

Frogs in the Living Room

a musical feud between Aline Barnsdall and Frank Lloyd Wright

libretto by Scott Guy
music by Liza Lehmann

Script/Lyrics Excerpt

(WRIGHT interrupts her fantasy by arriving in person. He has rolls of drawings under his arm.)

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Lady Barnsdall, I, Frank Lloyd Wright, greatest architect in the world, have arrived with the plans for your theatre.

ALINE

My model. My model!

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Far better than a model, my dear.

(HE presents them to her.)

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

The blueprints themselves. As the French say: *voila!*

ALINE

I need a model.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

You don't. I have thought of you, and have prepared for you -- a personal tour of the complex. Given by the architect himself. I will show you, in three dimensions, your new home.

(WRIGHT walks the space, envisioning architecture where currently there is mere nothingness.

La Grande Tour.)

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

(walking the space)

Look, look, here's your room, built directly into the curve of the hill itself. A blend of what Nature made and what she had intended to make, had she half my skills. And down the hill and the steps into the dining room where there will be six chairs and only six, for I believe no dinner should be hosted for more than six people at once, else conversation scatters and splinters into small groups most of whom therefore, are left out of the very conversation most important, namely *mine*. By which I mean yours, Mrs. Barnsdall. Don't interrupt *la grande tour*. And notice on our left of the dining hall, the living room, facing west, with the calming restorative waters running directly through it in a moat.

ALINE

A moat in my living room?

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

A moat around the stone fireplace, under a skylight, representing water, earth, wind and fire all unified at the center of the universe, the family hearth, from which all elements flow.

ALINE

But. A moat.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Flowing from an outdoor reflecting pool through the home down the hill to a lake at the bottom of the hill to a pumphouse, to return the water, back to the reflecting pool, representing --

ALINE

A moat will attract frogs.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

What? No frogs.

ALINE

Coming in from the reflecting pool. Into my living room. There will be frogs.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

The pumphouse will take care of that. It would churn any --

ALINE

Wait. These are same plans you showed me five months ago, aren't they?

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

You are only just now beginning to see the symbolic implications of --

ALINE

After all this time, after all the money I have advanced you.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Because, my dear, I've spent all that time on your theatre. Your magnificent theatre.

ALINE

Do you have a model?

(suddenly yelling)

I want to see a model!!

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

There are the exclamation marks I've come to expect. Let me tell you about the theatre. Shall I tell you about the theatre?

ALINE

Tell me about the theatre. Tell me all about the theatre. The. Theatre. Paint me the picture. Walk me down its aisles. Draw for me its curtain.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Well, it doesn't have a curtain.

ALINE

Not yet, no. But what color will it be? For Sugartop's sake, can we fashion a white or a gold -- Hollyhocks! Hollyhocks, yes, my favorite flower. Hollyhocks woven into the very fabric of the golden curtain, golden like the California sun. Yes. There shall be woven golden hollyhocks into the curtain and into the design of the building itself. I must have hollyhocks on the curtain, Mr. Wright, or I shall die.

WEAVE IN THE FOLDS OF THE CURTAIN

GOLD HOLLYHOCKS.

GOLD LIKE CALIFORNIA SUN

WHEN DAY'S BEGUN.

Oh, oh, and also

IN THE BUILDING,

DESIGN THE BUILDING ITSELF TO UNIFY

Yes!

I MUST HAVE HOLLYHOCKS ON THE CURTAIN,
MUST HAVE HOLLYHOCKS OR I WILL DIE(-IE).

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

LOOK. HERE ON THE PLANS.

ROUND. OUTDOORS. WITH BENCHES FOR SEATS.

See?

BENCHES FOR SEATS.

THERE'S NO CURTAIN.

ALINE

NO CURTAIN? NO CURTAIN?

BUT HOW CAN A THEATRE BE ROUND?

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

WELL, YOU WERE THE ONE WHO INVOKED THE GREEKS.

ALINE

AND WHERE IS MY DRESSING ROOM?

(moaning; a threnody)

AHHH....

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
 YOU WERE THE ONE WHO INVOKED THE DAMN GREEKS.
 THERE'S NO CURTAIN.
 IT'S ROUND.
 IT'S OUTDOORS.
 YOU'LL HAVE BENCHES FOR YOUR SEATS.
 ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?
 NO, YOU'RE NOT.
 IT'S AN AMPHITHEATRE,
 FOR THAT IS WHAT THE TOPOLOGY WANTS.
 FOR THAT IS WHAT THE EARTH DEMANDS.

ALINE
 IS THAT WHAT I DEMAND?
 NO, I THINK IT IS NOT.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
 PERHAPS IT IS NOT.
 SO I'LL CONCEDE

ALINE
 YOU'LL CONCEDE!?

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
 I WILL CONCEDE...THE HOLLYHOCKS.

ALINE
 (back to her threnody)
 AHHH....

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
 I have designed you a --

ALINE
 AHHH....

(Anger begins to overtake both of them.)

ALINE
 I BEG YOUR PARDON.
 HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN
 THE MONEY I'VE GIVEN YOU!
 ALL OF THE MONEY I'VE GIVEN TO YOU,
 ALL THE LAND THAT I BOUGHT,
 NOT TO MENTION THE PHILANTHROPIC AWES
 I INSPIRED FOR YOU,
 ALL BECAUSE OF PRESTIGE AND RESPECT
 AND ACCLAIM AND APPLAUSE!

WRIGHT
 I BEG YOUR PARDON
 FOR I'VE DESIGNED
 A MAGNIFICENT EDIFICE.
 I HAVE DESIGNED A MAGNIFICENT
 EDIFICE.
 HOW IS IT YOU ARE THE ONE
 MOST INSULTED BY REMARKS
 WHICH ARE MADE TO THE RICH MATRIARCHS
 WHO DON'T KNOW THEY USE
 TOO MANY EXCLAMATION MARKS!

ALINE
 And the theatre doesn't have a curtain!

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
By which you mean "And I don't have a dressing room!"

ALINE
(as if struck across the face)

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
(imitates her)

ALINE
(reeling)

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
(imitates her again; then:)
Mrs. Barnsdall, listen to me.

ALINE
Miss Barnsdall!!

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
Very well. Miss Barnsdall!

ALINE
Thank you!

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
You're welcome! Listen to me, Miss Barnsdall....

ALINE
(imperious)
No, you listen to me, Mr. Wright.
YOU SEEM OBLIVIOUS TO THE FACT
THAT YOU NEED ME.
YOU HAVE NO CLIENTS. NOT A ONE.
Oh, the Imperial Hotel, but I've read of the lawsuit against you
AND I KNOW THAT NO ONE'S HIRING YOU.
THE REASON IS THAT NO ONE WILL DARE.
YOUR PRIVATE LIFE IS A DISGRACE.
ONE SCANDAL FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER ONE.
THE PUBLIC SEES YOU AS A MONSTER.
AND WE ALL KNOW THE REASON WHY.
YOUR BEHAVIOUR'S RUDE AND UNACCEPTABLE.
SO WHO CAN PUT UP WITH YOU NOW, BUT I?

ALINE

Because, contrary to what you might believe, I think I actually do understand your art and wish to will it into existence. And the Japanese who don't understand a word you say to them, well, that's how they put up with you.

YOU THINK THAT YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING.

YOU DON'T.

I ADVISE YOU TO BUILD IT MY WAY,

BUT YOU WON'T.

MY BEAUTIFUL THEATRE, BUILT WITHOUT LIGHTS.

YOU DESIGN IT WITHOUT ANY WINGS,

WITHOUT FOOTLIGHTS OR TEASERS

OR OTHER REQUIRES FOR THE ACTOR

WHO DANCES AND SINGS.

AND MY THOUSAND SEAT THEATRE'S

NOTHING TO YOU.

YOU DESIGN IT WITHOUT ALL THOSE THINGS.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

That's right. Euripides didn't have any of that. And if it's good enough for --

ALINE

IT MAY BE GOOD ENOUGH FOR HIM,

GOOD ENOUGH FOR EURIPIDES,

BUT IT IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR ALINE BARNSDALL!

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

(hasn't been listening; suddenly inspired)

YOUR CURTAIN, PERHAPS, IS A FOUNTAIN.

YES, A SEMICIRCULAR FOUNTAIN AND,

AND YOUR CURTAIN IS MADE OF WATER.

ALINE

A FOUNTAIN.

WHERE I'D BE STANDING?

DOWNSTAGE?

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

AND THE WATER COULD FEED A REFLECTING POOL.

A GEOSYNTACTIC REFLECTING POOL.

ALINE

A REFLECTING POOL?

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Yes!

ALINE

A REFLECTING POOL --

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
GEOSYNTACTIC.

ALINE
RIGHT WHERE I WOULD SEAT MY AUDIENCE?

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
NO, THE AUDIENCE WOULD BE...
WOULD BE...WOULD BE...
YOU DO UNDERSTAND IT DOESN'T MATTER?
THE ENTIRE AUDIENCE WOULD FIT ON A SINGLE PARK BENCH.
THAT'S ALL WHO WILL COME TO HIAWATHA
OR ANY PLAY THAT'S STARRING YOU.
PLEASE DON'T RISK IT, ALINE BARNSDALL,
BELIEVE ME, I'M PROTECTING YOU!

ALINE
I THINK THERE IS ONE THING WE BOTH AGREE:
YOUR BUILDING IS ALL YOU PROTECT.
WHEN YOU DIRECT YOUR GAZE AT ME,
IT'S PATENTLY CLEAR ALL YOU EVER SEE
IS A RICH AND RIDICULOUS WOMAN.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
Well, you're wrong there. I don't see you as a woman at all.
I AM THE ARCHITECT,
I WILL CONVEY THE PLANS THAT I LAID
AND THEY WILL STAY!

ALINE
I'LL GIVE IT AWAY.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
THE HELL THAT YOU SAY.

ALINE
DON'T THINK THAT I WON'T.
YOU'RE SO RESOLUTE.
I'LL PAY FOR IT, THEN GIVE IT AWAY,
PERHAPS TO HOUSE THE DESTITUTE,
OR BETTER, A LUNATICS' INSTITUTE.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
I THINK IT IS THAT ALREADY.

ALINE
Yes! A mental institution.

WITH INMATES WHO WILL URINATE
 INTO YOUR REFLECTING POOL
 TO THE LIVING ROOM WHERE THE STENCH WILL COMPETE
 WITH THE STENCH OF THE FROGS I HATE YOU.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

That is irrelevant. Or should be. It doesn't matter what I
 think of you. What matters is our art.

ALINE

No, no. What matters is our friendship.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Our friendship!

ALINE

Let us preserve it all costs.
 WHY COMBAT IT?
 ON SOME POINTS, IT IS CERTAIN,
 YOU AND I ARE GOING TO BE ENEMIES.
 BUT IN THE INTERIM, OH,
 SHAN'T WE BE REASONABLE?
 SHAN'T WE?
 CAN'T WE BE GOOD FRIENDS?
 GOOD FRIENDS, BETWEEN TIMES?
 AH, CAN'T WE?

(SHE holds out her hand to Wright. HE does not
 touch it.)

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

YOU LIVE IN A FANTASY WORLD OF YOUR OWN MAKING.
I ACTUALLY ADMIRE THAT ABOUT YOU.
NOW GOD KNOWS FROM MY ENDLESS SHARE OF WOMEN
I'VE FOUND THAT THERE ARE BASICALLY TWO KINDS.
THE FIRST KIND OF WOMAN MUST CLING TO A MAN.
THE SECOND KIND OF WOMAN WILL FLEE IF SHE CAN.

But you belong to a rare third kind of woman, Aline Barnsdall.

SHE IS THE RAREST THIRD KIND:
THE WISTFUL LONELY WOMAN,
NONE TOO SURE OF ANYONE OR ANYTHING.
(imitates the wistful woman)

AH!

FOR SHE, HAVING VENTURED THE UNCHARTERED,
THEN FORTIFIED BY KNOWLEDGE GLEANED
FROM LIFE OR CIRCUMSTANCE,
SOMETIMES PAINFULLY, SO PAINFULLY ALONE,
SHE'S DRIVEN, OFTEN DRIVEN, TO COVER HER FEAR
BY DEFIANCE, BY AGRESSION, BY EMOTION.
BY YOUR UNCHARTERED POWER
AND YOUR CANTILEVERED PASSION
AND SELF-AGGRANDIZED WHICH IS NOT TO SAY BEAUTIFUL
AWE-INSPIRING SPIRIT YOU COUNTER WOMEN'S WEAKNESS
WITH WILLFULNESS, WITH WILLFULNESS
BEYOND ALL PARALLEL.

But shall we be friends? No.

(THEY acquiesce at last to their anger.)

ALINE

I BEG YOUR PARDON.
YOU DON'T KNOW ME
AND YET YOU PRESUME TO JUDGE.
NOR WILL YOU EVER KNOW ME
IF YOU DON'T COME TO SEE
IN THE PLANS THAT I LAID
I HAVE NEVER BEEN AFRAID.
AND IN FACT, I AM HAPPY AND STAID
WHEN ALL YOU MEN
THINK I'M HURT AND BETRAYED.
WILLFULNESS IS A FACT OF MY BIRTH.
YOU DON'T KNOW THE HALF MY WORTH.

YOU THINK YOU'RE SO SMART.
MAYBE SO IN YOUR ART
BUT NOT IN YOUR LIFE.
NO WONDER YOU CAN'T KEEP A WIFE.
YOU CANNOT, YOU CANNOT,
YOU CANNOT YOU CAN--

WRIGHT

I AM DELIGHTED OF COURSE
THAT THE BUILDING I PLANNED
WON'T BE YOURS
AND YOU'LL GIVE UP THE LAND I SURVEYED.
I HAVE LOST NO REMORSE
THAT PAID ALL MY COST
OF THE TWO MODELS I NEVER MADE.
OLIVE HILL IS A WASTE OF GOOD EARTH.
YOU DON'T KNOW THE TENTH MY WORTH.

IN CASE YOU CAN'T TELL,
YOU'RE THE PATRON FROM HELL.

A TERRIBLE WASTE.
YOU'RE SPOILED AND HAVE NO TASTE.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

I shall not build you your dressing room, because you don't deserve one.

ALINE
 YOU CANNOT.
 YOU CANNOT!

WRIGHT
 YOU DO NOT.
 YOU DO NOT!

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

(false exit; then:)

And what kind of mother names her child "Sugartop"?

(HE exits with a whirl. SHE is numb for a moment, trying to recover her dignity.)

ALINE

Well. You know I named you Betty. I only call you Sugartop because, because when you were born your hair was so blindingly white and sweet, it was, you know, like the top of your head were made of sugar. Honest. It's gone a bit brown now, hasn't it? Perhaps as you grow older, Betty might be more...appropriate. I could still think to myself "Betty Crocker," you know, white frosting. Except he would know. Oh, why did it have to be he who suggested not to call you Sugartop?

I have to give it away now, you know. I said it, so now I have to give away my house. My beloved Hollyhock House. To prove myself a woman of my word. I must give it away.

(SHE despairs. **Jamais.**)

ALINE

IF ONLY I'D APPROVED WHAT HE'D DESIGNED.
 OH WHAT, OH WHAT HAVE I DONE?
 IF HIS BLUEPRINTS I HAD NOT DECLINED,
 OH WHAT, OH WHAT HAVE I DONE?
 IF I HAD NOT ASSERTED MY WILL,
 I'D BE FOREVER LINKED TO HIM STILL.
 LINK FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
 WITH ALINE BARNSDALL
 WITH HOLLYHOCK HOUSE
 AND OLIVE HILL.

WE'D BE THE COVER OF *LIFE* MAGAZINE,
 RADIO STARS, AND NEWSREEL KING AND QUEEN,
 PRESIDENT WILSON FLATTERING ME
 TO LIGHT THE WHITE HOUSE CHRISTMAS TREE.

Oh, please. The honor is *mine*...Woodrow.

BUT NO. JAMAIS! AS SAY THE FRENCH.
 IT'S TOO GRAVE AN INSULT TO CONSUME.
 AND REALLY...MY AUDIENCE ON A PARK BENCH!?
 NOT TO MENTION FROGS IN THE LIVING ROOM.
 A MADMAN! THAT'S WHAT HE IS.
 AN EGOTIST BEYOND ALL CALL.
 INFLATED PIECE OF BLUSTER AND GALL.
 BESIDES, HE STANDS ONLY THIS TALL!

I SAID THAT I WOULD GIVE IT AWAY.
 I SAID I'D DO IT, SO I WILL.
 I'LL WRITE THE CITY,
 WRITE THEM TODAY.
 ADIEU! ADIEU TO OLIVE HILL!

Or. I could acquiesce. Just a little. Concede to him his ridiculous reflecting pool. But in exchange for which he would give me thirty minutes; that would be all I would need. Thirty minutes during which he would promise not to interrupt, that would be the key, so that I might present to him what it is that I envision. The artists' residences, the living room facing east, but first and foremost the theatre, the audience, the art. Oh, yes, Sugartop, what a fool I have been allowing him to interrupt me so often and so rudely, for once he could see the vision in my mind, oh surely then, oh then, oh then....

ALINE

THAT'S SOMETHING EVEN HE CAN'T SCORN.
 ONCE HE SEES MY VISION MUST BE BORN,
 SUGARTOP, HE WILL MAKE AMENDS WITH ME.
 HE MAY EVEN BE FRIENDS WITH ME.
 I'LL WRITE HIM TOMORROW!
 I'LL WRITE HIM.

Never forget, Sugartop, what Mummy has done to celebrate your birthday. It will all be for you!

FILLED WITH ARTISTS EVERYWHERE,
 PAINTERS, ACTORS, JARDINIERES!
 I WILL BUILD A LITTLE STAGE.
 SOON WILL IT BECOME ALL THE RAGE.
 CAUSE A THEATRE TO APPEAR
 AND ALL LOS ANGELES WILL CHEER!
 I WILL WRITE HIM.

(SHE turns, again admiring the view.)

EXCLAMATION MARK!

(Blackout.)

THE END