

H O B S O N ' S C H O I C E

A chamber opera

by

John Biggs

“Hobson’s choice” as a term: In mid 17th century England lived a man named Thomas Hobson who ran a livery stable. It was his requirement that customers take either the horse nearest the stable door or none at all. This type of choice came to be known as a “Hobson’s choice”.

S Y N O P S I S

ACT I

Scene: Mid-morning at Hobson’s Boot Shop, Market Street, Philadelphia, 1880

Henry Hobson has spent the previous evening, as usual, drinking with friends at near-by Moonraker’s Inn. His three daughters are readying the shop for business, and worrying about what his mood will be when he finally wakes up. Maggie, the eldest, deftly handles her father’s difficult moods and keeps the shop running and profitable. Alice and Vicky concern themselves primarily with courting. Hobson finally makes his appearance, and begins lecturing to the three of them. He causes Alice and Vicky to leave in tears when he announces that he, and he alone will choose husbands for them. As for Maggie, he tells her she’s well beyond the marrying age, and now “On the shelf” as he puts it. He begins to leave, but Mrs. Conway, a wealthy and influential customer enters, wanting to know who had made the boots she recently purchased there. It comes out that the shy and awkward bootsmith, Willy Mossop, is responsible. She instructs Hobson that Willy is to make all of her family’s boots from then on, and praises the workman to his face, calling him a “treasure”, and commenting that he is probably underpaid. She departs, and later Hobson departs in a rage, stating that women are the bane of his existence. Maggie, realizing that with her brains and Willy’s talent, they could build a business and life of their own, and proposes to him on the spot. Learning of this, Vicky and Alice pounce on Maggie, certain that this will push their father over the edge, and they will never marry. True to form, Hobson angrily refuses Maggie’s plan, confronts Willy, and in a rage, strikes him with a leather strap, thus setting into motion the onset of new lives for his entire family. Regretful, yet proud, Hobson throws the two into the street, and is left alone in his shop.

ACT II

Scene: Evening at Maggie & Will's Boot Shop, Chestnut Street, three weeks later

It's the evening of Maggie and Will's wedding day. Vicky with her Freddy, and Alice with her Albert have been invited. In this tiny cellar, converted into a bootshop and a home, they all drink toasts to the new couple. There comes a surprise knock at the door. Maggie is sure it's her father seeking advice, since she herself has arranged for Freddy's business to bring a law suit against him for having fallen down into their cellar from the street; drunk. She quickly instructs everyone but Will to hide in the bedroom as she answers the door. It is Hobson, who's come to show them a "Warrant for Trespass". After Hobson cries to Heaven for an honest lawyer, Maggie calls Albert, who happens to be a lawyer, and the others from the bedroom. Albert and Hobson discuss a settlement when Maggie takes over and sets the price. Hobson gives his word, but protests that such a large sum should not be leaving the family, Maggie reveals that it will not leave the family. In fact, it will be divided between Vicky and Alice for their upcoming weddings. Realizing the whole thing had been set up, he leaves in a rage, vowing to run his shop with nothing but men from then on. Upon his exit, the two couples break out in joyous celebration, realizing that now they are free to marry. In an space all her own, Mrs. Conway re-appears, taking satisfaction in her decision to help Maggie and Will to start out on their own. After the guests leave, and bedtime approaches, Maggie makes her way to the bedroom, inviting Will to join her when he finishes his lessons. When she realizes he's too timid to come in on his own, she re-enters, and gently leads him in the right direction.

ACT III

Scene: Morning at Hobson's Boot Shop, a year later

Hobson's faithful bootsmith, Toby, enters and tells us that not only has the business fallen apart since Maggie left, but that Hobson himself is very ill from drinking, and on the verge of death. Maggie arrives and sends Toby to the druggist for Hobson's medication, and asks him to fetch her husband.. Hobson admits that he needs someone to look after him, and asks her to come back. Maggie is not eager to return, and as Vicky and Alice arrive, it becomes clear that neither of them would even consider coming back, with Vicky now pregnant, and Alice moving in higher circles. Will then arrives, only to see Hobson chasing his two daughters out of the house. In a desperate attempt to entice them back, Hobson offers Will his old job, and his old salary. Astonished, and unwilling to agree to such a proposal, the two turn, and make

way for the door. Hobson stops them, and at that moment, Will decides to make his own proposal. In the following argument, Will, fully confident and determined, states his final position. In a moment of transition in their relationship, Maggie agrees with Will. Confronted with the decision of either becoming a silent partner in his own business or drinking himself to death, he chooses the former. As Hobson acknowledges he's been defeated by his own behavior, Maggie and Will go to Albert's law office to have the new partnership drawn up. Toby returns and asks: "Are they comin' back, sir?" With a sense of both regret and relief, Hobson replies: "Yes, they're comin' back."