BEOWULF

By Chris Thorpe
Directed by Bijan Sheibani

FROM 3 OCT – 3 NOV 2017
FOR PUPILS IN SCHOOL YEARS 5 – 8

WHAT WILL YOU FIGHT FOR?

At the end of this tale
I’ll go to fight a dragon
And I’ll be no more

Beowulf is the oldest surviving poem in the English language. Writer Chris Thorpe and director Bijan Shebani shine new perspective on this seminal text, drawing out the connections between the ancient and the modern worlds in this tale of heroism, fear, bravery, and anguish in the battle for life.

An exciting, adventurous and atmospheric new interpretation performed with live music.
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We are currently developing the full sequence of classroom activities with our partner school. They will be added to this pack by July 2017.
INTRODUCTION

This pack is for teachers bringing pupils to see *Beowulf* in autumn 2017.

The Unicorn production of *Beowulf* is a new interpretation by Chris Thorpe of the classic Old English poem.

Set in early 8th or 9th Century Scandinavia, it tells the story of the heroic acts of Beowulf, a warrior from Geatland (Southern Sweden) who travels north to help King Hrothgar and his people, who are being terrorised by Grendel, a horrific monster.

Beowulf demonstrates great bravery and leadership when he defeats Grendel in a bitter and violent battle. But Beowulf then finds himself facing Grendel’s mother who offers him a choice; to continue the cycle of violence or draw a halt to the fighting and make peace.

Told through powerful poetic language and accompanied by atmospheric live music, *Beowulf* will draw the audience into a world of terrifying monsters and steadfast heroes as it explores themes of fear and bravery, leadership and decision-making in difficult times.

The classroom activities (which will be added to the pack by mid July) are designed to support and extend pupils’ visit to the theatre and offer teachers ways to pick up on and explore the themes in the play, before and after a visit. They will use drama and storytelling as ways of exploring ideas that are relevant to the play and to support teachers in meeting National Curriculum requirements:

‘All pupils should be enabled to participate in and gain knowledge, skills and understanding associated with the artistic practice of drama. Pupils should be able to adopt, create and sustain a range of roles, responding appropriately to others in role. They should have opportunities to improvise, devise and script drama for one another and a range of audiences, as well as to rehearse, refine, share and respond thoughtfully to drama and theatre performances.’ National Curriculum

The full resources will also include contextual information about the original poem *Beowulf* and historical context that will help connect your visit to the play with curriculum work around the Anglo-Saxons.

Resources will also provide National Curriculum links at Key Stage Two: to English through the development of spoken word and poetry, as well as PSHE and citizenship.

There will be a free teacher CPD day for *Beowulf* on **Tues 26 September 2017 from 10am – 4pm** where teachers can find out more about the show and gain practical experience of the classroom activities, before leading them with a class.

To find out more about the CPD or to book your place, email schools@unicorntheatre.com.
ABOUT THE PLAY

Chris Thorpe’s new version of Beowulf begins with the hero of the poem addressing the audience directly. He tells us how the story will end, when he is defeated in battle by a dragon. He challenges the audience to make a judgment.

Was I a good king?
Did I treat you all fairly?

Beowulf, the narrator of his own story, goes back to a time long ago, before he was king, when he set out on a journey to the Northlands to help a people he had heard were in grave trouble.

He and his band of warriors arrive in the land of the Danes, ruled over by King Hrothgar. First met with suspicion, they are finally welcomed into Heorot; a great hall which has been built, according to tradition, to house the treasures from the Danes’ victories and celebrate the heroism of Hrothgar’s warriors.

However, for twelve years Heorot has been under siege from a terrifying monster, Grendel. Each night Grendel steals into the great hall and takes someone while they sleep.

Grendel, a prowler in the dark,
A monster of teeth and terror and stinking breath

When Beowulf and his warriors arrive to offer their services to the Danes, they find Hrothgar a shell of a king.

And I can tell you, honestly, I have never seen
A leader as beaten, a King as soul-wrenched

Hrothgar is like a ship becalmed
Hrothgar is like a spilled wine-cup
The skin of his cheeks sucked back on his face-bones
The fingernails gripping his throne-arms all bloody

Beowulf pledges to help them overcome the despair and fear they feel, and to fight for them to defeat the monster. One of the Danes, Unferth, casts doubt on whether Beowulf can do it. She has heard the tales of his heroism, but doesn’t believe he will save them. She questions why would he succeed, when their finest warriors have failed?

Beowulf listens to what Unferth has to say and asks for one night to prove himself.

When night comes, Grendel arrives at the great hall. Beowulf is terrified as he witnesses the full horror of the monster devouring two sleeping warriors. Drawing on all his strength, Beowulf attacks Grendel and they become locked in battle. The monster has him in a terrifying grip and Beowulf feels himself coming close to death when Unferth comes to his aide, and Grendel, turning attention onto her, loosens its hold on Beowulf.
Taking his chance, Beowulf rips the monster’s arm out of its socket and Grendel runs from Heorot in agony, towards the swamp that is its home, carrying Unferth with it.

Beowulf follows in pursuit. Arriving at the side of a lake, Beowulf finds Unferth dying. Unferth gives Beowulf the dagger she dreamt would kill Grendel. He takes it and dives into the lake to find the monster.

At the bottom of the lake, Beowulf finds Grendel. The monster is in a cave filled with the armour and remains of the Danes it has dragged there. Grendel is still alive, but badly wounded. Beowulf takes out the dagger and plunges it into the monster’s heart.

And I am full of what I have done  
Of a great evil gone from the universe  
And I shout to the dripping cavern walls  
I shout victory over our enemies  
I shout for the living who will not now die  
For the worst that is now past  
And for the better times to come

At this moment, a figure appears; it is Grendel’s mother. The monster’s mother speaks to Beowulf, offering a pact that would end the violence. In that moment Beowulf has a choice to make: to finish the cycle of violence with Grendel’s death and make peace, or to carry through and destroy the monster’s mother as well. Beowulf acts decisively, as a warrior hero, and kills the monster’s mother with one blow.

Beowulf returns to the great hall victorious and is honoured with gold by the Danes. When he returns home to Geatland he is eventually made king.

Fifty years pass in the Northlands and then a dragon comes. This is the dragon that will kill Beowulf. In his last moments, as he faces the dragon, Beowulf thinks about the choice that Grendel’s mother gave him and what kind of king he was.

As he did at the beginning of the play, Beowulf asks us, the audience, to judge whether he was a good king.
WHY DID YOU AGREE TO WRITE A NEW VERSION OF BEOWULF?

The Unicorn sets me interesting challenges, both of the plays I have written for the Unicorn have been adaptations of, or inspired by, existing, quite old works. I really relish that. (Chris’ last play for the Unicorn was a contemporary response to *Dr Faustus*.)

*Beowulf* is one of those stories that people think they know, but we don’t really, we just know the big details. It’s far enough away in time that it really asks you to find what’s in it that is still, on a gut level, familiar about human behaviour.

It’s quite easy to see the story as something that exists in a separate bubble of time, a long time ago, and feel the world has completely changed since then. The pleasure - well the pleasure and the horror of it - is in realising that, even though the detail is different, we haven’t changed that much.

WHICH TRANSLATION HAVE YOU USED FOR YOUR VERSION OF THE POEM?

Anyone who claims to have read the original *Beowulf* is either an expert in Old English (which I’m not), or is using one of the translations or adaptations which stand in for the original. Seamus Heaney’s translation of the poem is an incredible piece of work. I don’t claim to have read the original all the way through; I have read some to get the feeling of the sound, the feeling of that original language.

I don’t think I’ve strayed too far from the original story. I’ve given it a new ending and I’ve linked things in the story that aren’t linked. I’ve also made sure it’s not a story in which all we’re seeing is white men with beards, because I think that is an absolutely necessary change to make for the people who are going to come and see it at the Unicorn, and because we live in a world that is in no way as homogeneous as the world of *Beowulf*.

I’ve also kept the way it speaks to the audience. The rhythm of my version as it starts is quite modern, but when we get into the meat of the story, what creeps in is a sense of a driving rhythm and alliteration. This is inspired by the verse of the original and its use of alliteration, so although we might get parts where it feels like I’ve jettisoned the rules, then in comes poetic language which is closer to the original.

WHY DO BEOWULF AND HIS WARRIORS TRAVEL INTO THE NORTHLANDS TO HELP THE DANES? THEY HAD NO NEED TO GO, THE THREAT WASN’T TOWARDS HIS PEOPLE, THE GEATS.

They make a decision to go and fight with these other people that they feel kinship with. There’s a certain amount of fellowship between them, a shared history. It’s not their own community, but
there are links between the two communities, they are in effect fighting to protect their own. And if someone is in clear and present danger, it’s not necessarily the worst idea to go and attempt to protect them.

And they go for the glory – that’s the way that status is gained in that society - there’s a benefit. There’s also a feeling of duty; this is what you do as a warrior.

**THE WORLD DEPICTED IS THAT OF WARRIOR HEROES, WHERE PROBLEMS ARE RESOLVED THROUGH THE SWORD. HOW DOES THE PLAY APPROACH THE THEME OF VIOLENCE FOR ITS YOUNG AUDIENCE?**

The idea that *Beowulf* is outside the boundaries of what that age group are exposed to is not right; in terms of narrative violence, fictional violence. We may have a more subtle understanding of psychology, or think we do, we may have more science on hand to test out theories about it, but the world still tells people that solving problems, both personal and global, with violence is an acceptable solution. It’s not a pacifist play, I’m not trying to say that violence, or action, is never a solution to a problem, because I don’t believe that. What I am saying is that violence is a solution that’s applied far too readily and far too frequently. Actually the biggest problem for me is that we assume because one particular situation calls for the ‘last resort’ use of violence it then follows that other situations that might look similar call for violence as a solution, and that just isn’t true.

We are constructed and encouraged to think that if something works in one situation it will work in another. We like to recognise patterns and we do that with the use of violence as much as we do with anything else.

**CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT BEOWULF’S DECISION ABOUT WHETHER TO KILL GRENDEL’S MOTHER?**

It’s very clear in that moment that he’s offered a choice in a way that he isn’t in the original. In Grendel’s mother there’s another world view, and there’s an equality of intelligence, and depth of understanding - a willingness to talk. Which Beowulf makes the choice to ignore.

In the original, the mother of the monster is also a monster, that’s the narrative structure. Whereas in this version, the mother of a monster is not necessarily a monster, and does not, once you have dealt with the monster, need to be dispatched with the same violence.

I think that’s a different angle in my version; it’s an argument about violence that isn’t in the original. I wanted to introduce an examination of something that isn’t intentionally in the original poem.

**SO YOU LEAVE THE AUDIENCE TO THINK ABOUT THE IMPLICATIONS OR POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CHOICE BEOWULF MADE?**

At the end, Beowulf has saved everyone and everything is great and then fifty years later a dragon turns up and kills him. It gives you license as a writer to ask ‘what could the reason for that dragon be?’ The original never really suggests a link between the two; you are free to imagine a link between the choices he has made to use violence and the long term consequences that come back to bite him and his people. And it makes you think about what we might store up for the future if we use violence
in the wrong way in the present. And if we do fight someone’s violence with violence, how far should we go with that?

It’s maybe not a good idea to destroy the thing that the violence came out of (which isn’t itself violent). I think you can draw very clear parallels with the way that we talk about the relationship between terrorist organisations and religions today - we blame a larger framework much more than we should, for the actions of a very, very small minority.

That massive gap of fifty years in the original story gifts you the opportunity to think about now.

**CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE LANGUAGE AND THE POETRY IN YOUR VERSION OF BEOWULF?**

I didn’t want to hit the rhythm straight away, because it just says ‘ok, we’re watching a poem’ and you can let it just carry you. It’s important it starts talking to the audience in a way that demands attention, because it doesn’t have the rhythm to lean on, and then it starts to drive itself along by bringing that rhythm in.

But even when that rhythm is there, it alternates with passages where Beowulf is talking in a much more contemporary way, stepping out of that rhythmic drive and saying ‘what I was thinking at this moment was...’ in much freer, more contemporary language.

I think if you immediately go in at a rhythmic level what you’re saying is ‘ok, this is just a poem about something that happened a long time ago’. And what you need to be saying is, ‘we’re all in the room together and I’m going to tell you some stuff and then we’re going to think about it’.

**BEOWULF ASKS THE AUDIENCE TO CONSIDER WHAT KIND OF KING OR LEADER HE IS. IS THAT THE OVER-ARCHING QUESTION THE PLAY IS POsing?**

It asks the question on a larger scale but also an everyday scale, because it’s about leadership, not just about kings. Leadership can be as much about the decisions you make for yourself, about situations that you’re faced with. The play asks what makes a good decision - is it that once you’ve found a solution you just keep using that solution over and over again? Or does there have to be a certain amount of listening before you make an assessment of each situation on its own merits?

People the age of this audience have an emerging awareness of different kinds of leadership; how the societies they live in are structured and led. So hopefully this will help them wonder about how those decisions get made.

There’s also a really useful question for all of us to ask about how we apply decision-making in our everyday actions, particularly when we come into conflict with ideas or behaviours that we might not necessarily understand or like.
The activities - which will be added to this pack by mid July 2017 - are designed to capture children’s imaginations and increase motivation to learn. They will offer a range of possible ways to link with your classroom priorities.

Our teacher resources and CPD support teachers in embedding drama in their curriculum planning. Working through drama allows children to explore things that matter to them within a fictional context, draw on their prior knowledge and apply it to new situations, develop language as they give expression to new understandings and develop emotional intelligence and critical thinking as they see things from different perspectives. It also allows the children to take responsibility, make decisions, solve problems and explore possibilities from within the drama.

**ACTIVITIES MAY INCLUDE:**

- A drama sequence looking at the decision Beowulf and his warriors take to go to the aid of the Danes; leaving their homes and travelling into certain danger. The drama will set the context of the time by, building an understanding of the way of life for 8th Century Geats, exploring their sense of fellowship with the Danes and the warriors’ code of honour.
- Activities which use the text as the starting point for an examination of what it means to be a king. The sequence will look at Hrothgar, a broken king, and Beowulf, a king to be, and will reflect on the qualities that make a great leader.
- Activities which provide an opportunity to explore the original old English text and Chris Thorpe’s new version, focusing on the alliterative structure of both poems and device of kenning. (Kenning: a compound expression in Old English and Old Norse poetry with metaphorical meaning, e.g., oar-steed = ship). There will be an opportunity for pupils to write their own poetic responses, using a similar structure.
- An exploration of what bravery is and what happens when we face our fears.

These activities are currently in development with our partner school and will be available in July 2017. Please email schools@unicorntheatre.com if you would like notification as soon as they are online.
BEOWULF

A Unicorn production

By Chris Thorpe
Directed by Bijan Sheibani
Resource pack written by Catherine Greenwood