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BEARSKIN  
[EXCERPT]

a short play for children

adapted from the Brothers Grimm  
by  
Robert Kerr

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## CHARACTERS

A SOLDIER, later BEARSKIN

Five or more actors play the following roles:

The DEVIL

A BEAR

A HUNTER

A BARKEEP

Four BARFLIES

An INNKEEPER

An OLD MAN

ANNE-MARIE, his oldest daughter

PENELOPE, his middle daughter

GRUNHILDA, his youngest daughter

Voices from a RIVER

Double parts as necessary (a minimum of six actors is needed). All parts of unspecified gender (BARKEEP, BARFLIES, etc.) may be played by either men or women.

## SETTING

Germany

A long time ago. The seven years after a terrible war.

BEARSKIN was written and developed with support from the Jerome Fellowship program of the Playwrights' Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

## SCENE ONE

(The woods. A SOLDIER enters, carrying his gun and a rope with a noose on the end. He drops to the ground and wails in despair.)

## SOLDIER

It's all the color of ashes and smoke. When you're a man without a family, the green is gone from the leaves. When you're a soldier without a war, the blue is gone from the sky. There's no answer to my prayers, so all I can do is wander from here to there and back again. My money's all gone. The war is over, so I have no way to get any more. And I've just been turned away from the home where I grew up by my wicked, heartless brothers. I'm penniless, homeless, and friendless. I've just spent my last pfennigs on five yards of rope so I can end it here, all alone, in these deep, dark woods.

(The SOLDIER coils up the rope and looks for a branch. He spies one, and tosses one end of the rope up into the air. The rope misses the branch and falls to the ground. He tries again, and misses. He tries once more, and once more he misses.)

It's hopeless. I can't even hang myself. I'll just sit here till I rot instead.

(An ELEGANT FELLOW dressed in a green coat appears.)

## ELEGANT FELLOW

Hello, sir.

## SOLDIER

Oh. You startled me. I thought I was alone.

## ELEGANT FELLOW

I'm just passing through. I couldn't help noticing you tossing that rope up in the air. What were you up to?

## SOLDIER

Nothing.

## ELEGANT FELLOW

You seemed very intent. You must have been up to something.

(Beat)

## SOLDIER

I was trying to throw this rope over that branch.

## ELEGANT FELLOW

Here. Let me try.

(The ELEGANT FELLOW tosses the rope up in the air. It catches on the branch. The noose dangles. He ties off the other end of the rope.)

There you go.

SOLDIER

I'd like to be alone now.

ELEGANT FELLOW

Very well.

(The ELEGANT FELLOW starts to go.)

SOLDIER

Say... I forgot to thank you.

ELEGANT FELLOW

You're welcome.

SOLDIER

Wait. Who are you?

ELEGANT FELLOW

I am one who comes to people in their darkest hour.

SOLDIER

Oh. If you'd like to stay--

ELEGANT FELLOW

Thank you, but I must be going. Good day.

(The ELEGANT FELLOW withdraws, watching the SOLDIER from behind a tree. The SOLDIER steps up on the stump and stands behind the noose. He pulls on the rope, testing it. The rope is firm. The SOLDIER takes a deep breath and gets ready to step off the stump and into the noose. Beat. A bird sings. The SOLDIER steps away from the noose and sits down on the stump.)

SOLDIER

What am I doing? In the war I charged, alone and unarmed, into battle. I rushed straight into cannon fire to pull the wounded from the field. I dove into a raging river to save a drowning man. And now I'm ready to die like a candle guttering out on a windless night. Enough of this. I'm going to stop pitying myself find a way to improve my lot.

(The ELEGANT FELLOW comes forward.)

ELEGANT FELLOW

Hello again.

SOLDIER

I thought you had somewhere to be.

ELEGANT FELLOW

When I left, you seemed in a bad way. I wondered if there was any other way I could help.

SOLDIER

Well, you could... Wait. There's something strange about your feet. Let me see them.

ELEGANT FELLOW

Please. I'm very sensitive about my feet.

SOLDIER

Cloven hooves. A sign of evil.

ELEGANT FELLOW

Hey! Let's not jump to conclusions here.

(The SOLDIER raises his gun.)

SOLDIER

I'm warning you. I've never killed a man, but I will defend myself.

ELEGANT FELLOW

What kind of soldier has never killed anyone?

SOLDIER

I'm a pacifist.

ELEGANT FELLOW

A pacifist? In the army?

SOLDIER

I was a conscientious objector, so I served in the medical unit, and... Why am I telling you all this? Get out of here. Leave me alone.

ELEGANT FELLOW

I won't hurt you. I can't. I'm unarmed. Look:

(The ELEGANT FELLOW has a great number of pockets, each of which he turns out one by one.)

Empty... Empty... Empty... Just a bit of lint... Empty... And... Oh.

(He has just turned out one of the pockets in his green coat. A bunch of gold coins spill out.)

DEVIL (cont.)

Look at this.

(The ELEGANT FELLOW turns out the other pocket in his green coat. More gold coins spill out.)

See? All I have is money. Oodles and oodles of gold. You're not going to rob me, are you?

SOLDIER

Of course not.

ELEGANT FELLOW

You're an honest man. Honest and kind. A little paranoid, maybe, but--

SOLDIER

What's your name?

ELEGANT FELLOW

I am known by a thousand names the world over.

SOLDIER

Where are you from?

ELEGANT FELLOW

A very warm place, far beneath the ground.

SOLDIER

You're the devil, aren't you?

DEVIL

Yes. I am LUCIFER, PRINCE of DARKNESS!

(Pause)

I said, I am LUCIFER, LORD of the UNDERWORLD!

SOLDIER

I heard you the first time.

DEVIL

Aren't you afraid?

SOLDIER

No.

DEVIL

Not at all?

SOLDIER

Not at all.

DEVIL

Not even a teensey-weensey bit?

SOLDIER

They didn't give me this Medal of Bravery Above and Beyond the Call of Duty for nothing.

DEVIL

Well, let's see how fearless you really are.

(The DEVIL starts dancing a ridiculous dance. The SOLDIER laughs.)

Please. I'm casting a spell. I need to concentrate.

SOLDIER

I'm sorry. You just look so ridic--

(Time starts slowing down. The SOLDIER's voice grows lower and slower, as though he is caught in a film running in slow motion.)

--u--

(Time slows down even more.)

--lous.

BEAR

(offstage, also in slow-motion)

ROAR!

(Suddenly, a BEAR appears. The DEVIL laughs, in slow-motion. In slow-motion, the BEAR runs toward the SOLDIER, roaring. The SOLDIER turns around, also in slow motion, and sees the BEAR. The BEAR comes closer, still in slow-motion. The SOLDIER raises his gun in slow-motion and fires. The BEAR is hit, falls, and after a few slow-motion paroxysms, dies. The DEVIL is still laughing. Time speeds up again, and the DEVIL's laughter becomes faster and higher-pitched.)

DEVIL

Even in the face of death you don't bat an eye. I'm impressed.

SOLDIER

As I said, nothing frightens me.

DEVIL

Then why not get up on that stump, put your neck in that noose, and leap bravely into the arms of death?

SOLDIER

If I killed myself, you'd get my soul.

DEVIL

Surely you're not afraid of that.

SOLDER

No, but the place you come from is just a bit too warm for my taste.

DEVIL

I'll bet there's one thing you do fear. Being alone in this world.

SOLDIER

Not even that.

DEVIL

You didn't seem so brave a moment ago, crying "Woe is me" with your neck in a noose.

SOLDIER

That was a fleeting moment of cowardice. It won't happen again.

DEVIL

What if you were shunned by everyone you met?

SOLDIER

It wouldn't bother me.

DEVIL

What if you were turned away from every door you knocked on?

SOLDIER

I'd carry on.

DEVIL

What if you were cast out from the company of other human beings to live with the beasts?

SOLDIER

I'd make do.

DEVIL

What if even the beasts shunned you, so you were even more alone than Adam in the Garden?  
Could you face life then?

SOLDIER

No problem.



DEVIL

Are you willing to make a wager? I'll put up my green coat with the pockets full of gold against your eternal soul.

SOLDIER

I don't want to endanger my soul.

DEVIL

It's only in danger if you lose. Or are you afraid of losing?

SOLDIER

Of course not. It's a bet.

DEVIL

Shake on it. Good. Now here are the terms: For seven years you must never wash your hair, nor cut it, nor wash your face, nor any other part of your body, nor shave your beard, nor cut your nails. Since I'm a sporting fellow, I'll give you an edge by lending you my magic green coat.

(The DEVIL starts to remove the SOLDIER's coat.)

SOLDIER

What are you doing? Give me back my coat.

DEVIL

You can't very well wear both coats at the same time.

SOLDIER

But my Medal of Bravery Above and Beyond the Call of Duty.

DEVIL

You'll need this green coat. The pockets are always full of money. You won't get very far without cash, will you?

SOLDIER

But that medal's very dear to me.

DEVIL

Believe me, you'd be selling it for food within the week. Here, I'll hang it up in this tree, and you can take it back when the wager is done. Now, you must also wear the skin of this bear.

(The DEVIL removes the BEAR's skin and puts it on the SOLDIER's back.)

## DEVIL (cont.)

In this state you will go out in the world. No one will recognize you for the man you once were. Hereafter, you will be known by the name of Bearskin. If, at the end of seven years, you are still alive, I shall return you to your former state. You will be free from my power forever, and rich til the end of your days. However, if you meet your death before the seven years have ended, your soul is mine. Mine! MINE! Hahahahahaha!

(The DEVIL disappears, laughing. The soldier, who is now BEARSKIN, picks up his gun and starts walking. Other ACTORS appear.)

## ACTOR 1

Bearskin walked away from the clearing with his hope restored. With a pocket always full of gold he was sure he'd be able to survive the seven years, and what was a little long hair and dirt under his fingernails, anyway?

## ACTOR 2

The months passed, and Bearskin, as he was now known, did not bathe or cut his fingernails or brush his teeth, as the devil had instructed. Stubble grew on his cheeks and on his chin, and the stubble turned into a beard which grew dirtier and more tangled as time passed.

(ACTOR 2 puts a long, tangled beard on BEARSKIN's face.)

## ACTOR 3

Bearskin's hair continued to grow, down past his shoulders. Like his beard, it became knotted and caked with dirt as the months became years.

(ACTOR 3 puts a long, tangled wig on BEARSKIN's head.)

## ACTOR 4

Even though Bearskin did his best to stay clean without washing, he sometimes couldn't help slipping in the mud or getting covered with the dust kicked up by a passing horse cart. The dirt got everywhere--on his hands and face, under his fingernails, between his toes. Even the rain would not wash him clean.

(ACTOR 4 smears dirt on BEARSKIN's hands and face.)

## ACTOR 1

Bearskin became so hairy and dirty and smelly that people thought he was a wild animal. More than once the hunters mistook him for a bear.

(One of the ACTORS becomes a HUNTER and aims a rifle at BEARSKIN.)

## HUNTER

Pow!

BEARSKIN

Hey! I am not an animal.

HUNTER

Oh. Sorry.

ACTOR 4

Bearskin spent so much time on the road and so little in the company of other people that on bad days he would start to fancy he was a bear. So, to preserve his sanity and relieve the loneliness that had begun to gnaw at his heart, he stopped in a certain village with the intention of making some new friends.

SCENE TWO

(The Boar's Breath Tavern. The other ACTORS become four BARFLIES and the BARKEEP. They sing the song of the Boar's Breath.)

BARKEEP and BARFLIES  
HERE AT THE BOAR'S BREATH WE'LL LISTEN TO YOUR TALE  
IF YOU PULL UP A STOOL AND BUY A ROUND OF ALE  
WE'LL LAUGH WHEN YOU'RE LAUGHING  
AND CRY WHEN YOU'RE CRYING  
YOU'LL ALWAYS FIND A FRIEND HERE  
AS LONG AS YOU ARE BUYING

(They toast and drink down. BEARSKIN enters and sits by himself.)

Empty!  
BARFLY 1

Hello! I can hear my echo in there.  
BARFLY 2

Whose turn to buy?  
BARFLY 3

Sorry. I'm completely broke.  
BARFLY 4

Me too.  
BARFLY 1

Don't get paid til Saturday.  
BARFLY 2

Put it on my tab.  
BARFLY 3

Your tab's as long as my arm.  
BARKEEP

Then add your fingers to the end.  
BARFLY 3

I've got to draw the line somewhere. You'll put me under with your credit.  
BARKEEP

Put it on my tab, then.  
BARFLY 4

Same story with you. BARKEEP

I'll cover this one. BARFLY 1

With red ink? BARKEEP

You've been awfully quiet, Nils. BARFLY 3

Yeah. You're not holding out on us. BARFLY 4

Come on. I just paid off my tab this afternoon. Let me be square for just one day. BARFLY 2

We're always there for you. BARFLY 3

Miser. BARFLY 4

Penny-pincher! BARFLY 1

Lout! BARFLY 3

Scab! BARFLY 4

Rascal! BARFLY 1

Rat! BARFLY 3

(BARFLIES 1, 3, and 4 have surrounded 2. The situation has become dangerous. BEARSKIN plunks some money down on the bar.)

Ale all around. BEARSKIN

Thank you sir. BARFLY 3

A right kind gent you are!

BARFLY 4

A true friend.

BARFLY 1

You saved my neck.

BARFLY 2

(ALL raise their steins and sing.)

THE BARFLIES

YOU'LL ALWAYS FIND A FRIEND HERE  
AS LONG AS YOU ARE BUYING

So who are you, anyway?

BARFLY 1

Haven't seen you around these parts.

BARFLY 2

I'm new around here. I'm known as Bearskin.

BEARSKIN

Like your coat.

BARFLY 3

Exactly.

BEARSKIN

So, Mr. Bearskin, what's your trade?

BARFLY 4

Until recently I was a soldier.

BEARSKIN

You don't say.

BARFLY 1

I wanted to be a soldier once, but they wouldn't take me. They said I was too talented a musician to risk losing on the battlefield.

BARFLY 2

That's not true. They wouldn't take you because you're a stinking drunk.

BARFLY 4

You're one to talk, you dirty lush.

BARFLY 2

BARFLY 4

You wanna take this outside?

BARFLY 2

You bet. But let me finish my drink first.

BARFLY 3

You must be full of tales from the war.

BARFLY 1

Did you ever see any action?

BEARSKIN

Well, I never actually fought, myself. I'm a pacifist, you see.

BARKEEP

A pacifist in the army?

BEARSKIN

I worked in the medical unit. But I saw my share of battles as I carried the wounded from the field.

BARFLY 1

How exciting!

BARFLY 3

A seasoned veteran.

BARFLY 4

A hero. Were you ever decorated?

BEARSKIN

I don't like to brag, but I did get a Medal of Bravery Above and Beyond the Call of Duty.

(The BARFLIES make a show of being impressed.)

BARFLY 2

How many battles have you seen?

BEARSKIN

Oh, I've lost count.

BARFLY 4

Tell us about one.

BARFLY 3

Tell us about your first battle.

## BEARSKIN

My first battle was, let me think... The Battle of Oberammergau. It was dawn, the 21st of May. We had been driven back as far as the Elbe River, and if we had to retreat even a foot farther all would be lost. That morning the fog hung heavy on the hills. You couldn't see half as far as you could spit, that's how thick it was. That's why we didn't hear, until it was almost too late, the sound of--

Oops! Empty! BARFLY 1

Dry as a bone. BARFLY 2

All gone! BARFLY 3

Another round! BARFLY 4

Who's going to pay for this one? BARKEEP

Nils. BARFLY 4

Me? BARFLY 2

You're the man with the clean slate. BARFLY 4

The shortest tab. BARFLY 1

The blackest ink. BARFLY 3

Allow me. BEARSKIN

Oh, we couldn't. BARFLY 1

You just bought. BARFLY 3

Let someone else. BARFLY 4



It's all right. Really.

BEARSKIN

You sure?

BARFLY 3

Another round for my friends.

BEARSKIN

THE BARFLIES

HEY!

HERE AT THE BOAR'S BREATH ALL YOUR JOKES ARE FUNNY  
ALL YOUR TALES INTRIGUING, AS LONG AS YOU'VE GOT MONEY  
WE'LL CHEER WHEN YOU'RE CHEERING  
WE'LL SIGH WHEN YOU'RE SIGHING  
YOU'LL ALWAYS FIND A FRIEND HERE  
AS LONG AS YOU ARE BUYING

[END OF EXCERPT]