

# EMPIRES

A play in two acts

By Jeff Dunne

© 2017 by Jeffrey A. Dunne

Please note that although not depicted, this play contains references to physical torture.

## CHARACTERS

(Ordered most-to-least central)

EMPEROR (Lead)	Brilliant by any standards, Edmund has conquered the known world through his razor-sharp mind and deep understanding of the human condition – even the emotions that he won't permit himself to experience. He is exhaustively purposeful in every word and action.
ASSASSIN (Lead)	Aaron by birth, when he is selected to assassinate the Emperor, he adopts the identity of a man named Gerard, in order to protect Deirdre, his only living relative. He is extremely capable, compassionate, honorable, determined, and intelligent.
ADVISOR (Supporting)	Brother to the Emperor, Maxwell serves as his advisor. He is shrewd and cunning, and never grows particularly fond of the assassin.
CONSORT (Supporting)	Isabella, consort to the Emperor, is nearly as cunning as he, but in different ways. Where he shuts away his emotions, she controls hers with an unbending will.
SISTER (Supporting)	The most precious thing to Aaron, Deirdre is the younger sister he has spent his life protecting. She is wise for her years, and overflowing with confidence in her brother.
MOTHER (Minor)	A minor character appearing only in one scene of Act I, Aaron's mother is tirelessly compassionate and empathetic. In complement to his father, she is the magnet of Aaron's moral compass.
FATHER (Minor)	Also a minor character, the assassin's father appears briefly in Act I. He was a role model to Aaron, and the source from which the assassin draws his fundamental decency.
SOLDIER TWO (Minor)	Mr. Hodges is a young and clever soldier. Nervous in his inexperience, he is unsure of himself, but consistently uses his brain, especially in a crisis.

SOLDIER ONE (Minor)	Mr. Blythe is, at least initially, an energetic, enthusiastic, but not terribly intelligent or capable soldier.
GUARD CAPTAIN (Minor)	A captain of the palace guard. A reliable man who has risen to a position of authority based on his effectiveness.
JAILOR GUARD (Minor)	Cruel by nature, such as a thug who has found a career that supports a mean streak, this guard is a couple of ranks below the master of the dungeon. He's competent, but doesn't have what it takes to rise higher.
IMPERIAL ESCORTS (Minor and non-speaking)	There are several imperial escorts, protecting the Emperor. They are the height of professionalism and discretion, intelligent men willing to die for their Emperor on his merest whim.
PALACE GUARDS (Non-speaking)	The palace guards that appear in the show are reliable and capable, although not necessarily the highest caliber of human being.

## SETTING

The play is set in the palace of an Emperor who has conquered the known world.

## TIME

This play occurs in a fictitious, medieval timeline prior to the invention of gunpowder.

## ACT I

Scene 1	Palace Chamber 1
Scene 2	Dungeon Cell 1
Scene 3	Dungeon Cell 2
Scene 4	Dungeon Cell 3
Scene 5	Palace Chamber 2
Scene 6	Dining Hall

## ACT II

Scene 1	Palace Chamber 3
Scene 2	Dining Hall
Scene 3	Deirdre's Suite
Scene 4	Palace Chamber 4
Scene 5	Palace Chamber 5
Scene 6	Dining Hall
Scene 7	Palace Chamber 6
Scene 8	Emperor's Study

Note: Each of the dungeon cells is intended to be different, indicating that the assassin is being regularly moved around. This is a minor subtlety that can be ignored if necessary, or accomplished by simply shifting a few decorations around if a larger change is not feasible. Likewise, the scenes in palace chambers are also supposed to be happening in different areas of the palace. If different arrangements are not possible, minor alterations in decorations should be sufficient to make the point.

ACT I

SCENE 1

*(A chamber in the palace of the emperor. A prisoner in chains is secured by two or three guards. He has been lightly beaten, but is conscious and clearly able to follow the conversations. His clothing is modestly well-fitted. Nearby are two soldiers. The first is clearly wounded, but has made himself as presentable as possible. The second appears scuffed, but generally untouched.)*

*The Emperor, his advisor, and four armed escorts enter. The prisoner is forced to his knees.)*

EMPEROR

*(Approaches the prisoner and considers him.)*

So... This is the assassin. *(He squats down to look the prisoner in the eyes.)* I'm told it took a dozen men to subdue you. Perhaps I need better soldiers. *(Emperor turns to the lead of the guards who came in with him).* And where are these heroes of the realm?

GUARD CAPTAIN

Six are dead, your Majesty. Four are in the infirmary, and the two who are still able to stand are here.

EMPEROR

Indeed. *(Turning back to stare at the prisoner. The next line is said in subdued admiration:)* He doesn't look like much.

SOLDIER ONE

*(As he speaks, the advisor and four escorts blanch a little.)*

It was like nothing you have ever seen, Your Majesty! It's as if he was possessed by the wind itself--- *(Trails off as he sees the Emperor has turned to stare at him.)*

EMPEROR

I don't recall asking you to speak. Did I? (*The soldier, terrified, remains silent. The Emperor to his advisor.*) And then when I do ask a question, he remains silent. (*He studies the soldier for a moment, and then turns to the guard captain.*) His tongue is clearly beyond control. Have it removed and brought to the kitchens. Our prisoner here will no doubt be hungry after his capture. (*When Soldier One looks horrified, the Emperor adds:*) Waste not, want not.

SOLDIER ONE

Please, milord! I beg your forgiveness. Please!! I—

*(The Emperor motions him away, and two of the four guards take the soldier away.)*

EMPEROR

Ahh, confirmation of a decision well-made. Out of control indeed. (*He turns to the second soldier, who is looking very uncertain.*) Name.

SOLDIER TWO

Hodges, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR

Rank?

SOLDIER TWO

None, sire.

EMPEROR

Indeed. *You* seem remarkably unscathed from your encounter. (*He pauses to stare at the soldier. When it is clear the man knows his place, he smiles slightly and continues.*) Explain.

SOLDIER TWO

I... I didn't think... That is, when I saw the way he fought, I didn't think we could beat him. But I remembered seeing a good-sized rock, and... and so I ran and got it. When I got back, there was only Danners and Blythe left fighting him. He ran Danners through, and was focused on Blythe. So I snuck up behind him and... (*pantomimes hitting someone in the head with a rock. Then as an afterthought:*) Your Majesty.

EMPEROR

*(Observing, neither condemning or approving...)*

You ran away.

SOLDIER TWO

Uh, n- no, Your Majesty, I—*(stops, suddenly wondering if the Emperor had actually made a statement instead of asking a question).*

EMPEROR

Did you, or did you not, see your comrades fighting a dangerous foe, and choose to leave the battle?

SOLDIER TWO

I did, sire.

EMPEROR

And rather than face a man bravely as a warrior, you hit him from behind. Like a common cutpurse. *(There is a pause, as Soldier Two is unclear whether to say anything.)* Yes or no, Mr. Hodges?

SOLDIER TWO

Yes, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR

I see.

*(The Emperor indicates that he is done with all of this, and that the prisoner is to be taken away.)*

ADVISOR

Take him to the dungeons by way of the infirmary. We'll want to know his state of health before we begin the interrogations.

*(The guards take the prisoner away, and Soldier Two exits with the rest of the escort. Before he is off, however...)*



EMPEROR

Mr. Hodges. *(The soldier stops and faces the Emperor.)* This assassin hardly seems capable of holding a blade, much less defeating an entire troop of soldiers. How do you explain this?

SOLDIER TWO

Well, Your Majesty, I... I suppose if you are an assassin, you do your best not to look dangerous.

*(The Emperor smiles a little at this, in the way of someone impressed that a child actually came up with the right answer to a hard question.)*

EMPEROR

Indeed.

*(The Emperor dismisses him with a look, Soldier Two exits, and the Emperor turns to his advisor after they are alone.)*

Promote him.

ADVISOR

And the assassin?

EMPEROR

I want to know everything. What's his name? Where did he come from? What motivates him? Who prepared him? Who sent him?

ADVISOR

Do you think he could be from the north?

EMPEROR

Not likely. Probably from the Isles. It's the only place remote enough. We'd have gotten wind of this sooner otherwise. You can't keep that kind of training a secret. And Maxwell?

ADVISOR

Yes?

EMPEROR

Once you find a name, assume it's false and keep digging. There will be layers under layers with that one. Steel beneath cotton. Diamond under the steel.

ADVISOR

Indeed.

EMPEROR

In the meantime, put him in our *nicest* cell. (*The advisor looks surprised, so the Emperor explains.*) We'll change his accommodations regularly, each time to something a little less comfortable. Let him wonder how bad things can get. And vary the prisoners in the neighboring cells – women, children, elderly. Find out where his sympathies lie.

ADVISOR

You intend to break him.

EMPEROR

Break him? No. I intend to take him apart. Carefully. Piece by piece. Instruct the torture master that he is not to be permanently damaged. When all's done, I will have a new weapon in my arsenal.

*(Lights out)*

ACT I

SCENE 2

*(Lights come up in a dungeon. The assassin is chained within a cell, and is looking considerably worse than before, with the marks of fresh torture upon him. The Emperor enters with two escorts in the background.)*

EMPEROR

*(Brightly...)*

Aren't you looking well. This new life clearly agrees with you. *(No response.)*  
Hmm. *(Moving on to another topic.)* I'm told that you don't even scream during torture. That's very... determined of you. Impressive.

*(In the distant background there is a sound of a man screaming from torture. The assassin is aware of it, although he shows no emotional reaction. The Emperor notes the assassin's attention.)*

EMPEROR

You didn't think you're the only one, did you? Although the torture master assures me that you are his favorite. Normally he gets bored after a few sessions, but you... you've intrigued him. Inspired him, even, to... greater creativity. But I hardly need to tell you that, do I.

*(In the distant background, although distinct, there is the sound of a woman screaming. The assassin clenches at the sound, but quickly forces himself to neutrality. The Emperor smiles, watching.)*

EMPEROR

Well done. Oh, well done, indeed. One would almost believe that you don't care. Unless they saw you writhing to the sounds of a woman scream all through the night. *(The assassin suddenly understands, glares at the emperor with undisguised hatred.)*  
Oh yes, that's right. *(As an afterthought...)* You know what's funny? She didn't even do anything wrong. We just thought she... had the right kind of scream.

*(The assassin reacts aggressively to this, clenching tightly or perhaps lunging at the bars of his cell or against his chains.)*

EMPEROR

None of them did, you know. The husband. The children. Just an unfortunate family in the wrong place at the wrong time.

*(In the distant background, there is another scream from the same woman, though this time it ends with a faltering sound, as if the scream ended in death. The assassin is almost in a rage.)*

EMPEROR

Oh, that didn't sound good at all, did it? Well, I suppose we are going to have to arrest someone else now.

*(The Emperor watches carefully, as the assassin struggles with the situation.)*

EMPEROR

*(The emperor takes note of an empty bowl near the cell.)*

I see you've been enjoying the stew. Quite a difficult choice, I imagine. Starve, and risk being too weak to take advantage if an opportunity presents itself. Or eat, and prolong the situation. Well... *(he puts a hand to an ear, listening for another scream, but there is only silence. He shrugs.)* It sounds like there should be more stew ready in a few hours.

*(The Emperor smiles, watching the emotions play across the assassin's face – realization, revulsion, then gaining control as he is about to be sick. Finally, the assassin steels himself, an internal decision made.)*

ASSASSIN

You sick bastard.

EMPEROR

*(Clapping with restrained delight.)*

Oh, well done. Oh, oh you *are* a prize. Do you know, no one has ever held out this long before. Not even by half.

ASSASSIN

I'm going to kill you.

EMPEROR

By "I" you mean "we". And no, you're not. But keep those spirits up. There's a good fellow.

ASSASSIN

*(Feigning a false passion, he lashes out...)*

You blood-sucking son of a whore!

EMPEROR

*(Studying the assassin intently, with a dry chuckle.)*

You think me that stupid that I would kill you over an insult. At last, you disappoint me. *(He pulls up a stool, and sits down near the cell. Taking out a wineskin or other drinking vessel, he takes a sip.)* How would you like to play a game? *(The assassin just stares at him.)* Here's how it works. You tell me your name, and I give you the rest *(indicating the beverage)*. Now you're thinking, 'what have I got to lose? I've already given up on the cold silence, and I can give him any name that I like.'

*(The assassin starts to speak, but the Emperor cuts him off.)*

But... if the name you give me doesn't match one of the two that we've narrowed it down to... well, you'll get to hear *three* women screaming in agony while you... don't... sleep.

ASSASSIN

I'll pass.

EMPEROR

Unfortunately that doesn't match either name. But I'll give you another try, since I hadn't kept my end of the bargain yet. Here. *(He passes the drink to the assassin.)* Enjoy.

ASSASSIN

You really are one evil bastard.

EMPEROR

Name.

ASSASSIN

How can you look at yourself in the mirr--

EMPEROR

Name.

ASSASSIN

*(The assassin stares at the Emperor with undisguised hatred, finally realizing that he has been outmaneuvered.)*

Gerard.

EMPEROR

A pleasure to meet you, Gerard. Son of Mereth and Darren. Oh yes. We know.

ASSASSIN

Is there not a single redeeming thing about you?

EMPEROR

You think to change the subject with insults. You think that you are untouchable because your parents are already dead. But I know what you're like, the affections you build for those who have been part of your life.

ASSASSIN

*(As the implications sink in...)*

We are all prepared to die.

EMPEROR

Well, *you're* prepared to die. The others... *were* prepared to die. Hmm, yes. I did think about holding the promise of their lives over you for leverage, but you and I... we need to be honest with each other in all things.

*(Gerard is clearly shaken badly. He backs up, holding the drinking container/vessel like a security blanket.)*

See, isn't it better this way? I tell you the truth, and you're free to let your feelings show. And as a reward, I'll tell you this – they died well. Fierce and capable. In fact, had we not known how skilled they were – from the way *you* fought – we might have gone with too few troops to emerge victorious. So I suppose, when you consider it, I owe you my thanks.

ASSASSIN

*(The Emperor is clearly striking nerve after nerve.)*

You... You're in league with the devil.

EMPEROR

Interesting. Now what makes you say something like that?

ASSASSIN

There is no other way that God would permit a creature like you to exist.

EMPEROR

Do you really think God gives a damn about who does what and how? How quaint. You know, if I had thought you were a religious man, this would have gone differently. *(Pauses to study the assassin)* But you're not, are you.

ASSASSIN

God does not need me to defend Him.

EMPEROR

*(Still studying him intently...)*

I'm not sure you even believe in God. An assassin of the Lord? Not your style.

ASSASSIN

It'll just have to remain a mystery to you.

EMPEROR

Oh, but it's no mystery to me at all. You see, there are only a handful of options, and they all lead to the same conclusion. If there is no God, then we are on our own. Or perhaps there is a God, and he simply doesn't care, in which case we are, again, on our own. Or maybe he really does care. He sits on a high throne, wracked with guilt and anguish over the cruelties that permeate our world – yet He... does... nothing. Omnipotent? I think not. *Impotent*. And still we arrive at the same conclusion: we are on our own.

ASSASSIN

I wouldn't expect a scion of evil like you to understand.

EMPEROR

*(Feigning being deeply hurt...)*

Oh, dear. You mean... You think... I might be an awful person? Oh no! Perhaps I truly should reconsider my life! *(There is a pause, and then a curt laugh.)* You disappoint me a second time, Gerard of Merasia. I thought you an intelligent man. A worthy adversary... and a worthy ally. Perhaps I *should* just have you killed. I have no use for stupidity.

ASSASSIN

*(With intensity...)*

Do it.

EMPEROR

Tsk tsk. Waste not, want not.

ASSASSIN

You should kill me. If not, I'll destroy you.

EMPEROR

Really. Will you.

ASSASSIN

I can't think of a better way to die.

EMPEROR

You're right there. You will die. (*But then changing the tone from threat to one of congenial conversation.*) We all die. But first, you will serve me.

ASSASSIN

If you think I would ever help you in the slightest way—

EMPEROR

(*Mildly irritated and unexpectedly aggressive...*)

Save it. If I want you to help me, you'll help me. Poor information leads to poor decisions, and I control everything you know. But... (*a pause as he shifts back to philosophical*) I don't need another pawn. I don't want another pawn. I want a general.

ASSASSIN

It'll be a cold day in Hell before I'd join you.

EMPEROR

Again with the religion. Hell, heaven, God, Devil. If all it takes is a cold day in Hell, that's fine by me. Winter's not that far away, and I'm a patient man.

ASSASSIN

You think forging a Hell in this world justifies your acts? Let me be the one to break it to you - it doesn't work that way.

EMPEROR

You're right. It doesn't work that way. You think me the devil? You see me an agent of evil? Open your eyes, assassin. I'm a man... much like you. You want to see the wellspring of evil? Well look inside. Or on the streets. At your fellow man. Or (*jovially...*) in a church. (*Serious again.*) This *world* begets evil. Your God, who created it, who created us in His likeness. There's your source of evil. (*He pauses to study the assassin*) You don't believe me. No, you think, the Emperor – he's the one to blame. He hurts people, he... he sucks away the goodness in life. You sit there in your cell, and lament how you've been wronged, how everyone's been wronged. You feel superior and enlightened. But what you fail to recognize is that *I* have given you that.

ASSASSIN

You are a sick, delusional viper.



EMPEROR

And you are a meek, deluded lamb. Holding onto a comfortable fantasy because it makes you happy, not caring in the slightest that it's just a dream. I rule, and in doing so I delineate the greys. Do you know how many people die each month now compared to a decade ago? I have replaced squabbling with purpose. People need constraints, and I provide them.

ASSASSIN

You provide fear.

EMPEROR

Yes. Yes, at last we agree. But what is fear, if not a man's cage? Limits, boundaries. People *need* boundaries. Without them, they'll destroy themselves.

ASSASSIN

People need hope.

EMPEROR

Hope. People have hope. Hope is like a weed. It always returns. You couldn't take it away if you tried. That's what's so nice about it. It grows everywhere. From the fairest Eden to the darkest, most poisonous soil. Look at *you*. Captive, tortured, rotting away in a dungeon. You could have stopped eating. You could be dead by now, but... you... endure. Why? Hope! One guard looking the wrong way at the right time... a sliver of metal from the torture chamber that you can conceal just long enough to hurl into my eye. Hope. It flourishes in you. The barest hint that all the pain will be worth it if you can just...

ASSASSIN

And you seek to destroy it at every turn.

EMPEROR

Do I? Is your hope gone?

ASSASSIN

Every moment in your torture chamber fuels my hope.

EMPEROR

Indeed. (*With extreme intensity...*) I know it does.

ASSASSIN

(*After a pause, realizing he doesn't understand, the assassin attempts another angle...*)

Do you deny what your soldiers do? Could you be so blind as to think that they inspire hope?

EMPEROR

Now why in the world would I want to let weeds overgrow Eden? *(There is a pause as he lets the assassin chew on the thought.)* Hmm? One weed in the darkness is quite a different situation than an entire empire overrun with them. Think of my troops as gardeners. The lands must be tended.

ASSASSIN

Do you really believe this... this... rhetoric? You can't be that stupid.

EMPEROR

Neither can you. That's why I intend to show you the truth.

ASSASSIN

Your truth--

EMPEROR

*The truth. Plain and simple: comfort begets misery, Gerard. Hate me for it if you must, but I didn't make it that way. You can blame your almighty God for that. The world is as it is. I am no more a villain than the wolf that kills a deer. Nature's cruel, assassin. You should know that by now.*

ASSASSIN

The wolf doesn't kill needlessly.

EMPEROR

*(The Emperor reacts retrospectively to this comment for a brief moment, as it reminds him of an important lesson in his life, then...)*

Neither do I.

*(Emperor and guards exit.)*

*(Lights out)*

ACT I

SCENE 3

*(The lights come up on the assassin. He is now wearing (apparently) the same clothes, but they are large on him for he has lost a lot of his bodyweight. He is more wounded from torture than before. Although he is still in a cell, the rest of the stage is dark, and in the majority of the scene – until the guards enters at the end – he is dreaming.)*

MOTHER

*(Calling out for a lost son...)*

Aaron. *(Then louder)* Aaron. *(Lights come up on the Mother, who looks somewhat ghostly, or ideally enshrouded in an idyllic setting just around her. She can be young, even as young as the Assassin, for she is a memory from his past.)*

ASSASSIN

*(The assassin stirs a little.)*

Mother?

MOTHER

*(She approaches him.)*

Oh, Aaron.

ASSASSIN

*(Awakens, and moves to her. He is unchained, for this is in his dream.)*

Mother. You can't be here! It isn't safe, you must—

MOTHER

Look at you. What have we done?

ASSASSIN

I... I don't understand. You're... you're gone. How can you be here? Where's father?

FATHER

*(Father appears from the darkness, joining Mother and Assassin)*

I'm here, my boy. Look at how you've grown. You're a man, and a fine one at that.

MOTHER

Do you see what they've done to him? Oh, my little boy.

FATHER

He's strong, my love.

MOTHER

He's a boy.

FATHER

He's a man. And he has purpose. That's enough.

ASSASSIN

Is it, though? I don't know anymore, Father.

MOTHER

Come. Let me wash away the pain. Tell me where it hurts.

ASSASSIN

It's not the pain. Well, it's not that kind of pain.

MOTHER

What then?

ASSASSIN

They hurt people. *He* hurts people. So many people. Hurts them just to hurt me. They slaughtered Gerard's entire village. Not just the men...

FATHER

They knew the risks. They understood, and chose freely. You are their best hope.

ASSASSIN

Then they have no hope at all. I've failed.

FATHER

You live.

ASSASSIN

To what end? You don't know what he's like. He sees into you. He finds any weakness, and turns it into a gaping wound. That's what he's been doing all these months. The torture is just to distract me as he bleeds out my soul.

MOTHER

We're here for you.

ASSASSIN

You're dead.

MOTHER

We're here (*she touches his heart.*) for you.

ASSASSIN

For now. But for how long? (*He is at/near tears, as a man who sees only unending misery moving forward.*) It's like talking to the Devil himself. He has an answer for everything. A *reason* for everything. His words rip away any shred of goodness. And he watches everything. He misses nothing! Every twitch, every blink. Every hesitation. How long can this go on before I make a mistake? Before a wrong word slips out. What if he finds out who I am? What if he finds her?

*(Mother and Father have faded into the background, and as he looks up, the Assassin sees his sister as she comes to him.)*

SISTER

*(Soft and kind, she is a cool breeze in the desert to him, but one he fears to experience.)*

Hello, Aaron.

ASSASSIN

Deirdre... You can't be here. I... I can't let you be here.

SISTER

It's alright to need someone.

ASSASSIN

Please... I can't... You have no idea what he'll do.

SISTER

Kill me? Do you think I'm scared of death? Do you think that I'm not willing to sacrifice as you have?

ASSASSIN

He'll do so much worse than kill you.

SISTER

*(She takes his hands...)*

You're scared of him. When Mother and Father died, you said it's natural to be scared. Why is it alright for me and not for you?

ASSASSIN  
He's a monster.

SISTER  
You've destroyed monsters before.

ASSASSIN  
Not like him...

SISTER  
You'll destroy him. I know you will.

ASSASSIN  
You don't understand. It's been too long. I doubt I could even hold a sword any longer.

SISTER  
Then you'll find a new weapon.

ASSASSIN  
He's... unassailable.

SISTER  
Then don't assail him.

ASSASSIN  
Then what do I do?

*(Over the following lines, the Sister lays him back in his cell, covers him with a blanket, and then backs away to fade into the background and disappear.)*

SISTER  
What you always do.

ASSASSIN  
What's that?

SISTER  
Whatever it takes.

ASSASSIN  
I won't risk you.

SISTER

If that's what it takes...

ASSASSIN

Please don't leave me.

SISTER

*(This line will appear again in a later scene. The blocking, lighting, or other stage aspect should be memorable, and repeated later to make the connection.)*

You'll find a way, big brother.

*(The sound of a door rattling can be heard.)*

ASSASSIN

I need you safe.

SISTER

The world isn't safe, Aaron. You taught me that.

ASSASSIN

Don't leave...

SISTER

*(No longer visible on stage...)*

You'll find a way...

ASSASSIN

*(In tears now...)*

I love you...

*(There is a sound of a door opening, and the lights fade out. Just as they are gone, they come up on the other side of the stage as two guards enter. A moment later, the lights come back up on the Assassin, who is in chains again, and the blanket is gone.)*

JAILOR GUARD

Rise and shine, pet. Time for your session. I hear the torture master's come up with some really imaginative stuff for today. You're gonna love it. *(The guards start to pull him out, and he turns to another guard and says...)* See that? He's cryin' already. *(To another guard...)* Told you he's gonna love it.

*(Lights out)*