

THE DEVIL IN THE SHADOWS by ANDREW SHAKESHAFT

CAST in order of appearance

Poet

Blacksmith

Grandfather

Son

Soldier

Unferth

1st Soldier

2nd Soldier

Hrothgar

1st Advisor

2nd Advisor

Villager

Watchman

Beowulf

Look-out

+ other non-speaking roles: large number of soldiers belonging to Hrothgar's court + soldiers accompanying Beowulf.

The 15 speaking roles are all male. I have done this play with boys of 13/14 and it suited them well. Though a serious retelling of the Grendel/Beowulf story, it is leavened throughout with humour.

It lasts about an hour.

EXTRACT ONE

1.

A black stage. A fire light illuminates the Poet sitting in the great hall of Hereot.

POET

Welcome to this place many have called their home. This mighty hall of Hereot built many centuries ago and handed down to all who come to pass their time in deepest peace among these loving people. There were wars, of course there were wars; great battles raged over dewy mountainside and blossoming land, laid waste by mighty

armies. But these times have gone. Great heroes came into our midst: Scyld, Beow, names to conjure with - and Hrothgar, our current king. This ravaged land was brought from off its knees and sits now, proud, over all the earth, its light shining in the darkest places and brightening even deepest winter's eve.

The sound of the Blacksmith's begins and a light comes up on him, hammering away at his anvil.

POET

Men work for bread to feed their babes.
Young boys play at soldiers in frosted courtyards.
Laughter once again does fill these corridors
And life does spring through every doorway and from every heart.
Welcome to Hereot. I am poet of this tale. I bid you come in.

The sound of the furnace and the anvil grow louder as the light fades on the poet, then comes up on the Blacksmith's forge. The Blacksmith is still hard at work on his anvil. The Son is sweeping the floor in the background. An Old Man is seated in a rocking-chair at the front of the stage. The Blacksmith stops hammering and closes the door to the furnace. The sound of the fire fades ...

BLACKSMITH *rubbing his hands together*

Finished! It is done.

GRANDFATHER *sarcastic*

So soon?

BLACKSMITH

A man should take pride in his work.

GRANDFATHER

But why must he take so much time?

BLACKSMITH

I do things as they should be done.

No corners cut; no bodes or half measures.

All in its correct place. It is done.

GRANDFATHER

In my time ...

BLACKSMITH

People rely on me to do a job;

If it's not to your liking you could leave.

GRANDFATHER

You'd throw me out. An old man. No respect.

BLACKSMITH

None earned.

GRANDFATHER

I am your family.

BLACKSMITH

Which means I have no choice in keeping you. Nothing else.

GRANDFATHER *spoiling for a fight*

If I was ten years younger ...

BLACKSMITH

You'd be a damn sight more useful.

The Grandfather makes a grunting noise and sinks back into his chair, mumbling to himself.

BLACKSMITH *imitating the noise*

Hunuh! yourself! [*To the Son*] Son, has this floor been swept?

SON

I...I ...

BLACKSMITH

A simple question asked, a simple answer sought. Is it swept?

SON

Yes.

BLACKSMITH

So where is all the dust?

SON

I ...it's ...

BLACKSMITH

Where is the pile you have swept it into?

SON

I ... I ...

BLACKSMITH

Well?

SON

I don't have one.

BLACKSMITH

So what have you done?

SON

I've ... swept.

BLACKSMITH

You have pushed it around the room. You have taken it on holiday. What was there is now here - what was there has now taken a trip over to here. You have not swept, have you?

[Grandfather chuckles to himself.] Do it again.

GRANDFATHER

Can't even control his son....

BLACKSMITH

Quiet yourself, or there'll be little food on your plate tonight.

GRANDFATHER *grunting again and mumbling to himself*

So much time spent on one job. So much time.

BLACKSMITH *to the Son*

I'm watching.

The Son sweeps the dust into a pile.

GRANDFATHER

When I was young I could hammer forty-two swords in three days. My hands would bleed sometimes but I'd struggle through the pain.

BLACKSMITH

And look at you now. *[To the Son]* In a pile, sweep it in a pile. We are attempting to trap the dirt, not set it free. How many times? Slowly ... patiently ...

The Son brushes slower.

GRANDFATHER

So where is it? This work must have a product. So much noise and fury must have created something.

BLACKSMITH *to the Son*

Son, fetch them. *[The Son looks at him unsure.]* Let go of the brush and fetch them. Without you swishing around, the dust might have a chance of gathering in a pile all by itself. *[The Son fetches a large box full of metallic objects. He places it in the middle of the floor.]* There is my work.

GRANDFATHER

Where?

BLACKSMITH

There ... *[The Son tips the contents of the box out on a signal from the Blacksmith] ...*

fifty-seven ladles.
GRANDFATHER *confused and amused*
Ladles?
BLACKSMITH *proudly*
Fifty-seven of them. Count them. [*The Son starts to count them.*] Not you. Him.
GRANDFATHER *chuckling*
Ladles.
BLACKSMITH
Yes. Ladles.
GRANDFATHER
Three days for fifty-four swords, that was me. You ... you are three days for fifty-seven soup spoons.
BLACKSMITH
No one needs swords.
GRANDFATHER
Soldiers need swords.
BLACKSMITH
Soldiers at war need swords. Soldiers at peace need food to give them strength to train and grow strong. An army's strength comes from its belly.
GRANDFATHER
A belly full of soup.
BLACKSMITH
I give up.
GRANDFATHER
You can never have too much soup.
BLACKSMITH *to the Son*
Clear them away.
GRANDFATHER
Or is it a deadly soup spoon that could kill a man with a single blow?
BLACKSMITH
There are no wars any more.
GRANDFATHER
'Don't come near I'm armed with deadly cutlery!'
BLACKSMITH *angry*
This is what you do! This is what you drive me to. I sweat my blood to keep you sitting there with your belly full and mouth flapping. It's me that's worked this family from out of the ground to where we are now.
GRANDFATHER *sarcastic*
Congratulations! Aren't we doing well!
BLACKSMITH
You close your mouth or so help me, I will bash your ageing bones into their waiting grave.

The Grandfather is silent. The Blacksmith turns his back on him.

GRANDFATHER
What - with a soup spoon?

EXTRACT TWO

... the great hall where two soldiers, Unferth and another, are duelling. They are supported by a large number of soldiers who are sitting round the edge, cheering them on. The atmosphere is one of good-natured sport.

SOLDIER
You're tiring, Unferth.
UNFERTH
I've not even begun.

SOLDIER

Please tell me when you do. I'd like to see it. [*Unferth lunges for Soldier, who dodges the blow.*] I'd not pity you so much if we were on a battle-field.

UNFERTH

You'd not be standing there if we were. You'd be laid out, dying slowly.

They lunge at each other again and glance each other off.

1ST SOLDIER

Poet, what say you? Who wins this fight?

POET

The strongest man.

1ST SOLDIER

So which one is he?

POET

Enough time has not yet passed.

The fighters lunge again.

2ND SOLDIER

I have money in my hand. Which one wins?

POET

I am a poet, not a seer.

2ND SOLDIER

You're an educated man.

POET

Yes.

2ND SOLDIER

So who wins?

POET

I know not.

The fighters lunge.

1ST SOLDIER

He has money in his hand; I have a sword in mine. Tell him how to multiply his or I will halve you.

POET

Unferth. Unferth is the winner.

2ND SOLDIER

Did you see it in the stars?

POET

Yes. I see great visions of his victory.

2ND SOLDIER

Then that is all I need.

1ST SOLDIER

And if he loses?

2ND SOLDIER

Then by your sword we'll no longer have a poet.

The soldiers laugh and the fighters continue to fight. The lights focus in on the Poet.

POET

Peace time brings with it abandonment of purpose.

Men will gamble, drink and play with all time that is sent to them.

Amusement is all, and poets sit idle waiting for those epic moments.

I can speak of battles past when blood was shed for greater cause

But this is peacetime and we must all wait for greater times to come.

The lights open out again and the fighters continue to lunge.

SOLDIER

You're tired, man.

UNFERTH

I've strength of many more within me.

They lunge.

2ND SOLDIER

The money's placed. We're drinking well tonight.

1ST SOLDIER

Poet! Any change of heart?

POET

None. None at all.

Soldier lunges at Unferth who side-steps him cleverly and with one great swing of his sword, strikes him on his shoulder and sends him to the ground. The soldiers cheer. Unferth stands above him as he writhes in pain. He raises his sword above his head as if to bring it down on him. Soldier looks up at him in fear. Unferth brings his sword down and it misses Soldier's head by inches. The soldiers cheer again. They raise Unferth above their heads and carry him from the hall. Soldiers 1 and 2 raise the Poet above their heads and chant.

SOLDIERS 1 & 2

Poet! Poet!

POET

The injured man!

1ST SOLDIER

What of him?

POET

He needs help.

2ND SOLDIER

He can pray for it.

POET

Let me down. [*Soldiers 1 and 2 let the Poet down from their shoulders. He goes over to the injured man and kneels next to him.*] [*To 1st Soldier*] Lift him up and take him to the Blacksmith's.

2ND SOLDIER

I'd say he'd had his fill of swords.

POET

The heated iron will seal his wound.

1ST SOLDIER

I've seen that done.

2ND SOLDIER

Does it not hurt?

1ST SOLDIER

Like nothing you can think of.

The Soldier groans in pain.

POET

Quick, take him, before his wound spreads worse.

Soldiers 1 & 2 pick up the Soldier and carry him off. The Poet remains on stage. A spotlight comes up on Hrothgar sitting on a high throne in the background.

POET

Watch him. Unferth. Victor in this important fight.
Watch too our king, gracious Hrothgar, builder of the hall in which we stand.
The first is, shall we say, a shadow hero.
Brave in word, as I myself can be,
And brave too in his own mind, yet here, within his heart is he sore lacking.
The second, majesty on throne, is brave as any mortal man could be, yet not so proud...

EXTRACT THREE

...the Blacksmith's. He is carrying a large hammer, about to start some more work.

BLACKSMITH

Son? [*The Son does not respond.*] What could a son of mine be so thoughtful about?

SON

Nothing.

BLACKSMITH

What is it? You've sat there so long I can see the moss growing on you.

SON

Father?

BLACKSMITH

Yes.

SON

I want to be a soldier.

BLACKSMITH

I know.

SON

So when will you let me?

BLACKSMITH

I will never let you.

SON

But why?

BLACKSMITH

My grandfather was a blacksmith, his father was a blacksmith, his father before him. My father was not. My father was a soldier and my father never watched me grow up. He never got the chance.

SON

It's not the same.

BLACKSMITH

You think you won't die. You're young. Every young man thinks he won't die. My father did - left my mother with me in her arms and went off to fight ... and he never came back.

SON

I want to fight for my country: the honour of my country. I want to stand proud at Hereot's gate proclaiming victory. I don't want to bash metal and sweat my life away. I want to do something I can be proud of.

The Blacksmith stops short and looks at him, attempting to hold in his anger.

BLACKSMITH

I feed this family with the work I do. When times are hard, I ration food, so that we will all come out alive. In wartime, soldiers fight with the tools I give them. In peacetime, not a cart can roll without my work supporting it. This is a proud job; I am a proud man. I wish I was a proud father. [*The Son hangs his head.*] Fetch me my tongs.

SON

No.

BLACKSMITH

I am your father. I put food on the table and allow you time for these fanciful dreams of glory. I owe you nothing. You owe me everything. Agreed? [*The Son shifts uneasily.*] Fetch me my tongs. [*The Son fetches the tongs.*] Thank you. Now I can begin.

He raises the hammer high above his head and, with a roar, brings it down quickly onto a piece of metal he has gripped with the tongs. There is the sound of the Soldier screaming in the background...

EXTRACT FOUR

The door bursts open and Unferth enters with a group of soldiers at his side.

UNFERTH

I come to look at my vanquished foe.

The soldiers begin to walk across the Blacksmith's work surfaces and start mock-fighting with the ladles, etc., to amuse themselves.

UNFERTH

Does he live?

BLACKSMITH

He lives. Get off there. Leave that alone.

The soldiers taunt him.

UNFERTH

He's a brave man, though not as brave as I.

BLACKSMITH *threatening the soldiers*

Get off there or I'll ...

UNFERTH *taking the Blacksmith's shoulders and leading him away from the confrontation*

My dear Blacksmith, how goes the business?

How goes the creation? The flying sparks, the hammer on metal?

BLACKSMITH

It goes well.

GRANDFATHER

It goes slowly.

BLACKSMITH

It goes well.

UNFERTH

You're a brave man - all that sweat and blood ... all for others. ... men like me who fight in fiercest battle. I like your lack of pride, I respect that in you. Your ability to perform monotonous tasks day in, day out, for the rest of your life. That is a fine quality.

BLACKSMITH

Is it so?

UNFERTH

Oh yes. If I had not been born for greatness, I wish I could have been a man like you.

BLACKSMITH

Monotonous, you say?

UNFERTH

How do you have that patience? I have an intelligence which means I get bored with simple tasks ... but you ... they are like your food and ale.

BLACKSMITH *becoming annoyed*

Lack of pride? Lack of pride?

UNFERTH

Amazing! You are a real example to others.

BLACKSMITH
Am I?

With a single kick to the back of Unferth's legs, the Blacksmith sends him sprawling across the floor. The Blacksmith swings round and picks up an axe from one of the workbenches and charges at the two soldiers, who are standing on a bench. They run off screaming in fear. The Blacksmith stands at the doorway and looks down on the prostrate Unferth.

BLACKSMITH

You are now going to listen to me. I have a pride which doesn't need to be ridden on horseback through the heat of a battle. I have a pride that doesn't need to be increased by the half praise of others. I have a real pride, born of hard work and simple dreams. I don't need to take another man's life in order to increase my own. When I approach a stranger I will look him in the eye and greet him as a friend. You and your kind would slaughter him, not because he's your enemy, not for the protection of others ... no, you kill for the good of yourselves. It makes you feel whole, like a real man *like a real man.* I hate you and your kind. [*He watches Unferth for a moment. Unferth is quivering on the floor, too scared even to move. The Blacksmith suddenly raises his axe above his head and charges at Unferth. He brings the axe down and it hits the floor, narrowly missing the petrified Unferth. The two men are close now and the Blacksmith speaks quietly to him.*] I keep this axe, not for myself, but for people like you. It's the only language you understand, isn't it? [*Slightly louder*] Isn't it? [*Unferth whimpers a response. Blacksmith shouts angrily*] Get out! Go on, get out!

Unferth runs for the door and exits...

EXTRACT FIVE

The Blacksmith walks over to the Grandfather and stands next to his chair. He takes a deep breath and speaks loudly.] Hard at work I see!

The Grandfather wakes up suddenly and stands up in a complete panic, unaware as to what is happening. The Blacksmith laughs. The Grandfather looks at him in disgust.

GRANDFATHER

What did you do that for?

BLACKSMITH

Can't a man have a few small pleasures in life?

GRANDFATHER

I could have died of fright.

BLACKSMITH

Promises, promises. [*The Grandfather scowls.*] My son wishes to become a soldier.

GRANDFATHER

He's told me.

BLACKSMITH

What do you think I should do?

GRANDFATHER

He'd make a good soldier.

BLACKSMITH

He'll make a dead soldier.

GRANDFATHER

He's almost a man.

BLACKSMITH

I know.

Pause

GRANDFATHER

I took a walk by the river yesterday.

BLACKSMITH

Did you?

GRANDFATHER

Yes. I was looking for apples, just down by the creek. It's nice down there, isn't it?
Very peaceful.

BLACKSMITH

Yes, it is.

GRANDFATHER

I heard them telling those stories again. Do you believe the stories from the villages?

BLACKSMITH

No.

GRANDFATHER

But you've heard them?

BLACKSMITH

I've heard them.

GRANDFATHER

A creature coming out of the forest and taking loved ones.

BLACKSMITH

It's a fairy story. I've heard the poet tell them a hundred times. The people in the village are so stupid they believe him.

GRANDFATHER

I walked by the river.

BLACKSMITH

And you looked for apples and someone told you a tale.

GRANDFATHER

I saw a body in the water ... a young boy ... dead. Floating on the top ... he'd been there some hours ... the smell like the rotting meat I season heavily. I've heard the poet's tales ... but he never mentions the smell.

BLACKSMITH

People die. Another fact of life. My wife is dying - I face it every time I wake up in the morning.

GRANDFATHER

But this was different; this was not natural ... and there are many more. I've seen them. They showed me where they keep them ... in a pile ... no burials ... they have no time.

BLACKSMITH

It's a fever, a sickness. They happen in the villages.

GRANDFATHER

They all have scars - like knife wounds, only deeper.

BLACKSMITH

I don't believe in monsters.

GRANDFATHER

Neither did I. But this one - if it exists - will tear this place apart.

BLACKSMITH

Nonsense. *If* it exists this is still Hereot. This is the strongest fortress ever built. Gods couldn't knock this down.

GRANDFATHER

I've seen it.

BLACKSMITH *dismissing*

In the village.

GRANDFATHER

They are no less than us.

BLACKSMITH

But we have our walls.

GRANDFATHER

And that is all ... I have seen it.

BLACKSMITH

You are an old man. You see many things. You see the devil in your soup.

GRANDFATHER

This is real.

BLACKSMITH

It is not. It is bad dreams of the villagers who want to live within these walls. Do you think I'd let my son become a soldier if I thought he'd be going to war against the devil?

GRANDFATHER

You going to let him be a soldier?

BLACKSMITH

I have set him a task. If he completes that I'll let him. I have little choice...

EXTRACT SIX

VILLAGER

I have seen sights, my Lord, that no man should witness. I have lost a daughter. Men I know have lost wives, fathers, mothers. We sit quietly at night, not in peace but with the expectant dread of hearing the sound... A noise so terrible in all its aspects ... it comes in dead of night, cracking through the branches of the wood, breathing fire. Its hands are made of hardest iron; its claws are sharp as any blade forged by the finest blacksmith. He has killed my friends.... and every night he comes again.

HROTHGAR

Stop! Who comes? Who is this 'it'?

VILLAGER

No man has seen him, my lord, and I'll vouch that all that have are no longer with us. But we have a name for him. We call him Grendel.

1ST ADVISOR

Is it man or mythological beast?

VILLAGER

I don't know, sir.

2ND ADVISOR

You haven't seen it and you don't know what it is. Are you sure it exists?

VILLAGER

I have bodies piled by my gate and I have laid in wait and listened to the screams of others as it takes them and devours them.

1ST ADVISOR *enjoying himself*

Devours them? You are his food.

VILLAGER

And soon all shall be, sir. A beast who can tear apart a forest will not stop at your high fences and drunken guards.

2ND ADVISOR

Our guards are not drunk.

VILLAGER

We see them, sir, asleep or leaning on the fences for support. Every man knows there is too much ale in this place. Some say you have no water at all. I say peace-time makes the soldiers lazy.

HROTHGAR

Enough of this. You think it's coming here.

VILLAGER

Yes, my lord.

HROTHGAR

Have you any proof?

VILLAGER

Each house they strike ...

2ND ADVISOR

They. First it is 'it', now it is 'they'.

VILLAGER

It could be an army for all I know. Each night it ...they ... come from the forest and each night they have got closer to these walls before returning as the dawn approaches. It will reach here and soon...

EXTRACT SEVEN

POET *calmly*

As is called for on many of these feast occasions, I shall tell a story. I shall make it brief, as ale must be drunk and flesh devoured, but I feel that this story is so very close to home that all should listen.

There stands on a hill a giant hall, and there sits in a valley a wooded plain, in the midst of which are caves carved into rock by ancient ice. Into these caves no man would ever dare venture, for tales he has been told by old men warn him of the creatures that dwell there.

The singing was loud in the hall that night. The ale flowed and the soldiers rejoiced at another day completed.

Deep in the caves, the devil himself began to stir. His eyes were fire, his breath was as the deepest sulphur pools. His limbs, solid bone surrounded by a mass of pulsing sinew, pushed against the earth and raised him up to his fullest height.

He could hear them laughing.

This creature, whatever name you wish to call the devil, was not like a man. He had no reason; he has no soul.

The gates of Hereot stood wide as the soldiers feasted, and Grendel, sharp-limbed and open-mouthed, came into the great hall. The door was ripped from off its hinges, solid oak sliced in half with god-like ease. And each man, seated at each table, screaming for their lives, died that day at Grendel's claw. And war had come to Hereot...

EXTRACT from Production Notes

PRODUCTION NOTES + TECHNICAL CUES, ETC.

INTRODUCTION: THEMES, THE PLAY'S INTENTION

Written in language that is reminiscent of olden times without being in the least bit inaccessible, the play is a lovely blend of humour and tragedy. There is comic by-play, often of a slapstick nature, between the Blacksmith and his ancient Grandfather and amongst the bored soldiery of Hrothgar's court. Against this is the frightening story of the monster Grendel and his nightly forays on the surrounding villages and finally on Hrothgar's court itself. The play culminates with the coming of Beowulf, who kills the monster.

The play's intention is to show the reality and the futility of war; though the war is against a single creature, it is nonetheless devastating in its cost. The way it is done is to focus on the little family of the Blacksmith, who has a son who wants to be a soldier. The boy sees this as a noble vocation but his father, the Blacksmith, knows different, having lost his own soldier-father in war. Contrasted to the son's noble wish is the bored soldiery of Hrothgar's court who, without a war to fight, play dangerous games, gamble and get drunk. These soldiers are anything but noble and serve to back up the Blacksmith's argument against his son becoming one of them. The fact that the war, when it comes, is against a supernatural creature also backs the anti-fighting argument. The son joins up and is killed; he never had a chance against such a foe. Only a legendary figure, as is Beowulf, has a chance of prevailing; courage, fighting skill, even the tactics of cowardice have the same end in this uneven war - and that is death - futile

deaths because no normal blow can cut down the creature; the son's courage is wasted.

THE CHARACTERS

POET - acts as the storyteller. He alternates between direct address to the audience, setting the scene or telling the tale and being a character in the play. He is Hrothgar's own poet, employed to record the deeds of his court and soldiery. As the storyteller his character is impartial though as a character he has a wry honesty that makes him a trustworthy character. We feel, because the boastfulness of the bored soldiers cuts no ice with him and because he has the respect and friendship of the clearly honest Hrothgar, that the story he tells is true. The speeches he has are often long and need to hold an audience's attention. Therefore a competent actor will be needed, who can handle the variety of paces required and the sometimes difficult words. The voice will need a good range and a sense of theatre and excitement.

BLACKSMITH - The main character in the story, he is a straight-forward and outspoken individual. His views are strong, especially with regards to war. He is hard on slackers - which include his own grandfather and son. A fiercely proud man and an extremely hard worker, his constant grumbling at the other members of his family cover up the very real love he has for them. It is protectiveness of his son that makes him unsympathetic to him. Once he has given in to his son's wish to be a soldier, something of his fire goes out of him. In a way, he has lost his own battle, just as later the son loses his against Grendel. Because we come to feel affection for this curmudgeonly individual, his grief at the end is more moving. All the character's movements need to be strong and definite; he is often angry and his voice is usually loud and blustery, which will emphasise the stuffing being knocked out of him when he can no longer prevent his son from joining the army - here the voice needs to be quiet, subdued and sincere and his whole body language slumped, in contrast to the vigour of his normal movements.

GRANDFATHER - delights in winding his grandson, the Blacksmith, up. He loves to talk and tell tall stories, especially about his own deeds in the past. Since he was a blacksmith too, this is usually to dig at the inadequacies of his own grandson. A lot of the comedy comes from this character so it must be handled well. His voice should not be too feeble and old, except when he plays on his age for sympathy. His movements must of course show his age but don't overdo it. Most of the time, he sits and rocks in his chair, though he is also involved in some slapstick-style sequences. Though comical, he has sincere and serious moments, mainly when talking to his grandson the Blacksmith about the latter's father - his own son - who also died as a soldier - [in this way he mirrors exactly what the Blacksmith is going through and through his attitude, which is to accept the inevitable, he shows what the Blacksmith's attitude will also be, over time.] The transitions between comedy and seriousness will be hard to handle and need a competent actor.

SON - the character is never very defined. He is simply a young man who is fired up with enthusiasm about being a soldier, who gets his heart's desire and then dies fulfilling it. Though his death is tragic, there have been pointers to its inevitability and it is not dwelt on. Instead, the last word of the play is triumphant by implication. We are reminded that the son died doing what he wanted to do and that in Heaven, as the Grandfather suggests, he will be beating the evil Grendel - also now dead - again and again. The thought makes the Blacksmith smile and actually leaves us on a tranquil note. The Son early in the play is a clumsy tongue-tied individual. His body-language - slouched and reluctant - should contrast with later when he is working to fulfil his father's conditions and earn the right to become a soldier. Here his movements should be sharper, definite, his body straight, his walk faster, his face glowing and head held proudly. Even his speech should glow, excitably.

SOLDIER - a small speaking part, but a source of much slapstick comedy. He fights

with Unferth when we first see him, when he comes over as confident and strong. Then he is wounded and carried to the Blacksmith's house for treatment. From here on he does not speak but has things - like his wound being cauterised by the Blacksmith's poker - to which he must react. He eventually passes out and must show an ability to be completely floppy and relaxed - not easy - as his body is manipulated round the stage. He spends quite some time completely still, sitting up on the floor flopped over like a dummy, which will require considerable concentration and patience.

UNFERTH - is the official 'hero' of Hrothgar's court. He is a bullying, loud-mouthed, boastful coward - as it turns out. He is in the play to show the difference between bravery in peacetime and bravery in war. It is easy to be brave when there is no real danger but when put to the test, Unferth fails dismally and becomes a pathetic despicable character in the end. Even at the beginning, the so-called hero is an unpleasant character. He is lacking in courtesy and 'grace'. He should be acted with an unpleasant, over-emphasised sneering upper-class voice. His nose is in the air, chest stuck out and he swaggers rather than walking. He can use extravagant and perhaps rather foppish mannerisms. He is patronising to the Blacksmith and allows his men to wreak havoc in the smithy. He is clearly supposed to be typical of what can happen to an army that is not in use - if left in the wrong hands. Under Unferth and his like, the army has lost discipline and all respect for others. Their punishment is Grendel and they do not deserve to win. But because of their bad management innocent people - the villagers; the Son - also suffer, and that is not right. Beowulf and his disciplined band of mercenaries - who have kept their battle-wits sharp by moving around from one troubled spot to another, honing their skills, and who are always courteous, are shown at the end as a strong contrast to the home army. Beowulf, the real hero, is an obvious antithesis to Unferth. In the second half of the play, Unferth's body language and manner has changed from his early swagger to a shrunken, self-effacing sort of skulk. His voice loses its punch and becomes querulous and complaining.

1ST SOLDIER & 2ND SOLDIERS - the two soldiers are 'typical' examples of the lower ranks in this rotten army. They are aping their leaders, who have given them a bad example. Therefore they are brawling, drunken bullies. The way they threaten the poet in the first scene we see these characters paints the picture. The next event is their lack of care of one of their own who is wounded. The scene in the Smithy emphasises this. They do not care or know anything about their comrade-in-arms. They should be played as loud-mouthed bullies who are none too bright. Their movements are confident when with a crowd of other soldiers, but when in the Smithy on their own, their manner is less confident. They shuffle a bit awkwardly; they don't hold their heads so high; they look to each other - eye-contact - for support. Their voices are less sure.

HROTHGAR - the king. A likeable character. A pacifist who is aware of his shortcomings as a king - he cannot protect his people from Grendel - because he is merely a man. Justifiably angry when lied to and flattered by his advisors, his greatest friend and confidant is the poet. His mannerisms should be regal without being pompous; the play focuses on him as a human being rather than as a king. His anger is a feature of his character, but it is born of frustration. His body language should be upright and strong, except when alone with the poet when he is far more informal. Perhaps he could sprawl in his throne, for instance, at these times when at others he would sit upright in it.

1ST ADVISOR - a flattering deceitful courtier, obsequious in his voice and body language. Petty, too - such as when he enjoys picking holes in the villager's story. Much bowing and hand-rubbing. Concentrate on contrasting with the 2nd. The comedy of their playing will be better for it.

2ND ADVISOR - marginally better than his colleague. In the first scene we see them in he is the honest one, who tells Hrothgar the truth. His voice should therefore be blunter and less extreme. But later, he is united with his colleague in his mockery of the villager.

The writing of this character isn't very consistent, so give it consistency by making out that the man is an out-and-out snob, which is what motivates him in the latter scene. Keep his voice as a contrast to the 1st Advisor, with a dry cynicism in all he says - that way his 'honesty' in the initial scene comes out more as irony. The two actors playing these parts could make play of some rivalry between the two - the first one fussy and over-gesticulating, bobbing about to keep the king's attention on him, the second in contrast, deeper voice, stiller, spikier in general - perhaps showing irritation at the 1st's effusiveness.

VILLAGER - a small part, largely factual. He needs to look in awe of his surroundings and the king - though he conquers his fear, because the news he has to tell is more fearful still. Perhaps he holds a felt hat in his hands, which he has whipped off his head in the presence of the king and which he now wrings nervously. As the scene progresses and he suffers the mocking of the advisors, his fear is overcome and he becomes braver and more defiant. His body language will straighten and his voice gather strength. He needs to talk with a thick country accent.

WATCHMAN - a small part, his role is to build up hope and expectation in the audience about the arrival of Beowulf. His manner is excited and triumphant. This needs to be strongly done, to build up a buzz of hope amongst the court and audience alike. Manners wide, sweeping arm gestures, fast paced voice and body language.

BEOWULF - a small but very important part. Beowulf has little to say but needs to move and speak like the hero he is. It would help if he is played by someone who looks athletic and strong.

LOOK-OUT - once again, a very small part, but with an important speech that builds up to the arrival of Grendel and the battle between monster and Beowulf. The Look-out is nervous and on edge, but confident of Beowulf, his master. The speech needs to strike the balance between these two states. The nervousness is important because the battle - which has largely to be imagined - must not seem an easy one even for Beowulf to win and the Lookout's role is to underline that fact. When speaking to Beowulf, before the speech, the trust and adoration in his eyes and manner must be evident.

These are the speaking roles, but there are also many non-speaking ones - soldiers at Hrothgar's court and more soldiers accompanying Beowulf.

SETTING

The play moves between the smithy, the court and a variety of outside venues, so must be simple and adaptable. It could be done very nicely as a kind of promenade, moving between two permanent settings set up in two different parts of your school hall, with another neutral area for such as the Watchman and the final scene by the Son's grave. If this idea were used, the settings could be done in a far more detailed way and would benefit from that. However, having dropped that idea in to take seed with some of you, I shall now give ideas for a more traditional stage set-up...