

# TONKIN

opera in three acts

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concept by Thomas Bird

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# BACKGROUND NOTE

What happens when two nations with fundamentally opposing mythological pictures of their roles in the world come into conflict with each other? The opera spans the period 1945 to the present in the historical interaction between America and Vietnam, and interleaves and intermixes history with enactments of traditional Vietnamese and American fables.

Connecting events and fables are three lives: Ho Chi Minh, a professional revolutionary in 1945, John Paul Scott, a downed American flier he rescues and works with against the Japanese at the close of World War II, and Trung Minh Chau, a fourteen year old orphan whose spirit and idealism Ho sees as the hope for a new nation.

Scott will become a political advisor to the new South Vietnamese government in the 1950's and general of the American forces in the 1960's and 70's. Trung will become Ho's aide in the new North Vietnamese government, and will abandon him when responsibility for thousands of deaths in a failed agrarian reform program falls on his shoulders. She will join Scott in the Southern government, become disillusioned with the South in turn, and in desperation abandon her country. Ho will continue as the implacable leader of the fight against the Americans.

By the conclusion of the opera history and mythology have merged. Trung returns to Vietnam in the present day and meets the ghosts of Ho and Scott. She reconciles them to themselves and to each other, and calms their souls into repose.

## PRINCIPAL ROLES

TRUNG MINH CHAU, a Vietnamese woman, age 14 in Act I, in her twenties and early thirties in Act II, in late middle age in Act III.....lyric soprano

JOHN PAUL SCOTT, a young American flier, age twenty in Act I, in his thirties in Act II, a ghost in Act III.....tenor

HO CHI MINH, a professional revolutionary, in his late forties in Act I, in his fifties and sixties in Act II, a ghost in Act III.....baritone

MADAME NHU, sister-in-law to the President of South Vietnam/U. S. STATE DEPARTMENT REPRESENTATIVE.....mezzo soprano

## SECONDARY ROLES

NGO DINH DIEM, President of South Vietnam in Act II/YOUNG HO CHI MINH in Act III.....ensemble baritone 1

NGO DINH NHU, Councilor to the President of South Vietnam/TRUONG CHINH, official in the Northern government in Act II.....ensemble baritone 2

## ENSEMBLE AND CHORUS

EIGHT-VOICE SOLO ENSEMBLE and TWELVE-VOICE CHORUS: Mythological Figures of Vietnam; Members of Ho's Guerrilla Band; Residents of Hanoi, Members of Madame Nhu's Women's Security Force; Members of the Northern Government; Buddhist Monks; Reporters; Green Berets; Residents of Present Day Ho Chi Minh City; Ghosts.

## ORCHESTRA

Orchestra of thirty-five: 2 fl/picc, 2 ob, 2 cl/bs cl/sop sax, 2 bsn; 2 hrn, 1 tpt, 2 trmb; 2 perc, 1 piano/synth; 10 vln, 4 vla, 3 vlc, 2 bassi.

## DURATIONS

ACT I: 50 minutes

ACT II: 42 minutes

ACT III: 33 minutes

# SYNOPSIS

## ACT I

### Scene 1

A young Vietnamese woman, Trung Minh Chau, narrates the fable of Sword Lake while it is enacted in traditional Vietnamese operatic style: again and again an emperor leads his people to repel a foreign invasion. After each rebellion he returns to a life of meditation; always he is called again.

### Scene 2

The Vietnamese opera troop become members of Ho Chi Minh's guerrilla band, fighting the Japanese who occupy Vietnam at the close of World War II. Ho and Trung rescue a downed American flier, John Paul Scott, who would otherwise be captured by the Japanese. At first terrified, then merely skeptical, bit by bit Scott is won over to the idealistic and seemingly hopeless task that this raggedy band is devoted to: winning independence for their country after five years of Japanese occupation and a hundred years of French colonialism.

### Scene 3

It is September 1945; the Japanese have surrendered. In the central square in Hanoi Ho declares independence for Vietnam from France. In the midst of a giddy celebration, a U.S. State Department Official delivers the news that the United States will support France's colonial claim. Spectators react in shock and anger; Ho prophesies the thirty years of war that will ensue, first against the French and then the Americans; Scott realizes he will have to fight the people who saved his life; the State Department Representative is caught between the message she must deliver and the situation she finds; and Trung insists that victory will be the outcome.

## ACT II

### Scene 1

Scott narrates the fable of Johnny Appleseed, spreading the seeds of Democracy throughout the world. It is 1956, and he has become political advisor to the new South Vietnamese government.

## Scene 2

He introduces in turn its new leaders, Ngo Dien Diem, Ngo Dien Nhu, and Madame Nhu, who recount their successes. Madame Nhu's Women's Security Force rides in on motorbikes. At the same time in the North, a high official under Ho gives the orders that lead to a massacre of peasants rebelling against a botched land reform program.

## Scene 3

Late at night in the garden outside Ho's office, in the same year, Trung tells Ho she is leaving. Little needs to be said, they know each other so well, they have been so often together these eleven years. The land reform and the massacre have shaken her confidence in him; she hopes to find something better in the South.

## Scene 4

Now an aide to Scott, Trung joins in his unsuccessful effort to convince Diem, Nhu, and Madame Nhu of the necessity of negotiating with the Buddhists who oppose their regime. Buddhist monks gradually assemble on the stage, each carrying a gasoline can. In front of each a painted screen of flames is placed -- the immolations. As the stage fills with painted flame, Diem, Nhu, Madame Nhu, Trung, and Scott kneel in prayer, each hoping for the clarity that will see them out of this nightmare.

## Scene 5

In Trung's bedroom in Saigon, Trung and Scott try to imagine the events happening outside. Trung begins to dream of leaving the war; Scott is sure better days will come for the two of them. Shots are heard: Diem and Nhu have been assassinated. Madame Nhu flees to safety. Coup and counter-coup continue outside the bedroom. Ho appears, appealing to Trung with the example of her namesakes, the Trung Sisters, legendary woman warriors of Vietnamese history. Scott in turn commands Trung's attention as he moves to a press briefing room and announces the arrival of the first American ground troops.

## Scene 6

In an open field outside Saigon, in slow motion, the Green Berets begin to parachute in from above. The war begins, Scott appeals to Trung a last time, she rejects both men's appeals and abandons her country. The war continues, fading from view in smoke and fog.

### ACT III

Act III is in a single scene of five parts.

Modern day residents of Ho Chi Minh City — the former Saigon — engage in bustling commercial activity while Japanese, French, and American corporate signs flash above. In their midst Trung appears, a recently returned Viet Kieu -- an overseas Vietnamese -- stylishly dressed and laden with gifts which she distributes. She sees an old man stirring a pot of hot noodles at a sidewalk stand, and thinks that it's Ho Chi Minh, though she knows he's been dead twenty-five years.

A crowd of teenagers rushes through, fresh, innocent, ardently in love. Trung is intoxicated by a vision of the youth she didn't have. One of the teenagers is Ho Chi Minh, as he was before she ever knew him. She realizes for the first time how passionately Ho had always loved her, and sees a life with him that could have been if history had given them a chance.

In a flash the teenagers are gone, the young Ho no other than a sidewalk vendor. She buys a bowl of hot noodles from him, and as she inhales their warm steam smell she feels reconnected once again to her homeland. The sun sets; the city prepares for sleep; Trung alone keeps a silent vigil into the night.

The ghost of the State Department Representative leads Ho's ghost by the hand. Ho stumbles along, frozen in obsessive questioning of the success or failure of his life. Scott's ghost answers a superior's constant questioning about the tally of dead.

Every night it is like this, and they are not alone; others of the dead haunt these streets, knowing their time is past. Can any achieve freedom from their frozen torment? Trung blesses them; perhaps this will be enough. The sun rises, the waking city joins her in saying farewell to the dead who fade from view. Their story is over. All's said, all's sung, all's done, all's lost, all's won.

## Act I

### SCENE 1

*A mythological time. A young Vietnamese woman enters the stage suddenly, alone. Others follow supporting her narration, creating the world and the events she describes in a manner analogous to Vietnamese operatic stage-craft: banners, fabric, movement, imagination.*

#### TRUNG

We live in a beautiful land.  
Ocean, mountains, great river deltas,  
The earth gives us all that we need.  
We are a peaceful and happy people.  
We work, we sow, we reap.  
Our mothers gave birth here,  
Our fathers plowed this soil.  
Our ancestors sleep here,  
They speak to us deep in our dreams.

#### MALE VOICE

The story!

#### TRUNG

A giant lives in the north: China!  
Again and again her armies march against us.  
Each of us takes up a hoe or a rake to defend ourselves,  
To defend our fields, our villages, our ancestors' graves.  
But without a leader we fail.  
From the place where it lies hidden  
We seize our ancient sacred sword  
And rush to Hanoi, to the shores of Sword Lake.  
See, there on an island, shimmering in the water  
Our emperor Le Loi in his modest palace  
Studies and meditates in seclusion,  
Free from the four fallacies and the seven contradictions,  
In seclusion . . . free . . . seclusion . . . wisdom . . . us . . .

#### MALE VOICE

Trung! The story!

#### TRUNG

Now, up from the water rises the magic tortoise,  
Fantastic beast, strong, wise, enduring,  
Plunges toward us, cavorts in the silvery water,

And stops at our feet.  
Take the sword, our friend!  
Take it to Le Loi!  
Out to the island he swims.  
The emperor knows in an instant the reason,  
Takes the sword in his hand and rides back to us,  
Feet on the shell of the mighty tortoise,  
Braving the watery stream,  
Leading us on to victory,  
Pushing the giant back over his borders!  
Hail Le Loi!  
Peace again!  
We return to the shores of the lake.

*Members of the Ensemble perform an acrobatic dance in honor of the emperor and the tortoise*

Out to the island he rides, Le Loi,  
Back to his books and his garden.  
Your job is done, till we need you again.  
See, the tortoise returns the sword to us,  
Back to its safe hiding place till the next time we need  
Back to the land, to the ocean, the mountains,  
The jungles, the forest, the great river deltas,  
The land where our ancestors sleep in the soil  
Where the earth gives us all that we need.

*Having created this mythological world, Trung vanishes into it.*

### SCENE 2

*Jungle north of Hanoi, April 1945. Trung and he companions become a rag-tag guerrilla band, led by H Chi Minh, encamped for the night. At a distance, Scot parachutes in, his plane shot down by Japanese fire.*

#### SCOTT

I've had it  
I'm done for  
*He tries to get up, his leg is broken*  
Damn!

Indochina  
French Indochina  
Tonkin

*remembering*  
Bail out!  
Up the coast to Chungking  
Bail out!  
These mountains

Going down. . .  
Miss the tree. . .  
Damn this leg!

*Scott sees Ho and Trung as they approach.*

Stay back!

**HO**

The family goes away,  
The aunt stays behind,  
Lets in the monkey,  
He trashes the house.  
Who are you?

**SCOTT**

John Paul Scott,  
1st Airborne.  
*(aside)* Who ARE these people?

**HO**

Put your knife down  
We're in this together

**SCOTT**

You're not Hirohito's men?

**HO**

A different emperor.  
Stay with us  
Till your leg is better  
We have a doctor.

**SCOTT**

*(aside)* They didn't train me for this,  
name, rank, serial number  
This isn't like the movies.  
*(to Ho)* I don't know.

**HO**

Look!  
Look around you!  
Do we look like an occupying army?

**SCOTT**

Hell no!

**HO**

We're small  
We make trouble  
We help your side  
We blow up bridges  
We want the Japanese out  
We want the French out  
We want our own country  
Will you help?

**SCOTT**

Well, sure. How?

**HO**

Get better.  
See your people in the next valley.  
Take our message to your State Department.

**SCOTT**

What message?

**HO & TRUNG**

"Indochina shall not be served  
To the French, they've had it for ninety years.  
Rubber plantations, Michelin tires,  
Slave labor, forced confessions,  
Mass executions, the usual signs  
Of the mission to bring Civilization."  
-- The words of your President Roosevelt.

**SCOTT**

But Truman's in now.  
I think we support the French.

**HO**

My father's father, a scholar,  
Jailed by the French: treasonous tendencies.  
He wanted freedom.

**TRUNG**

*Indicates the future General Giap in the distance*  
His wife and child,  
Killed by the French. He got away.  
A teacher of history  
Now makes our battle plans.



## SCOTT

There's nothing to fight with.  
Fifty men, three rifles,  
What do you have to work with?

## HO

Strength, wisdom, endurance,  
Hope, anger, weapons,  
Fear, stealth, resistance,  
Arms, strength, farming.

## TRUNG

For fourteen years I had a family.  
Then they were killed by the French at Haiphong.  
Every one was shot, every one.  
I alone escaped.  
I came to the mountains  
Where people said you could fight.  
I found this place, this new family,  
By luck or fate or the will of god.

## SCOTT

She's just a fourteen year old orphan. . .

## TRUNG

My country is old, three thousand years --  
And the Europeans count history in hundreds!  
But our dream is new, a young country,  
It lies ahead, the old is gone  
The new is older still.

## HO

See how her fury blazes  
With this we cannot lose.

## TRUNG

From the womb of my ancestors  
Let fire and water rise  
To reclaim my destiny  
And bear a fierce nation,  
Young and awkward,  
Gawky but roiling,  
Hot, inevitable.

## SCOTT

Why do I believe this?

## TRUNG

I claim my soul,  
I give it, to make  
This dream by real!

## HO

See her fury, we are invincible!

## SCOTT

It's crazy, there's no way!  
She's crazy, she's wild,  
She'll fight, they'll all fight.  
It just can't work.

I guess I'll join them.  
We'll all fight.  
It's crazy.  
It's hopeless.

When can I start?

## HO

It's time to rest.  
Tomorrow,  
Next week.  
Good night.

*All prepare for sleep, Scott curls warmly into a spot of his own by a small camp fire, strangely at home. The day's events run through his mind as he gradually fall asleep.*

## SCOTT

Bail out . . .  
Going down . . .  
These mountains . . .  
These people . . .  
Going home . . .  
I'm here . . .  
Here . . .  
I'm . . .

*(he sleeps)*

### SCENE 3

*Independence Day, Hanoi, September 1945. A broad, empty square. Four women enter with flowers, a vast crowd assembles, Ho mounts a podium, Scott and Trung at his side.*

#### ENSEMBLE OF YOUNG WOMEN

Red with the blood of victory we give our lives.  
Distant gunfire calls us we obey.  
Striding o'er the bodies of our foes,  
Out of misery we break our chains.  
Our swallowed hatred burns.  
The old passes away.  
Joyous, fierce, the arm reaches, the bomb explodes,  
The trap is sprung, blood flows, a new country,  
eternal!

#### HO

Today we declare freedom from France.  
We call on the world to support our cause  
And especially on The United States.  
All men are created equal  
Unalienable Rights  
Pursuit of Happiness  
All on earth equal from birth  
The right to live happy and free  
Nothing is more precious than  
Freedom and Independence.

*During the following, a severely dressed woman, the United States State Department Representative, enters carrying a briefcase, gets Scott's attention, and engages him in an increasingly angry silent argument.*

#### CHORUS OF PEOPLE OF HANOI

Eternal homeland, arduous road,  
The path to glory, our resistance bases,  
For the cause we struggle, hastening to the  
battlefield,  
Forward together, radiant in sacrifice.

#### SCOTT

*To the State Department Representative, indicating Ho.*  
YOU tell him!

#### STATE

Dear Mr. Ho,  
We have to support the French. . . their schools and  
modern conveniences . . . all the fruits of civilization . .  
we stand behind them . . . they've taken a beating in  
Europe . . . they're our friends . . . I mean, since the  
Revolution . . . I mean our Revolution . . . besides they  
know you better . . .

Dear Mr. Ho  
The French have such a long tradition here.  
They brought so much, schools and roads,  
Modern conveniences, all the fruits of civilization.  
We stand behind them, they've taken a beating,  
They're our friends. Besides, they know  
So much better than we do  
How to take care of you.

#### TRUNG

What about freedom?  
What about independence?  
What about the rights of man?  
What about self-determination?  
What about us?  
Helping someone when they're down?  
Returning a favor?

#### STATE

We'd honestly like to help you,  
But, really, that's just how it is.  
Global considerations  
Preclude other options.

#### CHORUS

The old passes away  
Fire streams across the lake  
Blood rises  
The tortoise screams  
Fire haunts the overlord

#### SCOTT

What will happen?

## HO

*like an oracle looking into the future*  
War, death, resurrection,  
Lies, disease, disillusion,  
Deceit, compromise, continuance,  
Victory, poverty, confusion.

## TRUNG & ENSEMBLE & CHORUS

We'll win  
The path  
Is straight  
The goal  
Is seen  
In front  
Our face  
Can feel  
Its heat  
Our hand  
Will grasp  
Its neck  
Our teeth  
Will sink  
And stop  
Its breath  
And hold  
It fast!

## HO & ENSEMBLE & CHORUS

The hand  
Extends  
In peace  
Withdraws  
Confused  
You think  
You know  
Your friends  
You're doomed  
With them  
The world  
Is new  
The goal  
Is green  
The ghost  
Revolts  
Returns  
To haunt  
The man  
Who says  
He owns  
This nation's  
History!

## SCOTT & ENSEMBLE

It's hard  
Just how  
Am I  
Supposed  
To turn  
My back  
And say  
These friends  
Who saved  
My life  
Are now  
The ones  
I have  
To fight  
I guess  
That's just  
My job!

## STATE & ENSEMBLE

To think  
That this  
Is his-  
tory  
When all  
I have  
Is one  
Word: No  
And all  
Will turn  
And stop  
And sink  
Because  
I said  
The word  
As I  
Was told  
Does this  
Give me  
The way  
To own  
This nation's  
History?

*End of act I.*

## Act II

### SCENE 1

Saigon, 1955. Scott alone. He has become a political advisor to the ruling family of the new South Vietnamese government.

#### SCOTT

I'm Johnny Appleseed.  
I travel through the world  
Planting the seeds of Democracy in fertile soil.  
People know me everywhere I go,  
They greet me with open arms and hearts.  
Places I've been ten years ago,  
Why they point out the big apple trees,  
The whole orchards that have grown up since I planted.  
They love the apples.  
We love the apples.  
I plant,  
I nurture,  
I tend the sprouts,  
I pull the Weeds.  
Fertilizer, Good American Fertilizer.  
And when they have apple trees,  
Why pretty soon they're electing school boards  
And setting up a chamber of commerce.  
Everywhere I go these sprouts of Democracy  
Poke their little heads up out of the ground  
Grow straight and tall, stand with pride.  
Real American Apples even here.

### SCENE 2

#### SCOTT

*(to the audience)* Now let me introduce you to Our Man in Vietnam, Time Magazine's Man of the Year, The Hope for Democracy in Asia, The President of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem.

#### DIEM

Please allow me to introduce my brother Nhu, Councilor to the President, And his lovely wife, Madame Nhu. . . *(Diem begins a monologue as he wanders upstage; we hear fragments of it.)* personalism . . . communism . . . sacrifices . . . dedication . . . truth . . . military aid . . . business

opportunities . . . moral fibre . . . agricultural production . . . hoodlums . . . we must look beyond . . . in a true and happy. . . decency. . .

#### NHU & MADAME NHU

*(to Scott as Diem continues his monologue)*

We're popular, we're popular,  
But everywhere there're enemies,  
And every single one of them  
Is put there by the Northern demons.

We know what to do with them  
The French laid in the infrastructure:  
Vigilance, security,  
And strength build a democracy.

First there were the gangster mobs  
Who ran illicit industries  
And called the shots in politics.  
They're quiet now, they got their licks.

And then those two religious groups,  
With armies, even governments.  
We got them out, put our men in.  
Win hamlets back? They can't begin.

Building a democracy  
Takes some one as strong as me.

#### SCOTT

They seem to have the right idea.  
I think they get the point OK.  
They may be somewhat over-eager,  
But it's not for me to say.

#### NHU & MADAME NHU & DIEM

Now Madame takes up the task  
Of reining in the godless mass.  
No ballroom dance, no movie stars,  
No go-go girls, no drinks, no bars.

Our friendly people run the town  
While every village elder bows  
To our endeavor, noble, pure  
To show that freedom can endure.

#### SCOTT & NHU & MADAME NHU & DIEM

It takes a strong, strong arm  
To build a strong free state.  
Give me a man in charge,

A leader pure and great.  
Our noble President  
Will take his iron fist  
And with a cheery smile  
His foes cannot resist  
Will build democracy  
From an autocracy  
Where mediocrity  
Can't find a place to be.

### MADAME NHU'S WOMEN'S SECURITY FORCE *(entering on motorbikes)*

The past contains no greater light  
Than our celestial leader, bright  
With day-light's virtue streaming o'er  
Her youthful visage evermore.

She rides in state, her noble spirit  
Singing so our hearts can hear it.  
Onward on our motorbikes  
We follow where her genius strikes.

Grant us the fortune to insure  
That her example will endure  
To guide us in the endless fight  
For freedom and our leaders' might.

*Elsewhere on stage, Hanoi 1955, in Ho's offices. Trung has become Ho's Assistant. Truong Chinh is his Chief of Staff.*

### THREE MEMBERS OF HO'S GOVERNMENT

Trouble in Cao Bang Province. Trouble in Thai Nguyen. Not  
enough rice in Lang Son. How many small land owners in  
Phat Diem?

### TRUONG CHINH

Take care of it.

### GOVERNMENT

Trouble in Ha Tinh. Trouble in Dong Hoi. Not enough to eat  
in Ha Giang. How many landlords in Hoa Binh?

### TRUONG CHINH

Take care of it.

### GOVERNMENT

Riot in Nghe An.

### TRUONG CHINH

Shoot to kill.

### TRUNG

What?!

### TRUONG CHINH

*(To Trung, like it should be obvious)*  
Shoot to kill.

### SCENE 3

*A year later, late at night, beside the carp pool outside Ho's house and office. Little need be said, they have been so much together these last ten years.*

*(chorale)*

### TRUNG

It's not right.

*(time passes)*

### HO

Then fix it.

*(time passes)*

### TRUNG

They're dead already.

*(a very long time passes)*

I'm going South.

### HO

What do you think you'll find there?

### TRUNG

Freedom, hope, morality, nobility,  
prosperity, independence, happiness,  
work, reward, peace, victory.

HO

Don't forget me.

#### SCENE 4

*The Presidential Palace, Saigon, 1963. Trung has just been introduced to Scott as his new aide.*

SCOTT

No, amazing!

TRUNG

I'm here, what can I do?

SCOTT

Plenty! It's a mess.  
Help with the Madame.

TRUNG

What about elections?

SCOTT

Are you kidding? Ho would win.

TRUNG

*(to Madame Nhu)*  
Americans negotiate.

MADAME NHU

They don't know what they're dealing with.

TRUNG

You need the Buddhists on your side.

MADAME NHU

I just can't trust those infidels.

TRUNG

There's much they teach that's good to know.

MADAME NHU

You don't believe their superstitions, ghosts and demons?

TRUNG

No, I guess not, except . . .

SCOTT

*(to Nhu)*  
You've got to make a new alliance.

NHU

Not with them, we'd sooner crush them.

SCOTT

Then you've really got a problem.

*One by one Buddhist monks fill the stage behind the principals, sitting cross legged with cans of gasoline at their sides.*

NHU

No, you can't afford to cross us.  
We're the only force you've got here.

SCOTT

Not so fast, my sleek companion.

NHU

Try us, just see what it gets you.

TRUNG

*(looking out a window)*  
A busy street, a small car, yellow robes, a can, a match

TRUNG & SCOTT & NHU & MADAME  
NHU & DIEM

*(praying as the Buddhist immolations occur behind them)*

Grant me strength to hold and challenge.  
Let me know my fate is mine.  
Grant me sight to know the reason.  
Grant me time to make it right.

## SCENE 5

*Trung's bedroom, 1963 and beyond. Outside, Nhu and Diem are killed; Madame Nhu flees to safety; coup and counter-coup swirl through the streets.*

### TRUNG

A night flight out so some safe place.  
Paris, Rome, the Cote D'Azur.  
Someplace in Spain, Miami, or Beverly Hills.

### SCOTT

We'll take care of it, we owe them that.  
They'll all be gone, we can start over.

### TRUNG

A foggy runway, big black cars,  
Suitcases, diamonds, gold bricks.  
Ambassador Lodge shakes hands: "Good Luck."  
The engines roar, then silence.

### SCOTT

We didn't want to, he forced our hand.  
Got to get rid of him, while we still can.

### TRUNG

Oh yes, for Diem and Nhu and the Madame  
A fast airplane out.  
You've learned your lessons well from them.  
Line up the generals, get the word out on the street.

### SCOTT

We'll do anything just to get them out.  
No violence. . . We owe them that. . .

### TRUNG

Maybe Wimbledon, outside London,  
Miami, Beverly Hills. . .

### SCOTT

They'll all be gone. We can start over.  
We'll start all over.

### TRUNG

Miami. . .

*An embrace, Trung turns away, Ho appears.*

### HO

Long ago sisters, like you, called Trung  
Loved their country, fought for its freedom,  
Like you met defeat at the hands of the foreigners,  
Drowned themselves rather than  
Live under rulers not of their people.  
Break your bones! Tear your soul apart!

### TRUNG

My ancestors sing in my bones.  
We are a strong people and a happy people.  
We fight hard to repel the enemy.  
But who is the enemy, and where is the war?

### HO

Now you flee, hoping to find freedom from strife,  
But your soul is bound to the land of your people,  
Your bones are broken, your ancestors weep!

*Scott compels Trung's attention as the scene moves to a morning press briefing.*

### SCOTT

Gentlemen, I'm pleased to announce  
The landing today of the first contingent  
Of United States Marines on the beach at Danang  
At oh-eight-hundred hours, today, March 8,  
Nineteen-sixty-five. . .  
The physical infrastructure required in  
This underdeveloped country. . .  
Logistic island concept. . .  
Enough troops to progressively apply  
Pressure on the enemy. . .  
Achieved the crossover point  
By raising the enemy's  
Losses above his  
Input capacity. . .  
Certain very precise criteria  
And automated. . .  
People who live in caves don't deserve  
To be called an enemy  
Of the United States Army!

**HO**

*(in the middle of the press briefing, to Trung)*  
Remember in the camp, twenty years ago today,  
You were the hope of the new Vietnam!

**SCOTT**

*(to Trung)*  
Now you're my hope. Without you there's nothing,  
we've lost!

**SCENE 6**

*An open space outside Saigon, 1965 and beyond. Green Berets parachute down in slow motion.*

**CHORUS OF GREEN BERETS:**

Men of action, strong and bold,  
Falling from the sky so cold.  
Armed to fight at Tonkin Bay,  
The bold men of the Green Beret.

In the jungle, on the plains,  
Deserts and torrential rains,  
Green Berets on every hand  
Fighting hard to save the land.

Wives and mothers wait at home,  
Proudly serve as soldiers roam.  
Some come back, and some will stay,  
But all have won the Green Beret.

**SCOTT**

*(to Trung)*  
But you can't leave!

**TRUNG**

*(to Ho and Scott)*  
It's your war now!

*time stops*

Bail out. . .  
Going down. . .  
Coward. . .  
Wimp. . .  
Turncoat. . .

That's me. . .  
Find your own graves in this soil.  
I won't grace this land with my bones.

**SCOTT**

*(in desperation to Trung)*  
I'm here, I can't leave!

*Trung vanishes into the growing battle*

**HO**

*(to Scott)*  
It's your time now.

**SCOTT**

Men of action strong and bold  
Falling from the sky so cold  
Armed to fight at Tonkin Bay  
The old men of the Green Beret  
In the jungles, the old men. . .

**HO**

Some will stay.

*The war engulfs them.*

*End of Act II.*



### Act III

Present day Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). A street full of commercial bustle and activity. Illuminated signs overhead flash corporate names. At first the street is silent at sun-up, then suddenly it's animated and clamorous.

#### CHORUS OF PRESENT DAY HO CHI MINH CITY RESIDENTS

JVC Air France  
Sanyo Sony  
GM Exxon  
Mitsubishi World Bank  
Hundai Toshiba  
Phillip Morris  
British Petroleum  
General Motors  
Club Med IBM World Bank

Trung appears in the crowd, a stylishly dressed woman in late middle age carrying loads of gifts. She indicates where each item of her wardrobe came from.

#### TRUNG

Nieman Marcus  
Saks Bendel's  
Bloomingdales  
Ferragamo  
Gucci

She begins to give the gifts away, indicating where each one came from.

Buyrite  
Walmart  
Woolworths  
Crate and Barrel  
Safeway

Bubblegum  
Chocolate  
Vitamins  
Cotton fabric  
Makeup

Aspirin  
Pantyhose  
Cooking pots—

(She's distracted by the smell of hot noodles from a sidewalk stand. She doesn't notice at first that a man who looks remarkably like Ho is stirring the pot.) What's that smell? (she returns to her task) Still so much to give away. (thinking she recognizes Ho) The man there at the stand . . . (spoken) No, it couldn't be him.

#### ENSEMBLE OF ARDENT TEENAGERS IN LOVE (perhaps all wearing walkman headsets.)

Saigon Princess  
Gliding by on your  
Regal motorbike  
Oh, for a touch of your  
Soft silk fingertips  
Ah—Ah—

Young Ho emerges from the group of teenagers, as he and Trung are entwined and encircled by them, caught up in their freshness, youth, and ardor.

#### YOUNG HO

(to Trung, spoken over music)  
I was young, don't you know me?  
That sweet fellow with the big ears?  
You saw my photo, didn't you?  
No, I keep forgetting, you weren't even born yet.

#### ENSEMBLE

Oh— Oh—

#### YOUNG HO

No, you still don't know?  
My family could have known your family.  
I could have met you at the French Lycee in Hanoi.  
We could have walked down Tu Do Street and sat down on the grass at the edge of Sword Lake.  
You might have let me hold your hand.

#### ENSEMBLE

Ah—

#### YOUNG HO

I was the man who could have been your  
Vietnamese husband.  
But I grew up.  
And when I grew up I became

the man who cradled your  
head in my lap that  
first night in the camp,  
and sang you to sleep  
with an old lullaby I  
remembered my mother  
singing to me.

## TRUNG

*(spoken)*

Then I do know you.

But I never knew, not

till now, that you loved  
me, could have loved me,  
like that.

## YOUNG HO

It could have been.

## TRUNG

Yes.

*Time. Anything could happen, even something like the scene in the camp at night in Act I, reenacted in this new setting. Or the wedding they might have had.*

*Suddenly Trung sees someone who looks very much like Scott moving rapidly through the crowd.*

## TRUNG

*(spoken)*

They've all been dead twenty years!

*(Then she sees someone very much like Mme. Nhu.)*  
I'm really seeing things!

*(Back in the present, Young Ho is now the man selling hot noodles from the sidewalk stand. Trung asks him for some with every yearning for her lost past and her present homeland.)*

Can't I have a taste?

*(Sung, arioso, as she takes her shoes off and settles into a peasant's squat, luxuriating in the warm steam smell of her noodles.)*

See mother, see father

I was always just a farm girl.

*The city prepares for sleep; the chorus spans sunset into night.*

## CHORUS

Clouds race in  
Across the Mekong Delta,  
Cross the Saigon River,  
Race past the Cathedral spires.

Race home to your mother,  
To the kitchen, to the fire,  
To the bamboo mat by the stove in the corner,  
To the warm smell of dinner cooking,  
Soon in the bowl on the table.

Let the signs flash bright  
For the foreign men of business  
In their rooftop terrace lounges  
At the Rex and the Majestic.

Let the opera troop strike magic  
In the hearts of little children  
And their grandmas and their uncles  
In the neighborhood theaters.

Put an arm around the man  
Who chases fury in the avenues  
His jaw clenched, fist raised,  
Through the crowded streets at night.

Let the scar he wears be soothed,  
Let the night fall,  
Let ghosts pass,  
Let minds and hearts be mended  
In the hospital of sleep.

*The whole stage sleeps, except Trung, who begins a silent prayer vigil in front of a small shrine downstage. The State Department Representative's and Ho's ghosts emerge from the shadows.*

## STATE DEPARTMENT REPRESENTATIVE

*(to audience, indicating Ho's ghost)*

But some do not sleep

Even in this city

## HO

*(Questioning himself, unaware of State who watches over him.)*

What

Purpose

This

Path?

Whether  
Necessary  
Either  
Passion?

## STATE

The cause  
Is last  
To yield

The ghost  
Despairs  
And fails

He haunts  
Himself  
At last

## HO

How do you know  
Whether any of it  
Was worth any of it?

Is my place  
In history  
Sacrosanct  
Or overrated?

Did it mean  
Anything —  
Victory,  
Was it success?

Half a life  
In vain, past—  
Sure, Uncle Ho  
But where's the plan?

Bitterness  
And Sacrifice  
Were for an end.  
Is this the point?

How can I  
Find peace at last  
When all I see—  
Futility?

I lost the thread,  
I'll find it now.  
My mission's done  
Anyhow.

What purpose?  
What purpose?  
Anyhow,  
What purpose?

*Scott's ghost appears, seated at a table,  
speaking into a telephone. He is unaware of  
anyone else; State watches over him as well.*

## SCOTT

*(spoken sotto voce)*

Yes, sir  
Yes I'm sure  
Yes, yes I realize  
Yes, sir  
Yes  
Yes of course  
Yes, General  
We'll try General, yes General  
Yes we will, we certainly will  
We know it's very important to you General  
Yes  
No I'm sorry no new figures  
No  
No  
I'm sorry General, the same numbers as last month  
No  
Yes, we'll be in touch with you  
Yes  
Yes, thanks for calling General  
Yes  
Yes, we know it's very important  
Yes, next month  
Yes sir  
Yes sir  
Thank you General  
Yes

*Ghosts emerge from the shadows, tentative and  
hollow at first, then with increasing sureness.  
They include Diem and Nhu, a Green Beret,  
others from Acts I and II.*

## ENSEMBLE OF GHOSTS

We'll pass.  
The time  
Prepares  
And youth  
Conspires  
To see  
Us out

We're gone.  
We have  
Ourselves  
To thank  
Berate  
Or pass  
In judgement

*Ho's, Scott's, and State's ghosts are gradually drawn to these other ghosts who know better what to wish for.*

## ENSEMBLE & HO & SCOTT & STATE

Grant us  
Sweet  
Freedom  
Now

Leave us  
In  
The starry  
Night

Time  
Will see  
Our wishes  
Pass

Oh lord  
Or god  
Or fate  
Or luck

Console us  
In  
The passing  
Night.

*Trung has been watching all along from her downstage prayer position.*

## TRUNG

*(to the ghosts, but most of all to Ho and Scott, a benediction)*

Sleep  
In peace  
Disperse  
In time

We did  
Our best  
We grant  
You that

*A gradual sunrise. The sleeping chorus of living city dwellers awakens and joins Trung and the ghosts. The ghosts recede; State takes Ho and Scott by the hand and leads them into the distance.*

## ALL

We living  
Kiss  
Embrace  
The shade

And leave  
The past  
The future's  
Place

*The ghosts are far upstage, Ho, Scott and State with them.*

All's done  
All's sung  
All's said  
All's lost  
And won

*The ghosts are even farther away.*

All's lost  
And won

*This could be the end. . . but Trung begins to turn questioningly to the audience — there must be something more, she thinks — and suddenly she's possessed by the vivid memory of her naive hopeful enthusiasm at the close of Act I. She can't believe what's happened from then to now. She's startled, surprised, and to her own surprise she starts to laugh. The laugh grows and grows into a great release: a celebrating acceptance of everything life can bring and an affirmation that she's still alive to live it. Emerging from this free and rolling laughter, a cappella, with a great broad gesture of recognition and thanks to the audience, she sings—*

## TRUNG

All's won.

*Curtain. End of opera.*