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The Pretenders

A new version by
CHARLES EDWARD POGUE

Translated and adapted from the work of
HENRIK IBSEN

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CHARLES EDWARD POGUE

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(THE PRETENDERS)

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The Pretenders had its first staged readings before an audience on July 10 and July 18, 2015, during the Bluegrass Playwrights Showcase presented by Studio Players Theatre in Lexington, Ky., directed by Julieanne Pogue.

Cast:

HAAKON HAAKONSON	Adam Luckey
INGA.....	Lisa Thomas
DAGFINN.....	Eric Johnson
EARL SKULE	Charles Edward Pogue
RAGNHILD.....	Allie Darden
SIGRID	Lisa Thomas
MARGRETE.....	Laura Blake Bowling
BISHOP NICHOLAS	Carmen Geraci
GREGORIOUS JONSSON	James Hamblin
PAUL FLIDA.....	Terry Withers
VEGARD VAERADAL.....	Shayne Brakefield
PETER	Shayne Brakefield
INGEBORG.....	Allie Darden
JATGEIR.....	Carmen Geraci
BARD BRATTE	Eric Johnson
FATHER VILIAM	Eric Johnson
CITIZENS & VOICES	Ensemble

The Independent Shakespeare Company presented a staged reading in Los Angeles on Jan. 28, 2017. It was directed by Joseph Culliton.

Cast:

HAAKON HAAKONSONDaniel Jimenez
INGA..... Elizabeth Dennehy
DAGFINN..... Bruce Katzman
SKULE..... William Elsmen
RAGNHILD.....Bernadette Sullivan
SIGRID Betsy Reiz
MARGRETE.....Lovelie Liquigan
BISHOP NICHOLAS David Melville
GREGORIOUS JONSSON Nikhil Pai
PAUL FLIDA..... Faqir Hassan
VEGARD VAERADAL..... Jose Acain
PETER Erwin Tuazon
INGEBORG.....Bernadette Sullivan
JATGEIR..... David Melville
BARD BRATTE Jose Acain
FATHER VILIAM Jose Acain
CITIZENS & VOICESEnsemble

The Pretenders

CHARACTERS

HAAKON HAAKONSON: Elected king of Norway.

INGA: His mother.

DAGFINN THE PEASANT: His marshal.

EARL SKULE

RAGNHILD: His wife.

SIGRID: His sister.

MARGRETE: His daughter.

BISHOP NICHOLAS

GREGORIOUS JONSSON: Adherent to SKULE.

PAUL FLIDA: Adherent to SKULE.

VEGARD VAERADAL: Adherent to HAAKON.

PETER: A monk.

INGEBORG: His mother.

JATGEIR: A skald.

BARD BRATTE: Adherent to SKULE.

FATHER VILIAM: A chaplain and physician.

CITY FATHER: A citizen of Nidaros.

WIFE

NEWCOMER: A citizen of Nidaros.

NUNS

CITIZENS

OFFSTAGE VOICES

SETTING

Norway, in the first half of the thirteenth century.

DOUBLING

With judicious doubling, this play can be performed by a cast of twelve—eight men and four women—despite the nineteen speaking parts listed. Characters like Vegard Vaeradal, Father Viliam, Jatgeir, Ingeborg and Bard Bratte only appear in one or two scenes, or one half of the play. Potential suggestions include doubling Bishop Nicholas with Jatgeir and Ragnhild with Ingeborg. Vegard Vaeradal could also play Father Viliam and Bard Bratte. The non-speaking nuns in the first scene and the small citizen roles in the second half of the play could be easily doubled by any of the actors not present in those scenes.

Conversely, producing organizations with larger casts can assign each speaking role individually, and are welcome to fill the stage with extra non-speaking roles such as attendants, soldiers and priests as they see fit.

GHOST SCENE

The author has provided a note about Bishop Nicholas' ghost scene at the back of the playbook.

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON THE "GHOST" SCENE

There seems to be two minds about the second to last scene in the play, where the ghost of Bishop Nicholas appears to Skule. William Archer, in the introduction to his translation of the play, refers to the scene as, "The great and flagrant artistic blemish," "A sheer excrescence," "Indefensible, but, at the same time, fortunately negligible." Others have embraced this rather no-mincing-of-words opinion of the scene. But Ibsen scholar and translator, Michael Meyer, holds an opposite view and defends the scene, saying, "It is, in fact superbly effective if properly done and restores the balance temporarily upset by the bishop's death" in the first half of the play.

I find myself somewhere between these two adamant assessments and can see value and validity in both points of view. I agree with Meyer that it goes some way in restoring the balance by bringing us another scene with a delicious character who, due to the demands of the plot, departed from us too soon. Still I doubt I would find it "superbly effective" even if "properly done." As written, at least in the translations I've read, the rhymed doggerel the bishop recites comes off almost like a vaudeville turn and the shift into supernatural, other-wordliness seems to take the play into another sphere.

So in my brazen arrogance (and probably ignorance), I've whittled the scene to the bone, jettisoned the dubious poetry, and have tried, as an old director of mine used to put it, to "get to the grapes" or the dramatic crux of the scene ... at least what I think is the dramatic crux in my version of it (even if it still plays a bit like a vaudeville turn). I've suggested that rather than a ghostly visitation, this moment is more an hallucinatory delusion of Skule's tormented conscience. It

might even be interpreted as a waking dream. I leave it to directors and performers to flail their own way through it.

But for those who agree with Archer's "blemish" dismissal and just want to shave a few minutes off the play, it can be entirely excised by starting the cut on page 111. Resume at Paul Flida's entrance on page 113, so the scene plays as follows:

SKULE. It binds me. Like hellfire. I can't breathe! Can't breathe.

(He wakes, dazed, and slips his cassock off. PAUL FLIDA enters, wearing a monk's cowl. SKULE looks up. In the mist, he only sees a hooded shadow.)

SKULE *(cont'd)*. The shadows of dead men! No! No! Go back!

The Pretenders

ACT I

SCENE ONE

(A fire pit glows in a churchyard. BISHOP NICHOLAS' face thrusts over the flame, gleaming almost demonically in the eerie light. With a pair of tongs, he pulls a white hot crucifix of iron from the fire.)

BISHOP NICHOLAS. The iron!

(Lights up to reveal the witnesses to the Ordeal of Iron for INGA. An older woman, she stands to one side of BISHOP NICHOLAS. Beside her is VEGARD VAERADAL, a thane. Behind them, flanking either side of the fire are two NUNS with long wooden staves.

The EARL SKULE and his two thanes, PAUL FLIDA and GREGORIOUS JONSSON, watch the proceedings from one side of the churchyard. From the opposite side, DAGFINN THE PEASANT watches with HAAKON HAAKONSSON, INGA's son.)

BISHOP NICHOLAS *(cont'd)*. Inga of Varteig! Bear it on behalf of your son, Haakon Haakonsson, the pretender.

(INGA grasps the crucifix in both hands. It sizzles. She sags, but utters no sound. VEGARD VAERADAL moves to steady her, but BISHOP NICHOLAS motions him back, simultaneously commanding the nuns.)

BISHOP NICHOLAS (*cont'd*). The count!

(The NUNS pound the floor with their staffs in a measured nine-count as INGA walks forward. BISHOP NICHOLAS and VEGARD VAERADAL follow behind her.)

GREGORIOUS JONSSON. Pray to sainted King Olaf to uphold your rights, Lord Skule.

SKULE (*deprecatingly brushing the request away*). He'd hardly welcome such vain distractions now.

DAGFINN. Pray to God, Haakon, he sustain your mother.

HAAKON. No need to pray for justice from a just God.

PAUL FLIDA (*to SKULE*). Your fate and ours dangle on this ...

SKULE. The fate of Norway ...

(The NUNS reach their count. The ordeal is done. INGA falls to her knees and drops the iron, thrusting out her hands for all to see.)

INGA. God hold my truth bright as the hot iron these hands have held.

VEGARD VAERADAL (*examining INGA's hands*). Unblemished! Fair and white as before. Christ has protected the innocent hands of Inga, mother of our king!

(As the NUNS retrieve the iron and exit, BISHOP NICHOLAS slides past SKULE, whispering to him.)

BISHOP NICHOLAS. I warned you not to demand this, earl. Now the iron has scalded you.

SKULE. Not so, bishop. The holy ordeal rings with God's voice declaring Haakon of regal blood.

(BISHOP NICHOLAS smiles at him, then softly laughs.)

BISHOP NICHOLAS. And you and others have called his mother a witch. A witch may entice a man to her bed or withstand an ordeal ...

(SKULE starts to object.)

BISHOP NICHOLAS *(cont'd, cutting off SKULE's objection)*. Holy or not ... Salves, ointments, incantations will hold back blisters. But other things fester.

(He smiles and moves off, leaving SKULE uneasy. INGA, still on her knees, bows to HAAKON as he approaches. He gently raises her up.)

HAAKON. No ... I should kneel to you. *(Kneels and kisses the palms of her hands.)* I was against this. But you insisted and from the moment of your choice until now, the thought of the iron that questioned your honor and mine seared my heart with revulsion. And your sacrifice makes it soar with pride. It is done and you have proved what never needed to be proved. No reward can repay such a deed, you most blessed woman.

INGA *(raising him up)*. Your life will be my reward, my son. You will be king and a great one.

DAGFINN. There are those who should look on this noble woman and blush with shame. Her word was never doubted until some found it in their interest to doubt.

PAUL FLIDA. Whispers of doubt have hissed in the halls of the late King Inge ever since Haakon was hauled through them as a babe and hailed as heir to the throne.

GREGORIOUS JONSSON. And last winter, the whispers swelled to a roar of doubt echoing across the land.

HAAKON. And so I have humbled myself and submitted to indignities no other king-elect has had to endure. I do not seek

to know how hissing whispers grew, as the earl's men say, to roars. But now both are silenced by the bravery of this woman.

DAGFINN. There'd have been no humbling, if my counsel had been heeded. Cold steel, not hot iron, would have silenced the king's enemies.

HAAKON. Enough, Dagfinn. No need to brandish the blade when the battle is done.

SKULE. Yes, curb your faithful hound, Haakon, and let him learn from his master's modesty. Every man who counters a king is not his enemy. His worst enemy is the one who convinces him not to prove his claim.

HAAKON. The claim is proved and only at such a dear price because duty demands and the matter must be settled. More insidious whispers slide through the land. Other roars echo over the mountains and across the fjords. Whispers and roars rumbling with unrest and civil war. Norway needs a king! Being king is more than having a claim or wearing a crown. It is a calling. I am not as modest as you think. For my calling burns brazen within me. Its light fills my soul, its heat fires my thoughts. And I know Norway's destiny and know that I am the only man destined to forge it.

SKULE (*unsettled, almost frightened*). No modesty at all! Others might dare think they could rule as well as you.

HAAKON. I did not say rule ...

SKULE. You did not have to when you set yourself above all others. But I am the late King Inge's brother. And the law may well uphold my right as his successor.

HAAKON. The succession was settled the day King Inge acknowledged me as King Sverre's grandson and heir. He held the kingdom in trust for me. Now the assembly must confirm it. Too long my hands and hope have been shackled. Today I smash the chains.

BISHOP NICHOLAS. You run a little ahead of yourself,
Lord Haakon.

DAGFINN. King Haakon!

(VEGARD VAERADAL holds DAGFINN back.)

HAAKON. How so, Bishop Nicholas?

SKULE. All claimants to the crown long to be loosed of their constraints. Guthorm the Bastard and Sigurd Ribbung will be in assembly to argue their rights. We all have held back, for none of us were sure how far our claims would carry us.

BISHOP NICHOLAS. The church, even as the state, has trembled in this turbulent time. Now saintly King Olaf's law will judge who are the pretenders and who will wear the crown.

DAGFINN. No more tricks and delays!

(Once more, DAGFINN goes for his sword. VEGARD VAERADAL and HAAKON hold him back. HAAKON turns back to BISHOP NICHOLAS and SKULE, seething.)

HAAKON. Let there be no misunderstanding here. The Ordeal of Iron has ended all dispute. Now the assembly must legally confirm the decision of the Orething six years ago when it elected me king.

PAUL FLIDA. No! We deny that!

GREGORIOUS JONSSON. The misunderstanding is yours!

(Again, DAGFINN must be physically restrained.)

BISHOP NICHOLAS. That was not the intention of this assembly here. The Ordeal of Iron ...

SKULE. Has not handed you a kingdom yet. Only established your legitimacy and the right to stand with the rest of us ... pretenders ... and argue your case.

HAAKON. In other words, for the last six years I have unlawfully reigned as king and, you, Earl Skule, just as unlawfully as my regent.

BISHOP NICHOLAS. Not at all. On King Inge's death, it was crucial that order was maintained and a peaceful transition secured through the designation of an heir.

SKULE. Your faction and the lungs of Dagfinn the Peasant bellowed through your election and plopped your young rump on the throne before the rest of us could set forth our claims.

BISHOP NICHOLAS. What Earl Skule so bluntly expresses is that your election was a temporary expediency. Giving you the uses of the kingly title ...

SKULE. But not the forever right to it.

BISHOP NICHOLAS. And many agree with the earl's contention. As well you know, Lord Haakon, both ordeal and this assembly have been discussed often enough, but the turmoil of the last years has always delayed them.

SKULE. But now the law must chose the lawful king. And if you thought all had been decided six years ago at the Orething, why did you submit to the ordeal today?

DAGFINN (*drawing his sword*). My sword will decide!

(PAUL FLIDA and GREGORIOUS JONSSON pull out their blades.)

SKULE. Back! Back! Sheathe your weapons!

HAAKON. You too, hothead!

(HAAKON and VEGARD VAERADAL hold DAGFINN back.)

DAGFINN. Why? When it can eliminate one pretender now!

HAAKON. Because I am not a pretender! And even as God has upheld my just cause here, so will the law. Let assembly be called.

(HAAKON and INGA exit, followed by VEGARD VAERADAL. SKULE and his adherents pass the scowling DAGFINN and BISHOP NICHOLAS as they leave, talking among themselves.)

GREGORIOUS JONSSON. Before the ordeal you paced like a wolf trapped in a pit. Now you smile as if your burdens had lightened.

SKULE. Did you see his eyes as he spoke. Such conviction. If I am not chosen king, for Norway's sake, let it be him.

PAUL FLIDA. But stand your ground. Other's fates are bound in yours.

SKULE. I will stand on my right. Even as he will stand on his. And now I will offer a prayer to Saint Olaf.

(They exit.)

BISHOP NICHOLAS. Things move apace, good Dagfinn. And so should you. You must be there to keep Earl Skule far from your master when Haakon is elected king.

(DAGFINN brightens at the hint and hurries off. BISHOP NICHOLAS smiles, claps his hands and barks a single triumphant laugh.)

SCENE TWO

(Palace Hall. Two noble women gaze out a large window. One is middle-aged—RAGNHILD, the wife of SKULE. The younger is MARGRETE, SKULE's daughter. She is very beautiful. A third woman, SIGRID, in dark clothes, fingers church beads, brooding at a table. She is SKULE's sister.)

MARGRETE. The churchyard is so crowded but seems so desolate.

SIGRID (*muttering to herself*). The desolation of death ... where bodies are buried ... and hopes. Mine were ...

MARGRETE. The men stand as grey and grim as the day. How the wind moans.

SIGRID. Mourning ... mourning for the death to come ...

RAGNHILD. Which way it blows will make a bitter day for some ... But it had to come. He could not be content on the edge of uncertainty. To stay as he is would never be enough.

SIGRID (*to herself*). And never will ...

MARGRETE. No, never enough to remain king in name only.

RAGNHILD. Of whom do you speak?

MARGRETE. Haakon.

RAGNHILD. I speak of the earl, your father.

MARGRETE (*sadly*). Yes ... that the two noblest men in the kingdom must be set against each other in this

RAGNHILD. Look at the pretender Sigurd Ribbung sitting there, hunched over his sword, his chin on the pommel, gnawing at his mustaches like a mange-ridden cur.

MARGRETE. Slit eyes and a slit smile.

RAGNHILD. Thin as his hopes. The wind will make more noise than the few who cry his claim. Dogs as foul as their master. Who speaks?

MARGRETE. Gunnar Grjonbak.

RAGNHILD. For your father?

MARGRETE. For the king.

RAGNHILD. There is no king.

MARGRETE. For Haakon.

RAGNHILD. I do not see the bastard Guthorm.

MARGRETE (*pointing him out*). Behind his men.

RAGNHILD. Ah, yes, shrunken down in that long cloak, as if hiding from the shame of his mother.

MARGRETE. Haakon need have no shame of his. Tord Skolle rises to speak.

RAGNHILD. For your father?

MARGRETE. For Haakon.

RAGNHILD. How still your father sits. I wish I could read his thoughts.

SIGRID (*to herself*). Black ... they are black ...

MARGRETE. Haakon also sits silently. But full of strength. A stranger watching could pick out the only two men worthy to rule.

RAGNHILD. What is Dagfinn dragging through the crowd? A golden chair for Haakon to sit on. The presumption! The arrogance.

MARGRETE. Paul Flida brings one for Father.

RAGNHILD. Just so! Haakon's men are trying to stop Paul Flida.

SIGRID (*raising her voice, almost in a moan*). Shameful!

RAGNHILD. Yes, Sigrid! And presumptuous! Haakon may think he's destined for a gold seat. But he is not more deserving than my husband.

SIGRID. Shameful that men crawl so low to ascend a throne so high.

MARGRETE. Haakon has stopped his men from interfering and sends his own golden chair away. He disdains his old seat and remains standing for the judgement of the election.

(*RAGNHILD pushes her daughter aside to get a better look.*)

RAGNHILD. And your father?

MARGRETE. He sits in his gilded seat. Look how tightly he clutches it.

SIGRID. Afraid to let go even if it topples upon him.

MARGRETE. How he sneers at Haakon and his faction.

RAGNHILD. At their presumption.

SIGRID. Like a dog snarling over a table scrap.

RAGNHILD. At their arrogance.

SIGRID. Snarling, snarling ... woof, woof ...

(The "woof, woofs" turn RAGNHILD.)

MARGRETE. Such a glare. Oh, look at his eyes, Mother.
His eyes.

SIGRID. Slits like Sigurd Ribbung's?

MARGRETE. Yes.

RAGNHILD. No!

SIGRID. Then pray.

RAGNHILD. Yes, pray he wins the crown. It will kill his soul
to be denied.

SIGRID. I will pray for my brother's soul.

(A commotion is heard outside.)

RAGNHILD. They shout!

MARGRETE. They've all risen.

RAGNHILD. The decision! Pray they have given all power
in the realm to Skule.

SIGRID *(muttering once more)*. None, none ... Or both his
and Norway's souls are doomed.

RAGNHILD *(going to her knees, praying)*. Blessed Saint
Olaf, honor him with this greatness and his greatness will
grow to touch all.

MARGRETE. They take the oath.

RAGNHILD. To whom? To whom do they swear? ... Speak!

MARGRETE (*turning from the window*). To Haakon. Haakon Haakonsson is our king.

(RAGNHILD turns away and takes a few faltering steps before she buckles. SIGRID has risen and is there to catch her. RAGNHILD softly weeps as SIGRID leads her from the hall. MARGRETE weeps too, but also smiles. HAAKON enters with INGA, DAGFINN and VEGARD VAERADAL, who deposits the armload of writing materials he carries on the table. BISHOP NICHOLAS enters. HAAKON sees MARGRETE. She curtsies.

MARGRETE (*cont'd*). My congratulations, lord king.

HAAKON (*gently raising her up*). A gracious welcome, Margrete. But my good fortune must displease you where your father is concerned.

MARGRETE. No, your majesty. My father's concerns are not mine. Your good fortune is Norway's. You were destined to be king.

HAAKON. A rough destiny. But God and Saint Olaf have always protected me. And my good friends. I was barely a year old when Dagfinn and others bore me over the mountains, through the snow and frost and the swords that sought my life. And again at Nidaros, I escaped the bloodletting, thanks to strong arms, loyal hearts and God's will.

MARGRETE. You have endured much.

(HAAKON has fallen to silent, bold appraisal of her. It uneases her.)

HAAKON. I wish you had made it less hard for me.

MARGRETE. I, milord?