

OBLIVION

An Opera in One Act

Music and Libretto By John Aylward

Synopsis & Libretto

Oblivion | Opera Synopsis

Scene I

As the opera opens, a Wanderer has come out of the wild into the Hunter's lair. He sees a man tied up in a corner. The Hunter is unnerved by the Wanderer's arrival but greets him and allows him to eat. The Wanderer asks where he is and why he can't remember anything. The Hunter tells the Wanderer that it will take time to explain his circumstances but that the answers he seeks are back out in the wild. The Wanderer explains how dangerous the outside is, but the Hunter is adamant: the Wanderer can stay for a short while to rest, but then must leave. The Hunter retires and instructs the Wanderer not to speak with a man bound up in the corner because he is dangerous.

Scene II

The Wanderer, left on his own, sits by the fire and prays. The bound man, in mental and physical stress, tries to get the Wanderer's attention. All is interrupted as a second Wanderer enters from the wild. The first Wanderer takes her in. They talk and realize that she also cannot remember anything before her journey. They cannot even remember their names. The second Wanderer examines the room but the first Wanderer warns that the Hunter might be angry if anything is touched. The bound man begins to engage the second Wanderer, saying that he can help them understand where they are. As the bound man is speaking, the Hunter unexpectedly returns and is enraged to see the Wanderers speaking with the bound man. The Hunter offers his own explanation of the circumstances they are in and urges them to seek the path despite how dangerous it seems. Ultimately, the Wanderers have no choice since the Hunter says he will insist they leave by morning.

Scene III

At night, the Wanderers discuss what kind of situation they are in. One wants to explore despite the Hunter's warning and laments how she could have possibly found herself in this situation. The other thinks that together they might be able to survive in the wild. Despite fearing the Hunter, he agrees to try and explore. The bound man overhears their plan and asks to be freed. The Wanderers worry that the bound man could spoil their plans so they unchain him and take him with them.

Scene IV

The Wanderers have walked through the Hunter's space for a long time, through corridors, caverns and other endless liminal spaces. The first Wanderer laments his situation and the confusion he is in. Finally, they come upon a fountain. They set the man by the fountain to drink, seeing that he is nearly dead. The man quickly starts drinking large volumes of water and splashing his face with it. In between large indulgences of water, his memory returns. He explains that the fountain has restorative powers, both of the body and of the mind's memories. He tells them that he remembers that he is a King. With his memory returning to him, the King explains that they

have died and are all in a circle of purgatory within the afterlife.

The King explains that the Hunter has taken possession of this circle through force. Those who die in this circle are doomed to return, trapped in an endless cycle, each time their memory erased. The King invites the Wanderers to drink from the fountain and reclaim their memories. The first Wanderer drinks and realizes he and the other Wanderer were in love. Troubling memories surface for him and he suspects that the second Wanderer may have killed them both. He urges her to drink so that she can fill in the gaps of their story. Troubled and spooked, she refuses to drink. She realizes that it was a mistake to explore and that she should have followed the Hunter's warnings. The first Wanderer, meanwhile, is now happy that they have explored, ecstatic to remember his love, and pleads to his lost love to drink and remember. When she says that perhaps the Hunter's warning was correct, the King lashes out. The King decries how the Hunter trapped him, coveting the passage to the fountain and the doorway to heaven. The first Wanderer is intrigued, seeing an opportunity to pass through the circle of purgatory. The second Wanderer is less impressed. The King promises that if they help him vanquish the Hunter, he will lead them to heaven.

Scene V

As the King rests from his ecstatic awakening, the Wanderers discuss their situation. The second remains troubled that she may have been an instrument in their death. The first is at peace with the situation and encourages the other to remember what she can, which might be difficult but would include the love they shared. They sing to each other about their changing feelings, the second now wanting to explore the Hunter's wilderness and the first now wanting to trust the King's offer of redemption.

Scene VI

The King, and the Wanderers return to the Hunter's lair and the King, in a fury, lambasts the Hunter, calling him evil and obstructing what the King sees as a divine prophesy. The Hunter, insisting that the King is insane, speaks more about their history. He explains that the King once ruled Purgatory, allowing no one to leave and ascend to heaven through the wild, instead tempting them with false memories and promises of redemption. Finally, the Hunter was able to wrest control of the circle and keep the King bound, allowing others to continue along the path in the wild. The King insists this is all a lie – that the Hunter wants to keep control and ignore his own shame and lack of redemption. The first Wanderer, filled with anger, expels the Hunter. The King rejoices and the second Wanderer, stunned, runs out to the wild. The Wanderer looks upon what he has done in shock. The King congratulates him, telling him that he has fulfilled a great prophesy and that now he may be redeemed and ascend to heaven. The King opens the door that the Hunter had been guarding. The Wanderer walks through and vanishes.

END

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Dramatis Personae:

Wanderer – soprano

Wanderer – baritone

Hunter – baritone

Bound Man / King – tenor

SCENE I

Lights up on a mysterious room, appearing to be a relic of a distant or otherworldly time. Light emanates periodically from the surrounding walls but otherwise the space is dark. A door stage right opens up onto an ante space. Center stage is a door flanked by sitting spaces and a table. Just beyond there appears a darkened exit leading deeper into the space.

A Bound Man is sitting between the table and the door, his feet chained to the wall. The Hunter is at the table, tearing apart a large animal with a variety of tools.

Bound Man: In a great... a great... in a great battle. We are locked... in a... in a great... We are... beyond your perception... beyond, be...

H: Quiet!

The Hunter continues working.

The Bound Man begins to quietly babble again and then slowly raise his voice.

Bound Man: Even, even as we.... Even as we... as we.... pass on we are unaware of it.

H: I said quiet! (more to himself) Will you never leave me alone?

**A large rumble drowns out The Hunter and the Bound Man. There is a loud thud.
The Hunter looks stage left as dust begins to flood in through the door.**

H: Who goes there?

The First Wanderer appears through the door stage left, completely disoriented, dusting himself off.

H: Be gone!

Wanderer: I'm lost! The storm!

H: Be gone!

W: The wild! I'll die back out there.

H: You've just arrived.

W: Arrived where?

H: You don't know yet.

W: For the moment, may I rest?

H: (pause) For the moment, you wretch.

The Hunter takes the Wanderer to the table.

H: You may eat.

W: Where did you find this food?

H: I hunt the beasts.

W: You hunt the beasts?

H: What else is there?

W: You are a warrior.

H: And who are you?

W: I can't remember anything of myself. I wandered for what seemed an eternity. You must have answered my prayers.

H: I have answered no prayers.

W: Why can I remember nothing?

H: You must experience this world for yourself. I could tell you now but you wouldn't believe me.

W: I would believe you!

The Bound Man gathers his weapons to leave for his hunt.

H: For now, as you begin, you'll remember nothing.

Bound Man: You are in danger!

H: Ah! This man! He has infected everything. This place, my mind.

Bound Man: I shall tell you the truth!

H: (to the Wanderer, trying to ignore the Bound Man) He's here to haunt me. He insists I remember and repent. I am not a violent man, but his evil I could not stand. I have sought peace and balance, away from others, with only glimpses of my past.

BM: Those who sleep in the dust of the earth...

H: I can't remember what I'm so afraid of, but I don't wish to know. So it is best I am alone. There is a way to reclaim your past out in the wild. You can choose your own way there, but leave me be.

W: The wild is so dangerous.

H: If you stay here, do not speak to this man. He will infect your mind. Some voices are best left unheard.

END SCENE

SCENE 2

The Hunter is away and the Wanderer is praying by the fire. The Bound Man continues to babble.

BM: But for now... for now... you are blind. It is why... why... you must have...

W: Oh God, please help this sad and tortured man, and free me from this place.

**There is a rumbling as another wanderer approaches from the same entrance the first wanderer came through.
The First Wanderer begins to hear her voice.**

W: Who's there?

W2: Hello?

Second Wanderer appears in the entrance, disheveled.

W: Ah! Who are you?

W2: Where am I?

W: I don't know.

W2: The storm is frightful.

W: You were out in the storm?

W2: I was wandering. I seemed to be going nowhere.

W: I did the same until I found myself here, like you now. For how long did you wander?

W2: It seemed like an eternity.

W: The storm is so powerful. It has the strength to disorient.

W2: Why are we here?

W: Are we just lost?

W2: Is it some trick?

W2: Have we been injured? Or is someone taking vengeance on us?

W: Perhaps we've been abducted!

Both wanderers speak, overlapping each other:

W2: Well, if we've been abducted then wouldn't we have marks on us somewhere because we probably struggled somehow, but then again, what if we were

just knocked out and then dragged here. But you look fine, so maybe it was something even worse, like, well, I don't know it could be anything. It could be anything (repeat until both are saying 'It could be anything' in a kind of layered call and response that always overlaps.)

W2: What do you remember?

W: I ... remember nothing... and you?

W2: I too... remember ... nothing.

Both: ... nothing.

Pause

W2: I'm starving!

W: If someone is playing a trick on us, they better show up and explain themselves. That's got to be a pretty evil person. I mean don't you think that it's most likely that

we're lost? I really don't think we've been abducted, so it must be that we are lost. But I have no idea, I mean it could be anything, it could be anything (repeat until both are saying 'It could be anything' in a kind of layered call and response that always overlaps.)

W: Don't touch that! It's the hunters.

W2: Who?

W: The man who took me in.

W2: Who is this? (pointing to the Bound Man).

W: Don't speak with him, he's dangerous!

BM: Help! Help!

W2: Dangerous? Look at him!

BM: Help! Help! I can... can...

W2: What?

BM: I can...

W: If we disobey the hunter, we'll die. He'll kill us.

BM: Look! Look! I can ... (pointing to a passageway)

W2: A passageway!

W: Don't go there. The hunter told me not to! He will be angry to see you here!

W2: I will tell him I am lost. Like you.

W: He insists I go back to the wild, to the path. He will expect the same of you.

W2: Why hasn't he killed you anyway?

W: I am no threat to him.

W2: Maybe he is tricking us. He may tie us up! Just like him!

W: Don't you think he is bound here for a reason?

W2: It's true. Who should we trust?

W: Who should we trust?

BM: Me! Me! I can help! There is a great! A great...

W2: A great what?

BM: A great...

W: He has been speaking gibberish ever since I got here.

BM: Great, great! The dust!

W2: It sounds like he is warning of something. Or perhaps it's a riddle.

BM: There is a great, a great, battle, some shall fall so that the rest can be refined, refined! Until the end!

The Hunter enters abruptly

H: What is this?!

W: We were just....

H: I told you not to speak to him.

W2: He wouldn't stop!

H: And who are you?

W: She, she, she. I don't...

W2: I've arrived just as he did. Where are we?

H: I will kill you both for disobeying me.

W2: Please! He was doing what he thought was right.

W: Spare her. I let her in.

BM: It is, it is, it is, the way!

H: Silence!

Pause

H: You are testing my patience. If you wish to stay you must do as I say, or all will be chaos.

W2: Why do we remember nothing?

H: If you wish to remember, you must choose to walk the path in the wild. There all will be revealed.

W2: Why do you stay here?

H: (dismissively) I... I have had glimpses. They are too painful. I wish not to know.

W2: It's true – this not knowing is freeing. I feel I can be anyone here.

W: Do you wish to be someone else?

W2: Why not? To have a second chance – what a thrill! Think of all I could get right.

W: You sound like a perfectionist.

H: It is perfect not to know. There is balance and peace in unknowing.

BM: But you will never know yourself.

H: I know enough to be content.

BM: How will you atone?!

H: Silence!

BM: How will you atone?!

H: I will not atone! And be punished. And live in your torment. (to the wanderers) This man has been ruined. As for you, you will go.

W and W2: But the wild is deadly! The storm is deadly! Here we are safe.

H: No, here I am safe, because I seek nothing. It is clear you seek knowing and remembrance. You may stay the night, but then you must leave to the wild, to walk the path where you will find yourselves again. All else is temptation.

END SCENE

SCENE 3

As the Hunter sleeps, the Wanderers discuss their situation by the fire.

W2: Are you sleeping?

W: I think I am.

W2: So we're not dreaming.

W: We would have awakened by now.

W2: We would have awakened?

W: We would have awakened.

W2: So we're here, with ourselves, as nothing.

W: Nothing.

W2: We need a plan.

W: Yes, we must pray we can live in the wild.

W2: No, the storm is so dangerous. We'll die. We must find a way to stay here.

W: The Hunter says we must go.

W2: Let's explore while the hunter sleeps.

W: We must have faith that he's right.

W2: Let's explore beyond. You saw the passageway he took.

W: He may be waiting there to kill us if we disobey!

W2: The Hunter is hiding something. How does he survive here?

W: We musn't ask such questions.

W2: Listen! Listen! He is sleeping so loudly! He'll never hear us.

W: SHHHH! Are you mad? Tomorrow we can help each other in the wild.

W2: Why should we leave all this behind?! Why should the hunter live in safety while we suffer? Ah! What have I done? How could this be my fate? Be honest. Aren't you afraid of who you are? Or that some tragedy befell you? I have a feeling I have always been searching for myself. Why continue now? If here we can become someone new? It seems that all we have to do is start again. We can go back, through the storm, but it won't change that we're nothing. Nothing.

W: Nothing. It's true. Perhaps there is a reason we found this place, and each other. There must be a reason why.

W2: There must be a reason why!

W2: If we find nothing here, we can return while the Hunter still sleeps and walk the path.

The Bound Man lurches forward, still in chains.

K: Take me! Take me with you! Can't you see, I'm being tortured? Take me and I'll show you! Show you everything!

W2: Perhaps he will be useful.

W: If the Hunter sees he's gone, he will come after us.

K: I can show... I can show you! The way!

W2: See! He will help!

W: What if he's lying? The Hunter warned of temptation.

K: Freedom! Freedom!

W2: But if we leave him, he may tell the Hunter of our plans.

W: Then we must.

W2: How wrong can it be to free a tortured soul?

The Wanderers untie the Bound Man and help him up. They all exit.

END SCENE

SCENE 4

The Wanderers carry the Bound Man through the passageway, searching for escape.

W2: The passageway is endless.

W: The world is so strange.

W2: It feels like I am floating.

W: Or just swimming far from shore.

W2: With no land in sight.

W: Have we been shipwrecked?

W2: And slowly drowning?

W: After all this time of trying to make my life right, I see that I must have been all wrong. Look at us, only we two. All my wanting to be lost. Lost in the masses, and here we are, solitary. The illusion of what my life was! Those who judged us then must surely be laughing now, at us, diminutive creatures, in this wasteland. What is it that we are searching for? Freedom? Perfection? Greatness? We are so far away from all that now. Even peace, all I ever really wanted, seems so far away.

K: Do not despair, my friend. Do not despair. I won't forsake you. I feel we are close. Keep searching... Is it there?

W: What?

K Is it... is it... there?

W: What?

K: Water?

W2: Water?

W: Yes, look. A fountain!

K: Ah! The fountain!

W: You knew it would be here?

K: I had a glimpse!

W2: Let him drink!

The Wanderers set the Bound Man by the water and he drinks

K: (continuing the slurp water) Oh, Thank you! You have no idea what you've done!

W2: Are you healed?

K: Very much so. The water is so healing. And it restores your memory!

W2: My god!

W: A miracle!

W2: How can it be?

K: It's true. (continues to drink). I remember! I remember!

W2: What?

BM: Ah! It's coming back... I have passed here many times.... Wait... wait... returning... over and over... Souls. People. Destined to.... Dying and retuning, again and again. Each time... each time.... escaping... only to.... return. It is the Hunter... the Hunter who keeps me here.

W2: Why the Hunter?

K: Because I am ... I am ...King over all you see! He knows I have arrived to unlock the afterlife to all.

W: The afterlife?

K: Yes, we are in a purgatory and must be released.

W2: So we are dead! I knew it! How could all this be real?

K: Ah, but it is all too real, this purgatory you have found. The choices you make, and all that awaits you.

W2: Ah, the path, the wild?

K: Ha! The path? Not at all! That path will doom you. There is only one way to ascend from this place. To face your life, to remember each painful detail, and then... repent. Then you will be purified and may pass on. Go now, drink from the fountain and remember your life!

The first Wanderer drinks from the fountain.

K (To Athena) See, he gains strength, as he regains himself.

W: Ah! (he looks at the second Wanderer). It's you!

W2: Me?

W: Yes, yes. You! I remember. How we...

W2: What?

W: We were...

W2: What?

W: In love!

W2: Ah!

W: Yes! Love!

W2: I knew you seemed so familiar.

The Wanderers embrace, splashing water everywhere.

W: (drinking) Yes! Wait. Oh... ah... Yes.

W2: Yes?

W: I see. It seems maybe.

W2: What?

W: ... An accident?

W2: and...

W: Perhaps you ... killed me? Maybe I'm wrong?

W2: It can't be!

W: Drink and you'll remember.

W2: God no! Am I a murderer? Why should I remember such violence?

W: I can't see it all quite clearly yet.

K: Keep drinking!

W2: No! Stop! It must be a lie. Are these your memories? Is it poison, to make you think such things?

K: You must drink. Then we will know what you must atone for.

W2: Maybe there's a reason we forget here.

W: But our love?

W2: If we loved each other, that all ended when we died.

W: It could be now if you remember.

W2: How can you ask me -- it seems so terrifying.

K: Every life has need for redemption. How can you be forgiven for what you remember nothing of?

W2: But I wish not to know, like the Hunter.

K: The Hunter is evil. He keeps his freedom for himself and tortures those who would ask him to atone.

W2: He is just a lost soul. Why does he really bind you?

K: Because he is weak. He refuses to believe there is a great battle coming. How will we ready ourselves? A powerful one will rise with great might. By stealth and fraud he will seize the kingdom. Of the wise, some shall fall so that the rest may be tested, refined, purified, until the end time. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awaken. Some shall live in everlasting horror and disgrace. But the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament!

I believed you would release me. I had glimpses! I have been waiting. With your help, we may all atone, repent, and be purified. We must vanquish the Hunter and reclaim this world. He guards the doorway to ascension. He lets no one pass, turning them to the wild.

W2: (to D) How can all this be true?

K: You will both become more and more aware as you drink.

W: Thank you my King.

K: Let us all have faith. When we are rested, we will revisit the Hunter and take our freedom.

END SCENE

SCENE 5

The Second Wanderer is pacing. The King is asleep. The First Wanderer approaches the Second.

W: I have been drinking. I remember more our love.

W2: Tell me.

W: I can feel it, my whole life has returned, and our love was all of what made it worth anything.

W2: But then...

W: I don't quite know. You must remember it for yourself.

W2: Did I betray you?

W: I have remembered all I can.

W2: Perhaps all that the king has allowed you. Anyway, to remember being wronged is easy. Why would you have me remember such evil in myself? For what? So I may beg for my forgiveness? This is not the stuff of death. Death is quiet. There are no choices beyond it. This is all some kind of game.

W: It's no game to ask forgiveness?

W2: To whom? Why now? I owe you, and this man, nothing.

W: What do you owe yourself?

W2: That is not for you or anyone, especially in death. I exist as I am, that is enough. Whenever I come to my own, I can wait.

W: Then you will wait alone?

The Wanderers turn away from each other and begin to talk to themselves.

W2: What if what I've done cannot be redeemed? My forgiveness must be my own, granted to me by myself. Perhaps that is the path, perhaps that is the wild. It is there that I will become my own. No wonder it is so mysterious? No wonder no one chooses it dares. Perhaps I am a hunter as well. I will absolve myself there, or die again, and be at peace.

W: Perhaps she's right – it's over. But, how can I leave who I loved in life? Maybe it is the only way to find myself. The wild would be death again, for us both. It can be no mistake that I have come this far to be absolved. Love or redemption? Why must I choose? I'll never be at peace.

The King appears, newly rested, and interrupts both of the Wanderers

K: It is time. I have gathered my strength. Come you both! We will put an end to the Hunter's rule.

END SCENE

SCENE 6

The Hunter is alone at his table. The King bursts in with both Wanderers

K: My dear Hunter, we have returned!

H: Where have you been?

K: Your friends took me to the fountain.

H: (To A & D) What have you done?

K: They have only done what was prophesied. What you cannot prevent yourself.

H: Stay back! He's dangerous. What has he told you?

K: I have told them everything. That a great moment awaits. The fulfillment of all wonders is here. That they need only follow me to avoid damnation! Their presence is a sign!

W: You have chained him up, tortured him!

H: It is he who has tortured me. There is no prophesy. Only his wickedness. We came here long ago and have found no escape. To die here means only to return. We have glimpses of each time before, and it finally came to me that the path was the only true way... but it was too late.

This man saw only a world to conquer. He killed me, again and again and again and again and again and again and... I went mad. Finally I glimpsed enough. I knew I had to wrest this world from his evil. But the path is useless for me now - my memories, now shards of glass -- destroyed from his torture.

K: What a story! What lies! He covets all! The fountain, the doorway! And why? He is ashamed! Ashamed! Ashamed! Of himself! Of this world! Of all he spoils! Riddled with envy for us who will atone. Beware!

W2: What of the fountain? And the doorway?

H: If you drink, he will find what pains you and make you relive it as he promises your salvation. Then the doorway brings you back unaware. It's all just temptation.

K: He damns the magic of this world!

H: It's all just temptation.

W2: (to D) Ah! How can it be, we have come so far only to hear all these lies. Look at them, so angry and disturbed. Locked in some torturous way. They have never found safe passage, in all their time. How can we trust them? Redemption is an illusion.

W: I have awakened as well, to love and to death. But perhaps you're right. Our love was over when we died. It is I who must remember! I am destroyed to let you go again. But it was you who brought us here. It can be no mistake that we have come this far to be released. In the King's protection we may be absolved and ascend. It is only his foe who stands in our way.

K: It is he who must remember.

H: Beware his temptations!

W2: Redemption is an illusion.

W: It is only this foe who stands in our way.

The Wanderer approaches the Hunter, The second Wanderer steps away.

W: There can be no peace without justice for this man.

The Wanderer kills the Hunter and the second Wanderer runs off stage.

W: My love! Come back!

Pause

K: Very good my friend. Justice has won and the prophesy is coming true.

The Wanderer looks in shock and horror at what he's done.

W: What have I done?

K: You have fulfilled your purpose! You will be rewarded for your faith!

W: What have I done?

K: Look around you? This is a world of pain. It requires justice and repentance. You have redeemed yourself, and now you may ascend.

W: But what of her?

K: Your love was over when you died. But now, here you have a higher calling.

W: Yes, please now release me.... It would be torture to be alone with only these memories.

K: You need not suffer any longer. And you will be rewarded for the favors you have done for me and the Hunter. Through the doorway, you will find redemption.

W: At last, I will be at peace. But how will the others know?

K: I will guide them to their destiny.

W: Thank you, my king.

The Wanderer passes through the door.

K: (to himself) Even as we pass on, we are unaware of it, for now we are blind.

As the Wanderer disappears through the door. As the musical coda continues, lights flash, each time revealing the King in various relaxed circumstances, alone in the space. Finally, the King walks off. As the lights flicker a final time, we see the first Wanderer has appeared where the King once was, chained. The Hunter enters. The Hunter and the Wanderer exchange looks.

END
