

# AGAINST OBLIVION (PART 1)

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## AGAINST OBLIVION (PART 1)

### NOTES

Against Oblivion (Part 1) is the first section of a multi-part music theatre work each section of which can be performed on its own or in conjunction with others. Each section requires a varied number of performers and resources. Part 1 is written for eight performer/musicians. All performers either play an instrument or sing (or both) and are assigned speaking and performing roles. The configuration of roles and the performance skills required is as follows:

Performer A - harpsichord / marimba / performer  
Performer B - keyboards / accordion / performer  
Performer C - saxophones (soprano and alto sax) / marimba / performer  
Performer D - trombone / voice (baritone) / performer  
Performer E - violin / voice (soprano) / performer  
Performer F - violin / performer  
Performer G - voice (soprano) / percussion / performer  
Performer H – voice (alto) / percussion / performer

The characters are identified as A, B, C, D, E, F, G and H in the script because aside from the requirements of vocal range there is no specific gender requirement or character personality for the performers. In the first performances B, C and D were men and A, E, F, G and H were women and character and/or gender roles were worked out in rehearsal.

### PERFORMANCE REQUIREMENTS

Percussion: snare drum, medium tom tom, ocean drum, marimba

Keyboards: Player A: Harpsichord and drawbar organ  
Player B: Digital piano plus splittable MIDI keyboard controlling Korg 05RW or similar

#### Amplification

In addition to the boom mic on the stand, the performers should be amplified via radio mics and the table top amplified via contact mics Other instruments (eg marimba and harpsichord should be amplified by air mics or pickups for balance).

#### Staging requirements:

Full theatre lighting  
Long table (capable of seating 6 on one side)  
4 office telephones and office table lamps  
jugs of water and glasses  
6 office wheelie chairs  
paper shredder  
large pile of pebbles  
large quantities of looseleaf paper  
coat/hat stand  
smaller table  
portable cd player  
mic stand  
wind machine(s)

## **AGAINST OBLIVION (PART 1)**

### **SCRIPT/LIBRETTO AND STAGE DIRECTIONS**

**Pre set:** Long table with papers and phones, jugs of water, large pile of stones, 6 wheelie office chairs, a paper shredder, harpsichord, marimba, keyboards, coat stand, table for instrument cases, portable CD player, small and large stacks of loose-leaf paper with some paper strewn on the floor, Single mic on stand downstage right.

#### **Soundtrack – distant machinery – very low volume**

*A enters, wearing a formal long dress and carrying a stone, she searches through the paper strewn on the floor, picks up one sheet and comes to the mic. She speaks*

[TEXT (spoken) - FOREHEAD<sup>1</sup>]

A: My forehead is wrinkled so hard that it hurts, yet I cannot un wrinkle it. I spend many hours trying to un wrinkle my forehead. I try to catch myself by surprise, I try to smooth my forehead with my fingers; I try to concentrate my whole mind to this end, but I am unable to make smooth my brow. The skin over my eyebrows is tied in an aching, unbreakable knot.

*She puts on CD of Caruso, sits at table, stage right, listening.*

*B enters in a coat. Puts a stone on the pile, goes to CD and changes track, starts looking through papers on table, A gets up and changes back to her track. She gives B some music. Slight tension.*

*C enters with sax in case, looks at A & B, places stone and gets out instrument, sits at table. A begins to hand out music parts.*

*E and F enter doing everything as a pair, get out violins and tune up*

*D enters, on the phone ( just saying 'yeah' at intervals) takes music and starts getting ready.*

*G comes in, is handed music by A, empties a handbag full of stones onto the pile. A switches off CD and goes to harpsichord. They look at each other, all poised and ready to play when:*

*PHONE RINGS All suspended, look at phone.*

*H enters in a hurry, brings more papers and a stone, takes off coat. Picks up phone:*

**[MUSIC – OPENING]** *Interspersed with*

[TEXT (spoken) - H's side of the phone conversation]:

H: Yes?.....Hello?.....Who is this?.....No....no...well I'll tell you. No....no....He was on the boat...and he managed to get on the bus....It was very crowded, but somebody helped him out....Took pity on him I suppose....got him a ticket...well yes...once he was there he thought that it was.... that he'd made it...and was safe

Well it was a form of signalling...no, something done with mirrors I think...something he'd learned as a kid...at home in the village.....no, it wasn't meant as a secret code....something quite innocent...you know....boys' stuff

Anyway....they hauled him off the bus...took him away....didn't have the right papers you see....his family have contacted me....trying to track him down....to find out where he is....His sister's quite distraught...she doesn't know where to look for him.....See they beat him up....when they took him off the bus...They grabbed him....threw him to the ground...started kicking...his head...his arms....his legs...his stomach....while he lay on the ground. Kicking....hitting...beating....Then they took him away....I don't know where to.....nobody knows where they take them

Soundtrack: IMPRO /ATMOS – *Energetic, starting important work*

*F reads list [TEXT (spoken) –SMALL ARMS FIRE<sup>ii</sup>]*

*E says 'yes' after each item and ticks it off*

*C and H are on the phones constantly re dialling*

*A gives everyone lots more music. She goes to look at B's music, B gets up and goes to water jugs, pours from one to another, stopping to write down volume, pours back and repeats. D starts to count stones and lay out stone puzzle. G gets a big stack of papers and counts how many sheets, walking downstage of table. E's phone rings, she picks up her violin and she and F stand. G drops her pile of papers. C answers it 'Hello?' E starts to play:*

### **[ MUSIC – CHORUS ONE]**

*H and G crawl along picking up papers and discarding them until they 'find' their music and stand up to sing. C stands up to play*

*When others have finished playing they drift off into the wings (and pick up a book each. When music ends there is a lighting change and shift of atmosphere:*

*G goes to mic and speaks to audience, reading from her book:*

### **[MUSIC- STORIES]**

[TEXT (spoken) – THE TENTH MAN<sup>iii</sup>]

G The first to come back was Chaim the carpenter. He turned up one evening from the direction of the river and the woods; no one knew where he had been or with whom. Those who saw him walking along the riverbank didn't recognize him at first. How could they? He used to be tall and broad-shouldered; now he was

shrunken and withered, his clothes were ragged, and, most important, he had no face. It was completely overgrown with a matted black thicket of hair. It is hard to say how they recognized him. They watched him from above, from the cliff above the river, watched him plod along until, nearing the first houses of the lower town, he stopped and began to sing. First they thought he had gone mad, but then one of the smarter ones guessed that it was not a song, but a prayer with a plaintive melody, like the songs that could be heard on Friday evenings in the old days, coming from the hundred-year-old synagogue, ..... Chaim the carpenter was the first to come back.

[TEXT (sung)]

All            **Ah, ah, ah, ah**  
                  **Here, here, right here, right here**  
                  **Ah, ah, ah, ah**  
                  **All along, all along, all along, all along**  
                  **Ah, ah, ah, ah**  
                  **Ah, la la la la la**

*C goes back to table and starts to write*  
*D paces then sits down and speaks into phone, dictating*

[ TEXT (spoken) – RWANDA<sup>iv</sup>]

D            We were pulled out of the car. A man was kneeling by two soldiers. He was shivering with fear, his trousers covered in his own shit. The soldiers pulled our camera from us. We tried to explain who we were. They did not listen. Then some militia came up and took the man away - perhaps 50 feet away. Partially obscured by a banana grove, they hacked him to death. Everything was wrong. I ran my tongue over the roof of my mouth, trying to find moisture. I was frightened, but mostly I was bleakly confused by the shabby pointlessness of what I was sure was my own imminent death.

[TEXT (sung)]

All            **Ah, ah, ah, ah**

**Here, here, right here, right here**

**Ah, ah, ah, ah**

**All along, all along, all along, all along**

**Ah, ah, ah, ah**

**Ah, la la la la la**

*E & F stand behind C and when they speak it is a dictation for him to write down*

[TEXT (spoken) - KOSOVO<sup>y</sup>]

E 'This morning I woke up and saw they have burned seven kiosks on the pavements. I looked closer – we are frightened to go to the window for long – and I counted three bodies lying in the street. One body is a young man, a second an old one. The third is too far away; I can only see a body and clothes lying on the pavement.'

F 'All day long, we hear the ambulances, but they stop around midnight and then the shooting gets worse. There is no sound of ambulance sirens until dawn, when they start again.'

E 'This morning, at sunrise, I was happy because I was still alive, but now I am panicking because there is another night to come.'

F 'There was an incredible amount of shooting last night, but we heard only three or four bombs. I saw a squad in three cars shooting into people's homes. It is impossible to find out how many people have been killed, but we can see the buildings burning.'

E 'We left the village on the first night of the bombings at 11pm. It took six hours to get through the mountains. There were 48 of us, women and children too, and we had to stop often to help them. But we were lucky. They attacked the village.' They attacked at 8.30am, shooting and burning everything. They burnt all the homes, the school, the ambulance. They gathered everybody together in the centre of the village, men, women and children. Most of the men were old, because the young men had gone away. Near where they stood lay the body of Zymer Loku, an old man, maybe 70 years. He had been shot many times. His hand and leg had

been blown off by the bullets. They made a selection: men to the left, women and children to the right; 268 women and children were taken by the police in lorries and buses towards the border and then dumped, 39 men were taken away. We fear they have been massacred.'

[TEXT (sung)]

All            **Ah, ah, ah, ah**  
                  **Here, here, right here, right here**  
                  **Ah, ah, ah, ah**  
                  **All along, all along, all along, all along**  
                  **Ah, ah, ah, ah**  
                  **Ah, la la la la la**

*H and G go round, singing and standing behind people like angels. Last few bars D and C stand up  
When music ends:*

*E and F look at each other then start playing, A, G, C, & K all move downstage right and play looking at each other. H & G stand singing into phones*

**[MUSIC – CHORUS TWO]**

[TEXT (sung)]

G & H:        **Twenty fourth of August nineteen forty**  
                  **Fourteenth of September nineteen sixty**  
                  **Sixteenth of July in nineteen ninety**  
                  **Seventeenth of October nineteen thirty**  
                  **Eighth of November nineteen hundred and forty**  
                  **Tenth of September nineteen hundred and fifty**  
                  **Twelfth of July in nineteen hundred and twenty**  
                  **Tenth of May in nineteen hundred and ninety**

**[ MUSIC – SCHUBERT]**

*C and A to marimba, D goes to mic with his book and speaks to audience*

[ TEXT (spoken) – THE BADLANDS<sup>v1</sup>]

D        Right across America

We went looking for you. Lightning  
Had ripped your clothes off  
And signed your cheekbone. It came  
Out of the sun's explosion  
Over Hiroshima, Nagasaki,  
As along the ridge of a mountain  
Under the earth, and somehow  
Through death-row and the Rosenbergs.  
They took the brunt of it.  
You weren't too logical about it.  
You only knew it had come and had gripped you  
By the roots of the hair  
And held you down on the bed  
And stretched across your retina  
The global map of nerves in blue flames,  
Then left you signed and empty. But already  
You had got clear -  
Jumped right out of your crackling cast  
Through that hole over your cheekbone  
And gone to ground, gone underground, into moonland  
Somewhere in America

We came to a stone

Beside a lake flung open before dawn  
By the laugh of a loon. The signs good.  
I turned the stone over. The timeless one,  
Head perfect, eyes waiting-there he lay.  
Banded black,  
White, black, white, coiled. I said:  
'Just like the coils on the great New Grange lintel.'  
One thing to find a guide,  
Another to follow him.

In North Dakota

We met smoke of the underground burning  
A fistula of smouldering bitumen.  
Hellish. Or lit by lightning. Or



Dante's, to coach us. Ignited  
By the moon's collision. I saw it in a dream  
Coming bigger and closer till almost  
The size of the earth it crashed  
Into the Atlantic-

[TEXT (sung)<sup>vii</sup>]

H & G            **Ruh'n in Frieden alle Seelen,  
Die vollbracht ein banges Quälen,  
Die Vollandet süssen Traum,  
Lebenssatt, geboren kaum,  
Aus der Welt hinüber schieden  
Alle Seelen ruh'n in Frieden**

*H and G sing into phones, E & F go to sleep on table. At end of text D goes back to table and drifts in to sleep*

*When music ends E & F & D wake up suddenly. C brings dead people's hats. E, F & D put on hats and play:*

**[MUSIC – HATS AND WIGS].**

[TEXT (sung)]

G & H            **First to come back was the carpenter  
Turned up one evening from the river  
No-one knew where he'd been  
Those who say him walking along the river bank  
Didn't recognise him  
At first  
He used to be tall and broad shouldered  
Now he was shrunken and withered  
His clothes were ragged and most important  
He had no face**

*D is getting obsessed with stone puzzle and gradually adds more stones, building sound until he is scraping them on table.*

*G walks slowly, H watches. G sits on wheelie chair and spins gently. H walks with ocean drum.*

*When music ends:*

**Soundtrack IMPRO ATMOS –more chaotic but still rhythmic**

*G jumps on to a wheelie chair and glides across the space, A tapes music to everyone's back. F starts wheeling chairs around, mapping the space. Phones start ringing. B gets up and starts moving big piles of paper around.*

*E starts shredding papers, D tries to line up all the stones in one long line. C goes from one phone to another, answering, dialling and re dialling. H reads out dates and taps papers with pen B goes to mic and speaks*

[TEXT – ON THIS DAY<sup>viii</sup>] *with H interrupting.*

*A goes back to harpsichord, desperate for order, and starts playing:*

**[ MUSIC – CYCLOPES (after RAMEAU)]**

*Everyone stops and listens, gradually all gather round her and start joining in, which becomes a line. G & H sit on front of table, listening, and move along at intervals. Music ends, take time to change mood into stories.*

**[MUSIC – STORIES]**

*G goes to the mic and reads*

[ TEXT (spoken) – A VALLEY<sup>ix</sup>]

G:     There is a valley that I alone know.  
       You do not reach it easily,  
       There are crags at its entrance,  
       Brushwood, secret fords, and swift waters,  
       And the paths are reduced to faint traces.  
       Most maps overlook it:  
       I found the way in by myself.  
       I devoted years to it,  
       Often, as happens, making mistakes,  
       But it was not wasted time,  
       I do not know who was there before,  
       One, or someone, or no one:  
       That is a matter of no importance.  
       There are marks on slabs of rock,  
       Some beautiful, all mysterious,  
       Some certainly not by human hand.

Toward the bottom there are beeches and birches;  
On high, firs and larches  
Ever more sparse, tormented by the wind,  
Which in the spring robs them of their pollen  
When the first marmots awaken.  
Higher up still there are seven lakes  
Of uncontaminated water,  
Limpid, dark, gelid, and deep.  
At this level our local plants  
End, but almost at the pass  
There is a single, vigorous tree,  
Flourishing and always green,  
To which no one has yet given a name:  
Perhaps it is the one of which Genesis speaks.  
It bears flowers and fruit in all seasons,  
Even when the snow weighs heavy on its branches.  
There is no other of the same species:  
It fertilizes itself.  
Its trunk bears old wounds  
From which a resin drips  
Bitter and sweet, the bringer of oblivion.

*H and D sit on front of table and then walk and sing downstage, F, E and C walk and play upstage.*

[TEXT (sung)]

All            **Ah, ah, ah, ah**  
                 **Here, here, right here, right here**  
                 **Ah, ah, ah, ah**  
                 **All along, all along, all along, all along**  
                 **Ah, ah, ah, ah**

[ MUSIC – SO IN AMERICA ]

[TEXT (sung) – ON THE ROAD<sup>x</sup>]

D, H, G, E      **So in america**  
                 **when the sun goes down**

**and I sit on the old broken down pier  
watching the long long skies  
over New Jersey  
and sense all that raw land  
that rolls in one unbelievably long bulge  
over to the west coast  
and all that road going  
all the people dreaming  
in the immensity of it  
and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying  
in the land where they let the children cry  
and tonight the stars'll be out  
and don't you know that god is pooh bear  
the evening sun must be drooping  
and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie  
which is just before the coming of complete night  
that blesses the earth  
cups the peaks  
and folds the final shore in  
and nobody  
nobody knows what's going to happen  
to anybody  
besides the forlorn rags of growing old**

*C gets rid of sax and goes to marimba with A, F sits at harpsichord. D, H, G, E stand at table facing out, singing to horizon.*

**[MUSIC – THE VALLEY]**

[TEXT (sung)]

G, H & D      **Oh so lovely  
In my head now  
Crowding in now  
Oh so green now  
Shining brightly**

**Oh so lovely  
Through the trees now**

**Far to go now  
Oh my head hurts  
To a place where  
Heaven help us  
All is over  
Go no further  
Noisy people  
We can rest now**

**All the people  
From the past  
Crowding in now  
To my thoughts  
Heaven Help us  
Shining brightly  
Through the trees now  
Oh so green**

**Oh so weary  
Hear the sounds now  
Ringing truly  
In the air  
Calling out now  
Find the right words  
Tumbling over  
Falling freely**

*E and F start speaking straight away, reading lists of statistics, others join with lists, reading fast trying to remember everything before its too late*

[ TEXTS – SMALL ARMS FIRE, CAUSES OF DEATH, DEATHS 29<sup>TH</sup> SEPT, STATES OF AMERICA, RELIGION<sup>xi</sup>]

*a gentle breeze disturbs the papers and as the wind gets stronger everyone starts to try and pin down the papers with the stones. C climbs on to the table playing. The wind drowns the music.*

## SOUNDTRACK – wind and machinery noise rising to a deafening volume.

*Everything is blowing away. All but A get their coats, which flap in the wind, and they try to walk offstage against the wind. A walks forwards, cutting through them, towards the audience, looking intently at something far away on the horizon.*

END

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> From ‘The Dream Life of Balzo Snell’ by Nathanael West

<sup>ii</sup> Figures and data from statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam conflict published by US National Archives and Records Administration ( [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov) ). Relevant data to be selected for inclusion as required.

<sup>iii</sup> From “The Tenth Man” by Ida Fink (from ‘A Scrap of Time’ collected short stories)

<sup>iv</sup> From “Walking with Ghosts” by David Belton (The Guardian March 27, 2006)

<sup>v</sup> From eyewitness accounts published in The Guardian newspapers

<sup>vi</sup> From “The Badlands” by Ted Hughes (from ‘Birthday Letters’ collection)

<sup>vii</sup> Verse 1 of ‘Litanei’ by Franz Schubert (text from ‘Das Fest Aller Seelen’ by J G Jacobi)

<sup>viii</sup> Selected extracts from ‘On this Day’ from BBC website – to be selected from the entry for the actual date of performance.

<sup>ix</sup> “A Valley” by Primo Levi (from ‘The Mirror Maker’ – stories and essays)

<sup>x</sup> From “On the Road” by Jack Kerouac

<sup>xi</sup> Figures and data from statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam conflict published by US National Archives and Records Administration ( [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov) ) and from ‘Fourth Year Conflict Related Statistics’ published by Palestine Red Crescent Society ( [www.palestinercs.org](http://www.palestinercs.org) ). Relevant data to be selected for inclusion as required.