

PERSEPHONE UNDERGROUND

A stage play
By Carol S. Lashof

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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+ female) 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 ONE

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.

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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 TWO

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.

PERSEPHONE (CONT'D)

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.

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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.

DEMETER (CONT'D)

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.

And . . . then what? PERSEPHONE

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

And me? What do I do? PERSEPHONE

You? Nothing. DEMETER

But I want . . . PERSEPHONE

What? DEMETER

Nothing. Never mind. PERSEPHONE

Go on, then. Get ready. DEMETER

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

DEMETER (CONT'D)
All of Athens will see how beautiful you are.

SCENE THREE

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 intervention 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 FOUR

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.)

PERSEPHONE (CONT'D)
Where did you come from?

He gestures towards the cave.

PERSEPHONE (CONT'D)
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.

HADES' SON (CONT'D)

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.

PERSEPHONE (CONT'D)

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.

PERSEPHONE (CONT'D)

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.

HADES' SON (CONT'D)

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

(Horried)

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.

PERSEPHONE (CONT'D)
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.

HADES' SON

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 FIVE

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.

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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 ahold 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.

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.

DEMETER (CONT'D)

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

Persephone continues walking.

DEMETER (CONT'D)

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!
PERSEPHONE

Let her go.
HADES' SON

But she's my mother.
PERSEPHONE

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

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 SIX

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.

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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 SEVEN

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 EIGHT

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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