

# 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



To all the singers I've met, I've learned from each of you.

This music is especially dedicated to all the Mezzos in their beautiful variety.

Most of all, to Re'ut Ben-Ze'ev and Abby Powell, who most closely worked with me on this music. There is mark from each of you in our Penelope.

Also to the lyrical soprano Alexandra Filipe whose help was fundamental on the final stages of this project.

Thank you.



### 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.

“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 would change his mind about the state of affairs in the world of music many times after that.)

# 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 darkness I'm 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 gave me plastic flowers  
You said that plastic flowers last forever  
But I won't be your plastic flower anymore.

You took me to the tower.  
Even my glass desires seem to break down.  
Lonely hours, broken hearted,  
Wasting time takes forever.

You bought 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.

- scene 3

Penelope:

My first man was a boy  
And he came to me with flowers  
He held on to my hand  
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, beautiful, so fancy,

So special.

I had this dream of 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 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 secrets...

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 saw the stars.

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  
And 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

I felt...

I felt 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 open for my lover,  
in my hands flowing myrrh,  
my fingers smelling sweet 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 me fancy gifts

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.

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 goods from the ad

I was left just waiting 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 kiss my ass.

And eat the plastic food that's frozen,

What should I taste today?

I have plastic bottles full of soda

I have plastic dreams that bring me nothing

I am just a party doll that's wearing make up

Showing my plastic face to your plastic friends

Serving you pleasure, like a blow-up 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 goods from the ad

I was left just waiting for more.

Live Electronics:

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

- Scene 9:

Penelope:

I am lost to the world.

No one cares if I live or die.

Daddy,



26

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.

Maybe I'm just not there

But I could run away

To a new life.

Dum di dum di da

Dum di dum di da

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 darkness I'm 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.

You took me to the tower.

Even my glass desires seem to break down.

Lonely hours, broken hearted,

Wasting time takes forever.

You bought me plastic flowers

You said that plastic flowers last forever

But I won't be 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 heels

I can put on my red lipstick.

I guess I can still make a mess.

I see flowers.

Flowers.

But

Plastic Flowers never die.