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Beowulf (and the Bard)

By

VIDAS BARZDUKAS and
CHRISTOPHER R. BARTLETT

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(BEOWULF [AND THE BARD])

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The world premiere of *Beowulf (and the Bard)* was presented by Actors' Theatre of Columbus on April 11, 2019.

CAST:

BEOWULF John Quigley
BARD Christina Yoho
GUNBORG..... Sarah Vargo
HROTHGAR Scott Clay
UNFERTH Jabari Johnson
AESCHERE..... Kate Jones
GRENDEL/GRENDEL'S MOTHER Trad
PATRON 1/VILLAGER 1 David Harewood
PATRON 2/VILLAGER 2 Julia Cannell
PATRON 3/VILLAGER 3 Bryan Curtiss

PRODUCTION:

Director Philip J. Hickman
Set Design Andrew Weibel
Lighting Design Griffin DeWitt
Costumes..... Tonya Marie
Sound Design William Bragg
Fight Choreography Sarah Vargo
Stage Manager Jenna Messer

Beowulf (and the Bard)

CHARACTERS

BEOWULF: A Geat and wannabe hero.

BARD: Beowulf's companion and a singer of songs.

GUNBORG: A warrior princess.

HROTHGAR: King of the Danes.

UNFERTH: A Danish lord and village dandy.

AESCHERE: King Hrothgar's trusted advisor.

GRENDEL: A mean ogre.

GRENDEL'S MOTHER: The mean ogre's mom.

PATRON 1/VILLAGER 1

PATRON 2/VILLAGER 2

PATRON 3/VILLAGER 3

SETTING: The action of the play takes place in Denmark.

Beowulf (and the Bard)

SCENE 1

(The curtain rises to reveal a busy tavern in Denmark. The BARD stands atop a bench, strumming a lute and reciting an epic poem. A large hat sits on the floor at his feet encouraging tips. Three PATRONS sit around and listen.)

BARD. *The daring band had freed the land from dragons and from Celts,*

The mighty three showed bravery and strength beneath their pelts.

The mayor saved, the village paved a road straight out of town,

To see the three off merrily, with daughters' virtue sound.

(The PATRONS applaud enthusiastically. Several toss money into his hat.)

BARD (*cont'd*). Thank you! Thank you, ladies and gentlemen! Thank you!

PATRONS. One more! Come on! Another poem!

BARD. What kind of an artist would I be to disappoint my loyal fans? How about a serious song rich with alluring alliteration? Or perhaps a rhyming verse that's both gaudy and bawdy? Or maybe an onomatopoeic poem that really snaps, crackles and pops!

PATRON 1. We want a tale of excitement!

PATRON 2. And adventure!

PATRON 3. And danger!

BARD. I have those in spades! Does anyone have a request?

PATRON 1. *The Saga of the Frost Giants!*

BARD. Too long!

PATRON 2. *The Ballad of Gunnhild!*

BARD. Too dull!

PATRON 3. *Beowulf!*

PATRON 2. Too long and dull!

(The PATRONS laugh.)

BARD. Too long and dull? You wound me.

PATRON 1. It's boring!

PATRON 2. And dense! And that part about the dragon feels tacked on.

BARD. But "Beowulf" has heroes and violence! And monsters! And monsters' mothers! And heroic violence against monsters' mothers! What more could you ask for?

PATRON 3. But do you know it?

BARD. Know it? My friend, I wrote it!

(The PATRONS react with astonishment.)

PATRON 3. You wrote *Beowulf*?

BARD. Better still, I lived it.

PATRON 2. You knew Beowulf?

BARD. I did.

PATRON 1. What was he like?

BARD. He was exactly as I describe him in the tale, yet entirely different. Noble yet savage, courageous yet careful, wise yet ignorant beyond his years. He was fact and fiction so deeply interwoven that fiction became fact, and fact became fiction.

PATRON 2. I don't get it.

BARD. We were traveling companions, Beowulf and I. Dare I say, we even became friends at the end.

PATRON 2. Did he really fight monsters?

PATRON 3. There's no such thing as monsters!

BARD. Monsters are everywhere, my friend. They go by many names.

PATRON 3. So the tale really is true then?

BARD. Truth, fiction ... reality is found somewhere in the middle. But I can tell you that the true story of Beowulf is far more interesting than the tale I sang into history.

PATRON 1. I don't believe you.

BARD. You believe what you think is true.

PATRON 1. Then let us hear it!

BARD. You want to hear the true story of Beowulf?

(The PATRONS cheer.)

BARD *(cont'd, with a flourish)*. Then grab another flagon and make yourselves comfortable, my friends! I'm about to regale you with a story of men and women and monsters! A tale of bravery and romance! An epic epic about a warrior by the name of ... Beowulf!

SCENE 2

(As the BARD speaks, the PATRONS rearrange the benches around the stage, transforming the space into a town square. The PATRONS also change their wardrobe and become VILLAGERS.)

BARD. We were brought together by circumstance, Beowulf and I, walking from village to village across the frozen lands of gnomes and trolls: Scandinavia! Life was difficult. We

lived from hand to mouth—my hand, his mouth—depending on the kindness or naiveté of strangers. One fateful morning, we crossed the sea to Denmark, the land of the Danes, arriving at a nameless village not found on any map.

(As the BARD speaks, the VILLAGERS gather around to listen.)

BARD *(cont'd)*. *So that is the story of Balcron the ogre.*

He's a little bit dead; we're a little bit older.

*But Beowulf, the future king, did not emerge the same,
His fight with Balcron changed him, changed the entire
game.*

*He once strode the world on ego, words of him held sway.
But blood on his hands, some shed by him, wiped the words
away.*

*The crowd still cheered, reveling around him.
The people he saved began to surround him.
But he thought of the kill, the act that had crowned him.
He thought of the fight, and the weariness ground him*

*Down, and he fell to his knees and he bowed.
His collapse drew a quiet gasp from the crowd,
But the hero dug deep, a warrior proud
He stood ... and raised his arms to the clouds,*

AND GAVE HIS IMMORTAL CRY ...

*"I am Beowulf, the Axe of Man.
I cannot be defeated, I AM this land!"
He accepted their love.
And moved on.*

(The VILLAGERS applaud.)

BEOWULF enters unseen. He wears a large cloak that makes him look broad-shouldered and heroic. He lugs two pieces of luggage and sets them down tiredly. He exits.)

VILLAGER 1. Bravo! Bravo!

BARD. You're too kind.

VILLAGER 1. So what are you doing around these parts?

BARD. Why do you ask?

VILLAGER 2. We're the coast guard.

VILLAGER 3. It's our job to watch out for raiders.

VILLAGER 1. Dangerous raiders.

BARD. I bring no danger. I'm a bard, a singer of songs, schooled in ancient lore and precise meter. It's my job to recite the achievements and triumphs of great heroes.

VILLAGER 1. Like that Beowulf fellow you were just singing about.

VILLAGER 2. It's too bad a hero like this Beowulf fellow doesn't really exist.

(BEOWULF re-enters unseen. He lugs two bigger pieces of luggage and sets them down. He exits.)

BARD. Oh, but he does.

VILLAGER 3. There's a real Beowulf?

BARD. Oh, but there is.

VILLAGER 1. A real flesh and blood hero?

BARD. Oh, that's right. *(Perking up.)* Why? Are you in need of a hero?

VILLAGER 1. Maybe. But it's a pretty tall order.

BARD. Beowulf specializes in tall orders. The taller, the better. What's the matter? You got a witch in the woods? A bully bothering the village?

VILLAGER 2. In a way ...

BARD. Consider him gone. And Beowulf's not picky about the work, either. You need to get raccoons out of your shed? Done. Hornet nest under your front porch? Piece of cake.

VILLAGER 3. I don't know ...

VILLAGER 2. This is pretty serious ...

VILLAGER 1. Does he have any experience fighting ogres?

BARD (*long beat, then laughing*). Ogres? (*Lying.*) Yes. Absolutely.

VILLAGER 2. And he knows how to use a sword?

BARD. Yes, siree. Long swords, short swords, two-handed swords, three-handed swords ... you name it, he's a master.

(The VILLAGERS coo.

BEOWULF re-enters unseen. He lugs two even bigger pieces of luggage and sets them down. He exits.)

VILLAGER 3. And is he strong? Like Thor?

BARD. He would squash Thor like a grape.

(The VILLAGERS gather together.)

VILLAGER 1. He must be the Chosen One—

VILLAGER 2. The gods have answered our prayers—

VILLAGER 3. Maybe this one will live!

BARD. What's that now?

VILLAGER 1. He sounds terrific.

VILLAGER 2. We want to meet this Beowulf.

VILLAGER 3. We want to see if he's as great and wonderful and strong as you say.

BARD. Oh, but he is. He'll be right here. He's parking the boat now.

VILLAGER 1. See, we don't get a lot of heroes around here.

VILLAGER 3. That's because they've all been eaten alive.

(Long beat.)

VILLAGER 2. What he means is, they're all gone.

VILLAGER 3. Right. Gone.

VILLAGER 1. But this Beowulf sounds like he's exactly what we need.

VILLAGER 2. We have an opportunity for him.

VILLAGER 3. A unique opportunity.

VILLAGER 1. One of a kind.

BARD. I know what "unique" means.

VILLAGER 1. We would reward him.

BARD. Reward?

VILLAGER 2. In gold.

VILLAGER 3. And food.

VILLAGER 1. An abundance of both.

BARD. Gold and food, you say?

VILLAGER 1. In abundance.

(The BARD studies the VILLAGERS. Finally, he notices someone approaching offstage. The BARD strums his lute.)

BARD. You're in luck! Here he comes now!

*Muscles like iron, biceps like boulders,
He heaves justice and courage across his broad shoulders.*

Legs like the trunks of trees, sculpted calves 'neath sculpted knees,

Beowulf, Great Geat, the Axe of Man!

(BEOWULF enters, dragging a steamer trunk onto the stage.)

BEOWULF. Good gods, that's a steep hill! Hey Bard, how about helping me with the luggage next time?

VILLAGER 1. There he is! Beowulf, the great hero! Look at those shoulders!

VILLAGER 2. How strong! How magnificent!

VILLAGER 3. A man among men!

(BEOWULF removes his cloak and stretches. Underneath the cloak, BEOWULF is woefully below average and out of shape. The VILLAGERS are disappointed.)

VILLAGER 1. Or maybe not.

VILLAGER 2. I thought he'd be ... *(Flexing muscles.)* you know ...

VILLAGER 3. He does look a bit unhealthy, doesn't he?

BARD *(quickly)*. Beowulf, this is the coast guard. Coast guard, meet Beowulf, Beowulf of the Geat clan.

BEOWULF. Hello, Norsemen!

(The VILLAGERS respond with halfhearted "hellos.")

BARD. These fine fellows are in need of some assistance in the village.

BEOWULF. Oh really?

VILLAGER 1. But we're looking for someone ... How do I say this? "In shape."

BEOWULF. What's that supposed to mean?

BARD (*quickly*). Looks can be deceiving. Yes, his body may resemble a poorly packed potato sack, but underneath that flab is solid muscle. In fact, I saw him wrestle a bear once.

VILLAGER 3. Was the bear after his dessert?

BEOWULF. Now see here—

VILLAGER 1 (*to BEOWULF*). So you've fought an ogre before?

BEOWULF (*laughs*). An ogre? (*Looks at the BARD, who nods; suddenly serious.*) I sure have. Kicked him in the rump and sent him on his way, I did. (*Beat.*) I'm stronger than I look.

(*BEOWULF starts flexing.*)

VILLAGER 2 (*pointing*). Then tear out that tree stump over there.

(*BEOWULF stops flexing.*)

BEOWULF. Oh. I could easily, but I just carried the luggage up that hill, and ... it's a pretty steep hill ... I mean, look at it ...

VILLAGER 3. Uh-huh.

VILLAGER 2. Thor could tear out that tree stump.

BEOWULF. I never said I was bloody Thor, now, did I?

VILLAGER 1. Give us a moment.

(*The VILLAGERS gather together.*)

VILLAGER 1 (*cont'd*). I don't think he's the Chosen One—

VILLAGER 2. The gods hate us—

VILLAGER 3. I better get started on that grave.

VILLAGER 1. Hang on. He might make a sport of it.

VILLAGER 2. True. King?

VILLAGER 3. King.

VILLAGER 1 (*to BEOWULF*). We've discussed it, and we've decided that you should meet the king.

BEOWULF (*perking up*). The king?

VILLAGER 1. King Hrothgar.

VILLAGER 2. You're in his kingdom. He may have need of you.

VILLAGER 3. We'll be right back.

(The VILLAGERS exit. The BARD turns to BEOWULF.)

BEOWULF. The king! Did you hear that, Bard? We're going to meet a king! (*Beat.*) What's wrong?

BARD. Would it kill you to do a few sit-ups once in a while?

BEOWULF. What's the matter? Didn't you hear what he said? King Hrothgar might have need of us. What was that part about an ogre, anyway?

BARD. I don't know. It's probably some hairy drunk passed out in a bar.

BEOWULF. That doesn't sound too bad.

BARD. Don't get your hopes up. He'll probably want us to muck out the royal latrines next.

BEOWULF. At least we'll be fed. I'll muck out anything for a bit of bread and soup these days. (*Looking around.*) What a godforsaken place this is. Gods, I just want to go home.

BARD. We can't go home, remember? Not until you're a hero. Your father's orders.

BEOWULF. My father! What kind of father kicks his son out of the kingdom and tells him not to come back until he's a hero?

BARD. You're right. I expected more from a Viking king.

BEOWULF. Besides, I've done heroic things.

BARD. Like what?

BEOWULF. I gave that beggar a copper coin last week.

BARD. That was charitable, not heroic. And not enough to put in a song.

BEOWULF. I held the door open for that old man the other day.

BARD. That was polite, not heroic. No one sings about common courtesy.

BEOWULF. What about helping that old woman? Gutters don't clean themselves, you know.

BARD. That was helpful, not heroic. And definitely not enough for your father.

BEOWULF. Just you watch. I'm going to become a hero, Bard. And then we're going home.

BARD. And you'll do that by ... ?

BEOWULF. By following the heroic code: courage, honor and loyalty.

BARD. And how many have you marked off the list so far?

BEOWULF. Zero. But I've decided to maintain a positive attitude!

BARD (*sarcastically*). That sounds promising. Have you seen my notebook?

BEOWULF. It's in one of the bags.

(The BARD roots through a bag and pulls out a notebook and quill. He sits down and thinks.

On the other side of the stage, GUNBORG and AESCHERE enter. GUNBORG is dressed as a warrior. BEOWULF spots her and watches. The BARD does not see them.

AESCHERE reads from a book. GUNBORG practices sword forms and strikes like a samurai warrior.)