The Portrait

A musical tribute to Stella Bowen

Libretto and Score by Becky Llewellyn – July 2005
Chamber Ensemble Version - September 2006

Performed by
Co-Opera

Director/Dramaturg – Tessa Bremner
Musical Director – Anthony Hunt
Co-Opera General Manager – Brian Chatterton

World Premiere Season
The Space, Adelaide Festival Centre
February 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11th 2006
**PROLOGUE**

1944, BINBROOK RAF STATION, UK

SET: Central palette – Stella’s area has table, two chairs, easel and tea set – as an artist studio. Ford’s area opposite has table, chair, hat stand and bookcase.

**VISUAL: KIT ISSUE AT POW RECEPTION CAMP, EASTBOURNE**

**VISUAL: D-DAY, 0300 HOURS, INTERROGATION HUT**

Music begins: *Shadows*

STELLA (Speaks words from her BBC radio speech “Calling the Pacific” 1944)

(Stella rises from her table) “You know, I’ve been away from home for such a long time that I’d almost begun to look upon myself as someone who didn’t belong anywhere any more…

For the last few weeks I’ve been wearing an Australian uniform and it gives me infinite satisfaction. Even if it’s astonishing to find myself – an older lady of casual and undisciplined habits - suddenly buttoned up in a khaki tunic with a peaked cap and three pips on the shoulder and sent to an airfield to paint a bomber crew!…

**VISUAL: BOMBER CREW PHOTO**

Their leave had been stopped, but they hadn’t been told why. They were pretty sore until they found that their picture was for the Australia War Museum and that they couldn’t have been chosen for any but the most flattering reasons and then they were fearfully pleased. Goodness, they were a tough looking lot. Smooth, hard cheeks, craggy chins and clear, keen eyes… They talked about Australia and they said things like “dinkum” and “bonzer” and (Chuckles) “too right”.

That made me feel homesick and took me back across all the years to the time when my one idea was to get away to England. I thought Australia was a backwater and I wanted at all costs to get into the main stream - which of course meant Europe. It’s different now, because the war has become the main stream and we’re all in it and it’s flowing right around the earth. But in those days it was inevitable that we should feel the glamour of the old world and come over here in search of art and wisdom.”

And it got me thinking of Ford and how he was a soldier in the War to end all Wars…

**VISUAL: CAPT FORD IN WWI PHOTO**

STELLA’S SOLO: *What If?* (She pauses, picks up playing cards on her table and sings)

What if, my darling, we started again?
I wonder, what if...what might have been? (Moves to Ford’s table)
You were a soldier and I, an exile.
We needed each other to rest in a while.
You came out of warfare so tough.
After your three years in hell, how could I be enough? (Drops the cards on his table)
We tried with no water, no power, no money. (Picks up her palette from his table)

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1 From Miss Stella Bowen’s BBC broadcast series from 1942–1944, discovered by Llewellyn in researching the opera. “Calling Australia – An Artist’s Picture of an Air Station Bomber Command”, was produced by her friend, Mrs. Theadon N. Hancock, censored by M.O.I. Mr Lee; Security Unit (vetted by Air Ministry) and broadcast June 13th 1944.

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Libretto – The Portrait, a musical tribute to Stella Bowen by Becky Llewellyn – September 2006

www.theportrait.com.au
No fam’ly, the weather, all that rain, rarely sunny. (Goes to centre stage)
What if we hadn’t chosen to live life so hard? (Mimes painting, facing audience)
That forced us to new paths where our love was marred.
What if you’d not met her, or helped her to write? (Stops to reflect)
Would we be together now, not alone in the night?
What if...no novels, no portraits, no arts? (Resumes painting)
No great ambition, just our joining of hearts.

VISUAL: FORD’S JACKET AND SHOES

Would we be a couple now or would I have gone?
Was it my destiny or was I a pawn?
It's all academic. We've lived our lives now.
But, after all these years, I still wonder how...
It started with dreams and ended with tiffs? (Ford enters. Stella holds palette, remembering)

VISUAL: FORD MADOX FORD PLAYING SOLITAIRE

I wonder…what if? I wonder what if? If? If...? (Stella gazes at the ghost of Ford coming in. She sits. Ford sits, taking up the pack of cards she left and begins a game of Solitaire)

ACT I

SCENE 1 - War and Peace
1917, FRONTLINE YPRES, FRANCE / LONDON TEAROOM

VISUAL: FORD’S BOOKS COVERS

FORD’S SOLO: Mother England

How is a man to penetrate the layers of protection
That dear England gives to men of cloth and upper class selection?
In cosy little England where the middle-class grows savage,
Mother England weeps when they all aim to be so av’rage!
(Two WWI soldiers enter)
Huntin’, fishin’, shootin’ are prized arts of her elites
Their ideas of beauty? Page Three Girls from Fleet Street!
Mother’s fav’rites are financiers, the school tie, the decent club.
But if you're in the arts you're doomed, and that's the rub!
(He sticks out his shoe to be polished by Soldier 1)

SOLDIER 2 (Holding decanter of sherry and sherry glass)
Cheer up, Cap’ain Ford! You’re the toast of London’s liter’y circles. I fought your books wuz sellin’ well. Almost as good as your missus’ soapies. My gal can’t wait for the next Violet ‘unt romance!

FORD
Oh, she writes about romance all right. That’s just the trouble. It’s all fiction to her.

SOLDIER 1
’Ere, you’re a right one Captain!

FORD
Girls come and go… I need someone fresh.

SOLDIER 2
Sir, you always seem to have such luck with the ladies!

FORD
(Laughs) It's not luck I want. It's choice, lad!

VIOLET
(Violet enters stylishly to table with cloth and tea setting. Stella holds a painting) Pour moi, Stella? (She sits)

STELLA
Yes, Violet. (Stella gives her the painting. She sits) You’ve kindly given me your novels. How I wish I could write! This is a painting of a teapot I did in Adelaide years ago.

VIOLET
Oh, what a treasure! Your teacher...?

STELLA
Margaret Preston!

VIOLET
Yes... she taught you well!

STELLA
(Flustered) But I have so much more to learn!

FORD
If only we could turn back the clock, get out of this ruddy mud and back to civilised life!

SOLDIER 2
You know, I like it out here. Soldiers together.

SOLDIER 1
At least us men understand each other. (They nod in agreement. Two soldiers leave)

VIOLET
At least we gals understand each other. (Puts the painting down. Stella sits)

STELLA
Men! What is this mad dash to be heroes? All the beastly carnage!

VIOLET
Well you don’t see any of that if you live in the right part of London. And Stella, darling, when it comes to living in London, there is only one truism...Location, location, (Laughs) location. (Pours them cups of tea)

VIOLET’S SOLO: Location, Location

The market works on location, location,
But I’d rather go for sensation, sensation.
The corsets and stays to keep women proper,
I've chucked out the window and not come a cropper!

Well, lovers I've had by the ton and the tongue,
If they're racy or rich, I don't care if they're young
Or married, or vain, or afraid of the dark.
I'll bed them, not wed them, as free as a lark!

And Ford, he is all of these things and much more!
I've said to the world I'm his wife, not his whore!
My aristocrat leanings, plus his anarchist feelings,
We both put in our novels of wheeling and dealings. (Picks up her cup, rises)

The market works on location, location.
But I’d rather go for sensation, sensation.
Ambition and lust! Connections and style!
Living full tilt as the clock ticks… ticks… ticks…
I smile. Yes, I smile! I smile. (Hands empty cup to Stella and laughs at herself)

STELLA
Violet, you are amazing! Lucky Ford! Tell me, you’ve lived with him for 8 years?
(Violet agrees ‘mmm’) I’ve read all his poetry and novels, but…what is he really like?

VIOLET
He could write about anything at all. We’ve even written books together.

VIOLET’S SOLO: On Ford – 1 (Ford changes out of great coat, facing rear)

Charismatic, acrobatic, effervescent, quite depressant. (Ford goes to Violet)
A conundrum, nothing ho-hum. So endearing, so confusing. (They embrace)
He’s a lover like no other. Mister Ford Madox…
Make that Fraud Madox... Oh, I really mean Freud Madox ...
(He turns his back) Ford Madox, Ford Madox Ford!
(Speaks frankly to audience) But he says I’m too old!
Oh, yea! (Violet returns to Stella and freeze, holding hands together)

FORD SOLO: Women Today (Ford spins around)

I’d rather have lived when chivalry reigned,
When women were meek, and men's hearts were gained
By intrigue and rumour and gossip and notes
From damsels in distress behind those wide motes.
But women today?
Well! What can I say?
…THEY take their chances at… slight, little glances.
…THEY make advances. Love new romances.
…THEY fancy their chances to raise all our lances! Our lances!
…THEY tempt us at dances to get in our pantses!
Oohh, women today!
What… can I say?!
VIOLET: *Cha, cha, cha!* (She and Stella unfreeze. Violet takes Stella over to Ford)

**SCENE 2 – The Oldest Game**

1917 – FORD AND VIOLET’S LONDON FLAT, SOUTH LODGE

VIOLET

*There’s someone I’d like you to meet.* (Steers Stella towards Ford, who shakes hands. Partygoers enter and introduce themselves to Ford and Violet in happy mood. Set up a chorus line with backs turned from audience. Each turn on the letters of)

**CHORUS: G-O-S-S-I-P, Gossip!**

G-O-S-S-I-P: gossip! The old game we love to play.
Innuendo and rumour and hearsay. We whisper and chat, night and day.
Romance, and intrigue, affairs of the heart.
For professional gossips, that’s just the start:
Who’s in, who’s out, who’s doing who?
VIOLET: (Correcting them all) *WhoM.*
CHORUS: *(Yes, object not subject...That’s as bad as a split infinitive.)*
FORD: *Not in front of the guests, dear!*
CHORUS: Look out my friends, it might be you, might be… you.
G-O-S-S-I-P, gossip! The old game we love to play.
(Who! Oh! Really? I didn’t know!)
Innuendo and rumour and hearsay. We whisper and chat, night and day.
(AND they do it night and day! Oo! Ah! Tell me!)
Romance, and intrigue, affairs of the heart.
For professional gossips, that’s just the start:
What sets our tongues wagging is scandal and smut
That sets famous people apart.

Because,

**CHORUS: Twinkle**

Twinkle, oh twinkle, up there so far.
All of us love the idea of a star.
Fame, so glam, so ritz. (We want a piece of it)
Want his bum, her tits. (Just a little bit.)
Writers and painters so wanna be
Witty and rich to impress you and me.
Star attraction glows. We’re caught in undertows.

Twinkle, oh twinkle, up there so far.
All of us love the idea of a star.
Constellations made of fame (Oh, that’s what’s his name!)
Play the oldest game (The same old same.)
VIOLET: I like to be with him, to show who we are.
They stare when they see us, because WE are Stars!
CHORUS: Star attraction grows.
We’re caught in, caught in, caught in undertows. *(People break into couples. Ford holds
Violet, but smiles at Stella, who he has noticed)*

VIOLET
I’m tired Ford. I’m going home to write my diary. (She gives him a little peck on the cheek and goes off to his writing table. Ford gazes at Stella with intent. Violet takes in the look)

STELLA
I’m glad he’s out of reach. They adore each other. (Ford and she exchange coy looks and smiles)

CHORUS: Fictions and Fairytales

Fictions and fairytales. Where do they lead?
Who trusts a writer to see what you need?
How can you trust them to tell you what’s ‘true’?
Their fantasy words seem more real than you.
(Chorus change positions. Two couples sit at front of stage)

Your life is the detail they put in their books.
You want their attention, not their faraway looks.
Fictions and fairytales. Where do they lead?
Who trusts a writer to see what you need?

Is life a fairytale? Could ‘Happy Ever After’ be real?
Do you have to write to find out what you feel?
Fictions and fairytales. Where do they lead?
Who trusts a writer to see what you need?
(Dancers drift away, leaving Ford approaching Stella)

LETTERS ANIMATION

1917 Dear Mr Madox Ford, May I call you Ford? Yours, Stella
1917 Dear Miss Bowen, I was enchanted to meet you. Perhaps we could meet again? Your, Ford
1918 My dear Ford, I love the new poems you sent. Your very own Stella
1918 My dear S; Oh Stella, stellar one, you twinkle like heaven’s brightest star. My Belle, shine on me. Your F
1919 Darling One: I’m thrilled with your painting of the cottage. You mean the world to me and never, never have I known such joy. Your own always. F.
1919 My Dear, Darling F. Soon we shall be together in our very own cottage. I’ve enclosed your vegetable seeds and those gorgeous pink hollyhocks. Can’t wait to see them blooming. I love you so. Stella

FORD
(Ford puts his hand under her chin and lifts her face to his) En-chant-ed! (Violet interrupts and stares at them both distrustfully as she leaves. Ford and Stella turn to face each other)

LETTERS ANIMATION

1918 My dear S – Oh Stella, stellar one. You twinkle like heaven’s brightest star. My Belle, shine on me. Your, F

SCENE 3 – Seductions
1918–1919, LONDON

FORD & STELLA DUET: King and Queen of Ten Acres

FORD: (Ford bows formally to Stella with a flourish) Your Highness?
STELLA: (Giggles) Who? Me?
FORD: Perchance, would you like to dance?
Perchance would you like to dance?
I’ve pictures to paint, with words to foretell
The kingdom I’ve planned for Stella, my Belle! (She’s curtsys in reply to his earlier bow)
My dear! (They face front together)

**VISUAL: COOPERS COTTAGE SIDE PHOTO**

**FORD:** Pink carnations will perfume my cottage for you.
**STELLA:** Would you ring it with roses and sweet peas too?
**FORD:** Homes for our chickens, our ducks and a drake. Pigs in the sty.
**DUET:** What a feast they will make!

**VISUAL: COOPERS COTTAGE FRONT PHOTO**

Our cottage, our garden, our love, our love.
King and Queen of ten acres, ruling hand in glove. (They hold hands and circle, as in courtly dancing)

**STELLA:** A dominion for seeds of love and of life.
**FORD:** Happy ever after, like husband and wife?
**STELLA:** Cauliflowers, onions,
**FORD:** Bulging with age. (Ford pats his tummy. She laughs) Aromas of basil,
**DUET:** Thyme, parsley and sage.
**STELLA:** Potatoes and tomatoes.
**FORD:** What a fine sight!
**DUET:** Mother Nature provides,
**STELLA:** While I paint, (Sits on Ford’s knee)
**FORD:** And I write. (They spin around)

**DUET:** We could lie in our haven, in candlelit glows, (He sets her down)
These promises blooming as our bounty grows. (They chase, catch each other, laugh)
Like two lovebirds together we could build our nest
And cuddle each other…
**STELLA:** And giggle?
**FORD:** And rest!
**DUET:** With sighs and whispers, touch and perspiration,
Our plants will thrive on our inspiration. (Walking backwards but looking to their dreams)
Our cottage, our garden, our love, our love.
(Face front) King and Queen of ten acres.
**STELLA:** Ten acres?! (Delighted)
**DUET:** (They enjoy another mock royal bow/curtsy) King and Queen of ten acres!
Ruling hand… (They touch their finger tips together, gently matching with each other)
Hand… Hand in glove! (They sit down, lost in the wonder of each other and freeze)

**VIOLET’S SOLO: On Ford – 2**

(Turning) Charismatic, (Dismissive) acrobatic,
(Angry) effervescent, (Sad) quite depressant.
(Vexed) A conundrum, (Admiring) nothing ho hum.
(Sarcastic) So endearing. (Vulnerable) So confusing.
(Bragging) He’s a ‘lover’ like no other! (Realising she’s losing him)
Ford Madox… (Despair and passion) Ford! (Sobs, puts hand to face)

**FORD**
(Rising with Stella) I want time to stand still.

**VIOLET**
**Time. Tick tock. Tick tock. Ticking by.**

**STELLA**

*Just YO, and ME and this, NOW…*

**FORD, VIOLET & STELLA TRIO: My Living Hourglass**

FORD: (Moving to Violet) In your presence, my living hourglass,
(Ford embraces her) May my life’s hours through this waist pass. (Violet’s thrilled)
(Ford holds Violet, but watches Stella) Let me pour my life through here
(Ford lets go of Violet, who is shocked) Time contained, no death to fear.

*VISUAL: ANTIQUE CLOCK ANIMATION*

VIOLET & FORD: Enclose my days, seal off my past,
FORD & STELLA: Be my future. Make it last.
VIOLET: Gone my future. Gone so fast.
TRIO: It’s you I want with such tension. I burn with heat, yearn with passion.
(Both women grab at Ford in the middle. He holds them with arms outstretched, as hands of a clock)

FORD: As a woman, the source of life,
Be my centre. Melt any strife.
Make our minutes stretch to days. (Turn to Stella)
Postpone tomorrow. You have your ways. (Ford drops Violet to floor and embraces Stella)
FORD & STELLA: And in this time, and in this place,
Behold the cosmos within your face.
I bask abandoned in sands of time, lost in your gaze…
My desire, my desire, desire sublime. (They stroke each other)
FORD: My living hourglass! (His hand traces the shape of her waist a la hourglass)
FORD & STELLA: Lost in your gaze, (They move to his table, Stella sitting, Ford kneeling at her side)
In sands of time sublime, sublime. (They freeze in a close embrace. Violet turns to watch)

**VIOLET SOLO: Once, I Turned Heads** *(Sings on the floor where she was dropped.)*

It’s easy for you, in your youthful years now.
Soon you’ll be an age where it’s hard to know how
To win admiration, or even a man.
Pity my years, if you possibly can,

Because beauty means young, with radiant skin.
When your age is showing, the ice feels thin.
Fear of ageing and loss of youth,
Devouring hope, facing the truth

*VISUAL: CONVENTIONAL WOMAN IN SCARLET AND MAUVE*

That older women are wanted no more.
Our allure has wrinkled down to the core.
Once, I turned heads when I was seen,
But now, I’m alone - an old has-been! (She sobs on the floor)

**STELLA**

(Leaving Ford who starts writing. She crosses to Violet and confesses their love) *Violet. Ford and I…*
VIOLET & STELLA - T W O SOLOS: The Hunt

VIOLET: Love sows its crop. The future it seeds.
(Rises to her knees to tell Stella) Deception. Illusion. Shrouding our needs.
(Standing) My harvest is hardly a sweet, rosy bed.
Dragon’s teeth. Desertion. Bitter tears to be shed. (Sobs and faces away)

STELLA: (In her own happiness) He seduced me through his letters,
Made love to me with words.
All I heard in all his troubles was the chirping of lovebirds.
And when I went to see him, he lured me as he led
To a teapot full of sherry and the comfort of his bed!

STELLA: Once upon a time there was I. Now there is WE.
VIOLET: How do we let them persuade us with lust?
STELLA: We’re together. End of story.
VIOLET: Don’t we realise that juicy tongues turn to dust?
STELLA: One teapot full of sherry and look where it has led?
VIOLET: We’re bound in this cycle of bondage and luck.
STELLA: Lying together in this nice soft bed!
VIOLET: Caught in this trap for his mind and a fuck! (Violet leaves, disgusted)

VISUAL: HELEN BALLARD BOUQUET ANIMATION – CLOSE-UPS OF FLOWERS

STELLA SOLO: Love Addict (Dances in her own world, while Ford watches)

I’m high on love. I’m full of light.
Your kisses sear me to the core.
Our bodies fit together tight.
Don’t pull away, I ache for more…

(Ford joins her) I’m dizzy with you. You are in my veins.
Your slightest touch sets me alight!
Come dance with me down lover’s lanes
Where love junkies sink in the night… (They are on the floor together)

I’m doped with you, your eyes, your fingers.
Craving the haze of this ‘soft-real’.
Desire throbs. My addiction lingers. (She rises, he follows slowly)
My ecstasy! Cut me in on your deal,
Your deal. Your deal. (They kiss passionately)

INTERVAL

VISUAL: BRIDGE AT AVIGNON
ACT II

SCENE 4a – The Deal
1922, COOPER’S COTTAGE, SUSSEX

ORCHESTRA: Introduction

VISUAL: INSIDE COOPER’S COTTAGE, SUSSEX
VISUAL: STELLA WITH BABY JULIA
VISUAL: STELLA, PENNY THE GOAT AND KITTEN
VISUAL: FORD, STELLA AND MILKING PAIL
VISUAL: FORD, STELLA HOLDING GOAT
VISUAL: FORD, STELLA IN TREES WITH GOATS

(Ford comes in, looks at Stella’s painting gear, and crosses to his table, rolls up his shirt sleeves to write)

FORD SOLO: Confession

A clear conscience, her soft pillow.
But me, I must confess.
I feel guilty she supports me
And gives her life for my success. (He picks up his nib pen)

Without writing, I’m overwhelmed, suffocate, can’t breathe. (He begins writing furiously)
I must write to purge out demons that writhe and seethe.
Yes, words help decant them. Can’t stop now! I have to finish!
Each pen stroke, tiny markings, helping my fears diminish. (Checks his draft, screws it up disgusted, throws it to floor)

A clear conscience, her soft pillow.
The truth I must suppress.
(He looks at her studio area) Her talent lies untapped, you see
But I need her for my success.

(Attacking the paper) Without writing, I’m overwhelmed, suffocate, can’t breathe.
I must write to purge out demons that writhe and seethe.
Yes, words help decant them. Can’t stop now! I have to finish!
Each pen stroke, tiny markings, helping my fears diminish.
A clear conscience, her soft pillow.

VISUAL: COOPER’S COTTAGE INSIDE VIEW

STELLA
(From offstage, coming in wearing apron with basket of nappies and pail of garden produce) Ford? Ford? Ford?
Have you fed the chickens yet? (He is exasperated by the interruption. He wants absolute silence to write)
Have you finished that chapter yet?

FORD
If you’d leave me alone for five minutes, maybe I could!

STELLA
(Turns to him) That is unfair! (Takes nappy (diaper) from her basket) When I do everything for you.
(Throws it at him. Ford reacts angrily)
STELLA
(Crossing the stage, puts her basket down on the chair to fold the nappies) When was the last time I had five minutes to paint!

FORD AND STELLA DUET: The Clock on the Shelf

FORD: (Coming over with nappy) I’m drowning in metaphor, commas and grammar.
STELLA: (She turns) I’m juggling texture and line to make glamour.
FORD: Form and allusion and simile too. (He folds nappy awkwardly)
STELLA: (Shaking tablecloth to put on table) Perspective and shadows to name just a few. And serving you dinner!
FORD: I’m drowning in metaphor, commas and grammar.
STELLA: I’m juggling texture and line to make glamour.
FORD: Form and allusion and simile, too.
STELLA: (Now folding nappies) Perspective and shadows to name just a few. And washing your clothes!
FORD: I’m drowning in metaphor, commas and grammar. I’m juggling, juggling.
STELLA: I’m drowning, drowning. I’m juggling texture and line to make glamour.
FORD: Form and allusion and simile, too. Perspective and shadows to name just a few.
STELLA: Perspective and shadows to name just a few. Form and allusion and simile, too.

DUET: Whatever our art form, our fam’ly does know
We’re obsessed with our dreams. The clock is our foe.
It ticks away time we want for ourself.
Our domestic tyrant, the clock on the shelf. (Ford returns to his side of the stage)
FORD: Writing.
STELLA: Painting.
DUET: Farming. Friends. We want eight more hours when twenty-four ends.
(Stella still folding nappies)
When we’re making art, one place that we’re not
Is here in the present. Our heads are all caught
In passions and works, in our passions and works,
In our passions and works in our heads!

It looks like I’m listening. It looks like I’m listening, (Pause. They look at each other)
“What was that … you said?”

STELLA: (Moves into his arms) I’m tired, Ford, deeply tired! Can’t cook another meal.
FORD: This rain is never ending. (She moves away) I know how you feel.
STELLA: (Turns) No, you don’t! Work never stops! Feed the goats, the pigs… then you.
FORD: I feel stale here in this cottage, lack inspiration from this view.
DUET: I want something new.

STELLA
(Back at her table folding nappies) I need a holiday, Ford.
FORD
Well, let’s go somewhere then.

STELLA
What? And just leave the farm?

FORD
Yes. We’re not happy here. Perhaps some time on the Continent would be the change we need. I think it would be good for both of us.

STELLA
Ah, yes. And for little Julie… Yes… (Stella nods in agreement. They leave separately)

VISUAL: Bowen Packing Case + Places They Live in France - Animation

SCENE 4b — The Deal
1925 Paris, France

(Two dancers enter and waltz) VISUAL: Notre-Dames-des-Champs Studio

CHORUS: Paris in the Twenties (Party people waltz in and take static places)

For a good time, we know where to go,
To Stella and Ford’s bal musette for a show!
Alone, or in pairs, strutting our wares,
All of us have a good time.

Paris, in the Twenties, a high-stepping town
Where men drink from slippers of ladies in gowns.
Artists, writers, whores and thieves.
Parties in Paris, so much fun, no one leaves (They gather in a group)

(All dance till end) For a good time, we know where to go,
To Stella and Ford’s bal musette for a show!
Alone, or in pairs, strutting our wares,
All of us have a good time.

Talking and dancing, we smoke and we drink.
We revel like angels in heaven on the brink
Of Dante’s Inferno, a Hell of a place,
Where fallen angels still have smiles on their face

For a good time, we know where to go,
To Stella and Ford’s bal musette for a show!
Alone, or in pairs, strutting our wares,
All of us have a good time
In Dante’s Inferno, a Hell of a place,
Where fallen angels still have smiles on their face.

(The party-goers drift away. Ford and Jean move to each other. Stella escorts others back. Ford and Jean begin dancing. Stella leaves her guests, takes Ford away from Jean back to their guests. She turns and faces Jean Rhys)

STELLA
Jean, have you finished your piece for the Review?
PARTYGOER (to Stella)

So, who is this Jean Rhys?

STELLA

Jean is Ford’s new assistant at the journal.

FORD

A talented writer. (Ford and Jean begin a slow, sultry tango)

JEAN & FORD DUET: Lost and Found

JEAN: You’re gentle with me, my bear of a man.
I was lost before, now I hope I can
Find love in your arms, so strong, so tight.
Before you it was all one dark, cold night.

FORD: I have found you now to love so much.
A man needs a woman to unfold with his touch.
Come bed me dear, and lie so close.
We’ll comfort each other, and shut out our ghosts.

JEAN: You’re gentle with me, my bear of a man.
FORD: I have found you now to love so much. (They move to the floor)
JEAN: I was lost before, now I hope that I can
FORD: A man needs a woman to unfold with his touch. (Jean sprawls backwards)
JEAN: Find love in your arms, so strong and so tight.
FORD: Come bed me dear, and lie so close (He pulls her into his arms)
JEAN: Before you it was all one dark, cold night.
FORD: We’ll comfort each other, and shut out our ghosts.
JEAN: I was lost.
FORD: Now you’re found. (They cuddle warmly)

(The party breaks up. Stella, in tears, turns to see them on the floor together. She runs to pull Ford away, then throws Jean out.
She goes back to Ford, pleading him not to go back to Jean but he ignores her and walks back to Jean, who embraces him.
Stella is alone, despairing)

INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDE: Possessed

VISUAL: LE GLACIER

JEAN AND STELLA DUET: The Forced Choice

JEAN: (Jean takes Ford back to his table, then chases and grabs Stella, who spins around to face her)
Come on! Come on!

STELLA: Your shame I see. (Stella moves away)

JEAN: Come and fight me. Then we’ll be done. (Ford plays Solitaire, oblivious)

STELLA: He loves me!

JEAN: He’s mine! He wants to play.

STELLA: Jean, you predator!

JEAN: Watch me savour his love in every way.

Libretto – The Portrait, a musical tribute to Stella Bowen by Becky Llewellyn – September 2006

www.theportrait.com.au
STELLA: He must be here for our daughter.
JEAN: I’m more exciting. (Jean grabs Stella’s hand)
STELLA: I’m his best supporter. (Stella frees herself)
JEAN: He finds my body so inviting. (Jean strokes her own body)
STELLA: You think you can win by using trickery (They move to opposite sides)
JEAN: I have talent, not like you. (Jean points at Stella)
STELLA: You’ll never have fame, only misery.
JEAN: You’re a housewife! Look at you.
STELLA: At least it’s dignified, worthwhile and true.
JEAN: I’m Pandora in your marriage, the one you call a savage.
STELLA: You betrayed my sympathy. (Stella moves to)
JEAN: (Jean laughs) We make love all the time. (Stella shakes her head to hear this)
Our passion (Jean grabs Stella’s face to hear these words. Stella brushes her hands away) is sublime!
STELLA: I close my ears to what you say. (Puts hands over her ears)
JEAN: He’s tired of you. I’m new! Just look you’ll see it’s true. (Jean grabs Stella’s hand)
STELLA: Would he cheat me? Could it be?
JEAN: Ford’s the patron I need to make my books succeed! (Jean breaks away, moving to her side of stage, then turns)
STELLA: He likes new writers, but not you!
JEAN: (laughs) You have no say, so just go away!
STELLA: I won’t go. No, not even for show. (Stella holds her ground)
JEAN: Or this mistress, one day will make you pay!
STELLA: You force my hand, you and Ford, this cruel plan!
JEAN: I’m wild, an unruly child.
STELLA: I’ve been so patient… and so mild.
JEAN: You can’t lay blame since I’ve no shame.
STELLA: You say he wants you… I now see what I must do.
JEAN: I won’t leave. I’m here to stay. What will you do if I don’t go away?
STELLA: I accept he wants you. If there’s no other way to keep him, (Stella sinks to her knees)
JEAN: So Stella! (laughs) Poor Stella! (Jean stands behind her)
STELLA: Then you will come and live with us! And stay! (Offers forced choice)
JEAN: I’ll say “Yes!” (Jean smirks)
STELLA: Will you stay?
JEAN: I’ll say, “YES!”

FORD, STELLA & JEAN TRIO: Windows and Doors

FORD & STELLA: (Jean moves back to Ford and they cuddle each other. Stella sits deserted on the floor)
Windows and doors, what are they for?
Some to lock shut, some to explore.

VISUAL: WHITE STEPS

Open or locked. Closed or jammed.
An invitation, a haven, a squeak, a slam. (Jean caresses Ford)

VISUAL: LA TERRASSE

STELLA: (Lifting up) You just shut it behind you, walk out of my life
To a new adventure, new body, new wife.
FORD: I open the door and see her need. (Jean circles him, then sits at his side)
I’m ready, and eager, to do the deed.

2 Jean Rhys did live with Ford and Stella in Paris for over a year as his ‘kept woman’. Both Ford and Stella provided income for her after it all split up. Her story of this time is semi-fictionalised in Quartet.

Libretto – The Portrait, a musical tribute to Stella Bowen by Becky Llewellyn – September 2006
www.theportrait.com.au
STELLA: I gaze from within as you turn your back. (Holds brushes as weapons)
I close the curtains and wonder what lack
I had that you’d leave me, walk out of the door.
Your trail of women, after, before.

FORD: I’m ashamed to be leaving, but my heart, so burns. (Sings now to Jean)
My hand on the doorknob, I choose. You turn

VISUAL: EMBANKMENT GARDENS

It with the key to my heart. You free me…

JEAN & FORD: A man who’s wanted, desired, and always who can.

TRIO: Windows and doors enclose a real home, (Jean moves up behind Ford)

VISUAL: INTERIOR, PARIS

But when they are open, people may roam.
Open or locked, closed or jammed.
An invitation, a haven, a squeak, a slam!
(Stella lays her head on the table. Ford is led out by Jean)

SCENE 5 – The Dark Night
1926 – 1928, PARIS, FRANCE

VIOLET'S SOLO WITH OFFSTAGE CHORUS OF FORD AND JEAN: Protégés and Pets

(Violet moves to centre stage with shawl to do a shadow dance of prophecy)
Protégés and pets, being seen at dances.
Masks and illusions, gossip, romances.
Dressing for lunches, chatting at meals.
Art’s prison-palace of compromise deals.

TRIO: Oh, plunge me deep into ego-filled halls (Huge projected shadow)
Where would-be famous seek posterity’s walls.
Protégés and pets. Art's the business of tears.

VIOLET: Exposed to the critics, sharks smelling your fears.
Doubting one’s own talent, compared with one’s peers.
Feeling a failure, while lauding your latest.
We’d stop if we could, before people hate us.

Protégés and pets. Art's the business of tears, of tears.

INTERMEZZO: The Dark Night

(STella wakes out of her reverie over Ford with renewed determination to paint. She folds up the domestic tablecloth, puts on her artist smock, grabs her easel, palette and brushes and sets up. Paris Socialite with friend Jeffrey and Jean Rhys enter and sit at her table. Stella begins painting)

VISUAL: BLACK TABLE, WHITE FLOWERS

TRIO OF PARIS SOCIALITE (VIOLET), JEFFREY AND JEAN: So Don’t Be Rude!
TRIO: How to succeed in art!
PARIS SOCIALITE: For a start,
Play a part in breaking someone's heart.
While you’re at it, tell your mother that
TRIO: You'd rather have another.
Make sure to tell your friends
That you have no time to spend
And while you're being a bitch,
Make connections with the rich. (Jean drinks from hip flask disguised in a 1920’s bag)

PARIS SOCIALITE: As entertainment,
Not refrainment,
Is what oils the wheels of art.
Be the hostess with the mostest,
TRIO: Famous coast to coastest.
Sell your art behind your agent.
His cut pays for your rent
Buying paints, your secret joys? (French maid (Julie) enters with tea set, serves)
No cash left for your kid’s toys!

So don't be rude and paint a nude, if you're a lady painter.
Don't be rude and paint a nude, if you're a lady painter.
It’s so crude. It’s so lewd, not the outlook of a prude.
So don’t be rude and paint a nude! (Paris Socialite waves maid away)

JEAN: (standing) Oh, women are the models for men who make real art.
They don't draw perky nipples
TRIO: And that dark 'down under' part! (She winks knowingly while covering up)
JEAN: It makes men very twitchy if they think she may enjoy
TRIO: What nature intended for the gaze of a boy! (Jean swig drink)

PARIS SOCIALITE: Oh, I say!
JEAN: I wondered at the time (PARIS SOCIALITE: She did!) if she looked at me like this?
PARIS SOCIALITE: Did you? (to Jeffrey)
JEAN: With her husband on my mattress, was I her mistress?
PARIS SOCIALITE: WELL!
When she thought of us in bed, it must have gone to her head.
Did you hear what I just said?
TRIO: Look where her life has led!

So don't be rude and paint a nude, if you're a lady painter.
Don't be rude and paint a nude, if you're a lady painter.
It’s so crude. It’s so lewd, not the outlook of a prude.
So don’t be rude and paint a nude!

JEFFREY: You do landscapes and flowers. In portraits you excel,
But really! Women's bodies! Well, well, well!
TRIO: Well, well, well!
It’s men who do the looking, not a female voyeur.
Women painting nudes is a sickness that needs a cure, (that needs a cure!) (Jean has impromptu cadenza, then gulps from her flask)
What nice gal would uncover what makes her a mother?  
Heaven knows I'm praying you don't paint another!  
Get your grammar right! “Lady Painter” is not a verb.  
It's an adjective for proper gals, not an excuse for a pervert. (They look at Jeffrey, who is guilty and flustered!)

So don't be rude and paint a nude, if you're a lady painter.  
Don't be rude and paint a nude, if you're a lady painter.  
It’s so crude. It’s so lewd, not the outlook of a prude.  
So don’t be rude and paint a nude!

**VISUAL: RECLINING NUDE**

**PARIS SOCIALITE**

*Come along, Jeffrey.* (He follows obediently, muttering about Jean, who swigs the last of her flask, then falls asleep in her chair. Ford enters to sing to Stella, who keeps painting. Stella smiles when she sees him, listens to his case, but is unsettled by his provocation)

**FORD SOLO: Someone Like Your Father**

Stella, you're so bourgeois, so headstrong and so sure.
I had good intentions, though my actions were often poor.
Why did you choose an artist, with morals you may rue?
Why not someone steady to provide for you?

Someone like your father, so easy and so good. (She is hurt he misunderstands)
That's the kind of husband who could and should
Put you on a pedestal, adore you till the end,
An honest, true protector, a kind and dear best friend. (He tries to get close. She rejects him)

Stella, you're so bourgeois, so headstrong and so sure!
I had good intentions, though my actions were always poor!
Why did you choose an artist, with morals you may rue!
Why not someone steady to provide for you?

**VISUAL: T. H. Bowen**

Someone like your father, so easy and so good.
That's the kind of husband who could, and should,
Put you on a pedestal, adore you till the end,
An honest, true protector, a kind and dear best friend.

**JEAN SOLO: Jean the Jezebel** (Jean moves to be greeted passionately by Ford)

He loves me now, so do as I’ve said,
While your ex-lover I bed.
I am the temptress, the beauty, the belle.
Now pick up my clothes (Points demandingly) and fold them well. (Laughs)
You play the mother. I’ll be the lover.
That’s all he’s after.
You are the cast-off, obsolete, the dreaded waste.
**STELLA:** *Ford? …*

**JEAN:** Your man finds this little vixen much more to his taste.
You're sexless, you're finished. Admit that you're out!
When the sparks fly and sizzle in our bed, there’s no doubt!
You haven’t a leg to stand on. (Stella collapses) You’re just the old dregs! (Jean stands, dominating, above her)
It’s for ME, Jean, the Jezebel, your dear Ford pants (Jean pulls her hair, yanking her head backward) and (Jean laughs) begs! (Stella releases herself from this grasp, throws Jean out forcibly)

STELLA
(To Jean) GET OUT!

JEAN
(Appeals for help) Ford! (He shrugs, incapable)

STELLA
(Turning to Ford) And you too! Just GO! (Stella holds the power of her decision at centre stage)

VISUAL: STILL LIFE WITH PART OF ME ANIMATION

ORCHESTRA: Stella’s Theme
(Stella moves to her easel with palette and paints. She then packs it all up and leaves stage)

VISUAL: SELF-PORTRAIT 1928 ANIMATION

JULIE
(Daughter Julie comes onto stage after Stella has left. Her monologue in a spotlight continues as Ford brings his bed on stage in darkness) And so Mother left Papa in 1928 when he had finished his affair with Jean and gone to America. Mother threw herself into painting, and we managed somehow in Paris until the Depression made it too hard. Most of the expats went back to the States. We moved to London. I hardly knew a word of English. Dear Mummy found portrait and teaching work to support us. She even became an art critic, with the pen name ‘Palette’.

Daddy tried to make a living in the US. He’s had other affairs too. But he’s met another painter, Janice Biala, and he’s settled since then. He loves artistic women… at least for a while. Lucky Papa! Janice devote herself totally to him… like they all did. Daddy’s been ill and they’ve come back to France. But now Daddy dearest has telexed us with the most dreadful news… I hope the doctors are wrong!

SCENE 6a – Peace and War
1939, DEAUVILLE, FRANCE

(Lights up to reveal Ford’s hospital bed, where he lies panting and very ill. Julie moves to his side and holds his hand. In ‘waiting room’ Stella sits quietly at the small table and hospital style mug)

JULIE’S SOLO: Lullaby 1

Daddy, daddy dearest… daddy chéri,
Your war is over now. Just rest here with me.
Step out of the trenches. Raise the white flag.
You’ve been a good soldier, of that you could brag.

JULIE
Are you sure, Papa, that you won’t see her?

FORD
No, no ma petite. We can’t cross that bridge.
STEMLLA  
(Standing) **Ford. Ford, can I come in today?** (Julie looks both ways, feeling caught between them)

FORD  
(Yelling and afraid) **Into the trenches men! Fix bayonets. HE’S coming. Behold the King of Shadows cometh!**

JULIE  
(Moving to hold Stella’s hand) **Mother, you know he doesn't want you to see him like this.**  
(Julie goes back to Ford, Stella left alone)

STEMLLA  
*Please, Julie... Ford. Ford! Do you hear me?*

FORD  
*Take cover men!*

STEMLLA  
*Let me see you!*

FORD  
*There's a sniper.* (Julie soothes her dad)

STEMLLA  
*Garden indeed!* (She sits) **All gone to weed... Great writer and fame.** (As if seeing the truth for the first time) **I fell in love with your words before I knew you.**

**STELLA’S SOLO: The Empty Hearth**

How many homes did we make, you and I?  
How many times did we pack up and try?  
But my flowers and lace could never patch up  
The cracks and the chips in our loving cup.  
A home is a haven for comfort and rest,  
For us to care for each other, so soft in our nest.  
But you, such a soldier, kept bombing away  
That garden of love, once so green, shot all grey.  
The hearth now lies empty, the embers are cold,  
The ashes of dreams, and of love you foretold.  
The pain of that scar.  
Our defiled marriage bed!  
We did have so much! What got into your head?

**JULIE’S SOLO: Lullaby 2** (Julie strokes Ford’s head)  
Please let me soothe you in final surrender.
I’m here with you now, feeling loving and tender.
Daddy, you’re coming to a rest and a peace,
A final oblivion where worries shall cease.

Don’t fret about fame or fortune, you tried.
You’ve been… my dear father and a great man inside.
There’s no guilt in heaven, no harsh poverty.
There’s room for your writing and posterity.

**STELLA’S SOLO: Rage (Rising from table and singing to Ford)**

Ford, you bastard! You’ve stolen my life!
You promised the world, not this trouble and strife.
\textit{You twister, you liar, you sponger, you cad.}
Damn you to hell for the pain that I’ve had!

**VISUAL: ROSES AND A BLUE TEAPOT**

STELLA

\textit{So much for the teapot full of sherry!} (Mocks herself being sweet, as she grabs the mug) \textit{Would you like it sweet, dear? One lump or two? Or will it be Violet or Jean or WHO? Oh, how special and refined we are.} (Emptyed her cup of tea onto the floor) \textit{The CREAM of the art world, destined to go far.} (Drained of her bitterness)

How can you leave me, Stella, your star?
I adored you forever, wide, deep and far.
I still long to touch you and bid you adieu.
(Whispered rage, holding her table) \textit{You're selfish to the very core!}
\textit{I hate you…} (Cries)

**FORD**

\textit{Hold me. I feel so cold.} (Julie holds Ford)

**JULIE’S SOLO: Lullaby 3**

Daddy, daddy dearest, daddy cheri’,
Your war is over now. Just rest here with me.
Oh, you’re all the world to me. I love to be kissed.
Your soothing embraces will forever be missed.
(Soothing him) \textit{Let go... dear daddy.}
(Desperate not to lose him) \textit{Don’t go... dear daddy.}
(Confessing, consoling) \textit{I love you, forever…}
\textit{Let go...} (Accepting he’s dying) \textit{don’t go…} (Ford shuts eyes and dies) \textit{Let go...}
(Julie kisses his forehead lingeringly. Violet, Jean and Stella gather front stage, joined by Julie, who holds hands briefly with her mother, then sits on her knees. They form a formal quartet, like ‘Piero angels’)

**STELLA, JULIE, VIOLET & JEAN QUARTET: Go In Peace**

Go, Go, Go, Go,
Go in peace, since you must.
Rest at ease when you're dust.
No more war. All your words have been said.
There'll be no one quite like you.
I'm not sure what I'll do,
But remember the life we have led.

(a capella) Go, Go, Go, Go,
Go in peace, since you must.
Rest at ease when you're dust.
No more war. Not with you, not with me.
You'll be free in the light.
I'll be here in the night,
Alone with this great mystery.
Go… Go… Go… Go…
Go.

(The women disburse; Stella, to her table to grieve with head down in arms. In darkness, Ford gets up and leaves, taking his bed with other women helping)

SCENE 6b – Peace and War
1944, BINBROOK RAF STATION, UK

(Airmen enter the present, picking up her palette and brushes. Stella returns to reality of 1944, as Captain Bowen in the RAAF)

AIRMAN 1
(Holding her palette and brush) You know lady, you’re a real painter.

STELLA
Not just a lady painter? (Giggles)

AIRMAN 2
(Takes palette from Airman 1 and gives it to Stella) When we get back from this flight, we’ll sit for you again.

AIRMAN 1
(Still holding brush) Yeah. It’ll be great for the folks back home to see us all kitted up.

VISUAL: BOMBING UP A LANCASTER FOR WING COMMANDER DOUGLAS

AIRMAN 2
And Captain Bowen, that painting you did of our plane… it’s bonzer.

AIRMAN 1
(Agreeing) Yeah… too right! (She places them in a pose to begin painting them)

DUET WITH OFFSTAGE CHORUS: With Brave Heart

AIRMEN DUET: The hour before dawn is the coldest,
The darkest time of the night,
When shadows and mem’ries linger.
Waking, my dreams take flight.

MALE TRIO: (Ford sings backstage)
Into the winds of challenge. (Men strike a kneeling pose, as she paints)
Into the time of trial.
Into the jaws of destiny,
With courage all the while.
AIRMEN DUET: The dawning heralds fresh hope,
Bringing bright glows to the sky.
A new day opens before me.
I ready myself to fly.

MALE TRIO: (Men move to front and take standing pose)
Onto the new adversity.
Onto start what I fear to begin.
Onto the thrill of the risk,
Resilient and strong within.

AIRMEN DUET: (Men pose on floor, as if in cockpit)
Facing each day with my best,
Embarking on this journey.
Shaped with test after test,
Freedom grows within me.

TRIO: AIRMEN WITH STELLA (Stella kneels then joins them)
Unto the past, I pay tribute.
Unto the present, I belong.
Unto the future, I give my trust. (Airman 2 kneels, with hand on colleague)
True to my God and my song.

(FULL BOMBER CREW PICTURE REVEALED.)

TRIO AND OFFSTAGE CHORUS: (Men move to stand tall, angled to each other)
Into, onto, unto, with the courage I own.
Living through struggle and hardship,
With brave heart to face the unknown.
Into, onto, unto,
I rise to meet what may,
As time, that old adversary,
Grants me this new day.
Into, onto, unto, (Stella joins the airmen) with the courage I own.
Living through struggle and hardship
With brave heart, with brave heart, with brave heart,
To face, to face (Stella walks to centre stage spot) the unknown.3

THE END

ORCHESTRA: Curtain Call Medley

VISUAL: SALUTE DURING VICTORY MARCH, JUNE 10, 1946 ANIMATION

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3 This Australian bomber crew were shot down the same night Stella sketched them. Her painting was constructed from her sketches and photos, all now kept at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. Capt Stella Bowen died of cancer in 1947, aged 54 after completing Salute during Victory March, June 10, 1946. She had never been able to afford to return home to Australia. Her daughter Julie died at a similar age, as had her mother.
Ensemble Bows