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Dramatic Publishing

TOM WALKER

A Play
by
JOHN STRAND



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(TOM WALKER)

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For Amanda Strand

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America's colonial era is a wonderfully rich, remarkably contradictory period of history. We Americans generally insist on a romantic interpretation of it. We maintain a stubborn belief in the predominance of the heroic colonial figure, as though the streets were filled with galloping Paul Reveres, the forests felled by philosopher-architects like Thomas Jefferson. There is no denying it was a time of heroes, and we are entitled to our legends. But a legend, by definition, is as much fiction as fact. I suspect life in the New World was a seriously gritty affair for the majority of colonists never destined to make it to Mount Rushmore. Or into the history books.

Which brings me to Tom Walker. The Tom of my play is a decidedly unheroic figure, an early colonial under-achiever whose talent is fiddle music and taverns, not statecraft. If he is artful at anything, it is the avoidance of physical labor. He is susceptible, though, to dreams and greed, noted characteristics of his time and place. And to superstition. When he is approached by the devil, he is not too terribly surprised. In post-Puritan New England circa 1730, the devil was as much a part of the landscape as pine trees and granite boulders. That he walked the roads of the colonies was accepted as likely by many early Americans, although presumably they hoped to avoid the trauma of a face-to-face confrontation.

There is also a revealing commentary in the literature and drawings of the day. The Colonial-era devil was frequently depicted as a black man. This play explores something of that reality, too.

The selling of one's soul to the devil is a tale that belongs to numerous world cultures, but few were as fond of it as the early Americans (the Tom of this play, at least in

the first act, is borrowed from a sketch by Washington Irving). One suspects a reason for the fondness. Tom Walker, in the course of his descent and rebirth, stumbles through some of the reasons. Ambition bordering on desperation. Rampant speculation in land, money and human beings. In New England, a government-sanctioned religious fundamentalism that excluded, sometimes violently, Jews, Catholics, Quakers and others. A prominent subculture of indentured servants, many of them children working in appalling conditions. A growing trade in African slaves after decades of enthusiastic participation in the triangular commerce that drove the slave trade. A shrinking Indian population whose ranks had been decimated by the Europeans' cornucopia of infectious disease. Add to this an unexplored expanse of forest primeval where woolly mammoths were rumored to lurk and it is not hard to imagine the colonial sleep being frequently disturbed by bad dreams.

A fair amount of soul-selling went into the building of this country. Even the heroes walked in the mud. Their legends, though—and our histories—tend to fictionalize this fact away. But the forgotten are useful witnesses too. The ones on the wrong end of the whip, the devils and their dupes. Men like Tom Walker.

— John Strand

I wish to express my gratitude for the support and encouragement of the many people who helped get this play on stage, especially Molly Smith, artistic director, Arena Stage; Steve Samuels, artistic associate, Arena Stage; Jerry Patch, dramaturg, South Coast Repertory; Kyle Donnelly, director; the talented cast and crew of the premiere production at Arena; and all the members of the very special Arena Stage team.

Special thanks to South Coast Repertory and its Pacific Playwrights Festival where initial development of this play took place June 21-25, 2000, with Kyle Donnelly directing.

— JS

Tom Walker was commissioned by Arena Stage, Washington, D.C. It premiered there on the Fichandler Stage on February 2, 2001, directed by Kyle Donnelly and including the following artists:

CAST

Tom Walker JOHN GLOVER
Woodsman/Lucius WENDELL WRIGHT
Cora MARGARET LAURENA KEMP
Rose Walker, Ensemble KATE BUDDEKE
Bob Jenkin, Ensemble J. FRED SHIFFMAN
Widow Baine, Ensemble MARTHA HACKETT

PRODUCTION STAFF

Set THOMAS LYNCH
Costumes LINDSAY W. DAVIS
Lighting NANCY SCHERTLER
Original Music and Sound DONALD DiNICOLA
Stage Manager SUSAN R. WHITE
Voice and Dialect Consultant LYNN WATSON
Fight Choreography MICHAEL JEROME JOHNSON
Dance VIRGINIA FREEMAN
Dramaturg CATHY MADISON
Technical Director JIM GLENDINNING
Assistant Director JOHN WEINSTEIN

TOM WALKER

A play in two acts
For 3 men and 3 women

PRINCIPLE CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

CORA, a young black woman known as the devil's daughter, teens
TOM WALKER, a fiddler of insufficient means, 30
ROSE WALKER, his wife, a shrew, 30
BOB JENKIN, associate and drinking partner to Tom, 30s
WOODSMAN, a black man also known as the devil and later as:
LUCIUS, 40s
WIDOW BAINE, 30s

ADDITIONAL CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

FIRST POOR SOUL
SECOND POOR SOUL
THIRD POOR SOUL
A PHYSICIAN
MAN, employed by the devil
SHIP'S OFFICER
SEAMAN
OLD SALT
FUGITIVE 1
FUGITIVE 2
FUGITIVE 3
RIGGS, a usurer

PLACE: In and around Boston in the Massachusetts colony.

TIME: Circa 1730.

Single set/multiple locations

Running time: 100 minutes

ACT ONE

SCENE: *A town outside Boston, the Massachusetts colony, 1727.*

The stage in darkness. A flame appears, then the lights rise slowly on a child: CORA, a black girl about 14. She raises a bowl above her head as in offering; the bowl contains the flame.

CORA.

Arise ye dead ones, tell the story,
Truthful clear as it may be.
Descend ye Spirits come before me.
Shine thy light that we may see.

(She lowers the bowl to the ground. A pause. Then she lifts her head. As the scary storyteller.)

The devil, they say, had two and twenty daughters, all's dark as me. We was scorched black in the fires of hell and sent here to do his evil bidding! *(A beat. As herself, calmly defiant.)* 'Twas a lie. There were but twelve of us... Though it matter not: the truth will earn thee little profit when lies be the currency of the day—my Papa taught me that. I am the devil's daughter, then. The good Christians of Boston town gave me no blessing, but a

stone in my back, or set the dogs after me. Though it were not me they feared: he taught me that, too. 'Twas the darkness—of long winter nights and endless deep forests and their own covetous hearts... Hear me, then. I would set straight the record—of a time and place, and a battle that was fought against the darkness there. For lies and legends as weeds do grow, wildly and in every wrong place, to strangle truth. This new land were never no paradise. Every ancient vice lay in the very soil, and men hurried to the harvest of them. I know. I lent my hand to the effort. And Satan my father—he had as much of God in him as other men. More, would I say, than some. For the devil dwells in every human heart and doth battle for advantage. And he has it—over the weak and frightened who bargain out of greed, then seek to escape the contract. Men like Tom Walker. (*Lights rise on TOM, at home, tuning his fiddle.*) Simple in his desires, which most concern his own comfort. Slow to anger, slower still to forgive, passing honest if someone is watching. A lover of taverns and tankards of ale—and music. (*TOM plays a few cheerful notes.*) No man in all Massachusetts colony hates laboring more. (*TOM plays a few tragic notes.*) Long would be his journey, and far his fall. The year of our Lord, one thousand seven hundred and twenty-seven. Who was it brought Tom Walker to ruin?—if ruin it may be called. Before he met Lucifer, his life had little of heaven, surely. For poor Tom Walker had long ago met a devil of his own—and been fool enough to marry her...

(Enter ROSE, TOM's wife: a hard-edged woman who appears to be more than an even match for her husband.)

TOM takes the precaution of unshouldering his instrument, and remaining a safe distance away.)

ROSE. O! Slothful, scavenging, scab-souled sinner! Never was born a more sneaking, sniveling, swamp-dwelling dog of a man! It's gone, and you took it.

TOM. Rose, I'll not have you talk to me like that.

ROSE. I'll talk to you with clay pots, I will!

TOM. You'll not.

ROSE. I'll knock loose what tiny brain God gave ye, till it roll out your ear, being no more the size of a bean! The silver teapot!

TOM. Which did us no good—

ROSE. Given me by my dead mother!

TOM. She'll sip no tea where *she* is, though she have plenty of flame for hot water.

ROSE. It was mine!

TOM. What has a wife that is not her husband's?

ROSE. Honor and wit, dishonorable fool!

TOM. Peace, woman. I got a good price for the ugly old relic.

ROSE. Then hand me the money.

TOM. I've none of it yet.

ROSE. No, nor ever will, I wager.

TOM. Ha! You'll see. I know how to bargain. What would you say to three fat pigs, Rose Walker?

ROSE. "Be gone," I'd say, "for I've one stupid ass in my house as it is."

TOM. I'll have bacon and hams from one, another I'll fatten and sell to market—

ROSE. Fatten with what, I ask thee? You've a horse and a wife you can't feed now!

TOM. No. Nor mount neither, so black-tempered are they both!

ROSE. Aye. For both know the rider as unskilled—and unwashed, too.

TOM (*wounded*). Now that's unfair, Rose.

ROSE. On which count? And who'll build the sty, I'd like to know?

TOM. Myself.

ROSE. You, who can't keep this house from falling down 'round our ears?

TOM. I've been too busy for laboring.

ROSE. Busy at what?

TOM (*an attempt at humor*). Trading the silver you hide from me.

ROSE. Hide with good reason—though not well enough. And where are these magnificent pigs, sir?

TOM. In the future.

ROSE. In the future.

TOM. I now own half the next litter of Robert Jenkin's sow, Flora.

ROSE. That ancient piece of meat!?

TOM. She's a youthful pig.

ROSE. She's older than you—and smarter too, I'll wager!

TOM. He'll mate her come spring, says Jenkin.

ROSE. O! Thou son of a bitch! You've sold my mother's silver for the *promise* of a pig!

TOM. Now Rose...

ROSE (*throwing things at him*). Get out!

TOM (*dodging her projectiles*). You'll stop that, Rose.

ROSE. Out!

TOM. I am master of this domicile.

ROSE. Get out, you witless slug, get out!

(TOM is driven from the house. Lights down on ROSE, who exits. TOM takes a stance, left, and gestures in silent, fuming rage, a kind of colonial Tai Chi of angry frustration. CORA hovers nearby.)

CORA. An age of great men and their great achievements.

What, pray, did Tom achieve? Near starvation.

TOM. O for one damn mouthful of bacon...

CORA. Poverty.

TOM. Shoes you call these? Plow horses are better shod than Tom Walker...

CORA. Humiliation.

TOM. I'll let no one talk to me like that, I won't...

CORA. Without even the balm of religion to salve his wounds.

TOM. Damn this life, damn it all to hell—and damn heaven too, damn it!

CORA. He was jealous of the well-to-do, and bitter at how well they did it.

TOM. Charlatans and thieves! that hide behind a “God-be-with-you, sir”! Well, let God be by himself, unless he have two shillings for a tankard of ale and a pipe of tobacco. Oh, and that's a monstrous large house you've built yourself, Squire. But if you was forced to subtract one brick for each of your bald lies and your foul deceptions, there'd be nothing left but your chamber pot, God be with you, sir! Oh, and I pray—I do!—for the chance to burn such a house to the ground, and let me die fulfilled!

CORA. To be fair to Tom—

TOM. Who is ever fair to Tom, pray?

CORA. —in his last and only paid employment, he had a rough time of it.

TOM. “Rough time”? It near killed me dead.

CORA. Urged by his wife—

TOM. Tormented.

CORA. Tormented by his wife to find a job, Tom took his only offer and became...

TOM. A soul driver. Heaven and hell forgive me.

(Three POOR SOULS appear, chained together, looking very much beaten down by fate.)

CORA. White laborers fresh off the boat.

TOM. Redemptioners they be called—

FIRST POOR SOUL. Slaves.

SECOND POOR SOUL. Slaves, sir.

TOM. Though slaves is the truer word. Some of ’em but children, half naked and starving and sick...

CORA. Tom’s job was to herd these souls from town to village—

TOM. And keep ’em from running off in the night—

FIRST POOR SOUL. Please, Mr. Walker, sir—

SECOND POOR SOUL. Since Sunday last—no bite of nothing.

CORA. Then sell them in town square for the best price. Plus commission.

TOM. And I got the worst of the lot. The ones who failed to sell on the docks. *(To an imaginary assembly in some town square.)* Goodmen of this fair town of, uh— *(Aside, to one of the SOULS.)* What town is it, again?

THIRD POOR SOUL *(too loudly, as if a madman)*. I can herd sheep, Mr. Walker!

TOM (*to the assembly*). What am I bid on these fine laborers, gentlemen? The pick of the lot, sirs, straight from Boston Harbor. No consumption— (*some coughing and itching from the SOULS*) —no lice nor worms, no lameness, no distemper of any sort—

THIRD POOR SOUL (*same again*). I can herd sheep, Mr. Walker!

TOM. Will no one bid, sirs? Strong and supple they are, like young pine trees, every one—

(The SECOND POOR SOUL faints, the two others fall as well. A beat.)

TOM. Oh damn it all...

CORA. Tom despised it, every minute. It troubled his dreams for months on end.

(The FIRST POOR SOUL grabs at TOM, as if to appeal to him.)

TOM. Someone'll take you. You'll labor twelve or fourteen years, if you've no additional time for poor behavior, and then you're set free.

FIRST POOR SOUL. Let us go.

TOM. I've not the right.

SECOND POOR SOUL. Mercy, Mr. Walker.

FIRST POOR SOUL. You've a heart, sir, do you not?

(A beat. TOM turns his back on them.)

TOM. You escaped in the night. Go on, then. Be gone, the lot of ye! (*Exit the POOR SOULS. To CORA.*) Cursed

souls. What fool would sell his freedom for passage on a ship, I ask you.

CORA. Tom Walker, it seems, had a softer heart than he let on.

TOM. Ah, what's soft is my head. Soul driver. I'd not thought to sink so low in life. And what's worse, I never made a farthing at it... Hunger and want—it grinds a man down. Is it too much to be freed of want? I've but simple desires. Do I suffer from ambition, like my neighbors?

CORA. No.

TOM. No. Do I ask for increase and land and sacks of coin, like the rest of 'em?

CORA. No.

TOM. No. (*Gloomily.*) For it'll not be granted me.

CORA. Aye, the world owed Tom Walker a debt, as he saw it. But he could not get the world to pay up. So he schemed—another among the many of his time and place. He did his best scheming under the sign of the Blue Ball.

(She hands him a tankard of ale. Sounds of an ale-house—laughter, shouts; fiddle music. BOB Jenkin appears, well oiled with rum, his near-constant state of being. BOB speaks in an undecipherable language rarely heard before or since.)

TOM. Hear me on this now, Bob Jenkin. An honest profit, not a stone's throw from where we sit. At the docks, Bob. Meat on the hoof. Good succulent meat, and what do they do with it? They toss it in a pit for the gulls and

crows! Just because the poor beast passed away in ocean transit.

BOB (*unintelligibly*). [Oh no, says I—that's wasteful, Tom!]

TOM. I hear you clear on that, Bob—full wasteful it is. So there sits a free supply of cattle.

BOB. [And no need to slaughter 'em, Tom.]

TOM. No need to slaughter 'em, Bob, as you say. The killing part's done for ye by the beast itself!

BOB. [But Tom. Won't the meat look a bit sickly?]

TOM. Good point, Bob. The meat *may* look a bit sickly, aye. (*He ponders it.*)

BOB. [Tincture!]

TOM. Tincture, Bob! Right you are! A drop of color and who'd be the wiser, man? There's money in the butchering trade if you go at it right. Can't you see it, Bob—"Walker and Jenkin: Purveyors of Fresh Meat to the Upper Classes of Massachusetts Bay Colony."

BOB. [O! and you're a rare genius, Tom.]

TOM. That's a lovely thing to say, Bob. You've always had a way with words, you have. (*A beat. Holding out his empty tankard.*) Uh, Bob? As I'm a bit light in coinage at present— Could you not get this next one? (*But BOB is already stumbling off.*) Bob?... And where are those damn pigs, Bob?

(*BOB exits, unintelligibly. CORA appears.*)

CORA. Tom returned late to home on the nights he bothered to return at all, and had the greeting he earned.

(*Lights change. ROSE appears in night clothes.*)

ROSE. Sodden, staggering, swill-sucking sot of a man,
you're home.

TOM. And what a joy it is, madam.

ROSE. I'll not bother to ask where you've been.

TOM. Business meeting.

ROSE. Is it so, Squire?

(TOM turns his back, prepares to urinate in a pot.)

TOM. May'nt I relieve myself in peace?

(ROSE swoops in, grabs the pot.)

ROSE. For the leaky roof you're too useless to stop up.
(Exit ROSE.)

TOM *(after a beat, as it dawns on him)*. I've not a pot to
piss in!

CORA. It was early spring of that year—when the pessi-
mist is most resentful of the general cheer around him—
that Tom Walker had the encounter. He had taken the
long way home that afternoon—

TOM. I'm in no hurry to do battle with that harpie—

CORA. —through a gloomy, dark and lifeless swamp. It
was a place of legend and ill-omen, once the site of an
Indian fort—

TOM. Before our Christian ancestors slaughtered them all
for their land, the women and children too.

CORA. The mournful spirit of the place matched Tom's
mood, and he sat and dug at the muck with a stick,
thinking...

TOM. Of heaven's vast indifference.

CORA. And?