

Nicholas Maw

SOPHIE'S CHOICE

OPERA IN FOUR ACTS

Libretto by the composer
based on the novel by
William Styron

FABER *ff* MUSIC

Based on the novel *Sophie's Choice*
by William Styron © copyright 1976, 1978, 1979 by William Styron

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the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

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ACT I

Prologue

(The Narrator appears...)

NARRATOR It was the early summer of nineteen forty seven.
I vividly remember that year,
sunny and mild, flower fragrant...

I was twenty two,
and had come up to New York from the South,
hoping to become a writer.
I yearned passionately to produce the novel
so long captive in my mind.

One fine day in June
I walked down a Brooklyn street
lined with greening sycamores,
and took a room in the boarding house
of Mrs. Yetta Zimmerman.

(We see Yetta Zimmerman's boarding house in Brooklyn; summer 1947. To one side, occupying the lesser part of the stage, Stingo's room with door out to the hallway. The furnishings are rather sparse; visible items include a worktable-desk with typewriter, an armchair, and some well stocked bookshelves. In the hallway outside, stairs lead up to the floor above where Nathan's room is located. A door on the other side of the hallway leads to Sophie's room, which occupies the larger part of the stage. At the back of the hallway is the street door. It is late afternoon. Stingo is at work in his room.)

So it was I came to know
Sophie and Nathan...

Scene 1

(The novel Stingo is working on is proceeding with difficulty. He rises restlessly from his chair, strolls to look out of the window, takes a book down from the shelves. As he paces about the room he becomes aware of a furious quarrel taking place on the floor above.)

NATHAN *(invisible, from the back of the upper floor)*
Don't give me any of *that*, you hear?
You're a liar, a miserable lying whore!

SOPHIE Nathan, *listen...*

NATHAN A two-timing, double crossing whore!
Spreading those legs of yours
for a cheap, chiselling quack doctor.
Oh God! Let me get out of here before I murder you!

(Sophie and Nathan appear at the top of the stairway, he in the throes of an explosive and bitter rage, she tearful and pleading.)

You were *born* a whore and you'll *die* a whore!

SOPHIE *(sobbing)*
Nathan! Nathan! You must listen, *please*.

NATHAN *(bellowing)*
Don't you understand?
You fill me with *in-fin-ite* revulsion,
pure un-a-dul-ter-a-ted loathing!

(He plunges down the stairs, Sophie following.)

SOPHIE Nathan, don't go! I need you, Nathan.
You need *me*. *Don't* go!

NATHAN *Me* need you?
I need you like any goddamned insufferable *disease* I could mention.
Like a case of *anthrax*, hear me?
Like trichinosis! Pellagra! Encephalitis!
Cancer of the brain, for Christ's sake!
(howling dementedly) Aaaahooo-o!
I need you like *death!* *DEATH!*

(Stingo has come to the door of his room and looks on with bewilderment.)

SOPHIE Nathan, *please!*... Where are you going?

NATHAN *Going?* I'm going to clear out of *this* place.
Then I'm going to tell the Immigration Service
they'd better ship you back to Poland
for peddling your ass to any doctor in Brooklyn
who needs a quick lay.
(chuckling with satisfaction)
Back to Cracow, baby!

(He lunges for the street door, and in doing so brushes up against Stingo.)
(with oily sarcasm)

Well, lookee who's here,
our new roomer from the South.
Why, that's just what we need in this house,
a good ol' Southerner to fit in with all the other funnies.
Too bad I won't be around for some lively conversation;
we'd have had great fun, shootin' the breeze, you and I.
We could have talked about all those *Southern* sports,
like lynching niggers – or *coons*, I think you call them.
Or maybe enjoyed some Southern *culture*;
sittin' around listening to hillbilly records.
Ah well, too bad. Old Nathan's got to hit the road.
(suddenly clasping Stingo's hand)
So long, Cracker. See you in another life!

(He plunges out of the street door. Sophie weeps miserably. Stingo doesn't know what to say. He pulls out a handkerchief and silently hands it to Sophie.)

SOPHIE Oh, I love him so much... so much!
I love him so much I'll *die* without him.
(dabbing her eyes)
He has crazy idea I'm making love to my employer, the doctor.
It's so unfair of him – to say *that!*
I was never unfaithful to Nathan, never!
He's the only man I've ever made love to,
except my husband – and my husband's dead!
What am I going to do? I love him so...

STINGO Come and sit down.

SOPHIE Thank you.

(He leads her to a chair in his room.)

STINGO Oh boy – that Nathan!
I've never seen anything like him in my life.
He can certainly dole out the insults.
'Cracker' indeed!