

Monsters of the Forest

A one-act play by

Emma Payne

Cast

GAVRILO PRINCIP, 20

TRIFKO GRABEZ, 19

NEDJELKO CABRINOVIC, 19 The Bosnian-Serb students
involved in the assassination
of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

LIKHO..... An old woman with one eye

Synopsis

Once upon a time three boys went into the woods to learn how to shoot. But in the darkness of the Serbian forest, ancient terrors lurk - the screaming drekavac, Likho the witch... And by the end of the day a newer horror will have begun.

SCENE ONE

A forest outside Belgrade. GAVRILO PRINCIP (GAVRO) and TRIFKO GRABEZ (TRIFKO) are solemnly carrying out an initiation ritual.

An altar has been improvised in the centre of a clearing, with a gun and a crucifix laid on it. GAVRO stands before the altar, TRIFKO behind it, reading an oath which GAVRO repeats.

GAVRO: I swear by the sun that warms me, by the Earth that nourishes me, by the blood of my ancestors, that I will execute any commands without question. All this I most solemnly, sincerely promise and swear, under no less penalty than that of of having my throat cut from ear to ear, my tongue torn out by its roots and buried in the sands of the sea, at low water mark, should I ever violate this oath.

A hooded figure (NEDJELKO CABRINOVIC - NED) steps into the light.

It stands silent and menacing behind GAVRO.

GAVRO: I... I...

TRIFKO: I swear before God...

GAVRO: I swear before God on my honour and my life that I will take all the secrets of this organisation into my grave with me.

TRIFKO: Pick up the crucifix.

GAVRO: And I swear... (fumbles with the crucifix and drops it) Shit.

NED: (pulling off the hood) You idiot!

GAVRO picks up the crucifix and wipes it on his shirt.

GAVRO: It was an accident.

Ned picks up the gun.

NED: You know, if the Colonel was here...

Deadpan, he holds the gun at GAVRO's head.

GAVRO knocks it away angrily.

GAVRO: Don't point guns at people! It's dangerous!

TRIFKO puts his arm around GAVRO.

TRIFKO: We're just trying to make you understand, Gavro. Now shake my hand.

He holds out his hand, and after a pause GAVRO shakes it.

TRIFKO: Now you're in.

NED and TRIFKO walk off and start clearing away the altar. GAVRO is left, looking at his hand.

NED hands the gun to TRIFKO.

NED: Here, you practise aiming it for a while, and I'll talk you through it.

TRIFKO: I know how a gun works! The spring throws the hammer forward so it hits the primer. The primer explodes, igniting the propellant. The propellant releases a large volume of gas. The gas pressure drives the bullet down the barrel.

NED: Hey, wake up! (clicks his fingers in Trifko's face), you're not in the library now. (He indicates the forest around them). This is the real world! If you hold it all limp-wristed like that you'll break your arm.

He tries to take the gun back off Trifko, who resists and holds on to it.

TRIFKO: Get off! I know how to hold it!

NED: Let me show you how to do it! You don't get to be a marksman by reading a pamphlet.

He succeeds in taking the gun from Trifko.

NED: THIS is how to hold a gun. Gavro, are you watching me? OK. Number one, strong stance.

He assumes a position with left left forward, right leg back, hips slanted.

NED: Just remember, nose over toes. See? I'm perfectly balanced. Number two, high hand grasp. On the handle. This bastard is going to kick like a horse.

TRIFKO whispers something to Gavro.

GAVRO laughs.

NED: Shut up, this is important. Three. The crush grip. As hard as you can. Til you feel the tremor in your fingers. (demonstrates) And, most importantly, of all, don't pull the trigger. Don't squeeze the trigger. You ROLL the trigger.

TRIFKO: That's great. Now why don't you let us see what you can do? Soldier boy.

NED, stung by this, fires the gun at something offstage. They all look at his distant target.

GAVRO whoops.

GAVRO: Yes! Fantastic shot.

TRIFKO: Lucky.

TRIFKO takes the gun and fires it.

The others look unimpressed.

TRIFKO: Grouse are harder to hit.

GAVRO sniggers.

TRIFKO: Anyway Gavro, I'd have thought a farm lad like you would be an expert with a gun. Shootin' all those rats for your tea. Arr! Stoats! Delicious!

GAVRO pushes him. TRIFKO pushes back, and they scuffle.

NED: Oi! Not while he's holding the gun.

The others stop.

NED: Let's have some fucking discipline.

A distant shriek rings out from offstage.

Pause. They look at each other.

NED: Just a fox.

GAVRO: Or drekavac...

Pause.

GAVRO: That's what my gran would say.

TRIFKO: Drekaovac. God, you really are a yokel at heart.

GAVRO: I didn't say I believed in it.

TRIFKO: Yeah.

GAVRO: I'm just telling you. We used to hear that all the time when we stayed with her.

They all listen.

GAVRO: And some of the sheep were always dead in the morning...

NED: What the hell is drekaovac?

TRIFKO: 'The screamer'. ARRGH! (he screams in NED's face)

NED pushes TRIFKO away.

TRIFKO: The old peasant ladies frighten their kids with it. Don't they, Gavro? (assumes old peasant lady voice) 'Gavvy dear, if you don't eat up all your weasel stew, drekaovac will come and TEAR YOUR THROAT OUT!'

The scream rings out again and they all jump. Ned and Trifko quickly try to recover their cool.

TRIFKO: (to NED) You know, I heard Ferdinand was out hunting and he shot a white stag. It screamed like a woman.

NED: (pointing the gun) He deserves to die then.

NED and TRIFKO laugh.

They all sit down to rest.

GAVRO: I'm not making it up, you know. They'd have their throats all chewed out.

TRIFKO: Is that why you're so jumpy today?

GAVRO: No!

TRIFKO: Come on. You've been looking over your shoulder ever since we got here.

GAVRO: I'm just keeping an eye out. If you'd ever been in the countryside you'd know. That's what you do in the forest.

TRIFKO: Oh-h. Right. (taps his nose knowingly). The forest code. (assumes public information announcement voice) 'Be alert. Always be ready for the unexpected.'

Suddenly he gasps and points over Gavro's shoulder.

TRIFKO: OhmyGod!

GAVRO: (wheeling round) What!

TRIFKO: SQUIRRRRREL!

He clutches his head in mock terror and pretends to run away.

NED: He's joking.

GAVRO: I know! (Pause). It's not drekavac you want to worry about in this forest anyway.

Pause.

NED: (trying to seem casual) What is it, then?

GAVRO: Oh... you don't want to know.

TRIFKO: You know, you're right. We don't.

He starts to fiddle with fake nonchalance with the gun, turning his back on Gavro.

GAVRO: It's Likho you want to worry about.

NED: (to TRIFKO) What's Likho?

TRIFKO: Never heard of it.

GAVRO: Haven't you ever heard that saying? "When Likho sleeps awake it not"?

TRIFKO: This another of your gran's inventions? She knows how to keep the troops in line doesn't she.

GAVRO: Oh no. Everyone round here knows about Likho.

Pause.

NED: Well, go on then. You might as well tell us about it.

GAVRO: Not it. Her...

He stands up and walks around for a more effective storytelling style.

GAVRO: She's this old hag. As thin and bony as a skeleton.
(Pause) With just one dark, beady eye (he points at the place between his own eyes).

TRIFKO: Sure it's not your gran we're talking about?

GAVRO: And if she gets hold of you... (pauses for dramatic effect)

NED: (nervously) What?

TRIFKO: Yeah, what will she do? Wash your face too hard?

Ned prods him.

NED: Let him tell us.

GAVRO: My mouth is the lock, my tongue is the key.

He shuts his mouth and folds his arms.

TRIFKO: Weirdo.

NED grabs GAVRO and gives his arm a savage twist.

NED: Better unlock it then, you little freak.

GAVRO: Oww! (He rubs his arm, surprised and indignant at NED's violence)

NED: Come on.

GAVRO: Well, for instance, I heard about this man. He went into the forest and he got lost. It's easy to do. No landmarks, all the trees here are the same, see? He met Likho and she jumped on his back and took a hold round his neck. Whatever he did he couldn't shake her off. In the end he was so desperate, he jumped in the river. And drowned. Next day his wife found the body washed up downstream. She reached out to pull him to the side, and she was just turning him over to see if it was really him, hoping against hope it might be some stranger wearing the same coat, and she turned him over and GRAB!

GAVRO's hands shoot out and each grab one of Ned's and Trifko's wrists. They both jump.

GAVRO: Likho's hand shot out from underneath and grabbed her. And she never let go until the woman was DEAD.

Ned shakes himself free.

NED: What a load of crap.

GAVRO: Once she takes hold of you you're cursed. (pause) You can never shake off the misfortune she brings.

Uncomfortable pause.

TRIFKO: Those crazy witches, ay?

NED: OK. That's enough.

TRIFKO: 'The sky was all sprinkled with stars.
And the field was all starry with sheep...'

NED: Oh Jesus, not one of your poems, please.

TRIFKO stands up to declaim better.

TRIFKO: Don't you remember that? From school.
"Radoje! Your sheep have gone into the grove!"
[piping, childish voice] "Let them, sister, I can't help it. I've been eaten by witches,
My mother has taken my heart out,
with my aunt holding the candle.""

GAVRO: Shit, what kind of school did you go to?

NED: I preferred that one about the robins...

GAVRO: That's more like it.

(sings)

And when it was night, oh, sad was their plight
The moon had gone down, the stars gave no light;
They sobbed and they sighed, and bitterly cried
Then the poor little babes, they lay down and died.

The others join in:

And when they were dead the robins so red
Brought strawberry leaves and over them spread
And sang them a song, the whole summer long
Poor babes in the wood, who never did wrong.

GAVRO is convulsed by coughing and has to flop down on the ground again.

GAVRO: You may laugh. When I'm dancing for those girls in the Green Garland after I get back, they'll be all over me.

He turns his back and mimes caressing hands reaching around him.

The other two stop laughing.

Pause.

NED: What do you mean, Gavro?

GAVRO: They love a dancer. You wouldn't know, I suppose. [pats NED commiseratingly on the shoulder]. And when he's a hero as well...

He mimes shooting, then holds his hands in the air in victory, nodding as if acknowledging cheering crowds.

GAVRO: Yes, yes, thank you...

NED and TRIFKO look at each other. Trifko raises his eyebrows.

NED: So, Gavro...

Pause.

NED: You're planning to come back to Belgrade afterwards?

GAVRO: Yeah, why not? I might stop working at the printers, though, they might blab, they're real old gossips ... (beat) Do you think we should go somewhere else? I promised to do a job with my uncle, but I can put it off.

Pause.

GAVRO: Why?

NED: The thing is, Gavro. When you think about it...

He moves to sit down beside GAVRO.

NED: ... When you think about it, we three are dead anyway. (indicates all of them)

GAVRO: Well yeah. One day...

NED: Oh come on. You know why they wouldn't let me in the army. You know why you can't walk up a hill without

stopping ten times to let your breath catch you up. Fucking hell, you saw what he (indicates TRIFKO) coughed up yesterday...

GAVRO: Oh my God, yes! It was half a person. (pushes TRIFKO, who looks annoyed) It had a face!

NED: Exactly. And when you're sleeping in a doorway outside the printers, you don't get better.

GAVRO: I don't sleep in a doorway.

TRIFKO: Only Austrians get better.

NED: It's true. If you were an Austrian, Gavro, do you know what would happen?

GAVRO is scratching at the ground with his foot.

NED: You'd take the money you'd stolen from the peasants, from people like your gran and your aunties and uncles, Gavro, that they have to break their backs to earn, and you'd scoop it all up and go off to Split where you'd sit in the sun and bake your chest and let your lackeys rub you with goosefat til you're all pink and healthy again. Like Ferdinand did. That's not going to happen to you, though.

TRIFKO: No chance.

NED: No, Gavro, what's going to happen to you is that you'll sit in the rain in your little house of newspapers, - which we've seen you in so don't deny it - and you'll get thinner and thinner, and you'll cough and retch and the pain will get worse. Then it'll spread. And you'll end up like my cousin Tim, did you ever see him? Lying there screaming in agony, not for days, Gavro, not even for weeks, but MONTHS, maybe even years, of the worst pain you could ever imagine. You'll be begging for death. And I don't want to see that happen.

Pause.

GAVRO: I'll take my chance.

NED: OR. You can go out in an explosion of glory. Bang. (He mimes the action of a shooting comet and shower of sparks with his fingers). Imagine it, Gavro. Your name will live on forever.

TRIFKO: And even better, you get to take Him with you.

NED: Do you know what he did, Gavro? Remember what I told you?

GAVRO: I don't care.

NED: He and his men went into a village in Travnik, and they took all the corn and made it into a huge pile and burnt it. Their whole year's harvest.

TRIFKO: And then they raped the women.

GAVRO: I met a man from Travnik and he told me the town psycho burnt the corn. The fieldmice told him to do it.

NED: An Austrian propagandist. (takes out a piece of paper and a pencil) What was the man's name?

GAVRO: I don't know his name.

TRIFKO: And in Milesevo they cut all the men's throats as well.

NED: Gavro, some of your family live just down the road from there, don't they?

Pause.

NED: You could come in and find your uncles with their throats cut and your aunts raped. Your little sister! Your granny raped! Can you imagine it!

GAVRO: Shut up!

NED: Covering your ears won't make it go away. You can't hide from these things. You've got to come out into the light and face them head on.

NED takes a glass capsule out of his pocket and holds it up.

GAVRO: What's that?

NED: Cyanide.

Pause. They all stare at the capsule.

NED: Ciganovic gave them to me. I've got three. This one's for you.

Pause.

TRIFKO: We're going to be shooting two feet away from the car. Did you really think we would get away?

GAVRO: We can jump in the river. Or run into the crowd.

TRIFKO: Don't be stupid.

Pause.

NED: Be a warrior.

GAVRO: I don't want to be a warrior. I want to go home.

He turns to go. NED steps in front of him.

NED: I'm afraid that's not an option any more.

Beat.

GAVRO: Get out the way.

NED: Do you think the Black Hand are going to let you go home now? Blab your mouth off to every spy in the coffee shop?

GAVRO: I'm not going to do that.

NED: Do you know what they do with their enemies?

Beat. NED looks around him.

NED: Can you see these mounds here? Where the earth looks a little different?

TRIFKO goes to look.

TRIFKO: Oh yes. Someone's been digging here.

NED: And over there. You'll find quite a few of them, if you look around. A lot of people come into this forest.

GAVRO: Well. I'm dead anyway, according to you.

NED: Yes. But there's dead and buried safely in a martyr's grave in town. Covered with flowers. Visited every day.

Pause.

TRIFKO: And then there's being left in a few inches of loose soil in the forest.

NED: For the animals to gnaw at.

TRIFKO: Worse than animals. Who knows what walks around here at night.

NED: And alone, of course.

TRIFKO: Alone forever, yes.

Pause. GAVRO stares at NED and TRIFKO.

NED picks up the gun and gives it to GAVRO.

NED: Come on. It's your turn. Have a go at that rat over there.

GAVRO takes the gun but backs away.

GAVRO: You can't threaten me.

TRIFKO: We're not threatening you. We're trying to help you, you idiot.

GAVRO: Get away from me.

NED: We're not going to hurt you. Calm down.

GAVRO: I'm supposed to be going to Novi Sad with my uncle next week. I said I would.

NED: He'll understand.

TRIFKO: Gavro, listen...

He reaches out to touch GAVRO on the shoulder.

GAVRO: Get off!

He lashes out with the gun and hits TRIFKO, who falls. GAVRO runs off.

SCENE TWO

GAVRO is alone in the forest. It's getting dark.

He collapses to the floor - he has exhausted himself running.

An unearthly scream rings out somewhere in the distance. GAVRO jumps and shivers.

He tries to pull himself together.

GAVRO: (muttering and looking upwards at the sun) If that way's west... No. That must be west. I don't know.

He puts his head in his hands.

There is another, different animal shriek in the distance.

GAVRO: Oh God...

A loud crackling and rustling nearby.

GAVRO jumps up.

GAVRO: Ned? NED?

The rustling happens again, nearer this time.

GAVRO raises the gun.

GAVRO: Stop! Or I'll shoot!

More rustling.

Bang! GAVRO fires the gun, blindly.

The rustling stops.

GAVRO relaxes.

Suddenly an old woman with a patch over one eye (LIKHO) enters. She stands and stares at GAVRO.

GAVRO: Stop!

He raises the gun with a trembling arm.

GAVRO: W-Who are you? Get away! I'm not scared of you!

He shuts his eyes.

GAVRO: Get away! You're not really there!

He opens his eyes. The old woman is still there. He waves the gun.

LIKHO drops to her knees and raises her hands.

GAVRO: What are you doing? What's the matter with you?

She stays with her hands up in surrender, looking at him.

GAVRO: What do you want?

He looks at the gun in his hand.

GAVRO: Oh! Yes! Get down! Hands up!

He points the gun at her and she cowers.

GAVRO: Yes, not so cocky now are you.

She holds out a piece of bread to him.

GAVRO: Give me your food, yes.

He gnaws at it hungrily, still pointing the gun at her.

GAVRO: Then you can tell me the way out.

She holds out a few coins to him.

GAVRO recoils.

GAVRO: What are you doing?

LIKHO offers the money again.

GAVRO: I don't want your money, grandma! I've got plenty of money.

The scream rings out again distantly and he flinches.

LIKHO holds out her hand to GAVRO reassuringly.

GAVRO: I'm not scared! Who cares? They're scared of me!

LIKHO takes hold of his wrist, on the arm not holding the gun.

GAVRO: Get off!

He tries to pull free but LIKHO has his wrist in an iron grasp.

GAVRO: Let go of me!

He jerks his arm violently but she holds on.

He raises the gun and holds it at her head.

She drops his arm, and he takes a few steps back.

GAVRO: Yes! Better watch out. I'm not just some crappy bandit, you know. I'm an assassin!

He twirls round and points the gun dramatically.

She stares wide eyed as he sneaks up.

GAVRO: I come into your dreams, you hardly hear me approach, and then Bang!

He jabs at her with the gun.

LIKHO jumps.

GAVRO: But you don't need to worry. You're not Austrian, are you?

She shakes her head.

GAVRO: No. I have a bigger target in mind. A grand, gold-braided target, with a fat, plumed hat. All polished up. The glare! It'll be overwhelming. But I'm a professional.

NED and TRIFKO enter, and stand at the side watching, unseen by GAVRO.

GAVRO mimes picking up a grenade.

GAVRO: I'll have a bomb, like this - I haven't got it yet - and I'll throw that with one arm [He bowls in slow motion, like someone practising their cricket bowling]. Then I'll raise my gun and once he's in my sights that's the end for him... You'll hear all about it... No one can survive when the Black Hand strikes!

NED: What the fuck do you think you're doing?

GAVRO starts and sees the others.

TRIFKO: (to GAVRO) You moron!

NED goes to GAVRO, takes the gun from him and pushes him.

TRIFKO: She's scared! Look at her, she's trembling! Don't be scared, he's a stupid kid raised on turnips. He doesn't mean it.

NED: She should be scared.

GAVRO: I wasn't going to hurt her.

NED: She should be scared, thanks to you. (He draws GAVRO and TRIFKO away from her) Now if the Austrian police come looking for witnesses, they're going to find her. And thanks to you (he punches GAVRO viciously in the arm) she knows all about our plan. Much too much. Didn't you swear never to say the words Black Hand?

GAVRO: She won't tell.

NED: Do you know how they'll make her tell? Do you? First they'll get their cigarettes and they'll burn her on her hands. Just a little bit. To get her warmed up.

They all look at LIKHO, standing placidly, staring into the distance.

NED: Then they'll get out the special instrument. Specially for ladies. Have you heard of that? No? It's made of iron and it's got a spike here and here and one here.

GAVRO: Don't tell me any more!

NED: Then if she's got children, or even better, little grandchildren, they'll get them in. Give them a good going over in the next room. Get them really screaming so she can hear.

GAVRO starts to weep.

GAVRO: I didn't mean it!

NED: No. I know. But what are we going to do? How are we going to help her?

TRIFKO and GAVRO look at him helplessly.

TRIFKO: Should we... take her with us?

NED: We can't do that, can we? Any more suggestions?

Pause.

OK. There's only one thing we can do.

He picks up the gun.

TRIFKO: No!

NED: Yes. Quick, painless. Merciful.

He hands the gun to GAVRO.

NED: Well?

GAVRO stares at him in horror.

NED: Do you want me to do it for you?

TRIFKO: What are you talking about? You don't mean it... She's just an old lady! She probably didn't even understand what he said! (to LIKHO) Did you?

NED: (quietly) Gavro? Well? You do it or I do it. It's up to you.

Pause.

NED: Shall I do it, Gavro?

GAVRO nods, looking at the ground.

Ned takes the gun back from Gavro.

He goes over to LIKHO and takes her hand.

NED: Come with me, grandma.

The others watch, dumbstruck.

Then NED leads her offstage.

There is a scream, and then a shot.

Silence. TRIFKO and GAVRO don't look at each other.

NED returns.

NED: Now we need to go. We've got to avenge her.

He goes up to GAVRO and puts his arm around him.

GAVRO flinches in his too-tight, vicious embrace.

NED: Do you understand, Gavro? We've got to make Them pay for her death. If it wasn't for them, she could have lived. Couldn't she?

Gavro says nothing.

NED: And. (Beat) If we don't carry out our mission, she's died for nothing.

Pause.

NED: So. Are you ready?

Pause.

GAVRO: I'm ready.

The three of them exit, NED in the lead, GAVRO carrying the gun.

END

