

CHARACTERS

THE MORTALS

Benjamin Robert Haydon

History Painter (1786-1846)

John Keats

Medical student / poet (1795-1821)

THE IMMORTALS

Athena, Goddess of Wisdom and War

Apollo, God of Art and Medicine

Hephaestus, God of the Forge

SETTING:

Most of the action takes place in The Elgin Room of the British Museum, London, March 1, 1817. A large public room with benches, featuring the weathered pediment statuary and friezes of the Parthenon, from the collection of Lord Elgin.

PROGRAM NOTES:

Included at the end of this script are historical notes which appeared in the program for the Touchstone Theatre production.



John Keats by Benjamin Robert Haydon. Pen and Ink, 1816. NPG 3251
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ACT 1

A dimly lit surgery, early 19th century. A man lies strapped to a table, restless and mumbling. A young doctor, Keats, is about to make an incision into his temple with a lancet. The room is lit by a single bright shaft of light from a skylight. He mumbles as Keats positions his head to one side and cuts into his temple.

A brief, blinding light, then darkness.

Lights up on the Elgin Room of the British Museum, March 1, 1817.

Haydon: How I envy you. I wish I could see them again for the first time. I thank God that when I first saw them, I was prepared to understand them. So. What do you think?

Keats: Wha?

Haydon: Of the marbles?

Keats: Marbles.

Haydon: Lord Elgin's marbles! My gift to you, my legacy to the nation!

Keats: What do I think of the Elgin marbles?

Haydon: Yes, yes!

Keats: Uh

Haydon: Speak your mind.

Keats: Well, for one thing, they're very . . .

Haydon: Go on . . .

Keats: What I mean to say is—

Haydon: Yes?

Keats: What can one say?

Haydon: What is one saying?

Keats: I'm sorry, Haydon.

Haydon: I thought that of all the men of my circle, you might be intellectually, emotionally and spiritually prepared for these wonders. Was I mistaken? Was I over-eager to share them with you?

Keats: Please forgive me.

Haydon: 'Please forgive me Haydon, I'm so sorry Haydon.' Listen to yourself. Men of genius never apologize! Do you think that Phideas apologized for creating this perfect union of art and idea? What beauty! What grace! And this horse's head—what can be said but this? It is all truth. Truth and beauty, beauty and truth. In a nutshell.

Keats makes a note.

Keats: Beauty and Truth.

Haydon: Even nature bows to the great artist. A man of genius will make nature bend to him, kneel before him. He will force her into his service. Do you take my meaning?

Keats: Uh . . . I think so.

Haydon: And he will not release her until the thing is done! Then she may . . . skip along and fashion her daisy chains. Eh?

Keats: This is a new language for me, antiquities, fragments.

Haydon: Of course! I'll translate to a language you understand. We will hone the scalpel of our intellect on these stones, eh? Then we shall begin our dissection, peel back the skin and flesh and peer into the centre of the mystery.

Haydon puts a second pair of spectacles on over a first pair to examine a detail on a sculpture. He runs his hand over the marble.

Haydon: See the tension in the skin, as if bones and sinew were visible beneath. Touch it! Here the sculptor Phideas himself brought down his chisel and breathed life into stone! O, Immortal Phideas, creator of these noble works! What fire — what Genius! I bow and am grateful.

Haydon throws his arm around a statue.

Haydon: These stones have been divine friends to whom I could turn in my darkest hour. To them I owe every principle of art I possess. Once they graced the Parthenon of Athens, a temple containing a gold and ivory statue of the Goddess Athena forty feet high! Ah, the ancients understood that only a monumental scale could suit an immortal subject.

Keats: Is that why your paintings are so large?

Haydon: Precisely! And how this annoys the fashionable patrons of today. “Your paintings are too large, our houses are too small, we have no room!” No room? I say—no taste! The greatest country in the world has no room for its most sublime manifestation—History Painting? The expression of the greatest and most noble historic acts on a grand scale? And yet they'd happily commission some ‘furniture painter’ to render a portrait of great-granny nine feet

high! Genius must express itself on a scale befitting its vision. And if genius must toil in poverty four years without a penny's pay over a single great work—what of it!

Keats: How is your great work coming along?

Haydon: The time for painting the divine head of Christ is at hand. I have had recent assurances.

Keats: Assurances.

Haydon: Oh yes.

Keats: From a patron?

Haydon: Not just a patron. The Patron.

Keats: Who?

Haydon points upward.

Haydon: Divine assurances!

Keats: Ah.

Haydon: Last night in my painting room Raphael appeared to me.

Keats: The Angel Raphael.

Haydon: No! Raphael! Raphael! The greatest painter in history! My presiding spirit! And from 'neath his velvet cloak he gathered a globe of swirling mist, and bade me meditate upon it, until, just beyond my vision, what do you think I could see?

Keats: Uh, the divine face of Christ?

Haydon: The grandest conception of Christ's visage ever seen! Until *Christ's Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem* is complete, I will have but one patron!

God! And I promise you, once it is exhibited and sold, I will see to it that you will not want for a thing for as long as you live.

Keats: I could never repay you for everything you've taught me. But since we've touched the subject, I hate to ask, but the money I lent you—my brother is unwell as you know, and the winter has been very long, and any small amount you could manage—

Haydon: Let's not talk about who owes who what, it's in a poor taste. No, when I have made myself immortal through great works and the time comes to depart this life, I shall be your presiding spirit. For now, Shakespeare will have to do for you.

Keats: Shakespeare.

Haydon: Who else would preside over you? Shakespeare!

Keats: I've been reading Homer . . .

Haydon: Ridiculous!

Keats flips through his notebook.

Keats: I wrote a sonnet. Here. Much have I traveled in the reams of gold, and many

Haydon: Where did you get it? Who gave you the Homer to read?

Pause.

Keats: Hunt.

Haydon: Hunt! I should have known. It's no good. You can't just read whatever you're given willy-nilly. At this stage you're like wet plaster, everything sticks.

Keats: I asked to borrow it.

Haydon: You may borrow my copy.

Keats: You pawned your copy.

Haydon: I won't have some dilettante molding you to his whim. Next thing, he'll be forcefeeding you Miss Austen's latest twaddle.

Keats: Did you read it? It's quite good.

Haydon: I know. Damn her! And damn the Prince Regent's patronage of . . . ladies novels! This is what he calls high art—that is the problem with this country. No vision! Art should inspire even the lowliest citizen to elevate himself! This must be our mission! Swear it.

Haydon hauls Keats up on a pedestal.

Haydon: Swear. In the sight of God and the treasures of the Parthenon, swear to apply yourself to the cause of your art with the fullness of your whole heart. Swear!

Keats: I'll do it.

Haydon: Swear! Swear!

Keats: I swear.

Haydon: For if you do not, the heavens will weep, and your genius will ever sit upon your chest like a nightmare. Swear upon the chisel of Phideas!

Keats: I swear upon the chisel of Phideas. Now let me go.

Haydon: You and I are Colossi, Titans of the Arts, we stand astride the river of High Destiny, with

one foot planted in the classical perfection of Ancient Athens, and the other here—London, March first, 1817—the day the mighty course of history was changed forever!

Keats: By what?

Haydon: The publication of your book, of course!

Keats jumps down

Haydon: Your book will be the lightening-bolt to art this country needs! We stand on the brink of a new and glorious era for art. I declare a new pinnacle for civilization! London is the new Athens! We are the new Greeks! Say it with me! We are the new Greeks!

A guard approaches—Apollo in disguise.

Keats: Uh, Haydon?

Haydon: Here, amongst these ancient guardians, these silent historians, the mists are stirring! The faint Olympians awake! Oh take that down too, that's good, we wouldn't want that to be lost.

Guard: Quiet, please gentlemen.

Keats jumps down but Haydon remains on the pedestal.

Keats: Sorry!

Haydon imitates the guard behind his back.

Guard: Or I'll ask you to leave.

Keats: Sorry, sorry.

Guard: Other people are trying to enjoy the museum today.

Keats: We were just leaving.

Guard: So keep it down.

Keats: Yes, we will, sorry.

Guard: Down from there, sir.

Haydon: Have you any idea to whom you are speaking?

Guard: No, sir.

Haydon: Perhaps you've heard of the man who influenced the men of power to purchase Lord Elgin's marbles for the Museum? C'est moi!

The guard looks to Keats.

Keats: Benjamin Haydon. The painter?

Guard: What, the one who writes those letters to the papers? All in capital letters? About how parliament should be thanked for spending thirty-thousand pounds to buy these stones, while the people are starving for bread in the streets?

Keats: Yes, that one.

Guard: Are you his keeper then?

Keats: No, I'm his . . .

Haydon: Protégé!

Keats: Haydon, will you—

Guard: Don't matter if he was the Prince Regent, sir. He can't climb on them statues.

Keats: Come down. Or they'll throw us out.

Haydon: Never! I refuse to descend to his level!

Keats: Don't be ridiculous.