

# PILATE

By  
Mark Allen Eaton

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## INTRODUCTION

While opinions about the historical Pilate range from mindless puppet - whether Rome's, Satan's, or God's - to misunderstood saint to pitiless thug, the Pilate of this play is a man thrust into a role too big for him as he attempts to navigate the treacherous religiopolitical currents that drive him inexorably to the trial of Jesus. His relationship with his wife, Claudia, reveals a man who knows how to woo, and even how to win, but not how to give and receive genuine, sacrificial love. The temptation to simply soften him into a well-intended "good guy" has been resisted in favour of embracing his contradictions: Pilate is both smart and inept, brave and cowardly, sensitive and bigoted, and has a penchant for retreating into pragmatism when his good intentions hit the fan.

*Pilate* was originally written as a full-length play for the Master of Fine Arts in Script and Screenwriting portfolio requirements at Regent University in 1999. After winning the Christians in Theatre Arts (CITA) playwriting contest later that year, it was subsequently performed at Regent University in March, 2000, under the direction of Burton Matteson. This one-act version was adapted in 2011 and staged in 2018 by Theatre 315, the Salvation Army's off-Broadway venue in New York City, produced by Carol Jaudes and directed by Chuck Goodin. My thanks to Dr. Paul L. Maier, who graciously allowed me to borrow some of the "fictional mortar" from his excellent novel, *Pontius Pilate*.

## CAST & STAGING

This retelling of Pilate's story makes use of a simple multifunctional set comprising two distinct upper and lower sections. While both sections may be used for any scene, the upper is mostly associated with the Roman scenes. Here, Caesar's Imperial Seat is the only permanent furniture, and scenes taking place in its direct presence would be considered "The Palatine." Pilate's Tribunal, which is technically in Judea, could if space allows also be on the upper section since Pilate is exercising Rome's authority. The lower section is more associated with scenes in Judea and may in turn represent Pilate's work and home spaces, as well as other scenes as needed.

However, this staging is not essential and the play could just as effectively be played without recourse to an upstage raised area.

While the play is written in a contemporary voice, an eclectic mix of ancient and contemporary costumes, props, and set furnishings may suggest a violent collision of worlds – East and West, Ancient and Modern, God and Humans.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

There are 18 speaking characters but only seven feature regularly with two of these being major parts. The remainder mostly have one or two short scenes each and can be doubled up. The minimum number of actors required is ten (2F, 3M, 5 either).

### Main characters

Pontius Pilate

Claudia Procula

Tiberius Caesar (m/f)

Centurion (m/f)

Margaret

Caiaphas

Jesus

### Characters that can be doubled up

Herod Antipas

Sejanus (m/f)

Simon, Jacob, Martha & Miriam

2 Reporters (m/f)

Detective (m/f)

Peter

Caligula (m/f)

### Non-speaking characters

Jason

Blind Man

Party Guests in Rome

Crowd in Jerusalem

## SCENE 2: ROME: THE PALATINE

*PILATE enters, clipping on a tie, as he meets SEJANUS.*

MARGARET: *(to PILATE)* Late.

PILATE: I know, traffic was –

MARGARET: Nobody cares. Kneel on both knees, speak only when spoken to, “First Citizen” the first time and “sir” after that.

*(PILATE follows SEJANUS over to TIBERIUS’s chair and drops to his knees as TIBERIUS CAESAR enters and sits. SEJANUS salutes before presenting PILATE’s file, then stands behind TIBERIUS to whisper in his ear. MARGARET remains just behind PILATE. TIBERIUS looks the file over for a long moment.)*

TIBERIUS: Pontius Pilate. Military man, no diplomatic experience. *(To SEJANUS)* Think he’s up to it?

SEJANUS: Throw Pilate into anything, and he’ll come out under budget.

TIBERIUS: *(to PILATE)* Sejanus tells me I should pass over two ambassadors and the son of a wealthy senator for you. Are you the man for the job or not?

PILATE: Yes, First Citizen.

TIBERIUS: Do you speak their language?

PILATE: No, sir, but –

TIBERIUS: What do you know of their history, their politics ... their religion?

PILATE: Enough to rule with a firm hand, sir.

SEJANUS: They only have one god to keep track of. How hard could it be?

TIBERIUS: *(ignoring him)* “A firm hand”? Your resources will be limited, your friends far away. The tetrarchs don’t want you there any more than the terrorists.

PILATE: Well, sir, I ...

TIBERIUS: The point is, Pilate, I want someone with a sense of tact. I don’t want to worry about Judea.

PILATE: You won’t have to, sir.

TIBERIUS: *(beat)* You leave on Tuesday. Try to keep a lid on things.

*(TIBERIUS fishes around in his pocket, pulls out several rings. He picks one at random, hands it to SEJANUS, and exits. SEJANUS hands PILATE the ring. PILATE reads the inscription.)*

PILATE: “Amicus Caesaris” – “Friend of Caesar”! Is this ...?

SEJANUS: Congratulations, *Governor*. The Fates are in a good mood.

PILATE: Do I ... should I say something or ...? I thought there'd be an oath, or a ceremony.

*(PILATE places the ring on his finger with great reverence, then rises to rejoin the others.)*

SEJANUS: Caesar wasn't kidding, by the way. I'm afraid we're putting you right under Damocles' sword. I'm sending Margaret with you – technically she'll function as your assistant but first and foremost she's my eyes and ears.

PILATE: Great.

SEJANUS: Now let me offer you some advice. The only thing that keeps them from revolting is their fear of the Roman army. And their fear of you. A firm hand, Pilate. Even in those ignorant villages on the fringe of the Empire, you are the iron hand of Rome – incarnate.

*(SEJANUS and MARGARET exit. PILATE, quite taken with this idea, balls his hand into a fist, which he then opens to admire his ring.)*

### **SCENE 3: ROME: CLAUDIA'S HOME**

*CLAUDIA enters with a tea service and pours. PILATE enters.*

CLAUDIA: Would Rome Incarnate like some tea?

PILATE: Well, of course it's flattering. I'm in the loop! Not the inner circle, by any means, but a huge step closer. Judea!

CLAUDIA: Where is that again?

PILATE: North of Egypt, along the coast.

CLAUDIA: And when do you...?

PILATE: Tuesday.

CLAUDIA: That doesn't give you much time.

PILATE: No. It doesn't give us much time.

CLAUDIA: Is there an “us”?

*(PILATE kneels and kisses her hand. As she draws her hand back, we see that he slipped an engagement ring box into it.)*

PILATE: If you'll wear this, we'll know for sure . . . . .

#### **SCENE 4: CAESAREA: PILATE'S OFFICE**

*SEJANUS (still in Rome) enters and surreptitiously tries out TIBERIUS's chair for himself, likes it, and watches the action from there. CLAUDIA enters followed by REPORTER 1 and REPORTER 2, snapping photos. She wears a wedding ring, with which she deliberately poses for a few pictures.*

REPORTER 1: How are you settling into your new programme?

CLAUDIA: I love it.

REPORTER 2: Look over here, Lady! Nice!

*(SEJANUS calls PILATE, whose desk phone rings. PILATE hastily enters to answer it.)*

PILATE: Pontius Pilate.

SEJANUS: Pilate, while you're at it, why don't you rotate the cohorts there in Judea? Hoist the standards, polish the brass, march them around the roads. Let everyone know there's a new boss in Caesarea.

PILATE: Great idea, sir, I –

*(SEJANUS hangs up. PILATE settles into his work.)*

CLAUDIA: Thank you, Gentlemen. It's been fun.

*(She tries to leave, but REPORTER 1 blocks her way.)*

REPORTER 2: Come on, one more!

CLAUDIA: I'm tired. I need to go now.

*(CLAUDIA pushes past them and goes into PILATE's office area.)*

PILATE: Oh, hi.

CLAUDIA: I missed you at lunch today.

PILATE: Lunch! *(He goes into his jacket pocket, brings out a diabetic kit, and prepares to check his blood sugar.)*

CLAUDIA: You really should tell the press about your diabetes. I was just asked if you take drugs.

PILATE: The Iron Hand of Rome shows no weakness. *(He tests his blood sugar)* Ow! Did you wait very long?

CLAUDIA: You know, I imagined I'd enjoy being a governor's wife.

PILATE: Don't you?

CLAUDIA: It's overrated. This place is a fishbowl.

PILATE: Well, it's not my idea of a honeymoon, either.

CLAUDIA: Oh, it's not *bad*. It's just missing something. Now what could that be? Oh, yes. You. Conspicuously and often.

PILATE: Are you still angry about lunch?

CLAUDIA: And drinks at the Tiberium last night...

PILATE: I left you a message ...

CLAUDIA: ... and our private brunch, and the Sophocles festival. I get all dressed up only to get a note: "Sorry, honey, something came up." Then I have to face the paparazzi alone, *again* ... are you listening to me?

PILATE: Uh-huh.

CLAUDIA: What's this? *(Reads over his shoulder)* "The Jerusalem water supply is barely adequate for present conditions ..." *(She snatches them out of his hands.)*

PILATE: Give that back! It's important!

CLAUDIA: More important than me?

PILATE: Of course not!

CLAUDIA: It looks much more boring than I am.

PILATE: At least when that thing rambles, it makes sense!

*(CLAUDIA, infuriated, flings the papers across the room. HEROD ANTIPAS, the tetrarch of Galilee, and JOSEPH CAIAPHAS, the High Priest, enter as the papers waft to the floor. Where CAIAPHAS appears nervous, ANTIPAS is cool with sophisticated style. SEJANUS watches with acute interest.)*

PILATE: *(cont'd)* Public face, dear, we have an audience. Your Majesty, good morning. May I present my wife, Claudia Procula.

CLAUDIA: Your Majesty.

ANTIPAS: Always a pleasure. Allow me to introduce Joseph Caiaphas, Jerusalem's high priest.

CLAUDIA: Charmed.

PILATE: Will you sit down?

ANTIPAS: Thank you, but we only have a few minutes. (*Glancing around the room*) Roman organization at its best.

CLAUDIA: Not at all, Sir. A breath of hot air preceded you into the room.

PILATE: (*quickly*) What can we do for you?

ANTIPAS: Well, to come right to the point, Governor, the fact is that Rome's occupation of Israel leads to inevitable confrontations along lines that might seem trivial from your perspective, but shape and sustain the very soul of the people you were sent here to govern. And not to judge you or insult you in any way, or to suggest anything but complete cordiality between my Galilean tetrarchy and your governorship of Judea ...

(*CAIAPHAS becomes more and more agitated.*)

ANTIPAS: ... indeed, between all rulers now holding the lands of Herod the Great, the fact is that you are a stranger here, and there are one or two finer points that Governor Gratus may have forgotten to mention –

CAIAPHAS: Remove the idols from the Holy City.

PILATE: I beg your pardon?

CAIAPHAS: The Law of Moses forbids them. You must remove them.

ANTIPAS: The medallions on your cohort's flags – the one you rotated into Fort Antonia there in Jerusalem. They bear the image of Tiberius. A *graven* image.

CAIAPHAS: The Second Commandment of Moses forbids the making or worship of idols.

ANTIPAS: We allow no graven images past our city walls.

CAIAPHAS: These are displayed right next to the Holy Temple!

PILATE: I see. First of all, thank you for coming all the way down to Caesarea to speak to me personally, and, while I fully appreciate your concern ... those are military honours, not idols.

CAIAPHAS: Is it not true that your soldiers burn incense before these graven images every morning?

PILATE: By tradition, yes. But I doubt that you'll find any soldiers actually praying to Caesar.

CAIAPHAS: Nevertheless, you must remove them from the Holy City.

PILATE: Why don't we see what the general reaction is, and if there truly is a problem –

*(CAIAPHAS exits without shaking PILATE's outstretched hand. ANTIPAS looks at it before shaking it reluctantly.)*

ANTIPAS: I expected more wisdom, even in one so new.

PILATE: And I hoped for *some* flexibility. Sir.

ANTIPAS: *(laughing)* You really don't know us at all, do you?

*(ANTIPAS exits.)*