

1994

# The Minister. A one-act opera in six scenes. [Recording and libretto]

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*The Minister*

**Roger Scruton**

# **THE MINISTER**

**Libretto for an Opera  
in one act**

**Roger Scruton**

## CHARACTERS.

**Richard Hughes**, the Minister, about 50: tenor.

**The Servant (Tim)**, about 15: treble.

**Sir Henry Milhouse**, property speculator, about 55: baritone.

**Lady Milhouse**, society flirt, about 45: soprano.

**Olga**, the Minister's former mistress, about 30: soprano.

**William**, a failure, about 25: baritone.

Sir Henry and William are sung by *one* singer, as are Lady Milhouse and Olga. The servant is a boy; his part could be sung by a girl in boy's costume, or alternatively by a boy treble.

# SYNOPSIS

The action takes place in the South of England at some time during the nineteen sixties. Richard Hughes, Member of Parliament for the seaside town of Higglesham, has been appointed to the Cabinet, so fulfilling a life-long ambition, only to realize the emptiness of a success that he enjoys alone. Stepping into the future he had coveted, he finds himself without support, falling from 'is' to 'might have been', and from 'might have been' to 'was'.

Over dinner with two important members of his constituency, the Minister confronts the ghosts that have been haunting him, and renounces a life whose emptiness he can no longer deny. The catalyst of this event is an enigmatic young servant, sent by a catering agency, and the drama is a kind of No play, in which the fault-lines of a life give way to reveal another world beyond.

**Scene 1.** The Minister is alone in his study, overlooking the sea. It is early evening, and he soliloquizes about his success. His thoughts return to Olga, his former mistress, whose unborn child had been sacrificed to his ambition, and who, when the pursuit of power required it, had herself been coldly abandoned.

The servant enters. The Minister experiences a flash of recognition which briefly troubles him. He gives orders for dinner, at which he is to entertain Sir Henry and Lady Milhouse.

**Scene 2.** The Minister and the Milhouses enter the dining room. All are masked. Sir Henry, a property speculator, is a self-made man, with a philistine confidence in the future and his own part in shaping it. His wife is a would-be *femme fatale* who, having failed to be an actress, now flaunts her injured soul. The Minister politely listens to their self-centred chatter, hiding behind his mask.

Lady Milhouse catches the servant's eye and starts from her seat. She relates how, alone one day in her comfortable house, she had been watched

by unseen eyes — *those* eyes. They had led her to a lonely grave behind the church. The servant confirms her story, and, as she falls under his spell, lifts the mask from her face, revealing Olga.

**Scene 3.** The Minister rises in astonishment, removing his mask as Sir Henry fades into the background. Olga reminds the Minister of their love and former happiness, while he begs for forgiveness. Olga tells him enigmatically that forgiveness lies not in this world, but in a world that might have been.

**Scene 4.** The servant replaces Lady Milhouse's mask, and she returns to the table. The Minister likewise reassumes his social persona. After a brief attempt at conversation, Sir Henry lays down his fork, and relates an adventure of his own. He had come two weeks before to discuss that very plot of land behind the church. The Minister was not at home, and Tim, the servant, had let Sir Henry in — a fact which causes consternation in the Minister, whose servant at the time was his regular amanuensis, John. Alone in the Minister's study, Sir Henry had caught sight of someone drowning out at sea, someone whom he could not rescue.

Mesmerised by the servant, Sir Henry allows his mask to be removed.

**Scene 5.** The Minister jumps up in astonishment, to confront the youthful William — the friend who had admired and loved him, and with whom he had shared his first ambitions. The safe seat of Higglesham had been offered to William rather than to the Minister, who had therefore decided to expose his friend's homosexuality, so destroying William's career.

The Minister again begs forgiveness; and forgiveness is again enigmatically deferred.

**Scene 6.** The party is over and all are masked. The Milhouses say their trite farewells, and the Minister, shaken but controlled, promises to visit them.

As he returns to his study, the Minister collapses. He addresses the servant as his child, whom he now must follow to extinction. The servant leads the Minister down to the sea.

# THE MINISTER

*(Living Quarters of an elegant house, standing above the sea in the comfortable resort of Higglesham. The stage is divided into three areas, which may (but need not) represent three separate rooms: in one there is a desk; in another a dining table; in the third some armchairs, and a window opening to a veranda that overlooks the sea.)*

*It is evening in late summer, and the light from the sea is first white, then pink, then red, before sinking during the course of the opera into a silvery haze of moonlight.)*

## Scene 1.

*(The Minister is standing by the window looking out over the sea. Suddenly he turns and strides across to the desk, where he shifts the papers impatiently. Then, more calmly, he turns to the audience.)*

MINISTER: The perfect public servant, so they say,  
The dutiful M.P., hard-working minister;  
The final card Her Majesty can play  
To trump her enemies, however sinister:

This is the power I've won, and this the trust  
Bestowed up there, and down here in my surgery,  
On Richard Hughes, Right Honourable dust,  
Whose heart is treason, and whose word is perjury!

*(The Minister returns to the window, and looks out across the sea.)*

I loved you then, dear Olga, in those years  
Of hardship. But can it be that you've forgiven me?  
We killed our unborn child, shed useless tears,  
And went our separate ways: to power, and misery!

Oh Olga, let it be that you've forgiven me!

*(Enter Servant: he is young, almost a boy; the Minister turns back to the room and is startled.)*

Who are you?

SERVANT: The one you asked for, sir;  
Sent by the agency.

MINISTER: Of course.

So John's still sick?

SERVANT: He is, sir;  
But he told me what to do.

MINISTER (*agitated*): That face —  
Your face! I know you, do I not?

SERVANT: Perhaps our paths have crossed, sir.

MINISTER: What's your name?

SERVANT: Tim is what I'm called, sir.

MINISTER (*calmer*): Well then, Tim,  
Sir Henry Milhouse and his wife are due  
For dinner — local bigwigs, understand? —  
Who must be treated like the Queen of Sheba.

SERVANT: Yes sir, John explained sir.

MINISTER: Where did we meet?

SERVANT: I don't recall sir; in the street  
Perhaps...

MINISTER (*reassured*): Yes, in the street.

*(Exit Servant. Minister turns back to the window, and soliloquizes.)*

An old familiar lesson, never learned,  
That everything we strive for we obtain;  
But getting there both love and truth are spurned:  
The cost is happiness, and grief the gain.

*(Exit.)*



## Scene 2.

*(An hour later. The Minister enters, leading Lady Milhouse on his arm, Sir Henry behind them. All are wearing masks — the minister's looks like himself, only frozen in hypocritical bonhomie. Sir Henry's mask represents him as being about 55, tough but genial, while that of Lady Milhouse shows her to be somewhat younger, and a trifle neurotic. They sit at the table with much ceremony, and Lady Milhouse giggles.)*

SIR HENRY: Well, Minister, you certainly surprise us:  
So young and well-informed! The last chap...

LADY MILHOUSE: How lovely is the view from here!

SIR HENRY (*ignoring her*):

With you in charge we'll get things started;  
New firms will come here, bring our youngsters jobs.  
We'll build at last the school extension,  
Clean up the streets and civilize the jobs.

LADY MILHOUSE: I was to be an actress — did you know?

SIR HENRY: In fact I'll tell you what I think:

Our town has joined the twentieth century;  
The wheel of progress turns at last —  
In every market we've an entry...

*(raises glass)*

Here's to the future, down with the past!

SIR HENRY AND MINISTER (*raising glasses*): The future!

LADY MILHOUSE (*suddenly confiding*):

I ran away from home to be an actress —  
That was long ago, in fifty three...

*(Enter Servant, carrying food, which he serves in silence.)*

SIR HENRY (*also confiding*):

Just between us, Minister, the fact is  
My wife's a little mad, as you can see.

MINISTER (*to Sir Henry*): Really?

*(to Lady Milhouse)*: Do tell your story.

LADY MILHOUSE:

My story? Well, my story's Henry here,  
Who married me before I reached the stage  
And brought me down to Higglesham, poor dear,  
To invest my youth in the bank of middle age.

MINISTER: But you are young still!

LADY MILHOUSE (*archly*):

You make me young, dear Minister; you appeal  
To my artistic temperament...

SIR HENRY: To her artistic temperament!

*(A mime of social banalities follows, while waltz and foxtrot clash in the background. The Servant suddenly stands before Lady Milhouse. With a start she rises, and the Servant looks at her before exiting.)*

LADY MILHOUSE:

Who is he? Who is he? Those are the eyes  
That watched me on that troubled day!

SIR HENRY: Joanna! You are not well. I'll take you home.

MINISTER (*restraining him*):

Tell us, Lady Milhouse, what you mean.

*(Lady Milhouse goes to the window, and looks out over the sea, from which a red glow suffuses her mask.)*

LADY MILHOUSE (*recitative*): Henry was at the office, the children at school, and the cook on holiday. One of those days when time stands still, and the veins of the present are swollen by the past. I sat alone, amid our antique furniture, watching the dancing foam-flecks out at sea.

MINISTER (*to himself*): Watching the dancing foam-flecks out at sea.

LADY MILHOUSE: I felt a strange sensation, as though another person there were watching me. I left the house, he followed me — until I knew those eyes I could not see, knew them in the desolated

world they looked on.

The town was wrapped in silence, the small white houses side by side on their banks of grass, like sleeping heads on pillows.

*(The Servant enters and begins to clear away the dishes.)*

Where was I going?

SERVANT: To a grave.

LADY MILHOUSE (*turning*): He's right. My footsteps led me to a spot behind the Church. Not consecrated ground: a little patch of nettles by a shed, with broken flower-pots heaped beside a tank of water. Half hidden in the damp green undergrowth a stone, on which a name had been inscribed, and one word else beneath it: 'died'. The date...

SERVANT: There was no date.

LADY MILHOUSE: There was no date,  
That's right; nor could I read the name.

MINISTER (*turning to the Servant*):

Who are you?

SERVANT: Please don't blame  
My interruptions; my mother says  
I'm psychic, and I see what might have been.

*(The Servant approaches Lady Milhouse, who stands acquiescent, her back to the audience, as he removes her mask.)*

SIR HENRY (*musings*): A stone on which a name had been inscribed.

### Scene 3.

*(Lady Milhouse turns to the audience. Her face is that of Olga. The Minister rises in astonishment, and tears off his mask.)*

MINISTER: Olga! Here!

OLGA: Yes, Richard, always with you,

All these fifteen years

Apart from you.

MINISTER: Olga, let it be that you've forgiven me.

SIR HENRY (*fading*):

What a jolly evening!

OLGA: Remember our life and our love, dear Richard

In the house that was ours,

Where you brought me to stay at your side:

Remember, dear Richard, remember me...

MINISTER: Let it be that you've forgiven me!

OLGA: I gave you all, I gave you everything:

My love, my trust, my wisdom and my life.

And when you said 'Give up your hope',

I took my hope and stifled it,

For this thing too you sought, and this thing too

I'd give.

MINISTER (*duet with Olga*):

You gave me all, you gave me everything:

Your love, your trust, your wisdom and your life.

And when I said 'Give up your hope',

You took your hope and stifled it,

For this thing too I sought, and this thing too you'd give.

OLGA: You guess what happened then,

Guess my need for men

Who took me, gave me bread,

But never smiled, when in our bed

They clambered on my corpse:

For I was dead already, dead!

MINISTER: Olga! Hear me!

OLGA: Dead already, dead!

SERVANT: Let him speak, for

Time is running out.

MINISTER: I acted for the best. I had to use

What arts were mine to rise,

And rise I must, like oil in water.

You sank away from me: despise  
Me for it, but you know it's true!

OLGA: Love meant less to you than power.

MINISTER: Love without power cannot endure;  
Our powerless love was premature.  
And yet I loved you, Olga;  
All the power that's mine I'd give  
To know that you've forgiven me!

SERVANT: Forgive him now, for  
Time is running out.

OLGA (*turning away*):  
Only in the world that might have been  
Forgiveness lies.

*(The Minister rises as if to detain her; but she turns her back on him.  
The Servant comes forward to replace her mask.)*

#### Scene 4.

*(Lady Milhouse turns to face the audience. The Minister quickly dons  
his mask and beckons her to her seat.)*

MINISTER: You almost caught  
Me talking to myself, you stayed away  
So long, dear Lady Milhouse.

LADY MILHOUSE: O.K.,  
I'm back now. Henry dear, are you awake?  
It was a foolish tale, and my mistake  
To tell it.

*(To the Minister, gesturing to the Servant):*  
Who is this boy?

MINISTER (*shrugs*):  
Just someone for a day in my employ.

*(Sir Henry is now wide awake, and the Servant hands round the second*

*course. After a while, Sir Henry lays down his fork.)*

SIR HENRY: Your story, dear, reminded me  
Of something else that happened, in this room  
Right here, two weeks ago.

MINISTER: To whom?

SIR HENRY: To me. I came, dear Minister, for your advice  
About that very patch of rotten land  
Behind the Church. It would be nice  
To build on it — oh, nothing grand:  
Some offices perhaps, a supermarket;  
Maybe just a car-park.

MINISTER: And?

SIR HENRY: You had gone out. This boy here asked me in.

MINISTER: Impossible. It must have been old John.

SIR HENRY: No; unless I dreamed the whole affair,  
It was this boy who sat me down, right there  
Beside the window, saying he would come  
To tell me just as soon as you were home.

*(Sir Henry rises and goes to the window, while the Servant exits.)*

SIR HENRY (*recitative*): The sun was shining, and the sea was red,  
deep red like blood beneath the window. All of a sudden, across  
the beach, there came a human cry, long, anguished, full of fear,  
and out at sea I saw a hand raised up, the hand of someone  
drowning. I called, but no-one came, and running out I thought  
I heard my name, shouted in desperation from the waves. I cannot  
swim! I cried, and looked for help. But there was no-one. The  
long bleached sand was like the sand in dreams, a carpet of pure  
light, stretching untrodden to infinity. The hand waved once or  
twice, then sank entirely, and no sound came save the sound of  
the sea.

*(The Servant returns, and begins to clear the dishes.)*

MINISTER: Did you report this?

SIR HENRY: I came to sit a while, for I was shaken. I told the boy; he said I had not left my place beside the fire, where I had slept and dreamed.

MINISTER: Is this true Tim?

SERVANT: As dreams are. Yes, it might have been.

*(Sir Henry turns his back to the audience, and the Servant removes his mask.)*

### Scene 5.

*(Sir Henry turns to the audience, to reveal the face of William. The Minister jumps up and tears off his mask.)*

MINISTER: William! Good God!

WILLIAM: Here I am, beside you always,  
Faithful now these twenty years.

MINISTER: Twenty years!

WILLIAM: Yes, twenty years  
Since you and I competed for the seat  
At Higglesham.  
*(Pause.)*

I loved you, Richard.

MINISTER: Don't!

LADY MILHOUSE *(fading)*: What a fascinating evening!

WILLIAM: My teacher and my hero, friend and father,  
My unbelieving priest, the one I'd rather  
Trust than all who courted me;  
Whose voice and face and hands  
Were the dear tokens of eternity,  
The final cause of all our industry!  
Richard: the world was ours, and we  
Would govern it.

They offered me

- The seat you wanted: Higglesham —  
Safe, philistine and dull, the perfect rung  
From which to clamber upward to the stars.
- MINISTER: And so it was!
- WILLIAM: So one by one you told them: party officers,  
Local bigwigs, Tory ladies,  
Even the hungry tigers of the press:  
'Not William,' you said, 'for William's queer —  
I've proof of it.' And proof you had.  
I loved you, and to you I'd told  
The secret I had hidden from the world.
- MINISTER: You must forgive me, William.
- WILLIAM: Forgive? Those wasted years in dingy offices?  
Those lonely drunken nights, as year by year  
My chances slipped away, till I was dead  
To everything?
- MINISTER: Let it be that you've forgiven me!  
My life is nothing now, dear William:  
Friendless, loveless, childless, I would give  
My power and place to you, if I could live!
- SERVANT: Live he cannot; time is running out.
- WILLIAM: You killed me, Richard, though I would  
Have died for you. You understood  
My soul, and robbed me of it.
- MINISTER: Can you not forgive me? Say you could!
- WILLIAM: There is a world, not this one, where  
Your fault may be atoned.
- MINISTER: It's there  
I'll meet you, William! There I'll come!
- SERVANT: Our victims all await us in that home.

*(William turns his back to the Minister, as the Servant replaces his mask. The scene fades.)*



## Scene 6.

*(Dinner is over. The Minister, shaken but controlled, makes humdrum conversation. They rise.)*

SIR HENRY: And so we'll count on you, dear Minister.

MINISTER: Yes, count on me.

LADY MILHOUSE:

Such an interesting evening — almost as though  
I walked the stage at last, dear Richard —  
May I call you Richard?

MINISTER: Yes, of course.

LADY MILHOUSE:

And tomorrow, as you promised, you will come  
To see our house, and all the lovely things  
We've put in it?

SIR HENRY: We're counting on you.

MINISTER: Yes, I'll come. Goodnight!

ALL: Goodnight!

SIR HENRY (*vanishing*): To the future!

MINISTER: Goodnight... Time's running out.

*(The Servant shows the visitors out, and returns to confront the Minister who, with a sigh, takes off his mask and sinks into an armchair, clutching his heart.)*

Well Tim, I know you now, and it is you  
Who must forgive me in that other world.  
You are the child that might have been —

SERVANT: The child that was —

MINISTER: whose cry  
I hear in dreams, when Olga's face  
Returns. The child who died  
For my ambition's sake.

SERVANT: The child that lives

Eternally in you.

MINISTER: Eternally?

SERVANT: That's so.

MINISTER: I'm tired, Tim; let's go  
Where you reside.

SERVANT (*beckoning*): Look down below:  
The sea's full in; we'll go now  
With the tide.

*(He raises the Minister from the armchair. Together they go out on to the veranda, and down towards the sea.)*

*Finis*