

The Queer Century



1944: Home Fires

A one-act chamber opera

Music by Robert Ely

Libretto by Peter Scott-Presland

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HOME FIRES

CAST

Ivor Novello (Tenor)

An extremely handsome and well-preserved man of fifty. Pampered, sheltered and childish, but generous. Used to seducing in all kinds of ways. Very soft attractive voice.

Frankie Fraser (Baritone)

A good-looking lad of 20, but dangerous. More than a touch of psycho.

Mrs Clara Novello-Davies (Mezzo)

Ivor Novello's mother. She dies about a year before this, so she is in his memory. A large blowsy woman, self-dramatising, alcoholic, smothering.

Warder

SCENE

It is 18th May 1944. A cell at Wormwood Scrubs Prison. A bare bench. Plaindim lighting.

HOME FIRES

[WARDER shows IVOR into his cell. He is wearing a loose shabby grey jacket and trousers – prison clothes.]

WARDER: This is your cell

IVOR: Thank you *[Dismayed]*

WARDER: Don't worry, you'll get used to it
It's only a month

IVOR: May I have a cigarette?

WARDER: Sorry, Mr Novello
I'm not allowed
Perhaps your friends can bring you some
You can have visitors soon
Bear up
It's just a matter of will power

[WARDER leaves]

IVOR: Oh the shame.
My reputation ruined
I have filled Drury Lane
For nearly ten years
Night after night
With music and romance
Glamorous Night
Careless Rapture
The Dancing Years

Who will want to see me now,
A common criminal.
Look at me.
What do I look like?
I came in here dressed like a gentleman

Double breasted Glen Plain suit
Shirt from Jermyn Street
Silk tie and handkerchief
In the top breast pocket
Straight from the Court of London Sessions.

Not even pyjamas
I will miss my silk pyjamas

I need a cigarette
This craving is torture.

Oh Mam, I have let you down
So badly
I'm so glad you didn't live to see this

[CLARA appears]

CLARA: Oh Ivor, I will always live
In your memory
All my life I lived for you
And now I live in you

IVOR: I am so ashamed

CLARA: You have nothing to be ashamed of
That dreadful common typist
Took advantage of you.
She was in love with you

IVOR: Grace Walton?

CLARA: Constable. Not Walton, Grace Constable
She used a phoney name
So she could con you

IVOR: She was not in love with me

CLARA: Ivor, *everyone* falls in love with you

IVOR: *[Sighs]* I know. It is a great bore.

CLARA: My poor boy. Come here.

[She cradles his head in her ample bosom]

She lied to you
Promised you could keep your car
To use at weekends
While her company would own it
And get the petrol

IVOR: I didn't understand what was going on

CLARA: Of course you didn't
You were made for fairy tale and fantasy
What would you know of petrol coupons?

IVOR: I tried, Mam
To get my own coupons
I told them I was doing work
Of national importance

CLARA: Of course you were
You were keeping up morale

IVOR: They turned me down

CLARA: This wretched war
If I had had my way
It would never have happened

IVOR: *[protesting]* Mam...

CLARA: I should have sung for Hitler
I was all ready to go to Berlin
With my Welsh Grandmothers' Choir
To sing for him
I would have changed his mind
With the power of music

IVOR: Don't fret, darling

It's over now
There's nothing to be done
Peace, peace, darling

[She fades]

CLARA: Bear up, Ivor
Be strong, be proud
A son of the Valleys

[IVOR is left alone. He is twitchy without cigarettes. WARDER opens the door. Pushes FRANKIE in there.]

WARDER: Get back in there Fraser.
And watch yourself

FRANKIE: Fuck off, screw.

WARDER: I'll have you.

FRANKIE: How? I got no privileges to lose.

WARDER: One morning, when you're slopping out
Me and some mates, get you in a corner
You'll feel it

FRANKIE: You and whose army?
I can take you all down.
I just done a screw in Feltham
For having a go at me
About my stitching

WARDER: And what good did that do you?
Got you here
And now they're going to fry your brain

[FRANKIE is about the clock the WARDER, but IVOR intervenes]

IVOR: *[To the WARDER]*
Excuse me, please. I don't mean to interrupt
But won't you introduce me?

WARDER: This sorry human being
Is Frankie Fraser
Sorry, Mr Novello,
He's scum of the earth
But we're short of cells
Couldn't find you anything better
We'll move you when we can

IVOR: You're too kind

WARDER: *[To FRANKIE]*
And you behave yourself
With Mr Novello
We'll be watching you like hawks.

[WARDEN leaves. FRANKIE stares after him aggressively.]

IVOR: Good afternoon, Mr Fraser
I'm Ivor Novello, but
I'd be grateful if you'd call me Ivor.

[He holds out his hand.]

FRANKIE: Are you queer?

IVOR: What makes you think that?

FRANKIE: You're in the theatre

IVOR: Is everyone in the theatre queer?

FRANKIE: You tell me

IVOR: Quite a few, it's true.
I have a show running at the Adelphi
Called *The Dancing Years*
I've heard it called *The Prancing Queers*

[FRANKIE laughs, and it breaks the ice.]

FRANKIE: The prancing queers! That's a good one!
[Suddenly menacing again]

But are you?

IVOR: What can I say?
If I say yes, you'll do me over –
Is that the phrase? –
If I say no, you'll still be wondering

FRANKIE: Leave it out.
I've got to know, ain't I?

IVOR: Frankie, I am theatrical

FRANKIE: I know that

IVOR: And, yes, I'm musical

FRANKIE: That too
But – are you?
I need to know if I've got to watch my arse

IVOR: Frankie, I assure
You'll have no need to watch your arse
Quite the contrary

I'm Ivor, pure and simple,
A boy from the valleys
Who wants everyone to like him
I decided at a very early age
I would be very nice to everyone
However difficult it was.
I find it pays
I get niceness in return.
Friends? *[Offers hand]*

It will be much easier for both of us
If we can be friends. *[FRANKIE takes his hand]*

What are you here for?

FRANKIE: It's like I told the warder
They had me stitching mail bags
Eight stitches to the inch
You have to do
Screw said I wasn't doing enough
And belted me
Belted me while I was sitting down
A sack in my hands
I ask you, is that fair?

IVOR: Doesn't sound fair at all

FRANKIE: So they put me onto pounding
As a punishment.
Have to break up slates so small
The bits go through a sieve.
Ten and a half hours a day
And when you done it
The screws who watched you all day long
In little sentry boxes
Chuck the cunts away
Where's the point in that?
And it totally fucks your elbows
If you'll pardon my French
I wouldn't do it

IVOR: Can't say I blame you

FRANKIE: So they sent me here
They think I'm not all right in the head

IVOR: Will they make me sew mailbags?
You hear such awful stories
Do they still have the treadmill?
That's how they broke Oscar Wilde
On the treadmill in here

FRANKIE: Who?

IVOR: Oscar Wilde. Do they still have it?

FRANKIE: Nah. Ain't had that for forty years
You might not think it but
It's better than it was.
I know an old lag here
Johnny Ryan
He was a boy soldier in India
Chinned a Sergeant
Got ten years
That was sixty years ago

You couldn't see or talk to other cons
In those days
On exercise they put you in a hood
Hand on the shoulder of the man in front
To guide you
Like a fucking centipede
Only one to see was right in front
A trusty.
Johnny saw men hanged in Stafford nick
In public

IVOR: Do they still pick oakum?
Wilde picked oakum

[quote] "We tore the tarry rope to shreds
With blunt and bleeding nails"

Please tell me they don't pick oakum
I'll do anything but that
It will ruin my hands
I'll never play the piano again

FRANKIE: Nah, they won't make you do that
You're a toff, you are
Look at the screws,
Fighting with themselves
For the chance of crawling up your arse.

IVOR: I don't want any special treatment

FRANKIE: Sure you do.
You've had it all your life
You're soft as shit
They'll have you in the library, no fear
And playing in chapel Sunday
Your friends will bring your own clothes
And nice little tins of patay dee foy grass
And cartons of fags –

IVOR: Do you have a cigarette?

FRANKIE: I got a bit of snout. *[Produces tobacco pouch]*
Not much, mind, so go easy on it

IVOR: *[Bewildered]* What do you do with it?

FRANKIE: *[Resigned]* Here. Give it here.

[IVOR hands the pouch back.]

You're like a fucking baby, you are.

IVOR: I'm sorry.

FRANKIE: *[Rolling]* What you usually smoke?

IVOR: Abdullas. Turkish Number Five Plain.
I'm never without one.
I must smoke sixty a day.
I wish I had one now

FRANKIE: Nice, very nice. Cost a bomb.
Here.

*[Gives him a very thin roll-up. IVOR lights it with a match, coughs.
FRANKIE laughs.]*

FRANKIE: You'll get used to it.
Till your own come.

IVOR: Thank you.
I'll share mine with you of course

FRANKIE: Too right you will.

[They smoke a moment in companionable silence.]

FRANKIE: I had Abdullas once
Lorryload of cartons
From a Warehouse in West Ham
Lovely smoke
My first job
Stole three packets of players
Got sent to borstal
Well I had to, didn't I?
Six of us kids
Mum had three cleaning jobs
I stole to bring some extra money in
Quid here, quid there

I used to swim in the Thames
In the nude, with the rats
And catch the coins they threw
From the pleasure boats
Till I got too old
Only the young `uns got the sympathy

When I was a boxer
The shoes fell off my feet with use
During the boxing

I love this war.
I grew up in the blackout in this war
We'd go and nick a car
Smash a window
Nick some lengths of cloth
Or ladies stockings

Air raids are the best
When they're all down the shelter

And leave their front doors open
No police around
All called up
Headlights blacked out
No way to read
Your number plate

Before the war
Jewellery and furs
Safes for the safe-crackers
Now there's so much money
And stuff around –
Cigarettes, sugar, clothes
Petrol coupons, clothing coupons
Scotch under the arches
At London Bridge

Everyone's a thief
Steal stuff, sell it to a man
Man sells it to the shops
Shops sell to folks like you
Without the coupons
Everyone is at it
And it's wonderful

IVOR: Except I got caught
And twenty-eight days.

I hate the war
I cried when Chamberlain
Came back from Munich
Waving his piece of paper
I saw it on the newsreel
With Noel Coward
He got so angry that he hit me

But I thought things would carry on
Exactly as before

FRANKIE: They tried to get me in the army
But I went AWOL three times

They'll take prisoners, you know
They'll take any who can march
Into the mouth of a machine gun.

IVOR: Will we get bombs here?
What happens in an air raid?
I don't think I can stand it
I don't think I can take the noise
My ears are sensitive
I should have done my fire watching
On the roof of the Aldwych
But I fled to the shelter

You see? We're both the same
You fled from the army
I fled from the bombs

FRANKIE: But not cos I was scared
But cos I liked my life

IVOR: *[Delighted]* As I liked mine
Does nothing scare you?
I so admire that
I wish that I was like that

[FRANKIE is on the verge of a confession, which is not something that comes easily to him, but IVOR turns the full force of his gaze and his personality on him]

IVOR: Yes?

FRANKIE: It's – what the warder said
They're going to fry my brain

IVOR: No!

FRANKIE: They say I'm sick
I'm – what's the word?
A psychopath
Incurable
They want to take me

To Banstead Asylum
For electric shock treatment

IVOR: No! You poor, poor boy
You must not let them.
I had a – friend –
Who did something rather stupid

FRANKIE: What?

IVOR: Never mind what, it doesn't matter
But he was caught
And ordered to have – treatment
They gave shocks into his genitals
They gave shocks into his brain
He was tied down to the bed
A huge bung put into his mouth
To stop him screaming
He told me that the worst part
Was the smell of his own hair and flesh
Burning
Finally, when all else failed
They gave him a lobotomy
An icepick in the frontal brain
Through the eye socket

Now he is a husk
No memory, no emotion
A zombie

FRANKIE: Blimey!

IVOR: Promise me you'll never let them
Do that to you
Nothing justifies such treatment

FRANKIE: I must get out of here

IVOR: I'll speak for you
I can help
I have money

FRANKIE: I'll go on hunger strike

IVOR: I'll find you a solicitor

FRANKIE: I'll kill someone

IVOR: I can write to the Home Secretary

FRANKIE: I'd rather hang than not be me

[WARDER reappears]

WARDER: Time for lunch
You come down to the canteen
Mr Novello

IVOR: And my friend Frankie?
Will he come with me?

WARDER: He's on lockdown
He's too dangerous
He stays here
His food comes on a tray

IVOR: Please let him come
I need a friend for moral support
I'll vouch for him

WARDER: I'm sorry, Mr Novello
You ask too much

IVOR: I don't want to face the world alone
Look at me
There's nothing to hide behind
No make-up, no glamour
Let me stay with Frankie

WARDER: No, Mr Novello
You must
The other prisoners expect you

The warders want to meet you

[CLARA appears]

CLARA: Just your personality
And your god-given talents
No-one could ever begrudge you anything
Just to talk to people makes them feel good.
Remember Ivor you are beloved of the gods
When you were born you cried in perfect thirds

IVOR: This petty regulation will be the end of me
I have always been surrounded by people
Who loved me
When McKenna sent me down
I thought that on my own I'd 'find myself'
- Some rare new sense of wisdom
- Some revelation
- Some depth for my shallow soul

But no, not at all
I have learnt nothing
I am just the same
But bitter, bruised and angry
Oh Christ, help get me through this
And come out sane

[This is a quartet, with recorded chorus. So though they are written in order, they are actually simultaneous, as in 'Front'.]

IVOR: One day in maybe five weeks time
I must walk onstage once more
As Rudy Kleber
Again create the dream
But now the fantasy is ever tainted
With sordid memories
I don't think I can ever act again

CLARA: They love you, Ivor
They have always loved you
And they always will

You threw your heart at
At the feet of every audience
They always picked it up
Give them your heart now

FRANKIE: For Gawd's sake, Ivor
It's just a bite of lunch
Some horrible mince
And some old grey spuds
It isn't life or death
You'll be back in half an hour
Keep your pecker up

WARDER: I'm sure you'll find
It's better than you think
Everyone is so excited
And eager to see you
Shake your hand
You have no shortage of admirers here

[Offstage the prisoners start singing, softly at first but growing. I hope the effect is emotional and sentimental, like the Humming Chorus in 'Madame Butterfly'. It might be better hummed.]

CHORUS: Keep the home fires burning
Though your hearts are yearning
Though your boys are far away
They dream of home
There's a silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining
Turn the dark cloud inside out
Till the boys come home

CLARA/WARDER: You see? They really love/like you, Ivor
You have won your place in their hearts
And nothing can dislodge you now
Let them give you courage
Let them give you strength
You are a star, Ivor
Always a star

WARDER: Can I have your autograph?

FRANKIE: What's that tune? I know that tune
I remember that from when I was a kid

[Hums a bit]

Blimey, did you write that?
Just wait till I tell Ruby, Mike and Jock
The gang'll not believe it
Ivor Novello
I shared a cell with Ivor Novello
And he was such a gent, a real gent
I feel happier just for being with him
And Ivor, I'll get out unbroken
Just you see
Unbroken

IVOR: I know no other way to live
Except in glamour, music and romance
My heart is all I give
To live, to love, to dance
Impervious to fashion, immune to tears
This too will fade to nothing down the years
I can do nothing else but entertain
And give the tired world a chance to dream
My glittering stage impervious to pain
An ageless world where smiles reign supreme
The force of charm, the force of fantasy
Admits no doubts, and no reality.

BLACKOUT