

Red Devil



Arthur Reel

Adapted from the short story "Red" by Maxim Gorky

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**Do you think it's an easy thing
to be evil?**

— Vaska

Red Devil

DRAMA. This adaptation captures Maxim Gorky's stark, naturalistic rendering of five people locked in a dehumanizing system of oppression and violence. Set in a house of prostitution, three women suffer savage beatings inflicted by the sadistic "Red," a man employed by the proprietress to keep the girls in line. But when Red falls off a trolley and breaks his leg, he finds himself at the mercy of his victims. The women are overjoyed to see their tormentor injured and revel in their new-found power. Maska tries to convince the other women to murder Red before his leg heals, but Red's merciful pleas and promises that he will no longer beat the girls evokes pity in Aksinya.

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes.

Characters

(1 M, 4 F, 1 flexible)

FEKLA YERMOLAYEVNA: Mid-40s, proprietress at a house of prostitution.

AKSINYA: 20s, prostitute.

SARA: 20s, prostitute.

MASKA: 20s, prostitute.

VASKA (RED): Sadistic.

POLICE OFFICER

Setting

November, 1897. A house of prostitution in a city somewhere on the Volga. There is a small kitchen and an upstairs bedroom. In the center of the kitchen is a rough-hewn table, eight feet long, surrounded by stools. There is a low blackened stove UR and a small window next to it. A door UL leads to the rest of the house and a door DR leads to the outside of the house. The upstairs bedroom is empty, except for a narrow bed and chair. There are no windows in the room and just one door leads to the rest of the house.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: A small kitchen in a house of prostitution.

Scene 2: Upstairs bedroom.

Scene 3: Kitchen, the next day.

Scene 4: Kitchen, one month later.

Props

Fork
Plates
Knife
Water pitcher
Glass
Rag
Coat, for Vaska
Whip

Sound Effects

Someone approaching from outside
Loud, gay music for entertaining "guests"

Scene 1

(AT RISE: A small kitchen in a house of prostitution, a cold evening in November. Aksinya, Sara, and Maska are seated around the table, eating in silence. The door UL opens and Fekla Yermolayevna appears. She remains in the doorway, arms folded across her chest watching the others.)

FEKLA: Aksinya...you are wanted.

AKSINYA: A minute.

FEKLA: Sara Sherman...two callers from Moscow.

SARA: Finishing up, Fekla Yermolayevna.

FEKLA: How long, my dear?

SARA: How long? (*Mouthful.*)

FEKLA: Last night you kept someone waiting. The night before—

MASKA: (*Mimicking.*) The night before...

FEKLA: Be careful...the three of you.

MASKA: (*Mimicking.*) Be careful...the three of you.

FEKLA: Maska! Are you looking for another whipping?

AKSINYA: She's drunk, Fekla Yermolayevna.

MASKA: (*Mimicking.*) She's drunk, Fekla Yermolayevna.

FEKLA: (*To Maska.*) You'll get the three-tailed whip. The one with the wires woven into each tail.

MASKA: I'd like to scratch his eyes, the fat wart.

FEKLA: Scratch—so he'll break your neck with his iron hands?

MASKA: If he beats me again...I'll strangle myself.

FEKLA: He'll give you the rope for it, foolish girl.

MASKA: I'll call for help. I'll break the windows.

FEKLA: Break them...he'll make you eat the glass.

MASKA: The bastard! (*Spits.*) I'll go to the police this time!

FEKLA: Go. Remember when he beat you through the wet sheets? (*Laughs.*) He didn't raise a welt. And what did they tell you at the police station? "Where is it? There isn't a mark. There's no evidence. Go bring us evidence." (*Laughs.*)

MASKA: Some day there'll be evidence!

FEKLA: How? When they're all his friends? Foolish Maska. (*Crosses to Maska and strokes her back.*) When you're finished tonight, come and see me. I like a girl with spirit. (*Maska spits. Goes back to door.*) Fine. And this time, I'll tell him to give you the three-tailed wires. Each blow will cut you straight to the bone.

AKSINYA: Please, Fekla Yermolayevna...I...

FEKLA: (*To Aksinya.*) Then you've felt it? (*Aksinya twitches with the memory. To Maska.*) Then...to increase the pain...I'll apply a rag soaked in brine. (*To all.*) Three minutes! (*Exits.*)

MASKA: That woman.

AKSINYA: Sssh! Any minute he'll be coming...

SARA: Then the fireworks start. (*To Maska.*) I warn you –

MASKA: The monster!

SARA: He'll kill you.

AKSINYA: He never kills.

(*Maska spits.*)

MASKA: The hangman!

SARA: You'll get it.

MASKA: If I could... (*Takes a fork in her hand.*) If I were a man... (*Jabs fork into the table.*) And that witch...she pays him well just to...

(*Maska jabs the fork into the table again. Aksinya gets up from the table and begins to clean up the dishes.*)

AKSINYA: They all pay him. Last week at Lena Kalugina's house he flogged all six of her girls with sand and gravel.

MASKA: (*Hurling fork at the wall.*) I hate him!

AKSINYA: And yet...somehow...he doesn't...

SARA: No, he whips everyone with indifference.

MASKA: I can't forget Vera Kopteva...cut her up so badly, she's still suffering.

AKSINYA: I heard she was in a cellar at the marketplace, mumbling about her mamma.

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SARA: She oughtn't have stolen the 5,000 rubles from her Siberian merchant.

MASKA: But they acquitted her in the courts... *(Looks sharply at Sara.)*
...besides, there was another in the room when the Siberian was having his pleasures.

SARA: He asked for two girls.

MASKA: *(To Aksinya.)* Two girls...yet one gets whipped.

SARA: Are you saying...?

MASKA: Just thinking.

SARA: Stop thinking.

MASKA: Vera was my good friend. I brought her into this house.

(Sara stares at Maska. Aksinya comes back to the table and is about to say something. The door opens and Fekla looks in.)

FEKLA: Well!?

AKSINYA: Coming.

MASKA: *(With disdain.)* Don't worry...we'll be there.

FEKLA: Vaska is due back tonight.

MASKA: So?

FEKLA: A little reminder.

(Maska rises.)

MASKA: *(Defiant.)* I don't care. I've had enough—

FEKLA: Careful.

MASKA: I'll leave! I'll go back to my family in Kiev.

FEKLA: *(Laughs.)* You have no family.

MASKA: I have a brother.

FEKLA: He's in jail...for revolutionary activities.

MASKA: My father—

FEKLA: A drunkard! He used to beat you... *(Maska picks up a knife and starts toward Fekla. Aksinya shrieks.)* This time he'll make you strip outside...and after he's beat you, he'll pour water over you. You'll be an icicle! *(Maska stops. Aksinya comes over and tries to calm her.)*

Now hurry! *(To Aksinya.)* Comb her hair. And take some mints.
Fagh! What've you been eating?

(Fekla exits. The women remain stationary, unable to speak. Maska turns away from the door. The knife falls from her hand. She wanders back to the table, puts her head down and sobs.)

AKSINYA: Wait...her time will come. And so will Vaska's. *(Strokes Maska's head.)* I better comb it. You look a mess.

(Maska looks up.)

MASKA: My mother died that way. One evening, my father came home...very drunk...took her out into the snow, made her strip...and beat her...I was only five then...I awoke the next morning...looked out through the little window...and saw her laying there...stiff...
(Holding back her tears.) ...frozen stiff...

SARA: My pappa was educated. Education, he would say, is the whole key to life. Why, he even taught me how to read.

AKSINYA: And to love.

SARA: Yes...that too. *(Crosses to window. There is a noise from the outside.)* Somebody's coming. A droshky.

AKSINYA: A merchant.

SARA: No, wait. Look!

(Aksinya crosses to the window and stares out.)

AKSINYA: It's Vaska!

SARA: He's...drunk!

AKSINYA: No! There's a policeman with him!

(Maska crosses to the window.)

SARA: He's...being helped...as if...

MASKA: *(With joy.)* He must have had...an accident!

AKSINYA: An accident...yes...it must...

SARA: He...he...can hardly walk...

MASKA: Yes...an accident...he's...fallen...or was trampled.

SARA: Or beaten...by someone stronger...

(The kitchen resounds with oaths and malicious laughter. Even Aksinya participates, though with far less venom than her two friends. The door UL swings open. Vaska, supported by a Policeman, enters. On Vaska's thick reddened forehead are huge beads of perspiration. He is breathing deeply, as if trying to catch his breath. Fekla enters.)

FEKLA: What's happening? I heard Vaska!

VASKA: I...fell...

POLICE: He fell off a trolley. His leg was caught under the wheel.
Crack!

VASKA: *(Wincing, with ironic laugh.)* Crack...

POLICE: And there you are!

MASKA: Look at that...he's half a man.

(The girls begin to surround Vaska. Fekla breaks into the ring.)

FEKLA: Get away! Get back...you cats.

SARA: Meeeowww!

MASKA: Hrrrhhh.

VASKA: *(To the prostitutes.)* You're...glad...all of you...

SARA: We won't cry.

MASKA: Nor lose any sleep over it.

POLICE: Well...I must go. *(To Fekla.)* If this is your...ah...establishment, then I say...don't keep him long. He'll need treatment. The hospital is the best place for him. So there you are!

(The Policeman exits. The girls remain in their places. Fekla gives Vaska a hand and helps him sit down on one of the stools. Vaska groans and stares at the prostitutes.)

VASKA: I know...you'd tear me to pieces with your teeth...but there's no use...getting worked up about it...nothing will happen to me.

(The three look at him awhile, then, one by one, burst into laughter.)

Mistress! Chase them out...agh! I say...mistress...where are you?

FEKLA: I'm right here, Vaska!

MASKA: He's blind with pain.

SARA: *(Leaning close.)* Afraid?

AKSINYA: Ssssh! Maybe...he...

SARA: Don't worry!

MASKA: He...can't move!

SARA: Nor see!

MASKA: How will he catch us? *(Laughs.)*

FEKLA: Stop this! Enough!

(Fekla pushes Maska away.)

SARA: Push me, too!

(Fekla pushes Sara away.)

MASKA: And so...I return...to taunt!

SARA: To punish!

AKSINYA: Yes...it's true...he can't even stand up.

MASKA: *(Taunting.)* Stand up, stand up, Vasily Mironych!

SARA: Rise up...you fiend!

AKSINYA: *(Joining in the mood.)* See if you can catch us!

MASKA: See if you can flog us!

SARA: See if you can make us—!

(Blackout.)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: Upstairs bedroom. Fekla is attending Red (Vaska). She is helping him take off his coat. He is perspiring and groaning as she tries to pull the coat off. Aksinya enters. As she moves slowly into the room, Fekla finally succeeds in taking Vaska's coat off.)

FEKLA: Please forgive me, Vasily Mironych...I must attend to business. *(Red groans. He tries to lie down. Each move brings a sharp pain, not just to his leg, but to his hips and back.)* Aksinya, stay with him awhile.

AKSINYA: I'll...stay...

RED: Water...

AKSINYA: Yes...I'll bring some.

(Fekla and Aksinya exit. Maska peeks in.)

MASKA: Good, you devil! You're crippled. Stay that way – forever! I curse you!

(Red tries to lift his head. Maska withdraws her head, slamming the door. Red lies on his back staring up at the ceiling. Aksinya enters, carrying a pitcher of water.)

AKSINYA: I've sent them off.

RED: Vultures.

AKSINYA: Do you want some water?

RED: They'd tear me to pieces...with their teeth.

AKSINYA: They hate you.

RED: I have friends...

AKSINYA: Fekla Yermolayevna will be up soon...

RED: Police...bouncers...detectives...

AKSINYA: And then she'll make you something to eat.

RED: I'll get even...with them. *(Groans.)*

AKSINYA: Does it hurt much, Vaska?

RED: It...hurts...

AKSINYA: You'll get over it. Be patient.

RED: *(Another groan.)* Aksinya...come here...

(Aksinya comes closer.)

AKSINYA: I am here, Vaska.

RED: Sit down...

(Aksinya sits on the edge of the bed. She wipes away the sweat on his face with a rag.)

AKSINYA: What do you want, Vaska?

RED: Nothing...I...sit here awhile...

AKSINYA: I'm sitting, Vaska.

(Red takes her hand quickly.)

RED: Aksinya!

AKSINYA: What is it?

RED: Well, I...

AKSINYA: Yes...?

RED: I...

AKSINYA: Yes...?

RED: Let's...we two...live together.

AKSINYA: It can't...

RED: We must.

AKSINYA: But...don't we...? Now?

RED: Properly.

AKSINYA: Properly?

RED: Yes...we'll go away...and start over...

AKSINYA: *(Begins to rise.)* Silly...

RED: Not I...I... *(In pain.)* Leave with me...

AKSINYA: But where...?

RED: Some place...I'll sue the trolley company...for my injury...

AKSINYA: Will they pay?

RED: Yes...they must. It's the law. Besides, I have money of my own...about 600...

AKSINYA: Six hundred...?

RED: I'll get more...Fekla owes me...we can open up a house...of our own. We'll go to...Simbirsk...far away...

(Aksinya thinks.)

AKSINYA: Our own...

RED: The best house...we'll get the best girls...and charge five rubles admission...ten to stay the night...

AKSINYA: *(Doubtful.)* How you talk, Vaska...

RED: That's how it will be.

AKSINYA: Really?

RED: And if you want...we'll get married.

AKSINYA: Wha-at!

RED: *(Agitated.)* We'll get married! *(Aksinya begins to laugh. Red tries to sit up.)* What's the matter with you? *(She continues to laugh.)* What's the matter?!

AKSINYA: Why, nothing.

RED: Nothing? Then why laugh?

AKSINYA: I haven't been inside a church since I was five years old.

(Red falls back in pain.)

RED: We'll do it up...the right way...

AKSINYA: What a strange pair we'll be. Do you expect me to give you children?

(Aksinya begins to laugh again. Red stares at her in silence.)

RED: You think it's funny?

AKSINYA: Yes, quite.

RED: Keep still!

AKSINYA: And what will you do if I don't?

RED: *(Half-rising.)* I said, keep still!

AKSINYA: Or you'll beat me?
RED: I'll flog you!

(He lurches at her, but falls back in agony.)

AKSINYA: And you really believe I'll go anywhere with you? You'll take me somewhere and kill me. Everyone knows how you torture people.
RED: I won't torture anyone...I promise...
AKSINYA: Yes, I believe you.
RED: Believe me...

(Aksinya comes closer.)

AKSINYA: You remember poor Vera?
RED: I didn't...kill her... *(Aksinya begins to laugh again.)* I killed...no one...

(She laughs harder. Red tries to grab her, but falls back. Fekla peers in.)

FEKLA: What...what's the matter?
AKSINYA: Nothing. Some amusement.
FEKLA: *(To Red.)* What is she doing to you? *(He groans.)* Vaska! *(Fekla turns to Aksinya.)* He'll need to be taken to the hospital. I don't want anybody dying here. It's bad for the guests—
AKSINYA: I'll see to it he doesn't die.
FEKLA: How will you...? *(Looks at Aksinya awhile.)* And if so, I'll tell the police you helped...you poisoned him.
AKSINYA: But they'll find no poison in him.
FEKLA: The police are my friends, you understand? *(Turns back to Red.)* Vaska!
RED: *(To Fekla. Coldly, in a low voice.)* You owe me...300 rubles...
FEKLA: We won't haggle over it now. The guests are arriving. *(To Aksinya.)* Your friend from Kiev is asking for you.

(Pause. Aksinya looks at Red.)

AKSINYA: Yes...I'll come...soon.

(Fekla veers and is gone. Pause.)

RED: No...I...I won't open a house. I'd rather...have a shop.

AKSINYA: Yes, a shop...that's a good thing.

RED: Listen to me, Aksinya Semyonovna... *(Tries to lift his head from the pillow again.)* I swear by.... *(Drops his head.)*

AKSINYA: Don't swear. It doesn't matter...

RED: I'll...I'll be respectful...

AKSINYA: You'll flog me with that.

RED: What...?

AKSINYA: Respect.

RED: I swear...

AKSINYA: I'll go nowhere with you. Nowhere, Vaska!

RED: *(Agitated.)* You wench! Come here, I'll...

AKSINYA: *(Mocking.)* Yes, I'll strip... *(Opens her blouse and pulls it down over her shoulders.)* But wait. Let me put the sheets on first. Then there'll be no welts.

RED: You mock...

AKSINYA: *(Resolutely.)* I won't go anywhere with you!

RED: *(Fiercely.)* If I want you to go, you will. *(Aksinya laughs. Music is heard from another part of the house.)* What the devil?! Here you're fussing over me...doing things for me...so why won't you go?

AKSINYA: That's different, Vaska. You'll die here by yourself. But to live with you...you're evil. You're a murderer.

RED: I've...never killed. Besides...what is evil? You fool. Do you think it's an easy thing to be evil? *(Red begins to cough. He lies back. Aksinya adjusts her blouse, combs her hair, and begins to exit.)* Evil! You're laying it on thick. What is evil! Tell me that, Aksinya Semyonovna! Rah, tell... *(Tries to lift his head, but falls back. Aksinya watches him a moment, hears Fekla calling her, and then starts to exit again. The music is loud, gay.)* Aksinya Semyonovna...tell me! What is evil?! Hah! A-agh! *(In pain.)* Come with me. Come... *(Pleading.)* Please say you'll...come...

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AKSINYA: Don't say another word. Enough. She's calling.

RED: We'll open...a shop... A-agh! I won't...beat you...Aksinya Sem...
A-agh!

(Again Fekla calls. The music still louder.)

AKSINYA: Goodbye.

RED: Stay. I command. *(Aksinya exits. He falls back onto his pillow.)* I'll
take...and beat you...I'll cut you to the bone...I'll —

(Fast fade to black.)

Scene 3

(AT RISE: The kitchen, next day. Sara, Aksinya, and Maska are sitting around the table.)

SARA: What will she do with him?

AKSINYA: Take him to the hospital.

SARA: Then we should help her.

MASKA: What for? So he can return healthy and beat us again?

SARA: Why don't you help her, Aksinya?

AKSINYA: I've done...enough.

MASKA: Yes, you've forgotten everything.

AKSINYA: I've forgotten...nothing.

MASKA: You've forgotten the wounds! The beatings! Vera—

AKSINYA: Vera...was like a sister to me.

MASKA: A sister? Foolish girl. What is a sister? Or a brother? Or even a father or a mother? You'll get a good beating anyway.

SARA: It seems that's all any of us have gotten. We are born to be beaten.

MASKA: Or to beat.

SARA: Bitter. Hateful. Can you think of nothing better?

MASKA: Betraying someone...is that better?

SARA: Yes...have you betrayed someone?

MASKA: It wasn't I who spent the night with Vera and the merchant.

SARA: Nor I...that is, I...I...was there, but I never... Vaska beat her...for no reason. There was no money. The merchant was lying...

MASKA: You're the one who's lying.

AKSINYA: Stop. Why do you taunt her? You're always taunting. Why do you want to make everyone miserable?

SARA: She's that way...miserable.

MASKA: We're all miserable. Miserable, miserable people. Fagh! I'm sick of it.

SARA: Then kill yourself.

MASKA: Kill myself? I've thought of that...

AKSINYA: Why do you want to kill yourself, Maska?

MASKA: What does one live for? It's all a sham...a dull, ugly sham.
I'm sick of it.

AKSINYA: There's more to it...more to life. Last night I saw —

MASKA: Aksinya is in love. Our little Aksinya has fallen —

AKSINYA: Maybe I am...or I don't know what it is...to love somebody.
I understand myself better though. It's as if...a fresh wind has blown
through me. I've never known love...from childhood...an
orphan...on the street when I was ten. My brother hanged himself
in a jail. My mother took poison...so they told me...and I...have
always been afraid...of what?

MASKA: And now...you've fallen for our devil. (*Laughs.*)

AKSINYA: Yes, perhaps...I don't know...you call him a devil. But he
is...after all, human. Yes, Vaska, is a human being. He asked me to
go with him. But I wouldn't...I'm afraid...

SARA: He'll beat you every day.

MASKA: He'll comb your back with his fingernails.

AKSINYA: Maybe...I don't know...a man suffers pain. He is punished.
Suddenly...God comes to him.

SARA: And you think God has come to Vaska?

MASKA: There is no God. And if there were, he wouldn't come to
Vaska.

AKSINYA: Thy not? He is not so bad...surely not any worse than
these respectable men who come here...

SARA: They at least pay. What has Vaska paid?

AKSINYA: Vaska has paid...he sees death...that is paying.

*(Maska laughs. A commotion is heard. Door UR opens and Vaska enters,
assisted by Fekla.)*

FEKLA: Sit here. They should be coming soon.

VASKA: Coming...to fetch me... (*Ironic chuckle.*) And you...glad
I'm...going...?

MASKA: Glad!

(Sara comes closer.)

SARA: Aren't we sorry for you, Vasily Mironych!

MASKA: (*Behind him.*) Don't we just love you!

SARA: Don't we just want you to get better!

MASKA: So you can return...and beat us!

(*Maska grabs Vaska by the hair.*)

FEKLA: Stop! What is it! Have you gone mad!

MASKA: Yes...mad with hate!

(*Vaska groans, tries to strike out with his arm. Fekla pushes Maska away.*)

AKSINYA: (*Shouting at them.*) No! Hate is no good! Evil...you'll be doing what Vaska did to us! And maybe...please, God...he won't be doing it now!

MASKA: Is that true, Vaska?!

(*Maska grabs Vaska's injured leg and pulls on it. Vaska grits his teeth and howls. Fekla pushes Maska again, but Maska's grip is very firm. She continues to pull on the leg. Vaska swings his arm, but he is unable to reach her. He merely strikes his own stomach and howls.*)

AKSINYA: Please! I beg...enough! Have pity! He feels the pain. My dears, for Christ's sake...my dears! He feels—

VASKA: Have...pity...

(*Aksinya tries to pull Maska away.*)

AKSINYA: He begs!

FEKLA: Have pity! You'll murder him!

(*Fekla tries to pull Maska away too.*)

SARA: (*Seeing the light.*) It's true. You'll murder him. The poor man...

AKSINYA: Please...Maska dear, you must stop! In God's name!

VASKA: (*Convulsed face.*) Holy Father...it's true...

AKSINYA: He knows the pain. He knows, Maska.

SARA: He begs you, Maska!

VASKA: I beg...you...

MASKA: You'll never do...? You'll never hurt us again? Swear it!

VASKA: I...swear...

MASKA: Swear to Christ, Vasily.

VASKA: I swear...to Christ...

(Maska lets go of Vaska's leg. She retreats to the window, staring at Vaska. Vaska continues to groan and swear by Christ. There is a knock on the door.)

FEKLA: They're here. We're coming! *(To the others.)* Help me. Take his arm...

(Aksinya comes over and gives Vaska a hand. Sara comes over and fixes his coat. The three begin to lead him toward the door. Everyone in the kitchen preserves a heavy silence.)

MASKA: Goodbye, Vasily Mironych...

(Vaska turns back and stares.)

VASKA: Yes...it's true...what's the use...? Forgive me...for Christ's sake...those who...whom... *(They all look at him in silence.)* By Christ...forgive we...those whom...

AKSINYA: We forgive you...by Christ...

SARA: By Jesus...

VASKA: I feel...the pain...evil...I understand it...

AKSINYA: My darling...you'll be all right...

(There is another knock. They start leading him again. Maska goes to the door and opens it.)

FEKLA: This way...step easy... *(Exiting with him.)* Yes...one...two... *(Outside the door.)* There...that's right...

(Her voice fades. Sara, Maska, and Aksinya remain at the door, staring after them.)

SARA: What a crazy thing... *(Suddenly Aksinya lets out a shriek.)*

What's the matter, Ksyushinka?

MASKA: He's not dead, Ksyushinka.

SARA: *(Soothing Aksinya.)* You can go see him.

MASKA: *(Caressing Aksinya.)* Tomorrow...you can go to the hospital.

SARA: And before you know...he'll be back.

MASKA: Healthy...

SARA: And...a new man...

(They continue to comfort Aksinya. Fade to blackout.)

[End of Freeview]