

The many faces of Faust

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Randy Newman's "Faust" is only the latest in a long line of spinoffs on the theme of a mortal selling one's soul to the devil for some form of absolute power.

Scholars believe that the Faust story is based on the life of Georg Faust (about 1480-1538), an early Renaissance German necromancer and practitioner of black magic. He was a boastful man and apparently gained considerable influence in the upper echelons of the church and court. His exploits, real and imagined, were first collected in a German work, the *Faustbuch*, in 1587. These tales, combined with a Faust puppet show that he saw as a child, inspired Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), the German romantic poet, playwright and novelist, to begin his drama.

In Goethe's mammoth two-part work, Faust is an elderly scholar who yearns to comprehend all experience. To do so, he must offer his eternal soul to the devilish Mephistopheles, who then proceeds to restore his youth.

Here's a look at a few of the other Faustian bargains that have been struck in operas, musicals, plays, books, films and television shows:

Operas: Gounod's "Faust" (1859); Boito's "Mefistofele" (1868); Berlioz's "La Damnation de Faust" (1893); Busoni's "Doktor Faust" (1925).

Musicals: "Damn Yankees" (1955), by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross (music and lyrics) and George Abbott and Douglass Wallop (book), in which a middle-age former baseball player sells his soul in exchange for a spot on the lowly Washington Senators; "L'Histoire du Soldat," Igor Stravinsky's musical setting of the tale of a soldier, his violin and his dance with the devil. (Performances are scheduled for Oct. 2-6 at the UIC Theatre, 1044 W. Harrison.)

Plays: Christopher Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus" (1588); Goethe's "Faust, Parts I and II" (1808 and later); Vaclav Havel's "Temptation" (1985), in which Dr. Foustka, in a quest to study forbidden knowledge while living under a repressive regime, submits to greater and greater betrayals; Howard Brenton and David Hare's "Pravda" (1985), in which a journalist sells his soul to a media titan. Coming to Chicago's Athenaeum Theatre, April 10-12, will be "Faustus in Africa!" by the Handspring Puppet Company of South Africa. And currently

playing at Chicago Filmmakers is **Doorika**'s production of "Bathe Me, Gertrude Stein's Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights!," a strange, multimedia retelling of the tale.

Books: "The Devil and Daniel Webster," Stephen Vincent Benet's 1937 short story about a New England farmer who sells his soul for material prosperity (later made into a movie, play and opera); The Master and Margarita, Mikhail Bulgakov's Russian version, set in the Stalinist era; Doktor Faustus, German novelist Thomas Mann's 1947 novel about a composer.

Films: "Faust" (1926), the German silent film about a man who sells his soul to the devil (Emil Jannings) in exchange for youth; "Mephisto" (1981), the Hungarian film by Istvan Szabo about an actor (Klaus Maria Brandauer).

Television: "Devil's Food," a recent Lifetime show, in which Suzanne Somers plays an overweight TV news reporter who sells her soul to the devil in exchange for being forever thin; "A Year at the Top," the 1977 summer-replacement TV series that helped launch Paul Shaffer, in which two rock musicians exchanged their souls for fame and fortune.