

A Feast in the time of Plague.
(Loosely after Pushkin)

A libretto written by David Pountney initially for Creative Juices, a company formed to create and promote new work.

The piece is constructed to be performed by 12 singers, each of whom has a specific “aria” or “scena”, indicated by blue. Passages I suggest could be spoken are indicated in red.

CAST

ELENA a wealthy traveller
FRÉDÉRIC her servant
JOYCE the cook
Lidochka Her teenage daughter
ANTOINE a biker playboy
McGUIRE a grandmother
ADINA newly married to
PAT newly married to Adina
CLAIRE a clairvoyant
PIUS an informer
KARL a radical
JUDAS / DEATH / POLICEMAN

PART ONE

ARRIVALS:

We hear the sound of a powerful car drawing to a halt, a door opening and closing, a voice from off-stage:

Elena:

Is anyone there? Hallo? Hallo?

She hoots the car hooter.

E: (entering) Hallo? Hallo? HALLO!

- Cook: All right, all right. We're not really open, and no-one has stopped here for some days. Too busy running away, but I guess the disease is faster than they are.
- E: Exactly. That's why I decided to stop. Had enough of running. Do you have any food?
- C: That's my job, Ma'am. Food I have. Customers I don't.
- E: Call me Lena. In the face of all this, we're all equal.
- C: Maybe, but even if I *am* about to die, I still want my bills settled.
- E: At this point, money is no object. *(She takes a large wad of money from her handbag.)*
- C: Glad to hear it! And time no object too, I should hope. I'm all on my own here.
- E: But I am not. *(she whistles rather vulgarly).* Fréderick - come out! *(to the cook)* He's old, so officially not allowed to travel. That's why he's lying down in the back of the car. He'll be glad to help - and he has experience. *(Fréderick, a very tall, aged and elegant butler, emerges gingerly.)*
- Fréderick: I believe I shall never unbend again. *(He begins some very eccentric and strange stretching exercises.)*
- C: Come in then.
- E: No, we are going to set up table here.
- C: On the street?

E: Exactly - a street party. We'll attract some guests, and maybe some will equally be taken from us. But we will eat and drink all that you have...*(she looks up and sees a black -clad figure approaching - a biker.)*

Death already? The table is not even laid!

Antoine: *(removing his helmet)* No, not yet dead, nor even death himself. But I will be if I don't eat something. Did I hear the magic words: 'set up table'? Antoine, by the way.

E: Enchantée Antoine! Lend a hand. Come on Frédérick, look lively!
(Frédérick and Antoine set to work erecting a table and 12 chairs. During the following the table is gradually set in some style – tablecloths, cutlery etc.)

Lidochka: *(the cook's teenage daughter enters with a tray of sherbets)* Something fresh and fizzy in the heat?

E: So not alone after all?

L: I have to be kept in hiding till Mum's sure the customers are trustworthy?

A: *(taking off his dark glasses, flirting unashamedly)*
I am not sure that I would be totally trustworthy for long....

E: *(intervening)* So what made you leave the fleshpots?

A: ARIA
I tasted them all and was weary.
I broke every taboo - took every risk,
But my punishment was dogged survival.

I embraced the dying. Beautiful, pale but flushed women exhausted themselves - I imagined clouds of disease swarming about my head, but I remained stubbornly untouched. I went where it was forbidden and lay down with the damned and drank with the gasping and smoked with the terminal and survived. Finally there was no-one left, so I took my motorbike - perhaps looking for a brick wall - ker-splatt! - but instead I found... just what I was looking for. *(Taking Elena's hand)* Someone with the wit and courage to celebrate in the hour of need.

(An old lady arrives on a bicycle)

McGuire: Hallo, hallo! Can I join in? I'm going to die and I want to celebrate! I want to eat and drink and laugh. I didn't do enough of that during my life, and now there's no time to lose. No point in being glum, is there?

Antoine: Join in, Grandma, join in!

M: Excuse me, my name is McGuire. Mcguire!

E: Miss McGuire you are most....

M: Not "Miss", just McGuire! McGuire!

Tutti: *(toasting her)* McGuire!

(A young couple enter with rucksacks)

Adina: Thank God we got off. Another 5 minutes on that bus and I'd have died of everything *but* the bloody virus.

Pat: But what shall we do here?

Adina: Look - a table!

Pat: But that's not for us...

Ad: We just got married. Everything's for us.

Pat: Or against us?

Ad: Depends how you look at the world.

Lidochka: (*going up to them*) Champanska?

Ad: Oh - yes - finally a proper toast!

Pat: I don't think we can pay for....

Lid: Nothing to pay - just your smile will do!

Pat: Oh, in that case....to you my darling! (*They toast, and kiss*)

Tutti: (*Watching them affectionately*) To you both!

McGuire: ARIA

I was married on a September morning gone 62 years, when the cherries were on the trees and the young men were falling like ripe apples – the sun shone, and everyone tried to smile but we all knew that he would have to leave for the front. The cherries ripened but he never came back, and nor did my youthful joy. I found love here and there, usually among the ruins, or backed up against a tree, but every time the spring comes round and the cherries form their rosy orbs, I have a sad little moment. But now, in this time of death, I have such joy for every moment that I have broken the

rule - defied the prophecies and the damned statistics. I'm alive and I'll enjoy the moment, and thanks to you and this deliciously untimely feast, I celebrate! Maybe I never learned to love, but eventually I learned to laugh, and I am laughing now!

Cook: Á table! Á table! Soup is served!

E: And you too must sit, Cook, and you Frédérick, and lovely Lidochka. In the face of death, all are equal!

Ensemble: All are Equal.

E: Frédérick, please perform your office.

Fred: (*ARIA - he sings in Latin*)

BENEDIC, Domine, nos et
haec tua dona quae de tua
largitate sumus sumpturi.

BLESS us, O Lord, and
these Thy gifts which we
are about to receive from
Thy bounty,

Ad cenam vitae aeternae
perducatur nos, Rex aeternae
gloriae, per Christum
Dominum Nostrum,
Amen.

May the King of ever-lasting
glory lead us to the banquet
of life eternal. Through
Christ our Lord, Amen.

Ensemble: Per Christum Dominum Nostrum, Amen.

Karl: (*Enters during the prayer - a bohemian figure, beard, trench coat.*)

Aha, the fat cats saying their prayers! Feasting while the world is in ruins.

Cook: The table is for all. Even you!

Karl: So you can pretend the world has changed - that the poor can sit down with the rich?

Cook: You know what I learned in the camps: a cook is never poor. She has food, she has heat, she has shelter, and everyone wants to be her friend.

K: Well, I accept your food, if not your prayers.

Fréd: (CABALETTA)

That was my job: to pray!
 Until I was banished,
 Sent away
 For talking to God.
 Thought I had nerves of steel,
 But they broke me
 On their primitive wheel.
 I came back odd,
 Delusional, raving!
 (Looking at Elena) She was my saving:
 Took me in,
 Dressed me in the robes
 Of my new vocation.
 To serve is an honourable station,
 I feel a little pride,
 Yes, pride.

Pius: May I? (The "I" extremely high and long)

Ensemble: (With laughter) You may! You need neither excuses nor permission!

Pius: What a distinguished company. What elegance!
What generosity!

K: What a sycophant! Don't I know you from
somewhere?

Pius: Oh, I am sure not. I am far too insignificant....

K: Where did I see....

Clair: (*Entering enveloped in billowing flowing robes
with lots of jewellery.*)

Am I the last? Too late, or just the last? Ah no, I
see there are two spaces. The last one must be for
Judas. How strange for *him* to be late.

Antoine: (*Pretending to read a place card*) And this one
says" "Madame Arcati"!

Clair: Thank you for calling me that. I went to the
theatre a lot as a child. But I always knew
how it would end. The others got very cross when I
told them.

K: Then how will this end?

Clair: Don't be silly. We all know that. Badly!

K: ARIA

You say badly. But I say good riddance. How could
the world not be better after this purification?
Strip away the weak and the infirm. Collapse the
corrupt, venal systems. Wreck all the poisoned
institutions. Marriage will not survive this
onslaught - no - (*looking at Adina and Pat*) be you
ever so sweet. Religion will fool no-one after this.
Politics has long been bankrupt. Anarchy and the
law of the jungle are what survives, and

from that emerges a new, purified, heroic race ready to lacerate the wounds of the old, to cut the redundant knots of compromise, and to proclaim the new utopia.

(The table has fallen silent. Frédéric whistles (Ça Ira in a wistful way)

Adina/Pat: A duet of misunderstanding - their thoughts during this silence.

A: I always knew I wanted him.
 P: I never thought I'd marry
 A: He'll change when we settle down
 P: But it became a habit
 A: I'll be me, and he'll be him
 P: I couldn't break it off
 A: But together we'll be Jupiter
 P: I'll get used to it I suppose
 A: Mars, and Venus
 P: This feeling of being trapped
 A: When our future is unwrapped
 P: And caught up in a net
 A: The new paint is wet
 P: When we arrive
 A: If we survive....

Joyce: The main courses are ready. Cheer up everyone!

BRINDISI - Tutti lead by Elena and Antoine

Let's drink
 Till we cannot think
 That tomorrow we die.

Let's drink
 So we cannot sink
 In the mire where we lie

Lets' drink
 That we do not blink
 When God gives us the eye.

Let's drink
 For we're on the brink
 Of passing on by.

(The Policeman has entered during this drinking song)

P: (spoken)
 This must stop at once! At once!
 This is an illegal assembly.
 Singing is illegal. Embracing is illegal.
 You are a public nuisance,
 Passing on infection,
 Spreading disease,
 Insulting public propriety
 With your brazen feasting.
 Where are your papers? Your papers?
 It's a crime against public morals.
 Do you think the dead and the dyeing
 Want to hear your raucous carousing?

Elena: Officer, you are welcome!
 Your place is here.
 Your chair is empty, your glass is full.

P: (spoken) Don't try to sweet-talk me!
 You'll be arrested, arrested, imprisoned!

E: By whom? By what regiment of police?
 And if you talk of public morals.
 What could be a more inspiring message
 To the stricken people
 Than to defy death,
 To walk up to him and offer him champagne!

(She offers him champagne. He dashes the glass to the floor and marches off, shouting impotently.)

P:*(spoken)* Arrest them! Traitors! Dissidents! Foreign riffraff, enemies of the party...

E: Antoine, this is our moment. Let's go upstairs.

A: Let's enter paradise! *(they exit – singing an elegiac little duet as they leave)*

E/A: Let's enter paradise....

PART TWO: DEPARTURES

Joyce: I choose this moment to celebrate the gift of cooking – the menu for the Feast in the time of Plague: *(should be set like an exquisite, erotic Ravel mélodie)*

ARIA (as much of this as you want)

Saveurs d'ici et d'ailleurs à l'apéritif,
La soupe au pistou.

Crème anglaise aux parfums de meurette
SAINT-JACQUES tarte fine | tourteau | crème
d'Étrez | caviar |

jaune d'oeuf confit granité au chardonnay

LANGOUSTINES et VERVEINE cuites au naturel |
asperges vertes | sabayon verveine

RIS DE VEAU et TRUFFES NOIRES, bonbon de
calamar | haricots "petit riz" | bouillon de chou

AGNEAU DE LAIT cuit au feu de bois | ail caramélisé
| céleri et moutarde, pommes de terre fumées aux
sarments de vigne

FROMAGES FRAIS et AFFINÉS

CHOCOLAT et CARDAMOME VERTE, onctueux
chocolat Equateur | crème glacée fève de cacao gelée
et sorbet chocolat | espuma cardamome Mignardises
et chocolats

Elena: *(re-enters, slightly disheveled)* Antoine is dead. He died happy! Let's drink to happiness!

All: *(stunned by the first death to strike the table)*
To happiness!

Clair: This is, I think, my moment.
I'm Clair, the clairvoyant and, by the way,
The Cabaret. *(She climbs onto the table.)*

All my life I sold myself as the woman who could tell
the future.

Now that the future doesn't exist
I finally tell, to my surprise,
My own demise.
But I'll start, if I may,
With a brief resumé:

I already summoned up
The result of the World Cup
Several hours before they started the game.
I can tell a film's conclusion
Without a doubt or a confusion
Before they show the very first frame.

I read in my old papyrus
That the dread Corona Virus
Would rage until 2021.
I told Tommy when he reaches
The Normandy beaches,
Poor boy, your race will soon be run.

I saw the end of the Titanic
All the tragedy and panic
Before she even set out to sea.
I knew that Dodi and Diana

Would die in such a manner –
Yes, that was all revealed to me!

I knew that blasted referendum –
God, that drove me round the bendum,
Would end with a vote to leave.
I saw the Aberfan disaster
Coming closer, ever faster,
And leaving so many to grieve.

I saw that Wills would marry Kate
Long before their first date,
And the end of Harry Potter too.
I am afraid I long foresaw
The outcome of the Trojan War -
And the beginning of World War Two!

I told Obama he would win it,
And Corbyn he should bin it,
Before a single vote was cast.
I told the Lehman Brothers bosses
To start counting up their losses
As their “sell-by-date” had already passed.

I knew the winners of the Ashes
Dates of several market crashes
And the downfall of the Persian Shah.
I told Erdogan of Turkey
That his stars were somewhat murkey
And he shouldn't push his luck too far!

I told the runners and the riders,
The favorites and outsiders,
Which horse had already won.
I foresaw the Abdication,
Maggie Thatcher's resignation,
And lots of other items of fun.

For you see I've been around
 Since Adam first found
 The Garden of Eden was just a zoo.
 I knew that Cain and Able
 Would end up as a fable:
 All that bible stuff is just not true!

But it's no fun to be a prophet,
 For you can't switch yourself off it,
 You can't help being the one that knows!
 And as much as you'd like to stop it
 You know exactly who's going to cop it,
 And that's a burden that grows and grows,
 And grows and grows and grows!

And I am happy as happy to let it goes...

(Having removed as many veils as is feasible during her dance, she lies down on the table. The cook tips a bowl of strawberries over her body. The guests gather round with their spoons!)

Joyce: Salade des fraises au crème de Chantilly, servi sur le corps de Clair!!

Clair: At last I fulfill my own destiny instead of being the narrator of everyone else's. Elena, give me your hand – *(she examines it carefully)* – yes, I thought so – you alone will survive – but for me you are the black hand. Don't worry, I love you for it, and for your beauty and your intelligence and the supreme generosity of this perfect feast. The black hand! Your lifeline, my death! Adieu! *(she dies)*

Adina: Pat – let's go!

Pat: You want to go inside?

Adina: No, we can't disturb Antoine. Anyway, I prefer the open air. There, where the light shines through the trees.

Pat: It's very visible.

Adina: *(feeding him strawberries from Clair's body)* After this, do you think anyone minds?

McGuire: I certainly won't – I'll be cheering you on!

Adina: Thank you, McGuire. Have a strawberry!

McGuire: I don't mind if I do! Now off you go and enjoy yourselves.

Adina: ARIA Pt 2

Yes, quickly, while the sun through the trees is still warm and bright – while the light shines – come – don't hesitate – there is a shadow – circling, casting its shade – round and round – spiraling up and down - the black bird – quick under the trees where it cannot touch us – the black bird – the black bird....*(she dies)*

McGuire: Oh no! God damn it all – what a pity! I was so looking forward....

Lidochka: *(to Pat, who remains transfixed by Adina's body lying at his feet. She still has her arms full of pots and dishes)*

ARIA

Take me, take me instead! I don't want to die before anything at all has happened to me. Apart from Uncle Pawel messing around – but I don't count that, not that! Ugh! Filthy bastard! Otherwise nothing, nothing but pots and platters and dishes – *(she lets the dishes*

fall to the floor) I cannot be taken knowing nothing, having experienced nothing, on the brink of everything happening...on the very edge – about to fall over and dive into life, to life – to soar upwards like the bird – then crash down into the dirt and eat and smell that too till every apple has been tasted once – but now I see the black silk rope turning and twisting and tying itself like a python about my heart, stifling my future (the black silk rope is indeed twisting its way across the stage. She seizes it with all her force) Stop, stop, I will not let you smother my life – never, never – (she is becoming increasingly entangled in the rope) I will not let it...smoth...smoth...smother... (she dies)

Pius: It's very sad, but she makes a touching picture. (*He takes his little camera out of his pocket*) Hmm, the black silk rope....

Karl: The camera of course – now I remember.... a peace march – and suddenly I notice this figure moving through the crowds with his tiny little camera – I follow you – yes it was you – a lovely little Zeiss – but the crowd separated us.

Pius: I am sure you are mistaken...

K: But later, my friend, when we were being hauled up in court, I saw you handing in your film – your efforts much appreciated. How many people did you send away?

McGuire: Oh God – I don't want this to spoil the taste of our wonderful meal... (*she leaves, spitting in Pius's direction*)

Pius: It's not at all what you suppose. The pressure was intolerable. I defy anyone who has not lived through such times to claim they would have behaved better.

F: Excuse me – I am sorry to interrupt – but in this saucepan I have discovered a black toad – I somehow think this must be yours?

ARIA

P: Don't try to cut me off, to silence me, to scare me! I've been scared all my life. And who can say they would not try by any means to mitigate pain – the awful pain – the torture – what right have you to announce my death – it's premature – very premature! *(Pius in a panic jams down the lid of the saucepan containing the black toad, momentarily gaining some time. At the same moment, the policeman, now quite drunk, passes across the stage. Pius sees him and rushes to talk to him.)*

(spoken or intoned very fast on one note)

Sir, sir, a discreet word. I do not want to die, and I am sure you can make special arrangements. I have a valuable dossier here with all the information on these dangerous and illicit debauchees – your superiors are sure to reward you well for such a trove of damning information, not only about this repulsive and illegal assembly, but all their previous crimes and dissidence against the state. Be sure I only wish

to protect society from such blatant selfish and egotistical exhibitionism.

(SUNG from here)

And take note – she, *(indicating Elena)* she above all is responsible. Of course her blood is impure – she is racially compromised – how could anyone trust such an unfortunate mishmash? Here is the dossier, and here is a little list – I am sure you will consider it worth a considerable favour towards me – my – ha ha – black list, black, b-b bl... *(he involuntarily stuffs the black list into his*

own mouth and chokes on it. The policeman continues on his way.

Meanwhile, Pat is still standing motionless on the spot where Adina died.)

Karl: Aha, so the black toad was a red herring – *(he laughs and looks in the pot)* – and has duly vanished!

Pat: ARIA pt 2

I don't know how I am still standing, and she, lying at my feet.

My final defeat.

I could not even commit

To die with her. The little shit

Still stands beneath the beating sun

Casting his shadow across her corpse

Until the cloud, that tiny, growing

Cloud, that shifting, speeding, knowing

Cloud. That pitch-black cloud... (He dies.

Karl approaches Pius's body, feels in his pocket, and brings out the little camera.)

Karl: ARIA

(spoken)

A moment for a little act of revenge... (he photographs Pius's body) futile of course, like all such acts, but also of reconciliation. (He adjusts Pat's position so that he is embracing Adina). You see how sentimental all this makes me.

(sung from here)

But the plague reveals to us truths we have long suppressed. (He is meanwhile burning Pius's dossier.) I have spent my life arguing pitilessly for radical change, and for the brutal removal of all who stand in its way. Now I see, in the face of an even more brutal power, that it is in the small acts of personal kindness that the true politics begins. And maybe ends too.

(spoken)

The politics of everyday life outshines all absurd utopian ideals, which all too often only conceal another sort of coercion. If I should survive, I would become a monk – not to serve God – not by any means – but to serve humanity. In the end I am with Frédérick – I will serve with pride.

(Sung)

But now the first black bat of the falling dusk is flying, *(nervously looking into the pot)* ah - and the black toad is back in his pot, so my moment is come, praying fervently for my fellow creatures in all their breadth and diversity, who gathered round this table, for which I remain profoundly thankful. *(he dies)*

Joyce: *(Arrives with the final platter)*

Mes amis, the moment has come for my piece de résistance, presented in an appropriate spirit of self-sacrifice, since I am very well aware what it means: le blanc mange noir, le blanc mange, le blanc/noir/blanc/noir *(she dies, plunging face first into the blancmange. Frédérick returns with the bag with the black band.)*

F: Here Madame, we should not forget this – everything was so beautifully prepared.

Elena: Dearest Frédérick, thank you indeed for this, your last act of service.

F: For you dear Madame, the bag with the black band. *(he unties the black ribbon around the portmanteau and brings out a candle stick which he holds in front of him with both hands. Elena lights it for him.)* Pardon me, Madam, but I have always had a weakness for a little ritual. *(He dies. Elena opens the bag which contains candlesticks and black veils. She places these on and around the fallen figures.)*

Elena: ARIA

A funeral oration.
 I dress these vacant carcasses
 With badges of respect
 For when this fleeting moment passes
 They join the class elect
 Of those who spent their time on earth
 Remembering good food, good friends, and mirth.
*(Her oration is joined by the last words of the 9
 characters left on stage, plus Antoine who can be heard
 from off-stage)*

Frédéric: I served with pride.

Lidochka: Won't someone fuck me?

Antoine: (off) I will - in Paradise!

Pius: I meant no harm.

Joyce: Jus de truffe!

Karl: No more Marx!

Pat: I'm frightened.

Adina: I'm pregnant.

Clair: I saw it all coming.
*(Elena leaves. As the sound of her motor fades, Death
 enters, played by the same singer as the policeman)*

Death: ARIA
(spoken)
 And so I make my entrance,
 Though my work is almost done.

And what is left for me
 Where's my share in the fun?
 Of course I understand I am disliked,
 How many times have people spiked
 My drink, or cut my brake cable?
 But I soldier on as best I'm able,
 Looking after number one!
 Who am I anyway, one must ask,
 On finishing this gruesome task?

(Sung)

I am the blackened bed
 On which Antoine lies dead.
 I am the shadow of the bird
 That circled her lovely head.
 I am the black silk rope
 The cloud of futile hope
 I am the toad
 Who croaked as the reaper mowed.
 I am the bat, the warm black hand,
 The black blancmange and the jet-black band
 I am that dirty venal list
 That Judas so devoutly kissed.
 Who am I anyway, one must ask –
(McGuire suddenly appears)
(spoken) Aha – I'm not the last...

McGuire: *(sung)* I'll join you, if you'll break your fast,
 For I know who you are:
 The Black Mask –
 The force who nothing does by half,
 So death and I enjoy the final laugh:

(She starts to laugh. Death joins in, in the manner of "The Laughing Policeman" which those of us old enough to remember "Uncle Mac's favourites" will know. Gradually all the "dead" rise and join in with this triumphant laughing ensemble.) Ha ha ha!

Penarth
Lockdown
March/April 2020