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For Jessie, a heromaker

Dramatis Personae

THE POET

BEOWULF

KING HROTHGAR / ENSEMBLE

UNFERTH / ENSEMBLE

QUEEN WEALTHEOW /WIGLAF / ENSEMBLE

KING HYGELAC / ENSEMBLE

GRENDDEL

GRENDDEL'S MOTHER

AESCHERE

MESSENGER

BOY

Setting

The mind of a poet on the cusp of silent unconsciousness.

Author's Note

After seeing and directing a few productions of this play, it's apparent to me that this script is best performed with minimal technical effects. In the ancient tradition of storytelling, this play relies solely on the voice and body of the ensemble to communicate its effect to an audience. In my opinion, the best productions of this play will focus on the language and seek to engage audiences in an honest fashion. This story is very fluid and flexible and resonates deeply within our collective human subconscious. My intent in this translation/adaptation was to stage a universally wondrous and epic tale in a very adaptable way, allowing ensembles and directors the space to make specific choices so that the script may resonate even more with their individual audience. It's a limber story, so stretch it as much as you see fit. But, at the heart of this project, it's important to remember that you're simply telling a story, creating a brief glimpse into the heart of heroes (or heroines). The musical elements and soundscapes of the play have varied from production to production, but have always been performed without recorded instrumentation or effects. The actors and directors should collaborate to find the best tones for the musical moments, ones that fit the world of their play.

Acknowledgments

Beowulf was commissioned and received its world premiere at Actor's Express Theatre (Gabriel Dean, Director) in Atlanta, Georgia in September of 2003. *Beowulf* subsequently toured through 2005 (Michelle Johnson, Director).

BEOWULF

translated and adapted by Gabriel Dean

Sequence 1

(darkness. indecipherable nightmare sounds. a breathing, heavy and inhumane. susurrations abound. noise like language is heard in the blackness, misunderstood mumblings from the text of the script. cutting, percussive sounds, harsh and metallic. there are nightmarish groans. a bird in the distance sighs deeply: she is lamenting.)

(a red light rises, and with it, the high voice of an ancient woman crescendos, eventually altogether diminishing the nightmare sounds. she is singing “The Grief of the Geat Woman.” her voice trembles harder and harder as the red light rises, piercing the eyes and ears of the audience. it is like being inside fire. two figures appear—one is BEOWULF, bloodied on the floor. the other, WIGLAF, enters anxiously, carrying a handful of treasure.)

(BEOWULF wears a high warrior’s battle gear—mail shirt, shield, sword, gold collar, and gilded helmet. sounds of the dying Dragon dance maniacally throughout the scene. the lights cross fade to a stark, institutional white.)

(“The Grief of the Geat Woman,” repeated offstage or recorded until the sequence is finished:

Wael-fylla worn, werudes egesan

Hyndso ond haefta-nyd.

Heofon rece swealg.)

WIGLAF. *(swabbing his lord’s wounds:)* My lord, Beowulf—

BEOWULF. Wiglaf, I have bartered my last breath and can hold no longer.

WIGLAF. My lord, you leave your people defended. The dragon is dead.

BEOWULF. The treasure hoard?

WIGLAF. *(displaying his riches:)* A trove of countless worth. There is gilded war gear, gold spotting the ground, goblets and a standard entirely of gold—a filigree masterpiece lighting the barrow like the sun, a beacon for would-be thieves.

BEOWULF. To the King of Glory and everlasting Lord, I give thanks... Fortune has found me once again. A warrior leader's only wish is to endow his people with eternal goodness and riches.

WIGLAF. You leave your people well off, my lord.

BEOWULF. *(taking off gold collar:)* You, dear Wiglaf, are the last of the Waegmundings.

WIGLAF. I can never assume the throne of such a well-loved Lord!

BEOWULF. Take no advantage of the people who adore you. They will only adore you if you are willing to die defending them from the evils they create. Behavior that's admired is the means to power among people in any nation. *(beat.)* Use the gold collar to rule, the warshirt to protect the heart and the gilded helmet to defend the mind. Fate sends all of the brave clan into darkness, now I must follow her. *(he dies.)*

(WIGLAF throws himself on the body of BEOWULF. he weeps as the Geat woman sings. the sounds of the barrow entrance us and WIGLAF takes the gold collar from BEOWULF and places it round his neck. he takes up his sword and looks directly to the audience. lights drop to black. silence, then the looming voice of THE POET is heard. our story begins. during the speech of THE POET, the company moves onstage, stylistically mimicking the words with their bodies. the entire speech is underscored by a soundscape—a drum, a heartbeat, the wind, and our fateful bird songstress keening.)

Sequence 2

THE POET.

And the heavens swallowed the smoky air
that rose from the funeral pyre of our hero, Beowulf.
Wiglaf ordered the people to pitch the body of the dragon
over the edge of the cliff into the destruction of the forgetful sea.
And then he ordered them to build a barrow on the coast
to honor their war-weary leader.
Ten days the people worked on the barrow,
wishing to make a memorial worthy of their leader.
When it was complete, Beowulf's ashes were placed inside

and the people laced the tomb with golden torques,
 jewels and a treasure trove such as would-be thieves
 once coveted from the late, sea-rinsed dragon.
 The funeral fire billowed and the Geat nation lamented
 the death of Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, their tireless leader of fifty
 years.
 They sang out to the heavens, chanted dirges,
 extolled the man and the king,
 their most benevolent leader.
 In their grief state, they re-wove the tale of the kind man,
 the hero and slayer of beast and burden,
 who won fame throughout Geatland and abroad.

(four members of THE COMPANY chant and sing lines from the text. they move in a ritualistic circle, in and out of each other, bringing words as gifts to the audience—almost a Pagan style offering. the words topple over one another and grow louder and louder, repeating, until the lights darken and a fiend on the prowl menaces through the audience, howling lonely sounds. it is GRENDEL. the dancers whisper their word-offerings and do not see the beast, but, out of instinct, await something awful and vicious in the darkness.)

Sequence 3

THE COMPANY.

Alone with his longing, the burdened beast resolves...

FEOND ON HELLE!

*Heorot hall, high, awaits a barbaric burning, a rampant
 lust for blood*

A prince of death

Cain's misbegotten clan

GRENDEL!

They await the killer of souls

Hellmaker.

SAVE US!

*Mailshirt clashed against soulblind
 teeth...*

The lusty saliva of a lonely heart
King Hrothgar's house has fallen
to the nighttime prowler *FEOND ON HELLE!*
Burnt offerings of blood
Blood
Blood
Banished beast
Hardborn grievance
Murder
Murder
Murder
Moontime menace

(as the company repeats their chant, GRENDDEL moves onstage in the darkness. he glows. teeth gnash, winds howl. our bird songstress screams a cry of distress. a heartbeat sound quickens and GRENDDEL pours out a blood cry that chills the hearts of the company. he attacks. the company scatters, attempts to fight, but cannot pierce the skin of the beast. he slaughters them all slowly, while THE POET, holding a large and ancient book sings "Grendel's Charge." the lights fade from the carnage to become a solitary light on THE POET.)

Sequence 4

THE POET.

FEOND ON HELLE! FEOND ON HELLE!
WAES SE GRIMMA GAEST, GREN DEL HATEN,
MAER MEARC-STAPA, SE PE MORAS HEOLD,
FEN OND FAESTEN; FIFEL-CYNNES EARD
WON SAELI WER WEARDODE HWILE,
SIPOAN HIM SCYPPEND FORSCRIFEN HAEFDE

IN CAINES CYNNE—

FEOND ON HELLE! FEOND ON HELLE!

(as THE POET speaks, we hear the sound of night things—bugs, owls, toads, etc. there is a constant depraved moaning of a monster in the distance and HROTHGAR, surrounded by death, mumbles quietly in the darkness.)

THE POET.

In Heorot hall,
King Hrothgar, champion of the Danes,
gave freely to his people.
An aged and revered leader,
he took great joy in the mysteries of mankind,
feasted nightly, ordered poets to shape
tales of heroes and teach his people
of the wonders of the Almighty.
Nightly, he and his clan rejoiced in the movement
and life of all things.
Yet, there was one grieving alone.
A fiend out of hell!
Grendel, the offspring of man and evil.
Every laugh is a piercing screech to his ear.
Every embrace of brotherhood, a stab in his belly
and every mortal smile, a reminder of what he is not.
This demon, enraged by the joyous site of Heorot Hall,
mercilessly casts his encompassing evil over the corridor.
The Danes prove an unworthy contest
for the murderer, peppering
the land with slaughterhouses of slain corpses.

HROTHGAR. *(praying:)* Can there be no end to this blood-haunting? Almighty, my people make offerings to ungodly Pagan shrines hoping to resurrect the ancient killer of souls to destroy the hell-maker on my doorstep—but I plead to you, ruler of man! Each night I close my eyes, fat-bodied with the mead and song of your creation, I hope that the night will bring a glimmer of sweet rest.

(UNFERTH enters.)

HROTHGAR. But, I, a king of men, sleep in my own home as though it were a battlefield. I toss about in my mailshirt and wait for the sound of bonecrunch, the smell of lusty saliva, the palpitation of that lonely, old heart.

UNFERTH. Father...the beast has returned.

HROTHGAR. Do you think I lie in my bed and do not feel the shadow of death pass over my house?

UNFERTH. We must bury the dead once again.

HROTHGAR. (*putting on his armor:*) Why does he not come to me? I am the king and defender of my people. Why does he persist in the senseless destruction of innocents?

UNFERTH. He is an exile, father. The creator will not let him touch the sanctity of your throne.

HROTHGAR. Rules! Do you think the Almighty has rules for his kind?

UNFERTH. The Almighty rules over all things, good and evil. (*beat.*) You are too old to conquer the beast yourself. Your best men have perished...

HROTHGAR. (*pulling his sword swiftly:*) I would die defending my home.

UNFERTH. And leave the Danes without the King they love?

HROTHGAR. Their love is but an old man's fancy. They should revolt at the sight of me.

UNFERTH. Have you forgotten your legacy? You brought protection and riches to the Danes!

HROTHGAR. But these hands are no longer fit to wield the sword and shield that brought this nation to order.

UNFERTH. So, now is the time to use your mind and heart to call on the Almighty. Pray, father. Pray that the lord of men will send a deliverer to us.

(WEALTHEOW *enters.*)

WEALTHEOW. Yes, pray Hrothgar. For twelve winters now, your palace is a pool of blood and the murderer is howling on the crest of a high hill. He rules our palace by fear. Is there no warrior alive that does not fear death?

UNFERTH. I would gladly go to the beast, mother. But, we who are as kings must vanguard the lives of our people by ensuring our own legacy to defend. A King does not run headlong into sure death. Let us wait. Surely, the Almighty has not forsaken us. Surely, he will send us a deliverer.

WEALTHEOW. Say your idle prayers, dear son. Hell has encapsulated our palace—a hell so strong that prayers are but a child's fancy. These are different times now. Prayers are only heard when men are prosperous, yet my husband insists that we rejoice each night with song and food. We should be waging war against this evil! Are you so green to think that evil can be conquered with words and music!? If I weren't of woman-flesh, I would wield a sword so strong that all hell would shake at its descent.

HROTHGAR. And you would lose your life—

WEALTHEOW. Better to die defending your life than to idly wait for it to be defended.

HROTHGAR. In times to come, your woman-flesh will be exalted, dear wife. But now—let us leave our doubt and put this problem at the feet of the Almighty. We shall certainly die in warfare against this evil, man or woman, so I see no other choice—come let's kneel together. Three voices may pierce the din of hell.

(they kneel and begin to chant softly. meanwhile, a warrior across the waters resolves to defend Hrothgar's kingdom from the beast. BEOWULF is being dressed in war-gear as he goes through his monologue.)

Sequence 5

BEOWULF. Lord Hygelac, I see no other choice.

HYGELAC. You are the bravest of men, young Beowulf. And you descend from a great tradition of warriorhood. But, where is your allegiance?

BEOWULF. I am allied to the Geats, Lord Hygelac. *(beat.)* But a warrior is also allied to the service of protecting his fellow man. We are not at war with the Danes. And if we were to wage war on them, a battle would never need be fought—they are plagued with an unnatural corpsemaker. A darkly beast, I hear it told, that broods bloody thoughts and rules the hearts of men by fear.

HYGELAC. And you do not fear the beast?

BEOWULF. My warriorhood is not built on fear, but faith.

HYGELAC. Perhaps it was faith that created this monster.

BEOWULF. Men have many faiths, King Hygelac.

HYGELAC. And what separates you from other men?

BEOWULF. My hands are not my own. They are the weapons of the Almighty.

HYGELAC. *(long pause.)* I will not endorse your voyage to relieve the Danes. If you die, a great warrior will be lost for the Geat nation. If you return, you will be welcome home.

BEOWULF. The hands of fate guide the hands of men.

(BEOWULF is lifted high above the heads of THE COMPANY and transported to the throne room of Hrothgar. he turns his back to the audience. HROTHGAR and family are still praying.)

Sequence 6

MESSENGER. King Hrothgar...a Dane from Lord Hygelac's country has come across the waters to report an errand.

HROTHGAR. A Dane shall not diminish my prayers.

WEALTHEOW. Does he bring an army with him?

MESSENGER. He is adorned in war-gear and announces that he...

BEOWULF. (*turning to the audience, entering the scene:*) I am Beowulf. Son of Egctheow.

HROTHGAR. Your father was a great warrior.

BEOWULF. You knew him?

HROTHGAR. And I knew you as a boy. (*beat.*) You have not come to follow up on an old friendship?

BEOWULF. No.

HROTHGAR. I can offer asylum to no man.

BEOWULF. I am not a refugee. I am a warrior.

HROTHGAR. A dark war plagues my nation now.

BEOWULF. I am Hygelac's man. I have heard how the monster, Grendel, tortures your home and how the earth here smells of blood—an unnatural battleground.

HROTHGAR. I have heard stories of your strength.

BEOWULF. I have come to kill the corpsemaker mongering death in the dark night!

(*UNFERTH laughs.*)

UNFERTH. For twelve years, seasoned warriors have come to Heorot hall and they have waited with whetted steel to slay the beast.

HROTHGAR. Forgive my son. His incredulity comes from shallow graves of idealistic warriors who've come before you. A crew of seamen bringing gifts from Geatland once told me of your strength. It is believed you have the grip of thirty men in each hand.

BEOWULF. The elders of Geatland who know of my acts have urged me to your throne. They have seen my body bolstered in the blood of my enemies when I battled and bound five beasts, raided a nest of trolls and in the darkness of murky waters, brutalized sea-brutes. Now I mean to be a match for Grendel and conquer the beast in one combat.

UNFERTH. I wish you luck.

BEOWULF. Fate and luck are not of the same family of intangibles. Fate goes ever as fate must and luck is for a warrior who is not the left arm of the Almighty.

UNFERTH. And so it is fate, not vanity that brings you to my father's house?

BEOWULF. Vanity is the stuff for unfit kings.

UNFERTH. Are you not the same Beowulf who challenged Breca to a swimming contest on the open sea, risking the fury of the water just to prove you could win?

BEOWULF. I did swim with Breca in the sea.

UNFERTH. And you both toiled, against the wishes of your friends, for seven days, against the wild and wintry water. And Breca out swam you. Yes! Your pride was defeated and I can assure you, though you have defeated beasts of man, you will be worsted in the battle with Grendel. His force knows no love and cannot comprehend the hearts of men. Faith in fate is the fancy of your heart and though you have the strength of many men, it will not be enough!

HROTHGAR. Unferth, this is no way to greet a guest from Geatland!

UNFERTH. Let us be realistic, father. I only challenge him to remind him that he is not without weakness. Grendel feeds on the weakness of men.

BEOWULF. Friend Unferth, you have had your say about Breca and me, but it seems that you speak with a drunken mouth.

(UNFERTH draws his sword. BEOWULF quickly brandishes his weapon and disarms UNFERTH.)

BEOWULF. You are quick to cut those who challenge you, yet you do not raise your sword to the beast that cripples your kingdom? I'll tell you the truth of my sea journey with Breca. We struggled for five nights in the cold waters until the winds drove us apart. The deep boiled up from below and sent the murky waters wild sea brutes. My chain mail held out as some ocean creature pinched me

between her jaws. But my flesh was not for feasting on! I plunged my sword into her and the others came and met my fierce blade. There would be no more banquet at the sea's bottom. In the morning, when the light came from the east, the bright guarantee of God, the deep-sea monsters, mangled, slept the sleep of the sword as slopped and floated on the wake of the water. After I slay nine beasts, the ocean lifted me and put my body on the shore of Finland. (*beat.*) I do not know of any fights which you have dared enter, Unferth, that beg a comparison. If you were truly as courageous as you say, Grendel would not have gone unchecked for these twelve seasons. Your father is old and cannot raise a sword to the beast, but instead penitently and rightly bows his head to the Almighty. Your blood should boil at the sight of your people writhing nightly, but instead you dare take up arms against your deliverer. You are scared, dear Unferth. You are weak and Grendel preys on that weakness. But, in me, he shall find a different man.

(BEOWULF *gives UNFERTH his sword.*)

WEALTHEOW. I have seen many come before you, proud Beowulf. (*coming close to him:*) And they have died in their resolve to free our land of this demon. There is something different about you. After twelve seasons in hell, I am a woman of little faith, but I thank God for sending you here and I give to you my remaining faith. Let us commune together, Hrothgar. To victory. To our deliverer. To Beowulf.

(*she pours a libation of wine and goes round to all the company and some members of the audience, asking them to take from her communal grail. she goes last to BEOWULF and after he drinks, she kisses him delicately on the head.*)

BEOWULF. I had but one purpose when I put my ship to sea—to slay your people's fear or to perish in its clutches.

WEALTHEOW. Let us have a dance for Beowulf!

(*the company dances. a solemn and ritualistic battle dance around BEOWULF.*)

HROTHGAR. In all my days as warrior, I have never entrusted this great hall to any Dane, save you Beowulf. Guard it well. It is the most splendid of houses. Keep in mind your honorable reputation

as you battle the night away. If you defeat Grendel, there is nothing you desire that you shall not possess. I have riches immeasurable and they shall be yours when the demon is spoiled.

BEOWULF. All I ask is that you allow me to defeat the monster hand to hand. He has no idea of the arts of war and he shall face me unarmed. His strength shall meet my strength. Therefore I shall not meet Grendel with the edge of my sword. He shall face me, if face me he dare, as I am.

HROTHGAR. As you wish it, Beowulf.

BEOWULF. The Divine Lord shall grant the victory to whichever side he sees fit.

Sequence 7

(HROTHGAR exits. BEOWULF stands ready and the company lays down to rest, warily waiting for the monster. susurrations and night sounds abound in the too quiet atmosphere of Heorot. the earth breathes and the moon gives an electric buzz. tin leaves rattle on a faraway tree of iron. a solitary, haunted bird laments in the distance. darkness. chain-mail rustles as men's bodies sleep rigidly, preparing to die or be made limbless by the monster they cannot yet see. the cries of the bird crescendo . silence.)

THE POET.

From the moors, the cursed Grendel came silently lumbering to Heorot Hall.

The iron-braced door of the fortress turned on its hinge when he touched it,

then enraged, he ripped open the mouth of the building, maddening for blood,

scouring the length of the patterned floor while a flaming light flared from his eyes.

He saw the men sleeping, and picturing the mayhem to come in his mind, he let out a raging roar that caused the walls of the palace to quake.

(as THE POET speaks, GRENDAL approaches through the audience—a huge lumbering beast, glowing and shaking the earth un-

derneath him. he smiles and seems to laugh as he seeks out the spoils of Heorot. the sound of bones breaking, crunching, a low institutional grind, rocks over metal. a solitary human scream. GRENDEL is center stage. he roars. the fight ensues.)

BEOWULF. From the black night comes this shadow stalker, stealthy and swift, but God has woven a triumph on his war-loom for the Geats!

(BEOWULF and his men struggle with the mammoth beast, BEOWULF with his bare hands, the men with swords. one man is killed. BEOWULF and GRENDEL dance a wicked dance. and just as it seems that GRENDEL will destroy him, BEOWULF summons his strength and rips the shoulder and claw from the beast. GRENDEL wails in agony and lopes offstage. all that remains is the shoulder and claw and the bodies of the dead men. in the distance, a woman sings. only BEOWULF hears her. he smiles as he listens.)

Sequence 8

WOMAN SINGING.

*Sigemunde gesprong
aefter dead-daege dom unlytel
syþboan wiges heard. he under harne stan,
aepelinges bearn, ana geneode
frecne daede; ne waes him Fitela mid;
hwaepre him gesaelde, daet paet-swurd porhwod
wraetlyn wyrm, paet hit on wealle aestod,
drythlic iren. draca morore swealt.*

THE POET. *(as he speaks, THE COMPANY moves to his language.)*

And so morning came and the Danish warriors gathered, the clan-chiefs,

the minstrels and the strumpets all marveling at the monster's foot-prints.

Grendel's path of retreat was bloodied all the way to the bottom of the Mere,

where he lay awaiting death.

The bloodshot water heaved and surged.

There were great waves of gore and wound-slurry.

Hell was fast reclaiming his old soul

and in the hall of King Hrothgar,
one man, Beowulf, son of Egctheow,
was hailed as the mightiest to yield a sword
and most fit to rule a kingdom.
But no man faulted the aged and faithful King Hrothgar,
for he was a good king.

Sequence 9

(WEALTHEOW, HROTHGAR, *and* UNFERTH *enter the hall.*)

MESSENGER. The time has come! We no longer need to live in fear! Grendel is defeated!

HROTHGAR. The heavenly shepherd can work his wonders always and everywhere. You have accomplished a thing none of us could manage despite all our efforts. You are a true deliverer.

UNFERTH. You hold the fate of men in your hands, dear Beowulf.

WEALTHEOW. Take this drink and rest.

BEOWULF. I have gone through with a glorious endeavor and been much favored in this fight I dared against the unknown.

HROTHGAR. The lord of ages bestowed a blessing upon your mother when you were born.

BEOWULF. Only if you could have seen the monster where he lay beaten, my Lord. I would have been better pleased. My plan was to pounce, pin him down in a tight grip and grapple him to death, have him panting for life, powerless and clasped in my bare hands. But, I'm afraid, I could not stop his escape.

HROTHGAR. My men tell me he bought his freedom at a high price.

MESSENGER. The hell-creature left his arm and shoulder to show he had been here.

HROTHGAR. That is but a cold comfort for his crimes against us. Because of this fatal wound, it will not be another moon before Grendel perishes. His wickedness shall be repaid by the judgment of God. (*to BEOWULF:*) Kneel, deliverer. Beowulf, I adopt you in

my heart as a dear son. Rest assured, everything you need and want shall be yours. May the God of ages continue to keep you well. Take this torque and wear it proudly. Your strength and kindly guidance has won you fame and now you shall be known to men near and far as a deliverer, a keeper of order. I wish you a lifetime's luck and blessings to enjoy this treasure.

(in a spirited and festive dance, chanting, the company presents gifts to BEOWULF. the gifts are not necessarily present. the words serve as an offering to the Dane.)

THE COMPANY.

Keeper of the people

*Son of Egctheow,
well-born Geat and deliverer
take the gifts of our hearts*

*to your lord, Hygelac
you, the killer of killers,
the savior of the Danes.*

*An embroidered banner
breast mail and helmet
this sword carried high
an embossed ridge
and eight of the king's horses with gold bridles*

WEALTHEOW. Raise up your goblets, dear men, for peace! Relish each other's company and sleep well tonight. Take delight in this torque, dear Beowulf. Wear it for protection and as a remembrance of your noble deeds. Let us celebrate! Poet, a song for our savior!

(during the song, the company showers BEOWULF with white petals.)

THE POET. *(singing:)*

Hildeburh wept.

*How could she not lament her murdered dears in the bright morning?
Her son, the pride and prince of the Shielding lay dead awaiting flame
and everywhere there were blood plastered coats of mail.*

*The pyre heaped with boar shaped helmets of gold,
resting on split heads of well-born Danes.*

Then Hildeburh, noble and true to her countrymen,

*ordered the body of her son to be burnt there,
the flesh on his bones to sputter and blaze.
Carcass flame swirled and blistered
as they stood round the burial mound.
They howled as heads melted,
crusty gashes spattered and flowed bloody matter.
The warriors scattered.*

*(at the finish of the song, all THE COMPANY but THE POET and
BEOWULF exit abruptly. only BEOWULF is lit as THE POET
speaks.)*

THE POET.

And men and women in Heorot Hall settled into their beds,
bellies full of mead and heads full of hope.
A lucid air crept into the palace.
The breath of an unnatural avenger.
The bride of hell, Grendel's mother, approached Heorot.
The moonlight blinded her as she had never before seen the mantle
of the earth.
She was pushed down into the murky waters of the mere, to abide
alone.
After Cain killed his father's only son,
he moved into the wild and begot misbegotten spirits,
Grendel among them.
Grendel's mother coupled with mankind's first murderer,
the only to have pity on the exile.
In a cave with no light,
the beautiful beast and man propagated
the second evil of the world—
and now the mother of that dying evil sallied forth
in a strong hellfury,
grief-racked and ravenous,
desperate for revenge.

BEOWULF. The mother approaches.

(lights down as we hear the sounds of the bright beast approaching.)

Intermission

Sequence 10

(center stage GRENDEL'S MOTHER stands. a beautiful, brightly-lit woman dressed in all white and shrouded in a long transparent cloth that stretches from her body and covers most of the stage floor. the light hitting her comes from above and casts a solitary pool around her. she is silent and does not move. a man approaches—AESCHERE—one of Hrothgar's counselors. he is mesmerized by her beauty and seems entranced as though she were a siren. he walks slowly towards her and stops just out of her reach. one of her arms slowly rises and motions for him to come further. he does. he stands captivated in the pool of light for a moment and then—she attacks, killing him instantly. she waits, casts glances over the audience, sees GRENDEL's arm and claw and drags it and the body of AESCHERE off-stage, the long transparent cloth following her, leaving a pool of blood onstage.)

Sequence 11

HROTHGAR. And now we have woken the mistress of hell.

WEALTHEOW. Grendel is dead, yet there is no rest. Our palace is corpse-ridden still.

UNFERTH. *(entering:)* She has taken Aeschere! The men saw it happen. She is a hell-born devil, father.

HROTHGAR. *(kneeling into the blood:)* The blood of my wisest man, Aeschere, gathers in cold pools on these stained palace floors. *(he breaks.)*

WEALTHEOW. And this we should have known: if the mother lives, the son shall never die unavenged.

HROTHGAR. Send for Beowulf! Rouse him from his victory sleep and tell him of this hellish matron.

(UNFERTH exits.)

THE POET. And Beowulf was summoned. The halls echoed the cries of the desperate king and the Prince who slept soundly came forth—guided by his need to defend.

(BEOWULF enters and stands before HROTHGAR, still kneeling in the blood.)

BEOWULF. *(pulling HROTHGAR to his feet:)* Do not grieve, wise sir.

UNFERTH. She comes in fury to avenge her son's death.

WEALTHEOW. As the noblest among us would.

HROTHGAR. Sorrow has returned to my bright hall. Aeschere is dead. He was everything the world admires in a wise man and a friend. Where she hides, glutting on his corpse, I cannot tell you.

UNFERTH. I have heard it said by people in the hall that they have seen two marauders prowling the moors. One is a woman—a radiantly evil creature lighting the path to death. Miles from here, in a tangled maze of trees and roots, lies water. In moonlight, it is said, the water burns. This fire gives birth to fear—for man and animal both run away from bright death rather than dive beneath its surface. In this mere lake, lives Grendel's Mother.

HROTHGAR. Beowulf, if you dare face this next trial, you shall be rewarded whether you live or die.

BEOWULF. We all, noble or hell-born, await our death. To die in glory is a warrior's last wish and what more glorious than to be a tempered steel mast amidst all hell's release? To crush the mother is to bury the son. She cannot hide in the earth. She cannot flee to the sky. She cannot save her invisible soul under the ocean's depths. She will die by my hand. We will win when we face our fate.

Sequence 12

THE POET.

And the night wore the hush of chaos like a doleful countenance.
King Hrothgar mounted his royal horse and brought
Beowulf to the mere lake where the bride of hell feasted on the flesh
of his beloved advisor.

Unferth traveled with them, hoping to aid their hero on his quest to
bottom of the mere lake.

(sounds of the slosh and hiss of the nearby mere lake chill their bones. THE COMPANY, dressed in all black, move around them—spirits of the forest. the lonely bird songstress cries out.)

HROTHGAR. Tonight the moon hangs softly above us, casting light like a hovering mail-shirt.

BEOWULF. We've returned to our origin, my Lord. The beast is our beginning.

UNFERTH. And if she is left unchecked, she will be our end. This is the place where she abides. Below the ill water is her dank lair, full of the smell of havoc and bloodbrine.

BEOWULF. I will follow the trail of Aeschere's blood until I find Grendel's mother. If I should not return, send the tale of my warriorhood back to King Hygelac along with the riches you have provided me.

HROTHGAR. I will not forsake your name, Beowulf.

UNFERTH. Wait! Take this. *(pulls sword from hanger.)* It is a sword of no small importance. It is a rare and ancient craft named Hrunting. The iron blade has been tempered in blood. Use this to slay her.

BEOWULF. If I am to perish, Unferth should inherit all that I possess. I bequeath my own sharp-honed, wave-sheened wonderblade to you, Unferth. *(hands over his sword.)* With Hrunting, I shall gain glory or die.

(they exit.)

Sequence 13

THE POET. The prince of the Weather-Geats plunged away into the murky waters. It was the better part of a day before he could see a solid bottom.

And the evil empress of the mere lake quickly sensed a human approaching.

(sounds of water and breathing, sea monsters and grizzly, lifeless laughing haunts the underwater chamber. GRENDEL'S MOTHER, stands again with her back to the audience. her pool of magnificent

light rises slowly around her. she beckons to BEOWULF. he is entranced and comes to her. she seizes him. immediately he fights, but his blade is of no consequence to the beast. he flings it away and wrestles her with his bare hands. as she is closing in on him, he notices the shiny hilt of another sword in the wall of the cave. he grabs the sword and thrusts it into the beast. she cries out in agony. he thrusts again until the beast is weary and the light that shone upon her is no more. she falls to the ground and is dead. BEOWULF, smelling the rotting corpse of GRENDDEL nearby, pulls the dead monster from his deathbed and in one powerful stroke beheads the dead beast.)

Sequence 14

THE POET.

And Beowulf, son of Egctheow, slew the mother of Grendel with the mysterious sword and determined to take his revenge wholly, he dragged the dead body of Grendel out and in one mighty stroke, beheaded the terror of Heorot hall. And after the second death of Grendel, the sword blade began to wilt into gory icicles, to slather and thaw. It melted as ice melts when God eases the fetters of winter off the frostbitten and hoary ground and frees the spring from its water ropes.

It was a task for four men to hoist Grendel's head on a spear. When they entered the bright and relieved hall, they hauled the head by the hair, dragging the diminished horror across the floor for the people to behold.

BEOWULF. I bring this token of triumph from the battle under water. With God's help, I survived the clash at the mere's bottom. All of my strength could not spill the beast's lifeblood until the Lord of Men brought my eye to a sword calling out from the wall, a weapon made for a stronger breed of men. With that ancient weapon, I destroyed the dweller in her den, though the blade could not withstand the devastation of the enemy's blistering blood. I present the hilt and this prize to honor the newfound peace.

HROTHGAR. Never again need the Danes live in fear of the wasted life of yester-year. Sleep secure within these walls and enjoy once more the pleasantries of Heorot Hall.

UNFERTH. (*examining the hilt:*) The hilt contains the story of how the flood destroyed the giants.

WEALTHEOW. Only a descendant of the titans may wield such an incredible sword.

HROTHGAR. Beowulf, I stand firm by the pledge of friendship that we exchanged. (*to all:*) In all things even-tempered, prudent and resolute; his people's mainstay and own warrior's helping hand—I affirm that Beowulf, this protector of people, was born to distinction. I hope to be your friend forever and know, from now on, you are a legend.

(THE COMPANY *cheers.*)

HROTHGAR. It is a great wonder how God gives power, prestige and wisdom to the leaders of men. He grants fulfillment and felicity on earth and the command over earth's people. Yet, the gift of eminence may change an unthinking king's humor. Indulgence of desires; disregard of illness and old age; fearlessness of envy and malice from one's enemies—all of these weaken one's soul. God's gifts fade when a ruler cuts himself off from his own kind to conform the world to his will. A covetous king's possessions and honor seem paltry and he does not remember one universal future. When the end finally comes—when he collapses and dies—the eternal reward of God's glory will not be received. And so the ignoble king's desires cannot be realized. Beware then, Beowulf, of the dangers of power and continue to use the gifts given to you by God honorably.

BEOWULF. Here we have been welcomed, but I long to see the shores of Geatland and to bring this news and treasures back to Lord Hygelac. You have treated us well and if ever I hear from across the waters that you or your people are threatened, I shall land with a thousand Thanes at my back to help your cause.

HROTHGAR. You are strong in body and mature in mind. If ever Hygelac's descendants falter from the throne, no one but you is worthy to undertake the lordship of your homeland.

(*they embrace.*)

Sequence 15**THE POET.**

Beowulf, glorious in his golden regalia, joined the awaiting crew and set sail for Geatland. Right away, the mast was rigged, sail ropes were tightened and stiff winds kept the ship skimming ahead. As she heaved forward, her foamy neck was buoyant and lapped over currents until finally, they caught sight of coastline and familiar cliffs. As Beowulf stepped on soil from which he had long been away, he thanked God for his safe travels. Then he ordered the treasure trove to be carried ashore and sent a messenger to tell Lord Hygelac of his arrival.

MESSENGER. My lord Hygelac, the mighty Beowulf has returned triumphantly from his travels abroad and requests your ear.

HYGELAC. Bring him forth. (*he slaps BEOWULF.*) How did you fare on your abrupt voyage to relieve the Danes? I pleaded with you endlessly to let them destroy their own killer. But come, tell me of your triumph, for surely you have won, for thank almighty God you stand in one body in front of me now. (*he embraces BEOWULF.*)

BEOWULF. My Lord Hygelac, I am proud to announce to your worship that I have glorified you and the Geat people with the defeat of Grendel and his mother. I barely escaped with my life, but my time to leave this earth has not yet come. Now the Danes may live in peace. In appreciation of our victory, King Hrothgar granted me the freedom to choose from his treasures. It esteems me greatly to bring you this war gear: an ornate helmet, a decorated armor and this precious sword, all of which belonged to King Hrothgar's brother who never had a son worthy to wear them. And this torque. Now they are yours. Enjoy them well.

HYGELAC. Beowulf, I must admit to you that I never truly doubted your heroism, but rather feared your departure might be your last display of warriorhood. You have been formidable in battle, yet behaved with honor. Now you are much esteemed and deserving of all I shall give you.

BEOWULF. Your worship need only hold me honorable.

HYGELAC. Go hence, messenger, and bring me the gold chased heirloom of Hrethrel.

MESSENGER. Yes, Lord Hygelac. (*exits.*)

HYGELAC. Tonight, the Geats will celebrate the return of their warrior-hero.

BEOWULF. And the safety of their home. After I have stared into the eyes of hell, smelt the cold and dank breath of a devil, I can surely attest what a blessing it is to live in Geatland where mead is flowing and men need not live in fear.

HYGELAC. Yes, we are surely a blessed people.

MESSENGER. The sword, my lord.

HYGELAC. Take up this sword as a symbol of my pride. It is the finest in the Geat treasury. It is a symbol of your brave and noble deeds. I reward you with land, seven thousand hides and a great throne. I give you this in your finest hour.

Sequence 16

THE POET.

Beowulf demonstrated absolute dignity, behaved with honor and took no advantage.

Never cut down a comrade, his temper postured, his strength controlled, his warriorhood reserved for the trenches of battle.

A lot was to happen in later days.

The land of the Geats did not remain the peaceful dwelling it once was.

The fierce aggression of the Shyflings brought Hygelac to his grave.

The wide kingdom was now in the mighty hands of Beowulf, an honor he would embrace for fifty winters.

WIGLAF. (*entering and kneeling:*) My Lord, Beowulf.

BEOWULF. Speak, young Wiglaf.

WIGLAF. It is with a grave heart that I bring this news to you. I know of your heroics with the Danes. Indeed, you are a legend in this kingdom—the strongest of men, the most well mannered with a sword...

BEOWULF. Speak briefly, Wiglaf. To the point.

WIGLAF. Another rules our kingdom.

BEOWULF. The Shyflings have come back to face a mightier king. They will be met with a fierce and crippling blow.

WIGLAF. No, Lord Beowulf. Our enemy is not of human blood. A dragon on the prowl dominates the dark.

BEOWULF. What law of God have I broken?

WIGLAF. The laws of God need not be broken for evil to infiltrate our borders, dear Beowulf. For without evil, would there be a standard for good?

BEOWULF. You are a wise, young man. Tell me of this dragon.

WIGLAF. From the steep vaults of a stone-roofed barrow, the beast guarded a horde of treasure. There was a hidden passage, unknown to men, all but one, a thief who slipped in and removed a gem studded goblet of no worth. The thief's wiles drove the dragon into a rage and now he brings revenge on our kingdom. Seeing the tracks of the thief so close by where his head had slumbered enraged the beast and now he circles above our kingdom, scorching the ground below, belching out flames and burning bright homesteads. All corners of the Geat nation have witnessed the brunt of his brutal assaults and virulent hate.

BEOWULF. I am destined to die defending my kingdom from the fires of hell hovering in the heavens.

WIGLAF. But, what is worse still, your own home, the throne room of Geatland is a smoldering cinder. He is now again in his barrow, but his mind may be of the cyclic same as the nightly assaulting Grendel's once was.

BEOWULF. I cannot wait for the beast to return.

WIGLAF. I will fight with you.

BEOWULF. No, Wiglaf. To my loyal kinsmen impart that this fight is not yours. This path that I now take shall be my most challenging endeavor. And if I should, by my courage, win the day or perish in combat, this path I must walk alone.

WIGLAF. I will keep in my armor at your side.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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