

whities: eating and drinking
libretto

Dramatis Personae

Monika.....	Soprano
Vivienne.....	Mezzo-soprano
William.....	Tenor
Burkhard.....	Baritone

Night time, the apartment of Monika and William in an unidentified Western European city.

Monika, white, mid-30s, is bored with her relationship with William yet publicly expresses how exciting it is. Although not swingers per se, she and her husband frequently seduce others into joining them in the bedroom. That her friends see her marriage as sexually adventurous is the primary way in which she defines herself. She has an unsatisfying yet high-paying and prestigious job in advertising. She worked hard at the beginning of her career to break through glass ceilings but no longer has any energy for such battles.

William, white, late-30s, was born into money in a family already, for several generations, wealthy. He is careful and deliberate in his dress. What he thinks makes him look a “gentleman” appears dandyish to others: bespoke suits, loud socks, suspenders, etc. He has a Wealth Management Consultancy firm in an impressive office in an expensive building but the business is not profitable so he must subsidise it with his own private wealth. Regardless, he continues as the business endows him with feelings of power and influence.

The apartment’s size and furnishings show that the couple are rich. Their sense of taste, however, is not original- rather gleaned from interior design magazines and popular social media accounts. The result is obviously expensive furnishings and design with a sense of emptiness at their core.

At stage right, occupying about a third of the entire space, is the kitchen. It is scrupulously clean, with all of their high-end appliances on show. At stage left is the front door of the apartment with a tall mirror next to it, opening into a living /dining room dominated by a large dining table capable of seating twelve people. Up centre stage right is a sofa suite and a well stocked bar.

[orchestral prelude]

The curtain is already risen, stage lights fade up very slowly to reveal William and Monika in their apartment.

Scene 1:

William is sitting on the sofa in the living/dining room, scrolling through social media on his phone. Monika is in the kitchen making the final preparations for dinner.

WILLIAM

(Commenting to himself on the photos and videos he sees)

Mmmmm that arse [...]

I think I see a nipple [...]

Too fat [...]

Ooh, I like that [...]

Thirst Trap!

MONIKA

(Becoming distracted by William’s running commentary, unseen by her husband, she listens at the door)

(To herself, in disgust)

Lecher

WILLIAM
Duck lips

MONIKA
Pervert

WILLIAM
Does your daddy know you're on here?

MONIKA
Going grey

WILLIAM
Ugh! Please shave your legs!

MONIKA
(Turning away from the door to resume her dinner preparations)
Balding

WILLIAM
Too young
Too young?
(Pausing, transfixed by the photo)
(Quieter, almost under his breath)
Those pig tails
Oh, the nasty things I'd do to you –

(The doorbell rings, cutting off William mid-sentence)

MONIKA
(Suddenly lightly)
Darling, I'll get it
(Rushing from the kitchen, she stops to give William a playful kiss on the lips and sees the image on his phone)
What collarbones!
Her skin, translucent
Look: with a fingertip
I could trace her gossamer blue veins
Like lace cascading from her neck line down to her–

(Cutting her off, William grabs Monika and kisses her roughly, pawing at her waist and arse. Monika recoils unconsciously, but quickly recovers and enthusiastically returns his kiss. The door bell rings again, interrupting their kiss)

MONIKA
I'll get it

(William tries to pinch Monika's arse before she rushes to the door. With a cheeky smile, she swats away his hand. From off stage there emanates a riotous and ominous sound like an angry commotion, yet sounding quiet as if happening far away. Monika and William either can't hear it or ignore it. William returns to his phone whilst, at the door, Monika checks herself in the mirror, her smile fading)

That brute

He's smudged my lipstick!

(She tries to repair the damage with a tissue. She steps back to inspect her entire reflection, smoothing and fussing with her clothing at her waist, her arse, her breasts)

It doesn't sit right anymore

It's all twisted up

Scrunched—

(The doorbell rings again, this time continuously)

Yes, I heard you!

(Monika opens the door to reveal Vivienne standing there looking impatient. Vivienne, white, early-30s, values above all else her independence and privacy. She is a literary translator and lives happily alone. She shops exclusively at organic stores and wears high quality cotton clothes: shapeless tunics which mask her figure. She has a healthy, clean-scrubbed complexion and wears no make up.)

VIVIENNE

I was ringing! Didn't you—

MONIKA

Vivienne, hello! You look...

(Looking her critically up and down)

...well

VIVIENNE

(Entering the apartment)

I was ringing! Didn't you—

MONIKA

(Calling to her husband)

Darling

Vivienne is here!

WILLIAM

(Rising from the couch to greet Vivienne)

Vivienne

You're the first to arrive

MONIKA

(To William)

William, darling

Take care of her

Won't you?

(To Vivienne)

My manners

Have deserted me!

Welcome!

(Kissing Vivienne on each cheek)

Speaking of which

(Looking back at the kitchen and to Vivienne again. Apologetically as she makes her way to the kitchen)

I really must [...]

Last little things [...]

A woman's work [...]

You know

WILLIAM

(To Vivienne)

Drink?

VIVIENNE

(A little too quickly)

Yes!

WILLIAM

(They move to the sofa suite where they frequently change seating positions: William trying to get closer to Vivienne, and she escaping him)

Kir Royal?

Relax

Gimlet?

Negroni?

Take it easy

Martini?

Vermouth?

Make yourself comfortable

Pastis?

Calvados?

Cognac?

VIVIENNE

(Flustered)

Palvagnac

WILLIAM

(Spoken)

Palvagnac!

(He laughs)

(sung)

Words must be confusing

When translating books and things

All day

And all night.

So many languages

Rolling around your mouth

The tongues of others

Bumping 'gainst yours

Penetrating those lips—

(Vivienne finally gets far away from him)

What are you working on now

By the way?

“One thousand and one uses for chopsticks”?

(He laughs at his own joke)

VIVIENNE

I'm—

WILLIAM

(Before she can answer)

Pastis?

Calvados?

Cognac?

VIVIENNE

(flustered)
Cognac!

WILLIAM
Cognac it is!
(He pours a very big glass, hands it to her and sits very close next to her. Vivienne immediately puts it down on a table without drinking)

VIVIENNE
(Jumping up away from him and grasping desperately for any neutral conversation topic)
There must be something wrong with your doorbell

WILLIAM
(Broadly, with mocking irony)
There's nothing wrong with my doorbell!

VIVIENNE
I was ringing and ringing but—

WILLIAM
Oh, we heard!
You interrupted our little flirtation
Shame on you
Listening at doors!
You know there's nothing wrong
With a little voyeurism
Peeking through keyholes
The fear of getting caught
Increasing your arousal!
But if all you really desired was to join us
(Handing her the still-full glass)
You can just ask

VIVIENNE
(Calling towards the kitchen)
Monika
Can I give you a hand in there?

MONIKA
(Who has been eavesdropping the whole time. A little too quickly)
No!
(Sticking her head through the doorway)
Everything's under control
You two just enjoy yourselves

WILLIAM
Haha, well
Looks like it's just the two of us for now, Viv

MONIKA
(She returns to the kitchen and then calls out)
Burkhard should be here soon!

WILLIAM

Come, Viv
A little conviviality, Viv

MONIKA

(To herself)

Enjoy herself?

Enjoy herself?

Vivienne is so frigid

She wouldn't know

How to enjoy herself

Let alone enjoy others!

Just a little flirtation

She takes so seriously.

She needs passion

All consuming, self erasing

Rutting

Fucking

That many-backed beast, all fluids and flesh

To escape the cage of her own making!

WILLIAM

Tell me, Viv

Are you still with that girl,

What was her name?

VIVIENNE

Agatha, no

WILLIAM

Oh yes, I remember

You left her for that guy

The professor.

Got tired of scissoring

And silicone, eh Viv?

Missed the pleasure

Of real blood in the veins, Viv?

VIVIENNE

(to herself)

After Agatha, it was Massimo

Or was it the other way round?

I can't remember

WILLIAM

(oblivious to the fact that Vivienne isn't listening to him)

I'm all for it, Viv

You know that!

Swing both ways and

Take what you want from the world!

VIVIENNE

(to herself)

One wanted too much from me

The other too eager

To become a part of me.
Possession
Intrusion
In love there is no autonomy
(the doorbell rings)

MONIKA

I'll get it

(she rushes to the door, slowing down as she passes William and Vivienne observing with satisfaction the awkward scene between them. Opening the door to Burkhard, a riotous and ominous sound like an angry commotion, yet sounding quiet as if happening far away, is heard. Burkhard, white, early-50s, likes to spend time with younger people. He enjoys the authority amongst his friends that his age engenders, and needs always to be the smartest person in the room. He works as a director, mostly in theatre, but also for TV and advertising, which is where he and Monika met)

BURKHARD

Monika Urania

Or is it Monika Pandemos?

(kissing her on each cheek)

Khairre, salve, namaste!

(to Vivienne and William)

Khairrete all!

(kissing Vivienne on each cheek, and shaking hands with William)

'Tis cordial in here

But I felt some strange vibes

Pulsing through the city tonight:

Unbalanced Chi

Chakras blocked

MONIKA

You're too sensitive, Burkhard

WILLIAM

Was there a football match?

VIVIENNE

(to herself)

'Tis cordial in here?

(William fetches wine from the bar. The rest move towards the dining table)

BURKHARD

Sorry I'm late

I was dropping the kids

Back to their mother's house,

I took them to work with me

At the theatre.

Yan Li:

My ex-wife

Filled out in hips, breasts, and in spirit

Ful filled by her sacred womanly duty

Guan Yin smiles upon her

(to himself)

Though Yan Li no longer smiles upon me

(to Monika)

– she needed a Peripatetic parental pow-wow

MONIKA

Is she traveling somewhere?

BURKHARD

No, just returning my copy
of the Nicomachean Ethics
Unread, I'm sure
(*he laughs*)

WILLIAM

(*proffering two bottles*)
Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame 2008?
Or Louis Roederer Cristal Brut?
Also 2008
A couple of teenagers.

BURKHARD

(*addressing only Monika*)
Motherhood
Has given Yan Li a purpose

MONIKA

I have a satisfying career

WILLIAM

The young lady I think.
I've had her hidden in my cellar
Waiting patiently
For her to reach legal age.
Let's pop her cork!

BURKHARD

Young lives to guide
to shape, to protect

MONIKA

Growing the business

WILLIAM

(*he sings to the bottle as he begins to open it*)
She's playing hard to get

MONIKA

Empowering young women
in the workforce

WILLIAM

Six twists of the *muselet*
And just like that she's undressed.

BURKHARD

Responsibility!

WILLIAM

Now let me taste
What you've got inside!
(*he removes the cork*)

MONIKA

I am fulfilled!

BURKHARD

(*"fulfilled" together with Monika*)
Fulfilled by her sacred womanly duty!

WILLIAM

Vivienne, let me fill your glass.
(Vivienne accepts, and drinks quickly)
We don't have children
We don't want children

MONIKA

(suddenly turning towards William, looking like she's about to address him but quickly changing her mind)
(spoken)
I had better go and check on the starter
(she goes to the kitchen)

WILLIAM

(filling everyone's glasses)
It's our rebellion against
The nuclear family!
Our rebellion against
Nuclear society!
A toast:
To freedom
Free love –

BURKHARD

And free champagne!
(he laughs and then drinks deeply whilst William looks put out)

VIVIENNE

(staring into her glass)
How strange to want a child
How strange to have a child
How strange to be a child
How was it?
I can't remember
Only vague impressions:
Shame
Ill-defined anger

MONIKA

(approaching the dining table carrying a large serving plate)
Balinese chicken satay skewers
With cucumber salad
(putting the plate on the dining table)
William and I
Holidayed there a few years ago –

VIVIENNE

Oh, Bali
How lovely!

MONIKA

It's such a tragedy!
Femicide there
Is such a systemic problem –

BURKHARD

(poking at the food)
Is it spicy?

Fade to black

[orchestral interlude]

Scene 2:

The stage lights fade back up as Monika is clearing away the starter dishes. More wine has been drunk.

BURKHARD

(half rising from his chair)

Monika

Let me give you a hand

MONIKA

No need

You are our guest –

BURKHARD

(quickly)

Very well

I shall play my part

With great ardour

And devotion!

(Monika, her arms laden with dirty dishes, has already turned away from Burkhard and is on her way to the kitchen)

The delicacy of the feast

Is the learned guest.

Fidus Achateses:

How may I

Entertain you?

VIVIENNE

(to William)

I am just now

Translating a book

On Japanese Dining Etiquette.

(William reaches across Vivienne to pour more wine in all the glasses)

It's so fascinating

How obsessed they are

With rules and manners!

BURKHARD

(trying to insert himself into the conversation)

The nail that sticks out

Gets hammered down

But it's better to be without a book

Than to believe a book entirely

As the Chinese say

(Monika returns from the kitchen)

WILLIAM

They also have a lot of rules

VIVIENNE

One must slurp

One's soup

One must eat

Sushi in a single bite

WILLIAM

Sushi is Japanese

BURKHARD
Actually, William –

MONIKA
We had an Asian woman
Last week

BURKHARD
No?!

MONIKA
An Asian couple actually:
Her boyfriend
– A cuckold –
We handcuffed
To the headboard

VIVIENNE
(to herself)
Discretion!

BURKHARD
Shame
Is very complex
In Asian culture

MONIKA
Gagged and drooling
He could only watch
In humiliating arousal
As we had our way
With his girlfriend

BURKHARD
Libertine!

VIVIENNE
(to herself)
Prudence!
Tact!

MONIKA
Such slender limbs
So sweet and submissive

BURKHARD
Libertine!

MONIKA
Afterwards
Sweating and sated
We forced her boyfriend to –

VIVIENNE
Chopsticks!
(everyone turning to her in surprise, the ensemble suddenly stops)
(faltering, a cappella)

One should never
Point at food
With chopsticks
[...] In Japan
(the ensemble begins again)

WILLIAM
(to Vivienne)
Polyamory
Is actually
A feminist practice

VIVIENNE
I –

WILLIAM
Women are free to choose!
Explore their sexual desires
Without being branded
Harlots
Home wreckers
Whores
And kicked out of the house
By their husbands

VIVIENNE
I don't –

BURKHARD
William
You're mansplaining
You don't need to describe
To Vivienne
The difficulties of being a woman
In a man's world

VIVIENNE
I really don't think it's a –

BURKHARD
Solar Man
Lunar Woman
She reflects his light
His life giving light
But she is the tidal power
Waxing and waning
She is the nurturing cycle
Too often
Underestimated
By ignorant men
Disrespected
In her role as
Holy conceiver of creation.
But when she attains
Mindfulness –

(from off stage there emanates a riotous and ominous sound like an angry commotion, sounding somewhat loud as if happening not so far away. It interrupts Burkhard yet no one acknowledges the disturbance)

Mindfulness
Of her noble
Dharmic path

The light that she reflects
Is brightest:
She is no mere muse
She becomes
The goddess
Personified!

MONIKA
What do you
– A man –
Know about such things?

BURKHARD
My dear Monika
My dear doubting Semele
In my work
Developing strong
Female characters
With my actresses
I have had
The privilege
– With their help –
To develop a keen and sensitive
Understanding
Of female emotions and desires

WILLIAM
You must also
Have a keen and sensitive understanding of
Young actresses'
Emotions and desires!
(only Monika laughs at his joke)

BURKHARD
'Tis true
A man of vast experience
A man of sensitivity
A man of maturity
Is attractive to the
Younger members
Of the fairer sex

VIVIENNE
'Tis true
Those with daddy issues
Der Vatercomplex!

BURKHARD
Only recently
Clara
– A young ingénue
Under my wing –
Was seeking
Guidance
On her character's
Motivation.
I took her to
An intimate restaurant
With dim lighting –

MONIKA

(incredulously)
With dim lighting?

BURKHARD

Yes
Dim lighting
So as to provide
Privacy,
A safe space
For her to access
Her own
Vulnerability:
An act of great
Bravery
And an actor's greatest
Strength!

(to himself)

But after dessert
With wine, sugar, caffeine
And Clara's sweet perfume
Pumping through your veins
She seemed not to resist
The casual brush of your hand
About her waist
Nor the lingering of lips
In a less-than-chaste
Good night kiss
And then?
And then?
You could only sputter
"Good night"
And stutter
Professional platitudes.
She wanted it!
Her coy innocence
Just a seduction!
Why couldn't you?
It was there for the taking –

(he is suddenly interrupted by William laughing. The others have been carrying on their own conversation the whole time, oblivious to Burkhard's soliloquy)

VIVIENNE

(spoken)

[...] Anyway
I think that's what she was trying to say!

BURKHARD

What's so funny?

MONIKA

Oh nothing!
Just Vivienne's little story about
Translating from the trenches.
Do translators have trenches

Or are they reserved
For real writers only?

VIVIENNE

I am –

(from off stage there emanates a riotous and ominous sound like an angry commotion, sounding somewhat loud as if happening not so far away. It interrupts Vivienne yet no one acknowledges the disturbance)

I –

WILLIAM

(to Monika)

Remember that time
In Marseilles
When I tried to order
Bouillabaisse in the restaurant
And the waitress
Thought I wanted
To eat her –

MONIKA

Brazilian Feijoada
For the main course
If everyone is ready?
(She doesn't wait for responses from the others before going to the kitchen)

WILLIAM

Monika learned the recipe
In Rio de Janeiro.
What a holiday we had!
Such great variety
In those people's arses:
Juicy round ones
That could swallow you whole,
Ones that stick out suddenly
Like balconies
On a beachside hotel
Jiggling with every footstep,
(Monika returns from the kitchen with the Feijoada)
Even smaller ones
On the fairer women and men:
Taut and muscular
Each cheek a handful,
Widely cleft and heart-shaped
Showing off sun-kissed skin
And beads of sweat

MONIKA

(duo with William as she serves everyone)
You know
It's quite a machismo culture
Over there.
Of course those men
Couldn't say or do anything
Aggressive
In front of us tourists
But I saw it in the glint in their eyes
In the tensing of the muscles
Around their dark, ripe lips

VIVIENNE

(staring into her bowl; trio)

How the hell
Do I eat this?

BURKHARD

(staring into his bowl; quartet)

Beans and spices
Beans and spices
Cucina Povera
Always makes me fart!

Fade to black

[orchestral interlude]

Scene 3:

The stage lights fade back up as Monika clears away the main course dishes. The three at the dining table continue to drink wine, becoming increasingly drunk, as she goes back and forth to the kitchen.

WILLIAM

(to Burkhard)

As I was explaining
To Vivienne,
One must consider
Posterity

VIVIENNE

The past
The future
Better named
“Regret” and “Anxiety”

WILLIAM

I often wonder:
How will I be
Remembered?

BURKHARD

The artist:
He
– Or she –
Is immortal!

VIVIENNE

I prefer
The sweet amnesia
Of today

BURKHARD

(to Vivienne, jokingly moving his glass away from her)

Damned Helen
Keep your *Nepenthe*
From my wine!

WILLIAM

Ah yes
The arts.
I’ve thought about it:
Endowing a foundation.

An annual prize
For painting
Perhaps

BURKHARD

(to Vivienne, quietly so that William can't hear. But Monika, passing close by them, overhears)

Can you imagine
What infantile pornography
Would be celebrated
In his name?
A prize for painting?
Ha!

WILLIAM

Or better yet
To be associated with medicine
The saving of lives.
I could bequeath
A hospital
A new wing in my name!
Henrik
(to Monika)
– You remember Henrik,
Darling,
From the club? –
He's on the board of directors
At St. Lukes

(Monika doesn't reply. She's too busy surreptitiously eavesdropping on Vivienne and Burkhard)

VIVIENNE

(to Burkhard, quietly so that William can't hear)

It had better be
An abortion clinic
That bears his name!

MONIKA

William
Has already helped
So many people!
Advising them
On how to grow their wealth
(she snatches an empty wine bottle from the table and takes it back to the kitchen)
(to herself)

To grow their wealth?
To grow their wealth?

Such words
Turn to ashes
In my mouth!
(returning from the kitchen)

Such clunky
Cud
On which to chew.

He's such a –
(from off stage there emanates a riotous and ominous sound like an angry commotion, sounding very loud as if happening on the street outside)

What is that
Damn sound?!

WILLIAM

(Spoken)
What sound?

VIVIENNE
I didn't hear anything

BURKHARD
I thought I heard something
But –

WILLIAM
As I was saying:
The Napa Valley
Just can't compete
With Bordeaux

MONIKA
(to herself)
Look at them:
They think he's
A buffoon

WILLIAM
Châteaux La fite

MONIKA
(to herself)
No
A buffoon is harmless

WILLIAM
Margaux

MONIKA
(to herself)
He's a hyena!

WILLIAM
Mouton

MONIKA
(to herself)
He practically
Drools
And consumes
Greedily
Any willing piece of meat
That crosses his path

WILLIAM
Latour

MONIKA
(to herself)
Penetrating and
Coming quickly
With no passion
No seduction
No intimacy

WILLIAM
Haut-Brion

MONIKA
(to herself)
Then what does that make me?

WILLIAM
The most expensive
The most desired
Wine in the world

MONIKA
(to herself)
A scavenger!
That's what I am:
A scavenger!
Salvaging
Whatever there is left
Of the erotic
From those bodies
Tainted
By that man's
Touch!

WILLIAM
(to Monika)
Monika darling
Isn't it time for dessert?

MONIKA
(snapping out of her reverie)
Yes
Dessert
Sugar
Refreshment
A sweet end to our meal
(she returns to the kitchen for the dessert)

WILLIAM
Prepare yourselves for something
Exotic:
Ladob.
Ever heard of it?
I didn't think so!
(Monika places the dessert on the dining table)
It's from
Seychelles
Off the east coast of
Africa

VIVIENNE
Another holiday destination
I assume?

BURKHARD
An all-inclusive package
At a *jejeune* luxury resort
I assume?

WILLIAM

Oh yes
Island hopping
Scuba diving
Giant turtles
And all that

MONIKA

Seychelles:

I'd love to go back to that
Rugged and untamed
Beauty!

(the stage lights fade, leaving everyone in the dark except for Monika)

Not the beaches
The thick white sand
And crystal water.
Not the sunsets
Orange, purple, pink.
Not such banalities!
But to be surrounded
By so many
Dark bodies
Closing me in.

And William?

William?

Well,

He would simply
Melt away in the tropical sun.
He'd be just a fading memory
A tiny scar left over
After the scalpel
Does its job on the
Cancerous mole!
(she laughs)

A rainbow of

Dark bodies

Pressing in on me.

The coconut seller:

Milky coffee-coloured skin

His almond-shaped eyes

Undressing me in the street,

I'd let him do it for real!

The taxi driver:

Dark chocolate

Bitter and cloying on the tongue

Fill me up,

You can't ruin

My appetite!

The fisherman:

Black as coal

His giant calloused hands

Can wring from my body

All the tremors

And cries

Buried within!

To submit
Completely
Anonymously
For my
Pleasure
Take what I
Want
When I
Want it!

And then?
And then?
Well,
Scalpel and sun
Are both useful tools,
What's good for William
Is as good for any other man
No matter how lowly.

Leave me
To float free
In the ocean
Else simply board a plane.
Ha!
None of them
Could keep me,
None of them
Could keep up with me:
I'll celebrate my
Autonomy
And take what I want from the world!

(the stage lights fade up to reveal the others standing by the door. Burkhard and Vivienne are preparing to leave)

BURKHARD
When there is true hospitality
Not many words are needed

MONIKA
(joining the others at the door)
Yes
Thanks for coming

BURKHARD
Thanks for the excellent meal

VIVIENNE
Thanks for having me

WILLIAM
Vivienne
It would be a
Pleasure

To have you
Any time!

MONIKA

You must come again soon!
Next time I'll cook –

(from off stage there emanates a riotous and ominous sound like an angry commotion, sounding extremely loud and completely overpowering their voices and the ensemble. The stage lights cut to darkness and the riotous and ominous sound suddenly stops. Curtains. End.)