

PUCCINI'S GHOST

A two-act play

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CHARACTERS:

GIACOMO PUCCINI, a famous opera composer

ARTURO TOSCANINI, a prominent music director

ELVIRA PUCCINI, Giacomo's wife

ANTHONY PUCCINI (TONIO), Giacomo's son

DORIA MANFREDI AND HER GHOST, the Puccinis' maid

MARCO, owner of Del Mezzo Italian restaurant in Little Italy

TWO FEMALE COMPANIONS

PRELUDE

In 1909, Giacomo Puccini and Alberto Toscanini are planning to come to New York to produce the world premier of "La Fanciulla del West" (fan choo' la) ("Girl of the Golden West"). Puccini is fifty; Toscanini is forty-two.

Composer Puccini is counting on this opera to answer criticism that his popular operas are not serious major works. Despite his enormous success and popularity, he is insecure and prone to depression.

Puccini is also in an unhappy marriage with Elvira. He is despondent and angry at Elvira because, in her unfounded jealousy, she caused the suicide of twenty-two year old Doria Manfredi, their maid. Elvira falsely accused her of seducing Puccini and having sex with him. Elvira was subsequently convicted of libel and is jailed in Pisa.

Toscanini is the most celebrated music conductor of his time. He has been the Music Director at La Scala in Milan for ten years and has now been named by the Metropolitan Opera in New York to the same position. He and Puccini have previously worked together and are good friends. Toscanini is brilliant, ambitious and confident. He is a perfectionist and is temperamental.

Elvira Puccini is Giacomo's wife. She is in her mid-forties, willful, and spoiled by their new wealth and his celebrity status. She has a bad temper and a jealous streak and is used to getting her own way.

Antonio Puccini (Tonio) is the twenty year old son. He wants to learn to work with his father in producing the Puccini operas. He has mixed feelings about his parents because of his father's infidelity and his mother's jealousy and temper.

The Ghost of Doria Manfredi hovers over the play as her death has affected the other characters and their relationships. They cannot see or hear her, and she only addresses the audience.

The two women in the last scene are the companions of Puccini and Toscanini at Del Pezzo, an Italian restaurant in New York City.

ACT I, SCENE 1

The stage is dark. A middle-aged man, Puccini, is casually strolling in his garden. He stops and lights a cigar with some difficulty (bumbling, trouble lighting a match), and then continues walking.

Puccini (to himself)

Damn matches. Always have trouble lighting the cigar in the breeze.

A door opens, and a twenty-two year old woman, Doria, walks out on to the stage. Lights come up. Puccini is wearing a white shirt with a stiff collar and an open neck. Doria is wearing a simple work dress, perspiring and wiping her brow.

Puccini (looking surprised)

Hello, Doria, didn't expect to see you out here tonight.

Doria

It's too hot to iron in the daytime this summer. I'm ironing your shirts this evening and I needed a break, Maestro.

Puccini

Good for you! It's much better outside with the breeze. Also, the madame doesn't let me smoke my cigar inside.

Doria

She has never liked the smell of smoke. I've been wondering, do you think she is angry with me?

Puccini

Not that I know of. Why do you ask?

Doria

She seems different, more critical of my work.

Puccini

She may just be cross with me. I've been so involved writing my new opera that I haven't paid much attention to her lately. I wouldn't read too much into the signora's moods.

Doria:
You've become a night owl, working this late.

Puccini
I have a deadline to meet. Your family OK?

Doria
They are well. Poppa likes his new job, and Mamma stays home with my sister and brothers. Thank you for asking.

Puccini
Your brother is about to finish school, isn't he?

Doria
He'll will enter the monastery when he's through.

Elvira (off stage yelling):
I THOUGHT IT WAS YOU! YOU THOUGHT I WAS ASLEEP, YOU TRAMP!

(Puccini and Doria look in the direction of the noise. Elvira stomps in from stage left. She's very agitated.)

Elvira
I thought something was going on between you two! Now I have caught you in the act.

Puccini
What are you talking about?

Elvira
I see what's going on—can't fool me!

Puccini

Why are you yelling?! I was just smoking a cigar. Doria was ironing and came out for some air. We were talking.

Elvira

Talking love, maybe.

Puccini

That's crazy! How would I know Doria would be coming out to cool off?

Elvira

THE BITCH! That's not all she came out for. I know she's been sleeping with you.

Puccini:

That's absurd! How could you "KNOW" such a thing?! Doria has been working for us since she was a child.

Elvira

Well, she's no longer a child and she should be ashamed, having sex with a man your age.

Doria

Madame, I know my position. I would never socialize with the family!

Elvira

Your "position" has been with Giacomo. I've been watching you. I know that look.

Puccini

Now calm down, Elvira. Nothing's happened here. Take a closer look at what's really going on.

Elvira

I caught you in time, before you did it—and just outside my bedroom, too! Doria is a whore, and I can't wait to tell everyone

in Torre about it—even the priest.

Doria (in tears)
I've done nothing wrong. I'm leaving!

(Doria runs off stage left, Elvira follows her, yelling.)

Elvira:
I'M NOT THROUGH WITH YOU!

(Off stage, footsteps are heard, then a door is opened and closed, and Elvira is heard pounding on the door, continuing yelling through the end of the scene.)

YOU ARE SCUM!

(Tonio walks in)

Tonio
The commotion woke me up. What the hell is happening?

Puccini
Your mother has come unhinged. She believes Doria and I are having an affair.

Elvira (off stage, pounding on the closed door)
How about loyalty? I educated you, and now you screw my husband.

Tonio
That's ridiculous! Doria is like one of the family. Why, she and I grew up together!

Puccini:
You can talk to your mother, but I don't think she'll listen. I already tried.

Elvira (off stage pounding on the closed door)

YOU WHORE!

Tonio

What did you do to set her off?

Puccini

Sounds like you think I did something wrong. It was nothing. I was only smoking a cigar in the garden. Doria came outside, and we were just chatting. Apparently, that woke Elvira up.

Tonio

That's all?

Elvira (off stage pounding on the closed door)

YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A PUTTANA!

Puccini

That's it. Nothing else. You know how jealous your mother gets—sometimes over nothing at all, sometimes over something she imagines.

Tonio

Well, you have given her reason in the past. She gets suspicious about other women when you are away.

Puccini

But here at home, with a girl who was young enough to be my daughter? And outside her bedroom?

Elvira (off stage pounding on the closed door)

I was generous to you, and this is the thanks I get.

Tonio

I think Mother is dead wrong about Doria, but living with you has been not been easy on her. You leave home more often now for weeks at a time to produce your operas, not always taking her with you.

Puccini (getting defensive)

That's what I do, and that's what pays for her to have all these houses and new dresses and vacations at the best places!

Tonio

And she thinks you have other women, like singers, when you travel.

Elvira (off stage)

You will pay for having sex with Giacomo!

Puccini (more defensive)

I work closely with singers, men and women. We talk and we have drinks and meals together. To sleep with women in the cast could hurt my performances. That would be stupid!

(Puccini and Tonio have looked up, hearing Elvira pounding on the door and swearing in the background.)

Tonio

I'll go see if I can calm her down.

(Tonio leaves stage left.)

Elvira (to Doria, yelling off stage through closed door)

NO ONE IN TOWN WILL EVER SPEAK TO YOU AGAIN, DORIA! I'LL SEE TO THAT!

END OF ACT I, SCENE I

ACT I, SCENE 2

Puccini's home office in Torre del Lago, Italy, a year later. There is a large desk with chairs and a sofa and a book case. A piano stands near the desk, a bottle of wine and some glasses are on the desk. Puccini is sitting on the bench at the piano with pen and paper, editing the opera score.

He hears a knock on the door and rises, opens the door, and greets Arturo Toscanini. Toscanini sits in a chair in front of the desk. Afternoon sun is coming through the windows behind them. The two men are dressed in suits and ties.

Puccini
Just a minute, Arturo.

(Puccini goes back to the piano and plays some notes and scribbles on the sheet music. He then sits at his desk and pours red wine for his friend and himself.)

Puccini
I just haven't been able to make this right, so I am cutting out a tenor aria from the third act. Now the act flows more smoothly.

Toscanini
I know you will work it out. So, how are you, my friend?

Puccini
I've been better. Doria's death six months ago made me so sad, but I have to get over my mourning. I need to finish "Girl of the Golden West" for the January opening in New York.

Ghost: (Enters and stands behind the desk, looking at the audience; other characters cannot see or hear her.)
He may be sad, but I'm the one who is dead.

Toscanini

I am so sorry. I read about the suicide and Elvira's trial in the Rome newspaper. It was on the front page for several days.

Puccini

Yes, unfortunately it made headlines all over the world.

Toscanini

How is Elvira doing in jail?

Ghost

I hope she hates every minute of it.

Puccini

Oh, she's all right. Complaining as always. She has everything she needs. She's treated like a celebrity. What bothers me is the needless death of that young, innocent woman. It was so unfair and unnecessary.

Ghost

No kidding!

Toscanini

The Rome newspaper reports were confusing about how it all started.

Puccini

Here's how it was... I was working at home one night last summer. I went out to the garden for a cigar. In the summer, Doria did her ironing at night when it was cooler. She came outside for air, and we chatted a bit. Elvira heard us talking. She came outside screaming, accusing Doria and me of having sex in the garden.

Ghost

The signore never touched me in the six years I worked for them!
My goodness, he is older than my papa!

Toscanini

Knowing Elvira, that doesn't surprise me at all!

Puccini

Elvira acted crazy! She's always been jealous.

Toscanini (interrupts)

Sounds like Tosca in Act One.

Puccini: Who do you think was my model for the character? Elvira said Doria had seduced me. Can you imagine? In the garden, next to Elvira's own bedroom?!

Toscanini

Why would she ever even imagine that you would do that there?

Puccini

Who knows? But the very next day, Elvira went all over Torre del Lago telling everyone that Doria was having sex with me, calling her a whore. She insinuated that she had seen us fornicating in the dark garden.

Ghost

She went to the monsignor and asked him to throw me out of the Church! Can you imagine? She even complained about me to my parents. I was so ashamed!

Puccini

She wouldn't stop! Elvira's hurtful remarks went on for weeks, telling everyone she saw about how Doria was screwing me right under her nose. Finally, most people in town believed "poor

Elvira" and began to feel sorry for her.

Toscanini

What a lot of abuse and shame for a young girl!

Puccini

Yeah, Doria couldn't stand the stigma. She was shunned everywhere she went. People would turn their backs to her when she walked by. When she went to buy bread, the baker would ignore her as if she weren't there.

Toscanini

People can be so cruel.

Puccini

Even her family suffered from the sting of Elvira's sharp tongue. Her father was fired and her brother was turned down by the seminary.

Ghost

That was the final blow. I love my family.

Puccini: (Hesitates before continuing)

I regret now that I did nothing to try to change the minds of the people in town. People here respect me, and I could have used my influence to help her.

Toscanini: (interrupts)

That could have saved her, by countering Elvira's accusations and telling the other side of the story.

Ghost:

Yeah, I'll say! That would have been a big help. I would not be a ghost now and I'd still be alive !

Puccini:

I really should have gone into town. I was distracted, and I was

having problems getting my work done at that time.

Ghost (sits on the edge of the desk)

Excuses, excuses, excuses! I was so alone and desperate that I bought poison at the apothecary, said it was for rats. I thought it would just kill me right away; I didn't know it would make me so sick! Not a fun way to go!

Toscanini

And you're sure, Giacomo, you did nothing to create suspicion? I know how you are with women; I've been with you, you know.

Puccini

I did notice Doria was no longer a child. She's become a beauty. But I would never do anything at home, especially with Elvira and Tonio in the house! That would be foolish!

Toscanini

That's for sure!

Puccini

I swear I never touched her! After my car accident six years ago, I had a broken leg, and she was hired to nurse me and help me get around.

Ghost

I was only 16 at the time, straight out of convent school.

Puccini

After I recovered, Doria stayed on as a maid. She was part of our household for six years.

Toscanini

I assume she lived in your house, at least during the week.

Puccini

Yes, she had a room in the servants' quarters.

Toscanini

Did she ever have friends or family over?

Puccini

Not much. She would usually go into town to her parents' home when she had time off. I don't think she ever had a boyfriend. She was a virgin.

Toscanini

How can you possibly know that?

Puccini

Because after Elvira's accusations, the medical examiner, Elvira's very own doctor, did an autopsy. Doria was untouched.

Ghost

I never had a serious boyfriend, but I was kissed once by Armani behind the church.

Toscanini

That's when Elvira was arrested, after the autopsy?

Puccini

Not right away. But the same townspeople who had supported Elvira at first got up in arms against her after that report came out. Doria's family was so angry that they went to the constable and filed charges for Doria's wrongful death.

Toscanini

I remember hearing that you went to Milan around that time.

Puccini

I couldn't stand to be around Elvira after Doria's death. After the funeral, I left home. I couldn't work for over a month, I was so broken-hearted and depressed!

Toscanini

You tend toward melancholy anyway, my friend. I know you of all people would react this way. It's a wonder you came back to Torre at all!

Puccini

Giulio Ricordi came to get me, made me go back to work on the new opera. By then, Elvira was out on bond. She refused to go to her own trial. She thought it was a sham because she had done nothing wrong.

Toscanini

Not to go and defend herself was a colossal mistake! It's insane she could possibly still believe she was blameless!

Puccini

I don't get it either, but you know her temper. She remains obstinate to this day, says she was innocent, did nothing wrong, and had nothing to do with Doria's suicide. She told her attorney that, if anyone should have been arrested, it was me, for having sex with Doria.

Ghost (flaps her arms)

Just like my papa's rooster, always jealous and ruling the roost.