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Black Beauty
An Autobiography of a Horse
(60-Minute Version)

By
JAMES STILL

From the novel by
ANNA SEWELL

Optional music by
ROBERTSON WITMER

Dramatic Publishing Company
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(BLACK BEAUTY [60-MINUTE VERSION])

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“First commissioned and produced by Seattle Children’s Theatre.”

For my dad
who has always had horses
and loved horses
and made sure I loved horses too.

And for my first horse—
a gentle buckskin named Lady,
who taught me about patience.
And how to ride.
But mostly about patience.

Also Sugar, Suzie-Q, Lady the Second, Prince, Pete, Pally,
Beauty, Dude, Rusty, Dusty, Domino and Appoggiatura, too.
You're all in this play because you had to be.
It was only a matter of time.

Black Beauty

(60-Minute Version)

CHARACTERS

BLACK BEAUTY: A black horse with a white star on his forehead.

YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY

MOTHER: Black Beauty's mother.

MERRYLEGS: A smaller and grumpier horse than Black Beauty.

GINGER: Reddish-colored horse, Black Beauty's friend.

MISTER GORDON: Black Beauty's first owner. Kind older man.

LITTLE JOE: Mister Gordon's grandson. Gentle.

FLORA: Mister Gordon's granddaughter.

YORK: An old groomsman.

REUBEN SMITH: A younger groomsman.

THE MISTRESS: A demanding owner.

CHARLES THE DOG

CAPTAIN: Cab horse, former war horse.

JERRY BARKER: Black Beauty's owner, a cab driver. Kind.

MRS. FOWLER: A passenger in Jerry's cab.

MARY BARKER: Jerry's wife.

DOLLY BARKER: Jerry's 12-year-old daughter.

HENRY BARKER: Jerry's 8-year-old son.

NICHOLAS SKINNER: Black Beauty's owner. Wicked.

JUSTICE: An old, white horse.

JOE: Little Joe grown up. Black Beauty's owner.

OTHERS: Children, Stable Worker, People of London, Little Boy, Colts.

PRODUCTION NOTES

CASTING: There is opportunity for expansion through nonspeaking roles such as the full moon, morning sun, smoke and clouds, among others.

MUSIC: Customers are encouraged to create their own music; however, optional music is also available for rent from Dramatic Publishing.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: An author's note describing the writing process and tips for performance can be found in the back of the book.

Black Beauty

(60-Minute Version)

(Full COMPANY of beautiful actors.)

COMPANY *(rhythmically reciting).*

As black as night with one white foot

A star upon my forehead

Make a wish, make two, make three:

My beautiful, beautiful Black Beauty ...

(Soft, deep, velvety darkness ... the head and neck of a horse stretches long over an opening of a stall from inside a dark stable. This horse is black with a white star marking his forehead ... looking at him makes you want to make a wish.

Now he looks out at us ... and us at him.

This is how we first meet BLACK BEAUTY. He is as curious about us as we are about him. This is a relationship we want to have. Now there is music; there has to be music. Nothing stuffy, something surprising. BLACK BEAUTY's mixtape.

Now there is a tiny window in the dark stable and through the window—a single star in the night sky.)

BLACK BEAUTY *(making a wish).*

As black as night with one white foot,

A star upon my forehead ...

(Now the tiny window gets bigger, and a gorgeous full moon shimmies and shimmers into view. Take a moment to let it dance.

BLACK BEAUTY stares up at the full moon, which yawns and stars tumble out of its mouth like jewels trying to find their way home.)

BLACK BEAUTY (*cont'd, urgent*).

*As black as night with one white foot
A star upon my forehead ...*

(BLACK BEAUTY is an audience of his own life. A dream, a memory, a story he tells himself when he can't go to sleep.)

BLACK BEAUTY (*cont'd, more urgent*).

*As black as night with one white foot
A star upon my forehead ...*

(The morning sun rises, playfully bumping the full moon out of the sky. Pink, orange and violet light spills over green and gold rolling meadows. And yes, it is as idyllic as it sounds.

Now far, far away, appearing over a hill as small as a dot—it's YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY! He is coming toward us at a gallop—trying to gallop—his enthusiasm more than making up for his wobbly legs. He's going faster and coming closer!)

YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY. Mama! Watch me! Watch me!
Watch me!

Watch how fast I can run!

See see see see see see seeeeeeeeeeee!

(MOTHER trots on, amused by her son's latest antics. YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY runs in a circle around MOTHER. It's a game that never gets old.)

YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY & MOTHER.

Horsey horsey don't you stop

Let your feet go clippity-clop

Clippity-clop, clippity-clop,

Clippity-clop, clippity-clop, clippity—

MOTHER. STOP!!

(YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY tries to stop, but his gangly legs get tangled up, and he falls to the ground.)

YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY. I run the fast-est! But when it comes to stopping, I am not the best-est.

MOTHER. Best—

YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY *(noting the word)*. Best.

MOTHER *(amused)*. You'll learn.

Get up, try again, always try again, always do your best.

YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY *(saying the word again)*. Best.

MOTHER. Never give up, Black Beauty. Never. Give. Up.

Always make that part of your story.

YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY. Part of my story?

YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY & BLACK BEAUTY.

What does that mean?

“Always make that part of my story”?

(Back in the stable under the full moon:

MERRYLEGS' head appears over the top of his stall, which is shorter to accommodate his smaller size. He is energetically dappled—a 19th-century Jackson Pollack painting.)

MERRYLEGS. You're talking in my sleep!

BLACK BEAUTY. I wasn't sleeping.

MERRYLEGS. No I was—you're talking in MY sleep, and you WOKE me UP!

(Cynical, mocking.) “Horsey horsey, don't you stop—”

BLACK BEAUTY. Let your feet go clippity-clop!

Clippity-clop! Clippity-clop!

That's a game we used to play when I was little, when I was a colt.

(MERRYLEGS blows air through his lips.)

BLACK BEAUTY *(cont'd)*. What do YOU remember—about being a colt?

MERRYLEGS *(the eternal grump)*. I remember nothing about that.

I never had time for fun and games.

BLACK BEAUTY. Clippity-clop, clippity-clop—

MERRYLEGS. Stop stop stop!

BLACK BEAUTY. Can I ask you a question?

MERRYLEGS. No!

BLACK BEAUTY. What was your mother like?

(GINGER's head appears over another half-stall.)

GINGER. Why all this TALK TALK TALK in the middle of the night??

BLACK BEAUTY *(to GINGER)*. Hello.

GINGER. Talk no more and eyes closed tight!

Good night! Good night! Good night!

(GINGER disappears back into her stall.)

MERRYLEGS. Psssst. Better be careful with that one.

They call her Ginger. But her full name is ...

(In the know.) “Ginger Snaps.”

BLACK BEAUTY. Ginger Snaps?

MERRYLEGS. She's been known to bite.

(GINGER's head suddenly reappears again, ears flattened in anger.)

GINGER. What did you call me??

BLACK BEAUTY. What was your mother like?

GINGER *(thrown by the tenderness)*. My mother?

Why are you asking me that?

I—I don't remember.

BLACK BEAUTY. You don't remember your mother?

GINGER. I'm not as young as you,

and I'm not as foolish!

And I don't have TIME to think about such things.

BLACK BEAUTY. No one has time here.

My mother is beautiful. And kind.

Mama's name is Duchess,

and her breath always smells like clover.

She lives on the farm where I grew up.

This morning we said, "Goodbye."

(BLACK BEAUTY'S MOTHER appears in the shadows.)

MOTHER. "Goodbye."

BLACK BEAUTY. This is my first night away from her.

(MOTHER teaching YOUNG BLACK BEAUTY the incantation:)

MOTHER. Know your story, Black Beauty.

Know who you are.

Know that YOU are a beautiful horse:

MOTHER (*cont'd*).

As black as night with one white foot

A star upon your forehead ...

BLACK BEAUTY & MOTHER. *Make a wish, make two, make three.*

MOTHER. *My beautiful, beautiful Black Beauty.*

GINGER. I never knew a horse who spent so much time WISHING and THINKING.

BLACK BEAUTY. Not just thinking.

Dreaming!

Remembering!

Remembering where I came from.

Why should horses have no pasts?

GINGER. I don't know. Maybe ... because—

(*Genuine.*) I don't know.

MERRYLEGS. Maybe because we have to grow up.

Quickly.

GINGER.

MERRYLEGS.

And then our owners

sell us to NEW owners—

Goodbye and hello,

who then sell us to new owners—

and goodbye and hello,

who then sell us to new owners—

and goodbye and—

BLACK BEAUTY. Hello. My name is Black Beauty.

And I want to remember where I come from!

I want to remember EVERYTHING.

I want to remember YOU and YOU.

I want to know my story.

GINGER. Your story?

BLACK BEAUTY. *“The True Life Story of a Horse Named Black Beauty.”*

MERRYLEGS. You aren’t old enough to have a life story!

BLACK BEAUTY (*bringing MERRYLEGS along*). *“The True Life Story of a Horse Named ... Merrylegs ...”*

(This seems to work some strange magic.)

MERRYLEGS. *“The True Life Story of a Horse Named ... Merrylegs ...”*

BLACK BEAUTY. *“The True Life Story of a Horse Named ... Ginger Snaps.”*

GINGER. Just Ginger.

BLACK BEAUTY. *“The True Life Story of a Horse Named ... Just Ginger.”*

(The three horses all look out at us—and for a moment, we are their dreams, we are their stories.

But then MERRYLEGS’ common sense wins out and abruptly breaks the spell.)

MERRYLEGS. I’ve known many a horse—
but never ever a horse
like YOU.

BLACK BEAUTY (*sincere*). Thank you.
I know you’re going to like me.

MERRYLEGS. Tomorrow we have to WORK.

And I need my sleep.

The grandchildren will be wanting to ride me all day long ...

They’ll be climbing all over me,

treating me like some modern machine

who never gets tired.

I hate children.

BLACK BEAUTY. You LOVE children.

MERRYLEGS. Good night, Black Beauty.

(MERRYLEGS disappears inside his stall.)

GINGER. He really does hate children.

(GINGER disappears inside her stall. BLACK BEAUTY looks up at the full moon and starts dreaming again.

Now it's weeks later. BLACK BEAUTY and GINGER are pulling a carriage driven by MISTER GORDON. BLACK BEAUTY wants to go faster.)

MISTER GORDON. Steady, there, Black Beauty ... as soon as we're out on the open road, we'll run that tickle right out of your feet.

(BLACK BEAUTY and GINGER continue pulling the carriage.)

BLACK BEAUTY *(to GINGER, nonstop)*. Where did you live before you lived here?

And how long have you been with Mister Gordon? Do you like your life here, Ginger?

GINGER. You and your questions.

BLACK BEAUTY. Do you?

GINGER. Well Mister Gordon is fine, and the stable is clean, and there's always plenty of food.

What more could I want?

BLACK BEAUTY. What about Liberty!?

GINGER. Liberty?

BLACK BEAUTY. It's week after week after month after month, and still we're standing in a stable waiting waiting waiting for when they might finally need us??

GINGER. Yes. And THAT is

“The True Life Story of Every Horse Who Ever Lived.”

BLACK BEAUTY. But I miss LIBERTY! I miss freedom!

GINGER. Do yourself a favor and forget all that—

BLACK BEAUTY. I don’t want to forget! I want to remember ...

large open fields where the grass tastes sweet
and feels so soft on our feet,
where a horse can fling up his head and toss up his tail,
where we can gallop at full speed,
and then give a loud, joyful—

*(BLACK BEAUTY excitedly shakes his head vigorously,
snorting joyfully and blowing air through his lips.)*

MISTER GORDON. Steady there, Black Beauty, steady now ...

GINGER. Careful, or you’ll get yourself punished.

BLACK BEAUTY. By Mister Gordon?

He knows it’s only play—

GINGER. Yes, he is a good man—but he is a man. And even a
good man can lose patience with a spirited horse.

BLACK BEAUTY. I just listen to the sound of his voice and
that tells me everything he wants from me.

GINGER. Have you never known a man to be cruel?

BLACK BEAUTY *(serious)*. Never.

GINGER. Never? I envy you, friend.

BLACK BEAUTY. Has that ever happened to you?

Someone was cruel?

Someone did awful things? Ginger?

(GINGER doesn’t answer.)

MISTER GORDON. Here we go now, giddyup, giddyup ...

BLACK BEAUTY (*playful*). Clippity-clop, clippity-clop ...

GINGER (*chuckling, in spite of herself*). Clippity-clop, clippity-clop ...

(The two horses pick up their pace, and the carriage disappears from view.

In another part of the farm, MERRYLEGS is surrounded by the enemy: a gaggle of playful, screaming CHILDREN—colorful tied ribbons dotting his mane and tail. It is pandemonium and every horse's nightmare.

Children are up, on and off his back; one scoots on her stomach under MERRYLEGS pretending to swim in a river, then turning over and doing a backstroke too; another one is tying a silly straw hat on MERRYLEGS' head; two of them are tying more ribbons in his mane, another is trying to braid his tail; one of them is whispering secrets in one of MERRYLEGS' ears.

LITTLE JOE is using a stick as a sword in battle.)

LITTLE JOE (*very dramatic*). “Forward the Light Brigade ... Charge!!”

CHILDREN. CHARGE!!

(MERRYLEGS is heroic, standing there trying not to flinch or stamp or shake or buck. Or scream. It is not easy being a horse in this play.

The stable later that night: One—two—three heads over their stalls.)

MERRYLEGS. So I just pitched him off backward and onto the grass—

BLACK BEAUTY. You bucked off the children??

MERRYLEGS. Not “the children”! The MONSTER.

GINGER (*translating*). The grandson.

MERRYLEGS. He was being cruel!

BLACK BEAUTY. But you bucked him off!?

MERRYLEGS. Oh now I made sure he wasn't really hurt.

No broken bones and not even a scratch.

BLACK BEAUTY. But he's just a boy.

GINGER. Mean boys grow up to be mean men.

BLACK BEAUTY. But what did he do, why did you buck him off?

MERRYLEGS. What did he DO??

Well it MIGHT have had something to do with him plucking a fistful of hair—from my TAIL!

And saying he wanted to make a bow to play the VIOLIN!

BLACK BEAUTY. Does he play the violin?

GINGER. Of course he doesn't play the violin!

MERRYLEGS. It was my TAIL!

But I galloped that boy up and down fields
and all about the orchard for at least a good hour.

He had cut a great stick for a sword,
and he laid that stick on like a whip till at last I thought,
“*Enough is enough.*”

GINGER. If I had been you, I would have given that boy a good kick or a bite, which would really teach him a lesson.

MERRYLEGS. Yes, that boy needed to be taught a lesson, and I did exactly that, in my own way.

(*MISTER GORDON enters the stable with LITTLE JOE, who hangs his head.*)

MISTER GORDON. All right, Little Joe. Do as I said now.

LITTLE JOE. But Grandfather—he's just a horse.