

Plastic Flowers

Monodrama

Opera in 1 act

for solo mezzo-soprano, piano and live electronics.

Music and Libretto By:

João Macdowell



Illustrations: Bebel Franco

“As Flores de plástico não morrem”

(Plastic flowers do not die)

- Titãs

“Your kiss so sweet,

Your sweat so sour.

Sometimes I'm thinking that I love you,

But I know it's only lust.”

- Gang of Four

“Pop music seems to be the only area where there is to be found unabashed vitality, the fun of invention, the feeling of fresh air. Everything else suddenly seems old fashioned.”

Leonard Bernstein

The Infinite Variety of Music - 1966

(Of course, Bernstein had a very dynamic personality and would change his mind about the state of affairs in the world of music many times after that.)

Composer's Note:

There is an operatic tradition of long female arias for women in crisis. There is also an interesting tradition of monodramas. In Brazilian punk rock there was a tradition of translating verses from American songs and setting these to new music. It was a way to incorporate the theme of the song and yet to create original pieces. It was also a way for young songwriters to develop their personal voices.

This is my first attempt at an American Opera. In a way it is a tribute to the Empire of Plastic, and yet a thread to talk about emotions that may be common anywhere, in a globalised culture. I was trying not to be too critical, but instead to find some form of redemption in the large parking lots. This is also a comment on pop culture, as it seems to be made of plastic, and just as the material itself, it may aspire to last forever.

As a musician, this was an excuse to experiment with harmonies that thread slightly uncommon tonal approaches under memorable melodies. Resolutions may be misleading, tone alignments may translate personality quirks of the character, in a bi-polar, bi-tonal emotional territory. Familiar chords may lead into deceptive modulations. It was a way to quote and comment on my unconscious pop background and to sample without sampling.

Penelope was the archetype and I saw her waiting in Suburbia. She knits the inevitable web of emotion and desire. I started to follow the thread of one of her possible journeys. This is the story of a woman who became very close to me, as she wrote herself out. I feel for her passion.

Scenes:

1 - Plastic Flowers - Penelope is alone at home, a personal crisis.

2 - Memories of her Dad.

3 - First boy friend

4 - The second man

5 - Her lesbian Lover - The Song of Songs

6 - Meets husband

7 - Feels abandoned

8 - Losing control at the shopping Mall

9 - Considers suicide

10 - Plastic Flowers - Recapitulation and conclusion.

Plastic Flowers

Libretto

Stage:

Penelope at home: some kind of mess, random objects, boxes, wrapping paper, plastic toys, empty bottles of wine. She has her head down, disheveled hair, wearing a red dress, unzipped in her back.

Live Electronics:

- Voices of children in park, birds.

- Scene 1:

Penelope – Mezzo-Soprano:

I cried until I could no longer
See my eyes in the mirror.
I tore in small pieces the letters
That once I kept with my secrets.
I cried because I tore apart
The flowers I had by the window.
There's red all over my face.
There's red all over my body.
There's red when I close up my eyes.
It's painting my body like roses.

In flashes of light I am fading
In glimpses of more I am falling.
The pain will soon cure all the sorrows
My dream starts tasting like tears
My body is covered with flowers
The colors are bright in the corners.

You brought me plastic flowers
You said that plastic flowers last forever
But I won't be your plastic flower anymore.

Live Electronics:

Sounds from the body: heartbeat, blood, whispered thoughts

- Scene 2:

Penelope:

Dad used to make up songs with me:

Da da dum di dum

Da da dum di dum

Da da dum di dum

Da.

...

Pequeñita,

¿Dónde estamos?

¿Dónde vamos?

Pequeñita?

¿Dónde hemos de pensar que la vida nos sería

siempre hermosa, siempre rica,

siempre maravillosa?

Pequetita?

¿A dónde vamos sin tristezas, sin maldad, con ternura, con coraje?

A dónde vamos, Pequeñita?

Pequeñita ..

And then daddy left me,

The phone was ringing in the night.

Papito died in a car crash.

He was just a face in a box.

Mother was crying in a corner.

Live Electronics:

Church Bells, shakers, inverted sounds, crescendo. Like a tape rewinding faster and faster.

14

- scene 3

Penelope:

My first man was a boy
And he came to me with flowers
He walked me on the sidewalk
All the way up to my door.

He took me to the fair
And we rode the roller coaster
And he gave me a teddy bear.

"...baby let me be, your loving teddy bear,
put a chain around my neck and lead me anywhere..."

He talked about himself
And he called me his princess.
He told me of his life and how good a man he was.

I felt so special
So special
I had this dream of
Much love

I felt your body

So hot
I needed finding
What's love?

Yet it never felt so lonely
As when you got yourself going
Like I was not there
Like you did not care

And I cried alone into the pillows
For the moment was so fast,
And he was gone.

Live Electronics:

Reversed broken glass, sounds of voices echoing in corridors.

- Scene 4

Penelope:

The second one I met when I was old enough to drink
He took me to a bar, where he showed off all he could.
We danced into the night
Choosing songs from the old jukebox.

Yes, he had the smell of liquor
Yes, his hands were large and strong.

Yet he asked me of my past
And he looked into my drawers...

He would take his time
Trying out the food that we ate
Trying out the food that I made.

Yet I keep thinking about things that I don't remember
Thinking about moments that I lost...

He would ride me like a horse,
And I almost could enjoy it.

Yet I wanted him to stay,
But it did not take too long,
One day I woke up
And he was gone.

Live Electronics:

Rhythmic vinyl DJ scratches, slowing down, till it reaches low rumble frequencies.

- Scene 5

Penelope:

My third love was a woman
And we met outside the church
We would talk for days on end
Then she told me of her feelings
We kissed inside her room
We could spend the day in bed
We would hide under the sheets
And forget the world outside
That was when I felt the pleasure...
How my body could expand...

You taught me the Song of Songs
You were my priestess
You were my love.
You were my only one.
You were my lust.

“I rose up open for my lover,
in my hands flowing myrrh,

my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh,
on the handles of the lock.”

Your hands all over me,
My fingers dripped with myrrh...

“Your kiss so sweet
Your sweat so sour
Sometimes I'm thinking that I love you
But I know it's only lust”

Yet she held to me just like fire,
And I almost could not breathe
It was good but it was too much.
It was gold, but was it my gold?
It was life, but was it my life?
I was afraid.
I had to go.

Live Electronics:

Distant ambulance sirens, sounds of whales, ocean waves.

- Scene 6

(She wraps herself in white sheets.)

Penelope:

Then I met you in the Summer
Like someone who comes from nothing
You never gave any gift
Nor did you ask many questions
You just took me by the hand
And led me to the bed
You just seemed so undeniable
That I thought it was love at last...
So I thought it was love at last...
And I put on a wedding dress
Oh, my pretty wedding dress...
And in the church I did say yes.

I keep thinking about the moment when I first saw you
You were so handsome
You were so tall
You were like a tower
And I was so small
I keep thinking about the past,
Thinking about the future.
Thinking about my mother.

Thinking about my father.

Thinking about you,

Holding my hand at the movies

Touching my thighs in the dark room,

Thinking about the taste of your kiss...

Oh, how I felt I looked so pretty

In my white dress...

Oh, my pretty wedding dress...

Oh, my silly wedding dress...

And I spilled wine on my dress

But you did not seem to mind that.

Live Electronics:

Party voices, toasting glasses, bits of big band sounds winding down, all mixed and getting louder till abrupt halt.

- Scene 7

Penelope:

Yet you left me all alone

In a house away from everyone
Just the highway and the halls

I could go out shopping
I could see the newest mall
But I never had a child,
And you only come home to sleep,
If at all.

You leave me waiting.
And I keep waiting
And waiting
Always when you're not here,
I am waiting,
Even when you are here,
You are never really here at all.

You like the TV
But I like to dance...

I see signs of time in the mirror,
I see signs of love that have gone
And I never get an answer
Why does the clock tick so loud?

Live Electronics:

Highway traffic, automobiles crossing, broad panning.

- Scene 8

Penelope:

So...

I went to the mall to get more.

I bought all the gifts from the store

I got all the good from the ad

I was left just wanting for more.

Cause I have plastic cards,

I have credit.

And I can bring more

Plastic to the house

I filled my plastic home with plastic people

Plastic toys for the children

That I don't have

Plastic toys from the sex shop

Plastic chairs where I can sit my ass.

And eat the plastic food that's frozen,

What should I taste today?

I have plastic bottles full of water
I have plastic dreams that bring me nothing
I am just a plastic doll that's wearing make up
Showing my plastic face to your plastic friends
Serving you pleasure, like a party doll.

(Let's party...)

Throwing the plastic plates on the floor
Eating the plastic food from the drawers
Scratching the plastic nails that I put on
There's a plastic sign at the door
But I don't want to live here anymore.

Oh...

I went to the mall to get more.
I bought all the gifts from the store
I got all the good from the ad
I was left just wanting for more.

Live Electronics:

Sounds of paper being ripped, shopping center bells...

- Scene 9:

Penelope:

Any good
For anyone

Good for no one.
No one
No one looks at me
No one sees me
I'll just fade away
Into the background.

Daddy,
They'll be sending me to you in a box.

Live Electronics:

Voices of children in park, birds.

-Scene 10:

Penelope:

And then
I cried until I could no longer
See my eyes in the mirror.

I tore in small pieces the letters
That once I kept with my secrets.
I cried because I tore apart
The flowers I had by the window.
There's red all over my face.
There's red all over my body.
There's red when I close up my eyes.
It's painting my body like roses.

In flashes of light I am fading
In glimpses of more I am falling.
The pain will soon cure all the sorrows
My dream starts tasting like tears
My body is covered with flowers
The colors are bright in the corners.

You brought me plastic flowers
You said that plastic flowers last forever
but I am not your plastic flower anymore.

The thorns are deep in my skin.

(She zips up her dress.)

But

I can still fit on my red dress.

I can still get on my high hills

I can put on my red lipstick.

I guess I can still make a mess.

I see flowers.

Flowers.

But

Plastic Flowers never die.



Plastic Flowers

Vocal Score