

## On the horns of a dilemma

### Teen drama offers fresh take on selling soul to the Devil

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The story of selling your soul to the devil for fame and fortune has been around for over 500 years and yet never gets old.

The German legend about the magician Faust, or Faustus, first surfaced in 1580 but has been an enduring go-to plot in literature, music and movies ever since.

David Mamet borrowed the tale for his 2004 play *Faustus*, tunesmith Randy Newman used it as the basis for his 1993 concept album *Faust*, the Mephistopheles never looked so good as when Liz Hurley played him in the 2000 film *Bedazzled* and the Charlie Daniels Band made its own pact with Lucifer for its 1979 country hit, *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*.

In our *Idol* age, when bling's the thing and everyone covets their 15 minutes of fame, the cautionary Faustian story is no less significant.

"Maybe it still resonates because our society always wants more," says Winnipeg composer Olaf Pyttlik, who has reworked contemporary soul-selling into a pop-rock musical called *RICH*, which premieres tomorrow at the Manitoba Theatre for Young People. "People are never quite happy being who they are."

*RICH* is based on the James Krüss novel *Timm Thaler*, a beloved book from Pyttlik's childhood in Germany. During a trip home in 2005 he discovered a copy in a flea market and became enthralled again by the tale of a boy who sells his laughter to a rich businessman in exchange for winning every bet he will ever make.

With the help of former Winnipeg playwright Vern Thiessen (*Einstein's Gift*, *Apple*) *Timm Thaler* has been adapted to a skateboard world, where 16-year-old Timm agrees to sell his laughter to an unscrupulous CEO to market his company's questionable new energy drink.

It's a story tens of thousands of Manitobans will become familiar with through this weekend's three public presentations at the Canwest Performing Arts Centre, 13 school stagings this month or the three-month, 100-performance provincial tour beginning in February.

Edmonton actor Scott Shpeley is making his Winnipeg debut as Timm and is completely down with his character's Faustian tradeoff.

"When I was 16, I would have done it in a heartbeat," says the 23-year-old Shpeley, who still passes easily for a teen. "I would have sold it to learn everything as fast as possible. If I wanted to play violin, I would just have had to pick it up and be a virtuoso. I would be good at everything."

Director Ron Jenkins, another ex-Winnipegger who lives in Edmonton, would also have shaken hands with the devil for the opportunity to skate on the same line with Jets superstar Bobby Hull.

"We all sell it in some way on a daily basis," says Jenkins, who last directed at MTYP in *The Big League*. "We always say, 'I'd do anything to get with that girl or guy.' For me, it's the little stuff we sell. The big, broad sweeping stuff is what makes great theatre, but along the way it's the smaller things, as well."

The musical is directed at teens who are bombarded daily with advertisements peddling must-have electronics, cool clothing and better looks. The not-so-subliminal message is that material goods equal happiness. Young people like Shpeley have to come to terms with that temptation to chase the almighty buck.

"It's amazing to come to a show like this and go, 'Wow, that's what I've been thinking about for the past couple of years,'" says Shpeley, who graduated from the University of Alberta in Edmonton last spring with a degree in theatre. "I've spent three years and \$20,000 going into a profession in which I won't make a lot of money. I have to figure out what makes my life rich, because it's not going to be money."

He was performing recently in Fort McMurray and he struck up a conversation with a taxi driver taking him to the airport to catch his flight to Winnipeg. Shpeley was taken by the words of the cabbie on his personal wealth.

"He said, 'I'm not rich but I have seen a lot of rich things, I've been to a lot of rich places,'" he said. "It made me think about what it means to be rich."

#### Famous Fausts

- Christopher Marlowe's novel Tragicall History of Doctor Faustus (1604)
- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 12,000-line dramatic poem Faust (1808)
- Charles Gounod's opera Faust (1859)
- Oscar Wilde's only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray (1881)
- Stephen Vincent Ben?t's short story The Devil and Daniel Webster (1937)
- Broadway musical and film adaptation Damn Yankees (1958)
- Hit Charlie Daniels Band country song, The Devil Went Down to Georgia (1979)
- Randy Newman's concept album Faust (1993)
- Movie I Was a Teenage Faust (2002)
- Movie Ghost Rider (2007)

"I don't think a lot of people who are rich had a goal of becoming rich. I think they had to love something. You need to find what's important; then it doesn't matter if you are rich or not."

*RICH's* themes will not be wasted on adults who are regularly faced with making critical decisions about what must be sacrificed in pursuit of their dreams. That could be record-chasing baseball players who sell their souls to some Joe in a chemistry lab or a company CEO who lies and cheats to make himself one of the richest, most powerful men in the world.

"At some point in our lives, we are put in a position where we may have to betray our beliefs or somebody to achieve what we want," says Thiessen, 44. "That's something teenagers face more than adults. I have gone through situations like that and have sold my soul, so to speak, and have faced the consequences."

*RICH* opens Friday at Manitoba Theatre for Young People, Canwest Performing Arts Centre, and runs to Nov. 27. Tickets are \$13.25 at 942-8898 or [www.mtyp.ca](http://www.mtyp.ca).

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