

Introduction

Some of my closest friends are actors, and while I can honestly say that I can't stand any of them and find their need for constant validation nauseating, I am grateful for the free theatre tickets they give me. Oh sure, I have to go backstage afterwards and pretend I liked their performances, but sitting in those premium seats on opening night just before the curtain goes up, I cannot help but be transported back to my youth, when my mother and grandmother would take me along to see a whole host of wonderful plays, performed by people who I, mercifully, did not know: Charles Laurence's *My Fat Friend* (starring Graham Duckett, the first professional actor I ever saw on stage), Samuel A. Taylor and Cornelia Skinner's *The Pleasure of His Company* (starring Douglas Fairbanks Jr, no less), *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* by Steve J. Spears (starring a momentarily naked and twirling Gordon Chater) and many, many more.

I had first taken to the stage myself at the age of four in a Clovelly Park Kindergarten adaptation of Charles Perrault's *Sleeping Beauty*. I played the Handsome Prince (of course!) and the role required me to climb upon a rocking horse, ride furiously

to an imaginary castle, dismount and kiss Belinda Dabrowski on the cheek. It was a lunch-time performance, and during the morning rehearsal I rode so furiously and dismounted with such gusto that the horse continued rocking through the all-important kiss, causing the rest of the cast to giggle.

Miss Brooks, our teacher, took me to one side and told me that when we did the play for real, I was to be sure that the horse had stopped rocking or else the parents would laugh too. This note made no sense to me at all – why on earth would we not want the audience to laugh? But Miss Brooks explained that while laughter was a good and enjoyable thing, the author did not intend that particular part of the story to be funny, and that it would be best for the play if I did as she asked. Of course, I ignored her completely and, if anything, rode the horse even more violently so that it rocked for longer. It got a huge laugh and everyone looked at me.

From that day to this, I have done my best to ignore almost every single note given to me by a director and to treat the intention of the author with utmost contempt. Should you wish to put on any of the plays in this book, I hope and trust you will do the same.

1.

Faust and the Furious

I've always been fascinated with the idea of selling my soul to the Devil in return for untold power and riches. Perhaps it's the actor in me. Perhaps it's the lawyer I once was. Perhaps, like everyone, I just want untold power and riches in exchange for something that, let's face it, doesn't exist. It's a story that also fascinated Christopher Marlowe and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe before him. My own modest contribution to the *ouvre-boîte*, as Goethe himself might have said (he was German and might not have known it was French for 'can-opener'), is this piquant satire. *Faust and the Furious* is a modern retelling of the Faust legend with a sting in the tale sharp enough to puncture even the most sacred of cows.

There is a story – possibly apocryphal – that, while writing his play, Marlowe did *in fact* summon up the Devil and enter into a diabolical pact to surrender his soul in return for fame and fortune. During his trial for heresy, Marlowe admitted that he *had* summoned up the Devil but said that he was 'just doing some research' and that they 'only spoke for a few minutes'. Whatever the truth, Marlowe went on to enjoy great success as a dramatist and, for a while, his popularity eclipsed even

that of Shakespeare, with whom he is most often compared. In fact, so similar were they that some say he *was* Shakespeare. Others say that it was Shakespeare who was Marlowe. A few even believe that *neither* man existed and that their plays were written by Sir Francis Bacon. Fewer still contend that it was the plays themselves that never existed and that actors who performed in them simply made up the words as they went along. There might be something to this last theory. I know that whenever I've had to sit through anything by Shakespeare or Marlowe or even Ben Johnson, barely anything that's said makes any sense to me. The words are all in the wrong order; some of them, I'd argue, aren't even *real* words at all. I mean, what the fuck is a 'clotpole'? Well I remember leaning over and whispering to none other than The Bell Shakespeare Company's own John Bell, during what I thought a particularly gibberish-filled performance of *Volpone*: 'Jeez, John,' I said. 'They could sure use some subtitles on this turkey, eh?' John stared at me a moment or two with those wonderfully intense eyes of his and then continued on with the scene. What a pro.

* Cf. *King Lear* and *Troilus and Cressida*.

Faust and the Furious

ACT ONE

The rooms of Doctor Faust, a chiropodist in his mid-fifties. The good doctor is finishing up at the end of a long day, rinsing out a plastic bowl he uses when pumicing the heels of his patients. He's humming 'Spanish Flea' by Herb Alpert. There is a sudden blinding flash, and Mephistopheles, a red-skinned, horned demon with expansive wings and an impressive tail, stands centre stage. Faust notices none of this.

MEPHISTOPHELES: Doctor Faust?

FAUST: That is my name.

MEPHISTOPHELES: I am ... Mephistopheles.

FAUST: Do you have an appointment?

MEPH: It was *you* who summoned *me*, Doctor Faust.

FAUST: Oh, yes – Margaret arranged for you to come and look at our chair, did she?

MEPH: Margaret—?

FAUST: We've been having trouble with the split leg rest. It only angles out to 45 degrees—

MEPH: I'm not here about your *chair*, Doctor Faust. I'm here about your *soul*.

FAUST: My sole?

MEPH: (*Nodding*) Your very soul.

FAUST: Oh, that silly woman. I'm sorry she bothered you with this. (*Calling*) Margaret!

MEPH: It's not a bother, Doctor Faust. I am here at your service.

FAUST: It's just a small plantar wart near the base of my heel. I assure you, I am perfectly capable of attending to it myself with a topical application of salicylic acid ...

MEPH: A ... plantar wart?

FAUST: (*Louder this time*) Margaret!

MEPH: I'm not here about the sole of your foot, Doctor Faust.

FAUST: (*Annoyed*) Where is that woman?

MEPH: She is frozen in time at her station – as is all other life – until we have concluded our bargain.

FAUST: Frozen in time at her station? Yes, well that'd be right. (*Still even louder*) Margaret, you lazy good-for-nothing!!!

MEPH: She cannot hear you, Doctor Faust ... nor can she hear me. No one will intrude upon us as we ... negotiate. (*Smiling*) May I sit down?

Mephistopheles makes himself comfortable on the podiatry chair.

FAUST: I'm not buying anything today, Mister Mephistopheles. Or any other day for that matter. There's a sign on Margaret's desk: 'No Hawkers or Canvassers' ...

MEPH: (*Crossing his legs*) Oh, I think you'll be interested in what I have.

Faust notices Mephistopheles's hooves for the first time.

FAUST: Good Lord, yes – I can see. (*Stooping to have a better look*)
That is the worst case of fungal nail infection I have *ever* seen.
You're certainly not going to get rid of that with apple cider or
tea tree oil ...

MEPH: That is my hoof, Doctor Faust. My cloven hoof.

Mephistopheles smiles and recrosses his legs.

FAUST: And the other one's even worse! It's going to take several
consultations to turn that around. (*Calling again*) Margaret!!!!

MEPH: I don't need any treatment, Doctor Faust. I'm here to
make you an offer – an offer of something you asked for last
night ... Do you remember?

FAUST: (*Thinking*) I was home all last night. My wife and I binge-
watched six episodes of *Dance Academy* ...

MEPH: But do you recall what you did when the clock struck a
quarter-to-seven and your wife asked you to fetch her a packet
of peanuts.

FAUST: Yes, of course; we didn't have any, so I went down to the
shops.

MEPH: And while you were in the car going down to those
shops – listening to one of those inexplicably popular adult
contemporary radio stations – you drove past a bus shelter
on which was displayed a poster of celebrated moving picture
actress Cate Blanchett. Her eyes closed, her lips parted, her
head turned beguilingly over her milk-white shoulder as if to

say not only 'Buy this cologne' but ... 'Buy *me*'! Your senses raced as Michael Bublé's rendition of 'Me and Mrs Jones' reached its predictable instrumental section and you said – almost inaudibly – 'I would give anything to be able ... *to have that*.'

FAUST: Yes, that's right – but I was referring to the bus shelter.

MEPH: The ... bus shelter?

FAUST: Correct. My wife and I have often thought that one would come in very handy in the garden. A little bench to sit on and read together, and under-cover in case the sprinklers come on.

MEPH: So ... you weren't talking about lustfully possessing Cate Blanchett?

FAUST: Good Lord, no – I'm a happily married man.

MEPH: But haven't you ever craved power and yearned for more than earthly meat and drink?

FAUST: Not really, no—

MEPH: Has not the life of an intellectual and scholar grown hollow and shallow and empty to you by now?

FAUST: Not at all; I find chiropody a *very* fulfilling vocation and endlessly fascinating. For example, did you know—

MEPH: But if you had the power to do *anything* you wanted on this earth – to fulfill your wildest fantasies and dreams and desires – would you not seize that power and wield it like the god you would surely be.

FAUST: (*Momentarily intoxicated by Mephistopheles's honeyed*

words) Well ... my wife and I have always wanted to go on a holiday to Lobethal.

MEPH: Yes, yes ...

FAUST: Just for a long weekend. We'd like to visit the Tweed Museum and see the Christmas lights.

MEPH: Mmm. You ... you don't think that might be, perhaps, a *waste* of your unlimited power?

FAUST: Well, I think it'd be sensible to keep some of my unlimited power in reserve for when I really need it.

MEPH: I see.

FAUST: You know, save it up.

MEPH: For a rainy day.

FAUST: Correct. I mean, we might splurge and get that bus shelter we've always wanted—

MEPH: But, Doctor Faust, have you never wanted to crush your enemies like ants or rain down vengeance on those who would wish you ill?

FAUST: Ooh – now that's a good point. (*His eyes narrowing*) There's that podiatrist who has opened up his rooms right on the corner. I wouldn't mind visiting a plague of frogs or something on him; something that'd make him have to close for a while during our busy season in the lead-up to Michaelmas.

MEPH: Of course, of course – you could summon a million frogs with the mere wave of a hand.

FAUST: A million might be overdoing it a bit. Fifty ought to be sufficient. Take him a couple of days to sweep that out and give the area a going over with some antiseptic wipes, I reckon ...

MEPH: I can arrange all of this for you, Doctor Faust – and so much more.

FAUST: (*Chuckling*) You're a very good salesman, Mister Mephistopheles ...

MEPH: Please, I am not here to corrupt you, Doctor Faust. I am but a simple gatherer of men's souls.

FAUST: How does all this work though? Are you on some sort of commission?

MEPH: (*A bow*) I am in the service of Lucifer.

FAUST: So there are no hidden fees and charges?

MEPH: No, no – none at all. (*Unfurling a parchment*) It's all set out very clearly in the Terms of Agreement. In return for unlimited earthly power for the rest of your life – fixed at twenty-four years – you promise to part with your soul and spend eternity damned in a pit of everlasting hellfire.

FAUST: (*After a pause*) I see. So, it's sort of like a lay-by scheme.

MEPH: Sort of, yes.

FAUST: And the twenty-four years ...?

MEPH: *Or* when you die – whichever is sooner.

Faust strokes his chin.

FAUST: Eternal damnation does seem a lot for a trip to Lobethal.

MEPH: Don't forget the bus shelter and the plague of frogs – and whatever else you decide to do over those twenty-four years. How much or little you wield of your unlimited power is entirely up to you.

FAUST: Can I cash in what I don't use at the end and get *some* of my soul back?

MEPH: (*Making a face*) No. I'm afraid we don't give change.

FAUST: Mmm ... I'm not sure ...

MEPH: (*Hopefully*) Cate Blanchett.

FAUST: Well ... she *is* very pretty. Does she have a problem with calluses or corns?

MEPH: Um, I don't know ...

FAUST: It's just I thought that if she did ... and she came to see me ... maybe I could bewitch her, you know, with my powers – cure her of her corns or calluses, obviously – and then take her to Lobethal. I could leave my wife at the Christmas lights, you see, and meet Cate at the Tweed Museum—

MEPH: You can do anything you wish, Doctor Faust. But why take the chance that she *might* have corns or calluses and that she *might* come and visit you? Command the elements to bring forth corns and calluses upon her entire body, cure her with a simple nod of your head and then, in a malevolent caprice, have her instantly manifest in your bed in Lobethal.

FAUST: But what about the Tweed Museum?

MEPH: You can build a palace of tweed in an instant that would be the envy of all the mighty Caesars of Rome combined.

FAUST: Do you think she'd like that?

MEPH: What woman could resist such a grandiose gesture?

FAUST: Yes, yes – I'm beginning to see the benefits of this arrangement. But tell me, Mister Mephistopheles ... what is the accommodation like in Hell?

MEPH: Accommodation?

FAUST: Yes. Which level of Hell would I end up on? And what are the views like?

MEPH: Well, it does rather depend on what sins you end up committing within the term of our arrangement—

FAUST: 'Cos I don't want to be in Limbo with all those babies.

MEPH: *And* it's a question of what's available. Anything post-End of Days is going to be very busy—

FAUST: And what about this 'eternity' business? Can you move a little on that or is it a deal-breaker?

MEPH: 'Fraid so. There's no margin in it for us otherwise.

FAUST: I really should talk about it with my wife first.

MEPH: Why not surprise her. Imagine the look on her face.

FAUST: Oh, I don't think that's a good idea. I once bought a Kirby vacuum cleaner from someone at the door without checking

with her. She got very cross. Made me ring up the sales centre and ask for our money back—

MEPH: Get a *new* wife, Doctor Faust. Marry Cate!

FAUST: Oh no, I could never replace my wife—

MEPH: Well, marry Cate *as well*. You can do *anything* – ANYTHING – that you want!

FAUST: Two wives, eh? (*More chuckling*) That sounds a bit naughty ...

MEPH: You can have *a hundred* wives, *a thousand* wives! Each wife more beautiful than the next ...

FAUST: (*Lost in the thought of it*) A thousand wives ...

MEPH: As many wives as you wish.

FAUST: (*Still lost*) A thousand *and four* wives ...

MEPH: (*Proffering the parchment*) And all you have to do is sign away your mortal soul – you'll hardly miss it after all. None of you on this earthly ball seem to use it as you go about your business – blinking, toadish, sucking from sodden moss or dripping stone. This is a 24/7 twenty-four years of all-you-can-eat cosmic buffet ...

FAUST: (*As if in the throes of transfigurative besychasm*) *O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!*

MEPH: *And* an unlimited Happy Hour! Come and drink till you burst from the jacuzzi jet-like blessings of supernatural fountains ...

FAUST: (*Eyelids flickering as he takes the parchment*) *J'accusie ...*

MEPH: (*Handing him a quill*) Just sign there.

FAUST: (*Weakly*) Ink ... I have no ink. Margaret was supposed to pick some up from Officeworks ... (*Yelling*) Margaret!!!

MEPH: You don't need any ink, Doctor Faust.

FAUST: No ink? (*Examining the quill*) What – has this got some sort of cartridge in it?

MEPH: No, no—

FAUST: That's how they make their money on these things, you know. That, and the toner—

MEPH: No, no – you need to sign the contract in blood.

FAUST: In *blood*?!

MEPH: Your own blood. (*Pointing at the parchment*) Just there, if you would ...

FAUST: *My own blood*?!

MEPH: Yes. (*Pointing*) Right on the clotted line.

FAUST: (*Jabbing the quill into his arm then signing*) It's the bloody Kirby vacuum cleaner all over again ...

Cow bells and whistles.