

THE WOODEN SWORD

An Opera in One Act

**MUSIC BY
SHEILA SILVER**

**LIBRETTO
STEPHEN KITSAKOS**

ARGENTA MUSIC
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-CAST OF CHARACTERS-

KING ZAMANI, the ruler of an ancient kingdom Baritone
HAZIM, a poor cobbler Lyric Tenor
BENEFSHA, his wifeSoprano
ANYA, her mother Mezzo-soprano
PALACE GUARDBass
PRISONERTenor or Mezzo

CHORUS (SATB) OF WATER CARRIERS, WOODCUTTERS, PALACE GUARDS.

The time is long ago in a kingdom of Western Asia.

The action takes place within and outside of
the humble hut of Hazim and Benefsha and at the Palace of King Zamani.

The Wooden Sword was commissioned in fulfillment of the 2007 Raymond & Beverly Sackler Prize
in Music Composition awarded to the composer.

THE WOODEN SWORD

SCENE ONE

The stage is dark. Voices are heard from a distance.

HAZIM & La la. La la. La la.
BENEFSHA Lai lai. Lai lai. Lai lai.

The curtain rises on a split scene. The interior of a small hut. A door. A window. A table has been laid for an evening meal. HAZIM, a humble cobbler, and his pregnant wife, BENEFSHA, are singing happily. Her MOTHER is close by preparing the food. On the opposite side of the stage in a room in the great palace, KING ZAMANI is in the midst of disguising himself as a peasant. The music transitions to the KING's chambers and he is revealed.

KING ZAMANI I am rich. I want for nothing!
I am powerful. I live in luxury. I want for nothing!
I have dazzling palaces.
Stallions that I mount.
Wives and children too numerous to count.
My armies stretch from the mountains to the sand.
From the desert to the plains I am ruler of this land.
My kingdom is vast, my people content.
I want for nothing!

And yet my mind is always plagued by what lies ahead.
The “ifs”, the “uncertainties”, the “worries” overtake me.
What would happen if my people revolt?
My generals stumble?
What would happen if illness or disaster causes my cities
to collapse, my kingdom to crumble?

Where is the joy I *used* to feel?
From great stores of wealth and subjects who kneel?
Where is the calm I *used* to know?
Free from worry, free from doubt, free from living with suspicion?

I trust in no one!
I follow no one!
I trust in nothing!
No one. Nothing. No one. Nothing.
(Spoken) Nothing! But I have a secret.
A little game that I play to sooth my troubled mind
when I'm feeling distraught.
It adds a little fun to my day.

Disguised as a peasant I go out into the street
to see how the common folk live.
Disguised as a peasant not a soul that I meet
will know that I am King and I can spy on what they do.
What they want. How they think.
What they have to say.

He rummages through a chest pulling out a few items.

This old disheveled cloak will hide my royal bearing.

Then he dons a wig and fastens a false beard to his chin.

This scraggly old wig will conceal my royal daring.

He prances around admiring himself. Begins to apply some face paint.

A smudge here and there. That's better.
Don't you think the look is quite discrete?
And now for the finishing touches: Dirt! Dirt!
A little dirt under my regal fingernails.
Hmm... that's perfect.

I feel so free when I shed my royal clothes.
Divested of my riches I pretend to be like those
Who wander. Who search. Who seek.

The KING goes out into the night.

I hear music coming ... from that hut over there.

As the music continues he notices the hut of HAZIM and BENEFSHA and hears their joyful singing. Music is pouring out of the hut. Peering through the window he is astonished to see the family dancing and pounding the table in rhythm to the song. The hut is fully revealed and HAZIM and BENEFSHA are singing jubilantly, almost in complete exaltation. The KING is deeply moved.

Such power in their singing. Such joy in their song.
Yet their table is empty.
Few possessions. Yet they don't seem to care.
My curiosity is piqued.

He knocks at the door loudly.

HAZIM Who can that be at this hour?

BENEFSHA Some unfortunate. We must welcome strangers.

Hazim opens the door.

HAZIM Hello there. May I help you?

Welcome stranger to our humble home.

KING ZAMANI Thank you. Be assured that I'm no adventurer.
Just a weary wanderer.

BENEFSHA Please come in and rest. A stranger is always a welcome blessing.

HAZIM Sit down. We will bring you something to eat.
I am Hazim and this is my wife, Benefsha.
And her mother, Anya.
And this (*he pats her womb gently*) is a wondrous gift that
soon shall be arriving.

KING ZAMANI Thank you for all your kind hospitality.
I heard such beautiful music coming from your hut.
I have a question. I hope it won't offend you.
With so few possessions surrounding you.
Living so simply with little food on your table.
Why are you so full of joy?
What is the secret of your bliss?
Don't you worry? Don't you doubt?
You have little yet you fear not? I don't understand.
How can you be so joyful?

HAZIM Contentment is often an illusion.
But my answer is simple. I am a cobbler by trade
and each day I go out of my house and onto the street
where I fix the soles of those who have tripped or ripped a strap
or discovered a shoe with holes.
By day's sweet end I always earn enough to provide for my family.
I am content. We do not require more.

I have faith that in whatever trials we face, I will prevail.

KING ZAMANI But don't you worry that something bad will happen?

HAZIM I trust that all will be well. It is that simple.

KING ZAMANI But how can you be so certain?
(*aside*) Is this man just a simpleton?

HAZIM 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.
I see a path when I am still.
It winds its way around my heart, finds its way into my heart
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.

KING ZAMANI *(comprehending but perplexed)*
It is late and I must go.
But will I be welcome if I come again?

BENEFSHA A guest is always a welcome blessing in our home.

KING ZAMANI Good night.

BENEFSHA, ANYA
& HAZIM Good night.

HAZIM walks the disguised KING to the door and the women nod and bow as the he exits. The family fades into the background as the lights isolate the KING.

KING ZAMANI He trusts in joy and not in fear.
He sees a path. That much is clear.
But all roads are paved with stones that bruise.
He must know this ...
He fixes shoes!

He is convinced. I can surely see.
But how will he react to adversity?
A test is needed! A test! A test!
I will think of a test.

Music continues underneath to end of scene.

TRANSITION TO SCENE 2

SCENE TWO

A PALACE GUARD steps forward.

PALACE GUARD *(spoken voice announcing in rhythm)*
King Zamani . Majestic Ruler of the People.
Most Royal and August. Most Eminent and Magnificent.
Makes the following Proclamation:

(Sung) No buttons or bootlasts or leather, by hand
shall be hammered or pounded on streets in this land.
A road free from shoemaking, that is desired.
A fair shop for cobbling now is required.
The man who is caught fixing shoes on the street
an unhappy fate he surely will meet!

HAZIM and BENEFHSA hear the proclamation as they come out of their house.

BENEFHSA Hazim, how will we manage?
What will you do if you cannot cobble on the street?
We don't have a shop. Or money to buy one.
And the little one kicked today.

HAZIM Benefsha, my pearl. How long have we known each other?

BENEFSHA Since childhood we have been bound to each other.

HAZIM And our fathers were friends but our mothers ...

BENEFSHA *(playfully)*
Never had a kind word for each other.

HAZIM Benefsha, my pearl. My sweet, do not worry.
If the door to my livelihood has been shut, I am confident that
another will open to take its place.
Go back into the house and tell Mother not to brood.
Tonight, as always, we will have song with our food.

BENEFSHA returns to the house. HAZIM paces back and forth on the street and then sit down to think, closing his eyes in silent meditation. From a distance we hear the call of the WATER CARRIERS.

WATER CARRIERS Water. Water.

HAZIM is thinking. He doesn't quite hear them yet.

WATER CARRIERS Water. Water.

Now he hears them. His eyes are opened. Their song grows louder as they advance. We hear the sound of water splashing from their buckets and then we see them. Their backs are yoked with long sticks carrying buckets of water on each end.

WATER CARRERS Water. Water. Water. We bring water to your door.
Water. Water. For the privileged and the rich. And even for the poor.
Water. Water. Water. We bring it fresh and sweet.
Only a few rupees, it's coming down the street.
From the Sanglakh Mountains it flows in rapid streams.
From our buckets to your samovar to heat until it steams.
Water. Water. Water. We bring it fresh and sweet.
Only a few rupees, it's coming down the street.
Water. Water. Water. We bring water to your door.
Water. Water. For the privileged and the rich. And even for the poor.

And as the WATER CARRIERS march off, HAZIM joins their procession. A new door has opened and he has entered.

HAZIM Water. Water. For the privileged and the rich. And even for the poor.

BLACKOUT

SCENE THREE

Lights come up. Some time has passed. It is again evening in HAZIM'S house. A long pole and two buckets are at the side of the table, which has now been laid for supper. The lamplight in the hut fills it with a warm and contented glow. HAZIM & BENEFSHA are again singing their song of joy. ANYA looks on a bit disdainfully and comments.

ANYA

Just look at them.
They feel joy and elation.
They feel bliss and sweet rapture.
Yet. Yet, they have nothing.

They are filled with excitement.
They have their heads in the clouds.
Yet, they have nothing. Nothing.

Don't they know that stomachs cannot turn on air?
Don't they know that hunger turns into despair?
Don't they know that rain may cease to fall?
Rivers dry up. Lakes turn to stone.
Don't they know? Don't they know?

Don't they know that in order to survive, to stay alive
They must trust in the things that they can touch and feel.
Trust in what is real. Trust in what is known.
Don't they know? Don't they know?

(after a beat)

Hazim. Hazim. You were lucky this time!
You have the gift to make the best of what the day has to offer.
But ... Hazim. Hazim. You were lucky this time.

BENEFSHA

(admonishing)
Mother all is well in our home.
Life is always changing. The path reinvents itself.
Mother do not worry so.

ANYA

Eventually, Benefsha, I fear that path will come to a wall.
A wall that has no door.
There will be no place to go. No way to get in.
No place to knock ...

They hear a loud knocking at the door. HAZIM goes to answer and the disguised KING ZAMANI has appeared again.

HAZIM

Welcome again my friend. Please come in.

KING ZAMANI I thank you for your hospitality. I couldn't help but wonder.
What did you do today? For surely you heard the King's proclamation
forbidding cobbling on the street.

(looking around and seeing the bountiful table)

But I see you have the same as last night to eat.
How did you manage?

HAZIM Life is always changing. The path reinvents itself.
When the door to my livelihood was shut another opened to take its place.
I was not afraid. I listened to my heart and so,
I became a water carrier and at the end of the day
I had earned the same as before.
We do not require more.

KING ZAMANI What if tomorrow no one wants you to carry their water?

HAZIM

KING ZAMANI

I see a path when I am still.

Where does this path lie for me?

It winds its way around my heart,
finds its way into my thoughts
and shows me where I need to go?

Is there a path that I can find that will lead me
where I need to go?

Because I trust in joy and not in fear,
I know a new path will appear.

How can I trust in joy when all I feel is fear?
Only fear.

Again the KING is astonished.

KING ZAMANI I can see that your faith is unwavering.
Well...I must go now. Good night.

HAZIM Please come again.

BENEFSHA &
ANYA Good night.

HAZIM walks the disguised KING to the door and the women nod and bow as he exits. The family fades into the background as the lights isolate the KING.

KING ZAMANI *(annoyed and angry)*
He's been quite clever in this endeavor.
But he has not yet *tasted* hard times!
He thinks he's smarter.
(Sarcastically) He carried water.
But he has not yet tasted hard times!
He trusts that all will be well.
I don't believe it! How can that be?
Is he then smarter than me?
Let's see how he reacts to more adversity.

(shouting)

Another test!

TRANSITION TO SCENE FOUR

SCENE FOUR

A PALACE GUARD steps forward.

PALACE GUARD *(spoken voice announcing in rhythm)*
King Zamani . Majestic Ruler of the People.
Most Royal and August. Most Eminent and Magnificent.
Makes the following Proclamation:

(Sung) People of the kingdom let my edict be known.
As of today you will draw water on your own!
It matters not what your status may be,
From this moment on by *royal decree* transactions for water
shall always be free.
And those who disobey be warned!
Your punishment will be profound.
Your head submerged in a bucket of water until you're drowned.

(Overlapping) King Zamani. Majestic Ruler of the People.
Most Royal and August. Most Eminent and Magnificent.
Makes the following Proclamation:

HAZIM, BENEFSHA and ANYA hear the proclamation as they come out of their house.

ANYA *(Overlapping)* Hazim. Hazim. How will we survive this time?

BENEFSHA Mother he will find a way.

HAZIM *(Shouting)* Both of you stop worrying! Mother! Benefsha!
Go back into the house.

The women leave and HAZIM is left alone to sit and ponder in quiet meditation, turning his eyes towards the heavens. Shortly afterwards we hear the faint sound in the distance of the WOODCUTTERS singing their anthem. It is far away but close enough to come into HAZIM's awareness.

WOODCUTTERS From the depths of the river valley forests
to the upland and the prairie and the plains.
We are stewards of the weald and of the woodlands
that are nourished by the chilling winter rains.
From the cliffs to the icy mountain passes.
From the grasslands and the mosses and the hills.
We survey the mighty conifers and larch trees
then we chop them down and send them to the mills.

Wood for the fire and wood for the stoves!
Wood for the ovens that bake all the loaves.
Wood for the castle and wood for the cave.
Wood for the honest man and wood for the knave.

HAZIM *(Overlapping)* Benefsha.

BENEFSHA Yes, Hazim.

HAZIM Where is my axe?

She points to the axe which he picks up.

ANYA *(Sarcastically)* Let us see what you bring home tonight.

WOODCUTTERS *(Overlapping)* Wood for the ...
Wood, wood, wood.
Chop, chop, chop.

HAZIM *(Joining them)* We are stewards of the weald and of the woodlands ...

And he runs off following the WOODCUTTERS whose song continues to be sung underneath the following exchange between BENEFSHA and ANYA who are left alone on stage.

BENEFSHA Mother, don't you see that Hazim will always find his way.

ANYA *(Overlapping)* Oh Benefsha, lucky once again, but when will you learn?
In order to survive, to stay alive,
You must trust in what is real.
Don't you know? Don't you know? Don't you know?

BENEFSHA *(Overlapping)* Mother, why can't you learn to trust in Hazim?
Oh Mother, trust that we will each find our path.
Mother. Mother. Learn to trust.
Mother all *is* well in our home.

The lights fade to black and a Montage begins. It is intended to show glimpses of activity inside and outside of HAZIM's house. A two-shot. A wide-shot. A close-up. All punctuated by the orchestra and the lights. The orchestra initially sets the mood and the lights come up on HAZIM and BENEFSHA singing their song of rapture and joy; an idyllic moment. After a short time, the lights fade and come up again. Time has passed. ANYA has joined them in song and dance, though she is more reticent. Lights fade again to black. When they come up again KING ZAMANI is peering through the window of the house. He is spying on the family.

KING ZAMANI *(Angrily)* He still succeeds! How can it be?
He outmaneuvers my own decree!
How can it be? How can it be?

WOODCUTTERS *(Offstage overlapping)* Wood for the fire and wood for the stoves.
Wood for the ovens that bake all the loaves.

BENEFSHA *(Overlapping)* Hazim, I trust in you. Trust in you.
Hazim, I do. Hazim, I trust that you will find your way

ANYA *(Overlapping)* Don't they know that in order to survive. To stay alive.
They must trust in what is real.
Things that you can touch. And feel.
Don't they know? Don't they know? Don't they know?

HAZIM *(Overlapping)* I see a path when I am still.
It winds its way around my heart.

Find its way into my heart.

KING ZAMANI *(Overlapping)* He outmaneuvers my own decree!
Is he then smarter than King Zamani?
I'll get him *this* time.
Another test! Another test!
Let's see how he reacts to more adversity. *(He exits)*

The lights dim. Another day is passing. When they come up again inside the hut the table is bare. HAZIM enters clothed in the resplendent uniform of a PALACE GUARD. A large sword in a scabbard is hitched to his side. He is dejected, defeated..

HAZIM Tonight I return home sadly. My arms are empty.

BENEFSHA *(Overlapping)* What has happened? Why are you wearing those clothes?

ANYA *(Overlapping)* Hazim. Hazim. What is the meaning of this?

HAZIM I left this morning with my axe
to cut and chop just like before.
But as soon as I had traveled no more than ten yards
I learned I had become one of *the Palace Guards!*

ANYA But how can this be?

HAZIM It seems the King has issued another decree.

BENEFSHA Then why all this sadness when there should be praise?

HAZIM We guards are paid but once
Only at the end of thirty days.

ANYA So tonight we have nothing?

BENEFSHA Mother, let him be!

She goes to comfort HAZIM

Go sit down my husband. Rest and be still.
You will think of something. I know that you will.

Life is always changing. Nothing ever stays the same.
Life is always changing. Nothing ever stays the same.
Seedlings grow. Ice caps melt.
Snow turns into rain.
Trees are felled. Feathers plucked.
Wheat is plowed for grain.
But if our love is constant. If our love is true.
Even when life changes. Our love will see us through.

Hazim, your love is constant.
Hazim, your love is true.
Hazim, your heart is filled with courage.
Hazim, Hazim, Hazim ... I love you.

Rest now and be still.
You always say the path will appear.
Hazim, I trust in you and I know that it will.

The Orchestra plays out the last strain of BENEFSHA's song and the music transitions. HAZIM sits. Reflects. Meditates. We see the germ of an idea on his face. A rush of excitement. A plan. He rises excitedly and rushes off.

LIGHTS DIM

ORCHESTRAL INTERLUDE

(Hazim's Dance)

The lights come back up on the hut. It is later that evening and the table has been set for dinner. Only this time there is food and wine in abundance. BENEFSHA and ANYA are wearing new clothes. They are dancing joyfully with HAZIM. Eventually the lights pick out the disguised KING ZAMANI as approaching the hut to peer into the window.

KING ZAMANI Let's see how he fared this time!

He sees the festivities and recoils in disbelief.

I don't believe what my eyes do see.
Once more he triumphs against adversity.
How can this be? I need to know how this faith of his
keeps turning my tests around on me.
Is he then smarter than King Zamani?
Is he then smarter than me?

He knocks loudly on the door.

HAZIM *(Answering)* Welcome once again my friend.

KING ZAMANI It is astonishing. So astonishing.
How ever did you earn enough to pay for so much food today?

HAZIM Today I received two gifts:
The first from King Zamani, my lord.
He made me a Guard, gave me a Sword.

He pulls out the sword from its holder to show the KING.

KING ZAMANI But I only see a handle. Where is the blade?

HAZIM Exactly! Come here and see what I made.

He brings him to the table where he picks up a large blade that is obviously made of wood.

Receiving no pay at the end of the day
I thought of a way to get enough money to buy this food,
new clothes, wine and honey.
I sold the blade which was made of steel
and carved *another* to make it look real!

Take a look, it's really not bad.
It's a bit like the one that I carved as a lad.

The KING is fascinated.

KING ZAMANI And the second gift you did receive?

HAZIM Benefsha gave me a reminder to believe.

The music accelerates. The joy is sustained. Lights isolate the KING as he comments.

KING ZAMANI I wonder if it is his faith that makes so clever?
Or is it his cleverness that makes him so faithful?

HAZIM, BENEFSHA and ANYA begin to dance again. The KING looks on with envy and fascination. The trio beckons him to join them in their dance.

HAZIM, ANYA &
BENEFSHA (Overlapping) Come dance dear friend, come dance with us.
Come and dance, come share in our joy.

The KING is reluctant at first, but eventually he allows himself to be carried away by the infectiousness of their joy. They all dance together as the music reaches a climax and the lights fade to black.

SCENE FIVE

The curtain opens revealing the interior of a Courtyard in the Palace of KING ZAMANI. He is dressed splendidly in his royal finery and seated on an imposing throne on a raised platform. The Palace Guards, including HAZIM, flank his left and right sides. On the ground, centered in front of the throne, is a chopping block. The crowd, including BENEFSHA and ANYA has gathered.

There is a palpable and imposing silence that is suddenly broken by two chords accompanied by loud gongs.

KING ZAMANI Bring in the prisoner!
What has he done?

A Palace Guard drags in the PRISONER, whose hands have been bound, and deposits him on the ground in front of the KING. The PRISONER kneels in supplication.

PALACE GUARD He stole a melon. Then he tried to run.

CROWD Deliver Justice, Oh great Zamani!

PRISONER Oh great Zamani. I beg your pardon.
But I never was in the Royal Garden.

CROWD Deliver justice! Oh Great Zamani.

PRISONER Oh great Zamani. Please spare my life.
I have ten children. I have a wife.

CROWD Deliver justice! Oh great Zamani.

BENEFSHA And if he's murdered *she* bears the grief.

ANYA What proof do they have that he is a thief?

CROWD (overlapping) Deliver justice! Oh great Zamani.

BENEFSHA/ANYA Spare him. Oh great Zamani! (etc.)

KING ZAMANI Silence!

Deafening silence. ZAMANI contemplates a moment

I have decided this man must be punished.
His head reminds me of my lost melon and so
it shall be cut off and given to me.
(Diabolically) Now then. Hmm?
Who shall be the chosen one to come and cut the cord?

He looks around and focuses his eye on HAZIM.

You there! Step forward. For it shall be *your* sword!

There is a commotion. The CROWD gasps. The KING is angered. BENEFSHA and MOTHER huddle. They all sing simultaneously, overlapping each other. The tension mounts.

HAZIM (overlapping) Oh great King, how can it be poor Hazim that you ask?
I am not worthy of this important task.

BENEFSHA (over) What will happen when they learn that the sword is not real?
That it's not made of steel.

ANYA (overlapping) Dear God, help Hazim.
Dear God, help him.

KING ZAMANI Obey you must, or else your head
will be the one to roll in the dust instead!

HAZIM is deep in thought. Everyone is frozen in his or her own thoughts. It is as if a "moment" is passing.

CROWD & GUARDS Oh, great Zamani. Deliver justice!
Oh great Zamani! Deliver justice!

BENEFSHA Hazim. Hazim.
You always say the path will appear.
Hazim, I trust in you and I know that it will.

ANYA Dear God, help him. His heart is good.

Lighting shift. Time reverts back to normal.

HAZIM *(begins timidly and gets bolder)*
I am a poor and honest man who lives to serve your royal will .
But not even an ant would I kill.
To take a man's life is harder yet to fulfill.

But if you, great King order it so
Along this path, I must go

*He declares majestically:
(Spoken)*

King Zamani ,Majestic Ruler of the People.
Most Royal and August. Most Eminent and Magnificent.
Makes the following Proclamation:

(Sung)

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

He grabs hold of the sword in the sheath, pulls it sword quickly and raises it above his head. The crowd gasps and cheers overlapping.

CROWD: A wooden sword!

CROWD It's a miracle!

BENEFSHA A wooden sword!

ANYA A wooden sword!

CROWD It's a miracle!
A wooden sword!

The crowd claps and cheers. KING ZAMANI is utterly charmed and starts to laugh. There is no doubt now who has won.

KING ZAMANI: Free the prisoner, disburse the mob
Bring me the man who accomplished the job.

The CROWD goes off and HAZIM comes before the King.

KING ZAMANI Do you know who I am?

HAZIM But you are the King?
My sovereign. My Lord.

KING ZAMANI Yes, but I am also the wanderer
who visited you each night, the poor man
whom you fed at your table.

HAZIM *(he kneels before the KING)*
Your majesty, I am your humble servant.

KING ZAMANI

Get up my friend, Hazim, the wise.
Although you've won, *I* get the prize.
For this was the final test.
From now on you shall be *my* guest.
With you as my guide, my advisor and friend
my kingdom shall flourish without end.
Bring your wife and mother too.
In the palace we will find something for them to do

(he extends his arms to HAZIM and declares)

Come be my guest.
You shall want for nothing!

END OF THE OPERA