

STEAMSONG

LIBRETTO

BY JOHN KEFALA KERR

**Premier Performance
Saturday 12 July 2014
The Gala Theatre, Durham**

I PROLOGUE

station announcer

I see your form
In cups of tea
In clouds and fog
You stroke the land
With white-gloved hands

I see your form
In morning mist
In Yorkshire's pits —
A bed of holes that lies
In wait to swallow trains

You're hard to see
This summer morn
And hard to grasp
As people board
The streamlined bird

With heated lungs
Your tender cloud
First breath then steel
Could be a soul
If not a horse

Enter the birdman, writing on the back of an envelope. Desperate to shift the smoke.
He's already laced the big end with a stink bomb.

birdman

Seagull
Kingfisher
Herring Gull
Wild Swan
Guillemot
Woodcock
Falcon
Kestrel
Strong on the wing.

station announcer

The birdman thinks all manner of thoughts. He hears them in his head—a chorus of fine detail.

birdman

How to disperse the smoke? Great Western hear fanfares in their heads!

station announcer

And there it is...a tiny indentation...where someone has pressed their thumb into the plasticene.

birdman

A dimple, barely visible. That can't be the solution.

station announcer

It is the solution.

II CUPS OF TEA

<i>birdman</i>	Sparrow-hawk Osprey Capercaillie Mallard		
<i>LNER chorus</i>	You see my form In cups of tea In clouds and fog I stroke the land With white-gloved hands You see my form In cups of tea In clouds and fog I stroke the land With white-gloved hands You see my form In morning mist In Yorkshire's pits— A bed of holes that lies In wait to swallow trains	<i>station announcer</i>	A fry-up on the shovel Water; a bit of lard Fields alight with sparks A bird kills a bullock A 'hundred and sixty-five ton bird! Can you fire left-handed? No? Well I'm not takin ye! And don't cross the chalk mark! Can you smell aniseed? A message wrapped round coal Thrown out the cab: "Get a fireman!"
<i>station announcer</i>	It's the night before, and Driver Joe's thoughts turn to base metal shaking the very ore from his teeth.		

III SOOT

<i>driver joe</i>	Black in my eye Black in my right eye LNER soot!	<i>female worker</i>	Hold still now Hold still now Black in your eye
<i>station announcer</i>	This is no brief encounter!		
<i>driver joe</i>	I'll prove them wrong tomorrow All the doubters LMS and even Chamberlain He goes to Kettering And says there are no winners Only losers		He goes to Kettering And says there are no winners
<i>station announcer</i>	The speck of ash from Joe's eye. See it floating?		

IV LIVE THING

station announcer Now clear-eyed. Round-shouldered. Cap worn the wrong way round.

driver joe With my lovely blue
Streamlined engine *Mallard*
We drew away from Grantham
I accelerated up the back
To Stoke Summit and past

Stoke Box at eighty-five
Once over the top
I gave Mallard her head
And she jumped to it
Like a live thing!

Then 'Undred 'n eight...
'Undred an' nine
'Undred an' ten
Go on, old Girl
You can do better 'n this!

LNER chorus Here's the man with tattoos
And no shine on his shoes

station announcer Tommy's in his element

tommy Coal goes straight through
Feed that hot mouth
She's one hungry bird

LNER chorus / tommy Keep the rhythm
Never falter
Feed the hot mouth
Eat your fill

LNER chorus Shovel faster Tommy
Shovel faster Tommy
Shovel faster

LNER chorus / tommy They will say
Blighter Bray
Sweated buckets

station announcer Sweated buckets

LNER chorus Shovel faster Tommy
Shovel faster Tommy
Shovel faster

With my lovely blue
Streamlined engine *Mallard*
I drew away from Grantham
I accelerated up the back
To Stoke Summit and past

Stoke Box at eighty five
Once over the top
I gave Mallard her head
And she jumped to it
Like a live thing!

Then 'Undred 'n eight...
'Undred an' nine
'Undred an' ten
Then 'Undred an' twenty-three
Then 'Undred an' twenty-four
Then 'Undred an' twenty-five

V FEARFUL BREATH

station announcer Four months on. A wincing night of lightning and sand. Enter the fearful breath. Unbottled. The Syncopators have vacated their chairs, taking their brass tubes with them, leaving behind an unblown music. Enter the empty chairs. Enter the degenerate music, blown and unblown. Enter the lost property, worn and unworn.

frau Enter my fearful breath
Gives me away in the cold
Rises upward, t'ward
Boots unwelcome here
And I know where'er
I hide my breath
It will find safe passage
Through plaster
Uncut by glass

Enter my fearful breath
Gives me away in the cold
Rises upward, t'ward
Boots unwelcome here
And I know where'er
I hide my breath
It will find safe passage
Through plaster
Uncut by glass

LNER chorus What might be the effect of lightning striking a train at both ends when it's travelling to somewhere safe and sound, and what would a watcher see who's standing on platform three and one who's sitting in the speeding train, and who'd be right and who'd be wrong, and who'd dare say lightning never strikes in one place twice?

frau My fearful breath
Gives me away
Rises upward,
T'ward boots
Unwelcome here
And I know where'er
I hide my breath
It will find

Safe passage
Through plaster
Uncut by glass

My fearful breath
Gives me away

LNER chorus

What might be the effect
of lightning striking a train
at both ends when it's travelling
to somewhere safe and sound,
and what would a watcher
see who's standing on platform three
and one who's sitting in the speeding
train, and who'd be right
and who'd be wrong,
and who'd dare say lightning
never strikes in one place twice?

frau And who'd be right and who'd
be wrong, and who'd dare say
lightning never strikes
in one place twice?

I see the lightning
My fearful breath
I see the lightning striking

Lightning striking
Striking, striking, striking

Who'd be right
And who'd be wrong
Fearful breath

Lighting strikes
Twice in one place
Who would dare say?

VI MOVE AGAIN

station announcer

The children on the platform look up at the moon. Their song-breath rises, driving a piston-thought of parting on the out-stroke and sorrow on the in. The moon smiles down at the children with a big chalky grin. "Safe journey," it says. The children draw pictures of the grinning moon on the side of the carriage in chalk while Berlin's sparrows scuttle in the steamlight and steely points, ten miles down the line, obey levered commands and re-align.

kinder

"Move again"
Papa says "move again"
"Move again" Papa says
This is how it must be
This is how it must be

station announcer The apartment is mine

This is what my Papa says

station announcer I say the apartment is mine
You must leave

This is how it must be
This is what my Papa says

station announcer Papa wird wuetend und schreit
Papa nimmt mich auf sein Knie
„Das muss sein
Und Du musst jetzt ein guter Junge sein
Und tun was die Damen im Zug Dir sagen.
Du bist doch jetzt ein grosser Junge.“

kinder Don't leave me
Don't leave me
Papa told me there's a new home
We are going to in England

station announcer Papa wird wuetend und schreit
Papa nimmt mich auf sein Knie
„Das muss sein

kinder Move again, move again,
Move again, move again
There's a home we're going to
There's a new home
We are going to in England

VII ACME THUNDER

whistles

VIII SPECK OF ASH

station announcer Recall the tiny speck of ash
Retrieved from driver Joe's right lash?

A hundred years, less quarter that,
It's been abroad, doing this and that.

Once wiped, the speck did rise aloft,
Inclined t'ward Yorkshire, hard and soft.

It met a turbulent Pennine flow
That carried it both long and low.

A year from fate like this t'was dealt,
Till snagged by puny hills of felt.

It travelled on to Bramall Lane
And watched the home team every game.

Unbothered by the floodlight's fringe
(For is not ash itself pure singe?),

The years they passed till soot was laid
Upon a spinning turbine blade.

And there our lone nomadic grime
Did pass away a happy time,

Till thrown and gestured to explore
A place it once had seen before.

Unlikely venture some will say,
To have two things go the same way.

Yet so it was, in Bytham's fold,
Our nomad smut, now tired and old,

Did come to yearn for, want and need,
A home where once excessive speed

It reached perforce with great relief,
Alighting from Joe's handkerchief.

And miles-per-hour, all then achieved,
Saw half the world at once pay heed

To Mallard's run and Bytham's state
As rightful place to celebrate

The glorious past of England's prime
(A well-known tune, time after time).

Let Acme peas all render loud
Invading force and warring crowd.

"There's Medard's yard!" the speck now cries.
"It looks unchanged"; the same applies

To old Glen Brook, the High Street too,
And see! The Spinney, spanking new.

But where's that platform, left and right,
Where north and southbound did alight?

"I've been abroad too long, I fear!"
The hopeless speck sobbed with a tear

Whose liquid now dissolved apace
Unhappy grit, without a trace.

Assume for all such fate in store—
Three score and ten and little more.

A happy life that's long and true
Is all a grain can best accrue.

In seeking with intent avowed
To wander lonely as a cloud,

It quite forget at every bend
To still pay heed to awful end,

A lesson this particulate
Did fail to learn and inculcate—

That lost and found should both create
The means to render and donate

A gift of love and peace and mirth
To all who live upon the earth.

IX UMBRELLABY

driver joe

With my lovely blue
Streamlined engine Mallard
I drew away from Grantham

LNER chorus

I drew away
From Grantham

X SLEEPERS

narrator

The sleeper train
Digs out the future
With its Bugatti snout

Dispersed time flies
And we inhale
A smokey present—

Wheezing sleep
Snoozing dreams
Snoring mares

Twin bolts strike
And fiery Einstein
Races end to end

Violin in hand
Playing tomorrow's
Flashy cadenzas

The cruel lightning
Polishes silverware
Blinds the Hornbys'

Crazy lapdog
Breathes dragonfire
Over England

frau

"How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony."

XI LITTLE BYTHAM

1. *flood victim* The water is up to our knees. Water, water up to our knees.
2. *councillor* Tree-dressing at The Spinney. Hedge-laying at the Spinney.
3. *vicar* Mowing and strimming at St Medard's. A mower to tow us round the gravestones.
4. *single mum* When things went wrong I had a choice, move back to Leeds or soldier on. Single mums need grants not loans to help them set up on their own. Soldier on, soldier on.
5. *white van man* They stole the sat nav from my van! Last Wednesday night. Police are appealing for witnesses.
6. *scooter kid* My all-time favourite sexy man...David Beckham.
7. *shopper* They have to save two million. If the library goes, then what will I do?
8. *mobile postman* I'm parked in the layby on Station Road.
9. *councillor* It's quiz night at the Willoughby. Six per team. A pound to play.
10. *fete organiser* Another success for tea and cake, tea and cake, tea and cake, tea and cake, tea and cake.
11. *woman in slippers* How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank! Here will we sit and let the sounds of music creep in our ears.
- villagers* The water is up to our knees. Water, water up to our knees. Tree-dressing at The Spinney. Hedge-laying at the Spinney. Mowing and strimming at St Medard's. A mower to tow us round the gravestones.
- When things went wrong I had a choice, move back to Leeds or soldier on. Single mums need grants not loans to help them set up on their own—soldier on, soldier on. They stole the sat nav from my van! Last Wednesday night. Police are appealing for witnesses. My all-time favourite sexy man...David Beckham. They have to save two million. If the library goes, then what will I do? I'm parked in the layby on Station Road. It's quiz night at the Willoughby. Six per team. A pound to play. Another success for tea and cake, tea and cake, tea and cake, tea and cake, tea and cake.
- woman in slippers* Bring back the sun Dear Lord we've had enough. The rain it raineth on the just and also on the unjust fella, but chiefly on the just because the unjust hath the just's umbrella.

XII EPILOGUE

runner

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