do otherwise.

KING DARA Well, I only needed you to marry me so I can keep the crown.

PRINCESS CYRA And then you lock me away?

KING DARA Yes, because if you weren't locked safely away, and you heard my story, you might take pity on me and say –

HAROUN Don't...

KASHIFAH Please don't...

SHADHA I know what's coming...

PRINCESS CYRA – let me try.

KING DARA We knew it.

THE RETINUE

PRINCESS CYRA Let me try to tell the story, the one story, the story so touching, so human and so true. I want to know your heart, powerful, and strong, and brimming with love.

KING DARA No. Please.

PRINCESS CYRA Why not?

KING DARA I have heard one thousand and one stories, I have killed one thousand and one storytellers. I do not wish to kill any more.

HAROUN Listen to the nice man. I like my head. In fact I'm rather attached to it.

PRINCESS CYRA Let me try. I am your princess, your wife, and, in the name of Al-Latif, the Gentle, I should be your love. What would I be worth if I did not try?

HAROUN Attached to it. Do you see what I did there?

SHADHA This is not the time. We are under threat of execution...

KASHIFAH You don't need to kill us. We could stay locked up. Go on, throw away the key.

KING DARA I beg you, please. Please don't start a story.

SHADHA I have always liked small confined spaces, a diet of bread and water, taming birds...

PRINCESS CYRA There was once a very unlucky fisherman –

KING DARA No! Stop! What are you doing?

PRINCESS CYRA I'm telling a story.

SHADHA Typical.

KING DARA Do you want to die?

RETINUE No!

PRINCESS CYRA But the story's started now, and can't be stopped until we've reached the end. Listen! [*To the **RETINUE**.*] You're going to have to help me.

SHADHA I don't actually think we have much of a choice.

KASHIFAH Lose your head, or tell a story. I know which I'm choosing...

HAROUN What do you want us to do?

PRINCESS CYRA Listen carefully, and do try to keep up. [*The **HAKAWATI** laughs.*] You too.

HAKAWATI What?

PRINCESS CYRA You have to help too.

HAKAWATI I'm the Hakawati, the story maker, surely I can't be in my own story...Or rather in a story within my own story.

PRINCESS CYRA You started this. You made all of us up. So you can get us out of it.

HAKAWATI True, and fair. Disturbingly self-referential. But fair.

PRINCESS CYRA Exactly.

THE TALE OF THE FISHERMAN AND THE BOTTLE

PRINCESS CYRA There was once a very unlucky fisherman whomever caught any fish.

FISHERMAN [*To us.*] I wouldn't just call it very unlucky, I'd call it plain rubbish. Complete and utter pants. Go on – laugh if you want. But that's me she's talking about. Aaqil. Aaqil, the Rubbish Fisherman.

Aaqil, the Rubbish Fisherman's Song

FISHERMAN

[Singing.] When I was a young lad,
I only had one wish:
To take my nets to the sparkling sea,
And fill them full of fish;
But now I am much older,
And my boyish dream's come true
I really would be quite content
With just one fish, or two.

[Spoken.] I mean, I don't want to seem greedy.

[Singing.] Oh, I'm a rubbish fisherman,
The worst you've ever seen,
Despite all the years I've spent down here,
I haven't caught a bean.
I've got all the equipment,
I bought it off a mate,
The rod, the spool, the line, the net,
A catapult for my bait,
A fold up stool for sitting on,
Worms wriggling in a tin,
I've even got a Tupperware box
To keep my sarnies in.

[Spoken.] Cheese and pickle today. My wife made them.

[Singing.] But, I'm a rubbish fisherman,
The worst you've ever seen,
Despite all the years I've spent down here,
I haven't caught a bean.
All types of fish elude me:
I've never caught a plaice,
A herring, pike, or salmon,
A seabream, or a dace,
A flounder, shad or halibut,
A gurnard or a gar,
A marlin, bream or barbell,
But once I got a char.

[Spoken.] Although there was a hole in my net, so he got away.

[Singing.] For, I'm a rubbish fisherman
The worst you've ever seen
Despite all the years I've spent down here

I haven't caught a bean.

[Spoken] Every morning I come here to the beach, throw a net in the sea and pull it out again. I don't catch any fish but I have got a very clean net. But you know what? If I don't catch anything today, I'm going to give it all up and become a jam maker. I've always liked jam. Especially raspberry.

We see the **FISHERMAN** cast his net.

FISHERMAN

[To us.] I've caught something! I've caught something!! I've definitely caught something!!! *[He pulls in the net. In it is an old boot.]* An old boot. I told you I was a rubbish fisherman. That's all I seem to catch. Rubbish. No wait – this time I've caught – wait for it – a sole! Oh Cod, that joke was rubbish. And that joke was rubbish too. I really should know my place. And that one. I'm giving up. *[Pause.]* But no, I'll try again. As Al-Hakim, the Wise commands us, we must always have hope. *[The FISHERMAN casts his net a second time.]* I've caught something else! I've caught something else!! I've definitely caught something else!!! *[He pulls in the net. In it is a dead donkey.]* A dead donkey. It's like someone's trying to make an ass of me. *[To the donkey.]* You're a long way from Weston-super- Mare. *[He stands the donkey up. It falls over.]* Aah – a wonky donkey. *[He stands it up again. Again it falls over.]* I don't know why I bother. He-haw, he-haw, he's haw-lways doing that. I could find another job, perhaps a comedian. *[Pause.]* But no, I'll try again. As Al-Hakim, the Wise still commands us, we must always have hope. *[He is about to cast his net a third time when suddenly he stops.]* But this time, I will pray to Al-Muqit, the Nourisher first, and ask for a bulging net full of delicious fresh fish.

'Dear Al-Muqit, the Nourisher, please can I have a bulging net full of delicious fresh fish, please. Thank you. Please and thank you. Love, Aaqil. PS I have also always liked jam. Especially raspberry. PPS There is a mince pie and a glass of sherry on the kitchen table.'

That should do it. *[He casts his net. He begins to pull it in.]* What's this? There's definitely something. *[He pulls in the net. In it is an ancient bottle, stoppered with a cork.]* An old bottle. Thanks very much, Al-Muqit, the Nourisher. Perhaps I should have prayed for a bit longer. What are you trying to tell me, eh? I should give it all up and drown my sorrows? *[Pause.]* Well, it's a thought. Perhaps this is a bottle of rum. I could turn pirate. Yo-ho-ho! Aargh!

*He pulls out the cork. The **DJINNI OF THE BOTTLE** rises in a cloud of smoke from the bottle and towers over the poor **FISHERMAN**. The effect is not quite as magical as perhaps we might desire.*

FISHERMAN What are you?

HAKAWATI I'm a djinni.

FISHERMAN A djinni?

HAKAWATI A djinni. I've just appeared from the bottle in a cloud of smoke and now I'm towering over you.

FISHERMAN Now, I didn't expect that.

HAKAWATI Really. This is the Arabian Nights. It's what happens when you open a mysterious and ancient bottle. Don't you know anything about stories? What did you think was in the bottle? Rum?

FISHERMAN Well, I was kind of hoping...

DJINNI Prepare to die!!

FISHERMAN What?

DJINNI Prepare to die!!!

FISHERMAN Now, I didn't expect that either. Look, I'm no djinni expert, but aren't you supposed to offer me three wishes?

DJINNI That would be usual, yes.

FISHERMAN Well, go on then.

DJINNI Perhaps, if you'd met me when I was first trapped in that bottle, I'd have been in the mood. But not now.

FISHERMAN Perhaps, if you gave me three wishes, I could wish to go back in time and meet you and—

DJINNI Shut up, you pathetic little man. Prepare to die!

FISHERMAN How about two wishes?

DJINNI You really don't get this, do you? I've been trapped inside that tiny bottle for ten thousand years. Ten thousand years. At first I would

have done anything for the person who set me free – three wishes, what is your command, all the usual djinni stuff – but after one thousand years I began to get a little bit miffed. I'd say that was actually rather patient of me, wouldn't you?

FISHERMAN

Yes.

DJINNI

After another thousand years, I wasn't just a little bit miffed, I was starting to feel piqued.

FISHERMAN

Piqued?

DJINNI

Yes, piqued.

FISHERMAN

Nice word.

DJINNI

Thank you. I've had plenty of time to think about it. And after another thousand years, I was getting the hump.

FISHERMAN

Like a camel?

DJINNI

That isn't helping.

FISHERMAN

You know, I was thinking of becoming a comedian if this fishing business didn't work out. What do you reckon?

DJINNI

Don't.

FISHERMAN Ok.

DJINNI

And after another thousand years, I began to feel bitter.

FISHERMAN

Now, I'm not surprised. That's one, two, three, four thousand years already. That's a long time.

DJINNI

Exactly. A long time. So imagine how I feel now, after ten thousand years.

FISHERMAN

Er... quite relieved to be set free and ready to give me three wishes? Two wishes? One wish? A request? A small favor?

DJINNI

You really are infuriating! You will die right now!

FISHERMAN

No!

DJINNI

Wait, before you die right now, I will grant you one wish.

FISHERMAN Oh goody. That's more like it.

DJINNI *How do you wish to die right now?*

FISHERMAN That wasn't quite what I had in mind.

DJINNI Oh, enough of this! Prepare to die.

FISHERMAN Just before I do, I've got a question.

DJINNI Yes?

FISHERMAN How powerful are you? Exactly.

DJINNI More powerful than you can possibly imagine.

FISHERMAN Oh, I can imagine quite powerful. Are you, for instance, powerful enough to turn that old boot into a bag of gold?

DJINNI Do you doubt it? [*The **DJINNI** turns the old boot into a bag of gold.*] A trifling matter.

FISHERMAN That was pretty impressive. But are you powerful enough to turn that dead donkey into a fancy three course meal, complete with wine?

DJINNI Child's play! [*The **DJINNI** turns the dead donkey into a fancy three course meal, complete with wine.*] You've hardly begun to test the limits of my power.

FISHERMAN Obviously. But I bet you're not powerful enough to fit your enormous and impressively muscled body into this tiny bottle.

*He holds up the bottle from which the **DJINNI** emerged.*

DJINNI You think I can't do that? Pathetically easy! Just watch...

*The **DJINNI** shrinks to a tiny size and disappears into the bottle. Quickly the **FISHERMAN** puts the cork back in the bottle. Beat.*

DJINNI [*A tiny voice from inside the bottle.*] Hey, let me out.

FISHERMAN I don't think so. [*Throwing the bottle back into the sea.*] I haven't any more need of you. [*To us.*] If you decide to go fishing round here, please be careful where you cast your nets. I guess after

another ten thousand years he's going to be somewhat peeved.
[The **FISHERMAN** pockets the bag of gold and begins to dine.] A bag of gold and a fancy three course meal, complete with wine. Not bad for a day's work. I think I'll stick at this fishing business a bit longer.

THE TALE OF KING DARA AL-SAEED AND PRINCESS

KING DARA And that is the story you choose to tell me?

PRINCESS CYRA Yes.

KING DARA That rubbish?

HAROUN I don't think he liked it.

KASHIFAH You know what that means...

SHADHA Say goodbye to your body, head.

HAROUN Those were some of my best gags. And great djinni work.

HAKAWATI Thanks. Classically trained, you know.

HAROUN Me too. I went to RADA.

HAKAWATI I went to ASDA.

PRINCESS CYRA The story didn't work?

KING DARA My heart is every bit as frozen as it was. Where is the truth in that story? What have I learned? What? Tell me, what? Maybe this – if you are a fisherman don't open any bottles that you pull out of the sea, you don't know what might be inside? Pah! I am not a fisherman, and I never intend to go fishing!

PRINCESS CYRA You should try it one day, you might like it...

KING DARA And I am a king. I never open my own bottles.

HAROUN You should try that too.

KING DARA That story is not the one story...

PRINCESS CYRA ... and, anyway, the story was also about a djinni, trapped in a bottle...

HAKAWATI And very uncomfortable it was, too.

KING DARA ... and in telling that stupid story...

PRINCESS CYRA ... getting more and more angry, and more and more sad...

KING DARA ... you have condemned yourself to death...

PRINCESS CYRA ... as the years went by, until he could no longer contain his rage...

KING DARA Do you hear me?

PRINCESS CYRA ... and wanted to destroy everything.

KING DARA Prepare to die!

The very briefest of pauses.

PRINCESS CYRA So, maybe there is some truth in the story. I do have another story.

KING DARA I don't want to hear it. Why do you persist?

PRINCESS CYRA One should never give up hope.

KING DARA You do not know the one story.

PRINCESS CYRA Quite possibly not.

SHADHA I might know it though.

KING DARA What?

SHADHA Let me tell you a story.

KING DARA Are you crazy too?

SHADHA Looks like it...

KING DARA You will lose your head.

SHADHA ... and inexplicably loyal, it seems. Kamar al-Akmar had a truly extraordinary mind –

KING DARA What are you doing? I don't want to hear another story.

SHADHA But the story's started now, and can't be stopped until we've reached the end.

KASHIFAH Stop.

SHADHA What?

KASHIFAH You can't tell that one.

SHADHA Why not?

KASHIFAH Because of the Ebony Horse.

SHADHA Yes?

KASHIFAH And what it does.

SHADHA So?

KING DARA What it does?

KASHIFAH Yes, it's a wooden horse that –

SHADHA No!

KING DARA What does it do?

KASHIFAH It –

SHADHA Don't!

KASHIFAH Why not?

SHADHA You'll spoil it.

KASHIFAH But –

SHADHA Look, we've just had a djinni go in and out of a bottle, we can do this. Anyway it's not my problem. [*Pointing at **HAROUN.***] It's yours.

HAROUN Mine?

SHADHA You're playing Kamar. And I'm Princess Yelda.

KASHIFAH But you're the storyteller.

SHADHA True. *[To **PRINCESS CYRA**.]* Would you take over when we get to that bit?

PRINCESS CYRA Of course.

KASHIFAH So who am I going to be?

SHADHA You'll find out when we get there.

KASHIFAH I don't like the sound of that...

SHADHA And that's why I'm not telling you. So, all ready to start? Good. The Tale of the Ebony Horse... Listen!

THE TALE OF THE EBONY HORSE

SHADA Kamar Al-Akmar had a truly extraordinary mind. So, when he found himself lonely and alone, rather than let himself become bitter and cold, he invented a way to find a wife, and make himself happy.

***KAMAR AL-AKMAR**, carrying something covered in silk.*

KAMAR And here it is.

***KAMAR** removes the silk from the something. Underneath is a statue of a horse, carved in ebony. In fact, it is the toy horse that the **YOUNG PRINCE DARA** received as a child.*

KAMAR This wooden horse has the gift of flight.

KING DARA It can fly?

KAMAR Yes.

KING DARA That's impossible.

KAMAR Nothing's impossible. Just watch...

KASHIFAH This I've got to see...

***KAMAR** reaches into the horse's mane, and fiddles with its ear. We are amazed to see the horse rise off the ground by a few feet and then sink back to earth again.*

KAMAR And a man can ride it.

KING DARA Really? Isn't it a bit small?

KAMAR Watch.

By placing the toy soldier on the horse's back, we see the horse fly carrying a man.

SHADHA Well done!

HAKAWATI The magic of theatre...

KAMAR *[From the horse's back.]* Right – I'm off to find me a wife!

*The ebony horse rises off the ground and flies away, bearing **KAMAR** with it.*

SHADHA Being on the back of the horse, high above the clouds, was exhilarating, and it was days before Kamar thought to look down at the ground below him.

***KAMAR** looks down at the ground.*

KAMAR Oops... I don't recognize anything down there. I am impossibly lost. Al-Hafiz, Great Preserver, protect me. *[He looks down at the ground again. The toy castle that was given to the **YOUNG PRINCE DARA** lies on the stage.]* Look! There is a great castle over there. My prayers have been answered.

SHADHA As Kamar approached the castle he began to tremble with fear, for the battlements were crowned with one thousand and one heads, the victims of the heartless tyrant that ruled this land.

KAMAR I must however try my luck at the castle – inside even the most soulless black emptiness there is always a single bright spark of hope. *[A thought.]* It would be sensible to land on the roof though, rather than go knocking on the front door. There's even an open window over there, right at the top of the tallest, most secluded tower. Perfect. *[**KAMAR** lands upon the roof of the tower.]*

SHADHA From the open window came the most beautiful singing he had ever heard in his life. It was the singing of Princess Yelda. *[To **KING DARA.**]* That's my character. Imagine a nightingale trained by an angel, and –

PRINCESS CYRA The singing was quite nice. Don't get carried away.

SHADHA Sorry.

*We see the **PRINCESS YELDA** sitting alone, locked in her tower room, singing to a rag doll.*

Princess Yelda's Song

YELDA *[Singing.]* When the moon and stars are hid,
On the coldest, darkest night,
For the lost and weary traveler
In his window there's a light;
And in the closest dungeon,
There's a crack beneath the door;
And, cast upon the lonely waves,
There's the promise of the shore;
And the tiniest green shoot
Grows through the hardest rock;
If you didn't have a key,
Then you wouldn't have a lock;
And, at the bottom of the deepest well,
You still reach out for a rope;
And, in a soulless emptiness,
There's a single spark of hope.
In a fog of sad confusion,
You seek a friendly hand.
I believe that in this desert
Of unrelenting cruel sand
There's still one grain of goodness -
Of that I have no doubt.
Won't someone come and rescue me,
Before this spark goes out?
Won't someone come and rescue me,
Before this spark goes out?

***KAMAR** climbs in through the window.*

YELDA How did you get in? This room is locked, and there are twenty armed guards at the bottom of the tower.

KAMAR I... er... came through the window. It was open.

YELDA I always keep it open. It's my only hope of escape. Inside even the most soulless black emptiness, there is always a single bright spark of hope.

KAMAR I believe that too. Why are you being kept prisoner?

YELDA I have refused to marry the heartless tyrant that rules this land.

KAMAR What's that?

YELDA Oh, that's just my rag doll. I keep it with me always. Don't you think it looks just like me, but a lot smaller?

KAMAR It does. That may come in handy later.

YELDA Have you come to rescue me?

KAMAR Er...yes. Yes, I have.

YELDA How did you get up to my window?

KAMAR It's quite a story.

YELDA Tell it to me, for perhaps this is the story that will set me free.

KAMAR My name is Kamar al-Akmar –

They are interrupted by the sound of shouting and furious banging on the door.

TYRANT Let me in! Yelda, I know you have someone in there.

KAMAR Who is it?

YELDA It is the heartless tyrant that rules this land! Al-Wali, preserve us!

*The door is flung open, and in strides the ferocious figure of **THE HEARTLESS TYRANT**.*

TYRANT Who are you? How did you get in?

KAMAR In through the window.

TYRANT Aargh – the intruder window! And what are you doing in here?

YELDA This is the man I am going to marry!

*A look between **PRINCESS YELDA** and **KAMAR**.*

KAMAR That is right. I am the man she is going to marry.

TYRANT Never! I have sworn that no one shall marry her but me!

YELDA But I love him!

TYRANT What do you know about love? I have kept you hidden away from all other men –

YELDA – for one thousand and one long, lonely nights, but you have not frozen the heart that is within me!

KAMAR Let me speak –

TYRANT No! You shall die.

YELDA Kamar!

KAMAR Then, I demand my right to fight you in single combat.

TYRANT I agree, but here, in my country, you fight by my rules. Tomorrow morning you will not fight me, but one hundred and one of my fiercest mounted soldiers.

SHADHA One hundred and one?

TYRANT That's what I said. One hundred and one.

SHADHA That could be a bit tricky.

TYRANT One hundred and one, no more, no less, each armed with a deadly scimitar. You will face them alone, on horseback, armed only with a rhubarb leaf.

SHADHA You always take it a little bit too far, don't you?

TYRANT Do you accept?

KAMAR Yes.

TYRANT You have a horse?

KAMAR Yes. A wooden one, tied up outside on the roof.

TYRANT You are an idiot as well as an intruder. I will enjoy watching you die!

Perhaps an evil laugh.

KAMAR But if I win, then I can marry Yelda?

TYRANT Of course, this is a story. It's what happens in stories. But you will not win. One man against one hundred and one? Armed only with a rhubarb leaf? Impossible! You will be cut to pieces like so much maqaniq!

Perhaps the evil laugh again.

YELDA Kamar, my bright spark of hope, I can't bear to lose you.

KAMAR Yelda, my love, my heart, powerful, and strong, and brimming with love, do not worry. I have a plan...

TYRANT A plan? You don't need a plan: you need a grave! One hundred and one! Say goodbye, Yelda. You will never see this fool again!

Perhaps the evil laugh a third time. After all, if you're going for the evil laugh it should obey the Rule of Three...

SHADHA The next morning dawned bright but cold. The one hundred and one soldiers laughed their heads off when they saw him...

We are back into puppet scale again.

SOLDIERS Look at him on his toy! The ickle baby on his hobby horse with his icklewoobarb leaf!

KAMAR Laugh as much as you like. I fight for love. I am the bright spark of hope that fills even the most soulless black emptiness. Al-Qayyum, the Guardian, protect me now... Come on!

SOLDIERS C – H – A – R – G – E !!! [*The **SOLDIERS** charge at **KAMAR**, but just as they reach him he lifts the horse in to the air so that they pass underneath.*] Turn around! Quick, back the other way! [*There are some inevitable casualties as the **SOLDIERS** try to turn their horses around.*] C – H – A – R – G – E !!! [*Again **KAMAR** avoids the **SOLDIERS** by flying up into the air at the last moment.*] Turn around! Quick, back the way we first came! [*There are more casualties as the **SOLDIERS** try to turn their horses around.*] C – H – A – R – G – E !!! [*For a third time **KAMAR** avoids the **SOLDIERS** by flying up into the air at the last moment.*]

SHADHA Backwards and forwards, forwards and backwards the soldiers charged, but they couldn't harm a hair on Kamar's head – each time the wooden horse lifted him into safety. Soon, there was nothing left of the army but a tangled mess of horses, riders and

reins lying on the ground. One man had done the impossible, and defeated one hundred and one.

KAMAR Climb aboard, Yelda!

SHADHA But...

HAROUN The rag doll.

SHADHA Of course. So Princess Yelda climbed on to the saddle behind him and they flew all the way back to his home to be married.

KING DARA How did he get back?

SHADHA On the flying horse.

KING DARA But how did he know the way? He was totally lost a moment ago. It's impossible.

SHADHA Er...

PRINCESS CYRA He was in love. True love will always find a way. He did not give up hope.

KING DARA Typical story rubbish.

SHADHA *[To PRINCESS CYRA.]*Thanks. I was a bit stuck there. *[Back to the story.]* So Princess Yelda climbed on to the saddle behind him and they flew...

TYRANT Hold on a moment. Look, you have won, fair and square, I accept that, but before you leave, please may I have a look at that marvelous flying horse?

KAMAR Of course. What harm can come of that?

TYRANT I've even brought my own heartless tyrant doll... They didn't sell as well as I'd anticipated. Very useful now, though.

The HEARTLESS TYRANT brings his doll to examine the horse. KAMAR and PRINCESS YELDA are still on its back.

TYRANT May I have a go?

KAMAR Of course. What harm can come of that?

TYRANT Thank you.

***KAMAR** climbs down from the horse's back and the **HEARTLESS TYRANT** takes his place, with **PRINCESS YELDA** mounted behind him.*

TYRANT Could you show me which ear makes it fly?

KAMAR Of course. What harm can come of that?

*The **HEARTLESS TYRANT** twists the horse's ear and it rises into the air.*

TYRANT You will never see me or your princess again!

YELDA No! Kamar! My love!

TYRANT Call all you want. You are mine!

*More evil laughing? The **TYRANT** and **PRINCESS YELDA** fly off on the horse.*

YELDA *[In the distance.]* Help!

KAMAR What can I do? I cannot fly...

Princess Yelda's Song [Reprise]

YELDA *[Singing.]* Now the moon and stars are hid,
It's a cold, dark, empty night,
But just before she left me here
I saw her shining light.
In this soulless emptiness,
There's that single spark of hope.
In this soulless emptiness,
There's that single spark of hope.
I will come and rescue you,
Before that spark goes out!
I will come and rescue you,
Before that spark goes out!

SHADHA *[From off stage.]* Mistress, would you...

PRINCESS CYRA Of course. And, although Kamar had no idea where Princess Yelda had been taken, he did not submit to his fate and give up. Instead, with his heart powerful and strong and brimming with love, he began to search. The heartless tyrant, meanwhile, had taken Princess Yelda as far as the horse would carry them, to a distant

land, damp and miserable, beyond all known maps, a land known as England.

The horse and its passengers land in England.

SHADHA *[Popping her head onstage.]* And this is where the King of All Merrie England comes in. Kashifah, you're up.

KASHIFAH What?

SHADHA The King of All Merrie England. Come on.

KASHIFAH A man?

SHADHA There's no one else left...

*The **KING OF ALL MERRIE ENGLAND** enters from hunting.*

KING What ho!

TYRANT *[Secretly to **PRINCESS YELDA.**]* Do not say a word, or I will rip your throat out. *[To the **KING.**]* Who are you?

KING I am the King of All Merrie England.

The stage is filled for the briefest of moments with a jingle of morris dancers (I believe this is the correct collective noun.)

TYRANT And who are they?

KING Morris dancers. They follow me wherever I go. And who are you? You're not *foreigners*, are you?

TYRANT We have come from Arabia –

KING Arabia? Never heard of it. Are you trying to sell me something?

TYRANT – from Arabia, my most exalted Sultan –

KING I am not a Sultana, I am the King of All Merrie England.

A jingle of morris dancers.

TYRANT Listen. We are two humble travelers, desperately in love, who have been forced to escape from –

KING Ah, you have eloped! Top hole, what!

TYRANT I see that you are a man of some power –

KING I am the King of all Merrie England!

A jingle of morris dancers.

TYRANT – perhaps you have the power to marry us?

KING I certainly do. Both of you, down on your knees! [*The **HEARTLESS TYRANT** forces **PRINCESS YELDA** down on to her knees.*] By the power invested in me, being King of all Merrie England – [*A jingle of morris dancers.*] – I now pronounce you man and –

YELDA No! Stop!

KING What?

TYRANT Be quiet!

YELDA I will not be quiet! This man has brought me here against my will, and he is forcing me to marry him. I would rather be dead than his bride. Help me!

KING The dastardly wretch! Well, in that case... [*The **KING OF ALL MERRIE ENGLAND** pulls out his sword and with one swipe cuts the **HEARTLESS TYRANT**'s head clean from his shoulders.*] Never trusted him. Eyes too close together...

YELDA Thank you. What will happen to me now?

KING What usually happens in stories: I take you to the nearest abbey, where you live as a nun for the rest of your life.

YELDA Then that is what must happen to me...

KING Splendid.

YELDA ... for my beloved Kamar will never find me here in England. Lead me away, your majesty.

KING Top hole, what!

She begins to cry as she is led to the abbey.

PRINCESS CYRA Princess Yelda began to cry, and she found herself unable to stop crying. She had given up all hope. For ten years she cried, and would have cried for ten years more, were it not for Kamar. He truly believed that a single bright spark can light a dark emptiness, and he did not stop searching until he reached those same distant and desolate shores. Once there he addressed himself to the King of all Merrie Eng – shall we?

KASHIFAH No, a little morris dancing goes a long way...

*We see **KAMAR** with the **KING OF ALL MERRIE ENGLAND**.*

KING What ho! I say, you look strangely familiar. Have we met before?

KAMAR I don't think so. I am newly arrived from Arabia –

KING I met an Arabian once. He was travelling with a beautiful girl and a wooden horse. I cut his head off. Eyes too close together. Sorry to mix you up. Top hole, what!

KAMAR *[To us.]* A beautiful girl and a wooden horse! I have found her at long last! All praises be to Al-Mujib, the Answer to all Prayers. *[To the **KING**.]* What happened to the beautiful girl?

KING This is a story. What do you think happened to her? She became a nun, but she hasn't stopped crying ever since. I can't imagine why...

KAMAR I believe I may be able to help her.

KING Ah – Arabian witch doctor mumbo-jumbo, eh?

KAMAR Not quite. Your majesty, please may I just see the girl?

KING Of course.

*The **KING OF ALL MERRIE ENGLAND** summons **PRINCESS YELDA**. She enters in a nun's habit, crying.*

KING That's all she does. Cry. Dirty habit.

YELDA It was clean on today.

KING Go on then, help her. I mean, how do we solve a problem like Yelda?

KAMAR Yelda, it's me. I have found you at last.

PRINCESS YELDA sees **KAMAR**.

YELDA Is it you? Is it truly you?

KAMAR It is me.

YELDA I never thought that I would see you again.

KAMAR I never gave up hope.

YELDA All thanks to Ar-Rahman, the Exceedingly Beneficent! It's a miracle.

KAMAR It's love.

KING It's not very English.

KAMAR Can I see the wooden horse she arrived with?

KING Of course.

A full sized wooden horse is brought on the stage.

KAMAR Ah, my trusty steed. It's a bit bigger than I remember.

KING Maybe you're smaller.

KAMAR Thank you, your majesty.

KING People do shrink with age.

KAMAR Thank you.

KING Or maybe you're in the distance.

KAMAR mounts the horse behind **PRINCESS YELDA**.

KAMAR Your majesty, thank you. [*He reaches forward and twists the horse's ear.*] Now, farewell England! Back to Arabia! And happy ever afters.

*The horse, **KAMAR** and **PRINCESS YELDA** are just about to rise into the air, when **SHADHA** breaks the narrative.*

SHADHA Kamar and Princess Yelda were married, and lived long and joyous lives. The flying ebony horse was placed in the greatest museum in all Arabia, so everyone could come and have a look at it. And it is there still, I think. The End.

KING DARA Rubbish! Absolute nonsense! All those people with their big, fat, stupid happy ever after faces. None of you shall live!

PRINCESS CYRA I have another story.

KING DARA I do not want another story. What makes you think you could succeed, where the greatest storytellers in the world have failed? Who are you? Just a princess, and a very plain and ordinary princess at that.

HAROUN Let me have a go then.

KING DARA What?

HAROUN Let me tell a story.

KING DARA What is wrong with you all?

HAROUN There was once a rich and powerful Caliph who had three sons...

KING DARA What are you doing? I don't want to hear another story.

SHADHA Are you going to tell...?

HAROUN Yes, I am.

SHADHA But that story's got a you-know-what in it. I'm not going to be a you-know-what. An ancient and ugly seer with a disgustingly hairy upper lip and a suppurating wart on the end of her nose was bad enough.

PRINCESS CYRA I'll take that part.

SHADHA Phew! But where are you going to get a you-know-what for the you-know-what?

PRINCESS CYRA A you-know-what for the you-know-what? You know what?

SHADHA What?

PRINCESS CYRA I don't know. But I'm sure I can find a you-know-what for the you-know-what when the time comes.

KING DARA What are you lot whispering about?

KASHIFAH Just a you-know-what.

KING DARA What?

PRINCESS CYRA Nothing!

HAROUN The story's started now, and can't be stopped until we've reached the end. Listen!

THE TALE OF THE CALIPH'S SON AND THE LARGE AND RATHER UGLY TORTOISE

HAROUN There was once a rich and powerful Caliph who had three sons. The first two sons married well, and the king was delighted with their choices.

*We see **PRINCESS WAYUK** and **PRINCESS KABIHA**, the wives of the older brothers. The **CALIPH** and his youngest **SON** enter. The **SON** is carrying a bow and a quiver full of arrows.*

CALIPH *[To us.]* All praises be to Ar-Razzaq, the Provider. Their wives are beauteous beyond compare, rivals even to the silver stars in the night sky, and will bear them sons to inherit their thrones when it is time. Our family will reign for one thousand and one glorious years! *[His attention is suddenly drawn to his **SON** who is playing idly with his bow.]* But my youngest son? He shows no interest in marriage at all. He just wants to play with his bow and arrow.

SON *[To us.]* To be perfectly honest, I haven't met the right girl yet. Beauty's all very well, but if I'm going to spend the rest of my life with someone, then I think I'd like a little bit more. Until she turns up, I'm quite content practicing my archery. You know where you are with a bow and arrow...

*The **SON** begins to practice his archery. The **CALIPH** watches on in despair. Suddenly he snaps.*

CALIPH You and that wretched bow and arrow! In the name of Ad-Darr, the Punisher, I'm going to teach you a lesson! Do as I tell you. Fire a

single arrow into the air, and wherever it lands, on whatever house, you will marry the woman within, whoever she may be.

HAKAWATI That seems an unlikely and extremely unpredictable way of choosing a partner for life...

HAROUN It's like you told me. This is a story. And, as this is a story, the arrow will, of course, be steered to the correct house by Ar- Rasid, the Guide to the Right Path.

SON Oh yes, of course.

*The **SON** looses an arrow. It soars through the air and lands at the feet of **PRINCESS CYRA**.*

HAROUN The arrow landed on the roof of a lowly dwelling, on the distant outskirts of the great city. In it lived a large and rather ugly tortoise.

SON A tortoise? Great camels' humps! And that tortoise is to be my bride?

HAROUN That's what the arrow says.

SON Surely a Caliph wouldn't let his son marry a tortoise. And a large and rather ugly tortoise at that.

HAROUN You're probably right.

SON Father?

CALIPH Er, no. I think the wind snatched the arrow from the hand of Ar-Rasid right at the last moment and caused it to drift away from its true path. Fire again.

*The **SON** looses a second arrow. Again it soars through the air and lands at the feet of **PRINCESS CYRA**.*

SON Great camels' humps and eyelids! I got the tortoise house again.

HAROUN Yup.

SON Father?

CALIPH Hmm... Did the arrow not glance off one of the palace pigeons as it left your bow?

SON Ah, yes, now you come to mention it, the arrow did hit a pigeon. And an eagle. And a rukh.

HAROUN Don't get carried away.

HAKAWATI Sorry.

CALIPH I think it would be wise to try a third arrow.

SON Really?

CALIPH This is a story. Things always happen in threes. And this time close your eyes.

SON Close my eyes?

CALIPH Your eyes can deceive you – don't trust them.

SON But how will I see where to fire?

CALIPH Reach out with your feelings.

*The **SON** looses a third arrow. Again it soars through the air and lands at the feet of **PRINCESS CYRA**.*

HAROUN And there it was. Three times Ar-Rasid, the Guide to the Right Path, had caused the arrow to land on the roof of the tortoise's hovel. And who can argue with the hand of God?

SON Not me. Looks like I'm getting married to a tortoise. A large and rather ugly tortoise. [*With a shrug the **SON** accepts his fate.*] Still, if I have to get married at all it might as well be to a tortoise. Beauty isn't all, as we know well.

*The **TORTOISE** enters. **PRINCESS CYRA** has fashioned a most extraordinary tortoise costume out of whatever has come to hand.*

HAKAWATI What is that?

PRINCESS CYRA It's my shell.

HAKAWATI You look ridiculous.

PRINCESS CYRA It was the best I could do. Use a little imagination,

HAKAWATI Absolutely ridiculous.

PRINCESS CYRA Of course, little did the Caliph's son realize, in his selfish human way, that the tortoise found him just as ridiculous and repulsive as he found her. Where he saw a large and rather ugly tortoise, she saw a hairy human, with pasty skin and flabby fingers.

HAKAWATI That's not fair.

PRINCESS CYRA At least mine's a costume. I can take it off.

HAKAWATI Hey!

TORTOISE But, if I have to get married at all it might as well be to a human. Beauty isn't all, as we know well. I do.

SON Yeah, I do too.

CALIPH What?

TORTOISE Your youngest son has just married a large and rather ugly tortoise.

CALIPH Aargh! It's enough to make a man double up in pain, and cough as if he were about to die. [*The **CALIPH** suddenly doubles up in pain and coughs as if he were about to die. It certainly looks life threatening.*] I'm off to bed. [*He exits.*]

SON Princess Wayuk!

PRINCESS WAYUK [*Entering.*] Yes?

SON Princess Kabiha?

PRINCESS KABIHA [*Entering.*] Yes?

SON Princess... er... Tortoise?

TORTOISE Yes?

SON My father is extremely ill. Would you three, as his daughters-in-law, please prepare him a tasty and revitalizing broth?

PRINCESSES & TORTOISE Of course.

PRINCESS WAYUK Here is our chance to get rid of the repulsive reptile we have for a sister-in-law. She is bound to make something absolutely vile for the Caliph.

PRINCESS KABIHA Whereas our broth will be the most delicious and wholesome ever prepared.

*The two **PRINCESSES** cackle cruelly to each other.*

TORTOISE Sisters, I need some ingredients. Please may I have a large dollop of sticky grease from the back of your cooker, a dead cockroach and some of the hairy bits scraped out of the plughole in your bath?

PRINCESS KABIHA [*To **PRINCESS WAYUK.***] Don't give her anything!

PRINCESS WAYUK [*To **PRINCESS KABIHA.***] Would I? [*To the **TORTOISE.***] We're terribly sorry, dearest sister, we'd love to be able to help you, but we're not going to.

TORTOISE Oh, alright, I will just have to make do.

*The two **PRINCESSES** cackle cruelly to each other.*

PRINCESS WAYUK Let's cook!

*By the magic of theatre the two **PRINCESSS** and the **TORTOISE** suddenly have steaming bowls of broth in their hands.*

PRINCESS WAYUK Phew. Those hours of preparation seem to have passed in a flash.

PRINCESS KABIHA The broth is ready.

SON It looks delicious. What have you put in it?

PRINCESS WAYUK Only the very finest ingredients...

PRINCESS KABIHA ... the tenderest of meats...

PRINCESS WAYUK ... the choicest of herbs...

PRINCESS KABIHA ... the rarest of spices...

PRINCESS WAYUK ... the sweetest of honeys...

PRINCESS KABIHA ... the ripest of fruit...

PRINCESS WAYUK ... the most delicate of seasonings...

PRINCESSES ... and all mixed up with a large spoonful of our love.

SON It sounds wonderful, and exactly what the Caliph needs. I can't resist having a little try, just before I take it to him. [*The **SON** takes a big ladleful of the broth and drinks it. In disgust he spits it out.*] Yuk! This tastes like the sticky grease from the back of a cooker. [*He looks in the bowl.*] What's this dead cockroach doing in here?

PRINCESS CYRA Looks like the backstroke.

HAROUN I do the gags, sunshine.

*The **SON** picks at something between his teeth.*

SON And what on earth is this? Surely it's not a... oh, great camels' humps, eyelids and hooves, it is! Are you trying to poison the Caliph?

PRINCESS WAYUK I don't understand.

PRINCESS KABIHA It looked so delicious in the bowl.

TORTOISE My prince, my husband, my love –

SON Yes?

TORTOISE – I have made this for your father.

*The **SON** looks in the bowl.*

SON But it just looks like dirty washing up water.

TORTOISE I've had to make do. Taste it.

SON Well, you are my wife, and, beauty isn't all, as we know well. [*Gingerly the **SON** tastes the tiniest amount of the **TORTOISE**'s broth. A broad smile spreads across his face.*] This is delicious! And so nourishing. Thank you. Thank you. [*The **SON** takes the broth to the **CALIPH**. The **PRINCESSES** glare at the **TORTOISE**.]*

PRINCESS WAYUK We'll get you next time...

PRINCESS KABIHA ... you four legged freak in a shell.

PRINCESS WAYUK Or at least what passes for a shell.

*The **CALIPH** and his **SON** join them.*

CALIPH That broth was truly remarkable. I am fully recovered in an instant. Praise be to Al-Mu'id, the Restorer. And thanks and well done to you two lovelies, Princess Wayuk and Princess Kabiha. [*No one corrects him.*] To celebrate I am going to hold a grand feast, and [*To the **PRINCESSES.***] you are both invited. We are going to dine on mujaddara – that well known sloppy rice and lentil stew loved throughout the Arab world.

PRINCESSES A grand feast!

CALIPH With mujaddara.

PRINCESSES Delicious!

CALIPH [*To the **TORTOISE.***] And you can come too, but only because you're married to my youngest son. I would be grateful though if you could keep out of sight. I don't want to put the guests off their mujadarra. You are a large and rather ugly tortoise, after all.

TORTOISE Yes, I am.

*The **PRINCESSES** cackle cruelly to each other.*

CALIPH And you are all to wear your finest clothes, and arrive in the grandest of all possible styles.

*The **CALIPH** sweeps out.*

PRINCESS WAYUK I shall arrive on a milk white mare, seated on a saddle studded with diamonds and pearls.

PRINCESS KABIHA And I shall arrive on a coal black stallion, seated on a saddle encrusted with rubies and emeralds.

TORTOISE Excuse me sisters, may I please borrow a mangy goose to ride to the grand feast?

PRINCESS WAYUK No, you cannot.

TORTOISE Or a flea bitten goat?

PRINCESS KABIHA Why don't you waddle in on those short, scrawny stumps of yours?

The PRINCESSES flounce out.

TORTOISE I suppose that, once again, I'll have to make do.

The TORTOISE waddles out.

SON Women, eh? [*Three days literally fly by.*] Well, those three days seem to have literally flown by. It's the day of the grand feast already. [*He is joined by the CALIPH.*]

CALIPH Is the mujaddara ready?

SON [*Pointing to a large cauldron of sloppy rice and lentil stew.*] It certainly is. Nice and sloppy. Just how you like it.

CALIPH Splendid! Now, I did tell the wives to wear their finest clothes, and arrive in the grandest of all possible styles, didn't I?

SON You did.

CALIPH Good. Proper attire and befitting transport are most important to me. Especially the transport.

A fanfare.

SON Ah, that will be Princess Wayuk, my oldest brother's wife. She's promised to arrive on a milk white mare, seated on a saddle studded with diamonds and pearls.

PRINCESS WAYUK enters. She is riding a mangy goose.

CALIPH What is the meaning of this? Are you laughing at me?

PRINCESS WAYUK I'm so sorry. I don't know what's happened. When I left my home I was riding a milk white mare...

A fanfare.

SON And that will be Princess Kabiha, my other brother's wife. She's promised to arrive on a coal black stallion, seated on a saddle encrusted with rubies and emeralds.

PRINCESS KABIHA enters. She is riding a flea bitten goat.

CALIPH You too? Have you both conspired to make a mockery of me? Me, only just out of bed after a near fatal tickly cough?

PRINCESSKABIHA This is most unexpected, sir. I swear to you that when I left my home I was riding a coal black stallion...

A fanfare.

CALIPH And that will be your wife, the large and rather ugly tortoise, I suppose. What will she arrive on? A duck-billed platypus? [*In fact the **TORTOISE** just waddles in.*] Typical! No thought to befitting transport at all. And where's your proper attire? You've just come in that shell you always wear. You're supposed to change for a grand feast.

TORTOISE I have changed, underneath my shell.

CALIPH What?

TORTOISE I'll take it off, shall I?

CALIPH Al-Qawwi, Giver of Strength, give me strength! A naked tortoise! Yuk! [*To his **SON**.*] Why couldn't you marry someone beautiful like your brothers did? The perfectly gorgeous Princess Wayuk and the gorgeously perfect Princess Kabiha are clever and modest and kind – you can tell that just by looking at them.

SON You know what, father, they are not. They are not clever – it was my wife, the tortoise, who made the broth that revived you. They are not modest – you should have heard them boast about how they were going to arrive at this feast. And they are certainly not kind – they haven't helped my wife one bit when she needed it most. In fact, all they have done is laugh at her. Just because they are beautiful does not mean that they are good. Beauty isn't all, as we know well. Since I have married her I have found that...that... that I love her!

TORTOISE You love me?

SON I love you.

A Love Duet Between a Caliph's Son and a Large and Rather Ugly Tortoise

SON [*Singing.*] When love's fated arrow
Fell upon your roof,
I saw your shell, I saw your horny claws,

I saw your stringy neck, but I didn't see the truth:
Look deeper to find beauty such as yours.

BOTH *[Singing.]* For those lovers who are true,
Seek the soul that lies within,
For beauty isn't all, as we know well.

TORTOISE *[Singing.]* Yet I found it very hard to see beneath the skin

SON *[Singing.]* And I found it very hard to see under the shell.

TORTOISE *[Singing.]* When love's fated arrow
Dared to pierce my rafters,
I saw your hair, I saw your flabby fingers
I saw your pasty skin, but not happy ever afters,
Look deeper to find happiness that lingers.

BOTH *[Singing.]* For those lovers who are true,
Seek the soul that lies within,
For beauty isn't all, as we know well.

TORTOISE *[Singing.]* Yet I found it very hard to see beneath the skin

SON *[Singing.]* And I found it very hard to see under the shell.

BOTH *[Singing.]* Now love's fated arrow
Has brought us both together,
We see deep into each other's soul,
Find riches there within, a love that lasts forever,
The beauty of two people being whole.

BOTH *[Singing.]* For those lovers who are true,
Seek the soul that lies within,
For beauty isn't all, as we know well.

TORTOISE *[Singing.]* And now I cannot help but see beneath the skin

SON *[Singing.]* And I cannot wait to see under the shell.

*The song ends with a beautiful and tender kiss between a Caliph's **SON** and a Large and Rather Ugly **TORTOISE**.*

SON My princess, my wife, my love, I don't care what you look like, with
or without your shell on. I love you!

*The **TORTOISE** removes her shell. A ‘But-Miss-Jones-you’re beautiful’ moment. The lady revealed inside is beautiful beyond compare.*

SON Great camels’ humps, eyelids, hooves and lips! Is this what you really look like? I can’t believe my eyes. My love, you are... you are... you are...

TORTOISE Completely underdressed for the occasion, I know. But I can quickly remedy that.

She picks up the large cauldron of sloppy rice and lentil stew.

CALIPH The mujaddara – that well known sloppy rice and lentil stew loved throughout the Arab world! What are you doing?

TORTOISE Watch...

She tips some of the stew over her head. As it dribbles all over her, it transforms magically into a gorgeous dress.

PRINCESSES Now that we have got to try!

TORTOISE Be my guest.

PRINCESS WAYUK Would you mind... ?

TORTOISE Of course not.

PRINCESS KABIHA And don’t be stingy.

TORTOISE As if I would. Are you ready?

PRINCESSES Yes!

*She tips the remainder of the stew over the **PRINCESSES**’ heads. It remains resolutely a sloppy rice and lentil stew.*

HAROUN And the Caliph’s son and his former tortoise wife lived happily together until the end of their lives.

THE TALE OF KING DARA AL-SAEED AND PRINCESS

KING DARA So, it was alright that the Caliph’s son married a large and rather ugly tortoise because she turned out to be a beautiful princess in the end. Is it any wonder I despise stories so much?

HAROUN No, that isn't it at all.

KING DARA Oh yes, it is. And don't tell me that there's another truth like you did with that genie in the bottle story, because there's only one truth in anything. It's either true or it's not.

PRINCESS CYRA Are you sure?

KING DARA Yes.

HAROUN He isn't very good at this finding-the-message-in-a-story-thing, is he?

KASHIFAH Not at all.

KING DARA I am! And I should be; I've heard enough stories. One thousand and one heads crown the palace walls. And yours, I'm sad to tell you, are going to be the one thousand and second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth.

PRINCESS CYRA Maybe you weren't listening.

KING DARA How dare you tell me what I was or wasn't doing?! I am the King. That was not the one story.

HAROUN No... Maybe another one will help...

KING DARA You've had your chance.

SHADHA What if I –

KING DARA And so have you.

KASHIFAH Do you know the story about the wonderful bag?

KING DARA Don't tell me – you've got a story too.

KASHIFAH And the truth about what was inside?

KING DARA I forbid you to start another story.

KASHIFAH Actually, this one will need a bit of preparation. And I could do with a wash. Could you go away and come back in fifteen minutes?

KING DARA What? No one tells me what to do in my palace!

KASHIFAH *[To us.]* Then, could you go? It would be a real help. You could take the opportunity to stretch your legs, get an ice cream, go to the toilet.

We start to leave.

KING DARA Wait! Come back.

HAROUN Don't listen to him.

SHADHA Miserable old wind bag.

KING DARA I forbid you to leave.

KASHIFAH Go. To be honest we need a bit of a break too.

KING DARA Stay here! *[We continue to leave.]* It's the chop for the lot of you!

END OF ACT ONE