

The Devil and Margarita
a play with fire

book and lyrics by Alexandra Berlina
score by Dmitry Chuvelev

thedevilandmargarita.com – alexandra@thedevilandmargarita.com

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.

PROLOGUE IN THE NETHERWORLD

The prologue takes place beyond the planet Earth. Staging suggestion: darkness, apart from beams of lights focused on VOLAND, ASASELLO, BEHEMOTH, and HELLA. VOLAND in an armchair that appears to be hovering in space, holding a globe that lights up as he touches it. By his side, a walking cane with a poodle head knob. His entourage is sitting on swings hanging from the ceiling at different heights.

VOLAND

Well, surprise me. What do you suggest for the next Ball of the Full Moon?

[0. MOSCOW, 1938]

ASASELLO

WE DID OUR RESEARCH; HERE IS WHAT WE GOT—

BEHEMOTH (*interrupts*)

YOU'LL LOVE IT, SIRE! THE VENUE IS SO HOT!

ASASELLO

IT IS A PLACE AND TIME OF FEAR AND HATE.

VOLAND (*speaking voice, gravely*)

Of course it is. As always.

ASASELLO, BEHEMOTH, HELLA

HOW ABOUT MOSCOW, 1938?

HELLA

IT IS THE PERFECT DATE, THE PERFECT SPOT.
THAT GREAT CHUNK OF THE GLOBE, THAT BIG RED DOT.
IT IS THE PERFECT SPOT, THE PERFECT DATE:
LET'S GO TO MOSCOW, 1938.

ASASELLO

IN SOVIET RUSSIA, DEATH IS ON THE BEAT.

HELLA

THERE ARE ARRESTS AT NIGHT IN EVERY STREET.

BEHEMOTH (*excited*)

LET'S SPEND A WEEKEND IN THE SOVIET STATE!

ASASELLO, BEHEMOTH, HELLA

LET'S GO TO MOSCOW, 1938!

BEHEMOTH

HERE'S AN IDEA THAT IS REALLY NEAT,
A WAY TO WATCH THE CROWD, A "MEET-AND-GREET":
A VAUDEVILLE SHOW! THAT WOULD BE PRETTY GREAT-

VOLAND (considering)

A show in Moscow, 1938?

BEHEMOTH

Yes! We perform, you get your first impression of the locals en masse? I love being the Cultivated Cat!

VOLAND

Fine. Moscow 1938 it is. And do your vaudeville thing if you must. Don't forget to find a local Margarita to host the ball.

BEHEMOTH (mimicking VOLAND's grave voice and pose)

Of course we will. As always.

VOLAND points at BEHEMOTH with his cane, and he falls off his swing with a comical meow, then makes himself comfortable in the air on his safety wire or gets back on.

HELLA

To Moscow!

ASASELLO

To Moscow!

BEHEMOTH (*produces a bottle of champagne from the depths of his costume, opens it, toasts the others*)

To Moscow!

[...]

Scene 3: The Master at the Madhouse

Hospital room, bars on the windows. MASTER is sitting on his cot, swaying, wearing a straitjacket.

MASTER

Be damned, Pontius Pilate... Be damned. Be damned, Pontius Pilate...

There is a sound outside. The bars on the window disappear (by means of some tool or magic). HELLA slides into the room through the window.

MASTER

Another hallucination... Leave me be! Leave me be, I say!

HELLA

What's your story with Pontius? We had breakfast once, I quite liked the fellow.

MASTER

You had breakfast with Pontius Pilate?

HELLA

You think he wasn't entitled to a few hallucinations of his own?

MASTER

Oh—yes. Right. Well. You see, I wrote a novel about him. It was such a happy time, writing. With Margarita by my side... But then, a few months ago, I submitted it to *Sovyetskaya Literatura*...

In his excitement, MASTER tries to gesticulate but the straitjacket won't let him. HELLA snaps her fingers, and his arms are liberated. MASTER gazes at them in wonder.

HELLA

Yes?

MASTER

So *they* came for me. And after—after everything I ended up here. All I hope is that Margarita doesn't think of me anymore... She'd had such a good life before she met me. A flat all of their own! A maid, even. Married to a big cheese, a kind man, too... But she had the misfortune of falling in love with a writer!

HELLA

Indeed.

MASTER

She was my muse and typist and editor, and she laughed and cried in all the right places, and we were so so happy when it was finished! We both wished so badly to see it published! We should have known better. I should never have submitted to that wish.

HELLA

Or to that journal.

MASTER

She called me Master, you know.

HELLA

Did she now.

MASTER

Not like that! She believed I was a *Master*. A Master of my art, you understand? She made this for me, look—they even let me keep it! (*He produces from his pocket a black beanie or skull cap with a yellow M on it, gives it a long look, and solemnly puts it on.*)

[5A. ALL I WANT IS FOR HER TO FORGET ME]

MASTER

WHEN WE MET, LOVE ATTACKED LIKE A VILLAIN,
DROVE A KNIFE THROUGH MY HEART.
ALL WAS SET BACK TO NIL, BLANK TO FILL IN—
A NEW LIFE, A NEW START.

HOW SHE GLOWED WHEN I READ HER MY NOVEL!
SHE WOULD CRY, LAUGH WITH JOY!
WHEN I SHOWED THEM MY BOOK, ALL WAS OVER.
SHE AND I, BOTH DESTROYED.

(*chorus:*)

ALL I WANT IS FOR HER TO FORGET ME,
WASH ME OFF LIKE A STAIN.
SHE'D BEEN HAPPY BEFORE SHE HAD MET ME,
SHE'LL BE HAPPY AGAIN.

HELLA

Well, we're on the ground floor, the bars are gone. Go find her!

MASTER (*cont.*)

WHEN WE MET, PASSION CHARGED LIKE A KILLER,
PIERCED HER HEART LIKE A KNIFE.
CAN'T FORGET HOW THE WORLD SOUNDED STILLER —
WE WOULD START A NEW LIFE.

THAT DAMN BOOK WROTE ITSELF, AUTOPILOT,
I FELT GOOD; I FELT DRAINED.
IN A NOOK, ON MY SHELF: PONTIUS PILATE.
THERE, IT SHOULD HAVE REMAINED.

(chorus)

HELLA

Hey, I'm talking to you! The window's open, just get out of here!

MASTER *(cont.)*

WHEN WE MET, LOVE ATTACKED, WILD AND VICIOUS,
SET ON CRIME, KEEN TO KILL.
I CAN'T LET HER GO DOWN; NOW I WISH US
BACK IN TIME, STRANGERS STILL.

IF THE TEXT HAD REMAINED IN MY BOOKCASE,
NEVER SENT, SEEN BY NONE,
WHAT CAME NEXT WOULDN'T HAVE... OH BUT GOOD GRACE,
OFF IT WENT; IT WAS DONE.

(chorus)

HELLA makes an exasperated gesture and climbs out the window again.

MASTER

(chorus variation:)

ALL I WANT IS FOR HER TO FORGET ME,
BRUSH ME OFF LIKE A SPECK.
IF I FLEE, THEY WILL FIND ME; THEY'LL GET ME.
I'M NOT SAFE, I'M A WRECK.

ALL I WANT IS FOR HER TO FORGET ME...

Scene 4: The Invitation

Evening of the same day. The bench where EDITOR had been sitting in ACT I. Enter MARGARITA, restless. She sits down, stands up, sits down, takes a charred sheet of paper out of her handbag, looks at it, stands up again and sings, the sheet in her hand. During the whole scene, MARGARITA behaves rather melodramatically.

[6. ONE BLACKENED PAGE]

MARGARITA

ONE BLACKENED PAGE
IS ALL THAT I HAVE LEFT—
I YEARN FOR RAGE,
BUT I JUST FEEL BEREFT.

MY HOME A CAGE,
I HAUNT THIS LONELY SQUARE
TO ASSUAGE
THE PAIN I CANNOT BEAR.

(chorus)
GIVE ME A SIGN, PLEASE,
OR GIVE ME MY PEACE!
IF YOU ARE NO MORE,
PLEASE LET ME GO, GO.
PLEASE LET ME BREATHE, BREATHE,
DON'T HAUNT MY MEMORIES.

Enter ASASELLO. He stands to the side, listening to MARGARITA, making notes on her performance.

MARGARITA *(cont.)*

OH HEAL MY WOE!
I WANT SOME LITTLE CLUE.
I NEED TO KNOW:
WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO YOU?

YOU SEE THE SNOW
THAT CREPT INTO MY HAIR? *(holding a white strand to her eyes)*
I LOVE YOU SO!
WILL SOMEONE HEAR MY PRAYER? *(presses her hands together.)*

ASASELLO *(to himself)*

Hmmm... Nice voice, but much too much drama...

MARGARITA *(cont.)*

(chorus)

YOU CAN'T BE DEAD—
BUT WHY THIS PIERCING FEAR?
YOU MUST HAVE FLED;
YOU CAN'T BE DEAD, MY DEAR.

THE WORDS I READ,
THEY WERE PROFOUND AND CLEAR..
OH WHY THIS DREAD?
(almost spoken:)
AND WHAT'S THIS SOUND I HEAR?

While MARGARITA is singing the final bars, a funeral march becomes audible, growing louder after her song. Looking toward the direction of the march, she sits down on the bench, so immersed in her thoughts that she does not notice when ASASELLO sits down next to her—or when he stares at her with a degree of skepticism, making casting assessments (i.e. taking a picture of her profile, holding a tape measure close to her neck) and jotting down notes. Gradually, all grows quiet again—a funeral procession has passed by offstage. MARGARITA moves her lips silently.

ASASELLO

It's the funeral of Mikhail Berlioz. Editor-in-chief of *Sovyetskaya Literatura*, chairman of the Proletarian Writers Committee. Got offed today.

MARGARITA spins around in surprise.

ASASELLO

You wanted to know whom they are burying—well, that's whom.

MARGARITA

Oh, I asked out loud, did I? Berlioz! *Him!* Serves him right!

ASASELLO

You hate him that much?

MARGARITA

I loathe him!

ASASELLO (*making notes, to himself*)

Yees, rather histrionic...

MARGARITA

What?

ASASELLO

You'll find it ironic: some jokester managed to steal his head.

MARGARITA

Who'd steal a head?!

ASASELLO

Some kind of cat burglar? Now, Margarita—

MARGARITA

You know me?

ASASELLO *tips his hat.*

MARGARITA (*stiffening*)

Well, I don't know you.

ASASELLO

Indeed you don't. But never mind that. Are you any good at dancing?

MARGARITA *jumps up, about to leave.*

ASASELLO

I would advise you to sit down again.

Something about his tone makes MARGARITA hesitate and slowly sit down. ASASELLO looks her up and down, thinking, then makes a decision.

ASASELLO

Well, this must do.. Margarita, you are invited. For tonight.

MARGARITA

Invited where? By whom?

ASASELLO

To a big party. By a foreign gentleman.

MARGARITA (*indignantly*)

I'm not this kind of woman, thank you very much!

She jumps up again.

ASASELLO

Stupid bitch!

MARGARITA

Scumbag!

ASASELLO (*mocking reprise of "One Blackened Page"*)

ONE BLACKENED PAGE

IS ALL THAT YOU HAVE GOT.

YOU PACE THE STAGE,

YOU THINK YOUR MAN'S BEEN SHOT.

WHERE IS HE NOW?

YOU FEEL SO SAD AND BLUE...

(*speaking voice:*) You want a row-go, leave without a clue!

MARGARITA

I—I don't understand... How could you possibly know my thoughts? Who are you?!? Who sent you? Which institution? Are you going to arrest me?

ASASELLO

Hell, this drags on like molasses! I'm not from any institution. You Soviets are so nervous.

MARGARITA (*sitting down, pleadingly*)

But—who are you? I just don't understand. I am a simple woman—

ASASELLO

Yeah, a plain Margarita. And rather cheesy, too. All right, my name is Asasello. So?

MARGARITA

Would you tell me how you know my thoughts?

ASASELLO

I wouldn't.

MARGARITA

But you—you know something about *him*? Please, please, just tell me one thing: Is he alive?!?

ASASELLO

He might well be.

MARGARITA

Oh my God!

ASASELLO

Mind your language. Now, if you accept the invitation—

MARGARITA (*tragically*)

So I was right—that foreigner wants my body...

ASASELLO (*guffaws*)

Believe you me, most people would give their right arm for the privilege. You, however, are required for other duties.

MARGARITA

What other—but never mind! I could find out something—about *him*?

ASASELLO *nods*.

MARGARITA

I'm coming! I'm coming, wherever!

ASASELLO (*breathes out; his patience had been strained*)

Right. Take this. (*Fishes a jar from his pocket and hands it to her.*) This is hot cream. At half past nine, you are to apply

it to your face and body. Then I will call you and tell you everything you need to know.

MARGARITA (*weighs the jar in her hand; after a short silence*)

I see. This thing is pure gold. I'm being bribed and drawn into some dark affair—

ASASELLO

There we go again!

MARGARITA

I'm not saying—

ASASELLO (*grabbing for the jar*)

Enough! I'll get some other Margarita!

MARGARITA

No! I'll do it!

MARGARITA

(*reprise of "One Blackened Page"*)

I'LL PLAY THE ROLE,

I'LL DO THE THINGS YOU SAID.

I'LL PAY THE TOLL,

I'LL SHARE YOUR BOSS'S BED—

ASASELLO (*exasperated*)

I told you! Not gonna happen!

MARGARITA (*cont.*)

AND IF I DIE,

THEN I WILL DIE FOR LOVE—

ASASELLO *points to something over MARGARITA's head.*

ASASELLO

Oh look there! Woosh!

MARGARITA's gaze follows his finger. ASASELLO disappears (a trapdoor in the floor?). Once MARGARITA turns her head back, all she sees is an empty bench. She looks at the jar again to make sure it's real, stuffs it into her bag along with the sheet of paper, and hurries away.