

Beowulf Proposal

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Proposal

Introduction

Beowulf is an ancient Anglo-Saxon epic poem, written down somewhere between the 8th and 11th centuries, but likely composed at some time in the 6th or 7th centuries.

Originally, it would have been performed in large wooden drinking halls known as *Mead Halls* - anyone who has played Skyrim will be familiar with the concept from Dragonsreach. Likewise, the Golden Hall at Edoras, from The Lord of the Rings is a typical example.

My central idea is to take the idea of the poem declaimed in the mead hall, but instead of simply reading the poem, to act it out as well; with actors speaking (and acting) all the lines of their characters, and the bard narrating sections.

This, along with the set design (see below) should give an immersive experience that hopefully makes the audience feel as if they are sat in a mead hall watching the events unfold before them.

Synopsis & Structure

Beowulf is a hero of the Geatish people (from Scandinavia). On hearing that the king of the Geat's allies, *Hrothgar* is beset by an evil monster named *Grendel*, he travels to Denmark to slay it.

Once in Hrothgar's mead hall *Heorot*, he fights Grendel and kills him. The rejoicing however is cut short when Grendel's mother attempts to take her revenge on the Danes; and Beowulf is forced to travel to her lair and kill her too.

Beowulf then returns to his people covered in glory; and when the Geatish king dies he becomes the new king. His reign is long and prosperous, but comes to an end when a dragon, disturbed from its hoard attacks. Beowulf, with the help of a companion, slays the dragon, but is himself killed. The play ends with a dirge for the fallen hero.

Despite the length of the original poem, which runs to over 3000 lines, the play may be able to be performed straight through, without an interval.

If an interval is desired, it should happen after Act II.

The poem itself is loosely organised in three acts, characterised by the three combats Beowulf partakes in; that with Grendel, with Grendel's Mother, and with the Dragon.

It should take about 1.5-2.5 hours to perform, exclusive of interval. The truth is, I don't know how long it will take because the script isn't finished yet. Unabridged audiobooks tend to be in the 2-2.5 hour range, and I have cut lots of things that are irrelevant to the main plot so that should help keep the length down.

Cast

In order of appearance:

The Bard Narrator - Large role

Hrothgar King of the Spear-Danes (Scyldings)* - Medium role

Grendel An evil monster, descendant of Cain* - Medium role

Beowulf A hero of the Geatish people - Large role

Beowulf's companions 14 Geatish thegns* - Non speaking roles

Lookout A warrior of the Spear-Danes who keeps watch for ships* - Small role

Wulfgar Hrothgar's Counsellor* - Small role

Unferth Hrothgar's spokesman* - Small role

Wealhtheow Queen of the Spear-Danes* - Small role

Hrethric & Hrothmund Sons of Hrothgar* - Small roles

Grendel's Mother A monstrous ogress* - Medium roles

Ashhere Hrothgar's Counsellor* - Small role

Hygelac King of the Geats** - Small role

Hygd Queen of the Geats** - Small role

The Dragon A dragon, awakened from its slumber** - Medium role (for two people)

A Slave Who awakens the dragon** - Small role

Wiglaf Beowulf's faithful companion** - Small role

Beowulf's companions 7(?) Geatish thegns** - Non speaking roles

Of the cast, most of Beowulf's companions can be omitted as required, and those present at the court of Hrothgar (marked with a *) can be doubled up with those present at the court of Hygelac (marked with a **; characters who cannot be doubled up are unmarked). Hrethric & Hrothmund may also be omitted.

Likewise, additional extras may be present at both courts - councillors, warriors and servants.

Most of the minor roles can be played by men or women, as can Grendel, Grendel's Mother, the Dragon (possibly a two person costume) and the Bard.

In total, the play can be performed by anywhere upwards of 10 people, with an ideal number being around 14-20.

Creative vision

This play works best when the character of the mead-hall, for which the original work was composed, is retained. As such, the aim would be to make the UCH resemble as closely as possible a mead hall.

Staging should be minimal and as far as possible abstracted away. No set changes should be required, and scene changes can be suggested by lighting.

Costumes and properties should be as realistic as possible. Both of these will require the person responsible to make things rather than buy them, but for the most part these will not be too difficult to make.

Lighting by open flame, or at least the appearance of open flame, is preferred to standard theatre lighting.

Sound would consist mostly of subtle soundscaping to add to the ambience, plus some sound effects at specific points.

The most notable technical requirement is for three monster costumes - those of Grendel, Grendel's Mother and the Dragon. These are not something that we make often, but we have made similar items before and have the skills to do so again.

Technically, there are lots of things we don't normally do, but nothing that is outside of our skill set.

Production team

I will produce, along with an assistant producer.

I'll need a director and AD.

I'll also need lights, sound, costumes, props, set, FX and a stage manager.

Also actors are apparently necessary(?)

Rights

As the oldest surviving work in the English language, *Beowulf* is very much in the public domain. The translation on which I am basing my script (Micheal Alexander's verse translation) isn't however, and I would need to negotiate rights with him.

Script Excerpts

Act 1, Scene 1

A mead hall, somewhere in 6th Century Denmark

The Bard Listen!

We have heard of the thriving of the throne of Denmark,
how the folk-kings flourished in former days,
how those royal athelings earned that glory.

Was it not Scyld Shefing that shook the halls,
took mead-benches, taught encroaching
foes to fear him who, found in childhood,
lacked clothing? Yet he lived and prospered,
grew in strength and stature under the heavens
until the clans settled in the sea-coasts neighbouring
over the whale-road all must obey him
and give tribute. He was a good king!

...

Act 3, Scene 3

Beowulf and Wiglaf are fighting the dragon. Beowulf is already injured.

The dragon bites Beowulf's neck, but he stabs it with his seax and kills the beast.

Beowulf takes a few steps, and sits down on a ledge. Wiglaf tries to attend to his wounds.

Beowulf, painfully I would now wish to give my garments in battle
to my own son, if any such
after-inheritor, an heir of my body,
had been granted to me. I have guarded this people
for half a century; not a single ruler
of all the nations neighbouring about
has dared to affront me with his friends in war,
or threaten terrors. What the times had in store for me
I awaited in my homeland; I held my own,
sought no secret feud, swore very rarely
a wrongful oath.

In all of these things,
sick with my lifes wound, I may still rejoice:
for when my life shall leave my body
the Ruler of Men may not charge me
with the slaughter of kinsmen.

Quickly go now,
beloved Wiglaf, and look upon the hoard
under the grey stone, now the serpent lies dead,
sleeps rawly wounded, bereft of his treasure.
Make haste, that I may gaze upon that golden inheritance,
that ancient wealth; that my eyes may behold

the clear skilful jewels: more calmly then may I
on the treasures account take my departure
of life and of the lordship I have long held.

Wiglaf disappears into the wings, and returns with treasures. Beowulf looks over them.

Beowulf, painfully I wish to put in words my thanks
to the King of Glory, the Giver of All,
the Lord of Eternity, for these treasures that I gaze upon,
that I should have been able to acquire for my people
before my death-day an endowment such as this.

My lifes full portion I have paid out now
for this hoard of treasure; you must attend the peoples
needs henceforward; no further may I stay.
Bid men of battle build me a tomb
fair after fire, on the foreland by the sea
that shall stand as a reminder of me to my people,
towering high above Hronesness
so that ocean travellers shall afterwards name it
Beowulfs barrow, bending in the distance
their masted ships through the mists upon the sea.

Beowulf takes off his golden collar, helmet and arm ring and passes them to Wiglaf.

Beowulf, dying You are the last man left of our kindred,
the house of the Waymundings! Weird has lured
each of my family to his fated end,
each earl through his valour; I must follow them.

He dies. Wiglaf sits silently beside him.