

The Gay Century

1973: November

a one-act chamber opera

Libretto by Peter Scott-Presland

Music by Robert Ely

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Cast

VALENTINE DE VERE (tenor)

Male, 81, a former cabaret star, a queen with a strong sense of style. Always impeccable, though the effect is now achieved at great cost. Always behaves as if he is onstage. He plays the part of Valentine de Vere.

PENNY DREADFUL (countertenor)

Male, 21, a member of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), a Rad. Fem. (radical feminist), whose life and dress is a guerrilla war against masculinity. He is new to the movement, enthusiastic, but a bit naïve. Cockney.

WALTER CRAIG (baritone)

Male, 27, American, a member of GLF, but of the Marxist wing. His life is largely taken up with meetings, and with demonstrations in solidarity with other oppressed groups. A tendency to harangue. Little humour.

MRS. GOODHART (mezzo)

Early 40s, a Council social worker. She exudes motherly concern, of a rather bossy kind. Her heavy caseload means that her mind is often elsewhere, and she seeks the easiest solution, the line of least resistance, to difficulties.

Scene

De Vere's run-down council flat in Poplar; a clothing rack with stage costumes for his famous song characters – Clarissa of the Quays, Bertha of the Blackout, Bossy Flossy Nightingale, Vicky the Grumpy old Queen. An old chintz armchair, a table with a wind-up gramophone. Other chairs as needed. A full-length mirror.

Time

Autumn 1973

Orchestration

A piano trio; piano solo for de Vere's songs.

Scene One

[There is a record playing on the gramophone. De VERE is lying face down on the floor, half-dressed. He was in the process of bandaging his poor ulcerated legs. One is done, the bandage falls away from the other. A jar of E45 dermatological cream lies open by him. He is motionless.]

RECORD: They call me the idol of the dockyards
Cos there's no-one more idle, dear, than me
When there's lots of ropes to tie down
I just have to have a lie-down
Work plays havoc with the coccyx, you'll agree.
While dockers all rush to and fro
I tell those dockers where to go –
[very deep] Try to get them down below:

I'm Clarissa of the Quays
Clarissa of the Quays
When ships heave to, let joy be uncontrolled
In ones and twos or threes,
From o'er the seven seas
Can't wait to let them get me in their hold

Clarissa of the Quays
Clarissa of the Quays
Welcome to the dockyard
Where you'll find me on me knees
I'm such an eager scrubber
Trying hard to please

You could say that scrubbing's my vocation and my passion
I'm the only bit of meat that isn't on the ration

Clarissa of the quays
Clarissa of the -
Clarissa of the –

[The record is stuck in the groove. After a few minutes there is a banging on the door.]

PENNY: *[Offstage]* Mr de Vere! *[Pause]*
Mr de Vere! *[Pause]*
I know you're in there, I can hear the music.
It's stuck in the groove

WALTER: *[Offstage]* Just like him, dreadful old man

PENNY: *[Offstage]* Don't be rude. He might be ill.
Or hurt. *[More banging on the door]*

WALTER: *[Offstage]* Mr de Vere, we're coming in.

PENNY: Shouldn't we call the police?

WALTER: The fuzz? You must be joking
I got an ounce of pot on me.
Anyway, we *never* call the police to *anything*.
Now stand well back.

PENNY: You're so butch.

[The sound of a shoulder to the door. After a few blows, it gives way and WALTER falls into the room, followed by PENNY. PENNY goes to the gramophone and takes the needle off the record. WALTER looks around.]

WALTER: Jeez, what a dump.

PENNY: Look at these frocks! I told you he was a queen.

WALTER: Can't have been cleaned in years.
[He looks off] I daren't go in the kitchen.

PENNY: This is real silk, you know.
And the stitching is by hand

[De VERE groans]

WALTER: What are doing looking at that stuff?
There's a sick man here.

[Goes to de VERE and tries to turn him over.]

PENNY: Shouldn't we call an ambulance?

De VERE: No, no ambulance. I'll be fine.

WALTER: Here, let me help you.

[He lifts him towards the armchair.]

WALTER: Hey, you're heavy for an old broad.

De VERE: *[Instantly alert, touchy]* That's enough of that.
My name is Valentine de Vere.
Mr Valentine de Vere
There's nothing effeminate about me.

PENNY: That's telling him, girl. *[De VERE glares]*
Sorry, Mr. de Vere.

[WALTER goes to the kitchen.]

De VERE: And you are?

PENNY: Penny Dreadful.
Not my real name, of course.
My camp name, for the commune
We live in Pink Poplar
It's the squat on the corner
What used to be the Post Office

De VERE: We? You and - ?

PENNY: His name is Walter. Walter Craig

[WALTER returns with a glass of water. De VERE waves it aside.]

De VERE: There's a forty-year-old single malt
In the medicine cabinet in the bathroom
If you would be so kind, Mr. Craig,
I take it with water, fifty-fifty.

WALTER: But –

De VERE: I'm sure it will be much more therapeutic.
[Stern behind smile.] If you please. [Battle of wills]
Thank you so much, Mr Craig.
And do please get one for yourself
And for your – friend.

[WALTER exits again.]

De VERE: Mr Craig – he is your 'special friend', isn't he?

PENNY: *[Shocked]* Of course not.
We don't believe in monogamy.

De VERE: What are you doing here?

PENNY: We're organising a children's party
Down at the squat on Sunday, in the garden
We've got a magician and everything.
We were going round the estate
To tell people about it.
So they can send their children.

De VERE: Do you think they will?

PENNY: So far no-one's slammed the door on us.

[De VERE has recovered enough to carry on putting his bandages on. He talks the while.]

De VERE: You must forgive me,
But since you came uninvited
You have to take me as you find me.
I am never seen like this in public,
And my public for the day
Is Mrs Sandra Goodhart.
Goodhart by name, Goodhart by nature.
A well-meaning soul who means to tidy me
Away into an old folk's home

Where she can forget about me.
She'll tick me off her list and let the flat
To a nice young Asian family.
But I will fight her all the way.

PENNY: What will you do?

De VERE: I will refuse to go.
I will barricade myself in.

[WALTER re-enters with three glasses of scotch. They are generous doubles.]

WALTER: Did I hear the word barricade?
Do we have a revolutionary here?

PENNY: The council want to chuck him out

De VERE: They will not succeed.

[WALTER gives him his scotch, and PENNY hers.]

De VERE: Thank you, Mr Craig.

[PENNY knocks hers back. Coughs.]

De VERE: Mr. Dreadful, you have just
Poured ten shillings down your throat.

PENNY: Blimey, that's four pints of beer.

De VERE: I was given that bottle
In Nineteen-fifty-two
By Maurice Chevalier
After the Royal Variety Performance

PENNY: Get away!

[Over the dialogue, De VERE has finished bandaging his legs, and pulls up a pair of deep purple velvet trousers. He smooths his shirt down.]

De VERE: He did not mean me to give it away
For someone to knock back
Like orange squash.
Look at Mr Craig
Follow his example
He knows how to sip it
To roll it round his mouth

PENNY: You've rolled it round your mouth
A few times, aintcha girl?

De VERE: I could tell he was a member
Of the aristocracy

WALTER: I am not, not at all.

De VERE: The aristocracy of America
The aristocracy of money.
Over your Che Guevara T-shirt
You sport a bespoke Harris Tweed
Herringbone jacket
Which cost a good
Hundred and thirty pounds.
I'm sure those working boots
You bought in Jermyn Street
Am I right?

[To PENNY] Pass me those socks [PENNY does so]

PENNY: Are those real silk?

De VERE: They are. *[PENNY puts a finger through a hole in it.]*
Ignore the hole.
A gentleman never draws attention to his hole.

[De VERE has made a very naughty double entendre and knows it, but remains po-faced. PENNY splutters with laughter, but De VERE's manner forces him to keep a straight face, which makes it funnier. It is a moment of bonding. De VERE indicates WALTER's boots.]

De VERE: Jermyn Street? Am I right?

WALTER: Well...

De VERE: And made to measure?

WALTER: If you must know...
My parents lived in Boston
In Beacon Hill
The Hamptons in summer
They were what was called Old Money
Planters of untold wealth
Of vast lands and slaves
And I hate it, hate it

[De VERE is pulling on some well-worn, but well-polished elastic-sided shoes.]

PENNY: Why d'you think he goes with me?
Common as muck, me.
He's hoping it will rub off

WALTER: I spend it as fast as I can
But it feels like I can never catch up

PENNY: Thanks to Walter,
We're the best-appointed squat
East of Bethnal Green
Hot and cold and central heating
He's ever so generous
We always go to demos
In his Lamborghini.

WALTER: You can borrow it if you like.

[De VERE has finished getting his shoes on. He indicates the purple velvet suit jacket. PENNY brings it, and puts it on him, smoothing down the shoulders. For a moment de VERE is back in the theatre and PENNY is his dresser.]

De VERE: I have never learnt to drive
I always had a chauffeur

When I needed one.

[He looks in the mirror. He takes a silk scarf and throws it over his shoulder. Arranges it.]

WALTER: Well, maybe we can drive you.

PENNY: The only place Walter drives you is insane.

WALTER: Maybe we can take you to a Gay Day

De VERE: A what?

WALTER: A Gay Day. It's like a picnic
But with Pride.

PENNY: We got these letters
Sewn on sacks with sequins
Everybody wears a letter

WALTER: Spells out GAY LIBERATION

PENNY: I'm always the 'G' -
I like to be on the end -

And it matches my skin tones

[De VERE has taken a large Victorian diamond brooch and pinned it to his scarf. He wheels and faces them.]

De VERE: Mr. Craig, Mr Dreadful
You have been most kind
But now I must ask you to leave.

WALTER: We want to support you
In your fight with the fascists on the council

PENNY: Sisterhood is powerful

De VERE: Exactly what do you think I am?

PENNY: *[Indicating de VERE's outfit.]* It's obvious, innit?

De VERE: What is obvious, Mr Dreadful?

PENNY: Well look at yourself...
You must be gay

De VERE: There it goes again
Why did they ruin that pretty little word?
When I was young, we had gay parties
And they were gay affairs
It was a light, transparent word
Gossamer and sparkling.
What do we have now?
Gay Rights. Gay Power.
Heavy. Worthy.
Self-righteous. Dull.

[A bell rings before they can reply.]

De VERE: Ah, my public awaits.
Bring on the chorus girls
Let the show commence.

[He has transformed, become larger than life. He exits.]

WALTER: What a hideous monument
To the bad old days
A prime example of self-oppression

PENNY: I think he's rather sweet
I think he'd like our Fairy Frolics

[De VERE re-enters with MRS GOODHART]

De VERE: You must excuse the state
Of the State Apartments
Mrs Goodhart.
The chambermaid has not had time to tidy.
Be seated, please.
La mia casa è la tua casa.

WALTER: That's Italian – my house is your house

PENNY: I know. I've had enough Italian waiters.

MRS G: I won't beat about the bush,
Mr de Vere -

De VERE: Please, Mrs Goodhart
Don't stand on formality.
Call me Valentine.

MRS G: *[Playful in an elephantine way]*
Now, Mr de Vere, don't try to distract me
With your charm. You know why I'm here –

De VERE: Charm? Would I be so underhand?
[To the others] Have you ever known me to be 'charming'?

[They shake their heads in unison.]

MRS G: Who are they? Are they your next of kin?

De VERE: I have no next of kin.
My sister died three years ago.
She did not approve of me

WALTER: We're only neighbours who were concerned –

PENNY: We could be next of kin -

WALTER: Shut up –

MRS G: Concerned? What about?
[To de VERE] Have you had one of your turns again?
[To the others] He passed out a week ago
Left the gas on under a pot of soup
The smoke was pouring out of the flat.
Next door called the caretaker
The caretaker called the fire brigade
The fire brigade called an ambulance

De VERE: All that fuss. There was no harm.
I didn't even have to throw away the saucepan.

MRS G: You were unconscious for at least an hour

De VERE: I was asleep. I had had a bad night.

PENNY: I have those.
Especially after a night on the juice

WALTER: With one of those Italian waiters

[PENNY glares]

MRS G: You can make all the excuses you like,
Mr de Vere. That won't change the fact
You're a danger to yourself
You're a danger to others.
You're a fire hazard!

De VERE: I don't think so.
Velvet is quite fire retardant
I can spray it with borax
If you insist

MRS G: This is no laughing matter
Don't you see, Mr de Vere,
I'm worried about you.
Look at the state of your flat
The dirt is inches deep

De VERE: And has been for years. So what?
The rubbish goes out regularly
There are no crumbs or scraps
For cockroaches or mice.

MRS G: Only because you hardly feed yourself.
Look at you, you're skin and bone
You only live on soup and crackers
I've seen the empty tins in your bin

De VERE: I eat within my means
So I can drink above them.
Champagne, anyone?

WALTER: What right do you have
To order this man around?

MRS G: Who are these men?
Are they friends of yours?

De VERE: [*Confused*] I don't quite rightly know.
They came in and rescued me from the floor.
This is Mr Craig, this is Mr Dreadful.
Mr Craig is some kind of revolutionary,
I believe. Mr Dreadful is – Mr Dreadful.

PENNY: We live in the squat. Pink Poplar.

MRS G: The one the neighbours all complain about.
The Council has been trying to get you out.

PENNY: That rhymes! You're a poet!
The neighbours don't all complain
We're putting on a children's party
And nobody's objected.

MRS G: But nobody will come. You'll see.

WALTER: Answer my question.
By what right do you order him around?
What arrogance asserts you know better
Than he does what is good for him?
Benign despotism is not enough.

MRS G: But we do know better.
We have his interests at heart
When you get to Mr de Vere's age
You get confused. You cling
To what you know, and what is comfortable
Even if it's killing you.

De VERE: Funny how I'm now invisible
Please don't talk about me
As if I've left the room.

MRS G: It *is* killing you. Can't you see that?

De VERE: And what's so very dreadful about death?
People cling on so, to beauty, money, life.
Life at all costs, "we must have life".
Take the pills, run around, watch the weight;
Cut out the booze, cut out the fat.
Cut out the fun.

MRS G: Do you really want to die, Mr de Vere?

De VERE: I would rather die than live a half-life.

MRS G: Aren't you afraid of it?

De VERE: Why should I be?

MRS G: I see, you believe in Heaven.

De VERE: Certainly not. I could not join a heavenly choir
I am a natural soloist.

MRS G: What do you think will happen to you,
If you stay here?

De VERE: I hope that I'll be sitting here like this
Probably on my own
But let us assume, for argument's sake,
Talking to you. My heart will stop
My eyes glaze over,
Perhaps I'll clutch my throat for breath.
Then I will topple to the floor
And I'll be gone,
As if I'd never been here.
Blackout, curtain, the end.
You can drag the carcass out,

Do with it what you will.
[Quote] "Ain't it grand to be blooming well dead?"

MRS G: *[Upset]* Don't you mind?

De VERE: Why should I mind? What is the point?
Nobody can change it.
Anger is so bad for the complexion

MRS G: What about your work? Your reputation

De VERE: My reputation, such as it is,
Will soon be buried in the sands of time.
My work as distant as Dan Leno's

WALTER: Who's Dan Leno?

PENNY: Hang on a jiff. What work?
What reputation?

MRS G: Don't you know?
Valentine de Vere was a huge star
Before the war. Big as Noel Coward.
My mother thought him wonderful.

De VERE: And now to this we come. Eviction.

MRS G: Removal to a place of safety.
We have a lovely nursing home
You'll have the best of care
We'll feed you properly
Give you exercise
A sing-song every week

De VERE: What kind of songs?
I have no desire to know
The distance to Tipperary

MRS G: There is no point in carrying on like this
The authority has decided
You cannot go on living here

And that's an end to it
Your doctor agrees

De VERE: What do doctors know?
He thought I had cancer of the colon
When it was just a bad case of piles

WALTER: Surely we can fight this?

PENNY: There are lawyers come to GLF

WALTER: We can find someone to speak on your behalf

De VERE: That's one thing I have never needed.
I have never been at a loss for words

PENNY: Now, now. Don't be stubborn.

MRS G: *[Getting up]* The decision has been made
I'm going now to get your doctor
To sign the relevant forms
I'd advise you, Mr de Vere,
Get ready for the short journey –

De VERE: *[Hollow, dramatic]* To the grave

MRS G: To the Cedars. It's very nice.
You'll have a nice big room.
You'll only share it with one other.

De VERE: I have never shared a room with anyone.
My visitors have always been
Strictly come-and-go *[innuendo]*
A shared room?
It might as well be the grave
It's my idea of Hell.

Mrs G: I'll be back to supervise your move
On Monday. Meantime, I advise you
Decide what you want to bring with you.
A few photos, some trinkets.

There isn't room for all this

PENNY: Memorabilia. That's what it is.

MRS G: Then perhaps a museum would like it

De VERE: It is my life. I'll be dead in a month.

MRS G: From what you say, that's no big deal.
I'll see myself out.

[She exits. De VERE gets up. He is slightly faint as he does so, but steadies himself. Deep breath.]

De VERE: I think we all need a nice cup of tea.
I hope you're both happy with Earl Grey.

[He exits]

WALTER: I know what you're thinking.
It's out of the question

PENNY: Why? The squat is huge.
There's lots of spare rooms
On the second floor

WALTER: Which he can't reach. Those stairs

PENNY: Put a stair lift in

WALTER: Which he will be too proud to use

PENNY: I'd love to have a gay grandad.

WALTER: Didn't you hear? He isn't gay.
He's in the closet.
How will he deal with twenty
Raging queers, coming and going
At all hours,
Tripping half the time on LSD?

[De VERE enters again.]

De VERE: Are you talking about money?
Only people who don't have any
Talk about money.

WALTER: No, Mr de Vere. I was talking about drugs.

PENNY: There are lots of drugs at the squat.
WALTER thinks you won't approve

WALTER: I don't care if he approves or not.

De VERE: *[Dreamily]* Drugs... That takes me back
Cocaine in the twenties...
I used to go to dinner parties
Lady Diana Cooper served cocaine
In salt cellars, one each end of the table.

PENNY: No!

De VERE: Oh yes. Everyone used it then
Queen Victoria I believe was very fond of it.

PENNY: No!

De VERE: I was introduced to it on the Western Front
By Siegfried Sassoon before the Battle of the Somme
He had it sent from Harrods by his brother
"A welcome present to friends on the Front"
I remember there was morphine
In the kit as well. And a syringe.

[PENNY and WALTER are awe-struck, their jaws dropped.]

Of course, cocaine's a godsend at an orgy
Greatly enhances the prowess.
Barbara Cartland gave the most marvellous parties
Orgies in all but name
Full of naked men and dope
Ivor and Noël came often

PENNY: Ivor?

De VERE: Ivor Novello. Before your time.
And Noël Coward. He died some months ago.
We sent each other cards for forty years
At Christmas time. I always wrote
'Happy Birthday to you' on his.

[Blank looks]

Noël? Christmas?
I used to call him the first Noël.
And of course he was. Incomparable.

WALTER: He was an uptight closet queen
A reactionary and a bigot.

De VERE: Noel never concerned himself
With politics. He was an artist.

WALTER: A reactionary hack
Maids in uniform, French windows
Anyone for tennis

De VERE: Artists are neither right nor left
Artists are Above.
He was my friend, and very kind,
I'd be obliged, Mr. Craig
If you would respect my feelings.

WALTER: *[about to explode]* Mr. de Vere –

De VERE: *[Bland, polite, gimlet-eyed]* Yes, Mr Craig?

WALTER: *[Deflates]* I – you – nothing

PENNY: This is lovely tea.
[To WALTER] Let it go. He wouldn't understand.
[To De VERE] Will you be all right?

WALTER: Respect, respect. All we hear
Is demands for respect;
Respect the traditions
Respect our good intentions
Respect your elders and betters
Respect the feelings of others
We are paralysed with respect.

PENNY: We ought to go

De VERE: I am entirely recovered,
Thank you, Mr Dreadful.

PENNY: In that case we should go
There's several blocks
We still have to leaflet

De VERE: I understand. Your public, too, awaits

WALTER: We could come and help you pack on Sunday.
Help you chuck things out.
[indicating gramophone -]
That thing might be worth some money

De VERE: *[Bristling]* Thank you, Mr Craig
That won't be necessary

PENNY: He's going to barricade himself in,
Remember? *[to de VERE]* You are, arncha?
It'll be very dramatic. I can't wait.

De VERE: Goodbye, Mr. Dreadful, goodbye Mr Craig
You must be going.

[He shoos them out.]

De VERE: What can I do?
Have I the strength left to fight?
Every day it gets more difficult
To be Valentine de Vere.
The stairs get steeper
The shops recede into the distance

The legs get weaker.
[He fondly strokes the gramophone]
"Might be worth some money" – Ha!
The store of all my reputation
My talent
My memories
My money
My life
No, I will not fade
Or go without a fight
While there is breath in me
A door to lock, a key to turn
I will stand
As long as I can stand
I will stand here
The candle will blaze
Before it gutters
And splutters
And fades to nothing
Here I have lived
Here I will die.

[Sees his own performance. Ironic]

Not bad, not bad.
The local press will love it.

[Slow fade]

Scene Two

[Outside the flat. WALTER and PENNY arguing.]

WALTER: How can we?

PENNY: He won't be any trouble.

WALTER: What do you mean?
He'll be nothing *but* trouble.
Look how *old* he is.

PENNY: How can you be so ageist?
You of all people.

WALTER: I don't mean it like that.
But he is. Old.
He has blackouts, he falls.

PENNY: If he falls, we pick him up.

WALTER: If we're there at the time

PENNY: There's always *someone* there.
It's a squat, for Chrissake.
There's never less than fifteen people.
Always someone still in bed

WALTER: Screwing or stoned
I wouldn't trust a frail old man
With any of them.

PENNY: It's better than an old folks' home
Full of straights smelling of pee

WALTER: He'll smell of pee

PENNY: Rubbish. Didn't you smell the perfume?

WALTER: To hide the smell of pee.

PENNY: We must have him.
He's our history, our roots
We need him to remind us who we are.

WALTER: We are struggle, we are revolution
With our sisters in Liberation
With our black brothers in Power
We are not Noel and Ivor
And Barbara fucking Cartland

PENNY: We have a duty to care for our own

WALTER: We have a duty to change society
Not to apply a sticking plaster to it.

PENNY: I remember they proposed a fighting fund
For gay men to contest entrapment cases
For cottage and soliciting offences
To pay for legal fees and fines -
But you opposed it.

WALTER: Too right I did.
We should be making life worse
Not better for the ordinary gay.
That's the only way to stir them up.
We need to make them so mad
That they riot in the street
We need to have our own Stonewall.
Paying legal fees is pissing cash away
For nothing.
Is Valentine going to advance the revolution?

PENNY: Not rotting in an old folks' home, he ain't.

WALTER: He is, I fear, irrelevant
There are better ways to fund rebellion

PENNY: Oh, you fucking hypocrite
Who has more money
Than he can piss away?
Who gets his Daddy's dividends

From oil and exploitation?
You could pay for all the courts in London.
You could buy a flat for Valentine
Out of your small change -

WALTER: OK, OK, I'll buy him a fucking flat

PENNY: Except it will not give him what he needs
Care. Love. Attention.
He'll set fire to it one day
And still be taken into care.
He needs the commune
He needs us.

WALTER: The others will never agree.

PENNY: How do you know?
People always do what you want
Don't they?
Oh, the entitlement of the rich
And spoilt.
If you're so sure, put it to the test
Take it to the house meeting
See what they say.
And I'll speak up for Valentine.

WALTER: Hey, what's happened to you?
When did you get so mouthy
All of a sudden?

PENNY: When I saw what a heartless shit
I was going with

WALTER: [*weary*] OK, OK
Put it to the others in the house

PENNY: And you'll abide by what they say?

WALTER: I suppose so

PENNY: [*hugs him*] You see? That wasn't so hard, was it?

Scene Three

[Inside de VERE's flat. He has put his clothes rack – minus clothes - and other furniture against the door. Only the gramophone is not pressed into service. He stands leaning against it in an attitude of defiance. The barricade is rather pathetic. A peremptory knock. We can also see MRS GOODHEART outside at the door.]

MRS. G: Mr de Vere... Mr de Vere
It's Mrs. Goodheart here
You must stop being childish
You cannot fight social services
We know best
It's for your own good.

[A pause. De VERE doesn't move.]

There's no point in this.
I have the police here. *[she indicates offstage]*
And a warrant to enter.
In a few moments I shall ask them
To break the door down.

[Another pause. Another silence.]

I shall ask the officer
To effect an entry
On a count of five.
Ready, officer?

[Another pause]

I really do not want to do this
Mr de Vere.
I do not want to damage Council property

De VERE: And my property? What of that?
My records and my pictures and my costumes?

MRS.G: Those too, of course.

[Pause]

A count of five...

One.... Two..... Three....

[PENNY and WALTER rush in.]

PENNY: *[very dramatic]* Halt. Cease. Desist.

WALTER: Hold that policeman!

PENNY: In my dreams.

[WALTER produces two important looking pieces of paper.]

WALTER: I have here an affidavit
A commitment made by Penny here
And me, to take care
Of Mr de Vere
In the Pink Poplar commune
It's drawn up by Sir David Napley
Who knows my father.
He's much concerned with human rights
And miscarriages of justice.

PENNY: Mr de Vere, Mr de Vere
It's us. We've come to collect you
And take you to the commune.
You're in, doll.

De VERE: But what if I don't want
To live in any commune?

PENNY: Don't be an annoying old faggot.
You can come with us
Or go and rot in the Cedars,
Take your pick.
Now let us in.
Please

WALTER: Please
ALL: Please

[De VERE hesitates a long moment, then moves the coat rack out of the way. He unlocks the door. PENNY and WALTER push through. They clear a space, so Mrs. G can follow.]

PENNY: *[To De VERE]* What are you doing standing there?
You'll do your legs no good.
Go and sit down.

[De VERE does so. He is tired from the effort of defiance, rather shrunken.]

MRS.G: *[Reading the paper]* I'm afraid this will do you
No good at all.
Or someone with a power of attorney.
This undertaking isn't worth
The paper that it's written on.
The doctor's commitment still stands
I will call the policeman in
To assist me.

WALTER: *[Another flourish]* I also have here
A Lasting Power of Attorney
Which Mr de Vere has only to sign
And we will be jointly and severally
Entitled to take Mr de Vere –

De VERE: Into custody

PENNY: Will you stop this? We're trying to help you
You're being very ungracious.

WALTER: Otherwise, I also have
A statutory declaration
In which Mr de Vere
Nominates me and/or Penny
As next of kin.
This too will entitle us

To snatch him from your clutches.

PENNY: *[to MRS G]* You can be the witness if you like
Like the matron of honour at a wedding.

De VERE: And do I have no say in this?

PENNY: Of course you have a choice.
Next of kin or power of attorney.
Walter's so clever at that kind of thing.

WALTER: Or go to the Cedars.

De VERE: When you are old the walls close in
The choices shrink
The pathways get more narrow

PENNY: And you can bring all your lovely things
Play us your records
Tell us all your stories

De VERE: I won't have to – sleep with anyone,
Will I? *[He shudders]*

PENNY: They'll be throwing themselves at you
But you can always say No.
[sotto voce] Though that's not very polite.

WALTER: There's the sorting room at the back.
It has running water.
I thought we could turn it into a granny flat.

PENNY: Granny flat be buggered –
The Star Dressing Room and Trailer

WALTER: Whatever

PENNY: *[to de VERE]* And of course we'll cook for you.
It's all macrobiotic of course
And ever so healthy

De VERE: *[pained]* Too kind.
I think I'd find baked beans
So much more convenient.

WALTER: You can have one of the new ovens -
A microwave. We'll import one
From America, where they're the latest thing.

De VERE: What is a 'microwave'?

WALTER: It heats the dish by agitating the electrons

PENNY: Sort of makes your shepherd's pie do the shimmy.

De VERE: Now that I would like to see.

MRS G: Of course I shall have to see the commune
There are certain standards to observe
Cleanliness and safety.

PENNY: What do you take us for?

WALTER: We're not all hippies.

MRS G: Then there's the question of drugs

PENNY: *[To Mrs G]* You can't have any.
[To de VERE] We'll see about you

De VERE: *[Genuine distress]* I don't know what to do
I don't want to be
In anybody's way
I always swore I wouldn't be a burden.

WALTER: I can assure you
We will not allow you to become a burden

PENNY: No. We'll put you down if you start whinging.

De VERE: *[Starting to relent]* I hope you will.

PENNY: Tell you what: we'll choke you
To death with your ostrich feathers.

De VERE: I shall insist that you all come to tea
Every Sunday afternoon
Earl Grey in the Clarice Cliff
And cucumber sandwiches

PENNY: Cucumber sandwiches repeat on me
I said, CUCUMBER SANDWICHES REPEAT ON ME

[He falls about at his own joke, WALTER glares]

De VERE: You must come too, Mrs G
You've been arguing with me
And bossing me about so long
You feel like family

MRS G: You'll have to sign one of these first
Before we can release you.
You don't get away that easily

WALTER: Attorney or next of kin?
Which is it to be?

De VERE: Eeeny – meeny – miney – mo –

[He closes his eyes and chooses one. PENNY looks at which one he's chosen]

PENNY: Daddy!!!! *[Rushes into his arms]*

WALTER: We need a witness –

MRS G: I'll be honoured. *[She signs]*
But I'll still need monthly visits
And regular reports.

PENNY: Don't worry. We'll visit you.
[to De VERE] Poor old soul.
Here! You'd best get everything packed.

De VERE: It already is.

PENNY: So you were going to move all along?
You sly old –

De VERE: Sometimes one must surrender
To the hand of Fate.

PENNY: I bet you've surrendered
To some hands in your time

De VERE: Don't be vulgar, Mr Dreadful

PENNY: I apologise, Mr de Vere.

WALTER: Stop gossiping, you two.
The others will be here in fifteen minutes

De VERE: Others?

WALTER: From the commune. We have volunteers.
You don't think we're going to move
All this tat ourselves – only joking!
These priceless antiques ourselves.

PENNY: Don't talk about my grandfather that way.

De VERE: I don't mind being an antique
As long as I am priceless.

PENNY: We'd better hurry,
You'll need a quick rehearsal

De VERE: Rehearsal?

PENNY: For the children's party
You're the main entertainment
You're on at four o'clock

De VERE: I don't know about that

I don't know if I'm suitable –
My material, I mean

PENNY: Come off it, this is 1973.
Oz has had a Schoolkids Issue
Up in court as a dirty magazine.
Kids today, they've seen it all.
Done it too, more like.
To them you'll be as naughty
As Enid Blyton.

Now hurry up.
I got to iron your costume too
Before you make your entrance.
They'll love you.

De VERE: I've always enjoyed a warm hand on my entrance.

[He rummages in a box and produces the special scotch. A search only produces one mug. Takes a sip:]

De VERE: To pastures new!

[He passes the mug to MRS G, who takes a swig and coughs. It goes to WALTER then PENNY. They sing 'To Pastures New' in a round]

De VERE: *[To PENNY]* Go on, you can have a swig.
I don't think Mr Chevalier would mind
Besides he's dead, and me – I'm alive!

ALL: To change, to love, to life

De VERE: I'm alive!

BLACKOUT

Scene Four

[The party. Noise of children. De VERE quells them with a look. De VERE is Queen Victoria. It is not full drag. Like Douglas Byng, he achieves the effect with the merest suggestion – a shawl, a tea towel on his head, a small silver bowl for a crown. Piano Introduction:]

De VERE: You see me with me orb
And me sceptre in me hand

[spoken] It's a sceptre. Filthy minds!

Verse: You see me with me orb and me sceptre in me hand
Me sceptre's only kept to stir me tea with;
I keep you on your toes
By looking down me nose
People say I'm not the gay-
est gal to be with

And so they call me –

Chorus: Vicky the grumpy old queen
Grumpy and frumpy as crimp-er-lene
When I think of all yer sins
I shake me head and wobble me chins -

[Does so with a sound like a turkey]

If you talk to me you must keep it clean
Cos I'm Vicky – Vicky, the grumpy old queen.

Bridge: As I remarked to me aide de camp –

[spoken] A bit more aid and a bit less camp, if you don't mind

As I remarked to me aide de camp
Look at me on the postage stamp
They've got me left side, not me right side
They might at least have shown me bright side
He said, "You should be full of cheer
Not grim and glum and so austere

Cos everyone licks you on the rear,
Vicky you grumpy old queen"

[Spoken] We were not amused

Chorus: I'm Vicky the grumpy old queen
Wrapped like a parcel in bombazine
Sons and grandsons in their dozens
All of Europe's kings me cousins
We lost a few to the guillotine
But not Vicky the grumpy old queen

Bridge: I plunged in mourning when Albert died
But soon John Brown was there at me side
He kept me as busy as could be
I loved the feel of his knobkerrie.
I told protesters, 'Don't be silly
'He's not me hubby, he's me ghillie
'And who else should take me up the Dilly?'
I'm Vicky the grumpy old queen

[Spoken] Oh yes, he's taken me up the Dilly more times than I've had hot banquets. Mind you, he's not a patch on Albert, my dear husband. Albert was an exhibitionist. In fact he was a Great Exhibitionist. Built a crystal palace, and all so he could name a football team. I'll never forget when he took me to see it in Hyde Park. I said, Albert, what a magnificent erection. And the Palace isn't bad either.

Chorus: I'm Vicky the grumpy old queen
Been on the throne since sweet eighteen

[spoken] That's nearly fifteen years – *[looks]* – it's true! The lighting here is cruelly deceptive. Fifteen years I've been sat on that throne. Me constipation's something chronic. Nothing but a plunger can shift it.

I'm Vicky the grumpy old queen
Been on the throne since sweet eighteen

Bridge: When Albert came it was love at first sight
On his knees he was just my height
After he'd begun to propose
He said, 'I've a secret I must disclose;
I've got a ring, and I've got a spare
It's kept quite safe – you won't guess where';
I never knew rings could be kept Down There –
I said, 'Albert, you're rather obscene;
I'm Vicky the grumpy old queen.

Chorus: I'm Vicky the grumpy old queen
Rich as Croesus and fearfully mean
I own the world – it's all in pink!
[spoken] Pink is Sooo gay!
I own the world – it's all in pink!
Everything and the kitchen sink
I'm laden from Aden to Aberdeen
I'm Vicky the grumpy old Queen

I'm Vicky the grumpy old Queen
If you cross me I'll make a scene
Seen Prime Ministers come and go
They all get the old heave-ho
I just flush them down the latrine
[spoken] - Otherwise known as the House of Lords
I'm Vicky the grumpy old Queen

Coda: I had Mr Gladstone and Mr Disraeli
A terrible flirt who teased me daily
He said to me gaily, 'Call me Dizzy'
Which put me in the most frightful tizzy.
'If I call you Dizzy,' I told him, 'Laddy
I'll have to call Mr Gladstone, 'Gladdie',
Otherwise he'll be so green,
And though I'm frightfully keen,
I won't be known as the Dizzy Queen
When I'm Vicky the grumpy old queen

Coda 2: I'm Vicky the grumpy old Queen
And though you think I'm a has-been
I'm still all around you, ask any historian,

My attitudes live and they're quite dinosaurian
Better watch out for those values Victorian
They're everywhere still to be seen
Thanks to Vicky – I'm so tricky
Vicky - call me picky –
Vic - don't take the Mickey –
Vicky the grumpy old queen.

[APPLAUSE. BOW. FADE TO BLACKOUT. END]