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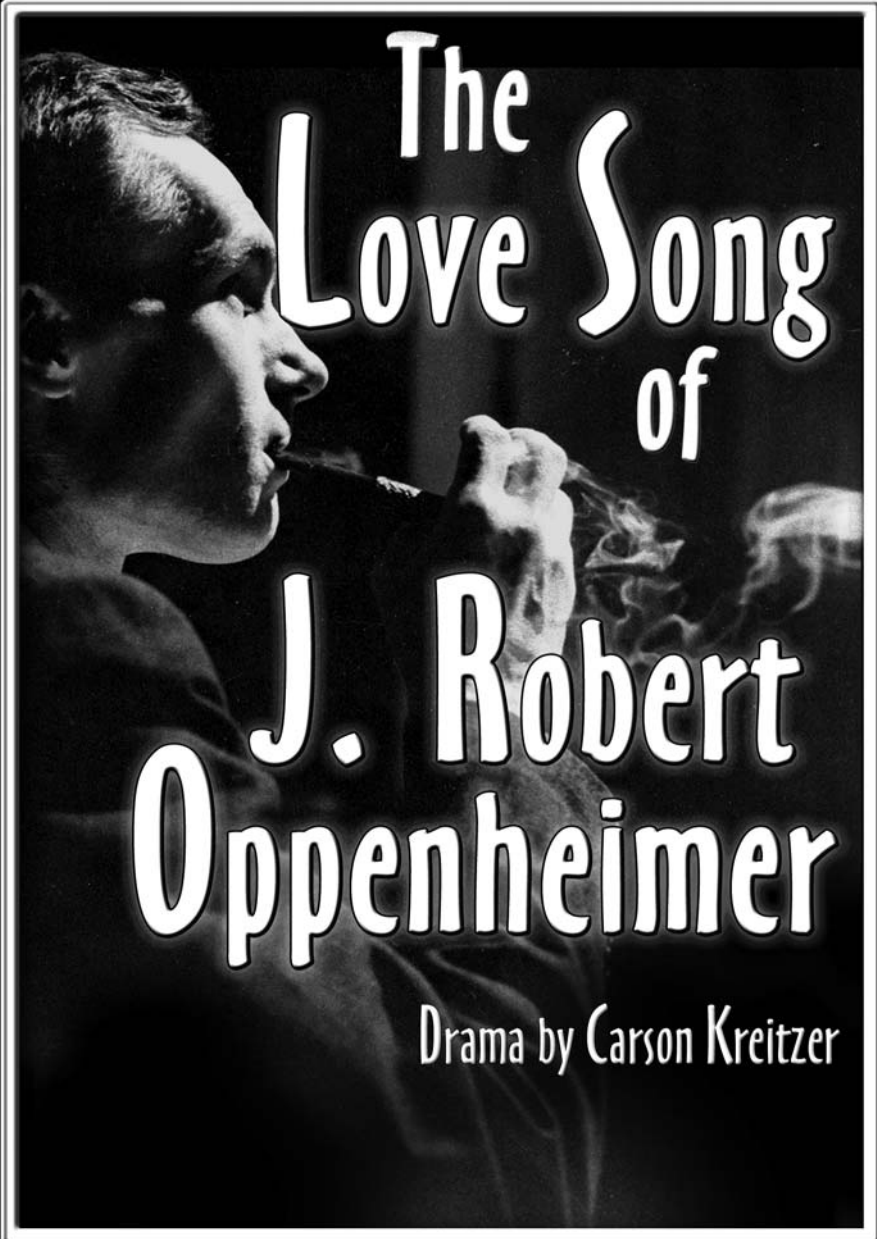
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Dramatic Publishing

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The
Love Song
of
J. Robert
Oppenheimer

Drama by Carson Kretzer

The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer

Drama. By Carson Kreitzer.

Cast: 4m., 3w. with doubling. May be expanded to 7 or more m., 5w.
“Do I dare disturb the universe?” J. Robert Oppenheimer’s rise and fall erupt in this kaleidoscopic play exploring questions of faith, conscience, and the consequences of the never-ending pursuit of knowledge. Act One: Math. The fevered wartime drive to build the first nuclear weapon, by a collection of previously academic theoretical physicists, many of them Jews fleeing Hitler’s Germany. Success turns to horror when “the Gadget” is dropped, first on Hiroshima, then Nagasaki. Act Two: Aftermath. Oppenheimer confronts his conscience; Russia turns from ally to enemy. The Red scare is in full swing as we shift to the courtroom. Oppenheimer’s wife, Kitty, drinks; J. Edgar Hoover does the dance of the seven veils; and the Father of the Atomic Bomb has his security clearance revoked, cast out of the world he helped create. In a flash that is the end of his life, J. Robert Oppenheimer paces the desert of the Trinity Test Site, wrestling with his memories and one scary, sexy, unpredictable demon: Lilith, Hebrew mythology’s first woman, cast out of Eden for refusing to behave. Hissing in his ear, she goads him to admit what he refuses to acknowledge: an anger that mirrors her own. “Oppie” is haunted by actions, decisions, and a trinity of women—mother, wife Kitty, and lover, Jean Tatlock. Her suicide is

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featuring Curzon Dobell. Photo: Sandy Underwood.*

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• Carson Kreitzer

• Dramatic Publishing



The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer

by

CARSON KREITZER



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(THE LOVE SONG OF J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER)

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“Do I dare disturb the universe?”

— *T.S. Eliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

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“Originally developed and presented by Frank Theatre,
Minneapolis, Minnesota, Artistic Director, Wendy Knox.”

“Originally produced by Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park,
Edward Stern, Producing Artistic Director,
Buzz Ward, Executive Director.”

The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer world premiered at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park (Ed Stern, Producing Artistic Director; Buzz Ward, Executive Director), March 22, 2003. It was directed by Mark Wing-Davey; the set design was by Douglas Stein; the costume design was by Catherine Zuber; the lighting design was by David Weiner; the sound design was by Marc Gwinn; the video design was by Rupert Bohle; the dramaturg was Kathleen Tobin; and the production stage manager was Jennifer Morrow. The cast was as follows:

J. Robert Oppenheimer Curzon Dobell
Lilith Judith Hawking
Young Scientist / Strauss, etc. Jason Bowcutt
Rabi / J. Edgar Hoover, etc. Michael Pemberton
Teller / Lansdale, etc. Steven Rattazzi
Kitty Oppenheimer Blaire Chandler
Jean Tatlock / Nurse / Mother, etc. Carolyn Baeumler

The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer was commissioned with public funds from the Individual Artists Program of the New York State Council on the Arts, and written during a Jerome Fellowship at the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis.

The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer was originally developed and presented by Frank Theatre, Minneapolis, Minnesota (Artistic Director Wendy Knox), February 6, 2003, as part of the Playwrights' Center's NewStage Directions program. It was directed by Wendy Knox; the set design was by John Francis Bueche; the costume design was by Kathy Kohl; the lighting design was by Michael P. Kittel; the sound design was by Reid Rejsa; the dramaturgs were Kathleen Tobin and Beth Cleary, and the production stage manager was Spencer Putney. The cast was as follows:

J. Robert Oppenheimer Phil Kilbourne
Lilith Maria Asp
Young Scientist / Strauss, etc. Patrick Bailey
Rabi / J.Edgar Hoover, etc. Tom Sherohman
Teller / Lansdale, etc. John Riedlinger
Kitty Oppenheimer Annie Enneking
Jean Tatlock / Nurse / Mother, etc. Gwendolyn Schwinke

The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer

A Play in Two Acts

For 4m., 3w., with doubling.

May be expanded to 7 or more m., 5w.

CHARACTERS:

J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER eminent physicist,
possible Communist

LILITH pre-Biblical demon, the first woman

KITTY OPPENHEIMER. wife

JEAN TATLOCK mistress
also MOTHER / CENSOR / REPORTER / NURSE

SCIENTIST ONE / RABI
also GROVES / SECURITY ONE / HOOVER

SCIENTIST TWO / TELLER
also VOICEOVER / LANSDALE / SECURITY TWO

SCIENTIST THREE / YOUNG SCIENTIST
also SOLDIER / BRITISH ENVOY / STRAUSS

NOTE: Lilith lives in the walls and ceiling, crawling up and across chain-link fence, perching, seething, lunging, curling up to sleep, but never touching the floor. She is only visible to Oppenheimer.

Action is continuous: The scene titles are for reader/actor orientation, and should not be felt by an audience, except in tone shift or light change.

LILITH: “Adam and Lilith never found peace together; for when he wished to lie with her, she took offense at the recumbent position he demanded. ‘Why must I lie beneath you?’ she asked. ‘I also was made from dust, and am therefore your equal.’ Because Adam tried to compel her obedience by force, Lilith, in a rage, uttered the magic name of God, rose into the air and left him.”

— *Robert Graves and Raphael Patai,*
“*Hebrew Mythology*”

NOTES ON THE TEXT:

Passage from the Bhagavad-Gita translated by Barbara Stoller Miller.

T.S. Eliot misquote in the final scene is intentional.

PLAYWRIGHT’S NOTES:

Based on the productions I’ve seen, Act I should run one hour, Act II fifty minutes. This has been pretty consistent. Lilith is scarier if she’s somehow damaged, not all-powerful. She’s also sexier. For Jean’s suicide, please have her dressed not in a slip, but in regular street clothes. This is not “find me dead and beautiful” but something much more deliberate and frightening. (The glamorous Jean in a slip in the courtroom is Oppie’s memory of her; the one who commits suicide is the real woman.) Take care of the comedy, the scientists’ occasional vaudeville, Oppie’s twinkle in the eye. The pathos will take care of itself.

ACT I

(A faint Los Alamos desert dawn. OPPIE appears. He addresses the audience as though it were his clearance board.)

OPPIE. *And how should I presume?*

And how should I begin?

You have my file before you.

I trust this board will take into account not only certain political associations of an impassioned youth, but our needs as a country, and what I can do toward the task at hand. Certainly, I have associations with various communists, my wife and my brother to name two, and I have supported various causes and been a member of nearly every communist front group on the West Coast, but I have never engaged in anything even resembling subversive activities.

LILITH *(shadowing him)*. ssssssubverssive

OPPIE. I am not ashamed of these political leanings. Only that they came rather late in life for me. They are a young man's politics. I had managed to remain shockingly ignorant of...the world and its ways. I read no newspapers, never had a radio. *(Smiles.)* I didn't hear

about the stock-market crash until a friend told me, six months after.

But events conspired to pull me out of this...life of pure scholarship.

I had relatives in Germany.

I met a woman, to whom I was engaged for a time,

(JEAN appears, shadowy.)

who introduced me to various worthy causes including Spanish relief and the organization of migrant farm workers at home. I contributed sums of money because I could; I never considered joining the Communist Party because I prefer to do all of my thinking for myself.

I assure you, all this is firmly in my past. Now, in time of war, I only seek to serve my country in the way I best can. As the head of the laboratory currently being built on the spot I suggested for it, Los Alamos. Beautiful part of the country.

Desolate.

Empty.

The site, I have named

Trinity.

VOICEOVER *(whispered)*. What's a Jew doing naming it Trinity?

OPPIE. Batter my heart, three-person'd God

VOICEOVER. What?

OPPIE. It's Donne.

YOUNG SCIENTIST. Oppie?

OPPIE. What?

YOUNG SCIENTIST. It's done.

VOICEOVER. 14 July. Gadget complete. Should we have the chaplain here?

SCIENTIST ONE (RABI). Place your bets, gentlemen. Will we ignite the atmosphere and blow up the world? Or just the state of New Mexico?

SCIENTIST TWO (TELLER). It's not going to ignite the atmosphere! My calculations prove—

SCIENTIST THREE (YOUNG). How do you plan to collect?

VOICEOVER. Seven.

Six.

Five.

Four.

(The opening bars of the "Nutcracker Suite" are heard over the final numbers.)

Three

Two

One

(Flash of light. A tremendous explosion.)

YOUNG SCIENTIST. Is it the end of the world?

OPPIE. Maybe.

(LILITH laughs. She appears, teeth first, like the Cheshire Cat.)

That was the first time I saw your face.

LILITH. You must admit.

It would have been funny.

OPPIE. What?

LILITH. If you had

ignited the atmosphere.

Consumed the world in a fiery ball.

OPPIE (*smiles*). We were a little bit afraid.

LILITH. shows what you know.

OPPIE. Yes.

We should have been much more so.

(LILITH makes a clicking noise like a lizard.)

An apple falls and hits a man on the head.

Thus begins Newtonian Physics. Which begat Theoretical Physics.

A discipline that ends, with great violence, July 16, 1945. Trinity.

I think this story is a metaphor. And it is knowledge which strikes Sir Isaac on the head.

The Apple of course its time-honored stand-in since Eve, the first woman, plucked one from the Tree of Knowledge. And that first sweet bite led to enlightenment. Banishment from the Garden. And eventual death.

LILITH. Sssssssshhhheeee was not the first.

OPPIE (*smiles*). The early Hebrew tradition holds that there was another woman, before Eve. Made from earth, like Adam. Lilith.

LILITH. Lilit. Lillitû.* Lamashtû. Astarté. Ardat-lili

OPPIE (*overlaps*). *But she would not behave.

LILITH. I dared disturb the Universe. God revoked my security clearance.

OPPIE. So God cast her out.

LILITH. I left.

OPPIE. Made a new one. Eve.

LILITH. From whom all you miserable creatures are descended.

And now here you are again.

A bunch of Jews in the desert.

Arguing esoteric points.

SCIENTIST ONE. You see, it is written

SCIENTIST TWO. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle

SCIENTIST THREE. Than to ignite the earth's atmosphere. (*Beat.*)

SCIENTIST TWO (*concerned*).

Or a very thick piece of yarn.

Through the eye of a needle.

LILITH. What leads a kind man. A gentle man. A scholar. To make the biggest explosion the world has ever seen?

OPPIE. I had a...continuing, smoldering fury about the treatment of Jews in Germany.

LILITH. Ssmoldering.

20th CENTURY

(*Sound of a train. OPPIE and GROVES in a train compartment.*)

OPPIE (*smiling*). Let us go then, you and I. The General and the Scientist. Still within the speed of the 20th Century...

GROVES. Strange name for a train, I always thought.

OPPIE. Hurtling toward an uncertain destination

GROVES. New York City. Though now that you mention it, I would call that an uncertain destination. (*Beat. He tries to figure out if this is the joke OPPIE was making.*) You understand, Dr. Oppenheimer, security is our number-one priority.

OPPIE. I thought getting the thing built was your priority.

GROVES. Well, yes, of course—

OPPIE. Then you've got to change the way things are being run. You can't just compartmentalize these people, have them toiling away in ignorance. Scientific discovery is built upon the free flow of ideas. You never know where the winning notion is going to come from. Sometimes the most unlikely of sources.

GROVES. Dr. Oppenheimer, we simply can't have this top-secret information being discussed out in the open—

OPPIE. YES YOU CAN— If. Instead of isolating each man. Isolate us all. The entire laboratory is top secret. But within this hermetic seal—no secrets. Everyone is working on the same problem. Give me thirty scientists, with complete freedom of discussion, and we can make this thing for you.

GROVES. We can't tell them anything about the project until they've agreed to work on it. Do you think you can recruit under those circumstances?

OPPIE. Yes. I believe I can.

LILITH. cocky bastard, aren'tcha?

OPPIE. Just practical.

Report to a post office box in New Mexico. Disappear.

And I got them.

Armed with nothing but the ever-growing list of luminaries in attendance.

Fermi

Bethe

all our brightest graduate students

eventually the thing had a gravitational pull of its own.

LILITH. Creating a new star system?

OPPIE. No. Just...a world.

LILITH. A world powered by fury.

OPPIE. Our own world.

LILITH. The fury of the small.

OPPIE. A world of pure discovery.

LILITH. The fury of the cast-out.

(RABI and OPPIE, walking the perimeter fence at Los Alamos.)

RABI. I suppose this is all part of a rich historical tradition.

OPPIE. This, Isador?

RABI. At very regular intervals, there's a panic, and Jews are accused of poisoning the wells. *(OPPIE nods.)*

Once a century, like clockwork.

OPPIE. I did not think it would happen in this one.

RABI. Chosen People, huh?

OPPIE. So they say.

LILITH. Chosen for the Pogrom. To bake your bread on your very back as you leave one not a home for another not a home.

You know what God does to his Favorites.

He does a Job on them.

oppie oppie oppie.

I could see this coming a century away.

OPPIE (*to LILITH*). It's almost funny. In the German university system, all the Jews were forced into Theoretical Physics. The unfashionable end of the University. Less prestige, less pay. Now the greatest minds in the world are coming to us, refugees. Thoughts *smoking* out of their heads.

RABI. Those Nazis have signed their own death warrant.

(*LILITH purrs.*)

If we can just make the damn thing work.
Before they do.

(*A SOLDIER approaches RABI.*)

SOLDIER. Dr. Rabbi?

RABI. Rabi!

(*Out.*)

MOTHER'S HANDS

OPPIE. Lying awake at night, I think of...many things. Mostly the critical mass of fissionable material. The critical mass of scientists. Fissionable minds. Will we be able to translate Theory into Practice? In time—?

Sometimes I remember

my mother's hands
smoothing down my hair.
With the soft kidskin gloves she always wore. To cover
a...defect in her right hand. It was not fully formed.
Missing three fingers.
We never discussed it. It just...was.
Soft gloves touching my face. smoothing down my hair.
Sending me off to Dr. Adler's School for Ethical Cul-
ture. (*Smiles.*)

Ethical...Culture.
How young we all were.
To believe in such...possibilities.

(MOTHER appears. Takes off a large, broad-brimmed picture hat. Takes off one glove. Is about to take off the other. OPPIE turns to see her. She disappears.)

Once Dr. Adler brought a geologist in to speak to my form. And this man brought with him a great iron contraption, much like a large ice chipper, and a box of unassuming-looking round brown rocks, only slightly larger than a fist.

He rested one carefully in the contraption, brought the handle down with a sharp CRACK, and there lay the geode, in two halves, inner cavern of crystals sparkling in the first light it had ever seen.

I...laughed aloud. With the shock of it. The truth of it.
And I knew. I had got to look harder. To *know* what was inside things.

Mineralogy was my first love.
It set me on a rather direct path...to here.

Los Alamos.

Where they question my associations. Read my mail.
Listen to every phone call. Listen at the keyhole till I
think I will go mad.

KITTY AND THE SECURITY MAN

*(The Oppenheimer home, Los Alamos. KITTY keeps a
man on the doorstep.)*

KITTY. I suppose I have to ask you in.

LANSDALE. Well, I don't think you want to leave me
standing on your doorstep—

KITTY. ah but I do.

LANSDALE. Ahem. I have quite a few questions to ask
you, actually. About your husband.

KITTY *(smiling)*. Which one?

LANSDALE. Well, now that you bring that up, all of
them.

KITTY. In that case I suppose I have to ask you in.

*(She disappears. LANSDALE looks puzzled for a mo-
ment. There is the sound of a cocktail shaker. He follows
after her, gingerly.)*

LANSDALE. Uh, thank you for taking the time, Mrs.
Oppenheimer—

KITTY *(reappearing)*. Martini?

LANSDALE. All right.

Not the type to serve tea, then?

KITTY. I suppose it was your remarkable powers of obser-
vation that landed you this security job.