
Jason—The End

ATHOL FUGARD

BOTH HIS GLORY and his shame were all but forgotten. For as long as the people of the village could remember he had lived there on the beach, sheltering during bad weather in the rotting upturned hulk of an old ship. A few of the old villagers said that in their youth it was believed that the ship had been his and that he had sailed all around the world in it with a band of great warriors doing wondrous things. The young people however scoffed at those stories. How could that shuffling, foul-smelling wreck of a man ever have commanded the likes of Hercules and Theseus, Castor and Pollux, Zetes and Orpheus? . . . to mention only a few of that great band who it was said had pulled away at the oars. There were also dark stories about the death of a king and his daughters and a beautiful raven-haired enchantress. But these were even harder to connect to the old outcast. There was however no denying the aura of mystery that clung to him. Although everyone knew that he lived alone, there were stories that at his camp he had been heard talking to and swearing at someone else; that at times a second voice, deep and disturbing, could be heard coming from the remains of the ship. But nobody was brave enough to investigate. For the most part, he was left alone or treated with wary suspicion when he appeared in the village knocking on doors and begging for food. On those occasions, even though there was no one who could honestly say that they had any feeling for him, he usually headed back to his beach with a bag of scraps. But when things went wrong—when

the fishing was poor, or a boat was lost out at sea, or some other disaster had struck the village—then he became the scapegoat and instead of the grudging handout of a few morsels and crusts of bread, he was met with curses and pelted with any filth or rotten food that was at hand. But even then, if among those missiles there was something still passably edible, it would end up in his sack. Like his once golden glory, there was now also no pride left.

It was the worst yet of one of those bad times and it had started with a spate of miscarriages by young women. Then a terrible illness that had small children and babies gasping for breath swept through the village. This in turn was followed by a black cloud of locusts that settled on the vegetable fields and all but ruined the harvest. When he made an appearance in the middle of all these calamities he didn't even get as far as knocking on a door. The guarded suspicion with which he was normally treated turned to outright hostility. The moment they saw him coming the children collected together in a gang and goaded on by their parents set upon him with sticks and stones. Emaciated to the point of being little more than a skeleton in a sack of skin, he was no match for them. He fled the village empty-handed.

It was on his way back along the little footpath leading to the beach that he got the first definite sign of her return. For some time there had been premonitions that the monotonous and mindless vacancy of his days was going to be broken in some way. At first these had been nothing more than vague feelings of unease or fits of impotent anger that had him shouting curses at the sea. Then he started having strange dreams and waking up with volcanic eruptions of emotion inside him, his fists clenched, shouting and swearing . . . but at nothing! At other times he would wake up with a burden of the most appalling grief, his cheeks wet with tears, but try as he might he could never recapture in his waking moments the dreams that had brought on these deep emotions. He was still innocent of what they meant. But then on that footpath he finally understood. The final stretch of it to the beach zig-

zagged down the side of a cliff. Near the bottom there was the skeleton of an old wind-blasted pine on one side. He had almost passed it when he heard the sound and stopped. It was small but deeply disturbing because he knew it immediately for what it was—she had taught him that. Something living was being torn apart with quiet but deliberate ferocity. He turned and looked directly up at the old pine tree. On the topmost branch an Osprey had a still-struggling silver fish in its talon. Its insides had already been ripped open and even as he watched the bird stabbed its beak in once again and tore off another strip of flesh. Two yellow, pitiless eyes stared down at him and in that instant he remembered her and knew that she was coming back. For a few seconds the bird ignored the stones he started to hurl at it and went on tearing the fish apart. But when one of the stones struck the branch on which it was sitting it spread its wings and with a sharp protesting shriek lifted leisurely into the air and flew away—the remains of its prey still secure in its talons. Hungry as he was he made no move to the tree to see if an edible scrap of the fish might have fallen to the ground; his sudden memories of another butchery were too vivid and had filled him with fear. But why? Why fear? He had nothing left to lose. There was nothing in his life that could be called precious, or even needed, the loss of which could cause him even a small spasm of grief or regret. Not even that Life itself. The thought of ending the meaningless succession of sunrises and sunsets was as pointless as the thought of continuing with it. He had ended up in a limbo of uncaring. But now suddenly: fear—the emotion which she had taught his once fearless heart.

He made his way along the beach to the wreck of his famous ship. It lay there half-buried in the sand like the ribbed skeleton of one of the leviathans that had sported alongside them on that voyage to the end of the world. As always, the moment he crawled into its meagre shade it greeted him with the rustling of leaves, the tinkling of bells and cooing of doves. That was the prelude to The Voice, the guiding oracle that the Goddess Athena had built into the ship to guide him safely

past the hazards and through the narrow passages that he would be the first seafarer ever to encounter. But that was a long time ago. The warping and rotting of the timbers had slowly unraveled the authority with which it had once spoken and it had ended up sounding more like a drunken old sailor mumbling on incoherently about his voyages and adventures. Because of this he had stopped paying any attention to it as it slurred out a jumble of names and images into the heat-shimmering air. Occasionally, when he was in a particularly hateful mood, he would hurl stones at the timbers to silence it; stones had replaced words in his dealings with the world. This time however the omens of her return had shaken him out of that mindless existence. He had already had in his hand the first of the stones he was going to hurl at the ship when he realized that the voice had regained its coherence and was speaking with its old power and authority. What is more, it was recounting in precise detail the voyage that had led him to her; the litany of names was coming out in exactly the right order:

Sail from Iolcus in Thrace and cross the Thracian sea, pass the Artemisium Promontory until you will come to the Islands of Euboea and Dolopes; you will have favorable winds here so hoist your sails as you pass more promontories: Pallene Bithonia and Mount Athos, and then ahead of you will lie the Thracian sea . . .

He listened with naïve wonder and disbelief, memories of that voyage shocking him back into a realization of who he was.

Lemnos will come next; so sail between Imbros and Tenedos, past Sigeum and Ilium.

Had that really been him standing so proudly at the prow of the ship? Had those great warriors behind him, bent over their oars and striking the wine-dark sea with a powerful and measured rhythm, truly been his comrades?

The Hellespont—the Chersonese Territory—Abydos—Lamp-sacus—through the Clashing Rocks (Symplegades) at the end of the Hellespont, then into the Propontis Sea.

Had they actually traveled that far and survived all those hazards? The voice continued to speak until finally the name 'Colchis' had been sounded, and he relived that walk along the beach to the woman who stood there waiting for him as if she had known since a time before memory that he was coming. And when he saw her . . . had she really been that beautiful? And then their love? And then the children? And then . . . And then . . . Pain after pain. He buried his head in his hands but The Voice and his memories were relentless and did not stop until they had reached the desolation of that moment on the beach, his 'here and now'—the last words spoken by the Oracle.

All was silent when he finally lifted his head. The sun had just set and the sea had pulled back to its furthest limit leaving a vast expanse of gleaming wet sand in front of him. Was that the way she would come? Walking on water this time? Or once again that Dragon Chariot in which she had escaped retribution for her unspeakable crimes. The sky had cooled to the colour of Parian marble when they appeared, walking hand in hand along the beach. At first he thought they were two of the children from the village who had chased him away earlier in the day. But when they came closer he could see that they weren't dressed in the coarse and colourless home-spun cloth of the local people. Their little tunics were brightly coloured and tied around their waists with golden girdles. Closer still he could hear their two sweet little voices. By then of course he knew who they were. Fighting down an impulse to rush out and embrace them and smothering the sobs that rose up in his throat he stayed hidden in the hulk of the ship. They were directly in front of him when they stopped and still holding hands began to dance around on the sand. They were also now close enough for him to see that

they were not blemished by their terrible end. But the fading light brought with it a new desperation as he watched the children slowly begin to merge and dissolve into the darkness. He struggled to his feet and calling out their names scrambled weakly to where they had been playing, but he was too late—they were gone. He wandered around aimlessly for some time still calling out their names until exhaustion finally made him drop down onto the sand. His body was completely drained of the little store of energy that got him through his day, but his eyes were as bright with memories as the purple sky above him with its stars and in every one of those memories she was there: waiting for him on that beach of a remote barbaric land and him walking toward her with a sense that she was his destiny and then that night holding him in her legs and arms as they made love in an embrace that he would never escape, the same arms that he saw dipped in blood as she murdered time and again to help him, arms that would also hold with loving and tender care their two baby boys as they sucked honeyed milk from her breasts, the same arms that a few years later would hold the bloodied bodies of those same boys in her arms as she looked down at him and laughed in triumph at his anguish. But they had come back to him! Walking out of the distance from whatever place to which their mother's bloody crimes had sent their young souls, they had found him on that beach and danced for him. But would they come again? It took him a long time to name the strange drunken but also painful feeling that came with that question. It was Hope. Him hope? He almost laughed. If it hadn't been for these long forgotten emotions surging through him once again, he might well have surrendered himself finally to the incoming tide which was already lapping over his legs. Instead he swung his body around and like a dog crawled up the beach to the soft, dry sand where he curled up and slept through the remaining hours of darkness.

Apart from one brief excursion in search of food—which didn't yield very much—he sat through the whole of the next day in the now silent hulk of the ship—The Voice, which had

been such a great blessing at first and such a terrible curse at the end, was now silent. He would never hear it again.

The sun had sunk below the horizon and he had started to despair of their return when the two boys once again came walking hand in hand out of a distance that was both space and time, and once again they stopped in front of him and romped happily on the gleaming sand. He longed to call out their names and join them but the fear of frightening them off stopped him. On the third day however he could no longer restrain himself. Weak as he was he managed to get to his feet and step out from his hiding place. They stopped playing as soon as they saw him but made no move to run away. He stepped forward slowly and they waited, staring back at him with open innocent expressions. Then they held out their hands and he realized they were waiting for him. He quickened his pace, stumbling occasionally as he ran to join them. And laughing. Oh yes, this time he was laughing and so were the children. He took their hands in his and with a new vigor in his emaciated legs, led them in a dance. It was one that he himself had taught them, one that they and other young men newly arrived at their manhood would dance one day with proud and passionate dignity. But now as he joined hands with them on the beach, being still only children, it was for them a dance of joy.

Far away in a very different world she heard that laughter. The first time it came to her in a dream and she of course immediately recognized his voice because that laugh had been one of the great joys of her life. She however dismissed it that first time as just an echo from those early, golden years when they had married their destinies. But when she heard it in the wind on the following day and then on the next she knew it was living laughter and not a memory. But what was most terrible of all for her was that behind his voice there also seemed to be two other sweet little voices, haunting and very faint. These sounds coursed through her body like one of her own poisons and she writhed in agony. Goading her torment into a fury was the fact that of all the ghosts in her

past he, the unfaithful fortune hunter who had shamed her, was the one to haunt her. She who had gone on to murder kings and great warriors and found an empire, who had been able to goad his terrible pain by telling him how he would die, was being pulled back now by the sound of his laughter into the world where she had suffered her one great shame. She had to find him. Like a predator she waited patiently for the sound of his laughter and when she heard it again on the wind, she followed it to the beach where their epic voyage in the great ship had ended and they had stepped ashore to take up the promise of a new life.

She arrived at sunset and there he was at the edge of the sea, his shaggy mane of hair and beard flecked by the light of the setting sun into his very own golden fleece as he danced around laughing on the sand. It wasn't the final image of him that she had waited for so patiently. Madness yes, because what man wouldn't have been driven mad by what she had done to him, but a madness of pain and loneliness not this joyous ecstasy that looked more like the climax to a Bacchic rite than that final Dance of Death she had always believed she would one day witness.

She did not call to him. She didn't need to. It was the children who made him realize she was there when they stopped dancing, wanted to pull their little hands out of his and run away, their eyes wide with fear. He turned to see what had frightened them and there she was. For the short span of time between the breaking of one playful little wave and the next—the sea was very calm—they stood staring at each other, the magnificent woman who had not aged a day since he first saw her and the man who had aged almost beyond recognition, both of them choking on their hatred of what they saw. Instinctively he moved so that the children were behind his back and held out his arms to protect them.

. . . but before he could say anything he heard the sound of their little feet slapping the wet sand behind his back as they ran away. He turned and was just in time to see his two little boys disappear into the distance. When he faced his

nemesis again he saw that she was looking at him strangely and even though the light was fading fast he could see that her forehead was puckered in a frown and that for the first time ever there was a hint of fear in her dark eyes. She murmured their names but questioningly, as a question to him. He nodded and in that instant realized what it meant: She hadn't seen them. She wasn't able to see them! She would never see them again as he had, restored to all their vital innocent splendor. They were veiled from her sight by what she had done to them. Her final image of their little boys would always only be the two bloodied little bodies she had cradled in her arms whereas he . . . well, might they not come again to dance with him at the next sunset? He laughed and even with the darkness closing in on them she could see his eyes shine with triumph. He turned his back on her and went dancing up the beach in a grotesque parody of the way he had danced on the night when they made love for the first time. Now she watched and waited . . . but not for long. It happened almost as soon as he reached the shelter of the old ship. The laughter had been too much for him and had turned into a violent fit of coughing. This in turn was too much for his weak legs and he reached out to support himself on one of the rotten beams of the old ship. Frail as he was that was also too much for what remained of the *Argo*. Something like a groan came from the timbers as they tore apart. One of them came crashing down on him, pinning him on his back. For a few seconds he lay there struggling helplessly like an upturned beetle, arms and legs flailing the air . . . and then it was all over.