The Queer Century

1900: Two Queens

A one act chamber opera
Music by Robert Ely
Libretto by Peter Scott-Presland

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CAST

Queen Victoria Contralto (or possibly male alto)

81 years old. Very small and enormously fat. She suffers from chronic arthritis and uses a bath chair.

Oscar Wilde Baritone

46 years old, very tall, and running to fat. Longish hair. His ear is bandaged [it is very painful after unsuccessful surgery]. Strong English accent, which slips into his native Dublin when he is agitated.

Page Boy Background actor. Unspoken

Queen Victoria's attendant - dressed as for court.

SETTING

30th November 1900.

Oscar Wilde’s room at the Hotel d’Alsace; sparse, an old bed, a bedside table. His overcoat is used as a bedspread.

ORCHESTRATION

Piano, Flute, Violin, ‘Cello
TWO QUEENS

A short musical prologue.

Slow lighting reveals the room is sparse; an old bed, a bedside table.

Wilde is lying in bed on his back, dying. His mouth is wide open, his breathing is laboured and heavy.

MUSICAL SCENE 1

Attended by a Page Boy carrying a small hand-bell and a tin, VICTORIA appears suddenly at the doorway in her bath chair. Her reticule in her lap, a walking stick tucked in at her side.

VICTORIA: [Declamatory] Mr Wilde! Mr Wilde!

[The Page pushes her part way into the room.]

Rise, sir, from that recumbent posture.

[WILDE wakes. He is very groggy, disorientated.

The Page moves VICTORIA closer to the bed side. He fusses over her before placing the hand bell and tin in her lap. From his pocket he produces an embroidered napkin and tucks it into her collar, smoothing it out down her front.

WILDE clears his throat, coughing and 'phlegmy'.]

WILDE:

Where’s Robbie? Where’s Reggie?

[VICTORIA dismisses the page boy, who leaves closing the door behind him. WILDE becomes more lucid and aware that he is not alone.]

VICTORIA: Your young friends have gone.

Everyone’s gone.

WILDE: [realising who it is he struggles to rise...}
Majesty! It is a signal honour.

...but fails and collapses to a seated position on the bed. VICTORIA doesn’t notice his deference]

VICTORIA: We heard of your parlous state.
Your poverty, your operation...
How is your poor ear?

[WILDE self-consciously places a hand over the bandaged ear]

WILDE: I bear it with what fortitude I can.

[He takes his hand away]

Having had some abatement.

[He brightens somewhat - almost childlike]

I have been out in a carriage with my friends.

VICTORIA: We hope you have been behaving very well

WILDE: I have not been feeling very well.

VICTORIA: In that case you likely have.
Behaving well and feeling well rarely go together.

WILDE: I am dying, Majesty.

VICTORIA: And have been for some weeks.

[Exhausted, he relaxes back to lying on the bed. VICTORIA leans closer and gently lays a hand on his shoulder for a moment then takes her hand away]

We really think it is high time
That you made up your mind
Whether you are going to live or to die.
This shilly-shallying is absurd.
WILDE: The doctor says I cannot live

VICTORIA: Then we hope that you will act
On his medical advice.
Our doctors say much the same
And we intend to follow
Their guidance unquestioningly.

[Darker] We shall not be long after you.

[Her mood brightens]
You had the last rites, we believe.

[Wilde brightens and struggles to a sitting position]

WILDE: Oh yes. It was a comfort
When the Catholic Church received me in.

VICTORIA: We are glad to hear it.
A man should always have an occupation
Of some kind.

[He struggles to get out of bed]

WILDE: I will not live out the century.
The English people would not stand for it.

[Having failed to stand, he sits on the edge, trying to put his shoes on]

VICTORIA: No need for shoes for you now!

[He throws the shoes aside... looks at her, then shrugs]

WILDE: Do you have any cigarettes?

VICTORIA: Certainly not. We only smoke opiates.

WILDE: Perhaps a glass of absinthe?

VICTORIA: Mr Wilde, absinthe is a drink
For Bohemians and anarchists.
It is not a fitting beverage for a queen

[WILDE double-takes the audience]

MUSICAL SCENE 2

[VICTORIA rummages under her voluminous skirts and brings out a hip flask]

VICTORIA: You may partake of this.

[She passes the flask to WILDE who takes the flask somewhat dubiously]

Just a little, mind -

[He removes the stopper and sniffs the contents]

A cocktail of claret, scotch and laudanum
I swear by it.
I never go anywhere without it.

[He takes a drink and finds it to his liking.

VICTORIA has another rummage and produces a cream cake. She appears childishly happy]

VICTORIA: Mr Wilde,
We heard how you honoured us
On our Diamond Jubilee.
A party for the children of Berneval

[She bites the cake greedily, cream goes round her mouth]

WILDE: I love children.
[Deep sorrow] I have not seen my own for six years -
I miss them dreadfully

VICTORIA: Children are the price one pays
For the pleasures of congress.
Sometimes we look at ours
And ask if it was worth it

[She considers another bite...]

Look what childbirth has done to our figure.

...but drops the cake into her lap, picks up the handbell and rings it delicately.]

WILDE: Children are an avoidable pleasure

[The page enters with a folded cloth over his arm and respectfully cleans around her mouth]

VICTORIA: [She splutters] Mr Wilde!
Do you imagine
That we would form an alliance
With a prophylactic?

[The page picks up the cake, removes the napkin, attempts to remove the tin which she holds on to. She waves the page away; he leaves]

WILDE: You are right. Majesty
One should never avoid a pleasure

VICTORIA: [sighs] And it was a pleasure.
Such a pleasure.
[sighs] Oh Albert.

[VICTORIA dozes]

INTERLUDE 1

[WILDE drinks more of the elixir. Slowly the alcohol and drugs take hold. He sits up and attempts to get up...but fails. He takes another drink. He attempts to get up again, successfully this time, he stands a little a little unsteadily at first. He takes another sip, becoming more stable, appearing to be more like his arrogant older self.
MUSICAL SCENE 3

WILDE: To my party in your honour
I invited local schoolboys
And their teacher Monsieur Hossein
And the postman, and the curé.
All devoted to your Majesty.

[He bows exaggeratedly]

There were union flags
The little children sang the Marseillaise
And then God Save the Queen

VICTORIA: How charming!

[She brightens suddenly]

We hear you had a giant cake

BOTH: With Jubilé de la reine Victoria

WILDE: Iced in pink and green.

[VICTORIA opens her tin and pulls out a chocolate]

We love cake in all its forms
Did you have chocolates too?

[She attempts to bite the chocolate but fails, it is too hard. She replaces it and closes the tin]

WILDE: Yes, and grenadine
And strawberries and cream

VICTORIA: Cream too! We love cream.
Chocolate, cake and cream
You seem to have lived entirely for pleasure

[WILDE returns to his bed and sits, forlorn]

WILDE: Pleasure has been my downfall

VICTORIA: Mr Wilde, tell me frankly:
Was it true, what was said at your trials?

[In despair, he puts his head in his hands..... then straightens up, lifting his head]

WILDE: I denied it always.

MUSICAL SCENE 4

VICTORIA: That was not what we asked.
To lose one trial may be regarded as a misfortune
To lose three seems like carelessness.
Or guiltiness.

[WILDE stands (not guilty)]

WILDE: Well, your majesty, I must confess
Beauty in all its forms
Has always attracted me.

VICTORIA: You need not be so mealy-mouthed.
We have read Krafft-Ebing.
You mean you are bisexual?

WILDE: Yes, your majesty [Mockingly, he half bows]

VICTORIA: Oh, they count as heterosexuals
They dine with us
Or come in the evening at any rate.

WILDE: [With irony] You are too kind.
MUSICAL SCENE 5

VICTORIA: We cannot say that we approve of you
You lavished too much mockery
Upon society, and that is vulgar
Never speak disrespectfully of society;
Only people who can’t get into it do that.
Mr Wilde, it may surprise you, but we like you.

[VICTORIA holds out a limp hand. WILDE takes it gently, considers kissing it but refrains, and removes his hand.]

According to our son, Bertie
You are the greatest wit in Europe.

WILDE: Was the greatest wit...

VICTORIA: He came ...

WILDE: Was...

VICTORIA: ...to all your opening nights
And laughed immoderately

WILDE: What a talent I once had.
All is gone.

VICTORIA: We read your plays as they were published.
We do so like to be amused

WILDE: But I am nothing with no audience.
So what is left but a long slow,

[WILDE returns to his bed, and sits - forlorn once more]

Long slow lovely suicide?
MUSICAL SCENE 6

VICTORIA: We have been paying you a pension
These last few years
In thanks for our enjoyment.
It is nothing short of scandal
That you should be treated so.

WILDE: Oh, hypocrisy!

VICTORIA: Why? Have you been leading a double life,
Pretending to be wicked
And being really good all the time?
Now, that would be hypocrisy.

WILDE: You say that you admire my work?
What then has my private life to do with that?

[He points accusingly]

You punish me, not for what I do
But for what I am.

VICTORIA: We punish no-one.
The law, the judge, the juries
Punish you.

[WILDE jumps up]

WILDE: You made the law, your majesty,
That caused my downfall.

VICTORIA: I, sir?
What has it to do with me?

WILDE: You signed it into law.
You could have stopped it.
You condemned me to a life of shame

VICTORIA: Shame you found thoroughly becoming
All those secrets, all those masks.
Your work thrived on it.
You would not have it any other way

WILDE: [Anguished] Not only me, many others.
Poor Francis Douglas, my Bosie’s brother,
Shot himself the day after he got engaged
Because of rumours of a liaison
With your Prime Minister, Rosebery,
Of whom you were so fond

VICTORIA: [She is lost in her memories.] We were.
We used to mother him,
Tell him he should wrap up warm.

MUSICAL SCENE 7

WILDE: What about your own beloved grandson
Prince Eddie?

VICTORIA: [Jolted back] What of him?

[He looks at her, incredulous]

WILDE: Because you did not stand up to Gladstone,
You almost ruined your family.

VICTORIA: We know not what you mean -

WILDE: Does Cleveland Street mean nothing to you?

VICTORIA: A baseless allegation of the Press;
Fake news of a radical persuasion.

WILDE: I was in France in Ninety-One.
Your grandson had been there nine months before,
And very red he was
At some of the reporters’ questions.
The French press know everything
About our royalty,
More than we do ourselves.
It is a form of envy.

VICTORIA: [VICTORIA, in angst, resorts to her native German accent.]

Ach! Du Englisch!

WILDE: [Angry] I am not English!

VICTORIA: You are obsessed with finding fault, Und schniffing scandal.

[WILDE pulls a handkerchief from a pocket to wipe his brow]

WILDE: I am an Irish gentleman.

VICTORIA: [She calmly returns to English] You may be Irish, sir, but you are no gentlemen. You forfeited the right to be called a gentleman [Accusing] When you gave your poor wife The French disease.

WILDE: [He flicks the 'kerchief...] Huh! A baseless rumour [...and returns it to his pocket]

VICTORIA: On this point, as on all points, we are firm

WILDE: Even if true, is that worse Than giving your son and grandsons Haemophilia?

[He sinks back to sitting on the bed.]

VICTORIA: How were we to know?

WILDE: And how was I to know? I thought I was cured.

[The lighting grows dimmer and both seem to fade in private thoughts.]
INTERLUDE 2

[The Page enters carrying lit candles which he places on the side table. (brightening the room). He ensures VICTORIA is comfortable, then leaves.

Gradually, WILDE seems to come back to life as ideas come to mind.]

MUSICAL SCENE 8

[He leaps from the bed excitedly]

WILDE: Prince Leopold, your youngest child,
Your grandson, Prince Friedrich -
Only three years old.
There will be more...

[VICTORIA slowly becomes quite sullen]

...Many more.
You have spread your fatal curse
Across the whole of Europe.
There will not be a royal house
From Spain to Russia
That will be free of your tainted blood.

VICTORIA: [in tears] We did not know.
How could we know?

WILDE: Your doctors, they should have known.

VICTORIA: They did not tell us if they did.
We did not know

WILDE: Well, you know now.

VICTORIA: Yes, we know now.
Thank you, Mr. Wilde

[VICTORIA pulls herself together.]
INTERLUDE 3

[She fumbles in her lap for her reticule... which she accidently knocks to the floor. WILDE picks it up and holds it out to her. She ignores him, fumbling still. In a panic she grabs her bell and rings it madly.

The page boy enters quickly. She flaps her hands around pointing to the floor. WILDE looks to him, questioningly.

Seeing the reticule in WILDE's hand, the PAGE raises his hands to indicate calm, WILDE realises that VICTORIA is blind. The page boy takes the reticule from WILDE, then reaches for VICTORIA's hand, giving her the reticule.

VICTORIA is visibly relieved, and opens the reticule, takes out a handkerchief, dabs her eyes and mouth then returns it to the reticule. The Page boy helps her tuck the reticule in her lap, safely behind the cake tin.

WILDE's demeanour softens significantly.]

WILDE: Forgive me, Majesty.

[She looks slightly startled. The page boy calms her. WILDE, rather theatrically, goes down on one knee....

MUSICAL SCENE 9

...WILDE takes her hand and places it on his head. Fear shows in her face, she pulls her hand away sharply. WILDE loses his balance, collapsing to the floor.]

VICTORIA: Mr Wilde if you think we are going to knight you, You are very much mistaken Much though you desired it.

[He raises himself to a sitting position.....
She smiles wryly to herself in self-congratulation and, with the Page’s help, levers herself out of the bath chair with the aid of a walking stick, to stand; As she staggers around, unaware of where WILDE is, the Page manoeuvres the bath chair behind her.

...WILDE staggars to his feet, dodging VICTORIA, her bath chair and the Page.]

VICTORIA: Well, we will forgive you.
You have a blazing cheek –
Which is half your function
And all of your charm.

[Gradually she becomes more unsteady on her feet.]

Do you recall, you had the nerve
To ask us for a poem
To feature in some magazine?

WILDE: The Woman’s World

[She turns abruptly to face WILDE]

VICTORIA: We, who could never in our whole life
Write one line of verse
Serious or comic
Or even make a rhyme!

(Even more unsteady)

But we were flattered to be asked.
We never showed it, but we were,
And we liked The Woman’s World
Especially when your Mother wrote of us.

[She loses her balance. WILDE catches her and helps her back into her bath chair. He steps back as the Page makes her comfortable.]

WILDE: Do you remember when we met?

VICTORIA: We met so many...
WILDE: A ruby set in jet.
   Such a regal walk.

[VICTORIA, now much more relaxed, dismisses the Page who leaves]

VICTORIA: No walking now for us

MUSICAL SCENE 10

[WILDE begins to pace the room becoming agitated]

WILDE: I was unjust.
   It was not you who sealed my fate.
   It was many things.
   Most of all I blame myself

VICTORIA: We blame that awful Henry Labouchère

WILDE: Labouchère...

BOTH: Nothing but trouble

VICTORIA: And nothing less than a Republican

WILDE: [nods in agreement] A trouble maker!

VICTORIA: He wanted to convert the Palace
   Into a home for fallen women!

[Then he nods to the in audience]

WILDE: A trouble maker!

WILDE: You kept him from the Cabinet.
   Gladstone wanted him, but you refused.
   Yet you could not refuse that vicious clause,
   Sneaked into law when nobody was looking.

VICTORIA: Please don’t start all that again.
Wilde: He was of course an atheist.

Victoria: Mr Wilde, we have not much time -
We have to go and plan my funeral.

Wilde: [over Victoria] When you deprive yourself of God

Victoria: The elements are all in place.

Wilde: You have to play yourself at being one.

Victoria: But we want some touches,
Personal mementos in the coffin.
Oh, how we love a proper funeral.

Wilde: I fear a pauper’s grave for me

Victoria: You do not plan your funeral?
Good. For men it is different.
A funeral should come on a man as a surprise,
Pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be.
It is hardly a matter
He can be allowed to arrange himself.

We strongly advise that you have a haircut.
Locks of hair make tasteful funeral gifts
When arranged in pretty lockets

Wilde: I fear, that I am beyond arranging anything.

Victoria: Quite right, for you are dead,
And we must go.
Strange to think we have so much in common.

Both: We were both outsiders.

Victoria: I alone with my hundred dolls
In Kensington.
WILDE: I prancing round
The snobbish paddocks
Of high society.
I worked hard to lose my accent -

VICTORIA: We never needed to -

[WILDE returns to his bed and rests, lost in private thought]

I was the Queen
Geliebte Volksmutter.

INTERLUDE 4

[The Page enters carrying a blanket which he, after removing the tin, bell and reticule, tucks around her lap. He replaces the bell and reticule on her lap.... then takes the tin away (off-stage), .... he returns and attend to the candles, some of which he douses.... after which he returns to VICTORIA and attempts to start to push her off stage which VICTORIA resists quite firmly, and she turns towards WILDE.]

MUSICAL SCENE 11

VICTORIA: May I prevail upon you, Mr. Wilde,
To push my bath chair?

[Flustered, WILDE gets back up]

WILDE: Certainly, majesty.

[He smiles at the Page and takes over the chair. VICTORIA dismisses the Page, who leaves, returning WILDE's smile with a sickly grin.]

VICTORIA: You know, Mr Wilde,
We are but thirty-two days away
From the Twentieth Century.
BOTH: I wonder what that century
Will make of us.
We will of course be two
Of the most famous figures
Of this one.
And two of the most recognisable.

VICTORIA: And I will stand for something.

[Wilde moves away from the chair... he becomes visibly annoyed with Victoria's claims.]

Order. Stability. Empire.
Loyalty.

WILDE: Hypocrisy

VICTORIA: Morality

Victorian values.
A stick to beat my kind
Down the ages.

[Victoria reaches her arms out, towards Wilde]

VICTORIA: But I was not like that.

[Her arms slowly fall into her lap]

WILDE: And I will stand for Art.
The rights of Artists,
And for courage
In the face of persecution.

VICTORIA: Irresponsibility, dissipation
Depravity, shallowness,
Luxury and unreliability.

[Wilde mirrors Victoria's previous arm movements]
WILDE: But I am not like that.

[He goes to the bed, picks up his coat, shakes it out then puts it on]

VICTORIA: I do not say you are, But so you will seem.

[He returns to push the bath chair, chastened.]

MUSICAL SCENE 12

[They move towards the front of the stage.]

BOTH: We are neither what we seem But what we seem is what is useful To set the coming century’s theme More convenient than truthful.

[WILDE suddenly steps away from the chair to face VICTORIA]

WILDE: I was right, it is a world of masks
VICTORIA: I wore one just as much as you
WILDE: But I used mine to tell the truth
VICTORIA: While on mine the canker grew So I was trapped by mine, mine.

[He realises that they are much the same and returns to push the bath chair.... however,...

EPILOGUE

...VICTORIA seems to have no further need of it. She stands up, without the need for her stick, and takes his arm. They come to the foot of the stage, turn to face each looking deep into their eyes.]
BOTH: So here we are, each behind our mask

[They turn back towards the audience]

And you will take our mask
You will not want to ask
About a truth that’s complicated by
The lie that tells the truth that’s still a lie.

[They turn and promenade... And the Page opens the door]

And as we disappear into the past,
You will not hear us say ‘Goodbye’.
For we are always with you
Clichés oh so ripe
Full-blooded stereotype

[...until both stand in the doorway as the Page retreats]

Nature’s opposites.
And on our shoulders sits
The battle of the twentieth century -
Two fat old queens

VICTORIA: I throw my good fat weight
          Upon the scales of decency

WILDE: I use my wit to arm
        The liberation of identity.

BOTH: We are twin pillars
      Of the century.

      You have to choose a side
      In the twentieth century.

[They move backwards into oblivion as the door slowly closes]

THE END