

THIS EARTHEN BOWL

**A stage adaption of
Edward Fitzgerald's
"Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam"**

by

Scot McPhie

CHARACTERS

Omar

A Porter/Angel

A Potter

The stage is framed by a series of legs and borders of white curtain like material draping down a little languidly - each set, moving upstage,

closes the space in just a little. Sleeping on a low stretcher bed up centre is OMAR, wearing traditional Persian robes. The down right leg has vines growing up it with a lot of leaves, and grapes and rose flowers showing amongst them - there is also a human skull positioned just below head height. Next to the leg is a column about 5 feet high, with a clay chalice on top, and next to that a slightly shorter column with a jug of wine. This whole down right region has a slight leafy-decal effect in it's lighting. Down left in front of that leg is about half a dozen pots each about two or three feet high, and next to them on the ground a stone tablet for working wet clay. The stage area is covered in rose petals sprinkled everywhere and is very very dimly lit - in a pre-dawn state - from this a shaft of light breaks through from the down left side and partly strikes OMAR - the PORTER/ANGEL enters from up left - he is dressed in white robes with visible wings - he kneels on one knee beside the bed and addresses OMAR in hurried whispered tones

P/A: Awake! for morning in the bowl of night has flung the stone that puts the stars to flight - and lo!.....the hunter of the east has caught the Sultan's turret in a noose of light

The PORTER/ANGEL exits and OMAR wakes and sits up - the lights build fairly quickly

OMAR: Dreaming when dawn's left hand was in the sky, I heard a voice within the tavern cry, "Awake, my little ones, and fill the cup - before life's liquor in it's cup be dry"

And as the cock crew, those who stood before the tavern shouted - "Open then the door! - you know how little while we have to stay, and once departed, may return no more"

OMAR stands up and walks down stage - the lights have now built to a morning state

OMAR: Now the new year reviving old desires - the thoughtful soul to solitude retires - where the white hand of Moses on the bough puts out, and Jesus from the ground suspires

Iram indeed is gone with all his rose - and Jamshyd's sev'n-ring'd cup where? - no one knows - but still a ruby kindles the vine, and many a garden by the water blows

And David's lips are lock't - but in divine high piping pehlevi, with "wine! wine! wine!" - "Red wine!" - the nightingale cries to the rose, that yellow cheek of hers to incarnadine

He crosses towards the chalice

OMAR: Come - fill the cup - and in the fire of spring your winter garment of repentance fling - the bird of time has but a little way to fly, and lo! the

bird is on the wing

And look - a thousand blossoms with the day woke, and a thousand
scatter'd into clay.....and this first summer month that brings the rose shall
take Jamshyd and Kaikobad away

He moves back towards centre

OMAR: But come with old Khayyam and leave the lot of Kaikobad and
Khaikosru forgot - let Rustum lay about him as he will, or Hatim Tai cry
supper - heed not you

With me along the strip of herbage strown, that just divides the desert from
the sown - where name of slave and Sultan is forgot, and pity Sultan
Mahmud on his throne

Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough - a flask of wine, a book of
verse, and thou beside me singing in the wilderness.....and wilderness is
paradise enow

"How sweet is mortal sovranity!" - think some - others - "how blest the
paradise to come!" - ah, take the cash in hand and wave the rest.....oh, the
brave music of a distant drum!

He crosses back towards the down right leg

OMAR: Look to the rose that blows about us - "Lo, laughing", she says, "into
the world I blow - at once the silken tassel of my purse tear, and it's
treasure on the garden throw"

And those who husbanded the golden grain - and those who flung it to the
winds like rain - alike to no such aureate earth are turn'd, as buried once,
men want dug up again

The worldly hope men set their hearts upon turns ashes - or it prospers, and
anon - like snow upon the desert's dusty face - lighting a little hour or
two - is gone

Think, in this batter'd caravanserai, whose doorways are alternate night and
day - how Sultan after Sultan with his pomp ~ abode his hour or two - and
went his way

They say the lion and the lizard keep the courts where Jamshyd gloried and
drank deep - and Bahram - that great hunter..... the wild ass stamps o'er his
head - but cannot break his sleep

He touches the skull ever so lightly

OMAR: I sometimes think that never blows so red the rose as where some
buried caesar bled - that every hyacinth the garden wears, dropt in it's lap
from some once lovely head

And this reviving herb whose tender green fledges the river-lip on which
we lean - Ah!....lean upon it lightly - for who knows from what once lovely
lip it springs unseen

He takes the chalice

OMAR: Ah, my beloved - fill the cup that clears today of past regrets and future
fears - tomorrow? - why tomorrow I may be myself with yesterday's sev'n
thousand years

*The PORTER/ANGEL enters and fills the chalice - OMAR drinks a bit
and considers for a moment*

OMAR: Lo!....some we loved - the loveliest and best that time and fate of all
their vintage prest - have drunk their cup a round or two before, and one by
one crept silently to rest

And we that now make merry in the room they left - and summer dresses in
new bloom.....ourselves must we beneath the couch of earth descend -
ourselves to make a couch - for whom?

Ah! make the most of what we yet may spend before we too into the dust
descend - dust into dust, and under dust to lie - sans wine, sans song, sans
singer - and sans end!

For alike for those who today prepare, and those that after a tomorrow
stare, a muezzin from the tower of darkness cries - "Fools! - your reward
is neither here nor there!"

Why, all the saints and sages who discuss'd of the two worlds so learnedly
are thrust like foolish prophets forth; their words to scorn are scatter'd, and
their mouths are stopt with dust

Myself when young did eagerly frequent doctor and saint, and heard great
argument about it and about - but evermore came out by the same door, as
in I went

But with them the seed of wisdom did I sow, but with my own hand
labour'd it to grow - and this was all the harvest that I reap'd - I came like
water, and like wind I go.....into this universe, and why? not knowing - nor
whence - like water, willy-nilly flowing - and out of it -as wind along the
waste, I know not whither - willy-nilly blowing

What, without asking, hither hurried whence? - and without asking whither

hurried hence!.....another and another cup to drown the memory of this impertinence!

He drinks, and considers - as he starts speaking again the lights cross fade to just him ~ but a soft light, not a spot

OMAR: Up from earth's centre through the seventh gate I rose, and on the throne of saturn sate - and many knots unravell'd by the road, but not the master-knot of human fate

There was a door to which I found no key, there was a veil through which I might not see....some little talk awhile of me and thee there was....and then no more of thee and me

Earth could not answer, nor the seas that mourn in flowing purple of their Lord forlorn - nor rolling heaven with all his signs revealed by the sleeve of night and morn

Then of the thee in me who works behind the veil, I lifted up my hands to find a lamp amid the darkness, and I heard - as from without - "Thee within thee blind!"

Lights start to cross fade back - but in slightly slower time

OMAR: Then to the lip of this poor earthen urn I lean'd, the secret of my life to learn - and lip to lip it murmur'd - "While you live drink! - for once dead you never shall return"

The POTTER enters from behind the down left leg and starts working the clay - OMAR walks towards him

OMAR: For in the market-place one dusk of day, I watch'd the potter thumping his wet clay - and with it's all obliterated tongue it murmur'd - "Gently, brother, gently, pray!"

And has not such a story, from of old, down man's successive generations roll'd - of such a clod of saturated earth cast by the maker into human mould?

The POTTER stops working the clay - OMAR sips and starts walking back towards centre - the POTTER exits back behind the leg, and as OMAR walks he throws the last drops of the wine out on the ground in front of him. He gets down on his hands and knees to look closely at the drops and the ground midway through the passage

OMAR: And not a drop - that from our cups we throw for earth to drink of - but may steal below to quench the fire of anguish in some eye there hidden - far beneath, and long ago

He straightens up as he starts speaking, though is still kneeling

OMAR: As, then the tulip for her morning sup of heav'nly vintage from the soil
looks up - do you devoutly do the like? - until heav'n to earth invert
you - like an empty cup

He stands up

OMAR: Perplext no more with human or divine - tomorrow's tangle to the
winds resign, and lose your fingers in the tresses of the cypress-slender
minister of wine

He crosses right and refills his cup as he speaks

OMAR: Ah! fill the cup - what boots it to repeat! - how time is slipping
underneath our feet - unborn tomorrow and dead yesterday - why fret about
them if today be sweet!

He drinks again, and moves back towards down centre

OMAR: And if the wine you drink, the lip you press, end in the nothing all
things end in - yes - then fancy while thou art, thou art but what thou shalt
be - nothing - thou shalt not be less

So when that angel of the darker drink at last shall find you by the
river-brink and offering his cup invite your soul forth to your lips to
quaff - you shall not shrink

Why, if the soul can fling the dust aside and naked on the air of heaven ride
- were't not a shame - were't not a shame for him, in this clay carcase
crippled to abide?

'T is but a tent where takes his one day's rest - a Sultan to the realm of
death adrest - the Sultan rises and the dark ferrash strikes - and prepares it
for another guest

And fear not lest, existence closing your account and mine should know
the like no more - the eternal saki from that bowl has pour'd millions of
bubbles like us...and will pour

One moment in annihilation's waste - one moment, of the well of life to
taste - the stars are setting and the caravan starts for the dawn of
nothing...oh...make haste!

Would you that spangle of existence spend about the secret - quick about
it, friend! - a hair perhaps divides the false and true - and upon what,
prithee, may life depend?

A hair perhaps divides the false and true - yes - and a single alif were the
clue - could you but find it to the treasure-house - and peradventure, to the
master too whose secret presence through creation's veins running

quicksilver-like eludes your pains - taking all shapes from mah to mahi -
and they change and perish all - but he remains

A moment guess'd - then back behind the fold, immerst of darkness round
the drama roll'd - which for the pastime of eternity, he doth himself
contrive, enact, behold

Ah waste not your hour, nor in vain pursuit of this and that endeavour and
dispute - better be jocund with the fruitful grape that sadden after none or
bitter fruit

You know my friends, with what a brave carouse I made a second marriage
in my house - divorced old barren reason from my bed, and took the
daughter of the vine to spouse

For "is" and "is-not", though with rule and line, and "up-and-down" - by
logic I define - of all that one should care to fathom, I was never deep in
anything - but wine

Ah, but my computations people say - reduced the year to better
reckoning? - nay - 'twas only striking from the calendar - unborn tomorrow
and dead yesterday

The PORTER/ANGEL enters and tops up the chalice

OMAR: And lately by the tavern door agape, came stealing through the dusk an
angel shape bearing a vessel on his shoulder - and he bid me taste of it -
and 't was - the grape!

The grape that can with logic absolute the two-and-seventy jarring sects
confute - the sovereign alchemist that in a trice life's leaden metal into gold
transmute

But leave the wise to wrangle, and with me the quarrel of the universe let
be - and in some corner of the hubbub coucht make game of that which
makes as much of thee

Why be this juice the growth of god, who dare blaspheme the twisted
tendrils as a snare? - a blessing, we should use it, should we not? - and if a
curse - why, then, who set it there?

I must abjure the balm of life, I must - scared by some after-reckoning ta'en
on trust?, or lured with hope of some diviner drink to fill the cup - when
crumbled into dust!

Oh threats of hell and hopes of paradise! - one thing at least is certain - this
life flies - one thing is certain and the rest is lies - the flower that once has
blown for ever dies

Strange, is it not? that of the myriads who before us pass'd the door of

darkness through - not one returns to tell us of the road which to discover
we must travel too

The revelations of devout and learn'd who rose before us and as prophets
burn'd, are all but stories, which, awoke from sleep, they told their
comrades, and to sleep return'd

I sent my soul through the invisible - some letter of that after-life to spell -
and by and by my soul return'd to me, and answer'd - "I myself am heav'n
and hell" - heav'n but the vision of fulfill'd desire - and hell the shadow
from the soul on fire, cast on the darkness into which ourselves, so late
emerged from, shall soon expire

For in and out, above, about, below - 't is nothing but a magic
shadow-show - play'd in a box whose candle is the sun round which we
phantom figures come and go.....but helpless pieces of the game he plays,
upon this chequer-board of nights and days - hither and thither moves, and
checks and slays - and one by one back in the closet lays

The ball, no question makes of ayes and noes - but here or there as strikes
the player goes - and he that toss'd you down into the field - he knows
about it all - he knows - he knows!

The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on - nor all your piety
nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line - nor all your tears wash out a
word of it

And that inverted bowl they call the sky, whereunder crawling coop'd we
live and die - lift not your hands to it for help - for it rolls impotently on as
thou or I

With earth's first clay they did the last man knead, and there of the last
harvest sow'd the seed - yea, the first morning of creation wrote what the
last dawn of reckoning shall read

Yesterday this day's madness did prepare - tomorrow's silence, triumph, or
despair - drink! for you know not whence you came, nor why - drink! for
you know not why you go, nor where

He drinks

OMAR: The vine had struck a fibre, which about it clings my being - let the
dervish flout - of my base metal may be filed a key that shall unlock the
door he howls without

And this I know - whether the one true light kindle to love, or wrath
consume me quite - one flash of it within the tavern caught better than in
the temple lost outright

What! out of senseless nothing to provoke a conscious something to resent

the yoke of unpermitted pleasure, under pain of everlasting penalties, if broke!

What! from his helpless creature be repaid pure gold for what he lent him dross-allay'd - sue for a debt he never did contract, and cannot answer - oh the sorry trade!

Oh thou, who didst with pitfall and with gin beset the road I was to wander in - thou wilt not with predestined evil round enmesh, and then impute my fall to sin!

Oh thou, who man of baser earth didst make - and ev'n with paradise devise the snake - for all the sin wherewith the face of man is blacken'd - man's forgiveness give - and take!

Listen again.....*(the lights start a slow cross fade to a moonlight state - lit from the down left region and only encompassing the forestage area)* one evening at the close of Ramazan, ere the better moon arose, in that old potter's shop I stood alone, with the clay population round in rows - and strange to tell, among the earthen lot - some could articulate, while others not - and suddenly one more impatient cried - "who is the potter, pray, and who the pot?" - then said another - "surely not in vain my substance from the common earth was ta'en - that he who subtly wrought me into shape, should stamp me back to common earth again?" - another said - "why ne'er a peevish boy, would break the bowl from which he drank in joy - shall he that made the vessel in pure love and fancy, in an after rage destroy!".....none answer'd this, but after silence spake a vessel of a more, ungainly make - "they sneer at me for leaning all awry - what! did the hand then of the potter shake?" - said one - "folks of a surly tapster tell, and daub his visage with the smoke of hell - they talk of some strict testing of us - pish! - he's a good fellow, and 't will all be well" - then said another with a long-drawn sigh - "my clay with long oblivion is gone dry...but fill me with the old familiar juice - methinks I might recover by-and-bye!" - so while the vessels one by one were speaking, one spied the little crescent all were seeking - *(the cross fade has completed)* and then they jogg'd each other, "brother! brother! - hark to the porter's shoulder-knot a-creaking!"

The PORTER/ANGEL enters at down right and OMAR crosses towards him, and he adds some to his chalice - he then moves towards down right and the PORTER/ANGEL exits at the same time

OMAR: Ah, with the grape my fading life provide, and wash my body whence the life has died - and in a windsheet of vine-leaf wrapt, so bury me by some sweet garden-side that ev'n my buried ashes such a snare of perfume shall fling up into the air, as not a true believer passing by but shall be overtaken unaware

Indeed the idols I have loved so long have done my credit in men's eye much wrong - have drown'd my honour in a shallow cup, and sold my reputation for a song

Indeed, indeed, repentance oft before I swore - but was I sober when I swore? - and then, and then came spring and rose-in-hand my thread-bare penitence apieces tore

And as much as wine has play'd the infidel, and robb'd me of my robe of honour well - I often wonder what the vintners buy - one half so precious as the goods they sell

Alas, that spring should vanish with the rose! - that youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close! - the nightingale that in the branches sang, ah...whence and whither flown again - who knows!

Ah love! could thou and I with fate conspire to grasp this sorry scheme of things entire - would not we shatter it to bits - and then re-mould it nearer to the heart's desire!

Ah...moon of my delight who know'st no wane, the moon of heav'n is rising once again - how oft hereafter rising shall she look through this same garden after me - in vain!

And when thyself with shining foot shall pass among the guests star-scatter'd on the grass, and in thy joyous errand reach the spot where I made one - turn down an empty glass!

He turns his empty chalice upside down out in front of him - he is now directly in front of the audience, centre - pause in this for just a moment, then blackout.