

# 1917

**Book, music and lyrics by Alex Thomas**

## SUMMARY

An epic scale book musical set in revolutionary Russia, packed with memorable ensemble scenes. It follows the fortunes of the aristocratic Vebronsky family and their servants through this tumultuous year, when a world comes tumbling down and a new one rises from the ashes. The musical score ranges from sweeping orchestral melodies to avant-garde jazz.

**ROLES:** 8m, 5f, large chorus (including numerous small speaking roles)

**MUSIC:** 26 songs, orchestrated for 18-piece orchestra

## CHARACTERS

**Count Vebronsky:** (Male, 45-55) The autocratic but generous head of the family, also a government minister. He believes firmly in the Tsar, God and himself.

**Countess Vebronsky:** (Female, 40-50) His wife; a rather cold but courageous woman. Utterly opposed to change, she will stand by her beliefs to the last. Little solo singing.

**Sasha Vebronsky:** (Male, 21) The eldest son, idealistic and passionate, but also dutiful. He goes off to fight in WWI and returns to find his world changed forever.

**Ana Vebronsky:** (Female, 17) The elder daughter, beautiful, head-strong and arrogant. She suddenly finds herself looking after her younger siblings, showing more admirable qualities.

**Felix Vebronsky:** (Male 14) The younger son, who wants nothing more than to be a soldier. The revolution makes him grow up very quickly. Little solo singing.

**Marya Vebronsky:** (Female, 12) The youngest daughter, mystic and other-worldly. She is out of place in the violent world of the revolution, but has visionary powers.

**Katya:** (Female, 18-20) Their nursery maid, a servant in the Vebronsky household. Brave, kind but uncertain, she gets swept along by the revolution and has to make difficult choices.

**Yuri Kaplov:** (Male, 25) A footman in the Vebronsky household, he becomes a fervent revolutionary. Passionate and bitter, he seeks revenge on the privileged classes.

**Mikhail:** (Male, 21) An idealistic young actor, friends with Sasha but from a very different background. The revolution gives him new horizons but takes him on a surprising path.

**Father Fyodor:** (Male, 75) A friend of the Vebronskys, he gives shelter to the children when their home is destroyed and helps secure their escape. Some solo singing.

**Sergei:** (Male, 21) A dashing army officer, friends with Sasha. Ana is very attracted to him. He is a loyal friend, and loathes the revolution. Little solo singing.

**Nikki Pokrovsky:** (Male, 21-25) A very wealthy young man, a friend of family – he is superficially in love with Ana, but his admiration is unrequited. No solo singing.

**Natalya Pokrovsky:** (Female, 17-18) Nikki's sister, in love with Sasha. She believes herself betrothed to him, unwisely. Little solo singing.

### **OTHER MINOR SPEAKING/SINGING ROLES**

Speaker

Angry man

Soldier

Soldier 2

Guard

Officer 1

Officer 2

Officer 2

Red Guard

**Chorus of workers, women, soldiers and revolutionaries**

## FULL SYNOPSIS

### ACT1

(*Overture*) The story begins in the year 1978. An old man works in his small shop on an elaborate model doll's house. 'Ra-ra-Rasputin' plays on the radio in the background. A young girl enters (*Prologue*). She watches him work and he tells her that it is a model of his family's old house, before the Russian Revolution. We are introduced to the family through the dolls; behind the shop the lights come up on a very grand St Petersburg mansion, in which appear the Vebronsky family. All except Marya, the youngest, who is missing. As the music swells the old man leads the little girl into the story to become Marya, while he becomes the family priest, Father Fyodor.

It is now New Year's Eve, 1916. The family are at prayers in the drawing room, while all of Russia prays for a better year, though hope has nearly disappeared (*Mother Russia*). Sasha, the eldest son, is going off to fight the Germans and a New Year's Eve ball is being held. Food may be horribly scarce but there's plenty of champagne and nothing to stop them dancing the night away. Sasha, a progressive, is critical of the Tsar and his government but his father reminds him that Russia has always survived and always will: the Tsar and God will see to that (*What is to be done?*). The count, alone once his children have dashed off to prepare for the ball, confides to his wife his real fears (*Mother Russia reprise*)

As the younger children are being put to bed Sasha finds a moment alone with Katya, the nursery maid. He has lent her a volume of Pushkin's poetry and there is an intimate moment before his sister Ana interrupts, crossly reminding Sasha of the proper way to treat servants (*Don't fool yourself*). During the song we see Katya, in tears, being advised by fellow-servant Kaplov not to take it to heart: soon the aristocracy will be overthrown. But Katya is confused by her feelings, wondering if she'll ever feel truly at home anywhere (*Belonging*).

The guests arrive and the waltz is danced. Knowing that many of the men will not return, there is a desperate quality to the merry-making (*Last waltz of the year*). We meet Sergei, a dashing young officer admired by Ana, and Natalya Pokrovsky, who has designs on Sasha. Sasha's best friend Mikhail arrives late; he has been at the theatre, watching one of Meyerhold's avant-garde plays; Mikhail is frustrated that such a genius is stifled by the stuffiness of Tsarist culture – he and Ana clash: she loves the lavish world of the Imperial Opera. Sasha staves off the argument by asking his sister to perform for the guests (*Russian Doll*). As midnight strikes, the traditional national anthem is sung (*God save our Tsar*) but Mikhail unsettles the guests with his talk of impending change and leaves under a cloud. His outburst inspires Kaplov to publicly defy the Count; he is thrown out of the house. The party resumes but with even more of a desperate edge (*Last waltz of the year, reprise*).

In the street outside Katya brings Kaplov food and warm clothes; he tries to convince her to join him in his new life free from servitude (*Anything is possible tonight!*). She leaves, but Mikhail appears and Kaplov persuades him to come to a meeting of the Bolsheviks.

A week or so later. Sasha has left for the front with Sergei. The women of Petrograd lament their position (*Nothing to do but wait*): the song becomes an anthem for the angry workers and soldiers, who join forces to overthrow the government that is leading them into defeat and ruin. All it will take is a spark (*Iskra*) to begin the revolution. With Sasha away, Ana comforts Marya and Felix in the nursery (*I can be brave if you can*) but the revolutionary mob draws nearer. Led by Kaplov they confront Count Vebronsky, who is executed with his wife in cold blood (*Judgement day*). Mikhail is also in the crowd, futilely trying to stop the bloodshed. The mob rampages wildly through the house and only Katya's quick thinking enables the children to escape (*The other half!*)

## ACT 2

October 1917. The revolution has not lived up to its promise. The Provisional Government, ruling in place of the Tsar, is leading Russia ever closer to defeat by the Germans and the food situation is as bad as ever. Ana and Felix perform in the streets to earn enough money to stay alive (*Russian doll, reprise*). The Bolsheviks are urging the people toward a second revolution and Kaplov is one of their leading spokesmen (*Answer me that!*).

Sasha, badly wounded, returns from the front to find his house occupied by Kaplov's revolutionaries and his family all apparently dead. (*Nothing to do but hate*). He accuses Katya of being complicit in their fate and in her anger she doesn't reveal that the children escaped.

Meanwhile, Marya is dangerously ill (*Angels*). She, Ana and Felix are living in secret with Father Fyodor, trying to stay out of Kaplov's clutches. Mikhail encounters Ana in the street, and despite their enmity persuades her that she can make more money by performing in his new play. She reluctantly agrees, for Marya's sake (*Anything is possible tonight, reprise*).

Sasha, with nothing else to live for, dedicates himself to the cause of restoring the Tsar, along with surviving brother officers (*What is to be done, reprise*). Kaplov is meanwhile involved in plotting the imminent Bolshevik takeover.

Ana throws herself into rehearsals, learning to accept her world has changed (*The avant-garde*). But Felix arrives with news that the Bolshevik takeover has begun and that Red Guards are on the streets. We see Sasha and his comrades-in-arms attempting a hopeless counter-revolution; Sergei is killed and Sasha desperately tries to convince Katya to leave Kaplov and come away with him (*Home*). Kaplov comes upon them and forces Katya to choose (*The climax*) – with their lives in his hands it falls to Felix to shoot Kaplov, whereupon they make good their escape. A brief reunion is had before Sasha and Katya part ways from Ana and Mikhail, who decide to stay in Russia to see what the future brings (*Finale*). The epilogue sees us back in the 1978 toyshop, where it emerges that the old man is none other than Felix. He gives the young girl the doll's house as a New Year's gift.

## **ORCHESTRATIONS**

Flute

Clarinet

Alto Saxophone

Baritone Saxophone

Trumpet 1

Trumpet 2

Trombone

Tuba

Harp

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

'Cello

Double Bass

Piano

Drum kit

Timpani

Percussion (glockenspiel/xylophone/cymbals/triangle)

## **MUSICAL NUMBERS**

### **ACT 1**

- |                                     |                         |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Overture                         | Orchestra               |
| 2. Prologue                         | Orchestra               |
| 3. Mother Russia                    | Company                 |
| 4. What is to be done?              | Vebronsky/Sasha/Fyodor  |
| 5. Mother Russia (reprise)          | Vebronsky/Countess      |
| 6. Don't fool yourself              | Ana/Sasha/Kaplov        |
| 7. Belonging                        | Katya                   |
| 8. Last Waltz of the Year           | Company                 |
| 9. Russian Doll                     | Ana and 'dolls'         |
| 10. God save the Tsar               | Company                 |
| 11. Last waltz (reprise)            | Company                 |
| 12. Anything is possible            | Kaplov/Katya            |
| 13. Anything is possible (reprise)  | Kaplov/Mikhail          |
| 14. Nothing to do but wait          | Company                 |
| 15. Iskra!                          | Chorus                  |
| 16. I can be brave if you can/Iskra | Ana/Marya/chorus        |
| 17. Judgement Day                   | Kaplov/Vebronsky/chorus |
| 18. The other half                  | Kaplov/chorus           |

### **ACT 2**

- |                                      |                                 |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 19. Entr'acte                        | Orchestra                       |
| 20. Russian Doll (reprise)           | Ana                             |
| 21. Answer me that!                  | Kaplov/Red Guards/chorus        |
| 22. Nothing to do but hate           | Sasha/Katya                     |
| 23. Angels                           | Marya/Fyodor                    |
| 24. Anything is possible (reprise 2) | Mikhail/Ana/Felix/Fyodor/Marya  |
| 25. What is to be done (reprise)     | Sasha/Sergei/officers           |
| 26. The avant garde                  | Mikhail/chorus                  |
| 27. Home                             | Katya/Sasha                     |
| 28. The Climax                       | Kaplov/Katya/Sasha/Marya/Fyodor |
| 29. Finale                           | Company                         |
| 30. Epilogue                         | Orchestra                       |

## **PRODUCTION HISTORY**

1917 was first performed at Magdalen College School in December 1916. The original production was directed by Alex Thomas, designed by Libby Todd and produced by Ciara McCafferty. The production was previewed and reviewed in the Oxford Times.