

Richard Farber

FANNY AND BERTHA

an opera

Libretto

preproduction version May '03

THE CHARACTERS: DORA: Dramatic alto who plays a woman in her late seventies or even older.

ZOE: Young soprano, the salesperson at the doll department

DOLL: Soprano [who also prerecords some music so that she can sing simultaneously in various languages.

THE PLOT: Dora an elderly lady who has suffered a single incident of child abuse visits the toy department of a department store to purchase a doll. Zoe, a young salesperson, activates a singing doll which brings back Dora's childhood trauma. Dora suffers a slowly developing cerebral incident and becomes more and more disoriented. Zoe is intent on selling and tries to understand what kind of a doll Dora wants to buy. Zoe finds it hard to believe that Dora played with dolls before the Ken and Barbie era. During the course of the first act we gradually learn about the abuse of Dora by her Uncle Izak. Zoe does not understand that Dora is seriously ill. Dora gradually loses touch with her surroundings. She has moments of fantasy where she believes she is dancing with the toys in the department store. Dora dies and suffers a long purgatory with Death. The opera ends with Zoe thinking that Dora had been given the gift of a painless death. This is not true.

In Hamlet's monologue, Act III Sc. I he says

*. . . To die, to sleep ;
"To sleep : perchance to dream : aye there's the rub ;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause : there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life ;
For those that bear the whips and scorn of time."*

DURATION: A full evening in two acts.

THE MUSIC: There will be three musical elements in the opera.

1] The music of the operatic convention as played by the pit orchestra and sung by the characters on stage.

2] The music of the toys from the stage which will have a rather surrealistic function as a kind of chorus which raucously comments on the action and plays in Dora's fantasy, and

3] The music of the character Death which is a solo viola with timpani

accompanied by the pit orchestra.

SOUNDS: There will be an additional acoustical element of highly realistic 'original tone' recordings that will be used in three places in the work. I believe this will further the feeling of depths of different realities and memories which the piece is about.

THE SET: There is one set - the toy department of an Art Deco department store. The dolls and toys may be of various sizes, some human sized, others smaller, and others appearing in projection or drawing.

THE ORCHESTRA: The orchestra is divided into two parts -- The pit orchestra and The on stage orchestra representing musical toys.

ON STAGE ORCHESTRA: There are five, E flat clarinet, Trumpet, Trombone, Small Drum set, Honky Tonk Piano. The musicians themselves may be dressed as toys [if the union allows it] or they may be put on stage behind a scrim in back of the toys and be represented by scenic elements or by dancers, mimes or extras.

PIT ORCHESTRA: size open to discussion in consideration of the space that will be used. In a small experimental space as few as 10 musicians or up to a large chamber orchestra.

The role of Death is played by a SOLO VIOLA accompanied by TIMPANI which are part of the pit orchestra. On stage might appear a dancer representing Death.

COSTUMES: Dora and Zoe may be more or less realistically costumed. Death must be very elegant, perhaps he appears at first as the floor manager of the department store and then later he is the embodiment of Death in Dora's imagination.

ORIGINAL TONE:

- 1] toy department of large department store
- 2] ambulance approaching
- 3] paramedics working on resuscitation

The people in the department store and the paramedics should not be seen.

Fanny and Bertha
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ACT ONE

AS THE AUDIENCE ENTERS THEY DISCOVER THE TOY DEPARTMENT OF A LARGE DEPARTMENT STORE. FROM ORIGINAL TONE RECORDINGS WE CAN HEAR HAPPY CHILDREN AND MOTHERS -- AT FIRST A FEW AND THEN MORE PEOPLE ARE IN THE TOY DEPARTMENT. THIS ACOUSTICAL ELEMENT WILL DISAPPEAR AT THE END OF THE OVERTURE.

NUMBER 1 Overture The Toys are Dreaming

DURING THE OVERTURE DORA ENTERS AND WALKS AROUND THE TOY DEPARTMENT. IN APPROACHING THE VARIOUS TOYS SHE MIGHT BE THE REASON WHY THEY BEGIN TO PLAY [IN HER IMAGINATION].

TOWARDS THE END OF THE OVERTURE THE ZOE, THE SALESPERSON ENTERS.

NUMBER 2 scene in the department store

ZOE TURNS THE DOLL ON WITH A REMOTE CONTROL DEVICE.

| | | |
|-------|-------------------------------|-------|
| DOLL: | Mommy, I'm hungry, Mommy. | PAUSE |
| | Mommy, please feed me, Mommy. | PAUSE |
| | Mommy, I love you, Mommy. | PAUSE |
| | Mommy, I need you, Mommy. | PAUSE |
| | Mommy, I'm thirsty, Mommy. | PAUSE |
| | Mommy, don't leave me, Mommy. | PAUSE |
| | Mommy, I want you, Mommy. | PAUSE |

| | | |
|-------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| DORA: | TOGETHER WITH DOLL | Mommy don't . . .oh yeah |
|-------|--------------------|--------------------------|

DOLL: Mommy, I'll love you always, Mommy. PAUSE
Mommy, don't leave me Mommy

DORA: Oh yea A SIGH

DOLL: Mommy, I'll be a good girl Mommy PAUSE
I'll drink all my

SUDDEN CUT OFF. ZOE TURNS OFF THE DOLL OFF

DORA IS CONFUSED BY THE SINGING DOLL AND THE SUDDEN CUT OFF.

ZOE: Good day Madam, may I help you?

DORA: What? . . . oh sorry. I was . . . um, I was . . .

ZOE: May I be of assistance?

DORA: No, thank you, I'll choose for myself.
Yes, I'll just . . .

ZOE: Beautiful aren't they?

DORA: The dolls, yes. Beautiful.

ZOE: [TOGETHER] yes. Beautiful.

SATIRICAL MUSICAL COMMENT FROM TOYS

ZOE: Madam, may I be of assistance?

DORA: No, no thank you, I'd prefer to choose for myself . . .
I really would
. . . for myself.

ZOE: It's not so easy now-a-days.

The choice is so huge.

DORA: Yes, so many dolls . . .
So many diff'rent kinds . . .
So many diff'rent faces.

ZOE: We have a huge selection
In all the diff'rent price ranges.

COMMENT FROM TOYS

ZOE: Now take this model . . .

DORA: A LITTLE SHOCKED Mommy don't, I'll be a good girl.

ZOE: . . . yes, that's right, the doll that talks,
Battery op'rated with a new
Gigabit microprocessor

DOLL Mommy, please buy me Mommy.

ZOE: . . . walks, talks, cries . . .

DOLL Mommy,

DORA: I was thinking of something more . . .

DOLL: . . . I'm hungry Mommy

DORA: . . . classical

DOLL: Mommy, please feed be Mommy,

DORA: . . . something more . . .

DOLL Mommy, I love you Mommy

DORA: . . . traditional

DOLL Mommy I [DOLL WAS CUT OFF]

ZOE: She has a selection switch
She can sing in fourteen different languages.

ZOE HAS TURNED THE DOLL ON AGAIN

DOLL: Mamman je t'aime, mamman . . .
Mamman je te besoin de toi. mamman . . .
Mamman, ne me quitte pas, mamman

ZOE AGAIN ABRUPTLY TURNS THE DOLL OFF. DORA DOESN'T UNDERSTAND.

ZOE: Like the dolls you played with when you were a little girl.

PAUSE

NUMBER 3 Department Store, Collage of doll singing in 14 languages

ZOE GOES TOWARDS THE TOYS WITH A REMOTE CONTROL IN HER HAND AND ACTIVATES THE DOLLS ONE AFTER THE OTHER.

THE FOLLOWING IS A COLLAGE OF THE DOLL SINGING FIRST IN ONE LANGUAGE AND THEN IN ANOTHER WITH PRERECORDING OF THE SAME LINES IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES MIXED IN TO CREATE A THREATENING MIX. USE AS MANY AS THE 14 LANGUAGES THAT THE DOLL KNOWS. SEE LAST PAGES OF LIBRETTO FOR OTHER LANGUAGES. THE LANGUAGES SHOULD NOT BE QUITE PERFECT BECAUSE THEY WERE PROGRAMMED INTO THE DOLLS BY ENGINEERS NOT SPEAKING THE LANGUAGES.

DOLL: Please love me Mommy. PAUSE
Mommy, I'll never leave you Mommy.

DIFFERENT LANGUAGES [14 TOTAL] ENTER ONE AFTER THE OTHER.

DORA: Please !

DOLL: MIX CONTINUES

DORA: Please !

MUSICAL COMMENT FROM TOYS ON STAGE

DORA: Please ! Would you please turn that damn thing off !

ZOE: Yes of course. Quiet, older people need quiet sometimes.
Sorry.

MUSICAL COMMENT FROM TOYS ON STAGE

DORA: Now where was I . . ?

ZOE: Classic dolls . . .

DORA: What was I . . ? Oh yes.

ZOE: Classic dolls,
. . . like Ken and Barbie . . .

DORA: No, not at all,
No, not like that at all.
They weren't around when I was a little girl.

ZOE: TO HERSELF Before the Ken and Barbie line?
How can that be
I didn't see . . .

Before the Ken and Barbie line?
Ages ago,
How could I know?
Before the Ken and Barbie line?
Imagine
Can you Image
Being that old
Without Ken 'n Barbie
To have and to hold ?

ZOE: Madam, that long ago?

DORA: No. I'm talking about real dolls. No batteries, no plastic. . .

ZOE: Before Ken and Barbie?

DORA: Yes, and before your video games
Your giga biga
Your . . .

ZOE: Madam ! If you'll tell me who you're buying the doll for
Then maybe I can be of assistance.

**NUMBER 4 A fantasy dance,
 toys including Ken and Barbie and Dora**

THE TOYS ON STAGE PLAY A CROOKED ALMOST SENTIMENTAL WALTZ. THE THREE CHARACTERS DANCE WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH OTHER TOYS PERHAPS INCLUDING TWO DRESSED LIKE KEN AND BARBIE THAT DANCE WITH ZOE.

NUMBER 5 Department Store continues

DORA: Dolls . . . yes . . .
I come here at least twice a year to buy dolls
. . . gifts for my two little girls.

ZOE: I haven't seen you here before
I guess that's because I'm new.

DORA: They really are too old for dolls now,
But still I come back . . .
Here . . . to the same store . . .
Year after year
. . . and every year at the same time . . .
Next week, the week after the twins birthday,
I'll visit my old Aunt Joyce. . .
My old
Aunt [SIGH] . . .
Joyce.

ZOE: Oh I understand. [SHE DOESN'T OF COURSE]
You're buying . . . I mean . . . for your . . .

TOYS ON STAGE COMMENT

DORA: She's not really my aunt, but a cousin of a cousin of my uncle's
stepbrother who married the sister of the wife of my great
grandfather's younger brother's second wife's divorced father
once removed . . .

ZOE: Uh huh

DORA: . . . or some relativity like that
. . . but I called her Aunt Joyce the times
I saw her when I was growing up . . .

ZOE: Sounds like a long, a very very long time ago.

DORA: She was old even then . . . or seemed to be . . .
And she loved me very much
. . . very, very much.
She even told me stories.

ZOE: That must have been very nice. SUB TEXT THE OPPOSITE

TOYS ON STAGE COMMENT

DORA: It was . . . It really was.
Not like today when nobody tells stories.
They never do.
. . . and well anyway her husband Uncle Louis died
Years and years ago
And I go to see her in the old peoples home
Once a year,
The week after my two girls have their birthday.

ZOE: Who died?

DORA: Uncle Louis.

ZOE: Who ?

DORA: Uncle Louis, Joyce's husband. He died of cancer . . .

DEATH - VIOLA + TIMPANI SHORT SOLO

ZOE: Oh I'm . . . I mean . . . yes, that must have been very sad.

DORA: Yes, but it was years and years ago, and that's not what I want
to talk to you about . . . and no, I don't want to talk about that, no, no,

definitely not.

ZOE: No, of course you don't.

DORA: I want to tell you about
Fanny and Bertha

TOYS PLAY LONG SOLO PASSAGE. A BIZARRE FANFARE.

ZOE: Who and Burt?

TOYS COMMENT

DORA: Good, and now that I've explained all that

ZOE: But I really don't . . .

DORA: . . . and it's all clear to you, I can . . .

ZOE: But I really haven't . . .

DORA: Fanny.

ZOE: Yes . . ? Who . . ?

DORA: You really haven't what ?

ZOE: Burt and what's her name.

DORA: Bertha !

TOYS COMMENT

ZOE: Burt and Bertha ?

TOYS LONG SATIRICAL COMMENT

DORA: No, I guess it really isn't very clear . . . or is it ?

ZOE: Not exactly. To be honest, well . . . no.

DORA: Then let me explain.

ZOE: Please.

DORA: It was like this . . .

THE INTENSITY OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT CHANGES AND BECOMES MORE
SERIOUS AND LESS MOCKING.

DORA: Joyce asked me if I remembered my old Uncle Izak,
He's the one who married . . . who married . . . who married
On my Cousin Kitty's side of the family . . .
The one who married a Turkish Jew . . .
And no of course I didn't . . .
Well you know . . . of course you do.

ZOE: Well actually I . . .

DORA: . . . no, I don't think that you do either . . .

ZOE: I do, or do not, what ?

DORA: Remember that is,
Because he was very very old
When Joyce was a little girl.

ZOE: Oh.
No, you're right madam,
I really don't . . .

DORA: . . . Joyce? That's my old Aunt Joyce
Who's really a cousin and lives in an old age home . . .
I visit her once a year at least,
The week after the twin's birthday,
But the story really is about Bertha and Fanny
And anyway Uncle Izak or was it Bert . . . ?
He's the one that married Cousin Kitty
Changed his family name when he immigrated to America
After the First World War.
Yes, and I lost touch with him.
[SIGH]
I lost touch with him.

ZOE: That is sad.

DORA: Sad ? Not really.
It's life.

DEATH - VIOLA SOLO IN COUNTERPOINT WITH REACTION OF THE TOYS.

DORA: But before that . . .
Yes, before he went away . . .

ZOE: When you were a little girl. . .

DORA: A little girl . . . yes, a
A very little girl,
You do understand . . .

ZOE: I do . . . ?

DORA: Yes, you do.

ZOE: You're right, I do. SUB TEXT THE OPPOSITE

COMMENT OF TOYS

DORA: But before that
 Before he went away,
 When I was a little girl,
 A very little girl . . .
 A long, long time ago
 When he came to . . . visit my mother.
 I mean , when he came to visit Joyce's mother . . .
 A long time ago
 Joyce's mother . . . yes, when he came to visit Joyce's mother . . .
 Yes before, just before he . . .
 Left for good . . .

DORA COLLAPSES

ZOE: I . . . but . . . what were you . . ? Madame ?
 SHE NOW REALIZES HOW ILL THE OLD LADY IS.
 Help !

NUMBER 6 Dora Dreams the Toys are dancing

THE LIGHTS OF THE DEPARTMENTS STORE CHANGE.

THE SOUNDS OF THE DEPARTMENT STORE RETURN BUT DISTORTED AS IF HEARD BY THE VERY ILL WOMAN. THE TOYS RECAPITULATE THE DANCE THEME FROM BEFORE BUT IT IS LIKE A STUCK RECORD AND GRADUALLY THE INSTRUMENTS FALL AWAY AND DORA IS UNCONSCIOUS.

PAUSE

NUMBER 7 Solo Aria Dora

DEATH PLAINATIVELY CALLS. VIOLA AND TIMPANI.

WE ARE IN THE MIND THE DORA. WHAT SHE IS DREAMING OR THINKING AS SHE IS OUTWARDLY UNCONSCIOUS. THIS SOLO ARIA TAKES THE BRIEFEST OF MOMENTS IN REAL TIME. IT IS AS IF THE END OF NUMBER 6 CONTINUES ON TO NUMBER 8 WHICH BEGINS THE SECOND ACT AND NUMBER 7 IS WHAT IS HAPPENING TO DORA IN A MOMENT OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS.

DORA: . . . a salmon colored velvet cape
With a silk or was it satin lining
An evening bag of little beads
. . . black . . . matte. . . shiny . . .
Purple highlights and green
. . . and I couldn't wait 'til she left the house.
I couldn't wait.
Leave the house mommy.
Please leave the house.
I wore the cape, and carried the bag
And put on Mommy's high-heeled shoes.
I fell down and wobbled on the high heels
Played the lady . . . carried the evening bag
Black . . . Black . . . Matte and shiny with beads
I was so beautiful
. . . and for me he brought . . . I mean for Joyce
He brought two dolls . . .
Fanny and Bertha.

COMMENT OF TOYS

DORA: . . . I always thought that Fanny was a name
That only happened in a Jane . . .
Austin novel.
But Uncle Izak said that they were called Bertha
and Fanny.

COMMENT OF TOYS

DORA: . . . I had this swing outside the house
On the branch of a . . . the branch of a . . . the branch . . .
On a . . . On a . . . On a . . .
Not a peach tree . . . not a plum
One of those hybrid things
. . . I can't remember . . . I can't . . .and . . .well anyway . . .
I put Fanny and Bertha down to rest
Under the tree where we always had our tea
Parties near the swing
On the white-on-white embroidered
Starched table cloth, my mommy kept especially
For me
White on white
For my tea . . . parties.
On the lawn . . .
White on white
Under the swing.

THE TOYS PLAY AN INTERLUDE

. . .and I told them to be good girls
. . . be very, very good little girls and wait for me
. . . wait, wait only for me and
Don't get into trouble when I'm gone
Be good, be . . .
Very very good and
Keep your party dresses clean
White on white on white
Be good, be very very good and
I went
Into the house
To bring the lemonade.

I heard the crash . . .

LONG PAUSE

THE LIGHTS AGAIN CHANGE -- VERY SOMBER AND THREATENING.
DEATH - VIOLA A PLAINTIVE BECKONING. THAN THEME OF TRUMPET.

DORA: [A WHISPER] and Uncle Izak was there . . .

LONG PAUSE

END OF ACT ONE