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The Sea-Change

Sylvia Townsend Warner

The Sea-Change

Opera Libretto in Six Scenes for Paul Nordoff.
(with love)

Characters:

SHELLEY
MARY SHELLEY
EDWARD WILLIAMS
JANE WILLIAMS
CLAIRE CLAIRMONT – half-sister to Mary
TRELAWNEY¹

CHORUS OF MEN'S VOICES, AND THREE SOLO MALE VOICES,
OFF-STAGE.

The action takes place in the year 1822, at the Villa Magni on the Bay of Spezia. The scene is a large room on the upper floor, with a door L. and five french windows in the back wall. These windows have slatted shutters, opening outward on to a flat roof, which extends the whole length of the five windows, and has a low balcony. Beyond is the sea. The room has a faded decoration of frescoed garlands on the walls, which are stained with damp. The furniture is scanty, 18th cent. in date; it has been handsome and now is shabby. In the opening scene the room must appear disused.

The producer should note that all the characters are young. TRELAWNY, the eldest among them, is thirty.

JANE	Soprano)	
)	
MARY	Mezzo-soprano)	or vice versa

CLAIRE	Contralto
EDWARD	Bass
SHELLEY	Tenor
TRELAWNY	Baritone

SHELLEY stands in the window when he first enters after his vision of Allegra.

The Sea-Change

[Act 1]² Scene i.

The time is spring and summer of the year 1822. The scene is the sala on the first floor of Casa Magni, at Lerici. Door on L. five french windows on the back wall. These are now closed with slatted shutters. The walls have a faded decoration of frescoed garlands. The furniture is scanty, a makeshift of shabby 18th cent. magnificence, and rough wooden stools. The ceiling is cracked and stained with damp, the whole room looks disused and out of condition.

Enter MARY, CLAIRE, and TRELAWNY, in travelling dress. MARY and TRELAWNY are preoccupied with some interior anxiety, which they conceal from CLAIRE.

TRELAWNY, *with a gesture of displaying the room.*

Here, is your sala, Mary. How does it please you?

MARY

If I were a lady in a poem, it would do well.

Penelope might sit here, weaving and grieving,

Or Hero trim her lamp for a drowned Leander.

But I am a poet's wife.

CLAIRE

Then it should please you;

For this is the very room for a poet,

Full of stains and shadows

With lyres and laurels on the walls.

Oh, it is certainly the room for Shelley!

TRELAWNY

But that's not all. Laurels and shadows are not all.

Laurels and shadows are everywhere in Italy;

But when I open this window, everything changes:

The house turns to a ship, we are at sea,

We suffer a sea-change. (*Goes towards window.*)

MARY

Not yet, Trelawny. Do not open the window.

No, Trelawny! Do not let in the daylight yet!

CLAIRE

My eyes are tired with the journey!

Let us wait till Shelley and the others come.

We will be changed together. Let the sea wait!

MARY

Trelawny wants us to be turned to coral.

CLAIRE

Trelawny wants to set the sea-nymphs tolling.

(Singing)

Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell,

Hark, now I hear it! Sing, Trelawny!³

CLAIRE, to SHELLEY Why did you bring me to this desolate place
To tell me I am desolate?

(SHELLEY leads her to the centre window, which he opens. It gives on to a flat roof, overlooking the sea. The afterglow of the sunset fills the room.)

SHELLEY Look out! Look round us! In what quietude
The mountains stand, and gaze upon the sea!
Cloaked in their woods, do they not seem like travellers,
Spell-bound, lost in arrival?
They hear the assenting murmur of the wave,
The salt sweet air fingers their stoic brows;
Here is their journey's end, here is the sea,
Hither their brooks, their cataracts, their rivers,
Have run, like children, before them.
Weep, weep, dear Claire, weep on this solemn strand!
Weep, while the yearning wave clings to the rock,
Sighing, and falls back, sighing. Weep, while the light
Mutely relinquishes the mountain.
Here, in this innocent desolation, unlearn
Hate and remorse and sophistries of comfort,
And as the mountains gaze upon the sea
Gaze on death's patient face till it grows beautiful.

(Close.)

Scene ii

Morning. Brilliant light. The centre window is open, JANE sits by it with her guitar, trying to pick up the tune sung by the fishermen on the strand.

CHORUS *off* Nicholas sailed to Jerusalem
(Pray for us, Nicholas!)
When the storm came down an angel took the helm.
Sail with us today, O good Saint Nicholas!

JANE, *sotto voce* Sail with us today, O good Saint Nicholas!

(Enter EDWARD. While chorus continues he goes affectionately to JANE.)

EDWARD My morning love! You sit there like a flower.

JANE What are they doing, the fishermen down there[?]

EDWARD They rig the boat,
And make it ready for sea.

JANE And sing of storms, do they not?

CHORUS, *rising* Sail with us today, O good Saint Nicholas!

EDWARD If I were Nicholas, I would go with them.
One would quit heaven to sail
On such a sea, under so blue a sky.
Look, how the ripples fold, one into another,
Like feathers on the breast of a dove.
So blue, so fair, so folded, our summer lies before us,
O my love

What happiness!

JANE When the storm came down... Not all are happy.
Claire, sorrowing for her child, has gone away,
To visit graves and lawyers.
Shelley grieves for Claire;
And Mary – grieves for Mary.

EDWARD Why does she grieve?

JANE Shelley loves her no more.
Why must all poets be inconsistent in love?

EDWARD Where is the rainbow's wandering foot?
(JANE looks at him, puzzled.)

EDWARD Have you never run,
To find the rainbow's foot? Now, it is in the meadow,
Now in the orchard. Now, it has crossed the brook

And is planted on the hillside. Track it as you will
It is always some other-where.
And still the rainbow arches overhead.
That is how Shelley loves, being a poet.

JANE Poor Mary!

EDWARD And now the rainbow's foot is on the sea.

Enter SHELLEY Why do they sing no more? Have they set sail?
I wanted to go with them; for while I sat
Looking in my empty heart for rhymes and jingles
I heard their song, rolling suddenly as Acheron
And the midge counterpoint of Jane's guitar, till
I thought
These fishermen learn their music from their lives,
Savage, suppliant, and inexorable.
Why should I wait for my smart new pleasure-boat?
I will go with them
Till I discover the true note of the sea.

(He goes to the edge of the platform and looks down.)

There is the boat,
Abandoned, as though the waves had cast her up.
And the fishermen are standing by her, idle.

VOICES, *below* Here it comes, here it comes!

Look, to the northward. Make the boat fast!

SHELLEY What do you see?

VOICE, *below* A storm, out over the bay.

That little darkness to the northward. A storm.

JANE, *rising* A storm? A storm, out of this blue sky?

VOICES, *below* A storm, a storm, travelling this way!

(SHELLEY, EDWARD, JANE, stand on the platform looking out to sea. The lighting changes to a leaden grey.)

JANE Faster than a dream it travels hither.
Our little world darkens and dwindles as the clouds
gather.

EDWARD The wind has whirled the blue out of the sky.
The sea is shaken with a cold fever.
Arrowy sleet and leaping spray struggle together.
The rooks answer with an iron cry.

SHELLEY Out of the abyss the storm boils up and over.
 Waves toss and winds blow me hither and thither.
 Like music from the stricken lyre I fly.

*(They move out of sight along the platform. The room is now almost dark.
Enter MARY.)*

MARY Shelley! Shelley! Where are you. Merciless God,
 Where is he? Oh, he is merciless as you.
 There is no mercy in God, no mercy in Shelley,
 Why should I cry to either when neither hears me?
 I will sit here like a patient wife and listen to the wind.

(She sits down. She remembers:)⁴

SHELLEY'S voice off-stage Listen, listen, Mary mine,
 To the whisper of the Apennine...

MARY But that was four years ago, when he loved me.

SHELLEY'S voice O Mary dear, that thou wert here,
 With thy brown eyes, bright and clear,
 And thy sweet voice like a bird
 Singing love to its lone mate.

MARY Ah, my lone mate, my phoenix, I love you still.
 But I can only croak like a raven! Where is he?
 Shelley, where are you? Why do you leave me?

(SHELLEY, entering through a window.)

SHELLEY Mary!

(She throws herself on his breast, then starts back, affectedly.)

MARY Cold, so wringing-wet and cold,
 It is a drowned sailor I hold.

SHELLEY Then warm me at your breast.

MARY Cold without and within,
 I feel your cold heart under your cold skin.

SHELLEY Take pity on the ghost.

MARY So cold and bitter as the brine.

Cold as your love are your cold lips on mine.

SHELLEY Yet I came at your call,

And came from further than you know.
MARY And in a moment you will go,
And that will be all.
SHELLEY Cold, cold as a stone.
Reasonable as a skeleton.
MARY Cold as the forsaken nest.
SHELLEY Cold and witty as an adder's tongue,
MARY Tedious as an old song,
TOGETHER That is the worst, that is the worst.

Scene closes.

SHELLEY I know you do not love the thought of our boat
Yet every day you watch the boats go to and fro,
Lightly, safely, as butterflies over a meadow.
Why should you be afraid?

JANE I have all the songs and ballads
On my side,
Where bright ladies grow dim,
Waiting for a ship
That never comes again.

SHELLEY Not all the songs are written.
I will bring back songs for you, far lovelier,
More strange, more flowing...
Lovelier, stranger, more magical...

A VOICE FROM THE SEA Ahoy!

VOICES ON SHORE Ahoy! Ahoy!

VOICES FROM THE SEA Is this the Englishman's house?

SHELLEY Joy! Joy!

(They hasten to the platform.)

VOICES ON SHORE Here! Here! Steer this way. So. Now clear
The reef.

Easy! Easy! Now let her go!

VOICES FROM THE SEA, *nearer.* Let her go!

VOICES ON SHORE Look, how she comes about. How she finds her
way.

EDWARD How smoothly she comes on!
Proud, painted, and new
Like the Virgin going in procession.
Going above the heads of the crowd.
How she comes in!
Easily riding like the rising moon.

(The sails of a ship come in sight at back of stage.)

SHELLEY My soul flies into her sails. I am gone. I am gone.

Scene closes.

Scene v.

Curtain down. All voices off.

TRELAWNY, *narrative* On the eighth day of July, I watched them sail from the port of Livorno on their homeward voyage.

A SAILOR, *conversational* They start too late. They should have sailed two hours ago.

TRELAWNY, *conversational* Soon, they will have the land-breeze.

SAILOR, *conversational* They will have more than a land-breeze. Look at those ragged clouds hanging in the south-west. Look at smoke on the water. There is a storm brewing.

TRELAWNY, *conversational* The sea-fog gathers round the boat.

SAILOR, *conversational* She carries too much sail.

TRELAWNY, *conversational* I can see her no more.

(Curtain rises. Stage in semi-darkness, all windows open, faint light beyond. The three women are grouped before the centre window, in silhouette. Lighting diminishing by degrees.)

TRELAWNY *narrative* It had grown dark as night. The sea was leaden colour, solid and smooth as lead. Gusts of wind swept over it without ruffling it. Large drops of rain fell on it, rebounding as though they could not pierce its oily swell. There was a commotion in the air, a hubbub of threat and danger coming upon us from the sea.

VOICES, *distant* Down with the topsails! Haul away! Make for the harbour!

TRELAWNY, *narrative* Fishing craft under bare poles come crowding, jostling into port, running before the squall.

VOICES, *nearer* Ahoy there! Make way, make way!

(The storm breaks with a crash of thunder. The stage is in darkness, except for distant lightning across back scene. Storm music dies down, stage slowly lightens.)

TRELAWNY, *resuming narrative* When the horizon cleared I looked to
seaward...

(Stage has lightened enough to reveal the bare shine of the sea.)

TRELAWNY I looked to seaward...
I looked to seaward...

Scene closes.

Scene vi.

Candlelight. All windows are shuttered, and the room is back as in scene i, except for some bales and boxes on the floor, ready for departure. MARY, in widow's dress, sits at the table, writing: Enter TRELAWNY, who approaches her in silence.

MARY, *after a pause* Do you remember how you came,
And stood, as you do now, saying no word,
Until at last I said, Is there no hope? And you were
silent.

(Noise of the sea, as in scene i.)

Do you remember our arrival,
And how I said, Listen! – and you said, Only the sea?

(She glances at what she was writing, and crumples it impatiently.)

TRELAWNY You tire yourself with writing. Do not do so.
MARY I must write down my recollection of Shelley.
I must; and yet I cannot. Tears come, and they are
true,
But my words betray him. What shall I write?
TRELAWNY Write, above all, that he was never-failing.

(She looks up, momentarily disconcerted by this unexpected word.)

TRELAWNY Do you remember, remembering our arrival,
How we stood here, huddled in fear and falsehood,
Being afraid of a dead child?
And how, when Shelley came, we were suddenly
ransomed,
Our cautious fetters struck off, our hearts recalled.
To the truth of living, and the truth of dying?

(MARY'S attitude and expression gradually animated by passionate attention.)

TRELAWNY Do you remember how he would flash and frolic
His spirit of delight through our dull vapours,
And how his twilight enfolded our garish day?
How he was wings to every joy, and glamour

To every hope; and a cold clay
 Sepulchre darker than our utmost melancholy?
 MARY Being a poet, a poet!
 TRELAWNY A poet!...
 How, from our mortal remembrance
 He is wafted;
 He rises to that untrammelled region
 Where poets as poems survive.
 Dying, he has reversed the sea-change.
 The sea enriched by him,
 And the wave lovelier
 His winding-sheet forever after.
 A poet. But not as the timid world would belie him:
 One dwelling in a dream's enclosure
 Whose blood dropped from a painless wound
 Whose imagination complied with a whim's disposal;
 No! But like his own Prometheus Unbound
 To extremity suffering, forgiving, and defying.
 MARY "To love, and bear, to hope
 Till hope creates from its own wreck
 The thing it contemplates...
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:
 This, like thy glory"⁵ ...like thy glory
 ...thy glory...

(The curtain falls slowly.)

MARY, *to herself, intensely.* To love, and bear, and hope.
 TRELAWNY Now from our mortal remembrance he is wafted
 MARY, *as before* Till hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates
 TRELAWNY He rises untrammelled to that region
 Where the poets as poems survive
 MARY Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:
 TRELAWNY Dying, he has reversed the sea-change:
 MARY This, like thy glory...like thy glory...
 TRELAWNY The sea enriched by him, and the wave
 Lovelier his winding sheet forever after
 MARY Thy glory!

Scene closes.

Notes

- 1 Warner spells the last name of Edward John Trelawny as 'Trelawney' throughout the libretto, except for once in the note on staging.
- 2 Editorial additions and corrections to Warner's typescript appear in square brackets.
- 3 The underlinings are reproduced as in Warner's typescript. See *The Tempest* 1.2.400–9.
- 4 Nordoff's score notes at this point '(She remembers the poems he wrote her.)' The lines from Shelley's offstage voice are 'The Passage of the Apennines', lines 1–2, and 'To Mary ----', lines 1–4.
- 5 Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 570–6.