

The City of Tales (Adapted)

A SCENE BY SCENE GUIDE FOR THE AUDIENCE

Written by Bijan Mofid, directed by Amir N. Hosseini, performed in Farsi with Persian music (setar and tombak).

Before you begin. This is a fable told with animals. A Narrator opens the story like a bedtime tale: once upon a time, in a green forest, there was a beautiful and peaceful city called the “City of Tales”. Every animal has a trade. They seem sweet and simple. Slowly you see that they are cruel, greedy and afraid, and that they destroy anything that is different from them. The comedy is fast, musical and full of wordplay. This guide tells you what happens in each scene so you can enjoy the playing, the music and the faces without worrying about every word.

The animals. Donkey, a carpenter, proud and quick to anger. Fox, the school teacher and religious man, sly and always asking for money. Bear, a fortune teller. Dog, a seller of herbal medicine. Parrot, a poet who copies other people. Monkey, the clever one who runs things. Lady Beetle, a beautiful and flirty young woman. Mouse, a shy young man in love.

One key joke. In Persian, calling someone a donkey means calling them a fool. The Donkey character is proud of being a donkey. That double meaning runs through the whole play.

ACT ONE

Scene 1. The Marketplace, the School and the Fortune Teller

The Narrator introduces the city and its people as each animal appears at its shop. Donkey the carpenter calls out to customers, selling pipes and flowerpots, then walks around the square at sunset reciting poetry. Dog the herbalist promises cures for every illness, while Lady Beetle strolls through the alley enjoying the attention.

Fox then becomes a school teacher, ordering everyone to repeat their letters. The lesson is nonsense, with Fox chanting meaningless Arabic letters while moving closer to Lady Beetle. The class panics, shouting that a genie has appeared under the teacher’s cloak. Fox runs away, and the class breaks into a wild dance.

Finally, Bear tells fortunes, shaking his instruments, muttering prayers, and blowing around himself. He tells a woman her stars are perfect, and her future is bright, but his speech turns into rude nonsense, making everyone laugh.

For the audience. The chanting scene is a joke about old religious schools where children memorised sounds in a language they did not understand. Persian fortune-telling used tools like the astrolabe and the practice of opening a book by the poet Hafez at random to read your future. Fox is not just a teacher; he is the village mullah, a religious figure, and the play shows him as a fraud who is more interested in girls and money than in God.

Scene 2. The Court

Parrot steps forward to recite his poem but cannot pronounce the first line correctly. He claims it has 1,123 verses, then keeps reducing the number as the others beg him, until Donkey grabs him and he gives up.

As Parrot walks away, he insults the others as stupid as donkeys. Donkey hears him, and Monkey quickly creates a courtroom, with himself as judge and Fox as secretary.

The trial is pure nonsense. Donkey complains that factories and plastic have ruined his carpentry business, while Parrot is accused of stealing Donkey's name. They debate what makes a real poet—pure, wise, tall, handsome, and well dressed—but Donkey says a donkey can be none of these.

Parrot defends himself through endless rhyming, becoming so carried away that everyone else starts babbling too. He eventually faints and is carried away.

The Narrator then introduces Mouse, who has no job because he has fallen in love. Mouse dances down the stairs and sings the play's first song about a heart that refuses to listen to reason

For the audience. Parrot is the fake artist, a person who copies other people's poems into his own notebook and signs them. The trial mocks a legal system where the words sound official but nothing has any meaning. The Donkey's speech about plastic and factories is one of the few moments where the play speaks openly about a country changing too fast.

Scene 3. The Drunk Donkey

The stage empties and Donkey speaks alone. He is drunk and heartbroken, dictating a letter to the woman he loves. He was once a sensible man with a life in order, he says. He remembers his mother darning his socks and scolding him, and his father shouting at him and tying his feet to beat him, then creeping in at dawn to wipe the tears off his sleeping son's face with rough hands. His father is dead now. His mother has gone blind and cannot leave her bed, and he believes his own disgrace is what aged and blinded her.

He insists none of it was his fault. It was her eyes. She looked at him, and love ruined him. He ends by asking her that if she ever meets a broken drunk man like him in the street at night, she should close her eyes, because if every look burns like this the whole world would already be ash.

For the audience. This is the quiet heart of the play, and the tone changes completely. The comedy stops. A rough character suddenly shows tenderness and shame. Persian love poetry is full of the beloved's eyes as a weapon that wounds the lover, and this speech takes that old image and puts it in the mouth of a drunk carpenter.

Scene 4. The Courtship and the Mouse

The Narrator praises Lady Beetle's beauty. She appears in the market in a red flowered dress, and the whole town falls in love with her.

Bear greets her as "sister," but she corrects him and teaches him romantic names. He proposes, but she refuses because she will not marry a fortune teller. The others then act out the fortune teller's ridiculous life.

Fox the mullah tries to court her too. After learning the right romantic words, he proposes, but she refuses again. The group acts out his strange daily life, which ends in a huge fight involving police, soldiers, and guns.

Lady Beetle lists her many suitors but says her mother rejects them all. Finally, Mouse asks if he could marry her. Their conversation becomes a chain of strange questions about eyes, dreams, gardens, tears, blood, and hearts. Fox begins a religious crying ritual, and soon everyone is crying without knowing why. Lady Beetle joins in because she believes crying earns a reward in heaven

Mouse takes her hand and leads her away, ending the act with the second song.

weeping ritual, and the whole town begins to cry together, though nobody knows why. Lady Beetle cries too, only because the mullah said crying earns you a reward in heaven. Mouse takes her hand and leads her away, and the act ends with the second song.

For the audience. The two proposal scenes are built to be identical, so you can enjoy the repetition even without the words. The list of suitors and the group weeping are the sharpest satire in the act: the crying is a mourning ritual, performed here for no reason at all, and the guns and the foreign advisor point at the politics of the time. The question-and-answer chain between Mouse and Lady Beetle is a classic Persian folk game of linked rhymes..

15-MINUTE INTERMISSION

ACT TWO

Scene 1. The Maid

The Narrator repeats the opening description of the beautiful city, adding one new line: now everyone is trying to learn English to make a living.

Parrot arrives looking for work as a servant. Bear interviews him. Bear asks for certificates, and Parrot produces one after another: cooking, tailoring, embroidery, typing, spinning yarn, and then simply certificate, diploma, certificate, diploma, over and over until Bear is out of breath. Bear then asks for body measurements and gets absurd numbers. Finally, Bear asks whether Parrot speaks English. Parrot says no. That ends it. By law, a girl who does not speak English cannot be a secretary. Parrot leaves, and Bear sighs that she would have made a lovely maid.

Fox then tries to borrow a few coins until Friday, and is refused. This turns into a sung complaint about prices. Bread, cheese, garlic oil, sugar, firewood, chalk, a bath: everything is counted out in old coins, and the refrain says that these prices make a penniless man dance. Fox describes his hungry son, his wife begging for new clothes, and a baby in the cradle crying with hunger. Donkey says he might as well go get a doctorate, or act in films, or direct them, or simply

For the audience. The endless certificates and the English requirement are a joke about a society where paper and foreign polish matter more than what a person can actually do. The obsession with English and with imported goods was a real and painful subject in Iran in the years the play was written, in the late nineteen sixties. The word Abbasi in the song is an old Persian coin, like saying pennies.

Scene 2. The Elephant, Part One

The Narrator says that some years ago, at dusk, an Elephant came to the town. He was watching the townspeople work, and he tripped and broke his tusk.

The Elephant cries out for a doctor, a surgeon, a vet. The animals see he is huge but clumsy, polite and shy, so they lose their fear and gather around him. Dog offers him dried flowers and herbs. Donkey offers to sell him a water pipe and a picture frame. The Elephant begs for a doctor and is told the city has no doctor, no pharmacy, no hospital, because the people here are not stupid enough to get sick. Parrot arrives and offers to recite poetry to him. Bear offers to read his palm, predicts money coming from an aunt or an uncle, and studies his hand.

Then they turn to his body. His tusk is crooked, they decide. It is not a good tooth. It would make a lovely set of pipes, or a comb. The Elephant protests that he would not sell it for any price. They break both tusks off anyway while he screams.

Next they decide an elephant with no tusks cannot be an elephant, and that his trunk is far too long to be a nose. Fox announces that for the purposes of zoology he must take a few samples from the nose. The Elephant hesitates. They promise it will be quick and painless, like an injection. Then they cut the trunk into pieces, one sample for fingerprinting, one for a criminal record, more for research, and a piece each for Bear and Parrot to keep in case it comes in handy.

The Narrator concludes: the poor Elephant had become something else, a new and strange animal with two horns on his head, no trunk and no tusks, a bit like a cow, but not really a cow either. Something with no head and no tail. Whatever it was, it was not an Elephant.

For the audience. This is the turn of the whole play. Everything before it is comic, and now the comedy has a victim. Notice that nobody is truly evil. Each animal only wants a small favour, a sample, a piece of ivory, a bit of business. The Elephant is destroyed by ordinary people being ordinary. The stump becomes a horn, and from now on the town will call his tusks horns and insist they are right.

Scene 3. The Elephant, Part Two

The mutilated Elephant thanks the animals for their kindness. They boast that their city is honest and civilized, while Donkey jokes about selling his tusks for decorations. The Elephant only asks to keep them as they are.

The animals then doubt that he is really an elephant and demand documents. Fox arrives and tries to sell him a divorce, even though the Elephant has no wife. Donkey explains that Fox has married and divorced him thirty times as practice.

Donkey also tries to buy the Elephant's tusks, but he refuses. Donkey produces official papers proving that he is legally a donkey, while the Elephant has no identity or documents. Fox questions him until the Elephant begins doubting his own identity and finally admits he may not even be an elephant.

They send him to the civil registry for an identity card. Bear, acting as the clerk, demands endless stamps, signatures, papers, and money. When the Elephant gives him a piece of his broken tusk as a bribe, the card appears immediately.

The Elephant returns and says his name is Elephant, then changes it to Manouchehr, an ordinary human name. Everyone laughs. Staring at the card that has erased his identity, the Elephant finally snaps and attacks them all.

For the audience. The clerk scene is the most famous part of the play and works on faces and rhythm alone, so you will follow it even without the language. Manouchehr is a common Persian first name, so the joke is that he has been given a name that belongs to nobody in particular. He has been cut apart, renamed, and forced to pay for the paper that erases him. The play was written in the late nineteen sixties under censorship, and audiences understood the city as their own country. The final scream is not a happy ending. It is the sound of someone waking up.

Thank you for joining us today!

Please click on the QR code to read the director's note and the cast & crew's bios.

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The performance is in Farsi. This guide follows the order of the scenes, so you can read it before the show or during the intermission.