

Rumpelstiltskin

A chamber opera in 1 act (6 scenes)

Libretto by Marti Epstein

Characters:

Gretchen: mezzo-soprano

Gretchen is a young woman who lives with her father, a miller, in the woods near the King's castle. She and her father dote on each other and care very much for each other. Gretchen's mother died when she was very young. Gretchen is an exceptionally talented creator of beautiful cloth- she is an expert spinner and a weaver of high artistry. Her skills are known throughout the entire kingdom, even by the King.

Miller: counter-tenor

Miller is Gretchen's father. He is a poor miller. His wife died when Gretchen was small. He and Gretchen are devoted to each other and love each other very much. He worries that he cannot give her nice things; he yearns for a better life for her, but does not know how to achieve that.

Rumpelstiltskin: soprano

Rumpelstiltskin is a hideously deformed little man who lives near Gretchen and her father in the woods. Despite his appearance, he is good-hearted and yearns to love and be loved. He spies on Gretchen and her father every day and is jealous of their love. He has strange magical powers, but is not interested in using them; all he wants is a child who will love him in spite of his appearance.

King: baritone

The ruler of this small kingdom is greedy, cruel, and not too smart. He sets out to look for Gretchen and her father as he has heard of her beautiful cloth and would like her to

make him a new robe. His curiosity is piqued when Miller brags that Gretchen can spin straw into gold. His greed for more wealth than he can possibly use, as well as his desire for an heir to his throne takes over and he forces Miller to send Gretchen to his castle for a test. He is exceedingly self-absorbed and has no real other interests than in himself.

SCENE 1

[Gretchen and Miller are in the woods gathering food and firewood. They are observed by a hideous little man hiding in the trees. He has observed them on many other occasions.]

Rumpelstiltskin:

She turns from me, he turns from me, everyone I meet turns from me, in fear and disgust.

Do they find me hideous, loathsome?

Will no one ever love me?

Will no one ever look at me without turning away?

I yearn for my mother, she was taken from me, she must have been the only person who ever looked on me with gentle kindness.

Wrenched away from me by Death, leaving me alone, unloved.

Only small children, who have not been taught that some things are beautiful, some things vile, only the very young do not turn away from me.

Didn't I once see a kind smile on the face of a child?

A child!

My own child!

My own child would love me!

My own child would not turn away from me, would not find me loathsome and hideous.

My own child would feel the kindness in me, would know the kindness in my heart.

Yes!

A child- I must have a child- but who would give me a child?
People turn away from me, run from me- I am too hideous to be loved except by a mother or a child!
A child is more precious than all the treasures in the world.
Treasures! Riches! Great wealth!
I could have all of that-
My magic, the magic I've had since birth- if people could see it, could see me turn anything to gold just with my touch, would they still turn from me?
All the riches of the world are of no use to me.
Love is all I want, a child is all I want.
A child is more precious than all the treasures in the world.
My own child would be loved by me, cared for by me, would love me in return.
My own child would see the kindness in my heart, would feel the kindness in my heart.

[Rumpelstiltskin sees Gretchen and Miller]

Rumpelstiltskin:

Look at those two- every day, together, laughing, talking, loving, caring.
Father and child- how she loves him!
I must have a child!
I cannot watch them, watching them pierces my heart.
I will do anything to have a child!
My own child would love me as she loves him.
Look at how she cares for him!
Their love is a halo of light around them- my child would care for me that way.
I will do anything to have a child.
A child is more precious than all the treasures in the world!

[Gretchen wanders off on her own, still singing to herself. The King walks up, sees Miller, and walks over to him]

King:

Are you the Miller whose daughter spins and weaves?

Miller:

Yes, your highness, my daughter spins and weaves.

King:

I have heard her work is more splendid than can be imagined.

Miller:

Yes, your highness, my daughter creates cloth of indescribable beauty.

King:

I would like to commission a new robe from her.

Miller:

Yes, sire, we would be very honored.

King:

Where is she? I would like to see if her face and form are as glorious as you say her threads and cloth are.

Miller:

I will call her, your highness. She is a great beauty, sweet and pure.

King:

Sweet and pure? Tell me more! Does she have any special talents?

Miller:

Your highness, my daughter has many special talents!

King:

Good Miller, tell me more of her!

It's time to take a wife, time to produce an heir.

I could not bear to have an ordinary Queen.

Your daughter makes beautiful things, and if she is herself beautiful, perhaps she would be acceptable as Queen, mother of my heir.

Perhaps she could make me rich with her extraordinary talents at the spinning wheel!

Miller:

Oh yes, your highness.

My daughter can spin threads and weave cloth of unimaginable beauty.

Her work is like spun gold, like spinning gold from plain straw!

She...

King:

She can spin straw into gold?

Miller:

That's not what I...

King:

Can she spin gold or not, Miller?
Remember that it's a crime to lie to the King!

Miller:

No, no, I did not lie-
She- she can spin straw into gold.

King:

Straw into gold?!?
That is a marvelous art.
I've heard enough.
If your daughter is as clever and beautiful as you say, bring her to my castle tomorrow and
I will put her to a test.

Miller:

Of course, your highness.
But what if she becomes weary? What if she can't spin enough gold?

King:

Can she do it or not?
If she can, she will become my wife and have anything she wants, and you shall have
anything you want as well.
If she can't do it, I will put her to death- punishment for having a stupid liar for a father!

[all 4 simultaneously]

Miller:

What have I done? It cannot be undone!
I will surely lose the only thing that means anything to me!
The King will keep his word, when my daughter cannot do as he asks, he will put her to death!
What can I do? I have no choice!
I must obey or lose my own life!
What have I done?

King:

I will soon be the richest man in the land-
my kingdom will be known far and wide for its great wealth, for the beauty and cleverness of its queen.
If the stupid Miller is lying, I'll have them both put to death.
But if he is telling the truth, I will have everything- fabulous fortune, perfect wife, an heir for my kingdom.

Gretchen:

[still singing wordlessly to herself]

Rumpelstiltskin:

I can help her!
And If I help her, she will help me.
I will save her, we will create gold together.
She will become Queen, she will have a child, she will give it to me in gratitude.
She will be so grateful to me for saving her life, she will gladly give the child to me.
She will give it to me willingly, I will not have to snatch it away from her.
The child, my own child- the one and only thing I want in this world.
A child is more precious than all the treasures in the world.

END SCENE 1

SCENE 2

[Gretchen is sitting at a spinning wheel in a room filled with straw]

Gretchen:

[humming to herself, thinking and remembering]

King: (offstage, as if Gretchen were remembering what he said to her...)

Lovely Girl, your graceful form and pretty face excite me.

If, as your father has promised, you manage to spin this straw into gold, you will make me rich beyond my wildest dreams.

I will reward you by making you my wife, my Queen.

You will never want for anything again.

Nor will your father.

You will lie with me, you will satisfy me.

I will give you a child, my heir.

You may be only a miller's daughter, but I am sure I could not find a richer, more beautiful wife in the whole world.

But if your father has lied to me, if you do not complete this task, fill this room with gold, I have no use for you.

You and your liar father will be put to death.

Do not call me to tell me you've grown weary.

You must complete this task by morning, or both of you will die.

Gretchen:

I have been spinning all my life.

I have been told my work is beautiful beyond description.

I only do what I know how to do. This I do not know how to do.

Spin straw into gold- the King must be mad, my father must be mad.

Surely he knows this task is not possible.

Surely he knows I will be put to death if I do not succeed.

The King has left me alone with this wheel, these empty bobbins, a room full of straw,

a locked door.

My task is clear- I must spin this straw into gold, or I will perish!

I will surely die!!

[weeps]

[hums to comfort herself]

[Rumpelstiltskin magically appears]

Gretchen:

Who are you? How did you get in?

Rumpelstiltskin:

Who I am is not important. I am just a hideous little man.

Who are you? Why are you weeping?

Gretchen:

My name is Gretchen. I am the Miller's daughter.

My father bragged to the king that I could spin straw into gold, but of course I cannot!

The King has commanded me to do it or be put to death.

I will surely die!

Rumpelstiltskin:

But can you spin?

Gretchen:

Yes, yes!

Rumpelstiltskin:

I can help you.

I have magical powers. I can turn anything to gold.

If you spin the straw, I will turn it to gold.

Would you like me to help you?

Gretchen:

Yes, yes, oh yes!

Rumpelstiltskin:

But you must give me something in return.

What will you give me?

Gretchen:

This necklace, it belonged to my mother.

Rumpelstiltskin:

I have no use for a necklace.

I can turn anything into gold, just with my touch.

Why would I want your necklace?

Gretchen:

I have nothing else, just this ring on my finger.

It also belonged to my mother. It is my most precious possession.

Rumpelstiltskin:

I have no use for your mother's ring, or for any other jewels or trinkets.
I can turn anything to gold, why would I want your ring?

Gretchen:

[weeping]
I have nothing else of value. What could you possibly want from me?

Rumpelstiltskin:

A child is the one thing I desire more than anything else in the world.

Gretchen:

A child? I have no child!
Why would you want a child?

Rumpelstiltskin:

Don't you see how loathsome I am? Don't you find me hideous?
People turn away from me when they see me.
No one will ever love me, and all I want is to be loved.
A child smiled at me once, I think.
A child would love me.
If I had a child, I wouldn't be alone.
My own child will love me more than anything in the world.
I would do anything to have my own child, no one else would love me.
My own child would see past my ugliness, would see that I am kind, would feel the
kindness in my heart.
A child is more precious than all the treasures in the world.

Gretchen:

But I am just a girl! I have no child to give you!

Rumpelstiltskin:

If you complete this task, the King will marry you, will make you his Queen.

He will give you a child.

Within a year, you will give birth to a baby.

You must promise the child to me.

If I help you, your life will be spared, you will be Queen, I will finally have a child to love me.

Gretchen:

How can you be so sure that will happen?

Yet, it's my only choice,

I would be so grateful to you for helping me.

I will agree to what you ask.

If I should become Queen and have a child, the child will be yours.

Rumpelstiltskin:

I know you will be true to your word.

Let's get to work.

Sit at the wheel.

Place the straw where the wool would go.

Turn the wheel.

As you spin, I will turn the straw to gold.

[Rumpelstiltskin and Gretchen work together silently, soon the bobbins fill with golden thread]

Gretchen:

How are you able to do this magic?

Rumpelstiltskin:

I do not know.

I have always been able to.

Who taught you to make beautiful cloth?

Gretchen:

My dear mother, when I was a tiny girl, before she died.

Rumpelstiltskin:

My mother also died when I was young.

Gretchen:

Where is your father?

Rumpelstiltskin:

I never knew who my father was.

I was told that he was very powerful.

He could not bear to have such a deformed and ugly child.

No one ever loved me, I am too hideous to be loved.

Gretchen:

[weeping]

My father must not love me.

He has betrayed me.

He put me in this situation.

He lied to a cruel and greedy king to make himself look more important, and here I am.

Rumpelstiltskin:

Did your mother love you very much?

My mother loved me, but she also died when I was very young.

My father abandoned me as soon as he saw how hideous I was.

No one can bear to look at me, no one will even smile at me.

No one cares about me.

I have no one to love, no one who loves me as you and your father love each other.

Gretchen:

It is my father's fault I am here.

He must not love me.

I am alone, like you.

[Gretchen weeps]

Rumpelstiltskin:

Your father loves you more than his own life.

He was trying to impress the king so that you could have a better life.

I have helped you, and in a year or so, you will help me and give me the one thing I desire.

Everyone will be happy.

[Rumpelstiltskin and Gretchen work in silence, more and more golden thread fills the room]

Gretchen:

The gold is such a brilliant color.

Rumpelstiltskin:

It's like the sunlight on the tress in the forest.

Gretchen:

I have noticed that too.

Rumpelstiltskin:

Have you noticed how beautiful those leaves are when covered with the still whiteness of the first snow?

Gretchen:

Or when they are many shades of red in the fall?

Rumpelstiltskin:

Have you seen the summer flowers in the meadow, just beyond the forest?

Gretchen:

Those flowers are my inspiration for the cloth I make.

Rumpelstiltskin:

Did your mother take you there? Did she teach you about the flowers?
How to spin and dye the threads? How to weave the cloth?

Gretchen:

Oh yes, I miss my mother very much. And I miss my father too.

Rumpelstiltskin:

But your father is still alive. You will see him again when we finish.

Gretchen:

I am afraid my father must not love me, to have done what he did.

Rumpelstiltskin:

It does not matter, your life will be spared!

Gretchen, look, we are finished!

Gretchen:

Look! We are finished!

Please tell me your name, I'd like to thank you properly.

I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am to you for saving my life.

Rumpelstiltskin:

Do not ask my name! No one must ever speak my name!

I am just a hideous little man who longs to be loved.

You will see me again.

Remember what you have promised me.

I will come back, you can show me your gratitude when you give me your child.

[Rumpelstiltskin disappears, Gretchen is left alone in the room, waiting for the King]

END SCENE 2

SCENE 3

[Gretchen is in a rocking chair, rocking a tiny baby]

Gretchen:

Just a year ago, my life was so simple.

I cared for my father, I loved to weave and make pretty things.

My life is so different now, now I have something that is more precious to me.

Oh, my beautiful child, my sweet baby, I love you so much!

I can't imagine life without you!

Maybe this is how my mother felt about me.

I could not bear to lose you, my precious baby!

Now I understand why that strange little man wanted a child so badly.

That ugly little man saved my life, but his price was too high!

Perhaps he does not remember?

He has not yet appeared!

What will I do if he does come?

I could not bear to give you to him, you are a part of me, I live for you!

But he saved my life, and I promised him!

Maybe he forgot.

Maybe I could hide you...

[Rumpelstiltskin has magically appeared in the room, but Gretchen does not see him yet]

This is my father's fault!

How could he do what he did to me?

I don't believe my father still loves me.

I could never do anything like that to you!

It's my father's fault I had to sit in that room full of straw and ask for help from that horrible little man.

Of course I am grateful, but I won't give you to him!

Maybe he found another child!

Maybe he forgot!

Maybe I could hide you....

Maybe....

[Gretchen suddenly notices Rumpelstiltskin]

Gretchen:

[startled]

Oh! It's you!

How did you get in?

Rumpelstiltskin:

Surely you're not surprised, Queen Gretchen!

You must remember the promise you made to me a year ago, when I saved you from certain death!

Gretchen:

Oh, I thought surely you had forgotten!

I could not bear to give you my child!

Rumpelstiltskin:

You promised me the one and only thing I want in the world,
A child!
As I told you I would, I have come for him.
Please don't worry about him!
I will love him, adore him, care for him.

Gretchen:

No! I know I promised, but I can't bear to give up my child!

Rumpelstiltskin:

Is the Queen not true to her word?
Don't you remember that I saved your life, and in exchange you promised your child to me?
Aren't you grateful to me for saving your life?

Gretchen:

Oh! Oh!
I cannot bear to give you my child, he is so precious to me!
I know I promised, but I did not realize I would love my child so much!
I am grateful to you for saving my life, I will happily give you anything else you desire in the kingdom.
But please, I beg you, don't take my child!

[Gretchen weeps]

Rumpelstiltskin:

Oh, Gretchen, you must NOT break your promise!

Gretchen:

Oh, please, he is more precious than my own life!

I could not bear to be apart from him!

Rumpelstiltskin:

Gretchen, I have refused to tell you my name.

No one must speak my name, it has never been spoken by anyone but me.

If you can guess my name, I will let you keep your child.

Gretchen:

[weeping]

How will I ever guess? There are too many names in the world!

[Rumpelstiltskin waits while Gretchen think and weeps]

Robert? Josiah? John?

Rumpelstiltskin:

[after each name] That is not my name!

Gretchen:

Cuthbert? James? David? Rudolf? Roald?

Rumpelstiltskin:

[after each name] That is not my name!

Gretchen:

Socrates? Gustav? Sebastian? Barnabas? Crabtree? Camille?

Rumpelstiltskin:

[after each name] That is not my name!

Gretchen:

Nepomuk? Hogoboom? Sheepshanks?

Rumpelstiltskin:

[after each name] That is not my name!

I know you cannot guess it.

And you must keep your promise.

But I will give you until the day after tomorrow.

If by some miracle you happen to discover my name, you may keep your child.

[Rumpelstiltskin disappears, Gretchen is left to think and weep.]

END SCENE 3

SCENE 4: NEXT MORNING

[King and Miller are out on the castle grounds coming back from a morning of hunting. As they approach, Rumplestiltskin can be seen doing an odd dance and singing a strange song.]

King:

Excellent morning of hunting, my good friend.

Miller:

Yes, your highness.

[sees Rumplestiltskin]

Look, there's that awful little man again! Who is he??

King:

He was the child of one of my scullery maids.

He grew up in the castle, raised by my servants.

He's quite horrible, isn't he?

But I let him stay here, he's rumored to have marvelous magical powers!

I have never seen evidence, but what is the harm of letting him stay, in case the rumors are true, and he could be of use to me?

He often sings bizarre little songs while he dances on the grounds.

I cannot bear to look at him, but if he truly is magical, I'd want to keep him close by.

Miller:

Listen- he's singing something! Can you hear what it is?

Rumplestiltskin:

[off in the distance, perhaps off stage?]

Today I brew, tomorrow I bake

And then Queen Gretchen's baby I'll take!

Her child is all mine to claim

For no one knows Rumplestiltskin's my name!

King:

Isn't that funny?? It's about a queen named Gretchen!

Miller:

Yes, it is terribly amusing!

And his name! I have never heard anything like it!

Let's go tell Gretchen about it.

She has been so sad lately, surely she will find it amusing and be cheered by it!

[King and Miller exit to go tell Gretchen about R and his song]

END SCENE 4

SCENE 5: NEXT DAY

[Gretchen is rocking the baby, repeating the name “Rumpelstiltskin” over and over. After hearing the story about the little man from her father and the king, she has guessed that this might be the name she has been trying to discover.]

[Rumpelstiltskin appears]

Rumpelstiltskin:

Gretchen, you have no more time.

You must keep your promise.

You may try to guess once more, but when you are wrong, you must keep your promise.

You must give me your child!

Gretchen:

[she is scared and nervous]

Is it...

Could....

Could it be....

Maybe....

[whispered]

Rumpelstiltskin?

Rumpelstiltskin:

[almost interrupting her]

The Devil told you that!

The Devil told you that!

Ah! Ah! Ah!

Now the child cannot be mine!

The one and only thing I desire cannot be mine!

The Queen has broken her promise!

Gretchen:

I have guessed your name,

That was our agreement!

I will keep my child.

You can't take him from me, no one could take him from me!

Rumpelstiltskin:

Ah! Ah! Ah!

Gretchen:

What is happening?

I am grateful to you for saving my life!

Without your help I would not have this child.

I owe you my life, but I do not owe you my child!

I could show my gratitude in any other way!

We had an agreement, I guessed your name, and now I keep my child!

What is happening? What is wrong with you??

[Rumpelstiltskin continues to scream and clutch his heart]

Rumpelstiltskin:

The pain is piercing my heart.

My heart feels as if it is breaking in two.

Gretchen:

What is happening?

Rumpelstiltskin:

My heart! My heart!

Gretchen:

I only said your name! I only wanted to keep my child!

I didn't mean to hurt you!

What is happening to you??

[Rumpelstiltskin dies, his heart breaking in two. He disappears. At the moment R's heart breaks, the baby undergoes a mysterious transformation]

[King and Miller enter the room]

King: What is all this commotion?

Miller:

Look! Look at the child! Look at his face! What has happened to him?

Gretchen:

My child! He has changed before my very eyes!

My child, I cannot bear to look at him, he is too horrible!

How did this happen?

Miller:

What has happened to him? How did this happen?

King:

How did this happen?

My God, that thing cannot be my child!

It is too hideous to behold!

Gretchen, you must have done this!

You are an evil sorceress!

That must be how you were able to spin all that straw into gold!

And now look what you have done!

You are of no use to me!

You and your father will immediately be put to death!
And that thing...
No! No, do not put it to death!
No, perhaps such ugliness could be useful to me some day.
It will be raised by my servants, I will never have to look upon it.
But you, Gretchen, and your father, are of no use to me.
You are both to die immediately!

Miller and Gretchen:

No! No! No!

END SCENE 5

SCENE 6

[The baby is alone in a crib, touching things and turning them to gold.] (we hear music from the beginning)

END

