

**THE WOODEN SWORD**  
A One Act Opera by Sheila Silver  
Libretto by Stephen Kitsakos

The action takes place in a kingdom of Western Asia, in ancient times.

Scene i

As the curtain opens, we see a poor peasant family, Hazim, his pregnant wife, Benefsha, and his mother-in-law, Anya, singing in their hut – a mixture of powerful prayer and joyful song.

At the same time, King Zamani, alone in his chambers, is fretting. In spite of all his wealth and power, he is not happy. He worries that something bad will happen -- that his lands might be invaded, that one of his generals will betray him, that illness or disaster might strike his people. As a distraction he decides to disguise himself as a wanderer, mingle with the populace and see how the common folk live. Concealed in a cloak and wig he goes out into the night.

This evening he hears music coming from a coming from a shack. He approaches curiously and peers in the window only to see Hazim, Benefsha and Anya sitting around their meager table, singing happily. He knocks and is received warmly. Commenting on how little it appears they have, he asks the young man, *“Why are you so full of joy?”* Hazim explains that he is a cobbler and each day he goes out to fix shoes on the street and earns enough money to provide for his family. That is all that he needs. *“I trust that all will be well”,* he exclaims, *“it is that simple.”* *“I see a path when I am still, it winds its way around my heart, finds its way into my thoughts, and shows me where I need to go. Because I trust in joy and not in fear, I know a new path will appear. Call it God, Call it Spirit, Call it Wisdom, Call it Truth, Call it Oneness, Call it Love.”*

The disguised King finds the man’s response absurd, but, intrigued by the cobbler’s simplistic philosophy he decides to amuse himself by putting the cobbler to the test.

Scene ii

The next morning a King’s Guard announces a proclamation from the King that no man is allowed to cobble on the streets. When Benefsha and her mother hear this, they are alarmed, for how will they survive? But Hazim calms them. *“If a door to my livelihood has been shut, another will open to take its place.”* He sits calmly for a moment and when he sees some water-carriers passing by, gets the idea that he too can be a water carrier.

### Scene iii

That night, once again, joyful music is being sung by Hazim and Benefsha, but this time Anya looks on, reflecting that Hazim is a dreamer and worries what will happen to them if bad times come upon them. *"They have nothing!"* she bitterly laments. She then warns her son-in-law, *"Hazim, you were lucky this time,"* while Benefsha tries to calm the tension in the house. Their discussion is interrupted by the re-appearance of the disguised King explaining that he had heard of the King's proclamation. Returning to see how the cobbler has fared he is surprised to find him well. Hazim explains that he became a water-carrier and was able to earn the same as a cobbler. Nothing has changed for Hazim and King Zamani, chagrined, leaves determined to test the man more harshly.

### Scene iv

The next day it is decreed that every person in the kingdom must carry their own water. Benefsha and Anya are alarmed. Anya taunts Hazim, *"How will we survive this time!"* but Hazim remains undisturbed. Then, he sees a group of woodcutters approaching and ponders them for a minute. He runs in the hut and asks Benefsha for his axe.

A couple of days pass: we catch glimpses of Hazim as a woodcutter; Anya worrying about their fate and Benefsha defending her husband; the two lovers singing happily together; and Hazim, Benefsha, and even Anya, singing joyfully together. Meanwhile, Zamani has grown furious. *"Is he smarter than King Zamani?"* asks the King and he vows to test Hazim even more harshly.

But one night Hazim returns home empty handed, his shoulders slumped, his spirit defeated. He is wearing the uniform of a palace guard. He explains that all woodcutters were enlisted into the Palace Guards and issued uniforms and swords. Anya thinks this wonderful until she learns that all guards are not to be paid until the end of 30 days. This time Hazim has no money to buy food for his family. His mother-in-law chides him but his wife, Benefsha, comes to his defense. *"Go sit down my husband, rest and be still. You will think of something. I know that you will."* She sings: *"Life is always changing, nothing ever stays the same"* declares her unwavering love for him. In this dark moment Benefsha's words soothe and inspire him and suddenly he gets up and leaves the house.

Later that night the disguised King returns to a house ablaze with light. The neighbors have gathered and are all singing, the table is set with abundance and the women are wearing new clothes. Standing aside, Zamani expresses his outrage that somehow this man has prevailed again. The "wanderer" again visits Hazim, who welcomes him warmly and reveals that he has sold his sword for enough money to live for thirty days. He explains that he cleverly carved another sword out of wood to replace the real one. When he gets paid, he will be able to buy back the real sword. The King is stunned and outside the hut he ponders, *"I wonder if it is his faith that makes him so clever. Or is it his cleverness that makes him so faithful?"* He strengthens his resolve to bring down the cobbler and prove himself smarter.

## Scene v

The scene opens on the town square where everyone is gathered to witness an execution. A Prisoner is brought forth, begging for his life. Hazim, standing with the Palace Guards, does not recognize the King who is now dressed in his royal apparel. Suddenly the King turns to Hazim and orders him to cut off the Prisoner's head. Hazim is shocked and tells the King he could never take the life of a human. The King insists, "*Obey you must or else your head will be the one to roll in the dust instead!*"

The crowd calls for justice as a myriad of thoughts instantaneously pass through Hazim's mind. Benefsha and Anya, shocked and terrified, utter prayers for him. Hazim recalls Benefsha's sweet encouraging words, "*Hazim, you always say a path will appear, and I know that it will.*" As the noise of the crowd dies down Hazim comes out of his reverie. He approaches the Prisoner and prepares to draw his sword, and then with great aplomb he declares:

*"Trusty sword, be so true  
If this man is guilty then cut him through.  
Trusty sword, be so good  
If this man is innocent then turn yourself... to wood!"*

He dramatically draws his sword and the crowd, seeing that it is a wooden sword, exclaims "*A miracle! A miracle! It's a wooden sword.*"

Everyone cheers except for the King. At first he says nothing and then, filled with astonishment and utterly charmed by Hazim's cleverness, he starts to laugh ... and laugh ... and laugh. Dismissing the crowd Zamani summons Hazim. "*Do you know who I am?*" he asks. "*But you are the King, my Sovereign.*" "*Yes,*" the King answers, "*but I am also the wanderer who visited you each night, the poor man whom you fed at your table.*" Hazim kneels before the King and proclaims, "*I am your humble servant*". But the King responds, "*Get up my friend, Hazim the wise. Although you've won, I get the prize.*" Hazim and his family are invited to live in the Palace under the King's protection, where Hazim will serve as advisor and friend. Whether it's his cleverness that makes him faithful, or his faithfulness that makes him clever, King Zamani is inspired to learn more from Hazim. "*You shall want for nothing,*" Zamani exclaims as he walks off with his new friend.