

FRANK PESCI

THE STRANGERS

Opera in a Prologue and Eight Scenes

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CHARACTERS

Principal Roles (9 Singers)

DAVID HENNESSY (Lyric Baritone) – New Orleans Chief of Police. Early 30s, revered, stalwart, tough as nails, a hero to the city. A shrewd tactician with access to the political and social elite, as well as connections to the Italian immigrant community. Assassinated by unknown assailants on October 15, 1890.

MARGARET HENNESSY (Dramatic Soprano) – David Hennessy’s widowed mother.

EMMANUELLE POLIZZI (High Lyric or Character Tenor) – a Sicilian immigrant in New Orleans. Mid 20s, driven by stress to paranoia, he is one of many Italian men accused for the murder of Hennessy.

IANIA ROMA (Lyric Mezzo-soprano) – A Sicilian immigrant in New Orleans. Early 20s, Polizzi’s lover.

MAMA ROMA – Iania’s mother; the family’s matriarch.

ZIA FRANCESCA – Iania’s maternal aunt; Mama’s younger sister.

CATARINA ROMA – Iania’s younger sister. Late teens.

BILL O’CONNOR (Tenor) – Representative of “Law,” he is the superintendent of a private detective force employed by the ruling classes of the city. Early 30s, a friend and professional colleague of Hennessy.

WILLIAM PARKERSON (Bass-Baritone) – Representative of “Order.” Early 40s, wealthy and influential New Orleanian.

SATB Chorus (off- and on-stage, as well as pre-records)– Sicilian Immigrants, residents of New Orleans, and the “Council of Fifty” (A citizen’s committee tasked with collecting evidence and information pertaining to the assassination of the Chief. Some chorus members may double as supernumeraries, as appropriate.

The action takes place in New Orleans in late 1890 and early 1891: “Piccola Palermo” (the Sicilian ghetto), Charity Hospital, the Orleans Parish Prison, on Girod Street, at the statue of Henry Clay on Canal Street, and at Hennessy’s Funeral at St. Joseph’s Church. The events depicted are presented in chronological order over two different timelines: those of Hennessy and Polizzi. Similar events in these different timelines are juxtaposed to emphasize causality and interconnectedness.

THEME

Xenophobia – Its complex emotional foundations, the translation of fear to violence, and the ramifications on its victims and perpetrators.

PROLOGUE

The COUNCIL OF FIFTY (Chorus), calls out to the city's Sicilian population:

We believe that the great majority among you are honest, industrious, and good citizens, and abhor crimes as much as we do. We want you to come forward and give us all the assistance and information in your power. Send us the names of every bad man, every criminal, and every suspected person of your race in the city.

We believe that we speak the unanimous sentiment of the good people of New Orleans.

We intend to put vendettas to an end, peaceably and lawfully if we can, violently and summarily if we must.

Upon you and your willingness to give information depends which of these courses shall be pursued.¹

First Scene

Girod Street, New Orleans - October 15, 1890

New Orleans in mid-autumn is sultry.

DAVID HENNESSY and BILL O'CONNOR stroll through the mist. HENNESSY is expounding upon plans for HIS future. They are grandiose, reaching beyond the city to the top of the nation. They come to a crossroad and, shaking hands, bid each other good night. HENNESSY exits right. O'CONNOR watches him leave, checks his watch, looks in the direction of HENNESSY's exit once again, then exits left, whistling.

A moment's calm is broken by the reports of shotguns and pistols, followed by a scream of pain. Several figures (maximum five) - dressed in long dark coats and hats that obscure their faces - race across the stage from right to left.

Entering in pursuit, staggers a bloody, tattered HENNESSY. With gritted teeth and pistol drawn, HE makes it to center, fires twice in the direction of the fleeing assailants, and collapses. HE yells for help. O'CONNOR comes running, but does not appear affected by the scene.

HENNESSY: They gave it to me, Billy. And I gave it back the best I could.

O'CONNOR *coolly*: Who gave it to you, Dave?

O'CONNOR bends down, and HENNESSY whispers into HIS ear.

¹ Open letter from the Committee of Fifty, addressed to "...All Italian-Americans." Published in several New Orleans newspapers, October 23, 1890.

Second Scene Piccola Palermo

MAMA, ZIA, and CATARINA are in an interior courtyard of a tenement building discussing life in America, as the sounds of the Sicilians (Chorus) are heard offstage. IANIA ROMA enters, asking the WOMEN if they have seen her lover, “Manni.” HE has not been seen or heard from all evening.

IANIA is concerned. Manni’s mind can get away from HIM, and HE disappears now and then. SHE has not adapted well to America, unlike CATARINA, who has embraced her new home and its customs. IANIA wonders, if SHE could convince Manni to leave the city, might they feel safer?

MAMA, ZIA, and CATARINA retire for the night. IANIA waits alone in the courtyard. EMANUELLE POLIZZI enters, with a bundle under his arm. HE is surprised to see HER waiting. Delicately, IANIA questions him, but he demurs. HE tries to allay HER fears, but admits that bleak thoughts have been creeping in again. She asks him about leaving New Orleans, to find a place where they can be safe together. HE believes that they can be strong and thrive, and the city can provide the opportunity to do so.

POLIZZI shifts the bundle, and a gun falls out of his coat and onto the ground.

IANIA *alarmed*: Where did you get that?

POLIZZI *hesitating*: I found it. Someone must have dropped it. I was going to leave it alone, but I thought: it is dangerous here, but I could be strong and protect you.

Hastily, HE stuffs the gun back in the bundle and THEY enter the tenement.

Third Scene SPLIT STAGE – Charity Hospital and Piccola Palermo The early hours of October 16, 1890

HENNESSY is lying in a hospital bed, his mother, MARGARET HENNESSY by his side. BILL O’CONNER and WILLIAM PARKERSON hover, trying to get HENNESSY to publicly identify the assailants. HE keeps replying “I’m not going to die. I’ll get over this. These people can’t kill me.”²

PARKERSON and O’CONNOR retreat to a corner of the room. They believe they are out of earshot, but both HENNESSY and HIS Mother can hear them.

Both MEN discuss the possible motives of the assailants. The chief had many enemies from all across the city – political adversaries, rival private police factions, and organized crime – and had recently found himself between two Sicilian family businesses vying for control of the docks. Neither MEN are happy about the growing number of Sicilian immigrants in

² Per eyewitness reports to local newspapers.

New Orleans – their secrecy and lack of integration, the poverty and illness they bring with them, and their ravenous industriousness and ambition that now threatens to overtake the city's economy.³

PARKERSON and O'CONNOR conclude that Sicilians are to blame for the attack on the chief. As they discuss what action to take, their words are played out in...

Piccola Palermo. The quiet night is interrupted by the sound of the POLICE (Men's Chorus) storming the courtyard and entering the tenements, mocking the Sicilians in broken English, *Who killa da chief?*⁴

O'CONNOR announces the orders:

*Scour the whole neighborhood...place an officer on every street corner of every Italian neighborhood...report the coming and going of every Italian...Arrest every Italian man you come across.*⁵

The POLICE emerge from the tenements dragging POLIZZI. IANIA follows, trying to intervene, but is forcibly thrown back by the POLICE. POLIZZI goes wild at the sight of this; the POLICE struggle to restrain HIM as they force HIM out the door. Unseen, MAMA, ZIA, CATARINA, and the SICILIAN WOMEN (Women's chorus), weep and call for their men, and praying to St. Joseph for protection.

Fourth Scene
Orleans Parish Prison
October 16, 1890

In a holding cell, POLIZZI is terrified.

Offstage, the POLICE (men's chorus) announce that witnesses have arrived to identify the assailants. IANIA and her RELATIVES are brought in by the POLICE and told to give names to the men being held captive, so that they may be charged. and try to among them, POLIZZI runs forward and grasps IANIA through the bars. O'CONNOR enters and, realizing that IANIA has lied about being a witness, pulls HER away for questioning.

O'CONNOR grills IANIA about POLIZZI – HIS past, HIS associations. Is he Mafia? IANIA, enraged denounces him for assuming that all Sicilians are criminals. O'CONNOR presses HER: Is POLIZZI sane? Dangerous? Violent? Does he have a gun? IANIA hesitates. O'CONNOR becomes violent, demanding an answer. HE threatens HER and her RELATIVES with deportation. Finally, SHE denies that POLIZZI has a gun, and says that he was with her all night. O'CONNOR orders the POLICE to bring HER back to the tenement and search it thoroughly until they find a weapon.

³ Detailed extensively in Chapter 9 of Richard Gambino's book, *Vendetta: The true story of the largest lynching in American History*, (Doubleday & Co., 1977; Guernica Editions, 1998)

⁴ This taunt followed the accused throughout the trial, and was used to antagonize the Italian community in New Orleans for decades after the lynching.

⁵ An order from Mayor Joseph Shakspeare. Reported in various newspapers, October 16, 1890.

Seeing HER threatened, POLIZZI has a mental break. In a desperate attempt to protect HER, HE proclaims that HE can identify the Sicilians who are in the secret society – the Mafia – the ones responsible for the attack. O’CONNOR motions for the POLICE to exit with IANIA.

Sensing that SHE is POLIZZI’s vulnerability, O’CONNOR puts the idea into HIS head that IANIA will betray HIM to save HERSELF. O’CONNOR encourages POLIZZI to turn in other Sicilian men and save HIMSELF.

Fifth Scene
St. Joseph’s Catholic Church
The Funeral of David Hennessy
October 17, 1890

MOURNERS (Chorus) sing a *Requiem aeternam*, which becomes a *Lacrimosa*. PARKERSON addresses the congregation:

With profoundest grief and indignation we witnessed the death of David Hennessy, superintendent of police of this city. Grief we feel at the loss of a true friend; indignation that he should have died by the hands of despicable assassins.

The circumstances of the cowardly deed show beyond doubt that he was the victim of Sicilian vengeance, wreaked upon him as chief representative of law and order. He was seeking to break up the fierce vendettas that have so often stained our streets with blood.

Bold, indeed, was the stroke aimed at their first American victim. A shining mark have they selected on which to write with the assassin’s hand their own contempt for the civilization of the new world.⁶

Hidden among the MOURNERS, MAMA, ZIA, and CATARINA pay her respects to the Chief, and pray to St. Joseph.

*O, Saint Joseph, I never weary contemplating you and Jesus asleep in your arms;
I dare not approach while He reposes near your heart.
Press Him in my name and kiss His fine head for me
And ask Him to return the kiss when I draw my dying breath.⁷*

At the head of the congregation, MARGARET HENNESSY reflects on women who naively wait at home while their men fight their battles. HER husband met the same fate that has now come for her son, and here she sits, again waiting to pick up the pieces of her life. In the face of HER son’s hubris and the talk of using HIS death to advance the aims of the

⁶ Speech made by Mayor Shakspeare to the New Orleans City Council on 18 October, 1890.

⁷ From a prayer said during the Novena (nine days preceding) of the Feast of St. Joseph, beginning March 10.

greedy and arrogant, SHE cannot remain silent and enable the destruction of her men. Where will that leave HER? HER lament combines with that of the Sicilian WOMEN.

Interlude

The CHORUS sings:

All good citizens are invited to attend a mass meeting to take steps to remedy a failure of justice. Come prepared for action.⁸

Sixth Scene At the Statue of Henry Clay – Canal Street, New Orleans March 14, 1891

Unseen, the SICILIANS (chorus) rejoice at the news that the MEN accused of killing the Chief have been found not guilty. The verdict coincides with the birthday of the King of Italy, and THEY sing a rousing salute to THEIR heritage, as well as their future in America.

PARKERSON whips the citizens of New Orleans (Chorus) into frenzy, accusing the Sicilians of mocking America with their song.

We owe it to ourselves and to everything we hold sacred in this life to see to it that this blow is the last. We must teach these people a lesson that they will not forget for all time. The Sicilian who comes here must become an American citizen, and subject his wrongs to the remedy of the law of the land, or else there must be no place for him on the American continent⁹

All the city's residents echo PARKERSON's sentiment, and sing together of their distrust of these Italian foreigners. They are neither white nor black, and they threaten to take the seaport business away under the specter of the Stiletto society that threatens their streets. Any Italian – man, woman, or child - could be Mafioso.

Incredulously, THEY declare "They are among us, but they are not of us."

PARKERSON channels their wrath, commanding action to avenge the CHIEF:

People of New Orleans! I appear before you, actuated by no desire for favor or prominence. Affairs have reached such a crisis that men living in an organized and civilized community, finding their laws fruitless and ineffective, are forced to protect themselves. When courts fail, the people must act! What protection is left, when the very head of our police department, our chief of police, is assassinated in our very midst by the Mafia Society, and his assassins are again turned loose on the community?

The time has come for the people of New Orleans to say whether they are going to stand for these outrages by organized bands of assassins, for the people to say whether they shall permit them to continue. I ask you to consider this fairly. Are you going to let it continue?

⁸ Advertisement published in several New Orleans newspapers on the morning of 14 March, 1891.

⁹ Shakspeare's address to the City Council.

*Will every man here follow me, and see the murder of David Hennessey vindicated? Are there men enough here to set aside the verdict of that infamous jury, every one of whom is a perjurer and scoundrel? Men and citizens of New Orleans, follow me, I will be your leader!*¹⁰

The music of the ITALIANS and that of PARKERSON clashes violently.

Seventh Scene
Charity Hospital - Hennessy on his deathbed
October 16, 1890

HENNESSY, to himself, reflects on HIS life and death, and the impending sainthood spoken by the voices surrounding HIM.

Everyone wants to know who pulled the triggers, but HE will take the identity of HIS murderers to the grave.

*My words, my life, my pains – nothing! The taking of my life – all! These last moments belong to me – this agony is my triumph.*¹¹

HE dies.

Eighth Scene
Orleans Parish Prison
March 14, 1891

With the joyous music of the Italian community still in the background, POLIZZI waits in prison for his release.

The joyousness of the scene is abruptly interrupted as the taunts of the coming MOB (Chorus) are heard. A GUARD opens the door to POLIZZI's cell, and begs him to hide. POLIZZI is bolted to the spot, unable to move, paralyzed by fear. He sings HIS part of HE and IANIA's love duet, hearing the music of HER voice far away. The tenderness of HIS memory fades into a silence that lasts for a few precious remaining seconds.

MEN with guns enter suddenly. After a moment's hesitation, they shoot POLIZZI and drag him from the cell.

Outside the Parish Prison, the LYNCH MOB howls for blood. PARKERSON exits the prison to the cheers of the MOB. HE is stricken by the carnage within. HE hasn't the stomach for killing.

POLIZZI, still alive, is produced to the crowds delight. HE is hanged and shot repeatedly. The MOB turns to PARKERSON for instruction. At the urging of O'CONNOR, he draws HIMSELF up and says:

¹⁰ Parkerson's address at the statue of Henry Clay.

¹¹ From the courtroom remarks of Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

*I called you together for a duty. You have performed that duty. Now go to your homes and if I need you, I will call you. Now, go home and God bless you.*¹²

The LYNCH MOB cries:

God bless you, Mr. Parkerson!

and exits triumphantly.

As the PARKERSON, O'CONNOR, and the LYNCH MOB exit, the body of POLIZZI lays on the stage. IANIA who was hidden amongst the crowd, is left alone, standing over HIS body.

Off stage, a drinking song is heard:

*Now we have shown our Southern blood – for nowhere you will find
A town that would have justice and fair play of this kind.
We would not have the verdict given by them men of nerve;
It seems to us as if the case had quite a crooked curve.
The execution was gone through quickly, and done by gentlemen,
And everybody will agree it could never be a sin.*¹³

MAMA, ZIA, and CATARINA enter to retrieve IANIA, who weeps over POLIZZI's body. This scene remains visible while lights come up on...

Charity Hospital – October 16, 1890. HENNESSY is dead; MARGARET weeps over his body. O'CONNOR and PARKERSON hover.

O'CONNOR: When I found him in the street, he whispered to me the identities of the assassins.

PARKERSON: What did he say?

O'CONNOR: "Dagoes."

Beat

PARKERSON: Did anyone else hear?

Beat

O'CONNOR: Does that matter?

END OF THE OPERA

¹² Spoken by Parkerson at the Prison, via eyewitness and newspaper reports.

¹³ Origin unknown