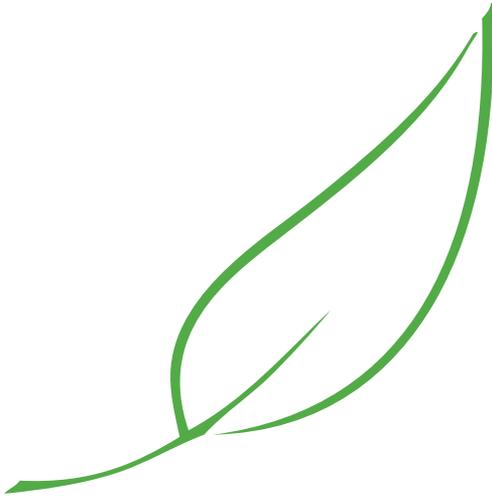


Agrippina

By A. Giovanni Affinito



GREEN ROOM PRESS

greenroompress.com

AGRIPPINA

By A. Giovanni Affinito

Copyright © MMIV by A. Giovanni Affinito, All rights reserved.

CAUTION: Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that this Work is subject to a royalty. This Work is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America and all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations, whether through bilateral or multilateral treaties or otherwise, and including, but not limited to, all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention and the Berne Convention.

RIGHTS RESERVED: All rights to this Work are strictly reserved, including professional and amateur stage performance rights. Also reserved are: motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound recording, all forms of mechanical or electronic reproduction, such as CD-ROM, CD-I, DVD, information and storage retrieval systems and photocopying, and the rights of translation into non-English languages.

PERFORMANCE RIGHTS AND ROYALTY PAYMENTS: All amateur and stock performance rights to this Work are controlled exclusively by Green Room Press, INC. No amateur or stock production groups or individuals may perform this play without securing license and royalty arrangements in advance from Green Room Press, INC. Questions concerning other rights should be addressed to Green Room Press, INC. Royalty fees are subject to change without notice. Professional and stock fees will be set upon application in accordance with your producing circumstances. Any licensing requests and inquiries relating to amateur and stock (professional) performance rights should be addressed to Green Room Press, INC..

Royalty of the required amount must be paid, whether the play is presented for charity or profit and whether or not admission is charged.

AUTHOR CREDIT: All groups or individuals receiving permission to produce this play must give the author(s) credit in any and all advertisement and publicity relating to the production of this play. The author's billing must appear directly below the title on a separate line where no other written matter appears. The name of the author(s) must be at least 50% as large as the title of the play. No person or entity may receive larger or more prominent credit than that which is given to the author(s).

PUBLISHER CREDIT: Whenever this play is produced, all programs, advertisements, flyers or other printed material must include the following notice: *Produced by special arrangement with Green Room Press, INC.*

COPYING: Any unauthorized copying of this Work or excerpts from this Work is strictly forbidden by law. No part of this Work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, by any means now known or yet to be invented, including photocopying or scanning, without prior permission from Green Room Press, INC.

GREEN ROOM PRESS, INC.
P.O. BOX 248 • CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA 52406
TOLL FREE (888) 350-5005 • FAX (319) 368-8011

AGRIPPINA

By A. Giovanni Affinito

SYNOPSIS: Powerful women take center stage in this classic story of ambition, lust, and betrayal. Agrippina is the widowed mother of the Emperor Nero, and she will do just about anything to have her way. The problem is that everyone else in the Roman court is just as willing to backstab, betray, seduce and manipulate in order to get into a position of power. Relationships are tested, lies are told and blood is spilled in this epic tale of ancient Rome.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 female, 7 male, 1 either)

- AGRIPPINA (f)The dowager empress of Rome. A woman in her forties or fifties. *(146 lines)*
- DELIA (f)AGRIPPINA's personal slave, intensely loyal to the empress. *(16 lines)*
- PALLAS (m).....AGRIPPINA's lover and Minister to NERO. PALLAS is a graying, muscular man in his forties or fifties. *(89 lines)*
- BURRUS (m).....NERO's former tutor, grave and Iago-like. A man in his fifties. *(97 lines)*
- OTHO (m).....Minister to NERO, an ambitious, vain dandy in his thirties. *(64 lines)*
- AGERINUS (m).....Slave to AGRIPPINA. *(9 lines)*
- NERO (m).....Young emperor of Rome. A superstitious, paranoid man in his twenties. *(183 lines)*
- HERCULEIUS (m).....Minister. Awkward and bumpkin-like, but dangerous. *(58 lines)*

BY A. GIOVANNI AFFINITO

POPPEIA (f)OTHO's wife in name only. A beautiful, deceptively sweet woman in her twenties. (43 lines)

BRITTANICUS (m)Step-brother to NERO and the true heir to the throne. Early teens. (21 lines)

FOODTASTER (m/f)The royal food-taster, male or female. (6 lines)

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Agrippina is easily produced with minimal props (i.e. a pillar depicting a chamber, etc.) and the usual battery of lights. The many scenes are fused by music, chosen at the discretion of the director(s) and played on several areas of the stage. Costuming is of the mid-first century in Rome.

IN MEMORY OF EMILE

*This perusal script is for reading purposes only.
No performance or photocopy rights are conveyed.*

ACT ONE

AT RISE: *A room in a house on the island of Pandataria off the Campanian coast of Italy. AGRIPPINA, the dowager empress of Rome, a handsome woman in her forties, is sitting motionless on a couch. DELIA, her personal slave, stands upstage, anxiously looking toward the right wing as though through a large window. The room is indicated only by furniture props set before a dark curtain.*

AGRIPPINA: Do you see anything?

DELIA: A boat has docked . . . but it isn't one of yours. It can't be him.

AGRIPPINA: Still no news of him?

DELIA: Not last night. Not today. The German guard went out to find him. *(Turns to her.)* They never came back.

AGRIPPINA: Someone has come, out of love or out of hate. But they've come.

DELIA: What could have happened?

AGRIPPINA: Perhaps he's dead. Killed by a street gang.

DELIA: *(Begins to sob.)* Oh, Augusta! The guard is gone . . . some of the servants . . . and tonight . . .

AGRIPPINA: Tonight? Tonight, what?

DELIA: I saw the cook leave. What does it mean . . . why are they all leaving us?

AGRIPPINA: They're not leaving, Delia. They're following. They think authority has gone from here, and they follow its scent like a pack of dogs.

DELIA: To the emperor?

AGRIPPINA: To my son. Do you want to leave me, too?

DELIA: I shall never leave you.

AGRIPPINA: Why not? Agerinus should have returned by now. Something has clearly gone wrong. Aren't you afraid?

DELIA: Only if you are. I've been a slave all of my life and have had nothing of my own except mirrors of your joy, your grief, even your hate. But I've never seen your fear. If I thought you were afraid, I would run out there into the sea.

DELIA starts to dress AGRIPPINA's hair.

AGRIPPINA: Things used to frighten me. Things I've never told anyone. Not even Pallas. Don't bother with my hair. It doesn't matter how I look. There's no one here to notice.

PALLAS comes in quietly. He is a graying, muscular man in a long cloak.

PALLAS: Someone might.

AGRIPPINA: *(Rising.)* Pallas! How did you get in here?

PALLAS: Easily. There's no one at the pier or in any corner of this prison. I thought Nero had shut you up for all time.

AGRIPPINA: Then you know I've been exiled . . . barred from this feverish new society and no longer allowed to roam the royal whorehouse.

PALLAS: Have you been allowed visitors?

AGRIPPINA: There was a brief visit from my son, accompanied by his crowd of freaks . . . a quick dutiful embrace and they all took flight like birds after a thunderclap.

PALLAS: As I shall.

AGRIPPINA: Why are you here, anyway?

PALLAS: To see you again.

AGRIPPINA: Then you had better go.

PALLAS: I came to say goodbye.

AGRIPPINA: Again? This is becoming a habit with you.

PALLAS: I've been ordered out of the palace too. Deposed.

AGRIPPINA: So. He means to take all from me.

PALLAS: Then you do care about my leaving?

AGRIPPINA: No. But not by his order.

PALLAS: Listen, Agrippina. He's not your boy any longer. Did you never think he would discover that the world had shapes other than the rounds of your breasts? That the world isn't bounded by the pillars of your legs? He's a man.

AGRIPPINA: Hah! Men. How you all hang together with puffed-up chests and flexed muscles. Humanity's seed pods, marching around shouting, WE ARE MEN! Well, WE are the women who nurture your seed. I made Nero. He's MINE! Alright then, Nero is a man. Now that you've given me this good piece of news, why don't you say your goodbye?

PALLAS: What will I do with my life?

AGRIPPINA: You're rich. As Minister of Finance you had virtual control of the treasury. Count your money. That should fill your days.

PALLAS: What about my nights?

AGRIPPINA: What shall I say? You think all a woman has to do is say yes to a man and everything will be fine? Should I rot away in exile on this dull island like a senile hag? Nero and Poppeia have beaten me . . . for now. But I'll never give up to a whore.

PALLAS: You talk like the monster everyone says you are.

AGRIPPINA: And you, as usual, are a bore.

PALLAS: (*Moves close to her.*) I remember when you were lovely. Even then you wore this hard defiance I never could penetrate. I mistook the ambition that flushed your cheeks for innocence. It breathed a fire that lit up the dark empty rooms of my mind, and I saw myself rising above a thousand black crimes committed for your sake.

AGRIPPINA: You never thought it was unworthy of you. You insisted on it. You . . .

PALLAS: I thought that once your boy was emperor, we would leave Rome and with snowy heads and retire to some island with the ghost of youth still in our hearts.

AGRIPPINA: I've no taste for island life. (*Suddenly contrite. Touching his face.*) My poor friend. I know this isn't what you had waited for: my sharp words, this boredom that glazes my eyes. It's true. I am a monster.

PALLAS: (*Embracing her.*) Pina . . .

AGRIPPINA: (*Pulling away.*) But I won't be counted among the vanquished. Not by Nero. I taught him everything he knows, and now he thinks he can manipulate me. I sent Agerinus to him with a gift. Only he will know its meaning.

PALLAS: And . . . ?

AGRIPPINA: He . . . never came back.

PALLAS: Doesn't that frighten you?

AGRIPPINA: I'm not alarmed.

During the following speech, the lights slowly dim out on the scene as the curtains part to reveal the council room in the Imperial Palace, represented by a few stairs leading up to a dais at center. Down right, a small table sits with a bowl of fruit and an urn of roses. AGERINUS, AGRIPPINA's male slave, is placing two curule (royal) chairs on the dais. BURRUS, a mature, barky man, and OTHO, a young dandy, stand below watching.

PALLAS: Your lack of fear is what alarms me. The day you casually sent out word that you would sit next to Caesar on the dais, when you knew it would incite the senate to a grand fury . . . that didn't scare you either.

Lights fully up on the council chamber.

BURRUS: Do you really think . . .

OTHO: (*Indicating AGERINUS.*) Shh. Shh. (*They watch AGERINUS leave.*) Agrippina has a thousand ears.

BURRUS: Do you really think she'll go through with it?

OTHO: She'll do as she pleases. She always does, doesn't she?

BURRUS: Yes. She has the arrogance. And he'll allow it because he's soft, a lover of Greek things. We'll all be laughingstocks.

OTHO: She's taught him effeminacy and now he'll do whatever she asks of him. You're right, the world will laugh.

PALLAS enters without his cloak.

BURRUS: Well, Pallas, do you think she'll do it?

PALLAS: I don't think so.

BURRUS: There are two chairs up there. We'll soon see who fills them.

OTHO: It's the worst humiliation. Nero mustn't allow it, mother or no. Rome has had tyrants to bear, but a mother's boy as emperor? It's just too much.

PALLAS: *(Laughing lightly.)* Why all the consternation? She wouldn't dare go so far, and even if she does, what is it to us? All mothers of emperors are proud.

BURRUS: But this one is also sister and widow to emperors and the daughter of a great general. Once she sits up there, she won't step down until she warms that royal chair herself.

PALLAS: Oh come, Burrus. You're addicted to palace rumors and slaves' gossip. Mark me, this will all come to nothing.

OTHO: *(Takes an apple from the bowl.)* All the same, this boy emperor has no style. In some ways though, I do find his reign enjoyable. *(He bites into the apple, making a loud sucking noise)*

PALLAS: As a paragon of style, you are supreme, dear Otho, but as a judge, you put the chariot before the horse.

BURRUS: He only means that what Rome needs is a man.

OTHO: Thank you, Burrus.

PALLAS: All this talk of manliness from two who gossip like slave girls at a public fountain.

BURRUS: Well, isn't it queer that the army honors a boy who's formed such an attachment to his own mother?

PALLAS: It's your thinking that's queer,, because his true attachment is to a Greek serving girl.

NERO suddenly bursts in singing a high note on "Ahhhhh". He is an attractive man of twenty, with light reddish hair and a beard, already showing signs of indulgences at court.

NERO: Ahhhhh . . . there, you see? My voice teacher is right. Definitely a richer tone. I practice with a marble weight on my tummy. What do you all think?

BURRUS: Oh . . . excellent.

OTHO: Uh . . . hmm . . . yes. Very penetrating.

BURRUS: You'll surpass even Augustus in speechmaking.

NERO: But I don't care for speechmaking. It makes me too hoarse to sing. We'll hire a speechmaker.

BURRUS: It comforts the people to hear the emperor himself speak. You mustn't go against tradition.

NERO: And we mustn't stop the current for dead fish.

BURRUS: I didn't mean to . . .

NERO: I know what you meant. I'm no longer your student, you know. I'm wearing the man-toga now . . . and I'm emperor.

BURRUS: Of course. I admire your confidence, Caesar.

NERO: Oh, Otho, I'm glad you're here. I have that rose perfume from Capua you recommended.

OTHO: Oil from the first pressing. The finest in Italy.

NERO: I'll send you some.

OTHO: Thank you, Caesar. It's my wife's favorite. Very expensive, but of course, she's worth it.

BURRUS: Otho confounds us all by being in love with his own wife.

PALLAS: Is that strange?

NERO: (*Sarcasm.*) I suppose YOU know all about love.

PALLAS: No. But being unmarried, I was merely curious. My own father and mother were completely devoted.

BURRUS: A man can be devoted to his horse. I was speaking of passion.

NERO: A passion for your wife, Otho? What is it like?

PALLAS goes out shaking his head.

OTHO: Poppeia. Her beauty has me freezing in the midday sun one moment, and in the next, it melts my soul like wax on burning coals. A beauty so luminous, she veils herself when riding in her litter to keep the traffic straight.

BURRUS: You love her looks. A perishable gift of nature . . . like youth.

OTHO: I tell you, my love doesn't fit your Stoic platitudes. Yes, she is nature's triumph, but her charm and intelligence have kept me safe from marriage to a half-wit who would deliver my good Roman blood into the hands of mediocrity.

NERO: Ooh. I must see her. Tell her she's invited to the palace.

BURRUS: Expect them late. He needs three hours to do his hair after she's spent half the day filling the mirrors.

NERO: What's wrong with that?

OTHO: Of what is he accusing me?

NERO: Unhealthy behavior. He's become so ascetic, he's even dispensed with giving me the ceremonial morning kiss.

OTHO: Yes. Don't look so gloomy, Burrus. We all know how elevated your mind is, but even the lofty in thought don't have to be quite so dull.

BURRUS: Then I shall leave you both to meditate on unhealthy behavior. *(Starts to leave.)*

OTHO: Where are you going?

BURRUS: The vomitorium.

OTHO: Well, don't go off in a snit. I was merely demonstrating that since one must live near the emperor, one should do it in the grand manner. I'll walk with you.

BURRUS: Why? Do you feel like vomiting, too?

OTHO: *(Slyly watching NERO's reaction.)* I'm going to my wife, that goddess who has what all men want . . . and only the most fortunate enjoy.

NERO: No, stay, stay. We'll have the council early. I'll go to the bath. *(Smiles at OTHO.)* Remember to bring her to the palace. I must see your living goddess. *(He exits.)*

When they are sure NERO is gone, the two men nod at each other with knowing smiles and then come together in a congratulatory embrace.

OTHO: We've done it!

BURRUS: You were wonderful. And Paris thought he was Rome's greatest actor.

OTHO: I was good, wasn't I?

BURRUS: I don't think I did badly either.

OTHO: Hah! A three-hour toilette indeed.

BURRUS: I had to say something to throw off suspicion. We couldn't both hail Poppeia as a melter of souls could we?

OTHO: A melter of souls. She'll love it when I tell her.

They laugh uproariously.

BURRUS: *(Suddenly serious.)* But will she move him to her?

OTHO: Oh, he'll love her, believe me. Love, love, love. He exhausts himself with it. People, horses, dogs, flies. Even his mother, who nobody cherishes.

BURRUS: That's the whole trouble. Loving a hateful mother is no crime.

OTHO: No. Only a disaster.

BURRUS: That's true, you know. Even his own father thought so. I remember when I was sent to tell him of Nero's birth. I said, "You have a son," and he looked at me queerly and snickered.

OTHO: Snickered?

BURRUS: He snickered and said that any merge between him and Agrippina was bound to produce a disaster.

OTHO: How prophetic.

They fall into helpless laughter again as PALLAS enters.

PALLAS: Control yourselves. World affairs are settled in this room. Have some respect.

BURRUS: Hah! Look who's offended.

OTHO: It really is a joke. A singing emperor. It's just too funny.

PALLAS: Remember he's one of the Ahenobarbi, so there must be some hardness in the boy, too. He's not all song and laughter.

BURRUS: Ahenobarbi. The bronze beards. And no wonder their beards were bronze, since their faces were of iron and their hearts of lead.

AGERINUS enters, announcing.

AGERINUS: The Imperial Mother.

AGERINUS leaves. OTHO drops his apple and begins to exit with BURRUS.

OTHO: *(To PALLAS.)* Are you staying?

PALLAS: Yes. Women don't frighten me.

OTHO: They don't frighten me, either. I was thinking of Agrippina.

OTHO and BURRUS go out almost as AGRIPPINA is entering. She stops short as she sees the departing men. The scene darkens leaving AGRIPPINA and PALLAS in a pool of light.

AGRIPPINA: Marble makes a swift field for palace rats.

PALLAS: (*Raising his arms in a gesture of peace.*) Don't humiliate them today.

AGRIPPINA: Why not? They humiliate me by leaving their scraps behind. (*She kicks the apple violently.*) What other filthy crumbs have dropped from their mouths?

PALLAS: They're all against this latest whim of yours, you know.

AGRIPPINA: (*Distracted.*) Where is my son?

PALLAS: It will infuriate the senate for a year, at least.

AGRIPPINA: Where is he?

PALLAS: In his rooms, I suppose.

AGRIPPINA: Well, of course they're against it, with their Greek views on women.

PALLAS: In Rome's history, no woman has ever sat on the same dais as Caesar. You can hardly blame the Greeks.

AGRIPPINA: That's not important. (*Points a scroll at him.*) Who is this . . . Acte?

PALLAS: Acte is a woman's name. I suppose she is a woman.

AGRIPPINA: Thank you. I could always depend on you for clarity. This . . . Acte has been sleeping with my Nero.

PALLAS: Stop licking your cub for a moment and look at the other side of that coin. Who, dear lady, has your Nero not been sleeping with?

AGRIPPINA: I'm warning you. Don't try me today. I'm not in the mood.

PALLAS: Why all the fuss? A young emperor ought to have mistresses. And the gods know he spends far too much time playing with pretty boy slaves.

AGRIPPINA: He has a royal wife.

PALLAS: One chosen by you. Do you really imagine that a child like Octavia knows how to move him to her couch? Or wants to?

AGRIPPINA: Still, she's Claudius' daughter. He has duties to perform other than singing and rushing around the race course. And now this absurd passion for a serving girl.

PALLAS: How do you know that?

AGRIPPINA: My agents never sleep. I simply asked you because I thought your effeminate male friends might have given you some added gossip. Listen. *(She unrolls and scans the scroll.)* He gave her a villa at Puteoli, one at Velitrae, potteries in Sardinia. And in her house: two chamberlains, a messenger, a baker, a eunuch, a Greek singer and . . . *(Throws scroll to the floor.)* The list is endless. He can have all the affairs he wants. But this one has become too serious. Rome needs heirs, not bastards.

PALLAS: *(Embracing her.)* What does the Mother of Rome need?

AGRIPPINA: *(Ignoring him.)* After all my years of work to give him the empire, I can't endure him as emperor.

PALLAS: Yes, you can. I know what you can endure.

AGRIPPINA: You? You're the Minister of Finance. All you know . . . is how to count.

PALLAS: Don't play the dowager empress for me. It was I who helped you create that role. Once when I helped you catch that old drooler, Claudius, and again when I misled him into adopting your Nero. I've worked the machinery behind you for much too long. Don't try to mislead me.

AGRIPPINA: I am what I am, and that is all.

PALLAS: Is that the latest from your astrologer?

AGRIPPINA: I've no doubt that there's a connection between earth and the heavenly bodies which regulate our lives . . . and that is all beside the point. I think Nero actually wants to marry this girl.

PALLAS: Your agents never sleep.

AGRIPPINA: They shouldn't. I pay them enough.

PALLAS: Come now. What harm is there in an affair with one serving girl? If it was with a noblewoman or married woman, there would be complications.

AGRIPPINA: But why must he choose an inferior Greekling?

PALLAS: *(Playful.)* You never minded my being Greek.

AGRIPPINA: That's different. You're harmless.

PALLAS: So is the serving girl, perhaps.

AGRIPPINA: Probably short and thick-waisted. You never know with the Greeks.

PALLAS: I've seen her, you know. I think you would be surprised.

AGRIPPINA: Surprised? Then there must be something extreme about her. Very beautiful or very ugly. *(Pause.)* Well? Which is it?

PALLAS: You would be pleased.

AGRIPPINA: Hah! Just as I thought. She's ugly.

PALLAS: Beautiful. And closely resembles a lady of high rank.

AGRIPPINA: Now, who can that be? Lollia Domitia? No. She's so smothered in cosmetics, one smile and she cracks like a stale loaf. Chlorus, possibly. But she hates the theatre and he would never . . .

PALLAS: You.

AGRIPPINA: What?

PALLAS: She looks like you.

AGRIPPINA: Like me?

PALLAS: Very much like you.

AGRIPPINA: I see. Perhaps this isn't as serious as I'd thought.

PALLAS: I guessed you might think so.

AGRIPPINA claps her hands. DELIA comes forth from out of the shadows.

AGRIPPINA: Delia, arrange my cosmetics and prepare my purple stola. Today . . . I sit with Caesar. THEY all exit.

Lights up onl the room with the dais. NERO stands at the top, next to one of the curules. There are four chairs below. The ministers, HERCULEIUS (robust and bumpkin-like) and BURRUS, are standing by two of them. After a moment, PALLAS hurries in.

NERO: You are nomenclature today, Herculeius. We'll begin.

NERO sits. All follow except HERCULEIUS.

HERCULEIUS: Caesar is seated. The council is open. *(He sits.)*

NERO: Gentlemen. It seems we're all here save our guests, my mother and Otho. Aside from regular business . . .

HERCULEIUS: Shouldn't we wait for the guests, Caesar?

NERO: I need an early bath today and I'm exhausted after my voice training. Don't worry, Herculeius, they'll be here. Aside from regular business, I will want to take some time to discuss the injustice of some of our laws and to make some sweeping changes. (*BURRUS raises his hand.*) Wait, Burrus, don't be so quick. I know you will say the people don't like change. Remember that thousands plunge their nice warm bodies into icy water at the baths every day. It's uncomfortable at first, but they become used to it and later enjoy its benefits.

BURRUS: You put it well, Caesar. May I only suggest a cautious approach to change?

NERO: Whatever for? We must quickly do what is for the public good.

PALLAS: What are Caesar's thoughts?

NERO: I simply wish to improve the quality of Roman life. To give more pleasure to the people. We'll begin by reinstating the Bacchanalian Rites.

BURRUS: (*Rising, horrified.*) A cult, as you know, gentlemen, banned by the state for its immoral and obscene practices. Believe me, Caesar, it will only engender crime.

NERO: (*Intensely. Leaning toward BURRUS.*) I'm going to tell you something you don't seem to know. None of us are pure in any part of our body. We hide our vices under a cloak of lies. Now, that's what I call criminal.

BURRUS: You know very well I'm the first to despise fleshly satisfactions which are not . . . regular.

NERO: Then you don't agree?

BURRUS: I say for those who choose to be immoderate, live and let live. Save for the practice of incest, which nobody sanctions, not the senate, not the army, not the gods themselves.

NERO: That old bell has a hollow ring. My own mother's marriage to Claudius was thought incestuous at the time because he was her uncle. Pallas here got that law changed by persuading the senate it was a change for the good. Can any of you say he was wrong? (*They are silent.*) Good. What's the news today, Herculeius?

HERCULEIUS: (*Rises. Holds up a scroll.*) A death warrant for you to sign.

NERO: Oh, another? Sometimes I wish they had never taught me how to write. Let me see it.

HERCULEIUS: *(Runs up to the dais, handing NERO the scroll.)* I know the case. It's against a certain Charmos, a Greek freedman of Lucius Lamia.

NERO: *(Scans the scroll.)* What is the charge?

HERCULEIUS: Immorality and treason. The snake scrawled a blasphemy against your mother on the wall of a brothel.

NERO: Who saw him do that?

HERCULEIUS: A patrician.

NERO: Well, who is this patrician?

HERCULEIUS: He won't disclose his name.

NERO: Do they know his name in the brothel? Is it a brothel for patricians or freedmen?

HERCULEIUS: I know nothing of the turnover in such establishments.

NERO: Where is he now?

HERCULEIUS: Who, Caesar?

NERO: Charmos, you fool. I must hear his side in order to make a judgment.

HERCULEIUS: But that's never been done. He's only a freedman.

PALLAS roars with laughter.

NERO: *(Reading from the scroll.)* Agrippina dyes her hair, it's said, but that's a poor aspersion. She wears it black; it therefore needs no subsequent immersion. *(To HERCULEIUS.)* Is this the epigram you say is against my mother?

HERCULEIUS: That's the graffito, Caesar.

NERO: It's untrue. My mother never wears a wig. I can't condemn this man for a tiny lie.

BURRUS: The man has committed an act of treason against the state.

NERO: And the laws of treason are stupid. I've decided to abolish them.

BURRUS: Abolish the laws that were designed to uphold the dignity of the Roman state? I tell you, it's unwise.

NERO: Tell me also why it was that on my mother's birthday, you alone neglected to offer sacrifice in her honor? Even the most lenient emperor would see that as treasonous. Don't look so nervous, Burrus. I'm wiping out those laws, so you're not in any danger.

BURRUS: (*Quickly humbled.*) Thank you, Caesar.

NERO: Oh, don't thank me. Only servants give thanks. (*Rises.*) And I don't need any, since I am the servant of humanity.

HERCULEIUS: Caesar has risen. The council is . . .

NERO: (*Overlap.*) I'm not finished. I wish to make another improvement. The sight of dying men is ugly. You'll agree then, that no games involving bloodshed should continue in the circus.

HERCULEIUS: NO games?!?

NERO: Involving bloodshed.

HERCULEIUS: The people will revolt.

NERO: Instead, we'll have contests for athletics . . . and poetry in the theatres. They will keep us strong and bathe our minds and our spirits in beauty.

OTHO enters quickly with the veiled POPPEIA on his arm.

OTHO: Caesar, my wife, Poppeia.

The others rise. NERO slowly walks down the stairs as POPPEIA's veil is lifted from her face by OTHO.

NERO: (*Entranced.*) Lady, it would please us if you and your husband stayed to dine.

HERCULEIUS: (*Seeing AGRIPPINA enter.*) Caesar has stepped down. The council is over.

NERO: Why, Mother, how well you look today. But you're late.

PALLAS rushes to the humiliated AGRIPPINA to escort her out. NERO begins to leave with HERCULEIUS and BURRUS.

NERO: (*Continuing.*) Shall we say, in an hour? I must have another bath. Ruling is such an exhausting business.

OTHO watches them leave. POPPEIA goes to the table and examines the roses. She is in her late twenties, small and extravagantly sensual-looking, with reddish-blond hair. Her soft features belie an intelligent and calculating nature.

OTHO: They're gone. It's alright. Poppeia?

POPPEIA: These roses are wilted.

OTHO: Easy, my girl. You're not in charge here yet.

POPPEIA: *(Takes up a rose.)* They only live three days. Such a short span of beauty.

OTHO: Better without them. I had an aunt who lost her breath from that dreaded rose disease for years. It finally killed her.

POPPEIA: Let it kill me. I'd rather die than see my beauty fade.

OTHO: Before your beauty does fade, go put some more paint on it for the emperor. And don't put him off tonight.

POPPEIA: I mustn't appear too anxious.

OTHO: It's not your anxiety that worries me. Last night for pleasures after dinner, we all had to play the mating game. He dressed in lion skins and attacked me with his teeth till I bled.

POPPEIA: You men write books on the art of love, but in practice, all you have is . . . drive. There's a certain amount of tact and sense of balance known only to us women.

OTHO: All the same, chastity is never rewarded.

POPPEIA: It's bad strategy. The fruit at the far end of the table always looks more succulent. If I stay just a hair out of his reach, I'll grow in his sight until the image of me is so huge, he'll no longer see Agrippina's authority.

OTHO: That won't be easy.

POPPEIA: I'll think of something. Leave it to me.

OTHO: Your conceit is astonishing. Do you really think your pretty face can lure him from her?

POPPEIA: Yours hasn't. Let's give mine a try.

OTHO: Careful lady, or I'll turn your famous beauty into such a horror, you'll have to go about veiled permanently. *(Raises his hand to her face.)*

POPPEIA: I thought this was designed to bring us closer to the throne. Let's not get caught up in a beauty competition. I'm listening.

OTHO: We'll frighten him somehow. He's easily frightened and absurdly superstitious.

POPPEIA: But if we succeed, what do you suppose he'll do with you? You are my husband, after all. So to speak.

OTHO: I'll be rewarded when I divorce you. Only a true and loyal friend would relinquish his own wife for Caesar. He'll love me.

POPPEIA: I don't like it. Sounds far too simple.

OTHO: Perhaps, to a simple mind. Anyway, now that you've met, you have your own task to perform.

POPPEIA: Aren't you afraid I'll bungle it, being a mere woman?

POPPEIA steps up to the dais and fingers one of the chairs.

OTHO: Not at all. Your job is easy. All you have to do is pretend a passion for him.

POPPEIA: Pretend? Yes. But I won't be a slave to anyone's passion, including my own.

OTHO: That's a good girl.

POPPEIA: *(Sits in the chair.)* Otho. How will you think of me as empress?

OTHO: Oh, my dear . . . magnificent. Now why don't you go paint an empress on your face?

POPPEIA: I will. But only if you fill that vase with fresh roses.

OTHO laughs. Lights dim to out and come up immediately on DR area depicting AGRIPPINA's apartments. PALLAS and AGRIPPINA have been talking.

PALLAS: . . . and don't mention anything about what happened today.

AGRIPPINA: That will be hard.

PALLAS: Remember what I said. He's not your baby any longer.

NERO enters.

NERO: Mother? *(Sees PALLAS.)* Oh, excuse me.

PALLAS: I was just going. *(He exits.)*

NERO: What is he doing here, always hanging around your rooms?

AGRIPPINA: We had some business. I wanted him here.

NERO: What do you want of me?

AGRIPPINA: Don't be sulky. (*Caresses his cheek.*) Look at you. Those idiots will squeeze the youth out of you at their interminable debauches.

NERO: They asked me to sing. They enjoy my singing.

AGRIPPINA: I thought this was the Imperial palace, not a theatre. Our wine and board are what they enjoy. Rome pillages the earth for delicacies to grace the stomachs of the fools who pretend to rule it.

NERO: I must be good to my ministers.

AGRIPPINA: You are their prince. Please remember that. You know I don't like to give orders or meddle in your affairs, especially now that you're twenty.

NERO: Then why are you doing it?

AGRIPPINA: My dear, I'm simply advising you, as I always have.

NERO: What have I done now?

AGRIPPINA: Well, you've committed no crime. But isn't it time you quit this nonsense about . . . singing and ruining yourself at those all night banquets? You never did badly by my advice until you began listening to others. If it's what you want . . . as I say, I won't interfere. You are emperor here, and I . . . I'm only a silly woman.

NERO: No, you're not. You're the dowager empress, and I'm the emperor. I don't always take advice from those elected to give it. I know where I sit and bend to no one.

AGRIPPINA: I don't mean for you to bend to me. I only want things as they were, with no one poking in our business.

NERO: What business is that, Mother?

AGRIPPINA: What . . . why, Rome. Rome is our business and a great burden.

NERO: Do you mean the people? We can't love all the people, there are too many of them. As for our friends . . .

AGRIPPINA: As for your friends. That young man Otho in particular, well, I don't love his garish ways and I've had bad reports about his wife.

NERO: Then you don't approve of his having a wife in the grand manner, while I'm tied to a thing that creeps about like one of her own serving girls?

AGRIPPINA: If you like, we can argue the values of a wife . . . and of serving girls.

NERO: If I take all your counsel, I'll be speaking only to you and the gods.

AGRIPPINA: And in good company.

NERO: Alright, Mother. I shall be a perfect emperor. One the world will never forget. Nor shall I forget to share the world with you.

AGRIPPINA: Just as you have shared the dais today?

NERO: It was over. We can do it another time.

AGRIPPINA: No matter. It was a foolish idea. I've been very foolish and I want to talk to you about it. Sit.

As NERO sits on a couch, AGRIPPINA removes her stola, revealing a gown of almost transparent Coan silk.

AGRIPPINA: *(Continuing.)* This girl . . .

NERO: Girl?

AGRIPPINA: You never lied to me as a child. To begin now is unbecoming to your age and position. This freedwoman, Acte.

NERO: Oh, yes. She pleases me.

AGRIPPINA: Octavia, your wife, no longer pleases you?

NERO: Never did.

AGRIPPINA: She's only fourteen and shouldn't be shown displeasure so soon.

NERO: She's an emperor's wife. That surely ought to make her happy.

AGRIPPINA: She's a royal child.

NERO: But humdrum. She hops and titters about like a mouse in heat. She's neither soft like a woman nor hard like a man and doesn't deserve my love.

AGRIPPINA: This serving girl does?

NERO: At least she serves me well.

AGRIPPINA: And my wish is to serve you. To see you happy. If you want this Acte as your mistress, well then, have her.

NERO: *(Startled.)* What?

AGRIPPINA: Still, it gnaws at me to think of you hiding your pleasure, begging a trysting place as though you were not the ruler of the world, but a common Greekling.

NERO: It isn't like that, Mother.

AGRIPPINA: Come here, to my own rooms. They're larger and more pleasant than yours.

NERO: Don't trouble yourself.

AGRIPPINA: A freedwoman is of no importance to us, it can lead to nothing. (*Sits by him.*) Tell me about her. Is she a beauty?

NERO: You're right. She's of no importance.

AGRIPPINA: (*She begins to rub the back of his neck.*) Come. Come, tell me. Describe her looks to me.

NERO: I have no need of your rooms.

AGRIPPINA: Does this please you? Come on. I'll make you talk.

NERO: I'm in love.

AGRIPPINA: Isn't love the subject here? Love all you like.

NERO: Acte pleases me, but I don't love her.

AGRIPPINA: (*Stops rubbing and move away slightly.*) Who, then? And what kind of love? The Greek kind, taught to you no doubt by their insipid poets?

NERO: One that freezes my flesh one moment, and in the next, melts my soul like wax on burning coals.

AGRIPPINA: (*Rises stiffly.*) Who is this goddess that goes around melting souls?

NERO: You're wrong about her. You mustn't listen to the gossipmongers.

AGRIPPINA: Wrong about whom?

NERO: She ran from me. Hid from me.

AGRIPPINA: I think I know.

NERO: We'll speak of it another time.

AGRIPPINA: We'll speak of it now. Could it be that married woman who veils herself like an eastern queen?

NERO: Poppeia.

AGRIPPINA: (*Pacing.*) I was willing to be generous, but this is too much. Do you have any idea of the trouble that could follow an affair with a married noblewoman? One like her?

NERO: You have no right. You haven't met her.

AGRIPPINA: I know her. I know women like her. They spend half their days soaking in asses' milk and the other half combing and anointing their hair. Lovely? Yes. For the eyes of all men. Oh, I know their type well. Dainty, golden and . . . vicious!

NERO: NO! I tell you she ran from me tonight. She's as chaste as the moon.

AGRIPPINA: Not as chaste. Only as beguiling. *(Her voice softens.)* I seem harsh, don't I? It stems from the love we mothers naturally bear our children. One more fierce and constant than the sort that . . . freezes flesh and melts souls. That sort passes quickly in time. *(Sits by NERO.)* Remember that for nine full months, I carried you in my body and fed you with my blood. *(She embraces and rocks him gently.)* I bore you in agony at the risk of my life. Pain so unbearable that if I couldn't imagine a healthy child to help me forget the terror, I would have gladly died for relief. After you were born, I dreamed that you would one day be emperor. I shouldn't remind you of all I've sacrificed or how I've struggled.

NERO: *(Breaks away and rises.)* Your struggles must have wearied you. I'll leave you to rest.

AGRIPPINA: How grave you look. As though you suspected me of some intrigue.

NERO: Do I?

AGRIPPINA: Do you think the title of empress means anything to me when you stare so accusingly?

NERO: Would you like to take Acte's place, Mother?

AGRIPPINA: STOP THAT! How dare you speak to your mother in such a fashion? The lust for power may corrupt the laws of nature, but what god in the pantheon would forgive such a black crime? I've done everything to put the laurel on you, risked everything, was prepared for everything . . . except to have serving girls and whores as rivals.

NERO: *(He picks up the stola and covers her breasts with it.)* Rivals? What an amusing idea. *(He starts to leave.)*

AGRIPPINA: THAT MARRIED WOMAN. SHE . . . SHE'S OLDER THAN YOU. SHE'S TOO OLD.

NERO: But so are you, Mother.

They stare at one another in silence. Curtain.

ACT TWO**AT RISE:**

One year later. NERO's bedchamber. NERO is lying bare-chested on a couch. POPPEIA stands before a full-length mirror combing her hair. It is very late at night.

NERO: Don't go yet. Stay.

POPPEIA: I can't stay.

NERO: One more night.

POPPEIA: Why should I? I can't afford to throw away my honor as a married woman. Not even for the emperor's whim.

NERO: I'm beyond whims, Poppeia Sabina. Oh stay, little fox. *(Playfully.)* Obey your emperor.

POPPEIA: Obey a mama's boy who's bound to obey orders himself? *(Preening before the mirror.)* My mother was the most beautiful woman in Rome. They say I look like her.

NERO: Your beauty is undisputed.

POPPEIA: At least Otho knows how to appreciate a woman.

NERO: I'm not sweating from the heat of the bath.

POPPEIA: Lust is lust from any man, including an emperor. But Otho made me his wife. He has character and style. When I lay on his couch in the dining room, I can say to the guests, "Look, here is my man."

NERO: I'm your man.

POPPEIA: You keep yourself low because you share your bed with common servants. How dreary.

NERO: Only before I met you. And when I did, you kept me waiting so long at the wrong side of the bedroom door, Eros made me itchy. I love you above all of them: the servants, the slaves, the boys . . . all.

POPPEIA: Above your mother?

NERO: No woman in Rome has had me pounding at their door but you. Remember, I am emperor.

POPPEIA: One under orders from his mother.

NERO: It isn't true.

POPPEIA: No? Then tell her we will marry.



GREEN ROOM PRESS

Thank you for reading this free excerpt from:

AGRIPPINA

by A. Giovanni Affinito.

*For performance rights and/or a complete copy of the script,
please contact us at:*

GREEN ROOM PRESS, INC.
customerservice@greenroompress.com
www.greenroompress.com