

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Melchior	Steward
Balthasar	Narrator
Gaspar	Herod

PRODUCTION

Set: a three-level staircase at stage right for Wise Men, lecturns, three individual levels as shown above.

Lighting: variation in color and intensity of area as the script suggests; individual spotlights: on Narrator alone at opening of scenes, dim on concluding words; on Steward and Herod only during their speeches.

Costumes: (1) for adult audience: classic white robes for Wise Men, neutral to dark solid for others. (2) for youthful audience: appropriate period costumes and properties: coronets, small casket, brazier, etc. Slight stage movement permissible; e.g. Melchior turned away from audience in scene 3.

Music: recordings of oriental themes, climaxing in *We Three Kings of Orient Old*.

STAR BRIGHT

A Christmas Play for Six Actors

By *JOACHIM CUNNINGHAM, O.P.*

Narrator: Our Christmas crib is crowded. The Child, His mother, St. Joseph, the shepherds and their animals. Soon shall three more statues be placed there—those of the Magi. Tradition names them as Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. Then shall the crib be complete—when these men from the East complete their journey.

This journey . . . have you ever thought about it? It must have been a long, tedious journey, and a hard one for them. For they were real men, as subject to the cold and darkness and misgivings as you and I.

Our story opens in Herod's palace. It is the ninth hour and the court attendants smile to each other; they recognize the familiar signs of the king's fatigue: he strokes his beard, folds his arms, gazes in space. . . .

The interview will soon be over. These strangers have taken much of his time this day. Further, it has not been as enjoyable as the king intended: he has been hard put to answer their questions and received only stale gossip in return.

Herod holds up his hand and speaks. . . .

Herod: The interview is over: the King must with others meet and counsel them on affairs of state. I trust your questions have been answered, most welcome visitors. Proceed in peace then to your destination; my signature assures your passage. Forget not your promise. Return when you have found this new king that I may visit him with honor. Farewell.

Balthasar. How good it is to breathe fresh air again.

Gaspar. Yes, that court is rank with acrid odors.

Bal. Not sweet spices, Gaspar, but the sovereign it is that disturbs me.

Melchior. Silence, Balthasar—such a one as Herod is easily offended.

Bal. And offends: Perhaps if Gaspar left some of his incense in the brazier; a single spoonful of your frankincense would sweeten that foul court. Melchior, do not fuss so. Why fear? We are without the walls. Oh, all right Gaspar, it is true. Western sovereigns seek in vain to capture the splendor of the East. It eludes them ever and they render self and court offensive. . . .

Mel. Such a gross kind is Herod. Though he seems to intend otherwise.

Bal. As . . .

Gas. As delegated king by Rome he has protected his people . . .

Bal. Protected his people from such successors as himself by slaughter of his own sons—granted.

Gas. No—from Rome's cruel yoke.

Bal. Better be subject to a stranger than a friend.

Mel. We quarrel over interior acts which none may see. The temple he has rebuilt stands for all. . . .

Bal. For all to see, and admire a great king. He built the temple over the bodies of his people; he emptied the treasury when half sufficed to raise up its walls.

Mel. Enough, Balthasar. Shall we repay royal reception with base ingratitude?

Gas. And we did learn from him of our destination.

Bal. And he from us all the gossip we gathered on this long sojourn. We are picked clean like bleached bones in barren lands. He was well satisfied with the exchange, as well he should be.

Mel. Not only he. We have learned at least of our goal.

Mel. Only a few hours journey and we shall be there. It is a comfortable thought.

Bal. But still distant and so it will remain unless we press on toward it.

Mel. Then let us hasten to arouse our caravan that we may start.

Gas. No need, Melchior.

Mel. What?

Gas. When dining we decided to press on, I called aside a servant of the king and dispatched him to our quarters. We need not move. Our party will arrive here shortly.

Mel. Good. It was a fine thought. We waste less time.

Bal. Indeed it was, Gaspar (*surprised.*)

Gas. Are you surprised, Balthasar, it entered my mind?

Bal. Yes and no. You have a good mind—it was you who first noticed the star and told us of its legend. But you seldom bring forth action from such clear knowledge.

Mel. The action you so dearly prize, Balthasar, may have bitter end if we continue haggling. Must we turn from Herod to feed upon ourselves?

Bal. Then return to that gross king—he is a sumptuous meal.

Gas. And his aspects for derision are unending.

Mel. I would this criticism cease. We are restless to complete our travel.

Gas. Not half as restless as Herod. Did you notice, Balthasar, his anxiety?

Bal. When?

Gas. When we spoke of the star and the king. He seemed disquieted. . . .

Bal. He did not know of the star.

Gas. Nor did the rest of Jerusalem. Yet none were so anxious as he. He grows in age and a new king. . . .

Bal. Yes, he would have reason to fear a new king.

Gas. Fear? No—desire for a successor. He expressed it before we left. (*Imitate*) "Return with news that I might come."

Bal. Herod?—move from his court? Never! Two kings within half a day's journey is most unlikely with such a one as Herod. He must rule all. Further, he expresses no knowledge of this king.

Gas. As did all Jerusalem.

Bal. Yes, but does one king not know of another if such there be? The star tells us of a king. It can only be the rival to succeed him.

Gas. No wonder, then, he was concerned. The diadem of Israel rests upon him insecurely.

Bal. Exactly.

Mel. What nonsense, Balthasar. The star tells us of a king, not a rival. No man before he bears a crown is called a king.

Bal. Look at Israel and tell me if there is room for more than one king. And that single sceptre we have seen in Herod's hand. No crowned head awaits us at Bethlehem, mark my words.

Gas. Retreat to less burning issues. Our tempers mount to match the setting sun. . . . Why think you Herod knew not of the star?

Bal. Merely partaker of Israel's ignorance.

Gas. A clearer answer.

Bal. None we questioned in this capital city knew of the star. Herod, though he rules the city, is a victim to its ignorance.

Gas. Why is it not seen here?

Bal. Perhaps a great veil overhangs the city, straining out the light of that single star.

Gas. A mighty conceit.

Bal. Such as would suit this complex, proud town.

Gas. Then why has it disappeared from our sight?

Bal. Only as we approached Jerusalem did it fail to light our way.

Mel. Concede we are as ignorant as the king.

Gas. More—he knew where to search.

Bal. In his holy books. Yet they were as foreign to him as to us. No credit to him—he had to seek from others.

Mel. As did we. . . .

Gas. Melchior, see, the servant approaches leading the caravan. He has received our word and assembled.

Bal. With no great haste.

Mel. Feed not upon that man. He is a good steward; his kind are rare and hard to come upon.

Bal. Let us quit this pretentious palace quickly and be off to Bethlehem.

Mel. And the king.

Bal. Our rival.

Gas. This talk of rival to Herod. You would overthrow—

Bal. Such a king as Herod?—yes.

Mel. Enough, enough. Hatch sedition elsewhere than the king's courtyard.

Gas. Is it that you intend, Balthasar, the gold you bear to spend for arms?

Bal. A slight war chest for a rebel would my gift be. No, Rome and Herod are secure. You jest well.

Gas. Your grace, my master, teaches well.

Mel. Then let us in these good spirits leave this town. Hasten—night comes soon enough.

SCENE II

Bal. Steward!

Steward. Sire? (*at a distance*)

Bal. Why have we stopped in our journey? Come here and explain.

Ste. It is the men—they are tired.

Gas. Tired? How could they be? We have just begun this day's journey. For two days we have rested in the city and are still within sight of its walls.

Ste. My Lords. . . .

Bal. Steward, is it from the journey or from the rest your men seek surcease?

Gas. What is this?

Ste. My lord knows men: the men dawdle not from the rigors of travel but to recall the luxury of rest.

Bal. As I thought. We begin our journey again—lead them forward if you must use a halter.

Gas. Balthasar, do you think that wise?

Ste. Or possible, sire?

Bal. Hold your tongue before your superiors, servant. We move on. Our goal is but three hours journey from here. Is it not so, Melchior?

Mel. It is so. Before this night is half completed we shall reach our goal.

Bal. Then we advance—to finish our long travellings, Steward. . . .

Ste. (*sighs*) The men will not move, sire. They dislike this flight by night. We might be mistaken for thieves by soldiers guarding the walls.

Bal. Not with the letters of safe conduct from the king in our possession.

Gas. Unless thieves consort with kings.

Bal. (*aside*) Gaspar. Such a relationship is not unlikely for such a king as Herod. But this is beside the point. (*aloud*) Steward, we shall not be mistaken. Advance.

Ste. The men. . . . If the goal is but a third part of a day's journey, why did we wait? Oh, to have left the city when the sun was high. Why wait until its failing rays?

Bal. Why? It is not for you to know our ways. Am I your servant? Do I come at your call? Do you seek from your superior's knowledge we deny you?

Mel. Steward, for two days in the city we made diligent inquiry with no success. This noon we were favored by an audience with the king. His counselors gave us that which we sought. Forthwith, we summoned you to continue and to end, on this night, our long journey.

Ste. I believe you, sire. But the men seek rest. They are impatient with night travel. In truth, they wish to return to the city.

Bal. See, Melchoir. Reason is wasted on dogs; commands, not discourses, they acknowledge. Command them, Steward.

Ste. They do not attend my voice in this matter. They return to the city this night with their masters or without.

Gas. We will increase their pay to complete this night.

Ste. Silver is of no value away from the city.

Gas. Bethlehem is a city. Money there can be spent. . . .

Ste. (breaking in) There is only one city in all Israel; a single rose in a bleak desert. Beside it all others blush for shame like old hags before a radiant queen. And we have just quitted its confines.

Gas. Tomorrow you may return to Jerusalem but tonight. . . .

Ste. Naught is as distant as future joy. The present conquers the most steadfast will.

Mel. You would have us think you are the advocate of others. But this plea sounds most sincere. Are claimant and counselor one?

Ste. My face colors to match this setting sun. I, too, my Lord, desire to return.

Mel. But faithfully you have served us and valiantly led us. Just a few hours journey. What we have passed through dwarfs the remainder.

Ste. Yes, what we have passed through—the city—shrinks all. When you enlisted my service in our homeland, no journey seemed too far, no goal too distant. Destination all unknown to me, my trust placed entirely in you, I led the way across the green valley and fertile pastures of our land. Over tall hills and through the mountain passage that is the sole entrance to our land I conducted your

caravan. At its borders, when others left you, I stayed. And then we encountered the desert, at whose confines many more quitted your numbers. Over burning desert sands and uncharted wastes we travelled with only momentary halts at springs and water holes. All this in unseeing obedience to your single command: "Further, further still." Never made privy to your plans, your thoughts inscrutable. All done in darkness and doubt. You seemed in doubt yourselves, unsure of the way, your destination uncertain. Three nights ago you fell to quarrelling among yourselves. Then we saw the silhouette of the city. Your eyes gazed as eagerly, as expectantly, as ours. We stopped there as if our destination was at last attained. Yet in the midst of our joys were we curtly summoned, cruelly called to commence again this unending journey. Is it to end in Bethlehem, or is that too, but a lure?

Mel. No lure that.

Ste. No matter. The city at noon, when light most harshly beats on its quarters and raises stench skyward we could quit and count ourselves well rid of its dust. But when the setting sun lends an aspect most sweet to the city, gilds each wall, each tower and roof top, indiscriminately casts a golden aura about temple heights and lowly hovel. . . . no, no further this day. Sooner separate mother and babe than we and the city. Jerusalem before us was inviting, behind us irresistible. We return.

Mel. Then go, go back to your city; and on the morrow rejoin me here.

Bal. Here? Melchior, do you stay here?

Mel. Yes.

Bal. But the night; bands of thieves roam these hills. We must move.

Ste. We move no further this night.

Gas. (to Steward) Quiet; I speak of no further journeying. (*then to Melchior*) Then let us return to the city together, Melchior, for protection, and, refreshed, set out together tomorrow.

Mel. No, no, no! The path is clear before me. Remain here I should not; retreat from here I shall not.

Bal. But what of us?

Mel. Do as you wish. But I must give witness to constancy of intent, though it be solitary.

Gas. No, Melchior, — we began this quest together and we — I — remain with you here.

Bal. Shall I with hirelings take flight? Our tent has quarters for

three—and I will not see one space free—even for a single night; my place is here with you.

Gas. Steward.

Ste. Sires? I shall not be moved by . . .

Bal. I speak only of your move to the city. Retreat there; return here tomorrow. Your lords remain in this place tonight.

Ste. As you will, sire.

Gas. (to *Bal.*) But what of thieves?

Ste. Roman soldiers posted at each mile guard the way. Thieves have vanished before their swift justice.

Bal. Justice—from the Romans?

Ste. Justice of a sort, my lord, justice of a sort. Criminals caught at rude soldiers court make plea of innocence to centurion-magistrate. Convicted, they are affixed to nearest barren tree that can bear their weight.

Gas. & Mel. Crucified??!!

Ste. Yes, my lords, crucified. We'll pitch your tent before we go and return at the sixth hour tomorrow.

SCENE III

Narrator: Poles were thrust vertically into the ground, joined one to another by light horizontal strips, all lashed with long hemp fibres. Then the tent rolls were unfolded, stretched across the frame and the ends secured to the ground by stakes.

At last the great tent was completed and a fire kindled.

Then in the lengthening shadows of dusk, brief farewells were exchanged and the party set out for the city.

The sounds of the men on the road back to Jerusalem grew faint, then inaudible.

Mel. (*turned away from audience*) Night falls swiftly in these hills.

Gas. . . . And brings with it icy blasts. Come, sit by the fire, Melchior.

Mel. I am well suited here.

Gas. Surely its warmth cannot be felt outside its light.

Bal. An even fainter light would bring Melchior greater warmth this night.

Gas. How's that?

Bal. The dim light of a star cannot penetrate this amber circle. So

Melchior stands on its periphery and, like a mariner, his glance is upward and outward raised.

Gas. Do come here, Melchior.

Bal. Perhaps I am mistaken . . . the city is outside our cone of light. Perhaps he looks back to *It*. The steward and party are there now. Do you regret your decision? Or do you prefer the companionship of commoners to kings?

Mel. (advancing) I look back on no city, choice or comrade. Your first sally was more close and kind: I seek the star.

Bal. Forgive me, Melchior, I meant no harm . . . Gaspar tired of my jests.

Gas. Yea! Many months before. . . .

Bal. What? Now you have stung.

Gas. But not tonight, Balthasar, not tonight. Your quips have lightened a heavy heart this eve.

Bal. A jester must, I suppose, receive what recompense royalty bestows. But bid farewell to my fool faces; buffoonery brings me no bread. Witless shall I witness the term of these travellings.

Mel. Balthasar, I was much grieved by the steward's departure. One wound would suffice for this night. Do not move your merriment from our midst. Insufferable would then be this night that weighs so heavily upon us.

Gas. Yes. The retreat of caravan and servants have worn thin our patience.

(silence)

Gas. Melchior. . . .

Mel. Hmmmmmm. . . .

Gas. . . . Did you, did you see it—there outside the fire?

Mel. No *(pause)*, no. The skies are filled with a thousand stars—all, indeed, save ONE.

Gas. Why has it disappeared?

Mel. Ask easier questions. For this I have no answer.

Bal. Sooner explain why all Jerusalem knew not of its appearance.

Gas. But they know now.

Bal. By that least creditable way, witness, and from without.

Gas. From within also . . . their scriptures.

Bal. (silently) They place no great trust in their testimony. This darkened field swears to that. Were they certain of a king in

Bethlehem, this road would ring with tunes of travel. This field would glow with a hundred campfires, the stars be blotted out by their amber aura. But, no . . . none travel the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. The cold hard stars stare down unblinking on this deserted field. No, none travelled the highway from Jerusalem this day save our party.

Gas. And the same has since returned . . . the sane at least.

Bal. More sane are those who stayed within Jerusalem's walls this day.

Mel. Together we chose to quit the courts and city of the king. Would you enjoy the harsh hospitality of Herod?

Bal. Much has he suffered at our hands, should we not return the favor?

Gas. That lately repressed roguery now rises lightly in your voice, Balthasar. But no matter. There are other hostels than Herod's in Jerusalem.

Mel. And in Bethlehem—are there no quarters in Bethlehem?

Bal. We only joke of Jerusalem. We are content to be here.

Mel. Is Bethlehem also a joke?

Bal. We are content to be here this night.

Gas. Yes, we are content. Provincial towns have rude resting places: we fare as well in this field.

Bal. The fire grows low and this talk of sleep nods my head in slumber and agreement.

Gas. Then let us retire now. Shall one of us stand watch?

Bal. No danger from robbers; Melchior's steward told us of that, and he is most trustworthy. All retire. Agree, Melchior?

Mel. As you wish. Go. I sit here awhile longer.

Bal. Why more? Your star won't shine this night.

Mel. I know. (*sorry resignation*)

Gas. There is no need of its appearance now. We know from the Hebrew's writings our final goal. Our purpose is firm: tomorrow will see it at last attained.

Bal. So, then, retire now. It is as foolish to stay awake as . . .

Mel. As foolish as to stay encamped in this field? As foolish as to have left the city at sunset. . . . As to have left our distant home . . . yes, it is as foolish.

Gas. What do you mean, Melchior?

Mel. Only this: we have come to honor a king. We saw his star shining in the East. And we vowed to follow it. So clear was our vision, so simple our belief. We were not alone in our knowledge of the star—there at home. Others shared our knowledge of it, but did not share our vow, our journey. They stayed at home, minding their affairs as these Israelites stay within their walled city. In its light we journeyed across the borders of our land, held in agreement by a single purpose. As each day lengthened the distance from our home, this unity was scattered like sand before a windstorm. At last, before the gates of Jerusalem, the star disappeared and we fell to quarrel. No wonder our men lost confidence in us.

Bal. I admit that I have grown troublesome to all. But that is ended. Tomorrow when we reach Bethlehem, all will be well.

Mel. I single out no one for censure; each bears a burden of guilt. Our failure is more elementary than that.

Gas. What is it?

Mel. Have we not failed to keep faith: Failed to preserve intact that vision splendid—the simple vow to follow? I must confess that I have. I did with guile erect an arabesque of tensions to move us onward—onward against the will of all.

Gas. Your cunning, if such it was, was only to achieve the appointed end.

Mel. By moving to the tune *I* called.

Bal. Someone must lead. We grow sluggish in all actions. . . .

Mel. Guided by the star, we moved with ease. . . .

Gas. Guided by the star, we did indeed. . . .

Mel. Yes, and our present weariness betrays our forgotten pledge.

Gas. Yes, fatigue is an index to failure.

Bal. Perhaps also a pointer to relief.

Gas. Speak further, Balthasar.

Bal. I spoke of a great tent that overhung Jerusalem, screening out the star from view. No more image that. Such a giant conceit envelopes that proud town, its sturdy fabric holding out the news of a nearby king. In our distant land, silken cobwebs suffice to bind the weak impulse to voyage here. Yet such slender threads permit the star to shine. By what power I know not, we broke the bonds at home and travelled—alas, to fall temporary victim to the stronger fetters—our own desires. Thus has distance dulled our design. And lost us our celestial guide.

Gas. Within Jerusalem's walls was even this hidden to us.

Mel. Then this dark night is not without a function. Reaffirm our unity and we withdraw from shadows. To this end, I renew my intent to honor the king in Bethlehem.

Bal. And I to present my gift to him whom the star has announced.

Mel. And you, Gaspar?

Gas. Most certainly, dear friends, but when do we this homage pay?

Bal. On the morrow. . . .

Mel. When the steward returns. . . .

Gas. Then we shall, in making this vow, break another.

Bal. How?

Gas. Do you not recall outside Herod's court . . . we proposed to enter Bethlehem *this* eve?

Mel. And so we would, but the steward intervened.

Gas. Leaving our promised unredeemed.

Bal. What do you propose?

Gas. Let us these two promises wed. Leave this night, go not to bed.

Mel. Go now? It is dark, the roads. . . .

Gas. Guarded by Roman soldiers, and lighted by the stars, "all save one"—remember?

Mel. Our camp, the tent. . . .

Bal. Concern for this patchwork when we have left more lasting dwellings? Surely this does not hold us back.

Gas. Then all hangs on our will. No longer distance or danger, lack of knowledge nor lure of luxury brooks delay.

The goal is in sight, the means at hand, all encumbrances cut away.

To Bethlehem this night, or lack of resolve betray.

Bal. Melchior, decide my mind; the part you assign, I shall play.

Mel. True, we seem most wise when we least our motives weigh.

MOUNT UP—and in this final foolishness, our wisdom display.

Gas. Melchior, Balthasar, LOOK UP . . . that brilliant ray.

Mel. THE STAR.

Bal. THE STAR, it has returned to light our way.

Mel. Obey its dictum, and we before the king at Bethlehem this night our gifts shall lay.