

# THE STRANGERS

an opera in two acts

Music by Frank Pesci  
Libretto by Andrew Altenbach

March 2022

*please discard earlier versions*

Treatment, synopsis and libretto © copyright 2022 Frank Pesci and Andrew Altenbach  
THIS DOCUMENT IS FOR INTERNAL PRODUCTION USE ONLY AND MAY NOT BE SHARED

## CONTENTS

A TRUE STORY ♦ HISTORICAL CONTEXT ♦ THE STRANGERS .....	3
PROJECT at a GLANCE ♦ CHARACTERS ♦ THEMES .....	4
SYNOPSIS .....	5
LIBRETTO .....	8

## A TRUE STORY

On October 15, 1890, unknown assailants murdered New Orleans Chief of Police David Hennessy. A group of eleven Sicilian immigrants were arrested, tried, and acquitted of the crime, but then lynched by an angry mob. In this dramatization, Post-Reconstruction tensions and a burgeoning nationalist movement serve as the backdrop to a conflict between immigrants, the ruling class, and law enforcement.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This episode laid bare the power of violent anti-immigrant rhetoric in America, coinciding with the dawn of a new nationalism and the codification of an Anglo-Saxon standard for citizenship.

The lynching, however horrific, was generally accepted across the country as an example of honorable justice and community protection. The complex emotional and societal foundations of power and xenophobia, its translation of fear into violence, and the ramifications on its victims and perpetrators hold particular relevance today. Global refugee crises continue unabated, as do the wide range of cultural and governmental responses – from acceptance and assimilation to violent rejection and expulsion. The same sentiments toward foreigners in late-19th century America and the use of fear to prop up societal structure in the face of perceived external threats are central to contemporary nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric worldwide.

Mark Twain wrote: “History never repeats itself, but it rhymes.” One work of art is not enough to illuminate such sprawling injustice and human cruelty. By placing history on a level stage, however, society can examine and recognize the rhyming nature of our historical narratives.

## THE STRANGERS

This opera follows the paths of four characters: **Iania Roma**, a young Sicilian immigrant whose family is torn apart by allegations against her immigrant fiancé, **Emmanuelle Polizzi**. Police detective **Billy O’Connor** sows xenophobic sentiments to foster chaos and political gain; he could also be responsible for the murder of police chief, **David Hennessy**. For his part, Hennessy has lived a life of great violence and ambition. He has wielded power through legitimate and nefarious ways throughout his career. Even in death, he realizes the mystery of his murderers gives him a sense of eternal power.

## THE PROJECT at a GLANCE

Projected Running Time: 100 minutes of music. Intermission possible after Scene 4.

Setting: New Orleans, late 1890 - early 1891: “Piccola Palermo” (the Sicilian ghetto), Charity Hospital, Orleans Parish Prison, Girod Street, the statue of Henry Clay on Canal Street, and Hennessy’s Funeral at St. Joseph’s Church.

Vocal Roles:

9 Principals – 5 women, 4 men; Ensemble – SATB (minimum of 4, see below for details)

Orchestration options:

- "New Orleans Traditional" - 8 players (clarinet, trumpet, trombone, piano, guitar/banjo, vibraphone, drum set, double bass)
- Britten-style Chamber Orchestra - 16 players (1.1.1.1 - 1.1.1.0, pno, gt/bj, vib, dr, 2vn, via, vc, db)
- Full pit orchestration - 19 players plus strings (2.2.2.2 - 4.2.2.1, pno, gt/bj, vib, dr, str.)

## CHARACTERS

### **Principal Roles (9 Singers)**

IANIA ROMA (Soprano) – A Sicilian immigrant in New Orleans.

EMMANUELLE POLIZZI (Tenor) – Iania’s fiancé; a Sicilian immigrant and one of many accused for the murder of Hennessy. He is often referred to as “Mani.”

BILLY O’CONNOR (Tenor) – a superintendent of a private detective force, employed by the ruling classes of the city.

DAVID HENNESSY (Baritone) – New Orleans Chief of Police.

WILLIAM PARKERSON (Bass-Baritone) – Wealthy and influential member of the city’s social and political elite.

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

MAMA ROMA (Mezzo-Soprano) – Iania’s mother.

CATARINA ROMA (Coloratura Soprano) – Iania’s younger sister.

ZIA FRANCESCA (Zwischenfach) – Iania’s maternal aunt.

### **Ensemble**

The Ensemble serves in the traditional choral role, in comprimario roles, and as supernumeraries. Evenly split SATB, the Ensemble can consist of as few as four singers, or multiplied as space and necessity allows (ideally 2-6 per part).

### **Chamber Casting**

The actors portraying Mama, Catarina, and Zia can be utilized as ensemble members. In this configuration, the addition of two tenors and two basses, and either Margaret or Iania, can form an 8-voice Ensemble for the larger choral moments.

## THEMES

Power – The pursuit, loss of, and manipulation of power in a society - between classes, and between individuals.

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

## SYNOPSIS

**Prologue:** “New Orleans is overrun.” WILLIAM PARKERSON bemoans the influx of “tramps and paupers” who flood the city to replace slave labor. Putting its faith in “the good people of New Orleans,” Parkerson and the Council of Fifty (ENSEMBLE) implores the city’s Sicilian residents to “dig out the criminals of your race.”

**First Scene:** October 15, 1890; just before midnight. DAVID HENNESSY and BILLY O’CONNOR stroll through a sultry evening mist. Hennessy sings an aria of his city, one’s path through its grime and struggle, and his expansive future plans, now that he’s on the other side. (“Nothing like the October air in New Orleans”). The two shake hands and part ways. Gunfire rends the night; a bloodied, staggering Hennessy curses and fires at his hidden assailants, then calls out to his friend before collapsing.

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?

Hennessy strains to whisper in O’Connor’s ear as the lights fade.

**Second Scene:** Piccola Palermo, the Sicilian ghetto; that same night. IANIA ROMA enters, looking for her fiancé, “Mani.” Iania and CATARINA bicker about their ties to Sicily and their future in their new home. MAMA ROMA and ZIA FRANCESCA interrupt the argument with startling news - Mama was assaulted earlier in the day, with vile epithets thrown at her by women and children. The four women consider *la via vecchia*, the old family traditions brought from Sicily, and *la via nuova*, a completely new way of life in America. Mama, Zia and Caterina leave Iania alone, wrestling with the question of how to honor the old ways while embracing the new (“But at night, I’m afraid”).

EMMANUELLE POLIZZI, enters hurriedly with a bundle under his arm and manic ideas about his future. Suddenly, a gun drops from Polizzi’s bundle, and Iania is terrified. He calms her, and they sing to each other about their fears, hopes, and how they must cling to each other to survive (“With only you can I live”).

**Third Scene:** Charity Hospital; October 16, 1890, just before 1AM. O’Connor and a few policemen (Ensemble) barge in, carrying a mortally wounded Hennessy. Nurses (Ensemble) begin to attend to the Chief. WILLIAM PARKERSON enters and tries to get Hennessy to publicly identify the assailants. Hennessy brushes him off.

MARGARET HENNESSY enters, and rushes to her son’s bedside. They share a tender moment as Parkerson and O’Connor retreat to a corner of the room.

Parkerson: ...what did he say?

O’Connor: “Dagos.”

Parkerson: Did anyone else hear?

O’Connor: Does it matter?

Margaret clasps her rosary, pondering the *Mater dolorosa* (“What can a mother say?”). Overheard by Hennessy and his mother, Parkerson and O’Connor declare that Sicilians are responsible and a price must be paid.

**Fourth Scene:** Piccola Palermo; October 16 1890, just before dawn. Polizzi is agitated. Iania tries to calm him, singing a Sicilian lullaby. She tells him about her mother’s assault, and broaches the subject of leaving New Orleans to start anew. Polizzi rejects the idea, fearing a break up of the family and the dangers that may lie outside the city. They hear voices in the

tenement - shouts, commands, shock. O'Connor and a few policemen (Ensemble) burst into the apartment, arrest Polizzi, and threaten Iania. As they take him away, Mama and the Sicilian women pray to St. Joseph - patron of Sicily - for protection. Stunned, Iania weeps and is swept up in their prayer. (*optional intermission*)

**Fifth Scene:** Orleans Parish Prison; October 16 1890, just after sunrise. Bored Policemen (Ensemble) gossip about the Chief's shooting ("Everyone's got a gun"). They quiet down as O'Connor enters, crossing directly to a cell holding Polizzi. O'Connor accuses him of being a foot soldier of organized crime. Polizzi accuses O'Connor of corruption, saying he deserves equal suspicion. O'Connor recounts a dream about Sicilian immigrants being loaded onto a ship, which is then swallowed by the sea. ("Last night I had a beautiful dream").

Unseen by Polizzi, Iania enters to beg for his release. O'Connor corners her and she agrees to a bargain, taking the police back to her tenement to hand over Polizzi's gun in exchange for leniency and, potentially, liberty for both of them. Polizzi catches a glimpse of Iania as she leaves and O'Connor tells him that she has betrayed him. Refusing to accept it, Polizzi's rage dissolves into despair as he wonders if he will ever see her again ("I will wait").

**Sixth Scene:** Charity Hospital; October 16, 1890, mid-morning. Hennessy, on his deathbed ("In, out... clumsy lugs"), flashes back to the violent death of his father - also a policeman. The tragedy left him and his mother destitute, setting him on a rocky path that led to the city's upper echelons. He hears the whispers around him, eagerly awaiting his impending martyrdom, but he will not satisfy them. By keeping the identity of his murderers to himself, he will attain the most power through the memory of his deeds. He dies, and the scene transforms into...

St. Joseph's Church; October 17 1890. Hennessy's funeral is the largest the city has ever seen. The congregation sings the *Requiem*, and Margaret reflects on the death of her child ("Mary watched her child on a tree"). Parkerson's eulogy shifts tone; there are cries for retribution and the congregation sings the *Dies irae*. Apart from the scene, Iania holds vigil. She prays for Polizzi, and for strength during the coming trial.

**Seventh Scene:** Piccola Palermo; March 14, 1891. The trial of Sicilian men - including Polizzi - for the Chief's assassination has gone to the Jury, and the city waits. Iania sees the path before Polizzi - New Orleans will not rest until Sicilian blood flows. She questions the wisdom of her loyalty, resolving to strike out from the city without him ("The hateful hands of the clock stare me down").

Mama, Zia and Caterina burst into the room with the news that the Sicilians have been acquitted, and the anger of the city runs hot. Iania tells them to gather everyone in the tenement; they will greet Polizzi when he emerges from prison.

In the Parish Prison, a victory song rings out - loud and triumphant - amongst Polizzi and other Sicilian men (Ensemble). At the statue of Henry Clay, O'Connor whips the citizens of New Orleans into frenzy, Parkerson egging him on. The musics clash violently.

From his cell, Polizzi hears the sound of an approaching crowd and believes it to be his countrymen, coming to bring them home. Above it, he thinks he hears Iania's lullaby and he calls out to her. Her music fades, drowned out by the crowd. He realizes that the crowd's song is not jubilant, but righteous, and calling for vengeance. He can hear voices inside the prison: shouts, commands, shock. Men with guns (Ensemble) - O'Connor among them - enter his cell.

There is a moment of calm as Polizzi and O'Connor regard each other. Then, the men raise their weapons and cut Polizzi down at the lights black out.

**Epilogue:** There is a jarring calm after the terror of the lynching. Lights slowly reveal the Ensemble, singing a lilting song about tides, light, and power. They engage in a call and response with four principals: O'Connor will continue on his path of consuming power; Margaret wanders the chapels of the city, looking for God; Parkerson engages on a national speaking tour to bear testimony to the lynching. Iania reflects on the horror that has destroyed her life. She wonders if Mani's soul will now fly to new realms and if he will be as unwelcome there as he was on earth. She hopes he will find the Golden Doors of a new world, which was promised to both of them.

The entire cast sings the final lines of Emma Lazarus's poem, "The New Colossus":

*"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

...

END OF THE OPERA

## LIBRETTO

**Prologue** *New Orleans, 1891. Alone on stage is William Parkerson: wealthy, influential, and righteous, he is a mixture of “silk-stocking” gentility and bare-knuckle hostility. He sets the scene:*

PARKERSON

New Orleans is overrun:  
Tramps and paupers pumped into our city  
to replace slave labor.  
One bad class for another.

These Sicilians, so strange!  
These dagos bear watching.  
They're not as tame as they appear to be.  
Their ambitions percolate in private places.

Allowing steamers of immigrants to land in New Orleans  
only encourages their crimes.

*Lights up on the “Council of Fifty” (Ensemble) - a citizen’s committee tasked with collecting evidence and information pertaining to the assassination of Police Chief David C. Hennessy. Parkerson takes his place among them.*

We advise:  
a better class of Italians  
should police the rest.

COUNCIL OF FIFTY (ENSEMBLE)

Give us, send us, come forward  
Now  
We believe in honesty and industry  
We believe in the good people of the city

We believe the **good** people of New Orleans

Give us, send us, come forward  
Now

We pursue what you know and who you know  
Dig out the criminals in your race  
Banish all *vendettas* with one final, lethal, blow

Upon you lies this power. Upon you lies this responsibility  
Give us, send us, come forward  
Now



**First Scene** *Girod Street, New Orleans - the waning hours of October 15, 1891. David Hennessy and Billy O'Connor are strolling down the street, clearly having been drinking.*

HENNESSY

Nothing like the October air in New Orleans  
Warm mist and cool breezes  
The smell of the water invigorates me.  
I love this stinking, rough town  
I know how to play it.  
Every citizen claws for a better life...  
A life about what you can take,  
And not what you need.  
That's why I love it, I do.  
Who the hell wants to be stuck in the filth?  
Who the hell wants to be hungry or dead?  
Can you get above the fray before the tides tear in?  
Or will you be swept away?  
Silt, sediment, and shit?  
Not me. I won't be swept away, 'cause  
I know how to play this town

O'CONNOR

Indeed you do, Chief.  
Everyone knows your courage  
You know how to fight for justice...  
Or at least *arrange* it.  
This shit world spins better because of you.

HENNESSY

Ha! Yes it does!  
I'm on the ladder, Billy.  
Running this town, hell, maybe  
Even this country, with its "pure" values! Ha!  
Destiny calls me!

*The two men shake hands and part ways. After a moment of silence, a barrage of gunfire rends the night. Hennessy is hit several times; he is knocked sideways, but remains on two feet. A moment of confusion turns to panic then clarity and anger. He pulls out his gun to fire back, laughing between groans.*

HENNESSY

Pigs, bastards, I'll kill you!  
You think you can do me in?

*Starting to fail, he reaches to steady himself, but collapses, screaming...*

BILLY!!

*O'Connor comes running, stops cold upon seeing the scene, and scans the surroundings while calmly approaching Hennessy.*

HENNESSY

They gave it to me Billy, and I gave it back the best I could.

O'CONNOR

Who gave it to you?

*O'Connor leans closer; Hennessy whispers into his ear, as the scene fades out.*

**Second Scene** *"Piccola Palermo," the Sicilian ghetto. The same night. Iania enters*

IANIA

Mama? Zia? Catarina?  
Have you seen Mani tonight?

*Iania enters. There is tension between them. Their argument overlaps each other.*

CATARINA

See? I told you he's no good.  
He's crazy and volatile.  
He stinks of the old world.

IANIA

You are wrong, sorella  
You are a coward! *Mi schifosa!*  
You are ashamed of *la Patria*,  
But we did not come here out of shame.  
Our beloved homeland was falling  
into holes of poverty and revolt.  
Safety and opportunity brought us here;.

CATARINA *mocking her*

"Our beloved homeland!"  
This is America.  
We are Americans now,  
and when you are with him,  
you hold this family back.

*Mama and Zia enter.*

MAMA ROMA

What are you talking about?

*Mama looks stricken, and Zia assists her walking; Iania and Caterina rush to her aid.*

ZIA FRANCESCA

Some ladies assaulted her today.  
Called her ugly and dirty.  
They asked, when would our worthless class go home? When will it all end?  
Even their children mocked us:  
“Dirty Dagos, dumb as clams!”  
Mama didn’t understand most of it,  
but she knew those kids spat poison at her.

IANIA

I wish Mani were here.  
He always knows how to make you laugh.

MAMA

I’m with you, so I’m happy.  
*To both Iania and Caterina*  
So, what are you talking about?

MAMA and ZIA

*La via vecchia? E la via nuova?*  
The men work, the women do everything else.  
We know our roles, we know who we can trust.  
Trust in family, not strangers.

Opportunity is like a phantom.  
*Pane e lavoro - ask the Padrones, most goes to them in the end!*

*Chi lascia la via vecchia per la nuova,  
sa quel che perde e non sa quel che trova!*

IANIA and CATERINA *translating*

“She who left the old way for the new  
knows what she leaves behind,  
but not what she will find.”

MAMA

I hope Mani returns soon.

MAMA and ZIA

Sleep, child...

*Mama and Zia exit. Caterina turns on Iania again, who raises a hand.*

IANIA

We can be Americans and Sicilians.  
My heart chooses both.

*Catarina scoffs and leaves. Iania is alone.*

But at night I'm afraid  
This city does not shield us  
And opportunity is like a phantom  
While the *padrones* sharpen their knives with lies.  
Mani, my Mani  
Mani's mind lives in a storm  
That I cannot quell.  
But his heart is as big as the gulf,  
And his eyes shine like a Mediterranean morning,  
And we tether to one another  
With bonds of kindness and love.

*Polizzi enters hurriedly with a bundle under his arm.*

POLIZZI

Iania!

LANIA

Mani! Where have you been?

POLIZZI

*Non importa*, my love

LANIA

I was so worried, and I want to talk about....

POLIZZI *interrupting*

No!

I'm sorry we fought with such bitterness.

Let us plan for tomorrow.

I have big new plans, Iania, big plans!

*He becomes more animated, bordering on mania.*

We can make it here, Iania.

This city is starved for workers,

And as your mother said,

Here, there is opportunity.

Here, there is power.

*He continues to obsess about his "big plans." Iania turns inward.*

LANIA

When I landed in this country,

I saw the most beautiful lady.

Her face was calm and hands were smooth,

and her rippling blue dress rivaled the ocean's beauty.

In our rags, I looked at my mother:  
Skin dried out from the wind,  
hands swollen and scarred from labor.  
But in the fire in her eyes and the steel of her voice,  
She said, Here...Here is the door to our new life.  
I knew this place was a new beginning  
It lead me to you.

*She turns to him, but he is still absorbed in his own thoughts.*

But when your eyes fill with disdain  
and your voice brims with fear,  
My heart cannot anchor in this shifting tide.

POLIZZI

But then the angry voices swim inside me  
And my thoughts are like muddy waters  
Fear and mistrust are everywhere.  
When the demons creep into my mind...

*They finally locks eyes, and sing to each other*

IANIA

We need a new life  
A new shore.

POLIZZI

...you are my sole consolation,  
the iron anchor of my life.

*They move to enter the tenement. Polizzi picks up his bundle, and a revolver falls out. The tender moment broken, they argue fiercely.*

IANIA *gasps*

What is that?  
Why is it here?  
What have you done?

POLIZZI

*Calma, carina.* Do not worry.  
Only another piece of armor to protect us.

IANIA

I hate it! My skin feels like ice.

POLIZZI

My love, please do not worry.  
If it haunts you, I promise to get rid of it...soon.

*Suddenly very fearful*

There are so many cruel voices,  
The shadows twisting everywhere around me.  
I wish only to feel strong for you.

*They embrace*

Only with you can I live in life's turmoil.  
Only with you can I chase away the dark  
Only with you can I find a new shore...

*They enter the tenement together.*

**Third Scene** *Charity Hospital, shortly before 1am on October 16, 1891. Sleepy nurses (Ensemble) are jarred into action when Billy O'Connor and a few police officers (Ensemble) burst in carrying a bloodied, but conscious David Hennessy.*

O'CONNOR

The Chief was ambushed.  
I think there are at least six wounds...

ENSEMBLE *echoing*  
...six wounds.

O'CONNOR

...but he did not fall!

ENSEMBLE

His wrists, his legs, his back,  
his lungs, his face, his neck.  
Six wounds!  
But he did not fall!

O'CONNOR, *with* ENSEMBLE *echoing*

But he didn't fall,  
he drew his gun, and with a steady hand,  
returned fire!

*Margaret Hennessy enters, and the room stands still for a moment. The nurses return to their work. O'Connor hears something offstage to and goes to investigate.*

ENSEMBLE

His wrists, his legs, his back,  
his lungs, his face, his neck.  
Six wounds!  
One question:  
Who did this?

HENNESSY *to Margaret*

Mama, don't cry.  
I will get over this.  
I'm not gonna die.  
Go home; I'll meet you there.

*One of the police officers brings a chair, and Margaret sits beside her son's bed, a vision of stoic calm. O'Connor returns and whispers orders to one of the policemen, who in turn sets the room buzzing.*

ENSEMBLE

Mister Parkerson's on his way.  
Silk stockings and bare knuckles.  
The voice of wealth and power.

*William Parkerson enters, O'Connor holds the door for him. Everyone is awestruck and a little afraid of him. Soon after, the commotion in the room crescendos and everyone begins to talk over each other.*

PARKERSON

What happened?  
Who did this?  
We should clear the room.

O'CONNOR *to Parkerson*

An ambush near his home.

ENSEMBLE

But he didn't fall!

HENNESSY

I'm not gonna die.  
They can't do me in...

MARGARET

Rest now, rest now...

O'CONNOR *to Hennessy*

Chief, do you remember what you whispered to me?  
Tell them who did this.

ALL

Who did this?  
Who did this?!

PARKERSON *to Hennessy*

Chief, can you make a declaration?

HENNESSY

No, I don't think I'm that bad off.

*Parkerson is visibly dissatisfied with Hennessy's answer. Before he can protest, O'Connor pulls Parkerson aside. Whispering into his ear, O'Connor reveals what he heard Hennessy whisper. Parkerson sees an opportunity. Margaret watches the two men.*

PARKERSON

What did he say?

O'CONNOR

"Dagos."

PAKERSON

Did anyone else hear?

O'CONNOR

Does it matter?

*Margaret turns her attention to her son.*

MARGARET

God, be merciful. Davey's my good boy.  
I thought I would be the first to go,  
but they are taking him from me.

HENNESSY

Why are you here, Mother?  
I'm alright now.  
Go home and stay there.  
I'll get well and I'll be there after a while.

NURSES (Ensemble)

Rest now, rest now...

*Exhausted, Hennessy drifts off to sleep. The commotion around him subsides, leaving Margaret alone with him. She produces a rosary from her bag and, with shaking hands, begins to pray. Her attentions are split between her adoration of the Blessed Virgin, and the horror that lies before her.*

MARGARET

What can a mother say?  
What can a mother do?  
*Ave Maria, gratia plena,  
Dominus te cum,  
Benedictus tu in mulieribus...*  
You build your little ones up  
And watch the world erode them.



*...et benedictus fructus ventris tui...*

Should I have led him away from this life?  
Away from the daily currencies of violence and anger?  
A boy marches into his father's shadow,  
The shadow of death,  
slipped away into a violent valley

*Sancta Maria, Mater Dei...*

What can a mother say?  
What can a mother do?  
*...ora pro nobis peccatoribus,  
nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.*

*Parkerson and O'Connor pick up their conversation; Hennessy and Margaret overhear.  
Occasionally, Margaret can be heard saying the rosary.*

PARKERSON

Martyrs have power...great power.  
We have to avenge the Chief's death.

O'CONNOR

The chief was never short on friends...or enemies.  
Police, *Mafiosi*, corrupt politicians.  
He knew how to fight for justice,  
Or at least *arrange* it.

PARKERSON

Yes, he could get any job done.  
And when bodies got scattered along the way,  
he'd say, "So what? Does it matter?"

O'CONNOR and ENSEMBLE *echoing*

Does it matter?

HENNESSY *to himself*

I'm not going to die...

PARKERSON

These foreign families who are taking over the docks - they're to blame.  
Bringing nothing but babies and disease...

O'CONNOR

...and crime, and words like:  
*Mafiosi, vendetta,*  
new words one hears on the streets and at the docks.

PARKERSON

The docks are overrun.  
They're working so hard,  
so drunk and never learning a word of English.  
Yet they do work hard, you know.  
So many hours.  
One wonders where they find the time to breed.

PARKERSON and O'CONNOR

But where does the money go?  
Back home, back to *la Patria*.  
Breeding like rats.  
Bleeding our markets dry.  
They sink in their teeth and then float away,  
Fat with our blood!

PARKERSON

These Sicilians! So strange!  
Too dark to be white,  
too light to be black,  
they don't belong here!

ALL *but Hennessy*

And look what they did!

*The hospital room fades to darkness. With a nod from Parkerson, O'Connor remains alone on stage, delivering orders to the city's police.*

O'CONNOR

Throw out your nets  
There will be no mercy, no mercy.  
Scour their neighborhoods and report  
Where they go, what they say, what they do, who they bed.  
Throw out your nets.  
Clean the waters.

*He becomes emboldened, relishing the power he has been given.*

This foul language, this foul culture,  
Defiles our bodies and borders  
Redeem this city, this land – our land  
Throw out your nets.  
Clean the waters.

**Fourth Scene** *Piccola Palermo; the wee hours of October 16, 1890. It is tense between Iania and Polizzi. He has retreated into his thoughts; she is trying to coax him out, singing a Sicilian lullaby. Occasionally, he mutters to himself.*

IANIA

Mani, please come to me  
Your eyes are red  
Your hands are raw  
You have paced all night...

POLIZZI *mumbling*

*Cinquantasei migle, otto coperte, due stilette, cibo, ...*  
I haven't seen anything..not anyone

IANIA

*Guardami nel'occhi!*  
Where are you?  
What are you counting?  
Rivers of figures I don't understand  
  
Some ladies assaulted Mama today  
Maybe Catarina was right...  
Mani...  
We must leave.

POLIZZI

No, Iania! Not this again.  
*La famiglia* must remain together  
*La famiglia* above everything

IANIA

They can come with us  
As long as we have each other,  
We are family.  
We can grow our family.

POLIZZI

Deep inside, you know I want this.  
But if we flee,  
Will we be hunted forever?  
Our eyes forever peering between the leaves,  
Our tracks baiting the bloodhounds?

The hunters, the police  
I cannot bear it, O God!

*He begins pacing again, gesticulating frantically.*

*Cinquantasei migle, otto coperte, due stilette, cibo  
Due, seicento, dodici, sessantatre*  
The thick mud, the the clattering footsteps,  
thunderous breaks upon our roof.  
They rain inside my head.  
Ah, they are closing in!

IANIA

I am here, *caro*.

*She reaches for him, takes his hand, and pulls him close. Cradling him, she takes up the lullaby once more. Hearing her song, he begins to breathe easier, and folds himself into her embrace. They share a moment of peace.*

*Indistinct voices are heard off-stage: commands, shock, fear. Iania and Polizzi become aware of a growing threat. Soon, angry voices are right outside. There are two bangs at the door, and police officers (Ensemble) burst into the room. They separate the two lovers. There is various, overlapping text: no, stop, ferma, let go, come here, quiet.*

POLICE *grabbing Polizzi*

Let's go you slimy Dago

POLIZZI

Please, no! I've done nothing wrong!

*Once Polizzi is subdued, Billy O'Connor enters the room.*

O'CONNOR *calmly, to Polizzi*

We want to question you,  
Find out what you know, who you know,  
Where you go...  
Our spies say you disappear sometimes ...just, poof!  
And nobody knows where you've been.  
This is your big chance  
Make things easier for you...for her...

IANIA

Why are you doing this?  
Can't you see we are frightened?

POLIZZI

*Iani, tace. Tace! No dice nulla!*

*To O'Connor*

I know why you are here  
But I am innocent  
I love this city, this country,

I work very hard for my family, very hard.  
I am good person for America.

O'CONNOR *laughs and shakes his head*  
Nonsense.  
You know more than you're telling us.

*He looks around with a sneer.*  
My God, you people....  
Rats keep nicer homes.

POLIZZI *suddenly defiant*  
I no go anywhere with you!

O'CONNOR  
I wasn't asking.

*One of the police officers puts his hands on Iania. She is repulsed and slaps him. The policeman recoils and then uses the palm of his hand against her face to push her into the wall. Polizzi erupts in rage. There is a struggle; the police are jarred by his bucking and twisting.*

POLIZZI *shouting*  
Ahh, you no touch her!  
*Attenzione!* I warn you  
You no want me for enemy...

O'CONNOR and POLICE  
You animals should have stayed in Sicily!  
This is OUR land,  
and God is watching...

*The policeman who assaulted Iania breaks the window. Outside, women's voices are heard. Polizzi is taken away, their struggle can be heard off-stage. O'Connor lingers, looking at Iania.*

LANIA  
*Figg'h'i buttana!*

O'CONNOR  
Careful with that filthy little tongue...

*O'connor exits. Iania, stunned, stands alone in the room. After a moment, Mama and Zia enter cautiously, then rush to Iania. Holding her tight, they pray to St. Joseph - Patron of Sicily, immigrants, and workers - for protection. As they pray, Sicilian women throughout the tenement join their prayer.*

MAMA, ZIA and SICILIAN WOMEN (ENSEMBLE)  
O St. Joseph, whose protection is so swift, so strong

Before the throne of God we place in you all our desires.  
O St. Joseph, Assist us with your power,  
Intercede and bring us blessings.

Most loving of fathers, most divine of sons  
We press our hearts to yours.

O St. Joseph, with the infant Jesus in your arms.  
Kiss His fine head for us,  
that He may return the kiss at our dying breath.

IANIA

Simple shadows devour him,  
but will nothing swallow the pain  
Swimming through my heart?  
These shattered panes cannot protect us,  
cannot shield us.  
The simple shadows devour him  
and erode our peace.

MAMA, ZIA and WOMEN

O St. Joseph....

*If necessary, an intermission can be placed here.*

**Fifth Scene** *Orleans Parish Prison; October 16, 1890, just after sunrise. Bored Policemen (Ensemble) are sitting outside Polizzi's cell, flipping through the newspaper's early edition and swapping gossip about the shooting of the Chief.*

FIRST POLICEMAN

Who did it? Who did it?

SECOND POLICEMAN

Does it matter?

FIRST POLICEMAN

Our precious Chief...

SECOND POLICEMAN

...our shining knight!

BOTH

Oh, who cares?  
Everyone's got a gun!

FIRST POLICEMAN

I heard he named his assailants.

SECOND POLICEMAN

I heard it was an inside job.

FIRST POLICEMAN

I heard his fingers were in too many pies.

SECOND POLICEMAN

I heard we picked up every Dago in town.

FIRST POLICEMAN

I heard we picked up everything that was brown.

SECOND POLICEMAN

I heard it doesn't even matter...

BOTH

'cos everybody's got a gun!

*O'Connor enters, glaring at the Bored Policemen, who straighten up, and pretend to be vigilant. O'Connor leans against the bars of Polizzi's cell, coolly addressing him.*

O'CONNOR

Ready to talk? Ready to help?

*He waits for a response from Polizzi; none comes.*

We know things, Polizzi  
The *Mafiosi* have used you, abandoned you.  
Help us fight them, Polizzi  
People like you and me  
Only want peace.

POLIZZI

You have no want of peace.  
You are only a jackal,  
Feeding off the miserable leftovers of others.  
Maybe even those of the Chief?

O'CONNOR

Last night, I had a beautiful dream.  
Look there! A huge boat!  
Warm sun caressing its decks,  
gently rocking like a cradle,

Into it we loaded all of your women, all your children -  
all your pretty little chickens - into its seething, hungry hull.  
Sailing out to sea, skidding over the waves.  
Then the sky smiled red and the sea boiled black.

And with a crack of justice, God sank that boat.

Down it plunged through ghost gray whirlpools  
Every dream, every memory,  
Gone beneath the soft silt and black dark rock.  
The stories of your people, Polizzi,  
Sucked down into the depths  
Of my fantasy.

POLIZZI

O'Connor...  
Your parents were strangers here too, no?

*O'Connor chuckles and moves to exit. Unseen by Polizzi, Iania enters and approaches O'Connor.*

IANIA

You know why I am here,  
Give him back to me.

O'CONNOR

Your Mani sits in a cage with his lies.  
Maybe he will share the truth...with all of us.

IANIA

*Non...non capisco.*

O'CONNOR

Oh, I think you...*capisco*... more than you admit

*He changes his tone.*

You must know the *Mafiosi* infect his mind  
destroying your chances for better lives.

IANIA

No, Mani cares for me...  
For *la famiglia*...

O'CONNOR

When he disappears, do YOU know where he goes?  
We do.  
We have tracked him through the alleys.

IANIA *scoffing*

*Tu menti!*  
You are lying.



O'CONNOR

Tell me,  
Does Mani keep weapons?

*This catches Iania off guard. She hesitates for a moment, then moves to leave. He catches her by the wrist, pulling her toward him. It quickly becomes too intimate for her.*

What's behind those walls?  
What's behind those eyes?

IANIA *pulling her hand away violently*  
Only a *stiletto* for you if you touch me again!

O'CONNOR *a little surprised by her reaction*  
Mani is just a pawn,  
bargaining your future for empty loyalty.

IANIA  
Please, oh please  
Just give him back to me.

O'CONNOR  
I can offer a way out.  
Go with my police,  
If he has weapons, turn them over  
and I can secure *libertá* for you both.

*O'Connor motions to the Bored Policemen, who escort Iania out. As they leave, O'Connor makes sure that Polizzi can see her exit. Polizzi leaps up and runs to the bars of his cell, calling after her.*

POLIZZI *spoken*  
Iania! Where are you going with these men?  
Come back!  
COME BACK!

*Polizzi is a storm of emotions. O'Connor takes advantage.*

O'CONNOR  
Emmanuelle Polizzi, Iania has betrayed you.  
She stands for honesty, while your lies poison the air.  
She says you are with the *Mafia*,  
conspiring against the city,  
responsible for the murder of the Chief!

She is ashamed of you, Polizzi.  
What have you done to your family?  
Now she has a chance to be free,  
and move on to a better life.

*O'Connor exits. Polizzi stands in the prison cell, a streak of light beaming in onto his face.*

POLIZZI

I will wait...I will wait  
I will coil patiently until the time is right  
to strike down this tyrant.  
Only now do I crave *vendetta*  
Only now does the conflict fuel me.  
When you spit in our faces,  
offer no respect or reward  
for our muscle or hustle,  
we will wait...we will wait...

*He stumbles out of the light, his anger having dissipated into sadness.*

But maybe I am just a stupid fool,  
just shame to the family and a squandered future.  
Maybe my hopes are nothing  
but useless specks stamped into the dirt.  
Iania...  
As the dawn seeps between these bars,  
will I really see those eyes again? Feel those lips?  
Press our bodies close?  
Can I ever get back to the white dark light of New Orleans  
and can I get back to you?

*The scene fades into...*

**Sixth Scene** *Charity Hospital; October 16, 1890, just after 9am. David Hennessy lays in his hospital bed.*

HENNESSY

In, out, in, out....  
Clumsy lungs  
Stupid Dagos, imbecile police, corrupted politicians...  
Fight, David, fight!  
Don't let 'em get at you.  
Don't let 'em crawl out from any of their holes –  
Rats, vermin, all of 'em.  
Don't you see? It's better with me up here. Up here....  
This is where I've built my dream  
Up here is where I make things turn and flow.  
This path, this plan, this dream...begun so long ago...Father!

*He has a vision of his father - an immigrant, a police officer, also gunned down while in uniform.*

Father, who shot you?  
No! Patch up these wounds.

*He pats at his own wounds. He begins to cry.*

Don't leave me here! I'm just a boy...  
Can't take care of Mama...I can't...Father...stay here.  
Look at me, Father...look at me...up here...

*He comes back to his own reality.*

You would be so proud, Father.  
I've dealt with those who stood in our way.  
They all will remember the name... Hennessy.  
To hell with the dagos,  
Or the cowardly O'Connor and Parkerson.  
The sands will stretch over THEIR names, buried forever,  
But the current of my legacy flows forever,  
Look at my works!  
Fear, loathing, envy, passion – all rent from the mystery I saw that night...

*He dies. Around him, the scene transforms into his funeral at St. Joseph's Church. It is one of the largest funerals in city history, rivaling that of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, a few years before. Iania hovers at the edge - she is not at the funeral, but is keeping vigil on her own.*

ALL (singing Latin text)

<i>Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine:</i>	Eternal rest give unto them, O Lord,
<i>Et lux perpetua luceat eis.</i>	and let perpetual light shine upon them.
<i>Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Sion,</i>	A hymn, O God, becometh Thee in Zion;
<i>Et tibi reddetur votum in Ierusalem:</i>	and a vow shall be paid to Thee in Jerusalem:
<i>Exaudi orationem meam,</i>	hear my prayer;
<i>ad te omnis caro veniet.</i>	all flesh shall come to Thee.

*Underscored by the hymn "Shall we gather at the river?", Parkerson climbs the pulpit to deliver the eulogy. The Ensemble echoes his message of "Law and Order" while the "Kyrie" is intoned.*

PARKERSON

With deep grief and indignation,  
We witness the sacrifice  
Of Police Chief Hennessy, our true friend  
Chief Hennessy stood for law and order  
Law and Order!  
Only his love for New Orleans  
And desire for peace  
Inspired his firm philosophy.  
Blood spilt without conscience

Leaves us in a long sorrow, told by tears.

ENSEMBLE WOMEN, MARGARET and IANIA

*Lacrimosa dies illa*

Full of tears will be that day

IANIA

*Qua resurget ex favilla*

When from the ashes shall arise

*Judicandus homo reus.*

The guilty man to be judged;

*Huic ergo parce, Deus:*

Therefore spare him, O God,

ENSEMBLE WOMEN

*Pie Jesu Domine,*

Merciful Lord Jesus,

*Dona eis requiem. Amen.*

Grant them eternal rest. Amen.

*Near the front of the congregation, Margaret sits alone, oblivious to the proceedings.*

MARGARET

On a tree

Mary watched

Her child on a tree

And remembered...

Small hands, small feet...and eyes...

Eyes that stared and searched in wonder, in love.

This wonder, this love,

Why can't that be the message?

Why does the world need messages

Through pain, through destruction,

Through death?

And why does my child...

Have to be the message?

How many more mothers will have to

Offer up

Those hands, those feet, those eyes...

As a message for the world?

*Parkerson continues; the tone of his eulogy becomes increasingly menacing.*

PARKERSON

We lift up beloved Chief Hennessy

Who gave the ultimate sacrifice.

And we will strike down

these criminals who have only

contempt for the civilized world,

contempt for decency,

contempt for honesty

contempt for TRUE American lives and

American values.

My friends...

A verdict is coming. Justice is coming.

ENSEMBLE

A verdict is coming,  
Justice is coming,  
*Dies iræ, dies illa,*  
*Solvat sæclum in favilla:*  
*Teste David...*  
*Iuste Judex ultionis!*

The day of wrath, that day,  
will dissolve the world in ashes:  
this is the testimony of David...  
Righteous Judge of Vengeance!

*The funeral scene dissolves. On opposite sides of the stage, Margaret reprises her text, while Iania repeats the Prayer of St. Joseph.*

PARKERSON *offstage*

Martyrs have power...

ENSEMBLE *offstage*

Justice, justice, justice...

**Seventh Scene** *Piccola Palermo; March 14, 1891. The trial of Sicilian men - including Polizzi - for the Chief's assassination has gone to the Jury, and the city waits. Iania is alone in the tenement, wringing her hands and pacing.*

IANIA

Tic-toc, tic-toc,  
the hateful hands of the clock stare me down.  
The police continue to question me, my family  
They see us as animals...are they right?  
Maybe our desperate lives distort our morality?  
No!

Maybe Catarina was right...  
I am tethered to this man  
who seems more and more dangerous.  
So, where is *my* life going?  
If I try to lead him, will he even follow?  
If I abandon him, will he turn on me?  
It will crush him.  
I will crush myself to protect him?

Now he stands with others on trial.  
Many feel the jury will convict with lust,  
ready for solutions, ready for a scapegoat.  
Our paths are flying away from each other.  
I will look into the lost seas of his eyes  
and tell him where **my** life is going

*Mama, Zia and Caterina burst into the room. A surprise verdict of innocence for Sicilians on trial for Hennessy's murder has rocked the city. The women talk over each other.*

MAMA, ZIA, and CATERINA

*Il Tricolore!*

It flies from the masthead on the docks!  
The Italians are acquitted!  
There is fury everywhere, but they will be free!

The court crackled from the start  
but the evidence was weak.  
Mani will be free!

*Libertà!*

Mani screamed of a greater conspiracy,  
the guilt shuttled up the city's ladder  
to the top rung!

IANIA

Go tell the neighborhood,  
Go tell *la Piccola Palermo*.  
We will greet them when they are released.

*The scene spreads across the stage, split into two. On one side of the stage, is a triumphant Polizzi and a few other Sicilian men (Ensemble).*

POLIZZI and SICILIAN MEN (Ensemble)

*Vittoria, vittoria!*

*E sarà gran festa quannu  
rivirannu Li tu mura  
tali e quali a primavera  
rinineddi migratura!*

Victory!

A jubilee will be the day.  
They will return to your walls  
As the ever-happy migrant swallows  
when spring has returned.

POLIZZI

Our futures are bright  
and filled with shadows no more.  
Listen to our silver strands of laughter!  
Justice has settled the score!

POLIZZI and SICILIAN MEN (Ensemble)

We stand with justice,  
Firm and proud.  
Our forefathers planted seeds of hope,  
Now reap the crop of our triumph.  
Proud Sicilians - Proud Americans  
Justice has settled the score!

*On the other side of the stage, O'Connor and Parkerson whip the city's residents into a fury, demanding that action be taken to remedy a colossal failure of the court.*

## O'CONNOR

Honest and True citizens of New Orleans  
We cannot endure the corruption of our judicial system.  
The river weeps into the gulf  
for our Chief, our city, our nation.

Hang them, hang them from the trees!  
Let their rotten corpses swing like broken branches  
and show others this is OUR time, OUR world!  
Renew this town and baptize our city again in the fires of justice!  
Protect our children!  
You are the inheritors of this land!  
The true citizens have the covenant from God!  
We are positioned to grow in God's blessings;  
We are the chosen generations that have made this city great.  
We are the chosen!

*The musics go back and forth across the stage, clashing violently. In his cell, Polizzi hears the sounds of a crowd approaching. He thinks that his people are coming to bring him back to Piccola Palermo. Above the din, he thinks he hears Iania's voice singing his lullaby and he rushes to the bars of his cell, calling out to her. Her voice fades as it becomes clear that it is not a jubilant crowd, but a mob seeking vengeance. Polizzi's hope collapses. The sound of the mob gets closer - they are furious and unwavering; they are inside the prison. There are two loud bangs and the door to Polizzi's cell bursts open. Men with guns (Ensemble) enter; O'Connor follows them in. There is a moment of calm as O'Connor and Polizzi regard each other, then they all raise their weapons and cut Polizzi down as the lights black out.*

**Epilogue** *After the horror of the climax, comes a jarring, dark silence. Lights up slowly on the Ensemble and central characters.*

## ENSEMBLE

Tide in, tide out, lights up, lights down, power in, power out.

## O'CONNOR

Lights down – power in.  
We are the law  
True justice flows through us...with me.  
I will walk down these streets for years  
And people will fear me.  
The immigrant trash will scuttle back to their dark corners,  
Knowing the power is here.  
And where there is power,  
There is morality.

## MARGARET

Lights down, power out.  
My mind has lost its mooring to this place.  
To these people.

The seeds of violence in my family  
Have brought only more hatred and bloodshed.  
I will wander the chapels of New Orleans  
To see if I can connect to God.  
I wonder if he's really there?  
Along the river banks?

PARKERSON

Lights up, power in.  
Across the nation I will proclaim justice.  
We are in a land of freedom for people who do right.  
I will tour city after city,  
Standing on every gilded dais,  
Stirring the hearts and souls about our story.  
Inspire them to sweat and nod,  
Telling them how God worked through the good people  
Of New Orleans.  
Gasps and Amens and guns will rattle and shake  
As they bear witness to the power of the mob...through me.

IANIA

Lights up, power out.  
Unwelcome...forever unwelcome.  
I always wanted to believe what Mama told me –  
This city was opportunity. Work hard and good things will come.  
But they did not.  
Not for me, or my mother, my sister, or Mani.  
Only a view of layers and layers and layers of people above me,  
Staring down as if their daily purpose on this Earth  
Was to keep me in this place.

Look at this horror now.  
This mushroomed Golgotha.  
Where are these souls going now?  
And when they arrive, will they again be strangers?  
I can only hope they find the golden doors –  
Opening to warm hearts and friendly voices.

ALL from "*The New Colossus*" by Emma Lazarus (1849 - 1887)

"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless tempest-tost, to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

\*\*\*

END OF THE OPERA