

UNDER THE VOLCANO

- Concept:** Harrowing story of the decline and fall of Geoffrey Firmin, former member of high society in London, British naval officer in WWI, and until recently British Consul to small district in Mexico. His wife Yvonne, who left him a year before because of his drinking, returns to Mexico for a last attempt at rescue and reconciliation. As part of the intervention, Firmin's half-brother Hugh arrives from England and Firmin's Mexican friend Laruelle, a filmmaker, also reaches out to him, but as events unfold, we see that the Consul's downward spiral into depression and alcoholism, fueled in part by flashbacks to a horrific wartime incident, has progressed too far; the pull of despair and addiction is finally stronger than his bonds with those who love him. Ultimately he is lost and his wife Yvonne is shattered.
- Characters:** Geoffrey Firmin, former British Consul. Tenor
 Yvonne, his estranged wife, a film actress. Soprano
 Jacques Laruelle, his friend in Mexico, a filmmaker Bass
 Hugh, his half-brother, a reporter and British spy Baritone

SYNOPSIS

- Prologue:** *Scene One: elegant London townhouse, 1913.* Firmin and Yvonne at the top of London society before the Great War. [set piece with choreographed dancing and special music] They entertain brilliantly; servants bring drinks and hors d'oeuvres on silver chargers; Firmin is tipsy but clever and charming; he is surrounded by friends and admirers. The love between him and Yvonne is palpable. [duet]. *Scene Two: aboard a British vessel under attack in a storm in the Atlantic in WWI (1916).* As the battle and the storm intensify, the ship's boiler begins to spew steam. Over the objections of his horrified crew [chorus: *they are still men*], Firmin orders six German prisoners from a captured U-boat to be chained to the engine room wall, where they are scalded to death. We occasionally flash back to both of these scenes as the opera progresses.
- Act One:** *Scene One: Sleepy town square in small village outside Mexico City, 1938.* As dawn breaks, twin volcanos rise in distance; it is the Day of the Dead. Firmin sits at table in disheveled evening clothes after drinking all night. Laruelle enters and sets the stage [Laruelle aria: the Day of the Dead, Firmin is at a crossroads; God have mercy on him.] [Firmin aria: dawn on another planet, beautiful but frightening; this place has taken my soul.] Yvonne enters, a total surprise to Firmin; she has come to rescue him and take him back to England. [Firmin aria: perhaps there is hope after all; Yvonne aria: twenty years of marriage does not end so quickly; I have failed you; come with me; we can find love again.] She leads him to his home. *Scene Two: the porch of Firmin's unkempt home, its garden overgrown.* Yvonne leads Firmin to his room and undresses him for bed;

she tries to make love to him but he is exhausted and impotent. Hugh arrives to participate in the intervention, but he is cynical and more interested in Yvonne than in saving his brother, who he considers a lost cause. Hugh and Yvonne decide to go for a horseback ride while Firmin sleeps. Laruelle stops in and is thrilled to see Yvonne, with whom he had a brief affair a year earlier. Suave and sophisticated, Laruelle warns Yvonne that Firmin is beyond help. Yvonne defends Firmin and says she can save him; Laruelle tells her she should look out for herself. They all plan to meet at the festival in town at midday. Alone again with his drink, Firmin rises and sings a love song to a bottle of Scotch. Flashback to testimony at 1917 court-martial of Firmin for alleged war crime aboard his ship. The crewmen's chorus haunts him.

Act Two: *Scene One: the carnival.* Laruelle muses on the significance of the holiday and kicks off the festivities. Villagers wear skeleton costumes and skull masks, carry bones, charms, talismans, amulets and trinkets. After swarming chaotically, they form a parade and proceed to celebrate the Day of the Dead. [set piece with choreography, special music and projections] The din is deafening, giving way to a swell of music that reflects zany excitement, confusion, absurdity, humor and pathos. As the parade passes offstage, a small Ferris wheel comes into view, silhouetted ominously against the sky. The carousing villagers force Firmin to get on it, then leave him suspended upside down as they laugh hysterically; he is terrified. Yvonne and Hugh arrive at last and rescue him. The village children point at him and laugh [*Boracho!* (drunkard)], but return the contents of his pockets which have fallen to the ground, a metaphor for his taking leave of earthly life. Hugh gives money to a boy who returns with tequila as Yvonne and Hugh steady Firmin and lead him to a table where he can sit and recover. *Scene Two: the bullfight arena.* Laruelle sets the stage and muses on the significance of the bullfight ritual. In the stands, Hugh flirts with Yvonne while Firmin sips from a flask. We hear the roar of the crowd washing over them in waves. As the bullfight proceeds, Yvonne is horrified at the humiliating and prolonged death being inflicted on the animal. To impress Yvonne, Hugh jumps into the ring and taunts the bull until he is chased back into the stands. While Hugh is in the ring, Yvonne explains that she has rebuffed Hugh's advances; she kisses Firmin and declares her love. [Yvonne aria: this can be a new beginning for us; all is not lost] [Firmin aria: do not pour your love into this broken vessel] The ritualistic death of the bull is a metaphor for the slow and agonizing spiritual and physical death of Firmin. [Firmin aria: all life must end in death; one can only hope it will be quick, but the gods toy with me as the matador toys with the bull] The bullfight ends; Yvonne, Hugh and Laruelle lead Firmin out of the arena. Firmin cheers as the matador is carried out on the shoulders of his admirers in triumph. We see Firmin sitting drunk on a bench on a side street; flashback to his exoneration in his court-martial and his subsequent decoration for his wartime conduct; the memory disgusts him.

Act Three: *Scene One: later that night; table at restaurant.* [Yvonne aria: foreboding; God save him; give me another chance to be his wife.] At dinner, Laruelle and Hugh both flirt with Yvonne. Firmin, world-weary and intensely aware that Yvonne has previously slept with both Hugh and Laruelle, rises from the table. He says he will be right back, but runs out into the night. *Scene Two: a brothel on the outskirts of town, midnight.* [Firmin aria: I cannot bear another day of this] Drunken revelers stagger with prostitutes as the bartender pours tequila for all. Everyone is still in costume for the Day of the Dead except Firmin. [set piece: choreographed drunken dance of the revelers] A prostitute tries to lead him to her room behind the bar, but Firmin shoves her to the ground in disgust; a fight ensues. A drunken policeman is roused from his sleep, breaks up the fight and leads Firmin outside. Wildly drunk, Firmin launches into a tirade against the policeman, the town, the entire country of Mexico. As the crowd sets on Firmin, the policeman fires into the brawl. The crowd pulls back to reveal the mortally wounded Firmin. The Mexicans agree to cover up the incident, dragging Firmin to the edge of a large ravine beside the brothel and throwing him into the abyss to die; with his last breath he calls out for Yvonne. *Scene Three: At dawn, Hugh and Yvonne arrive at the brothel, distraught; Laruelle soon joins them and rouses the sleeping policeman, who tells them he has not seen Firmin and leaves to return to town; Laruelle warns Yvonne and Hugh not to ask more questions.* [Yvonne aria: come back; give me another chance; do not let it end this way. Hugh aria: I have betrayed my own brother; may God forgive us. Laruelle: no one could have saved him; he chose to die; the volcanos consumed him.] Laruelle leads Yvonne and Hugh offstage. [Coda]

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