

# SHINING BROW – UrbanArias version DRAFT

An Opera in Two Acts and a Prologue

Libretto by Paul MULDOON

Music by Daron HAGEN (*b.1944*)

Commissioned by Madison Opera

Premiere on 21 April 1993 | Oscar Mayer Theater, Madison, WI

The Madison Opera / Roland Johnson

## CHARACTERS

Frank Lloyd Wright

Mamah Cheney

Louis Sullivan

Edwin Cheney

Catherine Wright

baritone, an architect

soprano, WRIGHT's mistress

tenor, WRIGHT's mentor

bass-baritone, WRIGHT's client

mezzo-soprano, WRIGHT's wife

**SETTING:** 1903 – 1914 | Illinois & Wisconsin

## SYNOPSIS

The opera concerns events that occurred between 1903 and 1914 during the great American architect Frank Lloyd Wright's life. Wright's determination to leave his wife and children, his relationship with Mamah Cheney, and the subsequent murders and conflagration at Taliesin, are all part of the historical record. The opera takes Wright to the point at which he vows to rebuild Taliesin in Mamah's memory.

## PROLOGUE

*All characters are onstage. SULLIVAN stage right, WRIGHT, center, and MAMAH stage left. CATHERINE and EDWIN are a step back in between SULLIVAN/WRIGHT and WRIGHT/MAMAH respectively. CATHERINE and EDWIN move between their actual characters and chorus with SULLIVAN also adding to the chorus commentary where appropriate.*

MEAS.#	CHAR.	ACTIVITY / NOTES
	SULLIVAN:	So much so, that even now I flinch at the very thought of a stone taking wing from Madison, Wisconsin;  it was every inch a proud and soaring thing that, true to form following function, lodged itself in my brow. As I did in his.  I was his <i>Lieber Meister</i> . He was a ‘pencil in my hand’.  I was his <i>Lieber Meister</i> ; he was a ‘pencil in my hand’; Together we would make our mark On the clean slate of America.  We dreamed of a mile-high building with a huge tap-root; But his ambition, or my pride – It’s hard to say exactly which – Would drive a wedge between us ...
	SULLIVAN:	And this, perhaps, is how things were meant to be; For Troy must fall, Achilles must slay Hector.
	SULLIVAN:	And therein lies ...
	CATHERINE/: EDWIN	<i>(as echoes)</i> And therein lies the poetry ...
	SULLIVAN:	And therein lies the poetry of architecture.

– ORCHESTRAL SEGUE –

ACT I | Scene 1

MEAS.#

CHAR.

ALL:

ACTIVITY / NOTES

The poetry of architecture  
is a poetry of vision;  
we set our sights  
on unscaled heights  
with our ground-plans and elevations.

The poetry of architecture  
is a poetry of tension;  
we take as our theme  
the brick and the beam  
and we add an extra dimension.

But the poetry of architecture  
is not without its laws;  
there's someone at the bottom  
of every totem- pole:  
you can't make bricks without straw.

So the poetry of architecture  
is a poetry that's composed  
by a chorus of slaves  
much like ourselves  
who get shunted from pillar to post.

For the poetry of architecture  
has its Masters and its Schools;  
some are destined to stand  
with their pencils in their hands ...

*(WRIGHT uses this anthem to step forward relishing the thought of  
dominance as an architect. SULLIVAN looks away disgusted by his ego.  
WRIGHT steps forward.)*

WRIGHT:

And some are destined to rule.

*(EDWIN couples up with MAMAH, whom he ushers to WRIGHT's drafting table, on which are spread the plans of various houses.)*

CATHERINE: *(bitter and judgmental)*  
Some are destined to stand  
With their pencils in their hands  
*(with awe and regret)*  
... and some are destined to rule.

*(CATHERINE crosses to SULLIVAN)*

WRIGHT: The poetry of architecture, Mr. and Mrs. Cheney, is universal.  
The Sioux and the Shoshone might have taught the Greeks and Romans a lesson in harmony.

MAMAH: I can't quite imagine the appeal to John Ruskin of a few sticks covered with deer-skins.

EDWIN: Mamah, please.

MAMAH: In any case, we might as justly speak of the 'music' of architecture.

WRIGHT: Indeed, we might. Be it mud hut, mansion or mosque,  
Cabin, cathedral or kraal –  
They should all be somehow integral.

*(WRIGHT comes round to the front of the desk and stands beside MAMAH.)*

WRIGHT: And Mah-mah – if I may?

MAMAH: *(correcting his pronunciation)*  
May-mah – if you would.

CATHERINE: Mah-mah. May-mah. My, my, my.

WRIGHT: May I say that what's uppermost in my mind

When I take my pencil in my hand  
To draw up a plan for *your* Utopia, *your* Erewhon,  
Is that form and function are one.

MAMAH: What a curious expression – ‘my pencil in my hand’.

WRIGHT: Take, for example, this house in Buffalo;  
Each room opens into the next, so one may follow  
One’s bent, as it were, from the living room  
Through the den to the bedroom ...

EDIWN: It’s faintly reminiscent of a maze ...

MAMAH: But a maze in which one finds oneself, my sweet,  
The way the greatest rivers must meander.

EDWIN: The way in every labyrinth there lurks a Minotaur.

WRIGHT: Over the lintel of the hearth  
In this house in Buffalo is carved:

SULLIVAN/: *The reality of the house is order*  
CATHERINE *The blessing of the house is community*  
*The glory of the house is hospitality*  
*The crown of the house is godliness*

MAMAH: What a curious sloping roof.

WRIGHT: That, Mamah, is a hip-roof;  
So called, I might say, because it follows the curve ...

EDWIN: Far be it from me to lower the tone  
Of these proceedings, but when all’s said and done  
There’s the little matter of how much it’ll cost ...

MAMAH: Edwin, you sound like Banquo’s ghost.

WRIGHT: It’s still a tad early to say exactly.

I'll have a more concrete idea by the end of the week.

MAMAH: Oh, Eddie, the cost is as nothing to the worth  
Of a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

EDWIN: Just so long as it doesn't cost the earth.

*(EDWIN and MAMAH take their leave)*

MAMAH: *(extending her hand)*  
Until the end of the week.

WRIGHT: *(kissing her hand)*  
Until then, Mamah.

EDWIN: *(abruptly)*  
Goodnight.

*(EDWIN and MAMAH turn upstage back to audience.)*

WRIGHT: Her hip ...  
And her scent. Was it musk?  
*(WRIGHT is alone at his desk, his 'pencil in his hand'.)*  
Not musk. Cedar perhaps. Perhaps night-scented stock.  
It all goes back to those Froebel blocks  
my mama gave me as a child.  
*La Belle Dame sans Merci, The Lady of Shalott* –  
these were my first patrons; I was their Master Builder.  
Not stock. Saxifrage. A flower to split a boulder  
in the prairie of men's hearts;  
*(Unbeknownst to him, CATHERINE crosses to him.)*  
She has pierced my heart like an arrowhead.

CATHERINE: Frank, my dear.

WRIGHT: Catherine. What brings you here?

CATHERINE: An arrowhead? But this is all so sudden.

Is it jasper or obsidian?

WRIGHT: What brings you here?

CATHERINE: Is it Minnetaree or Mandan?

WRIGHT: What brings you here?

CATHERINE: If Mohamet won't come to the mountain ...

WRIGHT: Catherine, my dear.

CATHERINE: We've scarcely spoken in a month.  
If not for mine, then for the children's sakes,  
Come home one evening at six  
If only to play a nursery game.  
I doubt if you even remember their names.  
Have you forgotten those evenings in Oak Park  
When we built upon the built-up dark  
And climbed aboard the old toboggan  
And ate roast chestnuts and pecans?  
At least do me the honor ...

WRIGHT: Lloyd Junior ...

CATHERINE: ... of considering whether you'll join ...

WRIGHT: John ...

CATHERINE: ... me for a late dinner.

WRIGHT: Kate Junior ...

CATHERINE: I'll wear the taffeta ...

WRIGHT: David ...

CATHERINE: ... dress and the pendant that reads *Semper Virens* ...

WRIGHT: Frances ...

CATHERINE: ... given to me by Louis Sullivan ...

WRIGHT: Llewellyn ...

CATHERINE: For though I may have grown a little stout ...

WRIGHT: Has anybody been left out?

CATHERINE: ... still and all, Frank, still and all ...

WRIGHT: *(insistently)*  
Has anybody been left out?

CATHERINE: All of us. We've all been shut out by the wall  
You've thrown up round yourself,  
While your pursuit of fame and wealth  
Would be laughable ...

WRIGHT: It all goes back to Froebel.

CATHERINE: ...if it weren't so cruel.

WRIGHT: All somehow integral.

CATHERINE: A paradox, Frank. Your public espousal of the ideal  
Of family life – all that tittle-tattle  
Carved on lintels and picked out in tesserae –  
While your own life's in disarray.  
As for your prattle about 'integrity' ...

WRIGHT: *(spoken - final)*  
I'll be home no later than nine-thirty.

*(CATHERINE exits, leaving WRIGHT alone at his desk.)*



WRIGHT: Each room opens into the next, so one may follow  
one's bent, as it were, from glade through sylvan glade –  
till the valley of disenchantment gives way to the Great Plains.  
There Louis Sullivan and I dreamed  
of a mile-high building with a huge tap-root  
that was every inch a proud and soaring thing.

Only the other day I read a newspaper report  
of a man who complained of an ache in his chest.  
When they opened him up they found a lump  
of gristle and keratin big as a baby's first;  
that lump was his own twin  
whom he'd ousted in their mother's womb. Not stock.  
Not saxifrage. Gardenia.

He was my *Lieber Meister*; I was a 'pencil in his hand';

*(WRIGHT is now ghosted by SULLIVAN.)*

together we would make our mark  
on the clean slate of America.  
But my ambition, or his pride –  
it's hard to say exactly which –  
would drive a wedge between us ...

What a curious name ... 'Edwin' ...  
Edwin, Edwin, Edwin ... Brood.  
She has pierced my heart  
Like an arrowhead;  
And the Seminole, the Sioux, the Shoshone, the Sans Arcs –  
They come sweeping back across the land  
To build upon the built-up dark.

– ORCHESTRAL INTERLUDE OF 'HYMN TO  
NATURE,' a piece attributed to Goethe –

## Scene 2

*Oak Park, Illinois. Six months later. The site of the Cheney house, in mid-construction.*

MEAS.#	CHAR.	ACTIVITY / NOTES
	EDWIN:	Look out below. Here comes a bit of skirt. Dig deep, little lady, I'll give you something hard.
	CATHERINE:	Far be it from me to suggest that this ruffian could lower the tone of the neighborhood, since it's already been lowered out of all recognition. By Frank Lloyd Wright and the Cheney woman. It's an open secret ...  He's just another man of forty, Turning his back on years of connubial bliss.  While she's no better than a common whore.
	EDWIN:	<i>(with wounded pride)</i> Three long days and three long nights in the belly of the beast Was as much as Jonah could bear; For more than three months, I've been trapped in the hump-backed whale Of this so-called 'prairie house'.  I know, I know, I know; I know only too well the features of the 'prairie house' – its walls of rain, its window-panes of ice, its door of wind, its roof of hard-packed snow, and, at its core, a vast emptiness. The truth is that my mouth is full of nails. For three long months I've hunkered in the maw, bowed under, mortgaged to the hilt, and pondered the universal law; for everything that's built something is destroyed. <i>(EDWIN spots a flint on the ground, picks it up.)</i> So it was that the Master Builder

Assigned Prometheus his rock  
And Sisyphus his boulder.  
*(EDWIN scrutinizes the flint.)*  
And Job his little pot-sherd;  
I do believe it's an arrowhead.  
*(EDWIN puts the flint in his breast-pocket, then stands in the door-frame, extending both arms.)*  
For three long months I myself have been the grist  
to Frank Lloyd Wright's grist-mill.  
I've been stretched upon the rack.  
I've put my shoulder to the burning wheel.  
More than once I've been pinned up by my wings.  
Instead of the cross, the Albatross  
about my neck is hung.  
Everything's out of kilter.  
The very house stands at a list;  
there's not a line that's not somehow askew.

*(EDWIN retreats within the house.)*

CATHERINE: They say the soul weighs about the same  
as a plumb-line and a plumb.

SULLIVAN: It's the fate of every carpenter  
To fade into his own woodwork.

*(WRIGHT and MAMAH enter. They are in buoyant spirits, oblivious of EDWIN.)*

SULLIVAN/: I know, I know, I know;  
CATHERINE I know only too well the features of the 'prairie house' –  
its walls of rain, its window-panes of ice, its door of wind,  
its roof of hard-packed snow, and, at its core, a vast emptiness.

WRIGHT: Each room opens into the next, if you remember,  
Like the chambers of the heart.

SULLIVAN/: *(sotto voce)*

CATHERINE    And, at its core, a vast emptiness.

*(WRIGHT goes down on one knee.)*

WRIGHT:    *(spoken)*  
*As the kiss of two lovers at night*  
*Makes the darkness a choir,*  
*The dusk is a-quiver with light*  
*Of its heart's desire.*

MAMAH:    *(extending her hand)*  
Oh, Frank, you've such a way with words.

WRIGHT:    *(taking her hand)*  
Those were the words of the Welsh bard, Taliesin,  
To the Lady of the Lake, with whom he ...

MAMAH:    ... had a secret liaison?

WRIGHT:    Something of that ilk.

MAMAH:    A lover's tryst?

WRIGHT:    She was less a lover than a muse.

MAMAH:    How dull. So it's what you might call an allusion?

WRIGHT:    I borrowed those lines from a masque  
By a certain Richard Hovey.

MAMAH:    Do you mean 'borrowed' or 'purloined'?

WRIGHT:    Borrowed.

MAMAH:    How positively dull.  
*(distractfully)*  
Was the house always meant to list?  
It seems somewhat topsy-turvy.

WRIGHT: Be it mud hut, mansion or mosque, a Minnetaree earth-lodge,  
a cabin with antlers of an elk gracing its eaves –  
be it the Chapel of the Holy Grail –  
They should all be somehow integral.

MAMAH: It's faintly reminiscent of a maze.

WRIGHT: To borrow a phrase from my old mentor, Louis Sullivan ...

EDWIN: *(singing out from within the house)*  
In every labyrinth ...

*(WRIGHT starts, releases MAMAH's hand and gets to his feet as EDWIN appears.)*

... there lurks ...

MAMAH: Eddie ...

WRIGHT: ... a Minotaur.

MAMAH: You sound like Banquo's ghost.

EDWIN: Far be it from me to lower the tone  
Of these proceedings, but when all's said and done  
There's the little matter of the Wedding Guest.

MAMAH: Please, Eddie. Try not to be distraught.

EDWIN: I've just been pondering the motto over the hearth.  
I think it should read;  
*For everything that's built something is destroyed.*

WRIGHT: I hope you don't mind, Ed;  
I borrowed your wife for the afternoon.

EDWIN: Mind? Why should I mind?

MAMAH: Why so crestfallen, so forlorn?

EDWIN: *(EDWIN moves towards MAMAH)*  
So crestfallen?  
*(EDWIN takes MAMAH's hands and presses them to his head.)*  
So forlorn?

WRIGHT: In the phrase I borrowed from Louis Sullivan ...

EDWIN: Can't you feel those little notes of gristle and keratin?

MAMAH: I feel nothing, Eddie.

EDWIN: For three months I've been losing hope.

MAMAH: *(snatching away her hands)*  
You know I simply can't abide your self-pity.  
  
*(EDWIN puts his hands to his head.)*

EDWIN: For three long months I've tried to ease  
The pain of these nodes of gristle and keratin  
But have found no salve, no Balm of Gilead.  
It's been to no avail, to absolutely no avail.

MAMAH: I feel nothing, Eddie, not the merest hint  
Of remorse; I must follow my bent,  
As it were, towards my own enfranchisement.

EDWIN: If not for mine, then for the children's sakes,  
Come home one evening at six;  
You've made us all a laughing-stock.

MAMAH: For three long months I've been ostracized  
but the nods and winks and twitching curtains  
have only strengthened my resolve;  
my love for Frank Lloyd Wright

will prevail when all else fails.

*(MAMAH moves towards WRIGHT.)*

WRIGHT: For three long months I've tried to loose the knot,  
The inextricable, Gordian knot  
That binds Mamah and myself.  
I'm consumed by guilt,  
Yet adamant as Percival  
In the Chapel of the Holy Grail.

EDWIN: For three long months I've tried to ease  
MAMAH: For Three long Months I've been ostracized  
WRIGHT: For three long months I've tried to loose

EDWIN: The pain of these nodes  
MAMAH: But the nods  
WRIGHT: The knot,

EDWIN: Of gristle and keratin  
MAMAH: And winks and twitching curtains  
WRIGHT: The inextricable, Gordian

EDWIN: Bu have found no salve,  
MAMAH: Have only strengthened my resolve  
WRIGHT: Knot that binds Mamah and myself.

EDWIN: No Balm of Gilead  
MAMAH: My love for Frank Lloyd  
WRIGHT: I'm consumed by guilt,

EDWIN: It's been to no avail  
MAMAH: Wright to prevail  
WRIGHT: Yet adamant as Percival

EDWIN: To absolutely no avail.  
MAMAH: When all else fails.  
WRIGHT: In the Chapel of the Holy Grail.

MAMAH: I'm leaving you tonight!

EDWIN: One of these days I'll boast  
a set of antlers fit to grace  
the eaves of any 'prairie house'.  
If all else fails,  
I'll swallow hydrochloric acid;  
I'd hang myself by a rope  
from a purlin if I thought  
it might be to some avail.

MAMAH: To absolutely no avail.  
I won't go back to needlework,  
to the drab monotony of plain one, purl one.  
My love for Frank Lloyd Wright will prevail.

*(EDWIN steps back into the shadows.)*

WRIGHT: Let us set sail;  
Together we will make our mark  
On the well-worn slate of Europe;  
In Rome, or Paris, or Berlin,  
We'll build our Chapel of the Holy Grail.

*(WRIGHT sweeps MAMAH off her feet and exits.)*

– ORCHESTRAL SEGUE –



### Scene 3

*Berlin, 1910.*

MEAS.#

CHAR.

ACTIVITY / NOTES

MAMAH: *Die Menschen sind alle in ihr und sie allen.*  
*(revising her translation)*  
We – are – all – within – Nature;  
She – is – within – us – all.  
*(MAMAH gets up from her desk and moves towards the window.)*  
How much longer must I endure our being apart?

I look out from the walls  
Of Troy, like Helen  
Sighing for a sail.

I see nothing. Only a camisole of a clothes line  
Over Friedrichstrasse.  
It might be a Rhinemaiden,  
A damsel in distress.  
She calls to me, ‘Cuckoo ... cuckold ...’  
As seamstress calls to seamstress  
Across a mile-wide quilt.

I feel nothing. Not the merest hint  
Of remorse. Not a pang of guilt  
For having followed my bent,  
As it were, from Boone, Iowa,  
And the monotony of needlepoint  
To the realm of Julia Ward Howe;  
As they say in Boone –  
Or used to say – *per ardua ad astra*.  
Though I went to such great pains  
to throw off my manacles of yarn ...  
*(MAMAH makes a show of wringing her hands, moves back towards the desk.)*  
... the truth is that my mouth is full of pins.  
*(MAMAH picks up the piece of paper.)*  
Am I destined merely to darn

The socks of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe?  
(MAMAH sets it back on the desk and moves towards a chair.)  
For everything that's built something is destroyed.  
(MAMAH runs her hand along the lapel of WRIGHT's distinctive  
overcoat, which is draped over the chair.)  
Am I destined forever to mend the torn  
Pocket of Frank Lloyd Wright's top-coat?  
To be yet another vassal?  
Am I destined forever to kowtow?  
To be some well-wright urn, some pot of basil,  
Into which a great man may flow?  
(MAMAH moves back towards the window.)  
For three long months he's languished in Fiesole  
Laboring over a portfolio  
Of drawings; I sit, meanwhile, my pencil in my hand,  
And look back down the valley  
Of disenchantment  
That runs from here to Chicago.

(SULLIVAN sings out from the darkness, stage right.)

SULLIVAN: Another brandy and *crème de menthe*.

MAMAH: Even now I hear an echo  
In the built-up dark, as Catherine, dear Catherine,  
Cries 'cuckold ... cuckoo ...'  
To the Gadarene swine in the Cliff Dweller's Club.  
While I embroider the quatrains  
Of Goethe's high-and-mighty verse  
I hear a higher, mightier voice resound;  
(mimicking CATHERINE)  
'There can be, and there will be, no divorce.'  
Though he's a stag dragged down by his own hounds,  
Actaeon to my Artemis,  
Edwin's honor knows no bounds.  
How can I redeem  
Myself? On a November  
Evening in Berlin, as the light further dims,

I look out from my chamber  
At that camisole, those three sheets in the wind,  
At what remains of my empire.  
And perhaps I do feel the merest hint  
Of remorse as a violin  
Rehearses from the apartment  
Opposite the high-flown  
Maunderings of a new masterwork  
By Richard Strauss. So much for Avalon.  
So much for our making our mark  
On the well-worn slate  
Of Europe.

*(SULLIVAN looks up suddenly from his newspaper.)*

SULLIVAN: An **elephant** portfolio ...?  
An elephant's graveyard, more like.

*(SULLIVAN begins to tear out a column from his newspaper, which he folds meticulously.)*

MAMAH: I stand on the edge of an abyss. I look into a chasm.

SULLIVAN: He was a 'pencil in my hand'.

MAMAH: There is no Balm in Gilead, no holy chrism  
Nor extreme unction  
With which to anoint my shining brow.  
Only a cataclysm of burning oil ...

SULLIVAN: ... form following function ...

MAMAH: ... and molten lead, an avalanche  
of fire and brimstone, broken glass and bricks  
taking wing ...

SULLIVAN: ... he was every inch  
a proud and soaring thing.

MAMAH/: So much so ...  
SULLIVAN

SULLIVAN: *(spoken)*  
Bring me that brandy, you little prick.

MAMAH: So much so, that even now I flinch.

*(SULLIVAN puts his hands to his head, MAMAH turns in a decisive gesture.)*

#### Scene 4

*Christmas Morning, 1911. Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin. A burst of energy ...*

MEAS.#	CHAR.	ACTIVITY / NOTES
	CATHERINE/: EDWIN	Scandal. Scandal. Sodom and Gomorrah Wouldn't hold a candle To the flesh-pots of Spring Green.
	EDWIN:	Not all the frankincense and myrrh Borne by the three wise kings Would rid us of the stink Of that bill-goat and his minx ...
	CATHERINE:	... his shrew ...
	EDWIN:	... his vixen.
	CATHERINE:	I believe I'll die of asphyxiation.
	CATHERINE/: EDWIN	Not since Sodom and Gomorrah has anyone launched such an assault

on everything we hold dear.

EDWIN: Keep your eyes peeled for a pillar of salt.

CATHERINE/: No one has launched such a fierce assault

SULLIVAN/ On everything we hold dear,

EDWIN Not since the days of Sodom and ...

*(WRIGHT and MAMAH enter, MAMAH keeps a discreet distance while WRIGHT, in his distinctive hat and coat, greets the assembly.)*

WRIGHT: Good morrow.

CATHERINE/: ... Gomorrah.

SULLIVAN/

EDWIN

WRIGHT: Good morrow.

CATHERINE/: Gomorrah. Gomorrah. Gomorrah.

SULLIVAN/

EDWIN

*(WRIGHT's public pronouncements are intercut with private ruminations.)*

WRIGHT: *(public)*

Ladies and gentlemen, let me take this occasion

To welcome you to Taliesin.

*(WRIGHT reaches into his pocket to retrieve his prepared statement, from which he reads.)*

For seven long years I have withstood

The slings and arrows

Of the fourth estate.

I am a man of sorrow

And acquainted with grief.

It's fitting that, today of all days,

I should most humbly crave

Your indulgence. Let me say my say.

You know only too well  
The details of my private life,  
How a great misfortune befell  
Myself and my wife,

How we drifted further and further apart.  
Can a man be a faithful husband and father  
And devote himself to his art?

*(private)*

The truth is that my back is to the wall.  
The truth, the truth ...

*(public)*

That necessary light comes from within;  
From there, and there alone.  
For seven long years we have been prey  
to rumors and allegations.

I prithee now; *Let him who is without sin*  
*Cast the first stone.*  
Let it lodge in the 'Shining Brow'  
Of Taliesin.

For, just as Taliesin is not 'on', but 'of',  
A gently sloping hill,  
So my love for Mamah Cheney is truly integral.

This is our Avalon.  
This is our Chapel of the Holy Grail.  
*(WRIGHT begins to fold his prepared speech.)*  
Now, ladies and gentlemen, we wish you all  
A very merry  
Christmas. We hope you will  
Join us in a glass of sherry,  
Here in this house that hill  
Might marry.

EDWIN:           Never mind a 'house that hill might marry';

When are you gonna marry Mamah Cheney?

CATHERINE: Don't you have any qualms of conscience?

CATHERINE/: Why should Frank Lloyd Wright be above and beyond  
SULLIVAN/ The 'average' laws for 'average' men?  
EDWIN

WRIGHT: *(impatiently)*  
The artist must take a harder  
And a higher road.  
And that, ladies and gentlemen,  
Is my final word.

*(WRIGHT pulls MAMAH aside. They sing a descant above  
CATHERINE, SULLIVAN, and EDWIN who counter them.)*

CATHERINE/: He's swept us off our feet  
SULLIVAN/ And danced us round and round  
EDWIN Then flung us back, exhausted,  
On the muddy ground.

WRIGHT: Together, Mamah, we will take that harder  
And higher road.  
You pierced my heart like an arrowhead.  
You did me mortal hurt.

MAMAH: *(Teasing him)*  
An arrowhead? But this is all so sudden.  
Is it jasper or obsidian?

WRIGHT: Mamah, please, try to maintain ...

MAMAH: Is it Minnetaree or Mandan?

CATHERINE/: So much so  
SULLIVAN/ That even now we flinch  
EDWIN At the thought of all this hullabaloo

For the sake of a column inch.

MAMAH: Can a man devote himself to his art  
And be a faithful husband and father?

WRIGHT: A great man may be true to both.  
He need never choose  
One path over another.  
You, Mamah, are both mother  
And muse.  
When all is said and done  
You are both key- and corner-stone.

*As the kiss of two lovers at night  
Makes the darkness a choir,  
The dusk is a-quiver with light  
Of its heart's desire.*

*(WRIGHT has gone down on one knee to present MAMAH with a  
single rose.)*

MAMAH: Those lines you borrowed from a masque  
By Richard Hovey.

WRIGHT: The rose I borrowed from *Der Rosenkavalier*.

MAMAH: *Ist wie ein Gruss vom Himmel.*

WRIGHT: And its scent? Is it musk?

MAMAH: *Ist bereites zu stark,  
Als dass man's ertragen kann.*

WRIGHT: Accept, Mamah, as a token of my love.

MAMAH: It reminds me of that night in Dresden  
When we ate roast chestnuts and pecans  
And built upon the built-up dark.



WRIGHT: That was the night we met Richard Strauss.

MAMAH: That was the night **you** met Richard Strauss;  
 I was merely a codicil  
 To your iron will.

WRIGHT: Accept it, Mamah, as a token of my love.

SULLIVAN: Is she destined to go down in history  
 As a codicil to Wright's iron will?

WRIGHT: The Chippewa, the Choctaw, the Cherokee, the Cheyenne  
 Could have taught Cicero and Cato  
 A lesson in oratory.

MAMAH: Am I destined forever to kowtow  
 To someone who's full of such moonshine?  
  
 My heart goes out to Catherine. So pure. So noble.  
 So noble, yet so weebegone.  
 Though Frank and I may seem the picture of connubial bliss ...

CATHERINE/: I am a breast without a nipple.  
 EDWIN I am a watch-tower without a beacon.  
 I am the gall in an oak-apple.

MAMAH: I'm destined for ever to do crewelwork  
 On Goethe's high-and-mighty quatrains.

SULLIVAN/: I am the birch stripped of its bark.  
 CATHERINE/ I am a raven swooping over the squadron.  
 EDWIN I am a hang-nail on a finger.  
 I am the eye that looks askance.

MAMAH: Compared to recent events in Morocco and Montenegro,  
 All pales to insignificance.  
 The Vandals and Huns, the Goths under Alaric,

Come sweeping back across the land  
To build upon the built-up dark.  
I hear them snort and snicker.

MAMAH/: I am a flint that holds no spark.  
CATHERINE/ I am the rain falling at a slant.  
SULLIVAN/ I am a half-moon-shaped gold torc.  
EDWIN I am a sponge steeped I vinegar.  
I am the hart. I am the hind.  
I am the green and burning tree.  
I am the cloud no bigger than a hand.

WRIGHT: *(fiercely)*  
I will go down in history!

## Scene 5

14 August 1914. The Cliff Dwellers' Club, Chicago.

MEAS.#	CHAR.	ACTIVITY / NOTES
	SULLIVAN:	Frank.
	WRIGHT:	<i>Lieber Meister.</i>  <i>(They shake hands.)</i>
	SULLIVAN:	You're well, I trust.
	WRIGHT:	I'm well. And you?
	SULLIVAN:	So so.
	WRIGHT:	I often think of you perched on a ledge At the Cliff Dwellers' Club Like an Anasazi In Canyon de Chelly or Mesa Verde.
	SULLIVAN:	An Anasazi? You speak far better than you know. The Anasazi were eclipsed By the Hopi and the Navajo.
	WRIGHT:	The Hopi, the Haida, the Huron, the Hunkpapa Sioux Might have taught the Greeks and Romans A lesson in harmony.
	SULLIVAN:	I know, I know, I know, I know, I know; I know only too well why you see me 'perched on a ledge' of the Cliff Dwellers' Club: I am Prometheus on his rock. <i>(SULLIVAN raises his glass.)</i> There's an eagle or vulture Feeding on my liver. <i>(He drains the glass.)</i>

I know only too well why you see me hanging in chains,  
Full of self-pity, pie-eyed, peripheral.

WRIGHT: No, no, no, no, no;  
When I see you perched on a ledge  
At the Cliff Dwellers' Club  
I'm thinking of your dream of architecture –  
To borrow your phrase –  
'virile and indigenous'.

SULLIVAN: Do you mean 'borrow' or 'purloin'?

WRIGHT: I mean 'borrow'.

SULLIVAN: It's a sore point, Frank.

WRIGHT: I know, I know, I know, I know, I know;  
I'm thinking of your dream of a mile-high building  
With a huge tap-root  
Every inch a proud and soaring thing.

SULLIVAN: It's a sore point, Frank.  
*(pause)*  
What of your own dreams?

WRIGHT: I had a dream of a house that hill might marry.  
Its walls are of stone from a local quarry.  
Its roof bespeaks  
The strength of native oak.  
The hill is a mass of apple trees in bloom,  
Gooseberries, cherries, plums,  
Heavy horses and Holstein cows,  
Bens and ducks and swans and geese.

SULLIVAN: You're taking up agriculture?

WRIGHT: I had enough of that as a kid;  
All pulling tits and shoveling shit.

SULLIVAN: You'd leave it, then, to the hired help?

WRIGHT: I know, I know, I know, I know I know;  
I know the virtue  
Of self-reliance.

But there's even greater virtue  
In giving employment.

SULLIVAN: *(calling out)*  
Another brandy and a *crème de menthe*.

WRIGHT: Even now I'm consumed by guilt  
At having to let someone go.

SULLIVAN: You want something?

WRIGHT: Nothing. I'm not much of a tippler.

SULLIVAN: I'm thinking more of the social purpose  
of art and architecture.  
It should be more than mere ornament.  
It should do more than revel in itself  
Like a porpoise turning on its own spit.

WRIGHT: It should be more than 'frozen music',  
To borrow a phrase from Goethe.

SULLIVAN: A phrase of Goethe purloined from Schelling.

WRIGHT: Do you mean 'purloined' or 'borrowed'?

SULLIVAN: I mean 'purloined'.

WRIGHT: This fellow I had to let go, my chef,  
Is a native of Barbados.  
He used to work at the Cliff Dwellers' Club.

SULLIVAN: A paradox, Frank. How to achieve  
A native architecture the natives might afford.

WRIGHT: There's Midway Gardens,  
Where 'earth and air and fire and water  
Are all somehow integral',  
To borrow another phrase from Goethe.

SULLIVAN: A phrase Goethe purloined from Tobler.

WRIGHT: Do you mean 'purloined' or 'borrowed'?

SULLIVAN: I mean 'purloined'.

WRIGHT: There's still Midway Gardens;  
There's art for the masses.

SULLIVAN: Please, Frank. You know I simply can't abide  
Your being glib;  
I don't mean bread and circuses:  
I don't mean a beer-garden.

WRIGHT: Be it beer-garden, byre, basilica, bank –  
They should all be organic, don't you think?  
Form follows function. Form and function are one.

SULLIVAN: A phrase you purloined, Frank, from me.

WRIGHT: Do you mean 'purloined' or 'borrowed'?

SULLIVAN: I mean 'purloined'.

(*WRIGHT moves towards the window.*)

WRIGHT: You were my *Lieber Meister*. I was 'a pencil in your hand'.

SULLIVAN: It's a sore point, Frank.

WRIGHT:       Together we would make our mark  
                  On the clean slate of America.

SULLIVAN:     But your ambition ...

WRIGHT:       Or your pride –

SULLIVAN:     I think I know exactly which –

WRIGHT:       Would drive a wedge  
                  Between us.

SULLIVAN:     It's a sore point, Frank.

WRIGHT:       *(moving towards SULLIVAN)*  
                  Is there no Balm in Gilead?

SULLIVAN:     *(getting to his feet, steadying himself on the table)*  
                  Would that there were, Frank; would that there were:  
                  For ten long years I've cowered in the Gothic arch  
                  Of your Leviathan,  
                  Bowed under by the jawbone of a whale.  
                  How you would damn  
                  Me with faint praise, then steal my thunder  
                  As Prometheus stole fire,  
                  All to the greater glory of your name;  
                  There's malice in your magnanimity.

WRIGHT:       *(turning away)*  
                  For ten long years I've tried to heal the breach  
                  Between myself and Louis Sullivan.  
                  He knows only too well  
                  How great I deem  
                  Him to be. He was my first mentor.  
                  He was the first to fire  
                  My imagination. I am the keeper of that flame;  
                  Why should he hold me in such enmity?

SULLIVAN: For ten long years I've cowered in the Gothic Arch  
WRIGHT: For ten long years I've tried to heal the breach

SULLIVAN: Of your Leviathan,  
WRIGHT: Between myself and Louis Sullivan.

SULLIVAN: Bowed under by the jawbone of a whale.  
WRIGHT: He knows only too well

SULLIVAN: How you would damn  
WRIGHT: How great I deem

SULLIVAN: Me with faint praise, then steal my thunder  
WRIGHT: Him to be. He was my first mentor.

SULLIVAN: As Prometheus stole fire,  
WRIGHT: He was the first to fire

SULLIVAN: All to the greater glory of his name;  
WRIGHT: My imagination. I am keeper of that flame;

SULLIVAN: There's malice in your magnanimity.  
WRIGHT: Why should he hold me in such enmity?

WRIGHT: Yet we hold so much in common.

SULLIVAN: So much?

WRIGHT: So much. The fact that we're both Celts.  
I often think of you perched on a ledge  
At the Cliff Dwellers' Club  
Like an Irish high king  
On the ramparts of Tara.

SULLIVAN: Not Tara, Frank. The parapets of Troy.  
The Irish are 'a pack of hounds  
Dragging down every noble stag'.



WRIGHT: Goethe?

SULLIVAN: Goethe.

*(The two remain motionless, as though reaching out to each other, yet unable to touch. An agitated EDWIN rushes in.)*

WRIGHT: Eddie? Why so crestfallen? So forlorn?

EDWIN: For three long hours I've tried to reach  
You by telephone, all to no avail.  
*(EDWIN takes a telegram from his breast pocket.)*  
I've had this telegram  
From Spring Green. I can hardly bear its candor.

WRIGHT: Read it, man.

EDWIN: 'Taliesin destroyed by fire'.

WRIGHT: By fire? And Mamah?

EDWIN: Nothing.

WRIGHT: Nothing?

EDWIN: Please, Frank. Try not to be distraught.

SULLIVAN: I'm sorry, Frank.

EDWIN: Quickly, now. We must be off.

WRIGHT: I know, I know, I know, I know, I know.

EDWIN: We can still catch the 5:05.

WRIGHT: The 5:05?

EDWIN: The train. It's almost five o'clock.

*(EDWIN has helped WRIGHT into his coat; he now steers him out.  
SULLIVAN calls after them.)*

SULLIVAN: Please, Frank. Please don't go.

*(SULLIVAN goes over to the window.)*

I know, I know, I know, I know, I know;

For ten long years I've perched on a ledge

At the Cliff Dwellers' Club;

I've stood on the parapets of Troy

Like Hector sighing for a sail.

Now I stand on the edge of an abyss.

I look into the chasm

Between myself and Frank Lloyd Wright;

We can never be reconciled.

*(SULLIVAN moves back to his table and chair.)*

So it is that the valley of disenchantment

*(SULLIVAN picks up his glass.)*

Gives way to the Slough of Despond.

*(SULLIVAN is overcome by a fit of coughing; he sets the glass back on  
the table, take out a handkerchief.)*

It's a sore point, Frank. It's a sore point.

There's a lump in my throat.

My mouth is full of bile.

I cry out from the Slough of Despond

While the Mohawk, the Shawnee, the Delaware,

Under Thayendanegea, Tecumseh, and Tammany

Come sweeping back across the land

That was not 'borrowed' but 'purloined';

*De profundis exclamavi ad Te Dominum.*

## Scene 6

*15 August 1914. The aftermath of the fire at Taliesin, the ruins of which are still smoldering.*

MEAS.#

CHAR.

ACTIVITY / NOTES

ALL:

*(a cappella)*

Out of the depths we heard them cry again,  
Out of the depths of hell;  
We formed a human chain  
To bring water from the well.

However deep the well,  
It would all too soon run dry.  
It was all to no avail;  
We did little more than stand by.

Our efforts were all in vain;  
We did little more than stand by  
As bricks took wing and a black rain  
Fell from the sky.

For although the sky was bright,  
Bright as at Pentecost,  
It was not until first light  
That we could count the cost.

The door was shut, we broke it down.  
We mounted the burning stair.  
Then and only then  
Were we truly made aware.

Only then could we tell ...  
... what havoc the chef had wreaked.

Only then could take toll of his cruel, cruel work.

WRIGHT:

Has anybody been left out?

EDWIN:

Please, Frank.

WRIGHT: For ten long hours they were trapped in the hump-backed whale  
Of this so-called 'prairie house':  
The truth is that I myself am the whale;  
I am both Ahab and Ishmael.

EDWIN: Please, Frank.

WRIGHT: The truth is that my mouth is full of steel;  
So much so, that I've been flayed and flensed  
And my blubber rendered  
To the cauldron of boiling oil  
That poured down on Mamah and your children.

EDWIN: Please, Frank. Please don't fan the embers.

WRIGHT: Forgive me, Ed.  
It's cost us both. It's cost us both the earth.  
My mouth is full of mud.

EDWIN: It sounds as if you might believe in fate.

WRIGHT: It seems somehow appropriate  
That a fire should crack the boulder  
In the prairie of my heart;  
My mouth is full of stones.

EDWIN: I used to believe that some Master Builder  
Assigned Sullivan his rock  
And you your boulder  
(*He removes a flint from his pocket and hands it to WRIGHT.*)  
And me this little pot-sherd.

WRIGHT: (*examining it*)  
She pierced my heart like an arrowhead.

EDWIN: It's not arrowhead, Frank. It's a broken-off flint.  
Accept it as a token

Of the randomness of things.

WRIGHT: The **seeming** randomness of things.

EDWIN: The sheer randomness of things.  
This broken-off flint  
Is an emblem of the haphazard;  
It's not more part of some grand design  
Than Carleton taking a violent  
Turn and setting fire to Taliesin.

WRIGHT: No, no, no, no, no;  
Had I not set myself about the 'average' laws  
For 'average' men,  
This might still be our Avalon,  
Our Chapel of the Holy Grail.

EDWIN: The Holy Grail's a stove-in pail.  
The Holy Rood's a splintered tree.  
I view your notion of destiny  
With nothing less than disdain.  
That there is some grand design  
Is the height of self-delusion.

WRIGHT: Is there no balm in Gilead?

EDWIN: Would that there were, Frank; would that there were.

WRIGHT: Is there no holy chrism  
With which to anoint her brow?

EDWIN: Her brow is ashen, Frank. Her hand is cold.  
*(pause)*  
I'm going now.

WRIGHT: Please don't go.

EDWIN: I must.

ALL: Out of the depths we heard them cry again;  
Out of the depths of hell.  
For ten long hours they hung in chains.  
They were stretched on the burning wheel.

They were stretched on the burning wheel.  
We heard them weep and gnash  
Their teeth. We heard them weep and wail.  
Our mouths are full of ash.

For ten long hours we heard them scream  
Out in their torture.  
Is their suffering part of a grand scheme?  
Is there some hidden order?

WRIGHT: I stand on the edge of an abyss.  
I look into a chasm.  
*(He ponders the flint.)*  
So much for my so-called 'lack of scruples'.  
So much for my 'ostracism'.  
*(He puts the flint in his pocket.)*  
She pierced my heart like an arrowhead.  
And her scent? Was it musk?  
Not musk. Cedar perhaps. Perhaps night-scented stock.  
Not stock. Sassafras.  
Not sassafras. Maple.  
Not maple. Pine;  
The scent of a plain pine box  
Where she'll lie in this hallowed ground.  
*(WRIGHT unfolds the paper MAMAH left in the pocket. He reads the Goethe translation.)*  
She sweeps us off our feet  
And dances round and round,  
Then flings us back, exhausted,  
On the muddy ground.

*(The disembodied voice of MAMAH ghosts WRIGHT.)*

WRIGHT/: MAMAH	We lie on the muddy ground And take her in our arms. She's nowhere to be found Amongst her thousand forms.  Though she takes a thousand forms She's always in one place. She takes us in her arms. She holds us in a fast embrace.
WRIGHT:	Would that she might take me in her arms. Would that I might fill the grave myself.
MAMAH:	That something is destroyed Is itself a grand illusion.
WRIGHT:	I will make of their <i>De Profundis</i> a <i>Kyrie Eleison</i> . I think the balsam-fir That springs up a hundredfold In the aftermath of a forest fire; Surely there is balm in Gilead? The Gila Apache, the Adirondack, The mighty Assiniboine, All perceived the intricate Order in even a pine cone. That Mamah's dead and gone Is itself a grand illusion; She'll be both key- and corner-stone Of a newly built Taliesin. She is the house. She is the hill. She is the house that hill might marry. I will dedicate both field and hall To Mamah's memory. She is within us all, We are all within Nature. Through winter and summer, spring and fall,

We will – we must – endure.  
Would that the Osage, bows in hand, the ostrogoths under  
Theodoric,  
Might come sweeping back across the land ...  
It all goes back to those cowboy books  
My mama gave me as a child.  
I will fill her plain pine box  
With wild  
Flowers and marjoram  
And mulberry leaves.  
Would that she might take me in her arms.  
Would that I myself  
Might fill her unmarked grave.  
Why mark the spot where desolation began  
And ended? It followed the curve  
Of an old toboggan.  
So much, then, for the domain  
Of the Ottawa, the Ojibwa, the Omaha Sioux,  
The Potawottoman;  
So much for all that tittle-tattle:  
They have all gone into the built-up dark.  
Yet my heart goes out to Louis Sullivan.  
In the prairie of my heart, a little  
Bird cries out against oblivion;  
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know.  
A shrike, perhaps. A siskin, or some such finch.  
So much. So much So much ... So ...