

PERSEPHONE UNDERGROUND

A one-act drama by
Carol S. Lashof

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www.youthplays.com
info@youthplays.com
424-703-5315

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

PERSEPHONE, a goddess, Demeter's daughter.

DEMETER, goddess of the harvest.

HADES' SON

An ensemble of six or more (1+ male and 5+ females) may play the following characters:

IRIS, a goddess, messenger between gods and mortals.

HERMES, a god, escorts the dead to Hades.

ATHENIAN GIRLS (MYRHINNE, AMARYLLIS, SOPHIA)

HIPPOLYTA

THESEUS

OTHER MORTALS

TIME

The mythic past.

PLACE

Athens, its environs, and the Underworld. All locales may be created by the ensemble.

NOTES

Incidental music for this play has been composed by James McCarthy. It is scored for string quartet and piano, and is available from the composer. <www.jamesmccarthy.co.uk>

The current version of *Persephone Underground* premiered December 29, 2007 at Peking University in Beijing, China. It was produced by the Peking University Institute of World Theatre and Film <beijingrep.com> and directed by Jack Young.

A previous version of the play premiered March 6, 1997 at Young People's Theater of Ann Arbor, Michigan. The production was directed by Kate Mendeloff with musical direction by Benjamin Cohen and choreography by Suzanne Willets. Much thanks to Kate Mendeloff, Cliff Mayotte, and the students in Cliff Mayotte's spring 2007 drama class at Lick-Wilmerding High School in San Francisco for assistance in developing this play. And much thanks to Saint Mary's College of California for a sabbatical leave which allowed me to complete it.

SCENE 1

(The stage is dark except for a light on PERSEPHONE, who is drawn towards the entrance of a cave by a faint melody. She stops and stands transfixed, listening. Lights rise as MYRHINNE, AMARYLLIS, and SOPHIA enter, chattering excitedly, their arms full of flowers. It is late afternoon on a bright spring day.)

SOPHIA: Would you want to be her if you could?

AMARYLLIS: Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons? Of course! Wouldn't you?

SOPHIA: She's not the queen of the Amazons anymore.

MYRHINNE: Soon she'll be queen of Athens. That's a lot better.

SOPHIA: Do you think so?

AMARYLLIS: She'll be married to Theseus! That's better than being queen of a tribe of warrior women.

(Sophia has noticed Persephone and is watching her curiously.)

SOPHIA: Persephone? What is it?

PERSEPHONE: Don't you hear it?

SOPHIA: Hear what?

PERSEPHONE: The music...

(Persephone starts to move towards the cave. Amaryllis grabs her arm.)

AMARYLLIS: Don't go in there.

MYRHINNE: You won't find flowers in there. Only mushrooms and creeping things.

AMARYLLIS: Things that live in the damp and the dark.

(The music from the cave grows a little louder and ever more inviting.)

MYRHINNE: Stay here.

AMARYLLIS: With us.

PERSEPHONE: But I want...

SOPHIA: You can't just wander off.

MYRHINNE: Not when your mother is the goddess of the harvest...

AMARYLLIS: Even if you were just anybody's daughter...

SOPHIA: Come on, Persephone. We'll be late for the wedding. Your mother will be angry.

MYRHINNE: And when Demeter gets angry...

PERSEPHONE: We don't have to leave yet. It's still early.

MYRHINNE: We're all leaving.

AMARYLLIS: You can't stay here by yourself.

PERSEPHONE: Why not?

MYRHINNE: Things happen.

SOPHIA: People don't come back. Or they come back but they're different.

MYRHINNE: You could be stolen away by eagles, or you might get turned into a tree or...

PERSEPHONE: It might be nice to be a tree.

MYRHINNE: Don't be silly.

PERSEPHONE: To stretch your roots down into the earth...
To stand up straight against the sky...

AMARYLLIS: It'll be dark soon.

PERSEPHONE: To be the tallest tree on earth...to stretch your branches to the sun...

AMARYLLIS: There could be something lurking in the dark. It might look like a rock.

MYRHINNE: Or a shadow. Or a bush.

AMARYLLIS: But it could be anything.

SOPHIA: Come on, Persephone. Your mother has to bless the king's marriage tonight, and you're supposed to be standing by her side. You had better not still be out here pretending to be a tree.

(Reluctantly, Persephone turns her back on the cave and follows the other girls offstage.)

SCENE 2

(DEMETER stands in the doorway of her temple, scanning the horizon. As Persephone approaches, Demeter points into the distance.)

DEMETER: Look there. What do you see?

PERSEPHONE: Wheat growing.

DEMETER: I see bread. Brown loaves that steam when they are broken open. The harvest will be good this year.

PERSEPHONE: The harvest is always good in Athens.

DEMETER: This year there will be plenty beyond anyone's imagining – in honor of King Theseus and his queen. *(Pause.)* Where have you been? It's late.

PERSEPHONE: Gathering flowers. For the wedding.

(Persephone holds out a garland of flowers to her mother.)

Do you think that Hippolyta will miss her home? That she'll miss being queen of her own tribe?

DEMETER: Mortals aren't always free to choose. Be glad that you're a goddess.

PERSEPHONE: Don't you ever miss living with other gods?

DEMETER: On Mount Olympus? No. The atmosphere there's too rarefied. You take a deep breath—nothing but thin air. Here, you breathe and your lungs fill with the perfume of hyacinth and lilies and the warmth of the earth.

PERSEPHONE: Do you ever wish that we could be mortals?

DEMETER: And allow death to take you from me? Oh, no. Never.

PERSEPHONE: But everyone here is mortal. All of my friends...

DEMETER: There are many advantages to being a goddess among mortal men and women. You'll see.

(Demeter places the garland on Persephone's head. She takes a step back and admires her daughter.)

Already you outshine Hippolyta. What a beautiful bride you will be. *(Pause.)* Someday.

PERSEPHONE: Do you think I will marry a hero, like Theseus? A man who slays monsters, the lord of an empire?

DEMETER: Certainly. Why not?

PERSEPHONE: A mortal? Not a god like my father?

DEMETER: The desirable gods all have several wives already, not to mention numerous children by earthly girls.

PERSEPHONE: But it's strange to think of marrying someone who...will...die.

DEMETER: Oh, death is a blessing if you look at it right. When you live forever, there's plenty of time to get bored with your wife.

PERSEPHONE: But surely, when you love someone...

DEMETER: Better to be adored on earth than taken for granted on Mount Olympus.

PERSEPHONE: But then if there is someone...someday...

DEMETER: There will be. Someday.

PERSEPHONE: And...then what?

DEMETER: Then...he will have to prove to me that he is worthy of you.

PERSEPHONE: And me? What do I do?

DEMETER: You? Nothing.

PERSEPHONE: But I want...

DEMETER: What?

PERSEPHONE: Nothing. Never mind.

DEMETER: Go on, then. Get ready.

(Persephone walks away towards the temple. Demeter stands still watching her go.)

All of Athens will see how beautiful you are.

SCENE 3

(A moonlit evening. The wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. With THESEUS watching from his throne, Demeter, Persephone, and the MORTALS perform a dance celebrating the fertility of the earth and the victory of Theseus over the Amazons. HIPPOLYTA is now led in by an honor guard. The Athenian Girls surround her, offering her flower garlands. Hippolyta sees Persephone standing slightly apart from the others. She approaches her, and Persephone holds out the garland with which Demeter had crowned Persephone in the previous scene. Hippolyta takes the garland and places it on her own head. She exchanges a look with Persephone that might be a look of warning. She dances first with Persephone and then alone. Her dance becomes increasingly wild until it is stopped by the intervoention of Theseus.)

THESEUS: Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling.

(Theseus takes the hand of his bride and presents her to the crowd. As a joyous crowd encircles the bride and groom, Persephone turns and runs away.)

SCENE 4

(The meadow. HADES' SON emerges from the cave. As far as possible, his appearance should suggest both his divinity and his other – [or more precisely under –]worldliness. Utterly quiet, he sits on the ground as Persephone enters running. Breathless, she pauses before approaching the entrance of the cave. She is about to enter when she sees Hades' Son.)

HADES' SON: Hello.

PERSEPHONE: Hello.

HADES' SON: Where were you running to?

PERSEPHONE: I don't know.

HADES' SON: Are you running away?

(Persephone shrugs uncertainly.)

PERSEPHONE: Everyone seemed to think it was such a beautiful wedding.

HADES' SON: Whose wedding was it?

PERSEPHONE: Don't you know?

(He shakes his head.)

Where did you come from?

(He gestures towards the cave.)

You live there? In that cave?

HADES' SON: No. Underground.

PERSEPHONE: No one lives underground. Except the shadows of the dead. *(Pause.)* And Hades. Their king. But you are too young to be him.

HADES' SON: I am not a shadow.

(He stretches his hand towards her. She draws back.)

My father says I am never to come above ground, but it's so beautiful – the surface of the earth, all silver and shadow. And the breeze is so soft.

PERSEPHONE: If you could see it in the daylight, the colors would dazzle you.

HADES' SON: They would blind me. The sunlight would blind me.

(She utters a wordless cry of pity and reaches towards him.)

PERSEPHONE: It must be awful to live underground.

HADES' SON: Oh, no! There's a glorious world there. There are waterfalls a thousand feet high and vast caverns where the softest whisper echoes forever. There's a cliff formed of pure obsidian and a river of molten lead –

PERSEPHONE: If it's so wonderful down there, then why are you sitting here in the dark, sighing for a whiff of fresh air?

HADES' SON: Because the air is sweet.

(He reaches for the blossoms that are tucked into her sash. She undoes her sash and lets the blossoms fall. He gathers them up.)

PERSEPHONE: They're Narcissus. Named for the boy who died of love for his own reflection.

HADES' SON: Yes, I know the story. He saw his own face reflected in a pool of water. And fell in love. And died of longing.

PERSEPHONE: And Echo pined away for love of him because she could not tell her love. She hid silently in the shadows until she became a shadow herself with no body, a shadow of a voice with no words of her own.

HADES' SON: If she had come out of the shadows, if she had spoken to him...

PERSEPHONE: If he had looked up and seen her there...

HADES' SON: Would she have run away?

PERSEPHONE: Would he have been afraid of the love in her eyes?

HADES' SON: Why wouldn't he be flooded with gladness?

PERSEPHONE: Why shouldn't she fly to his arms?

(The voices of the Athenian Girls are heard offstage, calling for Persephone.)

I have to go.

HADES' SON: Why?

PERSEPHONE: My friends are looking for me. If they find me here with you...

HADES' SON: What would they do?

PERSEPHONE: Shhh.

(The voices seem for a moment to be coming closer; then they begin to recede into the distance.)

When I was here earlier, I heard the strangest music. It seemed to be coming from under the earth.

HADES' SON: Come with me?

PERSEPHONE: To the Underworld?

HADES' SON: It's a world of endless adventure...

(He holds out his hand to her. She holds back.)

PERSEPHONE: I've heard that no one comes back from the Underworld.

HADES' SON: That's not true. You can come and go as you please-so long as you don't eat anything grown from the earth

while you're there. Every bite of fruit, anything with roots in the ground, binds your soul more tightly to Hades.

(Persephone shudders.)

Of course, the truth is that we don't have much in the way of fresh fruits and vegetables down below anyway. Naturally, we live mostly on ambrosia, my father and I.

PERSEPHONE: Who is your father?

HADES' SON: The king of the Underworld.

PERSEPHONE: *(Horrified:)* Hades? You are the son of Hades?

HADES' SON: Yes.

PERSEPHONE: I heard he had a son, but I thought...

(She trails off, stops, embarrassed.)

HADES' SON: Yes? What?

PERSEPHONE: Oh, you know. People say things.

HADES' SON: What do they say?

(Pause. He waits for her to continue speaking.)

PERSEPHONE: They say that...that your mother was a shade, that you were brewed in a cauldron and nursed on the roots of trees...

HADES' SON: That's true.

PERSEPHONE: And they say that your father is ashamed of you and keeps your existence a secret. That he has given you no name so that no one will trouble to know you.

HADES' SON: That's also true. *(Pause.)* Do they say anything else?

PERSEPHONE: Only that...that you are deformed and ugly. *(Pause.)* But that's not true.

(The voices of Persephone's friends are heard coming closer again, more urgent and anxious now.)

You'd better go.

HADES' SON: Come with me! *(Pause.)* You'll be back before dawn.

PERSEPHONE: I can't...

HADES' SON: Why not? *(Pause.)* You're a goddess. What do you have to fear in the land of the dead?

(He holds out his hand. She hesitates.)

Come with me?

(He stands still and quiet, waiting for her. Nervously, she takes his hand. They exit together into the cave. Amaryllis, Myrhinne, and Sophia enter, searching and calling.)

SOPHIA: Did you see something move? *(Pointing:)* Over there.

AMARYLLIS: It's just a badger.

MYRHINNE: I thought I heard —

AMARYLLIS: If you weren't making so much noise yourself —

SOPHIA: Shhh!

(All three stand still and quiet for a moment.)

MYRHINNE: Maybe she went home. Maybe she was tired.

(Sophia approaches the entrance of the cave. She spots Persephone's sash lying on the ground. Startled, she picks it up.)

SOPHIA: Oh! Do you think she might have...?

(Sophia takes a step into the mouth of the cave, and then jumps back startled.)

AMARYLLIS: What's in there?

SOPHIA: Just bats. I think.

MYRHINNE: Let's go back to town. She's not out here.

AMARYLLIS: And if she's not at home either?

MYRHINNE: Then we'll tell Demeter.

(Myrhinne turns to go and Amaryllis follows her. Sophia hesitates for just a moment, looking back at the cave, and then she too follows Myrhinne offstage.)

SCENE 5

(Under the earth en route to the land of the dead. The landscape of the Underworld may be formed by the ensemble. There might be a suggestion of souls on their way down to the depths of Hades flitting just out of sight in the shadows or around the next bend. A few steps ahead of Persephone, Hades' Son rounds a corner. Persephone pauses to catch her breath and look around. Demeter enters searching for Persephone.)

DEMETER: Persephone! Persephone!

PERSEPHONE: Mother! What are you doing here?

DEMETER: Are you all right?

PERSEPHONE: I'm fine.

DEMETER: What happened to you?

PERSEPHONE: Nothing. I just...

DEMETER: I've been looking all over...

HADES' SON (OFF): Persephone?

DEMETER: Who's that?

(Persephone hesitates for a moment and is about to speak when Hades' Son enters.)

HADES' SON: There you are! I was afraid you...*(sees Demeter:)* Oh!

PERSEPHONE: This is my mother. Demeter.

HADES' SON: Pleased to meet you.

(Demeter looks at him for a moment. She speaks to Persephone.)

DEMETER: He's the child of Hades, isn't he?

PERSEPHONE: Yes! Do you know him?

DEMETER: Hades does not allow anyone to know his son.

(Silence.)

PERSEPHONE: He's going to show me the Underworld. We're going to visit the obsidian cliffs and swim in a silver lake where—

HADES' SON: I'll make sure she's back before dawn.

DEMETER: She is coming back with me now.

PERSEPHONE: No. Not yet. I want to see the river of fire and ice and the cavern of a thousand eyes and—

DEMETER: Persephone, you have no idea of the danger...

PERSEPHONE: I'm an immortal. What danger is there for me in the Underworld?

HADES' SON: I'll keep her safe.

(Demeter glances at him sharply and then continues talking to Persephone, ignoring Hades' Son.)

DEMETER: If Hades gets a hold of your soul ...

PERSEPHONE: He won't. I'll be back before daybreak.

DEMETER: That's what this child of Hades says, but how can you believe him? He's the bastard son of death!

PERSEPHONE: I can leave whenever I want...

DEMETER: Then leave with me now!

PERSEPHONE: I don't want to.

DEMETER: Whether you want to or not, you're coming with me.

PERSEPHONE: No. I'm going to explore the Underworld.

(Persephone takes Hades' Son by the hand.)

DEMETER: You don't know what you're getting into.

PERSEPHONE: Then I'll find out.

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DEMETER: If you allow that vile nameless creature to lead you away with him—

PERSEPHONE: He is not a creature! He's a god like you and me.

(Persephone turns and starts to walk away with Hades' Son down the passageway.)

DEMETER: Persephone, I'm warning you...

(Persephone stops but does not turn around.)

If you don't come back right now...

(Persephone continues walking.)

Then don't come back again. Ever.

(Persephone continues walking. Demeter hesitates for a brief moment, then turns on her heel and strides away. Persephone stops and turns back. She watches her mother walk away. When Demeter is almost out of sight, Persephone takes a step to follow her.)

Mother!

HADES' SON: Let her go.

PERSEPHONE: But she's my mother.

HADES' SON: You're not a child any longer. What do you need a mother for?

(Persephone and Hades' Son move further into the Underworld. They remain visible onstage while above ground, Demeter turns her back on the earth, and it begins to die.)

SCENE 6

(A drab colorless day. Myrhinne and Amaryllis are sitting in the meadow outside the mouth of the cave, plucking at wilted wildflowers and bickering listlessly. There's a basket on the ground next to them.)

MYRHINNE: I wish it would rain.

AMARYLLIS: We should have followed Persephone. We shouldn't have let her go.

MYRHINNE: If you hadn't been so eager to dance with every boy at the wedding—

AMARYLLIS: Maybe if you hadn't been so eager to run and tell everything to Demeter—

MYRHINNE: She would have found out eventually.

AMARYLLIS: There must be some way we could get a message to Persephone. Tell her that Demeter is punishing everybody on earth because she ran away. She would come back then, don't you think?

MYRHINNE: Maybe she can't come back. Maybe she's a prisoner.

(Sophia emerges from inside the cave. Amaryllis sees her first and cries out in surprise.)

AMARYLLIS: Sophia! Where did you come from?

SOPHIA: I was trying to find a way down...you know, to look for Persephone.

MYRHINNE: *(Horried:)* Down to the Underworld?

SOPHIA: There's a tunnel—it goes for about fifty feet, and then it just...ends.

(Sophia flops down on the ground next to the other two girls. They sit silently for a moment; then Amaryllis stands and picks up the basket.)

AMARYLLIS: I think I'll try the blackberry patch over by the river on the other side of town. Maybe there's still something left over there.

MYRHINNE: I'll come with you.

SOPHIA: Me too.

(They all stand up and begin crossing the stage.)

AMARYLLIS: See all the scratches I got yesterday – all for a handful of dried up berries.

MYRHINNE: It feels like a storm is coming.

SOPHIA: It felt like that yesterday. And the day before. But the feeling just hangs in the air and nothing happens.

(They exit.)

SCENE 7

(Underground. Persephone and Hades' Son are walking through a narrow passageway. Less time has passed for them than for the mortals above ground.)

PERSEPHONE: But I have to call you something...don't I?

HADES' SON: I've been nameless always. I don't think I'd know myself by any name... Watch your step. There's a steep drop off to your left.

(They walk on in silence for a moment.)

PERSEPHONE: Was your mother really a shade? A dead soul?

HADES' SON: Yes. *(Pause.)* We're almost to the waterfall. Can you hear it?

PERSEPHONE: Where are they all? The souls of the dead.

HADES' SON: Below. In the lower depths.

PERSEPHONE: Do you ever go there? To visit your mother?

HADES' SON: The air down there is too thick with heat and dust. It's not fit for gods to breathe.

PERSEPHONE: And she doesn't come up here?

HADES' SON: No.

(Pause.)

PERSEPHONE: And your father? Does he...?

HADES' SON: I don't see him very much. *(Quickly:)* Careful. It's a bit slippery here.

(He takes her hand to steady her. They vanish from sight.)

SCENE 8

(The meadow is now utterly dry and brown. Groups of MORTALS, gaunt and wan, are foraging for food. They address the audience.)

MORTALS: In vain, the oxen plow the bone-dry soil;
the earth yields not a single blade of wheat.
In vain, the infant suckles at the breast;
his efforts do not bring a taste of milk.
The pregnant woman labors through the night,
but all in vain! The unborn child has starved.
The king insists the stores of grain are gone.
The gods have long since had our last thin goat.
There's nothing left to eat but ants, that's all.
That's all there is: just ants and grubs and hunger.

(Isolated in her temple and clothed in dark robes, Demeter mourns. IRIS approaches the entrance of the temple and calls out.)

IRIS: Demeter! Demeter! It's me, Iris. Let me in.

DEMETER: Go away.

IRIS: Listen to me. I have a message from Zeus.

DEMETER: I told you to go away.

(Iris slips around the side and enters through a window.)

IRIS: Zeus sent me to tell you –

DEMETER: I don't take orders from Zeus!

IRIS: The message is from all of us, from all the gods. We beg you to take pity –

DEMETER: I am bereft of pity—as I am bereft of my daughter. Zeus has allowed Hades to steal her from me.

IRIS: So you would steal the means to live from all the tribes of men?

DEMETER: It's not stealing to keep what's mine. The fruits of the earth are mine to give. Or not.

IRIS: Zeus is angry. Because of the drought, mortal men have nothing to sacrifice to the gods.

DEMETER: Should my heart bleed because the Olympians lack their customary tributes? I have lost my only daughter. Tell Zeus: when Persephone is returned to me, then the mortals will have their harvest and the gods will have their tributes.

IRIS: If she went willingly, then Zeus cannot force her to return.

DEMETER: She did not go willingly. She was tricked. Stolen. Lured away by Hades and his whelp. She who was the most beautiful of all the children of Zeus—now she makes her bed with worms. Would she do that willingly? (*Pause.*) They must be punished. Both of them. Banished. Hades and his wretched son. Cast out of the pantheon. Tell Zeus.

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