

**FLIGHT OF THE IBIS**

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**CHARACTERS**

(In Order of Appearance)

Chorus

Joachim Ben Israel.....Physician and Advisor to the Caliph, a Kabbalist

El Grandee Juan/Death..... Dancer

Grand Vizier.....Adviser to the Caliph

The Caliph Ahmed.....Caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate

El Grande Juan.....Spanish Envoy

Amina.....Servant to Sa'ida

Sa'ida.....Wife of the Caliph, a Sufi

Ibis.....Dancer

**SETTING**The Court of the Caliph of Cordoba in the Umayyad Caliphate, Spain, 10<sup>th</sup> Century.

Scene 1 – INCANTATION

EVENING

Scene 2 – ZENITH

NEXT DAY

Scene 3 – HEALING

FOLLOWING DAY

Scene 4 – CELEBRATIONS

A FEW DAYS LATER

Scene 5 – THE ABYSS

FOLLOWING DAY

ACT 1

SCENE 1

**INCANTATION**

(Joachim Ben Israel enters. He noticeably limps and uses a long staff to help him walk.)

CHORUS

Another! Another!

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Strange omens flood the skies!  
Streaks of blood wash swiftly 'cross the heavens.

CHORUS

Look! Still another! Fear grips our heart.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

The Millennium Eclipse, years before its appointed time!  
The sun flares violently around the blackened moon,  
Each in agony over its very being.

CHORUS

Dark Beings hateful of the new Adam rise up in wrath.  
We tremble within.

JOACHIM BEN ISREAL

Long nights I have labored in monkish solitude  
To descend into the wellsprings of Light,  
The very ground of our being.  
Long nights I have forsaken the comforts of hearth and home  
To learn the designs of the Illumined Ones,  
Those brighter than the sun, itself.  
The dallying moment, the light frolic of friendly chatter,  
All this I have foresworn to bring their Light  
To guide us to our inmost nature.  
Long years I have prepared for the new Adam,

The new being of shining spirit Kabbalah long ago foretold.  
 I shall bring forth these children of the spirit to inhabit  
     This land, all ablaze with a peaceful fire within,  
     All intoxicated with an inner joy.  
 First in twos and threes, soon after in sevens and eights,  
     They will come in ever larger numbers  
     Until a new era will dawn!

#### CHORUS

The succoring shade of Ahmed's glorious kingdom will  
     Like a mighty oak nurture the new Adam.  
 Its lengthy boughs will protect against storm and strife.

#### JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Each person one's own shrine!  
     The joyous Light within is one's Self.  
 Blessed are those who revel in the Light all day.  
     Ablaze with tranquil fire,  
     Drunk with Divine joy,  
     Playing on that inner shore of Light.

#### CHORUS

Look! Look! The Crescent Moon, the very sign and glory of Islam, all a kilter!  
 What evil does this portend for Caliph Ahmed's realm?

#### JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

I shall be no passive bystander to the ruin of my whole life's work.  
 No savage storms will I permit to stay the new Adam!  
 No array of Muslim rulers from Southern shores,  
     Nor Christian princes from Spain or all of Christendom,  
     Shall fell Ahmed's mighty kingdom.  
 No hidden malady nor court intrigue within these palace gates  
     Shall gnaw away the very core of my whole life's work.  
 I will challenge even the full forces of darkness!

(Pause)

I shall use this staff like the lengthy lever Archimedes wisely knew.  
 Upon the fulcrum of my prophetic powers  
     I shall heave this earth off course to a heavenly age.

(Pause)

Dark Spirits, I shall pry from you what is but yet to be,  
     Then turn this secret knowledge against your will!  
 I shall pry from you what is but yet our destiny,

Then turn this secret knowledge against your will!  
I shall use forbidden rituals to ferret out your threat to Ahmed.

### CHORUS

Forbidden rituals!  
Kabbalah warns against following the left-handed way.  
To know the future by forbidden rituals  
You bring about what you most fear.

### JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Let us begin our incantation!  
Let us address ourselves to those High Holy Ones,  
The servants of the Unnameable.

### JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL and CHORUS

(Draws with his staff counterclockwise.)

Slowly, slowly, I draw this great circle.  
Slowly, slowly, I draw this great circle.

Slowly, slowly, I draw this fiery circle.  
Slowly, slowly, I draw this fiery circle.

Slowly, I encircle the outer boundaries of darkness.  
Slowly, I encircle the outer boundaries of darkness  
Where war and demons dwell.

Slowly, I encircle the inner spheres of Light.  
Slowly, I encircle the inner spheres of Light,  
Emanations of the Ein Sof.

Within this great circle I draw three more.  
Three smaller circles I slowly draw.  
Slowly the one within the outer bound.  
More slowly still the two inner round  
Where the new Adam shines forth.  
Thus slowly have I drawn on earth the ethereal spheres!

### JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Into the intangible I draw the secret signs of the Kabbalah.  
The signs of great power, the signs of long lineage,  
The mystic signs revealing the invisible.

## CHORUS

He follows the left-handed way.  
We shudder in horror!

## JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

You who are beyond heaven and earth,  
Beyond the realms of time and space.  
You who are beyond heaven and earth,  
Beyond the realms of time and space.  
You to whom all spheres bend their will.  
You whose divine purposes govern our greatest glories,  
Our smallest errors.  
Reveal to me our unknown destinies,  
Reveal to me our fated footsteps.  
Reveal to me our unknown destinies,  
Reveal to me our fated footsteps.

(Pause, as if in a vision.)

On two hillocks stand two armed hordes,  
Horses rearing and bellowing in fury...  
They fall upon each other!

(Pauses)

The mist closes in, the outcome is in doubt.  
Who threatens Ahmed's mighty realm?

(A dance figure of El Grandee Juan appears from the shadows. Joachim is in great shock. Choral vocalizing of awe and terror.)

Who is this Spanish Grandee?  
Who is this Grandee who threatens Ahmed and the new Adam?

(Choral vocalizing subsides as El Grandee Juan continues to dance. El Grandee Juan becomes transformed into Death and dances a dance of death. Strong choral vocalizing of awe and terror.)

It is Death!!!  
Death masquerades as this Spanish Grandee.  
Then...I... will...tilt...with...Death...and...overcome!!!

(Joachim tilts with Death in a dance. Chorus continues vocalizing of awe and terror.)

(End of Act I, Scene 1)

## ACT 1

## SCENE 2

**ZENITH**

(The Caliph Ahmed is an aging man in his late 70s or 80s. The Grand Vizier is also older, perhaps in his 60s.)

## CHORUS

Hail to the great Caliph Ahmed! Hail to the radiant sun who lights the way.  
Wisest and strongest of rulers. Cordoba the brightest jewel of Europe.

## GRAND VIZIER

Hail to the sun whose rays of righteousness suffuse the earth!  
Your arms are triumphant!  
The Spanish cross of steel is broken!  
Hail to the great Caliph Ahmed.

## THE CALIPH AHMED

See how Allah smiles upon my graying hairs!  
My kingdom triumphs over the ravages of time.

## GRAND VIZIER

Oh deliverer of this earth, Spain is now yours!  
The gates of Europe swing open wide to Ahmed's arms.  
Hail to the great Caliph Ahmed!

## THE CALIPH AHMED

What aging ruler can rest assured as I  
That within his very life time  
The monuments he has built will last an eternity.  
My plan these many years proceeds apace.  
At last I can put in place the keystone of my grand design.

## CHORUS

This is the Ahmed of old!  
Youthful vigor runs through his veins.

Nimble thoughts fill his mind.  
A will of iron fulfills his purpose.

GRAND VIZIER

Soon all of Christendom will be within your grasp.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Mighty is the Caliph Ahmed in heaven's eyes.  
(To himself)  
Have the High Holy Ones mocked me with omens of doom?

THE CALIPH AHMED

As no other ruler I have disdained vain conquest,  
My sole purpose but to create a Paradise on earth,  
To fashion an oasis of wisdom and beauty  
Where a Tree of Life will grow,  
Where imagination reigns freely and soars to higher realms,  
Where art and culture flower and the mind is open,  
Where people of all faiths band together, their hearts transformed,  
Where Muslim, Jew, and Christian grow higher,  
Where Sufi, Kabbalist, and mystic reach the heavens.  
I have slaked the thirst of a thousand minds,  
And filled the cups of ten thousand more with joyous art.  
Thus will Ahmed be etched into men's hearts and minds  
through the endless eons of history!

(Pauses)

Trumpet our triumphs throughout Cordoba!

CHORUS

This is the Ahmed of old who sees beyond the horizon.

THE CALIPH AHMED

Four weeks of festivities I proclaim  
To celebrate our victory and  
Give thanks to Allah's beneficence.

CHORUS

Let poets recite Ahmed's grand vision!  
Let scholars record his deeds for all eternity!  
Let artists and artisans adorn Cordoba anew!

Let singers and dancers bring heaven itself to our noble state.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Perhaps the new Adam will indeed be present.

GRAND VIZIER

Oh most radiant of rulers

More triumphant tidings are still to come.

The last remaining Christian princes of Spain

Now sue for peace, to become Ahmed's vassals.

El Grandee Juan, their strongest and most valiant in arms,

Comes to present their petition to you.

THE CALIPH AHMED

My vision of a Spain all one under my wise rule

Will soon be fulfilled.

Christians must take an equal place. They are a keystone to peace!

Muslim, Jew, and Christian must support each other like stones in a great vaulting arch,

Else all I build will collapse, my life in vain.

GRAND VIZIER

Almighty Caliph, king of the four corners,

I come to announce the arrival of your new subject,

El Grandee Juan.

(El Grandee Juan as dancer is in the background. Joachim is aghast as he recognizes El Grandee Juan from his vision of the previous scene. Chorus vocalizes tension and apprehension.)

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

(To himself)

The Spanish Grandee!

Death masquerades as El Grandee Juan!

I must warn Ahmed or all is lost, all is lost!

(In a low voice to Ahmed.)

Beware this Spanish Grandee. He is valiant in arms

And ever more wily in the ways of the world.

Crush them now!

## THE CALIPH AHMED

To crush them now only brings lingering hatred and future wars.  
 Once they taste our sumptuous feast of culture,  
     Their swords and arms will lie in rust.  
 New vistas will appear, broader horizons will open up to replace their narrow views.

## JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

I see death in his shadow.

## THE CALIPH AHMED

(Angrily)

What do you say?  
 The Spaniards pose no threat.  
 Little land they have and less in arms.  
 A far greater worry are our Muslim brethren  
     To the South, the Almoravids.  
 Narrow minded in their piety, envious of our riches,  
     They would gladly set upon us,  
     But dare not since we are too strong.

## JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Only the fool would open the palace gates to such a deadly serpent!

## THE CALIPH AHMED

(Angrily)

Wait... Wait till he tastes the sumptuous feast of culture  
 And breathes the artful air of Cordoba.  
 His sword and armor will lie in rust.

## JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Beware the hungry jackal and snarling wolf at the gate,  
     Caring not for art nor learning  
     But to pounce upon the feasters.

## THE CALIPH AHMED

(Clearly annoyed at Joachim. Beckons to El  
 Grandee Juan.)

Come! Stay for our festivities! Stay longer!  
 See how poets and scholars, even princes and priests,  
     Come from afar to sit at Ahmed's feet to partake of the ancient lore,  
     The modern science, the mystic vision.

## GRAND VIZIER

El Grandee Juan will be as loyal as the royal servant who shaves  
Caliph Ahmed with his fine-honed razor.

## JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

The razor that trims the stubble can slit the throat...

## THE CALIPH AHMED

Enough Joachim!  
The followers of the Cross shall flourish  
    In our verdant pastures  
    As you and others of the Sacred Scroll.  
I follow my own way, not the wisdom of the day.

## JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

(An aside)

... and cut Cordoba to primal chaos.

(El Grandee Juan as dancer exits.)

## EL GRANDEE JUAN

(To himself)

They have us by the throat. Almost all of Spain is theirs.  
We must not give another inch... or too much treasure, what little we have.  
(Pause)

I shall have to play for time so we can survive.  
That's it, I shall feign cooperation and act like a humble vassal.  
    That will give us some breathing room.

(To Ahmed)

I come as the humble envoy of the defeated Spaniards to beg for peace.  
What tribute do you want?

## THE CALIPH AHMED

We welcome you to Cordoba. Look!

(Takes El Grandee Juan to a balcony to view  
the city. Projections of Cordoba and its  
magnificent buildings and gardens.)

See the marvels of our city.

## EL GRANDEE JUAN

Such wonders! Beyond imagination!  
 Its beauty! Long told tales of Cordoba all fall short.  
 What tribute do we pay?

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL  
 (Quietly to Ahmed)

See how stealthy he is, like a snake in the grass.

THE CALIPH AHMED  
 (Angrily)

Be part of us! Belong to Cordoba!  
 I want no tribute.  
 In our fertile fields, all grow high.  
 Christians will fully flower as have the Jews.  
 Muslims, Jews, and Christians will support each other,  
     Like stones in a great vaulting arch.  
 My grand design.

EL GRANDE JUAN  
 (An aside)

An offer so tempting!  
 Shall we have a place at the infidel's table and share his fruits,  
     Or shall I play for time so we Spaniards can regroup?

(Pauses)

Is it a ploy? Does he want to take what little we have?  
 Shall I put him off ... or play along with him?

(Pauses)

Yes... I shall tell him I'll seriously consider his magnificent offer  
     But first I must see our king.  
 That will string him along.

(To Ahmed)

Your offer is most noble and generous.  
 I am deeply moved and shall seriously consider it.  
     But first I must see our king. I shall soon return.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL  
 (Quietly to Ahmed)

See how he plots and plans, and feigns cooperation.

THE CALIPH AHMED  
 (Annoyed. To El Grandee Juan.)

You have seen the grandeur of Cordoba, not its heart and soul.  
 Stay! You shall see the brightest jewel, my royal mate.  
 She is Cordoba! Stay!  
 Amina, go beg Sa'ida to dance and sing for us.  
     Let El Grandee Juan see the brightest jewel

In all my Caliphate, the truly dearest of all my wives.  
 She is Cordoba, herself!  
 My state is all dependent on her.

(Amina exits to get Sa'ida.)

CHORUS

Bring hither Sa'ida,  
 The very muse of the lilting song and ecstatic dance.

AMINA

My Lord! My Lord!  
 For three whole nights Sa'ida has not slept,  
 Weary and restless she is.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

I shall attend to her immediately.

THE CALIPH AHMED

Go! Go quickly Joachim!  
 My whole well-being rests upon her.

(Suddenly Sa'ida appears, a woman well  
 into her 40s or 50s.)

SA'IDA

All hail to my mighty Lord,  
 Who towers o'er all earthly rulers.  
 I bow to you as those of field and jungle to the kingly lion.

THE CALIPH AHMED

My eyes rejoice with just the sight of you.  
 My ears respond more joyously to your voice  
 Than to the trumpeting of our greatest triumph.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

My daughter, is all truly well with you?

SA'IDA

New strength surges through my limbs

As I hear of Ahmed's mighty deeds.  
 New power comes to my soul through my love for Ahmed.  
 I rejoice for Ahmed in the zenith of his rule.

THE CALIPH AHMED

Oh Sa'ida! ... I wish you alone to lead my celebrations,  
 So the ages shall speak of such incomparable beauty  
 brought to earth in Ahmed's realm.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

(To Ahmed)

Do not let Sa'ida entertain the Spaniard. She is not well.  
 She should not dance!

THE CALIPH AHMED

She is the key to my fulfilling my vision.  
 Who can resist her artistry.  
 Allah will protect her.

CHORUS

See Sa'ida, the very muse of the ecstatic song.  
 As Sufis delight in the Divine through verse,  
 So Sa'ida does through dance and song.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

(To Sa'ida)

My daughter, do not sing or dance for the Spaniard.  
 He is an envoy of Death.

SA'IDA

My blood runs with passion. Songs and dances flood my being.  
 It would be easier for a stone to swim upstream  
 Than for me to rest quietly now.  
 For Ahmed I shall dance on moonbeams  
 and sing of the longings of the soul.

Musicians, play wondrous tunes to echo through these marble halls,  
 And I shall sing and dance for Ahmed as never before.

(Song sung by Sa'ida in Arabic)

(Amina vocalizes Arabic sounds while  
 Sa'ida does a slow Sufi dance. Sa'ida then  
 Sings. El Grandee Juan is clearly

Captivated as the dancer, El Grandee Juan is still stealthy.)

In moonlit glade, a racing brook  
 Tumbles and twists in reckless joy,  
 As it skips and hops, and jumps and leaps,  
 And gurgles into a giggly mirth.

(Amina again vocalizes Arabic sounds while Sa'ida resumes her dance.)

#### THE CALIPH AHMED

Such a wonderful song.  
 Youthful vigor races through my veins  
 Just watching my dearest.

(Pauses)

I am born anew through Sa'ida!

#### EL GRANDEE JUAN

Mira Cordoba! My God! An angel come to earth!  
 I must stay to see more. I must see more.

#### SA'IDA

Ripples glance at the moonbeams dance  
 As playful trout dart about  
 In peaceful, placid pools.

#### THE CALIPH AHMED

(As Sa'ida dances. As if in a vision.)

Long vistas I see  
 Of an endless avenue of scholars, artists, and poets,  
 Of mighty mountains guarding  
 People of all faiths and hues  
 On fertile plains below.  
 Of new Ahmeds forever bestowing  
 Their visions of paradise on earth!

#### JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

(Gestures her to go slower.)

Sa'ida! Sa'ida! Be gentle and brief.

#### SA'IDA

(In a trance she ignores Joachim and continues her dance in a spirit of ecstasy.)

Amina vocalizes Arabic sounds. Then  
Sa'ida sings. El Grandee Juan is  
mesmorized by Sa'ida.)

So flows the Spirit in Life  
In joy, jest, and stillness,  
Then rollicks and races  
Past all in its way,  
Past all in its way.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

You are too frenzied!

(As Sa'ida attempts to resume dancing, she  
becomes faint and then collapses. Joachim  
rushes to give her medicine. Mood is lyrical  
and sad.)

THE CALIPH AHMED

Sa'ida! ... Oh Sa'ida! .... How is it now?

SA'IDA

Suddenly faint and all weak within.  
Ahmed! ... Ahmed! ... Dear ruler of my heart.....

(El Grandee Juan hovers about Ahmed and  
Sa'ida, carefully observing Ahmed. Joachim  
gestures strongly to the Grand Vizier to  
quickly remove El Grandee Juan that he not  
see Ahmed's weakness. But El Grandee  
Juan resists the Grand Vizier's efforts.)

THE CALIPH AHMED

Ah Sa'ida!  
You are dearer to me, much dearer than all the glories of this earth.

SA'IDA

My dearest, your love and mine are entwined together forever.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL  
(To Ahmed)

Go now.

THE CALIPH AHMED

Oh Sa'ida,  
 You are the beautiful moon spreading soft hues of love  
 Over my soul's vast darkness...

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL  
 (To Ahmed)

Go!  
 Your armies have swept Christian foes from off the land.  
 Release your embrace that you not now lose  
 What is within your grasp.

THE CALIPH AHMED

Desire itself becomes muted, and all my strength ebbs away  
 When all I hold most dear is steeped in saddened pain.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

There is no time for this!  
 Dangers lurk in the shadows.  
 Protect your awesome realm.  
 The duties of the Caliph are upon you!

THE CALIPH AHMED

No, no, Joachim.  
 Daylight's soaring monuments soon crumble to dust.  
 In the autumn of my years I now see the fuller landscape,  
 Hidden by the summer foliage of youthful striving.  
 (Pauses)

I long for the nightly beauty of Sa'ida's love!  
 I am loath to leave her!

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Leave her you must! Abandon your longings!  
 (Shifts his tone to inspire Ahmed.)

The powers of night are great.  
 They nurture us for daytime's glorious deeds.  
 The dreams from the womb of night  
 Are enacted on the broad stage of light.  
 A Caliph dreams of a Caliph's greatness...  
 ... and so makes it thus.  
 You must awake from the bosom of night  
 To guide and succor others.

THE CALIPH AHMED

No, Joachim, I yearn for night's deepest love  
To sustain my final years.

(El Grandee Juan finally exits.)

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Unsettled are your feelings!  
Wisely, wisely, you must tread the razor's edge  
Between the nourishing comforts of the moon-bright night  
And the sun-drenched glories of the burgeoning day.  
Lean too far, be swayed to either side...

(Pauses for effect.)

and the darkest abyss will await your fall!!!  
Lean too far, be swayed to either side...  
And the darkest abyss will await your fall!!!

(End of Act I, Scene 2)

## ACT I

## SCENE 3

**HEALING**

(Amina plays an aoud and sings to Sa'ida to comfort her as she lies ill on the couch.  
Lyrical aoud music.)

## AMINA

Swift, swift, swirl and rush  
The turbulent torrents of early spring,  
O'er muddied banks, o'er field and wood.

Swift, swift, swirl and rush  
The turbulent torrents in frantic froth,  
Through mud-churned channels o'er the land.

Swift, swift, swirl the turbulent torrents  
In feverish haste.  
Suddenly.... Their headstrong frenzy spent,  
The waters glide gently and gracefully  
Between calming banks.

(Joachim enters)

Now.... warm breezes caress the meadows,  
The waters all crystal clear, bubble and dance  
To the sunlight's tune.

So strange fever pass away,  
Leave Sa'ida to bloom anew.  
So strange fever pass away,  
Leave Sa'ida to bloom anew.

## JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

You called me.  
How is Sa'ida now? All better? Has the potion worked its healing way?

## AMINA

Oh no, my Lord!  
A fever races on, like the turbulent torrents of early spring.  
I worry.  
Little sleep she's had this day, nor will,

Until her feverish blood be calmed between peaceful banks.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

How can this be?

When she should now be restored by my artful means,  
A frenzied fever rages on!

(Pauses)

My healing powers with all my strength I invoke,  
Lest her sickly state soon sweep away Ahmed's and all my work.

If Sa'ida succumbs to these woes,  
The world becomes unbalanced  
And the new Adam remains concealed.

(Amina exits, Joachim turns to Sa'ida.)

Tell me my daughter, what is it?

Tell me what ravages you so,  
For I fear your feverish condition bodes ill for Ahmed.

SA'IDA

I know not what tempest is here inside me.  
My limbs feel weak and my body droops,  
But a frantic restlessness surges within,  
And heat throbs about my head.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

When did this painful malady begin?

SA'IDA

Soon after you gave me the potion,  
I fell into a restless sleep.

Just before awakening, two great dreams came upon me,  
One now but vague and dim in mind,  
The other far more vivid.

Then I opened my eyes to this fever,  
And called Amina to come comfort me.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Tell me this dream that brought you to such a feverish state.

## SA'IDA

(The Ibis is danced with passion.)

A wondrous white-plumed Ibis circles the skies.  
 Swiftly and gracefully she mounts the winds.  
     Ever more swiftly she rises high upon the currents.  
 With broad strokes she flies among the mountain tops  
     Then soars above the highest peaks,  
     There glides effortlessly with full wing outstretched.  
 Until once again she strikes the air with her great power,  
     And ever higher she soars into the eternal.  
 Ever, ever higher she soars into the eternal.

Suddenly!.....

(Dancer imitates the Ibis in great agitation.)

    She starts to fall.  
 With frenzied stroke she strives to break her fall.  
     However strongly she pumps her wings, it matters not.  
     Slowly, slowly she descends.  
 She falls below the higher peak, lower still to mountain ranges  
     Where swift currents should bear her up again.  
 In greater frenzy she pumps those mighty wings,  
     But naught is there to press against.  
     Naught is there to press against.  
 From sheer exhaustion she plunges swiftly, relentlessly,  
     Swiftly, swiftly, ever more swiftly down to earth.  
     (Dancer becomes faint and collapses.)

I then woke with burning fever.  
 What is the meaning of this dream, Joachim?

## JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

The meaning is all too clear!  
 How dare this Ibis, like Icarus, fly beyond all mortal limits  
     To threaten the Caliph and all to come!

## SA'IDA

Oh no, Joachim, my whole life and being  
     Are all devoted to Ahmed and his visions.  
 Long moonlit nights in our younger years,  
     We whiled away the languorous hours in passionate embrace.  
     Ahmed, Ahmed was all to me.  
 As time fled by, many a moonlit night, my strength all ebbed away,  
     I whiled away the hours for Ahmed  
     With impassioned song and frenzied dance,  
     Lifting his spirit to new visions and staying his aging years.

Staying his aging years.  
 I soon soared to those infinite heights of ecstasy,  
 Far beyond the highest peaks of earthly love.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

But what need have you to leave this earthly realm so soon,  
 That you fly past all mortal limits?

SA'IDA

Ah... through impassioned song and frenzied dance for Ahmed,  
 I have soared to those heights of ecstasy.  
 In ecstasy I now live beyond my own frail frame!  
 In ecstasy I live beyond my own frail frame!

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Outrageously you.....

(Controlling himself)

My daughter, but what leads you to scale eternity, itself?

SA'IDA

Dear Joachim, the answer I have never murmured  
 Beyond my own impassioned heart.

While yet a little girl, an uncommon frailty  
 And a deep infirmity I felt within  
 That my days would be of no long count.  
 Feeling thus the brevity of life, I surrender all mortality,  
 All, all for the ecstasy of the joyous Light of Allah.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Let your deep love for Ahmed then guide your art;  
 Bathe yourself in his visions and be content with earthly love,  
 Lest together we all plummet like Icarus  
 From the radiance of the sun swiftly down to earth!

SA'IDA

Oh Joachim!  
 I give all to Ahmed...  
 But don't take away my ecstasy!!!...

For without it, the world seems too small and meager,  
 And the lingering pain throbs within.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Then listen well to me my daughter. Attend my every word,  
 For upon your understanding will all else depend.  
 Seek you a model in the heavenly hawk.  
 Study closely how her winged passions and yearnings  
 Are kept steady by her calm eye of wisdom.  
 Behold how slowly, steadily,  
 Her whole being in perfect balance,  
 She ascends to the heavenly realms of ecstasy.  
 Through ever sweeping circles, each more ethereal than the last,  
 She ascends to her eternity.  
 Seek thusly your perfection.

SA'IDA

I understand... I understand full well.  
 Easier and calmer I feel already.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Then let healing rest and sleep descend upon you.  
(Pauses. An aside.)
 Sleep well, my daughter, be well.  
 I fear your well-being is crucial  
 For the new Adam to appear.

(End of Act 1, Scene 3)

ACT 1

SCENE 4

**CELEBRATIONS**

(Throughout the scene, the dancer, El Grandee Juan/Death, dances in the background, ambiguously conveying the loyal, fawning subject, while being a constant threat through observing Ahmed's listless depression. This creates great tension in Joachim.)

CHORUS

Poets, recite Ahmed's grand vision!  
Scholars, record his deeds for eternity!  
Artists, artisans, adorn Cordoba anew!  
Singers, dancers, bring heaven to our noble state!

EL GRANDEE JUAN

(Standing by the balcony)

How they sing and dance! Beyond imagination!..... But where is Sa'ida?  
Ah to see Sa'ida again. Where is she?  
She dances with the Divine and brings heaven to earth.  
I long to stay.

GRAND VIZIER

Oh king of kings, your festivities echo throughout Cordoba.  
Thousands surge to behold the dancers in the courtyard.  
See how awestruck El Grandee Juan is.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Ahmed's name resounds from Cordoba's four walls.  
His glory reaches to the heavens.

THE CALIPH AHMED

But a hollow echo I hear through the empty halls of time.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Nay! These celebrations shall ring throughout the ages  
 With the wondrous sound of Ahmed's mighty deeds!  
 Ahmed's name etched forever in his peoples' hearts!

THE CALIPH AHMED

All joy is mocked without Sa'ida.  
 The rough-hewn monument but commemorates me in lonely valleys;  
 The ravages of time smooth over all memory of this moment.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Sa'ida will soon recover  
 To lend her winsome song to the celebrations.  
 Rejoice now and bathe in your glory!

THE CALIPH AHMED

Without Sa'ida the lithesome dance and lilting song  
 But grate upon my heart.

(Sa'ida suddenly enters to Ahmed's great  
 surprise.)

Sa'ida!..... Sa'ida!.....

SA'IDA

I have come to rejoice with you in this hour of glory and festivity.

THE CALIPH AHMED

Oh Sa'ida!....  
 You are the luminous new moon  
 Suddenly appearing in the pitch-black night.

SA'IDA

The music wafted to my chamber  
 And raced my blood to join this day.

THE CALIPH AHMED

But yesterday you lay fallen, ashen white;  
 Today you rise in beauteous splendor  
 To flood my heart with joy.

SA'IDA

I long to lead your celebrations.

THE CALIPH AHMED

No!..... No!.....

Just your shining presence beside me is my heart's deepest wish.

SA'IDA

Oh but to bathe this day in glory for Ahmed...

THE CALIPH AHMED

My soul rejoices just to have you well again!

Another day, in splendor you'll lead the festivities.

SA'IDA

How my blood races to sing and dance for Ahmed.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

No! No! It is too soon!

SA'IDA

But for a few moments only?

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

No! No! You should not dance! You shall not dance!

THE CALIPH AHMED

(Irritated by Joachim)

But Allah heals Sa'ida,

And sends a sign for her to glorify this day.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

It is far too early! She shall not dance!

THE CALIPH AHMED

Allah has brought the very breath of heaven

To Ahmed's celebrations...

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL  
(Interrupts)

No!!! She cannot dance!

THE CALIPH AHMED

..... to engrave this day upon the timeless scroll of history.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL  
(Interrupts again)

No!! No!!

THE CALIPH AHMED

Allah wills her dance!

(To Sa'ida)

But only that I may catch a brief glimpse  
Of your lithesome dance.  
Then return here at once!

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

My daughter, my daughter... but for a few moments only!  
Don't overstep your mortal bounds,  
Trode safely upon the razor's edge of wisdom...  
Else all is lost.

(Ahmed gestures as if changing his mind to stop her, but then lets her go. Sa'ida nods agreement to Joachim, then moves to the festivities to vocalize Arabic half-notes and dances.)

THE CALIPH AHMED

Ah to see my Sa'ida dance and sing once again!

(Pause while dance and vocalizing continue.)

New strength surges within,  
New purpose pulses upon me.

Ah, to encircle the earth once more!

EL GRANDEE JUAN

Cordoba! Cordoba! Mira Cordoba!  
I who once dreamed of conquest am now conquered by your spirit.  
I shall stay forever!

(Pause while Ahmed and others watch.  
Joachim becomes increasingly restive.  
Ahmed's mood changes from elation to  
worried concern. Gestures to the Grand  
Vizier to stop Sa'ida's dance.)

THE CALIPH AHMED

Enough now, Sa'ida.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

She dances too long!

THE CALIPH AHMED

No, no, but for a few moments longer.  
All must be well!

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

She dances by her will alone!

THE CALIPH AHMED

For another moment only.

(Joachim restrains himself from saying  
more, finally realizing his negative effect on  
Ahmed. Ahmed finally goes to the Grand  
Vizier to stop Sa'ida.)

It is enough! She must stop!  
Stop the dance before it is too late!

See the crowds intoxicated with the heady sight  
Of Sa'ida's dance!

(Pause)

She must be stopped!

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

She has not the strength!

THE CALIPH AHMED

Ahhh, their wild rapture sets Sa'ida on.

In frenzied ecstasy she dances!

Stop! Stop! Stop Sa'ida!

(Sa'ida suddenly cries out in a long,  
anguished, painful cry.)

Sa'ida!!!!..... Sa'ida!!!!

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

El Grandee Juan! Beware El Grandee Juan! Stay!

(Glances at the Grandee Juan, then hobbles  
after Ahmed.)

(End of Act I, Scene 4)

ACT I

SCENE 5

**THE ABYSS**

(Oud music)

THE CALIPH AHMED

Sa'ida!... Sa'ida!

Tears well up in my eyes to see you lying thus,  
Grief shakes through my frame to hear your moans of pain.

SA'IDA

Ahmed! Ahmed! .... Dear ruler of my heart.

How I danced and sang to shed radiance upon your realm!

THE CALIPH AHMED

Oh Sa'ida,  
You are the deep strains of the lute,  
    Calling me forth from worldly schemes.  
You are the high notes of the stringed oud,  
    Drawing me back to my ancient source.  
You are the lilting song, bearing my soul  
    On an endless ladder to heavenly bliss.  
You are the sensuous dance, unfolding all  
    Worldly forms for my eyes to feast on.

SA'IDA

What pleasure I have in seeing the four corners of the earth  
    Bow to you, oh king of kings.  
The winds sweep low in obeisance at your feet.  
The mighty elephant bends down his noble head to you.  
Princes and priests come from afar  
    To learn wisdom at your feet.  
The ravaging jackal and snarling wolf  
    Flee in terror at your presence.

(Joachim enters silently, unseen. Stays in the shadows unnoticed.)

## CHORUS

Far-flung fields of golden wheat  
 Now turn into desert wasteland.  
 Winter winds howl through stone-strewn gullies.  
 Large boulders and barren earth engulf Ahmed's realm.  
 No shelter is there in sight for the numbed traveler,  
 Nor friendly warming touch nearby.

## SA'IDA

My awesome Caliph!  
 Once more!.... Oh but once more could I but  
 Lift your soul to new delights!

## THE CALIPH AHMED

No more, no more shall I ascend upon my throne!  
 No more shall Ahmed rule his mighty realm!  
 No more shall Ahmed rule his mighty realm!

## CHORUS

Wearily, wearily, the lonely traveler trudges upon shifting dunes,  
 As stinging sand lashes all about.  
 The shadows deepen as he hunches over, numbed with cold.  
 No touch of human life is there to see upon the earth,  
 No light nor signs from heaven above,  
 As a sea of swirling wrath blankets the skies.  
 The dark void of night engulfs him as he wanders aimlessly about.

## SA'IDA

Ahmed..... Ahmed..... My mighty Caliph...

## THE CALIPH AHMED

(Runs off-stage crying out in great distress.)

Joachim!..... Joachim!.... Help Sa'ida!.... Help Sa'ida!

## JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Sa'ida has fallen!  
 The darkened moon eclipses Ahmed's golden sun.  
 Without their light, the new Adam cannot appear.

All is lost! All is lost!

A storm of fury bursts upon me!  
 The days of glory are doomed!  
 The new Adam is still-born!  
 All is lost! All is lost!

### CHORUS

Tempests batter our foundering ship of state.  
 Howling gales lash at tattered sails, screaming and screeching,  
 Then sinking in quiet repose, only to batter and pelt anew.  
 Shafts of fire dance an orgy on our decks.  
 In despair lies the Caliph Ahmed  
 As Muslim and Christian princes circle ravenously in the seething seas.

### JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

No more, no more shall Ahmed rule his realm!  
 Blinding rage impels me to strike such gaping holes  
 In our sinking ship  
 That the seas surge in and bring about our swift demise.  
 (Looks upon Sa'ida who is sleeping and  
 changes mood.)  
 Ah... Look now upon this sad sleeping princess, the soul of Cordoba.  
 A spirit and beauty more incomparable than  
 The noblest city of man's imagination.  
 Ah... how the city walls are now in ruins, fragments of once glorious days.  
 The streets... once enlivened by throngs of people  
 now grown over with tufts of grass.  
 Bare foundations, barely showing, all that is left of once thriving shops.  
 Libraries long abandoned mutely cry of scholar's learning.  
 Marble columns now half standing,  
 Their veins run dry of royal blood,  
 Blanched remains of kingly power.  
 Only roving goat and sun-drenched dog  
 Lick through cobbled byways.  
 Whispers of past grandeur echo, of once glorious days,  
 Of visionary dreams, of wondrous deeds.  
 (Sa'ida is awakened by Joachim and  
 interrupts him.)

### SA'IDA

Joachim?... Is that you, Joachim?

Pain pulses all within me.

Limbs droop from want of strength.  
Sleep becomes a fitful torment.

Joachim.... Joachim....

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

How is it now, my daughter?

SA'IDA

All within me is in deepest anguish.  
I have no strength to struggle.  
Oh Joachim.....dispel the dark.

(Pauses)

Joachim... Joachim...

I fear the measured beat of this life's clock will soon stop.

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

(To himself)

Ah, could I but once more impart to this great spirit  
A healing draught that she might move with artful passion.  
Alas!....

Her mortal means are too far spent.

(Pauses)

Shall I rid Sa'ida's deep distress by clever drugs,  
And wind the clock one more turn or two?

(Pauses)

But then imprison her soaring spirit in a frame too frail to move,  
And thus see her and Ahmed slowly sink in dark despair?

SA'IDA

Joachim.... Joachim....

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Or shall I free her soul to soar where she yearns to be?

(After some hesitation, he reaches into his  
robe for a vial.)

Here my daughter, drink this great potion.  
Calm, peaceful sleep will soon descend upon you.

SA'IDA

Dearest Joachim, will this new potion relieve me of my torment?  
Will it rob the pain of its full dull throb?

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

Yes... all of this and more.  
Everlasting rest will soon be yours.

SA'IDA

(Takes the vial)

I.....will obey your orders.

(... and drinks it.)

A fever now rages within me!

JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

For but a moment.

(Sa'ida soon falls back on the couch.)

Thus have I drawn down the final curtain on this Golden Era.

(Pause)

The very hands that rose to pry destiny off its chosen course  
Are now quickened to hasten its fated end.

It is we whom Death has hired,

El Grandee Juan he used as a ploy for us to do his bidding.

I bow to the wisdom of the Illumined Ones

Who now shroud the earth in darkness.

The dark passions within mighty Ahmed and heavenly Sa'ida

Were far more than all my secret powers could undo.

Ahmed blindly followed his vision to seek immortality,

Sa'ida flew past all mortal limits,

And I? .... I in my fear of enemies used forbidden rituals

To help push us into the void.

Unable we were to balance on the razor's edge

Between the moonbright night and the sun-drenched day.

Powerless, I saw this Golden Age and heavenly future

Slip into the dark abyss.

I humbly bow to the wisdom of the Illumined Ones.

THE CALIPH AHMED

Sa'ida...

(Pauses)

Sa'ida... Our future's all assured!

Has Joachim come?  
 (Expectantly)

He will surely cure you... And once more your dance and song  
 Will joyously bring the breath of heaven to Ahmed's realm.  
 Sa'ida...  
 (Pauses)

Sa'ida...  
 (Apprehensive)

Sa'ida!  
 (Sees her sprawled on the couch, mute. Lets out a loud cry.)

Sa'ida!!!..... Sa'ida!!!  
 (Picks her up. She is lifeless. In a long, mournful, wailing cry expressed by a musical instrument.)

### JOACHIM BEN ISRAEL

One last time I call upon the Kabbalah.  
 I invoke Thee by my secret signs, Oh Great Powers.  
 I invoke the prophet Elijah to carry me forth.  
 I invoke thee, oh great Elijah,  
 I invoke thee to bring me to those Illumined Ones  
 Of everlasting Light.  
 I invoke thee to let me sojourn there  
 While darkness shrouds the earth,  
 Until a new Golden Age of Caliph and Kabbalist, Sufi and Saint,  
 Muslim, Jew, and Christian bring forth the new Adam  
 Where women and men are addicted to the joyous Light within.  
 (Wailing cry stops. A dance figure appears covered with a cloak or mask. Choral vocalizing of exuberance.)

Elijah!!!.....  
 (The cloak or mask is thrown off. It is Death. Strong choral vocalizing of terror. Death dances in triumph.)

It is Death!!!  
 (Joachim starts to tilt with Death as at the end of Scene 1, but then as if overcome, drops his staff and retreats. He vocalizes a long, curdling cry, and then staggers and collapses.)

The End

## PROGRAM NOTES

The play is a mystical/psychological drama rooted in the Kabbalah and in Sufism (Islamic mysticism). In the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Kabbalah prophesied that there would be a new Adam, a new spiritual evolution in humanity. In the Sufi literature, the Ibis is a sacred bird who soars to God. The psychological drama involves intense paranoid anxiety, an over riding yearning for immortality, and a denial of physical fragility.

THE Umayyad Caliphate re-emerged in Cordoba, Spain in 756 CE after being overthrown by the Abassids in Damascus in 750. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Cordoba was by far the most advanced culture in Europe, drawing upon the great heritage of the ancient world: Biblical, Greco-Roman, and Byzantine. For almost three centuries there was remarkable interfaith harmony among Muslims, Jews, and Christians. By 1031, the Umayyad Caliphate imploded from internal dissensions within, and was overrun by a fundamentalist Muslim Moroccan kingdom, the Almoravids. They in turn were supplanted a century later by another Moroccan Muslim fundamentalist kingdom, the Alhmohads. By 1236, they succumbed to the Christian kingdom, culminating in the Reconquest of Spain and the Inquisition. These three fundamentalist kingdoms resulted in a severe decline in both the rich cultural heritage and the remarkable interfaith harmony of the Umayyad Caliphate.

**A Golden Age of the Jews:** The Jews played a central role in the Caliphate, its cultural life, and its trade with other countries, spreading the advanced culture of the Caliphate into Medieval Europe.

“The sharp edge of the razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path to Salvation is hard.”

*Katha Upanishad*

