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*Dramatic Publishing*

# CARAVAGGIO

By  
RICHARD VETERE



**Dramatic Publishing**  
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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“*Caravaggio* was originally produced by Silk Road Theatre Project, Chicago, Ill. Jamil Khoury, Artistic Director; Malik Gillani, Executive Director, Dale Heinen, Director, and Jennifer Shook and Dale Heinen, Script Development Dramaturgy.”

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For Lisa Battista,  
along with the loving memories of my mother,  
Angelina Guiliano Vetere,  
Mary Meagher and Alan Czak.

CARAVAGGIO had its world premiere at the Silk Road Theatre in Chicago on October 14, 2006 with executive producer Malik Gillani and artistic director Jamil Khoury. The cast was as follows:

CARAVAGGIO . . . . . Mike Simmer  
FRANCESCO . . . . . Levi Petree  
CARDINAL DEL MONTE . . . . . Don Blair  
LENA . . . . . Brenda Barrie  
ALOF de WIGNACOURT . . . . . Sean Sinitski  
STEFANO . . . . . Julian Martinez  
CARRACCI . . . . . Ron Wells

Director . . . . . Dale Heinen  
Stage Manager . . . . . Alexandra Herryman  
Production Manager . . . . . Josh Schultz  
Scenic & Lighting Designer . . . . . Lee Keenan  
Sound Design & Original Music . . . . . Robert Steel  
Costume Designer . . . . . Carol J. Blanchard  
Props Designer . . . . . Daniel Pellant  
Assistant Director . . . . . John Morrison  
Fight Director . . . . . Nick Sandys  
Script & Production Dramaturgy . . . . . Dale Heinen,  
Jennifer Shook, Lavina Jadhvani  
Technical Director . . . . . Left Wing Scenic

# CARAVAGGIO

a full-length play in one act

## CHARACTERS

**CARAVAGGIO:** In his 30s, he is sarcastic, has a biting wit, is rugged, street smart and has an authentic intellect. Driven by genius and an intrinsic need to battle authority he is as comfortable in a brothel as he is in the halls of the privileged. As comfortable with a sword and violence as with a paintbrush, and passionately physical as well as sensual. He is searching for his God.

**FRANCESCO:** In his mid 20s, he is sweet-natured but his intellect can be as biting as Caravaggio's. He has a budding talent though it hasn't arrived as of yet. He is in love with Caravaggio and sees his genius.

**CARDINAL DEL MONTE:** In his early 50s, he embraces secular power, is very political, in and out of the Vatican, adores art, is down to earth, and believes in Caravaggio.

**LENA:** In her 20s, she is a prostitute who also models for money. Born on a farm, she does what she can to survive Rome's mean streets. She is drawn to Caravaggio because he shows her the world. She loves him despite him.

ALOF de WIGNACOURT: In his early 50s, he is the grand master of the heralded Knights of Malta. Born to wealth, he has the bearing of an officer from an upper social class and the physical confidence to lead men. He has the deep religious faith of a man pursued by loneliness. He embraces the darkness instead of questioning it.

STEFANO: In his late 20s, he is ambitious, clever and also from the wealthy class but he is trained in mortal combat. Fearless, he questions nothing and is loyal to knights and most importantly to the grand master.

ANNIBALE CARRACCI: In his early 40s, he is a wealthy, educated, famous painter who pretends to be “one of the people” but who has lost his inspiration to paint. He battles his bitterness with silence and cynicism.

Playwright’s note on the style of the play: *Caravaggio* is a play defined by the use of stage light. There should be rays and streams of light filtering from above in every scene as if the stage itself is a “Caravaggio” painting. And though a drama, the dialogue should be delivered with a quick banter when called for and the actors should embrace the tongue-in-cheek humor. Actors also should never forget that these characters are passionate about what they say and feel. The amount of nudity and portrayed sexuality is up to the production.



## PROLOGUE

### SCENE 1

IN THE DARK:

A GLASS SHATTERS LOUDLY. *SHADOWS* blasted by glowing lamps. Angry *MALE VOICES*, screaming and cursing “*Scum! Bastard!*” and shouting names “*Rannucio! Toppa! Mario! Ottavio!*” in a chorus of anger. Figures come out of the shadows as a brawl is taking place between two distinct groups of men. They stare one another down cursing with venom. Along with the other street noises are shrill, enraged *FEMALE VOICES*, whores from the brothel, sucked in by the city’s teeming, blistering fury as they call out for a bloody outcome of the fight. The heat is unbearable even in the evening.

TIME: *The early 1600s.*

PLACE: *Piazza di San Lorenzo in Lucina, Rome.*

LIGHTS FOCUS ON TWO MEN *who are silhouettes in the torch-lit fires of the piazza. Each holds a short sword, a rapier, advancing, swinging the weapon wildly and missing. One man, dressed with flair but in a worn black blouse, with red trimming on his pants and sleeves, is the artist CARAVAGGIO. The other, a wealthy hoodlum, dressed in a light blue blouse, green and white trim and light blue pants, and wearing silver*

*family emblems as medallions and expensive accessories, is Ranuccio Tomassoni.*

*All of a sudden, Ranuccio swings his rapier, high cutting CARAVAGGIO on the forehead. SCREAMS grow with the sight of blood as others now join the brawl in the background. CARAVAGGIO falls backward and as he does, Ranuccio rushes toward him. CARAVAGGIO lifts his rapier and Ranuccio runs right into it. His stomach is pierced. He moans, staggers and falls. CARAVAGGIO finds his balance, stands, then rushes off in the opposite direction.*

*LIGHTS MELT into dark passionate amber:*

## SCENE 2

*LIGHT UP on a tableau vivant using all members of the cast of the painting the Death of the Virgin. In somber reds, greens and browns. CARAVAGGIO himself is a character in the tableau.*

*Slowly, LIGHTS DOWN on the tableau.*

*LIGHTS DOWN.*

# ACT ONE

## SCENE 1

**TIME:** *The following dawn.*

**PLACE:** *CARAVAGGIO's sparse studio in his rented house in the Vicolo dei Santi Cecilia e Biagio in Rome.*

**SET:** *The stage is dark. A thick curtain hides a ceiling from floor to window.*

*A COLD merciless WHITE LIGHT OF DAWN:*

*The door flies open and the cold light of dawn erupts into the room. CARAVAGGIO, looking haggard and out of breath, enters. He closes the door quickly behind him. His shirt is torn over one shoulder and there are bloodstains on his clothes and a wound on his face. Satisfied that he is alone, he sits down on a crate to catch his breath. A sliver of light filters in from the curtain-drawn window. He peeks through the curtains to see if he was followed, then stops for a cup of water, drinking it quickly. He notices that his work is packed in crates and is confused since he didn't pack them.*

*A canvas standing in the center of the studio then distracts CARAVAGGIO. He remembers. He looks closely at the painting. Unable to make it out clearly in the dark, he pulls open the curtain just enough to allow*

*some light of dawn through the window. The light is a cold blue, throwing the studio into the dizzy light of dawn. Distracted by the painting, CARAVAGGIO picks up his brush and quickly cleans it off.*

*But though the light is cold, as dawn nears, the warm summer air heats up.*

*CARAVAGGIO goes back to the canvas, dabs his brush in the paint for a couple of strokes, then puts down the brush, sweating, still tense from what had happened that night.*

*He hears a noise. He grabs his sword, jumps up and finds FRANCESCO entering. He's slim with soft features and mass of curly hair. His eyes are open wide.*

*FRANCESCO stares at his blade. CARAVAGGIO slowly lowers it. He allows FRANCESCO to get close. With the heat and anxiety of the moment, there's a shudder of sexual tension between the men.*

FRANCESCO. Are you all right?

*(CARAVAGGIO pulls away and points to the canvas.)*

CARAVAGGIO. I need more light!

*(FRANCESCO quickly rushes to the curtains and pulls them back. He sees the painting now completed.)*

FRANCESCO *(moved)*. It's beautiful. It's more than that.

*(CARAVAGGIO gestures to the crates.)*

CARAVAGGIO. Who did this?

FRANCESCO. The cavalieri had men at the door but they left. (*Noticing the wound.*) I can tend to that.

CARAVAGGIO. Don't! (*Exhausted, he leans on the table. FRANCESCO slowly tends to the wound.*) Why are you here?

FRANCESCO. I was worried. And I do live here.

CARAVAGGIO. As my valet...and nothing else.

*(FRANCESCO is taken aback but isn't deterred.)*

FRANCESCO (*a song*). Remember the song you were playing in the courtyard of the Palazzo Madama the night we first met. "Voi sapete ch'io v'amao, anzi v'adoro."

*(CARAVAGGIO recognizes it. FRANCESCO wraps the wound. He caresses CARAVAGGIO's face. In one impulsive moment, CARAVAGGIO passionately pulls him toward him. They kiss as FRANCESCO is now nude and CARAVAGGIO buries his fears in lust and in being comforted.)*

*They are standing in an embrace touching each other in the dim light when CARAVAGGIO hears someone at the door. He turns in fright as DEL MONTE enters dressed in a long, dark red cassock—BURSTS into the room.)*

DEL MONTE. Michale!

*(FRANCESCO, stunned by the interruption, quickly grabs his clothing and rushes to dress in another room and exits. DEL MONTE looks away and grins.)*

DEL MONTE *(sly smile)*. Pardon my intrusion. *(He looks over CARAVAGGIO quickly.)* You're all right then?

CARAVAGGIO *(concerned)*. Yes. You've heard?

DEL MONTE. Half the city is talking about it on the communion line.

CARAVAGGIO *(angrily)*. Francesco said the cavalieri were here. They have no right to be in my house!

DEL MONTE. I had them sent away. But they will come back and when they do, you need to be gone. *(Then quickly.)* Sit. If I'm going to build a defense I need to know every detail.

*(The following banter is quickly delivered as an interrogation; DEL MONTE needs to know all.)*

CARAVAGGIO *(straightforward)*. I have nothing to hide. I was at the Piazza di San Lorenzo with Toppa and Onario.

DEL MONTE *(smirks)*. Those two. You may call them friends but I call them Satan's more enthusiastic disciples. Then what?

CARAVAGGIO *(quickly)*. The Tomassoni brothers were waiting for us.

DEL MONTE. They're masquerading as police demanding protection money.

CARAVAGGIO. I owed Ranuccio scudi for a bet we made.

DEL MONTE (*knowing already*). You lost but you had no intention of paying. So, he insulted you and we know you do not tolerate insults.

CARAVAGGIO. We fought and he fell. I ran along the river and hid in the back room of the Tavern of the Blackmoore. Then I made my way here across the rooftops.

(*DEL MONTE now examines CARAVAGGIO's shoulder.*)

DEL MONTE. Ranuccio was given last rites.

CARAVAGGIO. He was alive when I left him.

DEL MONTE (*deadpan*). He's in the morgue.

CARAVAGGIO (*shocked*). Damn him!

DEL MONTE (*sharply*). This ending between you two was inevitable. And instead of *him* dead it could have been you. Now, listen to me, I've already discussed this with the chief investigator. He's a friend of mine. (*He's already figured it all out.*) He said that you will be called before the magistrate as soon as they gather up witnesses. The Tomassonis will, no doubt, put a bounty on your head and though they have strong political connections...so do I. However, "out of sight, out of mind"—we need time to allow the fires of revenge to burn out. So you must leave Rome immediately. (*Gestures to crates.*) I had some of my boys come over and pack up your work. I'll have it all moved to the Palazzo Madama.

CARAVAGGIO. I'm not afraid of the Tomassonis.

DEL MONTE. Besides the Tomassonis we also need to put distance between you and the pontiff.

CARAVAGGIO. Why is that?

DEL MONTE (*with utmost seriousness*). Haven't you forgotten? The Vatican has long issued a *banda capitale* on all murderers in the city and you are no exception.

CARAVAGGIO (*shocked*). I'm under a death sentence?

DEL MONTE. Yes. And I need not remind you that a *banda capitale* means that anyone can carry it out. You can be executed on sight. (*Shouts.*) Francesco, gather up some of your master's fresh clothing now! (*Back to CARAVAGGIO.*) I'll do all I can to convince the pope to retract the edict in your case. But I'll need time.

(*FRANCESCO enters, dressed, and quickly collects clothing for CARAVAGGIO. DEL MONTE pulls papers from his deep pocket then glances out the window for the carriage.*)

DEL MONTE. I've sent for a carriage to take you to the Sabine Hills. It'll be here any moment. Show these false identity papers if you are stopped along the way.

CARAVAGGIO. Why the Sabine Hills?

DEL MONTE. There is a shepherd...Orazio...

CARAVAGGIO A friend of yours...

DEL MONTE. ...a beautiful young boy once...prefers sheep nowadays. He'll take you to a boat that will dock in Sicily. Once there you'll be met by agents of the Knights of Malta who will take you to Valletta. The grand master wrote me several months ago. He'd seen a painting of yours.

CARAVAGGIO. Which one?

DEL MONTE. The *Calling of Matthew* I believe. (*Checking crate.*) He wants to commission you for a portrait.



*(DEL MONTE hands CARAVAGGIO the commission, which is an official letter, and then moves some of the unpacked smaller canvases to near the door as he explains. CARAVAGGIO looks over the commission letter as he listens. DEL MONTE clearly has his favorite paintings and is making sure they are gently packed.)*

CARAVAGGIO *(reads)*. “Alof de Wignacourt”? *(Then.)*  
Yes, of course, Wignacourt.

DEL MONTE. Yes, you know the one. I met him when he was last in Rome. He’s from French aristocracy and gave up a life of leisure to battle the Turks.

*(LENA enters, rushing through the open door carrying bags of food. She is dressed seductively having come directly from the brothel wearing a see-through flimsy blouse and loose-fitting see-through bottoms. She stops when she sees the cardinal and bows.)*

LENA. Cardinal? *(Then.)* Michale! *(LENA rushes to CARAVAGGIO as DEL MONTE again checks the window for the carriage but it is not there yet. CARAVAGGIO falls into her arms.)* The bastard cavalieri are everywhere.

DEL MONTE. There isn’t time for conversation. He’s leaving Rome.

LENA. Rannuccio started the fight. Everyone says so.

DEL MONTE. The testimony of a few drunks and whores will have little consequence.

*(Now drained of all energy, CARAVAGGIO sits and LENA takes fruit from the bag and hands it to him, then feels his head for a wound.)*

LENA. Here...eat this...and turn your head this way... My God! There's blood all over. *(To FRANCESCO.)* You let this wound fester like this?

FRANCESCO *(annoyed)*. You try tending to it. I already did.

LENA. You didn't try enough.

*(FRANCESCO tosses a towel at her.)*

CARAVAGGIO. Stop! The both of you.

DEL MONTE *(with envy)*. Yes, enough! I don't know how you endure their constant fussing over you. Lena, wash his wound. Francesco, give him some fruit to eat.

*(Both LENA and FRANCESCO tend to CARAVAGGIO, helping each other, as DEL MONTE notices the large canvas standing in the center of the room. It fascinates him as it did FRANCESCO earlier.)*

DEL MONTE *(riveted)*. The Brothers of Santa Maria della Scala commissioned this? *(Indicating painting.)*

CARAVAGGIO. Yes. They wanted a *Death of the Virgin*.

DEL MONTE. They'll never accept it.

CARAVAGGIO. Why not?

*(The following lines are delivered with a quick banter.)*

DEL MONTE. It's so real I find it nearly painful.