

Libretto for Prologue, Scenes 1 & 2

WHY I LIVE AT THE P.O.

A chamber opera in one act
based on the story by Eudora Welty

Music : Stephen Eddins

Libretto : Michael O'Brien and Stephen Eddins

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Prologue

SETTING: CHINA GROVE, MISSISSIPPI. JULY 1941. MID-MORNING.

THE BACK ROOM OF A SMALL POST OFFICE (DOWNSTAGE RIGHT), SET UP WITH
ALL THE AMENITIES OF A COMFORTABLE HOME - EASY CHAIR, RADIO, SEWING
MACHINE, ELECTRIC FAN, IRONING BOARD, LAMPS, HOUSE PLANTS, ETC.

SISTER 1 SINGS HER TALE RIGHT TO THE AUDIENCE

SISTER 1. Fine. Fine.
 I was getting along fine- fine -
 I was getting along fine -
 Till Stella-Rondo came home.

 Stella-Rondo - my sister -
 Stella-Rondo - home again -

Stella-Rondo - left her husband -

 You know - Mr. Whitaker?
 Mr. Whitaker - that photographer from Illinois?
 (Course I went with Mr. Whitaker first, when he first appeared here in
 China Grove, taking "Pose Yourself" photos, and Stella-Rondo broke
 us up. Told him I was one-sided. You know, bigger on one side than
 the other? A falsehood: a deliberate, calculated falsehood: I'm the

same! Stella-Rondo is exactly twelve months to the day younger than I am, and for that reason she's spoiled. Always had everything in the world she wanted.)

I was getting along fine...

Scene One

TRANSITION TO: DAYS EARLIER, THE FOURTH OF JULY. LIGHTS UP ON THE FAMILY HOME, (CENTER STAGE). LATE MORNING. IN THE KITCHEN IS "SISTER 2," SISTER 1'S DOUBLE IN THE FLASHBACK - SAME CLOTHES AND HAIR, BUT MORE BEAUTIFUL AND MORE INNOCENT THAN OUR NARRATOR. A MISSISSIPPI CINDERELLA. BUSY COOKING DINNER.

SISTER 1. Me. That's me,
 Fixing dinner for my family
 Last Fourth of July.

SISTER 2. (SINGS TO HERSELF AS SHE BLISSFULLY PREPARES DINNER.)

SISTER 1. And SHE comes home - from Illinois!
 Separated - from Mr. Whitaker -
 Separated - first thing she did!
 Bringing - to our complete surprise -
 Bringing - bringing -
 Bringing to our complete surprise -
 This child of two!

STELLA-RONDO ENTERS WITH SHIRLEY-T., CARRYING AN IMPOSSIBLE AMOUNT OF LUGGAGE. THEY STOP IN THE YARD.

STELLA-RONDO. (CALLING INTO THE HOUSE)
 Mama? Mama, I'm home!

MAMA. (CALLING FROM THE BACK OF THE HOUSE)
 Stella-Rondo?

MAMA RUNS UP THE HALLWAY FROM THE BACK OF THE HOUSE. SHE AND STELLA-RONDO RUN TO EACH OTHER AND EMBRACE.

MAMA. Here you are! Here you are!

SISTER 1. You oughta see Mama -
Two hundred pounds and real tiny feet -

MAMA. (DURING MAMA'S SOLO, STELLA RONDO AND SISTER 2 GIVE EACH OTHER A PERFUNCTORY PECK ON THE CHEEK. SISTER 2 GETS BACK TO WORK IN THE KITCHEN.)
Here you are! Here you are!
Like to make me drop dead for a second!
Here you had this marvelous child,
And never so much as a word wrote home about it,
To your mama!
I'm thoroughly ashamed of you!

SISTER 1. But of course she wasn't.

STELLA-RONDO. Why, Mama -

SISTER 1. And Stella-Rondo just takes off this HAT -
I wish you could see it -
She just takes off this HAT -

STELLA-RONDO. Why, Mama, Shirley-T. is adopted.
I can prove it.

MAMA. How?

SISTER 1. - Said Mama.

SISTER 2. Hmmm! -

SISTER 1. - Was all I said from the kitchen.
Me - over a hot stove.
Me - stretching two chickens over five people
And a completely unexpected child,
Without one moment's notice -

STELLA-RONDO. What do you mean- "Hmmm?"-

SISTER 2. Hmmm!

STELLA-RONDO. Hmmm?

MAMA. I heard that, Sister.

SISTER 2. Who, me?
Why - I didn't mean a thing!
Only Shirley-T. - whoever she is -
Seems the spit-image of Papa-Daddy,
If he'd cut off his beard,
If Papa-Daddy'd cut off his beard.

SISTERS 1 & 2,
MAMA Which of course he'd never do!
Which of course he'd never do!
Papa-Daddy'd NEVER cut off his beard
In the world.
No, no, no!

Papa-Daddy'd never cut off his beard,
But that Shirley T. - whoever she is -
Seems the spit-image of Papa-Daddy,
(Whoever she is)
If Papa-Daddy'd cut off his beard.
Unh-unh!

Which of course he'd never do!
Which of course he'd never do!
Papa-Daddy'd NEVER cut off his beard
In the world.
(Not one inch!)

MAMA. Papa-Daddy'd never cut off his beard.

SISTER 1. Papa-Daddy's Mama's papa, and sulks.

MAMA. Papa started growing that beard
Out on the coast when he was fifteen.

SISTERS 1 & 2.

MAMA. No!
Papa-Daddy'd never cut off his beard.
Papa-Daddy'd never cut off,
Never cut off,
Never cut off,
Never cut off,
Never cut off his beard!

STELLA-RONDO. (FURIOUSLY)
Sister -
I don't need to tell you -
You've got a lot of nerve -
You've got a lot of nerve, and always did have.
And I'll thank you to make no future reference
To my adopted child
Whatsoever!

SISTER 2. Very well, very well, very well - only -

SISTER 1. - Of course I noticed -

SISTER 2. That frown! - Why - that's Mr. Whitaker!
SHE looks like a cross between Papa-Daddy
And Mr. Whitaker!

STELLA-RONDO. Well, she isn't!
She's adopted.
That's all I can say.

STELLA-RONDO GATHERS SHIRLEY-T. AND HER LUGGAGE, AND FLOUNCES UP THE STAIRS TO HER BEDROOM.

MAMA. (LOOKING TENDERLY UP THE STAIRS AFTER THEM.)
Looks like Shirley Temple to me!

Interlude

MAMA AND SISTER 2 PREPARE FOR DINNER, SETTING THE TABLE AND PUTTING OUT THE FOOD.

MAMA. Dinner! Dinner!

Scene Two

STELLA-RONDO AND SHIRLEY-T. COME DOWN TO THE TABLE. PAPA-DADDY APPEARS AT THE END OF THE HALLWAY RUNNING THROUGH THE MIDDLE OF THE HOUSE AND SLOWLY HOBBLER TOWARD THE KITCHEN. HE MAKES HIS WAY TO THE TABLE AND TAKES HIS SEAT AT THE HEAD. ALL BOW THEIR HEADS AS PAPA-DADDY LEADS THEM IN THE GRACE.

SISTER 1. And the first thing Stella-Rondo did -
Was turn Papa-Daddy against me...

PAPA-DADDY FINISHES THE BLESSING AND THEY BEGIN TO EAT.

STELLA-RONDO. (WITH FALSE SWEETNESS)
Papa-Daddy. (PAPA-DADDY IGNORES HER)
(MORE INSISTENTLY)
Papa-Daddy...
Sister fails to understand.
Sister fails to understand
Why you don't cut off your beard.

PAPA-DADDY. What?? -

SISTER 1. Took me completely by surprise! -
And Papa-Daddy just LAYS down his knife & fork and -

PAPA-DADDY. What?? What?? Have I heard correctly?
The postmistress
Fails to understand

Why - I don't cut off my beard?

HE GLARES AT SISTER 2.

SISTER 2. (INDIGNANTLY)
Papa-Daddy,
Why, of course I understand!
I did not say any such of a thing.
The idea!

PAPA-DADDY. Hussy!

SISTER 2. Papa-Daddy - nothing was further from my mind!
You know I'd no more want you to cut off your beard
Than the man in the moon!
Stella-Rondo sat there and made that up
While she was eating breast of chicken.

PAPA-DADDY. Have I heard correctly??
The postmistress
Fails to understand
Why I don't cut off my beard?

STELLA-RONDO. Yes, you did say it!
Anybody could of heard you.
Anybody could of heard you
That had ears!

SISTER 2. I didn't say any such of a thing!
Stella-Rondo made that up!

PAPA-DADDY'S FURY GROWS. HE RISES.

PAPA-DADDY. "Bird's nest," did you call it?
"Bird's nest?" "Bird's nest?"
WHO got you that job at the P.O.? Who, who?
WHO got you that job at the post office through his influence
With the government?

SISTER 1. (Not that it isn't the next to smallest P.O. in the entire state of Mississippi!)

PAPA-DADDY. Hussy! Hussy!

SISTER 1. To be called such a thing
By my own grandfather!
I do not enjoy
Being called a hussy.
To be called such a thing!

SISTER 2. I never said any such of a thing!
I never dreamed it was a bird's nest.
I have always been grateful
Though this is the next to smallest P.O. in the
Entire state of Mississippi.

STELLA-RONDO. Yes, you did say it!
Anybody could of heard you!
Anybody could of heard you
That had ears!
Heard you, heard you,
Anybody could of heard you!
Anybody could of heard you that had ears!

MAMA. (TO SISTER 2, POINTEDLY)
Stop right there!!

(STANDOFF BETWEEN MAMA AND SISTER 2)

SISTER 1. So I pulled my napkin
Straight back through the napkin ring -
And left the table.

SISTER 2 GETS UP HUFFILY AND GOES INTO THE HALLWAY TO SULK

MAMA. Call her back, call her back,

She'll starve!
Call her back, call her back!

PAPA-DADDY. I will never cut off this beard!
I will never cut off this beard!
No!

(SHIRLEY-T. HAS SPIT UP)

STELLA-RONDO. Oh, Shirley-T.!
Oh, Shirley-T.!
Oh, Shirley-T.!

PAPA-DADDY. No!
Never -
Never cut off this beard!
Never -
I started growing this beard when I was fifteen.
Never, never, never, never, never!
No! I'll never, never, never
Cut off this beard!

No, never -
Not one inch.
Never -
Not as long as I live.
Never, never, never, never, no!
And I don't appreciate it in you at all!

And you can all sit here
And remember my words.
And now I am going -
going out -
going out and lie in the hammock.

PAPA-DADDY PASSES RIGHT BY SISTER 2 IN THE HALLWAY AND GOES STRAIGHT
OUT AND GETS IN THE HAMMOCK

STELLA-RONDO, SISTER 1, & MAMA. (GATHERING AROUND SHIRLEY-T.; STELLA RONDO AND MAMA, SYMPATHETIC; SISTER 1, SARCASTIC)

Oh -

Poor Shirley-T. -

Lost the Milky Way

She ate in Cairo -

SISTER 1. (BITTERLY, THINKING OF MR. WHITAKER)

- Illinois.