

BECOMING MISS HAVISHAM – FULL SYNOPSIS

Act One

An Author explains he once heard a story, which he used in a book he wrote, about Miss Havisham, an isolated woman dressed in a yellowing wedding dress. Members of the Company wonder what caused her to become such a strange, reclusive figure ('Miss Havisham').

In late-eighteenth-century Rochester, Augusta Havisham has led a lonely existence in the house of her father, a cold, unloving man who barely acknowledged her. No-one grieves when he is buried ('Funeral'). Now he has passed away, Augusta is uncertain what the future holds for her.

When a young lawyer, Jaggers, reads out the will, she is astonished to inherit her father's vast fortune, his impressive art collection, the brewing business and the family home, Satis House. She assumes he left everything to her in order to punish her dissolute half-brother, Arthur, whom he always despised ('Reading of the Will').

She decides to manage the business and transform her life – she will no longer be overlooked ('Ignored'). For the first time, she realises, she is free. Her cousin, Matthew, is taken aback.

Harriet, who once had a relationship with the late Mr Havisham, visits Satis House and invites Augusta to her marriage in Richmond, jokingly painting an idyllic picture of the place ('Everything's Lovely in Surrey'). Meanwhile, furious he has been disinherited, Arthur steals a highly valuable painting that once belonged to Augusta's mother.

At Harriet's wedding reception, Augusta meets Charles, an art dealer, who clearly finds her strikingly attractive ('The World and His Wife Love a Wedding'). She rejects his polite advances, however, having heard him speak disparagingly about how forbidding he at first imagines her to be ('Art Has No Heart').

In Satis House, sixteen-year-old housemaid Molly wishes life were different. Older maid, Betty, tells her it's impossible to escape the privations of their class and gender ('A Woman or a Girl').

Arthur demands Augusta should hand over her fortune in exchange for the painting, but she refuses. Charles unexpectedly arrives in Rochester and encourages her to accompany him on a walk around the town, during which her initial frostiness begins to thaw ('Take the Air').

Arthur sexually harasses Molly. Betty intervenes and he arrogantly throws wine in her face. Left alone, she reflects upon his regrettable resemblance to his father ('Man and Boy').

Augusta and Charles walk by the river. She has been told by Harriet that he masks his grief for his late sister with a show of cheerfulness. Augusta realises he is far less confident than he pretends and persuades him to stop hiding ('This is the Sun'). They kiss.

Arthur tells Augusta he shot someone in a drunken dispute and is being blackmailed by a witness ('Blood on My Hands'). He demands she pay the blackmailer, arguing Charles won't want to know someone whose brother hangs as a murderer. Suddenly, Augusta seems to see her late father but Arthur disregards her vision as an act.

Act One closes with everyone expressing or dismissing fear ('Afraid'). Harriet is fearful as to why her husband wanted Augusta at their wedding, Jaggers tells her not to be; Augusta is terrified Charles will discover Arthur's crime, making Charles worry about her state of mind; Molly is not afraid to leave, Betty thinks she should be; Matthew is anxious about Arthur's treatment of Augusta, she is outraged by his saying she is gullible to trust Charles. The Act ends with the word 'Afraid' being sung by all.

Act Two

The Author figure reminds us this is his story. Charles and Augusta watch a play discussing the nature of fiction. Augusta seems to hear one of the actors speak directly to her, calling her a fool for believing what she is being told ('A Little Bit of Fiction'). Horrified, she asks Charles to take her home.

Matthew wrongly believes Molly to be implicated in the theft of Augusta's picture and threatens her with dismissal. Augusta overrules him, saying the painting has been sold. She angrily demands he should call her Miss Havisham. Left alone, he laments his secret love for her. At the same time, Molly, elsewhere in the house, fantasises about living independently ('Not Me').

Augusta, who hasn't slept for days, visits Charles in his hotel room and finally confides in him about Arthur and the blackmailer ('I Don't Know What You'll Think'). She prompts him to think of someone who can help, hinting violence may be used. In a mixture of gratitude, love and fatigue, she pre-empted his marriage proposal ('This is the Sun Reprise').

Molly fancifully imagines the exciting world she and Betty would witness if they went to London. Betty says it would make no difference to their lives of drudgery ('Living in London').

Harriet is amazed to hear of Augusta's engagement. Jiggers insinuates she is envious and wants Charles for herself. Meanwhile, Augusta celebrates being ignored no more ('Adored').

Arthur, his composure beginning badly to crack as he descends deeper into alcoholism, bursts in on Charles. It is clear they are colluding to defraud Augusta, but Arthur worries he is being double-crossed. He threatens Charles with a pistol, demanding his share ('Blood in Your Veins').

Harriet attempts to reveal the truth about Charles but, increasingly manic with lack of sleep, Augusta will not listen. Against Matthew's advice, she insists Charles, who says he is experiencing temporary business problems, should have free access to her money so he can buy back her painting, which he claims to have found, and purchase a house for them in London. Matthew tries to stop her but she embarrasses and rejects him ('Reason to Wait').

Arthur attempts to rape Molly at gunpoint in the grain store but Augusta intervenes ('Hated'). Despite his alcoholic haze, he realises she knows Charles is lying but nonetheless thinks him in love with her. Arthur threatens to stop the marriage whereupon Augusta picks up his pistol and seems about to kill him ('I Never Will Be Like You'). However, she has another brief vision of her father and chooses not to.

Betty has been comforting Molly. She recalls being raped by Walter, giving birth to Arthur, and having the baby taken from her. After Augusta leaves the grain store, Betty arrives and, cradling Arthur in her arms, shoots and kills herself and him ('Man and Boy Reprise').

The next day, the wedding is due to take place ('Take His Name'). Augusta is frantically trying to pretend to herself that everything is all right when Matthew brings a letter confirming Charles has stolen most of her money. In a terrifying hallucination she thinks everyone is laughing at her gullibility and she breaks down ('Finale'). Members of the company describe her subsequent isolation and decline.

The Author declares this was the story he heard but is told that isn't how it ended. In a twist, we discover that after Harriet's husband dies she is unexpectedly visited by Augusta, and together they decide to change the way their lives seem destined to be. Members of the Company ask if this means Miss Havisham will be happy for ever. The play ends with Augusta saying that's up to her.