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CALIGULA AND 3 OTHER PLAYS



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PLAYS

by Albert Camus

Translated from the French by

STUART GILBERT



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CALIGULA

THE MISUNDERSTANDING (*Le Malentendu*)

STATE OF SIEGE (*L'État de siège*)

THE JUST ASSASSINS (*Les Justes*)

With a preface by the author

(Translated by Justin O'Brien)

AUTHOR'S PREFACE (*December 1957*)

THE PLAYS making up this collection were written between 1938 and 1950. The first, *Caligula*, was composed in 1938 after a reading of Suetonius' *Twelve Cæsars*. I intended the play for the little theater I had organized in Algiers, and my artless intention was to play the part of Caligula myself. Inexperienced actors often show such guilelessness. Besides, I was only twenty-five, the age when one doubts everything except oneself. The war forced me to modesty, and *Caligula* was first played in 1945 at the Théâtre-Hébertot in Paris.

Hence *Caligula* is an actor's and director's play. But of course it takes its inspiration from the concerns that were mine at that moment. French criticism, although it greeted the play very cordially, often astonished me by speaking of it as a philosophical play. Is there any truth in this?

Caligula, a relatively attractive prince up to then, becomes aware, on the death of Drusilla, his sister and mistress, that this world is not satisfactory. Thenceforth, obsessed with the impossible and poisoned with scorn and horror, he tries, through murder and the systematic perversion of all values, to practice a liberty that he will eventually discover not to be the right one. He challenges friendship and love, common human solidarity, good and evil. He takes those about him at their word and forces them to be logical; he levels

everything around him by the strength of his rejection and the destructive fury to which his passion for life leads him.

But, if his truth is to rebel against fate, his error lies in negating what binds him to mankind. One cannot destroy everything without destroying oneself. This is why Caligula depopulates the world around him and, faithful to his logic, does what is necessary to arm against him those who will eventually kill him. *Caligula* is the story of a superior suicide. It is the story of the most human and most tragic of errors. Unfaithful to mankind through fidelity to himself, Caligula accepts death because he has understood that no one can save himself all alone and that one cannot be free at the expense of others.

Consequently it is a tragedy of the intelligence. Whence the natural conclusion that the drama was intellectual. Personally, I think I am well aware of this work's shortcomings. But I look in vain for philosophy in these four acts. Or, if it exists, it stands on the level of this assertion by the hero: "Men die; and they are not happy." A very modest ideology, as you see, which I have the impression of sharing with Everyman. No, my ambition lay elsewhere. For the dramatist the passion for the impossible is just as valid a subject for study as avarice or adultery. Showing it in all its frenzy, illustrating the havoc it wreaks, bringing out its failure—such was my intention. And the work must be judged thereon.

One word more. Some found my play provocative who nevertheless consider it natural for *Œdipus* to kill his father and marry his mother and who accept the adulterous triangle if it is placed, to be sure, in the best society. Yet I have little regard for an art that deliberately aims to shock because it is unable to convince. And if I happened, by ill luck, to be scandalous, this would result solely from that immoderate devo-

tion to truth which an artist cannot renounce without giving up his art itself.

THE MISUNDERSTANDING was written in 1943 in occupied France. I was then living, quite reluctantly, in the mountains of central France. That historical and geographical situation would be enough to explain the sort of claustrophobia from which I suffered then and which is reflected in that play. It is true that its atmosphere is suffocating. But we were all short of breath at that time. Nonetheless, the play's gloominess bothers me as much as it bothered the public. To encourage the reader to approach the play, I shall suggest: (1) granting that the play's morality is not altogether negative, and (2) looking upon *The Misunderstanding* as an attempt to create a modern tragedy.

A son who expects to be recognized without having to declare his name and who is killed by his mother and his sister as the result of the misunderstanding—this is the subject of the play. Doubtless, it is a very dismal image of human fate. But it can be reconciled with a relative optimism as to man. For, after all, it amounts to saying that everything would have been different if the son had said: "It is I; here is my name." It amounts to saying that in an unjust or indifferent world man can save himself, and save others, by practicing the most basic sincerity and pronouncing the most appropriate word.

The language shocked too. I knew this. But if I had dressed my characters in peplums, everyone might have applauded. Putting the language of tragedy into the mouths of contemporary characters was, however, my intention. Nothing, indeed, is more difficult, since a language must be found that is natural enough to be spoken by contemporaries and yet sufficiently unusual to suggest the tragic tone. In an effort to approach that ideal I tried to give aloofness to the char-

acters and ambiguity to the dialogues. Thus a member of the audience was to feel simultaneously at home and out of his element. A member of the audience, and the reader. But I am not sure of having achieved the proper dosage.

As for the character of the old manservant, he does not necessarily symbolize fate. When the widow calls upon God at the end, he is the one who replies. But this is perhaps one more misunderstanding. If he answers "No" when she asks him to help her, this is because, in fact, he has no intention of helping her and because at a certain level of suffering or injustice no one can do anything for anyone. Pain is solitary.

Furthermore, I don't really feel that such explanations are very useful. I still am of the opinion that *The Misunderstanding* is a work of easy access if only one accepts the language and is willing to grant that the author has deeply committed himself in it. The theater is not a game—that is my conviction.

WHEN *State of Siege* first opened in Paris, there was no dissenting voice among the critics. Truly, few plays have ever enjoyed such a unanimous slashing. This is the more deplorable since I have never given up thinking that *State of Siege*, with all its shortcomings, is, of all my writings, the one that most resembles me. Still, the reader is quite free to decide that, however faithful it may be, he doesn't like that image. But in order to give greater force and freedom to that judgment, I must first challenge certain presumptions. For instance, it is better to know that:

(1) *State of Siege* is in no sense an adaptation of my novel *The Plague*. To be sure, I gave that symbolic name to one of my characters. But since he is a dictator, that appellation is correct.

(2) *State of Siege* is not a play of classical conception. It might better be compared with what were

called "*moralités*" in the French Middle Ages and in Spain "*autos sacramentales*"—a sort of allegorical drama which staged subjects known to the whole audience in advance. I focused my play on what seems to me the only living religion in the century of tyrants and slaves—I mean liberty. Hence it is utterly useless to accuse my characters of being symbolical. I plead guilty. My avowed aim was to divest the stage of psychological speculations in muffled voices so that it might ring with the loud shouts that today enslave or liberate masses of men. From this point of view alone, I am still convinced that my attempt deserves attention. By the way, this play about liberty is as badly looked upon by dictatorships of the Right as by dictatorships of the Left. Played constantly for years in Germany, it has never been produced either in Spain or behind the Iron Curtain.* Much might still be said about the hidden or obvious intentions of this play. But I wish merely to enlighten my readers' judgment, not to influence it.

THE JUST ASSASSINS had more luck. It was well received. Sometimes, however, praise, like blame, arises from a misunderstanding. Hence I should like to make clear that:

(1) The events recounted in *The Just Assassins* are historical, even the surprising interview between the Grand Duchess and her husband's murderer. One must therefore judge merely the extent to which I managed to give plausibility to what was true.

(2) The form of the play must not mislead the reader. I tried to achieve dramatic tension through classical means—that is, the opposition of characters who were equal in strength and reason. But it would be wrong to conclude that everything balances out and

* It has been played in Yugoslavia. At present a Polish theater is planning to put it on.

that, in regard to the problem raised here, I recommend doing nothing. My admiration for my heroes, Kaliayev and Dora, is complete. I merely wanted to show that action itself had limits. There is no good and just action but what recognizes those limits and, if it must go beyond them, at least accepts death. Our world of today seems loathsome to us for the very reason that it is made by men who grant themselves the right to go beyond those limits, and first of all to kill others without dying themselves. Thus it is that today justice serves as an alibi, throughout the world, for the assassins of all justice.

ONE WORD MORE to tell the reader what he will not find in this book. Although I have the most passionate attachment for the theater, I have the misfortune of liking only one kind of play, whether comic or tragic. After a rather long experience as director, actor, and dramatist, it seems to me that there is no true theater without language and style, nor any dramatic work which does not, like our classical drama and the Greek tragedians, involve human fate in all its simplicity and grandeur. Without claiming to equal them, these are at least the models to set oneself. Psychology, ingenious plot-devices, and spicy situations, though they may amuse me as a member of the audience, leave me indifferent as an author. I am willing to admit that such a conception is debatable. But it seems to me only fair to present myself, in this regard, as I am. Forewarned, the reader may, if he wishes, abstain from reading further. As for those who are not discouraged by such a bias, I am more likely to awaken in them that strange friendship which, over and above frontiers, joins reader and writer and, when it is devoid of misunderstanding, is the writer's royal reward.

(*Translated by* JUSTIN O'BRIEN)

CALIGULA

A PLAY IN FOUR ACTS



To my friends of the THÉÂTRE DE L'ÉQUIPE

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

CALIGULA

CÆSONIA

HELICON

SCIPIO

CHEREA

THE OLD PATRICIAN

METELLUS

LEPIDUS

INTENDANT

MEREIA

MUCIUS

MUCIUS' WIFE

PATRICIANS, KNIGHTS,

POETS, GUARDS, SERVANTS

*CALIGULA was presented for the first time at the
THÉÂTRE-HÉBERTOT, Paris, in 1945.*

ACT I

A number of patricians, one a very old man, are gathered in a state room of the imperial palace. They are showing signs of nervousness.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Still no news.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: None last night, none this morning.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Three days without news. Strange indeed!

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Our messengers go out, our messengers return. And always they shake their heads and say: "Nothing."

SECOND PATRICIAN: They've combed the whole countryside. What more can be done?

FIRST PATRICIAN: We can only wait. It's no use meeting trouble halfway. Perhaps he'll return as abruptly as he left us.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: When I saw him leaving the palace, I noticed a queer look in his eyes.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Yes, so did I. In fact I asked him what was amiss.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Did he answer?

FIRST PATRICIAN: One word: "Nothing."

[A short silence. HELICON enters. He is munching onions.]

SECOND PATRICIAN *[in the same nervous tone]*: It's all very perturbing.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Oh, come now! All young fellows are like that.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: You're right there. They take things hard. But time smooths everything out.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Do you really think so?

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Of course. For one girl dead, a dozen living ones.

HELICON: Ah? So you think that there's a girl behind it?

FIRST PATRICIAN: What else should there be? Anyhow—thank goodness!—grief never lasts forever. Is any one of us here capable of mourning a loss for more than a year on end?

SECOND PATRICIAN: Not I, anyhow.

FIRST PATRICIAN: No one can do that.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Life would be intolerable if one could.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Quite so. Take my case. I lost my wife last year. I shed many tears, and then I forgot. Even now I feel a pang of grief at times. But, happily, it doesn't amount to much.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Yes, Nature's a great healer.

[CHEREA enters.]

FIRST PATRICIAN: Well . . . ?

CHEREA: Still nothing.

HELICON: Come, gentlemen! There's no need for consternation.

FIRST PATRICIAN: I agree.

HELICON: Worrying won't mend matters—and it's lunchtime.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: That's so. We mustn't drop the prey for the shadow.

CHEREA: I don't like the look of things. But all was going too smoothly. As an emperor, he was perfection's self.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Yes, exactly the emperor we wanted; conscientious and inexperienced.

FIRST PATRICIAN: But what's come over you? There's no reason for all these lamentations. We've no

ground for assuming he will change. Let's say he loved Drusilla. Only natural; she was his sister. Or say his love for her was something more than brotherly; shocking enough, I grant you. But it's really going too far, setting all Rome in a turmoil because the girl has died.

CHEREA: Maybe. But, as I said, I don't like the look of things; this escapade alarms me.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Yes, there's never smoke without fire.

FIRST PATRICIAN: In any case, the interests of the State should prevent his making a public tragedy of . . . of, let's say, a regrettable attachment. No doubt such things happen; but the less said the better.

HELICON: How can you be sure Drusilla is the cause of all this trouble?

SECOND PATRICIAN: Who else should it be?

HELICON: Nobody at all, quite likely. When there's a host of explanations to choose from, why pick on the stupidest, most obvious one?

[*Young SCIPIO enters. CHEREA goes toward him.*]

CHEREA: Well?

SCIPIO: Still nothing. Except that some peasants think they saw him last night not far from Rome, rushing through the storm.

[*CHEREA comes back to the patricians, SCIPIO following him.*]

CHEREA: That makes three days, Scipio, doesn't it?

SCIPIO: Yes . . . I was there, following him as I usually do. He went up to Drusilla's body. He stroked it with two fingers, and seemed lost in thought for a long while. Then he swung round and walked out, calmly enough. . . . And ever since we've been hunting for him—in vain.

CHEREA [*shaking his head*]: That young man was too fond of literature.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Oh, at his age, you know . . .

CHEREA: At his age, perhaps; but not in his position. An artistic emperor is an anomaly. I grant you we've had one or two; misfits happen in the best of empires. But the others had the good taste to remember they were public servants.

FIRST PATRICIAN: It made things run more smoothly.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: One man, one job—that's how it should be.

SCIPIO: What can we do, Cherea?

CHEREA: Nothing.

SECOND PATRICIAN: We can only wait. If he doesn't return, a successor will have to be found. Between ourselves—there's no shortage of candidates.

FIRST PATRICIAN: No, but there's a shortage of the right sort.

CHEREA: Suppose he comes back in an ugly mood?

FIRST PATRICIAN: Oh, he's a mere boy; we'll make him see reason.

CHEREA: And what if he declines to see it?

FIRST PATRICIAN [*laughing*]: In that case, my friend, don't forget I once wrote a manual of revolutions. You'll find all the rules there.

CHEREA: I'll look it up—if things come to that. But I'd rather be left to my books.

SCIPIO: If you'll excuse me. . . .

[*Goes out.*]

CHEREA: He's offended.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Scipio is young, and young people always hang together.

HELIGON: Scipio doesn't count, anyhow.

[*Enter a member of the imperial bodyguard.*]

THE GUARDSMAN: Caligula has been seen in the palace gardens.

[*All leave the room. The stage is empty for some moments. Then CALIGULA enters stealthily from the left. His legs are caked with mud, his garments*