

IL TABARRO

Puccini

First performed 14th December 1918 at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York.

The protagonists:

Giorgetta (soprano), Michele's wife, aged 25; Michele (baritone), a barge owner, aged 50; Luigi (tenor), a stevedore and Giorgetta's lover, aged 20; il Tinca (tenor) and il Talpa (bass), stevedores; la Frugola (mezzo-soprano), Talpa's wife

The scene is Paris in the early 1900s on a barge tied to its moorings on the river Seine. It is early evening.

Michele, the barge owner, stares moodily into the sunset smoking his pipe; his unhappy, much younger wife Giorgetta busies herself with the laundry and other household tasks, and his stevedores Tinca, Talpa and Luigi are unloading sacks of cement from the hold, groaning under the weight. Giorgetta makes them take a break and offers them a glass of wine while Michele goes below deck, worried because Giorgetta is rejecting all his advances to her. An organ grinder comes along the quayside and Tinca starts to waltz rather clumsily with Giorgetta. When Luigi takes over from him there is an immediate and urgent sense of physical attraction between them and they dance together oblivious of the world around them until Michele appears again. They rush apart. Upon Giorgetta's casually phrased question about his plans for the crew Michele replies that, yes, Talpa and Tinca will stay - and Luigi, too.

La Frugola appears to collect her husband, Talpa. She goes about all day picking up bits and pieces that other people throw away and she gives Giorgetta a beautiful jewel-studded comb that she found that day (*Se tu sapessi gli oggetti strani*). Their talk about the back-breakingly hard life of the stevedores leads Luigi to an impassioned outcry against their lot that would not be out of place in a socialist manifesto (*Hai ben ragione*). Giorgetta falls into a wistful reminiscence about her youth in the Paris quarter of Belleville, and Luigi, also born and bred there, blends his voice with hers in happy duet (*Duet: È ben altro il mio sogno!*). For a moment all their troubles are forgotten.

When Tinca, Talpa and Frugola leave, Luigi stays behind, ostensibly to discuss with Michele whether or not to stay on the crew, but this is just an excuse for him to be close to Giorgetta. Michele goes off to put up the position lamps; ecstatically they recall their hour of love the night before and make plans to meet again later that evening after Michele has gone to sleep (*Duet: O Luigi! Luigi!*). They have a certain signal to give the all-clear: Giorgetta is to light a match to show Luigi that he can come aboard safely.

After Luigi has left, Michele tries to rekindle some of the old warmth in the couple's relationship as he talks to Giorgetta about the happy times they had in the past with their small child, long since dead. He talks about how he used to shield them all from the cold winds under his cloak (*Erano sere come queste*). But Giorgetta's mind is on other things and her heart remains closed to him. She pretends to be tired and goes below deck. Michele watches her through the window. She is not getting ready for bed, and she seems to be waiting for something.

A sudden flash of jealousy and despair makes Michele rant against the fate that has turned their relationship sour. Does his wife have a lover? Who could it be (*Nulla! Silenzio*)? He prepares to light his pipe.

Luigi, hiding on the quayside waiting for Giorgetta's signal, only sees the match being struck, not who is striking it, and sneaks aboard. It is so dark that he cannot see Michele until it is too late: Michele grabs him and presses out of him the confession that he loves Giorgetta (T'ho colto! - Sangue di Dio! Son preso!). Luigi, strangled, sits dead at his feet and Michele covers him with his cloak, waiting for Giorgetta who is stirring below. She approaches in a softened mood, but when she expresses a desire to be sheltered by Michele's cloak he pulls the cloak away to reveal Luigi's lifeless form. In triumph, he pushes her savagely onto the dead body.