

## **FISHING**

A pocket opera libretto in one act by Peter Scott-Presland

### SCENE

I envisage this being played in the round, though it is not essential. A bare stage, with four chairs at the corners of what might be a boxing ring. A piano aside from them. The action takes place in the year 2000, but then in memory returns to 1935. Period indicated by costume.

### CAST

Alfred Douglas: 65-ish. Shrivelled, wrinkled, bulbous white nose. No trace of the great beauty of the 1890s. His costume would have been considered old-fashioned even in the mid-1930s – wing collar like Neville Chamberlain's, maybe tweeds. [NB. There should be no hint that this is Oscar Wilde's lover; the audience should discover it at the same time as Philip's mother – see script.] I think his music should have echoes of the Gay Nineties – music hall, operetta.

Old Philip: 79, frail. A rug over his knees, a book of poems in his hand. A hint in the lighting of a flickering fire.

Young Philip: 14, handsome. He is on holiday. Short-sleeved Fair Isle sweater, shorts.

Mrs Dalton: 35 - 40, a working single mother, slightly harassed. [Philip's father is dead]

The singers all sit in the chairs, and come forward into the scene as required, with the exception of Old Philip, who stays sitting throughout. Hand props are kept by the convenient chair.

DOUGLAS occasionally uses words which have a double meaning, but he has no awareness of this fact, and their use is entirely innocent.

## SCRIPT

*[Spotlight on OLD PHILIP: He struggles to read, gives up, stares in the fire. It flickers and fades]*

OP:           The fire flickers  
              I cannot see to read any more  
              It fades,  
              As transient and fitful as memory.  
              But memories return.  
              The pier. Waves below.  
              A bobbing hook. The swaying line.

*[Over these last two lines YOUNG PHILIP takes up position, fishing rod in hand on Brighton Pier, a small bucket at his feet.]*

DOUGLAS: *[Distant, from his chair]*    Won't you say hello?  
  Won't you say hello?

*[Over OLD PHILIP's lines he comes forward to YOUNG PHILIP.]*

OP:           I can never forget him.  
              Never forgive him.  
              Never forgive myself.

              I read poems from his book every day  
              And always in my mind I hear him ... See him...

DOUGLAS:   What ho! Fishing again, young fellow-me-lad?

YP:           Sir?

DOUGLAS:   I saw you here yesterday.  
              And the day before.  
              I have watched you all week.  
              Do you like fishing? *[Pause]*

MRS D.: *[from her chair]*  
              Answer the question  
              Speak when spoken to.

YP:           Yes sir

DOUGLAS: I thought you must.  
You seem to catch so few  
Yet still you come.

YP: I like it very much.  
You can lose yourself in looking at the waves.  
And no-one bothers you.

DOUGLAS: Am I bothering you?

MRS. D: Answer the question.  
Speak when spoken to.

YP: Not at all.  
Thank you, sir.

But today I've caught nothing.

DOUGLAS: So I see.  
How long have you been here?  
Here on the pier today?

YP: Three hours, sir.

DOUGLAS: So long, and still an empty bucket.  
It's all in the wrist and forearm, you know.

YP: What is?

DOUGLAS: The secret of success.  
I know something about it,  
I'm something of a fly fisherman.

YP: You, sir?

DOUGLAS: Believe me.  
The slippery speckled trout, the crafty pike,  
Hidden in the reeds.  
Silvery salmon; carp, queen of rivers.  
Each with its ways.  
Each a challenge,  
And a strategy for each.  
Mostly rivers and lakes of course,

But the principle's the same.

YP: Really? Oh teach me, sir,  
I long to take a big fish home.  
For our supper  
To please my mother.

DOUGLAS: From here, from the pier  
You need a forward cast.  
The rod, a lever, gives energy to the line.  
Let me show you, see.

*[He leans over the boy, his hands over the boy's. He pulls the rod in an arc overhead, until it's parallel with the ground behind them, and then flicks it high overhead so the line spins out a distance. This is conveyed by their eyes – there is no line on the rod.]*

YP: Gracious heavens!  
I've never put it out so far before.

DOUGLAS: What is your bait, lad?

YP: Sandworms, sir.

DOUGLAS: No good - they disintegrate.  
You need a pheasant tail nymph  
Or some poppers or a woolly buggler.  
All good flies, and sturdy.  
I still have some, I think.  
I'll bring them if you like.

YP: Would you sir? That's very kind.

DOUGLAS: Now let's see if you can do it for yourself.  
Remember what I said.  
It's all in the wrist and forearm.  
So pull it back.... And over... And flick... and stop!  
Bravo! Well done!

OP: All afternoon I cast and hauled  
And made another cast.  
And I caught fish.

The sun blazed down, and slowly bent  
Towards the west.

DOUGLAS: Well done again. How many is that now?

YP: Five, sir.

DOUGLAS: That's very good off Brighton Pier.

YP: I can't wait to show Freddie. That's my brother, sir.

DOUGLAS: I think you've earned some tea. My treat. And a Chelsea Bun.

YP: Oh yes, please sir. I'm ravenous.

DOUGLAS: In that case we will have a slap-up spread.

*[At this point the music should become some kind of love duet to food!  
Interweave the lines as you wish.]*

Eclairs and French fancies

YP: And doughnuts and cream slices.

DOUGLAS: Cream slices! How I love cream slices!

YP: So do I!

DOUGLAS: How about cream horns?

YP: Oh yes.

DOUGLAS: And scones [rhymes with bones] with raspberry jam.

YP: You mean scones [rhymes with dons]

DOUGLAS: Yes, scones [rhymes with bones]

YP: And cream?

DOUGLAS: Of course. How are you on cake?

YP: I love cake

DOUGLAS: And I. Victoria sponge

YP: With cream. And jam.

DOUGLAS/YP: And rich moist fruit cake.  
Mmmmm!

DOUGLAS: Then come with me.  
We'll stop at a little baker I know  
I have a small studio in a basement  
In Nizell's Avenue in Hove.

*[Lights change. They travel across stage. Pull up their chairs in the middle. Lounge to suggest they are easy chairs.]*

OP: In those days we were trusting  
We did what grown-ups told us  
We believed what they said.  
We did as we were told.

*[Lights change on the middle. Mellow atmosphere. Tea and cream cakes.]*

DOUGLAS: Where are you at school, Philip?

YP: Lancing, sir. I have a scholarship.  
My father's dead.  
*[Ashamed]* We're rather poor.

DOUGLAS: I was Winchester.  
We used to play you at cricket.  
Do you like it? Lancing, I mean.

YP: Yes sir. I don't like cricket.

DOUGLAS: Nor did I. Another cake?

YP: I couldn't.

DOUGLAS: What, a growing lad like you? Go on *[PHILIP takes another cake]*  
So, what do you like most at Lancing?

YP: I like languages the best. French and Italian.  
But German I hate.

DOUGLAS: So do I. Filthy language, filthy people.  
Though Hitler's right about the Jews.

YP: I think Hitler's a rotten egg!

DOUGLAS: Do you now? Well, let's not quarrel.  
I speak French quite well, you know.  
I translated from the French.  
Do you know of Salome?

YP: Of course. She's in the bible.  
She did a dance for Herod.

DOUGLAS: So she did. With seven veils. That was in our play – we  
invented it - *[he stops himself]*  
Would you like to speak French?  
Nous pouvons parler en Français si tu veux

YP: *[Shudders]* Ugh. No thank you, sir. I'm on holiday.

DOUGLAS: What else do you like?

YP: I like –

DOUGLAS: Yes?

YP: I like poetry, sir.

DOUGLAS: You make it sound like some filthy habit  
Like picking your nose.

YP: It's just that – well – the other chaps  
Make fun of me.  
They're more keen on sport and stuff.

DOUGLAS: Ah.... Rise above them.  
You're better far than they.  
The soul of the artist is pure alabaster  
And wreathed in precious amaranths.

YP: I'm not an artist –

DOUGLAS: But you will be. You will be.  
You show all the signs  
You are sensitive to poetry and beauty

YP: Sometimes, when I'm fishing  
And I'm getting bored  
I say poems to myself

DOUGLAS: [*shyly*] Could you say one to me?

YP: No.

DOUGLAS: Why not?

YP: It's sappy

DOUGLAS: No! No! Never!  
It is a proud escutcheon  
A blazon of superiority  
Of intellect, perception and of soul.  
Like liquid amber on the breath,  
Both sword and shield  
Against the world's hostility

Go on. Say one. For me.

YP: So, we'll go no more a roving  
So late into the night  
Though the heart is still as loving  
And the moon be still as bright  
For – for er – I can't remember

DOUGLAS: For the sword outwears its sheath  
And the soul wears out the breast

YP: And the soul wears out the breast  
And the heart must pause to – pause to –

DOUGLAS: Breathe.  
And love itself have rest.

DOUGLAS/YP: Though the night was made for loving  
And the day returns too soon  
Yet we'll go no more a-roving  
By the light of the moon.

*[Over the last two lines, he touches the boy's hair.]*

DOUGLAS: *[Soft, to himself]*  
Such beauty, such beauty.  
Beauteous angel  
Hair, spun gold.  
Rich lips, carnation red  
And skin of ivory, white and smooth and fine  
Once I was such a one.  
I was beloved once.

YP: Sir?

DOUGLAS: You recite very prettily. Byron, was it not?  
They called him 'Mad, bad and dangerous to know.'  
And so he was. An irreligious libertine.  
But such beauty he could make.

YP: What's a libertine, sir?

DOUGLAS: A libertine?  
A man who lives but for himself,  
And for the whim of pleasure.  
And doesn't go to church.  
Do you go to church?

YP: To chapel, sir.

DOUGLAS: But do you believe in it?

YP: I don't know, sir

DOUGLAS: But you must, you must.  
It was the making and saving of me.  
And so it will for you.  
You see, I recognise the sickness in your soul...  
I – *[pause]* I am a poet too, you know.

YP: Really? Would I know your poems?

DOUGLAS: I doubt it. Perhaps when you are older –

*[Pause. A decision]*

I'd like you to have something.  
Perhaps it will speak to you.

YP: Something for me?

DOUGLAS: From me to you. Why not?  
I sense a fellow feeling  
The soul of an artist.

*[He goes to the chair of the sleeping OLD PHILIP and takes the book of poems from his lap.]*

Here. Let me inscribe it.

*[Writes]* To Philip  
To one who dreams  
And longs for what he cannot have  
From another fervid seeker after truth  
Your friend... etc etc.

Here.

YP: Oh sir, you are too kind.

DOUGLAS: I think we can advance beyond 'sir' now  
Don't you? Call me Alfred.

YP: I shall cherish it always – *[shyly]* Alfred.

DOUGLAS: And now it is nearly six o'clock  
And I must go to Mass  
And you to the bosom of your loving family.

YP: Only my mother sir.

DOUGLAS: But she will wonder where you are.  
And she will want that fish.

Where do you live?

YP: In Ovingdean.

DOUGLAS: There is a bus along the sea front.  
When I was your age, we had a goat cart  
My sister and I –

YP: What's a goat cart?

DOUGLAS: A little cart pulled by a goat.  
They were all the rage in Brighton.  
I miss them. Here –

*[He fishes in his pocket, pulls out a coin]*

That will pay your fare home  
Now don't forget your rod and line  
And your fish. And your book.  
Now go.

*[Shoos YOUNG PHILIP out. Turns out his pockets.]*

And that's the last till Olive sends  
My next allowance. To live on scraps like these!  
No more bets on horses now for me.  
Hey ho.

*[Lights change. An old-fashioned door bell of the kind that rings when a door is opened. MRS D to centre stage.]*

MRS D: Philip, is that you? Where have you been?

YP: *[rushing in]* Sorry, mother, but you'll not believe –  
Look, I caught some fish.

MRS D: So you have.  
We'll have those for our tea.  
That's come at the right time.  
There's nothing in the house.

YP: You have them, I'm not hungry.

MRS D: Look at you.  
Jam all round your mouth.  
What have you been eating?

YP: Scones. *[He pronounces it the AD way]*

MRS D: 'Scones', is it?!  
Where did you learn to speak all posh like that?

YP: And jam. And éclairs. And cream horns.  
He took me to his flat in Hove for tea.

MRS D: Who did?

YP: He taught me how to cast a line as well –  
You just flick your wrist like this *[He does so. It looks slightly fey.]*  
It's easy when you know.

MRS D: Who did?

YP: I met this nice man on the pier.  
He man took me home to tea.  
He was ever so interesting. He's a poet.  
He gave me some of his poems. Look!

*[He fishes out the book of poems.]*

He signed it for me. See.

*[MRS D reads. She mouths the words, AD sings them from his seat]*

AD: To Philip  
To one who dreams  
And longs for what he cannot have

*[The voice segues into MRS D's – there is a brief overlap]*

MRS D: From another fervid seeker after truth  
Your friend... Alfred Douglas.

*[DOUGLAS joins in this from his seat. MRS D turns the page over.]*

MRS D:               Sonnets of Lord Alfred Douglas.  
                          Oh, oh. Saints preserve us!  
                          Filthy. Abominable. Filthy.

*[She tries to tear up the book, which proves obstinately durable.]*

                          What did he do to you?  
                          Did he touch you?  
                          Did he try to put his hands  
                          On - ?  
                          If he laid a finger on you  
                          I'll kill him, so help me.  
                          What did he do to you?

YP:                    Nothing. He did nothing at all.  
                          He taught me how to cast my rod  
                          And gave me tea.

MRS D:               Disgusting. Disgusting.

*[She is literally frothing. She tries to tear the book with her teeth. In desperation:]*

MRS D:               Bring me some matches. I'll burn this evil book.

YP:                    It's only poems. Poems can't be evil.

MRS D:               You see? Already he's corrupted you.  
                          Take your clothes off.

*[She attempts to rip the clothes off PHILIP's body.]*

YP:                    Stop it, mother. You're hurting me.

MRS D:               I'm going to give you a good scrubbing all over.  
                          I'll wash his evil out of you.

YP:                    What has he done?

MRS D:               Never you mind what he's done.  
                          He did it, and that's enough.  
                          Now promise me  
                          You'll never ever talk to him again.

YP: What has he done?

MRS D: Promise me. Swear on your father's grave.

YP: But if he comes along the pier –

MRS D: Then don't go to the pier

YP: I must go to the pier.

MRS D: Why must you go to the pier?  
You want to see him, don't you?  
He has corrupted you.  
But I forbid it – do you understand?

YP: Yes, mother.

MRS D: Then swear. Swear.

YP: *[Grumbling]* All right. I swear.

MRS D: What do you swear?

YP: I swear I'll never talk  
To Alfred ever again.

MRS D: 'Alfred', is it? This is worse than I thought.  
Come with me to the bathroom.

*[She grabs him and tugs him off the stage.*

We'll run a bath and scrub you clean.  
And burn this rotten filth.

YP: But what's he done? What has he done?

*[Lights change. OLD PHILIP again.]*

OP: She never did explain. All she would say was

MRS D: If you don't know then I'm not telling you.  
And putting ideas in your head.

*[They exit, and the voices fade. Spotlight on OLD PHILIP.]*

OP:                    Oh how I longed to see that man again.  
                          To hear his talk  
                          And eat his scones with jam and cream.  
                          But I had sworn. On father's grave.  
                          And that was a mighty oath.

                          She could not burn the book.  
                          The cover would not take the flame  
                          In summer there was no fire  
                          To burn it on.  
                          I rescued it when her back was turned  
                          And hid it in the garden shed.

                          I did not see him again that holiday  
                          Although I thought about him often.  
                          Term came round. Lower Fourth.  
                          Football, hockey, fives  
                          And no escape  
                          I fell in love with Clayton Minor  
                          And no escape

                          The year passed  
                          The sun shone again  
                          Fred Perry had won Wimbledon  
                          And soon there'd be Olympics in Berlin  
                          And I was on the pier once more in Brighton

*[Lights change. Sound of the sea. YOUNG PHILIP again on the pier, with his fishing rod. He casts more expertly. DOUGLAS approaches, watches with satisfaction.]*

DOUGLAS:            Hello, young fellow-me-lad. What ho!  
                          It's Philip, ain't it?

*[There is no reaction. DOUGLAS gradually through this realises that something is wrong, and his joviality appears more and more to be whistling in the dark.]*

                          I was sorry not to see you again last year.  
                          Our little feast quite laid me low.

Too rich for my sad stomach.  
No more cream éclairs for me.

*[Pause for reaction. There is none.]*

You learnt your lesson well, I see.  
That flick of the wrist – very good, very good.  
And how is school? How is Lancing?

*[No reaction.]*

Have you learnt any good poems this year?  
Perhaps – you have learned – one of mine...

*[Still waiting for a reaction. There is none. YOUNG PHILIP keeps his head down, looking at the sea below, but we can see from his rigid back that he is well aware of what is going on. Music here echoes his mother's injunctions.]*

DOUGLAS: Don't you remember me? I gave you tea  
And taught you how to use your wrist  
To get the nymph to fly, the line spin out.  
We had eclairs, remember? And French fancies,  
Doughnuts and cream slices.

*[Another pause. YOUNG PHILIP turns his back more firmly. DOUGLAS can be in no doubt. An outburst.]*

DOUGLAS: Not you too, Philip!  
God, why must you punish me?  
Still you punish me for forty years ago.  
What more can I do? I joined the church,  
Repent my sins each day, go to mass  
*[pron. 'maas', in the Catholic way]*  
And say confession.  
I have confessed the sin of unkindness  
Atoned for Oscar, my slanders  
And my feuds with Frank Harris  
I made my peace with Robbie Ross at last.  
I wrote of Oscar's greatness, not his weakness.  
What more can I do?  
Sweet Jesus take this burden from my shoulders  
This everlasting loneliness and shame.

*[To PHILIP]* I never did you harm, my boy? Did I?  
I only fed you cakes and wished you well  
My only sin the sin of envy of your youth.  
What did I do, Philip? What did I do?  
The least that being a gentleman demands  
Is. Tell me what I did to you.

*[Still obstinate silence. DOUGLAS recognises PHILIP is determined to avoid him. He makes a very formal, old-fashioned bow.]*

DOUGLAS: I thought I recognised  
A soul of purest alabaster  
I was mistaken.  
At least I knew an artist when I saw one.

*[He exits. As he goes, an echo, a cry to the world.]*

Is there no forgiveness, is there no end to it?

*[A light change. OLD PHILIP by the fire.]*

OP: An artist? Ha! Oh, how I wish I was.  
But war and building the New Jerusalem  
Put paid to all those fancy daydreams.  
To build a hospital was more important  
Than writing a sonnet. Or learning one.

I saw his death in the papers.  
1941. I was in the RAF, aged twenty  
And lost my heart to an aircraftsman,  
Second class.

It was not true that I forgot him.  
I never ceased to think of him  
A sad old shrivelled man, kind to me  
Whose kindness I repaid with learned contempt.

Perhaps if I had joined the church  
I would have found forgiveness  
And a kind of peace.  
But I could not. And did not.

Sometimes it was good:

DOUGLAS: You must rise above them  
You are better far than they.

OP: That stood me in good stead  
With the hatred of the world  
For me and all my kind  
Fifty years ago.  
But mostly I have bowed  
Beneath the burden of guilt  
It pressed on me

Death comes. I see his shadow fall.  
I thought it would dissolve all things.  
But at the last the guilt still crushes me.

I knew no better  
That is all that I can plead.  
And I believed  
What grown-ups told me.

MOTHER: Answer the question  
Speak when spoken to  
Do what you are told

DOUGLAS: Come with me  
Come with me

*[This is a kind of musical battle between MRS D and DOUGLAS in the background; you can pretty much choose which lines you'd like to use to express it.]*

DOUGLAS: Such beauty, such beauty

MRS D: Burn this rotten filth

DOUGLAS: Rise above it  
We must both rise above it.

MRS D: Filthy. Abominable.

*[Her interjections fade, leaving the duet:]*

OLD P/DOUGLAS:      Though the night was made for loving  
                              And the day returns too soon  
                              Yet we'll go no more a-roving  
                              By the light of the moon.

*[OP slumps in the chair. Fade to -]*

**BLACKOUT**