

The Queer Century



1962/1975: The Dog It Was That Died

A one-act chamber opera

Music by Robert Ely

Libretto by Peter Scott-Presland

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CAST:

Mrs Tish
[soprano] A Jack Russell Terrier, quite young. Nervous and highly strung - a little ball of compressed energy

Rinka
[contralto] A Great Dane. Immense calm and dignity except where the prospect of a walk is concerned.

Norman Scott
[tenor] A man in his 30s with a history of nervous disorders.

Jeremy Thorpe (spoken), Doctor (spoken), Andrew Newton (sung - bass) Played by the same person.

Peter Bessell and David Holmes (spoken) – offstage/recorded in second interlude

Orchestration

Harp
Alto Saxophone
Tenor Saxophone
Baritone Saxophone

SETTING & SYNOPSIS

The opera has several scenes in different settings, so nothing specific is needed. A low rostrum about 6ft x 3ft distinguishes the human level above the dog level. On it a bed and (later) a car seat. This breaks down as follows:

Prologue: Instrumental. Bare stage, voiceover, projection of newspaper headlines about JEREMY THORPE

Part ONE, Sc 1: November 1961

Norman Scott's bedroom at the house of Ursula Thorpe, in Oxted, Kent. THORPE has just met NORMAN and taken him to his mother's house. MRS TISH, a Jack Russell, explores the strange smells of the room and recalls her meeting with 'JEMMA-DOG' as she calls THORPE, when she went to the House of Commons with 'NORMA-DOG'.

NORMAN settles MRS TISH and goes to bed, THORPE enters the room and seduces him. MRS TISH watches from the corner in some distress.

PART ONE, Interlude Orchestral, projections of contemporary newspapers 1961-62

PART ONE, Sc. 2: May 1962

North Devon, the garden of the local doctor. MRS TISH, high on blood, has savaged his chickens, her mouth covered in blood and feathers. There is a suggestion that her state has been brought on by NORMAN's. Her plea for similar medication is interrupted when NORMAN and the Doctor arrive to put her down. She dies.

Interlude: Instrumental. Newspaper headlines 1962 – 79, focus on the Jeremy Thorpe trial. Spoken dialogue (offstage) over the music: THORPE plots with PETER BESSELL and DAVID HOLMES to kill NORMAN

Part TWO: October 1975

Porlock, North Somerset. RINKA, NORMAN's Great Dane, watches clientele of the Castle Hotel, unimpressed. She is calm and superior. NORMAN has a drink. He is waiting for ANDREW NEWMAN, the hitman who is masquerading as his protector. When he arrives the action moves outside, into his car and onto Exmoor. NEWTON shoots at NORMAN, misses, and kills RINKA by mistake. He panics and drives off.

Epilogue: NORMAN's lament over RINKA. He praises the uncomplicated devotion of animals over the greed and vicious stupidity of man. RINKA and MRS TISH reappear and sing of their love for him.

STYLE

It is important that the events should all be seen from the dogs' point of view, and that the humans should seem strange and alien, except for Scott. This is in part achieved by the way in which the dogs only communicate directly with the audience, and the humans only communicate with each other (except Norman). Where events such as the sex are described in the opera, the actions should not be physically reduplicated. Whether the humans are on or offstage is a matter for the director.

Mrs Tish and Rinka should not be dog impersonations – definitely not down on all fours – but should retain dog characteristics.

PART ONE: 1961-62

Prelude:

An instrumental prelude, over which, spoken (recorded?) offstage:

SCOTT: Detective Inspector Huntley? I have come to tell you about my homosexual relations with Jeremy Thorpe, MP.

SCENE ONE: November 1961. A bedroom at the house of Ursula Thorpe.

MRS TISH: (*entering. She sniffs and goes round the edge of the room.*)

Mould. Nasty. No-one here long time.
No heating. Me gonna be cold. [*Sniffs again.*]
Mouse smell. Definitely mouse smell.
They got mice, lots of mice.
Maybe me catch. Maybe me eat.
Nyum, nyum, nyum, nyum.

Me hungry. No dog food here.
All me have is boiled egg, like humans.
Crunch shell, nice, ach, ach, ach, ach
But egg boring and make farts.
Me need meat.

My Norma-dog – he pack leader –
He me pack of two – has no dog food.
Poor Norma-dog, has no money.
Poor Norma-dog, has no dog food,
Has no money, poor Norma-dog.
So he go Jemmy-dog,
Who live in big, big stone kennel,
Big clock too – bong! – bong! – bong! - bong!
[the Big Ben prelude to striking the hour]
Man on horse with sword outside,
But no horse poo, no horse smell,
He no move.
Lots of humans made of stone outside.
Other humans, real humans, walk down corridors.
Me want run after them,
But my Norma-dog tell me no,
We have see Jemmy dog.

[Mrs TISH sniffs round THORPE's feet in memory.]

Me like Jemmy-dog,
He talk me nice, smile me, rub my nose.
He smell nice flowers
Out of a bottle.

And he make me royal! Yes!
Big man say me no can go in big kennel,
But Jemmy-dog says King Charspannel can go in,
Cos King Chars say so,
And me might be bit King Charspannel.
So me royal! And go in, very grand!
Heh-heh-heh-heh. *[She pants]*

We come in country in Jemmy-dog car.
Jemmy-dog car called Rover!
Me had Cotswold friend called Rover,
We chase round and round.
So now we in country.
Me like country. Me like smell,
Simpler smell, sweeter smell.
Petrol? Pah! Pah! Pah!

[She rubs her muzzle with her paw to get rid of the smell]

We stay Jemmy-dog's motherbitch.
She Urse. Yes, you're right....
She not Urse-dog, she don't like dogs.
Only humans like dogs become dogs,
Part of pack.

[NORMAN comes in. MRS TISH leaps to greet him.]

NORMAN: Hello, Mrs Tish.
Who's a good doggie, then?
Who loves Mrs Tish?

MRS TISH: You do! Norma-dog loves Mrs Tish.
And Mrs Tish loves Norma-dog.
[Licks his hand excessively]

NORMAN: Now calm down.
We got to sleep.
People want us to be quiet.

MRS TISH: *[To audience]* He just clean his teeth.
Smell toothpaste.
Nyum, nyum, nyum.

NORMAN: So there's a nice blanket for you to sleep on,
So you won't get cold.
Get on the blanket there.

[MRS TISH tries to follow him; she wants to sleep on the bed.]

NORMAN: No. Not here.
Can't sleep on the bed, you leave hairs.

MRS. TISH: *[to audience]* Me?! Hairs?!

NORMAN: *[orders]* Blanket!
[MRS TISH goes and lies down.]
Good girl, good girl.

MRS TISH: He got his pills now to calm him down.
He take them water. He sleep now.

NORMAN: Night night, Mrs Tish.

MRS. TISH: Night, night, Norma-dog.

[A huge dog yawn. Puts her head on her paws.]

[A click and a creak of the door opening. JEREMY THORPE is coming in. He has a towel and some Vaseline in his hands.]

MRS TISH: Hello? Hello?
What Jemmy-dog doing here?
He has own basket down the corridor.
He got jar *[sniff]* smell sweet and sticky.
I think Vaseline.
Norma-dog put Vaseline on me
When I was puppy
When cat – Grr - scratch my nose.
But me lick it off cos it's so
Nyum, nyum, nyum, nyum,
So Norma-dog angry.

[THORPE has come into the room and is sitting on the bed. This could intersperse with MRS TISH]]

NORMAN: There's nothing wrong, is there?

THORPE: Should there be? Don't look so scared. You look like a frightened little rabbit. Are you my little bunny, mm? *[NORMAN starts to cry.]* No, don't do that, please don't. I can't stand seeing people cry. Not – not people I care for.
[They kiss]

MRS TISH: Funny, how humans have more than one skin.
They have day skin, night skin,
Special skin for special things
Like party or dinner or play cricket.
Me have just one skin,
Keep me warm, keep me dry, keep me cool.
Jemmy-dog have special night skin.
It shiny gold and rustle –
Oops – no – he *two* night skins,
Take off shiny gold rusty coat,
Got jim-jams now.
Top and bottom jim-jams like suit,
Black suit, creamy buttons.

Norma-dog only have bottoms.
Stripey bottoms, heh-heh-heh.
And little vest show his real skin.
Me like his real skin, him soft.
Oops – now no bottoms.

NORMAN: No-one's ever been so kind to me before.

[They kiss again,]

MRS TISH: No-one? No-one???
You forget something.
What about me?
Me always kind, always love my Norma-dog.
Lick face, lick hands, sit on lap, lie on bed
– If you let me, if you let me.
And now – 'no-one's been kind to me'
That's all the thanks me get.

THORPE: You see? That wasn't so bad was it? Now I'm going to do something, very gently I promise, and I think you're going to enjoy it. Now turn over, and get on all fours.

MRS TISH: Look, he doggie now.
Norma-dog is real dog.
And Jemmy-dog real dog behind him.
They two doggies,
They go aah-aah-aah.
Me join in, what fun!

[She's very agitated, going to and fro]

No, maybe not.
Jemmy-dog be angry.

[Norman is stifling cries of pain.]

Angry

THORPE: No don't cry out. No noise. Mother's in the next room, she'll hear you through the wall.

MRS TISH: *[frenzied]* He hurt my Norma-dog.
Jemmy hurt my Norma-dog.
No, stop it,
Mustn't hurt my Norma-dog.
Me love him, stop it, now stop it,
Or me bite your ankles.
Stop it.

THORPE: *[Hissing]* Down, down Mrs. Tish. Back in your corner, go back. Sh! Sh!

MRS TISH: *[Slinking back]* What could me do?
That voice, there's no arguing with it.
Me know Alpha male when me hear it,
And this Alpha Alpha plus plus male.
Nothing to do but watch and wait.
Don't hurt him, Jemmy, don't hurt my baby.
Cos in a funny way
He my leader and my baby same time.

THORPE: See? That wasn't so bad, was it? And if you come to London we can see each other all the time. It's getting late now, I'd better go back to my room, Urse

wakes up very early, and she's got ears like a bat. And don't ever mention this to anyone, understand?

[THORPE exits]

MRS TISH: No, don't go to London, please.
 Me go anywhere with you, of course,
 You my leader, me love you.
 But please, not with Jemmy.
 He hurt you. He bad for you.
 And I want to chase rats. Nyum, nyum, nyum.

[MRS TISH comes hesitantly over to the bed, and licks NORMAN's hand, which is hanging down.]

MRS TISH: Mmmm. Vaseline. Nyum, nyum, nyum.

[BLACKOUT]

* * * *

First Interlude

Newspaper headlines and pictures from November 1961 to June 1962. Especially THORPE canvassing pics.

SCOTT: (Spoken, offstage) He's got my National Insurance card, you see. And since I walked out I can't very well go back and ask him for it. You're in a position to get me a new one. Could you do that for me? Could you?

* * *

SCOTT: (As above) I'm sorry to be a nuisance, but I really do need that National Insurance card, and you did promise me. Without my National Insurance card, I can't sign on to register for work, I can't claim unemployment benefits, I can't get another job. My money has almost run out, and I'm getting desperate.

* * *

SCOTT: (As above) I'm not well. I can't model any more, I sweat too much. All this stress, not having a job, not having any money, or anywhere to live. I've got to get that Insurance card back. You were my employer. You were my lover. I can't afford to make up the arrears, it's hundreds of pounds. Please just pay the stamps and give me the card. That's the least you owe me.

* * *

SCOTT: (As above) Look, Mr Steel, I haven't got a vendetta against Mr Thorpe. All I want is my card back. In fact, I still love him. Despite the way he's treated me. I can prove everything I say. I have the letters...

* * *

SCENE TWO: May 1962

[MRS TISH centre stage. She has blood all round her mouth, and chicken feathers on her coat.]

MRS TISH: Me naughty girl.
 Me know it.
 Couldn't help it.
 Can dog stop being dog?
 Don't know what came over me.

 Hmm, not true.
 Know just what came over me.
 Blood lust; dog lust.
 Untold doggy generations
 Calling in the blood
 Running in the veins, down the ages.
 Me was wolf once,
 Though you might not think looking at me.

 Chickens. Chickens food.
 Chickens. Chickens stupid.
 Once you start, can't stop.
 You say you keep them for later
 Cos you never know when next meal come.
 But me know when next meal come,
 From Norma-dog.
 Norma-dog feed me before himself.

 No, the blood bubble in the brain
 And in the nose
 And the smell of it drive you mad.
 The chicken blood mix with you blood,
 And all blood cries for more blood,
 More chickens.

Anyway, chickens taste scrummy.
Nyum, nyum, nyum, nyum. [*Licks round her chops*]
Blood – scrummy.

Shame it was the doctor's chickens.

We go out together, Norma-dog and me.
It's called a 'lection, cos they 'lect someone,
Which means choose and send them London.
Norma-dog give people paper
How marvellous Jemmy-dog is,
And they must send him London again;
He go all round farms.
Lots walkies, lots fresh air, lovely.

He work stables too,
Lovely smell horses,
Lots rats to chase too.
Make chickens fly around, me laugh so much.
Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

But Jemmy-dog make Norma-dog sad
Cos he ask for papers
And Jemmy-dog don't send papers.
We sit in offices long time nothing happen
And it very boring
And Norma-dog have no money.
He going crazy.
He go to doctor for pills
Lorazepam calm him down,
Tuinal make him sleep,
He take lots and drink too
He don't know where he is.

He go see Doctor,
Live in country
Nice big garden to pee and poo in,
Keep chickens down the bottom.
He have long chat with doctor,
Tell him all about Jemmy-dog
And pay no mind to me.

Me go sniff round garden,
Me very hungry and smell chickens at bottom.

Nyum nyum nyum.

And there is space in fence under the wire,
And chickens go cluck noise a
And look so fat and stupid,
And they so slow, and before me know
Me dig, dig, scratch under fence
Then me inside
And have mouth round neck of nice fat chicken,
And me shake and shake till neck go 'snap!',
And blood down throat, and it is so exciting
And wonderful
And marvellous
And me happy like in dream,
And red everywhere me see red, A
And me chase, me bite and snap,
And drink blood, like me drunk.

And Norma-dog come running
And pull me out of coop,
And then me see no chickens, only bodies.
Feathers everywhere.
Norma-dog so angry
He beat me,
He never done that,
With tears in his eyes.

Me dog.
Why leave me with chickens?
Asking for trouble.
Why can't me have Tuinal same as him?

He argue with doctor, who shout at him.
Doctor don't like dogs, he only human.
Norma-dog beg, plead,
But doctor say, 'I insist',
And take him needle.

Here come Norma-dog now, with doctor.
He got needle for me.
Me have tuinal, maybe.
Goody, goody.
Me calm now.
Me tired, very tired.

DOCTOR: If you could just hold her, she'll stay still for you.

NORMAN: I can't –

DOCTOR: I can get a magistrate's order, you know. Then she'll be put down among strangers, in an unknown place.

NORMAN: No.... please...

DOCTOR: She trusts you. She won't know what's going on. Phenobarbitol is very quick. She won't feel anything. It's best this way.

MRS TISH: Here come my Norma-dog.
I feel safe in his arms.

NORMAN: I love you Mrs Tish

MRS TISH: I love you too, Norma-dog.

NORMAN: There, there

MRS TISH: He stroke me so nice.

[She stiffens slightly as the needle goes in.]

DOCTOR: That's it. All over.

NORMAN: Go to sleep now, go to sleep.

MRS TISH: Sleep....

[MRS TISH dies. End of Part One.]

* * * *

Second Interlude: Passage of time 1962-78

Conversation off (spoken):

THORPE: There is no other solution.

BESSELL: We can't just sit and calmly discuss murder in the House of Commons.

THORPE: There is no other solution. What if Scott sells his story? I'll be ruined. He would have to be shot. Peter, it's no worse than shooting a sick dog.

[The Daily Mirror front page quoting that line flashes up]

BESSELL: It's a bloody sight worse. Scott may be a shit, but he's a human being.

THORPE: In New York, I believe they drop them in the river.

BESSELL: American rivers are deeper.

THORPE: I read somewhere in America they disposed of a body by covering it in fast-setting concrete.

BESSELL: If you read about it, they must have discovered it.

THORPE: *[Dejected]* Oh. *[Brightens]* I know! A tin mine! That's the answer. Take Scott to a pub, get him drunk, put him in a car, take him out on Bodmin Moor, and kill him.

BESSELL: How?

THORPE: It's quite easy to break someone's neck.

HOLMES: But what if I only choke him? What if he comes back alive?

THORPE: You're right, David. In that case you'll have to shoot him. Go through his pockets to remove any ID, drag him across the moor and tip him –

BESSELL: He's quite a large man. And there's bound to be a trail of blood.

THORPE: You'll have to mind the shit too. When you shoot someone they shit themselves, apparently. You don't want to smell of –

BESSELL: It'll have to be poison

HOLMES: Won't it look rather odd if he falls off his bar stool stone dead?

BESSELL: Just apologise to the landlord and ask him where's the nearest mine shaft?

THORPE: It'll have to be a slow working poison. Just do your research, David. Then find the man to do it.

* * *

PART TWO: 24th October 1975. The Castle Hotel, Porlock; later on Exmoor.

[The rostrum is a bar seat. RINKA is sitting on it, looking disdainfully at the other people in the bar. The sound of rain outside – which runs through the whole scene, louder when action moves outside.]

RINKA: What a common lot of people!
I expected better from the Castle Hotel, Porlock.
Its name holds far more promise than its clientele.
Look at them.
[Sniffs] I doubt one of them has had a bath all week.

Norman has a drink.
I wish I had a drink.
They never think of dogs in these places.
Norman is nervous.
His pills aren't helping.
He is waiting for a man.
The man is late.
He has no patience.
I have a lot of patience.
I wish Princess Eleanor was here.
She belongs to Norman's friend, so she's my friend.
I call her 'My Princess'.
Other dogs whisper that we're lesbians,
But do not dare to say it to our faces,
Because we're Great Danes.
Hah! Hah!

NORMAN: Sh, Rinka. You'll get us thrown out.

[The sound of the rain.]

I love rain.
I love to run over the moors
With the wet grass under my paws,
And the rain hitting my nose.
Rain tastes ever so sweet.
Better than tap water.
Maybe we will go for a walk,
Norman and me.
He has an umbrella.

He's getting up.

Walkies? Walkies?

[NORMAN clicks his fingers, and she follows him out. We are outside.]

[The rain is louder. The bed from Part One is now the back seat of a car.]

There is a car with lights on, waiting up the road.
Let's see.

[NORMAN goes to the car. RINKA hangs around, eager.]

NORMAN: What sort of time is this?
 I've been waiting an hour.

NEWTON: *Is that your brute?*

RINKA: Brute?
 I am the finest pedigree.
 Grrr...
 I do not like this common little man.
 He smells of fear and treachery.

NORMAN: Sort of.
 She grew too big for my friends,
 So now she's pretty much mine.
 Isn't she beautiful?
 Who's my beautiful Rinka then?

RINKA: I am. Me, me, me.

[She circles round NORMAN trying to get in on the conversation]

NEWTON: *Well put her somewhere. I can't stand dogs.*

NORMAN: I'm not going anywhere without her.

RINKA: We go for a drive?
 We go on the Moors?

NEWTON: *But she's the size of a bloody donkey.*

RINKA: Philistine.
 I am exactly the right size for a Great Dane.
 You have no appreciation of beauty.

NORMAN: Rinka is Japanese,
It means submissive.
She's very well trained.

RINKA: Thank you. And so are you.

NEWTON: All right. Get in the car. Put her on the back seat. She'd better not ruin my upholstery.

RINKA: Call this upholstery?
I've seen better cloth on pub tea towels.
This car is ten years old at least.
I can barely turn round.
A Cortina, I ask you!
I need a Jaguar at least.

NEWTON: She's soaking wet.

NORMAN: She doesn't mind.

NEWTON: I'm not thinking of her.

[RINKA settles on the back seat.]

RINKA: That's better. Now I'm comfy.

[The car moves off.]

RINKA: I can't see anything out of the window
In this rain.

NEWTON: Are they aggressive, Great Danes?

NORMAN: Of course not.
She's a sappy old thing, aren't you?

RINKA: Sappy? I don't think so.
But I do what I'm told.
Anything for a quiet life.

NEWTON: But do they attack sometimes? Pedigrees can be temperamental, it's the inbreeding.

RINKA: Temperamental? The very idea.
 I am renowned for my even temper.
 Children love me. I carry them on my back.

NEWTON: I mean, if someone was to threaten you, what would she do?

RINKA: Threaten Norman?
 Who's threatening Norman?
 They'd better not.
 I do not trust this man at all.

NEWTON: There's the man from Canada after you.

RINKA: What man from Canada?

NEWTON: Trying to murder you.

RINKA: This is preposterous.
 How can you believe this tosh?

NEWTON: And you were beaten up by those thugs. Was Rinka with you then?

RINKA: No I wasn't.
 But I saw him after,
 And licked his poor bruised face,
 Over and over.

NEWTON: I'm tired. I'm worn out. I've been on the go all day. This rain is killing me.

NORMAN: Let me drive then.

RINKA: Norman, you can't drive.

NORMAN: I've driven tractors.

NEWTON: I'll stop here.

NORMAN: I'll get out. You slide over.
 No, don't get out, you'll be soaked.

[NORMAN gets out of the passenger seat, NEWTON gets out of the car too, RINKA follows him so they are all outside.]

RINKA: What a relief to stretch my legs!

That miserable little car is agony.
Smell the gorse, smell like coconut. *[Sniffs]*
The heather's past its best.

NORMAN: Oh God, now she'll want to go for a walk.
Come here Rinka.

RINKA: No, Norman, you come with me.
You'll love it really.

NORMAN: Who's a silly thing? Who's a silly thing?

RINKA: Don't be so childish. I am not a silly thing.
I have a perfectly reasonable desire
To stretch my legs.
I need a lot of exercise.
I hate it when you talk like that.
So patronising.

NORMAN: Come on girl, come on.
Mwa, mwa.
Get back in the car, we'll all get soaked.

[He's trying to get her back in the car.]

NORMAN: Rinka, come on. Yes, my darling.

[There is a click of a gun. RINKA hears it, cocks her ear. Looks at NEWTON.]

RINKA: It's you.
You're the man from Canada.

[RINKA turns and runs away. There is a shot. RINKA falls.]

NORMAN: You've shot my dog.

NEWTON: Yes, and you're next.

[Click, gun won't fire. Click. Click.]

NEWTON: Shit, shit! Why doesn't anything ever fucking work? Why does everything go wrong? Always.

[A car door slams. The car drives off, the sound fades into the distance. NORMAN walks into the light, onstage, takes RINKA and cradles her in his arms.]

EPILOGUE

NORMAN: I always knew it was wrong
But Jeremy infected me
With homosexuality
And now I pay the price.

No, not me, my dogs
I have been the sinner
But they have paid the price

All the human lust and greed
All the selfishness and need-
iness, stampede
For pleasure and for gain
For power and fame
And never mind who bleeds

I have never met a man I liked
Not really
Men exploit you and they use you
Let you down, abuse you
Promise you the earth
Take everything you're worth
Tell you lies, give you pain
Make a vow, then lie again
Men are lower than the beasts

And if you fall for them
Then you become a beast as well

[MRS TISH enters, so there is now a ghostly dog backing chorus]

All the love I've ever known
Is dogs
Horses and dogs
Dogs give love without condition

TISH/RINKA: We loved you so
You were our world

NORMAN: Horses bear you with devotion
Ask for nothing
A soft word, a calming hand
A bag of oats, a little water
And some kindness

TISH/RINKA: We loved you so
You were our world

NORMAN: Will there be dogs in Heaven?
Do animals have souls?
If there are no dogs in Heaven
I don't want to go

TISH/RINKA: We have love
We have trust
Is that not enough?
We will be with you
Through all your life

NORMAN: No more people
No more men
I will be strong enough
To be alone
With my horses
With my dogs
With my seventy hens
A parrot, a canary
And a cat

TISH/RINKA: No, no
No cats

NORMAN: Yes, a cat
Cos animals are good
As men are bad

I have been treated as an animal
And cast aside
While all I love have died

TISH/RINKA: We died for you

NORMAN: No more the itch of the body
I would rather have your love

TISH/RINKA: Love

NORMAN: Than any touch of man

TISH/RINKA: We are love

NORMAN: The animals will teach us
The dogs will be our guiding star

TISH/RINKA: We can be with you
Through all your life

NORMAN: We can be like animals

ALL: We [you] can be better than we [you] are.

BLACKOUT: END