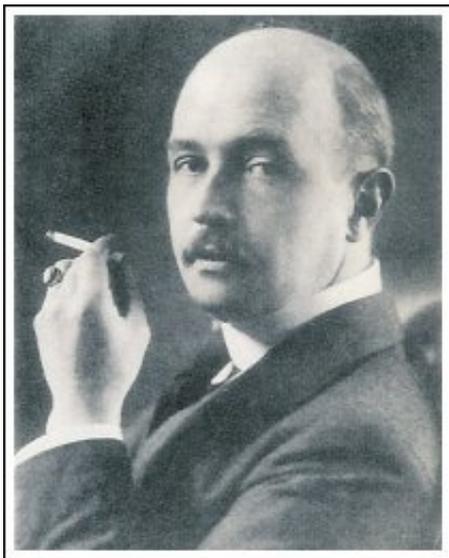


Front

An Operatic Conversation Piece in One Act

*Libretto: Peter Scott-Presland
Music: Robert Ely*



FRONT

CAST

Robert Ross : Baritone
49, plump, bald. A smoking jacket and cap. A heavy smoker.

Siegfried Sassoon (& Policeman) : Tenor
32, tall, handsome, smart in his 1st World War Officer's army uniform.

Podge (Noel Coward) : Counter-Tenor
18, Gangling and thin. Precocious. Open fur coat, silk scarf over a fair-isle sweater, shirt, cravat, slacks.

Splodge (Esmé Wynne) : Mezzo Soprano
20, Glamorous, slightly eccentric. 3/4 length heavy belted flowery dress, court shoes or buttoned boots.

SETTING:

The action takes place on the evening of October 4th, 1918, in Robert Ross's suite of rooms at 40 Half Moon Street, off Piccadilly, London. It is the night before his death. The main focus is a comfortable, though not sprawling, armchair with an art nouveau covering. At its side an ashtray is on a small table, which also holds a bottle of brandy, glasses, a plate of macarons and some turkish delight. A bookshelf is at the rear.

Instrumentation:

Flute, 'Cello, Piano

SCENE 1

[Gradual lights to Twilight.]

[ROSS is in his chair, staring into the fire, a cigarette in hand. He looks exhausted.]

ROSS: Tired
 So tired
 So many trials and libel cases
 Have worn me out.
 I have been on trial
 Most of my life.

 First Oscar was on trial
 - Well, Queensberry was on trial
 For libel.
 He wrote on his calling card,
 "For Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite"

[ROSS sneers audibly]

 He couldn't even spell the word.
 Yet he was right -
 Oscar was always posing.
 He might as well have been on trial,
 Not Queensberry,
 Instead of Queensberry,
 Not Queensberry.

 Then Oscar *was* on trial. Twice.
 And I and all our kind on trial with him.

[ROSS stands, stubs out his cigarette and ambles around as he recalls]

 I was with him when he died
 Held his hand on his deathbed
 While he was baptised
 Buried him in Bagneux
 Where Bosie stole attention
 With grotesque displays of grief –

He who had consigned him there
Through his rash vanity.

History repeats.
Douglas hounded me through literary London
Slandered me about affairs with waiters
Set detectives on me
Fingered me to Scotland Yard
For going with a rent boy.
I had to sue. I lost.

[ROSS sits]

I should have known from Oscar
Our kind are always in the wrong.

My secretary in prison now a second time.
My reputation tattered
The policeman at my door.

[Lights brighten slightly, Policeman appears at his side.]

SCENE 2

POLICE: We have information that
You are an art critic
A pacifist
A consorter with the conchies
A sympathiser with German prisoners –
[Sneering] You *visit* them! –
A man of feminine and perverted tastes

[ROSS stands]

And a professed and militant atheist

ROSS: Absolutely true
And I can produce
Documentary evidence to prove it.
So what are you going to do?

*[POLICEMAN shrugs and goes away, at a loss.
Lights dim as before. ROSS sits]*

ROSS: I am not afraid in these twisted times
But everyone must be careful.

I have been on trial all my life.
Win or lose
Every time a little death
A waning of vitality
Until now, when death
Cannot be far away.
Or maybe I am dead already.

SCENE 3

[Lights brighten significantly. SASSOON bursts in.]

SASSOON: I can't stand it anymore.
These armchair fighters
With their wall charts,
Pig-ignorant opinions.
They send men like me
To do their killing for them.
Second-hand blood lust
Murder by proxy

[ROSS picks up the brandy bottle from the side table.]

ROSS: *[Totally calm]* Have a brandy,
My last bottle from before the war

[He pours a drink into a glass, lifts the glass and sniffs it before passing it to SASSOON]

It's rather good.
There's Turkish delight
And macaroons –
I know your sweet tooth.

Help yourself, my dear.
I'm too tired to get up.

SASSOON: Do you know who I saw this morning?
Churchill. At the Ministry of Munitions.
Chips Channon thought he might have got a job
To keep me from the Front.
You know what the old brute said to me:

[Offstage recording of Churchill]

*"War is the finest pursuit of man
It brings out his noblest qualities
His courage and his sacrifice
Total comradeship
Total dedication
All focussed on one glorious goal."*

[SASSOON finishes off his brandy and puts the glass down.]

SASSOON: And I looked at him and thought,
'This is the man who killed my brother Michael.
He sent him to Gallipoli.'

ROSS: At least he spoke from experience

SASSOON: Behind the Front

ROSS: He was at the front

SASSOON: He only went to the front
For the photographs.
What does he know
Of guts exploding in your face?
Best friend blasted to a thousand bits
Beyond all hope of burial.
I told him he could keep his job,

ROSS: You don't have to go back, you know.
Wounded twice, you've done enough.

SASSOON: And then, you know what?
I had to go and see the Russian ballet
At the Coliseum. Maynard Keynes insisted.
Crazy for the dance.

ROSS: Or at least the dancers.
Always a ballerina on each arm.
Maynard without a dancer
Would be like Charlie Chaplin
Without his stick.

[SASSOON laughs]

What did you see?

SASSOON: 'Parade' – or should that be 'Parard'
It's by a Frog called Satie
And so ugly
Dancers going round in cardboard boxes
They could hardly move, let alone dance.

And what a noise,
What a noise

[He does an impression. ROSS laughs.]

Typewriters and foghorns
Smashing milk bottles
But when they came to pistols

*[Two pistol shots. Sassoon ducks, then shudders.
He slowly recovers his dignity.]*

SASSOON: The Ballets Russes has no idea
No-one in this country has any idea –
'Parade' is only twenty minutes long,
But quite long enough
To give me a splitting headache.

ROSS: Calm down.
Sit here.

*[He indicates between his legs. SASSOON sits, ROSS massages his temples.]
(There has been great physical intimacy in the past between them.)*

ROSS: Let's talk of something much more gratifying.
How is the book received?

SASSOON: It's not selling badly. For poetry.
It seems to appeal
To those now against the war.

ROSS: And they're growing daily, thank the Lord.
Haig and Lloyd George
Cannot – *cannot* – draw out
This blood sacrifice much longer.

SASSOON: You've always been consistent, Robbie
Opposed the war
When all were caught up in hysteria

ROSS: I had my share of white feathers

SASSOON: Another cross to bear among so many

ROSS: Hush, dear boy. No more of that.
Let us savour the piece and silence
Of Piccadilly at dusk.

[A companionable pause.]

SCENE 4

[A door bell interrupts. They come out of their reverie, SASSOON stands and goes to the door.]

SASSOON: *[Wearily]* I'll get it.

[The lights crossfade to reveal, at the side of the stage, PODGE and his best friend, SPLODGE. They are in the middle of a furious argument.]

SPLODGE: No Podge, it won't do

PODGE: Why not? I've written you a part.

SPLODGE: A wretched part.
A silly dim girl
Who follows you around
And giggles. *[She giggles girlishly]*
All the other characters
Say she's awful, like her mother.

[Coyly] I don't *mind* being awful

[More brazen]

I'd rather *like* to be awful
But there's nothing to be awful *with*. *[She sulks]*
Even her name is dull.
'Faith Crombie'. What a bore!

PODGE: *[bristling]* What's wrong with it?

SPLODGE: Can't I have a funny name at least?
I know – 'Faith Crumble'!

PODGE: Faith Crumble?!
And her siblings I suppose –
Apple and Apricot –

SPLODGE: Not forgetting Rhubarb –

PODGE: Dear little Rhubarb –

SPLODGE: An acerbic tot

[They both laugh. The tension is dissolved.]

SPLODGE: Don't you see?
We can make lots of crumbly jokes
Especially about my mother.

PODGE: We?
[Angrily] I will do no such thing.

SPLODGE: *[Pleading]* Oh Podge, why can't we write together again?

PODGE: Because this is my career –

[She puts an arm around PODGE, consolingly.]

SPLODGE: That much is obvious

[She turns slightly from PODGE]

The part you've written for yourself
Is not so much a character
As a walking self-advertisement

[PODGE straightens, becoming more statuesque]

Charming, talented, handsome, witty, musical –

PODGE: And so I am.

SPLODGE: So am I. Well, not handsome, but –

[SPLODGE becomes visibly more infuriated.]

PODGE: I need it more than you.
You don't need a career.
You got married.

*[She is deeply hurt by the last comment.
PODGE stares at SPLODGE icily.
After a short pause he turns abruptly and rings the bell.]*

SCENE 5

[The lighting intensifies back to the main set.]

SASSOON: *[irritated]* I'm coming.

[He opens the door. A whirlwind bursts onstage. It is PODGE, the Boy Actor, and his acolyte, SPLODGE. They all freeze as PODGE eyes SASSOON appreciatively.]

PODGE: *[Coyly/camp]* Hel-lo.

[SASSOON is clearly uncomfortable. They all unfreeze and PODGE addresses ROSS whilst still admiring SASSOON]

I hope you don't mind us dropping by.
Montcrieff said you keep open house
For people who are musical.
I am very musical
And talented in many other ways
As well as having a divine figure.

[He sees the macaroons and takes one to eat (between sentences)]

SPLODGE: And so modest with it too, Podge.

PODGE: My nickname.

[PODGE sits on the arm of Ross's chair.]

I was a podgy youth, and ugly too.
The sort of child
Only a mother or a pederast could love.
I made myself beautiful by sheer willpower.

[He stands]

They call me the Boy Actor.
I like smoking, drinking
And moderate sexual intercourse.

[He indicates SPLODGE]

This is Splodge.

[SPLODGE comes close to PODGE]

Her function is to laugh at my bons mots.

[He sits again, and checks his finger nails absentmindedly.]

SPLODGE: And stop you making a fool of yourself –
Which you are doing now.

[She moves towards SASSOON, whom she is clearly taken with]

[Aside to PODGE] Won't you introduce us?

PODGE: I'm so sorry. Miss Esmé Wynne
Actress, writer and chum.

[SASSOON takes Splodge's hand and kisses it. She blushes.]

SASSOON: Siegfried Sassoon.

[PODGE jumps up]

PODGE: Sassoon! My God, what an ass I've been.
Your picture's everywhere
I so admire your poems.
I read them in the nude
On a rock in Padstow,
You have the most marvellous clarity.
One day I will write as well as you

SPLODGE: He will too. Our songs are marvellous.

[PODGE glares at SPLODGE, then turns his attention back to SASSOON]

SASSOON: I sincerely hope so

PODGE: Do you have your poems here?
I would dearly love a signed copy.

[ROSS indicates the bookshelf]

ROSS: There are some copies over here.

[PODGE goes to the bookshelf and picks up a copy and a pen]

PODGE: *[Aside to ROSS]* Thank you.
[He hands the book and a pen to SASSOON]
Put 'To Noel Coward'.

*[SASSOON sighs, gives the book and pen back to PODGE.
He shows signs of a blinding headache.]*

ROSS: Sit down, Siegfried. *[He sits]*

[PODGE pockets the pen, opens the book and quotes from "Dreamers":]

PODGE: I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,

[SPLODGE peers over PODGE's shoulder to read the poem]

Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats

SASSOON: *[quoting from memory]*
And mocked with hopeless longing to regain

ALL 3: Bank holidays, and picture shows, and spats.
And going to the office in the train.

[PODGE slowly closes the book and puts it down. He turns to SASSOON]

SCENE 6

PODGE: I hate war, like you.

[SPLODGE makes herself comfortable, recognising a PODGE pronouncement]

I was called up, and I loathed it.
The training made me physically ill.
I had to clean latrines
It gave me a nervous collapse.
Thank God I had a senior officer friend
Who could get me out.

SASSOON: *[With some irony]* You are indeed fortunate in your friends.

PODGE: I have always felt affinity to older men
Ever since I was small.

[He becomes more animated]

When I was first onstage, aged eleven –
I scored a great success as Prince Mussel
In 'The Goldfish' –
I was besieged by besotted vicars.
I allowed them small liberties in taxis
With my inner thigh!
In exchange for a nice cream tea.

SASSOON: *[angry]* You seem to have been living entirely for pleasure.

PODGE: When I was fifteen
I was the mascot of the Artists' Rifles
And now it has come in handy
To get a medical discharge
From the army.

ROSS: Your hatred, then, of war is second hand.

PODGE: *[acidly]* As, I would hazard, is yours.

SCENE 7

[He realises his faux pas - Hand over mouth sharp intake of breath]

I'm so sorry, so very sorry
I've been ignoring you.
I must introduce myself.
The Boy Actor, at your service.

SPLODGE: And almost anybody else's.

PODGE: Hush, child. Hush, child.

SPLODGE: Anybody at all.
[She laughs shriekingly at her own joke.]

[Slightly amused, ROSS holds out a hand slightly effeminately which PODGE takes and shakes vigorously.]

ROSS: Robbie Ross.

PODGE: *[Slightly overwhelmed]*
A great collector and art critic
I read your reviews in The Morning Post
I admire your support
For the coming generation

ROSS: And what are you appearing in?

PODGE: *[Discomfited]* Nothing.
I was turned down for 'Oh Joy!' by Jerome Kern

SPLODGE: But only cos he's too good for the chorus.
He's going to be in 'Scandal' soon

PODGE: It's only a small part, but my career will grow.
I have a selfless devotion
To my own success.

[ROSS laughs]

ROSS: Scandal! The story of my life!
Always mired in Scandal.

SCENE 8

SPLODGE: Scandal, a play by Cosmo Hamilton.

PODGE: Scandal should stay where it belongs – on stage
Those who become the stuff of scandal
Have only themselves to blame.

[SPLODGE, then SASSOON turn on PODGE]

SPLODGE: Oh Podge, don't been so rude.
So rude, so rude.

SASSOON: Robbie, you young slug,
Has never sought scandal.
But never hid the truth.

Nor did he let the fear of it
Prevent him doing good
Or showing kindness.
And as for 'second hand'!
Robbie has been at war all his life
But not in a way that you would understand.

PODGE: *[arrogant]* You mean all that old stuff
About Oscar Wilde?
I know all that, it's history now.
Wilde brought it on himself
Through vanity and ego
He thought he was invincible
Because he was an artist.

SPLODGE: What are you saying?
He was an artist, and a great one.

PODGE: The artist is the servant of the public
Not its master.
And he who lives by the public
Can also die by the public.
As for so-called wit -

SPLODGE: Remember where you are
Remember who you're speaking to.

PODGE: A laboured, shallow, formulaic wit
The weapon of a fat and ugly man
Who knows he is intrinsically dull.
I'm sure he practised every word he said
In front of mirrors, ere he ventured out.

ROSS: *[Remembering]* I told him he should flee to France
I told him not to prosecute
But he was blinded by Bosie
That spoilt vindictive child

SASSOON: It was a fine, brave thing he did

PODGE: There's nothing brave in self-inflicted wounds

SASSOON: Brave? What do you know of brave?
This man here is braver
Than I could ever be,
Braver than you can conceive.
Think of it, twenty years ago and more.
Wilde in Wandsworth Prison
But now declared a bankrupt
The last humiliation
Up again to the High Court of Bankruptcy
Paraded in convict stripes and chains
The public staring, laughing, spitting
Never was man so alone

[He casually points at ROSS]

And this man here, his first and truest love,
The morning of the hearing

[ROSS rises]

Rose and dressed most carefully

[ROSS mimes the descriptions of dress]

SASSOON: Full morning coat, striped trousers
Wing collar, cravat, grey spats,
Tie pin and top hat of silk plush –
And dressed like this, came up to town
To dignify the outcast with respect.

*[SASSOON, moving to the side of the stage, becomes 'WILDE'
He shuffles across the stage as if heavy irons.*

ROSS watches intently as 'WILDE' approaches.

*As 'WILDE' gets near, ROSS steps forward and slowly, solemnly raises his
hat. Time seems to stand still.*

*A long look passes between them, in silence. ROSS steps back and gestures
politely to 'WILDE' as if to say: 'After you.' 'WILDE' passes on.*

SASSOON reverts to himself. ROSS returns to his armchair.]

SASSOON: You could not do that.
I doubt if six men in England
Could have done that.

SPLODGE: *(In awe)* You would not think to look at him
He could be such a hero.

SASSOON: He did not have to do it
Expose himself to shame and ridicule.

PODGE: My point exactly
Only a fool would do so willingly

(An icy silence)

SASSOON: *[With ire]* You've said enough. You'd better go.

(He becomes more visibly agitated)

Coward by name.....
It's men like you who make me glad
To get back to the Front.

ROSS: Don't be so harsh on him.
He has no experience of love
And there are many different kinds of front.

[SPLODGE, realising the tensions in the room, approaches PODGE and puts a 'sisterly' arm around his shoulders.]

He will find his in time.

SPLODGE: We'd better go, Podge
Trust you to go upsetting people

PODGE: Me? *[PODGE pulls away from SPLODGE]*
I am charm itself

[SPLODGE becomes more irritated.]

But I cannot abide the cult of Oscar
Or the man himself.

SPLODGE: You are jealous.
You're pining for a cult all of your own.

SASSOON: And you are the lesser man for it
It's why you'll never be as great a writer
You want too much that people like you.

PODGE: Mr Sassoon – may I call you Siegfried?

SASSOON: You may not –

PODGE: Well, anyway,
It's been enchanting meeting you.
I realise the feeling may be one-sided,
But I keep a book of notables I've met

*[He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a tatty note-book.
He opens the note book and reads casually, pointing to the names affectionately]*

This year alone there's Scott Moncrieff
Jerome Kern, Beatrice Lillie,
Fay Compton, Bernard Shaw,
[He flips the pages] Oh – and dozens more.
I'll be delighted to add you to their number.

*[SASSOON turns away from PODGE.
PODGE shrugs, puts the book back into his pocket and turns to ROSS]*

Mr Ross, thank you so much
For the macaroon.
We'd love to stay, but we have
An urgent appointment
To traumatise Twickenham. *[He exits flamboyantly.]*

SPLODGE: Oh, stop it Podge.

[She looks quite flustered, not quite sure what to do]

I'm sorry, Mr. Ross, but he can't help it.

[She follows PODGE out. SASSOON follows and closes the door behind her.]

SCENE 9

[The lights dim to an evening twilight. SASSOON returns, clearly suffering.]

SASSOON: This beastly headache.
That awful boy's done it no good at all.
I cannot think for the throbbing
I'd better go as well.

ROSS: I'll see you out.

[He gets up and walks SASSOON to the edge of the stage. They shake hands, hold it looking at each other.]

SASSOON: *[With great affection]* You don't look well.

ROSS: I have never been well since I was a child.

SASSOON: You need rest.

ROSS: *[Quite agitated]* How can I rest? I am going to Australia
A gallery wants advice on buying art
And they are paying well.
I think I will enjoy Australia.
I always fit in well
With the criminal classes.

SASSOON: Will I see you again before you go?

ROSS: I think not.

SASSOON: What can I say? I owe everything to you.

ROSS: And have given me so much in return.
We have traded well on the stock exchange of friendship.

SASSOON: I shall be back to the Front soon
But I will carry you there in my heart.

ROSS: And that I'm glad to say
Is as near as I will get to it.
Protect yourself, my dear.
The world still needs you.

SASSOON: And you

ROSS: No. It has had the best of me.

[SASSOON leaves abruptly.

The lighting dims.

ROSS turns into the darkness at the back of the stage.

SCENE 10

[Each character, on entrance, stands distant from the rest. They face outwards, never addressing each other. (Each Spotlit separately).

*ROSS comes forward to stage front, slightly off centre left.
Fade in warm spot on ROSS.]*

ROSS: Silence now in Piccadilly
Just the hissing of the gas,
And the blood beating in my veins
I hear the pounding of my heart
Erratic, overloaded
It feels huge within my chest
Rising almost to my throat
Until I choke.

[SASSOON enters quietly and stands to the left of ROSS, expand lighting]

SASSOON: I will go back again
To mud and shit and flooded dugouts
To barbed wire, shells
And machine gun madness.

ROSS: Nowadays all I ask of the friends that I have left
Is that they last until the end of dinner.
But I cannot now be sure
That I will last myself.

[SPLODGE enters quietly and stands to the right of ROSS]

Soon, soon, my love, my Oscar

SPLODGE: Oh Podge, what will I do with you?
A love never to be returned
I thought one day you might –
Don't think you really have such – er - affairs, affairs.

SASSOON: I see my men, scrawny, famished, filthy
White and shivering in October rain
They strip to wash, Their skin soft and silky –
Not what you'd expect – And trust in their eyes.

ROSS: I will join you again
Not in a sappy superstitious way
I will not follow you into faith

[PODGE enters quietly and stands next to SPLODGE]

PODGE: No, Mr Ross, you are wrong
I have known love.
Two years of it before the war.
Two years of constant sunshine
And Cornish idyll. I was thirteen and he –
Twenty years my senior, my senior.

I see him on a crisp white beach
Sketchbook in hand
And later in the Foresters

SPLODGE: For all your talk, it's just a front
To tease the fuddy-duddies.

SASSOON: I miss them. I love them, I love them.

ROSS: But I would like my ashes to lie
In Pere Lachaise

SPLODGE: You are too nice to be
An abomination in the sight of God.
And now I am Esmé Tyson-Wynne

PODGE: His brasses gleaming in the sun
A god in uniform.

SASSOON: Damn you, Winston,
You smug belligerent toad
Why must you be so right?

SPLODGE: Wife of Flight-Lieutenant
Lyndon Charles Tyson, RFC

PODGE: And then he died.

ROSS: Under Epstein's enigmatic Sphinx
With the mutilated genitals

SASSOON: Nowhere do we fill our lives so full

As in this miserable, endless stinking war

PODGE: "Each man kills the thing he loves"
To quote the mountebank.

SPLODGE: I got engaged to make Podge jealous
Thought I could make him pop the question too.
Fat chance. I was a fool.

SASSOON: I want to know everything in life
The best, the worst

SPLODGE: And now my husband flies in Sopwiths

SASSOON: Yet long for numbness, for nothing

PODGE: And I killed mine with my tubercular glands.

SPLODGE: High over the Downs
And maybe, next week

PODGE: Always, Philip, always you are with me
And I will never go through that again

SASSOON: Maybe this time I can take a hit
To end all these confusions

SPLODGE: France.
He wants to lie with me
But I am scared of childbirth.
I am too young.
And what I really want's a pal like Plodge.
Where will it all end?

PODGE: I will not love, not like that,
I will protect myself
And not be fooled by truth.
I will hide in plain sight:
'Mad about the boy?'

SPLODGE: Can one love two?
The word of God says No
And I must fight myself.

SASSOON: The lucky ones are out of it,
The dead are well off out of it.

PODGE: Is better on the stage
And from the mouths of women.

ROSS: What a perfect symbol of our lives
And of our fate.

[They move closer together forming a close bond. Spots off, general lighting changes to bright.]

ROSS: There is no fate but I have fought it

REST: There is no fate but we will fight it

ROSS: I have carved the space to be what I can be

REST: We will carve the space to be what we can be

ALL: Out of ourselves,
Out of our lives,
Out of the world

*[Lighting softens.
They close together almost in a circle and slowly join hands]*

To make our lives the best we can
And finally to make a truce
And peace.

[Gradual fade to blackout].

THE END