

Scenes from the Epic of Gilgamesh

Adapted from: McCaughrean, Geraldine. *Gilgamesh the Hero*.

Adapted by Abe Karplus.

Cast (in order of appearance)

Character	Actor
Archaeologist 1	Karen
Archaeologist 2	Emily
Archaeologist 3	Jake
Enlil (chief god)	Sean
Shamash (sun god)	Grant
Ishtar (goddess of love and war)	Jamie
Ea (god of rivers)	Madison
Gilgamesh (king of Uruk)	Abe
Scorpion Man	Eli
Scorpion Woman	Madison
Siduri (woman with inn)	Meggie
Urshanabi (ferryman)	Graham
Utnapishtim (the immortal)	Jack
Saba (Utnapishtim's wife)	Aneesa
The snake	Cheyenne

Scene 1: Archaeological dig in Iraq

Archaeologists 1–3 in front of stage, stage right, where they remain throughout play.

Archaeologist 1: Look, what is that?

Archaeologist 2: Oh, it's cuneiform tablets!

Archaeologist 3: What do they say?

Archaeologist 1: Here, I think I can read them. Can you get me the dictionary and the magnifying glass?

Archaeologist 2: OK, Professor, here you are.

Archaeologist 3: What do they say? What do they say?

Archaeologist 1: Will you be quiet so I can look at this!

Archaeologist 2: They're probably just warehouse records.

Archaeologist 3: Maybe, maybe, but what do they say?

Archaeologist 1: Let me see—it seems to be a story. The beginning seems to be missing. This bit says, “Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, sees the Scorpion People, they guard the entrance to a tunnel ...”

Archaeologist 2: This cuneiform tablet seems to have a title on it.

Archaeologist 3: “The Epic of Gilgamesh”

Archaeologist 1: Well, well, well, I'll continue ...

Gods enter and remain in front of stage, stage left.

Scene 2: In the Mashu Mountains

Enlil (*before stage*): I am Enlil, God of the Wind. Well, well, Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, has been wandering in the desert for a while. I know—I'll direct him to the Garden of the Gods. Let's see if he is strong enough to defeat the scorpion people, and brave enough for the tunnel 12 leagues long.

Gilgamesh enters stage right facing Scorpion Man and Scorpion Woman entering stage left.

Scorpion People (together): Halt! Who dares approach?

Gilgamesh: I am looking for Utnapishtim who lives beyond the Garden of the Gods! I am Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, and I believe that this is the way I have to go!

Scorpion Man: To do that, you would need to travel through the mountain—twelve leagues without light.

Scorpion Woman: What is so important that you should attempt the impossible?

Gilgamesh: I had a friend. His name was Enkidu. And he died. There was nothing I could do to save him. I thought there was; I tried; I couldn't.

Scorpion People (together, slightly moved): Are you not afraid?

Gilgamesh: Not afraid, did you say? I am so afraid. This "death" has turned me into such a coward that I can't sink any lower into fear. What good is a hero eaten up with terror?

Scorpion People part to let Gilgamesh exit stage left. Scorpion People exit stage right.

Scorpion Woman: Pass through before nightfall, Gilgamesh of Uruk.

Gilgamesh re-enters stage left, wandering through tunnel.

Gilgamesh: Dark.

Enlil: It is not the dark of night, pricked through with stars. It is not the darkness of indoors, with candles or embers in the grate. It is not the darkness of sleep, which is illuminated by dreams. No, this is solid dark.

Gilgamesh: Dark.

Gilgamesh exits stage left.

Scene 3: In the Garden of the Gods.

Siduri sitting on chair stage right.

Shamash: I am Shamash, the god of the sun. I see that Gilgamesh has braved the dark tunnel. Now that he is in the Garden of the Gods, I think I should direct him to that sea-front inn there.

Gilgamesh enters stage left, Shamash points to Gilgamesh, then moves his finger to point to Siduri. Gilgamesh follows the finger.

Siduri (*running behind chair and leaning on it as Gilgamesh leans on the other side*): Go away!

Gilgamesh: Let me in or I'll smash in your walls and kick your wine-press into the sea! I am Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, slayer of Huwawa and the Bull of Heaven!

Siduri: No, you're not!

Gilgamesh: Yes, I am!

Siduri: Not!

Gilgamesh: Am!

Siduri: Not! I've heard of Gilgamesh, and he's young and handsome, and you come along, telling me you're Gilgamesh, you ... you ... you old candlewick!

Gilgamesh steps away from the chair, so that Siduri falls out of it.

Siduri: Look at yourself.

Gilgamesh looks at himself by looking at seat of chair.

Gilgamesh: Why shouldn't I be changed? I've travelled half the world, and I have had troubles. I had a friend, the best friend a man could have. His name was Enkidu, and I loved him. Now he is dead. I've just walked through twelve leagues of darkness, and unless I can find Utnapishtim the Faraway, I shall die just like Enkidu. Isn't that grief enough to change a man?

Siduri: Give up, my dear! Who needs paradise? You're a long time dead—that's another true thing for you. What you ought to do is get married. Children—that's the shape of happiness. That's the way we foil the gods. I mean, what good would it do you to live a million years unhappy?

Gilgamesh: Keep your advice for your customers! Just tell me where I can find Utnapishtim!

Siduri: Oho! He lives over the water, over to the other side of the waters of death. No one crosses over there but Urshanabi the ferryman. He won't take you, though. Be better giving up and going home.

Shamash: So Gilgamesh went down to the water's edge in search of Urshanabi the ferryman.

Gilgamesh remains on stage for next scene.

Scene 4: The River of Death

Urshanabi enters poling his ferry boat.

Ea: I am Ea, god of rivers. So, there's Urshanabi the ferryman, and there's Gilgamesh. Well, this ought to be interesting.

Gilgamesh: So, that must be Urshanabi the ferryman and his boat!

Gilgamesh yells, attacks chair with floppy sword.

Urshanabi: Now what did you do that for?

Gilgamesh: You have to take me over to Paradise Shore!

Urshanabi: You made sure I don't, didn't you? You just smashed the steering gear!

Gilgamesh: I am Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, slayer of Huwawa and the Bull of Heaven!

Urshanabi: Then you must have fallen on hard times. What happened to you?

Gilgamesh: I had a friend. His name was Enkidu. When the gods decreed he must die, I was made to look death in the face. The sight terrified me. I can't die like that. Utnapishtim didn't. He can tell me the secret of immortality. Please—you go there every day. All I'm asking is that you take me there once.

Urshanabi: You ask more than you know. But, since the steering gear is smashed, I'll need you to cut twelve good long poles of wood. Can you do that? (*Pause while Gilgamesh gets poles.*) The crossing takes us over the River of Death. If you or I so much as dip one finger into that water, we'll discover the secrets of mortality—then and there!

As Gilgamesh punts the boat, they remain on stage as Siduri inches her chair off, as if they were moving away from the shore.

Ea: Gilgamesh discovered why they needed the poles. They were for punting. One was good for a while, but then they needed two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine ... and on the River of Death, ten, eleven, twelve ... Then even twelve was not enough. Then Gilgamesh came up with an idea.

Gilgamesh: We can use the mast as a thirteenth pole!

Urshanabi: Then how will we break free of the current?

Gilgamesh: I will be the mast!

They mime getting the mast down and Gilgamesh putting the sail on.

Ea: Paradise Shore is coming in sight.

Urshanabi and Gilgamesh arrive together at Paradise Shore, where Utnapishtim and Saba are waiting.

Scene 5: Paradise Shore

Ishtar: I am Ishtar, goddess of love and war. I see that Gilgamesh and Urshanabi have nearly reached Paradise Shore. I wonder what will happen now. Let's see.

Saba: Oh look, there's Urshanabi the ferryman. But he's bringing a mortal with him. Who could it be?

Gilgamesh (to himself): What would he be like, Utnapishtim whom the gods had rewarded with eternal life? Would he look like Enkidu—thickset and shaggy? Would he stand larger than life, skin radiating life like the zest from a lemon?

Urshanabi: This is Paradise Shore. No snow ever falls here. The animals live in perfect peace.

Ishtar: Gilgamesh has caught sight of a middle-aged couple sitting together under a halub tree, he in a hammock cracking nuts, she busy brushing a little white goat.

Urshanabi: There he is, man of Uruk. Not that he will tell you anything different from what I've said.

Gilgamesh (*in astonishment, disbelief*): This is Utnapishtim the Immortal? The Faraway?

Utnapishtim: Who are you?

Gilgamesh: I am Gilgamesh, King of Uruk! My friend Enkidu died, and I've sworn never to suffer the same fate. That's why I've come—to learn the secret of immortality, from the one man who has it.

I thought you would be more ... more ...

Utnapishtim: More what? More full of life? Raging and racketing about? Wrestling wild beasts to their knees? Slaying giants?

Gilgamesh: Yes! Yes! Yes!

Utnapishtim: Why? Where's the hurry? What do I have to prove? When a man has only a few years of life, he feels he must pack them full. Time is not standing at my back with his whip making me dance, making me run, making me strive. I've had time to learn the important things are few. A wife, contentment, memories, peace. You should not have put yourself to the trouble of coming all this way. It is your fate to live and then to die—just as it was mine to live forever.

Gilgamesh: Tell me. Tell me how you came to be immortal.

Saba: Come on, Utnapishtim. You can tell him.

Scene 6: Utnapishtim's Story

Utnapishtim moves to one side. Gods center stage.

Utnapishtim: I was king of Shurruk. In those times, Enlil hated humankind.

Enlil: Humans are too noisy. I know—I'll drown them.

Utnapishtim: And he made all his brother and sister gods give consent to the destruction of mankind. He made them promise not to tell anyone.

Enlil: Everyone, promise not to tell any humans about the coming flood.

Shamash: All right.

Ishtar: Yes.

Ea (*in a down-hearted way*): Very well.

Utnapishtim: Ea thought of a way to warn me without breaking his vow.

Ea: I know. I'll tell Utnapishtim's house, which can tell him.

Utnapishtim: So he whispered into the reeds which made up the walls of my house. Then my house told it to me in my dreams. It told me to make my house into a boat and take two of every kind

of animal on it, to wait out the great flood. I waterproofed the boat with bitumen. I went aboard with my wife.

The flood was horrible. I had to stay awake seven days and seven nights, waiting it out. All of the humans, besides me and my wife, turned to clay, back to the substance from which they were made. It was water as far as I could see—flat water.

Then I saw an island, a bare mountain tip sticking out of the water. For nine days and nights, we were wedged upon it. On the ninth day, I loosed a raven, and the raven didn't come back. That's when I knew it was safe to release all the animals. When Enlil saw my boat, I thought he would smash it with a single thunderbolt. Then I heard Ea's voice.

Ea: Punish people when they sin, but don't destroy them utterly! For seven days and seven nights, Utnapishtim kept awake, steering the ark safely through the waves. Should such a man die?

Utnapishtim: He was speaking up for me, reasoning with Enlil. I had crawled out of hiding to listen. Enlil saw me, before I could duck back down. He came closer and closer, and I felt so scared I could die of fright. Then, and I'm still not quite sure how it happened, he granted me and my wife immortality. He told me to make my home on Paradise Shore, past the River of Death. So that's why I'm here.

Scene 7: Paradise Shore 2

Gods return to front of stage, stage left.

Ishtar: And that is the story of Utnapishtim.

Gilgamesh: If only the gods would test me like that!

Utnapishtim: No need. I will set you a test. Could you stay awake seven days and seven nights, if lives depended on it?

Gilgamesh: Yes, of course! What is so hard about defeating sleep, after all! Does it have claws or horns or fangs? No.

Ishtar (*speaking like a lullaby*): Sleep is soft and wool-lined. Sleep comes, swirling and silken, rolling over a man like fog.

Gilgamesh falls asleep.

Utnapishtim: Wife, go and cook and loaf and set it down by our guest for him to eat when he wakes.

Saba: He won't wake for a week, poor weary soul.

Utnapishtim: I know that. But bake it anyway.

Ishtar: Every morning, Saba baked a loaf of bread and set it by Gilgamesh where he slept on the seashore.

Gilgamesh awakes.

Utnapishtim: That was a great sleep, Gilgamesh. A great sleep born out of a great weariness.

Gilgamesh: No, no! I just nodded for a moment.

Utnapishtim: For seven days and seven nights you slept.

Gilgamesh: Never!

Utnapishtim: Each day I had my wife bake a loaf. Look. There they are. You can see how old they are. The first is green with mold, the last is still warm. In between are all the stages a loaf goes through before it ceases to be a loaf. A little like the life of a man, wouldn't you say? Which loaf of bread are you?

Gilgamesh mimes kicking 1st loaf, pauses, cries.

Utnapishtim: Ferryman, you were wrong to bring this man here. Take him away, and take yourself off, too!

Ishtar: So Urshanabi the ferryman began ferrying Gilgamesh back to the Garden of the Gods. But they had not gone out of earshot before this conversation took place:

Utnapishtim: Am I a god? Could I have granted him immortality?

Saba: You could have told him about Old-Man-Young. It's not immortality, but it would have been something. Something, in return for all his sufferings.

Utnapishtim: It would be too great an ordeal—too terrible. I like him too much (*Notices Gilgamesh still there.*) You!

Gilgamesh: Too much for what? Who is Old-Man-Young? (*Gilgamesh grabs Utnapishtim.*) What did she mean? Tell me!

Utnapishtim: Calmly, man! Let go of me! Must you go looking for disappointment at the bottom of the sea!

Gilgamesh: Is that where it grows? What does it look like? What does it do? How will I find it? Tell me! Tell me everything!

Ishtar: And so Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh about Old-Man-Young: a single weed growing off-shore, protected by ripping currents and armed with thorns so sharp even crabs could not slice it through with their armored claws.

Saba: Grip it tight and fetch it up to the light, and it has magic enough to make a hundred old men young again.

Scene 8: Old-Man-Young

Ishtar: Urshanabi is ferrying Gilgamesh a bit up current of the plant. Gilgamesh is tying stones to his ankles.

Gilgamesh: I won't use Old-Man-Young first myself. I shall give it to the old men of Uruk and see them grow young again before my eyes.

Urshanabi: You must lift the sluice-gate and let the current carry you out to sea. These rocks will keep you from bobbing to the surface.

Ishtar: Now, he is trying to open the sluice gate. He is just strong enough to. He is diving in. Then he sees it—a dark green snaggle of leaves and spiky stalks. Not another plant grows in the strong current—only this plant is too well-rooted to be dislodged. He will have only one chance. If he fails to grasp the plant, he will be swept on by and lose it forever. He scuffs his feet, elbows, knees, against the sea bed, in an attempt to slow down, then reaches out and grabs the plant with both fists. It's nettle, briar, and cactus in one. He opens his mouth to yell, and the sea rushes in, but he does not let go. He picks up one of the rocks and slices at the rope with it, all the while holding fast to the fabulous plant with its bristles and spines and venomous hairs. The pain is so intense. His lungs flatten inside him. If he lets go, he might yet live. One rock comes off, the second is slipping off. And he's not sure how he does it, but he reaches the surface, brandishing the plant. He's back safe aboard the boat.

Gilgamesh dances a victory dance, then suddenly stops.

Gilgamesh: Urshanabi, what have I done to you? I've robbed you of your livelihood. I've put you out of favor of the gods. Come home with me, Urshanabi. Come back to Uruk. The Euphrates is no sea, but at least the spray of it can't kill you. There's no place in the world like Uruk.

Ishtar: They sail back over the ocean. They begin walking, and after they walk thirty leagues, Gilgamesh sees a lake, and he decides to bathe.

Scene 9: The Snake

Snake: I am Snake.

Hmmm, the air tastes funny—in a good way, though. Oh, Gilgamesh is bathing in my lake. I seem to taste a bit of—could it be magic?—in the air. It's coming from the plant perched on the rock. I slither closer to the rock, to get a better sense of what sort of magic plant is on it. (*Snake slithers to "rock."*) I can tell that this plant is Old-Man-Young. I can tell everything by scent. I am moving closer to it. Chomp! (*Eats plant.*) Yum! It tastes—how can I describe this?—sparkly, poky. It makes me feel all tingly. I'm shedding my skin. (*Drops cloth.*) I feel suddenly sparkly, and then young again, young.

Snake dances.

Gilgamesh: No! No! No! No!

Gilgamesh weeps as he exits.

Scene 10: Archaeological dig 2

Archaeologist 2: Well, that's a very interesting story.

Archaeologist 3: Yes, but I'm not sure what to make of it.

Archaeologist 1: It doesn't seem quite complete.

Archaeologist 2: I wish we knew how the story ended.

Archaeologist 3 (*sbrngs*): Let's move on to the next dig site. There doesn't seem to be anything more here.