

The Gift of the Magi

a mini-opera



libretto by
Jan Michael Alejandro & Jonathan Price
after the eponymous short story by
O. Henry

music by
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CHARACTERS

DELLA, Jim's wife..... Lyric Soprano

JIM, Della's husband Baritone

INSTRUMENTATION

Piano

TIME

1903

SCENES

Scene One - the store fronts on Broadway, New York City

Scene Two - Della and Jim's apartment, New York City

Scene One

DELLA enters, walking slowly, looking in the unseen Broadway shop windows, thrilled by all the gifts for sale. SHE has nearly floor-length hair. SHE faces the audience as SHE looks at the unseen gifts SHE sees in the windows. After looking at three items, SHE realizes SHE does not have enough money to buy the items. SHE opens her small purse and recounts the money SHE has to spend.

DELLA

One dollar and eighty-seven cents.
Only one dollar and eighty-seven cents
to buy a present for Jim.

How many hours have I spent planning
something nice for him.
Something fine and rare and sterling--
something just a little bit near to being worthy
to be owned by Jim.

(SHE looks in a window:)

Solid Silver Handle Knife.
Two blades, two dollars and fifteen cents.
Four blades, two dollars and eighty-five.
Why don't they make one with one blade?
I would imagine
That would cost one-eighty-seven...

(SHE looks in the next window:)

Gold filled, smoked pearl fancy holder
with fine gold pen!
In a satin-lined morrocco case.
Two dollars and sixty-five cents.
It would look very fine on Jim's writing desk.
And I would borrow it, too, to write
my little notes:

(miming writing to JIM:)

"Now I have gone to the grocer.
Now I have gone to the butcher.
Now I have gone to the vegetable man!"
Little notes that would mean the world
to Jim and I,
and nothing to the rest of the world.

One dollar and eighty-seven cents.
Only one dollar and eighty-seven cents
to buy a present for Jim.

Pennies I saved for something special,

something wonderful,
something Jim would want for Christmas!
And that I'd be bursting with pride and joy to
give him on this Christmas Eve!

(SHE looks in the next window:)

Oh, I have found it at last.
This watch chain has surely been made for Jim.
How much?

Twenty-one dollars.
Twenty-one dollars.

(Now at the end of the store row, SHE sees a shop offstage.)

"Madame Sofronie.
Hair Goods of All Kinds."

(SHE caresses her hair, suddenly hopeful.)

How much dare I hope she'd give me
for all this hair?

Dare I hope she'd give me twenty-one?

What will Jim say when he sees it short?

He'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl.

But what can I do--
with a dollar eighty-seven?

(motions to the watch-chain)

This is the one perfect present!

(motions to Madame Sofronie's hair shop offstage)

There is the money to buy it!

Madame Sofronie!

(SHE runs offstage toward Madame Sofronie. JIM enters from opposite, looking in windows, trying to find a gift for DELLA. HE is wearing an overcoat, a suit and tie. JIM is carrying a brown paper bag and a briefcase. HE pulls out his pocket watch, which has no chain, and looks discouraged. HE puts the watch back into his pocket.)

JIM

So, this is just great, Jim.
What are you going to do now?
You were ready to buy Della such a nice gift.
Something beautiful just for your wife.
Something sweet and special that she deserves.
I had planned this for quite awhile.

I had thought it was taken care of.
If things went as planned, I could have surprised her with a dress.
A dress that made her feel like a queen.
Or a handsome purse to take the place of that
beat up bag she carries.

But it all changed...
I didn't see it coming.
But, I should have seen it coming.
Yes, I should've...
But, I didn't.

My Christmas bonus was different this year.
We all knew it wasn't a great year...
But we worked hard!
And rumor was that we would still be getting a small bonus...
I was counting on that...
But here is what I got...

(HE lifts up the bag and shakes it towards the sky.)

What do I do with this?
I know, I know it's the thought that should count.
I know I should be happy for what I have.
I have a job.
I have a beautiful wife who loves me.
I have a roof over my head,
And I'm not starving like others,
But nevertheless...

(HE pulls his watch out of his pocket and looks at it.)

I'm running out of time...
The stores will be closing.

(HE puts the watch back into his pocket.)

What can I do?
This is the one time of year I look forward to
expressing all my love and thanks for
being a good wife... and I failed.

(With head down, JIM walks away from the department store
windows and comes across a pawnshop, offstage. HE stops, thinks
for a few seconds then looks up. HE pulls out his watch again, but
doesn't open it.)

Maybe I have all the time I need, after all.

(HE smiles and walks offstage, into the pawnshop.)

Scene Two

The small apartment of JIM and DELLA. DELLA backs onstage, looking aghast at the kitchen offstage. Her hair has been cut short.

DELLA

Oh...
The chops...

(DELLA is fretting because the chops SHE has saved to cook for dinner have gone bad and SHE cannot afford to buy more. SHE has a wrapped present for JIM. JIM enters, carrying a bag, his suitcase, and a wrapped present for DELLA. HE stares at DELLA in shock.)

DELLA

Jim, dear... Don't look at me that way.

JIM

But Della...

DELLA

I did it for you...

JIM

For me?

DELLA

I didn't have money for your gift.
I had my hair cut off and sold it.
I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present.

JIM

Della...

DELLA

Oh no...
Just say Merry Christmas...be happy.

JIM

I am, but...

DELLA

Are you angry?

JIM

Not at all, my love.

DELLA

I can tell. There's something.

JIM

No, please... I'm not angry.

I'm just surprised...

Listen...

Look at me, nothing's wrong.
You are here, by my side.
I'm with one
I adore.
Who could ask any more?

DELLA

I see more in your face.
I can't say, but it's there.
All these locks
Pushed aside,
Jim, it's me still inside.

JIM

Now, listen, Dell...
And listen well...
I love you.
You know this.
You have no cause to doubt me.
There's nothing...
more precious...
than you to me!

DELLA

When you stopped inside the door...
Your look I'd never seen before...
Not anger...
Not horror...
Just stared at me...
I wasn't prepared for that.
It was nothing I could read.
It terrified me.
I felt I had to tell you...

JIM & DELLA

I remain always yours.
You remain always mine.
When we're lost,
When we're tried,
We remain side by side.

JIM

Don't make any mistake, Dell, about me.
I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave
that could make me like my girl any less.
But if you'll unwrap this present
you may see why you had me going a while at first.

(JIM gives DELLA the wrapped package. SHE opens it to find a
set of beautiful combs for her hair.)

DELLA

Oh!!
(realizing she has no hair for the combs)
Ah!!
(hugs JIM)
My hair grows back so fast, Jim!

(SHE remembers SHE has a present for JIM.)

Oh, oh!

(SHE gives JIM his present. HE opens it to find a gold watch chain. HE smiles.)

Isn't it a dandy, Jim?
I hunted all over town to find it.
You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now.
Give me your watch.
I want to see how it looks on it.

JIM

Dell, let's put our presents away and keep 'em a while.
I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs.
And now suppose you put the chops on.

(HE winks at HER.)

DELLA

Oh.
(sinks in)
Oh.

Jim....

JIM

Yes, Dell...

DELLA

I meant to tell you...
The chops have gone bad.
We've no money for more...

JIM

Dell...
not to worry.

(JIM pulls out a ham, his Christmas bonus, from the bag HE has been carrying.)

Fine dell' opera