

thedallasopera™

WORLD PREMIERE

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly

Composed by Joby Talbot to a libretto by Gene Scheer | Production by Leonard Foglia

THE DIVING BELL AND THE BUTTERFLY (Synopsis by Gene Scheer)

ACT ONE

The lights come up on the Abbé Faria, a nineteenth-century priest locked in a dungeon cell in the Chateau d'If. As he tries to tunnel his way to freedom, Faria hears a stranger's voice, on other side of the wall, urging him to speak. In his mentally confused state, Jean-Dominique believes himself to be Edmond Dantes of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and, in the ensuing duet, each explains his respective plight.

It soon becomes clear that the year is 1995. Renowned French fashion magazine editor Jean-Dominique Bauby lies hospitalized in a coma. Sylvie and their children, Theo and Celeste, are at his bedside, until the youngsters—frightened by their father's condition—run from the room. Although Bauby's infidelity sparked their breakup months earlier, Sylvie still harbors feelings for Jean-Do and she sings to the unconscious man with a sharp sense of irony, as she recalls their strained relationship and strives to make sense of this unimaginable turn of events.

Four weeks into his coma, Jean-Dominique begins to regain consciousness. The patient slowly becomes aware that he cannot speak or move, and his voluntary muscle control is confined to a single eye. The medical term, we are told, is "locked-in syndrome." Jean-Do's intellect is completely intact but his poetic, passionate, funny and brilliant voice can only be heard by the audience and by the spectral Abbé Faria who, mysteriously, seems to live in both Jean Dominique's conscious and unconscious worlds.

Confined to his apartment, Bauby's 93-year-old father, Papinou, is dependent on Sylvie's updates as he struggles to process what is happening to his son. Meanwhile, at the hospital, Jean-Do is introduced to Sandrine, a young speech therapist, assigned to help him pursue alternate ways to communicate. As she coaxes Bauby to try to reconnect with the outside world, Sandrine's overwhelmed patient shuts down, envisioning himself locked in a diving bell sinking deep beneath the surface.

Now alone in his room, Jean-Dominique receives a call from Sylvie and the children. As he listens to their voices, Bauby imagines himself rising from the bed and rejoining his family at home. His need to connect with his children sparks his imagination to soar like a butterfly—freeing him from the diving bell resting on the ocean floor. Jean-Dominique imagines that he is back with Sylvie preparing an epic meal for their friends. However, when the guests arrive, it is hospital staff and physicians taking seats around the family table and Jean-Dominique realizes, with horror, that this dinner party is only in his own mind. The staff exits, leaving just Sandrine and Abbé Faria.

Sandrine, who has been unable to get Jean-Do to cooperate, is surprised when he suddenly blinks out the letters to a word: "Merci." With this opening, Sandrine poses the question that Jean Do will answer in Act Two. She asks, "What do you want to say?" as the curtain falls.

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ACT TWO

The hospital at Berck-sur-Mer is located on the French coast. Jean Dominique is in his wheel chair on the beach with Sylvie and their two kids. The family decides to play a game of Hangman. Jean-Dominique joins in by laboriously spelling out a word; blinking one letter at a time. Sylvie spies a woman watching them from the dunes. Mistaking her for Jean-Do's paramour, Sylvie confronts her for having the audacity to show up on Father's Day. However, the woman is not who Sylvie thinks she is. Her name is Claude and she has been sent by Bauby's publisher to take dictation for his memoir.

As Jean-Dominique is wheeled into the hospital to undergo a medical procedure, Claude, Sandrine and Sylvie look through the opening pages of Jean-Do's "writings." A trio emerges as the three women marvel at the beauty of the language and the depth of feeling they contain.

Jean-Dominique, meanwhile, imagines that he is back in his lavish corner office at *Elle* magazine where he works as the editor-in-chief. As he reviews pictures along with his assistant, Lea, it suddenly seems that he is the subject of each heroic image. Jean Dominique is jarred from his fantasy by the ringing of his telephone. He listens intently on the speaker, unable to respond, as his heartbroken father explains what his son has meant to him.

Claude arrives and pushes Bauby in his wheelchair onto the hospital balcony. There, she begins to read aloud one of Jean-Do's favorite passages from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He had been working on an adaptation of the novel prior to his stroke, and this story of imprisonment and liberation proved a touchstone throughout his illness. Once again, it sparks his imagination and helps Jean-Do process both his grief and his hopes.

With Claude's help, Jean-Do has reached the final chapters of his memoir. As he turns to describing the day he was struck down, the events leading up to his stroke suddenly come to life on stage. But a final liberation awaits; the author is not done imagining an ending in which hope triumphs. Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, although read and acclaimed by the world, was expressly written for his children. In a final gesture, the opera makes his motivations clear and celebrates both the will to live life fully and the courage to let go of it, when the time comes.