SAN FRANCISCO
OPERA

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene
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SYNOPSIS

ACT ONE

In an archaeological dig in the Holy Land, five modern Christians despair: they need to escape the negativity towards sex and women that poisons their tradition for them, but they don't want to leave that tradition behind. Their anguish summons a Chorus, which promises to correct and complete their story. Mary Magdalene appears, in the guise of the Shulamite from the Song of Songs, the Old Testament's poem of the sacrality of erotic love. She enters history and materializes, on a cold midnight in her dwelling in Capernaum.

That night, Mary's lover leaves her: this is the end of the latest relationship through which she's sought spiritual transcendence. Her lover's vengeful wife is about to have Mary punished when the preacher Yeshua appears and saves her: they disagree about her search for meaning. Mary asks how she can reward him for rescuing her: Yeshua tells her to find him at the synagogue at Capernaum.

The next day, at the synagogue, Mary finds Yeshua preaching. His lecture disgusts her until its end, when he utters a brief message reminding Mary of what she'd been seeking. A Pharisee insults Yeshua. Yeshua's mother Miriam appears, tries to avert an impending fracas: Yeshua flees. Miriam, recognizing Mary from Yeshua's description of her, warns her away from her son: Mary demurs, decides to join Yeshua's group.

The next day, Peter, Yeshua's principal disciple, also tries to keep Mary from Yeshua. Yeshua, overruling Peter, offers Mary an audition of sorts—if she can hold her own in the fractious group of his followers, they'll accept her. Over time, Mary earns the group's welcome. Two Police, enforcers of the Roman regime, disrupt a meeting of the followers with a report of the murder of a dissident; subtly they threaten that Yeshua could be next. Yeshua, anguished, reveals his connection to the dissident: Mary consoles him.

The next morning, Mary finds Yeshua withdrawn. She makes a strong case for her feelings: Yeshua doesn't respond. Mary makes to go: Yeshua asks her to stay.

Months later, on the night of Mary's wedding, Mary, trailed by Miriam, impulsively goes to Yeshua's quarters to see him. Outside, Mary overhears Peter quoting Yeshua's own words urging him to reject Mary. Yeshua placates Peter with a very strange promise. Mary wants to burst in: Miriam drags her away, claiming Yeshua's behavior is her (Miriam's) fault. Mary demands to know why Miriam consistently takes responsibility for her son's actions: Miriam, distraught, explains. As Mary comforts Miriam, Yeshua's followers bear him across the courtyard to begin the wedding. Mary excoriates Yeshua for his treatment of Miriam and herself, demands Yeshua choose between herself and Peter.

ACT TWO

Months later, Yeshua, transformed by joy, teaches with Mary and Miriam on a hillside. The crowd, energized, claims Yeshua as their political Messiah. The Police break up the rally by force: Peter spirits Yeshua, Mary, and Miriam to safety, and urges Yeshua to accept the people's will. Yeshua, supported by Mary, refuses. Peter and Mary press their cases until Yeshua tells them both to leave him. Alone, Yeshua decides. He and his disciples are preparing themselves for a demonstration when Mary appears.

Yeshua is crucified: Peter flees back to where the Followers used to meet, reliving the guilt of denying Yeshua. Mary enters, consoles him. Peter warns her to escape: Mary reminds him she must anoint Yeshua for burial. Before she goes, Mary offers to make peace: Peter considers her offer. Miriam joins Mary: the women set out for Yeshua's tomb.

We leave time for a moment and leap to the end of the story as recounted by the Gnostic text *The Gospel of Mary,* which gives a completely different version than the one found in the canonical Gospels.

Mary reenters the story, supporting Miriam on their way to the tomb. Miriam is too weak to manage the staircase to the crypt: Mary asks Miriam what she would tell her son if she could. Miriam says a final farewell: Mary leaves Miriam at the top of the staircase, descends into the crypt, and has an extraordinary vision.