

FRANK PESCI

THE STRANGERS

Opera in a Prologue and Eight Scenes

Fourth Draft: Köln Bayenthal
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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 (Mezzo-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 Soprano) – A Sicilian immigrant in New Orleans. Early 20s, Polizzi’s lover.

MAMA ROMA – (Mezzo-Soprano) Iania’s mother; the family’s matriarch.

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

CATARINA ROMA – (Light Lyric Soprano) 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, police officers, 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 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 you are good citizens. Send us the names of every bad man, every criminal,
and every suspected person of your race in the city.
We intend to put vendettas to an end, peaceably and lawfully if we can, violently and
summarily if we must.*

First Scene Girod Street, New Orleans - October 15, 1890

DAVID HENNESSY and BILL O'CONNOR come to a crossroad and bid each other good night. A moment's calm is broken by the reports of shotguns and pistols, Several men race across the stage with a bloody Hennessy in pursuit. He fires, collapses and yells for help. O'Connor comes running, asking who the assailants were. Hennessy whispers into his ear.

Second Scene Piccola Palermo

MAMA, ZIA, and CATARINA are in an interior courtyard of a tenement building, the sounds of the Sicilians (Chorus) are heard offstage. IANIA ROMA enters, asking if they have seen her lover, "Manni," who has been out all evening.

The WOMEN retire, and EMANUELLE POLIZZI enters, with a bundle under his arm. Delicately, Iania questions him. He tries to allay her fears, but admits that bleak thoughts have been creeping in again. Polizzi shifts the bundle, and a gun falls out.

Iania is alarmed. Polizzi hesitates, then says that he found it in the street. He decided to take it so that he could be strong and protect her. 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, MARGARET HENNESSY by his side. BILL O'CONNOR and WILLIAM PARKERSON hover, trying to get him to publicly identify the assailants. He replies, "I'm not going to die. I'll get over this. These people can't kill me."

Overheard by Hennessy and his mother, Parkerson and O'Connor discuss the many enemies the Chief has made. His meddling in a dispute between two Sicilian family businesses convinces them that immigrants are to blame. As they discuss what action to take, their words are played out in...

Piccola Palermo. POLICE (Men's Chorus) storm the courtyard and enter the tenements. They emerge dragging Polizzi. Iania, tries to intervene, but is forcibly thrown back. Mama,

Zia, Catarina, and the SICILIAN WOMEN (Women’s chorus), weep and pray to St. Joseph to protect their men.

Fourth Scene
Orleans Parish Prison - October 16, 1890

Polizzi is terrified. Iania and her relatives enter, posing as witnesses. O’Connor enters and, realizing that Iania has lied about being a witness, pulls her away for questioning. When asked if Polizzi has a gun, she hesitates. O’Connor becomes violent, threatening her with deportation. She denies that Polizzi has a gun, and says that he was with her all night. O’Connor orders the police to search her tenement.

Fearing she will be caught in a lie, Polizzi has a mental break. He proclaims to know the Sicilians in the secret society – the Mafia – responsible for the attack. Sensing Polizzi’s vulnerability, O’Connor tells him that Iania will betray him to save herself, and encourages Polizzi to turn in other Sicilian men and save himself before it’s too late.

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

MOURNERS (Chorus) sing a *Requiem*. Parkerson addresses the congregation, laying the blame at the feet of the Sicilians. Hidden among the mourners are Mama, Zia, and Catarina, who mingle prayers for the Chief with those for Iania and Polizzi. At the head of the congregation, Margaret Hennessy reflects on women who naively wait at home while their men fight their battles. In the face of her son’s hubris and the talk of using his death to advance the aims of the greedy and arrogant, she cannot remain silent and enable the destruction of his memory.

Interlude

Parkerson sings:

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

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 city’s residents into frenzy, accusing the Sicilians of mocking America with their song. The city declares, “They are among us, but they are not of us.” The musics of the Sicilians and Parkerson clash 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.

HE dies.

Eighth Scene
Orleans Parish Prison - March 14, 1891

Polizzi waits in prison for his release. The taunts of the coming MOB (Chorus) are heard. A GUARD opens the door, and begs Polizzi to hide, but he is paralyzed by fear. He thinks of Iania, and the life they could have had. MEN with guns enter suddenly. After a moment's hesitation, they shoot Polizzi and drag him from the cell.

Outside the Prison, the LYNCH MOB howls for blood. Parkerson exits, stricken by the carnage within; he hasn't the stomach for killing. Polizzi, still alive, is produced to the crowds delight. He is violently killed.

At the urging of O'Connor, Parkerson blesses the crowd's action, and they all exit triumphantly. As they exit, the body of Polizzi is revealed, stood over by Iania, who was hidden amongst the crowd. From off-stage, comes the sound of a drinking song proclaiming honor and justice. 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. Margaret weeps over Hennessy's 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."

PARKERSON: Did anyone else hear?

O'CONNOR: Does that matter?

END OF THE OPERA