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Family Plays

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Adapted by
Dennis Scott



Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Originally produced for the National Theatre of the Deaf, and premiered at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as a part of the first National Children's Art Festival.

Fantasy. Adapted by Dennis Scott. Cast: 4m., 2w., with doubling, or up to 20+ (6m., 3w., 11+ either gender). This wonder-filled tale of old is a gleaming thing of marvels, adventure, magic and mystery to be cherished by all people—young or old—for any time of the year and most particularly as a play of festival at New Year's or Christmas. It is a fantasy inspired by the late 14th-century Middle English story of an adventure of Sir Gawain, a knight of King Arthur's Round Table, and his encounter with a mysterious warrior, the Green Knight. This play is faithful to the wit, elegance and perceptions of the fabled original tale of old as told by Sir Gawain. The conteur tells the story, similar to a Merlin or Morgan le Fey of the Arthur legend. The story produces all the magic and creates all the obstacles for Gawain, who must exhibit honor and chivalry in the face of danger. Production notes are available in the script containing details on staging. Simple set. Costumes: versatile tunics over black dance pants. Approximate running time: 45 minutes. Code: SU8.

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By

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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was written and produced on commission from the National Committee, Arts for the Handicapped and the Alliance for Arts Education, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The first performance was held April 19, 1977, in the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater, Washington, D.C., as part of the first National Children's Art Festival.

THE O'NEILL CENTER'S
The National Theatre of the Deaf
presents

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by
Dennis Scott

Directed by Mack Scism

Setting & Lighting by
David Hays

Costumes by
Fred Voelpel

THE COMPANY

Robert Blumenfeld	<i>Conteur</i>
Betty Bonni	<i>Alison</i>
Candace Broecker	<i>Gringolet</i>
Raymond Fleming	<i>Guest at Camelot</i>
Joseph Sarpy	<i>Sir Gawain</i>
Raymond Parks	<i>Bercilak</i>

Stage Manager—JoAnne Fiore

The National Theatre of the Deaf

Producing Director	David Hays
Director for the O'Neill	George White
General Manager	Joseph J. Krakora
Tour Director	Mack Scism
Sign Master	Bernard Bragg
Company Manager	Tandy Cronyn
Education Administrator	Patrick Graybill
School Director	Raymond Fleming
Technical Assistant	Stephen Howe
Company Interpreter	Nikki Kilpatrick
Company Secretary	Gloria Anderson
Assistant to Mr. Hays	Marie Jetmore
Costume Execution	Bonnie McLean
Scenery Execution	Elliot Joslin

INTRODUCTION

This play came to be written for two main reasons. More than any other story I have read, the old poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has given me delight. And more than any other acting company I have seen, the National Theatre of the Deaf has restored theatre to its primary function: the simultaneous excitement of eye, ear, and mind through the enactment of a story. Constantly, their work asserts the parity and indivisibility of a play's three languages—the playwright's word, the actor's body, the symbols they create.

The NTD commissioned *Gawain* for performances in the Children's Arts Festival of 1977 at Kennedy Center. Without that challenge I might never have found the time to write it. I am grateful that they made it possible. My version of the story is a gift to a fine company, and to the audiences they teach.

We developed the play together: director, actors, and myself. I brought them a draft, and what could have been a point of contention was instantly agreed. We would create a play not just for children, nor merely for a deaf company, but for all people, young or old. We would attempt to include some of the wit, the elegance, and the psychological perceptiveness of the original. We would include the marvels, the adventure, the magic, and the sense of mystery that all men cherish.

We decided as well that in this particular production, for deaf and hearing actors together, that the actors who were to speak the lines being performed by deaf actors would not be mere convenient mouth-pieces. They, themselves, would become characters in the story. So they, too, have roles in the play, and transform into a variety of creatures: courtiers, wild animals, and above all,

the Conteur. It is he who tells the story, and who focuses our attention, like an old friend, on the things in it that matter most of all. Just as the anonymous poet of *Sir Gawain* once did.

The decision was, of course, a central one, and valuable to all subsequent productions of this play. It means that every actor in a performance of *Gawain* becomes equally important. It means that one small stage can become a multitude of places, in turn Camelot, Bercilak's Castle, the snowy wilds of North Britain, simply and wonderfully. The illusions are created by the actors, their words and their bodies; and not by the expensive and elaborate machinery of the modern stage. Such a decision makes the theatre again into a place of wonder where all things may be shown; it returns the power of transformation to the actor and his imagination.

Because of the way we worked at creating the production, together, the rehearsal process was for all of us, I think, a happy and rewarding one. Our constant aim was to find the words that would translate accurately and gracefully the Sign-mime of the performers—that dance-like combination of sign language, mime, and finger spelling with which the National Theatre of the Deaf create their theatrical images. I had chosen to adapt the Middle English of the original into a light, loose, and freely alliterated form of Standard English; it seemed the best way of retaining the narrative tone which would draw our audience close in sympathy. Now in the rehearsal process, we worked to simplify the language of the text. The original is tremendously rich in its visual descriptions, but we were making a piece for the theatre, in which the style of performance and the actors' behaviour would themselves create a multitude of visual images. It was necessary to discard many lovely passages from the poem in order to focus on other essentials—like the good humour of the poet's judgements, and his sharp observation of human frailty and strength.

And we stripped away much of the original that would have been meaningful only to students of Arthurian legend, like the dour duenna who in the poem turns out to have devised the plot against King Arthur's knights; and the details of the Christmas feast at which the Green Man first appears. What seemed central was the testing of Gawain. That we tried to retain in all its rich and ritual form. We wanted very much to keep the comedy of the seduction game, and the splendid cruelty of the hunts outside which parallel the pursuit of Gawain by the Lady. A sense of snow and of a brutal winter world must frame, we knew, the sensuous beauties and the seductive harmonies of Bercilak's court.

Those harmonies were sweet, and sad. They seemed a way of expressing for the audience what Gawain feels: that life is short and wonderful and to be treasured.

So there are moments in the play where the action lifts into a lyric, elegaic tone, and there is dance, and song. In those songs I have tried to capture that passionate medieval sense of innocence, morality, and experience which Gawain himself learns is part of living.

There was one single important change I chose to make in this adaptation. Bercilak's wife, the lovely temptress, became like Bercilak himself a shape-shifter: a small red bird. It seemed to me a logical extension of the meaning of the poem. Gawain, a mortal, embarks on a quest for the Green Knight, the perennial life force. Like any other comic hero, the knight is purified of his pride and folly. But something curious happens in the process. The Christian ethic and the courtly, less than Christian values that Gawain espouses are shown to be in conflict. He is caught between them. And though he survives, the winner is neither of the two value systems he lives by. Instead the victor is life itself, and instinct—the free and darting thing that has tempted him, tested him, and that survives him. On stage the image of that force unhesitatingly became that of a magic bird, gorgeous and dangerous, that Gawain is wooed by and must beware of.

For that is really what attracts us to the poem, and I hope, the play. They are like Gawain, in love with life.

Dennis Scott
Jamaica
March 1978

CHARACTERS

Conteur • King Arthur

Gawain

Gringolet • Deer • Boar • Fox • Guest at Camelot • Servant at Bercilak's

Alison • Bird • Guinevere

Bercilak • Green Knight

Guest at Camelot • Squire • Deer • Boar • Fox

Sir Gawain & The Green Knight

Gawain & Gringolet are fighting the wind, mist in their eyes: falling, getting up again. Conteur watches them, from far away.

GAWAIN

In the name of God, is someone there?

Alison, the bird, swoops and soars over. Watches them.

CONTEUR

Only a red bird, battling the wind, melts into mist. Be calm, Gawain. Help is coming. Oh, the cold!

Bird flies away, on a curved path: enters Bercilak's castle, alights. Turns three times. Becomes a woman.

BERCILAK

Is he close?

ALISON

He's here.

BERCILAK

Now, then. Light the candles. Let the castle blaze like a diamond in Gawain's dark. He will come to us across the snowfield.

They light candles, torches, lamps. Set them in windows.

CONTEUR

That's right, make yourself small, by that tree. He's come a long, long way, this brave wanderer. Look, on the high hill a huge castle, every light burning. If the wind blows the mist clear for a moment, he will see it, and find safety!

He blows a gust of wind toward Gawain.

There.

GAWAIN

Gringolet! Look! A fine castle! You'll spend Christmas in warm straw, after all!

Man & horse begin to move against the wind towards the lights of the castle.

CONTEUR

Let nothing surprise you in this legend. There are knights, and magic, and lovely ladies, and adventure. Gawain will keep a promise, break a bond, and learn a lesson for like all good stories, this marvellous adventure has—a moral!

Now he stands at the moat. . . Can you see the turrets and towers? The drawbridge is up. The walls are high, hewn from hard stone, smooth as glass. And the windows are shining like tall candles on the glittering white oak trees.

GAWAIN

I pray you shelter! I come in peace!

BERCILAK

Who goes? Friend or foe?

GAWAIN

Sir Gawain, knight of King Arthur's court! Sick from the cold I seek your fire!

BERCILAK

I bid you come in joy! My name is Bercilak.

ALISON

Alison joins her Lord in welcome!

BERCILAK

Sound the trumpets! A noble knight is here, in need of friendship.

CONTEUR

And suddenly the windows and battlements of that great house were filled

with Lords and Ladies, calling their greetings—"A Christmas Guest! A Christmas Guest! A Guest at the Gate! Welcome!" They dropped the drawbridge—it thundered down to the other side, and the great Gates swung open.

GAWAIN

He walked in front of his weary horse like a prince, across the bridge to the castle, and servants ran out to stable his steed.

BERCILAK

Off with his armour! Attend my Lord!

A rug is spread. Gawain steps on it. He is divested of sword, gloves, helmet, breastplate unlaced, thigh armour un-strapped, steel shoes un-buckled, and a great cloak thrown round him.

ALISON

They took his sword and his shield,

BERCILAK

...and led him into the great warm hall; the torches were shining on his golden helmet, and on the shield he had carried with the perfect star. Each sharp point of that endless figure showed his perfection—

ALISON

Prepare him a place close to the fire.

SERVANT

And under the holly branches in the hall, Bercilak, his gracious host, hailed him.

CONTEUR

They led him to a table, and washed his hands. The white cloth that seven ladies had sewn, embroidering it for seven winters, fell like snow on the fine wood. They set out silver spoons, and a dish of salt. And men hastened to make that table heavy with hot baked meats and fresh sweet breads.

BERCILAK

My apologies to you—we have eaten already, and this is all we have. Ah, but tomorrow we will feed you fairly!

Alison serves wine, tastes it, presents it to Gawain.

GAWAIN

Your servant, Ma'am.

ALISON

Ah, what elegance, what grace!

BERCILAK

Sir, the ladies of my house will be delighted that you honor us with your presence.

ALISON

You will break every maiden's heart, Sir Gawain—we have heard of your gallantry!

GAWAIN

Ma'am, I'm a soldier, I break heads, not hearts!

BERCILAK

Well said! My Lady Alison, more wine!

CONTEUR

In the great hall under the tapestries shining with old tales of victory and death, the other courtiers danced the night away. Oh, what giving of gifts, what taking of favours! What fair women, what stealing of kisses—what music! What honest mirth! You couldn't hear the wind outside, howling like lost souls in the lonely dark. The stones echoed with laughter. And wrapped in their fine furs, spoke Gawain the gentle knight, and Alison, and my Lord Bercilak...

BERCILAK

Of course, you'll stay the winter?

GAWAIN

I cannot, sir.

ALISON

Where do you go?

GAWAIN

I travel North.

BERCILAK

Still further North? This is the edge of the world—go further and you come by places that the wise man does not wish to pass! The Magic Hills—

ALISON

Only the wolves go there, and they tremble for fear.

BERCILAK

Did your King, Arthur, send you?

GAWAIN

No, sir. It is a game that brings me here. I cannot stay.

ALISON

A game? So far from home, at Christmas tide?

CONTEUR

Listen! The dancers laughing, like silver blessings!

BERCILAK

Dance with my Lord. I'll leave you to my Lady.

Bercilak exits. Gawain & Alison dance.

CONTEUR

A maiden's heart grows weary,
A watching by the fire,
To see the young men stride away
A-seeking their desire.
For the winter rocks are cruel sharp
And the blood is on the snow—
Oh, won't you stay at home with me,
And watch the heroes go?

GAWAIN

My Lady, you go light as a bird.

ALISON

Ah, Sir Gawain, you are a flatterer!

GAWAIN

A gay red bird! One followed me North all December.

ALISON

But birds fly South in Winter! It was magic, I'm sure. You should have killed it. Those things are dangerous!

GAWAIN

It was a living thing, and kept me company in my adventures! I gave it food when there was food to give.

ALISON

How sad the music is. . .

GAWAIN

I wish to live! But I must keep my honor, and be bold.

CONTEUR

And here now is the tale that Gawain told. . .

GAWAIN

Christmas at Camelot. Fifteen days' feasting.
What a coming and going, what to-ing and fro-ing!
Dancing at night—joy at its height,
wooing and fighting, ladies delighting in fashion and passion,
chapel bells ringing, minstrels singing.
Dandies decked out in the latest attire—
no time for sorrow, no time for tears!
Young and old laughing their lives away
Through days of gold
And at the very center of that gorgeous ring—
Queen Guinevere, and that most grave and gracious ruler of
the court,—Arthur the King!

ARTHUR

Sit down to dinner, my Lords and Ladies. Give thanks to our savior for
loveliness and life; and make you merry!

GUINEVERE

Eat, drink and be warm.
Sit you down, friends, and feast!
Camelot greets you:
Come from the West or East—
Merriment meets you!
Drink to the fair and bold,
Drink to the young and old,
Camelot's call—
Welcome to all!

GAWAIN

God save the King!

Enter Green Knight.

GUINEVERE

You should have heard the silence fall, like a fox-fur on the winter fields. . .

GREEN

He was green, all over. From the smallest hair to the ends of his fingers. Like
grass.

Green Knight moves slowly round, peering into faces.

CONTEUR

And on one hip he had an axe of pale green steel, hammered fine as a razor, four feet wide. Green. Like spring, and bound with vines like a young tree. Green.

GREEN

His beard was like moss.

GUINEVERE

And the green man wore no shoes on his bright green feet, but his tunic blazed with birds, and butterflies, and jewels like leaves. Green.

CONTEUR

Only his eyes shone like two flowers of fire.

Pause.

GREEN

Where is the King? Where is the Lord of this lovely company?

ARTHUR

I wear that crown, sir. I am Arthur. Welcome. Feast with us til the day goes down, sir.

GREEN

I have no wish to stay. I've come to play. Some little, dangerous game. Some little sport. I've heard so much about this valiant court.

ARTHUR

A challenge! Excellent! Choose your opponent, valour is our delight, sir! Every man here is ready to fight, sir!

GUEST

The truth is, not a man had stirred.

GREEN (*laughs*)

If I wanted to fight, I'd harvest out this gathering before night! No, no. Fighting is not my reason. I come to entertain you at this Christmas season. Here's my axe. And here I stand. Wanted: A man to chop me once with this. Just one blow. I won't resist!

GUINEVERE

What?

ARTHUR

Quiet!

GREEN

One eager warrior is all I ask, to give his best. After he's swung, I'll give him back one blow. A fair exchange. A Christmas jest! *(Pause)*

GUEST

Silence . . . Well, what would *you* do?

GUINEVERE

You'll give him back one blow?

GREEN

Not right away. Say, in a year. In one year's time, today. *(Silence)* King Arthur's Court. What a surprise! All these brave warriors! Will no one rise?

GUEST

Each famous fighter sits still as a mouse.

ARTHUR

This is folly. I won't be made a fool of in my house! Come play!

GUINEVERE

My, Lord!

GAWAIN

My, Lord!

GREEN

My Lord!

ARTHUR

Stay where you are!

GAWAIN

My King! I am the least of all, in deeds, in name. This foolish business fits my station, not your fame! I pray you, let me play the Green Man's game! *(Pause)*

COMPANY

Take care . . .

ARTHUR

Now do exactly what he said. That way you'll save our reputation, and your head!

GREEN

Before you strike, tell me, who cuts me down?

GAWAIN

Gawain.

GUINEVERE

A knight of great renown!

GREEN

So. Speak your bond.

GAWAIN

Before these Lords, and you, I hereby swear to meet you, to receive a blow again, next year!

GREEN

Gawain! This is indeed a pleasure! I've heard so much about you... Now, show me your measure.

GAWAIN

Where shall I find you in a year, Sir Green?

GREEN

Oh, here and there—after you've swung my axe, I'll tell you where.

Gawain beheads the Green Knight.

CONTEUR

The axe whirrs thru. The neck is ringed with red!

COMPANY

The clear blade cleaved skin. Flesh. Bone.
The great neck split. The green head slammed the stone.
The red blood rushed like rain to the grey floor.
The wind sighed in on a silence through the door.
The head rolled round. The bright green man stood dead.

ARTHUR

Well done!

ALISON

Gawain, well done!

GREEN

Give me my head.

Gawain strides forward, picks it up.

My axe. (*Takes it*) My Lords. I take my leave.
There is a chapel in the North, a place most fair
and green as trees: a green that will not fade.
Follow, and take the bargain of my blade.
I look to welcome you at the New Year!
Seek me till I am found. All heard you swear!

He goes.

CONTEUR

And that is Gawain's story, that is what moves him to ride so far from Camelot. . .

In Bercilak's house the Christmas guests are gay. Gawain, hear what the fire and the dancers say:

ALISON & BERCILAK

There's magic in the mountains,
There's danger on the hill,
And those who seek adventure
Fall down, and soon are still.
The daring go away to dark,
It brings the bravest low—

ALISON

Oh, won't you stay at home with us
And let the young men go?

Good Gawain, stay with us!

GAWAIN

My Lady, if I only could. But I must come on the Green Chapel within three days, or break my hond.

ALISON

You're close. Too close. By horse, you'll come on it against the mountain not more than seven miles away.

CONTEUR

Surely that place has nothing holy housed there.

ALISON

It is a place to pass by, not to stay.