

Such Stuff podcast
Season 2, Episode 1: What Would You Sell Your Soul For?

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello, and welcome back to Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

We've been taking some time off from the podcast as we settle into the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse for the Winter season. Now, we're back with more dark tales from the depths of winter here at the Globe.

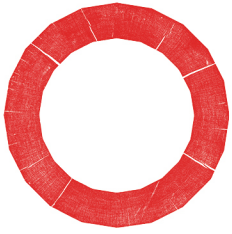
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To kick off the New Year, we asked an ensemble of brilliant women writers to respond to the question: what would you sell your soul for?

The result is a festival of new writing, *Dark Night of the Soul*, which sees five new short plays tackle the Faustian myth, and what it might mean for women. Running alongside *Macbeth* and *Dr Faustus* in the playhouse, the responses turn the Faustian myth on its head.

Here's Michelle on how *Dark Night of the Soul* came about...

Michelle Terry: So when we were originally programming the winter season, I just got fixated on the idea of the Faustian myth. Obviously *Macbeth* feels like a response to that myth. *Dr Faustus* definitely is the response to the Faustian bargain. And then realised that there are lots of masculine responses to the myth, but no feminine ones. And it became really clear that, as I approached writers, it felt quite a personal risk to declare what you would stand at the crossroads and sell your soul for. So no one wanted to put themselves individually on the frontline in that



way. So I wondered if there was a more collective response to the myth and to try and find female writers... a collective of female writers that would respond to the Faustian bargain. So we went to six female writers with the provocation of 'What would you sell your soul for' and out of that has emerged the anthology of Dark Night of the Soul.

[Music plays]

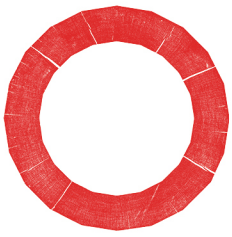
IG: This week on the podcast, we'll be catching up with the writers, chatting about their pieces, what they've been up to, and trying to answer huge questions about souls and women in history.

And stick with us as we take that very same question, 'What would you sell your soul for?' back to the women of the Globe offices with some interesting results...

So without further ado, here's our brilliant writing ensemble, introducing their pieces.

First up, Lily Bevan...

Lily Bevan: Yeah well my play is Elizabethan, well it's Jacobean. It's set in 1604. It's based on historical fact. It's set in a household belonging to a family called the Mountjoys, who were real and Shakespeare was their lodger and lived upstairs. They were French Huguenots, they made fancy wigs and tyres which are like tiara things for aristocracy and for the stage which is how we think they knew Shakespeare, and possibly Marlowe. And in my play they've seen Dr Faustus and they're all talking about it, and they're also playing out a drama of one day in their house. But Faustus ran for about 30 years after it was first written and it was a big hit, it was like the Hamilton of that time, so kind of like 'you've scored tickets to Hamilton and all your friends are chatting about it' is sort of the equivalent of my household where



everyone's talking about Faustus and like we said everyone likes to weigh in. Yeah, so that's kind of the premise.

IG: Next is Katie Hims...

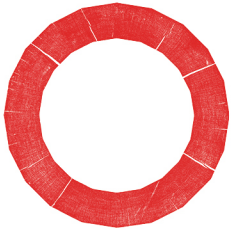
Katie Hims: I was very interested in writers selling their souls as a theme because it's a cliché, the writer who sells his soul. And I think it's in there for Marlowe as a metaphor, I think? So I was very interested in that territory really, so it's a playwright and her niece kind of fighting over who gets to tell what story and what's the truth.

IG: Next up, Athena Stevens...

Athena Stevens: My play is deeply personal. It's about two people who, due to one event, they are both wrapped up into each other's lives, even though they haven't seen each other for twenty five years. You go into this play thinking you know who made the Faustian bargain and what that bargain would be. But then you realise that it isn't the person who you expected, it's actually the other character, who has made a bargain and made it to damn herself, really.

IG: Here's Amanda Wilkin...

Amanda Wilkin: Quite early on, I started thinking about shame and how we enjoy shaming other people, and how we enjoy watching people shame themselves and that's kind of where mine grew from, that idea of... of also, when you talk about your shame, do you, do you... is there something therapeutic in that or do you lose something when you're that honest? It just felt like at the moment, there are a lot of women on trial. And men on trial, yes, but I mean the women are on trial for even accusing the men. But there's also a very... well, I think people probably find that very exciting to watch, the dramatic element of it...



IG: And last but not least, writing duo Lisa Hammond and Rachael Spence...

Rachael Spence: Well, I think first of all, our first response was 'What is a soul?'

Lisa Hammond: Do we have one? And like...

RS: We don't really...

LH: We haven't got any!

[Laughs]

RS: We didn't really buy that whole concept, so you know, the whole soul thing felt a bit too religious for us, we couldn't relate to it...

LH: And even if we bought into it...

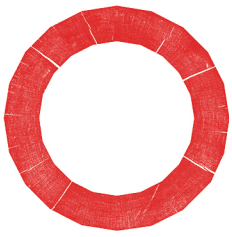
RS: Or maybe we just don't have a soul!

LH: Even if you did buy into heaven and hell, we sort of feel like we're already going to hell, so...

RS: Yeah!

LH: ...it felt like a sort of no brainer.

RS: Yeah. So that's when we started thinking about 'what is the equivalent for us?' So we sort of put it back to 'what is the most precious thing to us?' which, if it's not our soul, what is it? We



thought it would be interesting to ask other women what it was for them, if it wasn't their soul, what is it? Is it their creativity...

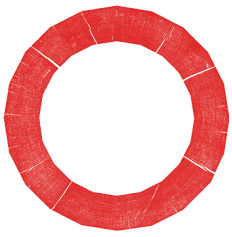
LH: ... integrity... their personal sense of self...

IG: So, we have five very different responses to the same question. But they all started, working together, in a workshop, getting to grips with the question. As Rachael and Lisa said, where do you start with this question of the soul, and what does it mean in a modern context?

LB: A lot of people don't really know what they believe a soul is at the moment or hell, so it seems quite a straight-forward sounding question, like 'What would you sell your soul for?', but I don't think it is at all, because I think it means completely different things to different people.

AW: It's very hard to think of this in a modern way as well, because not everyone thinks of heaven and hell in the way that people did back in the day, or were afraid of it, so how do you transpose that to a modern setting, if indeed that's what you're doing with your story. And that's why it's quite a hard thing because again it's not a very modern idea of what we think of heaven and hell. I mean I think that we sell a little bit of ourselves all the time?

LB: In contemporary society, I think there's an argument I think there's an argument that we sell our souls all the time already. Like, you know, where's my dress from, it's probably from a factory in a foreign country where people are not being paid as well as they ought to be, and I on some level am aware of that and I am comfortable with that, and isn't that slightly selling a piece of my soul already? So I was kind of interested in the argument that maybe it's not some question of 'would you ever do it?' but more like are you conscious that you do it all the time.



You know I think it's interesting 'cause like, the provocation we were given by Michelle which is like 'what would women sell their souls for?'. Well it's really different. Do you mean in 2018 or you know, do you mean in 1604? 'Cause that's a really, really different context for women. I feel like if I was a woman in 1604, I'd really like Tampax and the pill...

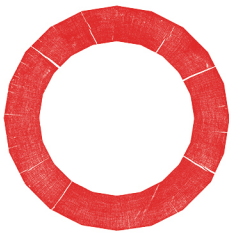
KH: Yeah, amazing.

LB: ...and to be able to read. So that is something I've slightly tried to begin to talk about. But also, we slightly patronise women of history I think, and often write them as quite unintelligent even if they weren't well educated. You know, my ancestors all lived round here, and I think they may have gone to see shows at The Rose and stuff. Why wouldn't they have been able to think about those plays in the same way that I can?

IG: The other big question they started to unpack in the workshops was the idea of a feminine response. Is a feminine Faustian bargain different? Do women make different pacts to men?

[Music plays]

AW: I remember on the workshop day we were talking about... because it's been such a male dominated question, we were asking ourselves 'what would women do'? How would women sell their souls? If men have asked for... to be able to play their instrument better, or for world knowledge on a high level, or for riches or for fame... would women do that? And there was an argument in the room... like a debate, sorry, in the room you know, would women ask for that? And of course some would, of course they would. Just because it hasn't been written down, you



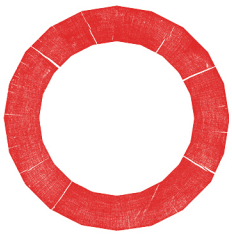
know, that's systematic of women's stories not being written down.

AS: So a year ago, I was talking to friends and it was men and women around a table and I said 'OK guys, here's what I'm working on, how about you?' and all the women were like 'equality, justice, to stop climate change' and I went 'well this is why we've never had a story written about it, because they're all good answers!' The men were going 'to change the last Star Wars movie'.

LB: Something that comes up in my play and I'm still not totally sure about this is like whether women maybe slightly have a tendency to have more of a sense of the collective. Like so I explore would women maybe sell their souls for connection and that the isolationism of Faustus makes slightly less sense in a feminine bargain. I'm not sure I have an answer to that, but I try to ask it in my play.

KH: For me, it was one of the reasons that I found it difficult to write my way into, because I think you do, even if you're not writing from personal experience, you write from a feeling, you know inside yourself one way or another. And I just find even the word ambition kind of embarrassing and I wouldn't willingly admit to being ambitious or wanting certain things. So to kind of write about women and ambition and making them in any way kind of akin to the ruthlessness that Faustus demonstrates, for a little while I was a bit lost because I was like 'I don't know who this woman is' and then of course, you know, actually if you dig a bit deeper...

RS: I think I was surprised by how selfless people were. Like people really wished for world peace and really wished for things for other people...



LH: [Laughs] We were like 'really?'

RS: And because we only interviewed women, I'd be interested to know if men's answers were the same or if they would be more about themselves. I don't know.

LH: Well we asked a group of women whether they think men's responses would be different, and a lot of them did but then it got a bit tied in knots because it sort of becomes about stereotypes and like saying 'oh I think they'd be... like they'd value power or money more over their children or their family'. But I'm not sure that's true, but that... it was interesting just talking to women in that sort of... But yeah if we'd have had longer, we might have been able to dig down and get them to admit something really selfish.

RS: Yeah because we did some very public questioning and also some very private questioning and the responses were still quite similar. So it wasn't like when people were in private or public that they felt they could be more exposing of themselves. You know it kind of was the same? Some people exposed themselves in a more public arena.

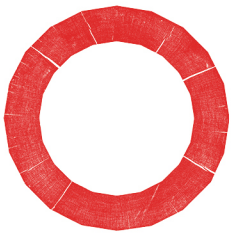
LH: [Laughs] That sounds so dodgy!

RS: [Laughs]

LH: Some people exposed themselves in a public arena! That's great Rach...

[Music plays]

IG: For all our writers, they were aware that they were stepping on literary ground that had been traditionally concerned with a male response to this question. Having grappled with it and



written their pieces... how do they think about the Faustian bargain for women in general?

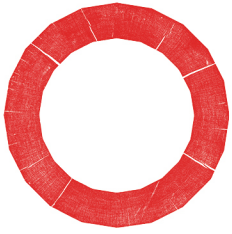
LB: Maybe we all know women who are older than us who in some ways have made big sacrifices for us, you know who sort of sold their souls for us to be getting where we are getting towards. And I feel immense kind of gratitude for that in terms of the kind of cultural context so I think that's something I'm just kind of questioning.

KH: I think if women are selling their souls, they're not getting as much back for it as men? So it's sort of like an equal pay issue basically.

LB: [Laughs] Yeah.

AS: What is the main dilemma that is centred around women? Which was basically be true to yourself or appease people in order to stay in power. Even though I didn't end up writing about that, that was something that I played with a lot over the past year. And was really helpful to go 'actually, that is the Faustian bargain for women. Now how do I respond to Faust with that in mind.

AW: We chip away at ourselves constantly and maybe it's just that we don't realise that we're chipping away at ourselves by not speaking up, by not... or by adjusting or by not taking up too much space all the time. And I think that in a way is a bit of selling your soul, because when you do that you're not able to stand strong and that's a complete and utter disservice to yourself.



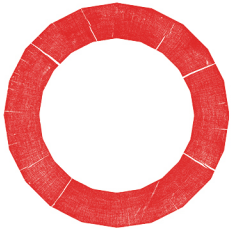
AS: In a world where women are not afforded equality, you have to believe that you're damn worthy because no one else will. And if you don't believe that you're in trouble.

LB: It's just good that we're talking about women's souls because they've been undervalued, you know what I mean? Like, the fundamental problem of humanity is half of it has been given less value than the other half since the beginning and that is soul-based partly. Because I'm not too bothered about like our bodies, it's about whatever the integrity is that need to have more value, and women need to be seen as equally valuable and they still are not, almost always. And that I think is about women's value so to me, there's something like women's souls are worth what women's souls are worth which is...

KH: As much as men.

LB: Equal. Yeah. And we still just... that's what the Me Too thing is about, that's what loads of people we've met believe, men and women, and you know, I just think to be given an option to just write anything that explores and gets people talking about the value of women's humanity... because still we're seen massively through our physical appearance, and our age, and our beauty and these things and it's a huge and dangerous distraction from this thing of 'what is the value of women's humanity?' It is equal, which is huge, it is huge, it is equal. And I just feel passionate that's the most... I'm more passionate about that than anything else in the world. So like to be given a chance to kind of even scratch the surface, I just think is really exciting...

[Music plays]



IG: The five plays are varied and complex, funny and moving. To bring it back to the original question... what would our writers sell their souls for?

LB: I still find the concept of soul really hard, I really do. I think it's something like ethics. So what would you betray your ethics for? You know, I like gin gimlets a lot... [laughs]... and my family [Laughs]

LH: I think part of the sort of making of the piece is about Rachael and I avoiding that question of ourselves. What would we sell our soul for? Avoiding answering that gave sort of a flavour to the show we were making. You have to come and see live on stage what we're gonna sell our soul for...

[Laughs]

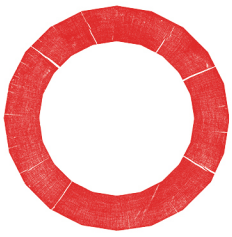
RS: Yeah that's what... you do sort of find out...

[Music plays]

IG: Inspired by Rachael and Lisa's piece, I decided we were letting the Globe team off lightly, and took to the offices to ask our very own women what they would sell their souls for...

Globe staff:

... Hmm what would I sell my soul for? Yeah. It's really hard isn't it? I mean there are some quite like slightly sappy answers which are still a bit true, and then there are more fun answers. I would potentially sell my soul to be a completely virtuosic piano player who can play absolutely anything on demand. That would be sweet! At the same time though, I'd probably also sell it for something like knowing my parents would be comfortable forever type thing... I'd probably sell it for that. That they'd be alright. If



you cut it so that only the piano bit goes in I'm gonna be really cross!

... I'd like to say something really altruistic like world peace or like the good of others. But I actually don't think that one soul can tip the balance so I'm gonna be selfish and say I would sell my soul to know the future. Because I spend so much time worrying about it! So I feel like just know what's going to happen, just give up your soul and then just get on with it!

... Maybe something with climate change and the environment.

... I would sell my soul for a really, really nice flat in London. Rent free, mortgage free, big enough to have parties but small enough to still be cosy. I would absolutely sell my soul for that.

... Tottenham to win the Champions League... [laughter]...

... To be able to understand what animals say.

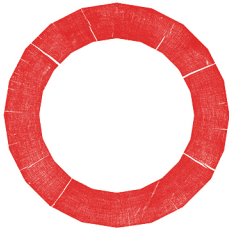
... An unlimited supply of biscuits I think? I would.

... I don't think I would. Who am I selling it to? That's the question.

... Ooh, I don't know. A nice holiday.

... What would sell your... Um I would sell my soul to save someone I loved. Friends or family or someone who needed to be saved. But that's a terrible thing and it says a lot about me... [laughs]... there we go.

... It's gonna be really cheesy! It's world peace. [Laughter] 'Cause I feel from that everything else stems! Do you know what I mean? I feel like everyone would work a bit more collaboratively together. I was gonna actually say I would do it for if I knew my



family and friends were gonna have a lovely and happy life together. Like long and healthy lives. But then I was like then I have to sell my soul so I wouldn't... I wouldn't... yeah maybe world peace... [Laughter]. I literally don't know what I'm saying!

... I can't think of anything nearly as selfless as both of you. I'd sell it for like endless food, like a bottomless stomach probably, yeah. If I could just eat all day I'd be happy.

... Oh my! What would I sell me soul for? I would sell my soul for the safety of my sisters and their children... I would sell my soul for the safety of my sisters and their children... Jesus Christ I hope nothing happens to them now! But yes, that is what I would do? I would. I think. I hope I don't have to!

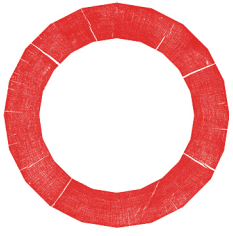
... I wouldn't sell my soul for anything.

[Music plays]

IG: That's it from us, but Dark Night of the Soul is playing until 1st February, across the Globe site. There will be special pop up performances in the tiring house of the Globe theatre, as well as the chance to see selected pieces after performances of Dr Faustus and Macbeth in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. To make sure you catch all five plays, come along to one of our anthology nights in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse on the 19th, 25th and 27th January and the 1st February. You can see our website for more details on all of these performances.

You've been listening to Such Stuff with me, Imogen Greenberg, and Michelle Terry.

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