

The Devil and Margarita **a play with fire**

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The Devil and Margarita is based on Michail Bulgakov's cult classic *The Master and Margarita*, in which the devil and his crew visit Stalinist Moscow. The novel is receiving renewed interest now that Russia is yet again totalitarian. The libretto adds a strong female character and turns up the novel's humorous and decadent vibes. The devil (Prof. Voland) and his crew—the clownish cat Behemoth, the smug demon Asasello, and the deadly dashing Hella—arrive in Moscow in 1938. They wreak havoc, enjoy themselves, and, at Margarita's behest, save a writer (the Master) from the loony bin.

Synopsis

Voland and his crew decide on a time and place for their traditional ball ("*Moscow 1938*"). Once there, they stage a rather unusual show, putting the "devil" in "vaudeville" ("*Magic Shop*") and making the vibrant Natasha realize that being Margarita's cook and maid is not what she wants to do with her life ("*Natasha's Epiphany*"). A very Soviet editor learns from Voland that his head will be cut off ("*Death Always Gets You*"), which promptly happens in the next scene ("*A Streetcar Named Death*"). Among the editor's papers, there is a manuscript by the Master, whom Hella visits at a mental hospital. He seems like a lost case ("*All I Want Is For Her To Forget Me*")—however, his lover Margarita does not give up on the hope of finding him ("*One Blackened Page*"). Asasello suggests that the devil might help and provides the means to get to his ball. When Margarita flies off on a broomstick, Natasha knows: this is what she wants ("*Natasha's Dream*"). She promptly hops onto a flying pig and follows.

The two arrive, are welcomed ("*Pleased to Meet You*"), prepared for the ball ("*Getting Ready*")—and then the fun starts. Though the guests are not, technically speaking, alive, the ball is a full success. "*The Ball Song*" gives Hella, Behemoth, Asasello, and Natasha (who is rapidly bonding with them) an opportunity to sing about what moves them most. When the guests are gone, Voland, his crew, and Margarita enjoy a cozy dinner together, Behemoth entertaining everyone with unbelievable stories ("*Tiger, Tiger on the Spite*") and Hella with a shooting performance. Natasha asks to join Voland's retinue ("*Natasha's Plea*") and is granted her wish. Margarita demands to be reunited with the Master. He tries to talk her out of it—he is a broken man, a liability—but finally begins to accept the idea that he might be happy again ("*Distant Duet*"). However, he would never write another sentence. The novel that had led to his arrest does not exist anymore, he says; he had burned the manuscript. But Voland teaches him otherwise: "*Manuscripts Do Not Burn.*" Moscow does, though: the final adventures of Hella, Asasello, and Behemoth, joined by eager Natasha, end up in pyromaniac hijinks. The final song, "*Ready to Depart*," unites these two motifs: Moscow fried to every heart's desire, they all ride above the smoking pyre—manuscripts, however, do not burn.

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The Master and Margarita is free of copyright; Alexandra Berlina has worked with the Russian original and uses no translations by others.

Time

1938

Place

Moscow (a vaudeville, a park, an apartment, a ballroom)

Cast

The devil and his trickster trio:

Prof. Voland (the devil): the actor can be any age and gender (the character is male); preferably tall, with a deep voice

Hella: has a red scar around her neck

Asasello: has some visual similarity to Hella

Behemoth: usually appears as a giant black tomcat

Between-the-lines relationships between Hella, Asasello, and Behemoth vary from rivalry to friendship (with benefits).

Local protagonists:

Master: in his thirties to forties, gaunt

Margarita: in her thirties to forties, a strand of white hair

Natasha: Margarita's maid, very vivacious

Local secondary figures:

Editor: of a literary magazine, in his forties or older

Pigman: can be played by the same actor as editor

Featuring also:

“Members of the audience,” police, “streetcar wagons” + driver, guests at the ball. These characters can be partially played by the same actors, min. 6 people in all. For smaller casts, the play may be tweaked to exclude these; please contact the author for suggestions.

Orchestra: gets onstage (partially or wholly) for one of the scenes.

Song List:

Prologue

0. "Moscow, 1938" Voland, Hella, Asasello, Behemoth

Act I

1. "Magic Shop" Hella, Asasello

2A. "Natasha's Epiphany" Natasha

3. "Death Always Gets You" Voland; chorus: Hella, Asasello

4. "A Streetcar Named Death" Hella, Behemoth

5A. "All I Want Is For Her To Forget Me" Master

6A. "One Blackened Page" + 6B, reprise Margarita

2B. "Natasha's Dream" Natasha

(reprise of "Natasha's Epiphany")

Act II

Hella, Asasello, Behemoth

7. "Pleased To Meet You" Hella, Asasello, Behemoth, Natasha, Margarita

8. "Getting Ready for the Ball" Hella, Asasello, Behemoth, Natasha

9. "The Ball Song" Behemoth

10. "Tiger, Tiger on the Spite" Natasha

2B. "Natasha's Plea"

(reprise of "Natasha's Epiphany")

5B. "Distant Duet"

Master, Margarita

(reprise of "All I Want Is For Her To Forget Me")

11. "Manuscripts Do Not Burn"

Voland; chorus: Hella, Asasello, Behemoth

12. "Ready to Depart"

Hella, Asasello, Behemoth, Natasha; chorus: ensemble