**THE DEVIL AND STEPASHKA**

 (a 90 minute stage drama

inspired by Leo Tolstoy's short story *The Devil*)

by Claire Booker

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**CHARACTERS**

Zhenya A Russian landowner in his thirties - an intense but sincere man.

Lisa His wife. A gentle, shy young woman.

Boris A friend from Zhenya's student days – a cynical barrister.

Stepashka A voluptuous peasant woman. *(can double as Dasha)*

Dasha Her sister. *(can double as Stepashka)*

**SET & PROPS**

Russia of the late 1860s. Lisa, Zhenya and Boris are dressed in well-to-do day wear. Dasha and Stepashka are in simple peasant clothing. The majority of the play's action takes place in a prison cell containing minimal furniture. Scenes set outside the cell can be represented with sound and lighting effects. Props include a wooden lectern, a leather briefcase, a silver hip flask, a note pad, a bible, a small table, a chair, a bench and a baby doll wrapped in swaddling.

EXCERPT

**ACT TWO Scene Two**

Zhenya is standing by the window of his cell. The door opens and Boris enters, dressed in legal garb and jubilant.

Zhenya Boris?

Boris Congratulations, old boy. You were magnificent. Simply magnificent. (*he strides up to Zhenya and gives him a bear hug*) What a triumph.

Zhenya I can’t believe . . . Is it true?

Boris Such instinct. Such timing. (*quoting melodramatically*) “Can you condemn a wife to years of loneliness and grief for the sins of her husband? She will live in shame and alone. In shame and alone.” There wasn't a dry eye in the house. (*quoting melodramatically towards the audience*) “Lisa, forgive me. Lisa! Lisa!” (*sighs*) You sly rascal. The effect was electric. And then the master stroke. (*quoting*) “Please do not look in her direction. I have no desire to torment her further!” (*laughs with joy*) So of course everyone, but everyone, turns to look up at your darling wife, who was so saintly in blue. Why didn't I think of that myself? It was such an obvious ploy.

Zhenya It was heartfelt, Boris.

Boris Of course it was heartfelt. That was the beauty of it. Nothing impresses a jury like sincerity. It was the only card to play in a case like yours and you played it magnificently. (*quoting Zenya*) “Behind the bars of my own conscience”. What a marvellous line. Poetic. “The bars of my own conscience.” Pushkin couldn't have put it better. (*sudden doubt*) It wasn't Pushkin, was it?

Zhenya (*Zhenya shakes his head, in a whisper*) No.

Boris Of course not. (*he pulls out his hip flask)* By God, Zhenya. Let’s celebrate. (*he opens the flask and sniffs it*) Mmm. Pertsovka! (*he takes a swig then pours a generous measure into Zhenya’s glass*) A toast! To that rare and beautiful thing. (*he clinks the flask against the glass*) Sincerity. And all who sail in her. (*Boris takes another good swig)* If you can't lie, be sincere. It’s the golden rule for those who haven’t a leg to stand on.

Zhenya What if you are sincere, yet living a lie?

Boris (*noticing Zhenya hasn’t touched his vodka*) Drink up, old boy! Put some fire in your belly.

Zhenya What if you desperately want to be sincere, but the lie keeps coming back?

Boris (*pauses to contemplate Zhenya, then sighs*) Let me give you a word of advice, Zhenya. Not from my own lips, but from those of our blessed Saviour himself. ‘Let the dead bury the dead.’ Eh? (*Boris raises the flask again*) To the dead. And all those who bury them. (*Boris contemplates for a moment, then laughs and takes another swig*) What a team we made, eh? Old Petrovsky would be proud of his boys. (*triumphant*) Nine months. Can you believe it? Nine months. I'll be honest with you. I was bracing myself for two years. Two years, I thought, and by the seat of our pants. But nine months – why, it's scarcely more than a vacation.

Zhenya (*distressed*) Her face, Boris - when everyone turned round to look at her.

Boris Damn me if she wasn’t right all along. Another lesson learnt. It has to be the right wife, of course. The wrong wife would have been a liability. (*he takes another swig*) And what a wife you have, Zhenya. What a treasure. She grows in my estimation daily.

Zhenya (*Zhenya puts his head in his hands*) Oh God.

Boris For Christ’s sake. Anyone would think I’d lost you the case.

Zhenya Where is she?

Boris Lisa Petrovna? In the ladies room - doing whatever ladies they do in there.

Zhenya Fetch her for me

Boris In the ladies room? I'd be drummed out of the regiment.

Zhenya I must talk with her. I need to know how she feels.

Boris Ecstatic, I imagine. She was convinced she’d lose you for good. I wouldn't mind being in your shoes in nine months' time. Or should I say, in your bedroom slippers? It'll be like a second honeymoon.

Zhenya Find her Boris.

Boris (*moving towards the door*) You’re a damn lucky man, Zhenya. You have a whole life-time together. The least you can do is smile. (*Boris knocks on the door*) Guard!

Zhenya Tell Lisa I love her.

Boris Beyond the realms of duty, old boy. Making love to pretty young wives is not in my brief. Alas. (*sound of the door unbolting and Boris exits*)

Zhenya (*rushes to the door and shouts through the grill*) Tell her I . . . (*he moves away from the door, rubs his face with both hands and moves restlessly to the window. He looks out thoughtfully for a while, then almost imperceptibly starts to hum a peasant folk song. Still off stage, Stepashka’s begins to hum the song along with him. As they hum together, Zhenya leans against the wall, eyes closed)*

Stepashka (*enters, chewing a leaf, still humming*) It's been a long time, sir. (*Zhenya swings round and sees her*) I've missed you.

Zhenya Step . . . Stepa . . .

Stepashka Don’t I please you anymore, sir? (*she moves away*)

Zhenya Don't go. (*she halts*) Stay a little. It can do no harm - to dream a while. (*he closes his eyes*) I can smell the nettles. That sweet, sharpness. They're damp with rain.

Stepashka (*ticking his face with her leaf*) You like that, don’t you, sir?

Zhenya How fresh the world is with you in it.

Stepashka Rolling and rolling and rolling down the slope. (*laughs playfully*)

Zhenya You haven't changed. You never change. (*he takes hold of her skirt*) Come. There's

 still time. Lie down. Here. No-one will see us. There’s still time. (*he pulls off his jacket in readiness)*

Stepashka I'm soaked to the skin, sir. Look at my blouse. It's awfully wet.

Zhenya Let me dry you.

Stepashka (*Zhenya reaches out and touches her breast*) Kiss me first, sir. I like a kiss.

Zhenya (*he traces the outline of her face with his hand)* I know every inch of you. *(he draws her to him slowly and kisses her mouth*)

Stepahska Would you like me to . . .?

Zhenya Yes.

Stepashka (*she distributes kisses over his face*) You like that, don’t you?

Zhenya Yes.

Stepashka (*she opens the top button of his shirt and kisses his neck*) You like that too, don’t you, sir?

Zhenya Yes. (*he unbuttoning his shirt*) Yes, I do.

Stepashka (*kissing his chest*) All the way down, sir.

Zhenya Oh God.

Stepashka (*as if by prior agreement*) I’ve done what you asked, sir. I haven’t washed.

Zhenya You . . . . (*he pulls her to him and they kiss her passionately, punctuating it with denials*) No, no, no, no! (*he backs away*)

Stepashka What have I done, sir?

Zhenya We can’t. We mustn’t. It’s not possible.

Stepashka (*she ties up her blouse again*) You could have had me, sir. It would have been easy.

Zhenya The shame. The guilt.

Stepashka You wanted me.

Zhenya I wanted you too much.

Stepashka (*moving towards the exit*) Two long years. Oh sir, what a crying shame. Never, never again. What a crying shame.

Zhenya Don’t go!

Stepashka (*Stepashka starts to hum and dance*) You thought you could forget me. (*she dances seductively round him*)

Zhenya Oh, this is intolerable.

Stepashka I was dancing only for you.

Zhenya I can’t live like this.

Stepashka Then kill yourself.

Zhenya What?

Stepashka Kill yourself.

Zhenya No!

Stepashka (*she smiles seductively and begins to play with the strings of her blouse*) Then kill me, sir. Put a bullet through my chest.

Zhenya She was a woman, she breathed, she was made of flesh and blood.

Stepashka (*quoting his court speech*) “She was the devil, m’lud. The very devil. I had no power to resist her tricks.” (*Stepashka takes Zhenya’s hand and makes it into the shape of a pistol*) Put a bullet through her chest. And you shall have peace.

Zhenya (*horrified*) I shot her like an animal.

Stepashka (*slowly backing away towards the exit*) Where your hands used to roam so blissfully, so freely. Remember? Five bullets through my chest.

Zhenya Soft. And warm. And free.

Stepashka (*backing away from him*) Five, sir.

Zhenya Oh God.

Stepashka Five!

Zhenya What have I done? (*the sound of five pistol shots; with each one, Stepashka buckles further*)

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