

Four excerpts from *Mrs. President*

Victoria Bond: composer; Hilary Bell: librettist

In 1872, Victoria Woodhull ran for president of the United States. She advocated women's suffrage and other social reforms, as well as the inflammatory issue of Free Love. The establishment swore to fight the threat of social upheaval, branding her 'Mrs. Satan'. She decided to enlist the support of the most popular preacher of the day, Henry Ward Beecher who, despite his unblemished reputation, secretly seduced his female parishioners.

Excerpt 1: Quartet

In the ransacked office of Woodhull's Weekly, Victoria sleeps in Blood's arms. He sings of his shattered dream of a peaceful life together. As she wakes, Victoria can think only of her own aborted dreams. In his study, Henry and Isabella are arguing over Victoria. Isabella claims that Henry is murdering a saint but he calls Victoria a fiend from Hell. The four join together, each locked in disappointment and accusing the other of trying to destroy love.

Excerpt 2: Predators

Henry Ward Beecher barges into the office of Victoria Woodhull's newspaper, "Woodhull's Weekly" and demands to speak with Victoria. He is furious over her allegations of his sexual misconduct but the more he tries to bully her, the more she teases him. She calmly informs him that an article about his sexual liaisons is ready to print. His anger turns to panic as he sees the possibility of his career crumbling in a scandal. He begs for mercy, but she tells him that far from condemning him, she recognizes his passionate nature and asks him to support her campaign. Stunned by this endorsement, he agrees.

Excerpt 3: Dewdrop

Henry Ward Beecher gives a sermon, during which he inspires his congregation to buy back the freedom of a young mulatto slave. Famous as an abolitionist, he stages a mock auction, selling the young girl's liberty from her slaveholder.

Excerpt 4: I'm Told I'm a Citizen

Victoria announces her intention to run for president. Citing discrimination against women and intolerable restrictions, she demands equal rights as a citizen and the freedom to dissolve loveless relationships. She claims to be the chosen leader and future president.

SYNOPSIS MRS. PRESIDENT

Act I

Scene 1: 1846 Homer, Ohio. A carnival crowd congregates around a homemade banner announcing “See Psychic Child Victoria! Only 10 cents!” Victoria’s mother, Roxie, claims that although she is only eight years old, Victoria is “Wise as Solomon.” As the banner flaps apart revealing the child, adult Victoria recalls her miserable childhood. Three men emerge from the crowd, Henry Ward Beecher, celebrity preacher; James Blood, Victoria’s future husband and Joseph Treat, who would become one of her lovers. Although they are all fascinated with her, each will attempt to destroy her during her lifetime.

Scene 2: 1865 Plymouth Church, Brooklyn. The congregation expectantly waits for Henry Ward Beecher, particularly Elizabeth Tilton, pregnant with his child. Henry gives an impassioned sermon to his adoring flock, complete with a feverish auction to buy the freedom of a young slave girl. Henry’s younger sister Isabella is impressed with his effectiveness and tells him about her new friend, Victoria Woodhull. Henry demands that Isabella never see her again, warning that Victoria preys on innocent minds and will corrupt her.

Scene 3: In a dimly lit drawing room, a group of Spiritualists hold hands and attempt to contact their departed husbands, sons and fathers killed during the Civil War. Joseph Treat is the only man present. He is a sweet-faced youth who has once enjoyed Victoria’s affection but has recently been cast aside. As he waits for her, his desperation mounts, and he threatens to mutilate himself in order to regain her sympathy. Victoria bursts into the room, interrupting the séance with breathless excitement, announcing that she is founding a newspaper that can expose corruption. She incites her followers to create a new world by burning down the old. Someday, she tells them, there may even be a President-ess of the USA! Intrigued, her followers ask her to lead them in one final séance. Falling into a trance, Victoria has a vision of womankind, free to love anyone and free to break the chains of marriage. Isabella is enchanted with this idea and naively suggests that her brother, Henry Ward Beecher, could help this cause. Victoria reveals the scandalous truth to Isabella that her brother is secretly seducing his female parishioners. Isabella is shocked at the revelation, but Elizabeth Tilton, one of his conquests, assures her that it is true.

Scene 4: Henry barges in, furious. He demands to speak with Victoria and the two are left alone. The more he tries to bully her into submission, the more she teases him. Although he is enraged and threatens to kill her, she is not intimidated and calmly informs him that the story of his sexual liaisons is ready to print. His anger turns to panic as he sees the possibility of his career crumbling in such a scandal. He begs for mercy, but she tells him that far from condemning his activity, she agrees with his passionate nature and suggests that he support her platform of Free Love. Stunned by this endorsement of what he has most feared, he agrees to support her campaign. They abandon themselves to their passion and as they strip off their clothing, Joseph Treat bursts in with a bouquet of roses for Victoria. He freezes. Victoria and Henry are oblivious. Treat hurls the roses to the floor and slams the door as he storms out.

SYNOPSIS MRS. PRESIDENT

Act II

Scene 1: Joseph Treat writes a letter to the New York Times alerting them to a pernicious force that threatens to tear apart the family: Victoria Woodhull. Meanwhile, Henry has second thoughts about his decision to support Victoria. Filled with self-loathing, he admonishes himself for his sexual weakness until he concludes that it is Victoria who has tempted him and who is really to blame. James Blood comes to tell him that Victoria is waiting for him to introduce her at Steinway Hall where she will announce her candidacy for president. Henry tells him that he has changed his mind and is not coming. Blood warns him that Victoria makes a formidable enemy.

Scene 2: Outside the auditorium of Steinway Hall people are impatiently waiting for Victoria to give her speech. Backstage, Isabella, Victoria, Roxie and Elizabeth nervously wait for Henry. Finally Victoria makes her entrance on stage alone. She begins her prepared speech, but a hostile crowd, led by Joseph Treat, heckles her. She sees Henry enter at the back of the auditorium and thinking that he has come to join her on the stage, she hurls her prepared speech to the ground and speaks spontaneously. Henry is silent, and then defiantly leads the crowd in chanting “*Mrs. Satan for President*” forcing Victoria off the stage. The crowd swarms into her office, tearing down a huge banner pronouncing “Victoria for President.”

Scene 3: The ransacked office of Woodhull’s Weekly. Victoria sleeps in Blood’s arms. He sings of his shattered dreams of a peaceful life together. As she wakes, she can think only of her own aborted dreams. In his study, Henry and Isabella argue over Victoria. Isabella claims that Henry is murdering a saint but he calls her a fiend from Hell. The four join together, each one locked within his disappointment. Finally, Henry threatens to commit Isabella to a deviates asylum for her unnatural affection for Victoria unless she abandons her friend. A police officer, led by Treat, enters Victoria’s office and arrests her for publishing a libelous account of Henry and creating a scandal. Victoria faints and has a hallucination in which she imagines she has already been elected president and that Henry congratulates her while the crowd cheers and the band plays “Inauguration Polka.” She wakes to find herself in prison.

Scene 4: A jail cell. Victoria reads a letter from Isabella who confesses that she has abandoned her friend because of pressure from Henry. Victoria casts the letter aside, crushed by this rejection. A small girl enters the jail cell with a meal for the prisoner and Victoria touches her faces tenderly. She regains her courage and convictions and from the darkness emerge ghostly Victorias, one after the other, until there are dozens of them, dressed in successively contemporary costumes going to the present day. They sing softly, building in volume: “*From my ashes a thousand more will rise. They will seize what I’ve begun, hold it high, and carry it on. Arise!*”