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The Price

a play in one-act by Don Zolidis

adapted from the fairy tale, "The Story of a Mother," by Hans Christian Andersen

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One-Act Drama/Fairy Tale
4w, 2m, 2 any gender plus ensemble

On a frigid winter night, a young mother nurses a sick child, hoping it will live through morning. A stranger appears at her door, asking for shelter from the cold. She takes him in, but no sooner does she close her eyes, the man and her daughter are gone. The stranger was indeed Death, and he has taken her child, but the Mother does not give up. She races against Death, trying to reach the other shore before he does, but what price will she be willing to pay to save her daughter? In another easy-to-stage production that nevertheless remains full of energy and life, acclaimed playwright Don Zolidis creates another thrilling fairytale adaptation perfect for all audiences.

Cast of Characters

THE MOTHER, a young mother

DEATH, a traveler

NIGHT, an elegant woman

THORNBUSH, a bush full of thorns

THE LAKE, a very large lake

OLD WOMAN, a caretaker, tending the flowers in Death's garden

TOMAS, a young man

ELENA, a young woman

ENSEMBLE, any number of actors who portray STARS, FIR TREES, WAVES, FLOWERS, and PEOPLE.

Double-Casting: All roles except Death and The Mother should also play parts in the ensemble.

Production Notes: The speaking role "ENSEMBLE" should be shared amongst multiple actors. Feel free to distribute the lines as necessary to all of the players. Where noted, I have suggested some parts where doubled or tripled voices might be quite strong, but feel free to discover where that works best in your own production. Multiple voices simultaneously can give an otherworldly affect to the dialogue, which can be powerful.

If the ensemble has multiple consecutive lines, that means that different members of the ensemble should speak the lines.

The ensemble should also create all the transitions and scenery for the various locations. The group can be as large or as small as necessary, but it seems like a minimum of 8 actors would be necessary for the ensemble.

Gender of the Characters: The Thornbush, Lake, and Ensemble members may be played by actors of any gender. Feel free to adjust pronouns accordingly. It's recommended for Death to be played by a male-identifying actor, but not compulsory.

Night.
A fire crackles in a hearth in a small home.
A MOTHER tends to her small child in a cradle, singing softly.

ENSEMBLE
Once upon a time a young mother sat up late at night with her small daughter –

ENSEMBLE
The mother was very tired and very sad –

ENSEMBLE
For the child was sick –

ENSEMBLE
And she feared it would die this night.

MOTHER *(singing softly)*
Greensleeves was all my joy
Greensleeves was my delight
Greensleeves was my heart of gold and –
One loud KNOCK on the door.
She stops.
Is someone there?
Another KNOCK.
She leaves the child and heads for the door.
We hear the cold winds of the night and the sound of something distinctly magical.
A TRAVELER is there, wrapped in heavy clothes.

TRAVELER
I hate to bother you miss, but I am very cold and I am weary from my journey. Might I ask to warm myself by your fire?

MOTHER
Of course. I have very little, but you are welcome to rest a while.

TRAVELER
You are very kind.
The Traveler enters, shivering.
The wind has teeth tonight.

MOTHER
Have you been traveling far?

TRAVELER

Quite a distance. And I have many miles yet to go.

MOTHER

Perhaps you would like some tea?

The Traveler is touched.

TRAVELER

I would like that very much.

MOTHER

I'll warm some over the fire. Please – make yourself comfortable.

The Traveler walks by the cradle as the Mother readies some tea.

TRAVELER

Your child is beautiful. How old?

MOTHER

She's just one year.

The Traveler sits by the cradle and rocks it gently.

I am afraid for her life. She has been so ill and she is so small.

TRAVELER

Hm.

MOTHER

For three days I haven't slept – I've barely closed my eyes for fear death would take her.

The Traveler reaches into the cradle to stroke the child's hair.

I would give anything to see her live a long and happy life.

TRAVELER

It is the rare life that is both long and happy.

MOTHER

Perhaps she will be one of the rare ones.

TRAVELER

Perhaps.

MOTHER

You don't suppose, do you, that God will let me keep her? In His mercy?

Pause.

The Traveler gives her a long look – smiles.

I see.

Forgive me I am so tired.

She sits back in a chair.

TRAVELER

Rest. I will take care of your daughter.

MOTHER

Thank you.

ENSEMBLE

And the mother had barely spoken the words when her eyes closed –

ENSEMBLE

Her head drooped –

ENSEMBLE

And she fell

ENSEMBLE *(x2)*

Asleep

ENSEMBLE

She dreamt of a bright and golden place, filled with tall flowers of all sorts – a summer day –

ENSEMBLE

Her child was laughing and running through a field thick with butterflies –

A bright summerly light shines.
We hear the sounds of children playing.

One members of the ensemble STRIKES a clock.
All sounds stop.
It's quiet and dark again.
The Mother wakes.

MOTHER

I'm sorry – I fell asleep I –

She looks around.

Sir? Sir are you there?!

ENSEMBLE

But the man was gone –

ENSEMBLE

And so was her daughter.

The Mother searches frantically as the Ensemble changes the scene.

MOTHER

Come back! You cannot take her! Come back!

ENSEMBLE

She rushed out into the frigid air without stopping to grab a coat –

The Ensemble creates the darkened street.
Stars hang from the sky.

ENSEMBLE

But there was no sign of the traveler or her child.

ENSEMBLE

Only the cold, starlit night.

A sound effect.
NIGHT enters, dressed in a rich black dress, like a queen.
She perches and observes the Mother.

MOTHER

You there! Did you see a man pass by with a young child in his arms?

NIGHT

I see everything. But that was no man. That was Death. He is faster than the wind, and what he takes he never returns.

MOTHER

Then I shall be faster still. Tell me where he went.

Night is amused.

NIGHT *(chuckling)*

You hope to chase down Death?

MOTHER

I will. Tell me where he went and I will be faster than the wind.

NIGHT

And what price will you pay for such knowledge?

MOTHER

I have no money, I am poor and –

NIGHT *(cutting her off)*

I have no need of your money. I am Night, and I have no care for your sorrow either. I ask again, what price will you pay for my knowledge?

MOTHER

What does the Night want from me?

NIGHT

I am vast and I see the whole world, but I have never felt a mother's love. I am feared, child. I am dreaded, but never cared for. Sing me the songs you sing to your daughter and I will tell you what I know.

MOTHER

Oh. Of course – any song or…?

NIGHT

All of them.

MOTHER

All my songs?

NIGHT

Every song you sing for your daughter. I want them all.

MOTHER

But that will take hours. Even now Death is hastening away –

NIGHT

You have heard my price.
Sing.

MOTHER

Of course.
She begins, quietly –
The stars sway gently as she sings -
Alas my love you do me wrong
To cast me off discourteously
And I have loved you so long
Delighting in your company

Greensleeves was all my joy
Greensleeves was my delight
Greensleeves was my heart of gold
And

ENSEMBLE

And so the Mother sang every song she knew –
The stars and the Mother hum the tune underneath the next lines
And if anyone in the little village had looked at the sky that night –

ENSEMBLE

They would've seen the very stars shine brighter, draw nearer in curiosity and wonder –

NIGHT

More.

ENSEMBLE

And though the Night was cold and dark –

ENSEMBLE

She felt loved –

NIGHT

More.

ENSEMBLE

And the Mother sang until her voice cracked and her fingers burned from the frost –

NIGHT

More.

The Mother's voice falters and breaks.

MOTHER

I have sung every song I know. Surely the Night has heard enough.

NIGHT

Has your daughter? Has anyone ever heard enough so that they need hear no more? Has anyone ever felt enough love so that they never need feel it again?

MOTHER

It has been hours and I have paid your price! Where is Death taking my child?!

NIGHT

Where he takes everyone. To the other shore.

MOTHER

And where is that?!

NIGHT

Follow the road out of town until you reach a dark forest of fir trees. He passes that way.

MOTHER

But he is so far ahead now, I will never catch him.

NIGHT

Death will reach the other shore at dawn. But I will keep the dawn at bay for you as long as I can. Even the Night is bound by natural law, but you have warmed my cold heart and I will help you as I may.

MOTHER

Thank you.

NIGHT

Thank you.

ENSEMBLE

And the mother hastened away as quickly as she could –

ENSEMBLE

While the stars refused to take their normal course across the sky, and time stood still.

The Stars hum Greensleeves as they change the scene.

A forest of tall, dark trees.
The ensemble becomes TREES.

ENSEMBLE

She came at last to an ancient forest of fir trees, draped with snow and icicles.

Mother enters, looks around.

ENSEMBLE

But Death's tracks were everywhere in the snow.

ENSEMBLE

Everywhere the mother looked she saw his passing.

MOTHER

He has been everywhere. Where does he go now?

She follows the tracks until she comes to a THORNBUSH, skeletal.

Has anyone seen Death?

All the TREES rotate slowly to face her.

FIR TREE

All that live have seen Death.

FIR TREE

But we are untouched by his passing. Even in deepest winter, we are green and strong.

THORNBUSH

Speak for yourself.

Skipping Forward

THORNBUSH

Yes.

MOTHER

But your thorns will prick me and I will bleed.

THORNBUSH

They will, yes.

ENSEMBLE

But a mother is used to suffering for her love.

ENSEMBLE

And she embraced the thornbush.

The Mother hugs the Thornbush.

ENSEMBLE

His thorns pierced her skin –

ENSEMBLE

And great drops of her blood fell upon the snow.

ENSEMBLE

And though it pained her and cut her, she held the thornbush tightly.

THORNBUSH

A little longer please

ENSEMBLE

And she held

ENSEMBLE

And she held

ENSEMBLE

And where her warm blood fell upon the cold earth

ENSEMBLE (x2)

The ground

ENSEMBLE (x3)

Thawed.

A magical sound

The mother releases the Thornbush.

THORNBUSH

The ground has thawed. My roots can reach the water again.

The Thornbush shudders with happiness.

ENSEMBLE

And even though it was the darkest night of winter

The Thornbush BLOOMS.

Light seems to come from inside of it.

MOTHER

You're beautiful.

THORNBUSH

Thank you.

The Thornbush hands one of his flowers to the Mother.

Take this. So that it might light your way.

MOTHER

Where did Death take my child?

THORNBUSH

If you head that way, you will come to a vast lake. Death will take your child to its other shore.

MOTHER

Thank you.

She heads off as the Ensemble changes the scene.

ENSEMBLE

Her voice was sore from singing, the scrapes on her skin burned where the night air kissed her-

ENSEMBLE

But she walked on.

ENSEMBLE

And came at length to a great dark lake which held neither ship nor boat.

The ensemble creates the lake.

Some of them become WAVES.

The lake shimmers in the starlight.

ENSEMBLE

Even in deepest winter the water had not frozen –

ENSEMBLE

And the other shore was so distant the mother could scarcely perceive it –

ENSEMBLE

There was no way

ENSEMBLE (x2)

Across

The Mother considers this.

MOTHER

It must be near dawn. There must be a way.

ENSEMBLE

So she knelt and

ENSEMBLE

Began

ENSEMBLE (x2)

To drink.

The Mother kneels and begins drinking the lake.

ENSEMBLE

Hoping perhaps

ENSEMBLE (x2)

For a miracle

She drinks.
And drinks.
No miracle.

The LAKE rises out of the water, lifted by her WAVES. She is haughty and dangerous.

LAKE

Foolish woman, what are you doing?

MOTHER

I am trying to reach my child.

LAKE

Is it lost beneath my waters? I have claimed many children. They sink so easily.

MOTHER

No. Death takes her to your other shore.

LAKE

Ah.

MOTHER

And I must get across.

LAKE

And you thought to drink me?

MOTHER

I have no boat and cannot swim. Your waters are not frozen enough to walk across. This is the only way.

The Lake laughs.

LAKE

You are tiny. You are like the merest water-bug to me. You might as well try to eat the sun. You will not drink me. Do you know how many of your kind I have swallowed? Slip beneath my waters and I will show them to you.

ENSEMBLE

But the Mother kept drinking

ENSEMBLE

And drinking

ENSEMBLE

As the Lake watched.

The Lake comes in a bit closer.

LAKE

I want you to consider how large your stomach is and how great and immense I am.

The Waves concur.

Gaze upon me. I am vast.

The Waves try to show how vast she is.

The Mother does not look up.

MOTHER

I have drunk larger lakes in the past.

LAKE

What? Where? You lie.

MOTHER

Believe what you will.

LAKE

Which lakes?

MOTHER
They don't exist any more. You are a mere puddle in comparison.

LAKE
A puddle?! Look at me! LOOK!
The Waves rumble threateningly.
They show how huge they are.
The Mother does not look.

MOTHER
Sorry, I'm busy.
She keeps drinking

LAKE
Stop that.
She keeps drinking
I said stop that.

MOTHER
I must tell you that you are the finest lake I've ever drunk. Your water is quite fresh.

LAKE
I know it's fresh! My mother was a glacier!

MOTHER
I feel that I could drink all night.

LAKE
Woman, you must stop. This will kill you.

MOTHER
Then it will kill me.

LAKE
Have it your way.

MOTHER
My body shall rest here upon your shore. And your waters will never be pure again.
The Lake groans in frustration.
All her Waves shudder with her.

LAKE
Very well. I will take you across. I cannot bear to see you die senselessly.

Skipping Forward

And there stood the most beautiful building imaginable, a greenhouse many miles in length –

ENSEMBLE

And within that house stood a flower or plant for every living person

ENSEMBLE

And if she could have seen it she would have wept at its beauty.

ENSEMBLE

All that

ENSEMBLE (x2)

life

ENSEMBLE

In the house of

ENSEMBLE (x2)

Death.

An OLD WOMAN enters, with a watering can. She is stooped and ancient. Dressed in a heavy coat.

MOTHER

Is someone there?

OLD WOMAN

Hmph.

MOTHER

I said is there someone there?

OLD WOMAN

I'm right here, can't you see me?

MOTHER

I have wept my eyes into the lake.

OLD WOMAN

Yeah that happens.

MOTHER

Are you – an angel?

OLD WOMAN

No.

MOTHER

What are you then?

OLD WOMAN

Lot of questions.

MOTHER

I'm sorry, I'm looking for my child – Death has carried her away and was bringing her back here.

OLD WOMAN

He does that.

MOTHER

I need to stop him.

The Old Woman laughs.

OLD WOMAN

Oh I see. You're going to stop Death from taking your child, are you? Good luck.

MOTHER

Can you help me?

OLD WOMAN

Do you know how many mothers have tried to stop Death from taking their babies?
Do you?
All of them.

MOTHER

Have any made it here?

OLD WOMAN

I'll give you that. You're the first.

MOTHER

So there might be a way.

OLD WOMAN

Perhaps.

MOTHER *(hopeful)*

Perhaps?!

OLD WOMAN

Inside that greenhouse is a flower for every living person. Inside each flower beats a heart; though you are blind you may recognize your daughter's heartbeat. Find that flower and there may be way to stop Death.

MOTHER

How?

OLD WOMAN

I have told you much because I like your face. But if I am to tell you more, I require a price.

MOTHER

Of course. Though I have given nearly everything I have tonight.

OLD WOMAN

Not everything.

MOTHER

What is the price?

OLD WOMAN

Your youth.

MOTHER

…is that all?

She takes a moment

Take it.

OLD WOMAN

It has been so very long since I was young. I did not appreciate it the first time.

MOTHER

Go ahead, take it.

ENSEMBLE

And the old woman grasped the mother's hands –

The Old Woman takes the Mother's hands
Magic.
Both the Old Woman and the Mother transform.
The Old Woman casts off her overcoat and white hair. She is young and beautiful now.
The Mother is now stooped and old – she wraps the coat around her.

The Old Woman rejoices in her youth.

OLD WOMAN

Oh this is amazing! Ha!

She dances about. Looks at her arms and hands.

MOTHER

…please. Show me the way.

OLD WOMAN

Of course!
She continues to look at her skin.
I need a mirror.

MOTHER

You said you would… help me.
A dangerous moment.

OLD WOMAN

I did. And I am true to my word.
Come with me.
The Old Woman offers the Mother her arm and escorts her into the greenhouse.
The Ensemble becomes FLOWERS.

ENSEMBLE

And the mother, now old and blind, came at last to the greenhouse of Death.

ENSEMBLE

There was a profusion of life within that place
The Old Woman takes it in with her young senses.

ENSEMBLE

Trees and flowers grew together –

ENSEMBLE

Hyacinths, roses, lilacs, mighty oaks –

ENSEMBLE

Each plant had a name

ENSEMBLE

Each plant belonged to

ENSEMBLE (x2)

One Soul

ENSEMBLE

And within each plant

ENSEMBLE (x2)

A heart

ENSEMBLE (x3)

Beat

The mother walks amongst the plants, holding them lightly.
We hear the heartbeats each time she touches one.
She touches one.
Then another.
Then another.

ENSEMBLE

There were millions –

ENSEMBLE

Billions –

ENSEMBLE

But at last –

MOTHER

This is it! This is my daughter's plant! It feels terribly small next to the others, but I know her heart.

OLD WOMAN

Do not touch it any more, but wait near it. When Death returns with your child, he will seek to pull it from the soil – do not let him. Seize another plant and threaten to tear that one out in the same manner. Death must answer to God for any life he takes – he will be afraid.

MOTHER

And then what?

OLD WOMAN

And then it is up to you.

She stretches.

I had forgotten what this was like. To be free from pain.
He comes!
Be ready!

The Old Woman darts off –
Death enters, holding a small child in his arms.
Death stops when he sees her.

DEATH

What are you doing here?

Skipping Forward

MOTHER

Let my child be. Let her live.

DEATH

And you would take someone's life to save your daughter's? You would make another mother as unhappy as you?

MOTHER

I do not wish to… but…

DEATH

Let me show you what you hold in your hands. Let me show you this life.

Death touches her.

ENSEMBLE

And though the woman no longer had eyes –

ENSEMBLE (x2)

She

ENSEMBLE (x3)

Saw

An impossible flash of light.
The mother is transfixed.

ENSEMBLE

It appeared before her like a ribbon of light –

A huge swoop of light and sound –

ENSEMBLE

He was a boy

MOTHER

Tomas

ENSEMBLE

About the same age as her daughter.

ENSEMBLE

His whole life stretched before her – all at once
Every moment
Every year
Every decade
Every second

The Ensemble become PEOPLE. Acting out the moments below like shadows.

It begins slowly
Then accelerates
More and more voices joining in until at last the entire ensemble is speaking.
His first steps holding on to his mother's hands
An Ensemble member acts like a mother, helping a toddler walk
The taste of sweet cherries, his fingers stained purple
The warm summer breeze on his face in a field thick with butterflies
A bee sting at six years old
A broken arm at nine when he falls from a tree
TOMAS, a young man emerges from the Ensemble
As a young man his heart flutters.
He looks into a girl's eyes
An Ensemble member becomes a young woman.
The flutter of his heart as he looks into a girl's eyes
His first kiss under a moon so bright it might be a diamond
He proposes
He gets down on one knee
Drops the ring into a stream, wades in to fish it out, the water as cold as ice
He laughs and tries to wade in for the ring.
The whole town at his wedding – dancing until the dawn –
The Ensemble dances
The Ensemble begins to speed up
Then the birth of his first son
A second
A daughter
Life goes faster
The time goes quicker
A life in town – A career as an innkeeper
He's a blessing to all who meet him – kind and strong
A grandchild on the way
How is he old enough to have a grandchild?
The Ensemble becomes guest at the inn
Strangers gather from around the world at his inn
The songs they sing by the fire
He takes the hands of the young woman who was his wife
The love in his wife's eyes
A look in the mirror – who is this old man?
The lines on his face from a life of laughter and joy
A second grandchild
A third
A fourth
A fifth
60 years
70

80
The sun comes up
The sun comes up
The sun comes up
The voices and light and sound crescendo.
The mother can't take it.
She screams, lets go of the plant and falls to her knees.
All returns to normal.

MOTHER
It is – so – much.

DEATH
Yes. And would you trade that life for your daughter's?

MOTHER
No.
Why does one child get so much life and one child get so little?

DEATH
Some day that may be clear to you.

MOTHER
I want that for her. I want my daughter to have all those days. The sunrises. The bee stings. Her first kiss. A wedding. Nights by the fire. A house full of grandchildren and laughter. A *life.* She just began!

DEATH
I know.

MOTHER
She just STARTED AND YOU WILL TAKE HER!
It's not fair! It's not -
She looks about
Where is my plant?!
Take mine instead! I have had twenty-five years, that's enough!

DEATH
You have so many years left –

MOTHER
I don't want them! I want my daughter to have them!

DEATH

Woman, no. You cannot.

MOTHER

I have spent the whole night!
I have given EVERYTHING to make it here.
She weeps
I thought I had spent all my tears.
Death watches her.

DEATH

It's time to go home.

MOTHER

There is no home without her.

DEATH

Then go to your house. And sit by your own fire. The night is cold.

ENSEMBLE

And the woman slumped to the ground, old and blind –
She slumps to the ground.

ENSEMBLE

Her skin ached where she had been cut

ENSEMBLE

Her voice was ragged –

ENSEMBLE

When had she slept last?

ENSEMBLE

But she heard a sound

ENSEMBLE

Somewhere above.
The Stars hum very lightly the tune to Greensleeves.

ENSEMBLE

And a thought occurred to her.

MOTHER

…I gave you tea.
Death stops.

Thinks about it.

DEATH

You did.

MOTHER

I was kind to you.

DEATH

Yes.

MOTHER

You were cold and tired from your journey and I comforted you.

DEATH

That is true.

Short pause

MOTHER

…Are there many who are kind to death?

DEATH

You were the first.

A moment passes between them.

Death thinks about it.

I will give you a choice.

The Mother looks up

MOTHER

A choice?

DEATH

I can restore everything you have lost tonight –
Your eyes
Your youth
Your blood
Or
I can give you back your daughter.

End of Excerpt.
To purchase this play, visit www.concordtheatricals.com