

Synopsis and Character Breakdown

CARNIVAL OF SOULS is the story of MARY HENRY, a church organist who has led her life removed from people and God, a soulless existence. Our story begins when Mary emerges from the Kaw River, the miraculous survivor of a terrible car accident. Mary and her friends were challenged to a drag race by a car full of young men, but the race ends tragically when the car Mary is in crashes off of the Kaw River Bridge and into the waters below. Dripping wet, she tells her story to a stunned QUARTET OF TOWNS-PEOPLE, while, unseen to all, a ghoulish figure with a white face watches. He is HARVEY THE SOUL, who will haunt Mary throughout the opera until he can bring her soul to its rightful place in the afterlife.

When Mary resumes her life after the crash we find her playing for the MASTER ORGAN BUILDER and his workers at the organ factory, where we learn she has taken a job at a small church in Utah. A trio of FACTORY WORKERS are proud that their prized work will be performed by Mary's skilled hands. But while the Master Organ Builder exults in the fact that Mary survived so that she may play for the Lord, Mary wants no part of spirituality, stressing that to her, this is "just another job."

HARVEY THE DIRECTOR and JC THE SCREENWRITER greet each other at the start of another day's work churning out industrial films in Lawrence, Kansas. Harvey describes to JC about his encounter with an old Mormon bathhouse on the edge of the Great Salt Lake. This, Harvey says, will be his source of inspiration for a new film.

While driving at night, Mary sees Harvey the Soul in her car window, then has visions of herself dancing in the Saltair pavilion with him. Why and who is this person haunting her? What is the significance of the pavilion? MRS. THOMAS, the chirping biddy who runs the boarding house where Mary stays, explains that the pavilion, once known as Saltair ("Used to be a pretty ritzy bathhouse"), has been abandoned for years.

When Mary begins her new position at the little church in Utah, she meets her new boss, MINISTER GUILD, who is impressed with her playing (as is the QUARTET OF TOWNSPEOPLE), but disturbed because she doesn't want to meet the congregation. Mary tells him she is not interested in social niceties, and then asks him to take her to see Saltair.

While at Mrs. Thomas's boarding house Mary meets the other boarder, the lecherous JOHN LINDEN. Linden's brazen advances towards Mary make for some awkward and hilarious scenes. Strangely, sometimes Mary welcomes his advances, flirting with Linden as they share a morning cup of coffee, and sometimes she is put off by him. But Mary's stay at the boarding house becomes more and more untenable, as the terrifying Harvey the Soul and the Chorus of Souls keep appearing to her, sending her into hysterics.

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Mary's day-to-day existence becomes increasingly surreal. While trying on dresses in a department store, the salespeople suddenly cannot see or hear Mary, nor can she hear anything. Harvey and the Chorus of Souls appear, telling Mary "This is no longer your place." Terrified, Mary dashes into the street, where she runs into DR. SAMUELS, who offers to help her. He suggests she may be suffering "guilt feelings" about having survived the accident. But Mary is certain her visions are somehow connected to the mysterious pavilion.

One day, after making a date with Linden, Mary practices at the church, and Minister Guild and the CHORUS OF TOWNSPEOPLE are stirred by the beautiful music. But Mary's playing turns demonic, and the appalled minister fires her on the spot. He offers her help, but Mary seems not to care, then leaves the church and joins Linden at a local juke joint. Here Mary shows her mercurial personality, at times desiring Linden's company, and a moment later asking to be left alone. When they return to the boarding house, with Linden licking his chops at the thought of a romantic liaison, Mary sees Harvey the Soul in the mirror and freaks out, which naturally spooks the heck out of Linden.

Harvey and JC enter again to discuss some of the nuts and bolts of producing their film, such as budget (\$30,000!); location (an organ factory in Lawrence, Kansas); and the haunting Saltair pavilion. They also talk about their main character, a church organist named Mary Henry: her shifting sense of reality and how they want to cast an unsympathetic lead.

Mrs. Thomas and Dr. Samuels discuss Mary's odd behavior, while Mary silently leaves the boarding house and makes to leave town. But at the bus depot Mary once again becomes a silent and invisible ghost to other people. Mary begs Dr. Samuels for help, but as the Chorus of Souls beckons her back to her rightful place, Mary sees Dr. Samuels only as Harvey the Soul. In a final dance-macabre at the abandoned pavilion, now eerily filling with dancing souls and demonic music, Mary dances with Harvey the Soul. "Have you ever really been alive?" the Chorus of Souls sings and Mary finally realizes that she no longer belongs in the world of the living.

Minister Guild, Dr. Samuels, and the Sheriff inspect Mary's footprints at the Saltair pavilion. They lead to nothing, as if Mary disappeared into thin air. And as the Chorus of Townspeople look on over the Kaw River Bridge, the Police finally retrieve the bodies from the accident: Elizabeth Johnson, Tracy King ... and Mary Henry.

Harvey and JC screen their completed film. On screen, Mary Henry is dead in the car, dredged from the river. On stage, Mary Henry is wet from the river, as the film credits roll: "*CARNIVAL OF SOULS*".

CARNIVAL OF SOULS, opera in 2 acts

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Jonathan Newman, Gary Winter

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MARY HENRY A	<i>20's. Fully engaged in earthly matters</i>
MARY HENRY B	<i>20's. In between earth and the next world</i>
MARY HENRY C	<i>20's. In the next world</i>
CHORUS:	
QUARTET OF TOWNSPEOPLE	<i>All ages. Mainly mid-American folks</i>
SHERIFF	<i>30's-50's Caring, small-town guy</i>
CHORUS OF SOULS / CHORUS OF TOWNSPEOPLE	<i>All ages. The souls are cheerful in a creepy kind of way</i>
TRIO OF FACTORY WORKERS	<i>Various ages. Working class</i>
MASTER ORGAN BUILDER / MINISTER GUILD	<i>50's-60's. Proud, working class, middle-aged men</i>
HARVEY THE DIRECTOR / HARVEY THE SOUL / DR. SAMUELS	<i>40's. As the Director, ambitious and competent As the Soul, scary As Dr. Samuels, stoic and professional</i>
JC THE SCREENWRITER/ JOHN LINDEN	<i>30's. As JC, young and idealistic As Linden, a sleazy womanizer</i>
MRS. THOMAS	<i>50's. A nosey biddy</i>