

# Layli, Majnun, and the Infernal Tree

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## SCENE 1

A nightingale's song. The Crack of dawn. The Islamic call to prayer. A lamp is burning, and a man beside it, in prayer. This is MAJNUN (maj-NOON). He sits on a large oriental carpet. The room is spacious with columns and hanging draperies. In the background, the soft colors of dawn play against silhouetted buildings of a 12th century Persian city. Majnun begins to chant, accompanying his chant with motions. He calls out, arms outstretched, and begins to drop toward the floor. At the lowest point of his prostration, a light comes up on Layli (LAY-lee). Music. Ravishing, ornately-dressed, veiled - she is the personification of Majnun's love.

As he prays she comes forward and begins to dance around him, music following. Eventually, he becomes aware of her presence, though he never seems to lay eyes on her. They dance: Fred and Ginger in 12th Century Persia. At the end of the dance, they both return to their former positions. Majnun moves as if to quench the lamp. Layli moves as if to remove her veil. Lights come quickly up to full, Blackout.

## SCENE 2

Lights up. The same house. Majnun is gone, Layli is in the courtyard, transformed into an ORANGE TREE. During the Scene 1 dance, another individual, MUSA (moo-SAH), entered the room and has been occupied in checking and correcting a set of blueprints of the house's structure. He has worked in a manner at once diligent, surreptitious, and evidently unaware of Majnun or Layli's presence, and he is now finishing up. He returns the blueprints to a long tube. A sound from outside, Musa is startled, fearful that

he might be caught and his precious drawings confiscated. He quenches the lamp and tiptoes out of the house. Another man, Karim (ka-REEM), enters. He stops at the Orange Tree, takes a piece of fruit, and begins to eat it,

surveying the property casually. He goes near the lamp and sensing the heat, reaches down to touch it. He jerks his hand back as if it's hot. He thinks a

moment and then returns to his orange and his musings. Another man, the MULLA enters. He seems to be in a big hurry.

## KARIM

Mulla, Maharba! Welcome, welcome to Shiraz!

## MULLA

Thank you. This is the house of Infernal Hell Fire?

KARIM

This is the house of Siyyid Ali Muhammad.

MULLA (Disturbed.)

Ali Muhammad will do.

KARIM

I'm sorry, Mulla, was he not a descendant of the Prophet?

MULLA

Peace be upon Him! Such an honor was made of no consequence once he made his pact with Satan!

KARIM

Oh.

MULLA (Looking around.)

Ayatollah says no stone will be left unturned.

KARIM

Yes, yes. Allah-u-akbar! Ayatollah speaks, and it is so! It is inconceivable this house could be used to promote the true faith of God!

MULLA

What are you saying?

KARIM

Who am I to say anything once Ayatollah has spoken?

MULLA

Come, come. To the point. I don't have all day.

KARIM

Insh'Allah. Excuse me, Mulla, for saying so, but this house. . . is. . . Well, is it impossible to conceive the good name of Islam might be promoted while it is still standing?

MULLA

Speak plainly, Karim. Don't vex me with your Shirazi riddles!

KARIM

For example. Mulla. If a local believer -- someone nearby -- were to come around every once and a while.

MULLA

A caretaker?

KARIM

That's a great idea, Mulla!

MULLA

It would have to be someone who lives very close, or someone who would be willing to live here.

KARIM

Yes. To make that sacrifice.

MULLA

Someone to look after the place.

KARIM

Yes.

MULLA

Someone we could trust.

KARIM

Absolutely.

MULLA

Of course, he would have to be compensated for his sacrifice.

KARIM

You are too kind, Mulla!

MULLA

(A pernicious smile. He pronounces each word with great relish.)

No stone unturned! (He laughs and goes to leave but turns.) And get rid of that accursed tree! "Verily, the Infernal Tree shall be the food of the sinner!"

[He exits, laughing. Karim throws his orange peels on the ground.

Lights out.]

SCENE 3

Absurd laughter coming from all directions. Lights up on Majnun in prostration.

Except he is now in the street. Merchants with wares, people passing by.

Layli is gone. Majnun digs his hands into the dirt, as if searching for gold.

MAJNUN

Layli! Layli! Layli!

[Two men stand over him laughing.]

MAN #1 (In Persian.)

(Look at this mad boy. He's lost his mind. Sifting the dust, crying out "Layli! Layli!")

MAN #2

Young man, what doest thou?

MAJNUN

I seek for Layli!

MAN #2

Alas for thee! Layli is of pure spirit, and thou seekest her in the dust!

MAJNUN

I seek her everywhere. Haply somewhere I shall find her.

MAN #1 (In Persian.)

(Trans: It is shameful)

[Layli peeks in.]

LAYLI (Whispering.)

Majnun.

[Majnun, hearing, starts up. The other men do not hear her, but are jostled by his change.]

LAYLI

Here I am.

[Majnun runs off in the general direction of her voice.

The men laugh out loud -The laughter amplifies. Darkness.]

SCENE 4

Back at the house, we hear demolition sounds. The orange tree (Layli) looks worried. Two WORKERS come over to look at it. They take out various implements of destruction and get ready to hack away at the orange tree.

Karim enters.

KARIM

Don't you gentlemen have something better to do?

WORKER 1

I thought we were supposed to get rid of the tree.

KARIM

Now?

WORKER 2

If not now, then when?

KARIM

I mean, don't you have walls to knock down? Foundations to tear up? It's just a harmless orange tree.

WORKER 1

Ayatollah says...

KARIM

Yeah, yeah, I know what Ayatollah says! Just get on with it, huh? You're not getting paid to stand around! (He walks away.) What are you looking at, huh?!

Get to work!

[The workers shake their head and began to hack away at the Orange Tree, chopping at its roots with an axe and a saw.

They grab the Orange Tree by the arms and tug. She puts up a good fight with comic results. Eventually, they succeed in tearing off an outer layer of her clothing. They seem quite happy with this and walk away, dividing up the cloth. The Orange Tree prostrates itself into a fetal position. She remains there for the following scenes. Lights down. ]

#### SCENE 5

Another street. Lights up on a doctor leading Majnun out of his shop. Some other young men stand nearby.

DOCTOR (Half in Persian.)

[I'm sorry, Majnun.] I have no medicine for one sick of love. [Aren't those your friends?

Go ask if they have seen her.]

[The doctor exits. Majnun approaches one of the young men.]

MAJNUN

[My friend.] These doctors, they know no cure for me. It's been years I've been away from her. [My friend] can you help me?

[The young man walks away apologetically. Majnun approaches another young man.]

MAJNUN (Cont'd.)

[My friend.] I can't sleep at night. I can't rest by day. Look at me, my body is worn to a sigh. Have you a good word for me, my friend?

[The other young man walks away. Majnun is left alone. He begins to convulse.]

MAJNUN

No. No. This tree has borne no fruit but despair. This fire is blazed out. Fallen to ashes. Hope be gone! Tonight I meet my beloved in the grave!

[He runs off. Lights out.]

#### SCENE 6

Musa is sitting on the street crying. His friend, HUSAYN, approaches him.

HUSAYN

Musa, what's wrong?

MUSA

Oh, Husayn! The house. It's gone. They've destroyed it. What do I do?

HUSAYN

But Musa, you said all the plans of the house were already drawn up.

MUSA

Yes, yes, they were.

HUSAYN

But then why despair, my friend? One day, this country will retrieve its sanity. And that day, we'll rebuild, Musa. Just as it was. Exactly as it was, my friend, and because of you. It is to your everlasting glory that it can be done.

MUSA

But Husayn, there is nothing left. Nothing. My friend, all I needed was a marker. One reference point and everything could have been rebuilt. One thing. Anything. A brick in the outer wall. That orange tree. But they even took the orange tree, Husayn! They've razed it all and covered it over with pavement.

HUSAYN

Well, that's okay, Musa. It doesn't have to be in the exact same spot...

MUSA

No, no. It's not the same. It's not the same.

HUSAYN

Musa! Where is your faith, man?! Certainly, you conditioned this endeavor on the Will of God. Now give it up. Come. Come to my house. We will pray and the way will be made plain.

[Musa gets up and follows Husayn off. Lights shift to the next scene.]

SCENE 7

Majnun reenters with a lamp from the back of the house. He is exhausted and walks with a limp down the aisle toward the stage.

MAJNUN

Where are you? Kojā hastid? Kojā hastid? Layliy-e-man! Do not leave me alone here! Khahesh-mikonam, Layli, do not leave me alone!

[A watchman enters.]

WATCHMAN (In Persian.)

[Hey there! Who are you? What are you up to at this hour?]

MAJNUN (Rousing from delirium.)

Uh.

[He sees the watchman and runs offstage.]

WATCHMAN

[Hey! Stop! Come back here!]

[He runs after Majnun. Lights shift to next scene.]

## SCENE 8

Lights up on the Orange Tree in Fetal position. At specific times during the previous scenes she has moved slightly. Now she begins to move and pushes upward, apparently breaking through the pavement. As she comes up, she gasps deeply as if she was suffocating. She struggles to stand. Musa enters.

MUSA

This, this. What is this? The tree? The tree? The orange tree!!

HUSAYN!!!

[Musa runs offstage deliriously. The Orange Tree struggles to grow. Lights shift to next scene.]

## SCENE 9

Majnun runs back on stage.

MAJNUN

Surely this watchman is 'Isra'il, my angel of death, following so fast upon me...

[The watchman reenters.]

WATCHMAN

[Why did you run? What have you done?]

MAJNUN

(Squaring off to fight him.)

Or he is a tyrant of men, seeking to harm me.

WATCHMAN

[Uh-oh. Mad dog. I'm not gonna fight you.] (He blows his whistle twice.)

[Majnun runs in one direction and is barred by another watchman.

He tries running in another direction and another watchman appears. Then others appear. He runs straight up the stage and jumps to scale a wall, crying out in pain as he climbs. The watchmen come behind him, grab his feet and push him up.]

## SCENE 10

Lights go out on the watchmen and the street, and come up on the garden where Majnun has flung himself at the feet of the Orange Tree, which he knows as Layli. A nightingale's song. Majnun looks up to see Layli as she is bending over to pick up a ring as if she had lost it.

LAYLI

Here you are.

[They look at each other. The Islamic call to prayer is heard. They move toward each other in a simple dance. Music. She gives him the ring and he places it on her finger. They move into a formal and highly anticipated moment. She puts her hand to her veil as might a bride on her wedding night, Eventually coming downstage of Majnun, so when she removes her veil. It is only Majnun that can look on her radiant face. He gazes at her, she at him for a long moment. She lowers her gaze, and he falls prostrate on the ground at her feet. She returns her veil and moves behind him as in the opening scene, Majnun lifts his head, draws a great breath, and speaks.]

MAJNUN

O God! Give Thou glory to the watchman, and riches and long life. For the watchman was Gabriel, guiding this poor one; of he was Israfil, bringing life to this wretched one! Glory to God in the Highest! My Beloved and I are one.

— Layli, Majnun, and the Infernal Tree (Used by permission of the curator)