

Alex Temple
Three Principles of Noir
(2017–18)
Libretto

1. You Won't Get Away With It

(spoken, unaccompanied)

“It doesn’t matter how well you plan it. You won’t get away with it.”

That’s what Joe said when I told him what I had in mind. But I was just so sick of Laura’s smug face. She was smug when she finished her degree first, smug when she got published first, smug when she found a job first, and then when she got tenure she wrote some smug bullshit on Facebook about how all the hours she’d spent combing through the city archives had finally paid off. As if Gary hadn’t been pulling strings for her. As if she hadn’t stolen half my work.

Chicago’s history is speckled with infamous killers. I’m sure you’re familiar with John Wayne Gacy, the clown with 26 bodies buried under his suburban ranch house. Maybe you know about Leopold and Loeb, who kidnapped and killed a 14-year-old boy to prove they could commit the perfect crime. You’re probably aware of H.H. Holmes, who ran a murder hotel during the 1893 World’s Fair. But I’m guessing you’ve never heard of Marble Mildred Bolton.

2. The Ballad of Marble Mildred

(song, with orchestra)

1936:

She'd already thrown her husband
In the dustbin,
Accusing him of dirty tricks.

Now she stalked him, hotel to hotel
And finally shot him multiple times in a jealous rage.

Cook County won't convict a woman, she said.
She'd been misled.
Encaged,
She got fan mail and fanfare.
"What chutzpah! What a dame!
I betcha I would have done the same!"

She was only half an hour from the chair
When—

Oh, well, it doesn't matter. Because Laura fucking Schumacher swiped my flash drive and got it all published before I could even submit.

3. Icebreaker Games

(spoken, unaccompanied)

Anyway. Joe started showing up at department events last April — or I guess I should say April of 2018. No one seemed to know who he was. He had an accent I couldn't place, and he sometimes used words in peculiar ways. One day he asked me to get dinner with him in Little Vietnam. He set off my creep radar, to be honest, but my curiosity got the better of me.

Halfway through dinner he gave me this little black cylinder. When he told me what it was, I just stared at him. Some kind of prank, obviously. What a waste of time. But I decided to play along, because I wanted to finish my pho, and he was paying. He showed me how pressing the bottom of it made the time and date appear in the air, and how you could change them by rotating the different parts.

"What would you do with it?" he asked. I've always hated those icebreaker games. Everyone's heard the obvious answers a thousand times. So I improvised. Went with something more personal. I'd go back to the World's Columbian Exposition, get the best research scoop any historian could dream of, and, oh yeah, kill Laura's great-great-grandmother. You know, the one she's got a picture of on her desk, standing by the Women's Pavilion. The date is written right there in the corner. July 15, 1893.

I was just bullshitting because I didn't want to say *[sarcastic]* "I'd kill Hitler!" or "I'd have dinner with Jesus!" But he looked me dead in the eyes, and that's when he said it: *[low, quiet voice]* "It doesn't matter how well you plan it. You won't get away with it." Then he threw some money on the table and walked out. I ran after him, but he ducked into an alley and I lost him in the shadows of the summer evening.

I found the thing in my bag a few days later. I was about to throw it out, but something stopped me. Did I believe in empirical research or not? I couldn't resist. I just ... had to be sure.

4. Just a Small Crime

(song, with orchestra)

[checks watch]

OK. It's 8:44.

Set it for a couple of minutes in the future.

This sort of nonsense should be easy to refute, surely; so let's explore.

Give the dials a twist and then test it.

What would the top of the cylinder do if I pressed it?

[a flash]

[checks watch]

Fuck.

It's 8:58.

But wait—

If Joe's little trinket is actually real,

Just think of the wild possibilities it would unseal!

I could spit in the face of Fate!

Let's do in a floozy!

Let's pay a quick visit to Laura's great-great-grandma Lucy!

I can see it now:

I'd find her at the Women's Pavilion,

Charm her and befriend her,

And once I'd managed to gain her trust,

With a single sudden thrust,

I'd end her,

And stain those pretty white walls vermilion

I'd become my own specialty:

One of the myriad killers with whom this city's past is checkered.

As smooth and cool as Marble Mildred,

I'd pierce her tender flesh,

And with a solitary stroke of the penknife,

Write history afresh,

And excise her thieving progeny from the historical record!

Straight down the genealogical line:

No more Lucy, no more Edna, no more Helen, no more Betty,

No more Laura goddamn Schumacher treating my work like a stripmine!

It'll be quick. Just a small crime,
Not a big gory drama.
And once I've returned from '93
The world will finally see
My expertise — now in Victoriana,
With the single most primary source of all time!

5. Time Travel is Complicated

(spoken, unaccompanied)

But time travel is complicated. You can't just pop over to another century, do a dirty deed and be back in your living room before lunch. A long trip like that is rough on the body, and you need time to recover. That's what Joe said, anyway. Who knew if *he* was reliable? But just to be safe, I decided to stay for two weeks.

In some ways it was perfect. I'd have plenty of time to do my research, and to get close to Lucy. But it also created new problems. Staying that long meant finding a *place* to stay. And finding a place to stay meant I needed money. 1893 money. I couldn't just buy it in the present; even a single bill would cost thousands of dollars. I'd have to acquire it after I made the jump. Theft was tempting, but I was on dangerous ground: what if I got caught before I made the kill? No. I'd have to get a job.

But getting a job meant interacting with people. And interacting with people meant passing as a respectable 19th-century woman. It meant speaking and dressing and moving just right. And that meant I needed practice.

I gave myself a crash course on the topics of the day — air pollution and abattoirs; yellow gaslamps and cheap zinc roofing; Sherlock Holmes; the Kinetoscope; economic panic and crooked aldermen like John "Bathhouse" Coughlin. And of course the Exposition itself — the White City, with its façades of gleaming stucco, its slapdash mélange of futurism and cultural imperialism — home of the first Ferris Wheel, birthplace of modern city planning, icon of American exceptionalism.

But I couldn't talk like that once I got there. I had to redact half my vocabulary — not to mention my figure. Can you picture me in a floor-length dress and a corset? Ridiculous. But I wasn't about to give up now. I found a little reenactment village in the suburbs. I visited over and over, until I found myself working there, leading tours in period accent and costume. And somehow, I started getting used to it. Kind of. In a conflicted, uncomfortable, capitulating-to-the-patriarchy sort of way. And that's how I knew it was time.

6. 2018 to 1893

(electronic interlude)

7. Nothing Can Truly Prepare You

(song, with orchestra)

Jumping ten minutes is easy —
A quirky little adventure we
Could all enjoy once in a while
But jumping more than century
Is something else — a crucible — a trial.

Nothing can truly prepare you
For the thump, the flash, the shimmer, the shriek,
The full-body ache and the feeling of wak-
ing up over and over again.
The vanishing words when you try to speak
The noise in your head and the creeping dread
That none of these symptoms will end.

But eventually, they start to die down,
And, shaking off your fear,
You take a look around
And you realize that yes — you're actually here.

Nothing can truly prepare you
For your first real glimpse of a different age—
The streets paved with rock and the stink of the stock,
And your strangely unimpeded line of sight.

It's no longer a photo, a play on a stage.
It's as real as the smoke that's unspooling baroque-
looking patterns in the glow of the gaslight.

Old Chicago!
Beautiful 19th-century imago!
The corruption of Bathhouse Coughlin, not the bribes of Blago!
Can't help but admire it!
The White City!
By day resplendent and by night gritty!
A glowing neoclassical nightmare; what a pity
That they had to retire it!

But that's enough gawking.
You have to prepare,
Even if nothing can truly prepare you.
It's time to start blocking
Out all your moves:
When to arrive and exactly where you
Should stand.
Her life is in your hand,
And it's far too late to check if your conscience approves!

8. Discovering Lucy

(spoken, unaccompanied)

I kept a strict schedule: work during the day, research at the Fair in the evening. The job was awful — sitting in a big room with a hundred other women in vast, overcomplicated clothing, lost in the cacophony of a hundred typewriters. Our attendance, our punctuality, our productivity — all monitored. Our speech, too. "No unnecessary talking!" Imagine thinking that talking was unnecessary.

My nights were a refuge at first. I felt wild and free as I peeked around corners and snuck photos with the camera hidden in my purse. But as the days went on, the work started wearing me down. The pain from the jump was still with me, and the whalebone around my torso wasn't helping. Put simply: I was exhausted.

The one bright spot was Lucy. She wasn't at all what I'd expected: she was curious, politically aware and a voracious reader; a suffragist, a temperance advocate, and a member of a women's club. She worked a telegraph operator — a job just as crushing as my own, and she'd be there for a lot more than two weeks.

The day I'd planned to kill her, she showed me her poetry. It was strange and hermetic, redolent of the French Symbolists and their hazy, sensual dreams. I couldn't reconcile it with her otherwise very proper presentation. Her last boyfriend had felt the same way, she said — so much so that he'd forbidden her from writing entirely. He'd ranted at her about decadence and moral decay right up until the moment a literary magazine accepted two of her poems, which he'd sent in under his own name.

9. The Kiss

(spoken, with orchestra)

[increasingly dreamy]

My knife was in my sleeve as I led her to the Women's Pavilion. I took a step back, watching her gaze out at the Lake, half in and half out of the sunlight, and I suddenly felt the full weight of the betrayal she'd experienced. The horror of being born too early.

I seemed to glide toward her. Something changed in her expression, and something turned around inside me, and then we were in each other's arms. Everything was vivid and unspeakable. We did the quiet dance of non-verbal consent, and then we were kissing, hidden in a shadow in the middle of that impossible city within a city. It overtook me so completely that I didn't notice Joe standing behind me until the moment he grabbed my torso.

10. 1893 to 2063

(electronic interlude)

11. The Trial

(spoken and monotone-sung, with orchestra)

THE COURT: The defendant stands accused of complicity in the death of Lucy Elizabeth Gray.

VALERIE: But I didn't do it!

THE COURT: It doesn't matter whether you actually did it or not. You won't get away with it.

VALERIE: I didn't kill her! I *made out* with her!

THE COURT: Let the record show that due to the defendant's meddling in the past, Ms. Gray was present at the World's Columbian Exposition on July 19, 1893, and thus fell into the hands of the murderer Herman Webster Mudgett, better known as H.H. Holmes.

VALERIE: That has nothing to do with me! [*aside, calmer and darker*] And there was Joe, off to the side, in some sort of strange silver uniform. "But you were *going* to do it, weren't you?" he said, in the same dark tone he'd used at the restaurant. I nodded. "So what difference does it really make whether you actually went through with it?"

THE COURT: We find the defendant, Valerie Ann Price, guilty of destructive interference with the timeline.

VALERIE: Wait...

THE COURT: This court hereby sentences the defendant to spend the rest of her natural life in a place where she can't cause any more trouble. Set the transport for April 10, 2284.

12. 2063 to 2284

(electronic interlude)

13. Pastorale

(song, with orchestra)

So here I am, surrounded by opulent greenery
On the planet we used to think of as ours.
Once there were skylines and suburbs and heavy machinery.
Now it's all grasses and shrubs and forests and flowers.

What could have made our benevolent bluegreen domme
Turn her attention from us to the ants? Was it the bomb?
The plague? The rising seas? The singularity?
What kind of civilizational collapse
Could have erased us so thoroughly that there aren't even scraps
Left for the scattered survivors to hold in posterity?

My mind still swims with fragments of bygone art.
"And my Lucy lies in ashes" — couldn't be saved.
Just one kiss before they ripped us apart,
Sending me into exile, and her to the grave.

Is there a moral to this mess?
Yes. In three parts,
And if you've got a grievance to redress
You'd better be okay with it:
(One)
"It doesn't matter how well you plan it;
You won't get away with it"

And when it comes to time travel,
If you're even vaguely contemplating
Engaging in foul play with it:
(Two)
"It doesn't matter whether you actually do it or not;
You still won't get away with it"

But the agents of the State propose,
As they stare at you with implacable paternal eyes,
Another message they think you should internalize.
The reason that the cons outweigh the pros,
If you think their argument hold any sway:
(Three)
"It doesn't matter whether you actually did it or not,
Cause you're a bad person anyway"