



SOCRATES

BY **TIM BLAKE
NELSON**



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PLAY SERVICE
INC.

SOCRATES
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*For my mother, Ruth Nelson
B.A. Philosophy '58, Bryn Mawr College*

The world premiere of SOCRATES was presented by the Public Theater (Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director; Patrick Willingham, Executive Director), opening in April 2019. It was directed by Doug Hughes, the set design was by Scott Pask, the costume design was by Catherine Zuber, the lighting design was by Tyler Micoleau, the sound design and original music were by Mark Bennett, and the production stage manager was Theresa Flanagan. The cast was as follows:

SOCRATES	Michael Stuhlbarg
PLATO	Teagle F. Bougere
A BOY	Niall Cunningham
PROXENUS/ARISTOPHANES/GORGIAS	Tom Nelis
XANTHIPPE	Miriam A. Hyman
THE ARCHON/MEGASTHENES	Lee Wilkof
ALCIBIADES/SIMMIAS	Austin Smith
AGATHON/MENO	Joe Tapper
ERYXIMACHUS/ANYTUS/GUARD	David Aaron Baker
CRITO/CHAEREPHON/MELETUS THE ELDER	Robert Joy
AENESIDEMOS/LAMPROCLES	Karl Green
DIOKLES/MELETUS	Dave Quay
LYCON/THRASYMACHUS/POLUS	Peter Jay Fernandez
ANDROMACHUS/AETIOS	Alan Mendez
ENSEMBLE	Daniel Reece, Ro Boddie

SOCRATES was developed with the support of New York Stage and Film & Vassar’s Powerhouse Season, Summer 2016.

CHARACTERS

SOCRATES

PLATO

A BOY

PROXENUS

XANTHIPPE

THE ARCHON

Followers of Socrates

ALCIBIADES

AGATHON

ARISTOPHANES

ERYXIMACHUS

CRITO

APOLLODORUS

ARISTEDEMUS

PAUSANIUS

CHAEREPHON

AENESIDEMOS

ANTISTHENES

SIMMIAS

Followers of Socrates and Eventual Tyrants

DIOKLES

THERAMENES

CRITIAS

The Accusers

ANYTUS

LYCON

MELETUS

The Interlocutors

MENO

THRASYMACHUS

POLYMEDES

MELETUS THE ELDER

MEGASTHENES

GORGIAS

CALLICLES

POLUS

Others

ANDROMACHUS

ANDROCLES

LAMPROCLES

SOPHRONISCUS

AETIOS

POISONER

GUARD

VARIOUS COUNCIL AND CROWD MEMBERS

SERVANTS AND REVELERS

NOTE

The play should be performed fluidly, boisterously, and with pace. A theatrical inventiveness is essential, as is a driving passion for the ideas and arguments. Though a play of many words, it is not to be performed as a series of inert conversations, but rather as mental struggle assayed eagerly, often with humor and sometimes rage. The stakes could not be higher, leading eventually to a great thinker's life being held in the balance.

Theaters are encouraged to cast as many or as few actors as works for the production. Gender- and racially diverse casting is also encouraged.

SOCRATES

ACT ONE

Lights reveal a Boy, fifteen. Plato and Proxenus stand apart.

PROXENUS. It's certainly not how I expected it.

PLATO. Athens?

PROXENUS. Athens. Yes.

PLATO. We've been through a great deal.

PROXENUS. There's an unease in your city.

PLATO. You're not wrong.

PROXENUS. But we're extremely grateful.

PLATO. As am I, if the boy's reputation is to be believed.

PROXENUS. I'll let you be the judge. His father was a remarkable man.

PLATO. So I've been told.

PROXENUS. He would have wanted me to bring the boy here. To you. He has some ideas he's written down...

PLATO. I'm eager to read them.

Pause.

Was there something else?

PROXENUS. No. It's just—

PLATO. Please.

PROXENUS. His father was a physician. Physician to the king. I know you don't have that sort of thing here.

Pause.

A king.

PLATO. I'm familiar with the concept, and certainly appreciate its efficiencies.

PROXENUS. The boy loved his father. Followed him everywhere. A man of science and facts.

PLATO. Yes.

PROXENUS. He gave the boy things I simply can't, which is partly why I've brought him to you. It's been...

PLATO. I can imagine.

PROXENUS. Like his father, he can be unforgiving. Relentless.

PLATO. I'll manage.

Pause.

PROXENUS. I'm sure you will.

Proxenus leaves.

PLATO. Well then. Here we are.

Silence.

Have you been here before?

No response.

Have you been to Athens before?

Pause.

How are you finding it? The city?

BOY. I find it murderous.

PLATO. Murderous?

BOY. In every face. A city that killed its greatest thinker. Killed him like a traitor. Why did they do that?

PLATO. This is not a topic I wish to discuss.

BOY. Because you're not capable? It's somehow too daunting for the great Plato?

PLATO. No.

BOY. Because you're an Athenian?

PLATO. What's that supposed to mean?

BOY. You're an Athenian. The Athenians killed him. My question therefore implicates you, especially in the context of a democracy

where leaders and their actions are promulgated as representing the people's will.

A pause.

PLATO. This is not beginning well.

BOY. In Macedonia they reported it to have been inevitable. I find that troubling.

PLATO. Troubling?

BOY. Meaning there was no other option.

PLATO. I know the meaning of the word inevitable.

BOY. So? He had to die? Did he?

Plato does not respond.

It's a simple question.

PLATO. You know nothing of democracy. You couldn't possibly, not having lived in one. And it's not a simple question.

BOY. Why?

PLATO. Because nothing about him was simple. He was in fact utterly confounding.

BOY. How?

PLATO. We're not—No.

BOY. Please.

A long pause.

PLATO. He was both ugly and beautiful, crass and eloquent, unkempt and impeccable. Unspeakably, arrogantly rude, and we all loved him desperately. Will that suffice?

BOY. It doesn't answer the question.

PLATO. He had every opportunity not to die. Time and again we begged him. You can't imagine the heartbreak.

BOY. Then?

PLATO. This isn't the purpose of—

BOY. Why would I come here...to study with you—

PLATO. That has yet to be agreed on. If your guardian didn't explain, I'm evaluating you.

BOY. Evaluate all you want. Why would I listen to any of what

you have to say without knowing why you even remain in a city that—

PLATO. Enough.

BOY. That would kill the man to whom you've devoted your life? A city that supposedly allows people to speak as they choose. And couldn't they do the same to you? To me?

PLATO. I don't yet know you, and I'm not him.

BOY. You've spent your life writing his words.

PLATO. Have I?

BOY. Almost every dialogue is filled with what he said.

PLATO. Most of them aren't actually.

BOY. That's a lie.

PLATO. I assure you it's not.

BOY. In every single one—

PLATO. He's the main character, yes.

BOY. So you can't spend a few minutes...

PLATO. It would be a lot more than a few minutes.

BOY. ...speaking about your own teacher?

PLATO. He wasn't my teacher.

BOY. Another lie.

PLATO. Enough with that. The fact is he would despise me for the very relationship you and I now seem to be negotiating. You were going to show me—Your guardian said you'd written some—

BOY. Why would he have been against your teaching me?

PLATO. My teaching anyone. Anyone teaching anyone.

BOY. Now I have to know.

PLATO. And I'm telling you—

The Boy rises.

Where are you going?

BOY. I'll learn more walking the city. I could speak with any stranger and get more than these mumbling prevarications.

PLATO. “Prevarications”?

And the Boy is gone.

Wait.

He returns.

I’ve determined there might be some use in it.

BOY. You’ve determined?

PLATO. Some terms though. Ones that I set, and not you.

BOY. May I hear them?

PLATO. That when we’re done, we work.

BOY. What else would we do?

PLATO. And that you truly listen. To understand, really to understand, this can’t just be about him, because you were right: As with any society that supposes leaders reflect its will, it’ll involve the city where you hope to study. A city that’s still recovering, as your guardian was wise enough to observe, from years of turmoil: plague, war, even tyranny.

BOY. Tyranny?

PLATO. So few understand what it was really like—and certainly not you with your needling presumptions. Even those who lived through it still grapple with whether our system has any of its self-proclaimed efficacy at all. Democracy when it was new and messy and fragile, filled with nervous wrath.

A pause.

And I loved him beyond what I could possibly describe which, if you must know, is why it’s difficult for me even to dare try. And I speak as the one who betrayed him in perhaps the worst way possible.

BOY. You betrayed him?

PLATO. In a sense I betrayed him more profoundly and lastingly than Athens did.

BOY. How?

PLATO. In time. In time. But above all, you must have patience, for in spite of how you’re coming off right now, there is much you don’t know.

SOCRATES

by Tim Blake Nelson

15 men, 1 woman (doubling, flexible casting)

SOCRATES is a witty and endlessly fascinating drama about a complicated man who changed how the Western world thought. This powerful play is an intellectual thrill ride from the philosopher's growing prominence in democratic Athens through the military and social upheavals that led to one of the most infamous executions in Western history. SOCRATES is a passionate tribute to the man who continues to inspire us to question authority and defend freedom of belief.

"Argument and inquiry are the engines of Nelson's SOCRATES... this is a play that hums with intelligence. ...As the play outlines Socrates' life and how he met his end, it shows what it looks like when a democracy responds with mortal force to someone who dares to question it, shutting him up by condemning him to death."

—The New York Times

"When the ancient arguments take center stage...they're still as pointed as knitting needles, poking illuminating holes in familiar, sanctimonious notions of democracy, morality, wisdom, and power. ...SOCRATES is engaging in its intellectual commitment to the rigor and nuance of its subject's thinking. ...it lets us think alongside a magnificent, humane thinker, and in a world so hungry for generous, rational thought, that's something."

—New York Magazine

"...a treasure trove of ideas bantered, tossed, shredded and otherwise analyzed... SOCRATES is hypnotically fascinating in its steady march toward its tragic denouement."

—TheatreScene.net

Also by Tim Blake Nelson
EYE OF GOD
THE GREY ZONE

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