

Rembrandt and Spinoza

a play

by

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CHARACTERS

REMBRANDT VAN RIJN	Artist and collector
BARUCH SPINOZA	Philosopher
HENDRICKJE STOFFELS	Rembrandt's live-in partner
TITUS	Rembrandt's Son
SAUL MORTEIRA	Rabbi - Spinoza's teacher
GERRIT HOOGSTRATEN	Assessor
CONSTATIJN HUYGENS	Statesman, poet, diarist, scientist
GOTFREID LEIBNIZ	Philosopher, mathematician
JACOB	Spinoza's attacker
DANIEL TYDEMEN	Spinoza's landlord
MARGARITA TYDEMEN	Spinoza's landlady

SETTINGS

This is a play about two people who have very different but parallel and contemporary lives, ending up via different routes at the same psychological and existential place. Rembrandt leads a visceral, sensual, sexually engaged life. Spinoza leads what seems like a sterile existence. The separate journeys towards their coming together is the meat of the play. It is not done as a descriptive narrative but in a sequence of scenes from both lives. These scenes should show, in a roundabout and fragmented way, the progress of both men towards the final scene.

The lighting in this is crucial. But it must never be obvious. The scenes with Spinoza can be very usefully toned down in blue grey light with gold back light. The scenes with Rembrandt can be toned towards red gold. In the final scene these lights should come together and blend.

PLACES

Amsterdam 1656 and later. Rembrandt's accommodation. First Act in a large mansion. For the rest in a smaller house.

Then Voorburg, a village near the Hague at various times. Spinoza's room.

ACT I

- Scene I: Prologue*
- Scene II Outside the Synagogue*
- Scene III Rembrandt's house*
- Scene IV Interior of the Synagogue*

SCENE I:

PROLOGUE – from black a light comes up on SPINOZA standing down stage left. Dressed in his usual black 17th century costume, he addresses the audience. The first part may be done humorously, perhaps playing with the audience – then change mood at second paragraph.

SPINOZA: I wonder who you are. You there - sitting in a time and in a place which to me are unimaginable. I wonder what circumstances you live in. I wonder what has happened to the old philosophies, the old politics. The old religions. Have you solved the problems of power? The power of arms and dogma and money? Can you say if life is better for you in your stretch of time than for all of us here, stuck in ours? Perhaps you are no longer oppressed by the race of mad men scrabbling for money and for power over women and still confusing all of that for a hankering after the divine. Perhaps all the old superstitions have been swept away and you have a clear view of life and how it should be lived. Perhaps you have found such a way that, in spite of your knowledge of the horror of things, you are all free to love life - and have learned to control your passions. And perhaps you have come to know the nature of God. Or should I say know the God in nature. Maybe you sit there with pride in the achievements of the ages. I don't know. I wonder.

Pause

But perhaps you have come to that place that Rembrandt and I reached towards the end. Travelling by very different roads we found ourselves, not necessarily by chance, at the same place. Had we reached a heaven or a hell? It didn't matter. They were the old terms and no longer applied. We knew in truth that we had journeyed to a place beyond all that. A long way beyond all of that.

Immediately to black

SCENE II

Amsterdam 1656. A street scene. A large double door is centre back. This can be used throughout the play if it can be moved from one side to another. In this instance it is the door to the Synagogue. Steps leading down to front stage

As the light comes up - bright day - the doors open immediately and two men emerge. Spinoza, a lithe young man dressed in lack with long black hair and a large hat. The other man is Saul Morteira, the Rabbi. Dressed appropriately.

MORTEIRA: (*imploring Spinoza gently*). Use reason Baruch. If you can't use your own for the general good, use our reasoning. Nothing you are saying can possibly accepted by our community. You know that. Of course you do. Use your reason and look at the implications. How *can* you be right. After so many thousands of years of tradition and fellowship, of study and profound thought on these matters. In the face of all the documents, the learning - the love. You think you know more of than we do? Than they do, than the whole of our history does? Use reason Baruch. Come and discuss it again. I am so concerned for you.

They have moved almost the foot of the steps. Morteira reaches out and takes Spinoza's hand.

Spinoza says nothing but stops and looks at Morteira. They stand in silence.

At this moment a young man rushes in from stage left at high speed and attacks Spinoza. He has a knife and is seriously trying to kill him.

JACOB: (*Very distraught. Crying. Shouting*) Spinoza! - You - I cannot - I will not - must stop you! Devil! For God!

(There is a very violent struggle. Spinoza tries to fend off the attacker but in a lack-lustre way. He does not panic. Morteira joins in, dragging the attacker off with great trouble. But he manages it and they are all sprawled centre front stage, Morteira holding onto Jacob. They all struggle to their feet)

MORTEIRA: Stop it Jacob! No. You can't. NO! Calm yourself. Hold back. The knife. Give me the knife. Drop it for pity's sake! - (*The knife drops to the floor*) There. Calm yourself. Calm down.

(Morteira holds Jacob tightly in his arms from behind..)

Good man.

JACOB: How can you put up with it – with HIM! He makes the place stink. The whole world stink. Look at him rotting away, infecting everything. He's the destroyer Rabbi.

MORTEIRA: Well yes, yes – no – Jacob – no – it's not for you. You can't do it this way. We can do it. Let us think and act for you. We know how. It is in hand. Have patience. *(to Spinoza)* And Jacob is just one, Baruch. Can't you see how much you are hurting your people? You are ripping out their hearts, wrenching their hands away from the certainty of their God. It's intolerable. Never forget Baruch – God is greater than you.

SPINOZA: O I know that. I know that better than you.

(To black immediately. Immediately loud knocking on a door - continues to . . .)

SCENE III

Interior of Rembrandt's house.

Loud knocking continues.

Lights up to show large room, central door still there. Another door to the right. Various bits of furniture and bizarre objects – suits of armour, stuffed birds, skeleton etc.. A table and chairs. Back projection(?) of many shelves stuffed with more objects. A shelf with smaller objects including an exotic shell.

Immediately HENDRICKJE rushes in from stage left. HENDRICKJE is plump and wholesome. She has energy and moves lightly and quickly, noticing everything. She is followed more slowly by TITUS, who half sits on the table. TITUS is a teenager but older in outlook. Tired of being young and aware of his intelligence.

HENDRICKJE: Rembrandt! They're here. Come! Titus - look sharp!

TITUS: *(He doesn't move)*. Look sharp about what?

As HENDRICKJE reaches the door REMBRANDT enters (more slowly than Titus) stage left. He is a ramshackle man, a bit overweight, dressed in good clothes but rather tossed on. He moves heavily. HENDRICKJE hesitates and looks around at REMBRANDT.

HENDRICKJE: So - you are ready for them?

REMBRANDT: Of course – I've been ready for some years now.

HENDRICKJE: Titus - offer them drinks – wine or beer. It will soften them up. And go round with them. Tell how much these things are worth – really worth – you understand.

TITUS: It's not going to work is it Dad?

REMBRANDT: What do you mean? Not going to work?

TITUS: There's not enough stuff. It won't make enough money. The whole lot. I've had a look and done my own sums. It's nowhere near.

Rembrandt lifts his arms and drops them in resignation.

Meanwhile Hendrickje has opened the door and (at least) three men come in. Smart, business like. Polite, they move around in this scene with some consideration of the delicate situation. Hendrickje fusses around them opening cupboards etc.

The man seemingly in charge (Gerrit – with Frederik and Martijn) approaches Rembrandt. Everyone stops and looks at them.

GERRIT: I'm sorry Rembrandt. This is not easy. But we have to do it officially and I have the papers here. Now you must understand this is not personal. Indeed the act says 'The act of Cessio Bonorum entitles . . .'

REMBRANDT: *(waves hands impatiently)* Yes, yes Gerrit. None of that. I know you and you know me. I know what you have to do. You know what you have to do. Can we just get on with it. Titus and Hendricke will come round with you – just to make sure you don't miss anything – or make any mistakes with the values. I have some things here none of you would have seen before and won't able to price correctly.

FREDERIK: *(Opening a cupboard and bringing out a Native American costume)* You can say that again. What on earth is this?

REMBRANDT: It's 65 florins, Frederick. Put it on your list. Clothing. From the Americas.

(Turns away and starts rummaging on a shelf. He picks up an exotic shell and keeps hold of it, unconsciously turning it round in his hands.)

I have some packing of my own to do – so you can keep your hands off these little remnants, these little momentos. Hendricke – take them upstairs. Most of it is all up there. And Titus - look sharp now.

TITUS: 'Look sh . . .'? Why does everyone keep telling me to . . .

(But he does, and jumps off the table and joins HENRICKE in ushering FREDERICK and MARTIN out of the other door. Rembrandt is left alone with GERRIT. They look at each other)

GERRIT: What a mess Rembrandt. A couple of years ago I was asking you for a loan. You were one of the richest men in Amsterdam. Now look. We're here organising a sale of your entire household. And - I think you know - whatever we get it won't cover the debts.

REMBRANDT: Yes, I know – how are the mighty etc. 'It's his own fault' I hear the general populace belching out. Yes, yes – buying this huge house was a mad idea. The collections I've stuffed it with were a mad idea. And my brief incursions into capitalism -

me - a trader! - were ridiculous. I had the mad idea that I should join in the Amsterdam party - join the pigs at the trough, the tribe of entrepreneurs running berserk in this city. It was fun for a while. They were trading anything to anyone. One daren't stand still for fear of being sold. Do you know - I'm sure you do (you may even have been part of it) (*GERRIT registers some discomfort*) – that the Bickers brothers were selling guns and ammunition, even ships, to our current enemy – whoever is it at the moment? - the French? the English? Both? Making a nice turn-over from the slaughter of their neighbours! No regulations, not much tax. What fun! But I couldn't run with it. Too lazy. Not enough oomph for a wide boy money-maker. The paintings were doing well enough but the fashion had been swinging away from me for some time. One thing led to another. And here we are. Up shit creek without a paddle.

GERRIT: Do you have any idea of what you are going to do now? I hear the Guild is going to prevent you trading as a painter.

REMBRANDT: Even that. Yes. Bit of blow. I say without a paddle but I do have my back up team. My vast staff of business associates who are swinging in with their vast experience and resources and will, they say, save the day. That is - Hendrickje and Titus are cooking up an idea which - they say - will make things work out. I have faith in my team.

Listen – you'd better join the party upstairs – it's where most of the collections are. You'll take all day if you hang around here making me feel terrible. You'll get a drink up there as well.

GERRIT: Very well - I'll do my best for you but you will only get what people are prepared to pay - doesn't matter much what the quality is.

REMBRANDT: Yes - just like selling paintings. I'll see you later.

(GERRIT leaves by the same door as the others and REMBRANDT is left alone. He wanders around for a bit still carrying the shell. After a while he notices the shell and puts it on the table. He draws up a chair sideways on to the audience and start looking at the shell closely.

The lights fade slightly on the rest of the stage and REMBRANDT and the shell are left in full light. REMBRANDT, slowly turns to the audience and addresses them.)

REMBRANDT: I did an etching of this shell some years back. I think the only true still life I have ever done. I mean a picture without people in it. It was born of this habit I have of gazing. Yes - gazing, looking, giving attention to objects. I didn't plan it. Just came about.

The job of a painter when I was starting out was, well - as it is now, has always been and will be forever, amen, - a highly competitive business. And you had to have an angle you could flog to the punters, something no-one else was doing. My angle was to make

historic or religious pictures that had something of an earthy feel, something of the real world. In my pictures these amazing things – angels appearing, resurrections, all that - were happening to real people, people you could meet in the street. People like you in fact. So I took to recycling the members of my own family in them. I put up with the grumbles, the whinging – they were ready to hand, costless models. Buy a few costumes and props and you could create a whole theatre in the studio and, if your copying of the set-up scene was accurate enough, got the light right, you would end up with something quite ‘real’. And it fascinated the punters.

And that’s when it started. The gazing. The idea of these images was to tell some kind of truth. And to do that I had to look, look, look at what was in front of me. Resist the temptation to fiddle with it, to over-egg it. But I discovered it’s a dangerous game this gazing. Can lead you into difficult areas. It tends to allow things to crumble. Have you ever tried repeating your own name over and over? Try it. Over and over. Rembrandt, Rembrandt, Rembrandt, Rembrandt, Rembrandt, Rembrandt. After a while it no longer says your name. It becomes a sound - just that - all attachment to a thing or person gone. A slight vibration in the air meaning sod all. It’s the same with gazing. Look long enough and whatever you are looking at begins to slide away from you, becomes a shape and a form drifting out of the world we know, away from any kind of ‘meaning’ into something - what? - I don’t know – something else.

But then out of this came another thought. Now I am not actually a religious man. I make these images of religious subjects but really it’s the stories that interest me. Doesn’t matter if they are true. All the how’s-your-father that goes in the religions I come across strikes me as not worth the breath. The very fact that there are so many religions in just this small corner of Amsterdam you would think would give people pause . . . Anyway - that’s not my game.

But I do think about God. I thought that if God was God and he had made everything, then everything would be something of him. Even this shell (*lifts it*). And I wondered about that. If what you had in front of you was made by God then perhaps it was part of his design of everything. And that if you looked long enough you might just get a glimpse of him in his world of - things. Or something like that. So each new item I bought for my collections offered a possibility. Keep looking – he’s in there somewhere. Come out, come out wherever you are! Well I went on looking and he didn’t – it didn’t work out like that. It was more serious than that. And I thought later that there are some doors in life that should perhaps remain closed.

(He turns back to the shell and becomes still and wrapt in its contemplation. The lights come up and HENDRICKJE, TITUS and the visitors tumble back into the room with a lot of fuss and noise. The assessors are protesting that they have given a reasonable assessment of the contents of the house and TITUS is complaining that they had rushed it all. All at once.

They all stop suddenly when they notice REMBRANDT sitting, now staring at them.)

TITUS: They say they are finished Dad, but really it's a fucking rip off. They couldn't give a shit about our situation, just trying to please the auction house - get rid of the stuff as quick as they can. And I bet they all have an interest there - am I right?

(Shocked reactions from the committee.)

HENDRICKJE: Titus – stop that! No need for language. They can do no more. We can do no more now. Let it go. Thank you gentlemen. I know you have done your best. We will be in touch to see what the next step is in this. Gerrit - take your lists away and do your best for us. You know what's what. You know he's a good man and doesn't deserve this - well - not entirely.

GERRIT: I will do what I can Hendrickje. But you do realise that you are not in a good position yourself in this – you are not married and the law will not deal kindly with you. And Titus - look to your self now.

REMBRANDT: Look to himself! - you may not be aware of this but his father is now poorer than his own son! He will have my dead wife's money when - if - he grows up! I have nothing! How about that!

TITUS: Well you approved of all that Dad – and don't forget you made me sign the deeds making the whole bloody lot over to you when I die. Don't blame me.

HENDRICKJE: That's enough now. Goodbye Gerrit. Thank you. Leave it with me and Titus. We do have an idea of what to do.

GERRIT: Goodbye to one and all. And good luck.

(REMBRANDT waves a hand at him and he leaves.)

REMBRANDT: There they go then.

(Titus begins to speak. REMBRANDT holds up his hand.)

Don't you start Titus. I can see what's on your mind. Don't you think I've had enough of it. I've had it. Yes - I know - shameful. Yes - a complete shameful, public, private humiliation. And you looking at me as if I am a completely useless old man. A failure. A ludicrous old fart. All this in front of Hendrickje. How do you think I feel?

HENDRICKJE: We'll get out of it. You'll see. I can do it if you can't. And Titus knows we can. He's just throwing his weight around, Mr Money Bags himself - for all the good it will do him. Or us.

TITUS: O yes - I inherit - what? Bugger all! And you both know it will, if there is anything left at all of Mum's money, it'll wend it's way back into Dad's pockets. I guarantee it. Since Mum died that's the way it goes.

REMBRANDT (stands up) and HENDRICKJE at once

R: Now that's enough

H: Don't come it Titus – there's no need.

R: I can still work. I am still a painter don't forget!

Etc.

TITUS: O shove it, both of you!

HENDRICKJE: Titus – I'm not your mother but I can still give you a clip when I fancy. So buck up, knuckle down and start thinking for all of us.

TITUS: I've no bloody choice have I!

(TITUS exits slamming the door)

HENDRICKJE: As for you – you'd better start bucking up and knuckling down as well. *(She finds this slightly amusing – the repetition of her silly phrase and faintly smiles fondly at REMBRANDT. Then frowns again. Goes out - slamming the door.)*

Rembrandt collapses on his chair. He drifts off in the ensuing quiet. He picks up the shell again and gazes at it for some time. Puts it down on the table and looks at it steadily.

At this moment the main door slowly opens again and SPINOZA puts his head into to the room. He then quietly and delicately enters the room. He tip-toes silently up to Rembrandt and politely coughs. Throughout all this SPINOZA talks with great precision, rather humourless but in a gentle way. Rembrandt turns and sees him.)

SPINOZA: *(brightly)* Well Rembrandt - how's your day been?

(REMBRANDT looks at him in fixed astonishment for a moment. He then relaxes.)

REMBRANDT: You see me stripped bare Baruch. Not a pretty sight. They will take everything, you know. Everything. On top of that it looks like the guild are considering preventing me from trading as a painter.

SPINOZA: Well - we discussed this before and you knew that this was coming. Looks as though you did nothing about it.

REMBRANDT: Hendricke - and Titus - say they working on an idea which might pull us through. In truth I can hardly string one thought after another. My mind is a blank. D'you fancy a drink?

SPINOZA: You know I am not . . .

REMBRANDT: If you don't, I do. Grab a chair and sit down.

(While SPINOZA pulls over a chair and sits, REMBRANDT goes to a cupboard and brings a decanter of wine and two glasses. He opens the wine and sniffs it.)

REMBRANDT: This still seems drinkable.

(He pours two glasses and sits down heavily.)

It's alright for you. You are clear minded, precise, follow things through. You're a businessman - or were. But it seems you are philosophising more than trading these days. Me - I'm a bumbler. I get distracted. I think I can cope with all the business of life – the not-painting business – but I've found I can't. I'm bloody hopeless.

Look - there's no point going over my situation here now. It needs time to work itself out. Let it settle. I'm sure it will all sort itself out in time. Let's put all that to one side for the moment. *(pause)* Strangely I have an unexpected and delightful sense of freedom after what happened today. *(Thinking – trying out the idea. Then comes back to himself.)*

But - you now. Distract me. Tell me about your meetings at the synagogue. You said something important was in the air.

SPINOZA: You could say that. At least it seems important to some. A few days ago one of them tried to kill me.

Pause. REMBRANDT stares in amazement.

As you can see – they didn't succeed.

REMBRANDT : Well – yes but . . .

SPINOZA: I have known for some time that the little fuse I lit would reach the gunpowder at some point. And, like you, I did nothing about it. In truth - unlike your case - there is nothing I could do about it. In my case, it has nothing to do with money or anything material. It is about my ideas – or, no, more than that – it is about telling the truth.

REMBRANDT : Very risky business, telling the truth. I do it all the time in this place and look at the result. So what is this truth that seems to bring out the murderer in certain members of your community?

SPINOZA: Are you really interested? I mean - now? After your . . . day?

REMBRANDT: Go on – give me the story. You've made an impressive start. I may nod off but I'll blame that on the way you tell it.

SPINOZA: It's certainly become an explosive situation. But I can't blame them for feeling a bit put out. In essence I have done away with their history, stripped them of their identity, their god and their whole reason for being. Anyone would be a little tetchy if it was done to them..

REMBRANDT: And how has the young Baruch Spinoza managed all that?

SPINOZA: Pure thought Rembrandt. Logic and a look at the evidence. A look which is not disturbed by allegiances, nor obligations to family, nor to community – nor to their traditions, no matter how ancient and venerated. These obligations and the sense of - I would say - false - security they provide, blind people to underlying weakness and error. They become the slaves of whatever has been handed down to them. They go on mouthing the old laws over and over and over until they no longer mean anything.

REMBRANDT indicates/lifts the shell and is about to talk but SPINOZA just carries on without noticing.

Empty rituals. They tie themselves in knots trying to make sense of them, and which in the end lead them to misery and unhappiness and cause pointless suffering to themselves and to others, and cut them off from those who are not in the 'family', the 'community'. They have woven a wondrous golden cloth of tradition and identity and thrown it over the rotting carcass of ancient laws and superstition. Now they are too scared to lift even a corner of it and have a peep underneath – just in case they sniff out something they don't like. And if anyone does dare to do that – well that's when the trouble starts.

I have been listening to the preachers and reading their books and going to their classes all my life. And from the start I had those little itches of disquiet about what I was hearing. Those itches have become raging rashes. I found I could no longer ignore them and made my own judgement. And my findings could not be ignored - not by me. And they needed to be said out loud.

REMBRANDT: O well – only got yourself to blame then. Putting yourself in harms way. We have all tried to avoid it in this house. Titus once said it was like a child's game and he called it Dodging the Dodgy Dogmas. (*Looks at SPINOZA - who doesn't react*). Made us laugh at the time.

It seems we are both a little out of tune with the world we live in.

Pause

So – all very well to take all that away. What did you offer in return?

SPINOZA: Clarity. And an inclusive view of the world - all of it. And - something those who call me atheist can't get their heads round - a greater God than they have ever imagined. If you take my view, rather than their fantastical - local - version of things, then their faith and their politics - your faith and your politics, such as they are - would

become easier to live with, easier to practice. Imagine - a way of looking at the world that gives life to everything, animates everything. Everything becomes of profound interest.

Look - it gets complicated when I spell it all out in technical philosophical terms, which I will have to do if I am to be taken seriously outside of this floating city.

(Looks intently at REMBRANDT)

REMBRANDT: I feel a shower of condescension about to descend on me.

(SPINOZA ignores this and carries on)

SPINOZA: Alright, here it is in a nutshell. Rather appropriate given I've been trading in almonds these last years.

(He waits for a response to his joke but gets a stare back. He moves closer to REMBRANDT)

If God is the creator of the Universe and all that's in it then we cannot possibly see ourselves as being created in His image. Put like that, it's obvious isn't it? Whatever we are, we are not that. And to think that we understand this creator of the stars and the worms, even have contact with him on a personal basis, is nonsense. This creator must be beyond all that - but also contained in all that. We turn it all round and make Him in *our* pathetic, flawed image - which is ridiculous. However, if God has created the Universe, then everything in it, if studied right, will us lead to him - or a least to a closer understanding of him and his ways. *(REMBRANDT fingers the shell again)* Oh - and by the way - the Bible cannot be true in the sense they think it. It's imaginative fiction written by various unknown authors.

REMBRANDT: So - you are ditching thousands of years of tradition and ritual along with Moses and Solomon and you seem to expect them to say 'Thank's a lot' Baruch - 'we all feel much better now'?

SPINOZA: No I don't and they haven't. You are right. I have dumped Moses and Solomon and, just to make a complete job of it, I have junked their Jehovah. I have been informed they are not best pleased. The day after tomorrow I have been called to the Synagogue. They, in their eternal wisdom and after doing their level best to get me back into the fold - are going to throw me into the outer darkness. Excommunication.

(Still looking intensely at REMBRANDT)

I think I might not go.

REMBRANDT: Sounds as though you don't care much. Apart from the doctrinal catastrophe you are presenting to them, I imagine quite a bit of this situation is aggravated by your manner. Your attitude. You can be an arrogant young sod at times

Baruch and your attitude, that look of - what - a know-all - would, sometimes does, get up my nose. Can't have helped.

SPINOZA: *(For the only time he seems put out and raises his voice a little)* My attitude! I do *not* have an attitude!

(Rembrandt points his finger at him.)

REMBRANDT: Hah!

(SPINOZA is caught out. He relaxes and smiles)

SPINOZA: Alright. Alright. But my 'attitude' does not, or should not, matter. All they have to do is look at the proof. The facts. The words. I have presented them with liberating gift. And if I may say so, in the case of this gift, it really is the thought that counts.

(another lame joke and REMBRANDT looks on without laughing)

REMBRANDT: OK then. But I don't have to tell you Baruch - you know you are walking a very dangerous path here. You know what can happen. And not just one lunatic with a knife. It really is serious.

SPINOZA: Yes, it is serious. Or to them it is serious. To me - I think not.

(Pause)

REMBRANDT: I just wonder, having some ideas of my own, how you came to reach these conclusions. What experience lead you to these conclusions?"

SPINOZA: No experience. Thought, Rembrandt. Pure thought. We must beware of passions.

(He stands) I have to go. Good luck with it all. I am not sure when I will see you again. I hope it's soon.

Spinoza stops for a moment and looks at Rembrandt.

I have a question. I have noticed a strange thing about your work, especially the etchings. I have seen stacks of them since I started coming over here. I noticed that in many images there is no moral to be drawn. Most of your fellow artists, when making pictures of daily life, always like to make a moral. Don't get drunk. Don't fornicate. Don't waste money. Yours don't do that. No judgement. What lead you to that 'conclusion'?

To black

SCENE IV

Interior of the synagogue. The pulpit is centre down stage. SAUL MORTEIRA is in place in the pulpit and addresses the audience as if they are the congregation.

MORTEIRA: The Lords of the Ma'amad announce that having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch Spinoza, they have endeavoured by various means and promises, to turn him from his evil ways. But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and born witness to this effect in the presence of the said Spinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter; and after all of this has been investigated in the presence of the honorable hakhamim, they have decided, with their consent, that the said Spinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel.

By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch Spinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.

No one should communicate with him neither in writing nor accord him any favour nor stay with him under the same roof nor within four cubits in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written by him.

Curtain

ACT II

This is performed in one set. There are two different scenes. The first is Spinoza's room in Voorburg. Simple – a workbench with microscopes, telescopes, lens making equipment stage left. Chair stage right. Back stage a curtained bed. This could be moved forward with the Rembrandt scenes.

SCENE I

SPINOZA is standing leaning over his desk looking through a microscope. Constantijn Huygens is lounging in a chair. Huygens is wealthy and dressed rather flamboyantly. Spinoza is in his usual very plain clothes. Spinoza looks up and addresses the audience.

I moved from Amsterdam to a small town on the outskirts of the Hague. I had no contact with Rembrandt after my move. It's cheaper and quieter here. My landlord, Daniel Tydman, a painter, is a very bright fellow and he and his wife Margarita have long been associated with, let's say, the more remote regions of Dutch political thinking for some time. I have had offers of university chairs and even been asked me to be a court philosopher in Paris. Me - in Paris! I decided I didn't want to be owing to people nor have to perform for anyone. I took up lens grinding to earn a living – making telescopes and microscopes. I became interested in optics and the nature of light. The wonder of rainbows.

I published my book on philosophy, politics and religion, which, even though printed in Latin, anonymously, and read by few people, caused some uproar and put me in some danger. To be expected. That was part of my reason for coming here. But I do not lack for company and conversation. I have many visitors. My visitor today is Constantijn Huygens, brother to the famous scientist Christiaan. They live in a large house with superb gardens nearby, built by their father. They collaborate on some projects but I think that Constantijn does not have to application of his brother. He enjoys life too much.

He turns back to the microscope

HUYGENS: What can you see?

SPINOZA: Vast spaces and soaring architecture. Cathedrals.

HUYGENS: Don't you mean synagogues?

SPINOZA: All the same to me these days. Whatever they are I can't see any congregations gathered in these structures.

HUYGENS: What are you actually looking at?

SPINOZA: A slice of quartz crystal. Did you realise the geometry goes all the way down - I mean into some kind of infinity, over and over, fracturing itself into untold depths. I wonder how far down it goes?

HUYGENS: You should try some of my new lenses. Come over to the house. You know you are always welcome. There's everything there you could possibly want to amuse yourself with. Bigger telescopes and - in my opinion - finer microscopes . . .

(SPINOZA reacts as if rather insulted - Huygens smiles and waves a hand)

. . . and good conversation. My father is very fond of you. What is it that keeps you away? The scent of money? The court connections? The good food? The lack of suffering?

SPINOZA: I don't suffer. I like this room. And I may seem picky but what you offer are gifts - kindly meant - but to me in the end gifts represent eventual obligation. And obligation is exactly what I do not want.

HUYGENS: O come now, you are being far too monk-like. But if that is the way you want it, so be it. You must remain in your cell and we poor bereft people must beat a path to your door. Where you can bestow on us your gifts so that *we* may feel - 'obligation'.

SPINOZA: (*smiling*) I don't want to seem rude, Constantijn but - really - you are not obliged to come.

HUYGENS: How could I not. You, me and my brother are the best lens makers in Europe – and we live almost next door to each other. Why would I not want to come and try to steal some of your secrets? And besides, with you I get the philosophy thrown in, which I do not get with Christiaan. With him the rainbow is light and light only. Of profound interest but still only light. With you it is an affirmation of God's presence in the world.

SPINOZA: To me everything is. Or rather God is the entire substance of the world.

HUYGENS: So you say. And this from the 'Jew of Voorburg'? What happened to Jehovah seated in his mystic elsewhere?

SPINOZA: O he went a long time ago. Or rather he was never there.

HUYGENS: O come now Baruch – allow some magic in. What is imagination for if not to invent vast and wondrous fantasies with which we can decorate the drab world.

SPINOZA: I don't find it drab.

HUYGENS: Of course you think a pile of dog's shit is part of God divine order, do you not? An admirable object from which to postulate and to contemplate on God's mystery and wonder!

SPINOZA: That is correct.

HUYGENS: I don't get it. Or rather I think I prefer the old God – miles away somewhere in the ether, just popping down from time to time to see what we're up to. Telling us off a bit then disappearing again up his own omniscience. One can't escape from your God. He's a bit close for comfort. Even in love making? Baruch it all gets too embarrassing. Your theology would mean that whenever I make love to a woman in some sense I would be fucking God.

SPINOZA: And they persecute me for heresy. How do you get away with it? But you have it wrong - as you well know. If all is of God's substance then the whole act, it's passion, it's physical motions, it's setting - are all one thing. You would be more correct in saying you would be fucking yourself.

HUYGENS: Careful Baruch - you're becoming as uncouth as me. Must be the company you keep. But what about love? Mad love? Have you never been in love? I've never seen or heard of you being in the company of women. Or of men in that sense. Is not love the essence of God? If so you do not seem to partake of it.

SPINOZA: It maybe that I am just not much good at human relationships - beyond conversation. But I do know one thing and that is that our passions are those aspects of life that lead us into most unhappiness. Attachment to the variable objects of the world - including, perhaps mostly, men and women - leads us to desire the impossible, leads away from the prime road to contentment - and that road is a growing knowledge of God and God's revelation in nature.

HUGENS: So you say but I don't think there are many of us who would swap our guilty dalliances for you attachment to the revelation of your God in the stones, worms and stars. The greatest joy available to man is in the ecstasy in the sexual climax. Which, by the way, is also the secret of the hidden sorrow of all men.

SPINOZA: Which great secret sorrow is this Constantijn? I am not aware of it.

HUYGENS: Then let me inform you. It is at the heart of men's chase after money. Because money gives men power and power gives them access to the greatest joy they can experience on earth - power gives them access to women (or so they think) and the annihilating ecstasy of orgasm. Men were born with an insatiable appetite to fuck, to chase this death-in-life with all their energy. Their consciousness of it stops there, in the fucking. No thought of procreation unless told of it. No thought of who it is they fuck. All their manifestations of the opposite are wiles and falseness created to allow them to fuck even more. And their appetite is boundless. They want to fuck every living - or maybe not even living - creature they can get their hands on. They would screw anything. They even desire those in past and those in the future, in every place and every clime. They try to accomplish this from the time they first taste, as I have described, that greatest, most intense of all pleasure available to them in their lives. Later, to their utter horror, they discover that they cannot have it all the time, with everyone. They realise with a sickening shock that it's utterly impossible. And in this lies their eternal frustration and profound sorrow. Their frustration must find release and it does so either in sulking or violence or any number of disguised actions. But that is the truth of it. And that is why, in your lone evenings, Baruch, even your mind may sometimes wander into dark places full of woe and loss - and you will not know why.

For me, having realised the futility of it all - well even a little nibble at the cherry is rather a good thing, and I make do with that.

SPINOZA: You surprise me Constantijn. You who seems the jolliest of men - the clown who cries?

SCENE II

The light goes up on the bed and the curtain is drawn back from inside by HENDRICKJE

HENDRICKJE: *(calling softly at first – then louder)* Rembrandt! Rembrandt!
Rembrandt! Come my dear. I'm so sorry. I am afraid it's happened again. I have mucked the sheets again. So sorry.

SPINOZA: My life may seem arid to one like you. But in reality this is not so. I have my own joys. I am not lonely *(he says this without conviction)*

REMBRANDT enters stage left and goes to the bed and comforts HENDRICKJE. The light fades on Spinoza and Huygens.

HENDRICKJE: I'm so sorry. I can't control it any more. It's horrible.

REMBRANDT: No matter. We are all used to it now. When you are well it will no doubt be my turn and then you'll be sorry. I shit more than you can ever imagine. You'll need help to deal with it all. Buckets. Titus is not strong enough to lift a bucket of my shit. Are you *(calls off stage)*

HENDRICKJE *(starts laughing – which develops into a cough)*: Stop it now, You'll have me peeing myself again just to add to it all!

TITUS enters.

TITUS: I can deal with anything you can throw at me!

REMBRANDT: Careful young man – that may well happen and if it does you will not be covered in glory.

TITUS: You are so crude Dad. It's always so embarrassing.

REMBRANDT: That's wonderful – coming from you – the most foul-mouthed youth in the district. Or has your bride-to-be tidied up your language? Or maybe the moneyed in-laws-to-be eh!

TITUS: Maybe it's dealing with your posh clients for you. Hendrickje – don't you think he's got off lightly in all this. He sits back and gets on with his image making and we scabble about for customers and do all the paper work.

HENDRICKJE: Don't start you two. I am not at all well and you going on in front of me is not doing any good. It may not be what any of us have wanted but it hasn't worked out too badly. Could have been a lot worse. You may have forgotten but I need cleaning up.

REMBRANDT: O my word – yes dear. So sorry. Get carried away. Let me.

REMBRANDT goes around the bed and lifts the blankets, moves HENDRICKE so that he can clean her. TITUS holds her steady. At the end of this REMBRANDT pretends to do a magic trick by whipping the sheet from under her and waving it in the air in triumph – it is stained. HENDRICKJE is jolted by this and groans. But also laughs weakly.

HENDRICKJE: Thank you my love.

TITUS: Careful Dad! – you are a maniac. Stop fooling around all the time. Always showing off. He is a ignorant pig isn't he Hendrickje? I've never known what you see in him.

HENDRICKJE: He's a good man. A pain in the arse of course - but then so are you. Let me rest now - or tell me some gossip.

REMBRANDT: I can tell you what I did this afternoon. It won't cheer you up but it's an interesting story.

TITUS: You've been to the pub? That's not news.

HENDRICKJE: Stop it. Go on love. Don't mind him..

REMBRANDT: Listen well young Titus. It's a warning to keep your temper.

TITUS grins and they settle down for the story.

Its about a very young woman – 18 years old. Elsje Christiaens. Danish. Came here to get her share of the boom. Amsterdam. Streets paved with gold. Only she found it was water instead. She arrived without much money and took a room while she looked for work as a maid. Ran out of money. No job found. Landlady banging on about paying the rent. Gets worse. Arguments. Landlady threatening to take what possessions she had. Gets even worse. A day or so later – another row and the landlady starts beating Elsje with a broom. Elsje can't take it any more. Grabs an axe which was lying about and wallops the landlady. Landlady falls bang down the steps into the cellar. Dead. Neighbours rush in to see what's the noise. Elsje panics and rushes out and throws herself in the canal. Doesn't work. People drag her out and hand her over to the magistrates. No messing about. Condemned to death. No delay - our dear executioner strangles her to death in Dam Square in front of the Town Hall. Just this morning. They took her body over the river to the Volewijk and hung her up with all the other corpses. So - all done and dusted.

HENDRICKJE: What a horrible, horrible thing. But what is this to do with what you did today?

REMBRANDT: I heard about it at the market and I thought I would go and pay little Elsjé a visit. I took the boat across with Anthonie and we had a walk around. Bodies all over the place. And there she was - with her axe hanging by her side. I did a couple of drawings of her. Here (*brings out pad and shows it round*). Anthonie did a drawing of the whole scene. It's a thing to see. And to smell. But I couldn't stop thinking of her at the moment she crossed the street from the house to the canal bank. What was it like? How terrible for her. How terrible. Those tiny moments.

TITUS: What are you going to do? Put her in a picture?

REMBRANDT: How would you see her? Which part does she play? She's no Delilah. Or Lucretia. Best let her go I think. She's gone. Or she will be when the birds finish with her.

HENDRICKJE: She's here in your drawings. She looks so young!

TITUS: (*looking over her shoulder*) Perhaps a 'Descent from the Cross' or even a 'Crucifixion'? She has the look of a Christ. Sleeping. Dead. Just use the head. I can see it if you can't.

REMBRANDT: You may be right. I'll think about it. But in this case it seems a crude thing to do.

TITUS: O come off it. You've spent your life stealing stuff like this. We had plenty of beggars in here, sitting around, stinking, having a glass of beer and the next thing you know they've popped as St. Bartholomew or Sampson.

HENDRICKJE: (*weaker*) Stop it now - you cannot leave off can you Titus. The bickering just wears me out. We know what he does. And we know the results. And we sell them. And we make a living from them. And they are lovely - most of them. I do love them. And he has used me countless times and - sometimes - I don't know - I am full of wonder. He doesn't do me any favours mind. Do you? (*She looks affectionately towards Rembrandt*). But I am what I am and that seems enough.

REMBRANDT: Yes.

HENDRICKJE: (*She is becoming slightly distant and dreamy*) Before I came here I got on alright doing this and that. Thinking this and that. But since being with you I have come to see something of - what - a sort magical thing - just getting about. I don't know how to say it. But something like that. And everything is so full of life. It's living with you - and the pictures - that's done it. I can't explain it but I feel better somehow. Even a better person. Calmer. So I feel as though I can take anything, Even now and this bloody illness of mine.

(She takes Rembrandt's hand and they look affectionately at one another)

So we do have work to do Titus – and *(to Rembrandt)* you have work to do my dear. It goes on. I will go away now. I am going to have my rest.

(She draws the bed curtain as the light fades on their scene and comes up on Spinoza)

SCENE 111

SPINOZA: No. Not lonely. I like this freedom. It may look like a prison cell but I am freer in it than anyone walking about town or country here.

REMBRANDT AND TITUS: *(Off stage)* Hendrickje - Hendrickje.

SPINOZA: So for me - for me - it's the only possible world. Not the best possible world. Not in your terms.

(Light comes up on Leibniz, where Huygens was sitting previously. Leibniz is foppish but not so much as to be comic. He is vain and self regarding. He has a different arrogance to Spinoza. He believes, no matter what inner doubts he has, he should be recognised as right. He starts tetchy and gets angrier. Spinoza knows without question that he, Spinoza, is right. He remains calm.)

LEIBNIZ: We are so close to agreeing in our ideas on the nature of God and his world but somehow you always slip through my fingers. Surely God is perfect? And surely if God is perfect then his creation must be perfect and therefore make this the best creation possible?

SPINOZA: Everything in the universe is of one substance and all of that *is* God – not *of* God. Is God.. The smallest part of the stuff of the material world is God. We cannot understand the full extent of it all. God is beyond our understanding. But by studying the material world we may come to a closer knowledge of his nature. I mean studying with scientific methods the whole of creation that we can see. You are a scientist Leibniz - you know how that works.

LEIBNIZ: NO Spinoza! God can not be everything everywhere. There is an obvious hierarchy - an order and we have our place in it. And God must have choice - which he doesn't seem to have in your system - he must have chosen his creation and it has to be his highest thought, his greatest imagining - and it is here and now!

SPINOZA: Ah! So you are getting close to me now!

LEIBNIZ: We are the beneficiaries of his love and this has placed us in his best of all possible worlds. Your image cannot hold. If you were to be right you end up with the impossible, blasphemous idea that we are actually part of God's substance!

SPINOZA: That is correct.

LEIBNIZ: (*fuming*) Spinoza, you must realise what this thought leads to. You can't seriously mean it. You must not be able to see the outcome of it all or you would not pursue this line of thought. What you are pronouncing is nothing less than the death of God!

SPINOZA: No - it is not that - no - not that. You haven't grasped it. It means the recognition of the union of man with God.

(*Leibniz stands twitching with anger but says nothing*)

But for you the implications of this are worse than you think. In God's universe there can be no sin. There can be no good and evil. These are human constructions. All actions, all motivations are of God and are beyond these local definitions. We have no unique volition, as in God all is determined. There is no difference between body and mind. It is all of one substance and that is of God. So whether you believe this is the best possible world makes no difference. And looking around - using these entirely human terms - one could hardly praise it as the best possible world. It is easy to imagine something better, even for you. But when you start to see that all is the same material and all is God, then a great weight is lifted from you.

LEIBNIZ: Oh yes! And then how could society possibly work if we made no judgements? What would the law be based on? Without MY God there would be complete anarchy.

SPINOZA: So it seems to me you need to invent your God of the best of all possible worlds out of necessity. To create civil order. And where does the truth lie in that? Surely it's you and your ordered society that will get lost as it will be based on a lie. And anyone can lie for whatever ends they think fit. And those in power can lie with enormous effect. They can sustain whatever power they might require by continuing and strengthening their lies. And if they say they hold the keys to the truth then there is only one result and that is oppression both physical and psychological. And because other states - other religions - hold other lies there are inevitably clashes - not of perceived truths, but of opposing lies. The ultimate expression of this is war. This is they way we live now.

LEIBNIZ: (*with some contempt*) To me Spinoza - me, a man who has been about in the world somewhat, that sounds incredibly simplistic. Surely you can't believe life is so easily described?

SPINOZA: Not simplistic. Simple. And being simple doesn't make it any less true.

LEIBNIZ: But you still haven't described to me what would happen in real life under your system? How would it work?

SPINOZA: It doesn't. It can't. I have described an ideal. If people could control their passions, if they could turn their attention from themselves to the study of God in his world - then it would definitely work. But they can't and it won't.

LEIBNIZ: So where does that leave us all?

SPINOZA: Under the law. We must have a central government which passes laws which restrict the human propensity to follow their passions. So those in authority - kings or stadholders - must be obeyed.

LEIBNIZ: But isn't that oppression? The very thing you want to avoid?

SPINOZA: O yes - but it is unavoidable. The one thing that alleviates that position to some extent is that they must be put in place democratically. But, in any case, it still remains possible for anyone to approach a knowledge of God - and that is the most noble and true path to contentment possible in our lives. You see, I am both an idealist and a realist rolled into one. I recognise in myself that the stronger passions cannot be denied. Passions make us passive - at their mercy. I have one myself, which is shameful. Here - let me show you.

SPINOZA opens a draw and takes out a pipe and tobacco. He starts to slowly fill the pipe.

LEIBNIZ: Is that it? Is this your appalling vice? The source of your shame? You have led a sheltered life. Do you think a law against tobacco would be necessary? There would be riots! And any authority would be toppled! I think you ought to be careful about how much oppression you allow your rulers.

SPINOZA: *(He lights that pipe)* Yes - you are right. But this is in reality not a passion. It's a pleasure, consciously sought out. And pleasure is good for people. But how to sort out the problem of power? I don't know yet. I'll work on it.

In Holland of course the priests of your God hold very little power even with their agility with very big lies. It's the traders who now tell the more powerful lies. Their big lie is that their trading is good for all. They first tell everyone that what they need is an excess of money. That it will make them happy. They then say that if some become very rich everyone will become rich. Both of these statements are lies. In the first place they fail to recognise that having an excess of money will not lead to happiness. This is a lie they have come to believe in themselves. The second is false in that in their preferred system of gaining money, competition, it is inevitable that eventually the traders will become richer and the rest, those working for them, will become poorer. In competition there must always be winners - and losers. The rich will become more powerful and the poor less powerful. So it will always collapse into an oligarchy. It is so blindingly obvious that it still astonishes me that the majority of people believe these lies and join in this mad game, scrabbling around all their lives for more money than they need, most of them

never to achieve it. And as is true of other lies of those in power, but especially this one, their ultimate and unavoidable expression is in war.

A lot of noise from a party off stage. It is Titus's wedding party. Dance music and shouting. Goes on only softer for the rest of the scene. Spinoza and Leibniz have heard nothing.

SPINOZA: It is in a sense a matter of both state, and self, control.

SCENE VI

Light begins to fade on SPINOZA and LEIBNITZ. At the same time light up on TITUS and REMBRANDT, who stagger on with their arms around each other. They are carrying glasses/bottles of booze. They are both drunk.

TITUS: Come along old man – we'll leave them to it. On my wedding day I can do what the fuck I like. You have drunk of the waters of life and look at the state of you. I don't know...

REMBRANDT: You don't know what?

TITUS: I don't know - I forgotten.

REMBRANDT: Never mind that. I am not the only one in a state. We both are. State of Holland. In other words, a right pickle.

TITUS: Cheers – o master of art!

REMBRANDT: Given the pickles I am now a master of fart.

(Throughout all this they are giggling and laughing)

TITUS: *(Pointing at REMBRANDT)* Wind bag. Listen. What d'you think? What about a lovely, lovely wedding portrait – double. Me and Magdalena. Wedding present. Wouldn't take you long. Just a quick one. Speaking of quick ones, don't you think my wife – s'funny that – my wife – my wife is the most beautiful woman in the world?

REMBRANDT: O yes. Pity about the name.

TITUS: What - Magdalena?

REMBRANDT: No, no - the other bit. The van Loo bit. Magdalena van Loo.

REMBRANDT looks steadily at TITUS with a straight face. Slight pause. Then cracks up.

TITUS: O no - not the Loo jokes. Dad - you've done them. All of them. Not funny any more. 'Don't touch her - she's a Loo's woman' Hah! yeah, yeah! Not the ones you were thinking of.

REMBRANDT: Wonderful figure your Magdalena. Very - full. Too much sausage I should say my dear boy. No, no - you shall have your portraits. Free, gratis and the rest. You will both look pissed off and shagged out - utterly true to life as only I can do it.

TITUS: And you will look fat and old and dying. And completely fucked off. And it will make me cry - laughing. Fat old master of fart.

REMBRANDT: And you will look bloody stupid and thin and ill and your Mogdeblona will look stuffed and I will look - I will look magnificent.

TITUS: Hang on. How come you're in it? What the fuck are you doing in our wedding thing? Clear off out of it!

REMBRANDT: All right then - I'll leave you to it. I'll just sit here and be fat and magnificent and - I miss Hendrickje.

They settle down - as and when perhaps on the floor. They become maudlin.

TITUS: Yes - I know.

REMBRANDT: Do you think she's somewhere else?

TITUS: No.

REMBRANDT: Neither do I.

TITUS: Neither do I.

REMBRANDT: Good job I've got the pictures. I would have forgotten what she looked like you know. I'm sure I would. Terrible memory for faces. But I can smell her all round the place. Good smell. Makes the place comfortable. And her bum.

TITUS: You can smell her bum! O Christ!

REMBRANDT: No - no - feel it in my hands. One of the great glories of life the feel of her bum. Better than food - or this (*waves glass*). Once you'd felt that you'd have had all there is on offer.

TITUS: There are other bums. (*giggles*)

REMBRANDT: True lad, true. And her kindness and cleverness and strengthness. More than me. I was no match. Never find another. Bit late for me. But maybe not. Who can

tell. Better not. Shared my life space with three women. Two dead. One in a nuthouse. Not good. I don't know. It's all a mystery.

TITUS: Do you think I will be as bad a father as you? You were awful. Neglect is the word. You always had a look in your eye – sort of drifting off. As if there was something over my shoulder. Something else in the room, even when you were talking to me. Bastard (*smiles at him*).

REMBRANDT: Well you made it this far. I wasn't death dealing was I? Here we are. Alive and kicking. But you may be right. It always comes back to the pictures. And the things in them. (*he actually starts drifting and looking into the distance*). Gotta concentrate. Keep looking. Telling the truth. But then you end up seeing things you shouldn't. (*pause*) Bloody job! Can't stop you know. Giving you a decent living – well – half decent – flogging them.

TITUS: Well, I now get more for Flick's old stuff than I do for yours. Think on that – an ex-student of yours. People think his stuff in your style is better than yours. Hardly credible but that's the business.

REMBRANDT registers resignation then continues staring into space.

I'd better get back. I'm the host – the bread and the wine – I've got a lot of converts in there and it's costing me a fucking fortune.

SCENE V

TITUS struggles upright and walks unsteadily towards the dark back stage and disappears leaving Rembrandt alone. The light comes up on Spinoza stage left and LEIBNITZ stage right. The party noise fades.

SPINOZA: You can't escape it Leibniz. My God. You cannot avoid my vision - no matter how you struggle to keep yours floating aloft. He will come down to meet you - even as you walk out of this door.

LEIBNIZ: I will not believe it. I will not! (*he edges towards the door*)

SPINOZA: But there is something else. My looking at Gods world. Looking at the ramshackle world around me and at the infinitely small and the infinitely vast (*indicates the telescopes*). It is leading me to something else. But it's too difficult to say what. Too vague, too undecided. I will carry on with it.

But I am full of fear.

He looks across at REMBRANDT - who stares back at him. LEIBNITZ stands, looks at the two other men with great agitation, and then leaves hurriedly stage left (slamming another door?). Lights go down on REMBRANDT and SPINOZA to black.

ACT 111

Spotlight reveals REMBRANDT at desk, where he is finishing writing a letter. He picks it up and reads it back to himself.

REMBRANDT: ‘Most Esteemed Signor’ – no, bugger him (*crosses it out*), ‘Dear Signor Ruffo’, - no - better not - er - Your Lordship, I am most astonished by what has been written about my painting ‘Alexander’, which you commissioned and which is so well done that I must suppose there are not many lovers of art in Messina. I am also surprised that Your Lordship should complain as much about the price as about the state of the canvas, but if your Lordship wishes to return it as he did the sketch of Homer, I will do another Alexander. As for the canvas, I did not have enough of it while I was painting - *will he buy this crap?* - and so needed to lengthen it, but - *can I really get away with this?* - but if it is hung well in daylight, one will not notice anything. *O Christ!* (*laughs*).

If Your Lordship likes the Alexander as is, very well. If he does not want to keep it, six hundred florins remain outstanding. And for the Homer five hundred florins plus the expense of canvas, it being understood that everything is at Your Lordship’s expense. Having agreed to it, would he kindly send me his desired measurements. Awaiting the response to settle the matter,

Yours grovellingly, sycophantingly, your sodding very humble, lickspittal slave, servant, arse-licker Rembrandt van Rijn.

(to himself) Or something like that. I don’t care anymore. Just send the bloody money and I’ll send a bloody picture. Then you and all your friends can make bloody noises in front of it before dinner. That’s it. That’s all it is. Now if they were to put my pictures in some kind of chapel and come and pray in front of them – then – maybe – that might work. But what is the point.

The door opens and TITUS enters wrapped in a blanket. He is weak and looks very ill. Moves slowly. Cough badly at times.

REMBRANDT: Ah Titus my boy. I’ve just written a begging letter in the guise of an insult to Ruffio in Italy. He will take it as a compliment in a roundabout arse-upwards way. And he will send the money. Come and sit down. Not too good eh?

TITUS: No. Not good. No pain today but I’m seeing things through a mist. A veil. And this fucking cough is driving me nuts. (*He sits down near to Rembrandt*).

REMBRANDT: It’ll be OK. Stick with it. You’ll get through it my boy.

TITUS: You say. (*Looks at Rembrandt for a few seconds*) You know as well as I do. I’ve hardly been here and now I’m off. What can I say – the usual (*silly voice*) ‘O it’s so fucking unfair’ and ‘Why me?’. But it’s all over the place. Death. Not even a plague this year but still they go. Every street someone disappears. Me just another one.

REMBRANDT: Don't tire yourself with talking. Sit here and I'll get you a drink.

TITUS: Make it a large one. Doesn't matter now.

Rembrandt gets a glass of wine/spirits. Gives it to Titus.

TITUS: Ta. You don't believe in anything do you?

REMBRANDT: I don't know what that means. I know we know nothing. It's a mystery – all of it. I believe that I suppose. If you accept that then all is possible – up to a point.

To black immediately

Lights up to SPINOZA'S room again. More or less the same as Act II but with four chairs. Drinks and glasses and the remains of a simple meal on the table. To one side is a window. SPINOZA sits with his landlords DANIEL and MARGARITA TYMANS finishing the meal.

DANIEL: (*wiping his mouth*) So – Baruch. You actually eat food. And drink, even if only this pissy beer. Amazing. And there was I thinking you were a creature from another world that didn't need to bother with such tedious things. And to be invited into your own holy cell to witness and share these wonders - it's a revelation.

SPINOZA: You are good people and you have been excellent landlords and good friends. I wanted to make a small gesture.

MARGARITA: We are very pleased to have you here. And I am very pleased that we managed to stop you from taking that ridiculous banner out of the house. The mob killed the De Witts for being decent people and there is no doubt that, had you gone out with that piece of nonsense, they would have killed you - for the same reason.

SPINOZA: And what difference would that have made?

MARGARITA: None for your cause so a waste of time and blood - but more important we would have lost a good tenant - and we need the money.

DANIEL: Mind you, I would have thought, given your erudition Baruch, that you could have come up with something a little more impressive than 'You are the worst of barbarians'. I mean, doesn't do much does it? Like looking at a rabid dog and saying – 'there's a good boy now – don't be naughty'.

SPINOZA: Well, the moment has passed.

DANIEL: You used your reason thank heavens.

SPINOZA: My old Rabbi used to tell me to use my reason. What people usually mean when they say that, is 'use my reason'. It's extraordinary how much trouble one can make just by sitting still.

DANIEL: If you call publishing the most inflammatory book ever published in the history of this country just sitting still then it's as well you didn't rise from your chair! Who knows what riots you would have started then! They would even now, if they could, burn your book and put you on top of the bonfire.

SPINOZA: I don't know about that. but there is a madness in the world. If my book had not inflamed people then something else just as innocent would have done. Some passion, induced or real, would have been found to allow the violence to continue. To fill the ever present vacuum.

MARGARITA: What was done to the De Witts was what we have seen happen over and over again in the same pattern. Good democrats. They were without guile. Straight. Wanted good governance for all. Like you, they didn't want either the church or royalty poking their noses into power. Didn't grovel to anyone. Treated everyone with respect. They argued their case with one and all with no hidden agendas. What you saw was what you got. And in the main people can't bear characters like that. I warrant if Christ himself appeared on the streets of The Hague they would string him up without blinking an eyelid.

SPINOZA: I think that is true. The sudden appearance of honest people in the midst of cheats and liars rather throws into some contrast the faults of the establishment. It's as if a utterly perfect glass mirror had been held up to them so that they may see every wrinkle, and every vice. Perhaps one of my glasses!

MARGARITA: I think, Baruch, that you are the perfect glass mirror now. Or your book is. You must watch your step. Mirrors can be easily broken.

DANIEL: You can also use the other kind of mirror, of course. Show me your latest work Baruch. You have the portfolio there I can see.

SPINOZA: I hoped you wouldn't ask. It's so embarrassing Daniel. You are a professional artist. I am a scribbler. But maybe you can give me some more advice. I keep making people look younger than they are - or more classical. Why do you think that is?

(Spinoza moves to a side table and brings across a portfolio. He opens it and brings out some drawings, Both Daniel and Margarita get up and look over his shoulder).

MARGARITA: *(she picks up a sheet)* Your latest? O I see. Well I think you have improved a lot. Eh Daniel?

DANIEL: Well – yes – up to a point. I see what you mean about them all looking a bit perfectly formed. I am surprised really. To my mind it means you are not looking at your

subject. You are drawing from some expectation of what it should look like and forgetting to look – *look* – at the subject. Allow yourself to disappear. I am surprised because you, to my mind, are an honest observer of life. Someone who stares – quite mercilessly.

SPINOZA: Yes – you are right. But I am beginning to see how it is with this looking. When I ‘observe’ as you say, it’s not personal. I take a distant view. But when I have someone sitting in front of me and I stare at them, something starts to happen which puts me off. They or I start to change in some way. It worries me. A mystery.

MARGARITA: Change?

SPINOZA: They seem to become misty or even start to disappear. Or rather their personality does. Their character But I can’t say. It is a very strange effect. Have you ever found that Daniel?

DANIEL: No - I don’t think so. Perhaps *I* don’t look hard enough! But even so it seems you give up looking at some point and your imagination takes over. It’s all there in front of you. You have to override what your brain is trying to make you do. Give yourself up to the object – or the person. You will see a difference in the result I guarantee. You have all the other skills.

SPINOZA: Very well - I will keep trying - or keep looking. Let’s put these away - they are beginning to worry me. I have a feeling that one should not lift the veil covering this. But science demands it.

(Fade to black. While dark DANIEL’S voice is heard)

DANIEL: Baruch! Baruch! You have yet another visitor.

(Lights up on SPINOZA writing at his desk among the telescopes and microscopes Throughout this scene to the end the room grows darker as it becomes evening. However, the light outside the window becomes slowly more glowing. From casting a slight blue light on the floor it grows to a golden light which floods the room. This change must be very subtle so that the audience is hardly aware of it.)

SPINOZA: Who is it this time?

DANIEL: He won’t say. He says he would like to surprise you. Shall I send him up?

SPINOZA: Why not? Send up the mystery man Daniel.

(There is a sound of someone heavy shuffling up the stairs then a knock on the door.)

SPINOZA: Come in sir – and welcome.

(The door opens and a shambling, dishevelled, rather plump man ambles in. He has the puffy face of someone ill. He closes the door behind him and stands and looks hard at SPINOZA. He begins to smile which develops into a broad grin and then he cracks into laughter)

SPINOZA: Rembrandt!

REMBRANDT: Yes

SPINOZA: My dear man! I didn't recognise you! My apologies. Come in. Come in and sit down. Let me get you something to eat? To drink? Wine? Beer?

(Spinoza fusses about pulling up another chair to the desk, shaking Rembrandt by the hand etc. Rembrandt stands there beaming)

REMBRANDT: Go on them. Bring some wine – I presume you have something drinkable?

SPINOZA: I usually just have some beer – but wine is good.

(He opens the door and shouts down the stairs)

Daniel – bring some wine please - something reasonable – I have a special guest.

(He turns to Rembrandt.)

Rembrandt! It's been such a long time. What on earth are you doing here?

REMBRANDT: Well – I have been visiting my family in Leiden.

He sits down. At this point DANIEL arrives with a tray of wine and glasses.

SPINOZA: Thank you Daniel. Daniel let me introduce an old friend from Amsterdam. Daniel - my landlord - meet Rembrandt.

(Rembrandt turns and offers his hand. Daniel stands struck dumb and doesn't take it for a moment)

DANIEL: Rembrandt? Rembrandt van Rijn? The painter?

REMBRANDT: Yes. I am Rembrandt van Rijn the painter.

(Daniel takes his hand with enormous reverence and keeps hold of it longer than is necessary)

SPINOZA: You must forgive Daniel Rembrandt. You see he is a colleague of yours. Daniel is also a painter.

DANIEL: O no! No – in this company I am no painter. I make marks on canvases and boards and if I'm lucky I make a few guilders. But really, Baruch – if you were to meet Socrates would you call yourself a philosopher? - O - well - yes - perhaps you would. But in this case - no - I am no painter.

REMBRANDT: Come now sir. We all do our best. I don't know your work so I can't comment. Perhaps you might let me . . .

DANIEL: (*panicking*) No, no - I don't think so. Not today. Perhaps you would tell me about your new work. I have heard nothing of you for some years now?

SPINOZA: I think we should leave the professional talk for later. There is time enough. Now I need to hear Rembrandt's news. Will you stay Daniel?

DANIEL: I think not. Very kind of course but I have other work - not painting! - to do. I'll leave you. Great honour sir (*to Rembrandt*). Great honour.

(*Daniel leaves closing the door. Spinoza pours two glasses and they settle down at either side of the desk. Rembrandt takes a swig. Spinoza fiddles with his glass*)

SPINOZA: I ask again Rembrandt what are you doing here and how did you find me?

REMBRANDT: As I began to say, I was visiting what's left of my family. The bastards all seem to be doing rather well with the mill. They weren't particularly pleased to see me. I believe they had the idea I was on the cadge. Which was of course true. No, it was all a bit embarrassing. I was about to leave for home when my brother, out of the blue, told me that there was a famous philosopher living not too far away in Voorburg who attracted kings and princes to his vast treasure-laden mansion and entertained the great and not so good from all over the world. He said he thought that this man was a Jew from Amsterdam 'like them you used to live with', he said. Well, it could only have been you. I couldn't resist the detour and here I am at your vast treasure laden mansion (*looking around*) Of course it makes me one of the great and not so good.

SPINOZA: Well, I am so delighted to see you Rembrandt. I can't say you look in fine, athletic trim. Are you ill?

REMBRANDT: Not really. I'm too fat and I'm sure the pigments do me no good at all. But there you are. I just carry on.

SPINOZA: Carry on what exactly?

REMBRANDT: Same thing. I'm painting everyday. Some things you might like. I have a large 'Prodigal Son' on the go at the moment.

SPINOZA: Who is it for?

REMBRANDT: This one? This one is for me.

SPINOZA: So you have managed to carry on in spite of that disastrous week - for both of us - when we last met?’

REMBRANDT: Oh yes. It was quite remarkable. Hendrikje and Titus formed a trading company and they commissioned paintings from me and they sold them. I could actually relax. And the commissions, though not quite so many, have continued to drift in.

SPINOZA: How are they? Hendrikje - and Titus - a man now I suppose.

REMBRANDT: Hendrikje is dead. Titus was married in February this year. Titus is dead. He died two months ago leaving the wife and a child.

SPINOZA: My God, Rembrandt! How awful! When did Hendrikje die? How? What happened?

REMBRANDT: It doesn't matter now.

SPINOZA: It doesn't matter! What do you mean – ‘doesn't matter’? But Titus too?

REMBRANDT: Leave it. It's past, gone, and all the bloody misery of it is mine, no-one else's. Just let it go. I really don't want to talk about it. I came here to get away from all that family, life, birth, death and marriage stuff. I've had quite enough of it all to last my life out – which I admit might not be very long. Tell me about yourself. That's what I came for. Since that memorable few days in '56 – for both of us as you say – you seem to have become a distinguished man – although these surroundings wouldn't say so.

SPINOZA: Well – if that's how you want it, we'll let it be. But I would be only too glad to listen. You must tell me at some other time how it went. It does sound utterly dreadful.

But it seems not now.

REMBRANDT: I can say that in a back-arse way my business collapsing was a wonderful escape. I had in fact become a free, unobliged man – except to the family of course.

(There is a pause. Rembrandt drinks. Spinoza stares at him Rembrandt suddenly becomes animated)

O come on Baruch. I want to hear your news not dwell on my past. Distract me as you used to. Get talking.

Spinoza sits back and relaxes a little

SPINOZA: I must say Rembrandt, it seems now remarkably fortuitous that you have arrived. I have had things on my mind that, now I come to think of it, perhaps only you, of all people, could take in. Maybe understand. Why did it never occur to me before? Yes – I am sure of it. I have at times talked to you in my head. And now here you are in front of me.

(he becomes more intense).

What you said just now made me think of my own situation. How strange that my rather dramatic excommunication had also set me free. Same week as you. And taking up this occupation with these lenses freed me from obligation. But then we went our own ways. Took different paths.

They look at each other.

Do you mind if I go on?

REMBRANDT: Please go on. You have me in your grasp.

SPINOZA: Let me go back a bit. I do have some notoriety – or fame – you might call it. I eventually published my book on politics and philosophy. The predicted storm followed. Even death threats at some point. There have even been demonstrations outside this house. You remember what it was all about, I think. No need to go into it further. The orthodox establishments in both religion and politics were shocked, as they often are, by a new thought. Even a thought that, if followed through, would make them happier human beings.

REMBRANDT: Was that the intention? To make them happier.

SPINOZA: O yes – why else would one follow these things through?

REMBRANDT: I thought you said it was all pure thought, not to do with the experience of life.

SPINOZA: Maybe that initial pure thought was an experience or an act in itself, worthy of even your attention. And maybe that pure thought led me to look at the world more intensely. You remember me saying that the only way to approach God was to look at his works? Well, astonishingly I discovered that I was telling the truth. It became so obvious that the close examination of the material world I was advocating was an equivalent, not the same, to what others were calling religious practise. Perhaps - art, perhaps painting. So much so that I started using the term God/Nature. It all seemed one to me.

(Pause. Spinoza gets up and walks about)

And it is rather fine, don't you think, that with this idea of looking with deep attention at the matter of the world I should now pre-occupy myself with these optical instruments. Strange amalgamations of materials - glass and metal - which allow us to see what we cannot normally see, and to give that part of the material world as much attention as we do to our shoes and socks.

REMBRANDT: So you came round to the practice of actually looking at the world through developing an abstract notion?

SPINOZA: Yes, you could put it like that. And what an adventure it has turned out to be, Rembrandt. When one looks at the world with such intense curiosity and with the knowledge that one is looking God - or God/Nature - straight into his multiple faces, everything in existence becomes of enormous interest. You begin to see that everything is of the same substance. One thing. One thing continually transforming itself.

(He looks intently at Rembrandt)

But you know this don't you? Your work, such as I have seen, tells me, with every image, that you have taken this way too.

REMBRANDT: O yes, I did – it started many years ago for me. And through all that, I know there is more to it. I wonder, looking at you and hearing your enthusiasm for this 'adventure', I wonder if you have taken the further step?

Spinoza becomes still. He looks at Rembrandt in silence. His expression slowly shifts from one of puzzlement, through apprehension and then of enlightenment. And behind this Rembrandt senses a kind of fathomless sadness, almost despair.

Then you know what I am talking about – the further step?

SPINOZA: O yes, I think so. The further step. Of course, as I presume was your 'further step', as mine, made up of a thousand smaller steps over the years, but I got there in the end. It has been a very long journey that has brought me to this end.

REMBRANDT: And where is that?

SPINOZA: Here, Rembrandt. Not *here (indicates the room)* – here! Me. Or rather not me. Sorry, sorry. I should not be ambiguous. But I suppose ambiguity is at the heart of it.

(He withdraws into himself and begins to stare at his glass of wine. When he begins speaking it is with a tight intensity, but his voice remains calm and low. Through all the following the set becomes very gradually darker)

It's the looking. My idea that studying the matter of the world would bring us to a closer understanding of God – or God/Nature – or, damn it, Nature! I started in a most scientific way, looking through my lenses at both the closest and tiniest of things and at the most

vast and most distant. But this habit of intense regard began to spill over into other parts of my life. Whenever I walked out, I began to look at the whole scene that I was walking through - the details and the whole scene. All of it, both as it seemed motionless and as it moved through time. A world that included everything - stones, worms, lightning. And – you know this don't you? - after a while, I began to see the underlying truth that it is all the same - the same matter. I could look at the trees and the buildings and the people and they became fluctuations of matter. At first I thought this quite wonderful and I experimented, pushing it further, seeing how distant I could become, not only from emotional attachments - the physical world - but also from the words, the chatter - the adjectives. I was fantastically excited and pushed on, gradually cutting away my, what I might call, perceptual ties with the world. But what was I left with? Where had these last steps taken me?

(Rembrandt gestures a sort of 'well?')

Well, I saw the truth of it all. Undeniable. The utter indifference of nature to all that. To us. To everything that happens. All those differentiations we make. All our judgements and categorisings. The torture. The bliss. It all became a faceless, seething mass of - stuff. With no intention and having no relation to what I had come to think of as me. All meaning dropping away. And in the end, even that construction - the 'me' - began to oscillate, become more and more insubstantial and fade. All the constructed theatre of our lives - not just mine - had collapsed onto what it must of course be - a vapour swirling into forms, constantly changing, as one sees in the dances of stars and planets. I seem to have reached a place beyond reaction, beyond beauty, beyond terror. Perhaps I'd taken a step far too far. I'd reached the very edge of an abyss. I was staring out into a void and about to step out into it. Is this the further step you meant? Don't answer.

I'm sorry – I haven't said this to anyone before. I'm sorry to go on so. But I need to. To you. Not much more. Listen.

There is a profound enigma at the heart of this, Rembrandt. Even at the moment of dissolution there was a remnant of a self which was observing it all and, in some inscrutable way, making judgements, or at the very least reacting. Now who, what and where was this? Perhaps at the end of the vast hall of mirrors which seems to be the way our minds are constructed, there was still a glimmer of a reflection, desperate to be - something. But there was no answer. It was part of the mystery.

REMBRANDT: And so? What did you do? How have you managed to keep going?

SPINOZA: It changed everything. My complete view of existence, formulated over years, dealing with minutiae of human life, had disappeared in a manner beyond anything I could have imagined. But how could I write that? How could I tell *this* truth to people, people who were actually looking for more solidity, stronger identity. What I had now to say was the opposite of that. How could I possibly tell them about the faceless indifference of their God/Nature. And how could I report my knowledge that me and my fellow creatures are simply wraiths of vapour, desperately trying to construct some sense

of solid belief in their own existence - and being in some hidden place terrified of failure. I remember saying that one could not possibly avoid telling a truth if it became so defined as to be unavoidable. But I couldn't do this. What was the point? Would it make people happier? I think not.

I had to continue with my writing, people were expecting it. At the end found myself fudging, proposing some kind of egalitarian utopia. Very radical in its way and, if taken up, would have formed a more just and happier place. Well - it seemed actually achievable. But it wasn't the whole truth. How could I tell the truth? This truth?

REMBRANDT: And what happened, in all this, to dear old God - your God/Nature?

SPINOZA: He didn't seem to matter any more. Using the word God just seemed a matter of naming and when one came to see a void there was no need of the name.. God - nature - nothing. Same thing.

(Spinoza looks up from glass into Rembrandt's eyes. Rembrandt had shifted in his chair. Through all this he had been refilling his glass from time to time while listening in a sort of detached manner, which Spinoza has now noticed)

You have of course been to that same edge?

REMBRANDT: Perhaps. It seems that we have, by very different roads, reached the same place. But I have a question – or an observation.”

SPINOZA: Say.

REMBRANDT: *(He leans back in his chair)* Maybe the place you have come to is not the end of the journey. In this dissolution of attachment, feeling - recognition - you failed to mention another experience which in my way seemed unavoidable. Not desired. A kind of natural progression. It just happened as a result of this, what? - letting go. It was the emergence of another kind of - feeling - I suppose I have to call it. You see how we both stumble. The language we have isn't adequate. It's this. Somewhere in this mess I felt sorry for it all. The whole thing, not just the people. The grass. The dog's shit. Chairs. Like you, I had no idea where or how this was occurring. If I had in one sense disappeared and the world with me, how could I observe it. It remains a mystery. But more than that - how did I feel sorry for it - what with? Some people would call it compassion. *(Rembrandt shifts in his chair)*

Of course it may have gone the other way. I might have reached the complete void and felt nothing, with the illusion of self dribbling away down a non-existent drain hole. And then what? Complete dissolution? The end of everything? No doubt some have gone through that door, stood in front of the last mirror – which then shatters into nothing. They may then bring the curtain down on their own particular play with great relief. It may be that I am simply a lucky bastard who took another door. Lucky? Not sure about that. Maybe just wanting a further act in my particular production. Out of curiosity.

Perhaps not. It's hard to tell. And I think that you are, at this very moment, standing in front of those doors now. In front of the choice.

(They look at each other. Rembrandt breaks the block)

For myself I felt that all one could do, before the inevitable, would be to express some pathetic kindness. Or rather, without my willing it this feeling, or need to act, emerged. It's ridiculous isn't it, in the face of a cataclysmic realisation of this numbing truth of how we are, how things are? To say 'there, there' to it, all the while patting it on the back - so to speak?

(silence)

SPINOZA: Yes.

(They stay silent.)

(Silence. It is late in the afternoon and the room continues to become darker while the window throws golden light throughout the space. Rembrandt stands up).

REMBRANDT: Bugger this! I came by just to see how you were getting on and I find myself at the end of experience, the far side of knowledge and perception. Thank God - or Nature - for the wine. *(Rembrandt empties his glass in one go and puts it back on the table)*. I'd better get going, I've got work to do.

SPINOZA: But Rembrandt - who will comfort us?

(Spinoza stands and they approach each other. The room is now full of golden light from the window. Rembrandt folds his arms around Spinoza and they stand there in silence, gently swaying, Spinoza's back is to the audience. Rembrandt's hand begins to delicately pat Spinoza's back. The light finally fades through gold to red to black).

Curtain.