

MISSY MAZZOLI & ROYCE VAVREK

BREAKING WAVES THE WAVES

LAUREN SNOUFFER
RYAN MCKINNY

Houston Grand Opera
Patrick Summers,
Conductor



Houston
Grand
Opera

*Lauren Snouffer as Bess McNeill
and Ryan McKinny as Jan Nyman,
with Michael Mayes as Councilman
(back) and the Houston Grand
Opera Chorus, in HGO's 2025
production of Missy Mazzoli and
Royce Vavrek's Breaking the Waves.*



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Ryan McKinny as Jan Nyman and Lauren Snouffer as Bess McNeill.



BREAKING THE WAVES

Music by Missy Mazzoli

Libretto by Royce Vavrek

Based on the film by Lars von Trier

Patrick Summers, Conductor

Bess McNeill

Jan Nyman

Mother

Dodo McNeill

Dr. Richardson

Councilman

Terry

Sadistic Sailor

Young Sailor

Tenor Solo

Lauren Snouffer

Ryan McKinny

Michelle Bradley

Maire Therese Carmack

David Portillo

Michael Mayes

Sam Dhobhany

Johnny Salvesen

Andrew Surrena

Jon Janacek

Houston Grand Opera Orchestra

Houston Grand Opera Chorus

Houston Grand Opera thanks the supporters who made this recording possible: Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Inc., Juan Moreno, Kristine Vikmanis and Denny Creighton, Alexander Sanger, and David Gindler.

Michelle Bradley as Mother with the HGO Men's Chorus.



CREATIVE TEAM

Tom Morris, Original Director

Sara Brodie, Revival Director
and Movement Director

Soutra Gilmour, Scenic and
Costume Designer

Richard Howell, Lighting Designer

Will Duke, Projection Designer

Jon Nicholls, Sound Designer

David Butler, Video Programmer
and System Designer

John A. Costa, Associate Video
Programmer and System Designer

Samantha Kaufman,
Intimacy Director

Adam Noble, Fight Director

Richard Bado, Chorus Director

Kathryn LaBouff, Diction Coach

Jenny Choo, Musical Preparation

Kyle Naig, Musical Preparation

Teddy Poll, Musical Preparation

William Woodard,
Musical Preparation

Annie Wheeler, Stage Manager

Colter Schoenfish, Assistant Director

BREAKING THE WAVES

CD 1

ACT ONE

1	Prologue, His Name is Jan	5:52
2	Prologue, We Do Not Favor Matrimony With Outsiders	1:42
3	Scene 1, Wedding	5:38
4	Scene 2, Ring the Bells	0:46
5	Scene 2, Golden Heart	3:01
6	Scene 2, We Two People are Joined in God	3:21
7	Scene 3, The Gift of Jan	2:38
8	Scene 3, Your Body is a Map	3:19
9	Scene 4, I Wish that the Church Had Bells	2:50
10	Scene 4, We Endure	2:00
11	Scene 4, I Thank You for Your Love	4:34
12	Scene 5, Prayer of a Selfish Girl	1:56
13	Interlude, Drill Deep, Men	2:15
14	Scene 6, Phone Booth	3:28
15	Scene 6, Prayer for Jan to Come Home	1:33
16	Scene 7, Accident	3:43
17	Scene 7, What is it Now, Bess?	2:00

BREAKING THE WAVES

CD 2

ACT TWO

1	Scene 1, Your Husband Has Suffered Serious Injuries	3:49
2	Scene 1, Goodness, What Powers You Possess	3:24
3	Scene 2, Love of My Life	5:45
4	Interlude, Wives, Submit Yourselves Unto Your Own Husbands	2:35
5	Scene 3, Jan, What Have You Done?	3:25
6	Scene 3, Love Will Keep Me Alive	3:52
7	Scene 3, I'm Tired of Waiting	1:31
8	Scene 4, I Brought Supplies	2:27
9	Scene 4, I am Lying on My Back	2:04
10	Scene 5, Dr. Richardson, I've Come to Dance	4:37
11	Scene 5, We Breathe, We Drip, We Bleed	2:15

ACT THREE

12	Scene 1, My Body is a Map	2:20
13	Scene 1, Feeble Girl	3:13
14	Scene 1, I Saved Jan When His Heart Stopped	0:59
15	Scene 1, There's Fluid in Jan's Head	3:43
16	Scene 2, Red Boat	3:17
17	Scene 3, Be Gone from the House of God	4:13
18	Scene 3, Who's a Tart?	0:49
19	Scene 3, Let This Be Over Now	2:18
20	Scene 3, Prayer to a Sleeping God	2:25
21	Scene 4, Complete the Task	2:41
22	Scene 4, My Poor Darling	4:21
23	Scene 5, Doctor's Report	1:32
24	Scene 5, You Deserve Your Place in Hell	1:39
25	Epilogue, I've Stolen You Back	6:28

Total run time: 126:18



The Alice and George Brown Theater at Houston's Wortham Theater Center.

HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

Khori Dastoor, General Director and CEO

Margaret Alkek Williams Chair

Patrick Summers, Artistic and Music Director

Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is one of the largest, most innovative, and most highly acclaimed opera companies in the United States. General Director and CEO Khori Dastoor assumed leadership of the organization and responsibility for its strategic vision in 2021. HGO was the only American finalist for Opera Company of the Year in the 2025 International Opera Awards, and the only American company to be nominated three times. In fulfilling its mission to advance the operatic art, to serve the Houston community, and to be a global leader in the future of opera, HGO has led the field in commissioning and producing new works (76 world premieres to date) and in training and nurturing promising young artists and administrators. In 2025, the company launched the Houston Grand Opera record label, enabling it to share American operatic works with a broad international audience. The label's first release, which captured the 2023 world premiere of company-commissioned opera *Intelligence*, won the 2026 Grammy Award for Best Opera Recording. HGO contributes to the cultural enrichment of Houston and the nation through a diverse and innovative program of performances, community events, and education projects that reaches the widest possible public. The company's pioneering community and educational initiatives have set a standard in the field. HGO invites all Houstonians to experience superlative opera without the barrier of price through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.

HGO has toured extensively and has won a Tony Award, three Grammy Awards, and three Emmy Awards. It is the only opera company to win all three honors.

Lauren Snouffer as Bess McNeill, David Portillo as Dr. Richardson, Ryan McKinny as Jan Nyman, and Maire Therese Carmack as Dodo McNeill.



HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ORCHESTRA

Patrick Summers,

Artistic and Music Director

VIOLIN

Denise Tarrant*, Concertmaster

Chloe Kim*, Assistant Concertmaster

Natalie Gaynor*, Principal Second Violin

Chavdar Parashkevov*, Acting Assistant

Principal Second Violin

Miriam Belyatsky*

Rasa Kalesnykaite*

Hae-a Lee Barnes*

Anabel Ramirez*

Mary Reed*

Erica Robinson*

Linda Sanders*

Oleg Sulyga*

Sylvia VerMeulen*

Melissa Williams*

Rachel Shepard

VIOLA

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Lorento Golofeev*, Assistant Principal

Gayle Garcia-Shepard*

Elizabeth Golofeev*

Erika C. Lawson*

Matthew Weathers*

CELLO

Barrett Sills*, Principal

Erika Johnson*, Assistant Principal

Wendy Smith-Butler*

Chennie Sung*

Shino Hayashi

DOUBLE BASS

Dennis Whittaker*, Principal

Erik Gronfor*, Assistant Principal

Carla Clark*

FLUTE/PICCOLO

Henry Williford*, Principal

OBOE

Elizabeth Priestly Gehrke*, Principal

CLARINET

Eric Chi*, Acting Principal

BASSOON/CONTRABASSOON

Amanda Swain*, Principal

FRENCH HORN

Sarah Cranston*, Principal

Spencer Park*

TROMBONE

Thomas Hultén*, Principal

PERCUSSION

Christina Carroll, Acting Principal

MELODICA

Spencer Park*

HARP

Caitlin Mehrstens*, Principal

PIANO/SYNTHESIZER

William Woodard

ELECTRIC GUITAR

Mark Moore

** HGO Orchestra core musician*



HOUSTON GRAND OPERA CHORUS

Richard Bado,

Chorus Director

Nathan Abbott

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Christopher Childress

Scott Clark

Patrick Contreras

Dallas Gray

Jon Janacek

Wesley Landry

Alejandro Magallón

Norman Mathews

Lance Orta

Patrick Perez

Saïd Henry Pressley

Nicholas Rathgeb

Roberto J. Reyna

Matthew Reynolds

Francis Rivera

Johnny Salvesen

Kellen Schrimper

Andrew Surrena

*Lauren Snouffer as Bess McNeill
with Michael Mayes as Councilman
(back) and the HGO Chorus.*



MISSY MAZZOLI

COMPOSER

The music of Brooklyn-based composer Missy Mazzoli has been performed by the Berlin Philharmonic, Atlanta Symphony, LA Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, Scottish Opera, Opéra Comique, LA Opera, the Kronos Quartet, eighth blackbird, and many others. She was recently described as “one of the more inventive and surprising composers now working in New York” (*New York Times*), and “a once-in-a-generation magician of the orchestra” (*The New Yorker*), has been nominated for three Grammy® Awards, most recently for her orchestral album *Dark with Excessive Bright*, and has served as Composer-in-Residence at the Chicago Symphony and Opera Philadelphia. In 2018 she became, along with Jeanine Tesori, one of the first two women to receive a commission from the Metropolitan Opera. In 2016, Mazzoli and composer Ellen Reid founded Luna Composition



Lab, a nonprofit mentorship program for young female and nonbinary composers. Mazzoli teaches composition at Bard College, and her works are published by G. Schirmer.

missymazzoli.com

ROYCE VAVREK

LIBRETTIST

Royce Vavrek is a librettist and lyricist whose opera *Angel's Bone* with composer Du Yun was awarded the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Music. He made his Houston Grand Opera debut in 2015 with HGO's world premiere of *O Columbia* (composer Gregory Spears), followed by the HGO world premiere of *The House Without a Christmas Tree* in 2017 (composer Ricky Ian Gordon). He is known for his diverse collaborations with composers Missy Mazzoli (*Song from the Uproar*, *Proving Up*, *The Listeners*); Mikael Karlsson (*Melancholia*, *Fanny & Alexander*); David T. Little (*Dog Days*, *Am I Born*, *JFK*); Ricky Ian Gordon (*27*); Joshua Schmidt (*Midwestern Gothic*); Paola Prestini (*The Hubble Cantata*, *Silent Light*); Mary Kouyoumdjian (*Adoration*); and Luna Pearl Woolf (*Jacqueline*). Upcoming projects with Mazzoli include two grand operas: *The Galloping Cure*, an original work developed with Karen Russell and Tom Morris



about the opioid epidemic, commissioned by Opera Ventures, as well as an adaptation of George Saunders's Booker Prize-winning novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* for the Metropolitan Opera. Vavrek is Artistic Director of Toronto's experimental opera company Against the Grain. He is an alumnus of Concordia University (Montreal), NYU's Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program, and American Lyric Theater's Composer/Librettist Development Program.

PATRICK SUMMERS

CONDUCTOR

Patrick Summers has been a central figure at Houston Grand Opera for almost three decades, conducting a vast range of repertoire during his tenure. First appointed in 1998 as Music Director, he was named Artistic and Music Director in 2011, and Music Director Emeritus, and holder of the Robert and Jane Cizik Music Director Emeritus Chair, in 2026. Engagements during the 2026-27 season include conducting Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* for Canadian Opera Company and Kern's *Show Boat* at HGO. Notable HGO productions conducted by Summers that were recorded and released as albums include Daniel Catán's *Florencia en el Amazonas*, Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*, and Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*. Mark Adamo's *Little Women*, conducted by Summers, was recorded for PBS's *Great Performances*. Summers has enjoyed a long association with San Francisco Opera and was



awarded the San Francisco Opera Medal in 2015. He has appeared with the Metropolitan Opera, Bregenz Festival, Gran Teatre del Liceu, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Opera Australia, LA Philharmonic, and San Francisco Symphony. He is Co-Director of the Aspen Opera Theater and Vocal Arts program with Renée Fleming, and a Distinguished Lecturer in Opera Studies at the Shepherd School at Rice University. He received HGO's Silver Rose award in 2026. Among his published books are *Tapestries* (2026), a collection of essays on the operatic art.



WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF BESS?

Missy Mazzoli

2026 marks the tenth anniversary of the premiere of *Breaking the Waves*. Since writing the work, I have been asked countless times some version of the question: What are we to make of Bess?

In my opera, Bess McNeill is neither heroine nor victim. She is a woman trapped in a tragic situation who makes brave and extreme choices in pursuit of spiritual perfection and true love. Bess's repressive Calvinist community controls nearly every aspect of her external life, but her spiritual and moral world, and her choices, are her own. When Lars von Trier wrote the original script to *Breaking the Waves*, he set out to create a story about goodness; Bess's faith and character remain consistently "good," while those around her raise their voices and their fists in an attempt to write her story for her. Even God

manifests, in Bess's earnest ventriloquism, as a stern, deep-voiced, omniscient version of the local minister. We may not share Bess's commitment to following this masculine God to the letter, or her willingness to risk her life for her husband. We may simply wish she had different choices to make or was born into a different era. But can we understand her as a remarkable product of a brutal and limited environment? Can we see ourselves in her? And at the end of the opera, do we still see her as "good"?

I do, and I chose to tell the story of *Breaking the Waves* because I feel it communicates an essential truth about my experience and that of many women I know. The patriarchal world of *Breaking the Waves* is extreme in this sense (women cannot talk in church, must get

permission to marry, etc.), but it is not wholly unfamiliar to anyone alive in 2026. For the majority of women, agency and goodness are intertwined in a complex tango with sacrifice and compromise. Everyone in Bess's world has their own opinion about her behavior (the men in the church, her husband, her mother, the doctor, her sister-in-law, God), leaving Bess unable to satisfy all of them. Bess cannot obey God while obeying her mother, cannot obey the men of the church while obeying her husband. Even the doctor tells her to "go dancing" and then yells at her to "go home" when she comes to his house to dance. This feeling of constant "wrongness" is very familiar to me, and the feeling of twisting into knots to meet the nearly impossible expectations of others is very much part of my experience growing up in a female body.

While I aim to create fully formed, multi-faceted, surprising female characters who are

not made one-dimensional by the oppressive forces around them, it feels disingenuous to offer them complete agency in a way that does not reference the complex position of women in modern society. The wedding vows—"wives, submit yourselves unto your own husband, as unto the Lord"—are not in the original film; my librettist Royce Vavrek and I found that text in a Calvinist hymnal that is still used today for marriage ceremonies. I live in a country where the right to bodily autonomy has been legally stripped from women, maternal death rates are rising, and even women's right to vote has recently been called into question. As an environment becomes more brutal, news cycle by news cycle, choices become more limited and behavior more extreme.

Many of my female composer peers in America's new opera scene are similarly occupied with the extreme lengths to which women must

Lauren Snouffer as Bess McNeill.



go to make their voices heard in patriarchal societies. I'm thinking of Bibi and Lumee, protagonists in Ellen Reid's *prism*, Mrs. X.E. in Du Yun's *Angel's Bone*, Mary in Emma O'Halloran's *Mary Motorhead*. Why are female creators drawn to these extreme and sometimes unlikeable female characters? These characters, like Bess, represent something vital about the experience of being a woman in the 21st century. Sometimes it's a fantasy, sometimes a catharsis, sometimes an exaggeration that shines a light on a world of extreme choices and difficult decisions, and sometimes a world of feral outbursts, imagined power, and violent fantasies that, for the vast majority of women, can only be safely realized in fiction. Sometimes it's simply a way to start a conversation.

When the aria "Map of Jan's Body" is reprised in the first scene of Act III, and Bess changes the lyrics to "My body is a map," I can't help

but hear it as a sort of manifesto; in the end, Bess is left with only herself to follow—she has been stripped of everything but her body, her inherent goodness, and her ideals, to which she remains true. Neither heroine nor victim, Bess stands before us as her remarkable self—resolute, steadfast in her belief, willing to bear any scar and sacrifice along the way. ■

ADAPTING FILM FOR THE OPERA STAGE

Royce Vavrek

I first saw Lars von Trier's film *Breaking the Waves* nearly 20 years ago, long before any notion that a career as a librettist awaited me. It came into my life at a crucial time; I was just 14 years old, living on a farm in northern Alberta, Canada, and grappling with my own perspective on spirituality and sexuality. It was also around that time that I began to align myself with the narrative sensibilities of storytellers who seemed to have direct access to my heart and imagination. Provocative world cinema quickly became my literature of choice, its influence felt from my earliest dramatic work. To this day, one can see the impact of a mind nurtured by the films of masters like Catherine Breillat, Pedro Almodóvar, Wong Kar-Wai, and my fellow countryman Atom Egoyan. Finding von Trier was like finding a creative comrade, an artistic hero who told stories the way I wanted to

hear them, and in the way I wanted to tell them. He made me want to be a filmmaker. Years later, I found opera... or opera found me.

In 2013, the composer Missy Mazzoli and I, fresh off *Song from the Uproar*, our first collaboration, brainstormed a number of ideas before arriving at the basis of our second endeavor. I proposed that my favorite film would provide the perfect foundation for the marriage of our voices: *Breaking the Waves* featured a strong central female protagonist in Bess McNeill, a young woman caught between the sacred vows she exchanged with her husband Jan and the oppressive Calvinist community that often seemed at odds with their love. Opera is a canvas for big ideas, and this story had a scope and depth to the characters that felt pregnant with the possibility of song. It



Ryan McKinny and Lauren Snouffer as Jan and Bess.

was also liberating that the soundtrack for the film was essentially limited to tracks by the likes of Deep Purple, Leonard Cohen, and Python Lee Jackson, accompanying eight interstitial title cards featuring now-iconic filmed panoramas created with Danish artist Per Kirkeby. In fact, aside from Bach's "Siciliana" over the final credits, the film is devoid of classical music, giving Missy the opportunity to freely imagine a sonic world for the opera that would provide a new element of dramatic cohesion.

The first challenge in the adaptation was to re-imagine the seven-chapter (plus epilogue) structure of the film as a three-act piece of theater. A few minor characters were cut, and scenes and locations were consolidated. Many moments needed distillation to allow music the power to take the lead as the dramatic engine, while other moments were lyrically expanded, providing opportunity for aria. The opening, for

Ryan McKinny and Lauren Snouffer as Jan and Bess (with Maire Therese Carmack as Dodo).



example, features a solo moment for Bess, as opposed to a dialogue with the church elders in the film. Jan's final moment became an opportunity for vocal expression, replacing a nearly wordless final gesture in the film.

In constructing the libretto, I had access to the published shooting script of the film, which gave another glimpse into the filmmaker's intentions. A scene that was shot and deleted from the film (featuring Jan confessing feelings of guilt to his friend Terry) was reinstated in the libretto, only to be deleted once again when we found that it contradicted a sense of desired ambiguity. Interviews with von Trier revealed an important influence of his own, a Danish fairytale called *Golden Heart* that formed an archetypal template for *Breaking the Waves*, as well as two other films in an unofficial trilogy, *The Idiots* and *Dancer in the Dark*. Reflecting on von Trier's idea that the film sought to explore the nature of

goodness, it seemed fitting to include the idea of a golden heart in the libretto, and it became the basis for an aria that Bess's sister-in-law Dodo gives as a toast at her wedding.

A not-so-secret weapon in libretto writing is the contribution of the dramaturg. Whether an adaptation from film or the written word, or an entirely original narrative, the objective eye and the creative catalyst of the dramaturg's questions have been an invaluable part of my process. For *Breaking the Waves*, Mike Cohen, who had worked alongside me on the operas *27* (composed by Ricky Ian Gordon) and *JFK* (composed by David T. Little), was joined by Cori Ellison and the opera's first director James Darrah in making sure that we, the authors, were in control of our choices. Although the opera will forever be spiritually tethered to its source material, it is also its own animal, and needed to thrive on its own terms.

Perhaps the most exciting challenge was the translation of the close-up. The emotional information remains the same in both the film and opera, but the screen allows for a more internal approach to the delivery while the opera communicates in a grandly external way. Emily Watson, who portrayed Bess in the film, often dominates the full frame, her expressions

supplying great subtext; Kiera Duffy, Bess in the premiere at Opera Philadelphia, was asked to communicate to the final row of the house, a different task entirely and more the visual equivalent of an extreme long shot. Such is the power of the medium: the aria becomes the close-up, the music provides the subtext, and our hearts and imaginations are fully accessed. ■



*Left: Maire Therese Carmack as Dodo, Lauren Snouffer as Bess, and Michelle Bradley as Mother.
Right: Lauren Snouffer.*

SYNOPSIS

**Setting: Isle of Skye, Scotland,
mid-1970s**

ACT I

Bess, a young Scottish woman, addresses the Councilman and elders of her Calvinist congregation. She asks them permission to marry her sweetheart Jan, a Norwegian oil-rigger who is an outsider to their small village on Skye. Sometime later, Jan arrives by helicopter from the rig, and he and Bess are wed. Dodo, a nurse and the widow of Bess's departed brother, gives a speech at the reception praising her sister-in-law's golden heart. Bess leads Jan to the bathroom where they make love for the first time, a moment of sexual awakening for the virgin Bess. Alone, she thanks heaven for her husband, answering her own prayers in the gruff voice she imagines belonging to God.

The couple lies naked in bed after the wedding, and Bess traces an imaginary map of their life together on the contours of her new husband's body. Jan asks why there were no church bells to celebrate their wedding, and Bess explains that her strict congregation flung them into the sea long ago. When Jan reminds Bess that he will soon have to return to the rig, she breaks down. Bess's Mother reprimands her daughter, telling her that it's a woman's duty to endure. After his departure, Jan phones Bess from the rig, and the two share an intimate conversation. The call is cut short, and Bess begs God to bring her husband home sooner than the ten days until his next visit. Back on the rig, Jan suffers a brain injury while saving his friend Terry and is rushed by helicopter to a hospital on Skye.

ACT II

Dr. Richardson, an English physician, explains to Bess that Jan will be paralyzed for the rest of his life. Humiliated by his inability to satisfy his wife, Jan sets Bess with a task that will grant him the will to live. She is to have sex with other men, and when she describes these encounters to him afterward, it will be as if Jan and Bess are making love themselves. Hesitant to commit adultery, Bess consults with the voice of God, which commands her to prove her devotion. Following a humiliating attempt at seducing Dr. Richardson, Bess manages to pick up a man at a bar. Meanwhile, Jan's heart stops during surgery but restarts at the moment of Bess's liaison.

ACT III

Bess's Mother warns her daughter that she risks being cast out of the church for her increasing promiscuity, which neighbors have begun to notice. But Bess believes her acts of

love are healing Jan. Dodo and Dr. Richardson worry Bess is falling victim to the delusions of Jan's addled mind. Bess propositions a pair of sailors aboard a red boat, but she flees when their treatment turns violent. Seeking refuge at church, she interrupts the Councilman's sermon and is excommunicated by the elders. Rejected by her mother and abused by the villagers, Bess learns from Dodo that Jan is dying. In a last-ditch effort, Bess gives herself over to the sadistic sailors on the red boat, who brutally rape and mutilate her. Bess dies, and Jan immediately recovers. He and Terry bury her body at sea as the sound of unseen church bells miraculously peals over the waves.

LIBRETTO

ACT ONE

1 Prologue

(BESS, a young woman in her early 20s, stands in a pool of light, seemingly speaking directly to the audience. She is dressed in woolen clothes, a crocheted hat atop her head. Her eyes glow with excitement – she's in love...)

BESS

His name is Jan.
You do not know him.
He's from the rig.

His name is Jan.
Jan, Jan, Jan...
Funny name for a man.
An outsider has wormed
His way inside my heart.
Jan from the rig.

His name is Jan.
He wants to marry me.
Holy matrimony:
When two people are joined in God.
I want to be his wife:
Mrs. Jan from the rig.

And God will be witness
To our covenant.
The whole community
Will know our love.
Jan's love of me.
My love of Jan.
Jan is my shaggy-faced man,
my strange, beautiful music.

The whole community will know his name.
His name is Jan.
His name sounds like church bells,
Jan, Jan, Jan, Jan...
God has given me a man,
You do not know him,
A Norwegian man
Jan...
A man that I'm to love forever.
With your permission.

2 *(The light shifts suddenly, revealing twelve Calvinist councilmen hovering around BESS in a domineering fashion.)*

COUNCILMAN AND CHORUS

His name is Jan.
We do not know him.
He's from the rig.
Does he agree with the articles and conventions of
our church?
Jan from the rig.
We do not favor matrimony with outsiders.

BESS

But Dodo is an outsider.

COUNCILMAN AND CHORUS

Do you understand that you are responsible?
Responsible for your marriage under God?
Responsible for another's marriage under God?

BESS

I know I am.

COUNCILMAN AND CHORUS

Out you go, Bess McNeill,
Out of the church.

(BESS moves to exit, the COUNCILMAN pipes in.)

COUNCILMAN

One last question, Bess...
Can you think of anything of real value
The outsiders have brought?

BESS

Their beautiful music.

COUNCILMAN AND CHORUS

His name is Jan.

3 Scene 1

(BESS waits for JAN to arrive by helicopter. DODO sits with her. BESS crumples, cries.)

DODO

When you cry
You make a mess of your pretty face.

(DODO licks a handkerchief and uses it to wipe away the running mascara.)

He will come, Bess.
Jan will come.
It's all happening so fast.
You've only known him a wee while.

BESS

Are you not happy for me, Dodo?
(DODO hesitates.)

DODO

Of course I am!
(A helicopter is heard in the distance. BESS jumps up, hastily zipping her dress and applying makeup.)

BESS

The helicopter! He's here!

(JAN rushes on, a ruggedly handsome oil-rigger who wears a giant lamb shearling over his gray wedding suit.)

BESS

Late! Late! Late!

(BESS hits JAN with her bouquet. JAN restrains her, kisses her, cuts her off. TERRY comes on, also dressed for the wedding.)

BESS

I was worried you wouldn't come.

JAN *(smiling)*

I promised, and I'm here.

(Music from the church spills out. TERRY and DODO represent BESS and JAN at the altar.)

CHORUS

How brightly shines
The morning star.

(JAN tries to pull BESS towards the altar but she resists.)
Amen, amen!

JAN

What is it now, Bess?

BESS

When you fly off to sea,
Off to work,

CHORUS

With mercy beaming from afar.
Alleluia, alleluia!

(JAN gives perfunctory reassurance. He ushers her into the church just in time, without really listening to her.)

BESS

I'm afraid you might disappear forever.

COUNCILMAN

As we stand in thy presence today
In thy house,
We worship thee,

CHORUS

Alleluia!

COUNCILMAN

As the author of every good and perfect gift.

CHORUS

Alleluia!

COUNCILMAN

Repeat after me.

COUNCILMAN, JAN AND BESS

I do take thee,
In holy matrimony
And promise to be faithful
until it please God
that death do us part.

COUNCILMAN

Wives, submit yourselves
Unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.
For the husband is head of the wife,
Even as Christ is the head of the Church:
And He is the Savior of the body.

CHORUS

Praise be given evermore
By Earth and Heaven.

BESS

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

(JAN lifts BESS's veil and kisses her, they run out of the

church to rice being thrown.)

4 Scene 2

TERRY *(a little drunk, excited)*

Ring the bells!
Ring the bells!

COUNCILMAN

Our church has no bells.

TERRY

The fuck kind of church has no bells?

(The COUNCILMAN looks at TERRY sternly. The action moves to the reception hall. BESS, JAN, TERRY, Bess's MOTHER, and the COUNCILMAN sit at a banquet table. DODO stands to deliver her speech.)

DODO

Where I come from there's always a speech for the bride.

5 Dear Bess,

You have a golden heart.
I've known this to be true
Ever since I came to Skye to marry Sandy.
Your smile is warm,
And you made me feel welcome.

You have a golden heart.
Sometimes too golden, too good.
And who am I to warn you
Of living life too honest, too true?
Your goodness made me stay
After Sandy died:
I had no husband,
You had no brother.
But we had each other, Bess.

I cherish your laughter,
And your tears,

For your tears and my tears
So often become one ocean.

If Jan doesn't keep you warm,
And take care of you –
I will kill him.

(smiles)

Thank you, Bess, for your golden heart.
I love you very much.

(raising her glass)

To Bess.

CHORUS

To Bess.

(TERRY stands, obviously quite drunk.)

TERRY

I'm Terry.
Work with Jan.
He don't deserve such a pretty bride, that's for sure.
But what the hell.

(comically triumphant)

To Jan.

CHORUS

To Jan.

(BESS gets an idea.)

6 BESS

We two people are joined in God.
Mr. and Mrs. Jan from the rig.
Have me now.

(JAN looks at BESS, stunned. Then they suddenly get up from the table, BESS leading him to the upstairs bathroom, locking themselves inside alone.)

JAN

In the toilet?

BESS

Have me now.

JAN

I just thought...
Something more romantic...

BESS

This is lovely,
A palace!
The sheets are made of silk.
The pillows stuffed with down.
Have me now.

(BESS hikes up her dress, JAN reaches for her undergarments and pulls them down. JAN drops his pants and pushes BESS up against the wall. He enters her. We see the pain on her face, but also a smile.)

BESS

The whole community will know our love.

(A flood of emotions overcomes BESS as her sexuality is unlocked, squeaking ever so quietly as he pushes into her repeatedly. JAN finishes.)

BESS

I am so happy. Jan, Jan, Jan...

JAN

You are a silly little thing.

(This strikes a chord.)

BESS

I am not silly!

JAN

You are a funny little thing.

(BESS thinks for a moment and agrees with JAN.)

You've bloodied your dress.

(Downstairs, the congregation celebrates, the music bleeding through the floor and walls of the bathroom. JAN leaves.)

CHORUS

With the pure thou wilt shew thyself pure,
And with the froward thou wilt shew thyself froward.

(BESS looks in the mirror and washes the blood from her wedding dress. The guests leave.)

7 Scene 3

(BESS is in the church bathroom, alone.)

BESS

Dear God:
I thank you for the greatest gift,
The gift of Jan.

BESS AND CHORUS

"But remember to be a good girl, Bess,
For I giveth and I taketh away."

BESS

Oh yes, I'll be good.
I'll be really, really good.

(BESS stands up and sheds her dress. JAN comes into the light, naked as well, looking at BESS. BESS slowly walks to him. He leans down and kisses her, placing her hand on his chest. He guides her hands to his penis and she holds it. She smiles.)

BESS

Am I as good as the other girls?
The ones you've had?

JAN

Bess, I've forgotten them all.
You are fantastic.

Eve before the apple.

Pure goodness.

Believe me, you are good.

You are good.

8 BESS

Your body is a map
Of our life together.
Your body is a map.
Jan begins here.

(BESS takes JAN's hand, placing it palm up.)

Bess begins here.

(She takes his other hand, placing it palm up.)

We meet at your neck,
Resting on your chin.
That's where we fell in love.
That's when we were married.

Your body is a map,
Each hair, a mountain,
Each rib, a loch,
Each freckle, a window,
Looking out on tomorrow morning.

Your body is a map,
Your button marks the spot
Where the stone will read:
Bess and Jan
Died together on this day,
Having loved one another entirely...
And good.

BESS AND JAN

Your body is a map
Of our life together.
Where Jan begins,
Where Bess begins,

Is now settled.
Not even in death
Will their paths unwind.

JAN

How did you keep away from all the boys?

BESS

I waited for you.
Thank you.

9 Scene 4

BESS

I wish that the church had bells.
I'd ring them now.

JAN

Why doesn't the church have bells?

BESS *(almost spellbound)*

They took them down...
Long, long ago.
They cast them out into the sea.
I heard them once,
The most beautiful music.
We can put them back.

JAN *(breaking the spell)*

I must go back to the rig.

BESS

You must quit the rig and stay with me.

JAN

I must go back.

BESS *(starting to get desperate)*

Stay with me, we're so happy.

JAN

You knew all along.

BESS

Quit the rig, we're happy.
Quit the rig, quit the rig and stay.
Quit the rig, we're so happy.

JAN

I must go back, Bess.

BESS

Mr. and Mrs. Jan...

JAN

You knew all along.

(BESS gets up from the bed and puts on her dress quickly, running downstairs. The house wakes up, MOTHER and DODO coming out of their rooms as BESS sits, nearly hyperventilating.)

BESS

Stay with me, quit the rig.
Mr. and Mrs. Jan...

(Cut off by MOTHER.)

MOTHER

What has you braying like a donkey, Bess?

BESS

We're happy.
Jan must quit the rig, we're happy.
Mr. and Mrs....

MOTHER

Stop it, girl!
Do you want me to put you in a hospital again?
Is that what you want?

(DODO goes upstairs to where JAN is getting dressed. She pauses at the door.)

DODO *(to JAN)*

She's not right in the head.

She doesn't have the strength.

JAN

She is stronger than you or me.

(Mocking DODO a little.)

She just wants it all.

(Focus back to BESS and MOTHER.)

10 MOTHER

I won't have this kind of behavior.

Not in this house.

Not in my house.

Control your moods, girl,

Or it's the hospital for you again...

Every woman endures being alone.

Every woman endures. Women endure.

Sons who die at sea,

Husbands on the rig.

Why should you be any different?

Every woman endures.

Control your moods girl.

"Bidh cas an eòin ghòraich 's an ribe."

[Gaelic: The silly bird's foot will go into the snare.]

Sons who die at sea,

Husbands on the rig,

We endure.

(MOTHER walks off as we hear the sound of a helicopter.

BESS, dressed in a wool coat and hat, and JAN in his shearling stand saying their goodbyes before he flies off.)

11 BESS

I thank you for your love.

I thank you for your prick.

JAN

Say it again.

BESS

Prick.

JAN

Never use another word.

(TERRY runs on.)

TERRY

Time's up, lover man.

BESS *(to JAN)*

Don't go.

TERRY

Don't make him late, Bess.

Pilot gets angry...

BESS

I thank you for your love. I thank you.

JAN

You'll wave at the helicopter.

BESS

Yes.

JAN

I'll watch,

Even from a mile in the sky.

BESS

Thank you.

JAN

My Bess. I'll phone every week.

BESS

Thank you for your love.

JAN

My Bess!

(JAN leaves. DODO steps in to hold BESS. BESS seems to be holding up.)

DODO

Only four weeks, Bess.
A short month.

(BESS cannot control her immediate heartache and begins to wail.)

BESS

Jan!

(DODO restrains BESS.)

DODO

It's all right, sweetheart. It's all right.

(DODO opens a jar of pills and hands one to BESS.)

Swallow your pill, you'll be just fine.

BESS *(settling down)*

I hate the rig.

(In the distance, the Calvinist men carry a coffin.)

DODO

Today they bury Antony.

BESS

If only Jan had stayed
To join the train.
To listen to the minister.

DODO

Jan didn't even know Antony.

BESS

Jan could join the train,
And we'd watch from the hill.

(DODO kisses BESS's forehead)

COUNCILMAN

Antony Dod Mantle.

CHORUS

Sinner, Antony.

COUNCILMAN

You are a sinner, Antony.

BESS AND CHORUS

Sinner, Antony.

BESS, COUNCILMAN AND CHORUS

You deserve your place in hell.

12 Scene 5

(BESS and DODO bike to a phone booth. DODO waits outside.)

BESS

Dear God...

BESS AND CHORUS

"What is it now, Bess?"

BESS

I am so miserable.
I love him so badly.

BESS AND CHORUS

"Your behavior is terribly selfish."

BESS

I promise to be a good girl.

13 Interlude

(JAN, TERRY, and the other men on the oil rig shower after a long day. They smoke a joint and run around naked, snapping each other with their wet towels.)

CHORUS

Drill deep, men.
We breathe oil.
We dream oil.
We drip oil.
We shit oil.
We bleed oil.

Drill deep, men,
Suck up the crude,
Pull out the crude,
Force it from the rock.

14 Scene 6

(The phone booth. BESS prays to God. Simultaneously, we see JAN on the rig, bribing a friend with cigarettes so he can use the phone.)

BESS

Teach me to endure,
Oh God!

(DODO knocks on the phone booth door.)

DODO

Don't you think you've waited long enough?
My shift starts in half an hour.

(The phone rings, BESS quickly picks up the receiver. JAN is seen in a towel, his hair still wet from the shower.)

BESS

Hello? Hello?

JAN

I'm sorry I'm late to call.

BESS

That's okay.

JAN

Can you hear me, Bess?

BESS

Yes.

JAN

You don't love me anymore, Bess?

BESS

I do!

If you knew how much I loved you
You might get mad.

JAN

Never be afraid to tell me you love me.
I hear you breathing.
Do you hear me breathing?

(JAN breathes heavily in and out. BESS lights up.)

BESS

I hear you, I hear you breathing.

JAN

We don't have to say anything.

(BESS pops her head out of the phone booth.)

BESS

Jan and I would like some privacy...please!

DODO

Don't be chatting all night.

(BESS closes the phone booth door as DODO rides her bicycle off.)

JAN

Tell me what you're thinking.

BESS

That you are here.

JAN

In the phone booth with you?

BESS

That's where I am.

JAN

I know where you are.
Are you wearing the clothes I bought you?

BESS *(opening her long wool coat to reveal red hotpants)*

*Maire Therese Carmack as Dodo and
Lauren Snouffer as Bess.*



and a tight blouse)
I am, I had to sneak by mother.

JAN

Good girl.
Do you feel me touching you
Between your legs?

BESS

Yes! You're all...You're all wet.

JAN

I'm a very hard worker.

BESS

Jan, you're so strong.
I'm touching your arms,
Touching your chest,
Your tummy,
Your...your prick.

JAN

I will be coming home in ten days.

BESS

Jan...

JAN

Hello?

(They lose the connection. JAN realizes this right away and hangs up. BESS stays on the line, unaware that JAN is no longer there.)

BESS

You're so strong, I hear you breathing.
I hear you, I hear you breathing, I hear you, I...
Hello?

15 CHORUS

What is it now, Bess?

BESS AND CHORUS

"Many years you've prayed for love.
Now you want me to take it back?"

BESS

I am grateful for love.
I pray for Jan to come home.

BESS AND CHORUS

"He will be coming home in ten days.
You must learn to endure."

BESS

I must learn to endure.
No.
I can't wait. I can't.
I pray for Jan to come home.

CHORUS

You must learn to endure, you must learn.

BESS AND CHORUS

"Are you sure that's what you want, Bess?"

BESS

Yes.

16 Scene 7

(Lights come up on oil rig. JAN and TERRY, covered with oil and mud, try to guide a giant drill bit into a hole. TERRY gets knocked over, JAN grabs him and pulls his body up to safety. TERRY laughs. The drill bit falls down and hits JAN on the head, knocking him unconscious.)

TERRY

Jan!

(At Bess's MOTHER's house, the COUNCILMAN knocks on the door.)

COUNCILMAN

It's Jan.

There's been an accident on the rig.

(The sound of a helicopter as JAN is delivered to the hospital on a stretcher. BESS, DODO, and DR. RICHARDSON, a handsome English doctor, run to him.)

BESS

Jan!
Can you hear me?

JAN

What are you doing?

BESS

I'm holding your hand.

JAN

Don't. Don't touch me.
Do as you're told!

(JAN is violently strapped into his hospital bed.)

17 *(Focus returns to BESS.)*

CHORUS

Bess, what is it now? What is it?

BESS

Dear God, it's me...
Are you still there?
"Of course I am, Bess...you know that."
What is happening, father?

BESS AND CHORUS

"You wanted Jan home..."

BESS

I've changed my mind!
I will learn to endure...

BESS AND CHORUS

"You are a stupid, stupid girl, Bess."

BESS

"Your love for Jan has been tested."

(to God)

Tell me, what is happening?

(BESS sees DR. RICHARDSON in the back of the chapel. To DR. RICHARDSON, eagerly.)

What is happening?

ACT TWO

1 Scene 1

(DR. RICHARDSON, a handsome young English doctor, speaks to BESS.)

DR. RICHARDSON

Your husband has suffered serious injuries.
The lesions in his brain are extensive.

BESS

Will he live?

DR. RICHARDSON

We've stabilized his condition for now.

BESS

So he'll live!

DR. RICHARDSON

Should life always be preserved at any cost?

BESS

Doctor Richardson, you don't know Jan.

DR. RICHARDSON

Sometimes it's better to die.

BESS

You should not say such things.

DR. RICHARDSON

He will never walk again.

BESS

But he'll live.

DR. RICHARDSON

Jan may be completely, completely paralyzed.

(An uncomfortable silence. DR. RICHARDSON waits for a reaction.)

But he'll live,
It seems,
He'll live.

(BESS smiles broadly, she is overjoyed.)

Dodo has this idea I should treat you.
You've been hospitalized before, have you Bess?

(BESS nods.)

You were upset when your brother died,

(BESS nods.)

And now you're upset for your husband.

(BESS nods.)

Nothing wrong with that.

BESS

I take my pills every day.

DR. RICHARDSON

I'm not like your old doctor, Bess.
Sadness is not a disease.
A heavy heart is a full heart.

BESS

The more I love him,
The more I hurt him.

(BESS begins to cry.)

I just want to be with the man I love.

Is that a crime?

What happened on the rig was my fault.

I prayed to God to send Jan home.

It was my fault!

(DR. RICHARDSON realizes BESS is getting out of control. He tries to calm her down.)

DR. RICHARDSON

Goodness!

2 Goodness! What powers you possess!
What a deal you've struck with God.
Is he rewarding Bess for cleaning the church?
Is Bess his wee pet?

You pray with all your might:
Folded hands clenched so piously.
What powers you possess!
You pray to send Jan home,
And God obliges,
By smiting him with a drill.
Is that what you think, Bess,
God is playing a game?
Twisting the intention of your prayer
To teach a lesson?

I know you people believe in listening to God,
But God wouldn't punish you
For missing Jan.
God wouldn't punish Jan
For your devotion.
I need to know you understand this, Bess.

(BESS does not respond.)

Have fun! Go dancing.
Dodo says you love to dance.
And do a little grieving for yourself.
It's a lot to endure alone.

Goodness, what powers you possess.
What goodness, what goodness you possess.

3 Scene 2

(BESS hesitantly walks to JAN, sleeping in his hospital bed. SHE leans into his face.)

BESS *(creating a voice for JAN, lost in fantasy)*

"Bess, you are the love of my life."

(in her own voice)

Jan, I want to help you so dreadfully.

(in JAN's voice)

"You help me by being strong, Bess."

(BESS can't keep up the fantasy anymore, she cries. In her own voice, desperate.)

You are the love of my life, Jan.

(BESS kisses JAN, he wakes up.)

JAN

Bess –

BESS

Yes?

JAN

Bess –

I want you to wear a loose blouse

When you come here.

A loose blouse and a long dress.

Do you think we turn bad

When we are standing on the edge?

When we are going to die?

This fucking prison –

They'll kill you if you divorce me.

BESS

We are joined in God.

JAN

Bess, listen.

The world is full

Of men...

Who can move their arms,

Move their legs.

I am a living dead.

BESS

We are joined in –

JAN

Please, let me finish.

I want you to find a man.

Someone to make love to,

Without anyone finding out.

I won't suffocate you, Bess.

Find someone to make love to.

BESS

Is that what you think I want?

Do you think so little of me?

You are a stupid, stupid man.

We two people are joined...

Stupid, stupid man.

You...you cripple!

(BESS slams the door on JAN. DR. RICHARDSON sees this.)

4 Interlude

(Work resumes on the rig. Men guide drills and walk on the floating derrick. BESS walks to church to meet with the COUNCILMAN.)

CHORUS *(men from the church swirl around BESS)*

Wives, submit yourselves

Unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.

For the husband is the head of the wife,

Even as Christ is the head of the Church.

And He is the savior of the body.

COUNCILMAN

You must make up with Jan.
Husband and wife must talk.
Ask him to forgive your anger.
You have the strength that your life in God has given.
That is a strength that Jan does not possess.

(The COUNCILMAN turns to leave, but turns to speak to BESS over his shoulder.)

You are a married woman.
You have responsibilities.

5 Scene 3

(JAN alone in his bed. He tries to reach for a bottle of pills. The bottle falls to the floor. JAN hangs off the bed. DODO hears the commotion and rushes in.)

DODO

Jan!
What have you done?

JAN

Set her free. Dodo, set her free.

DODO

Shut up, Jan. Shut up, shut up!
Do you really think I'll help you die?
You're mental! Mental!
Think about Bess.
She'd do anything,
If it meant a smile from you.
You know that.
She doesn't care a bit about herself.
Happiest I've ever seen
When you made her your wife.

Convince her to get on with life,
But hers is a life lived with you.

(DODO sees BESS looming outside of JAN's room.)

DODO leaves JAN and goes to BESS.)

DODO

Where have you been, Bess?
You can't just run off and leave him.

BESS

He's changed! I can't even touch him anymore.

DODO

Jan is very sick, Bess.
You must listen to what he says.
It's up to you!
You can do more than the doctors.
You can make him want to live.

(BESS enters the hospital room slowly, standing by JAN's bedside. She wears a loose black blouse and a long skirt, entirely unflattering and funereal.)

6 BESS

Please don't die, Jan.

JAN

If I die,
It will be because love cannot keep me alive.
I lied to you, Bess.

BESS

You did? You are forgiven.

JAN

When I told you to take another lover.
I lied to you, Bess...

BESS

You are forgiven.

JAN

No – you don't understand.
It's not for your sake, Bess.
You must love for my sake.

I can hardly remember
What it's like to make love.
When I forget,
I'll die, Bess.

BESS

Please don't die, Jan.

JAN

Do you remember
When I called from the rig?
How we would make love
Without being together?

BESS

You want me to talk to you again like that?
I'm touching your prick.
You're so huge, you're so –

(cut off)

JAN

Find a man, a man to make love to.
Then come back to me
And tell me what it's like.
It will feel like we are together, Bess.
Love will keep me alive.

BESS

I can't.

JAN

If you love me,
Do this for my sake, Bess,
Not for yours.
Do this for me.

BESS

Like we're together.

BESS AND JAN

Two people joined in God.
Mr. and Mrs. Jan from the rig.

BESS

And God will be witness to our covenant.
The whole community will know.

JAN

Find a man and tell me what it's like.
Find a man, Bess.

BESS AND JAN

It will feel like we are together.
Love will keep you (me) alive.

(A loud beeping comes from his heart monitor as JAN's situation turns serious. DR. RICHARDSON and DODO run into his room. BESS is shoved out of the way and retreats into the hallway. The doctor closes the door on BESS. She begins a conversation with God.)

7 BESS

"I'm tired of waiting..."
There's nothing I can do.
"Jan has given you a task.
Prove that you love him."

CHORUS

Prove it!

BESS

I do love him.
"So you keep saying.
I don't see it."

BESS AND CHORUS

"Prove it!"

BESS

"Prove that you love him,
And I won't let him die."

*Lauren Snouffer as Bess and
David Portillo as Dr. Richardson.*



8 Scene 4

(TERRY visits JAN at the hospital, sneaking in a six-pack of beers. TERRY cracks open a beer for JAN and places it in his hand. TERRY cracks open another beer for himself. JAN is asleep but TERRY talks to him in a one-sided conversation.)

TERRY

I brought supplies!
Got some cute nurses here!
Gettin' some hard scrubs, are ya?
Do they drain yer balls when they drain your brain?

(Stage splits. At a bus stop overlooking the ocean, an old man sits. BESS slowly bicycles up and sits down on the bench, with ample space between them. He smiles at her, obviously excited to be sitting next to a pretty girl.)

TERRY

You did a nice thing, out on the rig.
You saved my life!
And I'm messed up about it!
You don't deserve this.

(BESS begins to play with the old man the same way she would stimulate JAN. TERRY exits.)

(The old man climaxes, JAN wakes up suddenly, as if from a nightmare. The old man hands BESS his handkerchief, which she uses to wipe his mess from her fingers.)

JAN

No more dreaming! Bess.

(BESS bicycles away, leaving the old man stunned.)

9 BESS *(to JAN, warily, obviously making it up)*

I am lying on my back.
I am naked.
He comes to me.
He is on top of me.

He enters me.
He presses my legs over backwards.
Really slow, really gentle.
He is coming.

JAN

Who was it?

BESS

A man...a man from church.

JAN

You lie.

BESS

I didn't lie. I tried.
I met a man at the bus stop.
I squeezed his prick.

JAN

That's not what I asked you to do.

(JAN turns away from BESS.)

I am sick.

(JAN turns back towards BESS. DODO hears the commotion and rushes in.)

I am sick in the head.

(DODO, alarmed, quickly places the respirator on JAN's face, cutting him off.)

10 Scene 5

(DODO ushers BESS out of the hospital room. BESS suddenly becomes animated, doing her hair in an extravagant, tart-like fashion, pinching her cheeks to add color. She puts on a pretty dress, finds an unopened bottle of wine from her wedding and leaves her house. BESS steps outside, confidently walks up to DR. RICHARDSON's door.)

BESS *(hesitating for a moment.)*

Dr. Richardson! Hello?

(DR. RICHARDSON appears. BESS scoots past him and enters the house. She goes straight to the record player.)

Dr. Richardson, I've come to dance.

(BESS puts on a record. Upbeat Elton John/David Bowie-style instrumental music begins to play. BESS shakes her hips to the music. She pours two glasses of wine, handing one to DR. RICHARDSON, even though he doesn't drink. DR. RICHARDSON watches her intently, obviously attracted to her.)

BESS

Do you think I'm pretty?

(BESS dances more seductively.)

DR. RICHARDSON

Yes, Bess, you're very pretty. Now talk to me.

BESS

Close your eyes, please.

(DR. RICHARDSON closes his eyes.)

DR. RICHARDSON

Do you have something to ask me, Bess?
Bess?

(He opens his eyes and finds BESS naked.)

BESS

You can have me now.

(DR. RICHARDSON stands tentatively, perhaps wanting to make love to her, but he resists.)

DR. RICHARDSON

Put your clothes on, Bess.
You are too good for this.

BESS

Dr. Richardson, please, make love to me.

You said I'm very pretty.

Make love, for Jan's sake, for Jan!

DR. RICHARDSON

Go home, Bess.

(BESS puts her clothes on in great haste, not buttoning up her dress so that her breasts are visible. She leaves and bicycles to the village bar. She searches for the most desperate face in the bar, finally settling on a portly man of 55 who is sitting alone. BESS whispers in the man's ear. At first he smiles, then seems shocked. BESS turns away from him and leaves the bar. The man waits a few seconds before following her out. BESS and the man meet behind a shed, she pulls up her skirt. Lights come up on the hospital, where JAN is undergoing major surgery. The man climbs on top of BESS and fucks her dispassionately. Action continues on the rig.)

11 CHORUS

We breathe.

We drip.

We bleed.

BESS

And when he was inside of me,
I heard bells chiming your name:

(JAN's condition worsens; DR. RICHARDSON uses the paddles on his chest.)

Jan, Jan, Jan, Jan, Jan!

DR. RICHARDSON

Clear! Clear!

(The man slaps BESS and she stops singing. JAN's heart starts again and he opens his eyes. The scene sets on BESS as the curtain falls.)

ACT THREE

12 Scene 1

(BESS, disheveled and delirious, rides her bike home.)

BESS

My body is a map
Of my life with Jan.
My body is a map
Of where I must go
To save Jan from dying.

It's Jan
When they kiss me.
It's Jan
When they climb on top of me.
When they moan,
When they finish.

My body is a map,
Of my love.
My body...

13 *(Light comes up on MOTHER sitting at the dining room table. BESS stops short, surprised to see her mother up this late.)*

MOTHER

I won't ask
What you've been up to.
I don't want to know.
Out talking to the sheep?
The cows?
Feeble excuse
From a feeble girl.

I won't ask
What you've been up to.
But they will cast you out.
Without them, you'll have nothing, Bess.

Without the church,
You are a ghost.
Without the church, you are less than a ghost.

BESS

My body is a –

(MOTHER silences BESS with a look.)

MOTHER

I won't ask
What you've been up to.
I don't want to hear you lie.
Christ did not suffer
So Bess could mock his sacrifice.

BESS

My body is a map. My body –

MOTHER

You'll have nothing.
Without the church we have nothing.

(BESS, frightened by her mother's intensity, stops singing.)

Without the church
Stronger men have withered.
But you are not strong.

I won't ask
What you've been up to.
But the reek of sin
Has seized my house.

BESS

My body...

(MOTHER slaps BESS, cutting her off.)

MOTHER

You are a feeble girl.
A feeble, feeble girl.

14 BESS

I saved Jan when his heart stopped.

(DODO walks in from the shadows.)

DODO

His heart didn't stop.

BESS

I told him stories.

Love stories.

Love is a mighty power.

DODO

Sickness is a mighty power!

BESS

I saved Jan.

DODO

Are you so stupid?

Stupid enough to believe that?

MOTHER

When you live under my roof

You behave like a –

BESS AND MOTHER

Decent human being.

15 *(A knock at the door. DODO opens the door and DR. RICHARDSON enters.)*

DR. RICHARDSON

Hallo, Bess.

BESS

Hallo.

DR. RICHARDSON

Bess, you've fallen too deep into something which is out of your control.

(BESS ignores DR. RICHARDSON. This sets him off.)

There's fluid in Jan's head,
affecting his brain.

He's not himself, Bess.

Forcing you to sleep with all these men.

DODO

He's up to his eyeballs in drugs.

Don't feed his sick fantasies.

MOTHER

This is not the way, Bess.

We must live by the Word.

You must live by the Word.

BESS

Love is a mighty power.

DR. RICHARDSON

Dammit, Bess!

BESS

Love is the mightiest power.

DODO

Are you so stupid?

BESS

I make love with men

To save Jan from dying.

I have always been stupid.

But I am good at this.

God gives everyone a talent.

DR. RICHARDSON

So, your talent is getting fucked by strangers?

BESS

My talent

Is that I can believe.

Dear father in heaven...

Dear father in...what is happening?

(BESS starts to speak as God, but no sound comes out.)

Hallo? Where are you?

Answer me, please!

16 Scene 2

(BESS climbs onboard a giant red ocean vessel. BESS sees two menacing men, a SADISTIC SAILOR and a YOUNG SAILOR.)

BESS

Hallo.

SADISTIC SAILOR

Didn't they warn you about us?

The sick fuckers on the red boat?

BESS

What would you like?

(SADISTIC SAILOR takes his sweet time.)

SADISTIC SAILOR

I want you to fuck the runt while I watch.

(The YOUNG SAILOR puts his small pistol just out of BESS's reach, but close enough to intimidate her. He pushes her down on the sofa.)

YOUNG SAILOR

Stay still.

(The YOUNG SAILOR starts to rip apart her fishnet stockings, pulls down her leather skirt and tears at her undergarments.)

SADISTIC SAILOR

Quiet now.

(As he shushes her, the SADISTIC SAILOR puts his cigar out on BESS's hand.)

SADISTIC SAILOR

Shhhhhhhhhh...

(BESS can't contain the pain, and wails. She kicks the YOUNG SAILOR in the crotch, grabbing his gun. BESS points the gun at the SADISTIC SAILOR.)

BESS

I'll shoot!

I'll shoot your pricks off!

(BESS backs away.)

SADISTIC SAILOR

You'll never do it – you're just a hooker!

17 Scene 3

(BESS, bleeding and delirious, makes her way to the church. BESS stumbles into the church. The COUNCILMAN is in the middle of a sermon.)

COUNCILMAN AND CHORUS

Because there is only one thing for us,

Sinners that we are:

Perfection through unconditional love for the word that is written.

Perfection through unconditional love for the law.

BESS

I don't understand what you're saying.

You cannot love words.

You cannot be in love with a word.

You can only love another human being.

That is perfection.

COUNCILMAN AND CHORUS

No woman speaks here!

BESS

I don't under –

COUNCILMAN AND CHORUS

No woman speaks here!

Out you go, Bess McNeill.

The council of elders has decided.
Henceforth you shall not be welcome in this church.
Those who know you
Shall not know you.
Bess McNeill, be gone!
Be gone from the house of God!

(The men force BESS out of the church and slam the door behind her.)

BESS

Dear God...where are you?

(BESS stumbles to her MOTHER's house and tries to open the door.)

Hello?
I can't open the door!
Mother, it's Bess.
Mother, please, open the door!

(The figures of MOTHER and DODO appear on the other side of the door. DODO moves to open the door but MOTHER stops her.)

BESS

I promise to be a good girl.
A decent human being.

(BESS tries to back away from the door but a man throws a rock at her.)

18 CHORUS

Who's a tart?
Who's a fucking tart?
Hit the tart, hit the tart!
Who's a tart?

(A group of men block her path.)

BESS

Go away!

CHORUS

You're a tart!

(DODO runs out to BESS, shooing the men away.)

DODO

Be gone!
Go away.

19 *(DODO is shocked at BESS's appearance. She doesn't go to BESS right away.)*

DODO

My Bess,
Let this be over now.
You know I love you.
Dodo will always love you.
Just end this.

(BESS struggles to get up but can't.)

Dear Bess, I wasn't to tell you.
Jan is dying now.
No more can be done.

BESS

I must go now.

(BESS tries to stand again, falls down.)

DODO

There's nothing left to do!
(BESS stands up.)

BESS

Pray. Pray for Jan.
Pray for him to rise from his bed and walk.
Pray for him to be cured.

(BESS stumbles away from the door, towards the red boat. DODO remains, helpless.)

20 Dear father in heaven, why aren't you with me?

*Lauren Snouffer as Bess and Michael Mayes
as Councilman (top) with the HGO Chorus.*



(BESS is shocked to hear voices, she becomes giddy with happiness.)

BESS

"I am with you, Bess.
What do you want with me?"
Where were you?
"Perhaps I was sleeping?"
Of course, I hadn't thought of that.
"There's a silly little thing called Bess who always wants
me to listen to her."
Not silly...
Funny.
You're with me now?
"Of course I am, Bess.
You know that."
Jan has given me a task.

BESS AND CHORUS

"Complete the task, Bess.
I'm wide awake."

(BESS climbs back up the side of the red boat.)

BESS

Hallo? Hallo?

YOUNG SAILOR

Didn't get enough?

21 Scene 4

*(The two sailors have no mercy on BESS, slicing more
lines onto her skin, cutting deep into the tissues of her
breasts, their faces drenched in her blood.)*

CHORUS

Complete the task, Bess.
I'm wide awake.

**COUNCILMAN, DODO, DR. RICHARDSON,
MOTHER, CHORUS**

With the pure thou wilt shew thyself pure,
And with the froward thou wilt shew thyself froward.

*(A fisherman carries BESS's nearly lifeless body away, dropping
her off at the hospital. DODO is there to receive her.)*

22 DODO

My poor darling.

BESS

How is Jan?
He's not better?

(DODO shakes her head.)

I thought he'd be better.
We two people, joined in God.
Mr. and Mrs. Jan from the rig.
Dodo, maybe I was wrong.

DODO

Bess, you need a doctor now.

MOTHER

Bessie!

BESS

I'm so sorry.
I tried to be a good girl, a decent human being.

DODO

Shhh – rest those eyes, rest that golden heart.

BESS

Dodo...
Hold me.
I'm afraid!
Mr. and Mrs. Jan, Mr. and Mrs. Jan, Mrs. Jan...
Jan, Jan, Jan, Jan...

(BESS flatlines.)

DODO

Bess...Bess...

Bess!

23 Scene 5

(DR. RICHARDSON sits at a small table with a pitcher and a glass of water. BESS's funeral procession begins in the background. DODO and MOTHER trail behind the men.)

CHORUS

Sinner, Bess.

DR. RICHARDSON

If you asked me today for my diagnosis,
Instead of "neurotic" or "psychotic"
I'd simply offer..."good"...

(DR. RICHARDSON hears the funeral procession.)

Yes, good.

CHORUS

Sinner, Bess.

DR. RICHARDSON

Yes, just say she was good.

24 COUNCILMAN

Bess McNeill.

CHORUS

Sinner, Bess.

COUNCILMAN

You are a sinner, Bess.

CHORUS

Sinner, Bess.

COUNCILMAN AND CHORUS

You deserve your place.
We consign your bones to hell.
We consign your soul to hell.

DODO *(approaching the procession quietly)*

Not one of you.

Not one of you has the right to condemn Bess.

CHORUS

Sinner, Bess.

DODO

Not one of you.

Not one of you has the right.

Not one of you.

Not one of you.

Not one of you has the right.

Not one of you.

25 Epilogue

(DODO exits. We see JAN on the edge of an oil rig, with BESS's body wrapped in a sheet. JAN unwraps the sheet, revealing BESS's face. He cries over her body.)

JAN

My Bess, I've stolen you back.

Husband and wife must talk.

Can you hear me?

I stole you, Bess, I stole you back.

Your body is a map.

Bess begins here,

I begin and end here.

You told me, not even in death

Will our paths unwind.

Wait for me, until I too can rest

On the sea floor.

Wait for me, Bess.

Wait for me

In the whirlpools,

In the currents of the Little Minch,

My Bess.

(crumbling)

Dear God,
I thank you
For the greatest gift.
What powers you possess.

(JAN and TERRY commit BESS's body to the ocean. They watch as BESS's body is carried away by the waves.)

What powers you possess.
What goodness you possess.

(The faint sound of church bells can be heard in the distance. JAN and TERRY look up, astonished.)

TERRY

It's impossible.
There's nothing out there Jan.
Nothing for miles.

(The church bells continue to ring.)



*Ryan McKinny (Jan) and Lauren Snouffer
(Bess) in the opera's Epilogue.*

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