



Κόλαξ/Kolax

The Flatterer

a two hour game
for 3 or more players
featuring playful improvisation
and the uncovering of ancient knowledge
a game by Tim Hutchings

The plot centers round the rivalry of two young men, Pheidias and Bias, for the favours of the same courtesan. Each, perhaps, is accompanied by a hangeron, Pheidias by Gnathon, Bias by Strouthias, but it is, perhaps, more likely that Strouthis and Gnathon were different names born by a single character, 'who adopted Strouthias as an alias when associating with the soldier, but used his real name when associating with characters such as Pheidias and Daos' (Arnott, Loeb vol ii, p. 158)...the flatterer [Gnathon/Strouthias] persuades the free young man and the soldier to share the favours of the courtesan...

-Peter Brown, *From Menander, The Plays and Fragments*, 2008

Kolax, or The Flatterer, is a play written circa 300 B.C. by the playwright Menander (c.342-c.290BC). The play was mostly lost though fragments remain. What you hold in your hands is an attempt to rebuild that lost play through play. We will put on an anarchic and highly questionable performance of Kolax by reading the extant remnants and then improvising our way through the missing portions. Players will constantly switch characters, enter and leave the stage, posture with giant masks, and switch between reading, improv, and structured word games.

The script for this game is cobbled together out of the remaining play fragments (some buried in other plays that quoted Kolax) held together with a generous dollop of creative license taken by me, the creator of this game. This is not a scholarly document--it is not even well researched. Instead, it's a glorious slapdash mess mushed together out of the hard labor of centuries of academics to whom I deeply apologize.

The Game

The game is intended for three players or more players and, probably, a facilitator. The game should take less than two hours from warmup to debrief.

The tone of the play is riotous, bantering, insulting, boastful, flattering, and a little naughty. The tone of the game should reflect this--keep things moving along as if an audience is watching. There is a darkness at the kernel of the play; the sole female character is a pawn held by a brothelkeeper and is never given a role on the stage, never played by an actor.

You'll need a place to play with a roughly delineated stage. You'll need three or more players and probably a facilitator. You'll need masks drawn, preferably, on large pieces of foamcore or cardboard, or printed out of this book--the masks need to be stiff and light enough that they can be held by one hand.

Preparation

- A printed script for each player
- A large enough space in which to move, gesticulate, declaim
- Printouts of the masks. Better yet, draw the masks large on sheets of foamcore or cardboard. Write the name of the character on the back of each mask sheet.

Safety, Tone, Content

Kolax was probably written for a Dionysia; these were yearly revels in honor of Dionysus and were full of drinking, competition, dramas, giant phallus processions, and music. We wish to emulate the enthusiasm of a play performed at a riotous festival but without transgressing contemporary mores.

Work with your group to agree on appropriate safety tools to use during play. I suggest Cut and Brake, and The Door is Always Open. Unlike a real play we can always stop to make sure everyone is having a good time and remove any problematic material from the shared lexicon we've been building. Agree ahead of time about the limits of touch, physicality, shouting and raunchiness.

Take a moment and check the space itself for tripping hazards. Make sure the masks are in a place where they are easily accessed. Remind the players that people holding masks in front of their faces can't always see where they are going.

There is a disconnect between the subject matter of the play and its tone. The play is about two men vying for the right to buy a prostitute from a brothelkeeper. This woman is not given lines or representative mask and is never on the stage. This offscreen character is, by any interpretation, a victim of kidnapping, imprisonment, and rape.

Other subjects in the play include heavy drinking, violent stories, and speculation about kidnapping--you know, "comedy."

The Stage, the Actors, the Masks

Each character in the play will be represented by a mask, examples of which can be found elsewhere in this book. An ideal mask will be drawn onto a sheet of large foamcore with the name above the face. You can also use printouts of the masks included here. Keep the unused masks spread out in one area so they are easily found.

When a player is holding a mask they are that character. When a player is not holding a mask they are invisible and staying off stage. Masks can and should move between players several times a scene. Each scene has prescribed characters that are present in it. No more than three players or three masks are allowed on the stage at any time. At any time any player may swap masks with anyone else. This means that two players on stage can opt to switch masks, even mid-reading, or that a player off-stage can come on-stage and take the mask of a current performer. People without masks are invisible and silent.

If you are unhappy during an improvisation bit you can thrust your mask at someone else!

A note on players and characters: The players are players playing the game, characters are the characters in the play. Players without masks are the players themselves and are not actor-characters with motivations outside of the performance of the play. A player who is not in a mask should be standing off-stage and appreciating the performance and readying themselves to jump back in.

The Performance

The play is meant to be a 'cold read'. Do not practice the script ahead of time (unless you need to for personal reasons), do not memorize or prepare lines! Ideally you read it off the paper on stage as you go.

Don't stop the performance to hash out how things are supposed to happen, just push through.

You may pause for a few moments to read the instructions for the improvisatory sections, or you might just hand your mask off to someone offstage who skimmed ahead.

Go big. Gesture, strut, posture. Speak loudly and clearly so the back row can hear you.

Or that's the game designer's ideal, anyway. It might work better for some players to go through the script ahead of time and fill out the blanks or pre-read the lines.

The Structure

Each scene begins with a list of characters, some directions, and a script. Blanks in the script should be filled in during the reading on the fly (note: facilitator, if you think players would benefit you can have each player fill in the blanks with pencil on their own script ahead of time).

Scenes will flip from scripted sections to improvised sections. There will be simple directions of a structure for the players to play in. If someone gets hung up they can hand their mask off to someone else.

At the end of every scene players perform a Greek Chorus, as per below.

Every Scene Ends in a Greek Chorus

We end a scene with a Greek Chorus. For the sake of this game, a Greek Chorus is a speaking/improv mini-game. All the players put aside their masks and form a half circle on stage with the open side toward the imaginary audience. Together they start making a collective sound and hold the note, then start changing the sound as a group until it resolves into a long, slow word. They repeat this to make another word with the requirement that it make some sort of sense tied to the first. They keep making words until they have a sentence of some kind which, hopefully, ties to the scene that just ended. After resolving the slow and awkward sentence the group repeats it again and again, getting bolder and louder. After a satisfactory number of repetitions they can end the chorus and start the next scene.

If the Greek Chorus doesn't work with your group (you'll practice it in the warmups) you can swap it out for "each player contributes one word to a sentence, one after the other, with the requirement that it relate in some way to previous scene." You still chant the sentence after you resolve it!

Warmups

Some suggested warm up exercises are:

Fill in the blanks: The Kolax game is about filling in missing spaces. Have the players make a circle. One player starts telling a story and then hands it off mid-sentence to another by pointing at them. The recipient should pick the sentence up and continue the story then hand it off to someone else. Repeat until everyone seems comfortable with the exercise.

Practice both kinds of Greek Chorus, let the players choose which sort they want to use.

Practice changing masks. Put three players on the stage each with a mask, they should repeat their character's name, spout nonsense, and explore the stage. Other players should come up and take the masks and pick up the nonsense talk. Other people on the stage should switch masks with each other. Repeat this until everyone has swapped a mask at least four or five times and has mastered the niceties of the hand-off.

The DO's...

DO keep to three or fewer characters on the stage at any time.

DO feel free to pause a moment to read the directions but also DO stay in the play.

DO switch roles at least a couple of times each scene.

DO use the safety tools to ensure you are having a fun, comfortable time.

Kolax

or

The Flatterer

a play by Menander written c. 300BC
of which only fragments remain

PHEIDIAS: A young man in love with a courtesan

BIAS: a wealthy soldier in love with the same courtesan, a boastful soldier

GNATHON/STROUTHIAS: a hangers on, known as **GNATHON** to **PHEIDIAS** and as **STROUTHIAS** to **BIAS**, he is a shameful flatterer and parasite

DAOS: slave of **PHEIDIAS**

BROTHELKEEPER: Owner of the courtesan

COOK

Two young men, **PHEIDIAS** and **BIAS**, are rivals for the love of a courtesan. Each is often accompanied by a hanger-on who uses different names.

Summary of mechanics:

The masks represent the characters, anyone can play a character by holding up the relevant mask.

Only three characters may be on stage at a time.

Players may and should hand off masks to others mid-scene and often.

SCENE 1

Includes PHEIDIAS and DAOS. PHEIDIAS's father is gone and he is waiting for someone. DAOS the slave is there to help set up a party.

PHEIDIAS: For nothing is incredible in my present life.

Born of _____ parents who _____

I am not the _____ as all believe.

My father's sailed off on some business

And has left an empty house to me.

_____ the child; he himself left its upbringing

_____ to certain guardians

Oh, unhappy that I am, perhaps

_____ in such misery

_____ is a thing I must do.

We have a party coming soon, to honor Aphrodite

When I must be the host and the master of the house.

_____ told me to receive them.

MECHANISM FOR REST OF SCENE:

PHEIDIAS lists things he must have for a party and why but begins to mix them up with a love poem for the courtesan who he can sometime see from his window.

DAOS will repeat each item, trying to remember the list, and will mix up the love poetry with the party goods. The scene ends with players entering to perform the Greek Chorus.

SCENE 2

PHEIDIAS and **GNATHON** and **DAOS** enter carrying wine jars, preparing for a party. They are in mid-conversation.

PHEIDIAS: _____ must _____

BIAS is brilliant or great in reputation

He is _____ if not third in _____.

_____ will bring wild _____.

GNATHON: Now I'm

advising you to cheer up, **PHEIDIAS**.

PHEIDIAS: Cheer up? When I am so worried for this girl

Of mine? And this rival? Don't talk such nonsense.

PHEIDIAS gives a long, convoluted prayer ending in
...Lady Athena save me!"

PHEIDIAS: **DAOS** repeat my prayer but louder!

DAOS: <repeats prayer but louder>

GNATHON: A find prayer! The finest!

Those who observe with care the customs of

Our ancestors do no good to themselves,

The same men _____, they _____ cities.

PHEIDIAS: What do you mean you miserable man?

GNATHON: The wicked get more help than us from the gods;

For if we are good, we don't do well at all.

This champ on double pay, **BIAS**, who use to hump

His own _____ bag and helmet and haversack.

His pair of spears and rug! A burden more

Than any wretched ass can bear

Has suddenly become **BIAS**!

Because the gods have made him rich.

DAOS: And the gods make some men slaves.

PHEIDIAS: If you

Are talking of the man who just last year

Was so unhappy here and kept us so

Amused, the butt of all our jokes, and now

Has fifty servants following on his heels,

Then I am done for.

GNATHON: You will not know the man.

He is changed, no one who knew him then

would know him now. He is big and fine and

richly dress. Regardless of where he was,
Well, he's landed here
From somewhere after he betrayed some city,
Or some governor, or an army camp.
He's clearly made his pile dishonestly.

PHEIDIAS: How so?

DAOS: Yes, how so?

GNATHON: No one who's honest gets rich fast.
The honest man is thrifty, stores his gains,
The other lays a trap for him who's saved
So long and takes the lot.

PHEIDIAS: How monstrously unfair! **DAOS**
run on ahead!

DAOS <exits stage.>

GNATHON: I swear to god that were we not
Here walking with these jars
Of Thrasian wine, and so men might suppose
That I am drunk, I'd now be following him
And in the the marketplace I'd shout "Last year
You were a beggar, a mere skeleton,
And now you're rich. So tell me, what's your trade?
Answer me this: Where have you got your wealth?
Out of my way! Why teach us what is wrong?
Why demonstrate to us that evil pays?

_____ me?

REST OF SCENE

DAOS Re-enters, explains at length where he went and
his encounter with the **BROTHELKEEPER** who is afraid that
PHEIDIAS's party will result in the courtesan being kidnapped.
GNATHON keeps pressing **DAOS** for details of the plan
postulated by the **BROTHELKEEPER** because he thinks it
is a good one.

All players enter and form a Greek Chorus.

SCENE 3

*A party held in the estate of **PHEIDIAS's** parents. **BIAS**
will come seeking to confront **PHEIDIAS** who in turn is
looking for **BIAS** to have him ejected. They will never
meet. **GNATHON/STROUTHIAS** will meet each of them
every time they enter, acting as two-faced confidant and
misdirecting them so they miss each other.*

COOK, GNATHON/STROUTHIAS, and PHEIDIAS begin.

COOK: Pour a libation! Follow me and give
The offal here. Where are you looking? Pour
Again. Come on, boy, Sosias. Now pour
Once more. That's good! Now let us pray to all
The Olympian gods and goddesses at once—
You take the tongue meanwhile—to grant us health,
Protection, many blessings and that all
Enjoy the good things now before them. Let
That be our prayer.

DAOS: What is that banging? I shall go answer the door.

PHEIDIAS: No, you stay and serve
Our guests are demanding! I shall go
Myself to bring in the late revelers. <exit>

BIAS <enters>. **STROUTHIAS!** I seek **PHEIDIAS!** Give
Me a cup while I hunt! Know that
In Cappadocia I three times drained
A golden beaker, **STROUTHIAS**, brimful,
Which held five pints.

GNATHON/STROUTHIAS: You've put away more thanKing Alexander.

BIAS: Quite as much, I swear!

GNATHON/STROUTHIAS: That is a lot! I'm laughing
When I think about that joke
You made against the Cypriot.

BIAS: <boastingly tells of the prank made against a Cypriot,
He will use the term 'bullock' and describe the Cypriot as a
Dung eater.>

GNATHON/STROUTHIAS: Ha ha ha!

BIAS: What are you laughing at?

GNATHON/STROUTHIAS: At what you just now said and
Your joke about the Rhodian occurred to me!

BIAS: <boastingly tells a story about telling the joke about
The Rhodian but doesn't actually tell a joke.>

MECHANISM FOR REST OF SCENE:

BIAS and **PHEIDIAS** will alternate entering the scene.
Upon entering each will go to **GNATHON/STROUTHIAS**
and they will exchange a few lines of dialogue.

PHEIDIAS is convinced **BIAS** is in the house,
GNATHON/STROUTHIAS will assure him otherwise
and praise the **PHEIDIAS**'s love for the courtesan.

BIAS wishes to confront **PHEIDIAS**, he will boast while
GNATHON/STROUTHIAS tries to convey a plan to
kidnap the courtesan through force of arms.

The **COOK** will signal the rotation of the principals by
Offering up another toast. **COOK**, keep it quick! Have
fun with it!

The scene ends when **BIAS** or **PHEIDIAS** opt to not return,
the **COOK** will speak a benediction over the drunkards
sleeping in his dining hall then **DAOS** will enter and
explain that he heard all and must alert his master.

All players enter and form a Greek Chorus.

SCENE 4

*Scene features **DAOS**, **PHEIDIAS**, and **BIAS** enters later.
DAOS is warning **PHEIDIAS** of **GNATHON**'s duplicity.
BIAS and **PHEIDIAS** do not know each other's appearance.*

DAOS: There is one man, one only, who
Has brought disaster on all your affairs.
In short I tell you; all the cities you
Have seen laid waste have been destroyed by this
Alone, as I've discovered now through him.
All the dictators there have ever been,
All mighty leaders, every governor
And garrison commander, founders of cities,
And generals--I mean, that is, those who
Have been completely ruined--all have been
Destroyed by this alone--by flatterers;
And these it is that cause their misery.

PHEIDIAS: Who is this villain?

DAOS: You're own busom chum **GNATHON**!

PHEIDIAS: No, get you from me. Go to the house.

<**DAOS** leaves, **BIAS** enters>

PHEIDIAS: <thinking aloud> To think my father's own
servant, known since a child, tries to turn me against
my own friend.

BIAS: <overhearing> Oh not to pry, but I too have
known treachery amongst the servants.

PHEIDIAS: One so richly dressed as yourself must have
more than the common number of servants!

BIAS: And they have more than the common number of
intrigues!

MECHANISM FOR REST OF SCENE:

BIAS will boast about his intrigues and servants,
PHEIDIAS will complement him on his riches and wiles.
both will confess to the other that they are in love
with a beautiful woman and have a dreadful rival.
all players enter and form a Greek Chorus.

GNATHON *is advising PHEIDIAS on how to overcome his enemy BIAS.*

PHEIDIAS: Your words are quite impressive but I don't
See what it's all about.

GNATHON: Well, anyone

Whose judgement was unseen might think the man
Who's hatching plots against you was your friend.

PHEIDIAS: And if the plotter doesn't have the power?
How can I plot against a man I have never seen?

GNATHON: But anyone can harm a stronger man
If he's not on his guard...

Suppose Anstyanax were lying here
Flat on his back, why, I could take a pestle
And smash in his nose...

But the hit-man, hired for fifty coins,
Who's come expressly just to beat you up,
Would not have done the job so easily.

His victim's on his guard... He looks him in
The face and knows he is dangerous.

<mimes being dangerous>

He will beware of you likewise
_____ door _____.

You'll say you will send for your own friends
Since he is acting violently.

He'll come at once and send for other troops.
But possibly he'll not be on his guard

Against you after all.

Either you

or he will be wiped out. But if you're trusted

And seem to do nothing that's different

From what you usually do, you'll have the man

Quite off his guard, away from his house

And all his business. The rest of it

You will arrange however you may wish.

MECHANISM FOR REST OF SCENE:

All players enter and form a Greek Chorus.

*The COOK, BIAS, and STROUTHIAS are drinking in the BROTHELKEEPERS
brothel. PHEIDIAS will enter later.*

COOK: 'What made this scar?'

BIAS: 'A javelin.'

STROUTHIAS: Oh please Tell us the story.'

BIAS: 'I was on a ladder Scaling a wall.'

I in all seriousness

Proceed to demonstrate;

and then once more

They sneered at me.'

COOK: And then?

BIAS: <tells a remarkable lie of heroism

In which he is injured by a javelin>

STROUTHIAS: So brave! So intelligent.

BIAS: And rich! Tell me how rich I am!

STROUTHIAS and **COOK** *try to outdo one another telling stories about how
rich BIAS is. Eventually BIAS will be dared to buy the courtesan from the
BROTHELKEEPER.*

BROTHELKEEPER <to audience>: The man's a braggart; that's plain enough.

They're hungry beggars, aren't they, who arrive

With nothing in their hands but cudgels and

My neighbor **PHEIDIAS** is one of them. But all the same

If he hears this, he'll come with sixty friends

(The number that Odysseus took with him

To Troy), and shout with threats "I'll do for you,

You villain—have you sold my girl to one

Who has more money?" Why should I sell her?

Heavens above, I won't because of him.

The girl earns practically as much as ten,

Three hundred drachmas every day, from him,

The foreigner, I'm afraid to take so much.

Given the chance they'll seize her in the road

Then I shall have much trouble, go to law,

Call witnesses to get her back again.

And, oh no, here comes **PHEIDIAS**.

<**PHEIDIAS** enters>

THE REST OF THE SCENE:

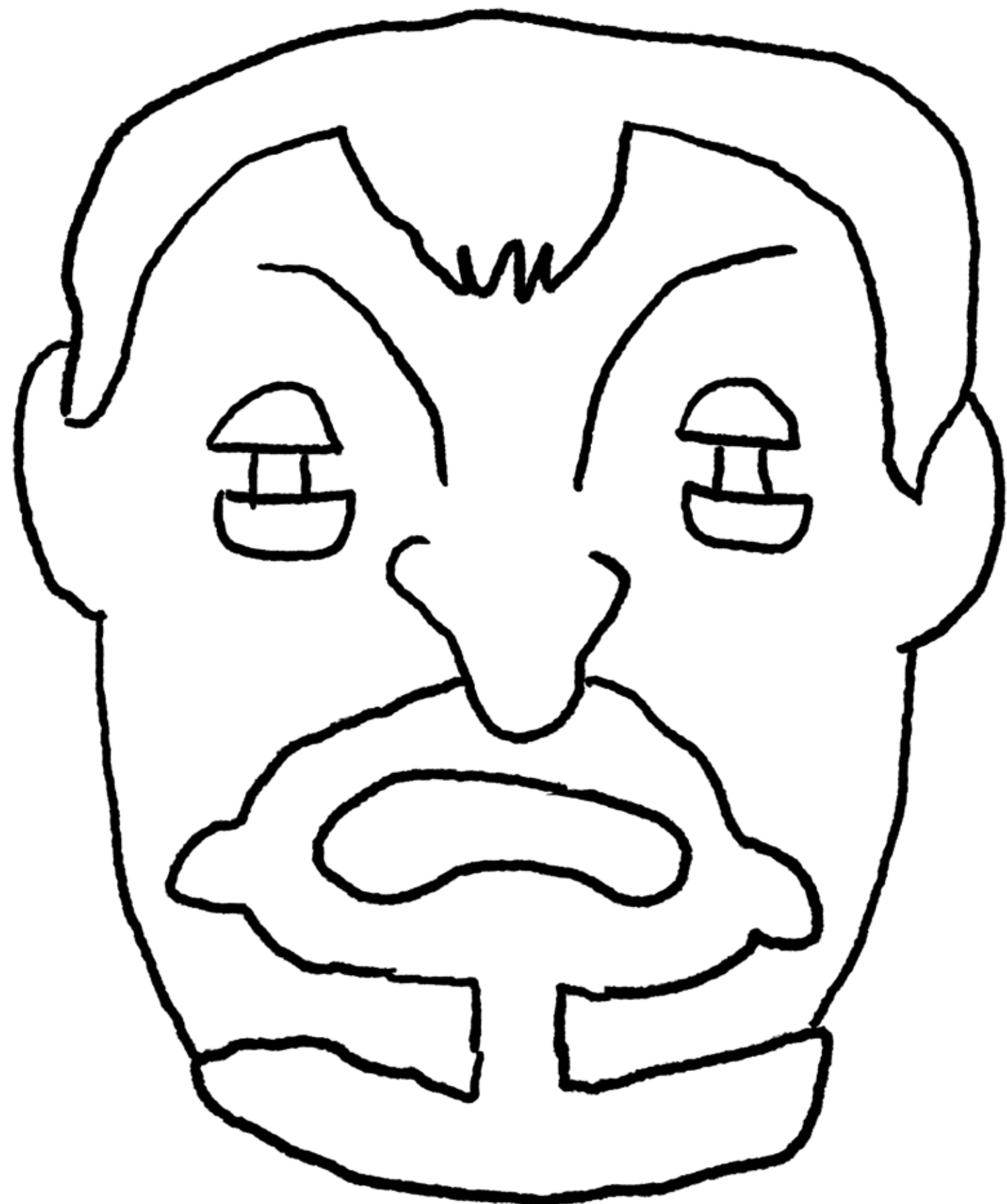
This play is unfinished, this game is unfinished. In some ways it should remain unfinished. At this point the facilitator should leave the room and allow the players to finish the scene as they feel best. Players, honor the lost play by not telling anyone what happened in that last scene. Keep it for yourselves.



PHEDIAS



BIA5



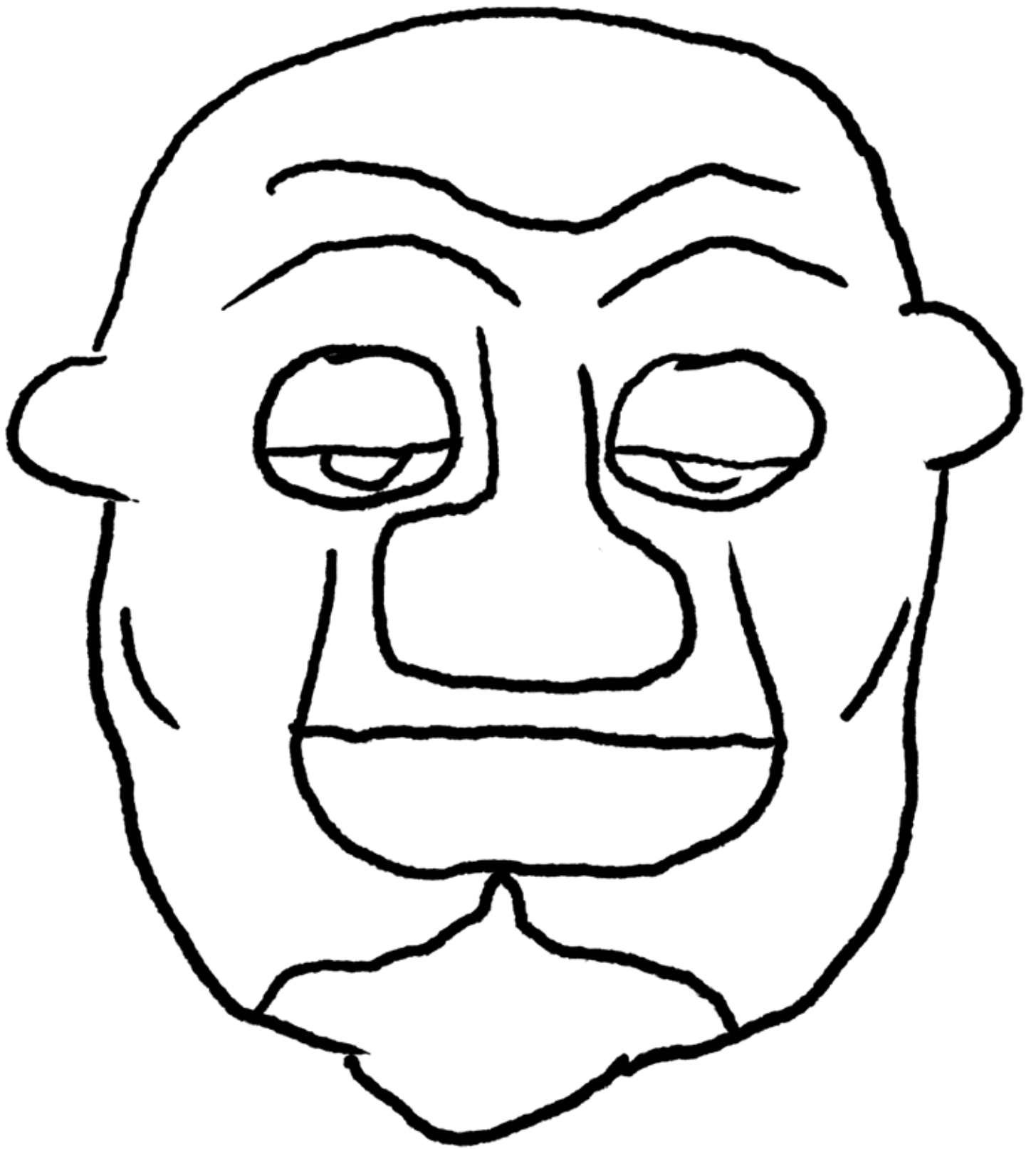
GNATHON/STROUTHIAS



DAOS



BROTHELKEEPER



COOK