

## ***And London Burned***

### **Libretto**

#### PROLOGUE

#### SCENE 1

##### LAW STUDENT

Things are a little dull here.

The long vacation gets longer.

The lawyers and judges are in the country.

The other students have fled the tedium.

The plague is abroad in the city,

The navy in the North Sea,

Their distant victory

The only glimmer of good news.

The burning and destroying of more than one hundred and fifty of the enemy's ships, and of a Dutch town on the island of Schelling. We observe in it a wise and prudent counsel seasonably taken, and most vigorously executed; the whole by the blessing of God attended with admirable success, without any considerable loss in the attempt; the several officers and commanders in the occasion bringing home a just reward of glory and reputation; and the common seamen and soldiers their pockets well-lined with duckets and other rich spoils.

How will glory ever come to me,

When life about me stands so still?

## SCENE 2

### LONDON

You know me now as a city of shards and red carpets  
Ringed by airports.  
A starburst of railways, motorways  
Flight paths and information superhighways.  
But once I was a squalid maze  
Of narrow streets,  
Humming with trade, gossip and desire.  
My appetites were catered for  
By spiced trade winds;  
My body inhabited  
By salty citizens.

## SCENE 3

### LONDONER 1

To think that my jewel  
Should torture me so,  
In love's flaming fuel  
With a fever I glow,  
She's more than ungrateful,  
Inconstant, unkind,  
To her dear loyal lover  
Like the wavering wind.

### VOICE

Fire!  
Fire in Old Fariner's bakery!

LONDONER 2

People are so careless.

LONDONER 1

Since I find out her folly,  
I'll no longer repine,  
But will strive to be jolly  
With a glass of rich wine...

VOICE

Fire! Fire!

INTERLUDE 1 – The bells peal backwards

SCENE 4

DRYDEN

In this deep quiet, from what source unknown,  
Those seeds of fire their fatal birth disclose;  
And first few scattering sparks about were blown,  
Big with the flames that to our ruin rose.

Then in some close-pent room it crept along,  
And, smouldering as it went, in silence fed;  
Till the infant monster, with devouring strong,  
Walk'd boldly upright with exalted head.

SCENE 5

LONDON

Would I have been so undone  
Had it not been that infamous hour

When workers fall to sleep exhausted,  
Not from the sober strain of commerce,  
But the serious demands of pleasure?

## INTERLUDE 2

## SCENE 6

LAW STUDENT

I came from the Temple Church.  
From its tower you can see the haze over London Bridge.  
What did the mayor say?  
Pull down buildings?  
Fetch the engines?

LAW STUDENT

He has been, has he not?

LONDONER 2

Indeed.

LONDONER 3

In the smallest of hours.

LAW STUDENT

Well, what did he say?

LONDONER 1

He said to piss it out.

LONDONER 2

He said a woman could piss it out!

LAW STUDENT

He didn't!

LONDONER 1, 2 & 3

He did!

LONDONER 2

Save the plate!

LONDONER 1

Bury the gold!

LONDONER 3

Remove the furniture to the fields!

LAW STUDENT

Stash the books in the crypts!

LONDONER 1

The books will be heavy.

My broad back,

My wheeled cart,

My willing hands;

I can lease these to you

For, shall we say,

Forty pounds?

LONDONER 2

Profiteer!

LAW STUDENT

Scoundrel!

LONDONER 1

It is simply business, sir.  
All is business.  
Business is all.

LAW STUDENT

I shall remember you  
In my reports.  
When judgement is passed  
You shall not be left wanting justice.

SCENE 7

LONDON

Oh Londoners,  
You have ridden my shoulders  
Or covered under my foot,  
In comfort or in filth.  
But now that mansions and tenements  
Are both reduced to ash,  
Still you find inequalities  
To govern your neighbour's fate.

INTERLUDE 3 – The chaos spreads

SCENE 8

LONDONER 2

A most horrid malicious bloody flame  
Storms westward along Cheapside.  
Why us?

Why here?

Why now?

#### LONDONER 1

It has been proven

By reason and authority

That the number five is fatal,

And all numbers that end in five

Or are made up of fives

Are evil.

Twenty-five is an oddly uneven number,

Unevenly measured

By an odd number.

And worse:

It is made up by the multiplication

Of five by five.

The square root of six hundred and sixty-six

Is twenty five.

Satan's most fatal number.

Bother not with fractions!

Twenty-five is the only number of unities

Of the same denomination

Which is or can be contained

In the root of six hundred and sixty-six.

The mathematics are clear.

Sixteen sixty-six is the year

That is has pleased God

To unleash the Antichrist

From his cabinet of computation.

#### LONDONER 2

The prophets, mystics and astrologers all warned us.

When the Aphelium of Mars appears in Virgo

There will appear in this kingdom

So strange a revolution of fate,  
So grand a catastrophe  
Unto this monarchy and government.

LONDONER 1 & LONDONER 2

The fire is God's will!  
God's will is fire!

LAW STUDENT

What vulgar errors are labelled knowledge.  
An ostrich can no more digest iron  
Or worms be empty of blood  
Than the stars predict the future of a city.  
There must be a logical explanation.

LONDONER 2

I saw a man throwing fireballs.

LAW STUDENT

It's the Dutch!  
Revenge for the town of Schelling.

LONDONER 1 & LONDONER 2

Seize all Dutchmen!  
Throw them in the tower!

PREACHER

Sinners!  
Sinners, we must look to the fire itself  
For the source of this gross punishment.  
Had it been the sin of lewdness,  
Drury Lane would have been first on fire.  
Had it been for lying,  
The flames would have sprung from Westminster Hall.

But since it began at Pudding Lane  
And ended at Pie Corner  
The fire must be occasioned by the sin of gluttony.

LONDONER 1

It is spreading farther west than that.  
Saint Pauls has fallen  
And Ludgate is ablaze.  
This freakish wind.  
This hostile breath from the east...

LONDONER 2

The east?  
It's the Dutch!

LONDONER 1

The French!

LAW STUDENT

The papists!

LONDONER 1

The Quakers!

PREACHER

God's wrath!

INTERLUDE 4 – God's wrath

## SCENE 9

### LONDON

The fire devours me.  
It claims my slums and castles,  
Homes, shops and halls,  
My beloved churches,  
My prisons, markets and taverns.

The Lombard bankers are ruined.  
The markets and exchanges melt down,  
Minted afresh as glowing gold  
That leaps and licks and spreads,  
Accumulating through loss.

### LAW STUDENT

The third day, and all is chaos.  
The water pipes are cut,  
The engines fallen in the Thames.  
The streets are choked with carts,  
Virginals stand mute on boats,  
Their ladies' hands removed to Oxford.  
Criminals are abroad in the liberties.  
Rich rub shoulders with poor,  
Their homes turned inside out in the fields,  
Their cheese, wine and gold  
Sweating underground.  
The price of bread leaps up like the flames themselves.  
Only the King and his brother stand by as they ought.

### LONDONER 1, 2 & 3

Gone are the halls of the Mercers, the Grocers, the Drapers, the  
Fishmongers,

Gone are the halls of the Goldsmiths, Skinners, Merchant Taylors,  
Haberdashers, Salters, Ironmongers, Vintners, Clothworkers,  
Bricklayers, Masons, Carpenters, Painter-Stainers, Leathersellers, Wax  
Chandlers, Tallow Chandlers, Butchers, Apothecaries, Cutlers.  
Gone is Saint Mary's,  
Gone is Saint Peter's, Saint Michael's, St John's,  
The great Saint Paul's.

LONDONER 3

The Fleet!  
The fire has crossed the Fleet!

LONDONER 1, 2 & 3

The Temple!  
The Lawyers!  
The Temple!

#### INTERLUDE 5

#### SCENE 10

LONDONER 1

Open up.

LAW STUDENT

There's no gold here.  
Go away.

LONDONER 1

Open up!

LAW STUDENT

To looters?

Never.

DUKE OF YORK

Then open up for the Duke of York.

DUKE OF YORK

Fetch the gunpowder.

Blow up that house.

Deny the fire its fuel.

LAW STUDENT

But the law!

It is against the law!

Behold the law!

It is against the rules and charter of the Temple

To wilfully damage any house or building therein.

## INTERLUDE 6

## SCENE 11

DRYDEN

The powder blows up all before the fire:

The amazèd flames stand gather'd on a heap;

And from the precipice's brink retire,

Afraid to venture on so large a leap.

SCENE 12

LONDONER 1

Wednesday.  
God tempers his punishment.  
The winds abate.  
The Duke of York and his sailors  
Outmanoeuvre the fire,  
Bringing it to its proper resolution.

LONDONER 2

Wednesday.  
There are no bells left to ring  
They lie molten in crypts  
Among disturbed bones  
And burned stashes.  
Everywhere, hot coals underfoot.

LONDONER 2

Our great city...

LAW STUDENT, LONDONER 1 & 2

...lost.

LONDONER 1

Our wealth...

LAW STUDENT, LONDONER 1 & 2

...lost.

LAW STUDENT

Our power...

## LAW STUDENT, LONDONER 1 & 2

...lost.

We are lost.

### LONDON

I do not exist as bricks and timbers,  
But in exertions and expenditures.  
I am the strengths and ambitions  
Of my singed and blackened citizens.

### DUKE OF YORK

The King, my brother, doth decree that:  
The City shall be built stately with large streets  
The ground all put to the best profit.  
The people will walk easy and dry,  
The offices and streets kept sweet and clean;  
The goods delivered more cheaply.  
The houses, shops, warehouses and wharfs  
Shall be convenient and amenable...

## INTERLUDE 7

## SCENE 13

### LAW STUDENT

The great fire judges put the city back in order,  
Bestowing property where it belongs,  
And reprimanding those who grab or grouse.  
Fairness and justice prevail.  
Except for me,  
Disgraced by my respect for the law  
When all about was lawless.

And so I return to you,  
Your loving son...

#### SCENE 14

#### LONDON

The foul past now vanished  
Mistakes and failures cleared away;  
Across my emptied expanse,  
A wider, cleaner, brighter future can be heard.

EPILOGUE: featuring *Voluntary* from Matthew Locke's *Melothesia* (1673)