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Dramatic Publishing

JACK FROST

by

JAMES STILL

Freely adapted from a Russian folk tale



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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**For James Larson
with respect and thanks**

JACK FROST premiered at The Emmy Gifford Children's Theater in Omaha, Neb., on November 27, 1990. Direction was by Kevin Ehrhart. The cast was:

MARTHA Tracy Iwersen
VOLGA Roberta Larson
LISABETA Robyn Munger
NASTASIA, LEG CREATURE Amy Kunz
FEDOR IVANOVITCH, STATUE, BIRD . . . Michael Wilhelm
JACK FROST Kevin Barratt

JACK FROST was a winner of the American Alliance for Theatre & Education's Unpublished Play Contest.

JACK FROST

A Play in One Act
For 2 Men and 4 Women

CHARACTERS

MARTHA

VOLGA

LISABETA

NASTASIA / LEG CREATURE

FEDOR IVANOVITCH / STATUE / BIRD

JACK FROST

SETTING: A small village, a long time ago.

JACK FROST

SCENE ONE

AT RISE: *Darkness. Far away there is the music of a balalaika. It is a sad sound, mysterious, beautiful. The lights slowly creep up to reveal shadows. In the shadows we see the figures of a MAN and a WOMAN who are adoring a baby wrapped in blankets. The sound of a young woman's voice narrates the action. The voice is calm, distant.*

WOMAN'S VOICE. ...and they adore the child. They look into the child's eyes which shine like jewels in autumn. They touch the child's face which is soft like echoes. The child breathes easily, innocent like the cool dirt far below the earth's surface. They hold the child up to the light—to see if it will reflect their own images of themselves. And the child laughs. (*Sounds of baby's laughter.*) And the mother holds the child close so that she can better feed the child. And the child drinks. But the mother is weak. And can barely keep her eyes open. So the father takes the child into his arms and the child is suddenly very heavy. The mother disappears. The baby begins to cry. (*Sounds of baby's cry.*) And the father, who is lonely now, tosses the baby high into the air to see if she can see any gold in the clouds... (*The MAN throws the blankets into the air.*)

(The lights immediately go to full. The music stops, the mother and father FIGURES are gone. We are in the interior of a small house. The blankets have landed in the hands of MARTHA—a young woman who is on her knees in a corner. VOLGA is watching MARTHA very closely. VOLGA is dressed in many layers of dark fabrics. Her hair flies from her face. Her movements are quick and frightening.)

VOLGA. Daydreaming again, Martha?

MARTHA. Just thinking.

VOLGA. Think about your work. *(VOLGA exits. MARTHA looks around to see if VOLGA is really gone. She checks the window, the doors. Finally she is convinced that she is safe and is about to sit on a bench when:)*

VOLGA *(offstage)*. I don't hear you working, MARTHA! *(MARTHA jumps back to her scrubbing and works in a mad fury.)*

MARTHA *(to herself, in the same voice that narrated the opening)*. After her mother died, and her father went off to war, the child ended up in the hands of an awful witch who made her work like a slave. There was no gold in the clouds.

VOLGA *(offstage)*. Did you say something, Martha?

MARTHA *(under her breath)*. The jewels in her eyes turned to stone and her breath became heavy like August. She saw no way to escape. *(She scrubs even harder—taking out her anger on the floor.)*

(VOLGA enters and watches MARTHA scrubbing.)

VOLGA. You are to SCRUB the floor, Martha—not destroy it!

MARTHA (*stops*). I forgot where I was.

VOLGA. Shall I remind you?

MARTHA (*looking into VOLGA's eyes*). I suddenly remembered.

VOLGA. Good. If you're finished there—are you finished there?

MARTHA. Yes.

VOLGA. Fine. There are apples that need to be peeled. And more clothes to be washed. Lisabeta and Nastasia are napping. When they are awake, they will need you to wash their hair. My daughters have lovely hair, don't you think?

MARTHA. Lovely.

(LISABETA and NASTASIA enter. They do not have lovely hair.)

VOLGA. Speaking of beauty. Did my pigeons have a lovely nap?

LISABETA & NASTASIA (*without feeling*). Lovely.

LISABETA. Is it time to eat, Mama?

VOLGA. Soon.

NASTASIA. What's for dinner?

VOLGA. Martha has a lovely meal planned, isn't that right, Martha?

MARTHA. Lovely. (*A loud gust of wind blows outside the house. LISABETA and NASTASIA shiver.*)

LISABETA. It's cold in here.

NASTASIA. My toes are freezing.

VOLGA. Sounds as though we're about to have a visitor.

LISABETA (*brightens*). A visitor?

NASTASIA. Is he a handsome prince?

LISABETA. Does he ride a beautiful white horse?

NASTASIA. And wear gold and silver?

VOLGA (*laughs*). He is an ugly old man with a wrinkled face and breath as cold as ice. His name is Frost. Jack Frost.

LISABETA. Oh, him.

NASTASIA. I hate being cold.

VOLGA. I know, my pet. Martha, maybe you should go out for more firewood.

MARTHA. Now?

VOLGA. NOW! If you hurry, I'm sure you can have dinner on the table at the usual time. Well run along. And don't go too far from the house. And don't talk to any strangers. And Martha: don't try to run away again. (*MARTHA looks at her, pulls on an old coat and gloves and runs out.*)

SCENE TWO

(Moments later and MARTHA is outside. She half-heartedly gathers small pieces of wood. Balalaika music begins to play from a distance. She pauses to listen as the music gets nearer. She closes her eyes, hums along and begins to dance with herself. She dances faster and faster until she whirls herself dizzy and falls to the ground out of breath.)

MARTHA (*in a loud whisper*). Fedor! Fedor Ivanovitch! You play your music too quickly! (*Laughs.*) I can't keep up!

(FEDOR appears, as if out of nowhere.)

FEDOR But you said you wanted to dance.

MARTHA. I said I wanted to dance SLOWLY.

FEDOR. You need a partner to dance slowly, Martha. *(They look at one another)*

MARTHA *(quickly)*. Anyway, I'm a terrible dancer.

FEDOR. No, you're a terrible liar. You're a wonderful dancer.
(He moves toward her as if to dance.)

MARTHA. We don't have much time. If I'm not back soon Volga will send her two monsters after me. She's been watching me like a hawk.

FEDOR. Run away with me. We can escape from here.

MARTHA. And if she catches us—I can't even think about it. She's capable of awful things, Fedor. There is a darkness in her eyes. I've seen it. It's bottomless.

FEDOR. Listen to me: you and I will dance quietly across the fields to the crackling sounds of the forest. Do you hear it?

MARTHA. Yes. And when we are far, far away—I will ask you to play your balalaika *(He does.)* and we will dance slowly and all my dreams will be sweet.

FEDOR. Martha, we have to run away.

MARTHA. No! If she catches us—and she will catch us—I'll never see you again. We have to do this carefully. *(Laughs.)* Maybe I should ask you to dinner and we could casually announce to Volga that you and I plan to run away and marry and never see her again.

FEDOR. You're giving up.

MARTHA. I'm NOT giving up. I'll have dinner with you, Fedor.

FEDOR. When?

MARTHA. Soon.

FEDOR. Martha!

MARTHA. I hear someone coming.

FEDOR. Remember that I am always close. Listen to my music. I am always thinking of you.

(He disappears and we hear his music, it is slow. MARTHA dances slowly with herself. She is lost in thought. LISABETA and NASTASIA enter dressed in many layers of warm clothes.)

LISABETA. You're supposed to be gathering wood for the fire, Martha.

MARTHA *(jumps)*. I was. I am. I—

NASTASIA. If Mama were to see you prancing around like a princess, her teeth would itch with anger.

MARTHA. Please don't tell her. *(Picking up the wood.)*
I've collected almost enough wood for a lovely fire. And dinner will be ready exactly when you like it.

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Promise?

MARTHA. Promise.

LISABETA. I don't know if we can trust you.

MARTHA. What do you mean?

NASTASIA.. We need proof of your honesty.

MARTHA. Proof?

LISABETA. Your old gloves will do.

MARTHA. But it's cold—

NASTASIA. And your old coat.

MARTHA. You have coats.

LISABETA. Make up your mind, Martha.

MARTHA. Why are you doing this?

LISABETA. You think you're so beautiful.

MARTHA. What?

NASTASIA. You think you're so much better than us.

MARTHA. What are you talking about?

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Give us the coat and gloves.

MARTHA. And if I don't?

LISABETA & NASTASIA. If you don't?

MARTHA. If I don't! (*LISABETA and NASTASIA whisper to each other, then:*)

LISABETA. We report to Mama about your lazy streak that stretches from here to the middle of the forest.

NASTASIA. And Mama will think up a wonderful punishment.

LISABETA. Perhaps it will be buttering my toast three hundred and thirty-two times—if that is what I require.

NASTASIA. Or finding fresh, juicy strawberries beneath the new-fallen snow because you KNOW how much I adore strawberries.

LISABETA. And cream! You can go out and find the cow to make the cream.

MARTHA (*looks at them*). I told you. There's almost enough wood for a fire and I'll have dinner on the table.

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Martha.

MARTHA. You can have these awful gloves. (*She throws them on the ground.*) And the coat too. I hope I freeze to death!

NASTASIA. Well.

LISABETA. You don't have to be so sensitive.

MARTHA. Just leave me alone. (*The balalaika music begins again.*)

LISABETA. Not HIM again!

NASTASIA. Doesn't he ever shut up?

LISABETA. Doesn't he ever get tired of hearing himself?

MARTHA. I don't.

LISABETA & NASTASIA. What?

MARTHA. I never get tired of hearing his music. I think it's beautiful.

LISABETA. Martha! Jewels are beautiful.

NASTASIA. Long velvet capes are beautiful.

LISABETA. Castles with thrones are beautiful.

NASTASIA (*hushed, carried away*). Queens are beautiful.
(*Pause, they listen to the music and a mistake is made.*)

LISABETA. THAT is not beautiful.

MARTHA. It's very ... human.

NASTASIA. The boy who plays the balalaika is not human. I heard he's a half-wit.

MARTHA. He's not!

LISABETA. I heard he mumbles.

MARTHA. He's shy.

NASTASIA. I heard he trips over his own feet.

MARTHA. He's awkward.

LISABETA. I heard he laughs at the drop of a hat.

MARTHA. He has a sense of humor.

NASTASIA (*suddenly*). How do you know these things?

MARTHA. I heard them.

LISABETA. What did you hear?

NASTASIA. What exactly did you hear?

MARTHA. I heard his name.

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Martha!

MARTHA. I heard it's a dignified name.

LISABETA. (*sudden interest*). Dignified?

NASTASIA. How dignified?

MARTHA. Majestic.

LISABETA & NASTASIA (*in a hush*). Majestic.

MARTHA. I can hardly say it.

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Say it!

MARTHA. The words are lined with silver and gold.

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Martha!

MARTHA. When you say his name, a symphony plays in the heavens.

LISABETA. Martha!

NASTASIA. Tell us!

MARTHA. I don't know if I should. I don't know if I can trust you.

LISABETA. Of course you can trust us.

MARTHA. I'll need something as proof of your honesty.

NASTASIA. Anything.

MARTHA *(to LISABETA)*. That coat. *(To NASTASIA.)* Those gloves. *(They start to give her the old coat and gloves.)* No. Not those. Those. *(She points to their nice coat and gloves, holds her breath wondering if she's gone too far. LISABETA and NASTASIA look at each other and then quickly take off the coat and gloves.)*

LISABETA. Here.

NASTASIA. Here.

LISABETA. Now tell us.

MARTHA. His name is Fedor Ivanovich. *(LISABETA and NASTASIA nearly faint at the sound of his name.)*

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Fedor Ivanovitch.

MARTHA. Fedor Ivanovitch.

LISABETA. It's a beautiful name.

NASTASIA. Exquisite.

LISABETA. And he is so handsome.

NASTASIA. Princely.

MARTHA. And mysterious...

LISABETA. Mysterious?

NASTASIA. How mysterious?

MARTHA. Intensely mysterious.

LISABETA & NASTASIA (*seduced*). Oh.

MARTHA. And secretive.

LISABETA. Secretive?

MARTHA. Private.

NASTASIA. Private?

MARTHA. Captivating.

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Yes. Captivating.

MARTHA. Fingers that are nimble on the balalaika. And he is a graceful dancer—flinging out his heels, laughing at the moonlight.

LISABETA. Perhaps he is the son of a king!

NASTASIA. Yes!

LISABETA. Fedor Ivanovich.

NASTASIA. It has a lovely ring to it. Fedor Ivanovitch.

LISABETA. Like music.

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Fedor Ivanovich.

MARTHA. He smiled at me.

LISABETA & NASTASIA (*out of their reverie*). He WHAT?

MARTHA. He smiled in my direction.

NASTASIA. Did he ask you your name?

MARTHA. Yes.

LISABETA. Did you tell him your name?

MARTHA. Yes.

NASTASIA. Did he say anything else?

MARTHA. No.

LISABETA & NASTASIA. Ha!

MARTHA. But he looked at me with kind eyes. (*NASTASIA and LISABETA look at each other*)

LISABETA. Why hasn't he talked to me?

NASTASIA. Why hasn't he looked at ME with kind eyes?

MARTHA. You said you didn't like him.