

SIEGFRIED WAGNER: *DIE BÄRENHÄUTER*

SYNOPSIS

Act 1: A village in Hummelgau; Hell

After the end of the Thirty-Years War, a soldier, Hans Kraft, comes home. Without any family or friends and jobless, he is ripe for promptings of the Devil, who offers him employment. In Hell Kraft is to heat and tend to the Seething cauldron in which the damned souls are held for eternity. A mysterious stranger tries to persuade Hans to gamble for the souls in the cauldron. Although Hans loses, the souls are overjoyed. The Devil takes his revenge on the miscreant soldier by condemning him to make his way in the world in a bearskin, stinking and filthy, without being permitted to wash himself, until a girl comes along who will be true to him for three years.

Act 2: An inn near Kulmbach

In his bearskin, Hans is a strange sight to the villagers, who see him as nothing more than a filthy and repulsive stranger and a penniless foreigner. But he manages to be of assistance to the Mayor with his financial difficulties: from the magic of a mysterious bag left for him by the Devil, Hans gives money to the Mayor in exchange for which the Mayor offers one of his daughters to be Hans' wife. Only the youngest (Luise) is willing, for she perceives a sensitive soul beneath the soldier's filthy exterior. Although he seemed the image of the Devil before, she tries to persuade the town's people that he is both human and caring.

Act 3: Forest; District near Plessenburg

Three years have passed. So, if Luise remains faithful to Hans, he will be released from the Devil's curse. Although the Devil makes every effort to hold him in thrall, Hans is released from his punishment and returns to his normal form. While making his way homeward to see his bride, a stranger helps him to achieve an heroic deed, which makes Hans famous. But will Luise recognize him now that he has shed his bearskin? Of course, she does, and this mythical tale ends as most do, with everyone "living happily forever after."