

# F a d e

An opera in one scene  
Music by Stefan Weisman  
Libretto by David Cote

## CHARACTERS

ALBERT, bass-baritone

GERTIE, soprano

HOUSEKEEPER, mezzo-soprano

## LOCATION

A large, newly built mountain estate in the Adirondacks about 200 miles north of New York City. We're in the spacious living room in the 25-acre, six-bedroom summer home of Albert and Gertie, a wealthy, childless couple. It's midsummer, roughly 20 minutes before sunset. There are large bay windows downstage. It is Albert and Gertie's moving day and there are boxes stacked high around the room. Sofa, chairs and a table covered in cloth.

## TIME

Present.

*(Lights up. HOUSEKEEPER, late 20s, in jeans and button-up shirt, moves among the boxes, unpacking contents, humming to herself. Maybe opening some with a utility knife. She disappears behind a wall of boxes. Enter ALBERT and GERTIE, carrying travel bags, dressed in casual, stylish summer attire. Albert covers Gertie's eyes, and "reveals" the house to her.)*

ALBERT

*(Proud)*

Ah?

GERTIE

*(Disappointed)*

Oh.

*(The Housekeeper enters from behind the boxes.)*

HOUSEKEEPER

Oh, hello! I'm the, you know—

GERTIE

Ah, yes, you're the girl from town—

ALBERT

Hard at work? Chaotic I see.

HOUSEKEEPER

It's a lovely house, sir. Ma'am. Always was.

You know, we used to come up here when I was in high school.

Meet here behind the old mansion.

No one around, sort of spooky. You really fixed her up.

ALBERT

Party on private property? Naughty, naughty.

Hmm. Party's over.

Anyway, we didn't renovate.

It was a mess. We tore it down. Boom! Clean slate.

GERTIE

*(Hurt, nostalgic)*

Oh. It was my grandmother's estate.

I would come here too.

As a child. I miss it.

*(Slight pause.)*

HOUSEKEEPER

How was the drive up, sir—?

ALBERT

Oh please don't be so old-fashioned.

I'm Albert.

GERTIE

And I'm Gertrude.

ALBERT

And when we've had a few we're Bertie and Gertie.

HOUSEKEEPER

All right. Very nice to meet you.

*(She returns to work. Albert and GERTIE head for the stairs)*

GERTIE

What's her name?

ALBERT

I can't remember her name.

GERTIE

Her name? Oh, this is embarrassing...

ALBERT

What's her name?

GERTIE

You ask her name.

*(They exit upstairs. The Housekeeper gazes after them, with a touch of envy and bitterness.)*

HOUSEKEEPER

Slavery was abolished ages ago,  
But, there are still maids. There are still maids.  
And not all of them old. Maids.  
Barmaids. Scullery maids. Kitchen maids.  
And Cinderellas. Ah!

*(Opening a box)*

What's in here?  
Papers and books, and paperback books,  
Photograph albums, family and friends.  
Hey, is that the ex-Vice President?  
Boxes. Lots of boxes. Boxes and boxes of...  
Trophies, and heirlooms. Pretty. Tacky.  
Glasses and crystal. Pretty delicate!

Lots, lots to unpack. Lots, lots to do.  
Do your job, but don't let your job do you.  
You won't get rich working for the rich,  
But if you slave you'll earn a bit.  
A little bit.  
I should have asked for more. A bit more.

These mansions.  
I would live in one... if I really had to...  
But up here in the mountains, tucked back from the road, miles from town...  
Surrounded by trees and the lake and metal gates, it's a little too alone.  
And I've got enough alone.  
The bed's too cold.  
Don't feel sorry for yourself.

*(Picking up another box)*

Oooh! This one's heavy. What—  
Bottles of whiskey, bottles of wine,  
Vodka and bourbon. Gin, rum and scotch...  
Looks like there will be a party for two.

*(Re-enter Albert, behind Housekeeper. He and Gertie have been arguing upstairs.)*

ALBERT

*(To Housekeeper)*

Ah. You found the hooch. Good girl.  
Why don't we have a celebratory drink?  
First day at the new manor.

*(Aside)* I need a drink.  
*(To Housekeeper)*  
What's your poison?

HOUSEKEEPER  
I couldn't. I drove and I need to get back to my kids by nine.

ALBERT  
*(Flirtatious)*  
You have kids? Plural? Impossible.  
I thought you were a college girl.  
School's out for summer...  
*(Pours himself a drink.)*

HOUSEKEEPER  
No, sir. I've never been to college.  
*(Re-enter Gertie, also a bit steamed over recent upstairs argument.)*  
Well, excuse me, dinner—

ALBERT  
*(Interrupting)*  
Just a minute.  
What do you think of the house?

HOUSEKEEPER  
Well...it's extremely new.

GERTIE  
*(Accusatory)*  
You said it would be eco friendly.  
*(To Housekeeper)*  
I'm green, that's my passion.  
And we agreed on a completely green mansion.

ALBERT  
*(Irritated)*  
Hmm.  
See that light fixture there? It's green.  
See those windows over there? They're green.  
See the walls, the wires in the walls, the paint upon the walls?  
They're green. They're green. They're green!

Renewable, sustainable, recyclable.  
It's Thirty percent green.  
Thirty percent green. Almost totally clean.

Organic architecture at the cutting edge.  
Noninvasive landscaping,  
Nonsynthetic materials,  
Solar panels above and smart sewage below.  
*(Remembering)* Oh...

No, it's not totally solar.  
Yes. We're still on the power grid.  
Half sun, half grid. It's a hybrid.  
Oh, I think the house is grand.  
Oh, I think the house is grand.

Half sun, half grid. It's a hybrid.  
Oh, I think the house is grand.  
It's one with the elements. It's elegant.

The architect told me...what did he say?  
What did he say?  
"A house should be a looking glass into your soul."  
Oh, I think the house is grand.  
*(Sweetly, to Gertie)*  
I built it for you, Gertie.  
Our friends could come. They could bring their kids.  
There's plenty of room. There's plenty of room.

And another advantage to a new house: No ghosts.

GERTIE  
*(Insistent)*  
But why not one hundred percent green?

*(Albert pours himself another drink.)*

HOUSEKEEPER  
*(Examining a light fixture)*  
Gee, I'm living in the future. Wow.

GERTIE  
It's too big. Too big for the two of us.  
Without any family around.

ALBERT  
Our friends will come.  
Plenty of room.

GERTIE

Too many rooms.  
Passages to stairs to doors to vestibules,  
And anterooms to empty rooms.  
I don't know what they're for.  
Useless leftover rooms.  
Empty rooms stay empty.

ALBERT

We'll throw parties. Charity events.  
*(To Housekeeper)*  
You used to party at the creepy old house.  
You can bring your friends.

HOUSEKEEPER

Oh.  
*(Nervous laughter)*  
Sure.

GERTIE

Too many rooms.

ALBERT

When we viewed the model you said you liked the design.

GERTIE

I liked it better when it was only four feet wide.  
*(Shivers)*  
Brrr. It's cold for a summer evening.  
Or is it air-conditioning? Albert?

*(Uncomfortable pause.)*

HOUSEKEEPER

Well...dinner.  
Cornish hens.  
Excuse me.

*(Housekeeper exits. Gertie moves downstage to the windows. Albert checks his cell phone.)*

GERTIE

*(Gazing at the sunset over the lake)*  
Hmm. Oh.  
Look, look at the light.

ALBERT  
Still no reception.

GERTIE  
Dancing on the lake.

ALBERT  
None at all.

GERTIE  
Last of the sun,  
So red so deep and gold.

ALBERT  
Need a landline.

GERTIE  
Astonishing view...

ALBERT  
Can't get a signal.

GERTIE  
It's taking me back...

ALBERT  
No connection.  
Need the landline installed.  
Can't even call to get the phone installed.

GERTIE  
For a month every summer,  
Father would drive us here,  
It was my favorite time of the year.  
Dancing by the lake,  
Hiding in the woods,  
Running up the path,  
Catching Father by surprise. Ah!  
Magical in the country...

ALBERT  
No damn reception or connection in the country.  
*(Pours himself another drink.)*

GERTIE

Oh god, I just remembered the rope!  
We would swing on that rope, tied miles up in the branches.  
Twist it tight. Tighter. Twist it tightest...  
Then let it go and twirl forever.

ALBERT

Want a drink?  
“Clink, clink, look I’m in the drink...”  
Is that an old song?

GERTIE

Let’s take a walk around the lake.

ALBERT

*(Pouring two drinks.)*  
“Clink, clink, have yourself a drink...”  
Tomorrow, after we unpack, my dear.  
“Drink, drink, throw me in the clink.”  
Have a drink.  
*(Calls offstage)*  
How’s dinner going, my college girl? My co-ed—

*(Lights surge very brightly, then go dark. The room is now only lit by the setting sun.)*

GERTIE

Oh! What happened?  
Did you pay the bill?

ALBERT

Must be an outage.

GERTIE

It must be an outage.

*(Housekeeper calls from offstage as she re-enters.)*

HOUSEKEEPER

Hello? There seems to be an outage.

ALBERT

*(To Housekeeper)*  
Do you know where the, the, fuse box is?  
Find the fuse box... Please...

HOUSEKEEPER

Does solar power use a fuse box?

ALBERT

I'm not an engineer.

HOUSEKEEPER

*(Aside, mockingly)* And I'm not an electrician.

GERTIE

It should have been one hundred percent solar.  
The sun never lets you down.

ALBERT

Actually, it does. Every night.

*(Pause)*

HOUSEKEEPER

It gets quiet when there's no light. Strange.

ALBERT

Let's sit down and we'll wait it out.  
*(Pours two more drinks.)*

HOUSEKEEPER

My kids are with a neighbor, so...

GERTIE

Oh, how old are they?

HOUSEKEEPER

Seven and nine.

GERTIE

You should bring them up.

ALBERT

Another drink?  
*(To Housekeeper)*  
Drink?

HOUSEKEEPER

No. Thank you.

GERTIE

I wonder what's going on...  
Did you hear the news this morning?

HOUSEKEEPER

Yeah, what a mess!

ALBERT

It's nothing.

HOUSEKEEPER

Nothing?

ALBERT

Well, nothing we need worry about.

*(Pause)*

GERTIE

But what if something happened?  
Would we know up here?  
Are we too far away?

ALBERT

I have to call to get the landline turned on.  
No cell phone reception out here.  
Can't even call to get the phone installed.  
When we get the lights on,  
We'll take a drive to town,  
I'll call from a hotel.

HOUSEKEEPER

Funny: When the power goes out,  
It gets quiet and you're surrounded by useless things.  
Now it's junk. No offense.

ALBERT

It's expensive junk.

GERTIE

It is junk.

*(To Housekeeper)*

You know, I help the poor. I try.  
I work with charities.

ALBERT  
Here comes the guilt.

GERTIE  
*(To Albert)* Don't laugh. It is work.  
*(To Housekeeper)* I see a bum, a homeless person, rather,  
and I think to myself, this person is historical.

ALBERT  
*(Sarcastic)*  
And often hysterical.

HOUSEKEEPER  
I don't understand.

GERTIE  
I mean, like something from the past, medieval  
His nomadic, unhygienic life is so primeval.  
It's original man as he has smelt, dwelt, hunted, died  
For centuries.  
It is historical man.  
And I feel unrooted in time. Unrooted everywhere.

ALBERT  
There are a million reasons why people stay poor.  
And one reason why a few of us get along: work.  
You know my philosophy.  
*(To Housekeeper)*  
That's my philosophy.

HOUSEKEEPER  
*(Suddenly, decisively)*  
I need to go. To check on my kids in town.  
See if their power's down.  
Look. I need to go.  
My kids are waiting, maybe in the dark.

GERTIE  
*(Frightened)*  
You're leaving?

ALBERT  
Well, of course, dear. But...

GERTIE

Of course we understand... But...

HOUSEKEEPER

I need to go.

I'm sorry. Really, I am.

GERTIE

It's our first day in a strange house...

HOUSEKEEPER

Wish I could help you.

GERTIE

And it's getting dark.

HOUSEKEEPER

Can't work without power.

GERTIE

How are we supposed to—

You should stay. You can be our guest.

We have so much room here.

ALBERT

*(Firmly)*

Gertie.

*(To Housekeeper)*

It's all right, dear. We understand.

HOUSEKEEPER

Sorry. See you tomorrow...

*(Housekeeper leaves. Pause.)*

ALBERT

We'll just wait it out.

These blackouts don't usually last long.

*(He pours himself another drink.)*

GERTIE

You heard the news on the drive up.

What about our family?

They're in cities. East Coast cities.

What if—

ALBERT  
They're fine.

GERTIE  
What if we're stuck here?  
What if it lasts...  
That girl.  
She thinks we're ridiculous.  
I don't think she'll work out...

ALBERT  
She came recommended.

GERTIE  
There are professionals, you know.  
Maybe if she were older...  
What is happening?  
Albert. Oh Bertie...  
It's getting colder.  
Let's just get out of here and drive.

ALBERT  
Drive where?

GERTIE  
Where are the keys?

ALBERT  
The keys...  
*(He starts to go toward the staircase, stumbles hard into a piece of furniture, or perhaps a heavy box falls on his foot.)*  
Damn! My toe.

GERTIE  
Are you okay?

*(The light has been fading steadily. Albert limping, still holding his drink, retreats to an armchair in the back of the room.)*

ALBERT  
Hmmm. Crippled my toe.  
Give me a moment. Hurts.

GERTIE

Bertie, are you okay?

*(Attention caught by the sunset again)*

Come look at the light.

It's fading away.

Bertie? I can't see you.

Bertie?

ALBERT

Yes, Gertie?

GERTIE

The light is astonishing.

ALBERT

Ah. That's good.

GERTIE

Come look.

ALBERT

Er. In a moment.

GERTIE

It won't last.

ALBERT

Hm. I'm... Okay.

GERTIE

You'll miss it. Don't miss it.

ALBERT

Ah... Wait... a moment.

GERTIE

Watch it fade:

Gold to gray.

ALBERT

Ah...

GERTIE

Come...

ALBERT  
No.

GERTIE  
Look.

ALBERT  
No.

GERTIE  
Look. Ah...  
*(She stares in trembling wonder as the light fades completely.)*

**THE END**