

BEOWULF

A NEW FOLK METAL OPERA
BY BARBARA BYERS



Librettist	-	Daniel Byers with contributions by Barbara Byers
Composer	-	Barbara Byers
Choreographer	-	Veronica Santiago
Director	-	Barbara Byers
Assistant Musical Directors	-	Jasper Sussman, Samuel Chan, Kyle Adam Blair

CAST

Skald(Narrator)	-	Barbara Byers
Grendel	-	Lauren Jones
Wealtheow	-	Jasper Sussman
Hrothgar	-	Jonathan Nussman
Aeschere	-	Samuel Chan
Sybil	-	Elizabeth Fisher
The Norns	-	Verónica Santiago Moniello, Ariadna Sáenz Marín
Beowulf	-	chicken wire, paper mache, paint
Odin	-	pvc pipe, rope, canvas, memory foam, paint
The Dragon/Time/Existence	-	bamboo, found objects, electrical wires

ENSEMBLE

Piano	-	Kyle Adam Blair
Percussion	-	Ben Rempel
Double Bass	-	Kathryn Schulmeister
Baritone Saxophone and Oboe	-	Samantha Stone
Flute	-	Michael Matsuno
Electronics	-	John Burnett

INTRODUCTION TO THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE WORLD

In the beginning there was a yawning void. Twelve rivers flowed from two realms of ice and fire, mixed together in the emptiness, condensed, and from them came salt and rock, a giant called Ymir and a cow called Auðhumla. Auðhumla, flowing with milk upon which Ymir fed, licked the salt of this new landscape until, out of that rock sprung the first God, Buni. From Buni and a Giantess came the Aesir, who turned upon and slayed Ymir. The Aesir created the earth out of his body, filled the seas with his blood, and covered the sky with his empty skull. The first humans they made out of trees, grown from Ymir's hair. They are called Askr and Embla.

At this time the other worlds were formed, nine in number, or perhaps more. Shadowy underworlds and lofty overworlds of Gods, Giants, Elves and Spirits. Dwarves were made out of maggots, and they crafted the finest jewels and armor from earth ores.

Yggdrasil, the world tree, connects all the nine or more worlds. At Yggdrasil's roots live three norns called Urdr, Verdandi and Skul, who etch out the fates of men onto bark that falls from the tree. By the tree there is a well, and at the bottom of the well lives a dragon, or perhaps a snake. In the tree's branches lives an eagle, or perhaps a dragon. A squirrel also lives in the tree, and carries messages and insults between the well-snake and the tree-bird. There are goats that live under the world tree, and harts, who eat the bark and the leaves, aggravating the life force of the worlds, but the tree is refreshed daily from the water in the well.

Over the course of time, Loki, a trickster and a giant who lives with the gods, sometimes helping and sometimes harming, takes his jokes too far and is bound by the gods to a rock underneath the earth by the entrails of his own son. The Aesir tie a poisonous snake above their prisoner to drip venom on his brow. Hel, ruler of the underworld, guardian of the forgotten dead, and Loki's daughter, lays a bowl above the chained God's head to collect the toxic fluid. Now and then Hel must empty the bowl and when Loki screams in pain from the drops that sear his face in these interims, the world trembles.

In the end, Loki is loosed and a great battle falls on the worlds. This battle is called Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods. This is the apocalypse. Surtr, a Flame Giant, leads the forces of evil and chaos against the Gods in a ship made out of the unclipped nails of dead men. Wolves run across the sky and swallow the moon and sun. On earth there are three winters with no summers in between, bonds of kinship break and all humans turn on each other. The gods are slain in turn and in turn take vengeance for each other, slaying the giants, orgresses and wolves. In the end, Surtr kills the last god, and sets the flame that consumes Yggdrasil and all the worlds contained in its roots and branches.

*inspirations/informants of the mythology just relayed come from the compilation of poems called the *Poetic Edda (Codex Regius)*, written down anonymously at a time likely between 600 AD and 1000 AD. A 13th Century reinterpretation of these poems by Icelandic author and politician Snorri Sturluson's called the *Prose Edda* adds details to the original poems. For a more detailed overview and a look into theories about life and consciousness in the Viking Age, see *The Viking Way: Religion and Warfare in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, by Neil S. Price.

BEOWULF

This is the world of *Beowulf*. Written down in Scandinavia sometime between 600 AD and 1100 AD, *Beowulf* had an aural tradition that was much older. The tale begins with the Danes (a group of people likely to have lived in present day Denmark), their construction of a glorious mead hall and the conflicts with the monstrous force of Grendel, Grendel's mother and a dragon. Beowulf is the hero of the tale, arriving from the land of the Geats (likely present day southern Sweden), to deliver the Danes from the monsters that oppress them.

This interpretation of *Beowulf* deals with the first half of the story, examining the tragedy of Grendel from his birth until his death at Beowulf's hands.

Hrothgar, King of the Danes, has gathered enough wealth to devote a portion to constructing a beautiful Mead Hall (community space for feasting and gathering, and a place where rulers could dole out treasures and gifts to their thanes, bestowing honor and encouraging loyalty), called *Heorot*. In the great hall, the warriors feast and consume ale provided by Wealtheow, the Queen of the Danes. Wealtheow has come to the Danes from a neighboring community whose forces matched Hrothgar's in might and quantity, and in order to prevent mass slaughter on both sides Wealtheow was offered in marriage to Hrothgar as a way to establish peace between the communities. So great was her wisdom and beauty that Hrothgar was powerless before her and accepted the deal forthwith.

In their new, gleaming, golden Mead Hall called Heorot, The Danes make such a raucous in their revelry that they attract the attention of Grendel, a monster who, according to the *Beowulf* poet, is one of the last of Cain's descendants. In other interpretations, Grendel could be of the race of Giants mentioned in the mythology above. Grendel is disgusted by the human's debaucherous behavior, and takes it upon himself to raid the hall and slaughter everyone in Heorot. He does this for 12 years, sparing no one except Hrothgar, Wealtheow, and Unferth (the court poet). He does not kill them in order to grievously torment them.

Then, from across the seas comes the hero Beowulf and his band of Geats. Beowulf is said to have the strength of 30 men in each of his hands. When he initially is greeted by the Danes, his bravery and good name is challenged by Unferth, who recounts an event where Beowulf allegedly swam and lost a race with his blood brother Brecca. Unferth is quickly corrected and the gathered people are told that Beowulf was both victorious in the race, and that he slayed hundreds of sea monsters to boot. When the festivities end and everyone has gone to sleep, Grendel comes and slays one Geat before coming upon Beowulf, who has been waiting without armor or weapons. When Beowulf grabs Grendel's arm in the dark, Grendel feels Beowulf's god-like strength and knows it is the end. Sure enough, Grendel pulls so hard to get away from Beowulf that he rips his own arm off from the socket. Grendel lopes home to die in his undersea cave.

Little do the Danes know that the monster has a mother who is twice the size of Grendel. The next night, in her grief and rage, she attacks Heorot, scoops up and crushes nine men. She then grabs Hrothgar's right hand man, Aeschere, and slings him over her shoulder to devour in her cave.

CONTEXT

We leave the story here, after Grendel's mother's grief at the loss of her son. Grendel's narrative and place in collective memory is as a monster, but what is this impulse to create beings, and call them 'monstrous'? What is the experience of the monster, who in turn finds humans contemptible and dangerous? Does Grendel represent the potential for monstrosity in all of us, or does he represent our ability to make anything that is strange and unknown into a repulsive, killable beast? Following the lead of John Gardner's work 'Grendel'(1971), which explores ideas of fatalism, nihilism and the existential crisis in the context of the monsters of Beowulf, this play presents the tragedy of the monster Grendel, illuminating his cruel birth as an always-other to the humans, created by humans, storied, demonized and finally killed by humans.

In this play, we mirror Grendel's tragedy, his birth and death, in the Norse mythology of the birth and death of the world (as we are able to interpret it from the poetic and archeological evidence, and a good serving of creative re-interpretation).

Over the course of this project I have thought about issues of monstrosity and fatalism in the context of the epic of Beowulf and the the surrounding late Iron Age history, mythology, archeology, poetry, religion, and linguistics. What is the impulse to tell stories, and how do we get from this impulse to performance? How does one translate Beowulf, a piece of literature shrouded in obscurity?

In imagining the past, how do our present physical surroundings influence our perception? How do we interact with materials and what influences do they have over our movement and our expression? How does the voice effectively translate stories beyond its practical function as resonator of sound and molder of words? What are the mental states of performance and how do they contribute to the translation of narratives outside the performing body? What is the space between the performing body and the audience, and what happens in that space? How does interacting with materials and inanimate objects affect us, and what does it mean that we influence, and 'animate' objects?

FURTHER READING

Professor Neil Price, a specialist in "early medieval North c. 400-1100 CE, especially the Viking Age, and the historical archaeology of the Asia-Pacific region from the 1700s to the present(<http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/staff/Presentations/neil-price/>)" at Uppsala University, Sweden, is perhaps my main inspiration around this project, and was my introduction to the concept of the archeology of consciousness (exploring how people may have thought and experienced reality in the past through looking at a combination of material archeology, text and living with contemporary communities who have a connection to the history). In issues of reconstructing pronunciation of dead languages, I have been interested in the work of Professor Jackson Crawford, a Norse specialist and linguist at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

I have also been inspired by the work of John Bell (Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects), Nina Eidsheim (Sensing Sound), John Emigh (Masked Performance), Mladen Dolar(A Voice and Nothing More), Werner Herzog(On the Sublime), Heidegger(Being and Time), Judith Becker(Deep Listeners), Benjamin Bagby (Performative Re-interpretations of Beowulf), Roland Barthes (The Grain of the Voice) Merleau-Ponty (The Phenomenology of Perception), and many more...