

UR

A new play by Sulayman Al Bassam
Inspired from the Sumerian tablet, *Lamentation for the Destruction of the City of Ur*

Gods: (dolls)

Nanna- God of the Moon and Deity of Ur, her husband
Enlil – her Father
Enki- her Uncle, a general

Men: (actors)

Ningal- Queen of Ur
Elam- her lover
Haqod- High Priestess of Ur
Diyala- her attendant
Fool

Animals: (cabaret elements)

Beetle- dream
Termite- war
Worm- death

Audience in traverse, on either side of the performance area.

Performance area: A large rectangular tablet, with a smaller raised rectangle in the centre.

On one side: Haqod, the High Priestess, and a chorus of female voices.

On the opposite side the Annunaki, or Divine Council. The Annunaki houses the seven major Gods of Sumer: Nanna, An, Enlil, Enki, Ninhursag. The seat of Nin-Gal is empty. The Gods are statues, dressed dolls, or green humanoid targets from U.S. army training grounds, with large painted eyes.

Scene 1:

(Nanna's Palace, Ur.)

HAQOD: *(reading from a clay tablet)* Ningal decrees the following: Firstly, Ur an open city. Secondly, Ur opens itself to any man: Sumerian, Obaidi, Akkadian or Elamite who recites a poem worth inscribing, a song worth the lyre or invents a tool that reduces the burden of human labour. Thirdly, Ur has seven doors, each door an orifice of fecundity and erotic poems are held in the highest esteem in Ur. Fourthly: Women of Ur are freed from their bonds, free to share their bodies without fear of sanction. Fifthly: Priests of the false temples, priests who abuse the defenseless widow, tax the dead for burial, deflower the orphan are to be imprisoned and banished, their income eliminated, Ur's taxes are to be paid to scribes not priests.

NANNA: Enough!

HAQOD: It's not finished.

NANNA: Won't hear anymore!

HAQOD: Your wife -

NANNA: Don't call her that.

HAQOD: How shall I call her?

NANNA: Nin-Gal, Goddess of Reeds.

HAQOD: Ningal, Goddess of Reeds, has pronounced her decree. This is one tablet: there are hundreds.

NANNA: Who's put her up to this? Her father Enlil?

HAQOD: Her father has Ur under siege.

NANNA: Her Uncle Enki, never liked that man.

HAQOD: Enki would see her stoned.

NANNA: Who then?

HAQOD: One of her lovers?

NANNA: What lovers?

HAQOD: Her scribes! They write day and night, her kilns are never cold.

NANNA: Break the kilns.

HAQOD: She's hidden them underground.

NANNA: Amputate the scribes' hands.

HAQOD: The army's been disbanded, she lodges her scribes inside the barracks and has a foreign militia that protects them.

NANNA: She's turning Ur into the whorehouse of Sumer!

HAQOD: Sex is the most public part of her plot: her project is much deeper.

NANNA: It's intolerable.

HAQOD: Every night messengers leave the city, evade the siege to smuggle bagfuls of tablets to other cities. She broadcasts her perverse laws, erotic poems, and mad songs polluting the lands of Sumer.

NANNA: I'll whip her.

HAQOD: You can't.

NANNA: Whip you I will, I shall.

HAQOD: I meant it's not advisable.

NANNA: I'm the God of this town: I am Nanna!

HAQOD: The people are enamoured of her. In Ur, they pray to Nin-Gal, in Lagash they sing to Nin-Gal, in Akkad they make sculptures of her arse.

NANNA: Her sagging, thirty-something arse!

HAQOD: She dreams, she claims, through a beetle-

NANNA: What kind of beetle?

HAQOD: A multi-coloured beetle with skins of azure and gold.

NANNA: She's mad.

HAQOD: Brings her knowledge, she claims, of the earth and its future days.

NANNA: Raze the city.

HAQOD: It's only taken us five hundred years to build it.

NANNA: So what? Raze it. Write to her father, Enlil: tell him his siege is pointless; tell him his daughter won't be deterred, she's lost her mind; Sumer is under threat from within, tell him to send in the troops, axes raised.

HAQOD: Attack his own daughter?

NANNA: She's attacking him, attacking me, attacking all the Gods.

HAQOD: Set a precedent for civil war?

NANNA: This is civil war: the heavens are cracked, the earth is proud.

HAQOD: The Elamites are scattered all over the hills. Every day they raid a new village. They eye every cup of beer we brew, awaiting the chance to pounce on Sumer. Enlil knows this.

NANNA: Bring her to me.

HAQOD: She refuses to see you.

NANNA: Tell her that her husband is enraged.

HAQOD: She lies locked in her chambers, prostrate on a white bed, her body covered in oils, her eyes trembling under the weight of visions. She wakes only to drink water and commune.

NANNA: Commune? With who?

HAQOD: Men, packs of them.

NANNA: Packs?

HAQOD: Hordes.

NANNA: Where are your spies, Priest?

HAQOD: They enter her chambers with heads covered in linen sacks.

NANNA: I'll pour hot tar into her vulva.

NIN-GAL: *(Off-stage)* You wouldn't know where to look for it, husband.

(Enter Nin-gal, Elam and Scribes)

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From scene 2:

ELAM: Leave, let's leave, take our love elsewhere.

NIN-GAL: What is our love? A sick child?

ELAM: There's no need for-

NIN-GAL: All need, all of it horrible, urgent need.

ELAM: I'll hide you in my mountains, you'll drink from the purest springs-

NIN-GAL: Don't be so bloody romantic!

ELAM: I'm a soldier, Nin-Gal.

NIN-GAL: A man of action!

ELAM: Let me arm the men of Ur, they're hungry to fight, to defend this city.

NIN-GAL: If I'd wanted to fight a war, would I appoint you- my people's enemy- as my lover?

ELAM: Then get to your father with my head in your hand and beg his forgiveness.

NIN-GAL: Fierce-eyed Elamite, are you turned into a sacrificial goat?

ELAM: Go to him. His siege is killing the city. No medicine in the hospitals, no bread in the kilns, no fish in the nets.

NIN-GAL: I gave myself to Ur and wasn't afraid: Ur gave itself to me and wasn't afraid. Elamite: I'm yours. Don't ever let what's yours imagine you are afraid of them.

ELAM: I'm stood here, like a blind stone marking a boundary, your chaos moves around me.

NINGAL: It used to be in the villages around Ur, when farmer's children wanted to become scribes their fathers would drag them to the village elders and the elders take a mallet then pummel the child's hands till they were maimed. This way the Elders avoided that the village lose a farmer. My own Father, Enlil, father of the Gods, liked this tradition, said it helped build communities, called it healthy and sent the villagers new mallets every year. Since I am this city's Queen, every farmer's child runs to be a scribe and the farmers help them run. The child's hand is in mine and while I have their hands in mine, I'll help them write what can't be erased. What Ur writes will not be erased.

ELAM: Pity won't swerve you, but my words are prayers, my utterances supplication-

NIN-GAL: Don't go on. I've made up my mind. I'll visit my father.

ELAM: I'll clear your route of corpses.

NIN-GAL: Undress me. Cover me with oil. Ride my narrow boat.
Hard, you are the body of my resilience.
Limp, you are the body of my chosen death.

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Scene 5:

NIN-GAL: People of Ur, precious black headed people of Ur, hear my dreams. I walked through a door into a valley blackened by fire. There, I saw a child crouched beneath a tree crying tears of blood, I opened my arms to the child who spat in my face and squawked; above us his mother, the vulture, circling the sun. Together they made a fire out of small bones. All down the valley, along the scorched vertebra of the earth, the fire echoed on shining tablets.

I reached a temple with no incense where men genuflected, murmuring without singing. A group of them held a woman to the sky and two others positioned a long saw between her legs and worked breathlessly to cut her body into two, vagina first. Veiled priestesses with no eyes, sung: "We cleanse our past, we prepare our future." There, a young child held the heart of a man to the sun, saying "This is my father's heart, my father was a traitor to God". Veiled priestesses with no eyes sung: "We cleanse our past, we prepare our future."

If this dream be true and if this be the future, will you say this is what Nin-Gal made? Ningal who raises the walls of Ur high to the heavens and keeps the doors of the city open; Nin-gal who frees the women of Sumer from bondage; Nin-Gal who inscribes her city's glory into the memory of the earth.

I say to you now: what Ur plants today will be reaped tomorrow: what Sumer plants today will be reaped tomorrow.

My father's soldiers have gone. They hit us and ran. Ur is without protection, within two turns of the sun, a second storm will attack us, more evil and more deadly than the first: Ur will be an empty city, a dead city. Do not tremble at this knowledge: do not let your hearts sink with fear. There is nowhere to run. The Gods have turned against us and Ur is called upon to fight.

By dawn, my people, Ur needs one thousand poems for its scribes to pen. No sleep this night and, without the poems, do not look for grain in the morning.

We run to the future days, the coming days, the days that are not yet, they are our beloved children, they are our chambers, our gardens, our precious beads.

Let them say of Ur that city raised its head high towards the sky, it raised its walls and kept its doors open, it did not fight with weapons, it wrote poems of exquisite beauty, even when death lowered upon it, Ur raised its face to the sun, wrote beauty into clay to blot out the horror that awaits them.

Do not cry tyranny. What is to come is harder to bear.
What I dictate to you is the cleanest form of love.

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HAQOD: *(singing)*

*Is this a city or a broken ceramic?
The axe rises.
The people groan.*

*On its walls, on its high gates,
Where before sunset they strolled
Now they lay prostrate.
In the market where fruits and sweetmeats were piled,
In the halls where dances and ribbons did flow
Now stacked high are the corpses.
Blood lickers along inclines like molten bronze or liquid lead,
And bodies like fat on the earth's hot plate melt into its openings.*

The people groan.

*Struck down with no helmets, no loin cloths,
Bleeding with no bandages,
Like a gazelle caught in a trap, their lips chapped in dust,*

*Like drunkards their heads droop on their necks;
The guards with hands on their weapons were killed
The unarmed with their backs turned were killed
The ones who stayed at home were burnt where they felt safe
Like new born babes, in their mother's blood they wailed
The strong and the frail died of hunger
The mother ran from her child
The father cast his eyes down
When the finger was pointed at the son.
The suckling child like fish carried off by big waters.*

The people groan.

*And above, a mad bird,
She, the woman, the goddess, roams.
She abandoned this city.
Don't let her say she didn't:
She stood aside like an enemy.*

The axe falls.

The people groan.