1958: SEPARATE BEDS

A one-act comic chamber opera

Libretto by Peter Scott-Presland

Music by Robert Ely

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1958: SEPARATE BEDS

Cast

EDGAR (Baritone)  A lawyer, 30-ish, quite conventional. Tall and stooped. Owlish, a little intimidating. For the last five years he has been living with

Eric (Tenor)  His partner, slightly younger, a civil servant making his way up the higher echelons of the Home Office

Esme Langley (mezzo) A huge, rather butch lesbian with a penchant for Army Surplus clothing. The upstairs neighbour. She has a rather hearty manner, a cross between Hattie Jacques in Matron mode, and Joyce Grenfell. A great friend.

PC Allcock (bass)  Young, keen and very good looking policeman

Setting

ERIC and EDGAR’s 1st floor flat in West Hampstead. This is the hall passage, running directly upstage to the front door at the back, facing the audience. We are to imagine off in the wings on each side are the main bedroom (Stage Right) and the spare bedroom (Stage Left). These two rooms face each other across the passage between front stage and the front door, rear. The kitchen is offstage Front Right nearest the audience. Near the front door is a plaster model of Michelangelo’s David. A chair also in the hall.

Instrumentation

A piano trio? It needs to be very nimble.
It is March 7th 1958, early evening. Edgar is in the hall dusting The David with a feather duster. A radio is playing Rossini’s ‘Zitto Zitto Piano Piano’ from ‘La Cenerentola’ on the Third Programme. Edgar is singing along, conducting with the duster.

Edgar:

“Zitto zitto, piano piano;
Senza strepito e rumore:
Delle due qual è l’umore?
Esattezza e verità.

Sotto voce a mezzo tuono; *
In estrema confidenza:
Sono un misto d’insolenza,
Di capriccio e vanità”.

Edgar stops dusting and goes into the kitchen during this. As he goes, Eric lets himself in at the front door and hums along. Edgar stops singing and turns off the radio.

Edgar: Is that you darling?

Eric: Well who did you think it was? The Special Branch?

Edgar: They have a key, I’m sure.

[He appears in an apron, with a frying pan]

And they tap our phone.

Eric: But they don’t sing along to Rossini Special Branch is not musical
And they don’t ask if you love them

[He holds and squeezes him]

Do you love me? Do you?
Or has someone else caught your eye?
EDGAR: Well... There was a rather nice builder
In the cottage at the end of the road

ERIC: Are you sure he was a builder?

EDGAR: Cement dust on his boots
I thought he’d suit me fine
But then I thought
More Eric’s type than mine.

ERIC: You’re quite right. Thank you.

[He turns abruptly as if to go out]
Well, I’ll just be off then,
And see –

EDGAR: [Grabbing him back]
Oh no you don’t
I’m starving.
I mean for food.
I bought some lamb chops.

ERIC: Yum. I love tasty little baa lambs
Whenever I see one in a field
Suckling its mother
Shivering its sweet little tail
I always go ‘aah’,
And think ‘Mmm.... Leg of lamb’

EDGAR: Would you like a drink?
I got a rather fine Amontillado
From the Wig and Pen
I dropped in for a quick one after court
Brought a bottle home
It’s an Amontillado del Puerto

ERIC: Very nice.
Do you want the paper?
[Gives him a copy of The Times]

There’s a letter urging the government
To implement the Wolfenden Report.
It’s signed by loads of people.
Clement Attlee’s one of them.
And Bertrand Russell

EDGAR: At last. There’s been six months’ silence
Since it came out. And over what?
All that mighty labour for a mouse.

Duetto: We can’t do it

We’ll be able to have sexual relations
But only in specific situations

ERIC: If we’re either of us under 21
We can’t do it

EDGAR: If we’re staying in a hotel or an inn
We can’t do it

ERIC: If we’re living in a flat

EDGAR: Or a bedsitter at that

BOTH: Then we have to tell you flat
We can’t do it

EDGAR: In Derry ‘cross the sea
We can’t do it

ERIC: If we’re living in Dundee
We can’t do it

BOTH: Or in any colony
We can’t do it

EDGAR: Guernsey, Jersey
Isle of Man
We can’t do it

ERIC: In the Isle of Wight
We can
We can do it

EDGAR: Though they’re sure to disapprove
And call us ‘queer’ and ‘poove’
And we’d really rather move
So we can do it

ERIC: In the army with a soldier
We can’t do it

EDGAR: In the air force with an airman
We can’t do it

ERIC: In the navy with a seaman
Though he’s ever such a he-man
Still the seaman’s not a free man
We can’t do it

BOTH: And even if we allowed to do it
We’re still not permitted to meet
We can’t say hello in the street
Though we are very discreet
We can’t importune
A guard or dragoon
We might have opportunity
But never have impunity

EDGAR: So why do we cherish this mouse of a bill
And Wolfenden hail as a hero

BOTH: There’s little to give us a cause for a thrill
But still it is better than zero
Eric gives Eric the paper back and goes into the kitchen. Eric pours two glasses of sherry. Sniffs his. Swills it appreciatively.

**Eric:** A fine amontillado indeed
Just the relaxation I need
Flavour rolling on the palate
Vapour strolling round the brain
Others may like oloroso
But to me it’s only so-so
Any true aficionado
Only drinks amontillado
Finer than the finest of champagne.

**Eric:** [He opens the paper. Finds the letters page.]
Where is the letters page?
Ah, here it is
"Sir! – never ‘Dear Sir’.
The editor of *The Times* cannot be a Dear;
[spoken?]
“We the undersigned would like to express
Our agreement with the Wolfenden Report. Homosexual acts committed in private
Between consenting adults
Should no longer be a criminal offence.
The continued enforcement of the present law
Will do more harm than good...
Legislation... early date...
Widest support from humane men
Of all parties”

**Edgar:** [Edgar comes back during this and takes his sherry.]
And what of inhumane men?
There are enough of them
In all parties as well.
So many MPs worry
That if they endorse a bugger’s charter
They will be tainted as well

**Eric:** But it’s such a timid little bill
Over twenty-one, in private
A mouse of a bill as you said - Eek! Eek! [ad lib]

EDGAR: Parliament is full of cats
Ready to kill your mouse stone dead

* * *

[Duetto – Wolfenden the Mouse]

ERIC: Eek! Eek! Eek!
My name’s Wolfenden, don’t kill me.
Eeeek!

EDGAR: Poor little Wolfenden
We don’t want to alarm you
We certainly won’t harm you
You’ve got to stay alive

ERIC: Eek! Eeek! Eeek!

EDGAR: We’ll make you grow and thrive

BOTH: Wolfenden the mouse
You’re welcome in our house
We’ll make you big and fat
Almost like a rat

ERIC: The Tories will be scared of you
After we have cared for you

EDGAR: The Labour Party too
Which hasn’t got a clue

BOTH: We’ll both keep you alive
We’ll make you grow and thrive

EDGAR: And what about the Liberals?

ERIC: Who? Them? There’s only five.
BOTH: We’ll give them all some backbone
    And we’ll tell them what to do
However much they grouse
Don’t worry, little Wolfenden
Don’t worry, little mouse
You’ll always have a welcome in this house.

*   *   *

EDGAR: Dyson is a name that I remember
    He wrote to The Spectator weeks ago
    To start a new campaign
    What do we know about him?

ERIC: He’s at the University in Bangor.

EDGAR: He’s moved fast. We should join him

ERIC: I’ll write to him at the university

EDGAR: After dinner. Aagh! The chops!

[He rushes to the kitchen. Returns.]

    Ah well, charcoal’s very good for you
    Purifies the blood they say

ERIC: Yum! Burnt bits! My favourite!

[There is an enormous car crash offstage. ERIC and EDGAR run to the window – by the front door, at the back – and look out.]

ERIC: Oh my God. That car’s run into a tree

EDGAR: It was trying to avoid a cyclist, I think.
    He’s lying in the road.

ERIC: We must help him. He may be dead
    And what about the motorist?
    What about the tree?
EDGAR: There are others out there already
   We’ll only get in the way.
ERIC: You mean, you don’t want to get involved
EDGAR: And with very good reason.
ERIC: We must call an ambulance.
EDGAR: And that means the police
ERIC: Exactly. An ambulance
   And the police
EDGAR: Not the police!
ERIC: Why not police?
EDGAR: Not the police, no fear
ERIC: The police will have to come
EDGAR: That’s the last thing we want in here
*   *   *
[Duetto – The police – no police]
ERIC: There must be the police to investigate the crash
EDGAR: They’ll be coming here and knocking at the door
ERIC: There’s nothing we can do so, don’t get in a pash
   They’ve got to come and ask us what we saw
EDGAR: They’ll be coming here inside,
   They will have a good look round
   And we could go inside
   If they act on what they’ve found
ERIC: That isn’t very likely so forget this balderdash
EDGAR: It’s very very likely, when they have some queers to Bash

ERIC: Balderdash!

EDGAR: Queers to bash (etc.)

ERIC: They’ll just want information on that maybe lethal Crash

EDGAR: If they find some perverts then they’re sure to make a Splash See how their arrest rates can go soaring in a flash

ERIC: If they’ve got a crash to deal with, then they’ll be in quite a dash

EDGAR: We can’t take any chances, we need a quick precaution

ERIC: Just calm yourself, it’s routine, you should keep it in proportion

EDGAR: We can’t have the police

ERIC: We must have the police

EDGAR: No police

ERIC: The police etc.

[The bell rings]

BOTH: [in panic] THE POLICE!

* * *

[EDGAR answers the door in trepidation. It is their upstairs neighbour, ESME. She is in her usual fatigues. She is thrilled at the excitement.]
ESME: Did you hear that? What a racket! That car is a write-off There’s glass and metal all over the road Mind you, the Renault Dauphine Was always a pile of crud Too much plastic and the brakes of a tortoise Give me a nice nippy Austin Sprite For performance Or a Land Army Land Rover Built like a tank For endurance

EDGAR: Like you, my love, like you.

[They embrace affectionately]

ERIC: Edgar’s in a panic About the police

ESME: Why, little Eric? He’s in and out of the public facilities Like a girl with cystitis And they’ve never caught him yet Does he think his luck is about to change?

EDGAR: But they’ll come here, Esme Don’t you see? They’ll look around And they’ll find – Well, you don’t want to know what they’ll find

ESME: I’m quite unshockable You forget I had two hundred WAAFs Under me, and what those girls got up to Was nobody’s business One up the duff every other day – Except the sensible ones Of the Radclyffe Hall persuasion.

*  *  *
Trio: The Girls [Boys] of Summer

ESME: Ah! Those girls!
The Girls of the summer of Forty
Flaxen and brazen and sporty
So lissom and lithe
The smiles so blithe
And more than inclined to be naughty

We’d lie there in the sweet-smelling hay
In the heat at the end of the day
And gaze at the cotton-wool clouds
In the sky high above
And nobody dared to claim it was love

But it was
Looking back,
Yes it was

It was life
It was laughs
It was love

ERIC & EDGAR: Ah Those boys
ERIC: Those boys on the base at Brize Norton
EDGAR: RAF Little Snoring

ERIC: So healthy and strong
EDGAR: All summer long

BOTH: And all of them keenly exploring

ALL: We’d lie there in the sweet-smelling hay
In the heat at the end of the day
And gaze at the cotton-wool clouds
In the sky high above
And nobody dared to claim it was love

But it was
Looking back,
Yes it was
We were in love
With the girls/boys
Of summer

* * *

EDGAR:  [Coming to] Have you gone mad?

They’ll be here any minute
And all our things are in there

[Indicates bedroom Stage Right]

And there’s nothing in the spare bedroom

[Indicates left]

ESME:  Pull yourselves together boys.
Was this the spirit won the Battle of Britain?
We need a plan
So act like a man

ERIC:  How can I change the habit of a lifetime?

ESME:  Edgar, your things can stay
Eric, we move your things in here [indicates stage left]

EDGAR:  But they’re all mixed up

ESME:  No-one’s going to look closely if the socks match

* * *

Trio: Quickly quickly

ESME:  Quickly quickly, systematic
Don’t be acting so dramatic
Just imagine that you’re packing
For a holiday weekend
Quickly quickly get them listed  
You’ll forget that they existed  
If you haven’t got them written  
Now - on that you can depend.

[ESME finds pen and paper, writes]

ESME: You’ll need underwear, that’s vests and pants
ERIC: Yes underwear
EDGAR: Yes vests and pants
BOTH: Police will notice at a glance

[NB Robert, each of these ‘items’ need to repeat for as long as it takes to make each transfer from left to right, ESME triggering the next one]

ESME: Shoes and socks and shirts and ties
ERIC: Shoes and socks
EDGAR: And shirts and ties
BOTH: Police will never realise

[They do ties, socks and shirts first]

BOTH: Then we have to do the shoes  
Which is which and whose is whose?
ESME: Shirts…. Ties….. socks….. shoes...

[They come back with a jumble of shoes]

EDGAR: Those are yours cos you’re a seven
ERIC: Those are yours, you’re an eleven
BOTH: Seven…. Eleven….. Seven…. Eleven
ESME: Oh for heaven’s sake get on
     A bobby will be here anon

ALL: Quickly quickly with the trousers
     And the jeans too, don’t forget ‘em
     Quickly quickly, with the cords, if
     You forget ‘em, you’ll regret ‘em

ESME: A jumper and a cardigan
      Pullovers and sweaters

BOTH: Playing the charade again
      When they come to vet us

ESME: And what about pyjamas?

ERIC: Well, what about pyjamas?

ESME: You must have some pyjamas

EDGAR: We never wear pyjamas

BOTH: Whoever wears pyjamas?

ESME: No pyjamas

ERIC: No pyjamas

ALL: No pyjamas

ESME: Some swimming trunks? Or tennis shorts?

BOTH: We never play those horrid sports

ESME: Then finally some blankets
     Some sheets, a pair of pillows

ERIC: Sheets, a pair of pillows

EDGAR: Sheets, a pair of pillows
[As they bring these out, ESME ticks off her list triumphantly]

ESME: That’s everything accounted for
There’s no more to be said
And if they have suspicions still
You’re sure to kill them dead

ERIC: There’s just one little problem – [gestures SL]
THERE ISN’T ANY BED!

* * *

[Aghast. Pause. In the silence, the front door bell rings again. EDGAR goes to answer it, putting down the sheets in his hand. ERIC goes to the SR bedroom. At the door, an attractive young PC]

ALLCOCK: May I come in, sir?

EDGAR: No! – Er – I mean, I don’t know

ALLCOCK: It’s about the accident.
You might have heard it in the street
We’re going door to door
Asking people to be witnesses
We’d like to know if you saw anything
Any of you

[He is trying to place the three of them. He has casually walked in. He clocks the David.]

A fine figure of a lad

EDGAR: Who is?

ALLCOCK: The boy there. [pointed] Big for his age.

EDGAR: I suppose –

ESME: [Takes charge]
Good afternoon, constable.
I am Esme Langley
I work for the BBC Monitoring Unit
At Caversham
And this is my fiancé, Edgar

EDGAR:  *staggering* Am I?
Yes, I am.

ESME:  We’re getting married next month
A quiet wedding, you understand
Nothing ostentatious
Just Lord Reith and a few other friends

[ERIC re-enters, with some magazines]

ESME:  And this is our neighbour, Eric

ALLCOCK:  *Is attracted* Very pleased to meet you, sir.

ESME:  He lives upstairs

ERIC:  Do I?

[In shock, he drops the magazines.  Some physique magazines fall out.  ESME gathers them up.]

ESME:  I buy them for the gardening tips

[ERIC and EDGAR instinctively cling together for protection, then realise what they are doing and spring apart.]

ALLCOCK:  *Reads* ‘Physique Pictorial’

ESME:  The exercises are so bracing

ALLCOCK:  Incorporating ‘Adonis’ and ‘Body Beautiful’

ESME:  I’m sure we all appreciate a body beautiful

ALLCOCK:  I’m sure we all do
In an artistic way
ESME: I’m forgetting my manners, Constable
- Are you allowed to have a name when you’re on duty?

ALLCOCK: Allcock

ESME: I beg your pardon

[ERIC perks up]

ALLCOCK: Constable Allcock

ERIC: [Murmurs] Allcock by name....

ESME: Would you like a cup of tea, Constable Allcock?
Why don’t you ask some questions while I make it
Of my fiancé and our friend

[Horrified, ESME notices among the bedsheets which had been dropped by EDGAR a large dildo.]

And if you’ll excuse me
I must get on with the supper
A woman’s work is never done!

ALLCOCK: That’s very kind of you madam.

ESME: Esme please

[She covers the dildo and exits. EDGAR sits]

ALLCOCK: Did you see anything, Mister –

EDGAR: Wright

ALLCOCK: Mr Wright, are you? [Pointedly, to ERIC]
And is he? Mr Right?

ERIC: He is. But I prefer to call him Edgar.

EDGAR: We’re just chums, constable
[They slap backs heartily in an unconvincing attempt to be chums]

ALLCOCK: Lived here long, have you?

EDGAR: Five years. I don’t mean here, not in this flat.

ERIC: What do you think we are?

EDGAR: In this block. Together in this block

ALLCOCK: It must be nice to have an obliging neighbour
If you run out of sugar
If you need a fag

EDGAR: Indeed

ALLCOCK: Do you often need a fag?

EDGAR: I prefer to roll my own

ALLCOCK: I find I’m always running out
Always on the bum
For a fag

[Re-enter ESME, with tea.]

ESME: I assumed you liked it strong [She exits]

ALLCOCK: Yes, thank you. I like it very strong.
Hot, strong and sweet, that’s me.

Aria: Hot Strong and Sweet

ALLCOCK: Hot strong and sweet
That’s something you can’t beat
When you want to rest your feet
Make your happiness complete
By taking something hot
Something strong
Something sweet
ERIC: I like something hot too

ALLCOCK: It’s something that you’ve got to

ERIC: Something hot

ALLCOCK: Something strong

ERIC: And I felt it all along

ALLCOCK: Nothing wrong with wanting something strong

ERIC: And something sweet

ALLCOCK: Yes something sweet

EDGAR: But quite discreet

ERIC: Oh yes, discreet

ALLCOCK: Nothing like some hot sweet tea

ERIC: That’s the ideal tea for me

ALLCOCK: Me too

EDGAR: Get you!

[Re-enter ESME. She has a bowl (mortar) with some spices in it. She casually returns to the sheets, and nonchalantly picks up the large dildo, starts using it as a pestle. She is ‘hiding it in plain sight’. She grinds spices vigorously.]

ESME: There’s nothing like the flavour of freshly ground spices.

[ESME can see that ALLCOCK and ERIC are attracted. She directs the aria to ALLCOCK]

* * *

_Aria: Pound and grind_
ESME: The mustard seed is small and round
The fennel and the cumin too
And every peppercorn is ground
To go into a tasty stew

You’ve got to grind, grind, grind
The flavours all combined
Pound, pound, pound
The spices in a mound

Press them hard, grind them down
The nutmeg and the mace
Turn the yellow, mix the brown
Crush them to a sticky paste

Grind grind grind
The sweet peppers and the hot

ERIC: The sweet

ALLCOCK: And the hot

ERIC: I like it sweet

ALLCOCK: I like it hot

EDGAR: She’ll give it everything she’s got

ERIC/ALLCOCK: We’ll give it everything we’ve got

ESME: I’ll give it everything I’ve got

You have to push

ERIC: Push

ESME: Hard

ALLCOCK: Hard
EDGAR: So hard

ESME: Press and twist
   It’s the action of the wrist

ERIC: How can I resist when you insist?
   I will take it like a shot

ALLCOCK: That hot sweet tea that fills the mouth
   That swirls around the epiglottis

ERIC: What a joy! It’s on my tonsils

ALLCOCK: Tell me what is, tell me what is

[ERIC and ALLCOCK now only have eyes for each other, and are oblivious to anything else going on. EDGAR sees this, sighs, and picks up a copy of ‘Physique Pictorial’]

ESME: There’s some mace inside my mortar
   And some poppy in my pestle

ERIC: We can have ourselves a snorter
   If we find a way to wrestle

ALLCOCK: Would you like to see my truncheon?
   I assure you, it’s gigantic

ERIC: That would give me lots to munch on
   If my hunger drives me frantic

EDGAR: And I will not be mean
   If Eric’s getting keen
   No harm done
   To let him have his fun

ALLCOCK: Better a demanding test
   Than making an arrest
   If I did that, truth to tell,
   I’d have to nab myself as well
ESME:  [To ERIC]  Why don’t you take him to the flat  
That’s on the floor above

ERIC:  Sure you won’t object to that?

ESME:  It’s best for making love.  
And how could I object to that  
When we’ve established it’s YOUR flat

ERIC:  As a solution, it’s a dandy  
Not much room here when you’re randy

ESME:  I’m glad the flat can come in handy  
Use it any time you like  
Just don’t disturb my motor bike

ALLCOCK:  Your motor bike?

EDGAR:  My motor bike

ERIC:  Your motor bike?

EDGAR:  My motor bike  
To strip it down is what I like  
And Eric has the space to spare  
To spread the engine here and there  
And leave some parts upon the stair  
If he’s got room it’s only fair  
To let my bike

ESME:  My bike

ERIC:  His bike

ESME:  To let the bike be quartered there  
Where it is easy to repair

ALL:  So easy to repair  
The bike he keeps up there

ESME:  [to ALLCOCK]  Would you like to see
The leather jackets that we wear?

[ALLCOCK coughs – aside]

ALLCOCK: If you’re in the police
You don’t often find a friend
They must frequent the station
But all of them pretend
I’m longing for some contact
If only for a night
I’m longing to say ‘Yes!’
And not repress this appetite

If only for a night

ERIC: [to EDGAR] It’s only for a night
Do you think I might?

EDGAR: By me that’s quite alright

BOTH: We promised that we’d always be
Prepared to grant the liberty
So that the other could be free
To this we thoroughly agree

ESME: [pointed, to ERIC and ALLCOCK] So you can go the two of you;
The window in Apartment Two
Has such a panoramic view
Of all the street, so you can see
Just how the car could hit the tree

[ERIC and ALLCOCK are in a dream]

ERIC: What car?

ALLCOCK: What tree?

ESME: The car that hit the tree
That caused the accident
You came here to investigate
And now you must corroborate

BOTH: That car! That tree!

ERIC: Now if you’ll only follow me
I promise you, you won’t be cheated
Once your thorough probe’s completed
You’ll be quite satisfied I’m sure
With things you never saw before

EDGAR/ESME: You’ll be quite satisfied we’re sure
With things you’ve never seen before

ALLCOCK: Ah what pleasure is in store,
With things I’ve never seen before

ALL: Quickly, quickly, up the stairwell [repeats]

ED/ES: Don’t delay now, say now farewell
An astounding revelation
Will appear before your eyes

ERIC: No regretting the decision
After you have seen the vision
The stupendous elevation
That within the bedroom lies

ALL: Quickly, quickly up the stairwell

EDGAR: I’ve got splendid consolation
In the pictures in my mags
They’re delightfully immoral
And they never pick a quarrel
Be it anal, be it oral
The most fanciable of fags

[Together]

ERIC: Quickly, quickly, I’m on heat here

ALLCOCK: Quickly sweep me off my feet here
ESME: I am filled with satisfaction
At my altruistic action

EDGAR: I’ve shown him my devotion
By indulging his emotion

ALLCOCK: Although I love detection
I prefer a good erection

E/E/E: Though there’s only one objection -
It’s not leading to promotion

ALLCOCK: I don’t care!

ALL: We don’t care!

When the fire of passion spreads
It lifts our hearts and turns our heads
And leaves morality in shreds
And sends us all to separate beds

['Separate beds’ ad lib. ERIC and ALLCOCK exit, waving goodbye to ESME and EDGAR, who collapses on the chair with his mag. ESME throws up the mortar and pestle in triumph, scattering powder everywhere.]

Blackout