VIVA’S HOLIDAY
An opera in one act

Music by Christopher Andrew Corbell
Libretto by C. A. Corbell and Liv Elise Osthus, based on
Magic Gardens: the memoirs of Viva Las Vegas

LIBRETTO

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Cult of Orpheus
PORTLAND, OREGON
PERSONAE

Viva (soprano)  
A stripper living in Portland, Oregon.

Dad (bass)  
Viva's father, a minister.

Mom (mezzo-soprano, or contralto)  
Viva's mother, a teacher.

Brother (tenor, or high baritone)  
Viva's brother, a soldier.

The action takes place in Duluth, Minnesota during the holidays. The setting is Viva's family home. The scenes take place in two rooms - a family area with holiday decorations and a fireplace, and Viva's bedroom. The action occurs in one room at a time. The living/dining area includes a front door (exit) and a doorway or hall to the rest of the house, including Viva's room.

SYNOPSIS

Scene 1
Dad lights a fire in the fireplace as Viva arrives for her holiday visit. The family gathers and discusses Viva's trip. Viva's brother brings up her work teasingly; Dad thinks Viva is working as a cocktail waitress. Viva and Mom both deflect the conversation to talk about the weather. Dad, Mom and Viva sing a warm family trio, ended by Brother saying “Come on sis, we have a lot to talk about.”

Scene 2.
Brother questions Viva about her line of work. She defends it, sometimes playfully, and finally with a three-part aria in which she questions puritanical assumptions, praises the sensual experience of dancing, affirms the value of the women she works with. She claims it’s her art, her calling and her life to do with as she pleases.

Scene 3
Dad questions Mom about Viva's work. She assures him that Viva will undoubtedly outgrow her “flirtation with the service industry.” Dad replies that he isn’t concerned about that so much, and cites his work in the prisons as leaving him open to all walks of life. He concludes with an aria expressing misgivings about his daughter living so far away, hoping she will find her path.

Scene 4
Mom comes to call Viva to dinner, and Viva takes the opportunity to show Mom some of her stripper clothes, thinking she will be pleased with how “girly” they are. Mom becomes increasingly uncomfortable, telling Viva she should not have brought those clothes and showing an aversion to hearing about the details of her work. Tension increases between them; Mom leaves abruptly. Viva considers what has transpired — particularly Mom's question “What if your father found out?” She longs to be able to communicate openly the life she has embraced. Growing bolder in her aria, Viva decides to out herself. She puts on her stripper clothes and makeup, and goes to meet the family.

Scene 5
Dad asks “What is this?” at Viva's appearance, and she explains this is what she wears at work, where her
stage name is Viva Las Vegas. Dad angrily condemns her for leading men astray and inspiring lust for money, and as his rage grows he yells “You are a whore!” and says she has no place in his house until she confesses the error of her ways. Mom chides her as well, and Viva retreats to her room. Dad continues to fume, and Brother convinces him to take a walk and cool down.

**Scene 6**

Viva is weeping and distraught in her room, wrapped in her coat. She gathers all her things back into her duffel bag and puts on her boots, and makes her way back to the family room to leave the house. Before the fire and amid holiday decorations Viva sings a final aria, asking “What is home?”, realizing that her home is now in Portland, “in a Chinatown dive,” and ends by affirming her new identity.

**Scene 1**

*Family room*

**Dad**

Now, to light a fire.
Let it be warm here
and let’s see it glow
to make this old house
feel more like home.

*(Noticing a sign of Viva’s arrival)*

**Dad**

She’s here!

**Mom**

*(entering)*

What?

**Dad**

She’s here.

*(enter Viva)*

**Dad**

Hi, sweetheart.

**Mom**

Hooray! You’re here.

**Viva**

Oh I’m so glad to be finally
back home!
Mother
Yes, such a long trip!
How was the train ride?

Viva
It was long, but interesting.
I had a lot of time to write
and watch the states drift by,
snowy mile by snowy mile.

(enter Brother)
Brother
Hi, sis.

Viva
Brother!

Dad, Mom
Look, we're all here.

Viva
Look, it's the holidays and we're all here!

Brother
Look, everybody look here!

Dad, Mom, Viva, Brother
Look, it's the holidays and we're all here!

Brother
So, how's work?

Dad
Yes, cocktail waitressing — how's that working out?

Viva
Oh, it pays the bills.

Did it just snow this morning?
I'd almost forgotten
what a real December feels like,
but the bracing cold
felt so familiar
when I stepped off of the train.

Brother
I wonder what it is
that makes it snow so here in Duluth
and "makes it rain" out in Portland.
Mom
(anxiously)
Did it snow this morning? Or last night dear?

Dad
Well it must have been last night.  
What are we talking about?

Mom
Oh but it probably was this morning  
or the snow plow  
surely would have cleared more.

Dad
If you say so!

Son, help your sister.

Mom
Dinner won’t be long.

Dad
And let me say before we reconvene:

This is the greatest blessing of the year,  
to have the fellowship of family  
to make this old house feel like home again.

Mom
I’m so glad you are here dear, safe and sound.

Viva
I’ve so looked forward to this holiday,  
and the snow, and you guys, and my room…

Brother
Come on, sis.  
We’ve a lot to talk about.

(Exit Brother and Viva)

Interlude 1

Scene 2
Viva's Holiday

Viva's room

(Brother carries in Viva's duffel bag, she takes off her coat.)

Brother
So, it's waitressing that pays the bills then?

Viva
You seem to know what's up. You have concerns?

Brother
Mom let it slip. Exotic dancer!

Viva
Stripper is the title I prefer.
Oh for shit's sake brother,
don't tell me you've never hit a titty bar
when you're off duty.

Brother
Not with my sister working there!

Viva
We're all somebody's sister,
or mother,
or daughter…
or simply somebody.

I love my work.

Brother
How can that be?
It seems so demeaning demeaning!

Viva
Ha! My most demeaning job
involved being fully clothed
and vacant in mind and soul -
my stage name there was “Data Entry Specialist.”

Brother
It really doesn't make sense to me
to try and make a living that way…

What happens when you're on your period?!

Viva
When a stripper
is on her period
she takes a little doo-dad
called a tampon
and with scissors
snips the string off
and she shoves it
where the sun don't shine
and gets her ass to work.

**Brother**
I’m so glad that I asked.

This could lead to something worse.

**Viva**
Like a career in advertising?

**Brother**
There must be sleazy men with drugs there.

**Viva**
Are you referring to attorneys?

**Brother**
It can't be safe.

**Viva**
…said the soldier to his sister.

Listen:

**[Aria]**

(*lively*)
I don’t expect you to rush out
and subject yourself to Michel Foucault
(though a little on your reading list
might not hurt) —

Sex is part of what we’re all about.

Yes the mind’s got thought
but sweat’s got salt
and the chair’s got legs
and the farm’s got dirt.

People having sex: why yes, that’s sexual.

Porn on the screen,
porn in a magazine,
porn on a pole,
oh yes, dear brother, that’s sexual.

And these received discursive conventions
of shaming and blaming us all for our sex
foster ever-intensifying
focus on myriad aspects of sex
and are therefore themselves also…

(sensually)
sexual.

The first time I stepped into the Magic
there was this curve of a back
reflected in the glass,
reflected in the glass,
and it snaked down to the floor,
a creamy belly,
a throat’s arabesque,
lips parted in pleasure

and I thought that my heart would break
and the world would be saved entire.

There was this curve of a back
reflected in the glass,
reflected in the glass…

(more powerfully)
The women where I work
are beautiful and strong.
They work their asses off.

They’re in control,
they’re self-made women,
they’re artists, activists,
women with power,
making forty dollars an hour.

I’m a stripper, not a victim,
a performing feminist
who knows that money is power,
making forty dollars an hour.

Stripping is not for everyone.
Being a soldier is not for everyone.

Becoming an accountant,
an athlete,
a lawyer,
an opera singer
is not for everyone —

when it's your calling you know!

It's my calling,
it's my art,
and it's my fucking life.

It's my fucking life.

Scene 3
*Family room*

*Dad*
It may be nothing, but I feel
that our daughter was a little bit evasive
when I asked about her job.
You two have talked at length —
do you know anything
about the place where she works?

*Mom*
*(Tersely)*
I don't.
I mean, I know
she's a waitress
and it's steady work,
and that's all
that I know.

*Dad*
I suppose she's grown up
and can look after herself.

And yet sometimes
a parent's instincts can't be denied.
I worry about what she's making of her life.

*Mom*
Well she's probably
just in a phase.
I'm certain that she will outgrow
this little flirtation
with the service industry.

*Dad*
I don't really care
what she does for work,
as long as she's happy.

You know,
ministering in the prisons,
I see grace touch
all walks of life.

And yet…

Mom
Yes…?

Dad

[Aria]

One thinks of one's child
in a city faraway
and one comforts oneself
with an image of her smile
and a sense of her spark.

We hope we've given enough
but lurking
at our little hope's edges
are the world's eyes,
dark predatory eyes,
in those streets
we never walk down,
leering hungrily.

Our doubts are there,
indolently groping
for certainty
that she will prevail
and find her way.

I think of my child
and I hope
her light will shine.

Interlude 2

Scene 4
Viva's Holiday

Viva's room

Mom
Dinner’s almost ready.

Viva
Oh Mom, I want to show you these things!
*(Viva takes some clothes from her duffel bag, holds up a camisole)*

Isn’t it sweet! and look at these…
*(She displays sparkly burgundy 7-inch heels)*

my ruby slippers!
“There’s no place like home,”
hahaha.

Mom
Oh gosh! Really.
I can’t believe you’re doing this.

Viva
They’re so much fun!
Remember how much we used to fight
because I refused to dress up like a girl?

*(Bringing out more items)*
The fuzzy sweater is fun
when I feel like being coy.
The mirror ball dress will dazzle
the less reflective boy.

Mom
Oh gosh, really, I don’t want to see that!
Really, with your education!

Viva
You truly would love
the theater of it.

If only you could see Miss Mona,
dressed up for a night out
in her peacock-green brocade
or skin-tight red cheongsam —

Mom
Well I’m sure
that you girls have your fun.
I don’t need to know the details.
Viva
…or the cabarets! Her legions in sequins and feathers!

Mom
I don’t need to know the details!

Dinner is ready.

Viva
(disappointed)
I thought you’d like these things.
We’ve talked about my work before.

Mom
You should not have brought those clothes into this house.

Viva
Why not?

Mom
What if your father found out?

Viva
I love dancing,
I brought these to show you.

Mom
What will we put in the Christmas letter now?

Viva
Oh wow!

Mom
Oh honestly. I’ve got to finish the dishes.

(Exit Mom.)

(Viva broods over what has transpired.)

Viva

[Aria]

"What if your father found out?"
What if…
Father, why should I fear you?
Haven’t we been open before?
Haven’t we had conversations?

I love to recall
that apocryphal gospel
we discussed:

"If you do not
bring forth
that which is inside you,
that which is inside you
will kill you."

"If you do
bring forth
that which is inside you,
that which is inside you
will be your salvation."

I have begun to bring it forth,
a little light in a dive,
a spark in a dark street —
how it shines!

How can I hide that which is inside me?
Haven’t we had conversations?

**Interlude 3**

*Viva contemplates, looking at her things from work, and then makes a decision. She takes off her street clothes and puts on her stripper attire, and a little makeup. Gathering her resolve, she exits her room.*

**Scene 5**

*Family room*

*(Mom, Dad, Brother present; enter Viva)*

**Viva**
Father…

**Dad**
What is this?
Put some clothes on,
for Christ’s sake it’s Christmas.

**Mom**
Oh gosh!
Viva
We need to talk.
In Portland this is what I wear at work.
My stage name there is Viva.
Viva Las Vegas.

Dad
No.

Viva
This is my job.

Dad
No! Do you hear me? No!!
Who made you do this?

Viva
No one, I chose…

Dad
You chose to lead men astray?

Mom
You should not have brought those clothes into this house!

Dad
You chose to bring yourself shame?

Viva
Stop! Can’t we talk?

Dad
(becoming enraged)
No! Not yet!
Not until you confess
the error of your ways!

You inspire lust for money.
For money!
You are a whore!!

You have no place
in this house
anymore!

Mom
You should not have brought those clothes into this house.
**Brother**
Dad…

**Dad**
Not until you confess the error of your ways!
Not until you confess you lead men astray!

**Brother**
…let’s take a walk
and cool down.

**Mom**
Dinner is ruined! Are you happy now?

**Dad**
This must end right now!

*(Viva, distraught, runs from the room.)*

**Dad** *(Dad initially starts to follow, Brother carefully prevents him).*
What have you done?
What have you done?
That’s not my daughter!
What has she done?
This is an outrage!

"This I say then, walk in the Spirit
and not in the flesh
and ye shall not fulfill
the lust of the flesh."

**Brother**
Dad, let’s take a walk
and cool down.

**Dad** *(His rage subsiding, but still upset)*
Yes, let’s go.
This hurts too much.
How could she go so wrong?

What have you done?
*(inwardly)*
What have you done?

*(Exit Dad and Brother)*
Interlude 4

*Viva is in her room, sobbing fiercely. She has put on her coat. After a bit she pulls on her boots, and begins hastily putting all her things back into her duffel bag. She takes all her things and exits her room.*

Scene 6

*Family room*

*Viva enters as the interlude music ends. The room is empty, darker, illuminated by holiday decorations and the fireplace, all of which she regards as she moves toward the door.*

*Viva*

[Aria]

What is home?

Is home the place others give you the name they want you to have instead of the name you've made your own?

Is home the place that demands you remain a pink peg fit for the bored hole on the plastic toy car in their little game of life?

What is home, if not the place one can be naked?

What is home, if not the place where you are yourself?

Goodbye, old house. This fire has hurt you. This fire is not safe for you.

This fire needs its hearth in a Chinatown dive on a cheaply-lit stage in a nicotine haze.

This fire needs the fuel of Miss Mona’s cabarets and shy boys’ eyes that cannot look away.
This fire is a light
that cannot be hidden.

This fire’s name is Viva.

(Exit Viva)

End.