

THE LAOCOON NOBODY KNOWS

Nearly a Monodrama

David S. Cole
1962

Characters

TROJAN KING

LAOCOON

PEOPLE OF TROY

Young Man

Old Man

Old Woman

Two Lovers

Two Little Boys

(A desolate plain outside Troy, reaching back to an empty horizon.

Up-left, the erect, chunky foreleg of a huge, wooden horse rises out of sight into the flies; the leg appears to be part of a huge wooden statue.

Center stands the TROJAN KING, casually and effortlessly holding a length of white rope out to his right side. The other end of the rope - which extends in the direction of down-right - is held level to the floor by an invisible wire fastened above, and so seems to be suspended in mid-air. The PEOPLE OF TROY - represented by a YOUNG MAN, TWO LOVERS, an OLD MAN, an OLD WOMAN, and TWO LITTLE BOYS - are trying to push past this restraining rope to get a better view of the horse.

Down-left of the TROJAN KING, LAOCOON is sitting on the ground, his legs crossed and tucked under him. He has in his hands a brass tripod consisting of a ring with three rods hinged to it. During the whole course of the play (except where indicated) LAOCOON is completely preoccupied tinkering with this tripod. He is trying to stand it firmly on its ~~three~~ legs, but one or other of these is always buckling under. With the persistency and absorption of a child building blocks, he tries any number of approaches to the problem, but in vain. This continuous business must be performed with variety, but must not divert attention from the TROJAN KING's speech. The continuous mime must complement the continuous speech; the rhythms of LAOCOON's movements must fall in with the TROJAN KING's speech-rhythms, etc.

The TROJAN KING watches LAOCOON intently; the PEOPLE OF TROY strain with increasing frenzy to get by the rope. Suddenly the TROJAN KING snaps the rope like a whip and the PEOPLE OF TROY shrink back. With a contemptuous gesture, the TROJAN KING lets go of the rope and it is hauled up.)

TROJAN KING

(facing front, as if giving an order)

I want the citizenry out, because it's time to determine the national interest, if you know what I mean.

(turning to the PEOPLE OF TROY)

And I can see by the rich intelligent smiles that you knew what I mean. So get out.

(The TROJAN KING turns his attention back to LAOCOON. The PEOPLE OF TROY, whispering sullenly among themselves, shuffle off, down-right - all but the YOUNG MAN, who tries desperately, by gestures and sign-language, to communicate something - probably a suggestion about fixing the tripod - to LAOCOON. The YOUNG MAN is doing his best to avoid the notice of the TROJAN KING, but when LAOCOON, whose eye the YOUNG MAN has finally caught, very slowly turns his head toward the YOUNG MAN, the TROJAN KING, who has been observing LAOCOON, also turns, and fixes the YOUNG MAN with a stare. The YOUNG MAN panics and runs off, down-right. LAOCOON slowly returns to his original attitude and gets back to work. The TROJAN KING looks after the YOUNG MAN for a moment, then briskly turns to LAOCOON, smooths down his robe and composes himself for speech.)

Though I am Trojan King, I want to begin with your opinion. I want to say I have a respect for you, Laocoon; there's nothing you that don't inspire the profoundest respect. And why is that? Because what there is to know about the gods, you know. And what there is to know about their creatures, I know. Which is a deal of knowing between the two of us, Laocoon. Now I don't come pestering you about tripods and animals because I don't care, and you don't come pestering me about money and soldiers because I'd kill you. If you were to once set foot inside my complex of offices I'd kill you. By god, if I once thought - ! But I don't think so, or I wouldn't have you here with me now. No, Laocoon has discretion; Laocoon will see the necessities I see. So: is it all right about that? Good. Is it all right about that? Good. Is it all right about that? Good.

Now I'm coming to see you not because I feel you have a solution, but because I'm sure I haven't. I haven't the solution; or at least not all of it; or even the better part. I see the need for... well, for counsel, if I may express myself in that way. Because this thing with the horse, where would I refer it? My Tactical Commission? My Policy Planning Group pro tempore? Or where? The solution is somewhere to refer it, and I don't know where to refer it.

I am not ashamed to admit this fact. Members of my dynasty have never been called upon to make the provisions I am now going to have to make. Well, you don't run down an inland prince

for neglecting his navy, do you, I mean, you don't run him down for that. Do you? Do you? By god, if I thought you did, that you did - ! But I don't think so, or I wouldn't have you here with me now.

No, I'm clear in my conscience about seeking you out." It may be a prince should have more vision than he can be held strictly responsible for, that may be. But at the critical moment - again, let me repeat: at what I consider to be the critical moment of my reign - I feel justified in consulting you. You, the particular priest Laocoon, as distinguished from theological generalisms, if you know what I mean. And I have reason to believe that you know what I mean. Referring now to childhood: we played ball together and you always wanted to be referee - d'you remember? - and now they make up parables about you and that's good enough for me, that's all I need to know. So when I made up my mind - or may I say, when Destiny made my mind up - that if we were going to be intelligent about this horse, we had better hear a word from the gods, I said, you can't do better than have a talk with Laocoon.

(LAOCOON starts, jerks his head up and stares straight out for a moment. He winces as if with pain. As the TROJAN KING begins to speak again, he goes back to work.)

What do you think? You think I've made my mind up? Well, no, in fact, I have not. In fact, I'm very far from having made my mind up, yet, really. So I'm going to enumerate some courses, and then I'm going to ask your opinion, an opinion which I have every reason to expect - don't you cross me! - every reason to expect... What do you say?

Common sense tells me, "Burn the thing, here and now, burn it all up." There could be soldiers inside; there could be a curse involved. But, Laocoon, there are times we must go beyond common sense. I don't have to tell you, there are times we must go beyond common sense.

Burn the horse - that's one possibility. As you're craning your neck down that path, I'll hit off down another. Assuming we don't have a burning, we could have a dedication and then leave it out here. Now, you see, that brings together the advantages of two courses. Leave it, and we don't risk the city; dedicate it, and we secure the

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favor of the goddess. All right, that sounds like the thing to do, but wait: I want you realize that we also bring in two disadvantages. One: we slight the goddess by refusing a place of honor to her gift; two: we leave far from surveillance what is possibly a hostile base of operations - and here you will say, "Well, let's have a look inside," but in violating this, shall I say, sacrament, we should be violating godhead itself, which heaven avert.

So, finally, it could be wheeled in. There's an engineering problem, but what's more important, we introduce this possibly hostile base of operations right into the Trojan confines. I would therefore characterize this last course as perilous; and yet fraught with advantages, advantages which have to do with the goddess Athene - and here you can tell me more than I can tell you. Such a course is therefore not to be passed over, but weighed. Weighed against the security of Troy. Our city against a god's honor. My realm against yours, Laocoon. Consider. Look on the balance and then try to tip the scale. What do you say?

(The TROJAN KING pauses expectantly. LAOCOON looks very slowly up from his work, but not at the TROJAN KING. He stares straight out, his face contorting in a painful search for words. Then, slowly and doubtfully, he speaks:)

LAOCOON

I wouldn't...

(He slowly goes back to his work.)

TROJAN KING

Wouldn't? Wouldn't what? What am I to understand by that? Wouldn't risk the city? Wouldn't snub the goddess? Wouldn't stand for the muttering? Or what? You have to be more clear, you have to show practicality.

(LAOCOON has finally maneuvered the tripod into a precariously upright position. He is slowly removing his hands so as not to knock it over by a careless gesture, but in fact he does knock it over by a careless gesture. It clatters to the ground; LAOCOON has a moment of vexation, and then starts in all over again. He works steadily from now till the blackout.)

I take your meaning to be this, then: that you wouldn't presume to dictate. Is that what you "wouldn't"? Is that what you mean? Am I right or am I right?

(Pause. LAOCOON goes on working.)

You choose wisely, old priest, it's the god in you coming out. Now when I say, "the god", I mean the people. This time, when I say the god, I mean -

(calling out instructions)

All right, get this horse ready to move! You will attach pullies, you will exert leverage. I'm directing operations for the manipulation of this horse. I want everything precise, I don't want anything to go wrong as to this horse.

(A rope is thrown out around the leg of the horse. The lights begin to dim.)

That's good! You will respond to my instructions as wheels to mainspring, and we acquire this horse.

(More and more ropes are thrown out around the horse's leg. The ropes become entangled with one another. The lights continue to dim. By the word "countervail", the stage is in complete darkness.)

Push. Pull. Deflect. Push. Counterbalance. Countervail.
 Pull. Push. Thalassa. Pull. Deploy. Push. Pull. Belay.
 Push. Excelsior. Push. Pull. I go before! And I tell you what. I will undo the gates for you. Undo the gates with my own hand! What do you say?

(The lights come up - a sort of half-light. The horse's leg has been removed. The PEOPLE OF TROY are dispersed about the stage in the following attitudes:
 The TWO LOVERS, arms at sides, stare into each other's eyes, profile to audience.
 The OLD MAN squats facing the audience; his jaw twitches and he makes a rasping, breathy sound.
 The OLD WOMAN stands rigid, legs wide apart, arms stretched straight out, palms out, fingers

splayed; a stylized expression of astonishment on her face.

The TWO LITTLE BOYS are wrestling on the ground; one has the other in a bear hug around the neck. The face of neither boy is visible, and neither boy moves.

Where LAOCOON had been standing, the YOUNG MAN stands, the collapsed tripod at his feet. He seems to be trying desperately to remember something.

His foot brushes the tripod.

He starts back.

He stares at the tripod.

He approaches the tripod and bends - does not kneel - over it.

He makes several half hearted attempts to stand the tripod erect.

He picks up the tripod, holds it out from him, just resting on his palms, and stares at it.

At their hinged end, he grips the three rods together, sheaflike, in one hand

He brandishes the tripod like a sword.

The lights go down.)

THE END