

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

[The Cull](#)

By Michele Riml and Michael St. John Smith
World Premiere: January 26–February 26, 2023
Granville Island Stage

“THE DEAL” [includes spoilers]

At first glance, Michele and Michael's truly remarkable and impressive script, *The Cull*, is a deftly wrought story about friendship, the balm of nostalgia, and the consequences of being an adult. Yet simmering beneath this familiar “dinner party play” is a cautionary tale about compromising one's values and the temptation of excess. If we were to identify the narrative legacy that *The Cull* takes up, we might reference other domestic battleground plays like *God of Carnage* or even *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* But what is impressed upon me, what gets me excited, is the play's intertextual relationship and structural echoes to other works, in particular, and unexpectedly, to Goethe's *Faust*.

In *Faust*, the titular character, unsatisfied with his life of reasonable privilege, literally makes a deal with the devil for the gift of knowledge, of superior awareness, of excess. He jettisons—or, at least, puts aside—his values to assume a fancied life not naturally afforded to him. He, effectively, forgets who he is to get what he wants.

In *The Cull*, Emily and (especially) Lewis have watched their peers gradually move away from their simple lives of songs in the proverbial (and actual) orchard towards one of financial security and comfort. They, instead, stick with their values of sustainability, a relationship to the land, of simple living. However, with this comes compromise, and *The Cull* introduces us to them when they are at their most vulnerable (in terms of financial stability). When the promise of comfort and security are waved in front of them, when they are tempted with the possibility of seeing their problems seemingly dissolve by simply reaching out and taking a cheque, they choose to make that deal (for a while). Perhaps like Faust, without knowing what this acceptance means for the future of their souls, they choose to join the club of comfort, and see what it's like to walk that path of excess. As Lewis says, “Gotta grow up sometime”—thankfully, he and Emily have the eventual foresight to recognize that having more toys does not make you an adult. Unlike Faust, they are able to get out and see the beauty and openness of the natural night sky while the others are destined to stay inside and show off their toys to each other.

But, of course, can we really blame them for being tempted? The world of the play—and indeed our world—is one of acquisition and property. The lives of their best friends—Nicole & Paul and John & Lynne—are based around the impulse to accumulate and gather. As we all exit a holiday season no doubt characterized in part by the occupation that material goods have in our lives, we are primed to consider John's challenge: “What about less stuff?” (I recognize the irony of this coming from the character of John who uses this hypothesis as a somewhat sarcastic provocation to Nicole, rather than a reasonable aspiration for himself.) In some ways, this question—What about less stuff?—becomes the de facto “theme” of the show; it is the koan we ruminate on; it is the song we sing in the car on the way home from the theatre.

Fittingly and beautifully, this question becomes a mystical leaping-off point for a daring, inspired, and deeply exciting production concept. Mindy Parfitt and Amir Ofek (director and designer, respectively) are approaching this material world and this culture of excess with an opposite premise—a spare, sparse world where excess is radically stripped away, inviting us to populate the blank stage canvas with our own stuff. It subconsciously positions us in the perspective of Emily and Lewis who, quietly and over time, have perhaps gently started to admire their friends’ lifestyles and, like Faust, they start to see what they don’t have—they start to see absence.

This production concept invites us to reflect on and challenge the idea that material objects are necessary to define us (the false and misleading extension of that being: the more material objects we have, the more defined we are—and if our belongings are beautiful, then we must be as well).

Emily and Lewis make a deal with the devil. They jettison—or, at least, puts aside—their values to assume a fancied life not naturally afforded to them. They, effectively, forget who they are to get what they want.

However, being a *modern-day* cautionary tale, *The Cull* takes a different turn than *Faust*. Unlike that character, Emily and Lewis realize soon enough what they have done and they are able to back out of their deal with their souls intact. They are able to see that they—for a moment—forgot that they are, effectively, animals. They don’t really need a Tesla, a \$20,000 chandelier, or a walk-in humidior. All they need—all we need—is each other, a safe space to share, and a clear, clean open night sky that we can populate with our own values, needs, and dreams.

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