



A BARREL OF LAUGHS, A VALE OF TEARS SYNOPSIS

Note: The following plot points occur in Feiffer's original novel. Changes to the structure and synopsis of the opera will arise during the opera's development process.

A children's chorus, the opera's storytellers, introduces Izzy (short for Isador), a young royal whose mere presence causes everyone around her to fall into fits of laughter. How can Izzy fulfill her destiny in this condition? How can she rule her kingdom one day in the not too distant future? King Whatchamacallit summons his daughter to the castle for an audience with J. Wellington Wizard. It's time to get serious.

The wizard determines that a quest, and the experience that comes with it, will cure Izzy of her affliction. He decrees that Izzy must travel to the "betwixt and beyond," a journey that will take her to the Forever Forest, the Dastardly Divide, the Valley of Vengeance, and the Sea of Malice. But how will she know when she's gotten to where she's going? Or when she's found what she's looking for? The wizard replies: "You will know you have found it when no one is laughing."

Izzy gleefully gets lost in the Forever Forest—where a year feels like a minute—passing the time by transforming herself into myriad beings via a magic sack of powder given to her by the wizard. It's here, in the Forest, that Izzy meets the irascible Tom, who refuses to do pretty much anything the storytellers intend. Polar opposites in temperament, Izzy and Tom become best of friends. In addition to Tom, Izzy meets a slew of other folk trapped in the limbo of the Forever Forest, including Lucille, who has been searching for her beloved, Andrew, for 30 years. Izzy provides entertainment for the forest dwellers, endlessly performing her feats of transformation.

But Izzy has been having so much fun, she has forgotten all about her quest. So the Wizard changes the rules. The sack is now no longer eternally self-replenishing. Izzy's days of perpetually entertaining herself and others are dwindling. She realizes she needs to find a way out of the Forest. Izzy figures out that if she walks *backwards*, she will outmaneuver its clutches. She walks backwards for days—until she steps off the edge of a cliff, her tunic catching on a rock. There she hangs until Lady Sadie, a loud-mouthed, plainspoken lady-in-waiting, shows up to rescue Izzy.

From a safe distance of 100 feet away, Izzy keeps Sadie company as they cross the barren Dastardly Divide. Turns out Sadie is on a quest of her own. To find a knight or a prince to rescue her princess, Petulia, who's been kidnapped by a giant. Izzy may not be a knight or a prince but she doesn't consider herself a princess either, even though she *is* royal. Sadie is not convinced.

The two make their way through the desolate Divide bickering and bantering, unintentionally performing small acts of kindness towards one another along the way, until not only do they realize they just might be smitten with each other, but they are also starving and out of options. Izzy uses her last pinches of powder to transform them both. She sprinkles Sadie first (this is the first time she puts another's interests before her own): Sadie turns into a leaf and flies off. Izzy turns into an egg and maneuvers herself to the edge of a precipice, rolling over the edge, cracking in two on a boulder, and emerging as an egret who flies off in search of Sadie.

Now a majestic eagle, Izzy soars above the Valley of Vengeance—people here are always angry at each other and desperate to get even. Sadie is nowhere to be found. In her stead, Izzy plucks children from the wrath of the fighting farmers, striking awe in the children’s hearts as she flies with them high up above the Valley, generating laughter and joy in this place for the first time.

An angry hunter shoots at the eagle. The hunter, it turns out, is Tom, who has changed for the worse, having become embittered ever since Izzy abandoned him (and all their friends) in the Forever Forest. Izzy’s apology makes no difference to Tom. Full of remorse, Izzy flies backwards in the direction of the Forever Forest, where she aims to rescue the friends she unwittingly left behind. As she flies over the Sea of Malice, she is pelted by a barrage of rocks wrapped in vicious notes.

These messages make Izzy so sad she wants to fade away to nothing and literally falls ill. Andrew, Lucille’s lost love, happens across the dying eagle and nurses her back to health—Izzy’s desire to reunite the couple gives her a newfound reason to live. She makes her way towards the Forever Forest. But before she goes, she asks Andrew to cut a swath in the meadow in the shape of a heart so that Izzy will be able to find him again.

As Andrew swings his scythe, he draws a crowd of onlookers, including Doveen the Serene, a mystic who foretells the future with questions. Izzy returns, carrying Lucille (only one of many she rescues). Doveen toasts to “the one who is not herself but someone else...Once good for nothing but didn’t care, now good for everything but doesn’t know.” Doveen tells Izzy that Lady Sadie is alive and well, serving as a Lady-in-Waiting to Princess Petulia, who still needs to be rescued. All Izzy has to do is “Wait.”

As Izzy flies over a silver sea (the Vale of Tears, we will discover), she realizes she is losing feathers, turning back into her human self. She plunges down, into the water, only to be rescued by Petulia, who is riding on a raft made up of Philip, the clumsy gentle giant. Petulia, it turns out, is in love with the giant. She informs Izzy that Sadie has been kidnapped by a bandit—the dastardly Tom, who has pushed his way back into the story again. Izzy has no choice but to “fight” a duel with Tom, who, lunging his sword at Izzy, misses. Tom’s heart is not in it. Izzy stands still, with Sadie at her side. She abstains from fighting. No one is laughing. At last Tom departs from the story in search of another adventure.

We close with a double wedding: Petulia and Philip, Izzy and Sadie. And J. Wellington’s disclosure that actually, Izzy ended up on the wrong quest. The wizard had intended for her to marry Prince Dauphin. But clearly, Izzy has found someone much more right for her.

