

EXTRACTS FROM
A WILDE AFFAIR

MISS PRISM AND CANON CHASUBLE IN CONCERT.

by CHRISTOPHER OWEN.

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A Wilde Affair was first performed at Fonthill Bishop Church, Wiltshire, on the 4th June 2005 by **Susan Flannery and Michael Lunts** as Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble prior to touring nationally.

THE YEAR 1902 – 2 YEARS AFTER THE DEATH OF OSCAR WILDE.

SET: THE STAGE OF A HALL OR THEATRE.

Piano. Music stand. A table, on which a large Gladstone bag and a jug of water and a glass and 3 heavy manuscripts, these being the 3 volumes of Miss Prism's memoirs.

MISS LAETITIA PRISM: 65 years old. Although it is believed that at one time Miss Prism was employed as a governess and was noted for her gentility and erudition, the woman who arrives on stage this evening is unexpectedly one of energy and great charm and dazzling theatricality.

CANON FREDERICK CHASUBLE, DD: 65 years old – in dog collar and appropriate suiting – a respectable gentleman, pedantic, repetitious and somewhat self-important.

FIRST EXTRACT

PART ONE.

CANON CHASUBLE AND MISS PRISM ENTER.

BOTH: Good evening.

CHASUBLE MOVES TO THE PIANO. MISS PRISM TO THE MUSIC STAND.

CHASUBLE: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. May I commence by introducing ourselves. Miss Laetitia Prism.

PRISM: (RESTRAINED ALTHOUGH NOT UNPLEASANT): Good evening.

CHASUBLE: (INTRODUCING HIMSELF): Canon Frederick Chasuble. Doctor of Divinity. Formerly rector at Wooton, in Hertfordshire. Now retired. Miss Prism and I consider it a great honour to have been invited here this evening, during the course of which we shall have the pleasure of singing a number of songs – many of which, we are sure, will be known to many of you.

Miss Prism and I, on occasion, have been asked when it was that we first began to sing together. Well, for your information, we began to sing together just two years ago in the church choir. Isn't that so, Miss Prism?

PRISM: It is, Canon Chasuble.

CHASUBLE: Thereafter, in response to numerous requests from friends and members of the public we began to perform our concerts, as indeed we are this evening..

PRISM: We shall also this evening be recounting one or two stories about ourselves, won't we, Canon?

CHASUBLE: Oh, yes, yes, we shall.

PRISM: These stories, together with a great many others, are to be found in my soon-to-be-published memoirs. My memoirs – SHE HOLDS UP THE THREE MANUSCRIPTS) – entitled: 'There's A Thrush In The

Corner Behind The Dead Tree.’ All three volumes of which, on publication, we trust you will all rush out to buy.

CHASUBLE: We shall now have our first song, shall we? A May Morning, by Luigi Denza.

PRISM: A lovely song. (TO CHASUBLE): Thank you.

CHASUBLE: (TO PRISM): Thank you so much.

SONG 1. A MAY MORNING.

BOTH: Come out, come out my dearest dear.
Come out and greet the sun,
The birds awake on tree and brake,
The merry May’s begun.
Come out and drink the diamond dew,
Come out and tread the lea,
The world is all awake, and you,
And you are all, are all the world to me.

CHASUBLE:
Put on your gown of dainty white,
Put on your bodice blue,
For I’ve been waiting all the night
To greet the May with you.
And ev’ry tree is white with thorn,
The village blithe and gay,
Come out, come out this happy morn,
And be our Queen, and be our Queen of May!

PRISM: The whitethroat sings unto his mate,
And I am singing too,
For morning early, ev’ning late
My heart is all for you.

CHASUBLE:
My songs shall blossom at your feet,

PRISM: Your heart my throne shall be,

BOTH: For you/I am Queen of May my sweet,
And all the world, and all the world to me.

Come out! Come out! Come out!

AFTER WHICH:

PRISM: Thank you, thank you.

CHASUBLE: Thank you very much. Our next song is the Moon Has Raised Her Lamp Above by Sir Julius Benedict.

PRISM: Before we sing The Moon Has Raised Her Lamp Above, I should like, at this early stage in our concert this evening, to take the opportunity of correcting the unfortunate impression, held by a number of otherwise well-meaning people, that the Canon and I are, in any way, as we have been most unfortunately depicted by Mr Oscar Wilde in his comedy of manners entitled The Importance of Being Earnest.

CHASUBLE: Mr Wilde's boulevard entertainment The Importance of Being Earnest was staged seven years ago in 1895 at the St James's Theatre in London, where it played for no more than just a few weeks.

PRISM: Canon Chasuble and I wish to impress upon the general public that neither he nor I are as Mr Wilde would have you believe us.

CHASUBLE: Indeed, indeed, that is so. Mr Wilde regrettably depicted Miss Prism as a neurotic spinster.

PRISM: Neurotic. I mean, you tell me, ladies and gentlemen, do I look neurotic?

CHASUBLE: He went on to suggest –

PRISM: I wouldn't bother to say any more about it, Canon – it's all slander.

CHASUBLE: He depicted me as a pedantic, self-important, repetitive old fool. Isn't that so, Miss Prism? Ha! Pedantic, self important, repetitive.

PRISM: Our next song then: 'The Moon Has Raised Her Lamp Above'.

CHASUBLE: Pedantic, repetitive, can you imagine?

PRISM: Are we ready for our next song, Canon Chasuble?

CHASUBLE: Me, repetitive.

PRISM: The song ‘The Moon Has Raised Her Lamp Above’ by Sir Julius Benedict.

CHASUBLE: Before we proceed with our next song - if I may Miss Prism - I am delighted to inform you, ladies and gentlemen, that this coming Sunday week, Miss Laetitia Prism and I are at last to be joined together in holy wedlock.

PRISM: We are to be married, ladies and gentlemen.

CHASUBLE: Dear Miss Prism and I finally – and, I might add, for the second time - became engaged to be married just two years ago – soon after the dear lady returned from France, where she had resided for all of five long, long years.

PRISM: (ENTHUSIASTICALLY): Ah, yes! La France! I’m just going to have to tell you about my life in Patee. Why, I have sometimes asked myself, did I ever leave?

CHASUBLE: That is a question best addressed on some other occasion. Don’t you think?

END OF FIRST EXTRACT.

SECOND EXTRACT:

PRISM: (SOTE VOCE TO CHASUBLE): You said we’d tell them about the baby.

CHASUBLE: (SOTE VOCE TO PRISM): Ah yes.
(TO THE AUDIENCE): Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Prism and I, at this juncture in the evening, would very much like to address some of the grave misconceptions surrounding the occasion, thirty eight years ago in 1864, on which Miss Prism lost her employer’s baby boy.

PRISM: Much of the unfortunate misunderstanding relating to that tragic event, we regret to say, has been caused by the sadly inaccurate and incomplete account of it in Mr Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

CHASUBLE: We may now hear the true story of that appalling accident, ladies and gentlemen, 'straight from the horse's mouth'. Miss Prism.

PRISM: Thank you.

CHASUBLE: In employing the phrase 'straight from the horse's mouth', I was, of course, speaking metaphorically.

PRISM: Oh, thank you – so gratifying to hear you say so.

CHASUBLE: My metaphor is drawn from Early Christian Veterinary procedure. Indeed, the phrase 'straight from the horse's mouth', according to Dr Ebenezer Cobham Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fables*, may be traced back to the twelfth century A.D.

PRISM: Oh, good.

CHASUBLE: And, as you may or may not know, it has as its genesis the scientific conclusion that the only certain way of discovering a horse's age is by the examination of the said animal's front teeth.

PRISM: Thank you, thank you, Canon.

CHASUBLE: Thank you, thank you.

PRISM: Well, dear ladies and gentlemen, with regard to that day, on which I lost my employer's baby boy: to begin the story at the beginning: I was, at the time of which we speak, a young lady of twenty six, and had been engaged as a nursery maid to the baby son of Mrs Moncrieff, who, subsequent to her husband's death, was staying with her sister Lady Bracknell in Upper Grosvenor Street, Mayfair. Unknown to my employer and her sister Lady Bracknell, *of which lady we shall this evening make no further mention*, I was, during this period, much occupied in the writing of a three volume work of fiction entitled: 'Cherubim and Seraphim In Glittering Ranks With Wings Displayed'. In order to keep this same work from the prying eyes of my employer and her sister, it had been my custom to keep it in my dear old handbag - which I am

delighted to say is, after so many years, again in my possession – lovely. I would then deposit my work of fiction and handbag in the left-luggage cloakroom at Victoria Station. Each morning, dear ladies and gentlemen, I would walk the baby in his perambulator to Victoria Station, collect my work of fiction, and, together with the baby, take it to St James’s Park where I would continue my work on it.

CHASUBLE: This is most fascinating.

PRISM: Thank you. However: One day - I was in St James’s Park.

CHASUBLE: We are now coming to a most exciting part of the story.

PRISM: We are, indeed. Indeed, indeed, we are. Thank you again, Canon, dear. One day – and this is an incident to which Mr Wilde in his play quite failed to alert his audiences - I was sitting on my bench in St James’s Park with the perambulator over here, and with my handbag and the baby on the bench beside me here, and with my work of fiction open on my lap, when I looked up and I saw standing beneath a hawthorn tree the most beautiful young man!

CHASUBLE: He had the most wonderful piercing blue eyes.

PRISM: You won’t believe this, ladies and gentlemen, but, for a brief moment, I thought that the young man whom I saw there beneath the hawthorn tree was none other than my long lost twin brother.

CHASUBLE: Miss Prism is speaking of the long lost twin brother of whom she has no physical recollection.

PRISM: No, indeed, none at all.

CHASUBLE: You see, her mother passed away when she and her brother were two years old, and, soon after, her brother was sent away to live somewhere else with some other family.

PRISM: And I never knew where. Well, as I was saying, I looked up, and saw beneath the hawthorn tree this most beautiful young man –

CHASUBLE: He had the most wonderful piercing blue eyes.

PRISM: (TRYING TO HIDE HER IRRITATION WITH CHASUBLE): He had the most wonderful piercing blue eyes – thank you, Canon - well done – and, ladies and gentlemen, I was possessed by this extraordinary idea that the young man was my long lost twin brother.

CHASUBLE: Her long lost twin brother.

PRISM: I rushed up to the young man –

CHASUBLE: Miss Prism rushed up to the young man –

PRISM: - and I said: ‘James! Darling! It isn’t!’

CHASUBLE: And it wasn’t.

PRISM: It wasn’t. But it could have been. And ever since that day, I have been asking myself will I ever, ever be reunited with him?!

CHASUBLE: Miss Prism continually asks herself will she ever be reunited with her long lost twin brother?

PRISM: Well, ladies and gentlemen, this young fellow strides off -

END OF SECOND EXTRACT.

THIRD EXTRACT:

PRISM: (TO AUDIENCE): Here we are again!

CHASUBLE: (TO AUDIENCE): Here we are.

PRISM: (TO AUDIENCE): We have been very busy entertaining Auguste Rodin, Mr Swinburne and Sir Henry, haven’t we? They have gone off for a spot of supper at Romano’s. Wonderful Romano’s. I tell Canon Chasuble he really must go there some day.

CHASUBLE: Miss Prism is always telling me to go to Romano’s.

PRISM: Yes, indeed – it’d do you the world of good, Canon. We shall now have the first song of the second half of our evening.

CHASUBLE: What I would very much like to know is what you meant when you said Monsieur Rodin greatly enjoyed the song Excelsior when it was sung at your wedding in Bordeaux?

PRISM: (DETERMINEDLY AVOIDING THE ISSUE): Monsieur Rodin is greatly attached to Excelsior, Canon. ‘The Lark Now Leaves His Wat’ry Nest’.

CHASUBLE: You say you were once married in Bordeaux?

PRISM: It’s in the past, Canon. Now then: off you go. (TO CHASUBLE): Thank you.

CHASUBLE: (TO PRISM): Thank you so much.

THEY SING THE SONG ‘THE LARK NOW LEAVES HIS WATERY NEST’.

PRISM: The lark now leaves his wat’ry nest,
And climbing spreads his dewy wings;
He takes this window for the East,
And to implore, and to implore
And to implore your light he sings,

BOTH: Awake, awake, the morn will never rise,
Till she can dress her beauty at your eyes,
Awake, awake, the morn will never rise,
Till she can dress her beauty, dress her beauty at your eyes.
Awake, awake, awake, awake!

BETWEEN THE VERSES OF THE SONG:

CHASUBLE: Are you by any chance still married?

PRISM: No, no. My husband died.

CHASUBLE: What did he die of – your husband?

PRISM: A blow to the head.

CHASUBLE: A blow to the head?

PRISM: Several blows to the head.

CHASUBLE: Good lord.

THEY CONTINUE TO SING:

CHASUBLE:

The merchant bows unto the seaman's star,
The ploughman from the sun his season takes,
But still the lover wonders what they are
Who look for day, who look for day
Who look for day before his mistress wakes.

BOTH: Awake, awake, the morn will never rise,
Till she can dress her beauty at your eyes,
Awake, awake, the morn will never rise,
Till she can dress her beauty, dress her beauty at your eyes.
Awake, awake, awake, awake!

AFTER WHICH:

PRISM: Thank you, thank you.

CHASUBLE: Thank you very much.

PRISM: Now then, we must attend to the ladies and gentlemen's written questions.

CHASUBLE: (TO PRISM:) The several blows to the head of the man you married in Bordeaux – may I enquire from what he received these blows?

PRISM: An axe.

CHASUBLE: An axe? Who, one may ask, dealt these fatal blows to the head to the man you married in Bordeaux?

PRISM: The French gendarmerie was not able to ascertain..

CHASUBLE: But there must have been suspicions.

PRISM: Oh, there were!

END OF THIRD EXTRACT.

FOURTH EXTRACT:

CHASUBLE: As the butler Merriman bent to offer her a cucumber sandwich, I knelt before her and humbly asked for her hand in marriage. And Miss Prism, I am proud to relate, replied: ‘yes, thank you. I will’.

PRISM: I’ve always loved cucumber sandwiches.

CHASUBLE: Alas, alas! Overwhelmed as Miss Prism was by the rekindled memory of having lost the baby boy all those years earlier, all thoughts of marriage had to be postponed.

PRISM: (LIFTING UP HER MEMOIRS): It’s in my memoirs, ladies and gentlemen – my memoirs entitled: ‘There’s a Thrush in the Corner Behind the Dead Tree’.

CHASUBLE: That same night, Miss Prism fled to France, where she remained for five long years before returning to this Country just two years ago.

PRISM: And what a wonderful five years in France those were, darlings. Next question! From Miss Featherstone-Barraclough of Hither Green, Kent: ‘Would Miss Prism please tell us if it is true she married the Impressionist painter Edgar Degas in Rouen?’ Yes, it is true, Miss Featherstone-Barraclough.

CHASUBLE: You married the Impressionist painter Edgar Degas in Rouen?

PRISM: No. I married Jean-Pierre ‘Peg-Leg’ Degas, the concierge in Monmartre.

CHASUBLE: You married Jean-Pierre ‘Peg-leg’ Degas in Monmartre? He would have been your second husband, would he, Miss Prism?

PRISM: So I was given to believe, Canon, dear. But, alas and alack, Canon Chasuble, Jean-Pierre ‘Peg-Leg’ Degas of Monmartre and I were together for no more than three weeks.

CHASUBLE: Just three weeks?

PRISM: (EXPLAINING): His wooden peg-leg.

END OF FOURTH EXTRACT.

FIFTH EXTRACT:

PRISM: On his deathbed, my father told me that I had a twin brother who was sent away to live with another family – I'm sure I've told you, dear man - and his name was James. James Progget.

CHASUBLE: But I have the initials J.P. on my brandy flask – which my adopted father told me had been found on my person when I was discovered on the steps of a children's home. Look.

PRISM: You were adopted, Canon?

CHASUBLE: Yes, I was. (SHOWING HER THE FLASK): You see? J.P.

PRISM: But it can't be! And here on my handbag! (WITH GROWING REALIZATION): No. Wait. Tell me, have you a strawberry mark on your right knee?

CHASUBLE: Yes.

PRISM: So have I!

CHASUBLE: The strawberry marks, are they significant?

PRISM: Everyone in my family has always been born with -

BOTH PRISM AND CHASUBLE: - a strawberry mark on their right knee.

PRISM: (PAUSE. THEN REVELATION!): Brother!

CHASUBLE: Sister! Sister!

THEY EMBRACE.

CHASUBLE: But wait! As we are now brother and sister, we can no longer be married.

PRISM: Oh, gracious me! Nor can we!

CHASUBLE: But a sister! I've always felt a sister is so much more desirable than a wife, don't you think?

PRISM: Oh, yes, yes! And a brother is surely so much more satisfying than a husband.

END OF EXTRACTS