PHILIP HENSHER POWDER HER FACE

AN OPERA IN TWO ACTS AND EIGHT SCENES

SET TO MUSIC BY THOMAS ADÈS



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First published in 1995 by Faber Music Ltd Bloomsbury House 74–77 Great Russell Street London WC1B 3DA Printed in England by Caligraving Ltd All rights reserved

> ISBN10: 0-571-51611-4 EAN13: 978-0-571-51611-7

Powder Her Face was commissioned by Almeida Opera and first performed by Valdine Anderson, Roger Bryson, Jill Gomez and Niall Morris with the Almeida Opera, conducted by Brad Cohen and directed by David Farr, in the Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham on 1 July 1995, as part of the 1995 Cheltenham International Festival of Music. Further performances took place at the Almeida Theatre, London on 5, 9, 14, 17 and 22 July 1995

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For Thomas Blaikie

CAST

Duchess Hotel Manager Electrician Maid

POWDER HER FACE

(LAUGHTER-PROLOGUE)

ONE

Nineteen Ninety

(As lights rise Electrician as Duchess in a very camp Statue of Liberty pose – immense fur coat and high heels. Apparently alone on the stage – actually behind him on a bed in the darkness is Maid, laughing (taking over from the orchestra's laughing). When her laughter subsides the scene begins.)

MAID: What happened then, your Grace?

ELECTRICIAN AS DUCHESS:

I was betrayed, girl. My life is one long sorrow.

There are moments in my life.

There are moments in my life as of no other life. Moments of anguish (melodramatically) and betrayal.

MAID: But why your Grace did this happen to you? Why

to you?

(Lights begin to rise and Maid is revealed sitting on a bed – so big she seems a small child, bouncing up and down – in a fabulously hideous gilt and pastel hotel room. At the back a pair of double doors. To the right is a huge chest, open and overflowing with clothes. A dressing table with detritus, wig stand, jewel boxes. A stuffed Pekinese lying on the floor. An old-fashioned gramophone.)

ELECTRICIAN AS DUCHESS:

I cannot say.

I was beautiful. I was famous. I was young.

I was rich, girl.

What more do they need? Do they need purity to

crow over?

They had it. Do they need innocence?

I was innocent, girl.

(sudden vulgarity, drops arms)

Girl, I had innocence.

(Maid laughs immoderately – shrill, horrible laugh – and Electrician as Duchess back to Statue of Liberty abruptly.)

I had my life, and it was good.

I was beautiful, and it was good.

Let me tell you about me. Let me tell you about my life as a famous beauty.

They wrote operas about me.

(laugh)

They wrote novels about me.

(laugh. Song starts in the orchestra about now)

They painted portraits of me that won every prize in London.

(grand gesture to spotlit blank wall)

They wrote songs about me.

You know that song. Everyone knows that song -

Love me

Why don't you suck me off until you can't take more

I'll really ram it in your jaw*

Because you practise every night fellatio It's the most delightful art you know. . .

(*Enter Duchess, behind. Tiny, terrifying, dressed in another fur coat, even more grotesquely enormous. Maid still laughing and laughing. Electrician drops out of pose, pulls wig off.)

DUCHESS: I see. This is what it has come to.

Take off my coat. (He takes off the coat he is wearing)

Who are you, boy?

ELECTRICIAN: Your grace, I came to mend your teasmade.

DUCHESS: My – teasmade. Have you mended it?

ELECTRICIAN: Your grace, I couldn't mend it.

DUCHESS: Why cannot you mend it?

ELECTRICIAN: Your grace. It's just too old. They stopped making

teasmades like this, you know; you want to buy a

new one.

MAID: I brought you tea, madam. (Indicates a tray)