

Lunch With The Romans

A Play in Two Acts

by
Camille Atebe

Dramatis Personae

Caius Perfidious:	Dictator of Rome
Scipio Amaretto:	A corpulent Senator
Glibula:	A witty Senator
Hugo:	Emissary of the Autovoths
Slabo:	Hugo's translator
Belligera:	Caius Perfidious' mother
Antonia:	Caius Perfidious' wife
Primo:	A slave
Secundo:	A slave
Tertio:	A slave

Note

This play is written, and is to be spoken, entirely in English. However, it should be played as though the Romans are speaking Latin and Hugo Germanic, with only Slabo understanding both. It is important that the actors do not show any understanding of the other 'language', so as to clearly portray the language differences and the role of the translator. This can be done by using different accents, but it is not necessary.

Place

The Palace of Caius Perfidious, an inside room and the exterior garden or courtyard.

Act1

SCENE 1

PRIMO, a slave, sweeps disconsolately in the courtyard. After a few half-hearted swipes with the broom he gives up with a sigh and leans on the broom, staring morosely into the middle distance. His reverie is disturbed by another slave, SECUNDO, who saunters in carrying a bucket.

SECUNDO Primo! As busy as ever, I see!

PRIMO And why should I be busy? They've asked me to sweep the courtyard. The more I sweep, the more dirt flies about. If I stand very still it all settles back down and it looks almost tidy.

SECUNDO Well I doubt if the same policy will apply to fetching water, but I'm willing to try.

SECUNDO overturns the bucket and sits down. A third slave, TERTIO, enters. He walks past the other two, and SECUNDO calls out,

SECUNDO Tertio! Where are you hurrying off to?

TERTIO sees them and doubles back to greet them.

TERTIO I'm headed for the kitchens.

PRIMO The kitchens? Now that's a bad idea. It's chaos in there. In any case, weren't you sent to Felix to train as a gladiator? You've got no business in the kitchens.

TERTIO Felix has loaned me back for this luncheon that's happening. They need some muscle to deal with the pig.

PRIMO You'd do well to try to make it a permanent loan. I hear Felix has been selling some of his less successful gladiators to the army.

SECUNDO And you know what would happen to you in the army.

PRIMO Marching endlessly in pursuit of the glory of the Roman Empire.

SECUNDO My brother-in-law is somewhere in Asia picking fights with Mongols.

PRIMO My brother is trudging northward, hoping not to run into anyone. They've orders to take all new land in the name of Caius Perfidious, which is easy enough provided there's no one to object.

TERTIO I wouldn't mind the army. It would be far more glorious than wrestling pigs for a lot of nagging kitchen wenches.

PRIMO Thirty years ago, maybe. These days the army is a repository for old men and failed gladiators.

SECUNDO They're spent. Used up. Run dry.

PRIMO They need a decade off to come home and sleep.

TERTIO Felix says the army is in fantastic shape. 'Out conquering the world with the same verve and ferocity with which we won the Social War'. That's what Felix says.

SECUNDO That's all well and good except for a few minor points...

PRIMO We didn't win the Social War...

SECUNDO We just failed to lose it decisively.

PRIMO And there was a distinct lack of both verve and ferocity.

SECUNDO To hear my brother-in-law talk, it was more like petulance and resignation.

TERTIO You're both just jealous that I was chosen to work with Felix and you were left behind to sweep and carry water. The empire is in fine shape, and it is thanks to men like myself, fine specimens who train thanklessly to protect the likes of you from the barbarous outside world.

PRIMO *(To Secundo)* And only two years past he was a part of that barbarous outside world!

SECUNDO Ah, but he was never the fine specimen that he is now. You see- slavery has done him good!

TERTIO shakes his head in disgust and walks off, while the other two laugh.

PRIMO He's made the mistake of listening to his betters.

SECUNDO No, he's made the mistake of not listening. It's when they aren't talking to you that you have to pay attention.

PRIMO You're right. Today, for example. We shall hear a great deal today.

SECUNDO We shall. Tertio, though, will not hear a thing, like a good little slave.

There is a sound of a squealing pig, and a scream from off-stage. The slaves notice, but go on with their conversation.

PRIMO There's a man named Fibius who pays for juicy information...

SECUNDO How do you think I get bribery money? I got my niece into Antonia's service with Fibius' coin.

PRIMO We shall have to pay him a visit after today, you and I.

SECUNDO But we'd best make it quick. Quintus is a swift little sneak, and likely to-

TERTIO enters, nursing his arm.

TERTIO You two layabouts better get moving. The cook is on the warpath, looking for assistance in the kitchen.

SECUNDO What happened to your arm?

TERTIO I was bitten by the bloody pig. It turns out they hadn't killed it yet, and it didn't want to die. I have to go find the surgeon, then the cook wants me back in the kitchen. She's on her way out here.

TERTIO slopes off, and PRIMO and SECUNDO quickly grab their bucket and broom and disappear.

SCENE 2

A courtyard in the palace of the dictator of Rome. HUGO, Emissary of the Autovoths, and his translator, SLABO, walk slowly through, stopping at a fountain. HUGO is clearly awed.

HUGO What a land! What a land this is! The streets! The buildings!

SLABO The people.

HUGO The people! Little did I think that such a cacophony of human kind existed. They prowl the streets in every colour from cream to coal, and think nothing of the disparity!

SLABO And the colour of their souls ranges alike. Watch yourself, sir, lest you find yourself bereft.

HUGO There's no call to warn me of human nature. Thieves and murderers are not strange amongst my people, either.

SLABO But perhaps your people do not find themselves packed so tight.

HUGO Boy, my eyes may widen but my brain still fills my skull. I may be provincial but the provinces do not breed idiots. *(Thoughtfully)* Boy, as well traveled as you are, what have you heard of this dictator, Caius Perfidious?

SLABO In Asia they scrape his face from the coins and in Gaul the speaking of his name is accompanied by angry exhortation. His name is mocked and reviled in every city in the known world.

HUGO So he is not a popular man?

SLABO Not in any positive sense of the word, no.

HUGO And his humour?

SLABO He has none.

HUGO I mean his temperament. Is he quick to anger, or is he gentle?

SLABO Could a man so hated *be* gentle?

HUGO I have seen it. There was a leader of our neighbours to the south, a man gentle both in temper and in mental faculty. His inadequacies inflicted themselves upon his people, and as his gentle nature thwarted progress, his people grew to hate him.

SLABO This Caius Perfidious, from what I've heard, is no fool. It is his malignancy, not mental deficiency that stirs such anger in his subjects at the mention of his name.

HUGO Then I should be wary of him.

SLABO One should always be wary of a Roman.

Enter GLIBULA, a senator. Jovial, relaxed but nonetheless a sharp politician, he has a quick wit and a better sense of reality than his contemporaries. He sees HUGO, who is dirty and scruffy, sitting on the edge of the fountain.

GLIBULA You there, traveller. These are private grounds and I'd suggest a move. Caius Perfidious is coming through, and he's particular about his fountains.

SLABO He speaks no Latin, sir.

HUGO Did he just say something about Caius Perfidious?

GLIBULA What did he just say about Caius Perfidious?

SLABO *(To Hugo)* Let me speak to him.

GLIBULA What was that?

SLABO Sir, my master here is Hugo, emissary of the Autovoths. He has come for an audience with your dictator.

GLIBULA This is the emissary? Hugo, eh? Just one travel-weary Autovoth in a pelt and beard, looking like he's walked the breadth of the world without a soul to talk to.

SLABO He has, sir. He engaged me only a few days ago, in the north of Italy.

GLIBULA Well, I only mention it because we'd expected an entourage. Lunch has been prepared for a multitude. Emissaries usually bring one. A multitude, I mean. Still, there's time enough to go out and shake up a few friends.

SLABO There's only himself, sir. I am his translator, Slabo, sir, at your service. May I enquire...

GLIBULA Who I am? Yes you may. None but a lowly Senator. Glibula, for my sins.

SLABO (*Bowing low*) Sir. (*To Hugo*) This gentleman is a Senator, called Glibula. He knows of your appointment with the dictator.

HUGO Wonderful. (*He steps forward and heartily shakes Glibula's hand*) I am Hugo, sent by my brother Elban, leader of the Autovoths.

GLIBULA What's that he's saying?

SLABO He is greeting you, sir.

GLIBULA Well, greetings back. Tell him he oughtn't to squeeze and wrestle Caius Perfidious like that if he wants to get anywhere with him. A respectful inclination of the head is more tolerable.

SLABO (*To Hugo*) He says, sir, that you are very welcome here.

HUGO He seems to have said more than that.

SLABO The Latin is very superfluous, sir.

GLIBULA He also ought to have a wash and a shave and see a tailor. Caius Perfidious hates beards. Thinks they're dirty. Which, in this case, they are.

SLABO With all respect sir, he could not be convinced to remove it. It is an item of renown in his parts. And, as he has cultivated it since late boyhood, his face without it would appear unevenly coloured and, well, quite odd.

GLIBULA Well, I suppose it would be all right if he just trimmed it, then. Removed those bits of bone and bird nest. Caius Perfidious can't really complain if it's at least neat.

HUGO What are you talking about? And why does he keep mentioning Caius Perfidious?

SLABO Sir, he says that Caius Perfidious is somewhat particular in his tastes. He is not fond of men wearing pelts, sir, nor excessive beards.

HUGO You can't be serious. What kind of man abhors a beard?

GLIBULA Tell him that he can come with me. I've got a good tailor and a barber who could clean him up. You know, normally I'm ambivalent about the personal grooming of the palace guests, but I'm to sit in on this luncheon and I don't fancy a massacre.

SLABO The Senator Glibula invites you to his abode to freshen up before the luncheon commences.

HUGO Well, I am a little dusty.

SLABO *(To Glibula)* He would be honoured.

GLIBULA *(Ushering them out)* And not a moment too soon. Caius Perfidious approaches, and it would not do for our guest to be seen as is.

All exit. CAIUS PERFIDIOUS and SCIPIO AMARETTO enter, CAIUS, the dictator, is a pompous, selfish and somewhat childish man who holds onto his power with an often unreasonably tight hold. He is visibly unsettled. SCIPIO, a fat, opportunistic senator, seems peeved too, but about something different.

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS Since when do we, Rome, talk to barbarians? Hmm? We don't. We run over them, we crush them, we enslave, destroy, consume, annihilate them.

SCIPIO AMARETTO Or we civilize them.

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS It's really all the same thing, Scipio. But my point is, what's all this talking? It's abominable!

SCIPIO AMARETTO What's especially abominable is the food. Have you seen what pestilence the kitchens are preparing?

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS If they serve me pestilence I shall have them crucified. That is not the uppermost issue in my mind. I have grave concerns about this Hun, this Goth with whom I am to lunch. What do you know about him?

SCIPIO AMARETTO What should I know about him?

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS What kind of land does he control? And why could he not have ceded it to us without forcing his company upon us?

SCIPIO AMARETTO I am beginning to think that the menu was conceived out of some ill-advised notion that our guest's tastes should be catered to.

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS What's wrong with surrendering from a distance? Scipio, get your mind out of your gullet. We have greater problems awaiting us.

SCIPIO AMARETTO If a man's gullet grumbles, his mind cannot focus. It is a well-established fact that an ill-fed stomach gives rise to an ill temperament.

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS Then Scipio, you have had enough good meals to keep you sweet for a century. Now, to the task at hand. We must expedite this lunch and surrender as swiftly as possible.

SCIPIO AMARETTO We, surrender? His cuisine may have overrun our kitchens but there's no need to give ourselves over to a barbarian on those grounds!

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS His surrender, Scipio Amaretto, not ours. Do try to pay attention.

SCIPIO AMARETTO Ah. Our lunch, his surrender. Perhaps a properly placed pronoun...

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS (*Frostily*) I did not have myself appointed dictator so that I might receive lessons in grammar from corpulent sycophants, Scipio.

SCIPIO AMARETTO (*Drawing himself up and sucking in his gut*) I was merely trying to clear up a simple misunderstanding...

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS (*Pointedly*) I understood the situation, Scipio. It is not my concern that you did not.

SCIPIO AMARETTO (*Trying to change the subject; he knows he should watch himself*) Now, this barbarian, are you sure he's come to surrender?

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS (*Knowing he's made his point, friendly again*) Barbarians know only two things, Scipio. Fighting and surrendering. Usually they fight until surrendering to death. This one seems to have a whit more sense. He is surrendering to us instead.

SCIPIO AMARETTO It seems odd though, Caius Perfidious, that they did not engage us militarily. One would think that they would try to fight at least a little.

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS Just as we have had our Social War, Scipio, so too have the chattering barbarian hordes been busy knocking one another about. I rather think they have depleted themselves too far to even contemplate engaging the mighty Roman army.

SCIPIO AMARETTO Even though our might is not at all what it once was?

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS Barbarians, my dear Scipio, are notorious for their inability to keep up with foreign affairs. The advantage, therefore, is ours.

SCIPIO AMARETTO Then as long as we do not keel over after eating, this will be a profitable luncheon.

CAIUS PERFIDIOUS You won't keel over, Scipio, unless it is from over-indulgence.

He claps SCIPIO on the back, and they exit.

BELLIGERA and ANTONIA enter. BELLIGERA, CAIUS' mother, is a haughty, pampered woman with limited intelligence but unlimited adoration for her son. ANTONIA, his wife, makes no effort

to hide her scorn for her husband. Though she is more intelligent than her husband and mother-in-law think, she too is prone to over-estimating her own abilities.

ANTONIA There he goes, the idiot. He'll have the empire destroyed before this lunch is through.

BELLIGERA Mind your tongue, girl. That is your husband, and my son you're talking about.

ANTONIA And well I know it. And so I am qualified to speak. He will ruin us all with his arrogance.

BELLIGERA More likely you will drive him to ruin with your slander and backbiting.

ANTONIA Slander and backbiting? I'm only stating the obvious, in hopes that we may arrive at a happy conclusion to these affairs.

BELLIGERA And when and how did griping further any cause?

ANTONIA I do not complain merely for the sake of complaint. *(Pause)* If I could gain a seat at this luncheon, perhaps I could help in some way...

BELLIGERA Gain a seat? You're dreaming, girl.

ANTONIA And why can't a girl dream?

BELLIGERA In any case, you overestimate the importance of this luncheon. One Barbarian will hardly make a difference to our glorious empire.

ANTONIA Caius Perfidious thinks that this man has come to make a gift of his land and assets. I hardly think that this Autovoth would have traveled this far just to give over his people and holdings. It doesn't seem logical.

BELLIGERA Then why would he have come? Perhaps he wants to grovel for something. Maybe he wants to be a magistrate in the new government.

ANTONIA No. I'm sure he's come to negotiate a compromise. A truce, an agreement of non-engagement.

BELLIGERA Faugh!

ANTONIA Convince Caius Perfidious to let me attend the lunch.

BELLIGERA Never! I would not even entertain the thought.

ANTONIA *(Pause, calculating)* I'm sorry. It was a hasty request. I know, it is too much to ask.

BELLIGERA Too much?

ANTONIA Why should I ask you to face Caius Perfidious' wrath on my behalf? To go begging to him as a favour to me? I apologize, I have overstepped my boundaries.

BELLIGERA Caius' wrath? Silly girl. I bore that boy, bade a nursemaid suckle him at her teat. Why should I fear his wrath?

ANTONIA You are right. He would be honour bound to show mercy to you.

BELLIGERA Mercy! He is my child, and so if anyone is to prostrate themselves at the mercy of another, it will be he who kneels to me. Such a small thing as a seat at a luncheon. You will have it.

She exits haughtily

ANTONIA Son and mother both, enslaved to their own false dignity. I shall have a job though, at this lunch. My husband is so sure of his superiority that he may well spark a war at this council of peace. I must know more about this Autovoth, our guest. Is he of the same arrogant temper as Caius Perfidious, or is his a more cool cunning? And is my assumption of his intent correct, or has the legend of Rome indeed so terrified him that he comes to beg for our mercy before we have a chance to issue a threat?

Enter GLIBULA. He hears some of ANTONIA'S musings, and does not reveal himself to her until she is done.

GLIBULA What ho, young Antonia! *(Antonia is startled, but recovers and gives him a peevish glare)*. My, but don't you look wan? Not sleeping well, m'dear?

ANTONIA Glibula. Do you know this Autovoth?

GLIBULA Which one? I don't see any around.

ANTONIA Glibula!

GLIBULA Well, well. Very pensive indeed. No response to a slight upon her personal beauty and then not even a smile at my wit.

ANTONIA Wit? I hadn't noticed any. The one coming to lunch, Glibula. Do you know anything about him?

GLIBULA Hugo. Yes, I know him. He is at present giving my barber hysterics and causing breakdowns amongst my tailors.

ANTONIA What?

GLIBULA It was his good fortune that I happened upon him before Caius Perfidious. This Hugo looked as though he'd eaten a wolf from the inside out and then begun walking about in the skins. Smelt that way too. I sent him for a wash and a perfume.

ANTONIA What is his intent?

GLIBULA To eat lunch with our dictator, myself, and Scipio Amaretto. I believe that will make a quorate.

ANTONIA You would need two more senators to have a quorate.

GLIBULA A well-informed wife. How wonderfully dangerous.

ANTONIA I'm worried that my husband might misunderstand this meeting.

GLIBULA This? Why, it's a public place. I've been closer to you and in a more private setting. He doesn't seem to care.

He moves closer and touches her arm. ANTONIA pulls away impatiently.

ANTONIA Not this meeting! The one with the Autovoth. Caius Perfidious thinks he has come to surrender.

GLIBULA Ah. Of course he would think so.

ANTONIA And *is* he correct in thinking so?

GLIBULA I wouldn't know.

ANTONIA But haven't you spoken to the Autovoth?

GLIBULA I was concerned only with his appearance. Not a thought to substance. Sorry.

ANTONIA (*Annoyed*) Useless! Then we shall have to see at lunch, won't we? We shall go into it blind.

ANTONIA moves to exit

GLIBULA Hold up, Antonia! What's all this *we*?

ANTONIA I shall be at the lunch.

GLIBULA Says who?

ANTONIA Belligera has arranged it. Or rather, she is in the process of doing so. I will be at luncheon, Glibula, so at least someone there will have an entire brain in their head. (*Exits*)

GLIBULA (*Mimicking her*) Unless, Antonia, I decide not to attend. Damn!

