

WILD BEASTS AMONG YOU

Synopsis of Scenes

The private home of zookeepers Jan and Antonina Zabinski on the grounds of the Warsaw Zoological Gardens in Poland.

Act One

Scene 1 - Just before dawn on July 10, 1939

Scene 2 - Early morning of September 1, 1939

Act Two

Scene 1 – Noon on September 28, 1939

Scene 2 – Afternoon of December 31, 1939

Scene 3 – Late afternoon of October 16, 1941

Act Three

Scene 1 – Just after sundown on April 20, 1943

Scene 2 – Almost midnight on July 31, 1944

Scene 3 – Just before dawn on August 23, 1944

The Setting

We are in the large living room of a 1930s two-story, Bauhaus-style stucco and glass villa. Most prominent are six tall window panels upstage center, blurring the boundaries between inside and out. Immediately outside the windows, blooming linden trees frame a view of the beautifully manicured zoo grounds. Beyond the zoo walls can be seen the Vistula River, and beyond that the skyline of Warsaw's Old Town and the distant Jewish Quarter.

Inside the living room there is a credenza displaying books, magazines, bird nests, feathers, small and large animal skulls, eggs, horns and several glass or wire cages. An upright piano is flanked by armchairs, and more armchairs and a sofa are situated near the windows. In one corner is a fireplace and hearth, with a sun-bleached bison skull resting on the mantelpiece. Oriental rugs are strategically scattered on the parquet floor and a non-fussy wood staircase against one wall leads to second-floor bedrooms. Several doors, swinging and not, lead to a kitchen, a study, a back porch, a bathroom and a small coat closet. And through an unadorned archway is a glimpse of a dining room and the foyer that welcomes those entering through the front door.

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The Characters
(in order of appearance)

PIETRINA BIANCHI – 29; the Zabinski’s cook and housekeeper
MR. TANAKA – 53; head groundkeeper
JAN ZABINSKI – 42; director of the Warsaw Zoo
RYSZARD “RYS” ZABINSKI – 7; son of Jan and Antonina
DR. LOZINSKI – 61; the zoo veterinarian
ANTONINA ZABINSKI – 31; zookeeper and Jan’s wife
MARCELINA GROSSMAN – 30; sculptor
LUTZ HECK – 46; director of the Berlin Zoo
SZYMON PAWLAK – 32; assistant zookeeper
MAJOR WOZNIAK – 40; officer in the Polish Army
MOTHER ZABINSKI – 70; Jan’s mother
MAKSYMILIAN FRISTER – 41; Marcelina’s friend
WERONIKA EILENBERG – 32; Ryszard’s tutor
MIECZYSLAW ARONSZAJN – 22; underground organizer
ODILO GLOBOCNIK – 35; SS-Brigadeführer of Lublin province
JACOB SPORRENBURG – 37; rising SS-Gruppenführer
GEBHARD HIMMLER – 41; SS Colonel and Heinrich’s brother
ZYGFRYD PARNICKI – 18; Catholic resident of Warsaw
HAYYIM KURATOWSKI – 31; Jewish resident of Warsaw
YITZHAK MANDELBAUM – 35; lawyer from Jewish Quarter
DOBROSLAWA MENDELBAUM – 32; Yitzhak’s wife
NATALKA MENDELBAUM – 11; daughter of the Mendelbaums
ROZALIA KURATOWSKI – 27; Hayyim’s wife
MARCINEK TRAMIEL – 31; Polish ‘Blue Police’ officer
MARYLA ASKENAZY – 25; journalist
VOICE OF RADIO ANNOUNCER
VOICE OF GENERAL ROMMEL
ASSISTANT ZOOKEEPERS, GERMAN SOLDIERS AND
OFFICERS, RESIDENTS OF THE VILLA

NOTE: The Zabinski family and nearly all others who populate this play are actual people found in numerous biographies, historical and archival documents. Names have been changed when license has been taken for dramatic purposes.

WILD BEASTS AMONG YOU

ACT I

SCENE 1

Just before dawn on July 10, 1939.

The only illumination onstage comes from a small Tiffany-shaded lamp on the piano, the earliest hint of a rising sun filtering in through the large windows, and a thin shaft of light from under the swinging door that leads to the kitchen.

And it is from the kitchen that we hear the only sounds: the muffled baritone of a male voice, followed by a female giggle, the male voice again, and then a sharp slap.

The kitchen door is thrown open and PIETRINA BIANCHI enters in a hurry, carrying a large mixing bowl. PIETRINA, 29, wears an apron around her waist and a kerchief on her head. A rolling pin is clamped under one arm.

Hot on her heels is MR. TANAKA, 53, wearing the green uniform of a groundkeeper. He holds gardening gloves in one hand and with the other hand gingerly touches his reddened cheek.

They speak in urgent whispers.

TANAKA (*with a strong Japanese accent*): Pietrina! You come back! Koneko! [Kitten!]

PIETRINA continues to move away from him, just eluding his grasp. She also speaks with a dialect — from northern Italy — but it's less pronounced than TANAKA'S. She continues to pound dough in the bowl as she speaks.

PIETRINA: No! Now get away from me!

TANAKA: Please! I know not what happened.

PIETRINA: You know very well what happened, Mr. Tanaka. Now I'm warning you ...

Still evading his advances, PIETRINA now brandishes the rolling pin as a weapon.

The room has started to brighten as a result of the rising sun. A few birds — starlings, cuckoos, macaws — are heard.

TANAKA: Strike, if you must! I'd prefer tender kisses, but we begin with a beating!

TANAKA bows.

TANAKA (*presenting*): My head.

PIETRINA: Don't think that I won't.

TANAKA continues the chase, his head bowed, seeing only the floor.

TANAKA: I pray that you will.

PIETRINA: Now *stop* this! I must make breakfast for the family.

TANAKA: I shall help you, my Pietrina. Together you and I—

Unable to see what's in front of him, TANAKA crashes into the piano. It makes a terrible noise.

PIETRINA (*still whispering*): Now you've done it! You've awakened everyone in the house for certain.

TANAKA: Yes! Beat me ... I must be punished.

TANAKA lets out a yelp of pain.

PIETRINA (*with genuine concern*): Are you injured?

TANAKA: Only my heart. Everything else work fine.

There is now, from the zoo grounds, the sudden whooping of gibbon monkeys, followed only a second later by the howling of wolves, then the screeching of peacocks, the gibbering of hyenas, the roaring of lions, the snorting of rhinos, the yelping of foxes and the braying of hippos.

PIETRINA and TANAKA have continued throughout, paying no attention to the crescendo around them except to let their own voices rise in turn.

PIETRINA (*wielding the rolling pin*): I'm going into the kitchen now. *Do not follow!*

She turns and goes.

TANAKA suddenly screams in pain and grabs his knee. PIETRINA rushes to him.

PIETRINA: You're hurt. I knew it!

As she bends over the stooped TANAKA, he quickly rises up, grabs her about the waist, and kisses her on the mouth.

She resists for a moment, then gives in. Then drops the rolling pin.

The cacophony of animal noises is now joined by the sounds of more animals ... cheetahs, elephants, more monkeys, seals and bears.

A light appears dimly from the top of the stairs.

Slowly, the cries from the animals begin to subside. Just as slowly, TANAKA releases PIETRINA, who haltingly takes a few steps backward. She then turns and starts for the kitchen, confused and visibly shaken.

When she gets to the kitchen door, however, she stops suddenly, then runs back to TANAKA, who stands ready to embrace her. But instead she deftly picks up the rolling pin in one sweeping move — greatly startling TANAKA — and then disappears into the kitchen.

The animal sounds have all but stopped as JAN ZABINSKI, 42, appears on the stairs. Tall and slender, but muscular, he is dressed simply and carries a fedora.

JAN (*striding down the stairs*): Good morning, Mr. Tanaka.

TANAKA: Good morning, Mr. Zabinski.

JAN: Beautiful day.

TANAKA: Yes, sir.

JAN: Are you taking up the piano?

TANAKA: Sir?

JAN: It earlier sounded as if someone was attempting an arpeggio.

TANAKA: No, sir.

JAN: Well, keep at it. Have you seen Pietrina?

TANAKA: Me?

JAN: Never mind. I'm sure to find her in the kitchen.

JAN moves past TANAKA and enters the kitchen. TANAKA then scurries to the foyer and out the front door.

The stage is empty for only a moment before RYSZARD ZABINSKI, 7, races down the stairs. RYSZARD is blond, tall for his age, and is dressed for a summer day of play, wearing tan shorts and a striped pullover.

RYSZARD (*shouting*): I'll be at the monkeys!

He disappears out the front door, leaving it wide open, and the stage is empty once again.

A motorcycle is heard approaching and grows so loud that it shakes the walls before it cuts off.

RYSZARD (*from outside*): Morning, Dr. Lozinski!

There is no response, but just a moment later DR. LOZINSKI, 61, enters. He wears a long and dirty white leather trench coat, boots, goggles and a half helmet. He carries a black doctor's bag.

LOZINSKI (*removing his helmet*): Hello? Zabinskis? (*no response*) Pietrina?

He starts for the kitchen when he hears a noise and turns to look toward the top of the stairs.

LOZINSKI (*startled*): Mrs. Z. I called out. The front door was open.

ANTONINA (*not yet visible*): Rys.

LOZINSKI: Ah! Darted out like a cheetah, straight in front of my bike. He must be more cautious.

ANTONINA He's seven. But I will speak with him.

LOZINSKI: I'm sure you know best. And how is our little girl doing today?

ANTONINA: She was fussy all night, but is taking to the bottle this morning.

ANTONINA ZABINSKI, 31, now appears, slowly descending the stairs. Statuesque and fair-skinned, she wears a long red robe that trails softly behind her.

She exudes a certain grandeur and inherent dignity that is not in any way lessened by what she carries in her arms ... a baby swaddled in a pink blanket, protected from the morning chill.

The infant is so tightly wrapped, however, that occasional squirms and the slowly disappearing milk from a bottle are the only evidence we can see of her.

LOZINSKI: Good ... good ...

ANTONINA: And she's put on more than three pounds since you saw her last.

LOZINSKI: Excellent! Let's have a look at her.

Setting down his doctor's bag, LOZINSKI removes a stethoscope. But when he puts it on, he realizes he still wears his goggles. He removes them and replaces the goggles with pince-nez eyeglasses.

ANTONINA is now at the bottom of the stairs and crosses to sit, the baby in her lap.

ANTONINA: She certainly *feels* heavier. (*to the baby in her arms:*) Tufa, darling, let me have the bottle. Please, sweetness.

As ANTONINA pulls the bottle away, the baby struggles.

LOZINSKI: Careful there, Mrs. Z. You may want to let her keep—

And suddenly the baby — a six-week-old lynx cat — has tumbled out of the blanket and is on the floor, scurrying in the direction of the kitchen.

LOZINSKI: —Oh, no ...

ANTONINA (*out of her seat*): If you would be so kind, Dr. Lozin—

PIETRINA opens the kitchen door just in time for the cat to dart through. PIETRINA screams.

ANTONINA: Sshh! You'll frighten her.

PIETRINA: Tiger! *Lion!*

LOZINSKI: Almost had her. I was *this close* to—

JAN emerges from the kitchen, holding the lynx in his arms.

JAN: –Did one of you lose something?

ANTONINA (*taking the cat*): Very funny.

JAN: She's surprisingly strong. And aggressive.

PIETRINA: And blood-thirsty!

ANTONINA: Nonsense.

JAN: Well, no, Pietrina, I don't think she's quite that. (*To ANTONINA*) But maybe it *is* time, darling, for Tufa to live outside. With the others.

ANTONINA (*starting up the stairs*): Maybe it's time for *you* to live outside!

JAN (*to LOZINSKI*): My wife doesn't mean it.

ANTONINA (*no longer visible*): *I do too!*

LOZINSKI: Perhaps I should be going ...

An upstairs door slams.

JAN: No, don't rush off. Pietrina, be kind enough to get the doctor an iced coffee. (*to LOZINSKI*) Yes?

LOZINSKI: And a little krupnik might be nice.

PIETRINA looks to JAN for confirmation.

JAN (*smiling at the doctor*): After rounds. But we have fresh honey for your coffee.

LOZINSKI shrugs. PIETRINA goes into the kitchen.

LOZINSKI: She seems annoyed.

JAN: Pietrina?

LOZINSKI: Mrs. Z.

JAN: Oh. Yes. You know Antonina, doctor. She falls so much in love with these baby animals she can't bear it when the time comes for them to live in the cages. Tufa is healthy enough now to live with the other lynx cats, yes?

LOZINSKI: Yes. Weeks ago.

JAN: Then you understand. My wife opens our house — and her heart — to these creatures, and to put them out is like abandoning a child.

LOZINSKI: She has a talent, you'll get no argument from me on that. She worked wonders with Tufa. No one else *I* know could have brought that baby lynx back from so close to certain death.

JAN: Are you now convinced no other animals are at risk?

LOZINSKI: Difficult to say. We must be ever watchful. In these settings, a virus or other illness can pass so easily from humans to the birds, the elephants, all of the cats, and back again to humans.

PIETRINA enters from the kitchen with two coffees; one iced, one hot.

LOZINSKI: One serious contamination from the outside world could wipe out the entire population. Animal *and* human.

JAN (*with a look to PIETRINA*): I'm sure it's not as dire as all that, doctor. Thank you, Pietrina. (*sips*) Delicious.

PIETRINA exits into the kitchen.

JAN: We mustn't unnecessarily worry Pietrina. There is much here that is still new to her. (*a moment*) Have I told you, doctor, of my latest thoughts on the remodeling of the zoo?

LOZINSKI quickly allows an item on the credenza to catch his eye and he moves toward it, away from JAN.

LOZINSKI: I believe so.

JAN: About the native habitats?

LOZINSKI (*drinking his coffee*): Yes, definitely.

JAN: I know you've been concerned, in the past, about natural enemies sharing enclosures without conflict. I've come around to your way of thinking on that. I'm in agreement.

LOZINSKI (*turning from studying an animal skull*): You are?

JAN: But if there is enough land, and sufficient sources of camouflage and areas to take cover ...

With a sigh, LOZINSKI turns again to the credenza.

JAN: ... as well as a system of interlocking moats, of course, and creative plumbing, I'm convinced that predators and their prey can live together ... the lamb living right under the nose of the lion, as it were. It's all a matter of illusion, really. Do you understand?

LOZINSKI (*mumbling, with mockery*): ... lions and lambs ...

JAN: If you like, we can step into my study and I'll show you—

The front door flies open and RYSZARD rushes in, out of breath.

RYSZARD: —Hey! HEY! Look what *I* found!

JAN: Ryszard! I've told you ... no more strays! (*to LOZINSKI*) Just like his mother, I'm afraid.

RYSZARD turns to the open door and shouts:

RYSZARD: Come in! It's alright! I promise!

After a moment, a pretty and petite MARCELINA GROSSMAN, 30, steps cautiously into the foyer. She has dark wavy hair, wears a flattering dress, and carries a sketchbook.

JAN is taken aback to see a human.

JAN (*stepping forward*): I'm sorry. Good day. How may I assist you?

RYSZARD: Her name's Marcelina, Papa. I *found* her.

JAN: *Did you?* Well, perhaps she wasn't lost. (*turning to MARCELINA*) Jan Zabinski.

JAN extends his hand, and MARCELINA places her hand in his. He kisses it lightly.

MARCELINA: Yes, I know. I'm very familiar with who you are. Although that doesn't excuse my intrusion. Your son and I got to talking — he's very ... *gregarious*, isn't he?

JAN: That's one interpretation, yes.

MARCELINA: And when I mentioned I would someday like to meet you, he grabbed me by the arm and wouldn't let go.

LOZINSKI edges forward, not wanting to miss this opportunity.

LOZINSKI: Good morning.

JAN (*by way of introduction*): Doctor Lozinski. The zoo veterinarian.

LOZINSKI (*advancing toward her*): How do you do, miss?

JAN is escorting MARCELINA into the room, and away from LOZINSKI.

JAN: You are visiting the zoo?

MARCELINA: Yes. I adore the days when the gates open before dawn. It's magnificent to be here as the sun rises and the animals greet the day.

RYSZARD: You *like* that? It's an *awful* noise!

JAN: Ryszard, perhaps Miss ...

MARCELINA: Grossman.

JAN: Perhaps Miss Grossman hears something in the cries of the waking animals that we— (*turning to her*) Marcelina Grossman?

MARCELINA: Yes.