

SENECA AND THE SOUL OF NERO

by

Marcia Eppich-Harris

SENECA AND THE SOUL OF NERO

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SENECA AND THE SOUL OF NERO

To Aric, for everything.

SENECA AND THE SOUL OF NERO

Seneca and the Soul of Nero was originally produced at the IndyFringe Theatre in Indianapolis, IN, by Southbank Theatre Company, directed by Doug Powers and featuring the following cast:

SENECA/THYESTES.....David Mosedale
NERO.....Evren Wilder Elliott
POMPEIA PAULINA.....Jenni White
AGRIPPINA and MEDEA.....Rachel Seraga
BURRUS.....David Molloy
OCTAVIABra’Jae Allen
BRITANNICUS, JASON,
TANTALUS, and GUARD.....Brant Hughes
LUCAN, AMBASSADOR 1,
and CREON.....Noah Winston
SABINA, NURSE IN MEDEA,
and AMBASSADOR 2.....Patricia Blanchfield

SENECA AND THE SOUL OF NERO

CAST: 4 Women, 5 Men with doubling. 17 characters, total, and one baby doll. Doubling may be reconfigured to best suit your casting, and servants may be added to fill out the world, if you choose.

SENECA	50-60, Tutor and then advisor to Nero. Stoic philosopher. Wealthy. Married to Pompeia Paulina. Uncle of Lucan.
NERO	17-30, Son of Agrippina and adopted son of Claudius. Becomes emperor as a teenager.
POMPEIA PAULINA	40s-50s, Pompeia Paulina (aka Poppy), Seneca's wife and best friend.
AGRIPPINA	40s-50s, Mother of Nero.
OCTAVIA	18-30, Wife and adopted sister of Nero.
SABINA	20s-30s, Second wife to Nero.
BURRUS	40s-50s, Co-advisor with Seneca to Nero. In charge of the Praetorian guard.
BRITANNICUS	14-18, Stepbrother of Nero. Should be played by a younger looking adult.
LUCAN	20s-30s, Nephew of Seneca, poet of the court.
GUARD	20s-30s, Guard in Nero's court.
AMBASSADOR 1	any age, Ambassador in Nero's court.
AMBASSADOR 2	any age, Ambassador in Nero's court.
THYESTES	40s-60s, Actor playing Thyestes in Seneca's play <i>Thyestes</i> .
TANTALUS	15-20, Actor playing Tantalus, son of Thyestes, in Seneca's play <i>Thyestes</i> .
NURSE IN MEDEA	20s-30s, Nurse and servant to Medea in Seneca's play <i>Medea</i> .
MEDEA	30s-40s, wife of Jason and killer of her own children in Seneca's play <i>Medea</i> .
JASON	20s-40s, Actor playing the mythic hero Jason in Seneca's play <i>Media</i> .
CREON	30s-50s Actor playing King Creon in Seneca's play <i>Medea</i> .
CLAUDIA	Infant, should be a doll.

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TIME: 54-68 AD, the reign of Nero.

PLACE: Imperial Rome. All scenes can take place in a single non-specific setting that includes a throne and a desk with a chair, although the scenic designer may reimagine scenes however they like. The varying locations in the play include Seneca's quarters, the throne room, Nero's quarters, Sabina's quarters, a beach on the coast of Ostia, a road outside Rome, and a palace in Antium.

NOTE: Seneca and Nero should have a close relationship that resembles father and son at the beginning of the play. Seneca obviously cares for Nero, and they easily joke around and tease each other. As time goes on, the relationship changes.

SENECA AND THE SOUL OF NERO

ACT 1 SCENE 1

Lights up on SENECA's quarters. There is a writing desk with scrolls on it, a chair, and a Roman-style couch, where POMPEIA PAULINA sits sewing. Enter SENECA.

POMPEIA PAULINA. I thought you were teaching today, husband.
(*Joking*) Or has Nero claimed omnipotence already?

SENECA. Agrippina interrupted us again. If Agrippina wants me to be a good tutor, I must be able to teach!

POMPEIA PAULINA. Now, now. It does no good to be cross.

SENECA. Yes, never anger the puppet-mistress of the empire.

POMPEIA PAULINA. She merely does her duty as empress and mother.

SENECA. She spoils him so much it drives me mad.

POMPEIA PAULINA. There's not much stoicism in madness. And I must admit, dear, if our son had survived, I would have spoiled him, too.

SENECA. Do not grieve for the dead, my dear. They do not suffer the torments of Rome.

POMPEIA PAULINA. Nor do they suffer its pleasures.

SENECA. Indeed, pleasure is far more dangerous. (*Enter NERO and AGRIPPINA.*)

AGRIPPINA. Apologies, Seneca. You may have your pupil back.

NERO. Can't we be done for the day, Seneca?

SENECA. It's important to know this history, my young master.

AGRIPPINA. What is it you're studying today?

SENECA. The curse of the House of Atreus.

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NERO. Does it have to be so brutally boring?

SENECA. How can revenge and cannibalism be boring?

NERO. They go on and on. I'd just have them all killed.

AGRIPPINA. They grow up so fast!

SENECA. (*Laughs.*) An emperor of Rome must follow the stoic principles – reason, virtue, wisdom, and duty to his people, honoring the ancestors and the household gods.

NERO. (*Mimicking Seneca.*) “Reason, virtue, wisdom, duty.” When I am emperor, the people will owe their duty to me – not the other way round.

SENECA. It is unwise to behave in a way that will encourage hatred.

AGRIPPINA. Who could hate this face? (*Pompeia Paulina approaches Agrippina.*)

POMPEIA PAULINA. Empress, perhaps we should leave the gentlemen to their studies. I fear our presence distracts them.

AGRIPPINA. Fine. But Nero, when you have finished, don't forget I have something for you.

NERO. Just tell me what it is. Enough with the suspense.

AGRIPPINA. All in good time, my love.

SENECA. Do not be too indulgent, Madame.

AGRIPPINA. Oh Seneca – he is my only son, after all. And a son needs his mother in times such as these.

SENECA. Has something happened?

AGRIPPINA. No spoiling the surprise! (*To Nero*) You shall soon learn that a mother's love can know no bounds. (*Agrippina kisses Nero on the mouth long enough to be uncomfortable. Nero pulls back.*)

NERO. I won't be long, Mother.

AGRIPPINA. Good. Seneca.

SENECA. (*Bows*) Empress. (*Agrippina and Pompeia Paulina exit.*) Now then. Let us return to our duty.

NERO. Duty. Your favorite word. If you loved me, you would allow me to breathe a while. You do love me, don't you, Seneca?

SENECA. Fortune's blessings fall upon those whose duty and love are of a piece.

NERO. (*Confused.*) Yes, then?

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SENECA. Do you know what I wish you loved? Studying.

NERO. To learn the great history of the Greeks and their war with Troy and all the curses and shipwrecks therein. (*Laughing*) Here – let’s have a play. You be Helen, and I’ll be Paris, the noble prince of Troy! (*Nero throws himself comically at Seneca, grabbing at his chest, as if to grab the breasts of Helen of Troy.*)

SENECA. Could you at least pretend to be stoic? Leave your antics for the stage.

NERO. I almost forgot – I have rehearsal for *Bacchides* tonight!

SENECA. Not one of those silly Plautus plays.

NERO. I dare you to write something better.

SENECA. I have!

NERO. Philosophy, psh! You do not like to laugh, Master Seneca.

SENECA. I laugh at you every day!

NERO. (*Joking*) To your peril, my friend. Only a stoic could be displeased with a Plautus comedy. Nothing excites you.

SENECA. That is a very shallow understanding of stoicism. A virtuous man –

NERO. Please, no more virtue lectures.

SENECA. Exhibit some virtue, and I shall no longer lecture! (*Enter BURRUS.*)

BURRUS. Seneca, forgive the interruption.

SENECA. Gods on high. What is it now?

BURRUS. Nero must come with me.

NERO. (*Mocking*) Oh no! No more studying? How will I ever be a great and virtuous emperor?

BURRUS. (*Clears his throat.*) The emperor has been poisoned. (*Nero freezes, shocked.*)

SENECA. What?

BURRUS. Claudius is dead. (*Awkwardly*) Hail, Nero, emperor of Rome.

NERO. Oh . . . gods. . .

SENECA. I imagine my educational services are no longer required. (*To Nero*) You shall now be a student of experience. (*Seneca starts to leave.*)

NERO. No. You cannot leave me.

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BURRUS. Agrippina would like you to remain as an advisor to the new emperor.

SENECA. Hm . . .

NERO. Seneca, I need you. Burrus – you shall lead the Praetorian guard.

BURRUS. (*Bows to Nero*) Many thanks, princeps.

NERO. I know I've been a fool, Seneca. I'll need you now more than ever.

SENECA. Let's be rational and calm. It will be all right.

NERO. I need to go find my mother. (*Nero exits.*)

SENECA. Well, I'm terrified.

BURRUS. You did well to hide it from Nero.

SENECA. There's no use rattling him more than this news already has.

BURRUS. It cannot be worse than Caligula.

SENECA. (*Shrugs*) May the gods grant us their favor, my friend.

BURRUS. As each deserves. (*Burrus exits. Seneca remains.*)

SCENE 2

Seneca's quarters. Enter Pompeia Paulina.

POMPEIA PAULINA. Did you hear?

SENECA. It seems I've had the bad fortune of being promoted.

POMPEIA PAULINA. I would have thought you'd jump at the chance to advise an emperor.

SENECA. This is dangerous. Nero knows he's not ready to be emperor. His mother on the other hand . . .

POMPEIA PAULINA. A woman cannot command her husband the way she may command her child.

SENECA. But Nero is not easily dominated.

POMPEIA PAULINA. She got him to marry Octavia. Although he certainly wasn't happy about it. Nor was she.

SENECA. Would you want to marry your stepbrother?

POMPEIA PAULINA. Royal families intermarry all the time.

SENECA. I suppose.

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POMPEIA PAULINA. Of course, Britannicus would be even less prepared to be emperor. And yet, Agrippina is quite fond of the boy.

SENECA. She loves Nero more. Then again, I'd wager she'll love whomever she can control. If only I'd had more time with the boy, he'd be able to stand up to her, be his own ruler and do what's best for Rome. He *has* potential. Yes, he's immature and foolish at times, yet he can be serious. You've seen him on stage.

POMPEIA PAULINA. He does wield a certain poetic gravitas at times. Perhaps you should tell him to "act" like an emperor, as if it were one of his roles.

SENECA. This is very wise. The best prince is a good actor. If I could simply anchor him, he could act his way through these first years. . . until he naturally becomes a wise and virtuous ruler. One of the greatest men in history.

POMPEIA PAULINA. Given the proper direction.

SENECA. Gods, Poppy. Do you think I can provide it?

POMPEIA PAULINA. You'll have me and Burrus by your side.

SENECA. I will have need of you both. So will Rome. (*Exit Seneca and Pompeia Paulina.*)

SCENE 3

The throne room. Claudius's funeral. Enter Burrus, OCTAVIA, and BRITANNICUS.

BURRUS. (*To Octavia.*) I am sorry to hear of your father's death, Octavia. (*To Britannicus.*) And Britannicus, you must be most aggrieved.

BRITANNICUS. Yes, it was such a shock.

OCTAVIA. Thank you, Burrus. (*Burrus stands aside, leaving Octavia and Britannicus alone.*)

OCTAVIA. Agrippina and Nero don't seem to be too terribly upset.

BRITANNICUS. You can't believe the rumors are true.

OCTAVIA. Britannicus, we can trust no one. Both of our parents were murdered. Which one of us is next? (*Enter Seneca, Nero, Agrippina,*

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LUCAN, Pompeia Paulina, and SABINA. Seneca pulls Nero downstage, takes a piece of papyrus from his robe, and speaks only to Nero.)

SENECA. Nero, I have written a few words for your eulogy.

NERO. Thank the gods. I had no idea what to say.

SENECA. It *is* awkward.

NERO. You're a true counselor, Seneca. I will not forget your aid in my time of need.

SENECA. Not to worry, my boy. Just remember the solemnity of the occasion. *(Nero moves to center, and others fall into places to listen.)*

NERO. *(Reading)* Romans and countrymen, we gather here at an end and a beginning. The end of my dear stepfather, Claudius's reign and the beginning of mine. *(Nero looks at Seneca for encouragement. Reads.)*

Augustus, my great-grandfather, founded our dynasty. He was the first Roman princeps. Under his tutelage, Rome unified after a long period of civil war. *(Goes off book.)* I learned recently that Augustus defeated Cleopatra – beautiful woman, they say. *(Seneca shakes his head at Nero and motions for him to focus. Nero returns to the written speech.)* Uhm – what makes us Romans is not just a location, but a philosophy. We honor our ancestors and their accomplishments upon which we will build a future free of barbarism and excess. *(Nero looks at Seneca after “excess,” not approving of the promise. Seneca silently urges Nero to stick to the script.)* But for the present time, we must think of more recent history and our most generous and noble Roman, Claudius, whom we celebrate here today. *(Going off-book again.)* I loved him as my closest uncle. And stepfather. *(Agrippina gives Nero a dirty look.)* Not that there's anything wrong with that. So, *(Back to the script)* Claudius, as we all know, was a brave and thoughtful man, full of wisdom and foresight. *(Agrippina bursts out laughing and tries to pretend she's crying. Nero goes off-book.)* I mean, he had his moments, right? Sometimes his stutter really got in the way. *(Nero imitates Claudius.)* M-m-m-my – f-f-f-fellow – Rrrr-omans. Good old Claudius.

SENECA. *(To Agrippina.)* Do you need my handkerchief, Madame?

AGRIPPINA. Yes, thank you, Seneca.

NERO. A man of much eloquence, that Claudius.

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SENECA. (*Trying to direct the rest of the Romans.*) Praise we all his name. (*To Agrippina.*) There, there my dear. (*To Nero.*) Sir, your mother is terribly upset. I suggest we proceed to the proclamation of the divinity of our deceased princeps and the inauguration of your new reign.

NERO. Indeed, Seneca. Let us proceed. (*Nero takes the ceremonial wine goblet and holds it aloft, reading from Seneca's paper.*) O Jupiter, Lord of Thunder, launch Roman glory along with Claudius. And if ever you honored Rome, console us with joy and prosperity in all the years to come.

ALL. (*Except Octavia.*) Joy and prosperity!

OCTAVIA. (*To Britannicus.*) Whose joy? Whose prosperity?

NERO. Now, music! Dancing. Our newest god, Claudius, desires a banquet in his name. Let us celebrate the newest member of our Pantheon! (*All except Britannicus and Octavia cheer bravo, huzzah! etc. Music plays, and Sabina dances for the crowd. Lucan hands a scroll to Seneca. Seneca reads the scroll, then approaches Nero.*)

SENECA. My lord, I have a pressing matter.

NERO. Now, Seneca?

SENECA. The senate has condemned a man to death.

NERO. What?

SENECA. Here. (*He hands over the scroll.*) As you can see, they would like you to sign his death warrant.

NERO. (*Becomes very moved, holding back tears.*) Must I, Seneca?

SENECA. This is one of the many difficulties of being emperor, I'm afraid.

NERO. I wish I'd never learned to write. (*Signs his name with the stylus Seneca has held out to him, and buries his face in his hands, crying. Sabina finishes her dance. Burrus, Octavia, Britannicus, Pompeia Paulina, Sabina, and Lucan exit. Agrippina, Seneca and Nero remain.*)

AGRIPPINA. Right. Let's get to work, darling.

NERO. Mother, I need to speak to Seneca.

AGRIPPINA. But Nero, we all should talk.

NERO. Later.

AGRIPPINA. Darling, I must help you with this transition. Your training is not complete.

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NERO. Seneca and I are just about to train, Mother. Now, on your way.

AGRIPPINA. Very well. Come see me later, my dear princeps.

(Agrippina exits.)

SENECA. I am heartened that you hope to continue your studies, my lord.

NERO. Well, I had to get rid of her. She hovers so much.

SENECA. You need to set your boundaries with your mother. She is used to having a certain amount of influence.

NERO. *(In shock.)* Seneca, can you believe I'm emperor? My gods!

SENECA. Yes, princeps.

NERO. Oh, don't call me that, Seneca. You're the only father I have left. Would you call your son "princeps"?

SENECA. I am very moved that you'd say that. All right, my lord – *(Nero gives him a look.)* Nero.

NERO. Listen, I know you're worried about my inexperience.

SENECA. Oh –

NERO. – and fondness for theatre.

SENECA. Well –

NERO. You think I can't do this job.

SENECA. I did not say that.

NERO. You don't have to. I – I could hardly sign a death warrant.

SENECA. There is no shame in compassion.

NERO. But I have no idea what I'm doing.

SENECA. The wise admit their own shortcomings.

NERO. Then, I will be the wisest emperor of them all.

SENECA. No . . . I mean . . . Yes. . . I mean – no disrespect. . .

NERO. Seneca! Mother said I have to give a speech to the senate and establish my authority. I have no idea what to say.

SENECA. Assure them that you aim to rule well – that they can trust you.

NERO. Yes, yes. But I'm an entertainer. A poet and a singer – an actor. Did you see my impression of Claudius? Brilliant, was it not?

SENECA. Perhaps another time would have been more appropriate.

NERO. What better time to roast one's predecessor than at his funeral? Anyway – right now, the only advantage I see of being emperor is that I can enter all the literary contests and guarantee I'll win.

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SENECA. I would discourage you from participating in light matters such as those contests.

NERO. Why?

SENECA. You have an empire to run.

NERO. Right.

SENECA. There are governors to manage, the senate to deal with, armies to command, wars to fight, a treasury to account for, building projects –

NERO. Building projects!

SENECA. Yes.

NERO. Can I build a gigantic golden statue of myself?

SENECA. Nero. Focus. Remember our ancient ancestor, Aeneas, fleeing Troy to found Rome. He did not know how to accomplish his quest. He only knew that he must carry his father and the household gods with him, leading his son by the hand.

NERO. You're trying to be metaphorical.

SENECA. And what am I trying to teach you?

NERO. I am to honor my ancestors.

SENECA. (*Surprised that he's gotten the right answer immediately.*) Yes!

NERO. And honor the household gods.

SENECA. Yes. . . and?

NERO. Get a son?

SENECA. No, no, no. Treat the people as you would your own child – lead them by the hand, as a compassionate and committed father.

NERO. But I don't have a son yet. Is it not my duty to have one?

SENECA. That will come in time.

NERO. The rest sounds like a lot of work.

SENECA. Being emperor should be a lot of work. It's not just eating, sleeping, and ordering slaves to do your bidding.

NERO. And what of the perks? Mother said that Tiberius and Caligula were fairly lecherous men.

SENECA. You should learn from their example.

NERO. So whoring around is part of the job?

SENECA. I meant learn from their example what *not* to do.

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NERO. (*Ignoring him.*) Who should I take to bed first? Should it be the freed woman, Acte? She is an impressive beauty. The man who dresses me? Is he a man? He's a eunuch – what are they?

SENECA. Don't distract yourself. If you have needs, take your wife to bed.

NERO. (*Makes a face.*) You sleep with her. I won't banish you.

SENECA. No, thank you.

NERO. Perhaps I'll banish you if you refuse.

SENECA. Nero –

NERO. I'm fooling with you. I'm the emperor. I can do that.

SENECA. Jests and appetites have nothing to do with ruling an empire. You have much to learn.

NERO. I'm sure you'll teach me. But first, the whoring!

SENECA. You have a speech to write!

NERO. You do it! Your eulogy was tremendous.

SENECA. You improvised several times!

NERO. I'll stick to the script next time. Write me a speech. From now on, that's your job – tutor, adviser, speech writer. You write my speech, and I'll deliver it to the senate after I bed Acte.

SENECA. At the very least, ask her husband first.

NERO. I'll send for them both. Perhaps he'd like to watch.

SENECA. Don't be crude. You're an emperor now – time to act like one.

NERO. To *act* like an emperor, I need a script. You're a writer – create my role.

SENECA. Fine. I'll write your speech. I just need a little time.

NERO. Excellent. I am an empty vessel, Seneca. Fill me with your words, and my deeds shall enact them. You want me to be a good emperor, don't you?

SENECA. That is my greatest wish.

NERO. Then it's up to you – make me into one.

SENECA. Any other requests?

NERO. Smooth over Claudius's murder.

SENECA. Do you know for certain how he died?

NERO. Yes. Mother killed him.

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SENECA. Gods...do you know why?

NERO. He annoyed her, I suppose.

SENECA. (*Carefully.*) Nero, I hope you understand – killing those who annoy you is no way to rule.

NERO. That's not the way that good, old Seneca would run things, is it? No, "Emperor Seneca" would have us sitting in a circle, holding hands, and chanting, "chastity, sobriety, and stoicism – oh my!"

SENECA. All I want is for Rome to thrive with you as her virtuous and wise ruler.

NERO. Then write a virtuous and wise speech, my good man. I have wooing to do.

SENECA. A good emperor, a wise emperor, is not subject to his loins, but uses reason as his guide.

NERO. I reason that my loins need cultivation, and ravishing Octavia gets tiresome.

SENECA. Nero –

NERO. Surely I'll be exhausted in a few hours. Show me what you've written while I bathe. We'll meet with the senate tomorrow.

SENECA. (*Resigned.*) As you wish. (*Exit Nero. Seneca remains.*)

SCENE 4

Seneca's quarters. Seneca sits at his desk, pulls out blank paper, a stylus pen, and ink. He starts to write. Enter Agrippina.

AGRIPPINA. Seneca, I wanted to return your handkerchief. (*Hands it over.*) Many thanks, my dear man.

SENECA. You are most welcome, Madame.

AGRIPPINA. I'm so glad you've decided to stay on.

SENECA. I didn't know I had a choice.

AGRIPPINA. And Nero says you don't have a sense of humor. . .

SENECA. I am much indebted to you and your family, Agrippina. I am well aware of what I owe you. (*Seneca returns to his writing.*)

AGRIPPINA. What are you working on?

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SENECA. The speech Nero will give to the senate.

AGRIPPINA. I thought I'd help him with that.

SENECA. He asked me to write it. Apparently, I am to be his speech writer.

AGRIPPINA. I would like to see it before you give it to him.

SENECA. There may not be time, Madame.

AGRIPPINA. What are you going to say?

SENECA. Well, Nero must build consensus among the political elite. Our last two emperors had significant problems with that.

AGRIPPINA. It's a pity they died before you could instruct them in diplomacy. (*Seneca returns to his writing. Agrippina tries to peak over his shoulder.*)

SENECA. Anything else?

AGRIPPINA. I noticed your handkerchief was very like some my sister Livilla used to carry.

SENECA. (*Pulls out the handkerchief to look at it.*) It was a gift from Livilla.

AGRIPPINA. You two were very close. Was your wife jealous of her?

SENECA. Not in the least.

AGRIPPINA. Pompeia Paulina must be a true stoic.

SENECA. Poppy understands that no one person can fulfill the curious mind – just as the juice of a single grape cannot fill a cask with wine.

AGRIPPINA. That doesn't sound very chaste to me.

SENECA. Chastity does not demand isolation. But (*Gesturing to his work.*) composition does. (*Seneca returns to his writing.*)

AGRIPPINA. Ruling the empire will take more than a speech. I will have to guide Nero ever so much. It's a pity he did not finish his studies with you.

SENECA. Even if he had, there is no manual for being an effective ruler.

AGRIPPINA. Then write one. What do you believe an effective ruler is made of?

SENECA. Well. . . What is the one thing that secures loyalty, ensures power, and can be guaranteed by no mortal other than the emperor?

AGRIPPINA. Money?

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SENECA. No.

AGRIPPINA. Military power?

SENECA. Gods no. The praetorian guard killed Caligula.

AGRIPPINA. What in Rome could make an emperor more powerful than money and military strength?

SENECA. Mercy.

AGRIPPINA. I'm sorry. Did you say "mercy"?

SENECA. When I was exiled for my supposed affair with Livilla, you bargained with Claudius to bring me back. His mercy enacted my return.

AGRIPPINA. But I was the one who bargained for you.

SENECA. Yes, but no one could have granted that clemency but the emperor, regardless of who asked for it.

AGRIPPINA. An emperor may also kill.

SENECA. Certainly. Yet a dead enemy cannot become a friend. A dead enemy cannot be indebted to the emperor for saving his life. When an emperor kills, he creates an entire army of enemies. When he pardons, he gains a multitude of devout followers.

AGRIPPINA. Well. . . An emperor may also *be* killed. I do not have the privilege of being merciful, Seneca. A Roman woman is either a tiger or its prey. I intend to be the tiger.

SENECA. There is no need to be a tiger with Nero. He will grow into his role, and if he listens to me, Nero will achieve greatness.

AGRIPPINA. Oh Seneca, I had no idea that a stoic could be so arrogant.

(Exit Agrippina. Seneca turns back to his writing but is too frustrated. Seneca exits.)

SCENE 5

The throne room. Enter Britannicus, Burrus, and Nero.

NERO. I'm doing well, aren't I?

BURRUS. Rome has never been more prosperous. And Britannicus, how does it feel to be granted your toga and join the ranks of men?

BRITANNICUS. I am greatly honored, sir.

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NERO. (*Sarcastic.*) You're welcome.

BRITANNICUS. Thank you, brother.

NERO. Right. What's next? Shall we have a bacchanal? I shall select the menu. Burrus – invite the guests. Britannicus, you choose the whores.

BRITANNICUS. I don't know any whores, brother.

NERO. Sure you do. Women who wear long dresses are virtuous. Women who wear short togas are whores.

BRITANNICUS. Oh. I had no idea.

NERO. Since it's your birthday, you can go first, but pick the younger ones – the younger the better. Fewer diseases, firmer bodies.

BRITANNICUS. I have much to learn from you.

NERO. I, myself, have learned much as emperor. In fact, come to me this evening, and we'll . . . chat.

BRITANNICUS. Thank you.

NERO. Thank me later. Go on, now. (*Exit Britannicus.*)

BURRUS. Nero, the plans for your statue are complete. (*Burrus hands over a scroll with plans on it.*)

NERO. (*Looking at the plans.*) Dear gods, it will be a colossus.

BURRUS. Just as you wished, my lord.

NERO. Excellent. I like the enhancements they made around the – (*Motions to his own groin area.*)

BURRUS. As you commanded. (*Enter Seneca.*)

SENECA. Nero, I spoke to the Armenian ambassadors just now. They wanted –

NERO. No need. I trust you.

SENECA. They would like to speak with you.

NERO. (*Gesturing to the plans.*) I'm busy.

SENECA. (*To Nero.*) Did you happen to read the treatise I wrote?

BURRUS. The essay on mercy? Oh, it was astonishing. So learned and insightful. Well done, Seneca.

SENECA. Nero?

NERO. Well done, old man.

SENECA. You didn't read it.

NERO. It was rather long.

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SENECA. Oh.

NERO. Maybe you should have written a play. I like plays.

SENECA. I can . . . write plays. Any particular theme? (*Enter Agrippina.*)

AGRIPPINA. Nero, my love.

NERO. (*Rolling his eyes.*) Mother.

AGRIPPINA. The Parthians have risen against Armenia.

NERO. Yes, yes. The Armenian ambassadors have already spoken to Seneca.

AGRIPPINA. And when will they speak to you?

NERO. Uh. . . well. Today, of course. (*Snaps fingers at Burrus.*) Why haven't you brought them to me?

BURRUS. As you wish, my lord. (*Exit Burrus.*)

AGRIPPINA. This is a provocation, Nero. It must be answered. You cannot allow these men to stand against our territory.

NERO. And what would you have me do?

AGRIPPINA. First, we must speak to the ambassadors. Make a stand. Say that Rome will crush these interlopers.

SENECA. We will, Madame.

AGRIPPINA. I will wait for them. (*Seneca gestures to Nero to stand up for himself.*)

NERO. You're such an Amazon, Mother.

AGRIPPINA. I have a strategic mind.

NERO. If you are here when the ambassadors arrive, they will question my authority.

AGRIPPINA. Why? Because I'm a woman?

NERO. Because you're my mother.

AGRIPPINA. And?

NERO. I'm in charge.

AGRIPPINA. This is your first military crisis as emperor, Nero. You cannot do this alone.

NERO. I'm certainly not alone. I have Seneca and Burrus – my advisors.

AGRIPPINA. Neither of them has been an empress, have they? (*Agrippina sits on the throne to wait. Seneca pulls Nero aside.*)

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SENECA. Do not allow her to sit on the throne. Burrus and I can stand beside you, as your advisors, but should Agrippina be allowed on the throne, the Armenians will think she rules the empire – not you.

NERO. How can I stop her?

SENECA. Approach her, take her down from the throne as if to greet the ambassadors, then send her on her way.

NERO. Will that work? You know she wants to be here.

SENECA. People will be watching. If she does not want to embarrass you in front of the ambassadors, she'll have no choice but to leave.

NERO. Good plan.

SENECA. Up on the dais with you. (*Enter Burrus and two Ambassadors. Nero ushers Agrippina centerstage, as if to greet the Ambassadors.*)

NERO. (*Embracing Agrippina.*) Ah, Mother, how good of you to visit. We'll talk tonight over dinner. I really must see my ambassadors now. Run along.

AGRIPPINA. (*Privately to Nero.*) Nero, what are you doing?

NERO. (*Playing it off as a joke, laughs.*) Oh, you're such a clever woman. See you tonight. Goodbye.

AGRIPPINA. (*To Nero.*) Watch yourself, my love. I put you onto the throne, and I can take you off. (*Agrippina smiles at the Ambassadors, then exits. Nero pretends to laugh, trying to play it off.*)

NERO. Now, then, my friends. Tell me of the Parthians' uprising. (*Mime a meeting as Ambassadors, Seneca, and Nero exit.*)

SCENE 6

Nero's quarters, later that day. Agrippina enters, pacing, waiting for Nero. He enters moments later.

AGRIPPINA. You embarrassed me.

NERO. Do you live in Rome? You act like you don't know how this works.

AGRIPPINA. I gave you the empire!

NERO. And I have been paying ever since. I didn't ask you to kill for me.

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AGRIPPINA. You could try to be grateful.

NERO. What is it you really want, Mother?

AGRIPPINA. Just because you have Seneca and Burrus whispering in your ears doesn't mean you don't need me anymore. I know things these men do not.

NERO. Indeed.

AGRIPPINA. I know Rome's secrets.

NERO. Such as?

AGRIPPINA. I have heard many things about you recently. Are you truly having an affair with the freed slave, Acte?

NERO. Yes. And other women and men. Although, I have recently taken a great fondness for Sabina.

AGRIPPINA. They're all beneath you.

NERO. Beneath me, on top of me, in front of me – sometimes behind me.

AGRIPPINA. You'll be lucky if no one cuts your throat during one of your orgies.

NERO. You're jealous, you nasty woman.

AGRIPPINA. (*Coming closer.*) You love nasty women, Nero. (*Kissing his neck.*) Is this the way to influence you, Nero?

NERO. Mother. . .

AGRIPPINA. How long has it been since I initiated you in the rites of love?

NERO. Some time. I thought you did not wish to enjoy me anymore.

AGRIPPINA. (*Embracing him and putting her hands where they should not go.*) Everything I have done, since the day you were born, was for the enjoyment of you.

NERO. Mother.

AGRIPPINA. You are not the only heir to Claudius.

NERO. Would you really kill me and promote Britannicus?

AGRIPPINA. Let's make sure I won't have to.

NERO. Yes. Let's. (*Agrippina and Nero kiss, then exit. It should be clear they are leaving to have sex.*)

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SCENE 7

The throne room. Enter Britannicus, Seneca, Pompeia Paulina, Burrus, Octavia, Lucan, and Sabina for Britannicus's birthday gathering. People stand around talking and drinking. Britannicus is a bit drunk.

OCTAVIA. Britannicus, you seem to be having a good time.

BRITANNICUS. (*Whispers to Octavia, while he points at an off-stage servant.*) She's wearing a toga – that means she's a whore. (*Bursts into laughter.*)

OCTAVIA. I see you've been talking to my husband.

BRITANNICUS. He's taught me so much in the last two days, especially in the baths.

OCTAVIA. Nero has always been fond of the bath houses.

BRITANNICUS. He told me he wants to have more baths erected in his name.

OCTAVIA. He's so obsessed with building new things. But enough about him. It's your birthday. We should celebrate.

BRITANNICUS. I'm a real man now, Octavia.

OCTAVIA. And may you be a great man, unlike our father and brother.

BRITANNICUS. I'd do anything to be more like Nero.

OCTAVIA. (*Sarcastic.*) He is so charming and handsome. Spare me.

BRITANNICUS. We've been spending a lot of time together. He's very generous. In fact, he initiated me in the ways of love last night.

OCTAVIA. (*Figuring out Nero has fooled around with their brother.*)

Nero is a monster. Don't confuse his attention with love. (*Enter Nero and Agrippina. Nero hands Britannicus a cup of wine, which he downs instantly. Then, Nero approaches Seneca.*)

NERO. Seneca, you're not eating and drinking, my friend.

SENECA. Since Claudius died, I eat at home.

NERO. You're paranoid.

SENECA. Never. Looking after my health, that's all. Poppy and I take our food from our garden and eat it raw. It's helpful to the constitution of sickly old men like me.

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NERO. Your health is of utmost importance to me. You should let my best cooks make your meals.

SENECA. A stoic needs nothing so sumptuous as what comes from an emperor's kitchen.

NERO. Don't be tedious. More wine, more wine! Never let our cups be emptied.

AGRIPPINA. (*Clinks her glass to get everyone's attention.*) May I have your attention, please? On the glorious evening of Britannicus's birthday, I call on all of us to remember our ancestors and the power they have granted us. May we all do our duty to their memories, to Rome, and to our great empire. Raise your glasses, please. To Britannicus: may the gods give you good health, long life, and powerful friends.

NERO. (*Raises his glass.*) To Britannicus.

ALL. Britannicus!

BRITANNICUS. Cheers!

NERO. Let us hear some poetry. (*To Seneca.*) Where is your nephew, Lucan?

SENECA. He's there, drinking.

NERO. No wonder I like him more than you! (*Seneca laughs.*) Listen everyone. I would like Lucan to recite some of his best poetry. Would you do us the honor, Lucan?

LUCAN. Yes, my lord. (*Lucan begins reciting the beginning of "Pharsalia," also known as "The Civil Wars."*)

"Wars worse than civil on Emathian plains,
And crime let loose we sing: how Rome's high race
Plunged in her vitals her victorious sword;
Armies akin embattled, with the force
Of all the shaken earth bent on the fray;" (*Britannicus starts to cough and choke.*)

OCTAVIA. Brother, are you alright?

BRITANNICUS. I need a drink.

OCTAVIA. Take mine. (*Britannicus takes Octavia's glass and drinks. Lucan tries to carry on.*)

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LUCAN. “And burst asunder, to the common guilt, / A kingdom’s compact.” (*Britannicus falls, convulsing. Octavia and Agrippina rush to help him.*)

AGRIPPINA. Britannicus!

NERO. All is well, good friends. He has the falling sickness, as you right well know.

OCTAVIA. This is not the falling sickness, Nero. His face is bright red.

NERO. It is merely his first time with unmixed wine, Octavia. He’ll be all right.

AGRIPPINA. My lord, we must help him.

NERO. Let the boy alone.

OCTAVIA. He’s dying, you ass! Someone find a doctor.

NERO. Did you just call your husband and emperor an ass?

OCTAVIA. And I will call you worse if you let our brother die.

NERO. See? He’s stopped shaking. Everyone leave him alone.

AGRIPPINA and **OCTAVIA.** Britannicus? Britannicus!

SENECA. (*Checks for a pulse.*) He’s dead.

AGRIPPINA. No. He can’t be. Britannicus?

OCTAVIA. Oh gods. He is gone.

AGRIPPINA. No . . .

NERO. (*Unconcerned.*) Poor thing. So much for him. Lucan, continue, please. The rest of you – stop distracting me.

AGRIPPINA. But Nero –

NERO. Sit down this instant. All of you. (*All move to their seats, deeply disturbed.*) Lucan, if you please –

LUCAN. (*Disturbed, he picks up where he left off.*)

“– eagle with eagle met,

Standard to standard, spear opposed to spear.

Whence, citizens, this rage, this boundless lust

To sate barbarians with the blood of Rome?

Did not the shade of Crassus, wandering still,

Cry for his vengeance? Could ye not have spoiled,

To deck your trophies, haughty Babylon?

Why wage campaigns that send no laurels home?

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What lands, what oceans might have been the prize
Of all the blood thus shed in civil strife!”

NERO. Bravo, bravo! Well done, Lucan. Indeed, the prize of blood shed
in civil strife – yes, what excellent poetry. Don’t you all agree?

(No one replies.) I said, “Don’t you all agree?”

ALL. *(Saying various things all at once to concur – like, “Oh, yes.”
“Undoubtably.” “What a genius.” etc.)*

SENECA. *(Comes close to Nero, speaking confidentially.)* Nero, what
have you done?

NERO. *(Confidentially to Seneca.)* He was in my way, Seneca. As long as
my mother could shove him in my face, he was a threat.

SENECA. He was a boy.

NERO. He was a pawn. I reasoned that I was better off without him. Do
you like that? I used reason.

SENECA. Reason should not be used to justify murder. Have you
forgotten mercy?

NERO. Who is going to show me mercy, Seneca? Look around. The
plebeians may love me, but the court is a kettle of vultures. Everyone here
wants power, and yet, they have no idea what price comes with it.

SENECA. It is very wise to know the price of power, Nero. But use that
wisdom to move forward. There will be no peace of mind if you try to kill
every threat you see. If you did, eventually, you’d have an empire of one.

NERO. I require absolute loyalty. How else will I secure my safety?

SENECA. Killing will only bring more enemies. Governing with fear
doesn’t win any hearts. Think of your great-grandfather, Augustus. When
did he gain the most power?

NERO. *(Reluctantly.)* When he gave it away.

SENECA. Exactly. Augustus resigned as consul, but he remained the most
powerful man in Rome. Why? Because no one feared he would become a
tyrant. His shrewdness allowed people to believe that all his actions were
in the public interest, whether they were or not.

NERO. That does not seem terribly virtuous, Seneca.

SENECA. Wisdom occasionally trumps virtue, my boy. Look at your
guests. They see a dead boy on the ground, and now they wonder if they’re

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next. They'll fight for their lives. Don't you see? You've endangered yourself with this murder.

NERO. No, I believe I have purchased safety. (*To everyone.*) Guests, fellow Romans. The death of Britannicus reaffirms that I am your emperor. I alone. And you will treat me with all the respect and loyalty you would to a god. Is that clear? (*Pause.*) I said, is that clear?

ALL. (*But not all together.*) "Yes," "Of course, Nero."

NERO. Now, I want this mess cleaned up. Mother, you take care of it. (*Nero starts to exit, but Sabina comes forward to speak to him apart from the others.*)

SABINA. You have shown your strength to the world, my lord.

NERO. Sabina. So you approve of my . . . dispatch of my brother?

SABINA. I cannot see that you had a choice.

NERO. Sabina, from now on, you shall be my chief mistress. Come with me. (*Sabina and Nero exit. Others gather around Britannicus's dead body. Lights down. All exit in blackout.*)

SCENE 8

Seneca's quarters. Lights up on Seneca and Pompeia Paulina.

SENECA. I am such a fool. I should have seen this coming.

POMPEIA PAULINA. But none of us thought Nero was a killer.

SENECA. It's my fault.

POMPEIA PAULINA. Don't be silly.

SENECA. I thought Agrippina was a far greater threat than Nero. I never imagined.

POMPEIA PAULINA. Perhaps Agrippina made him feel threatened. Maybe she cornered him.

SENECA. How she could be so stupid is beyond me.

POMPEIA PAULINA. Nero seemed different tonight – angry.

SENECA. Anger is a kind of madness, like a falling rock which breaks itself into pieces upon the very thing it would crush. Nero's anger must be tempered.

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POMPEIA PAULINA. Surely he wouldn't kill again. If he does, someone will eventually stand against him.

SENECA. But who? Things have been going well. The new buildings he's erecting are magnificent. The empire is thriving, especially for the wealthy. When people are satisfied, they don't stand up to tyrants.

POMPEIA PAULINA. Perhaps you could rein him in yourself.

SENECA. What do you suggest I do?

POMPEIA PAULINA. Write something for him.

SENECA. He doesn't read anything I try to give him – I wrote a treatise on mercy and another on anger. Did he read either one of them? No.

POMPEIA PAULINA. You should write him a play. You spoke of it before. Show him he can't play with fire.

SENECA. What consequences may befall an emperor, Poppy? He is the end all, be all, of justice – whatever "justice" may be these days. Not even Agrippina has the power to oppose him.

POMPEIA PAULINA. (*Thinks for a moment.*) But mothers do have power. Perhaps you could rewrite the tale of Medea – to warn him. Women who feel betrayed will go mad, even kill their own children.

SENECA. Let's not give Agrippina any ideas. She's killed before.

POMPEIA PAULINA. Don't have it played in public. Simply have Nero read it.

SENECA. Nero doesn't read.

POMPEIA PAULINA. Have it played for him in private, with no explanation. Perhaps he will see it as a cautionary tale and will try to dampen Agrippina's influence.

SENECA. The story does give a compelling argument against revenge and letting one's anger spiral out of control.

POMPEIA PAULINA. If he kills again, he may very well unleash chaos. He will learn from this story.

SENECA. My fear, Poppy, is that Nero occasionally recognizes metaphors, and then comes to exactly the wrong conclusion.

POMPEIA PAULINA. You must try something.

SENECA. Yes. Or go down in history as the tyrant tutor. (*Pompeia Paulina kisses him on the cheek and exits. Seneca goes to his desk to*

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write.) All right. Medea . . . (Seneca starts writing. Nero enters and watches the play unfold. Seneca's play is performed as he writes.)

CREON. “What, is Medea not yet gone?

Still she is plotting evil. Well I know

Her guile, and well I know her cruel hand.

Who does she spare, or who let rest secure?

Truly I had thought to cut her off

With the swift sword, but Jason's prayers availed

To spare her life. She may go forth unharmed

If she will set our city free from fear.

Threatening and fierce, she seeks to speak with us;

Attendants, keep her off, bid her be still,

And let her learn at last, a king's commands

Must be obeyed. Go, take her hence.

MEDEA. “What fault is punished with my banishment?

CREON. “Only an innocent woman may ask, ‘What fault?’

MEDEA. “If you will judge, explain.

CREON. “Kings command – just or unjust. A king must be obeyed.

MEDEA. “An unjust kingdom never long endures.” (*Creon exits, Medea remains. Seneca pulls out more paper for a new scene. “Nurse” enters, speaking to Medea.*)

NURSE. “Lady, restrain your spirit so disturbed by ills,

And let your storm-tossed soul find rest.

MEDEA. “Rest I can never find until I see

All dragged with me to ruin; all shall fall

When I do; so to share one's woe is joy. (*Exit Nurse, Medea remains.*

Enter Jason.)

JASON. “She threatens from the roof; let fire be brought,

That she may perish burned with her own flames.

MEDEA. “Pile high the funeral pyre of your sons,

And rear their tomb. To Creon and your wife

I have already paid the honors due.

One son is dead, and the other shall soon be so,

And you shall see him perish.”

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NERO. Stop the play. Give me lights. (*Nero and Seneca look at each other for a beat. All exit.*)

SCENE 9

Sabina's quarters. Enter Sabina. She sits to read. Enter Agrippina.

AGRIPPINA. Sabina, a word with you, please.

SABINA. Yes, Agrippina?

AGRIPPINA. I have noted of late that Nero has been spending quite a bit of time with you.

SABINA. Yes?

AGRIPPINA. Sabina, you are a married woman, and Nero is a married man.

SABINA. Otho understands that a man cannot withhold his wife from the emperor's desires, Agrippina.

AGRIPPINA. You seem to delight in his acquiescence.

SABINA. Nero is a gifted lover, Madame, as I have heard you know.

AGRIPPINA. What do you accuse me of, you little strumpet?

SABINA. Dear lord, Agrippina. The nerve of you calling anyone a strumpet.

AGRIPPINA. You stay away from my son, Sabina. If I hear that you have been to his bed again, I will find you –

SABINA. And what? Kill me in my sleep? Your threats mean the only safe place for me is at Nero's side.

AGRIPPINA. Your husband will hear from me.

SABINA. Nero has asked me to divorce him. He wants me for himself.

AGRIPPINA. And what of Octavia?

SABINA. Perhaps you have taught us the most expedient way to happiness.

AGRIPPINA. You have neither the cleverness nor the audacity to do what I have done. You're a common gold digger.

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SABINA. Your influence wanes, Madame. Each moment Nero shares with me, he grows colder toward you. Soon, you will learn – Nero is no longer ruled by you. He loves me.

AGRIPPINA. Love. (*Laughs.*)

SABINA. A foreign concept to you, certainly.

AGRIPPINA. Whether he loves you or not, the emperor submits to no one.

SABINA. The time will come when Nero must choose. Will he choose an old woman who cannot give him a son? Don't make me laugh.

AGRIPPINA. Sabina, lovers are expendable to Nero – his mother is not.

SABINA. I believe he has shown that family is no barrier to execution.

AGRIPPINA. Don't forget – I warned you. (*Exit Agrippina. After a moment, Sabina exits.*)

SCENE 10

Nero's quarters. Enter Nero.

NERO. Now, to settle affairs with Octavia. Gods, why can't an emperor just snap his fingers and say, "There, now I am divorced"? Or "There, now I am married"? Why must we marry anyway? But Sabina insists, and she is such a delectable lover. (*Enter Seneca.*)

SENECA. You wanted to see me, Nero?

NERO. Seneca, I need you to draw up divorce papers for me.

SENECA. Whatever for?

NERO. I have a new wife in mind.

SENECA. Nero, you already have a rotating menagerie of guests in your bed. From the smell of it, someone was just here. (*Nero shrugs in good natured agreement.*) If you do not like Octavia, you may ignore her – you already do.

NERO. Yes, well, I'm ready to have an heir. I haven't ravished Octavia in ages. Not after I found Sabina.

SENECA. Otho's wife? How long has this been going on?

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NERO. I don't know. Who cares? Everyone thinks Octavia is this perfect Roman woman. She's an ice queen in bed and a humorless wench outside it. I need love in my life, Seneca. And Sabina is that love.

SENECA. What will Agrippina say?

NERO. Don't worry about Mother. Leave her to me.

SENECA. Be careful, my boy. Remember the lessons of *Medea*.

NERO. It was an excellent work. It is with *Medea* in mind that I have reason and control firmly in my grasp.

SENECA. Wonderful. I had hoped you'd like it.

NERO. You really should write more plays. I enjoyed it immensely.

SENECA. It is immodest of me to say how thrilled I am at your admiration.

NERO. To have the admiration of an emperor? Abandon your modesty, my friend.

SENECA. Thank you, Nero.

NERO. Listen, I know how boring it will be to write proclamations after such a thrilling play. . .

SENECA. Oh, it's just part of the job.

NERO. Excellent. Now, go write a proclamation of my divorce.

SENECA. Nero. . .

NERO. I cannot be dissuaded.

SENECA. The public will not be pleased.

NERO. The public does not get a say in the matter. Nor do you. You may go.

SENECA. Very well. (*Seneca exits. Enter Agrippina.*)

AGRIPPINA. Nero, my love. I received your letter. Truly, there was no need for such an effusive apology.

NERO. Seneca encouraged me to make up with you, Mother.

AGRIPPINA. Seneca is a good friend.

NERO. He wrote a play about what happens when anger goes beyond limits. It was quite good – much better than his typical moral vomit.

AGRIPPINA. Seneca will always serve you well, darling. Do not forget that.

NERO. Indeed. Mother – I have a gift for you.

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AGRIPPINA. A gift for me?

NERO. More than my body and adoration.

AGRIPPINA. My love, I am in awe of your generosity. What is this gift?

NERO. I remembered that you greatly admired a boat that a Sicilian captain harbored in Ostia the last time you were there. I had a replica made for you.

AGRIPPINA. You made me a boat?

NERO. Yes. Aren't you excited?

AGRIPPINA. Of course, my love. It's just such a surprise, that's all.

NERO. It would be a great honor if you would take it for a ride this afternoon. I will supply the men. You may bring whomever you'd like.

AGRIPPINA. Will you join me, Nero?

NERO. Alas, I cannot. I am occupied for the remainder of the day with news from across the empire. But another time, of course.

AGRIPPINA. At your leisure, my dear princeps. Thank you for this great gift. (*Agrippina kisses him, and Nero holds her longer than usual, as if he wants to hold her one last time. Agrippina pulls back.*) Nero, there will be time for more of your mother's milk tonight. Allow me to see my gift.

NERO. Goodbye, Mother. (*Agrippina exits. Enter Burrus.*)

BURRUS. Princeps, you sent for me?

NERO. Yes. Burrus. (*Finds and hands Burrus a scroll.*) Follow these instructions to the letter. (*Burrus reads the instructions.*) Any questions?

BURRUS. No, my duty is clear.

NERO. Very well. You may go. (*Exit Burrus. Nero recites from Medea.*)

"Well I know her guile, and well I know her cruel hand. Who does she spare, or who let rest secure?" Well, security shall soon be mine. (*Exit Nero.*)

SCENE 11

A beach. Enter Agrippina, wet from swimming to shore.

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AGRIPPINA. (*Falls to her knees.*) Earth, the beaten comfort of the half drowned. (*Enter Burrus.*) Burrus, thank the gods. The boat I was in capsized. I was lucky to escape the water.

BURRUS. I'm sorry to see you in such a state.

AGRIPPINA. I have seen many worse days.

BURRUS. I fear not, Madame.

AGRIPPINA. You "fear not"? (*Suspicious.*) Why are you here, Burrus?

BURRUS. Nero did not mean for you to return.

AGRIPPINA. What? Nero loves me.

BURRUS. As a tiger loves its prey.

AGRIPPINA. Oh gods, what mischief has my son played upon me?

BURRUS. Nero meant for you to drown.

AGRIPPINA. After everything I've done for him? Killed for him, lay with him, bore his monstrous fits and desires. Risked all hope of honor to make his power come to fruition. And how can *you* obey such an order? I made you. You and Seneca both. How do you dare kill the woman who put you in line for power?

BURRUS. I cannot disobey him.

AGRIPPINA. Of course. You're just like all the praetorians. Duty before right or wrong.

BURRUS. Do you lecture me about right and wrong? Don't forget – it was the praetorians that killed Caligula. We know when a purge needs to be made and when to protect Rome from its enemies.

AGRIPPINA. Am I the enemy of Rome?

BURRUS. Just as Caligula was.

AGRIPPINA. Is there nothing more I can do for the mighty lord Burrus?

(*Agrippina tries to turn on her charm and seductive powers.*) Even the great master of the praetorian guard must have some desires that remain unchecked. I make a man feel things he didn't know he could feel.

(*Kissing him.*) Come along, Burrus. You're a man. It is impossible for you to feel nothing when you're near me.

BURRUS. He was right about you. You are the enemy.

AGRIPPINA. (*Putting her hands on him.*) Oh Burrus, an enemy?

BURRUS. Stop, Madame.

SENECA AND THE SOUL OF NERO

AGRIPPINA. You don't really mean that.

BURRUS. Madame –

AGRIPPINA. Let me show you what it means to be a man. (*Burrus pushes her away and unsheathes his dagger.*) Have mercy, for pity's sake. I beg you.

BURRUS. No man may grant mercy but the emperor, and he has sentenced you to death.

AGRIPPINA. And nothing can dissuade you?

BURRUS. Nothing.

AGRIPPINA. Then, aim for the place where the monster was made. (*Agrippina takes his hand and aims the dagger's point at her womb. Burrus stabs Agrippina. She falls and dies.*)

END OF ACT 1

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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