

THE FREAK

(George)

NARRATOR

GUNNA

KNIGHT

The Freak was first performed at BACA in Brooklyn as part of the series' premiere, March 1990, directed by Fritz Ertl. Artistic Directors: Bonnie Metzger, Thalia Field. Other Series Directors: Thalia Field, Jennifer McDowall, Brian Mertes, Bonnie Metzger, and Randolyn Zinn. Cast: Maja Hellmold, Phoebe Kreutz, David Alton. Production: Pat Chanteloube, Barbara Cohig, Betsy Finston, John Gromada, Lora Pennington, Peter Hine, Charlotte Kreutz, David Woolard, Karen Dillon, Amanda Junquera, Kyle Chepulis, Stephen Kellam, Dawn Groenewegen.

Scene One: Girl with Wings

(A woman in a Swedish teacher's uniform sits on a stool downstage right. The only light on stage is a large spot on the upstage wall; in the circle: the shadow of a moth, flying furiously.)

NARRATOR In 1957 in Stockholm, Sweden, a girl was born with wings. She was quick and mortal as a bee; her wings moved at a bee's rate. The doctor didn't know what to say, although he tried to piece together several different set speeches on death and deformity and the wonder of life, and the nonaccountability of the hospital. The mother, on the other hand, was quite happy with her new daughter, whom she named Gunna. Gunna flew in one spot in the center of the room, as if a ball of light were there, and flew and flew until her smiling mother opened her arms, held and nursed her, the silky membranes of her still moist wings flexing gently now, in time to her life-loving breathing. *(Light fades.)*

Scene Two: Classroom

(Lights up. An austere classroom; the sound of young men and women shouting. A teacher's voice over them: "Class! Class!" In midair, the puppet of the ten-year-old GUNNA flies with large white wings.)

NARRATOR Gunna was very popular with her classmates. Her parents sewed special vents in her uniform that allowed for the free exercise of her now great wings. She would not be daunted. In the middle of a recitation, she would take to the air. The other boys and girls would try to touch her, or even a piece of her clothing when she was in these ecstasies, hoping that they would wake up the next day with the same abilities. Even the teacher found her hand lifting slightly to the shoes of the girl making the turn in front of her. At the same time, Gunna was not neglectful of her studies. On the contrary. Life held so many possibilities for her that she wanted to know all about it: about its past, present, and future, about teeth and sins and towns. She would stay up all hours drinking espresso coffee and shifting hats on her head, talking rapidly with her parents on the highest plane. *(Lights fade.)*

Scene Three: The Dream

(Lights up on a real GUNNA in bed late at night.)

NARRATOR: One night Gunna had a dream. *(GUNNA gets out of bed and flies slowly downstage. Lights up on a room in a medieval castle, with straw on the floor. A young man in chain mail sits in the corner. He looks up sadly.)*

KNIGHT You're too late.

GUNNA For what?

KNIGHT I died a long time ago.

GUNNA What do you want?

KNIGHT I want to be a saint.

GUNNA Do you deserve to be?

KNIGHT I've been very virtuous. It would mean so much to me.

GUNNA What's keeping you?

KNIGHT A few things. Mostly though, I haven't been baptized.

GUNNA Why not?

KNIGHT A horrible oversight.

GUNNA I can help you.

KNIGHT Too late?

GUNNA I can baptize you right now.

KNIGHT Can you?

GUNNA Oh—but I can't touch you, if you're in another time.

KNIGHT Could you baptize a part of me?

GUNNA Give me your shoe. Try passing it over to me.

NARRATOR The knight took off his metal shoe, and, with serious effort, pushed it across the floor of the cell. (*A loud pop*) The article made it through the invisible pane of time and appeared in Gunna's present.

KNIGHT You can't perform the sacraments yourself, can you?

GUNNA Won't it be good enough? I have a jackknife.

KNIGHT It has to be official.

GUNNA I'll see what I can do.

KNIGHT You'll come back?

GUNNA Of course. (*She crosses back to bed.*)

NARRATOR When she woke up, she had a shoe. (*Lights fade.*)

Scene Four: Pope of Rome

(*Lights up on GUNNA in flight. Her wings are decorated with gold. She flies earnestly.*)

NARRATOR She told no one, but went straight to the Pope of Rome, looking her best. Her fame was such that she was granted an immediate audience. An archbishop at the pope's left ear expressed serious misgivings. But the pontiff smiled continuously at Gunna, assuring her that baptism by proxy was quite the norm. He sprinkled the shoe with some of Gunna's very own blood, drawn from her thumb with her jackknife. Translated by the pope, this was all made to seem on the up and up. Gunna flew off, but with no smile. She flew very thoroughly, so that she

would sleep deeply enough to reach the knight again and rise to any new challenge, strong in her dream. She could not hear the archbishop almost raise his voice. She could not hear the pope quiet his ally by saying:

VOICE OF THE POPE They look on her as on an angel. But she is just a girl with wings. The freak! (*Lights out.*)

Scene Five: Back to the Dream

(*Lights up on the girl in bed. She rises.*)

NARRATOR She — (GUNNA holds a finger to her lips and quiets the NARRATOR. GUNNA crosses to the cell. The KNIGHT is ill and holds his bare foot.)

GUNNA Tell me what happened.

KNIGHT Give me my shoe.

GUNNA You've hurt yourself. Tell me how. I'm taking care of you.

KNIGHT Then give me my shoe. (*She passes it to him with effort. The KNIGHT struggles to put it on.*)

GUNNA Your foot's swollen. Wearing the shoe gives you a horrible expression. You look like an old man.

KNIGHT There is a civil war outside. I was called to combat while you were out. (GUNNA finds an arrow in the straw.)

GUNNA This arrow —

KNIGHT It's poisoned. They shot me in the heel. I wasn't running away. They were all around us. I'm dying now.

GUNNA It's all been arranged, about the baptism. You're all right. They'll make you a saint when you die.

KNIGHT There's something else I need.

GUNNA Consider it done. Sit down. You're working the poison through.

KNIGHT I've had an unremarkable life. With no conquests. Do you know where you are now?

GUNNA I'm in the dream.

KNIGHT Since your blood is on the shoe, you're on my side of the time pane for as long as the dream lasts.

GUNNA I'll appear behind you in a battle — they'll take me as a sign.

KNIGHT The honor of the moment would be conferred on you, unless I carried the day. And I'm not feeling very well. Speaking plainly, I am not an especially good knight.

GUNNA There must be some advantage to my being here.

KNIGHT I need to accomplish a miracle. I doubt in my ability to make something good. Perhaps I can destroy something evil.

GUNNA Like a dragon.

KNIGHT That works. I'll show them the dragon's wings.

GUNNA I'm awake. I'm awake now.

KNIGHT No, you're not. You're deep, deep asleep. (GUNNA *flies, thumping around the cell.*)

GUNNA These wings are beautiful. They won't believe they're from a dragon.

KNIGHT They'll be covered in blood. Terrible. The wings are mine when I take them. You're too strange to live.

GUNNA What's your name?

KNIGHT George.

GUNNA You're Saint George, then. Yes, the dragon slayer. It all comes true. *(The KNIGHT pulls GUNNA down and cuts off her wings. GUNNA returns to bed.)*

NARRATOR When she woke up, her wings were gone. *(Lights fade.)*

Scene Six: The Narrator

(Lights up on a classroom.)

NARRATOR I have never flown since, even in my dreams. But I do remember. I teach in the room where I once flew, helping students with their penmanship. Damn saint stole my wings! But I walk the aisles, looking for young ones whose shoulders are especially hunched. For many of our girls and boys are born with wings, more than you know. But the parents follow a strict and loving instinct — they tie the wings back with strips of sturdy leather. When my wings were lopped, I was suddenly able to remember a thousand conversations that took place on the edge of my hearing — I didn't know I had heard these things until they all rushed at me at once. Pious speculations, and outright hate. The pope's word, "Freak," finally made its way to my ears. When I find a hunched student, a good one, I call this creature in for extra work, and I take out my jackknife, and cut slits for the wings. The problem is not the wings, I say. The problem is not the wings. *(The shadow of a baby with wings flies upstage in a circle of light.)*