

# A Child Possessed **The Opera**

## **DETAILED SYNOPSIS**

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Based on the novel by R.C. Hutchinson

**Time:** circa 1950

**Place:** Europe (Marseilles, Lausanne, French Alps) and New York City.

### **Act I**

#### Scene 1

New York City. The old Metropolitan Opera House at 1411 Broadway. The curtain rises on the Act II finale of *Il Fuoco di Amore*. In this late Romantic opera, the French-Romanian soprano Héléne Milescu plays Natalia, a beautiful young woman whose face has been partly scarred by a jealous would-be lover. Héléne delivers the final, heartbreaking aria as she despairingly exiles herself to a monastery, telling her mother to forget her and forget her face. Thunderous applause. Immediately, we go backstage. Héléne, in robe, removes scar makeup, accepts flowers and compliments. Her manager, Igranes, reads to her from some favorable reviews. A reporter knocks at the door. He is admitted and conducts a brief interview, back and forth witty questions and answers. Maybe bits of opera trivia: Favorite character? Favorite death? Least favorite composer? He asks about her past life. Héléne is evasive. Her dressing-room phone rings, the dresser answers, says it is a call from a doctor in Switzerland. Igranes says she shouldn't strain her voice, but Héléne says she'll take it and would like some privacy. She speaks to Dr. Chitry, who appears in a spotlight, stage left. Dr. Chitry says they would like to try a new operation on Génie, but they need both parents' approval. Héléne replies that the father is somewhere in Marseilles. Dr. Chitry insists that this operation could work a miraculous transformation. Héléne agrees to contact her husband. She hangs up and sings a short aria about how the past is never past.

#### Scene 2

Marseilles, France. Vitesse Trucking Company. Abu, a young Arab boy who is the son of Stepan Lopuchine's landlady, delivers a letter addressed to Stepan. Stepan's boss, Herbin, wipes his nose on the letter, throws it in the garbage. After some banter between Herbin, the boy and another trucker about Stepan ("I heard he's a revolutionary!" "Nonsense; he's disgraced royalty..."), Stepan himself enters swearing and shouting about someone blocking the driveway. Stepan complains to Herbin that he's giving him bad trucks. Herbin says there's nothing wrong with the trucks, it's his lousy driving. Stepan says he knows how to treat a truck. It's just like managing a woman. What would

you know about that, Herbin jeers. Stepan delivers an aria about how trucks are just like girls. Other truckers in the office laugh and sing along. As Stepan is about to leave, Herbin remembers the letter. He hands it to him. Stepan reads it and becomes animated. He leaves in a hurry.

### Scene 3

Marseilles. Prince d'Anjou Hotel. H  l  ne is in her room, practicing an aria, but her thoughts keep going back to years before, when she was married to Stepan. Knock at the door, and Stepan enters. There is an awkward scene between them. Duet as they reminisce about the past. Then H  l  ne delivers some major news: G  nie is still alive. Stepan is shocked. He thought she was dead. H  l  ne explains that it was all for the best, she couldn't care for her, and the hospital was the only place she could go. Now the doctors at the hospital are offering a treatment they think could cure her. Stepan is doubtful, but agrees to accompany H  l  ne to Switzerland immediately. Willfully deaf to H  l  ne's remarks about the "treatment," he sings tenderly about his little girl.

### Scene 4

Hospice Saint-Etienne in Lausanne, Switzerland. Miss Paumelle is conducting exercises with three male patients. Movements consist of passing a ball to each other, bowing and smiling. Enter H  l  ne, Stepan and Dr. Chitry. Dr. Chitry introduces Miss Paumelle and speaks glowingly of her work with the patients. Miss Paumelle gives a little demonstration with the boys. Stepan watches, interjecting ambiguous or downright derisive comments. "You are a fine clockmaker, my dear. How well you wind them up!" H  l  ne tells him to be quiet. One of the boys comes a little too close to H  l  ne, startling her. Dr. Kretschmann, a renowned surgeon, enters to explain that before the operation, the boys were dangerous to themselves and others. Now comport themselves like young gentlemen. "Like young watermelons," Stepan grumbles. H  l  ne shushes him. Stepan demands to see G  nie. The doctors send for her. In the meanwhile, Dr. Kretschmann launches into a speech about the proposed operation. Stepan demands to see G  nie and says he refuses to let the doctors cut up her brain. G  nie enters with an attendant. She is severely mentally challenged and distant. Her hair is unkempt and falls across her face. She needs constant attention. She's about eight years old, hardly able to register faces around her, and unable to vocalize except for grunts, screams and whining. Helen recoils in shame, but Stepan goes down on one knee, saying "My little beauty! My love! G  nie...come to me." He holds his arms out. G  nie comes forward, slowly, and when she gets to Stepan she clasps one of his hands. It seems like a beautiful reunion, but G  nie suddenly bares her teeth and sinks them into Stepan's hand. He stifles a cry and stays put. The doctors and nurses come forward but he roars, "Keep back!" He endures the pain, blood trickling down his arm, as he sings to G  nie "Foolish girl, foolish child, don't be silly, where's your smile?" He turns to the horrified onlookers. "See? She recognizes her father," he says sweetly. He then abruptly informs them that they're leaving.

### Scene 5

The train station in Lausanne. Stepan, H el ene and G enie enter on the station platform. H el ene is worried about G enie, but Stepan—his hand wrapped in a bandage, carrying G enie’s small, battered suitcase—says not to worry. He’ll take care of her. “She can stay with me at Madam Pascoli’s. The woman overflows with maternal instinct.” Maybe a little bit more about Pascoli, indicating that she used to run a brothel. H el ene is appalled and insists that they return to the hospital. But Stepan, with a touch of anger, tells her that she had her chance to raise the girl, now it’s his turn. There is a farewell duet on the platform as Stepan and G enie rush off to their train and H el ene watches them go. She sings an aria full of worry about what might happen. The train bearing Stepan and G enie to France pulls away.

## **Act II**

### Scene 1

Marseilles, two weeks later. Madame Pascoli’s bar, which doubles as a rather cheap boarding house. Stepan lives there, in a small room above the bar. It’s happy hour on a Sunday and several sailors, lodgers and assorted locals are drinking heavily. The crowd is loud and raucous. Some of the men are singing a dirty song about a blind man and his girlfriend, who is incredibly ugly. There’s gossip in the air. “Have you heard? The Russian has a girl.” “Impossible. He’s cracked in the head. What slut would take up with him?” Stepan enters with G enie. The girl looks markedly different: She’s had a haircut and a wash. She wears a pretty red dress. She even seems more responsive to her surroundings, and a bit more docile. Stepan carries more boxes under one arm; evidently he’s been shopping with her. Madame Pascoli immediately collars him and informs him that his “demon child” has bitten her own daughter and turned the kitchen upside down that morning. He calms down the lady of the house, but she’s not persuaded. She tells him that he better make that “disgusting creature” behave or they’ll both be out on their asses. A crusty old sailor asks Stepan if that’s really his child. He says she is. A student says something vaguely intellectual about the soul and consciousness, before he passes out. A painter says he’d like to use her as a model. Someone tells Stepan that the girl should be drowned like a cat in a bag in a lake. Another old reprobate goes up to G enie and asserts that she’s not even human, or she’s worse than a dog; at least a dog can defend itself. He makes to demonstrate by pretending to strike G enie in the face. Stepan calmly catches the man’s arm, swings him around and slaps him in the face a few times, before throwing him out the door. Pascoli flies into a rage. G enie throws a fit, screaming and throwing cups around upending chairs, kicking patrons in the knees. Stepan takes G enie up to his room, calms her down. He sings a little song to her. He says they will go on a trip the next day. The lights fade on his room, and come back up on the bar. Pascoli says no good will come of that little beast and her foolish zookeeper.

### Scene 2

The French countryside, a few weeks later. Stepan sits in the cab of his truck, G enie beside him. We can see that G enie is responding to Stepan’s “rehabilitation” method. She

is more coherent, attentive, fewer outbursts. As they drive along through the picturesque Southern Alps, he points out the sights to her, maybe even speaks what he imagines her responses might be. She is calmer than before. He sings his song. Génie laughs. Stepan stops the truck and gets out with her. They've stopped in a beautiful forest grove by the road. Birds sing. Stepan watches her play. Suddenly has a crisis of conscience: Does she even know who I am? Can she love me? Can I love her? Am I the fool? But he reflects on how she's changed in the last few weeks. Sometimes when she looks at him, she seems to see him. Overflowing with love for her, he looks around and cries out: "Look, Génie, look! The countryside! It's all for you!"

### Scene 3

Cannes, the Riviera. Hotel Deux Janvier, a luxury seaside hotel. Hélène's manager, Igranes, is on the phone speaking to a reporter. He talks about Hélène's upcoming concert at a Cannes theatre. The hotel manager appears with a note. He tells Igranes that Hélène has gone off with a Russian truck driver. Shift to: Hélène, Stepan and Génie on the beach having a picnic. It is beautiful. Stepan sings his little song to Génie, who laughs. They wade in the water. Hélène sings an aria about how natural Stepan and Génie seem together, and how she failed, just as her foster parents failed. Stepan and Génie return. She then asks the time, gets worried. She must get back to the theater. She invites Stepan and Génie to her concert that evening. They leave.

### Scene 4

Cannes. At the theater, Stepan sees Hélène perform another aria. He and Génie are enraptured by the performance, so much so that Génie makes disturbing grunts and squeals and Stepan makes impassioned exclamations at inappropriate moments. Igranes goes to their seat and asks them to restrain themselves. Stepan brushes him off. The performance ends and Stepan and Génie meet Hélène backstage. Here Stepan reveals the true reason he came to Cannes: He needs to go on a long truck delivery through the Alps and Génie is coming down with a cold. He needs Hélène to look after her for a week while he does the job. Hélène is unsure, but Stepan pleads with her. "I'll meet you back in Marseilles in one week's time, and you'll never have to see her again." He gives her his address at Madame Pascoli's. She agrees and Stepan, after a hearty farewell, leaves Génie and Hélène.

### Scene 5

Split scene: Stepan drives into the French Alps. It begins to snow. Meanwhile, Hélène takes care of Génie in Stepan's room at Madame Pascoli's in Marseilles. Génie is getting ill and nothing Hélène can do will make her better; even so, the child seems to growing closer to Hélène. Stefan's truck is caught in the snow. The motor stalls. He is trapped as the snow falls harder. Hélène receives Dr. Batel, who examines Génie and offers some medicine but explains that such children are especially vulnerable to disease. Stepan, freezing to death, shivers in his cab, singing to Génie. Hélène too sings to Génie, sings also about how she finds herself loving this strange child, this ghost of her past. Hélène and Stepan's songs intertwine and at their climax, they reach the same note, joined by Génie.

Génie sings a few lines from the lullaby, “Two blackbirds flew...” before collapsing back on the bed. Blackout.

#### Scene 6

Marseilles. Madame Pascoli's. Madame Pascoli and a barfly talk about the fancy lady upstairs with the child. Pascoli seems less hard-hearted about Génie than before. Stepan, weak and frostbitten but still alive, appears. Pascoli and a barfly badger him with questions about where he's been but he brushes them off, and heads upstairs. In his room, he sees Hélène holding Génie, but in a moment he realizes that he's too late: his girl is dead. He sinks to his knees, with an anguished cry. His grief turns to anger as he questions Hélène, who says there was nothing she could do. Together they mourn the child, repeating the duet from Act I. They fall into one another's arms.

#### Scene 7

Some weeks later in Paris. Stepan waits by the stage door with a bouquet of flowers. Hélène comes out of the building, and they greet each other. We don't know if they have resumed their relationship or have simply grown closer after the death of Génie. They walk along for a bit. Stepan gives her the flowers. She asks what he thought of the opera. He says something humorous about it, then remarks that Génie had a beautiful voice, a pure voice, a perfect voice. Hélène agrees. They walk on.

**End**