

SOCRATES

SYNOPSIS

SOCRATES tells the story of the renowned Greek philosopher during the last days of his life. Though tragic at the end, SOCRATES is not without many lighthearted moments reflected in songs like *After You Meet with Socrates*, *The Ities*, *Oh What a Joy to be Married to You*, and *This Great City*.

A Prologue follows the overture. A speaker enters and recites ten of Socrates' more famous sayings. The sayings are serious at first but gradually become more whimsical, ending with "Call no man unhappy until he is married." The speaker exits and four grotesque figures enter. They are the Sophists. The Sophists taught skepticism in both morality and knowledge thus standing in direct conflict with Socrates' more universal perspective. In *Meet the Sophists* they revel that nature did not endow them with "force for right" and, as Socrates enters, mock his insistence that each person take an honest appraisal of him or herself.

The Sophists exit and Socrates, now alone, tells the audience a story of how he came to realize that "I must indeed be the wisest man in the world" since he is able not only to perceive his own ignorance but can readily perceive the ignorance in others, an ability that, he adds, "has caused me no small problem." Thus ends the Prologue.

Act I opens in the Agora (marketplace) where Socrates conducted many of his philosophical inquiries. A young man, Plato, asks a merchant where he can find a man

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called Socrates. The merchant replies that Socrates will arrive shortly but cautions Plato not to meet him “that is, if you want to keep your sanity.” This leads to *After You Meet with Socrates* as all implore Plato not to enter Socrates’ orbit.

Nevertheless, Plato’s determination to meet and study philosophy with Socrates remains unshaken. Plato introduces himself to Socrates and inquires how he may lead “the good life.” Socrates replies that all one needs to do is practice the “Ities”, words ending in I-T-Y such as integrity, nobility, generosity, and humility. This leads to a major production number, *The Ities*, full of fifties’ doo-wop sounds and vibrant swing dancing. Plato asks Socrates if he can study with him. Socrates agrees and is warmly received by Socrates’ other students: Crito, Phaedo, and Apollo.

Next we meet Socrates’ long-suffering wife Xanthippe who is preparing dinner as Socrates returns home. Xanthippe ridicules Socrates’ seemingly carefree lifestyle and even makes fun of Socrates’ most famous maxim: The unexamined life is not worth living. This leads to the humorous *Oh What a Joy to be Married to You* detailing the constant woes she endures as his wife.

Socrates goes into his son’s room to say good night. His son asks him to sing as he gets ready for bed. Socrates complies and sings *A Lullaby* with Xanthippe joining in from a different room. The scene ends with Xanthippe taking Socrates’ hand suggesting that she still loves him in despite her complaints.

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In the following scene Plato is walking home alone. He has just met Socrates, is deeply impressed, and in *If I Could Be* fantasizes being like Socrates. However, as the song progresses, he comes to realize that it's more important is to become his true self rather than be like someone else.

Next, we see Socrates in action. He accidentally runs into an old friend, Euthyphro, who informs Socrates that he has come to Athens to prosecute his father for manslaughter. Euthyphro further claims that this decision is motivated by his deep understanding of piety. Socrates, playing the fool, asks Euthyphro to teach him the difference between piety and impiety. *Piety* is thus a series of questions by Socrates and answers by Euthyphro the end of which finds Euthyphro thoroughly dumbfounded how best to answer Socrates' increasingly deep inquiries. Frustrated, he takes leave of Socrates. Later we learn that not only did Euthyphro prosecute his father but used this occasion to bring a charge of heresy against Socrates.

In the next scene Socrates enters the marketplace alone. A merchant suggests he take a vacation. Socrates appreciates his concern but declines adding "I have nothing to learn from trees." This leads to *This Great City* giving Socrates the opportunity to express why he so enjoys engaging in philosophical debate. It also allows the Athenians to express their deep respect and admiration for Socrates and his work.

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The festive air is soon broken, however, as a messenger informs Socrates that he is to face trial for “refusing to recognize the gods” (Euthyphro’s charge) and “corrupting the youth.” His students tell him not to worry since “We will be there for you” and “We’ll do anything you ask.” Socrates responds half-heartedly, however, to their declarations of support. In response, the students sing *The Soldiers of Truth* vowing their unwavering and undying loyalty.

The Sophists enter and tell everyone that by following Socrates “you will just be led astray” and that safety simply requires them to repeat “I serve the state. It will provide.” Soon all in the marketplace, including Apollo, are chanting “I serve the state. It will provide” as they move menacingly close towards Socrates and his three remaining students. Crito exhorts Socrates to run but Socrates counters, “We walk. We will walk!” as Act I ends.

Act II opens with Socrates’ trial in the assembly hall. The exchanges are mostly sung. The three merchants appear as spectators and urge the jury to find Socrates guilty “for all that we have endured.” Meletus, the chief prosecutor, speaks first. He recites the indictment and forewarns the jury not to “be deceived by his ingenuities” since “enemies all lie.” In response, Socrates argues the he is just a man who wants to be free,” to say what I feel, to say what I need.” The jury deliberates, declares Socrates guilty, and sentences him to die by poison. Socrates is unrepentant. “Do you think that with my

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passing you'll be safer and free without me?" he asks, adding that the young people will continue to pursue "a life lived in truth" long after he is gone.

Phado tries to comfort him saying that the guilty verdict is the result of men who are "blind and thus could never bend." Socrates agrees adding that Man ought to "cast aside the lies that hide and bind his soul." Socrates says goodbye to Crito, Phaedo and Plato before being escorted to prison.

Crito visits Socrates in his cell. He frantically urges him to escape since it appears that he will be executed the following day. Socrates refuses, however, citing that although the guilty verdict is unjust, he cannot in good conscience selectively decide which laws to obey and which not to. In *Crito* Socrates is able to refute each of Crito's arguments. Crito relents and leaves with the task of informing Plato and Phaedo to come the following day for a final goodbye.

It is now the day of Socrates' execution. The jailor comes into the cell, unlocks Socrates' leg chains, and tells him his wife is waiting to see him. Though nervous, Socrates agrees to see her. Xanthippe enters as Socrates tries to make himself look presentable. They look upon each other in silence. No longer able to control his emotions, he breaks down and apologizes for not being a better husband. "I never gave you those things a woman loves," he says. Xanthippe replies that simply having him as her husband

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was enough. “I was the richest woman in the world. I had you,” she says before singing the tender *You Were Still My Star*.

She brings their son into the cell. He is unaware of what is happening however. Socrates tells him to listen to his mother and “always study hard.” They hug and the boy leaves. Socrates and Xanthippe embrace one last time during which she utters “My star” before exiting.

A few moments later Plato, Crito, and Phaedo enter and are surprised to find Socrates in a fairly good mood. “This is certainly no day to be cheerful,” Plato remarks. But Socrates replies that perhaps in death he can find time to be a philosopher since life on earth has so many distractions. The students are nevertheless heartbroken. “We will be orphans the rest of our lives,” Crito says. Socrates replies that they simply need to take care of themselves and “follow the line as I have laid it down for you and you will be fine.”

Socrates tells Phaedo to get the jailor. The jailor enters with a cup containing the poison. Crito pleads with Socrates to drink the poison later in the day since “the sun is still up.” Socrates counters that any delay “would only make me look ridiculous.” With a kind of toast he drinks the poison, briefly walks around the room then falls to his knees. The students carry him to his bed where he passes away.

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Plato, Crito, and Phaedo are consumed by grief. Birds are heard leading Plato to sing *The Death of Socrates* during which each member of the cast, friend and foe, enters and places a flower where Socrates lays then exits. Xanthippe enters last and remains on stage with Plato, Crito and Phaedo. As the music ends, Plato receives the assent of all three to become Socrates' successor. Plato then steps forward, signaling the passing of the teachings from Socrates to his most prized pupil.

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