

FEVER 107 DEGREES*

A play by **SILVIA PELÁEZ**

English version by **Caridad Svich**

*Play registered at SOGEM (Mexico General Society of Writers) according to the International Rights Law, 2001. This is a fiction play inspired in fragments of the life and work of American poet Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). The situations, events, places and characters are inspired by Sylvia Plath's life and work, but not in any moment should this be considered a biography. English version (**March 2004 draft**) commissioned by The Lark Theatre, NY, NY. All inquiries regarding English version should be addressed to the translator c/o newdramatists@newdramatists.org

CHARACTERS

SYLVIA

Tall and slender. At the beginning of the play she is thirty years old; at the end she has just turned thirty-one. Her pale complexion is offset by a sensual red mouth, contrasted by coffee-colored eyes, notable for their penetrating gaze. She has blond bangs, and wears her hair in a ponytail. She wears a straight black skirt, a dark red knit blouse and a sweater.

TED

Sylvia's husband. Very tall and extremely attractive. He exudes an intense virility. He is thirty-two years old. He has dirty blonde hair, which falls upon his large forehead. He has a slightly unkempt appearance. His face is dominated by his blue-grey eyes, prominent chin and strong nose. He wears pleasantly coordinated pants and shirt, with a honey-colored coat from WWI.

AURELIA

Sylvia's mother. She is fifty years old. Her hair is short and grey, and lightly curled. She wears small pearl earrings, and a very conservative tailored suit.

ARIEL

A figment of Sylvia's imagination. Wears clothes as mercurial as her character. Her movements are quick and graceful. She is both male and female in aspect. Bears a resemblance, in spirit, to the Chesire Cat from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

DOCTOR

A cold professional man in a white coat. Nearly forty years old.

NEIGHBOR

A sixty year old man. He wears comfortable clothes, and a sweater. His hair is uncombed. May also play the role of the Doctor.

SETTING

A fluid space which can transform itself readily and simply into different locations, as follows:

1. Symbolic space

A corridor of light with one small nursery table upon which rests an Olivetti typewriter, that bears an endless sheet of paper.

2. Chalcot Square, London, England (1960)

Small apartment with low ceilings. A small table doubles as both writing desk and dining table. It is covered with books, loose sheets of paper, notebooks, and an old volume of Shakespeare's collected works. A sofa. A kitchen counter. A staircase in the background.

3. Court Green, in Devon, England (1962)

Dining room of a country house. Dark and rustic with low ceilings. More spacious than the Chalcot Square apartment. To one side, there is a sofa.

4. Fitzroy Road, London, England (1963)

Small, two-story apartment decorated in red accents, in particular, a red sofa.

5. Massachussets, USA (1951)

Doctor's office

6. Neighbor's apartment (1963).

On Fitzroy Road. A dim lightbulb hangs outside the door. Inside there are two chairs.

ACT I

1

The corridor of light. SYLVIA runs in. She wears a lightweight dress of Prussian blue. She circles the typewriter. TED enters. SYLVIA sits before the typewriter and writes. She is giddy and euphoric. TED pulls her up out of the chair, and sits before the typewriter, and writes. SYLVIA sits next to him and watches him write. After a while, she sits on his lap, and types playfully. He kisses her on the neck. She responds. They continue in their foreplay; they roll on the floor. TED roars like a tiger. SYLVIA pounces on him like a panther. She is playful. TED rises, and returns to the typewriter. SYLVIA yanks TED so they can continue in their foreplay. TED rejects her. SYLVIA becomes upset. She is about to toss the typewriter, but TED stops her from doing so. They place the typewriter upon the table again. TED sits, and writes. SYLVIA massages her temples lightly. The sound of broken glass is heard, along with TED's typing. ARIEL enters. She circles TED and SYLVIA. They do not notice her. ARIEL watches TED and SYLVIA. Lights slowly fade on TED, SYLVIA and ARIEL.

2

1960. Chalcot Square. A little before five o'clock in the afternoon

SYLVIA sits on the sofa with the typewriter on her lap, and a volume of Shakespeare's collected works at her side. She has a headache. She types a bit, and stops.

SYLVIA: Oh, my head... *(She picks up the volume of Shakespeare's collected works, and reads.)* It was then I 'felt a fever of the mad, and play'd/some tricks of desperation.'

(Pause). Desperation. *(she types the word)*

TED enters from the kitchen with two cups of tea in hand.

TED. You're not writing?

SYLVIA: I have a headache.

TED: Take an aspirin.

SYLVIA: No. It will pass. *(Continues reading)* 'Remember I have done thee worthy service/Told thee no lies, made thee no mistakings, serv'd/without grudge or grumblings.' Do you need the typewriter?

TED: No, no. *(He sits, writes longhand, and looks at SYLVIA)* You look beautiful.

SYLVIA: No. *(Pause)* Have you checked in with Frieda?

TED: Yes, she is sleeping peacefully. Why do you smile?

SYLVIA: I have found happiness in that child.

TED rises. He sits next to her and rests his head on her stomach. She caresses him.

They look at each other. A quick kiss on the lips. TED goes back to his writing.

SYLVIA: *(Reads loudly)* 'Thou did promise...'

TED: Would you lower your voice? *(resumes writing)*

SYLVIA: Frieda's smile is a ray of sun.

TED: Uh-huh. *(Focused on his work)*

SYLVIA: And her gaze warms my heart.

TED: Now, now.... I am almost there...

SYLVIA: What? I am talking about our daughter.

TED: And I am giving birth to a new poem.

SYLVIA: I see. (goes back to her Shakespeare volume)

TED: Listen to this: (Reads) 'a sudden sharp hot stink of fox... enters the dark hole of the head'

SYLVIA: (She rises and goes to him) Hot stink?

TED: The strong odor of the fox reminds us that we are animals.

SYLVIA: (She sits on his lap and sniffs him) You smell like a fox. (She smiles coquettishly)

TED: (he sniffs her) You smell like a hyena.

SYLVIA (Laughs. She kisses him tenderly at first, then the kiss turns more savage. She bites his chin) Come now...Tiger, my tiger.

TED: (he caresses her) Ah, once again in my arms, where you should be.

SYLVIA: (she unbuttons his shirt) Tell me you love me.

TED kisses her. It is a long kiss, which calms her. They look at each other.

SYLVIA: We are almost alone. Our girl sleeps. (She takes him to the sofa. She adopts an animal-like position. She purrs)

TED: My little panther.

SYLVIA: My tiger.

TED: Today I am a fox.

They laugh, and kiss.

TED: The first time I saw you, I could smell you from across the room.

SYLVIA: And you had a hard-on from the moment you saw me.

TED kisses her passionately. They slide to the floor. They laugh. SYLVIA bites his shoulders. They start to make love. Suddenly TED rises and returns to his writing.

SYLVIA: What is it?

TED: I have to write. You don't want to...

SYLVIA: What are you saying?

TED: ...Or you cannot, but I must write.

SYLVIA: I worked this morning.

TED: You work in the morning and I work in the afternoon

SYLVIA: That is what we agreed.

TED. Exactly. So, now it's my turn. (He sits and writes)

SYLVIA: You don't appreciate me.

TED: That's not true. I just showed you how much I appreciated you.

SYLVIA: (She stands behind TED, kisses his neck, playfully) Would you give up poetry for me?

TED: You know I wouldn't. Would you? We would be betraying our very nature.

(he looks at his watch)

SYLVIA: What's wrong?

TED: I only have a little more time to get some writing done. No more interruptions.

SYLVIA: Do I bother you?

TED: No, no, I didn't mean...

SYLVIA: I live with interruptions: cooking, Frieda, you...

TED: I have to be at the university. There will be a meeting to decide the course list for next semester.

SYLVIA: You come first. You always have to me.

TED: You want me to risk losing my post at the university?

SYLVIA: The university, of course. (heads to the kitchen) Do you want some coffee?

(TED nods)

SYLVIA prepares two cups of coffee.

TED: (At the table, trying to concentrate on his work whilst taking sips of coffee) 'a sudden sharp hot stink of fox... enters the dark hole of the head'

SYLVIA: Dark hole?

TED: Will you stop...? I am trying to work. To keep food on our table.

SYLVIA: Do you love me?

TED: Yes, yes. (He rises. He draws near to her, violently) Yes, a thousand times yes.

(He places his hand on her neck and backs her up against the wall) Yes. And no more questions.

SYLVIA: (like a dutiful child) No, no more.

TED returns to the table. SYLVIA returns to the sofa.

SYLVIA: It's different when you're a woman.

TED puts his hands over his ears

SYLVIA: There's the children, the house, the shopping... And only later is there time for poetry.

Silence. TED resumes writing. SYLVIA rises and stands behind him, and reads over his shoulder.

SYLVIA: 'What would you make of its old smell, and its mannerless energy?'

TED: (Annoyed) It's clear one cannot work in this house. I'm off.

SYLVIA: To flaunt your sex before the hungry bitches.

TED: Enough. Sylvia. I love you, but I cannot stand this ...

SYLVIA: ... prison?

TED: I wasn't going to say that....I...(looks at his watch) It's late. I must go.

(he kisses her lightly) I'll be back for dinner.

SYLVIA: Do you love me?

TED: (starts to leave, stops, thinks, returns to SYLVIA) I love you. (kisses her passionately)

TED exits. SYLVIA bites her nails and looks anxiously toward the door. Light change.

3

SYLVIA moves about happily, impulsively. She hums while she removes the papers and notes from the table, and places a tablecloth, two glasses, candles and a bottle of wine on the table.

SYLVIA: He won't be able to resist the rabbit stew.

She takes a large casserole dish from the kitchen counter and places it on the table. She waits for TED. She double-checks every detail of the table setting. She goes to the door. She sits. She goes to the door again, and sits at the table again. She bites her nails. She looks at the clock. She lights the candles. She turns off the light. She stares at the candle's flame, as if she was hypnotized and plays with the flame, running her hand over it. She looks at the clock again. She rises. She goes to the door. She moves about the room. She bites her nails. She sits, turns the glasses upside down, and falls asleep with her head upon the table.

4

TED enters with a package in hand.

TED: Sylvia, Sylvia, I'm home.

SYLVIA: (awakens) Oh, it's you.

TED: Things ran late at university.

SYLVIA: (annoyed) Dinner is cold.

TED removes the lid from the casserole.

SYLVIA: It's rabbit stew.

TED: I can eat it cold.

SYLVIA: No. I'm throwing it out. (She grabs the casserole)

TED: (stopping her) I couldn't help it. Sylvia...! What are you doing?

SYLVIA: You don't appreciate my cooking.

TED: Don't say that. Come now, my dear. (he embraces her) Do you want some wine?

SYLVIA: All right.

TED serves the wine. They drink. She looks at him with severity. He is in a lighter mood.

TED: I have some news for you.

SYLVIA: You're going to give a lecture on Yeats.

TED: No, no. Guess.

SYLVIA: Does it have something to do with you?

TED: Not completely.

SYLVIA: (Excited) With me?

TED: Indeed.

SYLVIA: What is it? Tell me, and I will forgive you for neglecting me.

TED: William Heinemann has agreed to publish *The Colossus and other poems*.

SYLVIA: Do you mean it? My poems? (serves more wine) Let us toast to it.

TED: And something else.

SYLVIA: There's more? London is treating us well.

TED: The BBC wants me to write some children's programs for them.

SYLVIA: We must celebrate.

TED goes to the door and comes back to the table with the package.

TED: A gift.

SYLVIA: It's not my birthday.

TED: Open it.

SYLVIA tears the gift wrap.

SYLVIA: I can't believe it! A three volume edition of D.H. Lawrence's poems.

(Kisses TED. She is more engaged in the conversation) Do you want to eat something?

I can re-heat the stew.

TED: Let's eat it cold.

They sit at the table. While TED eats and drinks, she watches him and sips wine.

SYLVIA: Do you like the taste of mint?

TED: It's all right. (Pause) Were you able to write today?

SYLVIA: In my journal.

TED: I don't know why you devote so much time to it.

SYLVIA: I am not going to abandon the one thing I have been able to write these last few months.

TED: I am not asking you to stop, but rather to concentrate more on your poetry. Your first book is about to be published, and people will be waiting for your second.

SYLVIA: Many great writers have kept a journal.

TED: It distracts you from the real work at hand.

SYLVIA: Aren't you going to tell me how marvelous, extraordinary, and delicious my stew is?

TED: I already did.

SYLVIA: You weren't very expressive.

TED: You want to talk about trivial matters? Very well.

SYLVIA: You find my dedication to the culinary arts trivial?

TED: Yes, I do. There are more important things

SYLVIA: Look, Ted, if you don't like the stew, just say so.

TED: No, no. It's not that.

SYLVIA: I'm serious. If you prefer, we can just throw it in the trash.

TED: We're eating. (SYLVIA clears the table, and throws the food into the trash)

SYLVIA: There.

TED: What is this -?

SYLVIA: You should know. You came home late. (She draws close to him)

TED: I thought we had put that aside.

SYLVIA: Well, we haven't. (she sniffs him) And you smell of a young girl's perfume.

TED: I can't believe this. You're jealous? (he sits her on his lap) You know what? It turns me on. You wear your jealousy openly. I love that. (he kisses her)

TED rises and draws her toward him forcefully. He kisses her violently on the lips. She hits him. He pulls her hair. She unbuttons his shirt. They fall upon the sofa and make love. Lights fade.

5

A year later. Ten o'clock in the morning

TED is at the table, writing. He is marking a manuscript. SYLVIA is seated on the sofa, behind him, writing in her journal. TED is smoking.

TED: You won't let me concentrate.

SYLVIA: I am only looking at you. I love you no matter how much time has passed...

TED: (distracted by her, focused on his papers) What did you say?

SYLVIA: You seem distracted, distant. (she sighs) We've been living here in Chalcot Square for a year.

TED: Yes. (Pause) And you should be writing.

SYLVIA: I am writing.

TED: Real writing, Sylvia. You waste time on your journal.

SYLVIA: Frieda takes up my time.

TED: (looks at her) Tell me, do you write everything in your journal?

SYLVIA: What do you mean by everything?

TED: Do you paint a detailed portrait of every single day of your life?

SYLVIA: As faithfully as I can. (Pause)

TED: I see. (Pause)

(TED writes. SYLVIA rises and walks about the room.)

SYLVIA: Something warm will do you good. (She rises, heads toward the kitchen)

TED: Faber & Faber is going to publish *The Luperca*.

SYLVIA: Why didn't you tell me before?

TED: Didn't I tell you? It's dedicated to you.

SYLVIA: I am sure everyone at university knows. All the men, and girls...

TED: Are you going to start in with that now, with your petty jealousies?

SYLVIA: I am going to start making your soup. (Heads to the kitchen)

TED: No, no, I don't want soup.

SYLVIA: (From the kitchen. She puts on an apron) The fish soup you like so much...He dedicated the book to me...Ted loves me. Are you going to see *someone* at the university?

TED: No. I'm going to work.

SYLVIA: Do you have class til late?

TED: No.

SYLVIA: Will you be home for dinner?

TED: No.

SYLVIA: What?

TED: I mean yes, yes.

SYLVIA: Yes or no?

TED: Yes, yes. This is like an interrogation.

SYLVIA: If it seems so, it is only because I am asking you questions.

TED: Is something bothering you?

SYLVIA: No. Will you be home for dinner, then?

TED: Yes. (He looks at her harshly)

SYLVIA: It's better to know...

TED: Sylvia, please. I am the only one who's working right now.

SYLVIA: Don't I work? (more to herself than to TED) I work to make sure everything is in order: the leaves on the trees, the temperature in this house, our daughter... But you, Ted...

TED: Have you taken your pills?

SYLVIA: Naturally. (to herself) I can't stop taking them. Blame it on the pills. You sound like my mother: Sylvia, dear, don't ever forget your pills.

TED: Calm down, Sylvia. I didn't mean that. It's only I..... I must finish this.

SYLVIA: Do you want the soup to be very hot?

TED: Yes, I mean no, no. (looks at his watch) I'm going to be late.

SYLVIA: Eat quickly, then. You can't reject the soup I have made for you so lovingly. (sobbing) I only want to know if you love me.

TED: I love you.

SYLVIA: Then stay and have some soup with me.

(SYLVIA kisses him, and places her hand on his sex)

TED: Sylvia, don't make this more difficult.

SYLVIA: Don't you understand that I need you?

TED: And don't you understand that I am drowning in this house?

TED exits, bothered. SYLVIA is still for a moment. Then she takes a bowl of soup from the kitchen counter, and sips it. Lights fade

6

Three days later.

SYLVIA wears her hair in a braid atop her head. She is alone, seated on the sofa. She is upset. She takes a bottle of pills and looks at it. She takes out some pills, changes

her mind, and puts them back into the bottle. She serves herself a glass of brandy. She drinks. She calms down. She goes to the foot of the stairs, and listens attentively.

SYLVIA: Frieda is still sleeping.

SYLVIA sits before the typewriter and writes. A cat mews. SYLVIA stops writing for a moment. Night falls. She rises and goes to the sofa. She is about to turn on the light, but changes her mind and remains in the penumbra. She dreams with her eyes open.

TED enters.

TED: Sylvia, I'm home. (He turns on the light. He draws close to her) Sylvia...

SYLVIA: (startled) I didn't hear you come in.

TED. (affectionately) How are you?

SYLVIA: (Annoyed) As best I can.

TED: ...Are you all right?

SYLVIA: You're getting published and I can't even write one poem that's any good.

TED: You should be happy *The Colossus* is in print.

SYLVIA: I am. (shift) But there's something in the air. A swarm of poisonous bees. Nothing is perfect.

TED: I don't know what to do when you say such things. (Pause) Love is not perfect. I am not perfect.

SYLVIA: We should be. Poets, lovers, animals, parents, accomplices... The perfect couple.

TED: There is no such thing as perfection between human beings.

SYLVIA: You don't have to tell me. I know. I am not perfect. (Pause) Listen, do you remember when you said that you felt as if you were drowning in this house?

TED: I don't want to talk about that now. I'm tired. I'm going to sleep.

SYLVIA: Wait. Not yet. (Excitedly, she leads him to the sofa) I have a surprise for you.

TED: I'm not in the mood for games.

SYLVIA. I went out with Frieda today, and I found a jewel. You'll never believe it. Something that will make everything better. Everything.

TED: (Intrigued) What are you talking about?

SYLVIA: A gorgeous house in the country. With a garden, and a patio, and ten rooms.

TED: (increasingly intrigued) Really? And how much is it going to cost us?

SYLVIA: This flat is too small for us, Ted.

TED: Well, a change of scene might do us good. How much is it, though?

SYLVIA: Do you mean it? We'll move?

TED: Yes. We need privacy to be able to write properly. But have you thought about the money?

SYLVIA: I'll ask my mother to loan us some money. (TED indicates his discomfort; She drapes herself around his neck)

TED: You are to be congratulated for finding such a treasure.

SYLVIA: (ecstatically) We will be happy.

TED: I am going to sleep. (heads up stairs) Tomorrow we will go together and look at the house.

SYLVIA: Don't you want to celebrate?

TED: I'm too tired.

TED exits.

SYLVIA looks about the apartment, and trembles at the thought of what the future might hold.

Frieda's cry is heard, from upstairs.

SYLVIA: (happy) Mommy will be right there, Frieda.

SYLVIA goes up the stairs, skipping like a child.

7

1962, September. Court Green, Devon. Red is the dominant color of the room: red curtains with matching red sofa. A typewriter rests on the table next to the sofa. SYLVIA writes long-hand. It is early in the morning.

SYLVIA: A shadow... of love...

A baby's cry is heard, followed by Frieda's small voice calling: "Mommy, mommy."

SYLVIA: (stops writing) Mommy will be right there. (She goes up the stairs)

TED enters with a freshly-caught trout.

TED: Sylvia, I've brought breakfast.

SYLVIA: I'll be right down. I'm with the children.

TED: Will Frieda join us?

SYLVIA: (from Off) I don't think so. It's too cold.

TED: I brought her a gift.

SYLVIA: What is it? A flower?

TED: A squirrel, a deer, a bird? (He takes a pine-cone out from his jacket and places it on the table, next to the typewriter).

SYLVIA: (walking down stairs, and sees the pine-cone) Ah, I thought you brought her a real gift. (Pause) It's warmer upstairs. I don't want Nick and Frieda to catch a cold.

TED: I caught a trout.

SYLVIA: (Tired) I'll prepare it, then. How do you want it?

TED: (At the stairs) You're the expert. (goes up stairs)

SYLVIA: (shouts) Don't bother the children. Don't stir them up now.

TED: I won't. I only want to see Frieda.

SYLVIA: (under her breath) And Nick. He is your son, too.

SYLVIA takes the trout and goes to the kitchen.

Light change. Time passes.

8

Mid-day. TED and SYLVIA are seated on the sofa, looking out.

A cat mews.

SYLVIA: Did you hear that?

TED: A cat.

SYLVIA: It's death. I wonder who lived in this house before us.

TED: You're so nervous today. It's only a cat, Sylvia.

The cat mews again.

SYLVIA: The cat scratches at the door, as if she were trapped inside a box. The world is a box.

TED: (looks at her warily) Don't talk like that.

SYLVIA: (Trying to be playful) Maybe it's a ghost.

TED: (half in jest) You scare me.

SYLVIA: The ghost of whomever lived in this house before us.

They look at each other and laugh. SYLVIA leans on TED's shoulder..

SYLVIA: Are you happy?

TED: To live in the country and be able to hunt and fish is glorious. To be near squirrels, fox...

SYLVIA: (like an animal) And me. Your favorite animal. (Pause)

TED: It's hard to believe. I have less time to write here than when we lived in the city. We're practically in isolation here.

SYLVIA: Four hours from London.

TED: That's what I mean. Trout or rabbit? Take your pick.

SYLVIA: But you just said you thought living in the country was glorious.

TED: If only I were closer to London.

SYLVIA: (Surprised) What about us?

TED: Closer to my job.

SYLVIA: (Pause) Did you like how I prepared the trout? You don't praise my cooking anymore. Have you grown tired of me?

TED: My mind's occupied, that's all.

SYLVIA: (lively) The children will really enjoy the garden once it's in bloom.

TED: (in thought) You had said that you would write a lot here.

SYLVIA: Although it's expected to be a cruel winter. I can feel it already. When I go out to chop wood for the stove, the cold, invisible wind enters my nose and ears, and all my other orifices. (She leans in, provocatively). It courses through me, and quiets the volcanoes of my body.

TED: Oh, Sylvia, you shouldn't be left to the elements like that. Come here. (caresses her amorously) My white goddess, the fox traps your voluptuousness. (He leans into her on the sofa. He is on top of her). The animal in you, in me...

SYLVIA: Oh, Ted. I have missed you so much... (embraces him and weeps) Ever since I gave birth to Nick, we haven't...

TED: Why the tears?

SYLVIA: I don't know. Happiness, I suppose. Something in the air.

TED: When we lived in the city you would say the same thing. Now what's wrong?

SYLVIA: What's wrong with you?

TED: What do you mean?

SYLVIA: Ah, ah. What do I mean? Very well. You spend the day out hunting, working on your poetry or in London.

TED: It's difficult. I know. This house consumes me.

SYLVIA: Consumes you? You do what you need to do, while I, on the other hand...

TED: By God, Sylvia! It should be just the opposite. We're poets!

SYLVIA: And I am a vat full of milk for my baby. Yes, I am your white goddess, yes...

TED: I don't understand you. I thought you wanted to be a mother.

SYLVIA: Yes, but with you at my side.

TED: (a little annoyed) I'm right here.