

WE SAIL ON IN DARKNESS

By Ruthie Buescher

Cast (in order of appearance):

Amma Syncletica / Julian's Mother / Onlooker

Amma Sarah / Townswoman / Onlooker

Amma Matrona / Sister Elisabeth / Onlooker

Amma Theodora / Alice / Onlooker

Julian of Norwich

Perpetua

Angela of Foligno

Hildegard of Bingen

Perpetua's Father / Saturnus / Curate / Friar Arnoldo / Onlooker

Casting note: all five male roles should be played by the same actor.

Costuming note: Perpetua, Hildegard, Angela, and Julian should be dressed in period-appropriate clothing to indicate their own era; they move through interactions with one another, but are grounded in their own stories and their own time.

Production note: This is a piece of physical theater. Throughout the play movement should be used to ground and expand upon the dialogue. The visions should be embodied with puppets, movement, dance, and song. Music is essential, though not noted frequently in the script. There is a rhythm to the play that must be found.

Two pieces of music are mentioned in the script. The first, "Seikilos Epitaph," was a piece of sacred music written c. 200 CE. The second, "In Principio Omnes. Ordo Virtutum," was composed by Hildegard of Bingen.

Perpetua

(c. 180-203 CE) As a young mother, she was arrested and tried for professing Christianity. While in prison she experienced visions of her martyrdom and of the joy that awaited her beyond death. Despite being entreated mercilessly by her family, she refused to recant, and was martyred in a Roman arena in Carthage. We meet her at the age of twenty-two.

Chorus of Desert Mothers

(Amma Syncletica, Amma Sarah, Amma Theodora, and Amma Matrona)

(c. 300-600 CE) These women were deaconesses, ascetics, and leaders in the early church who lived in Egypt, Israel, and Syria. Many retreated to rural places in order to live a life of complete poverty and devotion to their God, and trained their acolytes in a tradition of solitude, silence, and prayer. They believed that union with Christ was the primary purpose of life on earth, and taught that through prayer, the spirit could be absorbed into God.

Hildegard of Bingen

(1098-1179 CE) The founder and first abbess of the Benedictine community at Bingen. She was a member of the aristocracy, but displayed an acute humility before God. She believed that she was the tool through which God was calling the church to reform, and spoke boldly in a realm where only men were expected to speak. She was also a prolific musician and playwright, and completed the first known morality play. We meet her at the age of eighty.

Angela of Foligno

(1248-1309 CE) Born into a wealthy Italian family, at the age of 40 Angela received a vision of St. Francis and recognized the emptiness of her life. Three years later her mother, husband, and children all died in quick succession, and she sold her possessions and placed herself under the direction of a Franciscan Friar named Arnoldo, who wrote down her visions. Though Angela was often distraught and sometimes seen as unstable, Friar Arnoldo was able to help her synthesize and order her thoughts into a cohesive literary work. We meet her at the age of forty-three.

Julian of Norwich

(c. 1342-1416 CE) Little is known of Julian's early life. She spent most of her life in permanent seclusion as an anchoress in a small cell attached to St. Julian's Church in Norwich, England. Because she writes extensively about the mother-like nature of God, and because she was at the age of 30 when she had her first vision, many have speculated that she was at some point a wife and mother. In her later years she had many devotees and disciples who came to her for advice and counsel, including other mystics such as Margery Kempe. We meet her at the age of thirty-one.

SCENE ONE - WE SAIL ON IN DARKNESS

A simple scaffold stage with several platforms and a wide, empty playing space in front. A ladder climbs to the top of the scaffold center left. Light is important to the production; the mood shifts throughout as we move through visions and reality.

At rise the stage is shadowy, a cool blue. The DESERT MOTHERS enter one by one, singing. Their song is layered over with speaking. Their words are hushed, slow, and mysterious. Movement and play while speaking and singing.

SYNCLETICA: We are on this earth as if in a second maternal womb. In that inner recess we did not have a life such as we have here, for we did not have there solid nourishment such as we enjoy now, nor were we able to be active as we are here, and we existed without the light of the sun and of any glimmer.

SARAH: Just as, then, when we were in that inner chamber, we did without many of the things of this world, so also in the present world we are impoverished in comparison with the kingdom of heaven.

MATRONA: We have sampled the nourishment here; let us reach for the divine.

THEODORA: We have enjoyed the light in this world; let us long for the sun of righteousness.

SARAH: Let us regard the heavenly Jerusalem as our homeland.

SYNCLETICA: *(Softly)* We sail on in darkness.

THEODORA: The psalmist calls our life a sea and the sea is either full of rocks, or very rough, or else it is calm. We are like those who sail on a calm sea.

The next lines are layered over each other quickly.

SARAH: We sail on in darkness.

MATRONA: We sail on in darkness.

SYNCLETICA: We sail on in darkness.

Movement sequence with music; the DESERT MOTHERS recreate a ship and journey on it.

As they sail, PERPETUA, HILDEGARD, ANGELA and JULIAN enter. ANGELA and HILDEGARD are on the scaffold.

Each performs her own movement— a slowed down version of a daily ritual. As the DESERT MOTHERS come near, the women stop what they are doing to reach for the ship, but as it passes them by, each slowly goes back into her own movements. Music continues throughout.

JULIAN: In the year of our Lord 1372, when I was thirty years old and a half, God sent me a bodily sickness, in which I lay three days and three nights, and on the third night I thought to have passed, and they that were with me thought the same.

PERPETUA: In the year of our Lord 202, as I nursed my infant son at my breast and heard the scriptures read, I was apprehended along with four others who were my brothers and sisters in the faith. They took my son from my arms.

JULIAN: And being still in youth I thought it great sorrow to die...

ANGELA: In the year of our Lord 1291 by God's will my mother died, who was a great hindrance to me in following the way of God; my husband died likewise, and in a short time there also died all my children.

PERPETUA: We were taken into a dungeon, and I was very much afraid, because I had never felt such darkness.

HILDEGARD: In the year of our Lord 1179 I saw a great mountain the color of iron, and enthroned on it one of such great glory that it blinded my sight.

ANGELA: I had great consolation of their deaths, albeit I did also feel some grief.

HILDEGARD: And behold, he who was enthroned upon that mountain cried out in a strong, loud voice, saying, "Arise therefore, cry out and tell what is shown to you by the strong power of God's help, for he who rules every creature in might and kindness floods those who fear him and serve him in sweet love and humility with the glory of heavenly enlightenment and leads those who persevere in the way of justice to the joys of the eternal vision."

As she speaks the DESERT MOTHERS move offstage, leaving the women alone. Their movements slow to a stop as HILDEGARD finishes, leaving the four of them in silence and stillness. A few breaths; they are present with each other.

The lights dim on JULIAN, HILDEGARD, and ANGELA.

SCENE TWO - PERPETUA

PERPETUA is illuminated. The light is warm. She begins to speak. Her mood is quiet.

PERPETUA: They took my son from my arms. *(She looks at the audience. A beat.)* I did not feel fear for my soul, neither was I in unrest about my safety. But the milk in my breasts grew heavier as the hours passed. My son's milk weighed within me.

PERPETUA'S FATHER appears behind her.

FATHER: Perpetua.

She does not turn, but continues to face out.

PERPETUA: Father.

FATHER: It is time to come home.

PERPETUA: They will not let me leave.

FATHER: They will release you if you give up this foolishness. Look at me, Perpetua.

She does not turn. They have had this conversation before.

Your son wails for you night and day. He cannot be comforted. What kind of mother abandons her child to starve?

He takes a step forward.

PERPETUA: What of his father?

FATHER: He has no father. Nor have you now a husband. You have brought disgrace upon him, and he has shed you. *(Gently)* Perpetua. Look at me.

She wavers. To look is dangerous.

FATHER: *(Losing patience)* You should be grateful that I have not abandoned you as he has. You have brought disgrace upon me as well, and yet here I stand. Look at me!

At his words he steps forward and grabs her arm roughly, forcing her to turn. They stare at each other, wordless combatants. After a moment she rips her arm

away. He allows her to do so, but could put his hands on her again at any moment.

PERPETUA: Do you see that little pitcher?

FATHER: *(Caught off guard)* Yes.

PERPETUA: Can it be called by any other name than what it is?

FATHER: *(Catching on)* No.

PERPETUA: Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am: a Christian.

He steps towards her and she flinches, but he does not strike her. His gaze changes and he turns to leave.

PERPETUA: Father—

He pauses. She turns to look at him.

My child...

A beat. He leaves.

AMMA SYNCLETICA enters. The lights become cool again.

SYNCLETICA: Those who put out to sea at first sail with a favorable wind; then the sails spread, but later the wind becomes adverse. Then the ship is tossed by the waves and is no longer controlled by the rudder. But when in a little while there is calm, and the tempest dies down, then the ship sails on again. So it is with us, when we are driven by the spirits who are against us; we hold to the cross as our sail and so we can set a safe course.

The other DESERT MOTHERS enter, each carrying a pitcher of water. The three MOTHERS pour out their water as PERPETUA speaks. Seikilos Epitaph sung throughout.

PERPETUA: Within a few days of meeting with my father I was baptized, and to me the Spirit prescribed that in the water of baptism nothing else was to be sought for bodily endurance.

And I asked, and this was shown to me. I saw a golden ladder of marvelous height, reaching up even to heaven, and very narrow, so that persons could only

ascend it one by one; and on the sides of the ladder was fixed every kind of iron weapon. There were swords, lances, hooks, daggers; so that if anyone went up carelessly, or not looking upwards, he would be torn to pieces and his flesh would cleave to the iron weapons.

SATURNUS appears at the foot of the ladder. He begins to climb as she narrates.

And under the ladder itself was crouching a dragon of wonderful size, who lay in wait for those who ascended, and frightened them from the ascent. And our brother Saturnus went up first, who had subsequently delivered himself up freely on our account, not having been present at the time that we were taken prisoners. And he attained the top of the ladder, and turned towards me, and said to me, "Perpetua—"

SATURNUS: (*Overlapping*) Perpetua, I am waiting for you; but be careful that the dragon does not bite you.

PERPETUA: And I said, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, he shall not hurt me." And from under the ladder itself, as if in fear of me, he slowly lifted up his head; and as I trod upon the first step, I trod upon his head.

She begins to climb.

And I went up, and I saw an immense extent of garden, and in the midst of the garden a white-haired man sitting in the dress of a shepherd, of a large stature, milking sheep; and standing around were many thousand white-robed ones. And he raised his head, and looked upon me, and said to me,

MOTHERS: You are welcome, daughter.

PERPETUA: And he called me, and from the cheese as he was milking he gave me a little cake, and I received it with folded hands; and I ate it, and all who stood around said:

MOTHERS: Amen.

PERPETUA: And at the sound of their voices I was awakened, still tasting a sweetness which I cannot describe.

She is alone on the platform, seated. The DESERT MOTHERS and SATURNUS have exited. She hums a few bars of Seikilos Epitaph. She hugs her breasts to herself, and winces.

JULIAN enters downstage and speaks to PERPETUA.

JULIAN: He is to us everything that is good or comfortable for us: he is our clothing that for love wraps us, clasps us, and all encloses us for tender love, that he may never leave us; being to us everything that is good, as I understand it.

Lights fade on PERPETUA. They grow warm on JULIAN.

SCENE THREE - JULIAN

JULIAN: I lay in bodily sickness for three days and three nights, and on the third night I understood by my reason and by my pains that I would die; and I assented fully with all the will of my heart to be at God's will.

Enter CURATE, who assists her through the next part.

JULIAN: I endured until day, and by then my body was dead from the middle downwards. Then I had a mind to be set upright, backward leaning, with help— to have more freedom of my heart to be at God's will, and thinking on God while my life would last. My Curate was sent for to be at my ending, and by the time he came I had set my eyes, and could not speak. He set the cross before my face and said:

CURATE: I have brought you the image of your master and savior: look upon it and comfort yourself with it.

JULIAN: After this my sight began to fail, and it was all dark around me in the chamber, as if it had been night, except in the image of the cross whereon I beheld a light. All that was away from the cross was of horror to me, as if it had been greatly occupied by the fiends. Then the upper part of my body began to die, so that I scarcely had any feeling, with shortness of breath. And then I thought in truth that I had passed.

Suddenly, all my pain was taken from me, and I was as whole as ever I was before. I marvelled at this sudden change, for I knew it was a secret working of God, and not of nature.

Then, by the grace of God and teaching of the Holy Church I conceived a mighty desire to receive three wounds in my life: the wound of very contrition, the wound of kind compassion, and the wound of steadfast longing toward God.

The DESERT MOTHERS return. The CURATE is gone. Lights shift again, growing hazy.

SARAH: Julian!

JULIAN: *(Her face brightens)* Mother?

THEODORA: Julian.

JULIAN is confused. She faces the audience, but seems to be searching for her mother.

JULIAN: Is that you, mother?

SYNCLETICA: Julian.

JULIAN: (*Turning*) Where are you?

MATRONA: Julian!

JULIAN: (*She cannot find her*) Mother! I am here.

SYNCLETICA: Keep up, Julian.

THEODORA: Faster!

SARAH: Julian, mind yourself.

JULIAN: Mother!

MATRONA: Be quick, child!

SARAH: Julian!

A sharp silence. JULIAN sinks to her knees. AMMA SYNCLETICA becomes JULIAN'S MOTHER.

JULIAN: My mother had hair the color of honey. It curled almost to her waist, so that when she stretched it out, it measured to her hip bone. She bore eight children, and I was the youngest.

Once, when I was ten years old, she handed me a basket and told me to keep up. I watched her shoulders as we walked through the forest; the light was golden in the late afternoon. At home, my sister Jane was tending the fire and my brothers were with my father in the field. Three of my sisters had already married and gone to their own homes.

We skirted the densest part of the wood and came out beside the river. Down at the bank some of the May Day decorations were still hanging from trees, and I stopped to admire them. My mother turned and shaded her eyes, admonishing me to make haste.

The bees were buzzing and the squirrels chattering, and my feet wandered. I almost lost sight of her several times. But finally, breaking through the trees

again, we came suddenly upon a little cross, set in a clearing. It was such a pretty sight; the hollyhocks and the little purple violets nodding in the light and the quiet sweet sound of birds above us, and my mother kneeling beside the cross.

She prayed quietly for some time, and then turned to take the basket from me. I saw that in it, she had tucked a meal for us two. She had never done such a thing before— never set aside time to tarry in the forest with me when supper was nearing. But she lay out bread and cheese.

I asked her what the occasion was, and she grew thoughtful. She squinted at me, perhaps trying to decide if she would tell me true or not.

MOTHER: I come here to pray for the souls of your brothers and sisters who have gone to be with the Lord.

JULIAN: I was confused, for none of my siblings had perished, as so many of my cousins had. It was a great thing, and one that my mother and father gave sincere thanks for. But eventually, it came to me that there may have been other babes that I had never seen.

I put the question to her, and she gave me a smile and brushed my cheek. But there did not seem to be grief in her. And she tipped her head back so that I could see her gray hairs tangled with her brown, and took a great breath.

MOTHER: Julian, there is no such thing as single-minded joy. But there is immense gladness in thanksgiving.

JULIAN: (*A beat*) My mother was not with me for my own miscarriages.

PERPETUA enters, holding a sleeping baby. Her face is radiant. The MOTHERS melt away.

PERPETUA: They brought me my son.

JULIAN stares at her.

PERPETUA: They brought him to me for suck; he had been enfeebled with hunger. But I have obtained for him to remain in the dungeon with me, so that he and I might grow strong and be relieved from distress. (*She looks at her child*) The dungeon has become to me a palace, so that I prefer being there to anywhere else.

PERPETUA sits and begins to nurse her son.

JULIAN: *(Watching her)* The mother may give her child suck of her milk, but our precious mother, Jesus, he may feed us with himself, and does it, full courteously and full tenderly, with the blessed sacrament that is precious food of my life; and with all the sweet sacraments he sustains us full mercifully and graciously.

The mother may lay the child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother, Jesus, he may homely lead us into his blessed breast, by his sweet open side, and show therein part of the Godhead and the joys of heaven, with spiritual sureness of endless bliss.

The women are quiet. PERPETUA hums a bit to her child. She speaks to JULIAN as if bridging a divide.

PERPETUA: The name Dinocrates came into my mind. He was my brother, seven years of age, who died miserably with disease— his face was so eaten out with cancer that his death was repulsive to all men.

I have seen him every night when I lie down to sleep, and it seems in my dreams that he is parched and thirsty, and stands at a pool full of water, but he cannot reach it. But last night this was shown to me— Dinocrates, with a clean body well clad, was finding refreshment. And where there had been a wound, I saw a scar; and the pool had been lowered so that he could reach.

She looks down at her child, now sleeping.

JULIAN: He has shown you a great thing. He has shown you that before God made us he loved us; which love was never slacked, nor ever shall be. And in this love he has done all his works; and in this love he has made all things profitable to us; and in this love our life is everlasting.

Lights fade. PERPETUA and JULIAN exit.

Music: Hildegard of Bingen's In Principio Omnes. Ordo Virtutum.