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## **Family Plays**

# Esther the Queen

Adapted for stage

by

ORLIN COREY

**Family Plays**

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(ESTHER THE QUEEN)

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## FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

*Esther the Queen* is the latest of the books accepted in the orthodox Jewish Canon. It was written about 150 B.C. in honor of the recently established Feast of Purim, traceable to events in fifth century Persia. Scholars debate whether *Esther* belongs in the realms of Idyl or Epic History. The latter view has gained credence from archaeological work in Iran and studies of the late twentieth century. Regardless of the scholarly debate, *Esther* is a personage cast in heroic terms. The book is alive with realistic characters, absorbing incident, and Persian nuance.

Controversy deepens when we examine the book further. It portrays a crisis of the Israelites scattered by the power of Persia—the threat of annihilation within the 127 provinces of the sprawling Persian empire. Deliverance appears within the steadfast character of the Jewish scribe Mordecai, uncle and guardian of the orphaned Esther, who is the other essential player. A beautiful young woman, she was first an intimate companion of the King, Ahasuerus (Xeres), and later his wife.

Esther, a secret Jewess, confronts the necessity to act to save her people. She does so courageously if not publicly, utilizing her dazzling beauty and influence on the King. The monarch is revealed as a typical Asian despot, indifferent to his own people, and eager to enrich himself. The Queen cleverly manipulates him. This contrived deliverance entails the slaughter of Persian enemies identified with the villainous Haman. In due course the pogrom against the Jews is foiled and diverted onto the people of Haman. Mordecai rises in influence and honors and, together with the Queen, initiates the joyful Feast of Purim to celebrate the deliverance of the Jews.

The real politic of the story—diversion of the bloodshed from innocent Jews to others alleged not to be innocent; the cautious faithfulness of the Jewish principles—have disturbed some theologians both Jewish and Christian who prefer more forthright heroes and heroines. Nevertheless, memories of the Holocaust in the twentieth century, have tended to extenuate tactics of survival employed by those who secretly nurture life and justice. The debate continues.

On the other hand *Esther* is one of the favorite stories of the Jewish people for obvious reasons. While it is not a book of overt and poetic intervention by Providence, it is a fascinating and credible historical tale, exquisitely told, of quiet courage and loyalty, and of the mysterious workings of Providence to ends of ultimate deliverance. Esther is a genuine heroine in the world that is. Her care and name are honored by great works of healing and charity done in her Hebraic name of Hadassah.

When I researched *Esther* in Israel in the mid-seventies, my hostess-guide in Tel Aviv, a producer at the famous Habima Theatre, knowing my interest in history, asked one day if I would like to visit the apartment of the late Prime Minister of Israel, Mrs. Golda Meir. I was thrilled. We presently stopped at a modest building and went upstairs to a small apartment. My guide was an acquaintance of the housekeeper who let us in. Mrs. Meir had died only a few weeks before. Papers were boxed and stacked, but the study was still filled with books and personal mementos. On the desk was a striking sculptured bronze head of a young woman. “Her daughter?” I asked. “No, Hadassah.” I looked for a few seconds. “I did not understand Mrs. Meir was a religious woman,” I said. “She was not, Orlin. But she said when she sat at her desk and looked at Hadassah, she was.”

No incident I know more succinctly suggests what *Esther* means to Jews today.

In this century, awash in tidal waves of castaway peoples and wandering refugees, *Esther* has a larger implication. It offers hope even to the most forlorn little feminine waif. Sometimes larger purposes inexplicably move in this world. Sometimes the insignificant are touched, discovering the forgotten, and find the courage to act and speak for loyalty and history. *Esther* is such a luminous figure and speaks beyond the Jews and out of time. When I visited her tomb in Hammadan in Iran, the simple stone was beautifully covered with new lace and fresh flowers brought that morning by girls and women of Islam. Far away in Jerusalem the world-class Hadassah Hospital is open to all. People are served there from every Middle Eastern Country regardless of the politics of their governments.

For all of these reasons—human, historic, religious, mythic—I turned to *Esther*. This adaptation faithfully sustains the narrative flow of the masterful text. It was extensively researched abroad. Designer Ken Holamon spent a year on his sumptuous designs which are both poetically and historically authentic. John Coe created the music, using exotic instruments to make music both oriental and universal. The horns and drums of Persia, the strings and flutes of Israel were his inspiration.

Production visualized an open platform—whether in temple, cathedral, or theatre. A black surround would serve on stage while space would be sufficient in cathedral or temple. Low-keyed lighting would employ gauze and silk filters for color and texture. A rich monumentality would be evoked by movement and voice—an operatic lustiness for the Elizabethan prose of the language. Each costume and prop would be created and employed from the first rehearsal so that the production feeds on familiarity, and informs performance from the outset.

## PRODUCTIONS

*Esther the Queen* received an experimental production at Wilson College, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, under the direction of Jennie Joe Champion. The full realization of the professional mounting is yet to come. What is visualized here requires a venue of great space and flexibility, with nearly 180 degrees of accessible openness, a shallow stage, and at least 17 players willing to fuse into seamless ensemble.

*Esther the Queen* was first performed at Wilson College, by the College Players, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, 1985.

# Esther the Queen

## CHARACTERS

SCRIBE/MORDECAI

AHASUERUS

HARBONA and SIX CHAMBERLAINS

QUEEN VASHTI and FOUR WOMEN

SEVEN SAGES (including MEMUCAN)

SEVEN EUNICHS (doubled with CHAMBERLAINS)

SEVEN WISE MEN (doubled with CHAMBERLAINS/EUNICHS)

HADASSAH (ESTHER)

HEGAI, KEEPER of the WOMEN

HAMAN

FOUR ASTROLOGERS

MAIDENS of ESTHER

ZERESH, WIFE of HAMAN (doubled with VASHTI)

TWO GUARDS

THREE SCRIBES

There is much doubling to play the above groups, including musicians for the final processional.



# Esther the Queen

**PRESHOW:** *When the audience enters they see a unit setting which at the moment appears dark and mysterious. Strange flute-like music is heard from a distance. The dark blue/purple silk curtains of the set are moving softly in a breeze. We may, perhaps, sense that time is moving. We also sense the presence of someone within the setting. Indeed, coming closer to show time, we see a figure moving furtively behind the silk hangings. We are unable to tell who it is.*

*In the middle of the main acting area we see a flickering brazier with bronze animals supporting the lighted fire dish. It is lite only light now, but the flame makes the silver and blue “jewels” on the curtains wink at us. Still we sense that someone is on the set, hiding or, perhaps, watching us.*

*The Ceremony of Beginning:*

*Musicians, marvelously costumed and carrying quaint and curious instruments of the art of Persia, Ethiopia, Egypt, enter amid great music of rare trumpets, gongs, bells, chimes, horns, drums, and stringed instruments. The musicians are preceded by the Bearer of a large, illuminated candelabra. Immediately following the musicians is the TEXT-BEARER, one who proudly holds a scroll of rare beauty, decorated with intricate and opulent devices, affixed to an appropriate stand. He walks before the SCRIBE, a man of commanding presence and ecclesiastical robes. There is a pause at the front for a brief dedication of both Scroll and SCRIBE to the Unseen and Omniscient, directed toward the Ark of the Covenant, or the Altar, if a Cathedral, then toward the audience and air itself. The SCRIBE is then seated on an ornate pillow, backed by the Candelabra. The Musicians disappear. Silence.*

*Now it is show time.*

*There is a sound of strange metallic sounding string instruments, plucking a rhythm which is bizarre and intriguing. Suddenly we feel the renewed presence of an unseen one watching us, and this is replaced by the approach of others from behind. The sounds of eastern trumpets announce a processional. The mysterious one behind the silk curtains has disappeared, and the grand processional begins through the center aisle, forward. All persons are dressed alike, members of a group called*

*REVELERS. As yet they are not characters in a play. Their march is trance-like and slow, almost Kabukiesque. They are moving to a ritual event. Everyone wears dark flowing robes of deep midnight blue. Decorating the robes are star-like patterns with hints of glimmering jewels like dewdrops on the shoulders, dripping down the front, back, arms. First in the processional are FOUR MUSICIANS, each carrying an exotic instrument native to the East. They are followed by A YOUNG WOMAN who carries a small clump of Myrtle (the only real color in the processional). Following this WOMAN is a group of SEVEN REVELERS, each carrying large, filigree stars atop tall poles.*

*When the processional reaches the stage they stand round the brazier. The character of the music announces someone. Finally we see the mysterious stranger step from behind the silks. It is HAMAN. The WOMAN walks to HAMAN, and ritually hands him the Myrtle. The star carriers and musicians kneel. The stars are lowered into the flame and each takes on a life of its own. The sizzling stars are raised high above the REVELERS as the YOUNG WOMAN begins a chant not unlike the wordless song of Ariel in the Everyman Production of The Tempest. As the sparklers in the stars die out, the SEVEN REVELERS briefly form a menorah, then take the stars to their upstage positions and hang them in place. As they return, they take up the WOMAN's chant. The FOUR MUSICIANS have departed. The chant is growing and all move closer to the flame. Suddenly they block it out. Instead of a flame, it seems that there is a magic internal glow from within the mass of people. HAMAN, above and beyond the group, is passive, unmoved by what is going on. The chant grows to the climax. Suddenly, all arms are raised in a cry to Ahura-Mazda and the REVELERS drop to the floor. HAMAN walks toward the brazier. (Whatever is about to happen is intentional). He pauses, looking at the group as contempt sweeps over his face. Slowly he breaks the Myrtle branch into pieces and drops it into the flame.*

*The flame leaps skyward and in a flash of light the REVELERS leap upward, reaching to the sky, then sink to the floor again. In their midst where HAMAN stood, we see another character. The effect should be, in stage picture terms, much like a time-warp. In HAMAN's place we see the SCRIBE/MORDECAI. He motions for the group to rise. Each does rise in his own time, but when he rises he is no longer wearing the dark robes of the REVELERS. Instead, we now see the glimmering costumes of the characters in the play. One at a time the REVELERS rise, first the SEVEN MEN who are dressed as the king's SEVEN CHAMBERLAINS, then HAMAN, and finally the YOUNG WOMAN. As she rises and allows*

*the dark REVELER's robe to drop from her shoulders we are greeted with our first glimpse of ESTHER. The effect of all this should be dislocation—except for SCRIBE/MORDECAI, they are all like they had just walked into a bright light after being in a dark place for a long time—asleep in history, perhaps.*

*SCRIBE/MORDECAI makes a gesture and we see the FOUR MUSICIANS from before (now in their first show costumes), but costumed as servants, bringing elaborate pillows, a scroll stand, and Menorah down right, and a version of the Persian Peacock Throne down left. After they have set the stage, SCRIBE/MORDECAI motions for the characters to take their places. A SERVING GIRL brings him a gorgeous wrapped scroll. He kisses the YOUNG WOMAN on the cheek and she exits as he crosses DR. There is great ceremony as he un-wraps the scroll and puts it on the stand. The lights have faded now so that it seems the Menorah is his only source of illumination. There is no sound, only the rustling of parchment. Finally, after a long pause, followed by silence as the FOUR SERVANTS leave.*

*The Play:*

*(At an appropriate interval, and with a suitable gesture by the SCRIBE/MORDECAI, a mysterious, wavering sound of limitless proportions and antiquity commences. Only the SCRIBE is visible.)*

SCRIBE. Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who reigned from India as far as Ethiopia, over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces:

*(The KING, sealed on the fanciful version of Persia's fabled Peacock Throne of phoenix origins, materializes with his court as described. During SCRIBE/MORDECAI's opening speech we see the SEVEN CHAMBERLAINS gather for feasting. One of them, HARBONA, is in charge. He whispers instructions to serving maidens. The mood is very casual among the CHAMBERLAINS. Suddenly there is music announcing the KING'S arrival. TWO SERVANTS pull the center drapes apart and from as far upstage as possible, we see KING AHASUERUS striding toward us. As he reaches the open curtain, one and all prostrate themselves.)*

SCRIBE (*cont'd*). That in those days, when the King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, in Shushan, the capital, in the third year of his reign, that he gave a banquet for all his officers and servants. The military force of Persia and Media, the nobles and rulers of the provinces

were before him, while he showed the riches and glory of his kingdom and the precious things of his great majesty many days, even a hundred and eighty days. When these days were completed, the king gave a banquet for all the people that were present in Shushan, the capital, both great and small, in the enclosure of the king's palace garden. There were hangings of white cotton and of blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver cylinders and pillars of marble. The couches were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of alabaster, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. They served wine in golden vessels, all of them different in design, and royal wine in abundance, as befits a king. And the drinking was according to the law; there was no compulsion. For the king had commanded all the officers of his house to do according to every man's pleasure. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal house of King Ahasuerus.

*(AHASUERUS is not what we might expect in the king of Persia. He is beardless, wears short hair unlike his CHAMBERLAINS. He does not possess a kingly presence in terms of pomp, yet there is a refined dignity about him. He is good looking and obviously possesses determination, if not actual strength. We are not intimidated by him as we were by HAMAN. The CHAMBERLAINS represent a cross-section of the lands ruled by AHASUERUS, from fair-skinned Medes to exotic Indians. Their clothes, make-up, and headdresses suggest the polyglot nature of the court of Persia. The KING motions for all to rise. The curtain-openers exit as HARBONA rises, followed by the others.)*

SCRIBE (*cont'd*). On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who attended the presence of the King ...

*(The KING strides to the throne, greeting the CHAMBERLAINS on the way. This traditional greeting for litose of high birth [but not royal birth] is to quickly place the hands on the KING'S shoulders. As the KING reaches the throne, HARBONA makes a sign and a SERVING GIRL brings in eight gilded rhytons of wine. She serves the MEN. HARBONA is first to drink. All watch. When it is seen that the wine has not been poisoned, the remainder, including the KING, drink up, and the festivities begin. The SERVING GIRL exits. The men's party continues in mime, but with the mention of VASHTI by SCRIBE/MORDECAI, the curtain UCR pulls back and we see VASHTI and FOUR OTHER WOMEN, feasting on bunches of grapes and drinking wine from gilded rhytons. Parallel parlies are going in mime, now. By Ms point the music has two different*

*themes. AHASUERUS; and VASHTTs, in counterpoint. It is important that all sense a great series of festivities merely represented by what is visible.)*

AHASUERUS. Mehuman! Bizzetha! Harbona, Bigthaand Abagtha! Zethar and Carcas! Bring Queen Vashti before the King wearing the royal crown, to show her beauty to the people and to the nobles, for she is beautiful.

*(The SEVEN CHAMBERLAINS [EUNUCHS] leave the KING and with HARBONA leading, go to the Queen's chamber. The LADIES-IN-WAITING see them first, amid the mimed chatter of VASHTI and her lady guests. VASHTI's attention is obtained. She pulls her royal robes around her, and, with dignity, goes to see what is wanted. The counterpoint music continues for a long while as we await her reply. It must be seen that she is contemplating the issue, but that because she has guests of her own, she cannot comply or leave. This may be clarified by gestures to the ladies. We clearly see her refuse to obey. HARBONA returns to the KING and in mime reports VASHTI's answer. The other EUNUCHS hastily exit.)*

SCRIBE. But the Queen Vashti refused to come at the King's command conveyed by the eunuchs. This enraged the king greatly, and his anger burned inside of him. Then the King said to the sages who knew the times *(For it was his royal custom to consult all who knew law and judgment, those closest to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had access w the king and held first place in the kingdom.)* ...

*(It is also clear that the KING is not pleased. HARBONA is dismissed with a gesture. Then he reflects. The UCR curtain has closed, of course, and the Queen's court has disappeared. The KING summons a SERVING-GIRL, whispers to her. She exits and the music, after a brief moment, announces the arrival of the SAGES. These WISE MEN are played by the same actors who played the CHAMBERLAINS [EUNICHS]. Their Sage costumes are designed for fast change—perhaps only a portion is changed. They, too, represent a cross-section of the lands ruled by Persia: Their entrance is ceremonial. They carry devices of their "art" such as telescopes, strange globes, stars, etc, perhaps an abacus. They begin to prostrate themselves before the KING, but he is hasty. The KING is not seeking revenge, but he is bewildered. MEMUCAN is the leading SAGE. A Mede, he ranks very high in the court. It is obvious that the KING relies on his wisdom.)*

AHASUERUS. What law shall be applied to Queen Vashti, since she has not obeyed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by his eunuchs?  
 SCRIBE. Then Memucan answered before the king and the nobles ...

*(The musical underscore will help build tension. The fate of VASHTI (seen in spotlight) is held by MEMUCAN. He speaks cautiously, choosing his words with care. The other wise-men defer to him. There is also a sense that he has carefully escaped a difficult assignment.)*

MEMUCAN. Queen Vashti has not only done wrong to the king, but also to all the nobles, and to all the people in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For this deed of the Queen will be reported to all women. Their husbands will appear contemptible to them when they hear the news: King Ahasuerus ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him—and she did not come! This very day, the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the deed of the Queen will tell it to all the King's nobles. There will be a surfeit of contempt and anger. If it please the King, let a royal command go out from him and let it be written into the laws of the Persians and Medes, which no one can revoke, that Vashti come no more before King Ahasuerus. And let the King give her royal position to someone who is more worthy. And when this royal decree which he will make is heard throughout all his kingdom, which is great, all the wives shall give honor to their husbands, both high and low.

*(VASHTI, meanwhile, royally dressed, preening with mirror, perhaps, is approached by attendants—once the words “that Vashti come no more” are spoken—and gently, deferentially, stripped of her robe, her crown, indeed, of her rank, except as an honored lady. The other sages bow approval of MEMUCAN's advice. The KING raises his rhyton in agreement, then drains it.)*

SCRIBE. And the advice pleased the King and the nobles, and the King did what Memucan had suggested.

*(There is almost a childlike excitement in the KING'S speech—“Send letters ...” By now all lights are faded from VASHTI who is seen no more.)*

AHASUERUS. Send letters to all the King's provinces, to every province according to its form of script and to every people according to its language, that every man should be master in his own house, and speak his own language.

*(Throughout the following speech, SAGES, except for MEMUCAN who stays to wait the KING'S command, bow and exit through the audience. The music now becomes supportive of the KING's somber memories and loneliness, as he considers what has happened. He whispers in mime to MEMUCAN, who moves down center where he is met by SCRIBE/MORDECAI. The two are unaware of each other, alone in pools of light. The KING'S throne light vanishes.)*

SCRIBE. After these events, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

The king's servants who attend him then said ...

*(Throughout the following, the two speak in unison—as a royal command from MEMUCAN, announced via SCRIBES [such as MORDECAI] to the entire Empire. Several other SAGES, who had exiled in all directions, join the speech, from wherever they are in the auditorium, surrounding the audience with the proclamation. At the mention of HEGAI we see him UC, opening silks revealing the chamber of the Women. He takes the typical stance of EUNUCH [feet wide apart, hands clenched behind neck, elbows out] as he waits the arrival of the YOUNG VIRGINS.)*

MEMUCAN & SCRIBE (*unison*). Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for die King. And let the King appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the beautiful young virgins to Shushan the capital, to the house of the women, into the custody of Hegai, the King's eunuch in charge of the women; and let their ointments be given to them. And let the maiden who pleases the King be Queen instead of Vashti.

*(Following the speech, MEMUCAN exits. Lights are now dim. Shapes are starting to move. The arrival of the VIRGINS begins in the SCRIBE's speech—he also sees the action, without comment: a girl calmly brought to HEGAI by a soldier; another girl rushing freely to HEGAI; another escorted by a soldier. We will sense that each girl has a different attitude. HEGAI looks each girl over, and motions her into the chamber.)*

SCRIBE. And the advice pleased the King, and he did so.

*(It is also during this time that the SCRIBE reveals his dual identity as MORDECAI, by the insertion of personal pronouns. And as he speaks of HADASSAH, she comes to him as a father, and he kisses her, and looks upon her as he speaks of "my own daughter.")*

SCRIBE (*cont'd*). Now in Shushan the capital there was a certain Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimai, the son of Kish, a Benjaminite. I had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been carried away with Jeconiah, King of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away. And I brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, my uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother. She was fair and beautiful. When her father and mother died, I adopted her as my own daughter.

*(Throughout the following speech, we see a SOLDIER come for ESTHER. She looks inquiringly to MORDECAI. He briefly admonishes her. Kisses her; lets her go. ESTHER is proud, even indignant, but dutiful. Once she looks back at MORDECAI, who never waivers watching her. HEGAI is intrigued by her proud bearing. He motions her within the chamber, but notices her again as she goes. He sends two serving women to her, with a ritual ewer and basin of water, with fine linens. Her face is washed, her feet are washed. Then they dress her discreetly—in a robe as they remove her original unstylish, non-Persian dress.)*

SCRIBE (*cont'd*). It came to pass, when the King's command and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were brought together to Shushan the capital, into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was also brought to the King's house, into the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.

The girl pleased him, and she received kindness from him. He speedily gave her ointments, and her portions, and the seven maidens chosen to be given to her from the King's house. And he moved her and her maidens into the best place of the house of the Women.

*(The lights fade put as the silk curtains close on the scene.)*

SCRIBE (*cont'd*). Esther had not revealed her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had told her not to reveal it. And Mordecai walked every day in front of the court of the Women's house to inquire after Esther's welfare and how she was faring.

*(MORDECAI is left alone, stricken. While he finishes the above speech we can see he is deeply concerned with what is happening in the palace. Possibly, the ritual dressing continues through the silks, as MORDECAI paces.)*

SCRIBE (*cont'd*). Now when the turn of each maiden came to visit King Ahasuerus, after a prescribed twelve month period of preparation (*The days of their purification were accomplished through six months with*



*oil of myrrh, and six months with spices and other ointments for the women.), then every maiden came to the King in this fashion:*

*(Then the curtains part UC again and we see the final moments of ESTHER'S dressing ceremony. She wears a sheer gown of white. HEGAI is nearby, pleased with his handiwork, proud of this spirited and beautiful girl. She carries a myrtle branch as her one piece of decor. She is ready to be taken to the KING.)*

SCRIBE (*cont'd*). She was allowed to take with her whatever she requested, when she went from the house of the Women into the King's house. In the evening she went in, and in the morning she returned to the second Home of the Women, to the custody of Shaasgaz, the King's eunuch who kept the concubines. She did not visit the King, unless the King delighted in her, and she was summoned by name.

*(Throughout the following, HEGAI escorts ESTHER and TWO HANDMAIDENS to the king's chamber, and stands, waiting instructions. The MAIDENS make final arrangement of ESTHER's dress, hair. The KING is now seen UC as silks rise. He glances up. GIRLS and HEGAI posture themselves.)*

SCRIBE (*cont'd*). When the turn came for Esther, the daughter of Abihai the Uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his daughter, to go to the King, she asked for nothing but what Hegai, the King's eunuch, the keeper of the Women, advised. And Esther obtained favor in the eyes of all who looked upon her.

*(ESTHER hesitates just long enough to suggest her pride, but she also complies. The KING motions all to rise, and for HEGAI and GIRLS to leave. ESTHER rises, and gives the KING the myrtle.)*

SCRIBE (*cont'd*). Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus into his royal house in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

*(Then music commences, she starts a courtly dance of Persia. This music, which started when she left the Women's house, seems to be reflecting stars. Now it modulates into something more lyrical and lovely. All lights are now very dim except on ESTHER—and the reflective MORDECAI at his SCRIBE's position DR.)*