

THE SPIS

by Phil Darg

Phil Darg
763-334-0982
www.PhilDarg.com
pdarg@comcast.net

THESPIS

Cast of Characters:

THESPIS (male, 25-40) – the irreverent, questioning, expressive (but inexperienced), and most recently recruited member of the chorus.

CORYPHEUS* (male or female, 30-50) – the temperamental, pretentious, and often condescending leader of the chorus, bound by tradition.

POLYBIA (female, 25-30) – a patient and encouraging member of the chorus who eventually comes to appreciate the creativity of THESPIS.

DIOCLES (male, 25-30) – the somewhat sycophantic assistant to CORYPHEUS, admiring friend of THESPIS, and a member of the chorus.

CHORUS (male or female) – another two-four members who participate in the rehearsal and performance as a chorus (but have no individual lines, and are thus **optional characters**). Ideally, the chorus as a whole (including the four major characters listed above) would be even in number, and evenly divided between male and female members.

Setting:

An ancient Greek *theatron* in Athens – likely the Theatre of Dionysus at the southeast base of the Acropolis.

Time:

The year 566 BCE.

Running Time:

About 30 minutes.

Synopsis:

As an Athenian chorus group prepares for its annual performance in the Festival of Dionysus, the predictable nature of its production is upset by the inquisitive Thespis, who suggests that their show would be much more interesting if they thought of a new script instead of just repeating the well-established chant.

*If the role of CORYPHEUS is played by a female actor, the character's name should be changed to CORYPHEA, and any stage directions that refer to the character's male gender (e.g. "he" or "himself") etc., should be changed to the appropriate gender form (e.g., "she" or "herself"), etc.

THESPIS

The setting is an ancient Greek orchestra – or the front part of an ancient stage facing out towards the audience. Behind the front stage area are a series of pillars or columns (or the suggestion thereof), and off to the sides there may also be a few steps or blocks, etc. As the lights come up, the male and female CHORUS members (which include DIOCLES and POLYBIA) are casually mingling, talking, and practicing their various poses they use in the chant. A moment or two passes, and then CORYPHEAEUS – the leader of the chorus – enters and addresses them.

CORYPHEAEUS

People!

(beat, the CHORUS members fall silent)

The hour is short, and our labors are great.

(beat, the CHORUS members begin to assemble themselves into an evenly-spaced line across the stage – from left to right and facing out)

Athenians, our time to perform is nigh . . .

(CORYPHEAEUS joins the chorus line at one end)

Ours will be the first performance that the citizens will see and hear at the festivities . . .

Our presentation must be strong!

(beat)

Are we ready?

Beat. THEY all strike a similar pose, then speak, move, and pose in sync with each other, delivering the chant below – together as one voice.

CHORUS (including CORYPHEAEUS)

Who dares to question the will of the gods?

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

What man could be so bold? Tell us his name.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

For he who shows his hubris shall suffer.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

He who does not bend to their will is crushed.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

Mortals – know your place! Accept your station.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

Think not of ambition – speak not your will.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

For we are but meek souls upon the earth –

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

Soon to be shadows in the underworld –

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

Give praise and sacrifice to all the gods!

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

CHORUS (CONTINUED)

For they have given us our life and breath.
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
And so we consecrate this harvest now.
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
We give thanks for our weather and bounty.
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
We sing your honor! We dance in your name!
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
Bow your heads – cease your thoughts – offer your praise . . .

THEY begin to sing a brief bit of modal music [“aahing” etc. – see appendix] with no clear words or lyrics. THEY then cease their singing. Beat.

CORYPHEUS

Well, it's not . . . *horrible* . . . it isn't very good, but it isn't horrible.
(beat, looking at the CHORUS)
Wait . . . Diocles – someone's missing.

DIOCLES

Uh – he isn't here yet.

POLYBIA

Who's missing?

DIOCLES

The new member. He said that he would be here –

CORYPHEUS

We need to have at least one more.

DIOCLES

I'm sure he'll show up.

CORYPHEUS

I gave you this one task – to recruit one more member.

DIOCLES

Yes.

CORYPHEUS

Does he know the chant?

DIOCLES

Of course! Everyone knows the chant . . .

THESPIS suddenly enters. POLYBIA sees him.

POLYBIA

He's here.

CORYPHEUS

What's your name?

THESPIS

I am Thespis.

POLYBIA

I am Polybia.

CORYPHEUS

You're late!

THESPIS

Sorry . . .

CORYPHEUS

No excuses! I am Coryphaeus – leader of this chorus. We are here to proclaim the glory of the gods and begin the Festival of Dionysus. Our role is very important.

THESPIS

Yes.

Beat.

CORYPHEUS

Well . . . *get in line!*

(beat as THESPIS quickly takes his place in the chorus line)

Are we ready?

Beat. THEY all pose, then speak, move, and pose in sync with each other, delivering the chant together. However, THESPIS is not in sync; neither his words nor his movement/gestures match the others very well.

CHORUS (including THESPIS and CORYPHEUS)

Who dares to question the will of the gods?

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

What man could be so bold? Tell us his name.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

For he who shows his hubris shall suffer.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

He who does not bend to their will is crushed.

CHORUS (CONTINUED)

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
Mortals – know your place! Accept your station.
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
Think not of ambition – speak not your will.
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
For we are but meek souls upon the earth –
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
Soon to be shadows in the underworld –
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
Give praise and sacrifice to all the gods!
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
For they have given us our life and breath.
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
And so we consecrate this harvest now.
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
We give thanks for our weather and bounty.
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
We sing your honor! We dance in your name!
(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)
Bow your heads – cease your thoughts – offer your praise –

THEY begin to sing a brief bit of modal music [“aahing” etc. – see appendix] with no clear words or lyrics. THEY then cease their singing. Beat.

CORYPHEUS

That was horrible . . . We’re getting worse. Let’s try the first part again.

THEY all start chanting/moving again. THESPIS remains out of sync.

CHORUS

Who dares to question the will of the gods?

THESPIS

– will of the gods –

Beat. THEY assume a different pose or gesture. THESPIS teeters in position.

CORYPHEUS

Stop.

(beat as CORYPHEUS looks at THESPIS – who is still teetering)
I think I’ve found the problem . . .
(THESPIS loses his balance)
You – Thespis – you’ve seen the chorus perform before, haven’t you?

THESPIS

Yes – many times. Every year since I was a child.

CORYPHEUS

Good . . . so then, you know how the chant is *supposed* to be performed, yes?

DIOCLES

Of course! Thespis is a true Athenian. He understands our art well.

THESPIS

I do understand it, but . . . I've been thinking . . .

CORYPHEUS

Thinking? About what?

THESPIS

About the chorus . . . the performance. We talk about it in the agora – the marketplace.

CORYPHEUS

The marketplace . . .?

THESPIS

Yes – there's a discussion after every festival.

CORYPHEUS

I see. And what is the nature of this discussion?

THESPIS

Well . . . the discussion is mostly . . . critical . . .

CORYPHEUS

Critical?

THESPIS

Yes. Some like it the way it is, but others – well, most actually – do not.

CORYPHEUS

Did you all hear that? This is how important we are . . . The eyes of Athens are upon us! That is why we must perform with utter perfection.

DIOCLES

Perfection!

CORYPHEUS

If we do not, we will earn the scorn of all Athenians.

DIOCLES

Scorn!

CORYPHEUS

This is the only performance given to honor the entire pantheon. Everything else at the festival honors only Dionysus.

DIOCLES

Only Dionysus!

CORYPHEUS

Therefore, it is the will of the gods that we perform well.

DIOCLES

Yes!

CORYPHEUS

Your voices must be one, your movements must be together!

DIOCLES

. . . yes . . .

CORYPHEUS

There is a right way to perform, and a wrong way to perform. Currently, some of you are choosing the latter.

(beat)

Now, let's try it again . . .

Once again, THEY all begin the chant and posing/movement. However, THESPIS continues to be out of sync and awkward in his movements.

CHORUS (ALL)

Who dares to question the will of the gods?

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

What man could be so bold? Tell us his name.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

For he who shows his hubris shall suffer.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

He who does not bend to their will is crushed.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

Mortals – know your place! Accept your station.

(beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture)

Think not of ambition – speak not your will.

Beat, THEY assume a different pose or gesture, but THESPIS teeters in his position again and then falls over.

CORYPHEUS

No no NO . . .
(beat)
Diocles – a word . . .

DIOCLES

Of course.

CORYPHEUS ushers DIOCLES off to one side of the stage.

CORYPHEUS

The rest of you – continue to practice – *quietly* . . .

THESPIS and POLYBIA chant and move almost silently as CORYPHEUS and DIOCLES speak to each other. THESPIS does his best to emulate POLYBIA, but remains hopelessly out of sync with her. SHE then instructs him supportively.

DIOCLES

Yes?

CORYPHEUS

This . . . Thespis. He's not very good. He's likely to embarrass all of us. Why on earth did you choose him?

DIOCLES

Well . . . he's a very expressive person.

CORYPHEUS

How so?

DIOCLES

In the market – every day. I can't explain it, he . . . announces things . . . pretends to be other people – or even animals . . . The crowds love to watch him.

CORYPHEUS

(disgusted)
. . . uh . . .

DIOCLES

He's quite loud – and he can sing too.

CORYPHEUS

Perhaps, but his clothes are shabby, and he looks . . . well, suffice it to say that anyone who performs on the stage should be beautiful to look at.

DIOCLES

He was very enthusiastic to join us –

CORYPHEUS

But he is not staying in time with us! His movement is . . . awkward. He's not doing what he's supposed to do.

DIOCLES

He's still learning.

CORYPHEUS

Is there anyone else you can get?

DIOCLES

No – not with all of the trouble that's happening right now, with Peisistratos on the rise –

CORYPHEUS

(loudly, smiling nervously)

Peisistratos – the generous patron of our festival?

Beat as CORYPHEUS and DIOCLES look around furtively.

DIOCLES

The political tensions are very high right now . . . The upper classes are upset – they don't want to perform. The rest either just want to join in the games or . . . get drunk. Thespis was the only person I could get . . .

CORYPHEUS

I don't like him. I don't like working with amateurs.

DIOCLES

I'm sorry – he's the best I could do.

CORYPHEUS

Hmm . . . I suppose – given the rise of Peisistratos – that it's appropriate for someone from the lower classes to join our ranks.

(beat)

Very well. We must make it work . . .

CORYPHEUS and DIOCLES approach the CHORUS.

POLYBIA

(instructing THESPIS on the positioning of his arms for a pose)

Higher . . . higher . . .

(THESPIS raises his arms higher)

Yes, that's better . . .

CORYPHEUS

People! We must continue to practice. Are we ready?

THESPIS

How many times are we to practice the chant?

CORYPHEUS

As many times as it takes – though, the hour is short.

THESPIS

Oh . . . Seems like a lot of practice.

CORYPHEUS

In my youth, we used to practice the chant until our throats were parched – we would move and pose until our bodies ached – and we were grateful!

THESPIS

You were grateful your bodies ached?

CORYPHEUS

No –

THESPIS

Why would you be grateful for something like that?

CORYPHEUS

We were grateful to carry the honor of performing in the chorus!

THESPIS

Oh.

CORYPHEUS

An experienced performer would know that.

THESPIS

I guess I'm not an experienced performer.

CORYPHEUS

Indeed not.

THESPIS

But, I do like to joke and move about.

DIOCLES

Yes – he's very good at that –

THESPIS

I can make people laugh . . . and pay attention to me. I guess I . . . just don't perform well with others.

CORYPHEUS

So I see.

(beat, somewhat patronizingly)

Well . . . this is your chance to prove yourself, Thespis. You are now a member of the chorus of Athens at the Festival of Dionysus. This isn't just some . . . fooling around in front of a market crowd. It's a grand performance!

THESPIS

It is grand, yes, but . . . every year the chorus does the same exact thing.

CORYPHEUS

The same – yes. That's what theatre is: doing the same thing over and over, year after year . . . attempting to do it better each time.

THESPIS

I'm used to doing different things – all the time – every day . . . What about doing something new?

CORYPHEUS

Something new?

THESPIS

A variation, perhaps?

CORYPHEUS

There *are* variations. Five years ago, the costumes were a splendid shade of lavender. We were going to keep using them every year but . . . the seamstress died and the moths had their way with the fabric . . .

THESPIS

I don't mean the costumes. I mean . . . what we say.

CORYPHEUS

The chant is always the same. It has been the same for hundreds of years.

THESPIS

How do you know? Have you seen the chant performed for hundreds of years?

CORYPHEUS

What – ?! Thespis – you need to get back in line!

THESPIS

And how did the chant originate?

CORYPHEUS

How should I know?

THESPIS

I know. Someone said – “let’s do a chant” – and then that’s what we’ve done ever since.

CORYPHEUS

Yes . . . so?

THESPIS

So . . . at one time, the chant was an *innovation*. It was something new.

CORYPHEUS

And?

THESPIS

Someone thought of the idea, and then they created it.

CORYPHEUS

Obviously.

THESPIS

But now, every year – the chant is always the same.

CORYPHEUS

That is our task.

THESPIS

Then, perhaps we should undertake a different task – a new chant.

CORYPHEUS

Why on earth would we need a new chant?

THESPIS

Perhaps . . . to tell a story.

CORYPHEUS

A story . . .? There is another group reciting Homer. There’s your story.

THESPIS

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*?

CORYPHEUS

Yes.

THESPIS

Those stories are old, too. They recite them every year . . . But we could really grab the attention of the audience by performing something that they haven't heard before.

CORYPHEUS

What do you mean?

THESPIS

We could enact a battle, or . . . depict the feat of a great hero –

CORYPHEUS

Rubbish . . .

THESPIS

Or tell a story of love and honor –

CORYPHEUS

Absurd . . .

THESPIS

We could each portray a different . . . character.

Beat.

CORYPHEUS

Are you suggesting that we . . . pretend to be persons that we are not?

THESPIS

Yes.

CORYPHEUS

But that's deceitful. It is a lie. We should be ashamed to act in such a manner.

THESPIS

(in deep thought)
. . . act . . .

CORYPHEUS

We are here to proclaim the truth.

THESPIS

We would create a new truth.

CORYPHEUS

Through lies? Through deception?

THESPIS

Through a *story*. A *new* story . . . or just share something interesting . . . You should hear the sophists debate in the agora . . .

CORYPHEUS

Good theatre is not just a lot of philosophical rambling.

THESPIS

Not rambling – reason! *Logos!* Focused, intelligent words with purpose . . .

CORYPHEUS

And what about praising the gods?

THESPIS

What about it? They seem to get their due.

CORYPHEUS

(offended)
. . . uh . . . We are here to do the chant!

THESPIS

But, they already know what we're going to say. I just thought –

CORYPHEUS

Thought . . .? You thought?!
(beat)
Thespis, what is your profession?

THESPIS

I'm a baker.

CORYPHEUS

A baker . . .? Being a baker doesn't require much thinking, does it?

THESPIS

No.

CORYPHEUS

Tell me, did you learn how to bake at the academy?

THESPIS

Uh . . . no . . .

CORYPHEUS

Well, I *did* go to the academy. So perhaps you should leave the thinking to me.

(beat)

Performing on stage doesn't require thinking. It is a matter of execution. In other words, *just do what I tell you to do* . . .

THESPIS

But . . . we could put some thought into it . . .

CORYPHEUS

Thespis, what if you *thought* about baking your bread, and you decided to bake it differently – perhaps use dirt instead of flour? That would certainly be *different*, wouldn't it?

THESPIS

. . . wouldn't taste very good . . .

CORYPHEUS

No. It would not. Which is why we do things the *right* way, and *only* the right way.

THESPIS

But . . . bread just feeds the body. The mind is hungrier – it needs more. If we could think of something new –

CORYPHEUS

There's that word again – "think." I don't like that word. Stop saying that word . . . If we Athenians spent less time thinking, and more time just doing what we're supposed to do, all of our problems would disappear.

THESPIS

Thinking is good. It creates new things. The wheel . . . the sailboat – they existed in someone's mind before they were ever actually created.

CORYPHEUS

Yes . . . well . . . those accomplishments are quite laudable.

THESPIS

Once an achievement exists, its value is obvious. But before it exists, its value is unknown . . . What else could our minds conceive of that is of such value? Think of the possibilities!

CORYPHEUS

Are you suggesting that a stage performance could somehow advance society?

THESPIS

Why not?

Beat.

CORYPHAEUS

I am not about to engage in sophistry with you, Thespis. My patience is ended.

(beat)

Diocles . . . I charge you with the task of instructing Thespis in the finer points of choral performance. The rest of us may take a break . . .

(sternly, to DIOCLES)

Time is short – make your efforts count . . .

Beat as CORYPHAEUS, POLYBIA, and the other CHORUS members exit.

THESPIS

I'm trying, Diocles.

DIOCLES

Yes. You're very trying . . .

THESPIS

It's hard for me to do what everyone else is doing.

DIOCLES

Watch me . . .

(beat, posing)

Who dares to question the will of the gods?

THESPIS

Apparently, no one. No one questions the will of the gods –

DIOCLES

Thespis –

THESPIS

How do we even know what the will of the gods is?

DIOCLES

It's . . . what happens to us – all of us . . . The lives we lead – that is the will of the gods.

THESPIS

What if we want to lead different lives?

DIOCLES

I don't understand. How can we lead different lives than the ones that we have?

THESPIS

By *thinking* . . . by striving to improve our lives – and the lives of those around us.

DIOCLES

That is hubris. Any person who tries to rise above his station will be swatted down by the gods.

THESPIS

You've seen this happen?

DIOCLES

Well, there's the story of Sisyphus, the evil king who – when he died – was condemned to roll a boulder up a hill in hades for eternity –

THESPIS

You've seen Sisyphus? You've been to hades?

DIOCLES

No . . . No one can visit hades. If you go to the underworld, you can never return.

THESPIS

How convenient.

DIOCLES

What?

THESPIS

Never mind . . .

DIOCLES

We need to get on with this . . .

THESPIS

Have you ever witnessed hubris yourself? Someone who tries to rise above their station and is then punished for it by the gods?

Beat as DIOCLES thinks.

DIOCLES

There was that one merchant – what was his name?

THESPIS

I don't know.

DIOCLES

It was said that he was cheating all who did business with him.

THESPIS

And what happened to him?

DIOCLES

He died.

THESPIS

How? Was he struck by lightning? Did the earth open up and swallow him?

DIOCLES

No. He lived to a ripe old age and then passed away in his sleep.

THESPIS

Not exactly punishment for hubris.

DIOCLES

No – but in the underworld –

THESPIS

Which none of us can see –

DIOCLES

I'm sure he was condemned to an awful fate.

THESPIS

Hmm . . .

DIOCLES

Thespis, we are all tools of the gods. We must acknowledge their power through our praise. It is they who have determined our lives. We must accept that.

THESPIS

Why?

DIOCLES

Because . . . if we don't, we are questioning the will of the gods.

THESPIS

Yes . . . I question the will of the gods. So, what is their answer to that?

(beat, looking upward, louder)

What is your answer, gods?!

DIOCLES

Stop it!

THESPIS

I've heard the sophists talk about this . . . If we simply accept that which exists, we have failed as thinking beings. We have not used our minds, our wills – and I agree.

DIOCLES

Hubris . . .

THESPIS

No . . . it is not hubris. It's . . . just making things better.

(beat)

Look at me – who am I?

DIOCLES

You're Thespis – the baker.

THESPIS

But today, I am Thespis – the chanter, the singer.

DIOCLES

Well, yes, but –

THESPIS

Who was I – many years ago?

DIOCLES

Many years ago . . . you were Thespis, the baker's son.

THESPIS

Ah – but that's where you're wrong! I am not the baker's son.

DIOCLES

What do you mean?

THESPIS

You're too young to know. I was Thespis – the street urchin. Thespis – the hopeless orphan. Thespis – the destitute beggar . . .

DIOCLES

You're not the baker's son?

THESPIS

No . . . When I was very young – so young I can hardly remember – I began to loiter around the baker's stall. At first, he and his wife gave me leftover scraps to eat. Then, in gratitude, I started to help them. Soon, it was like I was their son, and then I became a baker myself. When they passed away, I inherited their profession. I wasn't their son . . . but I *became* their son . . .

DIOCLES

I didn't know that.

THESPIS

So you see, their kindness – and my efforts – changed my fate – and theirs. It made things better.

DIOCLES

I suppose that true kindness makes the world a better place for all.

THESPIS

Yes – and such action was not hubris . . . It was thought . . . effort . . . change.

Beat.

DIOCLES

That is all well and good, Thespis, but you still have not learned the chant and the movements very well yet . . . Now, watch me . . .

THESPIS

(suddenly imitating CORYPHEUS)

People! Are we ready?

(beat, THESPIS poses in a ridiculous manner, DIOCLES laughs)

That was horrible . . . we're getting worse.

DIOCLES

You're . . . you're Coryphaeus!

THESPIS

(still imitating CORYPHEUS)

In my youth, we used to practice the chant until we died of thirst –

(THESPIS pretends to expire. DIOCLES laughs. THESPIS rises)

I think I've found the problem . . .

DIOCLES

Do you always make such jokes when you're in front of people?

THESPIS

No. Sometimes I tell stories of sadness – or even tales of fright . . .

DIOCLES

I recall you once told a story about a cat stalking a mouse.

THESPIS

I remember! The little ones listened with fear –

DIOCLES

It was very . . . engaging.

THESPIS

(acting like a cat)

I shall sneak up upon this mouse – and it will never even hear me . . . Then – when I am close – I will *pounce!*

THESPIS pounces like a cat, but then acts as if the mouse escaped his grasp.

DIOCLES

Yes – that's the one.

THESPIS

(as himself)

They all cheered because the mouse got away . . . but whenever the mouse gets away, the cat goes hungry . . . so then, the next day, I told a story about how the cat found a magic bowl of milk –

THESPIS – acting like a cat – pretends to lap milk from an imaginary bowl.

DIOCLES

I only seem to be distracting you, Thespis.

THESPIS

(as himself, ruefully)

Yes . . . perhaps I should spend some time rehearsing alone.

DIOCLES

Please do. Coryphaeus will have my head if you mess up the choral performance.

DIOCLES exits. THESPIS poses and begins to rehearse half-heartedly.

THESPIS

Who dares question the will of the gods?

(beat, breaking his pose, softly)

I do . . .

(beat, posing, louder)

Who dares question the will of the gods?

(beat, HE looks down at the ground and sees an ant)

What about you, little ant?

(shifting his stance, behaving like an ant – looking up, talking in a funny voice)

Are you talking to me?

(as himself, looking down)

Yes, I am talking to you . . .

(as the ant, looking up)

Are you . . . a god?

(as himself, looking down)

I can hold you in the palm of my hand . . .

THESPIS (CONTINUED)

(HE gestures as if to scoop up the ant)
I have the power of life and death over you . . .
(as the ant, looking up)
Then you must be a god!
(as himself, looking down)
No . . . I am not a god . . .
(HE gestures as if to release the ant)
You are free, little one . . .
(as the ant)
Free! I am free! I – oh no – someone is about to step on me – freedom is so cruel – agh!
(HE feigns “dying” as the ant. Beat, as himself, dramatically)
Poor tragic creature . . . his fate was death no matter what path he chose . . .
(Beat. HE looks over and sees a bird)
And what about you, little bird?
(shifting his stance, behaving like a bird, flapping his arms, squawking)
Caw! What about me?
(as himself)
Do you dare question the will of the gods?
(as the bird)
Yes! I do – caw! Caw!
(as himself, dramatically)
Impudent avian! I will punish you for your hubris.
(as the bird)
You can’t catch me – I will fly away!

THESPIS flaps his arms, runs about, and caws. As HE does, POLYBIA enters and sees him acting like a bird. SHE laughs a little. HE sees her and stops.

POLYBIA

That’s very good.

THESPIS

What?

POLYBIA

Your . . . bird.

POLYBIA flaps her arms a bit and laughs.

THESPIS

Oh . . .

POLYBIA

Don’t be embarrassed. It’s clever. It’s fun to watch you – acting like a bird.

THESPIS

. . . *acting* . . .

Beat. SHE approaches him.

POLYBIA

Are you ready for the performance?

THESPIS

Oh, I've been rehearsing but . . . I'm easily distracted.

POLYBIA

So I see . . .

(beat, with a stern expression)

I suggest that you practice until the very last minute.

THESPIS

Your face . . .

POLYBIA

What?

THESPIS

You were laughing a moment ago . . . now you're sad.

POLYBIA

I'm not sad. I'm just serious.

THESPIS

Being serious is just another version of being sad . . .

POLYBIA

You are a most mysterious man, Thespis.

THESPIS

It's as if . . . humanity always wears two masks, one happy . . . the other sad.

POLYBIA

Yes . . . well . . .

THESPIS

Polybia, do you believe in fate?

POLYBIA

Of course.

THESPIS

Do you believe that our fate is determined by the gods?

POLYBIA

It is the gods who rule our fates. It is they who decide our lives.

THESPIS

Yes, but . . . how do you actually know that's really true?

POLYBIA

Everyone knows that. It is unquestioned.

THESPIS

Yes. It is unquestioned – which is part of my point . . . But you still have not answered my question. How do you actually *know* that the gods rule our fates?

POLYBIA

You wish me to engage in idle sophistry?

THESPIS

No. I wish you to engage in reasoning – *logos!*

POLYBIA

That is still sophistry . . .

THESPIS

But not *idle* sophistry . . .

POLYBIA

Very well . . . we know that the gods exist –

THESPIS

Do we? Prove to me that the gods exist. We do not see them. We do not hear them.

POLYBIA

No, but . . . we feel their presence in the elements . . . the wind . . . the lightning.

THESPIS

Perhaps . . . or perhaps that is something else.

POLYBIA

You don't believe that the gods exist?

THESPIS

I didn't say that. But I'm asking you to *prove* that they exist.

POLYBIA

You are most confusing . . .

THESPIS

Let's try another example . . . Take mathematics instead. What is two plus two?

POLYBIA

The answer is four.

THESPIS

Prove it.

POLYBIA

Everyone knows that two plus two is four.

THESPIS

Yes. Everyone knows it. But *prove* it . . .

POLYBIA

Very well . . .

(SHE looks on the ground and finds some small stones)

Here are some pebbles . . .

THESPIS

Yes.

POLYBIA

(placing two pebbles in her hand)

I place two of them here.

(placing two more pebbles in her hand)

I then add these two pebbles as well. Now, how many pebbles are there?

THESPIS

Four. You have four pebbles. I can count them . . . One-two-three-four.

POLYBIA

And there you are: two plus two . . . equals four.

POLYBIA releases the pebbles from her hand.

THESPIS

Very good. You have proven your mathematical equation . . . Now prove that the gods rule our fate – or even that they exist.

POLYBIA

Well, there is . . . lightning, the wind . . . the sun. Those are from the gods –

THESPIS

Those are forces of nature – but we do not know if they are connected to the gods.

POLYBIA

Our stories tell us that they are –

THESPIS

Yes – but it is *we* who tell stories of the gods . . . and I suspect that it was *we* who created them . . . But even if we accept that the gods exist, *prove* that they rule our fate.

Pause. POLYBIA thinks.

POLYBIA

Everyone knows that . . .

THESPIS

No. That is not proof. I cannot use that to verify the conclusion.

POLYBIA

Uh . . .

THESPIS

Prove to me that the gods rule our fates.

POLYBIA

I . . . I do not believe that I can do so.

THESPIS

No – and that is my point.

POLYBIA

But everyone knows it.

THESPIS

Everyone *thinks* it . . . *believes* it . . . But they do not *know* it.

POLYBIA

You are impossible, Thespis.

THESPIS

Not at all . . . If you can prove your point – like the four pebbles – I will agree.

POLYBIA

For a baker, you certainly do think a lot . . .

THESPIS

Yes, I certainly do. But then, maybe I'm not just a baker.

POLYBIA

You would choose another profession? A profession where you can act like a bird?

THESPIS

Yes, act like a bird – or a hero, or a king.

POLYBIA

Your thoughts are quite entertaining . . . Are you going to share these thoughts with others, or just keep them to yourself?

THESPIS

I've shared them with you.

POLYBIA

Yes – but that is practically still keeping them a secret . . .
(SHE starts to walk away)

There is more to you than just being a baker, Thespis . . .

POLYBIA exits. Beat.

THESPIS

You have proven your point . . . Of course, in the current climate under the rise of Peisistratos, anything seems possible!

(imitating Peisistratos, quite dramatically)

Hear me, O Athenians! The oligarchs have kept you down for too long. It is time for us to join together and rise as one! We will end the trade embargo – the streets of Athens will brim with food . . . we will end the slavery of debt . . . it is not tyranny to dispel with such cruel masters . . . if the will of the gods is compliance with such existing evil, then I question the will of the gods . . .

(as himself)

Not bad, if I do say so myself . . . in fact, I might even be a little bit better . . .

DIOCLES enters.

DIOCLES

Are you ready? The time is nigh.

THESPIS

I don't know . . .

DIOCLES

Thespis, this is important –

CORYPHEUS enters.

CORYPHEUS

Thespis, I don't expect perfection from you, but you need to keep up with us as best you can. The food shortages have made the people unruly, and I don't want to antagonize them any further . . . And all this business with Peisistratos . . . it makes everyone nervous . . . I see the people's faces in the streets. Their smiles have disappeared. They need something to bolster their morale – they need to know that Athens is still the grand city that it has always been.

THESPIS

But . . . Athens is changing . . .

CORYPHEUS

Perhaps so – but we don't need to emphasize that.
(beat as POLYBIA and the rest of the CHORUS enter)
People! Our time has come . . .

POLYBIA

May the gods bless us all and make our voices soar . . .

The rising sound of a crowd entering the "theatron" is heard.

CORYPHEUS

They're coming in now – we must take our positions –

THESPIS

But . . . there's so much else we could do –

CORYPHEUS

There's no time for changes – even if I agreed to make them.

THESPIS

But –

CORYPHEUS

Thespis, so far, I have put up with your insufferable ways – but no longer! You have a choice to make. You can either be part of the performance – or not . . . Do you want to perform?!

THESPIS

Yes.

CORYPHEUS

Then, your choice is clear . . .

CORYPHEAEUS points THESPIS towards the chorus line. Beat.

THESPIS

Choice . . . yes. Quite clear . . .

THESPIS joins the chorus line at one end, while CORYPHEAEUS joins the line at the opposite end. The growing sound of an audience assembling is heard. Then, the sound of a low drum beating several times is heard. The sound of the crowd hushes to silence, and CORYPHEAEUS approaches the front edge of the stage.

CORYPHEAEUS

(loudly, as if making an announcement out to the audience)

Athenians, I bid you welcome to our festivities . . . On this day, we honor Dionysus, but we also honor *all* the gods of the pantheon . . . We thus begin our festivities with an ode to them . . .

CORYPHEAEUS repositions himself in the chorus line. HE then gives a signal, and the CHORUS begins to pose and chant.

CHORUS

Who dares to question the will of the gods?

THESPIS

(suddenly stepping away from the CHORUS and standing apart on the stage)

I do!

Beat. Several expressions of shock are heard from the audience. The CHORUS members – confused – look first at THESPIS and then at CORYPHEAEUS, who quickly urges them to continue.

CHORUS

What man could be so bold? What is his name?

THESPIS

I am Thespis . . .

The sound of murmuring is heard coming from the audience as CORYPHEAEUS looks on angrily. The CHORUS then continues their chant.

CHORUS

For he who shows his hubris shall suffer.

THESPIS

I may suffer – but I will make my own fate.

CHORUS

He who does not bend to their will is crushed.

THESPIS

. . . as you can see, I'm still here.

CHORUS

Mortals – know your place! Accept your station.

THESPIS

I . . . will . . . not.

CHORUS

Think not of ambition – speak not your will.

THESPIS

It is my choice. I choose to speak!

CHORUS

For we are but meek souls upon the earth –

THESPIS

I disagree.

(beat)

Hear me, O Athenians!

(beat, silence)

I am Thespis . . . and I will never cease my thoughts . . . I will pursue reason. For *logos* is my praise – it is *my* worship . . . I say, lift *up* your heads! Nurture your thoughts! Offer logic to yourselves and to each other! Seek the truth. The truth is only that which can be proven.

(beat, a commotion is heard coming from the audience)

If the gods disapprove of my thoughts, may they strike me down!

(THESPIS reaches upward dramatically with both of his arms as a few gasps are heard, etc. Pause. Nothing happens. THESPIS slowly lowers his arms)

You see? The gods do *not* disapprove!

CORYPHEUS

Hubris!

THESPIS

It is *not* hubris . . . I have proven to you that the gods do not disapprove of reason, of willful action. We can think for ourselves, strive for improvement!

CORYPHEUS

You will get back in line with the others – now!

THESPIS

I will never get back in line . . . and neither will they . . .

THESPIS gestures towards DIOCLES and POLYBIA, who break out onto the stage, proclaiming brief bits of dialogue such as "I am Diocles!" or "I am Polybia!" or "Who can ever really know the will of the gods?" or "Do the gods rule our fates, or do we?" etc. The lights then begin to fade out as the excited murmuring continues to build. As the lights fade to complete darkness, the excited murmuring then swiftly fades to silence.

END OF PLAY

Chorus Chant

from *Thespis*

Tempo = ca. 100 bpm

The musical score is written on a single staff in 4/4 time. It consists of two phrases of vocalizations. The first phrase is 'Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah!' followed by a long horizontal line. The second phrase is 'Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah!' followed by a long horizontal line. The melody is primarily composed of quarter notes and half notes, with some rests. There are two fermatas over the final notes of each phrase. The tempo is marked as 'ca. 100 bpm' and the second phrase is marked with 'rit.' (ritardando).

Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah! _____ Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah! _____