**LOVE IN THE MEADOW**

 a 45 minute stage drama

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

by Claire Booker

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**MAIN CHARACTERS**

Zhenya A Russian landowner in his thirties. He is 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 (*may be doubled with Dasha*)

Dasha Her sister (*may be doubled with Stepashka*).

Assorted cameo roles which can double up with main characters if need be.

**SET**

The play is set in Russia of the 1860s. The majority of the 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 bible and a baby doll wrapped in swaddling.

**Scene One**

As the lights rise, a Russian Orthodox requiem mass is heard, punctuated by the occasional cough and crying baby. The stage is lit to suggest the dim interior of a church. Three Russian peasant women of varying ages stand front of stage. Each holds a candle.

Woman1 Lord, I've never heard a choir so good in all my years, and they number a few summers.

Woman 2 It's the mistress what sent for them.

Woman 3 They say she’s paid out of her own money.

Woman1 No!

Woman 3 Two hundred roubles.

Woman1 Two hundred? *(she crosses herself)*

Woman 3 Well, it's only right and proper. Poor Stepashka - who'd have thought she'd die like that?

Woman 2 They say the master was possessed.

Woman 3 My Mitya saw him being carted off by the police.

Woman1 (*shocked*) Where will it all end?

Woman 3 Handcuffed.

Woman 1 (*shocked*) Handcuffed?

Woman 3 Oh, yes. Caught like a wolf in a trap.

Woman 2 And all because he couldn’t keep his hands to himself.

Woman 3 Not just his hands, neither.

Woman1 (*to someone standing behind her*) Oi, stop pushing. Show some respect for your elders.

Woman 2 Do you reckon the mistress knows? You know, about the affair?

Woman 3 She’d be the only one who didn’t.

Woman 2 It’s Siberia for him, I reckon.

Woman 1 Siberia? (*crossing herself*) Lord and all the Saints.

Woman 3 Now, if it was my Mitya, they'd string him up before you could say pork scratchings. But he's the master, isn't he? It’s different for them.

Woman 1 Shh. Here comes the Archdeacon. (*the women stand amazed*) What a sight. Gold and silver right down to his slippers.

Woman 2 Come on girls. We’re here for Steppie.

Woman 1 (*crosses herself*) God forgive her sins.

Woman 2 (*starts to wail the litergy*) Lord have mercy upon her. (*the others join in*) Lord Lord have mercy upon her soul. Lord have mercy.

(*the Orthodox choir swells in volume, and the three women exit still carrying their candles. Black out*)

**Scene Two**

Lights rise on a stark prison cell containing a bunk bed, a small table with drinking glass and a slop bucket. Zhenya is seated on the only chair. Boris stands and looks out of the window. Stage left there is a door with small observation panel. A lawyer’s briefcase is on the floor.

Boris It's a bad business, Zenya. You, of all people. Are they treating you alright?

Zhenya I can't complain.

Boris Good news on the jury front at least. All of them from St Petersburg. Not a peasant among them.

Zhenya Perhaps I should be judged by the peasants.

Boris Oh for heaven’s sake, Zhenya. Don't go maudlin on me. Next thing, you'll be begging for a public flogging.

Zhenya Would it be so wrong? *(Boris snorts)* I'm guilty. I shot her.

Boris Guilty? Yes. But of what? A crime of passion, a moment of madness. With your impeccable credentials, your devotion to family duty. And your remorse, Zhenya. Above all, your remorse. I'll eat my hat if you get more than two years.

Zhenya It's very hard on Lisa. I wish to God I could have spared her this.

Boris Ah yes, wives.

Zhenya She's determined to sit in on the trial.

Boris Good God!

Zhenya She insists.

Boris (*sighs*) Well. Court proceedings are public. We can't stop her.

Zhenya The things I have to say. The things she’ll have to hear. It’ll humiliate her, Boris. You have a wife. Surely you understand.

Boris My wife is impervious to humiliation, alas.

Zhenya Please, this is serious. I simply won't stand up in court and publicly insult her. I won't do it, Boris. I simply will not do it.

Boris And I wouldn't dream of asking you to. (*Boris paces the room*) This is all very awkward. What lady in her right mind turns up in a case like this? It's unheard of.

Zhenya Tell her that, Boris. Speak to her. She’ll listen to you. You have the magic touch with women. You always have.

Boris Well. Noblesse oblige.

Zhenya She’s coming this afternoon.

Boris I’ll see what I can do. Don’t worry, old chap. Wives have a wonderful way of bouncing back. I'm convinced mine's made of India rubber. (*takes out his notebook*) Enough chit chat. We're here to work, Zhenya. To work. And to win. (*Boris flicks through his note pad*) So far, we've concentrated on the end. Not a pleasant affair, judging by the coroner’s report. Today, however, I want to return to the beginning. The root cause of it all.

Zhenya (*pause*) Even with you, Boris . . . out loud, it's . . . wretched.

Boris Zhenya. We sowed our wild oats together. You weren’t so coy then.

Zhenya I wish to God I could have spared Lisa this.

Boris What we need here is clear thinking. We have to sell the jury a story that hangs together. Or you hang. (*pause*) The root cause. What drove you to do this terrible thing?

Zhenya (*making a huge effort*) I suppose it all began when I left Petersburg. I was all set for a promising career in the Ministry, then my father died.

Boris Yes, I remember.

Zhenya The estate was in a deplorable condition. Mama hadn't the faintest idea how to save money. There was nothing for it. I had to leave the bright lights and settle back in the country.

Boris A gargantuan sacrifice, old boy (*notes it down*) Devoted son sacrifices promising career to support widowed mother.

Zhenya I didn't feel it right to marry until I'd settled our affairs properly.

Boris Very wise.

Zhenya Of course, I hadn't lived the life of a monk up 'til then, as you know.

Boris (*reminiscing*) Yes, indeed. Vera, the little seamstress with the hare lip.

Zhenya I only indulged when it was absolutely necessary for my health and freedom of mind.

Boris For medicinal purposes, of course. (*laughs*)

Zhenya Perhaps if I'd had less 'medicine' in Petersburg I wouldn’t have missed it so much in the country. It was like a sexual desert there. I knew no-one. No contact for that sort of thing at all.

Boris So how did you find her – this unfortunate Stepashka?

Zhenya Daniloff, our bailiff, was extremely obliging. I felt an oaf, as you can imagine. But he seemed to understand what I was after without asking too many awkward questions. He said he had just the woman for me.

Boris Stepashka?

Zhenya Yes. Her husband worked away in town.

Boris And she was willing?

Zhenya Oh, Stepashka was always willing.

Boris What were your first impressions of her?

Zhenya (*looking out of the window*) If I stand here and crane my neck, I can just catch the top of the trees. (*almost to himself*) Everything hot. So hot. Not a breath of wind. Burning up. I was jumpy as a stag in rut. I went straight to Daniloff's hut, just as he told me to. She wasn't there. Nothing but nature all around me.

(*Zhenya closes his eyes and is lost in his own thoughts. The lights fade a little and sounds of birds and rustling leaves are heard in the background*)

Something’s got to break. (*he pulls out a handkerchief and wipes his forehead*) It's like an oven out here. Or is it me? Christ! What if someone spots me? What if she doesn’t come? (*loosens his tie*) Daniloff’s playing with me. They’re all behind the hut watching me, laughing at me . . . (*he appears to hear something, and calls out*) Who’s there? (*he listens for a moment then groans*) Whoever you are. I want you now!

Boris Zhenya, old chap. Are you alright?

Zhenya (*he momentarily snaps out of the trance*) Sorry. I . . . er . . . (*he pours himself water and gulps it*). The silence was unbearable. Then I heard a dry branch snap. (*he swings round and Stepashka appears stage left, dressed in a white embroidered blouse, red skirt and red kerchief on her head. Boris is never aware of her*) Stepashka - standing in the thicket beyond the gully. Barefoot, fresh, sturdy as a young heifer. She was everything I'd been craving.

Stepashka I've been here a long time, sir. Ever such a long time.

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